Self-Loving Jew

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By

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In memory of my Savta, who shepped nachus from talking to me about The 2,000 Year Old Man.
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Preface

I've told this story in a few classes at Bard, so bear with me if you've heard me tell it before. When I was in the sixth grade, my parents showed me the Mel Brooks classic *Blazing Saddles*, starring Gene Wilder and Cleavon Little. Co-written by Brooks and the peerless giant Richard Pryor, it was the movie that first turned me on to how being funny and sending a message were not mutually exclusive. From that point on, I knew I wanted to tell jokes and stories. My first attempt at doing so was in my seventh grade talent show, when I tried to perform George Carlin's "Al Sleet, The Hippie-Dippie Weatherman". I say tried to perform because by the time I got to the second marijuana pun, Mr. Anderson pulled the curtains on me. And that turned me on to the dangerous potential of comedy, which led me to the point of no return: Lenny Bruce. He taught me that funny Jews are sexy. All that happened when I was in middle school. Then by the time I was in high school, my Savta was diagnosed with Alzheimer's.

There came a point when my Savta, who used to drive me to the allergist and take me for ice cream afterwards, who congratulated me for punching an antisemitic classmate, who bought me all the books I wanted, who is in some of my earliest memories, didn't remember me. But she remembered Mel Brooks and Carl Reiner. Their indescribably brilliantly hilarious sketch *The 2,000 Year Old Man* became the only thing we talked about, and never failed to make both of us laugh. That's how I learned comedy could be sweet.

This senior project is, in many ways, a culmination of all the things I've learned comedy can be. Dangerous, meaningful, crude, Jewish, sexy, sweet, and above all, funny. I think I got it all, and if you disagree, it's a little late for edits.
Part One

One thing my moderation project, a sketch about Moses being interviewed by Tucker Carlson and Meghan McCain, taught me is that scheduling is a real headache. So *nu*, for my senior project I made the wise decision to do a solo piece. And then when the pandemic hit, it was an extra wise decision. I also knew that I wanted something funny, and it would have to be at least a little Jewish. But I told myself that I couldn't do stand-up, that's not serious enough for the Theatre and Performance Department. So I began to create an elaborate solo performance show in which I would perform as different character types I'd found while studying Jewish comedy and vaudeville. The three I came up with were Jacob Hertzman, a misogynistic master of the one-liner a la Henny Youngman; the Abrahamic Anomaly, a Zionist strongman; and Jackie Hertz, a dangerously hip counterculture comic in the vein of Lenny Bruce. I had finished writing about three pages of this, when I had my first senior project lightbulb moment: I was not happy.

I would sit and read back what I wrote, and always felt disappointed. It's not that what I wrote was bad. I've never written a bad thing in my life. But it was not what I wanted to read, and I figured if I didn't want to read it, an audience wouldn't want to watch it. And yet, I wasn't sure if I should try to make this idea work or do something else. The reason for my indecision was that I honestly didn't know why my idea wasn't working. What was it that made me not want to read it? Then one day while I was brushing my teeth, I had the second lightbulb moment. By making a piece about stand-up, instead of just doing stand-up, I had been apologizing for being a comedian. And to explain why, I'll have to give a little backstory about my experience doing comedy at Bard.
Comedy as its own artistic discipline at Bard is an interesting thing. I've been a member of B.R.A.D. Comedy, one of the longest running performance clubs on campus, since the first semester of my first year. I've been a theatre student equally long. And I can count on one hand the amount of theatre students outside of the club who have come to any of our shows. We've never been invited to the little meetings between the other theatre clubs, at best cohabitating an ecosystem with them. At worst we were mocked for trying to play their reindeer games. And yet, despite this ostensible rejection of comedy, whenever I or a classmate did some sort of comedic performance in class, it was treated as a breath of fresh air. So what was going on? Over the years, I came to a realization that the comedian is always enjoyed, but never valued. Boo-hoo, nobody wants me. So rather than try to make the T&P community care about my shows with B.R.A.D., I embraced the performance community that B.R.A.D. truly is. My two performance lives rarely collided, and while at one time that upset me, I came to enjoy it. I also found it easier to get my funny friends to come to other events outside of comedy club stuff, be it a music event or a protest I was organizing.

So when I realized I wanted to do comedy for my senior project, I worried that I wouldn't be allowed to and created this elaborate idea as an apology for my desire to do stand-up. And then I realized I had nobody to apologize to. This is what I want to do as a performer, this is what brings me joy and makes me feel fulfilled. Why should I do anything else? Having decided to do what I actually want to do, I moved on to my next challenge: writing the damn thing.
Part Two

I knew that I wanted to tell Jewish jokes. And I knew that I wanted to interrogate what a Jewish joke was. I also knew that there was some Jewish humor I had yet to watch, so before anything else, I sat down to watch the shows, stand-up, and movies that made up a lacuna in my Jewish humor knowledge. Of them all, two works of art influenced me the most: The Nanny and Curb Your Enthusiasm. While the shows are very different, they each have an unapologetically Jewish lead who comes into conflict with a goyish world and stands unchanged. They exist in contrast with a lot of earlier Jewish comedians and television writers, such as the great Carl Reiner.

