

The Gospel According to the Simpsons

An AJL Exclusive Book Excerpt

By Mark I. Pinsky

One night while working on this book, I heard my daughter reading aloud to my wife a story by Isaac Bashevis Singer, the great Jewish writer and Nobel laureate. It was a classic tale that provoked gales of laughter from both of them, and suddenly a thought struck me: The Simpsons' Springfield is a lot like Chelm, Singer's celebrated Eastern European village of Jewish fools, buffoons, and dunderheads, except that in Springfield, most of the fools are Gentiles (or seem to be). This transposition is not surprising, given the background and viewpoint of The Simpsons' writers and producers. "There have always been a lot of Jewish writers on The Simpsons," says longtime writer Mike Reiss. "We bring that comedy to it."

It is also not surprising that Judaism, although a target of satire like other faiths, denominations, and institutions in the series, is accorded considerable respect. As with most Hollywood productions, there is good representation of Jews on the creative side. "Jews play a disproportionate role in several key sectors of American society," including the media, according to Jack Wertheimer, provost of the Jewish Theological Seminary. "Jews have achieved respectability, and Judaism is treated with a great deal of acceptance within American society," he said at a seminar sponsored by the Ethics and Public Policy Center. Despite their atheism or secularism, the Jewish writers on The Simpsons represent their faith well. Jewish humor, says Rabbi Harold W. Schulweis, the longtime spiritual leader of Valley Beth Shalom synagogue in Encino, California, "is not just funny — it's philosophical." Comedian Mel Brooks, who appeared as himself in an episode, observes that, for the Jews, "humor is just another defense against the universe."

The many jokes squeezed into each episode of The Simpsons weave together two distinct strands of humor: on the one hand, the snarky, iconoclastic nastiness embodied by Harvard University's *Lampoon* magazine; and on the other, the dark, rapid-fire angst of Borscht Belt tumblers ("roisterers") and shpritzers ("sprayers") such as Lenny Bruce and Don Rickles. None is more typical of this Jewish strain of humor than the exchange between Bart's friend Milhouse and Lisa in the Exodus segment of the episode "Simpson Bible Stories." In this dream sequence, Milhouse is Moses. He has just led the Israelite slaves across the Red Sea, only to learn that what lies ahead is forty years of wandering in the desert. But after that, he asks Lisa hopefully, "it's clear sailing for the Jews, isn't that right?" Lisa, unwilling to break the news of what the next three thousand years holds for the Chosen People, smiles tightly and says, "Well, more or less."

There is an Orthodox synagogue in town, with the improbable name of Temple Beth Springfield (Jewish congregations are usually either "Temple" or "Beth," followed by a Hebrew name), located not far from Reverend Lovejoy's First Church of Springfield. The two houses of worship are so close, in fact, that once the church marquee carried the decidedly non-ecumenical message: "No Synagogue Parking." Without further comment on the subject in the episode, one can reasonably surmise that the incident might have occurred in a year when the Jewish High Holidays coincided with the church's Sunday morning service. This can be a sore point where synagogues and churches are neighbors. Otherwise, relations between Lovejoy and Rabbi Hyman Krustofski are cordial. The rabbi, bearded and dressed in the black garb of the Hasidim, is a regular on the minister's weekly call-in radio show, "Gabbin' about God." Orthodox rabbis are often wary of such interfaith dialogues, but Krustofski does not conform to this stereotype. According to The Simpsons Guide to Springfield, the rabbi plays basketball against Lovejoy in the annual "Springfield Two-Man Interfaith Jimmy Jam." Each Friday, according to the same guide, the synagogue offers a regular Friday Sabbath dinner that includes gefilte fish and Manischewitz wine,

although this is highly unlikely since such meals are traditionally held in Jewish homes.

