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# Introduction

## *The Best Medicine*

One morning, in Harvard's Semitic Museum where the Jewish Studies program is housed, I ran into two of my colleagues collecting their mail. The evening before, when I had lectured at a synagogue, a member of the audience had told me a good joke. I couldn't wait to share it:

Four Europeans go hiking together and get terribly lost.

First they run out of food, then out of water.

"I'm so thirsty," says the Englishman. "I must have tea!"

"I'm so thirsty," says the Frenchman. "I must have wine."

"I'm so thirsty," says the German. "I must have beer."

"I'm so thirsty," says the Jew. "I must have diabetes."

The joke was brand new when I told it that morning—though it is by now well worn, at least in part because I put it into circulation in published and recorded talks about Jewish humor. If you are into such things, you will appreciate my thrill at the laughter that greeted the punch line. How often do you get to tell Jews a joke that they haven't heard before?

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But as I was about to follow my colleagues out of the front office, the receptionist, who had overheard our conversation, told me that she found the joke offensive. Indeed, if we weren't Jews, she said, she would have called it anti-Semitic. Could I please explain what was funny about it and account for our hilarity?

This young woman, let me call her Samantha, was dating a Jewish student in our department, and as a Gentile, had previously asked me about unfamiliar terms and concepts in the novels of Isaac Bashevis Singer. Hence I took my time in reassuring her that stereotypes are a regular feature of joking, which depends for its effect on brevity. With no time for elucidation, jokes often designate people by a single characteristic. Is it fair that Poles or "Newfies" (Newfoundlanders) get labeled as dumb? Are all Scots stingy? Are all mothers-in-law hateful? Because compression of this kind is essential to the genre, a single national association represents each of the hikers in the joke, and whichever of them was placed last in a serial buildup would invariably be at variance with the others. As the last of the four, the Jew was *expected* to say something different.

But this did not yet seem to get to the heart of the matter, so I continued: The joke turns on the double meaning of the verb "to have": (a) to possess, as in, to have a drink, and (b) to be afflicted by or have a disease. Repetition of the first usage by the Englishman, the Frenchman, and the German raises the expectation that the verb will continue to be used in the same way. When the Jew breaks the pattern, we laugh at the displacement of one anxiety (thirst)

by a graver one (illness); Sigmund Freud provides a superb analysis of this technique in *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*. While the three hikers react to the problem at hand, the Jew anticipates its direst implications. The three want to quench their thirst, and he looks for complications behind the presumably obvious cause. Is he neurotic? A hypochondriac? Why is he conditioned for disaster? The joke may “know” what happened to the Jews of Europe and may assume that a Jew in European company is entitled to worry about his prospects of survival.

Forced in this way to think about the joke, I realized how it replicated the Jew’s anxiety. A Jew in mixed European company introduces an additional level of insecurity beyond the one involved in the hike. Many times I had stood in that very building with those same colleagues discussing a recent suicide bombing in Israel or trading stories about our relatives in some hostile climate. The Jewish hiker’s exaggerated worry made us laugh at a truth so ingeniously exposed. The joke organized our analogous concern and then exploded it to our surprised satisfaction.

I confess that my first impulse when Samantha asked me to explain the joke had been to tell her the famous one that introduces a collection of Yiddish humor by the folklorist Immanuel Olsvanger:

When you tell a joke to a peasant, he laughs three times, once when you tell it to him, the second time when you explain it to him, and the third time when he understands it.

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The landowner laughs twice. Once when you tell it to him and again when you explain it, because he never understands it.

The policeman laughs only once when you tell it to him, because he doesn't let you explain it so he never understands it.

When you tell a Jew a joke, he says, "I've heard it before. And I can tell it better."<sup>1</sup>

This joke ridicules those who don't get Jewish humor, in a pecking order of wit that is dominated by Jews to such a degree that their only competition is among themselves. Failure to laugh at a joke signifies something like dimness in the peasant, remoteness in the landowner, and severity in the police officer. The slowest to laugh is the most threatening, and the one who laughs soonest is the most human. If the Jew fails to laugh, it is not, God forbid, because he missed the point of the joke but because he has exhausted the fund of laughter. The joke uses humor as a touchstone of humanity, consigning those who lack it to some lower existence, but implying that Jews are almost too human for their own good.

