

# Holocaust Jokes on American and Israeli Situational Comedies: Signaling Positions of Memory Intimacy and Distance

Jeffrey Scott Demsky and Liat Steir-Livny

## Introduction

Current skits airing on popular American and Israeli sitcoms reveal that both societies have apparently reached the point where Woody Allen's witticism about humor being the combination of tragedy plus time now applies to the Holocaust. It is true that Jews under Nazism often relied on black humor as a coping mechanism for negotiating their captivity (Lipman 1993; Levin 2004; Ostrower 2014). After the war, survivors sometimes continued to find in levity a means for contemplating their Nazi-era experiences (Dagan and Dishon 2001). However, prisoners' use of humor to facilitate healing is significantly different from subsequent onlookers' appropriation of the impulse to fashion amusing television sitcoms. In this sense, American and Israeli sitcom writers reflect a larger creative razing of boundaries, taking place across multiple genres, pushing aside the expectation of solemn memorialization and steering the history into new commemorative spaces (Boswell 2012: 182–83).

We do not consider the question of whether or not this sort of joke work is amusing, or appropriate. Rather, we are studying its messaging, delivery, and impact on what has come to be known as Holocaust consciousness. Owing to the wide dissemination associated with some of these series—many are globally syndicated—it is a powerful, cross-cultural form of communication (Katayama 2009: 125). That an abundance of Holocaust-inspired jocularity now exists on American and Israeli television programming may not necessarily mean that the memory's "end" is nigh as some alert (for example, Rosenfeld 2013). Rather, the irreverent barbs might be better understood as directed at the dominant, inherited form of memorializing, and those figures in the United States and Israel judged to have stewarded the legacy in sometimes-questionable directions.

Admittedly, vast differences separate the American and Israeli experiences with this memorialization, including issues of national demography, geography, majority/minority relations, and dominant religion. Conspicuous distinctions also exist between

the kinds of humor being developed and broadcast in the two countries. If a strict comparative framework is impossible, however, there are some overarching themes that encourage us to conclude a dichotomous framework is both possible and needed. In both instances, the producers and consumers of these renderings tend to come from the so-called second, third and fourth generations' encounter with the Holocaust. A shared familiarity with devising cheeky Holocaust iterations via computer-mediated communications—for example, Photoshopping, GIFs, memes, and redubbed movie dialogue—is another important linkage joining the two discourses (see for example, Rosenfeld 2015). So, too, is the reality of having grown up in an age where intermittent outbreaks of mass murder and genocide regularly appear on global news reports, a turn that invariably mitigates the ways these viewers encounter Holocaust accounts.

Television's status as a guardian of the hegemony on one hand and as a presenter of certain subversive content on the other, becomes complex when sitcoms are concerned (Shifman 2008). On the one hand, situation comedy is generally perceived as a tool for representing superficial, reproduced stereotypes (Brook 2001). It repeats the predictable traits of sitcoms' protagonists perpetuates gendered, ethnic, and class-based social representations, and strengthens hegemonic groups' control over minority groups (Mastro and Tropp 2004: 120). Yet on the other hand, sitcoms are also able to offer a subversive look. The comic dimension may give room for criticism either by creating a carnivalesque situation—which enables a temporary release from inflexible hierarchies (Bakhtin 1984); by building antithetical frameworks of context between the possible and the unfeasible (Palmer 1988); generating conflict between different meanings (Boxman-Shabtai and Shifman 2014: 977), or by the exaggeration and vulgarization of stereotypes to the point where they are diminished or shattered (Lubin 2006).

While there are claims that Holocaust humor cheapens the Holocaust, now seven decades past the end of the Second World War, living in a “fake news” age, an obvious toxic atmosphere for Holocaust history, jokes may prove a useful way to help people form bridges to this memory, ensuring that it is remembered at all (Pinnock 2007: 516). Humor matters. Its words, images, and impacts cannot be undone (Wisse 2013). Like tragedies, comedy and satire have the ability to help people learn about serious topics, something Charlie Chaplin demonstrated in *The Great Dictator* (1940), although he later expressed ambivalence about his role. Alternatively, teasing Nazi/Holocaust memory may also have the exact opposite impact, as people might take from such ends the lesson that humanity is inexorably baneful, and laughing about it is all you can do (Desilet and Appel 2011: 343–49). This combustible foundation is the one upon which American and Israeli Holocaust sitcom humor rests. It is a risky business, but a flourishing one nevertheless.

## Holocaust humor in American sitcoms

In his groundbreaking study of American television and the Holocaust, Jeffrey Shandler demonstrated that television programs—more than theater, books, or motion pictures—promoted what later came to be known as Holocaust consciousness.

