

Will Laughing at and with One Another Save Us?

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Jeffrey Israel, *Living with Hate in American Politics and Religion: How Popular Culture Can Defuse Intractable Differences*. Columbia University Press, 363pp. \$65 cloth; \$26 paper.

Jeffrey Israel, a professor of Religion and Judaic Studies at Williams College, doesn't mention Eddie Murphy once in this book, but he surely has Murphy's type of comedy in mind in *Living with Hate in American Politics and Religion*. In his 1984 Saturday Night Live sketch "White like Me," Murphy, a comedic genius for reasons far greater than merely being funny, offered a prime example of what Israel contends about the social benefits of comedy in this challenging, learned, and at times frustrating book. In that sketch, Murphy channeled John Howard Griffin's then much acclaimed 1960 bestseller, *Black like Me*, which advanced the dubious premise that a well-meaning white man who temporarily dyed his skin could know what it was like to live as a black man in the Jim Crow South. In Murphy's adaptation, he plays "Mr. White," a black man who puts on white makeup and a conservative business suit, changes his haircut, affects uncool eyeglasses, and tries, he tells us, to walk with a tight butt. Looking perfectly plausible and utterly

anonymous, Mr. White then goes out into midtown Manhattan to see what he has been missing, and to understand how the secret world of American white people really works. Murphy's voiceover throughout is that of the same earnest *I-am-the-inquiring-documentary-reporter* that was Griffin's pose. First, Murphy visits a greeting card shop and begins to memorize the potted messages, as if they were revealed truth. Then he goes to a newspaper stand, where the owner, with a knowing, insider's look, waives the cost of the paper when he attempts to pay. He goes to a bank to ask for a loan, presenting no collateral and no identification: a black bank officer summarily refuses him, but a white bank official, with the same knowing look, intervenes, and not only gives him the loan, but opens a locked box and generously presents him gratis with as much cash as he wants. The sketch culminates on a public bus, on which there is one identifiable black passenger and a group of bored, white passengers, with vacant expressions, and, in his racial disguise, Mr. White. The lone black passenger leaves, and the white people immediately roll out a rollicking party, accompanied by music, which seems to be their standard practice as soon as they are alone with one another.

In the maybe three minutes that he has our attention, Murphy manages to make fun of everyone involved—himself, whites and African-Americans simultaneously—while reminding us of the utter implausibility of Griffin’s premise, no matter how well-meaning his white liberal intentions. African-Americans might imagine that life is ridiculously easy for these white people and consistently biased in their favor—free money, free newspapers, and secret parties in public space when black people are not around, but this is certainly not true. Who knows what tragedies, frustrations, failed aspirations and self-defeating habits are parts of the lives of everyone, race aside, whom we encounter impersonally, everywhere around us? Yet an elemental grain of truth nevertheless transforms Murphy’s comedy into social commentary. Life in America is a lot easier for these unknowing-looking, alternately genial and guarded, white people Murphy parodies, and white skin has its myriad privileges, even if they don’t include free money at the bank. An audience probably well-versed in the narrative Griffin constructed—the book continues to be read 60 years on—is reminded that, documentary-style objective reporting aside, it can no more easily imagine the multilevel struggles with race and identity of an African-American than Murphy could know what it is to be white.

Murphy did the same sort of telling setup, to take one last example, in his equally celebrated, “Mr. Robinson’s Neighborhood.” This was his series of parodies of Fred Rogers’ gentle, ever more appreciated children’s TV program from within a slum apartment, surrounded by drugs and violence, in which Murphy as Robinson concocts a variety of transparent scams one step ahead of the police and the landlord. Murphy uses a familiar scenario to hold a mirror up to Americans that instructs us in the realities of race in the United States. He reveals the depths of our comfortable and destructive

illusions, while making this bitter pill easier to swallow, because it is funny. It’s funny, because of Murphy’s genius for body language and his on-target dialogue parodying niceness, while playing the part of a very bad and yet also ridiculous dude. But if that were all there was about the comedy here, it wouldn’t mean much. It’s that mirror that makes it funny, because we need, all of us, occasionally to see ourselves naked and ridiculous.

