

THE BIG BOOK OF JEWISH NAMES

25th Anniversary

edited and annotated by

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THE

BIG

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JEWISH

HUMOR

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DAN BEN-AMOTZ

There's More Ways Than One to Kill a Joke

THE PRELIMINARY QUESTION TECHNIQUE

You must have heard the one about the Jew who comes to Haifa port trying to smuggle two sacks of coffee and when they ask him, "What've you got in the sacks?" he says, "Bird feed." And then when they ask him, "Since when do birds eat coffee?" he says, "They'll eat if they want; if they don't, they won't." Don't you know that one? Okay, so listen: There was this Jew at Haifa port with two sacks of coffee . . .

THE QUESTION TECHNIQUE

Do you know the one about the guy who said, they'll eat if they want; if they don't, they won't?



THE PERSONAL STORY TECHNIQUE

About two months ago, when I came home from a trip to Italy, I got off the ship at Haifa port and was waiting for them to inspect my luggage at customs. I was standing there and in front of me was this man with two big sacks and some sort of suitcase in his hand. I didn't notice anything special about him; you know, I didn't expect anything to happen. Anyway, this customs officer comes over and asks him very politely, "What have you got in those sacks, sir?" and the man says to him, "Bird

Dan Ben-Amotz, an Israeli humorist and satirist, was born in Poland in 1924 and came to Palestine in 1938. He is the author of two collections of essays and several novels, and has edited an anthology of Israeli humor and *The World Dictionary of Hebrew Slang*.



feed.” That was when I figured there was something funny going on. Then the officer says to him, “Would you mind opening the sacks, sir?” So the man opens the sacks, and what do you think they are full of? Coffee! So the officer says to him, “Why did you tell me bird feed when it’s coffee? Since when do birds eat coffee?” I felt like butting in right then and there, but this man in front of me said . . .

THE SURPLUS DETAILS TECHNIQUE

There was this man whose name was, I think, Rabinowitz, who’d been living in France all his life. Well, one day he got a letter from his sister in Tel Aviv, and she wrote to him that she had a headache and she hadn’t been feeling at all well recently and things weren’t so great with her in general. It doesn’t matter. Anyway, she wrote him: It’s getting close to Passover, maybe you come to Israel to visit for a while. We’ll take a tour to Galilee, there’s a lot of beautiful flowers up there now. . . . The man liked the idea and decided to take the trip.

But he must bring his sister some sort of present. Now, what sort of present do you bring to Israel? So he went to the *pletzl* in Paris and asked around what’s worthwhile to take to Israel these days. And they told him, “You can bring all sorts of things. You can bring wristwatches in sardine cans; diamonds on your person, radio sets inside a steam roller. It depends what you want. Tell us what you want.” So he said, “I don’t want to fool around with anything really black market; I’d like something simple, something to eat or drink. . . .”

So they told him, “To eat or drink? Take coffee!” So Rabinowitz asked them, “What sort of coffee is it worthwhile to take?” and they told him, “There’s Turkish coffee, and there’s Brazilian coffee, and there’s this kind of coffee and there’s that kind of coffee. . . . It all depends what you want.”

So he bought two sacks of fine Argentinian coffee and started out on his trip to Israel. Now, he was, what’ll I tell you, about forty-five years old at the time and on arriving in Haifa . . .

THE NEGLECTED CRUCIAL FACTS TECHNIQUE

A Jew once came to Haifa, got off the ship and went to customs. The officer asked him, “What’ve you got here?” and he said, “Bird feed.” Oh, oh—just a minute. I forgot to tell you he was trying to smuggle in two sacks of coffee. So the officer saw the coffee and asked, “What’s this?” and the man told him, “It’s bird feed. . . .”



THE CULTURAL JOURNAL TECHNIQUE

Customs Official: What have we here?

The Jew: Nourishment for our feathered friends.

Customs Official: How now? Do our feathered friends consume coffee?

The Jew: If they so wish, they may consume as much as is their hearts' desire.

