“Laughing Through The Tears”

The evolution of Jewish American Comedy
Until Modern Times - Jews Were Laughed At, Not With

Roman times - Juvenal’s *Satires* derides Jews as dangerous beggars, “who possess a basket and a truss of hay for all their furnishings.”

Shakespeare – Shylock is a creature of derision, his famous “Hath not a Jew eyes?” is tragic, not funny.

Dickens – Fagin, a receiver of stolen property, is often referred to as “the Jew.”
Modern Times

• Yiddish theater in New York was a form of entertainment that crossed ethnic barriers.
• The Jewish-owned resorts of the Catskills, the so-called “borsht belt”, were the training grounds for generations of comedians.
• By some counts up to 80% of the professional comedians in the United States today are Jewish.
Thesis of the transformation:

• Jewish American Comedy has roots in Europe
• Originates with the “Purim spiels”
• Influenced by the Haskalah and the pogroms
• Two styles of comedy: “Judenwitz” of the German Jews and the “Ostjude” of the Eastern European Jews
• In America, these different Jewish groups mix and a distinctly American form of Jewish humor arises
• Americans find this humor acceptable and accessible
• Acceptance leads to success, which leads to integration
What Is Judenwitz?

Jefferson Chase, from *Inciting Laughter*: “...the association of Jewishness and destructive, satiric laughter in 19th century Germany.”

Aarau Newspaper, 1819: “the export of jokes from Frankfurt should be strictly prohibited, and the shameless profiteers....must be either lynched or hanged.”
Heinrich Heine

Born to a Jewish family in Dusseldorf (which was controlled by France) in 1797, “Harry” Heine would convert to Christianity in 1825 and become “Heinrich.” Best known for his poetry (no less than 75 composers set his poems to music) Heine was also an influential humorist. His style of humor is considered the prototype of “Judenwitz.”

Heine made light of his own conversion, referring to it as the “ticket of admission to European society.”
Published in 1830, *Die Bäder von Lucca* ("The Baths of Lucca") is a satirical work from Heine. Heine’s rival, August von Platen, had mocked Heine’s Jewish heritage. Heine used what was ostensibly a travel book to make insinuations about von Platen’s homosexuality.

But von Platen is not the only target. The main character, a Dr. Heine, also finds time to ridicule converted Jews. The Marquis Gumpelino is a Jewish convert to Catholicism. He has given up his faith, but can’t shed his long nose.

“For one could tell from his nose that he came from noble stock, that he descended from an ancient international family with which even our Lord God established nuptial ties without fear of rendering Himself déclassé.”
Der Witz und seine Beziehung zum Unbewußten
“Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious”
(“Witz” is often translated as “wit” but in this case means “joke”)
Published in 1905

Jokes allow us to discuss topics that would otherwise be repressed

“I do not know whether there are many other instances of a people making fun to such a degree of its own character.”
Freud’s Analysis of Jokes

- “The contrast of ideas”
- “Sense in nonsense”
- “Confusion and clearness”
Freud Tells a (Jewish) Joke

A young man is taken to the home of a perspective bride by a marriage broker, a schadchen. While sitting in the parlor, the agent draws the attention of the young man to a glass closet displaying a beautiful silver set.

The broker comments “You can see how wealthy these people are.”

The young man considers and says “Is it not possible that they borrowed these things to give the appearance of wealth?”

“What an idea,” the broker replies. “Who in the world would be willing to lend them anything?”
Jokes About Being A Jew

Freud tells a joke about a Galician Jew riding on a train. The fact that the character is Galician is supposed to convey the expectations of traditionalism and a lack of social graces.

Finding himself alone in a compartment, the Galician unbuttons his coat and puts his feet up on the seat. Just then a modern looking gentleman enters the car. The Galitsyaner pulls himself together and puts his feet on the floor.

The gentleman pulls out a notebook and starts to write. After a few minutes he looks up and says “Excuse me. Do you know when is Yom Kippur?”

“Oho!” exclaims the Galitsyaner, and puts his feet back up before answering.
Theodor Herzl

The man who would become the father of modern Zionism took a less favorable view of Jewish stereotypes. In 1902 he would write the novel *Altneuland* (Old-new land) which portrayed a negative image of Viennese Jewish society. The book was a comedy, featuring the characters of Gruen and Blau at a dinner party:

“Why so late, Mr. Gruen?” asks the hostess.

