



# Jewish Humor

By Steve Cohen

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## Jewish Humor

Jewish humor has a long tradition in Judaism dating back to the Torah and the Midrash from the ancient mid-east. Today it refers to the more recent stream of verbal, self-deprecating and often anecdotal humor originating in Eastern Europe and which took root in the United States over the last hundred years. Beginning with vaudeville, and continuing through radio, stand-up comedy, film, and television, a disproportionately high percentage of American and Russian comedians have been Jewish.

Rabbi Moshe Waldoks, a scholar of Jewish humor, argued:

*You have a lot of shtoch, or jab humor, which is usually meant to deflate pomposity or ego, and to deflate people who consider themselves high and mighty. But Jewish humor was also a device for self-criticism within the community, and I think that's where it really was the most powerful. The humorist, like the prophet, would basically take people to task for their failings. The humor of Eastern Europe especially was centered on defending the poor against the exploitation of the upper classes or other authority figures, so rabbis were made fun of, authority figures were made fun of and rich people were made fun of. It really served as a social catharsis.*

After Jews began to immigrate to America in large numbers, they, like other minority groups, found it difficult to gain mainstream acceptance and obtain upward mobility. The newly-developing entertainment industry, combined with the Jewish humor tradition, provided a potential route for Jews to succeed. One of the first successful radio "sitcoms," *The Goldbergs*, featured a Jewish family.

As radio and television matured, many of its most famous comedians, including Jack Benny, Sid Caesar, George Burns, Henny Youngman and Milton Berle, were Jewish. The Jewish comedy tradition continues today, with Jewish humor much entwined with that of mainstream humor, as comedies like *Seinfeld* and *Curb Your Enthusiasm* indicate.

A number of traditions in Jewish humor date back to stories and anecdotes from the 19th century Chelm. One popular humorous tradition from Eastern Europe involved tales of the people of Chelm, a town reputed in these jokes to be inhabited by fools. The jokes were almost always centered on silly solutions to problems. Some of these solutions display "foolish wisdom" (reaching the correct answer by the wrong train of reasoning), while others are simply wrong.

Chelm tales were told by authors like Sholom Aleichem and Isaac Bashevis Singer. A typical Chelm story might begin, "It is said that after God made the world, he filled it with people. He sent off an angel with two sacks, one full of wisdom and one full of foolishness. The second sack was of course much heavier. So after a time it started to drag. Soon it got caught on a mountaintop and so all the foolishness spilled out and fell into Chelm."

An example: In Chelm, the shammes - the caretaker of a synagogue - used to go around waking everyone up for minyan (communal prayer) in the morning. Every time it snowed, the people would complain that, although the snow was beautiful, they could not see it in its pristine state because by the time they got up in the morning, the shammes had already trekked through the snow. The townspeople decided that they had to find a way to be woken up for minyan without having the shammes making tracks in the snow. The people of Chelm hit on a solution: they got four volunteers to carry the shames



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around on a table when there was fresh snow in the morning. That way, the shammes could make his wake up calls, but he would not leave tracks in the snow.

One common strain of Jewish humor examines the role of religion in contemporary life, often gently mocking the religious hypocrite.

A Reform Rabbi was so compulsive a golfer that once, on Yom Kippur, he left the house early and went out for a quick nine holes by himself. An angel who happened to be looking on immediately notified his superiors that a grievous sin was being committed. On the sixth hole, God caused a mighty wind to take the ball directly from the tee to the cup — a miraculous shot. The angel was horrified. “A hole in one!” he exclaimed, “You call this a punishment, Lord?!” Answered God with a sly smile, “So who can he tell?”

Religious humor comes in many shades: A Catholic priest says to a rabbi, “It seems to me that, since the Creator made pork, He must have made it for some purpose. Therefore, it must be a sin not to use it, don’t you think? So, will you finally eat some pork?” The rabbi replies, “I will try some — at your wedding, Father”

Often jokes revolve around the social practice of the Jewish religion:

*A man is rescued from a desert island after 20 years. The news media, amazed at this feat of survival, ask him to show them his home. “How did you survive? How did you keep sane?” they ask him, as he shows them around the small island. “I had my faith. My faith as a Jew kept me strong. Come.” He leads them to a small glen, where stands an opulent temple, made entirely from palm fronds, coconut shells and woven grass. The news cameras take pictures of everything — even a torah made from banana leaves and written in octopus ink. “This took me five years to complete.” “Amazing! And what did you do for the next fifteen years?” “Come with me.” He leads them around to the far side of the island. There, in a shady grove, is an even more beautiful temple. “This one took me twelve years to complete!” “But sir” asks the reporter, “Why did you build two temples?” “This is the temple I attend. That other place? Hah! I wouldn’t set foot in that other temple if you PAID me!”*

We can laugh with others but we should be cautious not to laugh at others for though their cultures may be different and languages strange to our own ears, we each have the same pressing need – to have our basic human needs met and to know that our eternal future is secure.



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