

# *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

ZEPPO

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.

*Baruh ata Adonai, elohaynoo meleh ha-olam, boray p'ree ha-gafen.*

We praise You, Adonai our God, who together with the blessed sages of our people – the Manishevitz 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.
- ZEPPO 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.
- ZEPPO 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 over-coats.*

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!

ZEPPO 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?

ZEPPO       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 talkin'. 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-frootsi,  
You can bet you sweet pitootsie,  
Tootsi-frootsi, 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!

