

Jewish Humor

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Henry James commented in the 1870's on the many things absent from American life that a serious novelist could profitably use -- no ancient schools like Harrow or Eton, no great manor houses and aristocracy, no Ascot and the like. He noted, however, that the country had one great resource, its private joke as it were, and that was its native humor and humorists. Similarly, deprived for centuries of the trappings James ironically lists, Jews have possessed that last resource in abundance, especially over the past two centuries, in the many lands (and languages beside their own) in which they have resided. Humor has been a way of coping with the challenges of modern life, of dealing with vulnerability in oppressive situations, of self-criticism and self-affirmation, of expressing and sharing pleasures as well as discomforts, of defusing fears.

There have been many efforts to explain the scope, persistence, and character of Jewish humor. Among the best-known theorists of the sources of humor generally have been the French philosopher Henri Bergson, and Sigmund Freud, both Jews. They discuss such themes as the reassertion of the human (and animal) as opposed to mechanical or socially-imposed roles (the enduring appeal of the pratfall) or, in Freud, the relation to dream-work -- when the forbidden or desired is a source of wish-fulfillment or of anxiety, manifested in content that may seem absurd, illogical, or highly condensed and surreal. There are also, of course, social and historical factors at work.

Freud was a great admirer of Jewish jokes and humor, judging from the liberal sprinkling and analysis of such jokes in his major treatise on *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious*.¹ He could often sound disrespectful or condescending, especially to *Ost-juden* (East European Jews). For instance, he uses a joke based on the stereotype of such Jews as dirty: Two Jews meet in front of the bath-house. One sighs and says to the other, "A year goes by so fast." An American version of this enduring stereotype is set in a Lower East Side cafe in the 1920's. Two customers order glasses of tea with lemon. One urges the waiter to be sure the glass is clean. The waiter returns to the table with the tea and asks, "Which one of you ordered the clean glass?" Freud processes many *Schnorrer* (a beggar) jokes as well, in which he frequently admires the *Schnorrer's* insufferable self-assurance and sense of entitlement. Though they be beggars, the ancient and continuing Jewish commitment to charity makes them indispensable -- as good as the givers, who may be Rothschilds. A story repeated and admired by Robert Alter displays this quality: a *Schnorrer* finally gets in to see Rothschild personally, whereupon he asks him for alms. Impatiently

¹ The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud. Trans. and ed. , James Strachey. London: The Hogarth Press and The Institute of Psychoanalysis, 1975, Vol. 8.

Rothschild asks, “If that’s all you wanted, couldn’t you see my secretary?” “Look here. Mr. Rothschild,” replies the *Schnorrer*, “You may be very competent in your field, but don’t tell me how to run my business.”

Freud also repeats many *Shadchen* (matchmaker) jokes. These provide him with the opportunity to attack an institution that frequently dehumanized people -- usually women -- by considering them mere property. Yet Freud clearly enjoys the quick wit in many of the jokes, even when they seem sophisticated. One such has the *Shadchen* chiding a potential groom for noting that a prospective bride has a humpback, a wen on her neck, one leg shorter than the other, and is loudmouthed and stupid besides. “Did you expect perfection?” he asks. Freud also admired the sheer mental complexity of some jokes. One such, a classic (not used by Freud) tells of two Jewish merchants who meet at the railroad station. One asks the other where he is going. The second replies, “To Krakow to buy cloth.” The first says, “You say Krakow to buy cloth, but you want me to think you are going to Lvov to buy seed. I know you really are going to Krakow, so why do you lie to me?”

A more famous story, in one of its versions, concerns a rabbi returning from Budapest to his provincial town in Hungary. He occupies the same train compartment as a well-dressed man who had purchased a ticket for the same town. He wonders who this fine gentleman can be and why the man would want to travel to his small village. He then proceeds through a tortuous (and brilliant) process of Talmudic deduction, elimination and logic to conclude that the man is a successful dentist, who had left the village thirty years earlier, changed his name from Jacob Cohen to a more Hungarian one, and is now returning to treat his brother Feivel, who the rabbi knew recently had trouble with his teeth. The rabbi smiles and addresses his traveling companion. “Doctor John Kovac, I believe. Permit me to introduce myself. I am Rabbi Scharf.” Taken aback, the stranger asks incredulously, “How did you know I was Doctor Kovac?” The rabbi leans back, at ease, “It was obvious.”

