"Real Americans":

The Evolving Identities of American Jews

by Sylvia Barack Fishman

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CONTENTS

Introduction 3

SESSION ONE
Tevye: A Father and His Daughters:
Fiddler on the Roof 12

SESSION TWO
A Mother and Her Sons: *Mirele Efros* 21

SESSION THREE
The American Dream: *The Jazz Singer* 30

SESSION FOUR
North of the Border:
The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz 38

SESSION FIVE
Brooklyn Nostalgia: *Brighton Beach Memoirs* 46

SESSION SIX
A Question of Faith: *Crimes and Misdemeanors* 55

SESSION SEVEN
Making It in America: *Avalon* 64

SESSION EIGHT
Wrap-Up 74

Notes 78

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INTRODUCTION

This course explores American Jewish life over the past century, using film as a prism through which to view social change. What does it mean to be an American Jew? At a time when most Jewish Americans are a few generations from their immigrant origins, is it possible to be both a "real American" and a "real Jew"? The films in this course provide varying perspectives on the nature of Jewish identity. And because there is not one identity that describes all American Jews, the course examines the ways in which Jewish identities have been shaped by the encounter between traditional and modern values.

The Films – From Eastern Europe to Baltimore

The seven films, which were made between 1927 and 1990, depict generations of Jews, first in Europe and later in America, grappling with the question of what it means to be a Jew in the larger society. The films explore the tensions and conflicts experienced by American Jews as they seek to reconcile the traditions of the Old World with the attractions and challenges of the New.

- *Fiddler on the Roof* (1971), a musical version of Sholem Aleichem's stories about Tevye the dairyman and his family, showcases tensions between tradition and modernity that affected Jews living in tsarist Russia even before they departed for America.
- *Mirele Efros* (1939), known as the "Yiddish Queen Lear," depicts a stormy conflict between generations of a family in which the matriarch and her traditional values are no longer accorded respect.
- *The Jazz Singer* (1927), the classic film starring Al Jolson, portrays the allure of assimilation against the pull of family, amid the promise and temptations of the New World.
- *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz* (1974) is the tale of a young Jewish man who sets out to "make it" in the larger world, interpreting the messages of his elders in ways they may not have intended.

◆ *Crimes and Misdemeanors* (1989) is Woody Allen's comedy/drama about Jewish belief set against the illusions and realities of contemporary society.

◆ *Brighton Beach Memoirs* (1986) is Neil Simon's comedy about an extended Brooklyn family that scrapes to get by in the 1930s without abandoning its principles and ideals.

◆ *Avalon* (1990) depicts several generations of a Baltimore family, from their closeness and cohesion as immigrants to their dispersion in the wake of their success.

What Is a Jew?

In the late 1980s the government of Israel considered limiting the Law of Return, which allows all Jews automatic citizenship in the Jewish State, to persons who can prove their mothers were Jewish or who underwent Orthodox conversion. Major segments of the American Jewish community, including national Jewish organizations, exploded in outrage at the idea that they or their descendants might be deprived of identification with Israel or the possibility of settling there in time of crisis. Although attempts to change the Law of Return were tabled, partially in response to pressure from the American Jewish community, they left unhealed sensitivities in the minds of many American Jews.

For most of Jewish history, a Jew was an individual who followed a lifestyle shaped by Jewish law, culture, and society. In the countries where they resided for most of the 2,000-year history of Diaspora life, Jews could be identified by their distinctive Sabbath and holiday observances, dietary laws, modes of prayer and study, patterns of family formation, language, and clothing. Sometimes Jews lived in self-contained communities in which their governing bodies as well as their lifestyles were distinctively Jewish. Sometimes they were more integrated into the larger community, depending on the disposition of their non-Jewish hosts.

The vast majority of Jews were born to Jewish parents, but people could and did convert to Judaism, and converts and their children were accorded full Jewish status. Once a person had become a Jew, he or she shared the lifestyle and destiny of other Jews. Since most societies were defined religiously, a Jew could only abandon Judaism by

converting to another religion. When Jews converted from the Jewish religion, they abandoned the Jewish people and Jewish destiny as well. Jewish societies treated them as though they were dead to Judaism.

Jews in every community shared certain common holy books, most universally the Hebrew Bible, and, until the eighteenth century, Jews in every community expected to follow the prescriptions of Jewish law. Jewish communities often had special languages like Yiddish and Ladino (Judeo-Spanish). They developed special cuisines, which adapted the culinary customs of their host countries to Jewish dietary restrictions. Their music also often blended the melodies and rhythms of surrounding cultures with Jewish lyrics and attitudes.

Jews were thus a people, a civilization, and a religion. Until modern times, it was seldom necessary to separate out the ethnic, religious, and social strands that made them distinctive.

With the coming of the Enlightenment and Emancipation, first in Western and then in Eastern Europe, Jews began to have the opportunity to integrate more fully into non-Jewish educational, occupational, and social communities. Western modern political movements such as socialism and nationalism increased these opportunities, while providing ideologies that often took the place of religious loyalties in the hearts of emancipated Jews. Thus, the hegemony of Jewish lifestyles had already begun to weaken in many communities even before large numbers of Jews left for America.

Into the Melting Pot

The deepest shock to traditional Jewish lifestyles and values came with emigration to the United States. There, in crowded and impoverished tenements, European Jewish parents struggled to keep food on the table. Patterns of traditional Jewish life were often disrupted. Children were enrolled in public schools, and they learned a new language, new styles of dress and behavior, and different attitudes, both in the classroom and on the street. Many new American Jews aspired to look, talk, dress, and behave like "real Americans."

The immigration years reflected the past and foreshadowed the future of American Jewish life. Some Jews felt divested of their Jewishness as soon as they shaved their beards or gave up their wigs and put on Western dress; others struggled to maintain traditional lifestyles; still others tried to combine Jewish and American mores. For American Jews who wanted out of Jewishness altogether, such a choice was far easier than ever before in Jewish history. An American Jew who had no interest in staying tied to Judaism didn't have to convert to anything but could simply walk away. Or one could be a totally passive member of the community and still maintain the identity of American Jew.

These trends continued throughout the twentieth century. The results of the 1990 National Jewish Population Study conducted by the Council of Jewish Federations, for example, reported that while some Jews defined themselves as "Jewish by religion" and generally identified with the Jewish community, people, and/or religious customs, others did not think of themselves as Jewish by religion and tended to have few, if any, ties with institutional or communal Jewish life. Especially among younger American Jews, ages 18 to 44, there was a great deal of overlap between social, sacred, and communal Jewish behaviors and attitudes. In contrast, another large group had few Jewish friends, did not belong to synagogues, visit Israel, or contribute time or money to Jewish organizations. This last group seemed defined by a kind of "effortless," or even apathetic, Judaism where one feels a vague connection without taking an active role in the community or supporting its institutions.

The results of this study were disturbing to many American Jews, especially to older American Jewish liberals. For many years, American Jews had cherished the concept that Jews could retain their passion for the Jewish people and Jewish ideals without the overt trappings of the Jewish religion or culture. If this assumption could no longer be taken for granted, had America's egalitarian and open society paradoxically weakened Jewish commitments? How could an American type of Judaism be transmitted to future generations? "Who is a Jew?" and "Who is an American Jew?" suddenly seemed very urgent questions.

Jewish Identity in Literature and Film

While these issues may seem strikingly contemporary, Jewish writers and filmmakers have been struggling with them for almost a century. From the time that modernity collided with Eastern European Jewish life, writers such as Sholem Aleichem, Chaim Grade, and Isaac Bashevis Singer have portrayed Jews struggling to redefine themselves and Judaism in rapidly changing times. With the mass immigrations of Eastern European Jews to the United States, the painful process of acculturation was depicted by such writers such as Abraham Cahan, Anzia Yezierska, Henry Roth, Samuel Ornitz, Charles Reznikoff, and others. Jewish filmmakers captured the clash between Western and Jewish values, and often between parents and children, men and women. Sometimes they placed the action of their films on one side of the ocean, sometimes on the other, in films such as, in Yiddish, *Mirele Efros, Tevye, Uncle Moses,* and *An American Shadchen,* and, in English, *His People* and *The Jazz Singer.*

In the middle of the twentieth century the experiences of American Jews were the subject of works by key North American Jewish writers and filmmakers, including such novels made into film as Herman Wouk's *Marjorie Morningstar,* Philip Roth's *Goodbye Columbus,* and Mordecai Richler's *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz.* They established Jewish fiction and film as a variety of American expression somewhat akin to fiction and film about life in the South. Depicting Jewish characters who stood both inside and outside mainstream American culture, these works portrayed angst-ridden assimilation as the interesting part of being Jewish in America.

By the late 1970s and 1980s, the struggle for assimilation was beginning to lose its bite, as new generations of American Jews matured who had no memories of more intensely Jewish communities. Their grandmothers – not their mothers – may have "pushed" chicken soup, and even the simplest Yiddish expressions were often not part of their vocabulary.

During the past two decades some American Jewish writers and filmmakers have looked at the question of "Who is a Jew" not from the outside – that is, a Jew as distinguished from a gentile – but from the inside: What is

the essence of Jewishness? Chaim Potok, who had pioneered such concerns at a time when few believed that his approach could be meaningful to most Jews, was joined by numerous authors and filmmakers. Indeed, one of the most powerful indications of this turn inward was the proliferation of films that returned to presentations of a more Jewishly intense past or Orthodox enclaves in contemporary America, such as *Fiddler on the Roof, The Chosen, Hester Street, The Imported Bridegroom,* and *A Stranger Among Us.* Even writers who had earlier been preoccupied by assimilation, such as Philip Roth and Woody Allen, created powerful new works that searched for the core of Jewish identity, such as *The Counterlife* and *Crimes and Misdemeanors.* The immigrant environments and humid family squabbles that were once energetically escaped by second-generation American Jews were now nostalgically invoked, as American Jews used film and literature to explore the intersection between their American and Jewish identities.

"Real Americans"

In many cases, the family is the setting and the springboard for forging a Jewish-American identity. Parents, grandparents, and siblings are role models as well as reasons for rebellion. Each film presents a different version of a Jewish family's powerful influence on its sons and daughters. While some of the characters may seem to confirm stereotypes, going beyond the stereotypes to examine the dynamics of family, social, economic, and religious life can be enlightening.

This course begins with two portrayals of Eastern European society *(Fiddler on the Roof, Mirele Efros)* in its initial confrontations with the "isms" that have shaped contemporary life – socialism, nationalism, secularism, Zionism, and, perhaps most powerful of all, individualism. Both films were based on Yiddish-language literary works but were made in the United States. They illustrate how American-based filmmakers viewed life in the Old Country, while providing a basis for comparison with stories about modern Jewish life. Although many Eastern European Jewish families were already profoundly affected by these sweeping historical currents at the turn of the century,

traditional attitudes were still firmly fixed in the minds of Jews – if not always in their behavior. Conflicts between the generations often related to the embrace by young people of a modern perspective, based on an "ism."

The curriculum moves through emigration to the United States, depicting the dislocation of Jewish family relationships and value systems in the early decades of twentieth-century American Jewish life *(The Jazz Singer)*. In immigrant society, life was often turned inside out, as old country elites became workers and common folk became entrepreneurs. Financial success, personal fulfillment, freedom, and egalitarianism replaced the more traditional Jewish emphasis on lifelong study, devotion to the larger family unit, conformity to religious laws and customs. As Jews became more and more acculturated, the attitudes and mannerisms of more traditional Jewish lifestyles often seemed quaint, comical, and sometimes threatening to their status as "real Americans." Many members of the younger generation sought to "make it" in America in a big way, striving singlemindedly for success *(The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz)*. "Making it" was deemed synonymous with "fitting in." The gap between the generations, between the Old World and the New, between tradition and modernity, continued to widen.

Many immigrants left the old neighborhoods and moved to new neighborhoods, still living mostly among Jews, at once preserving and transforming the American Jewish community. During the years of the Depression, Jews faced many of the same economic hardships as the rest of the population, and families and individuals had to muster much strength to survive. The family itself *(Brighton Beach Memoirs)* was a fortress of Jewish identity and stability.

The experience of Jews, who as a group fared better than average in the American free-enterprise system, has been depicted in films that present consumerism and materialism as seemingly ubiquitous Jewish qualities, in fact as the defining characteristics of the Jewish family. At its most extreme, the Jewish quest for financial success is presented by Jewish filmmakers as quasi- or frankly criminal behavior. At the same time, many Jews continue the long tradition of questioning their lives at every stage, reworking issues about the authenticity of their Jewish

beliefs and their personal philosophies *(Crimes and Misdemeanors)*.

The final film illustrates a recent nostalgic fascination with older lifestyles, especially those in which extended families issued clear guidelines for behavior *(Avalon)*. Informed by contemporary American society, in which family units and clear moral standards seem increasingly threatened, this film spotlights the caring attitudes that existed – or that we wish to believe existed – in extended families in an earlier age. It fits into the category of turning inward, or more accurately, turning to the past for an explanation of the present.

Our Families, Our Selves

Mirele Efros, Tevye, Duddy Kravitz, Neil Simon's Eugene Jerome, and the other characters in this set of films have more in common than a viewer might think at first glance.

The seven films share a family setting, although the families and their dynamics are quite different. Conflicts between parents and their children may be inevitable, but their resolution (or lack of resolution) is always interesting and instructive. Many of the sons and daughters encountered in these films are more "modern" than their parents, forging their own identities, sometimes reinventing themselves. They interact in a different world than that of their parents; it might be literally a different world when parents are immigrants who have left the world of their childhood behind, or simply a different perspective based on education, ideology, or experience.

