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## Jews and Humor

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# Jews and Humor

Studies in Jewish Civilization  
Volume 22

Proceedings of the  
Twenty-Second Annual Symposium  
of the Klutznick Chair in Jewish Civilization-  
Harris Center for Judaic Studies

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How Today's Jews Celebrate, Commemorate, and Commiserate

# Jews and Humor

Studies in Jewish Civilization  
Volume 22

Editor:  
Leonard J. Greenspoon

The Klutznick Chair in Jewish Civilization

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Dedicated to  
Dorothy C. Riekes

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# Acknowledgments

The Twenty-Second Annual Klutznick-Harris Symposium took place in Omaha, Nebraska, on October 25 and 26, 2009. Like this volume, it was titled “Jews and Humor.”

All of the chapters in this collection, with the exception of the one by Jordan Finken, are based on presentations made at the Symposium. Finken’s paper first appeared as an article, with the same title, in *Jewish Social Studies* 16:1(2009): 85-110, published by Indiana University Press. Finken’s article is reprinted here with the Press’s permission.

The first Symposium that I organized was held in October 1996. The Symposium on “Jews and Humor” is therefore the fourteenth one in which I have played a role—if my math is correct. While we have, over the years, developed positive working relationships with a number of people, the planning and implementation of a Symposium, even one related to jokes and story telling, are not all fun and games—although a sense of humor is *sine qua non*.

It is equally important to make sure that the people with whom you work combine expertise and experience with their own individual senses of humor. In this regard, I have been, I don’t mind saying, blessed in all respects by my colleagues: Dr. Ronald Simkins, director of the Kripke Center for the Study of Religion and Society at Creighton; Dr. Jean Cahan, director of the Harris Center for Judaic Studies at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln; and Mrs. Fran Minear, who works with both Ron and me. Additionally, Mary Sue Grossman, of the Omaha Jewish Federation’s Center for Jewish Education, insures that everything runs smoothly at the Jewish Community Center, where our presentations take place on Sunday. An equally committed group of individuals works with us on Monday for an equally smooth series of events on the Creighton campus.

This volume is the second in our collaboration with the Purdue University Press, whose staff, under director Charles Watkinson, has consistently made us feel at home among the growing number of Jewish Studies publications of the Press.

In addition to the the Harris Center, the Kripke Center, and the Jewish Federation of Omaha, this Symposium was nourished and supported by the generosity of the following:

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The Riekens Family

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The Center for Jewish Education  
The Henry Monsky Lodge of B'nai B'rith  
The Dr. Bruce S. Bloom Memorial Endowment  
and Others

This volume is dedicated, in loving memory, to Dorothy C. Riekas, whose generous support has enabled us to bring together the community at each Symposium.

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## Editor's Introduction

Just the other day something very funny happened to me on my way to work. And it wasn't long ago that I heard a great joke. How about that really humorous movie I saw last month?

I guess that I can admit it: I'm pretty good at identifying—and appreciating—humor when I hear it, or see it, or read it. Perhaps, nobody enjoys a good joke as much as (or even more than) I do.

None of this makes me a particularly funny person or a humorous one (if there is a distinction between the two). However, it does allow me to benefit, and derive great pleasure, from my role as editor of this volume because I have been afforded the opportunity to be the first to read each of the fourteen chapters that make up this collection. And, I am happy to report, each of these chapters is a delight to read, a fine example of what I might term a felicitous cooperation between style and subject matter.

Alas, this is not always the case among scholars, who have the unfortunate propensity to overanalyze, overload, and overlook even (or especially?) when presented with a topic so naturally enchanting as Jews and Humor. In no way am I diminishing the significance of research in this area or the difficulties that arise when trying to isolate salient and distinguishing features of this phenomenon; at the same time, I can barely suppress a sigh of contented relief that these authors really do allow the humor that they are discussing to shine forth.

It is with this thought in mind that I am including one joke or humorous story from each chapter in this Introduction. To the degree that we can “get” the joke or point prior to reading the chapter, the material that I have selected for inclusion here may be thought of as universally accessible. But, as will become increasingly evident as readers go to the individual chapters themselves, many of these jokes or stories reveal the fullness of their multivalent richness only to those who appreciate the background or context in which the story and storytelling originated.

### **Charles David Isbell, “*Humor in the Bible*”**

The career of the great prophet Elisha was filled with miraculous deeds.... Even after his death, the miraculous power of Elisha did not abate. His ultimate feat is described as follows: “Elisha died and they buried him. Now robber bands of Moabites came into the country annually. One time, people were burying a man when they spied the robber band. So they threw the dead body into the grave of Elisha and took off. When the dead man touched the

bones of Elisha, he came back to life and stood on his feet” (2 Kgs 13:20-21). No one could fail to be impressed at such power. Yet in this narrative, what is left unsaid is terribly important, at least to one character in it. Put yourself in the place of the resurrected man. You have just died. Without your awareness, faithful members of the *hevra qaddisha* [burial society] have prepared your lifeless body for burial. Then the miracle happens, and you regain consciousness. You come back to life, but are still tightly wrapped in your shroud and unable to run. The first thing you see is a robber band of Moabites ferocious enough to have chased away all of your pallbearers. Now you will surely die a second time, more than likely in quite an unpleasant manner. Resurrection for you would be a mixed blessing at best.

**David Brodsky**, *“Why Did the Widow Have a Goat in Her Bed? Jewish Humor and Its Roots in the Talmud and Midrash”*

Genesis Rabbah 26: Rabban Gamaliel married off his daughter. She said to him, “Father, bless me.” He said, “May you never come back here.” She gave birth to a son. She said to him, “Father, bless me.” He said to her, “May ‘Oy vey!’ never cease from your mouth.” She said to him, “Father, two happy occasions have come to me, and you have cursed me [on both]!” He said to her, “Both are blessings. Since you have peace in your house, you won’t return here. And since your son will survive [infancy], ‘Oy vey!’ will never cease from your mouth: ‘Oy vey that my son didn’t eat! ‘Oy vey that he didn’t drink! ‘Oy vey that he didn’t go to shul!”

**Eliezer Diamond**, *“But Is It Funny? Identifying Humor, Satire, and Parody in Rabbinic Literature”*

Moses is standing at Sinai and God says to him, “You shall not boil a kid in its mother’s milk.”

Moses asks, “So are You saying that we shouldn’t eat milk and meat together?”

God replies a little impatiently, “I said: You shall not boil a kid in its mother’s milk.”

Moses, still puzzled, says, “Do you want us to wait six hours after a meat meal before eating dairy foods? Is that what you mean?”

God, a bit more impatiently this time, reiterates, “I said: You shall not boil a kid in its mother’s milk.”

Moses asks again, “Wait. You want us to use separate tablecloths for meat meals and dairy meals?”

God replies with resignation, “You know what? Have it your way.”

**Peter J. Haas, “Masekhet Purim”**

Masekhet Purim: Our rabbis taught, R. Shikran [Drunkard] and R. Hamran [Wine-maker] were the descendants of Noah and once they were on the road and the time arrived for the obligation of the day to drink but they had no wine. They kneeled down and fell on their faces and burst out in cries and said, “*Ribbono shel Olam* [Master of the Universe], revealed and known to You it is that our father’s father, Noah, was the first *tzaddik* [righteous person] in the world and it was he who brought wine into the world in order to fulfill the mitzvah of the day and we, the children of his children, do not have wine this day to drink in order to fulfill the mitzvah of the day and our end will be to die of thirst on this road.” Thereupon their eyes opened and they saw before them a well of wine and they drank and became drunk. This well is called by their names, the well of drunkenness [Be’er Shikurim], to this day.

**Joanna Sliwa, “Jewish Humor as a Source of Research on Polish-Jewish Relations”**

In the monumental synagogue in Łódź, which was located on the corner of Kościuszki and Zielona [streets] before the Nazis have destroyed it, the prayer services were held only on Saturdays and holidays. Because this house of worship was mainly used by the plutocracy, one had to obtain expensive entrance cards in order to enter it.

On Rosh Hashanah, a Jew in a caftan tries to enter the building. He is stopped at the door by the *shammes* [a sexton in a synagogue]. “Entrance card?”

“What card?! I have urgent business with factory owner Rosenblatt.”

The *shammes* says sarcastically: “I already know you, you thief! You have no business to do with Mr. Rosenblatt. You came here to pray!”

**Jordan Finkin, “Jewish Jokes, Yiddish Storytelling, and Sholem Aleichem: A Discursive Approach”**

When one tells a joke to a farmer, he laughs three times. The first time he laughs when one tells him the joke; the second time when one explains it to him; and the third time when he understands it.

A nobleman laughs twice. One time he laughs when one tells it to him and the second time when one explains it, because in any case he doesn’t understand it.

An officer only laughs once: when one tells it to him, because he won’t let it be explained and he doesn’t understand.

But a Jew, when one tells him a joke, says: “What are you talking about! That’s an old joke!” and he can tell the joke better!

**Leonard M. Helfgott**, “*Groucho, Harpo, Chico, and Karl: Immigrant Humor and the Depression*”

*The Big Store* (1941): Groucho: “Martha, dear, there are many bonds that will hold us together through eternity.”

Dumont: “Really, Wolf? What are they?”

Groucho: “Your Government Bonds, your Saving Bonds, your Liberty Bonds.”

**Michael W. Rubinoff**, “*Nuances and Subtleties in Jewish Film Humor*”

*Blazing Saddles* (Mel Brooks, 1974): Scene: Three Indians on horseback approach a wagon with a black family of a man, wife, and young son. The chief wearing paint and war bonnet peers carefully in at the family.

CHIEF *Shvartzes!* [One brave holds up his tomahawk, but the chief motions him to be still] No, no, *seit ist meshugah*. [Chief shouts to the sky] *Laz im gehn!* [Chief speaks to the family] Cop a walk. It’s alright.

FATHER Thank you.

YOUNG SON Thank you.

CHIEF *Abi gezint*. Take off. [The wagon leaves and he turns to one brave] *Haz they gesehn in deinen leben?* They’re darker than us! Whoof!

**Giovanna P. Del Negro**, “*The Bad Girls of Comedy: Gender, Class, Assimilation, and Whiteness in Postwar America*”

Belle Barth: This is a story about the Jewish man who wanted to check into the Kennelberry [Kennelworth] Hotel in Miami Beach, and the clerk says, “It’s restricted.” The guy says, [with Yiddish accent] “Who’s a Jew?” “If you’re not a Jew, you wouldn’t mind answering three questions,” the guy says. “Fire away.” [The clerk] said, “Who was our Lord?” He says, “Jesus Christ.” “Where was He born?” “In a stable.” “Why was he born in a stable?” He says, “Because a rat bastard like you wouldn’t rent him a room.”

**Joyce Antler**, “*One Clove From a Pomander Ball: The Subversive Tradition of Jewish Female Comedians*”

Judy Gold: “My mother is the most annoying person on the face of the earth,” she jokes, “a miserable human being.” “You can say something to her and she cannot only make it negative, she makes it about herself. What are you having

for New Year's, filet mignon? I'll be eating shit." [Her] mother's just-published autobiography, she has quipped, is titled *I Came, I Saw, I Criticized*.

**Jason Kalman**, "*Heckling the Divine: Woody Allen, the Book of Job, and Jewish Theology after the Holocaust*"

Woody Allen: So that leaves Job's wife. My favorite woman in all of literature. Because when her cringing, put-upon husband asked the Lord "Why me?" and the Lord told him to shut up and mind his own business and that he shouldn't even dare ask, Job accepted it, but the Missus, already in the earth at that point, had previously scored with a quotable line of unusual dignity and one that Job would have been far too obsequious to come up with: "Curse God and die" was the way she put it. And I loved her for it because she was too much of her own person to let herself be shamelessly abused by some vain and sadistic Holy Spirit.

**Joan Latchaw and David Peterson**, "*Tragicomedy and Zikkaron in Mel Brooks's To Be or Not To Be*"

Mel Brooks, *To Be or Not To Be* (1983): Anna: Oh, sugarplum I'm so glad you're ok!

Bronski: Don't sugarplum me. Save it for your boyfriend, Lt. Sobinski!

Anna: Alright, we'll discuss that later. What did you do with Siletski's body?

Bronski: Never mind Siletski's body! What did you do with Sobinski's body?

Anna: How can you ask a question like that at a time like this?! Don't you realize Capt. Schultz out there is ready to take you to see Col. Erhardt who's head of the Gestapo?!

**Theodore Albrecht**, "*They Ain't Makin' Jews Like Jesus Anymore: The Musical Humor of Kinky Friedman and The Texas Jewboys in Historical and Geographical Perspective*"

It is surprisingly difficult to develop an accurate biographical sketch of Kinky Friedman. Internet sources make it easy to compile the roughest outline of Friedman's life, but he himself has written, "I don't have a computer. Nor am I ever likely to have one. I think that the internet is the work of Satan." Indeed, the devil is in the details, and in fact many sources contradict each other, lending credence to Friedman's own pronouncement, "My life is a work of fiction."

**David Gillota**, *“The New Jewish Blackface: African American Tropes in Contemporary Jewish Humor”*

*Curb Your Enthusiasm*: Larry David: “Now let me get this straight; your last name is Black? . . . That’s like if my last name was Jew, like Larry Jew.”

After an awkward pause, Larry goes on to explain: “Cause I’m Jewish. . . . Don’t you see? You’re black; I’m Jewish!”

\* \* \*

As can be seen, the chronological range of these essays is vast: from the Hebrew Bible to the 2000s, with many stops in between for Talmudic texts, medieval parodies, eighteenth century joke books, and twentieth century popular entertainment. The subject matter is equally impressive. In addition to rounding up many of the “usual suspects,” such as Woody Allen, the Marx Brothers, and Gilda Radner, these authors have also scouted out some unlikely comic resources, like the author of the biblical book of Exodus, the rabbinic writer of *Genesis Rabbah*, and the party records star Belle Barth.

Without relying on constrictive definitions or pre-constructed molds, the scholars who contributed to this collection allow readers both to discern the common features that make up “Jewish humor” and to delight in the individualism and eccentricities of the many figures whose lives and accomplishments are narrated here.

I do not assert that these authors, either individually or collectively, have come up with the definitive description of “humor.” Nor have they arrived at a consensus on what makes certain types, instances, or performances of humor “Jewish.” But this is as it should be—for the laughs you hear and experience when reading this volume are not the last laughs. Rather, they form part of a series that I, at least, hope will never cease.

Leonard J. Greenspoon



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# Humor in the Bible

Charles David Isbell

Understanding the world of the Bible can seem daunting for those of us who live in the twenty-first century. Not only are we confronted with an ancient language radically different from modern, especially Western tongues, but we also face a bewildering assortment of customs and cultural conventions that often leave us puzzled. And the content of biblical literature is so very serious. In its pages, we are reading about Almighty God, trials of faith, sin and punishment, truth and justice, heaven and earth. It is understandable that few people turn to the Bible for really good jokes.

But once in a while the veil lifts and we see that even holy ancient narrators could not always resist the humorous angles of a story. In this essay, I want to examine several such instances. To be sure, each of these stories deals with matters of utmost gravity, which even a bit of comic relief does not mask completely. But once in a while, a humorous touch makes an otherwise serious biblical narrative particularly delightful—and unforgettable.

## AARON AND THE MIRACULOUS GOLDEN CALF: EXODUS 32:1-24

We turn first to the picture of a sober religious professional, the father of all priests, Aaron himself. The story of the golden calf constructed in the wilderness is among the better-known narratives in the Bible. Following closely upon the apodictic commandments in Exodus 20 and the “if . . . then” regulations set forth in “The Book of the Covenant” (Exod 20:22-23:33), Moses takes his leave of the people to commune alone with God and receive instructions for the construction of the portable shrine in which the two sacred tablets containing the Ten Commandments will be housed. During the absence of Moses, the people are left without human leadership and without visible evidence of divine presence. We know that Moses and YHWH spend forty days discussing the architectural plan for the *miškan*<sup>1</sup> because we are allowed to read their conversation. Yet even for us, the architectural details, given both in the planning (Exod 25-31) and later during the actual building stages (Exod 35-40) are difficult to grasp with full appreciation. While God could create the entire cosmos in six days and a single chapter in Genesis, several weeks and thirteen long chapters of Exodus are expended on the construction of

one small portable shrine.<sup>2</sup> During all this time, the people have no idea why Moses is staying away so long.

From a theological perspective, three major ideas stand forth. First, the people whose status in slavery [*avôdah*] had once required that they build whatever the Pharaoh ordered (Exod 1:11) now must construct a portable sanctuary to be used in the “service” [again *avôdah*] of their new Master. Second, the God who had heretofore been accessible only on occasion now offers a permanent symbol of His presence among the people. Third, the geographical possibilities for worship are expanded from a single holy mountain standing in a fixed location to a portable sanctuary that will move wherever the people must travel.

From a literary perspective, Exodus 24:12-31:18 prepare us to understand the anxiety experienced by people left alone at the base of the holy mountain (Exod 32:1) while their leader wanders off alone. A cursory reading of Exodus 24:12 leads us to imagine only a simple transaction between Moses and YHWH that will not take very long. But as our reading unveils the complicated nature of the forty-day conversation and as we remember that the people are not privy to it, their impatience is understandable. They clearly panicked at the thought of being without their great leader: “We do not know what has become of this man Moses who brought us up from the land of Egypt” (Exod 32:1). Still, it is one thing to disbelieve, as the people have done often earlier, and quite another to disobey, as they do now. Thus their command to Aaron, “Make us a god” (Exod 32:1), comes as a structural shock in the narrative. We have observed Israel longing for the security of Egypt (Exod 16:3), frantic for water (Exod 15:24; 17:2), driven to despair by hunger (Exod 16:3), and desperate for answers (Exod 18:23). But not until this moment have they completely disregarded not only the miracles of YHWH that they have witnessed both in Egypt and in the desert but also their own solemn promises to accept Him alone as their exclusive deity.

God, of course, knew all along what they were doing and accordingly ordered Moses back to camp to face the sordid situation. There he prepared a magic potion for the sinners to ingest, threw down and shattered in disgust the two tablets of the Law, and finally came face to face with his older brother Aaron. His opening question (Exod 32:21) is telling: “What did these people do to you?”

I was married for fifteen years to an artist and watched her create jewelry on many an occasion. First she made a precise cast that was filled with wax. Next she melted the metal at an extremely high temperature. Then she poured the liquid metal into the cast, careful not to spill a single drop, and waited for

it to harden back into solid form before breaking the cast with great care so as not to damage her creation. And then she would take a variety of rasps and files to smooth out the burrs and other imperfections of the image being created. This step alone involved hours of sweat and great patience. Only then was she ready to use a variety of engraving tools to create the finished product.

The response of Aaron indicates clearly that my former wife wasted a lot of time and effort in these preliminary steps. Had she been a more careful student of Scripture, Aaron's answer to Moses would have saved her countless hours: "The people gave [miscellaneous pieces of gold] to me, I threw them into the fire, and out came this calf" (Exod 32:24). And such a calf! It was so awe inspiring that it looked like a god in whose honor a great party was necessary (Exod 32:6). This is surely a greater miracle than has been previously recognized!

Years ago, when my son was about six years old, I entered the kitchen shortly before supper time to find him standing on the counter top. Both of his cheeks bulged, he was clutching two chocolate cookies in each hand, his face and hair were littered with crumbs, and the cookie jar stood beside him gaping open. "Baraq," I sputtered, "did you get into the cookie jar?" Not an original question, I admit, but I really was at a loss for words! I can still see him standing there caught in the act. And I can still hear his response, the sound mangled so badly through the mouthful of cookies that only a trained linguist—or a father—could understand him: "No sir."

Well, actually, it was more like, "*Nuw thioor.*"

I know I should have looked stern, but I could not keep myself from laughing. And I think the Torah is probably being kind to omit the true response of Moses as he faced Aaron standing there, still clutching his engraving tools but denying all involvement in the creation of the golden calf. I am convinced that Moses laughed too.

I am not arguing that the point of the golden calf story is to serve as the background for a standup comedy routine, nor do I overlook the implications of the text regarding the relative significance of Aaron vis-à-vis Moses. The fact that Aaron refused to accept personal responsibility for his actions also remains clear, and the narrators could have made the point forcibly with arid prose. But they did not. They used a comical description of Aaron to great advantage, giving us a word picture not easily forgotten.

#### BIL'AM'S ASS: NUMBERS 22:21-35

The second story involves a foreign religious professional and a "dumb" animal. According to the prevailing scholarly view,<sup>3</sup> Numbers 22:2-25:9 is not an

artistically crafted unit offering a single point of view but a puzzling gumbo of stories featuring a character who, although he is given only one name throughout, nevertheless seems to be at least two very different individuals. On the one hand, Bil'am is a money-grubbing "diviner."<sup>4</sup> On the other hand, he is merely a pawn of YHWH. He is introduced as a professional "seer," but he does not "see" his own heavenly destroyer standing with sword drawn directly in front of him. At times, he stands up boldly to King Balak, but at other times he is entirely the sycophant. So it is clear, even for the person who is committed to understanding the theological impact of biblical stories in their canonical shape, that "Bil'am" presents a great challenge.

We begin with a simple question. Why are the Bil'am stories placed just here in the overall Torah narrative? The first twenty-one chapters of Numbers have chronicled six episodes of Israelite rebellion in the wilderness, even including the "sin" committed by Moses himself (Num 20:12), an act viewed so negatively as to provide justification for the fact that Moses would not be allowed to lead the Israelites into the land of promise. Everett Fox is surely correct that Bil'am provides "a welcome relief from the depressing and at times exasperating narratives of rebellion [suggesting] that, as we leave the old generation to die out in the wilderness, God's own 'cursing' of the people because of their rebelliousness will somehow, ultimately, be turned into blessing."<sup>5</sup> Bil'am and Balak are the two new characters introduced here for the first time. And it is telling that the narrators need to explain to us that Balak was the King of Moab (Num 22:4) because otherwise we would not know who he was. Conversely, mere mention of the name Bil'am ben Be'or is deemed sufficient for us to recognize who he was and what he did for a living. He was truly a character who "needed no introduction!"<sup>6</sup> What is significant is that the biblical text has little doubt that he was capable of affecting the outcome of a confrontation between Moab and Israel.

It is important to note the similarities between these Bil'am stories and the earlier story of the plagues in Egypt, and the biblical narrators call attention to these similarities using specific terms that cannot be misunderstood. The "loathing" felt by the Moabites for the Israelites links to similar feelings held earlier by the Egyptians,<sup>7</sup> and Balak's hyperbolic description of Israelite numbers echoes the paranoid fear of the earlier Pharaoh.<sup>8</sup> Likewise, the struggle over which people would "drive out" [*g-r-s*] the other reflects a clear exodus theme,<sup>9</sup> and the word *yada'* [know] is chosen to describe yet another foreign ruler who will be proven mistaken on all counts. Indeed, after Balak confidently asserts that he "knows" all about the efficacy of Bil'am's professional expertise (Num 22:6), the narrative proceeds to prove that he, like the

earlier king of Egypt, actually had no idea of the true identity and power of the deity of Israel (Exod 5:2).

We encounter in Numbers another king who is accustomed to giving orders that must be obeyed (22:16),<sup>10</sup> acquiring whatever he wants by command, power, money, or any other means.<sup>11</sup> His dramatic opposite is the deity of Israel who decrees that “only the word that I speak to you [Bil’am], that you may do,” a theme repeated so often that we clearly recognize it as the central idea of the entire corpus of stories. In other words, while Balak thinks he “knows” the outcome of the activities of Bil’am, he does not know that YHWH alone is in total control of that outcome. And just as YHWH’s control over Egypt had been certain before the first visit paid by Moses to the Pharaoh (Exod 3:8), so too is His control over Balak and Bil’am established from the outset. Bil’am refuses two lucrative offers from Balak not as a negotiating ploy to prompt an even higher offer but as an admission that there simply is not enough money in Balak’s kingdom to thwart the power of Israel’s God. Never in the stories does Bil’am say “I will not” to the offers of Balak. From start to finish, he simply says “I can not” [*lo’ ukhal*] do what you ask.<sup>12</sup>

So where is the humor in all of this? On one side are Moab and a paranoid but dangerous king seeking to hire a famous religious professional who has access to powers that could spell the doom of every single Israelite. On the other side stands YHWH, the deity of Israel. In the middle are the people of Israel, blissfully unaware that any danger exists. We want to believe that YHWH is in control, but we wonder why He inexplicably dispatches Bil’am on what the narrative understands to be his mission to destroy Israel. Who could hear this part of the story without questioning the very wisdom of God?

But, just as He had done in hardening the heart of the Pharaoh to set the stage for additional embarrassment right in his own country, out of nowhere God sends an emissary of death to kill the potential destroyer. OK. That makes more sense. There will be a fight to the death between Bil’am and the messenger of God, and that will be the end of it. Still, before there can be a fight, the two opponents have to find each other, and Bil’am, the internationally famous seer, cannot see his heavenly opponent. Enter the *’aton*, not just a silly ass, but a girl to boot! She sees the divine messenger of death whom Bil’am cannot see and swerves off course, only to receive a whack from her rider as he attempted to keep her on her original path (Num 22:25). When the messenger positioned himself in a narrow place between two walls to prevent the passage of Bil’am, the high-priced professional still saw nothing. So when the *’aton* pressed herself against the side of the mountain pass and crushed Bil’am’s foot in the process, she received another beating (Num 22:24-25). Then the



messenger advanced farther and took a position that trapped the hapless Bil'am completely, preventing him from turning right or left (Num 22:26). Almost incomprehensibly, Bil'am still saw nothing! So the 'aton, who had seen the danger all along, simply lay down under her rider. Her reward was beating number three.

Finally, the frustrated lowly animal began to converse with Bil'am in fluent biblical Hebrew. "What have I done to you that you have hit me three times?" And Bil'am, ever the consummate professional, answered (Num 22:28-30)! Only when YHWH uncovered his eyes (Num 22:31) did he finally see the messenger of death whom the 'aton had spotted from the outset. There can be no doubt about the ability of the deity who can manipulate a man stupid enough to converse with a jackass. Or, as one of my students suggested, perhaps the kind of man who thinks he can have an intelligent conversation with a jackass is more to be feared than any other kind!

#### KING SAUL IN DISGUISE: 1 SAMUEL 28:1-12

In our third incident, King Saul seeks advice following the death of Samuel. Once again the setting of the story is crucial. Samuel, long the trusted advisor to Saul, had died, and when the abandoned king sought answers via dreams, *Urim*, or prophets, "YHWH did not answer him" (1 Sam 28:6). In desperation, Saul ordered his courtiers to locate a "medium" [*'ešet ba'alat 'ov*]<sup>13</sup> to serve as his advisor (1 Sam 28:7), despite the fact that he himself had ordered their expulsion earlier (1 Sam 29:9). Of course, even in those days, long before Ronald Reagan's presidency, it would not do for the leader of the nation to be seen consulting a medium. So Saul contrived the brilliant idea of wearing different clothing to fool his consultant. Thus we are given the tongue-in-cheek picture of the Yao Ming of his day, King Saul, who towered over everyone in the kingdom from the shoulders up (1 Sam 10:23), attempting to disguise himself by the subtle means of changing his suit (1 Sam 28:8).

What is more, this professional, perceived to have secret access to information that was crucial to the entire nation, was absolutely fooled. One can only imagine Shaquille O'Neal walking into a local synagogue wearing a *kip-pah* [skull cap] and expecting not to be noticed. The biblical narrator could not have found a more striking way to underscore the truth that God alone possesses the wisdom of the universe.

#### GIDEON, THE MIGHTY WARRIOR IN HIDING: JUDGES 6:11-13

The next story centers on the career of Gideon, introduced in the narrative as he cowers inside the winepress of his father trying to keep the Midianites

from stealing his supper (Judg 6:11). But the divine messenger approaches him with nary a word of reproach about his attempt to hide, not a hint of the “be strong and courageous” encouragement so familiar from the conversations God had with Joshua (Josh 1:6, 9). Instead, he addresses the fearful Gideon with a title that smacks of irony: “May YHWH be with you, mighty warrior” [*gibbôr heHayil*].

Later, of course, we will learn that Gideon was such a master of military tactics that he could engineer the slaughter of 135,000 professional Midianite soldiers assisted by 300 Jews armed only with flashlights and kazoos (Judg 7:16; 8:10). That the story is about the power of God rather than Gideon is certain. But surely there is a hint of the humorous in the description of the fearful “mighty warrior” divinely chosen to lead the victory.

#### THE MAGICAL BONES OF ELISHA: 2 KINGS 13:20-21

The career of the great prophet Elisha was filled with miraculous deeds. His first recorded miracle was the parting of the Jordan River, which he accomplished with the mantle of his departed mentor Elijah (2 Kgs 2:14). But that was just the beginning. The new prophetic leader twice purified poisonous water (2 Kgs 2:19-22 and 4:38-41), called two she-bears from the woods to demolish forty-two truants who were taunting him about his baldness (2 Kgs 2:23-24),<sup>14</sup> rescued an impoverished widow financially by multiplying her oil provisions (2 Kgs 4:1-7), helped a childless woman with an old husband become pregnant and bear a son (2 Kgs 4:16-17),<sup>15</sup> and then brought the boy back to life after he died (2 Kgs 4:32-37).

There is more. With only a few ears of corn and twenty loaves of barley, Elisha fed 100 hungry men, who left satisfied and carrying doggie bags (2 Kgs 4:42-44). Our redoubtable prophet continued by healing a leper (2 Kgs 5:14), making an iron axe-head float (2 Kgs 6:1-7), and blinding an entire regiment of Syrian soldiers (2 Kgs 6:8-19).

Even after his death, the miraculous power of Elisha did not abate. His ultimate feat is described as follows: “Elisha died and they buried him. Now robber bands of Moabites came into the country annually. One time, people were burying a man when they spied the robber band. So they threw the dead body into the grave of Elisha and took off. When the dead man touched the bones of Elisha, he came back to life and stood on his feet” (2 Kgs 13:20-21). No one could fail to be impressed at such power. Yet in this narrative, what is left unsaid is terribly important, at least to one character in it. Put yourself in the place of the resurrected man. You have just died. Without your awareness, faithful members of the *hevra qaddisha* [burial society] have prepared your life-

less body for burial. Then the miracle happens, and you regain consciousness. You come back to life but are still tightly wrapped in your shroud and unable to run. The first thing you see is a robber band of Moabites ferocious enough to have chased away all of your pallbearers. Now you will surely die a second time, more than likely in quite an unpleasant manner. Resurrection for you would be a mixed blessing at best.

THE GERASENE DEMONIAK AND THE UNLUCKY PIG OWNER:  
MARK 5:1-16, MATTHEW 8:28-33, LUKE 8:26-39

I believe it is not inappropriate to include two incidents from the New Testament that contain a hint of the humorous, especially since both stories include details of interest to Jewish readers. The first concerns an incident that occurred in the region of Gerasa where Jesus encountered a man possessed by an evil spirit.<sup>16</sup> The poor unfortunate had been forced to live in the cemetery and was frequently shackled to prevent him from hurting himself. But so powerful was the evil spirit that eventually even shackles did not work, and the man set about gashing his body with sharp stones, running around shrieking twenty-four hours a day.

Naturally, the powerful evil spirit met its match in Jesus, who commanded it to depart from the poor victim. At that point, Jesus asked the evil spirit its name and learned that it was “Legion” because apparently an entire group had been working together against their victim (who is not named in the narrative). When “Legion” begged Jesus not to kick them completely out of the country, they also suggested an alternate plan, which Jesus adopted. So instead of banishing “Legion,” Jesus ordered them to infest a herd of 2,000 pigs (the ultimate unkosher animal) that happened to be feeding close at hand. The frightened pigs thereupon rushed headlong over a steep bank into the sea and drowned. We are not told whether “Legion” survived the fall. Furthermore, since the Sea of Galilee was about thirty-seven miles away from Gerasa, we may once again be dealing with a miracle of greater significance than is commonly realized.<sup>17</sup>

Clearly the point of the story is to emphasize the power of Jesus over the spirit world, and all who witnessed the event were appropriately awed. But imagine the plight of the hapless pig herders who were forced to report to their boss that all of his pigs were dead. Further, imagine the dismay of the owner, bereft of his entire capital investment in a single AIG-like stroke of misfortune. As we are not told whether “Legion” survived the angry waters, nor are we privileged to learn whether the herd owner declared bankruptcy or sought a

federal bailout. All in all, it is surely not surprising that the local Association of Pig Farmers officially requested that Jesus leave their region (Mark 5:17).

#### PAUL THE MAGICIAN: ACTS 19:11-16

The story of Paul's conversion to Christianity and subsequent evangelization endeavors is among the better-known stories in the New Testament. The book of Acts, which covers a large part of Paul's missionary travels, includes the notation that, along with his preaching in Ephesus, God worked countless miracles through the new apostle. This is very Elisha-like. In fact, Paul predates modern televangelists in sending out handkerchiefs that healed sick folk on contact and vanquished evil spirits (Acts 19:12). We are not told whether he charged a fee for this service. But naturally, some Jews who knew the history of miracle workers in the Bible felt that they should be entitled to copy the methods of Paul. So the story explains that "Some wandering Jewish exorcists attempted to use the name of the Lord Jesus over people who had evil spirits" and adds the specific formula they employed: "I adjure you by the Jesus whom Paul preaches" (Acts 19:13).

Now the narrative specifically identifies the exorcists as "the seven sons of Sceva," identified by Luke as "a Jewish chief priest," and this is problematic. Sceva may be a Greek or a Roman name, and no high priest by that name ever served in Jerusalem, leading some scholars to doubt that Sceva was in fact Jewish.<sup>18</sup> But these are details that need not detract from the point of the story, that only a certified Christian could access the power latent in the name Jesus. This is made clear by the reaction of the evil spirit, which did not simply ignore the uncertified exorcists but entered into dialogue with them: "I recognize Jesus, and I know about Paul, but who are you?" Failing to hear an adequate response, "the man with the evil spirit jumped on them, subdued all of them,<sup>19</sup> and overpowered them so that they fled from the house naked and wounded" (Acts 19:15-16). In other words, attempts by Jewish exorcists to use a Christian magical formula not only failed but, as F. F. Bruce framed it, "like an unfamiliar weapon wrongly handled it exploded in their hands."<sup>20</sup>

#### CONCLUSION

I have chosen only a few examples of biblical narratives that employ humorous, or at least whimsical, descriptions of certain characters and incidents to describe events that carry heavy theological freight. My contention is not that the biblical authors intended any story to be funny but simply that they sometimes chose humorous ways of expressing otherwise serious ideas. For me,

these sometimes surprising humorous descriptions help make serious stories unforgettable. And that, at the very least, the authors would have welcomed.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> This is the word used in Exodus 25:9 for the portable sanctuary constructed in the wilderness. The more common designation is *'ohel mo'ed*, “tent of meeting” [with God], which occurs about 150 times. In Exodus 39:32, *miškan* and *'ohel* are combined in the phrase *miškan 'ohel mo'ed*, attesting that they are synonyms (as is also the case in Ugaritic). In Exodus 25:8, the *miškan* is called simply a *miqdaš* [sanctuary], while Exodus 28:29 designates it as *ha-qodeš* [The Holy Place]. The innermost section of the sanctuary is known as the *qodeš ha-qodašim* [The Holy of Holies or The Holiest spot anywhere].

<sup>2</sup> Of course, God did not have to work with a building committee!

<sup>3</sup> Conveniently summarized by Jo Ann Hackett, “Balaam,” *Anchor Bible Dictionary* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), I, 569-72. Hereafter cited as *ABD*.

<sup>4</sup> Jacob Milgrom, *The JPS Torah Commentary: Numbers* (New York: JPS, 1990), 471, draws a helpful distinction between diviner (“one who foretells events but cannot alter them”) and sorcerer (“the magician who claims to curse or bless”).

<sup>5</sup> *The Five Books of Moses* (New York: Schocken, 1983), 765.

<sup>6</sup> Archaeological evidence in the form of an eighth century inscription from Deir 'Alla has fleshed out for us just how famous Bil'am was. Milgrom has given an excellent translation of this inscription along with a helpful overview of the significance of the text (*The JPS Torah Commentary*, 473-76). The most extensive treatment of the inscription is by Jo Ann Hackett, *The Balaam Text from Deir 'Alla* (Chico: Scholars Press, 1984).

<sup>7</sup> See *qutz* in Numbers 22:3 and Exodus 1:12.

<sup>8</sup> See *'atzum* in Numbers 22:6 and Exodus 1:9.

<sup>9</sup> See Numbers 22:6, 11, and Exodus 6:1; 11:1.

<sup>10</sup> Note the formulaic “messenger formula,” *koh 'amar Balak*, comparable to *koh 'amar par'oh* in Exodus.

<sup>11</sup> Note the root *k-b-d* in Numbers 22:15, 17, 37; 24:11.

<sup>12</sup> Compare Numbers 22:18, 22:38, and 24:13.

<sup>13</sup> Literally, “a possessor of ghosts”—that is, someone who was able to communicate with the dead.

<sup>14</sup> An act that I and other bald men understand fully!

<sup>15</sup> This was long before the discovery of Viagra, Levitra, or Cialis. We are not told by what method she bears this child!

<sup>16</sup> Or two such men according to Matthew.

<sup>17</sup> “Gadara . . . is also too far away, 5 miles SE of the sea” (John McRay, “Gerasenes,” *ABD*, II, 991).

<sup>18</sup> See W. Ward Gasque, “Sceva,” *ABD*, V, 1064, for references. However, many Jews had both a Latin or Greek and a Hebrew name, as did Paul (*Sha'ul*) the apostle himself. If the Hebrew name of Sceva were known, it might become possible to identify the person named in Luke's narrative.

<sup>19</sup> Greek *amphoterôn* may mean simply “all” here (so translated by the Revised Standard Version), as often in the papyri of the period. For references, see William Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 47.

<sup>20</sup> *The Acts of the Apostles* (New International Commentary on the New Testament; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1952), 368.



# Why Did the Widow Have a Goat in Her Bed? Jewish Humor and Its Roots in the Talmud and Midrash

David Brodsky

In the 1930 movie *Animal Crackers*, Captain Spaulding, played by Groucho Marx, regales the audience with his adventures in Africa:

The principal animals inhabiting the African jungle are moose, elks, and Knights of Pythias. Of course, you all know what a moose is. That's big game. The first day, I shot two bucks. That was the biggest game we had. As I say, you all know what a moose is? A moose runs around on the floor, and eats cheese, and is chased by the cats. The Elks, on the other hand live up in the hills, and in the spring they come down for their annual convention. It is very interesting to watch them come to the water hole. And you should see them run when they find it is only a water hole. What they're looking for is an Elk-o-hole. One morning, I shot an elephant in my pajamas. How he got into my pajamas I'll never know. Then we tried to remove the tusks . . . but they were embedded in so firmly that we couldn't budge them. Of course, in Alabama, the Tusk-a-loosa. But, uh, that's entirely irrelephant to what I was talking about. We took some pictures of the native girls, but they weren't developed, but we're going back again in a couple of weeks. . . [at this point Mrs. Rittenhouse interrupts him nervously, afraid of where this is headed].

The language play in which Groucho engages in this routine is often associated with Jewish humor. Many of these elements can be found in Jewish humor stretching as far back as the *talmudim* and midrashic literature some 1,500 years earlier. This is not to suggest that the Marx Brothers' humor comes from any direct study of rabbinic literature. Nor is it to suggest that such humor is unique to the Jewish people. Such "forced reinterpretation jokes," as Graeme Ritchie calls them, are quite common across cultural divides.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, to the extent that Jewish culture has been steeped in classical rabbinic texts, it has been steeped in midrashic hermeneutics, which themselves are closely related to the forced reinterpretation joke. My claim is that because midrash focuses on the multiple interpretations latent in every statement, it is inherently related to forced reinterpretation jokes.<sup>2</sup> In a sense, midrash is the first step in the forced reinterpretation joke. It is the reinterpretation, but without the second step: the timing, the intent to be humorous through reinterpretation.



Because midrash is so focused on playing with language, finding the multiple ways of reading words and sentences,<sup>3</sup> those rabbinic and Jewish societies that were steeped in midrash were ripe for humor to develop and take root. Rabbinic humor is particularly playful with language in ways that are grounded in midrashic hermeneutics, and modern Jewish humor often follows suit. This correlation between classical Jewish humor of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and the classical rabbinic texts in which many modern Eastern European Jews were steeped deserves some exploration. This essay focuses on the humor of the Talmudic period, although it frames that discussion by relating it to modern Jewish humor.

Let us begin by examining the kinds of language play found in Groucho's monologue. One of the main elements is the double entendre. When Groucho tells us of the moose, which he refers to as "big game," and says he shot two bucks, we assume he means that he shot a rifle and killed two male moose. But when he tells us it was the biggest game he had, we begin to realize that the "bucks" he "shot" were dollars that he lost in a dice or card game. In this same way, Groucho plays with the word "elk," which at first we assume refers to the animals, but then come to realize that he intends the fraternal order.

In addition to such wordplay, Groucho also plays with modifying phrases and clauses. When he delivers the famous line "One morning I shot an elephant in my pajamas," we first picture that he was still in his pajamas that morning, only to find out that it was the elephant that was in his pajamas. Here, it is an entire phrase that can be understood in more than one way in the sentence.

Similarly, when Groucho tells us, "We took some pictures of the native girls, but they weren't developed," we assume the pronoun "they" refers back to the pictures they took. But, when he says that he is going back again in a couple of weeks, we begin to suspect along with Mrs. Rittenhouse that he may have had a different antecedent in mind.<sup>4</sup> Incidentally, the objectification of women—or girls, in this case—inherent in this and other jokes is a problem we shall encounter in several passages, though it is a subject for a different essay.<sup>5</sup>

This basic hermeneutic of reading the multiple meanings in words, phrases, and clauses is the central aspect of the midrashic hermeneutic and emerges as a key aspect of rabbinic humor as well.

In this essay, I will first stake a claim for the value the rabbis of the Talmudic period placed on humor. I will then offer a few examples of precisely how the rabbis play with language in their biblical exegesis (a.k.a. midrash). Third, I will show how this midrashic hermeneutic became a central element of rabbinic and later Jewish humor.

## THE VALUE OF HUMOR

The rabbis express little patience for mockery (BT Megillah 25b), on the one hand, even as they maintain a rich sense of humor, on the other hand. Similarly, merriment is at times perceived by the rabbis to lead to sexual impropriety, while enjoyment of the *mitzvot* is nevertheless considered a desideratum. As a result, the rabbis encourage humor within the confines of Torah study even as they denigrate non-Torah-related humor.<sup>6</sup> Thus, in Genesis Rabbah 22, R. Simon is quoted as saying, “If your inclination comes to incite you to merriment, make it merry with Torah.”<sup>7</sup> Rather than fight the evil inclination, R. Simon has his listeners redirect it to a permitted, and even laudable, outlet.

In the Babylonian Talmud (Shabbat 30b), the anonymous editors of the Talmud note just such an attitude towards levity in the book of Ecclesiastes, which affords them the opportunity to contrast the dangers of levity in the absence of *mitzvot* with the benefits of levity found through *mitzvot*. The passage reads:

“The sages wanted to hide the book of Ecclesiastes because its statements contradict one another. . . .” And how do its statements contradict one another? . . . It is written, “And I praised joy” (Eccl 8:15), and it is written, “And regarding joy, what does it accomplish?” (Eccl 2:2). There is no difficulty. . . . “And I praised joy” refers to the joy of a mitzvah. “And regarding joy, what does it accomplish?” refers to joy that is not from a mitzvah. . . . Thus, Rava,<sup>8</sup> before he began his classes for the rabbis, would say something humorous [*bedihuta*].<sup>9</sup> Then he would sit in seriousness and recite a teaching.

After defining appropriate joy as that which comes from *mitzvot*, the Talmud concludes by modeling for us that when teaching Torah, we should begin with something humorous and then turn to serious matters.<sup>10</sup> The fact that humor was integrated into Torah study shows that the boundaries between Torah study and humor were not stark. This essay will show examples of rabbinic humor both in midrashim on Torah and using midrashic exegetical tropes whether or not connected to Torah.

## THE NATURE OF MIDRASH

First, we should begin by laying out the midrashic hermeneutic and its theological basis. Rabbinic midrashic exegesis of the Bible assumes that the Bible’s author, being God Godself, was a perfect author. It therefore assumes that no contradictions, redundancies, or superfluous language exist in the Bible.<sup>11</sup> Yet, as every biblical scholar knows, the Bible is full of all three. As just one quick example of a redundancy, the Bible states three times, “Do not cook a kid in its mother’s milk,”<sup>12</sup> and, for the rabbis, each utterance required a separate teach-

ing. One resolution of this redundancy was the legal declaration that milk and meat are forbidden for a Jew (1) to cook together, (2) to eat together, or (3) to derive any benefit from them.<sup>13</sup>

This form of omnisignificance—the insistence that every word, every anomaly must come to teach something—became so strong that, according to Genesis Rabbah 22, R. Akiva made sure that every occurrence of the word “*et*” in the Torah came to teach something beyond itself.<sup>14</sup>

#### GENESIS 27:18–19 AND GENESIS RABBAH 65:18

We now turn to the midrashic methodology itself: how words and sentences were mined for multiple readings. An excellent example can be found in Genesis Rabbah 65 on Genesis 27:18–19. In Genesis 27, at Rebecca’s prodding, Jacob dresses up like Esau and attempts to trick his blind father, Isaac, into giving him the birthright that Isaac intends to give to Jacob’s elder brother, Esau. Genesis 27:18–19 reads, “[Isaac] said, ‘. . . Who are you, my son?’ Jacob said to his father, ‘I am Esau, your firstborn. . . .’”

Jacob’s blatant lie to his own father was morally problematic to the rabbis and begged some kind of midrashic reworking, which is precisely what Genesis Rabbah provides: “[Jacob] came to his father. . . and said to his father, ‘I am Esau, your firstborn. . . .’” R. Levi said, ‘I am to receive the Ten Commandments, but Esau [is] your firstborn.’” While the midrash is reading more than one point into the verse, at its core, the midrash rests upon the midrashic tool of repunctuation. Since punctuation is not native to the Torah, repunctuation does not require the kind of redrafting that it does in translation. In Hebrew, the difference between Jacob saying, “I am Esau, your firstborn” and “It is I. Esau is your firstborn,” is simply a matter of punctuation: “*Anokhi Esav, bekhorekha,*” or “*Anokhi. Esav bekhorekha.*”<sup>15</sup>

The hermeneutic of repunctuation can be found in the modern Jewish joke about Josef Stalin’s telegram from Leon Trotsky:

During a gigantic celebration in Red Square, after Trotsky had been exiled, Stalin, on Lenin’s great tomb, excitedly raised his hand to still the acclamations: “Comrades! A most historic event! A cablegram—of congratulations—from Trotsky!” The hordes cheered, and Stalin read the historic cable aloud:

STALIN

YOU WERE RIGHT AND I WAS WRONG. YOU ARE THE TRUE HEIR OF LENIN. I SHOULD APOLOGIZE.

TROTSKY

A roar of triumph erupted. But in the front row, a little tailor called, “Pst, Comrade Stalin. A message for the ages! But you didn’t read it with the right feeling!”

Whereupon, Stalin stilled the throng once more. “Comrades! Here is a simple worker, a loyal communist, who says I haven’t read the message with enough feeling. Come, Comrade, read the historic communication!”

The little tailor went up to the podium, took the telegram, and read:

“Stalin, *You* were right, and *I* was wrong? *You* are the true heir of Lenin?! *I* should apologize?! Trotsky!”<sup>16</sup>

Both the written Torah and telegrams lack punctuation, and this absence frees the reader to punctuate various ways. Repunctuation is a key tool of midrashic interpretation, and it plays a role in Jewish humor of both the modern and Talmudic periods.<sup>17</sup>

#### LEVITICUS 20, PSALM 89, AND PIRKE R. ELIEZER 21

The first few chapters of the book of Genesis leave the reader with a logistical problem: from what sexual relation(s) does the third human generation derive? In the second generation, we are told only of Adam and Eve’s three sons: Cain, Abel, and Seth. We are never told of any daughters being born in this generation. Who did each of the sons marry? Even if we are to assume that daughters were born to Adam and Eve that the text failed to mention, Leviticus 18 and 20 make clear that siblings may not have sexual intercourse with one another. Nor, of course may a son have sex with his mother, as is proscribed by Leviticus 18:7 and 20:11. This leaves no legally viable marriage for this second generation. Pirke R. Eliezer 21 attempts to solve this problem by an innovative midrashic reading of Leviticus 20:17 and Psalm 89:3. It offers us an excellent example of the kinds of midrashic hermeneutics that play a key role in Jewish humor of the Talmudic and modern periods.

Leviticus 20:17 states, “And the man who takes his sister . . . and sees her nakedness . . . this is despicable [*hesed*], and they shall be cut off from . . . their people . . . he shall bear his iniquity.” The use of the word *hesed* in Leviticus 20 is unusual. Generally, its meaning is more like that found in Psalm 89, which reads, “Forever shall grace be established [*’olam hesed yibbaneh*].” Baruch Levine has argued that the word *hesed* in these two instances is homonymous.<sup>18</sup> That is, although they share the same three-letter root, they are actually not the same word.<sup>19</sup>

Pirke R. Eliezer plays with this homonym by redefining the word *hesed*

in Psalm 89 with the homonymous meaning found in Leviticus 20. Pirke R. Eliezer 21 reads:

R. Miasha said, "Cain was born with his wife as his twin with him."

R. Shimeon said to him, "But is it not written, *And the man who takes his sister . . . and sees her nakedness . . . [this is despicable (hesed)]?*" But rather, the facts should tell you that they did not have other women to marry, so [their twins] were permitted to them, as it is said, *The world shall be built through incest [olam hesed yibbaneh]*. Through incest [*hesed*] the world was built until the Torah was given."<sup>20</sup>

Pirke R. Eliezer plays on the double entendre of the first three words of Psalm 89:3. The Hebrew word *olam* can mean "forever," but it also can mean "the world"; *hesed* we have already seen generally means "grace," but in Leviticus 20 it is used to describe sibling incest; and the word *yibbaneh* can mean "to be established"—that is, "to exist"—but, literally, it means "to be built." While the psalmist likely intended to say "grace will always exist," in the hands of the midrashist, the verse is made to say, "The world will be built upon incest." While Leviticus 18 and 20 forbade siblings to have sexual intercourse with one another, Psalm 89 is now read as acknowledging the necessity of such relations in the foundational second generation.

As we shall presently see, rabbinic humor plays with language in many of these same ways. In fact, if humor is generally created by pointing out a new interpretation of a previous text, offering a reinterpretation in the punch line of a hitherto-offered text that the audience (erroneously) thought they had understood correctly, then midrashic hermeneutics are particularly well suited to this task.<sup>21</sup> It should not surprise us, therefore, if rabbinic and modern Jews steeped in such hermeneutics developed a rich genre of humor utilizing these hermeneutics.

#### MIDRASH AS HUMOR: THE FORCED REINTERPRETATION JOKE

Rabbinic humor is difficult to identify with certainty. Many scholars (I am among them) believe that the rabbis incorporated humor into their literature quite frequently. This general supposition is supported by the Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 30b, which we saw above. Nevertheless, which passages are to be categorized as humorous is a very subjective process. For this reason, I have decided to select only those passages that have a clear and definite punch line and that I believe are therefore fairly indisputably intended to be humorous.

#### BABYLONIAN TALMUD 66B

Rabbinic humor plays with the double entendres of words in ways that are

quite similar to that found in the above passage from Pirke R. Eliezer. A good example is the following story from the Babylonian Talmud, Nedarim 66b:

A certain man said to his wife, “May I derive no benefit from you unless you are able to show some attractive aspect [*mum yafeh*] of yourself to R. Ishmael b. R. Yose. [(According to rabbinic law, once such a pronouncement has been decreed, the couple must divorce unless the vow can be fulfilled or annulled). R. Ishmael b. R. Yose] said to them, “Perhaps her head is nice.” They said to him, “It’s fat.”<sup>22</sup> “Perhaps her hair is nice,” [he suggested. To which they responded:] “It’s like stalks of flax that have been beaten and baked dry.” “Perhaps her eyes are nice.” “They’re bleary and dim.” “Perhaps her ears are nice.” “They’re doubled over.” “Perhaps her nose is nice.” “It’s swollen.” “Perhaps her lips are nice.” “They’re fat.” “Perhaps her neck is nice.” “It’s stubby.” “Perhaps her belly is nice.” “It’s swollen.” [R. Ishmael thought for a moment and said:] “Perhaps her feet are nice.” “They’re wide as a goose’s feet.” [R. Ishmael thought long and hard, and then, suddenly, an idea came to him:]. . . “Perhaps her *name* is nice.” [but even here he was foiled.] “Her name is Soiled [*likhlukhit*]” [they told him]. [But then, in his darkest moment, his eyes lit up and] He said to them, “*yafeh qorin* ‘otah *likhlukhit*, she-hi *melukhlekhet ba-mumin*” [She is appropriately called Soiled, for she is soiled with blemishes]. And he permitted him [to remain married to her].

Granted, the humor objectifies women’s bodies, but that is a topic for a different discussion. What is of interest for this essay is the clear punch line at the end. The joke hinges on the double meaning of the words *yafeh* and *mum*. *Yafeh* generally means “attractive” but can also mean “fitting” or “appropriate.” *Mum* can mean an “aspect” or a “thing,”<sup>23</sup> but it can also mean a “blemish” or a “defect.” After failing to find even a single attractive part of this woman’s body, R. Ishmael turns to her name. As long as her parents gave her a nice name, even if she is physically revolting, he will have succeeded in finding a *mum yafeh*, an attractive aspect, of hers. Yet, even in this attempt, he is foiled. Her name is *Likhlukhit*, meaning “soiled.” Even her name is literally disgusting. She is disgusting through and through. Yet, it is this last failure that ultimately allows R. Ishmael to fulfill the vow and to allow her to remain married to her husband. Using the alternative meanings of *yafeh* and *mum*, R. Ishmael is able to find a “fitting” aspect about her. She is appropriately named *Likhlukhit*, Soiled, since her body is soiled with blemishes, *mumim*. It is *because* she is thoroughly revolting in both form and name that R. Ishmael is able to foil her husband’s attempt to force a divorce upon his ugly wife.<sup>24</sup>

The second humorous story is also found in the Babylonian Talmud,

Nedarim 66b. In fact, it directly follows the story about the unattractive woman. The fact that the two stories are told together helps to support the view that they are likely both intended to be humorous. The story is a typical marital comedy sketch compounded by the comic effects of their dialectical differences. While Aramaic was spoken in both Palestine and Babylonia at the time the story was told, the dialects were different, and in this story those differences lead to comic effect. The story reads:

A certain Babylonian man who moved to the land of Israel married a woman. He said to her, "Cook me two hooves [*talfei*]." She cooked him two lentils [*telofhei*]. He became angry with her. The next day, he told her, "Cook me a neck [*geriva*]." She cooked him a *geriva*-measure of grain [approximately eight liters]. He said to her, "Go bring me two gourds [*botzinai*]." She brought him two lamps [*botzinai*]. He said to her, "Go break them over the top of the gate [*reisha de-bava*]!" Bava ben Buta was sitting on the gate and judging.

She went and broke them on his head. He said to her, "Why did you do that?" [She responded] "Thus my husband commanded me." He said, "[Since] you did the will of your husband, God will bring out from you two sons like Bava ben Buta."<sup>25</sup>

Once again, this story is rife with gendered implications.<sup>26</sup> While the story is full of humorous double entendres, it is the last pair of double entendres that forms the punch line. After we have been well introduced to the wife's tendency to follow her husband's precise command, no matter how ridiculous his directive sounds to her, the comic moment comes with his last command. This time he *tries* to speak in her dialect. The Babylonian audience would appreciate his efforts to use the foreign-sounding Palestinian form *yat-hon* in place of the more familiar *leho*. He even avoids the Babylonian form *'a-reisha de-bava*, using the more universal form *'al*, instead, hoping *this* time he can avoid any further mishap. Yet he cannot quite manage it. He still slips up by using the Babylonian Aramaic word *bava*, a word his wife would not understand.<sup>27</sup> While the Babylonian husband intends for his wife to smash the candles over the gate, his excessively obedient Palestinian wife has no way of understanding the directive other than as referring to the head of a person named Bava, whom she soon encounters. His command ends with the words *reisha de-bava*, and the narrative picks up by telling us that "Bava ben Buta was sitting at the gate. . . ." We need hear no more!<sup>28</sup>

#### GENESIS RABBAH 91

Our next example of midrashic humor comes from Genesis Rabbah 91, which

in turn is a midrashic commentary on Genesis 42. Genesis 42 recounts the first reunion of Joseph with his brothers. All of his brothers except Benjamin, the youngest, have come down to Egypt to bring back food. Joseph, who has become an important Egyptian minister, recognizes his brothers, but they do not recognize him.

Joseph's vow of what he is about to do, stated in verses 15–16, seems to conflict with what he subsequently vows to do and then does in verses 18–19. In verses 15–16, Joseph promises upon Pharaoh's life to lock up all of the brothers except one who is to go back to get the youngest brother. But then in verses 18–19, he says that he will imprison only one brother, and the rest are to go back. Verse 20 tells us that it is the latter promise that is kept. This latter statement is made under the formula of "God I fear," whereas the first vow, the one that was not kept, was made under the formula, "by Pharaoh's life."<sup>29</sup>

As we have already seen in the story of Jacob's lie to his father Isaac, the authors of Genesis Rabbah are troubled by patriarchs lying and generally try to read the lie out of existence. They are particularly troubled by this passage, which contains not only a lie but also a false *vow*. Genesis Rabbah 91 interprets:

"With this you shall be assured, by Pharaoh's life" (Gen 42:15). When Joseph wished to swear upon a falsehood, he would say, "by Pharaoh's life." R. Levi said, "It is like the case of a goat that fled from the shepherd, and came upon a widow. What did she do? She slaughtered it, flayed it, put it in the bed, and covered it with a sheet. They came inquiring about it from her. She said, 'May I tear from the flesh of that one and eat, if I know anything about it.' Thus, 'by Pharaoh's life'!"

In the analogy, the men assume that the widow's husband is lying in the bed and that she is swearing by the life of her husband that she does not know where the goat is. While the implied claim that she does not know the whereabouts of the goat is false, her statement, "may I eat of the flesh of that one if I know anything about it," is not false. The widow does indeed wish to "eat of the flesh of that one." Only she knows that "that one" is actually the goat. Using the analogy to inform us about Joseph, it is true that Joseph's statement, "Send one from among you; and he shall bring your brother, and [the rest of] you shall be imprisoned," is false, since in the end he does not actually do this. Nevertheless, the vow as a whole is not false. Joseph is vowing: may Pharaoh die if I do not fulfill my word. Since Joseph is an important Egyptian minister, his audience would assume that he wishes Pharaoh to live and therefore that he intends to fulfill his statement. The rabbinic audience, however, knows that, contrary to the literal meaning of the biblical tale, in rabbinic midrash



the Pharaoh that would later enslave the Israelite people is interpreted to be this same Pharaoh of Joseph's time.<sup>30</sup> Thus, at the hands of the midrashists, Joseph is happy to have Pharaoh die, and therefore he is not swearing falsely at all. On the contrary, he is swearing truthfully over something he does not intend to do: May Pharaoh die (and I hope he does!) if I do not do X, Y, and Z (and I do not intend to do X, Y, or Z!).<sup>31</sup>

This kind of double message, with a public transcript and a hidden transcript, has been well documented by James Scott as an important trope within oppressed cultures, and Beth Berkowitz, Daniel Boyarin, and Joshua Levinson have shown its applicability to rabbinic literature.<sup>32</sup> In fact, I suspect that there is yet another hidden transcript that lies behind the one revealed by the midrash. While the midrash is ostensibly about Pharaoh, the evil Egyptian ruler of ancient times whom Joseph could not openly curse, it may also be about the emperor, the Roman ruler of their own time and place, whom they wish to curse but cannot do so openly.

A modern Jewish joke uses this same trope of public and hidden transcripts:

Two brothers, Shmulik and Yosl, living in communist Russia, were attempting to emigrate to America. One day, Shmulik received permission to leave, but Yosl had to stay behind. At their tearful goodbye, they were concerned how they would be able to communicate freely in spite of the fact that the Soviet government would undoubtedly be reading their mail.

"I have an idea," said Yosl, "If I write you in black ink, it will be the truth. If I use red ink, it will be false."

Shmulik emigrated, and months passed with no word from Yosl. Finally, a letter arrived in black ink:

My dear brother, life here in communist Russia is wonderful. We enjoy freedom and prosperity like never before. We have everything we could want. There are no food lines or shortages. We have a new TV, and household appliances. In fact, the only thing we're lacking in all of Russia is red ink.

Like its late antique counterpart, this modern Jewish joke is about transmitting a hidden transcript. But also, like its midrashic counterparts, it is about the multiple possibilities of interpretation. The humor hinges on the double entendre. At first, we assume along with Shmulik that we should read the letter *be-nihuta*, as a statement of fact. Only when we get to the last statement of the letter do we discover together with Shmulik that we have been reading the letter entirely reversed from its intended meaning.

Of course, Jews are not the only people to use the humor of the oppressed, nor are they the only ones to use humor that plays with double

entendres.<sup>33</sup> Thus, I do not wish to claim that playing with double entendres is unique to Jewish or rabbinic humor. Nor do I wish to suggest that modern Jewish humor should be viewed exclusively in relation to rabbinic humor. I do suggest, however, that there is a link between modern Jewish humor and the midrashic hermeneutics in which many Eastern European Jews of a century ago were steeped. Modern Jewish humor is particularly playful with language and often uses double entendres to create the joke, as can be seen from the Marx Brothers skit presented at the beginning of this essay. This focus on language and the multiple interpretations that can come from it is a central facet of the midrashic hermeneutic, of rabbinic humor, and even of modern Jewish humor.

#### GENESIS RABBAH 26

This next example is quite instructive. It contains two forced reinterpretations. The first has all of the structural elements of the forced reinterpretation joke, except that the punch line is more sweet than funny. The second has a forced reinterpretation that leads to a punch line with some bite. It can help us to see what extra steps are needed to turn rabbinic midrashic exegesis into humor. The passage reads:

Rabban Gamaliel married off his daughter. She said to him, "Father, bless me." He said, "May you never come back here." She gave birth to a son. She said to him, "Father, bless me." He said to her, "May 'Oy vey!' never cease from your mouth." She said to him, "Father, two happy occasions have come to me, and you have cursed me [on both]!" He said to her, "Both are blessings. Since you have peace in your house, you won't return here. And since your son will survive [infancy], 'Oy vey!' will never cease from your mouth: 'Oy vey that my son didn't eat!' 'Oy vey that he didn't drink!' 'Oy vey that he didn't go to shul!'"

The first forced reinterpretation is Rabban Gamaliel's statement "May you never come back here." Along with his daughter, we initially assume it to be a curse. It is only through his explanation near the end of the story that we discover that it really was a blessing: May your home life be so happy that you never need to run home to me. While this is a double entendre, it isn't quite humor. It effects a sigh of appreciation rather than a laugh (more of an "aww" than a guffaw). This is because the direction of the revelation is reversed from those of the humorous stories we saw prior to this one. Instead of leading *to* an embarrassing admonition of pettiness, this example moves in the opposite direction. We begin by assuming that Rabban Gamaliel is being petty, only to find through the forced reinterpretation that he is actually being quite nice.

Thus, what made the prior stories funny was that we were forced to reinterpret the initial statement in a much worse light than we originally had, which led to a somewhat embarrassing shock.<sup>34</sup> In the story of the rabbi charged to find some attractive characteristic [*mum yafeh*] about the man's wife, the only *mum yafeh* he can find is an appropriate blemish: her ugly name, which befits her ugly features! In the case of the widow with the goat in her bed, we are forced to reinterpret her curse, "may I eat of the flesh of this one if I know the whereabouts of the goat," as indicating that she does indeed wish to eat of the flesh of this one; she is not nearly as innocent as she appears to the goat's owners. This in turn forces us to recognize that Joseph, too, is not nearly as innocent as he first appeared when he swore "by Pharaoh's life." We begin to recognize that what had seemed like an innocent vow is really a blatant curse of his despised superior in disguise.

Returning to Genesis Rabbah 26, the second forced reinterpretation—that "oy vey" should not cease from her lips—itself has two factors: one that moves from nasty to nice, but the other that moves in the opposite direction. It is the latter that creates the humor: it is the embarrassment of the unexpected edginess that leads to the laughter. The first element of this second forced reinterpretation is that Rabban Gamaliel's statement that "Oy vey" should not cease from her mouth was not a curse but a blessing, a blessing that her child should be healthy and vibrant. This aspect of the forced reinterpretation, though quite pleasing, fails to yield laughter because the movement is from a previously assumed nastiness to a revealed nicety. The humor comes from the move from our previously assumed interpretation that having a child was itself a purely positive event for the daughter to our forced reinterpretation that having children carries with it many woes. The fact that this is said to her by her own father carries the potential second innuendo that perhaps she herself had brought woes upon her own parents. This passage demonstrates quite well the importance of the direction of the forced reinterpretation (from something nice to something less nice) for the forced reinterpretation to be humorous.

#### BABYLONIAN TALMUD 7B

Just as I do not wish to imply that rabbinic humor and modern Jewish humor are alone in playing with language, I do not mean to imply that their humor solely derives from playing with language.<sup>35</sup> An example of rabbinic humor that does not derive from midrashic hermeneutics, per se, can perhaps be found in the Babylonian Talmud, Megillah 7b:

Rava said, "A person is obligated to become drunk on Purim until he does not know the difference between 'Cursed is Haman' and 'Blessed

is Mordechai.” Rava<sup>36</sup> and R. Zeira made a Purim meal together. They got drunk. Rava got up and slaughtered R. Zeira. The next day, [Rava] prayed and brought [R. Zeira] back to life. The next year, [Rava] said to him, “Come, let us make a Purim meal together!” [R. Zeira] said to him, “A miracle doesn’t happen every day.”

Here, reinterpretation does not seem to play a part in the joke. Instead, the humor seems to rest on our image of poor R. Zeira nervously trying to get out of this potentially unpleasant invitation. While midrashic hermeneutics may not have played a role in every instance of rabbinic humor, they played an important role in rabbinic society, including rabbinic humor, and this legacy was passed on to modern Jewish comics as well.<sup>37</sup>

## CONCLUSION

The rabbis of the Talmudic period were trained to think of the multiple ways in which words, phrases, clauses, and even whole sentences could be read and understood. It was this hermeneutic that formed the mainstay of their exegetical enterprise. The forced reinterpretation joke plays with language in many of the same ways that rabbinic midrashic hermeneutics do. It should not surprise us, then, to find the rabbis of the Talmudic period themselves engaging in forced reinterpretation jokes. It should similarly not surprise us to find later Jewish cultures (parts of which in each period remained grounded in the study of Talmud and midrash) engaging in humor that plays with language and, particularly, with the forced reinterpretation joke.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> This genre of humor has been studied in Graeme Ritchie, “Reinterpretation and Viewpoints,” *Humor* 19 (2006): 251-70. Marlene Dolitsky defines humor as follows: “The humorous effect comes from the listener’s realization and acceptance that s/he has been led down the garden path. . . . In humour, listeners are lured into accepting presuppositions that are later disclosed as unfounded”; Marlene Dolitsky, “Aspects of the Unsaid in Humor,” *Humor: International Journal of Humor Research* 5 (1992): 35; as cited in Ritchie, “Reinterpretation and Viewpoints,” 252. Ritchie explains, “The proposal is that humor is caused by the stimulus (e.g., a text) having more than one interpretation in its initial stages (the set-up), but only one interpretation being perceived by the audience. The final part of the stimulus (the punch line) then forces the audience to notice an alternative, hitherto less obvious, interpretation”; Ritchie, “Reinterpretation and Viewpoints,” 253. See also, Victor Raskin, *Semantic Mechanisms of Humor* (Dordrecht: D. Reidel, 1985); Daniel Perlmutter, “Tracing the Origin of Humor,” *Humor* 13 (2002): 457-68; Salvatore Attardo, Christian Hempelmann, and Sara Di Maio, “Script Oppositions and Logical Mechanisms: Modeling Incongruities and Their Resolutions,” *Humor* 15 (2002): 15-16.

<sup>2</sup> The correlation between rabbinic humor and the multiplicity of interpretation has already been noted by Binyamin Engelman, “Humor mutzhar, galui ve-samui ba-talmud bavli,” *Be-khol derakhkheha d’ehu: ketav-et le-inyane torah u-madah* 8 (1999): 5–28, an article I encountered after preparing my paper for the symposium. While we share the same general thesis, our papers differ significantly. Engelman covers a broad range of humorous examples from puns to plays on words to anecdotes. His paper is of great value for delineating the ways in which the rabbis have fun playing with language in their everyday exegetical activities. In the present study, I limit myself to cases that I believe an Aramaic speaker would hear as a joke, complete with a punch line, whereas Engelman has cast a very wide net including wordplay more generally.

Rabbinic wit and humor in general have been explored in various works, including, Alexander Kohut, “Wit, Humor and Anecdote in the Talmud and Midrash,” *The American Hebrew* (7 May–11 June 1886), 2–3 (6 issues); Joshua Ovsay, “ha-humor ba-talmud,” in *Maamarim ve-reshimot* (New York: *ohel bevrach le-hotza’at sefarim*, 1946), 7–38; Mordechai Hacohen, “Humor, satirah u-bedihah be-fi hazal,” *Mahanayim* 67 (1962): 8–21; Mordechai Piron, “Yahas hokhmei yisrael la-humor ve-la-satirah,” *Mahanayim* 67 (1962): 22–24; Sh. Hagai, “Sha’ashu’ei lashon be-sifrut yisrael,” *Mahanayim* 67 (1962): 25–27; Israel Knox, “The Traditional Roots of Jewish Humor,” in *Holy Laughter* (ed. M. Conrad Hyers; New York Seabury Press, 1969), 150–65; Samuel Karff, “Laughter and Merriment in Rabbinic Literature,” in *Threescore and Ten* (ed. A. Karp; Hoboken: Ktav, 1991), 75–85; Daniel Boyarin, “Literary Fat Rabbis: On the Historical Origins of the Grotesque Body,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 1 (1991): 551–84; Menahem Luz, “Oenomaus and Talmudic Anecdote,” *Journal for the Study of Judaism* 23 (1992): 42–80; Joshua Levinson, “‘olam hafukh ra’iti: ‘iyun ba-sippur ha-shikkur u-vanav,” *Jerusalem Studies in Hebrew Literature* 14 (1993): 7–23; David Lifshitz, “Ifyono ve-tifkudo shel ha-humor ba-talmud” (Ph.D. diss., Bar Ilan University, 1994–95)—unfortunately, I was unable to obtain a copy of Lifshitz’s dissertation for this study; Rela Koslofsky, “Humor ve-tafqudav be-girsaoth ha-sippur: R. Yehoshua ben Levi u-mal’akh ha-mavvet,” *Mehqere Yerushalayim be-folklor yehudi* 19/20 (1998): 329–44; David Lifshitz, “Shemot ve-kinuyim ba-talmud ba-asplakaria humoristit,” *Ve-Eleh Shemot: Mehqarim be-Otzar ha-Shemot ha-Yehudim* 3 (2002): 95–109; Arkady Kovelman, “Farce in the Talmud,” *Review of Rabbinic Judaism* 5 (2002): 86–92; Eli Yassif, “Sippurei humor be-agadah: mashma’ut, nose, tipologia,” *Mehqere Talmud* 3 (2005): 403–30; Holger Zellentín, “Late Antiquity Upside-Down: Rabbinic Parodies of Jewish and Christian Literature” (Ph.D. diss., Princeton University, 2007); David Stern, “The ‘Alphabet of Ben Sira’ and the Early History of Parody in Jewish Literature,” in *The Idea of Biblical Interpretation: Essays in Honor of James L. Kugel* (ed. J. Kugel, H. Najman, and J. Newman; Leiden: Brill, 2003); Daniel Boyarin, “Patron Saint of the Incongruous: Rabbi Me’ir, the Talmud, and Menippean Satire,” *Critical Inquiry* 35 (2009): 523–51; Daniel Boyarin, *Socrates and the Fat Rabbis* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009); and Tal Ilan, “The Joke in Rabbinic Literature: Home-born or Diaspora Humor?,” in *Humor in Arabic Culture* (ed. G. Tamer; Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2009), 57–75.