Naturally, I didn't tell Sam this joke because it might have expanded the distance between us that we were trying to shrink. The Olsvanger joke, if I may call it that, assumes an adversarial relation between Gentiles and Jews. It suited European societies where Christian peasants, landowners, and police were often hostile to Jews; intended solely for those who spoke the Jewish language, it was told elsewhere in Europe about an Englishman, a Frenchman, and a German. The an-

tagonism of surrounding European societies made Jews eager for the only kind of payback they could afford to indulge. But as far as I know, the joke has no U.S. equivalent. Who would be its foils? Blacks, Hispanics, and WASPs? A bank teller, manager, and president? There may be plenty of ethnic and racial joking in the United States, and some anti-Jewish bigotry behind it, but nowadays East and West Coast Americans seem so familiar with Jewish comedy that I was frankly surprised Samantha did not join in our laughter. Had I thought the joke excluded her, I might not have told it in that semipublic space.

Sam seems to me like the kindly bystander who worries about the health of smokers. She wants to protect Jews from anti-Semitism, which she associates with whatever sets them apart. In her eagerness to draw us all together, she may fail to understand why we should accept, reinforce, and celebrate our peculiarity. So does Sam have a point? Is it appropriate to wonder why Jews should enjoy laughing at themselves? Why joking acquired such value in Jewish society, or why Yiddish—the language of European Jewry, whose culture I teach at the university—is thought to be inherently funny?

As it happens, joking had also figured at a faculty meeting a few weeks earlier—though lest you think this is what we do all day, let me say that I found such occasions memorable because they were rare. The senior faculty of Harvard's Department of Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations, which includes Jewish Studies, Arabic, Armenian, Turkish, and Persian as well as the languages and archaeology of the ancient Near East, had gathered to vote on a new professorial position. We had been looking so long for the "right person"

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that the dean was threatening to cancel the search if we did not immediately arrive at a decision. Our chair, who had also reached the limits of his patience, said he wanted a unanimous vote on our likeliest candidate, and that he would go around the table asking everyone either to agree or object with cause. The positive votes were adding up nicely until it came to our most demanding colleague, who had blocked some of the earlier applicants. He paused for a moment, then sighed and said, “Well, I guess he passes the Rosenberg test.” The non-Jewish members looked expectantly to us Jews, but we hadn’t a clue what this meant. Our colleague explained:

Mrs. Rosenberg goes to the butcher early Friday morning to buy her usual chicken for sabbath and begins her usual routine of inspection. She is not satisfied with an examination from across the counter, but asks the butcher to hand her the bird. She lifts each wing and sniffs suspiciously, then one leg at a time, and finally the orifice. The butcher, who has tired of this performance, says, “Frankly, Mrs. Rosenberg, I don’t know which of *us* could pass your test!”

The laughter that greeted this punch line sealed the decision. The fastidious colleague had told the joke at his own expense to expose the folly of excessive inspection. The mention of a Jewish-sounding name had raised expectations of some special Jewish wisdom only to dash them in a joke that was equally accessible to all. Implicitly, the laughter uniting us even included the prospective department member who had just been voted into our ranks.

These two examples of Jewish joking seem alike in making fun of Jews themselves, yet the ecumenicism of the second differs from the particularism of the first. Mrs. Rosenberg could have been Mrs. O'Brien stalking a Christmas turkey with no sacrifice of comic outcome, whereas the Jew's concern about diabetes spoofed some allegedly *Jewish* trait. The Jewish-sounding name that threatened to distinguish Jews from non-Jews in the Rosenberg joke was only part of the diversionary machinery that kept attention on the action until the final shift of focus, whereas in the hikers' joke the Jew was at once the target and audience. Here we see that even within the same academic department, Jewish joking can function in opposing ways to include and exclude different constituencies. How much more so in the geographically and linguistically divergent communities this book explores.

- Most of its aficionados take a positive view of Jewish joking. "Incidentally," writes Freud, one of its devotees, "I do not know whether there are many other instances of a people making fun to such a degree of its own character."<sup>2</sup> He writes this approvingly, adducing an example of Jewish self-deprecation:

A Galician Jew was traveling by train, and had made himself really comfortable, had unbuttoned his coat and put his feet up on the seat. [The regional designation here signifies traditionalism and lack of deportment.] Just then a gentleman in modern dress entered the compartment. The Galitsyaner promptly pulled himself together and took up a proper pose. The stranger fingered through the

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pages of a notebook, made some calculations, reflected for a moment and then suddenly asked the other: “Excuse me, when is Yom Kippur?” “Oho!” said our traveler, putting his feet up on the seat again as he answered.<sup>3</sup>

Freud thinks this anecdote conveys the Jews’ democratic mode of thinking, “which recognizes no distinction between lords and serfs, but also, alas, upsets discipline and co-operation.”<sup>4</sup> The joke reinforces the stereotype of the uncouth traditional Jew that exists in the mind of Gentiles, but redeems the indictment through the egalitarian spirit it uncovers among the Jews themselves. One may say the same of the analyst telling the joke. Freud, too, is relaxing, putting up his feet, indifferent to the impression he is making because he assumes that the others in his “compartment” of listeners or readers resemble him in finding it funny. (Regarding this intimacy, Theodor Reik, a member of Freud’s Vienna Psychoanalytic Society, recalls the quip of a fellow member at the appearance of Ernest Jones, one of the only non-Jews in their circle: “*Barukh atoh adonoy*, here comes the honor-Goy.”)<sup>5</sup>

