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The Chosen Comedians

Jewish Joking from Nineteenth Century Europe to Twenty-First Century Israel

By Daniel Taub

A review of *No Joke: Making Jewish Humor* by Ruth R. Wisse (Princeton University Press, 2013)

Have you heard the one about the older Jewish couple visiting Poland for the first time? During a Holocaust remembrance tour, they get into an argument, and stop speaking to each other. Later, on the bus back to their hotel, the wife turns to her husband and says, "You were right before and I was wrong. I'm sorry, honey." "Oh, so *now* you're sorry?" he responds. "You completely ruined my trip to Auschwitz!"

What you think of this joke—whether you find it funny or offensive, or, perhaps, a little bit of each—may say more about you than it does about the joke. Whether you are a Jew, or at least have close ties to the Jewish people, is likely to affect your response, as might your age, with those further removed from the horrors of the Holocaust often having an easier time mining the tragedy for humor than those more directly affected by it. "Comedy

needs enough detachment from its subject to allow for the enjoyment of its playfulness," writes Ruth R. Wisse in *No Joke: Making Jewish Humor*, her survey of two centuries of Jewish comedy from Europe to America to Israel. While the above joke does not appear in *No Joke*, several similar ones, along with Wisse's analysis of their meaning, do. (And it would be impossible for any fan of comedy to read the book and not start recalling his or her favorite Jewish jokes—and imagine what Wisse might say about them.)

We might be getting ahead of ourselves, though, by starting with the extremes of Jewish humor—and, surely, joking about genocide would be at the far edges of the genre. It perhaps makes more sense to first ask, as Wisse does, why Jews are so closely associated with humor. And there is no question they are. Over the course of her book, Wisse—the Martin Peretz Professor of Yiddish Literature at Harvard University—discusses, or at least mentions in passing, myriad Jewish comedians, humorists and satiric writers, a group so numerous that it would be a challenge for any other religion, nationality or culture to claim a bigger contribution to the world of laughter. Trying to make a list would be foolhardy, but even just the biggest names—all of whom Wisse writes about—would have to include Woody Allen, Philip Roth, Groucho Marx, Saul Bellow, Larry David, Mel Brooks, Isaac Bashevis Singer, Sacha Baron Cohen, Sholem Aleichem, the Three Stooges, Jerry Seinfeld, the Coen Brothers, S.Y. Agnon, Sarah Silverman—and on, and on, and on. (Incidentally, Silverman, in an interview with *Esquire* last year, told a version of the joke that opened this review.)

So why are Jews so comedic? For Wisse, the answer lies in the disparity between the promise Jews believe was made to them—being selected as God's chosen people, that is—and what they have endured in almost every land they have inhabited throughout Judaism's history. "Although many religions acknowledge a tension between the tenets and

confutations of their faith," Wisse writes, "few have had to balance such high national hopes against such a poor political record. Jewish humor at its best interprets the incongruities of the Jewish condition."

That brings us back to the Holocaust—the most extreme suffering ever experienced by the Jewish people—along with the humor associated with it. In her discussion of the topic, Wisse recounts a Yiddish witticism from the Warsaw Ghetto: *Opgehit zol men vern, di milkhome zol azoy lang doyern, vi lang yidn kenen oys'haltn*, which she translates as, "God forbid that the war should last as long as Jews are able to endure it." This saying, whose creator is lost to antiquity, "pits the monomaniac obduracy of the 'Final Solution' against the even greater stubbornness of Jewish survival," Wisse writes, while at the same time acknowledging that such extreme pluckiness should never have been required of the Jews. That ability to survive can be traced, at least in part, to Jewish reliance on humor, including humor about the most extreme challenges experienced by Jews.

Unsurprisingly, since World War II Jewish comedy has often made much use of the Holocaust. Wisse recounts a joke that garnered easy laughs in Israel in the 1990s, when the country was beset by a series of suicide bombings following the Oslo Peace Accords. (As with much humor from other cultures, this bit of comedy takes a bit of explaining: to understand and appreciate it, one must know that Israeli students are routinely taken on trips to Poland to visit the concentration camps where their ancestors perished.) The joke, as told by Wisse, goes:

Sara in Jerusalem hears on the news about a bombing at a popular café near the home of relatives in Tel Aviv. She calls in a panic and reaches her cousin, who assures her that thankfully, the family is all safe.

"And Anat?" Sara asks after the teenager whose hangout it had been.

"Oh, Anat," says her mother, reassuringly, "Anat's fine. She's at Auschwitz!"

Much like the joke with which I opened this review, the laugh comes (if it comes, that is—humor is subjective) with the joke's final word: Auschwitz. What is the source of the comedy? Partly it is the result of breaking taboos, which is a common source of humor—in this case the taboo of making jokes about such a terrible tragedy as the Holocaust. Furthermore, Wisse writes, the joke is an equal-opportunity offender (giving offense being, of course, another source of humor), thus broadening its appeal. "By acknowledging the infamous Nazi death camp as a refuge from what was intended to be the Jewish place of refuge, the joke offends both sides of the political spectrum—liberals who deny the ferocity of Arab aggression, and patriots who cannot acknowledge that Zionism does not fully safeguard the Jews."

The hardest people to make laugh, however, are ideologues such as those who have fought to make Israel a haven for Jews, Wisse contends. Irony is a survival technique for those who accept—or have no choice but to accept—the threatening conditions under which they live, while "the new society tackles imperfection instead of joking about it." That is not to say that Israel, with its military muscle and impatience with the dated view of Jews as underdogs, is without its humor. On the contrary, Wisse devotes almost forty pages of her book to the humor of Israeli comedy troupe Hagashash Hahiver; the film *Hill Halfon Doesn't Answer*, a war parody she describes as an Israeli version of *M*A*S*H*; and other comedians, films and television shows which demonstrate that the tradition of Jewish humor endures in the Jewish state.

While discussed at length here, the Holocaust and the humor that makes use of it are not *No Joke*'s focus; the 1968 Mel Brooks movie *The Producers*, for example, receives only a couple sentences despite being one of the best-loved, most-enduring comedies to take on

Hitler, World War II and Nazism. Much of the book is devoted to explorations of the Jewish humor found in Germany decades before Hitler came to power, the development of Yiddish humor across Europe and in the United States prior to the war, and the works of writers from Heinrich Heine, Kafka and Philip Roth to Leo Rosten, whose book *The Joys of Yiddish* was ubiquitous in American Jewish households for decades after its 1968 publication.

Despite its subject matter, *No Joke* is not, as some readers might expect, particularly funny. The work is scholarly (though written in a way accessible to the layman), and Wisse is not aiming for laughs on every page; the jokes, when they are told, are used to illustrate points rather than elicit guffaws. Furthermore, much of the humor discussed—especially when it originally appeared in another language, such as Yiddish, or is from a culture far removed from ours—requires so much explanation on Wisse's part that the humor may be understood but without a laugh. The reader also gets the sense that completely different examples could have been used throughout the book—different novelists, different films, different comedians, different television shows—with the exact same points still being made. That is hardly a problem though. It is almost as if *No Joke* is just one version of the history of Jewish humor—just as there is more than one way to tell a joke.

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