

## OY

20 February 2006

Paul G. Sittenfeld

Joke number 1: Why do Jewish women prefer circumcised men? Because they don't like anything that isn't 10% off.

Joke number 2: Three elderly men are sitting together on a porch at the retirement home, each in a rocking chair. "When I die," says the first man, "I'd like to be buried next to George Washington. It's a nice monument and everyone will know that I was an important fellow." "And when I die," says the second, "I want to be buried in Grant's Tomb. It's a very dignified place, overlooking the Hudson. People will know that I, too, was a somebody." "And I," says the third man, "I want they should lay me down next to Becky Rappoport." "But, Sam," he is told, "Becky's not dead yet!" Sam replies: "Neither am I!"

Joke number 3: A Jewish grandmother and her grandson are at the beach when a tidal wave sweeps him away into the ocean. The grandmother bows in prayer, asking the Almighty to return her beloved. "Please God, I've always been a good person, a faithful Jew, and a loving grandmother; please give me back my grandson." As she finishes praying, a huge wave crashes onto the beach and returns the young boy to her side. Overwhelmed with gratitude, she hugs her grandson, looks more closely, gazes toward the sky and yells angrily: "He had a hat!"

At this point, you might be saying to yourself, "Oy," – and that would be a perfectly appropriate response.

Jewish humor, the essence of these riffs, is not only an amusing topic but a large and rich one. The subject easily justifies a volume edited by William Novak and Moshe Waldocks titled "The Big Book of Jewish Humor." Jewish humor has consistently provided commentary on the

world surrounding the Jewish people; what has changed, inevitably, is the world it chronicles. Some argue that the early roots of Jewish humor can be found both in the Bible and the Talmud. More recent and stereotypically traditional Jewish humor dates chronologically from the 19<sup>th</sup> century and geographically from the *shtetls* of Eastern Europe. Most of it, like the preponderance of Yiddish in which it was originally told, was oral. With the exception of texts by Shalom Aleichem and a few other Jewish writers, stories were not written but repeated and shared from one generation to another. Novak and Waldocks believe that Jewish humor is only incidentally a reflection of what they characterize as laughter through tears. They acknowledge that the persecution, poverty and uprootedness of the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century contributed to much of the humor but insist that it derives from more quotidian issues as well. My readings and the jokes and stories that I have enjoyed and remembered would confirm this. So many subjects: education; matters of the heart; finance; health or its absence with a recurring chorus of unnecessary worry; expectations of one's progeny – from infancy until the parent departs; men who are not uniformly manly or athletic or enamored of the out of doors; women who are more decorative than useful, more drawn to jewelry than housework; sharp contrasts and comparisons with other cultures and other religions; anecdotes which reflect the historical ability and indeed the necessity of Jews to be clever and cunning often to survive and certainly to thrive.

Sigmund Freud is considered an early student of Jewish humor. He observed: “I do not know whether there are many other instances of a people making fun to such a degree of its own character.” In a book titled *Jewish Wit* by Theodor Reik, the author offers the notion that Jews have coped with the hostility they encounter by turning it against themselves. Psychoanalyst Martin Grotjahn agrees: “It is as if the Jew tells his enemies: ‘You do not need to attack us. We can do that ourselves – and even better.’ ”

I think you'll see what he's referring to in the following jokes. The first refers to Jewish stereotypes of overbearing mothers. The question: Why do Jewish mothers make great parole officers? The answer: They never let anyone finish a sentence.

Other jokes reference Jewish propensity for worrying and angst – often without cause. As Elayne Boosler has told us: “The only difference between Catholics and Jews is Jews are born with guilt and Catholics have to go to school to learn it.

Jewish worrying can be taken to absurd extremes, as when the astronomer was concluding a lecture at the synagogue: “And some of my colleagues believe that our own sun will probably die out within four or five billion years.” “How many years did you say?” asked Mrs. Siegel from the back of the room. “Four or five billion,” replied the scientist. “Whew!” said Mrs. Siegel. “I thought you said *million!*”

Then there’s the stereotype of wives disinclined toward housework: The question: Where does a Jewish husband hide money from his wife? The answer: Under the vacuum cleaner.

