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# “Jewish” Stand-Up Comedy in a “Post-Covid” Era

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**Abstract**
This thesis treats Jewish comedy, Jewish atheism, and Jewish conceptions of the afterlife. It also examines the intersection of these concepts, particularly in the contemporary moment. This thesis argues that since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, there has been a palpable shift in professional comedians utilizing comedy as a coping mechanism and discussing grief and the afterlife from the stage. Exploring the incongruity between atheism while purporting a belief in the afterlife, this thesis highlight the recent work of three Jewish comedians who lost beloved people since 2020. The comedians examined herein are Rachel Bloom, Sarah Silverman, and Marc Maron who lost dear friends, parents, and partners, respectively. The thesis concludes by suggesting that these comedians serve as exemplars of exploring grief and shifting belief in ways applicable to the contemporary Reform rabbinate.

Key Words: atheism, comedy, afterlife, grief, God, Rachel Bloom, Sarah Silverman, Marc Maron, COVID-19

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"The surest way to destroy the humor of a funny story is to analyze it."[1]

**Preface**

When the COVID pandemic first began and Los Angeles locked down, just before my mom unexpectedly died, the thing I missed most acutely and whose future I worried about the most was live comedy. I had been accustomed to going to the Upright Citizen Brigade's tiny theater on Franklin Avenue in Hollywood most Friday and Sunday evenings when I would come home from college. Having graduated in December 2019 and anticipating a year in Israel for rabbinical school, I was planning to go to as many UCB improv shows as I could afford. At no more than eight dollars a ticket, I was gearing up for a lot of shows, silliness, and belly laughs. Meanwhile, I was relishing being back home in Los Angeles, imagining all the shows I could see, envisioning my family parking on La Cienega to stand in line for first-come, first-serve seating at the Largo at the Coronet.

I spent my adolescence devouring comedy videos on YouTube, singing along to offensive songs, and looking up definitions as necessary on Urban Dictionary. I had clear computer rules and privileges; I also had very open parents who had used rap songs as lullabies and cursed, whether or not they were singing lyrics. My parents thought Bo Burnham's early music was as witty and humorous as I did. I have always enjoyed a clever joke, a brilliant pun, and a humorous window into the absurd.

With access to comedy on the internet and in person having been so formative a part of my upbringing and social life, I worried what COVID would do to this industry that brought me so much joy. By the end of 2020, one of UCB's Los Angeles theaters would close for lack of financial stability. Recorded stand-up specials felt trite, no longer speaking to the reality in

[1] Henry R. Spalding, ed., *Encyclopedia of Jewish Humor From Biblical times to the Modern Age* (New York: Jonathan David Publishers, 1969), XIII.

which we lived. In May of 2021, just as much of the world finally had access to vaccines, Netflix released Bo Burnham's special, recorded from his home, called *Inside*. The absurdist show reckons with Burnham's past insensitivity in his comedy, his particular experience of the global lockdown, and most poignantly, with his depression. With unkempt hair and beard, Burnham sings, "Woke up at 11:30, feeling like a bag of shit" while a chorus made of layered recordings of his own voice responds "Oh, no!" While much of the special exists within the classic Burnham style – one-man show in a t-shirt utilizing dark humor –, the overarching aura of the show is plain sad. This uncomfortably depressing show was the standard bearer for what comedy looked, felt, and sounded like in the wake of COVID-19.

By the time live comedy was safe again, I was champing at the bit to return to a boisterous community. My first show back was in the summer of 2021. It was an unnamed show starring Rachel Bloom at Dynasty Typewriter at the Hayworth. This intimate venue required each person who attended, hungry for comedic community, to provide proof of vaccination, a negative COVID test, and a legitimate mask. The show was largely about Space Jam and the Northridge earthquake, particularly germane for my dad and step-dad both born and raised in the San Fernando Valley and parents of young children in the late 1990s. Meanwhile, within the stuffy theater, I was experiencing one of my first panic attacks and a raging stress headache, so absolutely terrified of being back in the world, shoulder to shoulder with strangers. Eventually, Bloom began discussing the difficult experience she had at her daughter's birth and the baby's subsequent hospitalization. She then spoke of the death of her creative partner, Adam Schlessinger, from COVID. The show turned raw, real, and vulnerable. I missed my mom and my heart broke when I looked over at my step-dad with tears running

down his cheeks at the mention of the word "widower." Maybe it was too soon for the world of live comedy, at least for us. Instead of laughing through the pain, we just hurt.

The seeds in Bloom's unnamed show eventually blossomed into her special *Death, Let Me Do My Show,* now a Netflix special. She slashed all of the Northridge earthquake content in an attempt to appeal to a broader audience. I saw this show live once in full and saw Bloom workshop it in other live venues. Two years after my family and I sat through the show at Dynasty Typewriter, I went to a show at the Largo. Called "Comedy Pole Show," the set featured a rotating cast of comedians and pole dancers who took turns on the stage. Rachel Bloom sang some of her songs from *Death, Let Me do My Special*. My main impulse for going, though, was to see Sarah Silverman live, an opportunity I had yet to have. She emerged from the stage to uproarious applause, did a classically raunchy bit, and – unexpectedly – spoke candidly about the recent deaths of her step-mom and dad. That night I realized that, although I was no longer having panic attacks in theaters, there was still something *different* about comedy now. It was no longer clear to me what the job of the comedian in a post-COVID world, or at least a world in which it was safe enough to gather, would be. What becomes of the comedians when they themselves struggle with mental illness, depression, and grief? What becomes of comedy?

I had long been aware that hardship has the propensity to engender comedy. Not only is humor sometimes the best coping mechanism for dealing with difficult things, communal strife is inherently a shared event which is ripe comedic ground. COVID affected all humanity. Of course some people were affected more than others depending on their own health, socioeconomic status, or relationship to vaccines. COVID, like other disastrous moments in human history, was ultimately a unifying event, the whole world had a new experience,

vocabulary, and tragedy to make light of. I realized that the post-COVID world of comedy could not *not* address the pandemic; it reshaped the things that were laughable.

I also realized that some of my favorite comedians were speaking of the afterlife, Jewish text and ritual, and their grief in explicit and poignant ways. Perhaps I am more attuned to the grief and Jewishness of stand-up comedy than other listeners, but to me an undeniable pattern was emerging: stand-up comedy was becoming an arena to process grief. Further, in processing grief, Jewish comedians were wrestling with their own beliefs about the afterlife. In particular, I noticed that atheist comedians in particular – perhaps because they are more popular than their religious counterparts – seemed to be utilizing their art to explore aspects of the unknown, especially death and grief. This, to me, felt incongruous. How could atheists have a view of the afterlife? Is it not more, or just as, difficult to imagine or believe in an afterlife than it is to believe in God? How do avowed cynicism and rationalism mesh with a non-scientific belief in the afterlife? How, and *why*, can these questions and their answers be funny?

This thesis treats relationships among various phenomena: Jewish stand-up comedy, living in a post-Covid world, grief, theology, and Jewish conceptions of the afterlife. In looking at the recent work of three proudly Jewish and proudly atheist comedians, all of whom have experienced the loss of close loved ones since 2020, I explore the concept of Jewish humor in a post-COVID era. The superficial incongruence between atheism, on one hand, and a belief in the afterlife, on the other, is a rich ground for theological and sociological research. Further, since comedy is a cultural feature of American Jewish life and deeply tied to personal and historical events, the COVID-19 pandemic serves as a critical moment that not only changed the stand-up industry, but also comedians' personal lives and stories. Further, this thesis

explores further questions such as: What is it that draws atheist Jewish comedians to Jewish ritual, text, and resources? What does it mean to explore grief in the framework of comedy? How do comedians shape how people think about Jews and even, how Jews think about themselves? My research will be limited to American Jewish comedians who have spoken frankly about their loss, grief, and disavowal of a God concept; namely Rachel Bloom, Sarah Silverman, and Marc Maron.

This thesis draws on previous research into humor as a coping mechanism, especially for Ashkenazi Jews in the United States, but it will prove novel in its preliminary exploration of what such comedy looks like in a post-COVID moment. Humor is a conventional coping mechanism for pain and loss, and COVID presents a fertile landscape of grief whose effects on Jewish humor have not yet adequately been explored in any significant fashion. This exploration of comedy in a post-COVID world should prove helpful to religious leaders who will have to contend with COVID's collateral personal and political effects for years to come. My emerging rabbinate has already been shaped by COVID, but I find it useful to spend time exploring it, writing about it, and being prepared to face it further in the future. Ultimately, this study will prove useful in my rabbinate, and for others, who will continue to encounter personal grief and grief of constituents in years to come.

## Introduction

Oceans of ink have been written on skies of paper to try and define terms such as "Judaism," "Jews," and "Jewish." The elusiveness of these English[1] terms originates in complicated issues of translation, ethnicity, nationality, religiosity, and more. Similarly, defining "comedy" remains elusive as senses of humor change with the vicissitudes of time. Yet, any academic work that wishes to say something about "Jewish comedy" warrants a working definition of the phrase and its component parts.

For the purposes of this thesis, appropriately narrow in scope, what counts as "Jewish" will actually be understood quite liberally. There are two primary subjects that I will apply the adjective "Jewish" to throughout this study, namely individual comedians and their comedic product. Each of the individual comedians I study *are* Jewish. Each of them has Jewish parentage, a lifelong awareness of their Judaism, and incorporates their Jewish identity into their comedy. Each of them, also, espouses a non-belief in God, ranging from "I just don't give a fuck"[2] to admitted "godlessness"[3] and atheism. None of them engage in Jewish practice. The most compelling adjective, then, to describe the Jewishness of the examined comedians is "cultural," as opposed to religious, traditional, et cetera.

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[1] "Jew," as a word in the English language, derives from an age-old linguistic battle about how to translate Hebrew terms applied to those who eventually became Jews such as *yehudi* and *ivri*. This persistent debate colors all attempts to define "Jew," say versus "Judean," as a uniquely English-language issue.

[2] John Serb, "Marc Maron's confessional comedy touches on religion, loneliness and, yes, cats, in LaughFest show (review)," MLive, 16 March 2012, https://www.mlive.com/entertainment/grandrapids/2012/03/marc_marons_confessional_comed.html. In this article Maron does more explicitly quote "I am not an atheist, I just don't give a fuck." Regardless, this quip in conversation with most of his other public takes on God and theology still place him firmly in the camp of non-theist and his more explicitly atheist avowals elsewhere.

[3] Sarah Silverman's favorite epithet.

Cynthia Baker, as part of a keywords book series, attempts to define "Jew." But, the word "Jew," she writes, has "such persistent malleability…throughout history."[4] Baker explains the dilemma as follows:

> In a very real sense, then, classifying Jew as one or another kind of entity—as naming a member of a race, ethnicity, religion (or ethno-religion), class, or nation (or even gender)—is a matter of changing fashion and context that reveals more about reigning paradigms and the concerns of those doing the classifying than about the "nature" or "substance" of the object/subject thus labeled.[5]

This unstable signifier,[6] Jew, cannot actually be defined. Does it merely mean "an other"? Does its application mandate a certain set of beliefs? A set of actions? Ultimately the answers to these questions shift with geography and chronology. Judaism, ultimately, "has no essence" and "cannot be defined."[7]

Regardless, in contemporary America, the "reigning paradigm" demands that the three comedians examined herein are indeed "Jew." Their embrace of American Jewish culture, and indeed stereotype, *even* as they may deride it, situates them within an accepted definition of Jew in this place at this time.

Comedy, too, is an unstable signifier. In a 16th century essay on poetic theory, Sir Philip Sidney writes, "comedy [is] an imitation of the common errors of our life."[8] This definition, though perhaps stable throughout time and place, highlights the transience of

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[4] Cynthia Baker, *Jew* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2017), 2.
[5] Baker, *Jew*, 44.
[6] Baker, *Jew*, 70.
[7] Gershom Scholem, "Judaism" in *Contemporary Jewish Religious Thought: Original Essays on Critical Concepts, Movements, and Beliefs*, eds. Arthur A. Cohen and Paul Mendes-Flohr (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2009), 505.
[8] "Essay on Poetic Theory: The Defence of Poesy by Sir Philip Sidney," Poetry Foundation, 12 October 2009, https://www.poetryfoundation.org/articles/69375/the-defence-of-poesy.

comedy itself. It requires an understanding of "our," that is a shared cultural milieu and "life," that is a finite existence. Further, this definition requires a comedian to understand what counts as an "error," which mistakes count as funny foibles. Finally, "imitation" demands that a comedian discern what from life may be funny to any given audience, which may shift throughout historical eras, yes, but also in between sets.

