

# Sex, Drugs, and Rosh Hashanah: How *Broad City* Makes Young Jewish Women Feel Seen

*Clare Wiesen*

Nothing unites a group of millennial Jewish women like discussing their favorite moments on *Broad City*. The show is a favorite among young Jewish women who love comedy, and centers on two best friends, Abbi and Ilana, who live in New York City and are just trying to figure out their post-college lives through a mess of sex, weed, and odd jobs. The creators and stars of the show are Ilana Glazer and Abbi Jacobson, who play characters that are not so coincidentally named after themselves. While every fan has a different scene they call their favorite, there is one thing we can all agree on: *Broad City* is amazing because it is the first show that accurately represents us. There have been quite a few Jewish female characters in mainstream television, such as Rachel and Monica on *Friends*, but they all rarely, if ever, mention their Judaism. *Broad City* does the opposite. From the first episode, Ilana describes herself and Abbi as “two Jewesses just trying to make a buck” (“What a Wonderful World”). This embrace of Judaism is what makes *Broad City* successful, as it follows the tradition of female Jewish comedians using obscenity and brutal honesty to engage and shock their audiences and does not shy away from niche Jewish cultural references. These practices make it feel familiar yet contemporary and create a true representation of the lives of young Jewish women coming of age today which contributes to normalizing Jewish culture in a time of rising antisemitism.

Jewish female comedians established a tradition of bold and overtly sexual comedy that would have a legacy that continues in

contemporary comedy. The history of stand-up comedy as a whole is quite Jewish, with one of the most important figures of stand-up comedy, Lenny Bruce, being a Jew that frequently talked about being Jewish. The history of Jewish women doing comedy follows its own path. Working parallel to Lenny Bruce were Belle Barth and Pearl Williams, two Jewish women whose work continues to be influential. Known as the “Red Hot Mamas,” Barth and Williams worked as stand-up comedians in the 1960s whose routines often discussed sex as the women’s liberation movement progressed forward. These women were working at the same time as Bruce, who was often arrested on charges of obscenity, and while they were not often arrested, their jokes were certainly dirty. Grace Overbeke, a scholar on the intersection between Judaism and theatre who earned her Ph.D. at Northwestern University, notes in her article “Subversively Sexy: The Jewish ‘Red Hot Mamas’ Sophie Tucker, Belle Barth and Pearl Williams,” that “Barth and Williams intentionally delibidinize the female body as a way to refuse to conform to man's sexualized image of women” (48). This is exemplified by Pearl Williams’ joke in which she defines the term “indecent”: “If it's long enough, hard enough, and in far enough, it's in decent” (Williams qtd. in Overbeke 48). Barth and Williams both reduce sex down to the mechanics or turn men in the sex objects in order to talk about the taboo subject without ever appearing erotic.

While their jokes were shockingly sexual, Barth and Williams never neared appearing attractive, as the sex they talked about was aggressive and a method for these women to display their power. In their article titled “Obscenity, Dirtiness and License in Jewish Comedy,”

authors Debra Aarons, who specializes in the linguistic analysis of humor, and Marc Mierowsky, who holds a Ph.D. from Cambridge University in English Literature and Intellectual History, point out that Belle Barth's "routines were delivered in a husky, overtly coquettish way, throatily seductive, and the material was crude and direct. The effect on the audience was not titillating: rather than being sexually aroused, they guffawed" (168). While in another context, a woman talking so openly about sex might have been seen as sexually appealing, the manner in which they presented the jokes makes it clear that the comedians themselves are not sex objects to their audiences. Belle Barth and Pearl Williams both discussed sex and made crude jokes in a manner that was empowering, using their comedy to subvert the misogynistic gender roles that overly sexualized women.