He argued that it was while watching TV, alongside family members and neighbors, that folks, mostly Christian Americans, first confronted the realities of the European Jewish destruction. This process played out in various ways. Factual broadcasts sourced from wartime newsreels provided viewers a foundational basis of knowledge about what had happened (Shandler 1999: 24–27). The documentaries also helped establish a contextual backdrop against which viewers could understand later events like the much-publicized Adolf Eichmann’s trial (1961). Perhaps unwittingly, the factual television accounts also spurred the rise of fictionalized renderings. Such episodes were unconventional, but effective, examples of culture conveying history. A 1963 *Twilight Zone* (1959–64, CBS) episode entitled “He’s Alive” is one such instance. Aired just six months after Eichmann’s execution, the show cast Dennis Hopper as an American Nazi named Pete Vollmer. In the episode, Vollmer is a rabble-rouser who spends his days spewing anti-Jewish bigotries. In line with the *Twilight Zone* genre, Adolf Hitler soon appears to Vollmer in the flesh. “You invoked my name, you took my ideas,” the Hitler figure bellowed, “Now, we are immortal!” During the episode’s closing monologue, the show’s Jewish-American creator and lead writer, Rod Serling, a Second World War veteran, explained that he wrote the episode to remind Americans that tolerating ethno-racial prejudices put the nation at risk of resuscitating Hitlerism in a domestic context (Shandler 1999: 140).

Additional Nazi/Holocaust “guest appearances” appear across the landscape of American television during the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s. *Holocaust* (1978) the miniseries that Elie Wiesel characterized as a “soap opera” is perhaps the best-remembered example, but disparate shows from *Hogan’s Heroes* to *All in the Family*, *Star Trek* to *Sledge Hammer* aired episodes that intersected with this memory. Scriptwriters occasionally poked fun at Nazis, an impulse visible in Mel Brook’s *The Producers* (1968), but humor-based representations of the Holocaust were infrequent. This is what makes the “comedic turn” that we are exploring important. With regard to the American Holocaust sitcom humor tradition that emerged during the 1990s, we observe two major themes. The first theme is the subtle use of satire to both acknowledge and tweak what, for most Americans, had become a received and external history. The second leitmotif involves the more direct use of mocking to deflate the normative expectations of piety that surrounds this remembrance. Viewed collectively, these impulses demonstrate Americans’ growing reliance upon humor to negotiate this inherited past.

In the popular American sitcom *Seinfeld* (1989–98, NBC), the “Raincoats” episode brazenly depicted Jerry and his Jewish girlfriend kissing throughout a screening of *Schindler’s List*. It aired around the same time that the US Holocaust Memorial Museum opened its doors, the period when American artist Art Spiegelman won a Pulitzer Prize for his Holocaust comic *Maus: A Survivor’s Tale*, and the same year that *Schindler’s List* (Steven Spielberg, 1993) received the Academy Award for Best Picture. The comedic riff signaled new a variation in Holocaust cultural discourse, namely having fun with the memory. Looking back some twenty odd years now, the scene also encapsulated a phenomenon we characterize as “intimacy and distance.” The young couple’s irreverence did not necessarily intend to spoof European Jewish suffering, promoting memory distance. It was just that Jerry’s parents were visiting from Florida, and the theater was the only space where they could find some privacy. Nevertheless, such goings-on might be interpreted as disrespectful. Jerry’s nemesis, Newman, who

observed the affections, reporting them in fine-grained detail to Mr. and Mrs. Seinfeld, faulted Jerry's dereliction to the memory. So, too, did Jerry's soon-to-be-ex girlfriend's father, who Newman also told. However, this sort of scenario can also be read to indicate closeness to the trauma. Representing the daughters and sons of the survivor generation, Jerry and his date already knew a great deal about the Holocaust before going to watch *Schindler's List*. In this sense, their heady embraces derived less from an intention to denigrate the remembrance than to perhaps point out its saturation in contemporary American discourse (Rider 2013: 43–47).

It is unknowable if the show's creative team recognized that their related "Soup Nazi" or "Mr. Pitt as Hitler" skits would inspire evermore comedic Holocaust repurposing on additional American sitcoms. But that is what happened, and continues to happen. In 2004, *Seinfeld's* co-creator, Larry David, a second-generation Jewish-American, returned to the muse in his *Curb Your Enthusiasm* series (HBO 2000-present). "The Survivor" episode mischievously used the device of a family dinner party to bring together an erstwhile CBS Television *Survivor* contestant, and former death camp prisoner. As the popular culture "survivor" regaled guests with harrowing stories of poisonous spiders, the Holocaust victim exploded. "That's a very interesting story" he said, "But I was in a concentration camp! You never even suffered one minute in your life compared to what I went through!" "Look," the reality television participant retorted, "I'm just saying we spent forty-two days trying to survive. We had very little rations, no snacks. I couldn't even work out when I was over there. They certainly didn't have a gym." Such biting jocularly pushed well past the earlier *Seinfeld* treatments. Jewish-American David, who like Seinfeld, has knowledge regarding the Holocaust and its mythical place among American Jewry, uses this theme in order to critique the young generation not possessing of the emotive and cognitive skills required to approach this seventy-five-year-old history. Absent this contextual backdrop, however, appropriating Holocaust suffering into contemporary environments often lends itself to trivialization and mis-remembering (Levi, 1989: 128). Especially these risks are viable among Americans born well after 1945, those not possessing of the emotive and cognitive skills required to approach this over seventy-year-old history. It is at this unlikely juncture where American sitcom writers—many from Jewish heritages with firm knowledge of Nazis' crimes—could play a role in drawing up skits that appear to deflate the Holocaust's importance.

