

You only think you do.

**The Simpsons have
skeletons in their closet.
And they're shaped
like menorahs...**

BY MARK I. PINSKY

The pink suburban house might well be the most recognizable American home in history, except maybe for the White House. It's near Moe's Bar and the Kwik-E-Mart and right next door to Ned, the nicest darn-diddelyest neighbor you could hope for. So many of us have spent 30 minutes there on Sunday nights over the past 18 years that a recent study found that 91 percent of American children and 84 percent of adults recognize its inhabitants—Homer, Marge, Bart, Lisa and baby Maggie.



The Simpsons, which originated as a series of one-minute animated shorts on the *Tracey Ullman Show* in 1987, is now in its 19th season, with more than 400 episodes broadcast; the show airs in 70 countries and has been nominated for 34 Emmys, winning 23. This past summer *The Simpsons Movie* raked in nearly half a billion dollars.

There is no question about the impact of the series on North American and, arguably, world culture. “*The Simpsons* is an inexhaustible repository of humor, invention and insight, an achievement without precedent or peer in the history of broadcast television, perhaps the purest distillation of our glories and failings as a nation ever conceived,” wrote *New York Times* film critic A.O. Scott in his review of the movie. “I have long been of the opinion that the entire history of American popular culture—maybe even of Western civilization—amounts to little more than a long prelude to *The Simpsons*.”

As fodder for satire, *The Simpsons* has taken on modern life’s major institutions: schools, government and corporations. But the show really began to break ground when religion was added to the list of targets. Considered too divisive by sponsors and programmers alike, the subject was off limits during prime time network television’s early years. Gradually and fitfully, faith found its way onto the small screen in the late 1980s and into the ’90s with uplifting, inspirational shows such as *Highway to Heaven*, *7th Heaven* and *Touched by an Angel*. But it wasn’t until *The Simpsons* took aim that religion was portrayed in a way that more closely mirrored its complex presence in American life.

The Simpsons are a typical Middle-American Protestant family in a typical city, Springfield (named after another famous television city from the 1954-1960 series, *Fathers Knows Best*). They say grace at meals, read and refer to the Bible, pray out loud and, on Sundays, dutifully attend services at the First Church of Springfield, part of an invented denomination called the Western Branch of American Reform Presbyterianism Church.

But running beneath the *Father Knows Best* veneer is a busy, ever-moving religious world in which there is much to explore. One note-

worthy path, albeit circuitous, through this world is the Jewish one, which, like much of the show, holds surprises. One Sunday evening, when a door to the cluttered storage closet in the Simpsons’ house swings open, it reveals, for just a fleeting moment, a shiny object seemingly out of place amid the suburban detritus: a Hanukkah menorah. What is this ritual candelabrum doing in the home of a Gentile, lower-middle-class family in a small, overwhelmingly Christian city? A home we thought we knew so well...

CHELM: SPRINGFIELD’S SISTER CITY



Although it exists in a different time and place, Springfield, population 30,700, could easily be a sister city of Chelm. Long before *The Simpsons* became a cultural phenomenon, Jewish folklore and literature had already mastered the art of making light of village idiots. Many wrote stories of this sort, but the finest were Isaac Bashevis Singer’s tales of Chelm—the iconic Eastern European shtetl of Jewish fools, buffoons and simpletons, all of whom think they are as wise as scholars.

“The oldest absurdist jokes are the ones about Chelm, which date back to the 19th century,” writes Rabbi Joseph Telushkin in *Jewish Humor: What the Best Jewish Jokes Say About the Jews*. “The citizens of Chelm, an actual city in Poland, were for unknown reasons stigmatized as idiots. Most Chelm jokes are distasteful... However, the best Chelm jokes are not about stupidity, but rather about a naïveté so extraordinary that the listeners are catapulted to a new vision of reality.”

Excise the jokes and *The Simpsons* is a tragedy of operatic proportions—repeated failures and frustrations punctuated by the occasional, wacky, life-affirming reprieve that returns everything to the status quo. As is the case with the denizens of Chelm, the lives of the Simpson family and their neighbors are an ongoing chronicle of misfortune. No one in Springfield ever really succeeds in changing human nature, including his or her own. The characters are by turns stupid, ignorant, self-absorbed, lovelorn, venal and good-hearted.

