

By Rabbi Joseph Telushkin

NONFICTION

Nine Questions People Ask About Judaism (with Dennis Prager)
Why the Jews? The Reason for Antisemitism (with Dennis Prager)
*Jewish Literacy: The Most Important Things to Know About the Jewish Religion,
Its People, and Its History*

FICTION

The Unorthodox Murder of Rabbi Wabl
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An Eye for an Eye

Jewish Humor

What
the Best
Jewish Jokes
Say About the Jews

Rabbi Joseph Telushkin



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Introduction

What Is Jewish About Jewish Humor?

When the first-century Rabbi Hillel was asked by a would-be convert to define the essence of Judaism while standing on one foot, he told the man, "What is hateful unto you, don't do unto your neighbor. The rest is commentary; now go and study." Some two thousand years later, Israeli Rabbi Shlomo Lorincz related Hillel's response to American economist Milton Friedman, then serving as an adviser to the Israeli government, and asked if he could summarize economics in one sentence. "Yes," replied Friedman. "There is no such thing as a free lunch."

Is there one sentence that can capture the essence of Jewish humor? I'm afraid not. How could one statement encompass jokes about Jewish mothers, reckless and rude drivers in Israel, and antisemites? As I hope to make apparent, Jewish humor reveals a great *many* truths about the Jews, but no *one* great truth. Indeed, 150 years of Jewish jokes, and 2,000 years of folklore and witticisms, have the uncanny ability to express truths that sociological or other academic studies usually miss.

A caveat: An analysis of the Jews based on humor and folk-

lore alone necessarily leaves out some important topics. Nothing in these pages reflects Judaism's understanding of God's omnipo- tence, or why Jews believe they were chosen by God, or the Jew- ish position on birth control. I would gladly have included these subjects had I found jokes about them, but I didn't.

Many other important topics are the subject of jokes, but not very funny ones. As anyone who has ever perused a book of jokes quickly learns, all too many are not truly funny. I de- cided early on that it would be cruel (although hardly unusual) punishment of my readers to include such material, merely to have an excuse to say something about the joke's subject.

The good news is that many of the most important issues that Jews think about, often obsessively, *are* expressed in Jewish humor. Want to know a Jewish reaction to the antisemitic accusa- tion that Jews control world governments and dominate world finance? Well, there is a joke about it (see page 107).

Has Jews' concern with their and their children's financial suc- cess caused their values to go awry? This weighty question has been considered in many religious works, but there also is a joke about it, one that is particularly funny and insightful (see page 34).

Are Jews, products of a culture averse to physical violence, disproportionately prone to verbal ferocity and combativeness? Guess what? There's a joke about it, many for that matter (see pages 97-104). Just as there are jokes about Jews who assimilate or who convert to Christianity.

What makes a joke Jewish? Obviously, it must apply to Jews, but more significantly, it must express a Jewish sensibility. Merely giving individuals in a joke Jewish names, or ascribing the joke to Jewish characters, does not a Jewish joke make.*

*For example, a recent book containing hundreds of "Jewish" jokes in- cludes the following: "The husband walked into the room and sneered, 'Why are you bothering to iron your bra? You don't have anything to put into it.' ...I iron your shorts, don't I? his wife answered."

This is not just a bad Jewish joke—and it's not a Jewish joke at all, but rather a fairly typical, and hostile, American sex joke. It would be equally out of place were it in a book of "great" Irish or Italian jokes.

Jewish sensibility, however, concerns precisely those sub- jects and values that receive disproportionate attention among Jews. Antisemitism, financial success, verbal aggression, and as- similation are all particularly significant in Jewish life. Antisemi- tism, for example, is one of the few issues that unites virtually all Jews. A large number of American-Jewish organizations are devoted to exposing and combating antisemitism. Ethnic groups far larger than the Jews—the Irish and Italian Americans—ap- parently feel more secure, for they have far fewer "defense" organizations.

Professional success is highly emphasized and encouraged in Jewish life. It is no coincidence that Jews have achieved con- siderable affluence in every society in which they have had equal rights.¹

Verbal combativeness and aggression are well-known Jew- ish characteristics. "Spare me from gentile hands and Jewish tongues," ran a nineteenth-century Yiddish proverb in Eastern Europe. "Three Jews, three opinions" (in some versions, "four opinions," lest one of the Jews be a schizophrenic) is a com- mon American-Jewish cliché. When other arguments fail, mem- bers of the Israeli Knesset (parliament) have been known to accuse their opponents of holding "Nazi-like" views²; similar rhetorical excesses frequently poison American-Jewish life.

Finally, there is assimilation, which in the relatively tolerant world of America, Jews tend to view as the preeminent threat to Jewish survival. With intermarriage rates now 50 percent or higher, countless communal leaders, academics, and other com- mitted Jews warn of the danger of American Jewry "melting away" into the broader populace.

Jews feel anxiety about all these subjects, and one of the characteristic ways in which they, and most other people, deal with their anxieties and fears is by laughing at them: Anything that can be mocked immediately seems less threatening. The greater the anxiety a particular subject produces, the more jokes will be made about it. For example, since most American Jews today feel quite comfortable among their gentile neighbors, rel-

atively few jokes about antisemitism are being created. But look at collections of Jewish jokes from fifty or sixty years ago, when Jews in this country were far less secure, and you find many jokes ridiculing Jew haters. Among Jews in Russia, however, where antisemitism is still widespread—and was, until recently, government-sponsored—such jokes are more common and are still being created (see pages 117–123).

Other jokes have nothing to do with Jewish anxieties, but reflect the distinctive thought patterns of the Jewish mind. Jokes involving logic and argumentation emanate as directly from the Jewish experience and Jewish creativity as do those about assimilation and verbal aggression. The Talmud, one of the two cornerstone works of Judaism (the other, of course, is the Bible), is frequently concerned with finding logical solutions to seemingly insoluble legal and ritual problems. The most widely studied of its sixty-three tractates, *Bava Mezia*, opens with a legal conundrum: Two men come into court clutching a garment. Each asserts that he was the first to find it; needless to say, there are no witnesses. The Talmud spends pages, and the average yeshiva student dozens of hours, trying to find a logical method for assigning ownership of the garment.³ Probably no other culture exists in which so many people have concerned themselves with such intricate legal issues. Naturally, takeoffs on the reasoning processes used in talmudic disputes have long since found their way into Jewish humor:

A man, having been caught with another man's wife, is brought before a rabbi.

"You are a vile person," the rabbi tells him.

"Will you condemn me, Rabbi, before you let me prove to you I'm innocent? You admit, don't you, that I am entitled to have sexual relations with my own wife?"

"Of course."

"And you will grant, Rabbi, that the man who accused me is permitted to have sex with his wife?"

"Obviously. What a question!"

"And may that man have sex with my wife?"
"That's disgusting. Of course not."

"Well, then, Rabbi, everything makes sense. You yourself concede that I am permitted to have sex with a woman with whom my accuser is forbidden to have sex. All the more so should I be entitled to have sex with a woman with whom even he is permitted."⁴

Family relationships also are central to Jews. While the family is important in all societies, Jews seem to talk about it more than do members of other groups. That is why the expression "a real Jewish mother" has come to refer to an overly concerned and worried mother of any ethnic or religious background. Novelist Herbert Gold claims that the word "family" follows "Jewish" as inexorably as "cancer" follows "lung."

