

The Finkler Question: Very Funny is Very Serious

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Most critics agree that Jewish humour is defined by its capacity to laugh in the face of despair, tragedy, persecution. Humour has been a source of salvation for the Jews, allowing them to survive in a hostile world. Howard Jacobson is an English Jewish writer who has always celebrated the important role that comedy plays in literature. He regrets the false division between comedy and seriousness that critics have created and firmly believes that comedy reaffirms the value of life by offering us a way to transcend our sadness and misfortunes. In *The Finkler Question* humour indeed fulfils this redeeming function and allows Jacobson to tackle the dark forces of anti-Semitism.

Keywords: Jewish; comedy; seriousness; transcendence; anti-Semitism; anti-Zionism.

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The Finkler Question: muy divertido es muy serio

La mayor parte de los críticos considera que el humor judío se define por su capacidad para reírse frente a la desesperación, la tragedia, la persecución. El humor ha sido una fuente de salvación para los judíos, permitiéndoles sobrevivir en un mundo hostil. Howard Jacobson es un escritor judío inglés que siempre ha celebrado la importante función que la comedia desempeña en la literatura. Lamenta la falsa división entre comedia y seriedad que los críticos han creado y cree firmemente que la comedia reafirma el valor de la vida al ofrecernos una manera de trascender nuestras tristezas y desgracias. En *The Finkler Question* el humor cumple esta función redentora y le permite a Jacobson enfrentarse a las oscuras fuerzas del antisemitismo.

Palabras clave: judío; comedia; seriedad; transcendencia; antisemitismo; antisionismo.

In her article on Jewish humour, Salcia Landmann asserts that “Experts in Jewish humour are in fact agreed that it is more acute, more profound, and richer in expression than that of any other people” (1962: 194), an idea shared by Berger, who not only argues that the best jokes are Jewish jokes, but does not hesitate to add that this “is a well-known fact among, at any rate, college-educated Americans of whatever ethnic or religious background” (1997: 87). This characterization of the Jews as a peculiarly humorous people or as having a distinctive comic sensibility has been endorsed by both Jewish and non-Jewish scholars, who, since the beginning of the twentieth century, have tried to define what makes Jewish humour such a unique phenomenon.

One of the critics who has explored the image of the Jews as “the People of the Joke” is Elliott Oring. Like many other authors, Oring stresses that Jewish humour is a relatively modern invention originating in the nineteenth century, derived “from a conceptualization of Jewish history as a history of suffering, rejection, and despair” (1983: 266). Oring argues that the unique Jewish experience of defeat, exile, segregation and persecution allows for a conceptualization of Jewish humour which relies upon three characteristics: transcendence, defence and pathology, which are often intertwined. Oring’s analysis highlights two aspects of Jewish humour that have been thoroughly examined by scholars: on the one hand, the definition of Jewish humour as essentially self-mocking and self-derogatory and, on the other, the notion that Jewish humour is essentially transcendent in the sense that it allows Jewish people to cope with their suffering and liberates them from the social, political and economic forces that oppress them.

The idea that self-mockery is the most distinctive feature of Jewish humour was originated by Freud:

A particularly favourable occasion for tendentious jokes is presented when the intended rebellious criticism is directed against the subject himself, or, to put it more cautiously, against someone in whom the subject has a share —a collective person, that is (the subject’s own nation, for instance). The occurrence of self-criticism as a determinant may explain how it is that a number of the most apt jokes . . . have grown up on the soil of Jewish popular life. They are stories created by Jews and directed against Jewish characteristics. . . . Incidentally, I do not know whether there are many other instances of a people making fun to such a degree of its own character. (1991: 156-57)

Freud believed that tendentious jokes fulfilled a liberating function since they allowed individuals to criticise people or institutions to whom they were hostile or by whom they were oppressed. His arguments were further developed by Martin Grotjahn and Theodor Reik. The former emphasised the element of self-aggression in Jewish jokes: “It is as if the Jew tells his enemies: ‘You do not need to attack us. We can do that ourselves – and even better’” (1957: 12). Reik, on the other hand, distinguished masochistic and paranoiac tendencies in Jewish humour: “There is even a subterranean tie between the masochistic and the paranoid attitude in the idea that God chastises those He loves” (1962: 231).

