



Hazzan Rob Menes
10700 Havenwood Lane, Las Vegas, NV 89135
(702) 804-1333

Jewish Influence on Secular Society

Hazzan Menes

Judaism and Comedy I

From Wikipedia

Jewish humour is the long tradition of [humour](#) in [Judaism](#) dating back to the [Torah](#) and the [Midrash](#) from the ancient mid-east, but generally refers to the more recent stream of verbal, [self-deprecating](#) and often anecdotal humour originating in [Eastern Europe](#) and which took root in the [United States](#) over the last hundred years. Beginning with [vaudeville](#), and continuing through [radio](#), [stand-up comedy](#), [film](#), and [television](#), a disproportionately high percentage of American and Russian comedians have been Jewish.^[1]

The history of Jewish humour

Jewish humour is rooted in several traditions. The first is the intellectual and legal methods of the [Talmud](#), which uses elaborate legal arguments and situations often seen as so absurd as to be humorous in order to tease out the meaning of religious law. ^[1].

[Hillel Halkin](#) in his essay about Jewish humour^[2] traces some roots of the Jewish self-deprecating humour to the medieval influence of Arabic traditions on the Hebrew literature by quoting a witticism from [Yehuda Alharizi](#)'s *Tahkemoni*.

A more recent one is an egalitarian tradition among the Jewish communities of [Eastern Europe](#) in which the powerful were often mocked subtly, rather than attacked overtly—as [Saul Bellow](#) once put it, "oppressed people tend to be witty." Jesters known as [badchens](#) used to poke fun at prominent members of the community during weddings, creating a good-natured tradition of humour as a levelling device. Rabbi [Moshe Waldoks](#), a scholar of Jewish humour, argued:

You have a lot of shtoch, or jab humor, which is usually meant to deflate pomposity or ego, and to deflate people who consider themselves high and mighty. But Jewish humor was also a device for self-criticism within the community, and I think that's where it really was the most powerful. The humorist, like the prophet, would basically take people to task for their failings. The humor of Eastern Europe especially was centered on defending the poor against the exploitation of the upper classes or other authority figures, so rabbis were made fun of, authority figures were made fun of and rich people were made fun of. It really served as a social catharsis.^[3]

After Jews began to immigrate to America in large numbers, they, like other minority groups, found it difficult to gain mainstream acceptance and obtain [upward mobility](#). (As [Lenny Bruce](#) lampooned, "He was charming... They said, 'C'mon! Let's go watch the Jew be charming!'") The newly-developing entertainment industry, combined with the Jewish humour tradition, provided a potential route for Jews to succeed. One of the first successful radio "[sitcoms](#)," [The Goldbergs](#),



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featured a Jewish family. As radio and television matured, many of its most famous comedians, including [Jack Benny](#), [Sid Caesar](#), [George Burns](#), [Henny Youngman](#) and [Milton Berle](#), were Jewish. The Jewish comedy tradition continues today, with Jewish humour much entwined with that of mainstream humour, as comedies like [Seinfeld](#) and [Curb Your Enthusiasm](#) indicate.

[Sigmund Freud](#) in his [Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious](#), among other things, analyses the nature of the Jewish jokes.

Types of Jewish humour

Religious humour

As befits a community to which religion was so important, much humour centres on the relationship of Judaism to the individual Jew and the community.

Two Rabbis argued late into the night about the existence of God, and, using strong arguments from the scriptures, ended up indisputably disproving His existence. The next day, one Rabbi was surprised to see the other walking into the Shul for morning services.

"I thought we had agreed there was no God," he said.

"Yes, what does that have to do with it?" replied the other.

Assimilation

The American Jewish community has been lamenting the rate of assimilation and disappearance of their children as they grow into adults.

Two Rabbis were discussing their problems with squirrels in their synagogue attic. One Rabbi said they simply called an exterminator and they never saw the squirrels again. The other Rabbi said, "We just gave them all a [bar mitzvah](#), and never saw the squirrels again."

Self-hating

Jews often mock their own negative stereotypes.

Question: How can you always spot a convert to Judaism?

Answer: He's the only normal one in the congregation.

Wits

Similarly, in the tradition of the legal arguments of the Talmud, one prominent type of Jewish humour involves clever, often legalistic, solutions to Talmudic problems, such as:



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Q: Is one permitted to ride in an airplane on the Sabbath?

A: Yes, as long as your seat belt remains fastened. In this case, it is considered that you are not riding, you are wearing the plane.

Tales of the Rebbes

Some jokes make fun of the "[Rebbe](#) miracle stories" and involve different [hasidim](#) bragging about their teachers' miraculous abilities:

Three *hasidim* are bragging about their *Rebbes*: "My *rebbe* is very powerful. He was walking once, and there was a big lake in his path. He waved his handkerchief, and there was lake on the right, lake on the left, but no lake in the middle." To which the second retorted, "That's nothing. My *rebbe* is even more powerful. He was walking once, and there was a huge mountain in his path. He waved his handkerchief, and there was mountain on the right, mountain on the left, but no mountain in the middle!" Said the third, "Ha! That is still nothing! My *rebbe* is the most powerful. He was walking once on [Shabbos](#) (Saturday, the holy day in Judaism, on which it is forbidden to handle money), and there was a wallet crammed full of cash in his path. He waved his handkerchief, and it was *Shabbos* on the right, *Shabbos* on the left, but not *Shabbos* in the middle!"

The lives of the early [hasidim](#), while not funny in and of themselves, are rich in humorous incidents. The dealings between [rabbis](#), [tzaddikim](#), and peasants form a rich tapestry of lore.

Eastern European Jewish humour

A number of traditions in Jewish humour date back to stories and anecdotes from the 19th century.

Chelm

One popular humorous tradition from Eastern Europe involved tales of the people of [Chelm](#), a town reputed in these jokes to be inhabited by fools. The jokes were almost always centered on silly solutions to problems. Some of these solutions display "foolish wisdom" (reaching the correct answer by the wrong train of reasoning), while others are simply wrong.

Chelm tales were told by authors like [Sholom Aleichem](#) and [Isaac Bashevis Singer](#). A typical Chelm story might begin, "It is said that after God made the world, he filled it with people. He sent off an angel with two sacks, one full of wisdom and one full of foolishness. The second sack was of course much heavier. So after a time it started to drag. Soon it got caught on a mountaintop and so all the foolishness spilled out and fell into Chelm." The short animated film [Village of Idiots](#) is based upon classic Chelm tales.

