

**FROM ALEICHEM TO ALLEN:  
THE JEWISH COMEDIAN IN POPULAR CULTURE**

by

Allison Myers

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of the University of Delaware in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in English with Distinction.

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Approved:

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Elaine Safer, Ph.D.  
Professor in charge of thesis on behalf of the Advisory Committee

Approved:

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Ben Yagoda, M.A.  
Committee member from the Department of English

Approved:

---

John Montaña, Ph.D.  
Committee member from the Board of Senior Thesis Readers

Approved:

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Ismat Shah, Ph.D.  
Chair of the University Committee on Student and Faculty Honors

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## ABSTRACT

Motivated by the quest of contemporary Jewish Studies scholars to define “Jewishness,” my research explores Jewish identity through the lens of a figure in American popular culture: the Jewish Comedian. In response to critics who claim that the Jewish Comedian is removed from Judaism and true Jewish culture, I argue that the figure is essentially Jewish and has derived from a distinctly Jewish literary tradition. Tracing the persona of the Jewish comic back to its Old World origins, I compare the characteristics of the *schlemiel* figure in Jewish folklore and literature to the attitudes that define the modern Jewish Comedian. Finally, I explore how this Old World humor informs the work of contemporary Jewish comic performers.

## Introduction

Over the course of writing this thesis, I have attended enough conferences and research symposia that I can pretty accurately gauge how a fellow researcher will react when I explain my topic of study. Once I utter the words, “Jewish Comedian,” there is roughly a 10% chance that my listener will make some sort of disparaging quip about the Arts & Humanities. (“Comedy? How neat, but really, look what I’ve done with fuel cells...”) There’s a 15% chance that the listener will ask me to qualify what it means to study the Jewish Comedian. (“So, you just sit around and watch *Seinfeld* and Woody Allen movies?” I always reply affirmatively, much to their dismay.) A refreshing 5% will offer up their favorite Jewish comic, a film they’ve just seen, an article they’ve read, or a joke they’ve heard. The overwhelming majority just laughs.

Their laughter is not surprising, and hardly a reaction that I take personally. In our society, the word “Jewish” has become synonymous with “humorous.” Consider this telling anecdote from Rabbi Joseph Teluskin’s book on Jewish humor: He noted that in a certain episode of the Jerry Springer Show, a rabbi was brought on as part of a discussion. When he mentioned “The Jewish Encyclopedia” the audience reacted with laughter, but the rabbi remained straight-faced. The crowd hushed, realizing that he was referencing an actual work, not making a joke. Their laughter at the word “Jewish” was not hostile or hateful, but it certainly was a knee-jerk reaction, indicative of the phenomenon of Jewish humor in American popular culture.

### **Why study humor?**

Even in academic circles, the laughter of fellow researchers is predictable. Humor Studies, as a discipline, is relatively young, although the study of humor is not; Freud penned *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious* in 1905. In the past, however, humor research focused on comedy as a means to an end. In one psychological study, subjects were presented several stimuli – printed jokes or cartoons – and asked to rate the “funniness” of each on a scale of one to seven.<sup>1</sup> In this case, the subject’s responses to the jokes were used to give some insight into the human cognitive process or to better understand an individual’s mind. In a controlled experiment such as this, the study of humor seems absurd; who is to say what constitutes a “seven-point” joke? Is a “one-point” cartoon even funny at all? In other psychological studies, scientists acknowledged the subjective, problematic nature of using humor in the rigid context of a controlled experiment. These studies focused on exploring laughter as a psychological and subconscious physical process, like sneezing. Currently, some psychologists are embracing humor therapy, which emphasizes the positive physiological effects of laughter.

As it applies to literature, Humor Studies emerged as way to look not just at the effects of humor, but at the comic text itself. Instead of asking participants to classify humor on a scale of one to seven, this discipline encourages us to engage in a dialogue about comedy and to analyze the meaning of a comic text – be it a novel, play, stand-up

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<sup>1</sup> Mary Crawford, “Just Kidding: Gender and Conversational Humor” *New Perspectives of Women and Comedy* Ed. Regina Barreca (Philadelphia: Routledge, 1992), 24.

routine, or one-liner – just as we would for a “serious” text. The comic nature of a text is not grounds for its dismissal or deprecation. Rather, the humorous text should be viewed for its potential to be a commentary on social behavior or a means of survival, as it is and was for the Jewish people.

### **Why study the Jewish Comedian?**

Questions about Jewish identity have been emphasized in recent years with the publication of books like Jonathan Freedman’s *Klezmer America*<sup>2</sup> and Adam Garfinkle’s *Jewcentricity*,<sup>3</sup> published in 2008 and 2009, respectively. Both authors share a desire to hearken back, and explore Jewish history as a means of understanding what makes the Jewish people unique, or as Garfinkle puts it “why the Jews are praised, blamed, and used to explain just about everything.” The search for Jewishness is also the focal point of publications like *Acting Jewish*, in which Henry Bial uses performance studies to explore the way the Jewish identity is expressed to audiences,<sup>4</sup> and Simon Bronner’s *Jewishness*, a collection of essays about the representation and construction of a collective Jewish identity.<sup>5</sup> Much like Bial and Bronner, I explore the construction and representation of Jewishness, focusing on American popular culture. What distinguishes

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<sup>2</sup> Jonathan Freedman, *Klezmer America: Jewishness, Ethnicity, Modernity* (New York: Colombia University Press, 2008)

<sup>3</sup> Adam Garfinkle, *Jewcentricity: Why the Jews are Praised, Blamed, and Used to Explain Just About Everything* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley and Sons, Inc. 2009)

<sup>4</sup> Henry Bial, *Acting Jewish: Negotiating Ethnicity on the American Stage and Screen* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005)

<sup>5</sup> Simon J. Bronner, *Jewishness: Expression, Identity, Representation* (Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2008)



my work, however, is that I am looking at the concept of Jewishness through the lens of the Jewish Comedian. What better spokesperson does Jewishness have? He is a figure who is able to communicate his cultural and religious identity to diverse audiences. The study of the Jewish Comedian and his evolution throughout history brings to light ideas about the social construction of Jewishness in American society.

### **Why now?**

While there has been much terrific scholarship on the Jewish Comedian by critics like Sig Altman, Arthur Asa Berger, and Albert Goldman, I find that much of it seems dated. Although the 1970's are incredibly recent in the scheme of Jewish History, work written during this era appears to remain frozen in time in its references to popular culture. Consider the first sentence of Albert Goldman's essay "Laughtermakers": "'Jewish' and 'comic' are words that slot together like 'Irish' and 'cop.'" <sup>6</sup> While I comprehend the meaning of Goldman's comparison, something is lost on my generation, a generation that would think "Irish car bomb" not "Irish cop." Likewise, many of Sig Altman's ideas about the persona of the Jewish Comedian ring true today, yet his references to the recent appearance of "Negro comedians" serve as reminders that he wrote *The Comic Image of the Jew* in 1971.<sup>7</sup> This was six years before Woody Allen played the neurotic Jewish comic, Alvy Singer in *Annie Hall*; 18 years before Jerry

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<sup>6</sup> Albert Goldman, "Laughtermakers" *Jewish Wry* Ed. Sarah Blacher Cohen (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1990), 80. Goldman's essay was originally published in 1976.

<sup>7</sup> Sig Altman *The Comic Image of the Jew: Explorations of a Pop Culture Phenomenon* (Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1971)

Seinfeld and his ensemble cast became Jewish comedy icons with the ten year run of the “show about nothing;” and 23 years before Adam Sandler debuted “The Channukah Song” on *Saturday Night Live*. While I highly respect and frequently reference Altman’s work, it is worth noting that it was written when Sarah Silverman was one year old, and Andy Samberg was not yet born. Society evolves rapidly, and along with it evolves popular culture and the concept of Jewishness. I hope that my work both draws on the work of scholars like Altman, Goldman, and Berger, and also picks up where they left off.

### **Overview**

In the first chapter, I explain the problems that arise when scholars attempt to define the Jewish Comedian. By examining these problematic and sometimes contradictory definitions, I draw conclusions as to how I will classify the Jewish Comedian in my thesis. Further, after introducing critical claims that the Jewish Comedian has been stripped of his Jewishness over time, I express my desire to refute them and to defend the Jewish Comedian as an essentially Jewish figure. In Chapter 2, I more closely examine the persona of the Jewish Comedian and our perception of Jewishness in today’s culture, emphasizing otherness and chosenness as defining characteristics. Here, I also place the Jewish Comedian within a Jewish literary tradition by arguing that his attitude developed out of the biblical texts of Judaism.

In Chapter 3, I begin to trace the evolution of the Jewish Comedian’s character, beginning with the Old World schlemiel. I introduce various folktales of both Sephardic

and Ashkenazi tradition in which the Fool is a central character. By exploring the way the Fool is treated in folktales, I examine the connections between this Old World character and the modern Jewish Comedian. The evolution of the Jewish Comedian continues into the fourth chapter where I discuss the Fool in nineteenth century comic literature, specifically that of Russian author, Sholem Aleichem. This period in Yiddish comic literature represents the shift from people telling stories about fools, to the schlemiels narrating their own stories. Again, I explain this shift in relation to the persona of the Jewish Comedian. By tracing the Fool through folktales and literature and choosing this character as the basis of the Jewish Comedian's persona, I argue that the Jewish Comedian does possess an essentially Jewish quality, despite critics who opine otherwise.

In the final chapter, I counter claims that intermarriage and the secularization of Judaism threaten the future of Jewish humor. I focus on three contemporary figures, Larry David, Jon Stewart, and Sarah Silverman, to explore the ways in which today's comics adapt and modernize Old World style.

## Chapter 1

### DEFINING THE JEWISH COMEDIAN

#### Why is this comedian different from all other comedians?

In a section of the Talmud, the main book of Jewish law, that is meant to teach readers how to live a virtuous life, one story comments clearly on the Jewish attitude towards humor. In this story, the mystic Rabbi Beroka sees the prophet Elijah in a crowded marketplace and asks him “Is there anyone in this market who is worthy of a share in the world to come?” In response, Elijah singles out two men and vanishes from sight. The rite of having a share in the “world to come” is significant in Judaism, as these Chosen people will inherit the Earth and be present at the restoration of the Temple. Eager to know who the two selected men are, Rabbi Beroka rushes up to them, inquiring about their occupations. The men respond, “We are *badhamin* (Hebrew for “jesters”). When people are sad we cheer them up.”<sup>8</sup> This Talmudic tale illustrates that the Jewish reverence for humor existed in religious texts long before Henny Youngman started firing out one-liners in the Catskills. Further, in this Talmudic story, it is interesting how the *badhanim* are elevated to a position almost higher than that of the rabbi, for they are the ones who will inherit the world to come.

When looking at the contemporary culture of comedy, it seems as though Elijah’s answer rings true. In many ways, modern *badhanim* like Woody Allen, Jerry Seinfeld and Larry David have inherited quite a large share in the world of entertainment, if not the

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<sup>8</sup> Tractate Taanit, 22a, “The Virtuous Life”

world to come. In an article that first appeared in *Time*, Sam Janus makes a claim that roughly 80% of American comedians are Jewish, which is an especially staggering statistic given the fact that Jews make up only 1.5% of the entire United States population according to a 2006 United States census.<sup>9</sup>

The Jewish Comedian is a figure that represents the inextricable relationship between humor and Jewish culture. Not only is the importance of humor evident in Talmudic stories such as the one about Elijah and Rabbi Beroka, but Jewish humor has also developed in response to Jewish history, especially its more tragic aspects. Sholem Aleichem, a notable Russian writer of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, wrote some of his most beloved comic pieces in Russia at a time when his hometown was plagued by *pogroms* and his family was threatened to uproot their lives because of anti-Semitic violence. Yet, instead of channeling his fear and anger into bleak, bitter stories, Aleichem wrote of Tevye the Dairyman, a proud schlemiel, whose monologues continue to inspire laughter in modern audiences after being adapted to stage and film with the title, *Fiddler on the Roof*. As Jewish immigrants moved to America to seek a better future, they dealt with the frustration and embarrassment of assimilation. Yet they channeled their self-consciousness into jokes, poking fun at their own Yiddish-inflected accents and their difficulty adapting to American culture by making jokes like this one:

These emigrants go to the supermarket in search of some oranges, and the salesperson says, "Juice?" The little Jew nods his head, "Yeah." So the storekeeper wraps up the little oranges for him. When he goes home to his wife he says, "It's

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<sup>9</sup> "Analyzing Jewish Comics" *Time*, 2 October 1978

just the same discrimination as it was in Germany. The first thing he asks, are we Jews. Then he gives me the smallest oranges!<sup>10</sup>

The pressures of assimilation to American life and the tensions of difference from the mainstream also come to the forefront in the neurotic tension of Woody Allen's films or in the bitterness of Lenny Bruce's stand-up routines. For a people who have been persecuted so excessively, humor is a coping mechanism, a means of laughing at troubles so that they may be less threatening.<sup>11</sup> What results, a distinct brand of Jewish humor, is both a source of enjoyment for diverse audiences, and profoundly meaningful to the Jewish people.

