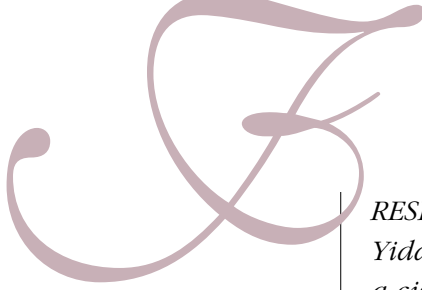


INTRODUCTION



RESH FROM EUROPE, a Jew sees another Jew reading a Yiddish paper on a park bench, on the Sabbath, smoking a cigar. “America is wonderful,” he says. Here even the goyim can read Yiddish!”

*“Sam, please close the window. It’s cold outside.”
“Nu, and if I close the window, will it be warm outside?”*

Sid Caesar: While I was in solitary, I spent a lotta time thinkin’. I did a lot of thinkin’! I got a lot of thought . . . I thought about the walls . . . the bars . . . the guards with the guns. You know what I figures out?

Carl Reiner: What?

Sid Caesar: We’re in prison.

A Jew and a hunchback were passing a temple, and the Jew said, “I used to be a Jew.”

And the hunchback said, “I used to be a hunchback.”

- Groucho Marx

The only honest art form is laughter, comedy. You can’t fake it . . . try to fake three laughs in an hour – ha ha ha ha ha – they’ll take you away, man. You can’t.

– Lenny Bruce

Comedy is wit, cleverness, discovery, spontaneity, nerve, silliness too, and more; it’s what happens when the tables are turned, sometimes upside down. The genius of comedy is difficult to define.

Laughter – the consequence of comedy – doesn’t imply the absence of thinking. Humor can also be a lighter way of looking at significant issues. Moreover, laughter can be mixed with fear, uncertainty, anger, even sadness.

By studying, and enjoying, examples of American Jewish comedy created over a fifty-year period, we can gain new insights into the American Jewish experience. This course presents five prime examples of Jewish comedy produced in America, all loved for their witty dialogue, inspired characterizations, and outrageous situations. These films and television programs present some of the funniest material and most renowned artists of American comedy:

One of the most popular of the Marx Brothers films, *Animal Crackers*, is an early example of an American comic talkie.

Your Show of Shows provides a sampling of sketches from this pioneer comedy-variety television series.

The Producers, Mel Brooks's first feature film, challenges conventional boundaries by using a musical comedy about Hitler as an improbable subject.

Annie Hall, one of Woody Allen's most accomplished works, is a rich example of Jewish self-portraiture in film.

A selection of sketches from *Saturday Night Live* uses Jewish characters, subjects, and themes in its rebellious approach to comedy.

The terms humor and comedy might be used almost interchangeably, but here we differentiate comedy as a performed work with an amusing theme. Other terms frequently used to connote humorous styles include irony, the use of words to express something other than and especially the opposite of the literal meaning; satire, a work holding up human follies to ridicule; sarcasm, the use of cutting language; and parody, a work that imitates another work for comic effect. All these techniques can spontaneously reduce an otherwise functioning person into uncontrollable laughter.

What Is Jewish Humor?

What is the essence of Jewish humor? Are there universal concepts or gags that all Jews agree are funny? Will different generations agree about humor? What's Jewish about Jewish humor? Do Jews from different parts of the world "get" – understand – one another's jokes? How different is Jewish humor from other ethnic humor? How is humor transmitted over time? How has Jewish humor evolved? Is Jewish humor amusing to non-Jews?

Like the question of what defines "Jewish literature," the issue is complex, and questions generate questions. In his book *Jewish Humor: What the Best Jokes Say About the Jews*, Rabbi Joseph Telushkin points out that it's impossible to sum up the essence of Jewish humor. "How could one sentence encompass jokes about Jewish mothers, reckless and rude drivers in Israel, and antisemites?" he asks.

Jewish humor, Telushkin continues, reveals a great many

What's a Jewish telegram?

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

**– Jewish Humor: What
the Best Jokes Say About
the Jews**

*Even in laughter the heart can
ache.*

– Proverbs 14:13

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.

How does Jewish humor relate to the Jewish religion? Of course there is humor about rabbinic figures, holidays, and ritual practice, but there might be some underlying Jewish thinking. Some jokes, Rabbi Telushkin points out, are connected to distinctive Jewish thought patterns. A certain kind of logic, argumentation, close examination and reexamination of words, and the ability to see several sides of the same issue are derived from the tradition of textual study.

