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“Stereotypes in Jewish Humor”

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A bar mitzvah is defined as the day when a Jewish boy comes to the realization that he is more likely to own a professional sports team than he is to play for one.

Jewish humor is an important part of the culture of the Jewish people. Jews – from secular to very orthodox – integrate humor into their lives. Based on the jokes I read while doing my research, I found that much Jewish humor over the past 100 years is very funny. I discovered a lot of Jewish jokes are based on different types of people, which are what make the jokes funny. In order to understand them and share this humor, you must be familiar with the stereotype, but it may also make the joke irrelevant. A stereotype may change or nobody may know of it, or it may become so offensive it is not used anymore.

Although the roots of Jewish humor cannot be traced to an exact place or time, Jewish humor probably originated sometime between the medieval times and the late 19th century. The earliest traces come from medieval times in the Middle East. Humor helped them to not give up on life, even when they were poor, persecuted, or being expelled from their homes. Humor was a way to gain control over life and to get rid of anxiety.

Today, we tell jokes to celebrate our Jewish heritage, to reflect on our own situation or simply to be funny. As you will see there are many categories. Some Jewish humor, like the movie “Borat” by Sacha Baron Cohen, is anti-**anti**-Semitism. In other words, a joke that makes fun of anti-Semitism.

To write this paper I began by going to websites and reading hundreds and hundreds of jokes. I picked out the ones that I really liked. I made an outline for each joke, which answered a few questions, such as, is this joke based on a stereotype, and is this joke classic or contemporary. I quickly found out that finding good jokes was a lot harder than I expected. After about a month I finally had one hundred jokes. I printed them out and made envelopes for the jokes, each labeled with different categories. Among them were jokes about Jewish mothers, cheap Jews, and rabbi jokes.

The envelope with the most jokes was in fact, jokes that have Jewish topics but would still be funny if changed to non-Jewish subjects. My favorite two categories are mother jokes and cheap jokes. They are my favorites because they are the two categories in which the punch line is something I understand.

After we had all the jokes filed away my mom, my dad, and I all read more about Jewish humor. At this point, my dad and I found out that one of the worst things you can do to a joke is to dissect it like a story, and look at its plot, characters and that sort of stuff. This is so true that after I explained a joke that was one of my favorites to my mom, it just wasn’t funny anymore and it never went into my favorites pile.

*A gentile once asked Rabbi Goldberg,
"Tell me, Rabbi, is it true that a Jew always answers a question with another one?"*

*The rabbi eyed him suspiciously and replied,
"Who told you that?"*

Some traditional subject categories of Jewish humor are, scholar jokes, old Russia jokes, food jokes and Hassidic jokes. Some of these categories are not as relevant anymore, as American Jews are more integrated and assimilated into the larger community and are farther up the cultural or generational ladder.

For example, jokes about Communist rulers don't seem as important or funny as they once were, because Communism isn't thought of in the same way. 50 years ago people were afraid of Communism the same way we are afraid of terrorism today. Now it is just another government and although it is not liked it is no longer feared.

Jewish mother jokes are still funny, but may also have lost some of their significance or punch since many Jewish mothers are no longer stay-at-home people who rule the household!

The first Jewish President calls his mother in Queens and invites her for Chanukah. "I'd like to," she says, "but it's so much trouble...First, I have to get a cab to the airport, and I hate waiting on Queens Boulevard...."

"Mom! I'm President of the United States! I'll send Air Force One!"

"Yes, but when we land I'll still have to carry my luggage through the airport... And try to find a cab...And you know what holiday crowds are like..."

"Mom! I'll have a helicopter pick you up! You'll go straight from the plane to my front lawn!"

"I don't know... I'd still need a hotel room. And hotels are so expensive. And they're not like they used to be..."

"Ma! You'll stay at the White House!"

"Well..." She thinks. "I guess. O.K. "she sighs," I'll come...for you."

That afternoon, she's talking on the phone with one of her friends. "What's new?" The friend asks?

"I'm visiting my son for Chanukah."

"The doctor?"

"No, The other one"

Most of these old jokes are about mothers and their sons, in which the men were the important part of the family and had to do the jobs like be a doctor and a lawyer while the women were caretakers who stayed at home, raised the children, and took care of the house. In the new generation many women do the same jobs as men and are not solely wives and mothers. With Hillary Clinton running for U.S. president, we can no longer see our mothers as my great grandparents did many, many years ago.

But in another way, some of the Jewish mother stereotypes are still alive. My mother is always pushing me to my limits, so I can be successful in life, which is something that comes up in Jewish mother stereotypes. This proves that although we think of stereotypes as a bad thing, they can also exaggerate a positive characteristic. Without that confidence behind us, many of us "men" would not be as successful. The idea of Jewish mothers pushing their children to be successful is most obvious in the stereotype that Jews only want their children to be doctors or lawyers. The next joke is one example of that.

*A couple sends out a birth announcement: Mr. and Mrs. Marvin Rosenbloom are pleased to announce the birth of their son, **Doctor** Jonathon Rosenbloom.*

These days I think parents are happy if their child is successful on his or her own terms. I have never heard my Mom or Dad say, "You better be a doctor when you grow up." A parent may be upset if their daughter or son is unhappy with his or her job. Many parents would much rather their kid be happy as a chef or a comic, than be miserable as a lawyer or a doctor.

For some, Yiddish is an important aspect of Jewish humor, and of course, only a few generations ago, was the language of many Jewish immigrants. However, most American Jews can't speak Yiddish anymore. I learned there are many jokes in Yiddish that I didn't get because of the language.

