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Essays on Jewish Humor

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INTRODUCTION

The Varieties of Jewish Humor

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Jewish humor, born out of the vast discrepancy between what was to be the "chosen people's" glorious destiny and their desperate straits, is a relatively modern phenomenon. In the eighteenth century it scantly surfaced in the witty poetry of Heinrich Heine, who, caught in the emancipation, captured the comic irony of the German Jews straddling two worlds—the traditional one, dead, no longer serving their needs, and the enlightened one, alive, but restricting their entry. But in nineteenth century Eastern Europe that world was not dead, so Jewish humor became the plentiful emotional baggage which Jews from the West transported with them to their Russian and Polish villages. While they also carried their Torahs, Talmuds and rabbinic commentaries, they looked to them as repositories of sacred law, not profane laughter.

This is not to say these texts were devoid of any laughter. Despite Alfred North Whitehead's claim that the "total absence of humor from the Bible is one of the most singular things in all literature," or Salo Baron's equation of the biblical period with his "lachrymose conception of Jewish history,"[1] scholars have isolated comic fragments in the Bible. They have identified puns in the Tower of Babel section of Genesis and the Joseph story in Exodus; they have located trickster motifs in Abraham's passing Sarah off as his sister, in Laban's saddling Jacob with Leah rather than Rachel, and in Jacob's stealthily purchasing Esau's birthright with a mess of pottage. They have commented on the

miraculous jest played upon Sarah when at age ninety she bore a son, named Isaac, based on the Hebrew word "to laugh." They have singled out the satire and irony of the prophets, who chastised the stiff-necked Israelites for succumbing to pagan temptations, for defiling their God-given images.

The Talmud, too, has its remnants of humor. Though it contains the injunction, "All that is not Torah is levity," it still possesses its unique word play, the witty intricacies of *pilpul* (disputation), farcical animal fables, and various forms of ideological comedy. Similarly, the rabbis of the medieval period thought humor frivolous, yet they occasionally employed *sihat hullin,* light talk or banter, in their explication of the law. They permitted raucous Purim celebrations, the irreverence of *badchens* or wedding jesters, and mirthful stories told by traveling preachers. Yet humor was not the main component of their world view.

The Yiddish humor of the late nineteenth century principally defined the identity of the Jews of Eastern Europe. The butt of a cruel joke, they found that God had singled them out to be a light unto the nations, but had given them a benighted existence. Powerful in interpreting the vast complexities of sacred texts, they were powerless in their dealings with brainless peasants. Priding themselves on the cohesiveness of their private world, they felt isolated from the world at large. To cope with the anxiety produced by these incongruities, they created a humor in which laughter and trembling were inextricably mingled.

Moreover, this "folk community of garrulous intellectuals and hair-splitters cut off from nature and animal life, intrigued only by the oddities of the human and the divine, taking as its frame of reference the complex structure of ghetto society, ghetto life and Jewish tradition" created the "humor of an intelligence running amok . . .," a humor of "rebellious rationalism."[2] Theirs was a cerebral comedy of errors which showed the limitations of strained thinkers—the circularity of their reasoning, their faulty premises and absurd proofs. The caricatures they gave rise to were the Chelm Fools, those harebrained sages so consumed with their wrong-headed thought processes that they totally lost touch with mundane reality. The ghetto-dwellers also became the subject matter of a unique set of jokes which exposed their mental follies rather than their physical flaws.

The "characteristic strategy" of these jests was, according to

Irving Howe, "an irony which measured the distance between pretension and actuality, held it up for public inspection and then made of it the salt of self-ridicule." The following joke illustrates this point.

