

Religion in The Simpsons - Judaism

Cartoons are often one of the most interesting sources of information about our culture's attitude from anything ranging from love to politics and even religion. In some cases the message can be subtle or even hidden, but in others it is exaggerated and overt (just think of South Park's use of Jesus and Satan as actual characters in the show). One cartoon in particular that has had a powerful influence on contemporary culture, while often taking on religious themes is The Simpsons. From Ned Flanders biblical literalism to Lisa's decision to become a Buddhist (an interesting example of the struggle within interfaith families), The Simpsons have never shied away from confronting contemporary religious phenomenon and stereotypes head on.



Judaism has often come to be represented in interesting, and perhaps at times less than flattering, ways throughout the show's history. The fact that the only Jewish person in Springfield is represented as an ill-tempered, alcoholic, money loving clown could perhaps cause us to raise an eyebrow or two. In the most recent **Simpson's Halloween special** we once again encounter a somewhat ambiguous portrayal of Judaism. The segment, which is a take off on the story of the Golem who was the legendary protector of the Jews of Prague, is rife with both easily recognized and recondite stereotypes. From the rather benign comments about Jewish guilt to the more obscure references linking Judaism to arcane mystical and magical practices, the segment while entertaining should also provide us a moment to pause and consider not just how Judaism but all religions are portrayed in popular culture. To an affiliated Jewish audience these representations may be a source of a few chuckles, while to unaffiliated Jews the jokes may seem foreign or even offensive. For those of other religions who are married to or involved in relationships with Jewish partners such representations may be confusing and the fact that they do not "get them" may ossify their already present feeling of being an outsider to the community.

Why a particular writer or director decided on the specific imagery and ideas represented in any given show and what their actual feelings are toward those representations may never be known. With the segment on the Golem the writers may have been simply making a few inside jokes or they may harbor some form of animus towards Judaism. Rather than troubling ourselves over what we cannot know, what we ought to do is focus on how these messages may be received. In the end once a message is conveyed, regardless of its original intention, we have little control over how it will be received. The discrepancy between what is said and what is heard is something worth remembering whether we are watching cartoons or engaged in acts of outreach.

Edward Sherman