nature, for they are transformations of that nature, pure human inventions. In that sense, they are not altogether unlike prayer, a human invention which transforms nature and the nature of men. Like prayer, gossip brings people together, gives them something to hold in common in spite of their various other pursuits. Accordingly, like prayer, gossip is very much at home in the shul.

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Thumma Reserve

Gossip is by no means the only source of conversation among the Jews of Kehillat Kodesh. They joke as well, and no study of the shul would be complete without some mention of this phenomenon. My purpose here is not to pursue an exhaustive investigation of joking and humor or to delve into questions of the historical foundations of Jewish humor; such tasks would far exceed the scope of this study. Rather, I shall briefly outline some of the functions and microdynamics of shul joking.

A close affiliation between gossip and joking prevails in the setting. Each may serve as a frame for the other and is often substituted for it in the course of conversational exchange, gossip

... many a drama will turn into comedy.

Henri Bergson, Laughter
being answered with a joke or joking remark and vice versa. For example:

Kosofsky and Bilansky are chatting. The one tells the other about Poker’s new job in the Sprawl City school system. Bilansky laughs and jokes, “What kind of an occupation is this for a Jewish man—teaching goyim [Gentiles]?”

Riken is making jokes about Velvel’s announcements. Wintergarten has overheard the joking and mentions that Velvel will be going to another shul next Sabbath for a bar-mitzva of a friend’s son. “He should try to make announcements over there,” Riken remarks, laughing.

Like gossip, joking may serve as the starting mechanism or focus of an interaction, helping to stimulate or sustain a gathering. As such it is a vehicle for the expression and exercise of sociability. The participants need not be—and indeed, because of the casual nature of the interchange, often are not—aware that the joking (or gossip) serves in this way. More often than not, once such interchange ends, the gathering breaks up. This fact becomes particularly apparent when one observes gatherings at sociability spots before and after the prayers, during the warming-up and cooling-down periods. Only when all the gossip and joking banter has been fully exchanged and some reciprocal balance has been achieved will someone at the sociability spot suggest that the prayers begin. Similarly, at the conclusion of the tefillah, groups disperse only when a silence indicates that nothing is left to be exchanged.

Sometimes the conversations during warming-up periods are prematurely ended by the congregational start of prayers. This commonly occurs because some members who have been warming up for prayer are ready and, by asserting the manifest purpose of the gathering, successfully dominate the action. When such a disruption of talk occurs, conversation becomes more prevalent than usual during the prayers; and cooling-down periods—periods of residual action after the formal end of the primary activity—also increase in substance and length. As if trying to balance and complete exchanges, tie up conversational knots, or finish narration rounds, the disrupted members keep on talking. Joking plays an interesting role here; it may easily act as the capstone for a social occasion—and become a termination signal—because it may at times require little more than a brief ratificatory or reassurance display—often simply a quick laugh or slight smile. It does not always demand the continuation of encounter and involvement.

Joking may, of course, also serve as the stimulus for further conversation and interaction, as the second extract above indicates. This is particularly true of joking that consists of formal narratives that are pointedly humorous. Such joking retains many of the qualities of gossip and so demands many of the same kinds of repayment. Joke stories, like gossip stories, have a pre-stamental quality. Often they become stimuli for a whole series of exchanges and may become used by the recipient for a future exchange. Like gossip, such jokes, since they are “re-tellable by any recipient,” are useful vehicles for interactive conversational interchange.

Joking, then, seems to have dual qualities, being at once a stimulus for interaction and conversation and a termination signal and finale of interchange. Such attributes are particularly useful in a context like tefillah sheh be tizbar, where sociable conversations are likely to be disrupted at any moment by prayer and other legitimate involvements. Accordingly, one is not surprised to find a great amount of joking punctuating the services.