> Chernov, the *shnorrer* of Petrograd, had a very wealthy patron who, for some obscure reason, had taken a liking to the nervy little beggar. Each year he would give Chernov a handsome stipend—never less than 500 rubles.
>
> One year, however, the rich man gave him only 250 rubles.
>
> "What is the meaning of this?" demanded the insolent *shnorrer.* "This is only half of what you have been giving me!"
>
> "I'm sorry, Chernov, but I must cut my expenses this year," apologized the wealthy man. "My son married an actress and I am paying all the bills."
>
> "Well, of all the *chutzpah!*" roared Chernov, hopping mad. "If your son wants to support an actress, that's his business. But how dare he do it with my money!"[3]

The joke captures the comic reversal of roles whereby the destitute *shnorrer* pretends to be superior to his well-endowed benefactor. Not only is the *shnorrer* ungrateful, but he feels entitled to his rubles because he enables the wealthy man to perform the sacred duty of giving charity to the poor. So smugly accustomed is the *shnorrer* to receiving his fixed dole, that he is outraged at having his funds in any way reduced. The joke mocks his impudence for claiming absolute control over money that is not his.

A similar joke directs its barbs not at the Jew and his flawed relationships with his fellow Jews, but at the Jew and his God. It functions as a form of camouflaged blasphemy, permitting the Jew to give witty expression to his disappointment at divine promises not kept and to comically censure himself for his own hubris at challenging God:

> A traveler, arriving in a Galician town, orders a pair of trousers from a Jewish tailor. Three months later he leaves, without the trousers. After seven years he happens to pass through the same place again and, lo and behold, the tailor comes to deliver the trousers. "Well," the traveler exclaims, astounded, "God created the world in seven days—but you took seven years for a pair of trousers!" "True," the Jew agrees, quite unimpressed, "but look at the world—and look at my trousers."[4]

The joke disparages the reliability of the tailor for his failure to keep his word and for his ingenious way of deflecting criticism from himself. But above all, it castigates him for his impudence to see himself as the rival of God, as the better craftsman whose hand-sewn pair of pants is a better piece of handiwork than God's creation. But the joke also finds fault with God for his shoddy workmanship, for his creation of an imperfect world.

The fact that these *shtetl* Jews could so cleverly ridicule themselves and their God prompted Freud to claim that their self-mockery was the most distinguishing feature of Jewish humor. Drawing upon Yiddish wit for some of his examples, he wrote in *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious:* "The occurrence of self-criticism as a determinant may explain how it is that a number of the most apt jokes . . . have grown up on the soil of Jewish popular life. They are stories created by Jews and directed against Jewish characteristics. . . . I do not know whether there are many other instances of a people making fun to such a degree of its own character."[5] Freud attributed the Jews' excessive ridicule of themselves to the excessive aggression they had to conceal to survive in such an inimical society. Their self-directed mirth was a camouflaged form of their masochism. It is as if they had to tell their oppressor, "You don't have to injure us. We'll take charge of our own persecution. And we'll do it more thoroughly than you ever could."

Jewish humor, however, is not only based on the masochistic characteristics of the Jews expressed in their self-critical jokes. It has also been a principal source of salvation. By laughing at their dire circumstances, Jews have been able to liberate themselves from them. Their humor has been a balance to counter external adversity and internal sadness.

The *shtetl* dwellers' attitude toward suffering is a case in point. Instead of valuing the tragic hero for his endurance of intense pain, they adopt as their model of heroism *dos kleine menschele,* the little man who takes suffering in his stride. He derives no ecstasy from agony but shrugs his shoulders at the inevitable misfortunes of life. Consequently, the Jewish comic vision, toughened by perennial troubles, punctures the inflated importance ascribed to suffering. According to Robert Alter, "Jewish humor typically drains the charge of cosmic significance from suffering by grounding it in a world of . . . practical realities." Recalling the Yiddish proverb, "If you want to forget all your troubles, put on a shoe that's too tight," he reminds us that "Weltschmerz begins to seem preposterous when one is wincing over crushed bunions."

This Yiddish proverb is perhaps best illuminated by the following Yiddish joke about painful shoes and the adept way to bear distress:

> Two woebegone talmudic students came to their rabbi and made a shamefaced confession. "Rabbi, we've committed a sin."
> "A sin? What kind of a sin?"
> "We looked with lust upon a woman."
> "May God forgive you!" cried the holy man. "That is indeed a serious transgression."
> "Rabbi," said the students, humbly, "what can we do to atone?"
> "Well, if you sincerely seek penance, I order you to put peas into your shoes and walk about that way for ten days. Perhaps that will teach you not to sin again."
> The two young men went home and did as the rabbi had ordered them. A few days later the penitents met on the street. One was hobbling painfully, but the other walked easily, his manner calm and contented.
> "Is this the way to obey the rabbi?" asked the first student reproachfully. "I see you ignored his injunction to put peas into your shoes."
> "I didn't ignore him at all," said the other cheerfully. "I just cooked them first."[6]