But Freud’s contemporary Arthur Schnitzler treated Freud’s joke much more guardedly. In Schnitzler’s novel *Der Weg ins Freie* (The road into the open), published in 1908, three years after Freud’s book on joking, the Gentile protagonist Georg von Wergenthin is engaged in conversation with Jewish friends in his Viennese circle, among them the playwright Heinrich Bermann:

Heinrich laughed. “You know the story about the Polish Jew who sat with a stranger in a railroad car, very

politely—until he realized from a remark of the other that he was a Jew, too, whereupon, with a sigh of *azoy*, he immediately put his legs up on the seat across from him?”

“Very good,” said Georg.

“More than that,” continued Heinrich forcefully.

“Deep. Deep like so many Jewish anecdotes. They offer an insight into the tragicomedy of contemporary Judaism. They express the eternal truth that one Jew never really gets respect from another. Never. Just as little as prisoners in an enemy country show respect for one another, especially the hopeless. Envy, hatred, sometimes even admiration, in the end even love can exist between them; respect never. For all emotional relationships take place in an atmosphere of familiarity, so to speak, in which respect is stifled.”

“Do you know what I think?” Georg remarked. “That you are a worse anti-Semite than most Christians I know.”<sup>6</sup>

Both versions of this joke feature the same discourteous Galician or Polish Jew, but what Freud celebrates as creative interdependency, Heinrich deplors as self-contempt. In Schnitzler’s scenario, the Jew does not tell the joke expecting to elicit a laugh; he knows that the most he can expect from the Gentile Georg is comprehension—the approbation of his “Very good.” He does not tell the joke to reinforce Jewish familiarity but rather to protest the imprisoning ghetto in which it thrives. Georg, in turn, knows himself excluded by this joke about Jewish intimacy and grasps how much it owes to the anti-Semitism that calls it forth.

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Freud and Schnitzler, Jewish contemporaries in Vienna, use Jewish joking to different ends. Freud delights in Jewish jokes and relays them for a general public in the same open spirit that they were told. He cheerfully pours out his evidence in a context of scientific investigation, extrapolating general principles from Jewish particulars without bothering about their provenance and ignoring that they are often antithetical to the traditions of German culture.

In contrast, Schnitzler's novel investigates the context of Freud's joking and questions its effects. Intelligent people pay attention to the social climate and don't strip naked before a frigid audience. They take into account the relation of cause and effect: Jewish joking is the product of an intricate culture, conceived in a Jewish language or idiom, drawing on Jewish memory, and responsive to shared experiences, especially of the deleterious kind. A reinforcement of collective identity, such joking necessarily calls attention to the difference between Jews and non-Jews, and even when explained, the fact that it requires explanation. The better the joke, the more it separates Jews from those it excludes. If Jews are "prisoners in an enemy country," to use Heinrich's comparison, they might do better to try to reach *der weg ins freie*, "the road to greater freedom," than to channel their humiliation into laughter. Schnitzler appreciates the humor no less than Freud, but uses it to dramatize the danger it harbors.

Just to bring the Viennese joke up to date, here is a more recent one on the relative civility of Jews and Gentiles:

A flight to Israel in late December is about to land. "This is your captain speaking. This is the culmination of El Al

flight 761, and we welcome you to Ben Gurion airport in Tel Aviv. Please remain seated with your seat belts fastened until the plane is at a complete standstill and the seat belt signs have been turned off. [Pause.] And to those of you who are still seated, we wish you a Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year.”<sup>7</sup>

How do we think *this* joke would fare in mixed company? The enormous differences in culture and politics between 1908 Austrian Vienna and Cambridge, Massachusetts, a century later make it all the more curious that sympathetic listeners in both—Georg there and Samantha here—should point alike to injurious strains in this favored Jewish pastime. The laughter invoked to offset anti-Jewish hostility concedes enough of that hostility to be mistaken for the thing itself. What Jews make fun of in their own character reflects to a perilous degree what others object to. Just as inoculations can make you ill if they are too powerful, self-deprecation that is too clever, too constant, too “deep,” may highlight the deformity it is trying to overcome.

