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“I’m a Survivor!”

The Holocaust and Larry David’s Problematic Humour in *Curb Your Enthusiasm*

Abstract

In 2004, Larry David’s HBO comedy series *Curb Your Enthusiasm* aired an episode entitled *The Survivor*, which featured two storylines – one about Hasidic Judaism and one about the Holocaust. In his writing for the comedy series *Seinfeld*, David created a world that had Jewish coding, but overt references to Jews and Jewish history were more oblique (“soup Nazi” and *Schindler’s List* episodes aside). In *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, David’s follow-up show about “nothing”, David frequently launched frontal assaults on everything Jewish, and many viewers found the *Survivor* episode beyond the pale. This paper investigates this particular episode as a case study to evaluate the broader issue of representing the Holocaust through the medium of comedy.

In 2004, Larry David’s HBO comedy series *Curb Your Enthusiasm* aired an episode entitled *The Survivor*, which featured two storylines – one about Hasidic Judaism and one about the Holocaust. The first storyline has David, who plays either a fictitiously offensive or offensively real version of himself, contemplating an affair with a Hasidic female friend, complete with jaw-dropping jokes about Hasidic notions of sex. The second subplot unfolds at a dinner in which a Holocaust survivor and a former contestant on the reality show *Survivor* square off in an escalating war of words. In his writing for *Seinfeld*, David created a world that had Jewish coding, but overt references to Jews and Jewish history were more oblique (“soup Nazi” and *Schindler’s List* episodes aside). In *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, David’s follow-up show about nothing, David frequently launches frontal assaults on everything Jewish, and many viewers found the *Survivor* episode beyond the pale. This essay investigates this particular episode as a case study to evaluate the broader issue of representing the Holocaust through the medium of comedy – in this case comedic television.

In his 1987 review of a number of comedic and semi-comedic works about the Holocaust, scholar Terrence Des Pres took issue with what he saw as the limits set on Holocaust representation, i.e., that it should be approached as a sacred, unique event and that depictions of it should be as “accurate and faithful as possible to the facts and conditions of the event, without change or manipulation for any reason”.¹ He argued in defence of humour and satire, declaring that the “value of the comic approach is that by setting things at a distance it permits us a tougher, more active response”. Proceeding from Des Pres’ assessment and employing the theories of Israeli psychologist Avner Ziv and historian Chaya Ostrower, I will assess what David’s humour in his *Survivor* episode might be contesting. Ziv has posited five functions of

1 Des Pres reviewed Tadeusz Borowski’s *This Way for the Gas Ladies and Gentlemen*, New York 1976; Leslie Epstein’s *King of the Jews*, New York 1979, and Art Spiegelman’s *Maus. A Survivor’s Tale*, New York 1986; see: Terrence Des Pres, *Holocaust Laughter*, in: Berel Lang (ed.), *Writing and the Holocaust*, New York 1987, 216-233, here 217.

humour: 1.) An aggressive function, stemming from a sense of either frustration or superiority; 2.) A sexual function; 3.) A social function; 4.) A defence mechanism (specifically, gallows humour and self-humour); 5.) An intellectual function.² While Ostrower demonstrated in her research that Holocaust survivors frequently utilised humour as a defence mechanism, I would argue that David (who is not a Holocaust survivor and operates in an entirely different universe – that of contemporary Hollywood) employs a more problematic form of aggressive humour. Specifically, in the episode in question, he zeroes in on the subject of what constitutes a victim. The questions for this paper therefore are: Does skewering victimisation constitute an illegitimate assault? What constructive effort could such comedy or satire possibly bring?