Other scholars have rejected the notion that self-mockery is a characteristic feature of Jewish humour. Dan Ben-Amos's 'The "Myth" of Jewish Humor' (1973) has probably been the most influential work in this area. Ben-Amos questions the theories that have tried to explain self-criticism in Jewish humour as either symptomatic of the unique nature of the Jewish psyche or as the consequence of the socio-economic environment in which the Jews lived. He argues that the main problem with all these approaches is that, in following Freud's ideas, they see Jewish society as a collectivity, as a united whole and not as a network of multiple interrelationships and affiliations. He asserts that as in Jewish humour there is no social identification between the narrator and the subject of his joke, the joke-telling thus merely shows the tensions within Jewish society: "The fact that Jews tell jokes about each other demonstrates not so much self-hatred as perhaps the internal segmentation of their society" (129).¹

Ben-Amos's scepticism about Jewish humour being self-derogatory or expressing masochistic self-hatred is shared by Christie Davies. Like other ethnic minorities, Jewish people tell, enjoy and even invent jokes about themselves: "If the joke tellers really were suffering from and revelling in self-hatred, then the occasions on which members of the minority meet and exchange jokes about their own group ought in general to be tense and hysterical" (1991: 190-91).² Bernard Saper's thesis is similar to Davies's: Jews accept and even enjoy being the butt of a joke as long as it is generated in an atmosphere of playfulness and not in a context of hate and anger (1991).

Interestingly enough, most of the critics who have been concerned with analysing whether Jewish humour is self-deprecating or not, have also emphasised the coping and liberating function that humour has fulfilled for the Jews. It is true that some of them believe that with the rise of the Jewish state, humour as a weapon against oppression, persecution or suffering became obsolete. As such, Salcia Landmann admits that in the nineteenth century "the joke achieved a special eminence and became an important means of expression among the Jews, a defeated and persecuted people *par excellence*" (1962: 194), but adds that Israeli citizens of today do not need humour to cope with reality, since they can take up arms to defend themselves: "in Israel today the joke as a weapon is out of favour and moribund" (198). Nevo and Levine also believe that with the transit to Israel the unique characteristics of Jewish humour were lost, but argue that when the Gulf War started and the Jews in Israel were confronted with conditions similar to those in the diaspora, old Jewish humour emerged again. For the first time Israelis could not respond actively to stop enemy attacks: "At this point, joking erupted. In no other Israeli war was humor so rich and prolific" (1994: 128).

¹ In a suggestive chapter on disparagement humour, Dolf Zillmann argues that the measurement of attitudes might explain why self-mockery in Jewish humour is enjoyed by both Jews and non-Jews. His conclusion is similar to that of Ben Amos: "to the extent that sentiment is not bound by formal affiliations and may run counternorm, a member of a particular group should be able to enjoy the humiliation of one of his or her own kind" (1983: 90).

² Interestingly enough, in an article written in 1941 and revealingly titled 'Self-Hatred among Jews', Kurt Lewin claims that Jewish self-hatred is a well-known phenomenon among the Jews and argues that the tendency towards aggression against one's group can be found in many underprivileged groups.

Other critics believe that Jewish humour continues to be transcendent. Thus Oring argues that as long as Jewish history and experience remains different from the history and experience of other nations, Jewish humour will flourish (1983: 271), while Davies reminds us that people usually joke about what they fear most and asserts, “The self-mocking Jewish jokes are thus a way of coping with a difficult situation by an overt, controlled, and temporary fantasy that combines imagination with reality to produce a laughter of endurance for those within the group” (202). Saper also draws attention to the fact that the Jewish sense of humour is defined by its capacity to laugh in the face of despair, tragedy, persecution: “[T]here is a unique tendency — cultural, religious, and ethnic— for the Jew to pick up on the terrible miseries of his/her life as well as its absurdities, to make jokes and laugh at them” (1991: 54).

This coping function of Jewish humour, which allows the Jews to maintain their dignity, integrity, equilibrium and sanity, as well as to look toward the future, has been beautifully explained by Berger in *Redeeming Laughter*. He argues that the Jewish comic sensibility that originated in the Yiddish culture of Eastern Europe is defined by the element of tragicomedy. The Jews of Eastern Europe, and especially those living in appalling circumstances in Russia in the nineteenth century, were aware of the incongruity between the promises of a majestic destiny for Jewish people as proclaimed by Judaism and the miserable conditions in which they lived. They developed a tragicomic approach to life in order to cope with their painful predicament allowing them to provoke laughter through tears.³ Tragicomedy does not annul suffering or sadness, but makes them more bearable. It consoles and reaffirms the power of life in spite of so much horror. Berger goes so far as to say that laughter fulfils a redeeming function and establishes a very interesting comparison between the comic as a signal of transcendence and Christian sacraments:

Sacraments are not magic. They do not transform the world in its empirical reality, which continues to be full of all the afflictions to which human beings are prone. Also, sacraments are not logically compelling: The grace that they convey cannot be empirically or rationally demonstrated, but is only perceived in an act of faith. In this case, the experience of the comic does not miraculously remove suffering and evil in this world, nor does it provide self-evident proof that God is active in the world and intends to redeem it. However, perceived in faith, the comic becomes a great consolation and a witness to the redemption that is yet to come. (1997: 214-15)

Berger’s arguments are shared by Conrad Hyers, who endorses this redemptive quality of humour. Hyers believes that laughter and comedy do not obviate suffering or conquer death but allow us to stand apart from and adjust to whatever circumstances in which we find ourselves. In laughter we transcend disappointment and the contradictions of our

