

Peyton Bryant

Nov. 17, 2023

Dr. Christopher Bingham

FMS-2033

Larry David's *Curb Your Enthusiasm*: "Judaism, where are you?"

In the length of his career writing for comedy television, Larry David has always been one to not only confront and question Jewish practices and stereotypes, but embrace his distaste in society's expectations of him as a Jewish-American. *Seinfeld* (1989-98), David's breakout hit, included many references Jewish culture and attributes, but neglects any commentary of issues throughout, despite its Jewish main characters. It became what many know to be one of the most influential shows of our time and, to many, acts as a precursor to the showrunner/writer's nearly 24-year-old sit-com, *Curb Your Enthusiasm* (2000-).

Written by and starring as an overexaggerated and unapologetic version of himself, David uses *Curb* to present the funny in very real and awkward situations most would dread to encounter. To him, it's his platform to speak his mind and overcome the polite nature of himself in real life interactions. The show-about-nothing – or rather the show-about-nothing's successor's writing has no script. Every episode is improvised by him and his cast; only given a mere outline of a scene to work with. Throughout the show's run, many evolving topics in modern culture and society come out in the limelight of David's satire; one recurring theme of his work points to his views as a Jewish American. On this subject, David takes advantage of his overexaggerated portrayal and his style of satire and comedy in *Curb* to express his position on evolving Jewish issues – whether his thoughts mattered or not.

Throughout the 11 – soon to be 12 seasons of *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, Larry plays the victim of circumstance as much as he does the agitator of sensitive situations. (Wright, 2011) No matter how right or wrong he might be, he’s typically the root of conflict and is almost always criticized for it. For example, this Larry sees no issue telling a couple their baby looks “a little Asian” for a white baby or not thanking a veteran for his service after he’d already been thanked in the same setting. This aspect of his fictional persona and comedy evolves over time when it comes to situations regarding the religion of Judaism and his relationship to it.

In a scene from season 2, episode 3, “Trick or Treat,” Larry and his wife Cheryl (Cheryl Hines) wait outside of a cinema for a movie premier. Minding his business, he whistles Richard Wagner’s “Siegfried Idyll,” and flatters Cheryl with the anecdote that the composer wrote it as a gift for his wife. A bystander steps in and questions Larry’s Judaism as he whistles a melody from “one of the great anti-semites of the world.” In the scene, Larry opposes the notion that, as a Jew, he should feel inclined to take offense by the music of someone historically regarded as “Hitler’s favorite composer.” The man asks, “Where is your heritage? Where is your Judaism?” Larry responds by mockingly calling out “Judaism, where are you? Where, where are you, Judaism?” Larry’s exclamation signifies his disdain for the social commitments expected upon him as a Jew. The scene as a whole “mocks the existential position that is produced by holocaustal consciousness . . . such that to be a Jew is to be in-relation to the Holocaust.” (Skitolsky, 509)

This is one of many episodes including statements on the Jewish in relation to the Holocaust and is something commentators and experts on Jewish culture spare no examination or criticism for. For episodes like the one discussed, Larry’s – among other Jewish comedians’

“Holocaust humor” is broken down and views Larry’s comedy as a rejection of the idea of the Holocaust being inherently tied to Jewish identity. (Skitolsky)

For an episode like season four’s “The Survivor,” Larry’s comedic lens on the Holocaust is heavily criticized and is associated with the broader issue of using the Holocaust for comedy. The 2004 episode was the center of inspection for Jonathan Friedman, a Jewish history expert, while examining the broader implications of Larry’s comedy regarding the Holocaust. The episode deals with the subject of victimization, and revolves around a misunderstanding between Larry and a Rabbi. The Rabbi offers to invite a survivor to Larry and Cheryl’s rehearsal dinner for their vow-renewal; Larry accepts, as his father also plans to invite a Holocaust survivor. The survivor the Rabbi invited turned out to be a former contestant from the show *Survivor* instead of a Holocaust survivor Larry assumed.

This situation ensues a rampant argument between the reality show contestant and the Holocaust survivor over who the real survivor is; satirizing the victimhood of a man taking part in a show over a man that escaped genocide. A 2004 review of this episode points out, “Larry David may not provide any brilliant insights into the Holocaust or the minds of its victims, but at least he breaks down some of the walls surrounding its discussion.” (Vider, tabletmag.com) This episode and the scene discussed earlier demonstrates Larry’s ability to speak out about issues regarding how the Holocaust is treated in discussion, by both Jews and Gentiles.

Friedman suggests Larry use “less incendiary Jewish imagery” to help David tear down the assumptions and stereotypes of his culture. However, the Holocaust is just the tip of the iceberg of Jewish topics Larry uses to make comedic “assaults” on the culture and traditions of his own nationality. In episodes like season 5’s “The Ski Lift” Larry mocked the strict rules of Jewish law when he overplayed himself as an Orthodox Jew; mimicking Hebrew and sporting a

yarmulke. Before that, season 2's "The Baptism" saw Larry prevent a Jewish man from converting religions when he mistakes his baptism for a drowning; sparking conflict between a Christian and a Jewish family; which see him as a hero for "saving" one of their own.