But a few Yiddish words have become so popular and that they have become part of the American English lexicon. For example, the word "kvetch", which means to complain, has been added to the Webster's Collegiate Dictionary. Here is an example of a kvetch joke:

A guy gets a new dog, a nice Jewish dog. He names the dog Einstein and trains Einstein to do a couple of tricks. He can't wait to show Einstein off to his neighbor. A few weeks later when the neighbor finally comes over, the guy calls Einstein into the house, bragging about how smart he is.

*The dog quickly comes running and stands looking up at his master, tail wagging excitedly, mouth open, tongue hanging out, and eyes bright with anticipation. The guy points to the newspaper on the couch and commands "**Fetch!**"*

Immediately, the dog climbs onto the couch and sits, his tail wagging furiously. Then all of a sudden, he stops. His doggie smile disappears. He starts to frown and puts on a sour face. Looking up at his master, he whines, "You think this is easy, wagging my tail all the time? Oy vey ... And you think its easy eating that junk that you call designer dog food? Forget it ... it's too salty and it gives me gas. It's disgusting I tell you!"

The neighbor is absolutely amazed ... stunned. In astonishment, he says, "I can't believe it. Einstein can speak. Your dog actually talks. You asked him to fetch the newspaper and he is sitting on the sofa talking to us."

*"I know, I know," says the dog owner. "He's not yet fully trained. He thought I said **kvetch.**"*

Another stereotype might have originated from the medieval times when it was against Christian law to lend money, and the majority of the population was Christian. Some Jews were able to take advantage of this and the fact that money lending did not require owning land, which Jews were forbidden from doing, and they became money lenders. In some places, they developed sophisticated banking practices and thrived on this part of the economy, even becoming wealthy. And yet these activities surrounding money, loans, and interest payments also played a role in forming the negative stereotype of the Jewish money lender.

Unfortunately, the stereotype was fueled by anti-Semitism and hatred, and at the same time exaggerated to make it seem worse. Then the stereotype that Jews are very rich was in vogue when Hitler was in power, and he told people that Jews controlled the banks and all the world's money.

As Rabbi Peter explained to me these stereotypes of being cheap and of being rich are two sides of the same coin and both are ways antisemites attack Jews. All of this leads to “Cheap Jew” jokes.

Abe's son arrives home from school puffing and panting, sweat rolling down his face.

*"Dad, you'll be so proud of me" he says, "I saved a dollar by running behind the **bus** all the way home."*

*"Oy" says Abe, "You could have run behind **a taxi** and saved \$20"*

Abe wants his son to save a lot of money, and when his son runs behind the bus to save a dollar, he is disappointed and tells him should have run behind a taxi to save 20 dollars when he would still only be saving one. This joke has two main characteristics, frugality and logic. The Jew is cheap and wants to save a lot of money, which is a trait of frugality.

The Jew is also using logic by thinking, if you don't take the bus you are *not spending* 1 dollar, therefore if you run behind a taxi you are *not spending* 20 dollars. This can either be a stereotype that Jews do not always use common sense or that Jews can be wisely foolish at times, as in their idea is logical but it is not following the rules of the world.

The most famous subject of this wisely foolish category is the fictional Jewish town of Chelm. Chelm appears mostly in Jewish folklore. The story behind Chelm says that god made two kinds of people smart people and foolish people, and when an angel was delivering the foolish people to the world he dropped the bag and all of them fell into Chelm. One tale of Chelm goes like this.

Two Citizens of Chelm are talking. One looks at the sky and suddenly asks, "Which do you think is more important, the sun or the moon?"

"The sun, obviously," is the response.

"You're wrong,"

"How can I be wrong?"

"Don't you understand that the moon is more important? After all, the moon shines at night when it is dark. But the sun, It shines during the daytime when we don't need it!"

Another type of Jewish humor is Talmudic logic. The Talmud is a record of discussions between rabbis that deal with Jewish law, ethics, and customs. The Talmud's logic is one where you must examine every possible outcome of an act. It is also an elaboration on the written laws of the bible, in it there are many arguments over the laws so the reader can really understand how the law works. The many arguments or contradictions in Talmudic humor most likely came from this. The results of this type of logic can sometimes lead to clever conclusions as is apparent in this joke.

Feld and Bein met on the street.

"Sholom aleichem," said Feld, politely.

"Go to hell," said Bein.

"Look," Feld said indignantly, "I speak nicely to you and you tell me to go to hell. What's the idea?"

"I'll tell you," said Bein. "If I answered you politely you would ask where am I going, and I would tell you I'm going to the 8th Street baths.

"You would tell me I'm crazy, the Avenue A baths are better, and I would say you're crazy, the 8th Street baths are better. You would call me a damn fool and I would tell you to go to hell.

"This way it's simpler. I tell you right away to go to hell, and it's finished."

Another example of the Talmud in humor is in a more recent Simpson's episode. In the episode Bart and Lisa used Talmudic logic to try to reunite Krusty the Clown, a Jewish clown for young kids, with his estranged father, a rabbi, Hyman Krustofski. It is interesting that Talmudic humor is in modern forms of entertainment when the topic itself is almost two thousand years old.

When this project began, I thought I knew a lot about Jewish humor, but I quickly learned that I actually knew nearly nothing. At the beginning I only knew the topics of Jewish jokes, like cheap or rabbi. Little did I know, there was a whole world of information on this topic going back hundreds of years. Researching this topic opened my eyes to ideas and facts about Jewish culture and history that I did not know about at all before.

The things I have learned will stay with me and have already become integrated into my own sense of humor and my view of the world. At the end I really feel good about doing all this work on a subject I knew so little about but was so much fun to research. I think that what I learned, connects to my Jewish culture because it showed me many things about Judaism that we find acceptable to make fun of because of how we feel about them. Reading all these jokes let me know of all these rules and traditions are such a big part of the Jewish culture.