


# Humor in Ashkenazi Jewish Women: Culture, Trauma and Coping

## Sensory Ethnography, Fall 2017

Elise Glaser




Elise Glaser  
With Chutzpah Episode 2: Sarah on Jewish Humor

16 hours

1:12:19

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Elise Glaser  
With Chutzpah Episode 1: Naomi on Jewish Humor

20 days  
#Comedy

0:32 59:15

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1

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## **Table of Contents:**

1. Abstract: 3
2. Introduction + Conceptual Discussion: 3
3. Methods: 5
4. Section I: Shabbat Services: 7
5. Section II: “With Chutzpah Episode 2: Naomi on Jewish Humor”: 9
  - a. <https://soundcloud.com/elise-glaser/episode-1-naomi-on-jewish-humor>
6. Section III “With Chutzpah Episode 2: Sarah on Jewish Humor”: 16
  - a. <https://soundcloud.com/elise-glaser/sarah-podcast-episode-2>
7. Conclusions: 21
8. Annotated Bibliography: 22

## **Abstract**

This research looks to explore the question: What role does humor play in the lives of young Ashkenazi women? In this paper, I use two podcast interviews, that can be found on Soundcloud, with three 21- year old Jewish cis- women: Naomi, Sarah and myself. This paper begs the question: “What characterizes Jewish humor?” with the conceptual aid of Ruth Wisse’s “No Joke: Making Jewish Humor”. Interview questions aim to discuss the role that humor plays in our lives. In these discussions, topics of trauma, gender, assimilation, oppression, Yiddish, family and coping are addressed. The podcasts are used due to their auditory importance and explore how humor is embodied in these women. Various conclusions were reached. Naomi and Sarah both agreed that “assimilation is oppression” which allows for enclaves of Jewish humor. Both made jokes about Jewish trauma, embodying their method of coping. Overall, common Jewish humor was characterized as usually situational, intellectual or vulgar.

## **Introduction + Conceptual Discussion**

Wisse begins her book “No Joke: Making Jewish Humor” with the questions: “Is it appropriate to wonder why Jews should enjoy laughing at themselves? Why joking acquired such value in Jewish society, or why Yiddish-- the language of American Jewry” “-- is thought to be inherently funny?” (Wisse 2013, 5). Jews are often associated with comedy in the media, and within Jewish communities many would agree that humor holds special value. ““No other community can compete with the range and subtlety of Jewish jokes”” wrote the London *Daily Telegraph* (12). Jewish humor is often described as “self-deprecating”. Wisse cites Freud who stated: ““I do not know whether there are many other instances of a people making fun to such a degree of its own character.”” (7).

With auto-ethnographic evidence, and two hour- long podcasts, I explore the question: What role does humor play in the lives of young Ashkenazi women? These two podcasts, conducted with two of my best friends explore how humor is embodied in these women. Our conversations look to understand how Jewish humor relates to culture, trauma and coping. In the podcasts, we focused on the following questions: What role does humor play in your life? In

your family's life? What role does Judaism play in your life? In your family's life? How would you describe your family's sense of humor? How would you describe your own? What does the term "Jewish humor" mean to you? Is this concept present in your life? Do you resonate with or like any Jewish comedians? Why? When has a Jewish family member made you laugh? What was the joke? What did it feel like? And what do you think of the statement: "Jewish Humor comes out of oppression and is lost in assimilation"? (Zwieg 2013).

### *Conceptual Discussion*

#### *"When Jews Were Funny" Documentary*

The night before I called Naomi, I watched the documentary "When Jews Were Funny" this piece consisted largely of interviews with older Jewish comedians, discussing the history of Jewish humor. I was disappointed that the documentary only focused on cis- male comedians, which inspired me to focus on how Jewish humor is embodied in women. However, the film also gave insight into Jewish humor, and from where it stems. In my interview with Naomi, I draw from this documentary various times. I was interested in the way the documentary discussed the cadence of Jewish humor as "Yiddish Rhythm". I was also intrigued by the statement: "Jewish humor comes out of oppression and is lost in assimilation". Lastly, I enjoyed the statement that Jewish humor is "looking at a situation and saying 'what's funny about this?'" Which was referred to this as the "funny eye" (Zwieg 2013). Throughout this paper, I will refer to this method of humor as "situational humor" or the "funny eye".

