



YES, AND...

10

LESSONS FROM IMPROV FOR DELIVERING TORAH SESSIONS

INTRODUCTION

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Since 1975, Saturday Night Live (SNL) has been a comedic lens through which contemporary culture and current events have been viewed and appreciated. The show has featured rising stars in the world of comedy and has been a start for many prolific stars such as Bill Murray, Eddie Murphy, Will Ferrell, and Jimmy Fallon. Through it all though, one man has been unanimously acknowledged as the leader who has stewarded the show through nearly five decades: Mr. Lorne Michaels.

In an article in The New Yorker entitled “Lessons From Late Night,” and later in her work “Bossypants,” Tina Fey, former head-writer at SNL describes the lessons

she learned from Lorne Michaels about management and performing.

So what does this have to do with presenting Torah?

Interestingly, the rules and guidelines for great improvised comedy can help with facilitating engaging, relevant, and exciting Torah sessions. Much like improv, you need to think on your feet and you can’t rigidly stick to the script (or source sheet).

Below we present 10 lessons from Tina Fey’s experience working on SNL and how they can inform and enhance your delivery and facilitation of Torah ideas.



TO ME THERE IS NO CREATIVITY WITHOUT BOUNDARIES. IF YOU’RE GONNA WRITE A SONNET, IT’S 14 LINES, SO IT’S SOLVING THE PROBLEM WITHIN THE CONTAINER.” – LORNE MICHAELS



YES, AND...



1

The fun is always on the other side of a yes.

LESSONS

A GREAT TORAH SESSION SHOULD NOT JUST BE A LECTURE. IT NEEDS TO ENGAGE THE PARTICIPANTS AND SOLICIT THEIR INPUT.

BUILD OFF THE POINTS AND IDEAS OFFERED BY THE PARTICIPANTS. IT IS THE BEST WAY TO VALIDATE THEIR IDEAS AND CREATE A GREAT ENERGY FOR EVERYONE INVOLVED.

The first rule of improvisation is AGREE. Always agree and SAY YES. When you're improvising, this means you are required to agree with whatever your partner has created. So if we're improvising and I say, 'Freeze, I have a gun,' and you say, 'That's not a gun. It's your finger. You're pointing your finger at me,' our improvised scene has ground to a halt...

Now, obviously in real life you're not always going to agree with everything everyone says. But the Rule of Agreement reminds you to 'respect what your partner has created' and to at least start from an open-minded place. Start with a YES and see where that takes you.

As an improviser, I always find it jarring when I meet someone in real life whose first answer is no. 'No, we can't do that.' 'No, that's not in the budget.' 'No, I will not hold your hand for a dollar.' What kind of a way is that to live?

The second rule of improvisation is not only to say yes, but YES, AND. You are supposed to agree and then add something of your own. If I start a scene with 'I can't believe it's so hot in here,' and you just say, 'Yeah...' we're kind of at a standstill. But if I say, 'I can't believe it's so hot in here,' and you say, 'What did you expect? We're in hell.' Or if I say, 'I can't believe it's so hot in here,' and you say, 'I told you we shouldn't have crawled into this dog's mouth,' now we're getting somewhere.

To me YES, AND means don't be afraid to contribute. It's your responsibility to contribute. Always make sure you're adding something to the discussion. Your initiations are worthwhile. — *Bossypants*, pg. 85

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FIGURE OUT IF THERE IS SOMETHING YOU'RE ASKING THE ACTOR TO DO THAT IS MAKING HIM OR HER UNCOMFORTABLE



LESSONS

IT'S IMPORTANT TO SOLICIT PARTICIPATION AND ENGAGEMENT, BUT NOT AT THE EXPENSE OF MAKING ANYONE UNCOMFORTABLE.

You have to remember actors are human beings. Which is hard sometimes, because they look so much better than human beings. Is there someone in the room the actor is trying to impress? This is a big one and should not be overlooked. — *Lessons from Late Night*

THERE ARE MANY IMAGINATIVE WAYS TO ENGAGE THE AUDIENCE. ASKING THEM TO ACTIVELY PARTICIPATE OR SHARE IS IMPORTANT. HOWEVER, SOMETIMES PUSHING SOMEONE WHO IS NOT AT EASE TO BE CALLED ON IN THE WAY YOU HAVE CHOSEN CAN NOT ONLY MAKE THEM UNCOMFORTABLE, BUT YOU COULD LOSE THEM FROM THE SESSION COMPLETELY.

3

PRODUCING IS ABOUT DISCOURAGING CREATIVITY



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TV show comprises many departments—costumes, props, talent, graphics, set dressing, transportation. Everyone in every department wants to show off his or her skills and contribute creatively to the show, which is a blessing. You're grateful to work with people who are talented and enthusiastic about their jobs.

You would think that in your capacity as a producer your job would be to churn up creativity, but mostly your job is to police creativity.