Many of the above articles focus particularly on farce, parody, and satire. For analyses of double entendres in rabbinic humor, see Koslofsky, “Humor ve-tafqudav,” 334; Zellentín “Late Antiquity,” 84; and Levinson, “‘olam hafukh,” 11.

On Jewish humor in general, see Dan Ben-Amos, “The ‘Myth’ of Jewish Humor,” *Western Folklore* 32 (1973): 112–31; Judith Stora-Sandor, *L’humour juif dans la littérature de Job à Woody Allen* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1984); Sara Blacher Cohen, “The Varieties of Jewish Humor,” in *Jewish Wry: Essays on Jewish Humor* (ed. S. B. Cohen; Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1987); Martin Grotjahn, “Dynamics of Jewish Jokes,” *American Behavioral Scientist* 30 (1987): 96–99; Joseph Telushkin, *Jewish Humor: What the Best Jewish Jokes Say about the Jews* (New York: William and Morrow, 1992), esp. 53–55; Richard Raskin, “The Origins and Evolution of a Classic Jewish Joke,” in *Semites and Stereotypes: Characteristics of Jewish Humor* (ed. A. Ziv and A. Zajdman; Westport: Greenwood Press, 1993), 87–105; Adir Cohen, *Ha-humor shel ‘am yisra’el le-dorotav: me-tanakh ve-’ad yameinu* (Israel: Amatziah, 2004).

<sup>3</sup> For some basic books and articles on the various midrashic ways of reading, see Isaac Heinemann, *Darkhei ha-Aggadah* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1970); Gary Porton, “Defining Midrash,” in *The Study of Ancient Judaism* (ed. J. Neusner; New York: Ktav, 1981), 1:55–92; Gary Porton, *Understanding Rabbinic Midrash: Text and Commentary* (Hoboken: Ktav, 1985); David Weiss Halivni, *Midrash, Mishnah and Gemara: The Jewish Predilection for Justified Law* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986); James Kugel, “Two Introductions to Midrash,” in *Midrash and Literature* (ed. G. Hartman and S. Budick; New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986); Avigdor Shinan and Yair Zakovitch, “Midrash on Scripture and Midrash Within Scripture,” *Scripta Hierosolymitana* 31 (1986): 257–77; David Stern, “Midrash and Indeterminacy” *Critical Inquiry* 15 (1988): 132–61; James Kugel, *In Potiphar’s House: The Interpretative Life of Biblical Texts* (New York: Harper Collins, 1990); Daniel Boyarin, *Intertextuality and the Reading of Midrash* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990); David Weiss Halivni, *Peshat and Derash: Plain and Applied Meaning in Rabbinic Exegesis* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991); Jonah Fraenkel, *Darkhei ha-Aggadah ve-ha-Midrash* (2 vols.; Masadah: Yad la-Talmud, 1991); David Stern, *Midrash and Theory: Ancient Jewish Exegesis and Contemporary Literary Studies* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1996); Lieve Teugels, “Midrash in the Bible or Midrash on the Bible,” in *Bibel und Midrasch: Zur Bedeutung der Rabbinischen Exegese für die Bibelwissenschaft* (ed. G. Bodendorfer and M. Millard; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1998); Azzan Yadin, *Scripture as Logos: Rabbi Ishmael and the Origins of Midrash*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004); Yaakov Elman, “Midrash Halakhah in Its Classic Formulation,” in *Recent Developments in Midrash Research: Proceedings of the 2002 and 2003 SBL Consultation on Midrash* (ed. L. Teugels and R. Ulmer; Piscataway: Gorgias Press, 2005), 3–15; John Townsend, “The Significance of Midrash,” in *Recent Developments in Midrash Research: Proceedings of the 2002 and 2003 SBL Consultation on Midrash* (ed. L. Teugels and R. Ulmer; Piscataway: Gorgias Press, 2005), 17–24; Menahem Kahana, “The Halakhic Midrashim,” in *The Literature of the Sages: Second Part* (ed. S. Safrai, Z. Safrai, J. Schwartz, and P. Tomson; Assen: Royal Van Gorcum and Fortress Press, 2006), 3–105; Marc Hirshman, “Aggadic Midrash,” in *The Literature of the Sages: Second Part* (ed. S. Safrai, Z. Safrai, J. Schwartz, and P. Tomson; Assen: Royal Van Gorcum and Fortress Press, 2006), 107–32; Paul Mandel, “The Origins of Midrash in the Second Temple Period,” in *Current Trends in the Study of Midrash* (ed. Carol Bakhos; Leiden: Brill, 2006), 9–34; Mayer Gruber, “The Term Midrash in Tannaitic Literature,” in *Discussing Cultural Influences: Text, Context*

and *Non-Text in Rabbinic Judaism* (ed. Rivka Ulmer; Landham: University Press of America, 2007), 41–58; and Michael Chernick, *A Great Voice that Did Not Cease: The Growth of the Rabbinic Canon and its Interpretation* (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 2009). For an excellent, recent summary of the various perspectives on midrash, see Carol Bakhos, “Method(ological) Matters in the Study of Midrash,” in *Current Trends in the Study of Midrash* (ed. C. Bakhos; Leiden: Brill, 2006), 161–88. On the history of how the midrashic approach was perceived and understood in the ensuing centuries, see Jay Harris, *How Do We Know This? Midrash and the Fragmentation of Modern Judaism* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1995).

<sup>4</sup> Much has been written on the Marx Brothers’ humor in general and on their word-play in particular. See, for example, C. P. Lee, “‘Yeah, and I Used to Be a Hunchback’: Immigrants, Humour and the Marx Brothers,” in *Because I Tell a Joke or Two: Comedy, Politics and Social Difference* (ed. S. Wang; London: Routledge, 1998), esp. 172–75; Riv-Ellen Prell, *Fighting to Become Americans: Assimilation and the Trouble Between Jewish Women and Jewish Men* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1999), 286 n37; Ted Merwin, *In Their Own Image: New York Jews in Jazz Age Popular Culture* (Piscataway: Rutgers University Press, 2006), 18; Lucy Fischer, “1929—Movies, Crashes, and Finales,” in *American Cinema of the 1920s: Themes and Variations* (ed. Lucy Fischer; Piscataway: Rutgers University Press, 2009), 251.

<sup>5</sup> Tal Ilan addresses this issue in her article, “The Joke in Rabbinic Literature.”

<sup>6</sup> See also Avot 3:13; Karff, “Laughter and Merriment,” 75–85.

<sup>7</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.

<sup>8</sup> I am here following the manuscripts (Munich, Oxford, Vatican, and Cambridge). The printed edition has Rabbah. See also *Diqduqei Soferim*, ad. loc.; and Engelman, “Humor mutzhar,” 11 n15.

<sup>9</sup> The printed edition and MS Cambridge T-S F2 (2) 18 add “and the rabbis would be cheerful [*qa badhi*].” The Aramaic word *bedihuta* and its corresponding verb *badah* are difficult to translate. Michael Sokoloff, *A Dictionary of Jewish Babylonian Aramaic* (Ramat Gan and Baltimore: Bar Ilan and Johns Hopkins University Presses, 2002), 186, s.v. *bedihuta* and 185, s.v. *badah*, translates them as “mirthful” and “be cheerful,” respectively. See also Engelman, “Humor mutzhar,” 11–13.

<sup>10</sup> See also Boyarin, *Socrates*, 9–10.

<sup>11</sup> See James Kugel, *The Idea of Biblical Poetry: Parallelism and Its History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981), 103–04; Stern, “Midrash and Indeterminacy”; Stern, *Midrash and Theory*, 29; David Stern, “The First Jewish Books and the Early History of Jewish Reading,” *JQR* 98 (2008): 174–75; Richard Steiner, “Meaninglessness, Meaningfulness, and Super-Meaningfulness in Scripture: An Analysis of the Controversy Surrounding Dan 2:12 in the Middle Ages,” *JQR* 82 (1992): 431–49; Yaakov Elman, “Midrash Halakhah,” 7–12; Yaakov Elman, “‘It Is No Empty Thing’: Nahmanides and the Search for Omnisignificance,” *Torah U-Madda Journal* 4 (1993): 1–83; Yaakov Elman, “The Rebirth of Omnisignificant Biblical Exegesis in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries,” *JSIJ* 2 (2003); Yaakov Elman, “Classical Rabbinic Interpretation,” in *The Jewish Study Bible* (ed. A. Berlin, M. Brettler, and M. Fishbane; New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 1848–58; Chernick, *A Great Voice*, 29–30 and 268.

<sup>12</sup> Exodus 23:19, Exodus 34:26, and Deuteronomy 14:21.

<sup>13</sup> That is, once they have been cooked together. See PT Avodah Zarah 5:12 (45b), BT Qiddushin 57b, and BT Hullin 115b. For other exegetical readings of the redundancy, see Mishnah Hullin 8:4; Mekhilta de-R. Ishmael, *Mishpatim*, *Massekhta de-Kaspa*, *parashah* 20; Mekhilta de-Rashbi, 23:19; Sifre Deut, *piska* 104; and Pesiqta de-Rav Kehana, *parasha* 10.

<sup>14</sup> The passage reads:

[“With God [*‘et ‘adonai*”] (Gen 4:1)]. R. Ishmael asked R. Akiva. He said to him, since you served Nahum Gam Zu for twenty-two years, [you know from him that the words] ‘but’ and ‘only’ [in the Torah] are limiters [i.e., they come to limit the scope of the law in which they are found], [and the words] ‘*et* and ‘also’ [in the Torah] are expansionist [i.e., they come to add to the law in which they are found]. [But the word] ‘*et* found here [in Gen 4:1], what is its function? [R. Akiva] said to him, “if it had said ‘I acquired man God’ [without the word ‘*et* between ‘man’ and ‘God’], the verse would have been unclear. Therefore, [it says] ‘*with* God [*‘et ‘adonai*].’ Previously, Adam was created from the earth, and Eve from Adam. From here on, ‘in *our* image, in *our* likeness’ (Gen 1:26). Neither man without woman, nor woman without man, and not the two of them without the divine presence.”

<sup>15</sup> In addition to repunctuation, Genesis Rabbah takes the midrash a step further by using the word ‘*anokhi* in Jacob’s statement in Genesis 27:19 to hyperlink to the ‘*anokhi* of the first of the Ten Commandments. In a sense, this is playing on the multiple meanings latent in the word ‘*anokhi*. In biblical Hebrew, both the words ‘*anokhi* and ‘*ani* were used for the first-person singular pronoun, “I,” though ‘*ani* was somewhat more common than ‘*anokhi*. In Rabbinic Hebrew, however, ‘*anokhi* had fallen out of use. It therefore stood out to the rabbinic listener, facilitating the hyperlink to the most famous verse containing the word ‘*anokhi*.

<sup>16</sup> Modified from Leo Rosten, *The Joys of Yiddish* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1968), xxiv–xxv.

<sup>17</sup> This kind of joke is also analyzed in Attardo, Hempelmann, and Di Maio, “Script Oppositions,” 16.

<sup>18</sup> Baruch Levine, *The JPS Torah Commentary: Leviticus* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 138, s.v. “it is a disgrace.” Cf. David Brodsky, *A Bride without a Blessing: A Study in the Redaction and Content of Massekhet Kallah and Its Gemara* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2006), 96 n31.

<sup>19</sup> A student’s father once told me a story of the first time he learned about homonyms from his rebbe in yeshivah. In his thick Yiddish accent, the rebbe explained to his class, “You hef homonyms in English, too. Fer exemple, you can write a letter, or you can climb a ledder.”

<sup>20</sup> This same midrash can also be found in the Babylonian Talmud (Sanhedrin 58b). I have selected the version in Pirke R. Eliezer because it spells out the exegetical basis for the midrash more clearly than its Talmudic counterpart. Pirke R. Eliezer is somewhat stylistically distinct from classical rabbinic literature, but this does not affect the outcome in this case. On Pirke R. Eliezer in general and its genre and relationship to earlier rabbinic sources in particular, two recent studies are worth mention: Rachel Adel-



man, *The Return of the Repressed: Pirke de-Rabbi Eliezer and the Pseudepigrapha* (Leiden: Brill, 2009); and Steven Sacks, *Midrash and Multiplicity: Pirke de-Rabbi Eliezer and the Renewal of Rabbinic Interpretive Culture* (New York: Walter De Gruyter, 2009).

<sup>21</sup> For this definition of humor, see Marcelo Dascal, "Language Use in Jokes and Dreams: Sociopragmatics vs. Psychopragmatics," *Language and Communication* 5 (1985): 95-106; Dolitsky, "Aspects of the Unsaid"; Neal Norrick, "On the Conversational Performance of Narrative Jokes: Toward an Account of Timing," *Humor* 14 (2001): 255-74; Victor Raskin, *Semantic Mechanisms of Humor* (Dordrecht: D. Reidel, 1985); and Ritchie, "Reinterpretation and Viewpoints."

<sup>22</sup> Literally, round. From the fact that the attribute is not considered attractive, I presume that "fat" is intended. Unfortunately, most of the descriptive words in this passage are fairly rare, leaving the precise description unclear. What is clear from the context, however, is that each descriptor is meant to indicate what the author considered an unattractive feature.

<sup>23</sup> I am reading *mum* as equivalent to *me'um*. See Rabbeinu Asher (Rosh) and R. Samuel Eliezer b. R. Judah Ha-Levi Edels (Maharsha) on this passage. See also Shulamit Valler, "Domestic Strife and Domestic Harmony in the Literature of the Sages" (Hebrew), in *Peace and War in Jewish Culture* (ed. A. Levav; Jerusalem: Zalman Shazar Center, 2006), 21.

<sup>24</sup> On this story, see also Lifshitz, "Shemot ve-kinuyim," 103-04; Ovsay, "ha-humor batalmud," 17-18; Yassif, "Sippurei humor," 410-11; Tal Ilan, *Mine and Yours Are Hers: Retrieving Women's History from Rabbinic Literature* (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 286-87; Eli Yassif, *The Hebrew Folktale: History, Genre, Meaning* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 172-73; Cohen, *Humor shel 'am yisra'el*, 48-49; Valler, "Domestic Strife," 20-22 and 30. Particularly in the case of the word *mum* meaning "blemish" and its homonymous meaning "thing," the pun is humorous because it plays both with sound and meaning in a meaningful way; see Christian Hempelmann, "Script Opposition and Logical Mechanism in Punning," *Humor* 17 (2004): 381-92.

<sup>25</sup> For the precise translations of these technical terms, see S. David Sperling, "Aramaic Spousal Misunderstandings," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 115 (1995): 205-09; and Brodsky, *Bride without a Blessing*, 111-12. For a *geriv* measurement, see, inter alia, Daniel Sperber, *Roman Palestine 200-400: Money and Prices* (Ramat Gan: Bar Ilan University Press, 1991).

<sup>26</sup> On the one hand, it ends by praising and even rewarding the woman for her unthinking obedience to what she understood her husband's command to be. On the other hand, this reward may not be so wonderful, since Bava ben Buta is known in the Babylonian Talmud to have had his eyes put out by Herod (Bava Batra 3b-4a). Even in this story in Nedarim, he does not come out unscathed. If the reward is said somewhat tongue in cheek, then the praise may be as well. Does the Talmudic author believe that women should adhere to the letter of their husband's commands without thinking through whether the directive even makes sense? Or is this author attempting to offer a subtle critique of such an ideology? For an analysis of these gendered implications, see Brodsky, *Bride without a Blessing*, 111-12, esp. n. 65; Ilan, "The Joke in Rabbinic Literature," 74-75; and Valler, "Domestic Strife," 22-24 and 31. See also William Chomsky, "What Was the Jewish Vernacular during the Second Commonwealth?," *Jew-*

ish *Quarterly Review* 42 (1951): 209, though this article is dated in its methodological approach; Yassif, *Hebrew Folktale*, 171–72; Yassif, “Sippurei humor,” 409–10; Cohen, *Humor shel ‘am yisrael*, 48; and Binyamin Lau, *Sages—Volume 1: The Second Temple Period* (Hebrew; Jerusalem: The Jewish Agency for Israel—Eliner Library and Beit Morasha of Jerusalem, 2006), 193–94.

<sup>27</sup> In Babylonian Aramaic, a *bava* is a gate; see Michael Sokoloff, *Babylonian Aramaic*, 183–84, s.v. *bava*. Palestinian Aramaic lacks the term altogether; see Michael Sokoloff, *A Dictionary of Jewish Palestinian Aramaic of the Byzantine Period* (Ramat Gan: Bar Ilan University Press, 2002). *Reisha* means the top of something, but, of course, most commonly refers to someone’s head.

<sup>28</sup> In many ways, this story has much in common with the type of *chreia* described by Henry Fischel in his article “Studies in Cynicism and the Ancient Near East: The Transformation of a Chria,” in *Religions in Antiquity* (ed. J. Neusner; Leiden: Brill, 1968), 372–411. In both, the wife ruins the husband’s meal, and both use double entendres and have something of a punch line, as Fischel notes regarding the *chreia*; “Studies in Cynicism,” 373. It is especially closely related to the version in *Vita Aesopi* 39–46, in *Aesopica* (ed. B. E. Perry; Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1952), 49–51, in which the preparer (in that case, the servant, Aesop) is overly literal in his interpretation of the master’s request to have the servant cook him a “lentil”; *Vita*, 41; Fischel, “Studies in Cynicism,” 380. Ultimately, Aesop serves his master pigs’ feet (similar to the hooves that the husband requests in the Talmudic version) and is then commanded to give the dish to the master’s beloved, by which he means his wife. Through Aesop’s overly literal interpretation, he gives the food to the master’s dog (his beloved), inciting the wife against the master. This last part *perhaps* corresponds to the request to break the lamps over the head of the gate in the Talmudic version: in both, the wife/servant is sent out with the “meal” to “give” it to a third party/thing, which, through overly literal interpretation, leads to great mishap. Of course, the pun between lentils and hooves works too well in Aramaic for the Talmudic story likely to have been borrowed directly from the Greek, but the many parallels between the stories do speak to an overall relationship.

<sup>29</sup> For the same concern, though a different solution, see Jubilees 42:5–6.

<sup>30</sup> At least, this is one midrashic position. See BT Eruvin 53a and Sotah 11a.

<sup>31</sup> That the message differs depending upon the listener’s perspective is what Ritchie refers to as viewpoints; Ritchie, “Reinterpretation and Viewpoints”. See also Geert Brône, Kurt Feyaerts, and Tony Veale, “Introduction: Cognitive Linguistic Approaches,” *Humor* 19 (2006): 210 and 218–19.

<sup>32</sup> James Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990); Daniel Boyarin, *Dying for God: Martyrdom and the Making of Christianity and Judaism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 42–66; Joshua Levinson, “atlet ha-emunah: alilot damim ve-alilot medumot,” *Tarbiz* 68 (1999): 62–63; and Beth Berkowitz, *Execution and Invention: Death Penalty Discourse in Early Rabbinic and Christian Cultures* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 161–64.

<sup>33</sup> An Indian joke, for example, contains both elements:

A British officer climbed to the top of a mountain in the Himalayas upon which he found a swami sitting, overlooking a cliff with a breath-taking view, and chanting, “34, 34, 34, 34.”

“Why are you chanting the number 34?” asked the British officer. At which point, the swami pushed him over the cliff and chanted, “35, 35, 35, 35.”

In the joke, at first, we, along with the British officer, assume that the swami is chanting the number 34 for some mystical reason, as the image of a swami sitting on a mountaintop and chanting conjures up certain stereotypical images of Indian meditation. It is only when the swami pushes the British officer off the cliff and changes the number he is chanting that we, though possibly not the officer, come to realize what the number 34 represented.

<sup>34</sup> In other words, incongruity alone does not create the humor, but incongruity that leads to an embarrassing realization does. While this still places this study solidly among the incongruity theorists, it gives it a psychoanalytical bent, at least regarding this case. Of course, competing theories of humor exist. Arthur Berger, “Humor: An Introduction,” *American Behavioral Scientist* 30 (1987): 6–15, categorizes the various theories into four main groups: superiority, incongruity, psychoanalytic, and cognitive. In addition to the various articles cited in footnotes 1 and 21 above, see also Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* (trans. J. Strachey; New York: W. W. Norton, 1960); Mark Ferguson and Thomas Ford, “Disparagement Humor: A Theoretical and Empirical Review of Psychoanalytic, Superiority, and Social Identity Theories,” *Humor* 21 (2008): 283–312.

<sup>35</sup> See footnote 2 above for articles that address aspects of rabbinic humor that are not particularly rooted in midrashic hermeneutics.

<sup>36</sup> Here and throughout this story, the printed edition and MS Munich 95 have Rabbah. I am following the rest of the manuscripts (Göttingen, London, Munich 140, Columbia, Oxford, and Vatican), which have Rava.

<sup>37</sup> This too can perhaps be seen as a forced reinterpretation joke: what was proffered as a pleasant invitation to a meal is exposed in the punch line for the dangers that underlie it. In this sense, then, midrashic hermeneutics may perhaps be seen at work even in this example, although not every example of rabbinic humor can be read as midrashic. On this passage, see Barry Wimpfheimer, *Narrating the Law: A Poetics of Talmudic Legal Stories* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, forthcoming). While I did not have access to Wimpfheimer’s forthcoming book, Boyarin, *Socrates*, 162–66, discusses it and Megillah 7b at some length.

# But Is it Funny? Identifying Humor, Satire, and Parody in Rabbinic Literature

Eliezer Diamond

The following joke is told in some Jewish circles:

Moses is standing at Sinai and God says to him, “You shall not boil a kid in its mother’s milk.”

Moses asks, “So are You saying that we shouldn’t eat milk and meat together?”

God replies a little impatiently, “I said: You shall not boil a kid in its mother’s milk.”

Moses, still puzzled, says, “Do you want us to wait six hours after a meat meal before eating dairy foods? Is that what you mean?”

God, a bit more impatiently this time, reiterates, “I said: You shall not boil a kid in its mother’s milk.”

Moses asks again, “Wait. You want us to use separate table cloths for meat meals and dairy meals?”

God replies with resignation, “You know what? Have it your way.”

Is this joke funny? That depends on what you know about Judaism and where you stand theologically because the joke is an insider joke that is also tendentious. Let’s unpack these two terms.

An insider joke is one that assumes specialized knowledge on the part of the listener. Without this knowledge, the joke is incomprehensible and therefore not humorous. In the present case you need to know three things if you are going to understand the joke. First, you need to have a general knowledge of *kashrut* laws and customs, thereby understanding that the joke refers to actual Jewish practice. Second, you must know that much of traditional Jewish practice is based not on explicit biblical commands but rather on rabbinic interpretations and extensions thereof. Third, it is important to be aware that many contemporary Jews, even those who are careful to observe *halakhah* [Jewish law], often feel that by adding ever more stringencies to halakhic observance one can lose one’s way spiritually, focusing on minute details of practice at the expense of engaging the larger significance of the commandments.

One who understands all of the above will also perceive that our joke employs a type of humor that Sigmund Freud labels as *tendenziös*, tendentious.<sup>1</sup> Tendentious humor is adversative, using wit rather than logic to undermine the authority of a person or an idea.<sup>2</sup> This is certainly true of the joke that we are analyzing at present. It may be told to offer a critique of the

increasing stringency of contemporary halakhic observance. Alternatively, it may reflect the teller's ambivalence about the traditional claim that the rulings and interpretations found in the Talmud reflect faithfully God's intentions as expressed in the Torah. In the first instance the jest cloaks anger at and frustration with what are perceived as the excesses of contemporary Jewish religious practice. In the second case the joke provides a safe means of expressing anxiety and doubt about the legitimacy and meaningfulness of the religious practices that one observes.<sup>3</sup>

One of the characteristics of tendentious humor is, as Freud points out, that it generally requires three participants to be effective: a joke teller, someone who or something that is the target of the joke, and a third party who is the audience. Because tendentious humor is adversative, its objective is best achieved when there is a third party to appreciate the jest and share the joke teller's dismissal of his adversary.<sup>4</sup> In the present case the joke teller invites us, the hearers, to share his frustration with and/or skepticism toward his antagonists, those who interpret rabbinic tradition stringently and those who engage that tradition uncritically.

I have begun with a relatively accessible contemporary joke in order to illustrate some of the basic characteristics of rabbinic humor and humor in general. Let us now turn to rabbinic humor proper, which is to be found in the Mishnah, the Babylonian and Jerusalem Talmuds, and other works of the rabbinic period (first–sixth centuries CE).

Two caveats need to be stated before we begin. The first is that my intention in this article is not to interpret rabbinic humor in light of its sociocultural context. This is certainly an important project, one that is presently being pursued in particular by Holger Zellentin and Daniel Boyarin.<sup>5</sup> However, my own agenda is to analyze rabbinic humor from a technical and sociopsychological perspective. By “technical” I mean an exploration of the means used to construct a joke—in other words, an examination of what makes a joke funny. With the term “sociopsychological” I refer to the psychological significance of jokes for those who tell them as well as their role in shifting the balance of power between the joke teller and his adversary. My analysis draws heavily upon Freud's classic work, *Jokes and Their Relationship to the Unconscious*.

My second caveat is a corollary of the first. Freud categorizes jokes as being either innocent humor, which is intended only to amuse its hearers, and tendentious humor, which, as stated above, has an antagonistic role as well. Because my focus is on humor that is adversarial, only the second genre of humor will be discussed.

## RABBINIC ATTITUDES TOWARD HUMOR

It is only recently that rabbinic humor has begun to be taken seriously, as it were, by the academic community.<sup>6</sup> Undoubtedly, as has been suggested,<sup>7</sup> this has a great deal to do with the austere image of rabbinic literature. As a consequence, scholars have assumed that it contains little or no humor and have not sought to identify and study it. Furthermore, it is not always easy or even possible to know whether something in rabbinic literature that strikes us as being humorous was in fact meant as such. As Yehuda Radday notes in his discussion of the difficulty of confidently identifying instances of humor in the Bible, “there lurks the methodological dilemma of veering between textual intentionality and reader’s reception/response.”<sup>8</sup>

In fact, the Sages<sup>9</sup> themselves are ambivalent about the use of humor. Among the terms they use to refer to humor are *leṣanut* (a Hebrew term) and *leṣanuta* (in Aramaic).<sup>10</sup> These terms generally refer to the sarcasm, cynicism, and mockery that are seen as the antithesis of wisdom. In comparing the words of Torah to olive oil, the Sages state, “Just as if a full container of oil were in your hand and a drop of water fell into it an equal amount of oil would spill over, so too for every word of Torah that enters one’s heart a word of *leṣanut* leaves it; and for every word of *leṣanut* that enters one’s heart a word of Torah leaves it.”<sup>11</sup> The Sages strongly denounced *leṣanut*,<sup>12</sup> approving its use only for polemical purposes, to denigrate idolatry,<sup>13</sup> scholars of ill repute,<sup>14</sup> sinners,<sup>15</sup> and heretics.<sup>16</sup>

Two factors would account for the negative rabbinic attitude toward *leṣanut*. In rabbinic study circles, disciples were expected to serve their master in addition to studying Torah. This was an expression of obedience and respect as well as an opportunity to learn how to live a life of Torah by the master’s daily practices. *Leṣanut* had the potential to undermine the master/disciple relationship by subjecting the master and/or his teachings to ridicule.

Even more radically, *leṣanut* could lead to questioning the authority and validity of the rabbinic enterprise itself. As Freud points out, mockery in the form of cynical humor is often used to attack not only people but also institutions and dogmas. Such humor is used particularly when the authority of the institution or belief is so great that it can be attacked only under the guise of a joke.<sup>17</sup>

The Sages also described attendance at stadiums, theaters, and circuses as *leṣanut*.<sup>18</sup> Besides their disapproval of the entertainments that took place there, they were aware that Jews and Judaism were sometimes mocked in the context of theatrical presentations.<sup>19</sup>

The term *seḥoq* refers to milder, more benevolent forms of humor: joviality and levity. Nonetheless, these types of humor are also regarded with some concern and suspicion. *Seḥoq* is an impediment to Torah study,<sup>20</sup> and it may lead to promiscuity.<sup>21</sup> Moreover in light of the Temple's destruction, it was considered inappropriate for one to "fill one's mouth with levity."<sup>22</sup> *Seḥoq* serves as a foil for *simbah* or joy, especially joy that is the result of fulfilling a mitzvah.<sup>23</sup>

*Bedihuta*, the Aramaic equivalent of *seḥoq*, is the term generally used to describe humor that the Sages consider appropriate. We are told that the fourth century Babylonian Sage Raba' would begin his teaching with "a word of humor [*bedihuta*],"<sup>24</sup> and we encounter him using *bedihuta* in self-deprecation in a halakhic discussion.<sup>25</sup> Even joviality, however, was inappropriate if it was excessive, as when some Sages were "exceedingly jovial [*badhe tuva*]" at the weddings of R. Ashi's and Mar B. Ravina's sons<sup>26</sup> or if it proved to be hurtful. When R. Aḥdehoi bar Ami speaks to R. Sheshet *be-vedihuta*, R. Sheshet is insulted and consequently R. Aḥdeboi is divinely punished.<sup>27</sup>

Nonetheless, humor is a component of rabbinic discourse. This is almost inevitable because of the dialogical and disputational nature of rabbinic discourse. As Binyamin Engelman puts it, "[The atmosphere of the Talmud] is one of intellectual tension, of mutual disputatiousness and competitiveness together with mutual achievement and normative obligation."<sup>28</sup> Wit is a powerful weapon in a debater's arsenal; it can sometimes carry weight that cannot be borne by the argument it seeks to buttress. Moreover, the atmosphere of the Babylonian Talmud (hereafter: Bavli) in particular is one of verbal violence,<sup>29</sup> one that lends itself to witty repartee that is often meant to wound more than to amuse—in effect, a form of *leṣanut*.

We now turn to four representative instances of tendentious humor in the Bavli. In each case we will, first of all, read the narrative in conjunction with a biblical verse or verses (in the first and second cases) or another rabbinic text (in the third and fourth cases) in order to make evident the presence of a humorous element. Second, we will identify the techniques being used to create a humorous effect. Finally, in each instance we will focus on the tendentious nature of the humor and consider its psychosocial function.

#### PARANOMASIA: THE PROPHETIC RODENT (*b. Pes.* 9b)

Paronomasia, or wordplay, is used quite commonly in both the Bible and rabbinic literature.<sup>30</sup> Jonah Fraenkel suggests that its frequent use by the Sages manifests sensitivity to wordplay resulting from their constant engagement in midrashic interpretation and the consequent attention paid to grammar and

semantics.<sup>31</sup> It may be used simply as a literary entertainment, but it often has a didactic or polemical function. In the passage about to be discussed, *paronomasia* is used by one to enliven his objection to a view of a colleague.

One of the obligations connected with Passover is the obligation to search one's home for *ḥameš* [leaven] on the night of the thirteenth of Nisan, which is considered by the Sages to be the beginning of the fourteenth, and then destroying it the following morning. The Mishnah advises that one should cover any *ḥameš* that one has found in the night of the thirteenth lest it be dragged away by a rodent, requiring the householder to initiate a second search.<sup>32</sup>

What if someone fails to follow the Mishnah's advice and indeed the mound of *ḥameš* that he has found disappears? The Mishnah seems to express two conflicting views on this matter. It says initially that "we do not concern ourselves with the possibility that a rodent has dragged off [the *ḥameš*]." <sup>33</sup> Yet later, when recommending that one cover any *ḥameš* that has been found, it explains that this is to be done so that one will not have to search for this *ḥameš* if it disappears.<sup>34</sup> The Bavli records two approaches to resolving this apparent contradiction.

The fourth century Babylonian Sage 'Abbaye proposes that the *mishnah* indicating that further search is required refers to the fourteenth day of Nisan, the eve of Passover, while the other *mishnah* deals with the night of the thirteenth. On the night of the thirteenth, when one has not yet removed the *ḥameš* from one's possession, a rat would assume that there was plenty more *ḥameš* in the house and consequently would probably consume any *ḥameš* it found. On the fourteenth, when the house has already been almost entirely rid of *ḥameš*, the rat would be more likely to store the *ḥameš* because there would be few crumbs available.

His contemporary Raba' offers an alternative solution: the *mishnah* that requires subsequent search refers to a case where one actually saw a rodent dragging away the *ḥameš*; the other *mishnah* refers to an instance in which the *ḥameš* disappeared for reasons unknown. In the second case, in addition to the possibility that a rat has taken the *ḥameš* and consumed it, there is a chance that a person took the *ḥameš* and ate it; the existence of two possible scenarios that would exempt one from further search leads to a more lenient ruling.

Raba', however, does not simply offer an alternative view. Initially he attacks 'Abbaye's position, saying, "Is a rat a prophet?!" Not satisfied with taking issue with 'Abbaye, Raba' wishes to expose the absurdity of 'Abbaye's proposed solution. He points out that 'Abbaye assumes a rat's ability to assess how much *ḥameš* is and will be present in the house on the thirteenth and



fourteenth days of Nisan. To this Raba' responds that only a rat gifted with prophetic powers, who therefore knew on the morning of the fourteenth that no more baking would be taking place until slightly before nightfall—it was the practice to bake the matzah for the Seder immediately before the advent of the holiday—would be capable of making this distinction.

Crucial to a full appreciation of Raba's riposte, however, is the knowledge that he is employing a sophisticated pun. The words translated above as "Is the rat a prophet" are in the original Hebrew, "*Ve-khi huldah nevi'ah hi?!?*" Now it so happens that the word for rat, *huldah*, is also the name of a biblical prophetess, a *nevi'ah*, who is mentioned in Second Kings and Second Chronicles.<sup>35</sup> Therefore, when Raba' is quoted as retorting, "Is the rat, *huldah*, a prophetess?" he is saying to 'Abbaye, in effect: it is true that the Bible speaks of *huldah ha-nevi'ah*, *huldah* the prophetess, but it is hard to imagine that it had an actual rat in mind.

Drawing on Freud's discussion of techniques of humor, one can say that at least two other factors contribute to the humorous effect of Raba's retort. The first is what Freud describes as "the use of the same or similar word from one circle of ideas to another, remote one," about which Freud says, "the pleasure . . . seems to be the greater the more alien the two circles of ideas that are brought together by the same word."<sup>36</sup> It is hard to think of two realms more alien to each other than women prophesying and rats dragging and consuming *hames*, yet a two-word phrase used by Raba' links them in memorable fashion.

A second source of pleasure and amusement is what Freud speaks of as the rediscovery of what is familiar; it is a particularly pleasurable source of humor, says Freud, when it is unexpected.<sup>37</sup> Raba' is in effect winking at the biblically knowledgeable reader, alluding in a totally unlikely context to a biblical character known to them.

The Bavli presents the dispute between Raba' and 'Abbaye in dialogical form, suggesting that this discussion took place face to face. It is only reasonable to assume that at least some of the disciples of the Sages were present at this debate; presumably it was one of them who preserved the exchange. We mentioned previously Freud's observation that tendentious humor requires the presence of at least one person beside the joke teller and his target to be fully effective. Presumably, the disciples would serve that function here. If so, part of Raba's motivation for incorporating a pun into his response would presumably have been to dazzle and entertain the students, in part by affording them the forbidden pleasure of laughing, even if silently, at one of their teachers.

There is of course another third party present here—namely, we who are reading the narrative. The willingness of the editors of the Bavli to preserve

Raba's jest as part of the narrative may be said simply to be the result of an unwillingness to tamper with received traditions, but this is a difficult case to make; the Bavli frequently reworks earlier traditions. Rather, the retention of Raba's *bon mot* in the Bavli indicates an appreciation of humor by its editors and a willingness to share that humor with its readers even when it takes the form of a disparaging remark. This is consistent with the generally disputatious character of the Bavli mentioned previously.<sup>38</sup>

REPRESENTATION BY THE OPPOSITE; PURIM PARSIMONY (*b. Meg. 7a-b*)

In Tractate Megillah, the Bavli delineates the parameters of two of the commandments relating to Purim—namely, *mishloah manot*, sending gifts of food to a fellow Jew, and *matanot la-eyyonim*, sending gifts to the poor. These commandments are based on two verses in the book of Esther, 9:19 and 9:22. Immediately after a brief passage in which the Bavli establishes the parameters of these obligations, the following narrative appears:

R.<sup>39</sup> Judah Nesi'ah sent R. 'Osh'aya' the flank of a calf and a barrel of wine.

R. 'Osh'aya' sent [R. Judah] the following message, "By means of the gift he has sent me our master has fulfilled the obligation of giving gifts to the poor."

[R. Judah] then sent R. 'Osh'aya' a third-grown calf<sup>40</sup> and three barrels of wine.

R. 'Osh'aya' sent a message to R. Judah saying, "[Now] our master has fulfilled the obligation of sending gifts to one's fellow Jew."<sup>41</sup>

The first message sent by R. 'Osh'aya' is an example of what Freud labels "representation by the opposite."<sup>42</sup> On the face of it R. 'Osh'aya's message is a positive one, assuring R. Judah that he has fulfilled one of the obligations of Purim. In fact, he is informing R. Judah that although the latter intended his gift as a substantial contribution to R. 'Osh'aya's Purim feast, R. 'Osh'aya' regards the gift as being so meager upon receiving it that he felt as though R. Judah was treating him like a pauper. The chastened R. Judah then sends R. 'Osh'aya' a more substantial gift, to which R. 'Osh'aya' replies, in effect, "Ah! That's more like it."

As in the case of Raba's retort to 'Abbaye, the particular phrasing of R. 'Osh'aya's responses yields even more delight to the reader familiar with rabbinic literature. R. 'Osh'aya' begins each response with the phrase *qiyyamta banu*, best translated as "you have fulfilled for us." First, this phrase alludes to a linguistic expression found elsewhere in rabbinic parlance. For example, the

following interpretation is offered for the verse “Tell now [*na*] the people to borrow, each man from his neighbor and each women from hers, objects of silver and gold” (Exod 11:2), based on the use of *na*’ in its petitionary sense:

In the study house of R. Yannai they said: The word *na*’ signifies entreaty. The Holy One, Blessed be He, said to Moses, “I entreat you, tell the people of Israel: I beg of you, ask the Egyptians to give you silver and gold vessels, lest that righteous one [Abraham] say ‘And they shall be enslaved and oppress them’ (Gen 15:13) God fulfilled for them (*qiyym ba-hem*) [but] ‘and they shall go free with great wealth’ (Gen 15:14) He did not fulfill for them (*lo qiyym ba-hem*).”<sup>43</sup>

Similarly in his dispute with R. Me’ir concerning the proper interpretation of Exodus 21:35, the second century Palestinian Sage R. Judah objects to R. Me’ir’s view saying, “You have fulfilled (*qiyyamta*) ‘they shall sell the live ox and divide its price’ but you have not fulfilled (*ve-lo qiyyamta*) ‘they shall also divide the dead animal.’”<sup>44</sup> Thus the reader who knows that “fulfilled” is sometimes followed by a qualifying “not fulfilled” hears the unspoken reprimand, “but you have not fulfilled the commandment of *mishloah manot*,” in R. ‘Osh’aya’s “assurance” that R. Judah Nesi’ah has fulfilled the commandment of *matanot la-’evyonim*.

Here again, then, the full entertainment value of the narrative is received only by someone who is well-versed in the style and content of rabbinic discourse. This story is meant to humor members of the rabbinic circle.

#### PARODY AND SATIRE: BIRDS ON THE BORDERINE AND BOVINE BABIES (*b. B. Bat.* 23b and *b. Nid.* 23a)

Satire and parody are closely related in that they both involve mimicry for the purpose of ridicule, and there has been some uncertainty among scholars as to how to distinguish between them.<sup>45</sup> Holger Zellentin has recently proposed that we define satire as “comical criticism” and parody as “imitative comical criticism.”<sup>46</sup> In other words, satire is humor that mocks, through allusion, an earlier text or idea, while parody involves crafting a text or narrative that subversively mimics an earlier one. Showing that one text imitates another while reworking it is, however, not sufficient basis for concluding that it is intended as parody. As Gilbert Hight puts it, “Parody is not merely distortion; and mere distortion is not satire.”<sup>47</sup> Therefore, says Zellentin, even after one has shown that one text imitates another, the “central question” is, “when are the retellings critical and meant to be understood in a humorous way?”<sup>48</sup> One of the crucial elements, in Zellentin’s view, is “their way of imitating a known target text,”<sup>49</sup> a target text being the narrative that is reworked in parodic fashion.

In the first of two instances discussed below, a question raised by the

Sage R. Yirmiyah is clearly considered to be satiric by his colleagues, even though on the face of it his question is no different from many others in the Bavli. The reason for this will become self-evident once we locate the target text that R. Yirmiyah is imitating and then examine the relationship between the two.

In the second case, R. Yirmiyah asks a question that the Bavli identifies as being facetious. A comparison between it and remarks made by R. Yirmiyah's colleagues that are similar but not satirical will demonstrate how it is the rhetorical strategy chosen by R. Yirmiyah in contradistinction to his colleagues that gives his question its satirical shading.

The second chapter of Tractate Bava Qamma is devoted to a discussion of zoning law. In this context, the Mishnah addresses the question of a domesticated dove or pigeon that is found near but not on the property of someone owning a dovecote. The Mishnah states that if a young dove is found within fifty cubits of a dovecote, it is presumed to belong to the dovecote's owner. If, on the other hand, the bird is found more than fifty cubits away, the finder is entitled to take the bird for himself.<sup>50</sup> The Bavli appends the following enigmatic narrative to this *mishnah*: "R. Yirmiyah asked: What if one of the bird's feet is within fifty cubits [of the dovecote] and one is more than fifty cubits? For this reason [i.e., because he raised this question] they expelled him from the *bet midrash* [house of study]."<sup>51</sup> The Talmud does not explain why R. Yirmiyah's query was grounds for his expulsion from the *bet midrash*, and at first glance this response seems strange and unreasonable. On the face of it, R. Yirmiyah's question is no more arcane and unlikely than many others found in rabbinic literature.<sup>52</sup> In fact, however, a comparison of R. Yirmiyah's question with another raised elsewhere in the Bavli makes it clear that R. Yirmiyah intended his question to serve as parody.

Before turning to the aforementioned question, however, we need to note the structure of the full passage in Baba Batra (of which only part is cited above). At the outset, the Bavli cites a view of R. Ḥanina' that may or may not have been stated in connection with the *mishnah* summarized previously. This is followed by an objection to R. Ḥanina's view by R. Zeira, a colleague and mentor of R. Yirmiyah. This is followed by another objection to R. Ḥanina'—the Bavli does not specify who raises it—from the aforementioned *mishnah*. The passage closes with R. Yirmiyah's question and the report of his consequent expulsion.

Elsewhere in the Bavli the same R. Ḥanina' whose view begins the passage in Baba Batra is recorded as asking whether someone with one foot inside of and one foot outside of the *tehum Shabbat*, the 2,000-cubit boundary that

marks the maximum distance one may walk from one's home in Shabbat, may return to his home on Shabbat.<sup>53</sup> While chronological considerations preclude that possibility that R. Yirmiyah addressed R. Ḥanina' himself, a comparison of his question with R. Ḥanina's, as well as R. Ḥanina's presence in the Baba Batra passage, strongly suggest that R. Yirmiyah's query was intended as a parody of R. Ḥanina's Shabbat-boundary inquiry.

Whereas the image of someone with one foot on either side of a boundary is plausible, the image of a bird, that most peripatetic of creatures, being found with its two feet firmly planted precisely on both sides of the fifty-cubit limit is comical. In asking his absurd question, R. Yirmiyah is implicitly ridiculing the question raised by R. Ḥanina'. Although R. Ḥanina's query is not ridiculous to the same extent as R. Yirmiyah's question, they are so similar that the potentially risible aspects of R. Ḥanina's question are foregrounded, and he is made to look foolish for asking it. It is this kind of *tour de force* that Gilbert Hight has in mind when he notes, "Some of the best material parodies are those which might, by the unwary, be accepted as genuine work of the author or style parodied."<sup>54</sup>

R. Yirmiyah uses a similar satirical technique in another context. In the context of delineating the laws of ritual purity of the parturient, the Mishnah discusses whether various types of births require a woman to observe these laws. One case is when a woman gives birth to a fetus that has the appearance and form of an animal. The majority of Sages rule that the purity laws of the parturient do not apply in this instance, while R. Me'ir treats it as a normal birth.<sup>55</sup> The Bavli reports the following query of R. Yirmiyah regarding R. Me'ir's view:

R. Yirmiyah asked R. Zeira: According to R. Me'ir, who says that an animal [formed] in a woman's womb is [considered] a genuine [human] embryo, what is the law if her [i.e., the fetus'] father accepted [money for] betrothal on her behalf [i.e., has a valid betrothal been contracted]?—What difference does it make? To forbid [the husband] to [the fetus'] sister.<sup>56</sup>—Do you mean that this fetus is viable? Did not R. Judah say in the name of Rab: R. Me'ir stated his view only because there are members of its species that are viable [implying that this fetus is not viable and therefore not subject to betrothal]!—R. 'Aḥa' b. Ya'aqob said: To this degree did R. Yirmiyah attempt to bring R. Zeira to laughter, but he did not laugh.<sup>57</sup>

R. 'Aḥa' b. Ya'aqob, a late third and early fourth generation Sage, reports that R. Yirmiyah's question was asked in jest. Once again, however, it is not clear why this is so. Of course this might have been obvious from the manner in which the question was asked, but there is no indication of this in R. 'Aḥa's

report.<sup>58</sup> Moreover, it is highly unlikely that R. 'Aḥa' himself was present when R. Yirmiyah raised his question.<sup>59</sup>

One hint that R. Yirmiyah is being satirical is the image portrayed by his question. The idea of a man seeking to betroth a monstrous creature as his bride is certainly absurd. This insight, in turn, makes it clear that R. Yirmiyah's question is actually a thinly disguised attack on R. Me'ir. If R. Me'ir treats an aborted animal-like fetus as having human status in that its mother is subject to the purity laws of the parturient, the implication is that, if it were possible for such a creature to survive, we would treat it like a human being in every respect, including viewing it as a potential marriage partner. The idea that Jewish law would regard such a betrothal as having legal validity and, as noted previously, the notion that anyone would be interested in betrothing such a creature are *prima facie* ridiculous. Since R. Yirmiyah's question is premised upon these far-fetched assumptions, it is clear that his question is facetious.<sup>60</sup>

However, saying that R. Yirmiyah's question is facetious is not the same as saying that it is satirical. In the passages analyzed above, Raba' and R. 'Osh'aya' utilized sarcasm, yet no one would label their remarks as satire. To isolate the satiric element in R. Yirmiyah's question, we need to compare the passage in Bavli Niddah with a section of the Jerusalem Talmud (henceforth: Yerushalmi) in which R. Yirmiyah's objection is raised in similar but yet significantly different fashion:

R. Ḥaggai said: R. Ḥananyah, the colleague of our masters, raised the following objection regarding R. Me'ir's teaching: If a woman miscarries, [producing] a creature in the form of a raven, [and it is]<sup>61</sup> standing at the top of the palm tree, do we say to it [if its "brother" has died leaving his wife childless], "Come and perform *ḥaliṣah* or *yibbum* [i.e., release or marry your sister-in-law]"? R. Mana' replied: If you are going to raise such an objection to R. Me'ir's view, raise it regarding the view of the sages [as well]! For R. Yassa' said in the name of R. Yoḥanan: [When the abortion is] entirely in human form but with the face of an animal it is not [considered] a human child; if [it is] entirely in animal form but with a human face it is [considered] a human child. [Now] if it is in human form but with the face of an animal and it is standing and reading the Torah do we say to it, "Come and we will slaughter you"? And if it as animal form but a human face and it is plowing the field, do we say to it, "Come and perform *ḥaliṣah* or *yibbum*"?<sup>62</sup>

R. Ḥananyah's argument is identical to the one implicit in R. Yirmiyah's question: to apply the laws of the parturient to a woman who aborts a fetus in animal form is to imply that the fetus has human status. Following this assump-

tion to its logical conclusion, in the hypothetical and presumably impossible situation that the fetus had survived, it would be considered the “brother” of the woman’s other children and could thereby affect his “brother’s” widow’s ability to remarry. As in the case of R. Yirmiyah’s proposed scenario, its implausibility is surpassed only by its absurdity, which is driven home with the image of the “brother-bird” perching on a palm tree as it being asked to perform a religious rite.

R. Mana’ objects in similar fashion to the view that the facial configuration of the aborted fetus determines whether or not the laws of the parturient apply. While his intent is not entirely clear, his point apparently is that facial configuration is an inadequate and unreliable guide to whether one is an animal or a human being and therefore should not be the standard for the purity laws. We can imagine a person with a bovine appearance and a cow with a human one; no one would ever consider the first an animal or the second a human being. Again, like R. Yirmiyah and R. Ḥananyah, R. Mana’ uses vivid and jarring imagery, the Torah reader being called to be slaughtered and the plowing ox being summoned to perform *ḥaliṣah*, to make his case.

And yet there is a crucial distinction between R. Yirmiyah’s rhetorical strategy and the one employed by his colleagues. R. Ḥananyah and R. Mana’ use the language and methods of open debate. Their words may contain ridicule, but the two Sages make their intentions clear and leave open for their adversaries the possibility of a riposte. Not so R. Yirmiyah. His weapons are satire and parody; thus his attack is oblique. R. Yirmiyah does not give R. Me’ir or his supporters the opportunity to respond to his critique because his use of the interrogative masks his true intentions. Moreover, he undermines R. Me’ir’s view by linking it with a question that, in the guise of taking that view seriously, mocks and derides it. Because satire and parody employ co-optation rather than negation, their targets are left with the impossible task of restoring dignity to a view or a literary or artistic creation that has been indelibly tarred with the brush of ridicule.

Before we leave our analysis of R. Yirmiyah’s questions, let us return to the episode recounted in Baba Batra. I explained that R. Yirmiyah’s intention was to ridicule a question asked by R. Ḥanina’ by asking a parodic version. It may be, however, that this was not the only reason for expelling R. Yirmiyah. As Yitzhak Isaac Halevy perceptively notes,<sup>63</sup> elsewhere in the Bavli, R. Yirmiyah is found questioning the arbitrary nature of rabbinic standards of measurement. In one instance he is skeptical that the Sages could accurately assess when grain had reached one third of its final growth.<sup>64</sup> Elsewhere he questions how a standard amount of water, a *revi’it*, can be used in all cases of the *meṣora’*

ceremony of slaughtering a bird over a bowl of water, given that the amount of blood that drips into the water may vary greatly and the obligation is for both the water and the blood to be distinctly visible.<sup>65</sup> In both instances his mentor and colleague R. Zeira cautions him, “Do not remove yourself from [the bounds of] the *halakhah*.”

R. Yirmiyah’s question in Baba Batra, therefore, besides being a denigrating parody of R. Hanina’s Shabbat-boundary inquiry, may also be an implicit expression of R. Yirmiyah’s disdain for the rabbinic system of measurement as a whole. He posits a case that is inherently ridiculous and that exposes the inadequacies of the rabbinic system. If the measurements to be used are absolute and inflexible, they will not be able to respond effectively to instances that are borderline cases literally, like the one posed by R. Yirmiyah, and/or figuratively. Presumably R. Yirmiyah’s own approach would be to apply measurements more loosely such that a question like his would never arise.

In short, R. Yirmiyah may have been doing more than ridiculing R. Hanina’s question. He may have been thumbing his nose at R. Zeira and at the rabbinic establishment as a whole. This would certainly be a compelling reason to discipline and silence him by excluding him from the circle of study.

One last observation is in order. There seems to be a joke embedded in the Baba Batra passage that may encompass the passages in Rosh Hashanah and Soṭah as well. R. Yirmiyah raises a question of boundaries: is a bird on the borderline inside or outside of the fifty cubit limit? Although there is no direct response to his question, his colleagues offer an implicit one. We may not be sure whether or not the bird is within the boundary line, they say, but there is no question that you are out of bounds; you must leave the study house at once. This sanction, moreover, is but a physical expression of what R. Yirmiyah was guilty of doing, according to R. Zeira: removing himself from the constraints of *halakhah*.

#### SCHNORRER HUMOR: BARREL-BUNGLING BEGGARS (*b. B. Mes.* 83a)

In numerous instances the same or similar narratives appear in both the Bavli and in the Yerushalmi. It has long been assumed that the version in the Bavli is almost always later than that in the Yerushalmi. A related observation is that the Bavli’s versions of these narratives are generally more highly developed than those of the Yerushalmi. In the case of the narrative below, it can be shown that the elements appearing in the Bavli’s version that are not in the Yerushalmi add humorous elements to the narrative.



The following narrative appears in the Bavli at the end of the sixth chapter of *Baba Meši'a*, which deals extensively with employer-employee relations<sup>66</sup>:

Some porters broke Rabbah b. b. Hanah's barrels [in the process of transporting them]. He seized their cloaks [as surety for his barrels].

They came to Rab and told him. He [=Rab] said to him [=Rabbah b. b. Hanah], "Return their garments to them." He responded, "Is this the law?!" He [Rab] responded in turn, "Yes. [Scripture states,] 'So follow the way of the good' (Prov 2:20)." He returned their garments to them.

They [then] said to him [Rab], "We are poor, we have worked the whole day, we are hungry and we have nothing." He said [to Rabbah b. b. Hanah], "Go and give them their wages." He said to him, "Is this the law?!" He replied, "Yes. [Scripture states,] 'And observe the paths of the righteous' (Prov loc. cit.)."

The primary purpose of this narrative is exhortatory. The Talmud has been discussing at length the mutual legal obligations of workers and employers. At the conclusion of this discussion the Talmud reminds us that what is legal is not always what is ideal. To use the language of Lon Fuller,<sup>67</sup> the chapter in the Talmud has been delineating a morality of duty; its final narrative espouses a morality of aspiration. Toward that end it tells of a Sage who is compelled by a colleague to pay wages to workers who not only did not do the work for which they were hired but actually caused damage to their employer's property. Clearly the letter of the law requires R. Rabbah b. b. Hanah's employees to pay him the value of the barrels that were broken if the damage occurred through their negligence. Instead, however, a different "law" is invoked—namely, Proverbs' imperative to "walk in the ways of the righteous."

Nonetheless, there is an element in this narrative that strikes the reader as being humorous. This element, of course, is the second claim of the porters; these gentlemen, who not only had not succeeded in transporting the barrels to the desired location but also had shattered every one, are asking, based on their poverty, that they be paid for this fine piece of work. The porters seem oblivious to the damage that they have caused their employer; their only concern is to be paid for services rendered, as it were. They feel entitled to this payment because of their status as unfortunates.

Our sense that this element of the narrative is intended to be humorous is strengthened by a comparison of this story with its parallel in the *Yerushalmi*. The *Yerushalmi*'s version reads as follows<sup>68</sup>:

A *tanna* taught: R. Neḥemiah the porter entrusted his barrels to someone who broke them. Neḥemiah seized his cloak. The man came before R. Yose b.

Ḥanina'. He said to him, "Go tell [R. Neḥemiah that Scripture states]," 'And keep to the paths of the just' (Prov 3:20)." He went and told [R. Neḥemiah] who returned his cloak.

R. Yose b. Ḥanina' then asked him, "Did R. [Neḥemiah] pay you your wages?" The man replied, "No." He said to him, "Go tell him [that Scripture states]," 'And keep to the paths of the just' (Prov 3:20)." He went and told [R. Neḥemiah] and he paid him his wages.

There are several differences between the two versions, besides the fact that the rabbi before whom the case is brought is a second generation Palestinian Sage in the Yerushalmi and a first generation Babylonian Sage in the Bavli. The following chart highlights the dissimilarities between the two narratives:

y. Bava Mezia 6:6, 11a	b. Bava Mezia 83a
R. Neḥemiah the porter entrusted his barrels to someone, who broke them.	Some porters broke Rabbah b. b. Hanah's barrels [in the process of transporting them].
R. Neḥemiah seized the man's cloak.	He seized their cloaks [as surety for his barrels].
The man came before R. Yose b. R. Ḥanina'.	They came to Rab and told him.
<b><u>He [=R. Yose b. R. Ḥanina'] told the man,</u></b> "Go tell him [that Scripture states], 'So follow the way of the good' (Proverbs 2:20).	<b><u>He [=Rab] said to him [=Rabbah b. b. Hanah],</u></b> "Return their garments to them."
	<b><u>He [=Rabbah b. b. Hanah], responded, "Is this the law?!"</u></b>
	He [Rab] responded in turn, "Yes. [Scripture states,] 'So follow the way of the good' (Proverbs 2:20).
The man went and told R. Neḥemiah and he returned his cloak to him.	He returned their garments to them.
<b><u>[R. Yose b. R. Ḥanina'] then asked the man, "Did he pay you your wages?" He replied, "No."</u></b>	<b><u>They [then] said to him [Rab], "We are poor, we have worked the whole day, we are hungry and we have nothing."</u></b>

<p>He said, "Go tell him [that Scripture states], " 'And observe the paths of the righteous' (Proverbs 3:20)." The man told R. Neḥemiah and he paid him his wages.</p>	<p>He said [to Rabbah b. b. Ḥanah], "Go and give them their wages."</p>
	<p><b><u>He said to him, "Is this the law?!"</u></b></p>
	<p>He replied, "Yes. [Scripture states,] "And observe the paths of the righteous."</p>

In the Yerushalmi the porter appeals to R. Yose b. R. Ḥanina', who instructs the porter to tell Neḥemiah, or R. Neḥemiah, that he ought to return the porter's cloak and pay him his wages. However, the "ought" here is not phrased in terms of obligation but rather as an appeal to follow the path of righteousness prescribed by Proverbs. The porter himself never thinks of asking for his wages, presumably because he considers such a request unreasonable if not laughable. It is R. Yose b. R. Ḥanina' who informs R. Neḥemiah that only if he pays the porter his wages will he fully realize the ideal of righteousness.

In the Bavli, however, we have a courtroom scene. The plaintiffs (the porters) bring the defendant (Rabbah b. b. Ḥanah) before a magistrate (Rab), who twice rules in favor of the plaintiffs. The courtroom setting necessitates that both the return of the cloaks and the payment of wages result from a claim by the porters and that Rab's determination be phrased as a ruling. This latter point is clear from Rabbah b. b. Ḥanah's response. As a consequence, we are confronted with porters who, having broken the barrels they were supposed to transport, are not content with having been exempted from liability; they claim as well that they ought to be paid their wages. This claim is based in part on their impoverished state, but they also point out that they deserve recompense for their arduous toil: "We have worked the whole day."

At this point in the narrative we have no choice but to laugh. The porters have been hard at work dropping and smashing all of their employer's barrels, and it is this heavy labor, they claim, that entitles them to receive their wages. There is only one word to describe this plea, and that word is *chutzpah*. Put this element of the narrative together with the fact of their impoverished state and you have an example of schnorrer humor. A schnorrer is someone who depends on others for his daily bread, often with a sense

of entitlement. It is this latter trait that is the basis for this genre of humor, and it is the attitude of the indigent porters that they are entitled to recompense that is the source of the humor in the Bavli. Had they simply pled poverty, we would be at least somewhat sympathetic to their plight. Once they base their claim on being owed wages for having destroyed their employer's goods they become figures of ridicule.

Freud makes the following observation regarding schnorrer humor: "The truth that lies behind [schnorrer jokes] is that the *schnorrer*, who in his thoughts treats the rich man's money as his own, has actually, according to the sacred ordinances of the Jews, almost a right to make this confusion. The indignation raised by this joke is of course directed against a [religious] law which is highly oppressive even to pious people."<sup>69</sup> In other words, schnorrer humor reflects a rueful acceptance of the claims that the poor have upon the religiously conscientious Jew at the same time as they express annoyance with the burden created by this obligation.

Applying this insight to the Bavli's version of the story of the porters, one could say that the Bavli is employing the schnorrer motif here in the manner suggested by Freud. The narrative is intended to be morally uplifting and inspirational, asserting that helping the poor is indeed the law, superseding, at least aspirationally, the specifics of labor law delineated at great length in the preceding chapter of the Bavli. However, that does not mean that one cannot have some humor at the same time—humor, moreover, that provides an outlet for the resentment sometimes felt toward those requesting or even demanding financial assistance. "Yes," the narrator is saying, "of course the ideal is to go beyond the letter of the law, particularly in the service of the needy, but let's face it: the poor who ask for our help can often be extremely presumptuous and annoying."

It could be argued that the humor here is not rabbinic humor in the sense that I have used that term; one need not be a rabbinic scholar to "get" a schnorrer joke. While this is so, the context of this humor—namely, a judgment concerning a matter of *halakhah*—gives it a particularly rabbinic flavor. Moreover, part of the humor is the result of Rab ruling in accordance with the claim made by the porters. As Rabbah b. b. Ḥana's outraged response to this ruling implies, the ruling seems to make a mockery of fundamentals of tort law and common sense. Consequently, the appeal to Proverbs notwithstanding, this narrative has a destabilizing effect on all of the rulings that precede it. When are judges allowed or even supposed to use aspirational standards rather than jurisprudential ones, for whom, and to what degree? The story of the porters raises these questions without answering them.

## SOME FINAL THOUGHTS

We have seen that humor is very much a presence in rabbinic discourse and narrative in general and in the Bavli in particular. Much work remains to be done before we can answer Zellentin's question: how do we know that a phrase or narrative in rabbinic literature is intended to be humorous? However, establishing that a narrative is recounted with humorous intent leads to another equally important question to be addressed: what is its function? I have addressed that question in each of the texts that were analyzed, but the question of humor's larger function or functions in rabbinic literature remains.

Daniel Boyarin has pointed us in a fruitful direction through his use of the model of Menippean satire to analyze rabbinic tales.<sup>70</sup> Satire and parody of this genre, sometimes referred to as *spoudogeloios* [serious laughing, or the seriocomic], is "produced by and for intellectuals in which their own practices are both mocked and asserted at the same time."<sup>71</sup> In the case of rabbinic narrative, argues Boyarin, this means that at the same time the Sages who teach and transmit Torah and who are generally depicted in heroic terms, are sometimes implicated in situations that are carnivalesque or sordid. These satiric narratives have the potential to undermine not only the Sages but also the Torah they teach. In the end, however, they are intended as problemization rather than rejection of the rabbinic enterprise.

There is much left to be done in the identification and analysis of the humorous elements in rabbinic literature. My study of four representative cases demonstrates some of the tools that can be helpful in this work and suggests some promising directions for further research. It is a project to which I hope to make future contributions.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and their Relationship to the Unconscious* (trans. James Strachey; standard ed.; vol. 8; London: Hogarth Press, 1960), 90.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 103.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 104.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 100.

<sup>5</sup> Holger M. Zellentin, "Late Antiquity Upside-Down: Rabbinic Parodies of Jewish and Christian Literature" (Ph.D. diss., Princeton University, 2007). I wish to thank my colleague and friend Professor Jeffrey Rubenstein for alerting me to Zellentin's work. Daniel Boyarin, "Patron Saint of the Incongruous: Rabbi Me'ir, the Talmud, and Menippean Satire," *Critical Inquiry* 35 (2009): 523-51.

<sup>6</sup> For a summary of the scholarly study of rabbinic humor, see Zellentin, "Rabbinic Parodies," 2-5; and Eli Yassif, *Sippur ha-'am ha-'ivri* (Jerusalem: 1999<sup>2</sup>), 185-212; Eli Yassif, *The Hebrew Folktale* (trans. Jacqueline S. Teitelbaum; Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 166-91. Eli Yassif's article, "Humorous Tales in the *Aggadah*: Typology,

Topos, Meaning” (Hebrew), in *Mehqere Talmud 3* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2005), vol. I, 403-30, is almost identical with Yassif, *Sippur*.

<sup>7</sup> Binyamin Engelman, “Explicit, Self-Evident, and Hidden Humor in the Babylonian Talmud” (Hebrew), *Be-khol derakhekha da’ehu: ketav et le-’inyane Torah u-mada’* 8 (1990): 7.

<sup>8</sup> Yehuda T. Radday, “Between Intentionality and Reception: Acknowledgment and Application (A Preview),” in *On Humor and the Comic in the Hebrew Bible* (ed. Yehuda T. Radday and Athalya Brenner; Bible and Literature Series 23; Sheffield, UK: Almond Press, 1990), 13-14. This problem is noted in connection with rabbinic literature by Zellentin, “Rabbinic Parodies,” 1-2, and Engelman, “Humor,” 6.

<sup>9</sup> Throughout this essay this term will be used to refer to the rabbinic scholars of the first to sixth centuries CE.

<sup>10</sup> Both of these terms derive from the root *lys*, from which the biblical terms *les* and *laṣon* are derived. The precise meaning of this root and how it comes to take on the meaning of mockery is beyond the scope of this article.

<sup>11</sup> *Song of Songs Rabbah* 1.2

<sup>12</sup> See in particular *b. Abod. Zar.* 18b-19a. See also Mordechai Hakohen, “Humor, Satire, and Jest in the Mouths of the Rabbis” (Hebrew), *Maḥnayyim* 67 (1962): 8.

<sup>13</sup> *b. Meg.* 25b.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> *b. Qidd.* 81a.

<sup>16</sup> See, for example, *b. Ber.* 10a.

<sup>17</sup> Freud, *Jokes and the Unconscious*, 108-09.

<sup>18</sup> *t. Abod. Zar.* 2.6 and elsewhere. Interestingly, a carnival atmosphere prevailed at the *simḥat bet ha-sho’evah*, the Festival of the Place of Water-drawing (or, possibly, the Festival of the Place of Fire), which took place on the evening following the first day of Sukkot; see *m. Suk.* 5.4. Precisely because of this, however, the Sages insisted on separating the sexes by constructing a balcony for the women in the Courtyard of the Women; see *b. Suk.* 51b.

<sup>19</sup> See *Lamentations Rabbah* (ed. Buber), 3.14.

<sup>20</sup> *m. Abot* 6.5.

<sup>21</sup> *m. Abot* 3.13; see *t. Sot.* 6.6.

<sup>22</sup> *b. Ber.* 31.a.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> *b. Shab.* 30a.

<sup>25</sup> *b. B. Qam.* 17a.

<sup>26</sup> *b. Ber.* 30b-31a.

<sup>27</sup> *b. B. Bat.* 9b.

<sup>28</sup> Engelman, “Humor,” 5.

<sup>29</sup> Jeffrey Rubenstein, *The Culture of the Babylonian Talmud* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003), 54-65.

<sup>30</sup> Jonah Fraenkel discusses at length rabbinic use of paronomasia in “Paronomasia in Aggadic Narratives,” *Scripta Hierosolymitana* XXVII (1978): 27-51. See the general discussion of paronomasia as a humorous technique in Freud, *Jokes and the Unconscious*, 29-41.

<sup>31</sup> Jonah Fraenkel, *Darke ha-'aggadah ve'ha-midrash* (Tel-Aviv: Yad la-Talmud, 1996), 272.

<sup>32</sup> *m. Pes.* 1.3.

<sup>33</sup> *m. Pes.* 1.2.

<sup>34</sup> *m. Pes.* 1.3.

<sup>35</sup> 2 Kings 22:14; 2 Chronicles 34:22.

<sup>36</sup> Freud, *Jokes and the Unconscious*, 120.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 120-22.

<sup>38</sup> I hope to show elsewhere that on occasion the Bavli supplements narratives in which one or more of the Sages are the butt of a joke with glosses intended to lessen the damage to the reputation(s) of the Sage(s) in question.

<sup>39</sup> An abbreviation of "Rabbi."

<sup>40</sup> *'eglah tilta'*. The exact meaning of this phrase is unclear.

<sup>41</sup> Bavli Megillah 7a-b, according to many manuscript versions. The version found in the Vilna edition makes no sense as a narrative; moreover, the version presented here is substantially the one found in the Jerusalem Talmud as well (*y. Meg.* 1.4, 70d).

<sup>42</sup> Freud, *Jokes and the Unconscious*, 73.

<sup>43</sup> *b. Ber.* 9b.

<sup>44</sup> *m. B. Qam.* 3.9.

<sup>45</sup> See, for example, Gilbert Hight, *The Anatomy of Satire* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1962), 14.

<sup>46</sup> Zellentin, "Rabbinic Parodies," 1, n. 1.

<sup>47</sup> Hight, *Anatomy of Satire*, 67.

<sup>48</sup> Zellentin, "Rabbinic Parodies," 1. See the somewhat unsatisfactory discussion of the same question in Hight, *Anatomy of Satire*, 14-18.

<sup>49</sup> Zellentin, "Rabbinic Parodies," 2.

<sup>50</sup> *m. B. Bat.* 2.5.

<sup>51</sup> *b. B. Bat.* 23b.

<sup>52</sup> This observation is made by a number of medieval commentators on the Bavli. See, for example, Tosafot *B. Bat* 23b s.v. *ve-'al da*. Isaac Hirsch Weiss, *Dor dor ve-dorshav* (Vilna: Romm, 1904), 3.96, suggests that it was R. Yirmiyah's sarcastic facial expression that was objectionable, but there is no evidence for this. Concerning Yitzḥaq Isaac Halevy's proposal see further on.

<sup>53</sup> *B. Erub.* 52b. This is noted by Ritba ad. loc. s.v. *'al da*.

<sup>54</sup> Hight, *Anatomy of Satire*, 72.

<sup>55</sup> *m. Nid.* 3.2.

<sup>56</sup> A man is forbidden to marry his wife's sister during his wife's lifetime; see Leviticus 18:18.

<sup>57</sup> *b. Nid.* 23a

<sup>58</sup> See n. 51.

<sup>59</sup> Although R. Aḥa was a contemporary of R. Zeira and R. Yirmiyah, the event in question seems to have taken place in the Land of Israel, and there is no indication that R. Aḥa ever left Babylonia.

<sup>60</sup> In understanding R. Yirmiyah in this way I am implying that the reason that R. Yirmiyah's question was regarded as facetious and was reported as such by R. Aḥa is not

the one suggested by the anonymous Bavli in the section interposed between R. Yirmiyah's question and R. Aḥa's remark—namely, that R. Yirmiyah was asking about a case that could not possibly arise.

<sup>61</sup> Following Pnei Moshe s.v. *ḥavrein de-rabbanan*.

<sup>62</sup> *y. Nid.* 3.1, 50c.

<sup>63</sup> Yitzḥaq Isaac Halevy, *Dorot ha-rishonim* (Frankfurt au Main: Slobotsky Printers, 1901), 2.364-65.

<sup>64</sup> *b. Rosh Hash.* 13a.

<sup>65</sup> *b. Sotah* 16b.

<sup>66</sup> *b. B. Meṣ* 83a.

<sup>67</sup> Lon Fuller, *The Morality of Law* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1965), 5.

<sup>68</sup> *y. B. Meṣ*, 6.6, 11a.

<sup>69</sup> Freud, *Jokes and the Unconscious*, 113.

<sup>70</sup> Boyarin, "Patron Saint," passim. See also Daniel Boyarin, "Literary Fat Rabbis: On the Historical Origins of the Grotesque Body," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 1 (1991): 551-84; Daniel Boyarin, *Carnal Israel* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 197-225.

<sup>71</sup> Boyarin, "Patron Saint," 526.





# Masekhet Purim

Peter J. Haas

## INTRODUCTION

My focus in this essay is on what I regard as a very striking example of classical rabbinic Jewish humor—namely, “Masekhet Purim,” or “Tractate Purim,” a medieval parody of the Babylonian Talmud. There are a number of different approaches one could take for analyzing this remarkable work. One approach, of course, is to look at it as a very clever and well-informed piece of literature. Another way to think about this document is as an example of the larger genre of religious parody literature, a phenomenon that was remarkably widespread within the surrounding Christian community of the Middle Ages. Such parodies exist regarding both Church liturgy and sermons. A third approach would be to ask about the function of this work within the traditional rabbinic culture of the time. In this mode of analysis, we ask whether this composition is an actual act of subversion or if it in fact supports, even if in a sort of backhanded way, the norms of rabbinic society. Before turning to the document itself, I want to take up these various approaches in turn.

## RELIGIOUS PARODIC LITERATURE

I turn first to Masekhet Purim as a piece of highly sophisticated literature. As will become clear in due course, the “masekhet,” for all its slapstick humor, is not the idle scribbling of an amateur. It is rather a clever and well-informed rewriting of the Talmud. In fact, it is such a knowledgeable reflection of the discourse, logic, and vocabulary of the Talmud that it could only have been written by an adept insider. This is true to the extent that, to fully appreciate it, the reader already has to have a good deal of familiarity with the Talmud’s style of discourse and argumentation.

