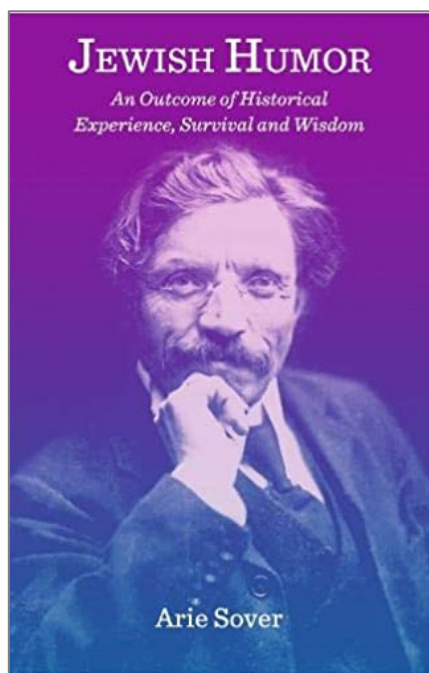


BOOKS

Arie Sover, *Jewish Humor. An Outcome of Historical Experience, Survival and Wisdom*, Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2021, 323 p.

Jewish humor continues to spring interesting scholarly approaches. Only in the past decade this field of research has been enriched with the publication of valuable works by researchers such as Ruth R. Wise, Jeremy Dauber, or Louis Kaplan. Arie Sover's latest book contributes to the field by revisiting the most commonly discussed aspects of Jewish humor, nuancing some popular claims regarding the roots of the Jewish humorous tradition, and updating the canon traditionally used for the exploration of the various manifestations of Jewish humor.

The central claim of Arie Sover's book is that literacy and the refinement of critical thinking through the study of the sacred texts fuelled the development of Jewish humor into a distinct category. As suggested by the subtitle, chronology guides Arie Sover's exploration of the Jewish humorous tradition, viewed as the product of the historical circumstances that have shaped the fate of the Jews for millennia.



The book begins with a careful examination of commonly held assumptions regarding the sacred texts as the sources of Jewish humor. The most accomplished is the discussion about the Bible as the first source of what will become the Jewish humorous tradition. After a thorough and convincing analysis of relevant biblical sections, Sover adds the appropriate nuances to the claim that Jewish humor stems from the Bible

and concludes that what the biblical text does is stimulate critical thinking, which "will later form part of the cognitive infrastructure for the evolution of modern Jewish humor" (13).

Arie Sover continues with a historical overview, which navigates centuries of anti-Semitism, discrimination, pogroms, massacres, and expulsions that have defined Jewish existence in the Muslim and the Christian worlds. The onset of the Enlightenment has considerably changed

the situation of the Jews for the better, even if not everywhere (mob violence against the Jews was still encouraged in the Russian empire and hostility towards Jews did not decrease in the Muslim world). The semblance of security offered by the tolerance of the Enlightenment allowed for the development of Jewish culture in Western Europe and, consequently, the appearance of modern Jewish humor. As Sover claims, even if “expressions and hints of humor can be found many years before ... none of these manifestations of humor had a great impact on the Jewish world” (80). The Enlightenment, on the other hand, offered the favourable context for the flourishing of Jewish humor, both in folklore and through humorous literature and not even the direst historical circumstances of World War II would curb its development. On the contrary, the ghettos, and even the concentration camps, witnessed the manifestation of Jewish humor as a mechanism of survival. As Sober writes, “humor was a declaration of hope even when the word ceased to have any meaning. As one survivor put it, ‘Without humor we would have committed suicide’” (139). The section on the Holocaust includes touching survivors’ testimonies, supporting Sover’s claim that “The existence of extensive cultural activities in the ghettos, as well as the concentration and death camps, are indicative of the Jewish determination to retain their sanity. This extraordinary phenomenon derives from cognitive and psychological self-defence mechanisms that illustrate how man’s very existence resides in his consciousness and thoughts” (140).

In line with other recent books on Jewish humor (e.g. Jeremy Dauber’s *Jewish Comedy: A Serious History*), Sover updates the literary canon traditionally used for the

discussion of Jewish humor. Thus, the series of brief presentations of authors traditionally discussed in books on Jewish humor is completed by succinct presentations of the contributions of contemporary writers such as Gary Shteyngart, Lara Vapnyar, and Jonathan Safran Foer. Also, after an overview of the manifestations of Jewish humor in American film and television, a short section mentions the American-Jewish comedienne as a fairly new phenomenon.

The most consistent section of the book and the most welcome addition to the field is dedicated to examining the role and the transformations of the Jewish humorous tradition in the State of Israel. Sover includes different media in his analysis: theatre, press, film, radio, television. He operates a periodization which allows him to trace the development of the Israeli humorous tradition from humor “based on suffering or existential anxieties” to humor focused on “the day-to-day events and controversies which shaped Israeli life” (186). The mild satire of the ‘pre-state’ (1890-1948) and ‘first period’ (1948-1963) stages, which supported the Zionist ideology and the formation of the new state, becomes more uncomfortable in the second period (1964-1993), when it would not hesitate to engage with the most sensible aspects of Israeli politics, by criticising social and governmental injustice, as well as foreign affairs measures resulting in armed conflicts, and decreases in harshness in the third period (1993-present).

If humor has been the hallmark of the best-known writers of Jewish origin writing in diasporic contexts (from Sholem Aleichem and Isaac Babel to Malamud, Roth, Bellow, and Foer), the situation seems to have changed in Israeli literature. According

to Sover, “The Jews in Israel were and are still free. Humor in the new State of Israel no longer served the Jew as a means of defense like it did when they were in exile and therefore lacked this existential need. Therefore, Israeli writers also did not feel the need to address this literary genre or rely on weak characters, such as the Schlemiel” (244). However, Sover offers a series of brief presentations of Israeli writers still interested in continuing the Jewish humorous literary tradition, to admirable results: Shmuel Yosef Agnon, for instance, was a Nobel Prize laureate.

Towards the end, the book offers a worrisome discussion of anti-Semitism in the contemporary world. Recent surveys reveal that the Jew is still the scapegoat for whatever goes wrong in the world, including the coronavirus pandemic (265). Sover, however, points to the bright side of this alarming reality in one of his concluding predictions: “so long as anti-Semitism remains a factor that threatens the Jewish existence, Jewish humor will continue to provide a psychological means to cope with it” (276).

Although the book could have benefited from more thorough editing, it makes an enjoyable and informative reading. The author’s personal investment transpires in the book, adding a welcome familiar

touch to his argumentation and well-documented research: “I recall a sentence my father, who was a Holocaust survivor, said in the Romanian language more than once: ‘The rider should stay on the horse.’ I understood that he meant that one should always be ready to leave to another place on a moment’s notice. I am not merely quoting him but feel like him and so do many other Jews” (175). The richness of historical information (it often reads more like a history book than a book on Jewish humor), the clarity of the explanations, and the integration of a generous body of previous research make Arie Sover’s *Jewish Humor: An Outcome of Historical Experience, Survival and Wisdom* a most welcome addition to the field. It can be of great help to researchers at the beginning of their careers, as it offers a systematized overview of the most important scholarly discussions in the area. It would also undoubtedly offer food for thought to more experienced scholars.

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