

A Secular Talmud: The Jewish Sensibility of *Mad* Magazine

Nathan Abrams

Mad magazine functioned as a secular Talmud for a generation of Jews and non-Jews alike in America and beyond. Like its religious forebear, *Mad* was inter-textual, self-referential, and arguably even formatted in a similar way. And similar to the Talmud, its influence extended outwards—from the comic book world, it inspired graphic novels, television, the movies, and more. Yet, to date, despite its highly Jewish and very Talmudic nature, little scholarship has been dedicated to exploring *Mad*'s Jewishness. The most recent edition of the *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, for example, only had this to say:

The editorial director of *Mad*, Harvey Kurtzman, along with the publisher, William Gaines, brought a distinctly Jewish flavor to what became one of the seminal magazines of postwar American culture. The first issue, in 1952, included a parody of gangster cartoons titled “Gonefs.” The Yiddish in the magazine was undefined. Later issues of *Mad* had sprinklings of Yiddish and Jewish-inspired satire. (Rosenthal and Kampel 501)

Yet popular sources increasingly recognize what academics have overlooked. Writing in *The Forward*, Eddy Portnoy opined in 2010, “As a seminal artifact of American popular culture, *Mad* is often revered as a product of heavily Jewish influences.” More recently, Columbia University Librarian Karen Green recalled that *Mad* was a “crash course in immigrant Jewish culture. I like to say that I learned how to be an American Jew from *Mad* magazine and the Marx Brothers” (Kaminer). Here, I begin filling this gap to consider *Mad*'s Jewish and Talmudic sensibility, and how this element played out in *Mad*'s history in the 1950s and 1960s in particular.

Born in the 1950s, *Mad* lived contemporaneously with that generation of writers, poets, essayists, and literary critics who came to be known as the New York Intellectuals, as well as such 1960s iconoclasts as Bob Dylan, the Beats, comedians Mort Sahl and Lenny Bruce, movie director Stanley Kubrick, cartoonist Jules Feiffer, novelist Joseph Heller, and those who would form the New Left and counterculture. This group of Jews, centered on New York, had come to political awareness during the Great Depression. Their religious/ethnic heritage had a direct and important influence on their work. Marinated in the same urban Jewish culture, *Mad*'s commitments mirrored theirs and arguably were part of the same debates, particularly in the post-Holocaust world. A detailed examination of *Mad*'s pages in the 1950s and the 1960s shows that it engaged with the same dilemmas and paradoxes as these intellectual New Yorkers, producing an alternative New York critique, which skewered the key intellectual concerns of those decades: suburbia, psychoanalysis, existentialism, Freudianism, intellectual pretension, bohemianism, technology, disarmament, and containment.

Consequently, in many ways, as I've detailed elsewhere, *Mad* represented a group of alternative New York Jewish Intellectuals (Abrams). Like their intellectual co-religionists, they were Jews who had grown up and come to political awareness during the depression, the Second World War, and the Holocaust. Al Feldstein, Kurtzman's successor as editor of *Mad* recalled: "I was an ultra-liberal when I was young, and a socially conscious person, having grown up in the Depression and seeing my parents lose their home, etc., etc." (Ringgenberg 82). *Mad's* leaders were Jews who used their work to reflect on the postwar world, conformity, and the Holocaust. Unlike the New York Intellectuals, however, *Mad's* staff as a group was unafraid to criticize or dissent from the prevailing mood of Cold War America during the 1950s and 1960s. *Mad* actually appeared to fulfill the function of the critic more often than did the New York Intellectuals' magazines.

This was because a high proportion of *Mad's* staff was Jewish. This "Usual Gang of Idiots," as the magazine referred to them, included founders William Gaines and Harvey Kurtzman; editor Al Feldstein, artists Mort Drucker, Al Jaffee, Will Elder, and Dave Berg; and writers Larry Siegel, Stan Hart, Arnie Kogen, Frank Jacobs, and Lou Silverstone. Added to this list were such Jewish guest contributors as Sid Caesar, Danny Kaye, Paul Krassner, and Jules Feiffer, among many others. "My writers," Feldstein recalled, "were all Jewish boys from Jewish families in urban centers" (Gluckson 72). These ethnic/religious origins played a key part in shaping *Mad's* sensibility. As Arie Kaplan put it,

