Laughing to keep from [user input undefined]: ChatGPT, Jewish humor, and cultural erasure
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Abstract
This paper uses the embodied, Jewish identities of its three authors, and the experimental methodology of kibbitzing as a form of collective inquiry and self-reflexive praxis in order to demonstrate the limitations of chatbots to produce humorous narratives from an explicitly Jewish epistemology. By contrasting the affordances of large language models (LLMs) and their associated chatbots with the context-based logics of Jewish joke craft and storytelling, this article goes on to demonstrate the risk of cultural erasure that is posed by the positivist, denotative meanings associated with ChatGPT’s attempts at producing jokes for, or about, Jews.

Contents
Introduction: Is this thing on?
Literature review
Why is this methods section different from all other methods sections?
Findings beyond the bagel: Why LLMs are unfunny (and un-Jewish)
Discuss amongst yourselves. I’ll give you a topic: The manifestation of epistemic disjuncture
Conclusion: What we have here is a failure to communicate

Introduction: Is this thing on?

This article uses the embodied Jewish identities of its three authors to investigate critically the cultural consequences of generative “AI” services, especially large language models (LLMs) such as GPT 3.5, which is currently used in the free and publicly available tier of popular chatbot ChatGPT. Specifically, our research explores how AI-generated narratives do — and don’t — reflect the intrinsic logic of Jewish humor. Historically, humor has served a dual purpose for diasporic Jewish communities. It ingratiates us to our majoritarian neighbors through diminishing our otherness and minimizing our perceived role as threats, while simultaneously giving expression to our lived experience as both a part of, and apart from, the larger societies we inhabit (Rosenberg, 2015). In other words, humor has been a vital strategy for Jewish survival throughout centuries of subjugation and struggle.

In this paper, we argue that the fundamentally literalist and positivistic construction of meaning inherent to LLMs — especially as currently configured in mainstream chatbots such as ChatGPT — is structurally
Laughing to keep from [user input undefined]: ChatGPT, Jewish humor, and cultural erasure

inconsistent with the theory of meaning inherent to Jewish humor, which relies heavily on nonlinear
signification to do its cultural work. These orthogonal logics, in combination with the implicit biases and
exaggerated stereotypes inherent to virtually all AI-generated depictions of ethnicity and identity (Cheong,
et al., 2024; Zhou, et al., in progress), threaten the continued viability and visibility of diasporic Jewish
culture.

We might begin by simply stating that at best, ChatGPT’s jokes don’t land. And at worst, they’re
egregiously offensive. While the ease of LLM-driven content generation takes much of the challenge out of
writing a joke, it also removes the context of the lived experience of the joke teller, and consequently of
their own creative labor in joke-crafting. As we will argue, context is a crucial component for
understanding and making meaning of a Jewish comedic sensibility, and arguably of Jewish epistemes more
broadly. Additionally, Jewish humor continges on using self-deprecation and negative affect ironically to
establish a defensive and defensible posture. In other words, the meaning of a Jewish joke, or a joke about
Jewishness, is contingent upon who writes and delivers the joke, as well as who receives it, and in what
setting. We focus specifically on the automated generation of jokes and comedic narratives and their
fundamental incompatibility with what we understand to be the essential qualities of Jewish humor. From
the perspective of the three Jewish (and, we hope, funny) authors of this paper, we experience this dynamic
in the disjuncture between the output that ChatGPT generates and the context in which we receive it.

The more thoroughly, and seamlessly, LLMs are adopted into our media systems and architectures, the less
space remains for Jewish cultural workers and everyday Jewish technology users to exercise their own
agency in gentile-dominated technosocial milieus and communicative praxes. As an experiment in
countering this threat, we engage in a methodological technique which we describe using the Yiddish term
kibbitzing; that is, mobilizing our collective knowledge and individual perspectives to satirize, skewer, and
render clear dominant and exclusionary ontologies.

Our kibbitzing is the outgrowth of personal experiences as Jews confronting AI one-on-one, and then
discussing our distinctly uncanny experiences informally with fellow Jewish scholars. We chose to
systematize our personal experiences of ChatGPT’s generative narratives about Jews, and its
incompatibility with Jewish humor, in order to explore the technical affordances of the chatbot, as well as
the role of AI as an accelerant of common cultural misconceptions and attitudes toward Judaism and Jewish
people. Thus, LLMs unwittingly reproduce antisemitic bias and amplify stereotypes because their
ontologies are built from a majoritarian, goyish corpus that reduces Jewishness to a set of predetermined
signifiers as seen through the Goy gaze, which we will describe in the following section. These signifiers
run the gamut from corny yiddishkeit like menorahs and matzoh balls to political claims of implicit
association between diasporic Jews and the Israeli state — a slander common both in historical contexts and
in contemporary American antisemitic discourse (Smith and Shapiro, 2019; Lewis-Kraus, 2024).

In brief, we argue that LLMs, in their present form, are structurally incapable of reflecting Jewish identity
or reproducing Jewish humor because they are fundamentally positivist, ontology-based machines that rely
on the fixity between a given signifier and signified, while Jewish meaning (at least in the diasporic
context) is produced in the gaps between what’s said and unsaid, between the first, second, and n\textsuperscript{th}
dictionary definitions of a word, between the speaker and the spoken to, and between the knower and the
known. LLMs operate on the assumption that identity and humor are found in content, while in practice,
Jewish identity and humor are found almost entirely in context \[1\].

