

# THE JEWISH JOKE

**DEVORAH BAUM** is the author of *On Marriage* (Hamish Hamilton, 2023) and *Feeling Jewish (a Book for Just About Anyone)* (Yale, 2017), and co-director of the documentary feature films *The New Man* (2016) and *Husband* (2022). She is Associate Professor in English Literature at the University of Southampton.

ALSO BY DEVORAH BAUM

*Feeling Jewish (a Book for Just About Anyone)*

*On Marriage*

# THE JEWISH JOKE

An essay with examples  
(less essay, more examples)

DEVORAH BAUM

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For Josh, Manny and Isaiah

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# Introduction

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## HOW DO YOU TELL THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN A SHLEMIEL AND A SHLIMAZEL?

The Jewish joke is as old as Abraham. Like the Jews themselves, it has wandered over the world, learned various languages, worked with a range of different materials, and performed in front of some pretty hostile crowds. That it's been able, for the most part, to adapt and survive in ever-new pastures and among ever-new company is no mean feat. Jokes don't tend to travel all that well. And a lot of things that once seemed funny no longer are. Yet Jewish jokes, or a fair few of them, have had astonishing staying power. The popularity of a recent TV show, *Old Jews Telling Jokes*, plays up to this: the jokes and the jokers may be old, the show suggests, but they've still 'got it'. But

*why* have they still got it? Is there no last laugh to be had? How old, really, can a joke get?

‘There’s an old joke,’ Woody Allen’s character Alvy says in the opening monologue of *Annie Hall* (1977):

Uh, two elderly women are at a Catskills mountain resort, and one of ’em says, ‘Boy, the food at this place is really terrible.’ The other one says, ‘Yeah, I know, and such ... small portions.’ Well, that’s essentially how I feel about life. Full of loneliness and misery and suffering and unhappiness, and it’s all over much too quickly.

But what exactly *is* the old joke here? Is it the still-good punchline about ‘such small portions’? Or is it the way of telling the joke so hesitantly that its punchline gets overwhelmed by the joker’s neurosis? Are we laughing along with this comedian, or are we laughing at him? Are we laughing at the funny ha ha or at the funny peculiar? Or could it be something sadder we’re finding funny? Might we be laughing, for instance, at how seriously the joke gets taken by a joker who has no sooner uttered it than he adds a commentary detailing an existential view of the world – one with a distinctly melancholic undertone?

‘The-the other important joke for me,’ Alvy falters on:

... is one that’s, uh, usually attributed to Groucho Marx, but I think it appears originally in Freud’s wit and its relation to the unconscious.\* And it goes like this – I’m paraphrasing: Uh ... ‘I would never wanna belong to any club that would have someone like me for a member.’ That’s the key joke of my adult life in terms of my relationships with women. Tsch, you know, lately the strangest things have been going through my mind, ’cause I turned forty, tsch, and I guess I’m going through a life crisis or something, I don’t know. I, uh ... and I’m not worried about ageing. I’m not one o’ those characters, you know. Although I’m balding slightly on top, that’s about the worst you can say about me. I, uh, I think I’m gonna get better as I get older, you know? I think I’m gonna be the-the balding virile type, you know, as opposed to say the, uh, distinguished grey, for instance, you know? ’Less I’m neither o’ those two. Unless I’m one o’ those guys with saliva dribbling out of his mouth who wanders into a cafeteria with a shopping bag, screaming about socialism.

\* Sigmund Freud’s *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* (1905) is a sober study of the psychoanalysis of jokes and other uses of humour. Most of the jokes Freud offers by way of example are Jewish jokes.

That's some shtick: digressive, interpretative, remonstrative. And it's got a long memory too, treating an 'important joke' as if it were a piece of scripture to be traced back, first to its earlier comic source (Groucho), and then to an even earlier scholarly source (Freud – although I haven't spotted it there). But who on earth wants to hear shtick like that? Doesn't everyone know that jokes are best left at their punchlines? Nobody wants their jokes *explained*, do they? ... Unless explaining the joke is part of the joke – or part of the *Jewish* joke?

