

תסודת הווען תה



with David Misch

Given their prominence in show business, is it possible there's a connection between Jews and comedy? The answer is: What are you, meshuga? (Or, to put it in contemporary terms: Duh.)

The Jewish sensibility seems part of comedy's DNA, or maybe it's comedy that's got Jewish DNA. In America, the influence is unmistakable; in the 1970's, it was estimated that Jews made up about 3% of the U.S. population... and 80% of professional comedians.

But why? Some say it's due to Jewish history, though that history is hardly the stuff of merry-making. But comedy is one of the best ways to deal with tragedy; Nobel Prize-winning novelist Saul Bellow said "Oppressed people tend to be witty."

In this talk, David Misch ("Mork and Mindy", "Saturday Night Live", "The Muppets Take Manhattan", "Funny: The Book") looks at the interaction between comedy and Jews, born of a fatalistic sensibility that sees irony everywhere, often expressed by sarcasm. (If a Jew says "Good thinking, Einstein", she doesn't mean you're smart.)

David looks at how comedy sees Jewishness as defined not only by having suffered but by a propensity to continue suffering (*How many Jewish grandmothers does it take to change a light-bulb? None: "Don't bother, I'll sit in the dark"*), as well as the ability to mock their own stereotypes (*What's a Jewish dilemma? Half-price pork.*) He also traces the career of America's Favorite (or at least he used to be) Jew, Woody Allen (*Not only is there no God but try getting a plumber on weekends*).

Although eternal outsiders (*Groucho: "I would never be a member of any club that would have me as a member"*), Jews have flourished in America beyond the wildest dreams of their immigrant forbears, and that goes double for entertainers. (Few people know that the word "humor" is itself Jewish; it used to be "humoroscowitz" but it was shortened at Ellis Island.)

So is humor, like ethnicity, a genetic trait? In the 1950s Larry Gelbart was asked why so many comedy writers like him were young and Jewish and he said "Probably because our parents are old and Jewish."