³ Nathan Ausubel (1967) was the first to use the expression “laughter through tears” to describe the mixture of comedy and tragedy we find in Jewish humour.

lives and are thus able to celebrate the gift of life. Hyers considers that this capacity for contemplating the dark side of life, while at the same time reaffirming the unconditional value of life, is characteristic of Jewish humour. He claims that it is no coincidence that a high percentage of comedians in the USA are either Jewish or black: “As gallows humor or concentration-camp humor will attest, it may also express a certain heroic defiance in the face of life’s most crushing defeats, an unquenchable nobility of spirit that refuses to permit a given fate or oppressor to have the last word —to be absolute. . . . Where there is humor there is still hope” (1997: 91).⁴

Irving Saposnik also believes that implicit in Yiddish comedy is the affirmation of the unconditional value of life: “Best of all, no doubt, Yiddish culture developed a comedy unlike any other Jewish comedy that had been before, a comedy that emerged from poverty and despair to celebrate life; a comedy that came close to tears but rarely cried, a comedy that came close to screaming but laughed instead” (1991: 101). Yiddish comedy is borne out of the awareness of the contradictions between the heavenly promise of being the chosen People and the cruel reality of exile, dispersion, wandering, alienation. The Jews faced this gap between the ideal and the real with characteristic humour and transformed Yiddish comedy into an existential force: “More eloquent oft-times than words, laughter is the beginning and end of Yiddish comedy, for, more than anything else, it insures survival” (105). Sarah Blacher Cohen shares Saposnik’s view of Jewish humour as a source of salvation for the Jews, allowing them to survive in a hostile world: “The Jews refuse to succumb to the dire circumstances. Abandoning the stance of tragic heroism, they create an alternative to an ennobling death. They learn to fashion their own reality. Though they are often gasping for air in their underwater existence, they somehow manage to survive, for humor is their life preserver” (1987: 14).

Howard Jacobson is an English Jewish writer who has always celebrated the important role that comedy plays in literature. He is proud of being labelled a Jewish author and does not hesitate to describe himself as “entirely and completely Jewish” (Jacobs 2008: 1). In fact, most reviewers have pointed out that few British authors have written so explicitly and fearlessly about Jewish experience and identity.⁵ Jacobson himself has explained that the reason why Jewish writers do not dare or are even embarrassed to write about Jewish life overtly is because they do not want to look provincial: “Jewishness is not at the heart of English culture. This is one of the things cultured Jews in England feel every time we write or make a play or music. But we’re not disrespected or disregarded. American culture is already Jewish culture. It’s yours, it’s ours. . . . Here, we’re still making space for ourselves” (Manus 2004: 3). Jacobson has admitted that when he started writing about Jewish experience he surprised his family, his friends and himself: “I never thought when I was trying to write in my 20s and even in my 30s, that I was going to write about Jews. But

⁴ Most of the critics who have explored the possibilities of treating a subject as serious as the Holocaust in a comic way have stressed how humour in ghettos and camps functioned as both a coping mechanism and a means of resistance. See Des Pres (1991), Cory (1995), Gilman (2000), Morreall (2009: 119-24).

⁵ See Lyall (2010) and Sax (2010).

I wasn't getting anywhere not writing about Jews. I couldn't write a page" (*Tablet* 2010: 3). But although Jewishness has become part of his subject, he does not consider himself conventionally Jewish, mainly because he was not raised in a particularly observant Jewish home: "What I feel is that I have a Jewish mind, I have a Jewish intelligence. I feel linked to the previous Jewish minds of the past" (Manus 2004: 1). In fact, he confesses that he feels a bit like Treslove in *The Finkler Question*: "I'm still a bit of a gentile, looking with my nose pressed in against the window of Jewishness, thinking, 'How fantastic! What great jokes they make! Look how wild they are, look how warm they are, look how deeply they love, and so on!'" (*NPR* 2010: 3). Although he has been compared with Philip Roth, he prefers to be called the Jewish Jane Austen: "As far as I'm concerned I'm an English novelist working absolutely square in the English tradition. . . . The voices in my head are Shakespeare, Dr. Johnson, Dickens, George Eliot" (*Tablet* 2010: 2).