As a writer for Your Show of Shows, arguably the most influential comedy show in television history, Reiner had made a permanent mark on American entertainment years before his career as a director. All but one of the writers for Your Show of Shows were Jewish, and yet, the show's sketches rarely if ever explicitly dealt with anything Jewish. And yet, the show was how a lot of America at the time became aware of Jewish speech patterns, slang, and a specifically Jewish comedic sensibility. When Carl Reiner tried writing a show about his time as a writer, entitled The Carl Reiner Show, he was told that it could not be about a Jew. And so it became The Dick Van Dyke Show. Jewishness had to be diluted to be allowed. And so, the entertainment industry treated Jewishness as something enjoyed but not valued. In 1993, Fran Drescher said "fuck that" and seven years later, Larry David elaborated on the point.

In The Nanny, Fran Drescher plays Fran Fine, a bold, brash, and beautiful Jewish woman from Queens who becomes the nanny for a WASPy British family. As the inevitable culture clashes ensue, she never loses herself or changes who she is. It is a radical embrace of Jewishness, and a celebration of Jewish womanhood. Some criticize it for leaning too heavily on
Jewish stereotypes, but I find that while the WASPs on the show mock Fran for her Jewish-American cultural norms, the show always makes it clear that the WASPs are in the wrong as Fran never changes. Instead, she boldly proclaims "this is who I am, and the goyim need to catch up".

Similarly, Curb Your Enthusiasm is about Larry David playing a fictionalized version of himself who regularly comes into conflict with broader society. The difference between the two is that where Fran's conflicts come from her making no real effort to try and understand WASP culture, Larry understands it and rejects it. He has his own set of rules for how things should happen and people should behave, largely based on an honesty that is not valued in the WASPy culture of America. This often gets him into trouble, but through a stubbornness and argumentative nature very similar to my own and the people in my community growing up, he remains unshaken in his convictions. It also speaks to something I've more specifically felt at Bard, and that is the terror of assimilation anxiety.

Larry David has reached the highest level of success a comedy writer could hope for and lives like a king. And yet, he doesn't fit in. Over the course of the show, he alienates almost everyone around him save his Jewish friends. They get him. WASPy Los Angeles, on the other hand, does not. One might imagine that of all places, the entertainment industry would have no problem with Jews being Jews, given the stereotypes of Jews in Hollywood, but alas. As I've stated before, it is enjoyed but not valued. Even in a place supposedly controlled by Jews, the Jew cannot feel comfortable, and is made to feel a constant anxiety about whether or not they have actually assimilated enough to be accepted. Except it never is enough.

In my time at Bard, I have heard a lot of "jokes" about how everyone here is Jewish. And yet, I have found little to no Jewish culture at Bard, only a cold "secularism" which is really just
Christianity in disguise. I mean, for crying out loud, this is a school that has two churches and no shuls, mosques, mandirs, or temples of any sort. Except for the basement of Resnick A, where they lump us together in an ugly multipurpose room and even then, there's still an office for Christian studies. So really, it makes a lot of sense that in my time at Bard, I have had to explain why

1. calling a Christmas party a "winter holiday party" doesn't do anything
2. you can't call someone a "sneaky globalist"
3. describing someone with a "cabalistic nose" is deeply offensive (looking at you, Djuna Barnes)
4. I was upset about a Kosher grocery store being shot up
5. it's deeply harmful to have a production of *Cabaret* where the Nazis are played by Jews

and do the same for countless other aggressions, both micro and macro. And then there comes the point that all marginalized people reach, where you get so tired of explaining that you just grit your teeth and bear it.

Perhaps the omnipresence of Christian hegemony at Bard would not bother me so much if not for the fact that it bills itself as and has a reputation for being a secular and progressive liberal arts institution. When I applied here just a few years ago, I thought that it would live up to that reputation. Now I have been disillusioned about the possibility of a secular place existing in America, or truly, existing anywhere in the lands touched by Christianity's stench. For a time, I was angry about this. Truth be told, I still am. Shocking, I know. And, at the risk of sounding like the Joker, the main difference is I realized I could make it funny.
Part Three

A big part of the reason why the comedic stylings of Fran Drescher and Larry David appealed to me is that they were telling Jewish jokes wherein Jews were not the butt of the jokes. In researching American Jewish comedy, I found that historically to not be the case so much. In fact, much of the early American Jewish comedy I found was by comedians such as Henny Youngman and Rodney Dangerfield, two men who made their names mocking Jews and especially, Jewish women. Though Lenny Bruce was performing in the 50s and early 60s, roughly contemporaneous with that old guard of Borscht Belt style humor, his style of shocking and aggressively Jewish comedy was always part of the counterculture, never embraced by mainstream American Jewish society. Meanwhile, Mort Sahl, a similarly provocative comedian in terms of political commentary was able to get regular late night talk show gigs. The difference? Sahl didn't talk much about Jewish stuff or make fun of Christianity. This trend continued, with a lot of Jewish comedians, including ones that I love and respect, having to play up being Jewish for laughs. So you can imagine my relief when I found a more subversive and, shall we say, en garde Jewish comedy through Drescher and David.

This subversive attack on WASPy American culture as seen in *Curb* and *The Nanny*, in addition to their refusal to let Jewish cultural practices be the punchline, inspired the direction I wanted to take with my senior project. At first, I was working on a sort of comedic appeal to Christians and Christian-adjacent people about antisemitism. I had written a very aggressive

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1 I define Christian-adjacent as anyone who was raised in an at least vaguely Christian home and doesn't adhere to another specific religion now. This includes Christian-born atheists and white pagans who don't have a specific pagan tradition which they practice. For the latter, it doesn't matter if you were born Christian or not. If your family is just "pagan" or "spiritual", you're still counted as Christian-adjacent. For the rest of the paper, whenever I say "Christians" I include Christian-adjacent people.
opening in which I essentially called all Christians antisemites, and went into explanations about antisemitism using personal experiences as examples. There was a lot of explaining Jewish concepts to a non-Jewish audience. But as I was watching *Curb* and *The Nanny*, and I thought to myself, "I want to be like them. I don't want to explain Jewish stuff to Christians; I just want to make fun of *goyim*!".