The distinct sensibility of Chelm humor suffuses much of the program. “The show has a Jewish feel,” says Moshe Waldoks, a Boston-area rabbi and co-editor of *The Big Book of Jewish Humor*. “One of the essential characteristics of Jewish humor, historically, is parody—the characters on *The Simpsons* are an extension of that. Much of the show’s content is poking fun at authority. The idea of parody, of peeling away things we think are on the surface and getting to deeper things, is very Jewish.”

Other strands of Jewish humor run through the series. One comes direct from *The Harvard Lampoon*—a publication where Jews and Irish have traditionally congregated and from which many *Simpsons* writers hail: a sort of snarky iconoclasm. Another is the dark, rapid-fire angst of tumblers like Lenny Bruce and Don Rickles. “*The Simpsons* fits in with this kind of wisecracking comedic tradition, which stretches back to vaudeville, the Borscht Belt—the absolute nursery of Jewish comedy—and early radio and television,” says Robert Thompson, director of the Bleier Center for Television and Popular Culture at Syracuse University.

Walter Podrazik, co-author of *Watching TV: Six Decades of American Television*, muses that the humor of *The Simpsons* is, in many respects, analogous to that of *Your Show of Shows*, which featured Jewish comedians Sid Caesar, Mel Brooks and Carl Reiner in the early 1950s and where “the characters were not the ones in charge. They had to deal with life and whatever turns it imposed on them.” *The Simpsons*, adds Podrazik, takes this same approach to life—“where it’s you against the world and, mostly, the world wins. But you do have victories, and they always come in humor.”

Mel Brooks (who has “appeared” as himself on *The Simpsons*), perhaps best articulated what lies beneath so many Jewish jokes, and so many *Simpsons* jokes, when he said: “Humor is just another defense against the universe.”

A TOUR OF JEWISH SPRINGFIELD



As in many a North American city, Springfield’s Jews first settled downtown before fleeing to the suburbs, although they still return to the “old neighborhood” to dine at restaurants like Tannen’s Fatty Meats and Izzy’s Deli. Most seem to attend Springfield’s Orthodox synagogue, Temple Beth Springfield, just down the street from the First Church of Springfield. The two houses of worship are so close, in fact, that the church marquee once carried a decidedly non-ecumenical message: “No Synagogue Parking.”

The town’s small Jewish community is misunderstood in ways that are still common in small Protestant communities. Homer, for instance—our bald and overweight, “D’oh”-spouting everyman—laughs when he first hears Hebrew, thinking it’s a made-up language. In another episode, when he needs \$50,000 for a heart bypass, he goes to the rabbi, pretending to be Jewish in the only way he knows how. “Now, I know I haven’t been the best Jew, but I have rented *Fiddler on the Roof* and I will watch it.” (All he gets from the rabbi is a dreidel.) And at the elementary school, Principal Skinner fields an angry call from Superintendent Chalmers. “I know Weinstein’s parents were upset,” he stammers. “But, but, ah, I was sure it was a phony excuse. I mean, it sounds so made up: ‘Yom Kip-pur.’”

Then there is Bart, the ever-scheming son, who in one *Simpsons* comic book is drawn to Judaism, like a moth to a menorah, for the eight nights of Hannukah presents. He visits a rabbi and argues that if he became Jewish, he’d be a “trash-talkin’ spiky-haired *Seinfeld* with a Fox attitude.” But the rabbi predicts the boy won’t

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like the religion because “so much Judaism is like opera, the Lincoln-Douglas debates and the Atkins Diet, all rolled into one.” Bart gives it a shot nonetheless, especially pleased that he no longer has to do chores during Shabbat. But eventually, Bart decides not to convert, reporting to his sister Lisa: “Love the religion but, oy...I can’t handle the guilt.”

Only Lisa, the show’s wisest character, exhibits sensitivity in her encounters with Judaism. In the Exodus segment of one fanciful episode called “Simpsons Bible Stories,” her friend Milhouse is Moses. He has just led the Israelite slaves across the Red Sea, only to learn that what lies ahead is 40 years of wandering in the desert. But after that, he asks Lisa hopefully, “It’s clear sailing for the Jews, isn’t that right?” Lisa, unwilling to break the news of what the next 3,000 years hold, smiles tightly and says, “More or less.”