The phenomenon of shul humor may be divided into two large types: jokes and joking remarks. The former are formal narratives, in great measure repeatable because they are not situationally specific. The latter consist of glosses, quite often situationally hinged, which may be anything from complex verbal recitations to brief nonverbal signals, such as winks or sardonic grimaces. Both have a need for some ratificatory response on the part of some or all of the participants. The proper acknowledgement consists of some form of laughter, from guffaw to fleeting smile. When no actual laughing response is made, some ratificatory substitute is called for, which will explain the apparently passive response. Such ratification is consistently provided by one’s friends, those who share the emotional responsibilities of communal existence. When there is no such link—as when, for example, a cabaret comedian faces a hostile and unappreciative audience—responses need not ratify, nor need silence, both verbal and nonverbal, be explained. Among shul members, joking is seldom if ever ignored.

Although everyone in shul engages in some form of joking behavior, an ethnography of its practice reveals distinctions, not only between jokes and joking remarks, but also with regard to who jokes with whom and about what. The latter distinctions are in many ways parallel to the categories of shul gossip discussed in the preceding chapter. Moreover, joking exchange follows many of the same lines as the exchange of gossip. Finally, these categories reflect particular relationships among the jokers, just as the categories of gossip do.
The most general type of joking behavior—open to almost anyone who enters the shul—may be called the *formal joke narrative*. While not everyone may recite such narratives, everyone may listen to and laugh at them as they are being told. Since there are few opportunities for mingling of the sexes within the setting, such jokes are most frequently recited in groups consisting of either all men or all women.

Narration of such “funny stories” about fictional characters is, in practice, restricted to insiders; for though outsiders may on occasion tell such jokes, the gathering of the necessary audience is more easily accomplished by insiders. Furthermore, the outsider may not always realize the proper occasion for a joke (although outsiders who have had experience in modern Orthodox shuls frequently display a sense of when and how to joke). The exchange and recitation of jokes tends to be prestidigitation in character. One joke deserves another.

Some kinds of jokes merge with gossip. This occurs when the characters of the story are no longer fictional but are people whom everyone knows. Such joking is no longer open to outsiders. Indeed, beyond the formal joke narrative, all other joking in the Kehillat Kodesh setting defines progressively more restricted types of in-jokes—jokes which can be recited and whose humor can be appreciated only by insiders. (In-jokes will be holistically considered later in this chapter.) In its most generally accessible form, in-joking may be termed *public joking*. This category of joking, analogous to public gossip, is the kind of banter that may and does occur among all the insiders in the congregation. Here one finds the recitation of the so-called “old jokes”—those long-known and oft-repeated narratives about insiders—along with the offering of joking remarks, repartee, and so on. The “public” here, as with public gossip, is restricted to persons who are considered insiders. Such restrictions are often imposed by the fact that the humor is comprehended only by insiders, who, being in possession of the necessary background information, are sensitive to all the implications of a particular remark. Public joking is perhaps the most prevalent type of humor heard in shul, for it cuts across age lines and, at times, sex lines as well. Here, as in the subsequent categories, words or phrases may become formulaic symbols of jokes or joking remarks and thus part of the private language of the group.

Included here is the ritualized joke, which, no matter how often it is told, brings forth the ritual response of laughter. Various events, for example, always bring forth the same jokes and ensuing laughter. Thus, around Passover everyone always makes a joking remark about the constipating qualities of the matzah diet, and others laugh in agreement. The ritual of symbolically throwing one's sins into a river at the New Year inevitably stimulates the remark, “You ought to throw yourself into the river,” or something of that order, always followed by the obligatory laughter. Such ritualized jokes and responses serve as signals that all is going as expected. They reveal the smooth and relaxed atmosphere of a world in order.

Having little conscious, objective purpose, such joking serves easily as a vehicle for sociability, and so it is frequently heard at sociability spots. As men stand around the bimah, for example, they engage in an exchange which blends public knowledge and public joking. That, in essence, is the substance of traditional *shmoosin*, the Jews' “ideal form of intimate communication.”

While public joking acts to separate the insiders from the outsiders, *privileged joking* makes an even further distinction. Here the division is between insiders, turning some of them into outsiders. Persons who are privileged may be in two senses: first, in a particular context they alone have license to joke without risking negative sanctions from the group; second, they alone are privileged to comprehend the humor in the joke or joking remark. The young boys at the back of the shul are often specifically engaged in such joking, often breaking into open laughter and leaving the rest of the congregation mystified outsiders.