In *A Treasury of Jewish Humor*, Nathan Ausubel explains that since the time the Talmud was compiled, Jews have been “indestructible moralists and teachers. They have turned the joke, the quip, and the humorous characterization into pedagogic aids with which to illustrate, to illuminate, and to improve.”

As for what constitutes Jewish humor, some of the most serious and learned observers of Jewish life – professors, scholars, and critics – have considered this question and have defined it in different, even contradictory ways. For the purpose of this course, we think in the most inclusive terms: Jewish humor relates to Jews and their experience. More specifically, Jewish comedy created in America pokes fun at the idiosyncrasies of Jewish life, and its tone, depth, and flavor has to do with Jews’ perceived position in American society.

Jewish humor has to do with both content and sensibility. A Jewish comedian might write a very funny routine that is ostensibly not about a Jewish subject, but if that comic sees the world as a Jew, his or her humor is likely to be infused with a Jewish outlook or attitude, whatever the subject may be. At the same time, not all jokes and quips written by humorists who happen to be Jewish are considered Jewish humor.

Beginnings: Laughter (and Tears) in the Shtetl

What we identify today as “Jewish humor “ is the creation of generations of artists, most of whom trace their origins to the East European Jewish communities from which

*It is a good sign for a man to die
laughing.*

– Talmud

*Either he's dead or my watch
has stopped.*

– Groucho Marx
A Day At The Races

the majority of American Jews are descended. These communities were places of religious observance and Jewish learning, of vital family and social life, but also of poverty, discrimination, and the ever-present fear of antisemitic violence. The folk humor that emerged in the shtetlach (Jewish settlements) of Russia and Poland reflected that world, from its lofty aspirations to the mundane vicissitudes of daily life.

One of the earliest public performances of Jewish comedy was that of the badhan, the professional jester who would entertain at Jewish weddings in Eastern Europe. These itinerant merrymakers and rhymesters were the forerunners of Jewish theatrical and comical artists.

The work of the distinguished Yiddish writer Sholem Aleichem is filled with a humor mingled with melancholy, irony, and Jewish learning. His characters and stories have influenced the development of Jewish literature as well as Jewish humor. Tevye, his well-known dairyman, according to Ruth Wisse in *The Best of Sholem Aleichem*, “may not be the Vilna Gaon, but he is the original stand-up comic, playing to an appreciative audience of one: his impresario, Sholom Aleichem, who then passes on this discovered talent to us readers.”

The humor that has touched such a responsive chord in America, not only among Jews but among wide audiences, was born, writes critic Sarah Blacher Cohen, out of the vast discrepancy between “the chosen people’s glorious destiny,” as they imagined it, and the reality of their trying lives in nineteenth-century Eastern Europe. She writes: “The butt of a cruel joke, they found that God had singled them out to be a light unto the nations, but had given them a benighted existence.”

The essence of this humor is described by Mark Shechner as “a sudden downward thrusting from the exalted to the workaday, from the tragic to the trivial.” Internal contradictions are central, in Shechner’s view, not only to Jewish humor but to a Jewish world view.

It is a paradox that “one of the grimmest stretches of Jewish history” also produced, observes Robert Alter, “the most richly distinctive humor.” In circumstances of poverty, fear, and oppression, he writes, “a shrewdly ironic humor became a source of necessary inner strength, a

A Catholic boy was bragging to his Jewish friend: "My priest knows more than your rabbi!"

"Of course he does," said the Jewish boy. "You tell him everything."

– The Big Book of Jewish Humor

mode of survival." Jewish humor, as he describes it, takes the "cosmic significance" from suffering "by grounding it in a world of homey practical realities. 'If you want to forget all your troubles,' runs a Yiddish proverb, 'put on a shoe that's too tight.'" In this way the sufferer becomes "at least faintly ridiculous" – a view that contrasts with the Christian idea of suffering as ennobling, and is one of the distinctions between Jewish and other types of humor.

In the "at least faintly ridiculous" sufferer characterized by Alter others have seen self-criticism and even, perhaps, self-hatred. Sigmund Freud wrote in *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, "I do not know whether there are many other instances of a people making fun to such a degree of its own character." And in *The Liberation of the Jew*, Albert Memmi states:

What Jew does not willingly listen to "good Jewish jokes" with a special pleasure, a strange mixture of jubilation and embarrassment, of provocation and complicity? Could we be influenced by non-Jews in our repetition of these stories? Every oppressed person adopts as his own part of the charge instituted against him: it is one of the eternal dramas of oppression.

