



TELEVISION'S Changing Image of American Jews

Neal Gabler
Frank Rich
Joyce Antler



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NEAL GABLER

FRANK RICH

JOYCE ANTLER

THE AMERICAN JEWISH COMMITTEE
AND THE NORMAN LEAR CENTER

Neal Gabler, a film and television critic, is a senior fellow of the Norman Lear Center at the USC Annenberg School for Communication. He is the author of *An Empire of Their Own: How the Jews Invented Hollywood* (1989); *Winchell: Gossip, Power and the Culture of Celebrity* (1995); and *Life the Movie: How Entertainment Conquered Reality* (1998).

Frank Rich, formerly film and TV critic for *Time* magazine and drama critic for the *New York Times*, is now a columnist for the *Times*. His most recent book is *Ghost Light: A Memoir* (2000).

Joyce Antler, Ph.D., is professor of American Studies and chair of the Department of American Studies at Brandeis University. Her most recent book is *The Journey Home: Jewish Women and the American Century* (1997).

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(FOREWORD)

OFTEN SENSITIVE TO CHARGES that “Jews control Hollywood,” the Jewish community has become circumspect in articulating criticism of television generally and network programming specifically. That does not mean that there are no Jewish communal concerns about television, its portrayal of Jewish characters and themes, and the core values that programming transmits. Rather, the Jewish community believes in the importance of dialogue with network executives, airing of shared concerns, and recommending potential directions for improvement and change.

To accomplish these objectives, in January 1999 the American Jewish Committee, together with the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Southern California and the Jewish Television Network, convened an historic conference with leaders of the television industry on Jews in Prime-Time Television. Participants included the heads of major networks, leading writers and producers, and commentators before an audience of invited guests and distinguished communal leaders, who themselves brought considerable expertise to the discussion. A full list of panelists follows this foreword.

Several themes permeated the discussion. Most participants agreed that religion generally and Judaism specifically received at best minimalist treatment in television programming. Jewish characters, albeit plentiful, were almost universally intermarried, suggesting falsely that the phenomenon of marriage between Jews had virtually ceased. Perhaps most strikingly, the dominant image of Jewish life portrayed in serious programs highlighted persecution—a theme remarkably dissonant with the narrative of the American Jewish experience.

Several papers prepared for this conference highlighted these and other themes. Critics Neal Gabler and Frank Rich prepared addresses to keynote the conference. Professor Joyce Antler, Brandeis University, prepared a background paper reviewing the history of the portrayal of Jews on television and analyzing its current context. As an alternative to publishing the full conference proceedings, we decided to publish these papers as a more focused vehicle to bring the issues before a broader public. Our hope is that publication of these documents will advance the dialogue initiated at this conference.

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Bruce Ramer
*National President,
The American Jewish Committee*

(CONFERENCE PANELISTS)

Jason Alexander, actor, *Seinfeld*

Chris Carter, producer, *The X-Files, Millennium*

Neal Gabler, author, *An Empire of Their Own: How the Jews Invented Hollywood; Life the Movie*

Gary David Goldberg, producer, *Brooklyn Bridge, Spin City, Family Ties*

David E. Kelley, producer, *Ally McBeal, The Practice, Chicago Hope, Picket Fences*

Jamie Kellner, CEO, The WB Television Network

Norman Lear, producer, *All in the Family, Sanford and Son, Maude, The Jeffersons*

Kerry McCluggage, chairman, Paramount Television

Greg Meidel, former chairman, Universal Television

Arthur Miller, Bruce Bromley Professor of Law, Harvard Law School.

Leslie Moonves, president, CBS

Don Ohlmeyer, president, NBC

Frank Rich, columnist, *The New York Times*

Jeff Sagansky, president, Paxson Communications

Lucie Salhany, former president, UPN, Fox Broadcasting

Jay Sanderson, CEO, Jewish Television Network

Dawn Tarnofsky, senior vice president, Lifetime

Grant Tinker, founder, MTM; former president, NBC

Dean Valentine, president, UPN

CONFERENCE
PRESENTATIONS

(NEAL GABLER)

I THOUGHT IT MIGHT BE useful to compare and contrast the motion picture industry—a field I know very well and wrote about in my book, *An Empire of Their Own*—with the television industry and examine it through what I would call a “twig theory.” This theory reviews the evolution of these two different industries to see how executive involvement by Jews may have impacted upon the eventual course of the industry. I call it a twig theory because I think if we see how the twig is bent, we’ll see how that tree grew.

To begin with, there is one basic similarity between film and television. The motion picture industry was founded by Jews and operated by Jews for a good many years, and the television industry, at least the major broadcast entities, was founded by Jews and run by Jews for a good many years. That, however, is where the similarity ends. The film Jews and the television Jews were two very different groups with two very different agendas. The Hollywood Jews, if I may call them that, were a relatively homogeneous group. All of them were of Eastern European origin. All of them either immigrated to this country when they were relatively young or were the sons of immigrants. All of them were born into dire poverty. All of them had a desire to succeed

and realized that the avenue to success would be an avid pursuit of assimilation. And though they were engaged in various professions in their youth, from selling soap as the Warner brothers did to selling junk as Louis B. Mayer did (and there were many people who said that he was still selling junk after he headed MGM), all found their way into the motion picture industry as a means of achieving those assimilative ends. The television Jews—and by the television Jews, I mean the three individuals who created the three major television networks, David Sarnoff of RCA/NBC, William Paley of CBS, and Leonard Goldenson of ABC—were a very different and more disparate group. For one thing, they were a generation younger, which may have made them less sensitive to the scourge of anti-Semitism than the Hollywood Jews. For another, they were less avid for assimilation because they had been born into assimilation.

“The Hollywood Jews, seeking acceptability, respectability, and assimilation, saw their medium—and this contradicts a good deal of the mercenary anti-Semitic tenor of film history—not as a quick way to make a dollar but as an art form.”

Sarnoff, who may have had most in common with the Hollywood Jews, was an Eastern European Jew. He came to this country when he was nine years old. At fifteen, he went to work for the American Marconi Company and rose steadily through its ranks until he became the general manager of that company, which later evolved into RCA. Sarnoff exercised a kind of power in the radio industry that one might compare today to William Gates's in the computer industry. But what distinguished him from the Hollywood Jews was that he was very secure unto himself and very secure with his power.

William Paley was a different kind of man. The son of the owner

of a fairly large cigar company, Paley was a scion of wealth—wellborn, well educated. In 1928, he got a tip from an uncle about the availability of a radio station in Chicago, which he bought essentially as a commercial venture. From that would later evolve the CBS Radio Network.

Like Paley, Leonard Goldenson was born into an upper-middle-class Jewish family in Scottsdale, Pennsylvania, where his father was a merchant. He attended Harvard University. (You couldn't find a greater difference between that and the kind of education Louis B. Mayer had, which was an education of the streets.) He then attended Harvard Law School. He accumulated a great deal of money, even while he was in law school, through investments. He moved into the motion picture business through the theater arm of Paramount Pictures. When the theater division of Paramount was divorced from the production division in the late '40s, he stayed with the former, eventually purchasing the ABC Television Network. In short, all three enjoyed tremendous success at early ages.

Second, television Jews not only had different backgrounds from the Hollywood Jews; they had very different mindsets and aspirations, which were reflected in the avenues they chose to pursue. The Hollywood Jews, seeking acceptability, respectability, and assimilation, saw their medium—and this contradicts a good deal of the mercenary anti-Semitic tenor of film history—not as a quick way to make a dollar but as an art form. They could invest themselves, and they could raise their status. Oddly enough, it was culture they were pursuing when they pursued the movies. In fact, some of them were already wealthy when they entered the industry.

Adolph Zukor had invented a fox stole in which the tail fit into a clasp in the mouth, made \$400,000 in 1903 off that novelty, and invested it in the motion picture business. Less sensitive to assimilation, the television Jews, on the other hand, saw television not as an art form but as a delivery system—a medium. When NBC president Pat Weaver talked to Walt Disney about bringing Disney's programming to NBC in the very early days of television, he told General Sarnoff, "Look, we can make this deal with Walt Disney and get this

programming into our television network. And the only stipulation here is that Disney is building this theme park, and he wants us to invest in the theme park, and we'll take a 25 percent stake." Sarnoff demurred. He said, "That would put us in the entertainment business." Weaver said, "Well, what business do you think we're in?" And Sarnoff said, "We're in communications."

Third, the idea that television is a medium rather than an art form led to a different model. The Hollywood Jews saw the movies as an extension of literature and theater. Adolph Zukor, who later would become the leader of Paramount Pictures, named his first company "Famous Players in Famous Plays," which aptly described the whole engine of that company. You hire famous actors from the stage, and you adapt stage plays for the screen. And Zukor was not the only one. Fox and Mayer and Laemmle and the others all pursued a cultural agenda that arrogated art to the movies.

"... if the movies were the weapon that killed vaudeville, radio was really the box they put it in, and television was kind of a visitation when they opened the coffin."

The model of television, needless to say, was radio, from which it evolved. And the model for radio was vaudeville, from which it evolved. Bob Hope said that when vaudeville died, television was the box they put it in. But, in point of fact, if the movies were the weapon that killed vaudeville, radio was really the box they put it in, and television was kind of a visitation when they opened the coffin. You could actually see the corpse there. It was a model with enormous ramifications for the way the industry would evolve.

Fourth, the movie and television Jews exercised authority very differently. The Hollywood Jews were autocratic. This was their empire, and they ruled it with an iron hand. Louis B. Mayer, Jack

Warner, Harry Cohn at Columbia hired the actors, the writers, the directors, the producers. They vetted the scripts. They vetted the budgets. In many instances, they watched the movies and actually determined how the footage would be cut. This was their baby, an extension of themselves, an extension of their own psychologies, and an instrument to fulfill their own needs. Paley, Sarnoff, and Goldenson were more seignorial than tyrannical. Sarnoff was very much a hands-off executive who delegated authority. Paley had a certain kind of control in the sense that he set the larger agenda for the network. He was very concerned that nothing affect his status as a cultured, mainstream, American aristocrat. And he knew that the reflection of CBS would ultimately bounce back onto him. But within that general agenda, he too, delegated authority, and the actual running of CBS was largely in the hands of its president, Frank Stanton. As for Goldenson, he once said something that one cannot possibly imagine any of the original moguls saying. He had put a program on the air that he had felt very strongly about, and it failed. He realized at that moment that his tastes were completely irrelevant. For Louis B. Mayer, personal taste was the only thing that was relevant to what he put on the screen, his idea being that his taste and the public's taste were identical. In the immortal words of Norman Krasna when Harry Cohn complained that he was squirming in his seat while he watched a movie and that proved that the audience wouldn't like it: "Imagine the whole world wired to Harry Cohn's ass." Moreover, because the power in television was decentralized, the Jewish influence there was less a matter of pressure from top down than from the bottom up. Television, unlike the movies, empowered the writer and performers, who had much greater latitude than their film counterparts to infuse their work with their own ideas and experiences.

Fifth, film and television followed different trajectories in how they went about attracting audiences. When the movies began, they were a lower class form that made its appeal primarily to immigrants and the working class in urban centers. But because of the desire for respectability by the immigrant Jews who created those major studios, the movies moved from storefronts and nickelodeons into larger

venues and ultimately to the movie palaces of the '20s and '30s. In doing so, they reached a middle-class audience that would, again, raise the status of the moguls who made the films. In effect, then, they moved from the lower class to the middle class.

For its part, television began as a middle- and upper-middle-class form because those were the only people who, at its inception, could afford a set. Gradually—first by placing televisions in saloons and taverns and wherever people would watch sporting events, and then by making affordable sets—it then moved from the middle class to the lower class. This change would have ramifications for the kinds of programming that one got on television and the kinds of themes that television purveyed.

Sixth, movies and television had two very different attitudes toward the audience at their inception. If you are making a movie with the idea of attracting a large audience, you operate from what I call a “horizontal” model—that is, you try to make a film that will attract the largest number of people. There was no niche marketing in the studios of the '30s. Moguls didn't say, “Okay, where's the 18-to-34 demographic that's going to go see this movie?” The idea was, “Can we get everybody from 2 to 84 to come see this movie?” Which, in a way, made the movie of the '30s and '40s the art of the middle, because by embracing the middle, everyone would go. Television, like radio, from which it evolved, had what one might call a “vertical” idea of the audience. The idea was that you would attract groups of people who chose to watch different kinds of programming. And indeed, this is one of the reasons why advertising agencies in television, as in radio initially, were the ones who provided the programming and not the programmers at the network themselves. If you were selling Woodbury soap, for example, you would go to your ad agency and devise a program that the consumers of Woodbury soap would want to watch. If you were selling Camel cigarettes, you would go to your ad agency and you would devise a program that people who smoked Camel cigarettes would want to watch. Or, if you were making breakfast cereal, you would go to your ad agency and devise a program that would appeal to those kids who are going to consume breakfast cereal. So even

though some people in television might like to think that only over the last fifteen years did they arrive at focus groups and niche marketing, a rudimentary demographics ruled from television's early days. To this day, television mavens talk in terms of "cume" ratings, meaning "cumulative audiences." They are always talking about how to build aggregate audiences from pieces. That is not something anyone in the movie industry ever thought about.

*"... ethnicity . . . is always the object of ridicule.
Not to be a mainstream American is ridiculous."*

There was also a difference, I think, in terms of the image purveyed by these two media, which is, in a way, the sum of all of these other things. Hollywood, because it was the art of the middle, because it was horizontal, because the men at the top chose to move the industry in that direction, took a melting pot model of America. The idea was that we would all be rendered in this pot into "Americans." And if you look at the movies of the '20s, the '30s, and the '40s, you can see how ethnicity is treated. In the '20s, when films even acknowledged ethnicity—as in things like *Abie's Irish Rose*, *The Cohns and the Kellys*, and *Private Izzy Murphy*, to cite Jewish examples—it is always the object of ridicule. Not to be a mainstream American is ridiculous. In these films, the whole object is to find your way, as indeed the moguls were trying to find theirs, to being accepted as, to be perceived as, to be American. Even the great film *The Jazz Singer*, a great film not aesthetically speaking, but as an historic milestone, is really about the tension between secular America—will Jake Rabinowitz appear on that Broadway stage?—and religious America—will Jake Rabinowitz sing the *Kol Nidre* at the Yom Kippur service because his father can't? Of course, in typical Hollywood fashion, he does both.

Television purveyed a different theme. Although it may sound unusual to say so, given the fact that we often think of the television of

the 1950s as being *Leave It to Beaver* and *Father Knows Best* and *Ozzie & Harriet*, it was a far more pluralistic medium than the movies were. For one thing, the programs were heavily oriented toward comedy. And comedy was itself, because of its vaudeville origins, a much more pluralistic medium. You were allowed to be ethnic in a comedy because you were being an object of humor; you were making fun of yourself. Think of *Allen's Alley*, for example, with Fred Allen. What you remember are all the different types of Americans from Mrs. Nussbaum to Titus Mundy to Senator Claghorn. These different types could be incorporated into that one program because it was acceptable to be different in a comic context. The acceptance of ethnicity also accounts for programs like *Beulah*, *Amos 'n' Andy*, *I Remember Mama*, and, lest we forget, *The Goldbergs*—all dealing with ethnic Americans.

“ . . . the grand theme of Hollywood, both in terms of its films and in terms of the lives of its moguls, is idealized assimilation.”

All of these differences finally build to one large idea that most clearly and powerfully distinguishes film from television. In *An Empire of Their Own*, I asserted that the grand theme of Hollywood, both in terms of its films and in terms of the lives of its moguls, is idealized assimilation. Indeed, Hollywood's great irony is that the moguls, in their desire to be regarded as American, went out to California. There they created this empire of their own. They created the images and the values and the myths on the screen that they thought idealized this country and ultimately, and ironically, those ideas, those images, those values, came to define America itself. They got embraced by Americans so that America, in a sense, is defined by Eastern European Jewish immigrants.

Television, I think, if one were to look at its grand theme in the

same way, is about idealized pluralism. Now idealized pluralism is not the same thing as pluralism as you and I often consider it. It is not that everyone is allowed to be whomever he or she wants to be. Idealized pluralism really has two manifestations to it. One is that you're allowed to be the stereotype that white Americans want you to be, which is why you can have *The Goldbergs* and *Beulah* and *Amos 'n' Andy* and *I Remember Mama*. And as we become more politically correct and move on through the '50s and into the '60s, idealized pluralism means that you were a white middle-class American. In some respect, these two grand ideas—the idealized assimilation and idealized pluralism—reflect another characteristic that divides film from TV: the difference between Los Angeles and New York. Television, lest we forget, began in New York at a time where there was much greater tolerance, much greater diversity than there had been in the early days of Hollywood, which accounts, in part, for the greater variety on the small screen.

One can see the limitations of this idealized pluralism in the *21* scandal. I don't have to remind you about the quiz show *21*, where Charles Van Doren, the son of the poet and writer Mark Van Doren, became a national hero by vanquishing Herbert Stempel. Herbert Stempel happened to be a very bright City College grad who, as one can tell from his name, was Jewish. When he was recruited for the program, however, it wasn't enough that he was Jewish. The producer of the program, Dan Enright, gave him a haircut—an awful haircut, as Stempel described it—and made him wear, week after week after week, the oldest jacket in his closet. The idea was that, yes, you're Herbert Stempel, but we have to make certain, visually, that Herbert Stempel looks like an absent-minded Jewish intellectual who has a bad haircut and wears an old coat. And now Herbert Stempel comes on the program and wins and wins and wins and wins. This is television pluralism. There are no Herbert Stempels in the movies of America.

But then come Charles Van Doren, the prince, the handsome intellectual. And because the show is rigged, Stempel is now required to lose to Charles Van Doren, as you know from the film *Quiz Show*. Stempel wears a new jacket on the show in which he loses as a small

mark of retribution. And what Stempel says of this episode, speaking of Dan Enright, the producer, was that "Enright's real name was Erinreich, and Barry's [Jack Barry, the host of the show] was Barrish. Enright was a typical self-loathing Jew. These people catered to the *goyim*, so it has turned into a cultural thing," said Stempel. "A Jewish boy from City College versus a WASP from Columbia. And, of course, the WASP from Columbia has to win."

But there is, in this story, a final twist. Because I think that ultimately the steady, pervasive influence of television pluralism, even in this diluted form, had its effect—a kind of revenge. Hollywood turned every ethnic into a white, middle-class American. If you couldn't be turned into a white middle-class American, your ethnicity was marginalized. But television has a very different process. Over time, television learned how to turn every white middle-class American—as anyone who watches television can see today—into an ethnic. In fact, it even went one step further. And I present Exhibit A, one of our esteemed guests—Jason Alexander, also known as George Costanza. Now, I don't know how many Jews are named Costanza. Clearly, the name is of Greek origin. And yet, anyone who watches *Seinfeld*, which is, I assume, everyone in America, knows that, despite the fact that George's parents celebrate Festivus rather than Hanukkah, they're unmistakably Jewish. So here you have George Costanza, a marginally Greek ethnic, now a Jewish ethnic.

