

## *Matza Ball Soup*

— *a Marx Brothers play* —

The Marx Brothers were the great anarchists of American comedy. No authority figure was safe from them, and no pretentious potentate could escape their wicked wit. The Marxes' antics were balm to battered American spirits coping with oppressive forces during the Great Depression and the Second World War.

And so in a book of interpretations of such a serious story – one of slavery and liberation, issues that are still current – I think the Marx Brothers have a proper place. Not only because the brothers themselves rehearsed the ritual every year in their Jewish home in New York's Upper East Side, but because it is a Jewish practice to bring down murderous dictators using ridicule. Just ask Mel Brooks. I think he would agree – and you can just chime in anytime, Mr. Brooks – that, had Jewish comedians been set loose in Ramses-era Egypt, one of the ten plagues would have been mockery. And that would have been a lot worse for Pharaoh than frogs.

In this *shpiel*, Groucho has the most lines. Zeppo and Margaret Dumont have the fewest lines, except for Harpo, who has no lines, but he honks. A bicycle horn would be useful for Harpo's portrayer.

MINNIE

SAM

GROUCHO

CHICO

HARPO

ZEPPPO

MARGARET (DUMONT)

GROUCHO      Take a walk with me down memory lane, into the world of my childhood, full of love and laughter and the pungent aroma of boiled cabbage. Above a butcher shop on East 93<sup>rd</sup> Street in New York City – in that cozy homestead, my parents settled down to raise a family.

The twentieth century had only just begun, and it was a time of dreams and struggles. That's my mother, Minnie. To tell the truth, she's more Maxi. You can see her slaving over a hot stove. But you can't see the stove. She's the only Jewish mother on the Upper East Side who won't let her son become a doctor. She wants me to be a singer. I think she's been reading the script upside down.

And that's my father, Sam, the worst tailor in New York. He married my mother because he wanted children. Imagine his disappointment when *I* arrived.

You may know my brothers – Chico, Harpo, and Zeppo. With a little hard work they'll go a long way, and I wish they'd start now.

So, since you're here, I guess you'll be sharing our seder. It will be entirely your pleasure. Just don't ask too many questions. The seder's already long enough with this bunch of clowns running it. I don't know how I get through it myself, and if you think I'm stopping after four drinks you're crazy.

SAM Minnie? I can't find the haggadahs. Where did we put them after the seder last year?

ZEPPO Were they in a small brown cardboard box tied with bakery string, and marked 'mixed nuts'?

SAM Yes!

ZEPPO No, I haven't seen them.

CHICO Hey, whatsamatter wit' these-a crackers, they taste just like-a the box they came in.

MINNIE Chico, don't eat that matza, the seder's not even started yet. Where's Harpo? I told him he could assemble the seder plate.

ZEPPO Last time I saw him, he was coming out of a pawn shop and heading for the race-track.

MINNIE If he sold that seder plate again, he's going to be sorry. Harpo!

HARPO *(honks)*

MINNIE Have you put everything on the seder plate?

HARPO *(honks)*

GROUCHO He's roasting a goose egg.

MARGARET Helloooo? Anyone home?

SAM Oh, it's Mrs. Dumont. We're so glad you could come.

MARGARET How kind of you, Mr. Marx. I'm delighted to be here. Everyone knows your seder is the social event of the season!

SAM I wonder where she's getting *her* information? Boys, I'd like you to meet Mrs. Dumont.

GROUCHO Pleased to meet you, Mrs. Dumont. I never forget a

face, but in your case I'll make an exception.  
Where's your husband?

MARGARET Why, he passed away.

GROUCHO I bet he's just using that as an excuse.

MINNIE All right, everyone, it's time to get started. Let's sit down.

SAM Groucho, since you're a bar mitsva now, would you like to start by saying the Kiddush?

GROUCHO It will be a great honor. Especially if I get to drink the wine afterwards. Ah, here it is.

*Baruḥ ata Adonai, elohaynoo meleḥ ha-olam, boray p'ree ha-gafen.*

We praise You, Adonai our God, who together with the blessed sages of our people - the Manishewitz brothers, Baron Edmond de Rothschild, Johnny Walker Red, Jack Daniels, Jim Bean and Old Grand-Dad - created the fruit of the vine, and made us holy through Your commandments and that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, fraternité, égalité, Sleepy, Grumpy, Sneezy and Doc.

We praise You who have freed us from the bonds of sobriety, sustained us and brought us to this time, six sheets to the wind, off the wagon, feeling no pain, up a lazy river, with liberty and justice for all. And let us say: amen!