One key element of *Mad's* appeal that was passed down from the Kurtzman years and continued during the Feldstein years (and beyond) was the magazine's inherent sense of Jewishness. To this day, Yiddish phrases are still frequently used in the magazine, as are Jewish themes. And it's no stretch to say that this is at least partly because *Mad* has consistently used Jewish cartoonists . . . The Jewish upbringing of the *Mad* contributors is evident from a random look at the magazine's content. (79)

Feldstein felt that *Mad's* Jewishness gave it "a cultural awareness (an outsider attitude). It might even be in the genes, it might go back hundreds and hundreds of years of a certain kind of living in society. Trying to survive in that society" (Gluckson 72). Writer Al Jaffee believed that "Oppressed people resort to humor. They can't afford to get angry" (Portnoy). Stanley Rothman and S. Robert Lichter summed up, "From the beginning *Mad's* editors have been Jewish and, as they themselves would agree, hostile to the American civic myth" (108).

Thus *Mad* used parody to criticize a predominantly Protestant culture from the perspective of the Jewish outsider. As Stephen E. Kercher has pointed out, "Kurtzman's *Mad* comics mercilessly lampooned a host of square-jawed, goyishe American tough guys, from the upright, virtuous marshal played by Gary Cooper in *High Noon* to Marlon Brando's motorcycle bad boy in *The Wild One*" (106). In February 1955's "Cowboy," for example, Kurtzman juxtaposed the "movie and television version" of a cowboy—a handsome clean-shaven man named, significantly, Lance Sterling ("Could you ever picture a cowboy hero named Melvin Poznowski?")—with John Smurd, a "100% genuine cowboy" who wore a

“nauseating walrus mustache” (#20, 2/55:25-29). Unlike Lance Sterling, “old John Smurd worked like a horse” and had no union, so he had little time or energy for “shooting it out with bad guys” (26). In “Starchie” the innocent teenagers Archie and Jughead became chain-smoking juvenile delinquents (#12, 6/54). “The Lone Stranger” was transformed from western hero into a *schlemiel* or a simpleton (#3, 2-3/53). And “Superduperman!” was not the triumphant superhero envisaged by two of their fellow American Jews, but a *shlmazel*, a perennially unlucky fellow (#4, 4-5/53). It also asked “What If Batman Were Jewish?” (Jaffee #516, 8/12) or “What If Superman were raised by Jewish parents?” (Bresman and Drucker #325, 3/94). In its early years, *Mad* loved to target films by Disney, who (accurately or otherwise) had a reputation for anti-Semitism. In impressively detailed mimicry of its signature visual style, under *Mad*’s penmanship, Disney’s central wholesome icon Mickey Mouse became the grizzled, rat-faced, vermin thug “Mickey Rodent,” whose fingers and tail were caught in mousetraps.

Mad also foregrounded issues of racism, intolerance, and prejudice. In so doing, it exploded the myths of a democratic, tolerant America. As writer Al Jaffee recalled:

I think that for Jews of my generation especially, social consciousness came naturally for those of us who suffered from a lack of civil rights and were discriminated against. Social consciousness really is in a way self-serving. Because by being in favor of civil rights for example, in a like way you’re really saying, “Jews have suffered without civil rights for so many centuries that we know what not having civil rights is, so we cannot possibly impose this on someone else, not to have civil rights.” I think it’s a gut reaction: I don’t think Harvey Kurtzman or I or anybody who works in the entertainment business—comedians, writers—sit down and say, “I owe something to society.” Basically, we’re trying to be funny, and a good source of humor is the stupidities in society, and certainly bigotry is one of the biggest stupidities. And Jews have experienced it firsthand and they know how stupid it is, so we go after it. (Kaplan 73-74)

But this was not just restricted to the wider gentile society, as *Mad* also managed to poke fun at its own co-religionists so that, in effect, no one was safe from its satire. In this way, it was bore more than a passing resemblance to the films of Mel Brooks. As Brooks said,

The roots of my humor are in very old-fashioned Yiddish comedy . . . which is based on some failure-making fun of the inept, which is cruel. So Jews taking off on unfortunates, it’s always compelling. Because you’re saying in a strange way, “Oh thank God, it’s not me.” You enjoy the humor because you are not the butt of the joke. It’s cruel but effective. (Desser and Friedman 121)

Like Brooks, *Mad* has been accused of being childish, scatological, and vulgar, of making films in bad taste. Consider the farting-around-the campfire scene in

Brooks's *Blazing Saddles* (1974). Perhaps *Mad* even provided the blueprint for Brooks, who, as a writer for Sid Caesar, may well have indirectly contributed to the magazine.