And this is the Jewish revenge. From an industry, namely film, that turned every ethnic into a white middle-class American, we have an industry, namely television, that turns every white middle-class American and every ethnic into a Jew. Such is the power of Jews on the medium.

(FRANK RICH)

I WANT TO TALK IN A somewhat personal way, and certainly in a very scattershot way, about the issue of the representation of Jews in television. I want to focus particularly on the period when I was growing up, and on where we are now.

I grew up in the 1950s in Washington, D.C., not exactly a hotbed of Judaism. My parents were pretty assimilated Jews for that time, for their generation. They loved the Jewish comedians that we constantly saw on television, and I did, too. And so we watched Jack Benny and Phil Silvers, maybe my favorites of everyone of that period. But I was keenly aware of the fact that there weren't really Jews on television, even though there were technically Jews on television. In TV at that time, the dominant representations of family life, of childhood, were shows like *Father Knows Best*, which was so ethnically drained. Not only was it very WASPy, but even the Mexican gardener, some of you who know TV trivia may recall, had the last name "Smith." Or *Ozzie & Harriet*. Or *The Mickey Mouse Club*, the advent of which I still remember as being a Red Letter Day in my childhood: the idea that you could watch this junk every afternoon, as soon as you got home from school. Nonetheless, among the Darlenes and Annettes, there was not one

zaftig Jewish girl. Indeed, even in Disneyland: it was Frontierland, it was Main Street, it was Tomorrowland. It was this very bland view of American life.

When you're a kid and you don't see your life represented on screen, it does have some sort of impact, I think. Certainly, it made me feel there was something "off" or not quite right or not quite mainstream about being Jewish in America. I didn't construe it as anti-Semitism or as a pogrom, not that I even knew what that was then. But I did feel that I wasn't represented in the medium that I think, then and now, is the most important medium in our culture, certainly the most influential, and such a mainline into American democracy that if you're not on it, you don't exist. Jews were not the only ones slighted in this way, but it struck me as amazing, given that there were so many people who were actually Jewish performing in this medium, let alone, as I would later learn, creating it and managing it.

“ . . . I wasn't represented in the medium that I think, then and now, is the most important medium in our culture, certainly the most influential, and such a mainline into American democracy that if you're not on it, you don't exist.”

A few years ago, the Jewish Museum in New York did an exhibit called “Too Jewish.” It was fascinating, and not just in its treatment of television; in fact, television was a minor part of it. But there was a clip reel in it that was absolutely astounding to see because it actually took these memories I had and showed me that I wasn't imagining them. For instance, they showed a clip of Jack Benny doing elaborate Christmas shopping, with no mention of his actual ethnicity. There was also this incredible clip of *The Goldbergs*—TV's one certified Jewish series—where Molly Goldberg was leaning out her window and doing

this spiel that she would do at the end of each show to sort of wrap things up. She was talking about how the seasons were changing and all these holidays were upon us. And she walked through Halloween, Thanksgiving, Christmas, New Year's, and Easter without so much as a mention of Hanukkah or Passover. There was definitely something off.

Similarly, when I was in my teens, I began to be aware that there was something really off when I would see something like *The Dick Van Dyke Show*, which was another great television show. I knew enough by then to know it was about the writing of *Your Show of Shows*, and that it was about Carl Reiner and Mel Brooks and Mel Tolkin and all of those people. But again, although Morey Amsterdam sort of seemed Jewish, it was a kind of closeted Jewishness. Of course he and Rose Marie, who probably represented Lucile Kallen, were hidden behind the Wasp hero and heroine, Dick Van Dyke and Mary Tyler Moore. Wonderful actors, but the show was a disguised version of the actual television history it was representing.

I think that the reasons for this are very complicated, and Neal talked about them, not only today but also in his first book. Some of what he says about the movie moguls carries over, despite the generational difference, to some TV executives. Particularly, Bill Paley really exemplifies the process of Jews who were assimilated to the point where they really wanted to forget about being Jewish and really did not want to promote any kind of Jewish ethnicity in the mass market. In some ways, when I think of Paley, I think about the scandal that long haunted the place where I work, the *New York Times*. If the *New York Times* has a sin that it's most likely to own up to in its entire history, it has to do with its reporting, or lack of it, on the Holocaust. Indeed, a couple of years ago, when the *Times* celebrated its centennial in New York, it helped put together an exhibit at the New York Public Library of great moments in the history of the *Times*—the Pentagon Papers and so on. But in one section of the exhibit, the *Times* confessed to its record on the Holocaust and reproduced the pages of what the paper had done at the height of the war. I took my kids to see it, and they were just really shocked, as teenage boys would be in this day and age, at what they saw. There, buried deep in the front section,

next to a huge mattress ad, was a brief, less-than-one-column story with a tiny headline saying something like: "Millions of Jews May Have Been Murdered in Germany." In other words, the *Times* under-reported the Holocaust as it was happening. The *Times* was a paper, however, owned by Jews. So again, the lapse can't be ascribed to anti-Semitism. I imagine that, at that time, Jews in the management of the *Times* very much had a Bill Paley view of a Jew in American society: he should not call too much attention to himself. Indeed, I wouldn't be surprised if the *Times* executives of that era who made such decisions traveled in the same circle as Bill Paley. It was this "our crowd" circle that Stephen Birmingham talks about in histories he has written about the class differences between immigrant Jews and assimilated wealthy Jews.

"It is to television's credit that it tackled the subject of the Holocaust at all when so many of the other mass arts would not."

This can all be regarded, in my view, as a larger cultural problem of which TV and newspapers are just a part. But I think the consequences were severe, certainly in the case of the many American news organizations that did not fully investigate the Holocaust while it was going on. These consequences also play out in a dramatic way on television throughout the '50s and really into the '60s and '70s in terms of television's treatment of the Holocaust. In fact, Deborah Lipstadt, an historian at Emory University in Atlanta who wrote the definitive book about the American press's failures in covering the Holocaust, is now writing a book about how television treated the Holocaust, not in its news coverage—since network television postdates World War II—but in terms of how TV dramatized the Holocaust to the public after the war. We think back to the Golden Age of television and we think of all the wonderful TV dramas that were done (most of which were way

ahead of the movies, I might add) that dealt with what had happened in Eastern Europe and Germany. But some of these dramas don't hold up so well. One hates to be harsh about it, but a lot of them sanitized what happened. TV didn't ignore the Holocaust, but it sometimes either gentrified or softened it. In some cases, TV underplayed or ignored the Jewishness of Nazi victims. In another new book on this subject, *While America Watches: Televising the Holocaust*, the historian Jeffrey Shandler cites this instance: in 1953, *This Is Your Life* had a Holocaust survivor on the show and paid great tribute to her without ever actually mentioning the Holocaust or how she lost her entire family. In the same vein, sponsors were able to exert pressure on *Playhouse 90* to remove from a Holocaust drama any references to gas in the concentration camps, for fear of offending the American Gas Association, a big sponsor at that time.

It is to television's credit that it tackled the subject of the Holocaust at all when so many of the other mass arts would not. And yet, there was still this lingering problem, this uneasiness, particularly among Jews, in dealing with Jewish material on TV. This has obviously improved a great deal in recent years. But I do feel, even now, that there's a wariness in show business in general and in TV in particular in dealing with Jews. At a time when almost every sitcom has a gay character, when many ethnicities are presented in a more or less realistic manner, it is less likely to happen with Jews. As was already mentioned, every married Jew who appears on TV has to be in an interfaith marriage. It's very unlikely you're going to see an entirely Jewish couple as continuing characters—despite the strides of, for instance, *Seinfeld*, and *Mad About You*, to some extent, and certainly *The Larry Sanders Show*, which may have had as realistic a portrayal of certain aspects of modern American Jewish life as I've ever seen on TV in the episode in which Hank Kingsley came out of the closet as a Jew to the horror of his network colleagues.

Despite such exceptions, it's amazing how much stereotyping still goes on in Hollywood. One thinks of the recent movie *Independence Day*, one of the biggest hits of all time. The Judd Hirsch character in that movie was unbelievable. He made Maurice Schwartz seem

like Gregory Peck. On television, there's *The Nanny*, which Larry Gelbart has referred to as the Jews' *Amos 'n' Andy*. I'm also one of the people who feels even a movie like *Schindler's List*, the signature treatment of the Holocaust both in movies and TV, to some extent shortchanges the Jewish component of history by minimizing the development and individuality of its Jewish characters, except for the somewhat stereotypical role played by Ben Kingsley.

There are no simple solutions to any of these issues. You think back to the '50s and you wonder, well, if Phil Silvers as Sergeant Bilko had been identified as a Jew, what would he be but this money-grubbing conniver one step from a Shylock? We'd lose all of the laughter from that wonderful show. It's extremely complicated, but I still find it a paradox in an industry with so many Jews working in it that Jews would be the one group that still seems somewhat less realistically presented and sometimes ignored. In many series, Jews just don't exist. This is not true of most other groups.

“ . . . Schindler's List, the signature treatment of the Holocaust both in movies and TV, to some extent shortchanges the Jewish component of history by minimizing the development and individuality of its Jewish characters.”

I'd like to bring up one other area that I feel is part of this syndrome. It doesn't really relate to the people in this room, but it does relate to the television industry: that's TV news. I've always found it strange that there has never really been a Jewish anchor. Jews, in terms of television personalities, are relegated to supporting character roles. There's always room for a Dan Schorr or a Maury Povich, but there is always, it seems, going to be a WASPy patriarch handing down the nightly news. The one exception, of course, was Barbara Walters, who did have a brief spell as an anchor on ABC with Harry Reasoner. But

she remains really the only major, top-rung Jewish network TV journalist delivering the news to the broadest American public, as far as I know. And while the whole issue may seem trivial—many anchors are just glorified news readers, after all—it still says something about our culture that Jews are not represented among a group that much of America regards as icons—whether Walter Cronkite in the past or Dan Rather, Peter Jennings, or Tom Brokaw, take your pick, now. I wonder where we've gotten when we've reached the point where the ultimate "get" in television news is Monica Lewinsky, and the person who got her is Barbara Walters. That's going to be the most awaited news event, presumably, of this year. But it seems to be a strange new kind of cultural ghetto of some sort, which I'll leave you to contemplate.

NOT "TOO JEWISH" FOR
PRIME TIME

Joyce Antler

(A PLURAL NATION)

SINCE ITS ORIGIN FIFTY years ago, television has become, in the words of one critic, “a master medium, influencing the form and content of other media while fostering cultural sensibilities of its own.”¹ No longer seen as only a “vast wasteland,” in the famous 1961 phrase of FCC chairman Newton Minow, television—whatever its faults—remains invaluable as a barometer of American culture; it “speaks to our collective worries and to our yearning to improve, redeem, or repair our individual or collective lives.”² Because of its immediacy in dealing with contemporary trends and values, moreover, it not only highlights and pinpoints cultural shifts, but sets much of the agenda for public discourse.³ The complexity of television programming is such that it is “simultaneously, a commodity, an art form, and an important ideological forum for public discourse about social issues and social change.”⁴

This is as true of entertainment television, the subject of this analysis, as it is of news, documentaries, movies, and other special programming. Entertainment television amuses and gives pleasure, to be sure, but at the same time it is a cultural forum that interprets social change and manages social beliefs.⁵ Popular television is such an integral and influential part of our lives, in fact, that it provides “in the

context of our private experience, a constant stream of social images that impinge upon our view of the world and our very definitions of who we are.”⁶ Some commentators argue that the genre of comedy, in particular, has taken up “some of the moral self-reflexivity that used to be in the ritual/religious sphere.”⁷ “Beneath the outward trappings of absurdity, fantasy and ribaldry,” one anthropologist notes, such television shows perform serious cultural work.⁸

Television images have especially played a formative role in shaping our sense of America as a plural nation, at once diverse and yet marked by a common consciousness. Film historian Neal Gabler, speaking at the Jews in Prime-Time Television Conference, suggests that television has been a far more open medium than film—the former promoting an “idealized pluralism” in which characters have the right to be ethnics, while the latter developed as a controlled medium promoting its founders’ vision of “idealized assimilation.”⁹ Judith and Jonathan Pearl, founders and directors of the Jewish Telemages Resource Center in New York, would agree, since they see Jews portrayed on TV as a “distinctive minority with a rich heritage, culture and religion,” shown across a wide range of character types and geographic settings. Within this multiplicity of portrayals, Jews are depicted in partnership with non-Jews in pursuit of the “common good”: “positive ties are fostered, knowledge is shared, and commonality among groups is stressed.”¹⁰

But other observers worry that precisely because of such idealized views of pluralism, television privileges the hegemonic, blocking out truly variegated, complex, and realistic patterns of ethnicity, race, class, gender, and religion. In this view, images of Jews are either rendered as harmlessly generic or are caricatured so excessively that they bear no resemblance to reality. For such reason, the *New York Times*’ Frank Rich, speaking at the Prime-Time Television Conference, voiced a darker view of pluralism than Gabler. According to Rich, television presents few models of real Jews; when they do appear they are shown as “almost too Jewish to a fault” and do not seem representative of Jewish life in America.¹¹ Rich’s view finds support among television critics like Michael Medved, who faults the negative imagery and

destructive stereotyping to which Jews have been subject.¹²

The representation of Jews on television has in fact varied considerably over the past half century, accounting in part for these divergent opinions. But different patterns of viewing and standards of comparison also shape the evaluations. Those who track every appearance of Jews on TV are more likely to credit the medium with diversified portrayals than those critics and general viewers who see a paucity of regular representations, or their exaggerated manner, as far more salient. Judgments may also be influenced by whether or not Jews appear as focal points of shows or merely as occasional characters (e.g., the "Jewish episode"). Whether or not viewers consider the appearance of comic, stock types of Jews as negative excess or, in the words of some critics, "affectionate self-parody" is another yardstick.¹³

"Television images have especially played a formative role in shaping our sense of America as a plural nation, at once diverse and yet marked by a common consciousness."

Beyond these distinctions lies the fact that television itself is a "contested ground of American culture," a site for the debates of the larger society.¹⁴ The "balancing act between diversity and unity" that characterizes American civic culture is also reflected in its TV shows, resulting in the fluctuating, often erratic, portrayal of most minorities.¹⁵ Jews, however, are distinctive on the television screen, in large part because of the great proportion of Jewish writers, directors, producers, and other personnel employed by the medium, whose point of view and experience often surfaces in unpredictable ways.¹⁶ While in some cases the incidence of Jews on the screen has matched the pattern of general minority representation, at many other times Jews have been much more visible than their numbers in the population would suggest. The dramatic escalation of Jewish themes and

characters in the 1990s, a time when the representation of other minorities did not improve, affords a prime example of the unique relationship of Jews to television. According to a 1998 Screen Actors Guild study conducted by Professor George Gerbner, for example, Asian-Americans, Hispanics, Native Americans, low-income citizens, the disabled, senior citizens, and women as a general category were seriously underrepresented on prime-time television. "The world of television seems to be frozen in a time warp of obsolete and damaging representations," the report concluded. While African Americans fared better than other nonwhite groups in terms of the number of television roles, the problematic nature of their representation was underscored in 1999 when the NAACP and other groups threatened a boycott if the "whitewashing" of actors in leading roles did not diminish.¹⁷ Under pressure, several networks have since agreed to increase minority representation in prime-time programming.

For Jews, however, the situation was different. On entertainment TV—both comedy ("the axis upon which broadcasting revolves," according to Gilbert Seldes) and regularly scheduled dramatic series, the television forms most accessible to viewers—images of Jews multiplied so rapidly that by the end of the 1990s, on certain channels, on certain evenings, Jewish characters virtually cascaded from the screen.¹⁸ These representations have indeed been more diverse than ever before, and they have been matched by unusually positive portrayals of Jewish themes and milieus. As opposed to the absence of most racial minorities on contemporary networks, Jews have been a formidable presence on recent television. The contrast can also be made to Hollywood films, where at least until very recently, Jewish characters were "virtually nonexistent."¹⁹ In Frank Rich's view, they appeared in cinema "less frequently than every other minority, whether religious, racial, or sexual."²⁰ *

But if Jews have a special relationship with television, that relationship is often problematic. Negative stereotyping has been a regular feature of TV's portrayal of Jews, and has often been so potent that it blocks the multiplicity of the new representations from viewers and critics alike. Indeed, media commentators commonly overstate the

prevalence of negative portrayals of Jews (e.g., from a recent, typical article in *Jewish Family & Life*: "Viewers will find only that the only overt Jews on TV these days are negative stereotypes").²¹ The issue of Jewish visibility is intensified by the fact that many TV Jews are not explicitly identified as such, and thus they remain invisible to viewers. Very often, the only Jews on a show to be immediately visible as Jews are portrayed negatively.

"... according to one observer, the images of Jewish women are as disturbingly stereotypical as those of blacks on the old Amos 'n' Andy shows."

Stereotyping and [in]visibility are not the only problems regarding the recent portrayal of Jews on the TV screen. The prevalence of interdating and intermarriage plots (to a point where they have become the paradigm for any romance involving a Jewish character); the virtual disappearance of Jewish families; the artificial limits on the number of Jewish characters on a single show, which might stigmatize it as "too Jewish"; and finally, the often tasteless representation of religious themes and characters are related issues. Connected to all of these matters is the very troubling portrayal of Jewish gender stereotypes, relating to both men and women. Jewish men appear much more frequently than Jewish women, yet while they are often negatively stereotyped, their portrayals are rarely as distasteful as those of many Jewish women; according to one observer, the images of Jewish women are as disturbingly stereotypical as those of blacks on the old *Amos 'n' Andy* shows.²² Indeed, Jewish women may be seen as the new ethnic "others," negative caricatures whose Jewish essence, magnified and openly mocked, contradicts the positive strides reflected in the wide acceptance Jewish characters and issues have generally received on the TV screen.