This also helped me to start really critically thinking about who my audience would be, and who my dream audience was, an essential practice that I had not thought enough about yet. I had a moment of clarity, and realized that I tell my best jokes when I'm hanging out with friends. So I began to think of the audience as one big friend. I don't spend much time explaining antisemitism to my friends when we hang out, so why would I do that with an audience? No, at this point, I realized what I wanted to do most was make fun of Christians.

At this point in my writing process, I realized I needed an open mic. It was sometime around November, I'd been writing for a few months, and I didn't know if anything was funny. I had tried out bits with friends, but friends aren't as useful as an open mic because my friends care about me. Comedy open mics are useful and good precisely because they are filled with people who are both comedians and strangers. A room full of coldly analytic competitors all counting down the seconds until their five minutes of stage time. Getting one open mic laugh is roughly equal to fifteen real world laughs. But with the pandemic, my only options for open mics on Zoom.

Over the summer, a friend and I went to a couple Zoom open mics, just to try it out. See if the format is transferable to a virtual space. We came to the conclusion that Zoom open mics must be a circle that Dante neglected to mention. I ended up using B.R.A.D. as a makeshift open mic, for even though they are my friends, I know they're funny people. So while it wasn't the
grueling torture of an open mic, it was a group of people I knew would give me good feedback. And that they did! I ended up rewriting several jokes based on recommendations they made, and was also able to use them as test subjects to see how alienating my Jewish content might be for a mostly *goyishe* audience. After a few club meetings where I performed what I had written thus far, I had about thirteen minutes of jokes. Now I had to come up with a structure to tie the jokes together.

Normally, when I write stand-up, I write five minutes of material for me to perform at an open mic. I don't really think about my material being part of anything larger than itself. I knew this senior project would be different, that I'd need to actually sit down and write material that connected with other material. Thinking that a story would be a good way of connecting the bits and scraps I'd written, I started thinking about all the Jewish-related things that had happened to me or that I'd been a part of over the past couple of years. And then I remembered that last year, Bard investigated me for alleged antisemitism.
Interlude; Or the Story of Bard Investigating Half of the Jewish Studies Students For Antisemitism

Some context that might be useful for anyone unfamiliar with my activities last year. Last year's annual Hannah Arendt Conference was on the theme of racism and antisemitism. Most of the speakers were the usual centrist pundits Bard's political studies program attracts, but one speaker was a far right racist Zionist named Ruth Wisse. Her speech was moderated by right-of-center editor and pundit Batya Ungar-Sargon in addition to a former Israeli government official named Shany Mor. My comrades in Students For Justice In Palestine and I didn't like that a racist Zionist was speaking at our school so we planned a protest. During Professor Wisse's speech, we stood silently facing the audience while holding up signs. When the Q&A began, we started chanting and were escorted out.

One of the moderators, Batya Ungar-Sargon, wrote an article in the magazine of which she was the op-ed editor entitled "I Was Protested At Bard College For Being A Jew". It contained several half-truths, a lot of self-victimization, and not much else. I took umbrage with it, and shared my feelings in a longish Twitter thread. I became in/famous on Jewish Twitter for a few days (discussed in-depth in my actual senior project), did a couple interviews, and thought little of it for the next couple weeks. Then Bard College's administration began investigating me and the then-head of SJP for antisemitism based on a complaint someone made about our protest. Keep in mind that I am half of the students concentrating in Jewish Studies in my year.

What was supposed to take a month at most took almost six. The investigating deans even told us that they had no protocol for this and were figuring out how to handle it as it went on. My lawyer, a staff attorney at the pro-Palestine pro-bono law firm PalLegal, told me that she
had never seen anything like this in her entire career. It was a terrible experience, and even though I was rightfully pronounced innocent, I still lost most of my year to the ordeal. I don't know if the process was so bad because of malice or ineptitude, but either way, it was awful. And I can't go back to viewing Bard the same way I once did. And so this senior project also represents for me a rejection of the soulless neoliberalism and faux progressivism that I've found not only at Bard, but in academia in general. I say this also because I anticipate being asked why I felt the need to mock a professor from political studies, and so I now answer: because he started it.
Part Four

So at this point in the process, roughly around December, I had written a lot of material down but still did not truly have the makings of a show. That is, I had several pages of stand-up comedy routines but I did not have a throughline to connect them. The story about the protest and all the backlash was obviously something big, and something important in my development as a Jew and an organizer, but I still didn't have a succinct way of explaining why or of putting into a larger framework with the stuff I'd already written. Here is where not writing for open mics came in handy.

As I've stated before, writing with the intent of performing at an open mic often leads me to conceptualize sets as independent works and not consider any sort of larger thread. It made it so that I would perfect five minute chunks through trial and error then forget about them before the next mic. By not having such a short time limit, and without needing to come up with new material on a weekly basis, I had the luxury of sitting down and really writing out a story that meant something to me. It also meant me explaining to myself why the story mattered to me, something I'll attempt to summarize here.

