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


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
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:

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:
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:

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


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


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


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


Movies

Yidl mitn Fidl. 1936.

The world of Sholom Aleichem


Fiddler on the Roof. 1971.


2. Analysis and background


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.