MARGARET That was so moving, Groucho. I simply adore tradition!

SAM Now, after everybody washes their hands ...

GROUCHO You can wash your neck, too, while you're at it.

SAM ... it's time to dip a vegetable in salt water.

- CHICO            Make-a mine Scotch, I no like-a salt water so much.
- SAM              (*Holds up matza.*) This is the bread of poverty, which our ancestors ate in the land of Egypt. It's time to ask the four questions. Boys?
- ZEPPO           Why is this night different from all other nights? On other nights, we eat bread or matza; tonight, only matza.
- CHICO           On all-a da other nights, we eat zucchini, peperone, pomodoro, spinaci - on this-a night, why we gotta eat this horsa-radish fra diavolo, it's so spicy it's-a gonna blow my head off.
- GROUCHO        On all other nights we don't dip even once. Why, once I was dancing the cha-cha with Lulu Rosenthal and I tried to dip - it took a carthorse and a block and tackle two hours to get me off the floor. So on this night, why do we dip twice?
- HARPO           (*Lies across two chairs and chews on a carrot.*)
- ZEPPO           He wants to know why we eat while reclining.
- MINNIE          Before we tell the story of the Exodus, someone should explain about the Four Sons.
- GROUCHO        Mother, I thought you knew this already. When a man and a woman love each other very much ...
- SAM              That's enough out of you. There are four types of children, according to the rabbis. One who is wise, one who is wicked, one who is simple, and one who cannot even ask a question.
- GROUCHO        We really have to get some new writers in here.
- SAM              The wise son asks -
- ZEPPO           What is the meaning of the decrees, laws, and rules that the Eternal has commanded us?

SAM            You should tell this child all the laws of Passover down to the last detail. The wicked son says -

GROUCHO      This is the silliest thing I *ever* heard.

SAM            To this child say: "This is done because of what the Eternal did for me when I went out of Egypt." The simple son asks -

CHICO          Whatsamatter you?

SAM            To this child, answer, "It was with a mighty hand that the Eternal brought us out of bondage." And to the child who cannot ask -

HARPO          (*honks*)

SAM            What's the point of saying anything to this child? He's just going to hang his leg over your arm.

HARPO          (*honks twice*)

MINNIE        Let's get on with the show, please. The brisket's going to burn.

GROUCHO      I wish to announce that a buffet supper will be served in the next room in five minutes. In order to get you in that room quickly, Mrs. Dumont will sing a soprano solo in *this* room.

SAM            Now it's time to tell the Passover story.

ZEPPPO        A new king arose over Egypt who did not remember Joseph. And he said to his people:

CHICO          Look-a these Hebrew people here. Boy, we gotta lotta dese Hebrew people in Egypt. We gotta more Hebrew people in Egypt than they got pigeons in Central Park. Here's what we're-a gonna do: we're-a gonna oppress them with-a hard labor.

ZEPPPO        You mean we're going to make them our slaves, mighty Pharaoh?

- CHICO That's-a what we're-a gonna do.
- ZEPPO Is this because you don't remember Joseph, great Pharaoh?
- CHICO Sure, I remember Giuseppe. We used-ta play-a stickball in the old neighborhood in Alexandria. Ah, Giuseppe - what a great stickball player! Now he's a-play minor league for the Cairo Cardinals.
- ZEPPO Mighty Pharaoh, I meant the Hebrew Joseph who saved Egypt from the famine and brought his family to live here. These are his descendants.
- CHICO No, I no remember-a Joseph.
- SAM But the more they oppressed them, the more numerous the Hebrews grew.
- MINNIE Then the Pharaoh told the Hebrew midwives to throw the Hebrew baby boys into the Nile River!
- MARGARET What an outrageous suggestion!
- CHICO It wasn't-a no suggestion!
- SAM To save her child, an Israelite woman from the tribe of Levi placed him in a basket lined with pitch, and put it among the reeds of the Nile. Sort of a little boat. Like a canoe.
- GROUCHO I wanted a flat bottom, but the girl at the boat house didn't have one.
- SAM The little boy's sister Miriam watched over him. The basket floated to where the Pharaoh's daughter was bathing in the Nile.
- GROUCHO She bathed once every four years. This accounts for the Nile's flooding. Also the extinction of the dinosaurs.
- MARGARET Why, it's an adorable little baby! I wonder if my fa-

ther the Pharaoh will let me keep him. I shall name him Moses, for I drew him out of the water.

MINNIE      Oh, Princess! Would you like me to find a slave woman to care for the baby?