Of course, the characteristics I have just described are hardly confined to Jews. If they were, Jewish jokes would have little attraction for non-Jews. Yet the long-standing Jewish prominence in American comedy—over the past forty years, some 80 percent of the country's leading comics have been Jews*—suggests that Jewish humor has a broad-based appeal. While the whole constellation of Jewish characteristics described in this book is not found in any other group (or in any one Jew), many non-Jews share one or more Jewish obsessions. Ask Italian Americans if relationships inside Jewish families are any more intense than those inside theirs. Nor, for that matter, do Jews have a monopoly on sharp tongues and argumentative or divisive behavior. Indeed, some jokes regarded as classically Jewish have the annoying habit of showing up in other people's collections of humor. I was amazed to discover the following story,

*This estimate is made by Steve Allen, a non-Jewish comedian and historian of American humor (Steve Allen, *Funny People*, p. 30. Note: Full references are not provided for books listed in the Bibliography at the end of this book). "American comedy," Allen believes, "is a sort of Jewish cottage industry" (p. 11). A listing of twenty of the most prominent American-Jewish comedians indicates the disproportionate success of Jews in this area: Woody Allen, Jack Benny, Milton Berle, Fanny Brice, Mel Brooks, Lenny Bruce, George Burns, Sid Caesar, Billy Crystal, Rodney Dangerfield, Danny Kaye, Sam Levenson, Jerry Lewis, Groucho Marx, Jackie Mason, Zero Mostel, Joan Rivers, Mort Sahl, Phil Silvers, and Henny Youngman.

versions of which appear in virtually every major collection of Jewish humor, in Professor Christie Davies's *Welsh Jokes*:

A Welshman was shipwrecked at sea and marooned on a desert island. When a passing vehicle picked him up five years later, the crew was amazed to find his little island covered in fine buildings that he had built himself. With pride the Welsh Robinson Crusoe took the captain round the island and pointed out to him his house, workshop, electricity generator, and two chapels.

"But what do you need the second chapel for?" asked the captain.

"Oh," he replied. "That's the one I don't go to."

Professor Davies, who presents this story as a typical example of Welsh humor, acknowledges that it is widely told about a shipwrecked Jew as well. But that does not mean that the joke is interchangeable among all ethnic groups. It would not sound plausible, Davies argues, were it told about Swedes, Italians, or the Irish, because the joke depends on the fact that Judaism and Welsh nonconformist Protestantism are religions in which the community is not under the control of one universally acknowledged religious leader, such as a pope. In groups like these, individuals tend to arrogate to themselves the right to make decisions about religious beliefs and practices rather than submit to religious interpretations and discipline imposed by others.⁵

Although the joke's essence and punch line are virtually the same in the Jewish and Welsh versions, there is one important difference. In most Jewish versions, when the man is rescued, all that he has built is a hut and two simple synagogues ("the one where I pray, and the one I wouldn't set foot into"). On the dozens of occasions I have heard this joke told, the marooned Jew never puts up a workshop or constructs an electric generator. Had such details been inserted, the joke would no longer have sounded plausible, because in the Jewish self-image, Jews are lawyers, doctors, accountants, and businessmen, not Robinson Crusoes or Mr. Wizards.

And yet the Welshman's behavior corresponds exactly to what Jews expect of non-Jews. Jackie Mason claims that when a car owned by gentiles breaks down, "in two seconds they're under the car, on top of the car. . . . It becomes an airplane and [the gentile] flies away." But when a Jewish-owned car breaks down, "you always hear the same thing: 'It stopped.' And the husband says: 'I know what it is. It's in the hood.'

"[The wife] says: 'Where's the hood?'

"[And the husband responds]: 'I don't remember.'"⁶

Mason's joke suggests both the wit of ethnic humor and the dangers of negative stereotyping. The most popular segment of his long-running Broadway show, *The World According to Me*, was an extended elaboration of the "differences" between Jews and gentiles: Jews are ambitious, gentiles are plodders; Jews work in business or the professions, gentiles do physical labor ("Did you ever see a [hardhat] on the top of a building yell, 'Happy Passover!'"); Jews eat huge quantities of food, gentiles drink vast quantities of liquor.

Although Jackie Mason's humor has sparked far more laughter than offense, the stereotyping inherent in much ethnic humor is worrisome. Far more often than most joke tellers will acknowledge, some hostile stereotypes are so negative as to do real damage to the ethnic group being mocked. The unremitting depiction of Poles as idiots in "Polish jokes" has influenced the way many people view Poles, and the way some Polish Americans view themselves. (Imagine the ethnic group to which you belong becoming a synonym for "stupid.") And yet a 1975 study revealed that Polish Americans are the third most affluent ethnic group in the United States, after the Jews and the Japanese.⁷ Because of all the negative stereotypes about Poles, many Americans would assume they are underachievers.

The ongoing torrent of 'JAP [Jewish-American princess] jokes,' which depict all Jewish women as materialistic, bitchy, and sexually frigid, has hurt the image of Jewish women. In fact, more than a few Jewish men justify their preference for gentile girlfriends by claiming that Jewish women are inordinately

selfish, cold, and obsessed with acquiring possessions. Far more disturbing, however, is the fact that the image of Jewish women conveyed in JAP jokes has been used to exonerate a man who murdered a Jewish woman. In 1982 an all-gentile jury in Phoenix, Arizona, sitting in judgment on Steven Steinberg, who had murdered his wife, Elana, was repeatedly told that the term "JAP" described Jewish women who were materialistic, frigid, and nagging, and that Elana Steinberg was such a person. The "JAP defense" was so successful that Steinberg was acquitted and permitted to inherit his wife's property. "The guy shouldn't have been tried," one juror told a reporter. "He should have had a medal."*

In recent years, the very negativism of so much ethnic humor, and the animosity it provokes, have caused many comedians to shy away from ethnic material. Naturally, there is even a Jewish joke about this:

Gold is telling his friend a story: "One day, Coben and Levine were going—"

"Coben and Levine, Coben and Levine," the friend stops him angrily. "Why are your jokes always about Jews? Why don't you tell them about the Chinese for once?"

Gold is taken aback. "You're right," he says. "One day, Soo Lung Mu and Mao Tsu Nu were going to Soo Lung Mu's nephew's Bar Mitzvah...."

*Shirley Frondorf, *Death of a Jewish American Princess: The True Story of a Victim on Trial* (New York: Villard Books, 1988). Sadly, the outrageous verdict in the Steinberg trial has not halted the spread of JAP jokes and other hostile material. Observers have reported the presence of T-shirts on college campuses asking HAVE YOU SLAPPED A JAP TODAY? and a poster of a woman holding a Visa card and can of Tab soda, with the headline BACK OFF BITCH. I'M A JAP BUSTER! At Cornell University, a "humor" magazine published a feature called JAPS-B-GONE: A Handy Info Packet for the Home Exterminator. with instructions telling readers how to kill a JAP. Letty Cottin Pogrebin notes that "logically, there's no difference between 'Kill a JAP,' and 'Kill a Jew' since women who are called JAPs are also Jews, yet few Jewish people react to JAP 'joking' with anything like the horror and outrage that would accompany the first T-shirt that said HAVE YOU SLAPPED A JEW TODAY? OF BACK OFF, YID, I'M A JEWBUSTER" (Pogrebin, *Deborah, Golda, and Me: Being Female and Jewish in America* [New York: Crown Publishers, Inc., 1991], p. 232).

The issue, however, is subtler and more complex than jokes about Bar Mitzvahs, circumcisions, or eating pork suggest. The issue, rather, is, can one tell ethnic jokes without dehumanizing the joke's subject? Pick up any collection of ethnic jokes, and you will find many stigmatizing Italians as mafiosi, Irish as alcoholics, British as uptight and kinky, and Jews as overly sharp in business dealings. And while we might all agree that it's wrong to stereotype a group, it's also true that offensive ethnic jokes usually don't arbitrarily target their victims; often there is a factual basis for the flaws ascribed to different groups. In fact, that's what makes these jokes "familiar" and funny. If the Irish tell many funny stories about alcoholism—in collections of Irish humor, a third or more of the jokes are invariably about drunkenness—that is because, as Nathan Glazer and Daniel Moynihan conclude in *Beyond the Melting Pot*, their classic study of ethnic America: "A dominant social fact of the Irish community is the number of good men who are destroyed by drink." Such jokes continue to be told because the problem has persisted, even with Irish-American upward mobility. "In ways," Glazer and Moynihan have written, "it is worse now than in the past; a stevedore could drink and do his work; a lawyer, a doctor, a legislator cannot."⁸

People who oppose telling ethnic jokes would have us believe that the whole genre is nonsense, that alcoholics, neurotics, oversensitive people, and shady characters are evenly distributed among all groups. However, tolerant as it sounds, this assumption makes no sense, for it implies that history and culture have no impact on human beings. But, of course, they do. What makes Jews Jewish is a specific religious culture and historical experience that has shaped their values and strongly influenced how they view the world.