The joke, like the Yiddish proverb cited by Alter, refuses to ennoble suffering. It mocks the talmud student who strictly obeys the super-pious authority figure and willingly subjects himself to harsh punishment. His painful hobbling is seen not as a worthy act of penitence but as a senseless act of masochism. On the other hand, it applauds the ingenuity of the non-masochistic student who obeys the rabbi's directive but cleverly avoids the injurious consequences of it. He has the resourcefulness to crush obstacles and so make them more manageable to tolerate. He thus permits himself the pleasure of lusting after women and pays not too hurtful a price for it.

The joke tells us that in life we must inevitably step upon hard peas, but it also tells us we have the power to transform them or alter our response to them. This response is similar to "the humor of verbal retrieval, the word triumphant over the situation" found in Sholom Aleichem's work. "Not what happens to people is funny, but what they themselves say about it. There is

nothing funny about Tevyeh the dairyman as a character and nothing funny ever happens to him. What Tevyeh does is to turn the tables on tragedy by a verbal ingenuity: life gets the better of him, but he gets the better of the argument."[7] While more tears than laughter predominate in the majority of Sholom Aleichem's stories, he is able to create a comedy of affirmation grounded in the harsh realities of Kasrilevke, the town of the poor, but cheerful, little people. When the Jews had no national homeland, he created his own fictional territory fraught with plagues and pogroms. Yet the characters he created, the Tevyehs, the Menakhem-Mendls and the Motls, were able to survive there because their comic spirit had not been subdued. It contains, writes Meyer Wiener, "a sort of merriment that comes from having overcome and tamed the fear of chaos, the fear of a maimed, confused and falsely-ordered life."

Yet they could not remain in Kasrilevke. To escape persecution, their real life counterparts had to immigrate to America where 1,300,000 came to the promised land between 1880 and 1915, to form a new beginning. Yet they still carried remnants of their Yiddish humor with them: humor in which they wryly deprecated their persecutors and bittersweetly mocked themselves; humor in which their adversaries were dimwitted and besotted and they, themselves, were incorrigible *schlemiels, schnorrers* and *luftmenschen* (beggars and men of the air). But this time they were aliens in a larger, more uncertain world. Cut off from *shtetl* solidarity, the enemy wasn't so easily identifiable and friends were not readily available. Longing for the old country and baffled by the new, their marginal status, that is, the psychological ambiguity of being on the outskirts, prompted them to make comedy out of constraint. Initially, however, they, like the Blacks, their fellow outsiders, were the butts of American society's aggressive humor. In pejorative tales and jokes the dominant culture depicted Jews as avaricious, cunning Shylocks and Blacks as genial, indolent Sambos. Such comic stereotyping was designed to keep the minorities in their place, to keep the "wretched refuse" from polluting the mainstream. But the "wretched refuse" refused to be wittily swept out of sight. To alter misconceptions, to sustain their pride and recoup their powers, both Blacks and Jews retaliated with a hidden form of protest humor, a response to subordination which Joe Boskin characterizes as "inwardly masochistic and tragic and externally

aggressive and acrimonious." Just as Blacks employed covert trickster motifs to insult their white opponents, Jewish immigrant humor contained a similar veiled hostility. It was "defensive and private, a reserve for one's own bitter amusement in the homely curses muttered under the breath in Yiddish that the customer or employer couldn't possibly understand. 'Of course, Mrs. Morgan (You should bury your head in the earth like an onion). But naturally, you're absolutely right (You should only swell up like a mountain).' "[8] By concealing the sneer beneath the smile and the grimace beneath the grin, Jews, like Blacks, belittled the towering strengths of the giant majority and elevated their own status in the process.