There are a number of feature film comedies about Nazi Germany and even the Holocaust, including *The Great Dictator* (Charlie Chaplin, 1940), *To be or not to be* (Ernst Lubitsch, 1942), *The Producers* (Mel Brooks, 1967), *Life is Beautiful* (Roberto Benigni, 1997), *Inglourious Basterds* (Quentin Tarantino, 2009), and *Jacob the Liar* (Peter Kassovitz, 1999).³ Comedy, which is at its core about generating laughter from an audience, according to Henri Bergson, stems from the human encounter with life's inflexibilities; for Victor Turner, comedy emerges in the liminal space between the "set rules of society".⁴ Each of the films above films operates within a state of liminality, in which societal rules, in this case the rules of Nazism or Nazi-occupied Europe, are encountered and rendered absurd. What distinguishes a classic, though, like *The Great Dictator*, from a critical and box office failure (like *Jacob the Liar*), is not necessarily easy to discern, and Des Pres, for his part, did not lay out criteria for the effective use of comedy in ventilating Holocaust narratives. In his conclusion, he seemed to qualify his approval, saying that the novels he was evaluating in his essay were basically serious, but that they included comic elements, that is to say, they weren't purely comedic. They recognised first and foremost the gravity of the universe into which they were venturing. Films like *Life is Beautiful* and *Jakob the Liar* both do that, while *Inglourious Basterds* does not, so why do critics generally regard the first and third as good films, while rejecting the second? In fact, of the three *Jakob the Liar* is perhaps the most earnest and desirous to achieve verisimilitude, and it ends on a more depressing note than either *Life is Beautiful* or *Inglourious Basterds*. A comparison of the original East German version of *Jakob the Liar* from 1975 is apt here, suggesting that it is not necessarily the genre of comedy that is the problem but the way in which a particular story is constructed within the framework of that genre. Peter Stack, writing in 1999 for the *San Francisco Chronicle* in advance of a limited run of *Jakob der Lügner*, argued that "the beauty of this film is its simplicity. There's no mugging for comedic effect, no pat jokes, no elaborate fantasies [...] slowly the vise of history closes on this decent, innocent man, and the viewer is simply left speechless."⁵

Comedy can therefore work as a means of representing the Holocaust, but because of the dangers it poses to the seriousness of the subject, producers should pro-

2 Chaya Ostrower, *Humor as a Defense Mechanism in the Holocaust* (PhD Thesis), Tel Aviv 2000, and Avner Ziv, *Personality and Sense of Humor*, London 1984; see also Ruth Wisse, *No Joke. Making Jewish Humor*, Princeton 2013, and Jaye Berman Montresor, *Parodic Laughter and the Holocaust*, in: *Studies in American Jewish Literature* 12 (1993), 126-133.

3 Daniel Mendelsohn, *Review: Inglourious Basterds. When Jews Attack*, in: *Newsweek*, 14 August 2009.

4 Henri Bergson, *Laughter. An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*, Paris 1924; Victor Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre. The Human Seriousness of Play*, New York 1982; and Andrew Horton (ed.), *Comedy, Cinema, Theory*, Berkeley 1991.

5 Peter Stack, *East German 'Liar' is Truly Devastating*, in: *San Francisco Chronicle*, 5 November 1999.

ceed with caution. The one semi-comedic moving picture with a Holocaust story that I would argue falls into this category is *Everything is Illuminated* (from 2005), based on the novel by Jonathan Safran Foer, which follows a fictional journey to Ukraine by Foer in search of a woman who, in this alternative universe, saved his grandfather during the German occupation. The comedy of the film, which involves numerous malapropisms, underscores the cultural clash between an American Jew and his Ukrainian travel guides, allows the audience to acclimate itself to what is unfamiliar geography. The comedy also recedes once the complex details about Foer's grandfather and the secret identity of his elder Ukrainian guide unfold. Thus, the comedic elements serve more as commentary not only about two peoples who know next to nothing about each other, but also on the absurdity of contemporary life in the wake of the Second World War. The movie and novel are more about the present and remembering the past in a region of the world little known to most Americans and still insufficiently explored in Anglo-American scholarship.

Some critics might take issue with how comic films have represented Nazi Germany and the Holocaust, but with television, voices of criticism could be (and have been) more severe given the place of television as a commodity in the modern home. The scale of television is at once small and linked with commerce. It was this intersection that troubled the many critics of the 1978 miniseries on the Holocaust. Film critic Molly Haskell argued that "[t]he Holocaust is simply too vast, the elimination of six million people from the earth too incomprehensible, to fit into any conceivable dramatic framework, particularly in the reductive context of the small screen".⁶ Historian Henry Feingold said that the numerous ad breaks amounted to "the commercialization of the Holocaust".⁷ TV dramas dealing with the Holocaust have become less of a controversy for critics over time, but the intersection of television, the Holocaust, and comedy remains largely avoided and toxic territory. Except for Larry David.