Jewish references thread through *The Simpsons*, and they sometimes reinforce stereotypes. One character observes that a grizzly bear can tear through a tree “like a Jewish mother through self-esteem.” The local Jewish hospital is considered the best, if the most pricey, according to an ambulance driver. An unnamed Jewish child can be seen in an occasional suburban crowd scene, called in from the playground to practice his music. There is still an “old neighborhood” downtown, Springfield’s Lower East Side, where Jews lived before moving to the suburbs. This is where Krustofski’s synagogue is located and where visitors can dine at restaurants such as Tannen’s Fatty Meats and Izzy’s Deli. In real life, if there were enough Jews in Springfield, the synagogue would have followed the migration from the urban center to the suburbs, the pattern in most American cities of any size. Thus, the town’s small Jewish community is marginalized and often misunderstood in ways that are still common in small Protestant communities in the American heartland. Related problems facing modern American Jewry in such towns — assimilation and how to fit into an overwhelmingly Christian society — are raised in various ways in *The Simpsons*. Thus, we learn that Kent Brockman, the local television news anchor and member of Springfield Community Church, started his broadcasting career as Kenny Brockelstein, and still wears a pendant around his neck with the Hebrew word *C’hai* (life). A tee-shirt pops up in one episode, reading “Jews for Jebus,” the name Homer sometimes mistakes for Jesus. Costington’s department store advertises “Christmas presents at Hanukkah prices.” This environment gives rise to a kind of unconscious anti-Semitism. For example, Lovejoy keeps the rabbi’s address and phone number on his “non-Christian Rolodex.” At the elementary school, Principal Skinner is heard fielding an angry call from the superintendent. “I know Weinstein’s parents were upset,” he stammers. “But, but, ah, I was sure it was a phony excuse. I mean, it sounds so made up: ‘Yom Kip-pur.’” The Day of Atonement, the holiest day of the year for Jews, is completely unfamiliar to the school principal. When Homer needs fifty thousand dollars for a heart bypass, he goes to the rabbi, pretending to be Jewish in the only way he knows how. “Now, I know I haven’t been the best Jew, but I have rented Fiddler on the Roof and I will watch it,” he says. All he gets from the rabbi is a dreidel. In another episode, while visiting New York City, Bart mistakes several Hasidic rabbis — black-clad and bearded — for the Texas rock group ZZ Top, who favor the same attire, plus sunglasses. Finally, Bart works a sympathy scam in the shopping mall wearing a yarmulke, pretending that his bar mitzvah cake has just been smashed.

Yiddish expressions, usually voiced by Krusty [the Jewish clown], abound: *tucchus* (butt) and *yutz* (empty head), *plotz* (burst), *bupkes* (nothing), *ferkakteh* (execrable), *schlemiel* (bungler), and *schmutz* (mess). The clown refers to his long-lost daughter as “my lucky little *hamentaschen*,” a reference to triangular pastry eaten on the holiday of Purim. Other Yiddish words and puns and double entendres also pop up. Springfield’s miniature golf course is sometimes (but not always) called “Sir Putts-a-Lot.” The Yiddish word *putz* means penis. Another of Krusty’s middle names is “Schmoikel,” which sounds like the diminutive of another Yiddish term for penis. “What’s a good Jewish word Krusty can use here?” Gentile writers would ask Mike Reiss. And it usually would be Gentile writers who would seek such words. “Not even a majority of the stuff comes from the Jews.”

There are other in-jokes that were obviously written by Jews for other Jews. A casino boat travels from Springfield beyond the territorial limit to allow activities forbidden by U.S. law. In a fleeting shot, a man in a tuxedo, under a canopy, is seen marrying a cow in what is clearly a Jewish wedding ceremony — then the groom smashes with his foot a glass wrapped in a napkin. The Jewish content of *The Simpsons* inspired one fan, Brian Rosman, a health policy researcher at a Brandeis University think tank, to create

a Web site that features still shots from “Like Father, Like Clown” under the heading, “Jewish Life in Springfield.” It also uses Homer Simpson to help Jewish viewers with the observance of Lag B’Omer, the counting of the sheaves between Passover and Shavuot, the Feast of Weeks, and a bilingual pun on Homer’s name. Rosman believes that: “The Simpsons does the funniest, most authentic parodies of Jewish life among all the comedy shows on TV, certainly compared to shows that are considered more “Jewish,” like Seinfeld. The Simpsons demonstrates a more intuitive understanding of American Jewish history, Jewish religion and culture, and Judaism’s place among all the other varieties of belief and identity in America. I only wish there was more Jewish content on the show, because when they do it, they do it very well.”