All of the these cinematic families, from Tevye and Golde of Anatevka to the Krichinskys of Baltimore, are portrayed as strong units. The principles of characters as diverse as Mirele Efros and Kate Jerome – a sense of history and peoplehood, deference to parents, discipline, respect for learning, a strong moral code, hospitality to the stranger in one's midst – can be identified as Jewish values with Biblical roots. These qualities have enhanced the endurance of the Jewish family as well as successful acculturation to America. At the same time the future retention of these values may be threatened by the very freedom, affluence, and mobility made possible in this "promised land."

Some of the films depict unsavory behavior by Jews, and Jewish viewers may feel uncomfortable viewing them. Analyzing such films in this course does not condone the behavior shown or imply that these are typically Jewish characteristics. Rather, it is interesting to see how Jewish writers and filmmakers grapple with issues of morality. Even when these artists are disaffiliated with the Jewish community, issues of Jewish identity continue to be of critical importance to them.

What Is an American Jew?

What it means to be a Jew in the twentieth century continues to be a perplexing, challenging, and ultimately fascinating question. Film offers a variety of images, and formulates the question of identity in unique ways.

On the most basic level, the filmmaker signals to or informs an audience (not necessarily made up of Jews) that a character is Jewish. Sometimes, a character is fully invested in a Jewish lifestyle; sometimes a distinctive Jewish name creates audience recognition. In Sidney Lumet's 1992 thriller, *A Stranger Among Us,* we enter the Hasidic world of Williamsburg (Brooklyn), New York. Jews speak Yiddish, wear untrimmed beards and clothing derived from eighteenth-century Poland, avoid modern media and profane language, immerse themselves in study of holy texts, and marry young and innocent. On the other hand, Lumet also portrays the Jewish Detective Levine as a man so assimilated into American culture that he has little awareness of his own ethnic, religious, and cultural heritage.

On a more philosophical level is the question whether such people as the Williamsburg Hasidim and Detective Levine are equally "real Jews." Is one more "authentic" than the other? Who decides? What about the broad spectrum of people who fall somewhere between these two extremes? What does it mean to be "more Jewish" or "less Jewish"? Can one be "a little Jewish"? Is there room – and openness – in the community for all Jews? These questions and the related themes of assimilation, community, culture, and identity that we explore in the seven films present challenges to the American Jewish community.

SESSION ONE

A Father and His Daughters: *Fiddler on the Roof*

Feature film, 1971
Director: Norman Jewison
Screenplay: Joseph Stein
Music: Jerry Bock
Lyrics: Sheldon Harnick

Tevye: Topol
Golde: Norma Crane
Yente: Molly Picon
Rabbi: Zvee Scooler
Tzaytl: Rosalind Harris
Mottel: Leonard Frey
Hodol: Michele March
Chava: Neva Small
Perchik: Michael Glaser
Fyedke: Raymond Lovelock

Length: 3 hours

As a Broadway play and a feature film, *Fiddler on the Roof* achieved great popularity in the United States as well as abroad. The story of Tevye and his daughters – the work of the great Yiddish writer Sholem Aleichem – has become part of American culture. But it's unmistakably Jewish.

In the world of *Fiddler on the Roof*, the delineations between who is and is not a Jew are quite clear. *Fiddler on the Roof* looks back to Eastern European Jewish life at the turn of the century and brings it to the screen through the eyes of the 1960s, with a Hollywood flourish. Here are "Jewish roots" presented in their most wholehearted and appealing form. Tevye the dairyman, as played by the Israeli actor Topol, is an earthy yet sensitive fellow, drawn to ideas and idealists as much as he is to a good meal or a stiff drink. Dedicated to his God and to his family, he has a large heart that's easily stretched.

Fiddler's Tevye personifies what many American Jews would like to think of as their Jewish souls. Tevye knows how to pray and how to listen, how to laugh and how to weep. Although he respects learning, he is no scholar; mostly, he loves the idea of loving his books. He believes in God, but he does not overly concern himself with fulfilling every iota of Jewish ritual, and he engages in an ongoing conversation with his Creator, arguing, thanking him, asking hard questions. His environment is one in which Jews are Jews, although, even in Anatevka, the village where Tevye and his family live, Jewish values are beginning to be challenged by modernity. The marital choices of his daughters are the metaphors for change.

Fiddler on the Roof is a carefully crafted and self-conscious teaching tool about Jewish "traditions." From the opening musical scenes, which amount to a primer on the traditional Jewish way of life, to the melancholy closing

scenes that send a dispirited but resilient Tevye off to the promise of distant America, this epic seems created to show Jews where they came from and what their essence is still. The characters are depicted as having minor, but never disturbing, flaws: Some are a little vain, some a little greedy, some timid, some too weak to oppose an evil decree.

But by and large this is a world inhabited by good people; it is a charming world in which many of the difficulties of shtetl life don't seem to exist. We don't see whole families huddling in one room wondering literally where their next meal will come from. No one is so greedy or so pious that they lose their compassion for other human beings; no husbands desert their wives to sit at the feet of a distant rebbe; no women languish as abandoned wives, *agunot.* In this world, no one starves or dies in childbirth or perishes from childhood diseases or pneumonia.

Tevye: *Here in our little village of Anatevka, you might say that every one of us is a fiddler on the roof, trying to scratch out a pleasant, simple tune without breaking his back. . . . And how do we keep our balance? That I can tell you in one word – tradition.*

Within this film, the milieu of Tevye's family and their friends and neighbors is a loving and bucolic world, as colorful, physical, and appealing as the world of the Amish farmers portrayed in *Witness.* Tevye and his family have the freedom to wander through the forest and spacious countryside, only occasionally terrorized by their usually well-meaning Christian neighbors. Most of the action takes place when their village is green and flowering and cloaked in a golden haze. Only when orders come from evil but far-distant officials does doom descend on their largely idyllic world.

This is not to say that *Fiddler on the Roof* is not a wonderful movie. It is in many ways a kind of miracle. The depictions of families united in warmth and love as well as piety on the Sabbath, the community-wide outdoor wedding with young and old carrying tapers and filled with yearning hope for the new couple and for themselves, the passionate and nurturing parenting of many Jewish fathers as well as mothers, the unarticulated love and loyalty between many husbands and wives – all of these elements are touchingly and accurately portrayed. *Fiddler on the Roof* does not lie about Jews and Jewish life in Eastern Europe. It simply does not include some rather unpleasant truths. Nevertheless, it retains the power to educate and to move viewers, and to make them think about issues of change and continuity in Jewish life.

Yente: *Such diamonds. Such jewels. I'll find a husband for every one of them. But you shouldn't be so picky. Even the worst husband, God forbid, is better than no husband, God forbid.*

In Depth: A Tale of Three Tevyes

There have been several recreations of the intriguing Tevye and his family.

The character of Tevye the dairyman originated a century ago in a series of stories by Shloime Rabinovitz (1859-1916), the immensely popular Yiddish writer who went by the pen name of Sholem Aleichem. Some of the Tevye episodes were selected and adapted for the New York stage and the silent screen by Sholem Aleichem before his death. However, when Maurice Schwartz adapted the drama for the 1939 Yiddish film which he directed and in which he starred, the concerns of Schwartz and the people around him colored the film. More than two decades later, very different kinds of changes were made to the Tevye materials in *Fiddler on the Roof.*

The original Tevye stories, published between 1894 and 1914, reflect both the individual world view and the broader historical times in which Sholem Aleichem lived. The stories show that the author's thinking was profoundly affected by historical events. Each of Tevye's daughters represents a different challenge modernity presented to traditional Jewish life.

In Sholem Aleichem's stories, each daughter meets personally with a tragic fate. Tsaytl marries Motel, a simple young tailor with whom she has been in love for many years, instead of a wealthy but vulgar older butcher. While her children are still young, Tsaytl becomes a widow when Motel dies of tuberculosis. Hodel links her fate to Perchik, an intensely idealistic young revolutionary who is subsequently arrested; she marries him and follows him to Siberia and is never reunited with her family. Chava is won over by Fyedke, a Russian intellectual, and she abandons both her family and her religion to marry him. When pogroms increase and the Jews are exiled from the shtetl, however, Fyedke abandons Chava and she returns to the household of her father and her widowed sister. Shprintze falls in love with Ahronchik, a wealthy but irresponsible young charmer; when he jilts her at the urging of his family, the distraught young woman drowns herself. Beilke, perhaps responding to the miseries that have befallen her sisters, marries Podhotzur, a vulgar, pretentious, supposedly successful but ultimately fraudulent and failed businessman.

Although Tevye pleads with her from the very beginning not to marry Podhotzur, whom he knows to be utterly unsuited to his daughter, she insists, saying that the time for idealism has passed and she must think of the material good of the entire family. Podhotzur, however, fails to provide the material salvation Beilke had hoped for. Tevye regards Beilke, chained to a despicable creature, as the most unfortunate of all his daughters.

Sholem Aleichem's Tevye is deeply devoted to the Jewish people, and although he is no pietist, he cannot conceive of the Jewish people outside the context of the Jewish religion. He is full of quotes from scriptural and rabbinic writings; although many of these seem to be misquotes, malapropisms, or nonsequitors, recent scholarship has demonstrated that Tevye knows exactly what he is saying, and his quotes often stand in ironic or satiric relationship to the context. His sense of humor is both sharp and warmly human.

Indeed, Sholem Aleichem's Tevye has an enormous generosity of spirit, which reflected that of his author and endeared him to thousands of readers. His conversations lurch forward with a kind of manic energy, in which he catapults from references to humiliations and tragedies that have happened or that may be waiting around the corner, to articulation of the comedic elements inherent in many of the same situations. His realism, born of hard experience, is tempered by hopefulness and optimism.

Tevye of the Yiddish Screen

Filmed on a farm in New Jersey, Maurice Schwartz's film, *Tevye,* follows the lead of Sholem Aleichem's stage play in focusing almost exclusively on the story of Chava. Tsaytl is Tevye's only other daughter in this film, appearing as a widow with two young children. But both Tevye as a character and the emotional tenor of the story have changed. Produced in the late 1930s, with the threat of war and Nazi conquest on one side of the ocean and the realities of assimilation and intermarriage in the United States, *Tevye* is more uniformly somber than Sholem Aleichem's stories. Tevye is a sober, aging patriarch; Golde is a prematurely old woman, a loving but anxious "bubbe" with little physical strength left. Visually, in the 1939 film

Tevye and Golde look and act like Old World grandparents – an American vision of pious "old folks," not like the vigorous, fiftyish couple whom Sholem Aleichem depicted. To be sure, Schwartz's Tevye is a profoundly moving figure. He loves his children and grandchildren deeply, and his only moments of sheer, transported exuberance come in his irrepressible joy with his grandson and granddaughter.

In Schwartz's film, the contrasts between Jews and non-Jews are sharply drawn. Only the non-Jews celebrate agricultural nature. The Jews live in dark interiors, in modest dwellings. Even the wedding scene in this film is a non-Jewish wedding, that of Chava and Fyedke, as the Christian peasants compete in dancing and musical antics in a state of rising inebriation.

In a particularly moving scene, Tevye recites the Havdalah prayer which separates the Sabbath from the weekday world; this Sabbath was the day Chava married Fyedke. Maurice Schwartz's face as he slowly recites the prayer is a breathtaking study in what "who is a Jew" meant to Tevye. As he recites God's name, his belief in God and God's laws vibrates from every fiber of his being. When he comes to the phrase celebrating God's separation of Jews from non-Jews, the quiet pain Tevye projects is almost unbearable. This is a man caught in a vise of God's making, bound by loyalty to a Creator whose ways he does not understand. Schwartz seems to be saying that this is *who a Jew is*: Tevye, a man who endures the unendurable and still believes.

The Jews in the film relate to the non-Jews with discomfort and fear; many of the non-Jews seem to delight in the Jews' misfortune. When Tevye and Golde try to reclaim Chava from the village priest on her wedding day, he is not only immovable, he is clearly delighted to have captured the girl whom Tevye described as his tender lamb. And when Tevye is ultimately driven from town, the townspeople extort his belongings for a pittance and even steal from him outright. As Tevye, his two desolate daughters, and his two grandchildren wend their solitary way out of the shtetl, they are poignantly symbolic of the vulnerable remnants of Europe's decimated Jewish community.

In *Tevye*, with its melancholy, often gloomy mood, the

vibrant musical numbers from *Fiddler on the Roof* would seem utterly out of place – literally from another world.

Tinseltown's Tevye

A different atmosphere and different concerns pervade *Fiddler on the Roof.* Looking to their own American community, the musical's authors emphasize not the enemy from without but the conflict from within. In *Fiddler,* Tevye's daughters are taken from him by modern ideas of romantic love, by socialism, by individualism, by universalism, by secular intellectualism. In so doing, *Fiddler*'s authors are not foisting foreign elements onto Sholem Aleichem's work, but emphasizing different pieces of the work than Maurice Schwartz had chosen to emphasize. Sholem Aleichem was in fact very interested in the social and intellectual unrest that had already begun to break up traditional Jewish family life and society in Eastern Europe. Large parts of the musical feature dialogue taken almost verbatim from the original stories.

