

Steven Gimbel*

Al Gini and Abraham Singer, one and an eighth Jews. One and an eighth? Why one and an eighth? The press offered one and they responded, “one and three quarters.” Roman and Littlefield wouldn’t go that high, so they met in the middle...a Jew and an eighth. Even with the amount of Jewishness, these two buy wholesale.

But they certainly do retail philosophy in their wonderful book *The Sanity of Satire*. There is so much in this book that is worth talking about and thankfully others to talk about it. I’m going to limit my comments to chapter 5: Why are Jews so Funny?

They begin the chapter by revealing that they have both been corrupted by the social scientists they hang around at Loyola by starting with actual data. Citing a statistic from *Time Magazine* in the 70’s, they point out that while Jews made up three percent of the population, they accounted for around eighty percent of the top performing comedians. That surely seems so stunning a statistic, that surely there must be an explanation.

There are four standard lines of argument designed to account for the proliferation of Jewish comedians in 20th century America: theological, psychological, sociological, and historical.

The theological line connects humor with Judaism (as opposed to Jewishness). Jews are called the people of the book, but perhaps it would better to call us people of the books since we have both the Torah (the sacred text) and the Talmud (the book of interpretation of the text). The Torah gives us 613 commands. To be a good Jew is to follow them. But they are general rules, what about the weird cases? I know I shouldn’t steal, but if I find a \$20 bill on the ground, is it stealing if I put it in my pocket? It depends. If you are in your friend’s kitchen, then you know it is his. Give him back his money. Don’t steal it. If you are in a busy shopping mall parking lot

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around the holidays and don't see anyone looking for it and there are no distinguishing markings on it...finders keepers, you are morally in the clear. So, Talmudic thought is looking at things from unusual directions and coming to understand different ways of seeing what you thought to be obvious.

This, of course, is what humor does. The set-up leads your mind in one direction. The punch line takes it in a different direction. To get the joke you need to see things in both ways. Talmudic thought resembles humorous thought. Jews are being theologically trained, one might argue, to be funny.

Gini and singer follow John Morreall (it is a halakhic requirement that all papers in the philosophy of humor must contain at least one mention of John Morreall) in arguing that Jewish humor is not related to Judaism, to religious aspects of the culture. If I can argue from anecdote, personally, the Jews I know who devote the most time to studying Talmud are not the life of the party. It is often those who are willing to be a little sacrilegious who make you laugh your tzitzis off.

A second explanatory hypothesis is biological. As people of the books, being well-read, being clever in interpretation, and being wise in understanding difficult disputations are socially lauded qualities. The most prized position in the community is that of scholar. The rabbi is the husband who has the highest status and our clergy are encouraged to reproduce as much as possible—don't just be fruitful and add, no, you need to multiply. Traditionally, Jews see nerdiness as sexiness.

Given that as a diasporic people who cluster themselves, creating insular communities, there would thereby be a selection pressure among Jews favoring intelligence. As such, over

generations, one would expect Jews to get progressively smarter as a group and smart people are funnier because humor is a cognitive activity.

Gini and Singer reject this as well. Since around 1933, any arguments with premises that connect Jews and genetics have rightly made folks a little nervous. Hitler was a terrible comedian, but he killed every time.

A third approach, probably the most common, and the one that Gini and Singer advocate, is the psychological/historical explanation. To study Jewish history as a Jew is to learn that every major civilization that came down the pike beat the snot out of your ancestors. With so much suffering, if you don't laugh, the argument goes, you cry. We kvetch enough, so let's laugh.

History has taught the children of Abraham to be "on guard," cautious, skeptical, and distrustful of the world. Even in good times, when life is not cruel, it is always hard, a struggle. Individually, and as a people, Jews have alternatively used humor as a narcotic, a tool, a weapon, and a buffer to seek relief, acceptance, or stoical resignation regarding the triumphs and vicissitudes of life. As many Jewish scholars have pointed out, "Humor is seldom the only answer." But what humorlessness fails to recognize is just how useful humor can be in confronting what one finds offensive, intolerable, or beyond comprehension. In the words of Chicago-based comedian Aaron Freeman, "I don't just tell jokes to earn a living or just because they are funny—I tell jokes as a self-defense mechanism. (118–9)

So, Jews are funny because humor is a self-defense mechanism that keeps you from getting beaten up, at least not as much as you might have been if you weren't funny.