Actually, there may be more than even Rosman realizes. Apart from Krusty, The Simpsons from time to time suggests an underlying element of what might be called “crypto-Judaism.” In one of the opening chalkboard sequences, Bart writes, “I am not the reincarnation of Sammy Davis Jr.” While watching the “Rapping Rabbis” on television, Homer asks Marge, “Are we Jewish?” Sight gags in the series also extend this conceit. A menorah — the Hanukkah candelabra — is seen in the Simpsons’ family storage closet, without comment on how or why it got there. There are other hints. Watching the cross-dressing movie Yentl puts Homer in an amorous mood — at least when he’s delirious — especially the part when Barbra Streisand, the title character, is in the yeshiva. In another episode, Homer, lightheaded from donating blood, raves, “Jewish? No, I’m not Jewish.” And Jews pop up in unexpected places. Along with Duff Man, the local beer company mascot, one of the regular trio of teenage toughs is also Jewish. He excuses himself from one incident of troublemaking to go to Hebrew school, donning a yarmulke and a prayer shawl and walking away chanting a Hebrew blessing.

In The Simpsons comic Holiday Humdinger, Bart takes a step further. At Hanukkah, he learns from a Jewish friend about the eight nights and eight gifts, and naturally Bart decides to convert, noting the additional benefit of holidays off school. Homer asks if his son is certain he wants to “abandon the faith you happened to be born into,” the reason most people worship where they do. Bart, now wearing a skullcap all the time, replies that he’d rather be on Krusty’s team than the Flanderses’. Following the sometimes traditional practice for those who want to convert to Judaism, Rabbi Krustofski turns Bart down several times — to be certain he is serious — before agreeing to take him on for classes. Bart argues that if he became Jewish, he’d be a “trash-talkin’ Spiky-haired Seinfeld with a Fox attitude.” Even so, the rabbi is unconvinced, predicting the boy would not like the religion because “so much Judaism is like opera, the Lincoln Douglas debates, and the Atkins Diet, all rolled into one.” Bart is plainly in it for the toys, which his parents supply each night of the holiday (along with gingerbread rabbis), but sister Lisa is optimistic that her brother may be undergoing a spiritual awakening. Her gift, after lighting the menorah, is a book about Jewish history, humor, and “food-oriented Yiddish phrases” that Bart uses as a TV tray, holding Dr. Brown’s Cream Soda and lowcarb hamentaschen. The boy also announces he can’t do chores around the house on Saturdays because he has become a strict Sabbath observer. As a convert to Buddhism, Lisa despairs at her brother’s antics. “I thought we finally had something in common,” she says. “That we followed our hearts because of what we believe in. But as usual, the only thing you believe in is self-gratification.” In the end, Bart spends enough time with the rabbi to make the right decision and not convert. “Love the religion,” he confesses to Lisa, “but, oy . . . I can’t handle the guilt.”

Several other characters in the show, ostensibly not Jewish, can be read by their names and their view of life as otherwise distinctly Jewish: Homer’s father, Abe; and Marge’s twin sisters, Selma and Patty Bouvier. In manner and disposition, Abe, a child immigrant from “the old country,” is every alta kaka (old fart) sitting around a swimming pool in Miami Beach, complaining about his declining health and

the ungrateful younger generation. His absent wife, Penelope Olsen, Homer's mother, is a '60s radical and free spirit whose anti-germ warfare activities forced her underground for twenty-five years. Her Scandinavian name notwithstanding, she could be Jewish; she fits the profile. The Bouvier sisters are also familiar types: sharp-tongued unmarried aunts and sisters-in-law, their dialogue taken directly from the late Selma Diamond or Fran Leibowitz or Sandra Bernhard. And according to Matt Groening's *The Simpsons Uncensored Family Album*, Montgomery Burns's sister, Cornelia, has five grandsons named Bernstein: David, Levi, Moshe, Murray, and Saul.

So, latent or blatant, is the portrayal of Jews in *The Simpsons* on balance a positive one, likely to encourage understanding among society at large? The rabbis seem to think that it is, although not entirely without qualification. Rabbi Steven Engel of the Congregation of Reform Judaism, in Orlando, says, "For Jews, humor has always been as reflective as our holy writings and sacred liturgy in expressing our feelings, concerns, aspirations, and in bringing to light the realities we face. Our general understanding is that humor has contributed to our ability to survive as a people. There is no question that *The Simpsons'* Springfield in many ways accurately reflects the feelings, concerns, aspirations, and realities of contemporary Jews. It is certainly funny stuff and does make people laugh. But is it good for the Jews? I suppose that depends upon who is doing most of the laughing, why they are laughing, and to whom the laughter is directed."

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