

Jewish Funny Movie Night

Source Sheet compiled by Annie Prusky, Jewish Life Specialist

September 2025

Background Info on Jewish Humor

What do we mean by Jewish humor? To begin, it is humor that is overtly Jewish in its concerns, characters, definitions, language, values or symbols. (A Jewish joke, goes one definition, is one that no gentile can understand, and every Jew says she's already heard.) But the rules of comedy can never—and should never—be airtight. Just like Jews themselves, Jewish comedy is varied, diverse, and ever-evolving. Even a list of features atypical in Jewish humor can be countered with famous Jewish comedians using those techniques. Jewish humor tends not to be:

- Slapstick (yet: Marx Brothers)
- Physical (yet: Jerry Lewis)
- Cruel (yet: Don Rickles)
- Highly polite (yet: Sam Levenson)
- Gentle and escapist (yet: Danny Kaye)

Jewish humor tends to:

- Feature topics such as food, family, business, anti-semitism, wealth and poverty, health and illness, and survival
- Be anti-authoritarian - it ridicules grandiosity and self-indulgence, exposes hypocrisy, and kicks pomposity in the pants. It is strongly democratic, stressing the dignity and worth of common folk.
- Have a critical edge. Sometimes the “point” of the humor is more powerful than the laugh it delivers, and for some of the jokes, the appropriate response is not laughter, but rather a bitter nod or a commiserating sigh of recognition.
- Feature interactions between prominent/powerful figures with simple folk and the disadvantages, with the latter often emerging triumphant
- Cross or blur boundaries, especially between the special/sacred and the mundane or secular
- Ultimately to affirm traditions, even while questioning their legitimacy
- Be self-deprecating, often combined with self-praise.

From “The Big Book of Jewish Humor” (William Novak) & “The Catharsis of Jewish Comedy” (Sarah Groustra)
Adapted by Anne Prusky, Jewish Life Specialist, Mem Global, with thanks to ChatGPT for suggesting some questions and how to adapt this guide for different types of funny movies.

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Judaism is diasporic, which brings with it a legacy of restlessness, fear, and loneliness. Comedy in the Jewish community is often used as a coping mechanism, a device to create joy in the face of fear and danger. It can be a form of catharsis, the “cleansing” or “purging” of emotions that we feel in the wake of consuming art. Although the idea of catharsis was originally used by Aristotle to define audiences’ feelings of renewal after witnessing tragedy onstage, comedy can certainly renew us in similar ways. At its core, Jewish comedy is a tool of resistance -- and proves that Jewish laughter only fuels Jewish resilience. An important aspect of Jewish comedy is *release*:

Release of tension: The diaspora leaves in its wake the stereotype of neurotic Jewish parents who instill fear of persecution in their Jewish children. Jewish comedy serves to mitigate the tension of living in a world where your background is not always accepted.

Release of anger: By rewriting history and reclaiming narratives, Jewish artists can feel a cathartic purge, almost like a kind of vengeance. And by opening the audiences to vulnerability with laughter, artists can inspire a kind of self-interrogation.

Release of grievances: As journalist and critic William Grimes wrote, “Judaism is defined by exile, and exile without complaint is tourism.” Jews are dispersed throughout the world, sometimes with nothing in common but their faith and having something to complain about. Kvetching is the most direct way to acknowledge hardships and proves to the audience that they are not alone in the challenges they are experiencing.