## Holocaust humor on American sitcoms as a negotiation of the memory

Americans' knowing about the Holocaust is not the same as their upholding its memory. Nowhere is this murkiness more visible than on American sitcoms. *South Park* (Comedy Central, 1997-present) is the longest-running American sitcom modeling a slippery use of Holocaust memory. The animation series depicts the lives of four grade-schoolers, and their neighbors, living in a quiet Colorado town. One of the boys, Kyle Broflovski, is Jewish, likely an eponymous character for the show's co-creator, Matt Stone. Kyle struggles to negotiate his Jewish identity, a process complicated by the

cascade of harassment he receives from his bigoted classmate, Eric Cartman. Although just a fourth-grader, Cartman is a hardened racist and anti-Semite. Throughout the show's run writers have used his character to negotiate Nazism/Holocaust history in comedic ways. During the show's first season, its "Pinkeye" episode (1997) featured Cartman outfitted in an Adolf Hitler Halloween costume. The youngster wore the garb because he reasoned the get up would garner him a top-prize in his school's annual contest. Throughout the first half of the school day, no authority figure commented on Cartman's attire. This changed, however, after the school's principal saw the boys in the cafeteria. She ordered Cartman to her office, sat him before a movie screen, and made him watch a film that began by announcing, "Adolf Hitler was a very bad man."

Unfortunately, the images Cartman witnessed for example, Hitler set atop a rostrum reviewing troop columns only enamored him further. After delivering several ebullient "Sieg Heil" salutes to the screen, Cartman slips into a daydream sequence. He is now the Führer, holding a riding crop and screaming German-sounding gibberish. This was not the only episode in which *South Park's* writers used their sitcom to point out the dissonance between normative expectations for Holocaust memory piety, and a churning American irreverence (Des Pres 1991: 277). The 2004 "Passion of the Jew" episode finds Cartman again attired as Adolf Hitler. Assembling a public march in support of Mel Gibson's *Passion of the Christ*, Cartman leads a goose-stepping mob. He exhorted his followers with German-language commands like "Es ist Zeit für sauberung!" (It is time for clean-up) and "Wir müssen die Juden ausrotten!" (We must exterminate the Jews). Such cartoonish dialogue about the six million victims is unavoidably provocative. It also points out how American sitcom humor which aims to criticize, broadcast globally, can inadvertently sanction more undesirable forms of mockery in Europe and elsewhere (Demsky 2016: 9–11).

*South Park*, however, also sometimes uses humor to bolster Holocaust truth functions. This is the case in their Anne Frank parody, aired in the 2008 "Major Boobage" episode. Ostensibly, the story's plot involves children huffing cat urine. To discourage them, authorities decided to round up and deport the town's cats. Nothing overt about this narrative suggested a looming Holocaust joke. However, when authorities arrived at Eric Cartman's home, searching for cats, a doorway to genocide humor opened. The anti-Semitic Cartman now channels Meip Gies, frustrating the officers' search. After it was safe, as plangent, minor-mode background music crescendos, Cartman ascends a staircase to his attic. He is hiding a cat. Before closing the attic's latch, he slips the animal a book and says, "Here, write a diary." Although debasing Anne Frank's experiences to that of a stray cat, *South Park* writers also conjured up a factual bridge to memory. The real-life Anne often began her diary entries by writing "Dear Kitty." It is possible the show's creative team selected the episode's feline/attic angle as a tangential way of again positioning her memory in western consciousness (Sackett 2002: 243).

"Death Camp of Tolerance" aired in 2002, is another instance where *South Park* writers simultaneously had fun with, but also helped promote, Holocaust memory. Parts of the show satirize *Schindler's List*, as the boys are imprisoned in a Nazi-like work camp which is supposed to encourage tolerance towards minorities. As with the earlier *Seinfeld* episode, the jabbing appears to target Holocaust memorialization, rather than its victims. Indeed, at the time it aired, the topic of how Americans commemorated this history was publicly churning, following Norman Finkelstein's indictment of the so-called Holocaust industry (Finkelstein 2000: 3–4).

The *South Park* team points this episode squarely into that debate, satirizing things like the cropping up of “Museums of Tolerance,” whether in Los Angeles, Washington DC, or Jerusalem, that fund their operations by promoting victimization discourses. That Cartman, of all people, thoroughly enjoyed his visit to the museum, since he encountered lots of familiar expressions of his own bigotries, is something writers challenge their audiences to contemplate, asking ultimately what positive effect things like blockbuster films and grand exhibitions have on the members of third and fourth generation post-Holocaust observers.