Alvy, above, makes no mention of Jewishness. Still, it's hard not to detect it in, for instance, the joke about belonging to clubs. For to get why this joker tells this joke in this particular way, by placing it within its Jewish heritage – Freud and (Groucho) Marx – you surely need an ironic sense of Jews as quintessentially members of a club to which they only really belong to the extent that they resist their membership. It's no accident, for example, that Alvy's life crisis has ensued because he can't make it work with a Jewish woman *or* with a shiksa (non-Jewish woman). Although if the shtick feels Jewish, then so too does the comedian himself, whose bespectacled face looms large and centre screen, eyes direct to camera, as if this were a joke on the cinema-going

audience, who find themselves addressed by a less than obviously cinematic figure busily assuring them that he is a man in his prime, now and for ever the 'balding virile type'. Ha!

Of course, in 1977 Woody Allen was indeed a man in his prime, and he was taking the little respected art of comedy and turning it into something smart, serious and sublime. This he did with the comedian's gift for great timing. Just when the traditional frameworks and religious institutions of Jewish life were losing appeal for an upcoming generation determined to throw off the shackles of the old and substitute the new liberal order in all its lustre and complexity, Allen showed audiences that he knew and understood the critical value of time-keeping:

I'm very proud of my gold pocket watch. My grandfather, on his deathbed, sold me this watch.\*

You look so beautiful I can hardly keep my eyes on the meter.\*\*

More than any other time in history, mankind faces a crossroads. One path leads to despair and utter

\* *Stand Up Comic: 1964–1968*.

\*\* *Manhattan* (1979).

hopelessness. The other, to total extinction. Let us pray we have the wisdom to choose correctly.\*

He showed, in other words, that he had his finger on the pulse of not only the present moment but the historical one. Because it isn't *really* the gold watch or ticking meter that tells the value of time for the comedian. It's a feel for the audience's narrative expectations and the ability to confound these with a sudden reversal or change of direction: what's known in the gag trade as a switcheroo. So where we're expecting a gift we get a sale, where we're expecting romance we get realism, where we're expecting a positive we get a second negative. To wit, the comedian is the person who reveals this to us, reveals that things can change when you least expect them to.

And the times they *do* keep on changing. Thus, in the words of the young American comedian Lena Dunham:

Over time, my belief in many things has wavered: marriage, the afterlife, Woody Allen.\*\*

\* *New York Times*, 'My Speech to the Graduates' (1979).

\*\* *Not That Kind of Girl: A Young Woman Tells You What She's 'Learned'* (2014).

Dunham's dismay at the clay feet of her comedy hero is palpable. Yet in saying so she also offers us a great line – a line reminiscent of Woody Allen, whose comic cadence it resembles while reminding us of Allen's main preoccupations: marriage, the afterlife, himself. So could this mean that – irony of ironies! – Allen *does* have an afterlife? Could all that Woodyish comedy – the sexual angst, the existential angst, the navel-gazing – have a young, hipster, *female* future?

When things reach crisis point, as they often do in Jewish history, it is Jewish custom to return to traditional sources for inspiration. According to the foundational text of Jewish mysticism, the Zohar, the biggest joke in the Hebrew Bible is the one when God tells Abraham to sacrifice his 'only son' Isaac. Isaac, whose name in Hebrew means 'laughter' on account of his mother Sarah's laughter upon learning at the age of ninety that she was about to become a parent for the first time – funny! – wasn't actually Abraham's 'only son'. He also had a son called Ishmael. Yet three times in the biblical story God insists that Isaac is the 'only one' to be sacrificed. Then, at the last moment, an angel stays Abraham's hand and recommends he sacrifices a ram in Isaac's place. So, a classic switcheroo. And boy oh boy, Abraham really fell for that one. The God of the Jews is clearly a prankster



of the highest order. He's the God who laughs hard when, as the old joke goes, you tell Him your plans.