Part of that religious culture is a proclivity for self-criticism. The biblical prophets repeatedly denounced their fellow Jews for their moral lapses; the Jews reacted, not by hating the prophets, but by canonizing their words and making them part of the Holy Scriptures. This tradition has carried over into Jew-

ish humor, so much so that Sigmund Freud, in his pathbreaking study *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, claims that self-critical jokes are one of the distinguishing and characteristic features of Jewish humor. Freud insists, however, that Jews' self-critical jokes are entirely different from those told by antisemites. These acknowledge no good in Jews; in fact, they often deny their very humanity. Only people with a profound animosity toward Jews would tell such a "joke" as "How many Jews fit into a Volkswagen?" "506. Six in the seats, and 500 in the ashtray."⁹

This does not mean, however, that only antisemites joke about the terrible events of Jewish history. During the Hitler era, but before the revelations of the gas chambers, German Jews would tell of two Jews who meet in Cologne. "Can I borrow some cigarette paper?" one asks the other. "Sorry," the second one answers. "I used my last one to wrap up my meat ration."¹⁰

The challenge confronting the teller of ethnic jokes is to avoid blurring the line that separates insightful, even scathing, humor from so-called jokes that are really an excuse for expressing hostility and prejudice.

While I have yet to find a fully satisfying formula for distinguishing fair from unfair ethnic humor, the following four guidelines should help ethnic storytellers to avoid bloody noses and broken friendships:

1. Would you be willing to tell the joke to a member of the group of whom it makes fun? If not, why?
2. If members of the group discussed in the joke don't find it as funny as or funnier than do outsiders, it's probably hostile and shouldn't be told.
3. The more biting the punch line, the more cautious non-members of the group should be before telling it. Years ago, black comic Dick Gregory announced that his son had told him that he no longer believed in Santa Claus: "I don't believe no white man would have the guts to come into our neighborhood

after midnight." Told by a white comic, this joke likely would have crossed the bounds of good taste.

4. Finally, when jokes treat members of an ethnic group not as individuals but *only* as stereotypes (as in Polish jokes or JAP jokes), they become offensive.

A closing confession: Having argued earlier that no one statement can summarize Jewish humor, I herewith present three jokes—one European, one American, and one Israeli—that come as close as any to conveying the contradictions and anxieties that have long characterized many Jews:

In the 1920s, a Jew travels from his small Polish shtet to Warsaw. When he returns, he tells his friend of the wonders he has seen:

"I met a Jew who had grown up in a yeshiva and knew large sections of the Talmud by heart. I met a Jew who was an atheist. I met a Jew who owned a large clothing store with many employees, and I met a Jew who was an ardent Communist."

"So what's so strange?" the friend asks. "Warsaw is a big city. There must be a million Jews there."

*"You don't understand," the man answers. "It was the same Jew."*¹¹

The "Jew in Warsaw" joke directly confronts the issues that divide the souls of so many Jews. For example, leaders of the intensely Orthodox Lubavitch movement have long noted that a large percentage of their contributors are totally irreligious Jews. As regards American Jewry's political views, it's been said that "Jews earn money like Episcopalians and vote like Puerto Ricans."^{*}

^{*}This quip simultaneously confronts some of the opposing stereotypical images non-Jews have about Jews. In the West, one common stereotype of Jews has been that they are leftists, even as newspaper and government propaganda in the Communist world depicted them as capitalists. Studies of non-Jews' attitudes to Jews indicate that the same people often hold conflicting images; those who agree with the statement that "Jews are always trying to push in where they are not wanted" are likely to also believe that "Jews are clannish, always sticking together."

Another reflection on the Jewish psyche:

What's a Jewish telegram?

It reads, "Letter to follow. Start worrying."

And finally, my own favorite story:

A group of elderly, retired men gathers each morning at a café in Tel Aviv. They drink their coffee and sit for hours discussing the world situation. Given the state of the world, their talks usually are depressing. One day, one of the men startles the others by announcing, "You know what? I am an optimist."

The others are shocked, but then one of them notices something fishy. "Wait a minute! If you're an optimist, why do you look so worried?"

"You think it's easy to be an optimist?"

The "distressed optimist" strikes the right chord in much Jewish humor. By insisting that the world is moving toward perfection, and that the messianic days lie in the future, Judaism encourages Jews to be optimists. But Jewish history, with its tragic record of crusades, expulsions, pogroms, and the Holocaust, impels Jews to pessimism. Hence, as Jews, we are optimists—with worried looks on our faces.

I

"Oedipus, Shmedipus, as Long as He Loves His Mother" The Inescapable Hold of the Jewish Family



Between Parents and Children

Three elderly Jewish women are seated on a bench in Miami Beach, each one bragging about how devoted her son is to her.

The first one says: "My son is so devoted that last year for my birthday he gave me an all-expenses-paid cruise around the world. First class."

The second one says: "My son is more devoted. For my seventy-fifth birthday last year, he catered an affair for me. And even gave me money to fly down my good friends from New York."

The third one says: "My son is the most devoted. Three times a week he goes to a psychiatrist. A hundred and twenty dollars an hour he pays him. And what does he speak about the whole time? Me."

The intense connectedness of the Jewish family is no invention of modern Jewish humor. Its roots go back to the fifth of the Ten Commandments: "Honor your father and mother."¹ To-

day people take it for granted that religion furthers family closeness; "A family that prays together stays together," a popular catchphrase of the 1950s declared. But, in fact, it was highly unusual to place respect for parents in a religion's most basic legal document. New religions generally try to alienate children from parents, fearing that the elders will try to block their offspring from adopting a way of life different from their own. In the United States, many religious cults are notorious for loosening, if not shattering, children's familial attachments.*

Hostility to parents also characterizes radical, particularly totalitarian, political movements. Both Nazi and Communist societies instructed children to inform party officials of any anti-government acts or utterances by their parents. In the Soviet Union, well into the 1980s, children who joined the Russian equivalent of the Boy Scouts took an oath to follow in the footsteps of Pavlick Maroza. During the 1930s, twelve-year-old Pavlick informed Communist officials of antigovernment comments made by his father, who was summarily executed. Outraged, the boy's uncle killed him. For the next half-century, until Gorbachev came to power, Pavlick Maroza was held up to Soviet youth as a model citizen, and statues of him were erected in parks throughout the USSR. One can only imagine the discomfort of parents who, taking their children to a park, were asked to explain whom the statue was depicting. "Pavlick Maroza," the father (or mother) would answer. "And what did he do, Daddy?" It must have made for some very unpleasant moments.

It is thus quite striking that from its very beginnings, Judaism

*Even Christianity, which has long been very family-oriented, was anything but in its earliest days. Jesus declared: "No one can come to me without hating his own father and mother..." (Luke 14:26). In the gospel of Matthew, Jesus advises a young man not to attend his father's funeral, but to follow him instead (8:21-22). Only after Christianity became established was family cohesiveness emphasized.

placed so positive an emphasis on parent-child relations.† Jewish humor, however, is concerned with the down side of this encounter, with what happens when the glorified relationship becomes too intense. Intimations of such an overintensity can be found in the Talmud. Some rabbis placed virtually no limits on filial obligations: "Rabbi Tarfon had a mother for whom, whenever she wished to mount into bed, he would bend down to let her ascend [by stepping on him]; and when she wished to descend, she stepped down upon him. He went and boasted about what he had done in his yeshiva. The others said to him, 'You have not yet reached half the honor [due her]: has she then thrown a purse before you into the sea without your shaming [or getting angry at] her?'" (*Kiddushin* 31b).

As if to ensure that children, no matter how well they treated their parents, would still feel guilty, the Talmud relates the story of a righteous gentile, Dama, who was about to conclude the sale of some jewels from which he would derive a 600,000 gold *denarii* profit. Unfortunately, the key to the case in which the jewels were held was lying beneath his father, and the old man was taking a nap. Dama refused to wake him, "trouble him," in the words of the Talmud. Of this same Dama, the Talmud relates: "[He] was once wearing a gold embroidered silken cloak and sitting among Roman nobles, when his mother came, tore it off from him, struck him on the head, and spat in his face, yet he did not shame her" (*Kiddushin* 31a).

So extreme and unending are the demands some talmudic rabbis make of children that one sage, Rabbi Yochanan, declared in despair, "Happy is he who has never seen his parents" (*Kiddushin* 31b).