MARGARET      Why yes, little girl, I would be eternally grateful.

SAM      The lad grew up in the palace of the Pharaoh.

GROUCHO      One day I killed a taskmaster in my pajamas. How he got in my pajamas I'll never know. When word got out, I fled to the land of Midian and became a shepherd.

SAM      Baa!

GROUCHO      Why, hello, little fellow. You look like a sheep.

SAM      Baa!

GROUCHO      I think I've seen you before. Are you one of *my* sheep?

SAM      (*Slaps self on the forehead.*)

GROUCHO      I suppose you are. You all look alike to me. I think you're trying to get my attention.

SAM      I want you to look at that burning bush over there.

GROUCHO      Not much gets past you sheep, does it? I saw the burning bush. So what?

SAM      It's burning, but not being consumed.

GROUCHO      Really? *That* I didn't notice. I could be wrong but I think that's a miracle.

SAM      Moses, I think it wants to talk to you.

GROUCHO      Now I know where I've seen you before – it was in Bellevue.



MINNIE Moses, Moses!

GROUCHO Who are you?

MINNIE I'm fine, who are you?

GROUCHO I'm fine, too, but you can't come in unless you give the password.

MINNIE Moses, I am the God of your ancestors. Remove your sandals, for the place where you stand is holy ground.

GROUCHO Maybe I should go back to Bellevue. You sound an awful lot like my mother.

MINNIE Such a son.

GROUCHO So, God, what can I do for you?

MINNIE Moses, I have seen the suffering of My people in Egypt, and have heard their cry. I have come to rescue them from slavery and bring them to a good and spacious land flowing with milk and honey.

GROUCHO Make sure you wear a hat - the sun is brutal in Egypt this time of year.

MINNIE *You* shall speak to Pharaoh and tell him to let My people go.

GROUCHO *I* shall go to Pharaoh! So *that's* your game! Well, you can forget about that. I'm no rube. I'm going back into the closet where men are empty overcoats.

MINNIE You shall plead with Pharaoh, but I shall harden Pharaoh's heart, and he will not let the people go.

GROUCHO Now, why would you do a silly thing like that?

MINNIE So that I may multiply My signs and wonders.

GROUCHO Couldn't you do it faster with a calculator? Listen,

God, I can't speak to Pharaoh. First of all, I'm a wanted criminal, and second of all, I am slow of speech.

MINNIE Slow of speech? Why, you never shut up!

GROUCHO How could I possibly convince Pharaoh to give up hundreds of thousands of slaves?

MINNIE I will be with you. And just because I like you, take along your brother Aaron to speak on your behalf.

GROUCHO No kidding! Aaron? Why, I haven't seen him in years. So, he'll speak to Pharaoh, is that right?

HARPO *(honks)*

GROUCHO This is gonna be just great. I can hardly wait to go back to Egypt and see Pharaoh again. What great times we'll have - you, me, and that bicycle horn, in the dungeon, for the rest of our lives.

MINNIE Aaron will create signs and wonders and Pharaoh will know that he faces a power greater than he.

SAM And so Moses, with his brother Aaron by his side, returned to Egypt to free the Hebrew slaves.

GROUCHO Okay, Aaron, you have everything you need to convince the Pharaoh to let our people go. These Egyptians are suckers for magic tricks. You've got a staff that turns into a snake, and a snake that turns into a staff. You've got a trick that turns your hand white. You've got a sea lion in your raincoat. You're a regular David Copperfield. According to a bush I met in Midian, the fix is in. Pharaoh will know a greater power than himself. What could possibly go wrong?

HARPO *(honks)*

GROUCHO Well, if Pharaoh's palace is in a hospital zone we might have a problem. Well, what do you know,

here's the big mummy himself.

CHICO Hey, Moses! You look-a great! How long's it been?

GROUCHO Well, I'm eighty now, so it's been, what, eighty years?

CHICO You look-a fine. You married yet?

GROUCHO Yes, I was married not too long ago. I'll never forget my wedding day ... they threw vitamin pills.

CHICO So, Moses, what can-a I do fa you?

GROUCHO I'd like you to let the Hebrew slaves go, just long enough so they can have a seder in the wilderness. Then they'll be right back.

CHICO Ha! You no fool-a me! They're gonna go to the racetrack.

GROUCHO No, seriously, Pharaoh, you have to let my people go. If you don't, my ancestors would rise from their graves and I'd only have to bury them again.

CHICO The slaves, they-a stay right here.

GROUCHO Well, don't say I didn't warn you. Aaron, do your trick.