“Because I could come no later.” Gruen replies.
The Joke On the Jews

But in the same book, Herzl introduces the character of Dr. Friedrich Lowenstein.

Gruen, the jester, was holding forth. "Well, Dr. Lowenstein, and how do you like it here? What! You find no words! Perhaps you think there are too many Jews here!"

“I am frank to say,” remarked Friedrich slowly, “that you are the first person to have made me think so.”
“Ostjude” & the Humor of Sholem Aleichem

• Writings of Sholem Aleichem embody Ostjude.
• Born Solomon Naumovich Rabinovich in 1859.
• Led the Yiddish literary and cultural movement.
• Embodied the Eastern European style of humor.
• His life was a series of juxtapositions that mirrored the changes of the Jewish community.
The Pale of Settlement
The Real Life of Sholem Aleichem

• Rich to poor to rich to poor again.
• Shtetl to city.
• Religious to secular.

Cultural, economic and political change all around him
Tevye the Milkman - Fiddler On the Roof

- Series of 10 stories set in the Pale; written in Yiddish; adapted into a musical.
- Tevye begins as a woodcutter; by virtue of a good deed he is rewarded with money and a cow.
- Like Sholem Aleichem in real life, he is swindled.
- First daughter, Tzeitl, marries the poor tailor, Motl. Poor, but happy.
- Second daughter, Hodl, marries a revolutionary, Perchik, and shares his exile.
- Third daughter, Chava, marries a non-Jew and the family disowns her, as if she were dead.
- Fourth daughter, Shprintze, has a failed love affair, which ends in her suicide.
- Fifth daughter, Beilke, marries rich. Her in-laws are embarrassed by Tevye, and try to send him to Israel.
"My dear Yankel, what can I say? At least we are all safe from a pogrom. We're not in the least afraid, we've already had one with two encores. In fact, the pogrom reached us a bit late. To make up for it, we had one with all the trimmings. No one from our family was hurt. Except Lipo, who was killed along with his two sons. And Noah and Melech. And poor Moishe who was dragged down from an attic. And Pesha who was found dead in a cellar, along with her tiny infant daughter still at her breast. The grand total of our family's losses was seven dead. In other words, it could have been worse. As for better, the sky is the limit."

– Letter to New York, From “Sholem Aleichem: Laughing In The Darkness"
Summary the First

Both Judenwitz and Ostjude were dark forms of humor, reflecting the lives of European Jewry. In Germany and Western Europe, the “Jewish question” was being posed. Assimilation was offered as an answer, but as in the cases of Heine and Herzl, that brought with it feelings of guilt and inner conflict.

The East had its own challenges. If you were lucky enough to survive the pogroms and to escape the hardship of shtetl life, you faced the challenges of modernization and the Enlightenment, changes that left many Jews feeling adrift.

Now America beckoned.
Introducing Jewish Humor to the West

• 1894 Israel Zangwill writes the play *King of the Schnorrers*.
• The title character, Manasseh da Costa, is a beggar living in London. His benefactor is Joseph Grobstock.
• The humor is sarcastic.
• The play is set in the previous century “In the days when Lord George Gordon became a Jew, and was suspected on insanity….when England denied her Jews every civic right except for that of paying taxes.”
• The schnorrer, while being of low station, is smarter than those around him who are, ostensibly, his betters.
• While still self-deprecating and relying on stereotypes, audiences were invited to laugh with, not at, the Jews.
• The play was a success in British society.
Yiddish Theater in New York

• In 1883, Yiddish theater is banned in Russia. In 1886, Zigmund Mogulesko forms the first troupe in America.
• Between 1890 and 1940, over 200 Yiddish theaters or traveling Yiddish theater troupes would form in America.
• In 1903, the Grand Theater was built specially for Yiddish shows.
• European stars such as Abraham Goldfaden came to America.
• In 1907, Sholem Aleichem came to New York to write plays.
Something Different Emerges

Those who had been successful in Europe did not find success in America. In 1887, Abraham Goldfaden came to New York amid great fanfare. “Goldfaden in America” was a headline in a Yiddish newspaper. But by 1889, he was back in Europe.

Sholem Aleichem tried to write two plays simultaneously for America’s two greatest troupes: Boris Thomashefsky and Jacob Adler. Opening the same night, both flopped. Later, when he offered his Tevye play, it was refused.