It’s Lisa who masters the art of Talmudic dialogue to come to the aid of Krusty the Clown, Springfield’s most famous Jew.

SPRINGFIELD’S MODEL JEW



Hershel Krustofski, better known as Krusty the Clown, hosts Lisa and Bart’s favorite TV show, a children’s program that features off-color gags and violent cartoons.

Descended from a long line of rabbis, Hershel always knew that his life’s desire was to make people laugh. But his rabbi father could not abide a clown in the family, and so parent and child didn’t speak a word to each other for 25 years, or until the episode “Like Father, Like Clown,” which aired in 1991 and won *The Simpsons* an Emmy. In some ways, “the story of Krusty is really the story of American Jews,” says Rabbi Simcha Weinstein, author of *Shtick Shift: Jewish Comedy in the Twenty First Century*.

In “Like Father, Like Clown”—written by Jay Kogen and Wally Wolodarsky (who enlisted the help of two rabbis as consultants)—Lisa and Bart attempt to reconcile a disconsolate Krusty with his father. Krusty’s Jewish identity is first

revealed in this third-season episode when he is asked to say grace before dinner at the Simpsons and recites the Hebrew blessing over bread, the *motzi*. At Lisa’s urging, he then tells the family his real name and describes his upbringing on the Lower East Side of Springfield and his estrangement from his father, who disowned his son after he chose the stage over yeshiva.

Lisa and Bart leap into action: Lisa studies Jewish law and lore, and Bart presents her arguments to Rabbi Krustofski in a number of venues: in his study, over a park chess table and in the *shvitz*. Lisa’s sources include Rabbi Simon ben Eleazer, a second-century Talmudic scholar. “At all times,” says Bart, to the approval of other rabbis sweating in the steam bath, “let a man be supple as a reed and not rigid as a cedar.” Bart stays the course and later, at a bris, offers this: “Is it not written in the Talmud, ‘who will bring redemption—the jesters?’” Over the course of this dialogue, Rabbi Krustofski goes from addressing the boy as a pisher to “my learned short friend.” But in the end, it’s a quote whose source the rabbi cannot identify that wins him over:

“The Jews are a swinging bunch of people,” Bart recites. “I’ve heard of persecution but what they went through is *ridiculous*. But the great thing is that after thousands of years of waiting and holding on and fighting, they finally made it.”

The rabbi is moved. “I’ve never heard the plight of my people phrased so eloquently,” he marvels. He asks Bart if the citation is from a sage like Rabbi Hillel, Judah the Pious, Maimonides or the Dead Sea Scrolls. No, the boy replies, it’s from *Yes I Can*, the autobiography of Sammy Davis, Jr., “an entertainer, like your son.” Father and son are reconciled at last and appear together on Krusty’s TV show.

The second act of Krusty’s Jewish comedy-drama aired 12 years later. In “Today I Am A Clown,” written by Joel H. Cohen, Krusty is again unhappy, this time because he never had a bar mitzvah. Bart

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Neeson guest-starred as an Irish priest to explain Catholicism, and Don Cheadle once provided the voice for a faith-healing, African-American Pentecostal in a traveling tent show. A few years ago, Lisa's disenchantment with the commercialism at church led her to Buddhism, with the help of Richard Gere, who played himself.

Even Satan worship has made a few appearances on *The Simpsons*: Bart, Homer and Montgomery Burns, the sadistic owner of the local nuclear power plant, have all had direct dealings with the devil. And the show has featured made-up religions like Movementarianism, an evil brainwashing cult strongly resembling Scientology.

Every religion has been fair game for the show's satirical jabs so far, with the conspicuous exception of Islam. (Interestingly, in the fall of 2005, the Arab TV satellite channel MBC launched a heavily censored Arabic version of the *The Simpsons*, renaming it *Al Shamsboon*. Stripped of bacon, beer and Jews, the show flopped.) *Simpsons* writers plead both ignorance and cowardice for avoiding the topic, leaving the Muslim faith to those cartoonists who are braver or more foolhardy, or live in Denmark.

