These Serious Jests: American Jews and Jewish Comedy

IRV SAPOSNIK

For Freud jests, especially Jewish jests, were serious (Peter Gay)[1]

HAD FREUD FOLLOWED HIS DREAMS HE SURELY WOULD have been a stand-up comic. Imagine: a dark room in a comedy club in Vienna and here is this bearded comic rattling off his favorite schnorrer, schadchen, and schliemiel jokes. But alas, Freud's one and only gig was in *Wit and Its Relation to the Unconscious,* and there he not only tells us jokes, but tells us why he tells us jokes. So much for the scientist as comedian.

For Freud, jokes were the expression of subconscious thoughts, and Jewish jokes in particular emerge from historical and personal constraints. Jokes provide an indirect means for circumventing an obstacle. No wonder that the Jews became such skillful practitioners at using this passive/aggressive device to meet the hurdles of history. In Jewish mouths, jokes became a weapon, a defense mechanism, a way of defining the world, but with laughter.

Laughter is the key, definition with a smile. And so the Jews gave to Europe, and then to America, the gift of laughter. When we laugh, it is most often a Jewish joke that we are laughing at, told by a Jewish comedian, with a Jewish inflection, in a Jewish accent, and no doubt written by a Jewish writer. Jews crossed the ocean with jokes in their trunk, and it didn't take long for the jokes to come spilling out.

Jokes were in the genes, and by the time of the second generation, would-be violinists, cellists, siding salesmen, garment manufacturers, secretaries, rabbis, and doctors turned to comedy instead of to the more serious and sacred professions of their ancestors. What made them do it? Surely it was not because of their parents who wanted them to be anything but–though they were usually blamed for their neuroses–more likely their peers, and most likely of all their peculiar personalities, that amalgam of Jewish wit and American alienation that helped form the Jewish American comic.

Had they not been born Jewish, they would probably have become kvetchers without craft; had they not been born in America, their humor would probably have been confined to the insular society of their ancestors. But America broadened their target, and Judaism gave them the ammunition, and growing up first in the city and then in the suburbs allowed them to tell their

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comic stories to other Americans who shared their fears, their hang-ups, their difficulties. From new immigrants talking to other recent arrivals, the Jews became the voice of the American norm, speaking a language that over and over again reminded us all how difficult it was to be not only Jewish but American.

Their breeding ground was the Catskill Mountains, where the young Jews on the way to becoming comics worked as underpaid tummlers, poolside pranksters, and would-be entertainers, all the time learning how to make people laugh. In the Borscht Belt Jewish American comedy was developed. The Catskills became the training ground for the stand-up comic, the sad-sack nebbish whose troubles are greater than life, and whose kvetch is cosmic as well as comic. While vaudeville comics often needed an accent and a costume, these stand-up comics needed only the power of speech, their singular ability to capture their complaint in verbal music, in a torrent of words, a shpritz, that was to develop into a Jewish jazz.

Neither the comic nor the cosmic kvetch was new to Jewish comedy. In nineteenth-century Eastern Europe, Sholem Aleichem's Tevye had shaken his verbal fist at an unrelenting God. But the Catskill comics were talking to a different audience, Jewish Americans like themselves, whose Jewishness was now tempered by the culture of the American street and school. Their argument was not with the God of history, but with the everyday reality of growing up with two often-conflicting identities; their difficulties came from the two-way street on which they found themselves: caught between old-world love and new-world needs.

It was these new comics who moved from the Borscht Belt to the big time, from tummler to television. These are the comics whose heyday was the 50s and 60s, that glorious time when every living room was a Catskill casino, and Jewish comedy was in. During those years, Sid Caesar, Alan King, Morey Amsterdam, Jack Carter, Buddy Hackett, Sam Levenson, Jackie Mason, Jan Murray, and Joey Bishop (among others) became household fixtures.

Suddenly Jewish comedians were everywhere: Milton Berle on the *Texaco Star Theater,* Eddie Cantor on the *Colgate Comedy Hour,* Sid Caesar and company on *Your Show of Shows,* and a whole comic cavalcade on the *Ed Sullivan Show.* Comics who not too long ago had been candy-store comedians and street-corner shpritzers, were now all of a sudden America's funnymen, playing in East Texas as well as East New York, Flagstaff as well as Flatbush.