Let me expand on this quality of the text for a moment. As anyone who has had a serious and sustained encounter with the Gemara can tell you, the Talmud is not an easy document. It focuses on often arcane legal principles and ideas; is written in a complex intermixture of Hebrew and Aramaic; has its own highly specialized technical vocabulary; develops ideas according to its own logic (itself the butt of many jokes); is written in an elliptical style in which often a word or phrase represents an entire complex of thoughts; and, finally, somehow assumes that you already know the rest of the Gemara since

the readers more often than not find themselves not at the beginning of an argument, but rather in the middle of an already highly developed one, often one in which materials from other parts of the Gemara are brought into play. All this means that, although making fun of the overly clever rabbi or fashioning a joke about the pitfalls of “Talmudic logic” is not all that hard, composing a true parody is a very difficult task indeed, one that requires specialized knowledge. This level of technical expertise is true not only for the composer of this tractate but also for the reader.

This of course raises questions not only about the author and the intended audience but also about the readers’ reactions, both intended and actual. Unfortunately, we have no access to those kinds of data. Although we have some idea of who authored the tractate, as discussed below, we have no way of knowing why, how it was used, how this work was received, or what others thought of it. All that we can safely adduce is that this tractate was meant to be “studied” on Purim, and so the (intended) audience would have been in that frame of mind. It also seems, given the sophistication of the work, that the intended audience would have been students in a yeshiva or kollel setting, at the least.

In light of these comments, it will be helpful to think about the whole phenomenon of medieval religious parody in general and about the making of parodies by members of a religious community of its own sacred materials in particular. As it turns out, this was a fairly common genre in Western Christendom, the supposed venue of our tractate. One of the classical studies of this genre is that of Paul Lehmann, who defined medieval parody as “a literary product, of any given known text or alternatively ideas, manners, customs, activities or people which are seemingly true but in fact are distorted, inverted with conscious, deliberate and noticeable comic effect, whether in whole or in part, whether formally copied or cited.”<sup>1</sup> Sander Gilman offers a more economic definition—namely, “a literary form which is created by incorporating elements of an already existing form in a manner creating a conscious contrast.”<sup>2</sup> Gilman goes on to argue that what makes for real parody is the maintenance of the same form, the parody lying in the introduction of new content. Conversely, under his definition, if the content remains the same but the form is changed, then we have something more like travesty.

In line with these definitions, Lehmann and Gilman go on to investigate this little-known genre in Western culture. Lehman traces the literary roots of such parodic literature back to Roman times and finds examples in the Middle Ages as early as the seventh century Latin grammar of the supposed Virgilius Maro.<sup>3</sup> More to our point, around the same time there appears the “Discus-

sions of Salomon and Marcolf,” which, with its mischievous [*fresch*] handling of the Bible, shows that even at that early date sacred texts could be the subject of such fun-making. Gilman’s interest is more in the parodic sermon. His argument is that the seed of parody lies in the idealized sermon—or, more specifically, the idealized sermon form (found in, say, the Sermon on the Mount of the Gospel of Matthew) on the one hand, and the actual given sermon on the other.<sup>4</sup> This latter definition works well with the tractate before us because the Talmud in some ways represents the ideal form of the Oral Torah, and what we have in our tractate is the preservation of that form but with a distinctly different content.

The real flowering of religious parody in the West, however, occurs only in the eleventh or twelfth centuries. At this time, a major stylistic transformation occurs as parodies move from being more gentle, amusing, and noncritical to being sharper and more satirical.<sup>5</sup> These changes are associated by Lehmann with the various struggles emerging at that time between spiritual and secular power, between cloistered and noncloistered clergy, and among the various religious orders themselves. To be added to this, it seems to me, should be the rise of Aristotelianism and of the early university as a source of knowledge and learning outside the conventional, church-controlled monasteries and seminaries. Such parodies focused not only on the Bible but also on prayers, hymns, the liturgy, and even the mass itself.<sup>6</sup> Lehman’s analysis deals with very early texts. Gilman, who is examining parodic sermons, especially the French “Sermon Joyeux,” deals with material that is somewhat later—namely, from the fourteenth century.<sup>7</sup> This later date seems to provide a more likely context for the composition of our tractate.

Among the writers of early medieval parodic literature were the “Goliards,” comprised largely of clerical students at the new universities of France, Germany, Spain, Italy, and England. These students, portraying themselves as the pious followers of one putative Saint Goliath, made fun of the Crusades, the Roman curia, church politics, financial abuses, and the like. Many of their works went even further, celebrating such vices as gluttony, gambling, and drunkenness.<sup>8</sup> Sometimes whole masses were written that revolved around figures like Bacchus, the Greek god of wine and therefore alcoholic consumption. While such nonconformist students, who were insiders in terms of their knowledge of the literature but outsiders in terms of their subversive attitudes, may be the models of the authors of Talmudic parodies like the Purim tractate, it is hard to find a direct connection. Martha Bayless points out, in fact, that most of these Goliard parodies are not terribly sophisticated but are written more to humiliate religious, political, or social rivals than to be serious pieces

of literature.<sup>9</sup> Masekhet Purim is, however, hardly amateurish or mean-spirited in this way. While it might be inspired by the existence of Goliard parodic literature in the Latin West more generally, it does not share the political, theological, or in fact social edge of such works.

A more apt model might again be the more sophisticated parodic sermons studied by Gilman. In discussing the mid-fourteenth century Spanish archpriest Juan Ruiz, Gilman notes that the “logical illogic is perhaps the highest level of parody to be found generated by the scholastic sermon. Further, the use of biblical quotations coupled with literary references to classical authors such as Cato add some measure of parodic authority to the sermon, but the true source of parody in the sermon is the convolute structure of medieval logic.”<sup>10</sup> In all events, as Bayless notes near the end of her study, much of this literature, as is the case of Masekhet Purim, was too sophisticated for a common lay audience. In her words, “The evidence of authorship, the fact that there is such a large body of the genre in Latin, and the familiarity with Scripture, theology and the Church required to appreciate the jokes suggest that these texts were written by and for members of the clergy and were not intended primarily, if at all, for lay consumption.”<sup>11</sup> This brings us to the issue of the potential subversiveness of parody literature.<sup>12</sup> Lehmann ends his discussion by asserting that the medieval parodic literature of the Latin West helped pave the way to the Renaissance and thus the beginning of modernity. In this regard, then, the literature may have been, and even intended to have been, for more than just comic relief. It may actually have participated in the undermining of the old order. One theoretical foundation for understanding the social subversiveness of humor is Mikhail Bakhtin’s analysis of the medieval carnival. In *Rabelais and His World*, Bakhtin posits that common folk participated in carnivals and perverse “ritual spectacles” precisely as ways of expressing their resistance to the religious, social, and political structures to which they were subservient. While Bakhtin’s understanding of “folk” humor may be correct to some extent, it seems clear from both the Goliard parodies and the Masekhet Purim that such humor challenging the powers that be is not restricted to the lower class but circulates as well, maybe sometimes almost exclusively, among the estate that is supposedly being subverted.<sup>13</sup>

On the other hand, such subversiveness need not lead to an outright challenge. Gilman’s study of the parodic sermons, for example, associates them closely with the “festum stultorum,” which had many parallels to some of the traditions of Purim (like the election of a boy bishop, reminiscent of the “Purim rabbi”).<sup>14</sup> Although disliked and at times directly challenged by the Church, such occasions not only were popular but also remained within

the confines of the Roman Catholic Church. The development of the “festum hypodiaconorum,” or feast of the subdeacons (marginally educated lay brothers), offers a good example of the “institutionalization” to some extent of the “festum stultorum.”<sup>15</sup> To be sure, such parodies of sermons and the like took on a specifically partisan role among Protestants during and after the Lutheran Reformation, but that is another story.

The parodic and at least potentially subversive nature of this literature raises an important question as to the intended, if not actual, function of Masekhet Purim. If there is a type of carnivalesque folk subversiveness in rabbinic Judaism, it is the holiday of Purim itself, which, in the end, became an “officially” sanctioned holiday. It is no secret that Purim portrays itself quite explicitly as the inversion of all rabbinic norms. Not only do Jews triumph over gentiles, but the rabbi is mocked, drunkenness becomes a mitzvah, and so forth. Medieval Megillot are often illustrated with truly carnivalesque imagery, including people wielding slapsticks and dancers wearing their clothing inside out. I do not intend here to go into the various anthropological and sociological theories of how such reversals and liminalities operate to preserve the status quo. Rather, my point is that it is the very occasion of Purim itself that embodies such subversiveness.

Masekhet Purim, insofar as it is associated with the celebration, thus adds no particular incitement to social rebellion or overturning of the rabbinic norm. It is, it seems to me, nothing more than a sophisticated participant in the already colorful array of Purim amusements and inversions. I should add at this point that Tractate Purim was not even the only form of Purim parody. There is also an Evening Service for the First Night of Purim, a service for the Second Night of Purim, and other “liturgical” sorts of things.

#### THE TRACTATE MASEKHET PURIM

With these thoughts in mind, I want to say a little about what we know of the history of this tractate. The main source here is Israel Davidson, who published in 1907 what still seems to be the definitive book on Jewish parodies, a book titled, appropriately enough, *Parody in Jewish Literature*. Davidson writes, “It is only in the twelfth century, that we first meet with parody in Jewish literature.”<sup>16</sup> In particular, he notes that the first Jewish parody of which he finds evidence is actually “Hymn for the Night of Purim,” composed by Menahem ben Aaron and found in the Mahzor Vitry (eleventh to twelfth centuries). It was modeled on the very serious piyyut “Hymn for the First Night of Passover” by Meir ben Isaac.<sup>17</sup> As noted above, we do find in Europe at roughly this same time—that is, the eleventh to twelfth centuries—Christian parodies

of the Gospels and the mass (so-called *parodia sacra*).<sup>18</sup> This strongly suggests that this rise of mockery and parody in Western Christendom may have sparked or inspired a parallel literature among the Jews, likely mostly in Italy and Provence. As for Masekhet Purim itself, Davidson, after reviewing allusions to the text in various sources, comes to the conclusion that the Masekhet Purim tradition goes back at least to Kalonymos ben Kalonymos circa 1320.<sup>19</sup>

A printed version of Masekhet Purim is first mentioned by Giovanni De Rossi, a Catholic archaeologist and philologist who was active in the later half of the nineteenth century. Among his many publications was a series of catalogs on Hebrew manuscripts in the Vatican library. In this series, he mentions what may have been the *editio princeps* of the masekhet from the sixteenth century. This edition may have contained other works, including “Sefer Habakbuk ha-Navi” [Book of the Prophet Bottle], an obvious play on “The Book of the Prophet Habakkuk,” with the name of Habakkuk being replaced with “HaBakbuk”—that is, “the bottle.” This Masekhet Purim was presumably published sometime in the early sixteenth century. What is more firmly known is that a second edition was published in Pesaro in 1552. By the seventeenth century there were at least five versions, all stemming, it seems, from the same source.<sup>20</sup> Davidson helpfully gives us a comparison of the various versions. The text I use below comes from an edition put together by Shelomo Ephraim Blogg (or Salomon Blokh), a Jewish educator from Hanover who also owned a publishing business. This text appeared in 1975 as a limited reprint of the original 1874 edition of Blogg’s.<sup>21</sup>

## THE TEXT

I now turn to the tractate itself and give a brief “feel” for the text with three short, but I think representative, excerpts. To fully appreciate the cleverness of the parody, one needs to be familiar with Talmudic vocabulary and diction, but I will do my best to convey some of its personality.

My first example comes from the opening of the Masekhet. The opening is almost certainly modeled after the opening of Bavli Tractate Pesachim. The real Tractate Pesachim, which is about Passover, begins by noting, “On the night preceding the fourteenth [of Nisan], they seek out leaven.” The reason one gets rid of leaven, of course, is the biblical command that no leaven shall be seen in the house and whoever eats of it shall be cut off from the people. This piece of rabbinic law is based on Exodus 12:19. It should also be pointed out that there is reference here to water. In the Talmud and the midrashic (extra-Talmudic exegetical and hermeneutic) literature, water is very often a sign of purity, Torah learning, and even life. As we shall see in a moment, it

has the exact opposite treatment in Masekhet Purim. The reason is, of course, given the logic of the parody, if you are drinking water, then you are not drinking wine.

Here is my translation of the opening of the tractate:

PART MISHNAH: on the morning of the 13th of the month of Adar, they remove [m'va'rin] all the water from the houses and from the courtyard. And it is forbidden to give drink from them until the fifteenth of the month and they are subject to flogging on account of "least you see" and "lest there be found" from the middle of the thirteenth day and forward. GEMARA: From where are these deductions? Said R. Hatsavah [Keg] said R. Kada [Jug], Scripture says, "remove the evil from your midst" (Deut 21:21). And evil is none other than water for it is written "but the water is bad and the land causes bereavement" (2 Kgs 2:19). This supports the view of R. Yayna Saba [Old Wine] for R. Yayna Saba said the generation of the flood was only punished because they drank water on Purim as it says of them, "every plan devised by his mind was nothing but evil all the time" (Gen 6:5). It was also thus taught in a baraita [early source "outside" the Mishnah], whoever drinks water on Purim has no portion in the World to Come, as it says, "the people quarreled with Moses. 'Give us water to drink,' they said" (Exod 17:2). The meaning is that had they asked for wine, they would have a portion in the World to Come, as it says, "and Noah began to plant a vineyard" (Gen 9:20).

The last allusion might bear a bit of explanation. The claim is that the world was brought to near chaos by water. Noah clearly got the message because the first thing he did when emerging from the ark was to plant a vineyard, presumably to make wine. Later, under Moses there was also an issue of water, suggesting that the demand to Moses to supply water occurred on Purim. Behind this one can make the further inference that this is why the striking of the rock is cited as the reason Moses was not allowed into the Promised Land—he made possible the drinking of water on Purim. This would of course violate the "command" on the holiday to drink (only) wine.

Before moving on to my second passage, I want to point out that the passage just cited perfectly follows Talmudic form. There is a citation from "Mishnah" and then the "Gemara" poses a very characteristic question in the standard form—from where do we know this [*mana haney miley*]? There then follows the various biblical references and cross-references. Also cited is a putative "baraita," a statement from a tannaitic authority—that is, someone from the time of the Mishnah, but a statement not in the Mishnah itself.

My second citation is from later in the first chapter (p. 7, bottom paragraph). It reads, in my translation:



Our rabbis taught, R. Shikran [Drunkard] and R. Hamran [Wine-maker] were the descendants of Noah and once they were on the road and the time arrived for the obligation of the day to drink but they had no wine. They kneeled down and fell on their faces and burst out in cries and said, “*Ribbono shel Olam* [Master of the Universe], revealed and known to You it is that our father’s father, Noah, was the first *tzaddik* [righteous person] in the world and it was he who brought wine into the world in order to fulfill the mitzvah of the day and we, the children of his children, do not have wine this day to drink in order to fulfill the mitzvah of the day and our end will be to die of thirst on this road.” Thereupon their eyes opened and they saw before them a well of wine and they drank and became drunk. This well is called by their names, the well of drunkenness [Be’er Shikurim], to this day.

This passage seems to echo in some way the story of Hagar and Ishmael from Genesis 16, in which a well is miraculously provided and is called “Be’er Le-Hai Ro’i.” The language is also similar to that describing the naming of the “well of the oath” [Be’er Sheba]. The language of “obligation of the day” is a standard expression for the Shabbat or one of the three major rabbinic holidays. At first read, it thus seems that this passage refers to the Sabbath and the need for wine for Kiddush. This would be a perfectly pious usage and an example of an actual mitzvah concerning the drinking of wine. The placement of this story, however, and of course the reference to the “tzaddik” [righteous] Noah suggest that the “obligation of the day” should be read as referring to Purim, which now has suddenly taken on the sanctity of Shabbat. It is also, of course, a bit of a clever twist to call Noah the first “tzaddik” [one of the Righteous of the World], a fairly weighty status when all the Bible says is that he was a tzaddik in the context of his generation. In short, this passage cleverly brings into juxtaposition well-known expressions and descriptions about the “real” holidays and the Sabbath in a way that elevates Purim to the height of importance and holiness. In this it is being very “Talmudic.”

My final illustration echoes the beginning of the Babylonian Talmud Tractate Berachot [Blessings]: “From when may they recite the Shema.” The opening argument in this section of the Babylonian Talmud has to do ostensibly with when one recites the Shema in the evening, but it is really a discussion about when the evening is taken to begin and to end. Here is the parallel in Masekhet Purim:

PART 3:

MISHNAH: From when (me’aimatai) do they begin to drink. R. Shakran [Drunkard] said, from the time the sun sets, R. Gargaran [Glutton] said, from the time the stars come out. GEMARA: What

is the reasoning of R. Shakran? In order to add from profane to the holy. And what is the reasoning of R. Gargaran? He compares wine to bread. As it says, “and Melchizedek, king of Salem brought out bread and wine” (Gen 14:18). Now just as we find that that matzah (unleavened “bread of affliction” used on Passover) is from the coming out of the stars, so also the drinking of wine is at the coming out of the stars. And if you were to ask me, just as the wine for sanctifying the day on the first night of Passover is from the time of the coming out of the stars, so is the obligation of drinking wine on Purim from the coming out of the stars.

The argument here recapitulates standard Talmudic discourse about how to fix the parameters of a ritual (in this case beginning the drinking of Purim wine). Usually, the argument places a general theory on the one side and a homologation to a specific practice on the other. In this passage, the argument is about how one goes about “adding to holiness”: one always starts a holy time early, in this case as soon as the sun sets without waiting for full darkness. This is the view of Rabbi Shakran. On the one hand stands the specific practice of the holiday of Passover. In this case, Rabbi Gargaran argues, the starting time for eating the unleavened bread is when it is dark enough to see stars, and so we follow the same practice regarding Purim wine. The implication is that, just as the matzah of Passover is a holy act, so is the analogous drinking of wine on Purim. The parodic character of this “debate” is heightened by the appearance of an almost identical argument ascribed to Shammai and Hillel about Hanukkah in the Babylonian Tractate Shabbat 22. The exact same structure appears, although the holiday being modeled in the second case is Sukkot, not Passover. The patterned discourse, however, is precisely the same, and as in the case before us, the second argument (Hillel, Rabbi Gargaran) prevails. The implication is that drinking wine on Purim is the religious equivalent of obeying the biblical command to eat unleavened bread on Passover.

## CONCLUSION

I think the above examples are enough to give you a flavor of the Masekhet and its intricate relationship with the real Talmud it is parodying. Although the work is almost totally unknown today, it should be remembered that it did survive for centuries. It thus had some sort of devoted following. To be sure, the humor and sheer artistry of this work would be totally lost today on the vast majority of Jews, as may well have been the case even in the heyday of rabbinic Judaism. As noted earlier, this is a text that presupposes a high level of Talmudic literacy. Yet the very creation and persistence of this remarkable work show us that, even in the Middle Ages, the traditional rabbis and schol-

ars could also mock themselves. This Masekhet seems to me to be a wonderful example of how deep-seated a sense of humor, self-reflection, and criticism were embedded in the culture of medieval religion in general and of Judaism in particular.

There is, of course, the other side of parody—that is, its potential subversiveness. I noted earlier in this essay that the parodic sermons of the “*festum stultorum*” were maintained within the confines of the Church but also were seen as dangerous. The carnivalesque ritual celebrations of Purim are very self-consciously mocking the establishment, but the parameters of the holiday itself keep the mockery within certain epistemological boundaries. No one is tempted to think of Purim as somehow reflecting a real alternative to Judaism. A parody of the Talmud, however, is not so easily confined. The tractate can, of course, be read at any time and in any occasion. It does show the flexibility of the Talmudic form and so can bring into question the objectivity, reliability, or even truth of the content. To be sure, there is no direct evidence that this or other like parodies played a role in the emergence of nonrabbinic Judaisms in the early modern period, such as Chasidism on the one hand or German Reform on the other. Neither movement, for example, mocked rabbinic Judaism in the way the Lutheran Reformation went on to mock the Roman Catholic Church. The German Jewish Reform movement took itself quite seriously as an intellectual movement and never fully rejected the Talmud. Quite to the contrary, the Jewish Reformers regarded the rabbinic literature as important and even seminal documents for getting at the spiritual heritage of Judaism, although they did question the authority of such documents for the modern Jew. This may well lie in that fact that the Reformation saw the Church as a perversion of true Christianity, while both Chasidism and Reform (in different ways, to be sure) saw themselves as building on and adjusting Rabbinism in ways that would better serve their religious constituency. Works like Masekhet Purim, then, did not give rise to a widespread parodic literature during the Jewish “reformations” of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

In all events, the text has had a long life, although with the coming of modernity it has slipped into obscurity. Most Jews today could not read and appreciate its humor, and the growing body of Yeshiva students is simply not exposed to this kind of parody of religious literature. This, it seems to me, is a real loss and maybe reflects, and even lends to, the unsmiling rigidity of modern ultra-Orthodoxy. The Masekhet Purim and texts like it show us that things could be otherwise. What we often regard as the grim and lachrymose “dark age” of persecution and expulsion that comprised the Jewish experience of the Middle Ages was in fact much more complex. As may have been the

case in Christianity, this literature may have had deep subversive or mocking intents, but much of it seems part of the human capacity to step outside of its current state of affairs and take frivolous potshots at the human condition. There is certainly no shortage of this in any religion, and Judaism turns out to be no exception. Masekhet Purim and its imitators like Masekhet America represent a part of the rich rabbinic tradition that, if lost, would only diminish our inheritance.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Paul Lehmann, *Die Parodie in Mittelalter* (Muenchen: Drei Masken Verlag, 1922), 13. My translation.

<sup>2</sup> Sander Gilman, *The Parodic Sermon in European Perspective* (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1974), 3.

<sup>3</sup> Lehmann, *Die Parodie*, 21f.

<sup>4</sup> Gilman, *The Parodic Sermon*, 9.

<sup>5</sup> Martha Bayless, *Parody in the Middle Ages: The Latin Tradition* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996), 11.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

<sup>7</sup> Gilman, *The Parodic Sermon*, 13.

<sup>8</sup> Bayless, *Parody*, 13.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>10</sup> Gilman, *The Parodic Sermon*, 15.

<sup>11</sup> Bayless, *Parody*, 177.

<sup>12</sup> On this, see, for example, David A. Flory, "The Social Uses of Religious Literature: Challenging Authority in the Thirteenth-Century Marian Miracle Tale," *Essays in Medieval Studies* 13 (1996): 61f.

<sup>13</sup> Bayless, *Parody*, has a considered critique of Mikhail Bakhtin's theory on pages 182-84.

<sup>14</sup> Gilman, *The Parodic Sermon*, 22-25.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>16</sup> Israel Davidson, *Parody in Jewish Literature* (New York: AMS Press, 1906; reprinted Columbia University Press, 1966), 3.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 115ff.

<sup>18</sup> See, for example, Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* (trans. Hélène Iswolsky; Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993); see also Paul Lehman et al., eds., *Die Parodie in Mittelalter* (Munich: Drei Masken Verlag, 1922), 42.

<sup>19</sup> Davidson, *Parody*, 133.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 172.

<sup>21</sup> Benjamin Maria Baader, *Gender, Judaism, and Bourgeois Culture in Germany, 1800-1870* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 2006), 107.



# Jewish Humor as a Source of Research on Polish-Jewish Relations

Joanna Sliwa

Joseph Telushkin, a rabbi and author of the book *Jewish Humor: What the Best Jewish Jokes Say about the Jews*, observed that “Jewish humor reveals a great many truths about Jews, but no one great truth.”<sup>1</sup> One obvious fact is that Jewish humor mirrors the Jewish condition. It has served as a coping mechanism for a people confronted with their minority status in an often hostile environment. As a mode of communication, humor also expresses the nature and intricacies of interethnic relations. The religious status of Jews’ “Chosenness” and their role in society evoked antagonism among gentiles and contributed to Jews’ contradictory lives as guards of cohesiveness in the private sphere and outcasts in the public realm. Jewish jokes, used by Jews in response to their circumstances, reveal important information about the life and struggles of the largest pre-World War II Jewish population in Europe—Poland, particularly in the Pale of Settlement and Galicia.

Humor as such can be defined as a “frame of mind, a manner of perceiving and experiencing life. It is a kind of outlook, a peculiar point of view, and one which has great therapeutic power.”<sup>2</sup> In its function, on the other hand, the joke serves as protective behavior that relieves tension of the reality’s seriousness.<sup>3</sup> As a “self-directed perspective-taking humor,”<sup>4</sup> jokes allow people to identify with a social, ethnic, religious, or national group. Sigmund Freud distinguished between three forms—jokes, comic, and humor—and their respective roles. He viewed jokes as provocative stories that provide outlet for expressing sexual tensions. Comic served to preserve spirit when the outcome of things was not as expected. Finally, humor is an emotion-centered coping mechanism that helps people live through conditions that evoke strong feelings.<sup>5</sup>

I define Jewish humor as humor created by Jews, that applies to Jews, expresses Jewish sensibilities, is often connected to Jewish folklore of the *shtetl* [Eastern European village], and reflects changing aspects of Jewish life.<sup>6</sup> Barry Sanders, author of *Sudden Glory: Laughter as Subversive History*, described the creation of a Jewish joke: “When the Jew makes jokes, he does it within his literary tradition by paying particular attention to the word, to levels of meaning, to a playful acknowledgment of context, and if at all possible, to an interpretation that will evoke a laugh in appreciation for his keen wit.” In doing so, “He turns himself into a rabbi with a sharp tongue; he becomes an authority

and a final interpretation unto himself. Riding on the edge of biting and witty sarcasm, the Jewish joker works through stealth, avoiding direct punch lines or obvious quips and puns.”<sup>7</sup>

The virtues of Jewish humor lie in its structure and social critique. On the one hand, Jewish humor can be viewed as testimony to the Jewish people’s genius. On the other hand, Jews historically employed self-mockery in response to their situation. In his article, “The People of the Joke: On the Conceptualization of a Jewish Humor,” Elliott Oring argued that the meaning of Jewish humor is far deeper than any simple formula can explain. Oring claimed that “Conceptualizations of the Jewish joke are merely crystallizations of conceptualizations of the Jewish people, their history, and their identity.”<sup>8</sup> I would also argue that jokes provide a lens on how Jews perceived their position in the larger world and how intergroup relations affected the structure, language, and content of the jokes they created.

Jewish jokes are based in the past. Their purpose is to confront antisemitism and explain the Eastern European reality in which Jews lived. Jewish self-mockery in humor can thus be viewed as society’s way of dealing with modernity and the expectations of Jews for assimilation and integration. In light of this, Dan Ben-Amos’s article “The ‘Myth’ of Jewish Humor” evokes the idea of the “transitional Jew,” attributing his or her self-mockery to the difficulties posed by living on the verge of the larger world, while still being steeped in the Jewish world.<sup>9</sup> The joke below illustrates this duality:

A baptized banker Rozenblum led to the engagement of his son to the daughter of the convert Kon:

“I’ve always wanted such a son-in-law,” says Kon to his friends, “a nice Catholic man from a good Jewish family.”<sup>10</sup>

Jewish jokes are part of ethnic humor because they are told by Jews using stereotypes intended to reinforce group identity, assert superiority, and portray interethnic relations in a pluralistic setting.<sup>11</sup> The power of humor lies in its flexibility to create both positive and negative stereotypes, as well as in its transferability across time and geography. I view stereotypes as generalizations about members of other groups that serve to construct social identities and hierarchies based on the ideas of excluding the outsiders while including the insider group. Arthur Asa Berger, author of *The Genius of the Jewish Joke*, explained that “Stereotypes play an important role in ethnic humor. These are group-held generalizations about members of other groups that are used to explain their behavior.”<sup>12</sup> The outside world began to create their own stereotypes of Jews with the transmission of Jewish humor and folklore stories and through personal and group interactions. In ethnic humor, however, there is a difference between jokes told by Jews about themselves and those told by oth-

ers about Jews. The latter jokes often focus on negative images of “the Jew” to sustain such stereotypes.

Jewish humor is an important part of Yiddish folklore. Nathan Ausubel, author of the anthologies *A Treasury of Jewish Folklore* and *A Treasury of Jewish Humor*, explained: “Folklore is a vivid record of a people, palpitating with life itself, and its greatest art is its artlessness. It is a true and unguarded portrait, for where art may be selective, may conceal, gloss over defects and even prettify, folk art is always revealing, always truthful in the sense that it is a spontaneous expression.”<sup>13</sup> In this sense, Jewish jokes portray the way Jews saw themselves, which, in turn, influenced their image among non-Jews. It is difficult, if not impossible, to trace the origin of a joke. Nekhame Epshteyn, a pioneering scholar of Jewish folk humor at the YIVO [Yidisher Visnshaftlecher Institut] Institute for Jewish Research in pre-World War II Lithuania, discovered variants of and constant interchange between some jokes in oral and written sources. This observation led her to differentiate between the process of localization, or telling the joke with local people as characters, and modernization of jokes, describing how some jokes change from one generation to the next.<sup>14</sup> As such, jokes are mobile, their duplications are inevitable, and they trace a particular motif while the secondary elements are adjusted in accordance with a particular situation.

The topic of how Jewish humor illuminates a view of Polish-Jewish relations and gentile perceptions of Jews poses several challenges. Selecting appropriate literature is a major obstacle. Owing to jokes’ fluidity, I cannot assert with full certainty that my sources originally referred to the situation of Polish Jews. Sifting through several humor collections and considering possible repetitions, I limited my choice pool to those jokes that specifically mentioned Poland and Polish Jews.<sup>15</sup> The joke teller was thereby alluding to Polish reality. This brings us to the issue of geography. Poland’s borders continuously changed over the years. Jokes about Polish Jews, therefore, can often be applied to Jews from Eastern and Central Europe in general. There are, however, a number of jokes that reflect specifically Polish situations. Establishing the time period when the joke’s description was taking place causes yet another problem. Since I was examining thematic patterns, determining jokes’ dates was secondary to my interest.

I emphasize Poland because its land became the focal point of Jewish life and culture throughout the centuries. Jewish folklore designated it as a place where Jews should settle.<sup>16</sup> Jewish jokes originated from Jewish folk tradition and reaction to daily life. They were created by Jews for a Jewish audience. With time, Jewish humor circulated in Poland in various versions, influencing Polish satire and humor [i.e., *szmonces*] due to its values and connections with



Polish land, its culture and fate. The tradition of Jewish humor remains popular in Poland, since its range of topics, punch lines, self-deprecating approach, and relation to real life renders it timeless.<sup>17</sup> The proliferation of Jewish humor collections translated into Polish exemplifies this trend.<sup>18</sup>

With the entrance of Jewish humor into the consciousness of gentile Poles, through both individual and group interactions, the image of “the Jew” contributed to creating a Polish collective perception of Jews. Speaking of a “collective perception” is problematic in itself. French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs’s concept of “collective memory” provides clues to understanding my claim. Halbwachs’s notion examines the ways in which the past is remembered through ascribing meaning to present concerns. In essence, collective memory tends to simplify memories without engaging in their exploration. Halbwachs differentiated between social memory, or things experienced on an individual level, and historical memory, which is mediated by outside sources, including mass communication (such as humor). “Collective perception” denotes an understanding that a group possesses and creates about something. Hillel Levine, a religion scholar and sociologist, argued that “Perception is determined not only by the cognitive capacity or philosophical acumen of individuals. It relates to the collective meanings that are made socially available as well.” As such, society is multilayered, “and society is constituted of more than hierarchies of power, safe of social interaction, and structure of economic relations repeated and formalized.” When it comes to its function, “Society is available to be the object of reflection and analysis, as well as manipulation, embodying the subjective and intersubjective interpretations of its participants.”<sup>19</sup>

When examining humor as a source of collective perception about Jews and interethnic relations, it is possible and necessary to correlate humor, as part of folklore, with the representation of “the Jew” in Polish folk culture. An important account of intergroup contacts and images preserved in Polish people’s memories was described in sociologist Alina Cała’s *The Image of the Jew in Polish Folk Culture*. This study, however, limits the perspective, since it is only concerned with people’s attitudes toward Jews in the provinces and not in the urban areas. Nevertheless, it provides an important account of how ordinary Poles viewed their Jewish neighbors and evaluated intergroup relations based on various factors, including humor. In her ethnographic study, Cała observed that the image of the Jew was not marginal to the larger culture but an integral part of it.<sup>20</sup> In the folklore and humor that the interviewees recalled, the fact that they saw the Jews as a distinct group did not necessarily lead to outright antagonism. Their perceptions were often shaped by indifference. But the personal and group interactions displayed contradiction, inconsistency, and ambivalence.<sup>21</sup>

In the Polish language, the word *Żyd* [Jew] is not a neutral term. It possesses a dubious connotation and rarely conveys information just about one's ethnic or religious identity. The imagery that Jewish humor evokes of Jews stigmatizes the entire people. The idea of Jewish inferiority is partly a result of myths surrounding the Jews and in part the legacy of World War II, when Jews were actually excluded from life.<sup>22</sup> The mutual isolation of both Jews and Polish gentiles strengthened various prejudices.<sup>23</sup> The myth of inherent differences between the two groups served to explain "the other," their origin, place, and fate in relation to the gentiles, as well as their characteristics that made them separate.<sup>24</sup> The "Jew" characterized everything defined as "anti-Polish" or "not-Polish."<sup>25</sup> Perception of the Jews is therefore also a product of collective meaning attributed to the presence of Jews, and it is often explained by the Jews themselves in the humor that they created.

According to sociologist Aleksander Hertz, the definition of a Jew embraced an array of beliefs, as well as moral, political, economic, and legal attributes that defined the Jews' societal functions and tasks.<sup>26</sup> Hence the memory of Jews is an issue rooted in the history of collective definitions of "the Jew." The comprehensive stereotypical image of "the Jew" that emerges from Jewish humor is not entirely negative. But there was a disdain for the businessman and for the middleman position of the Jew, a ridicule of strange habits, a suspicion of Judaism, ambiguity about their morale, but still a respect for the special wisdom the Jews were seen to have and admiration for their devotion to family life.<sup>27</sup> Jews' customs, by contrast, were mysterious and aroused anxiety. Through Jewish humor, gentiles' perceptions were confirmed, and the Jews were expected to comply with the bases of the stereotype.<sup>28</sup>

A societal hierarchy existed in which "the Jew" occupied a specific position. This phenomenon can be observed in the way Jews address themselves in humor to mock their own status and the way Jewish jokes refer to particular members of the non-Jewish population: "This sociology consisted of concise definitions applied to the inferior orders of Polish society: the peasant was a *cham*, the burgher a *byk*, the Jew a *parch*."<sup>29</sup> Such definitions did not necessarily express fervent social antagonisms. They attested to the existence of deeper intergroup conflicts. In effect, such a ladder of inferiority expressed in terminology was not a sign of outright hate within the framework of intergroup relations but rather a voice of contempt for those being the object of the joke.

Hertz elaborated on the significance of "the Jew" in Polish folk culture and the image's relevance for the way in which the entire Jewish people were perceived: "The derided Jew is an important motif in Polish folklore. It is not difficult to see that the true object of the derision is the caste and its characteristics." For the audience, the subject of the joke was the Jews' features: "Its sep-

arateness, its customs, its activities make the caste highly comical. Comical also is the conceit of a Jew who thinks himself better than someone else but who is only a *paroch*. The comedy now is not very different from what the noble felt about the peasant and the peasant about the noble.” In the end, what triggered laughter were the preconceived ideas the non-Jewish audience held about “the Jews” anticipated behavior: “To a great degree, the humor stemmed from the disparity between the behavior of a member of another group and the image considered proper for that group.”<sup>30</sup>

Bringing the image of the Jew into the public arena, also through humor, as sociologist Iwona Irwin-Zarecka argued, may be called “Jewish memory project.”<sup>31</sup> In the case of Poland, “to remember” is first to create a permanent space for “the Jew” in Poles’ collective memory, which can then be gradually filled with items of interest and relevance to those engaged in the memory work.<sup>32</sup> The memory of the Jews is an issue rooted in the history of collective definitions of “the Jew.” Interestingly, the Poles’ perception of Jews has remained largely unchanged, and it has been reinforced by a longstanding lack of contacts and thus limited interactions with them. The near disappearance of Jews from Polish public landscape as a result of the Holocaust has left a void. Perhaps nostalgia and curiosity are the reasons why Jewish humor has remained alive and why its images, as a substitute for real people, are taken for granted.

Perception depends on connotation of terms. For some, cleverness can signify a positive trait, like wisdom, while for others it may mean deceitfulness. The most absurd Jewish jokes, like the following, are about the Jews from the Polish town of Chełm<sup>33</sup>:

A citizen of Chelm came to Warsaw, and wherever he walked he carried a pencil and notebook in his hand. A friend met him and asked what his reason was.

“Well, when I cross the street, and an automobile runs me over, I will immediately be able to mark down the license plate.”<sup>34</sup>

The Chelemer wise are the quintessential fools, depicted as naïve and having their own unique explanations and solutions for every issue.<sup>35</sup> These jokes illuminate the confirmation that the Jews themselves sought to establish intra-community boundaries by allowing some Jews to be less wise than others.<sup>36</sup> On the other side of the spectrum is the perception of Poles, who retold those jokes noting that the Jews are really not stupid but, rather, quite cunning. By being able to twist the meaning of natural occurrences, Jews were believed to be ready to turn any truth to their own advantage.

A range of jokes appeared to gentiles as proof that Jews were inherently more intelligent than them. In Jewish humor, the phrase *Yiddisher kop* has

varied meanings, from a literal “Jewish head” to creative ways of approaching issues. But when used as juxtaposition to the *goyisher kop* [non-Jewish head], it clearly marks a division. This concept of a separate intelligence of Jews and gentiles originated in Eastern Europe when Jews found themselves in contact with illiterate, hostile peasants. For Jews, the biblical “People of the Book,” literacy allowed them to fulfill the religious requirements of studying sacred texts. This eventually led to the notion of Jewish inborn intellectual superiority. For the mostly ignorant rural inhabitants, wisdom and cleverness equated to sneakiness and cunning. This led the Poles to believe that Jews were disloyal to their host nation, did not play by the rules, but instead survived through swindling.<sup>37</sup>

The association of Jews with money led to the prevalent and dangerous stereotype of “the Jew” as a businessman and usurer, motivated by his religion. Jewish jokes mock this connection. Poles took it as a fact and saw it as proof that Jewish children not only inherited moneymaking skills but also learned them. This notion is contained in the following joke:

In religion class:

“Who can tell me,” asks the teacher, “what sin have Joseph’s brothers committed when they sold him out?”

Berek raises two fingers, “They sold him too cheap and without the box.”<sup>38</sup>

In the peasant system of values, business was a sin. Therefore, Jewish merchants were assigned negative traits, including laziness, dishonesty, craftiness, deceit, slyness, and greediness.<sup>39</sup> Jews acted as middlemen for the *szlachta* [nobility] as administrators of noble estates, tax and toll collectors, merchants, craftspeople, lease holders on mills, and manufacturers and distributors of liquor and malt.<sup>40</sup> The public believed that the economic role of the Jews was dangerous and harmful. Jews corrupted the nobles, which led to the entire population’s impoverishment.<sup>41</sup> In fact, the sentiments about Jewish merchants as exploiters, who earned money through trickery rather than honest labor, exemplified more than prejudice against Jews based on stereotypes. More generally, they comprised means of expressing agrarian society’s cultural opposition to the idea of trade and capitalism, which were often associated with Jews and their economic roles.<sup>42</sup>

Climbing up the social ladder by attaining financial affluence was a major factor emphasized and mocked in humor:

In the monumental synagogue in Łódź, which was located on the corner of Kościuszki and Zielona [streets] before the Nazis have destroyed it, the prayer services were held only on Saturdays and holidays. Because this house of worship was mainly used by the

plutocracy, one had to obtain expensive entrance cards in order to enter it.

On Rosh Hashanah, a Jew in a caftan tries to enter the building. He is stopped at the door by the *shammes* [a sexton in a synagogue].

“Entrance card?”

“What card?! I have urgent business with factory owner Rosenblatt.”

The *shammes* says sarcastically:

“I already know you, you thief! You have no business to do with Mr. Rosenblatt. You came here to pray!”<sup>43</sup>

Jews were inarguably active in the rapid growth of Łódź, the textile metropolis, where they represented the owners and managers of large factories.<sup>44</sup> In other big cities such as Warsaw, members of the Jewish bourgeoisie also occupied prominent positions. They were largely polonized, mostly assimilated, and often converted. But the peculiar perception of Jewish economic domination remained.<sup>45</sup> The view was that Jews had no regard for any sanctity, including their own. The synagogue was seen as the center of business transactions. The widespread belief was that if Jews could swindle their own people, they could certainly do the same to non-Jews.

Drinking was part of the daily routine, particularly in the Polish provinces. Jewish innkeepers were blamed for the spread of alcoholism among the peasants, who were going into debt over the purchase of drinks.<sup>46</sup> Jokes about innkeepers and their gentile clientele abound:

Two tavern owners are discussing business. One asks the other:

“Tell me, do you sell whiskey on credit?”

“Sometimes,” is the answer, “and when I do, I charge double. How about you?”

“Also rarely. But when I sell on credit, I charge the customer less than when I sell for cash.”

“What kind of sense does that make?”

“Don’t you see? Then, if they never pay me, I lose less.”<sup>47</sup>

The tavern, like its Jewish owner, was an intrusion of the “other” into the countryside.<sup>48</sup> Rural Jews who owned taverns represented to the villagers the abuses and wealth associated with noble estates and distilleries. The tavern quickly became a symbol of Jewish dominance over the peasantry.<sup>49</sup> The Jewish tavern, the *kretschme* or *shenk*, also functioned as a meeting place where locals took in entertainment. It was a place for passing hours, gossiping, and engaging in fantasies. The inn was the locus of political activity, center of economic transactions, and source of local credit. It was also a wayside rest, sitting at the geographical and social periphery of the community.<sup>50</sup> The villagers were suspicious of the lords and paradoxically found trust in the middle-

men relationship with Jews. The *kretschmer* provided information about the outside world, served as a go-between in peasant relations with the landlord, and gave advice and assistance on issues ranging from medicine and familial relations to financial and legal affairs.<sup>51</sup> In the end, a conflicting image of the village Jew emerges in humor, as a simultaneous informant and adviser.

In the context of Jewish humor, gender and age mattered. In humor with sexual undertones, the target was usually female, whose presence often served to ridicule the male.<sup>52</sup> When presented as young, the Jewish woman was viewed as beautiful and easily classified as a prostitute, as in this joke:

Lejb Sobel got married and constantly boasts about the good qualities of his beautiful wife. One day he meets a friend, who takes him under the arm and whispers:

“Give it a break with this talking. You’re being laughed at. Do you know that your wife has four lovers?”

“So what?” Sobel smiles. “I prefer to have twenty percent in a good business than one hundred percent in a bad one.”<sup>53</sup>

When the Jewish woman was old, she was represented as asexual, ugly, quarrelsome, loud, and gesticulating rather than verbally expressing herself. In some jokes the motif of mismatch highlights the bride’s ugly physique to emphasize the social awkwardness and helplessness of the Jewish male. In other sexual jokes, the image of the Jewish male is depicted as guilty of encouraging prostitution and robbery. He sells his own wife, if only he could profit from it. He has few inhibitions and little regard for females. Then, too, Jewish humor is full of jokes about older widowed Jewish men, who either look for or marry much younger women, which was a source of contempt for those who held it as religiously immoral. From the Jewish point of view, mocking such traits is an indication that such behavior did take place. From the perspective of non-Jews, obscene humor stimulated the ridiculing of individuals or groups that were generally disliked.<sup>54</sup>

However disconcerting the perceptions of Jewish men and women taken individually, the projected image of the Jewish family is rather positive. The dominant position of the father was in tune with that in gentile households. The care for children was praiseworthy, and the children themselves were regarded as more polite than their gentile counterparts. Non-Jews admired the Jews’ respect for the elderly and a greater sense of morality. Hospitality extended to strangers was a trait often emphasized in jokes, even if the joke’s focus lay elsewhere. Overall, Jewish family life provided an idealized image of the Jews in the eyes of the Poles.

Even the Jews’ attachment to Judaism, however negatively the Christians might have viewed the religion itself, was held in high esteem. One form in

particular aroused both controversy and admiration. Chasidism was a popular religious movement that gave rise to the pattern of communal life and leadership and to a particular social outlook that emerged in Judaism in the second half of the eighteenth century. Chasidism extolled *tsadikim*, the charismatic righteous ones. They served as spiritual leaders of Chasidic communities, intermediaries between man and God, and miracle makers. Because the *rebbe* was believed to be able to converse with God, and it seemed as if he had answers to all questions, he too was often respected by gentiles. Although Judaism was regarded by Christian Poles as a tainted religion, the *rebbe's* attachment to faith, his wisdom, and his intelligence were admired, thereby often making him not only a friend of the local priest but also an arbiter in Jewish-Christian disputes, whose verdicts and advice were respected by both sides<sup>55</sup>:

There was a terrible draught. A delegation of farmers came to the rabbi to ask him for a miracle, so there would be rainfall. The rabbi made a stern face and said:

“There will be no miracle, because there is no faith in God.”

“How come, *rebbe*? We came to you to ask for a miracle. How is that there is no faith?”

“There is no faith, because had you had faith in God, you’d come with umbrellas in the first place.”<sup>56</sup>

At the same time, its very differences and peculiarities made Chasidism and its followers ambiguous and the objects of superstitious ridicule on the part of the gentiles. Non-Jews assumed that supernatural powers protected Jewish sacred places and sites.<sup>57</sup> Hence non-Jews also inserted *kvitlekh* [request notes] in the *tsadikim's ohelim* [graves] and sought advice from the *rebbe*s. Because medicine was considered a dubious occupation, people maintained faith in the curative powers of this strange group. Anything foreign, however, had a suspected connection with the devil. Anything that was not integral to the coherence of the local culture was impure, as was the Jews’ presence.<sup>58</sup> Jews, therefore, also mocked the reliance on the their spiritual leaders’ powers:

A chasid with his deaf daughter came to the *tsadik* of Bobrka.

The Rabbi, long may he live, promised the worried father that he will cure his daughter. He took out his sable fur cap, held a stick, and hitting the floor three times, he cried out:

“Sara, daughter of Leah, I order you to speak!”

And the girl does nothing, and is silent.

“Sara, daughter of Leah, I order you to speak!” the *tsadik* repeats.

So, when Sara, daughter of Leah, remains untouched for the third time to the words of the *tsadik*, may he live long, he became angry and cried:

“You’re stubborn, so don’t let out any word from your indocile lips till you die!”

And so what do you think? The words of rabbi Elchanan of Bobrka, may he live long, have become reality—the girl is deaf till this day.<sup>59</sup>

Struggles with modernity led to the emergence of heretics, atheists, freethinkers, and converts to Christianity. Many Jews who rebelled against the Jewish way of life went to the extreme and acted according to the Yiddish proverb: *az men est khazer, zol es shoyrn rinen ibern moyl* [if you’re going to eat pork, then let it run down your face]. As reality confirmed, Jews could not escape their association with Judaism. No matter their conversion or degree of assimilation, Jews were judged based on their appearance and behavior. The outer image of “the Jew” served to explain the Jews’ inner character.

From the Jewish perspective, conversion was seen as treason and a pathway to social climbing rather than conviction. Converts to Christianity were viewed as renegades and radicals, while assimilationists were regarded more favorably because they did not totally renounce Judaism. Most converts ignored those reactions because they believed, or wanted to believe, that they enjoyed support from their new religious group. It was obvious, however, that even the converted Jew is still a Jew in the eyes of a gentile. According to Polish ethnonationalists, conversion did not automatically mean inclusion in a nation. In fact, it was actually considered threatening to the unity of ethnic Poles and their future existence.<sup>60</sup> In essence, then, Jewish converts—and assimilationists, for that matter—were seen as enemies of the Polish nation and Christianity.

The following joke illustrates the validity of my premise that Jewish humor can serve as source of research in the area of interethnic relations:

A Polish Jew converts to Catholicism in the nineteenth century.

The first Friday after the conversion, the priest stops by the home of his new congregant to see how’s he doing. The congregant is sitting at the table, happily eating a slab of boiled beef.

“What are you doing?!” exclaims the priest, “Don’t you remember I told you we don’t eat meat on Friday?”

“It’s not meat,” says the convert, “it’s fish.”

The priest says, “What are you talking about? I can see it’s meat. How can you say it’s fish?”

“Simple,” replies the convert, “I just did what you did. You took me to the baptismal font, sprinkled holy water over my head, and said ‘You’re Christian.’ I took the piece of beef to the same font, sprinkled holy water on it, and proclaimed, ‘You’re a fish.’”<sup>61</sup>

This joke illuminates the nature of Polish public perception of Jews and of Polish-Jewish relations. On the one hand, it depicts the profound suspicion



and distrust of Jews, even when they seemingly become part of the majority. It shows that Jews could not be truly converted either to the religion or to the Polish nation. On the other hand, it portrays the instrumental way in which some Jews might have treated their conversion in order to achieve a greater goal. The joke also elucidates the nature of Polish-Jewish relations as superficial, complicated, and conflicted. It is an example that illustrates the distrust that both groups had toward each other.

Joanna Michlic, a scholar of Polish-Jewish relations, argued in *Poland's Threatening Other: The Image of the Jew from 1880 to the Present* that, by pursuing an analysis of anti-Jewish idioms over a period of time, one can demonstrate their power, persistence, and consequences while detailing their modifications, transformations, and discontinuities. She claimed that through such an analysis the interpretation of Polish-Jewish relations can be expanded.<sup>62</sup> By the same token, it would be worthwhile to investigate the images of Jews and their stereotypical associations evoked in Jewish humor. Such examination would help illuminate particularly significant images and explore them in relation to the Polish situation. In addition, such an analysis can provide insight into how collective perceptions of Jews are constructed and discern general patterns of interethnic relations.

In light of Irwin-Zarecka's premise, humor comprises part of a nostalgic mode of memory. It can neutralize the past, while also having a normalizing effect on the discourse about Jews. As a vehicle of nostalgia, humor transforms "the Jew" into "an other" once interesting and complex, and in idealizing the Jew's image, nostalgia appeals to those who remember Jews and to those who do not.<sup>63</sup> Jewish humor, therefore, has the potential to become a ground for exploring ethnic relations and to open an informed dialogue. In its current state, while Jewish humor has been incorporated into the fabric of Polish public life (especially cultural and artistic), the Jews as real, living people have remained essentially strangers.<sup>64</sup> Taking this into account, I by no means advocate that Jewish humor comprise the main source of research. However, if critically examined, it can provide insights that complement other sources. It can also reveal the way it has been appropriated in remembering Jews.

Humor itself serves as an important source of information about interethnic relations and can tell us much about the history of ethnic groups themselves. Jewish humor is inextricably linked to Jewish folklore and history and the images that they evoke. Eva Hoffman, a scholar and writer on Polish-Jewish themes, argued, "Every time I hear Poland described reductively as an antisemitic country, I bridle in revolt, for I know that the reality is far more tangled than that."<sup>65</sup> Her statement indicates that the need to study collective

perceptions of both groups, existing within the larger framework of Polish-Jewish relations, looms large. As humor reinforces reality, the use of Jewish humor is a useful and valid source to elucidate these interactions, changes, and transmission of stereotypes, as well as their functions.

The role of folklore is often underscored in the study of interethnic relations. In fact, a multidimensional approach would help explain how the image and stereotypes of one group are reflected in the minds of the other group's members. The Jews' customs were unknown and mysterious and evoked anxiety and suspicion among gentile Poles. The stereotypes were a product of long historical experience, fragmentary and random generalizations, internal contradictions, and emotionally conditioned abstractions.<sup>66</sup> Such perceptions are the outcome of daily encounters, interactions on various levels, and judgments. According to Hertz, all these factors possess folkloristic features. The research on ethnic relations must, therefore, include vast areas of folklore. And humor is part of it.

Jewish humor illuminates a view of Polish-Jewish relations and gentile perceptions of Jews. When examined alongside Polish folklore, Jewish humor provides a lens on a complicated topic by expounding on the views that one group holds about another. The situational descriptions reflect historical reality and speak to people's reactions to changing circumstances. A careful study of patterns in and narratives of Jewish jokes has potentially greater implications for the study of ethnic relations in general. It illustrates not only intergroup perceptions but also the way that the Jews defined their place in society and the way that "the Jew" and his character were used to explain the modernizing world and society's fears. Equally important is the role that Jewish humor, and the images of Jews that it elicits, carries for the notion of the memory of Jews as humans and not as abstract objects for the sake of the jokes' comedy.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Joseph Telushkin, *Jewish Humor: What the Best Jewish Jokes Say about the Jews* (New York: W. Morrow, 1992), 15.

<sup>2</sup> Harvey Mindess, *Liberation and Laughter* (Los Angeles: Nash, 1971), 21.

<sup>3</sup> Gershon Legman, *Rationale of the Dirty Joke: An Analysis of Sexual Humor* (London: Cape, 1969), 18.

<sup>4</sup> Herbert M. Lefcourt, *The Psychology of Living Buoyantly* (New York: Kluwer Academic/Plenum, 2001), 73.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 57-61; Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* (trans. J. Strachey; New York: W. W. Norton, 1963).

<sup>6</sup> Telushkin, *Jewish Jokes*, 16; Freud, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, 111; Avner Ziv, "Introduction [Jewish Humor]" in *Humor: International Journal of Humor Research* 4.2 (1991): 145.

<sup>7</sup> Barry Sanders, *Sudden Glory: Laughter as Subversive History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), 52.

<sup>8</sup> Elliot Oring, "The People of the Joke: On the Conceptualization of a Jewish Humor," *Western Folklore* 42:4 (October 1983): 271.

<sup>9</sup> Dan Ben-Amos, "The 'Myth' of Jewish Humor," *Western Folklore* 32:2 (April 1973): 118.

<sup>10</sup> Horacy Safrin, *Przy Szabasowych Świecach: Humor Żydowski* (Łódź: Wydawn. Łódzkie, 1966; Warsaw: Iskra, 2003).

<sup>11</sup> Lawrence E. Mintz, "The Rabbi versus the Priest and Other Jewish Stories," in *Jewish Humor* (ed. Avner Ziv; New Brunswick: Transaction, 1998), 125. More on Jewish humor as ethnic humor: Joseph Boskin and Joseph Dorinson, "Ethnic Humor: Subversion and Survival," *American Quarterly*, 37:1, Special Issue: American Humor (Spring 1985): 81-97.

<sup>12</sup> Arthur Asa Berger, *The Genius of the Jewish Joke* (Northvale: Jason Aronson, 1997), 50.

<sup>13</sup> Nathan Ausubel, *A Treasury of Jewish Folklore: Stories, Traditions, Legends, Humor, Wisdom and Folk Songs of the Jewish People* (New York: Crown, 1948), xviii.

<sup>14</sup> Itzik Nakhmen Gottesman, *Defining the Yiddish Nation: The Jewish Folklorists of Poland* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2003).

<sup>15</sup> General anthologies of Jewish humor: Nathan Ausubel, *A Treasury of Jewish Humor* (New York: M. Evans, 1988); Berger, *The Genius of the Jewish Joke*; Henry Eilbirt, *What is a Jewish Joke? An Excursion into Jewish Humor* (Northvale: Jason Aronson, 1991); Jeffrey V. Mallow, *"Our Pal, God" and Other Presumptions: A Book of Jewish Humor* (New York: iUniverse, 2005); H. R. Rabinowitz, *Kosher Humor* (Jerusalem, Israel: R. Mass, 1977); Jacob Richman, *Laughs From Jewish Lore* (New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1926); Henry D. Spalding, ed., *Joys of Jewish Humor* (Middle Village: J. David, 1985); Henry D. Spalding, ed., *Encyclopedia of Jewish Humor: From Biblical Times to the Modern Age* (Middle Village: J. David, 2001); Elsa Teteilbaum, ed., *An Anthology of Jewish Humor and Maxims* (New York: New York City Pardes Publishing House, 1945).

Polish-language anthologies of Jewish humor: Aleksander Drożdżyński, *Pilpul, czyli z mądrości żydowskich* (Warsaw: Sztuka Polska, 1988); Mieczysław Jawerbaum, ed., *Same Cuda: żydowskie dowcipy i anegdoty* (Warszawa: Wiedza Powszechna, 1960); Safrin, *Przy Szabasowych Świecach*; Jerzy Wilmański, *Ale czy Kuba . . . !? Antologia humoru żydowskiego w stylu retro* (Łódź: Wydawn. Łódzkie; Współwydawca Cyklop, 2002).

<sup>16</sup> Hayah Bar-Yitshak, *Jewish Poland-Legends of Origin: Ethnopoetics and Legendary Chronicles* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2001).

<sup>17</sup> Wilmański, *Ale czy Kuba . . . !?*, 5.

<sup>18</sup> Most recent Polish-language collections of Jewish humor (apart from translations of English-language anthologies): Rajmund Florans, ed., *Humor Żydowski. Tylko Bez Cudów* (Most, 2004); *Wielki Kawalarz Żydowski* (Wesper, 2006); Weronika Łęcka, *Cymes i Piotun, Czyli Księga Humor Żydowskiego* (Videograf II, 2007); Juliusz Pipel, ed., *Humor Żydowski (w PRL!)* (Wesper, 2008); Marian Fuks, ed., *Pan Sobie Żarty Strosisz? Humor Żydów Polskich z Lat 1918-1939* (Sorus, 2009).

<sup>19</sup> Hillel Levine, *Economic Origins of Antisemitism: Poland and Its Jews in the Early Modern Period* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), 16-17.

- <sup>20</sup> Alina Cała, *The Image of the Jew in Polish Folk Culture* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, Hebrew University, 1995), 9.
- <sup>21</sup> Aleksander Hertz, *The Jews in Polish Culture* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1988), 36.
- <sup>22</sup> Iwona Irwin-Zarecka, *Neutralizing Memory: The Jew in Contemporary Poland* (New Brunswick: Transaction, 1989), 114.
- <sup>23</sup> Cała, *The Image of the Jew*, 93.
- <sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 150, 221.
- <sup>25</sup> Joanna B. Michlic, *Poland's Threatening Other: The Image of the Jew From 1880 to the Present* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2006), 5.
- <sup>26</sup> Hertz, *The Jews in Polish Culture*, 68.
- <sup>27</sup> Irwin-Zarecka, *Neutralizing Memory*, 37.
- <sup>28</sup> Hertz, *The Jews in Polish Culture*, 69.
- <sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 72.
- <sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 74.
- <sup>31</sup> Irwin-Zarecka, *Neutralizing Memory*, 5.
- <sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 5, 36.
- <sup>33</sup> The parallel town in the Polish public perception of themselves is Wąchock.
- <sup>34</sup> Teitelbaum, *An Anthology of Jewish Humor and Maxims*, 352.
- <sup>35</sup> Mallow, "Our Pal, God," 25.
- <sup>36</sup> Chaim Bermant explained in his book, *What's the Joke? A Study of Jewish Humor through the Ages* (London: Weidenfeld, 1986), 113: "Most small nations have a good conceit of themselves. Jews are no exception and if they will allow that some Jews are less wise than others, they will insist that they are absolutely tops in their folly. The wise, moreover, bred fools if only to be confirmed in their own wisdom, which is possibly how the legend of Chelm grew up." In part, thanks to the popularity of Isaac Bashevis Singer's literary work, the legends about the fools of Chelm have become part of the town's history, making it famous in its own way.
- <sup>37</sup> Christie Davies, "Jewish Jokes, Anti-Semitic Jokes and Hebreonian Jokes," in Ziv, ed., *Jewish Humor*, 78, 84, 85.
- <sup>38</sup> Safrin, *Przy Szabasowych Świecach*, 74.
- <sup>39</sup> Cała, *The Image of the Jew*, 26.
- <sup>40</sup> Michlic, *Poland's Threatening Other*, 31.
- <sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.
- <sup>42</sup> Robert Blobaum, "Criminalizing the 'Other': Crime, Ethnicity, and Antisemitism in Early Twentieth-Century Poland," in *Antisemitism and Its Opponents in Modern Poland* (ed. Robert Blobaum; Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005), 81-103.
- <sup>43</sup> Safrin, *Przy Szabasowych Świecach*, 156.
- <sup>44</sup> Keely Stuaater-Halsted, "Jews as Middlemen Minorities in Rural Poland: Understanding the Galician Pogroms of 1898," in Blobaum, ed., *Antisemitism and Its Opponents*, 55. A great example of the development of Jewish Łódź and the image of the Jews was described by I. J. Singer in *The Brothers Ashkenazi* (New York: Penguin Classics, 1993).
- <sup>45</sup> Stuaater-Halsted, "Jews as Middlemen Minorities in Rural Poland," 55-56.
- <sup>46</sup> Michlic, *Poland's Threatening Other*, 37.
- <sup>47</sup> Eilbirt, *What is a Jewish Joke?*, 64.

- <sup>48</sup> Levine, *Economic Origins of Antisemitism*, 9.
- <sup>49</sup> Stuaater-Halsted, "Jews as Middleman Minorities in Rural Poland," 47.
- <sup>50</sup> Levine, *Economic Origins of Antisemitism*, 9.
- <sup>51</sup> Irwin-Zarecka, *Neutralizing Memory*, 48.
- <sup>52</sup> Esther Fuchs, "Humor and Sexism: The Case of the Jewish Joke," in Ziv, ed., *Jewish Humor*, 111.
- <sup>53</sup> Jawerbaum, *Same Cuda*, 22.
- <sup>54</sup> Lefcourt, *Humor*, 64.
- <sup>55</sup> Cała, *The Image of the Jew*, 146.
- <sup>56</sup> Drożdżyński, *Pilpul*, 50.
- <sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 133.
- <sup>58</sup> Levine, *Economic Origins of Antisemitism*, 9.
- <sup>59</sup> Safrin, *Przy Szabasowych Świecech*, 26-27.
- <sup>60</sup> Michlic, *Poland's Threatening Other*, 99.
- <sup>61</sup> Mallow, "Our Pal, God," 54.
- <sup>62</sup> Michlic, *Poland's Threatening Other*, 8.
- <sup>63</sup> Irwin-Zarecka, *Neutralizing Memory*, 176.
- <sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.
- <sup>65</sup> Eva Hoffman, *Exit into History: A Journey through the New Eastern Europe* (New York: Viking, 1993).
- <sup>66</sup> Hertz, *The Jews in Polish Culture*, 68.

# Jewish Jokes, Yiddish Storytelling, and Sholem Aleichem: A Discursive Approach\*

Jordan Finkin

To begin with the straightforward statement that “laughter is universal; humor is local” is to assert that humor is an area in which cultural resonances feature quite prominently. However, although cultures do have humor, and although humor is not exclusive to the Jews, within the Jewish cultural system, and specifically within the Ashkenazi Jewish cultural polysystem, humor *is* Jewish. One important incarnation of this humor is the joke. There is, of course, much to say about jokes, and in surveying some of the writing on this notoriously slippery genre, I will focus on a subject that receives relatively shorter scholarly shrift: the important relationship between jeketelling and storytelling. I maintain that such a relationship does exist, that it is both an intimate and a complicated one, that it was recognized by some of modern Yiddish literature’s most important authors, and that, as a result, it has exerted some influence on the development of that literature. In order to support these claims, I analyze their relation to the story “Der daytsh” (The German; 1902) by Sholem Aleichem (1859-1916), one of the great folk satirists of Yiddish-speaking Eastern Europe. I argue that this story is, among other things, a long joke clothed as a literary narrative: a literary joke. The technique deployed, the specific “clothing” used, shows the cultural stitching between the Jewish joke and Yiddish literature.

The following joke, for obvious reasons, occupies a special position among those who study Jewish humor:

When one tells a joke to a farmer, he laughs three times. The first time he laughs when one tells him the joke; the second time when one explains it to him; and the third time when he understands it.

A nobleman laughs twice. One time he laughs when one tells it to him and the second time when one explains it, because in any case he doesn’t understand it.

An officer only laughs once: when one tells it to him, because he won’t let it be explained and he doesn’t understand.

But a Jew, when one tells him a joke, says: “What are you talking about! That’s an old joke!” and he can tell the joke better!<sup>2</sup>

This text is the first example found in what is, in effect, a collection of jokes, gathered by Immanuel Olsvanger and entitled *Røyte Pomerantsen*. There is, of

course, a thematic reason why a collection of jokes would begin with a meta-joke—that is, a joke about joketelling.<sup>3</sup> However, it also reveals something of the “Jewishness” of the activity itself. One should take note of this joke’s Jewish discursive weight on one-upmanship (and the related idea designated in Yiddish as *griblen zikh*, to inquire probingly) and competitive engagement, which are part of the key to understanding the issue.

Olsvanger opens his introduction with a programmatic statement: “Allow me to present you with this edition of Yiddish folk tales, that I took down just as they were told to me by the Jews of Eastern Europe themselves.”<sup>4</sup> Attention should be paid to two elements about the data (that is, the jokes) in this book: they are referred to as “folk tales”; and they are orally repeated and collected. How is the joke quoted above, for example, a “folk tale”? The short answer is that it is and it is not. However, we should not assume that Olsvanger was careless with his labels. This categorization indicates a terminological slippage between two concepts that overlap *intraculturally* but are *interculturally* distinct. Jokes, stories, and folktales can be maintained as separate categories, as many Western cultures are wont to do. However, despite their recognizable proximity in semantic space, the categories within Yiddish culture are fuzzier. This fuzziness was perceived by participants in that culture (such as Olsvanger), which is reflected in the literary experiment undertaken by Sholem Aleichem.

One important similarity highlighted by this connection between folktales and jokes is the oral component. Olsvanger mentioned that he collected his samples orally from informants in Eastern Europe. The notion of a storytelling or joketelling event, performance, or exchange should not be underplayed. In fact, a two-tiered structure of story/joke and storytelling/joketelling sustains a complicated system of cultural connections between what is narrative and what is performative. Ultimately, these correspondences drive some of the innovations in modern Yiddish literary language, as I will discuss below in relation to “Der daytsh.” In this connection, one important aspect of jokes is that they function in part by operating on the likely, even collective, assumptions of the audience and by manipulating them. In this way, jokes actively implicate the audience in the social context of joketelling.<sup>5</sup> Part of this implication and manipulation of assumptions is the joketeller’s intention to “frustrate” these expectations.<sup>6</sup>

If the social implication of the audience in the joketelling context of performance is part of the joke’s *Sitz im Leben*, then its Jewish discursive content is part of its *Sitz in der Kultur*. Jewish discourse is a way of thinking, speaking, and writing that developed in part out of traditional rabbinic language and entered Jewish culture more generally.<sup>7</sup> This feature of Yiddish-speaking

Ashkenazi culture was an important element in the creation and development of a modern Yiddish literary language. As the study-house culture of Yiddish-speaking scholars, who were the elite of that society, came into contact with the wider culture, some of the patterns of its discourse—including vocabulary, grammatical features, and modes of argumentation—were “nativized” and absorbed into that culture. Answering questions with questions, for example, or competitive argumentation<sup>8</sup> and indeed jeketelling all owe some of their cultural diffusion to this principle.

Words and texts were focal objects within the Jewish reality of Yiddish-speaking Eastern Europe, given the centripetal force exerted by the Talmud on that culture.<sup>9</sup> Yiddish reacted strongly to the associative “logic” and multi-directional narrative orientation of its structure and style. The dialogic mode of the text was mirrored by the dialogical context in which it was studied and debated. And that context was, for lack of a better term, competitive. A piercing question that bursts a proposition is often more highly valued than a conclusive proof. Jewish discourse appears as a way of engaging, understanding, and coming to terms with a textually oriented reality based on recognized and unmarked patterns of thought and speech.

One might well ask how this works in practice once that discourse has been accommodated and absorbed into the wider culture. The answer is, among other things, humorously. A telling example from the point of view of Jewish discourse and of jeketelling and storytelling is the following:

We had in our shtetl a coachman whose name was Dovidke. When one would call him “coachman” he didn’t like it at all. As he used to say: “I am no coachman! I have a wagon and a horse, and I drive; and whoever wants to ride along, let him ride! But I am *not* a coachman.” And as for driving he used to drive with wisdom. One night there was a big storm. And just that night he departed on a long journey. Some days later they asked him how he got through that night. So he says: “It was a difficult journey. But I drove with great acuity.” So they ask him: “What does that mean, ‘drove with acuity’?” So he says: “I drove by means of a *kal-vekhoymer* and a *gezeyre-shove*.<sup>10</sup> So listen up. Having set out several miles that night, a wheel of my wagon gets it in its head to fall off. So what do I do? I drive with a *kal-vekhoymer*! If a little cart on two wheels can go, then my wagon with three wheels will certainly be able to go! So I drove on. I hadn’t gone two minutes when another wheel fell off. So I gave it a thought and found a *gezeyre-shove*: just as a little cart goes on two wheels, so I will go with two wheels!—And I drove on. Another misfortune, and a third wheel fell off! Do you think I got rattled? Perish the thought! I drove on with a *kal-vekhoymer*: if a sled without wheels can go, *how much more so* will my wagon with



only one wheel surely go! So I drove on! The fourth wheel then also up and fell off. So what is one to do? I drove on with a *gezeyre-shove*: just as a sled goes without wheels, so will my wagon go without wheels! And I drove! Don't ask what became of me and my passengers and my wagon; but I drove!<sup>11</sup>

What is here germane from this fascinating text is the practical force that manipulation of these discursive strategies is thought to exert on the world. The logical structures, embodied as tools meant to negotiate reality, are able to persuade the coachman to stay on course, throwing common sense to the winds. That a coachman—a low-status livelihood whose typical occupants were generally not textually educated—essentially still understands and employs such logic gives evidence of the diffusion and assimilation of an elite textual discourse in the wider Yiddish-speaking culture.<sup>12</sup>

This brings us back to the question: What is a Jewish joke? Does such a thing exist? The philosopher Ted Cohen has maintained that “Jews have no monopoly on jokes, nor on good jokes, nor even on jokes of a particular kind, and yet there is a characteristic association of Jews with a certain joking spirit.” Cohen quite rightly asserts that it is “impossible to *define* Jewish humor”; however, one may *describe* or characterize it, which he does as follows: “(1) it is the humor of *outsiders*; (2) it exploits a deep and lasting concern with logic and language.”<sup>13</sup> This description represents part of an important shift in the larger discussion of Jewish jokes and Jewish humor. As a category, the Jewish joke received its kosher certificate as a subject of modern intellectual inquiry from Sigmund Freud in his famous study *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* (1905). The long shadow of that work continues to this day, with its psychological readings and essentialization of Jewish humor as one of self-criticism or inwardly directed ridicule. Irving Howe's comment that “Jewish humor was conceived as a means of *internal* criticism”<sup>14</sup> is a simple and classic iteration of that premise. Although this idea persists in some areas, particularly and interestingly in the analysis of Sholem Aleichem's oeuvre and notably in his stories about the character Tevye the dairyman, there have been diverging lines of inquiry questioning and problematizing precisely that approach. One of the earlier studies along that line was the strongly worded essay by Dan Ben-Amos, “The ‘Myth’ of Jewish Humor.” Beginning with a debunking of the accepted Freudian wisdom as an “interpretation,” and pursuing its ramifications through various disciplines, he ultimately presents his case as a folklorist's critique of the concept of Jewish humor as a retrospective categorization rather than a sociologically verifiable reality of actual communities.<sup>15</sup> As a folklorist, he wants to be able to test via social-scientific methods the accuracy of the persistent psychological claims.<sup>16</sup> His conclusion is best summed up in his title.