Because of the privileged character of such joking, it may be engaged in in the presence of the nonprivileged and even in front of the objects of its humor. Certain restrictions related to the maintenance of group amity and unity do, however, obtain. In the first place, the joke must be careful not to arouse tensions by overstepping the informal boundaries of good taste; furthermore, since they must not flaunt their privileged character and the discrimination it implies, they are often forced to disguise their laughter; finally, they must make sure that, when the object of a joking remark is present, the pronouncements are sufficiently controlled that they will not stimulate anger and argument, both of which are anathema to community life. This control can be achieved either by mitigating the depreciatory nature of the joke or by so disguising it that only the privileged are aware that a joke has been made at someone else’s expense. The same restrictions do not, of course, hold with regard to public joking, for real outsiders need not be treated with such circumspection.

One more point must be made with respect to this type of joking.
Those involved in it do not constitute an established group. Rather, the privileged differ from one moment to the next, with the result that those who are privy to one joke may not be privy to the one that follows it at some later time.

The final analytical category, secret joking, does reflect an established clique who alone may engage in it. This, the most socially restricted form of joking, includes the humor that severely and crudely satirizes identifiable others. Because of its vitriolic nature, this joking must be kept secret both from its targets and from others not in the clique so that the jugglers will not be stigmatized as socially disruptive. Sitting near one another in shul aids such jugglers in keeping this kind of joking secret.

Those who engage in secret joking are usually intimates; if, for some reason, they are not already tightly bonded, this activity will in time help bind them together. Like conspirators, they are united by their “crime.”

In terms of the distinctions already noted, one can say that most of the joking that occurs during the fluid context of the tefillah shel be tizbur consists of public joking. The other varieties, although by no means absolutely excluded during communal prayer, are more prevalent during moments in which the shul is primarily a house of assembly—for example, during the warming-up or cooling-down periods or prior to meetings.

Joking remarks have already been cited as starting and terminating mechanisms for interaction. They also emerge in other forms. One of these is the aggressive joking remark. Its substance may be a peculiar blend of friendliness and animosity. By taking the form of a joking remark, aggressive feelings may be expressed and exercised (as they are by some kinds of gossip) without the risks of open conflict. The most biting remark, penetrating criticism, or personal slur can, when carefully couched in humor, be expressed without manifestly tearing the fabric of the community. (Only the crudest joking need remain secret.) For small groups, like Kehillat Kodesh, whose tenuous survival depends on amity, joking, like gossip, serves as a social and psychological safety valve, allowing the group to maintain unity and display friendship even in the face of the normal animosities and tensions of collective existence. The joking remark maintains a show of friendship even as it expresses hostility to another. A few illustrations are in order.

On Sabbath or holy-day mornings, when participants in the service constitute a captive audience, Rabbi Housmann is fond of giving a sermonette at some point during the prayers. The imposed presentation of these “words of Torah” is, however, resented by some in this captive audience, many of whom would prefer such speeches to be canceled entirely. Although a tacit understanding has been reached to restrict the number of these sermonettes, Housmann still speaks more often than many people prefer; he often simply stands and speaks up during lulls in the action, which may occur when an unwary chazan has paused too long between stanzas of prayer. In spite of the widespread antagonism to Housmann’s speaking, no one will tell him openly and directly to stop, “because,” as one member put it, “we don’t want the guy to get insulted and leave.” Alternative means for expressing antagonism to the speaker include joking remarks. Ernst, Housmann’s son, is often the conduit for such aggressive joking: “Tell your father that I’m really hungry today and, if he speaks, I might faint.” Although humorous in its exaggeration, the remark is expected to be transmitted by Ernst directly to his father, minus the humor.

