

**“YOU DON’T HAVE TO BE JEWISH”:
THE REPRESENTATION OF JEWS ON TELEVISION SITCOMS**

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I would like to dedicate my Master's Thesis to my parents, Stephen and Sherry Litwack. They have been a source of support and inspiration throughout my life.

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Preface

Some of my favorite memories revolve around my Jewish-American identity. Spending the High Holidays with my family, eating *strudel*, *kugel* (noodle pudding) and *tzimmes* (carrot and sweet potato stew) singing Yiddish songs with my great-Grandma Bella, boasting that I had two names — one English and one Hebrew (*Aviva Regn* — Spring Rain) and spinning the *dreidel* on Chanukah with friends are cherished recollections. My *Bat Mitzvah* (ceremony where a 12 or 13-year-old becomes an adult in the Jewish community) was one of the most meaningful days of my life thus far.

Still, I must admit not all memories are so rosy. I disliked Hebrew School and *kvetched* about it relentlessly to my parents. On the High Holidays (2 days/year), temple services seemed never-ending. My grandfather and I would sneak out during service to browse at the local bookstore and return an hour later with guilty smiles. Also, looking at the ever-present herring at the Yom Kippur table makes me ill.

My experience was not that of a ‘typical’ Jewish kid ... or so I thought. Being one of a small number of Jews in my white-picket-fence New England town, I never experienced playing at the JCC (Jewish Community Center), eating *Shabbos* (the Jewish Sabbath, a day of rest and spiritual enrichment) dinner Friday nights with neighbors, or shopping from the kosher butcher with his blood-stained apron, roly-poly frame and friendly demeanor. Maybe these were nostalgic images from bygone

eras or maybe one had to grow up on New York's Lower East Side to have such ethnic experiences. Or, perhaps even my own ideas stemmed from cultural images in films, television, theatre and literature. Growing up, such books as *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* and *The Diary of Anne Frank*, movies and plays like *Funny Girl*, *Fiddler on the Roof*, *School Ties*, and *Yentl*, and such TV shows as *Brooklyn Bridge* or characters such as Paul Pfeiffer from *The Wonder Years* seemed to demonstrate what 'being Jewish' was all about.¹ Whether real or imagined, my images of Jews, Judaism, and Jewishness did not mesh with my upbringing. Weekly pork-chop dinners, playing an 'Angel' in the school Christmas pageant and my soft blonde-hair simply did not fit.

Clearly, media images and stereotypes influenced my understanding of Jewish culture. Whether similar Jewish depictions endure today and influence other young, impressionable minds is yet to be determined. Whether these media images have any effect on Jewish identity or non-Jews' perspective on Jews may never be resolved. Still, there is a need to explore these topics and add to the diverse and comprehensive research on Jewish representation in the media.

¹ Barbra Streisand, Jewish diva extraordinaire, is a major figure in my childhood memories.

Chapter 1: Jewish-American Identity

Exploring Jewish-American Identity

Since the late 19th century, Jews have struggled with their evolving identity in America. As a people who may self-categorize or be classified by outsiders as “white” or “other,” as a race, religion, or ethnicity, complex struggles over identity are inevitable. From 1880-1924, more than two million East European Jews immigrated to the United States.² As a minority, Jews faced alienation and discrimination, compelling them to assimilate and ‘fit in’ with American culture. Despite the constant threats of assimilation and the changing face of ‘Jewishness,’ Jews continued to sustain a cultural bond and sensibility. Jewish traditions and characteristics endured, including cultural and religious practices. Attending temple, engaging in rituals such as the Bar Mitzvah, eating traditional Jewish foods and even enjoying Jewish humor (a la Jackie Mason or Jerry Seinfeld) are common in American society. Nevertheless, the future of American Jews is uncertain in the 21st century.

Scholars define ‘Jewishness’ in various ways. For my purposes, ‘Jewishness,’ or Jewish sensibility, entails compassion, connection and endurance. Jews are the paradigmatic diasporic people having been exiled from their homes innumerable

² Riv-Ellen Prell. *Fighting to Become Americans: Jews, Gender, and the Anxiety of Assimilation*. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1999): 14-15.

times. From *galut* (exile), prejudice and diaspora, a Jewish identity developed. 'Jewishness' embodies *chutzpah* and *tzedakah* (charity) from which certain characteristics — gesticulations, intonation and expressions — sustain as generations pass these values and traits on to their children. This sensibility encompasses feelings and ties related to shared historical and cultural experiences. 'Jewishness' is distinctly different from Judaism because it focuses on cultural values rather than on religious ideals. Further, the vulnerability and humanity of Jews creates a strong community. While this sensibility adapts and changes over the years, it remains a vital element in Jewish sustenance and community relations.

This thesis will address issues related to Jewish identity — Jewish assimilation in America; 'Jewishness' versus Judaism; the relation of Jews to whites and other racial designations; and the connection between Jewish sensibility and stereotypes to media. The constant struggles to assimilate and embrace the 'new,' yet maintain Jewish traditions of 'old,' are a central component of Jewish identity that I will examine. I will also consider the critical, yet daunting issue of Jews as an ethnicity, race or religion and its implications on Jewish identity and 'other's' perception of Jews.

However, the majority of the thesis will address post-WWII Jewish-American culture and its relationship to and representation on television. As the mass medium that dominates the American household, television is a powerful tool for communicating and disseminating messages. Television representations of people

from various races, religions, and ethnicities influence the mass audience since its constructed narratives and visuals are convincing and abundant. Further, these images may be the only contact that some Americans have with ‘others’ and, therefore, are taken at face value. With a focus on “Jewish” situation comedies (sitcoms), I will argue how Jewish characteristics and humor have been a major part of TV history since the 1950s — the era where TV became popular and validated as a reliable source of information in American households. A “Jewish” sitcom may be defined in numerous ways, but for my purposes, it is a television show that encompasses Jewish humor — with its stereotypes, self-deprecating, dry humor, Jewish characters and themes. Examples include *The Goldbergs* (1949-56), *Rhoda* (1974-79), *Seinfeld* (1989-98) and *Will and Grace* (1998-2006).³ From the pioneering *The Goldbergs* to the wildly successful *Seinfeld*, Jewish characters and themes became fixtures in American homes. Regardless of religion, ethnicity or race, television audiences seemed to embrace “Jewish” sitcoms, fueling a surge of programs from the 1990s to present-day.⁴ Similar and repetitive Jewish stereotypes, including the overbearing “Jewish Mother,” the whiny “Jewish-American Princess (JAP),” the clumsy, misfit *Schlemiel* (fool) and the anxious, ill-fated *Schlimazl* (an unlucky person) continue to appeal to mass audiences.

Perhaps the stereotypical images of Jews that seem to focus on secular ‘Jewishness,’ rather than on religious Judaism, explains the enduring popularity of

³ Vincent Brook. *Something Ain’t Kosher Here: The Rise of the ‘Jewish’ Sitcom*. (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2003): 4.

⁴ *Ibid*, 21.

“Jewish” sitcoms. Diverse American audiences can identify to *Seinfeld*’s supposedly Italian, but stereotypically Jewish George Costanza and his nagging parents or laugh at *Will and Grace*’s materialistic Grace Adler and her obsession with *noshing*. Through four prominent archetypes of Jews on television, “The Jewish Mother;” “The JAP (Jewish-American Princess); the *Schlemiel* and *Schlimazl*, I will examine the implications of these stereotypes on Jewish-American identity.

Numerous reasons explain the attraction of “Jewish” sitcoms for various ethnic audiences. Jewish humor as a defense mechanism to alienation, as well as a means of assimilation, may resonate with other minorities and explain its enduring popularity. The continuing stereotypes and concentration on ‘Jewishness,’ instead of Judaism, is of particular interest because it mirrors the American Jew’s struggle with assimilation. Since they immigrated to America, Jews have had to negotiate their religious beliefs and ethnic identity depending on the political and cultural climate. In addition, the decision to combat or tolerate prejudice and stereotypes proved a constant struggle. Still, it is important to acknowledge that these sitcoms do not resonate with *all* American racial, religious and ethnic minorities, but their high ratings and long runs do indicate a major appeal in mainstream America. Further, television’s portrayal of the Jewish people and Jewish culture may prove problematic for the future of Jewish identity. I will examine the complex relationship of television to Jewish assimilation and identity. Jewish stereotypes, negotiating identity and its

implications on ‘Jewishness,’ and secular versus religious ideals will be major themes in the thesis.