In similar fashion, in the story about the three women in

†At a lecture, a questioner once challenged my assertion that early Judaism promoted the parent-child relationship: "Isn't it true that God's first command to Abraham was to leave his father's home?" "It is true," I answered. "But he was seventy-five at the time [see Genesis 12:4]; he was entitled."

Miami Beach, the best way a son can "honor" his mother is by paying a psychiatrist a fortune to speak about her nonstop.

The linking of psychiatry and Jewish mothers is no coincidence. While Jews are overrepresented in medicine in the United States, in no other specialty is this more the case than in psychiatry (477 percent of what would be normal, given Jewish representation in the general population).*

Large-scale Jewish involvement has characterized psychoanalysis, in particular, since its inception. Sigmund Freud selected C. G. Jung to be the first president of the International Psychoanalytic Association because he did not want psychiatry to be dismissed as a "Jewish science" (which the Nazis did anyway) and Jung was the only non-Jew in Freud's inner circle. "It was only by [Jung's] appearance on the scene," Freud claimed in a letter to a friend, "that psychoanalysis escaped the danger of becoming a Jewish national affair."

Jewish jokes about psychiatry almost invariably involve the family, and they have gone through two phases. In the earliest phase, they dealt with the inability of unsophisticated Eastern European Jews to understand the powerful new insights provided by psychiatry.

A mother is having a very tense relationship with her fourteen-year-old son. Screaming and fighting are constantly going on in the house. She finally brings him to a psychoanalyst. After two sessions, the doctor calls the mother into his office.

*"Your son," he tells her, "has an Oedipus complex."
"Oedipus, Shmedipus," the woman answers. "As long as he loves his mother."*

More recent humor assumes that modern Jews are sophisticated about psychology. "Every Jew is either in therapy, has just

*More than a few people have noted that what goes on in the psychoanalytic encounter is not totally unlike what goes on in the study of Talmud. Unlike most intellectual disciplines, Talmud is not normally studied alone. Traditionally, two Jews struggle together to probe and decipher a talmudic text, just as in analysis a doctor and patient jointly strive to make sense out of what at first seems unfathomable.

finished therapy, is about to enter therapy, or is a therapist," claims a current witticism. Woody Allen, the popular culture's image of the quintessential neurotic Jew, has revealed that he has been in analysis for over twenty years.

Not surprisingly, then, Jewish jokes about psychoanalysis have gone well beyond "Oedipus, Shmedipus":

Goldstein has been in analysis for ten years, seeing his doctor four times a week. Finally, the analyst tells him that they've achieved all their goals, he doesn't have to come back anymore. The man is terrified.

"Doctor," he says, "I've grown very dependent on these meetings. I can't just stop."

The doctor gives Goldstein his home phone number. "If you ever need to," he says, "call me at any time."

Two weeks later, Sunday morning, six A.M., the phone rings in the doctor's house. It's Goldstein.

"Doctor," he says, "I just had a terrible nightmare. I dreamed you were my mother, and I woke up in a terrible sweat."

"So what did you do?"

*"I analyzed the dream the way you taught me in analysis."
"Yes?"*

"Well, I couldn't fall back to sleep. So I went downstairs to have some breakfast."

"What'd you have?"

"Just a cup of coffee."

"You call that a breakfast?"

Jewish parents are also famous (in some circles, infamous) for anxiously hovering over their children. "A Jewish man with parents alive," Philip Roth wrote in *Portnoy's Complaint*, "is a fifteen-year-old boy, and will remain a fifteen-year-old boy until they die." A rabbi I know, who grew up in the intensely Orthodox neighborhood of Borough Park, Brooklyn, told me that it was his wife who taught him that one could express love for one's children by taking pleasure in their personalities. "My parents," he explained, "expressed their love through excessive nervousness and worrying." That was also the case with Mell

Lazarus, creator of the cartoon strip "Momma." Reminiscing about his overly attentive mother at a seminar on Jewish humor, Lazarus recalled, "We had very many interesting conversations, about my posture for example."

The overinvolvement of mothers in their children's lives might well have several roots. The dominant middle-class ideology of the 1940s and 1950s—and Jews were quintessentially middle class—dictated that a father should work, and that the mother stay home with the children. A large number of highly educated Jewish women found themselves displacing all their intellectual energy, aspirations, and professional ambitions onto their children, particularly their sons. It is doubtful if the current generation of Jewish women, many of whom do have their own professional identities, will hover over their children in quite the same way. In addition, parental overinvolvement may reflect the deep-seated Jewish fear, instilled by pogroms, the Holocaust, and the precariousness of the Jewish state, that the "next generation" might not survive at all.

Chaim Bermant, an English-Jewish writer, has captured the precise cadence of such parental nervousness. While working as a correspondent during the 1973 Yom Kippur War, Bermant was asked by several soldiers to telephone their parents and tell them that they were okay. When he returned from the front, he did so and kept a record of one of the conversations:

"Hullo," I began.

"Hullo? Who's that? What's that? Who are you?"

"My name is Bermant, I'm a journalist, and I've just met your son."

"My son? How is he? Where is he? Is he all right? Nothing's the matter?"

"Not a thing. He's in fine spirits, fine shape."

"And?"

"And he asked me to give you regards and to tell you not to worry."

"Not to worry? If you had a son at the front, wouldn't you worry?"

"Of course I would, and he knew you would, that's why he asked me to tell you he's fine."

"He asked you to tell me?"

"Yes."

"You mean he's not fine but he wants me to think he is?"

"No, he is fine. I saw him myself."

"Fine?"

"Perfectly."

"Then why didn't he phone me himself?"

"Because he's in the middle of the desert."

"My neighbor's son is in the middle of the desert, and he phoned."

"Maybe he was near a telephone."

"If my neighbor's son could get to a telephone, why couldn't he? I've been going crazy with worry."²

Other jokes focus on the hopes and fears that haunt Jewish parents. Perhaps their most prevalent desire is for *nakbas* from children (*nakbas fun kinder* is a common expression in Yiddish). *Nakbas*, meaning pleasure or contentment, is both a Hebrew and Yiddish word. Over time, however, it has come to connote the particular pride parents derived from their children's accomplishments.

What is it, according to Jewish humor, that brings parents the most *nakbas*? In the case of sons, it is professional attainments. As a "personal" in a Jewish newspaper announced:

"Mr. and Mrs. Marim Rosenbloom are pleased to announce the birth of their son, Dr. Jonathan Rosenbloom."

Jewish parents' obsession with their sons becoming doctors is so much a part of contemporary folklore ("my son the doctor") that in the early 1960s, when Catholic leaders at the Vatican II conclave drafted a proposal to exonerate Jews from the charge of deicide, comedian Lenny Bruce stood up in a nightclub and publicly confessed:

"All right. I'll clear the air once and for all, and confess: Yes, we did it. I did it, my family. I found a note in my basement. It said:

"We killed him.

Signed,
Morty."

"And a lot of people say to me, 'Why did you kill Christ?' ... We killed him because he didn't want to become a doctor, that's why we killed him."³

While Bruce's wisecrack reveals nothing about the decisive charge, it says a great deal about the aspirations of contemporary Jewish parents. Tell the same joke, but attribute it to another ethnic group, and it falls flat. Imagine if Lenny Bruce had said, "We found a note left by the Roman procurator, Pontius Pilate. It says, 'We killed him because he didn't want to become a doctor, that's why we killed him.'" No one would laugh.

What about *nakbas* from daughters? With women's increasing liberation and their advancement in the American workplace, a daughter's professional attainments might soon form the basis for parental *nakbas* as well. Then again, maybe not. Although it is unfair, *nakbas* from a daughter has long been primarily based on the answers to three questions: Is she married? Does she have children? What does her husband do?

Two Jewish women who haven't seen each other in twenty years run into each other on the street.

"How's your daughter Deborah?" the first woman asks, "the one who married that lawyer?"

"They were divorced," the second woman answers.
"Oh, I'm so sorry."

"But she got married to a surgeon."

"Mazel Tov [Congratulations]."
"They were also divorced."

At this point the first woman decides to keep her mouth shut. "But now everything is all right," her friend goes on. "She's married to a very successful architect."