The idea underlying Ben-Amos's important comment—"The textual basis for the whole idea of Jewish humor, as it developed in the twentieth century, is the personal recollections or literary collections of jokes"<sup>17</sup>—is picked up by, among others, the anthropologist Elliott Oring. Arguing that Jewish humor is a construct, "an *idea*,"<sup>18</sup> he tries to historicize that idea, namely the conceptualization of Jewish humor. Where Ben-Amos cites an anthological impetus in the early part of the twentieth century, noting the many collections of jokes and humorous anecdotes that appeared at the time,<sup>19</sup> Oring hypothesizes a series of ligatures between the development of the concept of humor in European intellectual history in the late nineteenth century and the condition of Jews in European societies. The upshot was that yes, Jews *do* have humor—a denial of which functioned at that time to make Jews seem somehow less human, or, conversely, the identification of a particular kind of humor opened them to charges of pernicious cultural adulteration.<sup>20</sup> Jewish humor was also seen as distinct and as engaging Jews' lowly and suffering condition in certain circumscribed ways.<sup>21</sup> It is easy to see how Freud's psychologization could flow from such a construct. Again, both of these positions represent a trend militating against the "psychopathology"<sup>22</sup> that is singled out for criticism.

For that reason, Cohen's characterization of Jewish humor as not psychological but as something simultaneously sociological and formal or conceptual is particularly useful here.<sup>23</sup> I also agree that these kinds of approximations are about as close as it is possible to come to a definition, should such a thing even be desired.<sup>24</sup> It is far more possible to produce a typology of joke *forms* or likely constitutive elements. (Freud also makes a series of categorizations of jokes, and especially Jewish jokes. His classifications, however, follow a psychologically oriented scheme, the underlying assumption being that jokes are motivated by psychological realities seeking expression. My interest is in the cultural space of jokes, which is far more linguistic than it is psychological.) Although producing a typology is not the purpose of this article, two important elements will be especially useful in the later discussion of a story by Sholem Aleichem: first, the so-called "shaggy dog" in which a series of similar events keep occurring, prolonging the joke, or subtly altering one's expectations and anticipation, until either the conclusion or the punch line is finally reached; and, second, the argument from multiple possibilities.

The following examples play on the connections between these kinds of generic divisions and Jewish discourse. In the first example, the construction of a long chain of conditional hypotheses is shattered by the conversational reversal found in the punch line:

In nineteenth-century Russia a young Jew is told he is to be conscripted into the army. So he asks an old Jew for advice.

“There’s nothing to worry about,” says the old man. “Just go into the army and things will turn out well.”

“How can you be sure?” asks the young man.

“Well, when you have joined the army, there are two possibilities—either you will be sent to a combat group, or you won’t. If not, then there is nothing to worry about.

“If you are sent to a combat group, then there are two possibilities—either the group will be sent into combat, or it won’t. If not, then there is nothing to worry about.

“If the group is sent into combat, then there are two possibilities—either you will be wounded, or you won’t. If not, then there is nothing to worry about.

“If the wound is mortal, then there are two possibilities—either you will go to hell or you will go to heaven. If you go to heaven, then there is nothing to worry about.

“If you go to hell, then there are two possibilities—either they take bribes or they don’t. If they take bribes, there is nothing to worry about.

“Of course they take bribes.”<sup>25</sup>

This joke plays on the emotional resonance of Jewish powerlessness in the face of enforced conscription by deflating its mortal seriousness.<sup>26</sup> The weak psychological consolation (beyond the cliché “it could be worse”) of hell’s mirroring human reality, where one can exploit personal frailties, matches that deflation. There is a much longer version of this joke that is set prior to World War I among a group of young Jews in London. One young man is asked about his sanguine attitude toward the impending war, and he launches into a lengthy succession of binary possibilities of precisely the form of the joke above. It culminates in the possibility of receiving a serious wound in battle:

There are two possibilities: either I’ll get well or I’ll die. Should I get well then that’s terrific and there’s nothing to worry about. But what if I die? Should I die then there’s surely nothing to worry about! But who said I’m going to die?<sup>27</sup>

This version seems less successful than its pithier counterpart, in no small measure due to its excessive length. The specificity of its wartime context (not to mention the potential blending of some of the sangfroid otherwise associated with the English in this London setting) is less culturally resonant than the vaguer ascription to *some* draft, or really *any* draft to which Jews were particularly prone.

There is also a formal component that affects the reception of this joke. Where the second version of the joke stops at death, the first version proceeds into the next world. In addition to engaging the traditional beliefs of this soci-

ety, with human-like demons subject to the Jews' laws and to human foibles, the joke toys with the cultural image of heaven's divine court paralleled by hell's infernal bureaucracy, which functions in a recognizably human way. The logic of the paired hypotheticals, as Cohen notes, "parodies" a certain kind of reasoning connected to Jewish discourse. The parody works by aligning that reasoning to a bureaucratic feel, which it lampoons.

This kind of multilayered comic deflation is very common in what I am calling Jewish humor. At the core of the comic deflation in this set of jokes is a series of hypothetical binary oppositions.<sup>28</sup> This has an analog in the argument from multiple possibilities, where the comic content begins with the absurdity of this simultaneity. Take the following passage from Sholem Aleichem's monologue "Dos tepl" (The Pot; 1901) in which the monologist, Yente, recounts her lament at having lent a new pot to her neighbor:

[A]nd she gives me back a banged-up pot. So I say to her, "What kinda pot is this?" So she says, "It's your pot." So I say, "So how come I get back a banged-up pot when you took from me a perfectly good pot?" So she says, "Quiet, don't carry on so, it's no use! First, I gave you back a perfectly good pot. Second, when I took the pot from you it was a banged-up pot. And third, I never took a pot from you; I have my own pot, so leave me alone!"...The things a libertine will say!<sup>29</sup>

Compare this to a passage that Freud presents as a joke:

A. borrowed a copper kettle from B. and after he had returned it was sued by B. because the kettle now had a big hole in it which made it unusable. His defense was: "First, I never borrowed the kettle from B. at all; secondly, the kettle had a hole in it already when I got it from him; and thirdly, I gave him back the kettle undamaged."<sup>30</sup>

In his analysis, Freud calls this "sophistry" and questions its "right to be called a joke." On the surface, the most important formal difference between the two is the presence of a juridical context. Freud's passage is denuded of its humor precisely because of that forensic element. One can surmise either that this is the form of the material as Freud encountered it, perhaps in a collection of some sort, or that Freud had rather a tin ear for humor, or some combination thereof. In this and other cases, however, Freud's analysis suffers from an inattention to precisely the cultural terrain occupied by jokes and especially their connection to Jewish discourse. As Cohen notes, "It is probably more accurately thought of as one of those jokes meant to parody—or represent—Talmudic reasoning" and in some cases as "the insane logic and the maniacal moves through language, [which] are abiding features of Jewish humor."<sup>31</sup> This is not to say that this joke was itself a direct parody of such reasoning but rather that the influence of such patterns of thought was diffused into (largely

Yiddish-speaking) Jewish culture in Eastern and Central Europe. For its part, the tradition of parody of talmudic reasoning extends even as far back as the Talmud itself, where the text sometimes presents a precise parody of the form of talmudic discourse. In a closely reasoned unpacking of a passage from tractate Bava Metsia, Daniel Boyarin shows how “the text is not an assertion of but rather a critique of its own practices, of its own forms of epistemological certainty. Rabbi Elazar’s logical deduction [i.e., a line of reasoning he proposes to a law enforcement official as to how to determine who is a thief, a line of reasoning that by its absurd inexactitude leads to the execution of innocents] with its concomitant certainty must be read, I suggest, as parodic of the practices of rabbinic deduction itself.”<sup>32</sup> Although a text that describes such a miscarriage of justice is certainly not comic, a textual corpus which encodes the parody of its own logical structures and discourse cannot but have humorous ramifications. Indeed, the Jewish discursive mediation of such parodic content,<sup>33</sup> particularly by means of the conflation of high- and low-register elements,<sup>34</sup> can be seen to flow into Yiddish culture, particularly in the domestic sphere.

That the example from Freud (based on the internal rules specific to the text) seems somehow more narrative while the Sholem Aleichem passage<sup>35</sup> is more jokative brings us back to an earlier question: Is there a way of distinguishing storytelling and jeketelling, or, in other words, a narrative joke from a funny story? Although I do not think one can speak of essential constituents, one *can* speak of tendencies. Stories can, and often do, involve Jewish discourse, but they tend to do so as a formal technique, often as a way of incorporating verisimilitude. Jokes also involve Jewish discourse, but they tend to do so as a part of the driving mechanism of the joke as a whole, as part of the point and meaning of the joke. Jokes and stories are both artificial. The joke, however, is self-consciously artificial, whereas a “story” per se is less so; for the joke there is no perceived verisimilitude—beyond the linguistic—or at least the verisimilitude is not a driving force.

A couple of further examples will make this point. Jokes, as has been noted, can be as simple as a single line or as long as a multiple-hour comedy routine. Take the following Jewish-performed conjugation of a Latin verb: *amo, amas, amat, a mame, a tate, a kind*.<sup>36</sup> This works on a secondary level where the immediately anticipated Latin form is *amamus*, which is to say that there is a sound similarity between, and perhaps even motivating, the form *a mame*. (A shared familiarity with grammar-school Latin tuition would be presumed in order to make this joke effective on that secondary level.) More importantly, though, this belongs to a subset of Yiddish jokes that deals (and plays) with the practices of kheyder-teaching (rote learning, etc.) or with the quotative activity of Jewish discourse.

This is particularly a “linguistic joke”—though all jokes are in *some* way linguistic. That is, some jokes play specifically on paradigmatic or syntagmatic peculiarities of language; these begin with puns and work upward. Part of this distinction lies in the fact that one of the most recognizable features of a joke is the punch line. The self-conscious artificiality of jokes, as opposed to stories, derives from the fact that they often seem to be constructed from the punch line itself. You start with the conclusion and build the joke around it.

This is not to say that stories are not constructed around peripeteia, hamartia, or anagnorisis (sudden reversal, behavioral flaws, or surprising discovery). Rather, the effect of the artificiality of such devices—which are thematic in a way that punch lines tend not to be—is qualitatively different. Y. L. Peretz’s famous story “Oyb nisht nokh hekher” (If Not Higher Still; 1900) is built precisely around the enigmatic “conclusion” of the protagonist, which is both the last line and indeed the very title of the story. Yet it is certainly not funny, nor can it be said to be a punch line. Furthermore, it is often difficult to read jokes as stories. There is little thematic “point” in the following example, which is oriented around the relationship between the *kashe* (a difficulty posed of a talmudic passage) and the *teyrets* (the solution of that difficulty):

Once a yeshivah-bokher entered the study-house and saw one of his friends running around back and forth, holding his head in his hands, and yelling: ‘Oy, vey! Good, fine! Oy, vey!’ He asked him: ‘Shmerke, what’s with you that’s good and fine; why are you yelling?’ Shmerke said: ‘Oy, good brother! Do I have a *teyrets*! Gold! Genius! Only one thing is wrong: I don’t have the *kashe*!’<sup>37</sup>

The *Jewish* joke, therefore, is the *teyrets* in search of a *kashe*.

Much of the preceding can be brought together in two further characteristics: concision and delayed punch lines. The principle of concision is borrowed from Ted Cohen. Explaining a joke, or setting up a joke with all of the necessary presuppositions and “required” information, “encumbers” the joke, makes it “labored, and even contrived.”<sup>38</sup> Jokes involve some kind of concision—that is, they can be short and they can be long, but “what matters is what makes the concision possible. What makes it possible is that so much can go unsaid. And why can it go unsaid? *Because the audience already knows it.*”<sup>39</sup> This “unsaidness” is what makes Jewish discourse within jokes such an important overlap in Jewish culture; popularized talmudic discourse engages a culture of presupposition in which emphasis is placed on strict economy of language. To formulate it a different way: a “joke” is concise; a “story” is not. Taking the coachman joke above, though a relatively long joke—and partially a shaggy-dog story at that—explaining it to someone outside of Jewish cul-

tural life and with little knowledge of Jewish discourse would take three times as long and would be hardly worth a laugh.

We can also see how, in his analyses, Freud takes the elements of jokes seriously as evidence of underlying psychological realities. His conclusions, though, often miss the mark. Such is the case in the following passage about a “Schnorrer,” the Jewish habitual beggar, jokes about whom Freud grouped into their own subgenre:

“A *Schnorrer* on his way up a rich man’s staircase met a fellow-member of his profession, who advised him to go no further. ‘Don’t go up today,’ he said, ‘the Baron is in a bad mood to-day; he’s giving nobody more than one florin.’—‘I’ll go up all the same,’ said the first *Schnorrer*. ‘Why should I give him a florin? Does he give *me* anything?’”

This joke employs the technique of absurdity, since it makes the *Schnorrer* assert that the Baron gives him nothing at the very moment at which he is preparing to beg him for a gift. But the absurdity is only apparent. It is almost true that the rich man gives him nothing, since he is obliged by the Law to give him alms and should, strictly speaking, be grateful to him for giving him an opportunity for beneficence. The ordinary, middle-class view of charity is in conflict here with the religious one.<sup>40</sup>

The presupposition undergirding this joke’s humor is that a beggar thinks reflexively he has a right to a rich man’s money and that it is somehow already his.<sup>41</sup> The “conflict” engineered by Freud between “middle-class charity” and “religious charity” is meaningless within the discursive world of the joke itself because the disparity is ultimately a matter of perspective. A conflict in some sense posits two relatively equal claimants; the joke presumes the validity of only one of them.

For their part, delayed punch lines are another important characteristic of this kind of jeketelling. By delayed punch line I am referring to those jokes that act as a kind of Chinese box, embedding one joke, whose punch line “tricks” one into thinking the joke over, into another. Olsvanger developed his own terminology for this phenomenon: “The significance of the Jewish version lies in the ‘super-climax’ that renders the original conclusion of the story a mere ‘pseudo-climax.’ I regard such ‘pseudo-climaxes’ and ‘super-climaxes’ as typical of the Jewish way of storytelling.”<sup>42</sup> Freud’s comment on a joke that he classifies as a “displacement joke” offers a noteworthy insight relevant to the underlying deceptiveness of the act of delay:

Here we are expected to laugh at the impertinence of the demand; but it is rarely that these jokes are not equipped with a façade to mislead the understanding. The truth that lies behind is that the *Schnorrer* [in a different joke than the one above], who in his thoughts treats the

rich man's money as his own, has actually, according to the sacred ordinances of the Jews, a right to make this confusion. The indignation raised by this joke is of course directed against a Law which is highly oppressive even to pious people.<sup>43</sup>

For Freud, this "façade" covers a serious (as opposed to a humorous) psychological reality. Despite this seriousness, it is related to the "delayed punch line"/"pseudo-climax," except in a structural and cultural sense, not a psychological one.

Jokes involving such delayed punch lines need some ingenuity of construction in order to pull them off, as in the following example:

A *melamed* was teaching his students. In the middle of teaching he remembered that he had to do something in the attic. So he told the children that until he came back they had to repeat and memorize such and such a passage and then he would examine them. And should they not understand some word, they were to go outside to ask him. The teacher left and the boys started studying. They understood all the words except for one which they didn't know: "*mimaylo*."<sup>44</sup> So a boy ran out of the *kheyder* and yelled to the teacher up in the attic: "Rebe, what is the meaning of *mimaylo*?" The teacher answered: "Higher." He thought the teacher had not heard and so he should speak louder.<sup>45</sup> So he yelled louder: "What is the meaning of *mimaylo*?" So the teacher again replied: "Higher." So the boy yelled quite loudly: "What's *mimaylo* mean?" Then the teacher angrily yelled back: "A devil take your dad! [*a ruach in dayn tatn arayn*]."<sup>46</sup> So the boy went away. Then, when the teacher came back, he asked: "So, have you done what I told you?"—"Yes."—"So, Yankele, translate the verse." Yankele started translating, and when he came to the word *mimaylo* he said: "A devil take your dad [*a ruach in dayn tatn arayn*]." The teacher got very mad and gave the boy quite a slap on the cheek. So the boy started to cry. His friend said to him: "How can you speak that way to the teacher? To a teacher do you use the familiar? You have to say: 'A devil take your father [*a ruach in ayer tatn arayn*].'"<sup>47</sup>

The Jewish discursive weight placed on overturning assumptions, questioning every proposition from multiple angles, competitive displays of analytic brinkmanship, and associative digression is also and particularly at work in a joke such as this. The mental acuity and argumentative dexterity so prized by this Jewish culture are mirrored in the compositional ingenuity of many of these delayed-punch-line jokes.

Part of the effectiveness of the jokes that play on both the content of Jewish discourse and its context, as in the common *kheyder* scene (such as from the previous joke), lies in the sensitivity to the structures of authority. As I mentioned earlier, much ink has been spilled discussing Jewish humor as a



cultural response to suffering and an expression of helplessness in the face of it. In a related characterization, the literary scholar Robert Alter notes that “Jewish humor typically drains the charge of cosmic significance from suffering by grounding it in a world of homey practical realities.”<sup>48</sup> Although this may or may not hold depending on how one views the psychological argument, the basic intuition it builds on is the deeply engrained instinct to bring low the lofty, to conflate the high and low, and to stick satirical pins into stuffed shirts.

Thus there are four differences—or potential differences—between joke-telling and storytelling that are not necessarily sufficient conditions individually, or in particular combinations, but constitute a set of guidelines for characterization: the relationship to Jewish discourse; the punch line as a conceptual organizer; concision; and contrivance. I began by making an *inter-* versus *intracultural* distinction. Jokes become all the more interesting when seen not only through the lens of difference, as just described, but also through the lens of similarity to storytelling. In a keen ethnographic analysis of storytelling in East European Jewish society, Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett outlines a basic scheme concerning when storytelling occurs and what forms it usually takes. As a basic rule, “There are various types of speech events in which stories play an important role and though not defined by the society in terms of storytelling, these events may require that stories be told, may be dominated by narration, will be structured so as to accommodate taletelling, and will influence the form of the narrative performance.”<sup>49</sup>

Many of these “structural accommodations” to storytelling can often allow jokes to take the place of stories. Within this framework, Kirshenblatt-Gimblett outlines a basic storytelling typology.<sup>50</sup> One can distill out of that typology an essential dichotomy between story as gloss and story as *Ding an sich* (a thing in itself). Jewish discourse can be seen at work far more readily in the latter than the former.<sup>51</sup> As a result, these are more likely structurally to accommodate jokes. In these cases,

Most highly valued, then, is the use of stories as an illustration to conversational or situational topics. . . . But stories in conversation may also be told for their own sake. When this is the case, one option is for the odd tale, especially in the case of jokes and humorous anecdotes, to be embedded in conversation as a topic in and of itself.<sup>52</sup>

Encapsulated in this account is what I am calling the principle of substitution. Joke-telling in these instances can easily fit into certain slots culturally “assigned” to storytelling. In effect, this is an elegant way of accounting for the similarities between joke-telling and storytelling—namely, they are treated as enough alike that they can both occur under some of the same conditions while still being “understood” as somehow different things.

The question now turns to literature. I have sketched the patches of continuity and discontinuity, the similarities and differences (however nebulous they may naturally be) between storytelling and joketelling, which in their way mirror those between stories and jokes. What about literature? How does the narrativity of jokes relate to literary narrativity? This is an immense subject, far greater than space allows here. However, an example may shed some light not only on how to approach the issue but also on the importance of the particular role that jokes played at a formative time in Yiddish letters. As I have tried to show in this article, par of the importance in maintaining an endogenous concept of a Jewish joke (as opposed to related exogenous categories such as *Judenwitz*)<sup>53</sup> is its potential application to creating, innovating, or adapting forms of literature that would be immediately understandable and appealing to Yiddish-reading audiences. Sholem Aleichem is a good test case precisely because of his keen manipulation of the patterns of Jewish discourse in Yiddish, especially in Yiddish speech. His “literary joke” form, an exemplary instance of which we find in “Der daytsh” is an experimental step that plays on these patterns and forms.

The structure of the story itself is an extended monologue of sorts. It opens with the line “So I am myself, as I told you, a Drazhner, that is, from Drazhne, a little shtetl in Podolia, quite a small shtetl” (*Bin ikh aleyh, vi ikh hob aykh gezogt, a drazhner, fun drazhne heyst dos, a kleyn shtetl in podolyer gubernye, gor a kleyn shtetl*).<sup>54</sup> First, the syntactic subject-verb inversion indicates the continuation of a previous piece of speech or text to which we, the readers, are not privy. This is an important contextual cue emphasized by the phrase “as I told you.” Moreover, the dialogical framework is marked by the expressed addressee “you,” and the oral framework is marked by the verb “told” (*gezogt*).<sup>55</sup> The narrative ligature between story and storytelling is precisely this orality.<sup>55</sup> As is so common in Sholem Aleichem’s work, and what makes it so interesting—though not necessarily unique—is the very close approximation of folk speech found in his works. It is a Yiddish version of what the Russian formalists called *skaz*, “a stylistically individualized inner narrative placed in the mouth of a fictional character and designed to produce the illusion of oral speech.”<sup>56</sup> The Yiddish writer and critic Meyer Wiener, in a study first published in 1941, makes a similar judgment not only of Sholem Aleichem’s adept stylization of folk speech but also of the humor that was almost grammatically bound to it:

Sholom Aleichem has a special sort of “comic” prose style. All the usual poetic devices are transformed into elements of verballity: the comedy derives not so much from the stories as from the style in which

they are recounted—from the various styles of garrulousness of the characters. These are, so to speak, his metaphors, tropes, stylizations, and so forth.<sup>57</sup>

In this particular construction in “Der daytsh,” the oral character of the “speech” is key. This is because, based on orality and the notion of substitution discussed earlier, joke material becomes fair game, as it were, and kosher for use as a literary narrative. “Der daytsh” is just such a joke.

Additionally, the language used by the storyteller is fraught with Jewish discursive turns. The inner “logic” of the story is one element, the vocabulary is another. So, for example, we find tautological infinitives in several instances as well as certain elements of Talmudic discursive vocabulary that have been made “native” in Yiddish: *davke*, *mekhteyse*, *a kayme-lon*, *meyle*, and *aderabe*, to name a few. These are shorthand tools to convey the “oral” quality of the characters’ language.

Taking a closer look at the story itself, it is structured as follows, in brief: After a prelude presenting the mis-en-scène or narrative frame, a longer story embeds two shorter shaggy-dog sequences, followed by a meta-pseudo-punch line, a punch line, and a narrative coda. In a way, it is an experiment as to how to inflate a mildly amusing joke into a full-blown story.

The conceit of the piece is that this nameless shtetl Jew is looking for ways to make money from the new train station in Drazhne when he spies a well-dressed man in need of assistance. Things transpire such that he takes the gentleman, a German businessman who speaks little to no Yiddish, home with him and puts him up as his lodger for a few days, charging him rather heavily. Once this has ended and the German has gone on his way, the Jew receives letter after letter, package after package, for all of which he has to pay cash on delivery, and all of which are from the German, thanking the Jew for his hospitality. This continues till he is summoned by telegram to Odessa to meet with a certain merchant named Gorgelshteyn. This he does at considerable expense. After a series of delays, he finally meets with the merchant who relays to him another note of thanks from the German.

When summarized, it is barely a story, much less a joke, which further supports the earlier contention about its hybrid nature. This is ultimately confirmed by how the story actually works. It begins with a prelude describing the shtetl Drazhne and the changes to it since the building of the train station (*stantsye drazhne*). This presents a connection to railway stories, such as Sholem Aleichem’s own *ayznbangeshikhtes* (railroad stories), and the whole genre of railway jokes.<sup>58</sup> The prelude ends by describing how the protagonist plans to make money on this new institution.

The story proper begins with the formula “It happened that...” (*treft*

*zikh a mayse*). It is not, I think, coincidental that in this idiom *mayse* also means “story,” to the extent that it is almost a self-categorization. In any event, the meeting between the storyteller and the well-dressed German plays as ethnic comedy, with stylization and mockery of ethnic speech. First there is the German, who greets the storyteller “Gut mo-yen”; not only is this German but Berlin dialect at that. (The humor is picked up later when the storyteller asks in an aside “But what does an Austrian know?” [*nor vos farshteyt a kire-daytsh?*].) A German is trying to speak Yiddish to a Jew and a Jew is trying to speak German to him, which turns into Yiddishized quasi-German. Then, when they get back to the storyteller’s house, there is the necessary scene where he tries to convince his wife to go along with the scheme. Of course, in speaking with his wife he tries to have her speak de-Germanicized Yiddish for fear that the German might understand some of what they are saying: “Jewess beware,’ I say to her, ‘Don’t speak in our language because the Sir understands German.’” The Yiddish—“Idene beloy, zog ikh tsu ir. diber nit af unzer tsung, makhmes der oden iz meyvin beloshen ashkenez”<sup>59</sup>—substitutes the feminine *idene* for the expected *yehudi* in a stock formula meant to prompt someone to emphasize the Hebraic component of the Yiddish to prevent intelligibility to non-Jews, or at least German-speakers.

The story continues with the first shaggy-dog subunit, recounting how each night the German keeps them awake with the same wild array of sonically evocative noises: “He started off snoring, wheezing, panting, then groaning and moaning, snorting and scratching himself, spitting and grumbling, then rising and throwing off all of the bedding, spitting insistently, getting mad, and cursing in his language: ‘*To the devil! Sacramento! Thunderrrrr-weatherrrrr!*’”<sup>60</sup>

This sequence, a kind of internal onomatopoeic mini-joke, is followed by the scene of reckoning all of the expenses the German has incurred, a very humorous monologue on its own, showing off the storyteller’s very creative accounting practice. This sequence concludes with the following: “‘You really are a clever German,’ I think to myself, ‘but I have more sense [*seykhl*] than you; what I have in my heel you don’t have in your whole head!’”<sup>61</sup> This is precisely the set-up to be deflated by the joke’s second shaggy-dog sequence and punch line, namely that all of his earnings from boarding the German will be lost to paying the charges on accepting thank-you notes from him.

The second shaggy-dog section is a lengthy string of similar occurrences in which a letter or package arrives without an indication of the sender. Each time the storyteller pays the charge for the letter and takes it to be read by the apothecary who knows German. And each time it says the same thing, a message of thanks and appreciation from the German. The storyteller continues

in this vein because he keeps hoping that the letter might be some business or other that he cannot ignore. Then: “Several months passed—there was an end to it, and no more German! Thank God, rid of that misfortune, silenced at last! I was simply overjoyed!...But are you ready for this? So you wait, and there’s still no end.”<sup>62</sup> That is, though not a false ending, it is Sholem Aleichem’s gesture to the tradition of giving a false ending, of overturning expectations and the like. To this extent Sholem Aleichem seems conscious of the joke convention and gives it a slightly literary caste.

Ultimately, things finish off with the inflated scene in Odessa with the merchant Gorgelshteyn keeping the storyteller waiting for days before finally showing up to deliver his message of thanks from his friend the German. There the “joke” ends, but Sholem Aleichem takes a few more sentences to conclude the story—that is, to wrap up the narrative frame presented at the outset. This coda presents a narrative conclusion within the storytelling framework but outside the jeketelling one. Sholem Aleichem’s experiment in this and other works, then, is to look at and play with the question of how a literary story differs from an oral one. This resonates with the orality that is such a prominent feature in the creation of a modern Yiddish literary language. It also points to the interest of these authors in the pliancy of all the potential materials at their disposal, among which the joke is conspicuous.

I am not the first to mention that Sholem Aleichem sometimes based stories on jokes.<sup>63</sup> “Der daytsh” is one of his earlier attempts. Ted Cohen makes the point that having to explain its circumstances “encumbers” a joke. In some sense in “Der daytsh,” it is the joke that “encumbers” the story, and as a result both are unsuccessful. It is neither a very good joke nor a particularly good story. Other Sholem Aleichem stories based on joke material—for example, “Iber a hitl” (On Account of a Hat; 1913)—succeed as stories precisely because the narrative or storytelling features are the ones that have been developed as dominant, making the jokative features less self-conscious and therefore less “concise.” As David Roskies notes about “Iber a hitl”: “Because the story is made up of so many heterogeneous elements...all in the context of an old joke retold in so lively a fashion that it remains a perennial howler—it defies a sustained reading along any single generic route.”<sup>64</sup> In fact, one of the reasons Roskies considers this story among Sholem Aleichem’s best is its narrative complexity, “a written transcript of several dialogically linked, spoken narratives. At least five such narratives can be heard *simultaneously*, each with its own diction and direction.”<sup>65</sup> It is indeed humor that connects “Der daytsh” and “Iber a hitl,” but in the former a hybrid experiment is not quite pulled off, whereas in the latter, after more than a decade, Sholem Aleichem’s experiment

had progressed, and he had made dominant his mastery of the storytelling art, which entailed the prevalence of a different set of generic traits. Put another way, the experiment of “Der daytsh” involves inflating a joke into something resembling a story but not transforming or transmuting it *into* a story in the way that “Iber a hitl” does.

In a period of notable fluidity in the concept of Yiddish literary form and language, Sholem Aleichem’s work offers a tantalizing glimpse at the process of their creation. In speaking again of Sholem Aleichem’s orality, Wiener noted that “Sholem Aleichem’s works, even the smallest of his master-stories, are therefore a sort of wordplay, depicting an illusory, playacting, world. This is a new genre in world literature. On the surface it appears to be prose, but in essence, it resembles high comedy.”<sup>66</sup> Although I am not suggesting that “Der daytsh” represents a “new genre in world literature,” it does seem clear that Sholem Aleichem’s experiment with a new kind of “literary joke” tells us even more about just how deeply humor was embedded within the interwoven discursive and literary systems of Yiddish culture as well as about the complicated nature of that humor itself. David Neal Miller has shown that Sholem Aleichem was very sensitive to the “severe criticism” of his work in the late 1880s on the charge that it was too lighthearted—in a word, too humorous—and thus insufficiently sober to meet the serious conditions and challenges faced by his readership at that time.<sup>67</sup> “Rabinovitch’s dual predilections [namely for humor and for socially responsible realism] could not possibly coexist without creating serious structural problems in his narratives,” Miller asserts, and then he goes on to offer an interpretative solution to this conundrum based on authorial and narrative personae.<sup>68</sup> To this I would add that, especially given the inescapability of humor for Sholem Aleichem,<sup>69</sup> he was not bound by a dichotomous choice between literary options, but experimented with forms and language that, in one direction at least, seem to have led to this literary joke form.

One of the key intracultural observations about jokes is that they may be inserted into cultural slots assigned to storytelling (the principle of substitution) but not necessarily the other way around. Nevertheless, their iconic status, certainly since Freud’s study first appeared in 1905, has generated considerable interest and anxiety. My goal has been to find a way of accounting for the Jewish joke as a cultural product, structurally related to the story, whose context of articulation—joketelling—mimics storytelling but whose primary distinction rests in its relation to Jewish discourse. This constellation of features, linking jokes and stories as complicated cultural products, allows us a richer appreciation of the sophistication of Yiddish literary crativity.

\*My hearty and heartfelt thanks to Professor Shlomo Berger for that great opportunity. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations from foreign-language sources are mine.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Immanuel Olsvanger, *Röyte Pomerantsen, or How to Laugh in Yiddish* (New York, 1978), 3. This joke has also been quoted and discussed in, e.g., Irving Howe, "The Nature of Jewish Laughter," *American Mercury* 72 (1951): 211, reprinted in *Jewish Wry: Essays in Jewish Humor*, ed. Sarah Blacher Cohen (Detroit, Mich., 1987), 16–17; Avner Ziv, "Psycho-Social Aspects of Jewish Humor in Israel and in the Diaspora," in *Jewish Humor*, ed. Avner Ziv (New Brunswick, N.J., 1998), 52; Dan Ben-Amos, "The 'Myth' of Jewish Humor," *Western Folklore* 32, no. 2 (1973): 113; and Elliott Oring, *Jokes and Their Relations* (Lexington, Ky., 1992), 112–13.

<sup>2</sup> Oring calls it "metahumor" (Oring, *Jokes and Their Relations*, 113).

<sup>3</sup> Olsvanger, *Röyte Pomerantsen*, xvii.

<sup>4</sup> Ted Cohen, *Jokes: Philosophical Thoughts on Joking Matters* (Chicago, 1999), 3–4.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>6</sup> This observation has also penetrated some popularized discussions of the "essence" of Yiddish language and culture. Michael Wex, for example, in his bestselling book *Born to Kvetch*, notes that "Talmudic ways of speech and thought are not so much the forerunners of Yiddish as its matrix, the womb and long-term gestational home of a language that was waiting to happen, a language that couldn't help but be born. From a linguistic point of view, the Talmud is nothing less than Yiddish in utero." (Michael Wex, *Born to Kvetch: Yiddish Language and Culture in All of Its Moods* [New York, 2005], 15).

<sup>7</sup> In a telling passage from Y. L. Peretz's *Bilder fun a provints-rayze* (1891), a quasi-fictionalized account of Peretz's ethnographic tour of Polish Jewish communities, a follower of the Vorke rebbe tells a digressive story about the fame of his rebbe. His fame was apparently so great that even non-Jews come to consult him, as did German Jews and Litvaks (Lithuanian Jews), whose antipathy toward the Polish Jews (and vice versa) is the stuff of Jewish cultural legend. "There is even a story about an interpretation of the Tosafot: a Litvak has to show how sharp his mind is, so this Litvak asks about the Tosafot on something in Tractate *Nedarim*. The rebbe, may his memory be a blessing, intentionally interpreted it in the opposite way. 'How is that possible, rebbe?!' the Litvak said, jumping up, 'A Tosafot in Tractate *Rosh Hashanah* on the same topic says precisely the opposite of your words?!' So, what do you think—it was a miracle from heaven that our compatriots [i.e. Hasidim] didn't beat him up on the spot." (Yitskhok Leybush Peretz, *Rayze-bilder* [Moscow, 1947], 34). Not only does this resonate with the deeply engrained cultural trope of Hasidim versus Mitnagdim (a trope that Peretz exploited to

great effect in some of his more famous works), but it also shows that, outside the walls of the yeshivah or the study-house, learned debate was an actual competition, in this case with potentially physical stakes.

<sup>8</sup> This important idea is usually assumed in the scholarship. See, most notably, Max Weinreich, *History of the Yiddish Language*, trans. Shlomo Noble (Chicago, 1980), 175-246, and Benjamin Harshav, *The Meaning of Yiddish* (Berkeley, 1990), 89-116.

<sup>9</sup> *Kal-vekhoymer* and *gezeyre-shove* are the names of two logical operations in rabbinic argumentation, an *a fortiori* inference and an analogical argument, respectively.

<sup>10</sup> Olsvanger, *Röyte Pomerantsen*, 100-101. This text is quoted and further discussed in Jordan Finkin, *A Rhetorical Conversation: Jewish Discourse and Modern Yiddish Literature* (University Park, Pa., 2010).

<sup>11</sup> For the importance of coachmen and other low-status figures in disseminating different kinds of (often technical) knowledge, see Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, "The Concept and Variety of Narrative Performance in East European Jewish Culture," in *Explorations in the Ethnography of Speaking*, ed. Richard Bauman and Joel Sherzer, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, Engl., 1989), 293-304.

<sup>12</sup> Cohen, *Jokes*, 60.

<sup>13</sup> Howe, "The Nature of Jewish Laughter," 19.

<sup>14</sup> For example, the folklorist and editor Alter Druyanov, in his collection of Jewish jokes in Hebrew, does try to make a case for a "Jewish" essence to the folk humor of the Jews. See his *Sefer ha-bedichah ve-ha-chidud*, vol. 1 (Tel Aviv, 1935), 8-11. He singles out linguistic essentialism (i.e., Yiddish) for some scorn and argues in favor of the legitimacy of Hebrew adaptations of Jewish humorous content. For a fine discussion of the ideological debates in Zionist circles surrounding Hebrew versions not only of jokes but also of folkloric material in general, see Adam Rubin, "Hebrew Folklore and the Problem of Exile," *Modern Judaism* 25, no. 1 (2005): 62-83.

<sup>15</sup> Ben-Amos, "The 'Myth' of Jewish Humor," 123.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 120.

<sup>17</sup> Oring, *Jokes and Their Relations*, 114.

<sup>18</sup> Ben-Amos, "The 'Myth' of Jewish Humor," 120. Incidentally, some interesting attempts have been made to use precisely those empirical data to make claims about this kind of Jewish humor in a historical social-psychological context. See, notably, Samuel Juni and Bernard Katz, "Identification with Aggressions vs. Turning Against the Self: An Empirical Study of Turn-of-the-Century European Jewish Humor," *Current Psychology* 14, no. 4 (1996): 313-28. As I said, though, my goal is formal and cultural, not psychological, and so I am not in a position to assess these claims.

<sup>19</sup> For an important study on the *Judenwitz* (Jewish joke) phenomenon, see Jefferson S. Chase, *Inciting Laughter: The Development of "Jewish Humor" in 19th-Century German Culture* (Berlin, 2000). See also Sander Gilman's explication of "the missing link of the Jewish joke and its role in defining Jewish identity in the 1890s" in Freud's thought in his "Jewish Jokes: Sigmund Freud and the Hidden Language of the Jews," *Psychoanalysis and Contemporary Thought* 7 (1984): 604. This identity is a specifically German-Jewish one, and Gilman goes into detail about Freud's preoccupation with jokes that highlight "the juxtaposition of 'bad' German, *Mauscheln*, and 'good' German, the German in which Freud embeds the joke" (605). These arguments concerning the "hidden lan-



guage of the Jews” are only applicable, though, in a society where Jews were functioning in the language of the majority (here, German); they have less purchase in a community speaking Yiddish, or for Yiddish texts.

<sup>20</sup> Oring, *Jokes and Their Relations*, 117-119.

<sup>21</sup> Ben-Amos, “The ‘Myth’ of Jewish Humor,” 115.

<sup>22</sup> This does not mean that jokes do not reflect or deal with psychological realities.

Rather, claims about how these jokes manifest some underlying collective Jewish psychological profile (referred to as a “psychopathology” by Ben-Amos) are exceedingly difficult to substantiate.

<sup>23</sup> Attempts at such definitions are nevertheless often made. See, e.g., Avner Ziv, “Introduction” in Ziv, *Jewish Humor*, 12, and Oring, *Jokes and Their Relations*, 114-115.

<sup>24</sup> Cohen, *Jokes*, 8. Paddy Chayefsky’s play “The Tenth Man” confirms the vivacity of this joke form. The principals of the play, a group of elderly Jews, are discussing the possible whereabouts of one of their granddaughters, an 18-year-old girl who, they are convinced, is possessed by a dybbuk that they are planning to exorcise. One of them, Alper, designated at this point as “the Talmudic Scholar,” reasons as follows: “If I call the girl’s home, there are two possibilities. Either she is home or she is not home. If she is home, why call? If she is not home, then [there] are two possibilities. Either her father has already called the police, or he has not called the police. If he has already called the police, then we are wasting a telephone call. If he has not called the police, he will call them. If he calls the police, then there are two possibilities. Either they will take the matter seriously or they will not. If they don’t take the matter seriously, why bother calling them? If they take the matter seriously, they will rush down here to find out what we already know, so what gain will have been made? Nothing. Have I reasoned well, Zitorsky?” (Paddy Chayefsky, *The Collected Works of Paddy Chayefsky: The Stage Plays* [New York, 1995], 146). In this case, the passage does not need an explicit punch line as its humor is produced both in its contextual application and, I would argue, in the fact that it already sounds like a well-worn joke formula.

<sup>25</sup> I must thank the very astute *JSS* peer-reader’s surmise that this joke probably refers to the conscription during the Russo-Japanese war and its great likelihood of fatality. Doubtless in the background of such Jewish draft jokes sits the cultural resonance and afterlife, though not necessarily the historical realities, of the early-nineteenth-century tsarist institution of cantonism, which involved a lengthy conscription of many Jewish boys, starting at the age of 12 (and in some cases even younger), into the army. For recent treatments of this phenomenon, see Yohanan Petrovsky-Shtern, *Jews in the Russian Army, 1827–1917: Drafted into Modernity* (New York, 2009); for its literary ramifications, see Olga Litvak, *Conscription and the Search for Modern Russian Jewry* (Bloomington, Ind., 2006).

<sup>26</sup> Olsvanger, *Røyte Pomerantsen*, 60-61; for the full joke, see *ibid.*, 59-61.

<sup>27</sup> At the beginning of the presentation of binary possibilities in the longer version of the joke, we encounter the Yiddish word *mimonefsekh*. By way of digression, this phrase in Yiddish—also variously pronounced [*mi*]mónēfshēkh or [*mi*]mónēshēkh—can mean “either or; one or the other; that being the case.” The expression (literally, “what is your desire?”) is sometimes used in the Talmud to give two possible alternative arguments. As

part of Jewish discursive nativization into Yiddish, the phrase appropriates a notational device that signals, in this case, the existence of two alternative positions. An expression whose literal meaning in the source language is “what’s your desire?” develops the idiomatic meaning of “either/or” in the target language. The Yiddish lexicographer Yitskhok Niborski cites a pair of examples from Sholem Aleichem that shows the two primary semantic trajectories in Yiddish. First: “*mimonefsbekh, yo—yo, neyn—neyn*” (one or the other, yes—yes, no—no). Second: “*mimonefsbekh, ir hot gevart azoy fil, vet ir vartn nokh a bisl*” (that being the case, since you have waited so long, you can wait a little longer). (Yitskhok Niborski, *Verterbukh fun loshn-koydesh-shtamike verter in yidish* [Paris, 1999], 174.) In Y. L. Peretz’s famous story “Mekubolim” (1894), we are introduced to the last two members of the Lashtshev yeshivah, its leader and his student. “And the two of them also often suffered hunger. From eating too little comes too little sleep, and from whole nights without sleeping or eating—a desire for the Kabbalah! In either case—should one have to be awake for whole nights and to be hungry for whole days—one should at least get some use out of it” (*monefsbekh—darf men oyf zayn gantse nekht un hungern gantse teg—loz men khotsh derfun a nutsn hobn*). (Y. L. Peretz, *Ale verk fun Y. L. Peretz*, vol. 5: *Khsidish* [New York, 1930], 109. Interestingly, this phrase is not used in Peretz’s Hebrew version [1891] of the story.) Peretz’s conscious phrasing of the situation—using a common word but from the study language—puts the sting in his criticism. Take your pick of abject poverties, he says, it is all of a piece for Kabbalah study.

<sup>28</sup> Sholem Aleichem, *Ale verk fun sholem aleykhem*, vol. 3, sect. 4 (New York, 1942), 24.

<sup>29</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, trans. James Strachey (New York, 1960), 72. These remarkably similar passages from Sholem Aleichem and Freud, both being found in works published four years apart, suggest the possibility of a shared source text, which could prove very valuable, but which I have as yet been unable to find.

<sup>30</sup> Cohen, *Jokes*, 9, 63.

<sup>31</sup> Daniel Boyarin, “The Talmud as a Fat Rabbi: A Novel Approach” *Text and Talk* 28, no. 5 (2008): 611.

<sup>32</sup> This is not meant to encourage an automatic association of the structures of Jewish parody and humor. Parody *can* be funny. The point, however, is that the humor of Jewish discourse is not restricted or confined to its parodic features. David Roskies nods in this direction when he refers to a larger “system of *yiddishkayt*” as a particular “system of meaning” of which parody is but a visible part. (David G. Roskies, “Major Trends in Yiddish Parody” *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 94 [2004]: 117). Jewish discourse as such, however, is much more closely related to this systematic level of semantic space than it is to parody (as Roskies claims elsewhere in that article).

<sup>33</sup> In a related vein, Boyarin maintains that “the Talmud is most abundantly read... in the context of the late-ancient genres... characterized by their indecorous mixing of genres both ‘high’ and ‘low’ ” (“The Talmud as a Fat Rabbi,” 609).

<sup>34</sup> This passage is set within a much larger text, which is a monologue composed entirely of “reported” speech. This jokativity is implicated by the passage’s being embedded in an orally structured performed narrative.

<sup>35</sup> Literally, “I love, you love, he loves, a mom, a dad, a child.” I heard this independently from both my father, Professor Matthew Finkin (who in turn heard it from his father and grandfather) and my teacher Professor Eli Katz, *z”l*.

<sup>36</sup> Olsvanger, *Röyte Pomerantsen*, 150.

<sup>37</sup> Cohen, *Jokes*, 25.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.* It is true that shared knowledge is a feature of jokes as well as of stories. The point of concision in a joke is that it serves the humor. Were stories to be concise in the same way, there would be little room left for the aesthetic, artistic, didactic, polemic, political, or other aims of non-jokative narrative.

<sup>39</sup> Freud, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, 135.

<sup>40</sup> This is also the humor at the heart of Y. L. Peretz’s story “Hakhnoses kale” (1894). Siegbert Praver, in an elegant essay on Jewish humor, analyzes a series of “Schnorrer” jokes, the punch line to one of which he decodes as follows: “The beggar’s last reply, when literally translated from the original Judaeo-German, reads: ‘For my health nothing is *to me* too expensive.’ To me. The ethical dative shows that the *Schnorrer* is treating the rich man’s money as his own; the point of the joke being that in a way the money *is* his own” (Siegbert Praver, “The Jew and the General: A Study in Diasporan Humour,” *The Cambridge Journal* 3 [Oct. 1949–Sept. 1950]: 352).

<sup>41</sup> Olsvanger, *Röyte Pomerantsen*, xi. Note again the degree to which Olsvanger has subsumed the joke under the category of “story.”

<sup>42</sup> Freud, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, 134-35.

<sup>43</sup> The humor is bound up in the fact that the literal meaning of this word is “from above” or “from on high.”

<sup>44</sup> The Yiddish word—*hecher*—can mean both higher physically or louder acoustically.

<sup>45</sup> For this curse formula, see James A. Matisoff, *Blessings, Curses, Hopes, and Fears: Psycho-Ostensive Expressions in Yiddish* (Stanford, 2000), 76-77.

<sup>46</sup> Olsvanger, *Röyte Pomerantsen*, 8.

<sup>47</sup> Robert Alter, “Jewish Humor and the Domestication of Myth” in Cohen, *Jewish Wry*, 26.

<sup>48</sup> Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, “Concept and Variety of Narrative Performance,” 285.

<sup>49</sup> In fine the typology is as follows: “story as gloss,” to exemplify a point as a kind of evidence; “single story as topic,” which functions either to maintain conversational flow or to effect topical shift; “storytelling round,” which is the realm of the competitive element of Jewish discourse; and “storytelling solo,” which is the purview of storytelling virtuosi. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, “Concept and Variety of Narrative Performance,” 287-289.

<sup>50</sup> In “story-dominated events, there is a preoccupation with narratives as things in themselves. . . . There is a tendency for story-dominated events to be organized like beads on a string. Free association, one story triggering the recall of another, is an important organizing feature of these events” (*ibid.*, 291). Clearly conversational logic is at work, employing a Jewish discursive strategy. Having evoked Jewish discourse, what of the competitiveness and focus on one-upmanship mentioned earlier as components of this discourse? Of two operative principles outlined by Kirshenblatt-Gimblett in storytelling events, the second is particularly instructive: “There is sometimes a building of intensity to climactic points, as competitive narrators vie with each other and try to top

each other's jokes or as the teller of saints' legends and their audience become caught up in the spirit of the tales they are narrating" (ibid.).

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 295. Note, too, the implied generic distinction made by the phrase "jokes *and* humorous anecdotes" (my emphasis).

<sup>52</sup> Judenwitz (Jewish joke) refers to the nineteenth-century German isolation of humor, and the joke in particular, as an essential (and largely negative) component of the Jewish character, and therefore the subject of public debate and criticism.

<sup>53</sup> Sholem Aleichem, *Ale verk fun sholem aleykhem*, vol. 16. (New York, 1920), 133.

<sup>54</sup> One should remember the strategic orality in Sholem Aleichem's "Dos tepl." The analogy with jokes and jeketelling should also not be forgotten. As Kurt Schlesinger noted: "Jewish humour as an oral tradition handed down over generations of joke telling is a form of secular communal ritual which both binds and characterizes the community, and acts adaptively for its survival." Kurt Schlesinger, "Jewish Humour as Jewish Identity," *International Review of Psycho-Analysis* 6 (1979): 319.

<sup>55</sup> Victor Erlich, "A Note on the Monologue as a Literary Form: Sholem Aleichem's 'Monolog'—A Test Case" in *For Max Weinreich on His Seventieth Birthday: Studies in Jewish Languages, Literature, and Society* (The Hague, 1964), 45.

<sup>56</sup> Meyer Wiener, "On Sholem Aleichem's Humor," trans. Ruth R. Wisse, *Prooftexts* 6, no. 1 (1986), 46.

<sup>57</sup> See, e.g., Olsvanger, *Röyte Pomerantsen*, 133–37. For the importance of train travel to Yiddish literature generally, see Leah Garrett, "Trains and Train Travel in Modern Yiddish Literature" *Jewish Social Studies* n.s. 7, no. 2 (Winter 2001): 67–88. For contemporary treatments specifically of Sholem Aleichem's *ayznbangeshikhtes*, see Dan Miron, *The Image of the Shtetl and Other Studies of Modern Jewish Literary Imagination* (Syracuse, N.Y., 2000); Sidra DeKoven Ezrahi, *Booking Passage: Exile and Homecoming in the Modern Jewish Imagination* (Berkeley, 2000), 109–15; Todd Samuel Presner, *Mobile Modernity: Germans, Jews, Trains* (New York, 2007), 106–13; and David G. Roskies, *A Bridge of Longing: The Lost Art of Yiddish Storytelling* (Cambridge, Mass., 1996), 176–88.

<sup>58</sup> Sholem Aleichem, *Ale verk* [1920], 136.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 139: "[F]rier gekhrapet gefayft un gesapet un gekhorkhelt, un nokh dem gekrekhtst un geoyket, geforshket un gekratst zikh un geshpign un gevortshet, un ufgekht zikh un aropgevorfn dem gantsn betgevant un geshpign klek un gebeyzert zikh un gesholtn af zayn loshn: 'tsum tayvl! sakramento! donnerrrrr-veterrrr!'" The earthy onomatopoeia of the language here was clearly designed to be risible.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 140.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 145.

<sup>62</sup> See the analysis of the story "On Account of a Hat" in David G. Roskies, "Inside Sholem Shachnah's Hat," *Prooftexts* 21, no. 1 (2001): 39–56: "As in the best of Sholem Aleichem's *oeuvre*, 'On Account of a Hat' is based on a well-known joke" (44).

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 46.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> Wiener, "On Sholem Aleichem's Humor," 49.

<sup>66</sup> David Neal Miller, "'Don't Force Me to Tell You the Ending': Closure in the Short Fiction of Sh. Rabinovitch (Sholem Aleykhem)," *Neophilologus* 66 (1982): 107.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 108.

<sup>68</sup> Miller cites a letter from 1889 in which Sholem Aleichem makes what Miller describes as a “rather curious rejection of humor”: “Despite my powerful leanings toward upbeat humor, in the present social situation I simply do not have the courage to clown around” (ibid., 107). It is “curious” precisely because Sholem Aleichem’s writing of humor continued unabated.

# Groucho, Harpo, Chico, and Karl: Immigrant Humor and the Depression

Leonard M. Helfgott

During the mid-1930s the Marx Brothers became the darlings of a particular set of American intellectuals, who in turn set the tone for the Marx Brothers' reception within the wider worlds of criticism and ideas. Dorothy Parker, Haywood Broun, Alexander Woolcott, Harpo Marx, and others, some with one foot still in the big city ghetto, traded quips at Algonquin Hotel luncheons (mostly on the house) and wrote for magazines like *Vanity Fair* and *The New Yorker*.<sup>1</sup> Sarcasm, badinage, and wit combined with an outsider's perspective on mainline American life and politics to produce a critical, cynical, and anti-ideological style that influenced American theater, film, and prose during the Great Depression.

The work of the Marx Brothers, which spanned vaudeville, the Broadway stage, and the relatively new talkie films, provided a particular appeal to the Algonquin circle. On one level, the Marx Brothers' satire reflected the essence of the Algonquin circle's critique of contemporary American culture. They used words like "zany" and "anarchic" to describe those Marxian antics that assaulted the pretensions of the rich and powerful, but they ignored the implicit political content of the films. They sanitized the work of the Marx Brothers and removed it from the larger critique of contemporary capitalism reflected in much of the popular culture of the 1930s.

The Marx Brothers films, especially in their appeal to urban, immigrant audiences, expressed issues of class, social control, and the very nature of Americanism during a period when all of these tensions were contested on the political, economic, and cultural levels. Popular culture of the thirties reflected the complexity of Depression America; it also sought to change it. It functioned as the Great Awakening of the Depression years. Michael Denning suggests the existence of a "Cultural Front" that embodied the perspectives of immigrant, largely working-class, leftist-influenced sectors of American society that persisted throughout the thirties. I argue that the films of the Marx Brothers form part of that Cultural Front.<sup>2</sup>

Walter Benjamin believed that the invention and dissemination of photography, lithography, and especially sound film dramatically changed the nature of art in the modern world.<sup>3</sup> Art was no longer contained by social or religious ritual, thereby shedding its cultic dimensions. Now mechani-

cally reproduced as photograph, lithographic print, mass-produced consumer items, or talkie-films, art lost its uniqueness and became available across social boundaries through museum-produced prints, radio broadcasts, movie theaters, newspapers, posters, or broadsides. The authenticity of an art object, expressed by what Benjamin called its aura, may have remained a concern for museum curators and wealthy collectors, but by the 1930s the new media had propelled the movement of art in its almost infinitely reproducible forms into the public sphere. Whether by integrating art into daily life through film or through textile and furniture design (Bauhaus, Constructivism, etc.), or by equating art with an “event” that sought to dissolve the boundaries between artist and audience (Brechtian theater, Dada), art, heretofore the domain of the privileged or the sacred, entered the realm of everyday life.

Benjamin’s analysis of the democratization of art in the twentieth century can be interpreted in two ways. Benjamin experienced directly the rise of fascism in Germany and was certainly aware of the uses to which the Nazis put film, photography, and lithography. It is hard, almost impossible, to imagine a greater subordination of mechanically reproducible art to reactionary state policy than Leni Riefenshtal’s *Triumph of the Will* or the later antisemitic film *Jud Suss*, to provide two among many potential examples. He certainly would have understood Nazi distinctions between Aryan art and degenerate art that provided guidelines for the masses as to the appropriateness of particular artistic tendencies.<sup>4</sup> A literary and art critic, Benjamin was also familiar with the hypermodernism of Filippo Tommaso Marinetti and other Italian futurists, which equated the new arts with Nietzschean notions of an elite, unique in its ability to understand modernity and impose it on the rest of society. Thus, one reading of Benjamin’s “Work of Art in The Age of Mechanical Reproduction” can easily conclude that the author intended it as a warning against the use of new art as a means of propaganda to shape the thought and actions of the masses. Indeed, during the 1930s the tendency to use art as a form of mind control existed from Madrid to Moscow and from Berlin to Madison Avenue.

However, we must keep in mind that Benjamin was a Marxist. Not an old-fashioned dialectical or historical materialist, but from a new breed of Marxist thinkers now referred to as the Frankfurt School. These new Marxists shifted focus from study of the inevitable fall of capitalism and the dictatorship of the proletariat to the study of everyday life of the masses under capitalism. They introduced a new interpretation of Marx as humanist, as concerned with the alienation of the individual under capitalism and the *telos* of unleashing individual creative capacities through a mutual struggle against capital.<sup>5</sup> To Benjamin, the contemporary stage of this human struggle to create had

been realized by technology's transformation of art into a potential weapon of historical change, used not by a repressive state reflecting the interests of economic elites but by a class-conscious proletariat.

Rather than (or in addition to) warning against the use of art by a repressive state, Benjamin's work suggests that the new art, represented primarily by film, could and should become both an agent of resistance to state power and an agent of human liberation. In this sense, Benjamin's ideas approximate those of Antonio Gramsci, who focused on the forging of a cultural force among the working class capable of both resisting the imposition of cultural power from above and moving toward the realization of human capacities through its own creative agencies.<sup>6</sup> The belief that culture could act as a force for social change animated much of the artistic production in America during the Great Depression.

The 1930s were unique in American history, not because of the Depression, but because masses of people mobilized to demand comprehensive expansion of their rights as workers and citizens. A loose multiregional, multiethnic, multigendered, multiclass, and multiracial coalition arose that pressured the agencies of the state to respond to a wide spectrum of social, economic, and cultural demands. This mass movement engendered not only socially conscious Keynesian policies from the government but also its own cultural forms, reflected in the variety of artistic media and venues. Pressure from below stimulated responses from the private sector and from the state. Both responded with an outpouring of products and patronage that reflected the goals of the mass movement.

On the cultural front, the state responded with the Works Progress Administration (WPA), which funded professional artists to make and present musical, theatrical, and visual arts to mass audiences. The private sector increased the number of films, radio shows, songs, plays, and dances, which replicated the militant support for the working class reflected in Aaron Copland's *Fanfare for the Common Man*.<sup>7</sup> The national anthem of the thirties could very well have been "Brother Can You Spare a Dime," which conquered the hit parade in 1932 when recorded by the crooners Bing Crosby and Rudi Vallee. Written for the Broadway show *Americana* by two Jewish socialists, E. Yip Harburg and Jay Gorney, "Brother Can You Spare a Dime" remained popular throughout the Depression years. Indeed, Harburg's work bracketed the atmosphere of despair and hope during the thirties when he wrote the lyrics for "Over the Rainbow" and the rest of the *Wizard of Oz* score in 1939.<sup>8</sup> He also wrote the lyrics to "Lydia the Tattooed Lady," Groucho's signature song from the 1939 film *At the Circus*.



During the thirties, popular culture assumed a new role in American life. The spread of radio, the advent of sound films, the popularization of sport, and the democratization of fine art all contributed to a culture that reflected contemporary ethnic, regional, and economic conditions. Certainly, a large number of feel-good, escapist films, plays, and visual arts were produced. However, the makers of popular art could neither ignore nor sidestep pressing issues like unemployment, urban crime, struggles to unionize, Dust Bowl and Appalachian poverty, racial strife, ethnic identity, and the growing threat of fascism. As these issues emboldened mass political action, artists and filmmakers who identified with the mass struggles, either through upbringing or ideology, responded by creating products that either reflected ongoing struggles or aimed at engaging directly in those struggles.<sup>9</sup>

The first sound film, *The Jazz Singer*, centered on the tensions between traditional Jewish life and the outside world. Even opera descended to the quotidian in the form of George Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess*, which transported the struggles of poverty-stricken African Americans from Catfish Row to Broadway (1935) and eventually (1985) to the Metropolitan Opera House.<sup>10</sup> Boxing produced America's first black hero, Joe Louis, "the Brown Bomber," whose popularity extended from the Black community into white America, even penetrating the most racist sectors of society. Films like *Public Enemy*, *Dead End*, *Scarface*, and *I Was a Fugitive from a Chain Gang* not only highlighted the plight of the poor but also catapulted actors from immigrant backgrounds like James Cagney, Edward G. Robinson, Sylvia Sydney, and Paul Muni to stardom. Frank Sinatra was not far behind. Immigrants could now see the drama and the humor of their lives portrayed by those familiar to them. Later in the decade, when Benny Goodman brought Teddy Wilson and Lionel Hampton into his quintet, the real Swing Age began, introducing millions of Americans not only to the first integrated band but also to the genius of black musicians and the vibrancy of jazz.<sup>11</sup>

The Marx Brothers were poor, ghetto kids and the sons of immigrants. They grew up on 93<sup>rd</sup> street between Lexington and 3<sup>rd</sup> Avenue in the German-Jewish neighborhood of Yorkville in Manhattan. Groucho had to leave school in order to help the family pay the rent. Harpo left school willingly. Luckily their mother's brother, Abraham Elieser Adolph Schoenberg, had become Al Shean, half of the popular Irish-Jewish vaudeville team Gallagher and Shean, who helped shape the brothers' later successes. The Marx Brothers' humor and their stance toward the world reflected a newcomer status, poised between throwing off the old and assimilating into the new.

But this process was long and often painful, and the experience became embedded in their stage and film characters. For example, when they first

started, the three brothers assumed accents of the ghetto. We know Chico spoke Italian, but it is less known that Harpo spoke with an Irish brogue and Groucho affected a German (Yiddish) accent. Eventually, Harpo stopped speaking, and Groucho assumed a persona that could not have flourished with an accent. But the connection to the accents of the ghetto probably lay behind their incessant playing with words.

Being caught between two languages encourages a kind of wordplay that seeks double meanings by distorting words, phrases, or sentences, especially in the language of public expression, English. This was a common phenomenon among immigrant children and the children of immigrants. For them, school-based culture and popular entertainment, like pop music and later the movies, were English-based. But they lived and played in a street culture that mixed the new with the old, English with the native tongue, which often still dominated the language of the home. When Chico and Groucho played with words, they replicated wordplay that occurred in virtually every immigrant home, schoolyard, poolroom, playground, or street. In *Duck Soup*, when choosing who will risk his life on the battlefield, they resort to their own version of *eeny meeny miny mo*.<sup>12</sup> Wordplay served as a validation of the old, of immigrant status, by expanding the potential meanings of English and infusing it with meanings only perceptible to the children of the ghetto.

As some of these children matured and entered the world of mass entertainment, they transported inner-city wordplay into the general culture. Language radiated from the street to film, radio, and theater and back to audience, linking the immigrant experience with that of the larger American culture. Wordplay allowed comedians to see around the corners of language, to find or create or cajole alternate meanings from sounds or juxtaposition of words. From Chico Marx (vy a duck?) to James Joyce (Here Comes Everybody) to Jerry Seinfeld (sponge worthy), this process has enriched our language and culture by expanding meaning and providing new forms of social relevancy. Chico and Groucho's wordplay was funny because it was familiar, because it replicated everyday ghetto humor rather than the repartee of the Algonquin intellectuals. As the language of the Marx Brothers reflected ghetto life, so did the personas they each assumed.

The Marx Brothers created characters on stage and screen that reflected familiar figures of inner-city life and the constant struggles for survival during the Depression. Decidedly distinct, the three brothers nevertheless also shared the characteristic of living on the edge of regular employment. Although Chico appears as a barber or a musician, he lives on the seams of everyday economic life, surviving through his wits while remaining part of the underclass as indicated by accent and costume. He is part of that rootless sector of society

another Marx called the *lumpenproletariat*. He lives by conning the wealthy but has no pretensions of ever moving into a respected place in the world. He is a permanent fixture in ghetto life, unwilling and incapable of social mobility. His connections to those institutions that serve the elite, like the opera, the health spa, the state, the university, are never permanent, and his accent, dress, and even the eccentric way he plays the piano punctuate his role as outsider. He is at home only in the speakeasy, where he knows the password (swordfish). The password signifies permanence of status, not mobility.<sup>13</sup>

In class terms, Harpo is similar to Chico. They often operate as partners. Yet his familiarity is different from Chico's. He is the neighborhood crazy man or looney, so off-center that outrageous behavior becomes the norm rather than exception. My Baltimore had Crazy Izzy and Freddy the Rat. Freddy sold newspapers, wore outlandish clothes, and sang "Bye Bye Blackbird" at the weekly amateur talent night at the Park Circle Tavern. Izzy haunted the entrance to the Avalon poolroom and insulted anyone who passed by. According to street legend, either they suffered from something popularly referred to as shell shock, resulting from unspeakable war experiences, or their mothers had slipped on the ice during pregnancy. Alfred Kazin describes Blumka, the neighborhood madwoman of Chester Street in Brownsville, as "mumbling to herself or jeering at the children; and when she liked, lay flat on the steps singing old Yiddish ditties to herself."<sup>14</sup> Harpo resonated with audiences because he played the movie version of Crazy Izzy, Freddy the Rat, and Blumka. Because he was crazy, he could do anything to anyone. On the bottom of the social ladder in a period of general institutional breakdown, he could mock those of higher status and find a large audience laughing and applauding.

Groucho's character served as the hinge on which the Marx Brothers films relied. He connects the world of the ghetto to the outside world of wealth and privilege. He is literate and knows the secrets of both the realm of poverty and the realm of wealth. More or less educated, he is a *spieler*, a con man, a charmer, a healer, a bit of a *gonnif* [thief], and, in his own words, a *schnorrer*. Upwardly mobile, he holds the life of the rich in contempt. He is incredibly clever with words and familiar both with the wordplay of the ghetto and the banter of elites. He often disdains his brothers' characters but invariably sides with them and others of their class against those more privileged. The dislocated intellectual portrayed by Groucho has a long history in ghetto life and has even assumed a centrality in the modern definition of the Jew as wandering or rootless.

As traditional society collapsed in Eastern and Central Europe and religious and ideological constraints eroded, dislocated young men, freed from

Talmudic study and forced out of petty entrepreneurial work, lived on the seams of society. Even before the great upheavals of the late nineteenth century, uprooted young men moved from village to village practicing a kind of folk psychiatry and preying on local weaknesses by mastering Jewish folklore. Some peddled medicinal cure-alls and supplemented their sales by telling stories and singing songs while wearing a pasty mustache and a long black coat.<sup>15</sup> Ultimately, these mendicants influenced the development of Chasidic Judaism. They remained a permanent feature of rapidly changing ghetto life and increased in numbers as Czarist Russia began to modernize. They became known in Yiddish as *Luftmenschen*, or men of air. Disconnected from the institutional life of the *shtetle* [small towns or villages] and from traditional religious ideology and control, they lived by their wits, learned how to survive in the gentile world, and in some cases gravitated toward new political movements such as socialism, anarchism, or Zionism that reflected changing social conditions.<sup>16</sup>

The *luftmenschen* formed a new subclass as they struggled to find a place in the New World. As Chico and Harpo formed part of a *lumpenproletariat*, Groucho and those like him formed a new *lumpenintelligentsia* composed of rootless intellectuals who have rejected their past and, without success, seek solace in the world dominated by gentiles. (This process was not limited to Jews. During the 1930s two other *lumpenintellectuals* had risen to power in Europe.) Groucho has been particularly appealing to other comedians, especially to Woody Allen, who often portrays characters similarly caught in the tensions between modern life and traditional immigrant culture and resorts to banter, often inane, both to cover his discomfort and to insult those who he feels exclude him from a world of prestige and privilege.

Groucho's characters, like those of his brothers, not only represented real tensions in urban life but also replicated ghetto figures. His names in the films reflect the characters he plays: Otis B. Driftwood, Rufus T. Firefly, Dr. Hugo Z. Hackenbush, Wolf J. Flywheel, J. Cheever Loophole. He is a drifter, a lightning bug, a hack, and a wolf, operating on the periphery of society, eager to take advantage of the foolishness of the bourgeoisie, constantly looking for loopholes. He is the pariah, using shady but acceptable channels to make it in the bourgeois world. As shyster talent agent for the opera, horse doctor, prime minister, or college president, he demystifies middle-class notions of success and accomplishment. He plays the eternal outcast, removed from his working-class background but retaining a proletarian disdain for elite behavior. His battle cry, "Whatever it is, I'm against it," can be seen both as an attack on

unduly held power and an anarchic expression of distrust of any form of social or political organization.<sup>17</sup>

Groucho, Harpo, and Chico define the comedic action in all of their films. However, two women feature prominently in the Marx Brothers films, and they portray two distinct images of women and sex. Thelma Todd gushes sexuality in *Monkey Business* and *Horse Feathers*. As the voluptuous and available wife of a gangster in *Monkey Business* and as the college widow in *Horse Feathers*, Todd catapults the lusty and seamy from the periphery of the films much closer to their centers. She uses sex to get what she wants from Groucho, while Groucho, fully aware of her intentions, nevertheless pursues her incessantly. In *Horse Feathers*, as College President Wagstaff he competes with his son, the student, for the affections of the college widow. She wants the football signals; he wants to get laid.

This overt sexuality recedes in the remaining Marx Brothers films. In later films, a love duo was added at the behest of the studio heads, hoping that a romantic interest would broaden the appeal of the films. In *Night at the Opera* (Kitty Carlisle and Alan Jones) and *Day at the Races* (Margaret Sullivan and Alan Jones), the lovers provide plot continuity and pretty music, but they add nothing to the erotic content of the films, which has all but disappeared. Sex is reduced to a harmless, nonerotic groping by Harpo or to the relationship between Groucho and the characters played by the other major female persona, Margaret Dumont. I will return to the Dumont characters later.

There seems to be little question that the Marx Brothers' success was driven by the actions of their mother, Minnie Marx, née Schoenberg. The daughter of Central European Jewish itinerant entertainers who immigrated to America in the 1870s (her father was a magician and a ventriloquist, her mother a harpist) and the sister of comedian Al Shean, Minnie served as manager, booker, writer, and sometimes cast member of the Marx Brothers' increasingly successful vaudeville act between 1909 and 1925. She managed their transition to the Broadway stage and lived to see their first film success, *Coconuts*, in 1929. Virtually all sources credit Minnie Marx for her sons' early success. Indeed, a 1970 play, *Minnie's Boys*, starring Shelley Winters as Minnie Marx, re-created the vaudeville life of the Marx Brothers and revolved around Minnie Marx's role in their success.

That the Marx Brothers, whose humor spared no image or institution that represented power and wealth, excluded the Jewish mother as a source of comedy or scorn in their films may suggest an awe and respect for their mother uncommon among their Jewish comedic peers during a period when the image of the overbearing, guilt-producing mother began to emerge.<sup>18</sup> However, the matronly image as a source of comedy persisted in the roles played by Margaret

Dumont in seven Marx Brothers films. Perhaps a Freudian inversion occurs in the creation of the Dumont matrons.

The Dumont characters differ significantly from Minnie Marx. First, she is gentle, with names like Potter, Rittenhouse, Teasdale, Claypool, Upjohn, Dukesbury, and Phelps seemingly garnered from the society pages. Second, she is rich, but her wealth invariably comes by virtue of her status as a widow. In other words, she does not work for anything she owns. In addition, she portrays characters that are boorish, pompous, stupid, and easily swayed. She is Groucho's business interest and seemingly his love interest, although he makes it clear that her wealth, not her mind or body, attracts him. She is presented as powerful and can effect the appointment of the prime minister in *Duck Soup*, but she is also cast as a social climber using her money to solidify her social position in *Night at the Opera*. She is the model of modernity in that her palatial residences reflect the newest in ostentatious art deco design and furnishing.

Margaret Dumont portrays characters that are the obverse of Minnie Marx. They reflect capitalism at its worst, rewarding indolence, status seeking, and the forms of the good life over its content. She prefers the arrogant, over-the-hill tenor rather than the obviously more talented newcomer. She represents a system, an image to be scaled or manipulated by those on the outside trying to survive. Her characters lack substance and achieve recognition only through money and its accoutrements, as illustrated by the following dialogue from *The Big Store* (1941):

Groucho: "Martha, dear, there are many bonds that will hold us together through eternity."

Dumont: "Really, Wolf? What are they?"

Groucho: "Your Government Bonds, your Saving Bonds, your Liberty Bonds."

In opposition to Minnie Marx, whose hard work and dogged persistence contributed to the Marx Brothers' success, Dumont's matronly character is central to most of the films as an object of derision, as a stand-in for an ordered, hierarchical world in need of change.

The Marx Brothers films are class humor. Set in the Depression, watched by millions of poor people, they offered an escape from the grim realities of staying alive and, at the same time, attacked those conditions and pretensions that separated the wealthy from the poor. Although none of the films dealt explicitly with Depression problems, each film made in the thirties reflected the schism between the elites and the rest of American society so acutely felt during the Depression. By focusing their attack on the pretensions of bourgeois culture, the Marx Brothers implicitly attacked the political and

economic conditions that provided the basis for bourgeois culture. Pompous opera-goers, foolish and meek college professors, and the niceties of political etiquette were portrayed as corrupt or phony. Reflecting popular resentment against the rich, no honored and hallowed tradition escaped their humor. They formed part of a cultural critique of American capitalism that stretched from WPA art programs to Hollywood, from state sponsorship to corporate patronage.

During the thirties, movie houses peppered the ethnic neighborhoods of the inner cities and were priced cheaply enough to allow for mass audiences. Film, especially since the addition of sound, became the primary medium that provided images and information from and about the larger world. Floods in Iowa, fashion shows in Miami, and wars in Spain and Ethiopia came alive in the weekly news shorts. Frank Buck and Clyde Beatty fought lions (and tigers!) in the deepest parts of black Africa. Gunga Din roamed the Indian-Afghani highlands. Dorothy escaped to Oz. One's visual sense of the world outside the city, one's fantasies, and one's sense of history itself came largely from the movies. In a world where travel was limited to the privileged few, a kind of global awareness developed through film.