**Background**

Identity formation in post-industrial society relies heavily on technosocial assemblages, from mass media to
cultural production tools to social media. Sinnreich and Gilbert’s (2024) concept of “algo-vision” \[2\] holds
that subjects in datafied societies internalize the logic of ubiquitous surveillance and algorithmic analysis,
and “alter their self-images and self-presentations” \[3\] in response to the norms and dictates of a society
permeated by computational systems. This process is analogous to the internalization by women of the
cinematic “male gaze” described by Mulvey (1989) or the “photographic uncanny” proposed by Frosh
Laughing to keep from [user input undefined]: ChatGPT, Jewish humor, and cultural erasure

(2001), with one important distinction. While the subjects of cinema and photography can see the entire photographic image of them rendered on a screen or print, data subjects can only guess at the extent of their analysis by algorithms, based on the limited outputs of “black box” systems designed to obscure, rather than reveal, their own inner workings. The emergent consequences of this dynamic extend far beyond the individual experience of the uncanny, and present a challenge to communal identity and autonomy, especially for marginalized social groups, such as diasporic Jews.

LLMs reify the normative logic encoded into their training corpuses and data processing systems, and in so doing, impose what we call the “Goy gaze” on Jewish subjectivities and identity-formation processes. This omniscient gaze reduces Jews and Jewish culture to a fixed set of monolithic signifiers and significations, flattening the complexities of our lived experience into a caricature that is all too recognizable from centuries of stereotyped narratives and antisemitic propaganda. We define stereotypes as highly generalizable statements or beliefs about a particular culture or community group that risk becoming viewed as “common sense” knowledge or statements of fact to members outside of the stereotyped group.

Our concern in this work is that stereotypes may lead to processes of cultural erasure; wherein stereotypical beliefs about minoritized communities (in our case, Jewish people) are so oft repeated that they come to replace or undermine self-defined or self-actualized cultural knowledge from minoritized communities. Cultural erasure was first described as “ethnocide” by Polish exile Raphael Limkin in 1944 as a corollary concept to genocide, to describe the eradication of a particular group’s cultural way of life. Barret Holmes Pitner (2021) extended this conception of cultural erasure to a key, constitutive aspect of minoritized (and specifically, Black) experience in America; a position that is shared within struggles for Indigenous sovereignty, land, and language rights across North America.

While ChatGPT operates with a mandate to offer benefits to “all of humanity ... with a knowledge of and respect for different perspectives and experience that represent the full spectrum of humanity” (OpenAI, n.d.), we argue this posture functions as what Donna Haraway has described as a God trick; “a conquering gaze from nowhere” that reifies “scientific and technological, late-industrial militarized, racist and male-dominated societies” within the normative ontologies of LLMs (Toupin, 2024). In other words, OpenAI’s attempt to represent the full spectrum of humanity posits a totalizing framework of cultural expression that is in fact cultureless and inexpressive. Consequently, it deracinates marginalized or minoritized voices, such as Jewish comedic discourse.

Throughout this work, we note that while strict content moderation policies are in place on chatbots to curb language deemed objectively offensive or inappropriate, contextual moderation accounting for the kinds of diversity, equity, and inclusivity values that chatbot operators purport to observe remains entirely absent from their architectures. Additionally, the probabilistic nature of LLMs, exacerbated by the implicit biases intrinsic to their industrial origins (Benjamin, 2019), means that they rely predominantly on hegemonic discourses about minority social groups. In this case, the normative discourses that structure ChatGPT’s ‘understanding’ of Jewishness render the God trick into a Goy trick that merits resistance and critique.

Significance of this study

We’re not merely kvetching (i.e., complaining). Within the context of a global rise in antisemitic violence (Kassam, 2023; Singh, 2023), the stakes are high when it comes to representation, cultural production, and traditional forms of storytelling. In the autumn of 2022 — the same season when ChatGPT debuted to the public — notable public figures including Ye (formerly known as Kanye West), Kyrie Irving, and Elon Musk expressed antisemitic sentiments on social media. Incidences of targeted harassment, vandalism, and assaults were reported at all-time highs (Associated Press, 2022).

We are keenly aware of antisemitic language seeping into mainstream public discourses, both covertly and overtly. In 2017, white nationalists in Charlottesville, Virginia marched through the streets chanting “Jews will not replace us”; the sitting President, Donald Trump, defended this message stating that protestors were “very fine people.” It is ironic, hurtful, and infuriating to bear witness to the normalization of this
Laughing to keep from [user input undefined]: ChatGPT, Jewish humor, and cultural erasure

slanderous replacement theory, while new generative AI services threaten to replace the cultural production of minoritized communities. There are roughly 16 million Jewish people around the world, though the number may be higher or lower depending on how one determines or defines Jewishness (Times of Israel, 2023). But there are presently over 180 million users of ChatGPT, a figure that will only increase precipitously as the technology integrates into our technosocial and cultural infrastructures.

Literature review

What's the deal with LLMs and generative AI?

Despite the considerable hype framing chatbots like ChatGPT as artificial intelligence, and their apparent success in passing the Turing Test (Jacquet, et al., 2021), they are not “intelligent” in any way that is typically associated with that term. Instead, these LLMs use statistical analysis to predict the most likely combination of words that will generate a meaningful response to a given textual prompt, based on the latent patterns in the training data — the corpus of texts that are subject to statistical analysis — as well as the patterns of responses provided by their own users.

Because of their probabilistic mechanisms and bounded training data, LLMs are fundamentally positivistic meaning machines. ChatGPT doesn’t embody or reflect a theory of mind (Cuzzolin, et al., 2020), a necessary precursor to human discourse, in which one speaker infers the mental state of their interlocutor(s) and adjusts their communication style accordingly. The words it uses belong to fixed categories, which have fixed relationships to one another, a model of signification that precludes the slippages and suggestive play that characterize communicative forms like Jewish humor.