Interestingly enough, one of the reasons why Jacobson does not identify himself with Roth is that, as he declared in an interview, he thinks that Roth "has essentially stopped being funny" (Jacobs 2008: 2). Jane Austen, on the other hand, was acutely aware of the importance and seriousness of comedy, like Jacobson himself: "To me, being a comic novelist is obviously to be serious, too – what else is there to be comic about?," he told Sarah Lyall of the *New York Times* (2010: 2). In fact, most critics have stressed that his novels are "Funny, yes, but seriously funny" (Jacobs 2008: 1) or, in other words, that he fuses comedy and tragedy in his novels, dealing with very serious issues in a comic way without trivializing them.⁶ Jacobson himself not only claims that comic novels should be taken seriously, but goes even further and argues that the distinction between 'comic novelist' and 'literary novelist' should be abolished, since, as Jane Austen suggested in *Northanger Abbey*, a good novel should always be effusive with wit and humour. Jacobson regrets the false division between comedy and seriousness that critics have created: "But there is a fear of comedy in the novel today —when did you last see the word 'funny' on the jacket of a serious novel?— that no one who loves the form should contemplate with pleasure" (2010b: 2). Jacobson stresses how from the very beginning the novel has been defined by its subversive character: "Comedy is nothing if not critical" (2). The novel has been the expression of freedom, as the work of Cervantes and Rabelais patently show.⁷ And in the process of challenging the reader and his/her beliefs, comedy "asserts the stubbornness of life" (6). Jacobson firmly believes that comedy reaffirms the value of life, thus allowing us to transcend our misfortunes: "Comedy is the handmaiden of tragedy . . . humor doesn't make things light — quite the contrary. . . . We affirm life with it"

⁶ See Cheyette (1999), Jacobs (2008), Brown (2010), Jeffries (2010), *NPR* (2010), Herschthal (2010, 2011).

⁷ Jacobson argues that the satyr plays of classical times and the novel share the same subversive intention, a statement which is very Bakhtinian, since one of Bakhtin's main arguments is that the parodic-travesty literature of Greece and Rome introduced the corrective of laughter to show that reality was richer and more contradictory than the straightforward genres suggested: "Such laughter paved the way for the impiety of the novelistic form" (1992: 59). Like Jacobson, Bakhtin also believes that "True ambivalent and universal laughter does not deny seriousness but purifies and completes it" (1984: 122-23).

(Herschthal 2010: 1). Comedy is crucial for our daily survival since it offers us a way to deal with the sadness of life, “[i]t’s our greatest achievement. Forget the pyramids. *Comedy*” (Tracy 2011: 3).

Like some of the critics mentioned in the first part of this essay, Jacobson thinks that there is something particularly Jewish about this blending of comedy and tragedy. The experience of 5000 years has shaped the Jewish sense of humour and, in fact, Tracy with great irony has described Jacobson as representative of one of the two archetypes of the Jewish intellectual: “For what is Jacobson if not the ribald and morbid Jew from the Pale . . . the fragility of whose life has led him to fear harm and to raise humor as a shield” (Tracy 2011: 1). Jacobson argues that, although many of his readers think that if a novel is funny it cannot be serious, “I think a Jew knows that very funny is very serious” (Manus 2004: 2).⁸ In fact, in *The Finkler Question* a character who has just found out that he is Jewish, exclaims, “It could explain where I get my comic genius from” (138).

Adam Kirsch has claimed that “as Jacobson shows, it takes a writer of genius to take all of life’s sordid humiliations and redeem them with laughter” (2011: 3). *The Finkler Question* is the best proof that comedy is capable of dealing with all aspects of life, including those that are most important or painful to us, without trivializing them: “When I do comedy, it bleeds” (Herschthal 2010: 3). Comedy allows Jacobson to tackle and transcend the dark forces of anti-Semitism and anti-Israel activism in modern Britain: “The question of anti-Semitism in this country is vexed. That’s why I wrote *The Finkler Question*. . . . Do we Jews imagine it, do we half want it to define ourselves by, do we contribute to it by harping on about it (a particular sinister suggestion)?” (Schischa 2011: 2-3). *The Finkler Question* was written in an extremely uncomfortable political climate during Operation Cast Lead, the name the Israeli army gave to its incursion into Gaza in 2009. Israel was being harshly attacked not only by British politicians and the media but by the most vocal Jewish critics. In fact, Jacobson devoted one of his columns in *The Independent* to denounce the hatred of Israel which the events in Gaza had generated: “A discriminatory, over-and-above hatred, inexplicable in its hysteria and virulence whatever justification is adduced for it; an unreasoning, deranged and as far as I can see irreversible revulsion that is poisoning everything we are supposed to believe in here” (2009: 1).

With characteristic irony Jacobson claims that he is not allowed to ascribe any of this to anti-Semitism: “It is, I am assured, ‘criticism’ of Israel, pure and simple” (2009: 1). Jacobson explains that it is as if nothing good could come out of Israel, whose inhabitants are compared to the Nazis, whereas Gaza is likened to the Warsaw Ghetto:

It is as though, by a reversal of the usual laws of cause and effect, Jewish actions of today prove that Jews had it coming to them yesterday. Berating Jews with their own history, disinheriting

⁸ Although Jacobson has underlined that laughter allows us to transcend our problems and sufferings, he has also made reference to the way in which Jews make fun of themselves. Interestingly enough, like Reik, he believes this is a masochistic strategy that allows the person telling the joke to achieve an intellectual and moral superiority (Manus 2004: 2).

them of pity, as though pity is negotiable or has a sell-by date, is the latest species of Holocaust denial. . . . According to this thinking, the Jews have betrayed the Holocaust and became unworthy of it, the true heirs to their suffering being the Palestinians. (2009: 3)