Situational humor is how many people describe Ashkenazi humor, as it came out of the ability to make a dire, oppressive situation funny. A comedian in the documentary "When Jews Were Funny" explains: "Jews in Europe had nothing, so they had to find a way to find humor in their lives." (Zwieg 2013). As an example, Naomi (interviewee in Section II) and I thrive off of this kind of humor, and I realized that her mom does as well. I brought up a time that we were at a mall with her mom and a store worker approached her mom and said "Hi! How are you today? What's your name?" her mom, who was annoyed this person had asked her name in a mall, replied: "Excuse me??" The three of us had laughed about this the day of and continue to memorialize the funny interaction. Although it may have only been an exchange between an

employee and a customer, the quickness of her mom’s response to an intrusive question became something hilarious and remarkable.

### *The Importance of Yiddish*

Yiddish was spoken mainly in Ashkenazi shtetls (villages) in Eastern Europe, and is not spoken frequently today. It is a language that was spoken only by Jews, is a mix of both German and Hebrew. Wisse agrees with the documentary, that Yiddish and its timing play a role in Jewish humor. She explains: “Yiddish signified, in however attenuated a form, Judaism’s many habits of mind and conduct” (Wisse 2013, 88). Also, while speaking specifically of women, she writes: “Though Yiddish cursing was by no means the exclusive preserve of women, the culture ascribes to them a special talent for verbal abuse” (Wisse 2013, 86).

The podcast is named “With Chutzpah” due to the influence of Yiddish in Ashkenazi

humor. This Yiddish word comes from the Hebrew, Chutzpah, חֲצִפָּה, meaning “cheek” or “audacity”. This is also a commonly used word in Ashkenazi families.



*“Naomi and Sarah Showing Cheek”*

*Photo: Me, Naomi, Sarah, Jaime  
NFTY Fall Kallah 2012*

### **Methods**

This paper discusses three Jewish cis- women; myself, Naomi and Sarah whose names have not been changed. Naomi and Sarah are some of my best friends whom I keep in touch with often. All of us are Ashkenazi, 21 and grew up Eastside of Seattle in different suburbs. I was born in California, Naomi was born in Massachusetts and Sarah was born in New York State. All

three of us attended public school K-12 grades and are currently seniors at small, private, liberal arts schools. We are all Reform Jews, went to Hebrew school as children and were participants in the youth group, NFTY (North American Federation of Temple Youth). We all had Bat Mitzvahs, grew up in two- parent homes and have older siblings.

### *Recording + Senses*

I chose to make a Soundcloud podcast to communicate the way that voices and sound play a role in humor. They were both recorded on my computer, edited minimally and posted publicly. Naomi and Sarah both received most of the questions beforehand so that they would be able to prepare answers. Due to this, and the podcast-style, these discussions were curated, prepared and performative. The podcast style of recording aims to communicate the complex fashion at which jokes are told; with the importance of voices, timing, tonality and accents. The auditory access to this conversation is integral to my project, as writing down the jokes may misrepresent or diminish the role that timing and speech play in Jewish humor. These podcasts are online, so that readers can concurrently read about the humor, but also experience the conversation that lead to the humor. This allows readers to have different access to the material. These podcasts are public so that they can be accessed by anyone who is interested in a conversation on Jewish humor.

With the goal of creating a podcast, the interviews are directed toward the public. The first podcast was recorded on the phone, because Naomi lives in Massachusetts, and my voice is much louder than Naomi's. Unfortunately, the sound quality is lowered due to this technical difficulty. The second podcast, Sarah's, was recorded in person, at my parent's home in Woodinville, Washington. Sarah had not heard Naomi's podcast when we recorded hers second. The times listed to the subtitles are the corresponding times on the podcast.

Boudreault- Fournier in her chapter, "Recording and Editing", discusses the usefulness of recording in a sensory ethnography. This chapter, she explains, "explores the ways in which we can use recording devices", "to creatively and imaginatively relate with the various environments in which we conduct research" (Boudreault- Fournier 2017, 70). She continues: "Digital recording devices allow for easy capturing, archiving, retrieval and consumption" (Boudreault-

Fournier 2017, 71). When discussing the sensory aspect of this, she says: “The senses are interconnected and we need to understand them in practice and through the act of making” (71). Boudreault- Fournier also describes the word “Polyphony” as, “the importance of including various voices in ethnographic writing-- so that the anthropologist’s voice is not the only one to be considered” (73). My podcast allows for the other voices to be heard, as well as experienced, in the exact tone and timing as they did in their conversation with me. In response to Geertz’s “Thick Description” Boudreault- Fournier explains that “the use of sound” “has the potential to thicken the implicit ethnographic description” (78). The podcast adds a layer of sensory information about the details Jewish humor as well as showing how humor is embodied in Jewish women.