Tevye: *On the other hand, our ways were once new, weren't they. . . . On the other hand, did Adam and Eve have a matchmaker? Yes they did, and it seems these two have the same matchmaker.*

However, *Fiddler*'s Tevye is a different man than the one described by Sholem Aleichem or the one depicted by Maurice Schwartz, and the context into which *Fiddler on the Roof* puts this struggle is very much the context of the United States in the 1960s. Here, religion is not God-given law, but is, instead, a "tradition." The authority of the religion derives not from God, but instead from human, patriarchal authority, "the papa." All of the conflicts are fitted into this interpersonal context. The young women who rebel are defying "tradition" and their "papa." The idea that they may, as individuals, have a direct moral commitment to God and to Judaism that is not filtered through their father is not part of the ideological framework of the film. Similarly, *Fiddler*'s Tevye sees their various defections as an affront to his parental, patriarchal authority. While Chava's apostasy is of a different degree than Tsaytl's romance and Hodel's socialism, it is not clear that it is also of a different kind.

Fiddler's non-Jews, as befits the musical's ecumenical American mindset, are an attractive lot. Blond, clean-featured, pink-cheeked, the local Christians are slightly ominous because they are strong and free, but they are mostly well-meaning. The wicked Christians are not the

townsfolk, not the healthy boys and the manly chief of police, but an excruciatingly thin, pathologically antisemitic official from a distant big city. Only at his orders are the locals incited into a carefully controlled pogrom. When the town's Jews are expelled, Chava's gentile husband Fyedke tells her that they cannot remain in a place in which people act so inhumanely to one another. Chava and Fyedke, looking for all the world like cross-country hikers with back-packs, come to Tevye, who is departing along with his townspeople, and receive his grudging blessing, "God go with you."

In *Fiddler on the Roof,* Tevye and Golde are feisty middle-aged sparring partners once again, as they were in the early Sholem Aleichem stories. Topol enacts Tevye as a 1960s man for all seasons. Charming, energetic, a fun-loving *kibitzer* (teaser, joker), he is coarser than either Sholem Aleichem or Maurice Schwartz depicted him. In truth, his optimism is closer in some ways to Sholem Aleichem's Tevye than the sober uprightness of Maurice Schwartz's figure, but Topol's Tevye has lost much of the sincere religiosity of the original. This is a Jew most American filmgoers could recognize. With a cigar in his mouth, this Tevye would be at home in the Catskills.

Tevye: *Dear God. It's enough you blessed me with five daughters, the life of poverty. . . . Sometimes I think when things are too quiet up there, you say to yourself, "What kind of mischief can I play on my friend Tevye?"*

While you watch, consider:

- What does "tradition" mean to Tevye?
- What are the father's and mother's roles in Tevye's family?
- What holds together the Anatevka Jewish community?
- How are the Jewish and non-Jewish worlds compared and contrasted?

Tevye: *As the good book says, each shall seek its own kind. A bird might love a fish, but where would they build a home together?*

Chava: *The world is changing, Papa.*

Tevye: *No, Chaveleh, some things do not change for us. Some things will never change.*

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- How does Tevye try to transmit his sense of Judaism to his daughters? What might he have done differently if he had sons?
- What elements of Tevye's value system have we preserved? What do we wish we had retained?
- Can "tradition" be updated? Is it possible to have new forms of tradition that are still authentic?
- Why is marriage such a fertile subject for examining continuity and discontinuity of Jewish tradition?
- What are some of the responses of Jewish parents today to a daughter (or son) marrying a non-Jew? How far have we come from sitting shiva? Is it too far, or not enough?
- How do we try to reconcile the encounter of Judaism with the non-Jewish world today?
- What kind of life do you imagine Tevye having in America?

SUGGESTIONS FOR READING AND VIEWING

Books and stories

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Films

Tevye (1939)
Yentl (1983)

SESSION TWO

A Mother and Her Sons: *Mirele Efros*

Feature film, 1939
Director: Joseph Berne
Screenplay: Ossip Dymow

Mirele: Berta Gersten
Shaindel: Ruth Elbaum
Shalman: Moshe Feder
Yosele: Albert Lipton

Length: 80 minutes

Mirele Efros might not seem like the stereotypical Jewish mother – she's making business deals, not chicken soup – but her character is based on reality. *Mirele Efros* began as a stage play (by the great Yiddish playwright Jacob Gordin) in Poland and the United States in 1898 and was made into a talking film – in Yiddish with English subtitles – in the United States in 1939. Often nicknamed "the Jewish Queen Lear," this film captures conflicts between generations, genders, and educational and socioeconomic levels in ways that do indeed echo some of the motifs of Shakespeare's famous drama. (More modern viewers have facetiously suggested that it might alternatively be nicknamed either "the daughter-in-law from hell" or "the mother-in-law from hell," depending on one's sympathies.)

Its setting in the Old World at the end of the last century provides a kind of benchmark for the changes that would be wrought in America. Mirele, the protagonist, is introduced to the audience as an attractive, hard-working middle-aged widow. She's a superorganized, competent, and dignified businesswoman. Mirele is absolutely dominant in her household. With the respectful propriety appropriate to a spiritual aristocrat, she gives orders to her business manager, Shalman, who, in turn, treats her with respect as he follows her orders. The details of her daily life are made simpler through the ministrations of her long-time friend, Machle.

This is a world of quiet religiosity, of compassion, and of order, a world that Mirele made and rules. Every person who deals with Mirele knows that her word is as good as gold, from the peasants who grow hay to Jewish communal dignitaries; every business detail is handled with honesty, kindness, firmness, and dispatch. Mirele's two sons, however, know little about this world; she keeps them

totally away from the business realm. Although she means to protect them, their ignorance of the tremendous effort and skill necessary to maintain Mirele's orderly world returns to haunt this protective mother in the future.

Mirele has chosen as a bride for Yosele a girl she says is from a poor but respectable family. Shaindel is first seen sitting and brushing her hair, looking longingly at Yosele's photograph. The picture of girlish sweetness, Shaindel clearly regards herself at this point as a kind of Cinderella, Yosele as Prince Charming, and Mirele as a beneficent fairy godmother. Unfortunately, Shaindel's parents also regard Mirele Efros as a fairy godmother who will relieve them of all their financial problems.

After the wedding, Shaindel and her family return to the big city with Mirele and her sons. The bride and her family are openly critical of the way Mirele conducts her business, and demand that the sons be given their share of their dead father's inheritance. Mirele lets them in on a family secret: Her sainted husband died and left her not with an inheritance but with an enormous load of debt. Through years of her own hard work and struggle, she paid off every ruble he owed.

Mirele: *Then I still have a good head.*

Shalman: *All Grodno says it's the head of a cabinet minister.*

Mirele: *Is that a compliment to cabinet ministers or an insult to me?*

Moved by her beloved son Yosele's obvious misery, Mirele capitulates to their demands and signs over all her business and personal possessions to her children. Shaindel and her parents take over the running of the business, and, although her father seems to know about Jewish prayer and Jewish tradition, their lack of honesty and reliability quickly run the business into the ground.

The "King Lear on the heath" rift occurs when the Jewish hospital committee comes to Mirele's house to collect a pledge from her. Shaindel refuses to give the committee any money, although Mirele had promised it to them. Shalman saves her by falsely claiming that Mirele had lent him money, which he is now donating to the hospital committee in her name. Mirele asks Yosele for the money when they leave, so she can pay Shalman back. He reveals to her that he has no money; he has signed it all away to his wife. Mirele is forced to plead with Shaindel, who brutally turns her down, openly glorying in her victory.

Mirele leaves her home and turns again to Shalman,

asking to work for him. As time passes, she does as well for him as she once did for herself and she regains much of her self-esteem. Meanwhile, the ugly aftertaste of remorse poisons the family relationships in Yosele and Shaindel's household.

At last, facing the Bar Mitzvah celebration of their son, Shaindel, Yosele, and the boy plead with Mirele to join them for this happy occasion. Mirele at first refuses each one of them, reminding the weeping Shaindel that when Mirele's life was on the line, Shaindel showed her no mercy. But certain words come back to haunt her: Shaindel has admitted that Mirele seemed like too much competition for Yosele's affections; her grandson has refused to keep his Bar Mitzvah gift if she would not come, accusing her, "What have I ever done to hurt you?" At the pivotal moment, Mirele arrives at the party. Shown to her old seat of honor, she is greeted with affection.

Mirele: *But you must always remain my good, loyal son Yosele.*

Yosele: *Yes, mother. How could you think anything else?*

In Depth: "Real Jewish Mothers"

In contrast to Tevye, here is the story of a matriarch. Tevye, the father of daughters, and Mirele, the mother of sons, do have much in common in the way tradition governs their lives, in spite of obvious differences due to Tevye's modest means and Mirele's wealth. Each is a doting parent, wanting the best for the children, yet slow to acknowledge that the world is changing.

Mirele is not Golde, Tevye's hard-working wife who is seen doing laundry, cooking, and preparing for the Sabbath; the self-made Mirele has help for those tasks. When contemporary people envision the Eastern European Jewish mother – and imagine the inspiration for the song "My Yiddishe Mama" – they're more likely to picture someone like Golde, but Mirele is derived from tradition too. Both women seem to possess what Irving Howe characterizes as the Jewish mother's "mixture of practical sense and emotional abundance."

In almost every detail of her existence, the character of Mirele Efros illustrates the figure of the ideal Jewish woman as she was envisioned in Eastern European Jewish life. From where does Mirele draw her strength?

Working Women

In the past, Jewish women have often worked at nondomestic tasks both inside and outside the home. Working for pay, rather than a contemporary innovation, has been an accepted part of the lives of many Jewish women. Unlike the prototype of the shy and sequestered "little woman" that held sway in Victorian societies, Eastern European Jewish women often had a "characteristic aggressiveness and marketplace activism," which they saw as an intrinsic part of their commitment to family and to community. In Europe, middle-class as well as impoverished Jewish women participated in acquiring the livelihood for the household. In some communities, women in elite families were encouraged to take on this responsibility exclusively in order to enable their husbands to devote their time to the study of sacred texts. Even the wives of powerful Hasidic leaders were praised for earning the livelihood of the household by becoming drapers, sugar merchants, real estate brokers, and traveling peddlers.

A myriad of cultural and historical factors contributed to the tolerance shown toward the marketplace activity of women. Jewish tradition did not set the woman on a pedestal and limit her to maternal tasks. In fact, religious texts depict active, busy women engaged in productive work. Proverbs 31 praises the "Woman of Valor" who buys fields and has vineyards planted out of her own earnings. Talmudic commentaries on the proper role for women exhibit a horror of idleness, which was seen as leading only to mischief. The rabbis assumed that women were diligent and preferred to be occupied. If one is so wealthy that one's wife has few tasks, they advise it is better that she should knit a specific amount each day rather than remain unoccupied. A man may not prevent his wife from such work no matter how wealthy he is.

Economic realities were certainly a major factor in pushing Jewish women into marketplace activities. European Jews were frequently limited by antisemitic laws to commercial and middleman activities. Even where legal constraints were less onerous, Jews tended toward business enterprises because such activities gave them independence and autonomy. The skills of women were especially useful in family businesses and were fully utilized.

Glueckel of Hameln (1646-1724) was one such woman. A middle-class merchant in an import-export business and pious mother of thirteen, Glueckel also wrote Yiddish memoirs which have supplied historians with one of the best pictures of the social, economic, and cultural life of Central European Jews during that time. In the twentieth century, Bella Chagall, in *Burning Lights,* recalls her middle-class mother keeping store, and Chaim Grade, in *My Mother's Sabbath Days,* elegizes his impoverished mother, who fed her children out of the proceeds from baskets of withered fruit. Many American Jews can recall immigrant grandmothers and aunts who worked as storekeepers or seamstresses, presided over orderly and hospitable homes, and often were the guiding personalities of the household as well.

Ironically, European and immigrant Jewish writers – influenced by the Jewish Enlightenment and the ideals of utopian socialist movements, and sympathetic to the plight of Jewish women – often strived to put an end to the marketplace activities of Jewish women. Stories by writers such as I.L. Peretz depict mothers overwhelmed by the burdens of earning a livelihood and raising a family, while their husbands devoted themselves to sacred study, seemingly oblivious to the needs of their wives and children. In the eyes of such writers, women were the proletariat of the proletariat, the most oppressed of all groups. They believed that the division of labor would only approach fairness when Jewish mothers were freed of the demands of labor force participation and enabled to devote themselves exclusively to domestic tasks.

Industrialization increased employment options for women both in Europe and the United States. Before emigration, with the proliferation of factory workplace settings, many Jewish girls found jobs making cigarettes, garments, and other items. Some sewed items by hand, but those who were able to learn how to operate sewing machines were considered fortunate, the elite of the industry, and generally earned higher wages. It is a mark of how accepted marketplace activity was for women – and scholarship was for men – that female seamstresses were regarded with respect among Eastern European Jews, while male tailors were often regarded with humor or even derision.

Making It in America

In the United States, Jewish women actively sought employment outside the home. They became extremely active and influential in some industries, especially the garment industry, because they possessed useful skills and enthusiastic attitudes. As Susan Glenn points out, "Jewish women brought with them a well-developed craft pride and a sense of competence that stood in sharp contrast to the stereotypical images of female workers as insecure, unambitious, and apathetic toward their jobs."

Single women commonly did factory work, while married Jewish women often did piecework at home, laboring long hours at the sewing machine; some took in boarders; some ran dry goods and grocery stores to help support their families. When married women ran stores or took in boarders, however, they often reported to census takers that they did not work; in the minds of such women and their families, "working" implied employment in a factory or other nonhousehold-connected setting.

