

Decoding *Seinfeld*'s Jewishness

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The hit series *Seinfeld* is widely regarded as one of the best situation comedies in the history of American television. During its nine-season run, it climbed the rating charts, reaching the zenith of popularity by the time its finale aired in May 1997. It brought fame and fortune to its cast and writers, who engendered a cultural phenomenon through quirky characters, deceptively simple storylines, and an endless spate of "Seinfeldisms"—stock phrases that found their way into the daily discourse of millions of viewers. Television critics and scholars also recognize the show to have been a watershed in the depiction of Jewishness in situation comedies. Before the 1980s, Jewish characters were few and far between, but following *Seinfeld*'s success, they began to surface on every network. Although Jewish executives, producers, and writers had always been the driving force behind network television, the "Jewish sitcom" was a new phenomenon.

Yet the nature and extent of *Seinfeld*'s Jewishness remains subject to debate, so much so that William Novak and Moshe Waldoks, the editors of the canonical *Big Book of Jewish Humor*, concede that "the precise relationship of *Seinfeld* to Jewish humor is a complicated question that we are happy to avoid," though "neither the quality of the product nor its Jewish flavor have ever been in doubt."¹ Indeed, there is little that is overtly Jewish about *Seinfeld*. Of the four principal characters, Jerry, George, Elaine, and Kramer, all of whom are thirty-something single New Yorkers, Jerry Seinfeld is the only one explicitly identified as Jewish; moreover, this does not occur until the 74th episode and only recurs on four occasions in the one hundred episodes that followed. A mere six episodes have what might be called "Jewish plotlines," including a bris, a bar mitzvah, a Jewish singles night, and a dentist who converts to Judaism in order to tell Jewish jokes.

The paucity of Jews, Judaism, and Jewish stories on *Seinfeld* coupled with the show's patently "Jewish flavor" has not gone unnoticed. Consider the title of Jon Stratton's essay, "Seinfeld is a Jewish Show, Isn't It?" or Rosalin Krieger's "'Does He Actually Say the Word Jewish?'" or David Zurawik's apt description of *Seinfeld* as "a too Jewish/not Jewish enough Jew for the '90s."² This paradox may explain how the *Washington Post*'s TV critic, Tom Shales, could slam *Seinfeld* as "too self-hatingly Jewish," while Abraham Foxman, the National Director of the Anti-Defamation League, called the show "human" and "universal," with characters who

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wear Jewishness "comfortably on their sleeves."¹³ Brandon Tartikoff, the president of NBC, had in fact nearly vetoed the show because he viewed the 1989 pilot episode as "too New York Jewish."¹⁴ But *Seinfeld* was granted a stay of execution thanks to another NBC executive, Rick Ludwin, neither a New Yorker nor a Jew, who liked the show, as it struck a chord with him.⁵

Seinfeld is a situation comedy infused with what may be called implicit Jewishness. It tacitly alludes to Jewishness at multiple levels and in a sophisticated manner: through comic strategy, narrative techniques, linguistic inflections, and dialogue whose immediate origins stem from Yiddish culture but extend further back into the talmudic discourse that had framed normative Judaism for centuries; through Jewish stereotypes, rooted in physical markers, gestures, movements, and behavior; and through the selective use of explicitly Jewish characters, plotlines, and vocabulary on a few but carefully chosen occasions. To borrow Henry Bial's term, *Seinfeld* is "double coded," written and performed in a way that could be read as Jewish by those who recognize the signposts and idioms.⁶

Seinfeld's creators did not invent implicit Jewishness. Rather, they inherited a blueprint that had shaped American Jewish entertainment, techniques that had gestated on New York's Lower East Side, and then reached maturity in theater, film, television, and stand-up comedy. The encryption of Jewishness was a necessary strategy at these sites of cultural production, even though these sites came to be dominated by Jews, the former pariahs of Christendom, who after centuries of legal exclusion could now enjoy mobility and success through the creative professions. Jewish hegemony in 20th-century American entertainment meant unprecedented visibility among a public that was ethnically diverse but still nominally governed by white Anglo-Saxon Protestant values. What materialized was an ideology of subdued Jewishness, one that stigmatized anything that appeared to be "too Jewish" but simultaneously sought to harness the vast output of creativity and talent these new arrivals brought to the table. Much had changed by *Seinfeld*'s time, with the preceding decades having witnessed a veritable explosion of Jewish films, novels, and comedians. But the centralized oligarchic television industry clung to an ethos of "write Yiddish, cast British."⁷ The executives demanded "Jewish flavor" without any Jews.

As the first successful Jewish sitcom since the cancellation of *The Goldbergs* in 1956, *Seinfeld* marked an important transition. On the one hand, the series represents the apogee of implicit Jewishness, the culmination of a century of surreptitiously injecting *yiddishkeit* into popular entertainment. On the other hand, *Seinfeld*'s unexpected success eliminated the "too Jewish" barrier from network television; it brought the revolution in Jewish visibility into prime time, the last bastion of cultural puritanism in America.

Until the 1920s, the public performance of Jewishness had flourished in America's ethnic minorities (often by other ethnic minorities) where crude portrayals of vaudeville they entered film, which in its early years continued the practices of vaudeville. But the end of the 1920s marked the onset of what Irving Howe famously called "de-Semitzation" and what other scholars have called "whitening."⁹ There were several factors behind this shift, including the rise of nativism, the fear of an

antisemitic backlash against the disproportionate presence of Jews in Hollywood, and self-censorship by the Jewish executives who ran the motion picture business. Some of these "Hollywood Jews," writes Neal Gabler, claimed that "no one else wanted to see a movie about a Jew," while others contended that they "didn't want to ruffle the goyim."¹⁰

With a few notable exceptions, the visible Jew did not return to the American scene until the late 1950s, when, as Patricia Erens puts it, a veritable era of philosemitism began: in literature, with Saul Bellow and Phillip Roth; in stand-up comedy, epitomized by Lenny Bruce; and a decade later in film, exemplified by Woody Allen.¹¹ Enjoying national acclaim, these artists had no qualms about being too Jewish: through the manipulation of stereotypes, through the unabashed use of Yiddish inflections to pollute Anglo-linguistic respectability, and through direct references to their Jewish heritage as a source of discomfort within white Christian America. They were iconoclasts, often branded as self-hating Jews who aired their dirty Jewish laundry in public. But they were immensely popular and they were funny.¹² They signified a turning point in American Jewish humor, bringing to national audiences the trick that had been confined to exclusively Jewish milieus such as the Borscht Belt.

Not so with television, where Jewish executives continued to employ self-censorship and act as the gatekeepers of televised ethnicity.¹³ To be sure, TV operated under certain unique constraints: it was a centralized industry monopolized by three networks; a medium that had to be family-friendly because it pervaded nearly every American living room; and there was a continual need to appease advertisers.¹⁴ Yet it is striking how Jewish sitcoms remained all but nonexistent into the 1970s, even after *All in the Family* shattered the erstwhile ethos of conformity that had kept race, sexuality, violence, and politics out of prime-time comedy.¹⁵ Although ethnic sitcoms subsequently saturated television, and several featured recurring Jewish characters, network executives still contended that nobody wanted to watch "people from New York, men with mustaches, and Jews."¹⁶

At the same time, de-Semitzation did not imply invisibility. Throughout the years of constrained ethnic comedy, Jewish writers, actors, and musicians embedded markers of Jewishness into their work. The Marx Brothers were adept at using what anthropologists call "ethnic signaling,"¹⁷ semi-concealed nods to Jewish audiences, such as this memorable scene in the 1929 film *The Cocoanuts*:

Groucho: Now all along here—this is the riverfront—those are levees.