CHICO So he turn the stick into a snake. My magician, he can-a do that too. Hey, Zeppo!

ZEPPPO Here goes! Wait, that wasn't supposed to happen.

GROUCHO Looks like your boy turned his staff into a duck. He forgot the magic word. Very impressive.

CHICO I spend thousands-a dollars to send him to magic school, and what do I get?

GROUCHO You get awfully tiresome after a while. Look, Pharaoh, since you're so hardhearted, I'm going to have to send a plague in your direction. The wa-

ters of the Nile have just turned to blood.

CHICO Hey, turn it back! I can't stand da sight-a blood.

GROUCHO Will you let the slaves go?

CHICO Sure, why not?

ZEPPPO The Nile has just turned back to water again.

CHICO Ots-a fine. Now, get outta here, I'm not lettin' da slaves go.

GROUCHO I'd get really mad, but I know it's just the bush talking. Let's save some time here. Rather than go through all that again, what do you say I just tell you the next eight plagues? Frogs, lice, wild beasts, cattle disease, boils, hail, locusts, and darkness.

CHICO I-a no let da slaves go because I gotta heartburn.

GROUCHO I could sense that coming. What do you take for heartburn?

CHICO Sometimes I take-a aspirin, an' sometimes I take-a calomel.

GROUCHO I'd walk a mile for a - never mind, that's too easy. You know, I think you're the greatest Pharaoh that ever lived?

CHICO Really?

GROUCHO No, but I don't mind lying if it gets me somewhere ... Pharaoh, you've been hit with nine plagues. All of them were highly unpleasant. Thus says the Lord, God of the Hebrews: so, what do you say, will you let the slaves go?

CHICO Shut up you face and get outta here, Moses, we don't need no slaves no more in Egypt.

GROUCHO Where shall I send the bill? That's six hundred thousand slaves, four hundred years each - even at

a non-union rate, it's quite a pile of change, you must admit.

HARPO *(honks)*

GROUCHO Plus a delivery charge.

HARPO *(honks twice)*

GROUCHO Plus bricks and mortar.

CHICO Ots-a fine. Take whatever you want.

GROUCHO So, how does one get out of Egypt?

CHICO Take-a left at Giza, cross the Nile Delta and then you get on-a da first cataract.

GROUCHO That might be hard to see. Well, Pharaoh, it's been nice talking to you and I look forward to never seeing you again.

ZEPPO Oh, great Pharaoh, how can you let the Hebrews go?

CHICO *(whispering)* Don' worry, I gotta plan.

SAM Before they left Egypt, Moses conveyed an interesting set of instructions to the Hebrews.

GROUCHO I thought you were a sheep.

SAM The sheep's part is over.

GROUCHO I wouldn't bet on it.

SAM Moses told the Hebrews to prepare for an unusual ritual before they left Egypt.

GROUCHO Hebrews, may I have your attention, please. Every family is to take one lamb from the flock, and sacrifice it. Then put its blood all around your door.

ZEPPO What a crackpot.

- GROUCHO In addition, you are instructed to avoid eating bread for a week, every year at this time.
- MINNIE Don't forget about the jewelry.
- GROUCHO Isn't that just like a woman! All right, then, everyone ask your neighbors to borrow their jewelry. If that works, ask to borrow all their shares of common stock. It's the least they owe us, considering all those years of hauling bricks, building pyramids, toting barges and lifting bales.
- SAM And at midnight, when the dreaded tenth plague struck Egypt, the children of Israel fled to the wilderness.
- HARPO (*honks*)
- GROUCHO Hey, what's the holdup? Where'd you learn to drive?
- HARPO (*honks*)
- GROUCHO Oh, now I see the problem. It's the sea. An enormous expanse of prime waterfront. Just when we thought we were free, we're stopped in our tracks. And I just put a security deposit on an apartment in Tel Aviv!
- SAM Suddenly, in the distance, Moses saw some strange figures.
- GROUCHO Exxon-Mobil 289, Apple 645, Alcoa 231 ...
- CHICO You just wait till I catch up with you, I'm-a make you sorry you were ever born!
- GROUCHO It's the Pharaoh and his army! They're headed straight for us. This whole thing sphinx.
- MINNIE Moses! This is God again.
- GROUCHO You better talk fast.

MINNIE Moses, hold your staff over the waters, and they will part.

GROUCHO At this point I'll try anything.

SAM And Moses parted the waters of the Red Sea, and the Israelites walked through to the other side.

HARPO (*honks*)

GROUCHO The Egyptians are walking through the Red Sea, too. Ain't that a kick in the pants.