In 2011, Larry made an episode regarding a different and rather current Jewish issue: the Israel-Palestine conflict. The season 8 episode, "Palestinian Chicken," follows Larry's liking to a new Palestinian chicken place along with his attraction to a Palestinian woman. Controversy sparks between Larry's Jewish friends when the restaurant, Al Abbas, plans a location next to a kosher deli. The episode ended up being one of *Curb*'s most critically acclaimed episodes; The Atlantic's Ray Gustini said to call the episode an instant classic would be underselling it. The sufficient praise comes from how it parodies real-life affairs; the ongoing Israel-Palestine conflict and the at-the-time development of a mosque near ground zero.

The circumstances of the episode pit Larry in the middle of the Al Abbas and the deli; one side has delicious food and the beautiful and seductive Shara (Anne Bedian), whose beration of Larry's Jewishness sadistically arouses him. The opposite has his Jewish co-stars, Susie (Susie Essman) and the recently converted Marty Funkhouser (Bob Einstein) in disgust of the restaurant's audacity to open a location next to a kosher deli.

The walls of the establishment are decorated with anti-Israel posters, which both Larry and his friend Jeff (Jeff Garlin) are amused by, considering their own Jewish backgrounds. "These people really do not like the Jews," Jeff remarks before suggesting they should send their chicken over to Israel for the peace process. Larry replies to his notion, saying "They'd take all those settlements down in the morning," and adds how it would also be the perfect place for Jews to cheat on their spouses. In the same scene, the beautiful owner of the restaurant, Shara, catches his eye.

In an interview with *The New Yorker*, Larry described how one day, he thought, “Would I have sex with a Palestinian? Sure, I thought for sure . . . What if as we were having sex, she’s kind of yelling out these anti-Semitic things? It wouldn’t bother me in the least.” This sadistic attitude drives the humor in this episode, and is another aspect of Larry’s sway towards indulging the Palestinians, with great intercourse in return of looking past Shara’s anti-Semitism.

Between interviews and analyses regarding the episode, it is mentioned how it “reduces the Israeli-Palestinian conflict to an inconsequential level with the same effect.” (Fine) Being consistent among the rest of the series, David refrains from any strong commentary on the larger subject of the conflict and, through his reductiveness, questions the triviality of the conflict. The episode concludes with Susie and Funkhouser among fellow Jews holding a rally protest against Shara and Al Abbas. Larry encounters the protest and stands between them and is urged by each side to join them. Funkhouser exclaims to Larry, “Come with us Larry, you’re a Jew.” While Shara contests, “No, Larry. Come to this side and I’m yours. I’m yours whenever you want.” His expression says it all, weighing both options in his head as the music rolls in and the episode ends with the signature cut to credits.

Beyond “Palestinian Chicken,” David’s aversions to any political or religious affiliation remains consistent to his style of comedy in later *Curb* seasons as well as his appearances and work externally. His 2017 appearance on *Saturday Night Live* can attest to this, when his opening monologue revolved around how he would hit on women during the Holocaust. His line, “There are no good opening lines in a concentration camp,” provoked hesitant laughter from the live audience and the bit as a whole garnered criticism by the media as it perpetuated the stereotype of Jewish men as carnal deviants during the height of the #MeToo movement. (Tanny