Here are a few examples of a Chelm tale:[\[citation needed\]](#)

In Chelm, the [shammes](#) used to go around waking everyone up for [minyan](#) (communal prayer) in the morning. Every time it snowed, the people would complain that, although the snow was beautiful, they could not see it in its pristine state because by the time they got up in the morning,



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the *shammes* had already trekked through the snow. The townspeople decided that they had to find a way to be woken up for *minyan* without having the *shammes* making tracks in the snow. The people of Chelm hit on a solution: they got four volunteers to carry the *shammes* around on a table when there was fresh snow in the morning. That way, the *shammes* could make his wake up calls, but *he* would not leave tracks in the snow.

Or,

The town of Chelm decided to build a new synagogue. So, some strong, able-bodied men were sent to a mountaintop to gather heavy stones for the foundation. The men put the stones on their shoulders and trudged down the mountain to the town below. When they arrived, the town constable yelled, "Foolish men! You should have rolled the stones down the mountain!" The men agreed this was an excellent idea. So they turned around, and with the stones still on their shoulders, trudged back up the mountain, and rolled the stones back down again.

Or,

The sexton of the synagogue decided to install a poor box so that the fortunate might share their wealth with the needy. On shabbes eve, he announced to the congregation that a new opportunity for *mitzvoh* was available. "But," one member complained, "it will be so easy for the goneffs (thieves) to steal from the box." The sexton thought long and hard that night, and announced the next day that he had found a solution. Pointing upward, he showed, the poor box was now suspended from a chain at the ceiling, high, high, high overhead. "But now how do we put money in the box?"

The next week, the congregation saw the wonderful solution. A lovely circular stairway now ascended to the poor box making it easy to contribute.

American Jewish humour

The role of Yiddish

Some [Yiddish](#) words may sound comical to an English speaker.^[4] Terms like [shnook and shmendrik, shlemiel and shlimazel](#) (often considered [inherently funny words](#)) were exploited for their humorous sounds, as were "[Yinglish](#)" [shm-reduplication](#) constructs, such as "fancy-schmancy". Yiddish constructions—such as ending sentences with questions—became part of the verbal [word play](#) of Jewish comedians.

About religion

One common strain of Jewish humour examines the role of religion in contemporary life, often gently mocking the religious hypocrite. For example:

A Reform Rabbi was so compulsive a golfer that once, on Yom Kippur, he left the house early and went out for a quick nine holes by himself. An angel who happened to be looking on immediately notified his superiors that a grievous sin was being committed. On the sixth hole, God caused a mighty wind to take the ball directly from the tee to the cup — a miraculous shot.



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The angel was horrified. "A hole in one!" he exclaimed, "You call this a punishment, Lord?!"
Answered God with a sly smile, "So who can he tell?"

Or, on differences between [Orthodox](#), [Conservative](#) and [Reform](#) movements:

An Orthodox, a Conservative, and a Reform rabbi are each asked whether one is supposed to say a *brokhe* (blessing) over a lobster (non-[kosher](#) food, normally not eaten by religious Jews). The Orthodox rabbi asks, "What is this... 'lobster'... thing?" The Conservative rabbi doesn't know what to say, muttering about [responsa](#). The Reform rabbi says, "What's a *brokhe*?"

In particular, Reform Jews may be lampooned for their rejection of traditional Jewish beliefs. An example, from one of [Woody Allen](#)'s early stand-up routines:

We were married by a Reform rabbi in Long Island. A *very* Reform rabbi. A Nazi.

Jokes have been made about the shifting of gender roles (in the more traditional Orthodox movement, women marry at a young age and have many children, while the more liberal Conservative and Reform movements make gender roles more [egalitarian](#), even ordaining women as [Rabbis](#)). The [Reconstructionist](#) movement was the first to ordain [homosexuals](#), all of which leads to this joke:

At an Orthodox wedding, the bride's mother is pregnant. At a Conservative wedding, the bride is pregnant. At a Reform wedding, the rabbi is pregnant. At a Reconstructionist wedding, the rabbi and her wife are both pregnant.

Often jokes revolve around the *social* practice of the Jewish religion:

A man is rescued from a desert island after 20 years. The news media, amazed at this feat of survival, ask him to show them his home.

"How did you survive? How did you keep sane?" they ask him, as he shows them around the small island.

"I had my faith. My faith as a Jew kept me strong. Come." He leads them to a small glen, where stands an opulent temple, made entirely from palm fronds, coconut shells and woven grass. The news cameras take pictures of everything — even a *torah* made from banana leaves and written in octopus ink. "This took me five years to complete."

"Amazing! And what did you do for the next fifteen years?"

"Come with me." He leads them around to the far side of the island. There, in a shady grove, is an even *more* beautiful temple. "This one took me twelve years to complete!"

"But sir" asks the reporter, "Why did you build *two* temples?"

"This is the temple *I* attend. That other place? Hah! I wouldn't set foot in that other temple if you PAID me!"

As with most ethnicities, jokes have often mocked Jewish accents--at times gently, and at others quite harshly. One of the kinder examples is:



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One early winter morning, Rabbi Bloom was walking beside the canal when he saw a dog in the water, trying hard to stay afloat. It looked so sad and exhausted that Rabbi Bloom jumped in, and after a struggle, managed to bring it out alive.

A passer-by who saw this remarked, "That was very brave of you! You must love animals; are you a vet?"

Rabbi Bloom replied, "And what did you expect? Of course I'm a-vet! I'm a-freezing cold as vell!"

About Jews

Jewish humour continues to exploit stereotypes of Jews, both as a sort of "in-joke", and as a form of self-defense. [Jewish mothers](#), "cheapness", hypochondria, and other stereotyped habits are all common subjects. Frugality has been frequently singled out:

An old Jewish beggar was out on the street in New York City with his tin cup. "Please, sir," he pleaded to a passerby, "could you spare seventy-three cents for a cup of coffee and some pie?"

The man asked, "Where do you get coffee and pie for seventy-three cents in New York? It costs at least a dollar!"

