
“Yad Vashem, You So Fine!”

The Place of the Shoah in Contemporary Israeli and American Comedy

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IN THE AFTERMATH OF the Holocaust, survivors in postwar Europe deployed humor as a way to process the recent traumas of the war, to cope with the enormity of the destruction, and to endure the seemingly absurd nature of continued Jewish life after the Holocaust. Humor helped survivors to maintain a sense of psychological advantage and served as an outlet for subversive and cynical observations on the postwar world.¹ After the war, humor directed at non-Jewish audiences often focused on using humor as a weapon, to minimize and belittle Nazis (most famously in the work of Mel Brooks). In recent decades, however, as the place of the Holocaust has grown in contemporary Jewish culture and identity, references to the Holocaust in Jewish humor have grown more frequent, although the function and deployment of such Holocaust humor is substantively different in form and agenda. Rather than deploying humor as a psychological coping mechanism or weapon against Nazis, Holocaust humor has taken on a decidedly more political tone, often used as a means to critique the place of the Holocaust in contemporary Jewish society, politics, and culture.

In this chapter I compare the deployment of Holocaust humor in recent Israeli and American Jewish sketch comedy to assess what humor can teach us about the place of the Holocaust in contemporary Jewish life.² I focus on several examples from Israel and the United States, including *Eretz Nehederet* (Wonderful Country), *HaHamishia HaKamerit* (The Camera Quintet), and *HaYehudim Ba'im* (The Jews Are Coming) in Israel and the work of Larry David, Sarah Silverman, Amy Schumer, and Nathan Fielder in America. Unlike Holocaust humor used as a weapon to attack Nazis and Nazism or humor used to alleviate suffering, these more contemporary

uses of humor often use the Holocaust as a backdrop for jokes precisely to reinforce or emphasize the absurdity of the joke. Most frequently, these jokes use the motif of the Shoah to satirize the current political climate, memorial practices, Holocaust education, and more but also to reflect the prominent place of “remembering the Holocaust” in contemporary American and Israeli Jewish identity. In many ways, Holocaust (sketch) humor has played a similar function in both Israel and the United States: to make fun of the tendencies in both countries to sacralize and, by the same token, to trivialize the Holocaust. Most recently, however, Holocaust-inflected humor in Israel has been deployed to draw attention to abuses of power in Israeli politics and society; on the other hand, in the United States, Holocaust-inflected humor has increasingly drawn attention to the current and mounting powerlessness of American Jews, reflecting a cautionary tale of a different sort.

The Place of the Shoah in Israeli Sketch Comedy

Although comparatively few scholars have examined the place of the Holocaust in contemporary American Jewish humor, Liat Steir-Livny’s recent study, *Is It OK to Laugh About It? Holocaust Humour, Satire, and Parody in Israeli Culture*, argues that in Israel, “a unique post-traumatic society where the trauma of the Holocaust lives as an integral part of the present, Holocaust humour in Hebrew functions as an important defence mechanism that challenges and deconstructs the fear factors.”³ Steir-Livny contends that satirical skits about the Holocaust in Israel do not minimize or trivialize the Shoah but instead simultaneously reinforce the centrality of the Shoah in Israeli society and allow for commentary on the political instrumentalization of the Shoah in Israel. Steir-Livny’s research also crucially points out that in Israel, where widespread Holocaust education has helped a younger generation of Israelis assimilate the Shoah as a central event in the formation of the state, a great familiarity with Holocaust history allows for a more nuanced engagement with aspects of the Jewish past through humor (compared with the United States, where the humor deals with certain symbols of memory or Holocaust icons, but in a more superficial way).

In Israel, where there is a massive use of Holocaust rhetoric by politicians, journalists and educators . . . the Holocaust has been assimilated as a central event, and young Jewish-Israelis perceive the Holocaust as the historical event that has had the greatest impact on them and their future, even more than the founding of the State. Other research has shown that the knowledge the second- and third-generation Holocaust survivors have about the Holocaust in Israel, and the way the Holocaust has shaped their identity is similar to those Israelis of the same age who are not biological offspring of Holocaust survivors. This phenomenon is very different from other places in the world.⁴

Since Menachem Begin's rise to power in 1977, exploitation of the Shoah for political purposes has become commonplace in Israeli life. Under Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's government, the Holocaust is invoked frequently, especially to underscore the threat posed by a potentially nuclear-armed Iran. For example, in his 2012 Yom HaShoah speech at Yad Vashem, Netanyahu invoked memory of the Holocaust as a defense against Iran.

I will continue to tell the truth to the world—but first and foremost, to my nation. The truth is that a nuclear-armed Iran is an existential threat to the State of Israel and also a grave threat to the rest of the world. The memory of the Holocaust is not just a ceremonial matter. The memory of the Holocaust is a practical commandment to learn the lessons of the past in order to guarantee the foundations of the future. We will never bury our heads in the sand. The People of Israel lives and the Eternity of Israel shall not lie.⁵

In Israel, nearly seventy years after the creation of the state, we might ask why the place of the Shoah has assumed more centrality in the national identity of the state as time has passed and distance from the event has grown. Why and how have we come to the place and time where the president of Israel (Rivlin) can state, "All of us, each and every one of us, have

a number tattooed on their arm”?⁶ Why and how has the Shoah become a central component of Israel’s educational curriculum, with trips to Poland a necessary rite of passage for students and Yad Vashem a required visit for all foreign political leaders? Israelis generally do not question the place of the Shoah in contemporary Israeli politics and society, although the centrality of the event in Israeli life, more than seventy-five years after the outbreak of World War II, demands investigation. Does Holocaust humor in Israel indicate that all Israelis are now survivors of the Holocaust, that is, with “a number tattooed on their arm”? And if this is true, what do mentions of the Shoah in American comedy reveal about the place of the Holocaust in American society? How might a comparative analysis of Holocaust humor in Israel and America reveal differences in the ways in which the Holocaust informs the identities of Jews in Israel and America?