As participants the Jews in Prime-Time Television Conference emphasized, the issues inherent in depicting Jews on television are complex and multiple. In the first place, because of continuing assimilation into the American mainstream, for many Jewish Americans "the distinctive quality of being Jewish has all but disappeared," as one recent study of contemporary Jewry suggests; defining Jewish identity on the screen is thus inherently problematic.²³ "If you have a character who is a Jewish character but who doesn't exhibit one of those traits that people identify with some of the stereotypes," one executive asked, "then how would you know the character is Jewish?"²⁴ Given such difficulties, other participants wondered whether authentic ethnic representations could ever be imposed from "on top" rather than developing out of specific characters or situations that unfold over time.²⁵ They questioned, further, whether such an evolution was truly possible in situation comedy—the "narrative of our time," according to one critic, but in the words of another, merely "assembly line technology."²⁶

The pragmatic issue of costs and profits was also acknowledged at the conference as a critical influence on portrayals of ethnics and minorities. Executives observed that while networks attempted to attract the broadest possible audiences to quality programs and to portray a wide range of situations and characters, they remain caught within the constraints of a medium as much devoted to marketing as to entertainment and information. Television's relentless demand for high ratings necessarily influences choices about who is represented and how.²⁷

Whether future programming leads to greater openness and realism or to continued negative caricature thus depends not only on how comfortable writers, executives, and advertisers are with representing diversity but on whether they believe that more inclusive programming will attract audiences. The increasingly numerous and segmented markets created by the advent of cable and the multichannel system has offered some new opportunities for diverse programming, but competition has often resulted in less, rather than more, represen-

tative programming on the national level. For Jews, it is possible that the pendulum will again shift from a period of plenty to one of scarcity: with several of the most popular shows with leading Jewish characters now off-air, there seem to be few prime-time characters ready to take their place and fewer new Jewish-identified characters waiting in the wings.²⁸

“Television’s relentless demand for high ratings necessarily influences choices about who is represented and how.”

Perhaps this is because as much as it manifests changing social, economic, and demographic patterns, television also reflects the fantasies of its creators and the cultural myths they share with audiences. Thus in important ways TV remains a world of its own, its landscape shaped in considerable part by personal, idiosyncratic visions and the medium’s self-referential norms. It is also driven, in Todd Gitlin’s words, by a “dialectic of difference and sameness”—a quest for the off-beat to keep viewers interested and engaged competing with the pursuit of mass market sameness. Networks can thus be “cautious” and “pluralist” at the same time.²⁹

For this reason, future patterns are hard to predict. While the increasingly thorough integration of Jews in all aspects of American social life has led to the expansion and general improvement of Jews’ screen image, the trend has not been linear or without reversals; its continuation is not automatic.³⁰ Yet there is mounting evidence that television programming that is more diverse and less stereotyped will be welcomed by audiences that hunger for authentic and inventive shows. Greater diversity can serve the dual needs of building such audiences while responding to cultural desires and the changing patterns of social life. The development of programs that reflect the expe-

riences and expectations of Jews as well as of other ethnic minorities can have other, far-reaching effects. As Frank Rich writes, "A true diversity of American voices on TV" can "unify an infinitely various population whose many different constituencies, whether separated by geography or race or class or ethnicity, are too often ignorant of too many others."³¹

(SINCE THE GOLDBERGS)

THROUGHOUT ITS FIFTY-year history, television has “portrayed Jews of nearly every background, political leaning, economic status, age, sexual orientation, and profession,” as the Pearls emphasize.³² Yet the saliency of Jewish characters to shows, and the openness of their identities, have varied considerably.

One of the most popular shows of early network television centered on the Goldbergs, a Jewish family living in a working-class, ethnic neighborhood in the Bronx. *The Rise of the Goldbergs* had been one of the most popular serials of radio’s Golden Age, running from 1929 through 1946, and then from 1949 to 1950. After 1931, the show aired nightly, for some years carried by both the CBS and NBC networks. In 1949 the show, then known as *The Goldbergs*, made the transition to television, running through 1956.

Both the radio and TV show were enormously popular, attracting an enthusiastic mass audience. In Donald Weber’s view, the construction of this “Jewish American family as American family ... truly inspired its listeners and ... seems ... to have filled an affective void—the show literally *became* a surrogate family. . . .”³³ Molly, the warm and wise Jewish matriarch, became a popular media figure among all eth-

nic groups, perhaps because she combined a warmly maternal, homespun, flexible, parental style with intelligence, incisiveness, and boldness. To audiences, especially Jews, Molly Goldberg was not a fictional construction at all, but "so basically true a character" that, as one critic wrote, she ought to "become an enduring name in the national literature." She was the "prototype of the Jewish mother during the past twenty-five years."³⁴

According to television scholar David Marc, *The Goldbergs* was the only show on early TV "that called a Jew a Jew."³⁵ The characters' Jewishness was apparent in their accents and intonations, the social, neighborhood, and family context of the show, and in the regular attention (at least in the early years) given to Jewish holidays and other observances. In dozens of formulaic although crisply written programs, the show exposed important issues, including ethnic and religious tolerance. In fact, it was *because* of Molly's ethnicity (her difference) that viewers apparently loved her so much; her success as a character epitomized the American ideal of brotherly love and interreligious cooperation. Yet Gertrude Berg, who played Molly, never risked pushing the Jewishness of the show too far. She told one reporter, in fact, that she made a conscious decision not to bring in

anything that will bother people ... unions, politics, fund-raising, Zionism, socialism, intergroup relations. I don't stress them. After all, aren't such things second to daily living? The Goldbergs are not defensive about their Jewishness, or especially aware of it. I keep things average. I don't want to lose friends.³⁶

Thus this first show to call "a Jew a Jew" established a model by which Jewish characters, whatever their special ethnic distinctiveness, were neither "too Jewish" nor too different from anyone else.

During its so-called "Golden Age," television had many variety show hosts who were Jewish—e.g., Jack Benny, George Burns, Groucho Marx, Red Buttons, Phil Silvers, George Jessel, Morey Amsterdam, Sid Caesar, and "Mr. Television" himself, Milton Berle. Star of the variety show *Texaco Star Theater*, Berle drew in over 75 percent of the viewing audience in the program's first years (1948-1951), when its audience was almost exclusively urban. To the increasing number of

rural midwesterners who began to receive the show over the coaxial cable, however, Berle's abrasive style (not to mention his cross-dressing) seemed "objectionable," "loud," and "vulgar."³⁷ What some critics call Berle's "Jewish shtick" and "ethnic vaudeville humor" quickly lost their appeal; by 1956, the show was off the air. "Too fast, too urban, and too Jewish to be broadly acceptable," Berle's show could not meet the medium's requirement that its stars emanate from mainstream America or at least blend in with "heartland" values.³⁸ The demise of the program signified how quickly television had come to "disdain ethnic and racial differences, in both program content and the look of its performers."³⁹

“. . . this first show to call ‘a Jew a Jew’ established a model by which Jewish characters, were neither ‘too Jewish’ nor too different from anyone else.”

Caesar, like Berle, brought broad physical comedy and other characteristic Yiddishisms into his show (which was written by a stable of Jewish writers, including Mel Brooks, Woody Allen, Larry Gelbart, and Neil Simon). David Marc contrasts the "Jewing-out" of such "electronic toomlers" to the more subdued sitcom characters like Benny and Burns, who played themselves as fully American characters who celebrated Christmas, joined golf clubs, and seemed, in every way, non-Jewish.⁴⁰ Esther Romeyn and Jack Kugelmass agree, arguing that while most Jewish variety show comedians avoided explicitly Jewish impersonations, their portrayals were implicitly coded as Jewish—for example, Sid Caesar's gibberish-talking European refugee intellectual. Romeyn and Kugelmass suggest that TV's "Yiddishization of American humor" replicated the vaudeville model of gags, skits, and improvisations but also embodied a particular Jewish "outlook," portrayed through the "klutz" body language of a Jerry Lewis or Danny

Kaye or the scheming of a Buddy Hackett or Don Rickles.⁴¹

While Caesar and his fellow comedians may have succeeded for a time in projecting Yiddish "right into American living rooms," by the end of the decade the spontaneous, unpredictable humor of the variety show format gave way to the more tightly controlled situation comedy. Following Berle's eclipse, Caesar's *Your Show of Shows* went off the air in 1957. In the monolithic, increasingly domesticated, television America of the 1950s, even *The Goldbergs* could not retain their distinctive ethnic character. When in 1955 the television family moved from a working-class neighborhood in the Bronx to a suburb aptly named Haverville (city of the "haves," as David Marc observes), most of the show's explicit Jewish content had been erased; no longer were episodes routinely devoted to Jewish holidays like Passover or Yom Kippur. One program about Molly's favorite recipe was called "Molly's Fish," since "gefilte fish" seemed much too Jewish. Now members of the suburban, assimilated middle class, the Goldbergs had left their Bronx (Jewish) neighbors and their working-class roots behind them. Yet Molly's malapropisms, and her Yiddish accent, persisted, and she continued to sprinkle her language with well-known Yiddish words. In spite of the show's "ethnoreligious denial," under Molly's influence white-bread Haverville became in some ways "Berg-larized."⁴²

But with Molly's core Jewishness camouflaged in suburbia, the show lacked a vital center and did not survive; it was canceled in 1956. Displaced by homogeneous, suburban-based "WASPcoms," as David Marc calls them, the "Ethnicoms" of early network TV like *The Goldbergs* lost their audience. With the exception of Ricky Ricardo on *I Love Lucy*, only families of Northern European descent survived on the television screen.⁴³ (A brief 1960 revival of Berg's show was named *Mrs. G*; the letter stood for "Green," not "Goldberg."⁴⁴)

The domesticated sitcoms of TV's early years left no room for either diversity or irreverence. According to a 1991 study by the Center for Media and Public Affairs, in the 1960s family shows were "all-American ... carefully noncontroversial" and homogeneous; in that decade, for example, just one in 700 characters was Jewish.⁴⁵ Shimon Wincelberg, who wrote for television during this period, explained

that “back in the 60s, there was a sort of informal quota on television westerns, police shows, detective shows; they let you do one Jew a year ... one black a year ... The producers made you feel that they were doing you a great favor by throwing you a bone.”⁴⁶

In Todd Gitlin’s view, a great deal of “self-censoring” took place in early TV regarding the presentation of images of Jews, blacks, and other minorities. As far as Jews were concerned, network executives were driven by marketplace judgments as well as by “self-protectiveness against any real or conceivable anti-Semitic charge that Jews were too powerful in the media.” In the belief that much of their audience preferred its “Jews Gentile,” producers, advertisers, and suppliers kept any character or theme that might be “too Jewish” off the air.⁴⁷

No sitcom history better illustrates the wariness of TV executives about televising Jews than the highly acclaimed, Emmy Award-winning *Dick Van Dyke Show*, which ran on CBS from 1961 to 1966. Although comedian Carl Reiner had written the pilot for a show based on his own life as a New York TV writer (originally called *Head of the Family*), CBS bought it on the condition that he recast the lead with a less ethnic actor to make it more “accessible” to the general public. Dick Van Dyke was cast as the writer, Rob Petrie, while Reiner, who directed the show, was cast as his boss, Alan Brady, an Irishman. Although there was one Jewish character on the show, Buddy, played by Morey Amsterdam, it was not until the final season of the show that Buddy celebrated his long delayed bar mitzvah on network television.

The 1970s witnessed a substantial increase in ethnic shows on the air, especially those dealing with African Americans, a response to the more tolerant social climate of the period and the growing ethnic pride movement. By 1975, more than half of the top twenty shows involved major characters who were members of recognizable minority or ethnic groups—e.g., *Sanford and Son*, *The Jeffersons*, *Good Times*, *Chico and the Man*, *Hawaii Five-O*, *Columbo*, and *Rhoda*, which had a Jewish character in a leading role. In 1974-75, the peak year of this ethnic celebration, six out of the seven top television shows had leading minority characters. From “virtually denying minorities repre-

sentation on the air," television thus moved to a "seeming obsession" with them.⁴⁸ The extraordinary success of the 1977 miniseries *Roots*, which followed an African-American family from slavery to the present, perfectly captured the public's desire for programming that revealed in ethnic heritage; the next year came the miniseries *Holocaust*, which similarly attracted huge interest both in the United States and abroad. The first program to portray the massive horrors of the Holocaust, the show not only opened up the devastation of the Shoah to full public scrutiny but, in the words of Jonathan and Judith Pearl, "cemented the permission for Jews to be fully Jewish both on screen and off."⁴⁹

"Only nominally Jewish, 1970s TV characters did not raise issues of Jewish identity nor provide mainstream audiences with insights into Jewish themes or milieus."

In terms of comedy, the popular *Mary Tyler Moore Show*, which ran from 1970 to 1977, heralded another milestone for Jews, marking the first appearance of a Jewish woman in a leading role, post-Molly Goldberg. This was Rhoda Morgenstern, Mary's wisecracking loyal best friend, played by Valerie Harper. Vivacious, gutsy, and proud of being Jewish (if neurotically obsessed with her weight, appearance, and men), Rhoda fought against the constraints of her situation—whether her self-perceived unattractiveness, her envy of Mary's perkiness, or the meddling of her parents, who wanted her married off. In 1974, *Rhoda* premiered as a spin-off from the *Mary Tyler Moore Show*, costarring Julie Kavner as Rhoda's neurotic, whiny, and self-proclaimed unattractive younger sister Brenda, and Nancy Walker as Rhoda's pushy, possessive, and demanding mother, Ida. Although it was up against popular Monday night football, *Rhoda* won its time slot. In a mere eight weeks, Rhoda was married off to a non-Jew, Joe

Gerard, played by David Groh (50 million viewers were said to have watched the wedding). The program, however, made very little of Joe's ethnicity, nor—after a while—of the couple's intermarriage. Yet Rhoda seemed less appealing as a married woman than as a feisty, angst-ridden single one, and ratings plummeted. Hoping to raise them, writers had Rhoda separate from Joe in 1976; the following year they divorced.⁵⁰ By 1978, the show was off the air.

Another sitcom about an intermarried Jewish-Christian couple had an even briefer lifespan. *Bridget Loves Bernie*, a show about a Jewish son of a delicatessen owner in love with a blueblood Catholic daughter, debuted in the fall of 1972. It was an immediate hit, ranking fifth in the year-end Nielsen ratings. Nonetheless, as the only show at the time featuring a Jewish character in a leading role, *Bridget Loves Bernie* drew strong protests from Jewish and some Catholic groups who criticized what they considered its highly romanticized and oversimplified treatment of intermarriage. The program was canceled after a single year. CBS denied that it pulled the show because of the protests, instead citing falling ratings. Nonetheless, sandwiched between two huge hits—*All in the Family* and the *Mary Tyler Moore Show*—*Bridget Loves Bernie* still held on to a respectable sixth place in the ratings when it went off-air.⁵¹

By the mid-1970s, however, with minority representation on television growing exponentially, the number of shows with Jewish characters increased as well. One of the longest running of these was *Barney Miller* (1975-82) about a New York Jewish cop; his identity as a Jew, however, was never discussed in the workplace or made explicit in other ways.⁵² Only nominally Jewish, 1970s TV characters did not raise issues of Jewish identity nor provide mainstream audiences with insights into Jewish themes or milieus. Some—like Juan Epstein on *Welcome Back Kotter*, Buchanan High's only Puerto Rican Jew—were presented for comic effect.⁵³

Norman Lear's *All in the Family* was in many ways a more important historical marker because it brought issues involving anti-Semitism and racial prejudice into open view. Yet Jews were not featured on the show until relatively late in its run, when the name of the

show was changed to *Archie Bunker's Place* and Martin Balsam was added to the cast. Several important episodes showcased Jewish issues. In one episode, Archie helps Stephanie, a young girl he and Edith help raise after her Jewish mother is killed, celebrate her bat mitzvah; in another, he joined a group to fight synagogue vandalism after Stephanie's synagogue was attacked.⁵⁴

Television's new concern with minorities was short-lived, ending by the early 1980s; the numbers of shows with Jewish characters accordingly diminished. *Love Sydney* was canceled in 1983 after two seasons, while the four-part miniseries *Masada* drew the lowest ratings in modern TV history. From 1984 to 1987, not a single program in Nielsen's top twenty shows had even one regularly appearing identifiably Jewish character.⁵⁵

Two television events in the 1989 season seemed to point in contradictory directions. Jackie Mason's show, *Chicken Soup*, was canceled for the stated reason it was too marked as "East Coast urban ethnic" (critics might have cited its quality). Yet the sitcom *Anything but Love*, starring Richard Lewis, finished number 10 for the year. In that show, Lewis played a neurotic Jewish character he had perfected in stand-up comedy routines. The following year saw the debut of a sitcom showcasing the talents of still another stand-up comedian, Jerry Seinfeld. With the success of Seinfeld and other Jewish comedians who followed with their own shows, like Paul Reiser and Garry Shandling, the Jewish presence on TV solidified, and led to further experimentation.

(FORTY PRIME-TIME SHOWS)

I N RECENT YEARS, JEWISH characters have been especially well represented on prime-time television. In the 1996-97 season, for example, 20 percent of dramatic programming featured plausibly Jewish characters in leading or supporting roles: nine of approximately twenty shows on NBC (40 percent), had Jewish characters; CBS offered five of twenty-one, or 23 percent, with Jewish characters, while ABC had none.⁵⁶ Comedy shows also boasted numerous Jewish characters.

What is equally noteworthy is how well shows with Jewish characters fared on the air. During the 1996 season, for example, *Seinfeld* ranked no. 2; *The Single Guy* no. 6; *The Nanny* no. 17; *Mad About You* no. 37, while many other shows with Jewish characters also did well.⁵⁷ Yet, in 1989, NBC executive Brandon Tartikoff had dismissed the pilot for *Seinfeld* as "too Jewish." When given a second chance the following year, *Seinfeld* and Larry David, his coproducer, shied away from developing any specifically Jewish plots; Gregg Kavet, coproducer and writer on the show, comments that *Seinfeld* consciously avoided explicit Jewish identification from the very beginning. The show premiered in May 1990, and by January 1991 it was a smash hit, first in the national ratings. But with more than half a dozen Jewish writers

working on the show and growing confidence in the show's universal appeal, several episodes relating to Jews or Jewish themes were aired (Jerry's kosher girlfriend; the Jewish singles scene; the jittery *mohel*; the dentist who wants to be Jewish because he likes to tell Jewish jokes; Elaine's betrayal by a rabbi; Jerry and a girlfriend making out during *Schindler's List*; arguably even the famous "Soup Nazi" episode). Though several of the show's leading characters were "crypto-Jews" rather than openly identified ones (see below for discussion), audiences widely associated Seinfeld's comedy with his Jewishness. ("It is obvious that the quirky witticisms and neurotic, oddball idiosyncracies of its four singles living on Manhattan's Upper West Side were not too Jewish for America," concluded one of his Jewish writers.⁵⁸) Rabbi Harold Schulweis and other Jewish community representatives agreed, noting that when a Jerry Seinfeld could represent the average American, even with all their *mishugas*, Jews really had arrived in America. Abraham Foxman pointed to the "human, universal" appeal of the *Seinfeld* ensemble.⁵⁹

That identification with Jewishness was no longer to be avoided was also signaled in *Third Rock from the Sun*, a sitcom about four space aliens who arrive on Earth and assume human names, jobs, and identities. When faced with the choice of an ethnicity, the characters first tried out Italian and African American, then finally took the name "Solomon" from a moving truck and declared themselves Jewish. The show was a surprise hit in 1996, its debut year, finishing twenty-third in the ratings.