## **Section I: Shabbat Services**

*Woodinville, Washington*

*September 24, 2017*

Sarah, my parents and I walked into my Temple Friday night for Shabbat services. I had dragged them all to services because I wanted to go while I was home for the weekend. Sarah (interviewee for Section III) and I grew up going to Sunday school at Kol Ami, had our Bat Mitzvahs there and were on the board of the temple youth group, KATY (Kol Ami Temple Youth). Rosh Hashanah had been the day before, so we knew there wouldn’t be that many people at services, but we weren’t expecting to be four of the ten people in the sanctuary. We immediately felt uncomfortable, and Sarah joked “Do you think anyone would notice if we left?” Following us, walked in Joshua, this older man who had a long-standing issue based on some old family drama. He really despised my parents, and gruffly looked away as my dad said, “Hi Joshua.” He walked in with three small drums and Sarah, in response, whispered, “No service is complete without bongos.” Everyone in this small Shabbat group had been members since we had gone to Temple there, and they introduced themselves to us, which we thought was strange and as we had been to Shabbat services only about a month prior. The cantor asked our majors and when Sarah said she was an English major he sarcastically said: “We always need more

English majors...” The Rabbi was off for the night because she was spent from running the Rosh Hashanah services, so services were run by the cantor and the president of the Temple, Miriam.

The cantor began, saying, “So, we got two college students and a snarky rabbinical student” and motioned towards an elderly woman with a cane in the front row. I had come in with the goal of taking notes on Jewish humor and my mom leaned over at this point and said, “Start taking notes...” The services started with the cantor on guitar, a flautist, a drummer with about the same amount of people listening in the audience.

As the prayers began, two more people entered, dressed in steampunk outfits. The woman had on all different shades of purple, a top hat and small wire brim glasses and the man had a large mustache, a newsboy cap and all different shades of green on. I whispered to Sarah that they looked like Oliver Twist characters. It was the first day of Fall and the Cantor, Asher, took over most of the service, and asked the audience what they have noticed of Fall. He said: “there is that one smell outside, have you been smelling it?” The ‘snarky rabbinical student’ yelled out “It’s called mold!” Sarah and I laughed as quietly as possible at these interactions, as they seemed wildly casual for a Shabbat service.

Later, we were singing the prayer to welcome the Sabbath bride, and the cantor said: “Imagine, this feminine energy that is the Sabbath queen, walking in. Have you *EVER* seen someone so beautiful?” Someone retorted from the audience “I’d like to think I have!” The heckler was my old Sunday school teacher, husband to the flautist, who had brought in a rocking chair and was wearing a purple kippah balanced on the side of his head and a matching purple University of Washington sweatshirt. Following this, the cantor slowly played on his guitar, while our nemesis, Joshua, played unexpected drum solos on his small drums. The cantor then spoke about angels and said: “My mother told me that she saw an angel once, and the angel was so tall that when she looked at it, she could only see up to its knees. Should I believe her?” a man listening emphatically said: “YES! You believe her!! It’s your mother!” Throughout the whole service, Sarah and I sat with our shoulders shaking, trying to hold in our laughter.

Later, we told Sarah’s dad about this service and he said that the older ‘snarky rabbinical student’s’ name is Rocky Chipchowski and that “Every time Rocky sees me, she throws her arms around me and kisses me on the lips!”



This is an example of situational humor, as the comedy comes from the absurdity of the situation as a whole and from mine and Sarah's critical perspectives of the service. Situational humor is humor that comes out of the act of experiencing a seemingly simple event by fixating on the idiosyncrasies and characters that give the situation comedy. This was not a specifically absurd service, but Sarah and I were focused on the small details and awkwardness that allowed it hilarity. In Section III, Sarah and I speak about how the main humor in our relationship with each other is situational humor. It also poses the question: How do we qualify Jewish humor? How much of this experience was intentional humor and how much of it was simply Sarah and I laughing at the situation, and the people present in it? This situation, seemed to have many "stereotypical" Jewish jokes, such as jokes about Jewish mothers and jokes using aggressive sarcasm.

## **Section II: "With Chutzpah Episode 2: Naomi on Jewish Humor"**

*October 28, 2017*

<https://soundcloud.com/elise-glaser/episode-1-naomi-on-jewish-humor>

*Her Family 2:25*

Naomi and I began the interview with a discussion of her family. Her dad is Israeli, and her mom is an East Coast Jew. Naomi was born in Massachusetts, grew up in the Seattle area and now attends college back in Massachusetts. She described both of her parents as funny, but in different ways. Her dad has intellectual humor, and "isn't scared of offensive, blue humor", while her mom prefers more situational humor.