The joking remark may be addressed directly to the person concerned—in this case, Housmann. For example, the word “amen” commonly recited as ritual affirmation at the end of a prayer, blessing, or section of study, has come to be used as a congregational response to all sorts of statements that can bear a religious interpretation. The ends of speeches are always marked with calls of amen from the congregation. Often, in the course of Housmann’s sermon, one or two members will choose to yell “amen” during any pauses that occur. Such calls are met with audible titters and snickers from other congregants, and these reinforce the signal for Housmann to stop. Enough ambiguity and humor remain so that Housmann may ignore the signal and continue speaking without undue embarrassment. Nevertheless, the call—much like quasi-chazanic activity—is a cue for him to get on and finish. The antagonism is perceptible but not overbearing. Such joking, much like the joking insults which Ben-Amos and Enobakhare found among the Igboike, “functions to release ... tensions without violence, to prevent and avoid conflict and manifest aggression in a cultural [sic] permissible and ... harmless manner.”

In the event that one is the recipient of an openly aggressive remark, joking may serve to defuse the tension of the encounter. Wishing to avoid open conflict, one may make light of insult and injury and thus allow the aggressor to retreat behind a cover of humor. The members of Kehillat Kodesh, who once easily took umbrage at even the most oblique aggression, now tend to joke
their ways out of confrontations. When sudden bursts of anger between two members seem to be getting out of control, third parties often step in to heal the breach with humor. Here the joke is used to aid in overcoming the growing disharmony by abruptly changing the thrust of the discussion. Thus, for example, at the end of a heated discussion between two members about current American politics, a third member joked, "The galitzianers [Jews coming from Galicia] have it all sewn up." This non sequitur made everyone burst into laughter. Behind the cover of this joke everyone could retreat from the oncoming argument. Indeed, the joke did not happen to come at the end of the conversation; it terminated it.

When a single joking remark is too weak to diffuse growing hostility, it may be followed by other jokes, or even by gossip, to drain off remaining tensions. Velvel is particularly skillful at alleviating tensions in this way. More than just a personality characteristic, Velvel's sense of humor is an important tool of leadership.

In addition to allowing antagonism to be harmlessly expressed, joking remarks may serve both to reveal normative behavior and assure its continuance, acting in this as a means of social control. Unlike the control of gossip, which often occurs by means of oblique references to third parties, joking often aims directly at its target. In the control over public religious practice and observance, this quality becomes most apparent.

Consider, for example, the joking remark about one member's prayer cloak. Two types of cloaks exist: a short linen scarf that hangs around the neck of the wearer, and a long woolen one which, draped over the shoulders, covers more than two-thirds of the wearer's body. The second is the one approved and worn by most Orthodox Jews. At one morning's service a novice member wore one of the short linen types. As he was called to the Torah scroll reading for a kibbut, one member called out, laughing, as the former touched the scroll with the fringes of his talis, "Why don't you get a talis instead of that simatch [Yiddish for rag]?" Everyone, including the target, laughed. Next time he appeared in a wooden talis.

The joking remark may be used to make points of criticism about another's actions without embarrassing him. For example, Velvel had just finished explaining, amid much laughter, how he had tried, illegally, to evade responsibility for causing a car accident. Upon completing the narrative, he looked around for some sort of ratifying response from his audience. One member replied, "I don't know if we should allow you to be president!" Again laughter. Yet amid all the jesting was the clear point that such action might be overlooked this time but was not something to be repeated too often, for it reflected unfavorably on Velvel's right to (moral) leadership of the group. After this remark, the subject was changed.

The humor inherent in these situations is not necessarily intrinsic to the words. Rather, "the speakers, the relationships between them and the speech situation ... are decisive contributing factors to the interpretation of the message" and its humor. That is, such jokes are situational; they depend on one's recognizing all the dimensions of the situation and of its participants. When people laugh at the remark, they laugh at the entire situation of which the remark is simply the marker. Consequently, quoting the actual remark can give the reader only an inkling—based on similar circumstances in his own experience—of the humor of the situation.