Specifically, *Mad*'s humor was grounded in Yiddishisms, sarcasm, and self-mockery, all defining features of Jewish humor. It employed a whole lexicon of Yiddish phrases, both real and imaginary, making Leo Rosten's *The Joys of Yiddish* (1968) a required companion text for the uninitiated. As Kitchen and Buhle point out, Elder and Kurtzman "added a peculiar Jewish New York dialect, from 'Mrs. Gowanus' (a reference to the Gowanus Canal in Brooklyn) to 'Potzrebie' (a real Polish word) and 'fershugginer' (an imaginary Yiddish word)" (Kitchen and Buhle 87). This flavor was announced from the very first issue when a strip entitled "Ganefs"—Yiddish for *thieves* or *crooks*—appeared. *Mad*'s Yiddish-inflected lingo also included the more familiar terms such as "schmuck," as when it ran Al Jaffee's strip "Don't You Feel Like a Schmuck?!" (#157, 3/73). But this also included the less known, and often made up, words: *schmaltz* (chicken fat), *shmeat* (spread on or for bread), *oy* (oh, no!), *feh* (ugh!), *borscht* (soup), *ganef* (thief), *bveebleftzer* (neologism suggesting "whatchamacallit"), *farshimmelt* (neologism for "all mixed up"), *kibitzer* (joker), *schlepp* (haul), *schnook* (fall guy), and *halavah* (ground sesame candy). In one column, "Murder the Husband" (#11, 5/54), it printed Yiddish in traditional Hebrew lettering, which translated as "the Danish king comes to wed in Copenhagen." As a consequence, readers often wrote in and complained of the strange and exotic-sounding words that saturated the magazine.

Similarly, in a reversal of the name-changing process so beloved of Jewish Hollywood stars during the heyday of the studio system, *Mad* Yiddishized Anglo names, turning Batman and Robin into "Bat Boy and Rubin" (#8, 12/53-1/54), G. I. Joe into "G. I. Shmoe" (#10, 4/54) and Sherlock Homes into "Shermlock Shomes" (#7, 10/53). The moniker *Shadowskeedeeboomboom* used for various heroes and foes, was a name inspired by the Yiddish comedian Aaron Lebedeff (Reidelbach 58). In this way, *Mad* reacted to the de-Semitization of the Hollywood studio system, which was often at pains to sideline or elide Jewishness and Jewish characters, in what Henry Popkin called "the great retreat" (51). During Hollywood's heyday, Jews were hidden on screen both literally and figuratively as the Jewish moguls, often prompted by pressure from Jewish organizations and the Hays Code, which exercised tight control over the portrayal of religion and ethnicity, promoted an assimilatory strategy of Americanization. Jewish actors changed their names, as their Jewish bosses, for commercial reasons, as well as fear of inciting anti-Semitism even further, calculated that their predominantly white working class audiences did not want to watch Jews on screen.

In contrast, *Mad* foregrounded Jewishness, even where it did not necessarily exist in the source text. "Dragged Net" (#11, 5/54), a spoof of *Dragnet*, was punctuated with a heavysset middle-aged Jewish woman intermittently shouting, "VIL-LEE." In the final panel she catches up to little "Villie Elder!" who, naturally for the Jewish-inflected mindset, can be found in the bathroom, the only private spot in a small apartment and an allusion to inside jokes about constipation from the Jewish diet. "Strangely Believe It" (#42, 11/58), written by guest contributor Ernie Kovacs, featured a "Dr. Sidney Klutz." A "Prof. Rumblemacher" appeared in another

guest contribution, this time by Sid Caesar (#49, 9/59). In its parody of the film *Rosemary's Baby* (Roman Polanski, 1968), renamed "Rosemia's Boo-Boo" (Kogen and Drucker #124, 1/69), the implicitly or conceptually Jewish character Dr. Abraham Sapirstein (Ralph Bellamy), whose ethnicity/religion is nowhere mentioned in the movie, was renamed the more obvious "Schlepperstein."