I was raised in a Zionist household. My parents have moved away from this political belief a little over the last few years, but they were staunch adherents when I began questioning Israel in the eighth grade. While my parents mostly tolerated my challenges, the larger community around me did not. When I did a semester in an Orthodox boy's high school, which was also a bit traumatic for me as a bisexual individual, I was continually called a self-hating Jew or a bad Jew. At the time I wasn't even a principled ant-Zionist, I was just challenging a slavish devotion to Israel that I saw. But that was enough to be labelled "self-hating". For a while, I thought they must be right, and tried to separate myself from Judaism and Jewishness as
much as possible. But I started learning more about Yiddish culture, and interrogating the origins of the "self-hating Jew", and began to reject my own rejection.

The more I studied the self-hating Jew, Zionism, and antisemitism, the more I realized how much Christian European values had traumatized my people. I noticed that so much of Zionist culture was based on an idea of not seeming weak by adopting Christian ideas of masculinity, by responding to stereotypes of the virginal Jewish men² through guns and ruining the ecosystem of Palestine. And so, as Israel came to represent an image of Jewish virility in the eyes of mainstream Jewish figures, questioning it came to be seen as denying one's masculinity. And the hatred I received online certainly pointed towards that phenomenon. I didn't go into this in my senior project due to a lack of time, but a plurality of the insults I got online were challenging my masculinity. By simply protesting a Zionist, not only was I a "self-hating Jew", but I was a "cuck" and a "soyboy". Because why else would I dare challenge the ultimate product of Jewish masculinity?

It got me thinking about how I feel about Jewish masculinity, as someone raised as a man but is really more of just a guy. He/they pronouns, by the way. I wanted to refute the concept of the sexless self-hating Jew without resorting to a crude masculinity. It brought me to thinking about Jewish men who embrace sexuality in a casual way, not in the service of a political ideology. That took me to one of the sexiest men in history, Leonard Cohen. Leonard Cohen was a profound Jewish man who lived up to Jewish ideals of the scholarly religious man, but he also fucked. A lot. But when he sang about it, it was never to brag. He had the quiet confidence of a man who knows what he's about. That's the kind of energy I wanted to bring to my refutation of the self-hating Jew: I am a sexy Jewish guy who doesn't need to colonize Palestine to prove it.

² Jewish men are either stripped of all sexuality or oversexed deviants. Either way, the Jewish man does not have sex in popular media. See The Big Bang Theory, Baywatch (2017), Glee, Family Guy, and basically any Jewish man in mainstream movies and television.
The story of my protest and the online backlash matters so much to my identity because it reopened an old wound I hadn't thought about in a long time. It brought me back to being an insecure fifteen year-old kid, trying to prove that I was Jewish enough and then deciding to scrap the whole thing. And for a minute, I considered trying to respond how I had in the past, by engaging with the insult and explaining why it didn't apply to me. To engage and hopefully change the mind of the insulter. But I came to a realization, one that has proven evergreen. Who the hell cares what a Twitter Zionist thinks? If the only resort of an adversary is to accuse me of hating myself and my own people, then clearly they're not on my level. So in the end, I decided my throughline of the project would be "I am a sexy Jew who doesn't hate themself. As a matter of fact, I love myself."
Part Five

Now I had my central story written out. I had a lot of jokes, the majority of which I could tie to my main theme and story. It came time to rehearse the whole shebang, around two months before I wanted to perform. And for the first time since a really awkward open mic a few years back, I was performing my comedy for an audience of one.

It was hard for me to work with my director, Emma, at first. I'd never rehearsed a solo performance with a director before, and in this one-on-one setting, I had to relearn how to be vulnerable and open. In a production with a full cast, I've found that vulnerability and honesty almost becomes their own performance. As though the cast members are saying "oh, look at me, I'm going to reveal the deepest thing about me." Maybe I'm too competitive, but this makes it easier for me to be open, not to mention the added bonus of everyone else doing it too. But now, it's just me and Emma. Even though we were already friends, I found it so hard to just tell her how nervous I was or what I needed from her as a director. But then I had yet another realization (funny how I keep realizing things while working on the most momentous project of my time in college), that rather than thinking of Emma as a director, someone hierarchically above me, I should think of her as my collaborator. Someone I was working with, not for.

Once I figured that out, things really started to roll. I began talking to Emma like a friend, and surprise surprise, it was easier to be honest with her. Performing for her now also reminded me of how it felt to tell jokes to friends, something I had always taken for granted. This got me to be more vulnerable when I perform, moving away from a knee jerk confrontational style that I often resort to when I feel nervous or vulnerable on stage. Now instead of that, I allow myself to be nervous or vulnerable and work it in. I use my own energy to give something to the audience, and trust that I'll get it back. And when we started inviting people in small numbers to watch me
perform, my trust proved to be correct. I remembered that yes, I am funny, and people want to hear my stories.
Conclusion

That brings us up to speed. At the time of this writing, I have not debuted my show to the public, and do not know if it will be a huge success or something else. Maybe people won't laugh. But hey, theatre is an often frustrating thing, and comedy even more so. You have to trust that an audience will really care what you have to say, or at least find you entertaining. In my opinion, this is why a lot of theatre people I know take themselves and their work very seriously. I know that I've all but wept at the self-perceived power of my creation. And to be sure, it is a powerful medium. I wouldn't have gone into roughly thirty thousand dollars of debt to study it if I didn't think so. But at the end of the day, I do theatre because it's fun. I tell jokes because it's fun. And if I have a *Blazing Saddles* moment, wonderful! In fact, I should be so lucky. But if I just write a bunch of annoying puns and crude dick jokes that make me and my friends laugh, that's no less wonderful to me.
(Stage is bare. I am announced. Leonard Cohen's "Hallelujah" plays until the first chorus, and I walk out. Music dies down.)