Comedy as a genre requires a sense of surprise. "The first theory [of humor]," writes Arthur Asa Berger, "argues that humor is based on some kind of incongruity - that is, what we get is not what we expect."[9] This shock-value is not only another reason why pinning down what is funny remains elusive, but also allows for things that may be categorically unfunny, like human mortality, to actually figure into comedy. The incongruous and enigmatic nature of comedy will be examined more rigorously below.

What, then, of Jewish comedy? If both Jewishness and comedy remain elusive, how can we approach a definition of them in tandem? If we accept that both "Jewish" and "comedy" are terms that rely on particular social-cultural contexts, then we can actually approach a working understanding of "Jewish comedy" today. There are scholars who would argue that certain books of the *Tanakh* are funny in their contexts.[10] I have peers that find certain Talmudic stories hilarious. Yet, various subsets of contemporary Jews may either take these documents entirely seriously, without a shred of humor, *or* as mere historical artifacts, with little to offer let alone humor. To define "Jewish comedy" today requires a certain scope.

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[9] Arthur Asa Berger, *The Genius of the Jewish Joke* (Northvale: Jason Aronson, 1997), 3.
[10] See Rachel Adler, "A Carnival At the Gates: Jonah and Laughter on Yom Kippur" in *Beginning Anew: A Woman's Companion To the High Holy Days,* eds. Judith A. Kates and Gail Twersky Reimer (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997) on the Book of Jonah and Jeremey Dauber, *Jewish Comedy: A Serious History* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2017) on the Book of Esther.

Jeremy Dauber offers seven criteria to define Jewish comedy throughout history. Though he first admits that artists "use multiple techniques at once; and comedy tends to blur boundaries anyway," he still outlines "guidelines, ideal types" for the genre.

1. Jewish comedy is a response to persecution and antisemitism.
2. Jewish comedy is a satirical gaze at Jewish social and communal norms.
3. Jewish comedy is bookish, witty, intellectual allusive play.
4. Jewish comedy is vulgar, raunchy, and body-obsessed.
5. Jewish comedy is mordant, ironic, and metaphysically oriented.
6. Jewish comedy is focused on the folksy, everyday, quotidian Jew.
7. Jewish comedy is about the blurred and ambiguous nature of Jewishness itself.[11]

These seven commandments, if you will, allow a rubric for any remark to trickle through to determine if it is Jewish comedy. Throughout this case study, I will evaluate the comedians and their jokes using these criteria. Oftentimes, one joke may play in multiple categories and other times the comedians will struggle to extract themselves from the criterion they are most associated with. Importantly, Dauber hedges his criteria and cushions them on both sides from stasis. He readily admits that comedy blurs boundaries *and* that Jewishness itself is ambiguous. Regardless, he asserts rigidity to the form. It is with this audacity that I hope to proceed. Acknowledging the flexibility of terms will not deter me from asserting that the comedians and their product examined in this thesis are indeed Jewish.

One more phrase from the title of this work requires elaboration, "post-COVID." Of course the coronavirus, which began spreading in the end of 2019 and became a global

[11] Jeremey Dauber, *Jewish Comedy: A Serious History* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2017), XIV.

pandemic by the spring of 2020, is still around. As of last week, there are 200 people in Los Angeles County hospitals with the disease.[12] Millions of people have perished from COVID worldwide and an unknowable amount of people continue to suffer with the whole-body symptoms of long COVID. Despite its persistent toll on humanity, the acute phase of the pandemic is undoubtedly of the past. No longer are masks mandatory; vaccines have bequeathed humanity the opportunity to gather again. Many have returned to normal life and the World Health Organization officially announced an end to the public health emergency in 2023. Yet, perhaps like "Jewish" and "comedy," pandemics and their ends are hard to statically define. As Jamie Ducharme wrote in *Time* in March 2024, "experts can't agree if we're still in a pandemic."[13] NPR journalists concur: "more clarity when describing the stage we're in now would be helpful."[14] Throughout this work, the boundaries of the pandemic will continue to remain elusive. Yet, each of the stand-up sets examined as case studies, notably were populated with a live, largely-unmasked audience. This telling fact alludes to the fact that though COVID persists, the era of acuity is indeed a thing of the past. As such, post-COVID is an apt descriptor for this new era of comedy.

[12] I wrote this sentence on 19 November 2024 and received the data from the Los Angeles County Department of Public Health website. As of 1 March 2025, the link is no longer active and instead leads to a page reading "With significantly reduced risks to the general public associated with COVID-19 infections, Public Health has retired the COVID-19 Data Dashboard." This fact indicates that though the COVID-19 virus is still circulating, human society is more clearly persisting in a post-COVID state. That said, the distinct end of the pandemic has yet to be dated.

[13] Jamie Ducharme, "Experts Can't Agree If We're Still in a Pandemic," Time, 11 March 2024, https://time.com/6898943/is-covid-19-still-pandemic-2024/.

[14] Kelly McBride, "What is post-pandemic?," NPR, 13 July 2023, https://www.npr.org/sections/publiceditor/2023/07/13/1187493251/what-is-post-pandemic.

## Chapter 1 - Setting the Stage

*Jews and Humor as a Coping Mechanism*

In returning to Dauber's first criterion for Jewish comedy, that it "is a response to persecution," we may begin to explore the extent to which Jewish people, let alone Jewish comedians, have utilized humor as a coping mechanism. Dauber writes, "I believe the comic impulse - for Jews and others - is like water, and it flows wherever and however people are willing to find it funny."[1] Not only does the description of this impulse help color the fluid nature of comedy, it also insinuates that even things typically not thought to be funny such as oppression and grief, *can* be humorous if people are willing to laugh at them. Dauber cites the earliest sources of Jewish humor in the Bible and believes the Book of Esther counts as Jewish comedy according to his first criterion. He claims the ancient book asks the same questions that contemporary Jews may wonder: *"Why don't those people out there like us? What makes us so different from all of them, if we are, and why?... Might they have a point?"*[2] These formulations raise the issue of stark in- and out-groups when it comes to Jewish comedy, an us and a them. *We*, the Jews in all of our difference, may not have power or strength in a society, but we can laugh with *them* at ourselves.

Of course to explore humor as a coping mechanism screams of lachrymosity.[3] Can Jewish comedy exist without persecution? Can it persist without particularity? What makes comedy a coping mechanism? Indeed, throughout much of Jewish history, most written text was religious in nature. Though Dauber asserts that religious text, even as ancient as the canonized *Tanakh*, can prove comedic, the luxury of comedy may not exist within periods of

[1] Dauber, *Jewish Comedy*, 3.
[2] Dauber, *Jewish Comedy*, 6.
[3] In a 1928 journal article, historian Salo Baron challenged the notion of a lachrymose conception of Jewish history in which all eras of Jewish history are defined by persecution and violence.

persecution. Other Jewish means of coping and contending with difficulty, such as ritual[4] and liturgical[5] innovation, remain important. But comedy and the *willingness* to find something funny persists even within the darkest periods of Jewish history.

The chief example of persecution against Jews, especially within recent memory, is the *Shoah*, the Holocaust. There remain many Jewish people, and others, who find any humor relating to the genocide of European Jewry entirely insensitive. Yet, as Bo Burnham sings in an ironically titled song "Sad," "the Holocaust and 9/11/that shit's funny 24/7/because tragedy will be exclusively joked about."[6] Or, as Mel Brooks' Tony Award winning best musical, *The Producers* suggests, Holocaust humor proves surprisingly lucrative. The plot of the stage musical and its subsequent film of the same name involves producers attempting to get rich quick by creating a flop but cashing in on opening night. Assuming the best way to fail is to create a musical celebrating the Nazis with songs like "Springtime for Hitler" which contains lyrics such as "Don't be stupid, be a smarty./Come and join the Nazi party."[7] What the fictional producers do not anticipate is the extent to which the farce tickles their audience and their show becomes a hit. Burnham's on-the-nose observation or Brooks' play may cause many to cringe and still others to laugh uncomfortably. Regardless, their lyrics ring true. Communal tragedy, in its absurdity and pain, serves as an ample resource of comedic content.

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[4] The invention of the holiday of Hanukkah, for example, as a celebration of the Hasmonean revolt demarcates a time in which Jews were troubled and then triumphed. The historical event has become canonized as an annual holiday to celebrate overcoming.
[5] Though its words were canonized in antiquity, the daily recitation of the *Aleinu* likely came into practice as a result of a Medieval French massacre of Jews in which those martyred recited the prayer. The liturgical addition of this prayer, then, is a response to tragedy.
[6] Bo Burnham, "Sad," recorded 2013, track 2 on *what.*, Comedy Central, compact disc.
[7] Mel Brooks, "Springtime for Hitler," recorded 1978, track 7 on *High Anxiety*, Asylum Records, compact disc.

Tragic events highlight that "[i]t is the comic, and the act of displacement that laughter offers, that allows us to move forward in the world."[8] Laughter, as the aphorism goes, is the best medicine. The unexpected absurdity of grim humor, especially in response to catastrophe, demarcates precisely the incongruity Berger describes. The Holocaust in particular shows the "dialectical relationship between humor and commemoration, as well as the dilemma between the everyday nature of joke telling and the monumental solemnity of the subject matter."[9] Humor, and its time-specific hilarity, may serve as a time capsule, a monument to a moment. Further, it may help to humanize individuals in moments of communal catastrophe.

Of course, communal catastrophe or danger, whether the Holocaust or the COVID-19 pandemic, also affects individuals. Families and loved ones are affected by the illness or passing of kin. Though it cannot be appreciated on the same scale as communal responses, individual people and smaller groups, like sibling pairs, use humor as a coping mechanism when faced with loss. As explored below, each of the comedians I study respond to both global and personal crises with humor; perhaps not merely because it is their job, but because of the human impulse towards comedy.

*Jewish Conception of God*

A family member recently sat me down, wanting to ask me a question, and said "ever since your mom died, I don't think I believe in God." "OK, that's perfectly valid, I understand,"

[8] David Slucki, Gabriel N. Finder, and Avinoam Patt, "Introduction: To Tell Jokes after Auschwitz is Barbaric, Isn't It?," in *Laughter After: Humor and the Holocaust*, ed. David Slucki, Gabriel N. Finder, and Avinoam Patt (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2020), 5.

[9] Marc Caplan, "Too Soon?: Yiddish Humor and the Holocaust in Postwar Poland," in *Laughter After: Humor and the Holocaust*, ed. David Slucki, Gabriel N. Finder, and Avinoam Patt (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2020), 40.

I responded, "What's your question?" "Can you just point to something and tell me 'That's God!?'," they wondered.

Therein lies the problem of an aniconic monotheism. Ever since God revealed Godself to the entire Israelite people at Mount Sinai and their near-immediate return to worshipping a physical object,[10] many heirs to monotheism have wished that God could manifest physically, immanently, and empirically. With the end of prophecy and miracle coinciding with the close of the biblical canon, a people largely existing in exile, and the persistent notion that God's home no longer exists, the Jewish conception of God evades systemization.

Theologians throughout the centuries have written extensively about God. From Maimonides' negative theology, embracing the notion that humans can only ever articulate what God is *not*, to Levinas' call to recognize divinity in each human face, Jewish conceptions of God remain diverse. The cultural and philosophical milieus surrounding any individual thinker, of course, influence their thought and stated understanding of God. Yet, throughout Jewish history, a strict understanding of monotheism endures.[11] Indeed, insofar as Judaism may have a defining characteristic in its dynamic instability, it may be its evolution "under the shadow, so to speak, of a great idea, namely monotheism - the idea of one unique God, the creator of the universe."[12]

The liturgical recitation of Deuteronomy 6:4 as the *Shema*, a pronouncement of peoplehood and monotheism, stands as the closest proclamation that Jewish people have to creed or doctrine. The *Shema* asserts that God is one. All Jewish conceptions of God follow

[10] See Exodus 32.
[11] Jewish mysticism, or *Kabbalah*, could arguably challenge the notion of a strict monotheism as it purports a ten-pronged understanding of the Godhead. Reflective of other contemporaneous mysticisms, *Kabbalah* still persists within mainstream Jewish theologies.
[12] Scholem, "Judaism," 506.

from this most-crucial point. Yet, it remains fair to say that there is not *a* Jewish monotheism, but rather Jewish monotheism*s*, contingent on the place and time in which they are described. Regardless, though, each Jewish conception of God asserts oneness and often radical difference and unknowability.