My main sources will be books and articles on immigration, assimilation, religion, ethnicity, and race, and their connection to Jewish-American identity. These texts include *Jewish Identity* edited by David Theo Goldberg and Michael Krausz, *How Jews Became White Folks and What That Says About Race in America* by Karen Brodtkin and *Fighting to Become Americans: Jews, Gender, and the Anxiety of Assimilation* by Riv-Ellen Prell. Critical texts to this thesis address television’s relationship and portrayal of Jews and their effects on Jewish-American identity. Some of these books include *Too Jewish? Challenging Traditional Identities* edited by Norman L. Kleeblatt, *Television’s Changing Image of American Jews* by Neal Gabler, Frank Rich and Joyce Antler and *Something Ain’t Kosher Here: The Rise of the ‘Jewish’ Sitcom* by Vincent Brook. Although there is a great deal of literature circulating on Jewish identity and its representation on TV, my focus on “Jewishness” versus Judaism and its implications on Jews themselves and ‘other’s’ perception of Jews is a distinguishing factor in this thesis. In addition to texts, I use archival footage of television sitcoms. Specific episodes of *The Goldbergs*, *The Nanny* and *Seinfeld* will be examined to demonstrate the persistence and appeal of Jewish humor and stereotypes to mass audiences.

Jewish-American Identity: Pre-WWII

Half a million Central European Jews immigrated to America from the 1840s-1880s.⁵ At this time, German-Jewish rabbis and scholars were the heart of Jewish intellectual life. Many of these German Jews came to America to escape increasing anti-Semitism and economic instability.⁶ Later in the 19th century, from 1881-1924, more than two million Eastern European Jews immigrated hoping to find a ‘new’ home of tolerance and opportunity.⁷ For most Jews, immigrating was a survival tactic to combat persecution. Russian and Polish Jews, in particular, faced massacres, pogroms, and strict legal restrictions — the May Laws of the 1880s, which “forced Jews to abandon their previous employments and way of life and to migrate to urban centers,” created a “mass exodus” to America.⁸ At first, the Eastern European immigrants, being from economically, politically and intellectually diverse backgrounds, embarrassed the secular and mostly upper-class German Jews. To remedy this problem, the German Jews established Jewish associations, philanthropic institutions and community centers, which brought Jews closer together.⁹ These organizations greatly aided in easing internal conflict among Jewish immigrants.

⁵ Peter S. Lemish. “Hanukah Bush: The Jewish Experience in America.” *Theory Into Practice*. Vol. 20, No. 1 (1981): 27. *Journal Storage*. Georgetown U. Library. Online. Internet Explorer. 17 Jan. 2006.

<http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=00405841%28198124%2920%3A1%3C26%3AHBTJEI%3E2.0.CO%3B2-7>

⁶ Jonathan D. Sarna. *The American Jewish Experience*. (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1986): 43.

⁷ Lemish, 27.

⁸ Deborah Dwork. “Immigrant Jews on the Lower East Side of New York: 1880-1914.” Ed. Jonathan D. Sarna. *The American Jewish Experience*. (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1986): 102.

⁹ Samuel G. Freedman. *Jew vs. Jew: The Struggle for the Soul of American Jewry*. (New York: Touchstone, 2000): 100, 106.

As internal struggles waned, external prejudice persisted. While murder and extinction were not a threat in the United States as in Europe, Jews did not escape anti-Semitism and ostracism. Edward S. Shapiro writes, “Jews faced Jewish quotas in the elite universities, restricted job opportunities in fields such as engineering, insurance, and banking ... Americans distrusted Jews more than any other European group with the exception of Italians.¹⁰ The Jewish people faced hardship and bigotry in their ‘new’ country, along with other European immigrants, such as the Italians and Irish.

Survival was the goal of early Jewish immigrants and assimilation seemed the means to accomplishing this goal. While living in America, entering their children in school was a priority for Jewish parents, since education had always been important for Jews because scholarship “preserve[d] their traditions and way of life.”¹¹ Samuel C. Heilman explains, “Throughout nearly the entire history of the diaspora, Jews have considered study and scholarship as the special heritage and religious responsibility of this ‘people of the book.’¹² Since scholarship was an essential value for Jews, Jewish immigrants wanted their children to integrate into the American school system, but their commitment to Jewish tradition and culture had to be compromised. Before arriving in America, Jewish education focused on religious teaching and

¹⁰ Edward S. Shapiro. “World War II and American Jewish Identity.” *Modern Judaism*. Vol. 10, No. 1 (Feb. 1990): 68-69. *Journal Storage*. Georgetown U. Library. Online. Internet Explorer. 17 Jan. 2006.

<http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=02761114%28199002%2910%3A1%3C65%3AWWIAAJ%3E2.0.CO%3B2-3>

¹¹ Lemish, 27.

¹² Samuel C. Heilman. “*The Sociology of American Jewry: The Last Ten Years.*” *Annual Reviews Inc.* 8 (1982): 153.

followed the texts of Jewish scholars,¹³ but American education encouraged diverse, secular subjects. This educational opportunity would act as a “socializing agent” and teach Jewish children American ways.¹⁴

Still, anti-Semitism was a barrier for Jews in the United States — quotas and exclusion were common in academic institutions. Leading American Jewish historian, Jonathan D. Sarna, writes:

During the 1920s, according to one incomplete list, Harvard, Yale, Princeton, Columbia, Duke, Rutgers, Barnard, Adelphi, Cornell, Johns Hopkins, Northwestern, Penn State ... all found ways implicit and explicit to limit the number of Jewish students, as did numerous private academies and preparatory schools. The extent of the restrictive quotas and the means used to achieve them differed from place to place, but what really mattered for Jews was that they were excluded not on the basis of merit but simply on account of their ancestry and faith.¹⁵

With hard work and persistence, Jews slowly integrated into the education system. It would take years for Jews to become fully accepted, but the founding of Brandeis University, the first Jewish-sponsored, non-denominational university in 1945 aided in this process.¹⁶ Although Jews benefited from an American-centric education, that eventually allowed many Jews to acquire respectable, lucrative professions, Jewish identity did suffer. Peter S. Lemish elaborates, “Most immigrant parents welcomed the Americanization process, although ... they paid a price for embracing it.”¹⁷ The

¹³ Ibid, 154.

¹⁴ Lemish, 27.

¹⁵ Jonathan D. Sarna. *American Judaism: A History*. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004): 219.

¹⁶ Ibid, 436.

¹⁷ Lemish, 27.

struggle between the desire for their children to thrive in America, but still maintain Jewish values, proved difficult for immigrant families.

Despite the economic, political and emotional struggles in academia, Jews not only survived, but thrived in America. Nevertheless, anti-Semitic rhetoric, stereotyping and prejudice were daily occurrences for Jews in the university, the work force and the public sphere. “A public-opinion survey had found that 63 percent of Americans believed that Jews, as a group, had 'objectionable traits'; a majority believed that German Jews were wholly or partly to blame for the Nazis' persecution of them,” writes Charles E. Silberman.¹⁸ As Jews assimilated, complexities and contradictions grew as well. Internal and external criticism appeared from politicians, religious leaders and intellectuals.

Gentiles opposed the infiltration of the Jews into society, but, perhaps, more disturbing, Jews criticized other Jews. In the 1940s, Milton S. Mayer, a Jewish journalist wrote an article, “The Case Against the Jew,” which “was permeated with anti-Semitic stereotypes.”¹⁹ Mayer seethes, “In their dreams of ‘assimilation,’ [American Jews] tried to shake the symbols of unassimilability from their coattails ... They tried to adjust, this pitiful people who once were proud ... There was nothing a gentile would stoop to that a Jew wouldn’t if he could.”²⁰ Such sharp critique of one’s

¹⁸ Charles E. Silberman. *A Certain People: American Jews and Their Lives Today*. (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1985): 57.

¹⁹ Shapiro, 70.

²⁰ Ibid.

own people demonstrated the “self-hatred”²¹ that some Jews imposed upon themselves. Other non-extremist Jews found it difficult, to reconcile their Jewish identity with American norms, but did not internalize it as a Jewish weakness. The Jewish people struggled to maintain their history, traditions and values in America, but confusion and ambiguity would consistently cloud their Jewish-American identity.

In his essay, “Jewish Survival in Protestant America,” Benny Kraut attributes Jewish self-preservation and endurance to four strategies: “Geographic mobility and relocation; erection of Jewish communal infrastructures; assessment of and adaptation to the host environment; and Jewish defense.”²² These methods of survival offered coping mechanisms for an ‘old’ people in a ‘new’ society and aid in sustaining ‘Jewishness’ throughout assimilation. Kraut is accurate in his assessment of Jewish sustenance, and underlying these tactics is the ever-present desire for Jews to survive as individuals and as a community. Perhaps this persistence explains Kraut’s precise statement, “Among all the distinctive American ethnic, racial, and religious groups, Jews stand out as having the longest and most successful historical record of surviving cultural interactions and confrontations with host societies while living as a minority in their midst.”²³ Still, while Jews continued to create homes for themselves in this ‘new’ land, challenges in America persisted. Both America and its

²¹ Sander L. Gilman. *The Jew’s Body*. (New York: Routledge, 1991): 33.