This legacy of using dirty humor to rebel against the oppressive social norms of their time that was established by comedians like Barth and Williams has been continued by other Jewish female comedians, especially Glazer and Jacobson in *Broad City*. In her article, Overbeke writes, "Currently, female Jewish comedians like Sarah Silverman ... take advantage of this cultural tradition to broadcast their views on pressing social and political issues," but I argue that Ilana Glazer and Abbi Jacobson on *Broad City* are executing the strategy most successfully (Overbeke 55). The very first scene of the pilot shows Ilana facetimeing with Abbi as she has sex. When the computer fails to reveal that Ilana is on top of her partner, Lincoln, Abbi says "Oh my god... is he inside of you?" Lincoln responds "Yep," and Ilana states casually as if it is no big deal, "I'm just keeping him warm" ("What a Wonderful World"). Just as the Red Hot Mamas were overly sexual, but not sexual

objects, this scene portrays one of the show's main characters in the midst of having sex, but its goal is not to arouse its audience. The jokes of Barth and Williams broke down sex into the mechanics and turned men into the sex objects, which is precisely what this scene in *Broad City* does.

*Broad City* also uses sexual humor to subvert traditional gender roles through its depiction of Ilana's relationship with Lincoln. The scene continues by Lincoln asking Ilana to define their relationship, to which Ilana responds, "This is purely physical," to which Lincoln says, "Why does this always happen to me?" ("What a Wonderful World"). In this scenario, Ilana is the one who is only looking for a physical relationship, while Lincoln is the one who wants a real commitment. In popular media, the opposite story is often told with women wanting a man who is looking for more than just sex, but *Broad City* turns the man into the role the woman traditionally plays: someone who is looking for a real relationship but is reduced down to a sex object. This idea of Lincoln as a sex object is further supported by the fact that in the scene Ilana wears a long sleeve shirt, while Lincoln appears to be fully naked. In this scene Ilana assumes the "masculine" role, as she brushes off the sex as casual and is physically on top of her partner, enforcing the notion of what is behavior typical of men versus women is completely arbitrary and not substantiated by reality. In this scene that is less than two minutes, Glazer and Jacobson have already established themselves as comedians that are skilled in the techniques of Belle Barth and Pearl Williams as they subvert gender norms by using crude humor as a tool. This scene between Ilana, Abbi, and Lincoln is only the first scene in the

first episode of the show, but this continuation of the tradition established by Barth and Williams carries through the entire show.

By using the same techniques as their predecessors, Glazer and Jacobson make their show feel familiar, as these traditions have rooted themselves in the casual Jewish humor that exists among peers, but their explicit, unapologetically sexual humor feels contemporary, especially as it is used to challenge traditional gender roles. This treatment of sex is one of the most praised aspects of *Broad City*. To take a case in point, Caitlin Wolper writes in her piece “How *Broad City* Encouraged Women to Be Their Grossest, Truest Selves”: “For as much as *Broad City* hits on gross aspects of sex and the body, ... the show’s acceptance of gross as quotidian allows for a much larger message of self-love and body acceptance.” Wolper explains how the show’s embrace of sexual freedom resonates with its audience. Young women today relate to how the characters happily move through hook up culture, as the tired narrative of the woman looking to lock down a husband and get married in her early to mid-twenties becomes antiquated and distant to a young millennial audience. While the discussion of sex on *Broad City*, or even by Barth or Williams, does not pertain specifically to Jewish cultural practices, their use of sexual humor to disrupt societal norms is an inherently Jewish tradition, as it has been established by their Jewish predecessors.

Having shown that *Broad City* is overtly Jewish, I will now argue why this feels more important than ever due to our changing political state. The election of Donald Trump to the American Presidency in 2016 radically changed the status of antisemitism in the United States. While before his election, antisemitism still existed among certain

circles, it did not have national attention. Tony Michels, a Professor of American Jewish History at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, writes in a 2017 article, “At worst, Trump has given encouragement to antisemitism; at best, he has tolerated it” (190). Trump’s “at best” tolerance of antisemitism gave modern day Nazis the courage to come out from the shadows, and shout their messages of hatred without fear, as exemplified by the long list of antisemitic acts that have occurred in the United States since Trump’s election. This list includes horrific and deadly events such as the 2017 Unite the Right March in Charlottesville, Virginia in which white supremacists marched down streets chanting “Jews will not replace us” and the 2018 shooting at the Tree of Life Synagogue in which the shooter killed eleven people. There is no question that antisemitism has once again become prominent, which only emphasizes the importance of positive Jewish narratives in the media. Lisa Liebman, a pop culture writer, writes in her piece titled “When Did TV Get So Jewish?” that “creators telling distinctly Jewish stories at a time when anti-Semitism poses an increasing worldwide threat have one more thing in common: they’re focused on what connects us, rather than what doesn’t.” While she is not explicitly referring to *Broad City*, her point applies to the proudly Jewish characters that Glazer and Jacobson create. Watching and making shows that celebrate Jewish culture help normalize Jewish traditions and work to counteract the spread of fear and hatred. Simply watching *Broad City* will not erase antisemitism, but it does help spread the idea that Jewish Americans have a place in this country.

