

A Better Mousetrap: Rube Goldberg and Jewish American Assimilation

Steve Gimbel,
Gettysburg College

Stephen Stern,
Gettysburg College

Olivia Handelman,
Gettysburg College

***Abstract:** Rube Goldberg's cartoons made him the first Jewish-American comedy star, but on the surface his works seem completely American and not at all Jewish. While the content of his most famous comic strip "The Inventions of Professor Lucifer Gorgonzola Butts" is reflective of the American ethos of innovation that was flourishing at the time, his religious roots are present in the form of the cartoons. There are strong structural similarities between these drawings and the European Jewish joke cycle concerning the wise men of Chelm that lampoon the byzantine Talmudic arguments of the rabbinate. In adopting this Jewish form of humor, but substituting the American civil religion of modernist innovative capitalism in the place of Talmudic interpretation as its focus, Goldberg's humor signals the interest of Jewish Americans to be both Jewish and fully American.*

Keywords: Rube Goldberg, Judaism, Assimilation, Jewish-American

Rube Goldberg is best remembered for his cartoons of comic inventions, multistage machines that integrate animate and inanimate objects in a clever, but convoluted fashion, designed to carry out a simple, everyday task in a complicated way. His work is central in the history of American cartooning, but when we place these comedic drawings in a fuller historical context, they stand as more than merely amusing illustrations. Rube Goldberg's works can be seen as a signal to the broader American culture in the period before the great wave of Jewish immigrants of the Jewish interest in and enthusiasm for assimilation through the use of what we term "Neo-Talmudic thought."

Goldberg's comics, especially his inventions, borrow from a Jewish comic tradition, jokes about the wise men of Chelm, a Polish town considered to be peopled by fools. The rabbis of Chelm are lampooned for engaging in Talmudic thought that serves to complicate the straightforward. Goldberg appropriated this Jewish form, but removed from the content those held in esteem within the Jewish community, the rabbinate with their commitment to that which is sacred to Jews, and replaced them with those who, and that which, held a similar position in American culture of the time, the innovative capitalists who were creating the comfort and advancement of modern American life. Rube Goldberg took the form of traditional Jewish humor and replaced the caricature of rabbi Akiva with a caricature of Thomas Edison. In doing so, he was demonstrating the Jewish commitment to American values in the period around World War I.

Talmudic Thought

Jews are called "The People of the Book," but since the ascent of Rabbinic Judaism in the first century BCE, one could use the plural, "People of the Books." The *Torah* emerges from the priestly period as the sacred text for Jews. But equally important is the *Talmud*, a later pharisaic book of rabbinic discussion and interpretation.

The most important part of the *Torah* for Jews are the 613 mitzvot, the commands that are the constitutive principles of Judaism. But where you need laws for a legal system, you also need judges to interpret them with respect to the intricacies of the complicated contexts of the real world. Where you need constitutive rules for a game, you also need referees to determine when and how the rules apply to the fast-moving and ever-changing action on the field of play. Analogously, the rabbis of the *Talmud* interpret the commands of the *Torah* for the unexpected morally complicated situations of real life. If the *Torah* is the rule book, the *Talmud* is the user's guide.

The difference, however, is that where a Supreme Court opinion or a referee's call settles the matter by specifying a privileged interpretation of the rule for a given context, Talmudic thought is inherently dialogical. God's wisdom is considered to be too big to fit into any single human interpretation. As such, we ought to seek and celebrate multiple, even contrasting or conflicting, interpretations because each illuminates a different aspect of the depth of the meaning of the text. We are not interested in determining which of the interpretations is *the* correct one; to the contrary, we are interested in milking the insight out of all the different readings.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Boyarin, Daniel. *A Travelling Homeland: The Babylonian Talmud as Diaspora*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015.
- Derrida, Jacques. *Of Grammatology*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998.
- Holtz, Barry. *Back to the Sources*. New York: Touchstone, 1984.
- Wittgenstein, Ludwig. *Philosophical Investigations*. New York: Macmillan, 1975.
- Wolfe, Maynard Frank. *Rube Goldberg: Inventions*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000.
- Ziv, Avner. *Personality and the Sense of Humor*. New York: Springer, 1984.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Steven Gimbel is Professor of Philosophy at Gettysburg College. His books include *Isn't that Clever: A Philosophy of Humor and Comedy*, *Einstein: His Space and Times*, and *Einstein's Jewish Science: Physics at the Politics of Science and Religion*.

Stephen Stern is an Associate Professor of Interdisciplinary Studies and the Chair of the Jewish Studies Program at Gettysburg College. He is author of *The Unbinding of Isaac: A Phenomenological Midrash of Genesis 22*.

Olivia Handelman is a student at Gettysburg College completing an independent major in Classics and Law and a minor in Jewish Studies.



Hebrew Matters

110 Hebrew Roots, The Roads
They Take, The Stories They Tell

By Dr. Joseph Lowin

**An exploration of the Hebrew language through a
cultural, historical, and philosophical lens**

"Nobody knows the Hebrew language the way Joseph Lowin does. Whether tracing the ethical root of an everyday phrase like "after you," or uncovering the deep-seated connections between Hebrew, Aramaic, and even English, Lowin is a master of Hebrew words, phrases and ideas. To read this book is to journey into history, literature, philosophy and politics. And besides all that, it is wonderful fun, whether you are fluent in Hebrew or just a beginner. So read, learn and talk the talk that Lowin makes so accessible."

—Francine Klagsburn

Author of Lioness: Golda Meir and the Nation of Israel

"Hebrew language is holy, its very letters sacred. In Joseph Lowin's hands, we see that it is also exuberant, full of rich treasures, fresh as well as ancient, funny as well as profound. This is a book for scholars of *leshon ha-kodesh*, for amateur linguists and for ordinary folk who simply like a good read."

—Blu Greenberg

Author of On Women and Judaism

From your columns emerges, subtly but powerfully, and without any preachment, the notion that Hebrew is quite the indispensable vehicle for knowing the amalgam of history, religion, culture, experience and wisdom that comprise Judaism."

—Howard Marblestone

Professor of Classical Languages, Lafayette College

"In this book I try to capture how the Hebrew language "matters" to us today. What I am interested in learning is how Hebrew makes its way through the roads and byways it takes and how the stories it tells through its three-letter roots travel to the various worlds that make up Jewish civilization through the ages. Almost every word spoken in the places where Hebrew has flourished resonates with the echoes of Jewish history, Jewish civilization, and the Jewish textual tradition. Readers of this book are invited to listen in to the stories of Hebrew told here in the hope that these echoes will resonate with them as well."

— An excerpt from an interview with the author

©2022 GCRR Press

1312 17th Street Suite 549 Denver, CO 80202 info@gcrr.org
720-706-GCRR

HEBREW MATTERS



110 HEBREW ROOTS
THE ROADS THEY TAKE
THE STORIES THEY TELL

JOSEPH LOWIN

Publisher: GCRR Press 2022

Pages: 245

DOI:10.33929/GCRRPress.2022.02

FOREIGN LANGUAGE STUDY / Hebrew

RELIGION / Biblical Reference /

Language Study

LANGUAGE ARTS & DISCIPLINES /

Linguistics / Historical & Comparative

Format: Paperback/Digital Wholesale:

gcrr.org/gcrr-press