The beggar replied, "So who buys retail?"

Or,

What did the waiter ask the group of dining Jewish mothers? "Pardon me ladies, but is ANYTHING all right?"

Or,

Q. What's a Jewish dilemma? A. Half-price pork.

Or,

A Buddhist monk goes to a barber to have his head shaved. "What should I pay you?" the monk asks. "No price, for a holy man such as yourself," the barber replies. And what do you know, the next day the barber comes to open his shop, and finds on his doorstep a dozen gemstones.

That day, a priest comes in to have his hair cut. "What shall I pay you, my son?" "No price, for a man of the cloth such as yourself." And what do you know, the next day the barber comes to open his shop, and finds on his doorstep a dozen roses.

That day, Rabbi Finklestein comes in to get his *payoss* [sideburns] trimmed. "What do you want I should pay you?" "Nothing, for a man of God such as yourself." And the next morning, what do you know? The barber finds on his doorstep — a dozen rabbis!

Or,

A Jewish man lies on his deathbed, surrounded by his children. "Ah," he says, "I can smell your mother's [brisket](#) — how I would love to taste it one last time before I die." So one of his sons hurries



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down to the kitchen, but he returns empty-handed.
"Sorry, papa. She says it's for *after* the funeral."

Or,

About traditional roles of men and women in Jewish families:

A boy comes home from school and tells his mother he got a part in the school play.
"That's wonderful!" says the mother, "Which part?"
"The part of a Jewish husband," says the boy, proudly.
Frowning, the mother says, "Go back and tell them you want a *speaking* role!"

Or,

A Jewish girl bemoans, "Finally, I meet a nice, rich Jewish boy! He's just like papa. He looks like him. He acts like him. Oy vey, mama hates him!"

Or,

After performing a marriage the Rabbi gave some advice to the newlyweds: "The first ten years are always the hardest," said the Rabbi. "How many years have you been married?" They asked.
"Ten years," the Rabbi replied.

Or, on parenting, (from [David Bader's Haikus for Jews](#)):

Is one Nobel Prize
so much to ask from a child
after all I've done?

or

"Sarah, how's that boy of yours?"
"David? Ach, don't ask - he's living in Miami with a man named Miguel"
"That's terrible!"
"I know - why couldn't he find a nice Jewish boy?"

Regarding hypochondria:

A Frenchman, a German and a Jew walk into a bar. "I'm tired and thirsty," says the Frenchman.
"I must have wine." "I'm tired and thirsty," says the German. "I must have beer." "I'm tired and thirsty," says the Jew. "I must have diabetes."

Or, on [kvetching](#),

A Jewish man in a hospital tells the doctor he wants to be transferred to a different hospital.
The doctor says "What's wrong? Is it the food?"



"No, the food is fine. I can't kvetch."
"Is it the room?"
"No, the room is fine. I can't kvetch."
"Is it the staff?"
"No, everyone on the staff is fine. I can't kvetch."
"Then why do you want to be transferred?"
"I can't kvetch!"

An old Jewish man riding on a train begins to moan: "[Oy](#), am I thirsty; oy, am I thirsty", to the annoyance of the other passengers. Finally, another passenger gets a cup of water from the drinking fountain and gives it to the old man, who thanks him profusely and gulps it down. Feeling satisfied, the other passenger sits down again, only to hear "Oy, was I thirsty; oy, was I thirsty".

A version of that joke is quoted in [Born To Kvetch: Yiddish Language and Culture in All Its Moods](#), by [Michael Wex](#), who writes,

"It contains virtually every important element of the Yiddish-speaking mind-set in easily accessible form: the constant tension between the Jewish and the non-Jewish; the faux naivete that allows the old man to pretend that he isn't disturbing anyone; the deflation of the other passenger's hopes, the disappointment of all his expectations after he has watered the Jew; and most importantly of all, the underlying assumption, the fundamental idea that kvetching—complaining—is not only a pastime, not only a response to adverse or imperfect circumstance, but a way of life that has nothing to do with the fulfillment or frustration of desire."[\[5\]](#)

About Christianity

Many Jewish jokes involve a rabbi and a Christian clergyman, exploiting different interpretations of a shared textual background. Often they start with something like "A rabbi and a priest..." and make fun of either the rabbi's interpretation of Christianity or (seeming) differences between Christian and Jewish interpretation of some areas.

A rabbi and a Catholic priest are having lunch in a restaurant. The priest's food arrives, a scrumptious-looking ham entrée. The priest attacks his lunch, savouring every bite of the ham. Noticing the rabbi eyeing him, he asks, "So tell me, Rabbi Goldblum, have you ever had any pork before?"

The rabbi hesitates. "Well, it's not for me to say..."

The priest pushes on. "Oh, c'mon, Rabbi. We're both men of God here. We can tell each other our sins. Nothing to it."

"Umm... well, yes, as a matter of fact, I did have pork once."

Smugly the priest teases him, "And a fine meat it was, wasn't it? Heheh."

"Yeah, I'll say."

A few moments pass. The rabbi asks the priest: "Tell me Father, have you ever had sex with a woman before?"

"Why of course... well, before I took holy orders, that is."

The rabbi smirks, "Sure beat the taste of pork, didn't it?"



Or, much more succinctly,

A Catholic priest says to a rabbi, "It seems to me that, since the Creator made pork, He must have made it for some purpose. Therefore, it must be a sin not to *use* it, don't you think? So, will you finally eat some pork?"

The rabbi replies, "I *will* try some — at *your* wedding, Father"

A few more examples:

A rabbi once asked his old friend, a priest, "Could you ever be promoted within your Church?" The priest says, thoughtfully, "Well, I could become a bishop."

The rabbi persists, "And after that?"

With a pause for consideration, the priest replies, "Maybe I could be a cardinal, even."

"And then?"

After thinking for some time, the priest responds, "Someday I may even rise to be the Pope."

But the rabbi is still not satisfied. "And *then*?"

With an air of incredulity, the priest cries, "What more could I become? God Himself?"

The rabbi says quietly, "One of *our* boys made it."

Or,

A rabbi is on his deathbed, and a friend asks him if he has any last requests. The Rabbi asks his friend to find him a Catholic priest, so that he might convert. Confused, his friend asks, "Rabbi, why? You have been a great teacher and leader of your followers, and you have led a good and honorable Jewish life. Why would you want to become a Catholic now, before you die?" He says, "Eh, better one of them than one of us."

