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Report on the Rabbinic Dissertation Submitted by

Matthew Cutler

in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for Ordination

There is something of a mystique about Jewish humor because of its presumed nexus to the mystery of Jewish survival. The subject has been of interest to literary historians, social scientists and psychoanalysts. Matthew Cutler has set himself the difficult task of studying this question through an analysis of the best known Hebrew anthology of Jewish humor, Alter Druyanov's Sefer ha Bedicha ve-ha-Hiddud. The rich but ornate and stylized Hebrew of this collection presented enormous obstacles. Mr. Cutler labored assiduously for months to penetrate Druyanov's amalgam of rabbinic Hebrew, Aramaisms, Biblical and modern Hebrew. Druyanov's is an esoteric style as difficult as that of Hazaz, for example. His style was Druyanov's effort to approximate the idiomatic flavor of various Yiddish dialects through manipulating obscure Hebrew words and phrasings. After a lengthy process of garnering a representative sampling of Druyanov's three volume work, after tedious hours of translating and editing, Cutler came up with a fine English rendering of the material. He then turned his attention to the personality of the compiler, Druyanov, as this personality bore on the anthology. The material which Cutler has gleaned from the numerous appreciative essays in Hebrew by writers who knew Druyanov and witnessed his perseverance during his many years of illness, has an interest of its own as an ancillary study. Cutler has also translated and studied Druyanov's introductions and essays on the topic of humor generally and Jewish humor in particular.

Cutler has furnished broad expository chapters dealing with the Eastern European Jewish society and with various scholarly approaches to the subject of Jewish humor. He was especially creative in building a chapter around a wide range of disparate jokes. His theoretical chapter on Jewish humor brings together research by Freud, Reik, the sociologist Sasha Landman, Dan Ben Amos and others. Throughout, Cutler was most critical in evaluating the statements of these scholars, and he devoted special attention to the theory of Jewish self-hatred. The reader will note Cutler's emotional and religious investment in this enterprise. He views humorous material with a seriousness perhaps not as austere as that of Druyanov but as a matter impinging on the Jewish soul and Jewish religiosity. This seriousness of purpose pervades the work even in spots where some strictly academic rigor could stand improvement. It is a pleasure to have labored with Mr. Cutler in this endeavor.

April 20, 1990

Respectfully submitted  
Dr. Stanley Nash, Referee  
Professor of Hebrew

ARE WE RABBI YITZMAK? A STUDY OF JEWISH HUMOR

BY MATTHEW STEVEN CUTLER

Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of  
Requirements for Ordination

Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion  
Graduate Rabbinic Program  
New York, New York

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

As a child, I remember hearing the sounds of laughter constantly in my house. I found that there was no greater joy than bringing happiness to those whom I loved. Over the years, I heard many jokes and stories which made me laugh with joy. It was only appropriate that when it came time for me to write my rabbinic thesis that I give back some of the joy that I found with Judaism through the power of laughter. The only experience that surpasses the act of bring laughter to my loved ones is the joy that comes from sharing my enthusiasm for the research and the learning with my teachers and friends. Let me take this opportunity to thank those who made a difference through out my extensive research:

A special word of heartfelt gratitude goes to my teacher, Dr. Stanley Nash, from whom I have learned so much about the scholarly enterprise, the world of our ancestors, and the craft of writing. No mere words can express the gratitude for all the hours he spent editing and guiding me through the process of writing a rabbinic thesis. It was more than an act of professional dedication, it was an act of love for the material and his students.

I would like also to express my profound appreciation to the members of Larchmont Temple for their unending support and dedication throughout my three year tenure as their rabbinic intern. I would like to thank Rabbi H. Leonard Poller for being my mentor and my friend; Cantor Edward

Graham for teaching me to enjoy the written word; and special thanks to my dear friend, Rabbi Jeffrey Sirkman, who has taught me that Jewish learning can be exciting and innovative.

My word of thanks goes also to my parents, Seena and B. Robert Cutler, who have been a source of strength for all the years of my life. My father, of blessed memory, has taught me the meaning of laughter. He would have been proud to have seen this thesis.

Last, but not least-- to my wife, Sharon. Words cannot express my deepest gratitude for all her love, inspirational support, and incredible patience. Who would have believed that rabbis could have been such funny guys? To you, I dedicate this work.

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**Chapter 1:**  
**An Introduction to the Joy of Laughter**

It never ceased to amaze me that whenever I told someone that my thesis was on the topic of Jewish humor, they proceeded to tell me at least one joke or about when they last saw a Jewish comedian perform. People seem fascinated with the topic not only because people enjoy to laugh, but also because Jewish humor was a part of their lives; it had become part of the cultural mainstream in America. This fascination was not only because they knew a couple of jokes, but rather that the jokes expressed the sentiment of their lives. It told the stories of who they were, where they came from, what provoked their emotions. This humor reflected their ethnic heritage-- in this case, mostly of the eastern European Jewish immigration of the turn of the century. Like any other ethnic group, the Jews possessed a developed form of humor which was an expression of their communal experiences.

The "Jewish" jokes which I heard from many of my friends were not their own, but stories from another generation. They possessed their grandfathers' jokes, some were not as funny out of the context of the lives of the immigrant generation. However, there were also several jokes which expressed the Jewish experience within the American culture. In both cases, I asked myself-- what was "Jewish" about these jokes? Was it simply because the jokes contained a Jewish term, or was it because the characters were



Jewish? Did these jokes tell us something about ourselves? Was there something more involved with humor than mere laughter? One of my oldest and closest friends told me that he felt that Jewish humor was a part of our "Jewish" psyche-- just like the holidays, eating gefilte fish with horseraddish, and the religious teachings that many have since forgotten since their Sunday school days. It was a part of us: it expressed our identity, values, fears and short comings. In his perspective, Jewish humor was always a viable part of the communal Jewish experience.

This perception troubled me. If his statement was true, where were the jokes and witticisms of over 5000 years of Jewish humor? Before the 19th century, there didn't exist a major anthology of humor-- only a small selection of humorous material. Yet, what I found more troubling was the lack of definition of the terms. My friend did not have an understanding of what was meant by Jewish humor. He did not have a working definition of humor nor could he identify what was Jewish about the jokes he called Jewish. His lack of understanding was equal to my own limited perception of what is Jewish humor. Thus, I decided that this was the area which my thesis would be about.

My first encounter with the study of Jewish humor led me to disprove another myth I had believed about the nature of humor. That definition was based on a routine performed by the late Jewish comedian Lenny Bruce in the 1960's: Jewish humor was anything

which is not *goyish* . A Jewish joke was one that a Gentile could not understand, and every Jew has already heard it. Was this Jewish humor? There must be something more other than the mere reference to a Jewish term or a punchline that was in Yiddish and, as my grandfather would say, which would lose its humor if it was translated. After a quite extensive bit of research on the topic, I realized that not all Jewish humor derives from Jewish sources nor is all humor created by Jews necessarily Jewish. In this case, it was better for me to study the humor than the comedians because it was the jokes rather than a comedian's interpretation which gave us insight not only into the nature of humor but the nature of being Jewish. Humor expressed the socio-cultural world in which we live. By study it, we not only laugh, but we live with a deeper understanding of who we are and from where we come.

Jewish humor is too rich and too diverse to be adequately described by a single generalization. Just as Jewish theologians would say that it is easier to describe God in terms of what God is not. The same process may be useful in understanding Jewish humor. One has to be careful not to generalize-- there were always exceptions to the rule. One could say that Jewish humor was not slapstick; then how would we explain the Marx Brothers. Some may say that it was not physical; then what about Sid Caesar, Mel Brooks and Jerry Lewis? Others may say it was not cruel nor was it polite. Yet, Don Rickles' humor was most definitely cruel and crude while

Sam Levinson's humor was more commonly perceived as polite. What Jewish humor was to earlier generations and what Jewish humor is to us today maybe more difficult to determine. However futile it may be, it is essential to any thesis to provide a series of working definitions which describes the criteria for my definition. This process will be described in length in Chapter #2.

The second question which concerned me was the nature of Judaism expressed by Jewish humor. Was there something Jewish in Jewish humor? The answer was not as simple as a yes or no answer. *Halacha*, Jewish law, established set parameters for the use of humor. However, it is important to stress that Jewish law is far from being humorous. The Talmud and various law codes speak about the use of humor, but rarely recite an anecdote or tell a joke. We must remember that the rabbis were recording law, a matter of the utmost seriousness-- a matter which reflected the idea of the Divine's presence in the world. This was hardly a matter which was to be expressed with light hearted laughter and mockery. The humor of the Talmud was intended to be humorous, and there are many rabbis who do not perceive the humorous *sugyuot* as humorous. The humor of the Talmud is seen through the eyes of the Talmudic interpreter. That person brings his own perception of what is funny and what is not to his study of Talmud. What is funny to one person may not be funny to another.

However, one interprets the *Halacha* , it is essential to remember that the Babylonian Talmud did describe the use of humor in Jewish life. In Ta'anit 22a, it is written: "Once Rabbi Beroka Hoza'ah ✓ asked the prophet Elijah if there was any one who had a share in the world to come... Elijah remarked that these two men have a share in the world to come. Rabbi Beroka then approached and asked them, 'what is your occupation?' They replied, 'we are jesters, when we see men depressed we cheer them up; furthermore, when we see two people quarreling we strive hard to make peace between them...'" The jesters served an important function in Jewish society-- they strived to create joy and peace. By making others laugh, they were performing a *mitzvah* , a Divine command.

Notice the power of laughter. As a reward for performing this mitzvah, the jesters were granted a place in the *Olam Habah* , the world to come. This was the highest possible reward, and it expressed the value the Jewish society placed creating joy and peace. It was the expression of joy when one performed a mitzvah; it was the expression of caring for your fellowman.

Laughter had an important role in the beit midrash, the place of learning. In Shabbat 30b, it was written: "...Rabbi Gidal said that Rav said, 'every student of Talmud that sits before his teacher and his lips do not drip bitterness-- he will burn as it is said: his lips are as roses, dripping flowing myrrh.' (From the Song of Songs 5:13) Do not read as liquid myrrh but as dripping bitterness. Do not read it as roses but as those who study. It is not difficult: The former is for the teacher and the latter is for the student. If you like I could say: both are for the teacher. There is no difficulty with the statement because the former applies prior to study and the latter applies after the lesson has started. Even is the case of Ravah who, prior

to the lesson, would say to the scholars something humorous. And the scholars were cheered. After that, they sat in awe and began listening and learning..."

What was meant by this *sugya* ? It established the boundaries for the use of humor. There was a time and place for it. The study of sacred texts was serious study; it was to be revered and not mocked nor taken lightly. Yet, according to Rav Yehuda whose words were recorded in an earlier part of the *sugya*, joyous laughter was commanded-- even while studying sacred texts. According to Rav Yehuda, studying is like a good dream. If you go to sleep with a smile, your dreams will be pleasant. If one studies with a smile, then the lessons will be sweet. Thus, Ravah started his lessons with humor, bringing smiles to his students. Once the mood was set, he began his lessons with the utmost seriousness, but there was still a smile on the lips of his students. Their serious approach to study prevented them from mocking the sacred traditions and laws, but their smiles made their studies sweet and full of good rewards.

The rabbis perceived humor as a powerful tool. It not only brought cheer and merriment, it also brought the ability to mock. Humor was a weapon of words, which could convince people to act in a certain way. It was used as a way of mocking things which were seen as evil and that people needed to stay away from it. With humor containing such power, its use had to be limited. In Megillah 25b, the limits for the use of humor were further described. The rabbis permitted the ridicule of acts of foreign worship, in particular idolatry, which was interpreted by Rashi to mean acts which were



morally and legally reprehensible. However, the rabbis limited the use of mockery-- it could not be applied to people. Just as creating joy and laughter was a positive mitzvah, the mocking laughter stemming from ridicule was a sin.

It was a sin to mock God. Therefore, it was inappropriate to mock anything which had a touch of the Divine within it. Since man was created *betzelem Elohim*, in the image of God, it was inappropriate to mock a fellow human being because the laughter mocks one of God's creation. Yet, it was permitted to mock those things which stand in opposition to the presence of God in the world such as idolatry and immoral activities.

The *Halacha* established the ideals which mankind strove to accomplish. All too often, Jewish law did not reflect the practices of the common people. The folk humor of the late 19th/early 20th century expressed the differences between the ideals established by Jewish law and reality. By examining the folk humor of this period, one will not only see the differences between the ideals and reality, but the tension inherent within the Jewish community structure. The eastern European Jewish society was a highly stratified environment. These socio-economic divisions fostered a type of humor which on the surface violated the spirit of the *Halacha*. Jewish law forbade the mocking of people, while Jewish folk humor would often mock elements within their society as a way of venting

frustration as well as a way of entertaining themselves. The study of Jewish humor is a study of Jewish life.

In the late 19th century/early 20th century, there was a pattern of social upheaval sweeping across Europe. Revolutions were occurring-- industrial as well as societal. The Jews were not isolated from these changes. Their society was greatly changed by the social changes that were occurring around them. In the wake of these social changes, the Jewish community was greatly influenced by a national revival. This revival influenced the culture and economy of the small communities of eastern Europe. Nationalism brought a resurgence of nationalistic pride and a strong desire to be a part of the 20th century. The old Jewish societal structure was disappearing and a new center for Jewish life was developing in the dreams for a Jewish homeland in the land of Israel. As the old world gave way to the new, there was a trend to preserve the heritage of the past. One of the tasks was to preserve the folk humor of the Jewish people because it was one of the characteristics that identified the Jewish people.

The most comprehensive collection of Jewish humor was compiled by the Zionist editor, Alter Druyanov. His goal for his 3 volume anthology was to provide researchers with socio-cultural material about the Jewish community. In Druyanov's opinion, the humor and witticisms of a people expressed the true emotions of the people. It illustrated their values, fears and anger as well as their

joys and their passions. Druyanov's collection did not try to comment on Jewish life preserved in the jokes, rather it served as a reference to illustrate the life of the Jewish community. By dividing the material into chapters based on various themes and explaining the more complicated jokes, Druyanov attempted to preserve the essence of the folk humor.

Yet, his critics charged that his editorial style and his vocabulary were often too eloquent for use by the common people. They questioned whether the jokes were worthy of being preserved. Many of them were vulgar and Druyanov's critics believed that many of the jokes did not belong in the collection. They also questioned whether Druyanov was the right person to edit such an anthology. He was not a humorous man. He was perceived as a cold individual who did not seem to possess an elaborate sense of humor. However, Druyanov dedicated over 12 years of his life to this task. In my opinion, the final result was an extensive and professional collection of jokes from the late 19th/early 20th century. His cold personality only made the anthology more authentic, because Druyanov did not view himself as a comedian, but as an editor. His anthology was not solely designed to produce laughter; it was also designed as a work of scholarship. In fact, Druyanov was never content with his work, he always strived to improve it. Many of his friends claimed that he was a perfectionist who was extremely critical of his own written work and the work of others. It was this quality that made him a

successful editor. It was interesting to discover that the only essay that Druyanov was proud and satisfied with as it appeared in its final form was the introduction to the third volume of this anthology, Sefer Habedicha veHachiddud.<sup>1</sup>

The high level of editorial skill and dedication that Druyanov demonstrated in his anthology served as a model for me. It was this type of dedication and love for Jewish humor that I found inspirational. My task was to continue the task that Druyanov started over 50 years ago: to provide an analysis of the jokes and witticisms he collected, to describe life within the European Jewish society based on the folk humor, to identify the socio-cultural factors which shaped Jewish life and illustrate how these factors changed life in eastern Europe, and, most importantly, to enjoy the national humor of Jewish world.

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<sup>1</sup> M. Glickson, Kitze, volume 2: People in Scholarship and Literature, [Hebrew], Dvir C. Ltd., Tel Aviv, 1941, page 253.



**Chapter 2: ~~✓~~**  
**Is a Definition of Jewish Humor Possible?**



At a recent congregational dinner, I was discussing my thesis with one of the congregants who told me the following joke:

Two Jews are having lunch, when one of them decides to tell the other a joke. He begins by saying: "Two Jews are walking down the street and..." His friend interrupted him and asked: "How come every one of your jokes begins with 'two Jews walking down the street'". The first man thought and started to retell the joke, with some modifications: "Two Irish men are walking down the street and one looks at the other and says, 'Nu? What are you doing for break fast on Yom Kippur?'..."

When I heard this joke, I laughed. One reason why I laughed was to be polite. I didn't find the joke humorous, but I didn't want to offend this congregant. But I also laughed because without knowing it, the congregant supplied me with some insights as to the nature of Jewish humor. Who we are is not a mere reflection of our personalities. It is much more complex than that. Who we are is as complex the universe.

However, as American Jews, there are certain life experiences which have shaped our communal existence. There are certain socio-cultural conditions which we inherited from the previous generations that provide the parameters for our current self-identity. Most of the American Jewish community immigrated from Europe between the mid 19th century to the early 20th century. In the latter part of the 19th century and the early 20th century, roughly 2 million Jews

emigrated from small towns and cities in eastern Europe. This immigration process changed the societal make-up of the Jewish community in this country. Not only did it increase our percentage of the population, it changed the societal structure of American Jewish community as well as the values. It also changed the way American Jews perceived the world. This influx of people brought their fears, strengths and insecurities that had developed living in eastern Europe.

The reason why I found the congregant's joke fascinating was because it revealed part of our communal insecurity. Since I am not a psychoanalyst, I can only project my hypothesis about why this particular congregant found this joke amusing. Mainly, I assumed that there are so many jokes about Jews in mainstream American society that each joke contributes to the development of a vivid stereotype of the Jews. Fear of being alienated and fear of persecution is etched into the Jewish psyche. Jewish history is filled with accounts of vicious antisemitism that destroyed much of the Jewish community. Yet, the Jewish community survived, but became very wary of comments with references about Jews because of the fear of history repeating itself.

Another way of perceiving this joke was to examine not the joke, but the joke teller. What does the man's laughter and sense of humor tell us about the individual's psychological background? Perhaps this man perceives something culturally unique about

himself and American Jewry as a whole. One can say that this particular congregant possibly found this joke amusing because it expresses the inability to separate Jewish characteristics from the rest of American populous as well as expressing his perceived communal insecurity of the Jew in American society.

Yet, what is it that makes this joke Jewish? Is it the mere mention of the word Jew and a brief reference to a Jewish holiday? Hardly--it is much more complicated than that. It is a combination of factors: psychological, societal, economic, cultural and religious-- to name just a few. Let me begin my exploration of Jewish humor with a joke:

Three Jews are sentenced to death. They are put in front of a firing squad. The officer turns to the first condemned man:  
-Do you want a blindfold?  
-Yes, sir.  
He asks the second one the same question.  
-Yes, sir.  
He asks the third.  
- No, I don't want anything from You.  
The second man turns to the third, and says to him in a worried voice:  
-Moishe, don't make trouble now!<sup>1</sup>

It is a fair assumption to make that this particular joke is a Jewish joke. How would this same joke sound if I transposed the names of the characters? If instead of three Jews, I would have written "three Frenchmen" and altered the punchline to "Jacques,

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<sup>1</sup> Avner Ziv, Jewish Humor, Papyrus Publishing House, Tel Aviv, 1986, p. 7.



don't make trouble now!", would the joke have the same impact? Most certainly not-- not only would the joke be less funny, it would not be as clear. There are inherent societal images, or stereotypes, that this joke emphasizes which makes it funny. Sociologists, such as Avner Ziv, have conducted research which has demonstrated the clear presence of a type of humor, which is definitively Jewish by its nature.<sup>2</sup> Ziv interviewed several participants and asked them why they found this joke with Jewish characters funnier than the joke with French characters. Ziv's research indicates that the humor of the joke does not rest on the surface. One has to examine the underlying nuances and subtle references within a joke. In essence, every ethnic joke implies a certain degree of societal connotations about the identity of the characters in a joke.

In the last joke, what was it that made the joke Jewish? As I mentioned earlier, the Jewish people were victims of countless attacks and acts of persecution. One of the stereotypes that developed was that the Jew did not want to cause trouble. Even when the violent acts were occurring, the perception was that the Jews desired to end of the situation, or at least, prevent the situation from escalating. Being a minority group that was often attacked by the majority on a whim, scared the Jewish community. This joke

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

illustrated the perception that the Jews were complacent and were not looking to stir up trouble, even when their lives were already lost.

Yet, the basic question remains--what is Jewish humor? Is it possible to develop a theory of Jewish humor? Based on months of research, I have discovered that there are a vast number of definitions. There are definitions created by the men of science, such as psychiatrists and sociologists. There are definitions created by the writers, artists, and rabbis. Every individual has his own definition, which tells us that Jewish humor is multifaceted. There are different theories which generalize once dimension of Jewish humor, while negating the others. It is almost futile to develop a theory because there will always be a joke or witticism that doesn't exactly fit into the theory. To understand what is Jewish humor, one needs to understand the social context that the jokes developed-- one needs to understand the common people, who created and laughed at these jokes.

According to Avner Ziv, "Jewish humor can be defined as humor created for Jews, intended mainly for Jews, and which reflects special aspects of Jewish life."<sup>3</sup> This is a very simple and broad definition, which contains within it humor collected from the folk by

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<sup>3</sup> Ziv, p. 11.



the folklorist as well as the humor created by professionals. Naturally, Jewish humor changes as a result of important changes that take place in the life of the Jewish people. Thus, one can speak of Eastern European Jewish humor, Moroccan Jewish humor, American Jewish humor or Israeli Jewish humor. Nevertheless, what is identified in worldwide professional literature as Jewish humor originated in the 19th Century Eastern Europe. There Jews lived under special and extremely harsh conditions, confronted with a real danger to their lives. In these conditions, "a humor developed over time which had particular characteristics that helped Jews cope with their terrible ordeals."<sup>4</sup>

Its functions were more than a way of dealing with the common burdens of their lives, it also provided the Jews with a weapon-- a double edged sword. On one side of the sword was the self-disparaging humor which has become synonymous with Jewish humor in the 20th Century. On the other side of the sword was the cutting wit that gave the opportunity for the Jew to combat the vicious and often violent attacks by their Gentile neighbors. It was through the use of humor that the Jew was able to present his response to antisemitism and to voice his opinion of how he envisioned the non-Jews with whom he came into contact:

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

A Jew and a Gentile sat in one of the railroad cars and debated about the war. The Gentile said: "The Jews are totally to blame. They have brought the war to the world."

The Jew responded: "You are mistaken Bicycles are to blame. They have brought the war to the world."

The Gentile was amazed: "Bicycles, how so?"

The Jew replied: "The Jews, how so?"<sup>5</sup>

This particular joke gives us an insight not only into how the Jewish humorist defined his relationship with his Gentile neighbors but as to how individuals dealt with antisemitism. In this particular joke, the Jew could never expect to convince the non-Jewish critic that the Jews were responsible for the war. This type of antisemitism is not based on logical thought, but rather on a emotional response to a problem facing the general society. The Jew who was riding the train intended to defend himself by using the only weapon he had available-- his witty logic. This particular joke is reminiscent of the Jew living in a non-Jewish world as a hatred, or at best, tolerated minority. The humor reflected their frustrations and the ignorance that the common Gentile had against the Jews.

The Jewish orators never expected to be victorious in their debates with their Gentile neighbors. To win could be more harmful than losing-- it could start a series of brutal attacks on the Jewish community. Their goals were intellectually to establish the Jewish

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<sup>5</sup> A. Druyanov, Sefer Habidecha veHachiddud, Dvir C. Ltd., Tel Aviv 1936, volume 2, p. 392, joke #2023.

superiority over the Gentile, while presenting the opinion that the Jew was also denigrated by his own humor.

The importance of Jewish humor as the primary form for a politically oppressed minority to express its communal feeling of being intellectually superior to the dominant social group cannot be underestimated. Laughter is the "physical expression of a special feeling arising in a person who suddenly sees himself superior to those who had just before been his equals or even his superiors."<sup>7</sup> Even the Bible supports this particular view of laughter. The mighty Samson, who terrified all his enemies but has suddenly become weak, bound in chains, is laughable in the eyes of the Philistines who have become superior to him.

However, this is not a universally accepted theory of the function of Jewish humor. There are those would argue that Jewish humor, in its very nature, is a humor of self-degradation. This conception of Jewish humor originated with Sigmund Freud. He was the first to single out "self-criticism" as the unique quality of Jewish jokes. According to Freud, the relationship between the raconteur and the subject matter of his anecdotes is one of self-degradation. The narrator is also the butt of his own story. Freud called this

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<sup>7</sup> A. Druyanov, "The Nature of the Comic" in Israel Cohen and B.Y. Michaeli's An Anthology of Hebrew Essays, Massada Publishers, Tel Aviv, 1966, p. 464.

tendenziösen Witz, the hostile aggressive nature of tendentious jokes. Freud wrote:

A particularly favorable occasion for the tendentious jokes is presented when the intended rebellious criticism is directed against the subject himself, or, to put it more cautiously, against someone in whom the subject has a share-- a collective person, that is the subject himself or his own nation for instance. The occurrence of self-criticism as a determinant may explain how it is that a number of the most apt jokes... have grown up on the soil of Jewish popular life.<sup>8</sup>

This implies that Jews created stories directed against Jewish characters. Freud admits that he does not know of any other people who make fun to such a degree of their own character. It is this conception which has been the cornerstone for most of the subsequent popular and scholarly opinions of the essence of Jewish humor. In this view, Jewish humor is unique because it is degrading to the person telling the joke.

From encyclopedists to folklorists to psychoanalysts, people of all perspectives have endorsed the idea. In an article about Jewish wit for The Universal Jewish Encyclopedia, Jacob P. Kohn and Ludwig Davidsohn summarized the typology of Jewish humor as follows:

A typology of Jewish wit has to demarcate the ever repeated figures and

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<sup>8</sup> Sigmund Freud Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious, Standard Edition, vol. 8, 1905, p. 111-112.

realms. First, therefore, we see the most prominent characteristic of Jewish humor: self-irony. The Jews of Western lands mock above, in innumerable jokes, all the linguistic peculiarities, the cunning mercantile tricks, the narrow mindedness and caricature-like traits of the Eastern European Jew...<sup>9</sup>

In the Druyanov collection, there are numerous jokes to support this hypothesis. Yet, there are other jokes that do not fit exactly into the Freudian perspective. Compare the following two jokes:

What is the difference between an Englishman, a Frenchman, a German and a Jew? The Englishman, when he hears a joke, laughs three times: once when he hears it; the second time, when he tells it to another; the third, when he understands it. The Frenchman is told a joke, he laughs twice: Once when he hears it, the second time when he tells another; he never quite understands it. The German when he hears a joke laughs once: when he hears it. He is not gifted to tell it to another nor to understand it. When a Jew hears a joke, he doesn't laugh at all: he already knows it and can tell you one better.<sup>10</sup>

According to the Freudian approach, the humor of the joke is found in the last line when the Jewish quality is established. Yet, although, this particular joke permits an inferior quality about himself to shine through, the Jew demonstrates his superiority to other peoples. This anecdote seems merely to express an unattractive sense of Jewish group superiority: the Jew is more

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<sup>9</sup> Jacob Pinchas Kohn and Ludwig Davidsohn, "Jewish Wit and Humor", The Universal Jewish Encyclopedia, New York, 1943, 10:547.