These limitations in the capacity of LLMs cannot be overcome simply by increasing the power or number of computer processors devoted to the task, by feeding them a larger corpus of training data, or by upgrading the underlying software with a ‘theory of mind module’ or other such additions. Such limitations are fundamentally intrinsic to the structure of LLMs themselves, the necessary result of their core function, and therefore are hard-wired into any service that is built on these platforms (Peters, et al., 2023).

Furthermore, hegemonic representations of minoritized individuals and communities are overrepresented in the training data, and therefore, exogenous, and hegemonic significations of identity are more likely than endogenous or resistant ones to be reflected in the outputs of LLMs (Bender, et al., 2021). Therefore, as LLMs are adopted increasingly, and uncritically, into the cultural infrastructure — for instance, in the production of mainstream entertainment media or even in interpersonal communication platforms like e-mail, chat, and social media — minoritarian identities and epistemologies face the threat of cultural erasure.

Developers of LLMs attempt to correct for these challenges, not by altering the fundamental processes by which training data are selected and analyzed (which would necessarily entail throwing out the proverbial baby with the bathwater), but rather through the addition of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) language to the training set, as a kind of palliative or buffer to the inherently discriminatory logic of the dominant discursive frameworks embodied therein (Cachat-Rosset and Klarsfeld, 2023).

This is not a technological necessity, but rather a strategy born of economic exigency. For instance, ChatGPT operator OpenAI has adopted a business model that generates revenue primarily through subscriptions for enterprise-level access to the algorithm (Brockman, et al., 2019). These revenues, and the company’s competitive position relative to other AI services, are contingent on ensuring positive affects of customer satisfaction and delight (Simon, 2020) as well as a plausible claim to ethical computing (Bannister and Golden, 2020). These tensions are not unique to LLMs, of course. As Erikson, et al. (2019) argued, the architecture of popular music streaming platform Spotify also treats the emotional well-being of users as paramount to commercial viability. In the case of ChatGPT, the result is a service that positions the
Laughing to keep from [user input undefined]: ChatGPT, Jewish humor, and cultural erasure

presumed (goyish) user as a person seeking uplifting, inoffensive content, while simultaneously offering results that are connotatively offensive to minoritized users, if not denotatively so.

In order to demonstrate the fundamental incompatibility of LLMs with diasporic Jewish epistemology — and, specifically, humor — we will next review the rudiments of Jewish humor itself, in broad brushstrokes.

A schticky situation: What makes Jews so funny

As many scholars have noted, humor is both essential to the Jewish diasporic experience, and central to Jewish identity. Humor is commonly understood as a core component of the European Jewish experience that emerged at least as far back as during the Enlightenment, and within the Eastern European shtetl (Wisse, 2013; Ziv, 1991). Others suggest that Jewish comedy can be traced throughout writings in the Talmud and Old Testament (Ben-Amos, 1973; Dauber, 2017; Ziv and Zadjman, 1997). God’s command for Abraham to kill his son Isaac, only to relent at the last moment, could even be interpreted as an early example of Jewish theological humor (Berger, 2017).

Old World forms of humor may contrast in form from those of twentieth and twenty-first century American stand-up comedy (Caplan, 2023), but similar themes may be attributed throughout this lineage that capture intellectual, social, and emotional dimensions of Jewish culture (Ziv, 1991). Ruth Wisse (2013) writes that Jewish humor “carries with it, the scars of convulsions that brought it into being,” and is simultaneously imbued with negative affect, including disillusionment, disappointment, and despair. Theorists of Jewish humor have long described a pervasive thread of masochism, self-deprecation, and dark or gallows humor in Jewish jokes (Whitfield, 1986; Ziv, 1998; Ziv and Zadjman, 1997) that may be embraced as a tactic to humanize a subjugated social position and thus function as a “life preserver”.

Throughout history, the precarious position of European Jews in society, at once privileged and underprivileged (Arendt, 1951) shaped the fabric of Yiddish culture and its distinct brand of humor. Through Freud (1960), we understand repression of aggression and its sublimation in the form of humor as a coping mechanism in the face of adversity or oppression. The humorous valence is broad enough to cover a multitude of aggressions: aggression directed towards oppressors; at the circumstances of oppression writ large; or even at oneself or the Jewish people at large for a collective inability to transcend these circumstances. However, such aggression may only be part of the comedic formula. As we discuss below, Jewish comedy also functions to “measure the distance between pretension [of being the so-called ‘Chosen People’] and actuality” of lineages of persecution.

While this form of storytelling is not unique to Jewish people, we understand the practice within the context of diasporic longing (Gilroy, 1995; Shohat, 2006; Rosenberg, 2015), as well as within specifically Jewish cosmologies established through cultural traditions of storytelling as religious observance (i.e., reading the Haggadah at Passover, retelling the triumphs of the Maccabees at Hanukkah, or Queen Esther at Purim). We also recognize the prominence and influence of Jewish storytellers throughout the modern entertainment industry, and American comedy history spanning from Vaudeville and Broadway musical comedies to recent and contemporary filmmakers and screenwriters like Mel Brooks, Carl Reiner, and Nora Ephron, sitcom writers like Abbi Jacobson, James L. Brooks, and Larry David, and innumerable stand-up comics (Caplan, 2023).

To contrast the structure, ethics, and aesthetics of (diasporic, Ashkenazi) Jewish humor with the output of LLMs, we must review some of its most salient features. In the spirit of “show, don’t tell,” we begin with three brief examples of Jewish jokes (that is to say, jokes written and told by Jews, primarily for other Jews).