If, according to this view, Jewish women aren’t doing a lot of vacuuming, well, it must be because they’re busy polishing their jewelry. Here for instance is the story of the voluptuous young woman who walks into a party on the arm of a doddering old man. At dinner, the lady seated to her right says: “My, that’s a beautiful diamond you’re wearing. Indeed I think it’s the most beautiful diamond I’ve ever seen.” “Thank you,” the young woman replies, ‘it’s the Plotnick diamond.” “The Plotnick diamond? Is there a story to it?” “Oh, yes. The diamond comes with a curse.” “A curse?” asked the lady. “What’s the curse?” And the whispered reply: “Plotnick.”

More bluntly, Charisse Savarin tells us: “I was once a stripper. I took off my jewelry and said, ‘according to Jewish law, I am now naked.’ ”

Of course, Jewish men come in for their fair share of mockery, too. Two Jews are walking one evening through a dangerous neighborhood when they realize they are being followed by a pair of hoodlums. “Sam,” says his friend, “we’d better get out of here. There are two of them and we’re alone!”

But it gets worse: Jewish men aren't just un-manly; they're frequently outright hypochondriacs: The Italian says I'm tired and I'm thirsty; I must have a glass of wine. The German says I'm tired and I'm thirsty; I must have a beer. The Greek says I'm tired and I'm thirsty; I must have some ouzo. The Japanese says I'm tired and I'm thirsty; I must have a sake. The Russian says I'm tired and I'm thirsty; I must have a vodka. The Jew says I'm tired and I'm thirsty; I must have diabetes.

Health concerns, assuredly, afflict both genders. Fran Liebowitz reflects: "I never worry about things I could actually get like from smoking, but I'll be watching TV and they'll be talking about a disease that only 75 year old Turkish men get and I'll have every symptom."

That Jews are neurotic is accepted as a given, and neuroses are demonstrated especially vividly in these personal ads said, dubiously, to be taken from contemporary Israeli newspapers:

First:

- Divorced Jewish man, seeks partner to attend *shul* with, light *shabbos* candles, celebrate holidays, build *Sukkah* together, attend *brises*, *bar mitzvahs*. Religion not important.

Another:

- Nice Jewish guy, 38. No skeletons. No baggage. No personality.

And finally:

- I'm a sensitive Jewish prince whom you can open your heart to. Share your innermost thoughts and deepest secrets. Confide in me. I'll understand your insecurities. No fatties, please.

And yet, for all our shortcomings, we Jews undeniably believe that we're a little, how shall I say, extra-special. To illustrate: Two attractive young Jewish women in their mid-twenties were waiting at the bus stop and comparing their weekends. "On Saturday, I pretended I was a gentile nurse," said the first. "How did you do that?" asked her friend. The response: "I slept with a Jewish doctor."

Jewish humor has been provided and popularized by a remarkable range of writers and performers spanning many years and many perspectives. These include Fanny Brice, Mel Brooks, George Burns, Walther Matthau, Jack Benny, Danny Kaye, George Jessel, Eddie Kanter, Woody Allen, Jerry Seinfeld, and, most recently, newly embraced comic Sarah Silverman who was profiled last fall in *The New Yorker*. Beneath her girl-next-door exterior, she reflects lewdly in a calm, understated manner. She relates: "While I was enjoying licking jelly off my boyfriend's penis, I suddenly thought: Oh my God, Sarah, you're turning into your mother."

Over time, what has changed is the context of Jewish humor: both for American Jews and, separately but significantly, for the non-Jewish American world around us. For non-Jews, there has been a growing and greater interest in Jews, the Jewish experience, the Jewish culture, and indeed in many cultures: African-American, Hispanic, and all the groups interacting increasingly with the ever less predominant white Christian culture. What mainstream white American Christian even two generations ago had heard of *chutzpah* or to *kibitz*? How remarkably insulated any mainstream white American Christian today would be who didn't have at least a general feeling for these words. Even in Cincinnati, I remember being amused when I moved here in 1970, and began going to lunch at the Queen City Club, and found matzos placed at every table in the second floor dining room – with precious few Jews in any of the chairs at the tables. More recently, bagel chips now appear regularly at lunch at the Cincinnati Country Club with the chips certainly outnumbering Jewish members by a mighty margin.