In this time of rising anti-Jewish sentiments, making explicit Jewish references helps break down negative stereotypes, and no show

exemplifies this better than *Broad City*. Ilana and Abbi identify as secular Ashkenazi Jews, an identity that they lean into, instead of shying away from as previous Jewish characters have, such as Monica and Rachel on *Friends*. While there are a few references to Monica celebrating Hanukkah, Rachel's character is so ambiguous that culture writer Lindsey Weber asks in the title of her article "Is Rachel Green Jewish?" Only through lacing together tiny clues from the ten seasons and a former writer of *Friends* weighing in, can Weber say that yes, Rachel Green is Jewish. *Friends* may be one of the most beloved shows of all time, but compared to *Broad City*, the characters' Judaism is as avoided as gefilte fish. Conversely, *Broad City* leaves zero questions of the Jewishness of Abbi and Ilana. Throughout the entire show, the pair refer to themselves as "Jewesses" and make references to everything from DevaCurl to shiva to how many Ashkenazi Jews are lactose intolerant. These references always make me at least smile, but usually burst out laughing because they are so on the nose with how I experience my own Judaism. But this experience is not unique to me. In her article for *The Cut*, senior writer Anna Silman asks Jewish millennial women to share which scenes most resonated with them. All of these moments that are highlighted share one aspect in common: they are all explicitly Jewish. From the parody of Birthright to Ilana struggling to embrace her curls, the scenes these women singled out as some of the best of the series are all extremely Jewish in content, showing that representation of specifically Jewish experiences remain with and are not ignored by the audiences that they aim to represent.

Because *Broad City* is made by and for young Jewish people, they nail all of the details perfectly, making the representation feel

authentic. One of the most iconic scenes of the series also finds itself on Silman's list: Ilana's grandmother's shiva in the season two episode "Knockoffs." Jessica Goodman, an editor at Cosmopolitan, writes that she loves the scene because "it perfectly portrays all the tiny moments that have happened at, like, every single shiva [she's] ever been to" including the "somber prayer and song," the "uncomfortable family revelation," and the "cardboard-y shiva cookies that are sorta-tasteless but dipped in chocolate so you're like, sure." Another moment that should be added to this list is someone forgetting the solemn occasion and blurting out something inappropriate, such as when Ilana yells "this is the best day of my life" upon learning that Abbi pegged her hot neighbor ("Knockoffs"). My favorite aspect of this episode is that the tradition of shiva is never explained or simplified. It would have been much easier to label the event as a funeral, but Glazer and Jacobson stay true to themselves because in real life if a death in their families occurred, sitting shiva would be their reality. For non-Jewish audiences who are unfamiliar with the practice of sitting shiva, they might have had to look up what the term meant, *which is okay*. It is okay that not everyone will understand the niche Jewish references that are regularly made on *Broad City* because for their Jewish audience, those references make the characters they have constructed feel real. Ultimately, what is at stake here is recognizing that there is value in telling a story that is specifically Jewish.

The characters on *Broad City* are so proudly Jewish, that in celebrating their Judaism, they make Jewish members of their audience want to also celebrate their shared culture. In her essay for *Buzzfeed News* entitled "Goodbye To *Broad City*, Which Put Jewishness Front And



Center,” Randi Bergman, a writer that often covers pop culture and lifestyle, notes that seeing how the characters on the show embraced their Judaism made her want to do the same, especially considering the changing political landscape. Bergman reflects upon how the show affected her, writing “The pleasures and pitfalls of millennial Jewish women have never been so hilariously relatable through the eyes of Abbi and Ilana, and I’ve loved watching them celebrate our eccentricities in ways that breathe new life into one of comedy’s oldest tropes.” Bergman, like many other young Jewish women, myself included, felt *seen* by *Broad City* and all its Jewish references. There are moments in *Broad City* that feel like they must have listened in on conversations between my sister and me and jokes that I could swear I have heard from the mouth of my Jewish friends at temple. Young Jewish women do not just like *Broad City*, they love it because it reflects their real-life experiences.