THE SIMPSONS' JEWISH ROOTS

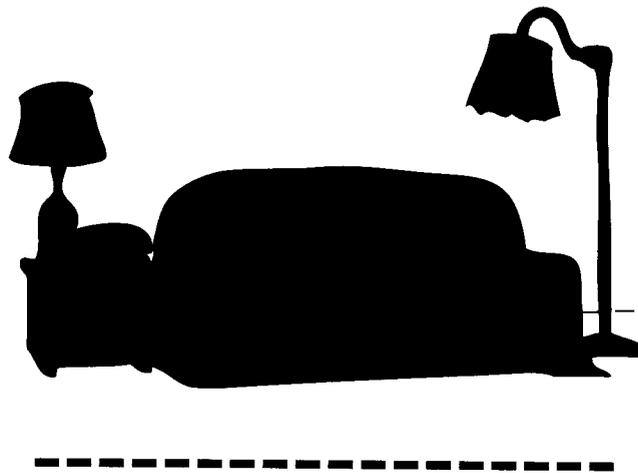


Despite the fact that the man who created the Simpsons character, Matt Groening, is not Jewish, the Jewish presence on *The Simpsons* is even more evident among Springfield's creators than in the town itself.

When credits roll on *The Simpsons Movie*, Jewish names are prominent, beginning with director David Silverman and writers Joel H.

Cohen, Mike Reiss, David Mirkin, Matt Selman as well as two of the show's creators and developers, James L. Brooks and Sam Simon. The same is true of the TV program, which features many of the same names and others, like long-time writer Josh Weinstein.

The Jewish sensibility in the writers' room extends beyond the members of the show's creative team who are actually Jewish. For years, when Mike Reiss wrote scripts with Al Jean, his Catholic writing



partner (and former Harvard roommate), everyone assumed that Reiss was the source of all Jewish-themed material. In fact, as often as not, the material came from Jean. "In the writing room, Jewish people are there to provide authenticity—and pronunciation," Reiss says. "It's the Gentiles who get a real kick out of this stuff."

The show's creators—Jewish and not—seem to enjoy scattering tantalizing hints that just maybe, somewhere in the dim mists of their past, the Simpsons family itself might have Jewish roots. And the clues aren't limited to that mysterious, unacknowledged menorah that briefly glittered in their closet one Sunday evening.

Homer's father, Abe, is every *alte kach-er* (old fart) sitting around a swimming pool in Miami Beach, complaining about his declining health and the ungrateful

younger generation. Marge's side of the family is also suspect: Her unmarried, acid-tongued twin sisters Selma and Patty Bouvier could be channeling Fran Leibowitz or Sandra Bernhard.

Bookish and deeply moral, it's Lisa who exhibits some of the positive stereotypical qualities attributed to Jews, promoting the Jewish values of learning and *tikkun olam* in nearly every episode. She even has an imaginary friend named Rachel Cohen who goes to Brandeis. "It's almost as if Lisa Simpson," says Syracuse's Thompson, "was a Jewish child who somehow got switched at the hospital."

Bart, despite his flirtation with Judaism, doesn't seem Jewish although, in one opening sequence, he is made to scrawl "I am not the reincarnation of Sammy Davis, Jr." repeatedly across a chalkboard. And while Marge has some, but not many, attributes of a Jewish mother, her inflection sounds Jewish at times, perhaps because she is the

one Simpsons family member voiced by a Jew, Julie Kavner.

Homer is the only Simpsons family member without any stereotypical Jewish attributes: He hasn't a whiff of intensity or guilt; probably a good thing, since there's much for which he is guilty.

But even Homer occasionally wonders about his origins. One night, as he and Marge watch their favorite show, "Rapping Rabbis," on TV, the subject comes up. As the rabbis sing "Don't eat pork, not even with a fork," Homer asks his wife, "Are we Jewish?"

Are the Simpsons Jewish? It may seem like an absurd question, but considering the humor, the traditions and the creative minds that have given us this family, Homer might—for the first time in his life—be asking a profound question. ☺