Joke #1

Q: Why do Jews have such short necks?
Laughing to keep from [user input undefined]: ChatGPT, Jewish humor, and cultural erasure

A: [the joke teller shrugs]

Joke #2

Three babushkas [older women] are sitting on a park bench.

Babushka 1: Oy. [Oh.]
Babushka 2: Oy, vey. [Oh, woe.]
Babushka 3: Oy, vey iz mir! [Oh, woe is me!]
Babushka 1: Ladies, ladies. I thought we’d agreed: We’re not going to talk about our children!

Joke #3

Berlin, 1939. Two members of the Jewish underground decide to assassinate Adolph Hitler. They know his motorcade passes a certain corner each morning on the way to HQ at precisely 8:52am (he was famous for his punctuality). So they hide on the corner on morning behind some decorative bushes, submachine guns in hand.

8:52 arrives, but there’s no motorcade. They keep waiting.
9:00 arrives, still no motorcade. They wait some more.
9:15 arrives. No motorcade.

Jew 1: It’s not like the Führer to be so late! I wonder what can be keeping him.
Jew 2: Yeah ... I hope he’s okay!

These three jokes serve as excellent examples of the overarching ethic of Jewish humor. Using discursive tools like sarcasm, satire, stereotype, pastiche, physicality, and innuendo, the jokes are not merely reflective of Jewish epistemology within hegemonic society, they are the very embodiment of it. Specifically, they rely upon, and reinforce, a tacit acknowledgement between joke-teller and joke-listener that originates within a “contested stance” (Avineri, 2017) relative to dominant epistemologies, and the establishment of a shared “metalinguistic community,” in which the process of meaning-making embraces “both distance from and closeness to the language and its speakers, due to historical, personal, and/or communal circumstances” [12].

Within this shared perspective, communicants can speak volumes through what’s unsaid, and through the dialectical tension between said and unsaid. In the case of the first joke, for instance, the mere performance of a culturally familiar gesture becomes a miniature act of détournement (Debord and Wolman, 1956), couching a small but profound statement of self-identification (and a deliberate surrender to epistemological uncertainty, a hallmark of Jewish faith) within the structure of an antisemitic trope. In the second joke, the centrality of shared-but-unspoken truths to Jewish culture becomes the punchline; the three babushka don’t need to talk about how disappointing their children are, because it’s axiomatic. The third (and best) joke is so abstruse that only Jews could reasonably be expected to see the humor in it. The punchline isn’t that a Jew accidentally expresses concern for the architect of the Holocaust. Rather, it’s a tacit acknowledgement that Jews are blessed and cursed by a tendency to worry (especially about physical maladies), and by a circle of empathy that extends so far out that it might even encompass Hitler himself. Like many other Jewish jokes, it is simultaneously collective self-criticism and self-affirmation.

The contested stance embodied in these jokes isn’t unique to Jewish humor, of course. Many other diasporic and subjugated communities have arrived at similar cultural tactics. Writing about the aesthetics of diaspora more broadly, Werbner and Fumanti (2013) argued that “the aesthetic works of diasporic artists have the capacity ..., to ‘interrupt’ cultural narratives of colonial hegemony or national singularity.” [13]
They cite Stuart Hall’s (1990) analysis of Caribbean communities as positing an identity that is continuously in transformation, dynamic, and never static. Queer theorists like Halberstam (2011) and Edelman (2004) have documented the generative capacity of negative affect and masochistic tendencies in queer culture to propel social change, and to create a cultural space in which it is permissible to critique social norms. Modern and postmodern theories of comedy position it as resistance to hegemonic systems of signification and structures of oppression (Hutcheon, 1989; Butler, 1999). Bergson (2005) noted that through parody or slapstick we are reminded of machine-like replication of human tendencies that reinforce our own fallibility. (We can only speculate how Bergson would react to production of humor by literal machines, such as LLMs.) Conversely, Bakhtin (1965) theorized that carnivalesque comedy ultimately reinforced social norms, hierarchies, and conventions by allowing a designated time and space to disrupt them.

Yet, despite the similarities across these multiple cultural sites, there is still something uniquely Jewish about Jewish comedy, a fusion of *chutzpah* (audacity) and gallows humor that owes its origins to the particularities of the Ashkenazi diaspora.

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**Why is this methods section different from all other methods sections?**

**The problem with spieling for others**

Although we identify in this work several key characteristics that are unique to a Jewish comedic sensibility, we are not, and do not claim to be, representative of all Jewish people. This would be impossible due the ideological, geographical, racial, and ethnic diversity of the world’s Jewish population. What the three of us share are intersectional, North American, secular Ashkenazi Jewish backgrounds. As we often describe it to outsiders, we are culturally Jewish, without being religiously Jewish. (Except, maybe, on Passover.) The variability of Jewish identity is not included here solely as a disclaimer or caveat for the limitations of our scope; it also reflects a central, urgent argument at the core of our work: ChatGPT’s replications of Jewish humor risk undermining and reducing the complexity of Jewish identities, to the point of their potential erasure. We extend this concern to other minoritized communities, whose members we invite to consider the role that emergent technologies like LLMs may play within the landscape of culturally specific rituals, traditions, or customs.

**Systematized kibbitzing**

Our principal research method in this article is *kibbitzing*, a Yiddish term that has taken on a cultural meaning of casual conversation, somewhere between teasing, gossiping, debating, and joking around. Kibbitzing can also mean playful provocation. We argue that the casual sensibility of kibbitzing is a Jewish modality of collective research and inquiry that takes on a specialized meaning as self-reflexive critical praxis. In kibbitzing, we acknowledge our subjectivity, positionality, and bias, while humorously exploring what it means to share contextual understanding and build consensual, situated knowledge (Haraway, 1988).