Freud discusses the various dynamics at work in jokes and humor: as displaced aggression and rebellion, the desire to reveal the forbidden, expression of skepticism, cynicism, self-criticism, or simply the desire to give and participate in pleasure. His most cogent statement about Jewish humor is:

The occurrence of self-criticism as a determinant may explain how it is that a number of the most apt jokes (of which we have given plenty of instances) have grown upon the soil of Jewish popular life. They are stories created by Jews and directed against Jewish characteristics...

The jokes made about Jews by foreigners are for the most part brutal comic stories... Jews are regarded by foreigners as comic figures. The Jewish jokes which originate from Jews admit this too, but they know their real faults as well as the connection between them and their good qualities, and the share which the subject has in the person found fault with... Incidentally, I do not know whether there are many other instances of a people making fun to such a degree of its own character. (pp. 111-112)

We may take issue with Freud on several points -- probably on what he regards as the Jewish “character” -- but there is certainly sympathy and an understanding here that will help us understand the long life and salient, often irreverent, characteristics of Jewish humor.

Jewish jokes and humorous stories flourish when traditions are changing or being undermined, when life is precarious (as when isn't it, in Jewish history?), or when the spectacle of human folly or vanity unfolds daily to the perceptive observer. The sharpening of Jewish wits and powers of perception have taken place over centuries of Talmud study and pilpul (the method of sharp questioning and answering, of spinning out logic and close analysis of language). There is also the gift of awareness that comes from being in the minority -- the kind of double consciousness that W. E. B. Dubois defined as the condition of African-Americans. Every Jew in Christendom knows there are at least two answers to every question. The overarching irony, at times a tragic joke, of Jewish existence has been the status of Jews as a people with “their feet in the mud and their brows touching heaven” - - that is, the great discrepancy between a proud Chosen People and their endured centuries of contempt, poverty, and persecution in much of Christian Europe.

A great deal of Jewish humor really dates only from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries -- when the great break from traditional life with its deeply embedded religious and cultural values, and the challenge of modernism, have occurred. The Yiddish literature that developed after the Enlightenment reached eastern European regions was ripe with satire, often self-critical -- as in the work of Mendele Moykher Sforim (Mendel the Book Seller), the nom de plume of the writer considered the first of the great classical masters of Yiddish literature -- and with humor that focused on the dualities of Jewish life, as in Sholem Aleichem's Tevye the Milkman stories. There was a folk tradition of humor as well, exemplified by the many Chelm jokes -- Chelm being a legendary town inhabited by fools. One such is of their building a tower at the edge of town from which it would be easier to see the approach of the Messiah. The watchman employed to keep the vigil, the town beggar, was asked what he was being paid. “Not very much,” he answers, “But it's steady work.” There were also many jokes about Chassidim and wonder-working rabbis, even about the ambiguities or wisdom of rabbinic advice in general. A cautionary joke that displays Jewish skepticism and wisdom applicable in many situations familiar to Jews and non-Jews alike concerns the search for a new rabbi. The members of the search committee for a small Eastern European shul write to their colleagues in another shtetl for their help. These worthies reply that in fact their own rabbi has been looking for another position and that he combines the qualities of Moses, Socrates, and Einstein. The searchers are enthralled, and hire this apparent paragon at once. Within a short time it becomes obvious to them that he is terrible as a rabbi, a dud in every way. They write indignantly to the other shul's committee and ask how they could be so flagrantly untruthful in their dealing with fellow Jews? It is a scandal and a shame to designate this flop as a Moses, Socrates, Einstein. “Not at all,” the offending group replies. “We told the truth. Like Moses he cannot speak; like Socrates he knows no Hebrew; like Einstein, he's an atheist!”