The first woman shakes her head from side to side. "Mmmmm, mmmmm. So much nakhas from one daughter."

While American-Jewish jokes generally assume that parents worry only about their daughters getting married—one rarely hears a joke about an unmarried son—in Orthodox Jewish circles, equal emphasis is placed on the marrying-off of sons. The

first of the Torah's 613 laws is the command to "be fruitful and multiply" (Genesis 1:28). According to Jewish law, this obligation applies solely to men, since women cannot be forced to undergo the pain and danger of childbirth. The Talmud regards an unmarried man as one who diminishes God's presence in the world (since every baby born is another creature in God's image).

In the Orthodox world, unmarried men edging into their thirties incur increasing community disapproval and pressure. One rabbi I know postponed marriage until he was thirty-one, and then succumbed only after a very long courtship. At the wedding reception, he told the following story:

In the early years of the State of Israel, the entire Jewish community of Yemen was airlifted there. Many of the arriving immigrants claimed tremendous old ages; some of them said they were a hundred and forty, a hundred and fifty, even a hundred and sixty years old. It seemed hard to believe, and it was impossible to substantiate their claims, for they had brought no accurate birth records with them.

One day, a newly resettled Yemenite Jew appeared in the Tel Aviv office of an insurance broker saying he wanted to buy a life insurance policy. The broker looked at the man, saw he was no youngster, and asked him: "How old are you?"

"Seventy-two."

"Seventy-two? That's too old. We can't sell you a life insurance policy."

"That's not fair," the man answered. "Last week you sold my father a policy."

"Your father? How old is he?"

"Ninety-five."

"Impossible."

"Go check your records."

The agent checked his records and found to his amazement that the preceding week the man's ninety-five-year-old father had applied for a policy, that a physician had found him to be in perfect health, and that he had been issued a policy. The agent came back.

"You're right. We sold your father a policy, we'll sell you one. But you have to come in on Tuesday for a medical checkup."

"I can't come in on Tuesday."
 "Why not?"
 "My grandfather is getting married."
 "Your grandfather is getting married? How old is he?"
 "A hundred and seventeen."
 "A hundred and seventeen? Why is he getting married?"
 "His parents keep pestering him."

Once the children are married, in-laws come in for their fair share of cracks, but overconcern with their children-in-law's welfare is hardly the crime of which they're accused:

In a small nineteenth-century Russian shtetl, two families negotiate with a prominent yeshiva to provide two students as husbands for their daughters. The two young men set out for the town. En route, their wagon is attacked by Cossacks, and one of the men is killed. When the survivor finally arrives in the town, a fight breaks out between the mothers of the two unmarried girls. Each claims that the young man is the intended groom for her daughter. The man himself can shed no light on the matter, and the case is brought before the local rabbi.
 "Cut the boy in half," the rabbi finally rules, "and let each girl be given half of his body."
 "Oh, no!" the first mother says. "Don't kill him. My daughter will give up her claim."
 "Go ahead and cut," the other mother says.
 The rabbi stands up and points to the second woman. "That is the mother-in-law."

In-law jokes usually are as hostile and cruel as JAP jokes, and represent the kind of tasteless humor generally omitted from this book. But the foregoing story can be regarded as an exception, both because of its inherent absurdity and, more significantly, because of its witty reworking of the biblical tale about the wise King Solomon (I Kings 3:16-28): Two prostitutes come before Solomon for his judgment on a particularly difficult case. The first prostitute tells the king that a few days earlier they had each given birth to boys. The preceding night, however, the other woman's son had died and she had switched the dead baby with hers. When she got up to nurse her child, she

immediately recognized that the dead baby in her arms was not her child. The second woman insists that the story is a fabrication and that no switch occurred.

Solomon asks that a sword be brought to him. "Cut the live child in two," he rules, "and give half to one, and half to the other."

One of the women begs him not to cut the baby. "Give her the live child, only don't kill him."

"Cut it in two," the other woman says.

Whereupon Solomon recognizes the merciful woman as the real mother, just as the rabbi in Jewish humor recognizes the unmerciful woman as the real mother-in-law.

From the Parents' Perspective

"Insanity is hereditary," claimed the late Jewish comedian Sam Levenson. "You can get it from your children."

Almost all the jokes related so far—mocking Jewish parents' overambitiousness, intrusiveness, and nervousness—have reflected the children's sensibility. Similarly, Sophie Portnoy, the overbearing mother of Philip Roth's *Portnoy's Complaint*, represents one man's revenge on all such "Jewish mothers." There is no comparably devastating work by a Jewish mother about Jewish sons, probably because parental love for children is usually more uncomplicated and protective than children's love for parents. Yet the ancient Hebrew expression *tza'ar gidal banim*, "the pain of raising children," expresses a long-standing recognition that children do not provide unmitigated joy.

Two women, good friends, leave their teenagers at home for a few days and check into a fancy resort. Just before dinner, one of the women invites the other to join her in the bar for a martini.

"I never drink," the woman answers.
 "Why not?"

"In front of the children, I don't think it's right to drink. And when I'm away from the children, who needs to?"

Of course, some parents sacrifice too much for their children:

A hundred-and-one-year-old man and his ninety-nine-year-old wife come before a judge. They want a divorce.

"How long have you been married?" the judge asks.

"Seventy-nine years."

"And how long have you been unbappy?"

"Almost the whole time."

"So why do you want a divorce now?"

"We were waiting for the children to die."

A mother goes into her son's room. "You've got to get up for school, Bernie."

Bernie pulls the blanket over his head. "I don't wanna go to school."

"You have to go," the mother says.

"I don't wanna. The teachers don't like me, and all the kids make fun of me."

The mother pulls the blanket down. "Bernie, you don't have any choice. You have to go to school."

"Yeab," Bernie says. "Give me one good reason!"

"You're fifty-two years old and you're the principal."

The preceding joke brings to mind a Yiddish proverb, *Kleine kinder, kleine tzoros; grosse kinder, grosse tzoros*, "Small children, small problems; big children, big problems."

A Final Joke

How do we know Jesus was Jewish?

Four reasons:

1. *He was thirty, unmarried, and still living with his mother.*
2. *He went into his father's business.*
3. *He thought his mother was a virgin.*
4. *And his mother thought he was God.*

6

“And I Used to Be a Hunchback” Assimilation and Its Delusions



Assimilation

American banker Otto Kabn was Jewish by birth but had converted to Christianity. He was once walking with a hunchbacked friend when they passed a synagogue.

“You know I used to be a Jew,” Kabn said.

“And I used to be a hunchback,” his companion replied.

Jewish humor consistently argues that a Jew can never really assimilate, and Judaism agrees. According to a medieval dictum, based on the Talmud, “a Jew, even if he sins [by converting to another religion], remains a Jew.”¹

During the early 1960s, Daniel Rufeisen, a Jewish convert to Catholicism who became a monk, decided to test the outer limits of this religious principle. Rufeisen, or “Brother Daniel,” as he is commonly known, emigrated to Israel and applied for citizenship under the Law of Return, which guarantees any Jew the right to become an Israeli citizen upon request. Rufeisen

argued that although he was Catholic by religion, he was still a member of the Jewish people.

The Israeli Supreme Court rejected his application. A Jew who lives as a Christian, the justices reasoned, loses the right to call himself a Jew; for Jews, religion and nationality have been fused since the time of the Bible (when Ruth converts to Judaism, she declares: "Your people shall be my people, your God shall be my God" [Ruth 1:16]). One can no more be a Jewish Christian, therefore, than be a Jewish Muslim. Furthermore, although the rabbis of the Talmud would certainly have considered Brother Daniel to be a Jew, this would have meant only that if he ate on Yom Kippur or smoked on the Sabbath, he would have been regarded as a sinning Jew. They had no intention of rewarding apostate Jews with special benefits such as those guaranteed by the Law of Return.

Jewish humor, the Talmud, and Brother Daniel aside, all too many Jews have in fact successfully assimilated into the non-Jewish world, and so have become lost to Judaism. The population of world Jewry in the year 40 C.E. is estimated to have been about seven million.² Almost two thousand years later, the number of Jews worldwide has slightly more than doubled, despite the fact that the entire world's population is currently doubling more than once every century. While the Jews' slow demographic growth throughout history is largely due to their mass murder, it also has resulted because many Jews have assimilated.