HaHamishia HaKamerit

Over the last twenty years, as Liat Steir-Livny argues, sketch comedy in Israel has often focused on satirizing the politicization and trivialization of the Shoah while simultaneously highlighting how the saturation of the Shoah in the public sphere minimizes the meaning of the Shoah and shapes the worldview of Israelis. In the 1990s the sketch comedy show *HaHamishia HaKamerit* (The Camera Quintet) included sketches on all aspects of Israeli society, with occasional references to the Holocaust. Several of these addressed the nature of Israel’s relationship with Germany, such as the skit “Feldermaus at the Olympics,” which included the bumbling Israeli diplomat Feldermaus interceding at a track and field event in Stuttgart in 1995. The sketch makes fun of Jewish athletic ability (or the lack thereof) while appealing to German guilt to allow a Jewish runner to gain some advantage in the race.⁷ After asking the German track and field judge for a competitive advantage for the little Israeli runner “with legs like popsicle sticks” but receiving no assistance, Feldermaus plays the “Holocaust card.”

Haven’t you seen *Schindler*? Haven’t the Jewish people suffered enough? . . .

His mother is in the stadium, after everything she has been through [implies she is a survivor] she has come back to see him compete.

Once the judge agrees to give the Israeli athlete a small head start to lessen the “historical suffering,” the two Israeli diplomats promise to honor the heroism of the judge: “We will take your details and get you a place on the Righteous Persons Boulevard.” The skit does not make light of the Holocaust itself, although it does lampoon the Israeli tendency to make use of memory of the Holocaust, particularly in its relationship with Germany, to secure every competitive advantage. Likewise, the joke about the “Righteous Persons Boulevard” also highlights the degree to which a Holocaust memorial and museum like Yad Vashem can be politicized.⁸

In another skit called “Ghetto,” which jokes about trivialization through street-naming practices in Tel Aviv, two friends talk about how to drive to a party in Tel Aviv.⁹

Are you coming with a car?

Here’s what you have to do: drive on Warsaw Ghetto, make a U-turn on Concentration Camp Boulevard, and park in Dachau Square.

Is it close?

What? Dachau? It’s here, just around the corner.

In making light of Israeli street-naming practices, the sketch also highlights how such practices might trivialize historical places and events and emphasizes the centrality of concentration camps and ghettos in the Israeli collective psyche.

Another *HaHamishia HaKamerit* short sketch called “Schindler,” which is modeled after Claude Lanzmann and *Shoah*, shows two men walking in a field in the distance, speaking French and a pigeon hybrid of Polish and Yiddish. A survivor (played by Rami Heuberger, who also acted in the film *Schindler’s List* as Josef Bau) describes being lined up in formation on a cold night. Suddenly a big black car pulls up: “Afterward they told us it was Schindler.” He describes a lot of shouting.

What happened on that night?

[speaking as if in Polish] I remember it as if it was yesterday.

It was a very cold night, they told everyone to stand in lines.

The ladies, too?

Men, women, all. All around guards, screams of the guards.

And then, what happened then?

Then, he arrived. We saw from far away a black car . . . and HE got out. A very handsome man. Very elegant. Very impressive.

Was that Oskar Schindler?

[Long pause] Afterwards, they told us it was Schindler.

But that night? That night we didn't know. Didn't know anything.

Afterwards?

Afterwards? Lots of shouting. What is this? Like this.

Was it Schindler?

What Schindler? Spielberg. Screaming at us. This was no good. That was no good. Screaming at us to run faster. Do it again. And they returned us to the train cars and told us to start over. It was horrible. Really horrible.

And afterwards? [in French]

Afterwards? They paid us and we went home.

What?

We went home. It was really, really late. But they paid us very, very little.

Spielberg?

He received the Oscar.

The punch line is in fact a commentary on forms of representation and the ease with which the lines can be blurred between genres—documentary, feature film—and who the actual hero of this historical episode actually is—Schindler or Spielberg—with an ironic pun at the end: He won the Oscar!¹⁰ Like the scene in *Seinfeld* where Jerry gets in trouble for “making

out during *Schindler's List*,” the comedians remind us that the representation of the Holocaust is not sacred, but that in sanctifying cinematic representations of the Shoah, we distance ourselves from the actual meaning of the event.

Eretz Nehederet

Even though such satirical representations of the Shoah may have been more biting in the 1990s, since 2000, audiences in Israel and America have grown more comfortable with seeing representations of the Holocaust on film and on television—and just as representations of the Holocaust have been more common, so have jokes and satire that use motifs of the Shoah in popular culture. More recent examples continue this trend, as in the late 2010 sketch “Hope Kindergarten” from *Eretz Nehederet* (A Wonderful Country). That sketch imagines a right-wing kindergarten run by the ultranationalist Im Tirtzu organization, which educates (or indoctrinates) Israeli children with such games as “Who Are They to Preach Us Morals?” reminding the children that European nations such as Italy “helped the Nazis” and that the French had the “Vichy Regime” while Turkey massacred the Armenians and the Kurds and Norway “killed all the salmon.” “What do we tell the world? Don’t preach morals to us! There won’t be another Auschwitz!” In this case both the politicization and the manipulation of the memory of the Holocaust for educational purposes are critiqued, as is the debate over whether or not to start Holocaust education for Israeli youth beginning in kindergarten.¹¹

A 2012 *Eretz Nehederet* sketch makes fun of American Jewish youth on Birthright trips, stereotyping lazy, spoiled American Jews on their tour of Israel while making light of the cynical fundraising aimed at American Jews in a scene reminiscent of Sallah Shabbati planting trees for wealthy American Jewish donors.¹² Riding on the bus, the mostly American Jewish youths reflect on their visit to Masada, which was so emotional, so powerful, and just “awesome!” The tour guide, Ze’ev, asks them to tell their parents that Israel is not what they thought; it is a progressive and developed place (not just camels in the desert). Then he asks for men to sit in the front, women in the back. With “Heveinu Shalom Aleichem” playing in the background, the *madrich* (guide) Ze’ev informs the group:

Here is the schedule for the rest of the day. At 12:00 we will arrive at the Haganah Museum [the tour groups screams and claps in joy; Josh shouts, “Fucking awesome!”], from there we will continue to Hasmonean village to see the olive press [more cheers and applause], and at the end, only if there is time, only if we have time and all goes according to plan [“please, please, please,” says Melissa, the New York Jewish princess], I intend to take you to . . . Yad Vashem Museum [kids are beside themselves, “Fucking awesome,” screams Josh, while Melissa and her friend sing “Yad Vashem, you so fine, you so fine you blow my mind!”].

Ze'ev continues with his explanation: “Yad Vashem is a museum dedicated to the Holocaust [as he plays a recording of the theme from *Schindler's List*]. We will give you some time to yourselves to be sad and at the same time to SMS your parents to continue donating to the state of Israel so there won't be a second Holocaust, because the sequel is never as good as the original.” (“No problem,” says one of the girls. “My parents have lots of money; *abba sheli* has tons of *kesev rav* [my dad has tons of money].”) Ze'ev passes around a blue JNF *pushke* (charity tin) equipped with a credit card swiper to collect donations.

The skit pokes fun at the degree to which the Holocaust has become a tourist attraction (“Yad Vashem, you so fine”) and at the fact that, by some estimates, at least 95% of Birthright trips make Yad Vashem a required stop on the standard 10-day itinerary. The commentary extends, however, to the willingness to make use of the Shoah as a philanthropic tool—please continue to support Israel “so there won't be a second Holocaust, because the sequel is never as good as the original.” Playing the theme from *Schindler's List*, which absurdly accentuates the artificial sadness of such a limited visit within the framework of a tightly scheduled itinerary, the tour guide, Ze'ev, like Prime Minister Netanyahu, is willing to invoke the prospect of a second Holocaust to justify defense of Israel (where there are now 6 million Jews).

Another *Eretz Nehederet* sketch from the tenth season in 2013 examines another aspect of contemporary society: the universal fascination with reality television, in this case asking how far unsuspecting Israelis would go to

be contestants on a reality TV show called “The Camp: Only One Wins.”¹³ The sketch uses a mockumentary style that both criticizes the willingness of ordinary Israelis to sell their moral principles for a chance to appear on a reality television show and exposes (in a Sacha Baron Cohen–esque way) the failures of Holocaust education, as typical Israelis, who are presumably familiar with the historical details of the Holocaust, are all too willing to imprison and persecute their fellow Jews for a chance to win 6 million shekels. The producer of the show, the self-styled “Mr. Reality,” explains that the game is “a German format that was a big success all over Europe” in which contestants will be divided into “two groups, Germans and Jews” and that “the prize is 6 million.” He interviews prospective contestants.

“Are you willing to be a kapo?” he asks one woman.

“Sure,” she responds.

“Would you send your friends to die in your place?”

“Of course!” [and she cracks a whip]

“Amazing,” he responds.

Whereas most of the prospective contestants express a preference for living on the German side of the camp, which resembles a “boutique hotel,” rather than living with the Jewish contestants, who will live in barracks, behind barbed wire, with armed guards and German shepherds, one contestant responds, “I’m willing to live with the Jews until death, until death.” The mockumentary format is designed to trick participants into an ethically questionable exchange of information in order to satirize,¹⁴ but the use of such an extreme format on an Israeli sketch comedy show for allegedly humorous purposes does highlight the degree to which Israeli society has been saturated with Holocaust icons and references, making the premise of a reality show based on a concentration camp plausible. But what is the butt of the joke here? The absurd nature of reality television? The greed of average Israelis willing to sell out their ethical principles, sense of morality, and memory of the Holocaust for 6 million shekels? Or the overall failure of Holocaust education? All of the above, it would seem.

HaYehudim Ba'im

A more recent entry into the Israeli sketch comedy scene is *HaYehudim Ba'im* (The Jews Are Coming), a satirical TV show that completed its first broadcast season in January 2015 and recorded two more seasons in 2016 and 2017–2018. The show has been broadcast on Israel's historic Channel 1—for many years the only TV channel in the country—and it is devoted not to spoofs of contemporary Israeli politics but to sketches that target the entire history of the Jewish people since biblical times. Unlike *Eretz Nehederet*, which like the *Daily Show* tends to focus on politics and current events, *HaYehudim Ba'im* analyzes central moments in Jewish history and culture through a comedic lens.¹⁵ The show features one of the foremost veterans of Israeli sketch comedy, Moni Moshonov (star of *Zehu Zeh*), along with newer stars Yossi Marshek and Yaniv Biton, among others. In addition to skits on Masada, the Dreyfus affair, the kibbutz movement, the Hebrew poetess Rachel, and the Bible, the show offers satirical looks at World War II history and the Holocaust.