<sup>10</sup> Selections of A. Druyanov's was reprinted in Epstein and Zeldner's Modern Hebrew Literature, Hebrew Publishing Co., New York, 1965, p. 212.



clever than anyone else. But with a second look, one sees a subtle and more complex world orientation. The narrator is really poking fun at the weakness of his own people; their intellectual impatience and overconfidence. One can say that the presence of this quality of self-criticism is self-degrading.

In the second joke, the Freudian perspective is more opaque. The psychoanalytic theories needs to be stretched to its limit to account for this joke:

A guest came to a village and entered an inn to eat.  
"What do you want to eat?" asked the innkeeper.  
"Meat and fish" replied the guest.  
"We do not have any fish," the innkeeper said, "in our village there is no river... Meat we have only on Shabbat."  
The guest said: "If that is so, bring me some butter cream and cheese."  
"There is none, my brother", the woman sighed-- "For some time now the cows have stopped growing milk."  
"There is nothing that can be done about it. Give me some herring."  
"There is none, cousin. My husband has yet to return from the city."  
"Do you have any bread?"  
The innkeeper stared angrily at him and growled: "In all my days, I never saw a Jewish glutton like this!"

It is because of jokes such as this one that I question the notion that Jewish humor has masochistic tendencies. The Freudian perspective might interpret this joke as denigrating because of generations of being second-class non-citizens, the Jewish psyche has internalized this notion of inferiority. One way that this joke can be perceived is that the innkeeper claim that the guest was a glutton, only reflected the innkeeper's feeling of inferiority and inadequacy for not being able to provide food for the guest. Had it been

specified that the innkeeper was a Gentile, then the joke would have lost its humoristic component.

In my opinion, the Freudian theory does not apply to this joke. The humor was simply in the irony that the innkeeper, who was angry at herself for not being able to provide for her customers, vented her frustrations at an innocent customer. The joke does not reveal any aspects about the Jewish psyche, rather comments on the economic difficulties of the 19th/20th century. Economic hardships effected everyone, the innkeepers were also effected. Since they made their living by providing food and comfort for their guests, the irony is that they too faced hardships and could not provide for themselves.

The fact that raconteur of these jokes was most likely Jewish raises the question whether the Jews, who told these jokes or laughed at them, were masochistic because they laughed at their hardships. Martin Grotjahn, a noted psychoanalyst, believed it did. He wrote that aggression turned against the self seems to be "an essential feature of the truly Jewish joke".<sup>11</sup> It is as if the Jews were telling their enemies: "You do not need to attack us. We can do that ourselves- and even better."

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<sup>11</sup> Martin Grotjahn, Beyond Laughter: Humor and the Subconscious, New York, NY, 1957, p. 12.

There are those who agree with this perception of the Jewish psyche-- Freud, of course, and Theodor Reik, who wrote a book entitled The Jewish Wit. This view has been adopted in the modern American society as well. A case in point is the conception of Jewish humor rooted in popular fictional Jewish figures such as Phillip Roth's Portnoy in Portnoy's Complaint, who states literally that self deprecation is, after all, a classical form of Jewish humor.<sup>12</sup> The spirit of the sharpest self-criticism and sarcasm directed at the self is not restricted to folk humor. Theodor Reik, as well as others, claimed that Jewish humor was a constant part of the people. He pointed to the presence of humor in the Bible to prove his point. Reik claims that it is present especially in the speeches of the prophets who cruelly castigate their contemporaries and Israel Zangwill, Reik noted, even went so far as to call the Bible an anti-Semitic book.<sup>13</sup>

I must interject my dismay at such radical statements. The Bible is the foundation of the Jewish people. It is hardly an antisemitic book. Rather, it is the interpreter who has projected these conceptions onto the Bible. As I stated earlier, each theoretical perspective adds a dimension to our understanding of Jewish humor. However, each theory presents a limited scope. In this case, the

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<sup>12</sup> Dan Ben Amos, "The 'Myth' of Jewish Humor", Western Folklore, volume 32, No. 2, April 1973, p. 114.

<sup>13</sup> Theodor Reik, Jewish Wit, Gamut Press, New York, NY, 1962, p. 220.

psychoanalytic theory describes the assimilated Jew, who is now a part of the general mainstream society, apologizing to the Gentile world for the actions and attitudes of other Jews. It is as if this type of Jew denigrates his fellow Jews in order to feel superior and gain acceptance into the non-Jewish world. This description pertains to many famous Jews who were born Jewish, yet excelled in a non-Jewish environment-- two prominent examples of whom are Karl Marx and Freud.<sup>14</sup>

Though Freud's psychoanalytic theory is an essential component in the study of Jewish humor, the mistake of many scholars was to perceive Freud's interpretation as fact. Subsequent writers have continued to advance his hypotheses concerning the primary cause of this ostensibly unique type of humor. Dan Ben-Amos, a sociologist, criticized these writers for failing to question the validity of Freud's insights on self-mockery.<sup>15</sup> He stated that the primary cause for the theory of self-mockery was based on two conditions: a) the alleged unique nature of the Jewish psyche itself and b) the social environment in which the Jewish people lived. According to Theodor Reik, the very behavior of the Jewish people

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

distinguished itself historically by oscillation between masochistic and paranoid tendencies. Reik wrote:

The masochistic attitude of ancient Israel was recognized at least in their relationship with God, whose punishment they took as deserved without complaint. They considered also the cruelty with which they were treated by their powerful neighbors as punishment for their sins, especially for deserting God. The paranoid attitude in the form of an idea of grandeur is obvious in the Jewish claim of being the "chosen people". There is even a subterranean tie between the masochistic and paranoid attitude in the idea that God chastises those He loves. Such an exceptional position has been claimed by the Jewish people since ancient time.<sup>16</sup>

In other words, according to Reik, humor is but an expression of the psyche of the Jews as it is demonstrated in their general behavioral pattern. Jews oscillate between masochistic self-humiliation and paranoid superiority feeling.<sup>17</sup> Ben Amos pointed out that according to this trend of thought, the notion that the Jewish community was projecting a concealed sense of superiority in its humor is not presented peripherally as a superficial impression, but rather as a logical and essential trait of Jewish humor.<sup>18</sup> In other words, Jewish humor only projects the image that the Jews viewed themselves as a confident people. The psychoanalytic theory presented the idea that the Jews projected an image of superiority

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<sup>16</sup> Theodor Reik, Jewish Wit, p. 230-231.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p. 233.

<sup>18</sup> Ben Amos, "The Myth of Jewish Humor", p. 116.



by mocking others while, in actuality, they were voicing their own insecurities.

Not being trained in this area, I can only offer my own 'gut' reaction to the psychoanalytic approach. I agree with Ben Amos who stated that the presence of self-mockery and masochistic tendencies within Jewish humor is not a communal expression but rather an isolated example of individual fantasies.<sup>19</sup> Reik assumed that the jokes were the collective property of the entire community. Since the jokes were present within Jewish society, all Jews were, therefore, engaged in this form of self-mockery. The Druyanov anthology is proof that this is not so. Only a handful of the jokes within the anthology are self-denigrating. Most are jokes directed at other elements within the internal Jewish society. The psychoanalytic approach explains the emotional make-up of a handful of Jews who were struggling with their identities as they became accepted into the general secular culture.

Another point that I felt that Reik generalized was the comparison between the shtetl and ancient Israel. Reik did not claim that Jewish humor was biologically based, he presented the assumption that there were inherent social relations between Jews and other nations which existed throughout history. The Jews always were in a minority position. Thus, the social relationship

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

between the 19th century Jew living in Odessa and his Gentile neighbor was not too different from the relationship between the ancient Israelites and their neighbors. Nothing could be historically farther from the truth. Both experiences were quite different. The ancient Israelites were a viable nation with an established home land and they were conquered militarily. The Jews of eastern Europe were viewed as a foreign minority group dwelling on European soil. They were generations of a homeless people. These are two different social experiences. In the first case, the ancient Israelites were politically independent. In the second case, the Jews of the shtetl possessed the social and political inferiority of a minority group. The psychoanalytic perspective equates the dominant role of religion, which historically manifested the changing roles between masochism and paranoia, with the social, time-oriented perception of humor.

There are other theories about Jewish humor. They express different schools of thought and disciplines such as sociology, anthropology and the study of folklore, to name a few. Each has its strengths and weaknesses. Since I have already explored the merits of the psychoanalytic theory, I will progress to the other major theories on Jewish humor:

The people of Prague asked Rabbi Meir Fischel, their rabbi: "We see that the wealthy are envious of the wise men and also we see that the wise men are envious of the wealthy, whose envy is greater?" Rabbi Meir replied: "Certainly the jealousy of the wealthy is greater

} because we see wise men who become wealthy, but never do we see a wealthy man who became wise."<sup>1</sup>

As I mentioned earlier, there is a great deal of difficulty in formulating a theory of Jewish humor because of the presence of many overlapping and sometimes contradictory social factors. Such is the case with the Freudian perspective of the "inheritance of psychic disposition." According to this theory, Jews have certain traits of collective consciousness which were transmitted from one generation to the next. Though it offers a partial explanation for the presence of Jewish humor, it does little to explain joke stated above. This joke demonstrated no self-deprecation. How do we interpret this joke? \*

There are others have a more dynamic conception of history and Jewish society and its so-called collective mind. Other psychologists, sociologists, historians, and folklorists realize the radical difference between the relationship of the past ancient Israeli society and its neighbors and the position of the Jews in the 19th century European society. Consequently, they consider Jewish humor, and its self-mocking feature in particular, a more recent phenomenon and seek its direct cause in the socio-economic situation of European Jewry. This shift in perspectives implies a crucial-

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<sup>1</sup>A. Druryanov, Sefer Habedicha vehachiddud, vol. #1, joke #214.

theoretical change. Jewish humor is not inherently Jewish anymore; it is not an expression of established patterns etched into the Jewish psyche, but a reflection of certain given socio-economic factors in a set region, mainly eastern Europe. Similar circumstances should produce the quality of self-ridicule in the humor of any other ethnic group. Therefore, according to this social, rather than psychological, perspective, Jewish humor is not an expression of the genius of the Jewish people, but just a particular case of a general sociological principle.

Yet, what are the circumstances that are responsible for the self-mocking quality in the humor of the Jews? Two contradictory socio-economic factors which stem from the ghetto experience, have been singled out as possible primary causes for this trait.

Edmund Bergler, a psychoanalyst, suggested that life in the European ghettos and small towns bred self-ridicule in humor. "The seclusion, poverty, absence of opportunity and bitterness of life in the ghetto certainly favored psychic masochism; so did the persecution and the bias encountered outside the ghetto."<sup>2</sup> Life in the enclosed, poverty ridden, environment fostered a sense of inferiority. The Jews of Eastern Europe were not viewed as an equal by their Gentile neighbors. They were often victims of pogroms,

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<sup>2</sup> Edmund Bergler, Laughter and the Sense of Humor, NY 1956, page 111.



ethnic slurs, random violent attacks as well as generally being perceived as a sub-species able to do ruthless and evil acts such as deicide. These feelings of the general populus were reenforced by the lack of political and social rights granted to the Gentiles.

In contrast to Bergler, there were others who viewed the primary cause of the self-hatred characteristic in Jewish humor to be the actual emancipation of the Jews from the bonds of their own closed community and their integration into the urban life life of the majority.<sup>3</sup> Accordingly, the cultural duality and ambivalent identity of those who assimilated, or at least took advantage of the education opportunities, are the sources of Jewish self-mockery. Marcus and Rosenberg state that the notion of Jewish self-hatred was more-or-less unknown prior to the Emancipation in Europe. Prior to this cataclysmic event, when the status of the Jews was lower as a minority group, this concept did not exist.<sup>4</sup> The Jews generally viewed themselves positively and considered themselves as a 'chosen people'-- a people unique in the world and standing above all

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<sup>3</sup> See Salcia Landmann, "On Jewish Humor", The Jewish Journal of Sociology 4, 1962, pages 193-204; Shapiro, "Marginality and Jewish Humor", Midstream 4, 1958, pages 70-80; Paul Marcus and Alan Rosenberg, "Another Look at Jewish Self-Hatred", Journal of Reform Judaism, Summer 1989, pages 37-57.

<sup>4</sup> Marcus and Rosenberg, "Another Look at Jewish Self-Hatred", Journal of Reform Judaism, page 43. See also Raphael Patai, The Jewish Mind, Aronson Publishers, NJ, 1977, page 457.

nations. "The Jews did not let anti-semitism undermine their basic sense of moral superiority as they preserved a counternarrative that protected their positive self-stereotype."<sup>5</sup>

The general perception of the sociological view is that masochism is not at all an indigenous element of Jewish Humor. As evident in the Druyanov collection, this trait is missing from the jokes of traditional European Jewry who lived in the shtetl. Under the latter perspective, the self-hatred aspect of humor was nurtured by the transitional Jews, who emerged from the ghettos but did not shed its culture, who interacted among the urban intellectual society, of which they were still not a part. Self-mockery in humor is a product of not being established confidently in their new society; it functions in the process of assimilation and integration into the new society. By laughing at traditional Jewish stereotypes, the transitional Jew is associating himself with the non-Jewish social majority:

Isaac Meyer bumps into a pale Gentile, who is a hunchback and has a sagging chest. Isaac Meyer latches onto him and asks: "Goy, what is your occupation?" "I am a weaver" the man replied. Isaac Meyer sighed: "A people similar to animals. Everything comes to them from nothing. From the looks of him, ~~had~~ he been one of us, he probably would have been a great and respected Rabbi..."

Had this joke been told by an assimilated Jew, it would be an excellent illustration of my point that assimilated Jews laughed at

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

their Jewish heritage as if they were a part of the Gentile community. Had this joke been told by a traditional Jew, it would be viewed as a joke that poked fun at the rabbis, who spent all of their time studying and thus, developing sagging chests and hunched backs. Let us assume that this joke was told by an assimilated Jew. What does this joke tell us about the nature of Jewish humor?

Salcia Landmann suggested that the socio-cultural transitional situation is not only the cause of Jewish humor, but its exclusive source.<sup>6</sup> Humor was the Jewish way of coping with the stress of the burdens of their lives.<sup>7</sup> The transitional Jew lived within a framework upon which a series of burdens have been laid: the moral and cultural burdens which applied to the newly emancipated Jew as he attempted to relate to the rest of the Jewish society; the spiritual and mental burdens which were firmly established upon the Jews as to their responsibility and connection to the society. The Jew was under constant scrutiny as to who he was and how he lived his life. There was also the factor of the danger that was inherent in an aggressive environment. It was the role of this bitter and critical humor to provide solace, not escapism.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Salcia Landmann, "On Jewish Humor", Journal of Jewish Sociology, 1962, pages 193-204.

<sup>7</sup> Landmann, "On Jewish Humor", page 197.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.



aggressive environment. It was the role of this bitter and critical humor to provide solace, not escapism.<sup>8</sup>

According to Landmann, before their emancipation, the Jews were actually less disposed to humor than during the period of transition. There are those who would interpret this to mean that the Jews were a humorless people.<sup>9</sup> After they gained their political independence, the Jews once again "lost" their sense of humor.

According to Landmann, the rise and fall of Jewish humor occurred between the 18th and 20th century. Under this perspective, Jewish humor did not exist as an entity before or after this time. Landmann stated that because of the close affiliation to Judaism, the faithful followers were careful in their use of humor in order not to violate Jewish law, which forbade the mocking of God.<sup>9</sup> "If the humor was pointed critically and with revolutionary intent at Jewish laws, it resulted in a weakening of resistance against a hostile environment and was therefore regarded as more dangerous than foreign occupation or persecution."<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Dan Ben-Amos, "The 'Myth' of Jewish Humor", vol #32, No. 2, April 1973, page 118.

<sup>9</sup> Landmann, page 198.

<sup>10</sup> Landmann, page 193



Landmann is wrong in her assertion that there was no humor in biblical society<sup>11</sup> and there is not wit in modern Israel.<sup>12</sup>

Contrary to her postulate, I do not perceive Jewish law as being uncondusive to humor. Granted, the legalistic text were not humorous but that is understandable. The *Halacha* established limits for the use of humor and even encouraged its usage. [See chapter 1 for further explanation of this idea] Yet, contrary to her critics, I do not understand her thesis to imply that the Jews were a people completely devoid of joy and laughter. There was joy and laughter-- yet, nothing distinct to be categorized as Jewish humor. There was folk humor, but not a viable entity with a distinct characteristics which can be called Jewish humor. It is possible to see Landmann's error because she generalized an abstract concept such as a definition of a sense of humor and conceived of it in terms of a particular repertoire of jokes. This enabled her to establish a direct and exclusive interdependence between the socio-cultural environment and the quality of Jewish humor. Once these primary conditions disappeared, Jewish humor itself vanished.

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<sup>11</sup> Jacob P. Kohn and Ludwig Davidsohn, "Jewish Wit and Humor", The Universal Jewish Encyclopedia, New York, 1943, vol #10, page 546. —

<sup>12</sup> There are many anthologies of Israeli humor. See E. Davidson, Tsechok LiYsrael, Ramat Gan, 1958 or Didi Menuzy, Od Bidechamin, Tel Aviv, 1987.

In Western Europe and the United States, the integration of the Jews into the majority culture is not a simple process in which the Jewish ideas were absorbed all at once. To view it as such would mean that Jews would lose their ethnic identities when they entered the cultural mainstream. For as long as Jewish society exists in these countries, Jewish humor provides at least a secondary, if not primary, focus for studying ethnic identity. Therefore, in their examination of Jewish humor in the United States, two sociologists, Rosenberg and Shapiro, suggested that the cause of self-hatred in Jewish humor is not the process of transition but the psychological ambiguity of life in a marginal social position.<sup>13</sup> They continue their postulate by stating that American Jews hate being Jewish and at the same time, they hate not being Jewish.<sup>14</sup> In other words, American Jews define their ethnic identity in terms of two opposing standards: the normative American culture and traditional Jewish values. Since they resemble neither, they indulge in self-derogatory humor.

Perhaps the only basis for the Jewish masochism thesis is its mass acceptance by writers and thinkers, Jewish and non-Jewish. Elliot Orning, a sociologist, wrote that the textual basis for this idea of Jewish humor was developed in the twentieth century by personal

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<sup>13</sup> Rosenberg and Shapiro, "Marginality", page 72.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid, page 74.

recollections or literary collections of jokes.<sup>15</sup> The publications of such volumes were in full force by the early to the mid-1920's, first in western Europe and later in the United States. Alter Druyanov's collection was part of this pattern. Druyanov's collection as well as the other editors' redaction of their anthologies appealed to a readership of a growing number of the Jewish educated elite who no longer lived within the confines of the traditional Jewish community. For them and their readers, these books represented the collective expression of Jewish humor and witticism of the Jewish communities. Within the framework of these collections, one must remember that the narrators as well as the characters are Jewish. Thus, it should be no surprise that generalizations and psychic patterns which are inherent within these collections are the only attributes of Jewish humor upon which intellectuals have based their theories.<sup>16</sup> That is to say, the collective community is being interpreted through the scholarship which is subjective, based on the collective bias of the editors.

These distorted perspectives result from historical and social circumstances as well as analytical frameworks which established scholar have constructed. However, these have never affected the

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<sup>15</sup> Elliott Oring, "The People of the Joke: On the Concept of Jewish Humor", Western Folklore, vol. #42, 1983, page 264.

<sup>16</sup> Ben-Amos, "The 'Myth' of Jewish Humor", page 121.



narrators of the jokes themselves who perceive the Jewish society as a complex society in which the individual performs according to standard societal and religious roles, and belongs to a distinct social group as well as an economic class. Like any other society, individuals of the Jewish community are linked to each other through a series of interconnecting relationships. However, theorists must remember that they are individuals who interact. The difficulty with generating a theory on the nature of Jewish humor is that it lumps individuals together who are quite different from each other. As a generalized theory appears, personal identities and personalities disappear. We define Jewish humor and apply it to a collective community. The so-called Jewish community persona suppress the personal traits and emotions of the common people. In essence, theorists have lost contact with the people whom they are studying.

Jewish humor is a relatively modern term. As we have seen, it has been formulated to conceptualize the humor that was in some way characteristic or distinctive of the Jewish people beginning in the 19th century. The first time that the term "Jewish humor" was applied to the collective Jewish community was in 1893 by the Chief Rabbi of London, Herman Adler.<sup>17</sup> As a growing tide of nationalistic

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<sup>17</sup> Herman Adler, "Jewish Wit and Humor", The 19th Century, vol. #35, 1893, pages 457-469.

feeling was sweeping through Europe, the Jews were beginning to identify themselves as a nation living in exile. It was a popular opinion that one of the characteristics of nationalism was the presence of a distinct form of humor.<sup>18</sup> One of the charges that antisemites were charging was that the Jews were a humorless people and unworthy of being a nation-state.

If the term Jewish humor was the invention of the 19th century, the idea had to be applied to earlier materials to demonstrate its existence throughout history. There were a series of books and article that appeared around the same time as the Adler article. One author, Abram S. Issacs published two books [ Stories from the Rabbis and Rabbinical Humor ] in 1893 with the intention of demonstrating that the Jewish sages were not "mere dreamers, always buried in wearisome disputations," but men who were as much impelled by "buoyancy" and "moral cheerfulness" as by intellectual motives.<sup>19</sup> In 1905, J. Chotzner expanded the history of humor in Jewish society by identifying little known humorists of the 13th, 14th, and 18th centuries.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Elliot Oring, "The People of the Joke: On the Concept of Jewish Humor", page 265.

<sup>19</sup> Abram S. Isaacs, Stories from the Rabbis, NY 1911, pages 7 & 114.

<sup>20</sup> J. Chotzner,, London, 1905.



As I mentioned in passing earlier, Elliot Oring stated that toward the end of the 19th century, the presence of humor was felt to be one of the signs of a civilized humanity. In the late 19th and early 20th century, Jews felt the necessity to demonstrate that they had a valid form of ethnic humor since their emergence from biblical times in order to justify them as a people in wake of the resurgence of nationalism throughout Europe. Nathan Ausbel stated that "wit and irony can be regarded as the likely attributes of a civilized mentality".<sup>21</sup> However, the biggest support for this nationalistic theory came from an antisemitic book entitled Sex and Character by Otto Weininger, published in London in 1906. In this book, he argued that Jews were not readily disposed to humor. According to Weininger, "humor recognized the transcendental and was essentially tolerant while wit and satire were essentially intolerant. Thus, Jews and women are devoid of humor but addicted to mockery."<sup>22</sup> Weininger denied that Judaism was a nationality and by doing so, he indicated that one of the criteria for nationalism was the presence of humor, wit and satire.

As Zionism began to emerge as the fruition of Jewish nationalism, one of the motives of the editors of Jewish joke

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<sup>21</sup> Nathan Ausbel, Treasury of Jewish Folklore, NY, 1948 page XX.

<sup>22</sup> Otto Weininger, Sex and Character, London, 1906, pages 318-319.

anthologies' was to justify the presence a viable Jewish ethnic humor. There is no better example than Alter Druyanov who edited Sefer Habidecha veHaChiddud. His anthology was written written in stages over a twelve year span. The first volume was completed while in a sanatorium in Germany during the early 1920's. The later volumes were compiled in Israel during the early 1930's. Druyanov was a Zionist who worked for the establishment of the state of Israel. It appears that Druyanov was collecting the jokes that were in the "spirit of the [Jewish] people" in order to protect them for posterity and to give them a nationalistic interpretation.<sup>23</sup>

To summarize my perspective, let me state that national humor is an abstract notion that was designed in wake of the growing nationalism of the late 19th century. This theory is different from the theory that claimed that Jewish humor was a form of self-mockery. The nationalistic theory views the jokes and witticisms as a verbal form of identification, while the self-mockery theory views Jewish humor as a behavioral pattern. In examining Jewish humor, one must realize that source material is subjective-- based on the definition of Jewish humor by the editor who compiled the material. There is little evidence to suggest that there are definite characteristics which are synonymous with a concept called Jewish

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<sup>23</sup> Alter Druyanov, Sefer Habedicha veHachiddud., vol. #1, page 10.

humor. Thus, to examine the humor that was present in the Jewish society as a collective expression of the Jewish psyche is fundamentally inaccurate. Hence, the examination of Jewish humor only serves a small series of functions. Primarily, it serves as an introduction to the socio-cultural patterns of the world in which the jokes were originally presented. If one were to psychoanalyze the jokes, one would not be analyzing the Jewish people, just the people to whom the jokes were attributed: editors, narrators, characters, etc. To conjecture any further would be distorting the textual material and making subjective perceptions.

There is, of course always the theoretical possibility that future examination of jokes would find an inherent trend of Jews who mock themselves. After all, masochism is not a psychological concept from which Jews are exempted. As Jewish community was transformed from a European shtetl existence into an assimilated part of American society, it is possible that the self-ridicule trait of Jewish jokes has disappeared. Yet, this is highly unlikely based on my limited research of material from Druyanov, Shalom Alecheim and other anthologies.

What Jewish humor is may be more difficult to express than what it is not. Though this is a futile exercise, let me proceed to generalize five aspects of Jewish humor:

-- Jewish humor is usually substantive; it is about something. It is especially fond of certain specific topics, such as people, family,



business, anti-Semitism, wealth and poverty, health, and survival. Jewish humor is fascinated by the use of logic as well as its finite distinction between the rational world and absurdity.

-- As a social or religious commentary, Jewish humor can be sarcastic, descriptive or resigned. Sometimes the impact of the joke is not measured by laughter but rather a bitter nod or commiserating sigh of recognition. Jewish humor express the pain and anguish of the people better than any other narrative style because the power of humor denigrates the pain to the point where one can adjust and live with. Humor gives us the strength to be survivors.