Suddenly, thanks largely to these refugees from the Borscht Belt, being Jewish was in. And Jews were everywhere! Jewish American literature, especially the fiction of that venerable trio Bellow, Malamud, and Roth became perhaps the representative post-war American literature; that great repository of the New York Jewish intellectuals, *Partisan Review,* became a leading journal of the time; and even Hollywood, ever so hesitant to make films about Jews, discovered that being Jewish on screen made money.

But it was the comics above all who brought Jewish life into the living rooms of America. While they were often forced to tone down much of their

shtick, they were nonetheless noticeably Jewish; even though they no longer spoke the language of Menasha Skulnick and Leo Fuchs, their voice was unmistakably the voice of Jacob.

And in that voice they told jokes, jokes familiar to friends and neighbors, jokes well known to other Jewish Americans. And much to their delight, their stories made others laugh, even those not born Jewish. As the Jewish comics discovered after the war, Americans were more like Jews than either ever imagined. The Jews no longer had a monopoly on feelings of displacement, discomfort, and uprootedness. As more and more Americans began to call the city their home, they began to understand the meaning of being an outsider, of not having a fixed home, of being strangers. And who better than the Jews to teach about the urban and diaspora blues?

These stand-up comics were immediately able to signal an increasingly familiar and uncomfortable predicament, the individual trapped by family, job, school, and/or society, whose only relief is the balm of laughter. Whether one felt forever bullied by Bronx toughs like Mel Brooks, or was a perennial dropout like Woody Allen, the funny story was often the only defense. Or the funny song, the funny routine, the funny imitation, the funny parody. All became stock ammunition in the Jewish American comic arsenal, the armor which Jews taught other Americans they would need to face the immediate post-war years, and what would surely come after.

By the 1960s, no less a person than President Kennedy was overheard singing Alan Sherman's "Sarah Jackman," many of us were cupping our ears and adding words to Red Buttons' "Strange Things are Happening," and nearly all of us were trying out our imitation of Will Jordan's imitation of Ed Sullivan. Those of us who ran away from the Yiddish accents of our parents were now doing Myron Cohen and Jackie Mason. And even before Sandy Koufax and the Six-Day War, we found our Jewish pride in the Jewish comics.

While the Jews joined America as never before, so too did America join the Jews, adopting Yiddish words and Jewish food, and, most of all, Jewish jokes. By the end of the 60s, not only Jews were eating bagels for breakfast, shlepping their way to work, and laughing instinctively as soon as they were urged to "take my wife, please."

Jewish jokes, like Jewish words, entered the American mainstream. Even as the Jews moved from the inner city to the suburbs, even as they helped create and domesticate TV, their comic abnormality became the American norm. By putting into words what others felt, the Jewish comics redefined themselves as classic outsiders telling inside jokes.

The Price of Success

Cantor left no son . . . laughter was his kaddish (George Jessel)[2]

The Jewish American comic voice was not always as up front as it became after World War II. Before and during the war, when radio was the rage, being

Jewish was less than acceptable. There were, of course, Jewish comedians, but their Jewishness was usually well hidden beneath their invented identities. Nathan Birnbaum, for example, who had spent his formative years on the Lower East Side, became George Burns, whose straight-man comedy left little hint of his Jewish roots. Israel Iskowitz, who was raised by his Yiddish speaking grandmother, became Eddie Cantor, whose Yiddish was confined to the stage and screen, but almost never allowed to enter people's homes via the radio. Benny Kubelsky, who came from an Orthodox Jewish home in Waukeegan, Illinois, emerged as Jack Benny, with only the violin as perhaps a reminder(to those in the know) of his ethnic background. And most sadly of all, Fanny Brice, who became famous largely because of her acquired Yiddish accent, could remain popular on radio only by being reduced to the voice of a bratty child.

In the 1930s, Jewish comedians paid a price for their success. To spend an hour each week with America, they had to submerge their Jewish identity. Cantor and Benny, at least, were able to develop shadow selves, ethnic characters who spoke and acted like people from their past. Schlepperman and Mister Kitzel gave Benny a chance to present a Jewish alter ego, while the Mad Russian allowed Cantor to generate Jewish laughs with little cost to his new identity. In the 1930s and '40s, Jewish comedy was not allowed to be part of mainstream America, and certainly not a regular visitor in American homes.