Chico: That's a Jewish neighborhood.

Groucho: Well, we'll passover that...

Encrypting Jewishness also occurred through the playful use of stereotype. Groucho often starred as an inveterate schemer who ensnared others into his machinations through imposture. Elaborate scams were also the hallmark of *Seinfeld* (CBS, head of a motor pool on an army base in Kansas on *The Phil Silvers Show* (CBS, 1955–1959), who commanded his troops through a philosophy of shirking duty and the fraudulent acquisition of wealth.¹⁹ Jack Benny was famous for his cheapness, but he also exuded effeminacy, wore glasses, and played the violin, which are Jewish stereotypes of European origin.²⁰ Although such traits were often the fodder of

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antisemites, the de-judaized Jewish comic clandestinely exploited them, communicating, as Henry Bial puts it, "one message to Jewish audiences while simultaneously communicating another, often contradictory message to gentile audiences."²¹

Encrypted Jewishness was primarily achieved through language, as Judaism is a textually grounded and linguistically driven religion. Groucho's debates with himself over the infinite possible outcomes of an imagined scenario evoke talmudic *pilpul* (sophistry), but also bear the imprint of Tevye's unidirectional conversations with God—monologues filled with second-guessing, objection, and resignation. Allan Sherman's musical parodies may be devoid of Yiddish words, but convey Yiddish through syntax ("Sarah Jackman, how's by you?").²² Bilko's machinations habitually follow the narrative of the classic Jewish kvetch: the expression of entitlement through complaint, argument, and justification. His tendency to gesticulate when speaking with his heavy New York accent marks him as an outsider, but one who, like the Marx Brothers, dexterously inveigles his way into white Christian America, only to subvert its hierarchical social order.

By the 1970s, encrypting Jewishness had become a sophisticated practice on television, particularly once the elimination of *some* taboos had expanded the boundaries of the permissible. The writers of *All in the Family* used Jewish characters on few occasions, but nonetheless encoded Jewish discourse within their scripts. A case in point is the third episode, in which the prejudiced Archie Bunker, after being in a car accident, solicits the services of a Jewish law firm, having bought into the myth of the shrewd Jewish attorney.²³ When the lawyer arrives and asks the ostensibly injured Bunker if he is comfortable, Bunker replies, "I make a living." Taking this as a joke, the lawyer laughs hysterically. But the joke is on Bunker, since the law firm of Rabinowitz, Rabinowitz, and Rabinowitz has sent over their "token goy," having assumed that Bunker would not want a Jew in his home. Although this episode playfully deals with antisemitism, its Jewish flavor is rooted in dialogue, not plot, for when Bunker responds to the lawyer's query with "I make a living," he is unwittingly telling a classic Yiddish joke.²⁴ The incident makes for an ironic twist because it is two non-Jewish New Yorkers—one a confirmed antisemite—who are "speaking Jewish." Perhaps Bunker's encoded *yiddishkeit* signifies what Lenny Bruce had in mind when he quipped that anyone who lives in New York is Jewish by definition.²⁵ Although he was describing the fluid ethno-cultural boundaries of the post-Second World War era, Bruce was also debunking the myth of the invisible Jew in American culture: Jewishness was discernible, if you possessed the tools to decode it.

Brandon Tartikoff possessed these tools and he knew their history, which explains his dismissive "too New York Jewish" assessment of *Seinfeld*. And like Lenny Bruce, Tartikoff also knew that "too New York" in itself meant "too Jewish." In 1989, when "too Jewish" as dogma and encrypted Jewishness as strategy were still entrenched in network television, Jerry Seinfeld and Larry David were on the brink of co-creating a sitcom destined to be a defining moment in American entertainment and the history of Jewish humor. They did so by perfecting a formula for implicit Jewishness that was built upon the complex interlacing of language, ritual, and stereotype that stemmed from the history and culture of Ashkenazi Jewry.

Implicit Jewishness on *Seinfeld* emerges most noticeably through physical, behavioral, and familial stereotypes that are often found in antisemitic discourse and in the

satirical work of allegedly self-hating Jews such as Philip Roth and Woody Allen. Although Jerry Seinfeld and his family—the only principal characters defined on occasion as Jews—display some of these stereotypes, they are far more developed in Jerry's best friend, George Costanza, and his parents, Frank and Estelle. TV critics have noted George's seeming Jewishness; the decision to give him an Italian family name was likely the product of the persistent self-censoring of "too Jewish" among the Tartikoffs of network television. And, as Vincent Brook argues, "for media watchdog groups concerned over offensive Jewish portrayals, George's miserly misanthropy becomes tolerable" once he is portrayed as ostensibly Italian.²⁶ In similar fashion, Abraham Foxman could refer to *Seinfeld's* Jews as comfortable, because the Jew who radiated perpetual discomfort claimed an Italian pedigree.

And yet David and Seinfeld undoubtedly envisioned George as Jewish, basing the character on David himself.²⁷ Although Jason Alexander initially played George as if he were Woody Allen, Alexander maintains that he gave little thought to George's background "until they cast his parents. . . . Estelle Harris played George's mother. And she can't be anything but Jewish. So I thought his folks must have had a mixed marriage."²⁸ Estelle Costanza's ethnicity is never mentioned, but her refusal to buy a Mercedes because "I won't ride in a German car," is in all likelihood an allusion to a post-Holocaust revulsion against German products.²⁹ Jerry Stiller, the Jewish actor who plays Frank Costanza, once told a reporter that "we're a Jewish family in the Witness Protection Program under the name Costanza."³⁰

There is more than humor behind Stiller's quip: Hollywood had a history of using the Italian as a stand-in ethnic for the unwelcome Jew. Chico Marx often played a generic immigrant with an Italian accent. Frank Capra's *A Hole in the Head* (1959) featured the Manettas, though the title was a literal translation of the Yiddish expression "a lokh in kop" and Arnold Schulman had adapted his script from his Broadway play about a Jewish family.³¹ On *Happy Days*, Arthur "Fonzie" Fonzarelli, the iconic sitcom rebel of the 1970s, was presumably Italian, yet he had been raised by his Grandma Nussbaum. And on *The Golden Girls*, Dorothy and Sophia Petrillo (played by Bea Arthur and Estelle Getty, both Jewish actors), spoke with a discernible New York Jewish inflection. "The Irish and Italian Catholics," Patricia Erens argues, were minorities that "counter the dominant WASP image" yet, as Christian, were more acceptable on screen than Jews.³² Italians migrated to the United States during the same era as East European Jewry, and both groups were labeled as "inbetweens" and "conditionally white" for their purported lack of Anglo-Saxon civility.³³ They were interchangeable in Hollywood's climate of constrained ethnicity.