The Marx Brothers films were aimed at urban audiences. Inner-city immigrants experienced the effect of *schnorrers* or could identify with Chico's accent. The audiences were Yiddish, Polish, Italian, German, Greek, and Irish. They lived in contiguous ghettos and shared a lifestyle of pushcarts and poverty. Football was a mysterious game played at colleges, which denied them access—Harpo's gridiron antics were funny because they satirized a game that seemed silly anyway.<sup>19</sup> Baseball, on the other hand, was already a big-city game, financially dependent on a large urban clientele. The juxtaposition of baseball and opera made sense in cities where big-time baseball was available to everyone, either on the radio or in urban stadiums, and the memory of opera as mass entertainment had not yet faded.<sup>20</sup>

The Marx Brothers brought to the ghetto resident things that were denied in real life. When Harpo played the harp, it was more than likely the only time many people, especially poor youth, had seen the instrument played. And they anticipated it in each film. Opera, diplomacy, Florida real estate, and fabulous art deco interiors featured in almost all of the Marx Brothers films, became objects of satire and elements of a material culture abused by the rich, but perhaps attainable in the future. Even during the Depression, the United States was on the cusp of a huge expansion of consumerism. The distance between the Marx Brothers films and the futuristic, consumer-oriented New York World's Fair of 1939 was perhaps not so great.

Chico and Harpo reflected the problems all immigrants had with a new language. What sounds like double talk to us had concrete meaning to the immigrant who could barely speak English. Second-generation kids laughed at their parents through Chico, while the parents laughed at themselves. If their language, even in butchered style, could reach the film, perhaps Old World culture retained some value. Using clear ghetto language, the producer Herman Mankiewicz downplayed the symbolic importance of Chico, Harpo, and Groucho as follows: "One of them is a guinea, another a mute who picks up spit, and the third an old Hebe with a cigar."<sup>21</sup> To accept Mankiewicz's simplistic view of the Marx Brothers implies the acceptance of the idea that their movies are merely entertainment and have little or no social or political significance. Nevertheless, his reduction of them to urban archetypes implies their resonance with inner-city audiences.

The Marx Brothers brought with them a strong feeling for what is funny in inner-city life: in addition to the oddities of language, they reproduced the visual imagery of the ghetto—the iceman, the dogcatcher, the ubiquitous cart drawn by an aged nag hawking anything and everything. They also brought with them a profound distrust of American culture common among immigrants, accompanied by envy and the inescapable recognition that leaving the ghetto meant entering bourgeois culture. This push-pull, attraction-repulsion mindset is reflected in every character portrayed by Groucho and not incidentally by the course of his personal life.

The Marx Brothers also included in their films an implicit critique of capitalism. Not just bourgeois pretensions but business practices receive the brunt of the attack. Illiterate Harpo signs a contract with an "X" to come to college and play football.<sup>22</sup> Chico and Groucho shred a contract while bargaining for the services of a singer.<sup>23</sup> Indeed, *A Night at the Opera* concludes with a repetition of this scene. Simplicity and traditional values are upheld as opposed to the formalized relations of the business world. Harpo survives without even speaking. Groucho prefers playing jacks to the affairs of state, which he, as any diplomat, can only mismanage. Politics, war, business, medicine, and the university are portrayed as forms of bourgeois gamesmanship that fill the needs of petty men and exploit the poor.

Seen in the context of the Great Depression, the Marx Brothers films reflected the distrust felt by urban immigrants toward the dominant values of the society and provided an outlet for audiences to express hostility toward elitist privilege. Their outrageous comedy served as a counterpoint to the outrageous lives of the poor. They formed part of a larger working-class, immigrant-centered culture during the Depression that articulated a critique



of American capitalism that went well beyond the banter of the Algonquin Hotel. This Cultural Front would fragment and virtually disappear during the late 1940s and the 1950s in the face of Taft-Hartley, McCarthyism, and the mass migration to beltway communities encouraged by a new form of state and corporate Keynesianism, liberated from the pressures generated by an activist working class.

In a parallel but related process, the cutting edge of art shifted from a critique of social and economic conditions to issues of style and technique in the direction of abstract expressionism, minimalism, atonalism, and serialism, in a sense re-creating many of the divisions between high and popular culture that threatened to dissolve during the Depression. The mechanically reproducible arts—namely lithography, photography, film, television, and radio—increasingly presented sanitized versions of white, suburban, middle-class American life with scant attention to issues of race, class conflict, poverty, or politics. The Marx Brothers stopped making films. Chico gambled and chased women while sporadically leading a jazz band; Harpo retreated into a stable family life punctuated by occasional television appearances; and Groucho achieved new fame as the host of television's *You Bet Your Life*, as a wisecracking, apolitical curmudgeon eerily foreshadowed by the Algonquin circle during the thirties.

The mass-based social movement of the sixties failed to stymie the rightward drift of America, which crystallized during the years of Ronald Reagan's presidency. Sixties radicalism, without support of a militant labor movement, tended to equate culture with individual or group lifestyle, foregoing the class-based critique of the Cultural Front and slipping into an identity-based politics that divided crucial segments of the underclasses from one another. This failure highlights those particular conditions of the 1930s Depression that produced, perhaps for the only time in our history, a multifaceted movement with a powerful cultural component shaped by class-consciousness that sought to transform American life.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Kevin C. Fitzpatrick, *A Journey into Dorothy Parker's New York* (New York: Roaring Forties, 2005).

<sup>2</sup> Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (London: Verso, 1997), 4-21.

<sup>3</sup> Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in The Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections* (ed. Hannah Arendt; New York: Harcourt, Brace, World, 1955), 219-53.

<sup>4</sup> Stephanie Barron, ed., *Degenerate Art: The Fate of the Avant-Garde in Nazi Germany* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1991), 9-25.

<sup>5</sup> Martin Jay, *The Dialectical Imagination: A History of the Frankfurt School and the Institute of Social Research, 1923-1950* (new ed.; Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996).

<sup>6</sup> Antonio Gramsci, *The Antonio Gramsci Reader* (ed. D. Forgacs; New York: NYU Press, 2000), 56-72.

<sup>7</sup> For a discussion of the tensions between “socially relevant” music and experimental music during the thirties, see Alex Ross, *The Rest Was Noise* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007). Copland’s paean to the American working class in music penetrated deeply enough into national consciousness that it served as the theme music for the heroism of police and firefighters during the September 11, 2001, attacks on the World Trade Center.

<sup>8</sup> Yip Harburgh, *The Yip Harburgh Songbook: Over the Rainbow; Brother can You Spare a Dime; Its Only A Paper Dream; April in Paris and Other Classics* (New York: Alfred, 1999).

<sup>9</sup> Isadora Helfgott, “Art and the Struggle for the American Soul: The Pursuit of a Popular Audience for Art in Depression Era America” (Ph.D. diss, Harvard University Graduate School, 2005).

<sup>10</sup> James Standifer, “The Complicated Life of Porgy and Bess,” *Humanities* 18: (Nov./Dec. 1997). Online.

<sup>11</sup> Dustin Prial, *The Producer: John Hammond and the Soul of American Music* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2006), 105-08.

<sup>12</sup> *Duck Soup*, 1933.

<sup>13</sup> *Horse Feathers*, 1932.

<sup>14</sup> Alfred Kazin, *A Walker in the City* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1974), 82.

<sup>15</sup> Josh Zimmerman, *European Traveling Medicine Shows* (Seminar paper, Western Washington University, 2005).

<sup>16</sup> Ezra Mendelsohn, *Class Struggles in the Pale: The Formative Years of the Jewish Workers’ Movement in Tsarist Russia* (London: Taylor and Frances, 1970).

<sup>17</sup> *Horse Feathers*, 1932.

<sup>18</sup> Joyce Antler, *You Never Call! You Never Write: A History of the Jewish Mother* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 2-3.

<sup>19</sup> Lawrence Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990).

<sup>20</sup> *Horse Feathers*.

<sup>21</sup> Simon Louvish, *Monkey Business: The Lives and Legends of the Marx Brothers* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1999), 203.

<sup>22</sup> *Horse Feathers*.

<sup>23</sup> *A Night at the Opera*, 1935.



# Nuances and Subtleties in Jewish Film Humor

Michael W. Rubinoff

From a purely an American viewpoint, people might think Jews became “funny” in this country or perhaps in relatively modern times. But such has not always been the case. As we know from documented studies, Jews and other minorities have borne the brunt of jokes for a long time. However, only in the post-World War II decades have Jews really been permitted to enjoy, if not enthusiastically contribute to, these entertainments.

Naturally, this presupposes that there is either a unique subgenre of Jewish film or at least Jewish comedic film. Over the past twenty-five years, American Jewish popular culture has attracted serious and scholarly attention.<sup>1</sup> These works have helped define various contexts. In studying film, there is also a risk. As illustrated herein, the humor shown in one decade or period does not always hold well with age. Arguing what distinguishes Jewish comedic film and/or a “Jewish film” suggests that the two are not mutually inclusive or exclusive. One does not have to be Jewish to even make a Jewish film. *Inglourious Basterds* (Tarantino, 2009) is but one of many such films made by gentile filmmakers. This study will analyze how these dynamics play against one another with examples from the early twentieth century through the heyday of Mel Brooks. The focus will be on six select films, both well known and lesser known, as primary source documents. Upon their examination, each movie reveals its own take on Jewish humor.

The definition of a “Jewish film,” much less what is comedic Jewish film, has changed over the years. The average movie scholar or buff might think the original version of *The Jazz Singer* in 1927 is a “Jewish film.” The movie stars Al Jolson, and the film’s opening is replete with Lower East Side scenery. Moreover, the story centers on a cantor and Yom Kippur and includes the chanting of Hebrew in synagogue scenes. With the exception of Jack Robin’s girlfriend played by May McAvoy, the principal cast appears to look “so Jewish.” In reality, neither Warner Orland nor Eugenie Besserer, who portrayed Jake’s parents, were of Jewish ancestry. However, for authenticity, Warner Brothers recorded the famed Cantor Joseph Rosenblatt for the prayer sequences. From the passage of seven decades, *The Jazz Singer* can be seen as a nostalgic allegory simultaneously enshrining pure melodrama. The humor in the film might best be seen in the story between the lines. With the narrative about a frustrated boy who runs away from home and generational conflict, the plot unfolds against

the thematic backdrops of assimilation and Americanization. But long before *The Jazz Singer*, there had been precursors presented to audiences.

The origin of narrative film goes back to the late nineteenth century stage. Jews were considered comical figures in vaudeville. Ethan Mordden has discussed the phenomenon of the German comic—which prior to World War I literally was understood to be a “Jewish comedian.” American-born Jews like Joe Weber and Lew Fields were the leading “Dutch or German” figures on the burlesque circuit.<sup>2</sup> When amusement was required, the bill would call for a “German Comic.” Such a figure was not necessarily German but a Yiddish-speaking Jew who could mime the accent. The largely unsophisticated immigrant audiences focused on the stage antics, not the performer’s diction. Once Russian Jews arrived in great numbers, they became subjects and/or targets of the vaudeville stage and early film.

Thomas Edison’s near monopolistic control over the infant film industry made it understandable that American Protestant mores would become the staple of movies. Thus, Jews and other groups were depicted as foreigners in early cinematic representations. This could be found in the 1907 American Mutograph and Biograph release, *Fights of Nations*.<sup>3</sup> The movie consists of several *mise-en-scène* vignettes captured by a single camera. Essentially, the shooting was done on a primitive indoor stage trying to simulate outdoor scenery. Absent any intertitles to weave the plot, several sequences depict ethnic groups: Spanish, Jewish, African American, Scots, and Irish.

In “Our Hebrew Friends,” a street scene opens with a bearded man wearing a bowler arguing with a necktie peddler in a top hat. This fairly physical melodrama shows the actors obnoxiously finger-poking one another to make a point. Suddenly a clean-shaven, respectable-looking (i.e., gentile) man wearing an overcoat tries to get by them several times. Impatient with the arguing, the man put his arms between the two Jews and finally passes—noticeably, he wears gloves and touches neither Jew. As this man disappears from view, another bearded man with a bowler promptly enters. He is dragged into the animated argument with the two Jews. The newcomer is grabbed by his necktie, breaks free, and soon wants to punch the other Jews. Then, the men inexplicably try to kick one another from behind. Their frenzy resembles a hora-like dance as they place their hands on one another’s shoulders. Suddenly, a policeman comes up and grabs the necktie peddler. As the peddler moves out of the way, the two other Jews take over. One Jew whispers something to the cop and points to the late arrival. The policemen talks to the other Jew who gets on his knees and appears to be pleading. Rising to his feet, he also whispers to the cop. The officer turns around but offers the back of his hand,

by which he takes a cash bribe and places the money in his rear pocket. As he leaves, the cash is attached to a string and one of the Jews with a single pull reclaims the bribe. The scene ends with the three Jews joyously hugging each other and breaking into dance again.

In seventy-five seconds, this short segment presents an image of unkempt, quarreling, and pretentious Jews. They get into the way of polite society. Thomas Cripps succinctly stated, “they’re petty merchants, they jabber, and they corrupt cops.”<sup>4</sup> Ethnic audiences of the early twentieth century were accustomed to this kind of humor from burlesque and vaudeville. The different immigrants mingled with one another, uneasily at times. They saw each other frequently, and this dry humor was common. With hindsight, the Edison image can be seen as more pernicious. At a time when New York street gangs were giving lessons to a young Bugsy Siegel and Meyer Lansky, a film like this was already implanting ideas to the country about Jews and corruption. The Dillingham Commission on immigrant crime specifically connected Jews with this problem and fueled nativist sentiments for quotas.<sup>5</sup>

Edison-style comedy was fairly single-dimensional. But fast-forward in time twenty years from the *Fights of Nations* to 1927. The Broadway drama based on “Day of Atonement” by Samson Raphaelson actually suited theatrical audiences.<sup>6</sup> When it was renamed *The Jazz Singer* and starred George Jessel in the lead role, the production was maudlin even for its time. With the show set in New York and with many Yiddish theater patrons moving uptown, Jack’s returning to the synagogue and assuming his father’s cantorial career was quite satisfying. Despite the popularity of the similarly-themed *Abie’s Irish Rose*, there was little the original stage drama did to challenge deeply held beliefs. After all, the setting is Orthodox, and many theater patrons were only one boat generation removed from the old country and arranged marriages.

But in transferring the play to the screen, the Warner Brothers adaptation created a new paradigm for the lead star and the story ending. Warner initially announced Jessel would soon be seen on film.<sup>7</sup> Jessel, then a dramatic stage personality, was caught between the salary of filming a silent movie and an additional contract for making Vitaphone recordings—he insisted on separate payments. Additionally, the star was incensed about the new assimilationist ending Raphaelson wrote with Alfred A. Cohen. The Broadway script had Jack return to the synagogue and continue the family’s cantorial line. For the screen, the finale showed Jack chanting *Kol Nidrei* and then racing to the Winter Garden in time to sing, “Mammy.” This was not the only major script change. As for the final scene, Jessel said, “Money or no money, I would not do this version.”

In the interim negotiations, Jessel had dinner with Jolson and spent the night at the singer's hotel. The next day, Jessel awoke to see Jolson casually dressing. The singer said, "Go back to sleep, Georgie, I'm going to play golf. I'll see ya later." The nap had consequences, as Jessel subsequently read the *Los Angeles Times* and news of Jolson using golf time to close with Warner on *The Jazz Singer*. It also helped Jolson's cause to ante \$180,000 and secure part ownership of the picture.<sup>8</sup> Both Neal Gabler and Donald Weber believe the substitution of Jolson for Jessel was not due to the latter's high salary demands. They have argued that Jessel, "a strident professional Jew," might have been fine for the New York audience but would have been "too Jewish" for national distribution in the hinterland.<sup>9</sup>

Jolson, the son of a lay rabbi in Washington, DC, was cast as Jack Robin. Perhaps as a concession to an ego-driven star, Warner allowed the unusual insertion of an intertitle bearing Jolson's name. This segues between young Jake (Bobby Gordon) running away and the nightclub scene where an adult Jack (Jolson) sings "Blue Skies." While audiences heard young Gordon and Rosenblatt singing earlier, the positive reaction to "Blue Skies" helped sell Vitaphone's sound-with-film technology. Actually intertitling Jolson's name was unique. He was such a bigger-than-life star that Warner interjected him deep into the movie. It is purely speculative if Jessel would have been accorded the same status had he remained in the movie. This was more than the quintessential definition of a star vehicle; it also is a novel film technique. They changed out the character and the actor, making both interchangeable. This might be called early "method acting," where Jolson plays both Jack and himself. This was the man who used to stop his Shubert shows and ask his audiences if they wanted him to scrap the skits and sing "April Showers" or "Toot, Toot Tootsie." So for an ego, Jolson was more than legendary as the intertitle displayed.

Robert Carringer quotes Raphaelson's own opinion of a Jolson stage appearance. Fresh out of college, he caught a performance of *Robinson Crusoe, Jr.* As he later recalled immediately following release of *The Jazz Singer*:

This grotesque figure in blackface, kneeling at the end of a runway which projected him into the heart of his audience, flinging out his white-gloved hands, was embracing that audience with a prayer—an evangelical moan, a tortured, imperious call that hurtled through the house like a swift electrical lariat with a twist that swept the audience right to the end of the runway. The words didn't matter, the melody didn't matter. It was the emotion—the emotion of a cantor.<sup>10</sup>

Raphaelson did not see much humor in the meretricious musical. By this time, King Oliver was quickly moving northward with his New Orleans Dixieland sounds. But the budding writer concluded upon hearing Jolson, "My God, this

isn't a jazz singer. This is a Cantor!"<sup>11</sup> The distinction between Jessel and Jolson was manifest. The Broadway version had Jessel abandon show business and follow a cantorial career. In the redone script Warner Brothers conveniently left Jolson as he was known on the Shubert circuit: an unembellished, blackface pop singer. At a time when Jews were trying to blend in, the movie was retro. As Eric Goldstein observed, "The former East European immigrants were increasingly adapting to American life," and many young Jews in the interwar years wanted to "shape their self-consciousness as white."<sup>12</sup>

Director Alan Crosland was anxious to give the film authenticity and shot the Lower East Side scenes on location. The film's opening shows the immigrant pushcart environment accompanied by strains of "East Side, West Side" heard on the soundtrack. The song itself dated back over thirty years. The montage of scenes moves from the overcrowded, ragged, ghetto look of the old Lower East Side and merges into a cheerful merry-go-round scene with children. This transitions the audience to the underlying themes of the film: mixing the old with the new along with multigenerational conflict between parents and children. While Jewish adults are depicted as foreign-appearing immigrants, the children are joyfully ensconced on a carousel bedecked with American flags. From this opening series of actualities, Warner allowed the older Jews to appear odd-looking and alien while the younger generation seems "American." Thus, with the assimilation theme established, *The Jazz Singer* underscores a serious issue set against melodramatic conventions.<sup>13</sup>

Inextricably part of Crosland's film is the injection of humor. With the infant talkies already being stigmatized as "canned vaudeville," it took little imagination to make the well-known connections. This is evidenced with the character of Moysha Yudelson. He was portrayed by Otto Lederer, an Austro-Hungarian-born actor. The bearded Yudelson is a nouveau riche. Probably by design, his very last name is a corrupted version of the Yiddish word for "Jew"—this might have been a little "insider" humor. In the context of the times, Yudelson's entire countenance was common for immigrant aspirations. He is dressed as a vested dandy wearing dark slacks and a fashionable white sport coat; he boasts of a conspicuous watch fob.

His white hat suggests an entirely different persona [*Bildung*] than a mere street hawker. He clearly was a step up from the gritty Jewish types shown in *Fights of Nations*. The intertitle says he is "rigidly orthodox," but Crosland shows him as a man willing to enjoy an afternoon drink in a local saloon. Adept at rolling his eyes and using sweeping gestures, his presence on camera was pure silent-film styling. He is a useful character covering several motifs: a combination of local political ward boss, a snitch [*yente*], and finally, by the film's close, a Jake Robin fan.



Yudelson is absorbed with his drink when he observes young Jake Rabinowitz performing in the saloon. Stunned by the sight, he hurriedly departs for the cantor's apartment. Once there, he anxiously knocks on the door, enters, and says, "In a saloon, who do you think I saw singing raggy [sic] time songs?"<sup>14</sup> This unflattering tattle tale is at once amusing and believable. But he alternates between the role of exaggerated comic relief and storyline promoter. Seen in 1927, he was the vaudeville ethnic type later projected into countless screen musicals and westerns. Lastly, his posing a question will be a screenwriting device used in Jewish film humor—essentially, mimicking the immigrant answering a question with a question. In many films, the very asking of a question can be seen as a classical stereotype differentiating a Jewish character from a gentile one.

As subsequent films following *The Jazz Singer* demonstrated, Hollywood was quite careful about depicting Jewish humor for decades. To be sure, Jewish comics such as Eddie Cantor, Ed Wynn, The Three Stooges, The Marx Brothers, Jack Benny, Milton Berle, and Jerry Lewis were spotlighted in many films of the 1930-50s. But it was difficult for any of these comics to appear overtly Jewish, deploy Yiddish idioms, or much less make even oblique ethnic references. Groucho Marx clearly understood these limits, but could not avoid his own ad-libs. In *A Day at the Races* (Wood, 1937), he sings "My Old Kentucky Home" and quips that it has been brought to you "By the House of David."<sup>15</sup> Groucho also intoned in *Animal Crackers* (Heerman, 1930), "Hurray for Capt. Spaulding. Did anyone call me shnorrer?"<sup>16</sup> An almost word-for-word repetition of the line was later spoken by Red Skelton in the Burt Kalmar and Harry Ruby biopic, *Words and Music* (Taurog, 1948).<sup>17</sup>

For over forty years, filmgoers have been amused by parodies and spoofs from Mel Brooks. His fond nostalgia for old genre films might be matched only by his infusing vulgarity and unsophisticated Jewish humor in his catalogue. Among his many send-ups, the most memorable might be the wagon trail scene in *Blazing Saddles* (Brooks, 1974).<sup>18</sup> Posing as an Indian chief, he bestowed greetings on a solitary pioneer wagon with an African American family. Brooks alternated his dialogue between Yiddish and English, proclaiming at the end, "*Haz they gesehn in deinen leben?* They're darker than us!"<sup>19</sup> This exclamation shows how it was acceptable in Jolson's time for a Jew to use burnt cork as a make-up or for Brooks to use black-white-and-red war paint in 1974. At once, Jolson is concealing Jewishness, but Brooks delights in revealing it. But he also betrays a deeper insight many of his generation knew—Jews were not always regarded by their fellow Americans as "white."

Scene: Three Indians on horseback approach a wagon with a black

family of a man, wife, and young son. The chief wearing paint and war bonnet peers carefully in at the family.

Chief: *Shvartzes!* [One brave holds up his tomahawk, but the chief motions him to be still] No, no, *seit ist meshugah*. [Chief shouts to the sky] *Laz im gehn!* [Chief speaks to the family] Cop a walk. It's alright.

Father: Thank you.

Young Son: Thank you.

Chief: *Abi gezint*. Take off. [The wagon leaves and he turns to one brave] *Haz they gesehn in deinen leben?* They're darker than us! Whoof!<sup>20</sup>

Use of the word “*shvartzes*” [blacks] leaps out from the dialogue. Carrying what some might argue is pejorative Yiddish slang, it had been heard before and in an unobtrusive way. In 1932, Warner Brothers was still addressing “insider’s” Jewish humor. They had a series of two-reel shorts called “Broadway Brevities.” Several older films from the first years of talkies were to be withdrawn under the soon-to-be-issued Production Code (or Hays Code). Among them was the popular stage operetta, *The Desert Song* (Del Ruth, 1929).<sup>21</sup> The comic relief in the film was “Benny Kidd,” a flamboyantly gay character.<sup>22</sup> Anticipating the code’s restrictions, all such controversial figures vanished or were closeted with other personas in Hollywood. Anxious for a remake, Warner cut the original two-hour script to just twenty minutes. This included changing the story somewhat, a deletion of dialogue/scenes, and keeping just enough of the show’s hit songs by Sigmund Romberg, Otto Harbach, and Oscar Hammerstein II. Curiously, Warner recycled some stock footage from the 1929 film and used it for between-scenes filler in the shorter version that was renamed *The Red Shadow* (Mack, 1932).<sup>23</sup>

The operetta set in French Morocco had a dual-personalities storyline similar to *The Mark of Zorro* (Niblo, 1920), *The Scarlet Pimpernel* (Stanton, 1917), and later seen with DC Comics’ *Superman* and *Batman*. The plot involves the French Foreign Legion trying to suppress the native Riff revolt in the 1920s. Aside from the chopped script, the clearest difference between *The Desert Song* and *The Red Shadow* involves the comic relief: instead of the overtly fey “Benny,” Warner created an entirely different personage. An unnamed character played by mustachioed Max Stamm appears, à la “Capt. Spaulding,” overdressed in a suit and flowing African hunter’s hat. His very appearance and his obvious German accent are amusing—harking back to the vaudeville German comic tradition. With quacking safari music in the background, this scene was set apart from any other in the film—it had no bearing whatsoever on the story except for brief comedy. With the studio cutting the

1929 original film to the bone, they nevertheless felt it necessary to include a modicum of irreverent humor.<sup>24</sup>

Following the opening sequences, the camera shows French Foreign Legionnaires marching and leaving the fortress compound. The use of black actors as guards at the gate is a marked departure from the Broadway and 1929 film versions. These earlier incarnations repeatedly emphasized the Europeans and depicted the warring Riff tribes as the racial “other.” But in *The Red Shadow*, the black legionnaires are indispensable for the scene. So in replicating the original comic character, they make him out as a short man walking in with a mule and a young bespectacled woman.

Scene: Entrance to fortress interior. French Foreign Legionnaires complete their departure leaving two guards. A short man walking a mule and accompanied by a young woman enters.

Man: Hold it there Suzy while I ask the *shvartses* here where we is. [Turns to Guard 1] We want to see the general who is in charge of this oasis.

Guard 1: [Replies in French]

Man: Is that so? [Speaking to the woman] Don't know what he said and don't like the accent in which he said it with, neither.

Suzy: Why you dumbbell, that's French. All the natives here speak French.

Man: Is that French? Why didn't you say so? [He opens up a phrase book and attempts to speak French to Guard 1.]

Guard 2 [changing to American-accented English]: You're sure having a hard time saying it. Just what is it you all want?

Man: Suzy! He speaks good English like we Americans! [To Guard 2] You know what we want? We want to have a little adventure. We'd like to see the Red Shadow.

Guard 2: So would the general.

Man: Ah! [A downward motion of his hand shows disgust]

The scene ends with the man, Suzy, and mule entering the fortress compound.<sup>25</sup>

The coding in the film requires two levels of audience consciousness. Like the dual personalities of the lead character (“The Red Shadow” and Pierre), the comic relief presents overt and covert signals. Overtly, the man's German accent is quickly betrayed when he misspeaks English and French. He says, “vee Americans” and “English” with a clear wink-and-nod to his own foreignness. These words aside, traversing the Moroccan desert in a buttoned suit and necktie is ludicrously comical. Covertly, Hollywood insiders along with first- and second-generation Jewish immigrants could readily identify with the type. Such newcomers also were anxious to appear as “American.” As discussed

in *Fights of Nations*, immigrant men were often overdressed—or at least they are depicted as such. The word “shvartzes” substitutes for what should have been a reference to the black legionnaires as “guards.” Clearly this was “insider speak,” something common enough for urban audiences—presumably, some theatergoers might have thought “shvartzes” actually meant “guards.”

The black legionnaires stand in stark contrast to the times. Moreover, the English dialogue and that of one legionnaire speaking fluent French turn the tables on the usual servile or “Steppin’ Fetchit” role played by blacks in mainstream Hollywood films during the Golden Age. Indeed, this brief scene in *The Red Shadow* might appear with hindsight as a near apology for the late minstrelsy exploitation of *The Jazz Singer* and other early Jolson films. Future Warner Brothers releases in the 1930s showed their predilection for making social commentary. As a minor film on a double-feature bill, *The Red Shadow* was not going to attract much critical attention. But for all of its multicultural tension, the film does allow for a rare celluloid moment: the smartly uniformed blacks in the movie were bilingual, clean-shaven, and sharp. The use of the word “shvartzes” in both *The Red Shadow* and *Blazing Saddles* is a path to a wider racial and ethnic understanding. This certainly was true given segregated conditions in the 1930s and well past the Civil Rights era flanked by *Blazing Saddles*. But the word itself is spoken in an unthreatening, humorous context. Further use of the word in film today would be highly unlikely except in a period piece about American Jewish life. Lastly, the mule, while popularly used in the Middle East, can be seen as a humorous conveyance opposite the horse-riding Berber Riffs.

The post-World War II period brought many changes for Hollywood and Jewish subject matter. Hard-hitting films like *Crossfire* (Dymtryk, 1947) and *Gentlemen’s Agreement* (Kazan, 1947) made it impossible to ignore lingering social antisemitism.<sup>26</sup> There were also early Zionist films like *Sword in the Desert* (Sherman, 1949) and *The Juggler* (Dymtryk, 1953).<sup>27</sup> When *The Jazz Singer* (Curtiz, 1952) was remade starring Danny Thomas, the setting was a Philadelphia reform temple. To immediately lighten the film’s tone, a marker on the temple says it was built in 1776. Not only does this create a visual joke, but the assimilationist message was far removed from the original stage play and the later Jolson picture.<sup>28</sup>

From the late 1930s onward, countless Jewish celebrities were honored in biopics. But aside from *The Jolson Story* (Green, 1946), *Jolson Sings Again* (Levin, 1949), and *The Eddie Cantor Story* (Green, 1953), the lives of an array of Broadway composers and celebrities like Lillian Roth were basically devoid of a specifically Jewish angle.<sup>29</sup> By the end of the decade, the de-semitization

cycle broke with the release of *The Diary of Anne Frank* (Stevens, 1959). But here again, the very story was not humorous in any sense, though Ed Wynn as “Mr. Dussel” can be viewed as an attempt to resurrect the comic-relief figure.<sup>30</sup>

Whatever their limitations, biopics did present studios with opportunities to insert some restrained Jewish levity. These appeared in the 1950s, a time when assimilationist strategies for American Jews were in overdrive. Culturally and defensively, this theme was represented by both Will Herberg and mainstream Jewish organizations. Hasia Diner summarized Herberg’s philosophy: “Jews had remade themselves to fit the American ideal that said that people could differ in where and how they worshipped but should be pretty much the same in every other way.”<sup>31</sup> Arguing that Jews were much like Catholics and Protestants would pose challenges for those seeking to inject any kind of Jewish humor into film. Early television was slightly bolder by showcasing Milton Berle and Jerry Lewis on their own shows. Both Mel Brooks and Woody Allen were writing television scripts for Sid Caesar. Seen in this convergence of older media like film and radio, television loomed as a new world for Jewish possibilities.

With musicals in their last great popular phase, MGM cast Jose Ferrer as Broadway composer Sigmund Romberg in *Deep in My Heart* (Donen, 1954).<sup>32</sup> Basically, Romberg was made representative of all immigrants from the early twentieth century, not specifically Jewish ones. This was evidenced in the book *Deep in My Heart*, published by Elliott Arnold in 1949.<sup>33</sup> Romberg assisted the author with telling his fictional biography.<sup>34</sup> References to Jews are few and often indirect.<sup>35</sup> John Tibbetts argues that both the book and film were determined to “whiten” Romberg’s image for mainstream Americans.<sup>36</sup> This was not untypical for the time when films like *The Jazz Singer* remake emphasized assimilation and Jewish inclusiveness.

In his study of director Stanley Donen, Stephen Silverman wrote about *Deep in My Heart*, “The film follows the same sketchy biographical formula that comprised Metro’s lavishly dressed but substantively naked composers series.” He notes the studio’s following the well-worn path of applying “white-wash” on biopics. Thus Romberg’s reasons for leaving Austria-Hungary are never mentioned. The antisemitism of pre-World War I Vienna is ignored, and the film’s opening scene shows Romberg entering a Lower East Side café. Obvious Jewishness is totally excised and leaves the composer as purely Hungarian-cum-Viennese. Nor is there any reference to his first marriage and divorce. In fact, his second wife, Lillian Harris, is erroneously presented as the only romantic interest he ever had.<sup>37</sup> Silverman said that, in the MGM films, “the life of the musician at hand was used merely as an atrophied skeleton on

which to hang theatrical musical numbers culled from the composer's formidable war chest."<sup>38</sup>

The final scene in the film has Romberg conducting a concert at Carnegie Hall. While dressed in a penguin-tails tux, Romberg shed none of his outward Old World, immigrant ways. This was the classic rags-to-riches story. He alternates between "hamming it up" and seriousness. Screenwriter Leonard Spiegelgass carefully avoided giving him too many clichés. The monologue toward the end is pure self-deprecation, a humor form patented by Jack Benny, Woody Allen, and a host of Borscht Belt comics such as Buddy Hackett, Alan King, and Rodney Dangerfield. The scene is amusing and punctuated with laughter. Yet, Romberg easily and earnestly moves from jokes toward the sentimentality long associated with his music and personal appearances.

Scene: Stage center at Carnegie Hall.

Romberg [Holding a baton]: Just a minute ladies and gentlemen—Like my friend Al Jolson once said, "Nothing you ain't heard yet." [Laughter. Romberg walks across the stage.] You know, tonight I learned something about conducting a symphony orchestra. Only three things are important: First, you must give the musicians a downbeat.—So. [Laughter. Romberg motions with baton in his right arm a downbeat.] Second, you must not disturb the musicians while they are playing. Third, you must be very careful to stop conducting at precisely the same instant they stop playing so everything comes out nice and easy. [Laughter] With Bruno Walter is it easy. With Toscanini it is a joy. With me, it is a miracle. [Laughter] Tonight, who should I kid? Tomorrow one critic will say that I'm corny. Another critic will say I that am schmaltzy. The jitterbugs will say that I am high brow—the Wagnerians will say I am low brow. [Cutaway shot to wing shot of Romberg's wife shaking her head sideways.] High brow, low brow—what I really am is a middle brow. [Laughter. Romberg ends his smiling.] What has come out of my head and my fingers is mostly, I think music to make people love each other. To make them dream of the way it was—to make them hope for the way it will be. So shall we have some more love and dreams and hopes? [Applause]<sup>39</sup>

Whatever else, Romberg amused his audiences in the 1940s and early 1950s with his mocking style. This humility suggested he did not take himself too seriously. Romberg wrote about this himself in Arnold's book. Ferrer's lines could be considered stereotypical immigrant banter in many ways. MGM made sure these and other malapropisms or "Romyisms" remained in the script. This included his misspeaking Jolson's line from *The Jazz Singer*, "You ain't heard nothin' yet."<sup>40</sup> Perhaps most noteworthy is the film's complete

retention of Romberg's triumphant success story, while masking his Jewishness with good-humored Hungarian charm.

*The Benny Goodman Story* (Davies, 1956) is another example of assimilation.<sup>41</sup> The first part of the film covers young Goodman's early life and career. The balance of the plot involves socialite Alice Hamilton's romance with the famous bandleader. She runs up against an iron wall: Mama Goodman (and that is how she is listed in the film credits). Much as Jolson's cantor father in *The Jazz Singer* insists that his son continue the family's cantorial tradition, Benny Goodman's mother stands firmly against intermarriage. In this scene, a cutting line denotes a shred of ethnic reference; clearly, it suggests cynical humor. Donna Reed (Alice Hammond) and Berta Gersten (Mama Goodman) ploughed their way through this sometimes painful dialogue.

Scene: Interior of a modern living room. Alice and Mrs. Goodman (seen knitting).

Alice: I hoped you could help me. Benny wants to marry me. He's been on the verge of asking me.

Mrs. Goodman: If he wants to ask you, why doesn't he?

Alice: I thought you might be able to tell me.

Mrs. Goodman: You're a nice girl Alice. You'll make some man a good wife, but not my Benny.

Alice: Why not, Mrs. Goodman?

Mrs. Goodman: Because you don't mix caviar with bagels, that's why. [Sighs] Always I was hoping Benny settles down, finds the right girl, but . . .

Alice: How do you know he hasn't? I love him Mrs. Goodman. What possible motive could I have except to make him happy? Don't you think I could do that?

Mrs. Goodman: You're young yet, Alice—so is Benny. Happiness is easy to talk, it's not so easy to live. You'll find this out some day. Only when you do, it's too late.<sup>42</sup>

Mrs. Goodman with her metaphors might not mix caviar with bagels, but she does make a biting point. With *The Goldbergs* transition from radio-to-TV sitcom by mid-decade, the average American audience could appreciate this moment. The preachy, defensive mother will eventually yield to her son and sit with Alice in his Carnegie Hall audience for the finale. This conclusion was identical to the one seen in *The Jazz Singer*. Both Mrs. Rabinowitz and Mrs. Goodman are accompanied by gentle girlfriends as they watch their sons perform. The message is unmistakable: assimilation overcomes romantic obstacles. Today, Mrs. Goodman's line would be quaintly out of place—especially when weighed against Woody Allen films where getting a *shiksa* [non-Jewish

woman] is akin to winning a prized trophy. Allen's obsessive style virtually made interfaith romance into a cinematic social norm.

Jewish humor can also mask the Jewish social condition. Jose Ferrer as Romberg turned from delivering a few jokes and could then talk from his heart. He speaks of his music conveying dreams about "the way it was and hope for the way it will be."<sup>43</sup> He urged his audiences to keep their loves and dreams and hopes. Musicologist William Everett argues how Romberg recreated nostalgia in his most famous shows. However much Romberg hoped for a world free from antisemitism and war, there were no perfect utopias in the 1950s. By contrast, Donald Weber questions the disabling nature of nostalgia, which clearly is so much a part of Jewish-themed films like *Radio Days* (Allen, 1987), *Avalon* (Levinson, 1990), and a more recent film like *A Serious Man* (Coen and Coen, 2009)—all of these movies play with differing periods of the American Jewish past.

Occasionally, nostalgia and acerbic humor can be welded together as in *Fiddler on the Roof* (Jewison, 1971). Weber candidly personalizes his study on Jewish popular culture, not as an expression of mourning for what was lost, but as "a way of re-viewing, of feeling the world of my father (and mother, aunts and uncles): to draw near their old (Bronx and Cleveland worlds), in order to negotiate better the complex and (at times) bewildering Jewish American dilemma of my own."<sup>44</sup>

The final thoughts in this survey come from David Desser and Lester Friedman on American Jewish filmmakers: "Most American Jews identify with cultural traditions rather than with religious adherence."<sup>45</sup> Some filmmakers draw the line on humorizing Judaism at its religious core, perhaps a lingering reminder of what the old Hays Production Code promulgated about respecting all faiths and clergy. But more than likely, the old humor will die hard. *Keeping the Faith* (Norton, 2000) paralleled the story of *Abie's Irish Rose*, all film versions of *The Jazz Singer*, and *The Benny Goodman Story*, except that it makes a complete reversal: the gentile girl assimilates by converting to Judaism so she can marry a rabbi.<sup>46</sup> Mel Brooks, Woody Allen, and their colleagues have been mining this exploitive trail for over forty years. Reliably, they and others can be expected to conjure up other cinematic ways to make us laugh at ourselves and with ourselves.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Michael Alexander, *Jazz Age Jews* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001); Sarah Blacher Cohen, ed., *From Hester Street to Hollywood: The Jewish-American Stage and Screen* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1983); Lawrence J. Epstein, *The Haunted Smile: The Story of Jewish Comedians in America* (New York:



Public Affairs, 2001); Patricia Erens, *The Jew in American Cinema* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1984); Lester D. Friedman, *Hollywood's Image of the Jew* (New York: Frederick Unger, 1982); Jack Gottlieb, *Funny, It Doesn't Sound Jewish: How Yiddish Songs and Synagogue Melodies Influenced Tin Pan Alley, Broadway, and Hollywood* (Albany: State University of New York/The Library of Congress, 2004); Jack Kugelmass, ed., *Key Texts in American Jewish Culture* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2003); Andrea Most, *Making Americans: Jews and the Broadway Musical* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003); Michael Rogin, *Blackface, White Noise: Jewish Immigrants in the Hollywood Melting Pot* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996); Donald Weber, *Haunted in the New World: Jewish American Culture from Cahan to the Goldbergs* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005); Stephen J. Whitfield, *In Search of American Jewish Culture* (Hanover: University of New England Press, 1999).

<sup>2</sup> Armond Fields and L. Marc Fields, *From the Bowery to Broadway: Lew Fields and the Roots of American Popular Theater* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993); Herbert Goldman, *Banjo Eyes: Eddie Cantor and the Birth of Modern Stardom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 307.

<sup>3</sup> *Fights of Nations* (American Mutoscope and Biograph Company/The Library of Congress, 1907).

<sup>4</sup> Simcha Jacobovici, *Hollywoodism: Jews, Movies and the American Dream*, (Arts and Entertainment Channel, 1998).

<sup>5</sup> Leonard Dinnerstein, *Antisemitism in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 68.

<sup>6</sup> Robert L. Carringer, ed., *The Jazz Singer* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1979).

<sup>7</sup> J. Hoberman and Jeffrey Schandler, *Entertaining America: Jews, Movies, and Broadcasting* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 85.

<sup>8</sup> George Jessel with John Austin, *The World I Live In* (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1975), 67-68.

<sup>9</sup> Weber, *Haunted in the New World*, 62.

<sup>10</sup> Carringer, *Jazz Singer*, 11.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> Eric L. Goldstein, *The Price of Whiteness: Jews, Race, and American Identity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 138-39.

<sup>13</sup> Alan Crosland, *The Jazz Singer* (Warner Brothers/Vitaphone, 1927), Warner Home Video, DVD 2007.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*; Carringer, *Jazz Singer*, 61, 63, 120. In the original scene scripted by Alfred Cohn, this copy appears: "62 Full Shot Room—As the cantor resumes his pacing, Sara hears someone at the door and goes to it, instead of the expected Jakie, an excited Yudelson. The cantor turns around in surprise. Yudelson rushes up to him and starts telling him about seeing Jakie singing nigger songs in Muller's. The cantor throws his arms up in horror. Yudelson nods grimly but in a satisfied manner." The fact that Warner Brothers changed the intertitle from the scripted word "nigger" to "raggy-time" certainly downplayed racial connotations. In all likelihood, the word "schvartze" and not "nigger" was initially used but deleted because too many audiences would not have known what it meant. Other changes likewise changed the racial references. In scene 77,

the script read, “The cantor glares down at the boy who stops squirming. He tightens his grip on him as he repeats over and over: ‘Singing nigger songs in a beer garden! You bummer! You no good lowlife!’ As Sara tries to intercede, the cantor silences her almost roughly. As he half pushes her away he says, ‘I’ll teach him he shall never use his voice for such low things.’” Later in the script, scene 326 had a line from Yudelson, “It talks like Jackie, but it looks like a nigger.” Thus in each racial reference, either Yudelson speaks the line or encourages the cantor in such word usage. Whatever else, none of the racial references in the original scripted scenes was humorous.

<sup>15</sup> Friedman, *Hollywood’s Image*, 66.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> Norman Taurog, *Words and Music* (MGM, 1949), Warner HomeVideo, DVD 2007.

<sup>18</sup> Mel Brooks, *Blazing Saddles* (Warner Brothers, 1974), Warner Home Video, DVD 2004.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> Roy Del Ruth, *The Desert Song* (Warner Brothers/Vitaphone, 1929), Nostalgia Family Video, VHS, 1996.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*; Richard Barrios, *A Song in the Dark: The Birth of the Musical Film* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 394; Richard Barrios, *Screened Out: Playing Gay in Hollywood from Edison to Stonewall* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 40–41.

<sup>23</sup> Barrios, *A Song in the Dark*, 93.

<sup>24</sup> Roy Mack, *The Red Shadow* (Warner Brothers/Vitaphone, 1932), Turner Classic Movies Channel.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> Edward Dymtryk, *Crossfire* (RKO, 1947), Turner Home Entertainment, DVD 2005; Elia Kazan, *Gentlemen’s Agreement* (20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox, 1947), 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox Home Video, DVD 2003.

<sup>27</sup> Edward Dymtryk, *The Juggler* (Columbia Pictures, 1953); George Sherman, *The Sword in the Desert* (Universal Pictures, 1949).

<sup>28</sup> Michael Curtiz, *The Jazz Singer* (Warner Brothers, 1953), Warner Archive Collection, DVD 2010.

<sup>29</sup> Alfred E. Green, *The Jolson Story* (Columbia Pictures, 1946), Sony Pictures Home Video DVD 2003; Henry Levin, *Jolson Sings Again* (Columbia Pictures, 1949), Sony Pictures Home Video, DVD 2003; Alfred E. Green, *The Eddie Cantor Story* (Warner Brothers, 1953); Warner Archive Collection, DVD 2010; Daniel Mann, *I’ll Cry Tomorrow* (MGM, 1955), Warner Home Video, DVD 2007.

<sup>30</sup> George Stevens, *The Diary of Anne Frank* (20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox, 1959), 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox Home Video, DVD 2009.

<sup>31</sup> Will Herberg, *Protestant, Catholic, Jew* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1960); Hasia R. Diner, *A New Promised Land: A History of the Jews in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 104.

<sup>32</sup> Stanley Donen, *Deep in My Heart* (MGM, 1954), Warner Home Video, DVD 2008.

<sup>33</sup> Elliott Arnold, *Deep in My Heart: A Story Based on the Life of Sigmund Romberg* (New York: Duell, Sloan and Pearce, 1949).

<sup>34</sup> William A. Everett, *Sigmund Romberg* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 13.

<sup>35</sup> Arnold, *Deep in My Heart*, 180 and 191 (direct Jewish references) and 412 (indirect Jewish reference to musicians fleeing Hitler's terror).

<sup>36</sup> John C. Tibbetts, *Composers in the Movies* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 121.

<sup>37</sup> Romberg was married to Eugenie Erb from 1912-1924, a fact conveniently left out of the film. Any inclusion of such an earlier relationship would have upset mid-twentieth century notions of marriage and divorce. News of Mrs. Romberg's filing (1923) and later consent decree (1925) was public. But the actual reasons for it were sealed by the New York State Supreme Court. For scholarly purposes, the author petitioned the court to unseal these documents (*Michael W. Rubinoff against New York County Clerk*, June 27, 2007, Index No. 108905/07). The court sustained the author's motion on September 18, 2007; thus all documents were subsequently released and copied.

<sup>38</sup> Stephen M. Silverman, *Dancing on the Ceiling: Stanley Donen and His Movies* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1996), 200.

<sup>39</sup> Donen, *Deep in My Heart*.

<sup>40</sup> Crosland, *The Jazz Singer*.

<sup>41</sup> Valentine Davies, *The Benny Goodman Story* (Universal Pictures, 1956); Universal Studios Home Video, DVD 2003.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Donen, *Deep in My Heart*.

<sup>44</sup> Weber, *Haunted in the New World*, 195.

<sup>45</sup> David Desser and Lester D. Friedman, *American Jewish Filmmakers* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.; Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 33.

<sup>46</sup> Edward Norton, *Keeping the Faith* (Touchstone Pictures, 2000), Touchstone Home Video, DVD 2000; Crosland, *The Jazz Singer*; Curtiz, *The Jazz Singer*; Richard Fleischer, *The Jazz Singer* (Associated Film Distribution, 1980), Starz/Anchor Bay Video, DVD 2009.

# The Bad Girls of Jewish Comedy: Gender, Class, Assimilation, and Whiteness in Postwar America

Giovanna P. Del Negro

In the late 1950s and early 1960s, the bawdy humor of Belle Barth, Pearl Williams, and Patsy Abbott, a trio of working-class Jewish stand-up comics, enjoyed enormous popularity in the United States. Today largely forgotten or dismissed, they released bestselling LPs known at the time as “party records,” which, though intended for respectable, middle-class consumers, were often sold under the counter and banned from radio airplay. With their earthy, old-world sensibility and strategic use of Yiddish, these middle-aged performers railed against societal mores that told them to be quiet, well behaved, and sexually passive. During the period in which these comics flourished, many working-class Jews experienced upward mobility and suburbanization, acceptance as racial whites, and substantial pressures to assimilate into mainstream American culture. This essay explores the ways these comics placed Jewish identity and highly sexual subject matter at the center of their humor and, in so doing, negotiated issues of gender, Jewish ethnicity, class, and whiteness in the 1950s.

In their heyday, the albums that these comics recorded proved enormously popular with American audiences across the country. Belle Barth, who released eleven LPs with sexually suggestive titles such as *If I Embarrass You, Tell Your Friends*; *I Don't Mean to Be Vulgar, But It's Profitable* and *This Next Story Is a Little Risqué* reportedly sold two million records in her career, while Pearl Williams, who released seven albums including *A Trip around the World Is Not a Cruise*, *Bagels and Lox*, and *Pearl Williams Goes All the Way*, sold over a million copies—or even more, given the recording companies' habit of undercounting sales in order to avoid paying taxes and sharing profits with artists.<sup>1</sup> The least prolific of the cohort, Patsy Abbott, recorded only two albums, *Suck Up, Your Behind* and *Have I Had You Before*.<sup>2</sup> By the conservative estimates of critic Michael Bronski, “the three performers may have released . . . more than five million records.”<sup>3</sup> At the peak of their careers, these comedienne played to sold-out crowds in the nation's top venues. Barth headlined at Carnegie Hall, Caesar's Palace, and El Morocco and owned her own club, named Belle Barth's Pub. Williams, who commanded a \$7,500 weekly salary, regularly

performed at luxury hotels and swanky clubs like the Foutainebleau, Maxine's, the Hotel Windsor, Chez Paris, and Place Pigalle.<sup>4</sup> After a successful run as a comedic singer on the stage and in the club circuit around the country, in 1958 Abbott opened her own establishment, Patsy's Place.

The trio performed regularly across the United States and Canada during the first decades of their careers, but audiences in the 1960s associated them most closely with Miami, and their success in this city was directly tied to the social transformations of Jewish American life that occurred after World War II. During this period, over 100,000 Jews migrated to Miami, which they jokingly dubbed the "Southern Borscht Belt"; many more went there for their holidays.<sup>5</sup> In Florida's tourism capital, the trio found lucrative work catering to vacationing Jewish suburbanites, retired Jewish snowbirds, and transplanted second- and third-generation Jews who nostalgically longed for the homes that they had left behind.

It was not only their nightclub performances that linked the trio to these social transformations; the emerging genre of the party album did so as well. After the war, an increasing number of returning Jewish servicemen with specialized skills in technical fields or management moved to the suburbs. Transmitting the sounds, images, and narratives of the older, working-class Jewish culture directly into the new suburban living rooms, the party albums that many of these recently married ex-soldiers enjoyed offered fresh representations of Jewishness and American life. The listeners were far away from the ethnic enclaves of their childhood, and many found in these albums a way of feeling connected to their old community. Played in the home but during social situations that were not fully private, these albums encouraged their audiences to think about the cultural transitions between the ethnic and the mainstream, the urban and the suburban, the public and the private. Thus, on the nightclub stage or the living room stereo, the humor of Barth, Williams, and Abbott addressed conflicting attitudes about gender, sex, intergroup relations, and the politics of whiteness and ethnic integration in post-World War II American society.

## BELLE BARTH

Although not as widely recognized as other female comics of her era, Barth had an enormous influence on the stand-up comics who followed her. According to Linda Martin and Kerry Seagrave, she was the "first to use the format of short jokes, as opposed to the monologues of [Beatrice] Herford and [Ruth] Draper."<sup>6</sup> Born Annabelle Salzman in New York City in 1911, Barth, who took her first husband's name, started her career doing imitations of "Al Jolson,

George Jessel, and ‘devastatingly funny take-offs’ of strippers Lili St. Cyr and Gypsy Rose Lee.<sup>7</sup> She grew progressively raunchier from the 1930s onward, doing more and more risqué songs and X-rated material. Called the female Lenny Bruce, even though she preceded him, Barth periodically battled the obscenity laws in court. Banned from radio and television, she spent most of her career performing in nightclubs and hotels, until her death in 1971.

In many ways the bawdy and irreverent Barth emulated the style and attitude of the female vaudeville performers she had seen at the B. F. Keith Theater while growing up in East Harlem during the 1920s. Dubbed the “Hildegard of the Underworld” and the “Doyenne of the Dirty Ditty,” Barth played the piano and sang in a gravelly voice. Mixing the red-hot mama style of performers like Sophie Tucker with that of more demure entertainers like Carol Channing, she often punctuated her sexually explicit jokes with a child-like manner of speech reminiscent of Betty Boop.<sup>8</sup> Barth’s live LPs featured scatological and sexual jokes and covered topics like hemorrhoids, rectal exams, baby’s feces, douching, masturbation, and intercourse. Excerpts from her party album *I Don’t Mean to Be Vulgar, But It’s Profitable* give an idea of the style and content of her comedy. Describing the mayhem that ensues when a kosher chicken is snuck into the movies, Barth said:

There was a woman, she was so kosher that she didn’t trust the cook in the kitchen. She sent her husband to a poultry market to bring her a live chicken. She wanted to kill it herself. On the way to the kitchen, he puts it under his arm, then he wanted to go to the movies, so he stuck it in his pants. You know, the chicken had to breathe. Two women sat next to him. One nudged the other, she said, “Sadie, what’s doing?” Sadie, referring to the bulge in his pants says, “What are you so nervous. You’ve seen one, you’ve seen them all.” The other says, “But this one is eating my potato chips.”

In another joke from the same LP, an unfortunate hunting accident turns even more absurd by the medical advice given to the victim.

Here is a story about two men who went hunting. One was [a] little cross-eyed hunter. Shotgun went off, hit the guy in the *citriolle*—it’s Italian for cucumber. He had nine holes in it. He ran to the doctor. The doctor got scared and says, “I think I’ll send you to Schwartz.” The guy says, “Who’s Schwartz, a specialist?” Doctor says, “No, he’s a piccolo player, who’ll show you how to finger it.”

In material such as this, Barth transgressed the boundaries of female decorum, performing the kind of absurd, sexual gags usually reserved for male comics, and Jewish identity is introduced with a light and skilled touch. In the chicken joke, Jewish dietary laws provided the impetus that set the comic situation in motion. Likewise, Barth allowed the hunter joke to subtly reference the ten-

sions surrounding ethnic upward mobility by making Schwartz, who bore an iconically Jewish name, appear to have the high status profession of a medical specialist, when in fact he was a lowly musician.

Although Barth filled her comedic repertoire with absurdly sexual or scatological jokes, such as the line about the precocious child who complains about having to “share a breast with a cigar smoker,” she interspersed her bawdy routines with material that directly confronted issues of discrimination and assimilation. In *I Don't Mean to Be Vulgar, But It's Profitable*, she said:

[This is a story] about the Jewish man who wanted to check into the Kennelberry [Kennelworth] Hotel in Miami Beach, and the clerk says, “It's restricted.” The guy says, [with Yiddish accent] “Who's a Jew?” “If you're not a Jew, you wouldn't mind answering three questions,” the guy says. “Fire away.” [The clerk] said, “Who was our Lord?” He says, “Jesus Christ.” “Where was He born?” “In a stable.” “Why was he born in a stable?” He says, “Because a rat bastard like you wouldn't rent him a room.”

Barth then continued, “Think if I get a nose job, I can work in the Kennelworth?” On the album, the nightclub's live audience applauded aggressively at the remark and one fan replied, “Touché.” Barth added, “You know what kills me, the rich Jews never know what I'm talking about [with that joke]. Yeah, you want to hear that, go to Miami Beach. ‘Very wealthy,’ she [a rich Jew, with a Yiddish accent] says. ‘I'm very sorry, I don't know what you're talking [about].’ I says, ‘Where did you get the accent?’ She [the rich Jew] says, ‘I travel.’”

Here, Barth relayed an unambiguous commentary on the cultural amnesia to which some upwardly mobile Jews had succumbed: even as she attacked the antisemitism of the day, she skewered those wealthy Jews who eagerly abandoned their immigrant past. In this bit, she develops a wealthy Jewish character who has tried to obscure her working-class roots. Her accent, this woman claims, does not come from something as lowly as immigration, long a mark of marginalization for diasporized Jews, but from the archetypal form of leisure-class activity, tourism.

## PEARL WILLIAMS

The daughter of a Russian immigrant tailor, Pearl Williams (née Pearl Wolfe) was born in 1914 in the Lower East Side of Manhattan. A former legal stenographer, she developed into an aggressive, zaftig, husky-voiced, piano-playing comic with a penchant for double entendres and naughty stories.<sup>9</sup> According to *Miami Herald* reporter Andres S. Viglucchi, the twenty-three-year-old Williams, who at the time had aspirations of becoming a lawyer, unexpectedly got

a very different big break in 1938 during her lunch hour, when she played piano for her friend's singing audition. The agent was apparently so taken with her musical talent that he hired her on the spot, and "that same night she went on stage at the Famous Door, on 53rd Street, opposite Louis Prima's Band."<sup>10</sup> Although she had no intention of going into show business, the \$50 weekly salary paid her to perform was almost three times higher than what she earned as a legal secretary. Williams, who came from a poor family, found the lucrative pay too attractive to turn down.<sup>11</sup>

Williams eventually graduated from performing at Maxine's in the Bronx to headlining at the Aladdin and the Castaway Hotel in Las Vegas, as well as in numerous clubs in Detroit, Chicago, Toronto, and Montreal. After regularly doing winter gigs in Miami, Williams eventually bought a home in North Beach Miami; there, she spent the last eighteen years of her career as the main attraction performing to houses packed with busloads of Jewish retirees from nearby condos.<sup>12</sup> After forty-six years of nonstop entertainment, Williams finally retired at age seventy, and she died in 1991 following a battle with heart disease.

Williams's repertoire of jokes ran the gamut from tame to risqué to sexually explicit, and in many of her albums, mild one-liners existed directly alongside X-rated material. Like Barth, Williams broached topics not permitted on television: breasts, pubic hair, ejaculation, douches, *knish* [vagina], *shlong* [penis], and cunnilingus. Deftly appropriating and inverting the canonical wife joke genre so common among male Catskill comics of the period, Williams often made the man the butt of her humor. In *A Trip around the World Is Not a Cruise*, she nonchalantly said, "There's a woman ironing her brassiere, and her husband says, 'What the hell are you ironing that for. You don't have anything to put in it.' The wife replies, 'I iron your shorts, don't I!'"

At her raunchiest, Williams could compete with any male comedian: in *Second Trip around the World*, she says, "Did you hear about the broad who walked into a hardware store to buy a hinge and the clerk says, 'Madame, would you like a screw for this hinge,' and she says, 'No, but I'd blow you for the toaster up there.'"<sup>13</sup> In her album *A Trip around the World Is Not a Cruise*, she joked, "Tonight I think I'll go home and douche with Crest. It will reduce my cavity by forty percent." Touting the sexual prowess of French-Canadian men in *Bagels and Lox*, she said, "Are[n't] those French-Canadian men gorgeous? They're the only guys who know what your belly is for. That's where they leave their gum on the way down. Oh that's nothing, then they put ice in your knish; they eat you on the rocks."

In performance, Williams typically underscored her punch lines with brief piano interludes and hummed recognizable tunes, such as "Hava Nag-



ila.” Her racier anecdotes, however, were ironically demarcated by demure sighs and a nasal, almost innocent laugh. Indeed, her ironic sentimentality and melodramatic interpretations of standard Jewish popular songs, obscene puns, and energetic musical interludes capitalized richly on her “hyphenated” Jewish American identity and the broad humor of the 1930s Yiddish theater and Borscht Belt *tumblers* [social directors]. Her comedic toolkit contained a number of “definition” jokes (“Definition of indecent? If it’s long enough, hard enough, far enough, then it’s in decent”) and sexually suggestive rhymes (“[sings] By the sea, by the sea [C-]U-N-T”).<sup>14</sup>

Williams filled her comic narratives with frustrated Jewish characters who would speak with thick accents and joyfully mete out their own brand of social justice. One bit in *Second Trip around the World* begins with a Jewish character who makes a long-distance phone call:

All of sudden, in the middle of his conversation—he’s talkin’ about a half a minute—he’s cut off. [Yiddish accent] “Hello operator, give me back the party.” She says, “I’m sorry sir, you’ll have to make the call over again.” [He says], “Operator, I’m entitled to three minutes. I was only talkin’ half a minute. Give me back the party.” She says, “I’m sorry, sir, you’ll have to make the call all over again.” He says, “Operator, what do you want for my life? . . . I got no money, I’m broke, give me back the party.” She says, “I’m sorry, sir, you’ll have to make the call over again.” He says, “Operator, you know what, take the telephone and shove it you know where,” and he hangs up.

Later, two large men from the phone company arrive and tell him that they will take away his phone if he does not call and apologize to the operator. He makes the call, saying:

“Give me Operator 28. Hello operator, remember me? Two days ago I insulted you. I told you, take the telephone.” And she says, “Yeah.” He says, “Well get ready. They’re bringin’ it to you.”

For middle-aged Jews in the 1950s, this comic narrative of working-class resistance would resonate with the well-known “Cohen” albums, a hugely popular series of comedy records released by Joe Hayman in the 1910s and 1920s. In Williams’s routine, the Jew’s frustration is transformed into retribution, and the shame of accented English becomes an auditory icon of toughness and guile.

Gentile oppressors often took the form of belligerent Texans in Williams’s stories, and these aptly illustrate the aggressive style of comedy with which the cohort became associated. In one story from *Second Trip around the World*, an exhausted Jewish traveling salesman is lucky enough to get the last room in a hotel. Shortly thereafter, a large Texan man bullies him into giving up the

room. As the Jew leaves the hotel lobby, he swears that he will get his vengeance. The next day, the Texan wakes up

with a big heavy load on his chest. He takes a look. There's a manhole [cover] on his chest. He starts laughing and says, "Ah the little Jew wanted to get even with me." Gets up out of bed, picks up the manhole cover, walks up over to the window of the twenty-second floor, flings it out of the window. He's walking back to the bed, laughing. He gets back to the bed. There's a big note waiting for him on the bed. It says, "And now, you big bastard, you have fifteen seconds to untie the cord that's attached to your *beardzall* [testicles]."

As she did with the "Operator 28" narrative, Williams drew on well-known comic stereotypes to symbolically invert the power relations of American society. Here, the hulking Texan stands for the arrogance of mainstream white America, and the marginalized figure of the scrawny Jew uses cunning to outwit and emasculate him.

### PATSY ABBOTT

Raised in the Bronx, Patsy Abbott, née Goldie Schwartz, was born in 1921 and started her career as a vocalist with the Teddy King Orchestra. Journalist Gail Meadows reports that Abbott credited her training to the time she spent at the Catskills resorts, where entertainers presented fresh shows every night. Early in her career, she "sang popular songs to tourists, gamblers, and mobsters" at the Paddock Club in New York, and she performed for the military with the USO during the war.<sup>15</sup> Although her costarring role in the hit musical *The Borscht Capades* made her the hit of Broadway in 1951, a series of illnesses abruptly cut short her rise to stardom. While she recuperated in Miami, she started doing one-woman shows at resort hotels, and eventually she decided to purchase her own nightclub, which she named Patsy's Place and which she ran from 1958 to 1965. After suffering two strokes, Abbott finally retired from show business, but she continued to work locally as a theatrical coach. In 1988, "she wowed the crowds again with [the show] 'The Golden Girls of Music and Comedy' . . . which became the longest, continuously running musical revue in South Florida's history."<sup>16</sup> She died at the Miami Jewish Home and Hospital in 2001, days before she was to stage a show with fellow residents.

Both *Have I Had You Before* and *Suck Up, Your Behind* captured the comedienne's ear for dialects, impromptu flair for a salty line, and gusto for singing lighthearted, lusty musical numbers. In her stage act, Abbott warmly dispensed philosophical wisdoms in a faux high-class voice and showed off her sparkling evening gowns. She would frequently ask young married couples

embarrassing questions. In her first party album, recorded live at Patsy's Place, she asked a bride, "How long have you been married?" The woman replied, "A week." "May I ask you a personal question?" Abbott then asked, "Is it nice?" and, when the woman answered, "Yes," Abbott asked, "What do you have to compare it to?"

Her jokes dealt with married couples lacking in sexual excitement, with the limitations imposed by Jewish holidays, with infidelity, with birth control.<sup>17</sup> She discusses marital boredom in *Have I Had You Before*, "There's a couple married for fifteen years. . . . Wedded boredom—but you know, bored or not you got to make hay. Comes time to make hay, and they're in bed, one hour. Nothing happens. Finally she looks at him and says, 'What happened, you can't think of anybody either?'"

Commenting on Jewish strictures on marriage in *Have I Had You Before*, Abbott said:

In [the] Jewish religion, you can't get married when you want to, right? See, you just go through the holiday. They got you by the holidays. Now they just go through *Tishabov*. That holiday you can't get married. And you can't go swimming. It's ridiculous that you can't get married, and you can't get wet. It is. Then you have a holiday like *Pesach* and *Shavues* where you can't get married, and you can't have any music played. And you can't get married without an organ. And if you're not Jewish, darling, it's Lent, right, and you can't get married. You gotta borrow somebody else's. That's why they got you by the holiday.

Insinuating the topic of sex into a discussion of religious holiday practices was indeed quite taboo, and Abbott's elegant demeanor and highbrow accent made the candid treatment of earthy bodily pleasures particularly amusing.

Abbott's routines conjured up a plethora of recognizable Jewish characters, ones who uttered malapropisms or told cautionary tales about counting their blessings, even in times of economic hardship. The following story from *Suck Up, Your Behind* calls to mind the Jewish stock character of the kvetch, or complainer:

People are complaining with two loaves of bread under one arm. I hear a man goes to temple every single day, and he's praying to God, and he says [in a Yiddish accent], "God, I'm here every day. Every day, I'm here. I know you by your first name. God. Got no second name. Every day, I'm here. I want you to know I don't have a job, and my children starving, and my wife is sick. But I don't mind, mind you. I don't mind, mind you. But why you see Feldman down the street who doesn't go to temple, don't go to church. He's gotta a mansion, with a Cadillac, with a Jaguar, [stuttering] hees wife with minks, with

chinchillas. Why he got? Why I ain't got? Why? Why? Why should he have when I ain't got? Why? Tell me why!" All of sudden there is bolt of lighting and the voice out of the blue says, "'Cause your *nudging* me. That means you bug me, man."<sup>18</sup>

Like many of the trio's stories, this joke follows the long tradition of what folklorists refer to as "dialect jokes." Just as such humor may reflect immigrant anxiety about language use and social exclusion, it may also allow third- and fourth-generation ethnics to emphasize their own social mobility and distance themselves from those of the older generation who were less assimilated.<sup>19</sup> The joke quoted is a particularly striking example of the genre; inverting the traditional stigma associated with the Yiddish-accented kvetch, the joke sets the heavily accented speaker as a traditional loser, only to reveal that the English of God himself is peppered with hip Yiddishisms.

\* \* \*

In the smoke-filled nightclubs of the late, late show, Barth, Williams, and Abbott spoke candidly about sex, cursed in Yiddish, and openly criticized what they saw as the hypocritical values of bourgeois culture. These tough women with working-class roots not only condemned the oppressive gender ideologies of the 1950s but also highlighted the growing tensions that existed both within the Jewish community and between Jews and non-Jews. The trio's bawdy party records offered the consumers of suburban America an opportunity to enjoy the exciting, uncensored atmosphere of the nightclub while safely ensconced in the privacy of their own living rooms. The recordings represented an alternative to mainstream forms of entertainment, which seldom acknowledged the existence of conflicting attitudes toward gender, sex, and intergroup relations or touched on the politics of ethnic integration. In some ways, these comics can be seen as enacting their ethnic difference for a mass market and helping to make Jewishness more assimilable for non-Jews. But at this transitional moment when Jews found themselves accepted in the American mainstream, these performances of esoteric knowledge also served to reaffirm ethnic boundaries. They cautioned Jews to resist the tide of cultural assimilation and not to fall victim to a false sense of security.

During the period after World War II, Jews saw both upward class mobility and a redefinition of the nature of their identity as white ethnics. As Mathew Frye Jacobson has shown, Jews and southern Europeans were, over time, increasingly seen by mainstream Americans as racial whites marked by a distinctive, nonmainstream ethnicity or religion, rather than as a racial group "less white" than Americans of English descent yet "more white" than African Americans, Native Americans, or Asian Americans.<sup>20</sup> This shift was directly

tied to changes in large-scale American institutions. Before the outbreak of World War II, Franklin Roosevelt's notion of inclusive nationalism allowed Jews to begin to gain admittance into the public sector and government, and the growing antisemitism of the period led Jews to question race-based definitions of Jewish character.<sup>21</sup> With the reduction of restrictive admission policies in universities and increased entrance into merit- and exam-based professions such as teaching, medicine, and law, Jews entered the middle class in ever greater numbers.

As Karen Brodtkin Sacks observes, the "whitening" of Jews continued after World War II; for example, federal assistance programs offered returning Jewish veterans cheap home mortgages, and the GI Bill allowed them to pursue higher education and thus to develop expertise in specialized occupations from which they had been barred and which were in great demand after the war.<sup>22</sup> Although these government programs may seem to speak to issues of class rather than of race and ethnicity, the pervasive discrimination of the day guaranteed the linkage of these forms of identity. African Americans continued to experience exclusion in housing, education, and employment, while such barriers began to fall for Jews. As a result, Jews saw new opportunities for upward mobility that were unavailable to other nonwhite groups, and with this upward mobility came a new sociopolitical climate, reinforcing the definition of Jews as an ethnic rather than a racial group.

Although the comics did not often explicitly discuss race in their routines, we would be projecting contemporary notions of race onto 1950s America if we understood the intergroup politics of the trio's humor strictly in terms of class and ethnicity. In a period in which notions of race were being contested, the trio and their audience, I suggest, were negotiating whiteness whenever ethnicity and class were on the table.

This is not to say, of course, that class was not the focus of much of their humor. Quick to refresh the memories of successful Jews keen on forgetting the harshness of their working-class immigrant past, Patsy Abbott commonly used "You don't remember?" as a coda to her jokes. Here is an example from her second album, *Suck Up, Your Behind*:

You pick up the paper, you want to throw up. It's better [in] the old days. We took the paper, and we put it on the kitchen floor. Remember? Remember when we had wall-to-wall papers? You don't remember the good old days? You had nothing to eat. Go ahead, remember. The only good thing about the good old days is a bad memory. We used to have a toilet. We used to have a toilet in the hall. Remember the toilet in the hall . . . ? You don't remember? You was always rich? . . . There's a man that had a toilet in the hall for years, and he vowed

himself that someday he'd make enough money to have a bathroom in the house. Today he's a millionaire in Miami Beach. Got three toilets in the house. *Ken nisht geyt*. [To one particular audience member:] That means he can't have a B.M. He can't go to the bathroom. I'm explaining, honey. If you listen to me, darling, I'll explain everything. But if he's [to another audience member:] busy explaining to you, then you won't hear me explaining either. Understand? Thank you.

Here, Abbott acerbically reminds Jews that, as Eric L. Goldstein has phrased this, "despite the social and [economic] benefits whiteness has conferred upon them, [they will never] feel the kind of freedom whiteness is *supposed* to offer—the freedom to be utterly unselfconscious about one's cultural or ethnic background."<sup>23</sup> We know from the recordings that other European ethnics attended performances by the trio, and in many ways the women's anti-assimilationist message could be viewed as a kind of protomulticulturalism for those who had recently crossed the color line, such as Italian Americans.