Jewish people traditionally relate to God through biblical precepts as interpreted by the late antique sages and codified by Medieval thinkers as the *mitzvot*, commandments. Commandments and prayer remain the primary avenues of human-divine interaction, particularly between Jewish people and the God of Israel. Indeed, chosenness persists as a unique aspect of Jewish particularity. The God of all people *chose* the Jewish people with whom to have a particular relationship. But with the advent of denominationalism as a result of modernity, Reformers in particular began to question the particular relationship between God and Israel. With these inquiries, traditional conceptions of chosenness began to erode.

Ultimately, Jewish conceptions of God depend on the individuals and communities attempting to describe God at any given time. Further, Judaism is a historically orthopraxic religion, requiring correct action rather than orthodox, requiring correct belief. As such, it is eminently possible that one could remain Jewish without any conception of God at all or with a complete disavowal of such a concept.

*Jewish Atheism*

American Jews are largely the intellectual inheritors of Reform Judaism which, owing to its origins during the Enlightenment values innovation and choice. As such, many American Jews *choose* whether or not they believe in God. Whether the product of Enlightenment attitudes, valuing of freedom, or an era of empiricism, over one quarter of American Jews

consider themselves "Jews of no religion."[13] In other words, 27% of Jewish people in America consider themselves Jewish but profess no belief in God and are "atheist, agnostic, or 'nothing in particular.'"[14] Further, 22% of American Jewish adults do not believe in God or any higher power.[15]

Jewish atheism is possible since Judaism is broader than a religious category, including ethnic, national, and cultural affiliation. Nearly 70% of American Jews, whether or not they themselves believe in God, assert that one can be Jewish and *not* believe in God.[16] Importantly, for the purposes of this thesis, 42% of American Jews believe having a good sense of humor is essential to being Jewish whereas only 19% assert that observing Jewish law, as is necessary with a traditional conception of God, is paramount.[17]

Importantly, there are small sects of Judaism, such as Humanist, that are avowedly atheist as a denomination. Yet, it is the "Jews of no religion" category that make up the majority of non-believers. In other words, non-affiliated Jewish people, who do not ascribe to any one denomination or rarely, if ever, go to synagogue make up the majority of that 22%.

Though God, or the idea thereof, plays a fundamental role in almost every story of the Jewish people, whether mythic or historical, *belief* in God is a non-essential aspect of Judaism. To Scholem's point of Judaism's non-essential nature, even belief in God or any higher power is not mandated.

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[13] "Jewish Americans in 2020, Pew Research Center, 11 May 2021, https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2021/05/11/jewish-americans-in-2020/.
[14] Ibid.
[15] Ibid.
[16] "A Portrait of Jewish Americans Chapter 3: Jewish Identity," Pew Research Center, 1 October 2013, https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2013/10/01/chapter-3-jewish-identity/.
[17] Ibid.

*Jewish Afterlife*

Like God, Jewish conceptions of the afterlife evade systemization. Friedman and Overton claim that the *Tanakh* has, at most, a whisper of a conception of the afterlife.[18] Yet, they also assert that evidence "both in the ground and on the parchment, we have reason to recognize that there were beliefs in life after death in biblical Israel."[19] Customs such as burial with certain objects or with a certain orientation indicate some anticipation of life after death. Like the philosophers influenced by the theology of the cultures around them, the ancient Israelites were most certainly impacted by the views regarding mortality held by their Ancient Near Eastern neighbors.

The Bible also introduces a lexicon of the afterlife. It discusses Gehenna[20] and Sheol,[21] hellish and neutral places, respectively, which human souls may traverse through after death. Further, in late apocalyptic books therein, such as Daniel, the notion of resurrection arises. By rabbinic times, new notions of the afterlife yet arose. The Sages discuss the primordial notion of the Garden of Eden as a heaven-like possibility. They also continuously assert a notion of Divine judgment after one passes away. Persistent ritual like reciting the Mourner's Kaddish, for example, also gives insight into Jewish conceptions of the afterlife. The custom of reciting the Kaddish for eleven months reflects a belief that a soul may only exist in the limbo of Sheol for one year. The better the person was in life, the shorter their stay. Hence, in saying the

[18] Richard Elliot Friedman and Shawna Dolansky Overton, "Death and Afterlife: The Biblical Silence," in *Judaism in Late Antiquity: Part Four: Death, Life- after-Death, Resurrection and the World-to-Come in the Judaisms of Antiquity* ed. Alan J. Avery-Peck and Jacob Neusner (Brill, 1999), 36.
[19] Friedman and Overton, "Death," 46.
[20] See Joshua 18:16 for the etymological source of "Gehenna" in the Hebrew Bible.
[21] See Genesis 37:35 for one example.

Kaddish for only eleven months, Jewish people recognize the merit of their own departed loved ones by insinuating they would not need a full year of Divine judgment.

Perhaps the most persistent belief about life after death in Judaism is the notion of *Olam haBa*, the World to Come. Though it has no rigid description, the general understanding regarding the World to Come is that it is a heaven-like state that all people, or at least all Jews, may have access to at some future time. This future time is often considered the end of all time, the product of an apocalyptic event in which God will reestablish a home on earth, Jews will be restored to the land of Israel, and perhaps the world will know peace and harmony with the appearance of the messiah. In all normative understandings of the World to Come, God plays a major role. For Judaism, eschatology and the afterlife are theological issues.

Though the World to Come plays a persistent role in Jewish thought and conceptions of the afterlife, Judaism as a whole focuses squarely on this world and this life. The actions one makes in this life, though, influence their share in *Olam haBa*. Despite the richness of Jewish beliefs about what happens after death, none has proven dominant and obviously none has yet been proven true. Rather, a diverse and vast vocabulary to describe the afterlife and an openness to influence from other cultures, permits no creed on Jewish conceptions of the afterlife.

In one of my first classes as an undergraduate student, a professor taught that religions exist to help explain the giant mysteries of human life: Why are we here? What happens when I die? Where is God? Yet, despite persistent attempts to say something empirical about life after death, Judaism revels in the mystery.

*Belief in God and Belief in Afterlife*

In Judaism, the power of giving and taking life belongs to God. Similarly, all conceptions of life after death, whether for an individual soul or on the path toward the World to Come, require God's active participation. God causes people to die, determines the contours of their afterlife, and ultimately contains the power of resurrection.

As such, in the contemporary era of empiricism and traditional Jewish theologies, it remains odd to profess any belief in a hereafter while simultaneously not believing in God. To my mind, each belief requires a certain jump, a leap of faith as Kierkegaard would have it. Yet, the comedians examined below each espouse some sort of belief in the afterlife, especially after losing loved ones. This seems incongruent. Of course the possibility remains that they explore the afterlife, mortality, and death facetiously without a genuine belief in a hereafter. Comedians are, in many ways, cynics and it is not always easy to glean real belief from stand-up sets.

Yet, ultimately, each comedic case study in this thesis explores a notion of an afterlife in the face of a non-belief in God. Perhaps people are more inclined to suspend disbelief in matters of mortality. Perhaps these beliefs are less incompatible than they initially appear.

## Chapter 2 - Rachel Bloom: Losing an Experience and a Friend

[1]*Doctor:* "You have nothing to worry about, Mr. Epstein. You'll live to see sixty-five."

*Epstein*: "But, I am sixty-five!"

*Doctor*: "*Nu*, did I lie?"[2]

[1] Each of the three case study chapters within this thesis begin with a thematically relevant classic Jewish joke.

[2] Spalding, *Encyclopedia,*361.

*Situating the Comedian*

Rachel Bloom (born 1987) grew up in Manhattan Beach, California, and is a lifelong theater person. She spent the early days of her comic career posting low-budget musical comedy videos on YouTube. These videos and songs, such as "You Can Touch My Boobies" about a young boy's dream of his voluptuous Hebrew school teacher and "I Steal Pets" about kidnapping pets from popular kids so they have to talk to her, are harbingers for most of Bloom's career trajectory. Her work has been provocative, raunchy, musical, and borderline absurd.

Bloom's claim to fame remains her show *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* which ran for four seasons on the CW, from 2015-2019. In it, she stars as the lawyer Rebecca Bunch who moves from New York City to the "sunburnt shtetl" of West Covina, California to pursue an old flame. The character struggles with her mental health with humor, grace, and genuine portrayals of despair. "Rebecca," writes Jennifer Caplan, "is arguably a perfect comedic heroine for the twenty-first century."[3] Indeed, "her presentation of twenty-first-century Jewish identity" creates a "new taxonomic category" in caricatures of American Jewish women.[4] Though Bloom employs the reclaimed phrase JAP (Jewish American Princess) to describe Bunch, Caplan contends that the character actually represents a new type which she calls the MAAW, or Modern Ashkenazi-American Woman. This new term is warranted at the very least because "It would be unthinkable for a JAP to be as sexually enthusiastic as is Rebecca."[5] Much of

[3] Jennifer Caplan, "Rachel Bloom's Gaping MAAW: Jewish Women, Stereotypes, and the Boundary Bending of *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend*," *Journal of Modern Jewish Studies* 19:1 (2020), 95.
[4] Caplan, "MAAW," 106.
[5] Caplan, "MAAW," 104.

Bloom's and *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend's* humor falls within Dauber's fourth criterion, namely "Jewish comedy is vulgar, raunchy, and body-obsessed."[6]

Yet, Bloom's uniqueness is not necessarily in her raunchiness, but rather in her raunchiness as a woman. Like Sarah Silverman (explored below), Bloom's gender performance on stage as herself or acting as another MAAW, embraces vulgarity. As Samantha Pickette writes regarding the contemporary Jewish comedienne, in "embracing of stereotypically 'masculine' behaviors (sexual promiscuity, irresponsibility, an aversion to 'settling down'...)," femininity dissolves. Indeed, "in 'doing' comedian the woman ceases to 'do' female."[7] Bloom and her character each exhibit a sexuality and vulgarity that laughs in the face of stereotypical femininity. Further, the unexpected nature of the crude female comic echoes Berger's important claim about the unexpected nature of comedy.

It is with this comedic acumen, a cult-followed YouTube digital record, and an award-winning syndicated television show, that Bloom makes her stand-up debut.

*Death, Let Me Do My Special*[8]

Rachel Bloom, in her first Netflix-partnered stand-up set titled *Death, Let Me Do My Special*, explores her experience in the year 2020. As she writes in her memoir *I Want to Be Where the Normal People Are,* speaks about in interviews, and explores within her special, 2020 had the potential to be Rachel Bloom's year. The CW's *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend*, which had brought her critical acclaim, had wrapped, as scheduled, in 2019. Grand Central Publishing

[6] Dauber, *Jewish Comedy*, XIV.
[7] Samantha Pickette, "Precarious Broads, Difficult Girls, and Baby Grown-Ups: Defining the Unapologetic Jewess on *Broad City* and *Difficult People*" in *Peak TV's Unapologetic Jewish Woman: Exploring Jewish Female Representation in Contemporary Television* Comedy (Lexington Books, 2023), 103.
[8] All otherwise unmarked direct quotes and paraphrasing in this chapter come from *Death, Let Me Do My Special*, Directed by Seth Barrish, 2024, *Netflix*.

was set to release her autobiographical book. She was brainstorming songs and shows with her creative partner Adam Schlessinger, perhaps most famous for "Stacy's Mom" with his band Fountains of Wayne. She was already crafting an hour-long stand-up special. Bloom was also in her third trimester of her first pregnancy as the decade changed.