During the past century, assimilation has been most aggressively promoted by Jews on the political left. Leon Trotsky, a leader of the Russian Revolution and at one time Lenin's heir-apparent, was born with the quintessentially Jewish name Lev Bronstein. But during his revolutionary years, Trotsky assumed his non-Jewish name.³ In 1920, when Trotsky was head of the Red Army, Moscow's Chief Rabbi Mazeh asked the Russian leader to use the army to protect Jews from pogromist attacks prompted by accusations that they were responsible for bringing communism to Russia. Trotsky reputedly responded to the

request: "Why do you come to me? I am not a Jew." Mazeh answered: "That's the tragedy. It's the Trotskys who make the revolutions, and it's the Bronsteins who pay the price." In his disdain for Jewish interests, Trotsky was paradigmatic of Jews on the far left.

Wealthy European and American Jews—politically the polar opposites of the left-wing Jews—harbored many aggressive assimilators as well, Otto Kahn being one of the more prominent examples. The Seligmans, a great American-Jewish banking family, named one of their sons George Washington Seligman, and another, Alfred Lincoln Seligman, out of fear that *Abraham Lincoln Seligman* would sound too Jewish.*

Jewish humor has long ridiculed such men as Leon Trotsky and Otto Kahn for believing that they could convince anyone, other than themselves, that they are not Jewish. In the early 1940s, screenwriter Ben Hecht approached Hollywood's leading producers, most of whom were Jews, for help in publicizing the Nazi Holocaust. David Selznick, producer of *Gone With the Wind*, refused him point-blank. "I don't want to have anything to do with your cause for the simple reason that it's a Jewish political cause. And I am not interested in Jewish political problems. I am an American, not a Jew."

Aware that Selznick was a gambler, Hecht proposed a wager. He would call any three people designated by Selznick and

*Stephen Birmingham, *Our Crowd: The Great Jewish Families of New York* (New York: Harper and Row, 1967), p. 150. Birmingham reports that William Seligman, the most snobbish of the Seligman brothers, came to New York from Paris in the 1870s to meet with his brother Joseph. "Joe," he told him, "now that we're getting to be men of substance, I suggest that we change our name."

Joseph Seligman nodded soberly. "I agree that you should change your name, William. I suggest you change it to schlemiel" (p. 151).

Joseph Seligman's sarcasm aside, the assimilationist process seemed irresistible, even within his own family. When James Seligman, one of the last scions of the family, died in 1964, *The New York Times's* obituary advised that the funeral service would be held at Christ Church, Methodist.

ask them if they agreed that Selznick was an American and not a Jew. If one of them agreed, Hecht would leave Selznick alone; otherwise, Selznick would have to help his cause. Selznick accepted. The first person he instructed Hecht to call was Martin Quigley, publisher of the *Motion Picture Exhibitors' Herald*. "I'd say David Selznick was a Jew," Quigley answered. Nunnally Johnson, a screenwriter, "hemmed for a few minutes, but finally offered the same reply." Selznick's final choice was Leland Hayward, an influential talent agent. "For God's sake," Hayward snapped, "what's the matter with David? He's a Jew and he knows it."⁴

Selznick's certainty that everyone thought of him only as an American typifies assimilationist thinking. Assimilated Jews in Germany were notorious for acting "more German than the Germans." After the Nazi rise to power, Erich Maria Remarque, author of the classic novel *All Quiet on the Western Front*, emigrated from Germany. Later a Nazi leader met with him and urged him to return home. "Only in Germany," he told Remarque, "can your soul fully express itself."

"Why should I long for Germany?" Remarque said. "Am I a Jew?"

A British-Jewish joke dating from the early 1950s, when much of the British Empire had just been lost, mocks the tendency of nouveau riche Jews to deny their Jewishness.

A Hasidic Jew leaves his small town in Poland and comes to London. He immediately discards his religious garb and habits, and seeks to become an Englishman. He goes to law school and marries into a prestigious, assimilated Jewish family.

One day he gets a telegram from his elderly father, announcing that he is coming to visit. The man is thrown into a panic. He goes down to the port to meet his father and tells him: "Papa, if you show up at my house with your long coat, your head-covering, your beard, it will destroy me here. You must follow everything I ask you to do."

The father agrees.

He takes the old man to the finest tailor in London and buys him a beautiful suit. Still, the man looks too Jewish. So he takes him to a barber. The beard is quickly shaved off, and the old father is starting to look more and more like a British gentleman. But there's still one problem, the peyot, the sidecurls around the old man's ears.

"I'm sorry, Papa, we have to cut them off."

The old man says nothing. The barber cuts off one peya. There's no reaction from the old man. But when he starts to cut off the second peya, tears start streaming down the old man's face.

"Why are you crying, Papa?" the son asks.

"I'm crying because we lost India."

A Jewish couple—the man born in America, the woman in Europe—are vacationing. One night all the hotels at which they try to register are fully occupied. The only hotel with vacancies is restricted; it will not accept Jews.

The man says: "When we check in, let me do the talking. You don't say a word, because the moment you open your mouth they'll know you're a Jew."

The woman agrees, and they register without a hitch. The next morning the woman goes down to the pool. She dives in, but the water is very cold, and she calls out: "Oy vey." Suddenly she sees everyone around the pool staring at her. "Whatever dat means," she adds.

Assimilated Jews have been disproportionately represented among the tens of thousands of Americans attracted to Eastern religions and mysticism. It is estimated that one third or more of Americans who journey to India to study with spiritual masters are Jews. Thus, the following:

An elderly Jewish woman sets out from her home in Brooklyn for India. She travels by foot over billtops and mountains. She crosses valleys and streams, and finally she arrives in a small rural village alongside a steep mountain. At the top of the mountain is an ashram, housing a great spiritual leader, the guru Baba Ganesh.

It takes all the woman's determination, and many long hours, to reach the mountaintop. There she announces that she has come to see the guru.

"Oh, that is impossible," the guru's assistant tells her. "No body is allowed to see the great guru for the next six months."
 "I must see him," the old woman cries. And she sits at the doorstep of the asbram without food and water for three days.

The keeper of the gate is desperate and finally makes her an offer. "Okay, you can go in to see our leader, but you must promise to say no more than three words."

The woman promises, and the man leads her down a long marble walkway. Tapestries and flowing fabrics cover the walls. They turn into a room at the end of the hall and enter through the archway. A young man is sitting on a bamboo mat in a yoga position, chanting, "Om chanti."

The woman steps in front of him, and pleads: "Come home, Sheldon."

The attraction of many American Jews to Eastern religious groups and cults, a subject that causes considerable anguish within the Jewish community in this country, is probably due to the relatively unspiritual nature of most American-Jewish homes, and of most American-Jewish religious life. As a rule, Jews, even rabbis, rarely speak about God. In a typical Reform, Reconstructionist, Conservative, or Orthodox synagogue on any given Sabbath, the likelihood that the rabbi's sermon will be about God or other spiritual matters is small. Some Jews who hunger for a bigger dose of spirituality are attracted to kabbalah and to Hasidism. Many, however, turn to Eastern religious teachings. Some disciples have even become gurus, perhaps the most famous one being American-born Baba Ram Dass, whose English name is Richard Alpert.

The Gastronemics of Jewish Assimilation

A man walks into a Chinese restaurant.

"What's the specialty today?" he asks.

"Eggplant parmigiana," the waiter answers.

"But this is a Chinese restaurant. Why are you serving eggplant parmigiana?"

"Because this is a Jewish neighborhood."

The expression "melting pot" suggests a kitchen; no coincidence, perhaps, given that it is in their eating habits that ethnic groups most easily assimilate into American life. Among the Jews, Chinese food, followed by Italian food, has long exerted the greatest lure. At last count, there were fifty-three kosher Chinese restaurants throughout the United States, and an even larger number of kosher pizzerias. The kosher Chinese restaurants' ambience is reflected in names that synthesize their Jewish and Oriental components: Moshe Peking, Shang-Chai, and Tein Lee-Chow (*tein lee* is Hebrew for "give me"), to cite three of the best known. These are the only places where religious Jews can order "spareribs," which in kosher restaurants come from cows, not pigs.