*Yiddish Rhythm 4:00*

This brought up the importance of timing, and what we called "Yiddish Rhythm". This rhythm is shown in a preemptive pausing that allows the joke to strike the listener intentionally. My dad is known for his impeccable timing when delivering a joke. For example, last summer, I was eating dried plantain chips with my mom, dad and a friend. My mom exclaimed: "Wow

these are actually really good!” My dad waited a moment after she said that, and then thoughtfully said, “I was thinking... that they were not good.” 9:00

It is difficult to type out how well that simple line landed with us, or to even repeat his joke in a setting out of that particular context. My dad’s humor was effortless, and brought humor into a simple moment.

In our conversation, Naomi attributed most of her humor to external forces and noted the importance of TV, like the Simpsons, had on her young mind. She explained that humor is a large part of her family’s interactions, and we clarified together that humor is not equated with happiness. She explained that her whole family struggles with using humor as a coping mechanism. She said: “We can’t stop being funny.” Which, she explained, is difficult, because when she was really depressed her mom said that the thing she loved about her is that she can find humor in things. I agreed, saying that people often have failed to pick up on my depression because of my sustained ability to make jokes.

#### *Naomi on “Jewish Humor” 7:00*

Following this discussion of Naomi’s family, I asked what the term “Jewish Humor” meant to her. She thought, and answered “It’s like that phrase ‘I don’t know what it looks like, but I know it when I see it.’” She continued to attempt to qualify the term, describing the humor as “self-deprecating but also goofy” and “always tied to the suffering and oppression that is felt in Jewish families”. She added that it is tied to intellectual ability and “smart wit” where “everything you say is funny and you don’t have to try.” She noted the importance of the way that Jewish jokes are told, and the Yiddish Rhythm that provides a “push and pull of the joke, leaving you waiting for the punchline”. As an example, she told a story about being on Birthright in Israel and a boy on her trip said that he went to a place that claimed to be the “Best Falafel in Israel”. He asked the workers there if they were truly the best, to which they replied: “Well of course!” He then said to Naomi, “Well... why would they lie?”

She had found this funny, simply because of the intentionality of his playful innocence, as well as the timing at which he delivered the story.

While thinking of other examples of Jewish humor, we laughed about an interaction we had had with her father, Avi, over the summer. Naomi had told him that she hadn't watched the recent Rick and Morty episodes, to which he said "Oh, it is bad." She replied: "Oh they are bad?" and he said: "It is bad... to not see it." 10:00

Once again, the importance of the pause allowed for the receiver of the joke to experience the anticipated but delayed punchline. When repeating this story, I realized the importance that his Israeli accent plays in the joke execution, disallowing me to properly tell it in his voice. However, this also led me to question why foreign-ness is perceived as funny.

The importance of an accent is also addressed in the documentary "When Jews Were Funny". A comedian tells a joke, and then repeats it in a Yiddish accent to prove how the accent adds humor to a story. This, I commented, adds to the self-deprecating nature of Jewish humor, as this caricatured accent can perpetuate negative stereotypes of Jews. Despite my skepticisms, I realized that Naomi and I did it often and unintentionally. On an earlier phone call I had used it to say: "But call ya motha!!" 13:00 We discussed the fine line of making fun of your own religion, culture and race.

### *Joking about Genocide 15:00*

Naomi explained that "Gallows humor is only funny when you're the one on the gallows. Meaning, you're making fun of yourself." As an example of the risky and fragile fine line of self-deprecation, she brought in a story about learning how to drive on the island where her parents live. After practicing with her dad, her mom asked how it went and she said: "Have you heard of the Holocaust?... This... was worse."

From here, she brought in another time her family had made a Holocaust-related joke. On the East Coast, her uncle was picking up his daughter from camp. When asked what kind of camp it was, he replied: "Oh I don't know, I think they said they were concentrating *something*?" Naomi explained that most of her extended Israeli family had died in the Holocaust, and that joking about it was a form of reclaiming that trauma. 17:00 I brought up that throughout my schooling experience, I was usually the only Jew in the room, and that people would commonly make Holocaust jokes. This was a traumatic, powerless experience, but laughing at these jokes

with Naomi allowed me to take ownership of that Jewish trauma. A large part of this type of humor is the immense shock value of joking about something so devastating, grim and horrific. Naomi explained that her family saw first-hand everyone die in the Holocaust, so she is in no place to tell them what jokes are okay and what are not. However, we discussed the vast importance of who exactly these jokes are coming from.

### *Our Jewish Friends + Vulgarly 17:30*

I asked Naomi if there were any Jewish comedians that she liked, and she first mentioned Sarah Silverman and then we discussed a mutual love of the Comedy Central show “Broad City”. She explained that she feels that Jewish comedy is “very different across gender” and that many funny Jewish women use very vulgar humor. She continued, saying that this is because, “Jewish women have historically had to fit into a feminine role, so it is shocking to hear a Jewish woman openly talking about sex and using bad words.” She feels that Broad City is very true to her own sense of humor, as it stars two millennial Jewish women and that “it is real to every Jewish woman I know—we are the funniest people in the world.” Here, Naomi exhibits the pride and importance she places on humor.