In March, though, the coronavirus pandemic changed Bloom's life and, ultimately, the trajectory of her career. *I Want to Be Where the Normal People Are*, whose overarching point is that normalcy is actually quite overrated, was released as scheduled in November 2020, but with an afterword describing just how *abnormal* the time around its release was. Earlier in the year, Bloom's due date approached, along with COVID's encroachment westward across the States, Bloom's obstetrician recommended induction. After a healthy pregnancy and labor, Bloom's daughter - whose name she has never shared publicly - was born purple, water filling her lungs. Bloom and her baby were hospitalized at the precise moment that California medical facilities had to shift to accommodate COVID patients. The hallway of the maternal unit became crowded with equipment as the wards around it shifted into COVID units. Meanwhile, Bloom's daughter was on a ventilator in the neonatal intensive care unit. Eventually, Dan Gregor, Bloom's husband and comedian/TV writer in his own right, was no longer allowed to visit the baby as the hospital worked to discharge Bloom herself.

All the while, Schlesinger, who had been Bloom's co-songwriter on *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* and texting her as labor began, had contracted COVID in New York. By the time her daughter was born, he too was on a ventilator. Though there were moments of hope in his sickness, he passed away just as Bloom brought her daughter home. In losing Schlessinger, Bloom not only lost a dear friend but her creative partner. Soon thereafter, Tommy Marquez, who had been a costume designer on *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* died after a private battle with cancer.

Bloom relied on her psychiatrist in this time of acute grief and anxiety, but he too unexpectedly passed away at age 44 of cardiac arrest.

It is against this backdrop that Bloom's final version of her special came to be. Having a baby in the midst of a pandemic, losing the experience of having skin-to-skin with her baby and grandparent visits to her home, Bloom's entrance into motherhood was rife with anxiety. Losing beloved people during the pandemic made that anxiety worse. In many ways *Death, Let Me Do My Special* (hereafter *Let Me*) is Bloom's reclamation of her experience, a grappling not only with grief but with death itself. Four years after she was set to release her first streamed special, Bloom finally takes the stage.

The live show begins with a put-together Bloom, decked out in heels and a glittering blazer, making her entrance dancing to the *Space Jam* theme - a remnant from the 2019 version of her show. She begins with observational comedy, describing the aroma of the Bradford pear tree, which she boasts is uncannily similar to semen. As she sings about a rendezvous under the so-called cum tree, her name emblazoned in front of a theatrical red curtain, the audience is brought into precisely what one would expect from a Rachel Bloom stand-up set; raunchy, witty, and lyrical. Quickly, though, the exposition ends and the facade of a typical show fades. An audience plant appears to heckle Bloom, interrupting her flow. This heckler announces himself as Death - played by *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* actor David Hull. He insists Bloom make the show about him and displays his power by exerting a Darth Vader-esque force, causing the marquee and curtain to fall. Bloom acquiesces. For the remainder of the show, the set itself remains in disarray, poetically representing the fragile facade of normalcy. As Bloom exposes her anxiety, grief, and experiences with death at Death's behest, her own flashy self devolves. Slowly, often imperceptibly, Bloom herself falls apart. She removes her heels and blazer,

switches from a handheld microphone to a headset. She becomes, as she says herself, increasingly vulnerable.

Throughout *Let Me*, Bloom speaks and sings candidly, but with no lack of humor, about her losses in 2020. The set design and costume choices speak to her vulnerability as life as she knew it to be unraveled before her, *and* before her audience. Further, in personifying Death, Bloom and the audience have the chance to take mortality on and ultimately, come to terms with it.

*Personifying Death*

Death, portrayed by actor David Hull, plays a crucial role in *Let Me* as a character. Though the genre of stand-up generally requires a singular comedian and the implicit understanding that, though the content is memorized and the show is an act, the comic themself is not necessarily *acting*. Hull and Bloom, though, play off of each other periodically throughout the show and Bloom utilizes a secondary character to further the plot of her show *and* to say what she needs to say, which is often *not* funny. The dynamic between the actors is familiar to *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* fans and though it disrupts the stand-up genre, can lend a sense of familiarity and calm to an invested viewer.

Writing personally, at one of the live shows at which I was present, Death - this time played by another *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* cast member, Danny Jolles - was not immediately clear as a plant. Rather, I thought the hoodied, mask-wearing heckler was a genuine audience member. Worse yet, I feared he was a bad actor, an interloper, perhaps someone to be feared. Similar to Jolles, Hull, in the recorded special, is costumed in a zipped up sweatshirt, face mask (notably in an era in which the people around him were not), and hat with a graphic of a skeleton hand in a rock-on gesture. The metaphoric Death who interrupts reality, perhaps even

what one deems normal and pleasant, is a stark choice on Bloom's part. Death the character mimics death in reality. Yet, the least sensitive aspect of the show, in my opinion, is the fearsome portrayal of Death, not as a ghoulish creature, but as an ordinary, white, middle-aged man attempting to disguise himself. I, one audience member with a post-COVID anxiety that could rival Bloom's, feared the worst at the live show, an audacious heckler who could cause physical harm.

Luckily, Bloom and her counterparts do not allow the ruse to last. Quickly, Death reveals himself and demands Bloom talk about him saying, ""I just sort of figured that you'd be talking about me…Come on, Rachel. You and I know that you have plenty to say about death." She demures and before causing the set to tumble, Death has a run-in with a fictional "all-female security team." He attempts to choke the guards and when Bloom finally acquiesces, Death reveals to the women, "That hurt me more than it hurt you." Here, we get a first peek at Death's gentleness, a trait that prevails throughout the show and allows for a coming to terms with mortality.

Bloom's first line after the interrupted show is categorically not funny. She announces "The sudden, one might say ubiquitous, presence of death that started…a couple years ago, uh took us by surprise I think because most of us don't go around thinking about death and then just like poof it was everywhere." The ubiquitous presence of death persists throughout the show, with Death the character continuously prompting Bloom to discuss her multiple run-ins with tragedy in 2020. Goading her, Death asks "Why don't you talk about your daughter?" and pushes the issue of Schlessinger's illness and death until Bloom ultimately tells that story.

Death eventually takes center stage singing his own number entitled "I Feel Just Like Dear Evan Hansen." The lyrics to the song itself reflect the hit musical *Dear Evan Hansen* but

the number serves Bloom's purpose: no matter how much people may wish to pretend it is 2019, death has made itself a focal point for the 2020s.

Death's solo sets the stage for a concluding duet between Death and Bloom in which they not only reprise the raunchy song about the Bradford pear but sing about reconciliation. In a convoluted song, contingent on others explored below, Bloom ultimately metaphorizes humanity's cosmic relation to death. Humans must acknowledge death and continue live. Bloom proves this by hugging Death in the final scene before the curtains close.

*"I Got Answers at the Base of the Rainbow Bridge"*

| Humans do not abide in honor, they are like beasts that perish. – Psalms 49:13[9] |
|---|

Bloom, in *Let Me*, shares that her pregnancy forced her to look at time on a "weekly, granular basis." This new relationship to time and its finitude subsequently caused her to realize that one day her dog, Wiley, would die. Of course, she probably already understood this concept, but ultimately creating a new life, even before COVID-19 existed, made Bloom wrestle with mortality. The only thing, Bloom asserts, that snapped her out of her anxiety regarding all living beings' morality was the concept of the rainbow bridge.

The rainbow bridge, particularly in Bloom's conception, is the notion that when pets die they wait in an edenic locale, waiting for their humans to die. After the heavenly reunion, the humans and their pets cross the rainbow bridge together into eternity. So poignant is this belief to Bloom she claims that "as an atheist,... [it] is the only belief I have."

[9] As part of my efforts to delineate clear subsections of the chapters within this thesis as well as orient myself within it with a distinctly rabbinic voice, each case study chapter contains Jewish text as epigraphs. In Chapter 2, I utilize biblical text; in Chapter 3, rabbinic; and in Chapter 4, liturgical. All translations are my own.

Like her confrontations with Death personified, Bloom uses her number on the rainbow bridge to wrestle with mortality. In reckoning with her own mortality and that of creatures she loves, Bloom's conception of the rainbow bridge reflects existential questions that religion often answers for people. In trying to parse this beautiful, profound afterlife Bloom ponders through her lyrics, "As we prepare to pass on I say, 'Hey 'what happens to those who've gone, who never had a pet? What happens when petless people die?" As is explained to her, "They get reincarnated as pets!" Relieved, Bloom muses, "I got answers at the base of the rainbow bridge, I have no follow up questions at the base of the rainbow bridge."

In this piece, Bloom imitates the quest for answers that many people are inspired to take when confronted with mortality. In a humorous piece, she actually accomplishes a fairly systematic eschatology and view of the afterlife. Bloom appears to have genuine faith in this version of the hereafter. Yet regardless of her sincerity, the stand-up stage remains an unusual arena for this sort of exploration.

*"Nothing Happens After Death"*

> A person's breath departs and they return to the earth, on which day their thoughts come to naught. – Psalms 146:4

Whereas Bloom's rainbow bridge song listens like a lullaby, the piece I explore below has more haunted house overtones. Over an ominous score replete with ghoulish cackles, Bloom argues in "No Ghost" that the most horrifying prospect regarding the hereafter is that it does not exist at all.

In this song, Bloom explores vignettes of normatively petrifying things and instead finds comfort in them since they prove an afterlife exists. For example, take the lyric, "I'm a bloody bride holding a knife/but I'm also proof of an afterlife." The eeriest thing Bloom deigns to conjure amongst the gore is the notion that "the spookiest, scariest ghost/is no ghost/it's

nothing." Ultimately, Bloom suggests "nothing happens after death" is the most disturbing potential in grappling with mortality.

Though the song itself may be more silly than poignant, Bloom's preamble before she breaks into song is earnest. Again citing her atheism she says:

> "I want there to be something! But the skeptic atheist in me needs proof. The thing that I want most actually, in this world, is to see a ghost…because it would be proof, with my own eyes, that there is something more."

Bloom here frankly states that belief in something, for her, requires empirical proof. Though she recognizes she would be a "low-priority haunting" for her *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* creative partners and her psychiatrist, she still yearns to experience them. In a genuine reflection on one of humanity's most pressing questions, namely "What happens when we die?," Bloom utilizes humor to consider the possibilities, including the stark notion that *nothing* may occur excepting the biological processes that cause bodies to decay.

*"Hush, Go to Sleep, and Please, Don't Die"*

| The children struggled within her and she said, "If this is so, why me?" – Genesis 25:22 |
|---|

To explore another of Bloom's lullabies in *Let Me*, entitled "Please, Don't Die," the comedian yet again examines mortality. This time, cradling her blazer like a baby, Bloom highlights the parental fear inherent in creating life knowing that it must end. With a daughter born ill coupled with unparalleled anxiety wrought by the pandemic, Bloom admits that her child's first weeks were fraught. She recounts the feeling of putting her baby down for a nap singing, "I love you so much I could cry/now, hush, go to sleep and please don't die." Rather than a picture of a happily sleeping baby, Bloom rustles her faux infant only to frantically sing "Hey wake up/be alive!"

In this song, Bloom suggests that the anxiety of new parenthood "is hell." Though she is using the phrase colloquially, she yet again brings up the issue of a hereafter. Fear of the finitude of life pervades this song and deepens her others, explored above.

*Analysis*

Throughout *Let Me,* Bloom reckons with life and death. Moreover, like Jewish comedians before her, she utilizes stereotype and inflection to belie her own Jewishness. Similarly, she broaches difficult topics such as sickness, death, dying, and mental health struggles from the comic stage. Yet, she also explores issues of theology, atheology, and prayer specifically because of her experiences surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic.

Bloom, for example, suggests she wholeheartedly trusted her doctor despite her baby's illness. That trust, though, did not prevent Bloom from Googling the myriad things that can, and sometimes do, go wrong in an infant's life. Regardless, she jokingly states that "I believe her, because atheist or not, I am still a Jew. And as we all know, the real God of the Jews is any doctor." Relying on this stereotype fulfills Dauber's second criterion for Jewish comedy which states "Jewish comedy is a satirical gaze at Jewish social and communal norms." In alluding to Jewish involvement in the medical profession, Bloom aligns with Jewish American comic norms.