²² Benny Kraut. “Jewish Survival in Protestant America.” *Minority Faiths and the American Protestant Mainstream*. Ed. Jonathan D. Sarna. (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1998): 15-16.

²³ *Ibid*, 15.

Jews experienced an identity crisis in the early 1900s — the clash between the American ideal of a pluralistic, tolerant society and the reality of a “culturally homogeneous Protestant society dominated by the spirit of an evangelical Protestant temper”²⁴ paralleled the Jewish struggle with assimilation. Both Americans and Jews were working on forming identities that feasibly merged their ideals with reality.

It became apparent that Jewish and American cultures were indeed different and Jews had to make concessions to assimilate. Lemish, in his essay, “Hanukah Bush: The Jewish Experience in America,” explains the divergence in Jewish and American perspective through three categories of “Jewish consciousness — historical, social, and cultural.”²⁵ These forms encompass values and traditions that distinguish the Jewish culture from other races, religions and ethnicities. The “historical consciousness” of Jews emphasizes the importance of remembering one’s ancestors and the persecution they endured, such as slavery, exile and genocide, to keep their faith. The “social consciousness” of Jews focuses on “maintaining the continuity of the Jewish culture.”²⁶

The family unit is central to this consciousness and Jews must extend the bond of their own family to their community. Philanthropy and education are significant acts that sustain Jewish culture, as well. Lemish explains the “cultural consciousness” of Jews is “the drive to put into action the values, beliefs, customs, and way of life of the Jew ... to fulfill the dream of creating a more complete and just

²⁴ Ibid, 23.

²⁵ Lemish, 27.

²⁶ Ibid, 28.

world.”²⁷ Actions towards fostering a fair and ethical world create meaning and purpose for the Jewish people. Lemish concludes, “Each form of consciousness interlocks and infuses the others so that the Jewish world view consists of concerns, values, beliefs, and feelings which emerge from a sense of who the Jews were, a desire to act in order to insure the Jewish culture will continue into the future, and a drive to create a just society.”²⁸ American values, which derive from Puritan and Protestant roots, are not opposed to Jewish ideals,²⁹ but vast differences, such as the focus on individualism and the Sunday Sabbath, did produce conflict.³⁰

In his book, *The Future of the Jewish Community in America*, David Sidorsky argues that three American values particularly affected Jewish-American identity in the 20th century:

The first is the development of modern science which has led to a dramatic shift in the locus of intellectual authority and cultural energy ... The second movement comprises growth of the secular ideologies of freedom and progress linked to movements of modern European Enlightenment ... Third, there has been a psychological revolution, related to both the development of modern science and the emergence of secular ideology, which has replaced a commitment to transcendent or traditionalist values by a stress upon expression of individuality, pursuit of individual happiness, or satisfaction of individual interests and desires.³¹

While the first value does not seem as influential as the other two on Jewish-American identity, the second and third will be addressed throughout the thesis. The

²⁷ Ibid, 29.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Kraut, 23.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ David Sidorsky. “Judaism and the Revolution of Modernity.” *The Future of the Jewish Community in America*. (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1973): 4.

latter ideal of individuality is significant because Americans hold individualism in high esteem and view an independent, self-sufficient person as a success. A ‘pioneering spirit’ and sense of self-sufficiency are ingrained in the American consciousness. “Rugged individualism” and the ‘heroic cowboy’ are romanticized in 20th century America, especially through filmic imagery. In over 150 Westerns, John Wayne³² portrayed a fearless loner, epitomizing America’s identification with individuality, patriotism, and nationalism. While the Jewish people value individualism, “observance of historical events from their nation’s past ... the traditional importance of the Jewish family and concern for the welfare of other Jews” are fundamental.³³ Further, family unity was essential with the dangers of persecution for Jews abroad and this cohesion remained with the Jews in America.³⁴ Therefore, conflict arose as Jewish ideals mixed with American ones.

While family is important, many Americans were focused on the “American Dream” of economic, social and personal success for an individual.³⁵ Since the typical Jewish family is a close-knit unit, conflict occurred as Jews acculturated into American society. A Jewish businessman asked to take an important client to dinner Friday-night or a Jewish teenager’s desire to attend the Friday-night school dance would cause turmoil in the household since the traditional Friday-night *Sabbath*

³² Legendary American actor — 1907-1979. Well-known for his portrayal of cowboys in Westerns throughout the 1900s. The Internet Movie Database. Database Search. John Wayne. 30 March 2006. <http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0000078/bio>

³³ Lemish, 29.

³⁴ Myrna Hant. “TV Jewish Mothers: The Creation of a Multiethnic Antiheroine.” (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2003): 3.

³⁵ Lemish, 29.

dinner is significant in the Jewish culture as a traditional time for family to be together. These not-so-serious, but common examples demonstrate the clashing of Jewish and American culture.

Jewish-American Identity: Post-WWII

During WWII, Americans, regardless of race, religion, and ethnicity, fought to defend their country and its democratic values. After victory, a newfound sense of unity, nationalism and pride created a more tolerant, open-minded society. In academia, employment and social activities, Jews experienced more tolerance and acceptance.³⁶ Sarna writes,

Thanks to federal and state legislation, pressure from returning veterans, government, and media exposure (including films like *Gentleman's Agreement*),³⁷ and the stigma of being compared to the Nazis, discrimination against Jews in employment, housing, and daily life also markedly declined. Antisemitism by no means disappeared, of course, any more than nativism, anti-Catholicism, or racism did.³⁸

Anti-Semitism significantly waned after the war, but surveys show that prejudice still loomed. Opinion polls in the 1940s indicated that some Americans believed the Jews were responsible for Jewish persecution and suffering, and more than 40 percent of

³⁶ Sarna, *American Judaism*, 275.

³⁷ An acclaimed 1947 film, which won the "Best Picture" Oscar. The first major Hollywood film to address anti-Semitism. In it, "Gregory Peck pretends to be Jewish in order to write about the effects of bigotry. From being refused a job and access to public accommodations, to his son being beat up ... Peck soon learns what it means to be Jewish." The Internet Movie Database. Database Search. *Gentleman's Agreement* (1947). 30 March 2006. <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0039416/>

³⁸ Sarna, *American Judaism*, 276.

Americans would not acknowledge that the Nazis had committed mass murder.³⁹ This disturbing perspective, along with a denial of the Holocaust, provided anxiety and confusion in Jewish-Americans. While Jews took advantage of the new economic, academic and social opportunities presented to them, an identity struggle still persisted in regards to their place in American society. While acceptance seemed to improve amongst gentiles towards Jews throughout the 20th century, anti-Semitism and internal feelings of alienation persisted for the Jewish people.

Although the Holocaust is prevalent in American discourse today, until the 1960s, Americans did not acknowledge this tragedy.⁴⁰ Focused on victory, Jews and gentiles seemed unaware of, or unwilling to face, the atrocity that had occurred overseas. Whether the immediacy of the trauma was too overwhelming or newfound economic and social opportunities for Jews acted as distractions, the Holocaust slipped under the radar. In the 1960s, the American attitude changed and the Holocaust was addressed. Alan E. Steinweis writes, “If the 1950s had been a period of relative neglect of the Holocaust in both the United States and Germany, the 1960s was a period of transition to a far more active involvement with the subject that would characterize the subsequent decades.”⁴¹ Several factors influenced this

³⁹ Alan E. Steinweis. “The Legacy of the Holocaust in Germany and the United States.” *The United States and Germany in the Era of the Cold War, 1945-1990*. Vol. 1. Ed. Detlef Junker. (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2004): 489.

⁴⁰ *Ibid*, 492.

⁴¹ *Ibid*.

ideological shift, including media attention. Film, theatre and television began examining the Holocaust, with movies such as *Judgment at Nuremberg* (1961).⁴²

The pivotal 1978 television mini-series “Holocaust” had the greatest impact on American society since “these television programs became significant for educating a broad public about the events in Germany and Europe that produced the genocide of European Jewry.”⁴³ Media in the 1960s and 1970s brought the Holocaust into American consciousness and provoked dialogue and academic inquiry into the tragedy. Americans started to recognize the power of media to influence public awareness and people’s opinions, which later would prove detrimental for Jews in combating misrepresentative images and stereotypes.