This lead us into a conversation of our friend group of Jewish women. Most of us had met at Jewish summer camp, Camp Kalsman, in junior high and continued to see each other in high school at weekend-long events that our youth group, NFTY (North American Federation of Temple Youth) which were held four times a year. I described the humor in this group as “intense and exhausting” as there was always constant joking that we all had to be quick to keep up with. When Naomi and I met in 7<sup>th</sup> grade, we would annoy everyone in our cabin by singing the crass words to the Lil’ Wayne song “Pussy Monster”. Cabin-mates would tell us that it was gross, but we discussed that “we thought it was gross too, but it was so funny because it made us uncomfortable. That’s the point.” Wisse explains that “Vulgarity may also function as a mask from behind it is safe to defy the norms of political correctness” (Wisse 2013, 234). We then remembered another time that we were talking with some boys from NFTY about a crude song in high school called “I want your Blood” by the group Mad Rad. Someone asked, “Is this song about going down on a girl while she’s on her period? That’s gross.” To that, Sarah replied: “Uh

no, it's called being a good boyfriend." Everyone was shocked that Sarah, who was usually quieter had said something so provocative. Sarah had known the shock that her comment would bring, and her quick retort allowed the group to laugh in discomfort and surprise.

### *Jewish Summer Camp 21:00*

I agreed with Naomi, that there was a crassness to our group's humor, but added that there was another side to it, that was also much more sophisticated humor which referenced literature, pop culture and history. We used to loudly sing the medieval song "Greensleeves" but change the words to "Greensleeves, my sleeves are green oh Greensleeves I love my green sleeves." Naomi brought in other examples of this more intellectually- driven humor 22:00 : "This year that you weren't at camp, we all decided to become obsessed with Chairman Mao. The concept of a bunch of 9<sup>th</sup> grade girls at Jewish camp worshipping a dictator was so hilarious to us. It was sort of turning camp on its head and asking, 'Are we in a cult right now?'" I had caught onto this obsession when they got home from camp. They had changed the words of a Jewish camp song "Weave me the Sunshine" to "Chairman Mao is the Sunshine." The original lyrics went: "Weave, weave, weave me the sunshine / Out of the falling rain / Out of the falling rain / Weave me the hopes of a new tomorrow / Fill my cup again!" The lyrics to their song sang: "Chairman Mao makes the sunshine / Despite all the falling walls / Despite all the falling walls / Lead me the hopes of a great leap forward / Cultural revolution! / The fine and the mighty fled to Taiwan / Shine on Mao again!" Naomi said that counselors would tell them that Mao was a horrible dictator who killed many people, but that this type of comedy was their "way of figuring out the world".

### *Gender at Summer Camp 25:00*

Following this, we discussed the way that humor can act as a defense in a world where we felt out of place or different. In 7<sup>th</sup> grade, at camp, Naomi broke away from the pre-teen conformity of "having camp boyfriends and straightening your hair" by dressing up as a boy as a joke and using Axe body spray. She explained that as a queer woman, she had always felt different from the girls at camp, and the way to break from that was to turn it into a joke and "be



like ‘Lol! Axe body spray!’” It became a running joke that every camp dress up night we would come in drag as small boys in giant Lil’ Wayne shirts. Part of this practice was shock value—everyone would look at us at 13 and think “Why are they doing this?” but Naomi went on to explain that she could “still be herself and be funny, and also be loved.”

### *“In Drag”*

*Me, Naomi, URJ Camp Kalsman*

*Summer Camp, 2009*

When we felt that people were confused by us, or annoyed by us, we would get louder and crazier. In high school, we were in NFTY, we continued our obnoxious jokes. Our mentality was: “Well you can’t tell me to shut up because I’m just going to get more ridiculous, louder and be more in your face.” Humor was our way of asserting ourselves as young women.

### *Dealing With Situations You Can’t Control 28:00*

*“Jewish humor comes out of oppression and is lost in assimilation”? 49:30*

I asked Naomi this question that I had heard as an affirmative statement in the documentary. Naomi replied: “Assimilation is a form of oppression and Jews have always been suffering the most when they are the most assimilated.” Naomi discussed our friend group from NFTY, commenting on the importance of “finding these enclaves of Jewish humor because we needed an outlet, because we had to assimilate the rest of the time.” Although we went to different high schools, both of our schools had about five Jews at them, so we often felt very isolated in our Jewishness.