Indeed, a curious transformation took place in the minds of American Jewish immigrants with regard to the propriety of married woman working. Within American society, unemployed married women were accorded great respect as domestic paragons, following the Victorian model of "the angel of the hearth." In non-Jewish, established American culture, women who worked outside the home were the object of pity, their husbands of scorn. A competent husband, it was felt, should earn enough money so that his wife could devote herself to domestic life and need not supplement the household income. This was the inverse of the ingrained Eastern European Jewish attitude which gave the domestic woman little societal prestige but valued her marketplace activity, which freed her husband and sons for sacred study. Women like Mirele Efros, hard-working, disciplined, and controlling, may have been the ideal in Jewish communities of the past. In America, however, they were to be regarded with very different eyes indeed.

In recent times, the outlook toward work outside the home has changed again. Work is valued not only for its financial aspects but for the satisfaction and spiritual gains that accompany pursuing a professional interest. Many contemporary Jewish women, like women across America,

struggle with the conflicts of balancing home and work lives.

The Real Mirele

Viewers may differ in their opinions about whether Mirele is an admirable person. She can be seen as the best and the worst of Old World ways. Indeed, she's complicated, and, to a contemporary viewer, something of an unusual person. Even with her impressive business success, Mirele is still a woman of tradition, adhering to established patterns of Jewish family life. Her conflicts with her son and daughter-in-law are ultimately about the breakdown of tradition. As Howe has written, "Mirele represents the conserving strength of the past, which alone has enabled the Jews to hold together." At the end of the film, there's a hint that Mirele will once again rally that strength for the benefit of her family.

Committee member: *What do you do with yourself?*

Mirele: *I make preserves and feed my ducks, so that my son's mother-in-law can eat them.*

While you watch, consider:

- Which characters do you most identify with or feel compassion for?
- Do you think of Mirele as a typical Jewish mother, or something more unusual, even exotic?
- Other than the Bar Mitzvah and wedding scenes, how do you know this is a Jewish film?

Shaindel: *If I was too hard, it was for your happiness and mine.*

Yosele: *You may have meant well but you didn't make me happier by it.*

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- How does Mirele the matriarch compare with Tevye the patriarch?
- How do the ways in which Mirele and Shalman show their religious fervor compare to the ways in which Shaindel's father shows his religious feeling?
- What characteristics of Mirele seem attractive and admirable, and what about her less than admirable?
- In today's world, we might find Mirele's exercise of power and demands for loyalty to be excessive. What are some of the demands made by parents in today's Jewish families? How do we balance family requirements and individual desires?
- Mirele is both mother and mother-in-law. If she is a typical Jewish mother, is she also a typical Jewish mother-in-law? Is the role of mother-in-law changing in contemporary times?
- What kinds of relationships do we hope to have with our in-laws? How might this be affected by the religious affiliation and involvement of the families (e.g., whether Jewish or non-Jewish, Orthodox, nonobservant, etc.)
- How do contemporary professional Jewish women cope with the pressure to advance their careers in the workplace and maintain some sense of being a "Jewish mother" at home?
- Is adherence to traditional family structure – with parents making important decisions, as Mirele did – part of the key to the survival of the Jewish people? What happens when this structure breaks down?

Mirele: *Good children, bad children – but children, after all.*

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Films

A Brivele der Mamen (1938)

SESSION THREE

The American Dream: *The Jazz Singer*

Feature film, 1927
Playwright: Samson Raphaelson
Adapter: Alfred A. Cohn
Director: Alan Crosland

Jakie Rabinowitz (Jack Robin): Al Jolson
Mary Dale: May McAvoy
Cantor Rabinowitz: Warner Oland
Sara Rabinowitz: Eugenie Besserer
Harry Lee: Richard Tucker
Concert recital: Cantor Yosele Rosenblatt

Length: 89 minutes

Half subtitled, half a "talkie," really a "singie," *The Jazz Singer* is an historical landmark in the opening of a new era in the cinema. The first feature with spoken dialogue, the film gives the celebrated Al Jolson, the best-known Jewish entertainer of the day, the opportunity to speak 280 words. When the film opened in New York City in October 1927, it received standing ovations in the theater.

Written by Samson Raphaelson, the original play *The Jazz Singer* ran on Broadway for 38 weeks in 1925. The story focuses on the son of an immigrant cantor who goes on to great fame as a jazz singer but has to confront his heritage in a profound way.

Jolson, who plays the son of Cantor Rabinowitz, was himself the son of a cantor in Washington, D.C.. The singer – who reached the height of his career as a minstrel, singing "Mammy" in blackface – began his performing career in the synagogue choir. For Jolson, *The Jazz Singer* was the "essence of Jewish autobiography," as rabbi and scholar Arthur Hertzberg points out. Hertzberg also explains that the film marked a turning point in Jewish life. "For the first time," he writes, "the Jews who dominated Hollywood came out of the closet as Jews."

The film's musical interludes, performed by Jolson with the prominent cantor Yosele Rosenblatt singing the liturgical music, are movingly and beautifully rendered. With clear lines demarcated between the pull of an ethnic past and the lure of an American future, the plot struck a chord not only for immigrant Jews and their descendants but for many other ethnic Americans, and it continues to resonate.

The Jazz Singer, filmed mostly on location on New York's Lower East Side, opens on the eve of Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. Quickly and effectively, the conflict is set up in musical terms. The viewing audience is

introduced to two Eastern European immigrants, the Cantor and Mrs. Rabinowitz, and their Americanized young son, Jacob, known as Jakie. The cantor, a bearded patriarch, "stubbornly held to the ancient traditions of his race," as the title card explains. The elder Rabinowitz's Jewishness expresses itself in and is symbolized by his exclusive and steadfast devotion to Jewish liturgical music, and he expects that his son will carry on in the family cantorial tradition. Jakie, however, is more drawn to America and its music than to Hebrew liturgy, and even as a young boy has a true passion for jazz.

Jakie decides to follow his passion. His mother, Sara, a traditional Jewish woman, understands her son and, unlike her husband, appreciates his talent. The cantor wishes to break all ties with Jakie when he leaves home to make a living singing secular tunes. Jakie becomes "Jack Robin," and his talents bring him great success – acclaim as a jazz singer, a leading role on Broadway, and a beautiful (gentile) girlfriend.

Narration: *In every soul, a spirit cries for expression – perhaps this plaintive, wailing song of jazz is, after all, the misunderstood utterance of a prayer.*

A dramatic and lovingly melodramatic ending brings Jack/Jakie home, where he must decide whether to go on with his opening night performance or accept his mother's request to chant Kol Nidrei in the synagogue on the eve of Yom Kippur, in place of his dying father.

In Depth: Leaving the World of Our Fathers

The uses of musical talent have moral and religious dimensions in this film. Both father and son sing out of a deep place in their soul and touch deeply those who hear them sing, although the settings for their music differ. The father sings to plead with his God; the son sings to entertain an audience.

To the cantor, the songs one sings declare either loyalty to or defection from Jewish history. When young Jakie is discovered by a neighbor singing "My Gal Sal" as "Ragtime Jakie" in a local saloon, his father thinks that he literally can whip the American music out of the boy. Even years of distance and separation do not soften the sharp lines of the conflict between Jewish and American values embodied by the songs of the grown artist and his father.

Throughout the film, the jazz songs that Jack Robin chooses to sing transform his own experience into an

American idiom. Immediately after the scene in which the young Jakie is whipped and, furious and humiliated, leaves his anguished mother for years, the film turns to a scene of the young man singing about a father and his son. The song, "Dirty Hands, Dirty Face," depicts a father who loves his son tenderly and gently, even though the child is mischievous. The understanding American father Jack Robin sings about is unlike his own stern Old World patriarch.

When Sara Rabinowitz comes to the theater with trepidation, she is treated to her son singing about a son who loves his mother dearly, who has been separated from her for too long, and who is giddily looking forward to his reunion with her. However, the son who sings is in blackface, and the mother he longs for is his "Mammy."

Sara: *Yes, papa – he knows all the songs – he has them in his head – but not in his heart.*

Significantly, Jack's Jewish heritage contributes to his talent and his success. He is said to "sing just like his father, with a tear in his voice." Jolson's singing is a powerful evocation of the numerous sons of Jewish immigrants who shaped and defined American music, often by celebrating the music of other minorities, men such as George Gershwin, Aaron Copeland, Irving Berlin, Oscar Hammerstein, Sammy Kahn, Leonard Bernstein, Steven Sondheim, and many others. Indeed, as Al Jolson puts on blackface to sing a "Negro" song, the contemporary viewer's mind leaps forward to such American Jewish musical contributions as Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess*.

The Great American Conflict

Decades before social scientists promoted the theory that the Jewish community was in the process of being transformed (and suggesting an alternative interpretation to the current fear among community leaders that it is in the process of assimilating to the point of disappearance), the Jewish creators of American films, music, and fiction depicted their own version of Jewish transformation. In the music of George Gershwin and Leonard Bernstein, the novels of Edna Ferber, the films of a host of Jewish screenwriters and directors, the American Jewish experience was translated into a generic American experience. When specific ethnic groups were invoked, they were often not Jewish. *The Jazz Singer* is one of a limited number of the many films produced by Jews that

focus on a Jewish family.

The issue, as the film sees it, is how the children of immigrants should respond to the unprecedented meritocracy American society offered to people whose ancestors' goals had been limited by antisemitism. Should they be loyal to their "racial" heritage and reject American culture and opportunities, which lure them away from their past? Or should they freely pursue an unencumbered American life as far as their talents and their energies will take them, leaving the past behind? Is it possible to do both?

The Jazz Singer sides with youth and opportunity. The authors of the film describe Cantor Rabinowitz as a man with "his face turned toward the past." Jack agrees, and chides his father. Significantly, he sees his father's religious objections to his lifestyle as outmoded vestiges of an outgrown world. When the father insists on whipping Jakie, the mother writhes in agony. The young man emerges from the experience humiliated and alienated, an alienation that sets the stage for his decision to leave his parental home and throw himself into a life in the theater.

The conflict between the generations is primarily a conflict between father and son as to how the son will live his life. The son, already an American, feels that his life belongs to him; the father feels that his life belongs to Jewish continuity, to the generations of Rabinowitz cantors of the past. When Jakie prefers jazz songs to religious ones, Cantor Rabinowitz declares that his son has rejected both him and the chain of Jewish tradition. "My son was to stand at my side and sing," he mourns, "but now I have no son." The patriarch stands alone in *The Jazz Singer,* like fathers in many pieces of immigrant fiction, as the wrongheaded, anachronistic defender of the faith.

The Jewish Mother, Revisited

As with many other mothers in immigrant fiction, Sara Rabinowitz respects and pities her husband, but deeply empathizes with and understands the young boy – and continues to dote on him, in the tradition of the stereotypical Jewish mother. "But Papa, he doesn't think like we do," she pleads. In this film, the mother is treated with great affection; she is depicted as flawlessly lovable

and wholly beloved by her son at all times.

Despite physical distance, the intense bond between Jack and his mother remains unbroken, because she has not put herself in the position of opposing his American goals. Years later, a major breakthrough in his career brings Jack back to New York and into his parental household for a brief visit. The relationship between him and his mother is as warm as ever, except that the son is now a man. He flatters and gives gifts to his mother and teases her sweetly; he promises her a pink dress, a new apartment, a trip to Coney Island; he sings "Blue Skies." The old woman is touched and charmed.

Jack (to his father): *My songs mean as much to my audience as prayers to your congregation.*

A real potential for conflict exists between Sara Rabinowitz and Jack's girlfriend, Mary, a beautiful, talented, gentile woman who has been very instrumental in furthering his career. Mary and the producer of the Broadway musical Jack is starring in encourage him to feel that he is now a citizen of the world, a man with artistic responsibilities as profound as religious beliefs. His mother, however, seeing him perform, does not oppose his career but states, "Here he belongs. If God had wanted him in His House, He would have kept him there. . . . He's not my boy any more. He belongs to the whole world now."

Returning Home

Jack's passage into the world of true Americana, however, is not meant to be uncomplicated. In remarkable dramatic coincidence, the opening of the new show takes place on the evening of Yom Kippur, with Cantor Rabinowitz lying on his deathbed. Sara pleads that Jack come home to sing Kol Nidrei and, in doing so, save his father's life. Mary pleads that Jack fulfill his responsibilities to the theater and his career. Both women, who truly love Jack and truly believe in what they are saying, use the heaviest possible moral and emotional artillery. Torn between his mother and his girlfriend, between his religion and his career – in truth, between his "race" and his new country, America – Jack is distraught and tormented, and keeps the viewing audience guessing, until the last minute.

Sara: *Maybe our boy doesn't want to be a cantor, papa.*

Cantor: *What has he to say? For five generations a Rabinowitz has been a cantor. He must be one.*

While you watch, consider:

- How is humor interwoven with pathos in this film?
- How does this set of parents relate to the Jewish parents seen in the previous films viewed, *Fiddler on the Roof* and *Mirele Efros*?
- How do you feel about the film's ending?

Jack: *Wait a minute, wait a minute. You ain't heard nothing yet.*

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- How are the values of the Old and New Worlds contrasted?

- As in *Mirele Efros,* in this film the parent (in this case, the father) expects the child to follow in the path he has determined. How do the two films seem to view this differently, and how do we react to such expectations today?

- How do you explain the very different reactions of Jakie's father and mother when he rejects his father's career and lifestyle?

- What, if anything, does Jakie/Jack lose in his rush to become Americanized? If the Jewish past is forgotten and abandoned, can it be recovered?

- The film's ending has it both ways: Jack honors his father and his tradition while also becoming a huge success in the secular world. How do we experience and resolve such conflicts between Jewish tradition and secular goals in our lives?