--Jewish humor tends to be anti-authoritarian. It ridicules grandiosity and self-indulgence, exposes hypocrisy and vents the community's frustration of having a second class status within the general society. Jewish humor illustrates that the common folk are worthy individuals and should possess self-dignity in wake of their difficult environment.

-- Jewish humor frequently creates discomfort in order to make its point. Often its thrust is political-- aimed at individuals who cannot be criticized in a direct fashion. This applies to prominent figures in the general society, as well as to those in the Jewish world: rabbis, cantors, synagogue officials, sages, teachers, doctors, businessmen, matchmakers and the rich and the poor. In general, one characteristic that is present throughout Jewish humor is the conflict between the common people and the power structure-- whether that

is an individual Jew facing the Jewish community, the Jew facing the Gentile world, or the Jewish community in relation to the rest of the world.

--Jewish humor mocks everything-- including the narrator. The humor can possess an ironic twist facing the narrator. It is characteristically self-denigrating. Jewish humor mocks itself-- especially the Jewish community. It frequently satirizes religious personalities and institutions as well as ritual and *Halacha*, Jewish law. At the same time, it affirms religious traditions and practices, seeking a new understanding for man in his struggle to understand God and the world.



**Chapter 3:**  
**Alter Druyanov-- The Man and His World**

The study of Jewish humor is not limited to the narrow scope of the mere examination of jokes. It also encompasses the study of the redaction process-- how did one obtain the material in question as well as the editors who compiled the material. It is possible to learn as much, if not more, about the individual agendas of the editors as one can learn about the society from the jokes themselves. The reason for this is not too complicated. The jokes, which were examined in this thesis, were not taken from a 19th century, Eastern European text. They were extrapolated from Alter Druyanov's three volume collection entitled Sefer Habedicha vehachiddud, an extensive collection of Jewish humor dating back to the late nineteenth century but compiled during a twelve year period during the 1920's and 1930's first in Germany and later in Palestine.

One of Druyanov's goals while compiling this anthology was to provide social researchers with a body of material.<sup>1</sup> He approached this light-hearted material with the serious pedantry which characterized his own writing. He must have wanted people to enjoy this collection. Yet, Druyanov hardly would have been suited for this

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<sup>1</sup>Alter Druynaov, Sefer Habedicha vehachiddud, volume #1, Tel Aviv, 1936, page xiv.

task, his friends portrayed him as a serious person without a sense of humor.<sup>1</sup> Rather, he intended to capture the wide scope of folk humor-- from the complicated Talmudic witticisms to the simple and often vulgar jokes of the common people.

However committed Druyanov was to preserving the nature of Jewish folk humor, he was still a literary editor by trade. He wrote in a beautiful and sophisticated Hebrew style, hardly the type of language utilized by simple people. His critics questioned the "folk"ness of his study because of the fact that he put such fancy language into the mouths of commoners. It was highly unlikely that they spoke so eloquently.<sup>3</sup>

Druyanov was an editor and literary publicist who made a career out of writing in a flowery style as well as commenting on the society in which he lived. Since he did not live in a societal vacuum, he had many different agendas in mind while compiling this anthology. He was fascinated by folklore, preservation of the Jewish people as they proceeded to develop a national identity. He was a literary publicist who was found of applying general European criticism to Jewish literature. For one to understand these concerns as well as his other agendas, it is important to understand the world

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<sup>1</sup>Abraham Kariv, *Lyvunim*, Hebrew Writers and Dvir Co, Tel Aviv, 1950, page 240.

<sup>3</sup> Eliezer Steinman, *Bema'agal HaDorot*, Dvir Co, Tel Aviv, 1944 page 218.



of Druyanov-- its societal stratification, its culture, its nationalistic desires, and most importantly, the development of the trend towards the literary style of criticism.

The post-Haskalah period of the late nineteenth century and early 20th century was a period of prolific productivity in the literary fields of fiction and poetry. It was the period when literary giants emerged within Jewish society-- Sholom Aleichem, Bialik and I.L. Peretz, to name a few. It was also a period of great productivity in the field of literary essays and criticism. The reasons for such an extensive and intensive activity in this branch of literature are not far to seek. It was primarily due to the national idea in Jewish life, which modified the aims and functions of Hebrew literature in the eyes of both writers and readers.<sup>4</sup> According to Meyer Waxman, the function of literature of the late nineteenth century was not merely to provide a means for increasing enlightenment among Jews, but it was regarded as an important creation of the national spirit, a key factor in the Zionist dream of revival.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, literature had to broaden its scope in order to be a necessary component of this national concept.

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<sup>4</sup> Meyer Waxman, A History of Jewish Literature, volume #4 part one, Thomas Yoseloff, New York, 1960, page 339.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

The nationalist tendency did not spontaneously appear in Jewish society. It was nurtured through a period of enlightenment which began in western Europe in the early part of the nineteenth century and progressed eastward. The abundant presence of numerous literary essays and criticism are tangible indications of the infusion of secular criticism and techniques into the Jewish literary world. Without the development of the process of critical thinking, the important Jewish essayists of the late 19th and early 20th century [such as Peretz Smoleskin, Nahum Sokolov as well as the minor figures such as Alter Druyanov] would not have possessed the refined tools to express their views upon all aspects of Jewish and general life. Prior to this period, many of these subjects were considered outside the purview of Hebrew literary activity.<sup>6</sup>

The boundaries of Jewish literature expanded beyond the limited religious horizons of the past. In addition to developments in Halachic interpretations and the critical study of midrash, non-religious writers found audiences thirsty for essays on subjects of a general nature: the economic, social, artistic and intellectual phases of life. Simultaneously, the past life of the Jewish people as well as the contemporary problems of humanity were also given attention and the interest in history which was always an important feature in

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<sup>6</sup> Elliot Oring, "The People of the Joke: On the Conceptualization of Jewish", Western Folklore, volume #42, 1983, page 267.



Hebrew Literature became intensified and deepened. There arose then numerous essayists who strove to create a literature which would not only satisfy the Jew as a Jew but as a rational thinking man as well.

There was an increase in the demand for essays on these subjects and the demand called for a supply. During the late 19th century and early part of the 20th, numerous periodicals, journals and anthologies of essays appeared. Yet, due to the difficult economic conditions of the time, many of these publications had a very short life span. Many only published 2 or 3 issues. This was the fate of many of the publications that Druyanov served as editor or publicist.

It is important to note however, that the economic failure of many of these publications was not the aspect of this era which should be remembered. Its presence alone signified the numerous changes in the Jewish world which made the development of modern Hebrew literature possible. These changes brought about social problems which caused the creation of a body to serve as the forum for analysis and intense discussion. Chief among these problems were those of economic improvements of the a majority of the Jewish populous in Eastern Europe and adjusting Jewish life to modern conditions of the newly emancipated Jewish world. There were also the social trends of Jewish migration not only to new countries, but in particular the colonization of Palestine. These problems called forth an extensive publicistic literature which found expression in

articles and essays published in various periodicals. No longer was the emphasis placed, as in the earlier Haskalah period, upon introducing changes in Jewish life so as to bring more in agreement with the general life by increased secular education.<sup>7</sup> That was taken care of by itself. The attention was now centered upon the question of retaining the integrity of Judaism in the midst of the appearance of general culture.<sup>8</sup> Debates raged as to the extent and the way the infusion of general culture was occurring in Jewish life. The question of education appeared with the aspect of intensifying its Jewishness as well as nationalizing it. The general culture's trend towards national identity for ethnic groups began to fuse with one's Jewish identity.

Many of the writers of this period were influenced greatly by the milieu of general culture. These influences were evident in the literature. Peretz Smolenskin was trained within the German milieu, while the influences of Russian culture were evident in the writings of men such as Sokolov and Bialik. [Bialik even translated the classic Spanish epic of Don Quiote into Hebrew, based on the Russian version.] The influx of general literary style lead to rise of Hebrew literature to a higher level, to that of a leading expression of Jewish

<sup>7</sup> Meyer Waxman, A History of Jewish Literature, volume #4 part one, page 339.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

spirit. As more writers were trained in the ways and methods of European literature, higher standards were placed on the Jewish fiction and poetry which was appearing. New subject areas were also appearing, the new writers began to discuss and analyze the principles of fiction and poetic composition as well as drawing attention to the authors, by composing biographies and assessments of their literary contributions.<sup>9</sup>

Alter Druyanov is an example of a writer who was a product of these literary changes. Born during the period of the Haskalah in 1870, Druyanov's literary career reflected the developments within the Jewish literary world. His writings were infused not only with general European literary techniques but also with a strong nationalistic identity, which developed into his commitment to the Zionist movement. He was an editor and publicist with several periodicals, such as *Ha-Olam*, the official organ of the World Zionist Organization; *Reshumot*, a periodical devoted to the study of Jewish folklore. He was a frequent contributor to the Hebrew press. He wrote essays for *Mi-Mizrach umiMa'arav* and *Hashiloach*.

Druyanov was an example of the type of writer who developed under the abnormal conditions of Jewish literature. Jewish literature reflected the world of a minority scattered throughout many different lands and cultures. It did not reflect the nurturing of any

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

one specific cultural influence. Writers knew only the specific cultural milieu in the area in which they were raised and educated. Secular education and travel was very expensive, reserved for the affluent members of the Jewish society. A few writers had the ability to have access to both the Russian and German milieu. Druyanov was one of them. He was educated in both the Jewish world and the secular world as well as the Russian culture and German culture. He was born to a wealthy family in Druyat, within the district of Vilna. He studied at the the Volozhin yeshivah under the guidance of Rabbi A. Y. Brochov, who encouraged him to receive a broader education. Druyanov continued his education in Breslau, Germany-- a city that was known for its modern Jewish intellectual development.

Druyanov did not dedicate his life to writing until later on because of the lack of economic stability in the literary profession.<sup>10</sup> First, he pursued a career in the family business. He moved to Odessa and worked as a merchant/trader for seven years between 1892 and 1899. Yet, he showed interest in writing. It was when Druyanov lived in Odessa that he began associating with Hebrew writers and began writing essays of a Zionist nature. His first essay, entitled "*Ha-Mehtz* ", was published in 1890 under the pen name "Alef, Beit, Gimel, Dalet". Once his financial future was relatively

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<sup>10</sup> Eliezer Steinman, *Bema'agal HaDorot* , Dvir Co, Tel Aviv, 1944 page 218.



secure, he dedicated his life to the development of the Jewish nation.<sup>11</sup> In 1899, he became the secretary of the "Committee for the Settlement of Eretz Yisrael" in Odessa replacing Zalman Ofstein.

Druyanov spent the next 20 years moving between Israel and Europe. In 1903, he moved to Israel and helped in the establishment of the *Irgun Kolel shel Ha-Yihshuv veHa-Morim*. In 1905, he returned to Vilna and worked at establishing the Russian Zionist Central Foundation. In 1906, he returned to Haifa and worked as a bookkeeper for the periodical *'Atid*. In 1909, he started work as the editor of the weekly Zionist newspaper *Ha-Olam*.

It was through his work at *Ha-Olam* that Druyanov established himself as an important literary voice. During his five year tenure as editor, which ended in 1914 with the outbreak of World War I, Druyanov served as the person who guided the policy of the official Zionist weekly as well as contributing much towards the clarification of the national view on Jewish life and its problems.<sup>12</sup> He was personally responsible for the literary rise of *Ha-Olam*. He encouraged writers and scholars to contribute their best to his weekly and he searched for new literary talents.<sup>13</sup> However, due to

<sup>11</sup> M. Glickson, *Katav*, volume 2: People in science and literature, Dvir Co. Ltd., Tel Aviv, 1941, page 247.

<sup>12</sup> Meyer Waxman, *A History of Jewish Literature*, volume #4 part one, page 417.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid*, page 418.



this very position, his activity expressed itself more in publicistic articles than in essay writing, for during the years of his editorship he wrote the weekly editorials. These were written with ability and with a keen understanding of the complicated problems of Jewish life, and at the time, exerted considerable influence upon both readers and writers.<sup>14</sup> His articles' importance, however, was mostly historical-- for they reflected both the leading events in Jewish life during the time and the attitude of the intellectual stratum in Jewry towards the problems and their proposed solutions.

His publicistic and editorial work did not exhaust his literary activity. His most important literary compilations were written after his work with *Ha-Olam* --Writings on the History of Chibbat Tzion and the Settlement of Palestine and Sefer HaBedicha veHachadud. Both of these collections were compiled in Europe. The three volume Writings on the History of Chibbat Tzion and the Settlement of Palestine was published in 1919. Sefer HaBedicha veHachadud had several editions, the first was published in 1922 in Palestine, though passion for collecting jokes and witticisms started in Germany.

Though he moved to Palestine in 1921 with a collection of writers headed by Bialik, his failing health caused him to return to Germany for medical treatment. He was forced to leave his position

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<sup>14</sup> Meyer Waxman, A History of Jewish Literature, volume #4 part one, page 417 and

Eliezer Steinman, Bema'agal HaDorot, Dvir Co, Tel Aviv, 1944 page 218.

as head of the publishing house *Dvir* and to distance himself from the formation of *'Omanut* in order to receive medical treatment. Druyanov suffered from chronic kidney and heart ailments. Sudden attacks of these ailments often left him debilitated and in severe pain. It was during his stay at a sanatorium in Dresden that Druyanov admitted finding comfort for his discomfort through the reading of jokes:

My doctor prohibited my study of books and permitted me only light reading which did not require much thought. One of my friends who frequently visited me in Dresden was Professor August Wuensche, who brought me the collection of Dessauer and Wuensche called "Der Juedischer Humorist" [editor's note: published in 1899 in Budapest] This beautiful collection shortened many boring hours from these idle days. Not only because of this do I remember this collection so fondly. I am grateful for much more than that. From the onwards, I dedicated myself to find and jot down in my notebooks every Jewish and witticism which I was able to obtain.<sup>15</sup>

This passion for Jewish humor was apart of Druyanov's life until his death in 1938. His friend Eliezer Steinman claimed that it was his love for Jewish humor that eased his physical pain in the latter part of his life.<sup>16</sup> He was extremely proud of his introduction to this collection.<sup>17</sup> Among those who knew him, Druyanov's

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<sup>15</sup> Alter Druyanov, *Sefer HaBedicha vehachiddud*, volume #1, Tel Aviv, 1936, page ix.

<sup>16</sup> Eliezer Steinman, *Bema'agal HaDorot*, Dvir Co, Tel Aviv, 1944 page 217.

<sup>17</sup> Glickson, *Kitve*, volume 2: *People in scholarship and literature*, Dvir Co. Ltd., Tel Aviv, 1941, page 253.

satisfaction with this collection as a whole was somewhat surprising as well as his passion for this type of literature. Druyanov had the reputation of being a serious man who was a perfection as an editor and a writer. He never admitted to being completely satisfied with anyone's work, especially his own.<sup>18</sup>

His dedication to the study of Jewish humor puzzled many of his friends and associates. One of Druyanov's critics, Abraham Kariv, commented that it was ironic that such a serious man who was so finicky and picky would collect jokes, often vulgar ones. Kariv questioned whether jokes had found their way into the hands of the right person or whether they had strayed into the hands of man who, on the surface, appeared to have no sense a humor.<sup>19</sup> Yet, in my view, Druyanov's goal was not to compose a humorous text; it was to produce a scientific text. Kariv admitted that Druyanov was a person who could handle such a task. He claimed that Druyanov did not deal haphazardly with material. There was a great deal of skill in all his actions. He was not casual in his approach to the material. He spent many years compiling the material and editing into its final form. Yet, Druyanov was removed from his research because he had no

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Abraham Kariv, *Lyyunim*, Hebrew Writers and Dvir Co, Tel Aviv, 1950, page 126.

connection to the material because of his serious nature. He organized humor without a smile as if he was a "trained monkey".<sup>20</sup>

Druyanov's critics challenged his assumption that the presence of humor was a strength. They questioned his assumption that humor gave a people a sense of superiority over their adversaries.<sup>21</sup> Yehashua Ovsay wrote that jokes were as dangerous as they were beneficial. They had the potential to truly destroy an individual, while they could be an effective means of criticism, though it was a sneaky form of criticism at best. Ovsay, himself, would have preferred to receive pleasant direct criticism than being the brunt of a joke.<sup>22</sup> Ovsay questioned whether or not the Jewish joking quality should be a trait that the Jewish people flaunted before the non-Jewish world.<sup>23</sup> Other critics, such as Abraham Kariv, elaborated on Ovsay's concern. Kariv claimed that jokes were "the illegitimate daughter of our cleverness" and the Jews should remember what the

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Druyanov's attitude toward humor see his essay "The Nature of the Comic" in An Anthology of Hebrew Essays, Institution of Hebrew Literature and Massada Publishers, Tel Aviv, 1966 page 467 as well as Alter Druyanov's Yalkut Masot, pages 111-112. For further comments on the criticism, see Abraham Kariv, Iyyunim, Hebrew Writers and Dvir Co, Tel Aviv, 1950, page 241 and Yehashua Ovsay, Maamrim veReshimot, Shulsinger Brothers, New York, 1946 page 243.

<sup>22</sup> Yehashua Ovsay, Maamrim veReshimot, Shulsinger Brothers, New York, 1946 page 243.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.



Psalmists said about the use of humor, when they warned "Don't join with light hearted ones".<sup>24</sup> Kariv saw humor as a people's weakness and he believed that jokes provided no inspiration for a people, they simply were a source of pleasure.<sup>25</sup> It is important that note, however, that Kariv was well-known for his intemperate critique of the satirist Mendle Mokker Sefarim and that his opinion of Druyanov is part of his reservations with regard to Jewish humor in general.

Kariv questioned the value of Druyanov's scholarship as well. He claimed that Druyanov's collection of Jewish humor was unusable, "it was bound to stay on a book shelf collecting dust."<sup>26</sup> According to Kariv, it could not be used for sociological research because Druyanov didn't use the language of the people. Druyanov's literary Hebrew and style was too flowery and therefore, he didn't capture the true essence of the people. As a result, part of the sociological value was lost.<sup>27</sup>

Many of Druyanov's friends portrayed a different image of the man who spent most of his adult life dedicated to the preservation of

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<sup>24</sup> Abraham Kariv, *Iyyunim*, Hebrew Writers and Dvir Co, Tel Aviv, 1950, page 243.

<sup>25</sup> Abraham Kariv, *Iyyunim*, Hebrew Writers and Dvir Co, Tel Aviv, 1950, page 241.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

Jewish folklore and humor. Both Steinman and Glickson described the serious, often angry side of Druyanov as only one side of him. There was another side which many people didn't see. He only pretended to be angry with the world. He was actually good hearted and he was just putting up a false front of being so serious. He was a bit of an intellectual snob, but that too was just an act.<sup>28</sup> Both Steinman and Glickson agreed that Druyanov's contribution to the preservation of the folklore and humor of the Jews was very successful. After Druyanov's funeral, Eliezer Steinman wrote:

Druyanov was not a master of style alone. He collected piles of Hebrew and Yiddish folklore with a tremendous amount of energy. He collected with a great care. He labored at great length over the treasures of people: the way of speaking, expressions, jokes and historical events. He collected and redacted with a sense of love for the material. In his notebooks, he jotted down [*reshimot*], and in *Reshumot*, he collected drops of our tears and drops of the dew of a national revival. He was an historian of the sorrows of Israel and the buds of their revival.<sup>29</sup>

Druyanov's friends and critics both agreed that Druyanov made a degree of progress in the general understanding of the nature of humor. However, they disagreed over how much of a contribution Druyanov made. Ovsay stated that Druyanov's introduction to his

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<sup>28</sup> Eliezer Steinman, *Bema'agal HaDorot*, Dvir Co, Tel Aviv, 1944 page 218 and Glickson, *Katvay* :volume 2-- People in Science and Literature, page 247.

<sup>29</sup> Eliezer Steinman, *Bema'agal HaDorot*, Dvir Co, Tel Aviv, 1944 page 217-218. Steinman's quote contains a Hebrew pun on the historical periodical *Reshumot*. In Hebrew, to jot down is a similar word--*reshimot*.

Sefer HaBedicha vehachiddud was scientific in its nature and tackled the question why jokes were funny.<sup>30</sup> He disagreed with Druyanov as to the amount of Jewish humor which could be on the Talmud. Ovsay claimed that Druyanov's introduction and collection gave an over abundant amount of Talmudic jokes and gave too much credit to the Talmudic style of Jewish humor.

Both Ovsay and Kariv were opposed to the inclusion of vulgar jokes. They felt that these types of jokes should have been excluded. Yet, Druyanov wanted to capture the essence of the Jewish folk humor. He could not remain faithful to that goal if he omitted jokes that he felt were vulgar in nature. Druyanov, himself, voiced his objection to other collections of Jewish humor because of the editors heavy hand in selecting the jokes that were to be included.<sup>32</sup>

In my opinion, Druyanov's collection captures not only the humor of European Jewry, his collection preserved the sociological structure of the Jewish society. However, the problem with this type of collection is twofold: first of all, whether the jokes are Jewish in nature and second, what distinctions were evident in the jokes that should the different social-intellectual stratum as well the distinctions between different geographic locals. Druyanov answered

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<sup>30</sup> Yehoshua Ovsay, Maamarim veReshimot, Shulsinger Brothers, New York, 1946 page 243.

<sup>32</sup> Alter Druyanaov, Sefer HaBedicha vehachiddud, volume #1, Tel Aviv, 1936, page x.

the first problem by stating that since the jokes were present in the Jewish society, they were a part of the Jewish people.<sup>33</sup> The validity of this point has been debated by scholars since the collection appeared.

As for my concern about identifying specific regional locations for the jokes and identifying the period when these jokes were popular, Druyanov did not mention in his introduction. It is important to remember that the Druyanov collection of Jewish jokes and witticisms spans the entire the entire spectrum of Jewish society-- from East European Jewry to German Jewry to early Israeli humor to references about the American Jewish experience. Druyanov did not distinguish between the experiences of Jewish communities within different cultural milieus. The material was lumped together under specific subject headings, there were no distinctions made regarding the origins or local of the joke. The researchers, for whom Druyanov compiled this collection, have a difficult task of desyphering the material and applying it to a study of Jewish material. After examining the Druyanov collection, this material did provide me with additional insights into the socio-cultural world of the Jewish community that were not readily available in historical narratives.

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid, page xii.



Though, Druyanov's description of his editorial methods raised a few skeptical concerns. Druyanov wrote with an authoratative style-- a style that was needed by editors and publicits. He also wrote with a great deal of self-confidence of an expert. Yet, there are times when Druyanov fell victim to his own methods. One one hand, Druyanov condemned his fellow writers for being attempting to make every joke that they obtained part of Jewish literature as well as adding too much of the editor's own persoanlity into the material:

Moreover, one cannot rely on the collections of 'Jewish jokes' which have multiplied over the years, both in Yiddish and Hebrew. The compilers of these collections customarily 'judaized' every joke that came into their hands: they threw a Jewish name into it, and it became 'Jewish' against its will.<sup>34</sup>

Yet, on the other hand Druyanov stated:

Only after time, did my ear learn how to pick out these [non-Jewish] jokes and witticisms-- whether by their sharp-witted logic and argumentation, by their biting sarcasm, or by different subtle signs, which the ear of an expert is able to discern.<sup>35</sup>

One may suspect that Druyanov was guilty of the same offense with which he charged the other compilers of Jewish humor. His criterium for selecting material was not subjective, but based on his own standard of what was Jewish humor which he outlined in great

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid, page ix

detail. He believed that humor reflected the psychological aspects or components of the Jewish people.

Druyanov did admit that there were a handful of jokes, a few dozen at the most, whose "Jewishness" were debatable. However, Druyanov asked that the reader trust his judgement because he spent years researching the nature of humor and considered himself an expert with an ear for distinguishing between Jewish jokes and jokes that have become "judaized." Such an explanation did not satisfy researchers, who approached the material with scientific methodologies. They immediately questioned the validity of the jokes: Did Druyanov present a bias view of Jewish humor by placing himself as the expert without presenting to the reader any detailed criteria of what Jewish humor was to him and how he selected what material went in to the collection and which was omitted?

Yet, the material was never intended to be a primary source that described life in the Jewish cultural community. Druyanov intended for the collection to aid researchers in their pursuit of understanding Jewish life in the past as it was transformed from the shtetl to a nation. If a joke was told among the common people, the collection reflected the essence of humor in the purest form he knew-- establish a general perspective of Jewish humor and retell the jokes that fit into it, that the editor did not find most of the jokes funny. It was only important that the jokes that were popular

among the common folk-- the people who told the jokes, who heard the jokes and laughed at the jokes.

Whatever the sociological value of the jokes within Druyanov's collection, one must examine the collection as a whole entity with special emphasis not only on the jokes themselves but on how the anthology was compiled. This collection reflected more than just the humor of its day; it was an example of the literary developments of its time. Its presence was a symbol of the advancements in Jewish literary style since the Haskalah. It provided another form of a national literature in the days when the Jewish people were struggling to become a nation.

Chapter 4:  
A Translation to the Introduction to  
Sefer Habedicha vehachiddud



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The following chapter is a literal translation of Alter Druyanov's introduction to the three volume set entitled Sefer Habedicha vehachiddud, published in 1935.

Sefer Habedicha veHachiddud is the product of collecting and editing that has taken me a considerable amount of time over an extended period. 5.

Thirteen years ago, I was institutionalized in the sanatorium near Dresden. My doctor prohibited my study of books and permitted me only light reading which did not require much thought. One of my friends who frequented Dresden to visit Professor August Wuensche, brought me the collection of Dessaur-Wuensche called "Der Juedischer Humorist". This beautiful collection shortened many boring hours from these idle days. Not only because of this do I remember this collection so fondly. I am grateful for much more than that. From then onwards, I dedicated myself to find and jot down in my notebooks every Jewish joke and witticism which I was able to obtain. In this way, the material was collected, and most of it has gone into my collection, which I now present before the readers.

This work of collecting became something I liked to do not only because the jokes were amusing [let this quality of humor also be noted], but rather because I immediately saw that folk humor had

the ability to serve as a key to several 'soul secrets' [i.e. psychological aspects or components] of a people. Other keys can not probe these secrets. I do not mean to say that this truth was immediately revealed to me in all its range and depth. I still needed to do a great deal of research, in order for me to comprehend that about which, I may say, I originally had only a vague feeling, an intuitive insight. But even the first insights were sufficient to make me enjoy collecting our folk humor. It also became clear to me that anyone committed to the study of "a people's psyche" [i.e. folklore] and to the understanding of the peoples' spirit would also need this material.

