

How to become a Jewish comedian

Eli Lebowicz riffs about going from Chicago to Israel to YU to full-time stand-up

By **JOANNE PALMER**

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Stand-up comedian Eli Lebowicz has a very Jewish show.

You know that guy walking up and down the aisles in a baseball stadium with that big box around his neck (it looks painful.) yelling something like “beah heah” or, more prosaically, “hot dogs!”

That's how Eli Lebowicz got his start.

Mr. Lebowicz grew up in West Rogers Park — the Near North Side Chicago neighborhood that's so thoroughly Jewish that it's basically Chicago's Teaneck — and spent his summers (and, he admits, the occasional spring Friday as well, even though school hadn't ended yet) in Wrigley Field.

Mr. Lebowicz was a student at the Ida Crown Academy, Chicago's big modern Orthodox yeshiva. He “started vending at Cubs games when I was 16” and graduated from high school in 2007, so this was in the mid-aughts. “It was a big thing in my day. There was a big Jewish contingent at Cubs games.” It was practically a rite of passage for Jewish kids — at least the ones with the personality for it — to work for food vendors there.

When he talks about it, even though he tells the story straight, you hear the storyteller. “You'd go to orientation, and they'd give you a uniform, and then you'd come in and buy the case on loan. When you check out, they give you a receipt that tells you how much commission to expect.

“And there are tips. It's a huge part of what you make.

“There was a woman who waved me off with a quarter,

and her mother was like, ‘Hey, give me that quarter back.’ And I was like, ‘But she gave it to me,’ and she was like, ‘Give it back!’

“So I gave it back. I didn’t argue with her. I didn’t want to see the headline in the newspaper the next day: ‘Jew Argues With Old Lady Over 25 Cents.’”

Will Ferrell did an impression of the Cubs’ legendary announcer, the late Harry Caray, on a talk show, and “I would do Will Ferrell’s Harry Caray,” Mr. Lebowicz said. Mr. Caray wore enormous glasses with thick black rims. “I bought the big glasses, and I’d walk around yelling, ‘Hey, who wants ice cream.’ People sometimes would give me money without even buying things.

“It was one of the best jobs I ever had,” he added. “I got a great workout, and a great tan.” And a built-in captive audience for his shtick, and the chance to develop it.

After he graduated from high school, Mr. Lebowicz went to Israel for his gap year. He didn’t do comedy then, at least not formally, but he used the skills he learned — a kind of cross between schmoozing and stand-up — in social situations that otherwise might have been stilted and awkward. At one “random Shabbat dinner, a couple said, ‘You should do comedy!’ And that was the biggest

ego boost.”

When he returned to the United States, Mr. Lebowicz went to Yeshiva University. He did his first open mic night — friends had started a fundraiser for Camp HASC, for kids with special needs. “I didn’t do very well, but I didn’t bomb,” he said. He did it again the next year, “and I won it.” The third year he tried, he came in second, “but I really should have won,” he insisted.

He also began doing something called “bringer night” at clubs. That’s “if you want to get up and have stage time, and someone like me can’t get a spot, so instead, on some random off night, you can bring 10 people and then you can get up on stage for five, six minutes.”

He did that at local clubs — at Comix NY, in the meatpacking district, and at Carolines on Broadway in Midtown. “I worked on getting material, and I started to realize that I could do Jewish material,” he said. He now often works at Stand Up NY, on the Upper West Side. He’s frequently opened for Elon Gold there, and now he is doing his own shows there as well.

When he was at YU, “I created a joke newspaper, our version of the Onion, called the Quipster,” Mr. Lebowicz said. “It was a lot of fun. It was online, and I’d print out articles and post them in the urinals. That really got them

read. It was great.”

But Mr. Lebowicz also started to realize that his own life experiences as an Orthodox Jew could be mined because they were comedy gold — at least when they were displayed to people who shared enough of his background to get the joke.