Although some second- and third-generation Jewish Americans may have nostalgically identified with the world that these comediennes evoked, many of the non-Jews in the audiences saw Jews as exotic. Jewish women represented a female cultural "other" whose more assertive displays of identity could flourish only in the marginalized atmosphere of after-hours nightclub and underground record labels—even as their male Jewish counterparts tamed their routines and capitalized on their gender privilege to gain greater access to radio, television, and film. In the face of an increasingly sanitized media to which Jewish entertainers were allowed entrance only at the expense of attenuating expressions of their ethnic identity, the adult-oriented party records helped to fill a cultural gap by providing an arena for the expression of an ethnically assertive counterdiscourse. By tapping into an underserved consumer need, the trio helped labels such as Chess, Laff, Surprise, Riot, Roulette, and After Hours carve out a profitable market niche. In so doing, they inadvertently became what Joel Foreman would call "agents of cultural subversion," and they paved the way for the production and dissemination of cheap media products that deviated from the norm.<sup>24</sup>

Although many Jewish women of childbearing age in the postwar period sought to fulfill themselves through domesticity and grappled with what the Jewish feminist author Betty Friedan would call the "problem that has no name," lingering antisemitism and the growing vilification of Jewish women as materialistic, guilt-inducing status seekers colored their experience.<sup>25</sup> In such an era of ethnic social exclusion and female scapegoating, these brassy women comics offered Jews a respite from the puritanical values of their middle-class suburban neighbors, whose attitudes told them to suppress their

Jewishness and their desire to be anything other than a housewife. Instead, these loud-mouthed, nonconformist comics did not shy from being “too Jewish.” Even though they challenged the religious tenets of Jewish female refinement and cleanliness—*edelkeit* and *kashrut*<sup>26</sup>—their unorthodox career choices reflected other Jewish traditions of female outspokenness, such as the more egalitarian gender values of East European society, which “reinforced the acceptance of female participation in the world of work and politics.”<sup>27</sup> These aging “ghetto girls” turned “vulgar, garish, uncultivated . . . plebian ways” into emblems of honor.<sup>28</sup>

And their racial ambiguity gave them the license to tackle forbidden subjects. As Ruth Frankenberg’s work on whiteness reveals, although Jewish women are either relegated to the borders of whiteness or marked as racial “others,” they are never viewed as “constitutive of the cultural norm.”<sup>29</sup> Interestingly, their African American counterpart Moms Mabley, a wise-cracking grandmother who lusted after young men, also enjoyed a huge following. Unlike the trio, Mabley made, at the height of the civil rights movement, a successful transition to television, appearing on afternoon and evening slots on the *Merv Griffin Show*, the *Smothers Brothers Show*, and the *Flip Wilson Show*, as well as in a series of specials hosted by well-known celebrities such as Harry Belafonte.

With humor that was more assertive in its politics and franker in its subject matter, the trio had little chance to attain the mainstream success that Mabley enjoyed. The rather unconventional, though affable, role of the grandmother that Mabley embraced on stage was far less threatening to American television viewers than the trio’s aggressively bawdy humor.

But finally, in an era when mainstream stereotypes represented Jewish women as greedy consumers who dominated their husbands and sons, why did this trio of outspoken women hold such appeal? If the Jewish men of the period feared the emasculating power of Jewish wives and mothers, nevertheless many frequented these shows by women who embodied many of the qualities that they resented.<sup>30</sup> In a time when many Jews enjoyed unprecedented financial success but limited social acceptance, jokes at the expense of non-Jews, a core theme in these comics’ repertoire, provided an outlet for the frustrations that male as well as female Jews faced. And, more generally, although the routines about impotence or philandering might deflate the male ego, these comics were motivated less by any desire to castrate men than by the pleasure of “shock[ing] the audience with their naughty Jewish girl” act.<sup>31</sup> Further, these comediennes mocked both Jewish men and Jewish women; male discomfort brought on by the penis jokes was quickly mitigated by the jokes

about women's sexual dalliances, cavernous knishes threatening to swallow up men, and nouveau riche Jewish wives trying to hide their ethnicity behind expensive minks. In these scenarios, both men and women were ridiculed, and everyone took their lumps.

The women's negotiation of gender, ethnicity, and class intertwined with their role as transgressive, trickster-like figures. Delivering their humor in the nightclub, a site associated with adult indiscretion, with shows as late as midnight or even four in the morning, targeted to audiences enjoying their annual Miami vacation, the women's performances took place in liminal spaces that encouraged both transgression and the kind of candid cultural reflexivity that would not have been appropriate in mainstream venues. Further, by reflexively commenting on their own performances with phrases such as "I know I'm weird," the comics marked themselves, too, as liminal. The scatological references further served to frame their performances as boundary breaking. This helped to prepare the crowd for the outrageous transgressions of gender and sexuality and the occasionally painful reflections on ethnicity and class referenced by their jokes.

Unruly "red hot mamas," the trio flagrantly embodied the carnivalesque, and in the erotically charged atmosphere of the nightclub they championed the principles of chaos, disorder, and excess, both orally and visually. Confronting the conservative gender ideology of the post-World War II era, they pronounced their refusal to hide at home. They used features of their identities that had been repressed—features such as flagrant ethnic Jewishness and women's sexuality—as weapons to mock social norms. These lusty, fleshy, obviously menopausal women with sequined dresses and painted-on eyebrows flaunted their girth to mitigate the threat of their jokes. While mainstream 1950s magazines depicted a world of normative sexual relations and bourgeois family life, the emergence of *Playboy* (first published in 1953) and the release of the Kinsey Reports (in 1948 and 1953) complicated the public discourse about gender and sexuality.<sup>32</sup> Thus, far from sleek-looking classical beauties, these outrageously blue, sexually frank performers obviously touched a nerve with many middle-class audiences who longed to escape the unquestioned blandness of their white-collar existence and the climate of cultural conformity.

Relegated to the liminal space of the late, late show, Belle Barth, the self-described "maven on *drek*," and her cohort offered many slumming middle-class patrons an opportunity to enjoy the rowdiness of "lower-class leisure" without discernible damages to their reputation.<sup>33</sup> Like the abject bodily functions from which polite society averts its gaze, Jews in the white suburbs of America of the 1950s had to hide their working-class roots and sanitize their



ethnicity and difference. Given this context, the trio's scatological humor, no less than their working-class dialects or omnipresent Yiddishisms, served as a metaphor for the return of the ethnic and working-class culture that assimilating Jews had repressed. Like the joke tellers that Simon Bronner discusses in his work on anal humor in Pennsylvania Dutch culture, these comics engage in "act[s] of verbal aggression, [symbolically] hurling 'shit,' at the establishment that 'looks down' upon them like dirt."<sup>34</sup>

By denuding sex of its seriousness and placing a uniquely female perspective on the subject matter, these brash comics ultimately challenged the male-centered visions of female sexuality that dominated vaudeville, burlesque, and the Borscht Belt. The trio replaced the "badgering mother-in-laws, homely naggers, ball and chain wives, or dumb bombshells" that dominated male comedians' routines with strong-minded, willful women always ready to offset their opponent with a cheeky remark.<sup>35</sup> Rather than playing the hapless victims of a male comic's jokes, the trio cast themselves as the instigators of humor and mayhem.

In their topsy-turvy world, annoying men are taunted by menacingly large mammary glands or those all-consuming knishes. Here, indeed, exaggerated female body parts (oversized breasts, buttocks, and vaginas) conspired to ridicule men and render them powerless. By playing on male fears about women's sexuality and by drawing on comedic devices historically used by male comics to demean women, these comediennes strategically employed the tools of their male-dominated trade to highlight the asymmetries that existed between the sexes. In the work of these talented performers, allusions to orifices and overabundant attributes associated with the feminine form become a source of strength, rather than embarrassment, and terms that had been used to objectify and silence women's sexual enjoyment served to destabilize the power and privilege exerted by men on the public stage and in the wider patriarchal culture.

The performances of Barth, Williams, and Abbott offer powerful insights not only into Jewish identity but also into class, assimilation, and whiteness. Even as these women highlighted the very real and suppressed cultural differences of Jews in the postwar years, their over-the-top acts also uncovered the constructedness of ethnic and racial identities. In other words, the women's humor focused on the tensions between being a Jew, with all the distance from mainstream American culture that this implied, and playing the Jew, being white and playing white, being middle class and playing middle class.<sup>36</sup> Certainly, the trio did not perform any type of realistic Jewish identity that they would have embraced off stage: they would not have agreed that Jews were

or should be hypersexual, loud, and crude. To the contrary, these women's parodies of working-class ethnic identity mirrored the everyday, sometimes strained performances of whiteness that they saw enacted by certain upwardly mobile Jews in the affluent, assimilated suburbs. The trio saw with great insight the constructedness of proper, middle-class white identity for Jews and non-Jews alike.

Projecting their voices into the living room, the trio reminded the new Jewish suburbanites where they had been and brought to light the parts of their audience's lives that audience members found difficult to express to their neighbors. These comics carried the tensions of Jewish private life into the marginalized public space of the late, late night comedy stage and then returned that public discourse to the domestic realm of the living room stereo, where it could be safely acknowledged. To be sure, their routines were sympathetic to the pressures that Jews faced in the ethnic and class environment of the era. Even as their humor unmasked the constructedness of whiteness and Jewishness, they warmly recognized the social dilemmas that their audiences faced. Seen in this light, their live and recorded performance of ethnic working-class identity highlighted the everyday performance of whiteness that Jews, though no more than white Anglo-Saxon Protestants themselves, engaged.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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All albums cited in this article were recorded between the late 1950s and the late 1960s: Belle Barth, *If I Embarrass You, Tell Your Friends*, After Hours Records LAH 69; *I Don't Mean to Be Vulgar, But It's Profitable*, Surprise 169; and *This Next Story Is a Little Risqué*, After Hours Records LAH 69. Pearl Williams, *A Trip around the World Is Not a Cruise*, After Hours Records LAH 70.192; *Bagels and Lox*, LAFF 127; and *Pearl Williams Goes All the Way*, Riot Records R309. For more on record company practices, see Ronald L. Smith, *Comedy on Record: The Complete Critical Discography* (New York: Garland, 1998).

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Ronald L. Smith, *Comedy on Record: The Complete Critical Discography* (New York: Garland, 1998).

<sup>2</sup> Patsy Abbott, *Suck Up, Your Behind*, Abbott LP 1000; and *Have I Had You Before*, Chess LP 1450.

<sup>3</sup> Michael Bronski, "Funny Girls Talk Dirty," *Boston Phoenix* (15-21 August 2003).

<sup>4</sup> Andres S. Viglucci, "Pearl Leaves Her Setting," *Miami Herald* (29 March 1984).

<sup>5</sup> Deborah Dash Moore, "Jewish Migration in Postwar America: The Case of Miami and Los Angeles," in *A New Jewry? America since the Second World War* (ed. Peter Y. Medding; New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 105–09.

<sup>6</sup> Linda Martin and Kerry Seagrave, *Women in Comedy: The Funny Ladies from the Turn of the Century to the Present* (Syracuse: Citadel Press, 1986), 141.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Although Barth, Williams, and Abbott owe a great deal to the sexually assertive, self-mocking "red-hot mama" persona that Jewish entertainer Sophie Tucker made famous in the early 1900s, Tucker's song lyrics and banter, though suggestive, were neither overtly blue nor as sexually aggressive as the trio's. Although the "red-hot mamas," too, played independent-minded, feisty older women with voluptuous bodies and healthy sexual appetites and although they used Yiddishisms for comedic effect, the trio were considerably more graphic. The trio also helped contribute to and build upon the Borscht Belt tradition most often linked with Jewish male comics of the Catskills, comedy that was characterized by insults, fast-paced one-liners, and amusing anecdotes about deeply flawed whiners and losers who would persevere, despite various forms of victimization, self-inflicted or externally imposed. Even though these comics are not associated with the hip, new, rebellious, antiestablishment stand-up comedy that emerged in the intimate clubs of New York, Chicago, and San Francisco in the early 1960s, they did in many ways pave the way for it.

<sup>9</sup> Marjorie Valbrun, "Pearl Williams, Well-Known Singer, Comedienne," *Miami Herald* (20 September 1991).

<sup>10</sup> Viglucci, "Pearl Leaves Her Setting."

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.; Valbrun, "Pearl Williams."

<sup>13</sup> Pearl Williams, *Second Trip around the World*, Surprise Records 75.

<sup>14</sup> Both examples are from *A Trip around the World Is Not a Cruise*.

<sup>15</sup> Gail Meadows, "Patsy Abbott, Miami Beach Entertainer, Impresario," *Miami Herald* (3 August 2001); Irene Lacher, "At Patsy's Place, There Was Always a Party Going On," *Miami Herald* (6 October 1985); *Borscht Capades* Playbill (24 September 1951) Zan T282, *Borscht Capades* Clip File, The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, 26.

<sup>16</sup> Meadows, "Patsy Abbott."

<sup>17</sup> Particularly relevant here is a passage from Pearl Williams's album *Pearl Williams at Las Vegas: "She's Doin' What Comes Naturally"* (Riot R303), in which the comic engages in a dialogue with Barth, who is in the audience, and a member of the crowd. Describing the damage that the comic and "her mother" Barth could unleash upon the conservative broadcast television of their day, Williams sarcastically howls, "We're doing

the *Tonight Show*. We really are, honey. Don't get hysterical. We're going on television. We're gonna blow the entire network. She'll take one end, I'll take the other end. We'll bring back radio." When an audience member brings up Patsy Abbott, Williams dismisses Abbott as merely a "nice girl." The mere fact that she needed to do so, though, shows how these three were linked in the public imagination.

<sup>18</sup> Although such dialect jokes were often seen as insulting to immigrant Jews, as Dan Ben-Amos points out in his 1973 article on "The 'Myth' of Jewish Humor" (*Western Folklore* 81: 129–30), "the fact that Jews tell jokes about each other demonstrates not so much [Jews' alleged] self-hatred as perhaps the internal segmentation of their society." He writes, "The recurrent themes of these anecdotes are indicative of areas of tensions within the Jewish society itself, rather than the relations with outside groups."

<sup>19</sup> Simon J. Bronner, "Dialect Story," in *Encyclopedia of American Folklife* (ed. Bronner; Armonk: M. E. Sharpe, 2006), 307–10; Ben-Amos, "The 'Myth' of Jewish Humor"; see also James P. Leary, "Dialect Story," in *American Folklore: An Encyclopedia* (ed. Jan Harold Brunvand; New York: Garland, 1998), 200–01; and Stanley Brandes, "Jewish-American Dialect Jokes and Jewish-American Identity," *Jewish Social Studies* 45 (1983): 233–40.

<sup>20</sup> Mathew Frye Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998). For related perspectives on this issue, see Eric L. Goldstein, *The Price of Whiteness: Jews, Race, and American Identity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006); Karen Brodtkin Sachs, "How Did Jews Become White Folk?," in *Race* (ed. Steven Gregory and Roger Sanjek; New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1994), 78–102; and Eli Lederhendler, *New York Jews and the Decline of Urban Ethnicity, 1950–1970* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2001).

<sup>21</sup> Goldstein, *The Price of Whiteness*, 189.

<sup>22</sup> Brodtkin Sachs, "How Did Jews Become White Folk?" 97.

<sup>23</sup> Goldstein, *The Price of Whiteness*, 236.

<sup>24</sup> Joel Foreman, *The Other Fifties: Interrogating Midcentury American Icons* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997), 10.

<sup>25</sup> See Riv-Ellen Prell, "Rage and Representations: Jewish Gender Stereotypes in American Culture," in *Uncertain Terms: Negotiating Gender in American Culture* (ed. Faye Ginsburg and Anna Lownhaupt Tsing; Boston: Beacon Press, 1990), 248–66; and Prell, *Fighting to Become Americans: Assimilation and the Trouble between Jewish Women and Jewish Men* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1999).

<sup>26</sup> Sarah Blacker Cohen, "Unkosher Comediennes: From Sophie Tucker to Joan Rivers," in *Jewish Wry: Essays on Jewish Humor* (ed. Cohen; Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1987), 105–24.

<sup>27</sup> Paula E. Hyman, *Gender and Assimilation in Modern Jewish History: The Roles and Representation of Women* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1995), 111–13.

<sup>28</sup> Prell, *Fighting to Become Americans*, 23.

<sup>29</sup> Ruth Frankenberg, *White Women, Race Matters: The Social Construction of Whiteness* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 224.

<sup>30</sup> A variety of scholars have examined depictions of Jewish women in post-World War II America as greedy, guilt inducing, domineering, and sexually aggressive. See, for example, Roberta Mock, "Female Jewish Comedian," *New Theater Quarterly* 58 (1999):

99–109; Joyce Antler, *You Never Call! You Never Write!: A History of the Jewish Mother* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007); Prell, “Rage and Representations”; Alan Dundes, “The J.A.P. and the J.A.M. in American Folklore,” *Journal of American Folklore* 98 (1985): 456–75.

<sup>31</sup> Cohen, “Unkosher Comediennes,” 112.

<sup>32</sup> On the complex reality of sexism and women’s resistance to it in 1950s America, see Joanne Meyerowitz, *Not June Cleaver: Women and Gender in Postwar America, 1945–1960* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994).

<sup>33</sup> Kathleen Spies, “‘Girls and Gags’: Sexual Display and Humor in Reginald Marsh’s Burlesque Images,” *American Art* (Summer 2004): 33–57.

<sup>34</sup> Simon J. Bronner, “Analyzing the Ethnic Self: The Hinkel Dreck Theme in the Pennsylvania-German Folk Narrative,” *Columbia Journal of American Studies* 8 (2007): 34.

<sup>35</sup> Spies, “Girls and Gags,” 45.

<sup>36</sup> In *Acting Jewish: Negotiating Ethnicity on the American Stage and Screen* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2006), Henry Bial explores how Jewish performers manage their ethnic identity by referencing a set of aural and visual cues, cues that are “double coded” (intended to be read differently by audiences of differing ethnic backgrounds). In such a situation, Jewishness is not a question of ethnic or religious affiliations, but a set of behaviors, gestures, and manners that are acted out for viewers who can or cannot, respectively, attend to messages expressing esoteric or exoteric knowledge.

# One Clove Away From a Pomander Ball: The Subversive Tradition of Jewish Female Comedians

Joyce Antler

“Let the fat girl do her stuff!” yelled the audience one night as a young Sophie Tucker came on stage. Even then, Tucker knew that size didn’t matter “if you could sing and make people laugh.”<sup>1</sup> Tucker is one of six veteran comedians profiled in the Jewish Women’s Archive’s documentary film, *Making Trouble*, who used not only her body but her subversive Jewish wit to make people laugh. Of the group, only writer Wendy Wasserstein didn’t go on stage herself, but joins the other funny women in this film by dint of her legacy of thought-provoking, trouble-making female characters. Like the others, Wasserstein doesn’t so much laugh at women but at the things that women find strange and funny. She wanted to give them their dignity rather than render them as caricatures. “Women who shopped at S. Klein’s and Orbachs,” Wasserstein comments. “Women who knew their moisturizer,” like Gorgeous Teitelbaum, the bloozy matron of *The Sisters Rosensweig*.<sup>2</sup>

Fanny Brice, Molly Picon, and Gilda Radner mugging it up may not seem dignified, and certainly Joan Rivers clowning about fallen vaginas looking like bunny slippers is anything but.<sup>3</sup> But these comedians’ performances show that Jewish women can be proud of the comic tradition in which they have been trailblazers. While the predominance of Jews in American comedy is well known (one frequently cited statistic is that the minute proportion of Jews in the United States made up eighty percent of the comedy industry), Jewish women’s comedy has largely gone unnoticed.<sup>4</sup>

Prominent exceptions to this critical failure include Sarah Blacher Cohen, author of the 1987 article, “The Unkosher Comediennes: From Sophie Tucker to Joan Rivers,” and June Sochen, whose essay “Fanny Brice and Sophie Tucker: Blending the Particular with the Universal,” appears in Cohen’s 1983 collection on Jewish theater and film.<sup>5</sup> Cohen’s piece on “unkosher comediennes” featured such “brazen offenders of the faith” as Sophie Tucker, Belle Barth, Totie Fields, and Joan Rivers, all of whom gleefully violated the Torah’s conception of feminine modesty. “As creatures of unclean lips,” Cohen wrote, “they make dirty, they sully, they corrupt,” but they also shattered taboos and liberated their audiences.<sup>6</sup> Focusing on Brice as well as Tucker, Sochen portrayed the theme of the female “victim” in addition to the “aggressive” type

created by Tucker and later *vilde chayes*, the “wild women” that Cohen writes about in her “unkosher” article.<sup>7</sup>

Some two decades later, the Jewish Women’s Archive film, *Making Trouble*, showcases a trajectory of three generations of funny Jewish women, including Molly Picon, Gilda Radner, and Brice from the gentler side of the comedy spectrum, as well as Tucker and Joan Rivers as representative vulgar-ians. Additionally, there is playwright Wasserstein, who thought of herself as a comedy writer, highlighting the significant role played by Jewish women authors in developing Jewish humor.

Fulfilling the archive’s mission of chronicling and transmitting the hidden story of Jewish women’s contributions to American history and culture, *Making Trouble* proclaims that there has been a veritable tradition of Jewish women’s humor.<sup>8</sup> From Yiddish theater and film, to vaudeville and burlesque, to nightclubs, improv and stand-up clubs, radio, television, the Broadway stage, and Hollywood cinema, Jewish women have made us laugh in a myriad of performance venues. In each of these arenas, they challenged conventional modes of joking. When they speak up, stand up, or even sit down (like the four younger comedians in *Making Trouble*—Judy Gold, Jackie Hoffman, Corey Kahaney, and Jessica Kirson—who guide us through the film as they chat in New York’s famed Katz’ delicatessen), these women create humor by speaking through their female sensibilities. Writer Ann Beatts, interviewed in the Gilda Radner segment in *Making Trouble*, joked that none of the writers on *Saturday Night Live* (*SNL*) saw the humor in a line that a character was a few cloves away from finishing a pomander ball.<sup>9</sup> None of the *SNL* men knew what a clove was (although executive producer Lorne Michaels guessed that it was a spice), much less a pomander ball, but the two women on the show found humor in this obscure term and a way to joke about women’s things in a male world.

It is not that Jewish women’s appreciation of humor has gone unnoticed—think of Sarah, who laughs when God informs her of the imminent birth of her son despite her advanced age. (And Sarah names this son, “Itzhak” or “Isaac,” meaning “He who laughed.”)<sup>10</sup> But the role of Jewish woman as professional comic has been largely overlooked. This was brought home to me some years ago, when I dedicated my book on Jewish women’s history, *The Journey Home*, to my two daughters, calling them “*badkhntes* of the next generation.”<sup>11</sup> At the time, Yiddish language experts discouraged my use of the word, telling me that there was no feminine form for *badkhen*, the Yiddish word meaning jester or clown. The *badkhen*, who had amused Jews in Europe for hundreds of years with his witty rhymes, composed on the spot at wed-

dings, was a formative influence on the creators of Yiddish theater and may be seen as the forerunner of today's stand-up comedian. However, this important Jewish icon, as well as the important tradition he started, has been considered wholly male.

Coming to America meant breaking the Old World pattern whereby men usually performed comedy, as *Making Trouble* makes clear. Jewish women became prominent comic artists in the immigrant generation, with such comedic talents as Tucker, Brice, and Picon. Their comic routines expressed the experiences and desires of many second-generation Jews while making the transition to mainstream audiences. Gertrude Berg, who began her long broadcast career on NBC radio in 1929, is another example of a Jewish woman who entertained audiences with a peculiarly ethnic humor.<sup>12</sup>

In every successive generation, Jewish female comedians helped shape the contours of American comedy. These comic pioneers were followed by a new cohort, schooled in the academy of improv clubs and liberated by feminism, which led them to invent new forms of comedy, more satirical and openly rebellious than their predecessors. Elaine May, Joan Rivers, Gilda Radner, Roseanne Barr, and Elayne Boosler were among these innovators.

A third generation of Jewish female comics came to prominence in the 1990s and fills mainstream and alternative comic venues today. These women, who came up through stand-up clubs and often appear on late-night television, HBO, Comedy Central, and in films and theater, are more diverse than previous cohorts of female comics, including such talents as Susie Essman, Wendy Leibman, Rita Rudner, Sarah Bernhard, Rain Pryor, Carol Leifer, Lisa Kron, Amy Borkowsky, Page Hurwitz, Cathy Ladman, Sherry Davey, Julie Goldman, Betsy Salkind, Susannah Perlman, Cate Lazarus, Jesse Klein, and Sarah Silverman. These comics can be as aggressive and bawdy as their male peers, but they emphasize women's strengths in ways that set them apart from many earlier women comedians.

When we look at the historical trajectory of Jewish women comics, we find them in every generation in every corner of American culture. Like male Jewish comedians, they have demonstrated superb verbal skills and the masterful use of irony, satire, and mockery, including self-mockery. Their heritage as Jews—especially, the diasporic experience of living between two worlds—gave them a sharp critical edge and the ability to express the anxieties and foibles of contemporary culture. Yet there is something unique about female Jewish comics that distinguishes them from male peers.

As the “pomander ball” exchange reveals, many of these comediennes center their humor in a specifically female—and often feminist—point of view that



showcases issues of particular relevance to women. Whether they have been explicitly bawdy in sexually frank and often unladylike routines in the manner of a Sophie Tucker, Belle Barth, Pearl Williams, Patsy Abbot, Bette Midler, or Joan Rivers or whether they presented more innocent challenges—think Molly Picon, Fanny Brice, Gilda Radner, and Goldie Hawn—these comedians have stretched the boundaries of conventional thinking about comedy and about gender roles. The laughter they engender is powerful and subversive.

Perhaps this is because women's humor often deals with the incongruities and inequities of a world based on gender distinctions. When women use humor to express and laugh at their visions of the world, they cannot help but challenge the social structures that keep women from positions of power. Some do this explicitly, others turn the spotlight inward, and the gender issues are expressed in self-deprecating ways. But because expectations are that men do the joking and women receive (or are targets of) humor, for women merely to take the microphone as comic performers upsets role norms.<sup>13</sup> Their humor challenges the structures that keep women from power by turning our attention to things that matter to women. Comedian Kate Clinton has called feminist humorists “fumerists,” a term that captures the idea of simultaneously being funny and wanting to burn the house down.<sup>14</sup> In her influential 1976 work, “The Laugh of the Medusa,” the French (Jewish) theorist Hélène Cixous talked about the revolutionary potential of women's humor, urging them “to break up the ‘truth’ with laughter . . . in order to smash everything, to shatter the framework of institutions, to blow up the law.”<sup>15</sup>

Jewish female comedians have successfully stretched the boundaries of conventional comedy and gender roles—even when they didn't intend to burn the house down. “A performing Jewish woman is a force to be reckoned with,” says June Sochen, “and possibly feared.”<sup>16</sup> They have been not merely funny, but transformative.

#### MOLLY PICON: “YONKELE”

Molly Picon, born Margaret Pyekoon on the Lower East Side of New York City in 1898, began her theatrical career performing with a Yiddish repertory troupe in Philadelphia, where her mother moved after her father abandoned the family. Picon went on to become the first great international star of the Yiddish theater.<sup>17</sup> When she presented humorous interpretations of the plight of first- and second-generation Jewish immigrants, audiences recognized “in her highly magnified or distorted humor the stuff which makes up their own lives.”<sup>18</sup> Tiny (4' 11") but sprightly (at age eighty, she was still performing

somersaults), Picon starred in a variety of venues as well as Yiddish theater—radio, television, Broadway, and Yiddish and American film.

Most often Picon played young girls who dressed or behaved like young boys, parts written for her by her Polish immigrant husband, director, and producer Jacob (“Yonkel”) Kalich, whom she married in 1919. Kalich convinced her to pursue a career in the Yiddish theater rather than the Broadway stage, to which she aspired, and took her to the great Yiddish theaters of Europe, “to perfect my Yiddish, to get my star legs.” Performing across the continent in original works by Kalich, Picon was launched to stardom in her role as the thirteen-year-old boy Yonkele, in the play of the same name produced by Kalich in Vienna in 1921. Between 1922-1925, she played similar characters in such Yiddish plays as “Tzipke,” “Shmendrik” [Loser], “Gypsy Girl,” “Molly Dolly,” “Little Devil,” “Mamale” [Mommy], “Raizele,” “Oy is Dus A Madel” [What a Girl], and “The Circus Girl.”<sup>19</sup> Even in middle age, Picon continued to reinvent her transgressive, tomboy character, which audiences loved. Her most famous film was the 1936 *Yidl Mitn Fidl* [Yidl with his fiddle], in which the thirty-eight-year-old actress played a girl disguised as a teenage boy so she and her father can earn a living as traveling musicians. In fact, said Picon, she played the “Yonkele” role at least “3,000 times”: “Deep down within me, I was Yankele [sic]. I still am.”<sup>20</sup>

### FANNY BRICE: “PLSYING THE CLOWN”

Fanny Brice (born Fania Borach) was “one of the great, great clowns of all time,” in the opinion of famed film director George Cukor.<sup>21</sup> Appearing in burlesque, vaudeville, drama, film, musical revues (including nine Ziegfeld Follies between 1910 and 1936), and on radio (she had her own *Baby Snooks* radio show from 1944 through her death in 1951), Brice had a career that lasted more than four decades. Biographer Barbara Grossman observes that the star built her career on “manic mimicry and exuberant buffoonery,” both rooted in Yiddish parody. When early in her career Brice went to Tin Pan Alley songwriter Irving Berlin, he gave her a new lyric, “Sadie Salome,” with the words, “With your face, you should sing this song,” and urged her to adapt a Yiddish accent. Brice learned the accent especially for the part—the most successful of all her stage appearances—and it became a trademark of her routines in burlesque and musical comedy.<sup>22</sup> Soon after she began appearing on the Ziegfeld stage, and although Brice did not conform to feminine beauty standards, the Follies proved to be a wonderful vehicle for her parodic talents. “If she could not be the prettiest girl on the stage,” says Grossman, “she would be the funniest.”<sup>23</sup>

Brice's broad physical humor and mimicry differed from the ingenuousness of Molly Picon's child/woman roles. Brice specialized in representing incongruity: she played the American Indian/Jewish girl Rosie Rosenstein; an evangelist and neophyte nudist, both Yiddish-accented; a Jewish girl, Sascha, who became a Sultan's wife; and Mrs. Cohen in "Mrs. Cohen at the Beach," a "consummate *yenta*" who nagged her children.<sup>24</sup> Whether Indian, Arab, or any ethnic personage, with her Yiddish accent and dialect, Brice constantly stepped out of character, commenting on the absurdities of the action going on. And she announced that she was Jewish.

There was a serious side to Brice's comedy. With numbers like "Second-Hand Rose," "My Man," and "Oy, How I Hate that Fellow Nathan," she mocked men's unreliability and also herself. Audiences related to her witty put-downs of men and marriage or to expressions of disappointment and unhappiness because they knew these portrayals sprang from Brice's life. "In anything Jewish I ever did, I wasn't standing apart, making fun of the race," Brice said. "I *was* the race, and what happened to me on the stage is what could happen to them."<sup>25</sup>

Combining a "'traditional' feminine concern for others, albeit in a funny vein" with a style and persona rooted in her Jewish environment, Brice tapped into current issues relating to all people, despite her pronounced ethnicity.<sup>26</sup> Yet by 1923, she wanted to play more universal roles and underwent a nose job to alter her appearance, an event that made the front page of *The New York Times*. But the desired parts never materialized—Brice had apparently "cut off her nose to spite her race," Dorothy Parker quipped, all to no avail.<sup>27</sup> Audiences apparently preferred her as she was—a talented, outrageously funny, good-humored Jewish comic. "If you are a comic," Brice once said, "you have to be nice. And the audience has to like you. You have to have a softness about you because if you do comedy and you are harsh, there is something offensive about it."<sup>28</sup>

Brice "immediately connected with her audience," says June Sochen, in a way that was both woman- and Jewish-centered, offering "a different reading of the known material. . . . she found the humor, the silliness, and the humanity beyond the stereotype."<sup>29</sup>

#### SOPHIE TUCKER: "YIDDISH/RED HOT MAMA"

Sophie Tucker (born Sonya Abuza) has a special place in the tradition of Jewish women's comedy because of the longevity with which she held the limelight—over sixty years in the industry, she was called the "Queen of Show Business"—but also because of her trademark transgressiveness.<sup>30</sup> Using humor and

self-mockery, Tucker sang “hot” torch songs with titles like “Nobody Loves a Fat Girl But How A Fat Girl Can Love,” “That Lovin’ Soul Kiss,” “Everybody Shimmies Now,” “Vamp, Vamp, Vamp,” and “Who Paid the Rent for Mrs. Rip Van Winkle when Rip Van Winkle Was Away.” Her message was that all women, even “big, ugly” ones, needed sex and love.

At the very time when vaudeville and burlesque were becoming increasingly subdued as they reached out to broader family audiences, Tucker managed to elude mass entertainment’s censorship; her supposed “ugliness” and her size permitted her to challenge social norms of femininity and “good girl” behavior. Eddie Cantor quipped that Sophie Tucker “sings the words we used to write on the sidewalks of New York.”

Tucker had not meant to become a comedian. She left home at seventeen, leaving her one-year-old baby with her mother, Jenny, in Hartford, for a show business career as a singer. The neighbors in Hartford were shocked: “they said only a bad woman would do such a thing. I must be a bad woman—a whore, in the unvarnished language of the Scriptures.”

Slowly, Tucker built her career, singing in rathskellers, becoming a well-known blackface “coon singer”—one of the few women to black up among the likes of performers like Eddie Cantor and Al Jolson. But she was uncomfortable in blackface because it masked her true identity. Sometimes Tucker pulled off a glove to show that she was white, and there would be a surprised gasp, “then a howl of laughter.” She would throw in some Yiddish words, too, to “give the audience a kick” and to show that she was white and Jewish.

The idea of becoming a comic performer came to Tucker by accident. One day a theater manager sent her on without blackface, telling her that her trunk was lost. Dressed one night in a tightly laced black princess gown (like a “baloney in mourning,” she cracked), with a long train of red chiffon ruffles, she slipped during her bows and caught her heel in the ruffles of her dress. “Down I went on my fanny like a ton of bricks,” she recalled. The applause was deafening; even the cast shrieked with laughter. Sophie the comedienne was born.

It was not only as a raunchy “Red Hot Mama” that Tucker reached the heights of stardom. Her most famous song was in fact “My Yiddishe Mama,” introduced into her repertoire after the death of her own mother, Jennie Abuza, in 1925. Jennie died when Tucker was crossing the Atlantic, returning from an engagement in London. Her death was deeply traumatic for the singer, who became “paralyzed” while performing at a benefit for the Jewish Theatrical Guild at the Manhattan Opera House. Led off the stage, she stayed in bed for weeks, her self-confidence gone. Soon after, her long-time accom-

panist wrote “My Yiddishe Mama” for her, and the effect was cathartic. Tucker sang “My Yiddishe Mama” thereafter at the Palace Theater and at the Winter Garden in New York, where “there wasn’t a dry eye in the house.” After that, she sang it in the United States and throughout Europe, where it was always a hit.

Sophie Tucker was an effective “Red Hot Mama” precisely because audiences believed she told the truth about her own experiences. Part of this authenticity lay in Sophie’s emotional revelation of her Yiddish/Jewish background and her deep love for her Yiddishe Mama. Of course, this Yiddishe Mama was just as much a construction as was the “Red Hot Mama,” since Jennie Abuza never sat home, quietly mourning the days passing her by, but rather was a dynamic activist who ran the family restaurant and was the leader of Hartford’s Jewish philanthropic community.

A generation of young Americans grew up listening to Tucker’s records, often forbidden them by their parents, in secret; others went to her live nightclub performances. She was a special favorite in England, even among the royals. (“Hi ya, king!” Tucker irreverently quipped to one of her most ardent fans.) The “Last of the ‘Red Hot Mamas’” died in 1966. Although not a “nice Jewish girl” by the standards of her mother’s generation, she was one of America’s first “popular culture” feminists and among its most celebrated Jewish comic voices.

\* \* \*

With Sophie Tucker’s death and the demise of Gertrude Berg’s long-running “Goldberg” situation comedies a decade earlier, the baton passed to a new generation of female comics. A new style of female Jewish comedy—fast-paced, hip, and deeply satirical—emerged to replace the pioneering women comics of the previous generation.

The new style of comedy was ushered in by a group of talented satirists, male and female—Lenny Bruce, Mort Sahl, Shelley Berman, and the extraordinary Mike Nichols and Elaine May. Though Nichols and May performed for merely four years, ending their collaboration in 1961, they left their mark on comedy for years to come.

The female Jewish comics that came up through the Second City route—Elaine May, Joan Rivers, and Gilda Radner—hit their stride in the 1960s–1970s. This comic wave was joined midstream by another group of Jewish women comics emboldened by the feminist movement—particularly during the 1980s when the increased confidence of feminism allowed women to laugh at themselves in new ways and to laugh at others.

## JOAN RIVERS: RITA and HEIDI ABROMOWITZ

"I am not the ideal Jewish woman," Joan Rivers admits in a comedy act filmed in *Making Trouble*. "I love to take [my audience] to the edge," she says. "I love to get them upset and ruin their value system."<sup>31</sup> Known for her aggressiveness and her "unkosher" bawdy style, in Sarah Cohen's words, Rivers (née Joan Molinsky), Phi Beta Kappa Barnard College graduate and daughter of a Brooklyn Jewish doctor, has been performing for over forty years. Making her television debut on Johnny Carson's *Tonight Show* in 1965, she went on to host a daytime talk show, became the first solo guest host of the *Tonight Show*, and by 1986 had her own late night show on the new Fox Network. In 1990 Rivers won an Emmy for Outstanding Talk Show Host. She also authored two successful books, *Having A Baby Can Be A Scream* (1975) *Life and Times of Heidi Abromowitz* (1984), and she wrote and starred in a well-reviewed Broadway drama based on the life of Lenny Bruce's mother, *Sally Marr and Her Escorts* (1994).<sup>32</sup>

Rivers struggled for many years to find her comic style. She bombed in the Catskills, feeling she was not "ethnic enough," and disliked the model followed by pioneer women comedians of the time, like Phyllis Diller, who were "basically doing a woman's version of men's acts."<sup>33</sup> Working with her comic "soul-mate," writer Treva Silverman, who appears in the Rivers segment of *Making Trouble*, Rivers began to find her comic voice. Elaine May served as role model for both women: "an assertive woman with a marvelous, fast mind and, at the same time, pretty and feminine. We did not know any other women like that."<sup>34</sup>

Rivers's breakthrough came at Second City, where she started in 1961—"the best girl since Elaine May." But Rivers was not the typical "compliant," "uncompetitive" Second City girl, and she found the troupe's unwillingness to treat her as an equal deeply troubling. Nonetheless, she feels she was "born as a comedian" at Second City: "No Second City, no Joan Rivers."<sup>35</sup> Seeing Lenny Bruce perform for the first time in Greenwich Village was another turning point. From Bruce she learned that "personal truth can be the foundation of comedy, that outrageousness can be cleaning and healthy." "I had found the key," Rivers recalled. "My comedy could flow from the poor, venerable schlepp Joan Molinsky."<sup>36</sup>

Rivers created a character named Rita, the "urban ethnic" "loser girl who cannot get married," who she believed became the secret of her success, allowing Rivers to "turn autobiography into comedy and touch all women." Rita was Joan Rivers in all her desperation: "I'm not married and life is awful, so what's wrong with me?" And finally, I'm married: "Why is everything still

wrong?” Rita worked because “people recognize insecurity and respond to it,” said Rivers, because “everybody is like me.”<sup>37</sup>

Rivers understood that she was part of a new transitional comedy generation that was leaving the one-line joke litany of traditional comics far behind. Nichols and May had been the pioneers of the new style—a much more “personal comedy” that described “humor behavior by describing our own behavior.” Rivers used this style to talk openly about her emotional travails and also about sex. “I was becoming a nice Jewish girl in stockings and pumps saying on stage what people thought but never said aloud in polite society.”<sup>38</sup> Mentioning the word “tampons,” she has said, was the greatest challenge of her career. But whereas Sophie Tucker (along with the streetwise raunchiness of Pearl Williams, Belle Barth, and Patsy Abbot) performed in the limited space of nightclubs and comedy LP albums, Rivers did her parodies on national TV, testing the medium’s limits. Despite her edgy routines, she never downplayed her Jewishness, even though her agent often warned her that she was “too Jewish” and “too New York” for much of the country.<sup>39</sup>

The self-deprecatory style that became the Rivers trademark coexists with a much more aggressive humor that targets others, often with great cruelty. Sarah Blacher Cohen feels that Rivers resembles the traditional *yente*, “a woman of low origins or vulgar manners,” a “scandal-spreader and rumor-monger,” although her biting sarcasm is not indiscriminate but directed at celebrities and “people of high degree.”<sup>40</sup> But Rivers offers a contrast to these routines through her Heidi Abromowitz character—her “comically spiteful portrayal of the nice Jewish girl’s direct opposite . . . the sexual transgressor . . . the whore with the heart of gold.” “Devoid of moral constraints,” says Cohen, “she can take the lid off her id and fly away on the wings of an ego. And we, who are grounded by our multiple repressions, are temporarily seduced into flying away with her.”<sup>41</sup> Over her long career, Rivers also introduced feminist characters, with hostile jokes aimed at gynecologists and others in the male power structure who demeaned women.<sup>42</sup>

Whichever the routine, Rivers spits out mocking, nervy jokes that Cohen sees as full of “unkosher” chutzpah. To her critics, however, she is merely “abrasive, tasteless, profane.” Rivers defends herself against such charges. “You have to be abrasive to be a current comic,” she says. “If you don’t offend someone you become pap.”<sup>43</sup> For Rivers, humor serves as a “medium of revenge” by which comedians “deflate and punish” rejection.<sup>44</sup> “Comedy is power,” she says. “The only weapon more formidable than humor is a gun.”<sup>45</sup>

## GILDA RADNER: "JEWISH JEANS"

Gilda Radner (the family name was originally Ratkowsky) decided to be funny as a teenager, when she knew she "wasn't going to make it on her looks."<sup>46</sup> Thirteen years younger than Rivers, Radner employed a humor that was very different than that of her predecessor, though Radner, too, got her start at Second City (the Toronto company).

With her fellow Second City players, Radner was a member of the Not Ready for Primetime Players, which became the first cast of *Saturday Night Live*, debuting to rave reviews in 1975. Radner became an audience favorite with her ingenious, loveable female characters—among them, dowdy schoolteacher Emily Litella; dorky adolescent Lisa Loopner; lispy newscasters Roseanne Roseannadanna and "Baba Wawa" (Barbara Walters); and Rhonda Reiss, a Long Island Jewish "princess."

A self-proclaimed "total child of television" who grew up admiring the female comedians of an earlier age, Radner provided a new template for female comics. Described as a "thirty-three-year old who had a band-aid on her knee," Radner combined the innocence of a little girl with a hip, fresh satirical zaniness that charmed audiences and her fellow players alike. "She was so happy on camera," Steve Martin observed; she was "the sweetest, kindest, funniest person. . . . You really came to love her."

The authenticity in Radner's performances was not that she played herself but that the vulnerability in all of her characters—a true part of the core Gilda Radner—shone through. There was nothing hostile about her. Rather, she excelled in physical comedy in the fashion of a Fanny Brice, and the versatility of her portrayals recalled her own heroine, Lucille Ball.

Radner did not shy away from doing Jewish characters, though some, like her famous "Jewish Jeans" ad parody, created controversy. With lines like "she shops the sales for designer clothes/she got designer nails and a designer nose," some thought it was "too Jewish," too "Jappy." But in *Making Trouble*, writer Marilyn Suzanne Miller notes that it is Radner, the Jewish Jeans girl in the spoof, whom the other multicultural singers aspire to be: she is their goal, the Jewish woman has triumphed. Like the other comics in the film, Radner is not afraid to wink at the audience, proclaiming her Jewishness. She always referred to herself as "this Jewish girl from Detroit."

Radner hated the idea, however, that "if you were Jewish and a comedian, you had to be unattractive." She fought her own battle with bulimia for much of her life, but she insisted, as the film makes clear, that she was a "beautiful girl" with "great legs and I am also funny": "Live with it!"<sup>47</sup>



## WENDY WASSERSTEIN: "SISTERS ROSENSWEIG"

Pulitzer Prize-winning dramatist Wendy Wasserstein, the first woman to win a Tony for a single-authored work, may seem like an unusual choice for inclusion in a film about Jewish comedians. But Wasserstein always thought of herself as a comedy writer, understanding comedy to be a "broader category than just fun and jokes."<sup>48</sup> Her comic voice is loud and strong in her dramas, and she enjoyed writing for television comedy series and humorous essays as well. In *Making Trouble*, Wasserstein stands for all the Jewish writers who created comedy, including Ann Beatts, Rosie Schuster, Treva Silverman, and Marilyn Suzanne Miller, all of whom appear in the film.

Born in Brooklyn, Wasserstein briefly attended the Yeshivah of Flatbush before switching to an exclusive Manhattan private school for girls. She graduated from Mt. Holyoke College, drawing on the incongruities of her experience at this all-female, upper-crust WASP school in her first play, *Uncommon Women and Others*, produced off-Broadway in 1978. *Isn't It Romantic?* followed in 1981; *The Heidi Chronicles*, winner of the Pulitzer Prize, a Tony Award, and a host of other prizes, in 1988; and *The Sisters Rosensweig* in 1992.<sup>49</sup>

*The Sisters Rosensweig*, Wasserstein's most explicitly Jewish play, worried colleagues who thought that it might not play well in middle America. "Believe it or not, I've heard there are sisters beyond the Mississippi," the author replied, and kept the play's title and focus.<sup>50</sup> *The Sisters Rosensweig* tells the story of three sisters, who greatly resemble Wasserstein and her own two sisters, who spend a weekend in London to celebrate the birthday of the eldest. Sara, cool and self-controlled, an expatriate and atheist, is a high-powered international banker who has renounced all possibility of romance as she moves into her fifty-fourth year. The "funsy," clothes-conscious, garrulous Gorgeous, slightly younger, is a housewife, mother, and temple member from suburban Boston, where she is a talk-show personality. Pfeni, single and forty, is the "wandering Jew" of the family—an itinerant journalist who roams the world in search of causes and stories.

By the time the play has ended, the identities the playwright establishes for the sisters evaporate, and they are revealed in surprising ways. Wasserstein takes us inside Gorgeous's seemingly superficial materialism, showing as much compassion for her struggles as for those of her more intellectual and achievement-driven sisters. "I grew up with the Dr. Gorgeous' of the world," says Wasserstein. "I loved them."<sup>51</sup> She and Madeline Kahn, the talented Jewish comedian who played the role on Broadway, believed that audiences would identify with the character—many of them were Gorgeous, Wasserstein

thought. (The character actually drew on her mother, Lola, and her own sister, nicknamed “Gorgeous.”) Gorgeous would not be “a joke,” not the extreme JAP rendered by so many other comic writers, but a character with familiar Jewish traits, at last rendered sympathetically.<sup>52</sup>

Wasserstein should be seen as a true social “reformer,” as June Sochen argues was the case with comedians like Tucker and Brice. Through their comedy, these women offered audiences “unpopular views in a popular mode,” aspiring to “change their audience’s . . . values.”<sup>53</sup> And although Sarah Blacher Cohen worried that feminism and comedy might be mutually exclusive—feminism could lead to a “rigid sense of political correctness that has a dampening spirit on humor,” she thought—Wasserstein’s plays show the compatibility of comedy and feminist thought.<sup>54</sup>

### THE RADICAL POTENTIAL OF HUMOR: CONTEMPORARY JEWISH WOMEN COMEDIANS

Jewish female humorists are more widely accepted today than ever before. The documentary *The Aristocrats*, in which 100 comedians are asked to give their renditions of the same obscene joke, is dominated by Jews. Although there are relatively few women comedians in the film, many of them are Jewish—Wendy Leibman, Susie Essman, Rita Rudner, Judy Gold, Cathy Ladman, and the sexy, sly, and sardonic Sarah Silverman. In addition to these comics, Jewish women comedians performing today include Jackie Hoffman, Cory Kahaney, Sarah Bernhard, Rain Pryor, Carol Leifer, Lisa Kron, Amy Borkowsky, Jessica Kirson, Sherry Davey, Julie Goldman, Betsy Salkind, Cate Lazarus, Susannah Perlman, and Jesse Klein.

Why are Jewish women comics so prominent today? Why do there seem to be so many of them, and why are they everywhere?<sup>55</sup>

One factor is the tremendous growth in comedy clubs that took place after the late 1980s. Comedy clubs have been joined by a wide network of small theaters and underground, alternative, “hipster” comedy rooms, and clubs—spaces where stand-up comedians, sketch comedy, and improv groups can perform. In addition, there is the festival route for stand-up, improv, sketch comedy, and short films.

This interactive world allows many younger comics to gain a foothold in the world of comedy. Opportunities in the television world, especially in cable television, where young comedians are recruited for stand-up, sketch comedy, and improv shows as performers and writers, have enlarged the possibilities for comedians. Working in multiple genres, lucky comedians today can be experimental and commercially successful.

A second factor is that women have so many more role models today than ever before. In the postfeminist era, women have become prominent in all the professions—in business, law, and medicine; as directors, theater producers, and actors; and in all capacities in television, especially cable television, and in performance art. Young comics see before them a plethora of female comic role models. A quarter century of *Saturday Night Live* comediennes and highly visible female comics of all ethnicities have broadened the theatrical types that women play. This contrasts with the experience of the early improv comics, for whom the only role models were women who played “angels in the house,” “mothers,” and “whores” or were zany screwballs à la Lucille Ball, stern spinsters like Eve Arden, or, in Joan Rivers’s view, women comics acting too much like men.

The flourishing of gay culture has also stimulated female comedy—there are many lesbian comics performing today, including Jewish lesbian comics, and these women have innovated fresh, forceful material. According to Susie Essman, who plays the foul-mouthed Suzy Green in *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, “really good lesbian stand-ups . . . are happier with power, not like straight [comedians] trying to be nice young ladies.”<sup>56</sup>

Finally, there is the prominence of comedy itself in today’s world. The great success of Jon Stewart’s *The Daily Show*, *The Colbert Report*, and the Comedy Central channel point to the central role that comedy now plays—many people believe that these shows are the only place where they can get their news and the truth.

All of these factors have empowered contemporary women comedians, including many Jewish comics, and have helped to catapult them into comic success.

The careers of the four “Katz’s deli” comedians in *Making Trouble* suggest the kind of issues and performance styles that characterize contemporary Jewish women comedians. They also reveal that, despite the many new arenas for female comics, it remains the case that to be Jewish and female in the still “all boys club” of comedy can be daunting. Katz’s deli comic Cory Kahaney was often told to keep her acts “Jew-free,” but she never hid her Jewish identity.<sup>57</sup> “It’s a very big thing among Jews when someone’s Jewish,” Jackie Hoffman notes in the film. “So whatever comic or whoever in the performing world was Jewish, it was a huge deal.” The *Making Trouble* pioneers helped these women find their voices and comic styles.

#### JUDY GOLD: “MOMMY QUEEREST”

Judy Gold won two Emmy Awards for writing and producing *The Rosie*

*O'Donnell Show*, a Cable Ace Award for her HBO special, and was twice nominated as funniest female stand-up by The American Comedy Awards. More recently she has had hit solo shows, "25 Questions for a Jewish Mother" and "Mommy Queerest."<sup>58</sup>

Often Gold's performances are little more than a stream of Jewish mother jokes. "My mother is the most annoying person on the face of the earth," she jokes, "a miserable human being." "You can say something to her and she cannot only make it negative, she makes it about herself. What are you having for New Year's, filet mignon? I'll be eating shit." (Her mother's just-published autobiography, she has quipped, is titled *I Came, I Saw, I Criticized*.) A lesbian who is raising two sons with her one-time partner, Gold often quips that she feels sorry for her kids because they had two Jewish mothers. She jokes that as a child, every time she left the house, her mother feared something was going to happen; when once she came home forty-five minutes late, her mother had already called the police and was serving them her homemade *rugaleh* in her living room. Gold's tardiness led her mother to attach an egg timer to her belt to remind her to get home on time. No fun and games in this family: Mrs. Gold's favorite read-aloud story to the young child was the pop-up version of *The Diary of Anne Frank*.

As an easily recognizable Jewish shtick, Gold's routine has an immediate payoff, calling forth a reflex response that allows spectators to laugh at this "insider" humor. Gold believes that her humor challenges rather than reifies stereotypes, illuminating the real women behind them. Audiences respond to her Jewish mother jokes because in fact they are stereotypes. Making the stereotypes excessive through insult humor may actually explode them, revealing through exaggeration that despite the kernel of truth that may lurk within, the caricature is anachronistic and incorrect.

"To be a great stand-up," Gold says, "you have to tell the truth and you have to draw upon your own experience. . . . Otherwise there's no passion." And comediennes often must take on aggressive styles of humor that are staples of the comedy-club circuit. Gold explains, "Stand-up comedy is not a feminine profession at all. . . . it's very aggressively male." Susie Essman, who stars in the HBO show *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, argues that stand-up is far more aggressive than doing sit-coms. Joan Rivers "had to be self-deprecating," she observes, "because you couldn't be an attractive, funny woman. It was too threatening." Gold echoes her thought: "There's nothing more threatening to a man than a female comic."<sup>59</sup> Even today.

But times are changing. Essman believes that comics like Judy Gold are changing them, and maybe, too, "younger guys [audiences and comedians] are

nowhere near as sexist, maybe because their moms are out in the workplace.” And women comics are getting more comfortable with the power of comedy. However confrontational, says Gold, “when you’re standing on stage alone with the mike—the phallus symbol . . . it is incredibly powerful.”<sup>60</sup>

#### JACKIE HOFFMAN: “THE KVETCHING CONTINUES”

Jackie Hoffman is an eight-year veteran of Chicago’s Second City improv group, an Obie Award winner for best actress, and much acclaimed for her performance as the pregnant coworker friend, Joan, in the film *Kissing Jessica Stein*. Hoffman also won awards for her performance in *Hairspray* and is also a regular performer on late-night television and comedy specials. She has done many one-woman shows, often with Jewish themes—for example, “The Kvetching Continues,” “Jackie Hoffman’s Hanukkah,” “Jackie’s Kosher Khristmas”—and she also played in *The Sisters Rosensweig* and the rock musical *Xanadu*.

Like Gold, Hoffman uses Jewish mother routines in her shows. Since every word to an older parent might be the last, she says that she frequently ends her calls by telling her mother she loves her. Her mother calls her too, leaving messages frantic with worry whenever Jackie does not immediately answer. Then she calls the police to describe her missing daughter. “She’s not married. She has a filthy mouth. If she took her hair out of her eyes she’d be a beautiful girl.” In another joke, Hoffman describes the language tapes she played to learn Yiddish. Rather than the standard phrases for language instruction, these tapes conveyed key phrases of Jewish life: “Her daughter gives her heartache. I feel sick.” Like Gold’s mother, Hoffman’s mother is supportive, despite the hostile-seeming jokes. “She always says, ‘If it weren’t for me, you wouldn’t have any material.’ My mom’s mantra is ‘Don’t give up the paycheck!’”<sup>61</sup>

#### CORY KAHANAY: *JAP: JEWISH PRINCESSES OF COMEDY*

Cory Kahaney is a popular New York comedian who created the hit multimedia show, *JAP: Jewish Princesses of Comedy*, a tribute to Jewish comic “queens”—Belle Barth, Pearl Williams, Betty Walker, Jean Carroll, and Totie Fields—who paved the way for “all females in comedy,” in Kahaney’s view.<sup>62</sup> Clips of the legendary queens are combined with individual sets by contemporary comedians—including *Making Trouble*’s Jessica Kirson and Jackie Hoffman. Kahaney was a grand finalist on NBC’s *Last Comic Standing* and has appeared in many comedy specials on Comedy Central and HBO. Kahaney also conceived and developed *The Radio Ritas*, a nationally syndicated talk radio show for Green-

stone Media, a company created by Gloria Steinem and Jane Fonda to provide radio programming for woman.

Kahaney allows that she was inspired to do comedy by her own Jewish mother's humorous impersonations and her family's regular trips to Grossingers, where they loved the comedy acts. One of her signature routines pokes fun at her own parenting of her teenage daughter, whom she raised as a single mother. "The other day, she emptied the dishwasher, which is like an annual act," Kahaney says. "And she asks, 'Do I get a cell phone now?' And I said: 'What happens when you take out the garbage? Do you get a Mercedes?'"<sup>63</sup>

#### JESSICA KIRSON: "MY COOKIES'S GONE"

The youngest of the Katz's deli comics in *Making Trouble*, Jessica Kirson, a social worker from New Jersey before she turned to comedy, has appeared on Comedy Central, Nickelodeon, the *Tonight Show*, and the Logo Network. Kirson tours with her one-woman show, *My Cookie's Gone*—her answer to a homeless person who asks her for food ("Do I look like I have leftovers?")—and makes fun of "fat, ugly" girls like herself who complain about getting hit on. Like the others, Kirson also jokes about her mother: "My mother is a therapist. She had clients in the house, so I always had to be quiet. I was like Ann Frank in my own house." Her jokes come at a frantic pace—she seems "out of control, like a more sarcastic version of early-career Robin Williams," wrote a *Variety* reviewer, and she "subverts some of standup's biggest clichés" about marriage, beauty, sex, ethnicity, and race. "I'm an angry Jew, and you'll get to hear about it," she tells her audiences. "But I feel like an angry black woman."<sup>64</sup>

\* \* \*

Not all of the *Making Trouble* pioneers or the four younger "deli guides" would label their comedy "feminist." But in drawing on their own experiences for humor, they reflected and helped to shape perspectives about issues of concern to women. Women have special secrets and shared bonds they tell us, like pomander balls; dieting and purging; the travails and joys of dating, marriage, and sex; being mothers and daughters. Much that defines their authenticity is also related to their experiences as Jews, and the dual emphasis on their Jewish backgrounds and female identities made them distinctive in the comedy world. Their struggles fill the screen in *Making Trouble*, along with their many triumphs, and always there are the jokes. We learn that laughter provides a way not only to cope with the tensions and conflicts of daily life but also to transcend them.

The gift of comedy that emanates from these Jewish women has been

to make us transcend our own daily lives as well and to see, through humor, alternative visions of who we could be if we, too, had the courage to challenge—and mock—the strictures that hold us back.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Sophie Tucker, *Some of These Days* (New York: Doubleday, 1945), 11.

<sup>2</sup> Quotes are from the Jewish Women's Archive documentary film, *Making Trouble: Three Generations of Jewish Women in Comedy* (2006), Rachel Talbot, director; Gail Reimer, executive producer.

<sup>3</sup> Joan Rivers in *Making Trouble*.

<sup>4</sup> "Behavior: Analyzing Jewish Comics," *Time* (2 October 1978); Samuel S. Janus, "The Great Jewish-American Comedians' Identity Crisis," *American Journal of Psychoanalysis* 40:3 (September 1980): 259-65. Among the many works on Jewish comedy, see Lawrence J. Epstein, *The Haunted Smile: The Story of Jewish Comedians in America* (New York: Public Affairs, 2001); Esther Romeyn and Jack Kugelmass, *Let There Be Laughter: Jewish Humor in America* (Chicago: Spertus Press, 1997); Sarah Blacher Cohen, ed., *Jewish Wry: Essays On Jewish Humor* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1987), 141-57. Also see Gerald Nachman, *Seriously Funny: The Rebel Comedians of the 1950s and 1960s* (New York: Pantheon, 2003).

<sup>5</sup> See Sarah Blacher Cohen, "The Unkosher Comediennes: From Sophie Tucker to Joan Rivers," in Cohen, ed., *Jewish Wry*, 105-24; June Sochen, "Fanny Brice and Sophie Tucker: Blending the Particular with the Universal," in Sara Blacher Cohen, ed., *From Hester Street to Hollywood: The Jewish-American Stage and Screen* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1983), 44-57; and June Sochen, *From Mae to Madonna: Women Entertainers in Twentieth-Century America* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1999); June Sochen, ed., *Women's Comic Visions* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1991). Also see June Sochen, "From Sophie Tucker to Barbra Streisand: Jewish Women Entertainers as Reformers," in *Talking Back: Images of Jewish Women in American Popular Culture* (ed. Joyce Antler; Hanover: Brandeis/University of New England Press, 1998), 68-84.

<sup>6</sup> Cohen, "The Unkosher Comediennes," 105-07.

<sup>7</sup> Sochen establishes the typology of "prey" and "predator." On Jewish women and comedy, also see Michael Bronski, "Funny Girls Talk Dirty: 'Shut Your Hole Honey, Mine's Making Money,'" *Boston Phoenix* (15-21 August 2003).

<sup>8</sup> See <http://jwa.org> for information on the Jewish Women's Archive projects.

<sup>9</sup> JWA, *Making Trouble*.

<sup>10</sup> Like her namesake, scholar-playwright Sarah Blacher Cohen loved to make people laugh. Even her academic presentations were filled with jokes, some of them surprisingly racy: she enjoyed offering audiences the choice of "the most vulgar or the least

vulgar” versions of her talks. See Irwin Richman, “11th Annual Conference Recap,” The Catskills Institute (27-28 August 2005). See also the website <http://catskills.brown.edu/confrep/11.html>.

<sup>11</sup> See Joyce Antler, *The Journey Home: How Jewish Women Shaped Modern America* (New York: Schocken, 1998).

<sup>12</sup> On Berg, see Glenn D. Smith, *Something on My Own: Gertrude Berg and American Broadcasting, 1929-1956* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2007); Joyce Antler, *You Never Call! You Never Write! A History of the Jewish Mother* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), chapter 2.

<sup>13</sup> As humor theorist Nancy Walker notes, women used humor to connect with one another and to share concerns about their oppression. See, for example, Nancy Walker, “Women’s Humor and Group Identity,” in Sochen, *Women’s Comic Visions*, 57-81.

<sup>14</sup> Gina Barreca, “Real stories, real laughter, real women,” *Ms.* (Summer 2004): 38-40.

<sup>15</sup> Hélène Cixous, “The Laugh of the Medusa,” in *New French Feminisms* (ed. Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron; New York: Schocken Books, 1981), 258.

<sup>16</sup> Sochen, “From Sophie Tucker to Barbra Streisand,” 69.

<sup>17</sup> Joanne Greene, “Molly Picon,” in *Jewish Women: A Comprehensive Historical Encyclopedia*, Jewish Women’s Archive. “JWA—Jewish Women in Comedy—Molly Picon.” Also see the website <http://jwa.org/discover/infocus/comedy/picon.html> (1 January 2010).

<sup>18</sup> Cited in Romeyn and Kugelmass, *Let There Be Laughter!*, 27.

<sup>19</sup> Jewish Women’s Archive Women of Valor exhibit, <http://jwa.org/exhibits/wov/picon/>.

<sup>20</sup> Greene, “Molly Picon”; “Molly Picon,” <http://jwa.org>.

<sup>21</sup> Barbara Grossman, *Funny Woman: The Life and Times of Fanny Brice* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), xi.

<sup>22</sup> Grossman, *Making Trouble*; Grossman, *Funny Woman*; Antler, *The Journey Home*, 147-50.

<sup>23</sup> Grossman, *Making Trouble*, and Grossman, “Fanny Brice.” *Jewish Women: A Comprehensive Historical Encyclopedia* (1 March 1 2009). Jewish Women’s Archive (1 January 2010). <http://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/brice-fanny>.

<sup>24</sup> See Antler, *The Journey Home*, 147-50; Grossman, *Funny Woman*, 27-29, 99, 170-72, 201, 208, 226.

<sup>25</sup> Cited in Sochen, “From Sophie Tucker to Barbra Streisand,” 72-73.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 73.

<sup>27</sup> Grossman, *Funny Woman*, 149.

<sup>28</sup> Cited in Norman Katlov, *The Fabulous Fanny*, <http://www.tcm.com/tcmdb/participant.jsp?spid=22123> (17 February 17, 2011).

<sup>29</sup> Sochen, “From Sophie Tucker to Barbra Streisand,” 73.

<sup>30</sup> This account of Tucker is taken from Antler, *The Journey Home*, 137-43; Antler, *You Never Call! You Never Write!*, 17-21; and Antler’s comments in *Making Trouble*.

<sup>31</sup> Rivers, *Making Trouble*.

<sup>32</sup> On Rivers, see Cohen, “The Unkosher Comediennes,” 105-24; Nachman, *Seriously Funny*, 591-625.

<sup>33</sup> Rivers, *Enter Talking*, 293.

<sup>34</sup> Nachman, *Seriously Funny*, 601.



- <sup>35</sup> Ibid., 268-69, 274.
- <sup>36</sup> Ibid., 608.
- <sup>37</sup> Ibid., 276-78, 298-99.
- <sup>38</sup> Rivers, *Enter Talking*, 341-42.
- <sup>39</sup> Rivers, *Making Trouble*.
- <sup>40</sup> Cohen, "The Unkosher Comediennes," 118.
- <sup>41</sup> Ibid., 120-21.
- <sup>42</sup> Ibid., 122.
- <sup>43</sup> Ibid., 119.
- <sup>44</sup> Nachman, *Seriously Funny*, 600.
- <sup>45</sup> Rivers, *Enter Talking*, 23-24.
- <sup>46</sup> On Gilda Radner, see Lauren Antler, "Gilda Radner," in *Notable American Women: A Biographical Dictionary, Completing the Twentieth Century* (ed. Susan Ware; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), 534-35.
- <sup>47</sup> Radner, *Making Trouble*.
- <sup>48</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>49</sup> See Antler, *The Journey Home*, 325-26, and Antler, *You Never Call! You Never Write!*, 193-95.
- <sup>50</sup> Wasserstein, *Making Trouble*.
- <sup>51</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>52</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>53</sup> Sochen, "From Sophie Tucker to Barbra Streisand," 68-84.
- <sup>54</sup> Cited in Andrew Wallenstein, "From This She Makes A Living?," *Hadassah Magazine* (June/July 2006). Accessed online October 1, 2009.
- <sup>55</sup> Thanks to comedian Lauren Antler for her insights on this question.
- <sup>56</sup> Susie Essman, cited in Dan Friedman, "High School Reunion: The Actress and Editor Visit Mt. Vernon High, 36 Years Later," *Forward* (21 October 2009). Online.
- <sup>57</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>58</sup> This discussion of Judy Gold is taken from Antler, *You Never Call! You Never Write!*, 249-52.
- <sup>59</sup> Cited in Debra Nussbaum Cohen, "Funny Girls: Gorgeous, Female and Profane—That's Today's Successful Female Stand-up Jewish Comics," *Jewish Women International* (2006). Online.
- <sup>60</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>61</sup> "So Laugh A Little," Jewish Women's Archive, Performance at Copacabana, New York City (14 March 2005); Antler, *You Never Call! You Never Write!*, 248.
- <sup>62</sup> <http://www.corykahaney.com/bio.html>.
- <sup>63</sup> Antler, *You Never Call, You Never Write!*, 253-54.
- <sup>64</sup> Mark Blankenship, "The J.A.P. Show," *Variety* (18 April 2007); Kirson videos, "Mom," "My Cookie's Gone," "The Jessy K Show," *YouTube*.

# Heckling the Divine: Woody Allen, the Book of Job, and Jewish Theology after the Holocaust

Jason Kalman

The so-called—it's become such a tiresome phrase—existential subjects to me are still the only subjects worth dealing with. Any time one deals with other subjects one is not aiming for the highest goal. One can be aiming at some very interesting things, but it's not the deepest thing for me. I don't think that one can aim more deeply than at the so-called existential themes, the spiritual themes. . . . I just feel that you must—if you're operating at the maximum of your capabilities—aim at very, very high material. And that to me would be the spiritual, existential realm. It's great when it's done realistically, and it's great when it's done poetically. But poetically is more intriguing for me.<sup>1</sup>

## INTRODUCTION

The biblical book of Job has troubled Jewish thinkers for more than two millennia. The story of the righteous sufferer has resonated even more strongly for its readers since the Holocaust. The book and its title character appear not infrequently in the creative oeuvre of Woody Allen, especially in his 1974 essay “The Scrolls.”<sup>2</sup> This article explores two issues: first, is there reason to take Allen's rewritten story of Job seriously, and second, if so, what does Allen's exegesis of the biblical tale offer the post-Holocaust reader? Not to give away the punch line, but an exploration of his explanation and interpretation of Job demonstrates that his comedy offers a serious theological discourse intended to confront the problem of maintaining the belief that God is just and compassionate in the face of the Holocaust.

## TAKING WOODY ALLEN SERIOUSLY

The problem with accepting Woody Allen as a critical thinker on Judaism is exacerbated by the frequent suggestion that he is a self-hating Jew who has done only harm to the perception of Jews in the mind of the movie-viewing public. The argument that Woody Allen is a self-hating Jew is unconvincing. He has admitted to self-hate, but he has denied that this is the result of his religious persuasion: “The reasons lie in totally other areas—like the way I look when I get up in the morning. Or that I can never read a road map.”<sup>3</sup> It is certain that more often than not his explicit depictions of Jews in his movies are

less than flattering.<sup>4</sup> The late Conservative rabbi Samuel Dresner raged: “The accepting Jewish audience of Allen’s writings and films has not only contributed to a betrayal of Jewish values, but to a betrayal of the Jewish people. For no one more than Allen has enabled so many to view the Jew, especially the religious Jew, in so corrupt a manner.”<sup>5</sup> But does a negative depiction of Jews in the films really make Allen self-hating? Scholars of Jewish humor have, by and large, rejected the idea that Jews who “invent, tell, and enjoy such jokes are masochistically attacking their own group and by extension themselves.”<sup>6</sup> If not as a self-hating Jew, then, how might Allen’s relationship to Judaism be understood?

Mark E. Bleiweiss has suggested that Allen’s critique of Judaism comes not out of self-hatred but out of ignorance of Judaism and its teachings. Commenting on the depiction of a character committing the double sin of eating a clearly *treif* [unkosher] pork chop on the fast day of Yom Kippur in *Radio Days* (1987), Bleiweiss comments: “While pointing to the neighbor’s blind observance of rituals like kashrut and fasting, which he neither believes in [n] or understands, Allen also reveals his own ignorance of the meaning of these Jewish traditions. . . . To people like the neighbor and Allen himself who do not understand the ethical value of such rituals, both fasting and keeping kosher appear foolish and unnecessary.”<sup>7</sup> Like those who prefer to see Allen as a self-hating Jew, Bleiweiss’s assumption of Allen’s ignorance allows for the all-too-easy dismissal of his critique and avoids serious confrontation with his attempts to deal with issues of religious belief.

By way of contrast, Ivan Kalmar has suggested an alternate way of understanding Allen’s relationship to Jewishness. He has categorized Allen among the “EJIs” (Embarrassed Jewish Individuals). EJIs are outwardly embarrassed by their Jewishness, and “The question that bothers the eji is: ‘Are they thinking of me as a Jew?’”<sup>8</sup> Among the fundamental characteristics of EJIs is their “intellectual preference for views that negate the Jewish ‘difference.’”<sup>9</sup> Allen fits quite neatly here. Central to his most serious essay, “Random Reflections of a Second-Rate Mind,” is a challenge to Jewish distinctiveness and a call for a certain type of universalism.<sup>10</sup> Readers of the essay were less than thrilled with his views, and the letters to the editor of *Tikkun*—where the article was first published—most certainly critiqued Allen for these “universalist” views. Although the essay is quite critical of various aspects of Jewish belief and traditions and was written in response to the negative reactions he received for criticizing the actions of Israel during the intifada in the *New York Times*, it suggests that Allen is invested in his Jewishness and in the well-being of the Jewish community.<sup>11</sup> This issue of investment is essential to dealing with

Allen's self-deprecatory humor and avoiding the self-hating Jew trap. In many ways the self-deprecatory nature of Allen's humor, which leads to accusations of self-hate, is the quintessentially Jewish characteristic of his comedy.

### JEWISH HUMOR AND THE PRESERVATION OF DIGNITY

Most scholars of Jewish humor trace its origins to the Jews of Eastern Europe in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and carried by their descendants to other lands of the diaspora.<sup>12</sup> This view does not negate that there is evidence of the comic in early Jewish texts including biblical, rabbinic, and medieval literature, but from an American perspective, it is the self-deprecatory sort of humor known from Yiddish literature and the like that has largely shaped the humor audiences have come to know.<sup>13</sup> Self-criticism was so much a part of Jewish humor that Sigmund Freud concluded in his *Wit and Its Relation to the Unconscious*, "This determination of self-criticism may make clear why it is that a number of the most excellent jokes of which we have shown here many specimens should have sprung into existence from the soil of Jewish national life. . . . Incidentally I do not know whether one often finds a people that makes merry so unreservedly over its own shortcomings."<sup>14</sup> In this particular type of humor, Jewish traits, beliefs, or concerns are treated comically and perhaps even blasphemously for their own sake, but, as Hillel Halkin has noted, the key aspect is that the teller of the joke identifies with and is invested in the person or group being mocked within the joke.