But gradually as the Jews grew taller in their own eyes and their greenhorn identity was being washed away in the melting pot, their humor became less insular. In their transformation from *Yidn* to Yankees, they became more open and ebullient, more eager to embrace the unknown. In vaudeville and burlesque halls, owned and operated by Jews, the street-trained Eddie Cantor, Georgie Jessel, Sophie Tucker, Al Jolson and Fanny Brice mingled breezy Americanisms with racy Yiddishisms and capitalized on the rich humor of their hyphenated origins. As they sang "Yiddle on Your Fiddle, Play Some Ragtime," or "I'm an Indian" in a Jewish accent or "Mammy" in black-face with cantorial resonance, they became comic universe-changers, "importing into one sphere an entire universe of discourse with all sorts of associations from an entirely different sphere."[9] These Jewish entertainers were not ashamed of their Jewish identity. Fanny Brice's justification for her Jewish routines expressed their general attitude: "In anything Jewish I ever did, I wasn't standing apart, making fun of the race, and what happened to me on the stage is what could happen to them. They identified with me and then it was all right to get a laugh, because they were laughing at me as well as at themselves."[10] But in the later part of the thirties and forties, during the period of the de-Semitization of the arts, Jewish entertainers did not make their ethnic identity paramount. Jack Benny, for example, invented a grotesque stereotype called Schlepperman for his comic scapegoat. He, himself, was tight-fisted with money, but he passed that off as a personal idiosyncracy, not a Jewish trait. Though born Benny Kubelski, he was detached from his people and on occasion made fun of them. When, for example, General Motors recalled

72,000 Cadillacs on the eve of Yom Kippur, Benny quipped: "I've never seen so many Jews walking to the synagogue in my life."[11] The same secularization of self was true for Groucho Marx. Like Karl, another Marx brother, he waged his own comic class struggle against Margaret Dumont, that bastion of WASP respectability. But it was as the aSemitic scapegrace, not as the Jew who, resigning from the Friars, explained that he did not care to belong to a club that accepts people like himself as members.

During the fifties and sixties Jewish entertainers no longer kept a low ethnic profile. A belated pride in the founding of the state of Israel, combined with a profound grief for the loss of their fellow Jews in the Holocaust, prompted them to resurrect their buried Jewish identity and draw upon its wit for many of their routines. So contagious was their material that they infected their own people as well as the gentile public with fits of philo-Semitic laughter. So widespread was their impact that Wallace Markfield describes it as "The Yiddishization of American Humor" with the following results:

> Turn to any TV variety show, await the stand-up comic, and chances are good that he'll come on with accents and gestures and usages whose origins are directly traceable to the Borscht Belt by way of the East European *shtetl* and the corner candy store. His material is a million light years removed from the old-style Bob Hope-type monologue, with its heavy reliance upon a swift sputter of gags plucked from card indices, then updated and localized. It is involuted, curvilinear, ironic, more parable than patter.[12]

Though Zion seemed to have invaded Main Street, Zion was still ill at ease on Main Street. Granted, Sid Caesar, the celebrated TV funny-man of the fifties whose script writer was Mel Brooks, capitalized on the comedy of ethnic incongruity by inserting in his parodies of foreign films such antic Yiddish phrases as *gantze mishpochah* (the whole family), *gehakteh leber* (chopped liver) and *shmateh* (rag) as the stars of a Japanese film and *La Fligl* (the chicken wing) as the setting of a French film. Yet his main concern was producing travesties of Hollywood violence and churning out forms of low comedy. Like Buddy Hackett and Jack E. Leonard, he used Yiddish as the familiar deflater of the exotic, the vulgar leveler of the refined. But this occasional use of Yiddish in no way constituted substantial Jewish-American humor.

"Jewish humor in mid-twentieth-century America," according to Albert Goldman, "was not a gentle, ironic Sholom Aleichem folksiness; nor was it a sophisticated Heinesque intellectual wit; nor was it simply the one-two-three, laff pattern of the professional joke huckster. It was the plaint of a people who were highly successful in countless ways, yet who still felt inferior, tainted, outcast; a people who needed some magic device of self-assertion and self-aggrandizement."

