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 joketelling 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 him the joke; the second time when one explains it to him and the second time when he understands 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!?

This text is the first example found in what is, in effect, a collection of jokes, gathered by Immanuel Olsvanger and entitled Röyte 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. 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 Yid-
dish as griben zikh, to inquire probeingly) 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.”
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 dis-
tinct. 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 folk-
tales and jokes is the oral component. Olsvanger mentioned that he col-
lected 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. Part of this
implication and manipulation of assumptions is the joketeller’s intention to
“frustrate” these expectations.

If the social implication of the audience in the joketelling context of per-
formance 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, speak-
ing, and writing that developed in part out of traditional rabbinic language
and entered Jewish culture more generally. 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 and indeed joketelling 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. Yiddish reacted strongly to the associative “logic” and multidirectional 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 joketelling 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.” 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 gezevre-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!11

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.12

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.”13 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”14 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.15 As a folklorist,
he wants to be able to test via social-scientific methods the accuracy of the
persistent psychological claims.16 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”17—is picked up by, among others, the anthropologist Elliott Oring. Arguing that Jewish humor is a construct, “an idea,”18 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,19 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.20 Jewish humor was also seen as distinct and as engaging Jews’ lowly and suffering condition in certain circumscribed ways.21 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”22 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.23 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.24 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.”

This joke plays on the emotional resonance of Jewish powerlessness in the face of enforced conscription by deflating its mortal seriousness. 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?

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.28 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!29

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.”30

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.”31

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.”

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, particularly by means of the conflation of high- and low-register elements, 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 is more jokative brings us back to an earlier question: Is there a way of distinguishing storytelling and joketelling, 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. 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!’

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.” 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.” 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. 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. 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 joketelling. 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.” 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.\(^43\)

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.*”\(^44\) 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.\(^45\) 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! [\(a\text{ }ruach\text{ }in\text{ }dayn\text{ }tatin\text{ }arayn\)!]”\(^46\) 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 [\(a\text{ }ruach\text{ }in\text{ }dayn\text{ }tatin\text{ }arayn\).]” 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 [\(a\text{ }ruach\text{ }in\text{ }ayer\text{ }tatin\text{ }arayn\).]’”\(^47\)

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.”

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 *intra*-cultural 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.”

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. 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. 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.

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, part of the importance in maintaining an endogenous concept of a Jewish joke (as opposed to related exogenous categories such as Judenwitz) 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 Podalia, quite a small shtetl” (Bin ikh aleyn, vi ikh hob aykh gezogt, a drazhner, fun drazhne heyst dos, a kleyn shtetl in podolyer gubernye, gor a kleyn shtetl). 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). The narrative ligature between story and storytelling is precisely this orality. 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.” 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 verbality: the comedy derives not so much from the stories as from the style in which
they are recounted—from the various styles of garrulosity of the characters. These are, so to speak, his metaphors, tropes, stylizations, and so forth.\textsuperscript{57}

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: \textit{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 \textit{(stantsye drazhne)}. This presents a connection to railway stories, such as Sholem Aleichem’s own \textit{ayznbangeshikhtes} (railroad stories), and the whole genre of railway jokes.\textsuperscript{58} 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…” (\textit{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”—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!’”

This sequence, a kind of internal onomatopoetic 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!’” 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.” 62 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 joketelling 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. 63 “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.” 64 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.” 65 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.” 66 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. 67 “Rabinovitsh’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. 68 To this I would add that, especially given the inescapability of humor for Sholem Aleichem, 69 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


2 Oring calls it “metahumor” (Oring, *Jokes and Their Relations*, 113).


5 Ibid., 8.

6 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).

7 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 Tosafo: a Litvak has to show how sharp his mind is, so this Litvak asks about the Tosafo 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 Tosafo 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.


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

10 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).

11 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.

12 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.

13 *Jokes*, 60.


16 Ibid., 120.

17 Oring, *Jokes and Their Relations*, 114.

18 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.

19 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.


22 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.


24 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.

25 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).

26 Olsvangær, *Röye Pomerantsen*, 60-61; for the full joke, see ibid., 59-61.

27 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]móneshekh* or *[mi]móneshek*—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: “mimonefshokh, yo—yo, neyn—neyn” (one or the other, yes—yes, no—no). Second: “mimonefshokh, ir hot gevart azoy fil, vet ir varn 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” (monefshokh—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.

29 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.
30 Cohen, Jokes, 9, 63.
32 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).
33 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).
34 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.
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.

I heard this independent-ly 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.

Olsvanger, Röyte Pomerantsen, 150.

Cohen, Jokes, 25.

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.

Freud, Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious, 135.

This is also the humor at the heart of Y. L. Peretz’s story “Hakhnoses kale” (1894). Siegbert Prawer, 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 Prawer, “The Jew and the General: A Study in Diasporean Humour,” The Cambridge Journal 3 [Oct. 1949–Sept. 1950]: 352).

Olsvanger, Röyte Pomerantsen, xi. Note again the degree to which Olsvanger has sub-sumed the joke under the category of “story.”

Freud, Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious, 134-35.

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

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

Olsvanger, Röyte Pomerantsen, 8.


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.

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.).

51 Ibid., 295. Note, too, the implied generic distinction made by the phrase “jokes and humorous anecdotes” (my emphasis).

52 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.


54 One should remember the strategic orality in Sholem Aleichem’s “Dos tepl.” The analogy with jokes and joketelling 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.


58 Sholem Aleichem, *Ale verk* [1920], 136.

59 Ibid., 139: “[F]rier gekhrapet gefayft un gesapet un gekhorent, un nokhdem gekrekhtst un geoyket, geforshket un gekratst zikh un geshpign un gevortshet, un ufgekhapt zikh un aropgevorfn dem gantsn betgevant un geshpign klek un gebevzert zikh un gesholtn af zayn loshn: ‘tsom tayvl! sakramento! donnerrrr-veterrrr!’” The earthy onomatopoeia of the language here was clearly designed to be risible.

60 Ibid., 140.

61 Ibid., 145.


63 Ibid., 46.

64 Ibid.


67 Ibid., 108.
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.