At Jewish weddings, the institution of the badkhen was developed: the badkhen was a poet employed to spontaneously compose in witty fashion rhymes about the couple and related matters. Comic traditions were part of the Yiddish theatre that was begun in Romania in the 1880s and was brought to America by Abraham Goldfaden. The Yiddish theater that flourished in New York City through the 1930s featured much comedy and music as well as serious drama and tragedy (the latter produced chiefly in the Yiddish Art Theatre of Maurice Schwartz). It helped develop the careers of many comic writers and actors -- among the best-known being Molly Picon and Menasha Skulnik -- and the taste of a large audience. That audience was the foundation for the rapid increase of Jewish comedians performing in English for Jewish audiences and ultimately the wider general American public.

Even as a not particularly endangered minority in a usually tolerant American society, Jews often display the double awareness, and humor, that can be ironic, bleak, skeptical, and critical. Often its subjects could be the lure and threat of assimilation: there is the generic joke about the old mother from the Lower East Side invited to her son's fancy new dwelling on fashionable Riverside Drive. He has, of course, in his upward climb changed his name. Waiting impatiently for her arrival, he finally goes down to the lobby, where he finds her sitting on a bench, hours after her expected arrival. "Why didn't you come up when you got here?" he asks. "To tell you the truth," she replies, "When the elevator operator asked me who I was going to see, I forgot your name." Or the sense of ethnic otherness, as in Harry Golden's story of the two Jews who meet at a convention. "Where are you from?" one asks. "Charlotte, North Carolina (Golden's home city)" the other replies. "How many Jews in Charlotte?" is the next question. "About three thousand." Then, "And how many Gentiles are there?" "Gentiles we have plenty; about two hundred and fifty thousand." The final response, "You need that many?"

There are numerous jokes about intermarriage -- reflecting a perennial concern -- and some about conversion. One tells of the Jew who converts to Christian Science. On his way out of the house to attend a meeting in the Science reading room he puts on his *yarmulke* (skullcap) and carries his *tallit* (prayer shawl) bag. "What are you doing with those things now," his wife asks incredulously. "Oi," he says, smacking his brow, "I forgot! That's my *goyishe kop!*" (literally "My gentile head," but colloquially, "My gentile stupidity" as opposed to "A *Yiddishe kop,*" or Jewish intelligence). The lure and risks of the marketplace are also a favorite subject, especially in hard times. There's the lawyer during the Depression boasting of the good week he has had, with a five dollar case, a three dollar one, "and two small ones." Or the merchant bragging about his two hundred thousand dollar order from Sears Roebuck: "If you don't believe me I'll show you the cancellation." Such crises or tensions, flirting with the potentially damaging or tragic outcomes of real life, could be eased by humor.

As in the blues, humor can confront the painful elements of life, not offer any easy anodyne, but give relief and pleasure in the style and manner of presentation. The part

played by Jewish comedians in American popular culture has been enormous. Until the 1960's, however, most of them, except when working before largely Jewish audiences -- as in the Catskill Mountain resorts, the so-called "Borscht Belt" -- were at pains to "de-ethnicize" themselves. Names were often changed to less "Jewish-sounding" ones. David Kaminsky became Danny Kaye, Joseph Leivitch Jerry Lewis, a routine procedure in Hollywood for its many Jewish actors, actresses, and screen writers as well. Jack Benny, born Benny Kubelsky, enormously popular in radio and later in the movies is a prime example. He distanced himself from Jewishness further by creating two subsidiary characters on his radio show called Shlepperman and Mr. Kitzel, replete with stereotypical names and dialects, which he could make fun of. The great Marx Brothers' comedy, honed in the period between the wars, is anarchic, wild, subversive and appeals to all ages right to the present but seems scarcely Jewish (except when Captain Spaulding, "the African explorer," played by the inimitable Groucho, sings, "Don't no one call me Schnorrer!"). Groucho's intelligence and irreverent wit can be clearly appreciated in his letter to the Warner Brothers (Hollywood moguls among those prone to de-ethnicize themselves and those they controlled) that appears here at the end of this essay. There were also Ed Wynn, "the perfect fool" of the Ziegfeld Follies, who was a radio pioneer; as was Eddie Cantor in film; the great "Funny Girl" of vaudeville and the Follies, Fanny Brice; and Milton Berle, Sid Caesar and Phil Silvers (Sergeant Bilko), all of whom were pioneers on early television. None, with the exception of Brice in her early routines, emphasized Jewishness, but who could doubt that Jewish life and its traditions sharpened their comedic talents?