“And then I just started leaning into it,” he said. “I realize that I have a certain perspective that is not that common. I grew up Orthodox, I live an Orthodox life. There is plenty of funny stuff about Orthodoxy, but Netflix doesn’t care about it.

“It’s very niche.”

He started with Passover programs, in 2014, he said. “I’d do shows at Purim, at synagogues, and slowly but surely I’d get more and more. There were sheva brachot, and a bunch of different things that I picked up through word of mouth,” which he boosts with an active social media presence, first on Facebook, then on Twitter.

Writing and performing take “a different skill set,” he added. “But it uses the same creative muscles. Sometimes if a tweet is good, it might work in stand-up. It would be good to test with an open mic night — but there are not a

ton of Jewish open mics either.”

And now Mr. Lebowicz does mainly Jewish stuff.

Mr. Lebowicz has been married for a decade — his wife, Tenima, is a genetic counselor. They have two children, one 5 1/2, the other 2 1/2; they plan to move from Riverdale to Teaneck in the next few months.

The life of a regular stand-up comedian isn't great for family life, Mr. Lebowicz said. “You audition at a club, and if you're lucky, you get a week's notice that you'll go on at midnight on a Tuesday.

“The goal is to move earlier in the evening, and eventually to host, and then you go on the road. You spend the weekend in Cincinnati.

“For me, that is really not a viable thing. For me, it is better and more lucrative to do a shul dinner or a Saturday night melave malka. So for me, going the non-Jewish route doesn't really make sense. I have done corporate shows, but my bread and butter is Jewish events — JCCs, dinners, synagogues, stuff like that.

“I was doing different day jobs for 10 years but, starting in January. I've been doing comedy full time.” That means

that he also can spend some time out in the world, watching people and what they do, and that informs his craft.

“My 2 1/2-year-old said, ‘I love you.’ And then he saw me, and said, ‘I wasn’t talking to you. I was talking to my teddy bear.’ That’s everyday life.”

So how stable is this new life? “It was great around Purim, but talk to me again during the 10 Days,” he said.

But seriously, “what I realized is that I wasn’t putting both my feet into comedy. Now I am. It’s terrifying, and it’s also exhilarating.”

Mr. Lebowicz did get a lot of material from his day jobs; many of them were in Jewish organizations or Jewish-owned businesses, he said. “I worked at B&H,” the Manhattan camera store that’s famous for many things, including both their merchandise and their large staff of very observant Jews — “for five years. They had a mandatory Chol HaMoed meeting at the zoo.

“I worked at the OU, and I answered questions. Someone called to ask if I had the number for the Kof-K. That’s like calling Coke asking for the number for Pepsi.”

Although Mr. Lebowicz wants to work in the Jewish world, he wants to enlarge his reach within that world. So far, most of his gigs have been for Orthodox groups, “because that’s my network, it’s where I started, but I am looking to branch out,” he said. “I have done JCCs and Chabad houses, and very much do not want to limit myself.”

That comes with challenges too. “I don’t know what references have made it to other denominations,” he said; he knows that many Reform and Conservative Jews would get neither the B&H nor the OU joke. But he’s working on it.

Mr. Lebowicz is grateful to the already-somewhat-established comedians who have helped him. “One of the first legs up I got was from Avi Liberman,” he said. “I met him at Pesach at a shul in Florida, probably around 2015, and he asked me to open for him. It was really nice. Elon Gold really helped me too, and there are other people like him.

Mr. Lebowicz also has worked with Ami Kozak and Mikey Greenblatt of Englewood. “We did a really good Purim sketch on Instagram,” he said. “We’ve done three so far.” To see one of them, google “Keeping Kosher at a Business Meal” and YouTube; be sure not to do it any place where you can’t laugh very hard out loud.

He's going to be at Kol HaNeshama through word of mouth and at least in part because he answered the phone when someone from there called. "I answer all my calls, even spam," he said. "Even robocalls. Maybe it'll be a prince from Nigeria! You never know."

Mr. Lebowicz is on Instagram at @elicomedyagram; his Twitter is @EliLebowicz, and his website is elicomedy.com.