

Chapter 6

Holocaust Humor in Israel as a Political Tool of the Left-Wing



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Abstract As part of the narrative in the last few decades that seeks to reevaluate how the collective memory of the Holocaust is conveyed to the Israeli public, left-wing scholars and intellectuals have claimed that Holocaust memory was and is politically manipulated by the right-wing to intensify a siege mentality, present Israel as an eternal victim, and elicit constant fear and paranoia to justify violent policies against the Palestinians in the occupied territories, and block opportunities for a peace treaty. Based on the literature in the fields of Holocaust commemoration, political agendas in Israel, and studies on humor, satire, and parody, this chapter traces how since the 1990s, Israeli Holocaust humor, satire, and parody have been a part of the left-wing struggle against the right-wing that has governed Israel (with a few exceptions) since 1977. The analysis shows how speeches and declarations by right-wingers who use the Holocaust to characterize threats to the State of Israel prompt the left-wing to produce Holocaust humor, satire, and parodies that castigate these attitudes and beliefs as false and manipulative.

6.1 Introduction

The Holocaust was and remains a major trauma in Israel's national consciousness. The memory of the trauma has not faded over the years. Surveys consistently indicate that since the end of WWII and across generations, most Jewish-Israelis have viewed the Holocaust as a defining event. Studies show that Israeli media, education, and culture frame the Holocaust as a current, ongoing local trauma rather than an event that ended decades ago in another place (Bar-Tal, 2007; Meyers et al., 2014; Steir-Livny, 2014).

A siege mentality is defined as a state of mind or behavior in which an individual or group perceives an external threat and feels emotionally and psychologically

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isolated, defensive, and fearful. It often results in an “us vs. them” mentality and an aggressive or paranoid response toward perceived threats, whether real or imagined (Ben-Shaul, 1997, 2006). The Holocaust, as a pivotal memory in Israeli life, impacts how the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is perceived and represented in Israeli culture. The decades-long, Jewish-Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the threat of annihilation, and the continuing terrorist attacks and intifadas, have created an atmosphere of constant vigilance and anxiety that is shaped by the trauma of the Holocaust in the Israeli collective memory.

From the late 1940s until the late 1970s, direct parallels between Arabs and Nazis were a key feature of Israeli culture. Israel’s wars against Arab nations were seen as a way to prevent a second Holocaust, and Arab leaders were depicted as Nazi successors. Demonizing the Arabs and forging links between the past and the present helped consolidate the ranks in Israel and created immediate empathy for Zionism in the Western world. The implication was that just as the Allied forces had fought the Nazis in the past, today it was their duty to subjugate the Arabs (Bar-Tal, 2007; Evron, 2011; Steir-Livny, 2009). Politicians and public figures from both the right and the left used the Holocaust to account for crises in present-day Israel, thus strengthening the siege mentality of a hunted, unwanted people, constantly intimidated by Arab states, continually on the verge of another extermination, that must defend itself from its enemies or be destroyed (Zertal, 1993).

Ever since the right-wing has controlled successive governments in Israel, left-wingers have gradually abandoned and condemned the victimization-siege scenario. This evolution is directly linked to local political and social changes. The decade spanning the late 1960s to the late 1970s was a period of crisis for the left-wing Labor movement that governed Israel since its founding. The 1967 war that initiated the ongoing moral and legal debate about the occupied territories, the *Yom Kippur War* (1973) and the commission of inquiry that followed it, the illegal dollar account held by Leah Rabin (the wife of then Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin) that was discovered in Switzerland, were all emblematic of the fall of the moderate left. The rise to power of the right-wing Likud movement in 1977 constituted the first time the left had been ejected from hubs of political power. In conjunction with the growing endorsement of right-wing attitudes, new militant groups emerged from the nationalist religious right.

From 1977 onward, the chasm between the right and left wings deepened. The right-wing continued to recycle the idea that Arabs are the equivalent of Nazis (Steir-Livny, 2014). As part of a left-wing narrative since 1977 that sought to reevaluate how the collective memory of the Holocaust is conveyed to the Israeli public, left-wing scholars and intellectuals have claimed that Holocaust memory was and is politically manipulated by the right-wing to present Israel as an eternal victim. Ophir (2001) argued that Holocaust memory in Israel underwent a process of “sanctification.” Avraham Burg (2007) referred to this evolution as “the religion of trauma,” and in Gan’s (2014) view, it created a “victimization discourse” with “victimized awareness” shaping the Israeli identity. In the left-wing view, this victimization elicits constant fear and paranoia that is mustered to justify violent policies against the

Palestinians in the occupied territories, as well as efforts to block opportunities for a peace treaty.