As Jeffrey Israel would have it, for a moment in such comedy, through Mr. White and Mr. Robinson, we are brought into intimate contact with ourselves, all of us, whatever our seemingly profound differences, sharing life in Israel’s words in a “fraught society,” where for all of our self-aggrandizing national illusions and mythologies, the histories of racial and gender oppression and class exploitation hang heavily on our individual and collective shoulders. Almost everyone in America at present has claims to a grievance, and feels the odds are in one way or another stacked against us or, at the very least, that we’re not sufficiently understood or appreciated. At the foundation of these states of mind are vast and widening inequalities of wealth and power and mutual accusations and suspicions associated with the claims of identity politics. The liberal project of constructive tolerance and mutual understanding on which the culture of democracy ultimately depends is badly strained; public discourse is rife with invective, abuse, and name-calling and the institutions of democracy are stalemated. These states of mind are hardly funny, especially as they play out in today’s deeply polarized, bitter politics. But to the extent we exaggerate them, get lost in our separate grievances and lose track of our common, frail and confused American humanity, all of us, Israel thinks, need to draw back and cast some ironic reflections on ourselves. It isn’t a profoundly original point, but

ultimately he means to tell us that wisdom comes with self-reflection, both individual and collective. We need to reclaim our common humanity as part of the project of reclaiming our collective future and saving what in liberalism continues to be worth saving: the balancing of the rights of the individual and the good of the community and the polity.

That is Israel's central purpose, and it is imparted in his discussion of the subtle workings of comedy when it engages in social and political critique. While the book's prosaic title does not do its purposes or methods justice, that message does come after rough slogging through his first 170-odd pages, in which he is principally preoccupied with laying out his vision of social justice, citizenship, and individual and collective obligations through long, often difficult moral and political analysis. He doesn't seek to explain our possible transformation through projections out of our history, but through the examination of philosophies of rights and liberties and the good that probe at the weaknesses and abiding strengths of American, and more generally Western, liberalism. Among others, he argues with Karl Marx, Sigmund Freud, Franz Fanon, John Locke, Thomas Hobbes, John Rawls, and Leo Strauss; who are discussed at length, juxtaposed, as Israel visits and revisits the analysis through many pages. So, too, does the eminent moral philosopher and legal scholar Martha Nussbaum, who writes the Introduction to the book. Nussbaum was Israel's mentor at the University of Chicago, and here he continues a spirited and apparently fond dialogue of agreements and disagreements, that probably has been going on for decades, and is a tribute to the best qualities of both mentorship and intellectual comradeship. Among their common concerns is a deep appreciation of what's funny and why it's funny, and why the funny, as Eddie Murphy understands, may be so important to us. The book's extended preface (though

I am certain Israel would see those 170 pages as a necessary and essential, morally driven act of obligation) lays out what an ideal America would look like, if we were to face ourselves and our past realistically, reconstruct our conception of democratic citizenship, valorize the lives of all of our people, and improve our institutions with human and humane ends in mind. We may then take seriously realizing what we have long liked to believe to be our national story, as it is ideally embodied in such expressive symbols as the Statue of Liberty, Plymouth Rock, and the Emancipation Proclamation.

If hopeful, Israel is far from utopian. Even in an America united in its dedication to its self-improvement, the burden of the past and the myriad of prejudices, resentments, and defensive-aggressive assertions of identity that are part of the burden, will continue to manifest themselves. We will continue to look backward to what pisses us off, and sideways to those around us, who seem likely to be self-righteous, pompous, and judgmental, even as we might strive to go forward. It's what Karl Marx called "the dead hand of the past," but no less real for being—maybe, hopefully—vestigial. This is the source for Israel of what is and will continue to be, even under much better circumstances, "fraught" about us, and form a part of our self-understandings and the social arrangements we form.

What is fraught can continue to be faced through mutual accusations, which will have us perpetually at one another's throats, or we can find ways to govern our complaints, and tame our ways of presenting our views to one another in the service of constructing a more humane and democratic American community. This is where comedy, which Israel advances, not as a palliative for individuals managing stress, but as a culturally and politically salutary form of play, presents itself. He does not advance comedy as therapeutic or cathartic; it is

instead ideologically constructive, but its portal into politics is through a back-door.

But not just any comedy. Israel is seriously—culturally more so than religiously—Jewish, and he finds in the Jewish traditions of ironic humor that juxtapose and reconcile opposites in improbable possibilities an antidote to the dead-end, irreconcilable bitterness of much of the current popular climate of opinion in America. Jews dominated American comedy for much of the twentieth century, just as Italian baritones did romantic crooning and African-Americans did jazz. The genealogy of American comedy is often analyzed as a Jewish genealogy, where styles developed by Jews begin trends picked up and taken to new heights by such distinctly un-Jewish performers as, not only Murphy, but George Carlin, Richard Pryor, Dick Gregory, Bob Newhart, Jonathan Winters, and Phyllis Diller.