### *Abba + Facebook 38:00*

We then got on to the topic of Naomi’s Israeli dad’s Facebook. She calls him “Abba”, meaning dad in Hebrew, but his name is Avi. She explained that he posts really scary political



stuff but it is always “jokes that go around”. One post she described was about sexual assault. He wrote: “If your gut is telling you that she deserved it, you should probably cut out your gut with a knife!”

This post to the left, we described as funny on many different levels. Trump, in the original tweet, had already spelled “heal” wrong and said “heel”. The bottom says “He can’t spell. Later deleted.” Avi used a wordplay the misspelling to say: “Ummm..... It’s spelled ‘Heil’” to highlight Trump’s similarities to Hitler.

### *Birthright Israel 52:00*

Naomi described some funny instances from her Birthright trip. When they were headed to Yad Vashem, the Holocaust museum, someone said: “How many Jews do you think we could fit on a bus?” to which a Rabbi replied: “Is that a Holocaust joke?” Wisse offers of Jewish humor: “Death is a common subject of jokes, thereby feeding on our common anxieties” (Wisse 2013, 223). We discussed, yet again, that jokes surrounding the Holocaust are in reaction to its tragedy, and its humor comes from the taboo of the joke. After our interview, I commented that I was surprised how often the Holocaust and joking about the Holocaust came up. To which she replied: “I hate Holocaust jokes, *Anne Frankly* I won’t stand for them.”

My parents have said, many times, that is Jews’ attitude of laughing in the face of fear which has allowed Jews and Jewish culture to persevere amongst frequent genocides. Our current threatening political climate also fosters this kind of comedy. Naomi’s dad is joking

about the similarities between Trump and Hitler, knowing that Trump has alt-right neo-nazis in his cabinet. This humor allows us to be aware of potential threats and resist structures of white supremacy, while still continuing on with our daily lives.

*Some Classic Jokes 56:00*

### **Section III “With Chutzpah Episode 2: Sarah on Jewish Humor”**

*November 24, 2017*

<https://soundcloud.com/elise-glaser/sarah-podcast-episode-2>

*Humor and Her Family 1:00*

Sarah and I were sitting in my childhood home in my parents’ office. We began recording with my computer after spending the whole day together. I started with some simple lead-in questions, asking what humor means to her and her family. She explained that humor is her way to “cope with anything difficult” and “the way I to connect with the world and to with others.” Within her family, humor is a way of “diffusing any tension” and also creating a bond between them. She feels she is most connected to her family when she is laughing with them. But, that humor is a way of communication and does not always not always include laughter.

I referenced the earlier scene of Sarah and I at Shabbat services, laughing at how her dad had said about the old woman: “Every time Rocky Chipchowsky sees me, she throws her arms around me and kisses me on the lips!” He had said this a few times, to different people in the room. Sarah and I agreed that funny people have great comedic timing so even if there is a rehearsed quality to the joke, it makes you laugh every time. My dad always says, “if it isn’t funny the first time, it is the 15<sup>th</sup>!” Sarah says she believes this too, so she can “Work at the joke over and over until it becomes funny.”

*Judaism and Upbringing 4:30*

Sarah and I met in 5<sup>th</sup> grade when I started to attend Sunday school in preparation for my Bat Mitzvah. Throughout our years of attending the same temple, we would giggle through services because we were singing louder than everyone in the room, and in our youth group



KATY (Kol Ami Temple Youth) we hosted a Saturday Night Live (SNL) event that resulted in thirty teens creating a full-length SNL-style episode.

Sarah described Judaism as a “major part of her identity as a child.” Explaining that her family is “not the most observant”, but that they had celebrated Shabbat weekly with her grandparents until she was seven. As Sarah has grown, her Mother has become less observant, as Sarah believes she was practicing more for the sake of her daughters. Her mom is a Jew by birth and their dad is a Jew by choice who was raised Catholic in Ireland.

Recently, Sarah has felt disconnected from her Judaism. We discussed how growing up, we were not very religious, but we were still extremely involved in our Judaism. In college, it is more difficult to find a community like that. Sarah said: “Judaism was always a cultural and social outlet for me. That is not an option for a college-aged person. It can feel a bit isolating to not have those venues where it’s just spending time with other Jews, in a not strictly religious context.”

#### *Her Parents 8:30*

Much of Sarah’s sense of humor comes from parents, whose humor she describes as “witty, melodramatic and self-sacrificing.” She explained that as a family, they are always jokingly “kvetching about everything”, and overdramatically saying things like: “Oh no... it’s no big deal it’s fine...” She coined this as “melodramatic passive aggressiveness.” I added that these statements are always a joke, but also rooted in something more serious and authentic.