A whole galaxy of Jewish characters appeared in *Mad's* "Credits for the Common Man" (Wood #2, 11/58). Sam "Red" Schlepp ran "a luncheonette so bold and difficult that only a schnook like Schlepp would dare to attempt it!" (30). There were also Irving Siegel, Seymour Cohen, Herman Katz, Phil Spieler, Stanley Klatch, and Bernie Levine. Even the very idea of the spread, giving credits to the "common man" as stars and crew received credits for movies, could be argued to have derived from its Jewish memories of the "*dos kleine menshele*" (lit., "the little man") so "fundamental" to *Yiddishkeit* (lit., "Jewish culture" or "Jewishness"). Indeed, according to Bonnie Lyons, "the ordinary man is elevated, or at least evoked with love." "*Dos kleine menshele*, the little man, with all his imperfections and foibles, is accepted and embraced The ordinary man struggling with his everyday problems is the core of Yiddish literature" (63-64).

Mad also took on Judaism. Its view of its own religion and especially what had happened to it in the United States curiously resembled an ultra-Orthodox rabbi who took a dim view of the reforms made by the non-*halachic* (law-driven) branches of Judaism. This rhetoric is most clearly articulated in "The *Mad* 'Religion in America' Primer" (Coker and Siegel #153, 9/72). Clearly, with its tongue placed firmly in its cheek, *Mad* introduced Judaism as a whole thus:

The Jews do not believe Christ is their Savior.
Who do they believe He is?
They believe He is a nice Jewish boy
Who went into his Father's business.
So much for our first lesson in religion.
Not you know why religion has been running for over 2000 years.
You also know why the Jews have been running for over 2000
years! (11)

The piece then went on to break Judaism down into its constituent parts of Orthodoxy, Conservatism, and Reform. It described the latter group as hardly observing any religion at all, concluding, "To the other two groups/Reform Jews have another name./They are known as 'Christians'!" For example, their temple was easily locatable because it was "the one with the Christmas tree in front." Thus, when a Catholic and Protestant decide to get married and compromise, in Dave Berg's "The Lighter Side of Weddings" (#152, 7/72), they choose a (Reform?) synagogue. Here *Mad* lampooned the rabbinic leadership as being more concerned with food than spirituality: a morose-looking rabbi postpones a bar mitzvah "because the caterer didn't show up," before adding, "How much suffering can the Jews stand?" (12). On the subject of Jewish food, the feature caricatured the stereotypical overbearing Jewish mother, depicting her as an overweight matriarch who stuffed her family with oversized bowls of soup while imploring them to "Eat! Eat!" (14).

Mad of the 1950s and 1960s was also punctuated with references to Hitler, the Nazis, and the Holocaust. It barely needs mentioning that the Jewishness of *Mad*'s writers had a part to play in this, as did the staffers' specific military and war experiences. In so doing, not only did *Mad* attack Nazis, it also lambasted American cultural representations of them. But rather than use serious tragedy as the vehicle for its indignation and fury, it used comedy instead. Just as Allied propaganda dropped behind enemy lines lampooned Hitler and just as the Nazis threatened to execute anyone who dared make anti-Hitler jokes, *Mad* recognized that a good laugh can communicate more than a well-meaning and long-winded speech. Thus one of its earliest allusions to the Second World War came in its parody "Frank N. Stein!" (#8, 12/53-1/54), in which Dr. Frankenstein succeeds in creating his eponymous monster. On the final page, the monster's face is revealed to the horror of the soldiers sent to apprehend it: "There it is!" "Look at its face!" "What a horrible face!" and "I can't stand it!" In the next panel, we see that it looks precisely like Hitler. (In the end, the Hitler-like monster flies away because, as it turns out, Bumble stole a "fershlugginer" bird brain!) The following December, *Mad* parodied the 1951 play and 1953 movie, *Stalag 17*, as "Stalag 18!" (#18, 12/54). Here the overweight and aging Kommandant, named Johann Sebastian Shmaltz, complains: "Oh for der good old days ven dey made us Nazis in der movies, tough, good-looking guys mit der blonde crew-haircut . . . mit der snappy uniforms mit der daggers in der belts" (28). Yet there is no mention of the Holocaust, given both pieces' publication during the mid-1950s. At the height of the Cold War, the resurrection of West Germany as an anti-communist ally was in full swing and hence overt discussion of the extermination of European Jewry was somewhat more muted, before the appearance in English of *The Diary of Anne Frank* (1952).

