

JEWISH JOURNAL

Waiting for Jewman

Jon Stewart did his show, business as usual, on Rosh Hashanah this year. That night, when his interview guest, Meghan McCain, daughter of Sen. John McCain, greeted him with “Happy New Year,” Stewart looked uncharacteristically nonplussed for a nanosecond, before replying, “What? Huh? See you in Times Square tonight.”

“Culturally Jewish, but not practicing” is what it’s called on the JDate profile form. Stewart grew up in suburban New Jersey with the name Jon Stewart Liebowitz. When radio host Howard Stern asked him about his real name, Stewart answered, “Actually, it’s ‘Jewy Jewman.’”

It’s hard to imagine someone who identifies more strongly with New York-style Jewish shtick. He switches into Jerry Lewis’ voice and gestures at the drop of a yarmulke. Yiddish intonations take up considerable space in his comic’s toolkit, as do mentions of obscure Jewish holidays, traditional Jewish food and top hits from the Torah.

He’s as much of a wise-ass about Jewish customs as he is about every other religion’s trappings. Earlier this year, in a segment about a “South Park” episode that brought veiled death threats to its creators for allegedly depicting the prophet Muhammad, Stewart expressed solidarity with his Comedy Central colleagues Trey Parker and Matt Stone by rolling a montage of “The Daily Show” ragging on practically every world religion. Stewart’s lead-in: “We’ve been ass-h---s to the Jews.” Clips that followed included Rob Corddry suavely exposing his junk to a couple of chicks in a Jacuzzi, saying, “Shalom, ladies. It took two mohels to do that.” There’s Colbert: “You people are *farkakteh*.” A Passover segment set-up: “Lamb shanks: friend or foe?” Stewart: “These *fershluggener shmucks* in Congress are completely *meshuggener*.”

Just to show he’s an equal opportunity offender, the montage also included “The Daily Show” segments going after the Amish, Jehovah’s Witnesses (Colbert: “Your best

chance to talk with old Jamaican women”), snake handlers, Lutherans, Mormons, Hindus, Wiccans, Voodoos, Catholics, Rastafaris, Buddhists and atheists (Colbert: “the religion devoted to the worship of one’s own smug sense of superiority”).

Recently, promoting his new book as a guest on “The O’Reilly Factor,” Stewart was pressed by Bill O’Reilly to admit he was having “Obama remorse.” Asked O’Reilly, “Did you buy the messiah thing when he was campaigning?” Stewart’s response: “Look, I don’t buy the messiah thing with the messiah thing, let alone with a politician.”

On Yom Kippur afternoon this year, at Temple Israel of Hollywood, my shul, I moderated a sort of town hall whose title drew a couple hundred people: “If I Don’t Really Believe in All This, Why Am I Here Today?” At one point, a congregant, without prompting, told the room that Stewart didn’t take the High Holy Days off. His tone was a mixture of anger and disappointment, the kind of sentiment someone might feel about a misguided family member. I heard a shocked intake of breath. The feelings about a beloved cultural icon that this revelation of apostasy uncorked (in a room containing, I’d guess, more than a few once-a-year Jews) were so strong that I couldn’t get the discussion back on track without first giving the floor to another congregant determined to explore the contrasting examples of two nonprodigal sons, Sandy Koufax and Hank Greenberg.

— Marty Kaplan