THE LITERAL-MINDED TECHNIQUE

A literal-minded gentleman heard the joke and said to himself: That's a good idea. He traveled abroad, bought two sacks of coffee, and came back with them to Haifa and customs. The customs officer asked him, "What have you got in those sacks?" The literal-minded gentleman promptly replied, "What I've got here is coffee for the birds."

Quoth the customs officer: "But, sir, birds don't eat coffee!"

Quoth the literal-minded gentleman: "What do you mean, they don't eat coffee? There is one bird of the *Litesrobucolo* genus, of the Red Ribucoli family, that eats coffee when it has nothing else to eat."



THE MORAL OF THE STORY TECHNIQUE

A Jew comes up to customs in the Haifa port. The official asks him, "What have you got here in these sacks?" and the Jew answers him, "Where there's a will, there's a way." The official asks him, "What's that meant to mean?" and the Jew explains, "You'll see right away. These sacks of mine contain bird food." "Now open the sacks." The official sees that it's coffee, and says, "How's that? Since when do birds eat coffee?" The Jew shrugs his shoulders and says, "Didn't I tell you: Where there's a will, there's a way."



THE LACK OF CONFIDENCE TECHNIQUE

- Izzy, tell the joke about the coffee and the birds.
- Everybody knows that one.
- Tell it, Izzy, tell it.
- All right, all right. This here Jew came to Haifa. . . . He wanted to smuggle in two sacks of . . . You know the joke!
- We don't know it. Tell it, tell it!
- There's no point in telling a story everybody knows.
- Go ahead, tell it. We don't know it.
- All right. He wanted to smuggle in these two sacks of coffee. So the customs official asks him, "What have you got in these sacks?" So he says . . . You know the joke. Look, you're laughing already. . . . There's no point telling something everybody knows. . . .

THE COUPLE TECHNIQUE

Wife: Abie, tell that joke about the Jew who was smuggling coffee.

Husband: There's no point. Everybody knows the story.

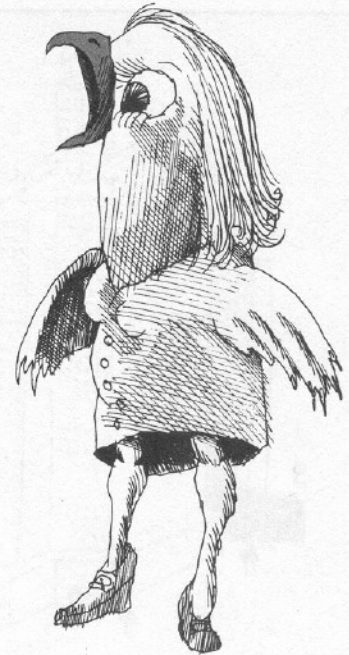
Wife: Tell it, tell it. You tell it so nicely.

Husband: All right, I'll tell it. This Jew once brings two sacks of coffee to Haifa. When he goes into customs, the officer says to him . . .

Wife: It wasn't in Haifa. It was in Lydda.

Husband: It doesn't matter. What difference does it make? So this officer says to him, Open the sacks . . .

Wife: But it does make a difference. The whole thing is that he brought the sacks by plane and it cost him a small fortune. Why, that's the whole point of the story. . . .



AFTER an hour of standing in line at the bank, Chaim was furious. "I hate all this waiting!" he shouted to his wife. "I'm leaving. I'm going to kill Ben-Gurion."

An hour later, he returned to the bank. "What happened?" asked his wife, who was still waiting in line.

"Nothing," said the unhappy man. "There was a longer line over there."

AN Israeli dies and is greeted by Ben-Gurion, who offers to guide him through both heaven and hell, so that he can make up his own mind about where to spend eternity.

He goes first of all to heaven, which is filled with clouds, angels with harps, heavenly choruses, sweetness and light. Then he decides to look at hell—and hell turns out to be something else again. Wonderful parties, wild gambling, terrific bargains, outrageous food. The man doesn't hesitate. "Send me to hell," he says.

But a moment later he is shaking his head in disbelief. Suddenly there are demons with pitchforks, and hot fires, and people being flogged. "Wait!" he cries out at the departing figure of his guide. "What happened? The hell that you showed me looked so good!"

