

Jeremy Dauber
What Happens Next – 05.01.2022

Jeremy Dauber:

A lot of people on this podcast talk about their points and they make three different points for two minutes each. And what I decided to do in talking about Jewish comedy was do something slightly different, which was to make twice as many points taking half the amount of time. So, six points because there were six different funny ways Jews do comedy.

The first is Jewish humor comes as a response to persecution. One of the ways of dealing with trauma is to make a joke about it. You can cope with it and feel better. So, one kind of Jewish comedy is a response to persecution, trauma, and antisemitism.

Another is Jewish comedy as social and political satire. Jews have had social, political, and religious institutions and they mock and make fun of them.

A third kind of Jewish humor goes back to this idea that Jews are the people of the book. It's a certain Jewish comedy is a witty bookish. It is very intellectual, practiced by the elites who had facility with texts.

The fourth kind of Jewish comedy is of the body. Jews have bodies, just like everybody else. They can have a vulgar comedy. Mel Brooks is bodily humor and intellectual comedy is Woody Allen, although his neurasthenic jokes about himself are very much of the body. You have those two different kinds, the wit and the bodily humor.

Our fifth kind of Jewish comedy is about metaphysics. Jews have flourished and suffered and lived through thousands of years of diaspora due to their self-identification as a people with a relationship with God, even if it's a God that they don't believe in, don't trust, and are angry with.

An example is someone like Tevye the Dairyman in Sholem Aleichem who is schlepping through the shtetl and talking with God and arguing with him. You look at the world, at God and at Jewish history and put that all together. That kind of Jewish comedy is metaphysical and it's pervasive.

The sixth kind of Jewish comedy is the Jewish folk tale. This is the Jews as a people who have their culture, folklore, and stories and how it applies to us today as it did to ancestors thousands of years ago.

Larry Bernstein
Is Jewish humor unique?

Jeremy Dauber:

Yes and no. It's unique because it has the details of Jewish history and culture and experience. That's what makes it Jewish humor. But it's not unique in those categories that I just described. It could be applied to other groups of people as well. Jews have an extremely long and quite varied set of experiences to draw on because of their diasporic nature over different continents and historical eras.

Larry Bernstein:

In your book, you reference biblical stories as a source of Jewish Humor. When I think about Jewish comedy, it's a secular and not an Orthodox one. I have never seen an Orthodox Jew in a comedic film or standup club. It is exclusively secular.

Years ago, I read aloud to my son Chaim Potok's novel, *My Name is Asher Lev*. The book is about an orthodox boy who wants to be an artist and that requires him to learn about the non-Jewish world. Asher paints a spectacular work of his father on a cross. It stuns and upsets his father and gets him tossed from his congregation. Humor often depends on pushing the edge of social norms and that might be pretty limiting for the orthodox.

Jeremy Dauber:

It gets to two different phenomena that are linked. The first is the role that comedy plays in religious societies. There's a great deal of humor in traditionally religious Judaism. It can be blasphemous. It can be obscene. In my class on Jewish humor I teach a 17th century poem about the genitalia of the patriarchs of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

This is rough stuff within a religious context, but it was done within this poem, this festival framework. Today there are many kind of religious comedians, and they work within the frameworks of their society, as we all do within ours. Even contemporary comedy clubs there are certain things that you can and can't do.

The secular American Jewish experience defined themselves in contradistinction to an Orthodox religious experience. And they do that in comedy as well. One way of doing this is to create a narrative that traditional religion is not funny. It's very serious. And our narrative of liberation allows us to embrace humor that they just don't get the joke. But I don't think that it's historically accurate.

Larry Bernstein:

In preparation for my son's bar mitzvah, a group of kids met with our Rabbi to discuss how to prepare the biblical interpretation speech that is given by each bar mitzvah child after his Hebrew reading of the Torah. My son asked the rabbi, "is it appropriate to use humor in the speech?" And the Rabbi said that humor is core to the Jewish experience, and that he tries to employ humor in every sermon. It is proper and encouraged to use humor in interpreting the bible. But be respectful.

Jeremy Dauber:

Let me applaud your son's impulse to bring humor in and particularly around the Bible. There's a lot of different humor in the Bible, a lot of different comedy. One way of being respectful, I'm not saying this is the way that your son's rabbi meant it. But one way is to take that humor seriously.

You could say that Eddie Murphy or Lenny Bruce took humor very seriously. Sometimes the humor is a mocking humor of Jewish superiority saying, we've got God on our side. We may find that discomfoting, but that's not to say it's not comedy.

Larry Bernstein:

Well, I think what the rabbi meant was that it would be inappropriate to do a fart joke or a vulgar skit like Sarah Silverman, or physical comedy like a Chevy Chase fall over the bimah that would've been off limits.

Jeremy Dauber:

Right.