INTRO
Goooooooooooooooooooooooood evening everybody! Thank you for coming to my senior project "Self-Loving Jew". Now a word about the title, because I know it sounds kind of, shall we say, Big Mouth-esque. You know Big Mouth? It's that Netflix cartoon where the children masturbate on screen but it's ok because they're voiced by adults and animated weirdly. Also the ghost of Duke Ellington lives in Nick Kroll's attic. It's a great show. Anyways, "Self-Loving Jew". So lately I've been watching a lot of Curb Your Enthusiasm and I love it. There’s an episode where Larry gets called a "self-hating Jew" by some schmuck up the street and he says "I might hate myself but it's not cause I'm a Jew". It's a good bit- but I don't like it, cause why hate yourself? I've been called that phrase a few times, never made much sense to me cause I don't hate myself. I hate Christians, and Christian adjacent people. Any of you here, by the way? I'm including people who were raised Christian but don't really identify as such anymore, I don't care how much of an atheist you are now, you probably still move like a Christian. That's one thing we figured out but you guys didn't, and you're weak for that. I have met like three Jews who really believe in God, we make it work. Now I know it's a rough strategy to start off my show saying that I hate most of my audience, but to be fair- you guys started it and maybe if you left people alone, I wouldn't hate you so much.

CHRISTIANS PART ONE- MISSIONARIES
That's the thing, you Christians are always in other people's business, with your missionaries and mishegas. You know I read an article about these missionaries who were making a big deal about how we're gonna go contact this tribe deep in the jungles of South America that has never been contacted by outsiders before. Maybe they don't want to be contacted so much. "Oh, Fred hasn't spoken to me or my friends in twenty years so I'm gonna go tell him about my religion. Won't he love that?" And the missionaries are always talking about "oh but it's good because we saved them, we brought Jesus to them" so? I haven't met Jesus, and I can run a mile in under nine minutes. I think they'll be fine.

CHRISTIANS PART TWO- HOLIDAYS

And it's not just the big acts of colonization and genocide you guys are always getting up to that bother me. Let's talk holidays. You all will take a perfectly good outside tree, bring it inside, throw some tin foil on it, and be happy about it. This, by you, is a holiday? For me, a holiday is contemplating theological notions of redemption and the sacrifices of my ancestors. You guys throw a birthday party for a dead handyman. And tinfoil is for keeping food moist and pans clean, not decorating a tree. Not to mention that you ruin a perfectly good tree, bringing the outside inside. What's going on there? What, you like trees? So do I. I also like bears, but I'll leave them in the woods with the trees. Why? Why go where the dirt lives, and steal from it? Then you get the needles everywhere it's such a mess. Granted I have allergies, but either way, it's a whole thing.

Not to mention what you do with the eggs on what's that holiday, Wester? Easter! That's the one. The painted eggs- a little tacky. I don't get it. Plus, once again, wasteful! You take an egg, you poke a hole in each end and blow the egg part out so you can paint it, why? You could've had a quiche! Instead you have the world's most fragile decoration. You're doing a lot,
and it just doesn't make sense. Also, the Easter Bunny is objectively terrifying. A six foot bunny? A me-sized bunny? Bunnies are supposed to be small!

And here's the thing, here's the thing- I bring this up to my Christian friends, and they don't get it either, they just do it! So I google this shit, and the only answer I seem to get is "uhh some pagans did it and Christians wanted them to convert". Once again, you guys being in someone else's business. And what does it get you? Useless eggs and inside trees.

**STORY BEAT ONE- HAC BACKGROUND**

You know, and this might come as a shock to you, I have opinions. Specifically, ones about society. One of them is that racism is not good. (Airhorn) Please hold your applause. In fact, I think it’s so not good, that last year I got canceled by racists for protesting a racist speaker at a little conference here organized by Professor Roger Berkowitz. For those of you unfamiliar with Roger Berkowitz, he is the Steve Harvey of Bard. For those of you unfamiliar with Steve Harvey, he hosts *Family Feud*, which is a show on tv. For those of you unfamiliar with tv, it’s television. I know we have some sophisticated theatre makers here who might not know what “tv” stands for. As host, Steve Harvey loves to tell people to say something erotic, then act shocked that such a thing was said on television.

Cause on *Family Feud*, Steve Harvey will ask

ME AS STEVE HARVEY: We asked one hundred veterinarians what's something that starts with 'pen' and ends in 'is'? 

ME AS CONTESTANT: A penis Steve!

ME AS STEVE HARVEY: A- a pe- a pen- a wha- I never- this is a family show how dare you-
Then he fucking dies. Then Roger Berkowitz'll be like

ME AS ROGER BERKOWITZ: We asked 100 Rush Limbaugh fans who should come speak at Bard, and I present to you Professor Schnitzel of the German Eugenics Academy!
ME AS STUDENTS: Hey we don't want a Nazi on camp-
ME AS ROGER BERKOWITZ: A Na-? How dare you call Professor Schnitzel a- why I never, this is a place to think, a place of learning- (Same thing as Steve Harvey me)

And he fucking dies too.