Yiddish theater in America, still in its infancy, went in its own direction.

"The still young Yiddish theatre that went to America did not recognize its father just three or four years later, nor would it obey or come when called."

- Jacob Dinezon
“Jewface” In Vaudeville

• “Jewface” refers to the vaudeville caricature of the Jew, a comic figure.
• Popularized from the 1880’s on.
• Stereotypical qualities: big nose, bearded, Yiddish accent.
• Portrayed by both Jewish and non-Jewish actors.
• Instead of fighting it, Jews took the image and made it their own.
Music and Comedy - “Yiddle On Your Fiddle Play Some Ragtime”

Written by Irving Berlin In 1909

Yiddle in the middle of your fiddle, play some ragtime
Get busy
I'm dizzy
I'm feeling two years young
Mine choc'late baby, if you'll maybe play for Sadie
Some more ragtime
Yiddle, don't you stop, if you do, I'll drop
For I just can't make my eyes shut up
Yiddle on your fiddle, play some ragtime
Sophie Tucker

Sophie Tucker (born Sonya Kalish) made her first stage appearance in 1907 wearing blackface. By 1908, she had mastered a Southern accent. When her luggage was stolen that year, including her makeup kit, she stunned the audience by saying "You all can see I'm a white girl. Well, I'll tell you something more: I'm not Southern. I'm a Jewish girl and I just learned this Southern accent doing a blackface act for two years. And now, Mr. Leader, please play my song."
The Women of Jewish Comedy

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<tr>
<th>Fanny Brice</th>
<th>Molly Picon</th>
<th>Gertrude Berg</th>
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<tr>
<td>Judy Holliday</td>
<td>Joan Rivers</td>
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<td>Gilda Radner</td>
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<td>Roseanne Barr</td>
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<td>Susie Essman</td>
<td>Rain Pryor</td>
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<td>Wendy Leibman</td>
<td>Sandra Bernhard</td>
<td>Sarah Silverman</td>
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Speaking Yinglish

Yiddish characters (and caricatures) became an entrenched part of comedy and brought their vocabulary with them:

• “Schmendrick”
• “Schnorrer”
• Hybrid or “Yinglish” terms – “Fancy-schmancy”
• “Schlemiel” and “schlimazel” - These words became so accepted as part of the American comedic vocabulary that by the time they were used in the theme song of the *Laverne and Shirley Show* (1976) the Yiddish origin was lost on most of the audience.
Almost from the outset, Jewish humor in America was different. Jews in America were finding acceptance, more or less, and wanted something lighter. The authors and topics that had been successful in Europe were failing here.

Something new was evolving here. Performing in Jewface or Blackface would not be acceptable today, but it was far better than the conditions being faced by Jews in Europe.

Jewish comedy in America has its roots in the musical comedy tradition.
The Marx Brothers (or “We owe it all to a mule.”)

On a night in 1912, the musical group *The Six Mascots*, comprised of four brothers, their mother and their Aunt Hannah, were interrupted by a ruckus outside. A mule had run away and the townsfolk were trying to subdue it.

Upset at the event, and perhaps angry that the audience was paying more attention to the mule than to the musical performance, Julius Henry began making snide remarks to the audience. Hilarity, as the saying goes, ensued.

While music would remain part of their act, the group would be reborn as *The Marx Brothers*. 
The Four Marx Brothers (Plus One)

“Chico” Leonard Marx. Born March 22, 1887. As with the three oldest Marx Brothers, his nickname, pronounced “chick-o”, was given him by Art Fisher during a poker game. Leonard was notorious for chasing after the “chicks” or women. His phony Italian accent covered his real Yiddish accent.

Born Adolph Marx on Nov. 23, 1888, he would change his name to Arthur in 1911, but was best known as “Harpo.” Of course, he played the harp and was a virtuoso. The silence of his character derived from his inability to memorize dialogue and his natural shyness.

“Groucho” Julius Henry Marx was born October 2, 1890. There are a number of explanations for his name, but the most commonly accepted is his grouchy personality. It was Groucho that took the town to task for the escaped mule.