The darkly funny writer Franz Kafka detected in the same story a sort of blueprint for Jewish comedy. Once again, the joke is on Abraham, who now appears as less of a 'knight of faith' – as in the (also darkly funny) Protestant philosopher Søren Kierkegaard's sobriquet for him\* – and more of a schlemiel. As Kafka tells it:

It is as if, at the end of the year, when the best student was solemnly about to receive a prize, the worst student rose in the expectant stillness and came forward from his dirty desk in the last row because he had made a mistake of hearing, and the whole class burst out laughing. And perhaps he had made no mistake at all, his name really was called, it having been the teacher's intention to make the rewarding of the best student at the same time a punishment for the worst one.\*\*

\* Though in claiming that one arrives at Abrahamic faith 'by virtue of the absurd', Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling* (1843) clearly sees some humour in the escapade too.

\*\* This can be found in Kafka's *Parables and Paradoxes in German and English* (Schocken Books, 1961).

Kafka's Abe has been singled out not for praise but for derision. He's the total shlemiel who, as he proudly walks to the front of the class to accept his 'prize', doesn't yet realise that the other kids are already laughing at the 'kick me' sign stuck to his back.

So is *that* – a sort of 'Bathos 101' – what explains the miraculous longevity of the Jewish joke? Does the full pantheon of Jewish comedy with all its parading fools – its shmucks, shlemiels, shlimazels, shnorrers, shmendricks, (sh)mothers (Yiddish has as many terms for fool as there are Inuit words for snow) – ramp up these various differences simply in order to disguise the overarching fact that any and every Jew answering to the name is not only 'in' on the joke, but the butt of it?

Or to put it slightly differently:

Q: How *do* you tell the difference between a shlemiel and a shlimazel?

A: The shlemiel is the one who slips up and spills his soup *over* the shlimazel.\*

\* From the Yiddish *shlim* (bad, wrong) and *mazl* (luck). While in America the use of the Yiddish word *shlimazel* nearly always alludes to a born loser, in Britain you'll just as often find it referring to a messy situation. In June 2004 *shlimazel* was voted one of the ten hardest-to-translate non-English words by a British translation company.

And in a joke, a little slip can make all the difference. Not that you can put limits on slipperiness. For as different as we may well be from each other, we're all, surely, alike in this: our identities are not so much fixed, as a matter of where it is we happen to be standing in relation to everyone else at any given time. Hence if, as Kafka has it, Jews are history's greatest schlemiels, then that doesn't make them *so* different. What it makes them is one half of an eternally returning comedy double act in which, as we'll see, all other Jews, Gentiles, the Chinese and *even* God can't help getting a little soupy.

The Chinese?

Yes. Jews distinguish Chinese people from all other Gentiles on account of a) China being a very long way away from where most Jews find themselves standing, and b) the privileged position of Chinese cuisine within the Jewish *Weltanschauung* (Jews may abandon Jewish dietary laws when inside Chinese restaurants alone):

A Jewish man and a Chinese man were conversing. The Jewish man commented upon what a wise people the Chinese are.

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‘Yes,’ replied the Chinese man, ‘our culture is over four thousand years old. But you Jews are a very wise people, too.’

The Jewish man replied, ‘Yes, our culture is over five thousand years old.’

The Chinese man was incredulous. ‘That’s impossible,’ he replied. ‘Where did your people eat for a thousand years?’

More recently, however, the Chinese have also been introduced to Jewish cuisine:

Upon leaving a kosher restaurant, one Chinese diner says to another: ‘The problem with Jewish food is that two days later you’re hungry again.’\*

\* The jokes I’ve included in this book belong to two categories: those that illustrate the arguments of the essay and those, like this one, that have no obvious place in the essay but were too good to leave out.

Less Essay,  
More Examples

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## HOW DO YOU TELL THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN ONE JEW AND ANOTHER JEW?

You'll have heard it said that wherever you can find two Jews, you'll find at least three opinions. It's because Jews don't only disagree with Gentiles, or with each other, they don't even agree with themselves:

A Jew is shipwrecked on a desert island. Years later, a passing ship notices his campfire and stops to rescue him. When the captain comes ashore, the castaway thanks him profusely and offers to give him a tour of the little island. He shows off the weapons he made for hunting, the fire pit where he cooks his food, the synagogue he built for praying in, the hammock

where he sleeps. On their way back to the ship, however, the captain notices a second synagogue. 'I don't understand,' the captain asks; 'why build two synagogues?' 'This,' says the Jew, motioning to one, 'is the synagogue I pray in, and this,' he motions at the other, 'is the synagogue I wouldn't be seen dead in.'