The tainted, outcast spokesman of this people who most used humor as a form of plaint was Lenny Bruce. Though he incorporated some borscht belt routines in his jazz club performances and used Yiddish "like a wet towel in the hands of a locker room bully,"[13] he saw himself performing a higher function. With great flare, he ordained himself a preacher who sought to deliver nonsectarian sermons, to avoid the parochialism of any one religion. Despite his ecumenical pose, however, Bruce was still staunchly Jewish and saw the world divided between "us" and "them," Jews and Christians.

> To me, if you live in New York or any other big city, you are Jewish. It doesn't matter even if you're Catholic: if you live in New York you're Jewish. If you live in Butte, Montana, you're going to be *goyish* even if you're Jewish.
>
> . . . Evaporated milk is *goyish* even if the Jews invented it. Chocolate is Jewish and fudge is *goyish*. Spam is *goyish* and rye bread is Jewish.[14]

His obsession with citing the differences between Jews and Gentiles did not blind Bruce to the flaws of each of them. He launched satiric jeremiads at them for their vindictiveness and venality, their racism and anti-Semitism, their prudery and lechery. Though Bruce, corrupted by what he ranted against, did not succeed as a moralist, he did succeed in producing a new kind of humor. "For Bruce," claims Sanford Pinsker, "the need to shock the Jews, to 'go public' with their secrets; the need to *shpritz the goyim*, to exorcise all their 'Southern-dummy-cheapo-drecky dumbbell shit,' all their white bread Protestantism, raised comedy-as-hostility and comedy as tragic catharsis to new levels, and to new expectations."

The title of Bruce's autobiography is *How to Talk Dirty and Influence People* and indeed he was the foulest Jewish stand-up comedian and had the largest repertoire of "tits and ass" jokes.

His audiences were shocked, but not too shocked because they expected such bawdiness to come from the Jewish male. Yet they were not prepared to issue the same sexual license to the Jewish female comic. Nonetheless, there were a group of unkosher comediennes—Sophie Tucker, Belle Barth, Totie Fields, and Joan Rivers—who, by being uproariously brazen, violated the code of gentility observed by respectable Jewish women. But they did not alienate audiences with their breaches of decency. Their Yiddish equivalents of foul language, their accented criticisms of anatomy, their caricatures of Jewish princesses and *yentas* amused rather than offended sensibilities. However, their humor was more than a form of ingratiation, more than a means of entry into a morally restrictive society. An act of camouflaged aggression, it enabled them to mask their hostility so they could mock judgmental society with impunity and improve it in the process. By being unkosher comediennes with a vengeance, they could infuse the bland with the off-color, the sterile with the racy, the staid with the forbidden.

Woody Allen, born Alan Stewart Konigsberg, is just the opposite of the tough, unkosher comediennes and the *macho-maggid* (preacher) Lenny Bruce. His film pose is that of the *schlemiel* figure who is the feckless son, the inept lover and the bungling urbanite. Like his *shtetl* ancestors, he unpacks his heart with whining words and contrasts his Jewish *angst* with gentile equanimity. He juxtaposes his imagination of disaster with their expectation of good fortune. A bundle of Freudian complexes and Kafkan insecurities, he flaunts his ineffectual self to win our pity, yet his inventive exposure of his weaknesses, his clever exaggeration of his vulnerabilities earn our sympathetic laughter. His other film pose is that of the caricature of the Jewish intellectual, replacing the stereotype of what Gerald Mast terms the "money-counting Jew" with the idea-generating one. Appearing in parodies, many of which are ludicrous imitations of conventional film genres and serious works of art, Allen is a master of half-knowledge and semi-enlightenment, the scrambled fragments of the world's great religious and intellectual thought. Yet he undercuts his high-toned philosophizing with the low-toned repartée of daily life as, for example, in *Play It Again, Sam* where Allen (as Allen Felix) attempts to meet a woman as they both admire a Jackson Pollock painting.

Allen: What does it say to you?
Woman: It restates the negativeness of the universe. The hideous lonely emptiness of existence. Nothingness. The predicament of Man forced to live in a barren, Godless, eternity like a tiny flame flickering in an immense void with nothing but waste, horror and degradation, forming a useless bleak straightjacket in a bleak absurd cosmos.
Allen: What're you doing Saturday night?
Woman: Committing suicide.
Allen: What about Friday night?