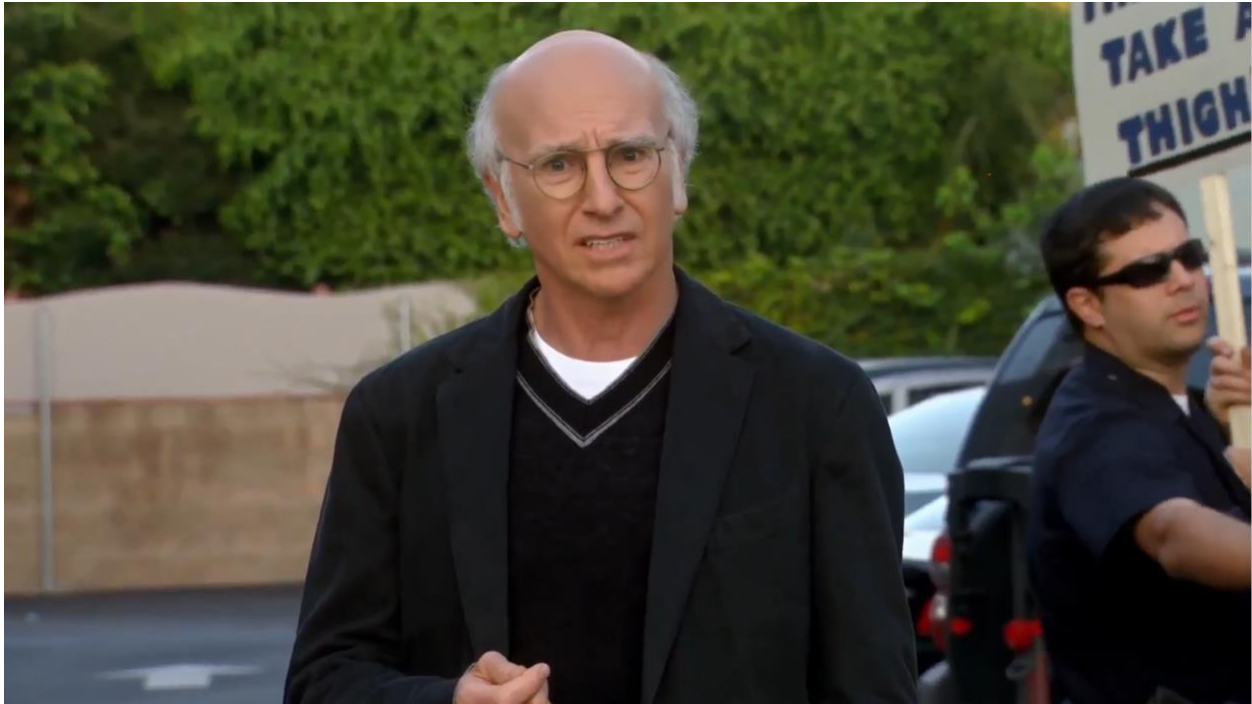
179) Positively, the moment sparked a wave of attention and awareness for the Holocaust and the same can be said for many episodes in *Curb* discussed.

David was able to look at issues regarding the Holocaust and remark on the pattern of victimhood people maintain in the face of a Holocaust survivor. He was also able to proclaim his opposition to Jewish Identity being inherently tied to societal, historical and cultural issues regarding Jewish history and faith. And lastly, he sparked a conversation about the Israel-Palestine conflict, while fundamentally saying nothing about it. When looking at David's brutally honest form of comedy, it's easy to see how he's allowed audiences to think more openly about current Jewish issues and Jewish history.



This long-shot from the conclusion of "Palestinian Chicken" represents David's satire of the Israel-Palestine conflict. The framing is simple, unlike the real-life situation being parodied. By reducing the conflict down to a simple matter of a restaurant opening next to a deli, David gives plenty of room for the audience's own ideas on the matter. The space made by the conflicting sides with Larry standing alone in the middle displays this perfectly.

Image belongs to HBO



Larry's confusion in this medium shot on which side he aligns with most allows the audience to feel conflicted as well, even if both options are ultimately arbitrary in the given situation. David uses this unserious portrayal of a serious situation – even more serious given current events – to express his indecision on the matter.

Image belongs to HBO.

Works Cited

- Fine, David. "Stinky Chicken: Reevaluating a Key 'Curb Your Enthusiasm' Episode." *The Current*, www.columbia-current.org/stinky-chicken.html. Accessed 16 Nov. 2023.
- Friedman, Jonathan. 2018. "'I'm a Survivor!': The Holocaust and Larry David's Problematic Humour in Curb Your Enthusiasm". *S: I.M.O.N. Shoah: Intervention. Methods. Documentation*. 5 (1):110-14.
https://doi.org/10.23777/sn.0118/ess_jfri01.
- Gustini, Ray. "Critics Laud Larry David, International Relations Genius." *The Atlantic*, Atlantic Media Company, 30 Oct. 2013, www.theatlantic.com/culture/archive/2011/07/critics-laud-larry-david-international-relations-genius/353229/.
- Nast, Condé. "Larry David on Writing 'Curb Your Enthusiasm' and Why He Doesn't Understand 'Squirmish' People." *The New Yorker*, www.newyorker.com/video/watch/the-new-yorker-festival-larry-david-on-writing-curb-your-enthusiasm-and-why-he-doesn-t-understand-squirmish-people. Accessed 16 Nov. 2023.
- Skitolsky, L. (2019), Holocaust Humor and Our Aesthetic Sensibility of American Genocide. *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 77: 499-511. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jaac.12679>
- Tanny, Jarrod. "Curb Your Orgasm: Larry David and the Schlimazel as Sexual Deviant." *Jewish Film & New Media*, vol. 7, no. 2, 2019, pp. 161–86. *JSTOR*, <https://doi.org/10.13110/jewifilmnewmedi.7.2.0161>. Accessed 17 Nov. 2023.
- Vider, Stephen. *Survivor Challenge - Tablet Magazine*, www.tabletmag.com/sections/arts-letters/articles/survivor-challenge. Accessed 16 Nov. 2023.
- Wright, Benjamin. "'Why would you do that, Larry?': Identity Formation and humor in Curb Your Enthusiasm." *The Journal of Popular Culture*, vol. 44, no. 3, 2011, pp. 660–677, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-5931.2011.00854.x>.