In the very first episode of *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, David's character, Larry, the retired ex-producer of *Seinfeld*, finds himself in trouble by referring to his wife Cheryl as Hitler in a conversation that is overheard by a friend who had a relative who was a Holocaust survivor.⁸ Depending on one's perspective as a viewer, it was either downhill or inspirational from there. In the series and its 80 episodes from 2000 to 2011, audiences were witnesses to vignette after vignette attesting to Larry's idiocy.

The Survivor episode from season four is squarely in that orbit. The intersecting storylines about the Holocaust and Larry's nearly consummated affair with a Hasidic laundry woman, Anna, played by Gina Gershon, attempt to lay bare underlying hypocrisies and mythologies, and the former subplot is effective, but the construction of Jewishness in the characters problematizes David's satire. Both Anna and the rabbi bear little resemblance to any Hasidic woman or proper spiritual leader in reality. Even if David's intention were to poke fun at what Jews don't know about Hasidim, his construction of Anna would still be outrageous. For instance, although Anna wears a head covering, she smokes, leaves her shirts unbuttoned to reveal cleavage, and is aggressively flirtatious with Larry, suggesting at one point that while her husband is at shul, she and Larry should have sex. David tackles the requisite

6 Molly Haskell, A Failure to Connect, in: New York, 15 May 1978.

7 Henry Feingold, Four Days in April. A Review of NBC's Dramatization of the Holocaust, in: Shoah: A Journal of Resources on the Holocaust, 1978; see also Jeffrey Shandler, While America Watches. Televising the Holocaust, Oxford 1999.

8 Derek Parker, Comedy Beyond the Pale. 'Working the Jewish' in Curb Your Enthusiasm, MELUS Conference, Fresno 2007.

urban legend about how Hasidic couples have sex, allegedly through a hole in a sheet, and although he has Anna point out Larry's stupidity when he wraps himself up in said sheet at their hotel room, David has her spout off more profanity than many secular Jews would probably ever use.

The rabbi, meanwhile, not only gives Larry approval for the affair, because Larry's wife was giving him a one-time sexual encounter as an anniversary gift, which no respectable rabbi would do, but he also fuels the Holocaust storyline by asking Larry if he could bring a survivor to the rehearsal dinner for Larry and Cheryl's renewal of vows. The person whom the rabbi brings, Colby, played by Colby Donaldson, is not a Holocaust survivor or a survivor in any sense of the word; he was simply on the reality TV show *Survivor*. The rabbi confuses the survival issue further after Larry asks him about a photo on his desk, and the rabbi says that it was his brother in law, who died on 11 September 2001 – 9/11. As Larry asks him about where he was at ground zero, the rabbi explains that his brother-in-law died uptown – on 57th street, run over by a bike messenger. So the rabbi is both questionable in his morality and even more patently clueless than Larry, if that were possible. The humour in these instances – sexual and social – may be funny, but one might see that it also has the potential of reinforcing negative images of Judaism. In fact, I would argue these images threaten to overshadow David's more valuable lampooning of what it means to be a survivor in contemporary American discourse.

Because the rabbi asks to bring a survivor to the dinner, and Larry assumes he meant a Holocaust survivor – and why wouldn't he? – Larry feels compelled to have his father invite his friend Solly, who, Larry knows, is also Holocaust survivor. So David sets up a classic comedic scenario based on character misunderstanding, and he plays it to the hilt. At dinner, Colby begins by describing the snakes he had to fend off in the Australian outback, and Solly responds: "That's a very interesting story. Let me tell you. I was in a concentration camp! You never even suffered one minute your whole life compared to what I went through!" Colby then starts the downward spiral into comedy oblivion by responding: "Look, I'm saying we spent 42 days trying to survive. We had very little rations. No snacks." To which Solly rejoins: "Snacks, what are you talking, snacks? We didn't eat sometimes for a week for a month?" Colby continues, "I couldn't even work out over there. They certainly didn't have a gym. I wore my sneakers out. The next thing I know I have a pair of flip flops! Have you even seen the show?" Solly shouts back, "Did you ever see our show? It was called the Holocaust! You don't know anything about survival. I'm a survivor!" The two then start screaming back and forth, "I'm a survivor!" until Solly hits his plate and splashes food on Larry's face and suit, prompting a non-sequitur from Larry's mother in law: "[S]omebody get a sponge." Larry's befuddled response ending the scene to the disgust of everyone is: "I'm sorry why don't you get a sponge? What? I just told her to get a sponge?"