Larry Bernstein:

Now, if he wanted to use witty intellectual humor related to his torah portion that would have been perfectly fine.

Jeremy Dauber:

Every place has its own sociological rules. Your synagogue has one set of rules, and an Orthodox shtiebel will have different rules.

Larry Bernstein:

Jews are only 2% of the U.S. population yet they dominate the comedic world. Jon Stewart when he got an Emmy for comedic writing said "For those critics who said, 'How could you possibly put together a team of comedic writers with only eight out of nine writers being Jewish?'" He lifts up the trophy, "We showed them."

Jeremy Dauber:

(laughs) That's great.

Larry Bernstein:

So, why is there an overrepresentation of Jewish comics?

Jeremy Dauber:

Jews were discriminated against and couldn't get into a number of professions. Mass entertainment was not prestigious as it is today. It was about making a living. I just wrote a history of comic books and one of the reasons that Jews are so omnipresent in the early days of comic books is because it was a crap medium, comic books. (laughs) So, they could get in.

Then you have network effects. My cousin needs a job, he's kinda funny, let's bring him in," For a lot of the 20th century, there is a very rational explanation for why Jews are so overrepresented, and I think it's this combination of social discrimination and network effects.

Larry Bernstein:

In the Jewish culture, there are just a few fields that your mother will find to be an acceptable occupation. There is the law, medicine, finance, real estate, accounting, tax, retail, and comedy. So, if your grades aren't great or you can't wake up early in the morning, comedy sounds like a real opportunity.

Jeremy Dauber:

(laughs) I think part of the question was it was legitimate for whom? Even within Jewishness, we have people saying, "I am working 16 hours a day, because I want my son to be a doctor or a lawyer. I don't want him to go off and be in showbusiness.'

And then that status changed. "My son the podcaster," (laughs)

Larry Bernstein:

I dunno, the pay isn't too good.

Jeremy Dauber:

As this became higher status, it became more of an aspirational Jewish practice rather than practical. For a long time, it was either people who were familiarly in showbusiness, or this was the job that they could get. As the decades went on, it became more socially acceptable.

Larry Bernstein"

Let's move on to intellectual comedy and use Woody Allen as an example. I grant your point that it sounds intellectual, but I think it is more of sham intellectualism, it sounds smart but its funny because its idiotic or simply nonsense.

Jeremy Dauber:

That is a great and incisive observation that you're making about Woody Allen. He was so influenced by Mike Nichols and Elaine May, who had that same kind of faux thing.

Allen said, "I'm not an intellectual, and everyone insisted on taking him as an intellectual," so I think you're absolutely right about that.

That was the beauty of Woody Allen, faux wit in his New Yorker pieces like the private detective parody of God is dead and we have to find out who did it.

Larry Bernstein:

Jerry Seinfeld wrote an article about how he writes, edits, and improves his comedy and that his work is a craft. What do you think of Jewish comedic craftsmanship?

Jeremy Dauber:

That's a really wonderful question about craftsmanship. A technical dedication is something that really can play across a wide spectrum of comedy.

It can take as much craft to set up a good fart joke as it can to do a polished, witty, elusive one-liner, but in either case, you have this spectrum of attention and care that different comedians put into these things.

I cherish the hard work and awed at the genius of off the cuff or out of nowhere. Its incongruity and shockingness can knock you off your feet. So, there's benefits to both approaches.

Larry Bernstein:

Don Rickles is a perfect example of a comic who can insult with machine gun accuracy. You are laughing three jokes back.

Jeremy Dauber:

(laughs) I love Rickles. He has such a connection with his audience. He's famous as an insult comic, creating this communication where he knows the people who are gonna be okay with being insulted, he knows how far to take it.

Larry Bernstein:

Sometimes you take it too far and then you get hit in the face. I guess Chris Rock didn't know his audience.

Jeremy Dauber:

(laughs) Yeah. The circumstances around the slap, as it's (laughs) become known, I think are not 100% clear to me.

Comedy norms change all the time. And one thing that would have been entirely fine 100 years ago, for example, making fun of people with a medical condition. If this had been an unfortunate hairstyle choice that would've been one thing. But it was because Jade Pinkett Smith has alopecia. We now say, "we shouldn't be making fun of people with medical conditions. That's not really the right thing to do."

Whether this deserves a physically violent response is another question.

One of the things that I teach is a Yiddish play from the late 19th Century in my comedy class. It makes fun of people with stutters. Isn't that funny? Now, it's gross to have that.

Larry Bernstein:

Some Jewish comics get nose jobs others change their names to sound less Jewish. My own great-grandfather changed his name from Palominsky to Bernstein to sound less Jewish. Is that still necessary to hide your Jewishness? Jackie Mason seems to flaunt it. Jew or not a Jew?

Jeremy Dauber:

(laughs) It depends on changing times and circumstances. Jackie Mason had a hugely successful career on Broadway for going Jewish.