Here we have a representative sample of Allen's distinctive brand of humor: the juxtaposition of high-brow and low-brow, the sublime and the profane. Allen is, according to Mark Shechner, "the master of comic techniques based on those sudden collisions of perspective: the serious side of himself suddenly brought crashing to earth by the madman in him." This comic clashing of such disparate frames of reference within the individual self is characteristic of the funniest of the Jewish-American novelists, Philip Roth and Stanley Elkin, whose works most resemble those of the stand-up comedians. However, the amalgam of dualities within their writing contains the trivial and the tragic, the parodic and the painful. Alexander Portnoy best expresses these twin effects in his own life: "Spring me from this role I play of the smothered son in the Jewish joke: Because it's beginning to pall a little at thirty-three: And also it *hoits*, you know, there is *pain* involved, a little human suffering is being felt."[15] Jewish jests and Jewish agony are thus the stuff of Roth's fiction, or as he identifies the two influences present in *Portnoy's Complaint*, the stand-up comedy of a Henny Youngman and the "sit-down" comedy of a Franz Kafka. Alan Cooper enumerates the characteristics of these two comic modes as "on the one hand, comic *shtick*, set pieces, one liners, *shpritzes*, rapid changes and juxtapositions of a subject matter; on the other, the extended monologue, 'guilt as a comic idea,' the hero as the butt of some great cosmic joke, contention against some absurd authority."

These same characteristics are featured in Stanley Elkin's work, only his is a Jewish black humor. Many of his characters are physical grotesques who are disfigured, malformed excuses for human beings. In his novel, *The Franchiser* (1980), he calls

them "human lemons, Detroit could recall them." Others are psychological grotesques whom he categorizes as "criers and kibitzers," obsessive complainers of monumental griefs and their opposite: compulsive gloaters of small-scale triumphs. Alienated from each other, they are similarly alienated from a God who is an indifferent, comic-strip being, a caricature of a supreme authority. In his novel, *The Living End* (1979), God is also a failed vaudeville entertainer who destroys the world because his audience doesn't appreciate him. Yet Elkin prevents us from having any compassion for this doomed audience. Endowing us with an extra dose of Bergson's "anesthesia of the heart," he makes us immune to their cartoon-like suffering, their horrific, yet hilarious plights. Their language is extravagant, alternating between high-flown fantasy and low-grade fact, between the grandiose and the insignificant. Yet these mock-heroic Jobs are not conspicuously Jewish. Though they occasionally employ a burlesque hall Yiddish, they are not practicing Jews. Even so, Maurice Charney claims that Elkin creates "a world that is convincingly Jewish . . . in its spontaneous assumptions, its feeling that triumph is inexplicably mixed with catastrophe, its manic urge for the small man through cunning, slyness and whimsy to conquer the world, its protagonists who speak with prophetic fervor tinged with neurotic insufficiency."

Though Elkin's humor is ironic and defensive, at times wavering and tentative, it and the other Jewish-American humor we've examined are firmly established, a highly admired and sought after commodity by the whole country. This is not the case with Mordecai Richler's Jewish-Canadian humor. As Canadian and Jew, he is the doubly alienated minority writer who is forced to be more caustic in his mockery of the majority. He must contend with what Michael Greenstein terms a "double marginality." As a Jew, he is barred from a rigidly stratified society of Canadian Gentiles and as a Canadian, he is denied acceptance in the Jewish-American mainstream, which he claims is a "veritable Yeshiva." What Richler creates then is a Jewish-Canadian comedy of cultural revenge. The lineage of his characters does not go back to *dos kleine menschele,* the little man of the *shtetl* who cowered before hostile peasants but to the rogues of Isaac Babel's *Odessa Tales,* whose vulgar physicality and bold defiance of the law shocked the fastidious Jews and Gentiles alike. Richler's urban comedy, with its unbuttoned candor, schoolboy

irreverence, and gutter literalness, ridicules the faithful and taunts the squeamish. Uncovering the venal within the venerable, it exposes the earthly fallibility of the seemingly virtuous.