Jacobson argues that this hatred of Israel is very well represented in Caryl Churchill's *Seven Jewish Children* (2008), a play which, in his opinion, shows a very poor knowledge of the history of Israeli-Palestinian relationships:

Jewish-hating pure and simple —Jewish-hating which the haters don't even recognize in themselves, so acculturated is it— the Jew-hating which many of us have always suspected was the only explanation for the disgust that contorts and disfigures faces when the mere word Israel crops up in conversation. . . . No, you don't have to be an anti-Semite to criticise Israel. It just so happens that you are. (2009: 5)

What really worries Jacobson is not so much that plays like *Seven Jewish Children* can be written and celebrated by critics, but that language can be manipulated to generate racist ideas:

And so it happens. Without one's being aware of it, it happens. A gradual habituation to the language of loathing. Passed from the culpable to the unwary and back again. And soon before you know it...

Not here, though. Not in cosy old lazy old easy-come easy-go England. (2009: 5)

The irony in the last sentence expresses Jacobson's own fears at the time he was writing *The Finkler Question*, fears that were shared by many British Jews: "When I was writing this novel . . . many Jews that I knew, rational, calm Jews were truly wondering whether England would go on being the safe haven for them that it's been for a long time" (*NPR* 2010: 2). Jacobson admits that many English people show much goodwill towards Jews (Jacobson 2010: 2), but there is also a virulence about Israel which English people would never acknowledge and which can be really trying for the English Jews: "It's just the temperature of the newspaper. It can be very wearing to Jewish nerves to have this bombardment all the time" (*NPR* 2010: 3). Jacobson confesses that it is very difficult to know for certain if anti-Semitism has increased in England, but he thinks that it is a Jew's duty to be constantly vigilant: "I'm not saying antisemitism is on the increase, but I am looking. I think it's irresponsible of a Jew not to. Especially a Booker-winning one", he stated in an interview (Jeffries 2010: 3).⁹ Jacobson is especially troubled by the virulent rhetoric used by left-wing intellectuals, many of them Jews themselves, to attack Israel:

⁹ Jacobson's joke at the end of the quotation illustrates perfectly how laughter allows him to cope with those aspects of life that worry him most.

What we don't know and what we're all trying to figure out and measure, those of us who think this is worth putting our mind to, is how far the rhetoric of anti-Zionism is spilling over into another thing, through the sheer violence and virulence of its own language. Because it might very well be that a person might say, "I'm not anti-Semitic, not at all, my best friends are Jews" —you know the story— "I just think this has to be said." But it might be that if enough people are saying that, then a kind of linguistic climate is created in which people feel Jews are what they've always felt Jews to be: fair game. (*Tablet* 2010: 3)

He accuses the anti-Zionist Jews of being one-sided and trying to impose on others what they consider to be the truth about the Palestinians and the Israelis.¹⁰ He even defines their anti-Zionist language as "pathological": "I don't need to know anything about Israel to know there is something wrong with the way they are talking, something false about it. No place could be as vile as they describe it. No people so lost to humanity. Not even the Nazis were as bad as the Jews are accused of being" (Jacobs 2010: 2).

But although Jacobson is a supporter of the Israeli state, he has tried to be fair and has pointed out those aspects of Israel's policy that he finds reprehensible: "to be a friend of Israel is to be critical of Israel" (*NPR* 2010: 2). Thus he has admitted that he does not like what has happened to Zionism or agree with the Israeli settlements: "I'd go out with my own bare hands and pull them down" (*Tablet* 2010: 4). In fact Jacobson asserts that much of the comic anger in *The Finkler Question* stems not so much from the political position of the anti-Zionists, which in some cases is perfectly respectable, but from their attitude of shame: "What annoys me about it is not the politics, but the idea that what's happening somewhere else is about them. . . . It's the vanity of it; it's the egotism. It's the wearing their hearts on their sleeves. It's this carnival of conscience that I make fun of in the book" (*NPR* 2010: 2).

Jacobson's fear that anti-Zionism may slide into anti-Semitism is present in *The Finkler Question* and echoed most accurately by two female Jewish characters: Hephzibah, who is setting up a museum of Anglo-Jewish culture, and Emmy, whose twenty-two-year old grandson has been stabbed in the face and blinded by an Algerian. Hephzibah is deeply worried about the steady escalation of anti-Semitism:

It had started again, anyway. Her emails streamed reported menace and invective. A brick was thrown through a window of the museum. An Orthodox man in his sixties was beaten up at a bus stop in Temple Fortune. Graffiti began to appear again on synagogue walls, the Star of David crossed with the swastika. The internet bubbled and boiled with madness. She couldn't bear to open a newspaper.

Was it something or was it nothing? (2010a: 282)

She is aware of the fact that her fear is shared by other British Jews:

¹⁰ Whenever he writes defending Israel, hate mail follows, having even once received a letter signed in excrement (Cooke 2006: 2).