Jewish humor, Memmi maintained, is a manifestation of Jews' identification with their oppressor, and thus, he writes, "Jewish humor tells of the fundamental lack of adaptation of the Jew to a non-Jewish world."

The Jewish Mind and Its Power to Tickle (and be Ticked)

While acknowledging some validity in the notion of self-directed hostility or what they call "the allegation of Jewish masochism," William Novak and Moshe Waldoks, coauthors of *The Big Book of Jewish Humor*, believe this is inaccurate as an overall description of critical views of Jewish life. "Jewish humor, after all," they write, "is an extension of the Jewish mind, which has traditionally been a highly self-critical instrument, reluctant to accept anything at face value, and not unwilling to search for evidences of the storm beneath the surface tranquility of everyday life." In fact, they assert, Jewish humorists like Lenny Bruce give offense instead by "revealing the more or less secret feelings of Jewish superiority." Humor is in this

sense power over those who might otherwise make one feel inferior.

Humor is also power over oneself; to Sarah Blacher Cohen, “a principal source of salvation. By laughing at their dire circumstances, Jews have been able to liberate themselves from them.” She quotes the great Yiddish actor and director Maurice Samuel who described the essence of Sholem Aleichem’s humor as “the word triumphant over the situation. . . . Not what happens to people is funny, but what they themselves say about it.” For Tevye the dairyman, “life gets the better of him, but he gets the better of the argument.”

“Don’t worry,” goes a joke cited by Novak and Waldoks, “God has protected us from Pharaoh and Haman. He will protect us from the Messiah, too.” Even in the shtetl, however, they state, humor dealt not only with the cosmic and the tragic but also with “less melancholy topics: the intricacies of the Jewish mind, its scholars, students, and schlemiels; the eternal comedy of food, health, and manners; the world of businessmen, rabbis, and schnorrers (beggars); the concerns of matchmaking, marriage, and family.” In America, there are jokes about Jewish mothers, Jewish leaders, and Jewish wealth. Although the subjects of the jokes might change, according to Waldoks and Novak, their themes remain the same. Jewish humor “mocks everyone,” especially figures of authority; it is “strongly democratic” and “ridicules grandiosity and self-indulgence, exposes hypocrisy, and kicks pomposity in the pants.” It is also “fascinated by the intricacies of the mind and by logic, and the short if elliptical path separating the rational from the absurd.” This may be traced in part to the tradition of Talmudic reasoning, honed from generation to generation of Jewish learning.

The effectiveness of Jewish humor has also been related to a facility with language demanded by the Jews’ many wanderings and settlements in alien countries. “Many critics and comedians alike,” writes Anthony Lewis, “have suggested that Jews fare well in comedy in part because of their polyglot background.” He notes that Leo Rosten and George Jessel, among others, cited the ability to speak more than one language as contributing to a facility with words. (In America, moreover, the cadences

and expressions of Yiddish became a signature of Jewish comedy.) Rosten also believed that, in contrast to “Anglo Saxons,” Jews “think feelings are meant to be verbalized.” To Jews, he asserts, “emotions are not meant to be nursed in private: they are meant to be dramatized and displayed – so that they can be shared.”

It was to be expected that in America, where the circumstances of Jews grew increasingly more secure, Jewish humor would change from that which prevailed in the poor, rural settlements of Eastern Europe. The subjects (or objects) of humor, the mediums in which it was delivered, the nature of the audiences, the economic and social standing of the humorists would all be different. Yet, in the view of many observers, the Jewish experience in America did not erase the memory of the calamities and uncertainties of their history. Thus, Albert Goldman describes Jewish humor in modern America as “the plaint of a people who were highly successful in countless ways, yet who still felt inferior, tainted, outcast; a people who needed some magic device of self-assertion and self-aggrandizement.” And Mark Shechner writes:

Although American Jews are no longer bilingual and the startling contradictions of ghetto life have melted into the suburban continuities of the American middle-class, habits of mind that were fostered in the old country stubbornly remain as structures of consciousness. Just as certain primal hungers persist long after every Jew has filled his stomach and has even joined weight-watchers in order to be hungry again, so too the habit of self-irony remains long after the disparities of the ghetto have either faded or been transformed.