Joking remarks may be either isolated communications or part of a stable pattern of relationship. In the latter case, such remarks make up much of the substance of what Radcliffe-Brown calls the joking relationship, "a ... relation between two persons in which one is by custom permitted, and in some instances required, to tease or make fun of the other, who in turn is required to take no offense." The relationship may or may not be mutual (i.e., with both parties taking turns at making joking remarks at the other). That such relationships exist not only between individuals but also between groups may be suggested by the descriptions of the relationship between Kehillat Kodesh and some of the other congregations in the area. Condemnations of other Jews are often expressed as joking remarks. The potential divisiveness in such criticism is moderated by the joking format. Although one can only guess the reasons for such restraint, one is tempted to think that a heritage of malevolence from the outside has made Jews wary of public conflicts among themselves. If one adds to that the particular dangers of a dwindling Jewish community in Dudley-Meadows, one may perhaps have some hint as to the reason for the development of a joking relationship between Kehillat Kodesh and its less Orthodox neighbors.

Aware of the power of the joking remark in acting disesteem, some members may engage in self-deprecatory joking as part of a strategy of defense. In a quasi-Socratic way, the self-deprecatory joker controls criticism by generating it himself before others
have had a chance to articulate it. (This kind of joking is analogous in its purpose to the self-gossip discussed in chapter 5.) Such self-deprecation allows the person to emphasize the most minor negative aspects of his persona and thus maintain hegemony over those aspects which at first appear beyond his control. Moreover, by presenting the self-deprecation as humoristic, the joker limits the injury of the remark. He also escapes the negative sanctioning of the collectivity, showing that he does not need others to tell him of his faults, since he knows them himself and is sufficiently in control of them that he can make jokes about them. As one member put it, "If you can still joke about it, it's not so bad."

An illustration can perhaps elucidate the point. According to halacha, or at least according to Ashkenazic Jewish tradition (which may at times have greater legal imperative than halacha), all adult males may wear a talis during morning prayers, but only the married ones are required to do so. By wearing a talis, unmarried men may hide the stigma of their single status. Of course, in a small community interlinked by gossip, as Kehillat Kodesh is, no member can really conceal his marital status. For all of his or her positive qualities, the unmarried member is inevitably subject to disapproval by the group, which places premiums, both ritual and social, on marriage.

Mendel Wintergarten is such a person. His reputation is constantly shadowed by the fact that he is unmarried. His self-deprecatory joking remarks reflect this awareness of this. For example, when his talis is slipping off his back during the services and another member replaces it for him, Mendel remarks, "They say if a woman doesn't put the talis on your back, it doesn't want to stay." Everyone, including Wintergarten, laughs.

Through his remark, Mendel, by admitting his failing, has in some way compensated for it. He displays his tacit acceptance of the legitimacy of communal standards which label him deviant. In accepting that status, he honors the group, winning at least partial indulgence from it. Indeed, because of Mendel's artful use of self-deprecating humor, he, unlike other adult single males in the shul, has managed to retain a position of respect in spite of his unmarried status. His joking is not, however, a source of respect (his scholarship is) but rather a device by which he minimizes the disapproval of others. Joking remarks may, then, be defenses and strategies for the self.

Such joking may also serve to expiate previously committed sins of deviance. By offering a disapprobatory image of oneself in a joking format, one accepts a limited penalty of degradation instead of a more injurious one. Moreover, the group, represented by the audience present, by recognizing the humor of the remark signals its approval of these limited confessions of guilt. In short, self-deprecating humor is a compromise between the conformist demands of the group and the defiance of individuality.¹¹

Groups may also employ such joking as a strategy of defense against defamatory assaults. Jews have become craftsmen in this type of self-deprecatory humor; some even make a profession out of it. Perhaps more than any other people, modern Orthodox Jews have developed a talent for such joking, for they have special need of it when they step outside their world of parochial tradition to face the often harsh inhospitality of the contemporary world. Although minimizing public self-deprecation, such Jews may, among themselves, engage in a scathing self-mockery which seems to coopt the criticism of the outside world and make it manageable. The stigmatization of Orthodoxy becomes the stuff of such humor. When one can joke about what should be hurting one, the power of the pain is somewhat diminished.