But the limits of ethnic interchangeability are revealed with George Costanza, who embodies the stereotyped misery, misfortune, and anxiety historically imputed to East European Jewry, a shlimazel who succeeds best at failing. He oozes Jewish affliction, believing he was destined for such a fate yet paradoxically professing an entitlement to more. "Why did it all turn out like this for me? I had so much promise,"³⁴ he kvetches to Jerry, bewildered that his best (Jewish) friend could be so satisfied:

George: There's gotta be more to life than this. What gives you pleasure?
Jerry: Listening to you. I listen to this for fifteen minutes and I'm on top of the world. Your misery is my pleasure.³⁵

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George represents the Ashkenazi Jew in exile, confirming the Jewish proverb that reprimands God for having "chosen us from among the nations—what, O Lord, did you have against us?" ("atah behartanu mikol ha'amim—vos hostu zikh ongezetst oyf undz?").³⁶

George's misery is inscribed on his body through stereotypes rooted in antisemitic discourse that are European in origin but surface as humor in post-Second World War America. The Jewish body, argues Sander Gilman, is culturally constructed as the sickly antithesis of the healthy Gentile body; it exudes a pathological effeminacy engendered by circumcision, the "symbolic substitution of castration."³⁷ The damaged penis, writes Nathan Abrams, came to represent the Jewish "nub of suffering,"³⁸ allegedly provoking insatiable sexual perversions and mental disorders generally associated with women, such as hysteria and neurosis.³⁹ Jewish writers also adopted the trope of Jewish pathology, though they often added touches of irony to capture the agonies of assimilation. For Heinrich Heine, there was "no healing for this sickness"; it was "the Jewish sickness of the centuries."⁴⁰ For Philip Roth, it served as the raw material for *Portnoy's Complaint*, whose hypersexual protagonist incessantly masturbates yet suffers from impotence, living in perpetual fear of genital disease and feminization. "What if breasts began to grow on me," Portnoy agonizes, "what if my penis went dry and brittle, and . . . snapped off in my hand? Was I being transformed into a girl?"⁴¹ Roth and his comedic successors established the damaged Jew as an American cultural archetype, with George Costanza emerging as the most perfectly realized damaged Jew in the history of network television; he suffers from Heine's incurable "Jewish sickness," in every-thing but name.

George's effeminacy and dysfunctional sexuality are recurring themes on *Seinfeld*. In one episode, a group of kids call him "Mary" for leaping over a puddle like a ballerina; in "The Outing," he expresses concern to a journalist recording their conversation because his voice "always sounds so high and whiny" on tape; in "The Hamptons," George is mocked when seen naked after swimming because the cold water caused "significant shrinkage," thus exposing his symbolic castration; and in "The Doorman," George discovers his father's large breasts and fears he has inherited "the bosom gene."⁴² His dread of sexual inadequacy is often revealed through a discourse of catastrophe:

George: I don't like when a woman says, "make love to me," it's intimidating. The last time a woman said that to me, I wound up apologizing to her.
Jerry: Really?
George: That's a lot of pressure. Make love to me. What am I, in the circus? What if I can't deliver?⁴³

George's sexual pathology manifests itself in an imagined state of infirmity and sterility. Upon learning that he may have accidentally impregnated a woman, he responds with elation: "I did it! My boys can swim!"⁴⁴ For George, triumphing over sexual dysfunction is far more important than the burden of unexpected fatherhood. George exhibits other well-known Jewish stereotypes, including cheapness, which Jack Benny earlier used to great effect. When he suspects his girlfriend is bulimic, George sees it solely in financial terms:

Elaine: So you're concerned.
George: Elaine, of course I'm concerned. I'm payin' for those meals. It's like throwing money down the toilet.
Jerry: In a manner of speaking.
George: Let me digest it. Let me get my money's worth.⁴⁵

But George's cheapness is rooted in principle rather than stinginess, and he justifies it through flawed logic and genetics:

George: I can't park in a garage.
Elaine: Why?
George: I don't know, I just can't. Nobody in my family can pay for parking, it's a sickness. My father never paid for parking; my mother, my brother, nobody. We can't do it.
Elaine: I'll pay for it.
George: You don't understand. A garage. I can't even pull in there. It's like going to a prostitute. Why should I pay, when if I apply myself, maybe I could get it for free?⁴⁶

The family has been a theme in Jewish humor at least since the 19th century, when the Jewish mother emerged as an iconic figure who smothers and manipulates her children. According to Joyce Antler, the late 1950s marked a transition in the Jewish mother's depiction. Humorists began to project their own postwar anxieties over assimilation and loyalty to tradition onto her, constructing a fierce matriarch who "pushed and prodded her offspring to succeed but relegated them to a clinging dependency."⁴⁷ On *Seinfeld*, both Jerry's and George's parents bear familial markers of Jewishness, though George suffers from his mother's damaging influence far more than Jerry. Perhaps this is because Jerry's parents retired to Florida, whereas George's stayed in Queens. "You have no idea how your life is gonna improve," Jerry tells George when the Costanzas consider moving south, "food tastes better, the air seems fresher, you'll have more energy and self-confidence than you ever dreamed of."⁴⁸ Or perhaps it is because George's unemployment forces him to move in with his parents, who even ground him for having had sex in their bed. Or perhaps it is because in rendering the Costanzas nominally Italian, *Seinfeld's* writers enjoyed greater license in marking George as an implicit Jew with suffocating parents, whose home movies include a tour of a highway restroom where they change a seven-year-old George on camera.

Estelle Costanza's Jewishness is captured through her simultaneous adulation and denigration of George: the Jewish son is imagined as a perfect being, but the real son can never live up to her expectation. Her reaction to George's engagement to the WASPish Susan Ross is a case in point:

George: Ma—guess what!
Estelle: Oh, my god!
George: No, it's nothing bad. I'm getting married.
Estelle: You're what?
George: I'm getting married! . . .
Estelle: Frank . . . Georgie's getting married. . .

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Frank: To a woman?
Estelle: Of course, a woman. . . . Let me talk to her . . .
Susan: I just want you to know that I love your son very much.
Estelle: Really? [...] May I ask why?

Does Estelle's "may I ask why" imply suspicion that no woman is good enough for her precious Georgie? Or is she baffled that anyone would marry her idiot son, whom she forces into therapy "so that someday," muses George, "I might be able to walk up to a woman and say, 'yes, I'm bald, but I'm still a good person' "749

There is no escape from the Jewish mother, neither through psychotherapy nor through flight into the arms of a *shiksa*. Alexander Portnoy knows this. And Woody Allen's protagonist in "Oedipus Wrecks" discovers this when his mother, Sadie Millstein, ends up surrealistically hovering in the sky, where she continues to badger her son over trivialities in front of a million Manhattanites.⁵⁰ George discovers this, too, when his fiancé moves her doll collection into his apartment, including one that strikingly resembles his mother. Like the colossal Sadie Millstein, the miniaturized Estelle compounds George's neuroses, rebuking him (in his own mind) in public for his poor eating manners and clothing. "I almost threw it down the incinerator, but I couldn't do it," George admits to Jerry, because "the guilt was too overwhelming." George's hesitancy is not the shame of committing surrogate matricide, but is rather due to Susan's intense attachment to the doll, which she even brings into their bed. When Susan attempts intimacy, George crumbles.

