

The Use of Humor on a Contemporary Folk Jewish Album

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Abstract: While most contemporary original Jewish music is liturgical and/or completely serious, a 2020 album of nonliturgical songs includes several songs that strategically use humor or playfulness. This article analyzes the nature and role of these songs in the context of entertainment, education, and their intersection.

Key words: humor, Judaism, Talmud, educational song

The author has experience delivering Jewish education in varied contexts and venues, including Yom Limmud, Tikkun Leil Shavuot, ALEPH Kallah, pluralistic Jewish day schools, supplemental Jewish education to teenagers, and individual lectures (e.g., Lesser, 2006, 2021). The author, who has experience using music as a vehicle for secular¹ as well as for Jewish education, recorded and released an album of original nonliturgical songs grounded in Jewish text and culture: <https://larrylesser.com/sparks>. A goal of the album is to inspire and educate through songs that are self-contained enough to be immediately engaging or entertaining and yet incorporate enough textual content to support or motivate accompanying text study or discussion. While the songs were written to work across denominational lines (e.g., avoiding gendered names of God as well as holy names of God), a main target audience of the album was those who did not have a great depth of (positive) Jewish experience or knowledge. Because members of this target group may have had boring, intimidating, or other negative experiences, it was an intentional decision to incorporate humor into this album and we will discuss three specific songs on the album as concrete examples.

1. Two Jews, Three Opinions

Having the album open with one of the album's more playful songs not only helps to break the misconception that Jewish learning and Jewish songs can't be fun, but also reinforces the Talmudic advice (Shabbat 30b) to start a lesson with a joke. Actually, the Talmud itself has much humor

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¹ E.g., <https://larrylesser.com/mathemusician/>

(Friedman and Friedman, 2017). “Two Jews, Three Opinions,” is a five-verse song whose refrain was sparked by a popular cultural quip some attribute to Israel’s founding father and first prime minister, David Ben-Gurion, though its essence is at least as old as the Talmud (Brawarsky and Mark, 1998). Here are the song’s last two verses, reprinted with permission:

Some towns are torn apart
On how to do service of the heart:
What tune is used, how much is read,
How long it lasts, what kind of spread?!
Now all the shuls pray for minyans:
Two Jews, three opinions!

We can disagree for Heaven’s sake,
But fights like Korach I just can’t take!
Meet me in the middle for a better stance
‘Cause that’s how my mezuzah slants!
Whether a sabra or Virginian:
Two Jews, three opinions! Two Jews, three opinions.... only 3?!

The song embraces the many and sometimes conflicting opinions of contemporary Jews as well as of sages of the Talmud, and affirm this diversity as a strength when we argue constructively, seeking truth rather than victory (Talmudic sources related to the lyric include Eruvin 13b, Pirkei Avot 5:17, and Menachot 33a). The song also reinforces that truth can be multifaceted (e.g., “70 faces of Torah” from Bamidbar Rabbah 13:1 or 13:16), recalling the popular Jewish joke about a presiding judge telling both sides that they’re right and when a listener asks how both sides can be right, the judge responds, “You’re right!” As Joe Buchanan puts it, “we come together with two different opinions and the third opinion is the greater understanding of what we’re talking about” (Kaye 2021, p. 196).

The “two Jews, three opinions” quip set in motion a playful challenge to find verse-ending words to rhyme meaningfully with the multisyllabic word *opinions* and the novelty of the rhymes enhanced the song’s humor. The question exclamation mark after the phrases “what kind of

spread” and “only 3” adds inflection for deliberate comic effect. The final verse has double meaning in the phrase “for Heaven’s sake” as well as the word “slants” and contrasting *sabra* with Virginian was a light-hearted way to juxtapose Israel with the (American) Jewish diaspora. The penultimate verse explores the reasons of varying importance why Jews may not agree on how to worship (not unlike the joke on pp. 97–98 of Telushkin, 1992), which can lead to “two Jews, three synagogues” as in the famous “desert island” joke (e.g., p. 501 of Rosten, 1972) that inspired this bonus verse (as a hidden track at the end of the album), reprinted with permission:

A boat sank with two Jews—
On a desert island, they were marooned.
But they used vines to bind some logs
And built a trio of synagogues:
One for each and one neither will set foot in—
Two Jews, three opinions!