What is quintessentially Jewish? It's being at odds with oneself. It's taking pride in one's difference *and* feeling ashamed of it at the same time. Hence, perhaps, why self-deprecation plays such a key role in Jewish joking – so much so, in fact, that Freud could ponder 'whether there are many other instances of a people making fun to such a degree of its own character'.

And yet the funniest thing about Jewish self-deprecation is the pride that Jews are wont to take in it:

It is the Yom Kippur service and the cantor suddenly stops mid-prayer and declares, 'Forgive me, God! I can't say this! I'm just a nothing!' Later the rabbi, mid-sermon, stops and cries, 'Forgive *me*, God! I am not worthy! *I'm* only a nothing!' Seeing this, the synagogue's caretaker charges from the back of the synagogue. 'If you two great men are unworthy to

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beseech God, then what right have I, as someone so ordinary? I'm a complete nothing! Oy vey, am I a nothing!' At which point the rabbi taps the cantor on the shoulder: '*Look* who thinks he's nothing.'

No two nothings are ever quite the same. Thus the joker's modest pose is assumed, the better to distance the joker from the real butt of her joke – always those *other* Jews whom she doesn't resemble in the least:

A woman is riding a bus in the Midwest, when a man gets on the bus and sits down next to her. He's wearing a black hat, long black coat, black trousers and shoes, and he has a long curly dark beard.

The woman looks at him with disgust. 'Jews like you,' she hisses at him.

He looks up at her, puzzled, and says, 'I beg your pardon, madam?'

She says, 'Look at you. All in black, a beard, never take off your hat! It's Jews like you that give the rest of us a bad name.'



‘I beg your pardon, madam, but I am not Jewish. I’m Amish.’

The woman suddenly smiles, ‘Oh, how *darling!*  
You’ve kept your customs.’

It’s a Jewish joke, in effect, *about* the Jewish joke – about the types of jokes that assimilated Western Jews have historically told to denigrate and thus distance themselves from their poorer relatives, the so-called *Ostjuden* (Jews from the East). Indeed, given how often Jewish jokes seem to turn on such divisions and doublings within Jewish identity, one wonders if Jewishness itself mightn’t be structured like a joke.

Of what such a suggestion might mean, there’s more in the rest of the book. But for now let’s simply note that, *like* jokes, Jews love nothing more than telling the difference between things – and especially each other:

Q: How do you tell the difference between one Jew and another Jew?

A: Wait, wait. They’ll tell *you*.

---

## HOW DO YOU TELL THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN A JEW AND A GENTILE?

There are occasions, though, when Jews *do* form a collective identity:

Back in the day, two Jews, Moishe and Itzik, are walking in the Ukrainian forest. In the distance, they see two local guys walking towards them. Moishe turns to Itzik, panics, and says, 'Itzik, what should we do? There's two of them, and we're all alone!'

There are a great many candidates for the world's most Jewish joke, but this one, for me, tops the list. Because there they are, those proverbial 'two Jews' – all alone in a big bad world, feeling weak and outnumbered (regardless of their strength or numbers), as two non-Jews (brute simpletons,

obviously) approach them ... Ahhhh! Danger! Help! What are two all-alone Jews expected to do in such a dastardly situation? Tell jokes?

Well, yes, as it happens. Here, for example, are those same two Jews encountering difficulties again:

Two Jews, driving a wagon along a narrow road, come to a place where boulders are blocking their path. They sit, considering what to do, discussing each of their options in great detail. Suddenly two Gentiles come along in another wagon, jump out of their seat, roll up their sleeves and push the boulders off the road.

‘There, that’s goyish thinking for you,’ says one of the Jews, ‘always with the might.’

Here, on the other hand, is Jewish thinking for you:

A Jewish woman in a hospital tells the doctor she wants to be transferred to a different hospital.