In *Up from Seltzer: A Handy Guide to Four Generations of Jews in the United States*, Peter Hochstein and illustrator Sandy Hoffman use food to satirize Jewish Americanization over the past seventy-five years:

Jewish Dietary Restrictions:

First Generation: Anything that isn't kosher.

Second Generation: Anything that isn't kosher except Chinese food.

Third Generation: Anything with cholesterol.

Fourth Generation: Anything with meat in it, and anything that wasn't organically grown.

In another passage, the breakfasts of four generations are satirized:

First Generation: Bagel and lox with a glass of tea.

Second Generation: Bagel and lox with a cup of coffee.

Third Generation: Bagel and Nova Scotia salmon with a cup of espresso.

Fourth Generation: Two croissants, an omelette aux fines herbes, and a glass of skim milk.

Up from Seltzer's structure, chronicling the four-generation shift from Jewish commitment and particularism to Jewish

Americanization and assimilation, might well be a humorous takeoff on a tragic story by I. L. Peretz, one of the early great masters of Yiddish literature. In Peretz's story, "Four Generations, Four Wills,"⁵ he records the last wills and testaments of one family.

The first will, written by a pious Jew, has just a few lines of text. The writer bequeaths his books to his children, asks his wife to take in a poor orphan girl, and continually invokes God's blessing on his heirs.

The second will, written by the man's son, expresses the wish that his male heirs will study the Talmud every day, and that his daughters and wife will study holy books as well. He expresses the desire that at least a tenth of his estate, and a tenth of his family's yearly income, be given to charity.

The grandson of the patriarch writes the third will. A "modern" man, his will has little to say about Jewish matters: "A telegram is to be sent to Paris," it begins, "and the funeral services are to be delayed until my son arrives." Since he has no expectation that his son will recite the memorial *Kaddish* prayer, he asks that a learned scholar be paid to do so. The primary preoccupation of the will is the disbursement of his considerable assets, accompanied by his advice on how to run the family business.

The final will, written by the great-grandson of the old Jew who was so devoted to Jewish learning, and whose primary concern was that his family lead actively Jewish lives, is a pathetic declaration: "I, Moritz Benditsohn's son, leave this world neither in happiness nor in sadness but because of emptiness. . . . I cannot live any longer, because I have nothing more to do on earth. . . . I changed peoples and languages as one changes gloves." The man signs the will, then kills himself.

Peretz was wrong, of course, in assuming that all Jews who assimilate become miserably unhappy. But he was correct in noting that when Jews stop reading Jewish books and stop giving charity to Jewish institutions, they lose their connection to the Jewish people. As Herman Wouk wrote in *This Is My God*, his spir-

itual autobiography: "[Jews who assimilate] . . . are lost from Judaism, that is all; lost down a road which has swallowed many more Jews than the Hitler terror ever did. Of course they survive as persons. But from the viewpoint of an army, it makes little difference whether a division is exterminated or disperses into the hills and shucks off its uniforms."⁶

When Jews Become Christians

Christ died for our sins. Dare we make his martyrdom meaningless by not committing them?

—Jules Feiffer

The Christian doctrine most unfathomable to Jews holds that Jesus' death can atone for other people's ethical transgressions. Other Christian dogmas are less problematic. For example, God could make a virgin pregnant; that would be no greater a miracle than fashioning Adam out of the earth and Eve out of Adam's rib. But Judaism teaches that God Himself cannot forgive evil deeds that people commit against others.

The belief that Jesus' death can atone for other people's sins is one reason Jews are skeptical about the theological avowals of Jewish converts to Christianity. A second reason is that Jews know that throughout history, most converts changed their faith to avoid antisemitism. One such man was Daniel Chwolson (1819–1911), one of the great intellectual figures of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Russia. A noted Orientalist, Chwolson converted to Russian Orthodoxy in 1855 and became a professor at the University of St. Petersburg. Unlike most apostates, Chwolson maintained warm relations with the Jewish community and, on several occasions, fought against blood libels and government suppression of the Talmud. His advocacy on these issues was so forceful that according to one story:

Some friends asked Professor Chwolson why he had become a Christian.

"Out of conviction," Chwolson answered.
 "Out of what conviction?" he was asked.
 "Out of the conviction that it is better to be a professor in St. Petersburg than a melamed [a Hebrew schoolteacher] in Sklop."

Chwolson's wry observation reflected the sad reality of Jewish life throughout Europe. In 1818, Heinrich Marx, a lawyer and the son of a rabbi, became a Lutheran to avoid disbarment under a new Prussian law that forbade Jews from practicing law. Six years later, Marx converted all his children, among them six-year-old Karl, so that they need never suffer from antisemitism. Ironically, Karl Marx, the grandson of two Orthodox rabbis, grew up to become a rabid Jew-hater.⁷

At about the same time in England, Isaac Disraeli converted to the Anglican church, an act that later enabled his son Benjamin to become prime minister. Unlike Marx, Disraeli retained great pride in his Jewish origins. On one occasion, when Queen Victoria asked him what his real religion was, Benjamin Disraeli reputedly answered: "In the King James edition of the Bible, there comes first the Old Testament, followed by a blank page, and then the New Testament. I am that blank page."

In the nineteenth century in Europe, Jewish conversions to Christianity were common; perhaps one third of Berlin's Jews became Christians between 1800 and 1850.⁸ German poet Heinrich Heine, a reluctant Jewish apostate, declared baptism to be the Jews' "entrance ticket" to Western society. So marginal to Jewish life were many prominent Jewish intellectuals that Sigmund Freud observed: "The Jewish societies in Vienna and the University of Jerusalem (of which I am a trustee), in short the Jews altogether, have celebrated me like a natural hero, although my service to the Jewish cause is confined to the single point that I have never denied my Jewishness."⁹

In late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century America, the percentage of Jews who became Christians was much smaller than in Europe, although here too the numbers were substantial. Most Jews who converted were drawn to nonfundamentalist

Protestant denominations. Some became Quakers, leading one wit to declare: "Some of my best Jews are Friends."

Far more common, however, were conversions to Unitarianism. Because Unitarians believe Jesus to be a prophet and not God, they are the most theologically liberal wing of Protestantism. As an old American riddle asks:

When is the only time you hear Jesus Christ's name mentioned in a Unitarian Church?

When the janitor trips on the ladder.

American philosopher Alfred North Whitehead defined a Unitarian as "a person who believes there is at most one God." Although Protestant fundamentalists have long denounced Unitarians for being "heathens," in the eyes of almost all other Americans, a Jew who becomes a Unitarian is considered a Christian.

In American-Jewish humor, converts, particularly when they tried to pass as "old-line" WASPs, soon became favorite figures of ridicule:

A Jew, desperate to be admitted to a fancy country club, knows he can't get in because he's Jewish. So he converts and applies for membership.

"What is your name?" the application committee chairman asks him.

He gives one of those pompous constructions like "Hutchinson River Parkway the Third."

"And what is your profession?"

"I own a seat on the New York Stock Exchange, and I also have an estate where I raise horses."

He looks like a shoo-in for membership. "One last question, sir. What is your religion?"

"My religion? Why, I am a goy."

Jews knew that most Jews didn't convert to become Christians. They converted to become non-Jews, *goyim*, part of the majority. In a related joke:

A Jew converts to Catholicism and eventually becomes a priest. He is invited to speak in a church. After the service, the local bishop congratulates him. "Everything was fine," he says. "Only next time, maybe you shouldn't begin by saying, 'Fellow goyim.'"

The word *goy*, incidentally, is not intrinsically disparaging; it is simply the Hebrew word for "nation." In a famous biblical verse, Jews themselves are referred to as a *goy*: "And you shall be unto Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (*goy kadosh*; Exodus 19:6). In time, however, Jews stopped using the word *goy* to refer to themselves, and it came to denote non-Jewish nations and non-Jews. The word also began to have pejorative connotations—in the film *The Last Dragon*, billed as a kung-fu comedy, some of the action takes place in a noodle factory named "Sum Dum Goy"—just as the word "Jew" is used derogatorily by some gentiles.* As one story has it:

A Jew converts to Christianity. The next morning, his wife sees him in the living room wearing his tefillin (phylacteries) and praying in Hebrew.