For the most part during these years, American comedy was drained of its Jewish flavor. Jewish comedians in almost all forms of entertainment were forced to put on a different face. Some like Al Jolson, Sophie Tucker, and Eddie Cantor hid behind blackface; others changed their names, and played down their Jewish roots. Jewish comics were in disguise, rarely acknowledging what only their *landsleit* knew: that beneath blackface, painted face, bobbed nose, dyed hair, and altered name was a Yiddisha child of the inner city.

For some, the disguise became the identity. Eddie Cantor, despite his Jewish roots, was turned into a wanna-be WASP, a parve version of an American everyman. His transformation from stage to screen to radio is a classic paradigm of ethnic cleansing. Even while disguised in blackface he was meant to be Rinso white. Witness his endorsement of Wonder Bread. In a photograph widely circulated to promote his new identity, Cantor smilingly displays his embrace of a wonder-full America. Like many Jewish entertainers, Cantor went from challah to white bread in one generation!

Cantor's career, like others of his generation, is a model of Jewish reformation. Laughter was his legacy, but it was also his kaddish, for it was a laughter born from the pain of compromise, from enforced assimilation, from the burden of making it in an America that at the time wanted no part of ethnic separatism. Cantor became perhaps the most beloved American comic of his time, a fixture of 1930s and '40s film and radio, but he paid for his success. In transforming himself, he compromised his Jewish identity. Even as Israel was becoming Eddie, his kaddish was already being chanted.

A Mechanism for Survival

Comedy is a form of religion. . . . It's how you live a life (Joey Bishop)[3]

Jewish comedy crossed the Atlantic at the end of the nineteenth century, a product not only of the enlightenment but of emigration. Jewish comedy came here in steerage, a product of movement, both physical and spiritual, away from the confinement of geography and the limitations of religion. Strict observance does not usually produce good comedy, for comedy requires a bifurcated vision, a neurotic personality, an individual at odds with the world, a verbal agility, a skeptical if not cynical point of view, and a mouth that often irritates.

And that mouth conveys multitudes! The single and singular Jew, alone against the world, has for long been the comic agent, the shaper of a communal response that conditions laughter even as adversity threatens. Throughout history, the Jewish mouth has been a weapon in the battle for survival. The Jewish American stand-up comedian is but a latter-day version of this ancestral heritage that repeats itself even unto these days of Seinfeld et al.

The lone comic on a bare stage, slightly out of step with the world, shaking his/her verbal fist at the disparity between the should and the is, speaking in a voice of urban desperation, is likely to be an undisguised Jew, a not too distant relative of his/her comic ancestor. Despite their economic success, despite their increasing acculturation, American Jews still speak with the voice of the outsider, still act like eternal immigrants never quite at home with their new surroundings. Even today, Jewish Americans still retain the (Groucho) Marxian suspicion of the club that might admit them as members.

Even today, Jewish comedians continue to use the language of life and death to define their comic success. Since comedy is their weapon, it is serious business. Without it life would be overwhelming. To die in front of an audience is not too far removed from death itself, for it signals the decline of comic (and cosmic) powers, the end of a singular ability, almost magical, to withstand the ravages of reality.

Jewish comedy has historically been therapeutic as well as defensive. A shield against the world, it is also an outlet for aggressions, neuroses, anger, ill will, and just plain annoyance. Telling a joke, like a story, allows for objectivity, a placing of emotions outside the self to be shared by all. The Jewish comedian needs company, a community that understands not only the text but the context. Jewish comics have a desperate need to communicate, to tell someone else their troubles, to ensure that while they may be alone on a stage, they are not alone in the world.

Like Freud, Jewish comics intuitively see the Jewish joke as a mechanism for survival. Stand-up comedy becomes popular as psychoanalysis becomes fashionable. And both replace the rabbi as venerable wisdom. When comedy becomes its own religion, traditional Judaism is left to a favored few. The analyst and the comedian become the voices of a new religion, a religion based

on laughter, on liberation rather than law. Psychoanalysis and stand-up comedy offer a distinct way of looking at the world. Both present the abnormal as normal, the neurotic as necessary, the outsider as the true insider.