### Holocaust humor on American sitcoms as a mockery of the memory

Across cultures, a familiar idiom teaches people about the differences between “laughing with” and “laughing at” people. This is particularly true with regard to Holocaust sitcom humor. Shows like the animation series *The Simpsons* (Fox, 1989-present), perhaps reflecting its patrician roots, have trodden lightly on this history. They mock Adolf Hitler, rather than his deeds and as such, representing a preliminary example of what in the years to follow (especially in the last decade) flourished globally as the “Hitler parodies” phenomenon (Rosenfeld 2013). Take for example “Simpson and Delilah,” a second season episode (1990). As the family watched a televised quiz show, the host read a question calling for North Dakota’s capital city. At the exact moment that his sisters-in-law correctly state, “Bismarck,” Homer blurts out “Hitler!” Such comedy identifies Homer’s ignorance, which satirically also skewers wider American society. The device also manages to “get a laugh” on Adolf Hitler without really saying anything at all. That forty-five years after Hitler’s death Homer’s blunder had humor value is significant. It indicates that American viewers still remembered what Hitlerism denoted, but appreciated that such horrors were long past. It is a balance of intimacy and distance. In 1995, the show’s “Bart vs. Australia” episode again came back to this device, as young Simpson called a random phone in South America, hoping to verify the Coriolis effect in toilet bowls. A man drawn to resemble Hitler, presumably in Argentina and standing before a Mercedes Benz with an “Adolf 1” license plate, answered Bart’s call. Again, so absurd as to be completely unmoored from reality, the sitcom’s comedic repositioning of Hitler’s memory aimed at evoking viewers’ humor rather than outrage, while referencing the historical truth that in the aftermath of the Second World War many former Nazi criminals found safe haven in South America.

Not all-American sitcoms, however, abide this template. Series like *Family Guy* (Fox, 1999-present), a long-running show airing directly after *The Simpsons*, have many Holocaust humor episodes in which the viewer might come to question who/what they are laughing at (Banjo 2011: 138). These dialogues represent evidence in which current American Holocaust sitcom humor has a sniping effect that pierces the empathic tradition. “Space Cadet” (2013) depicts Nazis forcing a row of prisoners into a smoke-stacked building that contains an implied gas chamber. “I guess it wouldn’t matter if I had a doctor’s note excusing me?” one of the men asks the Nazi guard.

Amused, the jailer smiles at the condemned and says, “Ahh . . . you, get in there!” The 2016 episode “Candy, Quahog, Marshmallow” also reaches toward this end. One scene was set inside a postwar movie studio. A German director declared, “Okay. Now that World War II is over we can get back to writing comedies!” He hands another man a list. “Get me these comedy writers.” Looking over the sheet, the second man shakes his head. “They won’t be available.” “What?!” “This is so crazy,” the director exclaimed, “Get me my agent!” “Sorry,” the assistant again replies, “He isn’t available either.” Dumbfounded, the director turns to a staffer, “What happened?” Met with a deep, empty stare, the German man soon confesses, “Oh, yeah. I remember.”

Other instances in which *Family Guy* punch lines poke at Holocaust violence include “Long John Peter” (Kristallnacht joke); “Mc Stroke” (Dachau joke); and “Cool Hand Peter” (dead Jews joke). Like with *Seinfeld* and *South Park*, *Family Guy* writers also parodied *Schindler’s List*. In “Family Guy,” (2009) the show’s writers re-imagine Amon Göth as Peter Griffin. He is drawn shirtless, cigarette dangling from his mouth, aiming a rifle out of his Quahog bedroom window. He aims and shoots at Mort Goldman, his Jewish neighbor and friend. “Fighting Irish” (2015) featuring Liam Neeson as a guest character, also takes a swipe at the film, closing the episode, “Oskar Schindler wasn’t real and neither was anything in that movie.” “Brian’s A Bad Father” (2014) satirized *Saving Private Ryan*, specifically the scene depicting the Nazi and Jewish-American soldier engaged in a hand-to-hand death struggle. Embedding a cut-away joke thanking the Mazda car company for sponsoring the film, scriptwriters had the Nazi utter the company’s “zoom-zoom” slogan as he stabbed his Jewish adversary.

Some people find this sort of creative intervention amusing. Understandably, others do not agree. We ultimately view these sorts of creative interventions as a way of dealing with postmemory, in line with the kinds of secondary witnessing about which Marianne Hirsch and others have written (Hirsch and Kacandes 2004: 22). Although noticeably askance from the accurate, lived experience, these off-kilter impressions are derived from the factual atrocities and still stoke some form of historical remembrance. Humorizing the Holocaust does not signal a rejection of prior memory, but rather is something that exists on its own terms, as another layer of memorialization (Landsberg 1997: 66–68).

## Part II: Holocaust humor in Israeli sitcoms

For many years, Israeli culture recoiled from dealing with the Holocaust from a humorous or satirical perspective. The perception was that a humorous approach to the Holocaust might threaten the sanctity of its memory or evoke feelings of disrespect toward the subject and hurt the survivors’ feelings. Official agents of Holocaust memory continue to make use of this approach, but since the 1990s, a new unofficial path of memory has begun taking shape in tandem with it. It is an alternative and subversive path that seeks to remember—albeit differently. Texts that combine the Holocaust with humor are a major aspect of this new memory (Steir-Livny 2017).