Many of us experience ourselves successively or simultaneously as insiders and outsiders. That morning in the main office of Harvard’s Semitic Museum—originally erected in tribute to the common origins of the three “Abrahamic” religions—telling a joke was a way of creating and enjoying camaraderie among Jews. Its unforeseen consequence was the momentary separation of us in the department along lines other than those of function (academic and nonacademic staff) and gender (males and females). Thanks to Sam’s initiative, the momen-

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tary separation between Jew and Gentile was overcome. She may someday shrink it further by marrying the student she is dating. But for the moment, let us note that the discomfort to Sam is also how we know that it was a Jewish joke. You know it is vinegar when you see it separating from oil.

### ■ What to Expect

*Jewish humor* rolls cheerfully off the tongue, like *French cuisine* and *Turkish baths*. “Jewish humor is one of the wonders of the world,” declares the London *Daily Telegraph*. “No other community can compete with the range and subtlety of Jewish jokes.”<sup>8</sup> Estimates of the proportion of Jewish professionals in U.S. comedy sometimes ran as high as 80 percent. “Indeed, it is difficult to imagine what would remain of American humor in the twentieth century without its Jewish component.”<sup>9</sup> The same has been said of Berlin in the 1920s and Russia during the seventy-five years of Bolshevik rule.

Almost as daunting as the corpus of Jewish humor is the supply of scholarship and commentary that threatens to overwhelm it. In the late 1960s BSE (before search engines), when I wrote my dissertation on the comic figure of the schlemiel as hero of modern Jewish literature, some Jewish psychoanalysts—Freud, Reik, and Martin Grotjahn—seemed the only ones apart from Yiddish literary critics who had thought deeply about the subject. Today, organizations like the Association for Applied and Therapeutic Humor, founded in 1987, and the International Society for Humor Studies,

founded in 1989—there is also a (fictitious) Canadian Association for Therapeutic Humour—sit atop an ever-expanding field of scholarship interested in Jewish humor. A bibliography on a subject like the schlemiel would by now fill its own book.

This burgeoning field of study puts every general claim about Jewish humor to the test. Freud's observation, cited above, that there are few other instances of a people making fun to such a degree of its own character, has been modified by Christie Davies's comparison of Jews to Scots, who appear to have a higher proportion of self-deprecating jokes, although not in the same absolute numbers or of the same quality.<sup>10</sup> Elliott Oring takes exception to the assumption that Jews are "the people of the joke," pointing out that as late as 1893, the chief rabbi of London, Hermann Adler, found it necessary to defend Jews against the charge that they were a humorless people.<sup>11</sup> Oring argues that Jewish humor as we know it is a late invention. In turn, the conference volume *Jews and Humor*, which traces the subject from the Bible through Talmud and midrash to modern times, though with an admitted emphasis on the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, challenges Oring's contention.<sup>12</sup> Hillel Halkin finds the beginnings of modern Jewish humor in the Hebrew geniuses of medieval Iberia.<sup>13</sup> Some believe that it starts with the rise of the wedding jester, or *badkhen*.<sup>14</sup>

I cheerfully confess that theories about humor interest me less than the evidence they offer of folk creativity—jokes being the only surviving form of "folklore" that is not protectable by copyright. From the late eighteenth century onward, we have some record of the Jewish humor that bubbled up

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from below as well as whatever came from writers and intellectuals. Of all the arts, humor depends the most on its immediate context, which makes it hard to generalize about this body of wit shaped variously by different surroundings and circumstances. Getting jokes is usually the hardest stage of acculturation, and the languages in which they joked separated as much as they united Jews in modern times.

In place of a general theory, I therefore intend to offer a descriptive map of some of the centers where Jewish humor thrived and where it still prospers, drawing examples from literature and mass culture that acted on one another. These comparative instances of Jewish humor in various languages should caution against overly facile generalizations about its provenance and nature. Laughter may be universal, but we will benefit from looking at some of the market conditions governing its production and consumption.

Since books have to begin somewhere, my point of departure will be Heinrich Heine (1797–1856), whose impact on Jewish humor was stronger than anyone's until Sholem Aleichem (Sholem Rabinovich, 1859–1916), born three years after Heine died. It was Heine who set the tone for Yiddish humor magazines on the Lower East Side of New York in the first decades of the twentieth century, more than did Sholem Aleichem, who shared the language of those magazines. No image of the Jew has exerted stronger influence than Heine's of the Jewish people as a bewitched prince:

Hund mit hündischen Gedanken,  
Köttert er die ganze Woche

Durch des Lebens Kot und Kehrlicht,  
Gassenbuben zum Gespötte.

Aber jeden Freitagabend,  
In der Dämmerungstunde, plötzlich  
Weicht der Zauber, und der Hund  
Wird aufs neu ein menschlich Wesen.

Mensch mit menschlichen Gefühlen,  
Mit erhobnem Haupt und Herzen,  
Festlich, reinlich schier gekleidet,  
Tritt er in des Vaters Halle.

