

Book review

Jennifer, Caplan (2023) *Funny, You don't Look Funny: Judaism and Humour from the Silent Generation to Millennials*. Wayne State University Press.

Jennifer Caplan has produced a new book about Jewish humour in the United States. She discusses the development of Jewish humour in that country chronologically, with reference to the social changes experienced by the Jews over the years, and with reference to the Jews' perception of themselves *vis-à-vis* the general American society.

Her main question is whether the attitude of the humour creators toward the Jews and Judaism is a valuable essence, or only a hollow cover from which a type of humour can be extracted. Caplan analyses four generations of Jewish humour creators: the "Silent Generation," 1925-1945; the "Baby Boomers," 1946-1965; "Generation X," 1966-1979; and the "Millennial Generation," 1980-1995. Her research covers literature, film, television, and social networks. In each field, she presents examples of humour regarding Jewish rituals or Judaism and follows how the approach to these topics changed across the generations.

Caplan cites Nathan Glazer (1988, p. 8) who pointed out that

in the years between 1920 and 1940... the areas of second settlement [such as the Upper West Side of New York City] contained the greatest number of American Jews, and it was in this zone of American Jewish life that the pattern of the future was being developed... The handwriting on the wall seemed to portend the transition from Judaism as a religion to Judaism as a civilisation, and the young Jews who grew up in that period very much absorbed that mentality. They produced at least two decades' worth of humour that reduced Judaism to an empty set of rituals or beliefs. In other words, they Thingified it

Caplan says that she focuses on humour that has some social or religious purpose, and therefore most of what she included in the research can be classified as satire (pp. 3-6).

Caplan further argues that

[t]he line between religion and culture becomes increasingly blurry when religion itself seems to be a cultural object. But all of that is public sentiment, the destruction of which allows comedians, especially satiric ones, to thrive. This becomes a game of follow the leader, where humourists create a vision of Jewishness (p. 9).

It appears that Caplan attributes too much weight to the social role of the humour creators as agents of change. Humour can reflect reality, but it does not change it. I am unaware of any study that indicates otherwise on the attitudinal, social, cultural, or political level.

In the first chapter, Caplan claims that "Silent Generation" comedians born during the Great Depression and World War II referred to Jewish themes and used Yiddish expressions in their comic work. The economic and social status of the Jews improved from 1950 onward and Jews were not afraid to flaunt their Judaism and their affiliation with the Jewish community. This is reflected in their comedic works in all fields: cinema, television, radio, and stand-up (Sover, 2021, pp. 148-149).

Caplan refers to the literary works of two authors of the Silent Generation: Woody Allen and Joseph Heller. She argues that Allen viewed all religion (including Judaism) as the great evil of modernity. Heller, on the other hand, viewed religion more positively. Both appealed to those who have some familiarity with Jews and Judaism. By viewing Judaism as a “Thing” in his comic work, Allen appeals not only to Jews but also to the general public.

To demonstrate Allen’s connection to Judaism, Caplan cites his *No Kaddish for Weinstein* and says that an understanding of the Kaddish prayer is needed to understand the framework. Similarly, in short stories like *Mr. Big* and short plays like *God*, one needs an understanding of the concept of God in Judaism, which significantly increases the appreciation of the story (p. 22). The same applies to the stories of *The Scrolls and Hassidic Tales, with a Guide to Their Interpretation by the Noted Scholar*. These two stories, according to Caplan, show that behind Allen’s absurdity, there is a high level of cultural knowledge, and that he has significant religious knowledge (p. 23).

Caplan rightly claims that Heller’s work is more imbued with Judaism and Jewish symbols than Woody Allen’s. This was not immediately reflected in *Catch 22* (1961), but it does appear in his third book *Good as Gold* (1979) and is reinforced in his book *King David*. Heller, contends Caplan, is the example of the Silent Generation that embraced Judaism or Jewishness compared to Allen who did not (pp. 35-41).

Caplan concludes:

Allen and Heller approach scripture in different ways, but there is a level of investment in both cases that belies their atheism. Both men seem to share a belief that, like it or not, God has left the building, and that modern people, including modern Jews, need to move on. Allen tries to highlight the ridiculousness of religious belief and blind faith, while Heller focuses more on the human stories behind the religious texts and traditions. They share with other members of the Silent Generation a desire to preserve, and even protect, the Jewish people (p. 41).

I disagree with the assertion that these two artists long to preserve and protect the Jewish people. There is no indication in the texts, certainly not in the cinematic works of Woody Allen, of anything that can support this claim.

