

Jewish Humor

Goals:

1. Students will understand that Jewish humor is an important aspect of Jewish culture.
2. Students will learn that Jewish humor is determined and classified by content and comedians.
3. Students will discover that Jewish humor can connect the Jewish community and the greater society.
4. Students will explore how Jewish humor is used to address complex issues facing Jews today.
5. Students will be reminded that Jewish humor can sometimes be perceived as negative.
6. Students will notice that Jewish humor has often been self-deprecating and perpetuating of stereotypes.

Objectives:

1. Students will be able to explain why humor is important to Judaism.
2. Students will be able to determine what makes something Jewish humor.
3. Students will be able to distinguish a “Jewish” joke from a secular joke.

Materials:

- projector
- computer for clips
- paper and pencils for each student
- copies of article (Appendix A)
- Dry Erase markers

Detailed Procedure:

19:00-19:15 Attendance, Tzedakah, Check-Ins for Madrichim

Allow students to come in and put their phones in the cell phone parking lot. Collect tzedakah and take attendance. Check in with the students about being Madrichim. How did it go last week? What was one thing that was challenging? One thing that was wonderful?

19:15-19:30 What is Jewish Humor?

“Before we look at other people’s definitions of Jewish humor, it’s important to note that there is no one single definition. I’d like us to come up with our own definitions.”

(Work on the board together to come up with key words/definitions)

“This article gives 4 components of Jewish humor. I want you to read it with the person next to you.”

(Read Appendix A)

“What do you think of this? Is there anything you didn’t understand?”

19:30-19:40 2000 Year Old Man

“We are going to listen to a clip of a stand up act called the 2000 Year Old Man. The idea is that a man who is 2000 years old is being interviewed.”

(Play clip “Phil”

<https://www.dropbox.com/s/0brerv6j32sap11/05%20Phil%20%5BLive%5D.mp3?dl=0>)

“Do you think is Jewish humor? Why or why not?”

- As students answer, you can divulge different pieces.

1. Improv sketch done by Carl Reiner and Mel Brooks, Jewish comedians – does that make it Jewish?
2. Mel Brooks uses an accent that is characterized as an “old Jewish man” accent. – does that make it Jewish?
3. Prayer/ use of “Amen” – does that make it Jewish?
4. Yiddish/Hebraic reference with gevault – does that make it Jewish?

5. References to God (Yahweh, etc.) – does that make it Jewish? (making fun of God?)

19:40-19:55 Jewish Jokes by Jews or not

“One of the things that some Jewish comedians do well is that they poke fun at Jewish people. It’s accepted, for the most part, because it’s expressed in a loving, teasing way, but does that make it okay?”

(Let students answer)

“I want to show you a clip from the TV show Seinfeld, which was created by Jerry Seinfeld and Larry David, two Jewish comedians. The show was on from 1989 to 1998. It is about 4 friends living their lives in NYC. Jerry Seinfeld plays himself, a comedian.”

(Show clip from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OsWDohWkkC0&t=13s> START AT 41 SECONDS)

“Why do you think Jerry gets upset? Should he be upset?”

(Let students answer)

“What if I told you that part of the reason Jerry is upset is because earlier in the series, we learn that the dentist converts and Jerry thinks it is just so he can tell Jewish jokes?”

(Let students answer)

“What if a non-Jewish person had a stand-up comedy routine making fun of Jewish people? How would that be different?”

(Let students answer)

19:55-20:10 Laughter through tears

“Many times, people describe Jewish humor as ‘laughter through tears.’ saying that Jewish comedy makes us laugh at things that are not always funny. In fact, many people use laughter to cope with the things that aren’t funny. I want to show you one of those situations. This is another Mel Brooks clip, but that doesn’t mean he is the only Jewish comedian, he just happens to be one of my favorites. This is from a movie called *History of the World Part 1* and it is a song called “The Spanish Inquisition.” It is telling the story of how the Jews were persecuted during the Spanish Inquisition.”