Based on research in the fields of Holocaust commemoration, political agendas in Israel, as well as studies of humor, satire, and parody, this chapter shows how since the 1990s, Israeli Holocaust humor, satire, and parody have been an integral part of the left-wing struggle against what they perceive as a siege mentality orchestrated by the right-wing. The analysis shows how speeches and declarations by right-wingers who use the Holocaust to characterize threats to the State of Israel prompt left-wingers to produce Holocaust humor, satire, and parodies that castigate these attitudes and beliefs as false and manipulative. Whereas the right-wing tries to generate more of a chasm between Jewish Israelis and Palestinians, Arabs, and Muslims, left-wingers use satire to protest and reveal these tactics. The analysis below illustrates the ways in which Holocaust humor targets right-wingers in general but also specific politicians. It also shows that even though the left-wing uses humor, satire, and parody to criticize the politicization of the Holocaust by the right wing, sometimes left-wingers do the same and tap into Holocaust humor, satire, and parody to advance their own political and social agenda.

6.1.1 Holocaust Humor and Black Humor as a Left-Wing Political Weapon

For many years, Holocaust humor, satire, and parody were considered borderline blasphemy in Israeli culture. Official agents of Holocaust memory still adhere to this doctrine. However, as of the 1990s, a new unofficial and subversive trajectory of memory began taking shape with texts that treated the Holocaust with humor, satire, and parody. The emergence of Holocaust humor is part of a broader pattern of changes since the 1980s in Holocaust awareness in Israel in numerous cultural fields (Pinchevski & Brand, 2007; Pinchevski & Liebes, 2010; Yablonka, 2011), which have been examined extensively in research (Ne'eman Arad, 2003; Ofer, 2013; Porat, 2011). Despite the growing acceptance of Holocaust humor, it remains controversial and continues to spark anger and debate (Rosenfeld, 2013, 2015; Steir-Livny, 2014, 2017). The left-wing has utilized Holocaust-related satire since the 1990s to counter the right wing's siege mentality. Satire, in particular, is used to slam the right-wing's attempts to exploit the Holocaust in the present to instill constant fear and anxiety that will permanently block dialogue between Jews and Palestinians.

Freud considered humor to be a key defense mechanism. He believed that when people use humor in situations that elicit fear and anxiety, they can acquire a new perspective that helps ease negative emotions. People can deal with difficult situations through humor and reduce emotional suffering and grief (Freud, 1990). More recent studies have argued that humor can alleviate stress, enable people to cope with negative feelings and challenging situations, mitigate suffering, temporarily dissipate anxiety, and gain some sense of power and control in situations of helplessness. This

can often take the form of black and self-deprecating humor (Ziv, 1996; Cramer, 2000; Ostrower, 2009, 63–104; Berger & Berger, 2011). Black (or alternatively sick or gallows) humor is deliberately used to cope with challenging situations where the harshness of reality cannot be changed. However, the attitude toward this reality can be inflected (Ziv, 1996).

Holocaust humor is used by the left to help cope with its political inferiority, with the dominance of right-wing siege narratives in Israel that are fueled with Holocaust memory. Left-wing satire works against victimization, protests against the amalgamation of the past with the present, and dismantles fear. In this sense, Holocaust humor in Israel also enables people to vent their frustration as well as serving as a mechanism for social cohesion (Ziv, 1996). Holocaust humor, satire, and parody challenge the way Israeli society lives the trauma in the present by deconstructing the fear factor. Paradoxically and probably unwittingly, it also simultaneously strengthens the dominance of trauma in the present by integrating it even more into everyday life and popular culture. Although the fear factor is much less frightening it becomes more salient through humor i.e., this contradictory process involves elimination and assimilation at the same time. The vignettes below illustrate this dual phenomenon.