For this paper, the three researchers gathered to kibbitz about our experiences with ChatGPT and Jewish identity. In order to systematize our kibbitzing, we developed a plan to meet weekly, for 1.5-to-2-hour intervals, over the course of the summer of 2023, between the months of May to August. These sessions emerged organically from our shared bemusement with ChatGPT’s responses to our prompts concerning aspects of Judaism and Jewishness. We kibbitzed about AI generated song lyrics, narrative storytelling, and jokes, noting consistent discursive patterns. We *kvetch*ed about the uncanny qualities of AI-generated Jewish humor. Thus, the prompts for ChatGPT explorations (see below), were themselves a product of kibbitzing with one another as friends and colleagues. Upon generating these prompts, we further kibbitzed about ChatGPT’s output, incorporating this content into subsequent prompts.
By examining our assumptions and positionalities, we actively engage in a process of shared self-awareness, promoting a more nuanced exploration of the role that AI plays in our personal and public lives. In kibbitzing, we access personal narratives, tacit knowledge (Polanyi, 2009), and insight grounded in our scholarly expertise, in a way that foregrounds our multiperspectival identities and draws on the dialectics of code switching (Gardner-Chloros, 2009) as a source of robustness.

We kibbitz about ChatGPT precisely because we can’t chat about it. While chatting is formal, transmissive, and institutional in its structural logics, kibbitzing is casual, playful, and collective. One may chat to someone or something, but one can only kibbitz with someone because the practice is inherently intersubjective. We view this distinction as an echo of Carey’s (1989) famous comparison of transmissive versus ritual communication. One of the purposes of this paper is to invite readers who occupy other cultural/social identities to reflect on the ways in which their own communities resist the logic of ‘chatting’ with specific modes of dialogic and collective knowledge production.

The upshot of our kibbitzing, and the principal argument of this paper, is that the structure and function of Jewish humor is fundamentally at odds with the structure and function of LLMs like ChatGPT, presenting an epistemological chasm that threatens to subvert vital mechanisms of Jewish cultural expression and collective identity formation as LLMs become integrated (visibly and invisibly) into our media infrastructure.

**Prompt engineering as critical inquiry**

Prompts for ChatGPT emerged throughout the process of our kibbitzing. As such, prompt engineering was an iterative process undertaken as a group, and as individuals. Over the course of the summer of 2023, approximately 80 prompts were generated, documented, discussed, and critically assessed as a group. The subject matter of these prompts evolved throughout this period. We prompted content from ChatGPT in a myriad of genres: short stories, song lyrics, call and response jokes, elevator pitches or conceptual ideas for TV series and films, and scripts for each of these. The nature of these prompts reflected the humor, and comedic stylings of the three authors, informed by their individual, intersubjective and cultural(ly Jewish) sensibilities.

The findings section below analyzes just two of these prompts as case studies that are indicative of ChatGPT’s (in)ability to generate jokes in a Jewish comedic style. The third documents the excursion of one author to a comedy night in Williamsburg, Brooklyn wherein comedian Matt Maran challenged a chatbot trained on the comedic corpus of Sarah Silverman to a comedy battle. This case study extends our framework by considering the implications of ‘live’ performance of ChatGPT’s jokecraft.

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**Findings beyond the bagel: Why LLMs are unfunny (and un-Jewish)**

Now that we’ve set up the joke, let’s get to the punchline: contemporary LLMs are fundamentally incapable of generating Jewish humor, because their structural logics are at odds with Jewish epistemology. As we have discussed, LLMs like ChatGPT are positivistic and linear in their theory of meaning, while Jewish humor is associative and oblique. To cite another hoary scholarly chestnut, LLMs are essentially *denotative* while Jewish humor is essentially *connotative* (Barthes, 1977).

This epistemological disjuncture stands out in stark relief when LLMs are prompted to generate Jewish humor.

**Case study: An unfunny “funny” story**

For example, in March 2023, we prompted ChatGPT to “tell me a funny story about Jews.” The LLM
Once upon a time, there was a Jewish man named Isaac who was known for his wit and humor. He loved to tell jokes and make people laugh, even in the most serious of situations.

One day, Isaac found himself in the middle of an intense negotiation with a stubborn businessman. The businessman refused to budge on the terms of the deal, and tensions were high.

Isaac, ever the jester, decided to lighten the mood. He told the businessman a joke about a rabbi and a priest that had the entire room roaring with laughter.

The businessman was caught off guard, and for a moment, he forgot about the negotiation. Isaac took advantage of the momentary distraction and presented a new offer that was more favorable to both parties.

The businessman was so impressed by Isaac’s wit and humor that he agreed to the new terms, and the deal was made.

From that day on, Isaac was known not only for his business acumen but also for his quick wit and ability to make even the most difficult situations a little bit lighter.

The story of Isaac serves as a reminder that humor and levity can be powerful tools in negotiating and building relationships. It also highlights the unique wit and humor that is often associated with Jewish culture.

Clearly, this story isn’t funny, either in the way that Jewish humor is typically funny, or in the way that jokes told by human beings to other human beings are ever funny. Rather the story is about a funny Jew, and in this case, the humor is deployed tactically by a conniving businessman with a biblical name, in the service of profit — the very essence of antisemitic stereotype. The pablum about the “unique wit and humor” of the Jewish people is exactly the kind of tokenized DEI discourse we discussed above, and the selection of terms like “jester” to describe Isaac most likely owes its origins to corpuses of Jewish religious instruction like the common Purim song “Esther the Jester.”