In fact, more than twenty dramas with Jewish characters appeared on prime-time television within recent years, including *A Year in the Life*, *Beverly Hills 90210*, *Brooklyn Bridge*, *Chicago Hope*, *Civil War*, *The Class of '96*, *The Commish*, *Hill Street Blues*, *Homicide*, *L.A. Law*, *Law and Order*, *Northern Exposure*, *Our House*, *Picket Fences*, *The Practice*, *The Pretender*, *St. Elsewhere*, *Sisters*, *thirtysomething*, *Trials of Rosie O'Neill*, and *The Wonder Years*. Comedies with Jewish characters were also plentiful: *Anything but Love*, *Caroline in the City*, *Cheers*, *Clueless*, *Conrad Bloom*, *Cybill*, *Frasier*, *Friends*, *Flying Blind*, *The Larry Sanders Show*, *Love and War*, *Mad About You*, *Murphy*

Brown, The Nanny, Ned & Stacey, Relativity, Seinfeld, The Single Guy, Suddenly Susan, and Will & Grace. The fact that Jewish characters have been written into more than forty prime-time shows—many of them the highest rated on the air—suggests that despite possible fears of losing audiences with “too Jewish” identifications, the trend toward marking Jewish characters on screen was well under way in the 1990s. A product of several factors, including the widespread and continuing acculturation of the Jewish population, new bursts of interest in Jewish religion and identity, and the increasing attraction of Jewish creative talent to the medium, the Jewish presence on television expanded significantly throughout the decade.

“When a Jerry Seinfeld could represent the average American, even with all their mishugas, Jews really had arrived in America.”

That Jews have appeared so regularly on television in recent years is also a product of a long-term shift in historical context. Discussing recent debates about cultural pluralism, historian David Hollinger observes that the “past quarter-century’s greater appreciation for a variety of kinds of ethnic connectedness” forms a stark contrast to the critique of ethnocentrism that shaped American culture in the middle decades of the century.⁶⁰ Standards of ethnic openness that flourished in the 1990s were not in place in the formative years of television.

The portrayal of Jewish characters on TV is noteworthy not only in terms of numbers but also because of diversity. Judith and Jonathan Pearl note that over time, Jews on television have been portrayed as “doctors, lawyers, Mossad agents, shopkeepers, police officers, criminals, soldiers, rabbis, business executives, politicians, Holocaust survivors, journalists and Nazi hunters.”⁶¹ They compare the earliest TV images of Jews, where the goal was to paint Jews “like everyone else,”

to today's TV images, which they feel are more likely to acknowledge difference.⁶² A similar view is taken by Robert and Linda Lichter and Stanley Rothman in their analysis of the portrayal of ethnicity on prime-time TV; these authors, however, are critical of the focus on pluralism and ethnic coexistence, which they think neglects serious racial and ethnic differences, including bigotry and intolerance.⁶³ Critic David Marc suggests that the two poles of assimilation and ethnic diversity in fact delineate the perpetual struggle to represent Jews on television, a struggle that he likens to the "tug of war" within the larger society.⁶⁴

While the Pearls believe that many aspects of the plentiful representations of Jews on television have been beneficial, other observers strongly disagree, suggesting that Jews on prime time—today as earlier—have been kept within carefully defined limits. In the words of the *New York Times*' television critic John O'Connor, they fulfill "familiar and comforting stereotypes." While Jewish characters appear on network TV much more regularly than in the past, agrees Michael Lerner of *Tikkun*, they never depict the fullness of Jewish life. To the extent that Jewishness itself becomes topical, it reveals an "empty culture."⁶⁵

(PROBLEMATICS)

DESPITE THE PROMINENCE of Jewish characters on television today, quite a number of shows downplay characters' identifications as Jews. The "J-word is never mentioned," comments one observer.⁶⁶ "When it comes to presenting traditional Jewish rituals and values on the small screen," notes another, "network executives seem to have been guided by a 'J-chip' mentality—hold the Judaism, please."⁶⁷

Seinfeld provides an excellent example. Some viewers insist that Elaine Benes, played by Julia Louis-Dreyfus (a descendant, in fact, of Captain Alfred Dreyfus) and modeled after comedienne Carol Leifer, a former writing partner of *Seinfeld*, both of whom are Jewish, is Jewish because she seems Jewish, although scripts have given more than a few clues that she clearly is not Jewish, including references to Elaine's sexy "shiksapower," which causes Jewish men to fall for her, and the fact that she has worn a cross. The character of George Costanza, played by Jason Alexander, and of George's parents, Frank and Estelle, played by Jerry Stiller and Estelle Harris, all three of whom are Jewish, also seem Jewish in affect, manners, appearance, and sensibility. For many viewers, episodes about the Costanzas' favorite rye bread and about their eating kasha clinched the question of their Jewishness, yet some

see Frank as written as Greek, while others see his son, George, as Italian.

Invisible Jewish Families

Even *Seinfeld* actors and creative and production teams disagree about the Jewishness of *Seinfeld* characters, especially George and his family. Writer Carol Leifer insists that the Costanzas are not Jewish, attributing any confusion to their status as New Yorkers.⁶⁸ But coproducer Gregg Kavet believes that "George Costanza, with an Italian name and all, is Jewish," because his mother was written as a Jewish character, even though her Jewishness was not explicitly revealed.⁶⁹ When she first started in her role as George's mother, actress Estelle Harris was confused, and went to the show's cocreator Larry David, who served as the model for George, for clarification. David replied elliptically, asking her why she cared whether or not the Costanzas were Jewish. Harris eventually came to believe that the vagueness of her character's ethnicity allowed everyone to relate to her. She is proud, she says, that Jews and non-Jews tell her that "you're just like my mother."⁷⁰

Nonetheless, according to Jerry Stiller, who plays George's father, the Costanzas are in fact a Jewish family "in a witness protection program."⁷¹ Stiller insists that his character is, in fact, Jewish because he is Jewish—"every time I play a role, it's a Jewish character, because I am Jewish." Jason Alexander agrees, declaring "George is Jewish" because "I'm Jewish."⁷² Producer Kavet explains that diversifying the main characters' religion made the show more interesting, but perhaps the fear of making the show "too Jewish" was equally determinant. On the part of many viewers, confusion reigns. Whatever their apparent identities, says one viewer, George and Elaine—"Neurotic. Obsessive. Compulsive. Insecure. Immensely human"—are still Jews.⁷³

David Marc believes that however the question of identity may be disguised, *Seinfeld* breaks new ground as a "Jewish" show. He disagrees with those who write off the program as simply being about self-hating Jews or barely identified "bagel and lox" ones. In Marc's view, the program shares more with the early Philip Roth than with

sitcoms like *The Goldbergs*, *Rhoda*, or the *Dick Van Dyke Show*:

Like Portnoy, Jerry lives out a dilemma that is simultaneously his deepest source of anxiety and his richest source of strength. He can do more than pass for a successful American since he is one, militantly bourgeois in attitude and bank account, freed of burdens of millennial suffering, ready to take on problems of sexual gratification, unchecked consumerism and dinner at good restaurants in an existential universe.

Yet at the same time, Jerry is "heir to the legacy of the Diaspora." His sense of humor, which allows him access to Gentile-style success, remains rooted in a "marginal point of view that grows out of exclusion"; Jerry is, in fact, "unexcludable without his Jewishness." *Seinfeld* thus creates his Jewishness out of an "elegantly constructed balance of American, Jew, and Jewish-American." Nonetheless, Marc argues that Jerry needs sidekick George to remind him of his Jewish identity; "hopelessly nebbishy," George is a schlemiel and a schlimazel by dint of his neuroses and physical traits.⁷⁴ Despite his name and phony "Italianness," George's Jewishness thus lies at the core of the entire show. That Jewishness (though of an implicit rather than explicit kind) stands at the core of a show that is widely recognized as "the signature TV smash hit of the decade" marks a fundamental shift in contemporary television.⁷⁵

According to historian Jeffrey Shandler, the masking of Jews on television has created "crypto-Jews"—characters who, "while nominally identified as having some other ethnicity or religion, are nonetheless regarded [by some viewers and even some creators] as Jews in disguise." In Shandler's view, such crypto-Jews are a sign of the "ethnic relativism" that marks much of contemporary American culture. Through such portraits, Jewish identity emerges not as "innate" but as "perform-ative," depicted through such character attributes as "being aggressive, neurotic, clever, or talkative."⁷⁶ Not only do actors widely recognized as Jewish, like Jason Alexander and Estelle Harris, play unmarked Jewish roles, but non-Jewish actors frequently use intonation, gesture, and accent to depict Jews on the screen.⁷⁷

Seinfeld, of course, is not the only recent show where several of

the characters' Jewishness is masked. The ethnicity of the characters on another leading prime-time show, *Friends*, created and produced by two Brandeis graduates, David Crane and Marta Kauffman, both of them Jews, is also oblique. Although the characters Ross and Monica Geller are presumably Jewish, the smart, funny, and insecure Ross (David Schwimmer) seems more Jewish than his china-doll-like sister Monica (Courteney Cox). According to David Crane, Ross is "half Jewish because Elliot Gould is his father, but Christina Picker (as Ross's mother) sure is not." If Monica is Jewish then what about Rachel Greene (Jennifer Aniston), Monica's childhood friend from Long Island? An early episode, "The Nose Job," referred to the fact that both girls were unattractive adolescents: then Rachel had a nose job, and Monica slimmed down. Now they are pert and fetching but, ironically, not at all Jewish-looking. When one reporter surveyed her friends to find out if they thought Rachel was Jewish, however, the response was "uniform confusion."⁷⁸ Producer Crane notes, however, that Rachel is Jewish because her father is played by Ron Leibman, an authentic ethnic like Gould. Yet the character's mother is played by the non-Jewish Marlo Thomas, making her a "half-and-half" like Monica and Ross.⁷⁹

"Jewish families have been much rarer on television than individual characters."

The Jewish nature of these characters is never clearly visible. As one commentator points out: "The observant viewer might catch a quick glimpse of a mezzuzah on the parents' front door, or Ross polishing a Chanukah menorah while his friends string Christmas decorations."⁸⁰ These indications, however, are irregular and they are merely clues. Ross, his sister, and her friend are usually indistinguishable from their Gentile friends. Even Ross is "unmarked" compared to the very Jewish Janice (see below). Elliot Gould argues that a deep

Jewish “value system” underlies the way Ross, his sister, and parents treat each other—“sense of community, family coming first, tradition, the love of charity”—and therefore that the show should be considered Jewish in its ethos. His argument, however, is not compelling.⁸¹ Had it been clear from the very beginning that both Ross *and* Rachel were Jewish, then those characters’ romantic liaison might have been an exciting example of an attractive Jewish-Jewish coupling.

The Jewishness of many other TV characters is apparent only in passing. An occasional reference to a Yiddish phrase, a mention of Hanukkah or bagels may be the only marker of a character’s Jewishness when it is not integral to character depiction, themes, or plots. For example, only a persistent viewer might realize that Richard Korinsky (Malcolm Gets), the lead character’s beau in one Monday night NBC sitcom of the late 1990s, *Caroline in the City*, is Jewish. His last name is a giveaway, but it is not frequently mentioned, and the actor himself, though portrayed as skittish and neurotic in opposition to Caroline’s fresh-faced openness, physically plays against the Jewish type. A 1998 Christmas episode had the show’s regulars visiting some sort of Santa-land donning seasonal costumes. Only the closing line of the episode, Caroline’s wishing Richard “Happy Hanukkah,” clued the viewer to his ethnicity.

Popular shows like *Mad About You* take a middle ground between identification and avoidance. Paul Buchman’s Jewishness is rarely if ever mentioned, but Reiser’s fairly heavy accent and mannerisms clearly indicate what his roots are. The show seldom focuses on Jewish themes, although guest appearances from Mel Brooks as Uncle Phil in several brilliant episodes—including one probing Phil’s immigrant background—underscore the family’s Jewishness.

Jewish families have been much rarer on television than individual characters. Some four and a half decades after *The Goldbergs* came Garry David Goldberg’s highly rated series *Brooklyn Bridge*, a nostalgic look at a Jewish family not in the Bronx but in 1950s Brooklyn. Goldberg has said that while he did the show to demonstrate “the power of Jewish life” and the strength of Jewish families, he also wanted to show that the “Jewishness, while it was so pervasive, was a very small part of

who we were day to day.... We were like every other family. The guys played ball, they got in fights. Some kids were good, some kids were bad. Some parents were smart, some weren't." Goldberg felt that it was crucial that the family be "one hundred percent Jewish": in their "specificity is the universality" that he believed was the "heart" of American family life. When viewers responded by telling him that the Jewish grandmother in the show, its "overriding presence," was "my grandma McClintock in Kansas," he was delighted.⁸²

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The network felt the show had not found its audience quickly enough, however, and it was canceled after a few seasons. There has been no Jewish family occupying the main stage of a sitcom or prime-time drama since. "Traditional Jewish families make Hollywood squeamish," notes one journalist.⁸³ "Jewish guys are funnier when we're single," adds a TV composer. "TV producers are worried that they're gonna lose their sense of humor when they get married, like Samson losing his strength when Delilah cut his hair."⁸⁴ Much as workplace colleagues and neighborhood friends have replaced the traditional family in contemporary society, so they have on television. "Add 'Jewish' into the [domestic] formula," observes another writer, "and any hope for a [family] program becomes a mirage."⁸⁵

Television executives may find Jewish families less appealing as sites for sitcom drama because they are presumed to be less open to situations of dramatic conflict than those with mixed families. The question is whether creative personnel and industry executives have searched adequately for opportunities to explore ethnic identities and themes in such settings that could tell meaningful, exciting stories

and/or provide occasion for laughter, even satire. Over time, in fact, some of the most successful shows have developed episodes or characters that are more explicitly Jewish than when they began. This can happen through plot lines that incorporate some display of ritual or cultural attitude that either marks the situation or character as Jewish or that explores conundrums of personal, religious, or ethnic identity with which the character might be grappling. For example, several highly praised episodes of the drama *Northern Exposure* deal with the lead character's deepening sense of himself as a Jew. In the show, Dr. Joel Fleischman (Rob Morrow), a young New York doctor uprooted to the small town of Cicely, Alaska, comes to grips with his Jewish background, and with Judaism, as he gropes to define himself as a stranger in town. Originally a "New York Jew who is not that Jewish," according to cowriter Robin Green, Fleischman reveals spiritual and moral growth as he defines himself anew. Nuanced treatments of Jewish identity are rarer, of course, in comedy sitcoms, but in some of these shows, occasional episodes have broken the mold of invisibility or implicit identification and dealt more openly and realistically with Jewish subjects.

Participants in the Jews in Prime-Time Television Conference suggested that the most honest portrayals of Jews on screen may develop from the "hearts and minds" of the characters.⁸⁶ By this, they suggest that such invented characters become real people who themselves control the direction of their growth and development. Sometimes input is provided by actors as well as by writers or producers and directors. David Kelley, for example, commented that he sometimes "weds the actor in with the character as time goes by." Noting that Fyvush Finkle, who played in Kelley's *Picket Fences*, would not work on Jewish holidays, Kelley asked Finkle if he wanted his TV character Douglas Wambaugh to be as adamant about his faith as Fyvush himself was. Finkle responded enthusiastically. Camryn Manheim, on Kelley's show *The Practice*, also "embraced the idea of her character being Jewish and we went from there," says Kelley. Similarly, writer Chris Carter notes that in his show *The X-Files*, the character Mulder was named after his mother who was Dutch, but David Duchovny,

who played him, decided to make the character Jewish. Here, too, the actor essentially decided that the character should be developed over time as Jewish.⁸⁷ In all of these cases, the process was evolutionary, highlighting the fact that television narratives are developed as a creative process with many different people involved. These instances reveal that sometimes the most successful programs with Jewish characters or themes rise organically, not necessarily deliberately, from these shows' premises.

Jewish Gender Stereotypes

Television, especially comedy shows, tends to depict both Jewish men and women in formulaic ways.⁸⁸ Some executives and creative personnel argue that stereotyped portrayals are de rigueur in situation comedies that must develop their characters quickly. Even in drama, the tendency is to "heighten, tighten, and simplify."⁸⁹ According to this view, the increasing visibility of exaggerated Jewish characters on television may in fact be cause to celebrate. "It is a healthy development" when ethnic shows are considered saleable, says New York University media critic Neil Postman.⁹⁰

Yet the gender gap in the portrayal of Jewish men and Jewish women is cause for deep concern. Although they are often seen as "neurotic, whining about their relationship problems, writers' blocks, kvetching about their parents and analyzing their struggles with commitment," Jewish men usually appear as sympathetic, caring, and sensitive, often with a wry sense of humor. An example is the character Miles Silverberg (played by Grant Shaud) in *Murphy Brown*, the TV producer with a persecution complex who whines his way through many a script but does get the girl he's after. Despite their "annoying qualities," says one writer about such characters, underneath Jewish men are "mensches."⁹¹ "We might not find the common media stereotype of glib, verbal, insecure, and neurotic [male] Jews to be especially flattering," agrees Michael Medved, "but the writers and directors who employ that stereotype unquestionably intend for audiences to react with sympathy and affection."⁹²

Other examples abound, including such nice Jewish doctors as Dr. Joel Fleischman (Rob Morrow) of *Northern Exposure*, Dr. Wayne Fiscus (Howie Mandel) of *St. Elsewhere*, and Adam Arkin and Mandy Patinkin's neurotic surgeons on *Chicago Hope*; such nice Jewish lawyers as public defender Ben Meyer (Ron Rifkin) in *The Trials of Rosie O'Neill*, Eli Levinson (Alan Rosenberg) in *Civil Wars*, and Stuart Markowitz (Michael Tucker) in *L.A. Law*. There are also detectives and investigators, among them Lenny Briscoe (Jerry Ohrbach) and Adam Schiff (Steven Hill) in *Law and Order*, Lieut. John Munch (Richard Belzer) in *Homicide*, and Jeffrey (Michael T. Weiss) in *The Pretender*. Other male Jewish characters in dramas include Michael Steadman (Ken Olin) in *thirtysomething*, Marshall Brightman (Joshua Rifkind) in *Marshall Chronicles*, Jim Eisenberg (Alan Arkin) in *A Year in the Life*, Sidney Shorr (Tony Randall) in a series of that name, and Joe Kaplan (Gerald O'Loughlin) in *Our House*. The many comedies with sympathetic Jewish male figures include *Seinfeld*, *Friends*, *Mad About You*, *Caroline in the City*, *Cybill*, *Murphy Brown*, *The Single Guy*, *Chicken Soup*, *Almost Perfect*, *Anything but Love*, *Men Behaving Badly*, and *Conrad Bloom*.

