

HEBREW 63/COMP LIT 70

Themes in Hebrew Literature and Culture
Rabbis, rogues and schlemiels: Jewish humor and its roots

Fall 2004, 2A
Lewis Glinert
Office: 305 Bartlett Hall
Office hours: Tu, Th 9-10 or by arrangement

Description

What is Jewish humor, what are its roots, and what can it tell us about Jewish society, its values and its self-image? This course mines the rich tradition of Hebrew comedy and satire from Biblical Esther to Mendele's Russian Shtetl, and their relationship to Yiddish and Israeli humor, Groucho Marx and Woody Allen. We will also compare the joke, popular song, film and the cartoon, asking how genre impacts on theme. A unique resource for this course is the online Dartmouth Jewish Sound Archive.

Taught in English translation. Open to all classes.

Books to buy

Course pack

Novak, William & M Waldoks. The big book of Jewish humor. Harper & Row, 1981.

Rosten, Leo . The New joys of Yiddish. New York, McGraw-Hill , 2003

Ziv, Avner. Jewish Humor. Transaction Publ, 1997

Assessment

There will be a midterm examination and a final examination, each counting for 35% of the grade. There will also be several written assignments, counting for 30% of the grade.

I encourage students with disabilities, including invisible disabilities like chronic diseases, learning disabilities, and psychiatric disabilities to discuss with me after class or during my office hours appropriate accommodations that might be helpful to them.

Syllabus

Weeks 0 and 1 What is humor? Cultural and psychological theories of humor. Popular and scholarly taxonomies. Continuity and cultural memory. Overview of Jewish cultural history. Jewish perceptions of Jewish humor. Stereotyping from without and within.

Reading:

Rosten. The new joys of Yiddish. Preface [so you can understand me]
Novak & Waldoks: Intro and pp. 1-57 [A taster of the raw thing]
Ziv, 5-15
Freud. Jokes and their relation to the unconscious [56-7, 62-76, 94-6, 121-139]

Lefcourt. Humor ch 2 (15-29), ch 5 (55-73)
Michelson, Bruce. Literary wit (1-36)
Epstein 287-307

Week 2

Comedy and satire in the Bible. (Special focus: The Books of Esther and Jonah)

Reading:

Esther (Old Testament) [use any translation]
Jonah (Old Testament) [use any translation]
Radday & Brenner. ch 2 (21-38), ch 10 (203-216), ch 13-14 (277-313)

Bermant. (course pack) 5-23, 37-45
Knox. The traditional roots of Jewish humour.

Assignment (800-1000 words), due Oct 13, 11 p.m. "What genres of humor can one find in the Hebrew Bible?"

Week 3

Rabbinic brainteasers and polemics: parable, riddle and anecdote
Comic and subversive traditions of reading the Bible: From linguistic wit to bawdy (Medieval Hebrew poetry, the Yiddish Purim performance)

Reading:

Rosten. The new joys of Yiddish 38-40, 157 (*kashe*), 411-13

Bermant. (course pack) 24-36
Heinemann. "Seriousness and Humor" *[hand out]*
Maccoby. The day God laughed [54-67, 68-74, 94, 98-9, 116-9, 140-2, 159]
Carmi. Penguin Book of Hebrew Verse. pp. 353, 421-7, 500-6

Week 3-4 Satirizing religion: Hasidic and anti-Hasidic narrative of the 18-19th century
Old World Jewish comic types: The wise guy, the schlemiel, rabbis, butchers,
matchmakers and others

Reading:

Rosten. The new joys of Yiddish 127 , 129-30 , 158-9, 208-11, 428-35
Bermant. (course pack) 65-99
Steinsaltz (Rabbi Nachman tale: The clever son and the simple son)
Avidor-Hacohen. Touching heaven touching earth. 7-13, 106-115, 135-143

Ausubel A Treasury of Jewish folklore:
264-80, 286-99, 303-307, 319-23, 331-8, 343-7, 362-7, 374-5, 377-82, 386-7,
390-5, 400-5, 409, 413-5
Bermant. (course pack) 113-124
Ziv, 135-147 ('Halachic issues as satirical elements...')
Knox. The wise men of Chelm.

Wisse. The schlemiel as modern hero ch 1 (3-24)
The world of Sholom Aleichem [video]
Bermant. (course pack) ch 4. (46-64)
Rosten. The new joys of Yiddish 254-6, 302-5 (rebbe, rebbitzin)
Ziv, 125-131 ('The rabbi versus the priest')

Assignment (800-1000 words), due Oct 26, 11 p.m. 'How did Eastern European Jewish humor treat erudition and religion?'

