

Life & Times

Good as Gold

New Jersey funny lady returns to her roots

by **Ron Kaplan**
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Judy Gold stands head and shoulders above most stand-up comics. Of course, at 6'3", she stands head and shoulders above a lot of people (ba-dum-dum).

But seriously, folks.

The native of Clark returns to her roots for a benefit performance for her old synagogue, Temple Beth O'r/Beth Torah on June 5.

Having just dropped her kids — eight-year old Henry and three-year-old Ben — at their respective schools, the ever-in-demand Gold juggled phone calls while talking with *New Jersey Jewish News*.

Her credits indicate her hard work and high energy level. The day before the interview, Gold was guest co-host on Air America's *Morning Sediton*; the day after, she would be performing at a fund-raiser for Art Start, a program that benefits underprivileged children.

Aside from an average of three nights of stand-up a week, she has appeared on numerous television programs, in both comedic and dramatic roles. She is a staple on cable comedy shows, including *The Heroes of Jewish Comedy*, and her one-woman show about Jewish mothers — *G-d Doesn't Pay Rent Here* — will be performed at

the Montreal Comedy Festival this summer. She also has a serious side, having appeared on *Law and Order*, *Law and Order: SVU* and the soap opera *As The World Turns*, as, strangely enough, a security guard who embezzled money.

The woman obviously can't hold a job.

Her Web site, JudyGold.com, is full of Jewish identifiers. A "chhalendar" of upcoming appearances beckons readers with the headline, "So how come I never see you anymore? What, are you so busy you can't come by?" Another link, explicitly warning "don't click here," punishes the disobedient with a litany of "stuff my mother said."

When leaders of TBOBT approached Gold for assistance in a fund-raiser, she also invoked her mother.

"What am I gonna say, no? I'm a Jew and I carry the guilt. My mother did an excellent job."

While Gold does "a lot of synagogues and JCCs," this one is special. The venue is Arthur L. Johnson Regional High School, her alma mater, she said with a tone bristling with discomfort. "I wouldn't say the word is 'exciting,'" she said of her return. "I'm curious to see what my memory of that place is.....I'm sure it will seem so much smaller. When I walked out of that high school, I never thought I'd have to go back

in again. I was like 'bu-bye, have a nice life.'"

Gold admits to difficult times at Johnson, due in part no doubt to her height: she grew to six feet by the time she was 13. "I was just the tall, awkward, very unpopular young marching band member." For awhile she was interested in playing basketball, but was discouraged by the coach because she was "too tall." It made, she said, for a very "interesting" childhood.

Although it sounds like something out of *Mean Girls*, Gold had a very mature point of view. "I always knew that it was not going to always be like this. I wouldn't be who I am without these experiences. Look, comedy equals tragedy plus time."

She found social freedom at Rutgers University at New Brunswick, where she earned a degree in music in 1984 and got her first taste of the life that awaited her. "Someone dared me to do a comedy routine using my dorm-mates as material." As the saying goes, a star was born.

She rates most of her material as "PG-13 to R," although she was going to "PG it" for the TBTOT gig. "It's part of your job to perform for your audience yet not lose any integrity. It's pretty much 'this is who I am — take it or leave it.'"

Gold finds anything misogynistic, homophobic, or racist to be "disgusting."

"You get to a certain level, you have a microphone, you have people listening and you're essentially a social commentator and I think you have a responsibility. I completely believe in freedom of speech and I would never tell anyone not to do anything. But, that being said, if I saw a comedian that I thought was perpetuating any type of horrible stereotype or could go somewhere else with the joke and make the joke better and not be racist, I will confront that person."

People don't realize how difficult her profession is. "[They think] it's not work. The travel, the years of writing.... If people knew how long it takes to write a joke, how many times you have to recite a joke until it's perfect.... You don't know if something's funny until you perform it. And one syllable can make it unfunny." And, unlike most of her television roles, it can't be rehearsed. "You have to just get on stage, take risks."

"There's nothing like live [performances] and it can't be translated onto television. Comedy is way harder than drama to do," she said, speaking from extensive experience. "You're really putting yourself out there. It really is such an odd art form. You're eliciting a response; you're playing with people's emotions."

Doing standup is "like a muscle," she said. "You have to continue to do it to stay in shape."



Judy Gold has received two Emmy Awards for her work on *The Rosie O'Donnell Show*.

There's another component to Gold's life and work: her sexual identity.

"I mention it. I never talked about being gay because I never wanted to pigeonhole myself. I'm a comic who happens to be gay, I'm not a gay comic. I don't want to work for one audience even though I'm proud of who I am. I do mention it because once I had kids, I had funny experiences being a gay mom." One of her best jokes, she said, was saying how she felt sorry for her kids because they had two Jewish mothers.

And what about the stereotype of the Jewish mother? "To be a great standup you have to tell the truth and you have to draw upon your own experience and what's really important to you. Otherwise, there's no passion. My mother loves it. She thinks it's hilarious. And it comes from a really good place."

Gold is a member of B'nai

Jeshurun in Manhattan, where Henry attends religious school. "I am very Jewish and I am religious and I try to practice; I try not to work on Friday nights and it's a huge part of my life."

Despite the recognition for her work — she has won two Emmy Awards for writing and producing *The Rosie O'Donnell Show*, a Cable Ace Award for her HBO special, and was twice nominated as funniest female stand-up by The American Comedy Awards — Gold said her proudest accomplishment has been her kids.

"To create a human being and try to bring them up with good values, to create a good person, to carry on lessons you've learned and lessons that *they* teach *you*...My life would be so empty if I didn't have my kids." ■

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Judy Gold listed Phyllis Diller among her all-time favorite comedians.

Photos from JudyGold.com

JUDY GOLD RETURNS to her hometown of Clark on behalf of Temple Beth O'r / Beth Torah, the synagogue at which she received her Jewish education and became a bat mitzva and where her family still worships, when she headlines A Night of Stars, on Sunday, June 5. Joining her on the program will be the legendary mentalist, The Amazing Kreskin, who was born, and still lives, in Montclair.

The program begins at 7

p.m. at Arthur L. Johnson Regional High School, 365 Westfield Ave. in Clark. General admission tickets are \$25. There is a \$500 Patrons package, which includes two reserved seat tickets to the show, a dessert reception with the stars, and a full-page ad in the commemorative journal. A Sponsors package, which includes two reserved seat tickets and the dessert reception with the stars, is \$180.