Similar to the Holocaust, the creation of the Jewish state of Israel in 1948 did not immediately affect Jewish-Americans.⁴⁴ This apparent disengagement changed over time, especially when media, such as film and television, became increasingly influential on political and personal views. When the epic Hollywood film, *Exodus* (1960),⁴⁵ hit theatres, America’s awareness of and interest in Israel increased. Sarna elaborates that *Exodus* “‘contributed mightily to the visibility of Israel on the American Jewish communal agenda’ ... the film’s highly sympathetic portrayal of

⁴² This film takes place in a 1948 American court in occupied Germany that tries four Nazi Judges who used their offices to conduct Nazi sterilization and cleansing policies. The large cast includes stars, such as Spencer Tracy, Burt Lancaster, and Marlene Dietrich. The Internet Movie Database. Database Search. *Judgment at Nuremberg* (1961). 30 March 2006. <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0055031/>

⁴³ Jeffrey M. Peck. *Being Jewish in the New Germany*. (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2006): 25.

⁴⁴ Sarna, *American Judaism*, 336, 446.

⁴⁵ Film about the founding of Israel. Based on the 1958 best-selling novel by Leon Uris. (Sarna, *American Judaism*, 336).

Israel's birth and the conscious links it drew between brawny Zionist pioneers and the heroes of traditional American westerns ... fostered identification with the Jewish state among Jews and Christians alike."⁴⁶

In addition to more media exposure, the Six Day War in 1967 sealed the Jewish-American commitment to Israel.⁴⁷ Charles E. Silberman writes, "Many Jews would never have believed that grave danger to Israel could dominate their thoughts and emotions ... before 1967 they had seen Israel as an object of charity rather (or more) than as an integral component of their own identity."⁴⁸ Today, Israel is considered pivotal to Jews and Jewish-Americans are committed to its preservation.⁴⁹ The connection between Israel and America grew stronger, as well, and today, Israel remains one of America's closest allies. Both the Holocaust and the creation of Israel were pivotal moments in Jewish history that connected Jewish-Americans to international Jews, emphasizing the common struggles that Jews worldwide face. Without media representation, awareness and communication over these events may have diminished, demonstrating the power of media to fuel discourse and unity.

The 1950s became the "golden age" for Jewish-Americans — anti-Semitism decreased and Jews reached middle-class standards in economic and social terms by 1955.⁵⁰ Sarna recognizes that "Jews had also moved up into professionals. One study

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Silberman, 184.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Herbert J. Gans. "Ethnicity in the Modern World." *Ethnicity*. Eds. John Hutchinson and Anthony D. Smith. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996): 148.

⁵⁰ Sarna, *American Judaism*, 277.

discerned that a particular increase in the number of Jewish journalists, authors, engineers, architects, and college teachers, and concluded that there had been a ‘rapid rise in the number of Jews engaged in all intellectual occupations in recent years.’⁵¹ Jews holding such prestigious positions and living in comfortable conditions was distinctly different from the immigrant experience earlier in the century. Jewish education also thrived during this period — “Whereas in the 1920s the majority of Jewish children received no Jewish education whatsoever, in 1959, the American Association for Jewish Education estimated that ‘more than eighty percent of Jewish children attended one or another type of Jewish school during the course of their elementary school years.’⁵² This interest in Judaism flourished throughout the 1950s and involvement among Jewish-Americans with Judaism increased. Still, what was once viewed as a ‘religious revival’ has been disproved. This false impression materialized from the accelerated building of synagogues and community centres in white, middle-class suburban neighborhoods.⁵³ Sarna perpetuates the ‘religious revival’ misconception by writing, “By the late 1950s ... 60 percent [of Jews affiliated with synagogues], a figure never exceeded and the only time in the 20th century that more than half of America’s Jews were synagogue members.”⁵⁴ Indeed, it is accurate that Jews attended synagogue and Jewish community events more often

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Sarna, *American Judaism*, 279.

⁵³ Gans, 152.

⁵⁴ Sarna, *American Judaism*, 277.

after moving to the suburbs, but this was less a religious phenomenon than a social one.

One could even interpret this Jewish activity as a resurgence of ethnic identification. Herbert J. Gans views the shift as “symbolic ethnicity” or a grand gesture “characterized by a nostalgic allegiance to the culture of the immigrant generation, or that of the old country; a love for and a pride in a tradition that can be felt without having to be incorporated in everyday behavior.”⁵⁵ To substantiate this theory, Gans regards the temple as the “symbol that could serve as a means of expressing identity without requiring more than occasional participation.”⁵⁶

Additionally, I would argue that the actual constructions of these Jewish structures were symbols by which the Jews exhibited their cultural allegiance. Thus, the Jew’s mobilization serves to accentuate this “symbolic ethnicity,” not define it.

Post-WWII, negotiating identity became increasingly complicated, since the United States prided itself on its “Melting Pot” image, but Jews, and other minorities, strived to revive their ethnic uniqueness.⁵⁷ Years earlier, Theodore Roosevelt emphasized the American ideal of a homogenous community: “We intend to see that the crucible turns our people out as Americans, of American nationality, and not as dwellers in a polyglot boardinghouse.”⁵⁸ The spirit of connection that materialized

⁵⁵ Gans, 146.

⁵⁶ Ibid, 152.

⁵⁷ Matthew Frye Jacobson. “Ethnic Jewishness in ‘A Nation of Immigrants,’ 1963-2000.” *“Jewishness” and the World of “Difference” in the United States*. Ed. Marc Lee Raphael. (Williamsburg, PA: The College of William and Mary, 2001): 27-28.

⁵⁸ Thomas G. Dyer. *TR and the Idea of Race*. (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1980): 134.

after the war reinforced acculturation and national unity, encouraging immigrants to “melt” into America’s “pot” and shed their differences.

In his essay, “Ethnic Jewishness in ‘A Nation of Immigrants,’ 1963-2000,” Matthew Frye Jacobson addresses the “ethnic revival” of the 1960s and 1970s that arose from assimilation and the blurring of ethnicities. While Jews had consistently strived to ‘blend in’ and reap the financial, political and personal benefits of American assimilation, they lamented the decline of Jewish history and culture. In addition, “the pronounced shift in American nationality in the post-1960s period — a secular canon of civic beliefs whose self-defined communion is as ‘a nation of immigrants,’” built ties between Jews and “various non-Jewish European ‘ethnics.’”⁵⁹ Ironically, America considered Jews white, yet Jews often identified with other immigrants and minority cultures. This struggle between the allures of assimilation and the desire for preservation persists for the Jewish people.

⁵⁹ Ibid, 28.

Chapter 2: “The Jewish Question”

Jews as a Race

Whether Jews are a race, ethnicity or religion is a highly debated, and controversial topic. Categorizing Jews as a religion is accurate, while an argument could be made for the Jewish people as an ethnicity. However, distinguishing Jews as a race is problematic since Jews have diverse backgrounds and race is a societal construct. Nevertheless, labeling Jews a race has a long history and, in the past, Jews were often considered an ‘inferior’ race, such as black. Cultural historian Sander Gilman explores the ideas on race in the 19th century: “The general consensus of the ethnological literature of the late nineteenth century was that Jews were ‘black’ or, at least, ‘swarthy’ ... ‘blackness’ of the Jew was not only a mark of racial inferiority, but also an indicator of the diseased nature of the Jew.”⁶⁰ Gentiles pointed to the Jew’s physical features, especially his/her face, in this analysis and considered Jews so ‘different’ that they had to be another race. Rhetoric in the 1800’s often compared the Jew to the black in statements such as,

A brow marked with furrows or prominent points of bone ... high cheekbones; a sloping and disproportioned chin; an elongated, projecting mouth ... a large, massive, club-shaped, hooked nose, three or four times larger than suits the face — these are features which stamp the African character of the Jew ... Thus it is that the Jewish face never can, and never is, perfectly beautiful.⁶¹

⁶⁰ Gilman, *The Jew’s Body*, 171-172.

⁶¹ Robert Knox. *The Races of Men: A Fragment*. (Philadelphia: Lea and Blanchard, 1850): 134.

Anti-Semitism played a large role in this discourse, but it was the norm in the 18th and 19th centuries to characterize Jews as “diseased” and “ugly.”⁶² Relating Jews with blackness was a mechanism by others who wanted to marginalize and control the Jews for political or social reasons. This racial construction alienated Jews from people, who considered them dangerous, dirty, dark people. Not until the Jews immigrated to the United States were they considered other racial types. Upon settling in America, others did not know what to make of Jews in regards to their race. Jews were often seen as their own distinct race, neither black nor white, but this changed in the early 20th century.⁶³ When Jewish-American entertainers, such as Al Jolson wore blackface, this distinguished Jews from black Americans, and whites began to accept Jews as Caucasian.⁶⁴

In her book, *How Jews Became White Folks and What That Says About Race in America*, Karen Brodtkin explores the complexity of race in the identification of Jews in America. Depending on historical and political circumstances, Jews were considered “white” or “non-white,” and “ethnoracial assignments” are distinct from “ethnoracial identity.”⁶⁵ “The Jewish question” becomes the relationship between these assignments and identity. Brodtkin argues that the “core constitutive myth” of America claims that there are only two races — “white or alien ‘other’ ... In this

⁶² Gilman, *The Jew’s Body*, 173.