- Could a contemporary version of this story be made today? In what ways might the father stand for "tradition," and how might the son depart from that course? What temptations, for example, might take the place of singing forbidden popular songs?

Jack: *But there's something, after all, in my heart – maybe, it's a call of the ages – the cry of my race.*

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Films

The Chosen (1981)
Hester Street (1975)
His People (1925)

SESSION FOUR

North of the Border: *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz*

Feature film, 1974
Screenplay: Mordecai Richler
Adaptation: Lionel Chetwynd
Director: Ted Kotcheff

Duddy: Richard Dreyfuss
Max: Jack Warden
Uncle Benjy: Joseph Wiseman
Lennie: Allan Rosenthal
Zeyda: Zvee Scooler
Yvette: Micheline Lanctôt
Virgil: Randy Quaid
Farber: Joe Silver
Friar: Denholm Elliott
Dingleman: Henry Ramer

Length: 121 minutes

This film detours to show some other North Americans – "real Canadians" and "real Jews."

The film, set in Montreal and based on Mordecai Richler's 1959 novel, presented North American audiences with depictions of Jewish men that were uncomfortably familiar to many Jews on both sides of the border.

Duddy Kravitz, played unforgettably by Richard Dreyfuss, lives in a crowded urban immigrant neighborhood. He sees around him two kinds of men: those who hustle, become successful, and are respected because of their success regardless of how they achieved it; and those who miss out, who struggle and are regarded as "losers" regardless of their human virtues. To the young man, the lessons are plain. Respect, as well as success, comes only to those who take risks, plunge ahead, and have the financial skills and intestinal fortitude to follow their own visions.

Like many other American Jewish films, *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz* has several early pivotal scenes in a Jewish resort, where Duddy is subjected to the brusque aggressiveness of wealthy Jews. Rather than resenting their behavior, he regards them as role models and decides that some day he will be one of them and have possessions and power like them. He wants to be a "somebody."

Dreyfuss's Duddy is a complicated character, with more capacity for goodness than he believes himself to have or allows himself to pursue. Driven toward gaining wealth, he pushes himself to be callous enough to achieve that goal. With the intensity of a man with a dream to fulfill, Duddy waits tables, drives a taxi, deals in pinball machines, and sets up a company to make films about weddings and Bar Mitzvahs. The aim of his success, he believes, will be to

earn his father's love and respect and provide his grandfather with a better life. His grandfather loves to plant things in the earth; Duddy plans to acquire for him a beautiful, bucolic setting near a lake, where he can plant in peace and joy.

Tense, manic, giggling, baby-faced Duddy is an unexpected charmer, scratching his chest compulsively but winning vulnerable people over with his irresistible warmth. He gains the love of Yvette, a French Canadian woman with a solid moral sense, who has been working as a chambermaid but has accounting and other business skills, and he wins the undying loyalty of Virgil, a young epileptic. Neither of them is Jewish, and it is probably not coincidental that, despite his genuine affection for them, Duddy exploits them repeatedly.

Zeyde: *A man without land is nothing. Remember that.*

The neighborhood where Duddy grew up is inhabited largely by Jews. With one or two notable exceptions, they are not unrelievedly evil persons, but, except for his lovable grandfather, they are severely flawed human beings. In contrast with the morally crippled Jews of Duddy's world, the two blond gentiles stand out as financially poor but morally pure.

In Depth: What Price Success

The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz is a dazzling, picaresque film about an inexperienced young man coming of age, acquiring knowledge about and making his way in the world. Like many twentieth-century versions of the earlier "young man from the provinces" plot, this young man comes from an urban ghetto of poor immigrants struggling to find a better life. The successes of newly rich former ghetto dwellers glitter before them, inspiring envy and ambition. Duddy and the members of the community in which he grew up are outsiders to Canadian society because they are poor, Jewish, and from other countries. The younger generation craves access to the mainstream, where they envision wealth and its accoutrements. Duddy wants to take the fast track, and he's willing to do whatever it takes to get there.

Duddy among Men

Duddy has a wide spectrum of male role models: his pious

and loving *zeyde* (grandfather), the only man in the family who likes and understands Duddy; his studious brother Lenny, the favored son, who is being sent to medical school through the energies of his father and the gifts of his uncle; his wealthy uncle Benjy, a rigid, repressed factory owner who disdains Duddy but is devoted to his father and to Lenny; and his father, Max, who drives a taxi, gambles, and pimps in order to raise money for Lenny but thinks Duddy will never amount to much. In addition, the men in the family speak often of Jerry Dingleman, the "boy wonder," whose wealth and power are the subject of awe in the ghetto. Later, Duddy meets a cigar-smoking scrap-metal magnate, Mr. Farber, a straight-shooter who, like his grandfather, takes a genuine liking to the jumpy, impulsive, profoundly insecure young man.

Irwin: *Look at him. He's got three more tables than anyone else in the dining room and he never stops. It's cretinous. It's little money grubbers like Kravitz who cause antisemitism, you know.*

Each of the young Kravitz brothers absorbs the lesson of who gets ahead in a different way. Lenny is full of scorn for his family and for Jews in general, and speaks of and to them with open derision. He sees medical school as his ticket into gentile society. Duddy, on the other hand, admires the entrepreneurship of successful Jews and takes them to heart as a map for his own life. With boundless energy, he dreams and schemes.

A Special Bond

Zvee Scooler, frequently seen in films in the role of Old World rabbi (as in *Fiddler on the Roof*) or the wise old Jew, is very appealing as Duddy's *zeyde*. The grandfather tries to provide a moral compass for Duddy. He tells Duddy that his Uncle Benjy, with all his money, is a nonentity, and his father Max is beneath contempt. Then the grandfather switches gears without Duddy realizing it and talks about the importance of a man owning his own piece of land. "Zeyde, if I got lots of land, would I be somebody then?" Duddy asks, with more sincerity than even his grandfather realizes. "Oh, Duddy, you conniver," he says in Yiddish, affectionately pinching his grandson's cheek. Duddy absorbs the wrong lesson. He yearns for land and being "somebody," rather than for the integrity and moral fortitude that are his grandfather's real strengths.

The grandfather's words mean the world to Duddy, because the old man's little gifts and caresses are the only

affection that Duddy, orphaned of his mother at six years old, receives in his rough-and-tumble, all-male environment.

Money Makes the World Go Round

Duddy is repeatedly humiliated by the wealthy, snobbish Jewish medical students working alongside him at the summer resort. Their contempt for him as an inferior lower-class Jew adds fuel to the fire of his ambition. But, as is typical of Duddy, he understands their contempt as based purely on money; he does not comprehend that their contempt is based partially on his lower-class attitudes and manners.

It is easier for Duddy to understand Mr. Farber, a guest at the resort, who operates with a moral compass very similar to his own: Do what you need to do and pay what you need to pay to win; be loyal only to your family and the very few friends you really care about. "I'm a real comer," Duddy says about himself, and that is what he would truly like to be. Duddy, however, lacks Farber's steady hand and practicality, his patience, his humanizing common sense.

But Farber has his dirty secrets. He explains that life confronts every successful man with "accidents" – tragedies that occur sometimes when one takes a risk at someone else's expense. A successful man should never take the punishment for causing these tragedies, Farber suggests, but should instead outwit fate with "payments under the table, lies. You don't build a big house and send your wife to Florida in the winter from driving a cab." Farber admits to Duddy that he once outwitted such an "accident" by maneuvering the legal system so his partner would go to prison instead of him. Farber justifies his actions by equating all of the "white men" – the non-Jews – with Nazis and other persecutors of the Jews.

Permeating *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz* is the theme of antisemitism, an antisemitism that is closely tied to perceived Jewish avarice. Yvette tells Duddy in one breath that the farmers will not sell land to him because he is a Jew, and with the next breath is mortally offended because (like a Jew) he tries to pay her for her kindness. Non-Jewish hatred for putative Jewish fondness for money is the

Duddy (to Max): *Why are you always afraid that I'm going to embarrass you?*

air that Duddy and the other Jews breathe. At one point, a drunken filmmaker speaks derisively of the "crass commercialism" of Bar Mitzvahs he has seen, and makes a Bar Mitzvah film that connects ritual circumcision and the Bar Mitzvah initiation rite of having a young man read from the Torah with masked African tribal dancers and ritual scarification. Later, too drunk to make a another film, he castigates himself, "Shame on me. I've sold my soul to the Hebrews."

For many years, the semilegal and at times illegal activities of Jews "on the make" was a favorite subject of American Jewish novelists and filmmakers. Jerome Weidman wrote an extensive series of plays and novels on the subject, beginning with *I Can Get It for You Wholesale.* A 1950s film, *The Trouble with Harry,* portrayed a rather unsuccessful Jewish racketeer trying to cope with his lower-middle-class family. Philip Roth created a series of minor characters, such as *Goodbye, Columbus*'s plumbing magnate, Mr. Patimkin, who could have been Mr. Farber's brother. More recently, films such as *Once Upon a Time in America, Billy Bathgate,* and *Bugsy* have explored Jewish involvement in the mafia. On some television episodes of popular series such as *Civil Wars* and *L.A. Law,* Jewish men who are brilliant financial successes as Hollywood producers or high-powered lawyers are shown to be crudely manipulative, avaricious, brilliant in business, yet callously disregarding human feelings and finer sensibilities.

The Real Duddy

Duddy truly loves his family and remains loyal and dedicated to them. He retrieves his self-hating brother Lenny from his miserable isolation and tries to get him reinstated into medical school after he is thrown out for performing an abortion on the girlfriend of one of his non-Jewish friends.

But Duddy is neither bad enough nor good enough to escape his morally impoverished surroundings. He lacks the steel necessary to become a semicriminal kingpin like Jerry Dingleman, or the devotion to business that has made a success of his Uncle Benjy. He cannot look the other way and take money from a man who has treated him and his father with contempt. He cannot become the business

partner of a drug dealer, a man evil to the very core. At the same time, Duddy lacks the virtuous strength, the moral steel and luminous vision of his grandfather. He lacks even the decency to lift himself up and make a life with the nurturing and stunningly wholesome Yvette. On his deathbed, Uncle Benjy sneers at Duddy: "You are a born *pusherke,* a little Jew boy on the make."

Duddy Kravitz ends almost where he began, as an upgraded small-time hustler. He had imagined himself an apprentice to entrepreneurial brilliance. He has, however, only been an apprentice to his father and St. Urbain Street. He betrays the film's "good" characters – Yvette and Virgil and his grandfather – but at last he wins his father's respect.

Still, Duddy can't easily be dismissed. He's smart and he's young. Perhaps he's learned something from all that's gone on.

Farber: *Listen, it's war, Duddy. It's war, and the white man has all the guns.*

While you watch, consider:

- How does Duddy's sense about business relate to that of Mirele Efros?
- Notice the particularly Canadian flavor of the urban life portrayed. How does it compare to urban areas in the United States?
- How does Duddy relate to his Jewish identity?
- What lessons does Duddy learn over the course of time spanned by the film?

Lenny: *All right, I'm an antisemite. I prefer the company of gentiles.*

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Duddy seems to be more independent, but is his connection to his father – and his desire for his father's love and approval – different from that of Tevye's daughters to Tevye, Yossele to Mirele Efros, Jack Robin to his parents?

- What does Duddy's *zeyde* represent to him? As Duddy moves away from his grandfather's world, what is lost? Is it possible to retrieve those things once lost?

- Is Duddy trying to escape his "Jewishness" or the sense of being an outsider in society? Is it possible to become an "insider" without giving up one's Jewish identity and Jewish values?

- Duddy and his family are recognizably Jewish characters, and his no-holds-barred pursuit of economic success has parallels in other fictional and film portrayals of American Jewish characters. Is there something inherently Jewish about his quest? Or is it the attitude of an ambitious immigrant, which might be shared by immigrants from other backgrounds?

- Duddy demonstrates loyalty and affection for his family but irresponsibility, or worse, in his business dealings. How would you characterize his values?

- How are identity and social/financial status related in the Jewish community? Are poor Jews invisible in our time?

- Could the film be set in contemporary times?

Max: *My boy . . . From the time of his birth, you knew he was slated for fame and fortune.*

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Films

The Apprenticeship of Mordecai Richler (1986)
Bugsy (1991)
Goodbye, Columbus (1969)
Lies My Father Told Me (1975)
Once Upon a Time in America (1984)

SESSION FIVE

Brooklyn Nostaglia: *Brighton Beach Memoirs*

Feature film, 1986
Director: Gene Saks
Screenplay: Neil Simon

Eugene: Jonathan Silverman
Kate: Blythe Danner
Jack: Bob Dishy
Stanley: Brian Drillinger
Blanche: Judith Ivey
Laurie: Stacey Glick
Nora: Lisa Waltz

Length: 110 minutes

Brighton Beach Memoirs is based on a play by one of America's most prolific playwrights, Neil Simon. This is the first of a semiautobiographical trilogy that includes *Biloxi Blues* (also made into a film) and *Broadway Bound.* Born in 1927, Simon would be slightly younger than Eugene Morris Jerome when the film begins, but Jerome has the voice and sensibility of a young man who already sees the world as a writer.

This play took Simon nine years to complete. More accurately, it took him eight months to write, but he left his original thirty-five pages for nine years – and began and finished several other plays – before coming back to this one. "Sometimes all you need is nine years of encouragement," Simon explains.