One episode includes a skeptical Hannah Senesh worrying about her fate before she is deployed as a parachutist; or in the same episode, “Art Academy in Vienna,” Adolf Schickelgruber’s artwork is rejected and a committee member ridicules him, explaining his work must have some emotion, some anger in it. A young Hitler is encouraged by Jewish committee members to change his name “to something more catchy,” stop painting fanciful portraits of cats, and channel his inner rage into something productive. In the sketch “Final Solution 2.0,” situated in 1956, the last surviving Nazis in Europe are meeting in a bunker to discuss the ultimate Final Solution. This time the final plan is to scatter Nazi sympathizers among all the media enterprises in Europe and guarantee that Israel does not receive one point in the Eurovision Song Contest. The plan is greeted with enthusiasm by all in the bunker, and one of the Nazis announces in German-accented Hebrew, “Zeh yaharog otam [That will kill them]!” The sketch concludes with the Nazis gathered around the table singing the West German entry to the 1979 Eurovision song contest, “Dschinghis Khan” (Genghis Khan).¹⁶ A seemingly farcical addition to the end of the sketch, this song is by itself meaningful on multiple levels: The 1979 Eurovision contest in Jerusalem marked the first time Israel hosted the contest as well

as the first time Eurovision was held outside the European continent. The performance by the West German group was groundbreaking, as they performed in German, in Israel, for the first time. The irony is that although the sketch parodies the Israeli tendency to perceive every slight against Israel as antisemitic, Israel in fact won Eurovision in back-to-back years in 1978 and 1979 for the songs “A-Ba-Ni-Bi” and “Hallelujah.” (Israel would triumph again in 1998, with Dana International’s “Diva” and in 2018 with Netta Barzilai’s “Toy.”)

In line with examining famous moments in Jewish and Israeli history, another *HaYehudim Ba'im* sketch imagines the execution of Adolf Eichmann in Ramle prison in 1962, but the bumbling and inept guards are incapable of executing Eichmann, incapable of stooping to the depths of evil represented by Eichmann himself. In the end, Eichmann places the noose around his own neck, concluding that “if you want something done right, you have to do it yourself.” Whereas the actual trial was meant by Israel’s leaders to exhibit Jewish power, the sketch seems to highlight Jewish weakness, which, according to Zionist ideology, Jews in Israel had shed. By the same token, this sketch and others are also a subtle reflection of Israeli Jews’ exercise of power and the ethical responsibility that comes along with it. Are Jews capable of “acting like Nazis”? Is the State of Israel even capable of stooping to the same level as the Nazis? (Moni Moshonov, who plays Eichmann in the sketch and one of the Nazi officers in “Final Solution, 2.0,” is



“The Execution of Adolf Eichmann,” *HaYehudim Ba'im*.

one of Israel's most recognizable comedic actors.) The "Mr. Reality" sketch on *Eretz Nehederet* asks the same questions. And although these questions are posed in a satirical manner, the answers are nonetheless uncomfortable, to say the least.

Holocaust Humor in American Sketch Comedy

This brief chapter reveals the degree to which satirization of the politics of Holocaust memory and education in Israel has become a staple of Israeli sketch comedy. Although it is also possible to trace a parallel rise in the frequency of references to the Holocaust in American sketch comedy, it is worth noting that Israeli shows such as *HaHamishia HaKamerit*, *Eretz Nehederet*, and *HaYehudim Ba'im*, broadcast on Israeli television (and online), can count on a largely educated Jewish audience. The producers and creators are making insider jokes in a country immersed in Holocaust education and collective memory, as opposed to Holocaust humor for an American audience, which, out of necessity, must be translated for a broader audience who is less likely to understand references to the Holocaust. Nonetheless, it is possible that increased Holocaust education in the United States (particularly since the opening of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in 1993 and the passage of legislation requiring Holocaust education in certain states since then) has increased general awareness of the Holocaust among an American audience, though it has not necessarily instilled a deeper knowledge of the historical specifics associated with the genocide of European Jewry.

At the same time, in the background of this examination is a question raised by data from the 2013 Pew Portrait of Jewish Americans that asked American Jews to take into consideration the place of "remembering the Holocaust" in contemporary American Jewish identity; 73% of respondents to the Pew survey identified remembering the Holocaust as an essential part of what being Jewish means to them.¹⁷ Even though this finding needs to be analyzed in much greater detail, the fact that remembering the Holocaust ranked highest among nine possible responses for an "essential component of Jewish identity" indicates the significance of the Holocaust for Jewish Americans in the twenty-first century. The same survey found that 42%

of American Jews felt that “having a good sense of humor” was “an essential part of what being Jewish means to them.”

Finally, there are more platforms than ever for the deployment of comedy, and it seems that the standards for what is considered acceptable or even funny continue to evolve. In the 1950s, when Sid Caesar and Imogene Coca along with writers Mel Brooks, Neil Simon, Carl Reiner, and others pioneered the sketch comedy series *Your Show of Shows* on NBC, sketches such as “The German General,” which made masterful use of Caesar’s double-talk, made fun of Germans (and presumably Nazis) while avoiding the subject of the Holocaust. As David Slucki’s chapter in this volume demonstrates, treatments of the Holocaust have evolved over the past several decades of sitcoms, just as the media environment has expanded from broadcast networks to cable television to a plethora of offerings on streaming services. And even so, as Larry David’s appearance on the sketch comedy staple *Saturday Night Live* in November 2017 demonstrated, the viewing public still seems to hold broadcast television to a higher standard.

Larry David

In his November 2017 appearance on *Saturday Night Live*, Larry David made a joke about sex in concentration camps that many observers found to be in poor taste because he situated the joke in a concentration camp and insinuated that Jews may have had sexual urges there (in the context of Harvey Weinstein’s sexual abuse charges and the fact that Jewish women and [and men] were subjected to widespread sexual violence during the Holocaust).¹⁸ “I know I consistently strive to be a good Jewish representative,” said David during his monologue, after expressing his discomfort with the fact that so many of those accused of sexual harassment, particular in the entertainment sphere, are Jewish. His joke reflected his own thoughts on the matter: As a Jewish man, would he have been focused on sex, even during the Holocaust?

I’ve always been obsessed with women, and I’ve often wondered—if I’d grown up in Poland when Hitler came to power and was sentenced to a concentration camp—would I still be checking out women in the camp? I think I would.