An anxiety had settled like a fine dust on everything she did, and on everyone she knew —on all the Jews at least. They too were looking askance— not over their shoulders exactly, but into a brittly uncertain future which bore fearful resemblances to an only too certain past.

Paranoia, was it? She asked herself. The question itself had become monotonous to her. (257)

Hephzibah becomes increasingly anxious about the museum's opening "because the atmosphere was wrong" (291). The only thing she can do is hope things will change for the better: "Head down, eyes lowered, fingers crossed" (291). Hephzibah's apprehensions are shared by Emmy. Thus in a conversation with Finkler and Treslove she "told them about the work she did, about what she feared, about the Jew-hatred which was beginning to infect the world she'd inhabited all her life, the world where people had once prided themselves on thinking before they rushed to judgement, and about her grandson, blinded by a person she didn't scruple to call a terrorist" (287).¹¹ She closely echoes Jacobson's rejection of anti-Zionist inflammatory language: "The trigger isn't the violence in Gaza. The trigger, in so far as they need a trigger —and many don't— is the violent, partial, inflammatory reporting of it. The trigger is the inciting word" (156). Even Samuel Finkler, a philosopher and well-known television personality who hates everything about Israel, becomes aware of how dangerous it is to use the word 'Jew' in public:

After everything that had happened, wasn't it a word for private consumption only? Out there in the raging public world it was as a goad to every sort of violence and extremism.

It was a password to madness. Jew. One little word with no hiding place for reason in it. Say 'Jew' and it was like throwing a bomb. (185-86)

Ironically Julian Treslove, a former BBC producer who is so obsessed with Jews that he wants to become one of them, seems to be more clear-sighted about the Jews' real problems than the Jews themselves:

He could see because he was outside it. He could afford to see what they —his friends, the woman he loved— dared not. The Jews would not be allowed to prosper except as they had always prospered, at the margins, in the concert halls and at the banks. *End of.* As his sons said. Anything else would not be tolerated. A brave rearguard action in the face of insuperable odds was one thing. Anything resembling victory and peace was another. (266-67)

Treslove, the Gentile, is merely reproducing what Jacobson believes others think of Jews and which, according to Jacobson, became obvious with the Six-Day War in 1967.

¹¹ Interestingly enough, although Emmy is convinced that anti-Semitic feeling is increasing, she, like Jacobson, believes that most British people are not hostile to Jews: "What you see is not what non-Jews see. Not the fair-minded ones and most of them are that. . . . You might be surprised to learn how few people see the archetypal Jew every time they see him. Or even know that he's a Jew. Or care" (214-15).

As long as the world thought that Israel was going to be defeated and destroyed everyone was on the side of “poor little Israel”. But things changed the moment Israel won: “Israel winning became a problem. And Israel winning big became a bigger problem. . . . It’s one thing to feel, ‘Those poor Jews, they’re about to be murdered,’ and another thing to feel, ‘Those bastard Jews have just won’” (*Tablet* 2010: 4).

It is true, as Kirsch has pointed out, that Treslove is the best source of comedy in the novel since his obsession with Jewishness and his melodramatic character allows Jacobson to make fun of some of the stereotypes about Jews. Jacobson himself has acknowledged that the “whole point of Treslove was to make some comedy out of how Jewishness looks to somebody who isn’t a Jew” (*NPR* 2010: 1).¹² And while Treslove wants desperately to become Jewish, Finkler “can’t wait to get the hell out of it” (*Jacobs* 2010: 2). Finkler and the anti-Zionist group he has joined, The ASHamed Jews, provide us with some of the most hilarious scenes in the novel: “People think they’re parodies of Jews who happen to disapprove of Israel. But they’re not. They’re parodies of Jews who parade their disapproval of Israel” (*Lyall* 2010: 1).¹³ Kirsch has argued that Treslove’s comedy is deeper and more humane than the satire Jacobson makes out of Finkler and he gives a very good explanation for this difference: “Jacobson is too personally implicated in this debate over Anglo-Jewish identity to be able simply to laugh at it. Instead, in the last part of the novel, the portents of Anglo-Jewry get darker and darker. . . . But the power of Jewish history is such that paranoia is a standing temptation —one that, as Howard Jacobson knows, can sometimes be banished by the power of laughter” (2010: 3). Kirsch’s argument seems to me fully backed by episodes in the novel. In fact, when Hephzibah’s museum is vandalized for the first time she cries and laughs at the same time, claiming that it is important to see the funny side of it: “She wasn’t, he realised, going from fear to amusement and back again, she was experiencing both emotions simultaneously. It wasn’t even a matter of reconciling opposites because they were not opposites for her. Each partook of the other” (208). Thus, although in *The Finkler Question* there is pain, sadness and the fear of anti-Semitism spreading in Britain, Jacobson uses humour to rise above all the forces that try to crush his spirit. And one very important way in which Jacobson ‘exorcises’ his anxiety about anti-Semitism is by making fun of Finkler and the ASHamed Jews, who give us some of the best comic passages in the novel.