“Although they are often seen as ‘neurotic, whining . . . kvetching . . .’ Jewish men usually appear as sympathetic, caring, and sensitive, often with a wry sense of humor.”

More often than not, Jewish men on TV are brainy and sharp-witted; however, they can also be clumsy and awkward, both socially and physically. Even the appealing Ross on *Friends* is a wimp, and *Seinfeld's* pseudo-Jewish George, schlemiel extraordinaire, is the show's perennial loser. The stock type is easy to call up: a much-talked-about show on Fox network's fall 1999 lineup, *Action!*, which delivered a devastating critique of Hollywood itself, offered such a

character in its premiere show, a writer named Alan Rafkin (Jarrad Paul), whom the tough lead character, producer Peter Dragon (Jay Mohr), hires by mistake. ("You mean we spent a quarter of a million dollars and we got the wrong Jew!" he bellows.) Nebbishy and meek, Rafkin is a misfit among the hip studio crowd; he can't even get an invitation to his boss's party. At least in its opening sequences, this show presents the Jewish male—even in a Hollywood milieu that Jews are supposed to dominate—as the ultimate outsider.⁹³

Writing of similar television portrayals of Jewish masculinity in recent years, Maurice Berger draws attention to "ubiquitous stereotypes"—"the passive or subordinated schlemiel, the neurotic, the inferred [assimilated, or cryptic] Jew, and the feminized Jew." He sees Jewish men most often depicted as "asexual and socially inadequate"; even if professionally successful, good-looking, or powerful, they "endlessly kvetch," like the characters Joel Fleischman on *Northern Exposure* and Miles Silverberg on *Murphy Brown*. In short, although they are "generally attractive and sweet—the quintessential nice Jewish boy," such types remain "nerds," "nebbishes," and "wimpy schlemiels" who must be validated by Gentile wives or girlfriends. Such pairing underscores the Jewish subject's marginal status while ostensibly making him less of a minority. Another consequence is to render the Jewish male unmanly, passive, and ultimately subordinate. His masculinity does not roar; it is voiced instead as "the quiet peeps of a mouse."⁹⁴

In Berger's view, these stereotypes of "social obedience" resemble those of other minority men whose on-screen weaknesses assuage fears of the dominant culture. At the same time, they reprise nineteenth- and twentieth-century cultural portrayals of effeminate Jewish men. In earlier times as today, such images responded to perceptions that the general public cannot tolerate full-blooded males who may be "too Jewish" while also playing to internalized anti-Semitism.⁹⁵

Jewish women are portrayed on screen much more rarely—but more cruelly—than men. Other than the women in *Brooklyn Bridge*, the family-centered drama that featured several Jewish women characters, Jewish female characters on television dramas in the last decade include the half-Jewish Andrea Zuckerman, played by Cabrielle

Cartens in *Beverly Hills 90210*; Theresa Saldana, portraying Rachel Scali, the wife in *The Commish*; Julianne Phillips as the convert Frankie Margolis in *Sisters*; Rhonda Roth, played by Lisa Epstein, in the short-lived *Relativity*, and Claudia Christian, playing the Russian space commander Susan Ivanova, in the science fiction show *Babylon 5*. In comedies, there are Lilith (Bebe Neuwirth) in *Cheers* and *Frasier*; Janice (Maggie Wheeler), Rachel (Jennifer Aniston), and Monica (Courteney Cox) in *Friends*; Cher (Rachel Blanchard) in *Clueless*; Fran, her mother Sylvia, and grandmother Yetta (Fran Drescher, Renee Taylor, and Anne Guilbert) in *The Nanny*; Vicki Rubenstein (Kathy Griffiths) in *Suddenly Susan*, and Stacey in *Ned & Stacey* and Grace in *Will & Grace*, both played by Debra Messing.

“When young Jewish women are on screen, they often fit the model of the spoiled Jewish princess looking for bargains and a man, preferably a wealthy doctor to take care of them . . . or they are frumpy and unattractive . . . or comically wisecracking and brash.”

Although the Pearls believe that most Jewish women on television have been “proud, heroic, and accomplished characters,” they have also been depicted as loud, vulgar, spoiled, unattractive and unsexy; frequently they appear as caricatures, usually as disagreeable ones, rather than characters.⁹⁶ When young Jewish women are on screen, they often fit the model of the spoiled Jewish princess looking for bargains and a man, preferably a wealthy doctor to take care of them (e.g., Fran Fine on *The Nanny*), or they are frumpy and unattractive (Fran on *Mad About You*, Rhoda on *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, Brenda on *Rhoda*), or comically wisecracking and brash (Vicki on *Suddenly Susan*). Older women are modeled after the tired stereotypes of possessive, manipulating Jewish mothers (the mothers on

Rhoda, Mad About You, Seinfeld, The Nanny).⁹⁷ In Maurice Berger's view, such mothers appear as "controlling and hypercritical monsters."⁹⁸

Although Jewish-princess and Jewish-mother jokes make for easy, quick laughs, such humor is cruel and upsetting to Jewish women, lessening self-esteem, particularly for younger women, who especially rely on the media for their role models, while shaping male attitudes toward Jewish women in negative ways. Those non-Jews with little acquaintance with Jewish women tend to accept the stereotypes as real. The negative effect such portrayals have on audiences has been suggested by the Morning Star Commission, a group of thirty top Los Angeles television and film professionals organized by Hadassah Southern California that has explored the depiction of Jewish women in the media. Focus groups of Jewish women created by the commission reported that they saw Jewish women on TV as "pushy, controlling, selfish, unattractive, materialistic, high-maintenance, shallow, domineering"; they were "cheap bargain hunters" who "nagged their husbands and spend all their time cooking or shopping." (Fran Drescher's character was cited most often as fitting these negative attributes and perpetuating stereotypes.) The commission found that non-Jewish women held equally disturbing images of Jewish women on TV—overweight and big-nosed, sharp-tongued and arrogant, scolds and henpeckers. Jewish men who were surveyed had only one positive image of a Jewish woman on television—the tall, blonde Dharma Finkelstein (played by Jenna Elfman) who was cited because of her "non-Jewish appearance." And despite the relatively more positive view of Jewish men in contrast to Jewish women, the commission also found that Jewish women saw the Jewish male on television as a "wuss," "henpecked," "nerdy," "a mama's boy" who is unattractive and unathletic.⁹⁹

Joan Hyler, chair of the Morning Star Commission, was "profoundly shaken" by the survey. She sees the harsh portrayals of Jewish women as part of a larger trend on television "to put down women in order to sell product and get higher numbers"; "we are at the end of the interesting, complex woman on TV," Hyler believes.¹⁰⁰ Another

explanation comes from television critic Michael Medved, who attributes the pervasiveness of negative stereotypes of Jewish women to the projections of male executives; with such caricatures, they can “handle their own images affirmatively and fondly on screen, while at the same time they provide abysmal treatment of the cinematic reflections of their mothers, sisters, and daughters.” Medved also wonders why “glamorous and sexy actresses of Jewish or partially Jewish background”—for example, Ellen Barkin, Winona Ryder, Barbara Hershey, Alicia Silverstone, and Debra Winger—almost never play Jewish characters. “Who can blame the Jewish male characters for choosing gorgeous or elegant shikshas as their media mates?” he asks.¹⁰¹

While some television executives claim that there is no problem because stereotyped portraits of Jews merely reflect certain “real types,” or that the sitcom formula requires comic exaggerations, the findings of the Morning Star Commission underscore how deleterious these exaggerations have been to the viewing public—men and women, Jews and non-Jews alike. The underrepresentation of Jewish women—and their virtual invisibility as attractive, intelligent, sensitive, caring, sexual persons—combined with the marking of Jewish women, when they do appear, in negative ways—unattractive, manipulative, materialistic, carping, competitive—results in the association of all Jewish women with negative traits. In their excesses and vulgarities, Jewish women are drawn as different—both from others of their gender and from Jewish men.¹⁰²

Is *The Nanny* Good for the Jews?

The Nanny, a show about a thirtysomething Queens-born former salesgirl who finds a position as nanny to three children of a British theatrical producer, debuted in 1993.¹⁰³ Written and produced by Fran Drescher, who plays the title character, and her ex-husband Peter Marc Jacobson, the show became an unexpected hit and was often at the top of the Nielsen charts. While Jewishness is not essential to the plot, which requires only that the uneducated, lower-class Fran winds up teaching her social betters, aspects of the character’s Jewish back-

ground are featured in most episodes. From the nasal whine, to Yiddish words (a Nanny Web page includes a Yiddish glossary), to the nanny's Jewish female desires—like getting married, preferably to a nice Jewish doctor—and certainly, shopping (“My first words,” says the nanny, “were can I take it back if I wore it?”), mannerisms that are identified as Jewish along with Jewish princess stereotypes fill the air. The contrast—the key to the show's slim plot device—is between the nanny's authenticity, however coarse and ostentatious, which is a product of her ethnic, supposedly lower-class origins, and the sterility of the British upper class and their hangers-on.

The Nanny has received a great deal of critical comment—much of it negative. Typical are those from the Jewish press, which see Drescher's character as a “princessy, irritating, Jewish woman,” a “whiny, manipulative, clothes-horse hunting rich (non-Jewish) men,” a “flashy, materialistic, and champion whiner.”¹⁰⁴ With *The Nanny*, comments one source, “the woman of valor has become the woman of velour,” one who “loves shopping, gabbing, whining, polishing her nails at every moment, spouting ‘Oy!’ after every sentence, searching for a rich husband, and putting plastic seat covers on the furniture.”¹⁰⁵

How an exaggerated Jewishness provides the central image and dramatic device of the show is exemplified in an episode aired in April 1996, on which the nanny is dating the young cantor of her mother's synagogue. When the star of Mr. Sheffield's forthcoming Broadway musical falls ill, he taps the cantor to play the lead. “God has sent us a nice Jewish boy,” Mr. Sheffield intones. But Fran's mother Sylvia (played by Renée Taylor) is deeply agitated that no one in her temple will talk to her since they blame her for the loss of their cantor. Sylvia threatens her daughter that she will get even: “our God is not a merciful God,” she warns. With that, locusts appear and there is lightning and thunder. Overlooking the disturbances, Fran's eye falls on an advertising circular on the hallway table. “Oh my God, I missed the Loehman's yearly clearance,” she wails. “God, why are you doing this to me?”

In the final scene of the episode, Fran and her mother, dressed in pastel miniskirted suits, enter their temple and take seats in the last

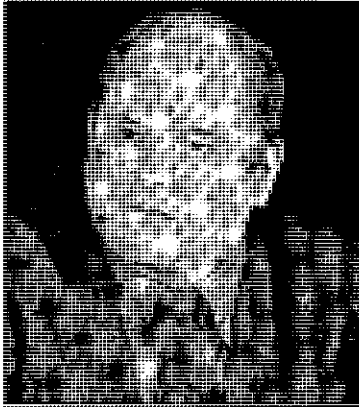
The Jews in Prime-Time Television Conference

Los Angeles, January 1999



L. to r.: Norman Lear, Gary David Goldberg, David E. Kelley, and Arthur Miller

Jason Alexander



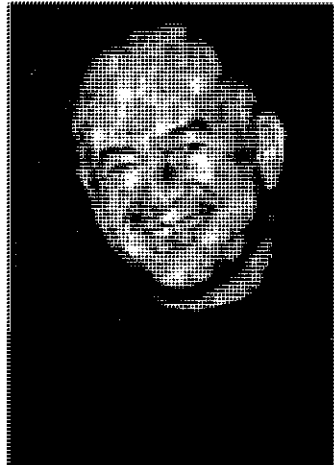
Neal Gabler



Chris Carter



Gary David Goldberg



Jamie Kellner

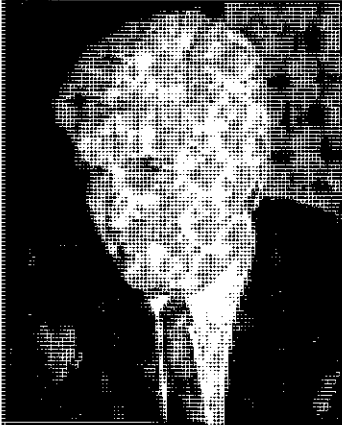


David E. Kelley



Norman Lear

Kerry McCluggage



Leslie Moonves

Greg Meidel



Don Ohlmeyer



Jeff Sagansky

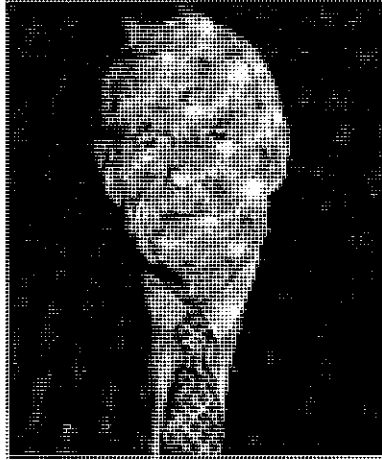


Frank Rich

Lucie Salhany



Grant Tinker



Jay Sanderson



Dawn Tarnofsky



Dean Valentine

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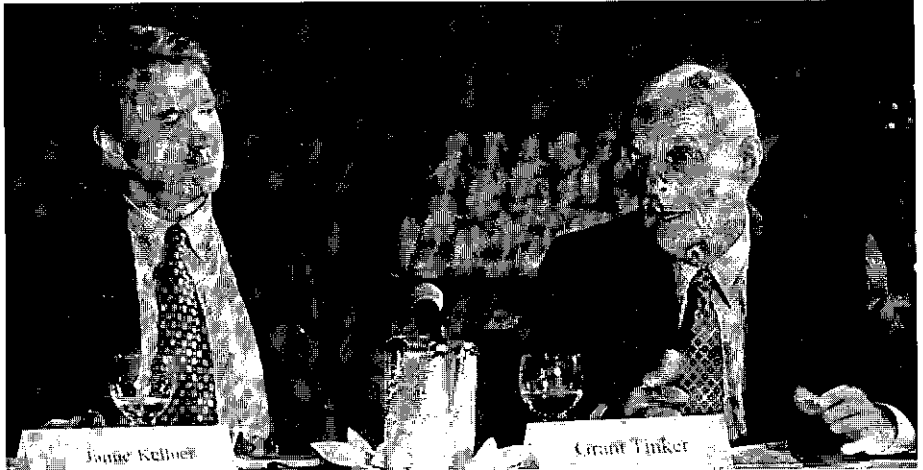


Joyce Antler



Bruce Ramer

Jamie Kellner and Grant Tinker



Jason Alexander and Jeff Sagansky

row. "We've been exiled to Siberia," Fran moans as her mother takes out a ham-and-cheese sandwich. "At temple?" Fran asks incredulously. "Nobody can see us here," Sylvia replies. "I can [even] throw a luau." Fran's discomfort increases when she sees her friend Debby, proudly sporting an engagement ring, seated a few rows ahead. Envious, she asks what she ever did to God to deserve such neglect. Remembering that she scammed \$500 from an airline, Fran goes up to the rabbi to contribute the airline's check to the temple. Immediately her luck changes. Debby is overheard in a dispute with her fiancé and returns the ring, while another congregant tells Sylvia that she can be first for the front row seats she no longer needs for the High Holidays. Thankful, Fran and her mother bow their heads: "Find her a doctor," the mother prays. "Find me a doctor," Fran says simultaneously.

Here, not only Jewishness, but Judaism as a religion is portrayed stereotypically and disrespectfully. The Jewish God is vengeful, the synagogue is a place for lavish and competitive display, and prayer itself is merely a means for special pleading regarding dating and marriage. The violation of religious norms apparent in eating a sandwich during a service (the running joke has Mrs. Fine an out-of-control eater at all times) is exaggerated by having the sandwich consist of a food that observant Jews strictly avoid; even nonobservant Jews, which presumably the Fines are, might well balk at taking pork into the sanctuary.

"Here, not only Jewishness, but Judaism as a religion is portrayed stereotypically and disrespectfully."

On several other occasions, the program has showcased Jewish customs; after Fran marries Maxwell, a Hanukkah episode finds Maxwell experiencing a "miracle" when his gasoline lasts longer than expected, sending him home to help Fran celebrate the holiday. On

"The Passed-Over Story," Fran gives the housekeeper tips that include prohibited foods. (Fran then rushes out when she hears that Barbra Streisand will be at the airport: "It's the miracle of Passover," she shouts. "The Messiah is coming!") On "The Kibbutz Story," Fran remembers her youthful experiences visiting a kibbutz in Israel.¹⁰⁶

But episodes with Jewish settings are exceptions. For the most part, *The Nanny's* Jewishness lies in her inflection, her whine, her Yiddishisms, her obsession with shopping and marriage, and her Jewish family. Like Fran, they are eccentrics, whether her gaudily overdressed mother or her chain-smoking Grandma Yetta. And like Fran, they are without taste and refinement, even without manners, as in "A Fine Family Feud," when Fran's Aunt Frieda (played by Lainie Kazan) and her sister, Fran's mother, carry on a long-standing feud by throwing cream pies down each other's bare bosoms at a sweet sixteen party in a nightclub.

"The nanny usually outsmarts her dramatic antagonists, because of her innate shrewdness, a genuine concern for others, and the folk wisdom apparently imparted from her heritage."

The "princess" nature of the nanny's identity is revealed on another show when Fran temporarily has amnesia. Despite her family's ministrations, she cannot remember who she is nor identify pictures of her family in an album. When, however, her mother mentions she must leave to go to Cousin Rose's wedding, Fran has sudden recall. "Rose, the Nose?" she asks incredulously. "Rose is getting married before I am?" When Fran's mother, delighted at Fran's apparent recovery, tests Fran's memory, she asks, in sing-song voice, "How much is that sweater in Macy's window?" Fran joins in immediately, "Who cares, because it will be in Loehman's tomorrow." In an instant, then, Fran recovers herself with three spurs to her identity: the Jewish

cousin with a big nose; her own continuing failure to trap a husband; and bargain shopping, particularly at Loehman's. These stereotypes constitute the nanny's true self.