The modern purveyor of Jewish humor, the Jewish Comedian, is an American cultural icon. Jewish comics have gained a great deal of notoriety since the days when they struggled to break out of the Borscht Belt and make a name for themselves on the mainstream American stage. Today, the Jewish Comedian is such a distinct and recognizable figure that he appears as an archetypal character in television and film, such as Jerry Seinfeld's character in his eponymous TV series or Woody Allen's Alvy Singer in *Annie Hall*. The term "Jewish Comedian" is no longer a straightforward description of a person's religion and profession, but instead, it is a loaded classification that comes with certain expectations and characteristics.

### **Who is a Jewish Comedian?**

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<sup>10</sup> Richard Dorson, "Jewish American Dialect Stories on Tape," *Studies in Biblical and Jewish Folklore*, eds. Raphael Patai, Francis Utley and Dov Noy (Bloomington, IN, 1960), 165.

<sup>11</sup> Rabbi Joseph Telushkin, *Jewish Humor: What the Best Jewish Jokes Say About the Jews* (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc. 1992), 17.

Even the most basic way to classify Jewish comedians is fraught with problems. Assuming a Jewish Comedian is simply a person who is both Jewish and a comedian, one must first ask “What is a Jew?” Unfortunately, this question is one that Jewish religious leaders cannot agree upon. While the Jewish Orthodoxy defines a Jew as one who was born of Jewish mother, other sects believe that descent can be patrilineal as well. Add to that issues such as adopted children, converts, non-Jews living in Israel, and spouses, and the definition is further complicated.<sup>12</sup>

Similarly, critics have been unable to come to a consensus on how to define the Jewish Comedian. Some scholars, like Albert Goldman, choose to define the figure in its strictest sense, a comic who is Jewish; however, he notes that because of the pressures of assimilation, some of these comics may be indistinguishable from other “Universal comedians.”<sup>13</sup> Sig Altman makes a point to draw a line dividing the true Jewish Comedians from comics who merely use their Jewishness “as a comic prop.”<sup>14</sup> Altman also makes the seemingly counterintuitive argument that the quintessential Jewish Comedian does not even necessarily have to be Jewish: “The dominant behavior of that role, as an ideal type, is sufficiently set to make it possible for anyone, even the non-Jew, to adopt it.”<sup>15</sup> From his vantage point, the Jewish Comedian is merely a character that any performer can emulate or embody.

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<sup>12</sup> George Robinson, *Essential Judaism: A Complete Guide to Beliefs, Customs & Rituals* (New York: Pocket Books, 2000), 177-79.

<sup>13</sup> Albert Goldman, “Laughtermakers” *Jewish Wry*, 80-81.

<sup>14</sup> Altman, *The Comic Image of the Jew*, 187.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 185.

Others choose to keep the definition more open-ended, like Rabbi Joseph Telushkin who suggests that the humor of the Jewish Comedian is anything that applies to Jews and possesses a “Jewish sensibility.”<sup>16</sup> After reading the work of other Jewish Studies scholars who strive to define the Jewish Comedian, it becomes evident why Telushkin chooses such a vague term; over the course of a typical article or chapter, many critics are so caught up in classifying comics – who is a true Jewish Comedian and who does not fit the mold—that they are hardly able to explore the figure’s significance on a deeper level.

As scholars struggle to clarify who is and who is not a Jewish Comedian, the academic dialogue takes on the tone of a famous routine by Jewish comic, Lenny Bruce. In this part of his stand-up, he attempts to explain the differences between Jew and gentile by assigning the labels of “Jewish” or “*goyish*” – coming from the Yiddish word “goy,” meaning gentile – in his signature rapid-fire style. He begins with labeling people, without regard for their actual religion or ethnic heritage:

Dig: I'm Jewish. Count Basie's Jewish. Ray Charles is Jewish. Eddie Cantor's goyish.

Which degenerates into the labeling of food items:

Kool-Aid is goyish. All Drake’s Cakes are goyish. Pumpnickel is Jewish and, as you know, white bread is very goyish... Fruit salad is Jewish. Lime Jello is goyish. Lime soda is very goyish.

Which further degenerates into what seems like stream-of-conscious labeling:

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<sup>16</sup> Telushkin, *Jewish Humor*, 16.



Trailer parks are so goyish that Jews won't go near them. Jack Paar Show is very goyish. Underwear is definitely goyish. Balls are goyish. Titties are Jewish. Mouths are Jewish. All Italians are Jewish. Greeks are goyish – bad sauce.<sup>17</sup>

While this routine is meant to be comic above all else, it points to a greater truth that exists at the core of defining the Jewish Comedian. In giving the label of “Jewish” to a non-Jew like Ray Charles or a food item like pumpernickel bread, Bruce insinuates that to be Jewish means more than simply to practice Judaism. Jewishness also has cultural, ethnic, historical, and even political implications. According to Bruce's definition, Jewishness is fluid and socially-constructed, and therefore evolves rapidly along with society and popular culture.

At times, the way scholars present their arguments about classifying Jewish comics seems as subjective as Lenny Bruce's method. Although Bruce fires out his labels with slick certainty, there also exists a troubling grey area between Jewish and *goyish*. Two performers in particular inhabit this grey area: Charlie Chaplin and Jack Benny. Chaplin and Benny have become a focal point for scholars who are troubled by the inconsistency between each man's personal life and stage persona. It is necessary to study figures like Chaplin and Benny in order to understand both the problems that come when trying to classify Jewish Comedians, and the ways in which scholars have dealt with the issues of classification.

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<sup>17</sup> Lenny Bruce performed this routine in various iterations over the course of his career, but the cited passage is taken from a collection of his comedy scripts, *The Essential Lenny Bruce* Ed. John Cohen (New York: Ballantine Books, 1967), 42.

## The Chaplin-Benny Problem

Charlie Chaplin is an interesting case because many film critics and scholars consider him to be an early version of the American Jewish comedian. Jewish Studies scholar Albert Goldman even declared that Chaplin's "comedy was an abstract for Jewish humor."<sup>18</sup> Because of his bowler-hat-wearing, mustachioed Little Tramp character that appears in short films like *The Immigrant*, Chaplin strikes audiences and critics as a Jewish version of the typical comic hero. Further, Chaplin reached out to the Jewish community by writing, directing and starring in *The Great Dictator*, a film that blatantly parodies Hitler and condemns Nazi Germany. Also in *The Great Dictator*, Chaplin took on his first explicitly Jewish role, as Hynkle the barber.<sup>19</sup> However, labeling Charlie Chaplin a "Jewish Comedian" is problematic; when asked in an interview if he was Jewish, Chaplin famously responded, "I have not that good fortune."<sup>20</sup> While some call him the forefather of Jewish comedy, Chaplin was not Jewish. In a similar vein of reverence and detachment, Chaplin once remarked that "All great geniuses have Jewish blood," and that he hoped to have some in him.<sup>21</sup> Even with this knowledge, scholars like Goldman continue to classify Charlie Chaplin as a quintessential Jewish Comedian, despite the fact that he was not Jewish.

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<sup>18</sup> J. Hoberman, "The First 'Jewish' Superstar: Charlie Chaplin" *Entertaining America: Jews, Movies, and Broadcasting* (Princeton University Press, 2003), 38.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

<sup>20</sup> Hoberman, 35.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

J. Hoberman explores the phenomenon of Chaplin's constructed Jewishness in his article "The First 'Jewish' Superstar: Charlie Chapin." He explains that at the height of Chaplin's popularity in silent comedies, most audiences viewed Chaplin as a Jewish figure and believed that his public denial of his Jewishness was merely a result of the anti-Semitic atmosphere of the time.<sup>22</sup> Further, Hoberman suggests that Chaplin often played into the common perceptions of his Jewishness by making comments that blurred the truth about his origins. His ambiguous origins, his Semitic appearance, and his choice to play an explicitly Jewish character in the film *The Great Dictator* made Chaplin a celebrated hero of the Jewish community. Sholem Aleichem's story, *Motl in America*, captures this sentiment in the thoughts of the narrator:

Sunday, after lunch, I and my friend Mike (who used to be called Mendel not so long ago) go to the moving pictures to see the great movie star, Charlie Chaplin...All the way to the picture house, we talk about Charlie Chaplin. What a great man he is, how much he must make, and the fact that he's a Jew.<sup>23</sup>

Even today, now that Chaplin's ethnic origins are known, many critics and scholars still maintain that he represents Jewishness on a deeper level. To a Jewish audience, he is recognizable as a classic *schlemiel* and as a David-like figure that is constantly battling the Goliath *goyim*.<sup>24</sup> Because the idea of persecution and resilience is so deeply rooted in Jewish history, it is natural for the Jewish people to claim Charlie Chaplin as their own. The fact that he triumphs over persecution in a way that is as pathetic as it is comic leads audiences to read Jewishness in Chaplin's performance.

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 38.

<sup>23</sup> Hoberman, 34.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 36.

While the figure of Charlie Chaplin in mind, Sig Altman's puzzling assertion that a gentile can take on the role of the Jewish Comedian gains merit.

While Chaplin the non-Jewish, Jewish Comedian, exists on one end of the classification spectrum, Jack Benny falls on the other. Radio and television performer, Jack Benny was of Jewish descent and made no effort to hide the fact that he practiced Judaism in his personal life. Yet, Jack Benny is very rarely called a Jewish Comedian. And even when scholars choose to label him as such, they qualify the distinction, claiming that he went to great lengths to disguise his Jewishness because of societal pressure.

The persona he portrays in his radio show and television series strikes audiences as too universal, too *goyish* – to borrow Lenny Bruce's expression – to be called a Jewish Comedian. Some scholars attribute his tendency to hide his Jewishness to the prejudices of the time, and indeed, based on the character he portrayed on *The Jack Benny Show*, no one would suspect that the man on the screen was fluent in Yiddish or an active member of B'nai B'rith.<sup>25</sup> His difference from the traits of the Jewish Comedian runs deeper than the fact he never mentions his religion on air, or the fact that he devotes an episode to the frustrations of Christmas shopping.<sup>26</sup> While the typical Jewish Comedian embraces being different from the norm, Jack Benny makes an effort to avoid and conceal his difference. While the Jewish Comedian embraces alienation from mainstream culture and from non-Jewish audiences, Benny performs with the intention of fitting in and forming a conspiratorial relationship with the audience.

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<sup>25</sup> Milt Josephberg, *The Jack Benny Show: The Life and Times of America's Best-Loved Entertainer* (Arlington House, 1977).

<sup>26</sup> *The Jack Benny Program*, "Christmas Shopping" (1957).

In episodes of *The Jack Benny Program*, he constantly surrounds himself with ethnic, vibrant characters like black, gravel-voiced Rochester or the “Italian Fruit Salesman” in order to emphasize his own white bread, *goyish*-ness. Benny’s attempt to hide his own difference becomes most obvious when he hosts the flamboyant pianist, Liberace, on his show. This exchange, taking place in Liberace’s lavishly decorated living room, sums up their dynamic nicely:

Benny: “Liberace, you certainly know how to live! You have a chef and two butlers.”

Liberace: “Oh no, no. I just have one butler.”

Benny: “What about this gentleman over here?”

Liberace: “Oh, that’s Mark. He’s my candle changer.”

Benny: “You mean you have a man just to change the candles?”

Liberace: “I have four of them.”

(Benny claps his hands and turns to look at the audience in disbelief.)<sup>27</sup>

While Liberace is extravagant and eccentric, Jack Benny is the straight man in the gag. The audience laughs along with his eye rolls and deadpan sarcasm because they identify with his incredulity in Liberace’s lavishness. In this way, the audience is set up to laugh at Liberace, yet laugh along with Benny.

It seems like a trivial distinction to make, however, the fact that Jack Benny eschews difference by playing to the majority is what truly prevents him from being labeled a Jewish Comedian. This is the gist of Lenny Bruce’s point as well. To be *goyish* is to be normal, in essence, and to be Jewish is to be subversive or exotic, different from the

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<sup>27</sup> *The Jack Benny Show*, “The Liberace Show” (1954).

norm.<sup>28</sup> According to audiences, Charlie Chaplin is as Jewish as pumpernickel, and Jack Benny is *goyish* like lime soda.

### **Defining the Jewish Comedian**

The case study of these two anomalies, along with some identification theories that Holly Pearse presents in “Jack Benny and the American Construction of Jewishness” and Henry Bial illuminates in *Acting Jewish*, have helped me to develop my own standards for determining which figures to include in my study of the Jewish Comedian. The first important distinction to make is that in order to define the Jewish Comedian from a critical standpoint, one must look at the comic’s on-stage persona instead of his or her personal background or religious choices.

While an actual Jewish upbringing and heritage often will influence a comic’s persona, Chaplin and Benny represent the possibility of exception. Critics label these men based solely on their performance rather than on their heritage or religious choices. When discussing this idea, I often use an example from the gospel of Seinfeld: In the episode that familiarized America with the “yada yada,” we meet Jerry’s dentist, a red-haired, jovial man and a recent convert to Judaism. Before long though, Jerry begins to suspect that his dentist has converted “just for the jokes.”<sup>29</sup> David the dentist, while he is an official, albeit new, practitioner of Judaism, does not exude the typical persona of

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<sup>28</sup> Holly A. Pearse “Goyish as Lime Jello?: Jack Benny and the American Construction of Jewishness” *Jewishness*, Ed. Simon J. Bronner (Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2008), 274.

<sup>29</sup> *Seinfeld*, Season 8, Episode 19: “The Yada Yada” (1997).

the Jewish Comedian. His joke about “the rabbi and the farmer’s daughter” or the fact that he asks the hygienist for a “*shtickle* of fluoride” seems inappropriate and disingenuous to Jerry and to the audience. The dentist’s conversion to Judaism does not grant him the ability to make Jewish jokes in Jerry’s eyes, because David presents his jokes and himself in a way that is jarringly different than the typical Jewish Comedian’s persona.