Jewish writers for the stage and screen created humorous skits, sketches, and scripts prolifically but rarely evoked specifically identifiable Jewish themes. Besides name changes, there were often half disguises as in the use of initials to cover over "Jewish" names like Sidney, Sam, or Abe (as in the cases of humorist S. J. Perelman, playwright S. N. Behrman, journalist A. J. Liebling). Ira Gershwin wrote brilliant lyrics for his brother George's songs, and for the scathing political satire in *Of Thee I Sing* (1931), the first musical to win a Pulitzer Prize, and for the first authentic American folk opera, *Porgy and Bess*, based on black life in the South with its witty commentary on Biblical stories in the song "It Ain't Necessarily So." Arthur Kober's comedy about Catskill resorts, *Having Wonderful Time*, replete with stereotypes, as were his "Dear Bella" letters in the *New Yorker*, was popular in the 1930's, as Garson Kanin's *Born Yesterday* with Judy Holliday was in the 1940's. Neil Simon is probably the most successful and prolific playwright of the century, and among the funniest; he only began to use the material of his own Jewish American life and upbringing markedly after the 1960's. Wendy Wasserstein, of a younger generation, has always used such material, as have others of her and later generations. Mike Nichols and Elaine May, popular for their early 1960's humor, were cross-over figures who bridged the world of comic improvisation and the "serious" stage and screen (where they occasionally still do comedies). S. J. Perelman, whose parody of Odets's *Waiting for Lefty* and his manic description of his brother-in-law

Nathanael West (ne Nathan Weinstein) was also a writer of many humorous books, scripts for plays and movies, and witty pieces for the sophisticated audience of The New Yorker.

In literature of the 1920's there was the raw comedy and satire of Ben Hecht's *A Jew in Love*, who is best-known, however, for his co-authorship with Charles MacArthur of the decidedly non-Jewish *The Front Page*. There is also Samuel Ornitz's *Haunch, Paunch and Jowl*, about a Jewish arriviste who anticipates Jerome Weidman's *I Can Get It for You Wholesale* of the 1930s and Budd Schulberg's *What Makes Sammy Run* of the 1940's. In that period, as noted earlier, we have the mordant humor and satire of Nathanael West. From the 1950's onward, the era of the Jewish "breakthrough" in American letters, there has been a flood of significant Jewish American writers of fiction in whose work humor is prominent. Among the most notable are Bernard Malamud, Joseph Heller, Erica Jong, Grace Paley, Bruce Jay Friedman and, of course, Philip Roth. Forty years after his *Portnoy's Complaint* changed Jewish American and American literature forever, Roth is as powerful, controversial, and funny as ever. Others one can name who should be read and enjoyed include Nora Ephron, Joanna Kaplan, Fran Liebowitz, Susan Fromberg Schaeffer, Wallace Markfield, Stanley Elkin.

It is in the field of stand-up comedy that Jews have been a most substantial influence upon American popular culture. First there was vaudeville and various painful but funny dialect acts, such as Dr. Kronkheit. One routine opens with a man deciding he's feeling so sick he'll go to see the doctor, for the first time in his life. In Dr. Kronkheit's office, he sees a sign that reads "First visit \$10; second visit \$5." When the doctor enters the office, the erstwhile patient extends his hand and says, "Good to see you again, Doctor!" After the examination, the man pays his five dollars and asks, "Well, what is the diagnosis?" "Oh," says Dr. Kronkheit, "The same as last time!" Not bad.