Week 5 The shtetl and the new Hebrew/Yiddish satiric realism (Sholem Aleichem,
Mendele, Peretz)
Yiddish popular comedy in its European heyday: theater, cinema, song

Reading:

Bermant. (course pack) 100-112, 125-147
Abramovitsh. Tales of Mendele the Book Peddler. 1-66
Novak & Waldoks 8-14
Ziv, 19-25 ('Sholem Aleichem's "On account of a hat")', 151-161 ('Tevye the Milkman')
Howe and Greenberg. A treasury of Yiddish stories 168-204, 223-31

Wisse. The schlemiel as modern hero, ch 2-3 (pp 25-57)
Shtaynberg. The Jewish Book of Fables. [intro and pp. 2-51]
Yidl mitn fidl [videorecording]
recordings from Dartmouth Jewish Sound Archive

Mid-term examination

Week 6 Some major themes in modern Jewish humor

Reading:

Novak & Waldoks: part 2 ("Jewish and Goyish"), pp 60-101, part 3 ("Promised Lands"), pp. 104-169

Ziv, 75-106 ('Jewish jokes...')

Novak & Waldoks: part 4 ("Making a living"), pp. 172-211, part 5 ("First things last"), pp. 214-305

Week 7-8 Anglo-Jewish comic performance: From Vaudeville to Seinfeld

The American-Jewish self-stereotype: Hyman Kaplan and Lenny Bruce.

The Americanization of Yiddish and the Shtetl: Fiddler on the Roof, Leo Rosten, Jackie Mason and the Jewish joke

Reading:

Bermant. (course pack) 190-219

Rosten. The new joys of Yiddish. Preface; 221-9, 262-273, 342-351

Fiddler on the Roof. [video]

Wisse. The schlemiel as modern hero ch 5-6 (pp 70-107)

Chametzky (Norton), 309-323

Rosten, Leo. The Education of Hyman Kaplan 3-22, 141-162

Rosten. The new joys of Yiddish 11-12 (alrightnik), 22-26

Zelig. [video]

Mason. The world according to me. [selections]

Annie Hall [video]

Epstein. The haunted smile ch. 8-11 (195-277)

Ziv, 29-41 ("The Jew as comic")

Hoberman & Shandler, 222-257, 274-8

recordings from Dartmouth Jewish Sound Archive

Assignment (800-1000 words), due Nov 21, 11 p.m. Analyze the Jewish humor in Jackie Mason's performance (video): "Look Who's Laughing!"

Week 8 (continued)-Week 9 Illusions of fostering the past: The comic Hebrew fiction of Agnon. The emergence of an Israeli 'Sabra' humor (Kishon's films and vignettes, the Chizbat, the Dosh and Dry Bones cartoon)

Reading:

Oring. Israeli humor ch 2 (23-38), ch 4 (57-86), ch 6 (120-128)

Agnon. The Bridal Canopy ch. 1, 2

Gardosh. To Israel with Love: intro, 18-20, 46-51, 124-5

Kishon. Look Back, Mrs Lot: 42-52, 92-101, 179-192.

Kishon. So Sorry we Won. "How Israel forfeited world sympathy' (approx p. 15-16)

Salah Shabbati. [video]
Kirschen. What a Country! pp 1-16, 149-204
Ziv, 165-171 ('political satire'), 191-200 ('Do Jews in Israel...'), 203-214 ('Political caricature')

Assignment (1000-1200 words), due Nov 30, 11 pm
'How does Israeli humor treat the Arab-Israeli conflict?'

Week 10 Is there an organic Jewish comic tradition and what are its objective sociocultural correlates?

Do different genres lend themselves to different types of humor?

Reading:

Altman. The comic image of the Jew 125-171, 185-205
Ziv, 47-71 ('Psycho-social aspects of Jewish humor in Israel & the Diaspora')
Blacher Cohen. 1-15, 16-36
Bermant. (course pack) 238-250

Books on reserve

1. Primary sources

Books

Afek, Yishai. Israeli humour and satire. Sadan, Tel Aviv. 1974.

Agnon, S.Y. The Bridal Canopy. London: Gollancz.

Alter, R Modern Hebrew Literature. Behrman House, 1975.

Avidor-Hacohen, Shmuel. Touching heaven touching earth: Hasidic humor and wit. Tel Aviv: Sadan, 1976

Ausubel, Nathan (ed) A Treasury of Jewish folklore. New York : Crown, 1948

Abramovitsh, S.Y. Tales of Mendele the Book Peddler. Schocken, 1996.

Carmi, T. Penguin Book of Hebrew Verse. Penguin, 1981.

Chametzky, Jules et al. Jewish American Literature: A Norton Anthology. W W Norton, 2001

Gardosh, Kariel. (Dosh) To Israel with Love. NY: Thomas Yoseloff, 1960.