In *Brighton Beach Memoirs*, Simon depicts a struggling extended Jewish family in Brighton Beach, Brooklyn, New York. Kate and Jack (Jacob) Jerome live with their two adolescent sons, Stanley and Eugene, and with Kate's widowed sister, Blanche Morton, and her two daughters, Lisa, a blossoming teenager, and Laurie, a frail preadolescent. The story is told through the eyes (and the journal) of the younger Jerome brother whose prime interests are baseball and girls.

Through Eugene, viewers gain a sense of the roots of Simon's humor. Eugene is self-deprecating and self-loving; his style of wry wit and sarcasm, which provides comic relief, can be seen as Jewish humor, even though the content might not be specifically Jewish.

Simon's family portrait is poignant and affectionate as well as funny. Here is sibling rivalry as well as brotherly (and sisterly) love, conflicts between parents and children, and their satisfying resolution. As World War II is approaching, the seven family members living under one

roof face financial, interpersonal, and other challenges with pride. Stanley deals with a quarrel with his boss, Blanche begins to regain her interest in living, her daughter Nora is offered what seems like a dream job, Jack's health deteriorates, Kate keeps a tight reign over everyone – and Jerome sees all. He also sees into the window of his female neighbor, a preoccupation he particularly enjoys.

Like many adolescents, Eugene is an expert on his family's foibles, and he depicts his mother's need to control, his father's weary exasperation, his aunt's indecisiveness with keen and accurate humor. However, the young man also conveys, far more generously than most writers dealing with similar materials, the kindness that underlies the behavior of the adults.

Eugene: *I hate my name: Eugene Morris Jerome. How am I ever going to play for the Yankees with a name like that? You have to be a Joe or a Tony or a Frankie. All the best Yankees are Italian.*

Simon successfully depicts an era and a place that a large number of American Jews feel some connection to. For many, Brooklyn was home at some point in their lives, or perhaps a transitional place between the immigrant neighborhoods of the Lower East Side and the more Americanized suburbs. And Brooklyn remains home to many Jews. Brighton Beach, the very neighborhood depicted here, is home to many of America's newest Jewish immigrants, those from the former Soviet Union. Its main street lined with Russian delicatessens and restaurants, and the Russian language spoken casually on the boardwalk, Brighton Beach is frequently referred to as "Little Odessa."

In Depth: Gentle Memories of a Jewish Past

Brighton Beach Memoirs is one of the most lucid depictions of a secularized traditional Jewish family available to modern audiences. In contrast to most of the films in this series, both parents in the Jerome family are strong characters. Kate and Jack are caring, compassionate people who see themselves primarily in relationship to their responsibility to other family members and ultimately to the family unit as an organic whole. They care for, counsel, and support not only their own children but Mrs. Jerome's widowed sister and her two daughters as well, almost without complaint.

The gendered division of parental attitudes and behaviors in the Jerome family precisely illustrates the way American Jewish families adapted historical Jewish gender

Eugene: *Actually, I think I'm going to be a writer. I want to write books, plays, movies. That is, if things don't work out with the Yankees. Yeah, I'll definitely be a writer.*

roles to the American scene. Like most American Jews in the late 1930s, they have thoroughly absorbed the American attitude that it is better for a man to work two jobs, day and night, than for married females to assume paid employment. Jack works in the garment industry during the daytime and takes a variety of night jobs, and Stanley works in a hat factory, where he and other workers must endure the tyranny of a supercilious German-Jewish boss, Mr. Strohmann. Both Jack and Stanley are committed to sending Eugene, whom they recognize as talented and intellectual, to college.

The Father as Hero

The father is no mere workhorse in this family. His enormous efforts as a breadwinner are fully appreciated, and he is cherished for his innate personal understanding as well. He is seen as the source of wisdom in making major personal and familial decisions for every member of the household and is treated by all with respect and deference interlaced with love.

The reasons for his family's respect of Jack Jerome are delicately illustrated in an interaction with his oldest son. Stanley has faced a moral crisis in his workplace. When a black coworker is unfairly blamed and punished for a workplace accident, Stanley is the only person who takes his side. Stanley acts impulsively, not only threatening Mr. Strohmann's authority but embarrassing him in front of his employees as well. Mr. Strohmann threatens to fire him unless he submits a written apology.

Outside in the yard, Stanley tells his father the story. Although he himself has just lost his night job and is suffering from chest pains that will soon result in a heart attack, the middle-aged man listens patiently and sympathetically to his son. Responding both sensitively and honestly, he praises Stanley for standing up for what he believes in. But he worries as to whether the family unit can now afford such integrity. By this time Stanley is radiant with pleasure at his father's approval: He has been permitted to go back to his job despite his revulsion at his boss's behavior, because his father has ratified and legitimated both his son's courage in challenging the boss and his responsibility in returning to work. The values the

father demonstrates – seeking justice, supporting, accepting, and loving a son – are important lessons here.

Another Version of the Jewish Mother

It is pragmatic Kate who must deal with the often irritating and sometimes terrifying intricacies of daily life. Tall and lean, unlike the stereotypical image of a Jewish mother, Kate has been the responsible and hard-working sibling ever since childhood. She deals with responsibilities that might overwhelm another woman by adhering to two principles: First, she never worries about eventualities, but instead deals swiftly and effectively with each day's trials – "I can't deal with boats that haven't landed yet," she declares. Second, she tries to maintain an iron control over every aspect of her household that fate allows her to control.

Eugene: *I love tense moments – especially when I'm not the person they're all tense about.*

There are many things Kate cannot control. Her brother-in-law died at thirty-six, leaving a timid, asthmatic wife and two young daughters. The plump, pretty but disorganized Blanche, whom Kate resented mightily as they grew up, has now once again become her responsibility. Putting dinner for seven hungry people on the table every night is a challenge with their limited budget. Kate is also limited by her own nature, by an emotional restraint or repression that seems almost physical at times. When her son Stanley returns after a long, tense absence, and the viewer knows her to be relieved and joyous, her face shows nothing. Instead, she suddenly declares that she must make a chocolate cake, and she imperiously dispatches Eugene to Gottlieb's grocery store for an unheard of luxury – two pounds of sugar. "I'll need identification," Eugene croaks.

The half-civilized Eugene, young, healthy, and exuberant, is the most controllable element in Kate's world, and control him she does, while she may. Eugene chafes under her awesome control. "If I came home and said my hands had been cut off, my mother would tell me to go upstairs and wash my face with my feet," he reflects morosely. But behind Kate's dry, controlled exterior glints an affectionate and generous woman. When the boat with a half-dozen more relatives finally lands, she unstintingly offers her own home to them. "We'll put beds in the dining

room," she says happily. "I like to eat in the kitchen." Her husband, who clearly adores her as much as she adores him, embraces her.

This serious, carefully crafted subject matter is kept from becoming too cloying by the hilarity of much of the material. Eugene, for example, is comically obsessed with sex, in a typically goofy, young adolescent way, and yearns to get a good look at a naked woman. He is almost painfully absentminded and oblivious to his surroundings at times, given to eating half a loaf of bread on the way back from the grocery store, spilling almost two pounds of sugar without noticing it, playing an imaginary game of football with a glass deposit milk bottle, and crashing into a neighbor. His unworldliness plays an interesting and believable counterpoint to his precocious understanding of other people. It is Eugene's raucous and often raunchy humor and his cracking adolescent voice that depict this tender page in the social history of not just one family, but indeed of American Jews as a culture.

Street Life

Urban neighborhoods during the Depression and World War II years have been popular settings in the creative work of contemporary American Jewish novelists, playwrights, and filmmakers. Woody Allen's *Radio Days* depicts a nearly identical setting and time frame. *The Way We Were* includes episodes in working- and lower-middle-class urban Jewish neighborhoods, as do Meyer Levin's *The Old Bunch,* Saul Bellow's *The Adventures of Augie March,* Chaim Potok's *In the Beginning* and *Davita's Harp,* Bernard Malamud's *The Assistant,* E.L. Doctorow's *World's Fair,* and others.

One explanation of the frequency with which these settings are used may simply be that so many writers grew up in them. For writers whose early impressions are based on life in the streets, schools, apartments, row houses, and flats of Brooklyn, Queens, the Bronx, certain areas of Manhattan, the West and South Sides of Chicago, St. Urbain Street in Montreal, and other urban areas, the real-life experiences of those settings provide a rich source of inspiration.

However, other factors in addition to sheer familiarity

may be at play. Some authors view these years as a kind of transitional plateau in North American Jewish life. Before the "white bread," homogenizing years of widespread suburbanization, professionalization, and affluence, many semi-acculturated first- or second-generation Americans had "street smarts." They were comfortable navigating in the English language through their neighborhood streets and the public school system, and were actively and aggressively working toward establishing themselves as middle-class Americans. However, despite such Americanization, many maintained traditional Jewish attitudes toward such crucial areas of life as extended family units, social responsibility, and higher education. They might, and did, often chafe under the social expectations imposed upon them, but they knew quite clearly what those expectations were. While some Jews had already opted out of Jewish environments through mixed marriage and/or rapid professional or financial success, the vast majority lived and studied and worked among Jews and neighboring ethnic groups. The sights, sounds, and smells that permeated their daily lives derived from the grocery stores and bakeries, the bars and pool halls, and the places of worship of their coreligionists and other ethnic Americans.

Ethnic groupings were an enormously salient factor in the lives of many urban Americans, including American Jews. Each group had clear (and often erroneous) ideas about the differences between their own ethnic group and their neighbors, and firm convictions as to why their group was superior to the others. The world of *Brighton Beach Memoirs* was largely one in which people stayed among their own kind. Fear of antisemitism prevailed. During a series of telling moments, Kate reveals her conviction that a timid, poor Irish widow and her often-drunk son who live across the street are virtually indistinguishable from the Cossacks. "They're all the same," says the widow coldly, lumping the entire non-Jewish world into one disreputable and dangerous whole. In her eyes, the widow's slovenly housekeeping and her son's amiable inebriation might turn, at any moment and without warning, into antisemitic violence.

Although the screenplay does not shy away from

Eugene: *I'm putting all this down in my memoirs so that if I grow up twisted and warped, the world will know why.*

interpersonal conflicts, the extended Jewish family Simon portrays struggles with poverty, unemployment, disease, and death while retaining its humanity, mutual affection, respect for higher education, and conviction that human beings have a responsibility that transcends their impulses toward ephemeral pleasures. In this film, there are no scenes of Jewish rituals – no holidays, no Bar Mitzvahs, no Jewish weddings. Perhaps Simon felt that the subtle references to a Jewish family were all that a mainstream audience could handle. Or perhaps he wished to show just how "American" Jews were becoming.

While you watch, consider:

- Which of the characters are most familiar to you? Do any seem to be stereotypes?
- Note the ways in which the word "Jewish" is brought into the dialogue. Would you define any of these occasions as specifically religious?
- How does Eugene's relationship with Stanley compare to the other sibling relationships viewed in the previous films?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- In what ways did you find the portrayal of the Jerome family realistic and in what ways unrealistic or perhaps idealized? Do you think families like the Jeromes still exist? If not, why not?

- Parental responsibility is accepted as a given in this film, but so is the responsibility of children. In what ways does the Jewish family expect children to "honor thy father and mother"? Is this commandment easier or more difficult to follow today than in the period of the film?

- For Tevye, the main decisions he faced about his daughters' futures related to their marriages. For parents of sons like the Jeromes, those key decisions relate to education and choice of career. How are sons and daughters treated, and how are their futures imagined, in contemporary Jewish families?

- In what ways do family loyalty and personal desires come into conflict? Is there a "Jewish way" to resolve such conflicts? If so, is it different from the "American way"?

- Do Jewish families follow different values systems than other families in America today? Should they?

- Like Eugene, many Jewish writers are "outsiders." Do Jewish writers (and artists) remain on the outskirts of the culture because they are writers, or because they are Jewish?

SUGGESTIONS FOR READING AND VIEWING

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Films

Biloxi Blues (1988)
Hannah and Her Sisters (1986)
Radio Days (1994)
The Way We Were (1973)

SESSION SIX

A Question of Faith: *Crimes and Misdemeanors*

Film: 1989
Director: Woody Allen
Screenplay: Woody Allen

Lester: Alan Alda
Cliff: Woody Allen
Hally: Mia Farrow
Dolores: Anjelica Huston
Judah: Martin Landau
Jack: Jerry Orbach
Rabbi Ben: Sam Waterston
Miriam: Claire Bloom

Length: 104 minutes

Woody Allen, who represents the quintessential New York Jew to moviegoers around the world, explores Jewish moral values and theology in this drama.

Crimes and Misdemeanors, written and directed by Allen, with signature Allen comic touches, asks some serious questions about the nature of human personality and character. What secrets lurk behind the personae we present to the world? What hidden cruelties, and unexpected kindnesses, define our inner lives? What motivates people to behave in ways conventionally recognized as "good" or "evil"? And underlying these questions, a query about the existential nature of life itself: Is human existence based on any innate moral structure or divine providential plan?

Using a classic storytelling technique, the screenplay plunges us directly into actions and events that have already assumed a life of their own. The first view of the upper-middle-class Rosenthal family is at a testimonial dinner lauding Dr. Judah Rosenthal for arranging the donation of an ophthalmological facility. Praised as a selfless physician and philanthropist and surrounded by his sweet, adoring wife and family, Judah seems the ideal successful American Jew.

In his acceptance speech Judah deepens the impression of perfection. Apparently gracious, gallant, and elegantly modest, he admits to his admiring audience that he is not formally religious, but that he is deeply affected by Jewish religious ideals. With just enough emotion, charm, and self-deprecation to be moving, he tells the audience that although he does not have his father's ritual piety, he feels himself guided by his early moral teachings.