While there is no shortage of Jewish women in comedy, *Broad City* stands out as one of the only shows that makes Judaism an integral part of the characters’ identities and continually makes references to Jewish culture. Other Jewish comedians such as Amy Schumer and Lena Dunham also have their own television shows, *Inside Amy Schumer* and *Girls*, but in neither program are there regular references to Judaism. In her chapter from the book *Shtetl to Stardom: Jews and Hollywood*, Shaina Hammerman, who holds a Ph.D. in Jewish History and Culture from the Graduate Theological Union, explains this pattern of Jewish female comedians neglecting Jewish humor. She writes, “When a Jewish woman employs Jewish men’s humor, she has gone too far. In being ‘too Jewish’ with her humor, she has betrayed her status as a woman. Jewish

men make Jewish jokes. (Jewish) women make women jokes” (64). With their intersecting identities of being a woman and being Jewish, comedians such as Schumer and Dunham make their gender the center of their comedy, but in turn, sacrifice using Jewish humor. Acknowledging this pattern makes it even more impressive that Glazer and Jacobson manage to consistently joke about Judaism and their gender in *Broad City*. Hammerman’s analysis of why Jewish female comedians often shy away from Jewish content also makes apparent the risk in appearing too Jewish, but Glazer and Jacobson take this risk in order to be authentic to themselves and their experiences. This authenticity comes through to their fans, making clear the risk paid off, as Jewish female viewers applaud them for making relatable content that is specifically Jewish.

*Broad City* holds a mirror up to the Jewish community, which most often makes us feel seen in a positive light, but on occasion also points out our flaws. While the show does not present the same unrealistic New York that shows such as *Sex and The City* do, it must be acknowledged that the two main characters are cisgender white women, but many of the supporting characters are people of color. One of the most controversial aspects of the show is Ilana’s appreciation of other cultures. Her appreciation often ends up on the wrong side of the line of cultural appropriation, and the other characters on the show are not afraid to call her out on it. In a scene from the first season, Abbi says to Ilana, “You know that you’re so anti-racist, sometimes, that you’re actually really racist” (“Stolen Phone”). Hannah Schwadron, a professor of Dance History at Florida State University, analyzes this scene, and other appropriative instances from the show, in her book *The Case of*

*the Sexy Jewess: Dance, Gender and Jewish Joke-work in US Pop Culture*. She explains “This lack of racial awareness plays out throughout the show’s multiple seasons as its unique brand of social conscience and self-consciousness... Writing this blind spot into [*Broad City*], the performers and collaborating writers of the show expose the asymmetry of white progressive maneuvers” (103). By acknowledging Ilana’s racist behavior, the writers of the show force viewers to address their own possible racial blind spots, as white Jewish people often use their Jewishness and status as a minority as a defense of their own racist behavior.

It cannot be debated that *Broad City* was a successful television show. It ran for five seasons and was featured on many lists in 2019 as one of the best television shows of the decade. The show has an incredibly loyal fan base that has most likely seen every episode three times, at a minimum. I argue that this success, at least in part, is due to its Jewishness. Its use of sexual humor to subvert gender roles is a Jewish practice based in the comedy of Belle Barth and Pearl Williams, and its embrace of niche Jewish references make it feel personal to every Jew that watches. It is important to acknowledge that *Broad City*’s Jewishness is a factor in why it was successful because for so long, television has resisted this exact notion that being successful and being overtly Jewish are mutually exclusive. Yes, *Seinfeld* was one of the most popular sitcoms of all time, but Jerry’s Judaism was rarely mentioned, and when it was, it was turned into a harmful caricature. On *Friends*, Rachel’s Judaism is reduced to flashbacks of her in high school with an abnormally large nose. It was accepted that the characters were not universal or relatable unless they celebrated Christmas, and Hollywood

stuck to that model. Especially in the modern political climate with rising antisemitism, positive representations of Jewish Americans are more important than ever. *Broad City* proves that being Jewish is not a character flaw that needs to be hidden in an ugly Christmas sweater, but that embracing Jewish humor and cultural references can actually make a program more successful and make its audiences feel authentically represented.

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