You know what I mean? Now, the Hannah Arendt Center, which Berkowitz runs, is an interesting part of Bard College because nobody knows what they do over there. It's kind of like your appendix. You don't know what it does, and you don't pay much attention to it unless something goes terribly wrong. The Hannah Arendt Center was holding a conference on how to be racist and stay in tenure track or something, and they had this one speaker named Ruth Wisse. Ruth Wisse is one of the world's most prominent scholars of Yiddish language and culture. She's also a raving radical racist who thinks Black people and Palestinians invented antisemitism. They didn't by the way. (Airhorn)

This guy who lived in my dorm freshman year invented antisemitism. I don't remember his name. I feel like it was Kyle. He just had Kyle energy. He sat down across from me in the dining hall, and like a maniac, started talking to me. At the time, I was not confident enough to be rude. So I played along, he said what are you up to, told him I'm reading some Jewish history book for my Jewish history class, and instead of taking the hint, he nodded solemnly, (a very goyishe behavior, by the way, being solemn) and said "it's so sad what they're doing to your
people over there". Where exactly? I turn around, expecting to see some poor Jew getting the shit kicked out of them, but nary a beaten Jew in sight! So I turn back to Kyle and say "to where are you referring?" He looks me dead in the face and says "Israel. It's just terrible how you're treated over there, and how the media here is so disrespectful to all of you." I'm sitting there thinking he knows I'm Jewish, right? Why does he think Israel is where I'd have a hard time? Plus I'm white, Israel was literally made for white Jews to have a good time. And speaking of Israel, let's get back to the story about me protesting a racist Jew.

So there was this racist speaker Ruth Wisse at the conference, and me and my fellow members of Students for Justice in Palestine decided to protest her. She was giving her little talk in this auditorium in the humanities building, where we walked in with some signs and stuff to protest the fact that a well documented racist was speaking at our school. We all lined up very peacefully facing the audience, between them and The Racist Professor Ruth Wisse, just standing with our signs. Then, when it was q&a time, my comrades and I went forth with our big, violent, display of hateful disruption: a chant. So we're chanting, the jackbooted fascists of Bard College safety and security department came marching towards us while a dean tried to pull me out by the arm which I managed to carefully evade by turning to him and saying "DO NOT TOUCH ME". (Pause)

Now I don't know if you heard, but our protest worked, and racism stopped. In fact the very next day the head of the KKK got on Instagram live and said "my bad" Alex Jones said "sorry Black people"; and the day after that, Boston just disappeared. We fucking won. Except that I kind of lost.

**STORY BEAT TWO- BATYA'S RESPONSE**
Now apparently, there were some fans of racism in attendance that night. Cause the speech moderator, Batya Ungar-Sargon, wrote an op-Ed in her little magazine the Forward titled "I Was Protested At Bard College For Being A Jew". Now, in fairness, there is antisemitism at Bard College. Just look at what the dining hall passes off as latkes.

Her op-ed starts off with "When I was asked to speak at last week’s conference at Bard College’s Hannah Arendt Center, I think my heart actually skipped a beat. Hannah Arendt is the thinker who has most deeply influenced me." I think it's time to say a few words about Hannah Arendt, since I've mentioned the center named after her and all that. Hannah Arendt, for those of you who have had sex, unlike Roger Berkowitz, was an essential Jewish 20th century philosopher who taught at Bard for a long time who's known for her groundbreaking analyses of fascism and formulating language still used today when responding to fascist violence. Also, she fucked a Nazi! Not only that, but after the war, she left her husband to go back to Germany to fuck the Nazi again. SHE CUCKED HER HUSBAND TO FUCK A NAZI. So when someone, especially a white person, is deeply influenced by Hannah Arendt, or names a political studies center after her, you got some questions to ask.

And so the Nazi-fucker apologist went ahead and talked about how she was being deplatformed in the magazine for which she was the chief opinion editor. I did the only mature thing in response to these accusations: yell about it on Twitter. Now keep in mind that at the time I tweeted (twat?) this thread explaining that I did not protest Batya for being Jewish because that's stupid I had so few followers at the time that it was basically a groupchat. When I woke up the next day, I had approximately 2500 notifications. A lot of them were people supporting and agreeing with me, which was great. But a lot of them were not that.

**STORY BEAT THREE- TWITTER**
For every person who chimed in to support me, it seemed like three people told me to go fuck myself. Even better, some people came up with new insults. I got called a Jewish Uncle Tom- by multiple people. What is that? How are you so racist that you have to appropriate Black insults to attack me online? And then some guy named IsraelRocks69 told me that I look like Osama Bin Laden's Lithuanian cousin. I kinda can't say anything cause he clocked me. I do in fact look like if Osama Bin Laden had a Lithuanian cousin.

But the other thing that I got called a lot isn't funny. That bit I talked about before with the "self-hating Jew"? Well I got called that the most. People kept calling me a self-hating Jew over and over and over and over and over and over and over and over and over and over again. And it fucking sucked, man. I don't like Israel, that doesn't mean I hate Jews, doesn't mean I hate my own people. I don't like bad music, that doesn't mean I hate Lin Manuel Miranda. Except I do, so that's a bad example. But the point still stands!

There's another reason I can't stand being called a self-hating Jew. It's pretty simple: I don't hate myself! If anything, I'm a self-loving Jew. Why would I hate myself when I'm so sexy? Why do you think I hate myself? If it's cause you hate me then just say you hate me and we can all go home. Also, sidebar, what is a self-hating Jew? Like why do we need a special version of self-hatred? You never hear about self-hating British people, and if there's any group that should hate themselves it's the British cause what the fuck is beans on toast?