Herbert Manfred Marx, better known as “Zeppo” appeared in the first five Marx Brothers movies, but then set off for a second career as an engineer. His company machined parts used during WWII, developed a motorcycle and a biometric watch. His patents made him a millionaire.
# The Marx Brother Filmography

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<tr>
<th>Broadway Plays</th>
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<tr>
<td>I'll Say She Is (1924–1925) – Musical revue</td>
<td>The Cocoanuts (1929) Paramount</td>
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<td>Animal Crackers (1928–1929) – Also with Kaufman</td>
<td>Monkey Business (1931) Paramount</td>
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<td>Horse Feathers (1932) Paramount</td>
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<td>Duck Soup (1933) Paramount</td>
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<td>A Night at the Opera (1935) MGM</td>
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<td>A Day at the Races (1937) MGM</td>
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<td>Room Service (1938) RKO</td>
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<td>At the Circus (1939) MGM</td>
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<td>Go West (1940) MGM</td>
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<td>The Big Store (1941) MGM</td>
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<td>A Night In Casablanca (1946) UA</td>
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<td>Love Happy (1949) UA</td>
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Jack Benny and Mary Livingstone

In 1911, Benjamin Kubelsky, under the stage name Jack Benny, was playing in the same theater as the Marx Brothers. Minnie Marx liked his violin playing and he became a friend of the family. In 1921, Zeppo invited him over for Passover Seder where he was introduced to their 14-year old cousin, Sadie Marx. Five years later he would meet Sadie again and fall for her. A year after that, in 1927, they would marry and begin a shared career that would span decades.

Best known for his radio and television shows, Jack Benny appeared in 44 movies beginning with The Hollywood Revue of 1929 and ending with the 1972 movie The Man. In 1942, Benny starred with Carole Lombard in To Be Or Not To Be.
The Three Stooges

Far from subtle, the Three Stooges specialized in physical humor. Moses Harry Horwitz (“Moe” Howard), Samuel Horwitz (“Shemp” Howard) and Louis Feinberg (“Larry” Fine) began working together in vaudeville in the 1920s as part of the act *Ted Healy and his Stooges*. Shemp, offended by Healy, struck out on his own in 1932. He would be replaced by younger brother Jerry Howard (“Curly” Howard.) Although they began as a live comedy act in vaudeville, they are best known for the **190 short films** they made for Columbia Pictures between 1934 and 1947. Although not explicitly Jewish in their comedy style, in 1940, they made the short *You Nazty Spy!* followed by the 1941 sequel *I'll Never Heil Again*. Lampooning Hitler and the Fascists, these films were made before America joined the war and while most Americans favored isolationism.
Summary the third

From the 1920s on, Jewish comedians often had starring roles in Hollywood films. They had made the transition from Yiddish theater to vaudeville to Broadway (the Marx Brothers early films all started as Broadway comedies) to the Big Screen. The fact that four of the Big Five (MGM, Paramount, Fox, Warner & RKO) and two of the Little Three (Universal, UA & Columbia) studios were either owned or operated by Jews didn’t hurt.

Many Americans didn’t realize that these were Jewish actors. People thought that Chico was Italian. Jack Benny and the Three Stooges just seemed American.
Comics of the Borsht Belt – the “Jewish Alps”

• From the 1920s until the 1970s the hotels located in the Catskill Mountains were the proving grounds for Jewish comedy.

• Comedians included: Jackie Mason, George Burns, Mel Brooks, Carl Reiner, Rodney Dangerfield, Don Rickles, Woody Allen, Buddy Hackett, Morey Amsterdam, Bea Arthur, Richard Belzer, Joan Rivers, Joey Bishop, Jerry Lewis and many more.
King of the One Liners

Henry "Henny" Youngman (Yungman) was born in London, but grew up in New York. A violinist, he was part of a jazz band. He also worked in a print shop, where he wrote "comedy cards" with one-line jokes. Encouraged by Milton Berle, he combined violin with stand-up comedy.

He built a career around saying “Take my wife...please.”
Milton Berle – Mr. Television

Milton Berle (born Mendel Berlinger in 1908) was not the only host of the Texaco Star Theater when the show began in September of 1948; it took the network a full month to settle on him. Due in large part to “Uncle Miltie” the show achieved an 80% audience share. Television sales doubled as a result of the show, rising to 2 million in 1949. In Detroit, water levels dropped between 9 PM and 9:05 PM. People waited until the show was over to use the bathroom.
Isaac Sydney “Sid” Caesar was born in Yonkers, NY in 1922. He worked as a musician, then an actor. In 1948, he appeared on the Texaco Star Theater. In 1950, he appeared on the first episode of Your Show of Shows.