Yet some media-watchers defend the caricature, singling out the positive aspects of the portrayal and the humorous elements in the exaggerated prototype.¹⁰⁷ Robin Cembalest argues in *The Forward* that *The Nanny* is "not merely rehashing stereotypes, but questioning them." In her view, the character's big hair, miniskirts, and pronounced accent indicate a hidden "conceptual twist" behind the show that subverts "conventional assumptions." Cembalest focuses mainly on the character's sexual appeal, seeing Drescher as the only reigning Jewish actress on television "with the chutzpah to celebrate her ethnic 'otherness.'" The result, says Cembalest, is to reenforce Jewish "self-esteem" rather than animate the usual "self-hatred" of Jewish performers.¹⁰⁸

Others single out the nanny's honesty, warmth, and cleverness. Not infrequently resorting to manipulation, like her model Lucille Ball in *I Love Lucy*, Fran Drescher as the nanny usually outsmarts her dramatic antagonists, whoever they may be, because of her innate shrewdness, a genuine concern for others, and the folk wisdom apparently imparted from her heritage. The Pearls find the nanny "warm, resourceful, giving, problem-solving, and peace making." They gave Drescher a Jewish Televimage Award, with the citation noting that "despite periodically presenting unflattering depictions ... her character reveals a woman of strength, compassion and unashamed Jewish identity who always saves the day with her cleverness, good heart and humor and insights into Jewish nature."¹⁰⁹ Drescher defended herself vigorously after a complaint from a viewer in a letter to the *L.A. Times*, arguing along similar lines that her character "displays such a great capacity for love and wisdom, and has such wholesome values and good instincts as a Jew, a woman, and above all, a human being" that she found it "infuriating" to regard "with negativity" a character "who is clearly carving inroads for other Jews."¹¹⁰ In Drescher's view, her character upset the "the fearful post-World War II mentality that a good Jew is an assimilated one." "My character does not try to assim-

late to a WASP ethnic in appearance or speech," she insists. "I speak Yiddish and celebrate the Jewish holidays" on the show.¹¹¹

In their book on Jewish comedy, Esther Romeyn and Jack Kugelmass argue that while ethnic humor may portray ethnic types "in carnivalesque terms—as vulgar, loud, given to excess, or unsophisticated," such constructions nonetheless can turn negative stereotypes into "positive symbols of collective identity." In the case of *The Nanny*, they interpret excess not as a "mark of shame," but as an "icon of identity" and "badge of pride"; "post-modern," "post-feminist," and "post-ethnic," *The Nanny's* excess can be seen as a version of Jewish "camp."¹¹² June Sochen presents the case more generally, arguing that several generations of bawdy Jewish women performers, including Sophie Tucker, Joan Rivers, and Bette Midler, by behaving in "decidedly unladylike ways," stretched the boundaries of respectability. Yet by mocking social values, they provoked audiences to question traditional roles and sometimes to think in new ways.¹¹³ Sochen doesn't name *The Nanny*, but like the reforming entertainers that she does discuss, Drescher thumbs her nose at propriety, flaunting her sexuality and laughing at her own JAP desires. The resulting humor does depend on stereotypes, but if viewed as farce, it can be seen as ridiculing contemporary middle-class notions of female worth.

Of course, many observers do not see *The Nanny* either as farce or as "fairy tale," as one executive at the Jews in Prime-Time Television Conference described the show. Another participant in the conference reported that based on his own experience, the program was in fact a "documentary ... a living, real thing and no stereotype."¹¹⁴ Whether or not viewers sees the show as a teinplate of the real world or an ironic, satiric comment on it surely influences whether the Drescher character is judged as positive or negative.

Beyond this divergence lies a conflict about the nature of stereotypes and their role in Jewish humor and perhaps about the nature of comedy itself. Riv-Ellen Prell, author of a scholarly treatment of Jewish self-representations, is much less forgiving of stereotypes than Cembalest, the Pearls, or Romeyn and Kugelmass. For Prell, excess, in the shape of vulgar displays and consumerism, has the effect of mark-

ing the body of the Jewish woman as ultimately Other, "not assimilable to American life." While she does not mention *The Nanny* specifically, Prell believes that stereotypes like Drescher's character "assert the Jew in the woman and the woman in the Jew as pariah."¹⁵ On the television screen as in misogynist fiction, films, jokebooks, and other popular media, they become avatars of both antiwoman and anti-Jewish sentiment.

Looking for a Few Good Women

Some Jewish female characters on recent television shows have been portrayed less stereotypically but as more ambiguously Jewish than the nanny. Melissa, Michael Steadman's cousin in the now defunct *thirtysomething*, played by Melanie Mayron, retained a modicum of Jewishness, although at the cost of usually being shown as too neurotic and unstable to have viable relationships. Another exception was the character Andrea Zuckerman in *Beverly Hills 90210*; Jewish looking, although played by a non-Jewish actress, the somewhat nerdy Andrea is respected by her teenage friends for her intelligence. In one episode, when she pledges for a sorority that doesn't admit Jews and is warned by the president to take off her Jewish star and hide her ethnicity, Andrea withdraws in disgust, convincing the president, who has denied her own Jewishness, to own up to who she really is. Eventually Andrea marries a Chicano and has a baby; she accompanies him when he goes east to Yale, where he has been accepted as an undergraduate.

Like *Seinfeld's* Elaine, played by Julia Louis-Dreyfus, other sitcom women are ambiguously ethnic, as for example the character of Dr. Lilith Sternin, the psychiatrist who is the smart but emotionally repressed ex-wife of Frasier, who appears occasionally on the show of the same name (a carryover from the long-running hit *Cheers*). Not until the birth of the son, and TV references to his *bris* (not shown on the episode), did viewers in fact realize that Lilith was Jewish.

On *Friends*, there is nothing inherently Jewish about the beautiful and vivacious Monica, Ross's sister. Conversely, Janice (Maggie Wheeler), on the same show, the onetime girlfriend of Chandler Bing,

another of the friends, provides a more stereotypical portrait of a Jewish woman, with her grating voice, generally obnoxious manners, and material concerns; her annoying laugh mirrors that of Fran Drescher on *The Nanny*. In one episode, Chandler tries to lose Janice, even buying a plane ticket to Yemen to escape her. Janice, horribly overdressed in a cheap leopard-skin outfit (a frequent JAP costume that the nanny often wears) and with her usual nasal whine, is shown on the same screen with the beautiful, ethnically unmarked, not-really-Jewish Monica and Rachel. The contrast could not be more revealing. Monica and Rachel (both refugees from Long Island who apparently renounced their JAP pasts) are sought by many men; Jewish Janice is the girl to date and dump. How could Jews and non-Jews alike fail to get the message that the Jewish woman is essentially unlovable?

A more positive image is that of the sister of Paul Buchman, the character played by Paul Reiser on the comedy show *Mad About You*. Yet the sister's proud lesbianism is more openly flouted than her Jewishness. Like Ross's sister Monica, Paul's sister is Jewish primarily in relation to the demeanor and manners of the main star rather than her own inherent characteristics. While Paul's parents are concerned about their daughter's lesbianism, furthermore, they apparently are not bothered by their son's choice of a non-Jewish wife. Jewishness as an identity is not at stake for the sisters in either of these shows.

“How could Jews and non-Jews alike fail to get the message that the Jewish woman is essentially unlovable?”

One of the most interesting of the new sitcom characters was Vicki, the tough-talking sidekick to Brooke Shield on *Suddenly Susan*, as Rhoda was to Mary. A likable colleague to her office mates, Vicki is a comic persona of the Bette Midler type—assertive, full of jokes, often at her own expense, but brash and bawdy. One critic called her

“the best slutty firecracker in sitcomland.”¹¹⁶ During the 1997-98 season, her persona, and her lines, were toned down somewhat, and she hooked up with a handsome young rabbi, Ben (Albie Selznick), whom she married in one of the season’s final episodes.

Drama series have had a number of well-rounded Jewish female characters, although far fewer than male characters in similar shows. Among the most notable is Sophie Berger, the matriarch of the *Brooklyn Bridge* television family, played by Marion Ross. Sophie’s wisdom and humor propelled the family through its periodic crises and was the center of family life. Sophie’s bohemian daughter, Sylvia, an aspiring poet (played by Carol Kane), was also a positive character. In one moving episode, “Sylvia’s Condition,” which takes place around the family’s celebration of Succoth—a rare event on network TV—Sylvia tells her assembled family of her impending divorce from her accountant husband who she finds boring and suffocating. Although Sophie criticizes Sylvia for wanting her own happiness, Sylvia’s sister, Phyllis, the mother of the two boys who are the central figures in the show, supports her right to be an individual. The episode deftly unites Jewish and wider family themes, including the roles and relationships of men and women, and shows two generations of Jewish women as strong, caring, and assertive.

Melissa on *thirtysomething* also offered a portrait of a young Jewish woman as both a caring family member and determined individualist. In an episode called “Be a Good Girl,” Melissa, a hip, successful freelance photographer, is forced to come to terms with her family’s expectations of her. When her tough but beloved nana, played brilliantly by Sylvia Sidney, decides to leave Melissa the clothing store she has operated for decades and which supported the family “to carry [my] name into the future,” Melissa must stand up for her own desires. The episode offers a compelling examination of that perennial conflict—a woman’s independence vs. family ties—which features realistic, moving, and complex portraits of three generations of Jewish women.

Another welcome character was that of college student Jessica Cohen on the short-lived but well-reviewed *Class of 96*. An intelligent,

popular, and confident young woman, the character was an identified Jewish woman who confronted JAP jokes on campus with wit and determination. There was also Susan Ivanova (Claudia Christian), the tough but lovely spaceship commander on the science fiction series *Babylon 5* set in the 2250s. Although the show gives her at least one male ex-lover, the commander is also shown as a lesbian. Her independence of mind, spirit, and sexuality attracted an admiring following during the show's four seasons. On daytime television, Nora Gannon (Hillary B. Smith) is a Jewish character, married to an African American who, in a 1996 episode of *One Life to Live*, invited friends and neighbors for Rosh Hashanah dinner. Finally, there is the character of Willow (Alyson Hannigan), on *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*; when several of her friends were discussing Christmas, Willow, a seventeen-year-old Jewish character, chimes in: "Hello, I'm a Jew here."¹¹⁷

Viewers have also been taken with the Emmy Award-winning performance of Camryn Manheim as Ellenor Frutt, a law partner in David Kelley's *The Practice*. A determined individualist and feisty colleague, Ellenor is Jewish, but her religion is not frequently mentioned in the series. (The fact that she is happily overweight has been cited far more often in press stories about the show than her religion.) But in the three seasons the show has played, Ellenor has referred to herself at times as a proud "Jewish woman," sometimes writing her own lines (see below). The potential for developing this aspect of her personal and professional side remains strong.

Representing Jewish Mothers

Jewish mothers have been shown even more negatively than younger Jewish women. In discussing the TV Jewish mother, *New York Times* critic John J. O'Connor notes that television "seems "curiously partial to neurotically overprotective, brash and often garish mothers of the unmistakably Jewish persuasion." "Sure, caricature is endemic to prime time," he acknowledges. "But why do Jewish mothers seem to have a monopoly on its more extreme forms?" O'Connor asks. "In years past, white Anglo-Saxon mothers in shows like 'Father Knows

Best' were models of decorum. Today, black mothers ... are paragons of warmth and nurturing. But too many Jewish mothers, it seems to this puzzled goy, become props for humor that often teeters on outright ridicule or even occasional cruelty."¹¹⁸

While the Pearls argue that mothers who are negatively stereotyped as "anti-Semitic caricatures or misogynistic foils" are "more the exception than the rule," the reverse seems to be true today.¹¹⁹ Today, the "ridicule" and "occasional cruelty" that O'Connor cites is more typical than not in portraying Jewish mothers on the television screen. The Jewish mother figure is usually a total nuisance in the lives of her children, whether married or single. Although never a central character, as Molly Goldberg was, she impinges on her children in other ways, nagging, whining, annoying. Almost all TV Jewish mothers fall into this stern-faced, nagging, guilt-tripping caricature. Witness the Sylvias—Sylvia Buchman (Cynthia Harris) on *Mad About You* and Sylvia Fine (Renée Taylor) on *The Nanny*; Jerry's mother Helen (Liz Sheridan) and George Costanza's crypto-Jewish mother (Estelle Harris) on *Seinfeld*; Conrad's mother on the short-lived *Conrad Bloom* (Linda Lavin); Grace's mother (Debbie Reynolds) on *Will & Grace*, and Vicki Groener's mother Edie (Joan Rivers) on *Suddenly Susan*. Even cartoon character Kyle Broslowski's mother, Sheila, on the animated show *South Park*, is drawn as a pushy yenta who calls Kyle "bubbie" and orders him around.

How stereotypical are these portraits? Mrs. Seinfeld, a dour, unsmiling character, is "nagging, smothering, and suffering."¹²⁰ Mrs. Costanza, says one critic, is "a fingernail scraping against the scattered life of her son George." And worse:

Her love is as soft as a pillow used to smother his dreams and drive ... she owns a "mutual fund" of guilt, trading shares for shame and embarrassment. She loves her son so much it hurts—everybody. He's bald because his hair couldn't survive the heat of his mother breathing down his neck.¹²¹

Sylvia Buchman, the mother of Paul Reiser in *Mad About You*, is so obsessively protective of her son that she sends food along when he goes to Jamie's parents for Thanksgiving. It is implied that when her

mild-mannered husband gets a heart attack, she caused it. The outlandish Sylvia Fine also nags her offspring to death, particularly about landing a man. The running joke is that this Jewish mother stuffs herself rather than her child; she is always obsessing over food and gobbling up whatever goodies lie in her path. Although she was more svelte in the show's final season than in previous years, Sylvia is invariably dressed in glitz, miniskirts, and open blouses that a woman of her age and shape would best avoid.

One of the most offensive caricatures is that of Edie Groener (Joan Rivers), the mother of Vicki (Kathy Griffith) on *Suddenly Susan*. Pushy, demanding, and manipulative, she is meddlesome to the extreme. Not only does she almost ruin her daughter's wedding day, later she actually precipitates her son-in-law's death by insisting that the couple have sex to give her a grandchild. Loud, whiny, nasal-voiced, and dressed in tacky outfits, Edie is an even more extreme caricature than Joan Rivers playing herself as sharp-tongued, aggressive, and blunt, sometimes outrageously so.¹²²

Grace's mother (Debbie Reynolds) has made an occasional appearance on *Will & Grace*; Grace's Jewish background is glossed over almost completely, playing a very secondary role to the difference between her heterosexual self and her roommate Will, who is gay. But when her mother shows up, Will's friend Jack acknowledges her as a member of the (Jewish) tribe, and it is clear that she is still another pushy, interfering mom, though certainly of more refined background than the Rivers character.

To be sure, the affection between mothers and their offspring sometimes comes through all the meddling, as was the case with Molly Goldberg, Ida Morgenstern, the rough-mannered mother of Rhoda, who demonstrated her love and concern despite her often overbearing manner, and even Sylvia, the nanny's self-indulgent but caring mother. It is also true that non-Jewish mothers can be portrayed as rigid and controlling, yet there seems to be more variety in their portraits than in the case of Jewish mothers, where the balance seems increasingly tipped in one direction. For the most part, televi-

sion ridicules the Jewish mother, stripping her of much of her humanity.

Intermarriage: One Plot, New Directions

As far as Jews are concerned, intermarriage has been the predominant theme of the 1990s. The trend toward mixed couplings of Jews on TV sets Jewish romance apart from those of many other racial and ethnic groups. As Michael Medved writes: "When African-Americans appear in movies and TV shows, they are generally allowed to find romance with other African-Americans.... Hispanic and Asian and Italian characters, when they appear, all seem to love other members of their own group. Only with Jews must love stories cross ethnic lines."¹²³ Among the many interfaith TV couples that include one Jewish partner are Paul Reiser's Jewish husband and Helen Hunt's Gentile wife, Jamie, on *Mad About You*; Miles Silverberg's romance with Corky on *Murphy Brown*; Jack Stein in love with the Waspy Wally Porter on *Love and War*; Marty Gold of *Anything but Love* in love with Hannah; Neil dating Gentile Alicia on *Flying Blind*; Stuart Markowitz of *L.A. Law* married to WASP lawyer Anne Kelsey; Michael Steadman of *thirtysomething* married to Hope, who is Protestant; Joel Fleischman of *Northern Exposure* consummating his feelings for Maggie O'Connell; David Silver dating Catholic Donna Martin, and his father married to Kelly Taylor's WASP mom on *Beverly Hills 90210*, where the character Andrea Zuckerman married a Latino. On *Sisters*, the non-Jewish siblings Teddie and Frankie married Jewish men at different times. On *Dharma and Greg*, the WASP Greg Montgomery married Dharma Finkelstein. Even *Brooklyn Bridge*'s eleven-year-old protagonist, Allen Silver, falls head over heels for the beautiful young Irish girl, Katie Monahan.

So pervasive has been intermarriage and interdating on television that it has been virtually impossible to find a Jewish couple anywhere on the screen. When the intermarriage rate in the population at large hovers around 50 percent, on television it is well over 95 percent,

and growing.¹²⁴ While most interfaith marriages or romances have been between Jewish men and non-Jewish women, two reverse couplings occurred during the 1997-98 season. On CBS's *The Nanny*, Fran Fine finally trapped her man, her blueblood employer, Mr. Sheffield, while over on ABC, the dippy Dharma Finkelstein married preppy WASP lawyer Gregory Montgomery. These plots may indicate that Jewish women now have the same right to marry non-Jews as do Jewish men, but they do not signal a triumph for the Jewish family.

Only rarely is a specifically Jewish woman portrayed romantically on TV shows, as for example the character Elaine, the former girlfriend of Dr. Joel Fleischman on *Northern Exposure*, who appears in one episode merely to free Fleischman from the constraints of his New York past. In a few *Seinfeld* episodes, Jerry dated an observant Jewish woman named Rachel whom Jerry's friend George tricks into unknowingly eating lobster. Examples of Jewish-Jewish romances are also infrequent, although there are a few older married couples (the parents of Paul Buchman in *Mad About You*, or *Seinfeld*'s parents, or the Costanzas, as hidden Jews) whose portrayal does not suggest much joy in their unions. What in fact would happen if Jewish men and women would become each other's love interest, asks one critic. "Would the television explode in fireworks of obsession, compulsion and sharp conversation?"¹²⁵

Critics have given a variety of reasons for the current focus on intermarriage. First, shows that are "too Jewish" and, by extension, families that are "too Jewish" will have limited audience appeal—think *Brooklyn Bridge*. "What better way to provide cover for a character's Jewishness," writes one observer, "than to give him a non-Jewish mate?"¹²⁶ Second, the demography of TV Jews reflects the marriage patterns of the largely Jewish male group of producers, writers, and directors who develop these shows. Third, cultural clash and conflict, like that between Jews and non-Jewish spouses and lovers, create tension and heighten viewer interest. Television intermarriages thus become convenient—some say essential—plot devices that focus useful attention on the divisions and conflicts inherent in all marriages, not solely those based on religious background.