“Hey Shlomo! Shlomo! Look at that one over there by barracks 8. Oh my God, is she gorgeous! I’ve had my eye on here for weeks. I’d like to go over and say something to her.” The problem is, there are no good lines in a concentration camp. . . . “How’s it going? They treating you okay? You know, if we ever get out of here I’d love to take you out for some latkes. You like latkes? What? What’d I say? Is it me, or is it the whole thing? It’s ’cause I’m bald, isn’t it?”¹⁹

Many observers considered the joke not to be the finest moment in Larry David’s career (Jonathan Greenblatt, CEO of the Anti-Defamation League, tweeted the next morning that David “managed to be offensive, insensitive & unfunny all at same time. Quite a feat”), but the fact that he told the joke as part of his opening monologue on *Saturday Night Live* before an audience of millions presents an interesting starting point to examine the place of Holocaust humor in American society. What is the focus of such humor? Can we draw a distinction between jokes that satirize the sacralization and politicization of memorial culture and jokes that are situated in the Holocaust, perhaps making light of Jewish suffering or Nazi persecution? David can segue from reflections on the nature of his own Jewish identity (consistently striving to be a good Jewish representative) to the Holocaust without missing a beat. For an American audience, this would not be surprising, because their most likely association with Jewishness is the Holocaust. (It is not coincidental that the “Jewish” museum on the National Mall in Washington, D.C., is the Holocaust Museum.)

The deployment of Holocaust humor in the American context functions in a similar way to Israeli Holocaust humor, satirizing the place of memorial culture in contemporary Jewish identity while also pointing out the slippage that takes place in the use of certain terms that have expanded beyond Holocaust usage (camps, survivor, ovens, etc.). How much do the conventions of Holocaust memory become the targets of satire? In contrast to Larry David’s joke, “safer” targets of Holocaust humor in the American context, less likely to provoke outrage, focus on Schindler, Anne Frank, references to “camps,” the “survivor,” Hitler memes, and so on. In general, the punch lines, as in Israel, satirize the place of the Holocaust in contemporary Jewish culture and political identity. At the same time,

frequent use of the Holocaust by Jewish comedians in America may also reflect the central place of the Holocaust in contemporary American Jewish identity, often in lieu of religion, tradition, or other ethnic markers of Jewish identity.

Curb Your Enthusiasm

Larry David returns frequently to the Holocaust in his material. For example in the “Trick or Treat” episode (or Wagner episode) of *Curb Your Enthusiasm* (season 2, episode 3), Larry points out the hypocrisy of a Jewish identity predicated on hatred of Wagner’s music. The episode begins with Larry’s neighbor attacking him for being a “self-loathing Jew” because he enjoys the music of Wagner as he whistles “Siegfried Idyll” for his wife, Cheryl. “I do hate myself,” Larry responds, “but it has nothing to do with being Jewish.” As the neighbor becomes more irate, asking Larry, “Where is your heritage?” and reminding Larry that the music of Wagner played as “millions of Jews were being taken to the concentration camps,” Larry responds by whistling the opening bars of “Springtime for Hitler.” At the end of the same episode, Larry becomes a victim of a hate crime; but in this case not antisemitism but anti-baldism (being labeled a “bald asshole” by his anti-Wagner neighbor’s daughter). David questions the nature of a Jewish identity based on boycotting German culture, a negative Jewish identity based in a memory of the Holocaust that raises children to commit hate crimes (if spray-painting “bald asshole” on a neighbor’s door can be labeled a hate crime).

Earlier in his career, as a creator of and writer for *Seinfeld*, Larry David, along with Jerry Seinfeld, asked whether it was possible for dentist Tim Whatley (played by Bryan Cranston) to convert to Judaism for the jokes; was it possible to adopt a history of suffering? Can he convert to Judaism just for the jokes, along with the implicit underlying belief that much of Jewish humor is a response to thousands of years of Jewish suffering (which he just adopted)? And can a Jew who has not suffered adopt a shared history of suffering? Again, David and Seinfeld question what defines prejudice and discrimination, as Jerry’s suspicion of the dentist’s motives lead him to be labeled a “rabid anti-dentite.”²⁰ In both cases, Larry asks about degrees of persecution and an identity based on collective

suffering: What is the difference between anti-baldism, anti-dentism, and antisemitism?

In the “Survivor” episode of *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, David not only satirizes the cultural slippage that takes place through the widespread use of the term *survivor* and the relative levels of suffering (when the Holocaust survivor Solly is introduced to Colby, the contestant from the reality TV show *Survivor*), but also introduces another current usage of the Holocaust in contemporary American comedy: using the Shoah as a stand-in for 9/11 and asking questions about who gets to claim the mantle of suffering. (In the same episode the rabbi’s brother-in-law died on 9/11, even though he was killed in a cycling accident uptown, not in the towers. Is he a victim of 9/11?) When Larry and Cheryl renew their vows, Larry offends the rabbi by using the phrase “let’s roll” and the episode concludes with an earthquake and Colby from *Survivor* telling Larry, “We survived!”

My Crazy Ex-Girlfriend

To cite another recent example that plays on the notion of survival and suffering, in the CW show *My Crazy Ex-Girlfriend*, Patti Lupone and Tovah Feldshuh temper the joy of a Jewish wedding by exhorting Rachel to “Remember that we suffered.”

We sing in a minor key to remember that we suffered! I don’t want to bring up the Holocaust, I know, I know, the Holocaust, but the Holocaust is a really big deal . . . remember that we suffered!

[The DJ announces]: My Grandmother’s a survivor, remember that she suffered! The Sweet and the Bitter, Streisand and Hitler—Remember that we suffered! Spielberg and Hitler—Remember that we suffered!²¹

Jewish identity is thus reduced to a few key buzzwords: a hora, a singing Tova Feldshuh, the Holocaust, survival, and a vague notion of collective suffering. The humorous commentary is not far from the truth, as Jewish wedding ceremonies include the breaking of a glass that recalls the

destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem. Again, what's the punch line? "The Holocaust, I know, I know, the Holocaust, but the Holocaust is a really big deal."