Imogene Coca, Carl Reiner, and Howard Morris were the comedy team. Writers that got their start on the show include Lucille Kallen (1st female TV writer), Mel Brooks, and Neil Simon.
More than any other single person, Milton Berle was the reason that people bought televisions. Of course Uncle Miltie and Sid Caesar were not the only Jewish comics coming into American homes through the little screen. The *shticks* that comics had perfected working in the Borsht Belt seemed perfect for TV.

Many of the writers and producers working behind the scenes were Jewish as well.

As the post-war years followed by the Eisenhower era gave way to the 1960s, something new was happening.
Edgy Comics – Mort Sahl

- Morton Lyon "Mort" Sahl born in Montreal, Canada to Jewish parents from New York
- Social satirist – “the only real political philosopher we have in modern comedy” (Steve Allen)
- Improvisation using a newspaper as inspiration and his prop
- Inspired a new generation of comics with both his subject matter and his style
- First comic to make a record album, first to win a Grammy, first to do college concerts. August 15, 1960 he was on the cover of Time.
The Life of Lenny Bruce

• Born Leonard Alfred Schneider in 1925, Mineola N.Y.
• Active duty in the U.S. Navy during WW II – discharged for appearing in drag during a comedy.
• Developed a “stream of consciousness” style of comedy that was highly influential. “Jazz” style.
• No filters, often obscene by the standards of the day.
• Arrested 4 times for obscenity, once for impersonating a priest. And multiple drug offenses.
• Changed comedy in America.
Woody Allen

- Born Allan Stewart Konigsberg in Brooklyn.
- Began his career in the 1950s at age 19 as a writer for the *NBC Comedy Hour*.
- By the 1960s, Woody Allen was doing stand-up comedy based on monologues rather than one-liners.
- Perfected the portrayal of the *nebbish* - insecure, intellectual, constantly worried.
- Known better today for his movies, Comedy Central ranked Allen as #4 on the 100 greatest stand-up comedians.
Jerry Seinfeld

• Born Jerome Allen Seinfeld in Brooklyn in 1954
• Began his career at *Catch a Rising Star* and then the *Improv Club*
• Co-created the TV show *Seinfeld* with Larry David
• The TV show ran for 9 years from 1989 until 1998.
• Named by TV Guide as the “Greatest TV Show of all time.”
Jon Stewart

• Born Jonathan Stuart Leibowitz in NYC
• Influenced in adolescence by Vietnam and Watergate
• Described himself in high school as “very into Eugene Debs and a bit of a leftist.”
• In 1993 he developed *The Jon Stewart Show* for MTV
• From 1999 until 2015 he was the host of *The Daily Show.*
Mel Brooks

- Born Melvin Kaminsky in Brooklyn
- Began his show business career at age 14 as a drummer, taught by Buddy Rich
- Drafted into the Army during WWII, he defused land mines
- After the war, worked the Borsht Belt as a musician. Changed his name not to be confused with Max Kaminsky
- Hired by his friend Sid Caesar to write comedy
- He began doing improv with Carl Reiner to amuse themselves
- In 1960, the duo first performed the 2000 Year Old Man
- In 1965, teamed with Buck Henry to produce Get Smart
- In 1968 he wrote The Producers, produced by Joseph E. Levine and Sidney Glazier
Conclusion

• Usually verbal, sometimes based on subtle wordplay
• Ironic, satirical and often anti-authoritarian
• Self-deprecating, while at the same time self-praising
• Mocking religion, including (perhaps especially) Judaism
• Every form of adversity became a source of humor
• While these qualities stayed largely consistent, in America Jewish humor became part of mainstream culture
• In many ways, today American humor IS Jewish humor
Dedicated to “Prof.” Irwin Corey
The World's Foremost Authority

Born July 29, 1914, Brooklyn N.Y.
Died February 6, 2017 (age of 102)
Raised in the Hebrew Orphan Asylum of New York.
“However.....” (Famous opening word.)
“Wherever you go, there you are.”
“You can get further with a kind word and a gun than you can with just a kind word.”
“If we don't change direction soon, we'll end up where we're going.”
"I was introducing Tom Lehrer one night and I must've gone on for 20 minutes. When he finally did come onstage, he opened his act by saying, 'And in conclusion..'"