(Note: This joke is also seen with an Irish Catholic replacing the Rabbi, and a Protestant minister replacing the Catholic priest.)

Or,

A minister told his friend Rabbi Goldman, "Last night, I dreamed of the Jewish Heaven. It was a slum, and it was overflowing with people — running, playing, talking, sitting — doing all sorts of things. But the dream, and the noise, was so terrific that I woke up."

The rabbi said, "Really? Last night, I dreamed of the Protestant Heaven. It was a nice, proper suburb, with neatly trimmed lawns, and houses all neatly lined up."

"And how did the people behave?" asked the minister.

"What people?"

Or,

A Catholic priest is called away by a family emergency one day, while on duty attending confession. Not wanting to leave the confessional unattended, he asks his friend, a rabbi from the synagogue across the street, if he can fill in for him.

The rabbi says he wouldn't know what to do, so the priest agrees to stay with him for a few minutes



and show him the ropes.

They enter their half of the confessional together and soon enough, a woman enters and says, "Father forgive me, for I have sinned."

"What did you do?" asks the priest.

"I have committed adultery," she replies.

"How many times?" continues the priest.

"Three times."

"Do three Hail Marys, put \$5 in the poor-box, and sin no more." finishes the priest.

The woman leaves and not long after a man enters and says, "Father forgive me, for I have sinned."

"What did you do?"

"I have committed adultery."

"How many times?"

"Three times."

"Do three Hail Marys, put \$5 in the poor-box, and sin no more." The man leaves.

The rabbi tells the priest he thinks he's got it figured out now, so the priest leaves, and the rabbi waits until another woman enters the confessional, who says, "Father forgive me, for I have sinned."

"What did you do," asks the rabbi.

"I have committed adultery," she replies.

"How many times?"

"Twice."

"I tell you what," says the rabbi. "Go do it one more time and come back. We got a special this week, three for \$5!"

And finally, possibly the most gigantic clash of religions:

One Pope, in the [Dark Ages](#), decreed that all Jews had to leave Rome. The Jews did not want to leave, and so the Pope challenged them to a [disputation](#) to prove that they could remain. No one, however wanted the responsibility... until the synagogue janitor, Moishe, volunteered. As there was nobody else who wanted to go, Moishe was given the task. But because he knew only Hebrew, a silent debate was agreed. The day of the debate came, and they went to St. Peter's Square to sort out the decision. First the Pope waved his hand around his head. Moishe pointed firmly at the ground.

The Pope, in some surprise, held up three fingers. In response, Moishe gave him the middle finger. The crowd started to complain, but the Pope thoughtfully waved them to be quiet. He took out a bottle of wine and a wafer, holding them up. Moishe took out an apple, and held it up.

The Pope, to the people's surprise, said, "I concede. This man is too good. The Jews can stay."

Later, the Pope was asked what the debate had meant. He explained, "First, I showed him the Heavens, to show that God is everywhere. He pointed at the ground to signify that God is right here with us. I showed him three fingers, for the Trinity. He reminded me that there is One God common to both our religions. I showed him wine and a wafer, for God's forgiveness. With an apple, he showed me original sin. The man was a master of silent debate."

In the Jewish corner, Moishe had the same question put to him, and answered, "It was all nonsense, really. First, he told me that this whole town would be free of Jews. I told him, Go to Hell! We're staying right here! Then, he told me we had three days to get out. I told him just what I thought of that proposal." An older woman asked, "But what about the part at the end?" "That?" said Moishe with a shrug, "Well, I saw him take out his lunch, so I took out mine."



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About Antisemitism

Moishe and Solly are passing a Catholic Church and see a sign that reads "Convert to Catholicism, \$50 Cash."

Moishe turns to his friend Solly and says, "Hey, I'm going to try it." He enters the church and returns a few minutes later

"So, did you convert? What was it like?" Solly eagerly asks.

"It was nothing", says Moishe, "I walked in, a priest sprinkled holy water on me, and said 'you're a Catholic.'"

"Wow," says Solly "and did you get the \$50?"

"You Jews," replies Moishe "all you think about is money!"

From Joke Central (Must Share Jokes)

Classic Woody Allen Jokes

A man goes to a psychiatrist and says, "Doc, my brother's crazy, he thinks he's a chicken." The doctor says, "Why don't you turn him in?" The guy says, "We would. But we need the eggs."

I was thrown out of NYU. On my metaphysics final, they caught me cheating. I looked within the soul of the boy sitting next to me.

I can't listen to that much Wagner. I start getting the urge to conquer Poland.

I'm very proud of my gold pocket watch. My grandfather, on his deathbed, sold me this watch.

In California, they don't throw their garbage away - they make it into TV shows.

My luck is getting worse and worse. Last night, for instance, I was mugged by a quaker.

Some guy hit my fender, and I told him, 'Be fruitful and multiply,' but not in those words.

When we played softball, I'd steal second base, feel guilty and go back.

Who bothers to cook TV dinners? I suck them frozen.

At the opera in Milan with my daughter and me, Needleman leaned out of his box and fell into the orchestra pit. Too proud to admit it was a mistake, he attended the opera every night for a month and repeated it each time.

Basically my wife was immature. I'd be at home in my bath and she'd come in and sink my boats.

And in all of Babylonia there was wailing and gnashing of teeth, 'til the prophets bade the multitudes get a grip on themselves and shape up.

Capital punishment would be more effective as a preventive measure if it were administered prior to the crime.

How am I immature? Intellectually, emotionally, and sexually. Yeah, but in what other ways?



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I don't think my parents liked me. They put a live teddy bear in my crib.

I am thankful for laughter, except when milk comes out of my nose.

I failed to make the chess team because of my height.

I think you should defend to the death [the KKK's] right to march, and then go down and meet them with baseball bats.

I will not eat oysters. I want my food dead. Not sick, not wounded... *dead*.

I'd call him a sadistic, hippophilic necrophile, but that would be beating a dead horse.

I'm really a timid person. I was beaten up by Quakers.

I'm short enough and ugly enough to succeed on my own.

I'm so excited—I think today I'm going to brush all my teeth.