ENDING

But the thing about being bullied or harassed is at a certain point, you start to wonder if maybe they're right. And I know you're supposed to block out haters or whatever, but goddamn, it's hard! What am I supposed to do, not look at my phone? When my whole self worth has
accidentally been put into this fucking app? Not to mention that all this is going on while I'm home for the holiday of Sukkos, so my dad is on my ass about this cause he read the op-ed. And he's a man of a certain generation so he's not gonna say "Akiva, my son, I'm worried about you and the backlash. Please take care of yourself, and know that you can always come to me if you want to talk through how you're processing it." No, what he does is wake up the next day and yell from the stairs "AKIVA! AKIVA! YOU'RE TRENDING! THEY FOUND SOME OLD TWEETS WHERE YOU LOOK LIKE AN IDIOT! WHY DID YOU CALL BEN SHAPIRO A DUMB KIKE ON THE INTERNET?" For the record, I called Ben Shapiro a dumb kike cause he is one, and I'm allowed to say that. Most of you cannot, in case you were wondering. So I turn to him and yell "I DONT NEED YOUR ADVICE! I KNOW TWITTER BETTER THAN YOU OLD MAN!" like the mature adult I am. My mom by the way doesn't really care that much cause she's sane, but it's still tense for me at home. So rather than go downstairs and be with my family, I sit in my room glued to my phone.

And I'm sitting, and reading, and I keep reading "self-hating Jew" like I'm swallowing flies on a rollercoaster. Cause the first fly, it's just "oh ew" and you keep it moving. But after a while, you got a mouthful of flies and you wanna puke but you know if you puke your camp counselor who took you on the rollercoaster is gonna make fun of you which feels inappropriate for a camp counselor but your parents couldn't afford the really good summer camp so you're just happy that you're out of the house. That's what the tweets felt like. So one night, I was sitting there, reading "you're a self-hating Jew, you're a bad Jew, you're a fake Jew" thinking to myself "Can a thousand people be wrong?" Probably, but also, maybe not. But if a thousand flies in my mouth won't stop me from enjoying a day at the amusement park, then a thousand schmucks on
Twitter won't sway me from my convictions. And it's like Leonard Cohen said in the last verse from "Hallelujah".

I've done my best, it wasn't much
I couldn't feel, so I tried to touch
I've told the truth, I didn't come here just to fool you
And even though it all went wrong
I'll stand right here before the Lord of song
With nothing, nothing on my tongue but Hallelujah

Maybe all I did was be one person in a protest at a small liberal arts college with a weird political studies department. Like, I went to improv after the protest. Couldn’t have been that big of a deal. But we must've done something cause I pissed off a lot of assholes. And I gotta say, to me and Leonard Cohen, not bad for a horny Jew.

That's my time, thank you all for coming here, zchorona lvracha Leonard Cohen, goodbye Bard!

(Playlist of "Hallelujah" covers, starting with Dan Kahn's, plays me out.)
Appendix: My Artist's Statement to Fulfill the Jewish Studies Requirement

**Self-Loving Jew: An Artist's Statement**

The first time someone called me a self-hating Jew, I was in the tenth grade in Torah Academy of Bergen County. The reason a classmate bestowed this mantle upon me is that I criticized Israel. I don't remember what criticism I made, but given that my politics were not so refined when I was fifteen years old, the criticism couldn't have been that sharp. And yet, it was enough to warrant an accusation of Jewish self-hatred. I remember thinking to myself that day, what's up with that? Or in more academic terms, how did this term come to be used against me and what is the appropriate discursive response to such an accusation? In this artist's statement, I attempt to answer that very question, first with a brief historical survey.

The term "self-hating Jew" first came to prominence with Theodor Lessing's *Der jüdische Selbsthaß (Jewish Self-Hatred)*, a book published in 1930 on German Jewish intellectuals' perceived predilection towards criticizing Judaism and in doing so, allegedly inciting antisemitism. However, this notion of Jewish self-hatred had precedence in Theodor Herzl's *Der Judenstaat (The Jewish State)*, published in 1896. There, Herzl describes those who disagree with his specific Zionist beliefs as "antisemites of Jewish origin". Interestingly enough, many if not all of the people Herzl refers to as such were not fully opposed to Zionism, they simply disagreed with Herzl's specific statist ideology (Reitter, 2008). But very soon, the term would be used against Herzl, as Antony Lerman notes below.

Assimilationists and anti-Zionists accused Zionists of being self-haters, for promoting the idea of the strong Jew using rhetoric close to that of the Anti-Semites; Zionists accused their opponents of being self-haters, for promoting the image of the Jew that would perpetuate his inferior position in the modern world (Lerman, 2008).

Despite there being some fervent debate over who the "real" Jewish antisemites were, with polemics published by both sides, the terms "self-hating Jew" and "Jewish self-hatred" did
not come into use until the aforementioned book by Theodor Lessing was published in 1930. Furthermore, there was no real analysis of the alleged phenomenon until Lessing's book. Even so, this first attempt was little more than an argument for Zionism. The book charts Lessing's development from a self-described self-hating Jew to the cultural Zionist that he had become, with small stops along the way to analyze what he considered examples of self-hating Jews (Lerman, 2008). Once again, harkening back to Herzl, we see a binary: you're either a self-hating Jew, or you're a Zionist. Lessing's colleague Kurt Lewin contributed more analysis of the subject, this time writing in English, with his essay anthology *Resolving Social Conflicts and Field Theory*. In it, Lewin uses mostly anecdotal evidence to describe and define his understanding of the self-hating Jew. His analysis strays a bit from the barely veiled Zionism of Lessing, with his main idea being that the self-hating Jew is a Jew who hates "everything specifically Jewish" because that's what keeps them out of the majority (Lewin, 1948). This analysis has one major flaw- it does not define what "everything specifically Jewish" is. Despite this problem in reasoning, Lewin's writing helped the term catch on and gain more prominence in the 50s and 60s, a period that Susan A. Glenn deemed the "vogue" of Jewish self-hatred.