My thesis tonight is that for many Jews - including me - Jewish humor is increasingly a way to identify with the past – to feel a connection to at least a piece of a heritage worthy of carrying to the future. Growing up in Kansas City, Missouri, in the 1950's, I had two Jewish parents and four Jewish grandparents. I also had the sense that to be more Jewish was to be less American.

I am the descendant of immigrants who came from Germany and Austria one or two generations earlier than the East Europeans of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, my family pursued no active religious involvement. No bar mitzvahs; no spoken Yiddish or Hebrew; no Sabbath dinners. No denial of Jewish roots and no wish to deny or avoid. Identification but historic, social and civic identification...not religious.

Kansas City in the '50s was pretty okay. We lived in a spacious two-family, called a duplex in Kansas City terms, with my aunt, uncle, and two cousins downstairs. My parents, younger sister and I upstairs. As anomalous as it was, it seemed just like a normal housing configuration then. Parents, products of private schools and Seven Sisters and Ivy league colleges, and yet less affluent than either of their sets of parents had been. My father chose Brown over Princeton because he was told Princeton wasn't a comfortable place for Jews. My mother remembered that at Wellesley, Jewish girls were assigned Jewish roommates. My grandmother noting over and over, in response to something never even asked, that her grandparents were all from Germany. Now, it seems certain she feared they were from Poland. We belonged to the older Jewish Country Club, the German one; not the Russian one. Somehow I knew it mattered, but I didn't know why.

Only one Jewish delicatessen in the entire City; only one Chinese restaurant. No Thai, Japanese, Indian. On our 9-inch black and white TV, I still remember Ozzie and Harriet Nelson and Lucy and Ricky Ricardo sleeping in twin beds. I was thrilled when, in 1954, the Philadelphia Athletics moved to Kansas City. It was the first time we'd had a Major League Baseball team.

For reasons that remain unclear to me, my parents sent me to a nursery school at a convent, directed by a French order of nuns, a school which accepted boys only through kindergarten. Each day, immediately before prayers in the classroom, a nun in a then standard full-length habit, would appear and ask that the non-believers which is what she called us – another classmate and I – join her in the Grande Salle while the others prayed. That was 1951. Two little boys and one nun in a large and too warm room. It smelled like the windows had not been opened for a long time.

Three years later, I found myself at weekly Sunday school, at our Reform Jewish congregation in Kansas City. Our second-grade teacher, Mrs. Lewis, asked which of us came from families which had Christmas trees. I raised my hand. “Well,” the wise and sensitive Mrs. Lewis intoned, “you and your families will go to Hell.”

I’m not certain to this day what I really made of my next door neighbor and friend Jeff, exactly my age, who went to Hebrew school twice a week, who celebrated and I mean really celebrated his *bar mitzvah* as he turned 13, whose grandparents spoke broken English and whose life clearly, even then, was enriched by religious threads tying each family member to the others. Was it wonderful? Probably. Was it confining? Probably. Was I envious? Perhaps and, simultaneously, perhaps not.

In 1961, my parents inveigled me to join a summer Junior Great Books course which convened at St. Peter’s Church. At the end of the summer session, there was an assembly and, to my surprise, each participant in the large auditorium was asked to stand up, and tell which his or her favorite book had been and to which parish he belonged. I mumbled: “*David Copperfield* and I’m not of the faith.”

As I look back at my middle school and high school years at an all boys' day school and indeed at my Princeton years, I know I felt a little different. And it was a time when kids my age and perhaps I especially didn't want to be different at all.

In 1969, I asked a Catholic woman to marry me. Betsy and I have known each other since we were 12. My twin aunts, later in the Wellesley College Class of 1936, and her aunt, a nun for 65 years, were three of the five students in their grade at the same French convent I had attended. And yet, when Betsy and I told her parents we were engaged, her mother's heartfelt, spontaneous sobs were not born of joy. And although my own parents were crazy about Betsy, my father, knowing I was days away from proposing, provided an unusual gift for me under the Christmas tree. I unwrapped a white note card with blue Hebrew letters. He didn't know Hebrew and I didn't know Hebrew. He had gleefully commissioned the would-be work of art and it took me several days to get it translated. When I succeeded, the greeting conveyed the following: Roses are Red, Violets are Blue. If you kiss a gentile girl, you'll surely choke to death. Is all of this why I relate easily to George Burns' reflection that "happiness is having a large, loving, caring, close-knit family... in another city." Molly Katz, in her book *"Jewish As A Second Language"* contends: "Once, nobody married Jews except other Jews (and rich, neurotic non-Jews trying to torture their patrician families after all other methods, such as working a live sex show, had failed.)" These days, statistics irrefutably confirm that a large and growing proportion of American Jews marry non-Jews and often do not belong to congregations. Naturally, the category of Jewish humor devoted to family matters is a significant one.