Although Holocaust satire appeared on Israeli television since the 1990s (Zandberg 2006; Steir-Livny 2016), Holocaust humor on Israeli sitcoms began appearing only two

decades later. In a society in which the Holocaust is such a fundamental experience, it seems that inserting Holocaust references in sitcoms was much tougher than addressing the subject in sporadic skits.

While analyzing Holocaust humor in Israeli sitcoms one can find four major topics that are being discussed and mocked: Holocaust as an integral part of contemporary life in Israel; constant victimization; official ceremonies' codes; and the ethnic conflict in Israel.

## Acting out the Holocaust in the Israeli present

"The Holocaust is tattooed on the Jewish-Israelis collective arm" claims poet Roni Somek (Steir-Livny 2014: 1). The Holocaust indeed was, and remains, a central trauma in Israel's national consciousness. The memory of the trauma does not fade over the years; on the contrary, Holocaust representations and the public discourse regarding the Holocaust have only grown stronger in recent decades (Steir-Livny 2009). There is massive use of Holocaust rhetoric by politicians, journalists and educators who, many times, frame the Holocaust as a current, ongoing local trauma rather than an event that ended decades ago in another place (Meyers, Neiger and Zandberg 2014).

The way the Jewish-Israelis "live" the Holocaust in the present is criticized and humorized in caricatures, social media, films and also on Israeli TV in satire shows since the 1990s (Steir-Livny 2017). Israeli sitcoms reflect the way the collective memory agents had succeeded in turning the Holocaust into the main perspective through which the Jewish-Israelis, even the young generations, perceive the world. Sometimes they do not mention the Holocaust, but the trauma is present in visual, vocal or symbolic aspects.

For example, Adir Miller and Ran Sarig, the creators of the sitcom *Traffic Light [Ramzor]* (Keshet Broadcasting, Channel 2, 2008–14), integrated Holocaust black humor associations into many episodes and emphasized through them how Holocaust recollection is an integral part of the young generations' lives. The series revolves around the lives of three, thirty-something-year-old men in contemporary Israel. Amir, one of the sitcom's main characters, uses the "Jewish Partisans' anthem" as the personal ringtone for when his mother calls, alerting him that it is her on the phone. In one episode, when one of the men takes his wife to a Bed & Breakfast, they learn that the place has strict rules, including a prohibition on mobile phones. They decide to escape, in a scene reminiscent of escape scenes from concentration camps in Holocaust films (with barbed wire, dogs barking in the background and watchtowers). In another episode, while Amir and his wife Tali explore the genetic tests they need to undergo before getting pregnant, they find out that the Israeli obsession with reproduction and the desire to create the perfect baby has infiltrated Israeli society from the Aryan ideology: there is a company named *Highgene*, where you can choose all the ingredients to form the perfect child as well as abort embryos which are suspected of minor "faults," such as having red or curly hair.

In his next sitcom, *Miller's Junction [Tzomet Miller]* (Keshet Broadcasting, Channel 2, 2016) Miller plays an extreme comic version of himself: a well-known stand-up

comedian who tries to stay popular. In the first episode of the first season (“Asi is a Friend”), his agent persuades him to visit a children’s hospital in order to entertain the sick children. Miller is hesitant. In these events, he explains, the sick children always bring along their families, and all the healthy children bypass the sick and run to have their picture taken with him. Eventually, because lack of time, the sick children do not manage to do the same. His agent promises this will not be a problem. Indeed, when they arrive at the hospital, his agent mounts a chair and starts screaming, “All those who are healthy go to the right. All those who are sick, go to the left!” Miller looks at him shocked. “Why are you so alarmed?” asks the agent, “it is [meaning the clear association] just in your head!” and he continues with the “selection.” But, of course, it is not just in Miller’s head. It is “in the head” of the Israeli spectators who can immediately understand the association.

The above examples demonstrate, through black humor and self-deprecating humor, that all Jewish-Israelis recognize Holocaust commemoration as integral part to their identity. They satirize it, but this satire reflects an unshakable intimacy. Public opinion polling notes this commitment. For example, in a survey conducted among high-school students, 76 percent said that the Holocaust influences their perspectives. According to another survey, 98.1 percent of Jewish-Israeli adults claim that Holocaust memory is a guiding principle in their lives (Friesem 2017).

### Reenactments of victimization

Within official national commemorations of the Holocaust, the perception that Jewish-Israelis still face imminent danger reappears many times. Alon Gan refers to it as a “victimization discourse” and “victimized awareness” that shapes the Israeli identity (Gan 2014: 28–35). Bar-Tal claims that this constant victimization creates a feeling of constant siege, fear, and anxiety (Bar-Tal 2007). Holocaust satire works against this impulse, attempting to both reveal and ridicule this mechanism in order to break it (Steir-Livny 2017). An episode in the sitcom *Naor’s Friends* [*Hahaverim shel naor*] (Israeli Channel 10, 2006–11) models and simultaneously subverts these efforts.