2. Max (The Bark Mitzvah Song)

The album’s fifth song takes an already-humorous piece slice of modern Jewish culture (Borden, 2019) and turns it into a Jewish coming-of-age song using a canine point-of-view as a vehicle to playfully (and, therefore, more safely) explore contemporary mainstream Bar Mitzvah culture in America. Given the number of insider references that non-Jews may not catch, it may be a bit surprising that this song won “Best Humorous/Novelty Song” in the 2021 New Mexico Music Awards, a music competition open to all 2020 albums recorded in New Mexico, and there were almost 700 entries in the 2021 contest. (Also, the album was one of five Finalists in the NMMA’s category for Best Album of the Year.)

As with rhyming with *opinions* in the previous song, part of the humor comes from unusual or unpredictable multisyllabic rhymes such as rhyming the word *mitzvah* with Shih Tzu at the end when some listeners were expecting the edgier (and a more perfect rhyme) choice of a different word also starting with sh: *shiksa* (a sometimes-derogatory Yiddish word some Jews use to refer to a gentile woman). This gives the line more implicit bite in light of high or increasing intermarriage rates. Puns are a huge part of this lyric, especially “Torah leash-ma” [Torah *lishma* refers to studying Torah for its own sake], “muzzle tov” [mazel tov], “Bark Mitzvah” [Bar

Mitzvah], and the song-ending punchline word *aufruf* [where the couple or groom receives a blessing during a service before the wedding] is similar to words (i.e., arf + roof) often used as onomatopoeia for a dog's bark. Also humorous is how the song offers and maintains such a number and density of fanciful parallels in the spirit of the factor labeled "nonsense humor" in Willibald Ruch's investigation of the factor structure of humor appreciation (Martin, 2007).

Another humor strategy is making the song interactive or conversational by having the singer appear to make spontaneous adjustments such as "rabbis.... I mean, rabies" in the first verse and "Too selfish? I'll try again...." in the second verse, which always generate laughs in live performance. Because the singer's character is a dog, it provides a safe way to counter the culture of Bar Mitzvah as rote "performance" ("it's not a show") rewarded with excesses of gifts (e.g., "no Gucci collar for just doin' my job"), while enjoying the familiar touchstones of a social action project, a gift involving the number 18 (the numerical equivalent of the Hebrew word *chai*, meaning *life*), and the custom of lobbing candy treats towards the Bar Mitzvah boy as he finishes the Haftarah reading, apparently a spinoff of a Talmudic (Brachot 50b) showering of a bride and groom with blessing and good luck.

I'm man's best friend, gotta healthy sheen:

in human years, I'll be 13.

I got good *yichus* in my pedigree:

my ancestors' silence in Egypt helped Jews go free.

Look at my tag: it certifies

I have no problem with rabbis (I mean, rabies)!

Now it's time for my Bark Mitzvah— I bound onto the *bima* with joy!

I run to do a mitzvah, fast as any girl or boy.

For my mitzvah project, my pet crusade,
is helping ev'ry cat get neutered or spayed.

Too selfish? I'll try again:

For my mitzvah project, I'll give 18 bones
to good dogs not blessed to have good homes.

My trainer says, “It’s not a show.
Torah *leash-ma* is the way to go!”
So no collar by Gucci for just doin’ my job:
I’ll be happy with whatever treat you lob.

I celebrate my Bark Mitzvah, I’ve learned to heed commands.
I beg to guard a mitzvah: I’ll do, then understand.

Today I am a Bark Mitzvah (muzzle tov!): I’ve shed my puppy youth.
One day, I’ll marry a Shih Tzu: I’ll see you at my *aufruf*!

While the song is humorous throughout, it also incorporates Torah and Talmudic references that have been used in an interactive session that combined music performance and text study, an approach described in Lesser (2020). References for this song include: the dogs’ silence in Egypt (Exodus 11:4-7), running to perform a mitzvah (Pirkei Avot 4:2), studying Torah *lishma* (Pirkei Avot 6:1), and taking action before understanding (Exodus 24:7).