Here, comedian Sam Levenson addressed parental overprotectiveness: "One mother," he recalled, "wrote a note to the teacher. 'If Gregory is a bad boy, don't slap him. Slap the boy next to him. Gregory will get the idea.'"

Mr. and Mrs. Goldstein have similar impulses. When the 90-year-old couple come to see a divorce lawyer, the lawyer is stunned. "Why now?" he asks. "You've been together all this

time; why after so long?” The old man replies: “We wanted to wait until the children were dead.”

Of course, Betsy and I were scarcely the first couple to find ourselves in a mixed marriage, and Groucho Marx is the source of a story, supposedly a true one, but certainly one worth sharing. His daughter, at that time a student at an independent school in Los Angeles, came home in a forlorn state one day to report that a number of her friends were forming a swimming club. Although she had expressed interest, she was told that she was not welcome to join because she was Jewish. Groucho, understandably concerned about his daughter’s unhappiness, phoned the mother of the girl organizing the group and proposed a solution. He suggested that while he was Jewish, actually his wife was not Jewish and therefore their daughter was only half Jewish. Might she join the swimming club and only go in the water up to her waist?

The way Jewish and non-Jewish cultures blend is also apparent in David Bader’s “*Haikus For Jews.*” These three –line poems, with a five-seven-five syllable pattern, include the following:

Odd new disorder –

the Jew who mistook his wife  
for a yarmulke.

Jewish triathlon –

gin rummy, then contract bridge,  
followed by a nap.

Seven-foot Jews in

the NBA slam-dunking –  
my alarm clock rings.

Hard to tell under  
 the lights – white yarmulke or  
 male-pattern baldness?

My nature journal –  
 today, saw some trees and birds.  
 I should know the names?

Is one Nobel Prize  
 so much to ask from a child  
 after all I've done?

In 1970, Betsy and I moved to Cincinnati for my job as a brand assistant at Procter & Gamble; I worked on Top Job Liquid Cleaner. Our first spring here, early and soon-to-become close friends, May and Charles Westheimer, invited us to their family Passover Seder. Betsy had never been to one and it was an especially meaningful evening for both of us. The next year, for whatever combination of reasons added to their fundamental good judgment, they did not invite us again and I made mention of my disappointment to Betsy. “Well,” she responded, “we can certainly do our own.” “Oh no,” I insisted, “we wouldn’t know how.” Betsy, as is her wont, ignored me, planned a Seder with Melissa Lanier, the subject of my last Literary Club paper, and started a tradition which has endured for 34 years.

Most Jewish people we knew, if Seders mattered to them, already had established groups with whom they celebrated. Thus, I am often the only or certainly one of the few Jews at our Seder and the guest list has always included a large proportion of nuns, priests, and other clergy. We use a potluck style, and each guest prepares a menu item or takes a turn at dishwashing. The order of service we use, the *hagaddah*, is a children’s version: an easy read of an inclusive and affirming liturgy.

Passover is only one example of Betsy's wise encouragement that our children be connected to the Jewish faith. She has wanted them to feel both knowledgeable and comfortable with all of their roots, even as her Catholicism continues to be important to her. When we were expecting our first child, it seemed logical that our daughter follow the lead of the parent who had demonstrated a continuing religious commitment. Betsy had; I had not. All four were baptized and are Roman Catholics. Further, we've always agreed that if there is a God, He probably doesn't favor one group over another.