What Israel has in mind is not the Jewish joke-tellers—the Myron Cohens, Groucho Marxes, and Henny Youngmans, who reached their apogee in vaudeville, night clubs and Borscht-belt resorts with their rapid-delivery quips and clever one-liners about traveling salesmen or nagging wives. He is instead thinking of the pioneer generation of those who invented stand-up—the monologists, beginning in the 1950s with Mort Sahl and a few years later, the notorious Lenny Bruce and ultimately encompassing, in all of their own variety, Elaine May and Mike Nichols, Shelley Berman, Joan Rivers, Woody Allen, Mel Brooks and Carl Reiner, Sid Caesar, and Don Rickles.

Dressed in a casual cardigan rather than the standard performance business suit and often sitting informally on his prop, a barstool, Sahl began a nightclub act in the heyday of the Eisenhower Era, when Lawrence Welk and Jackie Gleason dominated Saturday night TV and *Reader's Digest* formed popular tastes in literature. He declaimed ironically on the headlines and on cultural

trends, unmasking with a sly irony the hypocrisies and illusions of official America and its dominant public culture, not as tragedy but as farce, a situation comedy in which we somehow all had a starring role, but lacked confidence in the lines we were given to speak. This wasn't always easy to bring off, because much that Sahl dealt with—for example, the nuclear balance of terror and the arms race—wasn't at all funny. It was the improbable blind alleys and self-defeating meandering of public policy and the ultimately unconvincing arguments that explained it that he parodied. In effect, he asked the audience to wake up and get serious; you might not understand that at the moment you were taking in what he said, but perhaps upon reflection as you left the night club where he did his act you said to yourself, "This is actually serious."

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Crucial here for the likes of Sahl and especially Bruce was the position of outsider, the classic position of Jews in Western societies. No matter how close they might come to the centers of power, as Israel explains, Jews feel themselves to exist at a distance from the dominant culture and its centers of authority, and thus may be singularly qualified to comment, albeit mostly among themselves, on both. A good deal of that outsider's posture is also an historically conditioned feeling of vulnerability that manifests itself, beyond irony, in distrust and

fear. Jews seem always to be waiting for the boot to come down on their faces. And why not? It often has. Typically for many Jews, when they are asked to reflect on the apparent philo-Semitism of a figure of great Christian rectitude, like Vice President Mike Pence, their response is a terse, “Just wait ...,” pregnant with foreboding.

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What have the Jews done with this deeply engrained anxiety? Israel seems quite correct in his claim that if Melville’s Ahab, with his bitter rage at what is morally offensive and cosmically disordered, may be seen as a representative figure revealing the haunted soul of American white Protestants, for the Jews the complementary imaginative construction is the Yiddish writer Sholom Aleichem’s Tavye the Milkman. Tavye is a figure now so familiar from the musical *Fiddler on the Roof* that he has become a staple of class musical productions in high schools in unlikely places such as Iowa and Alabama. That familiarity has come at the expense inevitably of decontextualizing Tavye and his world, a small town (Yiddish: *shtetl*) in turn of the last century Tsarist Russia, a place of brutal anti-Semitic oppression. Tavye has seven daughters and their marriage prospects are circumscribed by his poverty. But all Jewish life is tentative in the midst of the difficult negotiations in daily life with gentile neighbors, which ultimately culminate in Sholom Aleichem’s cycle of Tavye stories in the expulsion of these Jews from their homes.

Through all, Tavye offers sly and ironic commentary. He is a victim, a person not in control of his fate, to whom bad things happen, and he is somewhat of a wise fool. He realistically expects the worst, but he hopes, too, for the best, which reflects his understanding ultimately of the duality of human nature and a rational calculation of the odds that somehow, a great deal of evidence to the contrary, things may just work out for the best after all. He is humorous, but certainly not “Funny, Ha! Ha!” His comment on the much misunderstood Old Testament grounded view of the Jews as a divinely “chosen people,” destined to live a life apart and be divinely judged apart from others, would be funny, if it didn’t comment so aptly on the history of the Jews from one who has to suffer the fate of being a Jew in a place like Tsarist Russia. “Next time choose someone else!” Tavye says, addressing God. To Ahab’s avenging angel, Israel posits Tavye, the *schlemiel*, victim and fool, ironist and wise man.

How this deeply culturally and historically grounded humor might salve America’s wounds, Israel confronts in his telling analysis of the ways that Jewish comedy, as social critique, has worked in three recent, Jewish-inspired American cultural productions. The first is Lenny Bruce’s pioneering stand-up performances, in which Bruce himself, and his martyrdom at the hands of police eager to bust him for obscenity or blasphemy, became increasingly the substance of his humor. Bruce examined the irrationality of mid-century cultural standards, and laid bare the frailty of contemporary cultural authorities, religious and secular alike, through what is in retrospect is rather benign humor. (The last time I showed tapes of a particularly controversial, at the time, Bruce performance to a class of undergraduates in my course *American Dissenters*, they couldn’t figure out why Bruce presented a problem to anyone.)