No wonder Jews invented both. Stand-up comics are Freudian surrogates, an unlikely synthesis of therapist and patient. Standing alone on a bare stage, with only the power of speech to shape their meaning, stand-up comics are part preacher, part analyst, part jester, part prophet. What they profess is an urban and urbane wisdom learned in the streets, the school, and occasionally in the synagogue. Theirs is the voice of reason masquerading as humor, of morality delivered with the force of a punch line. As Joey Bishop suggests, stand-up comedy teaches us how to live our life. For some, it is life itself.

Women Comics

Can we talk? (Joan Rivers)[4]

Yet for too many years, a part of the comic life remained silent; women comics were few and confined to the Catskills and the clubs. By the 60s, however, women comics began to stand up for themselves. And when they did, they responded to Joan River's question with a resounding yes. Women could talk as well as men, if given the chance. When Joan Rivers took Sophie Tucker and Belle Barth mainstream, she broadened the focus of Jewish American comedy. Women were now the agents, the subjects as well as the objects of a joke. Joan Rivers proved that Jewish women could be as neurotic, as anxious, as driven, and as funny as men.

Jewish women comics presented a point of view rarely seen before the 60s. While Sophie Tucker became famous by flaunting her red-hot sexuality, and Belle Barth could be bluer than any male, Jewish women as successful stand-up comediennes seemed unthinkable until first the clubs and then TV allowed them to speak. While TV made Joan Rivers possible, it was both liberating and limiting. While it gave women a chance to speak, it often told them what to say. Tucker's sexuality and Barth's aggressiveness had to be toned down. Joan Rivers had to make fun of herself before she could poke fun at others.

Yet the door was now open. Jewish women comics were soon on the talk shows, in sitcoms, on cable specials, and in the movies. Too long silent, the female Jewish mouth began to speak about what it means to be a Jewish woman: periods, tampons, gynecologists, Jewish men, the fear of aging, and how difficult it was to be a wife, mother, lover, daughter, and remain sane.

The female Jewish comic, like her male counterpart, was a liberating voice in a limited world. Her humor was, like his, meant to be cautionary and therapeutic. She could now say things formerly unspeakable, and make them not only funny but familiar. Her problems were both her own and everyone's. Joan Rivers talked about the trauma of growing up fat, Roseanne about the challenge of staying married, Rita Rudner about the difficulties of dating and

mating. Jewish women no longer needed to disguise themselves or their concerns. They no longer had to hide their sex behind a metaphor. Rather than being a red-hot mama (Tucker), or an eternal child (Brice), they could now be themselves.

In being themselves, they could even offend and get away with it. Joan Rivers: "I'm Jewish. If God had wanted me to exercise he would've put diamonds on the floor." "The only reason I had a kid is because my husband tossed and turned in his sleep." "They show my picture to men on death row to get their minds off women."[5] Roseanne: "A lot of stuff bugs me about husbands, you know, like, when they all the time want to talk to you–I hate that. Like he says: 'Hey, Roseanne, don't you think we should talk about our sexual problems?' You know, like I'm gonna turn off 'Wheel of Fortune' for that. Put it in a gift certificate, babe."[6] Rita Rudner: " I've been married for five years now, which is quite an achievement in Hollywood. In Hollywood, when you meet a man, the first question you ask yourself is, 'I don't know, is this the man I want my children to spend their weekends with?'"[7]

Women comics extended Jewish comedy by broadening its target. Jewish American comedy now came in several voices, and all the voices, male and female, formed a chorus of comic and cosmic complaint, a harmonious if sometimes discordant kvetch on what it means to be a Jewish American. Like the men who preceded them, once the women comics opened their mouth, they could never be silenced again. Given their freedom to speak, they had a lot to say.

Respectability

For the wisest men of our time–the stand-up comics (Wallace Markfield)[8]

While it was TV that launched the Jewish American comics, it was the movies that solidified their respectability. And by the 70s, they made it to Hollywood, having emerged from TV relatively intact. New comedians like Mel Brooks and Woody Allen came out of TV and the clubs to become the definitive comic voices of their generation, and both were unmistakably urban Jewish. With classic Jewish faces, and speech to match, they couldn't be mistaken for anything else.