"I thought you were a Christian now," she tells him.
"Oy," he says, smacking his head. "Goyishe kop."

And in another:

Three Jewish converts to Christianity are sitting in a country club, each explaining how he came to convert.

"I fell in love with a Christian girl," the first man says. "She

*Unfortunately, as folklorist Gene Bluestein has noted, "there is no neutral term in Yiddish [or Hebrew] comparable to Gentile." Hence *goy*, with its somewhat pejorative connotation, remains the standard Yiddish/Hebrew word for non-Jew. Some Israelis use the phrase *lo-yebudi* (literally, "not a Jew") to avoid the problematic *goy*. Among themselves, Jews often use *goy* to describe ignorant or nonobservant Jews. Thus, in Chaim Potok's novel *The Chosen*, a Hasidic rebbe declares: "Why do you think I brought my people from Russia to America, and not to [Israel]? Because it is better to live in a land of true *goyim* than to live in a land of Jewish *goyim*" (Gene Bluestein, *Anglisth/Yiddish: Yiddish in American Life and Literature* [Athens, Ga.: University of Georgia Press, 1989], p. 45).

wouldn't marry me unless I became a Christian. I loved her and so I did."

"I wanted to get a promotion at my bank," the second man says. "I knew there was no point in even applying for a higher position if I was Jewish. So I converted."

"And I converted," the third man says, "because I became convinced of the greater truth of Christian theology, and of the ethical superiority of the New Testament's teachings."

The first two men glare at him: "What do you take us for, a bunch of goyim?"

Several years ago, while interviewing a prominent Reform rabbi, I asked him whether the Reform movement imposed any religious standards on its members: "For example, would a Reform rabbi who came to believe that Jesus was God be expelled from the Reform rabbinate?"

"We do not expel people because of their beliefs," the rabbi answered. "In any case, a rabbi who held such a belief would effectively disqualify himself from his pulpit, and we would urge him to see a psychiatrist" (emphasis added).

The rabbi's last comment was telling. If a Reform rabbi suddenly announced that, as a result of reading about the Holocaust or because of terrible tragedies among his congregants, he had serious questions about God's existence, I strongly doubt that he would be urged to see a psychiatrist. To many Jews, however, any Jew who flirts with the idea of worshipping another Jew as God is undoubtedly having mental problems.

Intermarriage

A telephone rings in a house, and the mother answers. It's her daughter.

"Mama," she says. "I'm engaged."

"Mazel Tov!" the mother shrieks excitedly.

"You have to know something, though, Mama. John isn't Jewish."

The mother is quiet.

"Also, he's looking for work. At the moment, though, we don't have any money."

"That's no problem," the mother says. "You'll come live here with Papa and me. We'll give you our bedroom."

"But where will you stay?"

"Papa will sleep on the couch in the living room."

"And what about you, Mama?"

"About me you don't have to worry, because as soon as I get off the telephone I'm jumping out the window."

Until 1950, fewer than 6 percent of American Jews married non-Jews, and almost all Jews regarded intermarriage as an unmitigated disaster. Some Orthodox Jews even observed the laws of mourning for a child or sibling who intermarried. One story tells of a man who married a non-Jew, whereupon his brother sat seven days of *shiva*, mourning him as dead. On one of the days, his intermarried brother paid him a condolence visit!

Outside of the Orthodox world, however, Jews no longer tell such jokes. Since the 1970s, intermarriage rates have skyrocketed: Currently, about 50 percent of American Jews who marry are choosing non-Jewish spouses.¹⁰ While this statistic has received much publicity, few Jews realize that a high level of intermarriage is not unique to the United States nor even to the current era. In pre-Holocaust France and Germany, intermarriage rates also approached 50 percent within three generations of the Jews being "emancipated" (receiving basic civil rights).

The United States, and a few other English-speaking countries, such as Canada, Australia, and South Africa, were long the exceptions in their low levels of intermarriage. This was not because most American Jews were pious; in fact, the overwhelming majority were not. Rather, it was that people raised in Yiddish-speaking homes—as most first-generation American Jews were—even if the homes were nonreligious, were unlikely to feel so socially at ease with non-Jews that they would marry them.

By the 1970s and 1980s, however, the large majority of young Jewish adults had been raised by American-born parents

in English-speaking homes. Their entire lives had been spent mixing with non-Jews, and they felt fully comfortable being with them. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that intermarriage rates started rising dramatically. But although American intermarriage rates rival those of nineteenth-century Western Europe, there is one important difference concerning their repercussions. In France and Germany, when Jews intermarried, either the Jewish partner converted to Christianity or agreed that the children be raised as Christians. In America, when an intermarriage occurs, the couple usually agrees to expose the children to both religions. When a conversion does take place, however, it is more likely to be of the non-Jewish spouse to Judaism than the reverse. For this reason, intermarriage is not necessarily as much of a "death knell" to American Jewry as it was to European. Nonetheless, within the past two decades, the percentage of non-Jews converting to Judaism has declined markedly. In intermarriages that occurred before 1965, 20 percent of the non-Jews converted; since 1985 only 10 percent have done so.¹¹

Many conversions to Judaism are done haphazardly and with unbecoming speed—one Miami rabbi used to advertise regularly that if you came into his office as a non-Jew at 9:00 A.M., you could emerge as a fully converted Jew by 5:00 P.M. In recent years, and in all three major denominations of Judaism, the number of non-Jews interested in seriously embracing Judaism—as opposed to those whose conversions are triggered by the desire to spare their Jewish in-laws heart attacks—has increased dramatically. This phenomenon has even influenced the type of jokes Jews tell about intermarriage.

Because the following joke requires using a word that Jews should never use, *shiksa*, it demands a brief introduction. Most Jews think that *shiksa* means "female gentile" and *shoygetz*, "male gentile." (One joke has it that the two winemakers Manischewitz and Christian Brothers merged to form a new company called Manishaygetz.) However, *shiksa* literally means "female abomination," and *shoygetz* "male abomination." While few Jews know that this is what these words actually mean, they

should have guessed that they are offensive. After all, if you're speaking in one language, and refer to a member of a different group in another, you're probably not using a term of endearment. But since the word is indispensable to the following joke, feel free to use it—just this once:

A Jewish boy is going off to college and his father says to him: "Look, we've never been a religious family, so I'm not expecting you to become suddenly religious. But promise me one thing: You won't marry a shiksa."

The boy promises.

Sure enough, his senior year he falls in love with a non-Jewish girl. She loves him too, but he tells her he can't marry her because she's not Jewish.

"Don't worry," she says. "I'll convert."

After serious study, the girl converts. They marry and go off on their honeymoon. Four weeks later, Saturday morning at 9:00 A.M., the doorbell rings in their house. It's the boy's father. He's very upset. "You know that the last Saturday of every month we go over the books at the office. Why didn't you come down?"

"I couldn't come," the boy says. "My wife says it's forbidden. It's Shabbat."

"I told you not to marry a shiksa," the father screams.¹²

The irony is profound. In many contemporary American Jewish families, it's the convert to Judaism who takes religion seriously, only to find that the Jewish family into which he/she has married disdains or even ridicules the person's religiosity.

Shlomo Riskin, a prominent Orthodox rabbi in New York and Israel, tells of a very committed non-Jewish woman whom he converted to Judaism, who shortly thereafter became nonobservant. Riskin soon learned that not only did her husband's family refuse to practice any of the rituals she had learned, they also told her repeatedly that there was no reason for her to practice them either. "I learned an important lesson from that case," Rabbi Riskin said. "Whenever you teach conversion classes to a non-Jew who is involved with a Jew, it is vital that their Jewish boyfriend or girlfriend come with them to all the classes. Because the sort of Jew who is most apt to intermarry

is often as unknowledgeable about Judaism as is the non-Jewish partner, and needs the conversion classes every bit as much."

Today, most American-Jewish leaders would maintain, it is intermarriage, not antisemitism, that threatens American Jewry's future viability. As Milton Himmelfarb has quipped:

*What do you call the grandchildren of intermarried Jews?
Christians.**

*Himmelfarb's sally is a reworking of a mordant response to the age-old question: "Who is a Jew?" The answer: "One who will have Jewish grandchildren."