Alexander Portnoy's obsessive masturbation is his refuge from his mother, and perhaps as a nod to Philip Roth, George's mother makes her first appearance on *Seinfeld* in a celebrated episode about a masturbation contest, when Estelle catches George "treating his body like it was an amusement park," as she colorfully puts it.⁵¹ But whereas Portnoy's auto-erotic compulsions engender a fear of disease, Estelle's shocking encounter with her exposed son causes her to collapse and lands her in the hospital. Both instances imply a fundamental link between sexual deviance, the smothering mother, and disability. They suffer from Heine's "Jewish sickness," a disorder rooted in their common pedigree.

Portnoy's *Complaint* begat *Seinfeld*, and the child inherited the parent's Jewish afflictions: a damaged body, sexual dysfunction, and neurosis. But unlike Philip Roth, *Seinfeld*'s writers encoded their heritage, purging explicit Judaic content from the structure of Jewish performance and discourse. And to achieve this they needed to harness Jewish humor's greatest asset: the linguistically driven culture imported from Eastern Europe.

Although the assimilation of any minority group rarely results in the complete disappearance of its language, the fate of Yiddish was distinct for several reasons. As a dispersed people who needed to communicate with their Christian neighbors while simultaneously practicing a theology rooted in ancestral Semitic tongues, Europe's Jews lived in a linguistically fluid environment. With its Germanic foundations and absorptive vocabulary, Yiddish embodied flexibility; it connected the sacred to the profane, the yeshiva to the marketplace. "There was a direct flow of expressions and discourse patterns and gestures between the two domains of life, study and home,"

writes Benjamin Harshav.⁵² Yiddish was not merely a language; it was a porous yet resilient cultural container that facilitated the survival of a stateless people. Such linguistic plasticity also explains why the Jews were exceptionally skilled in adopting local languages on their own terms. European Gentiles viewed this phenomenon with anxiety, and they questioned the sincerity of their formerly heretical neighbors' assimilation into modernity. Language emerged as a symbol of treachery; as Sander Gilman argues, antisemites accused the Jews of sounding "too Jewish" and, paradoxically, of speaking a "hidden language."⁵³ Whether overt or disguised, "the informed listener hears the Jew hidden within."⁵⁴

Speaking Jewish was conceptually nebulous, elastic in practice, and replete with historical baggage. The ability to traverse linguistic boundaries with ease (and on the sly) translated into cultural currency, particularly for Jews entering the relatively open creative professions. Observers noted the permeation of Yiddish into American English as early as the 1940s, which occurred through structure and style, not just vocabulary: through reduplication ("fancy-shmancy"), syntactical borrowings ("I should worry"), and literal translations of common expressions ("I need it like a hole in the head").⁵⁵ "So much Yiddish is finding its way into TV usage at the very time when the tongue itself is losing ground," wrote Lillian Feinsilver in 1957.⁵⁶ Fifty years later, Jeffrey Shandler elaborated: "the atomization of Yiddish has also expanded the potential for reconceptualizing it as a semiotic system, in which its signifiers might be inflections, melodies, gestures, or objects," such that "Yiddish culture does not require Yiddish fluency or, for that matter, any use of Yiddish at all."⁵⁷

Indeed, dialogue on *Seinfeld* is replete with Yiddishisms despite the almost complete absence of Yiddish words. In one episode, Jerry's mother berates her son for not asking out a waitress, declaring that "I should drop dead if she's not beautiful."⁵⁸ The statement, morphologically Yiddish, is actually one of the more transparent Yiddishisms. More often, these surface in the form of interjections and calques, including "enough with the . . .", "what's with . . .", "again with . . .", and the use of "already" at the end of a sentence:

Elaine's friend:

Elaine. Move to Long Island and have a baby already.

Jerry's mother:

Enough with the comedy.

George:

Enough with the bar already.

Jerry:

What's with the eyebrows?

George:

What's with this Russell?

Jerry:

Again with the sweatpants?

Frank Costanza:

Again with the pepper?

Jerry's Uncle Leo:

Ma, again with the ketchup?

Japanese businessman

[in Japanese with English subtitle]:

Again with the oranges.

Enzo the Barber:

Oh-fah, again wid-a Edward-a-Scissorhand. How can you have a hand-a-like-a scissor, eh? Show me one-a person who's got a hand-a like-a scissor!⁵⁹

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Jewish speech is often characterized as brash and argumentative, a stereotype reflected in a 19th-century Yiddish proverb, "God protect us from Gentile hands and Jewish tongues" ("Got zol op'hitn fun goyishe hent un yidishe reydn"),⁶⁰ and given weight through the work of 20th-century American linguists.⁶¹ Deborah Schiffirin demonstrates that Jewish families tend to converse through debate and disagreement, regardless of the subject and its gravity. She concludes that "Jewish speakers use argument as a vehicle for sociability," and what appears to be fighting is in reality "the tolerance of conflict... made possible by the take-for-granted level of intimacy of the relationship."⁶² Deborah Tannen similarly infers that the stereotyped "pushy New York Jew" is merely conversing through a tenacious and diffuse convention brought from Eastern Europe and then absorbed by non-Jewish New Yorkers.⁶³ To be from New York is to be Jewish, and to be Jewish is to converse through argument.

Speaking Jewish on *Seinfeld* is rooted in the way discourse is structured, the way interjections and intonation bind seemingly abrasive dialogue through ironic repetition, the inversion of statements into questions, and the insertion of Jewish stereotypes that suggest intimacy. When Jerry and Elaine visit Jerry's parents, Morty and Helen, in Florida, squabbling immediately ensues:

- Morty: So, what took you so long?
Jerry: We waited thirty-five minutes in the rent-a-car place.
Helen: I don't know why you had to rent a car. We would have picked you up.
Jerry: What's the difference?
Helen: You could have used our car.
Jerry: I don't wanna use your car.
Helen: What's wrong with our car?
Jerry: Nothing, it's a fine car. What if you wanna use it?
Helen: We don't use it.
Morty: What are you talking? We use it.
Helen: If you were using it, we wouldn't use it.
Jerry: So what would you do, you'd hitch?
Helen: How much is a rent-a-car?
Jerry: I don't know, twenty-five bucks a day.
Helen: What? Oh, you're crazy....
Jerry: God it's so hot in here. Why don't you put on the air conditioning?
Helen: You don't need the air conditioner.... Where are you going with those?
Jerry: I'm gonna put Elaine's stuff in here.
Helen: Don't sleep in there. You can use the bedroom.
Elaine: I can't take your bedroom.
Helen: I'm up at 6 o'clock in the morning.
Elaine: I can't kick you out of your bed.
Helen: We don't even sleep.
Jerry: Ma!

Jarrod Tanny

Decoding *Seinfeld's* Jewishness

- Helen: But this is a sofa bed, you'll be uncomfortable.
Jerry [to Morty]: What about you?
Morty: Why should I be comfortable?
Jerry [to Helen]: What about him?
Helen: Don't worry, he's comfortable.
Morty: I'll sleep standing up. I'll be fine.