Inside Amy Schumer

Although each of these examples reflects references to the Holocaust that seem to question a Jewish identity based in the Holocaust or that implicitly criticize identities based in vague notions of collective suffering and survival, Amy Schumer's "Museum of Boyfriend Wardrobe Atrocities," a sketch from the 2015 season of *Inside Amy Schumer* (season 3, episode 7), represents a much more direct satire of contemporary Holocaust memorial practices (even more spot-on than Sarah Silverman's "Wowschwitz" episode of *The Sarah Silverman Show*; see David Slucki's chapter in this volume for a more detailed discussion of this episode). In this short but powerful spoof of Holocaust museums, Amy Schumer narrates an audio tour with sad classical music in the background that follows a group of female visitors (with one exception) to a museum that highlights wardrobe atrocities perpetrated by fashion-challenged boyfriends.²²

Alana O'Brien plays a visitor to the museum listening to the audio tour. Standing before a tacky male outfit, she hears the narrator explain, "This is what Josh wore to meet her parents; tragically, the relationship perished soon after." In another display, visitors see Mark and his bowling shirt, learning that "he insisted on wearing calf high tube socks; she hid them in her attic, but sadly they were discovered and forced back into rotation." In another part of the exhibit, viewers learn they "are in the accessory wing. One survivor recorded the following words: first he wore a braided belt and . . . I said nothing. Then came that hat . . . and I said nothing. Then he wore that fucking hemp necklace and I was like . . . PEACE!!" One female visitor nods in recognition and understanding. In the next room: "You are entering the Hall of Sighs. You will hear recordings of real girlfriends the moment they bore witness to their boyfriend's mistakes." The wall is a hall of photos of boyfriend wardrobe atrocities that evokes the tower of faces at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C. (In the background we hear recordings of girlfriends complaining about men wearing ugly shorts, Birkenstocks, etc.) The only man on the

tour (an angry white guy with a red beard who represents a boyfriend wardrobe-atrocity denier) says, “I don’t think this many guys wore this stuff. These numbers are exaggerated.” In the final scene of the short clip, visitors stand before a giant pile of Crocs that evokes the piles of shoes at Holocaust museums and concentration camps. “There are 5,200 pairs of Crocs in front of you. Each one represents a relationship that was real and tangible until poor judgment tore it apart.” At the end of the tour a little girl in a red coat modeled after the girl in the red coat from *Schindler’s List* asks, “Did this really happen?” As the screens fades to black and white, only the girl’s coat remains in color and the adult with her answers, “It did, Gabby, it did.”²³

The museum tour includes references to relationships that have “tragically perished,” articles of clothing “hidden in the attic,” a reference to the famous Martin Niemoller quotation, deniers of wardrobe atrocities, piles of Crocs, and a not so subtle final reference to *Schindler’s List*. Even the exhibit descriptions (barely visible in the sketch) carry the hyperbolic wardrobe atrocities to their most extreme, such as this one below a bowling shirt: “It is now considered Charlie Sheen’s most heinous crime to have been the inspiration for this outfit.”

As Rachel Shukert writes in *Tablet*, the sketch is a “pitch-perfect send up of the kind of solemn, often self-imposed field trip we’ve all taken



The 5,200 pairs of Crocs shown in the sketch “Museum of Boyfriend Wardrobe Atrocities,” *Inside Amy Schumer*.

to various Holocaust museums the world over, from the United States Holocaust Memorial in Washington D.C., where . . . you are given the identity of one of the perished, like one of those troubling games one used to play at one of your more Jewish-inflected summer camps; to Yad Vashem, in whose tomb-like, black marble walls the numbers of the dead are ominously listed by country.”²⁴ At the same time, the sketch satirizes how mundane and commonplace Holocaust commemorative practices have become—and the kind of slippage that can take place when the terms *evil* or *atrocious* are used casually. Likewise, as we become overly saturated by all kinds of violence and catastrophe, the term *atrocious* loses its power.

Nathan for You

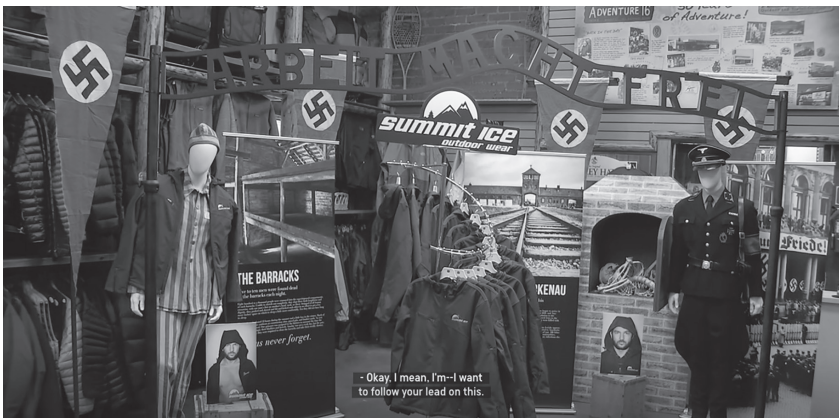
Another recent parody of Holocaust memorial culture in contemporary American sketch comedy comes from the 2015 “Summit Ice” sketch on the Comedy Central show *Nathan for You*.²⁵ Nathan Fielder is a Canadian Jewish comedian whose show on Comedy Central describes him as “a business advisor who implements strategies that no traditional consultant would dare attempt.” In “Summit Ice” Fielder concocts an absurd business strategy that is a critique of the ridiculous extremes of Holocaust memorialization and education; at the same time, he uses the new line of outerwear clothing he has developed for the show as a means of funding Holocaust education, raising hundreds of thousands of dollars for the Vancouver Holocaust Museum. In the sketch Nathan, disappointed to learn that his favorite brand of winter outerwear, Taiga, also supports Holocaust deniers, decides to create his own brand of outerwear, called Summit Ice, to confront deniers, with a model who announces in advertisements, “Deny Nothing.” As Fielder has explained in interviews:

When I was younger, and until recently, I used to wear a jacket brand called Taiga, which is from a shop just down the street. I discovered recently that they published a tribute to a Holocaust denier in their winter catalogue, but I was wearing their jacket on my TV show. I felt like that was bad because I was giving them publicity. I didn’t know what

jacket company to trust, so I thought it was easiest to start my own company.²⁶

In the mockumentary-style sketch, Nathan consults a real Los Angeles rabbi (who is, in fact, the butt of the joke), who helps Nathan design a retail display for his outerwear clothing line that will confront Holocaust denial. The display mixes mannequins in concentration camp uniforms wearing Summit Ice outerwear, educational posters on the history of the Holocaust, a replica of the Auschwitz “Arbeit macht frei” entrance gate, photos of the clothing model wearing Summit Ice and reminding shoppers to “deny nothing,” and, of course, Summit Ice apparel for sale. In the end, it is the hippie, laid-back storeowner who has to be the voice of reason: Retail and the Holocaust don’t mix. Fielder takes “Museum of Boyfriend Wardrobe Atrocities” and ups the ante. What are the limits of extreme memorialization? And why can’t he wear the jacket of his favorite apparel company because Taiga supports Holocaust deniers? Are we supposed to boycott Nazis? Is financial resistance real resistance?²⁷

What are the limits of Holocaust memorialization? For American Jews who advocated boycotting the Nazi movement in the 1930s, why can’t contemporary Holocaust memorialization take the form of boycotting a clothing line that supports Holocaust deniers? Fielder probes the limits of the commercialization of Holocaust memory while using his critique to fund Holocaust education. In the new post-Trump reality, Fielder’s 2015



Holocaust retail display in the sketch “Summit Ice,” *Nathan for You*.

satire seems prescient, highlighting the limits of education and boycotts to confront antisemitism and Holocaust denial. Do American Jews actually have the tools with which to confront such threats, or does such Holocaust-inflected humor draw attention to the current and mounting powerlessness of American Jews?

Conclusion

What is the difference between Holocaust humor in America and that in Israel? Does humor in America reflect an anxiety over forgetting, over the ways in which “remembering the Holocaust” has become a stand-in for Jewish identity, whereas humor in Israel—where the Shoah is too central to Israeli national identity to be forgotten—instead becomes a political tool to criticize that very centrality in the culture? Israelis fear instrumentalization by their leaders; in a country where Jews exercise sovereignty, the target is the state and political culture is turned inward, as Jews are no longer the outsiders. On the contrary, Jews in Israel must deal with exercising power and the fear that they now abuse power as a majority that “subjugates” a minority; at the same time, the Shoah is used to justify political choices and the exercise of power. In America, Jews also have power, especially to shape culture. However, in the American context the function of the Holocaust is to remind American Jews of who they are, of their otherness, and in the age of Trump and the reminders of persistent forms of antisemitism, Holocaust humor functions as a form of satire invoked to again critique the powerful and to reinforce the minority status of the Jews, lest they become too white or too privileged. At the same time, the historical specificity of the Shoah in the American context is reduced to a number of “Holocaust icons.” American sketch comedy about the Holocaust does not make fun of specific historical events but of symbols and terms the audience will be able to identify: survivor, the Anne Frank “game,” Spielberg, Schindler, and a vague sense of collective suffering.²⁸ As distance from the event grows, the Shoah continues to assume a central role in both Israeli and American Jewish identity. Humor about the Holocaust not only mirrors the concerns of each society but also reflects the degree to which a vague sense of collective memory of the Holocaust has replaced any historical specificity of the event itself.

Notes

1. Avinoam Patt, “Laughter Through Tears: Jewish Humor in the Aftermath of the Holocaust,” in Eli Lederhendler and Gabriel N. Finder, eds., *A Club of Their Own: Jewish Humorists and the Contemporary World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 113–31.
2. The genre of sketch comedy, unlike situation comedy (or sitcoms), allows for short explorations of a concept or a situation; longer than a skit generally built around one joke, the sketch allows for the development of an idea over several minutes but can be strung together with several other sketches to form a show. The genre has its origins in vaudeville and is an ideal format to allow talented comedic actors to play off one another.
3. Liat Steir-Livny, *Is It OK to Laugh About It? Holocaust Humour, Satire, and Parody in Israeli Culture* (London: Vallentine Mitchell, 2017), book jacket blurb.
4. Steir-Livny, *Is It OK*, 40.
5. Benjamin Netanyahu, Yom HaShoah speech, 2012; see text in various sources, for example, <http://www.israelnationalnews.com/News/News.aspx/154895> [accessed 1 August 2017].
6. President Reuven Rivlin, Yom HaShoah Memorial Day Ceremony, 15 April 2015, http://www.president.gov.il/English/ThePresident/Speeches/Pages/news_150415_01.aspx [accessed 1 August 2017].
7. “Feldermaus at the Olympics,” *HaHamishia HaKamerit*, 3 July 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1FPRYXbIxDc> [accessed 1 August 2017].
8. In the sketch “Feldermaus at the White House,” the two bumbling diplomats attempt to surprise Bill Clinton at the White House with a request to play saxophone at a small party at the Israeli embassy. Rebuffed by a secretary who insists the president is a “very busy man,” Feldermaus loses his patience, insisting he will wait no more: “We will not be taken like lambs to the slaughter!” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LLIWCW4ewb8> [accessed 1 August 2017]. It should also be noted that the name of the diplomat “Feldermaus” is itself an ironic inversion. In Hebrew the name of the opera by Strauss, *Die Fledermaus*, can also be mistakenly read as Feldermaus. In so doing, the “bat” from Strauss’s humorous farce is transformed into a common “field mouse.”
9. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nRTI_yI7-Oc&feature=youtu.be [accessed 1 August 2017].
10. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=liYGNXMtIhw> [accessed 1 August 2017]. Steir-Livny points out that, in this case in a postmodern sense, “the satirists remove themselves and their audiences even more from the historical event.