⁶³ Matthew Frye Jacobson. *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998): 178-179.

⁶⁴ *Ibid*, 187.

⁶⁵ Karen Brodtkin. *How Jews Became White Folks and What That Says About Race in America*. (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1998): 24.

myth, the alternatives available to nonwhite and variously alien ‘others’ has been either to whiten themselves or to be consigned to an animal-like, ungendered underclass unfit to exercise the prerogatives of citizenship.”⁶⁶ Therefore, for acceptance and opportunity, Jews chose assimilation and inclusion in America. Still, to categorize Jews as a race is flawed, especially if skin color and physical traits are determining factors of the typology.

The theory that race is irrefutable and stagnant is erroneous since races have appeared and disappeared throughout history. “Racial classifications” change depending on economic, political and cultural circumstances, which leads to the conclusion that race is a fabrication.⁶⁷ The construction of Jews as white is unsound, considering their diverse biology, history and geography. Further, the Jewish people consistently encountered persecution and prejudice abroad because they were the alien ‘other,’ and often considered black, yet in America, “it was their *whiteness*, not any kind of New World magnanimity, that opened the Golden Door.”⁶⁸ Similar to Brodtkin, Jacobson argues that race is not natural, but politically conceived to create hierarchies and boundaries. Both authors are correct in their analysis of race as a construction used to further political and personal agendas.

While race may be constructed, that creation, by itself, will not fuel anger, violence, and exclusion. It is the perception of race that is injurious. Unfortunately, human beings recognize and legitimize race, creating boundaries and prejudices.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color*, 3.

⁶⁸ Ibid, 8.

Jacobson elaborates, “In racial matters above all else, the eye that sees is ‘a means of perception conditioned by the tradition in which its possessor has been reared.’”⁶⁹

Therefore, one is taught prejudice and stereotypes by one’s familial, cultural, and societal surroundings. To develop and sustain, discrimination must be validated.

Further, Thomas H. Eriksen addresses man’s legitimization process for prejudice and inequality: “Racism, obviously, builds on the assumption that personality is somehow linked with hereditary characteristics which differ systematically between ‘races,’ and in this way race may assume sociological importance even if it has no ‘objective’ existence.”⁷⁰ This justification of racism is unacceptable, as is the construction of race to separate human beings. Jews have been considered white or black throughout their long history as a means of inclusion and exclusion, acceptance and persecution.

Molding ‘Jewishness’ as ‘Whiteness’ is a political and cultural myth.

Particularly disconcerting is racial ideology’s focus on the Jew’s ‘typical’ physical appearance. Stereotypes such as the Jewish “high-bridged nose,” “bulging eyes” or “thick lips” lead to alienation and discrimination.⁷¹ By focusing on physical traits of a group, one molds an ‘other,’ which creates the dichotomy of those ‘included’ and ‘excluded.’ This false construction may be utilized negatively for political, economic and social power structures. Jacobson writes:

There is no foolproof way of ‘distinguishing one people as a whole from another people as a whole by mere physical appearance,’ yet ‘racial’ thinking

⁶⁹ Ibid, 10.

⁷⁰ Thomas H. Eriksen. “Ethnicity, Race, Class and Nation.” *Ethnicity*. Eds. John Hutchinson and Anthony D. Smith. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996): 29.

⁷¹ Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color*, 65.

continues to hold sway — ‘the Nazis have driven this form of logic to its fanatical extreme,’ and ‘we are not free from those tendencies in the United States.’⁷²

While the Holocaust and acts of genocide demonstrate the extreme consequences of race politics, exploitation and maltreatment occur daily due to racial discrimination. Classifying Jews as any race is problematic — ‘Jewishness’ cannot be pigeonholed into any racial category, such as “Caucasian [white], Negroid [black], and Mongoloid [asian], the mantra of America’s public discourse of ‘difference.’”⁷³

Jews as a Religion

While one may question Jews as a race, the Jewish people are definitively a religion. Jews practice the religious ideals of Judaism dating back to 3760 BC.⁷⁴ Although not every Jewish person subscribes to its religious doctrines, Judaism follows the 13 principles of the Jewish scholar, Rabbi Moshe ben Maimon (Maimonides).⁷⁵ The basic tenants include belief in one God; the sanctity of the *Torah*;⁷⁶ and the coming of the Messiah.⁷⁷ Historically, much has been examined and

⁷² Ibid, 101.

⁷³ Ibid, 124.

⁷⁴ The year that the Jewish calendar begins. (The American-Israeli Cooperative Enterprise. “The Dawn of ‘History.’” (ca. 3800-2001 B.C.E.). *Jewish Virtual Library*. 2006. Online. Internet Explorer. 2 April 2006. <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/History/dawn.html#1>)

⁷⁵ Tracey R. Rich. Judaism 101: “What Do Jews Believe?” *JewFAQ.org*. 1995-2001. Online. Internet Explorer. 2 April 2006. <http://www.jewfaq.org/beliefs.htm>

⁷⁶ The first five books of the Hebrew scripture. “A narrative ... of events from the creation of the world to the death of Moses.” (Milton Steinberg. *Basic Judaism*. (San Diego: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1947): 19).

⁷⁷ The “human being appointed by God and armed by Him with power and authority to purge the world of its evils and to establish the good upon foundations so firm as never to be moved.” (Ibid, 167).

written on the Jews and their religion, legitimizing Judaism and its relation to other world religions, such as Christianity and Islam. Over the years, scholars interpreted Judaism differently, leading to the separate denominations of Jews, including Orthodox, Conservative, Reconstructionist, and Reform.⁷⁸ The last two American-born sectors may be considered more fluid and liberal than Orthodoxy and Conservatism, and each has its own beliefs and traditions. While it is important to acknowledge that Jews are a religion and not a race, identifying Jews as an ethnicity is not as simple or lucid.

Jews as an Ethnicity

It is essential to define and historicize the term, “ethnicity,” before applying it to the Jewish people because the word has different meanings and constructions over time. Unlike race or religion, ethnicity has not been studied and explored in the American consciousness until very recently. Although the concept has old roots, ethnicity did not spark interest until the 1950s in Africa and Asia, and, as late as the 1960s in Europe and America⁷⁹ — the term did not appear in the English language until 1953.⁸⁰ “Ethnicity” comes from the Greek word *ethnos*, meaning “gentile,” which at this time was defined as a “non-Christian and non-Jewish pagan,”⁸¹ but

⁷⁸ Nicholas De Lange. *Judaism*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986): 84-85.

⁷⁹ John Hutchinson and Anthony D. Smith. “Preface.” *Ethnicity*. Eds. John Hutchinson and Anthony D. Smith. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996): v.

⁸⁰ John Hutchinson and Anthony D. Smith. “Introduction.” *Ethnicity*. Eds. John Hutchinson and Anthony D. Smith. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996): 4.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

today is used to describe any non-Jewish person. Using the term *ethnos* was a means of distinguishing ‘us’ from ‘them,’ with the *ethnos* referring to the more alien ‘them.’ As the term developed and crossed into other cultures, it lost some of its negative connotation and “applied to majorities and minorities, host and immigrant communities, alike.”⁸²

The French version, *ethnie*, demonstrates another construction that is widely accepted today and applies to the American understanding of ethnicity, as well: “a named human population with myths of common ancestry, shared historical memories, one or more elements of common culture, a link with a homeland and a sense of solidarity among at least some of its members.”⁸³ Although there are various definitions of ethnicity, this definition could apply to the Jews, who do encompass cultural and historical memories and a sense of community. Indeed, the Jewish people do not have a single homeland, but Israel could be considered a shared nation, since Jews established this country and are always welcome to live there. Ethnicity is applicable to the Jews because one does not need to practice religion or label oneself a race to be part of an ethnic community. Therefore, ethnicity may be more of a chosen identity rather than a culturally or historically constructed and forced identity.

From ethnicity comes terms such as “ethnic identity” and “ethnic origin.” These “refer to the individual level of identification with a culturally defined

⁸² Ibid, 5.

⁸³ Ibid, 6.

collectivity, the sense on the part of the individual that she or he belongs to a particular cultural community. 'Ethnic origin' likewise refers to a sense of ancestry and nativity on the part of the individual through his or her parents or grandparents."⁸⁴ In other words, through ethnicity, an individual finds a community that he/she relates to and molds his/her identity around. Of course, parents or grandparents may have an influence in introducing one's ethnic origin, but practices and beliefs are fluid and may be determined throughout one's life. Markers of ethnicity may include, but are not limited to language, dress, food, physical features, rituals and beliefs. Some of these markers are adaptable and some (physical features) cannot change, which individuals must negotiate and address in their day-to-day identification.

