

# THE JEWISH JOKE

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THE  
**JEWISH JOKE**

An essay with examples  
(less essay, more examples)

**DEVORAH BAUM**

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# HOW DO YOU TELL THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN A SHLEMIEL AND A SHLIMAZEL?

The Jewish joke is as old as Abraham. Like the Jews themselves, it has wandered over the world, learned various languages, worked with a range of different materials, and performed in front of some pretty hostile crowds. That it's been able, for the most part, to adapt and survive in ever-new pastures and among ever-new company is no mean feat. Jokes don't tend to travel all that well. And a lot of things that once seemed funny no longer are. Yet Jewish jokes, or a fair few of them, have had astonishing staying power. The popularity of a recent TV show, *Old Jews Telling Jokes*, plays up to this: the jokes and the jokers may be old, the show suggests, but they've still 'got it'. But



*why* have they still got it? Is there no last laugh to be had? How old, really, can a joke get?

‘There’s an old joke,’ Woody Allen’s character Alvy says in the opening monologue of *Annie Hall* (1977):

Uh, two elderly women are at a Catskills mountain resort, and one of ’em says, ‘Boy, the food at this place is really terrible.’ The other one says, ‘Yeah, I know, and such ... small portions.’ Well, that’s essentially how I feel about life. Full of loneliness and misery and suffering and unhappiness, and it’s all over much too quickly.

But what exactly *is* the old joke here? Is it the still-good punchline about ‘such small portions’? Or is it the way of telling the joke so hesitantly that its punchline gets overwhelmed by the joker’s neurosis? Are we laughing along with this comedian, or are we laughing at him? Are we laughing at the funny ha ha or at the funny peculiar? Or could it be something sadder we’re finding funny? Might we be laughing, for instance, at how seriously the joke gets taken by a joker who has no sooner uttered it than he adds a commentary detailing an existential view of the world – one with a distinctly melancholic undertone?

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‘The-the other important joke for me,’ Alvy falters on:

... is one that’s, uh, usually attributed to Groucho Marx, but I think it appears originally in Freud’s wit and its relation to the unconscious.\* And it goes like this – I’m paraphrasing: Uh ... ‘I would never wanna belong to any club that would have someone like me for a member.’ That’s the key joke of my adult life in terms of my relationships with women. Tsch, you know, lately the strangest things have been going through my mind, ’cause I turned forty, tsch, and I guess I’m going through a life crisis or something, I don’t know. I, uh ... and I’m not worried about ageing. I’m not one o’ those characters, you know. Although I’m balding slightly on top, that’s about the worst you can say about me. I, uh, I think I’m gonna get better as I get older, you know? I think I’m gonna be the-the balding virile type, you know, as opposed to say the, uh, distinguished grey, for instance, you know?’ Less I’m neither o’ those two. Unless I’m one o’ those guys with saliva dribbling out of his mouth who wanders into a cafeteria with a shopping bag, screaming about socialism.

\* Sigmund Freud’s *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* (1905) is a sober study of the psychoanalysis of jokes and other uses of humour. Most of the jokes Freud offers by way of example are Jewish jokes.

That's some shtick: digressive, interpretative, remonstrative. And it's got a long memory too, treating an 'important joke' as if it were a piece of scripture to be traced back, first to its earlier comic source (Groucho), and then to an even earlier scholarly source (Freud – although I haven't spotted it there). But who on earth wants to hear shtick like that? Doesn't everyone know that jokes are best left at their punchlines? Nobody wants their jokes *explained*, do they? ... Unless explaining the joke is part of the joke – or part of the *Jewish* joke?

Alvy, above, makes no mention of Jewishness. Still, it's hard not to detect it in, for instance, the joke about belonging to clubs. For to get why this joker tells this joke in this particular way, by placing it within its Jewish heritage – Freud and (Groucho) Marx – you surely need an ironic sense of Jews as quintessentially members of a club to which they only really belong to the extent that they resist their membership. It's no accident, for example, that Alvy's life crisis has ensued because he can't make it work with a Jewish woman *or* with a shiksa (non-Jewish woman). Although if the shtick feels Jewish, then so too does the comedian himself, whose bespectacled face looms large and centre screen, eyes direct to camera, as if this were a joke on the cinema-going

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audience, who find themselves addressed by a less than obviously cinematic figure busily assuring them that he is a man in his prime, now and for ever the 'balding virile type'. Ha!

Of course, in 1977 Woody Allen was indeed a man in his prime, and he was taking the little respected art of comedy and turning it into something smart, serious and sublime. This he did with the comedian's gift for great timing. Just when the traditional frameworks and religious institutions of Jewish life were losing appeal for an upcoming generation determined to throw off the shackles of the old and substitute the new liberal order in all its lustre and complexity, Allen showed audiences that he knew and understood the critical value of time-keeping:

I'm very proud of my gold pocket watch. My grandfather, on his deathbed, sold me this watch.\*

You look so beautiful I can hardly keep my eyes on the meter.\*\*

More than any other time in history, mankind faces a crossroads. One path leads to despair and utter

\* *Stand Up Comic: 1964–1968*.

\*\* *Manhattan* (1979).

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hopelessness. The other, to total extinction. Let us pray we have the wisdom to choose correctly.\*

He showed, in other words, that he had his finger on the pulse of not only the present moment but the historical one. Because it isn't *really* the gold watch or ticking meter that tells the value of time for the comedian. It's a feel for the audience's narrative expectations and the ability to confound these with a sudden reversal or change of direction: what's known in the gag trade as a switcheroo. So where we're expecting a gift we get a sale, where we're expecting romance we get realism, where we're expecting a positive we get a second negative. To wit, the comedian is the person who reveals this to us, reveals that things can change when you least expect them to.