My father had been actively involved in Kansas City with the American Jewish Committee, an organization interested in harmonious relations between the Jewish community and all other segments of the community at the local, state, national, and international levels. After his death in 1970, I wanted to stay connected to something he'd been interested in, and I accepted an invitation to join the Board here in Cincinnati. At a meeting when I probably was 27 or 28 years old, one of the local Board members noted, as a subject of concern, that there were no Jewish members of either the Wyoming Golf Club or the Cincinnati Country Club. I don't squirm particularly easily but the observation made me uncomfortable and I said that in fact I was a member of the latter club. He said I misunderstood him: that he had not referenced the Cincinnati Club but the Cincinnati Country Club. I said I understood perfectly well and he said that it was clear that the Club had no idea that I was Jewish. I let it go.

In the meantime, I relished as I still do, the rich Jewish history with which Cincinnati is blessed.

Rabbi Isaac Mayer Wise, the founder of Hebrew Union College, also founded the *American Israelite*, a weekly newspaper chronicling events involving and of interest to the Jewish community here in Cincinnati. In that journal, it was announced in 1975 that I had been elected President of the Board of Easy Riders...a small United Way agency which provided transportation for people, usually elderly and/or impoverished, to medical appointments. A couple of days later, the phone rang at our home and a woman, with a thick foreign accent and

clearly emotionally charged, asked for me by name. She said that her maiden name was Sittenfeld; that all the other Sittenfelds she knew in Germany had been killed during the war; and that she had not even seen the name since 1945. By that time, my father and all my grandparents had died, and it was the first I had ever heard of any family connection to the Holocaust. Betsy and I arranged to have dinner with her the next night near her Bond Hill apartment at Tom House, a Chinese restaurant which may still be around. In any event, we had a memorably pleasant visit and agreed to be together again soon. She died the next week.

My Jewish identification continued to strengthen with ties to Hebrew Union College. During my undergraduate years, I had forged a friendship with a couple who lived in the town of Princeton named Mary and Wendell Davis. After Wendell Davis died, Mary married Ken Keating, then the widowed Senator from New York and subsequently, the Ambassador to Israel. Shortly after his death, we invited Mary to come and visit us here in Cincinnati which she did. When I queried her as to what she wanted to see or do, she asked to tour Hebrew Union College presuming that we were well aware of and probably actively involved with the institution. I explained I wasn't even aware of its existence, but would be pleased to take her. Alfred Gottschalk, then College President, welcomed us warmly and, subsequently, I came to know him well and joined the Board of Overseers in 1976 on which I have served ever since.

It would, however, be disingenuous to claim I don't feel occasion discomfort or tension around my Judaism even now. It surfaces in different ways around Jews and non-Jews. When I joined the Overseers of Hebrew Union College, I was asked which congregation I belonged to locally and explained that I didn't belong to any congregation. Fred Gottschalk suggested that I affiliate and gave me the names of several temples. I had the opportunity to meet and, subsequently, get to know pretty well a special fellow named Harold Hahn. He was the senior Rabbi at Rockdale Temple. Far beyond his very substantial pastoral and homiletic skills, he was a gifted human being. He enabled me to begin to understand the difference between rituals and religion and that which is simply and sustainingly spiritual. Some years after Harold's death, I received a call from a Rockdale Board member who said my dues were inappropriately modest.

I explained that Rabbi Hahn and I discussed this at the time I joined and agreed that, with then five people in our family, one-fifth of our temple or church dues would go to the Jewish congregation and four-fifths to the Catholic Church at which our children received religious education. The Rockdale representative, not unpleasantly, said that really wasn't satisfactory. I said I could resign and he said that wasn't a bad idea. So I did.

A different but parallel awkwardness arose in another context: For the past 32 years, I have been a member of an investment club which meets quarterly and, every three or four years, takes a brief holiday, with spouses, to some splendid domestic or international destination. When a resort in Virginia was suggested a decade or so ago, a member who I considered to be a good and a comfortable friend commented to the assembled group: "I think we would find that the guest list includes a very large proportion of people of the Hebrew persuasion." I didn't say anything; I've never been exactly certain why.

Of course being Jewish in non-Jewish settings can also have its humorous moments. In 1976, after nearly 150 years of having only Jesuit Board members, Saint Xavier High School decided to add five lay trustees. In an atypical lapse of judgment, the head of the School asked me to be one of them and, after a couple of years, elected me as the School's first lay Board Chair. One of our usually efficient Board meetings dragged on one October afternoon and I finally had to explain to my all-Catholic group of cohorts that I needed to end the meeting because I would be late for *Yom Kippur* services. On a similar note, our oldest daughter recently reminded me of a time in the early 1980s when the Easter Bunny hid the children's presents in an unnecessarily obscure location to scold them for having misbehaved at the Seder two nights before.