Jerry Seinfeld is a key example of the second element of my definition as well. In the series *Seinfeld*, he stars as a fictionalized version of himself, a Jewish comic living in New York’s Upper West Side. Over the course of the show’s run, Seinfeld became an icon of New York culture, and Jewish culture.<sup>30</sup> Few, if any, fans would deny Seinfeld’s Jewishness, yet, in the ten-year run of the television series, the fact that Jerry is Jewish only receives direct mention in four episodes out of 180. Audiences of the show read Jewishness in the performance of Seinfeld, not because they are inundated with Jewish references, but because they recognize an essential Jewishness in his action, behaviors and attitudes. As Hoberman points out, “Jewishness is often signaled – and deconstructed – on *Seinfeld* though other, quirkier tactics.”<sup>31</sup> This is an important characteristic in defining the Jewish Comedian: the ability to signal Jewishness to an audience without explicit references to Jewish culture or Judaism. While many Jewish comedians do incorporate some direct Jewish references into their comedy, they do not rely on the mention of rabbis and bar mitzvahs to communicate their Jewishness.

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<sup>30</sup> J. Hoberman, “Seinfeld (and Others) on *Seinfeld*” *Entertaining America: Jews, Movies, and Broadcasting* (2003).

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 252.

In an article that asks the necessary question “If someone is Jewish, how is that Jewishness communicated to others?” Holly Pearse explores the phenomenon of a comic’s ability to “perform Jewishness” and an audience’s ability to “read Jewishness.”<sup>32</sup> Reinforcing the ideas brought to the forefront when classifying Chaplin and Benny, Pearse draws from the theories of Henry Bial, who emphasizes the “importance of performer-spectator interaction” when exploring how the Jewish-American identity is constructed by performers and understood by audiences.<sup>33</sup> Pearse agrees that “we must conclude that there is more to the identification of a Jewish author or performer than the publicized details of their upbringing. This ‘more’ resides in persona-performance elements, as well as in popular recognition.” The first element of her concept speaks again to the necessity of classifying performers based on their on-stage or on-screen persona, rather than their personal lives. But the second element, that of audience perception and participation, is just as important. The ability of performers to signal their Jewish identity indirectly requires that the audience have an understanding of what it means to be Jewish, or to “read Jewishness” in a performance.<sup>34</sup> In this way, the non-Jewish public has as vital a role in determining the social construction of Jewishness as the performers do.

As current academic discourse about the social construction of ethnicity becomes prominent, Sig Altman’s statement that a Jewish Comedian need not be Jewish is increasingly relevant. This movement has left Jewish Studies scholars wondering

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<sup>32</sup> Pearse, “Goyish as Lime Jello?” 273.

<sup>33</sup> Bial, *Acting Jewish*, 2.

<sup>34</sup> Pearse, 273.



“What’s Jewish about the Jewish Comedian?” now with a sense of troubled urgency, rather than innocent bemusement. Because Jewish humor is no longer a notion that is exclusively defined and created by Jews, many critics seek to divorce it from Judaism completely. I acknowledge the validity of their concerns: Why is a certain brand of humor even called “Jewish” when the non-Jewish community has such a crucial role in its definition? Can a true version of Jewish humor be preserved?

Perhaps it is the notion of self-preservation that explains critics’ willingness to declare that there is nothing essentially Jewish about the Jewish Comedian, and instead attribute our current ideas about “Jewish humor” to *goyish* American popular culture. Altman goes as far as to say that “the authenticity of the Jewish Comedian is so drastically threadbare that there is nothing really Jewish about his ‘Jewish humor.’”<sup>35</sup> Contrary to this claim, I wish to argue that the Jewish Comedian is an essentially Jewish figure. Further, I believe that making this distinction is necessary so as to truly embrace the Jewish Comedian as a means of understanding the way society creates and defines Jewishness. Tracing the history of this figure back to Old World precedents, I argue for the Jewish Comedian’s legitimacy as a Jewish cultural ambassador, not based solely on subjective “Jewish sensibilities”, but because the figure has evolved from a distinctly Jewish literary tradition and from the texts of Judaism itself.

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<sup>35</sup> Altman, *The Comic Image of the Jew*, 194.

## Chapter 2

### THE TRAITS OF THE JEWISH COMEDIAN

Attempting to find common traits that unite all Jewish comics sheds light on how subjective our perception of Jewishness can be. Publicly recognized Jewish Comedians vary greatly in their appearances, personalities and comedic styles: They are silent like Charlie Chaplin and brassy like Sophie Tucker. They are dopey like Rodney Dangerfield and anxious like Woody Allen, lighthearted like Adam Sandler, and tortured like Lenny Bruce. They star in “shows about nothing” like Jerry Seinfeld and host shows that offer political satire like Jon Stewart. While I tend to refer to the Jewish Comedian as “he,” the label applies to women as well; Sarah Silverman, for example, is one of the key figures shaping today’s version of Jewish humor. As a whole, Jewish comics make up a motley crew; however, something unites them. Despite their differences, audiences recognize traces of Jewishness in each comedian’s performance.

A common way for critics to explore the Jewishness of the Jewish Comedian is to list traits that all members of the group seem to have in common. This approach is logical, for as all these individuals have been publicly labeled “Jewish,” it follows that their shared characteristics would give critics some insight to what Jewishness is. Some characteristics that Jewish Studies scholars attribute to the Jewish Comedian include: New York accent, use of Yiddish words and inflection, an exaggerated concern for money and wealth, or being a part of a tight-knit family that includes certain stereotypical figures.

Although these attributes are read as “Jewish” by an audience that, on the whole, is made up of outsiders to Judaism, some can be said to have truly Jewish origins. The sing-song variation in pitch that was characteristic of early Jewish comics is a product of time spent in the *yeshiva*, learning prayers that are chanted or sung.<sup>36</sup> This chant-like tone affected with an Old World Yiddish accent has been replaced by the New York accent as the defining speech pattern of the Jewish Comedian. Today, it is more common for Jews to congregate on the Lower East side than in a religious school. Speech patterns that are commonly used by Jewish comics clearly reflect the influence of Yiddish. Words like *shtick*, *spiel*, *putz* and *schmuck* entered the lexicon of popular comedy as Jewish comics gained notoriety. Sentence structure, specifically the use of sentence inversion, reveals traces of Yiddish grammar in the speech of the Jewish Comedian as well.<sup>37</sup>

Consider the inexplicable Jewish feel of the sentence:

Him I don't like.

As opposed to the sentence free of the influence of the Yiddish inversion:

I don't like him.

Change “Him” to “That schlemiel,” and the sentence becomes undeniably Jewish.

Many critics point out that many Jewish comics play with the stereotype of Jew as money-hoarder or penny-pincher.<sup>38</sup> This stereotype has roots in Jewish history as

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<sup>36</sup> Jacob L. Orenstein-Galicia, “Linguistic Patterns and Devices in American Jewish Humorous Discourse” *META: Translator's Journal*, Vol. 34 (1989), 126.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> In Holly Pearse's essay debating Jack Benny's Jewishness, as well as in Arthur Asa Berger's book, *Jewish Jesters*, both authors use the extreme stinginess of Jack Benny's character as a basis for labeling him a “Jewish Comedian” instead of a “Universal Comedian.”

well. Unlike the characteristic speech patterns that have origins inside the Jewish community, this stereotype of the Jewish desire for wealth or of Jewish frugality is the result of anti-Semitic reactions to the advancement of Jewish people. In Europe's history, Jews were unable to hold land, because of discriminatory anti-Jewish laws.<sup>39</sup> Therefore, many Jewish people turned to occupations in trade and commerce, eventually dominating these industries.<sup>40</sup> Because of the power that this position granted to the Jewish people, many Europeans accused the Jewish money-holders of exploiting their gentile neighbors. These anti-Semitic suspicions developed into the stereotype of the cheap, money-hungry Jew that many Jewish Comedians use to develop a comic persona. As Henny Youngman, a Borsht Belt comic famous for his one-liners quipped: "What the use of happiness? It can't buy you money."

The focus on family is also a concept that is central to Judaism, as the sanctity of the family was divinely established with the commandment: "Honor thy father and thy mother."<sup>41</sup> The commandment of familial closeness is exaggerated to comic levels by Jewish Comedians, often targeting the stereotypically overbearing Jewish mother. In one joke, three Jewish mothers bicker over which woman has the most devoted son. The third mother's response trumps the other two as she delivers the punch line: "My son is the most devoted. Three times a week he goes to the psychiatrist. A hundred and twenty

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<sup>39</sup> Telushkin, *Jewish Humor*, 65.

<sup>40</sup> Robert Weinberg, "Stalin's Forgotten Zion: Birobidzhan and the Soviet Jewish Homeland" (talk given at the University of Delaware) 10 March 2010.

<sup>41</sup> Exodus 20:11

dollars an hour he pays him. And what does he speak about the whole time? Me.”<sup>42</sup> The Jewish mother is not the only target of the Jewish comedian’s humor though. The dynamic of the Jewish family and some of the key stereotypes about Jewish sons are nicely summed up by this joke:

How do we know Jesus was Jewish?

1. He was thirty, unmarried, and still living with his mother.
2. He went into his father’s business.
3. He thought his mother was a virgin.
4. And his mother thought he was God.<sup>43</sup>

In looking at these traits, I am troubled by the notion that they represent Jewishness, as some scholars insinuate. While many of these characteristics trace back to Jewish history, most all of them derive from exaggerations and stereotypes, even anti-Semitic ones. The Jewish Comedian undoubtedly engages with these stereotypes in certain ways; however, I hesitate to conclude that these stereotypical traits define the Jewish Comedian, or Jewishness as a whole. As scholars like Altman and Pearse suggest, the Jewish Comedian’s persona is based on something deeper and more complex. One famous scene in Woody Allen’s 1977 film, *Annie Hall* hints at what this “something deeper” might be.

The scene begins when Allen’s character, a Jewish Comedian name Alvy Singer, dines with his girlfriend’s wasp-y family on Easter. As they sit in their pristine, well-lit dining room, the conversation is polite and pleasant. The family’s *goyish*-ness is reinforced as they innocently offer Alvy ham, a meat that is strictly forbidden for Jews who keep kosher. As the dinner progresses, the screen splits down the center, showing

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<sup>42</sup> Telushkin, *Jewish Humor*, 27.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

Annie's family on the right and adding Alvy's family dining on the left side of the screen. In stark contrast to the calm, cordial atmosphere on the right side of the scene, Alvy's family is bustling around their cramped, dim room and shouting about "hospital visits and terminal diseases."<sup>44</sup> Fitting with Allen's directorial tendency to play with reality, the two families eventually break through the split screen and engage each other in dinner conversation. The shot of Alvy's family crammed around the dinner table, talking over each other through mouthfuls of food, is humorous in itself, but further, the scene is made comic in the way Alvy's Jewish family is juxtaposed against Annie's non-Jewish one.

### **Jewishness as Difference**

The juxtaposition of Alvy and Annie's families, or more generally of Jew and gentile, is central to understanding the Jewish Comedian and understanding how audiences read Jewishness. When exploring the kinds of traits audiences ascribe to the Jewish Comedian – accent, speech, movement, physical features – it becomes increasingly obvious that a large part of this process involves looking at Jewishness as difference. This is the same idea that Lenny Bruce emphasized in his Jewish and *goyish* routine – to be Jewish means to be different from mainstream, *goyish* culture.

Just as difference defines the Jewish Comedian, differences in ethnicity, race, religion and culture define human relationships. Sociologist Peter I. Rose's book *They*

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<sup>44</sup> Gerald Mast, "Woody Allen: The Neurotic Jew as American Clown" *Jewish Wry*, 132. See pp. 131-33 for a more in depth discussion of this scene.

*and We* discusses a wide variety of power relations – native versus conqueror, slave versus master, immigrant versus native, minority versus majority, oppressed versus powerful – all with the point of emphasizing that “our society remains a divided nation.”<sup>45</sup> Most American citizens would not deny this fact. But who are They exactly? And who are We? When political scientist, Samuel P. Huntington set out to answer these questions, he determined that “we” are “white, Anglo-Protestants of English background.”<sup>46</sup> For my own purposes, I would expand his *Protestant* to more general *Christian*, or perhaps even Christian is not as all-encompassing as Lenny Bruce’s “goyish.” Often, when a viewer says that a comedian sounds, looks, or acts Jewish, his observation is not rooted in true Jewishness at all. Simply put, they seem Jewish because they do not sound, look, or act *goyish*.

While we no longer live in a country that maintains segregated restrooms, or restricted country clubs for that matter, the idea of ethnic and cultural difference cannot be dismissed, and indeed it is not overlooked by Jewish Comedians. The humor of the Jewish Comedian is often a product of this difference. Jackie Mason, who got his start in predominantly-Jewish Catskill resorts, made a career out of comparing the differences between Jew and gentile in the same way that Lenny Bruce did. His most famous routines use his observations about these cultural differences and exaggerate them in a comic manner. In his 2008 stage show, *The Ultimate Jew*, Mason describes the differences between the ways Jews and gentiles do everything from weighing

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<sup>45</sup> Peter I. Rose, *They and We: Racial and Ethnic in the United States*, Edition 9 (Paradigm Publishers, 2006).