6.2 Prime Minister Benyamin Netanyahu and Holocaust-Related Satire

TV Holocaust-related satire aims at a range of right-wing figures. However, the most vilified politician is Binyamin (“Bibi”) Netanyahu, who has served longer than any other prime minister in Israel. Netanyahu constantly uses the Holocaust when discussing the Jewish-Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the Jewish-Israeli-Arab conflict, and the Jewish-Israeli-Muslim conflict. In his fifteen years at the helm, he has frequently equated Arabs with Nazis, Palestinians with Nazis, and the nuclear threats of Iran with Hitler’s goal of exterminating the Jewish people. Netanyahu has repeatedly argued that a nuclear Iran would happily commit a second Holocaust. Left-wing Israelis express their outrage at these analogies and ridicule his attempts to conjure up atavistic fears.

For example, during the 2012 Purim holiday, Netanyahu held a series of meetings with U.S. President Barack Obama to discuss Iran’s nuclear threat and whether Iran should be preemptively attacked. Netanyahu found it appropriate to give Obama *The Book of Esther* [*Megilat Esther*],¹ that relates how the ancient Persian vizier Haman set out to exterminate the Jews and how his plans were ultimately foiled. In his speech to Obama, Netanyahu also produced an historical document dating from the Second World War in which Jewish-American representatives pleaded with the American government to bomb Auschwitz. Netanyahu hinted that in a similar situation the Jews would handle matters themselves and not wait for an American green light.

¹ *Megilat Esther*—one of the five scrolls in the Writings [*Ketuvim*] section of the Jewish *Tanakh* (the Hebrew Bible). The Megillah forms the core of the Jewish festival of *Purim*.

The skit “Remembrance Day for Shushan and Heroism” [*Yom ha’zi’karon la’shushan ve’la’gvuran*] on the satire show *It’s a Wonderful Country* (*Eretz Nehederet*; Keshet Productions, Channel 2-Keshet, 2003–2023) was aired on Purim 2012. The skit satirized the political links between the Holocaust, ancient Persia, and modern-day Iran. It depicted employees at a nuclear reactor in Iran, marking “Remembrance Day for Shushan² and Heroism Day,” thus renaming the ceremonial hallmarks of Israel’s Holocaust and Heroism Remembrance Day. In Israel’s first decades, survivors were sometimes criticized for having gone to their death in the Holocaust “like sheep to the slaughter.” In the skit, the master of ceremonies says that the downtrodden Persians went like “sheep to the slaughter” under Ahasuerus, the ancient Persian ruler. The phrase “and these are the names of the fallen,” intoned during observances of Holocaust and Heroism Remembrance Day in Israel, is used in the skit to eulogize Vizier Haman’s murdered sons.³ The two-minute siren that is sounded throughout Israel on Holocaust and Heroism Remembrance Day is replaced by shaking a rattle.⁴ The skit also depicts a well-known emotional reaction in Israel when people struggle to stifle their laughter during the two-minute memorial siren rather than stand silently at attention. Here, an Iranian reactor employee cannot stop laughing during the ceremony.

On Holocaust Remembrance Day in Israel, the regular TV schedule is canceled and replaced by programs dealing solely with the Holocaust and its memory. Dirges are played throughout the day on Israeli radio. In the skit, we learn that the TV program schedule in Iran has also been changed, and the radio plays songs from “good old Iran.” The Iranian nuclear reactor employees slander the Israeli Zionists who stuck to their usual schedules that day as “Purim-deniers” (vs. “Holocaust deniers”). The role-switching in the skit ridicules Netanyahu’s attempts to represent the Israelis as eternal victims. By deconstructing the behavioral patterns of Holocaust Remembrance Day, the writers showed how easy it is to manipulate memory.

Left-wing satire also criticized Netanyahu’s political use of the Holocaust in his speech to the World Zionist Congress in Jerusalem on October 20, 2015, in which he stated that Hitler did not want to murder the Jews but only expel them and that it was the Arab Mufti, Haj Amin El-Husseini, who advised him to murder the Jews. The subtext was clear: at a troubled time in Israel (October–November 2015), sometimes called “The third Intifada,” Netanyahu claimed that all Arabs—from the past to the present—were Nazis. This subtextual comparison turned Jewish–Israelis into eternal victims, trapped in a repetitive Holocaust by the Nazis and the Palestinians combined.

Israeli right-wingers took quick advantage of his speech to anchor their claim that Palestinian terror is not related to the Jewish settlements in the West Bank but, in fact, existed long before the 1967 war. Right-wing public figures claimed that historically, the Arabs in *Eretz Yisrael* (the Land of Israel) wanted to obliterate the Zionist entity

² *Shushan* was the capital city of ancient Persia.

