

In an exclusive interview with *Celebrate!* Magazine — Jackie Mason is

Offstage & Loving His Neighbor

by Aliza Davidovitz

Whoever attempts to stigmatize Jackie Mason as a borscht-belt comedian, probably harbors the “too Jewish” complex and prefers sushi to gefilte fish. However, with a Tony Award and four Broadway hits under his own belt, *The World According to Jackie Mason*, *Jackie Mason Brand New*, *Jackie Mason: Politically Incorrect*, and *Love Thy Neighbor*, Jackie Mason has undoubtedly achieved international acclaim which extends far beyond the Catskill Mountains. He was twice invited by the British Royal Family to give command performances; he has entertained former Presidents of the United States; and is often invited to speak at high-level political conventions, most recently, the 1996 Republican Convention in San Diego and the Democratic Convention in Chicago. Mason also co-hosts a weekly political talk show on BBC radio with divorce attorney, Raoul Felder. For certain, Mason is the only comedian *ever* who made it to Broadway and was able to stay there — ten years.

If it weren't for the running mascara, tickled bladders and bellyaching laughter of hysterical audiences, one might think one was attending a university lecture in Political Science or Comparative Cultures. With keen insight and an agile tongue, Mason exposes the foibles of various cultures and society's hypocrisies and pretensions. “Every Jew I meet can't wait to tell me he is on the Internet. When I ask him how it works — he is stuck for an hour. He can't remember why he bought it, what to do with it, where he put it. But that doesn't matter, as long as he is “on-line”—he's happy.” Then he proceeds to pick on Starbucks Coffee wondering why anyone would go there to pay \$2.50 for a cup of coffee when they can pay 60 cents at a regular coffee shop. He continues, “At Starbucks, you have to go to one end of the cafe to get



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the sugar, to the other end to get the milk, back to the counter to get a napkin...for an hour-and-a-half you're running around, and they have the nerve to ask you for a tip.”

Considering the sharp-witted content of *Love Thy Neighbor*, Mason's latest hit, one could say that the title is somewhat ironic. For no one escapes Jackie's omniscient eyes, from President Clinton to Jesse Jackson: “Every morning Jesse Jackson wakes up and he is looking for a disaster. Tell me, did you ever see Jesse Jackson show up at a pleasant occasion? Did you ever see him at a *bar mitzvah*?” Yet off-stage Jackie Mason is indeed a man who truly “loves his neighbor” without prejudice. As an advocate of human rights, he has donated both his time and his money to benefit the Civil Rights Movement, the NAACP, old age homes, *yeshivas* and causes much closer to home. Mason is also a strong supporter of Israel. During the Six Day War when Israeli reserve officers from around the world were being called to arms, the 5-foot-4-inch hero from Brooklyn was also on his way to the battle front. Pulling strings with

high government officials to gain transportation and entry into the promised land, Mason wanted to be the Bob Hope of the Israeli troops. “This is the only country that runs a budget war. Israel makes the soldiers pay for the ammunition! That's why everybody is such a sure shot.” There was only one problem, his accent was “too Jewish” and the Israeli soldiers did not understand his jokes.

In any case, whether he is walking along the streets of Manhattan, or attending a fundraising benefit, I have personally observed that Mason always takes the time to sign autographs and to speak with his numerous fans. “Wow, are you Jackie Mason?” asks one fan. Mason replies, “I sure hope so, because I've been cashing his check every week.” No matter how busy he is, he is never too busy to ask them their names, what they do for a living and to wish them well. Although Mason can mingle in any social circle he desires, he prefers the down-to-earth company of the corner deli, to the rhinoplastic company of the upper crust. Perhaps it is his love of people that endows him with such

great insight into human nature.

But who has insight into Jackie Mason? He continues to remain a mystery. Probably because he chooses to answer serious and probing questions with jokes. When asked what is his biggest fear, Mason answers, "Getting hit by a truck." Then he opts for a funnier answer, "Getting turned down by a woman — after I made love to her." When asked to comment on death, he answers, "It is not a very healthy way to live." Few can see beyond the veneer of the star whose very presence, incessant pacing and hilarious gestures command the stage. However, the one thing fans can be sure of is that when the gesticulating Mason throws his hands and head up toward the sky, he is most likely looking for his cue and not for G-d.

Despite being a rabbi's son and a former rabbi himself, Mason muses whether a world such as ours, filled with greed, killings and starvation can actually be run by a G-d. "More people have been killed in the name of G-d than for anything else. If G-d makes rules and then doesn't enforce them, what is he doing for a living? If a person

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would run a company the same way G-d runs the world, he would get fired."

Mason is also miffed by a world where people will spend eighty thousand dollars on a car, and those same people will not spare five dollars to help a beggar. "I am not a religious person, but I believe in decency and respect for human life. I admire *Judaism* because it has a strong emphasis on charity and accentuates love of your fellow man."

Indeed Jackie Mason does love his neighbor, but the question remains, "How much does he love himself?" Although he jokes that he is the biggest ego-maniac that ever lived, incredibly, Mason has never saved a single photograph of himself or any article written about him. The 62-year-old bachelor preserves no memorabilia and makes no pretense at self-deification. He simply says, "I just want to be remembered for a guy who is still living." But Mason

doesn't really care how he is remembered, claiming that he won't be around to notice it. What Mason does care about is that every night he takes his bows before a full house and a standing ovation, despite all the obstacles that stood in his way while striving to becoming a star.

The obstacles were many indeed. In his earlier years, his comedic aspirations were strongly discouraged by his orthodox family who preferred to see him on a rabbinic podium rather than the stage. In 1964, Ed Sullivan brought Mason's career to a near halt by blacklisting him for raising the wrong finger (few people know that Sullivan forgave Jackie and invited him back onto his show). In 1988, there was a Grammy Award disaster when Mason picked on a certain "Mistah" named Quincy Jones. Then in 1989, civil rights groups attacked him for referring to Mayor Dinkins in a manner they misinterpreted as derogatory. It even led to the cancellation of his television series, "Chicken Soup," which was criticized for its ethnic stereotyping. One thing remains certain, the life and times of Jackie Mason have never been boring.

However, what remains outstanding about Mason is that he has surmounted all these obstacles with integrity and without bitterness. No one has ever paid the price for Jackie Mason's success except for Jackie Mason himself. He has sacrificed his youth, possibilities of a family life, and his orthodox heritage to pursue his dream. With hard work and perseverance, he was committed to realizing that dream, most essentially because he believed in himself. Doing five hours of homework every day, he reads through several newspapers and magazines and describes himself as a student of humanity. "I like to think about life and what strikes me as funny or ridiculous. Society's hypocrisy and irony write my routines for me." Mason normally takes three to four months to create a new show. He emphasizes that the success of a joke depends on timing. Delivering the punch line a moment too early or too late, can kill the joke. Jackie Mason's own success also depended on timing. Although it came late, it came nevertheless, and he has truly earned his place upon the great stages of Broadway and the world.