And the times they *do* keep on changing. Thus, in the words of the young American comedian Lena Dunham:

Over time, my belief in many things has wavered: marriage, the afterlife, Woody Allen.\*\*

\* *New York Times*, 'My Speech to the Graduates' (1979).

\*\* *Not That Kind of Girl: A Young Woman Tells You What She's 'Learned'* (2014).

Dunham's dismay at the clay feet of her comedy hero is palpable. Yet in saying so she also offers us a great line – a line reminiscent of Woody Allen, whose comic cadence it resembles while reminding us of Allen's main preoccupations: marriage, the afterlife, himself. So could this mean that – irony of ironies! – Allen *does* have an afterlife? Could all that Woodyish comedy – the sexual angst, the existential angst, the navel-gazing – have a young, hipster, *female* future?

When things reach crisis point, as they often do in Jewish history, it is Jewish custom to return to traditional sources for inspiration. According to the foundational text of Jewish mysticism, the Zohar, the biggest joke in the Hebrew Bible is the one when God tells Abraham to sacrifice his 'only son' Isaac. Isaac, whose name in Hebrew means 'laughter' on account of his mother Sarah's laughter upon learning at the age of ninety that she was about to become a parent for the first time – funny! – wasn't actually Abraham's 'only son'. He also had a son called Ishmael. Yet three times in the biblical story God insists that Isaac is the 'only one' to be sacrificed. Then, at the last moment, an angel stays Abraham's hand and recommends he sacrifices a ram in Isaac's place. So, a classic switcheroo. And boy oh boy, Abraham really fell for that one. The God of the Jews is clearly a prankster

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of the highest order. He's the God who laughs hard when, as the old joke goes, you tell Him your plans.

The darkly funny writer Franz Kafka detected in the same story a sort of blueprint for Jewish comedy. Once again, the joke is on Abraham, who now appears as less of a 'knight of faith' – as in the (also darkly funny) Protestant philosopher Søren Kierkegaard's sobriquet for him\* – and more of a schlemiel. As Kafka tells it:

It is as if, at the end of the year, when the best student was solemnly about to receive a prize, the worst student rose in the expectant stillness and came forward from his dirty desk in the last row because he had made a mistake of hearing, and the whole class burst out laughing. And perhaps he had made no mistake at all, his name really was called, it having been the teacher's intention to make the rewarding of the best student at the same time a punishment for the worst one.\*\*

\* Though in claiming that one arrives at Abrahamic faith 'by virtue of the absurd', Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling* (1843) clearly sees some humour in the escapade too.

\*\* This can be found in Kafka's *Parables and Paradoxes in German and English* (Schocken Books, 1961).

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Kafka's Abe has been singled out not for praise but for derision. He's the total shlemiel who, as he proudly walks to the front of the class to accept his 'prize', doesn't yet realise that the other kids are already laughing at the 'kick me' sign stuck to his back.

So is *that* – a sort of 'Bathos 101' – what explains the miraculous longevity of the Jewish joke? Does the full pantheon of Jewish comedy with all its parading fools – its shmucks, shlemiels, shlimazels, shnorrers, shmendricks, (sh)mothers (Yiddish has as many terms for fool as there are Inuit words for snow) – ramp up these various differences simply in order to disguise the overarching fact that any and every Jew answering to the name is not only 'in' on the joke, but the butt of it?

Or to put it slightly differently:

Q: How *do* you tell the difference between a shlemiel and a shlimazel?

A: The shlemiel is the one who slips up and spills his soup *over* the shlimazel.\*

\* From the Yiddish *shlim* (bad, wrong) and *mazl* (luck). While in America the use of the Yiddish word *shlimazel* nearly always alludes to a born loser, in Britain you'll just as often find it referring to a messy situation. In June 2004 *shlimazel* was voted one of the ten hardest-to-translate non-English words by a British translation company.



And in a joke, a little slip can make all the difference. Not that you can put limits on slipperiness. For as different as we may well be from each other, we're all, surely, alike in this: our identities are not so much fixed, as a matter of where it is we happen to be standing in relation to everyone else at any given time. Hence if, as Kafka has it, Jews are history's greatest schlemiels, then that doesn't make them *so* different. What it makes them is one half of an eternally returning comedy double act in which, as we'll see, all other Jews, Gentiles, the Chinese and *even* God can't help getting a little soupy.

The Chinese?

Yes. Jews distinguish Chinese people from all other Gentiles on account of a) China being a very long way away from where most Jews find themselves standing, and b) the privileged position of Chinese cuisine within the Jewish *Weltanschauung* (Jews may abandon Jewish dietary laws when inside Chinese restaurants alone):

A Jewish man and a Chinese man were conversing. The Jewish man commented upon what a wise people the Chinese are.

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‘Yes,’ replied the Chinese man, ‘our culture is over four thousand years old. But you Jews are a very wise people, too.’

The Jewish man replied, ‘Yes, our culture is over five thousand years old.’

The Chinese man was incredulous. ‘That’s impossible,’ he replied. ‘Where did your people eat for a thousand years?’

More recently, however, the Chinese have also been introduced to Jewish cuisine:

Upon leaving a kosher restaurant, one Chinese diner says to another: ‘The problem with Jewish food is that two days later you’re hungry again.’”

\* The jokes I’ve included in this book belong to two categories: those that illustrate the arguments of the essay and those, like this one, that have no obvious place in the essay but were too good to leave out.