In Chapter 2, Caplan refers both to Bernard Malamud and Philip Roth. While Roth belonged to the Silent Generation (1925-1945), Malamud was born in Brooklyn in 1914. His inclusion here is not in line with Caplan’s claim of presenting the material in a chronological order. Caplan chooses Roth’s *Eli the Fanatic*, to show the socio-economic change that Jewish society in the United States was going through. I am not sure that this is the best choice of Roth’s literary humour works. Caplan claims that the Jews reacted to Judaism as something from which they would not benefit, and indeed, perhaps even cause them harm. This led them to try and avoid Jewish symbols. An appropriate choice of Caplan to depict the migration of Jews to the suburbs and the desire to be Americans is Malamud’s *The Jewbird*. This is a tragic-comic story, mixing laughter and sadness in Chaplin’s style, but with a sad ending. Caplan contends that Malamud’s work supports the claim that the Silent Generation wrote their satires out of a desire to protect the Jews even if they wanted to absolve themselves of Judaism (p. 59). Again, in my opinion, Caplan’s claim is not supported by anything concrete in the text.

The third chapter focuses on the Baby Boomer generation. Caplan claims that at the end of the twentieth century, the Thingification of Judaism, the feeling that organised religion is a joke at best and a real danger at worst, remained present in the humour of this generation. In her opinion, the creators in this generation might not criticise the lack of unity or inauthenticity in the Jewish community, but they still shy away from jokes that poke fun at the Jewish people and their behaviour (p. 72).

Caplan claims that jokes about the Jews in the United States in the mid-1970s commonly dealt with four Jewish rituals: circumcision, bar/bat mitzvah, funerals, and marriage. These rituals continued to resonate even in families that have rejected their religious significance generations earlier (pp. 73-75, 77). I would add that jokes about Jewish mothers and JAPs were also common from the mid-seventies onward (see Christie, 2018).

Caplan refers to a skit from the series *Saturday Night Live* that aired on 9.24.1977. In this skit, Caplan claims, the Rebbe is presented in a commercialised manner and Jewish materialism is emphasised in a critical way. Whereas that satire is clearly meant as a critique, the writers of *Saturday Night Live* are more concerned with tapping into the zeitgeist to generate laughs. The Rebbe is called Rabbi and not Mohel, and the covenant ceremony, which is commonly called *bris* among the Jews, is presented in English as circumcision. Caplan concludes and claims that “[a]s we have seen time and time again, throughout this period Judaism was pushed more and more aside and became a ‘Thing’” (pp. 78-79, 84).

If so, I argue, it can be said that almost all Jewish satire writers turn the Jewish essence into a ‘Thing’. After all, this is how humour is created. Humour is meant to be funny. You can laugh at the characteristics of your community and the culture you belong to and still love them. Enlightenment writers such as Yosef Perel, Heinrich Heine, Y. L. Peretz, Sholem Aleichem, and others, criticised Jewish Orthodoxy and their old world, but did so out of affection for the Jewish culture.

Chapter four deals with Generation X. Caplan selects several representatives for Generation X (I will refer to some of them). The first is the actress and creator Jennifer Westfeldt. In her film *Kissing Jessica Stein* (2002), Caplan finds that Westfeldt is responding to Judaism she inherited, which was already shaped and changed by the Silent and Baby Boom generations, and she is adjusting it to what she believes modern Jews need and want: “Westfeldt seems unable to do away with the archetype entirely, but she is willing to explore different dimensions of the JAP ... Jessica is a new breed of JAP” (pp. 93-94).

The second representative chosen by Caplan is the writer, Jonathan Tropper. According to Caplan, his fifth novel *This Is Where I Leave You* (2009), demonstrates an attitude towards Jewish rituals similar to *Kissing Jessica Stein* and it is also an example of how humour about Jewish rituals has become more universal (p. 99). Caplan claims that the burial scene and the Shiva are managed as a Thing and not as an important Jewish essence (p. 101). She even goes further and writes: “He (i.e. Tropper) falls back on many traditional anti-Semitic stereotypes—the lecherous Jewish man, the overbearing Jewish woman, the snobby Jewish princess, the coddled Jewish prince—in ways that are often much harsher than the things that got Philip Roth branded an enemy of the people in the 1960s” (p. 103). Once again, we see Caplan analysing a work, in this case a literary one, from the point of view of “the defender of the Jews and Judaism”, and do not consider that we deal with a comic-satirical work. An answer to Caplan’s claim is received by Tropper himself: “A fictional story is to make things up. I am a fictional writer and my whole gift is the ability to create something that sounds honest and authentic. The fact that I can only choose from my life is ignorance” (p. 101).