It is undeniable: My world is enormously different from that of my parents, and our children's world is and will continue to be different from mine. So for me, and perhaps for many other non-traditional Jews today, humor is a link. David Ellenson, President of Hebrew Union College and a valued friend who has joined me here at the Literary Club, suggests that for those

who do not read or speak Hebrew and in some ways do not fully embrace or even fully understand religious services even if they do attend them, humor provides an authenticity...an ownership...a sense of participation in a potentially elusive culture.

Is that why Jewish stories and jokes appeal to me so much? Why do I, little more than a year from my 60<sup>th</sup> birthday, delight so belatedly in feeling part of a heritage from which I had sometimes wanted distance? Why are our children, who are religious mongrels as well as enthusiastic and often raucous joke-tellers, so at ease with who and what they are? Maybe it's because laughter is welcome in a world often short of reasons to laugh. If the rituals or the prayers or the Yiddish or the Hebrew don't connect me, the humor does. Flawed as our country is today, I do live in a place which allows me to be or become what I want: To feel a tie to the past and a link to the future. Betsy's and my children feel the richer for the blend of their past. I am comforted by their comfort.

In conclusion, or more honestly moving toward conclusion, Rabbi Schmuley Boteach shares a traditional Jewish aphorism which says that the difference between the wise man and the clever man is that the clever man can extricate himself from a situation into which the wise man would never have gotten himself in the first place. It is abundantly clear that this evening's speaker is not wise, but I will make an effort toward a certain degree of cleverness by extricating myself from this lectern with a focus on the recurring Jewish theme of not getting mad but rather of getting even. Historically, Jews have often found that going with the flow was more necessary than pleasing and have resorted to cunning to make a point. For instance: "When the doctor called Mrs. Liebenbaum to tell her that her check had come back, she replied: "So did my arthritis."

Or, harking back to more traditional East European humor, a dry goods merchant in Lublin, Poland, orders a consignment of goods from Warsaw. Instead of the desired shipment, he receives a cable saying: "Sorry, cannot fill order until previous order is paid for." Regretfully, the merchant wires back: "Please cancel order. Can't wait that long."

Finally, a lengthy concluding story but a favorite of mine and indeed one shared with me years ago by the wife of a Literarian. It showcases the victory of clever over strong and of meek trumping menacing.

A wise and learned Talmudic scholar boards an airplane for a long flight. He goes to his assigned seat – the middle of three – and is both surprised and delighted, as the plane is about to depart, to have the entire row to himself. Being a scholar, he happily anticipates the time and the space to read and reflect quietly...the kind of things all Jewish men do so well. Alas, just as the doors are about to close, two Arab men enter and are seated on either side of him.

Saddened and discouraged, the scholar, after the journey is in progress, determines to sleep through as much of the flight as possible. He accepts a glass of orange juice from the flight attendant, reclines his seat, removes his shoes, and dozes. Merely minutes later, the fellow in the aisle seat, awakens him and says: “Where is my juice? Why did you not get me something to drink?” The scholar asks why the fellow had not requested a beverage but the man will not be placated. To avoid a scene, the scholar rises and, in his stocking feet, walks to the back of the plane and secures juice for the other man. While he is gone, the Arab spits in his right shoe.

The good and gentle Jew returns with the juice, gives it to the scowling seatmate, sits down and finally gets back to sleep. Shortly, the other fellow, in the window seat, jostles him and, in a hostile, threatening voice says: “You got him juice and you got me nothing. I want some juice as well.” The wonderful Jewish chap is outraged - we do have our limits - but to avoid an ugly encounter, again in his stocking feet returns to the flight attendant and secures yet another juice. While he is gone, the reprobate in the window seat spits in the left shoe. When the scholar returns, he sits down, agitated, angry, and more than wide awake, and puts his feet into his shoes.

Realizing what has happened, with a forlorn wail of which only the pious among Jews are capable, the heroic victim lifts his eyes toward heaven and says: “Oy, God, when will it stop? Where will it end? This spitting in shoes, this pissing in orange juice.”

On that note, thank you, Shalom, and Oy to the world.