Bruce was quite conscious of the role he had come to play. Whatever the circuitous path by which Bruce, the sometime hustler and general wiseass prior to his notoriety, had come to play the role of cultural pioneer, he knew what he was about. It's well to recall that he titled his 1965 autobiography, *How to Talk Dirty and Influence People*.

The second is Philip Roth's *Portnoy's Complaint*, the confused and often hilarious, again if not ultimately so serious, stand-up monologue in novel form driven by the sexual and cultural angst of a successful young Jewish professional trying to negotiate the gap between the limited but sustaining ethnic Jewish world into which he was born, and the world of seemingly unlimited possibility that American Jews began to dream of in the 1950s. Here, too, the serious point may be elusive in the midst of the manic, ribald energy of the narrative, but the narrative itself is framed as a therapeutic encounter between Alexander Portnoy and Dr. Spielvogel, his psychiatrist. That conversation culminates in the doctor's invitation to get serious, "So. Now vee may perhaps to begin. Yes?"

Finally, there is the familiar primetime sitcom, *All in the Family*, which ran for fully 205 episodes between 1971 and 1979—a record of longevity that marks the program as a veritable popular cultural institution. Readers might ask what *All in the Family* had to do with Jews. Memories of it may be fading, but it is generally known among those with even a passing acquaintance with recent popular culture history that the program centered around the iconic Archie Bunker, a middle-aged working-class white Protestant bigot, living in Queens. Bunker's freely expressed, and often more ridiculous and misinformed than obnoxious opinions, clashed regularly with those of almost everyone around him: his Polish-American, Roman Catholic son-in-law, Mike Stivic (who Bunker casually calls, "Meathead"),

a more or less left-wing, countercultural hippie who is generally unemployed and lives with and off Bunker; his African-American neighbors, the Jeffersons; his simple, sensible and good-hearted wife, Edith; Edith's outspoken feminist sister, Maude; the Jews with whom Bunker owns a neighborhood tavern; and his daughter, Gloria, who agrees with her husband and is as stubborn as her father. In his clashes with these and other characters, Bunker argues and gets wrong the Vietnam War, race and racism, affirmative action, homosexuality, feminism, religion, abortion, and every other source of intense political and cultural debate of the time.

Many people were hostile to the idea of featuring someone like Bunker in primetime, for fear that his views would be legitimated during TV's highly coveted, evening family hours. In reality, when not looking out of his depth in discussion of any question of importance, Bunker was less a bigot than the parody of a bigot, and too confused by the changing world around him to do any harm. Indeed the audience would come to see him as strangely loveable, if often badly in need of correction. In the artlessness with which he defended his positions and the comic confusions of his view of the world, he brought bigotry down to size. If you disagreed with him, you wanted to argue, not give him a bloody nose. You recognized him as a sort of American *schlemiel*. Maybe, you recognized something of yourself in him. Maybe something in you was also confused by the pace of change in the world around you, and by the accusations leveled by passionate advocates of tearing down what stood in the way of justice that you were in the way of progress. Under any circumstance, taking up big, difficult, and polarizing issues with humor softened the difficulties of confronting them and dealing with one another amidst that confrontation, and that is Israel's point.

Of course, the point of view here was left-wing or liberal. It's hardly surprising that William F. Buckley, Jr., the godfather of postwar American conservatism, objected to the frequently, comically illogical Bunker standing in as the representative of the movement which he had anchored in both Western philosophy and Christianity. Buckley didn't get it, of course: he would have influenced many more people with humor than with his highly refined ideas and tastes. Amidst bitter contentions about racial and class inequalities, he is remembered to have said that no society could be said to be truly undemocratic in which the Bach Brandenburg Concertos were available in mass produced, inexpensive phonograph records. Whatever standing Buckley had in the world of ideas, he was distinctly lacking in the common touch, and hence not unrelatedly in humor. Asking Buckley to consider humor would have been as profound a dead-end as asking him to accept the Rooseveltian welfare state. For all of the tasteless sitcoms that haunt the distinctly right-leaning FOX network, it is hard to imagine the American right coming up with a parody of the left, in which a conservative played the same ideologically deconstructive role, comically choreographed, that Archie's son-in-law Mike played in consistently getting the better of Archie. This is not to say there isn't plenty to parody on the left.