The third representative of the Generation X is the writer, Nathan Englander. Englander’s work is almost entirely about Jews and Jewish themes. He is best known for short stories. Caplan argues that just the fact of Englander’s constant and unambiguous use of Jews, Judaism, and Jewishness in all his works speaks to the generational difference between his writing and that of the Silent Generation. “While he may not have remained as Orthodox as he was raised, his connection to Judaism has remained very strong... He is both a good example of a Generation X satirist and an outlier... Englander’s Judaism may be an object, but it is not a Thing” (p. 104-105). The inability to understand what Caplan means when she says a Thing is exacerbated even more when she introduces another concept, that is, the *object*.

Caplan ends the chapter with the series *Curb Your Enthusiasm* by Larry Davis. This choice takes us back to the Baby Boomers generation - Larry Davis was born in 1947. The jump back disrupts the chronological order that is guaranteed to us by the research method in the introduction. Caplan chooses two episodes that she claims particularly illustrate Larry David's approach to Judaism: the first, *Palestinian Chicken*, the third episode of season 8, and the end of the sixth season, *The Bat Mitzvah*. Caplan claims that most of the time Larry David operates the old way in his treatment of Judaism as a 'Thing'.

It seems to me that if we follow Caplan's outline, then one of the funniest scenes in the series, which could be another milestone in turning Judaism into a 'Thing' (always according to Caplan) is *The Survivor*, in which a Holocaust survivor argues with a contestant in the television series *The Survivor*, which of them suffered more.¹ Caplan rightly claims that humour depends on time and cites as an example the distance of the Millennial Generation from the Holocaust, and therefore its attitude to the subject is different from that of the Silent Generation and the Generation X, all based on the memories and the direct or indirect experiences of each generation to the subject.

Caplan rightly claims that the Millennial Generation's humour extends to new platforms, that is, social networks. To see how this manifests itself, Caplan selects several segments: two episodes of the series *Broad City*; excerpts from *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend*; and some samples from *@CrazyJewishMom*'s feed. Caplan chooses sections that are created by women. To the obvious question why to focus specifically on women, she answers: "I am focusing entirely on women here, in short, because I can. Women are, perhaps for the first time, driving at least as much (if not more) of the production of Jewish humour in the twenty-first century and that is worth celebrating" (p. 126). And I ask, what does it mean "because I can"? Is this an answer worthy of a scientific research? Doesn't focusing in this chapter on Jewish women humour - a worthy study in itself - bias the research?

On *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend*, Caplan writes that it is important for these women to identify as Jews, and it seems that they are not bothered by criticism that their Judaism is hollow, superficial, or even dangerous to the survival of the Jewish people. Millennials know they are part of an exclusive club, and they are proud of it (p. 133). If so, do these women represent Judaism or a Thing? Caplan leaves the question unanswered.

Caplan concludes with Kate Siegel's Instagram feed *@CrazyJewishMom*. As archetypal millennial humour (pp. 133-134), it focuses on the relationship between mother and daughter, which is different from the familiar stereotype of the Jewish mother and the JAP as expressed in previous generations. Here, too, Caplan is content with the Jewish women and their self-perception, and less so with one of the two actual topics in the book, which is whether their attitude to Judaism is as a Thing or not. Caplan rightly argues that *@CrazyJewishMom* does provide more information about the direction of millennial humour and what shape it might take in the years to come (p. 136).

To conclude my review, here are my main points:

- A. Caplan did not define what Judaism and/or Jewishness is - which I find difficult to define and therefore failed to create a clear distinction when it can be said that one creator writes "Jewish" and another refers to Judaism as a Thing.
- B. The attempt to find a clear distinction between the humour creators and their products by generations is not without bias. We saw that sometimes the humour of a more advanced generation is compatible with the one in previous generations.

¹*Curb Your Enthusiasm* - 'The Survivor' episode, season 4, March 2014, 2004.

- C. In the introduction to the book, Caplan writes that her book focuses on humour that has some social or religious purpose. In my opinion, this is a misunderstanding of what humour is. The main purpose of humour is to make the recipient laugh and also to criticise reality. Beyond that, humour has no ability nor is it its role to change reality.
- D. Caplan chose texts and creators arbitrarily, hence they do not necessarily represent the great wealth of Jewish creators in each generation but were intended to reflect her position on the central issues: Judaism, Jewishness, and Thing.

Arie Sover

The Open University of Israel, Israel
ariecsover@gmail.com

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