However, if I knew clearly why the very act of collecting was important to me. I had many difficulties-- particularly at first -- with regard to identifying the "Jewishness" of several of these jokes. It has been said that "a cat and a joke do not have an owner". In our anthology of humor, nevertheless, there are entire categories of jokes, whose "Jewishness" is certain: a) Jokes dealing with "midrash-lashon" [play on language], be it a play on the Hebrew language or the Yiddish language; b) Jokes that bear the earmark of Jewish folkways. We may add to these two distinctive types a third category: jokes whose signs of "Jewishness" are not intrinsically prominent, but are well-known by the Jewish people. About these it can be said: since these jokes are well-known and widely told, they therefore conform to the spirit of the people and

belong to them. Even if they did not evolve from within our milieu, one can be sure that they became Jewish in our milieu and became ours. They follow the pattern of freely circulating proverbs and maxims which each nation appropriates from the common stockpile of sayings", as it were, and makes these sayings its own by imbuing these with its own spirit and formulation. But there also came into my possession -- whether through books or through storytellers-- Jewish jokes and witticisms which do not fit into the aforementioned three categories. In the beginning of my research, I had a great deal of difficulty deciding whether to include these jokes or to exclude them. I did not have a clear criterion for making these decisions. Moreover, one cannot rely on the collections of "Jewish jokes" which have multiplied in recent years, both in Yiddish and in other languages. The compilers of these collections customarily "judaized" every joke that came into their hands: they threw a Jewish name into it, and it became "Jewish" against its will. Only over time did my ear learn how to pick out these types of jokes and witticisms -- whether by their sharp-witted logic and argumentation [*Pilpul* ], by their biting sarcasm, or by different subtle signs, which the ear of an expert is able to discern. It seems to me-- and I am able to say this with complete certainty: among the one thousand four hundred jokes and witticisms included in my book, one cannot find more than a few dozen about which one can cast doubt as to whether or not they are ours.

All of this discussion has been with regard to the process of accumulating of material. Now I turn to a discussion of the editing process. At first, I, too, followed the conventional assumption that the nucleus of our folk humor tends to lie in the joke. Like all word jokes, it requires the encasement of that language in which it was created. Therefore, since the majority of our folk humor had been created, heretofore, in the Yiddish language, it seemed to me that from the vantage-point of language, I would have to give the collected material a Yiddish form. But the more the material increased in my notebooks, the more it became clear to me beyond any doubt that the assumption about the Jewish joke's "natural affinity" for the Yiddish language was fundamentally erroneous. I observed that our humor is unique: a great and decisive majority of the jokes are not slaves to the language in which they were created. I also observed that even if there are a few of the jokes and witticisms in our anthology in which the dominant influence of the Yiddish language is indeed overwhelming and it is impossible to free the jokes from this dominance, we still have, at the very least, an equal number of jokes and witticisms that rely upon the use of the Hebrew language and which are impossible to understand without the Hebrew language component. Needless to say, when I arrived at this perspective, it became clear to me that my material had to be presented in Hebrew.

Then the question of style confronted me.



Folk humor is secular in its nature, because it deals with everyday matters--the home, the street, and the market place -- which a person "wades through daily." Nonetheless, its mode of locution is not vulgar; it is not uttered as if it were completely unadorned or unrefined. On the contrary, the entire essence of the joke is that it comes in order to forge a unique groove into the psyche of the one who hears it and, of necessity, it must utilize locutions which have undergone a prior refining process; which, at the very least, intimate the beginnings of literature and art. This means that from the vantage-point of the joke's style, it stands on the borderline between street-language and literary language-- i.e., between vulgar and artistic linguistic stylization. Logically, it can be assumed, however, that collections of folk humor and witticisms, if they are properly reworked and edited, are likely to serve as a source of enrichment for any language and, in particular, for a language which aspires to transform itself from a purely literary language into a discourse of common use. Equally, jokes of the narrow and limited boundaries of a literary language are extended by virtue of the fact that the jokes capture the conversational components of people at home, in the street, and in the marketplace. They capture this conversational component, however, not in its crude form, but rather through a certain elevation of its quality. Because of this, it made sense to me to utilize a style close to the style of the *Aggadah* because the latter,

too, is essentially a folk style which always sought the conducive linguistic form through which all of the people-- not only the select few-- could speak in a way that they could "hear themselves." But because our humor is suffused with sophisticated logic [*pilpul*], I felt the need to add in the appropriate places some phrases drawn from the Talmudic style of argumentation. How successful I was in this I do not know.

Here, I must make one additional comment. There are those who think that the renaissance of the Hebrew language will ultimately cast out piece by piece, the Aramaic loan words-- especially the grammatical patterns--which have found their way into the language (of course, except from these, which already have become entrenched) and replace them with Hebrew expressions and forms. In part I agree with this, but I, nevertheless, I did not avoid using Aramaic expressions and grammatical forms which have become commonplace in our Talmudic literature. In the last analysis, the joke is a folk creation and it cannot give up that unique folk flavor. Moreover, I was unable to find a Hebrew equivalent to replace these expressions and forms, which could approximate the same degree of folk nuance and flavor.

In the presentation of the jokes and witticisms, I tried my best to keep to the instructions of Polonius who stated that brevity is the soul of wit [Hamlet Act II, scene 2]. This talkative person gave wise counsel. In the introduction, it will be seen that if the true

intent of the joke is to expose, its assumed pose is one of concealment. From this it follows that every superfluous illustration takes away from the joke. For this reason, the readers will find in my anthology jokes which have only two or three lines. I was afraid that one extra line would ruin the flavor of the jokes. I intended to transmit only the body of the joke, namely, its humorous bite [or its sharp "punchline"]; the rest of its "adornments" which transform the joke into an anecdote are not my concern. Only when I had a joke which in its very essence was an anecdote [of these there are many in our anthology], I added on these necessary embellishments, but I was careful as much as possible not to be overly free even here.

I have divided my collection into 25 chapters, which embrace our way of life in all its aspects. But I must admit that in truth, it is impossible to define strict rules in this matter. There are more than a few which would have fit into almost all of the sections. It was equally impossible to determine by any absolute standard what should precede and what should follow in each section. Here it was a matter of discretion, and not everyone will agree with my judgment.

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These are the words, which I wrote as a preface to the first Sefer Habedicha vehachiddud, was created in the winter of 1922..

This book was published by my "*Omanut*" publishers, and it is my pleasant obligation to mention them with thanks and felicitations. Thirteen years ago, an anthology of Jewish jokes was virtually an entirely new concept in Hebrew literature. There prevailed a misleading assumption that our jokes were integrally connected to the Yiddish language, and that it was impossible to transmit these witticisms in any other language-- especially not in Hebrew, a language which was suspect as to whether it was "alive or dead," and which, in the view of many individuals of lesser faith, was utterly dead. There was therefore room to fear that the collection would not be successful that it would not find readers, and that it would be consigned to waste away, being useless. Nonetheless, "*Omanut*" paid no attention to these fears and published it and in a particularly beautiful format and deluxe edition. After only a short time it became clear that these fears were for naught. The jokes written in Hebrew found their audience, and after a few years the anthology became virtually a collector's item. Moreover, after my anthology, several other Hebrew joke anthologies appeared, and all of them together debunked the myth that Hebrew is not a fitting medium for telling jokes properly.

For these thirteen years, I have been engaged in the joke profession. These I have selected from among many specialized areas, which have been designated as a whole as "folk creativity." I am not off target in saying that I have not labored in vain. The first



volume contained 653 jokes, and I have another 750 jokes for a second volume; in the present volume there are 1021 jokes (including 500 jokes from that earlier edition, almost all of which have been stylistically emended) I have another two thousand left for a second and third volume, which hopefully, will appear soon. I am obliged to emphasize that had I not lived in *Eretz Yisrael* for the past 14 years, I would have lacked a great portion of the material. We in the land of Israel have been fortunate to have had an ingathering of the exiles, and more than 120 people who reside in the land, have provided me with jokes and witticisms now current among the people of various lands of the Diaspora. But not only from storytellers alone did I collect the material, but perhaps even more so, from books. The third volume contains a detailed list of the books and literary resources, to which I am indebted for the material which has come into my hands.

In the process I have followed for the past 22 years, I have found jokes of other people as well. Those that appeared interesting to me, I put down in my notebook. Slowly they have accumulated until the point where they deserve their own volume, which I am entitling: "An Anthology of World Humor". I have already published a small sampling of it in newspapers and I will publish all of it as the fourth volume of *Sefer Habediha vehachiddud* [editor's note: this volume did not appear].

I must state that the more I examined and compared our humor with theirs [i.e. non-Jewish humor], the more I realized that the field of creativity drew upon the other. I admit that had I now written what I wrote thirteen years ago, that "the ear of an expert is able to perceive subtle signs of Jewish humor and witticism as well as the ability to distinguish our humor from the humor in their anthologies," then I would have chosen my words more carefully.

The by-product of my comparison of our humor to their humor are the endnotes of this and the end of the next two volumes. Let me preface this by saying that these notes are only for comparison, and they should not at all be considered for any serious scholarly research. It suffices me that scholars will find material in them for their own research.

I hope that there will be a fifth volume in my series which should be the introduction or, more precisely, the introductions. Every person learns more over the years and I am no exception. The introduction, was written 13 years ago, has expanded and branched out. Its chapters have expanded, as well, as new topics have been added. These new additions are going to be included in the future in the fifth volume of Sefer Habedicha. [editor's note: this volume has never appeared as well.]

One last final comment.

The first principle of humor is the way the joke is told. One additional word and the joke is completely ruined. One missing word

and the joke loses its soul. I must admit that I had difficulty fulfilling this principle and I haven't refined my presentation because of this. I believe the process of adding extra words and subtracting to be superfluous. My experience has taught me that humor cannot be comprehended at one time: it is the obligation of the reader to examine it again and again in order to properly understand it. At a single glance, one cannot perceive all of its flaws. Excessive and hasty writing has given Hebrew prose, generally, a somber form and has kept it indistinctive in its form, so that one cannot even recognize the outline of limbs or nuances of color. In order to avoid that error, I had to keep my book with me a bit longer and edit it until the "thorns" were removed. But the writer's impulse, in particular a writer who has aged greatly and whose days are gradually sinking, forces him to want to see his words not only in manuscript, but in published form as well. I do not know if this [writer's impulse] is part of the *yetzer hatov* or the *yetzer harah* but it is very hard to conquer. That impulse compels me, as well, to stop writing and editing before I have removed all the thorns. May it be God's will that my old age will atone for my shortcomings.

**Chapter 5:**  
**The Jewish World As Seen Through**  
**The Eyes of Jewish Humor**



For several hundred years, there was an established Jewish community, which flourished in eastern Europe. Bound together by their connection to Judaism, a common language, and culture, the Jews of eastern Europe were a kind of nation without recognized nationhood. It was within this community context that we begin to examine the socio-cultural life of the Jews-- a people who resided in countries without being permitted to become citizens; never being integrated into the general mainstream of the secular society. It was a fair assumption to make that they were unwelcome guests in most of the countries where they lived. Since they could not depend on the greater secular society to provide for their cultural needs, they developed their socio-cultural institutions such as the synagogue and schools, theater and literature. The Jewish community was a complex society, about as complex as that of a nation-state. Their community was a nation without borders, culturally distinct from the non-Jewish world which surrounded them.

The cultural life of the eastern European Jews was not stagnant by any means. As I mentioned in the previous chapter, the literary life of the Jews was flourishing. Yet, eastern European Jewish society was far from a utopian society. It contained different social groups which often competed within the community to create social strife [though there were more conflicts which stemmed from being Jewish

in a non-Jewish world]. It contained elements that were ignorant, provincial, and even corrupt. One of the motivating forces behind the communal and political movements that sprang up during the last two decades of the 19th century was to erase the social inadequacies that were present in the Jewish society-- social isolation, poverty, and violence in the form of sporadic pogroms. These factors were present in the rich literature of the time as well as represented in the dark, biting sarcasm of the humor of the period.

The Jewish world did not divide itself into sharply defined and antagonistic classes until the social upheaval of the period of the *Haskalah* in the mid-19th century when movement and general education became accessible to the Jewish community. By the 1880's, when these cultural doors were shut after the assassination of Czar Alexander II in 1881, some Jews had settled in larger cities, such as Warsaw, Kiev, Odessa, and Lodz; within the next few decades the number of Jews moving from the *shtetl* to urban concentrations increased sharply. The beginnings of a Jewish proletariat started to appear in cities. Yet, in the *shtetl*, one could hardly speak of rival socio-economic classes, since there was no means of mass production nor a working class proletariat. In the social strata of the *shtetl*, there were two classes, those who had something and those who had nothing. [Irving Howe described this as the comfortably poor and

the hopelessly poor, who were jealous of their richer neighbors.]<sup>1</sup> Had the pressures of the outside world been removed, then the economic conflicts between these two groups would have been a major source of strife. As it was, the outside world was filled with so many problems that internal strife was muffled. It was, however, detectable in the words of the common folk, as present in their humor.

The shtetl was the center of a backward economic economy where Jews, who were prohibited from land ownership, had to live by trading, artisanship, and/or farming on rented land. Though the social classes were not a distinct factor in the shtetl life, it was not a democratic community. Distinctions of caste were maintained through learning, economic position and the concept of *yiches*, one's family status and pride.

Gross misperceptions exist about the nature of the shtetl. The passage of time has created an illusion of what life was like in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. For many, the perceptions of shtetl are seen through the preservation of the folklore of the time--the stories of Sholom Aleichem, and I.L. Peretz; the mystical folklore about the Chasidic rebbes or, in the 20th century, as they are portrayed in the glorified film versions of Sholom Aleichem's famous

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<sup>1</sup>Irving Howe, The World of Our Fathers: The Journey of the East European Jews to America and the Life They found and Made, Simon and Schuster, New York, 1976, p. 8

character of Tevya the milkman in "Fiddler on the Roof," or in the movie of I.B. Singer's "Yentel". The folklore of the age had a tendency to paint the shtetl in vivid colors, though they might have distorted the historical facts. Professor Jerold Frakes stated that this distortion was one of the function of folklore-- to transcend the pain and suffering of reality and bring the reader to a level of dreams and hopes could possibly come to fruition.<sup>2</sup> Frakes claimed that folklore spoke in the terms of the age, but distorted reality in order to bring comfort and provide a form of entertainment.

The shtetl was a town. It was not a village-- there was another Yiddish word for that, a *dorf*. The shtetl was not a picturesque place. Some of them had cobbled streets, but most of them had dirt roads that turned muddy in the rain. Some had imposing structures such as synagogues, but most were too financially depressed to afford such elaborate building. Maurice Samuels described Sholom Aleichem's fictional town of Kasrielevky as:

a jumble of wooden houses clustered about a market-place.. as a crowded as a slum... The streets are as tortuous as a Talmudic argument. They are bent into question marks and folded into parentheses. They run into culs-de-sac like a theory arrested by a fact; they ooze off into lanes, alleys, back yards... (At the center is) the market-place, with its shops, booths, tables, stands, butchers' blocks. Hither come daily, except in the winter, the peasants and peasant women from many miles around, bringing their livestock and vegetables, their fish and hides, their wagonloads of grain, melons, parsley,

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<sup>2</sup> Jerold Frakes, The Politics of Interpretation, State University of New York Press, Albany, 1989, p. 47.



radishes and garlic. They buy, in exchange, the city produce which the Jews import, dry goods, hats, shoes, boots, lamps oil spades, mattocks, and shirts...<sup>3</sup>

} Locked into a backward economy, the Jews of eastern Europe continued to act and think primarily in pre-modern, pre-bourgeois terms. Economic concerns dominated the people's thoughts. They had to; the struggle for livelihood, putting food onto the table, obtain adequate clothing and shelter were the main concerns of the people. Yet, providing for one's self and family was never acknowledged as the primary reason for their existence.<sup>4</sup> Their connection to the sacred traditions provided a religious outlet and provided a theological meaning to their lives, which was obtained through the performance of mitzvot and study. The study of sacred texts brought the people closer to God and fostered their connection to the Messianic age, which would provide them with a sense of much-needed salvation from the anguish they were suffering in this world. Therefore, scholarship was honored as a way to transcend the difficulties of their life. How much a man knew determined a man's prestige, authority and societal position. Wealth was secondary. How much a man was worth was not as important as the amount of wisdom he possessed. This attitude was reflected in the humor:

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<sup>3</sup> Maurice Samuels, The World of Sholom Aleichem. Atheneum Publishers, New York, 1986, p. 26-27.

<sup>4</sup> Irving Howe, The World of Our Fathers: The Journey of the East European Jews to America and the Life They found and Made, Simon and Schuster, New York, 1976, p. 8

The people asked a wise man: "which is preferred-- wealth or wisdom?" The wise man replied: " wisdom is preferred." They said to him: "if that is so, why do the wise men knock on the doors of the rich and not the other way around?" The wise man replied: " There is no difficulty with this! The wise men know the value of wealth, but the wealthy do not know the value of wisdom."<sup>2</sup>

Theodor Reik called this type of humor a form of "jealous degradation", which was a common feature of Jewish humor.<sup>3</sup> In this type of joke, the narrator disparaged the values which he didn't have but wanted. He was envious of those did possess them. His rage, which was really focused on his own financial position, was vented against the affluent members of the society. By making fun of the things he didn't have, he asserted his own self-esteem. These jokes were popular among the common folk, who struggled to make a living. By telling this type of joke and by laughing at the joke, people demonstrated their superiority.<sup>4</sup>

As a communal cultural value, the amount of knowledge one had and how wise one was took precedence over one's financial status. As a result, the stereotype was developed that the wealthy elements of the society were not always the wisest members of the community. This attitude was present in the folk humor:

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<sup>2</sup> Alter Druyanov, *Sefer Habedicha vehachiddud* , volume #1, Tel Aviv, joke 213, p. 83.

<sup>3</sup> Theodor Reik, *Jewish Wit*, Gamut Press, New York, 1962.

<sup>4</sup> Alter Druyanov, "The Nature of the Comic", Institute for Hebrew Literature and Massada Publishers, Tel Aviv, 1966 p. 467.

They asked Rabbi Meir Fischals, the rabbi of Prague: "We see that the wealthy are envious of the wise and we see also that the wise are envious of the wealthy, whose envy is greater?" Rabbi Meir replied: "Certainly, the jealousy of the wealthy is greater because we see wise men who become wealthy, but never do we see wealthy men who become wise."<sup>5</sup>

or we see it visibly in this joke:

They sharply asked of a clever rabbi: "Why is it that the wealthy people prepare a donation for a poor cripple but not for a poor student?" The rabbi replied: "The judgement is unclear. It might be that every rich man is afraid that he might become a poor cripple, but he is not afraid that he might become a poor student."<sup>6</sup>

Though there was tension between the comfortably poor and the hopelessly poor, these sly comments and jokes were not said directly to the people who were the subjects of the jokes in order not to offend them. That would be a violation of Talmudic law.<sup>7</sup> It was the type of humor that was said in the presence of a small group at the most and said in an off-the cuff fashion. Other than a few jokes said in a sporadic manner, people demonstrated a great deal of respect to people with status. This was especially seen in the synagogue setting, the central gathering place for Jews in their community. The prestigious and important people of the community had reserved seats along the eastern wall of the synagogue, closest to

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<sup>5</sup> Alter Druyanov, Sefer Habedicha vehachiddud, volume #1, Tel Aviv, joke 214, p.82

<sup>6</sup> Alter Druyanov, Sefer Habedicha vehachiddud, volume #1, Tel Aviv, joke 215, p.83

<sup>7</sup> See Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Megillah 25b. For further explanation see chapter #1 of this thesis.

the direction which Jews faced when they prayed. There is a joke in the Druyanov collection which illustrates this point:

After the death of their father, two brothers fought over their inheritance of their father's seat along the eastern wall of the synagogue, next to the seat of Rebbe Chaim Moishe. One brother said that he should get the seat because he was a successful merchant and deserved the honor of the seat. The other brother said that he deserved the seat because he was a wise student and he deserved the honor of the seat. Rebbe Chaim Moishe said that there will be a compromise; for four days during the week, on Sunday, Tuesday, Wednesday, and Friday, the brother who was merchant, will get the seat. For three days of the week, on Monday, Thursday, and Shabbat, the brother who was a wise student would get the seat...<sup>8</sup>

The decision demonstrated by the rabbi in this particular joke reflected the communal attitude towards the synagogue and the wealth versus wise controversy. The synagogue was a sacred place and the prestigious seats were reserved for most important people. Both the wise men and the affluent men were honored with these seats-- the wise men because of their knowledge of the sacred texts and the wealthy men because it was through their contributions that the synagogues were able to sustain themselves. On the surface, this particular joke seemed to honor the wealth of individual over one's wisdom because the merchant brother was able to sit in the desired seat four days during the week. Yet, the wise son received a slightly greater honor because he was able to sit in the seat on the more important days of the week. On his three days, the Torah was read.

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<sup>8</sup> Alter Druyanov, Sefer Habedicha vehachiddud, volume #1, Tel Aviv, joke 390, p. 143.



Another sign of prestige in the synagogue was the *aliyot*, the honor of being called up to the Torah and recitation of the blessings. It was the custom to honor an individual by giving them an *aliyah*. Not only was the *aliyah* an honor, which *aliyah* a person received made a status statement. On Shabbat, there were seven *aliyot* plus one additional one who also read the *maftir*, the concluding section from the Torah and the *haftara* from the books of the Prophets. The first three *aliyot* were given to people who descended from the *kohanim*, the Levites and *Yisrael*. However, to be given the third or sixth *aliyah* was considered a high honor. This particular joke illustrates this point by using the *aliyah* as a vehicle to make a joke about doctors:

A wife of a doctor gave birth. On the following Shabbat, the doctor went to the synagogue to receive a blessing for his wife. The shamus called him to the Torah as the rabbi carefully said: THE THIRD MAY ASCEND TO THE TORAH. The Gabbai asked: "Rabbi, why are you so precise for him? If a rabbi and a father were present, a rabbi should be called first [and given this precise care] because the rabbi brings life to the world to come." The Rabbi replied: "For a doctor, you are more precise. If a rabbi and a doctor are both present, a doctor should go first because he DEFINITELY brings life to the world to come."<sup>9</sup>

Within the synagogue structure, the rabbi was the chief authority figure. This attitude was also present in every day living. People would go to the rabbi and ask him questions. Because of his textual knowledge, he was supposed to have the ability to answer any question. He knew what God and the ancient rabbis have said

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<sup>9</sup> Alter Druyanov, *Sefer Habedicha vehachiddud*, volume #1, Tel Aviv, joke 915.

about a particular issue because he was a master of the written sources. In a sense, this was a learned trade. The power of the rabbi was fallible as well as an integral part of the community and there was, therefore, frustration because of the decisions and abilities of the rabbis. Humor created an outlet for this frustration. Many of the younger rabbis were respected, but since they were inexperienced, they were prone to make a few mistakes. This particular joke illustrates such an incident:

The Chasidim were gathered around their so-called wonder rabbi. In their town, there was a drought. The faithful called upon their rabbi and asked him to pray for rain. The rabbi prayed and it rained. But the rain did not stop. So the faithful followers went back to the rabbi and asked him to pray for sunshine. The rabbi prayed and the rain continued. so the rabbi's servant, the shammus, explained: "You must bear in mind that the rabbi is still quite young. He has learned the prayer to make it rain, but he has not yet learned how to stop it..."<sup>10</sup>

The rabbi was the symbol of the value of study. It was, therefore, considered a mitzvah to assist in someone's pursuit of knowledge. Young people were very much at the social center of the studying element of the community. This implies that many of students of the yeshivot were living in poverty and were depended upon others for financial support. Some were fortunate and came from affluent families who could afford to pay for the student's living needs. If not, the student relied on the hospitality of strangers. When the yeshivot were located in large communities, the

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<sup>10</sup> Alter Druyanov, Sefer Habedicha vehachiddud, volume #1, Tel Aviv, joke 646.

poor yeshivah students were dependent of "eating days", which meant that the student had to find different people who were able to feed him one meal a day, one day a week. These students were called "day-eaters". The "successful" day eater was the student who found seven different houses at which to eat as to cover every day of the week:

They asked a poor boy, a "day eater": "What will you pray for on *Hoshanah Rabbah* as the gates of Heaven are open?" The student responded: "As soon as the gates of heaven split open, I will pray before God that He will give me seven beautiful houses. I will rent them to seven important people on the condition that I will get from each and everyone of them food for one day a week. In this manner, I shall experience heaven on earth..."<sup>11</sup>

There was a second institution for the encouragement of study: namely the "kept son-in-law". A well to do Jew would marry his daughter to a promising student, and the marriage contract (the *Ketubah*) assured the son-in-law a stated number of years to study. During this period the student lived with his in-laws, contributing nothing towards his support, or that of his wife and children. His business was to study; he did not study a profession, but the sacred texts. It was an honor to be a "kept son-in-law" as well as to have one.

The obligation to study the sacred texts was placed on the males. The women were exempt from this mitzvah because they

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<sup>11</sup> Alter Druyanov, *Sefer Habedicha vehachiddud*, volume #1, Tel Aviv, joke 195, p. 75.



were obligated to provide a home and raise the children. This principle of the Jewish community created an area for a great deal of jokes pertaining to a husband who saw every action as a sign of God's presence in the world and a wife who saw the economic reality of every action. Examine the following joke:

A woman complained to her husband: "I have already given birth six times. Now, it appears that I am pregnant again". The husband tried to placate her: "You are angry without any reason. It is written in the Torah-- 'When the seventh son was born to Leah, she said Gad comes' and RASHI commented that it means that good luck comes". [Genesis 30:11] The woman sighed: "Woe is me. I am a woman and I do not know what is written in the Torah. But what has happened in my house I do know-- the more luck, the less bread..."<sup>12</sup>

Though this type of joke was popular, it didn't curtail the community's general enthusiastic attitudes towards study. This attitude was an essential component of the cultural renaissance that occurred throughout the eastern European Jewish community in the mid-19th century. The new age created an influx of Jews to non-Jewish universities. In the larger cities such as Odessa, Kiev, and Warsaw, non-Jewish thinkers were more commonly known than the Jewish writers from earlier ages.<sup>13</sup> Yet, within this new era of enlightenment also remained the old antisemitism. As Jews overcame the old obstacles, they encountered new ones. Once the Jews

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<sup>12</sup> Alter Druyanov, Sefer Habedicha vehachiddud, volume #1, Tel Aviv, joke 191, p. 74

<sup>13</sup> Maurice Samuels, The World of Sholom Aleichem, Atheneum Publishers, New York, 1986, p. 243.



were accepted into the universities, they encountered difficulties such as: limited access to areas of study, living under a constant fear of starvation, inability to be accepted and evasion from deportation.<sup>14</sup> For some, these fears were too much of a burden to carry. The choices were simple: either convert or fail and return to their peasant existence. This type of decision presented the students with a terrible dilemma. How could they return to their old ways once they could a glimpse of what life could be like? But if they were baptized, they could never return home again. The student's family would have view this as if he died because the old world attitude of the Jewish community looked down on apostasy.