For shul members such joking self-deprecation is a frequent group activity, concerning not only Jews in general but also Orthodox Jews in particular, for it allows the members to cope with the character assaults which they perceive to be directed against them by and in the Gentile and "ex-Jewish" world.¹² Such joking at times requires the speakers and auditors to assume the perspective of outsiders. The victims, in a kind of imitative magic, play at being attackers.

Consider, for example, the joking about one of the complicated rituals surrounding the Passover holy day. During the eight days of Passover, halacha demands not only that Jews refrain from eating leavened goods (chometz) but that such goods (e.g., dough) be removed from Jewish ownership. According to the specifications of the law, any chometz which is not so removed is prohibited for use by Jews not only during Passover but for eternity. For Jewish owners of bakeries, this law creates particularly complex problems. Like all Jews, these bakers must meet the requirements of halacha, especially if they wish to retain their Orthodox clientele after Passover. Since actual disposal before the holy days of all his chometz would be both economically and logistically burdensome for the Jewish baker (he would have to sell and replenish his entire stock in a very short time), he satisfies the law by means of a legal fiction: he closes his shop during the holy days but beforehand
“sells” all his chometz to a Gentile (whose Passover-chometz is not prohibited for use by Jews after Passover) for the duration of the holy-day season—all the while keeping the actual goods in his closed bakery; after Passover, the Jewish baker buys back the chometz, opens his bakery doors, and resumes business as usual.\footnote{51} Commonly, because of the complexity of the law, a rabbi acts as an agent between the Jewish baker and the Gentile.

Two members, in talking about this Passover procedure in reference to a local Jewish baker, are joking about how strange it must seem to the uninformed. One man mentions that his wife called the local bakery to find out whether it had “sold” its chometz for Passover and received a perplexed answer from the owner, who said he always sells his bread—all year. “She should have asked him if they went through some mumbo-jumbo with a rabbit,” the other jokes. In the joke, the exquisite complexity of the legal fiction, which these Jews strictly observe, is satirically labeled “mumbo-jumbo.”

Such joking about religion and ritual seems particularly indigenous to modern Orthodox Jews. While their Orthodoxy requires involvement in and fulfillment of the ritual demands of their religion, their modernity and experience in the modern world encourage a show of detachment from the parochialism of Jewish observance. Joking about that observance is a handy way of maintaining this front of detachment. Moreover, one finds that the more traditionally Orthodox members of Kehillat Kodesh are those who least often (and some never) joke about ritual or religious observance. The professionals—cosmopolitans whose careers have propelled them outward and away from the total Orthodox environment—are the most frequent jokesters of this sort. Yet, even to the latter group, such joking on the lips of true outsiders would be taken as insufferable defamations of Jewry and of Orthodoxy. Coming from insiders, it is funny.

No aspect of Jewish life is immune to such joking. A discussion of Jewish education, the historical mainstay of Jewish survival, is punctuated with the scoffing remark, “Look, if Jews had a bell in their synagogues, there would have been a whole gemara [volume of the Talmud] on it.” Even the sacrosanct corpus of talmudic literature, to say nothing of the ritual of study, is open to ridicule by the same people who revere it, although the ridicule is always blended with a sufficient tinge of humor to make the slur ambiguous.

Physical characteristics and economic success, the two most frequent subjects of vilification by outsiders, are also included in self-deprecatory humor. Consider the following two examples:

Lemberg and Fiedler are joking about Shonsky’s appearance. “Did Shonsky have a nose job?,” said Fiedler. One look at Shonsky’s nose made it apparent that Fiedler had to be joking. “If he did, he ought to get a refund,” Fiedler said.

“That’s just what I was going to say,” said Lemberg, laughing.

“Course, I’m not one to talk,” Fiedler allowed.

“That’s all right, none of us are,” Lemberg answered.

“Except for Ronald. He’s got a nice nose,” Mel piped in, commenting about his seat neighbor.

“Yeah, but his body’s a bomb,” I joked. We all laughed, and Ronald hardest of all.

Lemberg and Riken are talking about the Sprawl City Yeshiva’s need for able lawyers. “We really don’t need ‘em,” Riken says; “we’re all con artists. We can get outta taxes on our own.” Both men laughed.