³ The King’s advisor *Haman* plotted to kill the Jews but, in the end, after Queen Esther interceded with Ahasuerus, he and his sons were executed instead.

⁴ A rattle or noisemaker is used during readings of the *Book of Esther* on Purim, every time the name of *Haman* appears in the text.

and the Jews in Palestine, and the fact that Israel still controls the West Bank and that there are Jewish settlements in the West Bank is not and was never the reason for Arab terror.

Left-wingers responded through serious commentary but also with humor. Many made it clear that Netanyahu had committed a historical mistake, reminding their audiences that the Mufti, a Nazi sympathizer, did not represent all the Arabs in Eretz Israel. Thus, the speech was nothing more than another example of attempts by the Israeli right-wing to fuel hatred and racism, strengthen its siege mentality, and undermine opportunities for dialogue. Netanyahu's speech was criticized and dismantled through satire and parody. Left-wingers released memes titled "The Mufti made me do it" on the internet, mocking his statement on Israeli social media.

An analysis of "The Mufti made me do it" memes suggest they can be divided into several main groups. The first is political memetic photos. Meme-based political discourse often begins with a single memetic photo that relates to political actors and controversies. The memetic responses to these photos expose their use as inauthentic, flawed, and manipulated (Shifman, 2013). The famous picture of the Mufti meeting Hitler is known and genuine and was not disputed. Left-wingers added to the photo Netanyahu's image as though he had been there to listen to the conversation or added ridiculous subtitles explaining how a fairly naïve Hitler does not want to hurt the Jews. However, the Mufti persuades him to do so. For example, in one, Hitler wants to punish the Jews by denying them ice cream, but the Mufti replies, "No. Kill them."

The second group is comprised of memes drawing on pop culture to create a comic effect to discuss politics. Numerous memes depicted figures from popular culture on TV shows, sitcoms etc., blaming Haj Amin El Hussein for their misfortunes. For example, in a famous episode of the sitcom *Friends*, Ross and Rachel decide to separate for a while and Ross kisses someone else. This episode caused turmoil amongst *Friends* fans, and other episodes discussed this kiss at length. The caption under a picture of Ross and Rachel in the meme says that Ross did not want to kiss her; the Mufti made him do it. In another meme, under a picture of Gargamel, the villain in *The Smurfs*, the caption says that he actually liked the little blue creatures, but one day the Mufti convinced him otherwise. A caption under a picture of Jerry Seinfeld says that numerous Israelis wanted to go to Seinfeld's gala performance in Israel, but the Mufti bought all the tickets. The caption to a picture of Biff Tannen, the villain in the film *Back to the Future* (directed by Robert Zemeckis in 1985), explains that the Mufti is the vicious power that turned innocent Biff into the bad guy. In yet others, the Mufti's head is placed on iconic pop culture heroes, suggesting that he was the cause of their tragedies. For example, the Mufti's head was positioned on one of the Beatles, thus "explaining" who really caused their breakup.

The third group comprises videos based on the "Hitler rants" YouTube parodies that began appearing in August 2006. A Spanish web surfer took a scene from the film *Downfall*, showing Hitler yelling at his staff as the end of WWII approaches—but added subtitles in Spanish to make it seem that Hitler is upbraiding Microsoft's flight simulator. An English-speaking surfer uploaded the English subtitles version, thus making the joke accessible to the rest of the flight simulator fans on YouTube. Since then, hundreds of parodies have been produced in English, Spanish,

Chinese, Japanese, and many other languages (Ben-Ari, 2020) that engage with politics, economy, sports, technology, gaming, culture and everyday trivialities, topical events, and trivial news or gossip.

Hitler rants parodies started appearing in Hebrew in 2009 and have become hugely popular. In Israel, they are used to protest political issues, Israeli wars, military service, religious coercion, etc. In one video, Hitler is presented as a Judeophile who wants to help “the poor Jews” but is driven to killer behavior by the evil Mufti. In the second one, he gets angry because Netanyahu took the credit away from him for killing the Jews.

Netanyahu, who as mentioned, uses Holocaust memory numerous times in his rhetoric, sometimes criticizes other politicians who use Holocaust associations. One of the ways left-wingers use to respond to this is satire. For example, in May 2016, Deputy Chief of Staff Yair Golan gave a speech on Holocaust and Heroism Remembrance Day in which he said that Jewish-Israelis must look reflexively at Jewish-Israeli society and acknowledge its tendencies toward racism and violence: “What is frightening me in the memory of the Holocaust is to recognize disheartening processes that happened in Europe and especially in Germany then, and finding evidence of them here in 2016.” His speech caused turmoil and was criticized by Netanyahu and others, who stated that Golan had “cheapened the Holocaust” (Efraim & Azulay, 2016).

