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On Campus

Oy Vey, Need a Few Smiles?

Rutgers' Bildner Center presents program on Yiddish, Jewish cartooning

By Steve Manas



"And, while there's no reason yet to panic, I think it only prudent that we make preparations to panic."

Credit: Courtesy Robert Mankoff, The New Yorker

Students in every course start with a clean slate, but for those enrolled in Eddy Portnoy's course in the Yiddish language, it's slightly different. They start with a blank sheet of paper.

"I begin by asking them to write all the Yiddish words they know – clean or not," the lecturer in Rutgers' Department of Jewish Studies says. "Most of the kids are Jewish, but EVERYONE knows some Yiddish. I never get back a blank paper," he *kvels* (a word that most often conveys the feelings of grandparents over everything their grandchildren do.)

Portnoy developed a love for Yiddish from his *Bubbe* (grandmother) as a child in suburban Detroit, which eventually led to earning a master's in Yiddish Studies from Columbia University and a doctorate in Modern Jewish Studies from the Jewish Theological Seminary, where his dissertation was on the cartoons of the Yiddish press.

His background and scholarship make Portnoy the ideal *mensch* to co-host a free, public [program](#) Thursday, April 7, "Cartooning Jewish New York," presented by the Allen and Joan Bildner Center for the Study of Jewish Life. Portnoy will be joined by Robert Mankoff, renowned cartoon editor of *The New Yorker*, for the 7:30 p.m. Abram Matlofsky Memorial Program (funded by the Karma Foundation) at the Cook Campus Center in New Brunswick.



Eddy Portnoy, Rutgers University

Portnoy learned Yiddish – derived from Middle High German, spoken by Eastern Middle European Jews and their descendents and written in Hebrew with borrowed vocabulary from Hebrew, Russian, Polish, and English, among others – by tagging along as his grandma made her daily rounds. Ever curious, he asked lots of questions, eventually compiling a list of Yiddishisms the way others collected baseball cards. “It was a strange but interesting hobby,” he said, “but I had no friends to share it with.”

So, Portnoy rarely got to speak the language. “I was a native listener,” he jokes, but after becoming proficient in reading and writing, he would eventually turn what he called a “fun linguistic hobby” into a “low-paying career.” While working on an Eastern European Jewish history project at a small academic publisher in New York, the Boston University graduate learned of a Yiddish summer program at Columbia. “I took a leave of absence, enrolled, and was hooked,” he recalled.

Mankoff grew up in Queens, New York. “As a kid, it was about holding your own, with everyone ranking you out,” he says. “Trading barbs and repartee were the norm.” His mother was fluent in Yiddish, but spoke very little of it to Bob, “except by way of epithets, some of them contradictory.” Two that remain fresh



Robert Mankoff, cartoon editor, The New Yorker

in his mind: *kleyne hunt* (small dog) and *grois ferd* (large horse). “She was more a typical Jewish mother – unintentionally funny,” he said.

As a teen, Mankoff displayed a knack for drawing cartoons, a talent that led to the High School of Music and Art – now LaGuardia High School – Syracuse University, and to his career at *The New Yorker*. He is an author and editor of numerous cartoon books, including four of his own.

“What’s unique is the cerebral nature of Jewish thought that leads to a manipulation of concepts,” he said. “To be funny, we must look at ideas from all different ways. My humor is thinking humor.”

Mankoff says that in general, “cartoons poke fun at generic religion,” and offers the example of a lawyer on the phone with a client. “Act of God? Not a problem – we sue God.”

“To make them specifically Jewish would ruin the generality of the idea for me,” he says. In another, he depicts an elderly couple, rocking on their porch. “No I don’t want to live forever,” the husband says, “but I damn sure don’t want to be dead forever, either.”

Mankoff admits his Jewish background influences his cartoons because “Jews question everything, even God.” He cites Job demanding reasons for his punishment, and speculates that God is playing a practical joke on his loyal servant. “God’s answer,

‘Where were you when I planned the Earth?’ might not be everyone’s idea of a punch line,” says Mankoff, “but once you imagine the clap of thunder rim shot, it works.”

Humor in the early editorial cartoons during the formative years of the Yiddish press in the late 19th and early 20th century, also was meant to stimulate thought, but it was far from subtle, according to Portnoy. “The Jewish press was a free press and magazines saw themselves as watchdogs to expose the hypocrisy of Jewish politicians, cultural types, theater people in their editorial cartoons,” he said. “In a funny way, cartoons evoked all kinds of issues Jews dealt with in those days. Everything was fair game. They took everyone to task.”

<http://news.rutgers.edu/focus/issue.2011-03-29.4421505211/article.2011-03-29.5766328981>