Such joking is not limited to general characteristics of Jews but is often directed by members at the shul itself, as the following example suggests:

The shul has been having some trouble in recent weeks in gathering a minyan for the services. Now, for the past week, we have been having a good turnout. Riken is commenting on the matter and jokes.

“It’s not good,” he says. “We’re getting too many. I mean sixteen—that’s a bad sign. We should just be making it. Velvel, don’t announce anything about this. Say [that] we’re barely making a minyan. Say that at seven in the morning we didn’t have a minyan. Don’t tell them [it’s] because people are coming in at seven ten.” Riken and the others are laughing.

If the minyan, that sign of the community’s strength or weakness, is not immune from deprecation, then the very central concerns of group existence are not immune. Indeed, this suggests that a good way to find out what people or groups are most concerned to protect is to look at the substance of their self-deprecatory humor.

Self-deprecatory joking is associated with another quality of joking at Kehillat Kodesh: its use as evidence of community membership. Deprecatory humor directed at the group is permissible only to insiders. Should outsiders make similar remarks, the response would be not laughter but resentment. Only when I had
been completely reintegrated as an insider after revealing my role as an observer was I able once again to make deprecatory remarks in my joking. Such jokes were made cautiously at first, since I realized that the very activity which at one point could mark me as an insider might, at too early a juncture, stigmatize me as an outsider.

In essence, self-deprecatory joking is simply a specific form of the joking that enables one to exhibit insider status—the so-called in-joke. Such jokes are for the most part situational joking remarks, occurring often in the midst of conversation. They may be deprecatory but are by no means necessarily so. In both their recitation and reception, in-jokes may be seen as exercises of “unity in plurality”—vehicles for marking one as separate from some and included by others. When the content of in-jokes is sufficiently esoteric, it tends to guarantee secrecy and limited accessibility, so that the conditions for the in-joke’s transfer need not be meticulously restricted.

In-jokes may also latently communicate norms, expectations, criticisms, and public knowledge. In these functions, in-jokes, perhaps more than any other kind of joking, most closely approach gossip. As criticism, the in-joke, by keeping evaluations at the level of humor, enables the speaker to criticize without appearing to be involved in a pointed effort at discreditation. Such purposive evaluations would too easily subvert the atmosphere of sociability in which the in-jokes usually appear. Thus, for example, in the congenial context of Velve’s public announcement that a particular couple has become engaged, one member comments to another, “They’ve both done a mitzva [good deed] for each other.” The remark receives laughter, since everyone knows that neither of the betrothed pair has been very popular with the opposite sex.

In-jokes may consist of epithets which classify a person or activity:

Zenmount has been the chazan today, and now it is the point where a youngster usually concludes the service. No boy is around to take over, and Zenmount simply steps away from the bimah, commenting, “I don’t care. Get someone else to daven [pray].”

“He’s getting to be a Caleb Goltner,” one member says, referring to a former member with the reputation of a prima donna when it came to being chazan. Those hearing the comment laughed.

Here the in-joke requires one to know Caleb Goltner and what he has come to represent. Such in-joke epithets, like other joking remarks, may serve as insiders’ signals that they are able to catalogue all members of the collectivity. In this cataloguing sense, epithets are similar to gossip.

The issue of gossip brings to mind the function of joking as a framework for gossip exchange. In their efforts to acquire and maintain a store of gossip, members often find themselves having to solicit information about the personal and private affairs of others. Blatant solicitation marks one as a busybody; to cover such personal inquiries, members therefore often resort to the ostensibly concealment which joking allows. While this manner of deliberately casual inquiry is not always successful, it does offer certain impersonal and structural advantages. For example, upon my earlier-than-usual arrival in shul one Sabbath my seat neighbor satisfied his curiosity about this violation of my timetable with the joking inquiry: “What happened, did the heater go off in your apartment or something?” Without overstepping the bounds of propriety, the member found a way of signaling his interest.

Joking allows for the exchange of gossip without the donor appearing to be a gossipmonger. Velve, making his usual visits with members during the course of a service, is jokingly asked, “Where did you put Riken today?” In answering the quip, he may harmlessly display his store of community information.