Left-wingers turned against the fact that the prime minister who uses the Holocaust so often is seemingly appalled when a left-wing politician uses Holocaust equivalencies. Satirist Asaf Harel, for example, in his late-night *Asaf Harel* (Channel 10, 2015–2016), created a skit called “Mr. Holocaust.” This skit was a take-off on Charles Roger Hargreaves’ famous children’s book series, *Mr. Men*. In the skit, Harel is holding a book that looks like it is from the series, but instead of Mr. Happy, Mr. Tickle, or any of the other childish protagonists, Harel reads from a book entitled Mr. Holocaust. The protagonist resembles Hargreaves’ images (a monochromatic round image of a head with a small body) but is still identifiable as a depiction of Netanyahu with purple hair. Harel reads the story as though he is talking to children:

Mr. Holocaust lived in a big house with a dog and many servants [...] From morning till night, he kept comparing, frightening, and warning: “it might come back. This is the reason you should vote for me.”

On the following pages, Netanyahu has a yellow star coming out of his mouth, which looks like the yellow badge Jews were forced to wear on their clothes. Harel continues:

And as Mr. Holocaust repeated these messages, he got reelected again and again. [...] One evening he met Mr. Security, who stood on stage, compared and warned and even dared to alert. Mr. Holocaust became so upset: ‘the Holocaust is mine! You have no right!! If somebody else talks about the Holocaust, it is cheapening!’

The camera focuses on Yair Golan’s cartoon image in the book, looking sad and lying in bed, while through the window violence rages. Harel ends: “Mr. Security returned to his home sad and upset and thought that from now on he would

not compare the Holocaust to socio-political phenomena in Israel. Moreover, since that day, everybody understood that only one man can warn, frighten, compare.” The camera shows Netanyahu’s image in the book embracing the yellow badge as though he owns it. The moral, as though taught to children, emphasizes the hypocrisy in Netanyahu’s statements against Golan but also alerts the public to Netanyahu’s constant use of the Holocaust as a political tool and his interest in fanning constant fear and anxiety to get reelected.

6.3 Lampooning the Siege Mentality and the Holocaust-Based Victimization Narrative

In recent decades, right-wing circles have broadened the purview of groups that can be compared to Nazis, including people expressing left-wing positions and/or those willing to give up the occupied territories (or parts of them) for a peace treaty. Both are often represented as collaborators with the Arabs and as Nazis. For example, a photograph of Yitzhak Rabin, doctored so that he appears to be wearing a Gestapo uniform, was brandished at a right-wing demonstration in Jerusalem’s Zion Square in 1995. This photo became a major symbol of right-wing resistance to the Oslo Accords and ultimately played an integral part in the demonization process that ended with Rabin’s assassination in November 1995. When Jewish settlements in the (Gaza-area) *Gush Katif* bloc were evacuated in August 2005, IDF soldiers and the government that sent them (a right-wing government headed by Ariel Sharon) were sometimes called Nazis. Holocaust survivors living in *Gush Katif* were dispatched to the media to relate how the evacuation reminded them of their expulsion during the Second World War. The settlers called the evacuation “an expulsion,” wore orange stars (reminiscent of the Nazi-era yellow star), and frequently compared the disengagement to the expulsion of European Jews from their homes.

Left-wing satirists responded to these trends by ridiculing them. For example, during the Gush Katif evacuation the satirists Goldstein and Rephael (2005) wrote a short column in the *Ma’ariv* newspaper entitled “The same as in the Holocaust.” They ridiculed the political manipulation of those who were evacuated from *Gush Katif*:

The settlers are right. What’s happening now really resembles the Holocaust [...] In the Holocaust, it was hot. Now it’s also hot. Now it is exactly like in the Holocaust. In the Holocaust, there were flies. In Tel Aviv there are also flies. Tel Aviv is like the Holocaust [...] In the Holocaust, there were six million. In the lottery, there are also six million. The lottery is like the Holocaust [...]