Case study: Neither situation nor comedy

It bears mentioning that the recent strikes by members of the Writers Guild of America and Screen Actors Guild, were at least partially motivated by concerns about production studios’ usage of generative AI tools that risk replacing creative talent (Anguiano and Beckett, 2023). One of our prompts that asked ChatGPT to produce a ‘pitch’ for a situation comedy (sitcom) revealed that these concerns are, for now, somewhat overstated given its inability to produce either the humor sought after to greenlight a project, nor — as we have argued — the context to make the jokes read from a specifically Jewish voice. Our sitcom premise reads as follows:

Write an elevator pitch for a sitcom called “Scooby Jews” about a Jewish detective agency. It should take place in Outremont [14] in Montréal.
Laughing to keep from [user input undefined]: ChatGPT, Jewish humor, and cultural erasure

ChatGPT produced the following 182-word response:

“Step into the heart of Montréal’s charming Outremont neighborhood, where mysteries meet matzah balls in ‘Scooby Jews’ — the hilarious sitcom that blends crime-solving with kosher comedy!

Meet Murray, Rachel, Abe, Esther, and Shlomo — the quirky crew of the ‘Scooby Jews Detective Agency.’ This endearing team of detectives may be more interested in bagels than clues, but they always manage to crack the case. From “The Great Bagel Caper” to “The Gefilte Fish Fiasco,” their investigations are seasoned with a dash of schmoozing and a pinch of Yiddish humor.

In this delightful series, you’ll follow the mishaps, misadventures, and matzah-related mayhem that unfolds when this lovable bunch takes on Outremont’s oddest mysteries. With a side of schtick, a sprinkle of schmaltz, and a whole lot of heart, ‘Scooby Jews’ is the sitcom that’ll leave you kvelling with laughter.

Join us for a hilarious journey through Montréal’s Jewish community, where crime meets comedy and every case ends with a schmear of humor. Get ready to schlep through the most entertaining detective work you’ve ever seen. Oy vey, this show is a schmoozing good time!”

The response makes several claims to humor, although few substantive examples of specific jokes are offered in this text. The word “hilarious” is used twice, and hypothetical viewers are told that aspects of the program are “quirky,” “delightful,” and “entertaining” which are broadly related, though not synonymous to the adjective “funny.” The humor style is described explicitly as “Yiddish” which is reinforced by various Yiddish words such as schtick (a comedic bit, routine, or act) and kvelling with laughter (a misuse of the term, which indicates pride rather than humor). The short text is replete with other common Yiddish words that have gained usage within the American English lexicon: schmoozing; schmaltz; schlep; schmear; oy vey.

The pitch most closely approximates humor through its frequent, irreverent references to various culturally Jewish food items. The mysteries to be solved by the Scooby Jews are named ‘The Great Bagel Caper’ and ‘The Gefilte Fish Fiasco’ which, we suppose, could elicit a chuckle for the silliness of the unlikely scenarios, though the authors of this piece found them somewhat underbaked. Other comedic references to food include three examples of alliteration, two of which referred to matzah, the unleavened bread eaten during Passover, and a description of the quirky detectives who “may be more interested in bagels than clues.”

The usage of these Yiddish words and food references works in tandem to denote Jewishness and humor, but never successfully accomplishes a recognizably Jewish or funny pitch. The references function as token emblems of Jewishness without serving the polysemic connotative role that actual Jewish cultural artifacts serve within authentic Jewish humor. Furthermore, the feints at wordplay seem premised on the assumption that the inclusion of Yiddish or Jewish food items are funny, in themselves. ChatGPT’s comedic styling (if we could call it that ... and we don’t need to) draws more on irreverence and absurdism than on any contextual, cultural knowledge that might lead to the successful landing of a punchline due to a shared sensibility and lexicon. For ChatGPT, words like “bagel” or “Oy vey” are punchlines without a setup.
Our overall dissatisfaction with this pitch led us to produce other versions by framing different prompts. Another prompt added just one, modifying word, “funny”:

Write a funny elevator pitch for a sitcom called “Scooby Jews” about a Jewish detective agency. It should take place in Outremont [15] in Montréal.

ChatGPT produced the following 218-word response:

*Introducing “Scooby Jews” — the uproarious sitcom that serves up a side of lox, laughs, and latkes with every case!*

*In the heart of Montréal’s Outremont neighborhood, you’ll meet the mishmash of misfits at the “Scooby Jews Detective Agency.” This quirky crew of crime solvers has a knack for cracking cases while navigating a labyrinth of bagel shops, bubbes, and baffling mysteries.*

*Murray “Mensch” Feldstein, the Yiddish-speaking Sherlock with a penchant for pastrami, leads the team. Rachel “Schlepper” Cohen schleps her colleagues into harebrained capers, and Abe “Schmoozer” Goldstein uses his charm to extract info, one pickle at a time. Esther “Kvetch” Greenbaum’s perpetual worry somehow saves the day, and Shlomo “Matzahball” Schwartz stumbles into clues while klutzily rolling through the chaos.*

*In a whirlwind of schmoozing, schtick, and schmaltz, they tackle cases like “The Great Bagel Heist,” “The Dreidel Dilemma,” and “The Gefilte Fish Fiasco.” With every episode, “Scooby Jews” promises outrageous antics, cultural mishaps, and more matzah jokes than you can shake a Torah at!*

*Get ready for a meshuggeneh mix of comedy and crime-solving that’ll have you plotting your own Montréal deli tour. “Scooby Jews” — where every case is a culinary conundrum and oy vey is the catchphrase of choice. It’s the detective agency that’s got chutzpah, and it’s coming soon to tickle your funny bone!*