Heinemann, Joseph. The Methodology of the Aggadah. "Seriousness and Humor" (pp. 186-195). Summary by Marc Bregman, [hand out]

Howe, Irving and Eliezer Greenberg (eds). A treasury of Yiddish stories Cleveland : World Pub. Co., 1958.

Kirschen, Yaakov. What a Country!: Dry Bones Looks at Israel
Jewish Publication Society, 1996

Kishon, Efraim. Unfair to Goliath. Penguin, 1971

Kogos, Fred. 1001 Yiddish proverbs. Secaucus: Citadel Press, 1974.

Levinson, Jon. Esther: A Commentary. Westminster John Knox Press. 1997.

Maccoby, Hyam. The day God laughed: Sayings, fables and entertainments of the Jewish sages.
NY: St Martin's Press, 1978.

Mason, Jackie. The world according to me. Simon & Schuster 1987.

Novak, William & M Waldoks. The big book of Jewish humor. Harper & Row, 1981.

Olsvanger, Immanuel. Royte pomerantsen, Jewish folk humor gathered and edited by Immanuel Olsvanger. New York, Schocken Books 1947 [selections translated by Lewis Glinert]

Rosten, Leo. The Education of Hyman Kaplan and The Return of Hyman Kaplan. 1937, 1959.

Rosten, Leo . The joys of Yiddish. New York, McGraw-Hill , 1968

Roth, Philip. Portnoy's Complaint. London" Jonathan Cape, 1969.

Sadeh, Pinhas (ed). Jewish Folktales. Doubleday, 1989.

Sholem Aleichem. (Curt Leviant, trans.) Stories and satires. Yoseloff, 1960.

Shtaynberg, Eliezer. The Jewish Book of Fables. Syracuse U P. 2003

Steinsaltz, Adin. Beggars and prayers : Adin Steinsaltz retells the tales of Rabbi Nahman of Bratslav. New York : Basic Books, c1979.

Movies

Yidl mitn Fidl. 1936.

The world of Sholom Aleichem

Salah Shabbati. (dir. Ephraim Kishon) 1964.

Fiddler on the Roof. 1971.

Annie Hall. (dir. Woody Allen) 1977.

Zelig. (dir. Woody Allen) 1983.

2. Analysis and background

Altman, Sig. The comic image of the Jew; explorations of a pop culture phenomenon. Rutherford, Fairleigh Dickinson University Press. 1971.

Bermant, Chaim. What's the joke? A study of Jewish humor through the ages. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1986.

Blacher Cohen, Sarah (ed) Jewish wry : essays on Jewish humor. Bloomington : Indiana University Press, 1987

Chapman A and Foot, Hugh. (eds) Humour and laughter : theory, research, and applications New York : Wiley, 1976

Chase, Jefferson S. Inciting laughter : the development of "Jewish humor" in 19th century German culture. Berlin : Walter de Gruyter, 2000.

Dundes, Alan. Cracking jokes : studies of sick humor cycles & stereotypes. Berkeley, Calif. : Ten Speed Press, 1987

Epstein, Lawrence J. The haunted smile : the story of Jewish comedians in America. Lawrence J. Epstein. New York : Public Affairs, 2001

Freud, Sigmund Jokes and their relation to the unconscious (trans. Strachey)

Hoberman J and J Shandler. Entertaining America: Jews, Movies and Broadcasting. Princeton, 2003.

Knox, Israel. The traditional roots of Jewish humour. Judaism 12 (1964-5), 327-333

Knox, Israel. The wise men of Chelm. Judaism 29 (1980), 185-196

Kronish, Amy World Cinema: Israel, Madison [N.J.] : Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1996

Lefcourt, Herbert. Humor. Kluwer, 2001.

McCann, Graham. Woody Allen : New Yorker . Cambridge : Polity, 1990

Michelson, Bruce. Literary wit. Amherst : University of Massachusetts Press, 2000

Miron, Dan. A traveler disguised; a study in the rise of modern Yiddish fiction in the nineteenth century. New York, Schocken Books 1973

Miron, Dan. The Image of the Shtetl and Other Studies of Modern Jewish Literary Imagination. Syracuse UP, 2000

Oring, Elliott. The jokes of Sigmund Freud.

Oring, Elliott. Israeli humor : the content and structure of the chizbat of the Palmah. Albany : State University of New York Press, 1981

Radday, Yehuda T. and Athalya Brenner (eds) On humour and the comic in the Hebrew Bible. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1990

Telushkin, J Jewish humor: What the best Jewish jokes say about the Jews. HarperCollins, 1992

Whitfield, Stephen. The distinctiveness of American Jewish humor. *Modern Judaism* 6, 1986, 245-260

Wisse, Ruth R. *The schlemiel as modern hero*. Chicago, University of Chicago Press 1971.

Ziv, Avner (ed) *Jewish humor*. New Brunswick, U.S.A. : Transaction Publishers, 1997.