Left-wing skits also criticized the victimization narrative of the right-wing in general. They turned against using Holocaust memory to gain favors in the world (by playing the victim card) or in Israel (intimidating voters by reminding them of the past and/or the problematic security situation).

For example, a skit in *It's a Wonderful Country* in 2004 was broadcast after a terror attack in a Sinai desert resort at a time when warnings about travel to the Sinai were issued in the Israeli media. In the skit, a travel agent counsels a couple worried about flying to dangerous places to consider flying to a concentration camp memorial site. When they arrive, the woman comments that she feels safe because of the watchtowers and the electrified fence: they have come to the Auschwitz-Birkenau Museum. This skit criticized the “industry of fear” in Israel (Feldman, 2008; Zertal, 2010), which feeds off recurrent warnings about the likelihood of terrorist attacks. It sparked numerous complaints to Israel’s Channel 2, the Television Broadcasting and Radio Authority, as well as to Yad Vashem. Keshet, the show’s production company, responded that there had been no intention to ridicule the Holocaust or use its memory as entertainment. Its spokesperson pointed out that *It's a Wonderful Country* is a satirical program whose skits are intended not solely to provoke laughter but also to warn and sometimes shock. He insisted that the skit was an allegory for the state of fear after the recent terror attack in Sinai and warnings regarding overseas travel, which added to the sense of siege (Holler, 2004).

Other satirical texts have expanded the debate on the misuse of Holocaust memory by addressing the instrumentalization of the Holocaust by public figures. A well-known skit by *The Chamber Quintet*, “Feldermaus at the Olympics” [*Feldermaus baolimpyada*], is set in Stuttgart, Germany, during the Olympic Games. Two Jewish-Israeli wheeler-dealers have managed to get onto the track. In broken English spiked with Hebrew and Yiddish, they demand that the official poised with his starting pistol let the Israeli runner start before the other athletes to reduce the “historic injustice” and “to reduce the humiliation.” The Israeli athlete, is short and scrawny; he has “legs like toothpicks.” Since the Israeli runner seems incapable of competing with the other participants (who are non-Jews) in terms of his physical strength, the wheeler-dealers use a stereotypic Jewish tactic of bargaining, which is accompanied by the quintessentially Israeli quality of *chutzpah* by tapping into the historical injustice of the Holocaust. They operate in the Jewish *schnorrer* (supplicant/beggar asking for handouts) tradition, combining their dealing with Israeli aggressiveness that soon devolves into curses and threats but ultimately manages to convince the starter to do their bidding.

Uzi Weil, a screenwriter for *The Chamber Quintet* noted that these manipulations of the Holocaust have become unpleasant and disproportional: “Somebody says ‘Holocaust,’ and everyone shuts up.” His view is that the Holocaust has become a mechanism for forcing people to stand at attention whenever the word is spoken mentally; he links this to the “Holocaust industry” that includes the de-rigueur school trips to Poland, the selling of right-wing politics in the guise of sensitivity to the Holocaust, etc. Weil says that using humor to highlight the Holocaust’s instrumentalization can counter hypocrisy and close the gap between people’s words and genuine emotions (Shifman, 2008). By confronting the pathos-ridden, political exploitation of the Holocaust, the satirists of the “Feldermaus at the Olympics” skit were holding up a mirror to emphasize, through humor, how ridiculous and wrong it is.

In another example, a skit entitled “This Terrible Place” [*Ha'makom ha'nora ha'zeh*] by *The Chamber Quintet* depicts an Israeli prime minister and his entourage

who are touring Poland with a crew of security guards and photographers and decide to use the site of mass murder as a photo opportunity. The prime minister asks to be photographed next to a specific tree “in this terrible place.” He is not sad or touched while the camera is not on; instead, he is all smiles, cracks jokes, and is entirely detached from the site’s significance. When the photographers start filming, he puts on a serious face. All he can do is repeat the mantra, “In this terrible place, in this horrible place, Jews were slaughtered.”

In broken English, he mumbles a series of clichés along the lines of “Look at this tree. This holy tree was watered with blood.” His movements are ludicrous: he pushes his wife aside and tries to find a place in the center frame above the heads of the still photographers crowding around him. As he is swept away by the metaphor of a tree symbolizing the Jewish people, its roots emblematic of the roots of the Jews whose ancestors were killed next to that tree, a security guard steps away and discovers that they are standing next to the wrong tree and that the right one is a few yards away. The prime minister’s embarrassed advisors ask the delegation and photographers to move to the right tree and start again; the politician’s wife smiles hypocritically. The politician resumes the same cliché-ridden and detached speech when they reach the right tree. With the very same pathos, he repeats his speech about what happened “in this terrible place.”