Fear of assimilation was once of the strongest fears that were a part of the Jewish community during this transitional period, between the old world of the shtetl and the new, modern era. This fear was visible in the Jewish towns of eastern Europe. The beards and the gaberdines were becoming shorter, the *peos* [earlocks] were removed, people were beginning to eat forbidden meats such as pork, and people were converting.<sup>15</sup> People chose to pass out of Jewish life either by baptism or converting to the growing revolutionary movements. These "enlightened" Jews looked down upon the religious society form which they came. They saw it as

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

primitive, backwards and full of superstitions that had no place in the modern world:

Jewish ritual is very strict and prohibits any physical exertion of the Sabbath, including lighting a fire. Accordingly, no observant Jew would dare smoke on Shabbat. The 'enlightened' Chaim Katz, however, for a walk one Sabbath day with a lighted cigar between his lips. As he passes a gunpowder magazine, a Gentile guard calls out: "You must not smoke!" To which Chaim Katz replies disdainfully: "Pshaw, I got over these prejudices long ago..."<sup>16</sup>

What makes this particular funny was the hidden notion that 'enlightened' Jews had to make a statement about their new-found identity. Though Chaim Katz was fully aware that he was smoking on the Sabbath, he did not realize that his smoking could cause an explosion around the army garrison. Chaim Katz was symbolic of the 'enlightened' Jew of this era, who saw confrontation from all dimensions within the established, old world community. He was a revolutionary-- rebelling against the old ways, wanting to be a part of modern world and to excel within it, both spiritually and financially. Yet, the established community looked down upon these types of individuals because they have degraded themselves. They have settled for material gain and have sacrificed the religious values of their tradition:

Moses Mendelsohn, a prominent assimilated Jew, served as a bookkeeper to a wealthy, Gentile businessman who did not treat his employees as they deserved. Once, he asked the observant Jew, Ben Menachem: "See, you always

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<sup>16</sup> S. Landman, "On Jewish Humor", Jewish Journal of Sociology, volume 4, 1962, p. 201.

said that the ways of God are straight, and how fair is it that a crude Goy like your boss is given such wealth and to a wise person such as yourself, He gave nothing?" Ben Menachem replied: "On the contrary, from this we see the proof of my statement. The ways of God are straight. Had He given my boss wealth, where would this man get his life? Whereas I-- what need have I for such wealth? My wisdom supports me..."<sup>17</sup>

This witticism has summarized the response of the traditional element to the modern quest for success in the non-Jewish world: God has given wealth to those who can not transcend to a higher understanding of the meaning of life, which could be obtained through devout study.<sup>20</sup> The witticism was an example of resistance to the societal changes which were occurring within the Jewish community. These changes, whether visible as seen in the clothing and hairstyles or philosophical as seen in increase in assimilation, ignited fear in a majority of the Jews, who desired their lives to remain status quo.

Such fear was expressed by the resistance by a majority of the Jewish community to accept aspects of the gentile culture. For too many generations, the Jews had looked down upon the Gentile world, viewing it as inferior and filled with stupid people. There were many stories about a "Yiddishe kopf" [a Jewish head] and a "goyishe kopf" which expressed a sense of communal superiority. According to Avner Ziv, the Jews used humor directed against the gentiles for the purpose of strengthening Jewish affiliation and fostering

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<sup>17</sup> Alter Druyanov in George Epstein and Max Zeldner, editors, Modern Hebrew Literature, Hebrew Publishing Co, New York, joke #15, p. 217.



resistance to socio-cultural changes.<sup>19</sup> The intellectual and moral superiority of the Jews were the weapons in their war against their culturally invading enemies. Humor was an intellectual weapon for the Jewish community. It rallied support by poking fun at the so-called enemy:

A Jew decides to convert to Christianity. One day his wife finds him wrapped in a talit, wearing a kippa, a prayer book in his hands and praying fervently. "What are you doing, Moishe? Did you forget that you are no longer Jewish?" Moishe replied as he struck himself on the forehead: "Oi, this goishe kopf!"<sup>18</sup>

Humor became the Jewish vehicle for striking out against the non-Jewish world. By poking fun at the things that were not Jewish, the Jewish community demonstrated to itself its own superiority over the non-Jewish world. Alter Druyanov wrote that this ability to laugh at others was a basic component in Jewish humor. He wrote "that laughter is the physical expression of a special feeling arising in a person who suddenly sees himself superior to those who had just been his equals or even his superiors."<sup>20</sup> By laughing at the inadequacies of another, one builds his self confidence. Such was the case of the Jewish community, who laughed at the non-Jewish world, even though they were oppressed by it.

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<sup>19</sup> Avner Ziv, Jewish Humor, Papyrus Publishing House, Tel Aviv, 1986, p. 52.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Alter Druyanov, "The Nature of the Comic", Anthology of Hebrew Essays, Institute for Hebrew Literature and Massada Publishers, Tel Aviv, 1966 p. 464.



Humor also provided a direct way of combating the gentiles' anti-semitic notions:

A Jew and a Gentile sat in one of the railroad cars and debated about the war. The Gentile proclaimed: "The Jews are totally to blame. They have brought the war to the world." The Jew responded: "You are mistaken. Bicycles are to blame. They have brought the war to the world." The Gentile was amazed: "Bicycles, how so?" The Jew responded to him: "The Jews, how so?"<sup>21</sup>

• As Theodore Reik stated in his dedication of his book Jewish Wit, the truest statements are often said in jest.<sup>22</sup> The last joke illustrated this point. The Gentile was convinced of his illogical feeling that the Jews was the major cause of World War I. It could also be assumed that had the Jew logically try to argue with the Gentile, it would have been of no avail. By making a joke as a rebuttal, the Jew demonstrated to the Gentile the fallacy of his position before the debate started. In essence, the Jew won the debate before it had begun.

Though alienation from the non-Jewish world united the Jewish community, there existed within the community a series of internal strifes that threatened to destroy the communal structure. Each one of the tensions harbored tremendous amounts of anger, but no violence. Had the Gentiles been less than a uniting foe, the Jewish community would have divided over four issues: status, general culture, nationalism, and interpretation of Judaism. This was reflected in the class divisions of the community. Yet, these tensions

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<sup>22</sup> Theodor Reik, Jewish Wit, Gamut Press, New York, 1962.

did not develop into a violent conflict, but rather, it developed into vicious arguments with a great deal of animosity. Needless to say, an ironic outlook and self disparaging humor arose from these feelings, that not only helped the Jews to cope with their vicissitudes, but also to express their opinion of a better future. Yet to understand the humor, one needs to first understand the communal structure in which these conflicts developed.

We have already discussed relationship between the poor and the rich. In the shtetl, there was no "wealthy" group, only those who weren't as poor. Yet, in the bigger towns and cities, there were affluent people who were Jews. According to Maurice Samuels, some of the Russian Jewish wealthy families had wealth that paralleled the Rothschilds in Germany. Families such as the Guinzburgs, Poliakovs and Wissotzkys were among the richest families in Russia.<sup>23</sup> Yet, they represented only part of the upper societal brackets. The *nogid*, the rich man, did rank highest in his bracket. But there were others who deserved the highest respect because of their status. Along with the those men of wealth were the trustees of the local synagogues, who had the status not necessarily because of their wealth, but because of their connection to the synagogue. The rabbi, cantor and the ritual slaughterer were in the middle class financially,

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<sup>23</sup> Maurice Samuels, The World of Sholom Aleichem, Atheneum Publishers, New York, 1986, p. 179.

but in terms of status, they ranked in the same group as the wealthiest people.

In the shtetl, there were two groups, the poor and the hopelessly poor. Yet, in the large cities, there was a greater division of classes. There was an affluent class, who were highly educated-- speaking several languages; Yiddish, Hebrew and Russian at least, as well as the only Yiddish speaking poor. In the cities, there was a powerful middle class. This group was made up of the educated professionals-- journalists, mathematicians, doctors, lawyers, dentists, engineers, merchants and revolutionaries, who fought against the Russian monarchy. In the cities, there was another group as well-- the lower middle class. This was the group that was caught in between the old world traditions and the enlightenment of the new era. This group was made up of Yiddish speaking jews, still bound by tradition, but already in contact with provincial modernity. Samuels called this group immigrants in the land of their birth<sup>24</sup> They spoke Russian poorly and they were unfamiliar with the new customs and technology of the modern cities. This was a group who was trapped in between worlds-- their children were drifting away from them toward the modern era, and their spiritual life was out of

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<sup>24</sup> Maurice Samuels, The World of Sholom Aleichem, Atheneum Publishers, New York, 1986, p. 182.

step with their lives, because it was rooted in a world that none of them understood any longer.

The tensions between the social classes was a factor in the cultural conflict about the "official" language of the Jews. The higher classes of Jews were proud of their ability to converse in other languages. The more languages a person was able to speak, the more it signified the level of education a person was able to afford. Since education was a prized possession, people were proud of their ability to converse in other languages. Yet, the more assimilated Jews were embarrassed by Yiddish. They felt that Yiddish was a gutter language, spoken by the poor masses. For the affluent and assimilated, Yiddish was not seen as a socially accepted language, especially in the presence of westerners. However, some of the middle class Jews, the educated professionals, found Yiddish to be an exciting medium to exchange ideas throughout the Jewish community. Toward the end of the 19th century, Yiddish newspapers, essayists, and writers [such as Sholom Aleichem] appeared to be writing fervently throughout eastern Europe.

The battle over the use of Yiddish was not limited to the division between social classes. It was an important factor in the growing feeling of nationalism in the 19th century eastern European communities. The revival of Hebrew as a spoken language was an integral part of the growing Zionist movement, which aimed at least the establishment of a Hebrew-speaking homeland in Palestine. The



insistence on Yiddish was a feature of the anti-Zionist labor movement, which equated Hebrew with superstition, reaction and nationalist revolutionary thought. The anti-Zionists wanted to see an end to the ghetto system and the integration of the Jews into the Russian mainstream. The use of Hebrew would hinder this integration because it fostered separatist attitudes.

Also, the use of Hebrew as a secular spoken language was fought bitterly by the extreme orthodox. They believed that Hebrew was a sacred language and it should remain holy by limiting its use to religious activities, such as praying and studying. They were afraid that the *lashon kodesh*, the holy language, would be denigrated by every day usage; it would lose its divine aura when it was spoken in common places. Even worse, the extreme orthodox viewed the secular use of Hebrew as a sin against God.

Yet, on the other end of the communal spectrum, the people of the Haskalah, as a group, despised the use of Yiddish. It was the language of the ignorant masses and of the courts of the Chasidic rabbis. They called it jargon because of its limited scope of the world. They associated it with all the spiritual stigmata which the long exile had produced in the Jewish people.<sup>25</sup> Lucy Dawidowicz described the Zionists like this:

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<sup>25</sup> Maurice Samuels, The World of Sholom Aleichem, Atheneum Publishers, New York, 1986, p. 8

Zionists chose to revolutionize their own Jewish society, to 'normalize' the Jewish people, make it like all other peoples, and above all, to repudiate Israel's chosenness. They came to loathe the Jewish diaspora, the good and the bad without distinction: the inflexibility of religious tradition, the Yiddish language and its folk culture, the Jewish culture, the gift of accommodation and nonviolent resistance. The philosophical concept of the negation of the galut became, among many Zionists, a negation of Jewish creativity in the Diaspora...<sup>26</sup>

The relationship between the orthodox segments of the community and the Zionist groups were best summarized by the following joke:

A rabbi and a Zionist were talking on the street. The Zionist said: "Behold the culture which we are now being exposed. I enjoy reading the great writers of all times-- Tolstoy and Doskevsky..." The rabbi replied: "Nu? what about the truly great writers of all time--the prophets, the sages, the rabbis..."<sup>27</sup>

The members of this Haskalah group were from the upper strata of Jewish society. There was also a series of groups, who were just as passionate about the Haskalah's dream to modernize the Jewish community. Yet, they represented the common masses more so than the secularly educated. The major Jewish socialist movement, the Bund, at first showed little concern for the cultural resources of Yiddish, using the language only because it was the natural medium for speaking to the Jewish proletariat; but after time the Bundists recognized that their task was not merely economic and political but cultural as well. Despite their radical secularism, the

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<sup>26</sup> Lucy Davidowicz, The Golden Tradition, Bantam Books, 1967, p. 15.

<sup>27</sup> Alter Druyanov, Sefer Habedicha vehachiddud, volume #1, Tel Aviv, joke 214, p. 82.

political but cultural as well. Despite their radical secularism, the Bundists built a relationship to the traditional Yiddish Jewishness. The relationship between the two groups was summarized by this joke:

A member of a revolutionary group was standing on a corner, speaking to a crowd of Jews: "Jewish Workers, unite!" At which point, a Zionist interrupted and asked: "Why don't you ask for just the Jews to unite?" The rebel leaned over and whispered: "If I say 'Jewish workers', maybe the Gentiles might make a donation to our cause..."<sup>28</sup>

Though this joke does not mention the Bundist by name, it mentioned an important Bundist attitude. The Bund what to see change within the the greater society. They did not want to break away and demand to be treated as a nation. They wanted to see reforms occur within the Russian society and they were going to be a part of it.

The final controversy that needs to be addressed is the religious conflict between the Chasidim and the Mitnagdim. By the end of the 19th century, this controversy became infused into the Jewish society. Though tensions between the two rival groups ceased after a reallocation of the territory as part of a treaty between the Russian and Austrian governments, there remained dozens of jokes within the Jewish community and a distinct form of Judaism, known

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<sup>28</sup> Alter Druynaov, Sefer Habedicha vehachiddud, volume #3, Tel Aviv, joke 2834, p. 274

as the Chasidic movement. Yet, approximately for 200 years prior to the start of the 20th century, the Jewish community was in the midst of a controversy between two opposing religious factions-- the Chasidim and their opponents, the Mitnagdim.

The Chasidic movement was lead by charismatic leaders, who were viewed as *Tzadekim* , righteous individuals. These masters were articulate men, knowledgeable in the religious field, who built up followings comparable to the followings dedicated to worshipping Christian saints. They were simple men, who appealed to the rural, poor, unworldly masses.

The Mitnagdim [literally translated as "those who opposed"] were led by the dynamic personality of the Gaon of Vilna. At first, in the 18th century, the Gaon was open to the study of secular thought. He felt that Jewish learning excluded too much of secular knowledge which could be helpful in understanding the world as well as Judaism. He had no objection to the acquisition of general information, provided such information could be used to dignify life and broaden understanding, especially if it helped in the study of Jewish lore. The Gaon urged one of his pupils, who apparently new German, to translate Euclid's Geometry, which he felt ought to be studied by Jews.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Solomon Grayzel, A History of the Jews. The Jewish Publication Society of America, Philadelphia, Penn, 1969, p. 530.



The Gaon and the other Mitnagdim looked upon the Chasidic movement as heresy. They charged the Chasidim with minimizing the value of Jewish learning, encouraging the common people to make changes in Jewish prayer, and setting up as *tzadekim* who claimed reverence of the people. All of these were breaches of tradition which the Gaon believed had to be suppressed. The Mitnagdim failed to see that Chasidism was an expression of the need of the masses for a simple religion of warmth and feeling which could understand despite their comparative lack of education. The Mitnagdim saw only that Chasidism was destroying learning, dignity and tradition and mixed public worship with exhibitions of frivolity.<sup>30</sup> It derided Talmudic study, but considered the most childish expressions of mysticism holy. At the same time, some of the *tzadekim*, who were forcing the ordained rabbis into the background, brought shame and scandal to the movement by scheming for lucrative positions.<sup>31</sup>

In examining several jokes on the topic of this controversy, the Druyanov collection illustrated some of the shortcomings of the *tzadekim*. The jokes portrayed the *tzadekim* as people who were interested in making money from their activities in the form of a *pidyon*, the price for the services of the *tzadekim*:

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

A Chasid came to a Tzaddek and gave him 18 gold chains. After the Chasid left, the Tzaddek felt the chains and realized that one of the gold chains was counterfeit and he requested the Gabbai to return it. The Gabbai said to him: "Leave him alone. He cheated you out of one of the gold chains, but we cheated him out the other 17..."<sup>32</sup>

or examine the following:

Some of the Chasidim sat in a group and debated: "Who was greater than who?" They said that: "a bartender was great because the bartender does business with all the Gentiles in the village. A nobleman was greater than a bartender because he does business with all the bartenders in the district. A king was greater than a nobleman because he did business with all the nobleman in the kingdom. Yet, a king with a vault [editor's note: there is a pun here because the word for vault also mean a skull cap, thus a Jewish king is greater than a regular king] because the emperor does business with all the other kings. But a Tzaddek was the greatest of them all because he does business out of the King of Kings..."<sup>33</sup>

The jokes described some of their actions as though they were guiltless thieves:

At a moment of lightheartedness, the Tzaddek asked his Gabbai: "Perhaps you are able to be like me?" The Gabbai responded: yes, rebbe-- I am able to do all that you do except for one thing." the Tzaddek said: "What is that one thing?" The Gabbai replied: "Rebbe, I would be able to to sigh like you, help the barren woman like you, pray for the rich like you-- all that I would be able to do. But to grab a fistfull of the *pidyon* at the end of the day from on the and insert the coins into my pocket without a smile-- that I would not be able to do..."<sup>34</sup>

The some of the more corrupt *tzadekim* were viewed in this collection of jokes as men who took advantage of the society in which

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<sup>32</sup> Alter Druyanov, Sefer Habedicha vehachiddud, volume #1, Tel Aviv, joke 612, p. 234.

<sup>33</sup> Alter Druyanov, Sefer Habedicha vehachiddud, volume #1, Tel Aviv, joke 621, p. 236.

<sup>34</sup> Alter Druyanov, Sefer Habedicha vehachiddud, volume #1, Tel Aviv, joke 623, p. 234

they lived. In contrast to the pious life of the many of the *tzadekim*, several of them lived on the fringe of society. They were not known for cleanliness, they had a passion for drink and lust for women. They were hardly possessed the of the saintly characteristic of the great *tzadekim* :

Two Chasidim were talking among themselves about the righteousness of their rebbes. One of them said enthusiastically: "My reebe does not need to pray." "why is that?" asked his friend. "Because all of him, in his entirety, is prayer," His friend answered: "My rabbi does not need to clean himself." "Why is that?" asked the first. "Because he is the embodiment of cleanliness."

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Or examine this example of the stereotype of the Chasidic pursuit of lust:

A group of Chasidim got to talking and decided: "the later of the *tzadekim* are greater then the earlier ones. About Jacob it was said, 'he didn't know that Rachel had stolen the idols.' Of Moses, it was said 'he didn't know that he had horns of light radiating from his head'. Is it imaginable that our rebbe didn't know? [i.e. Our rebbe is so great that he could not know his greatness?] A mitnagid joined in the conversation and added: "Even I who is like Judah can give you an example of your Rebbe: Of lot it is said 'he didn't know when she lied down and when she rose up.' Is it imaginable that your rebbe wouldn't know this?"<sup>36</sup>

This joke poked fun at the rebbe's self-assumed greatness and also at his desire for women. Here is another example:

There is a story about a Tzadek, who was suspected of fooling around with a non-Jewish girl. The mitnagdim were angry at the Chasidim and held the sin of this Tzadek against them. One Chasid was angry at the insult and said to them: "May you all burst! You are a bunch of Mitnagdim asses-- all of your explanations are according to the *peshat*. Could he have intended to only

<sup>35</sup> Alter Druyanov, *Sefer Habedicha vehachiddud*, volume #1, Tel Aviv, joke 618, p. 232.



satisfy his lust, surely there was a greater intent! He only intended to take revenge against the Gentiles-- perhaps she will become pregnant and die..."<sup>37</sup>

This vulgar joke described not only the lustful attitudes of the Chasidim, but also the tensions that existed between the Chasidim and Mitnagdim as well as the Jewish community's hostility toward the Gentile world.

According to the folklore, the Chasidic masters had the ability to perform miracles. There are countless stories of the miracles performed by the Baal Shem Tov, the Maggid of Mezhrich, and Rabbi Menachum Nachum of Chernobyl. needless to say, those who did not follow the Chasidic ways often poked fun and these so-called mystic abilities. Examine the following joke:

In a group of Chasidim and Mitnagdim, one of the Mitnagdim sharply exclaimed an idea: "All the miracles that all of you speak about, never occurred. You only heard about them and no one ever saw them." One of the Chasidim became enraged and responded: "Stupid mitnagid. There are miracle which occur each hour. With my own eyes, I have seen them... Once time, I merited to sneak into the rebbe's room prior to his mystical unification. I stood in a dark corner and watched. he was the only person in the room. He sat in his chair and on the table before him was a glass pitcher. I stood and watched and I almost fainted from the excitement. At the start, he was pale and the pitcher was red. After about an hour, the pitcher was pale and he was red..."<sup>38</sup>

The image was that the alleged miracles were not miracles at all. Most were legends that were passed by word of mouth or they were

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<sup>36</sup> Alter Druyanov, *Sefer Habedicha vehachiddud*, volume #1, Tel Aviv, joke, 617, p. 232.

<sup>37</sup> Alter Druyanov, *Sefer Habedicha vehachiddud*, volume #1, Tel Aviv, joke 610, p. 235.



The image was that the alleged miracles were not miracles at all. Most were legends that were passed by word of mouth or they were distorted acts, as in this case. The disciple thought he saw a miracle, when in actuality he saw the rebbe getting drunk. This particular joke illustrated the image of the Chasidim's love of alcohol. It would be manifestly unjust to view the Chasidic indulgence of alcohol in the same light as the senseless drunkenness of the Russian peasant. The Chasid drank "for the soul, to banish the grief which blunteth the heart, to arouse religious exultations and enliven social intercourse with his fellow believers."<sup>39</sup> Yet the consequences of both types of drinking were equally sad. For, excesses of alcohol drained one's ability to think, created stagnation of the society and economic ruin. S.M. Dubnow in his history of the Russian and Polish Jews claimed that the *tzadekim* and the whole Chasidic movement was a reactionary response to the pain inflicted by the Russian Government. It encouraged drinking because itself was a mystic opium for the masses to consume.<sup>39</sup>

The real source of controversy was in the class struggle this tension symbolized: Chasidism was a movement against the aristocracy of learning as well as wealth, a rebellion against the

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<sup>38</sup> S.M. Dubnow, History of the Jews in Russia and Poland: From the Earliest of Times until The Present Day, volume #2, Jewish Publication Society of America, 1918, p. 124-125.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

authorities of the the Jewish community and against the pain inflicted by the Russian government. Though the hostilities between the Chasidim and the Mitnagdim did not cease, the bitterness of the conflict gradually wore off. It became apparent to the Mitnagdim that the Chasidim were not aiming at the destruction of Judaism; and it became clear to the Chasidim that the mitnagdim were not sinners and oppressors. Actual conflict stopped when both groups recognized by the mid-19th century that a common enemy was threatening them equally-- the age of enlightenment. Another factor contributed to the end of the hostilities. While the war of the words was at its height, the Polish kingdom collapsed. Many of the Chasidic provinces were taken over by Austria, while the districts where the Mitnagdim prevailed went to Russia. Divided between two different governments and cultures, the communities faced internal economic and political problems of a dissimilar nature. Contact was limited-- hostilities were no longer the pressing concerns.<sup>40</sup>

The Jewish communities of eastern Europe were greatly shaped by the actions of the gentile world. By the time of World War I in 1914, the Jewish society had been transformed from the world of the shtetl to a stratified minority group with nationalistic tendencies. The socio-cultural environment which kept the society together was breaking apart. the Jewish people began a series of migration from the east to America and to Palestine. The world of the shtetl was shrinking, only to be completely eliminated by the Nazis. Men such

as Alter Druyanov saw the changes coming and began to collect the material of the past, in order to preserve it for the future. The goal of this chapter has been to examine parts of the society structure and understand its workings through the folk humor of the time.

Chapter 6:  
A Critical Survey of Selections from  
Sefer Habedicha vehachiddud



The intention of Druyanov's collection was to provide researchers with information pertaining to the Jewish community. The table of contents therefore reads as an overview of the Jewish societal structure. It demonstrated that within each of the three volumes, different types of people are discussed. The organization of each volume, therefore, has a different series of themes. In volume 1, Druyanov place jokes of the established institutions such as the synagogue and its officials, the artisans and their crafts, the rich and the poor. In volume 2, the "fringe" elements of the society are discussed. These are the people who are a visible part of the Jewish society, but they not fully accepted into the mainstream. In this volume, there are jokes pertaining to the liars, cheats and forgers within the community as well as the thieves and robbers. It also includes the people who are the intellectual outcasts of the society-- the ignorant and the unlearned, *Am Ha'aratzim* . The second volume also includes jokes and witticisms that were found in the relationships between people as well as between man and God. The third volume includes the material about the infamous people of the Jewish society as well as material that did not fit into either of the two volumes such as *Seder Tahor*, the chapter that pertains to purities. The following is a translation of the table of contents of Druyanov's Sefer Habedicha veHachiddud :

Book #1

chapter #1. Contractors, stockbrokers and middlemen; merchants, go-betweens, shopkeepers and peddlers; buyers and sellers

chapter #2. Money lenders and borrowers; those who are bankrupt and those who attempt to avoid payment

chapter # 3. Artisans, laborers and workers; agents, clerks and servants

chapter # 4. The poor and the rich; beggars and misers

chapter # 5. Synagogue officials, *Gaba'im* [those who aid the rabbis] , rabbis, judges, preachers, *Shaliach derabbanan* [those who were empowered to collect money for charity] , Ritual slaughterers, Cantors, *Shamus*, teachers and scribes.

chapter # 6. Tzaddikim and Rabbis, Chasidim and Mitnagdim

chapter # 7. Young men and young maidens; the old and the young

chapter # 8. Those who live in cities, Provincial dwellers--those who live in towns and those who travel

chapter # 9. Hostel operators and guests

chapter # 10. Eaters and drinkers

chapter # 11. Doctors and patients

chapter # 12. Simpletons and sly people

Book #2

chapter # 13. Fools, idiots, and those who are crazy

chapter # 14. *Am Haartzim* and those who are uneducated

chapter # 15. Liars, cheaters and forgers

chapter # 16. Thieves and robbers

chapter # 17. Apostates and informants

chapter # 18. Matchmakers and those who were matched

chapter # 19. Between a man and his wife

- chapter # 20. Between a father and son
- chapter # 21. Between a man and God
- chapter # 22. Between a man and his fellow man
- chapter # 23. Between Israel and other people

### **Book #3**

- chapter # 24. Idlers [those who do nothing] and those who give folk philosophy
- chapter # 25. Jesters, clowns and Rebels
- chapter # 26. Clever people, Talmudic arguers [those who are witty in a Talmudic fashion], and those who speak with flowery language
- chapter # 27. The great and the famous
- chapter # 28. Zionism and the land of Israel
- chapter # 29. From the tribes of Israel
- chapter # 30. From the heroes of Israel
- chapter # 31. War and Revolution
- chapter # 32. *Seder Tahor* : a section pertaining to religious purities in particular jokes about the laws of kashrut, going to the mikvah, and relationship with the Gentile community
- chapter # 33. From the mouths of children
- chapter # 34. Within the walls
- chapter # 35. Miscellaneous jokes

Though Druyanov hoped to expand his collection to include jokes about other nations and peoples, he died before he could complete a fourth and a fifth volume. These were the only three volumes of Druyanov's collection that were ever published.