What value, then, is there in laughing, or causing others to laugh, at the foibles and beliefs of one's own ethnic or religious group? How does mocking themselves benefit the Jews? Sarah Blacher Cohen provides a succinct answer, "Jewish humor, however, is not only based on the masochistic characteristics of the Jews expressed in their self-critical jokes. It has also been a principal source of salvation. By laughing at their dire circumstances, Jews have been able to liberate themselves from them. Their humor has been a balance to counter external adversity and internal sadness."<sup>15</sup> Thus, Jewish humor served to help the community psychologically overcome persecution and suffering and, as Robert Alter suggests, to allow the maintenance of dignity in the face of persecution: "If in the tradition of Jewish humor suffering is understandably imagined as inevitable, it is also conceived as incongruous with dignity. . . . [I]t is not, after all, fitting for a man to be this pitiful creature with a blade of anguish in his heart and both feet entangled in a clanking chain of calamities."<sup>16</sup>

These two issues—the inevitability of suffering on the one hand and the maintenance of dignity on the other—prove to be at the heart of Allen's reading of Job. If Allen is writing as an invested member of the Jewish people, it

is valuable to avoid writing off his negative portrayals of Jews and Jewishness as self-hatred and to examine them as a legitimate critique of Jews, Judaism, and Jewishness. In exploring the book of Job, even through, or especially through, the mode of comedy, Allen takes direct aim at the core text of Jewish religious life and at traditional Jewish theodicy and raises important questions for understanding the nature of Jewish belief and theology after the Holocaust.

Allen's retelling of the story of Job is entirely concerned with allowing Job to retain his dignity by challenging God's integrity. It is most certainly consistent with Alter's description of Jewish humor in that the idea that Job's suffering may have meaning is fundamentally rejected: It is not the traditional divine punishment for sin, and it does not improve his character or his relationship with the deity. "Jokes aimed at God," writes Joseph Telushkin, "tend to be the gentlest in the Jewish tradition—ironic digs, rather than belly laughs. More than any other contemporary comedian, Woody Allen is the master of this genre."<sup>17</sup> But why joke at God's expense? In this case, Allen highlights the dissonance between traditional belief and the state of the world and offers a suggestion, if not an entirely satisfying solution, to how to maintain a relationship with God in the wake of the Holocaust. Humor of this sort offers the opportunity to respond to the apparent contradiction between God's providential role in Jewish life and Jewish suffering. If God acts in history, Jewish persecution does not take place without His knowledge and may even be the result of His actions. Jewish humor was understood as an appropriate response to persecution of Jews by non-Jewish powers, but what about when God appeared responsible for the persecution? In this sense, jokes about God afforded Jews the opportunity to soften blasphemy with wit, to raise serious questions about the nature of belief, and to laugh through the pain.

#### THE HOLOCASUT IN WOODY ALLEN'S THOUGHT

Allen has repeatedly commented that he writes about what he knows and what he has primarily captured is the life of the twentieth century American Jew who has broken with religious strictures to assimilate into American life, but who has not quite completed the transition.<sup>18</sup> On the way he has attacked hypocrisy in the Jewish clergy; critiqued ritual observance, Israeli military prowess, and Jewish theology; and ultimately distanced himself from the religious institutions of Jewish life.<sup>19</sup> Allen reported to his biographer Eric Lax that he had attended synagogue with his grandfather and Hebrew school until he was bar mitzvahed. Despite this, though, he was unmoved by either. His encounter with friends of other faiths left him unmoved by other organized religions like Catholicism as well.<sup>20</sup>

Despite his disillusionment with the trappings of organized religion, the experience of growing up in a Jewish family, in a largely Jewish neighborhood, attending a school with primarily Jewish classmates, most clearly became fodder for his comedy and moviemaking.<sup>21</sup> Further, while his parents were born in the United States, Allen's family helped care for relatives who survived the Holocaust. For Allen, as for many American Jews, the Holocaust became the defining event in the shaping of Jewish identity.<sup>22</sup> In his 1990 essay "Random Reflections of a Second-Rate Mind," Allen, responding to Elie Wiesel's repeated assurances in *Night* that the survivors did not contemplate revenge, comments that he always found it funny that while the survivors did not contemplate it, someone who had lived in the United States, who always had food on the table and a warm place to sleep, continued to think "of nothing but revenge."<sup>23</sup>

It is evident in his movies that the Holocaust was never far from Woody Allen's mind, and he uses comedy to broach the serious questions the catastrophe raises. Allen biographer Nancy Pogel claims "his films are often haunted by a post-Holocaust sensibility."<sup>24</sup> The place of the Holocaust in Allen's work has been well documented: "Throughout his movies, especially *Shadows and Fog* (1992) and *Crimes and Misdemeanors* (1990), as well as in his seminal essay, 'Random Reflections of a Second-Rate Mind,' the comedian and filmmaker Woody Allen has joined the ranks of theologians and Jews in the latter part of the twentieth century who ask troubling questions concerning the Holocaust and its implications."<sup>25</sup> More than a decade earlier, Morley T. Feinstein had concluded: "The single most important fact in Woody Allen's Jewish identity is the Holocaust. It's his philosophical touchstone, his constant reference point, his favorite metaphor."<sup>26</sup> A survey of his work suggests that the "big questions" bothered Allen from the very beginning.

In 1977's *Annie Hall*, Allen's character takes his girlfriend to see Max Ophul's *The Sorrow and the Pity*, which examines French collaboration with the Nazis, and feels triumphant when he meets Annie, after they have broken up, leaving the same film with her date. In 1983's *Zelig* the issue of assimilation is taken up with a title character who, like a chameleon, takes on the identity of those around him in an effort to fit in. The most poignant scene may be that of Zelig standing on the dais with Hitler at a rally, having joined the Nazi party. In 1986's *Hannah and Her Sisters* Frederick, the alienated artist, in response to a television show that treated Auschwitz as a historically unique event, comments that he is surprised that such events, given the state of the world, don't happen more often. Here Frederick is perfectly in line with Allen's own thoughts. Writing in early 1990, he noted that already in his midteens he had

concluded that Anne Frank's view that people were basically good was nonsense and had accepted the view that "people were no damned good." Living inside of people of all creeds and colors is "a worm of self-preservation, of fear, greed, and an animal will to power."<sup>27</sup> Given this truth, further destruction was inevitable. After all, "History had been filled with unending examples of bestiality, differing only cosmetically."<sup>28</sup> Allen's view is echoed again by Harry, in 1997's *Deconstructing Harry*, who comments on the inevitability of another genocide more severe than the Holocaust: "Records are made to be broken."

Allen's most extensive cinematic treatments of the Holocaust appear in 1989's *Crimes and Misdemeanors* and 1991's *Shadows and Fog*. In the former Allen's character Cliff Stern is shooting a documentary about Holocaust survivor and philosophy professor Louis Levy. Throughout his time in the concentration camp and after his liberation, he affirmed life, until one day he inexplicably walked out a window, exemplifying "the long-term emotional damage wrought by the Holocaust."<sup>29</sup>

In *Shadows and Fog* the Holocaust is clearly, though never explicitly, referenced. Even the title calls to mind the 1955 French documentary short film, *Night and Fog*, directed by Alain Resnais, made ten years after the liberation of Nazi concentration camps. Allen's movie describes a world in which the Holocaust can occur: One foggy night, a malevolent evil man terrorizes a city by killing random victims. Various groups take justice into their own hands in an attempt to capture the stalker. Allen's character, nebbishy accountant Kleinman, is awakened and drafted into a group although he never quite understands what is going on. Various innocents are gathered up because the vigilantes seek a scapegoat. An innocent Jewish family is captured. Kleinman is subject to antisemitic taunts, as when his boss says that he is "a slimy vermin more suited to extermination than life on this planet."

While Allen's movies have been studied for Holocaust references, his essays and short stories have received significantly less attention. In his entry on the Holocaust in *Woody, From Antz to Zelig*, Richard Schwartz notes that Allen's April 1971 essay in *The New Yorker*, "The Schmeed Memoirs," satirized Nazi war criminal Albert Speer's *Inside the Third Reich*, telling the story of Hitler's barber who considered "loosening the Fuhrer's neck-napkin and allowing some tiny hairs to get down his back," until he lost his nerve.<sup>30</sup> July 1976's "Remembering Needleman" (*The New Republic*), offers an obituary for Sandor Needleman, a composite character melded from mid-twentieth century leftist intellectuals. Attracted to the "Brown Shirts" because the color offset his eyes, he rationalized his amoral behavior by arguing against existence: "the only thing that was real was his IOU to the bank for six million marks."<sup>31</sup>

From Schwartz's presentation what becomes manifest is that, if we disregard a few passing remarks on Nazis in his stand-up comedy, it is in his short essays that Allen first began to treat the implications of the Holocaust.<sup>32</sup> With this in mind, Allen's retelling of the biblical story of Job as found in his 1974 essay "The Scrolls" is worth exploration as a response to the theological questions raised by the Holocaust. As is discussed in more detail below, exploring the book of Job became a common way for Jewish writers to examine the Holocaust by paralleling the experiences of the biblical character with those of the victims. The question under discussion, then, is should Allen's retold biblical tale be understood as part of the broader trend in contemporary Jewish theology?

### THE BIBLICAL BOOK OF JOB

Allen's essay opens by describing the discovery of ancient scrolls found by a shepherd in a cave in the Gulf of Aqaba. The introduction satirizes the discovery of and controversy surrounding the Dead Sea Scrolls.<sup>33</sup> Among the scrolls Allen's archaeologists discover is a version of the book of Job and an account of the binding of Isaac (Gen 22:1-24). The focus here is on the former, but first a summary of the biblical book of Job may prove helpful for comparison's sake.

The biblical book of Job tells the story of a pious man of ambiguous ethnic and religious origins, who, because of his piety, is rewarded by God with wealth and a large family. The prologue to the biblical book of Job takes the reader to a royal court scene. On the particular day described, along with the *b'nei ha-elohim* [often translated as angels, but more appropriately *gods*]<sup>34</sup> who appeared before God, came "the satan"—small "t," small "s." God questions the satan as to his previous whereabouts, and the satan indicates he had been out and about on the earth. God asks the satan if he has taken notice of Job, whom he explicitly describes as pious, upright, and blameless. The satan declares that he has seen him and challenges God's assertion of his piety, declaring that Job serves God only because He regularly rewards him. In the face of such a challenge God allows the satan to take away Job's wealth and to kill his family to ostensibly test Job.

Despite the tremendous loss, Job remains loyal to God. God declares that the satan made him destroy Job without cause, but the satan convinces God to allow a second test, this time allowing Job's health to be attacked. As a result of his painful sores, Job covers himself in ash and continues to mourn his losses. Only after this second challenge does he begin to curse. By and large what concerns him is the fact that his suffering seems to come without justice. It does not appear to him to be a punishment, since he is blameless. He demands



that God come forth and explain the situation to him. In the meantime, Job is visited by four friends, each of whom, to varying degrees, suggests that Job is not blameless and that he should repent to bring about an end to the suffering. Job refuses to surrender, and eventually God appears in a whirlwind and blasts Job with a series of questions, each designed to show God's power and Job's weakness. In the face of the divine onslaught Job repents, and he is rewarded by God with replacement children and double the wealth he had before—a very happy ending.

### JEWISH INTERPRETATION OF THE BOOK OF JOB

For most of the 2,000-year history of Jewish interpretation of the book, interpreters have tended to align themselves with Job's friends, this despite God's own explicit declaration of Job's piety and his chastisement of the friends. In large part the interpreters had little choice but to go this route. Jewish theology was heavily shaped by the book of Deuteronomy, which assured its readers that the righteous would be rewarded and the wicked punished. The rabbis and their heirs consistently read historical events through this lens. The exile to Babylonia, the destruction of the two Temples, the crusades, the Inquisition and expulsion from the Iberian Peninsula, all were punishments for a sinful people.

By contrast, the biblical book of Job suggested an alternate possibility for the cause of suffering—God did what God pleased and he could do so simply because he was God. Although consistent with many depictions of the gods of the Ancient Near East, this was not the message Jewish readers took from the Bible. They preferred a world run with divine justice even while their experience of the world might suggest a certain dissonance between theory and practice. In order to realign the book of Job with the deuteronomistic view of the world, the rabbis read the story of Job extremely carefully to find an explanation. While not all the sages of the Mishnaic and Talmudic periods agreed that Job was a sinner, the vast majority did.

The harshest critique of Job taught that he was one of three servants to the Pharaoh who sought a way to curb the growth of the Israelite population in Egypt. When the Pharaoh recommended the killing of children, Job remained silent and did not oppose the immoral decree.<sup>35</sup> In addition, Job was accused of having come into the world only to receive his reward<sup>36</sup> and of uttering a variety of heresies,<sup>37</sup> including denying the resurrection of the dead and the existence of divine providence.<sup>38</sup> Furthermore, in his dialogues he challenged God's authority,<sup>39</sup> attempted to place himself on the same level as God,<sup>40</sup> and generally expressed incorrect views of the deity.<sup>41</sup>

As should be clear, it was in Job's questioning of divine justice in the middle chapters of the book that the early rabbis found cause for Job's suffering. They were troubled by the harshness of his protest, and to them, at least, his punishment appeared appropriate.

The medieval readers of the text responded similarly. Maimonides, the twelfth century Spanish philosopher, responded to Job by asserting that his sufferings resulted from his own lack of wisdom. He presented Job as an evolving philosopher who hurled baseless accusations at God because he simply did not understand the true nature of the universe.<sup>42</sup>

The mystical tradition responded likewise to Job's predicament, asserting that Job's suffering resulted, in part, from erroneous thought. It blames Job's suffering primarily on the mystical notion of the transmigration of the souls—that is, reincarnation. Job was, in fact, righteous, but he did not know he was being punished because his soul was faulty. It carried blemishes imposed by earlier users of it; by bearing the suffering, Job could redeem it.<sup>43</sup>

These interpretative trends, which blamed Job, continued to be perpetuated by Jewish thinkers including Hermann Cohen and others well into the twentieth century. How then, does Woody Allen's treatment of Job compare to this trend?

## WOODY ALLEN INTERPRETS THE BOOK OF JOB

What follows is a commentary on Allen's retold Job story. To avoid issues of copyright infringement, the original material is infrequently cited. Readers of this article are recommended to read the commentary alongside the original text, "The Scrolls," as it appears in *Without Feathers*.<sup>44</sup>

In the opening paragraph Allen explains that God made a bet with the satan to test Job's fidelity and caused him harm, including physical punishment and destruction of his property. Job's immediate reaction is to ask God why He has acted thusly. Here Allen highlights several important issues: (1) God caused Job to suffer as a result of a bet with the satan, not because of anything inherently wrong with Job. (2) God is not omniscient; the outcome of the test is unknown to Him. (3) In contrast to the biblical text, Job immediately begins to protest from the onset of the first test.

In the second paragraph, in response to Job's question, God snaps the tablets of the commandments closed on Job's nose. This is followed by a description of Job's wife crying about what she has witnessed. God then "mercifully" has an angel strike her on the head with a polo mallet and subjects her to the first six of the ten plagues. Job is then described as angry, and his wife tears her garment as a traditional sign of mourning.

The treatment of Job's wife here is reminiscent of a classic Yiddish proverb: If you want to forget all your troubles, put on a shoe that is too tight. Here God mercifully distracts Job's wife from her *tsuris* [troubles]. Or so it seems. Allen here has added an interesting twist. In contrast to the biblical text (Job 2:9), where the wife tells Job to "Curse God and die" and Job puts her in her place ("You speak as one of the foolish women"), Allen gives us a sense of her emotions. She is allowed to weep and allowed to be angry about the situation. Allen has elsewhere commented concerning his feelings about Mrs. Job:

So that leaves Job's wife. My favorite woman in all of literature. Because when her cringing, put-upon husband asked the Lord "Why me?" and the Lord told him to shut up and mind his own business and that he shouldn't even dare ask, Job accepted it, but the Missus, already in the earth at that point,<sup>45</sup> had previously scored with a quotable line of unusual dignity and one that Job would have been far too obsequious to come up with: "Curse God and die" was the way she put it. And I loved her for it because she was too much of her own person to let herself be shamelessly abused by some vain and sadistic Holy Spirit.<sup>46</sup>

Allen shows an appreciation for her protest and her ability to maintain her dignity in the face of horrendous suffering.<sup>47</sup> In the retelling of the story, though, God distracts her with a polo mallet before she has the opportunity to encourage Job to maintain his dignity by cursing and to defend her own integrity. From Allen's perspective, she is heroic in the biblical text, Job is not. As a result, in the remainder of Allen's retold story of Job, Job is unlike his biblical namesake and more like his wife.

But things only get worse for Allen's Job: his pastures dry up and his tongue cleaves to the roof of his mouth, causing people to laugh when he speaks. And then the story changes direction:

And once the Lord, while wrecking havoc upon his faithful servant, came too close and Job grabbed him around the neck and said, "Aha! Now I got you! Why art thou giving Job a hard time, eh? Eh? Speak up!"

And the Lord said. "Er, look—that's my neck you have. . . . Could you let me go?"

But Job showed no mercy and said, "I was doing very well 'til you came along. I had myrrh and fig trees in abundance and a coat of many colors with two pairs of pants of many colors. Now look."

Note here that Allen's God does not appear to respond to Job's question. In contrast to the biblical text, God, not the satan, causes Job's suffering, and while He causes the trouble He demonstrates His fallibility by getting "too close to Job" and getting caught by him unintentionally. This provides Job

with the opportunity to confront God directly. He gets to ask the questions and to demand answers. The roles are reversed. Job, who had previously been caught by God, now has a hold of God and will not let go. The narrative concludes with God attempting to extract Himself from the situation by demanding, as He does in the biblical text, to know why Job thinks he can ask for answers from the One who created the heavens and the earth and all that are in them. Job will not accept God's questions as answers, and while he releases God he reminds Him: "Thine is the kingdom and the power and glory. Thou has a good job. Don't blow it."

Here Allen has Job reject outright the answer to the quandary posed by the biblical text. "I am God and that's the way it is" is not just an unsatisfying answer; it is, in Allen's mind, an unacceptable one. If God is "some vain and sadistic Holy Spirit," He must be called on it. Job's final line demands appropriate leadership from God. Given divine power, there must be divine responsibility. Until now, at least according to Allen, God has not been doing his job properly.

In 1975's *Love and Death* Woody Allen's character, Boris Grushenko, comments, "If it turns out that there is a God, I don't think that he's evil. I think that the worst you can say about him is that basically he's an underachiever." Allen, by contrast, thinks God can be evil, but in doing so He is underachieving, and Allen's Job boldly calls God's attention to this fact.

By contrast, in a more recent film, *Whatever Works* (2009), Allen references Job as well. In this case the mother-in-law of the lead character, Boris Yellnikoff, describes a series of tragedies that have befallen her, including losing her house and divorcing. Boris responds, "Christ, this is like Job. No locusts?" The woman continues describing how she spent all her money on medical bills to cure a case of shingles and how she prayed to God constantly asking for help. Boris again responds, "Let me guess what happened, your shingles got worse." She explains how all she asked for from God was a sign, "Lord, just give me one sign that all my suffering is for a purpose. . . . Please, God, just say something. Break your silence. I can't take any more misery!" From Boris she gets, "Nothing, right?" The dialogue encapsulates precisely what should be expected from a Woody Allen character. If there is a God, He makes the situation worse or simply remains silent when needed most. This silence may demonstrate that there is no God, but if there is a God he must be called on to behave justly and compassionately.

Writing about Allen's theological imagination, Gary Commins has suggested that "Allen comes out of the Jewish tradition which, from its scriptural roots, has poked and prodded the powerful. He turns this protest against

a powerful God, saying ‘Thou hast a good job. Don’t blow it.’ *If* you are a powerful God, act like it and straighten things up! Again and again, human suffering and the omnipresence of death haunt him. He wants a God who will agonize and act with love in response to the human condition.”<sup>48</sup> Although Commins may oversimplify the Jewish tradition of protest, the question he raises concerning what Allen wants of God is worthy of discussion.<sup>49</sup>

“The Scrolls” does not describe what Allen wants of God but rather is the logical outcome of Allen’s basic assumptions based on human experience. Given the Holocaust and so many other cases of human suffering, it is implausible that the universe is controlled by a just God. Allen’s essay is descriptive rather than prescriptive. This is not Allen’s wishes but rather an observation. If there is a god, He is falling down on the Job (double entendre intended); but Allen does not assume God’s existence. In fact, it is the absence of God that scares him: “The empty universe is another item that scares me, along with eternal annihilation, aging, terminal illness and the absence of God in a hostile, raging void. I always feel that as long as man is finite he will never truly be relaxed.”<sup>50</sup>

Elsewhere in his oeuvre Allen suggests a more appropriate answer for God to give Job. In the movie *Manhattan*, Woody Allen and his young lover, played by Mariel Hemingway, are riding in a horse-drawn carriage through Central Park. She says to him, “You know you’re crazy about me.” He replies, “I am. You’re . . . You’re God’s answer to Job. You would have ended all argument between them. He’d have said, ‘I do a lot of terrible things but I can also make one of these.’ And Job would’ve said ‘OK, you win.’” The response to suffering in the world is to seek out those things that make life worth living—like beauty and love. As Prof. Levy, the Holocaust survivor in *Crimes and Misdemeanors*, claims,

Events unfold so unpredictably, so unfairly. Human happiness does not seem to be included in the design of creation. It is only we, with our capacity to love, that give meaning to the indifferent universe. And yet, most human beings seem to have the ability to keep trying and even try to find joy from simple things, like their family, their work, and from the hope that future generations might understand more. Ultimately, human beings have to find a way to go on, even if God is evil or indifferent to them.

On a side note, it is worth pointing out that Allen does not seem entirely convinced of this answer. After all, the professor commits suicide in the film, and in *Love and Death* Boris comments, “To love is to suffer. To avoid suffering, one must not love. But, then one suffers from not loving. Therefore, to love is

to suffer, not to love is to suffer, to suffer is to suffer. To be happy is to love, to be happy, then, is to suffer, but suffering makes one unhappy, therefore, to be unhappy one must love, or love to suffer, or suffer from too much happiness—I hope you're getting this down."

Although love can bring suffering, it is among the three responses to suffering that allow it to be transcended, if only for a short while. According to critic Richard A. Blake, Allen suggests a turn to art if love is too elusive. Artists withdraw into the world of the imagination and create their own universe, and thus they "give purpose to the creatures" therein.<sup>51</sup> When this fails, a person might turn to religion. The difficulty with the biblical book of Job is that as a religious text its teachings are unsatisfying. Allen, the artist, has created his own biblical world and given new purpose to Job and his wife: they are the official voice of protest. Allen's Job, despite being God's victim, is prepared to give God another chance but does not give up the protest. He releases Him to go back to ruling the universe with the direct assertion that God should not "blow it."

The protest aspect of the story should not be overlooked. The biblical Job repents in dust and ashes and gives up his protest; Allen's does not. In this it is consistent with Allen's turn to a Holocaust metaphor to explain life. In a 1977 interview with *Esquire* Allen remarked, "Life is a concentration camp. You're stuck here, and there's no way out, and you can only rage impotently against your persecutors."<sup>52</sup> While Job's protest is actual, for Allen, finding love and creating art are likewise a form of protest against a universe that consistently persecutes those who inhabit it. The position is somewhat ambiguous, though. It is unclear if this is an optimistic view—that is, the suffering can be overcome, although not entirely—or a pessimistic view, as Mark T. Conrad has suggested: In "the end Allen seems to tell us that, instead of discovering and creating real meaning and value (through relationship and artistic creativity, for example), all we can ever really hope to do is distract ourselves from, or deceive ourselves about, the meaninglessness of our lives, the terrifying nature of the universe, and the horrible anticipation of our personal annihilation in death."<sup>53</sup> A more optimistic view is offered by Marc S. Reisch. In a thoughtful study of Allen's first two volumes of collected essays, he concludes, "The direction of Allen's humor is to create sense where there is no sense and to find hope where there was none."<sup>54</sup> That Allen continues to go on living suggests that the method, although its sense of the world is hard to evaluate, is effective.<sup>55</sup> In "The Scrolls," Job protests the meaninglessness of suffering; by writing "The Scrolls," Allen does.

## POST-HOLOCAUST INTERPRETATION OF THE BOOK OF JOB

Throughout history Jewish intellectuals used the book of Job as the jumping-off point for discussions of Jewish individual and communal suffering. Certainly no event of modernity has had the kind of impact on Jewish theological discourse as the Holocaust, and the use of Job as a stand-in for the victims of the Holocaust has become a dominant trope in the writings of Jewish theologians, including J. B. Soloveitchik, Eliezer Berkowitz, Martin Buber, and many others. Given Allen's biography and the significant place of the Holocaust in his work, the question is, how does Allen's retelling of Job compare to other post-Holocaust interpretations of it?

When contrasted with the exegetical tradition, Allen's retelling of the Job story seems blasphemous. The tradition worked hard to defend God, even at the expense of Job. Allen exalts Job at the expense of God. In so doing, though, his comments on the nature of God fit perfectly in the realm of Jewish theology in the wake of the Holocaust. In interpreting Job in this way, he points directly at the difficulty of accepting God as omnipotent, omniscient, and just in the wake of the mass suffering of the Holocaust. Like Allen, most Jewish theologians could not accept a theology that explained the suffering of the Holocaust by blaming the victim. Parallel to the story of Job, post-Holocaust theologians could not accept the traditional interpretation that explained away God's actions in the book of Job by claiming that Job had been worthy of punishment. The closest parallel to Allen's conclusion is found in Elie Wiesel's retelling of the book of Job, where he too sought to maintain the dignity of Job and the Holocaust victims his story represents. It should be noted, however, that Wiesel is only one example of many Jewish writers who respond similarly to Job in their attempts to confront the suffering of the Holocaust.

In Wiesel's 1976 essay, "Job: Our Contemporary," Job is a stand-in for Wiesel, for Holocaust survivors generally, and for Israel.<sup>56</sup> Wiesel criticized Job for acquiescing when confronted by God. Like Job he continued in his writings to challenge God. He did not deny God, his faith remained, but his relationship with God was built on protest. Wiesel could not forgive Job for recanting and relenting:

God spoke to Job of everything except that which concerned Him. . . .  
 And yet, instead of becoming indignant, Job declared himself satisfied.  
 . . . He asked for nothing more; as far as he was concerned, justice had  
 been done. . . . No sooner had God spoken than Job repented. . . . And  
 so, there was Job, our hero, our standard-bearer, a broken, defeated  
 man. On his knees, having surrendered unconditionally.<sup>57</sup>

Wiesel could not accept this conclusion. Using the argument of biblical critics

that the epilogue may be a later addition to the text, Wiesel offers an alternative ending: "I prefer to think that the Book's true ending was lost. That Job died without having repented, without having humiliated himself; that he succumbed to his grief an uncompromising and whole man."<sup>58</sup> Wiesel, like Allen, rejects the undignified and repentant Job. Both prefer a Job who continued to protest divine injustice, what Wiesel calls Job's "desperate act of courage." Wiesel's protest against Job's end resulted as well from his encounter with other survivors. He noted that he was "preoccupied with Job, especially in the years after the war. In those days he could be seen on every road of Europe. Wounded, robbed, mutilated. Certainly not happy or resigned."<sup>59</sup>

While Allen's tone might appear blasphemous, certainly his depiction of God and his demand that God behave justly are not. His Job, like Wiesel's, challenges God but preserves his own dignity. This is consistent with a Jewish post-Holocaust theology that does not relieve God of His responsibility for His role in the Holocaust but encourages renewing the relationship. For context's sake it is worth noting, for example, Irving Greenberg, who has argued that the divine covenant must be voluntarily renewed in the wake of the Holocaust because with the Holocaust God invalidated the contract: "I submit that the covenant was broken but the Jewish people, released from its obligations, chose voluntary to take it on again and renew it. God was in no position to command anymore [after the Holocaust] but the Jewish people was so in love with the dream of redemption that it volunteered to carry on with its mission."<sup>60</sup>

Note that Allen's comment concerning God being a sadistic Holy Spirit does not appear in the comedic essay, but in a "serious" article intended to respond to the charge of Jewish self-hatred. While it is clear that he sees God in the book of Job in this way, the material in "The Scrolls" is somewhat softer. What we are left with, though, is Allen's description: God is fallible and callous and apparently indifferent. In this he is not alone among modern Jewish thinkers. In Martin Buber's third lecture, *The Dialogue between Heaven and Earth*, the philosopher evoked a cruel God. He suggested that religious thinkers could not make demands on survivors of the Holocaust: "Dare we recommend to the survivors of Auschwitz, the Job of the gas chambers: 'Give thanks unto the Lord, for He is good; for His mercy endureth forever?'" The only answer that the biblical Job received was God's nearness, that he know God again. "Nothing is explained, nothing adjusted; wrong has not become right, nor cruelty kindness."<sup>61</sup> Responding to his own question, Buber suggested that the time would come when he and other survivors would "recognize again our cruel and merciful God."<sup>62</sup>



## CONCLUSION

Allen's Job, the innocent victim, heroically catches God by the neck and takes advantage of the moment to put God in his place. In this, the victim retains his dignity while confronting a powerful persecutor. The text, as humor often is, is shocking in its depictions and in its inversion of roles: God becomes laughable in his actions as the classic depiction of Him, as omnipotent, omniscient, and just, is thrown out the window but Job, in his protest, becomes heroic. In Allen's retelling, Job behaves the way God should: protesting injustice and acting compassionately (it is Allen's Job, after all, who releases God unharmed while God did not behave this way to him).

Allen's depiction of God as having acted capriciously with Job stems from the same set of questions asked in explicit works of post-Holocaust thought and comes to similar conclusions. In the movie *Stardust Memories*, Allen's character utters the oft-repeated line "To you, I'm an atheist. To God, I'm the loyal opposition." In this, he places himself on a team with many modern Jewish writers. There is no doubt that Allen's Job, perhaps as a stand-in for Allen himself, exemplifies this role quite exceptionally. In Plato's *Cratylus* Socrates tells us that "Even the gods like jokes." One only hopes, for Allen's sake, that this is true of the Jewish God too.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Woody Allen, quoted in Stig Björkman, *Woody Allen on Woody Allen* (London: Faber and Faber, 1995), 211.

<sup>2</sup> "The Scrolls," *The New Republic* (31 August 1974): 18-19. Reprinted in Allen's second collection of essays, *Without Feathers* (New York: Random House, 1975), 24-28.

<sup>3</sup> Woody Allen, "Random Reflections of a Second-Rate Mind," *Tikkun* (January/February 1990): 15.

<sup>4</sup> Noted film critic Pauline Kael commented concerning Allen's *Stardust Memories*, "The Jewish self-hatred that spills out in this movie could be a great subject, but all it does is spill out." Quoted in Marion Meade, *The Unruly Life of Woody Allen* (New York: Scribner, 2000), 154.

<sup>5</sup> Samuel Dresner, "Woody Allen and the Jews," originally published in *Midstream Magazine* (December 1992) and reprinted in *Perspectives on Woody Allen* (ed. R. R. Curry; New York: G. K. Hall, 1996), 191.

<sup>6</sup> "Exploring the Thesis of the Self-Deprecating Jewish Sense of Humor," in *Semites and Stereotypes* (ed. A. Ziv and A. Zajdman; Westport: Greenwood, 1993), 29.

<sup>7</sup> Mark E. Bleiweiss, "Self-Deprecation and the Jewish Humor of Woody Allen," originally published in *Jewish Spectator* (Winter 1989) and reprinted in Curry, *Perspectives on Woody Allen*, 207-08. Bleiweiss's argument does not stand up to scrutiny. Bleiweiss's turn to the ethical value of the rituals in actuality misses Allen's critique of them and even the key issue regarding them in the first place. These are not only rituals that

need to be enacted but are, more importantly, Divine commands that must be fulfilled. Allen's concern as framed in this part of *Radio Days* is one to which he consistently returns: Is there a Commander who rewards and punishes those who fulfill the commandments or sin by transgressing them? Allen commented in an interview with filmmaker Stig Björkman concerning the murderer Judah in the Allen film *Crimes and Misdemeanors*: "We live in a world where there's nobody to punish you, if you don't punish yourself. . . . If he doesn't choose to punish himself then he's gotten away with it." Björkman, *Woody Allen on Woody Allen*, 212. In *Radio Days* the question is not about whether the rituals make a person more or less ethical but about the fact that that the neighbor has broken the connection between God and the rituals. In the words of the neighbor, "the problem is not between man . . . and some imaginary super being." The neighbor does not believe in God, so the need to fulfill the commandments, to repent of sins, is muted. Bleiweiss, offering apologetics in place of explanations for the commandments, leaves God out entirely.

<sup>8</sup> Ivan Kalmar, *The Trotsky's, Freuds, and Woody Allens* (Toronto: Viking, 1993), 13-14. It is worth noting biographer Eric Lax's similar assessment in discussing Allen *qua* Jew: "The tension and humor in Woody's work come from the anxiety produced in him by wanting what he doesn't have and by the discomfort the world inflicts on him for being the thing he is." *Woody Allen: A Biography* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1991), 165.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>10</sup> See note 2 above.

<sup>11</sup> Woody Allen, "Am I Reading the Papers Correctly," *New York Times* (28 January 1988): A27.

<sup>12</sup> That is the self-deprecatory humor often identified as "Jewish humor."

<sup>13</sup> For discussion of "early" Jewish humor, see, along with the essays collected in this volume, Israel Knox, "The Origins of Jewish Humor," in *Holy Laughter: Essays on Religion in the Comic Perspective* (ed. M. C. Hyers; New York: Seabury Press, 1969), 150-65, and, more recently, Hillel Halkin, "Why Jews Laugh at Themselves," *Commentary* 121:4 (April 2006): 47-54. On the appropriation of nineteenth century East European Jewish humor by American Jewish comics, see Albert Goldman, "Laughtermakers," in *Jewish Wry: Essays on Jewish Humor* (ed. S. Blacher Cohen; Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987): 80-88.

<sup>14</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Wit and Its Relation to the Unconscious* (trans. A. A. Brill; New York: Moffat Yard, 1916), 166-67. As to Freud's incidental question, Christie Davis and others have identified this trait with the humor produced by many ethnic minorities. Thus Jewish humor "is a special case of a more general phenomenon, namely, the asymmetry between the humor of culturally dominant majorities and the humor of culturally subservient minority groups." Christie Davies, "Exploring the Thesis of the Self Deprecating Jewish Sense of Humor," in Ziv and Zajdman, *Semites and Stereotypes*, 29. Allen is quite familiar with Freud's work on humor. It is referenced explicitly in the opening to *Annie Hall*. For discussion of Allen and Freud, see Sam B. Girgus, "Philip Roth and Woody Allen: Freud and the Humor of the Repressed," in Ziv and Zajdman, *Semites and Stereotypes*, 121-30; and, Cesare Musatti, "Humour as Jewish Vocation and the Work of Woody Allen," in *Freud and Judaism* (ed. David Meghna; London: Karnac Books, 1993), 103-13.

<sup>15</sup> Sarah Blacher Cohen, "Introduction: The Varieties of Jewish Humor," in Blacher Cohen, ed., *Jewish Wry*, 5.

<sup>16</sup> Robert Alter, "Jewish Humor and the Domestication of Myth," in Blacher Cohen, *Jewish Wry*, 26. On this psychological aspect of Jewish humor, see Avner Ziv, "Psychosocial Aspects of Jewish Humor in Israel and in the Diaspora," in *Jewish Humor* (ed. Avner Ziv; London: Transaction Publishers, 1997), 47-74.

<sup>17</sup> Joseph Telushkin, *Jewish Humor: What the Best Jewish Jokes Say about the Jews* (New York: Harper Collins, 1992), 143.

<sup>18</sup> Commenting on the character of Judah in *Crimes and Misdemeanors*, Allen offered, "Well, Judah's problem and its relation to religious teachings and religious belief is significant, and the only religion that I feel I can write about with any kind of accuracy is the Jewish religion." Björkman, *Woody Allen on Woody Allen*, 213.

<sup>19</sup> By way of contrast, Allen has not distanced himself entirely from institutions important to the American Jewish community. He was, for example, among the signatories to the list of major supporters of the National Political Action Committee at its founding in 1982 by businessman Marvin Josephson. NatPAC was intended to support American political candidates who supported Israel.

<sup>20</sup> Lax, *Woody Allen*, 40-41.

<sup>21</sup> The extensive "list" of Jewish topics and issues Allen has discussed in his movies, essays, and stand-up are treated approvingly in Morley T. Feinstein, "Woody Allen and Jewish Experience," *Jewish Spectator* (Spring 1984): 47-48. Canadian-Jewish novelist Mordecai Richler concluded that it is "fair to say that just about everything Woody Allen has produced has been enriched by his experience of having been born and raised as an urban Jew in America." "Woody," originally published in *Playboy* (December 1991) and reprinted in Richler's *Belling The Cat: Essays, Reports and Opinions* (Toronto: Alfred A. Knopf Canada, 1998), 62.

<sup>22</sup> The broader events of the Second World War certainly left scars on Allen. In *Radio Days* the character Biff Baxter warns people to keep an eye out for German planes or submarines off the coast of New York. This theme appeared more than twenty years earlier as part of Allen's stand-up routines where he noted that the German submarines had been destroyed by the pollution in the bathing area at Coney Island. This latter material is included in the routine "Brooklyn" available on side 1, track 2 of the recording "Woody Allen: Standup Comic, 1964-1968," (New York: Rhino, 1999). In an interview concerning the autobiographical nature *Radio Days* Allen pointed out that he explicitly remembered going to the beach to look for German aircraft and boats (Björkman, *Woody Allen on Woody Allen*, 158).

<sup>23</sup> Allen, "Random Reflections," 13.

<sup>24</sup> Nancy Pogel, *Woody Allen* (Boston: Twayne, 1987), 25.

<sup>25</sup> Mashey Bernstein, "'My Worst Fears Realized': Woody Allen and the Holocaust," in Curry, *Perspectives on Woody Allen*, 218. See also the discussion in Graham McCann, *Woody Allen: New Yorker* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990), 154-57.

<sup>26</sup> Feinstein, "Woody Allen and Jewish Experience," 48.

<sup>27</sup> Allen, "Random Reflections," 71.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> Richard A. Schwartz, *Woody, From Antz to Zelig* (Westport: Greenwood, 2000), 121.

<sup>30</sup> For discussion of the “memoir,” see Maurice Yacowar, *Losers Take All: The Comic Art of Woody Allen* (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1979), 83-84.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 89-90.

<sup>32</sup> References to Nazis, Hitler, Himmler, and Eichmann are common in Allen’s stand-up comedy from the latter half of the 1960s. Bernstein correctly suggests: “For Allen, the Holocaust serves two purposes. On the one hand, more than any other historical event, it is his most ongoing referent. He often uses it, without further musings, as the punch line for jokes or to make a point about a character. On the other hand, and on a far more significant level, it provides him with the lens through which he can examine society and God in the latter part of the twentieth century.” Bernstein, “My Worst Fears Realized,” 218-19.

<sup>33</sup> Allen’s humorous essays frequently parody the world of scholarship. For discussion, see Marc S. Reisch, “Woody Allen: American Prose Humorist,” *Journal of Popular Culture* 17:3 (1983): 68-74.

<sup>34</sup> See, for example, Marvin Pope, *The Anchor Bible: Job* (rev. ed.; New York: Doubleday, 1973), 9.

<sup>35</sup> *b. Sotah* 11a; *b. Sanh.* 106a; *Ex. Rab.* 1:12, 12:3; *p. Sotah* 5:8/20c.

<sup>36</sup> *b. B. Bat.* 15b; *p. Sotah* 5:8/ 20c; *Gen. Rab.* 57:4.

<sup>37</sup> *b. B. Bat.* 15a and 16a.

<sup>38</sup> *b. B. Bat.* 16a.

<sup>39</sup> *Pesiq. Rab Kah.* 10:7; *Tanh. B., Re’eh* 13 and 15; *Tanh. B., Tazria* 8; *Tanh. B., Bere’shit* 13.

<sup>40</sup> *b. B. Bat.* 16a.

<sup>41</sup> *Pesiq. Rab., Harnina* 38. On rabbinic exegesis of Job see, *inter alia*, Judith Baskin, *Pharaoh’s Counsellors* (Chico: Scholars Press, 1983).

<sup>42</sup> *Guide of Perplexed*: Book 3:22-23. For discussion of the medieval philosophical interpretation of Job, see Robert Eisen, *The Book of Job in Medieval Jewish Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

<sup>43</sup> *Zohar* 3:216b.

<sup>44</sup> The text can also be found in multiple anthologies online as part of the collected materials in Google Books.

<sup>45</sup> This is Allen’s error. The reader of the biblical text is never told that the wife dies; she simply disappears from the narrative.

<sup>46</sup> Allen, “Random Reflections,” 14.

<sup>47</sup> Similarly in the subsequent retelling of the story of the binding of Isaac, in contrast to the biblical narrative, Abraham’s wife Sarah has a speaking role and acts as the voice of reason.

<sup>48</sup> Gary Commins, “Woody Allen’s Theological Imagination,” *Theology Today* 44:2 (1987): 247-48.

<sup>49</sup> While the biblical patriarch Abraham is noted for protesting God’s destruction of innocents in Sodom and Gomorrah, by and large the tradition has seen protesting one’s own personal or communal suffering as inappropriate. First and foremost, suffering was understood as a punishment for sin; as a result, introspection and correction were

required, not protest against God. This explains why the traditional interpreters of Job, as discussed above, described Job as a sinner who deserved his punishment rather than the innocent victim of a callous or capricious deity.

<sup>50</sup> Allen, "Am I Reading the Papers Correctly," A27.

<sup>51</sup> Richard A. Blake, *Woody Allen: Profane and Sacred* (Lanham: Scarecrow Press, 1995), ix.

<sup>52</sup> Quoted in Yacowar, *Loser Take All*, 212. The original interview with Frank Rich was published as "Woody Allen Wipes the Smile of His Face," *Esquire* (May 1977): 72-76, 148-49. In a 1979 follow-up interview with Rich, Allen reiterated his commitment to this position. See "An Interview with Woody," *Time* (30 April 1979): 68-69 and reprinted in *Woody Allen: Interviews* (ed. R. E. Kaspis and K. Cobentz; Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2006), 43-48.

<sup>53</sup> Mark. T. Conrad, "God, Suicide, and the Meaning of Life in the Films of Woody Allen," in *Woody Allen and Philosophy (You Mean My Whole Fallacy is Wrong?)* (ed. M. T. Conrad and A. J. Skoble; Chicago: Open Court, 2004), 8.

<sup>54</sup> Reisch, "Woody Allen: American Prose Humorist," 73.

<sup>55</sup> In contrast to Conrad, Ian Jarvie suggests that the fact that Allen continues to produce art makes him a "pragmatic optimist," for he is affirming his optimism through action. See Jarvie, "Arguing Interpretation: The Pragmatic Optimism of Woody Allen," in Conrad and Skoble, *Woody Allen and Philosophy*, 48.

<sup>56</sup> Elie Wiesel, "Job our Contemporary," in Wiesel, *Messengers of God* (New York: Random House, 1975), 187-208. The book is translated from the earlier French edition: *Célébration biblique: Portraits et legends* (Paris: Editions Du Seuil, 1975). For further discussion of Wiesel's reading of Job, see my "Biblical Criticism in the Service of Jewish Theology: A Case Study in Post-Holocaust Biblical Exegesis," *Old Testament Essays* 18:1 (2005): 93-108.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 205.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 233.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 233-34.

<sup>60</sup> Irving Greenberg, "The Third Great Cycle in Jewish History," *Perspectives* (September 1981): 25. For further discussion, see Steven T. Katz, *Historicism, the Holocaust, and Zionism* (New York: NYU Press, 1993). See especially chapter 9, "'Voluntary Covenant': Irving Greenberg on Faith after the Holocaust."

<sup>61</sup> Quoted in Maurice Friedman, *Martin Buber's Life and Work: The Latter Years, 1945-65* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1988), 147.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*

# Tragicomedy and *Zikkaron* in Mel Brooks's *To Be or Not To Be*

Joan Latchaw and David Peterson

Much has been made of Mel Brooks's *The Producers* (both film and Broadway musical),<sup>1</sup> yet little critical attention has been paid to *To Be or Not To Be* (1983),<sup>2</sup> which Brooks produced and in which he played the leading role of Frederick Bronski. It has most often been (mis)understood as a mere remake of the Ernst Lubitsch 1942 classic of the same title. Wes D. Gehring comments, for example, that Brooks's version "followed Lubitsch's original nearly scene for scene," and he quotes film critic Pauline Kael's assessment that the remake "has nothing to take the place of that . . . anti-Nazi rambunctiousness" exhibited by Lubitsch's version.<sup>3</sup> Other critics have further dismissed Brooks's technique. David A. Brenner asserts that Brooks's film merely "raised an important question about the generic status of parody: What happens when film parody becomes banal or even habitual."<sup>4</sup>

Yet Brooks's film does more than simply rehash Lubitsch. Indeed, it substantially revises and redirects the original in terms of character, plot, form, style, themes, and, ultimately, purpose. Jewish characters, for example, are more prevalent. In addition to Lupinski, we have Gruba, the Bronski Theatre's Jewish housekeeper, and her extended family and friends. The 1983 version significantly adds an out and proud gay character, Anna's dresser Sasha. Pauline Kael's dismissive protestations notwithstanding, Brooks's film brings Jewish humor to the fore more forcefully than Lubitsch's. The 1983 *To Be* contains more one-liners and jokes, many of which are much more clearly based on Jewish in-group knowledge than the 1942 version. For example, when Sobinski, Anna's admirer, asks after her cat, Moska, and her bird, Kishka, Anna, after a silence spawned by her momentary ignorance as to whom Sobinski refers (revealing that she has deceived her fans regarding her dedication to her pets), says, "Oh, Moska ate Kishka." Another classic one-liner is given by Gruba, a stereotypical Eastern European Jew with babushka, while talking with Bronski about Shakespeare: "Shakespeare wasn't Jewish?" she queries incredulously, "Go figure."

Many of these revisions, then, make salient what Lubitsch's version did not—the Jewishness of the story. Although Melchior Lengyl (the original story's author), Edward Justus Mayer (the screenwriter), Lubitsch, the studio owners, and Jack Benny were Jewish, as numerous film historians have noted,

nobody in 1941-1942 Hollywood was going to make a Jewish-focused film, regardless of what was happening to Jews in World War II Europe.<sup>5</sup> Thus Lubitsch's film generally limits itself to the invasion of Poland and Polish resistance.<sup>6</sup> While Brooks's version similarly focuses on a broadly construed, postinvasion "Poland," Brooks knows that in remaking the film the Holocaust will be present in his audience's mind. Thus the historical events form an important, however muted, theme in the film, portrayed by the hiding of Jewish families, transfers to concentration camps, and acts of Jewish resistance.<sup>7</sup> More significantly, Brooks's film depicts how the Shoah's penumbra encompassed numerous ethnic, political, and sexual minorities, arguing that the Holocaust literally and metaphorically affected all "Poles," a national identity that includes the audience.

The film's engagement with the Holocaust could be construed as a form of *zikkaron* [remembrance], the basis for many Jewish festivals (Sukkot, Hanukkah, Passover), fast days (Tisha B'av, Fast of Esther), holy days (Shabbat, Yom Kippur, Rosh Hashanah), and communal events (Yom HaShoah, Yom HaZikaron). Sometimes translated as "reminder," *zikkaron* can refer to the covenant between God and the Jewish people or invite commemoration of a historical event. The Jewish people are, in fact, commanded to recall and reflect upon moments of tragedy, of triumph, of survival, or of disaster averted. As Harold Fisch notes, eating matzoh during Passover, for example, serves as a *zikkaron* for both the "'bread of affliction' eaten by the Israelite slaves in Egypt" and for "the suddenness of their redemption from that same slavery."<sup>8</sup> Similarly, the *Megillat Esther* entails that all Jews commemorate the defeat of Haman through "feasting and merrymaking, and . . . sending gifts to one another and presents to the poor" (Esth 9:22).<sup>9</sup>

Appropriately, Brooks harnesses one traditional form of Jewish remembrance, Purim, in order to produce his own *zikkaron*. Brooks adapts Purim's themes and theatricality, drawing from both the *Megillah* and *Purimspieln* [humorous plays staged on Purim], to remember the events of the war. As Harold Fisch argues, *zikkaron* "operates in two directions, backwards and forwards . . . having reference to the future as much as to the past."<sup>10</sup> Such bidirectional memory is an important component of Brooks's revision of Lubitsch's film. Brooks's film looks backward to remember the tragic history of World War II while celebrating survival, and it looks forward to envision a process for resisting future holocausts for all peoples.

This need to mourn loss, celebrate survival, and envision a better future accounts for the film's tragicomic structuring at least in part.<sup>11</sup> Tragicomedy wields comedic structural elements such as romance, farce, burlesque, satire,

and parody—all of which are present in *To Be or Not To Be*—to confront tragic experiences such as moral struggle, the dissolution of the self, or the destruction of a society. Brooks's film demonstrates how tragicomedy blends, using Lee Bliss's definition, "tragic potential" with "comedy's final reconciliations."<sup>12</sup> As Gordon McMullan and Jonathan Hope argue in their introduction to *The Politics of Tragicomedy: Shakespeare and After*, the tragicomic form also has important, though frequently ignored, political implications: "tragicomedy appears conservative in the sense that it is driven by certain forces of reconciliation and regeneration. Yet such regeneration frequently comes in the form of a displacement of the political status quo, the regeneration of a political nation away from tyranny."<sup>13</sup>

Applying Bliss's definition, the *Megillat Esther* can be read as a tragicomic text that blends "tragic potential" with "comedy's final reconciliations." For example, the Megillah's central villain, Haman, is characterized as being so egotistical that he plots the destruction of the Jewish people because of Mordecai's refusal to bow to him. That threat of destruction has tragic overtones, both for the Jews and for the Persians. Haman's monomaniacal hatred of all Jews spreads like a cancer through all of Persia. Yet, consistent with the tragicomic impulse, Haman's plot is undone through a reversal of fortunes that sees Haman's fall and the Jews' triumph. Furthermore, Haman's character, both in the Megillah and in Talmudic tradition, has a comedic component. Recall, for example, when King Ahasuerus, remembering Mordecai's service to him, asks Haman, "What should be done for a man whom the king desires to honor?" (Esth 6:6); Haman, thinking the king is referring to himself, suggests a present of expensive royal clothing and a horse to be followed up with a parade of honor through the streets of Shushan. What makes this moment so humorous is its delicious irony. We readers know something that Haman does not: Mordecai is the intended honoree. So when the text draws our attention to Haman's inner thoughts—"Whom would the king desire to honor more than me?" (Esth 6:6)—we have an opportunity to laugh at his egotism. The king decrees that Mordecai should be so honored, foiling Haman's attempts to glorify himself. The image of Haman as the humiliated villain having to lead Mordecai through the streets simply adds to the humor, which the Talmudic tradition extends with a story of how Haman's daughter, thinking he is Mordecai leading her father, pours a chamber pot on her father's head (and then commits suicide).<sup>14</sup>

The rest of this article explores how Brooks's tragicomic *zikkaron* functions. We first explore how Brooks uses Jewish comedic forms, particularly *Purimspielen* and folk traditions related to schlemiels and schlimazels, to reveal



the characters' foibles, particularly those that prevent successful collaboration and hence prevent successful resistance to tyranny and oppression. We next explore how, as the tragedy of Poland's fall unfolds, the characters attempt to collaborate against tyranny, by themselves adapting *Purimspieln* theatricality and techniques. Here we see that their reversals of fortune, a key theme from the Megillah, necessitate reversals of roles, a key theme from *Purimspieln*, in order to survive. Finally we examine how the characters triumph over the Nazis through collaborative resistance. Here again we see *Purimspiel* techniques used to overcome impending tragedy.

In the opening scenes of *To Be*, all the characters reflect what could be described as comedic or parodic variations on Haman's egotism, frequently fulfilling stereotypical roles. Like Haman and his need for fame and status, Frederick and Anna Bronski are embroiled in their competing desires to be lauded and to receive prominent billing. Anna, like the character from the film's opening song ("Sweet Georgia Brown"), is desirous of the admiration of men, regardless of the consequences to her marriage. She and Sasha are lost in the fog of romance, plotting Anna's tryst with Lieutenant Sobinski. Sasha initially appears to be a shallow celebrity- and fashion-obsessed drama queen.<sup>15</sup> He swoons over Anna's possible affair with the handsome (though laughably innocent) Sobinski, who in turn is a mock-heroic parody of the dashing war hero. Sasha, in *shadken* [match maker]-like manner, encourages the affair, playing the stereotype of gay men being interested primarily in affairs of the heart.

The Bronskis and Sasha are depicted as unconcerned by impending war; indeed, while other cast members—led by Lupinski—gather around the radio listening intently to an Adolf Hitler speech, Bronski denounces such concern as mere "politics." While Lupinski does seem politically aware and hence nobler than the Bronskis, he also obsesses over his desire to play Shylock, constantly undercutting Bronski with cynical—sometimes mean-spirited—witticisms about the latter's acting abilities. He does not initially get to play Shylock because Bronski always demands the spotlight, and thus Lupinski often appears more like the luckless schlimazel, "the perennial victim of circumstance and gratuitous accident, none of his own making."<sup>16</sup>

The character with the most foibles is certainly Bronski. He is obsessed with his own importance (much like Haman) and thus cannot perceive the seriousness of Hitler's threat. He is so absorbed by his own sense of greatness as an actor and so obsessed with his ire at Sobinski walking out during his Hamlet monologue—surely a personal affront—that he does not understand that war has been declared by Germany, hearing instead another iteration of his own ego-centric drama:

Bronski: Oh, That man. I hate him.

Anna: I hate him, too. Everybody hates him. All Europe hates him.

Bronski: Well they should! I mean, two nights in row (sniffles).

Anna: Two nights in a row? What do you mean, what are you talking about?

Bronski: He walked out on me again!

Anna: Oh Bronski! Bronski! Can't you forget you for one minute?! It's war!

Even his acknowledgment that the invasion is “bad too” places the tragedy of war on par with the “tragedy” of having someone walking out on his performance. Like the Fools of Chelm, who misunderstand or misrepresent reality, Bronski is “totally unaware of his folly.”<sup>17</sup> We laugh, then, because Bronski's tunnel vision is so far removed from the imminent tragedy. Both Haman and Bronski, in their pettiness and egotism, are at times envisioned as witless fools, though ultimately Haman is clearly motivated by evil intent whereas Bronski appears mainly to be a shallow-brained innocent.

Moreover, Bronski's ineptness—his poor acting skills, his political naïveté, and so forth—align him with the quintessential schlemiel. The schlemiel is typically defined as a naïve simpleton, one who “falls below the average human standard, but whose defects have been transformed into a source of delight.”<sup>18</sup> Bronski, like many legendary schlemiels, potentially becomes a cuckold through Anna's romance with Sobinski.<sup>19</sup> Isaac Bashevis Singer's “Gimpel the Fool” provides an example of the archetypal schlemiel as cuckold. Gimpel marries the town prostitute, who, though they have not had sex, gives birth seventeen weeks after their wedding. Gimpel questions his wife about this conundrum, and she swears that the child is his: “She said she had had a grandmother who carried just as short a time and she resembled this grandmother of hers as one drop of water does another. . . . To tell the plain truth, I didn't believe her; but when I talked it over next day with the schoolmaster he told me that the very same thing had happened to Adam and Eve. Two they went up to bed, and four they descended.”<sup>20</sup> Here Gimpel, in typical schlemiel fashion, easily accepts the suspect logic of both his wife and the schoolmaster: their syllogistic reasoning is valid but also untrue.

Gimpel in his innocence, however, cannot pierce the veil and seems easily duped. Bronski, upon uncovering the “other man” when he slips into bed with who he thinks is Anna, becomes angry at first, but like Gimpel, the mood passes quickly. When he later confronts Anna about Sobinski, anger must be pushed aside in order to prepare to meet Erhardt:

Anna: Oh, sugarplum I'm so glad you're ok!

Bronski: Don't sugarplum me. Save it for your boyfriend, Lt. Sobinski!

Anna: Alright, we'll discuss that later. What did you do with Siletski's body?

Bronski: Never mind Siletski's body! What did you do with Sobinski's body?

Anna: How can you ask a question like that at a time like this?! Don't you realize Capt. Schultz out there is ready to take you to see Col. Erhardt who's head of the Gestapo?!

Of course, Anna has not done anything "with Sobinski's body"; though she has flirted with him (and has kissed him), Bronski was never truly a cuckold. The dialogue here argues, moreover, that there are larger, more important problems than a jealous husband's demands for explanations. Bronski still seems to insist on dwelling on his own sense of misery rather than accepting that the tragedy of war unfolding around him merits his full dedication. This disjunction between Bronski's self-absorption and the call to serve is the source of our laughter, yet it draws our attention to the need to serve something larger than ourselves in times of tragic need.

At times Bronski appears less self-serving and more politically aware. For instance, he plays Hitler in the film's second song "Little Piece," part of the theatre's "Naughty Nazis" routine.<sup>21</sup> Filmed in part in homage to Charlie Chaplin's *The Little Dictator*, the routine satirizes Hitler's avowals of peaceful intentions. As we laugh during this spoof, we also begin to feel the pressure of the larger political consequences of der Fuhrer's desire for just a "little piece"—they will add up to all of Europe. And yet, Bronski's performance in this routine indicates that he still has not moved beyond taking center stage, has not understood that resisting Hitler and fascism must entail more than simple parody or satire. As much as the company does not understand what it faces, neither does the Polish government: the foreign office drops the curtain on the performance to avoid angering "Chancellor Hitler," a farcical gesture in itself, as if closing a minor theatre's act was going to stop the Nazi war machine.

While the film's opening scenes predominantly rely on Jewish humor and comedic folk types to highlight the characters' foibles, the second half highlights the tragic potential of what the characters face as a result of the invasion. At this point, the historical tragedy becomes more salient, more threatening, as the Nazis, having entered Warsaw, begin to directly affect various theatre members, depicted by a series of personal tragedies following Poland's fall. The first tragic moment points to the film's function as *zikkaron*. We have spent most of the film up to this point laughing at egotistical fools and schlemiels. However, the mood begins to shift as we begin to remember historical trauma: the formation of the ghetto and the struggle to escape Nazi terror through hiding are explicitly addressed, bringing to the fore what was mostly latent.

It is appropriate to *zikkaron* that the first affected by the fascist takeover is Gruba, the theatre's stereotypically Yiddish-accented seamstress. She comes to Bronski to ask if her cousin Rifka can stay at the theatre: "She was bombed out," Gruba explains, "She's a Jew, she doesn't have where to go." Bronski's rather blithe agreement, and then his surprise when Rifka is joined by two more ("What," Gruba quips, "you think she'd leave her husband and her son behind?"), keeps the tone light, but from this moment on the audience is never allowed to forget that the Shoah has begun.<sup>22</sup> Thus, for example, when Sobinski later comes to the theatre looking for Anna, Gruba and a more extended version of her family appear fearfully on the stairs, their clothes now bearing prominent yellow stars. These scenes represent one of a number of important moments in the film where the tragicomic form begins to reveal its potential for doing the work of *zikkaron*. Gruba's "She doesn't have where to go," for example, not only draws the audience's attention to the fictive family's *potential* tragedy (relieved by Bronski's compassion), but also recalls the plight of millions of real Jews who, unlike Gruba and her family, were not hidden but exterminated.

The Bronskis are also affected, receiving notice that the Gestapo are taking their house. Bronski swears resistance with great bluster: "They cut off my gasoline. They closed my bank account. They took my pearl stickpin; they took my little pinkie ring; they took the top off my gold cane. But they are not, I repeat NOT, taking my house. Never!" His protest resembles that of the henpecked schlemiel, with the Gestapo replacing the shrewish wife who enjoys ordering her husband around while her friends look on:

"Schlemiel," she ordered. "Get under the table!" Without a word the man crawled under the table.

"Now schlemiel, come out!" she commanded again.

"I won't I won't," he defied her angrily. "I'll show you I'm still master in this house!"<sup>23</sup>

The Bronskis are evicted in the next scene (with Bronski uttering a defeated "Got everything?"). Yet, though they are victims, Bronski adds a small, but important, act of resistance with a seemingly ineffectual skewing of the Hitler portrait now hanging on their living room wall. Ironically, Brooks, the Jewish actor, gets to do what Jews in the Warsaw ghetto could not—he verbally protests the taking of his house; in so doing, in a sense, he gives them voice. This, too, is a form of *zikkaron*. We are again reminded of the millions who first lost everything—livelihoods, homes, shoes, eyeglasses, lives.

*Zikkaron* is extended to acknowledge the Nazi oppression of homosexuals, gay men in particular. Soon Sasha, who has taken in the homeless Bronskis, is affected, and he appears wearing an inverted pink triangle. This detail is

inaccurate; in actuality homosexuals were assigned pink triangles only in the camps. Brooks's choice, however, a retelling of historical tragedy, argues for a direct connection between the persecution of Jews and of homosexuals.<sup>24</sup>

As the tragedies unfold, the Bronskis, Sasha, and Gruba—like Mordecai, Esther, and the other Jews of Shushan—find that they are no longer masters of their own “house,” and in this respect, they become, like the schlemiel under the table, “a metaphor for European Jewry . . . ineffectual . . . at self-advancement and self-preservation . . . emerg[ing] as the archetypal Jew, especially in [their] capacity of potential victim.”<sup>25</sup> Moreover, as their fates are inextricably tied to the fate of Poland, they become not just a metaphor for European Jewry but the Everyman of any nation or people subject to tyranny.

Their reversals of fortune entail a transformation of their characters: as their livelihoods and lives are threatened, they form their own microcosmic version of the Polish Underground. Anna, for example, changes from ingénue to spy, willing to risk her marriage in the rendezvous with Siletski and arrest—possibly even her life—in attempting to prevent the Gestapo from taking Sasha. Sasha, too, is willing to risk arrest by asserting his right to be with “another pink triangle” and, as we discuss below, risk his life in helping the hidden Jews escape from the theatre. It is from Sasha that we learn the meaning of the yellow stars and pink triangles:

Anna: What the hell's that pink thing?

Sasha: Haven't you heard? The latest fashion in occupied Poland. Jews wear yellow stars, homosexuals wear pink triangles.

Anna reacts with a stricken “Oh Sasha, how awful for you,” but rather than indulge in self-pity (as Bronski did when he's walked out on), Sasha stands erect and says with both indignation and dignity, “I hate it.” Anna gets up to comfort him, and Sasha adds with campy demure: “It clashes with everything.” Rather than being a crass stereotype of gay men as some critics claim, Sasha here demonstrates “humorous displacement”—which uses “scorn to withdraw the ideational content bearing the distressing affect from conscious attention.”<sup>26</sup> Although Sasha is aware that the triangle represents his subjection by the Nazi machine, he immediately deflects its power through a defense mechanism that draws energy away from the displeasure, “transforming it into pleasure.” As a result, Sasha is able to go off to seek his “triangle” friend in relatively good spirits. More significantly, *zikkaron* operates here as well: Sasha's use of camp humor allows him to maintain, as it did for many survivors while in the concentration camps, a sense of “control in a situation where no control was possible.”<sup>27</sup>

In *Purimspiesque* fashion, Bronski is also transformed, changing from the comedic schlemiel into a heroic, or what Ruth Wisse terms a political,

schlemiel. In the first part of the film, Bronski was—as Wisse argues all schlemiels are—“vulnerable [and] ineffectual in his efforts at self-advancement,” thus representing “the archetypal Jew, especially in his capacity of potential victim.”<sup>28</sup> As we note above, he, like many of the other characters, is certainly victimized, at least in terms of his loss of material possessions. Yet he also refuses to be further victimized, choosing to risk his life by first impersonating Colonel Erhardt and then playing Professor Siletski. In each case, his initial reaction to the challenge, potentially life-threatening to himself and to the theatre’s crew and denizens, is doubt and panic, a recognition of his failure as an actor generally: “I don’t think I can get away with it,” he exclaims when he must play Erhardt.

But as Wisse notes, schlemiels often have within them a “hard inner strength,” a strength Bronski, much to his surprise and the audience’s, begins to demonstrate in the second half of the film. Bronski sheds the ineffectual and foolish aspects of his schlemiel nature and becomes a powerful political agent. For example, during the first interview with Erhardt, Bronski disguised as Siletski discovers he really can act through improvisation, and in that moment he becomes the heroic schlemiel. He triumphs first by stealing lines from the real Siletski and then, having quickly and astutely studied Nazi character, by successfully intimidating the Gestapo, particularly Erhardt himself, who appears to be an even greater schlemiel (and, as his protestations against Gestapo failures reveal, a *schlimazel*).

Bronski continues such masquerading for the rest of the film, his improvisational powers growing each time he takes on a new role. When he again appears as Siletski to secure Sasha’s release and encounters the body of the real Siletski in the room, Bronski’s quick thinking (shaving off and then attaching a spare fake beard on the dead Siletski) saves the day. The real Siletski becomes the “imposter,” Bronski the imposter becomes the “real” Siletski, and Sasha is freed at his request. The theatre troupe then appears at Gestapo headquarters posing as members of Hitler’s security detail and claiming to have uncovered a plot against the Fuhrer. They reveal the “imposter Siletski” as the real Siletski by pulling off Bronski’s fake beard, and the troupe then “arrests” both Bronski and Sasha, and together they all make their escape.

Though the theatre troupe’s efforts were unnecessary, it reveals that they are becoming a collaborative force to be reckoned with. Indeed, Bronski would have been unable to develop his heroic potential without the entire troupe’s involvement. Together, they collect props, bolster Bronski’s confidence, and express their belief in his ability. This joint effort reveals, to both Bronski and the audience, that he and the others have become collaborative

resistance fighters (however in comic fashion), recalling for the audience the historic Polish resistance, as well as all Jewish resisters.

This ability to collaborate contrasts with their first efforts, which occur during the film's third musical number, "Ladies." Another lighthearted show tune, it starkly contrasts to the tragic events unfolding back stage: Sasha is fleeing from Gestapo officers, who are, he declares to Anna in panic, "rounding up homosexuals and putting them in concentration camps." The scene and the line are fraught with terror. The film's previous references to the Shoah in part create an expectation that we might see Jews arrested at some point. We certainly see Jews having to go into hiding; but the film never represents the ghetto, arrests, or the box cars. Sasha's line and situation substitute for the expected subject ("rounding up Jews") with an unexpected one ("rounding up homosexuals"). Doing so draws our attention to forgotten history, insisting (as with the pink triangles/yellow stars) that there is an important parallel between the various groups who suffered during the Nazi horror. "Let's face it," Bronski quips at one point, "without Jews, fags, and gypsies there is no theatre." Nor is there full remembrance.

The scene's tragic charge and ending are actually bolstered by its comedic elements. The "Ladies" sequence entails a form of masquerading common in both gay men's camp performance and *Purimspieln*: the theatre crew attempts to save Sasha from the Gestapo by dressing him in full drag and sending him out on stage as a substitute for Anna, where he suddenly must play the "lovely lady," who is most beloved of all. This action connects him to Esther (the most beautiful); he thus becomes the figure for her, a connection reinforced by Bronski singing, "She's a princess / No, she's a queen." The moment is poignant, especially when we recall that one possible meaning of Esther's name according to the Talmud is "hidden," which associates her with the hidden hand of God. As Esther's ethnic identity was hidden by necessity (Mordecai worrying that she might lose the king's favor), so, too, in this scene, is Sasha's sexual identity.

The ruse fails, however, for several reasons. First, it fails because Sasha, a tall man with a solid build, cannot fully become a woman (though his name can be used for either men or women). Ironically, his inability to mask his masculinity comports with some rabbinic rulings that those who masquerade as women during Purim must do something to indicate they are men (and thus avoid breaking the Levitical law against men wearing women's clothing and vice versa). But it also fails because Bronski, in contrast to his later "performances," cannot yet improvise well enough to work Sasha into the number in order to better hide him; Bronski drops Sasha on a dip, and the latter's wig falls off, revealing that which was hidden.

Sasha's arrest and impending incarceration in a concentration camp galvanize the theatre group. Their collaborative efforts, fraught with comedic tension, succeed. Sasha is now rescued, mainly through Bronski's brilliant improvisations, and the troupe next plans their escape from Poland, which will happen during a "command performance" that the theatre is ordered to give for Hitler. The plan is complex and daring: cast members and the hidden Jews will exit the theatre through a crowd of Nazis by dressing up as clowns. Meanwhile, Bronski will play Hitler (while the "real" Fuhrer watches the clowns), and Lupinski will finally play Shylock, all of which provides a diversion that will allow them to get to a plane—the very one that has brought Hitler to Warsaw—to fly to safety.

The scene in its entirety demonstrates how the film's tragic and comic modes work in tandem to facilitate *zikkaron*. While it contains several moments worthy of analysis, including Brooks's performance of Bronski playing Hitler, we choose to focus on two moments that seem to best encompass the film's tragicomic act of remembrance: Lupinski's performance of Shylock's famous monologue and Sasha's rescuing of the horror-stricken elderly Jewish couple.

In playing the role he has desired most, Lupinski exhibits hard, inner strength, transforming from the comic luckless schlimazel whose only power previously lay in biting wit to a poignant and passionate hero who effectively silences Hitler and the Nazis by wielding the Bard's Jew. Here Brooks's production restores what Lubitsch's had muted: returning the word "Jew" to the speech.<sup>29</sup> In playing Shylock, Lupinski challenges the fake Hitler and the real Nazis: "If you prick us, do we not bleed? If you tickle us, do we not laugh? If you poison us, do we not die? And if you wrong us, shall we not revenge?" with the last line being delivered with all the weight that post-Holocaust Jewish actors could desire. These are weightier questions than in the Lubitsch version because they serve as a mnemonic trace; for the audience of 1983 and today, "poison" recalls the memory of Zyklon B and "pricking" the literal loss of blood resulting from the final solution.

Lupinski's heroism seems especially remarkable in that a "customarily gentle European Jew fling[s] himself in fearless abandon at the symbolic Fuhrer" and the Nazi guards.<sup>30</sup> The Shylock monologue answers Hamlet's/Bronski's earlier queries about whether "to be" in the world. The answer is a resounding "yes!" But it's an inclusive "yes," as Lupinski stands metonymically for all Polish-born people, whether they be Jews, Christians, gypsies, or gays. Likewise, as Joel Rosenberg points out, the film's "Slavic Poles"—and by extension the audience—become "'Jews'—sharing momentarily the fate and perspective of Shylock."<sup>31</sup> That is why diverse members of the troupe must



pull together, collaboratively plan the escape, play their roles flawlessly, and support each other unconditionally.

While Lupinski gives his Shylock, distracting the attention of Hitler's guards, Sasha leads the other theatre members and the hidden Jews out of the theatre via their staging of "Klotski's Klowns." Members of the troupe have dressed as various forms of clowns, and they proceed to climb out of a car, reproducing the well-known vaudeville act. All goes well, the clowns prancing on stage, sliding through the Third Reich's finest with pokes and prods, the officers never realizing they are being duped because they are so caught up in that which appears to be mere theatrical shtick. Until, that is, in perhaps the most moving and tragedy-laden moment in the film, the elderly Jewish couple clamber out of the car only to freeze in abject horror before a sea of Nazis. The wife begins a barely audible moan, "They'll kill us, they'll kill us." All seems lost, yet suddenly Sasha bounds back to the stage apron and produces (from God knows where—or, rather, echoing the Megillah, perhaps from the hand of God Himself) two yellow stars and a gun that shoots out the fascist flag. Pinning the stars on the beleaguered couple, he pronounces them "*Ju-den! Ju-den!*"—naming them, but thereby keeping their identity hidden in plain sight.

The Nazis laugh at this performance of their racist fantasies: "vile" Jews being caught by superior Aryan prowess, the labeling words seeming to cause a Pavlovian reaction that blinds them to what is really going on. It is the most heart-wrenching, gut-wrenching *zikkaron*: for the film's audience, the terrible cry of *Juden . . . Juden* forever invokes the *buchstabe* lettering on official decrees and yellow stars and the dripping paint of *Kristalnacht*.

This moment reveals who the real Hamans are, these Nazis ready, like the Persians of Shushan, to witness the slaughter of the Jews. But, as in the Megillah, ultimately the oppressed triumph; the troupe, *Purimspielesque* clowns all, pass safely out of the theatre and board the waiting trucks that will take them all to freedom in England. And the Nazis? We know they die, pass from history, become the very watchword and name of Evil, defeated by that which they most reviled, by clowns making fools out of the high and mighty, overturning power structures, righting wrongs. Their subterfuges in outwitting the Nazis and their final escape also are moments of *zikkaron*, metonymically representing and celebrating all survivors of the Holocaust.