On television Chicken Soup was cancelled because he was getting complaints of being too Jewish. After Seinfeld there's more depictions of Jews on television.

Larry Bernstein:

In the Dick Van Dyke Show, Carl Reiner was the creator and originally played the Dick Van Dyke character in the pilot. But he was perceived to be Jewish. George Costanza's name was changed to sound not Jewish, but the character is all-in.

Jeremy Dauber:

There is no question that television and media are much more comfortable in 2022 with a much wider depiction of demography, ethnicity, and identity. Seinfeld is now 35 years ago, as hard as that is to believe, that it premiered in 1989 is much closer to 1955 (laughs) than it felt like at the time.

Larry Bernstein

Let's talk about Jewish comedy and metaphysics. This is the concept of the relationship of the individual and God. In the bible, Jewish characters talk with God seemingly all the time. Abraham has an active conversation with God over killing Isaac. Moses is trying to weasel out of going back to Egypt, please God send my brother instead. Job gets angry with God over his mistreatment. But in Fiddler on the Roof, Tevya's conversation is one way. Talking to God with no response, and that allows the use of humor, because God gets to play the straight man. Sort of like the gagged prosecutor in the Woody Allen movie Bananas.

Jeremy Dauber:

(laughs) The first instance of laughter in Jewish literature is where Sarah laughs ironically because she thinks she's not gonna have a kid because she's post-menopausal. But God says that's not funny. You don't understand the way that things work, because I'm God and I can do whatever I want, and Sarah then transforms her laughter into a laughter of acknowledgement. It uses irony.

Tevya, as you say, does not have the privilege of God responding to him. The conversation that he's having is kind of with himself. He is amusing and comforting himself. Maybe he's also kind of explaining the world and providing himself with some solace.

It's doing something very serious helping him make sense of the tragedies that befall him in his life. And there are really parallels between the two, where you have this humor in the text, but it's being used for a very deep purpose. And that's why I sort of juxtapose them in my writing.

Larry Bernstein:

It is like a modern soliloquy strategy that allows Teyva to speak directly to the audience about what is on his mind without being compared to Hamlet.

New topic, another aspect of Jewish comedic craftsmanship, where the generic joke provides a structure for embellishment and personalization. I'm thinking about the Aristocrats joke where you have a structure that allows for creativity by the joke teller.

Jeremy Dauber:

One of the things about The Aristocrats, which makes it such a good example, is that it is a scaffolding, which is, ethnically, religiously, culturally neutral, and you can put in whatever you want into it.

The Aristocrats itself is not an inherently Jewish joke, but you could make it into a Jewish joke by virtue of whatever details you put in and that's very frequently the case with a lot of entertainment genres. A romantic comedy isn't necessarily Jewish, but you can certainly make a Jewish romantic comedy.

You can make anything Jewish, but, it doesn't necessarily mean that it is.

Larry Bernstein:

Jewish humor tries to push the edge of what's sociologically tolerated. Mel Brooks in The Producers is poking fun with the musical number Springtime for Hitler and Seinfeld has an episode where Jerry makes out with a girl during a screening of Schindler's List. Do Jewish comedians excel at testing boundaries?

Jeremy Dauber:

There are definitely some Jewish comedians whose Jewish comedy pushes the edge, and there are others who are very comfortable doing some of the nightclub acts at the Copa. When Larry David came back to write the series finale of Seinfeld, where they get thrown in jail because they are monsters. People didn't like that because they had affection for the characters. But David and of Seinfeld do push the edge.

Larry Bernstein:

Next topic is Norman Lear, the Jewish archetypal comedy All in the Family and the audience's response to Archie.

Jeremy Dauber:

Well, that's a great question because it gets ultimately to that dynamic between the artist and audience. Lear is a self-identified liberal who felt that the Bunker character was someone who was not to be admired and not a hero. And the reason for All in the Family's remarkable success was that people identified with Bunker, they thought he was great.

Lear is a great artist who is like a thief with the hole in his pocket. He leaves more than he carries away. That he couldn't help but make these characters so human that people did identify with them, even if that wasn't Lear's ideological and political intent.

Larry Bernstein:

How is Andy Kaufman's comedic style different from other Jewish comics?

Jeremy Dauber:

Kaufman is an exception to the rule. We've been talking about comedies creating a communication with your audience and trying to have a positive response from your audience. Kaufman was often interested in bewildering his audience sometimes even enraging them. Kaufman was a genius and was able to make his own space.

Larry Bernstein:

I end each episode on a note of optimism, what are you optimistic about with Jewish comedy?

Jeremy Dauber:

We have this new kind of media for more voices and new jokes than we ever could have before. There are more platforms to hear more funny things. And millions of people are interested in series about ultra-Orthodox Jews on Netflix. The success of Shtisel, which has its comedic elements, show that there are audiences for Jewish comedy.