#### *Sarah on “Jewish Humor” 10:50*

“The only humor I know of is Jewish humor, I’m not entirely sure that other people can be funny. I think it is basically the worldview that Jews as a whole tend to have. We look at the world as, ‘If you weren’t laughing you would have to cry.’ Making a mockery of all of the horrible things that we are very well acquainted with.”, Sarah stated. Sarah then said of Jewish humor almost exactly what Naomi had said: “You know it when you see it. It is very difficult to characterize.”

### *Our “Claim to Fame” 13:00*

Throughout our friendship, Sarah and I have had many humor- based endeavors. When we worked at our Sunday school as Madrichim (teaching assistants) we would leave our classrooms to meet up in the storage closet to rehearse our improv singing shtick. In private, we mimicked the skit style of “Garth and Kat” from Saturday Night Live by improvising songs on the spot and watching each other’s lips to sing along to them together. Every year, our youth group, NFTY, which had about 150 people in it would hold a talent show at the Fall Kallah weekend. At the last minute, Sarah and I decided to perform under the name “Vintage Tissue”, a name we had created after she found a tissue in her grandma’s dress from the 80s.

The audience loved our performance and were laughing hysterically. Of this, Sarah said that “nothing makes me prouder” than making people laugh. Wisse speaks to the pride in humor Sarah exhibits: “Always eager to ‘contribute’”, “Jews in modern times may want to claim humor among the many blessings they share with and bestow on their fellow citizens” (Wisse 2013, 242).

### *Jewish Women 16:30*

Mine and Naomi’s conversation discussed the stereotypes of the Jewish woman as the feminine homemaker. I asked Sarah about this and she agreed that there is the stereotype of the Jewish woman as the overbearing mother, but that she is more familiar with the Jewish woman as “very sexual, hyper- sexualized” like “La Belle Juive or Salome, which is the trope of dark, exotic Jewish woman” She went on to say: “People say Jewish women are crazy in bed and good at oral sex.” On the topic of gender, Sarah disagreed with what Naomi and I had discussed, that our group’s vulgar jokes were in resistance to Jewish women stereotypes. Sarah felt that that vulgarity was more about “confronting the teenage sexual awakening.” Sarah described our humor with Naomi as: “Rude, crude and totally lewd.”

### *The Age of Humor 19:00*

Following this, Sarah and I discussed the way that humor between two people is often defined by the history and nature of their relationship. When I met Naomi at camp, we were

thirteen and trying to figure out sex, creating a legacy of crude jokes that stemmed from our tween friendship. Sarah and I, however, met in 5<sup>th</sup> grade when we were goofy little kids. Due to this, our current humor stems from this childish glee. As kids, we would pull obnoxious pranks such as changing the name of a peer in our Sunday school class from Robert to “Rojer.” We were able to convince everyone to call him Rojer and still think of that as his real name.

### *Situational Humor 21:30*

When listening to the first podcast, it is evident that my friendship with Naomi revolves around running jokes and one-liners. After discussing, Sarah and I realized that most of our humor together is situational humor. Sarah explained that her gravitation towards Jewish humor is rooted in her social anxiety as it allows her to mock the entirety of a situation she is uncomfortable with. I agreed, but explained that my situational humor comes from a different kind of anxiety. To me, the world is a mysterious and strange place and humor is a way to rationalize situations that make no sense to me. However, humor allows me to think: “How ridiculous is life, and how strange is life. This lets me laugh instead of being freaked out.”

### *Black Friday 29:00*

Discussing social anxiety, we had recorded this on “Black Friday”, the day after Thanksgiving, and Sarah explained how she had “never left the house on Black Friday, because it seemed like the darkest part of Capitalism.” However, in response to our discomfort, we spent the day laughing at the ridiculousness of the capitalist holiday. We had giggled at young women dressed as Disney princesses struggling to ice skate while holding hands with tiny children. Later, we were in a local nursery that was full of poinsettias and Christmas decorations. Sarah depicted this scene from earlier: “A woman will bull us over the way to the Christmas ornaments while we’re looking at their meager Hanukkah section and say ‘Excuse me!!’ “And I’ll say [pretending to be her] ‘Outta my way kikes!’” Wisse explains Sarah’s use of an anti-Semitic slur in her discussion of Borat: “Borat’s anti-Semitic slurs”, “are there to expose the anti- Semites who hold such views” (Wisse 2013, 233). Sarah then explained that there was “Nowhere we could go that something funny wouldn’t happen. Humor follows us it is the way we together to

process whatever happens.” Sarah agreed that Jewish humor is going into a normal situation and saying: “What’s funny about this?”