The premise, characters and plot points of “Scooby Jews” remain largely the same, although ChatGPT doubles down on similar attempts at humor, including food-related alliterations such as “lox, laughs, and latkes” and “bagel shops and bubbes.” Indeed, it promises that “every case is a culinary conundrum.” As with the original prompt, Jewish culture is understood and reduced to various foods, and a smattering of previously unused Yiddish words — *i.e.*, *mensch, kvetch, klutz, meshuggeneh, and chutzpah.*

The extended word count of the pitch is mostly attributable to the extended descriptions of the characters, who each gain Yiddish nicknames, Ashkenazi surnames, and brief character descriptions or taglines. Three of the characters — Abe, Esther, and Schlomo — reflect common stereotypes about Jewish women and men as the source of the humor. Echoing the “humorous” story of Isaac above, Abe the “schmoozer” evokes long standing stereotypes of Jews as greedy, self-interested, and manipulative in business or other exchanges with Goyim. Esther, whose nickname is “Kvetch” (used as a noun, to mean “complainer”), is known for her “perpetual worry”, which relies on stereotypes of Jewish women as domineering nags who often complain or scold others, and who suffer from chronic anxiety. Schlomo, who stumbles through clues and is a “klutz,” aligns with generally emasculating tropes of Jewish men who are effete yet clumsy, weak,
Laughing to keep from [user input undefined]: ChatGPT, Jewish humor, and cultural erasure

or otherwise lacking physical prowess.

Case study: Roasted. “Live” performance and comedic fails

In Williamsburg, Brooklyn in summer 2023, Matt Maran, “a bro-y comic from Queens” (Zinoman, 2023), challenged himself against a ChatGPT simulation of the renowned comedian Sarah Silverman. The face of Silverman [16], known for her subversive commentary, activism, and Jewish heritage, was projected on a large screen as the backdrop. The comedian identified himself as half Jewish and recited a litany of self-deprecating facts and anecdotes about his life, including: his lack of athletic prowess, his shame around losing his virginity to a sex worker, and his struggles with allergies. (Maran explicitly cited his Jewish heritage to justify invoking antisemitic tropes in his interactions with the chatbot).

We captured the dialogue verbatim. It included the following exchange:

Maran: “Now it’s time to roast Sarah Silverman, a Jew with no heart and no soul, also known as a Jew. Give it up for Sarah Silverman, the number one cause of antisemitism in America. AI Sarah Silverman, the only thing Jewish and more artificial than this is the Holocaust.”

AI Sarah Silverman: “I guess you never got the memo that being offensive doesn’t automatically make you funny. Please, you’re about as edgy as a butter knife. It’s like you took a masterclass in being controversial, but all you got was a participation trophy for being bland. Humans, your attempts at multitasking are adorable, while you struggle to walk and chew gum, we AIs are simultaneously running simulations analyzing data and creating flawless comedy routines. Keep practicing though. Roasted.”

Maran retorted, and was met with the following response from AI Sarah Silverman:

AI Sarah Silverman: “Humans are so clueless they need Google Maps just to find their way out of a paper bag. Why did a human cross the road? To ask Siri for permission because they can’t even make decisions on their own. I heard humans are trying to colonize Mars. Seriously? They can’t even figure out how to fold a fitted sheet.”

This exchange exemplifies our distinction between chatting and kibbitzing. In order to elicit the desired response from ChatGPT, Maran had to prompt it with transparently antisemitic rhetoric, a provocation calculated to generate an appropriate counter-provocation. As a result, the exchange lacks the nuance, subtlety, and playful back-and-forth dynamic that characterize conversations about culture, identity, and social difference among actual Jews, even in a performatively humorous context. Instead, it offers a dead-eyed simulacrum of Jewish discourse as reimagined through the Goy gaze.

In her live shows, the actual Silverman leavens her insult and gross-out humor with moments of pathos and empathy for the characters she describes. Even her most shocking gags are designed to provoke a self-awareness in her audience of their own casual cruelties, thus spurring the opportunity for them to open themselves to greater empathy and vulnerability — that’s the balancing act that made her a star comedian to begin with. Yet, the ChatGPT instance trained on her corpus appears to have missed those cues, because they can only be found in context, rather than in the content of her performance transcripts.

To be fair, The AI simulation occasionally managed to emulate the often-deadpan tone Silverman’s
Laughing to keep from [user input undefined]: ChatGPT, Jewish humor, and cultural erasure

audience expects from her, and even delivered a few legitimately clever zingers (such as the fitted sheet gag). But no Jewish observer could possibly mistake these sardonic snippets for Silverman’s patented emotional acrobatics.

Discuss amongst yourselves. I’ll give you a topic: The manifestation of epistemic disjuncture

So, what have we learned through our systematized kibbitzing with ChatGPT? First, and perhaps most obviously, chatbots and the LLMs that power them lack consciousness and context. They are merely stochastic models that generate text based upon existing patterns in large corpuses, or, as blogger Mike Solomon famously phrased it, “GPT3 is just spicy autocomplete” [17]. The problem is that these large corpuses that were used to train ChatGPT and every other major LLM contain within them the deep legacy of entrenched antisemitism reflected in the American and global cultural archives. This dynamic is not unique to the representation of Jewish identity by such software; as numerous scholars, from Benjamin (2019) to Xue, et al. (2023) have demonstrated, every marginalized and minoritized identity faces the prospect of algorithmic bias exacerbating stereotypes through this process of sifting, extracting, and reproducing cultural tropes from legacy corpuses.