(Watch <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LnF1OtP2Svk&t=282s>. Can stop it when it seems like it’s too long, or can just watch the whole thing.)

“What did you think of this? How did this make you feel? ‘Self-deprecating humor is often a ‘survival tool.’ If you make fun of yourself first, it takes the power away from someone else that might make fun of you.’ Do you feel this fits that? What if it was about the Holocaust or something else? How would it make you feel? Is it okay because it is done by Mel Brooks, who is Jewish?”

20:10-20:20 Purpose of Jewish humor – Wrap Up

“What is the purpose of Jewish humor?”

(Let Students answer)

“In the Jewish community, we are always looking for ways to come together. Jewish humor is one way we connect with other Jewish people. In other words, Jewish humor is often used as a teachable moment with either: a Jewish purpose, concern, or idea behind the laughter.”

(Clean up)

Appendix A – Four Components of Jewish Humor

The 4 Components of Jewish Humor

Defining what Jewish humor is and is not. BY WILLIAM NOVAK

<https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/defining-jewish-humor/> (Edited by Rabbi Yergin)

What do we mean by Jewish humor? To begin, it is humor that is overtly Jewish in its concerns, characters, definitions, language, values or symbols. (A Jewish joke, goes one definition, is one that no *goy* can understand and every Jew says he has already heard.) But not all Jewish humor derives from Jewish sources, just as not all humor created by Jews is necessarily Jewish. In these matters it is best to examine not the singer but the song.

Jewish humor is too rich and too diverse to be adequately described by a single generalization. Jewish theologians used to say that it is easier to describe God in terms of what He is *not*; the same process may be useful in understanding Jewish humor. It is not, for example, escapist. It is not slapstick. It is not physical. It is generally not cruel and does not attack the weak or the infirm. At the same time, it is also not polite or gentle.

But individual humorists come to mind immediately to negate each of these tendencies: The Marx Brothers are slapstick performers; Jerry Lewis and Sid Caesar are physical; Don Rickles is cruel; Sam Levenson is polite and Danny Kaye is playful. So much for generalizations.

What Jewish humor *is* may be even more difficult to determine, and we offer the following broad statements in full awareness of the possible futility of the exercise:

1. Jewish humor is usually substantive.

It is *about* something. It is especially fond of certain specific topics, such as food (noshing is sacred), family, business, anti-Semitism, wealth and its absence, health, and survival. Jewish humor is also fascinated by the intricacies of the mind and by logic, and the short if elliptical path separating the rational from the absurd.

As social or religious commentary, Jewish humor can be sarcastic, complaining, resigned, or descriptive. Sometimes the “point” of the humor is more powerful than the laugh it delivers, and for some of the jokes, the appropriate response is not laughter, but rather a bitter nod or a commiserating sigh of recognition. This didactic quality precludes laughing “for free,” as in slapstick humor, which derives its laughter from other people’s misfortunes.

2. Jewish humor tends to be anti-authoritarian.

It ridicules grandiosity and self-indulgence, exposes hypocrisy, and kicks pomposity in the pants. It is strongly democratic, stressing the dignity and worth of common folk.

3. Jewish humor frequently has a critical edge.

This edge creates discomfort in making its point. Often its thrust is political—aimed at leaders and other authorities who cannot be criticized more directly. This applies to prominent figures in the general society, as well as to those in the Jewish world, such as rabbis, cantors, sages, intellectuals, teachers, doctors, businessmen, philanthropists, and community functionaries. A special feature of Jewish humor is the interaction of prominent figures with simple folk and the disadvantaged, with the latter often emerging triumphant. In general, Jewish humor characteristically deals with the conflict between the people and the power structure, whether that be the individual Jew within his community, the Jew facing the Gentile world, or the Jewish community in relation to the rest of humanity.

4. Jewish humor mocks everyone — including God.

It frequently satirizes religious personalities and institutions, as well as rituals and dogma. At the same time, it affirms religious traditions and practices, seeking a new understanding of the differences between the holy and the mundane.

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