The screenplay quickly reveals, however, that much is rotten under the refined surface of the Rosenthal family.

Cutting back and forth tightly between the present and the past, the film brings the audience in on the ugly secrets of Judah's life. The eminent physician has been guilty not only of cheating on his wife, but also of embezzling and misdirecting philanthropic funds.

Now these hidden lies threaten to break the calm surface of his existence and to destroy the serenity of his home and the prestige of his communal standing. Judah faces the greatest moral challenge of his life. Dolores Paley, a statuesque and passionate yet vulnerable flight attendant with whom he has enjoyed years of extramarital diversions, insists that he divorce his wife Miriam, or she will reveal both his marital and his financial indiscretions. To put an end to the threat Dolores poses, Judah is tempted to employ the criminal talents of his underworld brother, Jack, to put an end to Dolores.

Judah: *I remember my father telling me that the eyes of God are on us. The eyes of God. What a phrase to tell a young boy.*

Several subplots work in counterpoint to Judah's moral struggle. Woody Allen characteristically plays a neurotic intellectual writer and filmmaker, Cliff Stern, who serves as the organizing nub of another group of plots that overlap with the Rosenthal group: Cliff himself is struggling to emerge from a loveless marriage and finds solace sneaking off to the movies in the afternoon with his young niece. Stern's sister, a lonely divorcee, encounters some of the ugly and incomprehensible perversions of human sexuality in the men she meets through personal advertisements. Stern's brother-in-law, Ben, an idealistic rabbi, is stricken by a rare ophthalmic condition and is rapidly going blind – and, as Judah's patient, is a tie-in to the plot involving Judah. Meanwhile, another of Cliff's brothers-in-law, Lester, a smooth-talking, shallow producer played with oily perfection by Alan Alda, is thriving financially and professionally; he is the subject of a documentary film project Cliff reluctantly gets involved in.

Although Cliff's "crimes" are not of the scale of Judah's, he is no innocent. A character of complexity, he too is something of a phony. He's guilty of intended adultery and dishonesty in his art (he gets involved in a project he cares little about, other than to make Lester seem unappealing).

The moral focus of Cliff's life is provided by two characters, one gentile, one Jewish, whom he idolizes: Holly Reed, an angelic-looking, intellectual filmmaker

played by Mia Farrow, and an aging philosopher, Louis Levy, a brilliant, articulate Holocaust survivor based on Primo Levi. Each of them seems bathed in an aura of calm rationality, sensitivity, and unimpeachable morality. And yet each of these paragons ends up behaving with shocking irrationality, in ways that seem to run counter not only to their stated philosophy but indeed to their existence as human beings.

In Depth: Mysteries of the Jewish Heart

Crimes and Misdemeanors presents a world presided over by two Jewish patriarchs, one formally religious, one avowedly atheistic, who face a world of uncertain morality. Judah's father, a small, bearded man, has little money but is rich in religious belief. He perceives a universe fully invested in divine providence, a universe in which the eye of an eternal God sees everything and enforces justice. The threats of scientific rationality mean nothing to him. Philosopher Louis Levy, equally diminutive, having suffered through the horrors of the Holocaust, does not believe in God. A rationalist, he recognizes a universe amorally indifferent to the yearnings and even the well-being of individual human beings. Nevertheless, he respects the impressive capacity of many human beings to create moral resonance in this universe by loving and caring about one another and by behaving in ways that defy self-interest.

Judah: *God is a luxury I can't afford.*

Ben: *Now you sound like your brother Jack.*

Judah: *Jack lives in the real world. You live in the kingdom of Heaven.*

Each of the other characters plays a variation on the moral and religious platforms set forth by these two patriarchs. Rabbi Ben, brother-in-law to both Cliff and Lester, is the most overtly religious of the younger generation. A gentle man whose life seems suffused by invincible belief in Judaism, in God, and in the innate goodness and perfectibility of human beings, the rabbi endures a fate that might infuriate a different kind of man. In the prime of life he is being stricken blind. Is this the just action of divine providence? Ben acknowledges that he willfully chooses to be a man of belief; he asserts that while some might think that he is fooling himself, because of his beliefs his life is more meaningful than the lives of nonbelievers. Should Rabbi Ben's serene acceptance of God's will be considered testimony to his religious depth, or does it illustrate his need for denial, for a self-serving

voluntary blindness to the true nature of life? Allen's film poses – but does not answer – these questions.

Codes of Conduct (and Misconduct)

At the opposite end of the religious spectrum stand the pragmatic realists, the socialist, Aunt May, and the man who puts Judah's crime in motion, his brother Jerry. Although both of these characters reject formal Judaism, they are very familiar Jewish ethnic types. Like Aunt May, Jews who had thrown off formal religious behaviors were very prominent in European and American socialist movements. Like Jack, some Jews were involved in underworld activities.

Aunt May is impressed not by man's ability to create meaning through love and human relationships but by his ability to callously ignore the needs of others and promote his own self-interest. Since there is no innate moral significance to the universe, she asserts, the man who has most effectively freed himself from superstitious fears of divine retribution can best commit crimes and misdemeanors with impunity and accomplish his goals. Since ancient religious ideas cannot be enforced, she assumes, only a socialistic system based on equity rather than religion can force people to behave fairly to others.

Jack too believes that the strictures of the past are meaningless today. He clearly sees himself as a crook with integrity, a man of honesty and loyalty who acknowledges the exact nature of his acts. A realist, Jack taunts his brother Judah as a person who is not more moral than he, but rather more hypocritical and squeamish and less honest. He sees Judah as rich and well-situated enough to lie to himself and others about the true nature of his behavior. The film leaves unanswered the question as to whether Aunt May and Jack are the persons they believe themselves to be – clearsighted moderns – or are, instead, individuals blind to the profound insights of Jewish moral guidelines.

Judah, who actively participates in creating a communal and familial impression of himself as a moral paragon, breaks at least three of the Ten Commandments (theft, adultery, and finally murder). Yet Judah sees himself as more "moral" than his brother because he indulges in maudlin regret – but only after he has taken care of his

own needs. The psychological struggles that he finds necessary to his own sense of self may cause Judah to thrash around a bit, but they never change his course of action.

In Search of Role Models

Both Judah's father and Rabbi Ben conduct their lives according to a Judaism that demands more than belief. Their traditional Judaism takes the approach that people need structured guidelines to lead a compassionate, spiritually significant life. Their Judaism celebrates permissible pleasures and encourages human beings to see the spiritual potential of those pleasures, but it also says that not every pleasure is permissible in every circumstance.

Judah: *How did I get into this so deep? What dream was I following?*

But even the saintly Rabbi Ben accepts money from a nonsaintly source for his daughter's wedding. The viewer has trouble accepting his moral and aesthetic standards as having compelling integrity, under the circumstances. The viewer searches in vain for a clear alternative to the hypocritical amorality of Judah and Lester or to the open criminality of Jack. Both Hally and Rabbi Ben, supposedly luminously spiritual, are taken in by these two charlatans. Cliff too has his "misdemeanors," and his hero, the brilliant, clear-sighted Professor Louis Levy, kills himself.

Woody Allen's indictment leaves no solid "lesson" for the viewer. It might be argued that he stacks the deck by presenting characters who are all (though each in his own way) misguided if not hypocritical. Allen's own highly ambivalent attitudes toward Judaism, as expressed in this and other films, must be taken into account. Yet it is fascinating that he chose to make a popular film that addresses Jewish moral values and behaviors as its central subject.

While you watch, consider:

- What are your reactions to each of the characters in this film? In what ways do the characters surprise you?

- Do the Jewish environments that are portrayed seem familiar to you? Are they realistic?

- Which of the misdeeds are "crimes" and which are "misdemeanors"? Is there a difference?

Ben: *I couldn't go on living if I didn't feel with all my heart a moral structure with real meaning and forgiveness and some kind of higher power. Otherwise there's no basis to know how to live.*

Hally: *No matter how elaborate a philosophical system you work out, in the end it has to be incomplete.*

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Can you draw parallels between the Rosenthal brothers – Judah and Jack – and the Kravitz brothers – Lenny and Duddy?

- Like some of the characters in the previous films, Judah has moved away from the religion of his father, but it still has a certain pull on him – even if it's more sentimental than spiritual. How does his Jewish identity relate to that of the other sons viewed in the previous films?

- What does "tradition" – Tevye's mantra – mean to Judah? To Rabbi Ben?

- The contradiction between Judah Rosenthal's public persona and private actions make for an interesting film. But in offering us this character and this plot, is Woody Allen playing fair? Is Judah Rosenthal's action in arranging the murder of his mistress believable, or does it stretch too far to make its point?

- Whether we think the Judah Rosenthal portrait valid or not, we have all read about or met people who appear to be upstanding professionals and exemplary citizens but who have behaved immorally or even illegally. How are we to respond to such behavior? Can such a person be a "good Jew"? Is it our right to judge, or only God's?

- Is it possible to retain moral values without religious observance? How are they linked? How are they separate?

- Are the ethical questions raised by the film particularly Jewish, or are they universal? How might Jews and non-Jews react differently to this film?

- Many Jews express their connection to Judaism through social activism and the quest for justice. In what ways does such engagement reflect Jewish values?

- Do you think many American Jews have a sense of God being in their lives, in a sense, watching over them?

Louis Levy: *We define ourselves by the choices we have made. We are the subtotal of our choices.*

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Films

Do the Right Thing (1989)
Homicide (1991)
A Stranger Among Us (1992)

SESSION SEVEN

Making It in America: *Avalon*

Feature film, 1990
Director: Barry Levinson

Sam Krichinsky: Armin Mueller-Stahl
Eva Krichinsky: Joan Plowright
Jules Kaye: Aidan Quinn
Ann Kaye: Elizabeth Perkins
Gabriel Krichinsky: Lou Jacobi
Izzy Kirk: Kevin Pollak
Michael Kaye: Elijah Wood

Length: 126 minutes

Part poetic elegy to his own family, part documentary history, part social commentary interspersed with comic vignettes, Barry Levinson's *Avalon* is a powerful, visually beautiful evocation of the changing American Jewish family.

Assembled for their yearly Thanksgiving dinner, the multigenerational extended family goes through the ritual of telling and retelling the story of how the Krichinsky brothers arrived and established themselves in America.

The lines of the story are as simple as a fable, as complicated as every person's family history. Sam Krichinsky landed in Baltimore in 1914 on the Fourth of July. The fireworks and flag-waving and bands all seemed to him to celebrate his arrival in a wondrous country. With the help of a little man breaking in leather shoes for rich gentlemen, Sam locates his four brothers in the section of the city known as Avalon. Elder brother William establishes them all as wallpaper hangers. They meet appropriate young women, marry, and have children. They are a close-knit family and they do well, using their profits to further the family business and to bring first their father and then the remaining relatives over from Europe.

As they sit around the Thanksgiving table, the brothers and their wives bickering over the details of the family odyssey, the grown children laughing over the bickering, and grandchildren drinking it all in, it seems as though this large, vibrant family grouping will continue forever. But the elegiac theme music that drifts over the scene as the action progresses alerts the viewer to the fact that Avalon will be a kind of Camelot, and their Thanksgiving table will be a round table that is subject, like all things human, to the forces of time and change and decay.

This film has the aura of an historical document. *Avalon* is the quintessential American immigration story, spanning over half a century and following the process of

Sam: *I came to America in 1914 by way of Philadelphia. That's where I got off the boat. And then I came to Baltimore. It was the most beautiful place you've ever seen in your life. There were lights everywhere. What lights they had. It was a celebration of lights. I thought they were for me.*

acculturation among each succeeding generation. Much of what it has to say about the immigrant experience is reflected and reinforced in recent immigrant literature by other ethnic Americans. Little in the film, with the exception of Eva Krichinksy's pungent "Yinglish" dialect, a few scattered words of Yiddish, and the comic routines of the four brothers commenting on life, seems specific to Jewish ethnicity. The film has been criticized by some, especially within the Jewish community, who see the omission as evidence of the filmmaker's cowardice or self-hatred. Nevertheless, many viewers will feel that *Avalon* is a faithful representation of the American Jewish experience.

If *Fiddler on the Roof* looks backward to Jewish life before America and states, "This is what we once were," *Avalon* looks backward to Jewish life in the United States and states, "This is how we became what we are."

In Depth: The Demise of (Jewish) Family Values?

Family is the key to the ethos of Barry Levinson's *Avalon.* No religion or moral culture places demands on the individual outside the framework of the family; family defines the ethnic culture. Within the framework of this film, the extended ethnic family is pitted against American devotion to individualistic "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness."

The first break with family tradition was the emigration of each individual to the United States. However, among the first emigres family ties were still very strong. Each of the original Krichinsky brothers felt himself to be responsible for the rest of the family. The brothers showed a great deal of enterprise as they established themselves in their new country, and in their hard work never lost sight of the greater good of the family unit.

Each brother found himself a wife. Sam's narrative about his discovery of Eva, "a beautiful young girl," among the dancers at an affair for which he and his brothers are the musicians, is a romantic American story. In his memories, he is a passionate young musician whirling round and round the dance floor with his exquisite young bride.

It is hard not to love Sam Krichinsky, because the story of his life is seen and told through the eyes of his adoring

grandson, Michael. Grandfather and grandson make up a portable family unit which usually includes other family members but can, when necessary, include just the two of them. For the first part of the movie, the family unit is full and exuberant indeed. All the brothers proudly remember their role in the arrival and care of their bearded father. "He never had to work a day," they brag, remembering how they each gave him 10 percent of their earnings. "He never drank water," they laugh. "He drank only whisky and sometimes mineral water."