The film's ending highlights overturnings and transformations, all achieved through collaboration. By witnessing Lupinski's plea for the recognition of common humanity and the elderly Jewish couple's horror and then rescue, the audience experiences sympathy and empathy, two key tragicomic emotions that link viewers to collective Holocaust memories, forging a strong,

indelible bond between characters and audience, between Pole and non-Pole, gay and straight, Jew and non-Jew. Common sense tells us that nothing should connect a gay non-Jewish Pole with an elderly Jewish couple. However, in terms of both the film's plot and actual history, these seemingly unrelated minorities were subject to the same denial of their humanity at the hands of the Nazis, though certainly for different reasons and through different means. Thus it is important to the film's message of cooperation and collaboration that gays and Jews work together to resist oppression.

This message is addressed by the film's repeated references to and performances of Hamlet's "To be or not to be." While frequently read as a tragic outpouring of existential angst generated by the "slings and arrows of affliction" that Hamlet—and by extension humanity—must face, Brooks seeks to do what Hamlet did not, to ask the question from another perspective: Shylock's. Whereas Hamlet questions his will to live, Shylock insists on his right to survive. Such insistence motivates the Bronski Theatre's collaborative efforts, with all their *Purimspielesque* overturnings. Purim overturnings are only temporary; like all comedic endeavors, normalcy, at least for the characters, has been re-established. But the tragicomic challenges us to make the choice between Hamlet's solipsistic paralysis and Shylock's struggle for social justice. Brooks's filmic *zikkaron* ultimately says the future demands the latter choice and suggests it can only be possible through a collective effort that begins with the willingness to set social and cultural divisions aside.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Susan Gubar, "Racial Camp in *The Producers* and *Bamboozled*," *Film Quarterly* 60:2 (2006): 26-37.

<sup>2</sup> *To Be or Not To Be*, directed by Alan Johnson (Twentieth Century Fox, 1983).

<sup>3</sup> Wes Gehring, *American Dark Comedy: Beyond Satire* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1996), 81.

<sup>4</sup> David A. Brenner, "Laughter and Catastrophe: *Train of Life* and Tragicomic Holocaust Cinema," in *Visualizing the Holocaust: Documents, Aesthetics, Memory* (ed. David Bathrick et al.; Rochester: Camden House, 2008), 272.

<sup>5</sup> For a useful overview of Hollywood's self-censorship efforts, see Gerd Gemunden, "Space out of Joint: Ernst Lubitsch's *To Be or Not To Be*," *New German Critique* 89 (Spring/Summer 2003): 75-77. See also Neal Gabler, *An Empire of Their Own: How the Jews Invented Hollywood* (New York: Doubleday, 1988), and Lester D. Friedman, *Hollywood's Image of the Jew* (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1982).

<sup>6</sup> As both Gemunden, "Space out of Joint," and Joel Rosenberg, "Shylock's Revenge: The Doubly Vanishing Jew in Ernst Lubitsch's *To Be or Not To Be*," *Prooftext* 16 (1996): 209-44, argue, Lubitsch's film is not stripped of Jewish references or perspectives; however, these elements are conveyed predominantly through implicit discourse or allusion,

a strategy Lubitsch chooses both to avoid censorship and also to appeal to America's non-Jewish majority. Gemunden cogently argues that Lubitsch's film presents a German Jewish exile's perspective on the war through both its comedic attack on Nazism and its critique of Hollywood's self-censorship of Jewish content and themes. In his powerful analysis of Lubitsch's film and the "Jewish Question," Rosenberg asserts that Lubitsch's film is "one of the few . . . that made any sort of allusion to the situation of Jews in Europe, and perhaps the sole film to let an Eastern European Jewish face and voice [the character Greenberg] do the talking at key points in the story," "Shylock's Revenge," 209.

<sup>7</sup> Sander R. Gilman, "Is Life Beautiful? Can the Shoah Be Funny? Some Thoughts on Recent and Older Films," *Critical Inquiry*, 26:2 (2000): 288, argues that "The strained nature of [Brooks'] remake was to no little degree the result of that oppressive if unspoken presence of the Shoah in the audience's awareness. That Brooks too is Jewish did not ameliorate this sense of unease. . . . Comedy in this context was only possible with the bracketing of the Final Solution"; he adds that "The comic . . . is invoked as a means of avoiding any representation of the Shoah. Laughter can exist because the Shoah is unmentioned (and unmentionable)."

<sup>8</sup> Harold Fisch, "Reading and Carnival: On the Semiotics of Purim," *Poetics Today*, 15:1 (1994): 57. Our application of *zikkaron* to Brooks's film is indebted to Fisch's cogent reading of Purim as remembrance.

<sup>9</sup> *The Five Megilloth and Jonah: A New Translation* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1969). Other quotations from the book of Esther are also taken from this translation.

<sup>10</sup> Fisch, "Reading and Carnival," 57.

<sup>11</sup> Lubitsch's film has also been discussed as tragicomedy. The harsh judgments of Lubitsch's film by contemporary film critics Bosley Crowther, Eileen Creelman, Archer Winston, and others led the director to declare in defense of his film's mixed modes, "I was tired of the two established recognized recipes: drama with comedy relief and comedy with dramatic relief. I had made up my mind to make a picture with no attempt to relieve anybody from anything at anytime" (quoted in Rosenberg, "Shylock's Revenge," 242, note 26). For a succinct overview of the negative criticism of Lubitsch's film, see Gehring, *American Dark Comedy*, 77-81, and Gemunden, "Space out of Joint," 76. Brenner, "Laughter and Catastrophe," 266, identifies Lubitsch's film, along with Charlie Chaplin's *The Great Dictator* (1940), as important precursors to post-Cold War Holocaust tragicomedies.

<sup>12</sup> Lee Bliss, "Pastiche, Burlesque, Tragicomedy," *The Cambridge Companion to English Renaissance Drama* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.; ed. A. R. Braunmuller et al.; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 241. Bliss, "Pastiche," 236, upon whose definition of tragicomedy we heavily rely, notes that "[i]n formal terms, tragicomedy's structure is comic" and thematically "include[s] the kinds of experience, personal relationships and philosophic questioning formerly associated with" tragedy. Definitions of tragicomedy are frequently frustratingly vague and vary widely. See also Paul Hernadi, *Interpreting Events: Tragicomedies of History on the Modern Stage* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), particularly his insightful discussion of the historical roots and general moods of tragicomedy, 38-52.

<sup>13</sup> Gordon McMullan and Jonathan Hope, "Introduction: The Politics of Tragicomedy, 1610-1650," in *The Politics of Tragicomedy: Shakespeare and After* (ed. Gorder McMullan et al.; London: Routledge, 1992), 10.

<sup>14</sup> *Mas Megilah*, 16A, *Soncino Babylonian Talmud* (ed. I. Epstein; <http://halakhah.com/pdf/moed/Megilah.pdf>).

<sup>15</sup> Some film critics complained Sasha was a negative stereotype. Writing for *The Washington Post* (16 December 1983), F1, Gary Arnold declared, "The only new character is . . . Sasha, an ostentatiously effeminate gawk exploited for gay jokes on one hand and bogus anxiety on the other." Vince Canby's review for *The New York Times* (16 December 1983), C10, admired Sasha as a "swishily courageous homosexual, who wears his pink triangle with pride," but noted his character is "not among the film's great inspirations."

<sup>16</sup> Sandford Pinsker, *The Schlemiel as Metaphor: Studies in the Yiddish and American Jewish Novel* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1971), 9.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>18</sup> Ruth R. Wisse, *The Schlemiel as Modern Hero* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), 4.

<sup>19</sup> According to Pinsker, *Schlemiel as Metaphor*, 4-8, the schlemiel figure first emerges as the consummate cuckold.

<sup>20</sup> Isaac Bashevis Singer, *Gimpel the Fool and Other Stories* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1957), 9.

<sup>21</sup> Both "Little Piece" and "Ladies," which we discuss below, were written by Brooks and Ronny Graham, one of the film's writers (who also plays Sondheim).

<sup>22</sup> Interestingly, the plight of Jews is generally depicted in this seemingly disjunctive fashion where their tragic situation seems deflected by humorous lines; for example, later in the film, as the characters are preparing to make their escape, a curtain is lifted to reveal Gruba's entire extended family, for whom she pleads. Bronski, surprised at their seemingly prolific numbers, exclaims "What are they, Jews or rabbits?"

<sup>23</sup> The joke is told in full in Pinsker, *Schlemiel as Metaphor*, 18.

<sup>24</sup> For a cogent, comprehensive discussion of the history of Nazi policy regarding homosexuals, see Robert Plant, *The Pink Triangle: The Nazi War Against Homosexuals* (New York: Holt, 1988).

<sup>25</sup> Wisse, *The Schlemiel*, 4.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>27</sup> Gilman, "Is Life Beautiful?" 284. Deb Filler and Francine Zuckerman's *Punch Me in the Stomach* provides one useful example of how humor functioned in this way. Filler plays thirty-six characters, including her father, all of whom are based on interviews with Holocaust survivors. The father recounts that on his first night in the concentration-camp barracks, someone rolled over on him and the bunk mates laughed all night. "What else could we do?" his character quips. We, the audience members, are often uncomfortably baffled by such moments, but clearly humor serves as a psychologically life-giving coping mechanism. See Deb Filler and Francine Zuckerman, *Punch Me in the Stomach*, directed by Francine Zuckerman (National Center for Jewish Film, 1997).

<sup>28</sup> Wisse, *The Schlemiel*, 4-5.

<sup>29</sup> For a discussion of the implications of Lubitsch's changes to the "Rialto Speech," see Gemunden, "Space out of Joint," 72-73.

<sup>30</sup> Rosenberg, "Shylock's Revenge," 231.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 233.

# “They Ain’t Makin’ Jews Like Jesus Anymore”: The Musical Humor of Kinky Friedman and The Texas Jewboys in Historical and Geographical Perspective

Theodore Albrecht

For the past three decades or more, it has been difficult not to be aware of the name of Kinky Friedman, a Texan country singer of controversially humorous lyrics, the first full-blooded Jew to have sung at Nashville’s Grand Ol’ Opry, the leader of a country band offensively named The Texas Jewboys, a successful novelist whose detective stories portray himself as a transplanted Texas cowboy wise-crackingly solving crimes in New York City, a failed candidate for public office in Texas, and an essayist whose first-person pieces include a mixture of eyebrow-raising humor, common sense, and often thoughtful and thought-provoking wisdom.

As many readers know, there have actually been six flags over Texas, now largely forgotten by a widely franchised amusement park, whose name originally referred to them and whose rides and entertainment areas reflected them. First came the Spaniards from the south and later the French explorers from the east. Then, from the 1820s, the flag of independent Mexico, followed in the mid-1830s by a revolutionary and independent nation of Texas. Texas was annexed to the United States in 1845 but in the early 1860s lived under the flag of the Confederacy. Today, the state’s Lone Star flag still flies high next to the Stars and Stripes.

Apart from the Alamo, the overwhelming popular image of Texas is still cowboys and oil money, originating culturally in an extension of the Deep South in southeastern Texas, the Appalachian South (Tennessee and Kentucky) further west and northeast, and the American Midwest extending into central northeast Texas. Even so, much of its character in the mid- to late-nineteenth century was determined by immigrant groups, some in the cities, but many in folk islands in rural areas: vast numbers of Germans before the Civil War, as well as Czechs (including both Bohemians and Moravians) after the war, with smaller groups from Poland, Italy, France, Ireland, as well as Scandinavian and Baltic countries.<sup>1</sup>

The phenomenon known as Kinky Friedman is difficult enough to describe, but this article attempts to place him within the culture and history of Texas, whose geographical size alone immediately dooms us to failure.

### THE JEWISH ELEMENT IN TEXAS

Although several Jews (probably *conversos*) arrived with the early colonial Spaniards, the first Jewish family in modern Texas was probably that of Elijah (1775-1859) and Samuel (1804-1878) Isaacks, who came with Stephen F. Austin's American settlers in the mid-1820s. Adolphus Sterne (1801-1852), direct from Germany's Rheinlands, landed at New Orleans and settled in Nacogdoches in eastern Texas in 1826, and he even became the community's *alcalde* [magistrate].<sup>2</sup> Starting with Texas independence in 1836 and continuing after annexation in 1845, many Jews arrived among the European and especially German immigrants. Most of them came directly from Germany or Alsace to the flourishing Gulf Coast ports of Galveston and Indianola (which was destroyed by a hurricane in 1886), and not through such eastern immigration points as New York, Boston, or Philadelphia. In Germany and Alsace, most of the Jews who came to Texas had already, without losing their own identity, assimilated into their surrounding cultures and therefore thought of themselves as much German or Alsatian as Jewish. Like their Christian fellow travelers, they became part of the German-Texan or French-Texan cultures that, whether farmers, tradesmen, or merchants, simply transplanted their traditions onto a welcoming Texas soil.

By 1854 (some say 1859), the Jews in Houston had established Congregation Beth Israel, with others rapidly following in Galveston (1868), San Antonio (1874), Dallas (1875), Austin (1876), and—with many more in between and to follow—in Texarkana (1885) and Corsicana (1898).<sup>3</sup> Despite a few attempts at Orthodoxy, most of these early congregations represented the assimilated Reform practices of Germany and nearby Central European regions. Eastern European immigrants remained a distinct minority within Texas Jewish culture, even when New York, Boston, Philadelphia, Baltimore, and Chicago received thousands escaping Poland and Russia after 1880 or so.

During the Nazi period in Germany, Texas received relatively fewer Jewish refugees than other parts of the country, but several within music enriched the state's cultural life, from the famed Hungarian Antal Dorati (1906-1988), who became conductor of the Dallas Symphony,<sup>4</sup> to the lesser-known Max Reiter (1905-1950), who became conductor of the newly reorganized San Antonio Symphony in 1939,<sup>5</sup> to the virtually unknown Michael Balnemes (1876-1972), who had been a clarinetist at the Berlin State Opera, emigrated

in 1938, and became bass clarinetist of the same San Antonio Symphony a few years later.<sup>6</sup> Among the Jews already living in Texas for generations, Houston lawyer Maurice Hirsch (1890-1983), son of an Alsatian immigrant and a member of the venerable Congregation Beth Israel, rose to the rank of general in the army and otherwise supported his city's symphony orchestra, opera company, and art museum with his time and wealth.<sup>7</sup> In San Antonio, the vivacious and cultured socialite Pauline Washer Goldsmith married symphony orchestra conductor Max Reiter, survived him by a quarter century, and was an active supporter of the organization until her own death.

During the world wars, Texas (with its warm, sunny climate) became the site of many army and air force training bases, and after World War II, the flood tide of American immigrants of all religious persuasions, seeking respite from heavy industry and cold winters up north, poured into the state. Among those was the Friedman family of Chicago.

#### FRIEDMAN FAMILY BACKGROUND

It is surprisingly difficult to develop an accurate biographical sketch of Kinky Friedman. Internet sources make it easy to compile the roughest outline of Friedman's life,<sup>8</sup> but he himself has written, "I don't have a computer. Nor am I ever likely to have one. I think that the internet is the work of Satan."<sup>9</sup> Indeed, the devil is in the details, and in fact many sources contradict each other, lending credence to Friedman's own pronouncement, "My life is a work of fiction."<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, Friedman's essays seem the best source for glimpses—whether brief or extended—into his life.<sup>11</sup>

He was born Richard S. Friedman in Chicago on November 1, 1944, the son of S. Thomas and Minnie Samet Friedman. Kinky wrote that he and his father "derive[d] from a small, ill-tempered family,"<sup>12</sup> presumably of Eastern European origin.<sup>13</sup> Tom and Minnie later had another son Roger and, much later, a daughter Marcie.

Tom Friedman had been born on March 2, 1918,<sup>14</sup> and grew up in the Chicago of the late 1920s. His first job was working for a Polish fruit and vegetable peddler on the old West Side, running purchases up to the top floors of the tenements. He remembered the word that the peddler seemed to shout out more than any other: "Kartofel" [potato].<sup>15</sup> He earned a B.A. in psychology from the University of Illinois in 1938 and a master's degree from the University of Chicago in 1942.<sup>16</sup> He then enlisted and "served as a navigator in World War II, flying a B-24 ('Liberator') bomber for the Eighth Air Force. His plane was called the 'I've Had It,' and he flew thirty-five successful missions over Germany, the last on November 9, 1944. He was the only man in the



10-man crew who had a college degree, and was also, at twenty three, the oldest in the plane. He received the Distinguished Flying Cross and the Air Medal with three Oak Leaf clusters.”<sup>17</sup> He emerged as a first lieutenant in 1945.<sup>18</sup> Many years later, Kinky’s sister Marcie once saw the aged Tom sitting alone in a darkened room and asked: “Is everything all right, Father?” His reply: “The last time everything was all right was August 14, 1945”——VJ Day, the day that Japan surrendered.<sup>19</sup>

## FROM CHICAGO TO TEXAS

Married to Minnie and with their young son Richard, born on November 1, 1944,<sup>20</sup> Tom cast his eyes southward. In 1946, he was appointed executive director of the Southwestern Jewish Community Relations Council in Houston, Texas, and held that position until 1959.<sup>21</sup> Minnie became the first speech therapist in the Houston Independent School District.<sup>22</sup>

By 1950, the family lived at 2635 Nottingham in West University Place. Little Richard was a student at Edgar Allan Poe Elementary School; his mother took him swimming at Shakespeare’s Pool, and the family’s (black) maid, Lottie Cotton (1902-2003), made popcorn balls. Very early on, Tom taught him to play chess—so well that, by 1952, at age seven, he was the youngest of about fifty people, mostly adults, pitted against the world master Samuel Reshevsky in a marathon match. Even though Reshevsky beat them all in an hour and a half, little Richard Friedman’s photo appeared on the front page of the *Houston Chronicle*.<sup>23</sup> Tom also taught Richard how to play tennis and how to belch.<sup>24</sup> If the latter, then both generations qualify as what historian Ruth Gay termed “unfinished people.”<sup>25</sup>

In 1952, while still living in Houston, the Friedmans bought a 400-acre ranch northwest of San Antonio and just south of Kerrville, named it Echo Hill, and transformed it into a summer camp for Jewish boys and girls to ride horses, swim in the river, and explore the hills.<sup>26</sup> On June 19, 1953, at about the same time that the camp opened for the first time, Julius and Ethel Rosenberg were executed at Sing Sing for having betrayed American atomic secrets to the Soviet Union. The distant execution of two fellow Jews so moved young Richard that he cried when he heard the news reports, and he later, as Kinky, mentioned it as a contrast to his first impression of hummingbirds at the new Echo Hill Ranch.<sup>27</sup>

After having participated in his elementary school’s Christmas pageant in the third grade (although he refused to do so in the fourth), Richard, at age thirteen, was bar mitzvahed by Rabbi Robert I. Kahn at Temple Emanu El, a Reform synagogue founded as recently as June 8, 1944. The following year, he

cancelled his hated accordion lessons at the Bell Music School on Edloe Street and traded the instrument for a guitar.<sup>28</sup>

In 1959, probably to be nearer to the ranch year-round, Tom moved the family to Austin and began doctoral studies at the University of Texas, receiving his degree in psychology in 1963 and joining the educational psychology faculty there in 1964.<sup>29</sup>

## AUSTIN

In Austin, young Richard enrolled in Stephen F. Austin High School and formed his first band, the Three Rejects, a name that foreshadowed the decades to come. In 1962, he enrolled at the University of Texas as a psychology major in Plan II, one of the highly advanced liberal arts programs so popular at the time. Here he established his second band, a rock 'n' roll group called King Arthur and the Carrots. One of its members, Chinga Chavin, dubbed him "Kinky" because of his curly "Jew-fro" hair (as he himself termed it), and the name has remained with him to the present day.<sup>30</sup>

In November 1963, when Jack Ruby shot President Kennedy's accused assassin, Lee Harvey Oswald, Friedman found another Jewish hero. Later he termed Ruby "the first Texas Jewboy." Incensed at injustice, he and his friends picketed restaurants—even their own favorite haunts—where blacks were regularly denied service.<sup>31</sup>

In 1965 (some sources say 1966), Friedman graduated from the University of Texas and entered the Peace Corps (after being rejected once). Soon he found himself in the jungles of Borneo, where his job as an agricultural extension worker was to teach the local inhabitants—who had been farming their lands successfully for 2,000 years—how to improve their agricultural methods. Bored and frustrated by the system, Friedman read Joseph Heller's *Catch-22* for the first time, began drinking an excessive amount of *tuak*, a local hallucinogenic rice wine, and indulged in other extracurricular activities.<sup>32</sup>

## THE RISE AND FALL OF THE TEXAS JEWBOYS

During his two years in the Peace Corps, Friedman also envisioned forming a country music band, "Kinky Friedman and the Texas Jewboys," with a name reminiscent of "Bob Wills and His Texas Playboys," a western swing band that had been popular in the Depression era.<sup>33</sup> Conveniently mustered out of the Peace Corps, Kinky visited New York, then headed back to the ranch in Kerrville and, in 1971, established the Texas Jewboys, which he termed "a country band with a social conscience, a demented love child of Lenny Bruce and Bob Wills."<sup>34</sup>

The post-World War II atomic era had given rise to a nostalgic thirst for American folk music, and there were genuine models in materials that had been collected as recently as the Depression era. Folksongs, often adapted from traditional sources or newly composed, became big business. Individual folksong singers such as Pete Seeger (b. 1919) and Richard Dyer-Bennet (1913-1991) were joined by folksong groups, whether discovered or created outright by concert or recording promoters.<sup>35</sup> The Vietnam era stimulated both nostalgia and social protest, the latter often in the form of outrageous satires or parodies. From the 1950s, Jewish mathematician-turned-satirist Tom Lehrer (b. 1928) extolled the joys of “Poisoning Pigeons in the Park”; in reviewing the year 1965, parodied the obituaries of the long-lived and many-loved Alma (Schindler) Mahler-Gropius-Werfel (1879-1964) in “Alma”; and satirized the Catholic Church’s new ecumenism and adoption of the vernacular in his “Vatican Rag.”<sup>36</sup> Among the many folk groups, the Chad Mitchell Trio (with John Denver later replacing Mitchell himself) alternated folk and folklike fare with incredibly biting satire. Their “I Was Not a Nazi Polka” lampooned Germans who minimized the Nazis or their influence; their “Ecumenical March” treated the Vatican Council’s pronouncement that the Jews had not killed Jesus from a giddily relieved first-person Jewish standpoint. Perhaps their most ferocious satire of all, however, was “Twelve Days,” an adaptation of “The Twelve Days of Christmas,” with a new text from the viewpoint of the unrepentant Nazi, beginning gently and rising to Hitler-like ranting.<sup>37</sup>

It was into this musical and social environment, then, that Kinky Friedman envisioned creating and promoting the Texas Jewboys, using a country-western format rather than the more common generic American folksong setting. He even wrote several songs while still in Borneo, including “Ride ’em Jewboy,” “They Ain’t Makin’ Jews Like Jesus Anymore,” and “We Reserve the Right to Refuse Service to You.”<sup>38</sup>

“Ride ’em Jewboy” is a deceptively comforting lullaby, as if sung by a cowboy rounding up cattle on the range. What the rider is quietly rounding up, however, are Jewish prisoners in a concentration camp, calmly heading for death and cremation. By contrast, “They Ain’t Makin’ Jews Like Jesus Anymore” is a first-person ballad about a Jewish cowboy who encounters a belligerent, belittling redneck in a bar. It includes several distasteful racial and ethnic slurs, extending to Mexicans, Asians, blacks, Jews, college fraternities, and even to the Greek Aristotle Onassis (then prominently in the news), before the insulted Jewish cowboy throws a single punch that leaves his adversary lying on the barroom floor. Thus, Friedman used the Jewish Jesus’ image of turning the other cheek to those who offended him, asserting that modern Jews, when

offended, are not afraid to strike back. Even so, the Jewish establishment was hardly immune to criticism in "We Reserve the Right," where Friedman compared a rabbi's refusal to admit a wayward member to services with a restaurant owner's refusal to serve blacks and other undesirables. As Friedman later said, his songs had "a little something to offend almost everyone."<sup>39</sup>

The original Texas Jewboys consisted of Friedman, Kenny ("Snakebite") Jacobs, Thomas William ("Wichita") Culpepper, and Jeff ("Little Jewford") Shelby, so called because he was a Jew and he drove a Ford. Of the four Texans in the band, only "Wichita" was not Jewish. Three other original members were described as "Texans and Jews by inspiration."<sup>40</sup> As Friedman wrote of the band's genesis, they rehearsed for six days, and on the seventh they had a sound check.<sup>41</sup>

In 1972, *Rolling Stone* magazine published a story about them, titled "Band of Unknowns Fails to Emerge." In 1973, however, they did emerge and gave their first concert in Luckenbach, Texas,<sup>42</sup> a nearly deserted German farming town between Fredericksburg and New Braunfels.

Originally a small farming community, established in the pre-Civil War wave of German immigration that also brought German Jews to Texas, Luckenbach, by 1973, had an antiquated general store, a small social hall, the ruins of a mill, a half dozen farmhouses, a single side road connecting everything together in a half-mile semi-circle, and an official population of approximately 21. Whether a German polka band or a country band played on weekends, the little town would draw a modest crowd from Fredericksburg to New Braunfels.<sup>43</sup> Later (and with a stereotypical tongue placed firmly in his cheek), Friedman recalled that the Luckenbach residents "tied their shoes with little Nazis," and that "the juke box contained mostly old German drinking songs and warped Wagnerian polkas." He wrote: "I was a bit nervous until I looked out over the krauts. They were big and friendly and goose-stepping in time to the music. Soon they stopped polishing their Lugers altogether, clicked their heels, and broke into a moderately Teutonic variant of the bunny hop."<sup>44</sup>

One of the band's earliest ventures, setting the tone for so many others and guaranteed to get an audience singing along with them, was "Asshole from El Paso," Chinga Chavin and Snakebite Jacobs's socially satirical parody of Merle Haggard's clean-cut, patriotic country song "Okie from Muskogee." Where Haggard sang, "And I'm proud to be an Okie from Muskogee. . . . And white lightning's still the biggest thrill of all," Friedman's parody ran "And I'm proud to be an asshole from El Paso. . . . And the wetbacks still get twenty cents an hour."<sup>45</sup>

Then Kinky Friedman and the Texas Jewboys set out across the coun-

try in a station wagon pulling a U-Haul trailer: from Kerrville to Nashville, Boston, and Los Angeles.<sup>46</sup> Everywhere, they managed to offend somebody, if not for their lyrics, then for their costumes, which were not limited to just cowboy attire. In San Francisco, they were attacked by Native Americans (including folk singer Buffy Sainte-Marie) for wearing Indian feathered war bonnets and singing “We Are the Red Men Tall and Quaint.”<sup>47</sup> In Buffalo, they were attacked by feminists and lesbians, who took offense at the song “Get Your Biscuits in the Oven and Your Buns in the Bed.” Blacks chased them in Denver, and rednecks sent them death threats in Nacogdoches, Texas, home of the early Jewish magistrate Adolphus Sterne. In Dallas, a nightclub manager unceremoniously tossed them off the stage, and they were rescued by none other than Willie Nelson, who became one of Friedman’s best friends. In New York, as Friedman recounts, “Mild-mannered, pointy-headed liberal Jews called us a *shande* [a shameful thing or a scandal].”<sup>48</sup> Even Friedman’s own father Tom called the band’s name “terrible. . . . It’s a negative, hostile, peculiar thing.”<sup>49</sup> Nonetheless, the recordings of Kinky Friedman and the Texas Jewboys, begun in 1973, became treasured possessions to their cult followers.<sup>50</sup>

On November 11, 1975, they played at the Austin City Limits, a studio-club where the shows were filmed for later airing on the *livefromaustintx* television program. The band wore their most colorful costumes, some only faintly reminiscent of their supposed cowboy origins, although Kinky, wearing dark glasses, was dressed in a blue cowboy outfit with a blue-fur-lined guitar strap. Their performance was predictably outrageous.<sup>51</sup> The band and Friedman himself were at the height of their undisciplined, artistic, and humorous powers. “Asshole from El Paso” and “They Ain’t Makin’ Jews Like Jesus Anymore” received particularly colorful readings, and “Ride ‘Em Jewboy,” although used as an encore, suffering from technical problems, and truncated as the credits rolled, was—with its particularly poignant falsetto cattle calls—perhaps their most soulfully heartfelt performance on record. Even though an enthusiastic crowd cheered the live concert, the producers determined that it was too controversial for public broadcast and refused to air it, in spite of vigorous protests by Friedman and his friends.<sup>52</sup>

But, with the Vietnam era over, America’s receptiveness to hard-hitting satire was changing. Political-musical satirist Mark Russell (b. 1932) noted that such material has “a shelf life shorter than cottage cheese.”<sup>53</sup> Even the legendary Tom Lehrer wound down his career just as Kinky Friedman’s was on the rise, commenting that awarding the Nobel Peace Prize to Henry Kissinger in 1973 “made political satire obsolete.”<sup>54</sup> Kinky had arrived a decade too late.

When Kinky appeared on NBC’s *Saturday Night Live* on October 23,

1976, he did so alone, to his own guitar accompaniment, singing the relatively tame "Dear Abby." In it, he calls himself a fan in Texas and asks how to find love but also wanders and wonders topically "if we lost more than the war."<sup>55</sup> Without the Texas Jewboys as a back-up and without the shock value of his offensively humorous lyrics, Kinky proved not to be a very accomplished or charismatic soloist.

Identifying with Jesus, as he often does in his essays, Friedman later wrote: "Like Jesus, I was a big believer in resurrection. I've had to resurrect my career on at least three or four occasions."<sup>56</sup> Indeed, he did just that in the late 1970s. Placing the Texas Jewboys on sabbatical,<sup>57</sup> he moved to New York and began writing detective novels with himself, a transplanted Texas cowboy, as the wise-cracking sleuth. Here was the almost universally acknowledged success that had eluded him with his musical activities, and here, across twenty mysteries (published between 1986 and 2006), he could polish his style and add depth and consistency to his content.<sup>58</sup> When his mother Minnie died in May 1985, he returned to Texas, mostly living in solitude at Echo Hill Ranch,<sup>59</sup> except for tours with Willie Nelson and White House visits with both Bill Clinton and George W. Bush.

Even so, Kinky's adventurous side took hold in 1986, and he ran for justice of the peace in nearby Kerrville—and lost.<sup>60</sup> His father Tom stepped on a rainbow in August 2002, shortly after celebrating fifty years at Echo Hill Ranch.<sup>61</sup> In 2006, Kinky ran as an independent for governor of Texas—and lost. In April 2009, he announced plans to run for governor again, this time as a Democrat, but withdrew in December. Instead, he sought the nomination for Texas agricultural commissioner—but lost again in the primary held on March 2, 2010 (Texas Independence Day).<sup>62</sup> Surely his political career cannot be over so soon; surely there will be another "resurrection"!

Along the way Kinky Friedman added the role of essayist to his portfolio, publishing in the *Texas Monthly*, with a supposed readership of two million. Collections of the most universally humorous and enduring of these essays, along with other literary outpourings, have sold like hotcakes to a national audience.<sup>63</sup> Occasionally, Friedman's loyal readers have to forgive him if he reiterates his one-liners too frequently—but these words and phrases are old friends by now, just like the refrains from his shockingly satirical songs of thirty-five years.

## CONCLUSION

Kinky Friedman may not represent the Jewish community in Texas as it existed historically and culturally during the authentic cowboy era before World

War II. In his musical humor, however, he has united a postwar immigrant's social awareness with the traditional cowboy image—embodied in one memorable line from his poignantly beautiful Holocaust round-up lullaby, "Ride 'Em Jewboy"—"Anything worth cryin' can be smiled."

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Summary background material may be found in cultural geographer Terry G. Jordan's *German Seed in Texas Soil: Immigrant Farmers in Nineteenth-Century Texas* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1966).

<sup>2</sup> Rabbi James L. Kessler, "Jews," *New Handbook of Texas* (ed. Ron Tyler; 6 vols.; Austin: Texas State Historical Association, 1996), III, 938-39; Robert Wooster, "Isaacks, Elijah," *Ibid.*, III, 876 (young Samuel may actually have arrived in Texas before his father Elijah); Archie P. McDonald, "Sterne, Nicholas Adolphus," *ibid.*, VI, 94-95.

<sup>3</sup> Theodore Albrecht, "Julius Weiss: Scott Joplin's First Piano Teacher," *College Music Symposium* 43 (Fall 1979): 89-105.

<sup>4</sup> Antal Dorati, *Notes of Seven Decades* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1979/81), 194-216. The Dallas Symphony Orchestra was over four decades old and already a fine ensemble when Dorati arrived, but he can be credited for bringing it to artistic maturity within a relatively short period of time.

<sup>5</sup> Lois G. Oppenheimer, "Reiter, Max," *New Handbook of Texas*, V, 521-22; Theodore Albrecht, "San Antonio Symphony Orchestra," *Ibid.*, V, 813-14; and Albrecht, "101 Years of Symphonic Music in San Antonio," *Southwestern Musician* 43 (March 1975): 18-19; (November 1975): 22-23.

<sup>6</sup> Christine Fischer-Defoy, *Kunst im Aufbau: Die Westberliner Kunst- und Musikhochschulen* (Berlin: Hochschule der Künste, 2001), 352; see website: <http://www.worldvitalrecords.com> (Social Security Death Index).

<sup>7</sup> Diana J. Kleiner, "Hirsch, Maurice," *New Handbook of Texas*, III, 630. Houston's oldest congregation, Beth Israel, founded in 1854 as Orthodox, became Reform fifteen years later.

<sup>8</sup> The most extensive is "The Kinkster—An unofficial biography," available online at <http://kinkyfriedmansgreenwichvillage.wordpress.com>, though the current Wikipedia article, which can be seen at [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kinky\\_Friedman](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kinky_Friedman), despite inaccuracies, contains nuggets of information not easily found elsewhere. Other websites provide the lyrics of his songs and so forth.

<sup>9</sup> Kinky Friedman, *The Great Psychedelic Armadillo Picnic: A "Walk" in Austin* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2004), 76; and *Texas Hold 'Em: How I Was Born in a Man-ger, Died in the Saddle, and Came Back as a Horny Toad* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2005), 115-18, with the variant, "computers are the work of Satan."

<sup>10</sup> Kinky Friedman, *Cowboy Logic: The Wit and Wisdom of Kinky Friedman and Some of His Friends* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2006), 184. Indeed, Jim Bessman's program notes to the CD re-release of Friedman's 1973 album *Sold American* (Vanguard 79734-2 [2003]), unnumbered 7, assert: "Richard Kinky 'Big Dick' Friedman (as he identifies himself on his answering machine) was born fittingly on Halloween, October 31, 1944, to be exact, in of all places, Palestine—Texas."

<sup>11</sup> Autobiographical references abound in Friedman's detective novels as well, but these truly are "a work of fiction" (as noted in *Cowboy Logic*, 184) and are more subject to literary distortion than those that appear—sometimes repeatedly—in his essays.

<sup>12</sup> Kinky Friedman, *'Scuse Me While I Whip This Out: Reflections on Country Singers, Presidents, and Other Trouble Makers* (New York: Harper-Collins/William Morrow, 2004), 106.

<sup>13</sup> Friedman never specifies his family's origins, but his father's first job as a helper to a Polish fruit-and-vegetable vendor in their Chicago neighborhood and Friedman's own lack of identification with the Texas German population lead one to presume Eastern European roots. One suspects, too, that one or more of Friedman's grandparents were his immigrant ancestors.

<sup>14</sup> University of Texas, Faculty Council, Memorial Resolution, prepared by Professors Toni Falbo and Ed Emmer, April 14, 2003.

<sup>15</sup> Friedman, *'Scuse Me*, 190. *Kartofel* or *kartofle* is perhaps the most common Polish Yiddish word for potato (as opposed to *ziemniak*); *Kartoffel* is actually German, but probably went east with the migrations of the fourteenth century, among others.

<sup>16</sup> University of Texas, Faculty Council, Memorial Resolution.

<sup>17</sup> Friedman, *'Scuse Me*, 191. Quoting his father's reminiscences, Friedman also related that, "After each successful mission, the crew would paint a small bomb on the side of the plane, and, in the rare cases of downing an enemy plane, a swastika. When one incoming crew accidentally hit a British runway maintenance worker, someone painted a small teacup on the side of the plane, nearly engendering an international incident."

<sup>18</sup> University of Texas, Faculty Council, Memorial Resolution.

<sup>19</sup> Friedman, *'Scuse Me*, 192.

<sup>20</sup> While some internet sources give Richard's birth date as October 31, Kinky himself wrote that he was born on November 1, 1944, "in a manger somewhere on the south side of Chicago." He further commented, "I lived there one year, couldn't find work, and moved to Texas, where I haven't worked since." The month only is given in Friedman, *'Scuse Me*, 190; the exact day in Kinky Friedman, *Kinky Friedman's Guide to Texas Etiquette, or How to Get to Heaven or Hell Without Going Through Dallas-Fort Worth* (New York: Harper-Collins/Cliff Street Books, 2001), 38.

<sup>21</sup> University of Texas, Faculty Council, Memorial Resolution.

<sup>22</sup> Friedman, *'Scuse Me*, 192; *Texas Hold 'Em*, 214-15. Friedman does not specify when they moved to Texas, but it may have been in time for school to start in September 1945 or possibly 1946.

<sup>23</sup> Friedman, *Texas Hold 'Em*, 126-28, with more details. A photograph of the event is reproduced on the dust jacket of Friedman's novel *Blast from the Past* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1998).

Lottie Cotton was born in Liberty, Texas, on September 6, 1902, and died in Houston during the summer of 2003. In *Texas Monthly* (1 October 2003) and *Texas Hold 'Em*, 214-15, Friedman wrote in tribute that she was not really a maid or a nanny and that she did not live with them, but that she occupied a special place within the family and his affections. Indeed, this was often the case with domestic servants and their employers of two or three generations ago.



Samuel Reshevsky (1911-1992) was born near Łódz in Poland (then Russia) and came to the United States in 1920.

<sup>24</sup> Friedman, *'Scuse Me*, 193.

<sup>25</sup> Ruth Gay, *Unfinished People: Eastern European Jews Encounter America* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1996).

<sup>26</sup> Friedman, *Texas Hold 'Em*, 12, 42; *'Scuse Me*, 192. Calling it “on the outskirts of Medina,” which is twenty-three miles south of Kerrville, Friedman noted its modern origins as “the old Sweeny place,” a ranch owned by Reverend Sweeny, a circuit preacher who lived there from 1921, drove a Model T Ford, and kept meat down in the well for refrigeration.

<sup>27</sup> Friedman, *Texas Hold 'Em*, 43.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 129.

<sup>29</sup> University of Texas, Faculty Council, Memorial Resolution. Tom Friedman was tenured already in 1967 and retired from the University in 1983. During the presentation of this material at the Klutznick-Harris Symposium on October 25, 2009, one audience member said that she had taken classes with Tom Friedman and noted both his excellent teaching and his devotion to Jewish social causes. In *'Scuse Me*, 192, Friedman likewise specifies that his father's area was educational psychology.

<sup>30</sup> “The Kinkster” (website); Friedman, *Texas Hold 'Em*, 99-101; *'Scuse Me*, 86-87; *Armadillo*, 75.

<sup>31</sup> Friedman, *Texas Hold 'Em*, 99-101; *'Scuse Me*, 87.

<sup>32</sup> Friedman, *Texas Hold 'Em*, 21-24, 101; *'Scuse Me*, 37, 145, 165-69; *Armadillo*, 66.

<sup>33</sup> A 2006 compilation of forty of their songs is available on Primo PRMCD 6012.

<sup>34</sup> Friedman, *Armadillo*, 66.

<sup>35</sup> For an alternately entertaining and embarrassing parody “retrospective” of such groups, see the 2003 motion picture *A Mighty Wind*, available on Warner Bros. DVD 27718.

<sup>36</sup> Lehrer did not tour extensively, but his recordings reached millions in various issues and repackagings. See, for instance, his 1965 parody on the satirical television program *That Was the Week That Was* in the record album *That Was the Year That Was*, available on CD as Reprise/Warner 6179-2.

<sup>37</sup> Among the Chad Mitchell (and simply Mitchell) Trio recordings for Mercury transferred to CD, see Collectors' Choice Music CCM-374-2 (twenty-four items including the “Ecumenical March” and “I Was Not a Nazi Polka”); and CCM-372-2 (twenty-four items including “Twelve Days”).

<sup>38</sup> Friedman, *'Scuse Me*, 27-32.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>40</sup> Friedman, *Armadillo*, 66-67; *Texas Hold 'Em*, 21-22, among other retellings over the years. The three inspired members were Billy Swan, Willie Fong Young, and Rainbow Colors.

<sup>41</sup> Friedman, *'Scuse Me*, 33.

<sup>42</sup> Friedman, *Etiquette*, 36-37; *Texas Hold 'Em*, 22; *Armadillo*, 67.

<sup>43</sup> Glen E. Lich, “Luckenbach,” *New Handbook of Texas*, IV, 329; and personal observations, 1972-75. Religiously, Luckenbach was pretty much evenly divided among Catholics, Lutherans, and German Methodists.

<sup>44</sup> Friedman, 'Scuse Me, 35. Most of Friedman's facts and fancies here are exaggerated, but they make for humorous reading in his essay.

<sup>45</sup> Haggard's recordings and performances have been anthologized many times; for a CD reissue, see *Merle Haggard, Okie from Muskogee*, Capitol CDL-52746 (1989); Friedman's parody, cleaned up to read "Arsehole from El Paso" on the CD jacket, is *Kinky Friedman: livefromaustintx* (the unaired concert of 11 November 1975), New West Records NW6124 (2007). The texts of many of Haggard's and Friedman's songs are available from internet sources. Friedman's 1973 *Sold American* album, re-released on CD as Vanguard 79734-2, includes the lyrics to all of its thirteen songs.

<sup>46</sup> Friedman, 'Scuse Me, 33.

<sup>47</sup> Such costuming can be seen in connection with the song "Miss Nickelodian" in the DVD version of *Kinky Friedman: livefromaustintx* (11 November 1975), cited below.

<sup>48</sup> Friedman, 'Scuse Me, 37-38; *Texas Hold 'Em*, 22, 158. The Yiddish *shande* has its origins in the German *Schande*.

<sup>49</sup> Quoted on *CBS Sunday Morning* (21 August 2005).

<sup>50</sup> In addition to the other CDs cited elsewhere in this article, the relatively current Friedman discography includes *From One Good American to Another*, Fruit of the Tune Music 1111 (1995), including late sessions from 1974, 1979, and the early 1980s (produced by Friedman's old friend Nick "Chinga" Chavin); and *Old Testaments and New Revelations*, Fruit of the Tune Music 777, a compendium of live performances of standard and previously unrecorded songs.

<sup>51</sup> See *Kinky Friedman: livefromaustintx* (the unaired concert of 11 November 1975), New West Records, DVD, NW8044 (2007). The video program includes fourteen songs and runs fifty-seven minutes; picture and sound quality are both excellent. Friedman's running commentary included such words as "shit," "hell," and "goddam" and characterized the Christian Trinity as "the Old Man, the Boy, and the Spook" and La Cienega Boulevard in Los Angeles as "La Cienigger." There are few references to classical music in the Friedman canon, so it is perversely gratifying when Friedman refers to keyboardist "Little Jewford" Shelby as "a goddam Shostakovich!" While shocking, the language used at the concert must be considered within Friedman's own declaration that his material had "a little something to offend almost everyone" (Friedman, *Texas Hold 'Em*, 27-32).

<sup>52</sup> Friedman, *Texas Hold 'Em*, 155-58. Fortunately, as noted above, New West Records issued the concert in CD and, especially, DVD forms in 2007, in the same series as they published similar Austin City Limits concerts by Willie Nelson and Johnny Cash.

<sup>53</sup> Mark Russell's musical career lasted considerably longer than many others because he concentrated almost exclusively on political satire lampooning current events, aired only a few times each year on PBS. See [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mark\\_Russell](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mark_Russell).

<sup>54</sup> Lehrer also disliked touring and repeating the same songs night after night. See [http://en.wikipedia.org/Tom\\_Lehrer](http://en.wikipedia.org/Tom_Lehrer).

<sup>55</sup> *Saturday Night Live, 1976-1977 (The Complete Second Season)*, NBC Studios DVD 61001030 (2007), disc 2 (23 October 1976). Consistent with the comments by Tom Lehrer and Mark Russell, *Saturday Night Live* has also had difficulty over the years in maintaining the high level of its satire and comedy.

<sup>56</sup> Friedman, *Texas Hold 'Em*, xix; *'Scuse Me*, 12.

<sup>57</sup> Friedman, *'Scuse Me*, 37. He did not specify exactly when this took place, but there seem to have been a number of revivals and reunions over the years.

<sup>58</sup> Kinky Friedman's novels began with *Greenwich Killing Time* (1986) and later included nineteen other titles, themselves parodying everything from common folk phrases to T. S. Eliot and Neil Simon: *Armadillos and Old Lace* (1994); *Blast from the Past* (1998); *A Case of Lone Star* (1987, featuring fictionalized members of his band); *The Christmas Pig* (2006); *Curse of the Missing Puppethead* (2003); *Elvis, Jesus and Coca-Cola* (1993); *Frequent Flyer* (1989); *God Bless John Wayne* (1995); *Kill Two Birds and Get Stoned* (2003); *The Love Song of J. Edgar Hoover* (1995); *Meanwhile Back at the Ranch* (2002); *The Mile High Club* (2000); *Musical Chairs* (1991); *The Prisoner of Vandam Street* (2004); *Roadkill* (1997); *Spanking Watson* (1999); *Steppin' on a Rainbow* (2001); *Ten Little New Yorkers* (2005); and *When the Cat's Away* (1988).

<sup>59</sup> Friedman has remained single, and his rationalizations abound in his essays, but his long-time girlfriend, "the great love of his life," Kacey Cohen, had died in an auto accident in the late 1970s (Friedman, *Texas Hold 'Em*, 42, 198-202; *'Scuse Me*, 192).

<sup>60</sup> Friedman, *'Scuse Me*, 67.

<sup>61</sup> Friedman, *Texas Hold 'Em*, 42. "Steppin' on a rainbow" is Friedman's gentle euphemism for dying and provided the title for one of his mystery novels.

<sup>62</sup> For the most current developments, see [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kinky\\_Friedman](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kinky_Friedman).

<sup>63</sup> Friedman's essay collections not otherwise cited or quoted above include *You Can Lead a Politician to Water But You Can't Make Him Think: Ten Commandments for Texas Politics* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2007) and *What Would Kinky Do? How to Unscrew a Screwed-Up World* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2008).

# The New Jewish Blackface: African American Tropes in Contemporary Jewish Humor

David Gillota

American Jews have often articulated their ethnic identity in relation to African Americans. At times—such as during the socialist movements of the 1930s or the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s—this has manifested itself through Jewish identification with the oppressed status of African Americans and resulted in cooperation between the two groups.<sup>1</sup>

Often, however, Jews participated in the subjection of African Americans as a means of making their own claim upon assimilated white identity. One of the most fascinating occurrences related to this phenomenon is the Jewish donning of blackface makeup. In the nineteenth century, blackface minstrelsy was among the most popular cultural expressions in the country, but at that time, most blackface performers were working-class Irish Americans.<sup>2</sup> In the twentieth century, however, blackface moved from concert halls and minstrel performances to vaudeville and motion pictures, where most of the entertainers to wear blackface were Jewish.

The most famous Jew to black up was undoubtedly Al Jolson in the 1927 film *The Jazz Singer*, but George Burns, Sophie Tucker, Fanny Brice, Eddie Cantor, and the Marx Brothers all donned blackface as well. Michael Rogin convincingly argues that Jewish blackface in the first half of the twentieth century served as a cultural “rite of passage,” transforming the immigrant Jew into an American.<sup>3</sup> By participating in the exclusion and stereotyping of blacks, American Jews made themselves white. Rogin explains that for American Jewish entertainers, “[f]ocusing attention on blackness protects [their own] whiteness as the unexamined given.”<sup>4</sup>

By the 1960s, the blackface mask had all but disappeared, and like the N-word and the swastika, it became, in John Strausbaugh’s words, “utterly taboo.”<sup>5</sup> Since then, Jewish blackface still made the occasional appearance, but it typically took the form of what Strausbaugh calls “virtual blackface” or “blackface as lifestyle,” in which whites adopt the stereotypical mannerisms, fashion, or language of African Americans without literally blacking up.<sup>6</sup> The best Jewish American example of this sort of “virtual blackface” may be the Jewish hip-hop trio The Beastie Boys, who served an instrumental role in bringing rap music into the cultural mainstream.<sup>7</sup>

Today Jewish blackface is making a surprising resurgence in popular culture. While literal blackface is still rare, many Jewish entertainers, and particularly Jewish humorists, can be seen playing black, rhetorically claiming African American identity or expressing a fascination with the language, style, or music of black culture. An extreme example can be found in the 2003 film *The Hebrew Hammer*, a comic Jewish rewriting of the 1970s blaxploitation genre. This resurgence of Jewish blackface, I argue, suggests a backlash against the assimilationist motives of early Jewish entertainers. By the twenty-first century, American Jews have, for the most part, successfully assimilated into white America and enjoy the privileges of the dominant ethnic group. As Eric Goldstein points out, however, many contemporary Jews feel uncomfortable with this position of undifferentiated whiteness: “many Jews at the turn of the twenty-first century seem particularly conscious of the way that being seen as white delegitimizes their claim to difference as Jews.”<sup>8</sup> This discomfort manifests itself in a number of ways, one of which is the embracing of African American culture as a means to reassert the minority status of Jews. The major difference, then, between contemporary Jewish blackface and the Jewish blackface of the early twentieth century is that Jewish humorists today use blackface not to hide their Jewishness but rather to highlight and explore it. While Rogin argues that early Jewish entertainers donned blackface as a means to claim white identity, today Jews claim blackness in order to distance themselves from it.

This is not done, however, in an obvious or straightforward manner. The humorists I will discuss—Sarah Silverman, Larry David, and Sacha Baron Cohen—create a series of fictional personas through which they perform or otherwise claim black identity. While the comedians themselves are well aware of the complex racial issues that their humor raises, their personas—which often share similarities with the artists themselves—are ignorant of and insensitive to the nuances of racial and ethnic identity. Their humor, then, often comes across as shocking and politically incorrect, and locating a stable or consistent racial commentary amid this humor is virtually impossible. Nonetheless, all three comedians explore the anxiety that many contemporary Jews have about their place in the multiethnic, twenty-first century landscape.

### *THE SARAH SILVERMAN PROGRAM*

Of recent Jewish comedians, Sarah Silverman not only provides the most explicit exploration of blackface in recent years, but she also draws a direct connection between the blackface mask and American Jewish identity. On *The Sarah Silverman Program* (2007-), Silverman plays a fictional character

also named Sarah Silverman.<sup>9</sup> The fictional Sarah is an unemployed, insensitive, unintelligent loafer who lives off her sister. The show often deals with African American themes, but the season two episode “Face Wars” is the most important for our discussion.<sup>10</sup> In the episode’s opening scene, Sarah is not allowed into a WASP country club, and she assumes that she is being discriminated against because she is Jewish. An African American waiter overhears her complaining to her friends that being Jewish is harder than anything else, and he asserts that being black is actually more difficult. Sarah and the African American man then agree to change places for a day in order to decide which group suffers more.

Sarah then engages a makeup artist to transform her into an African American. The black makeup, however, is simply a layer of dark brown grease smeared over her face, and it is clear from her white neck and arms that Sarah is white. To top off the costume, Sarah ties a bandana around her head, and she becomes the offensive image of a minstrel “darky.” When Sarah goes out into the world to try on her new black identity, she is berated by the public for her offensive appearance. Ignorant as always, Sarah assumes that people are yelling at her for being black, not for wearing blackface, and she concludes that it is indeed harder to be black than Jewish. The African American man with whom Sarah had made the bet undergoes a similar transformation, for his Jewish costume consists of a plastic strap-on nose, a *kippah* [skull cap], side locks taped to his face, and a t-shirt that reads “I Love Money.” When he meets Sarah again, he concedes that it is more difficult to be Jewish than black. Sarah and the black man agree to disagree.

Behind the patent absurdity of this storyline, there lurks a fascinating reversal of the received logic of Jewish/black relations. Sarah’s blackface mask not only invokes the long history of discrimination against African Americans, but it also makes no attempt to hide the Jewish complicity in that discrimination. At the same time, however, Sarah also invokes the history of prejudice against Jews. This begins with the scene in the WASP country club (clubs of this sort were notorious throughout much of the twentieth century for both their exclusionary practices and their blatant antisemitism), and it continues with the collection of offensive images that make up the African American man’s Jewish disguise. While Sarah’s contest with the black man over which group suffers more is both ridiculous and potentially offensive to both groups, the important point is that Silverman uses the blackface mask as a means to highlight Jewish identity and distance that identity from an undifferentiated (read: WASP) whiteness.

As the episode moves forward, Jewish identity is seemingly eclipsed by

an extended treatment of black/white relations. The black man—and his Jewish costume—are never heard from again, but Sarah's blackface getup starts a trend: whites all over town begin donning blackface as well, and Sarah is seen as a heroic race crusader. In one scene, a crowd of Sarah's devoted blackfaced followers demands the right, through a repetitive chant, to explore racial issues in America "through the use of postmodern irony." This turn of events moves the episode into the realm of highly self-aware metacomedy. While Sarah remains ignorant and insensitive, Silverman demonstrates her knowledge of not only the racist history of the blackface mask but also contemporary debates about the possible uses of that mask in contemporary culture. African American filmmaker Spike Lee, for example, explores the very issue of "ironic blackface" in his 2000 film *Bamboozled*. While Silverman never posits a precise racial commentary, the moment in which Sarah's ignorance makes her a race crusader anticipates the politically correct backlash that the episode was likely to receive and provides a knowing wink—or, depending how we look at it, a satirical jab—to audience members who are attuned to contemporary discussions about race and its representations in popular culture.<sup>11</sup>

Beneath these layers of knowing irony and tongue-in-cheek humor, I contend that this episode reflects a genuine anxiety about the role that Jews play in multicultural America. For after its exploration of the uses of blackface for racial commentary, the episode reverts to its original preoccupation with Jews and Jewish persecution. At a blackface rally, Sarah is accidentally shot in the arm by an inept police officer, and in the hospital, her sister begins to wipe away the black makeup. She is interrupted, however, by the WASP woman who had denied Sarah entrance to the country club in the opening scene. The only makeup left on Sarah's face when she greets the woman is a small patch just above her lip: a Hitler mustache. Sarah, from behind her Hitler mustache, asks the woman from the country club if she "had hated any Jews lately." The woman admits that she had not let Sarah into the club because she was Jewish but explains that when she saw Sarah on TV in blackface, she realized that "it could have been a lot worse." She tells Sarah that she is welcome to play tennis in the club any time not "during peak hours."

Like the rest of the episode, this final scene is ridiculous on the surface. Beyond the silliness, however, an ambiguity about Jewish persecution in America emerges. The implication behind the WASP woman's comment is that the American Jew stands in a midway point in the black/white racial binary.<sup>12</sup> As a Jew, Sarah is not as "bad" as an African American, but she is still not fully white. It is thus presumed that, while Sarah is allowed to go to the country club in the off hours, an African American would not be allowed to go there at all. The statement undermines Sarah's original position that Jews in

America suffer more than blacks (not that anyone took that position seriously to begin with). But the elephant in the room during this conversation is Sarah's Hitler mustache. Even while the episode mocks the idea that contemporary American Jews suffer more than blacks, it also reminds viewers of the very real and serious persecution of Jews in recent history. While the blackface mask signifies centuries of racism directed at African Americans, the image of the Hitler mustache similarly connotes the Holocaust and centuries of European antisemitism. Silverman thus transforms the blackface mask into a Jewish one and reasserts the American Jew as an ethnic minority.

### *CURB YOUR ENTHUSIASM*

While Sarah Silverman literally applies black makeup, Larry David, the star and creator of the HBO series *Curb Your Enthusiasm* (2000—), provides a more subtle version of Jewish blackface, one that reflects a similar anxiety about Jewish identity. Like Silverman, David portrays a fictional, crass, insensitive version of himself. As in real life, the fictional Larry David is a wealthy Jewish TV mogul, famous for being the co-creator of the hit TV series *Seinfeld* and the basis for the nebbish character George Costanza. Aside from his abrasive personality and his habit for getting himself into embarrassing situations, the key difference between David and his on-screen persona is that the fictional Larry is married, throughout most of the series, to a gentile woman and David's real-life now ex-wife is Jewish. This change highlights the fact that one of David's primary preoccupations on *Curb* is the exploration of Jewish identity in contemporary America.<sup>13</sup> As Simcha Weinstein asserts, *Curb* is "one of the most openly Jewish comedy series ever."<sup>14</sup> This Jewishness manifests itself in a series of plotlines that develop around David's struggles with his *shiksa* wife and his *goyish* in-laws. Despite being married to a gentile, Larry often expresses an anxiety about being seen as a fully assimilated white. For example, in the season three episode "Mary, Joseph, and Larry," Larry objects to having a Christmas tree in his house because he is afraid that God might think he's "switching."<sup>15</sup> In addition, in the pilot episode, he admits to his manager that he has "a tendency to nod to black people" to let them know that he is not "one of the bad ones."<sup>16</sup>

One of Larry's methods of dealing with his anxiety is by identifying or forming bonds with various cultural minorities, especially African Americans. We see this in the opening scene of the season three episode "Krazee-Eyez Killa." At an outdoor barbecue, Larry finds himself in conversation with an African American hip-hop artist named Krazee-Eyez Killa. Krazee-Eyez raps the obscene lyrics of a song and asks Larry for feedback. Larry, skeptical at first,



smiles appreciatively and offers some minor suggestions. Krazee-Eyez expresses his gratitude, saying, "You my dog. You my nigger." Larry responds, "I am your nigger, absolutely."<sup>17</sup> This moment, in which Larry accepts the label of black identity and claims it as his own, is a subtle form of Jewish blackface, and it suggests that, like Krazee-Eyez, Larry is an outsider from mainstream white America.

A more extended treatment of Jewish/black relations occurs throughout the ten episodes of season six, in which Larry becomes a virtual member of an African American family allegorically named the Blacks. Larry and his wife take the Black family, who has been displaced by a devastating hurricane, into their home. The family is made up of Loretta Black, her two children, her aunt (named Auntie Ray), and her brother Leon. When Larry first encounters this family, he cannot help but comment upon their last name: "Now let me get this straight; your last name is Black? . . . That's like if my last name was Jew, like Larry Jew." After an awkward pause, Larry goes on to explain: "Cause I'm Jewish. . . . Don't you see? You're black; I'm Jewish!"<sup>18</sup> It is important to note here that Larry could just as easily have suggested the name "Larry White," but he attempts to form a bond with the Blacks—and by extension with all African Americans—by explicitly connecting his own Jewishness to the Blacks' blackness. Since Larry openly asserts his Jewish identity, this is not truly blackface, but it does show the opposite impulse of Jewish blackface entertainers in the early twentieth century. Larry turns to black identity to accentuate rather than hide his Jewish identity.

Throughout season six, Larry repeatedly offends the Blacks with his peculiar behavior. With each transgression, however, the Blacks ultimately accept Larry back into the fold. One could argue that this is only because Larry helps them financially. Larry himself, however, willingly plays a large role in their family, driving the children to school, attempting to help Loretta get a job, and setting aside space in the yard for Auntie Ray's garden. Moreover, in a manner that resembles his friendship with Krazee-Eyez, Larry becomes particularly close to Loretta's brother Leon, and at times they seem to be symbolically joined. They carry identical cell phones, for instance, and in the episode "The Rat Dog," they mistakenly ruin important calls for each other. And in "The Anonymous Donor," a complex series of events causes them to wear identical baseball jerseys. Dressed identically, the two men sit on the couch together playing cards, and they appear to mirror each other. Throughout all of these episodes, Larry continues to alienate himself from the wealthy whites and assimilated Jews who make up his own social milieu. His identification

and friendship with an African American thus suggests a symbolic distancing from mainstream white culture.

This separation from white America reaches a climax in the season's final episode, titled "The Bat Mitzvah." Larry's wife Cheryl leaves him midseason (paralleling Larry David's real-life divorce from wife Laurie David), and nearly all of Larry's friends—primarily whites and assimilated Jews—side with Cheryl and abandon him as well. This alienation from white society causes Larry to become even closer to the Blacks. Feeling alone and abandoned, Larry invites Loretta Black to attend a Bat Mitzvah with him because he knows Cheryl will be there with her new boyfriend.

The Bat Mitzvah itself is a lavish affair, and it resembles the notorious "sweet sixteen" parties that rich whites throw for their daughters. Larry is ostracized by the guests, and Loretta is simply ignored. In a room full of assimilated Jews and white Christians, both Larry and Loretta are clearly outsiders. For in siding with Cheryl and dismissing Loretta, the Jewish guests affirm their own claim to assimilated white identity. Larry has no community of his own left, so he turns to the Blacks.

In the final scene, Larry fully embraces his outsider status and asks Loretta to dance. As they dance, both viewers and guests at the Bat Mitzvah become aware of a romantic connection. The camera then cuts to Larry and Loretta waking up in bed together as Loretta's children run into the room and jump on the bed. What follows is a hilarious montage of Larry and the Blacks living as a family in Los Angeles: going to the movies, attending soccer games, and arguing with the neighbors. The final image of the episode, and the season, is a card with a photograph of Larry and the family that reads, "Happy Holidays from Larry and the Blacks."<sup>19</sup> The virtual blackface in this moment is clear: unable to adhere to white identity, Larry literally becomes a Black.

### *BORAT AND DA ALI G SHOW*

Among the three artists under discussion, British comedian Sacha Baron Cohen's use of Jewishness and blackface is the most puzzling. Cohen is famous for his television series *Da Ali G Show* (2000) and for his feature-length films *Ali G Indahouse* (2002), *Borat* (2006), and *Brüno* (2009), all based on characters created for *Da Ali G Show*.<sup>20</sup> In all of these works, Cohen assumes one of his bizarre fictional personas—wannabe British gangster Ali G, Kazakhstani reporter Borat, or Austrian fashionista Brüno—and interacts with unsuspecting victims, often causing them to embarrass themselves on camera. Since none of Cohen's fictional personas are either Jewish, black, or American, his

work does not easily fit into discussions of African American or Jewish identity. Nonetheless, both African American culture and Jewishness are major preoccupations in his humor.

In order to fully appreciate Cohen's Jewish blackface, one must read his personas (particularly Borat and Ali G) in conversation with each other. Cohen additionally relies on his viewers' prior knowledge of his own Jewishness in order to get the full import of his humor. For instance, whenever the antisemitic Borat is supposedly speaking Kazakh, Cohen actually uses Hebrew instead. The use of Hebrew acts as a wink to audience members who are in the know and provides an ironic counternarrative to Borat's Jew-hating ignorance. In fact, one of the major themes of Borat, both in his segments on *Da Ali G Show* and in the feature-length film, is antisemitism in the contemporary world. Borat's antisemitism is an exaggerated stereotype form that is often associated with uneducated and superstitious Eastern European peasants. For instance, in his film Borat relates that in Kazakhstan a favorite local pastime is known as "The Running of the Jew," in which locals wear giant masks with stereotypically Jewish features and chase Kazakh children through the streets.<sup>21</sup> In his travels throughout America, Borat continues to spout his antisemitic rhetoric, often causing white Christian Americans to reveal their own anti-Jewish sentiments. A famous example occurs in an episode of *Da Ali G Show* where the patrons of an American country-western bar sing along to Borat's song "In My Country There is Problem" with lyrics such as: "Throw the Jew down the well / So my country can be free / You must grab him by the horns / Then we have a big party."<sup>22</sup> A similar preoccupation with Jewish persecution occurs in Cohen's Brüno segments, where the Austrian fashion expert decides which celebrities, due to their outfit, can "stay in the ghetto" and which must take the "train to Auschwitz."<sup>23</sup>

Even though his characters themselves are not Jewish, Cohen's emphasis on Judaism and Jewish persecution firmly establishes him as a recognizably Jewish comedian and makes *Da Ali G Show* one of the most explicitly Jewish television series since the turn of the century. This Jewishness, I suggest, informs our understanding of Cohen's virtual blackface persona, Ali G. Ali G comes from Staines, a working-class suburb of London, but his clothing and language suggest an affinity with African American culture. Ali G is extremely ignorant of the world around him and seems to understand little beyond hip-hop music, fast food, and designer clothes. In one sketch, for example, Ali G claims that movies about slavery are "racialist" because they always have black actors portraying the slaves.<sup>24</sup> Therefore, while Ali G's skin tone (like Cohen's) is consistent with white ethnicity, his appearance, language, and personality

embody some of the most malicious stereotypes about African Americans. Ali G himself, however, claims to be black.

Taking all of this into account, Ali G seems to be constructed as a deliberate racial conundrum. Critics have speculated that he is from Asian, Turkish, or Jewish descent, but most consider him a white, wannabe “gangsta,” enamored with African American culture even though he has but a superficial understanding of it.<sup>25</sup> However, with Ali G’s sunglasses, hat, and most of his body covered with loose-fitting clothing, it is too difficult to see enough of him to make out any discernible ethnic features. This lack of ethnic specificity often drives the character’s humor, especially when Ali G is interviewing unwitting celebrities. For example, in an interview with the *60 Minutes* pundit Andy Rooney, Ali G repeatedly exasperates the curmudgeonly Rooney with mistakes in verb conjugation that are consistent with Ebonics. When Rooney claims he has had enough and gets up to leave the interview, Ali G asks, “is it ‘cause I is black?” Ali G then goes on to accuse Rooney of being “racialist.” Rooney, visibly confused, looks at Ali G and asks, “you’re black?”<sup>26</sup> Ali G’s indeterminate ethnicity thus forces his interviewees (and viewers) to reevaluate their understanding of racial categories.

In Ali G then, Cohen presents a peculiar sort of blackface. Like early minstrel shows, Ali G represents a recognizable cultural stereotype, but since Cohen does not actually wear black makeup, the stereotype is deflated. Cohen plays at playing black. Early minstrel shows, according to Eric Lott, represented the mixed emotions that whites felt toward black culture: a “dialectical flickering of racial insult and racial envy.”<sup>27</sup> While whites found the dance, style, and music of African Americans fascinating, they also feared coming into close contact with real African Americans. Thus, the minstrel show provided an outlet for whites to express their fascination with black culture in a safe, all-white environment. By acting black, Cohen mocks this sort of white fascination with and fear of black culture. Since on *Da Ali G* show segments featuring Ali G are shown alongside the more overtly Jewish Borat and Brüno sketches, viewers are never allowed to forget that behind the Ali G persona, there is a Jewish man. These confounding layers of ethnic identity are part of what drive Cohen’s humor. Sarah Silverman and Larry David seem to suggest that contemporary Jews must choose either to assimilate into mainstream white society or to reject it by identifying with the black minority. The Ali G persona, however, both collapses and rejects this binary, for through it Cohen is simultaneously white and black. Cohen thus superimposes different ethnic identities (Jewish, white, black) on top of each other. This superimposition assumes that racial and ethnic categories are defined not by rigid categoriza-

tions but rather in relation to each other. The result is not so much an anxiety over the Jews' place in a contemporary multiethnic landscape but an assertion that Jewishness is an integral part of it—not to be subsumed by or removed from the surrounding cultures.

## CONCLUSION

What I have hoped to do here is point out a fascinating trend in contemporary Jewish humor that highlights how many Jews have, over the last century, changed the way that they think about and present their ethnic identity. Rather than looking for ways to hide Jewishness and blend into mainstream white society, many Jews are doing just the opposite and turning to blackness to reassert their own minority status. On the one hand, it could be argued that this trend suggests that Jews want to have their cake and eat it too: enjoy the privileges of the dominant ethnic group and simultaneously claim separation from that group. On the other hand, it could be argued that despite the different contexts and intentions, what I have called “the new Jewish blackface” is not so new but is just another example in a long line of whites appropriating black culture for their own ends. It is clear, though, that Jewish comedians today are well aware of the myriad changes occurring both within the Jewish community and in American culture as a whole. Moreover, these comedians are finding ways to adapt the long tradition of Jewish humor to these changes and provide a humor that reflects the complexity of our contemporary, multiethnic culture.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Cheryl Lynn Greenberg, *Troubling the Waters: Black-Jewish Relations in the American Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006).

<sup>2</sup> For a detailed history of Irish Americans' use of blackface, see Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995).

<sup>3</sup> Michael Rogin, *Blackface, White Noise: Jewish Immigrants in the Hollywood Melting Pot* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 5.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

<sup>5</sup> John Strausbaugh, *Black Like You: Blackface, Whiteface, Insult, & Imitation in American Popular Culture* (New York: Penguin, 2006), 9.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 314.

<sup>7</sup> The stand-up comedy of Lenny Bruce may also serve as an early example of a Jewish “virtual blackface.” Bruce’s humor was inflected by the rhythms and structure of jazz, and his language was infused with an African American vernacular. As Mel Watkins notes, Bruce “conveyed a comic *attitude* reflecting prominent aspects of genuine black

American humor." Watkins, *On the Real Side* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1994), 485.

<sup>8</sup> Eric Goldstein, *The Price of Whiteness: Jews, Race, and American Identity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 236.

<sup>9</sup> I will use "Sarah" to refer to the character on the show and "Silverman" to refer to the artist.

<sup>10</sup> "Face Wars," *The Sarah Silverman Program*, Television. First aired on Comedy Central Oct. 17, 2007. All references to *The Sarah Silverman Program* refer to this episode.

<sup>11</sup> "Face Wars" did not receive as much criticism as we might expect. To my knowledge, neither academics nor mainstream journalists have offered any extended discussion of the episode. Some online bloggers, however, did express outrage over Silverman's use of the blackface mask. See, in particular, username Kevin's discussion titled "The Blackface Files Return" on the online blog <http://www.slanttruth.com>. Or see the website <http://slanttruth.com/2007/10/23/the-blackface-files-return>.

<sup>12</sup> Karen Brodtkin asserts that American Jews have "a kind of double vision that comes from racial middleness: an experience of marginality vis-à-vis whiteness, and an experience of whiteness and belonging vis-à-vis blackness." Karen Brodtkin, *How Jews Became White Folks & What That Says About Race in America* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1998), 2.

<sup>13</sup> I provide an extended discussion of Jewish ethnicity on *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, without the emphasis on blackface, in my article "Negotiating Jewishness: *Curb Your Enthusiasm* and the *Schlemiel* Tradition," *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 38:4 (December 2010).

<sup>14</sup> Simcha Weinstein, *Shtick Shift: Jewish Humor in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (Fort Lee: Barricade Books, 2008), 27.

<sup>15</sup> "Mary, Joseph, and Larry," *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, Television. First aired on HBO (10 November 2002).

<sup>16</sup> *Larry David: Curb Your Enthusiasm*, Television. First aired on HBO (17 October 1999).

<sup>17</sup> "Krazee-Eyez Killa," *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, Television. First aired on HBO (3 November 2002).

<sup>18</sup> "Meet the Blacks," *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, Television. First aired on HBO (9 September 2007).

<sup>19</sup> "The Bat Mitzvah," *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, Television. First aired on HBO (11 November 2007).

<sup>20</sup> *Da Ali G Show* originally aired in the United Kingdom in 2000. The episodes were later repackaged, given new titles, and rebroadcast, on HBO, in the United States from 2003-2004. I am using the U.S. titles.

<sup>21</sup> *Borat: Cultural Learnings of America for Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan*, Film, Twentieth Century Fox, 2006.

<sup>22</sup> "Peace," *Da Ali G Show*, Television. First U.S. airing on HBO (1 August 2004).

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> "Jah," *Da Ali G Show*, Television. First U.S. airing on HBO (15 August 2004).

<sup>25</sup> For an insightful exploration of Ali G's ethnicity, see "Is it cause I is black?," *The Guardian* (12 January 2000). See website: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2000/jan/12/race>.

<sup>26</sup> "Realness," *Da Ali G Show*, Television. First airing on HBO (22 August 2004).

<sup>27</sup> Lott, *Love and Theft*, 18.