<sup>46</sup> Samuel P. Huntington, *Who Are We? Changes in America's National Identity* (2004).

themselves to measuring a house. He says that while a gentile like John Glenn can go into space at the age of 70, older Jewish men are “only concerned with one kind of space, closet space.”<sup>47</sup>

In another of Mason’s stage shows, *The World According to Me*, he makes a joke about the differences between Jews and gentiles going out to eat at a restaurant and ordering dessert; while a gentile family might marvel at the size of the cake slice and start singing “Happy Birthday,” a Jewish family would *kvetch* about the small portions.<sup>48</sup> Sometimes, in the same performance, he uses specific ethnic groups to represent gentiles. In one joke, he contrasts the way Italian and Jewish women react when mistaken for a prostitute. Mason says that if you were to make that mistake with an Italian woman, you would be dead at the hands of her family. Whereas, the same mistake would inflate a Jewish woman’s ego and make her feel sexually attractive. Taking on the role of this Jewish woman, Mason struts around the stage with his chest in the air. The fact that he continually returns to these insights about the great differences between both cultures makes the audience ever aware of Mason’s difference from the norm, his own Jewishness.

Instead of merely talking about ethnic difference as a means to make audiences laugh, some comics actively take part in it by pairing up with a *goyish* companion to emphasize their own Jewishness. This method of comedy-making is not new; William Hazlitt made the case that “the essence of the laughable is the incongruous, the disconnecting one idea from another” in an 1819 lecture on comic writers. Jewish

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<sup>47</sup> *The Ultimate Jew Live on Broadway* (2008), DVD.

<sup>48</sup> *Jackie Mason: The World According to Me!* (2003), DVD.



comedians use their own incongruity from the mainstream to create humor. This explains why Jewish humor is born from the conflicting stereotypes of Jew and gentile. Think of Woody Allen on *The Dick Cavett Show*, whining about his inability to do a push-up while the fair-haired tan-skinned Cavett looks on and laughs heartily.<sup>49</sup> Think of Charlie Chaplin in *The Immigrant*, facing a towering, pale-faced bully.<sup>50</sup>

Further, some Jewish comics use a similar technique by putting themselves in comically uncomfortable situations in which they are the outcasts. Think of Larry David in the Christmas episode of *Curb Your Enthusiasm* as he negotiates with members of a live nativity scene, hoping that they might relocate to his house as a gift to his Christian wife, Cheryl. Larry eventually bribes the actors playing Mary and Joseph by offering them Chinese food.<sup>51</sup> The Jewish Comedian is not only a product of difference, but he becomes the spokesperson of it. Through publicly performing Jewishness, the Jewish Comedian gives the Other a voice and capitalizes on his otherness to make audiences laugh. Difference is part of their *shtick*.

My intention is not to trivialize the notion that Jewish comics play with ethnic difference, however. In fact, the portrayal of Jewishness as difference is one of the most essential components of understanding the Jewish Comedian as a representative for the Jewish people. The way the Jewish Comedian embraces difference illustrates one crucial way that this figure possesses attitudes that are rooted the texts of Judaism, specifically with the concept of biblical chosenness.

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<sup>49</sup> *Dick Cavett: Comic Legends: Disc 1* (1968), DVD.

<sup>50</sup> *Chaplin Mutuals: Volume 1: The Immigrant* (1917), DVD.

<sup>51</sup> *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, Season 3, episode 9: "Mary, Joseph, and Larry" (2002).

## Jews and Chosenness

Judaism is centered on the idea that the Jews are God's Chosen Ones, a holy people. *Quadosh*, the Hebrew word for "holy," specifically means "to be set apart for a special purpose." In this way, taking on the identity of being a holy people has less to do with a sense of superiority and more to do with divinely-mandated difference. The notion of being set apart pervades Jewish law as well. With *mitzvot* (commandments) that enforce the laws of *kashrut* (kosher-eating) and insist that Jewish families circumcise all male newborns, the Jewish people are commanded by God to perform acts that separate them from mainstream culture. In fact, many of these commandments were created with the purpose of separation in mind. The detailed dietary laws associated with keeping kosher are based on various biblical citations,<sup>52</sup> but most importantly, the restrictions prevented Jews from sharing the dinner table with their gentile neighbors.

Circumcision also has a biblical precedent: God told Abraham to perform the act on himself as a mark of the covenant.<sup>53</sup> But further, the removal of the foreskin is a physical marker of Jewish difference, which was the subject of ridicule when Jews lived under Greek rule. Because their Hellenistic culture was centered on the perfection of the male form, Greeks felt that Jewish tradition of circumcising their male children was foolish or deranged. Similar attitudes existed in biblical times as well, which led some

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<sup>52</sup> Deuteronomy 14:21 forbids eating meat and dairy within the same meal, while Leviticus 11: 9-12 forbids followers of the dietary laws from eating shellfish, for example.

<sup>53</sup> Genesis 17.

Jewish males to “cover over the mark of their circumcision” which is equated to “[abandoning] the holy covenant.” In the Torah, it is said that these Jews “allied themselves with the Gentiles and sold themselves to wrongdoing.”<sup>54</sup> To deny their difference as Jews was to disregard His covenant. To assimilate with the dominant culture was, and is, to disobey God.

The implications of biblical chosenness have been contemplated by rabbis and debated by Jewish Studies scholars, but I think the Tevye sums up it up best in a line from the film adaptation of *Fiddler on the Roof*: “I know, I know. We are Your chosen people. But once in a while, can’t You chose someone else?”<sup>55</sup> Rabbi Telushkin furthers Tevye’s sentiment, saying “on one hand, Jews see themselves as God’s chosen people; on the other hand, they believe they are judges by a severer standard *precisely* because they are chosen.”<sup>56</sup>

The effects of biblical chosenness are clearly complex. As Tevye implies, with high-status comes high-standards. God requires the Jewish people to live up to a great number of *mitzvot*, to observe His commandments, and to stand out among the rest of Creation as his people. One can begin to see where Woody Allen’s self-deprecating neurosis comes from, or why Rodney Dangerfield feels that he “gets no respect.” Further, as Jews declared their Chosenness, making their difference known, they have historically become a target for persecution and alienation: from the Crusades, to the Holocaust, to the current threat of an openly anti-Semitic leader like Iran’s Mahmoud Ahmedinejad.

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<sup>54</sup> 1 Maccabees 1.

<sup>55</sup> *Fiddler on the Roof* (1971), DVD.

<sup>56</sup> Telushkin, *Jewish Humor*, 86.

Yet in the face of persecution, the Jewish people have developed a sense of humor that unites and sustains. This sense of laughing in the face of persecution is another one of the defining aspects of the Jewish Comedians, which is perhaps why Charlie Chaplin is so aggressively branded as a Jew.

His Little Tramp character is a clear example of an individual who is not only persecuted, but someone who is persecuted and prevails thanks to quick wit and resilience. Chaplin, like Woody Allen, Rodney Dangerfield, Jackie Mason and Larry David, acknowledges that he is, in essence, the proud punching bag of the world. Their persecution and their pride are of equal importance in the development of the Jewish Comedian's persona.

### **The Attitude of the Jewish Comedian**

The defining attribute of the Jewish Comedian, as I see it, is the ability to balance these attitudes of self-deprecation and self-pride. In light of the concept of biblical chosenness, the seemingly paradoxical attitudes can appear side by side in the persona of the Jewish Comedian. According to Rabbi Telushkin, these attitudes not only *can* appear concurrently, but they must do so in order to capture the essence of Jewish humor: "Proud of their chosenness, yet aware of a history in which they have been brutalized, murdered, and repeatedly humiliated, Jews do not seem to find solace in jokes that reflect only one side of the equation."<sup>57</sup>

For the sake of my argument that the Jewish Comedian does preserve essential Jewishness, the biblical root of this attitude is significant. Biblical chosenness and the

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<sup>57</sup> Telushkin, *Jewish Humor*, 86.

commandment to be set apart provide a text in Judaism that has greatly affected the development of the Jewish Comedian's persona. It also suggests that what audiences read as "Jewish" runs deeper than mere references to rabbis, bar mitzvah and blintzes. Even non-Jewish audiences do not necessarily need to hear Yiddishisms or an unmistakable "New Yawk" accent to read Jewishness. While an accent can be affected or a joke about a Smith could be modified into a joke about a Cohen, the subtle balance of self-pity and excessive pride is a bit more complex. This attitude becomes more evident when looking at examples of Jewish stand-up comedy. Consider the persona made famous by Woody Allen with jokes like this one:

I had taken some karate lessons for a short while, and they taught me to shatter a three-inch board with one chop of my hand. I was coming home late at night and two guys stepped out of an alley and attacked me with a four-inch board... They beat the heck out of me.<sup>58</sup>

While Allen initially gloats at his ability to learn to split boards during karate lessons, his inability to defend himself becomes the punch line of the joke.

Another popular joke of his follows a similar format. He begins by explaining how we entered an amateur music contest, arrived late, and still managed to win second place in the contest. Again, he reveals a sense of pride in himself, this time regarding his apparent musical abilities. Then he continues on to his self-deprecating punch line:

I won two weeks at Interfaith Camp... where I was sadistically beaten by boys of all races and creeds.<sup>59</sup>

On the surface, these two bits are connected by their common endpoint: Woody Allen gets beaten up. This is why his quips are often dismissed as victim humor. But even

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<sup>58</sup> *The Dean Martin Show* (23 November 1967)

<sup>59</sup> Woody Allen, "Standup Comic" (1999), Audio recording.

though Allen makes himself the victim in these jokes, he does so with a sense of pride. While he does get beaten up in the end, he makes a point to mention that initially he did place at the music contest, and successfully learn to chop a board in karate lessons. This tenuous balance of self-pity and self-pride is at the core of the Jewish Comedian's performance, and manifests itself in many ways.

A similar contrast between self-deprecation and pride becomes evident when looking at Lenny Bruce's use of the word "Jewish" in his comedy routines. When Bruce says that he is only capable of throwing a "Jewish punch," he means that his attempt to fight was weak and laughable.<sup>60</sup> Beyond that, he implies that this inability to fight is somehow innately Jewish. However, in other routines, he contrasts Jewish with *goyish* as a means of putting a positive spin on Jewishness. It is important to note that he begins the routine by saying "Dig. I'm Jewish..." In saying that Jewishness is cool and counter-cultural as he does, Lenny Bruce labels himself cool and counter-cultural. Despite this clear pride in his Jewish identity, traces of his self-deprecating joke about the "Jewish punch" still linger.

An early star of Jewish comedy, Sophie Tucker, brought a similar sense of *chutzpah* to the vaudeville stage. Much of Tucker's humor derived from physical comedy, specifically from her tendency to make self-deprecating jokes about her curvy physique. As part of her stage show, she would boldly flaunt her sexuality by singing torch songs with lyrics like "I've put a little more meat on. So what, there's more to *schmaltz* to sizzle when I turn the heat on."<sup>61</sup> With sexually charged lyrics, she was aware that her body

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<sup>60</sup> *The Lenny Bruce Performance Film* (1965), DVD.

<sup>61</sup> Sarah Blacher Cohen, "The Unkosher Comediennes" *Jewish Wry*, 107.

and her sexuality were sources of comedy rather than lust. Tucker invited the audience's laughter at her own expense and continued pushing the boundaries of what is acceptable behavior for a woman, especially a Jewish woman.

A more recent example would be comedian Adam Sandler's "The Chanukah Song," which he debuted on Saturday Night Live in 1994. This song expresses a sense of pride and solidarity to Jews who feel neglected by Santa Claus during the Christmas season by listing various famous Jews such as Kirk Douglas and Dinah Shore, as well as famous half-Jews like Goldie Hawn. Yet in this performance, like in many of his stage acts and on-screen roles, Sandler employs a childish voice and adds an affected speech impediment. The way he plays with language also gives his performance an air of foolishness— for example, when he rhymes Chanukah with "gin and tonic-ah" or "marijuana-cah." While the sheepish immaturity that Adam Sandler exudes is not as forthright as Woody Allen or Sophie Tucker's self-deprecation, it serves the same purpose of balancing out his original sense of pride in his Jewishness.

There are traces of the same absurdity that Adam Sandler portrays in "The Chanukah Song" in Sid Caesar's character, the Professor. While this reoccurring character on Sid Caesar's *Show of Shows* speaks with a German accent, there is a distinctly Jewish attitude that Caesar brings to his portrayal of the character. In each sketch, the Professor was brought in as an expert on a certain subject matter, but before long, he is exposed to the audience as a fraud by his comical and incoherent responses. Yet, the other participants in the scene are unable to see through his phony exterior because of his impassioned delivery and his commanding presence. In one sketch, he gets a boardroom full of Hollywood agents to agree with statements like "Louis Pasteur

invented the airplane.”<sup>62</sup> Despite the obvious absurdity of his statements, they are blinded by his moxie, his *chutzpah*. Indeed the Jewish Comedian plays the role of the fool, but he’s always a fool with *chutzpah*.