Finally, the joking nature of the inquiry helps both the inquirer and the person he questions to avoid the tension of information denial. One who wishes to keep information secret can respond with another joke without obviously insulting the questioner. Newcomers, not yet adept in the gathering of gossip, are frequent users of such joking inquiries, which signify both their interest in community affairs and their patience with the initiation process. In joking replies, insiders do not scornfully put them off.

Personal inquiry may be straightforward as well. The inept gossiper usually uses such an approach, and the joking reply may then (just as after joking inquiries) be used to avoid truth or direct responses. In this case (1) the respondent’s information remains undisclosed while he avoids appearing stingy with his information or callous in his refusal to answer; (2) the inquirer is emotionally protected and discreetly put off, even though he has exhibited himself as unduly curious; and (3) the community is spared open conflict and tension. For example, to the question, “Did Sidney get divorced again?,” the nonanswer is, “Are you keeping scorecards?”

In order for a personal inquiry to be made in a joking way—whether it is addressed directly to another about himself or to a
third party about another's personal affairs—the actual substance of the remark need not necessarily be funny in its own right. By surrounding his inquiry with laughter or by using vocal and nonverbal glosses in which curiosity appears unimpassioned, the speaker can maintain enough distance from his remark so that he can down it at the slightest evidence of risk. The following incident is a case in point.

There has been a great deal of joking about attendance at the minyan. Everyone is laughing or smiling as we stand and sit around the bimah. Now, in the midst of all this, Riken asks, "I wonder why Zinger has been coming to the minyan every day?"

Zinger, sitting nearby, easily avoids the seriousness of the question's substance by saying, "I want to get into Sam's book [i.e., this book, for which, as everyone present knows, I am gathering data]."

We all laugh again, and Riken chortles, "Yeah, yeah, that's good."

A member's religion and ritual observance are quite often the substance of joking inquiry. Except in the environment of the gossip clique, most solicitation of such information is engaged in with the circumspection which humor allows. It is religious observance which has brought the people together in the first place. Too close an inquiry into the private religious life of the members could be—as it was in the early life of the shul—a stimulus for disintegration. By jokingly making such inquiries, members guard against the dangers of exposing and hence emphasizing the irresolvable differences among them.

The tension-reducing quality of joking was useful for handling the potentially explosive issue of an insider—the author—suddenly turning into a reporter/researcher. Two major modalities of reaction emerged in response to my revelations of intent. The first, as can by now be guessed, involved the discussion in gossip of both the project and myself. The subject became ultimately a part of the public knowledge that was passed on to all new members as they became part of the group. The second response entailed joking. Inquiries to me about the purpose and substance of my interests were quite often expressed in joking form. "You checking up on us to see if we daven every word?" "How come you don't set up a secret tape recorder inside the bimah?" To such joking inquiries, and others even more penetrating, I learned to respond with joking of my own, thereby avoiding a full and detailed revelation of the nuances of my concern, which might affect the action in the setting.

If something occurred which might reflect unfavorably on the collectivity and its members, individuals would joke to me, "Don't put that in your book," or "Better make that a footnote." On one occasion, when a shul event failed to draw a good showing of members, I jokingly asked, "What will I write in my notes?" "I'll tell you exactly what to write," the president answered with a laugh, and to the amusement of others listening, "Write that a lot of people came, and everybody had a good time."

Finally, a psychotheological explanation may be offered for the incessant joking and gossip that constitute shul conversation. This "light" chatter of sociability, almost compulsive in character, blocks out—literally as well as symbolically—the possibility of the speakers' having to come to terms with the deeper antinomies inherent in their modernity and Orthodoxy. To talk about such matters of the spirit would be to open a Pandora's box of anxieties and theological conflicts with which the everyday shul Jew refuses to deal. The "small talk" of joking and gossip is infinitely safer and more manageable.

Between their gossiping and joking, the members have other responsibilities and involvements. While in practice these often seem secondary, they are by tradition and structure much more manifestly part of proper shul behavior, and it is to them that we will now turn our attention.