I'm very proud of my gold pocket watch. My grandfather, on his deathbed, sold me this watch.

In the event of war, I'm a hostage.

I took a speed reading course and read 'War and Peace' in twenty minutes. It involves Russia.

His lack of education is more than compensated for by his keenly developed moral bankruptcy.

I'm astounded by people who want to know the universe when it's hard enough to find your way around Chinatown.

I tended to place my wife under a pedestal.

Interestingly, according to modern astronomers, space is finite. This is a very comforting thought -- particularly for people who can never remember where they have left things.

Comedy just pokes at problems, rarely confronts them squarely. Drama is like a plate of meat and potatoes, comedy is rather the dessert, a bit like meringue.

Harvard makes mistakes too, you know. Kissinger taught there.

I have bad reflexes. I was once run over by a car being pushed by two guys.

I ran into Isosceles. He had a great idea for a new triangle!

It is impossible to travel faster than the speed of light, and certainly not desirable, as one's hat keeps blowing off.

My education was dismal. I went to a series of schools for mentally disturbed teachers.

When I was kidnapped, my parents snapped into action. They rented out my room.



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More than any other time in history, mankind faces a crossroads. One path leads to despair and utter hopelessness. The other, to total extinction. Let us pray we have the wisdom to choose correctly.

Organized crime in America takes in over forty billion dollars a year and spends very little on office supplies.

Students achieving Oneness will move on to Twoness.

The government is unresponsive to the needs of the little man. Under 5'7", it is impossible to get your congressman on the phone.

Somebody so stupid he put wood on Woody Allen.

Henny Youngman Jokes

Born March 16, 1906, in Liverpool, England; died February 24, 1998. The "King of the One Liners" was a comedian and violinist.

I was so ugly when I was born, the doctor slapped my mother.

A car hits a Jewish man. The paramedic rushes over and says, "Are you comfortable?" The guy says: "I make a good living."

Take my wife... *please*.

A father is explaining ethics to his son, who is about to go into business. "Suppose a woman comes in and orders a hundred dollars worth of material. You wrap it up, and you give it to her. She pays you with a \$100 bill. But as she goes out the door you realize she's given you two \$100 bills. Now, here's where the ethics come in: should you or should you not tell your partner?"

A Jewish woman had 2 chickens. One got sick, so the woman made chicken soup out of the other one to help the sick one get well.

A Jewish man pulls up to the curb and asks the policeman "Can I park here?" "No" says the cop. "What about all these other cars?" "They didn't ask!"

Why do Jewish divorces cost so much? They're worth it.

Why do Jewish men die before their wives? They want to.

Why don't Jews drink? It interferes with their suffering.

I asked a Jewish man "Do you know where Michigan Avenue is?" He said "Yes", and walked away.



Hazzan Rob Menes
10700 Havenwood Lane, Las Vegas, NV 89135
(702) 804-1333

Jerry Seinfeld Jokes

What the hell were they doin' with a car on the g-d damn moon? You're on the moon already! Isn't that far enough?

I'll tell you what I like about Chinese people... they're stickin' with the chopsticks

What's with the cab drivers and B.O.? Just how long are these shifts? It's like they just get in the cab and drive 'til they are dead. Then they always have that cherry popit on the dashboard. Like that's suppose to be some kind of an improvement. Now you've got the cherry flavored B.O. I can't even imagine fruit going that long without a shower.

Men want the same thing from their underwear that they want from women: a little bit of support, and a little bit of freedom.

Dogs are the leaders of the planet. If you see two life forms, one of them's making a poop, the other one's carrying it for him, who would you assume is in charge?

There's very little advice in men's magazines, because men don't think there's a lot they don't know. Women do. Women want to learn. Men think, "I know what I'm doing, just show me somebody naked." Why do people give each other flowers? To celebrate various important occasions, they're killing living creatures? Why restrict it to plants? "Sweetheart, let's make up. Have this deceased squirrel."

What's with the people who put carpeting on the lid of their toilet seat? What are they thinking -- "Gosh, if we have a party there may not be enough standing room; I'd better carpet the toilet too."

What's with this weird hotel custom of leaving a piece of chocolate on the pillow? I awoke thinking my brain had hemorrhaged some sort of fecal matter.

Have you ever noticed that the waiter who takes your order is not the one who brings your food anymore? What is *that* about? And which waiter are you tipping, anyway? I think that next time I go to a restaurant I'll just say, "Oh, sorry, I only eat the food. The guy who pays the bill will be along shortly."

Would somebody please explain to me those signs that say, "No animals allowed except for Seeing Eye Dogs?" Who is that sign for? Is it for the dog, or the blind person?

Why do people give each other flowers? To celebrate various important occasions, they're killing living creatures? Why restrict it to plants? "Sweetheart, let's make up. Have this deceased squirrel."

Can't we just get rid of wine lists? Do we really have to be reminded every time we go out to a nice restaurant that we have no idea what we are doing? Why don't they just give us a trigonometry quiz



Hazzan Rob Menes
10700 Havenwood Lane, Las Vegas, NV 89135
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with the menu?

If airline seat cushions are such great flotation devices, why don't you ever see anyone take one to the beach?

Bozo the Clown. Do we really need "the Clown"? Are we going to confuse him with Bozo the Tax Attorney? Bozo the Pope?

Why do they call it a "building"? It looks like they're finished. Why isn't it a "built"?

Why is it when you turn on the TV you see ads for telephone companies, and when you turn on the radio you hear ads for TV shows, and when you get put on hold on the phone you hear a radio station?

Why is it illegal to park in a handicapped parking space but okay to go the bathroom in a handicapped stall?

How come you have to pay someone to rotate your tires? Isn't that the basic idea behind the wheel? Don't they rotate on their own?

All the king's horses and all the king's men? Are you kidding me? No wonder they couldn't put Humpty together again. Just what did those idiots expect the horses to do, anyway?

Did you ever notice, when you are sitting at a red light, that when the person in front of you pulls up a couple of inches, you are compelled to move up too? Do we really think we are making progress toward our destination? "Whew, I thought we would be late, but now that I am nine inches closer, I can stop for coffee and a danish!"

Isn't it weird that we drink milk, stuff designed to nourish baby cows? How did that happen? Did some cattleman once say, "Oh, man, I can't wait 'til them calves are done so I can get me a hit of that stuff."