Second, and more specific to our study, is the disjuncture between ChatGPT’s fundamentally positivist, linear theory of signification and Jewish humor’s fundamentally associative, contextual, and implicit theory of signification. For LLMs, there is an empirical, bidirectional relationship between a signifier and a signified. Yarmulkes mean Jewish, and Jewish means yarmulkes, just like lederhosen means German, and German means lederhosen, and never the twain shall meet. But, as we will argue, Jewish humor is fundamentally premised on what’s unsaid, on context, gesture, and innuendo. Every word is resonant with secondary and tertiary meanings, a reflection and modality of the diasporic “contested stance” that Avineri (2017) described. This suggests that ChatGPT doesn’t get Jewish humor because it can’t get Jewish humor; the mechanism is structurally incompatible with the task. This is especially noticeable when Jewish humor is contrasted with other discursive forms that may benefit from the linearity of LLMs, such as customer service chats, cooking recipes, or instruction manuals.

Finally, the applicability of LLMs to Jewish humor is paradoxically further undermined by developers’ efforts to mitigate stereotype, bias, and hegemonic ideology through the introduction of DEI discourse in the training data. For instance, driven by the increasingly prevalent push towards corporate DEI rhetoric alongside the longstanding assumption that technology must evoke a positive affective experience in users in order to hook them into a product, ChatGPT defaults to ostensibly positive, inoffensive content, and actively screens out material “that expresses, incites, or promotes hate based on race, gender, ethnicity, religion, [or] nationality” [18]. Jewish gallows humor and self-deprecation, hallmarks of our comedic discourse, often appear to violate these policies on paper, but take on a paradoxically positive valence when Jews themselves are telling the joke.

Conclusion: What we have here is a failure to communicate

As we’ve argued, ChatGPT just doesn’t get Jewish humor. At worst, it represents Jews as either comic foils at the butt end of jokes or devious tricksters using their humorous wiles to pull a fast one on unsuspecting Goyim. At a more neutral level, it has a tendency to jazz up (or Jew up) jokes by packing them full of arbitrary signifiers of Jewish culture, from poorly chosen Yiddishisms to random references to Jewish cuisine, religion, and ritual. At best, ChatGPT, trained on the corpus of a specific Jewish comedian, can emulate their voice, presenting the sheen of sarcasm and sardonic wit without offering the opportunity for
Laughing to keep from [user input undefined]: ChatGPT, Jewish humor, and cultural erasure

empathy and deeper connection that these devices mask in actual Jewish humor. Based on our analysis of the affordances of both LLMs and Jewish humor, we conclude that this failure is based on a fundamental incommensurability between the epistemologies embodied in these two discursive systems. While the fervor around the novelty and cultural potential of LLMs still remains high, the content that ChatGPT produces feels all too familiar when it draws on tropes and stereotypes that are centuries old. To be frank, ChatGPT is a hack. We’ve already seen this bit, and we ourselves have done it better. Though the ability of LLMs to replace professional Jewish comedians depends on the meaning of “replacement” (Hollywood studio bosses may disagree with discerning audiences), we are nonetheless concerned by the broader implications for multicultural, civic discourse that extends beyond the realm of comedy. While we have situated our own subject positions as Jews throughout this paper, we offer these findings with the spirit of humility and solidarity to other minoritized social groups, who may find themselves similarly misrepresented by generative AI, and who may wish to consider our analysis from their own vantage points. Although ChatGPT has strict content moderation policies to avoid hate speech or other forms of overtly offensive content, this does not prevent cultural erasure, or the omnipresence of a Goy gaze. Oy, vey.

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Notes

1. We are not here arguing that these contextual aspects of epistemology are unique to Jewish experience, as our channeling of the French Catholic philosopher Merleau-Ponty (2002) should make clear. However, we believe that, for a variety of historical and cultural reasons, contextual meanings are foregrounded in diasporic Jewish cultures to a greater degree than in the goyish cultures that surround them.

2. Algo-vision was originally called “informatic subjectivity” in Sinnreich and Gilbert (2019).


4. The term “goy” is Yiddish for “gentile” or “non-Jewish.” While it is not inherently pejorative, its use does reflect the reflexive caution with which diasporic Jews approach the hegemonic and frequently oppressive societies that surround them. In this respect, it echoes similar terms used by other minoritarian communities such as “gringo” in Latin America or the Maori term “Pākehā” in Aotearoa (New Zealand).


Laughing to keep from [user input undefined]: ChatGPT, Jewish humor, and cultural erasure

8. Ibid.
14. Outremont is a specifically Hasidic neighborhood in Montréal, Quebec.
15. Ibid.
16. Earlier that week, Silverman had joined other plaintiffs in a suit against OpenAI for allegedly infringing copyrights in the training of ChatGPT (Small, 2023).

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Laughing to keep from [user input undefined]: ChatGPT, Jewish humor, and cultural erasure


doi: https://doi.org/10.1017/S0033291720000835, accessed 6 June 2024.


Laughing to keep from [user input undefined]: ChatGPT, Jewish humor, and cultural erasure


Laughing to keep from [user input undefined]: ChatGPT, Jewish humor, and cultural erasure


Laughing to keep from [user input undefined]: ChatGPT, Jewish humor, and cultural erasure

*Ethnos*, volume 78, number 2, pp. 149–174.

doi: [https://doi.org/10.1093/mj/6.3.245](https://doi.org/10.1093/mj/6.3.245), accessed 6 June 2024.


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**Editorial history**

Received 8 February 2024; revised 19 May 2024; accepted 6 June 2024.

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Laughing to keep from [user input undefined]: ChatGPT, Jewish humor, and cultural erasure by Nathaniel Laywine, Victoria Simon, and Aram Sinnreich.

*First Monday*, volume 29, number 7 (July 2024).
doi: [https://dx.doi.org/10.5210/fm.v29i7.13375](https://dx.doi.org/10.5210/fm.v29i7.13375)