But that spawned talents who went on to better things. Willy Howard came on stage in the ideological 1930's with a soapbox, exclaiming to his single, lonely straight man, "Hey, you! Come here -- make a circle!" He begins to orate: "Comes the revolution you'll eat strawberries and cream!" "But I don't like strawberries and cream," is the response. "Goddamnit!" he yells, "You'll eat it!" Jewish women – "unkosher comediennes" in Sarah Blacher Cohen's phrase -- made unique contributions, from the "red-hot momma" Sophie Tucker, with her ribald and sexually emancipating routines and songs, such as "When Am I Getting the Mink, Mr. Fink," through the "funny girl" Fanny Brice, to the inimitable Dorothy Parker, and Joan Rivers, the queen of contemporary chutzpah, and scores of others.

Sophie Tucker was born on the road, as it were, while her mother was fleeing Russia in 1884 (or perhaps 1887) to join her husband in America. She was an anomaly as well as a ground-breaking headliner for several decades in American cabarets, nightclubs, stages. She was a large, fat woman who sang and joked about her size and sexuality with an unabashed view of women's desire and power, challenging stereotypes of the day. It was said of her when she started out that she dressed like a hooker (which she was not, although

sympathetic to women in the trade) and, in her glory days, like a madam. One of her songs, sung in 1906-07, when she worked a club in New York's red-light district, was "There's Company in the Parlor, Girls, Come on Down." She claimed to make such songs funny, not salacious. The same might be said of her jokes, which she interspersed as patter between songs. One such goes: I got a call the other night from my old boy friend Ernie. "Soph," he said, "When I celebrate my eightieth birthday, in honor of the occasion I am gonna marry myself a twenty-year-old girl. What do you think of that, Soph?" "Ernie," says I, "When I am eighty years old, I shall marry myself a twenty-year-old boy. And let me tell you something, Ernie, twenty goes into eighty a hell of a lot more than eighty goes into twenty." Her "hot" (sexy) songs were done with humor and a sense of her own power. She sang: "I'm the last of the red-hot mamas, they've all cooled down but me. Flapper vamp, say, what do they know? Come and get your hot stuff from this volcano. I'm the last of the red-hot mamas, I'm getting' hotter all the time!" And her signature song, "Some of These Days" (written by an African American songwriter, Shelton Brooks) ends with the refrain, "You're gonna miss your mama, your big fat mama, some of these days." This was no shrinking violet, passive victim of masculine desire and control. Among her many songs, one of her most popular, cited by Sarah Blacher Cohen, should be noted for, among other things, its bilingual appeal to a Yiddishly-aware audience:

Mistah Siegel, you'd better make it legal, Mistah Siegel
Mazel Tov:
 Something happened, accidentally.
 Consequently, we should marry.
 No, no, it isn't a mistake.
 I'm swearing I should live so.
 It wasn't Sam or Jake.
 A *klug tzu Columbus*, what you made from me.
 My mamma told me yesterday I'm gaining weight.
 It's not from something I ate.
 You said, "Come'on make whoopy, come'on, just one
 little kiss."
Ich bob moira far da chupah
 (I'm afraid of the wedding canopy.)
Vet dos zeyn bei uns a bris.
 (We'll have a circumcision ceremony instead.)
 Mistah Siegel, Mister Siegel, in my *boich is schoen a kiegel.*
 (In my belly is already a noodle pudding.)
 Mistah Siegel, make it legal for me.