Now they show you how detergents take out bloodstains, a pretty violent image there. I think if you've got a T-shirt with a bloodstain all over it, maybe laundry isn't your biggest problem. Maybe you should get rid of the body before you do the wash.

Have you ever noticed how they keep improving your laundry detergent, but they still can't get those blue flakes out? Why do we trust them to get our clothes clean? These guys can't even get the detergent white!



Did you see these new minivan ads? All they talk about are cup holders, kiddie seats and doors. What kind of advertising is that? When you see an ad for a suit, do they say, "And look at the zipper! Carefully hidden, but easily accessible when you need it!" I think not!

Horse racing... now here's something idiotic. I have no idea which horse is gonna win. I don't even think the horses know they're racing. It's not like they're going back to the barn going "I was first" "I was second"...you cut me off there, watch that, next time I'll kick your ass." I'll tell you one thing the horses don't know--that if they fall and break their leg, we're gonna blow their brains out. I think they're missing that vital piece of information... if they did know, you'd see some mighty careful stepping going down that backstretch.

From Soul Mentor, Richard Stromer

Laughing at the Inscrutability of God: Judaism, Comedy, and the Schlemiel as Holy Fool

Richard Stromer, Ph.D.

It has often been suggested, at least within the Christian traditions of Western Europe, that the comic impulse and the religious impulse are ultimately inimical urges within the human psyche. Even when the boundary between comedy and religion is recognized as permeable, there is still some sense in which the comic is barred from full admission to the hallowed inner sanctum. Thus even while acknowledging the healing gifts of humor, the great Protestant theologian Reinhold Niebuhr emphatically states that "there is laughter in the vestibule of the temple, the echo of laughter in the temple itself, but only faith and prayer, and no laughter in the holy of holies" (148-9). For Niebuhr, though laughter may help prepare the way for an experience of the holy, humor alone can never bring us into communion with the divine.

The question of the relationship between comedy and religion, between laughter and prayer, is an important one to seriously reexamine in the light of a postmodern consciousness that is justifiably suspicious of all such sharp and emphatic distinctions, especially when expressed in tones of reverential piety. Among comedy's many virtues and assets, perhaps none is more relevant to the postmodern frame of reference than its unique ability to shine a spotlight on the incongruity between the assumptions and expectations of rational consciousness and one's unmediated experience of life.

Significantly, for Niebuhr it is this very gift of comedy for recognizing and taking into account life's enormous incongruities that makes it "more profound than any philosophy which seeks to devour incongruity in reason." Oddly enough, however, while it is precisely this ability of humor to recognize and accept life's incongruities that Niebuhr credits for bringing laughter into the forecourt of the temple, he seems to imply that faith would be tainted by laughter if both were to enter the divine presence together. Niebuhr's rationale for barring laughter from the core of the sacred is that, as he writes, "the sense of humor remains healthy only when it deals with immediate issues and faces the obvious and surface irrationalities." This contention reinforces the traditional religious vision of a hierarchy that separates—and privileges—the religious dimension of life from the everyday mundane world in which we live out our daily lives.

An alternative view, and one that sees the comedic voice as potentially bridging this gap between the experience of life's everyday incongruities and those of a more cosmic nature, is offered by Conrad Hyers. Hyers writes that the jester, like all figures of a comic nature, "reminds us of the essential awkwardness of the human condition, an awkwardness that is only intensified in the religious situation." Moreover, he suggests, "the awkwardness that is portrayed on a more trivial plan in the endless pratfalls of the clown, the predicaments of the comic hero, or the confusions of the fool reaches its climax as we attempt to deal with matters of ultimate concern" (*Spirituality of Comedy* 123). This perspective not only opens up the holy of holies to possibility of laughter's healing power, but also reminds us that there is a sacred dimension to comic impulse. Equally importantly, this view also recognizes comedy's potential for bridging the gap between the realms of religion and of everyday life. "In humor," observes Hyer, "the unquestioned



authority of the sacred is questioned, the superior status of the holy is bracketed, and the radical distance between the sacred and the profane is minimized” (“Dialectic” 220). This ability of comedy to help us bridge the gap between the mundane and the sacred is another of its qualities of heightened interest to postmodern consciousness.

As a response to Niebuhr's approach to the relationship between laughter and faith, Hyers offers the proposition that “religious expression at its best functions within a delicate dialectic between faith and laughter” (*Spirituality of Comedy* 127). It is in keeping with that vision of religious experience that I now wish to explore the particular relationship of comedy and the sacred within the Jewish tradition. To both deepen and focus that exploration, I will also consider the figure of the Schlemiel, a particular manifestation of the archetype of the fool as he has appeared within Jewish folklore and literature.

While the Judaism shares much in common with the various sacred traditions known collectively as Christianity, several factors have resulted in significant differences between the older religion and its offspring and these differences appear to have affected their respective orientations to the comic perspective. Critical among these factors has been the unique historical experience of Judaism, both as a religion and as culture. Throughout most of the last 2000 years of their history, Jews have lived as outsiders within other cultures and other religious traditions. In particular, the status of the Jews within Christian Europe, both East and West, has often been fraught with both religious persecution and physical deprivation and violence. Combining the Jewish sense of self-identification as God's “Chosen People” with the reality of living for generations under such perilous and hazardous conditions resulted in a unique and pervasive sense of life's incongruities. One impact of that unique historical experience seems to have been the evolution of peculiar relationship to the comedic frame of reference. “It can be imagined,” writes Steve Lipman, “that humor helped the Jewish people survive a long series of tragedies through the ages—the Crusades, the Inquisition, the pogroms and expulsions.” It was to better insure that survival, Lipman suggests that “the wandering Jew never left his sense of humor behind” (135).