Throughout the 20th century, Jews have embraced or rejected Jewish religious teachings and rituals, depending on economic, political and social circumstances. Still, a connection with their Jewish heritage and a bond with other Jews remained. Therefore, Jewish ethnicity may be considered to be the strongest affiliation in America. Ethnicity is more fluid and diverse than race or religion, allowing Jews, and other minorities, to embrace 'ethnic identity,' while still assimilating as Americans. Silberman writes, "Ethnic vitality does not require isolation, nor does assimilation necessarily mean disintegration or loss of élan."⁸⁵ As an ethnicity, Jews may mold their everyday lives, manipulating an identity, rather pushing one. Jews may attend

⁸⁴ Ibid, 5.

⁸⁵ Silberman, 168.

synagogue, light *Shabbos* candles, give money to Jewish charity, or even classify themselves as ‘Caucasian’ on a form, since identifying ethnically allows one to shape one’s Jewish identity.

‘Jewishness’ is the embodiment of Jewish ethnicity. ‘Jewishness’ or Jewish sensibility includes connection to and a bond with other Jews from a shared historical and cultural background. The knowledge of past hardship and current experience as a Jew molds ‘Jewishness.’ Scholars have defined ‘Jewishness’ in many ways, allowing various interpretations. Bethamie Horowitz writes in “Connections and Journeys: Assessing Critical Opportunities for Enhancing Jewish Identity,” “What do we mean by a person’s sense of ‘Jewishness’ or Jewish identity? In this study ... *Jewishness refers to the set of beliefs, images, feelings and practices that a person considers to be Jewish.*”⁸⁶ This definition of ‘Jewishness’ starkly contrasts Paul Ritterband’s idea that ‘Jewishness’ is “that which is peculiar to Jews, that which marks Jews off from other peoples either absolutely or in probabilistic terms. Thus Jewishness as an abstraction stands for the markers by which both Jews and non-Jews establish the Jewish social boundary, as well as the content of traditional Judaism and the behaviours and attitudes that are derivative from both.”⁸⁷ When gentiles identify ‘Jewishness,’ it is their subjective opinion of Jewish traits and characteristics, rather

⁸⁶ Bethamie Horowitz. “Connections and Journeys: Assessing Critical Opportunities for Enhancing Jewish Identity.” *A Report to the Commission on Jewish Identity & Renewal*. (New York: UJA-Federation of New York, 2000): 3.

⁸⁷ Paul Ritterband. “Jewish Identity among Russian Immigrants in the US.” *Russian Jews on Three Continents: Migration and Resettlement*. Eds. Noah Lewin-Epstein, Yaacov Ro’I, and Paul Ritterband. (London: Frank Cass, 1997): 326.

than an objective opinion. Television representations, especially, are subjective, since they focus on constructed stereotypes to entertain their audience, rather than any objective experience. While Horowitz considers 'Jewishness' an individual's personal idea of what it means to be Jewish, Ritterband suggests it is the individual, as well as the outsider's perspective that distinguish Jews from 'others.'

While inconclusive, these constructions of 'Jewishness' are also problematic since the definitions could apply to various ethnic groups and their identification. It is legitimate to ponder what distinguishes 'Jewishness' from 'Christianness,' 'Blackness' or 'Irishness.' Although there is no single or 'correct' answer, some differences between Jews and their 'Jewishness' emerge. Although primarily other people's difficulty with Jewish identity, Jews will always struggle with the tension and dispute over whether they are a race, religion or ethnicity because a constant societal reminder will affect them. Jews have labeled themselves and been labeled by outsiders consistently and continue to find difficulty negotiating their identity. That particular conflict is distinct to 'Jewishness,' since 'Catholicness'⁸⁸ identifies with a religion, 'Blackness' a race, and 'Italianess' an ethnicity. However, 'Jewishness' and 'Blackness' are similar because blacks are from diverse backgrounds, geographies and cultures and could identify as a race or an ethnicity. Because of their skin color,

⁸⁸ Catholics suggest that identifying as Catholic is more than religious. They argue that one can experience 'Catholicness' by growing up in a Catholic community, even if one is not religiously Catholic. This suggests that the 'Jewishness' struggle may occur within other groups, but at present, most would still identify Catholics with religion. Jeffrey Peck. Personal Conversation. 5 April 2006.

black people are often labeled “African-American,” even if they have no connection to Africa, fueling their identity struggle.

Additionally, Jews are not a nationality such as Irish, Italian, Puerto Rican, African, or Chinese. While Israel exists as a Jewish homeland, there is no distinct national identity that connects Jews, making ‘Jewishness’ an anomaly. The “Wandering Jew”⁸⁹ persona and lack of a nation-state molds ‘Jewishness’ and creates a diasporic community for the Jews. Although some may legitimately consider Israel the Jewish motherland, many Jewish-Americans have no reason to identify with Israel. Those born there identify as “Israeli” — a nationality that is separate from Jew, since other races, religions, and ethnicities are Israeli, as well. For instance, Israeli Arabs are not Jewish and distinguish their national identity from their ethnic identity.⁹⁰ Vincent Brook addresses this confusion and complexity when he ponders whether ‘Jewishness’ could be “a religion, a race, an ethnicity, a culture, a sensibility, a unique historical consciousness,”⁹¹ and, indeed, it could be any or all. While others may identify with a race, religion or ethnicity, “The Jewish Question,” as the issue has often been phrased, remains problematic, as well as forces Jews to understand that contradictory opinions will persist and no concrete answer will be found.

⁸⁹ Carla Johnson. “Luckless in New York: The Schlemiel and the Schlimazl in *Seinfeld*.” *Journal of Popular Film & Television*. Vol. 22, No. 3 (Fall 1994): 119. *ProQuest*. Georgetown U. Library. Online. Internet Explorer. 30 Jan. 2006.

<http://proquest.umi.com/pqdlink?index=0&did=1770412&SrchMode=1&sid=2&Fmt=6&VInst=PRO D&VType=POD&RQT=309&VName=POD&TS=1145382603&clientId=5604>

⁹⁰ Peck, Personal Conversation, 6 April 2006.

⁹¹ Brook, 11.

‘Jewishness’ focuses on cultural unity, while Judaism focuses on religion. They are distinctly different and one does not need to follow Judaism to encompass ‘Jewishness.’ Michael Krausz echoes Ritterband’s perspective on ‘Jewishness’ when he writes, “Jewishness is understood as *a set of characteristic positions in which certain people are cast or ascribed — by themselves and by others.*”⁹² He continues that ‘Jewishness’ is by “assent, which, while related to the question of descent, is distinct from it. Jewishness by assent involves certain beliefs, as well as sentiments and disposition. It involves *identification* with a historical group.”⁹³ This argument distinguishes ‘Jewishness’ from Judaism, because the former is more fluid than the latter and emphasizes agency.

Still, I would maintain that ‘Jewishness’ is not merely a lifestyle preference, but constructed by historical experiences and cultural circumstances. ‘Jewishness’ may be molded, but it comes from a historical background of values and ideas that generations passed on. Being part of a long-standing diasporic people also aids in the connection of Jews. Jewish sensibility does not have one definition and may be understood in various ways. This ambiguity of ‘Jewishness’ and its cultural characteristics make it a real, but puzzling phenomenon. Through language, customs, gestures, humor and other Jewish signifiers that have a deeply-rooted history, the Jewish people are connected.

⁹² Michael Krausz. “On Being Jewish.” *Jewish Identity*. Eds. David Theo Goldberg and Michael Krausz. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993): 266.

⁹³ *Ibid*, 270.

In general, the Jews of today are more flexible, tolerant and assimilated than the past. ‘Jewishness’ depends upon the negotiation of tradition and progression. Intermarriage and interfaith relations are increasingly prevalent, creating tension within the Jewish community.⁹⁴ Nevertheless, ‘Jewishness’ endures and connects Jewish-Americans. Jews of past and current generations have diverse experiences and encompass unique complexities and struggles, but Selengut’s argument that past “contradictions and conflicts”⁹⁵ do not affect today’s Jews is erroneous. The earlier generation’s identity struggle persists with Jews and will not be erased from their consciousness. A major factor in the survival of Jewish sensibility is the acknowledgement of a shared history and cultural conflict.

The examination of Jewish identity is an ongoing process. Leon J. Goldstein states that this study is “quite impossible to realize. There is no simple, or even moderately complex, way to determine what Jewish identity is and how it affects those who are Jews.”⁹⁶ While there is no ‘concrete’ definition of Jews or ‘Jewishness,’ a “sense of awareness”⁹⁷ related to history and the search for freedom is imperative to Jewish sensibility. While the sensibility adapts and changes over the years, it remains an imperative element in Jewish sustenance and community relations. The complexities of the 21st century will present modern-day challenges for Jewish identity.