Nor did they want to be. Like the Jewish stand-up comedians who inspired them, their Jewishness was their identity. It was likewise the crux of their comedy. Brooks and Allen saw the world through Jewish eyes, and spoke with the sounds of Brooklyn and the Bronx still on their lips. They were city boys, Jewish kids once removed from the immigrant generation, who looked and sounded like their ancestors. There was something old fashioned about both of them, something anachronistic for the 70s. It was as if they were the last members of a lost tribe. Their Jewishness became their trademark.

With their Yiddish mannerisms intact, they brought the Catskills beyond TV and into the movie theater, turning Jewish jokes into scripts, and offering

Jewish heroes instead of WASP archetypes. Often playing characters much like themselves, they were stand-up comics surrounded by a story, classic schlemiels in search of a new/old identity.

Their early comedy dealt with easy targets, parodies of the familiar: the western, the prison film, the horror movie, science fiction. Not yet ready to enter fully into the labyrinth of their Jewish identity, Brooks and Allen began their movie careers by joining the Jewish and the American in an uneasy alliance. Like Mickey Katz and Allen Sherman before them, they paused between all-out assault and minor skirmish. *Blazing Saddles,* for example, is never as upsetting as it promises to be; *Young Frankenstein* may question the givens of the horror film genre, but it never revises them; *Take The Money and Run* pokes fun at the prison film but leaves it intact; and even *Sleeper* is more revisionist than radical.

Perhaps too much in awe of their models, Brooks and Allen started slowly, throwing in Yiddishisms now and then, old-world characters on occasion, selective reminders of the old neighborhood. But their early films were still more American than Jewish. Until *Annie Hall,* Jewish American life remained Allen's subtext, while Brooks has never yet explored fully the implications of his anarchic vision.

For Woody Allen, *Annie Hall* marks the beginning of his distinctive film comedy. Less derivative than his earlier films, it is a stand-up routine writ large. Its opening is both a tribute to his stand-up days, as well as a prelude to the films that follow. Speaking directly to the audience, he begins the film with a series of familial neuroses delivered in familiar style, and only after this monologue does he open the film to extended narrative. The pain is acute, and the usual stand-up suspects are rounded up for criticism: family, school, sexual hang-ups, antisemites, and even the expanding universe.

Most of Allen's later films follow from the opening of *Annie:* stand-up routine becomes extended narrative. With *Annie,* Allen bids farewell to his stand-up comic days (and nights). Allen and, to a lesser extent Brooks, develops the stand-up Jewish comic into an American comic everyman, a full-blown narrative character entangled in everyday predicaments. Immediately identifiable as Jews, these comics turned writer/director/actor play with the intricacies of stereotype, even as they reflect on the conundrum of being a Jewish American. Never attempting to disguise who or what they are, Allen and Brooks create Jewish characters who often look and speak like their Eastern European ancestors; they are their grandfathers slightly Americanized.

Allen's Jewish Americans are seemingly sophisticated relatives of his immigrant ancestors, not as far removed from the lower East Side and Eastern Europe as their contemporaneity would suggest, while Brooks' 2,000-year-old man comes direct from Eastern Europe, by way of the Yiddish theater. For Allen and Brooks, Jewish American comedy reverses course, returns to its origins, and deals directly with the tensions of living suspended

between two worlds.. For them, being a Jewish American means being an inheritor of physical, cultural, and verbal characteristics that are both a blessing and a curse.

The Frustration that is Jewish History

This is my life, my only life, and I'm living it in the middle of a Jewish joke (Philip Roth)[9]

As Freud realized, and as the comedy of Mel Brooks and Woody Allen affirms, Jewish comedy emerges from the comedy of being Jewish. Alexander Portnoy is neither the first nor the last Jew to be trapped in the middle of a Jewish joke. Portnoy, like so many of his ancestors, like the Jewish joke itself, is caught between the scream and the punchline. And that has been the nature of Jewish existence for most of its history: to be in-between, to be at the almost, to pause just before the conclusive act. The anger, the rage, the pain is internalized, and what rises to the surface is a verbal alternative, a softening of the passion, an often inner-directed expression that masks the hurt.