However, these three volumes provided researchers with quite an extensive body of jokes and witticisms from which to choose.

The goal of this particular chapter is to examine some of the highlights of this collection. The jokes were not chosen from the collection in a specific manner-- rather, I randomly selected the material from each of the volumes in order to obtain a true sampling of this anthology. In addition to providing translations to the selected jokes, I have also provided several editorial notes in order to explain certain jokes which are not easily understood. Let me begin by examining several jokes from the first volume:

**Section #1:** The first series of jokes are from the chapter 1 about merchants, stockbrokers, middlemen, etc. and the role they played in the Jewish society. It also includes two jokes from chapter 2 because of its close financial similarities. It was interesting to see the degree of interaction between the Jewish community and the non-Jewish world that these jokes expressed. This type of humor further demonstrated that the Jewish society was not isolated from the general society nor was it a self-sufficient entity in the Eastern European society. Jews constantly interacted with Gentiles especially when it came to business activities. As a result of these encounters, the Jewish folk developed their own unique style of humor that reflected their circumstances. The self image refracted through Jewish humor indicates that they viewed themselves as



intellectually superior to the Gentiles with whom they engaged. While at the same time, they were degrading themselves before their Gentile neighbors. Several jokes indicated an acceptance of traditional Jewish stereotypes such as that of the aggressive and indomitable Jewish businessman.

1. This is a story about a ship carrying wine. It was sailing along on the sea, when a large fish was about to swallow it. The captain took a barrel of wine and dropped it into the mouth of the large fish-- and this did not satisfy her. He put a Gentile from one of the Gentiles aboard into the large fish's mouth -- this did not satisfy her. The captain returned and took a Jew that was aboard the ship and placed him into the large fish's mouth-- immediately with the swallowing of the Jew, the fish was satisfied and departed from the ship and went away. Several days later the same fish was caught. The hunters decided to dry her out, cut her belly open and found-- the Jew in the process of selling the wine to the Gentile...

This particular joke is of interest because it describes the traditional stereotype of the Jew as someone who was always interested in making money. One might be initially surprised to see the anti-Semitic images of Jews in their own folk humor because it was used as propaganda against Jews and often led to violence and continued hatred. Why then would Jews say these types of jokes among themselves? To answer this, one must remember that the established theory about Jewish humor has self-depreciation and even masochistic qualities within it.<sup>1</sup> By telling this type of self-deprecating joke, the Jews were laughing at themselves-- laughing

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<sup>1</sup> Theodor Reik, Jewish Wit, Gamut Press, New York, NY, 1962.

at their status in a Gentile society as if with a degree of complacency.

However, the interpretation of jokes is in the eyes of the person doing the interpretation. Another way that one may view this joke is that it is a comment about the Jewish people's ability to survive. Even when the Jews seem to be in a terrible predicament, they manage to adjust their lives to fit the circumstances. In this case, when the Jew found himself in the belly of the fish, he established a business and set-up his life within the fish.

2. A saying from the school of Rav: How do we know that a gentile who sells merchandise will in the end have plenty of profit. And that a Jew who sells merchandise will in the end merely make a marginal profit? It is written: "Of abundance-- the peoples will draw sustenance", the word "people" means exclusively the Jews.

Druyanov's footnote to this joke read: "The *Darshan* was mixed up and made a mistake by reading  $\text{א'י'ם}$  'amim ' [people] instead of  $\text{א'י'}$  'yamim ' [seas] in Deuteronomy 33:19", which states "They shall call peoples unto the mountain; there shall they offer sacrifices of righteousness; for they shall draw from the abundance of the seas, and the hidden treasures of the sand." By mixing up the letters of that one word, the meaning becomes quite different. In essence, this a Hebrew pun, a play on words.

Since books and written material were a scarce commodity among the poorer Jews, people relied on hearing the sacred texts. Since there are subtle differences between certain words [as in this case when the letter ayin and yod were confused], people will hear

a different meaning than intended. This is a Jewish pun-- citing a distorted prooftext to support a false or ridiculous statement. Such was the case with this joke whose proof text should have said 'abundance- the days were nursed'. Then the prooftext would not have fit into the context of the joke. Yet, by distorting that one word, it became a pun as well as a punchline to the joke.

4. Motkha Chabad was prolific: he already conceived 6 children, and his wife was pregnant with another. They slyly said to him: "Mordecai, when they grow up, how will they support themselves?" Motkha replied: "They will be neither contractors, teachers or merchants or good-for-nothings. One way or another, they will not really achieve anything. They will be supported by God."

This bit of folk witticism presented an illustration of the faith of the Jewish people. It was a theological statement which demonstrated the connection between Jew and God-- no matter how successful a person was, it was done with divine blessing. God was seen as a functional, immanent part of their daily lives. No act should be taken for granted, every action reflected the presence of God in their lives.

However, I find it interesting that Druyanov placed this particular joke in this chapter pertaining to businessmen and not in the third volume in the chapter entitled "Between Man and God." To justify his actions, the bit of folk witticism did mention the positions by name that were indicated by the chapter heading. Yet, the addition of the specific names might be because of Druyanov's editorship. He might have changed the names or simply added

them to fit this chapter. Both were unlikely because of the degree of pride that Druyanov brought to creating this anthology. It was his editorial style to change jokes to make them fit a chapter.

Rather, by placing this joke in this chapter, Druyanov demonstrated the inseparable connection between a Jew and God. [This point was explained within chapter 5.]

7. Two of the most important stockbrokers were strolling in the street in front of the stock exchange. One of them looked to the side and said to his friend: "Do you see that youngster trailing after you? He is a pickpocket and he intends to take the kerchief that is in your pocket". The other replied: "Relax, didn't you and I also start with little things..."

8. A young man from the provinces came to the city and he stayed with his cousin. The cousin said to him once: "Let's go and I will show you our stock exchange that is one of the most famous in the world." When they arrived there, they saw that two potbellied men came out from the stock exchange and they were speaking more with their hands than with their mouths. The visitor from the Provinces lifted his eyes and said to his cousin: "Who are these men?" His cousin responded to him: "These two are brothers and big-shots on the exchange. Whenever they leave each other, they count their fingers-- perhaps one stole a finger from the other."

The image of the stockmarket, as seen, through the eyes of the common folk was an image of a form of gambling. People would place bets on whether a company would increase in value or not. Most of the common people did not have money to waste on this type of investment. Those who did needed a degree of expertise in this field or they would be taken advantage. Thus, the stereotype emerged that if an individual lost money, the stockbroker stole it from him. If an individual profited by making good investments,



he was a thief. Furthermore, all stockbrokers were seen as thieves because they made their money off the investments of others.

Druyanov echoed these stereotypes in his explanation of joke #8. He stated that the punchline from this joke used the same wording as a Talmudic saying and an Arabic expression. In Tractate *Chulin* 127a, it was written: "Rabbi Gidal said in the name of Rav, if an inhabitant of Naresh has kissed you then count your teeth..." which indicates that they are all thieves and insincere about their friendship, which they extended by kissing you. The Talmudic saying was similar to the Arabic expression of "Give him *shalom* and count your fingers", as if to imply that by shaking hands with a thief, he will steal one of your fingers.

The involvement in the stockmarket was a part of the Jewish society. Though it was a relatively late achievement-- somewhere in the mid 19th century. The stockmarkets were located in large cities, mainly in central Europe in places such as Germany and France. These financial investments and speculations involved constant interactions with non-Jews. Germany, the Netherlands, and France were places where the Jews assimilated quickly into the general society. They entered the mainstream society with a great deal of capital. Most of the wealth of affluent Gentiles were tied to the productivity of their land. By engaging in business with affluent Jews, the Gentiles were able to obtain the need funds-- for business expansion or to eliminate their financial debts.

Traditionally, Gentiles were not inclined to join this form of financial speculation because of Christian values forbidding usury and the shunning of Christians who made large profits off other people's money. However, the onset of the Industrial Revolution in the 19th century caused a great need for capital. The selling of stocks and bonds became a common way to generate the money needed to start and expand new technologically advanced industries. Certain Jewish families such as the Rothschilds and de Hirschs became some of the wealthiest families of Europe because of their involvement with the stock market and investments in large companies.

10. During the blackmarket turmoil of the war days (editor's note: World War I), a Jew went to see an accomplished profiteer in order to receive some straight financial advice. "Have you heard the rumor that the Austrian *ketars* will continue to rise. Is it worth buying them?" The profiteer said to him: "I advise that you should not invest/buy. The Austrian *Ketars* have a bad track-record." The man seeking the advice of the profiteer was skeptical-- and he went and bought and he lost his money. After a week, he went back again to the same profiteer. "I didn't listen to your advice and I was punished. I make an oath that from now on, I will not veer from your advice... I heard praises about the Rumanian *Arayot*. What do you think about them, should I buy them or not?" The profiteer said: "I advise that you shouldn't buy. There isn't much to the Rumanian *Arayot*." He heard the advice and he went and bought and lost money in the investment. He went back again to the profiteer. "Twice I didn't listen to your advice and I lost out. I will be cursed, if from now on digress to the right or left of your words... I heard they are saying great things about German marks. What is your advice?" The profiteer said: "I advise you to kiss my navel". The answer confused him and he stuttered to respond because of his confusion: "Your navel?" The profiteer responded: "This is my advice, and it is a sure thing that you will do the opposite..." [editor's note: it implied that the person should kiss the rear end of the profiteer.]

19. The German Count Svizhinski came from his estate to the city and commanded that Beril, "his" Jew be summoned to the place he was spending the night. "Berka," the count said: "The mistress commands that you buy her a beautiful fox coat (pokas ). Are you able to buy one immediately?" "Is it not a matter of course?" Beril replied and added--"How much are you willing to pay for a nice pokas for the lady?" "Twenty Ketars ". Beril shook his head from east to west and said: "My master Count, it is impossible." "Then for how much" the count asked. "Nothing for less than 30." "Agreed...go and buy and bring it. I am hurrying to return to my house." Beril did not move from his place; he stood and scratched the back of his head. The count was annoyed--"why are you standing? I said 30." Beril coughed once, twice and said: "I am really sorry Count, but what is a pokas ?"

This joke illustrated the relationship between Gentile nobility and his Jewish subjects. Svizhinski was a prominent late 18th century count who lived in the southern part of Germany/Austria. Because of his status, he employed several Jews who served a variety of capacities such as providing capital and serving as financial consultants, banks and merchants. It was a feudal relationship-- the count ordered and the Jew obliged.

Also present in this joke was the stereotype of the bartering Jew. The Jew was given a task by his feudal count, to whom one can assume the Jew was dependant upon, and began to negotiate the price with the count. Yet, the Jew did not understand the task-- pokas was not a Hebrew word nor Yiddish, it was German and the Jew was obviously unfamiliar with it. The humor of this joke was self-deprecating because when a Jew told it or laughed at it, he was reinforcing the stereotype that Jews would bargain for anything, even when they do not know what they are bargaining for.

22. "I have had many different businesses"-- a Jew wrote to his friend--"all of them did not succeed." Now I have a new business which I am sure will succeed, if God is willing. I opened a store for food goods and a store for burial goods. Everyone will need me, the living as well as the dead." Days passed and so did weeks-- no one came in to buy. The landlord came to check on him and found: "In this city, there are no living people nor dead ones; everyone is dying."

26. A paragraph of a letter from a small town shopkeeper to a wholesaler in the city: "The cloth that you sent to me was good and beautiful in my eyes. The price, a ruble for a yard is agreeable to me. But if customers from our town come to your excellency in order to buy, will you please say to them that the price is nothing less than a ruble and twenty. In that way I will not be compelled to lie..."

63. A Jewish immigrant stood in New York near a popular bank and sold hot dogs. A New Yorker approached him and asked: "How is your business doing?" The hot dog salesman replied: "Thank God! I have already deposited in the bank a little bit of money set aside for expansion of the business." "If so"-- said the New Yorker-- "do me a favor and lend me 20 dollars?" "God forbid!"-- the hot dog salesman refused-- "It is prohibited for me!" "What do you mean it is prohibited?" the city dweller replied in astonishment. "There is an agreement between me and the bank that we do not infringe on each other's business. They am prohibited from selling hot dogs and I am prohibited from lending money..."

The hidden message of this joke was the image that the eastern European Jews had of America, a land that was supposed to be filled with riches. As the economic and political climate of Europe became more instable and hostile towards the Jews, the Jews began to look towards America as a land for their redemption. America became a haven from all their problems. Therefore, the folk image of America was a distorted one-- America was a place where the streets were lined with gold, a place where the poor became rich. These misconceptions were fostered by immigrants who either returned to their old homes in Eastern Europe or sent letters describing how wonderful life was on the other side of the



Atlantic.<sup>2</sup>

The dreams and ideals of a people were expressed in the folk humor as presented by this particular joke: America was a place where a poor man could obtain financial security as a hotdog salesman. He became so rich that the bank was worried that he might be competition if he started lending money. Both the narrator and the listener probably did not take this joke seriously-- they were aware of some of the difficulties that existed in America, but they wanted to preserve their dream.

This point can be further illustrated by examining another joke from the Druyanov collection. Joke #1460 in the second volume from the chapter on matchmakers reads as follows: A matchmaker praised a certain young man to the father of a girl with whom he has arranged a match: "He is perfect in every way (editor's note: literal translation of "*hama'alot*." is levels) He is like a great book (editor's note: in Hebrew, it is *sefer rabbah* ) none is like him." The father asked: "What do you mean that there is none like him?" The matchmaker responded: "When he writes an address, immediately the letter goes from here to America..." This joke used the word "*hama'alot* " meaning levels. This is a term which has kabbalistic connotations meaning to ascend from one

<sup>2</sup> For further illustration of this point, see Irving Howe, World of Our Fathers, Simon and Schuster, New York, 1976; Stephen Birmingham, The Rest of Us: The Rise of America's Eastern European Jews, Little, Brown, and Company, Boston, Mass., 1984; and Harry Golden, The Greatest City in the World, Doubleday and Co., NY, 1972.

spiritual level to another. Therefore, this joke implied that by knowing someone in America and being able to correspond with them makes an individual particularly desirable, even sacred. He was able to communicate with America, a skill which was paralleled with being able to communicate with heaven and God.

64. Two men were walking together in the city and suddenly, robbers jumped them: "Your money or your life!" When all their requests and pleading were of no benefit, the two of them were requested to empty their purses. One said to another: Velvel, I remember that you lent me hundred rubles. Here they are, I am returning them to you..."

**Section #2:** In an earlier chapter [chapter 5], the relationship between the affluent members of the society and the poorer members of the society was discussed. I stated that in the cities, these divisions were along class lines while in the rural shtetl areas, these divisions were between the comfortably poor and the desperately poor. The next series of jokes illustrated the findings of that chapter:

179. A German jester used to say: A word about the Haggadah's four sons--one of them is wise, the other is wicked, another is simple and one does not know how to ask-- all these qualities are in me. What does the wise one say? "There is no bread for the wise" [Kohélet 9:11]; What does the wicked part say? "The wicked borrows and doesn't repay" [Psalms 37:21]; What does the simple part say? "How is it that our money is all spent?" [Genesis 47:18]; and what does the son who didn't know how to ask say? "Who is a fool who would lend to poor man like me?"

The term for German in this joke was *yekeh*, a nickname for a German Jew. German Jews viewed themselves as the top of the Jewish social spectrum. Within the group, of course, there was

stratifications. The German Jews of Frankfurt considered themselves superior to the Jews of Hamburg, but the Jews of Frankfurt and Hamburg considered themselves superior to the Jews of Munich. They were aristocratic, highly educated and cultured-- in essence, they were snobs. This joke implied that the *Yekeh* jester had all the abilities to achieve success-- he was smart, wicked and poor with nothing to lose. With all these abilities, he knew that no one would take a financial risk on him-- the joke was his resignation to that fact. However, by and large, a majority of the *Yekes* did obtain a larger degree of financial security and the humor of this joke was found in that contradiction.

Another aspect of the humor within the joke was a Hebrew pun-- a play on the word *tam*, meaning both simple as in the simple son of the Passover Haggadah and meaning an end, all used up as in the case of Genesis 47:18. The pun implied that the *yekeh* was not simple, a *yekeh* would not admit to being a simpleton. Rather, the use of word *tam* implied that his financial resources were drained, empty and he was in need.

180: Herschel Ostropoler visited a famous wealthy man to request a donation. The wealthy man said to him: "Heschel, since you are a shrewd fellow, could you please explain to me a difficult thing. There are many poor people who are sustained by the rich, and nonetheless, they all hate us. What is the reason for this?" Herschel replied: "It is like the angel of death-- Many people are sustained by him, yet they all hate him."

Jewish folk humor had its literary figures and folk heroes. There were a great number of these comic figures and several of



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them were real people: Shmerl Shnitkover, Yossel Marshalik, Reb Shoime Ludmirer, Mordecai Charkover, Motke Chabad, Sheike Feifer and Froyim Greidinger. Some of the anecdotes have lost their names and have merged with the larger body of anonymous folk humor. When the names are used, one must question its authenticity-- these names are associated with personality traits that people desire to describe a popular story or joke.

Unique among the characters was Herschel Ostropolier because of his unique comic originality.<sup>3</sup> He was a jester whose antics were known throughout the Yiddish speaking world. He was not a mythical character, rather a product of folk fantasy. He began the process of creating folklore about himself-- he was endowed with an unusual capacity of self-irony, a comical way of facing disaster. He was the classic example of a *schlimazal*, a Yiddish term meaning a person who was the victim of bad luck. Yet, his misfortunes were not brought about by his own personal character weakness, rather from the chaos of the world in which he lived.

He was born in a town called Ostropolia near the city of Balta in the Ukraine, during the second half of the 18th century. He was born of poor parents and was trapped within the shtetl environment without being able to learn a trade. He was the

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<sup>3</sup> Nathan Ausbel, A Treasury of Jewish Folklore, Crown Publishers, New York, 1951, page 286-287.



typical example of not being able to succeed financially. There were countless stories of his business transactions that failed. Yet, though he lacked the wits to succeed, his wit provided for his family.<sup>4</sup> He served as a sort of court jester for the Chasidic Rebbe Boruch from 1770-1810. Boruch was the grandson of the Ba'al Shem Tov and the dynastic successor of his grandfather's reign.

Ausbel claimed that neither Boruch nor Herschel liked each other very much. Herschel was known for playing pranks and chances are that hurt Rabbi Boruch with many of his pranks. In fact, there was evidence to suggest that Boruch was very sensitive that his claim as the leader of Chasidism was based solely on his *yikhes*, familial connection. Herschel often remarked about this relationship and even boasted that he was more scholarly than the rabbinic master.

Such was the background to this particular joke-- yet, the question remained: how did the angel of death sustain people? The answer lay in the comparison with the wealthy. A rich man has the power to destroy a poor man by buying his property or by placing enough financial pressure to cause bankruptcy. Yet, the wealthy person created business opportunities for the poorer people. The angel of death also created business opportunities by killing people-- people who left money to another or left a void that

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid, page 287.

generated new jobs. It was obvious why the angel of death was hated-- he killed people. Both were needed in the society, but both were disliked because of the hardship their encounters brought.

181. A beggar spoke to a miser: "My daughter has grown up, but I am unable to marry her off. To whom shall I turn, if not to you? We are second cousins." The miser replied: "I know that we are 'second cousins', but my money-- it is a 'first cousin' to me!"

182: A poor teacher had only ten z'huvim . He went and bought a goat. His wife worked hard with the goat several days. She fed her, she gave her water, but the goat didn't give any milk. The wife was very angry with her husband and said: "You are a stupid teacher. You went out to buy a goat and instead, you bought a billy goat!" The teacher resigned himself to his plight and kept silent. Not too many days later, a plague broke out among the goats. His goat also died. The teacher raised his eyes to heaven and sighed: "Will not the Righteous Judge act justly! Regarding milk, you give me my goat-- a billy goat. Regarding the plague You considered my billy goat-- a goat!"

183. A plague broke out among goats and a teacher said to his wife: "When our goat dies, that is if God desires, we should give its hide as a donation to the poor." The woman cried and cursed him: "God forbid! May your tongue dry up!" The teacher replied: "Fool, why are you cursing? Since we are promising to donate the skin to the poor, thus, it is a wonderful sign that our goat will not die!"

This is another example of the *schimazal* in Jewish humor.

The notion behind this joke is simple: if you prepare for something, it won't happen. If you want to avoid bad luck, prepare for the worst. It is as if one was carrying an umbrellas as a guarantee that it will not rain.

184. A man from a noble family who had a series of bad luck incidents was in the in the city. All that he did, God did not permit him to succeed. Finally he got down to his last loaf of bread. His friends had mercy upon him and sought to help him in a honorable way, but they too did not succeed: Satan always managed to come and foil all their good intentions in front of them. One of generous ones thought it over and said: "I will do and I will succeed." A deaf mute stood and followed this hard-luck man. When he saw that it was

his intention to cross the bridge which spanned over the river, he preceded him and causally he dropped his bags filled with coins on the bridge, and stood afar to see what he will do with the bags. A moment later, that poor man from a good family arrived at the bridge, he stood a moment and said: "This bridge I've crossed hundreds of times. Yet, I still don't know if I am able to cross it with my eyes closed; Now, I will try." Immediately he closed his eyes and crossed over the bridge completely from start to finish, and the bags which were placed before him he did not see.

185: A midrash on poverty: Shlomo said beautifully, "All the days of my poverty were bad". If a poor person has an injury-- he has no onion to place in his mouth. If he did have an onion, he has no sickness!

It appears that the onion was a type of folk remedy. This I will be discussing in further detail in the section of this chapter pertaining to the relationship between doctors and patients.

206. They asked one man: "How is your [financial] situation?" he responded: "It seems to me that I am becoming a rich man." They said to him: "What does it mean that it seems to you that you are becoming a rich man? If you have money, you are rich. If you don't have money then you are poor." He replied: "Money I still don't have, but I am already a pig."

This joke is an example of an authentic and esoteric Jewish joke because to understand it, one needs to understand Talmud. It is written in tractate Shabbat, page 155b: "Rav Pappa said: None are poorer than a dog and none are richer than a pig." Rashi commented on this line stating that a pig eats anything and is also given a lot of food, while a dog scavenges throughout different areas in search of food. The man believed that he was becoming rich because he was eating plenty and didn't have to look for food, though he still lacked the essential ingredient for being rich-- money. Yet, in his perspective, he was one step away from being rich because he was already a glutton.

207. A scholar came to a famous rich man and requested from him an amulet, a device to obtain wealth. The rich man said to the scholar: "Go and be a pig for 12 years."

The scholar was amazed: "Then what?"

The rich man replied: "Don't bother yourself! Afterwards you will be a pig the rest of the days of your life."

208. A rich man, who is like a pig, boasted before his friend: "Never did a man earn money with *prutah* in his hand." His friend was amazed: "How can you image that? Several times you entered a bathhouse and paid the attendant for the use of the bath house." The rich man replied: "And when no one else was looking at me there, so I immediately stretched out my hand and shattered a window pane."

209. A group of Jews were sitting in group and they estimated the riches of an affluent individual. One said this and the other said that. One of them stood and said: "In my opinion, he is missing 200,000." The group laughed at him and said: "If that is so, according to you he is at the verge of bankruptcy." The man replied: "It should only be that every Jew is at the verge of bankruptcy like him. But he is a pig and behaves as if he is worth half of a million but he actually only has 300,000."

These three jokes illustrated the Jewish perspective of gluttony. A Jewish 'pig' was addicted to his gluttony, competitive as well as jealous of another's success and would exaggerate his wealth to make him seem more affluent than he was in reality.

In joke #207, gluttony was described as an addiction-- once you had a taste of it, you could never rid yourself of it.

While in joke #208, the glutton realized that he was paying money to an attendant who was doing nothing. The attendant was a contradiction to the statement-- he was standing there, collecting money as an entrance fee. The glutton was jealous or enraged by this notion and broke a window pane, thus requiring the attendant to pay for the replacement from the money he had received. The image of a glutton was not only of an individual who desired



possessions, but also one who was a *mamser*, a bastard, who would try to hinder another's success.

In joke #209, the glutton was described as someone who would boast and even exaggerate about his wealth.

210. They asked Rabbi Herschel: "They say that money purifies the *mamzerim* [Kiddushin 71a]. How can you image that the strength of money is more powerful than the Torah which has declared a *mamser* impure?" Rabbi Herschel explained: "We are of the opinion that all this insolence from an individual may cause us to infer that he is a *mamser*. What does this mean? Simply that arrogance from a rich man is invalid because "The rich answer arrogantly" (Proverbs 18:23), even if they aren't a *mamser*. Thus, they say that money purifies a *mamser*. We can attribute the arrogance of the rich not necessarily to their wealth but to the fact they are *mamzerim*."

This joke was attributed to Herschel Ostopolier. It was an example of a rabbinic pun. It copied the style of using Talmudic and Biblical verses to answer a question. Yet, this *pilpul* style answered a ridiculous question: how can the Talmud state that money can purify a bastard if the Torah states that a bastard is permanently impure?