"No," Ben-Gurion responds, "it just seemed that way. The first time you went, you were only a tourist. But now you're a permanent resident."

Hasidic Tales, with a Guide to Their Interpretation by the Noted Scholar

These tales are clearly a parody of Martin Buber's famous rendition of Hasidic tales. Woody Allen is clearly fascinated with Hasidim, who make absurd, cameo appearances in several of his films (in *Annie Hall*, Allen turns into a Hasid when viewed by Annie's mother; in *Take the Money and Run*, Allen takes an experimental drug and turns into a Hasidic preacher); perhaps, like Kafka, he thinks of them as the *real* Jews.

Whether or not he is aware of it, Woody Allen is contributing here to a venerable strain of Jewish humor: parodies against Hasidim. The first major work in this tradition was *Megalleh Temirin* (Revealer of Secrets), published in 1819; it was so skillfully rendered that it was accepted as genuine—even by Hasidim. A similar fate has taken place with anti-Hasidic songs. The famous "*Un Az Der Rebbe Zingt*" ("When the Rebbe sings, so do all the Hasidim . . .") was composed as an attack on Hasidism and the way the disciples instinctively follow their leader. The song, however, endures as a piece of nostalgia, evoking a scene of warmth and good humor.

An anonymous parody from 1868 was more effective; it described a novice who encounters a group of Hasidim playing cards, and who explains:

"What shall I tell you, dear brother? The *Shechinah* [divine presence] actually revealed itself there, for the room was full of smoke from end to end, as from twenty pipes. But it was certainly no smoke, because it was Sabbath, and therefore must have been the *Shechinah* in full revelation. . . . Then I saw them take many pieces of paper that looked like tablets, bearing strange images of female servants, priests, butchers, each one with two heads. Some of these they held in their holy hands and some they threw at each other. I do not know what all this signified, but I am sure there is some sublime secret in these tablets. For I have seen how careful they were with them and how they counted them many times. . . ."

A man journeyed to Chelm in order to seek the advice of Rabbi Ben Kaddish, the holiest of all ninth-century rabbis and perhaps the greatest *noodge* of the medieval era.

"Rabbi," the man asked, "where can I find peace?"

The Hasid surveyed him and said, "Quick, look behind you!"



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The man turned around, and Rabbi Ben Kaddish smashed him in the back of the head with a candlestick. "Is that peaceful enough for you?" he chuckled, adjusting his yarmulke.

In this tale, a meaningless question is asked. Not only is the question meaningless but so is the man who journeys to Chelm to ask it. Not that he was so far away from Chelm to begin with, but why shouldn't he stay where he is? Why is he bothering Rabbi Ben Kaddish—the rabbi doesn't have enough trouble? The truth is, the rabbi's in over his head with gamblers, and he has also been named in a paternity case by a Mrs. Hecht. No, the point of this tale is that this man has nothing better to do with his time than journey around and get on people's nerves. For this, the rabbi bashes his head in, which, according to the Torah, is one of the most subtle methods of showing concern. In a similar version of this tale, the rabbi leaps on top of the man in a frenzy and carves the story of Ruth on his nose with a stylus.

A man who could not marry off his ugly daughter visited Rabbi Shimmel of Cracow. "My heart is heavy," he told the Reb, "because God has given me an ugly daughter."

"How ugly?" the seer asked.

"If she were lying on a plate with a herring, you wouldn't be able to tell the difference."

The Seer of Cracow thought for a long time and finally asked, "What kind of herring?"

The man, taken aback by the query, thought quickly and said, "Er—Bismarck."

"Too bad," the Rabbi said. "If it was matjes, she'd have a better chance."

Here is a tale that illustrates the tragedy of transient qualities such as beauty. Does the girl actually resemble a herring? Why not? Have you seen some of the things walking around these days, particularly at resort areas? And even if she does, are not all creatures beautiful in God's eyes? Perhaps, but if a girl looks more at home in a jar of wine sauce than in an evening gown she's got big problems. Oddly enough, Rabbi Shimmel's own wife was said to resemble a squid, but this was only in the face, and she more than made up for it by her hacking cough—the point of which escapes me.