Helen smothers Jerry, infantilizing him through argument. She imposes her conception of "comfort" onto him by ostentatiously sacrificing her own welfare and by claiming she knows what is best for everybody. But her words produce discomfort, revealed by Morty's ironic interruptions, and the passing reference to an "unnecessary" air conditioner despite the oppressive humidity. The Jewish boy is asphyxiated by his mother's linguistic domination and the stifling heat of a condominium complex filled with (implicitly) Jewish retirees.⁶⁴

Seinfeld's writers were hardly the first to construct comedic Jewish discourse through argument. One can find it, for instance, in the writings of Sholem Aleichem, Israel Zangwill, and Philip Roth. It was also a strategy used to mark certain characters as implicit Jews during the era of "de-Semitized" television. On the sitcom *Bewitched* (ABC, 1964–1972), the protagonists live across the street from a couple named the Kravitzes, a hysterical wife whose constant badgering of her husband provokes him to respond with insults characteristic of Borscht Belt humor:

- Gladys: Abner, a wonderful thing has happened, guess what I've got!
Abner: Heartburn....
Gladys: Extrasensory perception... I was over at the Stephens' house, now I know it's hard to believe, Abner, but I moved all their pictures on their wall, without even touching them.
Abner: You moved their pictures, huh? Over here I'd be glad if you just dusted the pictures.
Gladys: You don't believe me do you?
Abner: When is this all gonna stop? When? When am I gonna have peace? The last time it was yoga, before that it was karate... to protect yourself from strangers. To tell the truth I wish you'd go out some night and meet a stranger.⁶⁵

On a sitcom set in tranquil suburbia devoid of explicit Jews, the intermittent appearance of the Kravitzes fundamentally ruptures the narrative structure of *Bewitched* with Jewish discourse. On *Seinfeld*, in contrast, argument does not break the narrative flow, because each episode unfolds through a chain of disputation.

Sociable argument on *Seinfeld* is not merely normative; it is the rule of engagement, and the violation of this code signifies a breach of the show's linguistic structure. Yet the boundaries of Jewish-speak are sufficiently elastic and nebulous to accommodate such ruptures, and they usually provoke an analysis of the dispute itself, at the "metacommunicative level," as Deborah Schiffirin puts it.⁶⁶ In "The Postponement," George questions his engagement to Susan after she refuses to discuss toilet stalls:

- George: I will never understand the bathrooms in this country. Why is it that the doors on the stalls do not come all the way down to the floor?
- Susan: Well, maybe so you can see if there's someone in there.
- George: Isn't that why we have locks on the doors?
- Susan: Well, as a backup system, in case the lock is broken, you can see if it's taken.
- George: A backup system? We're designing bathroom doors with our legs exposed in anticipation of the locks not working? That's not a system. That's a complete breakdown of the system.
- Susan: Can we change the subject, please?
- George: Why? What's wrong with the subject? This is a bad subject?
- Susan: No, fine. If you wanna keep talking about it, we'll talk about it.
- George: It's not that I want to keep talking about it, I just think that the subject should resolve itself based on its own momentum.
- Susan: Well, I didn't think that it had any momentum.
- George [to himself]: How am I gonna do this? I'm engaged to this woman? She doesn't even like me. Change the subject? Toilets were the subject. We don't even share the same interests.

Although Susan does not share George's (well-documented) obsession with toilets, his anxiety is the product of her ostensible unwillingness to "speak *Seinfeld*," her attempt to rupture the flow of sociable argument. She—not George—is the one who is trapped, because her response spawns a debate about the nature of debate, which resurfaces later when George relates the conversation to Jerry:

- George: This is what she said to me, "Can we change the subject?"
- Jerry: See, now that I don't care for.
- George: Right. I mean, we're on a subject. Why does it have to be changed?
- Jerry: It should resolve of its own volition.
- George: That's exactly what I said, except I used the word "momentum."
- Jerry: Momentum—same thing.
- George: Same thing.⁶⁷

Perhaps Susan's unwillingness to engage in "speaking *Seinfeld*" stems from her being a *shiksa*. Her aversion is shared by another *shiksa*, Elaine, who declares: "I can't spend the rest of my life coming into this stinking apartment every ten minutes to pore over the excruciating minutiae of every single daily event."⁶⁸ Yet this is New York, where even the *shiksas* speak Jewish—even if they claim otherwise—and Elaine continues to participate in the ritualized debates that earned *Seinfeld* its reputation as "a show about nothing." One hundred and seventy-six episodes of analysis, argument, and seeming indecision. One hundred and seventy-six episodes of talmudic discourse. It has long been recognized that an important relationship between the Talmud and Jewish humor exists, though the precise connection—in true talmudic spirit—

is subject to debate.⁶⁹ To modern eyes, the Talmud misleadingly appears funny because of its meandering discussions over seeming trivialities, digressions, and the lack of firm conclusions. The "hairsplitting" so often imputed to the Talmud has been a subject of ridicule since the Haskalah, coming to represent one of the sources of European Jewry's backwardness and sickly diasporic condition.⁷⁰ Humorists, however, have been exploiting the talmudic form for centuries, mimicking its disputational structure and ascribing comical dialogue to its sages, perhaps most notably with the 14th-century *Tractate Purim* (Masekhet Purim), and more recently with Gerson Rosenzweig's *Talmud Yankee*, a satire of life in America.⁷¹ The fact that talmudic discourse served both as an object of ridicule and as a rhetorical device to engage in ridicule underscores its all-encompassing role in framing Jewish culture. What began as halakhic debate during the rabbinic era became the portable homeland of diasporic Jewry, trickling down to the masses, particularly in Eastern Europe. There, conversational Yiddish came to reflect the talmudic form, and, as Harshav puts it, "dialogue within dialogue within dialogue was the name of the game."⁷²

The weight of talmudic discourse in normative Judaism led to its penetration into non-halakhic spheres, including philosophy, literary criticism, folklore, and humor.⁷³ Open-ended discussions are the backbone of *Seinfeld*, governing the overarching storylines and the multitude of little debates within each episode: Are there degrees of coincidence? Is it permissible to parallel park headfirst? Is it poor hygiene to "double dip" a chip? How long must you keep a greeting card before you can throw it out? Why does Jerry's new girlfriend wear the same dress on every date?

In the episode titled "The Good Samaritan," the subject of discussion is the question whether it is appropriate to say "God bless you" to a woman who sneezes, if her husband has not said it. George does so, at a dinner engagement, and then inadvertently puts the matter to the test when he follows up his chivalrous gesture with an ill-conceived attempt at humor: pointing to Michael, the sneezer's husband, he notes that "I wasn't gonna say anything, but then I could see that he wasn't gonna open his mouth." Michael explodes with rage; subsequently, Robin, the sneezer in question, decides to have an affair with "Mr. Gesundheit," as Elaine sardonically dubs George.

"The Good Samaritan" appears to be driven by a linear plot, typical of sitcoms, with humorous dialogue having a descriptive function. But it is the dialogue that produces plot; the discursive deconstruction of what may be called "the sneeze event" is the episode's core, and the course of its analysis drives the story forward. The initial sneeze event is followed by an intense debate between Jerry and George over what transpired:

- George: I said "God bless you." Was that so wrong?
- Jerry: The question is, did you allow a space for the husband to come in with his "God bless you"? Because as the husband, he has the right to first refusal . . .
- George: Yes, yes, I definitely waited. But let me say this: Once he passes on that option, that "God bless you" is up for grabs.
- Jerry: No argument. Unless, she's one of these multiple sneezers, and he's holding his "God bless you" in abeyance, until she completes the series.

