

No joke: Making Jewish Humour by Ruth R. Wisse.
Princeton University Press 2013.

No people who have endured what has been the fate of the Jewish people could have survived without a sense of humour. Jewish comedians and comic actors, Jewish wits and humourists have had a disproportionate influence in modern history, in no relation whatever to our demographic significance.

But what is 'Jewish Humour' and how did it develop? In No joke: Making Jewish Humour, Professor Ruth R. Wisse of Harvard University has written an approachable, informative, fascinating and, above all, humorous analysis of Jewish humour.

Following an introduction entitled The Best Medicine are five chapters: German Lebensraum; Yiddish Heartland; The Anglosphere; Under Hitler and Stalin; Hebrew Homeland, finished by the conclusion When Can I Stop Laughing.

Wisse traces the evolution of Jewish humour in Germany, part of it an inevitable and ultimately tragic response to anti-Semitism and Jewish stereotyping, played in to by Jewish writers such as Heinrich Heine and thinkers such as Sigmund Freud; its rise and rise to hitherto unknown heights of sophistication in Yiddish, both in terms of writing and performance in Yiddish theatre; its synergy with English and yet further development in America and, to a lesser extent, *pace* Israel Zangwill, in England (Wisse states that in 1975 an estimated two thirds of U.S. comedy professionals were Jews!); the challenges to Jewish humour posed by the twin totalitarian dictatorships of Hitler and Stalin; and finally its newest incarnation in Israeli society, disproving the old adage that Israelis had no sense of humour.

No joke: Making Jewish Humour is the perfect combination of the scholarly and the populist, with some excellent jokes thrown in – not least that at the foot of page 122 (you need to buy the book!) which while old still hasn't lost its comic power.

Enjoy, enjoy: what's not to like?!

Rabbi Dr Charles H Middleburgh