MINNIE Just wait.

CHICO Hey, Moses, come back here! You an-a me gonna settle this once and-a for all!

GROUCHO Now, let's be reasonable about this.

CHICO Are you a man or a mouse?

GROUCHO Put a piece of cheese on the ground and you'll find out.

SAM As the Egyptians followed the Hebrews through the Red Sea, suddenly the waters closed again and the Egyptian army was drowned.

ZEPPO Why didn't I bring my swimmies?

GROUCHO I got Pharaoh a good steady position in a pyramid. Horizontal! Let it never be said that I don't take care of my friends.

SAM Boys, you've done a fine job, and you've been very patient sitting through the seder. But it's not over. There's someone outside who wants to come in.

GROUCHO If it's my bookie, you haven't seen me all day!

SAM No, it's Elijah, the invisible guest who visits every seder in the world. Chico, why don't you go and open the door for him?

- CHICO            I don't think so. He's-a come in and drink up all-a da wine!
- MARGARET      But it would be a great honor to meet such a distinguished visitor! Mrs. Marx, I appeal to you, please admit Mr. Elijah.
- CHICO            No, first I think I'm-a gonna sing "Dayenu."
- GROUCHO        Go sing next to that window and I'll help you out.
- CHICO            *If I had some tootsi-footsi,  
You can bet you sweet pitootsie,  
Tootsi-footsi, sweet pitootsie, Dayenu!*
- ZEPPO            Everybody! Day-dayenu, day-dayenu, day-dayenu - dayenu, dayenu!
- GROUCHO        There's my argument. Restrict immigration.
- MINNIE          Groucho, do as your father tells you and go open the door for Elijah.
- GROUCHO        I guess there's no getting out of this one. All right, I'm opening the door. Elijah, you sly dog - you want to come in?
- CHICO            Depends. What's the password? I give you three guesses.
- GROUCHO        Let's see - is it horseradish?
- CHICO            No, it's-a no horseradish.
- GROUCHO        Is it haroset?
- CHICO            No. Hey, I tell you what - it's a kind of fish.
- GROUCHO        A kind of a fish? Is it herring?
- CHICO            No.
- GROUCHO        Is it a mackerel?



CHICO No. What's-a da thing you put the coffee grounds in?

GROUCHO The filter?

CHICO That's-a right, you got it! Da-filter fish.

GROUCHO All right, Elijah, I guess you can come in.

CHICO Hey, a glassa wine! Here's mud in your eye!

MARGARET Where did he go? He was just here!

MINNIE He never stays long - he has a lot of Manishevitz to put away tonight.

SAM All right, that about wraps it up for the seder ...

ZEPPO Wait a minute, you can't stop here!

GROUCHO A seder should begin at the beginning and end at the ending. Anything less isn't right. Those are my principles, and if you don't like them, well, I've got others. What about our favorite songs? Like the one little goat that my father bought for two zuzim plus stock options?

HARPO (*honks*)

GROUCHO That's right, what about the afikomen? You don't think you're getting away with *that*, do you? A fine father *you* turned out to be! Taking dry crackers from your family's mouths! Chico, go find that afikomen!

CHICO Eh, you want I should-a steal?

ZEPPO Oh, no, no! It's not stealing.

CHICO Well, then, I couldn't do it.

ZEPPO But we *have* to find it!

CHICO Harpo, he can-a find it. Why, he got a nose just

like-a bloodhound. And the rest-a his face don't look so good either.

SAM Harpo, get your hand out of my pocket!

MINNIE Very good, son, you've found the afikomen.

CHICO You want-a da afikomen, we give you a good deal. One dollar.

GROUCHO One dollar?

CHICO One dollar and you'll remember me all your life.

GROUCHO That's the most nauseating proposition I've ever had. All right, fine. Father, we'd like to present you with this afikomen. You'll need it to finish this seder. I have nothing but confidence in you, and very little of that.

SAM We conclude the seder with these inspiring words: next year in Jerusalem!

GROUCHO I'd settle for Palm Springs.

MARGARET My dear Mr. and Mrs. Marx, thank you so much for your kind invitation.

GROUCHO Mrs. Dumont, I've had a perfectly wonderful evening, but unfortunately this wasn't it.

My friends, that's it for the seder, the most fun you can have in a small room with two dozen relatives. It's nice to see you, but I've got nobody to blame but myself. You're welcome to come back tomorrow for our second seder; just follow the trail of matza crumbs up Lexington Avenue. For now, I think I've earned a nice after-dinner cigar. Ta-ta!