To understand the joke, one must remember that the term *mamser* means not only the child born out of wedlock or a child from a forbidden marriage as it means in the legal definition of the word, but also it has a slang connotation of implying that the person is cold, heartless and cruel. It also could be a "backhanded" compliment by commenting on someone's shrewdness. The humor of this joke is found in the Halachic justification of the two images.

In Kiddushin 71a, it is stated: "Rabbi Joshua ben Levi said: 'money purifies the *mamserim* '", which is the contradiction to the biblical injunction of Deuteronomy 23:3: A bastard shall not enter into the assembly of the Lord; even to the tenth generation shall none of his [offspring] enter into the assembly of the Lord. The question is valid-- how can both statements be true? Rabbi Herschel clarifies the folk term *mamser* by indicating that one of their characteristics is being arrogant. In Baba Matzia 83b, it is written that an insolent person is most certainly a criminal or a culprit who is engaged in some type of wrong doing. One of the characteristics of the rich is that they, too, are arrogant-- as it says in Proverbs 18:23: "the rich answer arrogantly." Therefore, the rich can be perceived as *mamserim*. Yet, unlike the children of an illegitimate marriage, the affluent can pay to have their impurity overlooked.

The joke, while using the Talmudic style of argument to explain the difference between the two apparently contradictory statements, pokes fun at the arrogant nature of the wealthy. This joke reflected the jealousy that the lower classes had of the more affluent social groups which was part of the tension between classes in the Jewish society.

211. They asked a sharp scholar: "Rav honors wealth (Eruvin 96a). Where did we find that he gave honor?"

He responded sharply: "In the Mishnah, Rav details three types of encounters, which are dangerous: the old, the fool, and the little-- if you

harm them one is obligated [to pay], if they harm/bruise another they are exempt [from paying damages] (Mishnah Baba Kama 8:4). The difficulties are that one should add also a rich man to the list. Certainly his encounter is bad: one is obligated to pay him if he is harmed but he is exempt if he harms another. But in this place, Rav honors the wealthy-- he does not group them with the old, the fool and the young. Implies that by not including them, one is paying them a back handed compliment. He honors them by not including them, thus shows that he is afraid of the encounter."

This is a backhanded compliment. Rav honors the wealthy by not placing them on a list of people whom one must be careful when encountering them. Yet, the joke states that they certainly should be included on such a list, encountering them can be harmful and costly to another person. Yet, Rav does not denigrate them, he honors them because of their wealth. It is their money that supports him and the synagogue. In Rav's eyes, they are deserving of honor-- the honor of not be degraded. Though, they deserved to be placed on the list because encounters with the wealthy can be costly, Rav did not want to offend them and risk an encounter of this kind for himself.

212. "Rabbi Judah Ha-Nasi would honor the wealthy and Rabbi Akiba would honor the wealthy, this is as Rabbah ben Meir taught: "The world sits before God, righteousness and truth will protect him". The difficulty is that there is no mention of the wealthy? Yet, righteousness is the wealthy individual because a rich man does good deeds for mankind. Truth is the preacher, who teaches mankind the way of truth. (When you remove the letters in common from the terms) the rich man and the preacher (all that remains) are the *mem* and the *nun* [*man*] which protects them [the people]: remove the *mem* from *magid* and the *nun* from *nagid*, what is left?

This is a wonderful example of a Jewish pun because one needs to understand Jewish sources to understand the joke. First of all, the word used for a wealthy individual is *nogid*, a folk term.

The term for preacher is *magid* . When you subtract the common letters, all that remains are the *mem* and the *nun* , which is the abbreviation for the term *manot mazon* , the giving of food. Yet, the pun is the fact the three letters which they have in common are the *gimel*, *yod* and *dalet* , which spells *gid* , the portion of the thigh which cannot be eaten.

The pun is that if one is dependent on the righteousness of the wealthy or the preaching of truth in order to receive food, one will be given the unkosher part of the meat. Thus, one should not depend on these two groups to provide for him.

213. They asked a wise man:

wealth or wisdom, which is preferred?

The wise man replied: Wisdom is preferred.

They say to him: if that is so, why do the wise men knock on the doors of the rich and not the other way around?

The wise man replies: There is no difficulty with this! The wise men know the value of wealth, but the wealthy do not know the value of wisdom.

214. They asked Rabbi Meir Fischels, the rabbi of Prague: We see that the wealthy are envious of the wise men and we also see that the wise men are envious of the wealthy, whose envy is greater? Rabbi Meir replied: Certainly the jealousy of the wealthy is greater, that behold, we see wise men who become wealthy, but we do not see wealthy who become wise.

215. They asked sharply of the clever Rabbi: Why is that the wealthy prepares a donation for the poor cripple but not for the poor student?

The Rabbi replies: The judgment is unclear, it might be that every rich man is afraid that he might become a poor cripple, but he is not afraid that he might become a poor student.

216. This is a story of a poor man whose relatives forgot about him and they didn't even visit him once a year. One day he became wealthy and immediately all his relatives began to visit him in the mornings and the evenings. He saw this and decided that he would place before them a metal



box on a table. He turns his face to the wall and is silent. His relatives are amazed and one of the more outspoken ones states: "Is it polite for you to stand there facing the wall. It is impossible for any of us to speak to you and ask about your well-being." he replied: "Did you come to see me? You came for the sake of what is on the table. Speak to it and ask how it is 'doing!'"

217. One rich man went to visit Rabbi Moshe Sofer. Rabbi Moshe proceeded to honor the man by saying: It is of you to trouble yourself to come to visit me.

The rich man becomes to friendly, to the point where he is disrespectful and responded: It is nothing, I was on the way to visit my cousin So-in-so who lives in the neighborhood and by the way, I turned in to see you also, Sir. When the rich man got up to leave, Rabbi Moshe accompanied him. The rich man said to him: It is so good of you, Rabbi, to trouble yourself to accompany me.

Rabbi Moshe responded to him: It is nothing. I am on my way to relieve myself and by the way, I will accompany you.

another version [editor's note: a more polite version to be told in order not to offend the wealthier elements of the society]: A Yeshivah student came to the city. After some time, he did not come to be received by the Rabbi. Finally he went to the rabbi's house and said: "I happened to be in this neighborhood and by the way I thought that I would come to be received by you, Sir." The rabbi was quiet, he didn't say anything. When the young man got up to leave, the rabbi got up and made a gesture as if to request accompanying him. The young man said: "God forbid. You should not waste your trouble by accompanying me!" The rabbi replied: "I am moving to the bathroom and by the way I will accompany you."

218: A woman came to the sharp and clever Rabbi, she was gloomy: I dreamt that my Jewish son became insane.

The rabbi interpreted this: Your son will become rich because all the rich men are crazy.

219. They ask Rabbi Baruch Mordecai Lipshitz: "Why do people say that the rich are as rich as Korach? Wasn't all of Korach's possessions buried with him and disappeared. There is no man who knew exactly how much he had."

Rabbi Baruch Mordecai Lipshitz replied: "That is the point! It is the customary that during the lifetime of a rich man, that one estimates his wealth in the tens of thousands. When he dies, it is immediately clear that he died worth half as much. Like Korach, his estimated wealth is buried with him and disappears from view. From this view, his status still stands that he was an exceptionally wealth mah."

Korach was the Biblical character in Numbers 16 who revolted against Moses in the desert. According to midrashic legend in Numbers Rabbah, Korach was an affluent man but no one knows

how wealthy because his punishment for his insurrection was to be swallowed up by the earth with all his possessions and his family.

When a rich man dies and is buried [a parallel image to having the earth swallow Korach up], his estate is appraised. The joke states that the appraisal is only half as much as it was assumed it to be or he boasted that it was worth. The question is where is the missing money [the difference between what he was assumed to be worth and what he was actually worth]? The joke states that the rich man was like Korach, the difference was buried with him, i.e. it never existed.

**Section #3:** Druyanov collected over 200 jokes pertaining to the people who were involved with the religious life of the Jewish society-- rabbis, cantors, assistants, heads of congregations, etc., which will be presented in the first part of this section. In addition, he collected another 150 jokes pertaining to the Chasidim-Mitnagdim controversy of the late 18th/early 19th century, which will be presented in section #3b. For further explanations of the role of religion and an explanation of the controversy, see chapter 5.

361: Take a rule into your hand and stick to it-- Isaac Meyer Dick used to say-- there is no difference between a clergyman and a nail without a head; when you hit fix it into place, it is fixed, you are unable to pull it out forever.

362: Isaac Meyer bumps into a pale Gentile, who is hunch backed and has a sagging chest. Isaac Meyer latches onto him and asks: Goy, what is your occupation?

"I am a weaver."

Isaac Meyer sighed: A people similar to a donkey! Everything comes to them for nothing... had he been one of us it is so; he probably would have been great in Israel.

This joke was not an attack on Gentiles. Rather it poked fun at the physical stature of scholars. Since scholars spent their time studying sacred texts, the "great" scholars who spend the most time studying were presumed to be the ones with hunched backs and sagging chests from being bent over the texts so long.

363: This was the way of Vilna, where the people were rebelling against a strong president of the congregation, Yudal Ofetov. He was informed that from now on, they would not follow his leadership. Yudal was angry, he hit his fist on the table and called: "All of Vilna will kiss me on the same place." In the evening, after midnight, a voice knocked on his door: "Mr. Yehuda, open!" Yudal was scared and so where all the people in his household, and they gather around the door: "Who is there?"

"I am here. Mortka Chabad. Tell me something about you, Mr. Yehudah."

Yudal was angry: "Now is no time for time for a conversation!" Mortka responded from behind the door: "It is a matter of necessity, Mr. Yehudah; it is a public need and there is no delaying it." Immediately Yudal wrapped himself [i.e. got dressed] and opened the door. "What is in your mouth, Mordecai?" [i.e. what is on your mind?]

Mortka answered and said: "I was sent from Shnefeshook, a town near Vilna, to you, Mr. Yehudah, to ask you a question: if also this rule [that everyone had to kiss your rear end] was for Vilna or did it apply to the region as well..."

Yudal Ofetov was a prominent *parnes*, a synagogue president, in the mid-19th century in the city of Vilna. He was a man of extensive wealth and carried a great deal of political clout. This particular joke questioned the extent of Ofetov's clout. While in the mist of a temper tantrum, he proclaimed that the people of Vilna should kiss his rear end. Upon hearing the news in the smaller



towns, the traditional jester, Mortka Chabad, was sent to see if such news applied to them as well.

370: Two tax collectors came to the house of a Jew to collect from him a communal tax. He was unable to pay. They took the pillow from on his bed and the lamp from his table and they left him. The person who lost everything went to the official of the community and complained before him: "[Talmudic saying meaning to think things out] From where is your soul? If you assume that the night was created for only sleep, and there is no purpose for you to command the taking of his lamp. And if you assume from this saying that the night was created for studying, there is no reason for you to command the taking of the pillow." The public official responded: "I also find this matter difficult and I don't know, the judgement is with whom. Therefore, I carefully examined and sent two tax collectors. One assume that the night was created for sleeping, and he took the pillow. The other assumed that the night was for studying and he took the lamp..."

Within the Jewish societal structures there were institutions such as the synagogue, the burial society and the beit midrash along with other communal programs that required the levying of taxes from the Jewish population.

One such program was created by the *shtandalim*, who were the Jewish notables who attempted to obtain relief from the raging anti-semitism. In exchange for the relief from the brutal attacks, these wealthy men promised the good behavior of the Jews and offered substantial amount of money to serve as a bribe. According to Maurice Samuels, these Jews were often corrupt and kept a large percentage of the money for themselves.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Maurice Samuels, The World of Sholom Aleichem, Atheneum Publishers, New York, 1943, page 147.



Though the taxes were essential to the proper maintenance of the towns and shtetl, the burden of taxation was a heavy weight for people to carry. People found different ways to avoid payment. Yet, the Jewish community did have official taxpayers, who were instructed either to collect money or the equivalent in property.

371: Someone came to the "faithful" [i.e. the members of] the Burial society to bury his wife. The "faithful" was amazed: Didn't your wife die two years ago?

The widower sighed: "Two years ago, my first wife died and now the one whom I married after her has also died."

The "faithful" stroked his beard and said:

I didn't know that you married another woman. Mazel Tov!

This joke spoke of an encounter between a man and a member of the the *Chevra Kaddisha*, the Jewish Burial society. In Mishnah Pe'ah, there were certain *mitzvot* which people performed without benefitting from a reward. The highest one of those was honoring the dead by giving them a proper burial and providing a *minyan* to say kaddish. Yet, this particular joke illustrated a popular connection of the society who dealt with death so often that they allegedly became insensitive to the needs of the mourner.

The *Chavarot* of the traditional society was organized the performance of certain obligations. There were groups who "visited the sick", "clothed the naked", and "supported the fallen." Yet, with the enlightened period of the 19th century, these traditional groups yielded to new ones-- cultural societies of Yiddish or Hebrew speakers, drama, art as well as political societies that were geared

for societal changes such as the different workers' groups and unions.

This joke is funny because the member of the burial society did not know that the widower remarried. His first response to the news that the man's new wife died, was to extend congratulations that h remarried because the "faithful" did not previously say it. The joke is that his timing is inappropriate he should be extending sympathies, not congratulations.

372: A man with no children was sick. He invited the rabbi over and privately, he transmitted his possessions to his authority in the name of public need. The next day he died, and immediately after the funeral the head of the Burial Society went to collect a donation:

"The fence around the cemetery has been neglected for many years. The headstones are desecrated by dogs and pigs. There is a need to build a new fence. Perhaps the rabbi's honor knows source of finances for this great need."

The rabbi listened and returned: "Those who are precious in the eyes of God will be sustained... But I am amazed that the pigs and dogs did not know that yesterday Ploni ben Ploni transmitted his finances to me desecration..."

To understand the punchline of this joke, one must recognize that the pigs and dogs that the rabbi was referring to were the people who wanted to obtain the dead man's property such as individuals within the Burial Society.

Section #3b: The following jokes are selected from the chapter in the Druyanov collection pertaining to Chasidim and Mitnagdim. The leaders of both movements attracted devoted followers, especially the Chasidic masters. Their disciples would follow their exact

words and view all their actions as sacred. Needless to say, this type of fervor and commitment made the Chasidim the victims of numberless jokes by those who were a part of their movement.

606. Three Chasids who were at an inn, sat down to tell their praises about their rebbes to each other. One of them said: "My rebbe is extremely careful to separate meat and milk to such an extent that he has even hired two cooks in his house-- one for meat only and the other for milk only." [Another Version states that he has hired 2 *shiksas* [non-Jewish women] with whom he slept.] "My rebbe", said the second, "is extremely careful to separate meat and milk to such an extent that he waits 24 hours from the time eating meat to eating dairy." The third responded: "My rebbe is extremely careful to separate meat and milk to such an extent that he separates his study of the laws meat and milk by 24 hours!"

607. Three Hasids were speaking among themselves about the righteousness of their rebbes. One of them said: "When my rabbi goes out, he takes with him his Chazan and his *shochet* ." The second said: "When my rebbe goes out, he takes with him his *sefer Torah* as well." The third one said: "When my rebbe goes out, he takes with him his *mikvah* ."

608. Two Chasids were talking among themselves about the greatness of their rabbis. One of them said enthusiastically:

"My rabbi does not need to pray."

"Why is that?" asked his friend.

"Because he embodies prayer."

His friend answered: "My rabbi does not need to clean-up."

"Why is that?" asked the first.

"Because he embodies cleanliness."

609. A Chasid said about his rabbi: "Everyday he studies Torah and all night, he is involved with the Kabbalistic notion of unification." They said to him: "When does he sleep?" He responded: "He sleeps one hour before *tefillah* ." They responded: "have you ever seen such a man for whom one hour a day is sufficient to sleep?" The Chasid became angry and said: "Such fools in the world! When he sleeps an hour a day, it is better than all the sleep others have in a night!"

The followers of the Chasidic masters viewed their master as an intermediary between them and God. The role of the rebbe was

more than spiritual leader, all of his actions were perceived as sacred and had to be analyzed over and over again by the followers in order for them to obtain the fullest spiritual implications that an action may possess. Needless to say, the non-Chasidim viewed this type of fervor as ridiculous. Yet, Chasidism was extremely popular among the poorer classes in eastern Europe.

These previous set of jokes illustrated the degree of pride that many of the mainstream Jews perceived that the followers possessed. There were many different Chasidic disciple circles, which centered around the charismatic charm of the master as well as his *yikhes*, his family connection to the great Ba'al Shem Tov. The competition between different Chasidic factions reflected the internal power struggle of the times-- which master had was more spiritual and had a stronger connection to the word of God.

610. In a group of Chasidim and Mitnagdim, one of the mitnagdim sharply exclaimed an idea: "All the miracles, that all of you speak about, never occurred. They were only heard about and no one ever saw them." One of the Chasidim became enraged and responded: "Stupid mitnagid. There are miracles which occur each hour. With my own eyes, I have seen them... one time, I merited to sneak into the rabbi's room prior to his mystical unification. I stood in a dark corner and watched. He was the only person in the room. He sat in his chair and on the table before him was a glass pitcher... I stood and watched and I was amazed [exactly: my soul flew out from me]. At the start, he was pale and the pitcher was red. After about an hour the pitcher was pale and he was --red..."

Part of the Chasidic master's image of being more than a mere man fostered a whole body of folklore about the Tsadikim's ability to perform miracles. Some of the legends transcended their earthly



realm, such as the legend of the Maggid of Mezeritch. When the Maggid was handed a copy of the mystical book, the *Zohar*, by the Ba'al Shem Tov, he transcend back in time to Sinai and stood next Moses when he received the Torah.<sup>6</sup> Other stories spoke of small miracles, such as the classic Chasidic tale by Peretz "If Not Higher", about a rabbi who performs small miracles around the community by assisting those in need. The legends were passed from one community to another as part of an oral folklore tradition. Not only were the legends past from one Chasidic group to another, an equal number of jokes mimicking these legends appeared. Joke #610 was an example of this mocking type of humor.

611. We have a tradition that the old man, of blessed memory, merited all his days not to drink from a cup but from a flask. Why is that? He received it from the hands of the rabbis, others say he received it from his teachers, that a small sip from a flask is like a great big gulp from a glass.

The Chasidim had a reputation for enjoying life-- they had reputations for dancing drinking and eating. There are countless stories of Chasidim consuming a great deal of alcohol and getting drunk as well as being gluttons-- eating everything they could and as quickly as the could. These reputations reflected the rural, lower classes that were the origins of the Chasidic movement.

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<sup>6</sup> Elie Wiesel, Souls on Fire, Simon and Schuster, New York, 1972, page 55.

612. The grandson of the Rebbe came to a city and went to the notables of the town for them to greet him. When they were about to leave, they requested that he state a blessing. He said to them: "My friends, you all are mistaken. I am not a *tsadik* nor am I a rabbi. I am the grandson and I only know two blessings; the one over wine and '*hakol*', these two are the only ones I need for myself."

As mentioned earlier on in this chapter, one's familial connection brought an individual a great deal of honor and prestige. Rabbi Boruch, who was the patron of the jester Herschel Ostroplier, was very sensitive to accusations that he did not merit his position as Chasidic master and only obtained the stature because of his relations to the Ba'al Shem Tov.

This particular joke mimics the prestige given to the grandson of the great masters. In this example, the grandson was dined by the community but when came time to recite the proper benedictions he only knew two-- one over bread and the other over other types of food, including alcohol.

613. A Chasid was praising his rabbi in front a mitnagid. The rabbi would sit and fast all day long." The mitnagdim denied this: "With my own eyes, I have seen him eat and drink." The Chasid mocked him: "Foolish mitnagid! Even the simplest thing your brain cannot understand. He pretends to eat and drink so that all mankind would not realize that he was sitting and fasting..."

614. A mitnagid said to a group of Chasidim: "You all sit around and tell miraculous tales which you have only heard about and have not seen for yourself. It is better for me to tell all of you what I saw and you should not hear it from a stranger. You know me, you know that I am a Mitnagid son of a Mitnagid. Though once I went to the house of the old man, of blessed memory, to take his sound advise. When I came to his closed door, I wasn't permitted to enter until he opened the door. In the meantime, I was sitting and looking through the keyhole. I saw that he of blessed memory washed his hands and blessed this act with tremendous passion. First he recited '*al hatatlit*' and then '*ha motzi*'. After he blessed, he dipped a bit of bread in

salt and gave it to a fat hen. Then before my own eyes, he immediately made the hen into a heap of bones..."

615: A Chasid made a mistake and went to the bedroom of the Rebbe. He was shocked and said: "Great are the works of the Holy One blessed be He! Behold his bed-- angels were dancing around above it. Behold his wife's bed-- fornicating horses, God forbid, were upon it..."

The perception was that the Chasidim had a lust for women. The image portrayed in the joke stated that the rebbe was maintained his stature as a holy man by engaging in sexual intercourse on his wife's bed.

616: A Mitnagid went to a Tsadik and found a overflowing tray of steaming of jelly doughnuts. When the Tsadik noticed them, he took a salt container from the table and poured it completely over the doughnuts. The Mitnagid was amazed: "Why does he do that?" The Gabbai whispered: "He always does this so that he should not have too much pleasure from the doughnuts." When the Mitnagid was about to leave the Tsadik's room, he saw the wife of the Tsadik-- a beautiful woman who was healthy, and adorned in jewelry. Immediately, he bent over to the Gabbai and whispered: "How much salt does he pour on that?"

617: There is a story about a Tzadik, who was suspected of fooling around with a *shitksa*. The mitnagidim were angry at the Chasidim and held the sin of this Tsadik against them. One Chasid was angry and said to them: "May you swell [and burst!], you stupid mitnagdim asses, all your explanations are so simple. Could he have intended to satisfy his own lust? He only intended to take revenge against the Goyim-- perhaps you will become pregnant and die.

618. A group of Chasidim got to talking and decided: The later of the Tsadikim are greater then the earlier ones. About Jacob, it was said: "He didn't know that Rachel had stolen the idols". Of Moses it was said: "He didn't know that he had horns of light radiating from his head." Is it imaginable that our rebbe didn't know?" A mitnagid joined in the conversation and added: "Even I who is like Judah know that of Lot it is said: "He didn't know when she lied down and when she rose up". Is it imaginable that the rebbe didn't know?"

619: A Chasid had the practice of regularly going to visit his Tsadik once a year for the High Holydays. Once there was some sort of compelling circumstance and he didn't go. For several days the reason persisted and finally the Tsadik went to him and asked: "How come you didn't visit me for the High Holydays?" The Chasid excused himself: "Rebbe, I had some difficult

dealings and I could not bring myself to come." The Tsadik sighed: Oy... 'and therefore Your awe' [using a line from the High Holyday Mahzor] but also you fear money?" The Chasid sighed as well: Oy... 'and therefore the Tsadikim' are also concerned about money."

*Uvachen ten pechadchah* , literally meaning "and therefore, God, let Your awe..." is a line from the traditional High Holyday Mahzor, recited as part of the '*amidah* . A whole series of these phrases are linked to together in order to exclaim our respect and humility before God. The punchline mimics the line in the '*amidah* : "And therefore, the righteous shall see and be glad..."

In this particular joke, the phrase is used to demonstrate the Tsadik's greed for money. When a person visits a Tsadik, it is customary to leave a *pidyon* , a donation for the Tsadik. In this joke, the Tsadik did not receive his *pidyon* because the man did not visit. The Tsadik is therefore hinting that the man should give him a *pidyon* because it is part of the liturgy and the man should not delay in the performance of this mitzvah. The punchline mocks the Tsadik--when the man arrives to see the Tsadik, the Tsadik shall see him and be glad because the Tsadik will receive a *pidyon*.

620: A Famous Tsadik went to to visit his followers. His entourage accompanied him. By morning, they arrive at a village. Immediately, the owner of a warehouse went up to the Tsadik and requested that the Tsadik come over to his house and recite the morning prayers so that his house would be blessed because of his presence. The Gabbai said to him: "What will you give me as a *pidyon* , the redemptive donation given to a Tsadik?" The owner of the ware house said: "I will give you three-times 18." The Gabbai rebuked him: "With such a little *pidyon* as incentive, all he will be willing to do is prepare to pray in your house..."

622: A Chasid came to a Tsadik and gave him 18 gold chains as *pidyon* . After the Chasid left, the Tsadik felt one of the gold chains and he realized that it



was counterfeit and he wanted to return it. The Gabbai said to him: "Leave him alone. he cheated us out of one gold chain, but we cheated him out of 17..."

623: At a moment of light heartedness, a Tsadik asked his Gabbai: "Perhaps you are able to be like me?" The Gabbai replied: "Yes, Rebbe, I am able to do all that you do except for one thing." The Tsadik asked: "What is that one thing?" The Gabbai replied: "Rebbe, I would be able to sigh like you, 'help' the barren women like you, pray for the rich like you-- all that I would be able to do, but to grab a fistful of the *pidyon* at the end of a day from the table and put it into a pocket without a smile-- that I would not be able to do..."

section #4: In this section are the jokes about doctors and patients. This section contains several vulgar jokes which illustrates that the humor is a part of the people's everyday life. These jokes describe many folk ailments and their remedies. Therefore, researchers can observe that life of the eastern European Jews were primitive, especially in regard to their medical procedures.

890: They asked sharply: a doctor and a banker-- which of the two of them is more important before God? They respond sharply: A doctor is more important before God. For it is seen in the 10 Commandments that God puts 'Do not murder' before "do not steal".

891: A sick person is sitting before a doctor that is evaluating his way of life. "You must be careful not to get too excited, eat at regular times, walk everyday for at least one hour, sleep for at least one hour in the afternoon and no less than 8 hours at night." The patient wonders: "Mr. Doctor, if I already do this, why do I need a doctor?"

There was a great deal of skepticism of the medical professionals during the late 19th/early 20th century. Eastern Europe during this period was still evolving; culturally politically and medically. For the Jews, they were emerging as well-- from a

period of social isolation from the rest of the world. Most of the common people had a perception that medicine was practiced by charlatans or by people who had a limited more knowledge of their problems than the common folk. It was hardly the trusted profession of today. Most of the medical advances did not reach the shtetl and the medical professionals that the average person living in the shtetl encountered was most likely a second rate physicians.

Most of the remedies were based on traditional folk remedies which were passed down over generations. Folk remedies included eating or drinking mixtures of strong smelling roots and herbs, enemas, primitive forms of surgery, and simple prescriptions that were designed to prevent ailments from escalating. The average Jew could not afford elaborate tests and medical care, though they would have to travel to the large cities to obtain such care. But in most cases, it was economically feasible.