The sitcom deals with the lives of unmarried thirty-something friends living in Tel-Aviv. In the third seasons’ ending episode (“Profile right side”), two parallel stories take form. In one, Naor’s friends Netzach and Deddy travel to South America in order to locate and kill “the last Nazi.” In the second story, Naor travels with his mother and his friends Daniel and Dafi to London. In the first story, after the friends locate the last Nazi, they learn that he is actually a huge fan of Israel. Moreover, he actively atones for his past sins. Whenever an Israeli arrives at his estate, he hosts him like royalty, provides him with “the most luxurious food and most beautiful prostitutes.” In addition, since he is in the coffee business, each year he sends free coffee to Israeli cafes throughout the country. The friends decide to forgive him and enjoy his generous hospitality. In the second story, Naor and his mother come across two actors in London who offer them small paid parts in their *The Merchant of Venice* production. Since Naor’s mother wallet was stolen, and they need the money, they accept the offer. However, when they arrive at the production, and go on stage, they find out that this is a neo-Nazi theater.

Since they were cast as the play's Jews, the anti-Semitic crowd boos and shouts Nazi slogans toward them. Naturally, they flee as fast as they can.

These two stories symbolize creative and humorous ways in which the young generation reconstructs the official perceptions of siege and eternal victimization. Even though the last Nazi is already old, and claims contrition, the episode reminds viewers that the danger has not disappeared. There is a new generation of neo-Nazis who want to destroy the Jewish-Israelis, and thus the passage of time doesn't change the fact that the Jewish-Israelis are forever hated and eternal victims of anti-Semites and their prejudices.

## Reconstructions of Holocaust Martyrs' and Heroes' Remembrance Day official ceremonies

Official ceremonies marking Holocaust Martyrs' and Heroes' Remembrance Day (*Yom hazikaron lashoa velagvura*) are held in Israel every year on the Jewish date of 23 Nissan, and take place on the eve before Holocaust Martyrs' and Heroes' Remembrance Day, as well as on the following morning and evening. The canonical ceremonies marking this day have a similar narrative structure: they usually combine prayers for the dead, sad songs and spoken texts and passages of melancholic poetry or prose, accompanied by text highlighting the Zionist "lesson" of the Holocaust. Alternative ceremonies are an integral part of the changes that have developed in Israeli culture regarding Holocaust commemoration since the 1990s, and are expanding every year voicing other narratives and suggesting various ways to gather and remember (Steir-Livny 2017).

Israeli sitcoms that deal with the remembrance ceremonies criticize the young generations as captured in the official codes and unable to break away from them. For example, the sitcom *Mother's Day* [*Yom haem*] (Dana Eden Productions, Channel 2 Keshet 2012, 2016) follows the life of the Shahinu family and especially Ella, the mother. Episode six of the first season ("Fire brothers, fire") deals with Holocaust Martyrs' and Heroes' Remembrance Day. On this day, Israeli TV stops the regular programs and broadcasts only Holocaust related films and programs. Ella finds out that her best friend Micky has a fetish for this day ("They are going to screen the mini-series Auschwitz by the BBC. So much fun!"). Micky awaits this day with anticipation ("I'm crazy about this depression. I wait for it all year long"). Ella finds herself fighting for her daughter's role in the school's ceremony. She insists that Tamara, her daughter, will recite the song "Fire, My Brother, Fire," a well-known Holocaust poem. Ella claims that this is the song her mother, the Holocaust survivor sang to her "as a lullaby," and Tamara, the third-generation Holocaust survivor must recite it. Ella pushes toward it as if it is the most important thing her daughter can do in the education system. She sends emails to the teacher, the headmaster and the parent/teacher association, brings Tamara's grandmother, the Holocaust survivor to school in order to influence the teacher, interfere in her daughters' audition and doesn't rest until the teacher caves and assign Tamara and another pupil together to recite the poem. At home, Ella rehearses with Tamara the part as if it is the lead in a Broadway show. Alas Tamara doesn't have a white shirt to wear to the ceremony. Ella remembers she received a gift—a white

T-shirt from the exterminator she invited in order to solve the cockroach problem in their apartment. She gives it to Tamara and they both do not notice that the T-shirt has a slogan in the back. On stage, during the reciting of the poem, as Tamara turns her back to the crowd, everyone can see the slogan on her back: “The best in extermination.” Of course, the teacher kicks Tamara off from the stage.

A similar example can be found in the sitcom *My Successful Sisters* [Ha'ahayot hamuzlahot sheli] (Guri Alfi, Yes, 2016), which follows the life of three unsuccessful sisters in their twenties and thirties.