George: Well, I don't think she is a multiple sneezer, because she sneezed again later, and it was also a single.

George meets Robin for a romantic tryst, but it is the further deconstruction of the sneeze event—not the sex—that defines their encounter:

George: Oh my God. I must be crazy. What have I done?

Robin: Oh no, what's wrong?

George: What's wrong? I'll tell you what's wrong. I just committed adultery.

Robin: You didn't commit adultery, I did.

George: Oh yeah.

Robin: If I didn't do it with you, I would have done it with someone else.

George: Well, I wouldn't want you to do that. You know there's a lot of losers out there.

Robin: Maybe even someone who didn't say "God bless you."

George: Well, that's a given.

Robin: In three years with Michael, not one "God bless you."

George: Must be hell living in that house.⁷⁴

Seinfeld is linguistically driven insofar as the plot is dependent upon debate, which often transpires in a manner reminiscent of *havruta*, the paired adversarial study of Talmud in the yeshiva, "an interactional language game which imposes a set of conversational obligations on its players," as Shoshana Blum-Kulka, Menahem Blondheim, and Gonen Hacohen suggest in their study of talmudic discourse in Israeli media.⁷⁵ The Talmud's rules of engagement shape Jerry and George's daily *havruta*, which in turn produces the direction and delimits the boundaries of plot.

Seinfeld is celebrated as "a show about nothing" for the same reason that the *maskilim* and their successors derided the Talmud: "It consists in eternally disputing about the book, without end or aim," wrote Solomon Maimon in the 18th century.⁷⁶ But talmudic argumentation is in fact a sophisticated tool, developed in the Babylonian academies where intellectual virtuosity was achieved through verbal confrontation, "the violence of debate," as Jeffrey Rubenstein calls it, or, as the sages put it, the "wars of Torah."⁷⁷ Victory is attained by mastering argument, and this dynamic has found its way into Jewish humor just as much as the stereotype of talmudic sophistry. Jewish folklore is filled with tricksters who achieve their sordid ends through linguistic manipulation, among them the *shadkhn*, the shtetl matchmaker skilled in unloading shabby brides, and the *shnorrer*, the Jewish mooch who inveigles others into supporting him.

Seinfeld's characters are masters in manipulating language to attain their goals, justify their behavior, and destroy their adversaries. In one episode George discovers that he is losing a promised apartment to another tenant because the latter is a survivor of the *Andrea Doria* shipwreck. Upon learning that a mere 51 passengers drowned ("Fifty-one people?... That's no tragedy! How many people do you lose on a normal cruise? Thirty? Forty?"), George confronts the survivor, determined to get the apartment he believes is rightfully his:

George: Ahoy! Mr. Eldridge. I understand you were on the *Andrea Doria*.

Eldridge: Yes, it was a terrifying ordeal.

George: I tell ya, I hear people really stuff themselves on those cruise ships. The buffet, that's the real ordeal, huh, Clarence?

Eldridge: We had to abandon ship.

George: Well, all vacations have to end eventually.

Eldridge: The boat sank.

George: According to this [book], it took ten hours. It eased into the water like an old man into a nice warm bath—no offence. So, uh, Clarence, how about abandoning this apartment, and letting me shove off in this beauty?

Eldridge: Is that what this is all about? I don't think I like you.

George: It's my apartment, Eldridge! The *Stockholm* may not have sunk ya, but I will!

George challenges Eldridge's alleged suffering by deploying phrases ("Ahoy," "It eased into the water like an old man") that embed his argument *within* Eldridge's discursive framework; he gains the upper hand by evoking, disparaging, and trivializing Eldridge's narrative through linguistic infiltration and subversion.

Yet there is another side to George's linguistic manipulation, rooted in his own misery. Perceiving himself a victim, George demands restitution:

George: So, he's keeping the apartment. He doesn't deserve it, though! Even if he did suffer, that was, like, forty years ago! What have you done for me lately? I've been suffering for the past thirty years up to and including yesterday!

Jerry: You know, if this tenant board is so impressed with suffering, maybe you should tell them the "astonishing tales of Costanza"?

George: I should!

Jerry: I mean your body of work in this field is unparalleled.

George: I could go bumper to bumper with anyone on this planet!

Accordingly, George presents his case to the tenant board, an extended kvetch about his miserable existence. He reduces them to tears, and a dejected Eldridge realizes he is sunk, much like the boat that failed to sink him four decades earlier.⁷⁸

In professing entitlement through self-denigration, George exhibits the attributes of the *shnorrer*, whom William Novak and Moshe Waldoks define as "a Jewish beggar with *chutzpah*. He does not actually solicit help; he *demand*s it, and considers it his right."⁷⁹ George persistently deploys the *shnorrer*'s discourse of victimhood to achieve ignoble ends, including the advancement of his career. In one episode, George gets a new job because his prospective employer mistakenly thinks he is handicapped:

Jerry: You got the job?

George: Jerry, it's fantastic. I love the people over there. They—they treat me so great. You know they think I'm handicapped, they gave me this incredible office, a great view.

- Jerry: Hold on, they think you're handicapped?
- George: Yeah, yeah, well, because of the cane. You should see the bathroom they gave me!
- Jerry: How can you do this?
- George: Jerry, let's face it, I've always been handicapped. I'm just now getting the recognition for it. Name one thing I have that puts me in a position of advantage. Huh? ...
- Jerry: Do you know how hard it's getting just to tell people I know you?
- George: I love that bathroom. It's got that high, high toilet, I feel like a gargyle perched on the ledge of a building.⁸⁰

George is handicapped because his self-pity is rooted in an imagined state of disability, Heine's "Jewish sickness of the centuries," the disease of exile that damaged the Jew's body and (halakhically) imprisoned his mind. But the diasporic Jew believes himself entitled to more—"restitution," as George so often demands—because he is the chosen one whom God unjustly abandoned to a life of suffering. He expresses this dialectic of chosenness/abandonment (or, in the secular context, entitlement/victimhood) through linguistic manipulation stemming from a theology of ritualized argument. The archetypal *shnorrer* of shtetl folklore is the comical incarnation of the diasporic Jew, and George Costanza is his prime-time American descendent, a Jewish rogue who summons tradition to transcend his exilic condition.

George is an impostor because linguistic deception is his *modus operandi*, and his charlatanism is symbolic of Jerry Seinfeld and Larry David's far greater act of imposture: the unprecedented encryption of Jewishness in an industry where the explicit Jew remained unwelcome. But this, talmudically speaking, raises a question: if they achieved high ratings without explicit Jewishness, why bother producing a handful of episodes that satirize Judaism, risking the ire of executives and the Anti-Defamation League? Indeed, critics responded harshly to a fifth-season episode, "The Bris," for its portrayal of a neurotic and cantankerous *mohel* who slips during the ceremony and "circumcises" Jerry's finger.⁸¹ Events seemed to repeat themselves two seasons later, when a gossipy rabbi violates Elaine's confidence on his weekly television show. The Anti-Defamation League received more than a hundred calls from enraged viewers, far more complaints than NBC ever received over *Seinfeld's* lampooning of masturbation, homosexuality, and the handicapped.⁸² Apparently there was a line of political correctness involving Jews that could not be crossed.