[As a dog, thinking doggy thoughts,  
he curs it all week long  
through the filth and rubbish of this world,  
while street urchins mock him.

But every Friday night,  
as dusk falls, suddenly  
the spell is lifted, and the dog  
turns, once again, into a human being.

As a man, with a man's thoughts,  
head and heart proudly uplifted,  
dressed festively, cleanly and neatly,  
he enters his father's house.]<sup>15</sup>

The once-sovereign Jew who is now schnorring leftovers in other people's lands appears in the poem, "Princess Sabbath," which spans the heights and depths of Jewish experience in a tragi-comic mix. Without ever naming the wizardry that

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has cast its evil spell on the Jews, Heine deplores what he pictures as their everyday degradation in Europe, except for the interval of dignity they assume once a week in the privacy of their homes. This representation of the Jew fallen from ancient glory and exiled from ancient homeland came from deeper in the Jewish psyche than the competing Christian and anti-Jewish image of the Wandering Ahasuerus who has been doomed for the sin of denying Christ. Many laughed with Heine at his incongruous portrait—laughed ruefully, “with lizards,” as the Yiddish expression had it.

If the first chapter showcases Heine in the German sphere of Jewish humor, Sholem Aleichem follows as the central figure in the formation of Yiddish humor, drawing from intersecting streams of folk humor that converged wherever Jews lived, exploiting the wordplay of traditional sources and dialectical differences among speakers from various regions.

Once spoken by more Jews than have ever shared the same language at any time in Jewish history, Yiddish was treated by some as the mongrel of Heine’s sabbath poem and charged with having stolen scraps from other languages. But the vernacular delighted in its hybridity. With little reputation to protect, Yiddish enjoyed flaunting what others considered its flaw—its mixtures and fusions—along with the tension between sabbath and weekday, or sacred and profane, that was implicit in the interplay between Hebrew and Yiddish. Yiddish, the subject of my second chapter, gave Heine’s crossbreed the means to speak for itself—even to the point of mocking the culture of Heine. As if to illustrate that Yiddish allowed Jews to escape their caricature, the Yiddish and

Hebrew writer Mendele Mocher Sforim (acknowledged by Sholem Aleichem as his literary progenitor) wrote a Yiddish novel in which Heine's bewitched Jew, in the form of a mare rather than a dog, shames the reformer who tries to "civilize" her.<sup>16</sup> According to this version of the fable, Yiddish set the Jewish tongue free, and by allowing Jews to speak for themselves, restored them to human form.

"Now let us leave the princess and look in on the prince" is how Sholem Aleichem might have spoofed the transition from a chapter on Yiddish to one on humor in English. There was no need for Aesopian language in the lands and language of the free, because in Britain or the United States there was no political censorship of the kind that existed under the Russian czars. Discrimination against Jews abated to the point that Madison Avenue advised, "Dress British, think Yiddish." Without obscuring the differences between England and its former colony, the chapter on Jewish humor in the English language traces its phenomenal rise and spread from the Borscht Belt to the comedy clubs, from Whitechapel to the Web.

Jewish comedy must go where the Jews go, into the concentration camps of Adolf Hitler and gulags of Joseph Stalin. The witticism that stands at the heart of this book was recorded in Yiddish in the Warsaw Ghetto: "God forbid that this war should last as long as we are able to endure it." This saying pits the monomaniac obduracy of the "Final Solution" against the even greater stubbornness of Jewish survival, recognizing, however, that no such plucky stubbornness should ever have been required. By treating fascism and communism in tandem, chapter 4 shows how freely humor under

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oppression passed from one sphere to the other even as the humorists themselves remained trapped. Russian humor is much more abundant than German humor, but the repressive tactics of the two brutal regimes that are the targets of such jokes induced comparable and often identical humor among their Jews. One might say that modern Jews are known best through their humor and the Holocaust; while this book follows many others in celebrating the virtues of the former, it also explores correlations between it and the latter.

Finally, I approach what may prove the most lasting topic: emerging Jewish humor in the Land of Israel, where it was least expected to flourish, yet where it is by now as entrepreneurial as technology. Heine's mutt turned up early on, in unlikely form, in a novel, *Only Yesterday*, by S. Y. (Shai) Agnon (1888–1970), so far the greatest of Hebrew novelists, and there the dog runs amok—like the humor of which it forms an element. I will not trace the long and troubled path of the book's hero, Yitzhak Kumer, who arrives as a young settler in Palestine during the pioneering days, except to recall that by way of a joke, Kumer paints the words “mad dog” on the fur of a stray. Jokes have their consequences, and the dog Balak turns mad indeed and fatally bites the man who dubs him mad. That the dog also bears the name of a biblical enemy of the children of Israel invites the myriad interpretations that the book has received. According to Agnon, Heine's prince may now be restored to his homeland, but he remains in danger of self-transmogrification, of inadvertently doing damage to himself. I cite this famous episode from *Only Yesterday* merely to suggest how humor in Israel takes up the tradition into which it was born.