Episode nine of the first season deals with Holocaust Martyrs' and Heroes' Remembrance Day ceremonies. The episode reveals, like in *Mother's Day*, that Mor, the youngest sister, who is a soldier in the Israeli Defense Forces, has a Holocaust fetish. She is depressed because all the soldiers traveled to a “fun day” at *Yad Vashem* (“I’m crazy about Yad vaShem,” she tells her sister). She stays in the army base and spends the day watching Holocaust films on TV with a friend (“I’m crazy about these films”). Orit, the oldest sister is a high-school teacher. She has new subversive ideas that crash in the face of reality and the conservative values of a typical Israeli high school. Orit is asking to change the frozen official structure of the high school ceremony “which is based on victimization,” deal with universal issues like racism, explain to the high-school students the universal danger (“in each and every one of us there is a little Nazi”). The headmaster rejects her ideas and wants to continue with the known routine, but Orit insists. The headmaster finally agrees to let her arrange the ceremony. But as she approaches the high-school students with her new ideas (“I want each and every one of you to go on stage and describe an episode in your life in which you were Nazis”), she finds out that they feel no need to change anything. “We don’t have a little Nazi inside of us,” they declare, and reject any attempts to change the ceremony (“we love the format”).

The episodes clearly criticize the educational system that turned Holocaust commemoration into a series of clichés, and the high-school students’ inability to detach themselves from the official codes of commemoration. These scenes critique the way the young generations find themselves locked in the same mental “prison,” as they revive the codes of Holocaust commemoration in the Israeli present, but simultaneously these scenes ratify these codes and strengthen them. The person who appears ridiculous is Orit, the teacher who decorates herself with “advanced notions” that nobody is interested in.

## Holocaust humor and the ethnic conflict

The encounter of the Jewish-Israeli Ashkenazim (Jews who immigrated from Western countries) and the Mizrahim (Jews who immigrated from Asia and North Africa), was complex and hurtful. Its echoes are still present in contemporary Israel. There is enthusiastic debate regarding this encounter, representing two major schools of thought: the first claims that the Mizrahim were deliberately pushed to the margins of society and that the divisions between Mizrahim and Ashkenazim are still preserved in present-day Israel (for example, Chetrit 2004). The second claims that many of the clashes were due to the chaotic period of establishing a state, the ethnic conflict had vastly changed over the years, and the Mizrahim’s situation had changed for the better (for example, Smooha 2007).

Until recent decades, the Holocaust in North Africa was rarely discussed. The Holocaust was perceived and commemorated solely as an Ashkenazi trauma and the persecutions, labor camps and the North African Jews who were sent to concentration camps in Poland were marginalized. Thus, Mizrahim were marginalized not only in the general Israeli culture, but also in the realm of Holocaust commemoration (Yablonka 2008, Kozlovsky Golan, 2017).

The perception that Israeli Ashkenazim have made the Holocaust a dominant component of Israeli identity, thus excluding the Mizrahim—not only from the particular memory of the Holocaust but also from “Israeliness” in general—constantly reappears throughout the recent decades in the serious works of researchers, artists, authors and public figures (Yablonka 2008: 268–89; Steir-Livny 2014: 113–48) and also in YouTube skits, satire shows and in Israeli sitcoms and comic daily dramas.

For example, in the sitcom *Naor's Friends*, one episode revolved around the question, “Can a Mizrahi man have a relationship with an Ashkenazi woman whose grandparents are Holocaust survivors?” Naor Zion, a Mizrahi male, the maker and star of the sitcom, meets in this episode an Ashkenazi young woman whose grandparents are Holocaust survivors, and falls for her. According to the episode, being the granddaughter of Holocaust survivors strengthens the stereotype about women of Polish origin (In Israeli humor, women of Polish origin are often considered as cold, nagging, and bossy). Her name is Ya'ara and her surname is Warsaw. Naor says that her name makes him want to “act like a partisan and start an uprising.” His friends warn him that dating her will “start well and end like the Holocaust,” but he refuses to listen. As time goes by, he learns that his friends were right. The sequence depicting their relationship includes scenes in which she is cold to him, makes him clean the house while she doesn't lift a finger, makes comments about every little thing, and bosses him around. Throughout the sequence, the Hymn of the Partisans plays in the background. While having dinner at her house, he meets her mother, a second-generation Holocaust survivor, who mocks him and treats him in a racist manner. Naor decides to end the relationship, and returns to his Mizrahi friends.

Through this comic episode, harsh and radical perspectives on an Ashkenazi-Mizrahi relationship in Israel are presented, and the incapability of holding a dialogue is demonstrated. In the binary division between the two worlds, the Holocaust is an Ashkenazi marker of identity. This episode seems like a kind of a late revenge on the Ashkenazim who did not let the Mizrahim enter the realm of Holocaust commemoration: a Mizrahi satirist ridicules their world while using Holocaust associations.