As to the question of whether the Jews had a comedic tradition prior to the expulsion from their homeland by the Romans, scholars are of differing opinions. While most research finds little to indicate the sort of vibrant humor of Eastern European Jews in the centuries before the Holocaust, there is some evidence in both the Hebrew Bible and the Talmud of a comedic consciousness. Citing material from at least seven books of the Hebrew scriptures, Rabbi David Marcus, a biblical scholar at the Jewish Theological Seminary, observes that “the interplay of God and the early Israelites is seasoned with dashes of irony” (qtd. in Lipman 134). Marcus also observes, as do number of other Judaic scholars, that while the Talmud offers fewer instances of obvious irony or satire, the entire method of hair-splitting disputation made famous in the Talmud is often but a hair's breadth from falling into satire. Nevertheless, the consensus among scholars seems to conclude that, much in keeping with the general seriousness of the God of the Old Testament, the people worshipping such a god were not overly inclined to a comedic view of life. “In attempting to trace the association of humor with Jewishness back to its earliest manifestations,” observes Sig Altman, “one discovers that there is no evidence that the ancient Jews, both of the biblical and postbiblical eras, were a ‘humorous’ people” (125).

One aspect of the Judaic vision which has remained consistent from earliest times to the present day and has likely fed the Jewish orientation to comedy is that tradition's approach to questions on the nature and significance of suffering in human life. Unlike the ethos underlying Greek tragedy or the central story at the core of Christian belief, Jews do not see suffering as the primary medium through which they must seek self-understanding, salvation, or fulfillment. While suffering is undoubtedly recognized and accepted as part of the mysterious unfolding of the divine will, it is not viewed in the Jewish tradition as having any uniquely salvational properties. “Jewish humor typically drains the charge of cosmic significance from suffering,” writes Robert Alter, “by grounding it in a world of homey practical realities.” Additionally feeding that sense of incongruity which lies at the heart of Jewish humor's ability to provoke redeeming laughter is the idea that, as Alter wryly comments, if “suffering is understandably imagined as inevitable, it is also conceived as incongruous with dignity” (26).

A second important source feeding Judaism's unique relationship to humor is the particularly fractious nature of Jewish relationship with God. This contentious relationship between God and humankind is a distinctively Jewish conception and, as Peter L. Berger writes, “more than people of any other religious tradition, Jews have argued with God.” Given such a relationship with God, the whole universe becomes the subject of a kind of cosmic argument. “It would seem that this makes for a surreal vision,” comments Berger, “a view of reality as full of immense incongruities reaching all the way to the Divine throne—a vision that is very close to the essential comic perspective” (93-4).



A third contributor to the importance of the comic perspective with Jewish tradition is Judaism's messianic vision of the future. According to that vision, the Jewish People are awaiting a messiah who will lead them and the world into a heavenly realm of eternal peace and love, a realm referred to simply as "the World to Come" by Jews. Devotedly awaited by Jews since biblical times, this messianic age has proven frustratingly slow in arriving. The unmistakable and painful discrepancy between the world which has been promised and the world as-it-is has led to perhaps the most difficult of the incongruities which Jewish humor seeks to cope. Within the Jewish tradition, Alter notes, "the perception of incongruity implies the perception of alternate possibilities, humor peeking beyond the beleaguered present toward another kind of man and another kind of time" (26). The essence of Jewish humor, comments Israel Knox, lies in contrast between "the childlike assessment of the world as though its ideal fulfillment were already an accomplished reality" and the ironical knowledge "of our distance from the redemption" (165).

As a comic figure, the fool in one or more of his many guises is a universal character of folklore, literature, and theater throughout the world. In many cultures, the fool is also a figure of playful reverence and a roleplayer in sacred ritual. In describing the Jewish comic figure known by the Yiddish term "schlemiel," Ruth R. Wisse observes that he is "one version of the fool" and that he "shares many of the fool's characteristics" (4). Leo Rosten's definition of the attributes of the schlemiel includes "a foolish person," "a simpleton," and "a consistently unlucky or unfortunate person," as well as one who is "naïve, trusting, and gullible" (344). While the precise origins of this figure are unclear, most accounts recognize a connection between the schlemiel and the annual observances of the Jewish festival of Purim. Celebrating the ancient victory of the Jews of Persia against a political leader seeking their destruction, Purim has always been granted a unique license for frivolity and seems to have combined aspects of the modern celebrations of Mardi Gras and Halloween. Particularly in medieval times, Purim was the one time of the year when the rabbis formally sanctioned a complete break in public piety. During Purim celebrations it was also customary to engage in irreverence, including irreverence toward religious authority itself. In a similar manner to the medieval Feast of Fools in the Christian communities of France and England, notes Altman, "a town wag was appointed Purim Rabbi," whose "function was to deliver parodies of sermons and pronounce ludicrous 'decisions' based on Talmudic religious law" (130). The Purim gaiety, "writes Wisse, 'found expression in the Purim-Spiel, a farcical reenactment of the story of Purim' (39). A typical feature of these Purim plays would have been the figure of a schlemiel-like fool to help garble the story and otherwise provoke laughter and general merriment.

Among the oldest and most enduring of folktales featuring the character of the schlemiel are the stories of Chelm, a village said to be populated entirely of fools. Typical of these tales is a kind of logic that, while seemingly rational on the surface, ultimately proves to be a kind of laughably charming nonsense. Despite the fact that some retellings of these stories seem to provoke laughter at the expense of the poor befuddled citizens of Chelm, writes Nathan Ausubel regarding the Chelm tales, "Compassion, not derision, is the key in which laughter at the fool is pitched in Jewish humor" (380). Beyond that, comments Joseph Telushkin, the best Chelm stories "are not about stupidity, but rather about a naïveté so extraordinary that listeners are catapulted into a new vision of reality" (58). Typical of the flavor of the best renderings of these stories is the line Steve Sanfield offers at the conclusion of his retelling of some of the most famous Chelm tales: "Before you're tempted to say, 'But I'm no fool,' I would urge you to remember what the good folks of Chelm always said: If you claim you are not a fool, you only show your ignorance, for is it not written that 'the world was delivered into the hands of fools'? And I ask you, is not this the world?" (90). In considering the figure of the schlemiel further, I wish to focus on two particular and, I believe, interrelated manifestations of the schlemiel as he has appeared in Jewish folklore and literature: in his mundane guise as the simpleton and his sacred guise as the holy fool. Often these two images of the fool have been linked and observations about one of them often applies equally well to the other. In commenting on the image of the holy fool, for example, Elizabeth-Ann Stewart suggests that "his is a foolishness which recommends ambiguity over certainty, innocence over cunning, honesty over deception, humility over pride, simplicity over complexity, living from day to day, instead of planning, plotting, and hoarding" (94). In commenting on the character of the schlemiel, both as simpleton and holy fool, Thomas P. Riggio observes that while "the ordinary run of mortals manufacture a false logic that deprives existence of its magical properties... the schlemiel accepts the world and takes its apparent illogic on faith" (142). A particularly remarkable aspect of this vision of the character of the schlemiel is his inversion of Jewish culture's traditional reverence for the scholarly man of wisdom, a reverence dating back to the founding of rabbinic Judaism in late-biblical times. As a kind of reaction to the idealized position of the rabbinical scholar, Wisse observes, the schlemiel seemed to evoke a kind of ridicule at Talmudic "sophistry or sterility of thought, which is dissociated from practical experience" (11). One can even detect this anti intellectual stance in the Chelm stories, many of which featured the town's council of sages, all of whom were just as foolish as the rest of Chelm's inhabitants. These "wise men" typically would deliberate for