Such a representation would not come for another decade at least. In 1967, the "Mein Kamp Humor Dept." parodied the television show *Hogan's Heroes*, which ran on CBS between 1965 and 1971 in "Hokum's Heroes" (Davis and Siegel #108, 1/67). The sitcom starred Bob Crane as the titular character who was incarcerated in a World War II German POW camp, and Werner Klemperer played his kommandant, Colonel Wilhelm Klink. *Mad* attempted to demonstrate "the idiocy of a program which would have fun with a time when there was such horror going on and make it seem so light" (Reidelbach 83). Writer Larry Siegel reported that he was annoyed by the program's sensibility: "I resented the fact that that they were making the Germans so cute, and these guys were sitting in prison. I was over there, and I saw what it was really like" (Reidelbach 83). In the cartoon strip, Colonel Hokum is scared because, as he tells Colonel Klunk,

I know what TV Networks are like! This show is so successful that there's bound to be imitations! Soon, there'll be other funny shows about Allied soldiers in Prisoner of War Camps . . . dozens of them! And people will get sick of our shows. You know how TV trends go! (8)

He informs the Colonel that he is taking his men out of the prisoner of war camp and is moving them to a much funnier show, entitled "Hochman's Heroes."

The final page of the parody reveals his vision (see fig. 1). We see a splash panel showing what would eventually happen if shows such as *Hogan's Heroes* continued. The headline announces, "And here it is . . . the brand new weekly TV situation comedy featuring that gay, wild, zany, irrepressible bunch of World War II concentration camp prisoners . . . those happy inmates of 'Buchenwald' known as . . . 'Hochman's Heroes.'" The panel features shaven-headed prisoners, wearing the striped uniforms of concentration camp inmates, while lounging on their bunks.



Figure 1: Taking the Second World War POW sitcom, *Hogan's Heroes*, to its logical conclusion, *Mad* unveils "Hochman's Heroes," a sitcom set in Buchenwald concentration camp. Conceptually overlaid with the typical Jewish American youth summer camp, these prisoners are a happy group having a great time, thus praising the merits of the Nazi concentration camp system. From *Mad* #108, 1/67:9. © EC Publications.

But Buchenwald has been conceptually overlaid with the typical Jewish American youth summer camp. Thus these prisoners are drinking champagne, beer, and cocktails, eating chicken, smoking cigars, and generally having a whale of a time, while praising the merits of the Nazi concentration camp system. One prisoner tells another, “What a ‘fun’ Concentration Camp this ‘Buchenwald’ is!” The reply comes, “You bet! It’s fun, fun, fun—day and night, without let-up!” Another, who is pouring champagne over himself, announces, “I’ve been in some fantastic German Concentration Camps but this one is by far the most fantastic of all!” Yet another says, “Every night, I thank God for the pleasure He’s given Jews like me during World War II! When I think of how close Hitler got to being killed in that bomb plot!”¹ Another inmate avers: “Wait’ll you see the latest gag we’re gonna pull on the guards over at the Crematorium! Boy, it’s a hot one.” The Kommandant tells Hochman, “Herr Hochman, your Inmate’s Baseball Team iss terrible! you know vot? I t’ink I’ll send your pitcher to ze showers! Get it? SHOWERS? Ha, ha, ha, ha, ha!” A smug Hochman responds, “Kommandant, you know what? You’re a gasser! Do you dig? GASSER? Ha, ha, ha, ha.”