⁹⁴ Ibid, 14.

⁹⁵ Ibid, 6.

⁹⁶ Leon J. Goldstein. “Thoughts on Jewish Identity.” *Jewish Identity*. Eds. David Theo Goldberg and Michael Krausz. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993): 17.

⁹⁷ Ibid, 90.

The Jewish-American identity struggle and ‘Jewishness’ are difficult concepts to examine. Questions, such as, “What is a Jew?”; “How does one define ‘Jewishness’?”; and “How does Jewish sensibility relate to other ethnicities and religions?” do not have clear-cut answers. Nevertheless, scholars continue to study Jewish identity and attempt to understand ‘Jewishness’ because this ambiguity itself distinguishes the Jewish search for a sense of identity, home and belonging. Although they faced much adversity, including prejudice, exile and diaspora, the Jewish people survived and Jewish sensibility endures today. Erich S. Gruen elaborates, “Diaspora lies deeply rooted in Jewish consciousness. It existed in one form or another almost from the start, and it persists as an integral part of the Jews’ experience of history ... Jews have written about it incessantly, lamented it or justified it, dismissed it or grappled with it, embraced it or deplored it.”⁹⁸ Additionally, Jews have laughed about it, and used humor as a defense mechanism to alienation and as a means of acceptance into society.⁹⁹

⁹⁸ Erich S. Gruen. “Diaspora and Homeland.” *Diasporas and Exiles: Varieties of Jewish Identity*. Ed. Howard Wettstein. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002): 18.

⁹⁹ Lawrence J. Epstein. *The Haunted Smile: The Story of Jewish Comedians in America*. (New York: PublicAffairs, 2001): x.

Chapter 3: Jewish Stereotypes

The Theory of Stereotypes

Stereotypes seem impossible to avoid. Whether positive or negative, truthful or fabricated, humans use stereotypes to understand themselves and 'others.' Minority groups have always been subjected to outsiders' perspectives and Jews in particular have consistently struggled with stereotypes and prejudice precisely because of their different and anomalous position in society. Television, with its infinite array of images, is an arena where stereotypes are portrayed easily. Actors depend on stereotypes to create a television persona. When one is acting, one utilizes a certain preconceived notion of that character's physical and behavioral traits to bring the character to life. For instance, Jason Alexander decided to play up paranoia, neuroticism and grand, exaggerated gestures when molding his character, George Costanza. Although the character is supposedly Italian, these stereotypically Jewish characteristics are recognizable to the audience changing the character's ethnic markers. Further, audiences tend to identify and find comfort with characters if the television representations mirror the viewer's presupposed stereotypes. Perhaps people feel safe when their views are validated, instead of an uncomfortable paradigm change.

In his essay, “Stereotyping,” Richard Dyer argues that humans classify and categorize things to “make sense” of the world.¹⁰⁰ This practice of “typification” may apply to objects or people, but, depending on one’s cultural background, the categorizing will differ.¹⁰¹ While similar to stereotyping, “typification” is not as narrow or divisive. Additionally, stereotypes are more rigid and fixed than other distinctions. Dyer differentiates “types” and “stereotypes”: “Types are instances which indicate those who live by the rules of society (social types) and those whom the rules are designed to exclude (stereotypes) ... You appear to choose your social type in some measure, whereas you are condemned to a stereotype.”¹⁰² For several reasons, stereotypes are potentially more harmful for individuals, especially if one belongs to a minority group.

Cultural theorist Stuart Hall writes that stereotypes “get hold of a few ... characteristics about a person, *reduce* everything about the person to those traits, *exaggerate* and *simplify* them, and *fix* them without change or development to eternity ... *stereotyping reduces, essentializes, naturalizes and fixes ‘difference.’*”¹⁰³ This limited perspective allows individuals and groups to determine a hierarchy of races, religions and ethnicities, which often leads to prejudice and violence. Dependant upon such factors as beliefs, appearance, and language, stereotyping

¹⁰⁰ Richard Dyer. “Stereotyping.” *Gays and Film*. Ed. Richard Dyer. (London: British Film Institute, 1977): 28.

¹⁰¹ *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*. Ed. Stuart Hall. (London, Sage Publications, 1997): 257.

¹⁰² Dyer, 29.

¹⁰³ Hall, 258.

divides cultures and forces boundaries on people. Hall elaborates, “[Stereotyping] sets up a symbolic frontier between the ‘normal’ and the ‘deviant’, the ‘normal’ and the ‘pathological’, the ‘acceptable’ and the ‘unacceptable’, what ‘belongs’ and what does not or is ‘Other’, between ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders,’ ‘Us’ and ‘Them.’”¹⁰⁴ Just as race is politically and culturally constructed as a means of inclusion and exclusion, acceptance and persecution, so too are stereotypes.

Power politics play a significant role in stereotyping. Philosopher Michel Foucault labels stereotyping a “‘power/knowledge’”¹⁰⁵ construct, where power is the ability to manipulate people’s opinions and perspectives. Hall recognizes this power “involves knowledge, representation, ideas, cultural leadership and authority, as well as economic constraint and physical coercion.”¹⁰⁶ Governments or individuals with economic, social and political advantage may mold an ‘other’ and manipulate stereotypical representations to their liking. Edward Said relates the ‘other’ to identity construction: “The construction of identity ... involves the construction of opposites or ‘others,’ whose actuality is always subject to the continuous interpretation and re-interpretation of their differences from ‘us.’”¹⁰⁷ Therefore, ‘othering’ is used to construct boundaries between groups of people to create a sense of security against people deemed ‘different.’ Stereotyping is another tool for those in power to create an

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid, 259.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid, 261.

¹⁰⁷ Edward Said. *Orientalism*. (New York: Vintage Books, 1978): 332.

‘other’ and ensure their status in society. For those without power, stereotypes may be devastating.

Jewish Stereotypes

Stereotyping persistently haunts the Jewish people. Two types of stereotypes — physical and behavioral — affect the Jews. Consequences of their perceived ‘difference’ and ‘otherness’ include persecution, exile and genocide. Physical stereotypes played a major role in the Holocaust, which was the most tragic, extreme culmination of prejudice and violence for the Jews. Although for thousands of years, Jews have been subjected to stereotyping, Hitler’s manipulation of stereotypes convinced a country to ‘demonize’ and exterminate the Jewish population. He compared Jewish physical traits that were considered “dangerous” — the prominent “Jewish nose,” beady eyes that “reduce all they see to money,” “thick lips,” “large, repulsive ears” and dark, “diseased” skin — against the light-skinned, “pure” German-Aryan race.¹⁰⁸ Many of these stereotypical Jewish traits were not representative of 19th and 20th century Jewish bodies, which, because of exile and assimilation, had been altered, hence the need for the “Jew’s cap or the Jew’s badge ... and the tattoo in Nazi concentration camps.”¹⁰⁹ Not only were Jews persecuted for

¹⁰⁸ Sander L. Gilman. “Extreme Makeover: Jews and the Invention of Cosmetic Surgery.” Lecture at DCJCC. Washington DC: 23 Feb. 2006.

¹⁰⁹ Gilman. “The Jew’s Body: Thoughts on Jewish Physical Differences.” 70.

being ‘different,’ but their ability to assimilate and adapt to new cultural surroundings proved injurious, as well.¹¹⁰

Perceived behavioral stereotypes affect Jews, as well. Most of these characteristics are not as blatantly negative as the physical images, but they are still unflattering and potentially dangerous. These stereotypes materialized during historical periods when politically, economically, and culturally, gentiles thought it necessary to label and control the Jews. One of the oldest stereotypes is the image of the ‘greedy Jew’, which dates back to the Middle Ages, where Jews had to work as money lenders for the gentiles because they were forbidden from other professions.

¹¹¹ Thereafter, Jews were considered stingy and money-hungry. Furthering the stigma were old religious laws that convinced Christians that money lending was a dishonest, unworthy profession and that Jews were “usurers.”¹¹² The stereotype of the Jews as greedy, dishonest people persists. Fueling these stereotypes were images and representations in cultural material, such as literature, film, and television.