This skit turns the Holocaust from an historical event to a representation of the representation, a situation in which the creators do not refer to actual historical events from the Holocaust, but rather respond to other texts representing the Holocaust as acts of homage to them.” Steir-Livny, *Is It OK*, 103–4.

11. In 2014 Israel’s Ministry of Education released a Holocaust education curriculum for kindergartners, in conjunction with Yom HaShoah. See <http://www.tabletmag.com/scroll/170448/israel-to-teach-about-holocaust-in-kindergarten> [accessed 30 November 2017]. See also <http://cms.education.gov.il/EducationCMS/UNITS/Moe/Shoa/ganeyeldim> [accessed 30 November 2017].
12. *Eretz Nehederet*, <https://vimeo.com/35660324> [accessed 1 August 2017].
13. “Mr. Reality,” *Eretz Nehederet*, <http://www.mako.co.il/tv-erez-nehederet/season10-articles/Article-e1ea8be897bbe31006.htm> [accessed 1 August 2017].
14. See, for example, M. Campbell, “The Mocking Mockumentary and the Ethics of Irony,” *Taboo: The Journal of Culture and Education* 11, no. 1 (2017): art. 8, <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/taboo/vol11/iss1/8> [accessed 1 August 2017].
15. See Wendy Zierler, “‘The Jews Are Coming’ Offers Hebrew Satire of Jewish History,” 28 March 2016, <http://jewishstudies.washington.edu/hebrew-humanities/the-jews-are-coming/> [accessed 14 January 2018].
16. “Final Solution 2.0,” *The Jews Are Coming*, 20 May 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Pp3Qi07nJK4> [accessed 14 January 2018]. “Dschinghis Khan” became the basis for several popular covers of the song, including the Hasidic hit song “Yidn, Yidn Kumt a Heym,” by Mordecai Ben-David.
17. See Pew Research Center, “A Portrait of Jewish Americans,” 1 October 2013, <http://www.pewforum.org/files/2013/10/jewish-american-full-report-for-web.pdf> [accessed 7 July 2015].
18. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G0eeNijdv3I> [accessed 11 January 2018], starts at 5:30.
19. Jenny Singer, “Why Larry David’s Holocaust Jokes Didn’t Go Far Enough, and Four Comedians Whose Did,” *The Forward*, 6 November 2017, <https://forward.com/schmooze/387012/why-larry-davids-holocaust-jokes-didnt-go-far-enough-and-four-comedians-who/> [accessed 11 January 2018].
20. “The Yada,” *Seinfeld*, 1997, <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0697814/> [accessed 11 January 2018].
21. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iLNa-ocdryY> [accessed 11 January 2018].
22. “Fight Like a Girl,” *Inside Amy Schumer*, 2 June 2015 (season 3, episode 7); see <https://www.hulu.com/watch/800365#i0,p4,s3,d0> [accessed 30 November 2017].

- 2017]; or for video of just the sketch, see <https://vimeo.com/141682826> [accessed 30 November 2017].
23. In the *South Park* episode “Death Camp of Tolerance” (season 6, episode 14, 2002), the boys are taken to “tolerance camp” as punishment for their insensitivity to their teacher, Mr. Garrison, who hopes to be fired by the school district for being a homosexual. The scenes in the tolerance camp are shot in black and white (a direct reference to *Schindler’s List*), and the boys are also taken on a field trip to the Museum of Tolerance, where they also learn many other harmful stereotypes and forms of hate speech. <http://southpark.cc.com/clips/104220/museum-of-tolerance> [accessed 11 January 2018].
24. Rachel Shukert, “Amy Schumer Satirizes the Rite of Visiting Holocaust Memorials and Nails It,” *Tablet Magazine*, June 2015, <https://www.tabletmag.com/scroll/191741/amy-schumer-satirizes-the-rite-of-visiting-holocaust-memorials-and-nails-it> [accessed 30 November 2017]. See also <https://www.pastemagazine.com/articles/2015/07/the-10-best-sketches-from-inside-amy-schumers-thir.html?a=1> [accessed 30 November 2017]. For a literary take on summer camp games that evoke the Holocaust, see Ellen Umansky’s short story “How to Make It in the Promised Land,” which was made into a film of the same name in 2013.
25. <http://www.cc.com/episodes/05z29h/nathan-for-you-horseback-riding-man-zone-season-3-ep-302> [accessed 28 January 2018].
26. See, for example, “I Went to Nathan Fielder’s ‘Holocaust Awareness Outdoor Apparel Sale,’” *Vice*, 27 March 2017, https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/mgdp7y/i-went-to-nathan-fielders-holocaust-awareness-outdoor-apparel-sale [accessed 28 January 2018].
27. <http://www.cc.com/episodes/05z29h/nathan-for-you-horseback-riding-man-zone-season-3-ep-302> [accessed 28 January 2018].
28. The term *Holocaust icons* comes from Oren Baruch Stier, *Holocaust Icons: Symbolizing the Shoah in History and Memory* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2015). Nathan Englander plays with the idea of the “Anne Frank game” in his short story “What We Talk About When We Talk About Anne Frank,” <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2011/12/12/what-we-talk-about-when-we-talk-about-anne-frank> [accessed 28 April 2019]; in this story the characters examine the meaning of living a Jewish life predicated on remembering the Holocaust while also grappling with the question of whether they would have sheltered one another during the war.