— *Lessons from Late Night*

LESSONS

IT IS IMPORTANT TO FOCUS ON THE GENERAL TOPIC. NOT EVERY SESSION CAN BE AS BROAD AS A PARTICIPANT WANTS TO TAKE IT.

BEING OPEN TO QUESTIONS DOESN'T MEAN BEING OPEN TO COMPLETELY CHANGING THE DISCUSSION.

DON'T LET ONE PERSON HIGHJACK THE ENTIRE SESSION.



WHEN HIRING, MIX
**HARVARD
NERDS** WITH
**CHICAGO
IMPROVISERS
AND STIR.**



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hen hiring, mix Harvard nerds with Chicago improvisers and stir. The staff of Saturday Night Live has always been a blend of hyper-intelligent Harvard boys (Jim Downey, Al Franken, Conan O'Brien) and gifted, visceral, fun performers (John Belushi, Gilda Radner, Jan Hooks, Horatio Sanz, Bill Murray, Maya Rudolph).

Lorne somehow knew that too many of one or the other would knock the show off balance... If Harvard is Classical Military Theory, Improv is Vietnam. — *Lessons from Late Night*

LESSONS

DON'T JUST GIVE YOUR ATTENTION TO THE KIDS YOU LIKE. THERE ARE MANY PERSONALITIES AND LEARNING STYLES AND IT IS IMPORTANT TO REACH EVERYONE.

WHEN MAKING GROUPS OR ENGAGING WITH PARTICIPANTS WITHIN A WIDER GROUP, DON'T ALWAYS BUNCH THE SAME PERSONALITIES TOGETHER. IT IS GOOD TO HAVE A HEALTHY MIX OF DIFFERENT TEMPERAMENTS WITHIN EACH GROUP. THEY WILL BOUNCE OFF EACH OTHER, ENGAGE AND ARGUE TOGETHER WHICH WILL MAKE FOR A RICHER AND MORE DIVERSE DISCUSSION.

IF YOU ARE FACILITATING GROUP WORK, MIX IT UP!

5

MACGRUBER

TELEVISION IS A VISUAL MEDIUM

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orne has said this to me a lot. It basically means, “Go to bed. You look tired.” You may want to be diligent and stay up with writers all night, but if you are going to be on the show, you can’t. Your street cred with the staff won’t help anybody if you look like a cadaver on camera. — *Lessons from Late Night*

LESSONS

THE PARTICIPANTS OF YOUR LEARNING SESSION WILL MIRROR THE ENERGY YOU PROJECT. DON’T SHOW UP EXHAUSTED. DON’T SHOW UP HALF-DRESSED. SHOW UP READY TO LEARN AND THEY WILL, TOO.

MAKE SURE WHATEVER VISUALS YOU HAVE FOR YOUR SESSION ARE APPEALING. YOUR SOURCE SHEETS SHOULD NOT BE WRITTEN ON TOILET PAPER. TORAH SHOULD ALWAYS BE THE BEST LOOKING MATERIAL IN THE ROOM.

6

THE SHOW DOESN’T GO ON BECAUSE IT’S READY;

IT GOES ON BECAUSE IT IS

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his is something Lorne has said often about “Saturday Night Live,” but it’s a great lesson about not being too precious about your writing. You have to try your hardest to be at the top of your game and improve every joke until the last possible second, but then you have to let it go.

You can’t be that kid standing at the top of the waterslide, overthinking it. You have to go down the chute. (And I’m from the generation in which a lot of people died on waterslides, so this was an important lesson for me to learn.) You have to let people see what you wrote. It will never be perfect, but perfect is overrated. Perfect is boring on live television. — *Lessons from Late Night*

LESSONS

THERE IS A BALANCE BETWEEN BEING PREPARED AND DIVING IN. YOU HAVE TO BE PREPARED, THAT IS UNDISPUTED, BUT REGARDLESS OF WHETHER YOU HAVE DOTTED EVERY “I” AND CROSSED EVERY “T,” THE SESSION NEEDS TO HAPPEN EACH NIGHT AND YOU HAVE TO DO IT!

BE PREPARED AND BE CONFIDENT TO IMPROVISE WHAT YOU COULDN’T HAVE FORESEEN.

IF THE SESSION IS NOT GOING THE WAY YOU EXPECTED, DON’T PANIC. SESSIONS NEVER GO THE EXACT WAY YOU PLANNED. THAT WOULD BE BORING.

7

NEVER CUT TO A CLOSED DOOR



Lorne said this once in exasperation over some sketch that I can't remember. The director had cut to a door a moment too soon, before the actor entered, and in that moment Lorne felt "we had lost the audience." This can mean a lot of things. Comedy is about confidence, and if people in the audience sense a slip in confidence, they're nervous for you and they can't laugh. Lorne would prefer that the camera cut follow the sound of the actor knocking on the door. Which is to say that sketch should lead the cutting pattern, which is to say that content should dictate style, which is to say that in TV the writer is the king.