Yet the chapter on Israel also includes jokes that lack the angst of that tradition:

A rabbi dies and rises to the gates of heaven. As he waits for admission, an Israeli bus driver comes up beside him. Without a second thought, the admitting angel waves the bus driver through. The rabbi cries, “Hey! How come he gets in so quickly? He’s a bus driver, while I’m a rabbi!” The angel explains, “When you delivered your sermons during the prayer service, the whole congregation fell asleep. When this man drove to Tel Aviv, all his passengers were praying to God!”

Like the joke about Mrs. Rosenberg inspecting the poultry, this one, too, with a little tweaking, could be transposed to an Irish Catholic context.

## ■ With What Do We Eat It?

This book’s inquiry into the varieties of Jewish humor in different languages and under diverse conditions hopes to advance our understanding of its various parts along with our appreciation of the whole. There is no denying that humor, the consummate insider’s sport, has flourished among Jews, prompting us to ask *why* this activity should enjoy such widespread popularity. The subject begins to interest us at the point that humor is identified by others and Jews themselves as a Jewish specialty, a pursuit disproportionately associated with Jews. That this occurs only at certain points of intersection between tradition

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and modernity helps us arbitrate the dispute between those who want to trace its origins back to biblical times, and others who insist on its contemporaneity. Jewish humor obviously derives from Jewish civilization, but Jews became known for their humor only starting with the Enlightenment. As this book will show, it responds to conditions of Jewish life, but only where it becomes the response of choice.

This focus on Jewish humor at the point that the phrase begins to trip off the tongue accounts for what some readers may resent as the Eurocentrism of this book. Comedy and laughter are common to all cultures, and for most of Jewish history, humor was no more observably associated with Jews than with other religious or ethnic groups. In some parts of the Jewish world, this remains the case. The Ladino folktales of the Jewish trickster *Joha* bear a close resemblance to the Arabic ones of the Muslim trickster *Juha* and his Turkish counterpart *Nasreddin*, but recent collectors of these tales do not claim they were any more prominent among Jews than their analogous versions among other peoples of Yemen, Iran, Egypt, Turkey, or Morocco. Jewish humor in Judeo-Persian, Judeo-Arabic, and Judeo-Spanish, or *Judezmo* (Ladino), generated no treatises about the *schlemiel* or *schlimazel*, and no theories about parody as compensation for powerlessness. Jews laughed in Casablanca as they did in Kraków, and maybe at some of the same things, but though there are scarcely five hundred Jews left in Kraków, its bookstores still carry Polish collections of Jewish humor, whereas today's Casablanca, with more than ten times as many Jews, has no such Arabic equivalent. Jews of Arab lands appeared to have acquired no comparable *reputation* for humor.

The Yiddish expression, *mit vos est men es?* (With what does one eat this?) means something like, “Please explain to me why this matters?” or, “How does this apply?” That Jewish humor becomes prominent at a certain point does not yet address its significance or functions. How and why does it explode at the point when ghetto doors are breached, and as Jews begin mingling with fellow Europeans who also are being granted new rights and freedoms? Suppose we establish that it gains momentum among Jews who lose divine justification for their exceptionalism and now face the world stripped of the authority of the covenant in whose name they were Jews. Suppose we see its escalation in times of threat—which are nothing new in a history replete with massacres, expulsions, and inquisition, but are now experienced for the first time without the perceived protection of God in whose name Jews are being threatened. Suppose we can demonstrate that Jewish humor erupts at moments of epistemological and political crisis, and intensifies when Jews need new ways of responding to pressure. Does this mean that humor compensates them for the absent security? Does it work to their benefit or detriment? Does it become a secular expression of their identity? And what do these findings tell us about the universal significance and functions of humor?

To be sure, Oring’s cautionary note about the chief rabbi of London reminds us that not everyone savored Jewish humor to the same degree. Observant Jews who kept their cultural distance from Gentile society, whether in Christian or Muslim lands, did not all take up the Jewish sport with the same enthusiasm as those who relished contradictions between the foun-

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dational idea of Jewish *chosenness* and the historical record of persecution. At the other end of the religious spectrum, young people dedicated to socialist or nationalist political action did not appreciate ridicule of their goals. “How many feminists does it take to change a lightbulb?” “That’s not funny!” Ideologues do not welcome levity. Joking flourishes among those who sustain contrariedades, tolerate suspense, and perhaps even relish insecurity. Many writers featured in this book are situated—none put it better than Franz Kafka—with their posterior legs still glued to their father’s Jewishness, and their waving anterior legs finding no new ground. But other Jews preferred to seek out steady, level land.