Another “revenge” in the system that rejected the Mizrahim can be found in *Zaguri Empire* (Herzliya Studios, HOT Telecommunication Systems, 2014-2015). Writer Maor Zaguri, a Mizrahi Jew, created a daily comedy-drama series which is, to a large extent, autobiographical, revolving around the life of a family of Jewish-Moroccan descent living in Beersheba: Albert “Beber,” the patriarch, a grouchy man trying to earn a living, Vivienne, his wife, trying to keep the family intact, and their eight children—Aviel, Avishag, Eviatar, Miriam (Miri), Avi, Avishay, Abir and Avigail—who are constantly getting into trouble.

The second season's first episode, focuses on Holocaust Martyrs' and Heroes' Remembrance Day. In this day a siren is sounded at a set time, during which Israelis are expected to stand at attention and in silence to respect the dead. When the siren begins, Beber refuses to stand up. In the furious comic dialogue that

develops between him and his son Aviel, who asks the family to respect the siren and stand at attention, Beber, who feels like he has been marginalized by the Ashkenazi hegemony, states that once people start acknowledging the adversities experienced by Jews of North African descent in Israel, he will show his respect to the trauma of the European-descended Jews. Aviel, yells at him, trying to convince him to stand up, but Beber refuses. The placing of Aviel, who accepts the official codes of Holocaust commemoration and Beber who resists them because he feels that he and his culture were marginalized by the Ashkenazi hegemony, reflects the complex relationship of Mizrahim with the commemoration on a range that moves from total acceptance to detachment and rejection.

A discussion of the so-called detachment of Mizrahim from the trauma combined with their appeal to the Holocaust is to be found in the daily comedy-crime drama *The Arbitrator* [*Haborer*] (HOT Telecommunication Systems, 2007-2014) which tells the story of Israeli criminals, most of whom are of Mizrahi descent. In the fifth episode of the third season, one of the most preposterous and exaggerated characters on the show, Naomi "Spoon," the daughter of a Mizrahi crime family who has repented and found God, decides to travel to Poland. She scolds her husband for not wanting to join her with a series of absurd sentences like "Shame on you. Have a bit of culture! We're going to fall on the graves of the righteous . . ." In her opinion, if there had been some Moroccans in the Holocaust, things would have looked different: "wow wow wow, the things I would have done to them had I been in the Holocaust, all the Kapos would have been sent to the hospital by the end of the first day! Like someone could wake me up at four in the morning and tell me to go take a shower in the snow???? . . . I'd tell them: pal, all Holocausts come to an end and you're on my list!!!"

In these sitcoms humor is used in order to vent frustration, and as a social cohesion tool for a marginalized group. They seemingly display the Mizrahim's lack of understanding of the Holocaust as well as a lack of sensitivity toward it, showing another manifestation of the hegemonic argument regarding the detachment of the Mizrahim from the Holocaust. Alternatively, the skits can be interpreted as a form of resistance, undermining these perceptions: the fact that Mizrahi comedians repeatedly engage in the issue suggests that they are actually profoundly interested in it rather than detached from it.

In addition to and along with claims according to which exaggeration of the vulgarization of stereotypes shatters them (Lubin 2006) the Mizrahi characters in the skits are an inclusive collection of overstated negative stereotypes, and therefore these skits break the stereotypes rather than confirm them. They speak against common concepts in society regarding Mizrahim and their emotional detachment from the Holocaust in order to rebel against these concepts, make them absurd and shatter them.

## Conclusion

Comparisons between Israeli and American sitcoms demonstrate that even though in both countries Holocaust black humor represents positions of distance and intimacy to the history, there are differences in the themes and perceptions of these sitcoms. It seems that

American sitcoms are more focused on breaking what Tim Cole (1999) calls “The myth of the Holocaust.” The shows’ creators and fans grew up in a society in which Holocaust became a major part of the American and Jewish-American collective identities.

In the United States, comedy writers are enabling laughter where, until these shows cropped up, Americans received only pathos-ridden glimpses of this history. While some shows see in the Holocaust a backdrop against which to critique wider American values, most treat the subject with black humor aimed at both remembering and moving on. Of course, such representations can be problematic because the domestic American television audience is overwhelmingly non-Jewish, lacking natural bridges to this memory. Animation sitcoms viewers specifically may also be more youthful, absent any serious understanding of the loss, and could come to normalize as factual the comic misrepresentations they witness.

Israeli Holocaust humor in sitcoms is different for several reasons: first, the context: the use of the Hebrew language turns it to an inner dialogue between Israelis. The Israeli Arabs, who also know Hebrew, are also subjected to the Israeli educational system, thus mostly have the serious historical knowledge regarding the atrocities. The encounter with Holocaust humor is not their first and only knowledge about the topic. Second, Holocaust humor in these sitcoms contains notably more social aspects than the American sitcoms. The creators are not busy just breaking the myth (a process which began in Israeli culture almost two decades before the sitcoms began to address it) but use it in order to critique Holocaust commemoration in Israel and expose its problems: acting out the trauma, constant victimization, national ceremonial codes and the marginalization of Mizrahim. Yet, the polysemic reading of these sitcoms revile that alongside their critique on Holocaust commemoration they can be read as ratifying these elements, by representing them in a popular genre as a natural and integral part of Holocaust awareness in Israel.

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