The worry I have with the suffering Jew as the funny Jew hypothesis is that some of our funniest Jews are those who have suffered the least. For example, the only Nazi that Jerry Seinfeld has had to deal with was of the soup variety.

Indeed, the first Jewish American comedy superstar predates the Marx Brothers, predates Vaudeville, even pre-dates Molly Pincon and the Yiddish theater in America. The first Jewish American comedy superstar was Rube Goldberg, the master of the cartoon. Indeed, he helped found the National Cartoonist Society and their annual award for the best cartoonist is the named after him, the Reuben (it is, of course, the only major artistic award made with sauerkraut and Russian dressing).

Because such a huge percentage of American Jews trace their family's entrance to America to the great wave between the 1880's and 1920's, we forget that there were Jews in America before that. Mostly from Germany and Austria, these early settlers did not come in great numbers, tended to be better educated and better off, and quickly assimilated into American culture. A lot of them, including Goldberg's family, caught the wave heading west. Rube Goldberg's father had a colorful life including a stint as a rancher in Tucson, Arizona. As a result, his large Stetson hat became a standard part of his get-up, even when the family moved farther west, settling in San Francisco, where Rube was born and raised.

Rube Goldberg took art lessons when young and hoped to become a professional artist, but his father demanded that he go to college and get a degree in something practical. So, he attended Berkeley and became an engineer. But drawing was in his blood and he left his cushy job with the city to start drawing images for the sports page (this was before photography was a possibility in newspapers) and then comics. He became successful enough on the West coast that he decided to try to hit the big time and came east to New York City.

Again, having to work his way up from the sports page, he ultimately ended up drawing many comic strips simultaneously, Pepsi and Pete, Mike and Ike, Bobo McNutt, and I'm the Guy are just a few. But the comics that immortalized him in the dictionary and the popular imagination were the Inventions of Professor Lucius Gorgonzola Butts. Modeled on certain members of the engineering faculty at Berkeley, the professor came up with the crazy multistage contraptions that we all picture when we hear the phrase "Rube Goldberg machine."

You have to remember that when he was writing was the golden age of American inventions. We not only had the Alexander Graham Bell's telephone, B.F. Morse's telegraph, the Wright Brother's air flight, and the anti-Semite Henry Ford's automobile, but also a spate of smaller advances in daily life like the zipper and, yes, the mousetrap. When Rube Goldberg machines first appeared in the public discourse, American ingenuity was a core virtue spurring a deep sense of progressive optimism. The future seemed bright. Things were getting better and the United States was moving from a cultural backwater, inferior in cultural output to Europe. Virtually all of our medical doctors traveled to Germany and France to train. But for the first time, America was starting to gain a sense of self-confidence.

Rube Goldberg's cartoons was not a comedy of self-protection. Rather, it was ribbing a friend who was looking in a mirror, fixing his hair, and thinking he looks hot. As someone myself who has never been particularly good looking or charming, when I wanted people to like me, I tried to make them laugh. (Please, like me). Perhaps, we should see Jewish comedy not as the work of bruised and battered victims trying comfort themselves. Rather, we should see it like Irving Berlin's "God Bless America," "White Christmas," and "Easter Parade" which celebrate mainstream American culture and voiced a clear interest in joining it. Jewish humor is not meant

to accent our Jewishness (even if it was delivered with a Jewish accent), but was meant to highlight how we would be the life of the party...if you'd invite us to the party.

And I think it worked. Not only because of the way that Jews face less overt bias (or, at least did before the last four years), but from what comedy Central looks like. It looks a lot like A Night at the Improv meets the United Nations. We now have a wide range of comic perspectives, people from an incredibly broad cross-section of our melting pot taking to the stage with the stool and mic stand. They likely would not be following the trail blazed by Jewish comedians if it was not, at least in part, successful.

So, I hope to offer a more positive theory because reading Gini and Singer's book is nothing but a positive experience.