Mad’s vision of a television sitcom, based on the Nazi death camps, came a mere 22 years after the end of the Second World War. At the same time, *Mad* could not resist attacking its fellow American Jews in the entertainment industries, either. After all, many of them staffed the offices of the big television companies. The very fact that they would sacrifice their principles for profit indicates a great deal about the willingness of modern Jews to ignore the tragedies of the past and do business in the present. The parody also attacked the depths to which audiences, some of whom were surely Jewish, will sink to be entertained. In satirizing a hit show entitled *Hogan’s Heroes*, *Mad* attacked an American public willing to find humor, however grotesque, in the Third Reich. In that sense its strip was astutely prescient. Hitler, the Nazis, and the Holocaust become, in the words of Desser and Friedman, “another piece of fodder gobbled up by the era’s ravenous appetite for cultural kitsch” (156). In making the Nazis, Hitler, and the Holocaust a ripe subject for satirical exploitation, *Mad* followed in a (Jewish) tradition that stretched back some three decades. Its World War II parodies resembled those of Charlie Chaplin in *The Great Dictator* (1940) and Ernst Lubitsch in *To Be or Not to Be* (1942), both of which confronted the Nazi menace to expose it the best way they could. “Hokum’s Heroes” also anticipated Mel Brooks’s *The Producers* (1968) and its own parody of Holocaust commodification and trivialization. Perhaps only a Jewish humorous magazine could have produced such a satire as this.

Maybe such humor can be considered sick, bordering beyond the pale of good taste, but it paralleled that used by other Jewish stand-up comics of the 1950s and 1960s. Theodore Roszak observed the continuum across comedic forms: “*Mad* brought into the malt shops the same angry abuse of middle-class America which comics like Mort Sahl and Lenny Bruce were to begin bringing into the night clubs of the mid-fifties” (24). As Bruce famously said, “the world is sick and I’m the doctor. I’m a surgeon with a scalpel for false values,” adding, “I satirize many subjects that are particular sacred cows. In other words, I am a satirist basically. I am irreverent politically, religiously, or any other things that I think need discussing and satirizing” (Kercher 408). Such statements were just as applicable to *Mad*. What

David Kaufman wrote about Bruce's humor—that it was “chock-full of Jewish content, absolutely unique for its time. This content included Yiddish words and expressions, Jewish characters and scenarios, irreverent critiques of both Judaism and Christianity, and most important, the correlation of Jewish otherness with a subversive, iconoclastic attitude part beatnik and part hippie” (102)—is just as true, if not more so, of *Mad*. In fact, like *Mad*, Bruce began using Yiddish expressions in his act, not caring who did or did not understand them, or even whether anyone did (Epstein 171). *Mad*'s satire on Judaism, discussed above, resembled one of the most controversial segments of Bruce's routine, “Religions, Inc.” Homing in on Judaism, in particular, he described Reform rabbis as “so reformed they're ashamed they're Jewish” (Kercher 407), the same point made in the 1972 “*Mad* ‘Religion in America’ Primer” (Coker and Siegel #153, 9/72).

As Kercher points out, “In a manner consistent with that deployed by Ernie Kovacs, Harvey Kurtzman, and the Jewish American writers and artists at *Mad*, Bruce used parodies to take comic revenge on the shallow lies perpetrated by American popular culture” (399). This approach was particularly evident following the kidnapping, trial, and execution of Adolf Eichmann between 1960 and 1962, after which Bruce made shocking jokes about the Holocaust. In a redneck used car salesman's voice he would say, “Here's a Volkswagen pickup truck that was just used slightly during the war carrying the people back and forth to the furnaces.” Or he would hold up a newspaper with the headline, “Six Million Jews Found Alive in Argentina.” As Epstein explains,

The shock of such “jokes” came not only from the inappropriateness of joking about the Holocaust, but also from the fact that very few people even discussed it at all. Bruce's [and *Mad*'s] provocative joking forced Americans to recall what had already been discarded as forgotten history or simply repressed. (171)

A very pertinent question here is: who influenced whom?

These similarities are surely no coincidence, for prior to taking over the editorship of *Mad*, Feldstein had been attempting to sell a magazine conceived as a showcase for new talent. “I wanted guys like Lenny Bruce to have a place of publication,” Feldstein recalled (Gluckson 85). Although he never succeeded in securing a contribution from Bruce, taking advantage of *Mad*'s New York City location, Feldstein did tap the best talent flowing through radio, nightclubs, and Broadway for *Mad* (Rodman 173). As he explained, “I was trying to get names into the magazine, like Bob [Elliott] and Ray [Goulding], and Ernie Kovacs. Bob and Ray gave me some scripts of theirs to adapt. They agreed, and I got Tom Koch—his name was on the script—and I called him up, and said, ‘Do you want to write for *Mad*?’ He said, sure!” (Gluckson 84). Among those whose verbal material that he used, or who gave him permission to reprint and render their material into visual form, were (in addition to those mentioned above) Orson Bean, Carl Reiner, Wally Cox, Andy Griffith, Tom Lehrer, Henry Morgan, J. Fred Muggs, Jean Shepherd, Paul Krassner, Ernie Kovacs, Al “Jazzbo” Collins, and Danny Kaye. From issue 31 in January 1957 through issue #55 in June 1960 (initially consistently but then only sporadically