Jacobson has confessed that Finkler is something of an archetype: “There are a lot of Sam Finklers . . . which is why I invented him —I invented him out of what I saw” (*NPR* 2010: 2). Both Tyler, Finkler’s wife, who although a Gentile seems to be more Jewish than her husband, and Libor Sevcik, a Jewish retired history teacher and Hollywood reporter who supports the state of Israel, are very critical of Finkler’s actions and ideas and reprimand him for his public display of shame and vanity: “Look at him,” Libor said, ‘parading his shame to a Gentile world that has far better things to think about, does it not, Julian?’”

¹² Some critics have argued that Jewish humour plays with stereotypes about Jews themselves. See Davies (1991) and Nevo and Levine (1994).

¹³ Rebecca Schischa has suggested that Jacobson is referring to Independent Jewish Voices, an organization founded by a group of prominent British Jews to condemn perceived Israeli brutality (2011: 2).

(26). Of course, Jacobson does not miss this opportunity to make fun of Finkler and what he represents: “A thinking Jew attacking Jews was a prize. People paid to hear that” (230). Jacobson also introduces the comic element by highlighting the contradictions in Finkler, for instance that it does not make much sense to join a group of Jews in order to turn on Judaism: “He was a thinker who didn’t know what he thought, except that he had loved and failed and now missed his wife, and that he hadn’t escaped what was oppressive about Judaism by joining a Jewish group that gathered to talk feverishly about the oppressiveness of being Jewish. Talking feverishly about being Jewish *was* being Jewish” (275). Also, this man who prides himself on his highly rational mind and on being ‘a principled amoralist’ is the victim of religious superstition. Whenever he is out driving with a mistress he feels less safe than when he is out driving with his wife: “Yet apprehensive he always was, whenever he committed one of those sexual crimes which in his eyes were no crime. The car would crash. The hotel would burn down. And yes —for it was as primitive as this— his dick would fall off” (186).

Tyler, a very clever woman, who before marrying Samuel Finkler insisted on getting an education in Judaism, tells him that his problem is that he is too Jewish and, like the orthodox Jews he constantly scorns, arrogantly believes that “Jews either exist to be ‘a light unto the nations’ (*Isaiah* 42: 6) or don’t deserve to exist at all” (271). In fact, Jacobson continuously makes fun of how incongruous it is for a man like Finkler who “would eventually spit out Israel-associated words like Zionist and Tel Aviv and Knesset as though they were curses” (20) to believe that there is something special about the Jews. Thus, when Treslove intervenes in a conversation Samuel and Libor are having on Israel, “[t]hough he detested his fellow Jews for their clannishness about Israel, Finkler couldn’t hide his disdain for Treslove for so much as daring, as an outsider, to have a view” (26). Finkler’s “Jewishness” becomes obvious when his son gets involved in an anti-Semitic incident and explains to his dad what actually happened:

‘And then I knocked his hat off.’

‘You knocked a Jew’s hat off.’

‘Is that so terrible?’

‘Jesus Christ, of course it’s so terrible. You don’t do that to anyone, least of all a Jew.’

‘Least of all a Jew! What? Are we a protected species now or something? These are people who bulldoze Palestinian villages. What’s a hat?’

‘Did you hurt him?’

‘Not enough.’

‘This is a racist assault, Immanuel.’

‘Dad, how can it be a racist assault when they’re the racists?’

‘I’m not even going to answer that.’

‘Do I look like a racist? Look at me.’

‘You look like a fucking little anti-Semite.’

‘How can I be an anti-Semite? I’m a Jew.’ (189-90)

The ludicrousness of the conversation lies in the fact that Finkler, the anti-Zionist par excellence, is speaking like an orthodox Jew, and his son, like the anti-Zionist his father purports to be. But behind the façade of laughter lies Jacobson's fear that anti-Zionism might be transformed into anti-Semitism.

Finkler is not alone in his crusade against Israel: he has joined the so-called ASHamed Jews, an anti-Zionist group which becomes the target of Jacobson's comic genius. As outlined earlier, the ASHamed Jews are parodies of Jews who parade their disapproval of Israel and humour totally pervades those passages of the novel dealing with them. To start with, the main members of the group could not be more ludicrous: Lonnie, a presenter of children's television programmes, scares children because of his "hungry horse's face and yellow horse's teeth" (168), whereas Merton Kugle becomes the comic incarnation of the political fanatic:

a *gornisht* who belonged to every anti-Zionist group that existed, along with several that did not, no matter that some were sponsored by far-out Muslims who believed that Kugle, as a Jew, dreamed of world conspiracy, and others expressed the views of ultra-Orthodox Jews with whom Kugle would not in any other circumstances have shared a biscuit; so long as the phrase anti-Zionist was in the large or in the small print, Kugle signed up. (167)