Israel would have no trouble explaining this, for it would bring him back to the salutary playfulness of the comedic, as it is found in the culture of the ever-left leaning Jews. What, might you ask, did Archie Bunker, the outer-borough reactionary, have to do with a Jewish style of comedy? How do we get, if you will, from Tavye to Archie? The culmination of Israel's book is his convincing analysis of why *All in the Family* worked for almost a decade, and how it had the power to generate such successful and often equally controversial spinoffs as *Maude*

(1972-1978) and *The Jeffersons* (1975-1985). At the center of *All in the Family* and its various sequels was Norman Lear. One of the most successful producers in the history of primetime TV sitcoms, Lear has been a longtime supporter of progressive advocacy and church-state separation. He founded People for the American Way in 1980 to counteract the influence of the Moral Majority, which had been founded the year before by the evangelical minister, Jerry Falwell, to combat secularism and the amorality that Falwell associated with liberal hegemony in culture and politics. A decorated veteran of the Air Force, Lear returned from World War II to a variety of dead-end sales jobs in the East and in California before, like Mel Brooks and Woody Allen, the 1950s found him writing jokes for TV performers. From there, he entered movie and TV production.

Apart from its domestic political vision, *All in the Family* had a complex genealogy. It was inspired by a British TV sitcom, *Till Death Do Us Part*, about a working class Tory involved in endless arguments with his son, a Socialist. In explaining the origins of *All in the Family*, Lear also gives formal credit to Lenny Bruce, who had died of a drug overdose in 1966 at the height of his legal troubles, for being a "prophet" of the possibilities lurking below the surface of comedy to deal with what enflamed public opinion and put people at one another's throats. Lear sought to put a different face, which turned out to be Bunker's, on the "white backlash" against the Civil Rights and Black Power movement and the antiwar protests that Richard Nixon had sought to mobilize in his successful 1968 and 1972 presidential campaigns. Lear's motive was less to change the world than to produce great television. But he was also aware, as he explained, that he was dealing with volatile materials. "I've always considered," Israel quotes Lear as saying, "that an audience

laughs hardest when they're concerned most."

Format and delivery of the message aside, Lear looked back into his own past. The characters were often lifted out of Lear's life. Archie, he explained, was not unlike his father, Hyman (Anglicized to the more acceptable *Herman*), the son of immigrant Jews, who was sent to prison for fraud when Norman was a boy. Edith resembled Jeanette, his Jewish mother, who had emigrated from Ukraine as a young girl. In arguments with his father, Lear recalls, the old man revealed a heightened sensitivity to the vulnerability of the Jews and in that connection a more or less desperate grasp of whiteness and respectability that led him to take on all manner of American biases. He was perhaps never more an (admittedly perverse) object of love than when he revealed this vulnerability in grasping at narrow-minded American prejudices about race, religion, and other ethnic groups—not unlike the way Others regarded Jews, of course. As Israel and others have seen it, packed into Archie, from all of these directions, was somehow the possibility of a kind of redemption for all of us.

So? As I was reading this book, rich in warm, humane purposes and democratic hopes and intelligent in advancing them, I was nonetheless haunted by a photograph taken at the disastrous, violent confrontation between aggressive white nationalists and peaceful antiracist demonstrators at Charlottesville, Virginia in 2017 that continues to seem a harbinger of the decline of democratic institutions and

the culture of liberal democracy itself. In the photo, off to the upper left, I recall an image, sticking out in a crowd of faces and bodies, that seems to symbolize these pessimistic forebodings: a large shirtless man, perhaps 250 pounds and prominently tattooed with Nazi symbols. The tattoos catch your eye, of course, but what really seizes the viewer's attention is the fierce expression on a face twisted by rage and hatred. Maybe there is something weirdly comic about the perversity of defacing your body with the symbols of mass murder, and probably getting stuck with them for the rest of your life, even if somehow you change your politics. That response might help bring this man and his ideological purposes down to size, and make him less menacing. In 1940, in *The Great Dictator*, Charlie Chaplin made Hitler and Mussolini objects of humor, though we need to recall that was before we fully understood the murderous legacies of both men. Removing menace from this image out of 2017, whether through comedy or anything other method, seems indeed to be a stretch. Yet it is not nearly as unlikely as convincing this twenty-first century Nazi to somehow understand that we're all in his life together. Constrained by a lack of moral let alone practical alternatives, we should perhaps learn to laugh at ourselves and laugh with others at being merely human, and then move on at peace to construct a just, humane future. Would he listen to this invitation to play? That may be the ultimate test of Israel's ideas. ♪