The same bellicose comic vision of Richler's Canadian fiction is found in Israel's popular literature. Gone is the awkward sycophantic smile of diaspora Jews, their use of self-deprecating humor as social lubricant to ease into the closed gentile society. In its place is an aggressive humor, confident of its muscle and vigor, which lashes out at condescension and bigotry. Yet it is also a humor which can laugh at its own pugnacity, as exemplified in the following joke by Israel's most celebrated humorist, Ephraim Kishon: "You are walking down the street and somebody kicks you from behind. 'Excuse me,' he says, 'I thought you were somebody else.' You say, 'Do you have to kick me?' 'Sir,' he says, 'are you telling me whom I am supposed to kick?' "[16] This joke mocks the Israelis' unchecked hostility, their supreme self-confidence, their stubborn resistance to change, their gleeful impudence. Other jokes by stand-up comedians ridicule Israelis' obsessive complaining about austere conditions while over-indulging in costly luxuries. In a skit called the "Expatriates" they take Israeli emigrants to task for their declaration of unswerving loyalty to the country, "promising to return soon—as soon as their three-year-old has graduated from college." This humor thus reflects what Esther Fuchs describes as "the breakdown of the socialist Zionist value system and the growing consciousness of the incongruity between the ideal of the state and its actual reality." Yet this humor, despite its carping criticism, its questioning of suspect values, ultimately is supportive of the state with all its flaws. It enables the state to persevere and survive.

So it is with all of Jewish humor. It has helped the Jewish people to survive, to confront the indifferent, often hostile universe, to endure the painful ambiguities of life and to retain a sense of internal power despite their external impotence. The following anecdote illustrates the Jews' comic vision which enables them to cope with their impending doom:

> An Englishman, a Frenchman, an American and a Jew are in the midst of a philosophic discussion. The problem is posed how each would act when it became unmistakably clear that they had only a few hours to live. They hypothesize the situation in which a flood inundates the land, there is no means of escape and they are awaiting

the inevitable end. The Englishman speaks first: "I would open my best bottle of port. Sit and enjoy every sip. Think of the life I've lived, the experiences I've had and let the waters come and take me."

The Frenchman says, "I would drink a great Bordeaux, prepare a *coq au vin*, make love and let the waters overwhelm me thus."

The American is next: He would eat, drink, make love, try to improvise a raft and finally swim until his strength gave out, and he drowned, "fighting to the end."

The Jew says: "I would do all you have described and when the water got over my head, I guess I would have to learn how to live underwater."[17]

The Jews refuse to succumb to the dire circumstances. Abandoning the stance of tragic heroism, they create an alternative to an ennobling death. They learn to fashion their own reality. Though they are often gasping for air in their underwater existence, they somehow manage to survive, for humor is their life preserver.

NOTES

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3. Salicia Landmann, "On Jewish Humor," *Jewish Journal of Sociology* (Fall 1962): 204.
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5. Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, trans. James Strachey, in collaboration with Anna Freud (New York: W.W. Norton), pp. 111–112.
6. Spalding, *Encyclopedia of Jewish Humor*, pp. 2–3.
7. Maurice Samuel, *The World of Sholom Aleichem* (New York: Schocken Books, 1943), p. 186.
8. Earl Rovit, "Jewish Humor and American Life," *The American Scholar* 36 (Spring 1967): 240.
9. D. H. Monro, *Argument of Laughter* (South Bend: University of Notre Dame Press, 1963), pp. 45–46.
10. Quoted in Norman Katkov, *The Fabulous Fanny: The Story of Fanny Brice* (New York: Knopf, 1953), p. 205.
11. Mary Livingston Benny, *Jack Benny* (Garden City: Doubleday & Co., 1978), p. 235.

12. Wallace Markfield, "The Yiddishization of American Humor," *Esquire* (October 1965): 114.
13. *Ibid.*
14. John Cohen, ed., *The Essential Lenny Bruce* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1967), pp. 41–42.
15. Philip Roth, *Portnoy's Complaint* (New York: Random House, 1969), p. 39.
16. This joke was told by Kishon at the Fourth International Congress of Humor held in Tel Aviv on June 10–14, 1984.
17. Quoted in Kurt Schlesinger, "Jewish Humor as Jewish Identity," *International Review of Psycho-Analysis* (1979): 6.