The doctor says, ‘What’s wrong? Is it the food?’

‘No, the food is fine. I can’t kvetch [complain].’

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‘Is it the room?’

‘No, the room is fine. I can’t kvetch.’

‘Is it the staff?’

‘No, everyone on the staff is fine. I can’t kvetch.’

‘Then why do you want to be transferred?’

‘I can’t kvetch!’

Kvetching is that special type of pleasure to be elicited from complaining even when things go right – because if there’s one thing Jews can be sure of, it’s that there’s *always* a negative.

And, as we’ll discover, there are reasons for that. For it’s not only that Jews love to kvetch, they also take a pretty dim view of the world:

Q: How many Jewish mothers does it take to change a lightbulb?

A: That’s OK, don’t trouble yourself, we’ll sit in the dark.

Given the ordeal that characterises so much of Jewish history, it's hardly surprising if Jews *do* tend to see things darkly (not to mention the expense to be spared when the lights are turned off\*). But what jokes like these also show is that, while an intolerable heaviness has been the burden of Jewish history, it's a heaviness accompanied by an irreverent levity whose aim it is to make that intolerable heaviness a little more, well, tolerable:

Two Jews sat in a coffeehouse, discussing the fate of their people.

'How miserable is our history,' said one. 'Pogroms, plagues, discrimination, Hitler, neo-Nazis ... Sometimes I think we'd be better off if we'd never been born.'

'Sure,' said his friend. 'But who has that much luck, maybe one in ten thousand?'

So it's not for nothing that the waiter must ask of the Jewish diners, 'Is *anything* all right?' Though the waiter's question is best considered alongside the

\* Hard to resist, though precisely the kind of borderline anti-Semitic joke that only Jews can reasonably expect to get away with.

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jokes Jews sometimes like to tell about their comedy counterparts – those peculiarly unflappable creatures known as ‘Gentiles’ ...

Two Gentiles run into one another in the street.

‘Hi, John. How are you?’

‘Oh, hello, Freddie. I’m fine, thanks.’

Jews find that one side-splittingly funny. And this one ...

A Gentile calls his mother.

‘Hello, Mum.’

‘Hi, darling.’

‘I can’t come over for dinner tonight after all.’

‘OK. See you soon.’

Hilarious!

As for the mothers of *Jews*, still sitting there, lightbulb-less, in the dark (‘Honestly, we’re fine like

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this, you go ahead and enjoy yourself ...'), well, at least they have each other to kvetch with:

'Oy,' says one.

'Oy vey,' sighs a second.

'Nu,' shrugs the third.

At this, the fourth gets up from her chair, glowering.

'I thought we'd agreed *not* to talk about our children!'

---

## HOW DO YOU TELL THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN A JEWISH PERSON AND A COMEDIAN?

Remember that episode of *Seinfeld* when Jerry's dentist converts to Judaism?\* Jerry is seated in his dentist's chair, and his dentist tells him a (not very good) Jewish joke about matzo balls:

Jerry: 'Do you think you should be making jokes like that?'

Dentist: 'Why not, I'm Jewish, remember? Jerry, it's our sense of humour that sustained us as a people for three thousand years.'

\* 'The Yada Yada' (TV episode, 1997).



Jerry: 'Five thousand.'

Dentist: 'Five thousand – even better.'

His dentist, Jerry figures, shouldn't get to tell Jewish jokes – you need millennia of persecution to have a sense of humour like that (though, you have to admit, 'Five thousand – even better' is a pretty good Jewish joke). But does Jerry really have the right to kvetch? For while having badly-told Jewish jokes visited upon you while supine in your dentist's chair is no picnic, Jerry hasn't *personally* suffered so much of that history of persecution. Yet there's something about his dentist's conversion to Judaism that troubles him. What, he suspects, his dentist may *really* be after is the holy grail of comedy: 'total joke-telling immunity'. Getting to tell any joke he likes. Which is suchchutzpah, it's enough to lead Jerry to a confession box to grass on the dentist to his former priest:

Jerry: 'I have a suspicion that he converted to Judaism only for the jokes.'