Seinfeld's portrayal of the *mohel* and the rabbi fits within the tradition of Jewish humor; it was just not kosher to subject them to satire on network television. But these were not the only instances of explicit Jewishness on *Seinfeld*. In fact, the few other examples are far more illuminating, insofar as they grapple with important aspects of Jewish identity in 20th-century America. In one episode, Jerry is caught making out with his Orthodox girlfriend in a movie theater during a showing of *Schindler's List*. Although this may strike some as offensive, the episode lends itself to multiple readings. It may be a subtle critique of the sacralization and exploitation of Holocaust memory in America, which, as Peter Novick argues, is "used for the purpose of national self-congratulation... to demonstrate the difference between the Old World and the New, and to celebrate, by showing its negation,

the American way of life."⁸³ Conversely, Jerry's irreverence may be interpreted as a generational indifference to the historic suffering of the Jewish people. In another episode, Elaine attends the bar mitzvah of her former employer's son, who, upon being told that he is "a man today," grabs Elaine and gives her an open-mouth kiss. When she explains to him that he is hardly a man at age 13, he declares his bar mitzvah a sham and "renounces" his Judaism. But Elaine's troubles persist: she receives invitations to more bar mitzvahs and is subjected to sexual advances from numerous Jewish men because, as George explains, "you've got 'shiksappeal.' Jewish men love the idea of meeting a woman that's not like their mother."⁸⁴ Although this episode, like "The Bris," may be interpreted as ridiculing Judaism, it could also be read as a critique of American Jewry's superficial religious practices, which seem to define "Jewish manhood" as an *entitlement* to have sex with non-Jewish women. Both the *Schindler's List* make-out and the bar mitzvah make-out exhibit what Richard Raskin calls "*interpretive margin*,... an openness to alternate ways of understanding the joke, coupled with the possibility of simultaneously holding positive and negative attitudes toward the embodiment of Jewishness in the punch line."⁸⁵

Even more revealing is Jerry's relationship with his own Jewish heritage, mentioned only five times, and all but once indirectly, in an eighth-season episode that explores the murky boundary between ethnic humor and political correctness. After his dentist, Tim Whatley, converts to Judaism and proceeds to make self-deprecating Jewish jokes in public, Jerry becomes distressed, suspecting that "Whatley converted to Judaism just for the jokes." Jerry's distress turns into outrage when Whatley later makes a Catholic joke, which he defends on the grounds that he used to be Catholic. Jerry decides to report Whatley to Father Curtis, Whatley's patient and presumably his former priest. But Jerry's amiable conversation with Curtis leads to disaster after Jerry makes a "dentist joke"; Whatley finds out, and is offended because Jerry is not a dentist and has no business mocking "my people." After the "offensive" joke circulates, Jerry is branded "a rabid anti-dentite." The professional Jewish comedian has crossed the line, while his dentist is on the road to possessing "total joke-telling immunity" through identity fraud. "If he ever gets Polish citizenship," Jerry ruminates, "there'll be no stopping him."

Whatley's quest for the right to offend with impunity cleverly problematizes the use of Jewish humor in America, where identity is more fluid than ascribed, where cultural and denominational boundaries can be negotiated, traversed, and abused with relative ease. But there is another layer to this episode, which is revealed when Jerry visits Father Curtis in his church's confessional. The absurdity of a Jew entering a Catholic confessional to inform on his (Jewish) dentist is underscored by their dialogue:

Father: Tell me your sins, my son.

Jerry: Well, I should mention that I'm Jewish.

Father: Well, that's no sin.

Jerry: Oh good. Anyway, I wanted to talk to you about Dr. Whatley. I have a suspicion that he's converted to Judaism purely for the jokes.

Father: And this offends you as a Jewish person.

Jerry: No, it offends me as a comedian.

But within this absurdity lies its hidden meaning. Jerry's casual banter with Father Curtis belies the centuries of Jewish persecution by the Catholic Church: at least until Vatican II, to be Jewish was not only to sin—it made one complicit in deicide. Both Jerry and Father Curtis exhibit a lack of awareness of Christian antisemitism. Their encounter is double-coded, in that it covertly implies the convoluted history of European antisemitism, the agonies of Jewish integration, and the problematic place of Jewish visibility in American popular culture. It is implied by what is left unsaid on the sole occasion that Jerry says "I'm Jewish."⁸⁶

The 1990s marked a turning point in the representation of Jewishness on television. Between 1992 and 1998 alone, twelve series featuring explicitly Jewish characters premiered, with many more to follow.⁸⁷ The shift was due to several factors, including changing demographics and the rise of independent stations and cable channels, which engendered the decentralization of the hitherto oligarchic television industry.⁸⁸ Even if *Seinfeld's* success was not the immediate cause, the new "Jewish sitcoms," as Vincent Brook argues, bear the influence of the show subsequently labeled as decade-defining: "Jewish sitcoms had become not only 'safe' but also potentially lucrative commodities."⁸⁹

If *Seinfeld* abetted the elimination of the "too Jewish" barrier, it was Larry David who subsequently confirmed that what had transpired on *Seinfeld* was in fact the clever encryption of "too Jewish." Much like *Seinfeld*, David's hit HBO series, *Curb Your Enthusiasm* (which premiered in October 2000), is driven by debate, the violation of ritualized codes of behavior, and linguistic manipulation. Given that David was the creative force behind *Seinfeld* and that David based George Costanza on himself, the affinities should hardly be surprising. Indeed, *Curb*, Naomi Pfefferman writes, pushes "politically correct notions of Jewish identity and race to cringe-worthy and hilarious extremes."⁹⁰ "The Jewishness that is the subtext of much of 'Seinfeld,' maintains Jason Zinoman, "becomes the text of 'Curb.'"⁹¹

A few examples underscore this relationship. Where George feigns disability to succeed, Larry misuses Judaism, even masquerading as an Orthodox Jew to dishonestly secure a kidney for his ailing friend. Both series parody the Holocaust's sanctity, but Jerry's unseemly behavior at *Schindler's List* pales in comparison to the turmoil engendered on *Curb* when a Holocaust survivor quarrels with a contestant from the reality TV show *Survivor* over who suffered more and is thus a genuine "survivor." Where George is humiliated through penile shrinkage, Larry ends up in the emergency room because a dog bites his penis, moments after he had an argument with a friend's wife over "who has less of a Jew-face." Both instances echo Sander Gilman's "symbolic castration," but Larry's painfully ascribed Jewishness is embedded within an explicitly Jewish text.⁹²

On *Seinfeld*, interfaith relationships are dealt with elliptically, as when George considers converting to Latvian Orthodoxy (from what, exactly, is unclear) to please his girlfriend. But *Curb* tackles the issue head on when Larry's Christian sister-in-law

gets engaged to a Jew who is converting for her. Chaos ensues when Larry inadvertently disrupts the baptism, mistaking the ritual dunking in the river for an attempted homicide. The bride-to-be confronts Larry, accusing him of feigning idiocy to mask a hidden Jewish agenda:

Becky: You happy about this, Larry, is this what you had in mind, you dick... what the hell is the matter with you?

Larry: I thought that he was drowning him, OK, I'm sorry.

Becky: Bullshit, you didn't think he was drowning him, you just didn't want him to convert....

