

# ASHLEY BLAKER, A FRUM **Funnyman**



## THE UK'S BIGGEST KIBBITZER CHATS WITH TJH

By Yoni Mercan

**A** comedian gets up on stage wearing a white shirt, black pants, peyos behind the ears, and his tzitzis hanging out. No, this is not the start of a Jewish joke; it's a description of Ashley Blaker, a stand-up comedian who has performed all over the UK, in Israel and in South Africa. Ashley is now heading to the United States, where audiences are lining up to get their velvet yarmulkes knocked off by his punchlines. He took a few minutes out of his busy schedule practicing jokes in front of the mirror to chat with *The Jewish Home*.

**Ashley, you've been in comedy for many years. When did you find out that you are "funny"?**

My parents tell me that when I was three-years-old I would perform something I called "Rude News" while we waited for my brother's school bus to come. This basically involved me sitting on a low chair we have in our front room and saying, in the style of an old-fashioned BBC news reader, things like "The Queen is currently sat on the toilet." I can't recall this myself but I think it's pretty sophisticated for a three-year-old. Some may even say it's the funniest thing I've ever done as well but I think that would be cruel of them.

**So you've been funny for a while. Tell us about your career as a producer.**

It was amazing *hashgacha* pra-

*tis*. I had no idea of what I wanted to do with my life and then one Thursday evening I went for a drink with a couple of former teachers from high school. One of them said to me, "Why don't you look in the media supplement of *The Guardian* newspaper?" I wasn't a *Guardian* reader (it was, and still is, a very left-wing, antiZionist newspaper) but he told me that the supplement was in Monday's paper so four days later I bought *The Guardian* for the first time. And there was an advert that read, "Do You Have Funny Bones? The BBC need trainee comedy producers." I applied on an off-chance and started work there ten weeks later. The advert was only in the paper that one week. In fact, I also bought the paper every Monday in those ten weeks

and didn't even apply for another job!

If that isn't incredible enough, a week before I was due to start I was walking in London and bumped into someone called Matt Lucas who I had been in high school with but hadn't seen for three or four years. I told him about my job and how we should do something and the direct result was a series called "Little Britain," which is commercially the most successful comedy show the BBC has ever produced! It was the first thing I made at the BBC and it was all because I bumped into someone on the right day!

**That's unbelievable! Is there a "school" for comedy that you went to?**

No, there isn't but I kind of went

to the closest thing to it. I went to a really good high school called Haberdashers' Aske's in north London and the school has strangely produced something like 15 people currently involved in comedy either as performers or senior producers. Among them is not only Matt Lucas (Americans may know him best from "Bridesmaids" or "Doctor Who") but also Sacha Baron Cohen who was four years above me.

**Borat! He's really funny. Where do you find your best material?**

Most of my comedy just comes from my daily life. Much of it is about my experiences as a *baal teshuva*, a lot comes from working in TV comedy, and a lot comes just from going to shul. I am blessed by going to a shul that provides enough material to keep me going for another few decades, I think. In fact, I think the Jewish people in general provide a lot of material so there is never any fear of running out of ideas.

**You became frum twenty years ago. What made you change paths?**

There wasn't any moment of epiphany. When we got married we received a year's free membership at our local shul and so I thought I should go along and see what it was like. The rabbi was a very smiley man called David Lister and he came off the *bimah* and was so friendly I decided to go back the following week. The trouble is I am very bad at saying no to people so when he saw me and said, "We struggle with a *minyán* on Shabbos afternoons. Is there any way you could come back for Mincha?" I felt compelled to say yes. He obviously thought, "I've got one here" and then asked me if I was free on Sunday morning as well. By the end of the week I was going every day! Then I realized I better start learning so I would know what I was doing.

**Since becoming frum, how has your career path changed? Have you encountered any challenges since then?**

Yes, lots of challenges but the great thing is that it's provided me with a huge amount of material. For exam-

ple, I speak a lot in my show about the challenges of working in a very touchy-feely industry like the media when you don't shake hands with members of the opposite gender apart from your spouse. The amazing thing is all these men in Hollywood are now getting in trouble for having been too handsy – and I've offended people for refusing to be! It's also a very social industry and I can't go out with people for a drink on a Friday night. I've invited them all to my *shteeble* for Kabbalas Shabbos but they've always turned me

*sidewalk*; each *mobile* is now a *cell-phone*; and *nappies* are now *diapers*. I have even had to lose one of my favorite jokes of which the punchline is "on your head be it." See, you don't know what that means, do you? That's why I have had to remove it. But trust me, it was hilarious.

But the good news is the subject matter hasn't had to be translated at all. Because as I've discovered over the past few years, Jews are pretty much the same all over the world. In fact, when videos of me performing have

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down for some reason. I'm pretty sure it's because they all daven *nusach Ashkenaz* and we daven *nusach Sefard*.

**Yes, it's certainly because of that. Ashley, you are English but have done stand-up in South Africa, Israel, and now in the United States. Does comedy differ depending on the country the audience is in? Do you have to tailor your act for different countries?**

Linguistically everything has to be adapted. Readers will be pleased to hear that I have been through the show with a fine toothcomb and every British word or phrase has been replaced. Every *pavement* is now a

been posted online, many people have commented, "Wow, I thought that was just a Crown Heights thing." No, it turns out we triple park and leave the car with the hazard lights on everywhere! The Jewish obsession with sushi? Yep, that's the same in Golders Green and Stamford Hill as it is in Flatbush and the Five Towns. Men all over the world go to work on the subway wearing a baseball hat to hide their *kippah* despite obviously being Jewish. Shuls have the same characters everywhere, from the security obsessives to that man who thinks he's really interesting because he always wears a bowtie Friday night. We even have the same hand gestures through-

out the world for *hagba*, *gelilah* and opening and closing the Aron. It doesn't matter what language they speak, go into any shul and if someone does one of those signs at you, you'll know exactly what he means.

**How do you prepare for a show?**

This normally involves me rehearsing in front of my wife who doesn't even smile, let alone laugh. At the end I ask, "What did you think?" She normally replies politely, "Well, you know I'm not a good judge." After I've performed for her no other audience can be as tough.

**Who is your favorite Jewish comedian?**

Me. Next question.

**Do you have any advice for aspiring comedians?**

Well, if they are Jewish I would talk to them about *hasagas gevul* and that since I am already doing this then it is forbidden for them to infringe on my *parnassa*. Tough luck, I'm afraid: I got here first, you now need me to either retire or die. Sorry, I didn't write the *halachos*!

**Your show is called "Strictly Unorthodox." But aren't you the only Orthodox comedian in the UK?**

I liked the name "Strictly Unorthodox" because I think it sums me up quite well. I am strictly orthodox but I am also unorthodox in several ways. I am definitely unorthodox for an orthodox Jew: there aren't many who do what I do. But then I'm also unorthodox for a comedian because they don't tend to look like me either and very unorthodox in the TV business walking through the BBC wearing a black hat and with my *tzitzis* hanging out. My wife and I are also quite unorthodox in many ways and have made unusual decisions like adopting our daughter with Down syndrome when we already had a houseful, including two autistic sons. Maybe we're just crazy but I think unorthodox is a better adjective.