seven days and seven nights, only to deliver nonsensical decisions vaguely reminiscent of convoluted Talmudic disputation.

Isaac Bashevis Singer, the Nobel Prize winning author who chronicled the end of the Jewish culture of Eastern and Central Europe in the twentieth century, wrote frequently about schlemiel-like characters and even published three compilations of retellings of the Chelm stories. Among Singer's best-known works is his short story entitled "Gimpel the Fool." Regarding the title character in this story, Edward Alexander writes, "What mainly characterizes Gimpel is his readiness to believe everything he is told, no matter how improbable, fantastic, or incredible (50). >From that observation we can see that Singer's Gimpel clearly derives from the classic vision of the schlemiel as simpleton.

Indeed, Gimpel appears to be so gullible and naïve at the start of the story that he allows himself to be married off to the village whore, a woman whom he accepts as the virgin that both she and the other townspeople unconvincingly portray her to be. He then accepts his wife's convoluted explanation of how "their" first child is born just six weeks after the wedding and accepts paternity of six additional children whom he suspects are very likely not his either. When Gimpel begins to realize the full implications of his wife's unfaithfulness, he tells us "I resolved that I would always believe what I was told. What's the good of not believing? Today it's your wife you don't believe in; tomorrow it's God Himself you won't take stock in" (13-4).

As Wisse observes, throughout the narrative, Singer is deliberately ambiguous "about what is alternately referred to as Gimpel's 'faith' or 'gullibility'" (62). For example, in one pivotal scene in the story, when Gimpel returns home unexpectedly to find his wife asleep in bed with another man, Gimpel ruefully refrains from making a scene on account of the small child asleep nearby. "A little thing like that," he says, "why frighten a little swallow?" Wisse contends that Gimpel is actually "conscious of the distinction between the figure he cuts in the world and his own self-conception" and that he is "a character who may be choosing to play the fool in order to retain his moral sanity in the face of universal cynicism" (61). After his wife's deathbed confession of her continuous unfaithfulness to him, Gimpel finally does become angry, both at his own willingness to play the fool and at the villagers enjoyment of his predicament. Gimpel then has a dream in which a demon urges him to take a kind of revenge on the village and, through them, on the world. When he resists the demon's urging, citing the "judgment in the world to come," the demon replies that there is neither a "world to come" nor a God to invoke such judgment. However, before he is fully resolved to take the action suggested by the demon, he sees his wife in another dream. She chides him for his impending loss of faith on her account, saying "Because I was false is everything else false too? (19). "Is faith contingent on human proofs?" Wisse asks rhetorically in her commentary on this moment in the story. "Gimpel's soul, whose essential quality is the ability to believe," she responds, "would indeed have been lost had he satisfied himself with a mean revenge" (63).

Instead of losing his faith, at the end of the story Gimpel tell us that he decided to leave the village and became a wandering storyteller and a witness to his newly restored philosophy of life. "The longer I lived," he observes, "the more I understood that were really no lies. Whatever doesn't really happen is dreamed at night [. . .]. No doubt the world is entirely an imaginary place, but is only once removed from the true world." That "true world," is, of course, the Messianic "world to come," a world which Gimpel tell us will be without ridicule or deception, a world in which "even Gimpel cannot be deceived" (20-1). "We may be unwilling to suffer fools in real life," Wisse writes, "yet in our encounter among the pages of books we may learn from them a wisdom more profound than our own." That wisdom, she notes, offers Gimpel—and, by extension, us—a kind of "freedom from despair," permitting him "to live in harmony with his conscience, to practice goodness, and hope for justice" (64). Ultimately, Wisse suggests, this tale offers us an opportunity "to appreciate the challenge of the unheroic," both as a means of seeking one's own redemption and, in the words of the Kabbalah, aiding in "the healing of the world."

Singer wrote "Gimpel the Fool" shortly after the end of World War II and the full disclosure of the events of the Holocaust, so this story would appear to reflect his sense of the continuing role of the schlemiel in the post-holocaust world. Nevertheless, writes Wisse, "the destruction of European Jewry during World War II, the systematic slaughter of millions of people and the annihilation of thousands of communities has necessarily influenced our attitude towards the schlemiel as the victor in defeat." She goes on to inquire, "After entire populations... were reduced to the ash of crematoria, does it not become cruel sentimentality to indulge in schlemiel humor and to sustain a faith in the ironic mode?" (60)

Wisse ultimately concludes that the schlemiel has indeed managed to survive even the horror of the Holocaust. Thirty years after Wisse published her study of the schlemiel in Jewish culture, we can see



Hazzan Rob Menes
10700 Havenwood Lane, Las Vegas, NV 89135
(702) 804-1333

ample evidence that her conclusion was correct, given that three separate motion pictures produced within a single two-year period have specifically attempted to see the Holocaust itself through the eyes of the schlemiel. Whether or not we find the stories recounted in *Life is Beautiful*, *Jakob the Liar*, and *Train of Life* to be artful, it is clear that even this most horribly incongruous of events can be viewed through the healing irony of the schlemiel. As Hyers writes, "Humor is not only possible in relation to the more superficial and innocent incongruities of life; it may also express a certain heroic defiance in the face of life's most crushing tragedies, and an unquenchable nobility of spirit that refuses to allow fate to have the last word, to be absolute" ("Dialectic" 233).

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