The idea that the Jewish Comedian embodies this “fool with *chutzpah*” is the basis of my argument that this figure is part of the Jewish literary tradition. Jews have been telling stories about the Fool, or *schlemiel*, since as early as the fifth century.<sup>63</sup> Many critics trace the figure of the Jewish Comedian back to the *badkhen* or *marshallik*, a Jewish wedding jester. The *badkhen*, in the style of the Jewish Comedian, would make jokes about the newlyweds and the troubles that await them in married life. While the connection between *badkhen* and comedian is a logical one, I think the persona of the Jewish Comedian more accurately derives from the stock character of the Fool – or the *schlemiel*, *schlimazel*, or *nudnick* – that appears in both folktales and comic literature. The tradition of telling stories about the Fool evolved into Jewish authors casting these schlemiels as the narrators of their comic stories. These schlemiels and schlimazels of 19<sup>th</sup> century comic literature, whether consciously or subconsciously, inspired the persona of the Jewish Comedians we know today. As the authors of books like *Jewcentricity* and *Klezmer America* suggest, it is necessary to look to the past to understand the present state of Jews in popular culture. But rather than looking at the rise of the Jewish Comedian in America, I want to direct our attention to a different kind of funnyman – the *shtetl* schlemiel.

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<sup>62</sup> *The Best of Sid Caesar* (1955), DVD.

<sup>63</sup> Dan Ben-Amos, “An General Note on the Tales of Djuha” *Folktales of the Jews, Volume 1: Tales from the Sephardic Dispersion* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2006), 547.



### Chapter 3

#### THE SCHLEMIEL IN FOLKTALES “Serious, deep-thinking, respectable fools”<sup>64</sup>

Storytelling is an aspect of Jewish culture that has sustained its people and distinguished its culture since biblical times. Jews are called People of the Book for good reason, as texts and teaching, stories and storytelling are central to Judaism. The Torah, the holiest Jewish text, and The Talmud, the main book of Jewish law, contain rules and chronologies, but more importantly, they are full of stories. In the Jewish tradition of *midrash*, rabbis tell stories to further interpret the bible and to fill in the gaps left in the original biblical narrative. There is a midrash by Rabbi Levi explaining that Noah and his family did not sleep for 12 months while caring for the animals on the ark.<sup>65</sup> There is even a midrash that explains that Adam and Eve were created as twenty year olds, and that they were the most beautiful human beings ever in existence.<sup>66</sup> These stories are central to the texts of Judaism, and further, the act of passing down oral traditions and folklore unites the Jewish community. As a sustaining force during times of repression and persecution, storytelling functions much like humor, so it is not surprising that the Israeli Folktale Archive has a special section for Comic Tales.

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<sup>64</sup> Sheldon Oberman, *Solomon and the Ant: and Other Jewish Folktales*, ed. Peninnah Schram (Boyd's Mill Press).

<sup>65</sup> Tanchuma Noah 14.

<sup>66</sup> Genesis Rabbah 14:7.

Although many of these folktales have been passed down orally while the Jewish community was spread throughout the world during the Diaspora, they retain distinct similarities, especially when focusing on the figure of the Fool. The Fool or “a man who falls below the average human standard, but whose defects have been transformed into a source of delight,” is a universal figure.<sup>67</sup> However, the schlemiel is a distinctly Jewish brand of fool, although he retains many of the same qualities as the universal jesters: like Shakespeare’s Touchstone in *As You Like It* or Feste in *Twelfth Night*. Comparing the universal Fool to the distinctly Jewish schlemiel is much like examining divide between universal and Jewish comedians. At times, it seems that the schlemiel is merely a standard Fool with a Yiddish name, but like the Jewish Comedian, there is something essentially Jewish about the schlemiel’s persona. In *The Schlemiel as Modern Hero*, Ruth R. Wisse writes:

Vulnerable, ineffectual in his efforts at self-advancement and self-preservation, he emerged as the archetypal Jew, especially in his capacity of potential victim. Since Jewry’s attitudes toward its own weakness were complex and contradictory, the schlemiel was sometimes berated for his foolish weakness, and elsewhere exalted for his hard inner strength.<sup>68</sup>

While Wisse describes the paradoxical attitude of a classic Old World figure, her description resonates with the characteristic attitude of the modern Jewish Comedian as well, especially in the balancing of his “foolish weakness” with “his hard inner strength.” Just as Wisse believes that the schlemiel is a representative of the Jewish community as a whole, I believe that the Jewish Comedian has evolved from this Old World figure and

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<sup>67</sup> Enid Welsford, *The Fool, His Social and Literary History* (Gloucheser, MA, 1966), xi.

<sup>68</sup> Ruth R. Wisse, *The Schlemiel as Modern Hero* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), 4.

now serves as the ambassador of the Jewish people. The humor of the Jewish Comedian is part of a legacy of fools with chutzpah.

Before delving into the comic folktales, it is worth mentioning that the schlemiel is not the only Jewish Fool figure. It is a popular rumor that in the Inuit language, there are over 100 words to mean snow.<sup>69</sup> While this cliché has been disproved, it is true that in Yiddish there are over 30 ways to call someone a fool. While speakers tend to use words like *schlemiel*, *schlimazel*, *nudnick* and *shmuck* interchangeably, they are all highly nuanced insults. Each represents a different kind of fool, aside from *shmuck*, which is not a kind of Old World fool at all, but rather Yiddish for what I will euphemistically call “a part of the male anatomy.” While I could spend pages detailing the various kinds of fools and their attributes, I will focus on schlemiels, schlimazels and schnorrers, as these three types are the most common, and they best exemplify the complex persona that Wisse describes.

Schlemiel is the term I default to most often, as it is the most general in definition and most common in usage. Schlemiel is usually defined as an inept, bumbling fool, or as Wisse puts it as an “active disseminator of bad luck.”<sup>70</sup> As I highlighted earlier, the schlemiel also displays the same kind of fool with chutzpah attitude that audiences see in the Jewish Comedian. While the schlemiel is a pitiful character, he is at times prideful to a fault, like in this joke:

A Schlemiel was married to a really shrewish woman who ordered him around all the time. Once, while the woman was entertaining some friends at tea, she decided to show her friends how much control she had over her husband.

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<sup>69</sup> Unsigned editorial in *The New York Times*, 1984.

<sup>70</sup> Wisse, *The Schlemiel as Modern Hero*, 95.

“Schlemiel,” she commanded. “Get under the table.”  
Her husband, without saying a word, got under the table.  
“Schlemiel,” she then said, “come on out!”  
“No!” he said, angrily. “I’ll show you and your friends who’s master in this house!”<sup>71</sup>

The schlimazel’s name comes from the German *schlimm* for bad and the Hebrew *mazel* for luck. Just as the schlemiel is the “active disseminator of bad luck,” the schlimazel is its active recipient. It is an old joke that when the schlemiel spills his soup, the schlimazel is the one he spills it on. (Then the *nudnick* [pest] asks what kind of soup it was.) Like the schlemiel, endeavors end poorly for the schlimazel; however, unlike the schlemiel, such failures are not due to his stupidity, but rather due to his terrible luck.

The schnorrer is described by Berger as “a beggar, a moocher...bum and drifter.”<sup>72</sup> But like the other Old Word fools, the schnorrer also possesses a sense of self-pride, which is a kind understatement. He does not humbly beg, but rather, openly demands the best. Nathan Ausubel says of the schnorrer that “[t]act and self-restraint were not his strong points; they would only prove practical stumbling blocks to the practice of his ‘profession.’ Next to his adroitness in fleecing the philanthropic sheep was his chutzpah, his unmitigated arrogance.”<sup>73</sup> While tales of the other Jewish comic figures illustrate a more tenuous balance between self-pity and self-pride, jokes about the schnorrer hinge on his unnerving chutzpah:

A schnorrer appeared at the home of a rich man and begged for some money to see a doctor. The rich man gave him some money. “But I need more than this if I’m to go to the clinic.” “But that’s very expensive,” said the rich man. “Why don’t

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<sup>71</sup> Berger, *The Genius of the Jewish Joke*, 96.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 98.

<sup>73</sup> Berger, *Jewish Jesters*, 105.

you go to a regular doctor?" "For my health," said the schnorrer, "nothing is too good."

The schnorrer strikes me as an Old World version of Seinfeld's intrusive neighbor, Cosmo Kramer, with his penchant for Cuban cigars and his lack of steady income. In fact, traces of these comic types are present in all of today's Jewish Comedians. Although a *schmendrick* (weakling) like Woody Allen has a quite different persona than a *nogoodnik* (bad boy) like Lenny Bruce, both characters derive from distinctly Jewish comic types.

The fact that the nuances of figures like the schlemiel and the schnorrer are preserved in jokes today is a testament to the strength of Jewish oral tradition. Comic Jewish tales centered on a fool figure began as early as 776 CE with a character called Djuha.<sup>74</sup> He is a "popular buffoon character of many colors – a numskull, a naïve fool, a trickster, a comic who satirizes people in power, and an idiot whose literal logic exposes the ambiguities of language."<sup>75</sup> Because the tales of Djuha existed before the creation of Yiddish, the language that allowed speakers to distinguish a nudnik from a schlimazel, he is a character that possesses many, sometimes contradictory, traits from story to story. In the introduction to the story "Djuha's Nail," Peninnah Schram notes that in certain interactions, Djuha responds in ways that are "surprisingly foolish, but he can also be surprisingly clever."<sup>76</sup>

Many of Djuha's storylines derive from foolish communication errors, as in "Why Djuha Never Got Married": The schlemiel takes the matchmaker at her word when she

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<sup>74</sup> The character was sometimes referred to as Goha, Nasreddin Hoca or Abu Nawas depending on the storyteller's region.

<sup>75</sup> Ben-Amos, *Folktales of the Jews, Volume 1*, 547.

<sup>76</sup> Oberman, *Solomon and the Ant*, 121.

says to cast eyes on his shy marriage prospect when he meets her. Djuha ruins the mood of the evening by tossing sheep eyes at his potential bride during dinner.<sup>77</sup> The character again shows his foolishness in a story called “Djuha Helps His Mother”: When instructed to buy sacks of flour and meats for his mother at the market, Djuha gets this idea to enlist the help of some unlikely porters to carry the goods home. He throws the flour to the wind and the meat to a pack of dogs, and is surprised when none of the items arrive at his home as he expected. His mother wails, “When will he ever get any sense into that head of his?”<sup>78</sup>

While in stories like these, Djuha is the pitiful fool, at times the roles are reversed and he triumphs as a trickster. In “A Fair Division,” after Djuha and two friends buy a ram and two lambs, he succeeds in convincing his partners that it would be fair to divide into groups of three; the two friends take one lamb, and he and the ram will take the other.<sup>79</sup> Djuha plays the role of the trickster again in “Djuha Plays Dead” when he and his wife attempt to fool the king into thinking that they died so that he would leave money to pay for the burial. The plan is foiled by Djuha’s pride though. When the king stops by the house to see Djuha and his wife stretched out on their mats, he wonders aloud, “Who died first?” to which Djuha and his wife both jump up and respond, “Me, me, I died first!”<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> Ben-Amos, *Folktales of the Jews, Volume 1*, 562-62.

<sup>78</sup> *Folktales of the Jews, Volume 1*, 556-57.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 584.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 566-67.

Like the modern Jewish Comedian, Djuha may bring his mother grief, but his ultimate goal is to bring joy to others. In a story called "Djuha's Face," the king, in a rage, tells Djuha that he doesn't want to see the fool's face anymore. Upon hearing these words, Djuha tears off his clothes and lays in front of the king, bottom up, so that the king could look at his rear instead of his face. This exemplifies Djuha's tendency to take people at their word, but further, the last sentence of the story is striking: "The king laughed, his good mood restored."<sup>81</sup> This sentence reveals Djuha's true function. Indeed, Djuha makes endless, frustrating mistakes, but most importantly, he has the capacity to make those around him laugh. As a merrymaker, he retains a certain pride in his role as the town jester.

The main function of the schlemiel is to bring humor and joy to others through his own follies. The schlemiel suggests an alternate, simpler view of reality by turning language, logic, and social order on its head. The upside-down-ness of the schlemiel's existence is reflected in the stories of the town of Chelm and the "wise men" that populate it. While the tales of Djuha were popular among Sephardic Jews, the Chelmites were the punch line of Ashkenazi stories. Although Chelm is an actual town in the backwoods of Poland, there is no evidence as to how or why it became the subject of these comic stories. In the myths of Chelm, the town that is populated entirely by fools, inverted logic is the norm, communication is problematic, and failure is inevitable.