The hurt begins in the frustration that is Jewish history: exile, dispersion, wandering, living on the margin, walking the tightrope between an unrealized heaven and an unfulfilled earth. The hurt begins in youth and may last a lifetime, but it is often submerged, kept to oneself, suppressed. Instead, the voice that comes out of Jewish mouths is more likely to groan and gripe, to kvetch. The Jewish joke emerges from tensions that could lead to compromise; ever aware of the gap between the goal and the achievement, between the road not taken and the eternal road, between earthly practice and heavenly promise; but the Jewish joke captures both poles.

Jewish American comedy, like the Yiddish comedy that is its antecedent, is a comedy of survival. Not the survival of pogroms and persecutions, but the survival of American success and excess. It cautions us to temper the American dream with a little Yiddish memory, to understand who, why, and what we are, to be aware that as we reach for the stars, we should keep our feet on the ground. Its jokes and stories are oft-times minor prophecies, a cautionary voice that speaks to the totality of Jewish history. Its Biblical fathers are Abraham arguing with God to spare Sodom and Gomorrah, and Jacob wrestling with God's angel and emerging triumphant but maimed. Its Biblical mother is Sarah laughing at her pregnancy in old age even as she is about to become the mother of two great nations.

The Jewish joke, and the Jewish comedian that gives it voice, counsels that continuity amid the chaos of history is itself a victory, that adversity can be alleviated by words as well as action, that success is not to conquer the world but to learn to live with it. The Jewish joke, while not always funny, always makes us laugh, for that is how we need to respond if we are to live in this world. Living in the middle of a Jewish joke is at least creative confinement, for between the joke and the punchline there remains possibility.

A State of Mind

Mouths are very Jewish (Lenny Bruce)[10]

Someone once observed that while dying is easy, comedy is hard. If it is hard to be a Jew, it must surely be at least twice as hard to be a Jewish comedian. And yet, even with the rise of Black and Hispanic comics in recent years, Jews and comedy continue their long-time partnership. Jerry Seinfeld, Paul Reiser, and Roseanne have moved from the clubs to TV, and Adam Sandler, Kevin Pollack, and Sandra Bernhard have begun to make it in the movies. But their significance goes beyond their popularity. They, and many others still waiting to be heard, suggest that the same people who invented psychoanalysis continue to practice the art of verbal expression as therapy. The Jewish voice still remains the voice of the American comic norm.

Perhaps Lenny Bruce said it best: being Jewish is not only a religion, it is a state of mind, a condition, a way of looking at the world: "Dig: I'm Jewish. Count Basie's Jewish. Ray Charles is Jewish. Eddie Cantor's goyish. B'nai B'rith is goyish. Hadassah, Jewish. If you live in New York, or any other big city, you are Jewish. It doesn't matter even if you're Catholic, if you live in New York, you're Jewish. If you live in Butte, Montana, you're going to be goyish even if you're Jewish. . . . Negroes are all Jews. Italians are all Jews. Irishmen who have rejected their religion are Jews. Mouths are very Jewish."[11]

So let us celebrate the Jewish mouth. From generation to generation: the joke begets the spritz; the spritz begets the shtick; the shtick begets the laugh. As Alan King once observed, "If you don't laugh, you die."

NOTES

1. Peter Gay, *Reading Freud: Explorations and Entertainments* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), p. 144.

2. Larry Wilde, *The Great Comedians Talk About Comedy* (New York: Citadel Press, 1968), p. 54.

3. Wilde, p. 25.

4. Darryl Lyman, *The Jewish Comedy Catalog* (Middle Village, NY: Jonathan David Publishers, 1989), p. 193.

5. Lyman, p. 194.

6. Lyman, p. 37.

7. Larry Gelbart et al., *Stand-up Comedians on Television* (New York: Harry N. Abrams Publishers, 1996), p. 142.

8. Wallace Markfield, *You Could Live If They Let You* (New York: Knopf, 1974), p. 4.

9. Philip Roth, *Portnoy's Complaint* (New York: Random House, 1969), p. 36.

10. William Novak and Moshe Waldoks, eds., *The Big Book of Jewish Humor* (New York: Harper & Row, 1981), p. 60.

11. Novak and Waldoks, p. 60.