She references the contemporary moment, though, when she admits that during her daughter's first fragile weeks and Schlessinger's sickness she wanted to pray. In a quite earnest prayer, perhaps even a prayer asking for the ability to pray, Bloom shares the following:

> "For the first time in years, I was helpless. I prayed. And my prayer, it started with an apology. I said, 'Dear God, I'm very sorry that I haven't spoken to you in a long time. I'm also sorry that I regularly tell everyone you don't exist. But you get why I think that. Right? Like you understand how I could very logically come to that

> conclusion. Okay. Table for that for now God. For now, please please please keep my daughter safe and please keep Adam safe and if you do that, in exchange, I will think about becoming agnostic.'"

Though this passage does elicit laughter from the audience, taken out of its comedic context, it is earnest. Bloom contends with her own lack of faith in any sort of divinity. It is interesting that at moments that bring up the liminal space between living and dying, life and death that people of faith may begin to doubt God while people without a belief, to the contrary, may begin to wish that they had a relationship with a listening God. Regardless, there is nothing funny about Bloom's genuine beseeching and yet she brings it to the stage. This personal, vulnerable grappling may be the intervention that some comedians are making as a result of the recent pandemic. It goes without saying that comedians, no matter how famous, are people too, and it is worth noting that many did not emerge unscathed from the trials of the early 2020s.

Bloom also admits that despite her trying, "The moral of the story is I will never know if God heard my prayers." But she does say that she knows her psychiatrist did. Therefore, his death in the midst of her other trials furthered the mental health and grief crises that Bloom was enduring. Perhaps, this is why she ret urns to comedy precisely at this moment. Not only has it been a safe haven for her since her awkward, bully-ridden childhood, but it became a safe haven and a place to process in attempting to emerge back into the world without some of her most important people.

Within the show, Bloom seems to want to believe in something bigger than herself which could explain the difficulty she faced or add meaning to her struggles. It seems her preferred epithet for this transcendent force is "cosmos." In revisiting the most dire of her predicaments she relates, "Two people I love are on ventilators on either coast and it feels

cosmic. But not in a good way… Well the cosmos are vast, and cold, and unforgiving, and they don't care about you…" This uncaring cosmic entity may represent Bloom's less processed, immature understanding of something beyond herself. Yet, *Let Me* concludes with a song that not only allows Bloom and Death to reconcile, but situates the cosmos as a key player between humans and their relationship with their mortality.

Recall that in her song describing the rainbow bridge, Bloom paints an afterlife in which the souls, or essences, of pets await their owners' before crossing into eternity. This, she suggests, adds a layer of purpose to everything. Her dog is a compelling reason to live and imagining her eternal existence adds meaning. As such, despite her anxiety, Bloom metaphorizes this scenario and suggests *she* is her daughter's dog. In other words, if all goes according to nature Bloom will predecease her daughter, but await her in a state of limbo prior to entering eternity together. Her life and afterlife will give her daughter purpose. In making the metaphor all the more convoluted, Bloom ultimately suggests that "we are the cosmos' dog." Though I respect Bloom's professed atheism, this metaphor remains a rather cogent theology. As she sings, paraphrasing, maybe the lonely cosmos just wanted a witness and friend. In resolving this metaphor, Bloom suggests that ultimately there is order and meaning to the universe and existence. Humans and the cosmos exist in dynamic relationship to each other.

Bloom's personal connection to this cosmic idea only arises because of her new fangled relationship to death and mortality. Without the trials of the last half-decade, perhaps her staunch atheism would continue with less nuance. Rather, though she is inherently skeptical, the empirical facts of her own life compel Bloom to examine her relationship with something beyond herself.

*Let Me* concludes with great resolution. Not only do Death and Bloom sing a duet belting, with playacted realization, "we are the cosmos' dog!," they reprise the raunchy song Bloom opens with about the Braford pear tree. As fake petals fall upon them, Death and Bloom embrace, a physical representation of Bloom's own reconciliation with death, mortality, and the cosmos.

In a *New Yorker* interview with Alexandra Schwartz, days before the Netflix release of *Death, Let Me Do My Special*, Bloom shares what she believes comedy's role is in the grand scheme of life. "It's an escape, she says, "and, also, laughter makes you defy death. Life is inherently tragic and serious, but comedy makes you feel, for a moment, immortal."[10] Like the rainbow bridge or a bloody apparition, comedy remains Bloom's balm in "that uncanny synchronicity, the jolting coincidence of birth and death."[11]

[10] Alexandra Schwartz, "Rachel Bloom Has a Funny Song About Death," The New Yorker, 13 October 2024, https://www.newyorker.com/culture/the-new-yorker-interview/rachel-bloom-has-a-funny-song-about-death.
[11] Ibid.

## Chapter 3 - Sarah Silverman: Losing Parents

The dutiful Jewish son is sitting at his father's bedside. His father is near death.

Father: "Son."

Son: "Yes, Dad."

Father: (weakly) "Son. That smell. Is your mother making my favorite cheesecake?"

Son: "Yes, Dad."

Father: (even weaker) "Ah, if I could just have one more piece of your mom's cheesecake. Would you get me a piece?"

Son: "OK, Dad."

(Son leaves and walks toward kitchen. After a while the son returns and sits down next to his father again.)

Father: "Is that you son?"

Son: "Yes, Dad."

Father: "Did you bring the cheesecake?"

Son: "No, Dad."

Father: "Why? It's my dying wish!"

Son: "Well, Dad. Mom says the cake is for after the funeral."[1]

[1] David Minkoff, *Oy! The Ultimate Book of Jewish Jokes* (Thomas Dunne Books, 2005), 378.

*Situating the Comedian*

Sarah Silverman (born 1970) grew up in New Hampshire and first did stand up at 17 years old. A professional comedian for over three decades, Silverman has had her own television show, multiple streamed stand-up specials, and even a much-coveted *Saturday Night Live* writing stint. Prolific as any other American comedian, Silverman's career is not without its blemishes. Much of her comedy has not aged well, so to speak, and some of her words even garnered rebuke at the time she spoke them.

Despite instances of controversy and staunch political allegiances, Silverman has managed to uphold a consistently successful career. Part of her success, like Bloom's, has to do with her gender performance. Silverman's persistent raunchiness and bathroom humor is all the more shocking because she is a woman. As Linda Mizejewski writes in *Pretty/Funny: Women Comedians and Body Politics*, "Silverman's comic performances often provoke discomfort, using the body as comedy's ground zero."[2] Silverman's "nonthreatening femininity" and beauty, Mizejewski suggests, contrast profoundly with the vulgarity she espouses.[3] Or, put another way, "the disconnect between her feminine beauty and the decidedly unfeminine spew that comes out of her pretty mouth" highlights the unexpected nature of comedy.[4]

"Gross--out comedy is…a form of social mayhem… But antisocial comedy has traditionally been male."[5] As such, Silverman's performance of gender, as an attractive woman, still situates her within a male milieu. It is only because of her beauty that she

[2] Linda Mizejewski, "Sarah Silverman: Bedwetting, Body Comedy, and 'A Mouth Full of Belly Laughs," in *Pretty/Funny: Women Comedians and Body Politics* (University of Texas Press, 2014), 92.
[3] Mizejewski, "Silverman," 94.
[4] Ibid. The direct quote is sourced from a *Rolling Stone* article by Vanessa Grigoriadis.
[5] Mizejewski, "Silverman," 103-4.

embodies the "hybridity of appeal and repulsion, the attractive and the objectionable" as both a person and a persona.[6] As with her ability to straddle both male and female worlds, Silverman utilizes her Jewishness to situate herself as an insider and an outsider depending on what is funniest. Further, she consistently, especially in the past, has utilized her Jewishness as an excuse to utilize racial epithets against other minority groups. Dauber writes, "in her dedication to offend, [she wraps] that offensive in a kind of who-doesn't-love-me stereotypical Jewish persona."[7] Silverman, with her checkered history and insatiable raunch, remains claimed as a female, Jewish comic. Her liberal political stances and activism, including the claim that *she* got President Barack Obama elected, also aid in the distinction between her as a person and her as a performer.[8] In reality, Silverman is a committed liberal and an open-minded individual, despite what she has said from stage. In fact, her two-season stint as late-night host on Hulu's *I Love You America* promotes Silverman's liberal commitments as she used the platform to discuss politics in the United States between 2017 and 2019.

In her TV shows and stand-up specials, Silverman has always referred to herself as godless and has taken on religious themes and stories from a cynical perspective. One need only consider her first stand-up special's title: *Jesus is Magic*. Silverman, though she utilizes her Jewishness, as mentioned above, to situate herself as an outsider whenever it is helpful or funny, is an atheist. She was raised in a culturally Jewish home. Two of her three sisters are also not "believers." Her third sister is a rabbi. Silverman told me that when her older sister Susan went to her father and announced she was going to pursue the rabbinate, he responded, "You're Jewish?!"

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[6] Mizejewski, "Silverman," 107.
[7] Dauber, *Jewish Comedy*, 166.
[8] Sarah Silverman, *The Bedwetter: Stories of Courage, Redemption, and Pee.* (HarperCollins, 2010), 226-7.

Silverman, known for her beautiful but brutal exterior and jokes, was forced to soften during the pandemic. "I didn't do standup for the longest I have ever gone without doing standup," she shared, "And then standup came back."[9] In the intervening years, between the start of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 and the resurgence of safe, state-sanctioned stand-up, Silverman started a podcast. On it, she is more person than persona. The podcast serves her creatively, but she does not feel the pressure to be funny on it. Rather, "it definitely scratches the itch of my interest in human dynamics and connection."[10] For the podcast, listeners leave voicemails asking Silverman a variety of questions which she earnestly discusses.

As she began utilizing podcasting, HBO Max dropped a series Silverman had signed with them. But, in the intervening years, she still "owed" the network a stand-up special. That is how, in early 2023, Silverman's fourth syndicated special, *Someone You Love,* aired on HBO Max. Silverman admits that the editing of the special for a post-COVID world was meticulous. All the more difficult, the special aired in the same month that both her father and step-mother passed away. As such, the recorded special has no indication of Silverman's impending strife and its pursuant grief. Rather, it is a relatively relaxed special, a gentle foray back onto the stage.

Yet, Silverman's comedic impulse resurfaced after her parents' deaths and the grief of so many as the pandemic surged on. It is against this backdrop, of personal grief and a career shift spurred by the pandemic, that Silverman went back on tour at the end of 2024 with an entirely new set.

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[9] Carrie Battan, "The Zen Wisdom of Sarah Silverman," The New Yorker, 31 May 2023, https://www.newyorker.com/culture/the-new-yorker-interview/the-zen-wisdom-of-sarah-silverman.
[10] Ibid.

*Postmortem Tour*[11]

As I write this, Silverman is on her *Postmortem* Tour across the United States. Unlike Bloom's *Let Me* or Maron's shows (explored below), *Postmortem* is not yet recorded nor available for streaming. As such, the methodology of this chapter will vary insofar as it relates to direct quotations, multiple viewings, et cetera. On 4 September 2024, I saw Silverman live at Dynasty Typewriter at the Hayworth Theatre in Los Angeles, California. The show took place weeks before her tour debuted and she was still workshopping some sections, utilizing this September show to see which jokes got the biggest laughs and which did not land. The analysis below will refer only to this one show.

Despite its status as a work-in-progress, Silverman's September version of *Postmortem* was a rich show replete with reflections on death and grief, family relationships, and stories about her deceased parents. Like Bloom, Silverman has a long history of public "godlessness," infamously referring to herself and her fans as such. Silverman consistently utilizes her rabbi sister Susan's spirituality as a foil to her own, making their different paths a punchline. Yet, their sororal paths overlap in unexpected ways during the end of their parents' lives.

*Postmortem*, not unlike Bloom's *Let Me*, begins in typical raunchy fashion. Characteristic of observational stand-up comedy, Silverman recalls an incident that probably did not occur. After calling herself a "hotel slut," she explains a sexual encounter she had in one. Describing a role-playing situation, she and her partner decided to pretend not to know each other. During intercourse, as Silverman shares, he said "Wait, I don't even know your last name?" The punchline: "It's Hitler," she said atop him. The rimshot: "He immediately came."