In Chelm, when a person loses a coin on the dark side of the street, he goes to look for it across the street, under the streetlamp so that he can better see the ground. In Chelm, after men have carried rocks down the mountain to build a synagogue they are

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<sup>81</sup> *Folktales of the Jews, Volume 1*, 560.

told by the town constable that they should have saved their strength and rolled the stones instead. Agreeing with the constable's idea, the Chelmites carry the stones back up the mountain so that they can roll them back down. In Chelm, when men are digging a hole, they dig another hole to put the excavated earth into, and another, and another.<sup>82</sup>

A story called "Chelm Law" illustrates the backwards logic that drives the city of fools. In this story, the mayor of Chelm buys a large, live fish from his friend Sholem. However, because he forgot to bring a bag and is too embarrassed to be seen wrestling with the fish in the streets, he decides to carry the fish home by sliding in inside his shirt and jacket. When the mayor uncrosses his arms to salute the town police chief, the fish wriggles free and bursts out of the mayor's shirt, slapping him in the face with its tail. The Chelmite policeman takes action and arrests the fish for assaulting the mayor. The fish's trial lasts a week, with arguments for and against his case, and the jury reaches a verdict: the fish was guilty and would be sentenced to death. The story ends: "The next day at dawn, the policeman carried the fish out of the town, accompanied by the judge, the jury, the lawyers, and the mayor. They stood at the bridge and watched with serious faces as the policeman threw the fish into the river. The judge had sentences the fish to death by drowning."<sup>83</sup>

But the folktales about Chelm and its residence are not merely silly for the sake of silliness. According to Ruth Wisse, they served an important purpose in a society that was obsessively focused on the yeshiva, education and stifling intellectualism: "These Chelm jokes ridicule sophistry, or sterility of thought, which is dissociated from practical

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<sup>82</sup> Nathan Ausubel, *Treasury of Jewish Folklore* (New Century Publishers, 1948), 338,

<sup>83</sup> Oberman, *Solomon and the Ant*, 129-30.



experience. Intellectualism is here turned on its head.”<sup>84</sup> By telling tales of Chelm, storytellers allowed their audiences to escape, however briefly, from their rigorous education, learning Torah portions and studying pages of Talmud. For a culture that was heavily focused on “learning and the singular status of the scholar,” the fools of Chelm provided an alternate view of reality, one that is foolish yet optimistic.<sup>85</sup> Further, beneath the comedy of the Chelm stories exists the truths about the limitations of communication and the brokenness of our relationships with one another. As Peninnah Schram writes in her commentary on the Chelm stories, “these humorous tales allow us to laugh and realize that we are all part Chelmiter, sometimes.”<sup>86</sup>

The schlemiels of Old World folklore are important figures in the scope of the Jewish literary tradition that has influenced the Jewish Comedian’s development. Both figures – the fool and the comedian – illustrate the paradox of biblical chosenness, as they display both piteous foolishness and unnerving bravado. They also represent the idea of otherness; just as the Jewish Comedian uses comedy to bring awareness to Jewishness as a form of difference, the schlemiel’s “village fool” status isolates him from the other members of the *shtetl*, which becomes a source of comedy rather than pain. The complexities of chosenness and otherness, as captured in this comic persona, distinguish the Jewish schlemiel from the stock character of the Fool. As Wisse writes, “the most interesting schlemiels of folklore and literature are those in whom both attitudes [strength and weakness] find simultaneous expression, reflecting a genuine,

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<sup>84</sup> Wisse, *The Schlemiel as Modern Hero*, 11.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>86</sup> Oberman, *Solomon and the Ant*, 130.

sustained ambivalence on the part of the author and raconteur.”<sup>87</sup> It is important to note that Wisse speaks of the schlemiel as a figure of folklore and of comic literature.

A crucial point in the evolution of the Old World schlemiel into the Jewish stand-up comedian is when the schlemiel is granted the ability to narrate his own story. While Djuha and the fools of Chelm are the subject of their stories, and therefore the butt of the joke, in nineteenth century comic Yiddish literature, there is a distinct movement to cast the schlemiel as the narrator instead. As the schlemiel recounts his triumphs and follies, readers are able to view the complexities of the fool’s character. We see his self-importance and his insecurities, his fears and his dreams. We see comedy in his most tragic moments, and ironic tragedy in his inflated ego. In essence, we see the makings of an Old World stand-up routine.

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<sup>87</sup> Wisse, *The Schlemiel as Modern Hero*, 5.

## Chapter 4

### THE SCHLEMIEL IN NINETEENTH CENTURY YIDDISH LITERATURE “Couldn’t You find any other Jews to pick on?”<sup>88</sup>

By the time I. B. Singer’s “Gimpel the Fool” was published in 1953 and translated into English by Saul Bellow, Gimpel was in good company. The most famous writers of Yiddish comedy had all written stories centered on the Fool. From S.Y. Abramovitch’s “Fishke the Lame” to I.L. Peretz’s “Bontshe the Silent”, the schlemiel, especially the idea of schlemiel as narrator, is central to nineteenth century Yiddish comic stories. By adapting the folktales of the *shtetl* fool into the form of short stories, these Yiddish authors gave life to the schlemiels that exist in Jewish folklore as a rather one-sided, stock character. More importantly, these authors gave the schlemiel a voice with which to tell his own story, and with that voice, the schlemiel-as-narrator gives the reader a first-hand account of the simple joys and heartbreaking woes that come with living as the village idiot.

Of all the fools of comic Yiddish literature, the one I chose to study most closely is Sholem Aleichem’s Tevye the Dairyman. Aleichem’s stories about Tevye the Dairyman, his wife Golde and his many daughters were adapted into a Broadway show, *Fiddler on the Roof*, which opened in 1964. After a successful run, the musical was made into a film in 1971, which sparked several reunion tours of the stage version. While several of

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<sup>88</sup> Sholem Aleichem “Shprintze” *Tevye the Dairyman and the Railroad Stories* Ed. Hillel Halkin (New York: Schocken Books, 1987), 95.

Aleichem's short stories were modified and strung together in the adaptation process, the character of Tevye remains more or less the same in print, on stage, and on screen. Aleichem's Tevye is the quintessential fool with chutzpah. His stories draw from characteristics of the traditional schlemiels of Jewish folklore and also advance the figure of the schlemiel into a more realistic, relatable character.

Tevye is full of foolish pride like the Chelmites and Djuha, and also like the Old World schlemiels, some of the most comic moments in his stories come from his own misunderstandings and communications errors. In an episode that is particularly reminiscent of this Old World comic trope, Tevye spends hours negotiating a deal with the local butcher Lazar Wolf. It is not until the end of their meeting that Tevye realizes that while he thought that they had been bargaining over his brown cow, Lazar Wolf was asking to marry Tevye's eldest daughter, Tsaytl.<sup>89</sup> A similar miscommunication occurs when Tevye encounters the matchmaker in "Tevye Leaves of the Land of Israel." While the matchmaker assumes that the now widowed Tevye is looking for a new wife, Tevye believes that they were negotiating the marriage of his daughter Beilke, and is caught off guard when the matchmaker offers him "a childless widow, a cook in the best houses, net worth five hundred rubles."<sup>90</sup>

Unlike the fools of Old World folklore, however, Sholem Aleichem's Tevye the Dairyman is a self-proclaimed fool, one who is able to admit his foolish mistakes and troublesome pride. He says in one story, "when God decides to punish a man, He begins by removing his brains. How many times have I said to myself, Tevye, you jackass, would

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<sup>89</sup> Aleichem, "Today's Children", 37-38.

<sup>90</sup> Aleichem "Tevye Leaves for the Land of Israel", 101.

you ever have been taken for such a ride if you weren't the big fool you are?"<sup>91</sup> The fact that Tevye is aware of his own foolishness plays a crucial role in adding complexity to his comic stories. At certain times, he admits his own follies and laughs along with the audience, but at other times, the audience laughs at the faults he is unable to recognize, like his vanity and his tendency to bore his neighbors with questionable interpretations of the Torah and Talmud.

Each story is set up as a monologue by Tevye, directed to a friend, a non-speaking listener named Sholem Aleichem, who is a writer by trade.<sup>92</sup> As he recounts each episode, usually surrounding the marriage of one of his daughters, Tevye uses a relaxed, conversational tone and departs from formal structure. In what seems like an Old World stand-up routine, the narrator rambles off on tangents, mangles biblical interpretations, and reveals his comically inflated sense of self. The modern reader finds the conventions that Aleichem employs when writing Tevye's monologues to be remarkably familiar: He *kvetches* like Jackie Mason, makes Jerry Seinfeld-esque observations about his world, possesses a dark edge to his humor like Lenny Bruce, and like Rodney Dangerfield, he "gets no respect" from his daughters, nor from his long-suffering wife Golde.

Tevye, like Woody Allen, is the kind of schlimazel who would win a trip to camp, and then get beaten up by his fellow campers. The reader gets this sense just by reading the titles of his stories: "Tevye Strikes It Rich" and "Tevye Blows a Small Fortune" being the first two. Just as I have argued that the attitude of the Jewish Comedian stems from

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<sup>91</sup> Aleichem, "Tevye Blows A Small Fortune", 21.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid., 20.

the paradox surrounding biblical chosenness, Tevye demonstrates contradictory feelings regarding his chosenness as a Jew. In “Tevye Strikes It Rich”, he proclaims: “We’re God’s chosen people; it’s no wonder the whole world envies us.”<sup>93</sup> Within the same story, he later laments, “since Jews can’t help being Jews, someone else had better help them.”<sup>94</sup> He identifies his people, and himself, as both the subject of the world’s envy and neglect. In several stories, Tevye alludes to himself as reincarnated version of Job, the biblical figure and archetypal sufferer. Given Tevye’s love for *midrash* and the great weight he places on biblical knowledge, the act of comparing himself to this biblical victim of God’s wrath reveals Tevye’s exaggerated feelings of self-importance. He believes that he has been singled out to shoulder God’s punishment and suffers with a sense of pride for his chosenness, but also wonders aloud to God: “Couldn’t You find any other Jews to pick on?”<sup>95</sup>

This balance of pride and self-pity extends into other areas of Tevye’s character as well, notably, in the way he view his occupation. Even after he “strikes it rich,” Tevye acknowledges that he is hardly a wealthy man. His living requires him to engage in the manual labor of milk, cheese and butter-making, then to “scrape and bow to the rich Jews” so that he can sell his wares.<sup>96</sup> But the fact that he is a dairyman hardly diminishes Tevye’s sense of pride:

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<sup>93</sup> Aleichem, “Tevye Strikes it Rich”, 5.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>95</sup> Aleichem, “Shprintze”, 95.

<sup>96</sup> Aleichem, “Today’s Children”, 46.

One day early last winter I started out to Yehupetz with some merchandise—twenty-five pounds of the very best butter and a couple of wheels of white and yellow cheese such as I only wish could be yours. I hardly need to say that I sold it all right away, every last lick of it, before I had even finished making the rounds of my summer customers, the dacha owners in Boiberik, who wait for me as though I were the Messiah. You could beat the merchants of Yehupetz black and blue, they still couldn't come up with produce like mine! But I don't have to tell you such things. How does the Bible put it? Yehalelkho zor—quality toots its own horn...<sup>97</sup>

In his job as the village dairyman, Tevye is constantly being made aware of his low status as he must shill his goods to the rich Jews of Yehupetz and Boiberik. But regardless of his social standing, Tevye maintains a sense of self-importance and expresses exaggerated pride for the products he sells, even if he is only talking about wheels of cheese.

Likewise, when speaking about his seven daughters, Tevye often complains, saying things like, "It's better to have a house full of boarders than a house full of daughters."<sup>98</sup> Further, most of his stories center on his daughters and the grief that Tevye feels as they grow up and rebel against their father in their choice of romantic partners. In the story, "Today's Children," Tevye's eldest daughter falls in love with a poor tailor, even though she is engaged to a rich, albeit elderly, butcher. Similarly, his next daughter falls for a Russian revolutionary, and the next falls for a Christian neighbor, each more stressful to Tevye than one before. At other times though, he glows with pride. He says that his eldest daughter is worth more than "all the rice in China" as he negotiates her marriage to a suitor<sup>99</sup>, and of his second daughter Hodl, he brims with similar pride:

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<sup>97</sup> Aleichem, "Tevye Blows a Small Fortune", 22.

<sup>98</sup> Aleichem, "Tevye Blows a Small Fortune", 14.

<sup>99</sup> Aleichem, "Today's Children", 41.

She's like the Bible says of Queen Esther, *ki toyvas mar'eh hi*—prettier than a picture! And if looks aren't bad enough, she has the brains to go with them; she reads and writes both Yiddish and Russian and swallows books like hot cakes.

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As Tevye narrates his stories to he imagines listener, Sholem Aleichem, he demonstrates the same balance of pride and pity that is present in the stories about the schlemiel of Old World folklore and in the stand-up of contemporary Jewish comics.

In keeping with this Jewish comic tradition, Sholem Aleichem's stories also focus on the idea of difference, and especially Jewishness as difference. In Old World folktales, the schlemiel represents difference from the mainstream in his status as the solitary, Fool figure within the tight-knit community, or in the case of Chelm, the fools represent difference in that their backwards *shtetl* is unlike any other town in the world. Tevye's stories introduce a new kind of difference, one that becomes central to the development of the Jewish Comedian; he makes mention of the divide between his own Jewish community and their gentile neighbors. When boasting about his successful dairy business in "Tevye Strikes it Rich", he proclaims that "the best sort of people, Gentiles even" want to purchase his products: "We've heard, Tevye," they say to me, "that you're an honest fellow, even if you are a rat-Jew..." I ask you, do you ever get such a compliment from Jews?<sup>101</sup> In this way, Aleichem uses Tevye to highlight the tension between Jews and gentile that existed in Russia at the time, but given Tevye's inability to see that backhanded nature of the "compliment," the tone remains comic, rather than bitter.

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<sup>100</sup> Aleichem, "Hodl", 53.

<sup>101</sup> Aleichem, "Tevye Strikes it Rich", 20.



In the story “Chava,” the inter-faith tension explodes when Tevye’s daughter falls in love with a young Christian man and secretly decides to leave the Jewish faith. While Tevye seems blind to Jew-gentile tension, he confronts the idea of Jewish difference with much more gravity when dealing with Chava. When he finds that she has converted to Christianity and plans to marry a gentile, Tevye disowns Chava and instructs his family to pretend that she never existed. Despite this harsh reaction, his insight about the differences between Jew and gentile reveal the possibility of more grey area between the two groups: “What did being a Jew or not being a Jew matter? Why did God have to create both? And if He did, why put such walls between them, so that neither would look at the other even though both were His creatures?”<sup>102</sup> However, Tevye dismisses this progressive epiphany as a hallucination and ultimately remains stubborn in upholding the boundary that existed between Jews and gentiles.