towards the end), Feldstein prominently listed on the cover a broad range of guest celebrity contributors. Impressed with the work of Jules Feiffer, who began contributing cartoons to *The Village Voice* in 1956, *Mad* invited him to contribute. An excerpt from those cartoons ran in November 1958 as “Sick, Sick, Sick” (#42); however, as Rodman points out, these contributions were secured “circuitously, by the acquisition of permission directly from the publisher, rather than through any desire on Feiffer’s part to link himself to *Mad*” (177).

Many of these celebrity contributors were Jewish comedians and personalities. They supplied the text, and *Mad*’s artists did the rest, transforming the latest radio, television, and stand-up humor of the day into comic book magazine material. One of the most prominent contributors was Sid Caesar, who employed the comedic-writing talents of Mel Brooks, Woody Allen, Larry Gelbart, and Neil Simon. Rodman has noted, “In the text-heavy situational humor of the *Mad* piece, Caesar’s protégé, writer Mel Brooks’ authorial voice and Borscht Belt terminology comes through. It’s evident that he had a hand in the contribution, however uncredited” (Rodman, 174). Therefore, it is also possible that *Mad* showcased the uncredited comedy of Allen, Gelbart, and Simon. For example, “A Mad Guide to Art Films” (Siegel and Woodbridge #83, 12/63) featured a made-up Japanese art-house movie called “Rosh-Hoshona, Myer Moore,” playing on the name of the Jewish New Year festival. Did this provide the inspiration for Allen’s movie *What’s Up Tiger Lily?* (1966), in which he took a Japanese spy film and overdubbed it with dialogue that had nothing to do with the plot of the original film? Under Allen’s direction, it became a James Bond spoof in which Phil Moscowitz (Tatsuya Mihashi) tries to find the secret recipe for egg salad, a Jewish delicatessen staple.

All in all, *Mad* functioned as a secular Talmud. Like the Talmud, it was inter-textual, bringing in a range of other texts into its purview. In order to make the most of its humor, its readers were required to be versed in Western culture, both high and low, as well as middlebrow. It even had Talmud-style formatting. In what was known as the “chicken fat” method, pioneered by Will Elder, the frame was filled with details, and no space was wasted. The schmaltz was laid on thick, piling joke upon joke upon joke. Side jokes abounded, such as the sacks of kosher hams in a North Pole cave or Dr. Frank N. Stein’s assistant reading a Yiddish newspaper. Like the Talmud, *Mad* was self-referential: in one spread it referred to the “Chicken Fat” by “Seymour Cohen.” Inside Frank N. Stein’s creation, he has placed a jar of “Instant Chicken Fat,” and its “Special ART issue” (#22, 4/55), was devoted wholly to the story of “Bill (Chicken Fat) Elder.” “Nothing more Jewish could be imagined than the infant ‘shmearing’ chicken fat on towels, bald heads, visitors’ dresses, and convenient walls – illustrated in color with thousands of blue and red lines” (Kitchen and Buhle 106). The column stated, “Today those shmears ... are hung in various museums and signed with Elder’s various pen names such as ‘Braque,’ ‘Matisse,’ ‘Picasso,’ etc.”

Mad’s alternative Jewish sensibility permeated the entire magazine. It was iconoclastic, held no golden calves or even tablets of stone. It showcased the best Jewish comedy talents of the 1950s and 1960s, while anticipating what was to come from those of the later ’60s, ’70s, and ’80s, including Woody Allen, Mel Brooks, and the team of Zucker-Abrahams-Zucker. It was thus surely no coincidence that *Mad*

artist Jack Davis went on to design one-sheet posters including Allen's *Bananas* among many other films (1971). In the final analysis, *Mad* of the 1950s and 1960s very much articulated the position of the Jew in genteel (read *gentile*) society: one who does not quite belong.

Notes

¹ Note how, in deference to Orthodox Jewish tradition, Siegel has capitalized the word, "He," when referring to God.

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