The Comedian as Outsider

At their best, comic artists exude originality. By the nature of their chosen profession, they’re observers, on the margins, looking in from outside and reporting on what they see. They’re wise-cracking onlookers. Even when they move closer inside – when they are embraced by society – they remain at the edges. Distance provides a perspective that fuels their humor. Indeed, being an “outsider” is a very Jewish stance.

It is the experience of the modern Jew, Shechner writes, “to be neither wholly or comfortably Jewish nor

cozily American, a predicament that renders the hyphen in his identity the cutting edge of his wit. Everything is alien to him . . . and he tends to approach the world with a tourist's sense of wonderment."

"You want to know where my comedy comes from?" Mel Brooks asks. "It comes from not being kissed by a girl until you're sixteen. It comes from the feeling that, as a Jew and as a person, you don't fit into the mainstream of American society. It comes from the realization that even though you're better and smarter, you'll never belong."

Remaining outside can also be an active decision. As Groucho Marx wrote, and Woody Allen retells in *Annie Hall*, "I don't care to belong to any club that will have me as a member."

Stand-Up Comedy – From Vaudeville to the Borscht Belt to Cable Television

Many comedians whose careers began in vaudeville made their names in small Jewish hotels in the Catskill Mountains in New York. Eventually, comics like Milton Berle, Jerry Lewis, Alan King, and Buddy Hackett performed far beyond the Borscht Belt. Comic artists featured in this course – Groucho Marx, Sid Caesar, Mel Brooks, Woody Allen – worked as stand-up comics in a variety of settings.

The tradition goes on, with many Jewish comics performing in stand-up clubs around the country as well as on network comedy television shows and humor cable channels. Some are masters of the one-liners, others make storytelling a comic art. In New York City, a comedy club recently ran a competition for the "Funniest Rabbi," featuring rabbis from different denominations doing shtick. Comedian Jackie Mason has had much success in bringing his own brand of irreverent Jewish humor, with its Borscht Belt roots, to Broadway.

Although many subjects of ridicule for Jewish comics have remained the same – Jewish mothers, hypochondria, feuding relatives, the shortcomings of non-Jews are evergreen topics – the themes of contemporary Jewish stand-up comics have more to do with life in the suburbs than immigrant life. They joke about Hebrew school, nouveau riche lifestyles, overprotected childhoods, and Chinese food. It is the delivery, with a Jewish

A man asks a passerby, "Do you speak Yiddish?" The man shakes his head. He asks a second man, but gets no answer. He stops a third man: "Do you speak Yiddish?"

"Of course."

"Please, vat time is it?"

expressiveness that might include waving arms, Yiddish expressions, and certain recognizable syntactic switches, as well as the subject that makes the creative work of these comics distinctive. "The Jewish comic steps out onto the stage as a Jew," writes Anthony Lewis.

The Evolution of American Jewish Comedy

The programs in this course, examples of the vast and varied output of Jewish humor in this century, trace an evolution that retains elements of the past while reflecting a rapidly changing present. They not only illustrate the changing styles of comedy, but also provide insights into the experience of Jews in America, as seen by some of its great comic artists. The characterization of Jews in popular culture reflects, at least in part, their circumstances in society and their shifting identities. Their portrayal both responds to and shapes attitudes about Jews and Jewishness.

The films and television programs span a five-decade period of American Jewish acculturation – from the immigrant experience to mainstream suburban life. Each example also reflects the time in which it was made.

Animal Crackers, released in 1930, followed by only a few years the great period of immigration (1880-1924) that brought more than 2 million Jews to America, mostly from Eastern Europe. It also brought about 25 million people from Italy, Germany, Ireland, and other countries. These immigrants, Jewish and otherwise, struggled to survive and succeed and learn the ways of their new country, and become accepted in it. Those already here looked at the newcomers – with their odd appearance, different customs, and unintelligible languages – as strange if not threatening; some who had immigrated earlier looked on them with a sense of embarrassment and even contempt. For audiences of immigrants and their children, the Marx Brothers – the American-born offspring of Russian Jewish immigrants – represented zany, irreverent outsiders knocking on the door of the American establishment, exposing its stuffiness and making it look absurd.