Tevye’s view of the boundary between both groups is a logical one in the context of Russian history. During the time that Aleichem wrote, the idea of Jewish difference from gentiles was heightened by anti-Semitism, and Jewish separation from gentiles was even mandated by laws that restricted Jews from living in major cities like Moscow and St. Petersburg.<sup>103</sup> Russian gentiles openly discriminated against their Jewish neighbors, as it was a popular belief that the assassination of the Czar which brought on the Russian revolution was organized and carried out by Jews.<sup>104</sup> Aleichem’s choice to write about

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<sup>102</sup> Aleichem, “Chava”, 81.

<sup>103</sup> Charles D. Smith “Zionism: It’s Origins and Development to 1914” *Palestine and Arab-Israeli Conflict* (Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2000), 27.

<sup>104</sup> David Grubin *The Jewish-Americans* PBS Documentary Series (Washington, D.C: JTN Productions, 2008).

Jewish difference in a comic way set a precedent for those Jewish entertainers who would later cope with the pains of assimilation and with a growing sense of anti-Semitism.

In this way, the satirical aspect of Aleichem stories are reminiscent of an early Woody Allen routine: He tells a story of how he once brought a moose to a friend's costume party where it got into a scuffle with the Berkowitzes, a couple wearing a moose costume. Once the moose was knocked out from the fight, he strapped it onto the front of his car, and left it in the woods. The joke ends: "The next morning the Berkowitzes wake up in the woods in a moose suit. Mr. Berkowitz is shot, stuffed and mounted at the New York City Golf Club, and the joke is on them 'cause they don't allow Jews."<sup>105</sup> While the story as a whole is comic in its absurdity, there is something more darkly humorous in the punch line. In the joke, Allen makes the restricted golf club the subject of humor, but at the same time points out the painful fact of the existence of such clubs that barred Jews from membership.

In Russia during the late 1800's, Jews were banned from far more than membership to exclusive golf clubs, and Aleichem embeds these painful truths about anti-Semitic discrimination into his stories. For example, Tevye makes a joke about his daughter Hodl not being able to get into a university, despite her intelligence. He quips "Why, a cow can sooner jump over a roof than a Jew can get into a Russian university!.. They guard their schools like a bowl of cream from a cat."<sup>106</sup> His tone is light, although at the core of his statement is a sad truth about the discriminatory Russian laws that

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<sup>105</sup> *Woody Allen: Standup Comic* (1999), Audio recording.

<sup>106</sup> Aleichem, "Hodl", 54.

barred Jewish men and women from pursuing an education. In this way, Aleichem uses the dark-edged humor of Tevye's stories to highlight the injustices that he experienced as a Russian Jew.

Sholem Aleichem uses the same technique to discuss the Russian pogroms in the story "Lekh-Lekho." There is nothing innately comic about the pogroms that began in 1821 and continued on into the early twentieth century. During these attacks, anti-Semitic mobs would attempt to drive their Jewish neighbors out of Russia by breaking their property, burning their houses, and using physical violence. Some pogroms had a death toll of over 50 and left over 500 Jews injured.<sup>107</sup> Aleichem published many of his Tevye the Dairyman stories at the time of the bloodiest pogroms between 1903 and 1906, and was forced to uproot his family and seek refuge in Kiev, before fleeing to America in 1916.<sup>108</sup> Although he was aware of the danger of these violent attacks and feared for his family, Aleichem managed to make mention of the pogroms in one of Tevye's stories in a way that is comic.

Tevye has a much different encounter with his gentile neighbors in "Lekh-Lekho" than Aleichem did in real life. Because Tevye (Tevel to his gentile neighbors) had lived in relative peace with non-Jews, the village priest approaches him diplomatically:

"We've come to you, Tevel" says Ivan Papparilo, stepping forward and getting right down to it, "because we want to have a pogrom."

Yet Tevye responds with sarcastic enthusiasm instead of fear or rage:

How's that for an opener? There's nothing like breaking it gently!

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<sup>107</sup> Smith, "Zionism: Its Origins and Development to 1914", 28.

<sup>108</sup> Hillel Halkin, introduction to *Tevye the Dairyman and the Railroad Stories* (New York, NY: 1987), xv.

“Congratulations!” I said to them in my cheeriest voice, “What’s taken you so long, though, my children? Everywhere else the pogroms are already over!”<sup>109</sup>

Many of Tevye’s comic moments derive from his own pride and his inability to fully comprehend the motives of others; however, this moment is different. Tevye’s sarcasm shows a clear break from his prior naïveté in his dealings with his neighbors. With the threat of pogroms, Tevye does not play the fool. In fact, it is Tevye’s neighbors, such as Ivan Paprilo, who Aleichem portrays as the foolish ones.

At the end of the Tevye the Dairyman series, the schlemiel and his family are forced to leave their home along with the other Jews of their village, but his final message is not one of despair:

But Tevye asks no questions; if he’s told to keep moving, he does. Today, Pani Sholem Aleichem, we met on the train, but tomorrow may find us in Yehupetz, and next year in Odessa, or in Warsaw, or maybe even in America...unless, that is, the Almighty looks down on us and says “Guess what, children! I’ve decided to send you my Messiah!” I don’t even care if He does it just to spite us, as long as He’s quick about it, that old God of ours! And in the meantime, be well and have a good trip. Say hello for me to all the Jews and tell them, wherever they are, not to worry: the old God of Israel still lives!<sup>110</sup>

His parting words to Sholem Aleichem, and to the reader, are a message of hope that captures the essence of Jewish humor that lives on in folktales and literature, as well as in synagogues and comedy clubs. This literary tradition of the schlemiel, exemplified by characters like Djuha and Tevye, provides a lineage from which today’s Jewish Comedian both draws inspiration and adds his own interpretation of what it means to be Jewish.

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<sup>109</sup> Aleichem, “Lekh-Lekho”, 121.

<sup>110</sup> Aleichem, “Lekh-Lekho”, 131-32.

## Chapter 5

### THE FUTURE OF THE JEWISH COMEDIAN “Full-frontal Jew-dity”<sup>111</sup>

When reading *Jewish Jesters* by Arthur Asa Berger, I was intrigued by his choice to title the epilogue “The Last of the Jewish Comedians?” In this chapter, Berger wonders: Will Jewish humor disappear as the population intermarries? He makes a strong case, citing both the dwindling Jewish population and the end of the stand-up comedy boom<sup>112</sup>; however, to believe that there is an end in sight for Jewish humor is to overlook its highly adaptive past. I strongly believe that Jewish humor will adapt, just as it did when Jews emigrated from the Old World to America, just as it did when Jews assimilated to American culture, and just as it did in the face of escalated anti-Semitism. The events of Jewish history prove that Jewish humor is not weakened by assimilation, but rather made stronger, and made new.

The marriage of cultures – whether literal or figurative – gives birth to a new kind of Jewish humor. Bill Maher, a stand-up comic raised by a Jewish mother and Catholic father, represents the product of assimilation and intermarriage. He makes a joke in one of his routines that exemplifies this cultural shift: “I was brought up

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<sup>111</sup> *The Sarah Silverman Program*, Season 1, episode 1: “Officer Jay” (2007).

<sup>112</sup> Berger, *Jewish Jesters*, 159-60.

Catholic...with a Jewish mind. When we'd go to confession, I'd bring a lawyer in with me. 'Bless me Father, for I have sinned...I think you know Mr. Cohen?'"<sup>113</sup>

In light of Berger's question, this final chapter addresses the future of Jewish humor by discussing three contemporary Jewish comics who represent the way in which the current generation of humorists have adapted the Jewish humor of their predecessors. While some conform to Old World styles, like Larry David and Jon Stewart, others like Sarah Silverman begin to define new aspects of Jewish humor. David and Stewart take on Old World roles, schlemiel and satirist. Silverman, however, adapts her persona to meet the need for more dynamic female characters in comedy, while still staying true in some aspects to her Jewish female comic predecessors.

### **Larry David as a Modern Schlemiel in *Curb Your Enthusiasm***

Although I use it heavily in my writing to generally mean "a fool", I will admit that in Yiddish, schlemiel is a highly-nuanced word; a schlemiel is best defined by his actions and attitudes, but when put into words, he is most commonly defined as a "bumbling fool," a man who is ineffectual and inept. Such a definition fits Larry David's character in the series *Curb Your Enthusiasm* perfectly. In the series, *Seinfeld* co-creator Larry David plays a fictionalized version of himself living in Los Angeles in the aftermath of *Seinfeld's* successful run. Many of the plot lines are based on actual events in his life, and David often includes his friends, like Ted Danzen, Wanda Sykes and Richard Lewis, to appear on the show as themselves. While the 62-year-old David belongs to an earlier

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<sup>113</sup> *Religulous* (2008), DVD.

generation of Jewish comics, this show is a current success, especially with audiences who were too young to experience the beginning of *Seinfeld*'s ten-year run.

Fans of the show cannot deny the Jewishness of Larry David's character in the series, as many of the episodes are based around Jewish customs and holidays. For example, in the episode when Larry's parents come to visit, he frantically searches for a way to hang a *mezuzah* on his door post, as he knows it will be the first thing his traditional father<sup>114</sup> will look for when he enters the home.<sup>115</sup> In season five, David comments on the absurdity of Hollywood Judaism in "The Larry David Sandwich," where the main conflict surrounds Larry's attempt to buy scalped tickets to his synagogues services on the High Holy Days.<sup>116</sup> His priority is not to observe the Jewish holiday, but rather to impress his gentile wife with good seats. Throughout the show's run, episodes like "The Seder" and "The Bat Mitzvah" use Jewish events and themes as a source of conflict and comedy.

As I have suggested by calling Larry David's character a modern schlemiel, there are distinct traces of Old World Jewish comedy in the series as well. Like the folktales about Djuha or the Fools of Chelm that center on a particular misunderstanding or comic mishap, each episode of *Curb Your Enthusiasm* follows a similar format. With few exceptions, episodes of the show follow Larry as he deals with a seemingly trivial conflict or breaks a code of social etiquette with disastrous results. One illustrative verbal misunderstanding occurs when Larry invites his rabbi to a dinner party, and the

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<sup>114</sup> Larry's father is played by Jewish comic, Shelley Berman.

<sup>115</sup> *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, Season 5, Episode 3: "The Christ Nail" (2005).

<sup>116</sup> *CYE*, Season 5, Episode 1: "The Larry David Sandwich" (2000).

rabbi asks Larry's permission to bring "a survivor" along.<sup>117</sup> Assuming he means a survivor of the Holocaust, Larry decides to invite a family friend who had lived through the Holocaust as well, so that the rabbi's guest might feel more comfortable. In the end, Larry's thoughtful act backfires when the rabbi shows up with a contestant from the reality game show, *Survivor*.

Like a schlimazel such as Tevye, many of Larry's misfortunes are due to his terrible luck. In season two, Larry receives courtside seats to a Lakers game, and then infuriates the entire city of Los Angeles by accidentally tripping Shaquille O'Neal, forcing the star player out of the game with a knee injury.<sup>118</sup> Like the *shtetl* schlemiel though, Larry delights in his sudden celebrity outcast status and, in one scene, does a celebratory jig in Starbucks when he is recognized as "the guy who ruined the Lakers' season." Also like the Old World schlemiel, Larry is constantly at odds with the world around him. The show is replete with comic – and sometimes almost painful to watch – confrontations between Larry and strangers: from a friend's dentist who accuses him of being racist after a failed affirmative action joke,<sup>119</sup> to a fellow customer at an ice cream shop who he believes is abusing her "sample privileges" and holding up the line.<sup>120</sup>

In *Jewish Jesters*, Berger posits that because of the shrinking Jewish population, Jewish comics will be less likely to make jokes based on overt Jewish references, for fear

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<sup>117</sup> *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, Season 4, Episode 9 "The Survivor" (2004).

<sup>118</sup> *CYE*, Season 2, Episode 8 "Shaq" (2002).

<sup>119</sup> *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, Season 1, Episode 9: "Affirmative Action" (2000).

<sup>120</sup> *CYE*, Season 6, Episode 3: "The Ida Funkhouser Roadside Memorial" (2007).



of alienating most of his audience.<sup>121</sup> Instead of shirking away from overt Jewish humor because of the trend of intermarriage and secularization of Jews, Larry David embraces it. Further, he uses the current state of Judaism in America as inspiration for various characters and storylines. While David may be a quintessential schlemiel, his wife Cheryl is the picture of *goyish*-ness, and their conflicting beliefs are a source of comedy in many episodes. In the episode in which Larry scrambles to find a way to hang his *mezuzah*, the true comedy of the situation comes from religious difference: As a last resort, Larry steals a nail that Cheryl's father had bought from the set of *The Passion of the Christ* and wore as a necklace. When his father-in-law wakes up to find that Larry used "the Christ nail" to hang his Jewish ritual item, he is furious.<sup>122</sup> Cheryl's father's inability to understand the significance of the *mezuzah* and Larry's refusal to acknowledge the significance of the symbolic movie-prop shows a more modern adaptation of the tension between Jew and gentile in the stories of Sholem Aleichem or the stand-up routines of Jackie Mason.