This rise in the term's usage coincided with the years immediately following Israel's establishment. During this time, reeling from the Holocaust, Jews everywhere were suffering an identity crisis. The new state gave Jews, American or otherwise, something to latch on to and create a new identity. Interestingly enough, this also created a new source of anxiety around Jewish identity. "Support"³ for the state of Israel became a new litmus test for mainstream Jewish American communities, and if one's support was found to be lacking, it meant they were seen as a self-hating Jew (Glenn, 2008).

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³ I would argue that the very term "supporting Israel" is not as meaningful as some might believe, but this artist's statement does not have enough space for that.
The next great development in the study and theorizing of the self-hating Jew came in 1986 with Sander Gilman's *Jewish Self-Hatred: Anti-Semitism and the Hidden Language of the Jews*. In this book, Gilman focussed on what he saw as the internalization of antisemitic tropes among Jews and how he believed it played out in Jewish life. One example he gave was that of Jews who oppose the existence of Israel (Gilman, 1986). Once again, we see the Jewishness of anti-Zionists being called into question. Gilman is regarded as one of the great Jewish cultural historians, and his book was the one most frequently recommended to me, but based on this example he gave, I refuse to consider the rest of his book.

This might sound harsh, immature, or amateurish. I do not care. No matter how it is dressed up, any attempt at defining a self-hating Jew using how they feel about Israel is little more than attempting to pathologize a politic. Why else would the language of self-hatred be used, if not to delegitimize an argument using the stigma of neurosis? The language assumes that for a Jew to be against Zionism or the state of Israel's existence, they must hate themselves, opening the window to associate anti-Zionism with mental illness. It takes Herzl's original phrasing, antisemites of Jewish origin, which equates statist Zionism with Jewishness, to the next conclusion of such fallacious reasoning. For if Zionism/Israel = Jewishness, then of course standing against them means one has self-destructive inclinations. This practice of associating anti-Zionism with insanity has only become more the case in the decades since Gilman's book was published, and I can think of no better example than an op-ed written by Shany Mor, an associate fellow of Bard's Hannah Arendt Center.

In the summer of 2020, actor/writer Seth Rogen made some objectively tepid comments explaining his anger about realizing that he had been fed Zionist propaganda from a young age. Hearing this immediately made me think of when my kindergarten teacher at Salanter Akiba
Riverdale Academy, a supposedly open-minded and progressive institution, told my class that Israel should carpet bomb the West Bank because there were only terrorists there. That Israel's military was the only thing keeping Jews around the world safe. So, needless to say, Rogen's anger resonated with me. It did not, however, with Mr. Mor.

Shany Mor wrote an op-ed in The Forward entitled "Dear American Jewish Boys: Please Find Another Outlet For Your Oedipal Rage. Signed, Israeli Jews.". In it, he accused Seth Rogen of lying about the propaganda he was fed, and went on to claim that Rogen, and all American Jews (Seth Rogen is Canadian, but that's besides the point) angry at Israel have Oedipal rage that they misdirect towards Israel. Though Mor never used the phrase "self-hating Jew", he really didn't have to to make his feelings clear. It was, to use scholarly terms, a stupid argument. And to give more context, Shany Mor was Director for Foreign Policy on Israel's National Security Council, specializing in US-Israel and Europe-Israel relations. That is to say, at one point his job was literally helping Israel represent itself to the rest of the world. Therefore, I think it is very fair to take his "Seth Rogen has an Oedipal complex" argument as representative of the current state of Zionist thinking and Israeli philosophy. In the face of something so ridiculously absurd, so truly nonsensical, what can I do but laugh?

Zionists referring to Jews who seemingly disagree with them as self-hating Jews, and descending to even more personal attacks like Shany Mor did, are essentially doing these two things: One, they are trying to paint those who disagree with them as mentally unwell and therefore not trustworthy. Two, they are conflating Jewishness and allegiance to Israel, creating a static definition of what it is to be a Jew. These are both hilariously foolish things to do. In what remotely serious debate setting is it remotely acceptable to just say "my opponent hates themself, therefore I am correct"? And at what point in history have Jews fit in a simple static definition?
Our greatest strength is our diversity of thought and experience, our propensity for debate and argument. So I'll ask again, how can I take Zionists seriously when these are their arguments? And before I am told "not every Zionists uses variations of self-hating Jew", they don't call Herzl the father of Zionism for nothing. The movement is rooted in this intellectually dishonest discrediting of fellow Jews, and I see no way for it to be disentangled, or even any efforts at doing so.

If Zionists refuse to be reasonable, refuse to be honest about their settler-colonialism, or talk to Jews without resorting to these childish attacks, then I see no reason to maintain civility. I see no reason to play along with their games, and defend my Jewishness as so many people before me have done in the face of these accusations. I will admit that this was my initial response after I was the subject of much Zionist virtual vitriol last year, but I came to realize that my "Jewish credentials" did not matter to them, and more importantly, I did not want to be in community with them anyways. So what's the point in trying to play their game and "prove" my Jewishness? Rather, I will simply mock them, and move on, because there's no point talking to a brick wall, especially if the wall is insulting me. And that is what I do in this senior project. If Zionists will write me off as ridiculous, I will do the same to them, but with better jokes and without accusing them of self-hatred.

4 In addition to Seth Rogen, look at Bernie Sanders for a recent example.
Works Cited

Glenn, Susan A. "The Vogue of Jewish Self-Hatred in Post-World War II America", *Jewish Social Studies*, Volume 12, Number 3, Spring/Summer 2006