Father: 'And this offends you as a Jewish person?'

Jerry: 'No, it offends me as a comedian!'

And if you remain unsure *how* exactly to tell the difference between a Jewish person and a comedian, then you're probably getting what I take to be the point of the whole episode: it isn't so easy to tell.

In fact, when his dentist first announces his conversion, Jerry's response – 'Welcome aboard!' – is less offended, or delighted, than bemused. If, indeed, *anything* tells the difference between Judaism and the major monotheisms to which it's most often compared, this could well be it: while Christians and Muslims tend to regard converts to their faith as serious people of good sense, Jews harbour a sneaking suspicion that the would-be Jewish convert must be joking.

Although if Jews often have a hard time accepting why anyone would want to convert *to* Judaism, they're usually even less accepting of those who attempt to convert *out* of it:

Two Jews are strolling down the street one day in the Pale of Settlement, when they happen to walk past a church. Above the door of the church they see a big sign that says 'Convert and get ten rubles'. Moishe stops, stares at the sign and turns to his friend:

‘Avreleh, I’m thinking of doing it.’ With that, he strides purposefully into the church. Twenty minutes later he comes out with his head bowed.

‘So,’ asks Avreleh, ‘did you get your ten rubles?’

Moishe looks at him contemptuously: ‘Is that *all* you people think about?’

Which is surely one of the best jokes, let alone Jewish jokes, of all time, because it demonstrates so neatly how power really works.

And such jokes also help to explain why Jews, historically, have often viewed conversion as a sociopolitical rather than authentically religious phenomenon:

Four converts trade stories about why they converted. The first claims he was a victim of a false accusation and converted to escape the harsh sentence he would otherwise have had to serve. The second confesses that her parents drove her wild with complaints about her lax observance, so she converted to spite them. The third gives a rambling account of falling in love with a Christian boy: she converted in order to marry him. The fourth pipes up: ‘Unlike the

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rest of you, I converted out of a firm conviction that Christianity is a religion of a higher order.'

'Oh, PLEASE!' the others interrupt him. 'Save that for your goyishe friends!'

Which suspicion of conversion has lingered even when Jews have turned to other religions during more liberal times:

My best friend is a Jewish Buddhist. Believes you should renounce all material possessions but still keep the receipts. *David Baddiel*

So you think you can cease to be Jewish, huh? Well then, the joke's on you:

Mr Dropkin was on a business trip in a small town and was giving his major presentation on the stage when he bent over and gave the loudest fart anyone had ever heard. He never showed up in that small town again. But many, many, many years later he was invited back. Undecided whether or not he could yet show his face, he tried to coax himself: 'I'm so old now,' he thought. 'Surely no one will remember me from all those years ago. I don't even look as I did

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then.’ So he decided to return. All the same, when checking into the hotel he took the precaution of changing his name.

‘Have you ever visited our pretty town before?’ the hotel receptionist asked him, genially.

‘Only once,’ said Mr Dropkin. ‘But it was a long time ago and between you and me I haven’t returned until now because I’ve always been so embarrassed about a very painful experience that happened to me when I was here, and have feared that people might still remember it.’

‘Oh, what a shame!’ said the receptionist, before reassuring him, ‘you know, people have such short memories and they’re really only focused on their own lives – things are never quite so bad as you think. So I’m sure you’re being paranoid. I mean, how long ago *was* this incident?’

Dropkin said he didn’t exactly remember.

‘Well, was it before or after the Dropkin fart?’

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## HOW DO YOU TELL THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN A JEW AND A PARROT?

We can think of the Dropkin fart as a metaphor for Jewish history: however much Jews try to repress their origins, they've learned the hard way that what they thought was past always returns to embarrass them by slipping out one way or the other:

A Jew converts and becomes a priest. He gives his first Mass in front of a number of high-ranking priests who came for the occasion. At the end of the new priest's sermon a cardinal goes to congratulate him. 'Father Goldberg,' he says, 'that was very well done, you were just perfect. Just one little thing. Next time, try not to start your sermon with 'My fellow goyim ...'