Larry: What do I care, I don't care if he converts, what do I care....

Becky: You didn't want to lose a Jew and you know it.

Larry: I don't care if I lose Jews, take 'em all, I don't need 'em.

The Christians are not buying his excuse and neither are the groom's Jewish relatives:

Jewish man: Larry, you don't know me, I'm the schmuck's brother-in-law. What you did is a very gutsy thing... one Jew to another, it's a gutsy thing to come in and step in on something like this.

Jewish woman: A mitzvah for my family, thank you....

Jewish man: You're with us now.

With his denials falling on deaf ears, Larry the shlemiel transforms himself into Larry the Jewish charlatan, embracing his ascribed identity:

Jewish man: The way you told them you'd never seen a baptism before... that was brilliant.

Jewish man: You're a genius, a genius.

Larry: Well, you know I thought something had to be done, really....

Jewish man: Whoever steps up and does something like this?

Larry: I feel good.

Jewish man: Listen, I'd like you to talk at my daughter's bat mitzvah.

Curb confronts the problematic history of Jewish-Christian relations with irony on numerous episodes, treading on terrain that *Seinfeld* could never have approached.⁹³

But the underlying message is the same, which Jerry's casual confession of Judaism to Father Curtis demonstrates: the place of Jewishness in American entertainment can only be understood in its historical context. The bitter legacy of medieval antisemitism coupled with the astonishing success of Jewish acculturation and mobility in the modern era made Jewish visibility in popular culture problematic. Nevertheless, the Jewish upstarts transformed the cultural landscape of their host societies by drawing from the wellspring of their heritage. The linguistic foundations of Judaism and the performative nature of its rituals served as effective tools for infiltrating entertainment and for crafting humor that was ostensibly universal but implicitly Jewish and often subversive. *Seinfeld* is a historical milestone, because the extent of its covertly inscribed *yiddishkeit* was unprecedented, and because its popularity hammered the final nail in the coffin of "too Jewish," a relic from a bygone era of constrained Jewish visibility.

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2. Jon Stratton, "Seinfeld Is a Jewish Sitcom, Isn't It?," in *Seinfeld, Master of Its Domain: Revisiting Television's Greatest Sitcom*, ed. David Lavery with Sara Lewis Dunne (New York: 2006); Rosalin Krieger, "'Does He Actually Say the Word Jewish?'" Jewish Representations in *Prime Time* (Lebanon, N.H.: 2003), 201.
3. Tom Shales, "So Long, 'Seinfeld.' Let Me Show You to the Door," *Washington Post* (16 April 1998); Rebecca Segall and Peter Ephross, "Critics Call Show 'Self-Hating': Was 'Seinfeld' Good for the Jews?," *Jweekly.com* (8 May 1998), www.jweekly.com/article/full/8208/critics-call-show-self-hating-was-seinfeld-good-for-jews/ (accessed 14 December 2014).
4. Quoted in Zurawik, *The Jews of Prime Time*, 204.
5. *Ibid.*
6. Henry Bial, *Acting Jewish: Negotiating Ethnicity on the American Stage and Screen* (Ann Arbor: 2005).
7. Zurawik, *The Jews of Prime Time*, 53–54.
8. Harley Erdman, *Staging the Jew: The Performance of an American Ethnicity, 1860–1920* (New Brunswick: 1997); Lawrence J. Epstein, *The Haunted Smile: The Story of Jewish Comedians in America* (New York: 2001), ch. 2.
9. Irving Howe, *World of Our Fathers: The Journey of East European Jews to America and the Life They Found and Made* (New York: 1976), 567; Patricia Erens, *The Jew in American Cinema* (Bloomington: 1984), 135–138.
10. Neal Gabler, *An Empire of Their Own: How the Jews Invented Hollywood* (New York: 1988), 300.
11. Erens, *The Jew in American Cinema*, 198.
12. Susan A. Glenn, "The Vogue of Jewish Self-Hatred in Post-World War II America," *Jewish Social Studies* 12, no. 3 (Spring–Summer 2006), 95–136.
13. Zurawik, *The Jews of Prime Time*, 5–11.
14. Allan Neuwirth, *They'll Never Put That on the Air: An Oral History of Taboo-Breaking TV Comedy* (New York: 2006), 1; Vincent Brook, *Something Ain't Kosher Here: The Rise of the "Jewish" Sitcom* (New Brunswick: 2003), 47–48.
15. Zurawik, *The Jews of Prime Time*, 78; Brook, *Something Ain't Kosher Here*, 67.
16. Zurawik, *The Jews of Prime Time*, 77.
17. Susan A. Glenn, "'Funny, You Don't Look Jewish': Visual Stereotypes and the Making of Modern Jewish Identity," in *Boundaries of Jewish Identity*, ed. Susan A. Glenn and Naomi B. Sokoloff (Seattle: 2010), 79–80.
18. *The Cocoanuts*, directed by Robert Florey and Joseph Santley (1929).
19. Epstein, *The Haunted Smile*, 147–148.
20. *Ibid.*, 59–60; Maurice Berger, "The Mouse That Never Roars: Jewish Masculinity on American Television," in *Too Jewish? Challenging Traditional Jewish Identities*, ed. Norman L. Kleeblatt (New Brunswick: 1996), 99.
21. Bial, *Acting Jewish*, 3.
22. Allan Sherman, *My Son, The Folk Singer* (1962).
23. *All in the Family*, "Archie's Aching Back" (26 January 1971), CBS Network.
24. There are numerous variations of this joke, including this fairly typical one: Mr. Cohen falls and is laying in the road. A lady gets a pillow from her car and lays it under his head until the ambulance arrives. "Are you comfortable?" she asks. "Ah vell," he says, "I make a living." See "Jewish Humor and Joke Page," *The Jewish Magazine*, www.jewishmag.com/111mag/humor/humor.htm (accessed 22 January 2015).
25. Lenny Bruce, *How to Talk Dirty and Influence People: An Autobiography by Lenny Bruce* (New York: 1992), 5.
26. Brook, *Something Ain't Kosher Here*, 107.

27. "Jason + Larry = George," *Seinfeld: Season 5*, DVD, Disc 1 (2005).
28. "The Conversion: Notes about Nothing," *Seinfeld: Season 5*, Disc 3.
29. *Seinfeld*, "The Money" (16 January 1997), NBC Network.
30. Bruce Fretts, "Cruelly, Madly, Cheaply: The 'Seinfeld' Parents—Jerry Stiller, Estelle Harris, Barney Martin and Liz Sheridan Discuss Their Roles," *EW.com: The Entertainment Weekly* (4 May 1998), www.ew.com/article/1998/05/04/seinfeld-parents (accessed 14 December 2015).
31. Erens, *The Jew in American Cinema*, 229–230.
32. *Ibid.*, 138.
33. David R. Roediger, *Working toward Whiteness: How America's Immigrants Became White: The Strange Journey from Ellis Island to the Suburbs* (New York: 2005), 12; Krieger, "Does He Actually Say the Word Jewish," 394.
34. *Seinfeld*, "The Opposite" (19 May 1994).
35. *Seinfeld*, "The Old Man" (18 February 1993).
36. Shirley Kumove, *Words Like Arrows: A Collection of Yiddish Folk Sayings* (Toronto: 1984), 107.
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