892: A question from a Jew to his rabbi that is in his city:

"Rabbi, we were taught that that a city which does not have a doctor, no Jew is permitted to dwell within. ( Sanhedrin 17b) If this is so, how is it that we are permitted to dwell within our city?"

The rabbi responded to him: "We trust in our "expert" [our Talmud scholar] and we think of him as a doctor."

The Jew returned and asked: "Rabbi, this is desirable for all the Jews of the city, but it is not desirable for our "expert" himself. It is revealed and known that he is not a doctor. If so, how is it that he is permitted to dwell within our city?"

The rabbi explained to him:

"It is a matter based on trust. We trust him and even though he knows nothing about medicine, we think of him as a doctor. Thus he too trusts each Jew within the city. Though each one of them knows nothing about medicine, he thinks of them as a doctor..."

893: A woman who is crying is at the door of Isaiah, the doctor: "My teacher Isaiah, help [me] please! My son, my only one, fell from a large cross of a Christian priest!"  
Isaiah shook his head and said: "Impossible, what does he want with a Jewish boy and for a large cross of a Christian?"

894: A prescription is in the hands of Isaiah: For all types of intestinal diseases, hard cheese is good for them. For constipation, people eat cheese that is greasy at the bottom. For shilsul, one that is dry on the bottom.

This is an example of a folk remedy. It was a common perception that the consumption of hard cheese will ease stomach pains. This joke mocks the remedy because it understands the common perception that greasy, oily cheese induces one to defecate. While it adds that drier cheese must do the opposite.

895: When Isaiah die, they found written in his notebook. I discovered: Malaria has only two proven cures, neither of them are effective...

896: Also they found written in his notebook: An enema-- its strength is good against all the diseases in the world. It is explained in the Bible [Exodus 21:24-25] "An eye for..., a tooth for..., a hand for..., a leg for ..., etc." (The pun is on *tachar*, under or bottom or in Yiddish, *tuchas* )

897: Also they found written in his notebook: a remedy for a tooth ache-- sit in hot pants on a cold oven. If it doesn't work, it didn't hurt!

898: And on the the last page of his notebook, the following was written: "Now that the angel of death stands above me, the hour has arrived to reveal to all mankind a wonderful remedy which I received from my rabbi who received it from his rabbi, all the way back to *Todros*, the doctor." This is a story which came to him from a patient, who had a tooth ache. *Todros* the doctor entered and all the doctors with him. *Todros* said: "I have received a tradition: one who has a tooth ache goes and fills his mouth with cold water, he lowers his pants to his ankles. He gets up and sits on a burning stove with a bear buttocks. He doesn't get down until the water boils in his mouth."



899: From the register of an ancient community: A tradition is passed onto us from our ancestors. A midwife must be a hunchback. If she is hunched in front and in back, there is nothing better than that.

This joke is making reference to the position the midwife remains in during childbirth. If she is bent over in both the front and the back, the joke assumes that she is in the best position to assist in the delivery of the child.

900: An old paramedic got sick. Another paramedic entered to examine him. He reached out his hand to take his pulse and the sick man said: "Between you and me, why this deception? It is only make believe. You and I know that a pulse never existed but ....."

901: An old man was sick with a dangerous sickness. A paramedic came, shaved his head, gave him an enema, drew some blood and the paramedic left. "I did all that was in my power" said the paramedic to the sick man's family, "May God be compassionate." A few moments passed and a rumor spread throughout the city-- that old man died. The paramedic was very sad and said: "Pity! I know one more remedy. I forgot and I didn't do it. I could have pulled his tooth and I didn't pull it."

902: From a lecture of an "expert": "Don't you all know how great is the science of medicine? In the past few days, a new book was published on this science. I found in it a wonderful thing-- It is prohibited to touch a dying person for whom there is no remedy except to give him an enema and he is lying on a bed with his back towards the wall. What is the plan of action? Check inside the new book and find out -- move the bed from the wall.

903: An expert paramedic enters [a house of] a sick man. When the patient reaches out his hand to have his pulse checked, The paramedic was startled: Scarlet Fever!  
Scarlet fever?--the patient responded-- Yet, I am 60 years old.  
Your shaking hand gives me my proof-- said the paramedic-- it is red.  
Red?--the patient responded again-- This is my trade. I am a painter.  
The paramedic thought and responded: You are lucky that you are a painter.  
If you weren't--then I would say that you had scarlet fever.



904: An old man got sick. A doctor came and looked at him and said: "There is no remedy for him. He is going to die."

There was one paramedic there. He put his face near the doctor's face and said: "I know a remedy for him-- an enema."

The doctor answered: "I agree. But you must know, the results of the remedy are good, already known in the world to come."

905: A cobbler got sick. A doctor came, examined him and said:

"A difficult case of typhus. I am afraid that there is no cure." The words arrived to the ears of the patient, he became strong and said: "Doctor, if that is how I am in your eyes, perhaps you will permit me one pleasure before I die? May I have some good pickled cabbage?"

The doctor thought it over and said: "You are permitted."

The patient ate-- and he recovered. The doctor was happy and noted in his journal: "A proven remedy for a bad case of typhus-- pickled cabbage."

Days passed and the same doctor was called to the house of a sick tailor. he came and examined him and said: "A bad case of typhus, your remedy-- pickled cabbage."

The patient ate and later, he died. The doctor took out his journal and noted on the side: "What do we learn from this? For a cobbler, pickled cabbage is a fine remedy, but that is not the case for a tailor."

908: They told Marcus Hertz, the well-known doctor and philosopher, about a wealthy man who would read many medical books in order to find a cure for his illness. Hertz answered: Now I know what will be his down-fall. In the end, it will be a printing mistake will be his death.

909: A woman complained before a doctor: In her life, there is no life. Her whole body hurts. She is unable to sit, to lie down, to stand.

The doctor pitied her by saying: I have returned to all my medical books but I am unable to find a remedy for you except for you to go and hang yourself.

910: A Jew asked his friend: How is your cough?

He responded: I went to the famous Dr. So-and-So and he gave me a spicy drug for diarrhea.

The first responded: Why cure diarrhea while you have a cough?

The second responded: I am not really sure, but from that moment on, I am afraid to cough.

911: An old man entered a doctor's office: What is the matter with you?-- asked the Doctor.

It is as if it has stopped raining...

How old are you? the doctor responded by asking  
I am 80 years old-- answered the old man.  
The was angry: Aren't you ashamed to bother me? It is enough that you have  
been sprinkling until now...

912: An old man was sick. A doctor came, examined him and whispered to his  
family: I am afraid it is from "Afikomen".  
From "Afikomen"?- The family responded to him-- isn't Hanukkah today?  
Yes-the doctor responded--it is Hanukkah today. But the old man has already  
eaten 80 afikomens and I do not know what the danger may be from this.

The joke describes the perception that eating too much  
matzah makes one constipated. Though it was Hanukkah, the  
doctor realized that it must be because of the matzah he has eaten  
over the years. The joke is that there is obviously no connection  
between the matzah and the the man's ailment.

913: A woman came to a non-Jewish professor. "I haven't rested during the  
day or night. My stomach pains me."  
"Since when?" the professor asked.  
"Since Tish B'Av."  
There was a serious look on the face of the professor: "Tish B'Av? What is it?"  
"It is the day that the Temple was destroyed and Israel went into exile."  
The look became more serious on the face of the professor and he responded:  
I do not know a cure for such an ailment, especially one that has been rooted  
for two thousand years!

The irony of this joke is that the Gentile doctor assumes that it  
was the holyday that was the cause of her pain. The joke  
comments that there is no cure for the problem of the Jewish  
people. The ironic twist of the joke is that Tish B'Av is a fast-day,  
one is not permitted to eat. Therefore, it is ironic that she  
developed a stomach ailment on that day.

914: A doctor is invited to see a sick person. The doctor examines him and  
shakes his hands and says: "There is no cure for him." Several days passed

and the patient recovers. When this thing was told to the doctor, he answered: "Certainly, there was no remedy for him according to Halacha."

915: The wife of a doctor gave birth. On Shabbat, the doctor went the synagogue to receive a "*mi sheberach*" for the woman who gave birth. The *shamus* called him to the Torah. The rabbi said precisely: The third may ascend to the Torah.

The register said to him: Rabbi, for him are you so precise. If they said a father and a rabbi-- a rabbi goes first because he brings life to the world to come. For a rabbi and a doctor, even the more so should the rabbi go first because he definitely brings life to the world to come.

916: Rabbi Azel Harif was sick. They brought a famous doctor to him from Vilna. The doctor examined him and said: There is no advice against the drawn sword of the angel of death. Several days later, the famous doctor met Rabbi Aiyzel walking in the street of Vilna. He began to wonder and after meeting rabbi Azel, he said to him: Rabbi, blessed is God who did for you a miracle and cured you.

Rabbi Azel responded to him: You made two mistakes: I am not well but I died. God didn't do for me a miracle but for you He did a miracle. It happened like this: When I died and I ascended to heaven, I heard a decree issued there-- "All doctors to Hell" And you were there. My compassion came out for you and I informed the court up above that you were not a doctor at all and immediately they took you away from the decree.

917: Rabbi Azel was saying: Why do they call them doctors? To teach you that they are similar to ghosts. What dies knows nothing and likewise they too know nothing.

This joke is a pun of the Hebrew word רופא, which means either a doctor or a ghost. In the Bible, the word has two meanings. The first definition is the Hebrew *rofeh*, רופא, meaning to heal. The second definition of *rofim*, רופאים, means the inhabitants of Sheol, people who have died, i.e. ghosts. The latter connotation of ghosts is a later interpretation, appearing first in the wisdom literature of the Bible. This definition of the word is most likely not originally Hebrew, but a loan word from another Semetic language.

918: He was saying: Why is the language Latin called a dead language?  
Because of the doctors, who are partners with the angel of death, are using it.

**Section #5:** The last series of translated jokes are from the Epstein and Zeldner's edition of Modern Hebrew Literature.<sup>7</sup> The editors provided a wide variety of different Hebrew literary styles, designed to teach Hebrew to high school students. It includes different short stories, essays and poems from a variety of authors such as Bialik and Peretz as well as a selection of jokes from the Druyanov collection. The selections also include a biographical note about the author and vocabulary lists:

1. What is the difference between an Englishman, a Frenchman, a German and a Jew? The Englishman, when he hears a joke, laughs three times: Once when he hears it; the second time, when he tells it to another; the third, when he understands it. The Frenchman is told a joke, he laughs twice: Once when he hears it, the second time when he tells another; he never quite understands it. The German when he hears a joke laughs once: when he hears it. He is not gifted to tell it to another nor to understand it. When a Jew hears a joke, he doesn't laugh at all: he already knows it.

2. A guest came to a village and entered an inn to eat. "What you want to eat?" asked the innkeeper. "Meat and fish" replied the guest. "We do not have fish" the innkeeper said. "In our village there is no river... Meat we have only on Shabbat". "If so, bring me butter, cream, cheese." There is none, my cousin" the woman sighed-- "there are several missed stops by the milkman." "There is no advice. Give me one herring". "There is none, my cousin. My husband has not yet returned from the city." "Do you have bread?" The innkeeper stared angrily at him and growled: "In all my days, I never saw a Jewish glutton like this."

3. Children from Tel Aviv sat and discussed in *Chevruta* : "What is snow?" One boy from the group and said: "Snow is sugar". A second boy contradicted

<sup>7</sup> George L. Epstein and Max Zeldner, editors, Modern Hebrew Literature, Hebrew Publishing Company, New York, first printing- 1948, second printing 1965, pages 212-222.



him: "Idiot! Perhaps you have heard in your lifetime of a man drinking tea with snow?" The first boy asked: "What then is snow?" The second said: "Snow is ice." The first contradicted the second: "Stupid! There is ice only in the summer and it is sold for money..."

4. It was the first night of Chanukah. A woman from Tel Aviv came to Ein-Charod, wearing rouge and lipstick. A boy from Ein-Charod looked at her and said: "Mother, we have Chanukah today, but in Tel Aviv, they are already celebrating Purim".

5. A Jew entered his house and found his son sitting with the Hebrew tutor studying "Kaddish". The Jew was angry: "I am disgusted that you teach 'kaddish' to my son?" The tutor answered: "Don't worry, until your son learns 'kaddish' you will die alone in your life..."

6. On Tish B'Av, a boy went to the cemetery with his father and read the tombstones: "Here lies the master of compassion"... "Here lies the righteous rabbi"... "Here lies a giver and doer of charity at all times"... The boy turned his eyes away from the tombstones and said to his father: "Father, are there no thieves who ever died?"

7. They say about Jewish Education in America: In the beginning of the "semester", when the tutor arrives to teach the student about 'the prayerbook'. The student hides. In the middle of the semester, when the tutor requested his fee, the father hides. At the end of the sessions, when the father comes to examine the student, the teacher hides.

8. A Jew and a Gentile sat in one of the railroad cars and discussed the war. The Gentile said: "The Jews are totally to blame. They have always brought on the war." The Jew responded: "You are mistaken. Bicycles are to blame. They have always been the cause of the war." The Gentile was amazed: "Bicycles, how so?" The Jew responded to him: "The Jews, how so?"

9. Two Germans entered a train car and found that a majority of the passengers to be Jewish. One of the Germans growled and said to his friend in a thunderous voice: "I would give a lot of money in order to find a nice place without Jews. One Jew answered him: "For free, I will show you a place as nice as any other." Angrily the German asked: "Where?" The Jew replied: "In your cemetery..."

10. Woodrow Wilson died and they immediately opened the gates of the Garden of Eden for him. He was one of the righteous Gentiles from the nations of the world during his life. In the Garden of Eden, he became acquainted with Moses Ben Amram, and Moses said to him: "Perhaps you know what mankind has done, in the world below, to your 14 point plan?" Wilson replied: "Perhaps you know what mankind has done, in the world below, to your 10 commandments?"

The "14 point plan" was Wilson's peace proposal that he presented at Versailles Peace Conference in 1918. It was designed to end World War I, dismantle the German Empire, create the League of Nations and prevent the reoccurrence of another global conflict.

11. "Rebbe"-- A Chasid complained to his rabbi-- "what am I and my son to do for room in my house because my apartment is so small?" "Go and bring your goat into your apartment!" The Chasid wondered, but did as the Rabbi commanded. After a few days, the Chasid returned: "Rebbe, there is no place for my head [i.e. to lie down] in my apartment." The rabbi said: "Go, bring in all your roosters and hens into your apartment!" The Chasid bowed his head and did as the rabbi said. The Chasid returned again: "Rabbi, I have exhausted my strength... There is not enough room to sit down in my apartment." The Rabbi said to him: "Go, expel the goat from your house!". The next day, the Chasid burst into the room of the rabbi and his face was beaming: "Rebbe, I am relieved..."

12. "Rebbe"-- A Jew complained to the rabbi that is in his city-- "I consented and married my daughter to a man who is not respectable. I do not see any remedy for her except for him to divorce her and give her a *ketuba*." The rabbi asked: "What terrible thing have you found in him?" The Jew sighed and responded: "He does not know how to play cards." The rabbi wondered: "Why all the excitement? I wish no Jew would know how to play cards." The Jew responded: "Of course, Rebbe, you are right. And in truth, my son-in-law doesn't know, but he plays..."

13. An author brought to Rabbi Ayzel the Wise his essay, that he entitled "The Hands of Moses". Rabbi Ayzel read casually the essay and said to the author: "You shouldn't have entitled the essay 'The Hands of Moses', rather 'The face of Moses'. The author asked why. The rabbi replied: "The Torah already testified that in the face of Moses no man was able to look..."

14. In the beginning, when Sholom Aleichem was rich, he had a trade business and only at certain times, did he set aside for writing. After some time, he lost his money and had no business except for writing only. From then on, he was sometimes in need of charity/loan, in the manner of Jewish writers. Once a friend asked: "What is your situation/standing?" "Thank God" Sholom Aleichem responded-- "I sit on Torah, on worship and on acts of loving kindness..."

15. Moses Mendelsohn served as a bookkeeper to a wealthy merchant who did not know how to treat his employee that was worthy of it. Once, one of his

friends asked Ben Menachem: "See, you always said that 'the way of God is straight', and how straight is it that an ignoramus like your boss, God gives him such wealth and to the wise such as yourself, He gave nothing?" Ben Menachem replied: "On the contrary, from this we see the proof of 'the way of God is straight'. Perhaps He did not give my boss wealth, from where was this man's life? And perhaps I-- one who is in need has such wealth? MY wisdom stands for me."

16. Ben Menachem was a hunchback and he fell in love with Fromet Gugenheim, a maiden of blessed grace and the daughter of an important merchant in Hamburg. One day Fromet asked him: "Is it really the truth that an angel proclaims the mate for a man in heaven?" Ben Menachem replied: "I am a witness to this. When my time arrived to earth, the angel proclaimed also a mate for me. I said to him: 'I want to see my soulmate'...The angel answered by saying: 'Here she is before you.' I looked at her and I saw that a hunchback was standing with me. For one moment I was frightened and immediately I said to the angel: 'The redemptional price will be her soul that this woman is not wonderful, I will be a hunchback on the world below.' The angel replied to me and did according to my wishes: she was as upright as a palm, and I married her as it was decreed in the beginning..." Fromet heard and she responded: "When the angel proclaimed this, he will arise..."

17. A young provincial man was prepared to introduce himself to a young woman from the big city-- to see and be seen. Before he went there, the *shadchan* spoke to him: "for your own sake, know this: a woman is won by three conversations; the first conversation is about family; the second is about love; the third is about philosophy. If you succeed in all three, good for you!" The young man remembered what he learned from the *shadchan*. When he met with the young woman, he opened by asking her: "Do you have any brothers and sisters?" "No"-- the young woman responded-- "I am the only one to my mother and father." The young man asked again, "Do you love milk noodles?" "No"-- the young woman replied-- "I do not love milk noodles." The young man sat and thought: I properly brought up the first two-- family and love; now I am in need of the final one-- philosophy. And immediately he asked the young woman: "If you had brothers and sister, would you love milk noodles?"

18. A young man married a young woman, and in the following summer, she gave birth to a son. Immediately, he wrote a telegram to his father and mother: "My wife bore a son, Gimpel." His father-in-law saw the telegram and said: "Come and I will teach you about the ways of [writing] telegrams. This rule should be in your hand. There is no need to write an extra word than what was needed in the telegram, but there are extra words in your telegram. First why 'Gimpel'? Your father and mother understand that everyone else would make it known in the marketplace that a son was born to him. Second, why "my wife"? Should it be

understood that another woman bore a son for you? Third, why "bore"? From heaven falls to you a son? (How do I translate this line?) Fourth, Why a "son"? In all my days I never seen someone announce the birth of a daughter...

19. Here is a difficult question: What is the difference between an optimist and a pessimist? The reply: Here is a doughnut. An optimist examines it and sees what is around the hole. The pessimist examines it and sees only the hole.

20. Two Jews sat across from each other in a train. One of them lifted his hand every other minute and waved across his face as if he was swating a fly. The other said to him: What are you doing? Perhaps you are sick, heaven forbid? God no! The trip was boring so I decided to tell myself jokes, and sure enough each joke that I thought of, I already knew it to begin with and immediately I shooed it...



## Chapter 7: Conclusion

In chapter 7, I have tried to show that the function of humor is to make us aware of the absurdity of the world. When we are aware of the absurdity of the world, we are able to see it as it is, and not as we wish it to be. This is the first step in the process of understanding the world. The second step is to see the world as it is, and not as we wish it to be. This is the second step in the process of understanding the world. The third step is to see the world as it is, and not as we wish it to be. This is the third step in the process of understanding the world.

— Jewish humor is usually satirical. It is about something. It is especially fond of certain specific topics, such as people, family, business, anti-Semitism, wealth and poverty, death, and survival.

What is the importance of Jewish humor? Humor encompasses who we are and what we think. In his dedication to his book, entitled Jewish Wit, Theodore Reik wrote that true wisdom can be found in the words of jest. Jokes and witticisms are more than words that entertain us, they identify us as part of a people, they express our fears and concerns, they bring us comfort and joy as well as serving as an expression of our anger, a type of weapon of words. The study of Jewish humor is a study of the Jewish people on different levels: psychological, cultural, social, economic, political and spiritual. Each joke contains insights into the understanding of who are the Jewish people.

As explained in chapter #2, creating a totally functional definition of Jewish humor is an almost impossible task. Each theoretical prospective, whether Freudian psychoanalytic or nationalistic, offers an insight into the complex nature of Jewish humor. Though I do not like to generalize any particular theory, I offer these broad statements in full awareness of the possible futility of the exercise:

-- Jewish humor is usually substantive; it is about something. It is especially fond of certain specific topics, such as people, family, business, antisemitism, wealth and poverty, health, and survival.

Jewish humor is fascinated by the use of logic. At the same time, it uses the reality of the world in order to point out the absurdity that exists within it.

-- As a social or religious commentary, Jewish humor can be sarcastic, descriptive or resigned. Sometimes the impact of the joke is not measure by laughter but rather by a bitter nod or commiserating sigh of recognition. Jewish humor expressed the pain and anguish of the people better than any other narrative style because of the power of humor to denigrate the pain to the point where one can adjust to it and live with it. Humor gives us the strength to be survivors.

--Jewish humor tends to be anti-authoritarian. It ridicules grandiosity and self-indulgence, exposes hypocrisy and vents the community's frustration of having a second class status within the general society. Jewish humor illustrates that the common folk are worthy individuals and should possess self-dignity in their difficult environment.

-- Jewish humor frequently creates discomfort in order to make its point. Often its thrust is political-- aimed at individuals who cannot be criticized in a direct fashion. This applies to prominent figures in the general society, as well as to those in the Jewish world: rabbis, cantors, synagogue officials, sages, teachers, doctors, businessmen, matchmakers and the rich and the poor. In general, one characteristic that is present throughout Jewish humor is the conflict

between the common people and the power structure-- whether that is an individual Jew facing the Jewish community, the Jew facing the Gentile world, or the Jewish community in relation to the rest of the world.

--Jewish humor mocks everything-- including the narrator. The humor can possess an ironic twist with regard to the narrator. It is characteristically self-deprecating. Jewish humor mocks itself-- especially the Jewish community. It frequently satirizes religious personalities and institutions as well as ritual and *Halacha*, Jewish law. At the same time, it affirms religious traditions and practices, seeking a new understanding for man in his struggle to understand God and the world.

Equally as fascinating as the understanding of the function of Jewish humor within the Jewish society is the understanding of the function of the study of Jewish humor. Why did some of the writers of the early 20th century, such as Alter Druyanov, dedicate much of their lives to the preservation and the study of Jewish humor? The early Zionist editors and writers had an important role in the transition of Jewish society. Starting with the *Haskalah*, the period of enlightenment, which swept through eastern Europe during the mid 19th century and culminating with the establishment of the state of Israel, Jewish society went through a series of radical changes which brought the Jewish community into the modern era. These writers were involved with evolution of the new Jewish world.



Writing expanded beyond the realm of religious thought. New literary avenues were explored: fiction, plays, poetry and essays that commented on the changes within the Jewish environment. Editors such as Druyanov played an important role in the transition of the Jewish mind from life limited to the primitive world of the shtetl to life within the Jewish nation. The collection and study of Jewish humor was a part of this national revival. It demonstrated that the Jewish people had its own distinct form of humor which further validated its claim to be a separate nation.

The Druyanov collection illustrated the life within the Jewish society of the 19th century as it appeared before the onset of radical social changes brought about by the Russian revolutions of 1905 and 1917 as well as the reshaping of Europe caused by World War I. Unfortunately, Druyanov did not provide sufficient background for many of the jokes. His editorial style lacked the addition of historical facts and he did not provide a historical framework pertaining to the origin of the jokes. Druyanov believed that these additions would cause the jokes to lose their folk nature and they would become his versions of the jokes and witticisms. He desired to preserve the jokes in their purest form.

The challenge of writing this thesis was to absorb selections of this anthology of humor, including all the subtle nuances and hidden references, and reconstruct Jewish life in eastern Europe. Such a task was not an easy one because many of the jokes lacked references to

a specific time or place. What I did develop was a general overview of different aspects of Jewish life-- different socio-economic groups and unique personalities such as the rabbis, cantors, matchmakers, etc. Druyanov's collection of jokes covered the entire spectrum of relationships within the Jewish community. What remained was for someone to attempt to place these jokes within the boundaries of socio-historical perspective. That was the goal I established for myself. I must admit that my research only scratched the surface. There remains a great deal more research to be done, more jokes to be translated and laughter to be heard.

As I concluded my research, I asked myself the same question that I began this thesis with-- "what is 'Jewish' in Jewish humor?" The answer is that it is the laughter of survival. The Jewish people have survived oppression and persecution throughout the centuries. Yet, it is my opinion that the gift of laughter has given Jews the strength to survive. A people devoid of laughter and the ability to rejoice will surely perish. Without laughter, are we truly alive?

Ironically, the Hebrew word to laugh is *tzechok*. The same name is given to Abraham's son, whom he brought to Mount Moriah to be offered as a sacrifice to God. It is appropriate that the Jewish people are B'nai Yitzhak, the children of Isaac, because they, too, have survived near extermination. How did the Jewish people manage to survive? No one can identify exactly what characteristic within the Jewish psyche helps the Jewish people survive. But, in

my opinion, the ability to laugh and to joke is an important component to Jewish survival.

"Rebbe"-- A Chasid complained to his rabbi-- "what am I and my son to do with my family so numerous that they make my apartment so small?" "Go and bring your goat into your apartment!" The Chasid wondered, but did as the rabbi commanded. After a few days, the Chasid returned: "Rebbe, there is no place for me to lie down in my apartment." The rabbi said: "Go, bring in all your roosters and hens into your apartment!" The Chasid bowed his head and did as the rabbi said. The Chasid returned again: "Rabbi, I have exhausted my strength... There is not enough room to sit down in my apartment." The rabbi said to him: "Go, expel the goat from your house. Put the roosters and the hens back into the barn." The next day, the Chasid burst into the room of the rabbi laughing and his face was beaming: "Rebbe, you have given me new life; I have room to live..."

Like the Chasid in this joke, the Jewish people have managed to survive. They have coped with their hardships. Life for Jews living in eastern Europe during the end of the 19th century was extremely hard. Not only was it a struggle to provide for oneself and family the essentials-- food, clothing and shelter, there were additional hardships place upon them through acts of antisemitism-- pogroms, high taxation, compulsory military training, quotas, travel restrictions, etc. One of the greatest treasures that remains from that period is the humor-- the ability to laugh and rejoice...

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