[11] All otherwise unmarked direct quotes and paraphrasing in this chapter come from *Sarah Silverman* at the Dynasty Typewriter on 4 September 2024. All quotes are written to the best of my recollection and according to notes I took during the show. All errors and discrepancies are my own.

Silverman interrupts the flow of her show after that first bit, stating, "anyway my parents died nine days apart…that's the rest of the show." Throughout the set, she appeared stoic, but real; a genuine bereaved child. Though she strutted out in flared jeans, a blue three-quarter sleeve shirt emblazoned with Mickey Mouse, and her signature black Converse, Silverman appeared more embodied than in her more polished sets. She consistently twirled her ponytail, a nervous tick recognizable to many with long hair. Also, in recalling her parents' love she often hugged herself, perhaps an instance of showing rather than telling or perhaps of some self-soothing and regulation. Further, throughout the show, when recalling difficult things, including her father's anticipatory grief, she clasped her chest; a show of real embodied emotion.

In other words, though much of stand-up comedy appears farcical, blurring the lines between real and exaggerated - including Silverman's introduction to *Postmortem* - much of this show, even if humorous, did not *feel* like typical stand-up. Silverman admits that the loss of her parents was a "real whopper." In beginning to honor her parents' legacies, she says "they gave me so much, most recently 52 new minutes." With that, she launches into a beautiful, heart-wrenching show in which she wrestles with grief, belief, and memory.

*Anticipatory Grief*

Though the title of Silverman's show is *Postmortem*, it mostly deals with the days leading up to her parents' deaths. Silverman explores, in intimate detail, not only the broad legacies but the last days of her dad's and step-mom's lives. Leading up to their back-to-back demises, Donald "loved being old." Yet, when his second-wife and life partner, Janice, was diagnosed with a terminal illness he exclaimed in the physician's office, "I'm alone! I'm a

widow!" It seems anticipatory grief runs in the Silverman family. As Janice got sicker, Donald also fell ill.

They were sick long enough that Silverman, her sisters, nieces, and nephews were able to gather and spend their last months, which whittled into weeks and then days, together. Silverman got to ask her father if he was afraid to die. He responded, "Not at all, don't remember before I was born, I won't remember when I am dead." Even though, or perhaps because, Donald loved being old, Silverman was alarmed to find out that he and Janice did not have the logistics of their deaths planned. In the nine days after Janice's passing, Silverman had even more of an opportunity to speak to her father about his postmortem wishes. When he announced that he wished to be cremated, he seemed certain, stating "Fuck, I'll be dead." So together they called Mount Sinai cemetery and attempted to arrange the cremation. The mortuary attendant was confused and had to tell the morbid Silvermans that "we can't make cremation plans for someone who is currently living." In describing the rapidity typical of Jewish funerary custom, Silverman quips, "in Jewish, funerals are very farm to table." It makes sense for a funeral home to need a decedent in order to schedule a cremation slot.

Ultimately, Silverman shares that her family "doulaed them into death." Whether or not she is aware of the contemporary practice and professionalization of death doulas, Silverman acknowledges the sanctity inherent in ushering loved ones into the unknown, into death.

*Family Ties*

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| Upon receiving bad news, one says "Blessed be the true judge." – Babylonian Talmud *Berakhot* 60b |

As mentioned, Silverman, along with her sisters, nieces, and nephews, gathered with Donald and Janice as they were dying. Not only were they able to get a sense of their parents' and grandparents' wishes, they united as a family. Though Silverman anticipated that her sister's rabbinic duties would come in handy at this lifecycle event, she found herself fulfilling pastoral roles as Susan was more daughter than rabbi, understandably. Though Sarah did admit to saying to her, "be a rabbi and do your thing," on the morning of Janice's passing Susan froze and felt unable to tell their father that his beloved had died overnight.

Susan's spiritual connections did prevail though. Sarah shares that her sister felt their dad knew Janice had gone since he slept later than he usually had been; she thought he did not want to wake up and know yet. But, when the sisters discussed how they were going to alert their father to Janice's overnight death, it was Susan who suggested telling him through a joke and Sarah that knew they had to be clear. The death of a parent, let alone the deaths of multiple parents in rapid succession, may reweave the bonds of family members and their roles within the system.

*The Fly*

> If a person is worthy, we say to them "You precede the ministering angels." And if not, we say to them "A fly precedes you, a gnat precedes you, this worm precedes you."– *Breishit Rabbah* 8

Interrupting her reflections on her parent's lives and last days, Silverman tells a parable about a horsefly trapped in her home. She recalls, from a 1994 *Saturday Night Live* sketch she authored, that the lifespan of a fly is only one day. So when she sees one on her bathroom mirror while brushing her teeth in the morning and again that night, she assumes, nay swears, it was the same fly. Knowing come nightfall that it probably had just a few hours left of its 24

hour spree, Silverman and her partner, comedian Rory Albanese, open the window for it to fly free. Silverman wishes it luck, hoping its brief time was worthwhile.

Later, in doing better internet research than was possible before the turn of the century, Silverman learns that a fly's lifespan is actually one month. Though this is the punchline for this bit, I think Silverman presents something much deeper in sharing this story. Whether a month or a day, a fly's life span is short compared to a human's. Whether one makes it to ripe old age or not, human life spans *also* feel too fleeting and finite. Though she does not explicitly draw the connection or hash out the metaphor, Silverman's fly bit is deeply poignant. Fly death is digestible and much funnier than human demise. Yet, there is an unspoken wish in the bit. Just as the fly received a thirty-fold increase in its expected time on earth, Silverman, like other grievers, wishes for the prolongation of good, healthy days with her parents. As the fly bit concludes with raucous laughter, a warranted distraction in a tear-filled comedy show, Silverman returns to her parents, calling the audience together with her saying "Let's focus, cause this is hard."

*Stand-Up as Eulogy*

> Warm hearts during my eulogy because I will be standing there. – Babylonian Talmud Tractate *Shabbat* 153a

In many ways, the entire set can be described as an extended eulogy for each of Silverman's parents. Silverman utilizes the opportunity to share, for the first time from the stage, about the death of her mom, Beth Ann. Beth Ann predeceased her ex-husband and his wife by nearly a decade. Silverman, though quite profuse on Instagram and other social media, rarely speaks of her mother in her stand-up. In *Postmortem*, though, she shares about her mother and their relationship. She jokes, "my mom's last words to me were even 'your hair is

so dry.'" Though this reads derisive, she also shares quite fondly about her mom's art and exuberant spirit.

Throughout the bulk of the show, however, Silverman permits herself to share about the lives and legacies of Donald and Janice. She recalls in great detail about Donald's business legacy. Perhaps, like me, she utilizes her 2010 memoir *The Bedwetter: Stories of Courage, Redemption, and Pee* to source stories about her dad, in particular. Many of the stories she recalls in *Postmortem* are also written in *Bedwetter*. In particular, Silverman cites many hilarious voicemails that Donald left for her, even donning his strong Boston accent. In many ways, the stand-up set allows her to remember him as he was in life.

Yet, typical of eulogy, Silverman also seems to have some recency bias. She is wont to share the way in which Donald spent his last days, bedridden and grief-stricken. The two of them, father and daughter, began the Netflix show *Beef* together. The evening they started, though, Sarah decided to go somewhere else to sleep and attempt to get a better night's rest. When she arrived at her dad's bedside the following morning, ready to watch the next episode, he admitted he had finished the season. Whether a testament to *Beef*'s storytelling or Donald's tenacity, this episode colors Silverman's memorialization of her father.

Try as one might to conjure the lives of deceased loved ones, it is often their last events or words that put a fine point on their personalities. Silverman utilizes the comic stage as an opportunity to eulogize and remember her parents. In so doing, she not only contends with death, but with the moments that make life funny, interesting, connected, and ultimately meaningful.

*Diapers*

In one of Donald's many voicemails to Sarah he identifies himself as the person who changed her diapers. From the stage she recalls in full:

> I remembah when you wuh a tiny baby and I had to lift those tiny legs and wipe the SHIT out of you-ah tuchus. It was fuckin' disgustin'. All right. If you get a chance - I know you-ah really busy - give a call back to the guy who gave you life. Love you. Bye.[12]

Not only does this exchange exhibit Donald's own humor and highlight the source of Sarah's own raunch, it serves as an interesting bookend for *Postmortem*. In musing on her father's final days, Silverman states, "I miss him, I ache for him." In particular, she recalls with fondness the ways in which she had to care for him, including changing his diapers as his health declined.

In an uncharacteristic move, Silverman describes this circle-of-life moment with earnestness. She does not take her own bait and denies herself the "doody joke." Instead, she very seriously recalls the inversion of the relationship. Whether she intends to bookend the show with diaper changes, her seriousness and sadness in describing caring for her father that way colors the show as a whole. This is a unique moment not only in Silverman's life, but in her comedy. In the third decade of a successful career making waves and occasionally causing people to gag with her gags, Silverman is serious on the stage. As she states herself, there is no good age at which to lose a parent. Like the fly whose life is fleeting, human life is finite as well. Unlike the fly's death, though, the loss of a parent causes a seismic shift. In the identity crisis that ensues, losing parents causes one to ask, as Silverman does, "Who am I without them?"

[12] Silverman, *Bedwetter*, 172.

The last moments of life, Silverman shares, are not like the movies with slo-mo and sad music. The last moments of life, contrarily, are real. They include binging television and changing diapers, laughs and tears, jokes and seriousness. In responding to the personal shift losing her parents wrought, Silverman also exhibits a professional shift. Her comedic self is also changed and through *Postmortem*, fans encounter, perhaps for the first time, a serious Sarah Silverman.

*Analysis*

Throughout *Postmortem*, in addition to eulogizing her parents, Silverman also explores her own belief system. She frankly states, "grieving itself is a lot like religion and I now know what it's for…needing to understand what's not understandable." In a stark statement from the comedic stage, Silverman addresses the same inquiries explored throughout this thesis: How does grief shape belief structures? What is the intersection between grief and religion? And, can one believe in some sort of afterlife or eternality of the soul as a deeply skeptical atheist?

Though she pokes fun at and utilizes biblical and other religious themes throughout her entire comedic career, Silverman actually seems to have some doubt about her beliefs in *Postmortem*. Though one can falsely assume that people are atheist precisely because they are riddled with doubt, atheist individuals often feel very staunch in their beliefs.[13] Silverman herself seems to have no doubt; for her, God does not exist. Yet, her parents' deaths actually *introduce* doubt into her belief system.

She wonders and frets, for example, upon leaving their gravesides in Simi Valley, California: Where are they? "My shrink said my loved ones aren't in the ground, they are in the car with me as I go home," Silverman shares. Though she is a self-proclaimed "science

[13] Greg M. Epstein, *Good Without God: What a Billion Nonreligious People* Do *Believe* (HarperCollins, 2009).

person," as it makes her distinct from a "God person," death does make Silverman question. She chooses to believe that they are in some way, "somewhere else."

Silverman remains almost apologetic in *Postmortem*, admitting "it's hard!" and that "It's a lil' relief laugh, We nee-, I need more relief laughs." "Death," she quips, "is very hard for me which makes me extremely not unique." Silverman situates herself as a griever and fully humanizes herself from the stage. Again, as her comedy is far more embodied throughout *Postmortem* than in her other straight-backed sets, Silverman comes across as someone new.

In bluntly admitting that funerals are for us, the living, and not for them, the deceased, Silverman continues to show her cards regarding belief, grief, and memorialization. Yet, she remains persistent, she *wants* there to be something, somewhere else. In a bit that encapsulates the show as a whole, Silverman shares:

> "I do believe our loved ones are watching over us, like in the most important times. [Beat] Like when we are masturbating. I *need* to think that. [Beat] In order to come. It's so serious! I need it to be funny!"

Here we see a complete Sarah Silverman, raunchy and rude, but also newly earnest. As a comedian *and* as a person, Silverman seeks the humor even in the most sad and poignant of situations. She admits that she "needs" things to be funny. In attempting to square her new-fangled beliefs about the afterlife after losing Donald and Janice, Silverman still relies on her tried and true form of onanistic comedy. Yet, the feel, like all of *Postmortem,* is distinct. Silverman, since the death of her parents during the COVID-19 pandemic, explores belief and doubt, finitude and memory, and what it means to *be*.