By removing the figure of the schlemiel from his tight-knit Jewish community and placing him in an L.A. mansion with a gentile wife, David creates a kind of Jewish humor that bridges the Old World with the New. In the case of *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, the secularization and inter-marriage of the American Jewish community does not suggest an end to the Jewish Comedian, but rather allows Jewish humor to evolve along with the Jewish people.

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<sup>121</sup> Arthur Asa Berger, *Jewish Jesters*, 159-161.

<sup>122</sup> *CYE*, Season 5, Episode 3: "The Christ Nail" (2005).

## Jon Stewart and the Tradition of Jewish Satire

Jon Stewart has hosted the satirical news program, *The Daily Show*, for over a decade, and since then, he has gathered both a devoted audience and critical attention. Critics have published journal articles and books focusing on Jon Stewart's brand of political satire, but a writer for Slate Magazine, Ron Rosenbaum, had a different focus in mind when he wrote an open letter to Stewart in 2009: "I want you to change your name. Back to Leibowitz."<sup>123</sup> Rosenbaum argues that by taking on the stage name Jon Stewart, the man originally named Jon Stuart Leibowitz is disguising his Jewish roots and prolongs a show business tradition that must end to show our willingness to move beyond the anti-Semitism of our country's past. Rosenbaum calls on Stewart, and other Jews, "to reject the rejection of their ancestry and the WASP-ification of their names."

Other critics seem to think Stewart's name-change is hardly as controversial and that he remains "an ambassador of Jewishness...dispensing Jewish humor like a tic."<sup>124</sup> At times, Stewart does wear his Jewishness on his sleeve, like when he used the phrase "It gives me *nachas*" when interviewing his friend, Representative Anthony Weiner of New York,<sup>125</sup> or when he referred to Elinor Burkett, the woman infamous for interrupting an acceptance speech at the 2010 Oscar's, as "the woman who runs the snack counter at my synagogue's Purim festival."<sup>126</sup> Even in the context of his fake news

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<sup>123</sup> Ron Rosenbaum, "An Open Letter to Jon Stewart" *Slate Magazine*, 24 July 2009.

<sup>124</sup> Jeremy Gillick and Nonna Gorilovskaya, *Moment Magazine* "Meet Jonathan Stuart Leibowitz aka Jon Stewart" 2008 Nov/Dec.

<sup>125</sup> *The Daily Show*, 4 February 2010.

<sup>126</sup> *The Daily Show*, 8 March 2010.

program based on politics and current events, there are moments that remind the audience that Stewart is a man who once did an HBO special called “Unleavened” and idolizes Woody Allen.<sup>127</sup>

Satire is an important element in the humor of many cultures, and the Jewish community is no exception. In the spirit of Jewish satirists such as Sholem Aleichem, Jon Stewart uses his show as a platform to promote certain politicians and progressive figures and uses his comedy to criticize his opponents. His method has traces of Old World Jewish style as well. Consider, for example, the formulaic structure of the Fools of Chelm stories: The Chelmites encounter a problem and create a solution that is logically sound, but foolish in practice. In *The Daily Show*, Stewart takes the formula a step further by pointing out the “sound” logic of politicians and public figures, and carrying it out to its extreme, thus highlighting its true absurdity.

Stewart exemplifies this method in a segment directed at individuals who used the snowstorms of early 2010 as a means to reject the idea of global warming.<sup>128</sup> He rolls several clips of news stations mocking “Al Gore’s hysterical global warming theories” based on the logic that, because there has recently been a blizzard, the global temperature must not be rising. Stewart takes this logic to the extreme by calling upon several Daily Show correspondents to report from different locations. The first one, reporting to New York City, agrees with the global warming deniers, citing a graph that shows how temperatures have declined since August. The correspondent in Australia retorts that global warming must be true because “it hit 90 degrees today, in February!”

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<sup>127</sup> Gillick and Gorilovskaya.

<sup>128</sup> *The Daily Show*, 11 February 2010.

The last report draws Stewart's point to its comic conclusion when his correspondent cries, in a panic: "Jon! Help! It's dark where I am... It's only getting darker. This proves global darkening!" What results is the audience's laughter at the expense of the news outlets that had used the snowstorm to disprove global climate change.

Stewart uses a similar technique when he takes on the Supreme Court decision of *Citizens United v Federal Election Commission* that essentially gives corporations the same rights as individuals. He reasons that, based on the logic of this decision, individuals should have the same rights as corporations as well, and thus, he creates "United Jonco International" as a comic example of the decision's destructive potential.<sup>129</sup> In this segment he makes sharp-edged jokes about the ability of corporations to lie about assets, dodge creditors, and reward themselves with large severance packages, causing the audience to laugh at the absurdity of "Jonco's" actions, but also shedding light on the kind of practices that are common in the corporate world.

In *The Daily Show*, Jon Stewart both adapts the Old World tradition of satiric humor from folklore and literature and pushes its boundaries. Unlike Aleichem who hinted at the injustices of Russia in the late 1800's with light tone, Jon Stewart is much more upfront with his satiric attacks. Rather than play the fool, he uses his fake news program to make political comedy based on the foolishness of others.

### **Sarah Silverman and the Women of Jewish Comedy**

Of all contemporary Jewish comics, Sarah Silverman is perhaps the most complicated, and certainly the most polarizing. During a recent radio interview on NPR's

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<sup>129</sup> *The Daily Show*, 16 March 2010.

*Fresh Air*, the first question asked of Silverman was: “Are you good for the Jews or bad for the Jews?”<sup>130</sup> After watching Silverman’s comedy special, *Jesus is Magic*, one can understand why this question was raised. In this hour-long comedy special, Silverman skips onto the stage and smiles innocently while telling vulgar jokes about AIDS, pornography, and even the Holocaust, a topic that other Jewish Comedians steer away from out of respect. She delivers lines like, “I was raped by a doctor... which is so bittersweet for a Jewish girl” and “Everybody blames the Jews for killing Christ... I’m one of the few people that believe it was the blacks.”<sup>131</sup> Because her comedy, as displayed through her stand-up and her television series, is considered offensive and off-putting to some viewers and critics, they wish to dissociate her with Jewish comedy altogether. Regardless, Silverman does not shy away from labeling herself Jewish and using her comedy to explore what it means to be Jewish, especially a Jewish woman, in American society.

Sarah Silverman is an interesting individual to study when considering her relation to Old World Jewish humor. Throughout my argument, I have used the figure of the *shtetl* schlemiel as a basis for the Jewish Comedian’s persona; however, the subject of the female Jewish Comedian raises an important point: the schlemiel and his creator are always male. From Djuha to Tevye, the Fool character is never a woman, although women are often present in their stories. In these tales, Jewish women are given their own Old World stereotypes. Tevye’s wife, Golde, is an example of a quintessential Jewish wife, characterized by her tendency to nag her husband, her melodramatic reactions,

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<sup>130</sup> NPR *Fresh Air*, “Sarah Silverman: Turning Ignorance into Comedy”, 22 April 2010.

<sup>131</sup> *Jesus is Magic* (2005), DVD.

and her incredible blintzes. Yet, readers only hear the voice of Golde through that of Tevye, preventing her from becoming a more complex character. Like the comedians of today who make jokes about their stereotypical Jewish mother, Jewish humorists of the past used women as a source of comedy, but rarely gave them their own voice.

In some ways, Silverman and the female Jewish Comedians who came before her use the characteristics of their male counterparts, such as the balance of self-deprecation and pride, to construct their comic identities. In other ways, they started anew, as Sarah Blacher Cohen discusses in her essay "The Unkosher Comediennes." Cohen starts with a bold statement: "Jewish women comedians are brazen offenders of the faith," making the point that, in order to take part in the world of vaudeville or stand-up comedy, Jewish women must reject the laws of feminine modesty presented in the Torah.<sup>132</sup> As much as these female comics share many traits with their male counterparts, they also intrude on "the holy sphere of the Jewish male comic. They usurp his audience and so diminish his self-esteem."<sup>133</sup> It seems that not only is Sarah Silverman a complicated comic figure, but so is the female Jewish comic in general.

Earlier female Jewish performers like Sophie Tucker and Belle Barth engaged in the same self-deprecating routines as male comics. On the vaudeville stage, they offered their bodies as a source of comedy, relying on humor that ridiculed their weight and appearance. There are hints of self-deprecation in Sarah Silverman's comedy as well, for example, when she includes a disclaimer on an episode of her television program,

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<sup>132</sup> Sarah Blacher Cohen, "The Unkosher Comediennes: From Sophie Tucker to Joan Rivers" *Jewish Wry*, 105.

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.*

warning the audience about the presence of “full-frontal Jew-dity.” In her stage act, she also mocks her own lack of sexuality as a Jewish woman. What is more important in Silverman’s persona, however, is an exaggerated ego that makes her oblivious to her own foolishness, much like that of Tevye. In *Jesus in Magic*, Silverman whispers “You’re beautiful” at her own reflection. Her self-obsession is brought to new levels at the end of the program, when we see her passionately kissing her mirror for an uncomfortable two minutes.

In addition to possessing a sense of self-pity along with her self-obsession, Silverman also comments on the differences between Jews and gentiles, as comics like Lenny Bruce and Jackie Mason do. When talking about how she and her Catholic boyfriend would deal with raising a child, she says: “It wouldn’t be an issue for us. Because we’d be honest, and say ‘Mommy is one of the Chosen people... and Daddy believes that Jesus is magic.’” On that note, she continues with: “You know, Jesus is magic because he turned water into wine, and I think he made the Statue of Liberty disappear in the eighties.”<sup>134</sup> This attitude characterizes the way that Silverman deals with religious differences. Unlike Mason’s jokes that normally target the Jewish community, Silverman makes humor at the expense of Christians, seeming proud of her Jewish origins. To some viewers, she takes this pride too far at times, such as when she makes statements like “I hope the Jews did kill Christ! I’d do it again!” that could potentially cross the line between comedic and offensive.<sup>135</sup>

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<sup>134</sup> *Jesus is Magic* (2005), DVD.

<sup>135</sup> *Jesus is Magic* (2005), DVD.

One of the most controversial aspects of Silverman's comic persona is the way she uses the stereotype of the Jewish-American Princess, or "JAP." In her act, Sarah Silverman embodies the character of the Jewish-American Princess, presenting herself as self-obsessed and materialistic. She talks, for example, about wanting this "gorgeous, rare jewel" that is made from deboned Ethiopian babies, but is "so worth it."<sup>136</sup> She uses this spoiled, self-centered stereotype again when talking about September 11<sup>th</sup>: "The events were totally devastating... especially for me. Because it happened to be the same exact day that I found out that the Soy Chai latte was like 900 calories. I had been drinking them every day."<sup>137</sup>

Some viewers are offended by her use of this stereotype, arguing that by playing into the character, she gives anti-Semitic stereotypes validity. I agree that, at times, the way she slips into the character is so convincing, that audiences may have difficulty distinguishing Silverman's persona from her own identity as a young Jewish woman. As one reviewer writes, "she doesn't insulate herself with fictional characters: Her persona—an incestuous, genital-obsessed, racist narcissist—looks and sounds exactly like Silverman herself. She delivers even the most taboo punch lines with almost pathological sincerity."<sup>138</sup> I believe, however, that the jokes she makes about this stereotype are meant to comment on its absurdity. She leads the audience to laugh at the

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<sup>136</sup> Ibid.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid.

<sup>138</sup> Sam Anderson "Irony Maiden: How Sarah Silverman is raping American comedy" *Slate Magazine*, 10 November 2005.



materialism and egotism not specifically of Jewish women, but of all humans, giving her comedy a satiric purpose, rather than an offensive one.

While she has stretched the boundaries of Jewish humor and offended some audiences in the process, Sarah Silverman makes a point during interviews to explain that her bigoted persona is just that, a persona:

I think I've been called edgy -- but in all honestly, there is a safety in what I do because I'm always the idiot. Unless you're just listening to buzz words and not taking into account the context of the situation, you see I'm always the ignoramus. So no matter what I talk about or what tragic event, off-color, dark scenario is evoked in my material, I'm always the idiot in it.<sup>139</sup>

The fact that Silverman plays the fool in her comic routines shows that she has not strayed too far from the Old World tradition. While her comedic style may seem foreign to the performers who got their start in Catskill resorts, the essence of Silverman's persona is rooted in the Jewish literary tradition of the fool.

Larry David, Jon Stewart, and Sarah Silverman, as well as the many other notable Jewish comics of today, show the ability of Jewish humorists to adapt to new circumstances like the secularization of the Jewish community and the increased marriage rates between Jews and gentiles. Like their predecessors, these contemporary comics sometimes have complicated relationships with their own Jewishness, for example Jon Stewart's willingness to self-identity as a Jew while still choosing to drop the "Leibowitz" from his name. They pay homage to the Old World tradition, as Larry David does, and they ridicule anti-Semitism, as Sarah Silverman does. Whether they live in Chelm or Manhattan's Upper West Side, these comics make a statement about Jewishness, and from Aleichem to Allen, the message remains the same: To be Jewish is

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<sup>139</sup> NPR *Fresh Air*, "Sarah Silverman: Turning Ignorance into Comedy", 22 April 2010.

to show the possibility of self-mockery without a loss of pride; to celebrate difference from mainstream culture; and especially to laugh, like a fool withchutzpah, in the face of tragedy.

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