Your Show of Shows, premiering in 1950 as one of the first programs on national television, reached an audience farther removed from the immigrant experience, enjoying

the new prosperity of the postwar boom, but, in the case of Jews, still not fully accepted in American life. By the 1950s most American Jews had left urban ghettos like the Lower East Side for more comfortable neighborhoods, held white-collar jobs, and were achieving success in many areas of society. They were, however, still excluded from some of its sectors, such as colleges that maintained quotas on Jewish students, restricted neighborhoods and places of recreation, like resorts and clubs. (Such exclusion was the subject of a dramatic film, *Gentleman's Agreement*, that won several Academy Awards in 1947.) A largely Jewish team of writers and performers produced, in *Your Show of Shows*, a hugely popular series acceptable on national television, where the word “Jew” was carefully never uttered. Yet it was peppered with perspectives, topics, and language reflecting the tradition of Jewish humor. As with the Marx Brothers, while the inspiration for such comedy may have been inseparable from the Jewish experience of its creators, the humor rang true for a much broader society.

The Producers (1969) and *Saturday Night Live* (beginning in 1975) are examples of more explicitly Jewish comedy, coming after a period that saw the disappearance of many of the barriers to Jewish participation in American life that were still notable in the 1940s and 1950s. Equally significant, the civil rights struggle helped create a climate where not only blacks but other groups began to speak openly of their heritage and perspectives, and the countercultural fervor of the sixties introduced a new spirit of challenge to authority. The “melting pot” notion, to which most immigrant groups, including Jews, had subscribed in their efforts to blend into American society, was challenged. Suddenly it was acceptable to be different. Perhaps, at least for Jews, their more secure place in society also made it seem safer to do so. *The Producers* compromised with no one in offering its inescapably Jewish characters and the most serious subject, which only Jews could possibly have the right to parody, in a play-within-the film, “Springtime for Hitler.” *Saturday Night Live*, similarly, took advantage of freedoms never before permitted on television to satirize Jewish customs and lifestyles (as well as those of many other groups).

Woody Allen's *Annie Hall*, released in 1977, reflects in many ways the comforts and discomforts of contemporary American Jews, free to participate in virtually every aspect of American life while at the same time increasingly concerned with the implications of that freedom for their Jewish identity. By the mid-1970s most Jews found themselves squarely in the middle or upper-middle class, despite significant numbers, especially among the elderly, who were poor. Today the majority are college-educated (66 percent, compared with 27 percent in the population as a whole) and in business or professional jobs (80 percent). Their lives are in many ways indistinguishable from those of other Americans. In these circumstances, just what it means to be a Jew is the subject of ongoing concern, debate, and exploration. This struggle with Jewish identity is a central theme of Woody Allen, whose stance as the Jew who never feels fully accepted mirrors the uneasiness of many successful, assimilated Jews in tolerant America, after the Holocaust (and whose relationships with women, Jewish and non-Jewish, reflects the frequency of intermarriage). While Allen's posture is personal and unique – and, to many, indicative of discomfort, or worse, about his Jewishness – his humor touches on issues very familiar to the modern American Jew.

A License to Laugh

Why we laugh, like why we fall in love, is somewhat mysterious.

Many things make people laugh – verbal humor such as puns, jokes, silly voices, and snappy dialogue, and visual humor such as slapstick, clowning, and pantomime. Sometimes a situation generates humor, like Woody Allen in Hasidic garb sitting at dinner with his WASP girlfriend's family.

To share humor with others, to find the same incident amusing, to “get” the same jokes, it is necessary to have some common ground, some mutual understanding of the world. Shechner has written that Jews share a “structure of perception” related to their inner mingling of several identities; the interplay of their “contrasting internal frames of reference” sustains a “particular sort of Jewish imagining.”

But it is nearly impossible to predict what different people will find funny. There are few, if any, universals in humor. What strikes one person as hilarious might seem silly, dull, or even offensive to another. Or someone might try to tell a story that made them laugh, only to find that the audience groans and complains that they just don't know how to tell a joke. Comedy, as the title of a popular off-Broadway show implies, is all in the timing.

The success of comedy also depends in part on its context: the place, atmosphere, and audience. For example, political humor is only successful if the audience shares an understanding of the current events. Jokes in old television programs and movies that refer to celebrities or fads or events of the day will go past audiences who are ignorant of the references (like the allusion in *Animal Crackers* to Abie's *Irish Rose*, a popular play and 1928 film about a Jewish-Irish romance).