## Chapter 4 - Marc Maron: Losing a Partner

Sadie had passed away and her funeral service was being held at Greenlawn cemetery. Morris, her husband for over forty years, had tears in his eyes. At the end of the service, as the coffin was being wheeled out, the trolley accidentally bumped into the doorframe and jarred the coffin. To everyone's total shock, they heard a faint moaning coming from the coffin. They quickly opened it and and found that Sadie was alive. Wonder of wonder – a miracle if ever there was one.

Sadie and Morris lived together for ten more years and then Sadie died. The ceremony was again held at Greenlawn. At the end of the service, as the coffin was being wheeled out on the trolley, Morris shouted out, "Watch out, don't hit the doorframe again!"[1]

[1] Minkoff, *Oy!*, 182.

*Situating the Comedian*

Marc Maron (born 1963) grew up in a military family and thus lived in many cities ranging from Jersey City to Albuquerque, with a stint in Alaska as well, during his formative years. Author of three books and performer of eight specials, the first in 1995, Maron is an extremely prolific comedian. In addition to his more traditional material, he has also been running a biweekly podcast called "WTF with Marc Maron" since 2009. On the podcast, he hosts known people from all professions in his home while they discuss hot topic questions. Some of his more influential guests include Robin Williams and President Barack Obama. Despite hosting so many famous people, Maron's own fame sometimes remains a moving target.

In his 2020 special *End Times Fun*, Maron makes a joke about the extent of his fame. He recalls a group of men walking down the street and one instantly recognizes him and is so excited to run into one of his favorite comedians. His pals, however, do not recognize Maron and remain unconvinced that he is worth knowing. Similarly, in his 2013 memoir *Attempting Normal*, he writes "I'm not a household name, I'm not a huge comic."[2] Maron is able to joke about his fame, or lack thereof, precisely because he has had such a long and prolific career and still pumps out specials at least once every five years.

Unlike his own content, however, scholarly work examining Maron's pedigree does not abound. He is more often mentioned within a certain class of comedians. For example, Jarrod Tanny points to Maron as an exemplar in the category of "parodies of Jewish-Christian polemics."[3] Tanny continues, these "have been a popular theme in Jewish humor ever since

[2] Marc Maron, *Attempting Normal*, (New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2013), 204.
[3] Jarrod Tanny, "Curb Your Orgasm: Larry David and the Schlimazel as Sexual Deviant," *Jewish Film & New Media* 7, no. 2 (2019), 178.

Lenny Bruce infamously took personal credit, on behalf of the Jewish people, for the killing of Jesus."[4] Yet, the author does not explore Maron's work further. Maron's name occurs similarly in articles and chapters about comic podcasts, but does not garner a lot of scholarly attention.

Regardless, a recent chapter on his work entitled "Marc Maron as Philosopher: Comedy, Therapy, and Identification," by Steven S. Kapica, argues that Maron consistently presents a compelling argument for "a philosophy grounded in collective, comedic catharsis."[5] Kapica also notes that Maron spent decades under the radar, building his own repertoire in night clubs and fundraising gigs before emerging as the sometimes-famous comedian he is today.

Kapica contends that Maron is a philosopher because it is clear that Maron is a deep thinker throughout all of his work. Like Kapica, I have noticed a recent trend of Maron deputizing the "sad clown trope" and bringing his true grief into his work. It is with this increasingly wise understanding of self that Maron begins his most recent special. Not only are his typical political commentaries sharp and witty, but he speaks candidly about his own experiences with aging, death, and grief.

*From Bleak to Dark*[6]

Maron's 2023 HBO special, *From Bleak to Dark*, begins with the comedian walking out from the wing, wearing a casual outfit of jeans, a maroon leather jacket, and boots, stating "I don't want to be negative, but I don't think anything is going to get better ever again." Then,

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[4] Ibid.

[5] Steven S. Kapica, "Marc Maron as Philosopher: Comedy Therapy and Identification" in *The Palgrave Handbook of Popular Culture as Philosophy* ed. David Kyle Johnson (Palgrave Macmillan, 2024).

[6] All otherwise unmarked direct quotes and paraphrasing in this chapter come from *From Bleak to Dark*, Directed by Steven Feinartz, 2023, *HBO Max*.

his name and the show's title appear, filling up the screen, the transition choppy as a clapboard. Viewers return to Maron on stage saying, "Don't misunderstand me, I have no hope. I think if you have hope, what are you, fucking seven?" Against an ethereal backdrop that evokes the most picturesque sunset, Maron admits "a lot of these ideas I am playing with are hard to work comedically."

He acknowledges that the current moment, in the wake of the pandemic, is hard to handle on a variety of fronts including the cultural and political. He muses on adult indifference, though, in the face of systemic issues especially regarding the climate. He suggests that liberal adults are leaving it up to "that Swedish teenager;" Greta seems to have everything under control. And even in moments where adults may loudly wonder what they can do, they get distracted wondering, "wait, is that gnocchi?" The climate crisis, in many ways, is too much to bear.

Maron similarly alludes to the persistent issue of "Christian fascism" in the United States of America before naming the problem outright. In a grotesque, extended bit he assumes the personality of a "brazen, sort of shameless, confident, stupid" person who gathers their information exclusively from podcasts. In an exaggerated representation of the supplement-pushing podcast host - no doubt a caricature of Joe Rogan and his ilk - and his listener, Maron feigns an anti-vax tirade. Rather than rely on science, this listener suggests a convoluted antidote to illness which includes a nauseating description of masturbating into an elk heart, grilling it, and consuming it. Maron's performance highlights the absurdity he sees amongst the current extremist populace.

Throughout, his reference to the brazenly stupid comments on fascism. He suggests repeatedly that the group order uniforms and that their first order of business once they come

in will be to eliminate consequences. Eventually, Maron is blunt: "I don't want to say there's a problem with Christian fascism, but…there might be a problem." Maron continuously references religious themes and speaks on his own Judaism throughout the show. Calling out all Christians, he wonders, "Do you really think a flying Jew is gonna come back?" Throughout the show, he wonders about belief systems as they relate to politics and religion. Where do we get our information? How does it color our views of the world? Is belief a choice?

*Voices from the Future*

> Place blessing on the face of the Earth and satiate us through your goodness. – *from* The Blessing of the Years in the *Amidah*

Throughout *From Bleak to Dark*, Maron suggests he is working on a number of serious one-man shows. He imagines these performances taking place in small, black box theaters. The first he pretends to be working on is titled "Voices from the Future." He jokes that at the time of the special's recording, "Voices" is running a tight minute and a half. In it, Maron plays a variety of people from the future. Each persona will be cast in a spotlight as they say their line. Most of the characters, Maron admits, best suit a West Coast crowd.

Maron feigns the spotlight turning on and in turn shares these various one-liners, the so-called voices: "How close are the fires?," "Will the fifth booster work on the Zephyr strain?," "What do you mean - You mean there's no more water?," "Do they have the floatable seating at the restaurant downtown?," "You know, 130 is not that hot…Don't be a pussy and hydrate." Two years later, many of these voices remain quite on the nose. The first two in particular make 2023 Maron appear prophetic.

Each of these voices receives uproarious laughter from the crowd though they are each quite bleak and dark. As much a sociopolitical commentary as comedy, this first "one-man

show" idea highlights the unexpected nature of comedy and the comedian's ability to twist fear into humor.

*Plague Baby*

In a much longer enacting of a one-man show that Maron dubs "Plague Baby," he voices the monologue of a father to a child conceived in 2020. The forced homebounded-ness of the parents results in a loveless marriage and intercourse atop pieces of the pandemic puzzle they had been working on. Funnily, Maron reveals that this dad is talking to their child at just five years old, sharing the story of their conception. The telling is interrupted when the mother comes to pick up the kid, with their backpack and iPad, and the dad refuses to walk his child out to his now-ex-wife.

Maron, who throughout the show remains very glad that he himself does not have children, suggests that "plague babies" are going to want answers. Much like adults who lived through the pandemic, these children will come of age and wonder, what world was I brought into? Situated amongst Maron's own gladness that he does not have adult children in this moment, "Plague Baby" raises questions of legacy, leaving one's mark on the world, and what it means to live through disaster.

*Aging Like Soy Sauce*

> These are the things that cannot be taught, whose fruits a person in eats in this world but their reward extends to the World to Come. They are: Honoring father and mother. – *from Eilu D'varim*

Maron, in beginning to fret about his own aging and mortality at 59 years old, also reflects on what it means to be the adult child of aging parents. "If you have kids," Maron shares, "you can see you're dying in your kids." In other words, as children age, parents can

see their own aging and mortality come into stark view. I suppose he reflects that one generation up onto his own parents. If he is old, then they certainly must be.

Maron shares about his father, who was "self-centered most of my life." He shares this tidbit so the audience has precisely the right amount of empathy for him. In his memoir, Maron reflects on his father's self-centeredness further recalling that at his paternal grandfather's funeral, his own father was "making rounds, telling jokes, laughing, and checking with people's lives."[7] While Maron's read of his father may lack in generosity since grief manifests in manifold forms, he uses the point to show just how self-centered his dad has always been. But now, at 84 years old, Maron's father has dementia. Maron shares a vignette about bringing his father to lunch at a Chinese restaurant where his father promptly fills his spoon with soy sauce, slurps it up, refills it, and does it again. "I didn't know my dad did that," Maron thinks. Then he remembers his father's deteriorating mental state and takes the spoon away. Maron, whose rocky relationship with his father has been alleviated by his recent age-wrought forgetfulness, suggests that on the day his father's memory deteriorates to the point where he can no longer remember his son will be the day "I am truly free." This complicated factor of aging parents, often sad and distressing, is comedic ground for Maron.

He also shares about his mother, his dad's ex-wife. She has a new boyfriend whose droning stories bore Maron until he thinks of them as staccato poems. The new person seems particularly old to Maron which also forces him to understand his own parents as elderly. He shares, "the guy who's fucking my mother is 85 years old…it's great, it takes the load off of me…in a metaphorical way." The tone of this joke hints at Jewish stereotypes especially

[7] Maron, *Attempting*, 43.

regarding overbearing mothers. This Freudian humor may help Maron accept the mortality of his parents, particularly his mother whom he is closer to.

*TED Talk*

In the beginning of *From Bleak to Dark*, Maron concedes, "So like I'm trying to cover a lot of territory…and it gets a little heavy but you'll be alright." He knows that after his lengthy and relatively theoretical commentary at the top of the show, about halfway through he would pivot and talk about the heavy-hitting personal wrestling with mortality the 2020s have brought him. "The point I was trying to make was the mortality thing," he says, "the idea of impending death, which is, you know, pretty much going to happen to everyone. It's right there."

Maron admits the difficulty of this subject matter and suggests that perhaps his new material is more well-suited for a TED Talk rather than the comedic stage. Miming a headset microphone, with a deep voice, Maron says "Everyone dies. I'm gonna die. You're going to die. We all die. I'm Marc Maron. I'm a comedian." Here he acknowledges the incongruous nature of talking about aging and mortality from the comedic stage. Perhaps, as he suggests, there are better arenas for this type of musing. Ultimately, he shares, "If you need to talk about it in a funny way, it will happen at some point, if it's necessary, which it always is." The necessity of humor is Maron's guiding principle, not merely as a comedian, but as a person in this absurd world.

*Marc Maron's Kaddish: A Prayer for the Dead*

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| Magnified and Glorified is God's great name. – *from* Mourner's *Kaddish* |

The above quote regarding the necessity of humor may generally apply to any difficult situation to substitute for the "it." In Maron's case, however, the "it" he was speaking of was the sudden death of his partner Lynn Shelton, the "director and genius," at 54 years old in May of 2020. Shelton had directed Maron's most recent Netflix special, 2020's *End Times Fun*, and

the couple had also worked creatively together on the TV show *Glow*. "It was the most horrible thing that's happened to me," Maron shares. To add humor he quips, "and I am sure to her." As he defends himself as the audience laughs and cringes, he says, "It was right there!" Reflecting on this joke in an interview Maron shares,

> It's a little callous and it's almost like a classically structured Jewish joke beat…it is a good bridge for the audience to realize that I've got a handle on this. It was just a one liner, and then the deeper stuff comes after that.[8]

Indeed it does. Maron turns the mood around and states, "Let me get serious. She did die and it was a terrible tragedy." Earnestly he shares his professional musings in the aftermath of her death: "How am I going to talk about that? Is there a way to bring humor to that?" It was not as if, the moment his beloved died, he thought "She's dead, what are the bits, let's go!"

