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Kosher jokes for the halalidays

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Jodie Shupac, Staff Reporter, Tuesday, December 23, 2014

Tags: Arts comedy Eman Elhuseini Israeli-Palestinian conflict Jessica Salomon
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Jessica Salomon and Eman Elhuseini

Comedians Eman Elhuseini and Jessica Salomon remember hanging out at a now closed comedy club in Montreal several years ago and getting into a discussion, over drinks, about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

"The bar completely cleared out," laughs Salomon, a red-haired, native Montrealer who jokes in her set that she looks more Irish than Jewish. "People were pretending to be smokers so they could get away from us."

But the two comics, who had recently met through Montreal's standup scene – though Elhuseini, also in her 30s, born in Kuwait and raised in Montreal by Palestinian parents, had several years on Salomon in terms of experience – were energized by the discussion and launched into fast friendship.

They currently share an apartment in Brooklyn, where they're based temporarily as both work to break into the scene there.

"[Israel-Palestine] was never really an issue between us," Salomon said. "We're both open-minded, moderate and always curious to hear each other's perspectives."

Back in Montreal, Elhuseini had, after observing how well Muslim and Jewish comics seemed to get along, to be naturally drawn to each other and to find affinities in their senses of humour, already developed a Jewish-Muslim comedy show in Montreal with Jewish comic Jeff Shouela, with whom she still produces the Montreal iteration.

A year later, Salomon came on board as a co-producer and the two women began taking the show on the road to Ottawa and Toronto.

The show, *Kosher Jokes for the Halalidays*, is intended to showcase Muslim and Jewish comics and their commonalities, but also, Salomon said, "to bring together people that aren't normally in a room together."

"Jess and I often fight about who is hated more, my community or hers," Elhuseini joked. "[The show is] about making light of this plight. Both communities have parents that drive us nuts, and both want you to marry someone of your own kind...Through exposure and interaction we realize we're more similar than we are different and what we may have learned [about the other] growing up isn't necessarily as accurate as what we thought."

"Kosher Jokes" typically features Elhuseini and Salomon's curated mix of local Jewish and Muslim comics from each city, as well as the womens' individual standup acts.

Having just finished its fifth year (though fourth in Toronto and Ottawa), *Kosher Jokes* played to a packed crowd at Toronto's Comedy Bar Dec. 14, hosted by local comedian Faisal Butt, with the show's jokes running the gamut from Jewish and Arab parents, respectively, to intermarriage, sex and male pattern baldness.

Though Israel was only briefly touched on, by Salomon, who did a bit about the country being like the abandoned house in a horror movie: Beautiful and enticing, but haunted by its previous tenants, who, it turns out, "actually have a legitimate claim" on the place, the women explained they don't shy away from the subject in their material.

"I've made so many Israeli-Palestinian jokes in the past," Elhuseini said, "But it's hard to constantly generate new material about it...I'm doing more jokes these days about religion."

The reactions they get are varied, with older crowds tending to laugh less at material that pokes fun at more conservative or hardline Jewish views on the conflict in Israel.

This is likely because their audiences, across the three cities, though less in Ottawa, are largely comprised of Jewish people, and include far fewer Muslims.

In Ottawa, Salomon, who previously worked in the field of international law, explained they have connections to a group called the Canadian Centre for International Justice, and the latter often helps bring people from diverse backgrounds to see *Kosher Jokes*.

"We also get a lot of Christian or non-religious people there that are part of the human rights world. Those are the ones that we count on to drink," she quipped.

Elhuseini noted that the Jewish community is generally very supportive of comedy, compared to the Arab community, which she said is "less

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used to it.

"It's a cultural thing," she explained. "They don't fully understand what stand-up is all about. The Jewish community tends to take chances on new talents, but the Muslim community kind of wants you to already be an established star. Once you're a star, they'll pay big bucks for it, but they don't have the patience or understanding to nurture an up-and-coming comedian – somebody like me, who's not really that known yet."

Both Elhusseini and Salomon credit the way they were raised for helping to foster a sense of openness in them.

"I grew up with a Jewish best friend," Elhusseini said, "and I was always exposed to people of different ethnicities... We have some conservative Muslims in my family that are religious, but I never noticed much racial tension. We were immigrants in an environment that was so open to people from all different communities."

Salomon, who didn't attend Jewish day school, emphasized the importance of interacting with people from different backgrounds.

"That generally makes people open-minded," she said.

Still, the two admitted they're not immune to entrenched perceptions or knee-jerk reactions when talk of Israel-Palestine comes up, and they often make a point of challenging each other.

"Jess and I are two very liberal people," Elhusseini said, "But we've caught ourselves having debates where we've had to stop and push each other to research things, rather than just using arguments we heard at the dinner table...to not have arguments based on emotions."



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