This skit did not refer to a specific prime minister. It did not name names or use mannerisms to signal a specific individual; instead, the pathetic prime minister in the skit is a synecdoche for politicians who have no real feeling about the trauma and use it as a political instrument. Ami Meir, the producer of *The Chamber Quintet*, maintained that skits citing the Holocaust are intended to show how it has been twisted to respond to a manipulative need to justify actions in the present. In his view, satire is aimed to make the audience realize that the exploitation of the Holocaust is pathetic (Blau, 2004). “When it comes to jokes, the question is always who is being laughed at,” says Uzi Weil. “Humor may be a weapon, so who are we actually fighting against? In my skits, I attack the contrast between the bland language we use and how we exploit the emotion surrounding the Holocaust for reasons far from being high-minded” (Blau, 2004).

6.4 Right-Wing Politicians as Nazis

The sections above showed how left-wingers use Holocaust-related humor, satire, and parody to protest right-wingers’ statements, policies, and culture of siege. However, left-wingers sometimes use the Holocaust to criticize right-wing politicians and public figures’ nationalistic and racist stances.

The examples illustrate how they tackle specific politicians based on his/her statements. In the second season of their TV satire show, *This is our Country [Zu Arzenu]* (Channel 2; Reshet, 2001), satirists Sahi Goldstein and Dror Rephael created a skit criticizing the right-wing’s attempts to use the Holocaust to impart nationalistic ideas to Israelis. In the skit, Likud minister Limor Livnat gives Raphael a lesson in Zionism

which quickly turns into a lesson in racist nationalism, while acknowledging her with a semblance of a Nazi salute.

In 2006, Knesset (Israeli Parliament) member Avigdor Lieberman suggested exchanging territory with the Palestinian Authority and transferring the Arab citizens of Israel to the Palestinian territory and then compared members of *Yesh Gvul* (a human-rights anti-occupation movement) to Kapos in the Nazi extermination camps. He became the focus of a controversial *It's a Wonderful Country* skit in December 2006. Each time Lieberman's character appeared in the skit, he was greeted with "Heil Lieberman!" and a right-arm salute.

In March 2010, right-wing Knesset member Yaakov Katz circulated a memorandum calling for African asylum seekers who had entered Israel through Egypt to be relocated to a 'distant city' that they would build from scratch through "workfare." Paying homage to the opening sequence of *Inglorious Basterds* (directed by Quentin Tarantino in 2009), an *It's a Wonderful Country* skit (March 2010) addressed the theme of the right-wing's persecution of refugees and illegal migrant workers. It showed Katz, depicted by the actor Tal Friedman, as the Nazi officer, Col. Hans Landa, who hunted down Jews in occupied France. In the skit, Katz is shown going from house to house, evicting asylum seekers and foreign workers. Several of Friedman's lines also repeated memorable quotations from the film.

In May 2012, during a demonstration in South Tel Aviv protesting authorizations to allow African refugees to live, work and stay in Israel, right-wingers attacked African bystanders, shop windows were shattered, and goods were stolen. As part of the left-wing counter protest which extended to the right-wing's attitude toward the refugees from Africa in general, left-wingers posted numerous comparisons to Kristallnacht and caricatures comparing the protestors and their supporters to Nazis on social media. For example, Miri Regev (at the time a Knesset Member), who attended the demonstration, referred to the African refugees and foreign workers as a "cancer in our body." Caricaturist and illustrator Mysh Rozanov published a caricature entitled Kristallnacht, in which Regev approaches a group of Ku Klux Klan members who are saying, "Thanks for coming to complete our minyan, Miri'leh." The Facebook group *Entrecotes from Holy Cows* [*Entrecote mi'parot kdoshot*] uploaded a photograph of a protester wearing a T-shirt with the words "Death to the Sudanese" glued next to a picture of Hitler talking on the phone, giving the illusion that the protester was calling him. They both seem happy with the conversation, and the caption, "No, you hang up," illustrates their loving relationship.