Roughly contemporaneous with Tucker and like her from an impoverished immigrant background, Fanny Brice (1891-1951) was a great star of vaudeville, musical comedy, several Ziegfeld Follies before, at the end of her career in the 1930's and 1940's, she became a radio star with her portrayal of a de-ethnicized, precocious, bratty toddler "Baby Snooks." Before that, as Barbara Grossman has shown in her expert biography, *Funny Woman* (1991), her chief *shtick* was to portray an awkward *klutz*y girl, done with great

facial and physical mobility, with a Lower East Side, Yiddish-inflected voice, attempting to rise above or out of her obvious immigrant cultural status. Brice's efforts at ballet dancing, for example, apparently laid audiences in the aisle. A woman wit at the other end of the cultural scale from Brice or Tucker, Dorothy Parker (1893-1967), was born Dorothy Rothschild in New York City to affluent parents, whom she cordially disliked along with a good many other things. She was renowned for her acerbic wit and in the 1920s and early 1930s as the sole female member of the Alonquin [Hotel] Roundtable of Wits (Robert Benchley, Alexander Woolcott, and others). She did not display notable interest in Jewish subjects, although she could be fiercely abrasive in denouncing social hypocrisies and injustices. Her mordant humor can be seen in her 1926 inspired doggerel verse on the subject of suicide, called *Resume*: "Razors pain you;/ Rivers are damp;/ Acids stain you;/ And drugs cause cramps./ Guns aren't lawful;/ Nooses give;/ Gas smells awful;/ You might as well live." Finally, to bring things up to the present, there are now scores of Jewish women comics, among them Bette Midler, Fran Drescher, and especially Joan Rivers, the Queen of Chutzpah. Rivers made her reputation on television, as a stand-up comedian when the form was largely male-dominated. Still performing, she carries on a tradition of sexual frankness, but ruefully, unlike Tucker, as in her comment on Jewish porn, in a supposedly sexually liberated era, as one minute of sex and six minutes of guilt.

One of the richest veins of Jewish humor in America centered on the garment industry, predominantly Jewish and New York-located. This is especially true of the work of Myron Cohen. One of his stories has a manufacturer telling another: "Jack jumped from the window of his shop last week." "Really," the other responds, "Poor Jack -- business was so bad he had to commit suicide!" "He didn't get killed," the first explains, "He fell on a bundle of returns." When things get really bad, Jack eludes the arms of his partner and leaps again from the window. As he is falling he passes the windows of the loft below in which he sees two hundred sewing machines busily whirring. He calls up to his startled partner, "Morris, cut velvet!" These jokes slayed them in Sha-Wan-Ga Lodge and other Catskill resorts in the 1940's.

There were gentle comedians like Sam Levenson, a former high school Spanish teacher in Brooklyn. Warm and folksy, he told of his grandfather stuffing his *kishke* (intestines) with *kishke* (stuffed derma, a Jewish "delicacy," made by stuffing beef intestines with flour, seasonings and fat and then cooking it), which produced a heartburn that kept him warm through the Russian winters. Like this joke, much of Jewish humor makes a virtue of necessity. The line of comedians extends through Shelly Berman and Mort Sahl in the 1960's heyday of Jewish comics, along with Lenny Bruce and Woody Allen, through to the present popularity of Rodney Dangerfield ("I don't get no respect!") formerly Jack Roy, but born Jacob Cohen, Jackie Mason, Mel Brooks and Carl Reiner in their 2000 year old man routines, Jerry Seinfeld, among others. Billy Crystal's film, *Mr. Saturday Night*, is an affectionate tribute to this tradition as is the opening sequence of Woody Allen's *Broadway Danny Rose*, in which four comedians, including Jackie Mason and Morty Gunty, sit at a table

in the Carnegie Delicatessen in New York, reminiscing about the late, affable agent, Danny Rose (a fictional character, played by Allen).

All of these commented, often acerbically, on the foibles of their times and their contemporaries, giving pleasure in the process. From the almost innocent humor of their forebears in Second Avenue cafes to the challenging, corrosive, seemingly nihilistic wit of Bruce and Allen, they have made their indelible mark on our culture. One of the old stories: Two rival Yiddish poets meet at the Cafe Royale on Second Avenue after long absence. After ordering their tea with lemon, one boasts to the other, “Since we last met I have twice as many readers!” “*Mazel tov! Mazel tov!*” the other replies, shaking his hand vigorously, “I didn’t know you got married.” Compared with the world of that joke, Lenny Bruce and Woody Allen (born Allen Stewart Konigsberg) are difficult cases.