As for Jewish humor’s genealogy, scholars are certainly justified in tracing its roots to its sources in the Bible and Talmud. One might locate the seeds of Jewish skepticism in Sarah’s laughter when she is informed in Genesis 18:12 that she and Abraham, at their very advanced age, will conceive a child. “Therefore Sarah laughed within herself, saying, ‘After I have grown old shall I have pleasure, my lord being old also?’” Joking frequently exposes unauthorized truths, and Sarah’s trust in biological probability over divine prophecy is an early example of the cognitive independence that Judaism encourages. Biblical challengers to authority often outdid even the boldest of moderns in daring, and the Talmudic record of disputation supplies incontrovertible proof that Abraham and Job invited emulation on the part of generations of rabbis. Yet the Bible confirms that Sarah *did* bear Isaac, and duly named her son *Yitzhak*, signifying a laughter of joy more than cynicism; Abraham’s challenge to God over His intention

of destroying Sodom is finally quashed by the wickedness of that condemned city. In each case, the Bible's claim of divine authorship guarantees the predominance of the Lord's point of view. Modern humorists, in contrast, challenge authority without conceding its supreme authority.

Similarly, while Jewish tradition offers occasions of merriment and templates for humor, these are part of an ultimately, if not at all times, well-ordered universe. Jews everywhere celebrated the feast of Purim that recorded the improbable political victory of their ancestors Esther and Mordecai over their archenemy Haman in Persia. On that day of merry-making, the Talmud encourages drinking to the point that one can no longer distinguish "cursed be Haman" from "blessed be Mordecai." Some communities of eastern Europe got into the spirit of inversion by appointing a Purim rabbi to upend homiletics for a day. But in the 1930s, as we will see, a Yiddish writer forging his own rendition of the Purim story felt it necessary to add a jilted lover and failed assassin to the cast of characters to represent the disastrous realities of Jewish politics that stood in ironic contrast to the victory recorded in the Book of Esther. Rather than celebrating the exception, he reintroduced the more likely failure, reversing the reversal, recording what the Jews of Europe were actually experiencing in his time.

Modern Yiddish "proverbs" did the same with the liturgy: "Thou hast chosen us from among the nations—why did you have to pick on the Jews?" "God will provide—if only He would provide until He provides." "Pray to the Lord—and talk to the wall." Whereas religion reinforced God's promise,

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modern humor questions His constancy. True, modern scholarship has found commonalities in the language play of the midrash and Marx Brothers, and some of this material will be alluded to in the following chapters. But it was only in the modern period that humor became the *aim* of such entertainment as opposed to a delightful by-product of otherwise-earnest interpretation.

All this is to say that this book explores Jewish humor at the point that it becomes a modern phenomenon. A creation of the Jewish people, drawing on its texts and habits of mind as well as heart, reflecting its historical development and interaction with surrounding cultures, it emerges from Baruch Spinoza's mid-seventeenth-century denial of any functional reciprocity between the divine and human spheres, thus undercutting the philosophical basis of the covenant without dissolving the community formed by its demands. The ensuing rifts between the religious and agnostics, elites and masses, and especially warring impulses of loyalty and restiveness within individual Jews and their communities generates the humor that is this book's subject. Jews who found cognitive security in tradition or revolution may not have needed humor to reconcile their contrarities, but they became the unwitting butt of the conflicted Jews who did.

An association with humor would seem to have benefited Jews, since physiologists nowadays confirm the advantages of joking, long since touted by philosophers:

[Laughing] lowers blood pressure, reduces stress hormones, increases muscle flexion, and boosts immune func-

tion by raising levels of infection-fighting T-cells, disease-fighting proteins called Gamma-interferon and B-cells, which produce disease-destroying antibodies. Laughter also triggers the release of endorphins, the body's natural painkillers, and produces a general sense of well-being.<sup>17</sup>

A popular Web site lists among the benefits of laughter everything from the relief of physical tension and prevention of heart disease to strengthened friendships and the promotion of group bonding.<sup>18</sup> Sholem Aleichem was fond of saying, "Laughter is good for you. Doctors prescribe laughter."<sup>19</sup> Now that its therapeutic value is being scientifically confirmed, why would anyone question the merits of joking?

