

Review

Arie Sover. *Jewish Humor: An Outcome of Jewish Wisdom, Historical Experience, and Survival*. Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2021. \$99.95 (Hardcover). 330 pages.

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Many books on humor focus so much attention on the linguistic and psychological mechanisms found in works of humor that they don't adequately consider their social, cultural, and political impact or the impact of the societies in which the creators of that humor grew up and lived. A joke or any other humorous text, such as a comic play, a sitcom, or a comic strip always is created by someone or a group of people and is affected by the backgrounds of the creators of these texts and the societies and cultural formation of the humorists. In considering humor, we have to keep in mind several factors such as the psyche of the humorist, the social background of the humorist, the target audience of the humorous text, the society in which the text is created and the medium used by the humorist, such as language, in the case of jokes.

Arie Sover's *Jewish Humor: An Outcome of Jewish Wisdom, Historical Experience, and Survival* is remarkable in that it not only deals with the mechanisms at work in creating humorous text but also with Jewish history and culture, which have played a major role in shaping Jewish humor.

In his introduction, Arie Sover—founder and editor of the *Israeli Journal of Humor*—describes his remarkable book as “a complicated mosaic based on three central components of Jewish life: Wisdom, Historical Experience, and Jewish survival. One

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cannot understand Jewish humor without referring to the various factors which led the Jewish people to create its unusual humor.”

His book, then, is about Jewish humor and, at the same time, about Jewish culture and the Jewish people who created this humor. So, the book functions as both an analytic study of humor and a social history of the Jewish people in Europe, the United States, and many other parts of the world as well. And the historical experience of Jews, everywhere, plays an important role in helping us understand the sources of Jewish humor.

The scope of the book is incredible. Sover writes about everything from JAP (Jewish American Princess) jokes to Yiddish humor writers, from Kafka to Phillip Roth. Sover discusses humor in the Old Testament (it is questionable if there's humor in the Bible), in the Talmud, in medieval Europe, in contemporary America, and Israel, among other places. He deals with Jewish literary humor, Jewish pop culture humor, Jewish folklore, Jewish jokes, Jewish comedians, and countless other manifestations of Jewish humor. What is important about this book is that it connects Jewish humor to the Jewish experience and Jewish civilization and thus functions, the way humor often does, as a means of dealing with social and political issues of importance.

In his chapter on the sources of Jewish humor, Sover discusses Talmudic study:

The most prominent attribute of Talmudic study culture is creativity and innovation. Talmudic study is based on raising questions and providing creative and innovative answers to Halakhic questions...In the early fourteenth century, the interpretation of Talmudic issues was performed through the pilpul (quibbling)

method called “the division method,” which peaked between the fifteenth and seventeenth centuries in Germany and Poland. (Sover 2021: 20–21):

It is reasonable to suggest that if you secularize pilpul, and take the same mindset but apply it to a comedic look at society and politics instead of the Talmud, you come up with comedians and humorists of all kinds. That may explain why so many comedians were Jewish in the United States and many other countries, as well...

One feature of this book is that, unlike some books on humor that contain no humorous texts, Sover provides us with many jokes and reprints jokes about rich Jews, rabbis, matchmakers, Hasids, and gentiles, as well as jokes about Jewish comic types such as Schlemiels and Schlimazels. He also has a chapter on “Jewish Jokes Under the Nazi and Soviet Regimes,” as well as Jewish “self-jokes” told during the Holocaust. His book also contains a chapter on American Jewish jokes (Jewish mothers, Jewish American Princesses) and another, in considerable detail, on Israeli satirists and humorists working in all media.

Sover also discusses Jewish American humorous literature and covers writers such as Isaac Bashevis Singer, Leo Rosten, Bernard Malamud, Saul Bellow, Philip Roth, Gary Shteyngart, Lara Vapnyar, and Jonathan Safran Foer.

In his chapter, “Jewish Humor: An International Brand,” Sover points out that “Jewish humor forms a significant portion of the world's humor. In many countries in the West, the leading humorists have been—and in some of the countries still are—Jews. He cites an interesting statistic, namely that in the mid-70s, eighty percent of the humorists in the United States were Jews.

The conclusion of the book contains three predictions or hypotheses about Jewish humor. The first is that the Jewish traumatic experience will be transferred epigenetically to future generations of Jews. The second is that as long as anti-Semitism remains a factor threatening Jewish existence, Jewish humor will provide a psychological means to cope with, and triumph over it, and finally, that because of their creativity, wisdom, and curiosity, Jewish people will continue “to break new frontiers in science, culture, and humor.”

Sover’s book is a major contribution to the study of humor, Jewish humor, and its relation to Jewish historical experience. It is scholarly, with more than thirty pages of references, and encyclopedic, but it is written in an accessible style and, thanks to all the jokes in the book, highly entertaining.