Maron explicitly takes on the death-averse culture in which people live in America, "No one talks about grief. No one talks about grief…Everybody has it. It's just, you know, locked into us. There's not really a cultural conversation around it. And it's difficult." He shares in earnest that the Jewish conciliatory phrase "may her memory be a blessing" has been a balm for him. He also shares that since Americans have such a difficult time talking about grief, showing up for mourners seems phenomenally difficult. Yet, during his period of acute mourning, in which it was unsafe to gather, Maron realized that "showing up" for a mourner is actually quite simple. "You just have to be like, 'How you doing?,' wait till they stop crying and go like, 'okay.' And they'll think you're the greatest person in the world. Like, 'You really

[8] Michael Schneider, "Marc Maron on the Joke that Made it OK to Address the Death of His Partner, Lynn Shelton in His Latest Special," Variety, 20 June 2023, https://variety.com/2023/tv/awards/marc-maron-hbo-from-bleak-to-dark-special-podcast-1235648899/.

showed up for me when I was grieving.'" He shares that his across the street neighbor did just that for him as both men brought their garbage cans to the curb in the immediate days following Shelton's death.

Here, Maron also posits another serious one-man show entitled "Marc Maron's *Kaddish*: A Prayer for the Dead." It would begin, he says, with *"yisgadal v'yiskadah*," the Ashkenazi pronunciation of the *Kaddish* prayer. *Kaddish*, of course, arises throughout Jewish liturgy, typically as a signpost between portions of the service. The Mourner's Kaddish, recited originally by orphans and eventually by all those bereaved, is unique amongst the *kaddish*es since it is spoken rather than chanted. The meaning of *kaddish* itself has nothing to do with death, rather it is about sanctifying and glorifying God's name. It is with this background that the former synagogue-attendee, Maron, begins the prayer from the stage. He does chant the prayer (according to its Friday night, not-related-to-mourners tune), but regardless he brings Jewish liturgy to the stage. Mock reviews of this one-man show include, "That wasn't funny. Definitely wasn't funny at all. And I like him. He's funny. But this was very sad. I'm glad for him he seemed to really work through some stuff, but not one laugh. Not one laugh."

Though the fake show does create laughs, Maron still cannot shake his professional fear of losing humor after Shelton's death. He describes, in rather traumatic detail, receiving the call from the doctor telling him to come down to the hospital. Since it was during COVID and he was not allowed to visit prior, he knew it meant that by time he arrived she would be gone. He relives this story all with the comedian's promise to share the first joke he thought of after these difficult hours. Maron wavered and hesitated. Going to the hospital seemed like "the worst thing I can ever do in my life." Most of his support system agreed. But one friend encouraged him to go suggesting it may provide closure and if he did not go he may regret it.

When he arrived, a security guard was waiting for him. He thanks nurses who worked through the pandemic, but suggested the ones that tended to Shelton were a bit "too chipper" when they greeted him. Regardless, he makes it to her room, has the opportunity to touch her forehead and say his goodbyes. As he leaves the room, a first joke manifests itself. Maron thinks to himself, "Selfie? No, right?" Even his most morbid colleagues suggested that this joke as a whole was too grim to share. Perhaps, though, it was no joke at all but rather a genuine reaction to tragedy; the human attempt to insert levity in the heaviest of moments. Maron was so happy that he was able to access humor. Plus, he shares, "I think Lynn would like it."

*Analysis*

In confirming his suspicion that the departed Shelton would enjoy this joke, Maron relies on what I can only surmise is a skeptically earnest belief in an afterlife. Earlier in the set, he shares about some of the platitudes people shared with him in the wake of Shelton's death. Someone offered him, "when people die they don't really leave, their energy is still here." Maron's initial reaction, "how is that helpful? I got used to her in a human form." "But oddly, when you're fucking sad," he acquiesces, "you'll go mystical. You need it." Just as he reflects in an introduction to a chapter on mortality in an anthology of quotes from his podcast, Maron writes "I have no idea what happens after we die…Being terrified of death is part of the human condition."[9] Though he once suspected "probably nothing" occurs after death, his grief at losing a dear person propels his imagination.[10]

And so, in the warm months following Shelton's death, Maron was liable to sit on his porch. While outside, hummingbirds began to visit. He thought, "Oh my God! Lynn! Lynn,

[9] Marc Maron, *Waiting for the Punch: Words to Live by From the WTF Podcast* (New York: Flatiron Books, 2017), 343.
[10] Ibid.

you're a hummingbird now. Of course you are. That makes so much sense." Ascribing Shelton's essence to the hummingbird places Maron in a common camp in terms of meaning-making in mourning. Many bereaved people believe they witness signs from their departed loved ones in nature, their homes, or other locales. Though, the rational part of Maron's brain does acknowledge that the season was typical for hummingbird appearances and that Shelton could not possibly have been *each* hummingbird he saw that spring. Despite his resistance, though, he does not fully deride the idea and appears genuinely open to Shelton's spirit/soul/essence/memory somehow manifesting itself physically in the world.

Because of his openness, he also ascribes meaning to technical difficulties during a dry run of this show in Ireland, a place beloved by Shelton. While there, as he was saying the "selfie" joke above, the spotlight on him flickered. He took that as a sign that she was there with him and approving of the joke. When the technician apologized Maron remarked "No, it was Lynn, she's hanging out. Usually she's a bird." He caps the entire storytelling set about Shelton by inserting doubt into the narrative. While on tour, he shared the same morbid joke in Texas. There, his microphone went out and that same night, the lights in his hotel room did not work. "Maybe," Maron thinks, "she doesn't like the jokes." Perhaps this bit of doubt, while deflected onto Shelton's essence, also echoes Maron's own doubt about the potential of her essence's presence at all. Regardless, Maron genuinely entertains the notion that something about Shelton outlasts her physical life.

The show does indeed touch on heavy things and Maron does not shy away from them. Like the mock-review of "A Prayer for the Dead," viewers of *From Bleak to Dark* can tell that Maron really has worked through his grief and continues to, while utilizing comedy as a medium. He describes the potency of comedy in difficult moments. Cutting to the extreme, as

comedians are wont to do, Maron says "I believe there were probably some hilarious people in Auschwitz. Come on? It was, like, all Jews!" Whether or not Maron has read about humor within concentration camps during the Holocaust, he still alludes to a poignant feature of Jewish comedy, in particular. In making this joke, and the ones surrounding it including "He does *all* the Nazis!" and "I am sure there is an Auschwitz joke book by Jews…that no one knows how to publish," Maron hints at the long tradition of humor as a coping mechanism. In using it as his own mechanism, he situates himself within a long chain of Jewish people who turn to humor in tough times.

Ultimately, Maron, though historically critical of religion and its extreme forms, including from within *From Bleak to Dark*, embraces "the mystical." As a result of his recent confrontations with mortality, from within his own aging family and witnessing the death of his partner, Maron's usual skepticism and mordancy pale in his most recent special. His spiritual side emerges as he attempts to marry the comic and the real.

## Conclusion

Rachel Bloom, Sarah Silverman, and Marc Maron though each at different points in their comic careers and with their own unique styles share many commonalities. Each of them are proudly Jewish comics who nonetheless espouse deep disconnect from institutional Judaism and do not believe in God. Though they utilize their Jewish identities and Jewish stereotypes as pieces of their humor, they each also remain notorious for their raunch, wit, and brains.

Yet, their similarities do not end with their religious and theological backgrounds nor with their proclivity to joke about genitalia. Bloom, Silverman, and Maron all suffered tragedy since the COVID-19 pandemic wrought havoc on humanity. Losing friends, parents, and a partner, respectively, each of these comedians were brought face-to-face with genuine tragedy. Like Melpomene and Thalia, each of these comedians traverse happiness and grief within their most recent specials.

Each of them have offered their own musings on how comedy operates in the face not only of the mundane, but of the tragic. Silverman, in her blurb on the back of Bloom's memoir offers the phrase "heartbreaking comedy." When heartbreaking comedy is shared, laughter and tears may coexist. As Kohelet shares, there is a time indeed for both.[1] It is rare, however, that the comedic stage causes fans, *or the comedian themself*, to cry as Maron did in working out *From Bleak to Dark.*[2]

Maron, perhaps the most earnest comedian amongst the test cases in this thesis, shares quite poignantly in *From Bleak to Dark*, "I find that humor that comes from real darkness is really the best because it disarms it. It's elevating to the spirit." Like Berger's first theory of

[1] Ecclesiastes 3:4.
[2] Schneider, "On the Joke," Variety.

humor, namely that it is precisely the unexpected nature of humor which allows for hilarity, Maron contends that humor that emerges from the depths elevates the spirit. Heartbreak comedy serves an almost therapeutic purpose. Bloom, Silverman, and Maron have all shared in turn about the way their current projects marry the comic and the tragic *and* the ways this union has aided them personally.

Adam Schlesinger, Bloom's partner from *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* who tragically died of COVID, was also a close friend of Silverman's. Early in 2020, the two of them were also working together. Silverman was working to adapt her 2010 memoir *The Bedwetter* into a musical. Schlesinger was pitching songs. The show, currently in its first run through mid-March 2025, "confronts death, mental health and middle school pariahdom, [but] its profane whimsy, flurry of farts and bubbly songs lighten weightier topics."[3] Silverman, in reflecting on the wide appeal of the show quips, "We all have endless, endless material within ourselves and our own experience that can be comedy, tragedy and everything in between."[4] Perhaps, *this* is the ultimate punchline. Whether spurred or accelerated by global pandemic or personal loss, every human's life is replete with ups and downs. Comedians, particularly stand-up comedians who utilize observational comedy, need only tap into the humor that arises from reality. This reality contains joy and grief, and each of the comedians herein, moved by their grief, highlight the ways in which they coincide.

*This* attunement to the persistent reality of both goodness and hardship is perhaps also the role of a clergy member. In many ways, the job of the rabbi is to be present to both joy and tragedy. Though a sense of humor from the bima is often warranted, solemnity often prevails.

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[3] Thomas Floyd, "Sarah Silverman on Finding the Humor in Heartache," Washington Post, 29 January 2025, https://www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/theater/2025/01/29/sarah-silverman-bedwetter-musical-arena-stage/.
[4] Ibid.

A thesis on stand-up comedy may not appear directly applicable to a rabbinic life. The bima is not a stage. And yet, as these comedians prove, perhaps the stage can hold more than jokes. The comic stage may also be a venue for processing, for grief, for moving through difficulty. So too, the walls of a synagogue or non-profit or academic institution in which rabbis operate are privy to the everyday reality of both difficulty and joy.

I do not suggest that I will utilize scatological or otherwise inappropriate humor as a rabbi. But as a person, I know that humor is amongst my own preferred coping mechanisms for dealing with grief, tragedy, and pain; especially my own. As Avner Ziv writes on the main characteristics of Jewish humor including its intellectual dimension, it reduces "the awful reality into absurdity."[5] It is not my job as a rabbi to make jokes or utilize humor in the face of tragedy that is not my own. Rather, recalling the fluid nature of comedy and the human impulse to utilize it, I can better show up for all people. Whether explaining to teenagers why they giggle upon learning of some of the most grotesque facts of the Holocaust or why *shiva minyanim* occasionally devolve into uncontrollable laughter, the rabbi who understands the blurred boundary between humor and tragedy can better show up for all aspects of life.

Plus, as Maron rightfully notes, Americans live in a death-averse culture whose grasp extends to discussions of grief. In taking a lesson from these comedians, who candidly discuss grief and death, rabbis ought to challenge the norm. The subversive act of talking about death and grief is a necessary one. For all rabbis working and learning through the end-stages of a pandemic, in which all manner of different infectious diseases continue to spread, we may take a lesson from comedians. The job of those inspiring and speaking to others need not disregard

[5] Berger, *Genius*, 13-4.

harsh realities, *even* if the job is to make jokes or to comfort. Acknowledging difficulty may perhaps be the most comforting path forward.

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