In order to make amends, Larry invites Solly to the renewal of vows, but in the car, Solly's glass eye reflects into Larry's face, and his arm movements lead Solly to believe that he's making fun of him so he gets mad and bumps Cheryl who spills wine on Larry's suit, freshly cleaned after the dinner incident. Solly demands to get out of the car and washes his hands of the whole pathetic lot. Here, David clearly does not intend to poke fun at the victim, but rather himself, and so while the bulk of the humour in the survivor storyline would fall into Ostrower's aggressive category, it's done so from a position of frustration and self-skewering. Even at the episode's climactic scene, the renewal of vows, Larry is incapable of anything positive to say. His vows are an incomprehensible mess ("it's pretty, pretty, pretty, pretty good. And I am

your devoted servant. Well I don't know about servant. You know I'm not a servant, but I'll certainly help you.") And then when Larry steps on the glass in the custom of Jewish weddings, he does so too quickly, before the rabbi is able to move his hand away, resulting in a bloody hand injury and a screaming rabbi. The final scene of the episode, in which Anna chides Larry about the sheet, brings the *deus ex machina* of an earthquake, forcing the two almost lovebirds out into the parking lot of their room at the St. Regis Hotel still wrapped up in their bed sheets. There, they see Colby, who is also coincidentally staying at the hotel, and he has the last words of the show: "Larry, hey, we survived!"

The recent documentary, *The Last Laugh* (Ferne Pearlstein, 2016), explores the subject of the Holocaust and comedy and fits well within Ostrower and Ziv's model of the many uses of humour. For some of the interviewees in the film, particularly survivors, humour remains important as part of the process of working through trauma. For comedians like Sarah Silverman, humour allows light to shine on darkness. For Mel Brooks, comics "have to tell us who we are, where we are, even if it's in bad taste". In the case of the *Survivor* episode of *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, it is not the Holocaust that Larry David is satirising, and he certainly is not mocking Holocaust survivors, but rather what journalist Stephen Vider dubs a culture of victimhood that conflates real tragedy and survival with things that no one in their right mind would ever see as tragic or in the realm of surviving. As Vider rightly claims, David is sending up "a culture that reveres trauma and the traumatized at the same time it enjoys the *schadenfreude* expressed in 'reality' contests like *Survivor* and mock-reality television".⁹ David's brand of aggressive and self-humour therefore serves as dual criticism, both of collective and individual bad behaviour. Everyone is either a *schlemiel* or a *shlemazel* in David's world, and this amplifies the satire, although once again the downside is that it has the potential side-effect of reifying abstractions of Jews as bad people.

So in answering the questions which I posed at the beginning, this is an overriding qualification. Calling out people who think that they are victims when they really are not, calling out double standards and insensitivity, all of which Larry David skillfully does, are legitimate and necessary in preserving respect for real tragedy and trauma. Criteria for distinguishing successful from unsuccessful Holocaust comedy, comedy-drama, or satire on television might be too subjective to be of any consistent or systematic use but taking an unspoken perception of some behaviour and putting it out there in such a ridiculous way to make us realize how awful humans behave, is one possible avenue. At the same time, comedy's transgressive potential can be destructive, and the boundary of what is acceptable as a pun or humorous scenario is not easily discernible or agreed upon – especially when it comes to the Holocaust. David makes himself the butt of the joke throughout his series, but at least for me, the question remains: does he have to do that to all of his other Jewish characters as well? In fairness, he is an equal opportunity misanthrope when it comes to Gentiles and other minorities, again to play on collective anxieties and to uncover latent and overt prejudices. However, less incendiary Jewish imagery might actually help David better deconstruct the assumptions of our bizarre culture of both revered and trivialised suffering.

⁹ Stephen Vider, *Survivor Challenge*. Ten years after Jerry Seinfeld got caught necking during Schindler's List, reverence for the Holocaust still makes Larry David squirm, in: *Tablet*, 26 March 2004; <http://www.tabletmag.com/jewish-arts-and-culture/1271/survivor-challenge> (13 June 2018).

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