3. Spiritual Not Religious

The third example on the album was sparked by Pew Research Center reports on the rapidly increasing segment of (American) adults who are spiritual but not religious and Jews are apparently less religious than American adults overall.² This phenomenon is especially prevalent among younger Jews, some of whom might use the similar labels “cultural Jews” or “Jew-ISH” (Margolis, 2009). The irony, however, is that some of these same Jews might be surprised to learn Judaism has counterparts to the very spiritual sensibilities (or secular events such as the National Day of Unplugging) they enthusiastically pursue. Holding up such a mirror directly could be off-putting, so the song was written with a dose of humor to lower defense mechanisms and using a first-person perspective allowed the listener to safely reflect privately on how much of the singer’s insights might apply to them, without feeling alone in any confusion or ignorance. Grawe (2016)

² E.g., Lipka and Gecewicz, 2017; <https://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/religious-denomination/spiritual-but-not-religious/>; <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2021/05/11/10-key-findings-about-jewish-americans/>.

claims that this type of sympathetic pain humor supports connection and empathy and this has been also used in the context of statistics education songs (Lesser, 2018).

On the album, the track is a live recording made by an audience member at a 2018 community-wide Jewish music festival where the author debuted this song. Humorous songs often work better on an album when they are recorded in front of a live audience. Here are its verses (reprinted with permission), with the humor intensity increasing from verse to verse, peaking with the “I asked as chocolate sweets” line being sung rapid-fire in one breath:

With organized religion, I did not identify.

Here’s what I’d say to a friend who asked me why:

“Ancient Jewish teachings don’t fit modern life,
but Ayurvedic wisdom transcends time.

I follow my heart, I need no part of a group that’s superstitious: I am spiritual, not religious.”

“And I love to unplug and spend weekends at the beach,
but I don’t keep the Sabbath – it seems out of reach.

The sun and moon are comfort, they light a path that’s clear;
that synagogue’s confusing – candle times change all year.

The food and art, I view apart from the superstitious: I am spiritual, not religious.”

“I don’t need rabbis judgin’ what I do.

‘It’s unhealthy,’ says my shrink and my yoga teacher, too.

Like, why let rules guide what we eat?”

I asked as I biked to the co-op to buy

grass-fed pastured beef, wild-caught salmon,
GMO-free corn, free-range hormone-free
organic chicken, veggies sustainably locally
grown, and fair trade chocolate sweets.

I said, “I need no laws, I’m moral ‘just because’, and I am not litigious –
I am spiritual, not religious.”

4. Discussion

While the author is certainly not the first to use humor on contemporary Jewish albums (examples of other artists include Rav Shmuel, Yidcore, Shlock Rock, Sean Altman's Jewmongous, etc.), the author's songs may be fairly distinctive in their degree of being useful for both entertainment and deeper educational purposes. Having three humorous or playful songs on the album may parallel the optimum dosage of Ziv (1981, 1988) to have about three or four jokes per college class period, as fewer would have little effect and "more would risk transforming the teacher into a clown and students' attention would be diverted from the content of the lesson" (Ziv, 1988, p. 10).

The author's humorous songs serve several roles for his audiences, beyond an inherent putative greater preference for songs when they are perceived as humorous (LeBlanc et al., 1992). The expansive and playful inclusion of the humorous songs may make the subsequent earnest or serious songs more easily received. The placement of humor within a song can be intentional as well. For example, there may be greater impact as the song finishes due to the density or intensity of the humor increasing over the course of the song.

The inclusion of humor was also used to implicitly signal that the album, while informed by a depth of engagement with Jewish texts that some might associate with a more traditional background, was nevertheless pluralistic, not fundamentalist, in tone. A footnote in Chave (2020) explains why humor has a negative correlation with religious fundamentalism (see also Saroglou, 2002, 2003).

As Friedman and Friedman (2015, p. 22) note, "There are no jokes in the Torah, but there is an abundance of wit, irony, wordplay, sarcasm, and humor" that serves to narrow the distance between God and humankind. Analogously, it is hoped that the humor on the album discussed serves to narrow the distance between the listener and the singer as well as between the listener and the Jewish tradition.

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