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Rabbi Zwi Chaim Yisroel, an Orthodox scholar of the Torah and a man who developed whining to an art unheard of in the West, was unanimously hailed as the wisest man of the Renaissance by his fellow Hebrews, who totaled a sixteenth of one percent of the population. Once, while he was on his way to synagogue to celebrate the sacred Jewish holiday commemorating God's reneging on every promise, a woman stopped him and asked the following question: "Rabbi, why are we not allowed to eat pork?"

"We're *not*?" the Reb said incredulously. "Uh-oh."

This is one of the few stories in all Hasidic literature that deals with Hebrew law. The rabbi knows he shouldn't eat pork; he doesn't care, though, because he *likes* pork. Not only does he like pork; he gets a kick out of rolling Easter eggs. In short, he cares very little about traditional Orthodoxy and regards God's covenant with Abraham as "just so much chin music." Why pork was proscribed by Hebraic law is still unclear, and some scholars believe that the Torah merely suggested not eating pork at certain restaurants.



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How to Be a Jewish Mother

Dan Greenburg, writer and journalist, is the author of many articles and books, including *How to Make Yourself Miserable*.

Jokes about the Jewish mother—the biggest cliché in contemporary Jewish humor—are a relatively recent phenomenon. Traditional Jewish humor had no such jokes, although mothers-in-law were quite another matter; they served as fine targets for scoffing and derision, probably because the son-in-law was frequently supported by the bride's parents for several years after the wedding—a kind of familiarity which breeds real contempt. Sholom Aleichem remarked that "Adam was the luckiest man to ever live, because he had no mother-in-law."

The vital economic role played by Jewish mothers in Eastern Europe is one explanation for the absence of jokes at their expense: one didn't joke about where one's next meal came from. Mother earned the bread, in many cases, while Father was occupied with prayer and study.

Jewish mothers have always been invested in the success of their children, but it was not until the mass arrival of Jewish immigrants to America that the Jewish mother was transformed into an object of humor—and even then, only after several decades.

A possible reason for this change may be the image of womanhood which confronted the new immigrants. One sign of financial success in America was the ability to earn enough money so that one's wife did not have to work. And so Jewish mothers gradually became removed from active participation in the economic survival of their families, and began to live vicariously through their children. This in turn led to certain neuroses and problems—and in their wake, a double helping of jokes.

HOW TO PAY A COMPLIMENT

Paying people compliments is really a lot of foolishness because it either embarrasses them or gives them a swelled head. It is permissible, however, to pay a compliment in an emergency:

"Florence, what have you done to your hair? It looks like you're wearing a wig!"

"I am. All my hair fell out."

"Oh. Listen, it looks so natural I'd never have known."

HOW TO ACCEPT A COMPLIMENT

Never accept a compliment:

"Irving, tell me how is the chopped liver?"

"Mmmm! Sylvia, it's delicious!"

"I don't know. First the chicken livers that the butcher gave me were dry. Then the timer on the oven didn't work. Then at the last minute I ran out of onions. Tell me, how could it be good?"

HOW TO TELL A FUNNY STORY

Your family and friends will expect you to be able to relate amusing stories which you have heard at the butcher shop, at a meeting of Hadassah, or which your husband has told at a previous gathering of these same people. Familiarize yourself with the following formula for successful storytelling and in no time at all you will have a widespread reputation as a raconteur. To begin the telling of any story:

(1) *Ask whether anybody has heard it before.*

"Listen, you all know the story about the old Jewish man?"

It is important that this initial query be as general as possible, so that anybody who has heard the story before should not recognize it and hence have it spoiled for him. The next step is:

(2) *Ask someone else to tell it.*

"Listen, it's a very funny story. About an old Jewish man. Al, you tell it."

"I don't know the story you mean, Sylvia."

"Of course you know. Don't you? The story about the old Jewish man. Go ahead, you tell it, Al. You know I can't tell a story properly."