All the brothers worked as paper-hangers for a time, "except Gabriel," Sam remembers. "Gabriel didn't work much. He told everyone else what to do." Although Gabriel is not the oldest, he does indeed see himself in a patriarchal position. When the father and the oldest brother, William, die, Gabriel assumes he is entitled to the quasi-paternal mantle of respect, an attitude not shared by Sam or by Gabriel's nephews. As the years pass, Gabriel's expectations of familial deference come into direct conflict with American notions of egalitarianism. Gabriel wants to be catered to by virtue of his family position; the younger family members live with the idea that each person must earn, and return, respect.

Sam: *Oh, the family. How it grew. The wives, the kids. Krichinskys everywhere, everywhere. So we had the first family circle meeting. We put money in it to bring over the aunts, the uncles, the cousins.*

Who has and has not earned respect becomes the subject of much festering argumentation when Sam's son Jules and his cousin Izzy go into business together and do very well. Their financial struggles and successes are depicted with much detail, sympathy, and humor by Levinson. To young men coming from an ethnic ghetto, men who start with little but their own intelligence, energy, and willingness to take enormous risks, the business endeavor can be a warmly human enterprise. Levinson's argument with materialism, unlike that of many of his contemporaries, does not have to do with the process of making money itself, but with the side effects of successful entrepreneurship. The Kaye-Kirk cousins (they changed their names) share some of Duddy Kravitz's zeal to succeed – but they have also inherited their family's sense of principle.

Jules's and Izzy's successes enable them to take the first step in breaking up the coherent family unit. They move their parents, their wives, and their children out to the

suburbs. They join a country club and take up golf. Now, family meetings and family gatherings necessitate travel for someone. Sometimes the suburbanites travel into the city, to sit in Avalon's row houses. "It's like a foinace in here," complains Eva. "I'm dripping." The older members of the family are insulted and angry. They grumble with sullen self-righteousness that in the old days, family members knew that family meetings were important in and of themselves. "A meeting is a meeting, not an outing," Gabriel declares.

As American as Apple Pie

The action of the film is anchored by two American holidays, Thanksgiving and the Fourth of July. This is curious, because it is never clear how these holidays acquired intrinsic meaning to the family. Eva complains that she doesn't understand Thanksgiving, a holiday where the primary observance is to eat turkey. Nevertheless, it is clear that these holidays have enormous symbolic significance in the Krichinsky family. Levinson's choice of these holidays, rather than the Passover Seder gathering that families such as the Krichinskys surely observed in some form, emphasizes both the generic nature of the immigrant experience he is describing and the specifically American quality of their hyphenated lives. It is one of the points on which he has been most vociferously criticized.

Although Levinson does not touch on the sociological implications of his choice of holidays, the Fourth of July and, more especially, Thanksgiving, have been the American holidays most beloved by Jews, partially because they have no specifically Christian source or symbolism. It seems likely, as well, that in some ways Thanksgiving can be seen to echo the themes of both the harvest holiday of Succoth, which commemorates shelter for the traveling Israelites in the desert, and the spring holiday of Passover, the festival of freedom. For American Jews, Thanksgiving often became, psychologically, the holiday of shelter and freedom, the holiday when they paid joyous homage to their adopted land.

Thanksgiving in the suburbs becomes the focal breaking point of the Krichinsky tribe. For years, Gabriel has indulged in testing behavior. He deliberately comes late

to Thanksgiving meals, expecting the whole family to postpone eating until he arrives, in order to establish two points: (1) he is the patriarch and deserves respect, therefore no one should eat until he is seated at the table; and (2) the suburbs are too far from the old family neighborhood to hold a family gathering. It is unfair for the newly wealthy members of the family to impose the unfair burden of travel on the less wealthy family members.

The Loosening of Ties

One year the inevitable happens. The children are shouting and hungry, their Americanized parents are annoyed with Gabriel because they recognize his habitual lateness as deliberate, and they urge Sam to give the word that they turkey may be cut. Sam, who has already traveled some emotional distance from his brothers in the city, agrees that they may begin. When Gabriel discovers that "You cut da toikey!" he storms out of the house, never to return. The underlying reasons for his anger are underscored in a subsequent family meeting in Avalon, when he taunts Sam and his children for their arrogance, based on money, and their lack of respect for an older brother. As Sam, now furious himself, rages out of the house, Gabriel reminds him that it was he, as the older brother, who made possible not only Sam's emigration to the United States but also all his subsequent progress.

Sam: *I'm nervous about making a change.*

Jules: *Ah, what are you talking about? You came all the way to America. We're just going to the suburbs.*

Sam: *Then I was a young man.*

Neither brother will give in. Sam will not admit that he owes a great deal to Gabriel, nor will he show any sensitivity to the envy and resentment Gabriel is feeling. Gabriel will not, and probably cannot, acknowledge that he has provoked them to start without him by deliberately keeping a large group of people waiting, year after year. This is not a generation much given to the sort of introspection that leads to a personal admission of guilt.

For little Michael and the other young cousins, the breakup of the family leads only to feelings of loss. Although their parents imagine that the children will love the suburbs, the children seem much happier surrounded by family, dashing about in the rough and tumble of city streets, sharing the excitement of the circus coming to town. Eventually, even Sam's extended family breaks up when his son and daughter-in-law give birth to a second

child and "need" his room for a nursery. They yearn for the American privacy that a single-family residence in the suburbs can bring. But for Michael, no amount of privacy or independence can substitute for his grandfather's company. In a bleakly symbolic moment, Michael, his parents, and his little brother listlessly share Thanksgiving dinner, eating on TV trays in the den, staring, glazed over and expressionless, at the television screen. The gleaming table stands, perennially empty and unused, in their pristine dining room.

Another moment of pathos occurs at the funeral of Eva, Sam's wife. Few of the family members – including Gabriel, still feuding with his brother – manage to show up. Not even death brings them back together.

Sam: *If you don't remember, you will forget.*

Of Loss and Redemption

Years later, from his room in a nursing home, Sam reflects sadly that if he had known that things would change so drastically, to the point where even the old neighborhood, Avalon, has physically almost disappeared, "I would have remembered better." But Sam has remembered very well indeed, because he has endowed Michael with his own memories. What is cultural continuity after all, Levinson seems to be saying, but the ability to successfully transmit our memories to the next generation? The fact that Michael flouts European Jewish custom by naming his son after his grandfather, Sam, while the old man is still alive, seems to both break tradition and to preserve it, within the ethos of this film. Levinson seems to indicate that in a stable society, one keeps tradition alive by identifying with and naming the next generation after the dead; however, within the rapidly changing, mobile American society, our only hope for continuity is to identify with – to name our children after – living Jews we can admire, love, and emulate.

While you watch, consider:

- How the language, behavior, and incidents mark this film as specifically Jewish, rather than generically ethnic American.
- How do the brothers communicate with each other? With their children?
- As the film progresses, what, if anything, remains the same?
- Which of the families seen in the earlier films remind you of the Krichinskys?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- How do the generations of Krichinskys differ in their views of money and success? How are they different from the families in the previous films?

- What holds the Krichinsky family together, and what ultimately drives them apart?

- In what ways do you identify the Krichinsky family as Jewish? As typically American? How does the filmmaker address or avoid any differences or conflicts?

- In what ways does the history of the Krichinsky family resemble, and in what ways diverge from, our own families' stories?

- In this family epic and in the parallel story of the American Jewish community, in what ways is the attainment of material success accompanied by losses in other areas? Gains? Do you think Levinson in *Avalon* paints a fair picture of the tradeoffs?

- Many children of immigrants feel that they know more than their parents. How is the commandment to "honor one's parents" regarded by the different generations in the film? How does the degree of respect shown compare to that seen in the earlier films?

- Levinson has been criticized in some quarters for not making the Krichinsky family explicitly Jewish enough. It can be argued, however, that he intended to portray their story as a paradigm for the experiences of many immigrant groups, which unite us as Americans. In what ways is the experience of Jewish Americans similar to and different from that of other major immigrant groups, for example, Italians, Chinese, Latin

Americans? Do what we consider "Jewish values" differ from the values of these groups?

- Is the breakup of the large, close-knit Jewish family, as depicted in this film, inevitable? Are there ways to prevent it? To replace physical proximity with other connections? Should such dispersion be applauded or mourned, or both?

Sam: *Who's this "Jules Kaye"?*

Jules: *That's me, Dad. I changed my name.*

Izzy: *Me too. I changed mine to Kirk. It's easier to say. . .*

Sam: *Who said names are supposed to be easy? What are you, a candy bar?*

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Films

Lies My Father Told Me (1975)
Moonstruck (1987)
Once Around (1991)

SESSION EIGHT

Wrap-Up

The seven films in this course cover a wide range of settings, content, and time frames, as they deal with issues of Jewish identity. Yet while Tevye of *Fiddler on the Roof* is, first and foremost, a "real Jew," and Michael Kaye, an adult at the conclusion of *Avalon*, is a "real American," they have much in common.

The following questions look across the films to inspire thinking about our past and our future, how we live our lives and how we would like to live, how to be Americans and how to be Jews.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- As we become "more American," is it inevitable that we become "less Jewish"?

- Characters like Judah Rosenthal in *Crimes and Misdemeanors* and Lenny Kravitz in *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz* don't stop being Jewish by virtue of their ideas or the fact that they no longer embrace their Jewish identity. In contemporary times, what defines membership in the Jewish community? Who decides?

- What can replace immigrant memory as a unifying force among American Jews?

- Many significant changes, whether situational, psychological, or attitudinal, occur over the course of most of the films (i.e., the *Avalon* neighborhood changes, Tevye's daughters grow more self-confident, many of the characters become more "Americanized").

Is it possible to see change as it's happening, or is it only visible with the perspective of distance? How is the American Jewish community changing now?

- Once Jewish sons and daughters leave the "old neighborhood," leave behind the Jewish lifestyle if not the values of their parents, can they ever return? Is it ever possible to "go home again"? Can those childhood experiences be recycled into a new sense of Jewish identity?

- Do you think that Jewish social values, like the pursuit of equality, justice, and world peace, can sustain American Jewry? What about other core values like support of Israel and opposition to antisemitism? How about religious practices? What do you think is essential to sustain the community?

- Several of the films deal with Jewish moral and ethical issues. Do you think of the intention to live an ethical life as a particularly Jewish concern? Or is it universal? Why are ethics and morals so important to many American Jews? Do you think Jews have a greater responsibility than others to live an ethical life?

- For Tevye and Rabbi Ben, God plays a role in their day-to-day lives. Other characters, like Judah Rosenthal or Jake Robin, might perform those few Jewish rituals they observe out of a sense of family feeling. Do they have a sense that God plays a role in their lives? Do you?

- How do issues of gender relate to Jewish identity? Do you think men and women face different challenges in forging an American Jewish identity they are comfortable with?

- If you could arrange a meeting between two characters from different films in this course, who would you

select? Sam Krichevsky and Tevye? Mirele Efros and Kate Jerome? How would they relate to each other?

- Do contemporary American Jewish families face some of the same issues as families in these films, with sons and daughters wanting greater access to the mainstream culture than their parents ever considered? How are such conflicts resolved?

- Another recent trend in the American Jewish community is the "return" to Judaism movement, with many young people finding meaning in the religious practices their parents abandoned. Why do you think the search for meaning and roots is so important to many young people? As people choose to become "more Jewish," is it necessary to give up anything?

- Orthodox American Jews can be seen as facing fewer choices about their Jewish identity than other Jews, for many decisions about how they will lead their lives are dictated by their religious beliefs. Does this make for a less conflict-filled American identity?

- How do you think issues of Jewish identity will play out in the future of the American Jewish community?

- Themes of Zionism and Israel are not mentioned in these films. How does the State of Israel affect American Jews' sense of identity? Can one be a strong supporter of Israel and still a "real American"? Conversely, can one be a "real Jew" and uninterested in Israel?

- Do you think the latest wave of Jewish immigrants to America – those from the former Soviet Union – have to deal with the same issues of cultural loss and family conflicts that the earlier waves of Jewish immigrants faced in their efforts to become "real Americans"?

- How does your own family history relate to the stories you've watched?

NOTES

Page 23 — Irving Howe, *The World of Our Fathers: The Journey of the East European Jews to America and the Life They Found and Made* (New York: Harcourt Brace Javanovich, 1976), p. 173.

Page 24 — Hasia Diner, "Jewish Immigrant Women in Urban America," unpublished paper for the Mary I. Bunting Institute, Radcliffe College.

Menachem M. Brayer, *The Jewish Woman in Rabbinic Literature,* Col. II (Hoboken, N.J.: Ktav Publishing House, 1986), p. 48.

Pesachim 47a; Ketubot 61b; see Mishnah Ketubot 5:5.

Page 25 — *The Life of Glueckel of Hameln, Written by Herself* (New York: Thomas Yoseloff, 1962).

Bella Chagall, *Burning Lights* (New York: Shocken Books, 1946).

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Page 26 — Susan A. Glenn, *Daughters of the Shtetl: Life and Labor in the Immigrant Generation* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990), p. 5.

Page 27 — Howe, *World of Our Fathers,* p. 495.

Page 30 — Arthur Hertzberg, *The Jews in America: Four Centuries of an Uneasy Encounter* (New York: Touchstone/Simon & Schuster, 1990), pp. 214-215.

Page 46 — *Collected Plays of Neil Simon* (New York: Random House, 1991), Vol. 3, p. xviii.

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