Bruce challenged his era with his general irreverence and sharp questioning of hypocrisies in American life. In his routines, which can still be heard on records, he attacks racism, the prurience that often lay under puritanical attitudes, and shibboleths regarding language uses. Most famously, he was arrested for uttering “lewd” and forbidden words in the course of his act. Most of these words, if not commonplace, have become accepted and widely used in film, television, and popular culture generally. A clip from today’s MTV or a rap hit would make Bruce in his prime -- the 1960’s, when he helped Jewish humor enter mainstream America -- seem relatively tame. His use of drugs, from which he may have died in 1966, made him seem like a moral outlaw. His position as an outsider and provocateur in a good cause – as one notable story has it in his autobiography, *How to Talk Dirty and Influence People*, he attacks the absurdity of an ancient anti-Semitic canard. His challenge extends to Jews as well, some of whom may be alarmed when the evil or stupidity is confronted so uncompromisingly and in a way that might be misunderstood.

Finally, Woody Allen’s re-telling of the Abraham-Isaac story, the *Akedah*, one of the most important and commented upon in the Bible. It is in the great Jewish tradition of commentaries, albeit Allen’s is full of irreverence, *chutzpah*, and a contemporary secular perspective. His films, for which he is best known, display these characteristics as well. Lines and situations from them have become minor classics, repeated often by the Jewish middle class, intellectuals, intellectual wannabes, and professionals or near professionals who are often at the center of his humor as subjects and targets. They usually live in a New York City (Manhattan, specifically) that is remarkably clean as well as Jewish. It is romantically evoked in such landmarks as Central Park in Manhattan, the old Thalia cinema where the people line up to see *The Sorrow and the Pity* (the brilliant four and a half hour documentary by Marcel Ophuls about the German occupation of France during World War II), the Museum of Modern Art and the Planetarium. In *Annie Hall*, there is the unforgettable line about the beloved journals of the New York Jewish intelligentsia, *Dissent and Commentary*, merging in a new journal to be called *Dysentery*. Or in *Play It Again, Sam*, the scene in front of a Jackson Pollock painting is memorable. The Woody Allen character, as usual a nervous, neurotic, nebbish looking for a date, always sexually-driven and fearful of rebuffs, sidles up to a young

woman and asks: “What does it say to you?” She: “It restates the negativeness of the universe. The hideous lonely emptiness of existence. Nothingness. The predicament of Man forced to live in a barren, Godless, eternity like a tiny flame flickering in an immense void with nothing but waste, horror and degradation, forming a useless bleak straightjacket in a bleak absurd chaos.” He (after a short pause): “What’re you doing on Saturday night?” She: “Committing suicide.” He: “What about Friday night?”

Along with his often exaggerated vulnerability and sensitivity as a “*kleine mensch*” type of Jew (the “little person,” so central to the image he projects, as it was to much of Yiddish literature as a foil to the arrogance and brutality of Power), this undercutting of philosophical pretentiousness seemed to fit the mood of his time. That mood, and perhaps even more fittingly, that of the post-modern era, was expressed well by the playwright Eugene Ionesco when he said “God is dead. Marx is dead. And I don’t feel so well myself.”

Now that’s Jewish humor. At least Lenny Bruce might have said so in the routine in which he identified people and things as Jewish (even if they weren’t) by their cultural baggage, tam or tone (rye bread is Jewish, white bread is “goyish”; if you live in Montana, you are Goyish, even if you’re Jewish, and in New York you’re Jewish, even if you are not). Although Ionesco was not Jewish (or was he?), his formulation has the Jewish “*knaitch*” (twist or turn) that enables one to face the worst, smile ruefully, shrug, and go on living as best one can.