In their detailed analysis of intermarriage on television, Jonathan and Judith Pearl observe that the history of interfaith couplings on TV reflects diverse attitudes—“both vehemence against and praise for it”; almost always, however, intermarriage is presented “within a Jewish framework” and as a problematic issue that must be dealt with. They cite several dramatic shows, e.g., *thirtysomething*, in which an intermarried Jewish character begins to explore his religious identity, particularly after the birth of a child, often ending in a “kind of return to Judaism.” Sometimes, conversion of the non-Jewish partner is an option. The Pearls see the prevalence of interfaith couples on TV as a mirror of the social milieu, and conclude “that intermarriage as it appears on television is not negative in and of itself, given its widespread existence in reality.” Indeed, they feel that the many TV presentations of the issue have become “a dynamic part of the ongoing debate on this vital issue.”¹²⁷

“Because it is almost impossible to find any love relationship between young Jews, both men and women absorb negative messages about each other’s attractiveness and appeal.”

Despite this positive effect, because the rate of television intermarriage is nearly double that of real life intermarriage, the cumulative effect of such portrayals is more dramatic, and damaging, than may first appear. Television shows need not replicate the exact demographic, economic, and social patterns of the real world; nevertheless, the medium forecloses creative options by making intermarriage ubiquitous. Because it is almost impossible to find any love relationship between young Jews, both men and women absorb negative messages about each other’s attractiveness and appeal. Moreover, while the dramatic shows that the Pearls cite might offer a hopeful vision by provoking characters to reconsider their Jewish identity, the same is

not generally true of sitcoms, where there has usually been little consideration of the impact of the intermarriage on the Jewish partner's religious or cultural identity.

There are some indications that the formulaic plot of interdating and intermarriage is expanding into new directions. Examples include the final episode of *The Nanny* in the spring of 1998, when Fran finally married her employer in a wedding conducted by a rabbi and minister and replete with Jewish customs; a Christmas episode of *Frasier* where the non-Jewish lead character dates an attractive, intelligent Jewish woman, Faye Moskowitz (Amy Brenneman), whose quarrel with her mother points to the underlying strength of Jewish mother-daughter bonds; and an episode of *Dharma & Greg* the same season that depicted a multicultural *bris*—with rabbi, minister, and Native American shaman. But clichéd intermarriage shows continue to be introduced—a recent but fortunately short-lived one was *You're the One*, a Warner Brothers sitcom about a newly engaged couple consisting of a young woman from an ultraconservative Southern family whose fiancé is a Jewish man from a liberal background. And while the Kathy Griffin character, Vicki, on *Suddenly Susan*, seemed to be a “historic breakthrough,” in the view of one observer, since Vicki began to explore, and deepen, her own Jewish identity after her romance with and marriage to a rabbi on the show, the possibility of an enduring prime-time relationship between two vital Jews was dashed with the TV rabbi's fatal heart attack.¹²⁸

Negative Portrayals of Religious Themes

Television tends to depict Jewishness in secular, cultural terms rather than focus on any religious dimensions of Jewish identity. Although this in itself is neither surprising nor necessarily problematic, what has troubled members of the Jewish community is the frequent ridicule with which religious themes and characters are portrayed when they do become subjects of TV shows.

A case in point are *Seinfeld* episodes that depicted a rabbi and a *mohel* in decidedly unflattering and—according to many observers—

“intolerable” ways. The *mohel* episode (“The Bris,” Oct. 14, 1993), showed a *mohel* performing a *brit milah* in a manner that one reviewer called a “cruel caricature.”

The *mohel* was, in a word, obnoxious. He stormed into the apartment, berating the new parents for not being able to control their crying infant. He whined about being called out to perform a *bris* in a questionable neighborhood. He was shaky, nervous and edgy.... Seinfeld sidekick Kramer continually challenged the ritual of circumcision as “outdated and barbaric”; the *mohel* himself was shown as a “buffoon, a jerk, and a creep.”¹²⁹

Jonathan and Judith Pearl, who find that *Seinfeld* has been unfunny, and even hostile, on Jewish issues, described the episode as “tasteless, humorless, and embarrassingly bad: if one could imagine the notorious wedding scene of *Goodbye Columbus* combined with a scene from Woody Allen at his self-disparaging worst, all transformed to a *brit milah*, this would be it.”¹³⁰ But *Seinfeld* writer Carol Leifer disagrees. “It’s a funny idea to have a *mohel* who’s jittery.... It’s not making fun.”¹³¹

Two years after presenting the *mohel* as a “greedy, whiny shlepper,” a *Seinfeld* episode introduced a new character, Rabbi Kirschbaum, whose “nervy mannerisms and conduct unbecoming a spiritual leader,” as one critic described it, resulted in over 100 angry calls to the Anti-Defamation League. The story line involved Jerry’s friend Elaine, who seeks counsel from the rabbi, her neighbor, to deal with some problems that have made her depressed. Played by Bruce Mahler after a character he developed in his comedy act, the rabbi listens to Elaine’s problems but then betrays her confidence with other neighbors, Elaine’s friends, and then later on his cable talk show. Seinfeld’s sister and manager, Carolyn Seinfeld, replied to those who protested the depiction that no harm was meant and that “the greatest Jewish tradition is to laugh. The cornerstone of Jewish survival has always been to find humor in life and ourselves.”¹³² The show’s defenders do not believe that *Seinfeld* is “self-hatingly Jewish,” in the words of Tom Shales, writing in the *Washington Post*; they argue, instead, that it is an equal-opportunity offender of many different kinds of groups.¹³³

“Religion is funny,” agrees Matt Stone, cocreator of the animated show *South Park*, which includes an identifiably Jewish third-grader, Kyle Broslovski, whose father wears a yarmulke. Several episodes have focused on Jewish themes, including the well-known “Mr. Hankey, the Christmas Poo”—where a lonely Kyle spends Christmas singing the dreidel song and his friends learn that “Jewish people can be cool”—and “Ike’s Wee,” a show about Kyle’s brother’s *bris*, in which Kyle’s friends wind up wanting *brises* of their own. In addition to these cartoon themes, Jewish religious characters are sometimes shown as attractive and engaging. One example was the character of Ben Rubenstein, Vicki’s husband on *Suddenly Susan*. While the relationship between Vicki and Ben briefly pointed to a new development in portraying religious Jews as lovers, another episode of *Suddenly Susan* presented a young, attractive, but quite oversexed female cantor who dated a non-Jewish character on the show. When alone, the cantor enticed him into sex, only to break out into a Hebrew-esque operatic (her Hebrew is unintelligible and only by circumstance and intonation do we recognize it as a prayer). These sexual exploits caused her to lose her voice before a very important weekend at her temple. Although she is portrayed as a regular person, not at all stiff and formal, the cantor’s sexual desire, and her relationship with this non-Jewish male, thus affects her ability as a religious leader.¹³⁴

A few shows have explored Jewish religion, or a character’s spiritual nature, in a more serious manner. *Northern Exposure*, for example, held a seder in Cicely, Alaska, with the townspeople of this multicultural community helping Dr. Joel Fleischman explore “the existential questions of the universe, including his relationship to his own religion and culture.” According to Robin Green, coexecutive producer and writer, “Jewish rituals were very much a part of Dr. Fleischman’s character, and that’s how he expressed himself Jewishly.” More New York- than Jewish-identified at the outset of the show, Fleischman searched to adapt as a stranger to a new community and is aided by his exploration of his own religious background. “We wanted Joel [Fleischman] to have a direct experience of the Almighty,” adds producer Andrew Schneider. “We wanted him to go on a journey, to

tear down boundaries and view God in an all-embracing way.” While there were no inherent religious motives for Fleischman, his Jewishness—enhancing the original “fish out of water” theme—grew integrally out of the character, making him “the most complex Jewish character” ever presented on network TV, according to some critics.¹³⁵

Other well-received treatments of Jewish religious themes were the character Michael Steadman in *thirtysomething*; an episode about a mother’s unveiling, complete with rabbi and the recital of Kaddish at the cemetery, on *Relativity*; episodes called “Kaddish” on both *Homicide* and *The X-Files*, and the wonderful bar mitzvah episode of *The Wonder Years*, in which the bar mitzvah of the lead character Kevin’s best friend, Paul Pfeiffer, shown as rooted in meaningful family and religious tradition, causes Kevin to ask questions about his own family’s roots and beliefs.

“ . . . plot lines concerning anti-Semitism and its dangers continue to hold promise for the development of authentic portrayals of Jewish life, values, and morality on television.”

Over the years, from *The Goldbergs* to *The Dick Van Dyke Show*, to *All in the Family*, and beyond, television has offered a window to the religious elements of Jewish life by presenting such life-cycle rituals as *brit milahs*, bar/bat mitzvahs, weddings, funerals and unveilings, as well as celebrations of the High Holidays, Passover, and Hanukkah, and glimpses of Shabbat observance. The meaning of religion as personal spiritual quest as linked to tradition has also been explored, although more rarely. Many shows have also incorporated plot lines concerning anti-Semitism and its dangers. These areas continue to hold promise for the development of authentic portrayals of Jewish life, values, and morality on television.

Non-Jews as well as Jewish network producers and creative staff

have incorporated Jewish religious themes in their shows. David Kelley, the creator/writer and/or producer of *L.A. Law*, *Picket Fences*, *Chicago Hope*, *Ally McBeal*, and *The Practice*, has been called one of the few "TV titans who religiously injects Judaism" into his shows.¹³⁶ Yet while Kelley greatly admires Judaism's blend of law and religion, he also uses religious themes for their shock value. In the spring of 1999, his Emmy Award-winning drama *The Practice* aired an explosive show about a much-admired married rabbi who turned out to have taken sexual advantage of a young woman with whom he had been having an affair. She claimed rape; he said she liked violent sex and said no when she meant yes. Suspenseful, fast-paced, and edgy, this show carried the well-known marks of a Kelley script, but Kelley was pushing the envelope when he made the rabbi so unsympathetic. The temple elders, greedy and promoting a coverup, were portrayed in a similarly unflattering light. The incongruity of a respected rabbi on trial for such an action in the first place heightens the show's trademark dramatic tension, but the unfortunate effect is to perpetrate onerous and disturbing notions about Jewish clergy.

The Practice had depicted a controversial rabbi in one of its earlier shows; the rabbi on that show failed to stop a congregant from murdering a drug dealer to avenge the death of his daughter and in fact justified the congregant's and his own actions; the firm's lead partner describes the rabbi as "ruthless." Camryn Manheim, playing the Jewish lawyer, Ellenor, on the show, found the depiction so distasteful that she wrote in her own lines. When the rabbi asks her why she doesn't want to participate in the case, Ellenor tells him: "You wore your yamulke on that television program. When a rabbi speaks as a rabbi, he represents Judaism. You represented it as vengeful, and as a Jewish person I was offended." She then tells the firm's top lawyer that she would rather not take the case.¹³⁷

These episodes of *The Practice* encapsulate an important dilemma concerning the representation of Jews on television. Entertainment television cannot be held to a standard whereby only positive portrayals of Jews, or only typical or representative characters and issues, are transmitted. Depictions of deviant or otherwise unusual

individuals may be of genuine interest, even if such representations are unpleasant or statistically insignificant. At the Prime-Time Television Conference, David Kelley acknowledged the conflict between responsible image-making and creative concerns. "Doing entertainment shows that dare to be daring, you're always going to be on the boundaries," he observed. Because in his view "good taste is much like the Supreme Court's definition of obscenity" ("I know it when I see it"), he believes that "to creep way back inside the boundaries" affords no solution. Nonetheless Kelley acknowledged a responsibility to viewers that impinges on his own artistic license; at the end of the day, he hopes that his influence will have been "more good than it is bad."¹³⁸ The kinds of personal judgments made by producers, directors, and writers like Kelley and actors such as Camryn Manheim will shape the new boundaries of ethnic representations, alongside, of course, marketplace considerations. "As competition increases in the media, so does sensationalism," writer Alan Leicht, an observant Jew, reminds us.¹³⁹

The increasing number of observant Jews working in television may in fact influence the medium's portrayal of religious Jews and religious values. Because of intermarriage and the inroads of multiculturalism, moreover, viewers are likely to be more open than ever before to explorations of religious difference. As evidenced by the popularity of *Touched by an Angel* and similar shows, programs devoted to religious themes and spiritual exploration have been unusually successful in recent years. Episodes of *thirtysomething*, *Northern Exposure*, *Homicide*, and other shows that have dealt with Jewish rituals of all sorts have also received positive critical and audience response. On the other hand, shows that have caricatured religious figures continue to be sources of controversy and criticism.

(THE ULTIMATE MASS MEDIUM)

THE VAST INCREASE IN THE numerical representation of Jews on the TV screen in the last decades must be acknowledged as a unique and hopefully positive force. Reflecting the increasing visibility of Jewish arts and culture throughout American society, the appearance of Jews and, increasingly, Jewish themes in scores of shows marks a break with the past, when even a decade ago there were no more than a handful of identified Jewish characters on the air.¹⁴⁰ These impressive numbers indicate, too, how permeable the boundaries between Jews and non-Jews have become. In just a decade's time, image-makers have adopted a more open and flexible attitude about putting Jews in leading roles on both drama and comedy shows, in part because of these social changes as well as the confidence engendered by the overwhelming success of *Seinfeld* and other popular shows with recognizably Jewish characters. Jonathan and Judith Pearl contend that over the last two decades, images of assimilation have been replaced by a new "resurgence of Jewish identity." The record of television's Jews offers proof, the Pearls argue, of the "full integration of Jews into American life."¹⁴¹

While images of Jews may have been much more prevalent in recent years than ever before, there is no guarantee that, given the

vagaries of television trends, Jewish images will continue to be represented in anywhere near the proportions of the last few years. “Jewishness no longer reads as funny, in a broadly appealing way,” notes one observer of the recent season. Her view is that with *The Nanny* gone, “actual Jews are fast disappearing from television.” Instead there are merely “colorful neurotic characters of a Jewish or a generally Jewish-like flavoring.”¹⁴² While it may be unnecessary to categorize characters ethnically if such distinctions have no relevance to story lines, often Jewish identifications that could make a difference are deliberately hidden or rendered ambivalent. In other cases, only the “flavoring” remains. Yet the notion that a character or a situation or even a sitcom may be “too Jewish”—and hence less interesting, or lacking broad audience support—has less validity today than ever before, given the popularity of Jewish themes and milieus in society at large and the expansion of interest in Jewish religion and Jewish culture more broadly. Rooting Jewishness as part of the complexity of character and story can add depth and psychological complexity to the presentation of comedy and drama alike.

A second major problem relates to the continued depiction of stock characters that are formulaic and anachronistic. Stereotypical portraits, especially of Jewish women, suggest that notions of the Jew as “other”—different, unattractive, unwanted—remain pervasive. Jewish women are regularly marked with traits that exaggerate Jewish characteristics in an unflattering way; like the nanny and comedian Mike Meyers’s character Linda Richmond on *Saturday Night Live*, they are venal, manipulative, flashy, selfish, and crude (unlike television’s Jewish men, who are merely sensitive, anxious, and somewhat nerdy). Rarely do they demonstrate the full range of human characteristics—intelligence, generosity, ambition, striving, achievement, conflict—that truly represent contemporary Jewish women’s lives. And relatively few Jewish women appear regularly on television as they do in real life—as writers, journalists, teachers, doctors, lawyers, mayors, senators, and judges. Similarly caricatured portrayals of Jewish men, though not as severe, and of religious issues and themes, place substantial brakes on the progress of Jewish representation in

this medium. These caricatures, leftovers from stock images of earlier generations, serve no real artistic purposes.

This does not mean that Jews on television must appear only as positive representations; particularly in comedies, which typically exaggerate human peculiarities, they may usefully appear as flawed, eccentric, or ridiculous. In dramatic shows, too, portrayals of Jews that challenge conventional types, even if they are unpleasant and unusual, may serve to probe issues and enlighten audiences. The challenge is to create portrayals that satisfy because they are original and provocative—whether positive or negative—without resorting to images and modes that are merely reductionist and stereotypical.

The issue of intermarriage and interdating deserves special comment. Stories of interfaith romance reflect the very real situation of many Jews in America and may be a legitimate subject of both comedic and dramatic treatments, yet the almost universal presentation of mixed marriage and dating for Jewish partners distorts its prevalence in the population. Moreover, few shows take advantage of the opportunities presented by this situation to examine its inherent possibilities; most treatments of intermarriage remain tired and formulaic. Because Jewish men and women receive a great deal of their own sense of self-worth from reflections they encounter in the media, the challenge is to examine intermarriage honestly even if comedically, as well as to create situations with sufficient dramatic tension or comedic appeal that pair Jewish partners with each other. Unless Jewish women are seen as romantic objects, they will tend to downgrade their own attractiveness and appeal. Unless Jewish men become, at least occasionally, objects of desire for their own coreligionists, they, too, can lose a valued part of their heritage.

The question of the depiction of Jews must also be seen in the light of other images of diversity. When racial minorities are marginalized on the TV screen as they have been for the past few years, with each new season showing fewer minorities in leading roles on network prime time, the climate for improving the depiction of all ethnic groups worsens. Without shows that picture diverse groups and individuals in interaction, television may well lack a common ground of

representation about issues that affect all Americans; it may become “balkanized” into networks that showcase programs for particular ethnic and racial groups. It is in the interest of American Jews to promote diversified programming that includes adequate representation of all minorities and women.

With its immediacy and accessibility, the medium of television affords wonderful opportunities to introduce viewers to diverse ethnic lifestyles, traditions, and beliefs, including those of Jews. How to ensure the survival of Jewish moral and religious values in an increasingly secular, assimilated, postmodern world is not the responsibility of the artists and executives who create the media representations of Jews, but entertainment television does play a significant role in shaping consciousness, identity, and history. When inauthentic, negative images predominate, their impact is inevitably destructive, reenforcing the trend toward the decay of Jewish family, religious, and community life. The absorption of stereotypical media images of Jews by non-Jews may also increase anti-Semitic stereotypes, especially among those with little personal contact with Jews.¹⁴³

“It is in the interest of American Jews to promote diversified programming that includes adequate representation of all minorities and women.”

The failure to present Jews in an openly visible manner may also harm Jewish interests. Given the lack of attention paid to anti-Semitic rhetoric in public life, “American Jews can’t be blamed for wondering if we’re a little too invisible for our own good,” Frank Rich writes. “We are living in a time when being too Jewish in America wouldn’t hurt,” he argues, and in this regard, mass culture has a significant role to play.¹⁴⁴

What is clear is that how Jews and other ethnic and racial minorities are portrayed on television will have enormous impact on

the way in which television's diverse audiences understand their histories. As media scholar Vivian Sobchack underscores: "We exist at a moment when identity, memory, and history are re-cognized as mediated and media productions." When images of ethnicity are so "constructed and consumable," when the boundaries of identity are vague, arbitrary, and diaphanous, on the one hand, and drawn to the hyperbolic requirements of an ill-defined mass audience on the other, ethnic representation becomes inauthentic. "Bits and pieces of identities and artifacts once historically and personally located now primarily cohere in the simulated history and memory of the media," Sobchack writes. "Lacking a sense of our roots, distanced from the gravitational pull of community and history, we have become strangers to our own lives."¹⁴⁵

Because TV is so connected to the contemporary pulse of American society—a society in which cultural diversity is increasingly accepted as a national virtue—it is not unlikely that this "ultimate mass medium" may respond to the triumph of multiculturalism by acknowledging and even celebrating ethnicity, perhaps in new and vital ways.¹⁴⁶ Despite the many influences that constrain television programming, the medium's capacity to surprise and innovate remains. More positive attitudes toward self-representation on the part of the many Jews employed in the entertainment industry, and a reversion from inherited, atavistic, stock images, will do much to foster such changes.¹⁴⁷

It is precisely because television so fundamentally structures the public's conceptions of self and the social world, and of future possibilities, that Jews must care so much about how the medium presents them.