*To hear other examples of situational humor on the podcast:*

*Bookstore Flirtation Story 31:00*

*Bizarre Lady at Camlann Medieval Village 37:00*

*Watching Weird Things on TV 45:00*

*Bad High School Musicals 50:00*

*Assimilation as Oppression 52:00*

I ended the interview posing the same question I had asked Naomi: “Does Jewish humor come out of oppression and is it lost in assimilation?” Sarah agreed that Jewish humor was founded on our oppression and is how we cope with our oppression. She cited a Sherman Alexie character who said: “The two funniest tribes I’ve ever been around are Indians and Jews.” Sarah then said “This shows the inherent humor of genocide.” In response to the assimilation question, Sarah said nearly verbatim what Naomi had said, that assimilation is a form of oppression. We joked about the earlier interaction at the nursery, finding the tiny wall of Hanukkah decorations—that were truly just blue and white ornaments. Sarah laughed that we had ran to it and “were like ‘Ah! My people!’” We discussed how we both enjoy the Christmas spirit, but that it is inescapable, and we are forced to have associations with it because it is so present. Sarah quoted Star Trek to explain how powerless we often feel: “Resistance is futile”.

We then discussed the example of assimilation as oppression, citing how exhausting it has always been to never have Jewish holidays off from school. This year, Hanukkah falls during finals week. In addition to this, the High Holidays always fall during the second week of school and we have to worry about teachers’ questions like, “Why are you missing school already?” and worry about “Starting off on the wrong foot”. Sarah explained that “People from the majority culture never have to worry about or question this.” We discussed how our winter break is centered around school being off for Christmas, and yet Christians will still get upset if you say “Happy Holidays” instead of “Merry Christmas”. Frustrated, Sarah said: “Playing at being

oppressed is the most frustrating thing Christians do.” I explained that I can only hope this experience helps me understand other marginalized cultures. We joked that we would never wonder, “Oh, so, Ramadan isn’t Christmas? So is it just a really long Hanukkah?” Wisse discusses the way Jewish humor can be of interest to other marginalized communities: “Once fascism and Communism routed and regimented the rest of the population as well, though, Jewish humor resonated with citizens under similar attack” (226).

*Sarah Tells a Classic Jewish Joke 1:10:00*

## **Conclusions**

Wisse explained that people want to find specific characteristics that distinguish Jewish humor from Gentile humor: “To them all I would say that the distinction lies more in the Jews’ greater reliance on humor than in the precise nature of that humor” (Wisse 2013, 228). However, I disagree with Wisse, as I believe that specific historical and cultural differences within Jews, such as the Yiddish, influence the specificities of Jewish humor, giving it particular distinctions.

Throughout these two podcasts, Sarah and Naomi both discussed the particularities of Jewish humor. Both Sarah and Naomi separately stated that “assimilation is oppression” and named the ways this oppression has been present throughout their lives. As Naomi, Sarah and I were all in the same Jewish friend group, we all discussed the role the great importance of humor within our group. With this discussion was the importance that our Jewish youth group was an “enclave” of Judaism from our Christian- dominated high schools, that allowed humor to flourish. Within the Christian hegemony of our daily lives, we often have to banish our Jewish identities and cultures, as Sarah and I discussed. However, in these Jewish enclaves, humor allowed us to reclaim our assimilated experiences as well as resist the powers of assimilation. Wisse explains that Jokes allow Jews to cope because: “Joking becomes their bid for freedom, if only through the utterance of otherwise-prohibited truth.” (Wisse 2013, 229).

In relation to gender, Naomi and Sarah had differing views on the Jewish woman. Naomi focused on humor as resistance against a female gender norm and heteronormativity. She also

saw Jewish women using vulgarity as a resistance against gender stereotypes, while Sarah saw the Jewish woman stereotype as an “exotic and over-sexualized” figure, stating that vulgarity runs directly with that concept.

Discussion of the Holocaust, and Jewish trauma were addressed in both conversations. Naomi, the descendant of Holocaust survivors, was comfortable making jokes about the Holocaust, and Sarah used an anti-Semitic slur as a joke. Sarah also discussed the “inherent humor of genocide”. Wisse gives an explanation for this humor, that humor can be used as a healing process. She states: “If Jews truly consider humor to have restorative powers, they ought to encourage others to laugh at themselves as well.” (Wisse 2013, 243). Humor within our lives has provided us with relief from social anxiety, forced assimilation and generational trauma. In the current political atmosphere, humor, once again, can soothe our fears and worries, allowing us to persevere despite frightening events like the Charlottesville neo-nazi march.

## **Bibliography**

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