Yet I am obliged to ask whether an excess of laughter might exacerbate the tensions it is meant to alleviate. Can a surfeit of comedy be unhealthy? Is there a point at which too much joking could cause someone harm? In his biography of Lenny Bruce, Albert Goldman describes a fellow comedian engaging in what Germans call *Todlachen*—making people helpless with laughter so that they beg him to stop. "When he sees you're on the ropes, going down, he works twice as hard to kill you. Zooms in close to your face, locks onto the rhythms of your body, lasers and razors you till finally you tear yourself away."<sup>20</sup> The ostensible provider of psychic relief appears to have become an instrument of torture. As it happens, Sholem Aleichem uses the quoted tagline, "Doctors prescribe laughter," at the end of a story that takes its hero beyond comedy into madness. Speaking as the professed comic writer, he asks the readers' pardon for having

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been unable to rescue the humor from its end in tragedy. The late rabbi Joshua Schmidman, who had considered becoming a stand-up comic but found himself officiating instead at a great many funerals, was fond of reminding his congregation that Judaism considered dying only a *minhag*, not a *mitzvah*. He might have said the same about joking: it is only a custom, not a religious imperative, and it is a custom that may be revved up into overkill.

### ■ Caveat Emptor

I was once addressing an academic audience, and caught off guard by a request to tell them my favorite Yiddish joke, could only come up with a quip attributed to the Zionist activist Shmaryahu Levin: *di yidn zenen a kleyn folk, nor paskudne*, “Jews are a small people, but rotten.” A deadly silence fell, and my discomfort was so great I felt obliged to try to explain: “The expected reversal introduced by ‘but’ is supposed to be followed by a mitigating quality to compensate the Jews for their ‘smallness.’ Instead, it damns them for their nastiness,” or words to that effect. All the while, I was thinking, How fortunate the audience that doesn’t understand Levin’s sally! Anyone who lives at the heart of the Jewish community—of any community—and is fighting an uphill battle for what they think is in its best interest would appreciate the frustrations that triggered this epigram. Levin (1867–1935) might happily have traded in the witticism for a stretch of Jewish history calmer than the one he had to navigate.

An analogous moment of bitter intimacy occurs in the wondrous story “Gedali” by the Russian Jewish writer Isaac Babel (1894–1940). The tale is based on Babel’s own experiences as a Soviet propagandist for the Bolshevik revolution. His narrator, Lyutov, is accompanying the Red Army as it fights its way into Poland, harassing (to put it mildly) the Jews in the small towns it occupies. One Friday evening, Lyutov is engaged in a conversation with a Jewish shopkeeper, Gedali, who cannot reconcile the revolution’s stated intentions with the barbarous actions of its enforcers. The old Jew complains, “The International, comrade, one does not know what to eat it with.” “One eats it with gunpowder,” I replied to the old man, “And seasons it with the finest blood.”<sup>21</sup>

Gedali’s Yiddish expression, *mit vos est men es*, translated in the Russian text, conveys how much understanding still exists between these two politically divided Yiddish speakers, and also between the author, Babel, and the native language and culture that he is suppressing. Lyutov’s reply is as brutal as the actions of the Cossack soldiers. Of all those who justified Bolshevism, no one ever assumed as much moral blame for it as this Jewish writer from the Odessan Jewish heartland, who did finally season it with the finest blood—his own. Babel *exaggerated* his complicity with evil in order to exploit for irony the paradoxes of a Yiddish-speaking Jew (himself) defending the violence of Cossacks to a fellow Jew with whom he then welcomes in the sabbath.

My discussion of humor, which includes all manner of comedy, satire, and irony commensurate with the ironies of Jewish experience, goes well beyond light entertainment and what

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some consider funny. It is therefore not surprising that in the following chapters, some of the strongest warnings against the excesses of humor come from its finest practitioners—Kafka, Sholem Aleichem, Babel, and Philip Roth—which of course did not prevent them from continuing the practice. If there were an Olympics for irony, *Hatikvah* (The Hope), might be the most played national anthem in the world. The Zionist leader Ze'ev Jabotinsky is reputed to have said of it, “Don’t count on me to stand still during the singing of the national anthem if at the same moment I feel someone picking my pocket.”

When they search for universal aspects of human behavior, social scientists—many of them Jews—sometimes underplay the distinctions among cultures. But as long as Jewish experience remains distinctive, so, too, will its impulse for laughter. This book demonstrates how the benefits of Jewish humor are reaped from the paradoxes of Jewish life, so that Jewish humor at its best carries the scars of the convulsions that brought it into being.

Which might have remained an insular problem were it not for the fact that by now, much of the United States is almost as addicted to joking as are the Jews. News programs regularly end with comic segments, as though the reporters were charged to leave ’em laughing. We are told that most young people take their news straight—straight from the comedians. When did news get to be an excuse for comedy? Or rather, when did Americans begin to deal with the news by laughing at its absurdities and their own attempts to solve the problems of the world?

Laughter may be the best medicine, but conscientious doctors also warn against overdose.

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