Jews and Humor

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Published by Purdue University Press

Greenspoon, Leonard J.
Jews and Humor.
Purdue University Press, 2007.
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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!”


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!


*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 gesehen in denen 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 Sobinsk’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.”

_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 Jew-ish. . . . 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