Good comedians, comic actors, and humorists are keenly aware of the special and intimate relationship they have with an audience. The audience, expecting to be amused, gives the performer permission to say and do things that would be inappropriate in other settings. When people tune in a comedy on their television sets, they expect performers to misbehave, say silly and outrageous things, and become involved in ludicrous situations that they might not otherwise accept.

In this special license granted to comedy – to amuse, ridicule, shock, denounce, criticize, and provoke – attitudes can be expressed that otherwise might not get a hearing. Comedy, by its nature, often offers images of people that are less than flattering; comedy may fly in the face of what we think is decent.

How Far Is Too Far?

But even within comedy's special license, an audience sometimes feels that a performance has gone too far. The notions of what is beyond the boundaries of acceptability vary a great deal over time as well as over differences in age, gender, class, and ethnicity. For example, a joke that alluded to going to the toilet seriously compromised Jack Paar's career as a television personality in the 1950s; today, more explicit examples of bathroom humor – as well as

jokes about sex and violence – are frequently heard on television. Conversely, jokes about women drivers and mothers-in-law that were standard fare a generation ago are now considered sexist.

Testing the limits of acceptability has been central to the careers of many comedians including Lenny Bruce, Richard Pryor, and Andy Kaufman. Some of the creators of comedies in this course, including Mel Brooks (*The Producers*) and Lorne Michaels (*Saturday Night Live*), have deliberately challenged the implicit social contract of comedy.

Some of the material in this course may seem to some viewers to be in poor taste, disturbing, or offensive. In considering their reactions, viewers might ask whether they think the material was intended to be upsetting. Would original audiences have reacted in a similar way? If the offensiveness is intentional, what does it contribute?

Some viewers may find themselves uncomfortable with comedy that presents Jewish characters, customs, situations, or language as the object of laughter. In contrast to the Yiddish humor of the Old World, Jewish comedy on film and television is intended for the consumption of gentile as well as Jewish audiences. The more explicit (and explicitly Jewish) comedy of the late 1960s onward has been possible in part because of a greater openness about ethnic, including Jewish, identity, but some viewers may still find its words and images inappropriate. Whether such humor seems to be a sign of Jews' having "arrived" and mockery thus being safe, or a sign of self-hatred and a spur to antisemitic reactions, will depend not only on the specific work but on the eye and ear of the beholder.

Jewish Humor and Jewish Identity

Viewers may disagree on which characters in the programs they will see "look Jewish" and even on whether, how, and to what degree the programs themselves are examples of Jewish humor.

Unlike real people, characters in a film or television program are artistic creations. They have no inner life; what goes on "inside" is communicated by what they do or say, or what other characters do to or say about

Ad in Jewish newspaper:

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

– Jewish Humor: What the
Best Jokes Say About the
Jews

them. Whether they are meant to be Jewish may be communicated by their name or through such devices as Yiddish expressions, cultural stereotypes and dramatic or comedic convention, reference to Jewish holidays or customs, or behavior considered “typically Jewish” – which can range from, in a positive sense, emphasis on learning to, more ambiguously, the goal of a professional career (“my son, the doctor”) to, negatively, acquisitiveness. Ethnic stereotypes, such as the Jew who is greedy, dishonest, and scheming, have appeared in non-Jewish (but also Jewish) works; character types such as the luftmentsh (idler) or the schlemiel (bumbler) are favorites of Yiddish folklore. Modern times have yielded new types, which range from the Israeli soldier-hero to a gallery of images of the contemporary Jewish-American family: the “suffocating” mother, the “neurotic” son, and the “princess” daughter. Some of these types find their way into comedy, including some works in this course. The Jewish “types” of *Saturday Night Live* are perhaps the most explicit (and, to some, possibly offensive); the heroes of Mel Brooks’s *The Producers* perhaps the most outrageous. In some of the programs in this course, there are no obviously identifiable Jewish characters, and the Jewish element may be inherent more in the situations and the nature of the humor.

All these programs have something to tell us about how the place of Jews in American society has changed over time, how Jewish life reflected American experience and, conversely, what Jewish humor said to America about itself. The programs are just a sampling of the great variety of Jewish comedy that has been produced in America. We hope that from this beginning, viewers will want to tap the almost inexhaustible supply of wonderful films and television programs that are available on video, and that many will also want to explore the treasure of Jewish humor that exists between the covers of books (for suggestions, see the “For Further Reading”).

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