Another member of the group has just found out that he is Jewish and after "weeping before a memorial in Auschwitz to dead ancestors who until that moment he had never known he'd had", decides to take a stance against Israel: "Born a Jew on Monday, he had signed up to be an ASHamed Jew by Wednesday and was seen chanting 'We are all Hezbollah' outside the Israeli Embassy on the following Saturday" (138-39). Tamara Krausz, academically the best known of the ASHamed Jews, becomes a caricature of the Jewish intellectuals who passionately criticize Israel and whom Jacobson sees as a threat to the safety of Jews: "Zionism was her demon lover, not Finkler. She could not, in her fascinated, never quite sufficiently reciprocated hatred of Zionism, think about anything else. Which is how things are when you're in love" (231). Although Finkler shares her ideological position, there is something in her voice that inflames him almost to madness. Every time she talks about anti-Zionism he thinks of slicing off her tongue and slitting her throat:

Which might have been the very thing she was referring to when she spoke of the breakdown of the Jewish mind, the Final Solution causing Jews to go demented and seek final solutions of their own, the violence begot of violence. Indeed, Finkler would have done no more than illustrate her thesis.

Was this not the very thing she sought? Kill me, you demented Jew bastard, and prove me right. (231)

As Finkler regretfully admits, with the exception of Tamara, if he "had gone into adult education, these were the sorts of people with whom he would have spent his evenings" (144).

In spite of their radical ideas, the ASHamed Jews have their ‘soft spots’ and make their excuses when a meeting coincides with a Jewish celebration: “those ASHamed Jews who were only partially ashamed —that’s to say who were ashamed, qua Jews, of Zionism but not, qua Jews, of being Jewish— were permitted to put their mortification into abeyance on Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur and Hanukkah, etc., and would resume it again when the calendar turned secular” (138).

Jacobson also makes fun of the ASHamed Jews’ discussions, like the one in which they decide the name of the group:

‘Firstly there already is an ASH,’ Ivo Cohen said. ‘It’s an antismoking charity with which, as a thirty-a-day man, I would rather not be confused. Secondly, it sounds like we’ve been burnt alive.’

‘And thirdly,’ Merton Kugle interposed, ‘it too closely resembles AISH.’

AISH was an educational and dating organisation for young Orthodox Jews, one of whose aims was to promote travel to Israel.

‘Not much chance we’d be confused with that,’ Finkler said. (166)

In another meeting the ASHamed Jews are trying to make up their mind about the boycotts against Israel and Jacobson, who once asserted that “the university lecturers who are boycotting Israel—they make my blood boil” (Cooke 2006: 2), uses his comic artillery to satirize those in the group wanting to boycott Israel poking fun at academics who want to boycott Israeli Universities and Institutions arguing that they “could imagine no greater deprivation than being denied access to academic conferences or having your latest paper refused by a learned magazine” (143). The group has the ‘honour’ of having a prime boycotter, Merton Kugle: “Already he was boycotting Israel in a private capacity, going through every item on his supermarket shelves to ascertain its origin and complaining to the manager when he found a tin or packet that was suspect. In pursuit of ‘racist merchandise’—usually, in his experience, concealed on the lowest shelves in the darkest recesses of the shop— Merton Kugle had ruined his spine and all but worn his eyes” (143). He is deeply disappointed when he is told that there can be no boycott of Israeli athletes and sports competitors because there are none. But the greatest joke as far as the boycotts are concerned comes from Finkler himself, who at the beginning of the novel is in favour, but when confronted with the issue in the meetings of the ASHamed Jews decides to steal a line from Libor: “So if we’re family, what’s with the boycott? Whoever boycotted his own family?” (145).

In *The Spirituality of Comedy* Hyers asserts that comedy is no more tied to the happy ending than tragedy is to an unhappy one. In fact, happily-ever-afters are presented humorously and as fantasies: “We know that it is a clever trick, an ingenious farce, and we laugh. Our wildest dreams have been simultaneously indulged and debunked” (1996: 162). What defines the comic is not a particular ending, but the celebration of life and the renewal of hope and faith despite the problems, tensions and incongruities of the

world. Interestingly enough, Jacobson expresses the very same idea in his defence of comic fiction: “If there’s one thing the novel at its comic best knows for sure it’s that a happy outcome . . . is an illusion. How not feeling good nonetheless conduces to our not feeling bad, indeed conduces to our feeling exhilarated, is one of the great mysteries of art” (Jacobson 2010: 5). *The Finkler Question* ends ambiguously: Treslove leaves Hephzibah and goes back to his life as a celebrity double, Hephzibah cries for Libor, who is dead, and Treslove, who has left her, while Finkler seems to have gone back to his religious roots, praying three times a day not only for those already dead —Libor and Tyler— but also for Treslove. The characters’ —and arguably the readers’— expectations have not been fulfilled and the threat of anti-Semitism has not disappeared, and yet, because comedy permeates the whole novel, we are not left with a sense of failure or despair, but with the feeling that life should be enjoyed, celebrated and affirmed.

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