Or - and this is a distinct possibility - it doesn't mean anything and he was just in a grouchy mood. — *Lessons from Late Night*

LESSONS

"DO YOU LIKE HOMEWORK? NO? OK!" THAT WAS AN EXAMPLE OF A POORLY CRAFTED QUESTION. A POORLY CRAFTED QUESTION LEADS NOWHERE. THERE IS NO INTRIGUE, NO PULL, NO EXCITEMENT OR ENGAGEMENT. IF YOU WANT TO PULL IN YOUR AUDIENCE, YOU HAVE TO ASK ENGAGING AND EXCITING QUESTIONS.

IF YOU START THE SESSION WITH LOW ENERGY, IT WILL BE HARD TO RECOVER FROM THAT. SIMILARLY, AS RABBI YAAKOV GLASSER ALWAYS SAYS, "THE ROOM WILL ONLY BE AS QUIET AS THE MOMENT YOU BEGIN." MAKE SURE YOUR SESSIONS AND PRESENTATIONS BEGIN ON THE RIGHT NOTE.



NEVER TELL A CRAZY PERSON HE'S CRAZY

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Lorne has an indirect and very effective way of dealing with the crazies. It is best described by the old joke that most people know from "Annie Hall." A man goes to a psychiatrist and says, "My brother's gone crazy. He thinks he's a chicken." And the psychiatrist says, "Have you told him he's not a chicken?" The man replies, "I would, but we need the eggs." Lorne knows that the most exhausting people occasionally turn out the best stuff. — *Lessons from Late Night*

LESSONS

SOMEONE IN YOUR AUDIENCE WILL SAY SOMETHING THAT MAKES NO SENSE! YOU CANNOT ROLL YOUR EYES AND SAY "IDIOT." YOU HAVE TO FIND SOME MERIT AND RELATE TO THAT POINT. YOU SHOULD NOT ALIENATE ANYONE, NO MATTER HOW WACKY THEIR OPINION IS. IN FACT, SOMETIMES THE MOST EXHAUSTING PARTICIPANTS HAVE THE MOST BRILLIANT INSIGHTS.

9

DON'T MAKE ANY BIG DECISIONS RIGHT AFTER THE SEASON ENDS



This is the same advice they give people who just came out of rehab. After a grueling period of work (or what passes for grueling work in our soft-handed world), you will crave some kind of reward. But don't rush into a big decision like a new house or a marriage or partial ownership of a minor league baseball team, which you may later regret. The interesting thing about this piece of advice is that no one ever takes it. — *Lessons from Late Night*

LESSONS

DON'T THINK THAT AS A RESULT OF THIS SESSION JUST NOW, SOMEONE HAS TO MAKE A LIFE CHANGING DECISION, OTHERWISE THEY HAVEN'T REALLY MOVED AS A RESULT. CHANGE AND DECISIONS ARE A PROCESS, CERTAINLY BIG CHANGES. OFFER SMALL TANGIBLE TAKE-AWAY IDEAS RATHER THAN TRY FOR THE EPIPHANY.

THERE ARE NO MISTAKES, ONLY OPPORTUNITIES

10



If I start a scene as what I think is very clearly a cop riding a bicycle, but you think I am a hamster in a hamster wheel, guess what?

Now I'm a hamster in a hamster wheel. I'm not going to stop everything to explain that it was really supposed to be a bike. Who knows? Maybe I'll end up being a police hamster who's been put on "hamster wheel" duty because I'm "too much of a loose cannon" in the field.

In improv there are no mistakes, only beautiful happy accidents. And many of the world's greatest discoveries have been by accident. I mean, look at the Reese's Peanut Butter Cup, or Botox.

What I learned about bombing, as an improviser at Second City was that, while bombing is painful, it doesn't kill you. What I learnt about bombing, as a writer for "Saturday Night Live" is that you can't be too worried about your permanent record. Yes, you are going to write some sketches that you love and are proud of forever - your golden nuggets. But you're also going to write some real bad nuggets. You can't worry about it. As long as you know the difference, you can go back to panning for gold on Monday. — *Lessons from Late Night*

LESSONS

DON'T BE OVERLY CONCERNED ABOUT BOMBING.

TANGENTS, DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVES, AND ALL OTHER UNEXPECTED ISSUES THAT MAY ARISE DURING A SESSION ARE NOT MISTAKES; THEY ARE ALL OPPORTUNITIES FOR INSPIRING AND IMPACTFUL EDUCATIONAL MOMENTS.

IT'S OK TO MESS UP OR SAY "I DON'T KNOW." THOSE ARE TEACHING MOMENTS, TOO. SOMETIMES THE MOST IMPORTANT ONES.