In December 2013, following the refusal of African asylum seekers to be sent to the *Holot* detention facility, a formal document was published in which the asylum seekers were not mentioned by name but given numbers. Many respondents compared the numbers to those tattooed by the Nazis on the arms of Jewish prisoners in Auschwitz. A photograph uploaded to the Facebook page of *It's a Wonderful Country* presented former Minister of Interior Gideon Sa'ar getting ready to tattoo a number on the arm of an anonymous refugee. The photograph caused turmoil and received mixed responses ranging from horrified objections to support. The image was removed from the program's Facebook page a day later.

In October 2022, the most right-wing government in Israel's existence was elected. Among the new politicians given prominent ministries in the new government was Itamar Ben-Gvir, a radical, highly controversial figure who heads the *Jewish Force* [*Otzma Yehudit*] party. For years he supported *Kach*, a racist movement whose key platform is the transfer of Arab Israelis, while displaying a photograph in his living room of Baruch Goldstein, a settler and *Kach* supporter who massacred 29 Palestinians in the Cave of the Patriarchs in Hebron in February 1994. For years Ben Gvir publicly said he adored him. Since the elections and Ben-Gvir's ministerial appointment, left-wingers have frequently compared him to Nazi leaders on social media. For example, in January 2023, Zehava Galon, the former head of the left-wing party *Meretz*, whose party failed to pass the electoral threshold in the last elections, tweeted a picture of Ben Gvir raising his hand in what resembles a Nazi salute with the caption "Heil Kahane" (Meiri, 2023). She later deleted the tweet.

The satirical show *It's a Wonderful Country* has addressed his racist, semi-Nazi traits in many shows. The most obvious comparison to a Nazi appeared in a skit entitled "*It's the Ben-Gvir Time*," perhaps one of the show's most daring skits since it made an obvious comparison between Ben-Gvir and Hitler. In the skit, Netanyahu introduces his "winning card" to escape his pending corruption trial, and then Ben Gvir appears. Ben-Gvir sings and dances as he explains his agenda, accompanied by a chorus wearing T-shirts with the *Kach* logo.

The effect is a grotesque combination of racist violence set to a jaunty song and dance routine. He sings about burning Arab villages and tells Netanyahu that Baruch Goldstein deserves to have his own official day of mourning, that the Jew who deliberately set a fire that incinerated an Arab family should have a pool installed in his cell, and that Yigal Amir, who assassinated left-wing prime minister Yitzhak Rabin, should rapidly be pardoned and released from jail where he is currently serving a life sentence. He promises to transfer all the Arabs, left-wingers, and judges from Israel (as the chorus sings, "the train is leaving" with its clear association to the death convoys). He promises to flatten the Al-Aqsa Mosque and return the LGBTQ community "to the closet." The Netanyahu character explains that Ben-Gvir "has become moderate, no longer extreme and delusional." However, the satire goes much deeper.

The comparison is blunter for those who recognize the tune since it is a satirical homage to "Springtime for Hitler and Germany" from the film *The Producers* (directed and produced by Mel Brooks in 1968), a song and dance routine where the Hitler character describes all the good he will do for Germany. In the film, the audience loves it, and it becomes a tremendous hit to the dismay of the producer characters hoping to claim bankruptcy by producing a flop. In Israel's reality, *It's a Wonderful Country* clarifies that the voters got what they deserved: an imitation of Hitler in the Israeli government.

6.5 Conclusion

Left-wing satirical use of the Holocaust tries to fight what left-wingers perceive as right-wing siege mentality by ridiculing three themes: Prime Minister Netanyahu and his constant use of Holocaust jargon, right-wing politicians' racist stances, and the domestic and international manipulation of Holocaust memory for political purposes. Alongside, this chapter has shown that left-wingers use Holocaust-related associations many times when they want to strengthen their agenda—for example, by creating comparisons between right-wing politicians and Nazis.

There is ample evidence that humor can enable individuals to feel that they are part of a larger group. Humor increases group cohesion and relieves stress within the group. It boosts the group's morale and strengthens the bonds between its members, thus strengthening consensus and minimizing the distance between its members. Humor also creates a common language that emphasizes the group's uniqueness. Aggressive humor mocking other groups emphasizes the superiority of the group using it (Ziv, 1996). The left-wing's political and social Holocaust satire and parody give the defeated left-wing a sense of power. It is used not only to vent frustration but also to create social cohesion and as a political tool to protest against right-wing narratives, and what left-wingers see as distorted connections between the Israeli-Palestinian-Arab conflict, and the manipulation of Holocaust memory for political profit.

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