• (ENDNOTES)

I wish to express my gratitude for the helpful suggestions of Stephen Antler, Jeffrey Shandler, Stephen Whitfield, and Janna B. Rogat.—J.A.

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2. *Ibid.*, p. 134; Ella Taylor, *Prime-Time Families: Television Culture in Postwar America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), p. 3.

3. Taylor, *Prime-Time Families*, p. 3.

4. *Ibid.*

5. See Bonnie J. Dow, *Prime Time Feminism: Television, Media Culture and the Women's Movement Since 1970* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996), pp. xi-xiv.

6. Andrea Press, *Women Watching Television: Gender, Class, and Generation in the American Television Experience* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991), p. 16.

7. Lori Landay, *Madcaps, Screwballs, Con Women: The Female Trickster in American Culture* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998), p. 26.

8. Victor Turner, *The Anthology of Performance* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), cited in *ibid.*

9. Neal Gabler, keynote address, Jews in Prime-Time Television Conference sponsored by the American Jewish Committee, the Annenberg School for Communication, University of Southern California, and the Jewish Television Network, Jan. 21, 1999. Gabler's *An Empire of Their Own: How the Jews Invented Hollywood* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1988), is an essential

beginning for the study of Jews in the world of entertainment.

10. Jonathan and Judith Pearl, *The Chosen Image: Television's Portrayal of Jewish Themes and Characters* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland & Co. 1999), pp. 65, 79-81, 101.

11. Frank Rich, Jews in Prime-Time Television Conference.

12. See, for example, Michael Medved, "Medved: Jews Must Counter TV, Hollywood Influence," *Jewish Bulletin*, Dec. 1, 1995, and Michael Medved, *Hollywood vs. America: Popular Culture and the War on Traditional Values* (New York: HarperCollins, 1992).

13. Esther Romeyn and Jack Kugelmass, *Let There Be Laughter! Jewish Humor in America* (Chicago: Spertus Museum, 1997), p. 8.

14. Michael Fox, "TV Jews Have Evolved Since the Goldbergs, Critic Says," *Jewish Bulletin*, Feb. 24, 1992, p. 32.

15. Pearl and Pearl, *Chosen Image*, p. 65.

16. Tom Turgend, "Hollywood Insiders Ask: Are Jews Portrayed Negatively," *Jewish Bulletin*, June 9, 1995. Alina Sivorinovsky reports that in a poll of TV's creative leaders, 59% responded that they had been raised Jewish, with 38% still identifying themselves as Jews (Sivorinovsky, "Do Jews Control TV? No, But They Have Strength Without Numbers," *Inside*, Dec. 31, 1996, p. 70). Todd Gitlin, however, allows that the "ethnicity of executives and suppliers doesn't necessarily determine characters" (Gitlin, *Inside Prime Time* [New York: Pantheon, 1983], p. 184).

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18. David Marc, *Comic Visions: Television Comedy and American Culture* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1989), p. xiii. On postwar television series, also see Hal Himmelstein, *Television Myth and the American Mind* (New York: Praeger, 1984); Darrell Y. Hamamoto, *Nervous Laughter: Television Situation Comedy and Liberal Democratic Ideology* (New York: Praeger, 1989); and Lynn Spiegel, *Make Room for TV: Television and the Family in Postwar America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992). For a discussion of television's role as mediator between changing consumer roles and family life, see George Lipsitz, "The Meaning of Memory: Family, Class, and Ethnicity in Early Ethnic Television," in Lipsitz, *Time Passages: Collective Memory and American Popular Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990).

19. *Entertainment Weekly*, cited in Frank Rich, "The 'Too Jewish' Question," *New York Times*, Mar. 16, 1996.

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21. Harry Medved, "The Invisible Minority: Jewish Images on the Tube,"

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24. Donald Ohlmeyer, Jews in Prime-Time Television Conference.

25. For example, remarks of Frank Rich, *ibid.*

26. James Kaplan, cited by Sylvia Brownrigg, "Friends?" *New York Times Book Review*, Nov. 21, 1999, p. 21; and Marc, *Comic Visions*, pp. 22, 203.

27. Donald Ohlmeyer, Jews in Prime-Time Television Conference.

28. See, for example, Paul Cohn, "Two New Network Shows Portray Jewish Storylines: Returning Shows Chicago Hope & Guiding Light Think Jewishly," *Jewish Family & Life!*, www.jewishfamily.com, Aug. 10, 1999.

29. Gitlin, *Inside Prime Time*, pp. 186-87.

30. See, for example, Press, *Women Watching Television*, p. 28, and Gitlin, *Inside Prime Time*.

31. Frank Rich, "What the Tube Is For," *New York Times Magazine*, Sept. 20, 1998, p. 56.

32. Pearl and Pearl, *Chosen Image*, p. 79.

33. Donald Weber, "The Jewish-American World of Gertrude Berg: *The Goldbergs* on Radio and Television, 1930-1950," in Joyce Antler, ed., *Talking Back: Images of Jewish Women in American Popular Culture* (Hanover, N.H.: University of New England Press, 1998), p. 92.

34. Charles Angoff, "The Goldbergs and Jewish Humor," *Congress Weekly* 18 (Mar. 5, 1951): 13.

35. Marc, *Comic Visions*, p. 36.

36. Morris Freedman, "The Real Molly Goldberg," *Commentary* 21 (April 1954): 360.

37. Spiegel, *Make Room for TV*, p. 148. See, especially, Arthur Frank Wertheim, "The Rise and Fall of Milton Berle," in John E. O'Connor, ed., *American History/American Television* (New York: Ungar, 1983), pp. 55-78.

38. Steven Stark, *Glued to the Set: The 60 Television Shows and Events that Made Us Who We are Today* (New York: Free Press, 1997), p. 13.

39. *Ibid.*, pp. 13-14.

40. Marc, *Comic Visions*, p. 36.

41. Romeyn and Kugelmass, *Let There Be Laughter!*, pp. 60-61.

42. See, especially, Vincent Brook, "The Americanization of Molly: How Mid-Fifties TV Homogenized *The Goldbergs* (and Got 'Berg-larized' in the Process)," *Cinema Journal* 38: 4 (Summer 1999): 45-67.

43. *Ibid.*

44. According to Brandon Tartikoff, former president of NBC Entertainment, *The Goldbergs* succeeded in the early days of television when its viewers

were disproportionately middle class and urban. It would "not work today," he told Todd Gitlin in an interview (Gitlin, *Inside Prime Time*, p. 184).

45. Cited in Sivorinovsky, "Do Jews Control TV?"

46. Shandler, *While America Watches*, pp. 135-36.

47. Gitlin, *Inside Prime Time*, p. 184.

48. Howard Suber, "Television's Interchangeable Ethnics: 'Funny, They Don't LOOK Jewish,'" *Television Quarterly* 12 (Winter 1975): 51.

49. Pearl and Pearl, *Chosen Image*, p. 231.

50. Dow, *Prime-Time Feminism*, pp. 59-60.

51. Jack Kugelmass, "Bridget Loves Bernie," unpublished paper, Key Texts in American Jewish Culture, Arizona State University, Feb. 14, 2000. According to Kugelmass, intermarriage as the comic premise of the show had been dealt with in an especially lively fashion in the show's early episodes. Because the situation it parodied was fast becoming a social reality, however, with almost 30 percent of Jews marrying out by 1972, the community found the show too threatening.

52. Other shows of the period with Jewish characters included *Welcome Back Kotter* (1975-79), *Fish* (1977-78), *Lanigan's Rabbi* (1977), *M*A*S*H* (1972-83), and *House Calls* (1979-82).

53. Robert S. Lichter, Linda S. Lichter, and Stanley Rothman, *Prime Time: How TV Portrays American Culture* (Washington, D.C.: Regnery Publishing Co., 1994), p. 349.

54. Norman Lear's *Maude*, starring Bea Arthur, had no specific ethnicity, although many viewers considered the lead character Jewish because of her vociferous liberal views. Lear acknowledged that some local stations didn't want to carry the show in syndication because *Maude* was a "bossy Jewish broad" (Norman Lear, Jews in Prime-Time Television Conference, Jan. 21, 1999).

55. Sivorinovsky, "Do Jews Control TV?"

56. *Ibid.*; also see Terry Barr, "Stars, Lights, and Finding the Way Home: Jewish Characters in Contemporary Film and Television," in *Studies in Popular Culture* 15:2 (1993): 87-100.

57. Sivorinovsky, "Do Jews Control TV?"

58. Rebecca Segall and Peter Ephross, "What does success of 'Seinfeld' say about the Jews of America?," *Jewish Family & Life!*, www.jewishfamily.com, May 4, 1998.

59. *Ibid.*

60. David Hollinger, *Postethnic America* (New York: Basic Books, 1995), p. 4.

61. Jonathan and Judith Pearl, "Jews on Prime Time," *Greater Phoenix Jewish News*, Aug. 13, 1993, p. 5.

62. Doug Chandler, "Jews' TV Image Changed in 90, Experts Tell YLC," *Jewish Exponent*, June 19, 1992, p. 23.

63. Lichter et al., *Prime Time*, pp. 356-59.

64. Fox, "TV Jews Have Evolved Since the Goldbergs."

65. Cited in Barr, "Stars, Lights, and Finding the Way Home," p. 95.

66. *Ibid.*

67. Medved, "Invisible Minority."

68. Amanda Krotki, "Good Reception: A Discussion on Jewish TV Characters Reveals Hollywood's Fascination with Depicting American Jews in Different Roles," *Baltimore Jewish Times*, Nov. 20, 1998.

69. "Why Seinfeld Is Ending," *Jewish Advocate*, Jan. 15, 1998, p. 12.

70. Michael Elkin, "Mother's Daze: What to Get Mrs. Costanza of 'Seinfeld' for Sunday? How About a New Son!" *Jewish Exponent*, May 8, 1997, p. ix.

71. Michael Elkin, "'Seinfeld' and the Jews: Does TV's Leading Comedy Series Go Overboard on Stereotypes?" *Jewish Exponent*, Dec. 4, 1997, p. ix.

72. *Ibid.*

73. Seagall and Ephross, "What does success of 'Seinfeld' say about the Jews of America?"

74. Marc, *Comic Visions*, pp. 200-2.

75. Rich, "What the Tube Is For."

76. Jeffrey Shandler, "Television," in Paula E. Hyman and Deborah Dash Moore, eds., *Jewish Women in America: An Historical Encyclopedia* (New York: Routledge, 1997), p. 1393.

77. *Ibid.* Shandler writes specifically of Jewish women characters who are often played by non-Jewish actors (e.g., Valerie Harper as Rhoda and Nancy Walker as her mother, Ida, on *Rhoda*, and Amy Aquino as Phyllis Silver on *Brooklyn Bridge*).

78. Nora Lee Mandel, "Who's Jewish on 'Friends,'" *Lilith* 21 (Summer 1996): 2.

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80. Medved, "Invisible Minority."

81. *Ibid.*

82. Gary David Goldberg, Jews in Prime-Time Television Conference.

83. *Ibid.*

84. Medved, "Invisible Minority."

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86. Frank Rich, Jews in Prime-Time Television Conference.

87. David Kelley and Chris Carter, Jews in Prime-Time Television Conference.

88. Among works on women and television, see Press, *Women Watching Television*; Mary Beth Haralovich and Lauren Rabinovitz, *Television, History and American Culture: Feminist Critical Essays* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1999); Charlotte Brundson, Julie D'Acci, and Lynn Spice, *Feminist Television Criticism: A Reader* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997); and Dow, *Prime-Time Feminism*.

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Fleischman: As Rob Morrow Departs 'Northern Exposure,' TV's Jewish Landscape Is Diminished," *Baltimore Jewish Times*, Feb. 3, 1995, p. 44.

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93. *Action!*, Sept. 16, 1999.

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97. On this subject, see Medved, "Is Hollywood Too Jewish?" and Kaplan, "From 'Seinfeld' to 'Chicago Hope.'"

98. Berger, "The Mouse That Never Roars," p. 95.

99. Sherrill Kushner, "How We Look on TV," *Lilith*, June 30, 1989, p. 3; Marlene Adler Marks, "On Jewish Women and TV—Going Beyond the Nanny," *New Jersey Jewish News*, Apr. 23, 1998, p. 5; "First-Ever Study of Media Portrayals of Jewish Women Including 'Fran' and 'Dharma' Indicates Surprising Outcome," *Morningstaronline.org*. Also see Sylvia Barack Fishman, "I of the Beholder: Jews and Gender in Film and Popular Culture," International Research Institute on Jewish Women, Brandeis University, Working Paper No. 1, May 1998.

100. Hanania, "Playing Princesses"; Kushner, "How We Look on TV."

101. Medved, "Is Hollywood Too Jewish?," p. 41.

102. See, for example, Beverly Gray Bienstock, "The Changing Image of the Jewish Mother," in Virginia Tufte and Barbara Myerhoff, eds., *Changing Images of the Family* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), pp. 173-91; Allen Dundes, "J.A.P. and the J.A.M. in American Jokelore," *Journal of American Folklore* 98 (1985): 456-75, and Riv-Ellen Prell, *Fighting to Become Americans: Jews, Gender, and the Anxiety of Assimilation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1999), chs. 5 and 6.

103. The following summary is taken from my epilogue, "Jewish Women on Television: Too Jewish or Not Enough?" in Antler, *Talking Back*, pp. 242-52.

104. Nora Lee Mandel, "Media Watch: What the World Sees in 'The Nanny,'" *Lilith*, Dec. 31, 1996, p. 40; Robin Cembalest, "Big Hair, Short Skirts—and High Culture," *Forward*, Feb. 14, 1997.

105. Medved, "Invisible Minority."

106. Janna B. Rogat, "On Screen, Off Target: A Study of Jewish Characters in Prime-Time Situational Comedies of the Late 1990s," senior honors thesis, Brandeis University, 1999.

107. Pearl and Pearl, *Chosen Image*, pp. 88-89.
108. Cembalest, "Big Hair, Short Skirts."
109. Cited in Connie Benesch, "Positive TV Role Models?" *Jewish Bulletin of Northern California*, June 13, 1997, p. 38.
110. Medved, "Invisible Minority."
111. Cited in Hanania, "Playing Princesses."
112. Romeyn and Kugelmass, *Let There Be Laughter*, pp. 12, 82-83. Kugelmass expanded his positive appraisal of *The Nanny* in his paper "From Cultural Pathology to Social Salubrity: A Comparison of Jewish Differences in Two American Sitcoms," presented to the Annual Conference of the Association of Jewish Studies, Chicago, Dec. 20, 1999.
113. June Sochen, "From Sophie Tucker to Barbra Streisand: Jewish Women Entertainers as Reformers," in Antler, *Talking Back*, pp. 68-84.
114. Dean Valentine, Leslie Moonves, Jews in Prime-Time Television Conference.
115. Prell, *Fighting to Become Americans*, p. 193.
116. Matthew Gilbert, "Kathy Griffin Funny but Uneasy," *Boston Globe*, Aug. 14, 1998.
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118. John J. O'Connor, "This Jewish Mom Dominates TV, Too," *New York Times*, Oct. 14, 1993.
119. Pearl and Pearl, *Chosen Image*, p. 87.
120. Solomon, "Farewell, Fleischman."
121. Elkin, "Mother's Daze," p. ix.
122. On Rivers, see Gray, *Women and Laughter*, pp. 138-40.
123. Medved, "Is Hollywood Too Jewish?"
124. *Ibid.*
125. Kaplan, "From 'Seinfeld' to 'Chicago Hope.'"
126. Hanania, "Playing Princesses."
127. Pearl and Pearl, *Chosen Image*, pp. 223-25.
128. Hanania, "Playing Princesses."
129. "Pulling the Plug on TV's Often Nasty View of Jews," *Jewish Exponent*, Oct. 22, 1993, p. 32.
130. Pearl and Pearl, *Chosen Image*, p. 31.
131. Krotki, "Good Reception."
132. Adam Dickter, "'Seinfeld' rabbi portrayal raises furor," *Jewish Advocate*, Oct. 26, 1995, p. 13.
133. Cited in Segall and Ephross, "Behind the Headlines." Many Puerto Ricans were especially upset about the next-to-last episode of *Seinfeld*, "The Puerto Rican Day," broadcast on May 7, 1998. During the show, one of the main characters accidentally burned and then stomped on the Puerto Rican flag. See Robert Dominguez, "Seinfeld Episode Still Angers Puerto Ricans," *Hispanic*, Aug. 31, 1998, p. 16.
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135. Medved, "Invisible Minority"; Solomon, "Farewell, Fleischman."
136. Michael Elkin, "Kelley's Jewish Soul," *Jewish Exponent*, Jan. 22, 1998.
137. Personal communication from Camryn Manheim, Oct. 21, 1999; the script for this episode was written by Rabbi Joseph Telushkin, who has contributed other ideas to the show.
138. David Kelley, *Jews in Prime-Time Television Conference*.
139. Gail Schiller, "Observant Jews Hope to Uplift Hollywood," Part 2, *Jewish Family & Life!*, www.jewishfamily.com, Mar. 17, 1999.
140. "You couldn't do better than grow up Jewish and gay if you want to be in show business," commented Don Roos, a TV and movie writer in Los Angeles, "and you couldn't do worse if you grew up black and Protestant" (Paul Brownfield, "As Minorities' TV Presence Dims, Gay Roles Proliferate," *Los Angeles Times*, July 21, 1999).
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142. Sandra Tsing Loh, "The Unbelievable Whiteness of Prime Time," *New York Times*, Sept. 26, 1999, Arts and Leisure, p. 29.
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144. Rich, "The 'Too Jewish' Question."
145. Vivian Sobchack, "Postmodern Uses of Ethnicity," in Lester D. Friedman, ed., *Unspeakable Images: Ethnicity and the American Cinema* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991), pp. 333-35.
146. Cited in David Hollinger, *Postethnic America: Beyond Multiculturalism* (New York: Basic Books, 1995), pp. 141-42.
147. On the question of Jewish influence in the entertainment industry, see Medved, "Is Hollywood Too Jewish?," p. 36.

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