This modesty is very becoming to a performer and will

surely be countered with heartfelt cries of denial from your audience. You are now ready to:

(3) *Explain Where You Heard the Story.*

"All right. This story I heard originally from Rose Melnick. You all know Rose? No? Her husband is in dry goods. Melnick. You know the one? All right, it doesn't matter to the story, believe me. Anyway, Rose Melnick heard it from her son-in-law, Seymour, a lovely boy, really. A nose and throat man. Seymour Rosen—you know the name?"



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By now your audience has been sufficiently prepared for the story and will be anxious for you to begin. Go ahead and tell it, but be sure to:

(4) *Begin the Story at the Ending.*

Professional comedians call the end of the story "the punch line." Since this is usually the funniest part of the story, it is logically the best place to start: "Anyway, there's this old Jewish man who is trying to get into the synagogue during the Yom Kippur service, and the usher finally says to him, 'All right, go ahead in, but don't let me catch you praying.' (Pause.) Oh, did I mention that the old man just wants to go in and give a message to somebody in the synagogue? He doesn't actually want to go into the synagogue and *pray*, you see. (Pause. Frown.) Wait a minute. I don't know if I mentioned that the old man doesn't have a ticket for the service. You know how crowded it always is on Yom Kippur, and the old man doesn't have a ticket, and he explains to the usher that he has to go into the synagogue and tell somebody something, but the usher isn't going to let him in without a ticket. So the old man explains to him that it's a matter of life and death, so then the usher thinks it over and he says to the old man, 'All right, go ahead in, but don't let me catch you praying.' (Pause. Frown. Stand and begin emptying ashtrays.) Ach, I don't think I told it right. Al, *you* tell it."

This classic circulates in several versions. In some, it is the son who calls, often upon returning from military service, with news of the *shikse* he has met, and married, overseas.

In a related and equally well known joke:

The married daughter calls:

"Hello, Ma?"

"*Shirley darling*, what's the problem?"

"Oh, Ma, I don't know where to begin. Both of the kids are sick with the flu. The Frigidaire has just broken down. The sink is leaking. In two hours my Hadassah group is coming here for lunch. What am I going to do?"

"*Shirley darling*, don't worry. I'm going to get on a bus and go into the city. Then I'll take the train out to Long Island. Then I'll walk the two miles from the station to your house. I'll take care of the kids, I'll cook a nice lunch for the Hadassah ladies, and I'll even make dinner for Barry."

"Barry, who's Barry?"

"Barry—your husband!"

"But, Ma, my husband's name is Steve. Is this 536-3530?"

"No, this is 536-3035."

(Pause.) "Does that mean you're not coming?"

Carol, thirty-seven and unmarried, calls her mother.
"Hello, Ma? It's Carol. Yes, I'm here in New York. Yes. Listen, Ma, I have news for you."

"*Carol*, is that you? In New York? Are you healthy? What's the news?"

"Well, Ma, it finally happened. I met him. I finally met him. It's going to be wonderful. I'm getting married!"

"*Carol!* Wonderful, darling, wonderful. We were afraid you never would! This is wonderful news. We're so happy for you!"

"Ma, before I bring my fiancé to visit, I want to tell you a few things about him. I know this may be hard for you, but he's not of our faith."

"A goy? Nu, it's not so terrible. As we get older, it's important to find somebody, anybody, to build a life with."

"Ma, I knew you'd understand. It's great that we can talk openly to each other. There's another thing I want to tell you. He's not of our color, either."

"A shvartze? Oh, color, shmolor. Doesn't matter. As long as you're happy, then we're happy."

"Ma? You're such a wonderful mother. I feel I can really share things with you. Richard doesn't have a job."

"No job? Nu, you'll survive. Don't worry, a wife should stand by her husband, help him out. It'll work out fine, I'm sure."

"You're terrific, Ma. There's just one more thing: We don't have enough money to get a place to live, and when we get married we won't have a home."

"No place to live? Don't worry, you'll live with us. You and Richard can sleep in the master bedroom. Pop will be fine on the couch."

"But, Ma, what about you? Where will you sleep?"

"Honey, about me you shouldn't worry. As soon as I get off the phone I'm gonna stick my head in the oven!"