Dicken’s Fagin, the vile leader of a young gang of pickpockets, from *Oliver Twist* (1838),¹¹³ and Shakespeare’s heartless moneylender Shylock in *The Merchant of*

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ Rabbi Barry H. Block. “The Jew as Money Lender.” Sermon delivered 11 March 2005. Temple Beth-El. San Antonio, TX. <http://www.beth-elsa.org/bb031105.htm>

¹¹² Thomas McKendy. “Gypsies, Jews, and *The Merchant of Venice*.” *The English Journal*. Vol. 77, No. 7. (Nov. 1988): 25. *Journal Storage*. Georgetown U. Library. Online. Internet Explorer. 17 Jan. 2006. <http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=00138274%28198811%2977%3A7%3C24%3AGJA%22MO%3E2.0.CQ%3B2-3>

¹¹³ The Microform Research Collections at Boston Spa. “154. The Original Manuscripts of Charles Dickens from the Forster Collection, The Victoria and Albert Museum.” *The British Library*. Online. Internet Explorer. 2 April 2006. <http://www.bl.uk/services/document/microrescoll/rescolo.html>

Venice (1600),¹¹⁴ are well-known Jewish villains that endure in society's consciousness. Today, this stereotype is not as prominent, but the connection between Jews and money does emerge in American discourse.

Other Jewish behavioral stereotypes developed throughout history including such characteristics as neurotic, paranoid, brainy, clever, loud-mouthed, overbearing, controlling, and materialistic. While most of these traits are uncomplimentary, a few, such as intellectuality and cleverness, could be considered positive. Nevertheless, these stereotypes were often construed to portray Jews as a power-hungry, dangerous people that were involved in "a secret plot to dominate and enslave the entire world."¹¹⁵ Therefore, stereotypes proved damaging for Jews, utilized for Jewish persecution and ostracization. When the Jews immigrated to the United States in the 20th century, these stereotypes were already established in their new land. Still, Jews succeeded in assimilating into the professional, social and political sects of America, despite harmful images.

Post-WWII, Jewish stereotypes persisted through media, such as film and radio. Edward Said problematizes stereotypes in cultural forums: "I believe it needs to be clear about cultural discourse and exchange within a culture that what is commonly circulated by it is not 'truth' but representations ... In any instance of at least written language, there is no such thing as a delivered presence, but a *re-*

¹¹⁴ Treasures in Full: "Shakespeare in Quarto." *The British Library*. Online. Internet Explorer. 2 April 2006. <http://www.bl.uk/treasures/shakespeare/merchant.html>

¹¹⁵ J.J. Goldberg. *Jewish Power: Inside the American Jewish Establishment*. (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, Inc., 1996): 8.

presence, or representation.”¹¹⁶ Therefore, distinguishing the construction of representations from reality is important to understand a culture, but too often only the representation is considered. When the television emerged as the new, exciting technology, older Jewish stereotypes were reinforced and new images and representations began to circulate.

Gender and Stereotypes

Gender differences often fuel stereotypes and the media exacerbates these representations. Traditional, old-fashioned Jewish culture mirrored American values pre-World War II in their patriarchal perspectives on women. Both cultures agreed that men were central to the family unit and in the *shtetls* (small Jewish village) of Europe, Jewish females were “excluded from the ‘heart’ of traditional Orthodox Judaism, from the mandatory *communal* prayer and study which is the Jew’s primary mode of expression and commitment, and, therefore, from an active religious role.”¹¹⁷ The Jewish women took care of the business in the marketplace, which was considered less important than education. While Jewish men prioritized prayer and education, American males valued business and labor. American women stayed at home to bear children and take care of domestic chores, while men entered the workforce. When the Jews immigrated to the United States, they adopted the gender

¹¹⁶ Said, 21.

¹¹⁷ Estelle Roith. *The Riddle of Freud: Jewish Influences on His Theory of Female Sexuality*. (London: Tavistock Publications, 1987): 89.

roles of America, with the mother's identity attached to the domestic sphere of the household, instead of the marketplace of old.

In *Fighting to Become Americans: Jews, Gender, and the Anxiety of Assimilation*, Riv-Ellen Prell concludes that changing gender images and stereotypes are a reflection of assimilation anxiety.¹¹⁸ Whether the overbearing Jewish Mother or the frigid Jewish-American Princess, "gender images have served as a powerful medium through which Jews expressed and reflected their relationship to America."¹¹⁹ As they navigated their new home, stereotypes followed Jews to America and new ones developed. The external pigeonholing of Jews fueled the Jewish-American identity struggle by affecting the Jewish psyche and influencing relations between Jews themselves. Prell elaborates:

The inescapable fact is that Jews, like other minorities, carry a double burden in that they represent to a dominant culture what it reviles, while they also attach those castigations to themselves ... Jews, therefore, continue to create and recreate themselves at least in part in response to the American mirror in which they gaze to find themselves portrayed simultaneously as outsiders and powerful insiders, as excessive consumers and tight-fisted misers, as arbiters of upper-class taste and tacky marginals who believe that more is better.¹²⁰

Jews, as well as other minorities, are easy to scapegoat and undermine since they are from a 'different' culture and represent the 'other.' Also, American society's pigeonholing and stereotyping came natural upon a group that could be classified as a

¹¹⁸ Prell, 4.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

¹²⁰ Ibid, 13, 245.

race, religion, or ethnicity. Abundant opportunities arose to deride and ridicule Jews because their ambiguous identity made them vulnerable targets.

Media became a powerful vehicle in portraying and sustaining Jewish stereotypes. Radio, film and television focused on stereotypical portrayals of Jews because those representations were often marketable with humor. Said elaborates on media's role in exacerbating stereotypes, "Television, the films, and all the media's resources have forced information into more and more standardized molds."¹²¹ Audiences accepted the derogatory images of Jews as neurotic, foolish, whiny, materialistic, stingy, and loud-mouthed, since this is what Americans came to expect from Jews and the representations did not threaten their precious comfort zone.

The "Ghetto Girl"

The first Jewish female stereotype surfaced in America following the mass immigration between 1880 and 1924 — the "Ghetto Girl."¹²² Riv-Ellen Prell explains this stereotype as "garish, excessively made up, too interested in her appearance, and too uncultivated to dress smartly. Her vulgarity embarrassed other Jews."¹²³ The "Ghetto Girl" was a working-class woman who found intrigue in her new financial independence and shifting economic and social status in America. She did not have the social graces and refined look that Jews were desperately trying to emulate to 'fit' into America, and therefore, Jews and gentiles alike disapproved of her

¹²¹ Said, 6.

¹²² Prell, 24.

¹²³ Ibid, 23.

excessiveness. German Jews, who had immigrated earlier than their Eastern European cousins, were especially disgraced by the “Ghetto Girls” because the Germans had been succeeding in separating from the ‘old world’ image of Jews as unsophisticated, money-hungry and vulgar, yet the “Ghetto Girl” halted their progress.¹²⁴ Anxious over assimilation, many Jews distinguished themselves from the “Ghetto Girl” to connect with gentiles over the shame of this Jewish abomination.

By the 1920s, the “Ghetto Girl” disappeared because new immigration laws halted the flow of immigrants and women stopped working, so the need for this stereotype lessened.¹²⁵ In her place appeared another “misogynist Jewish imaginary” — the “Young Jewish Woman in Search of Marriage.”¹²⁶ This stereotype was popular in the 1920s and 1930s and closely resembled the “Ghetto Girl,” with her “desires ... also represented as insatiable, leading her to drive away men of her class who might not measure up, or to yoke a man to ceaseless work to satisfy her wants.”¹²⁷ The American struggle with moral, simple values and their passion for materialism and excessiveness translated into these Jewish representations to ease anxiety. Both the “Ghetto Girl” and the “Young Jewish Woman in Search of Marriage” became obsolete during WWII, but they would resurface post-WWII in the offensive, ‘ripe-for-ridicule’ form of the Jewish American Princess (JAP).¹²⁸

¹²⁴ Ibid, 24-25.

¹²⁵ Ibid, 25.

¹²⁶ Brook, 142.

¹²⁷ Ibid.

¹²⁸ Ibid.

Unfortunately, these representations began a long, enduring line of negative portrayals of Jewish-American women.

The “Jewish Mother”

Although historically Jewish females were negatively portrayed and oftentimes misrepresented by their own culture, as well as gentiles, the “Jewish Mother” of the ‘old world’ (“Yiddishe Mama”) was a highly respected, well-loved figured.¹²⁹ Pre-WWII, literature and folklore depicted “Jewish Mothers” as loving, caring women, who were strong role models for their children. In the 1927 film, *The Jazz Singer*, the relationship between mother and son demonstrates the positive image of the “Yiddishe Mama.”¹³⁰ In this pivotal film, Jakie Rabinowitz (played by Al Jolson), struggles with pursuing his dream as a Jazz singer or following his father’s wish for him to sing as a cantor in the synagogue.¹³¹ Although the mother is conflicted by her son and husband’s opposing desires, she remains loyal to both men and mends their estranged relationship. She is willing to sacrifice her own opinions and traditions to keep her family together. This short-lived image of the loving, dedicated Jewish female changed dramatically post-WWII.

¹²⁹ Martha A. Ravits. “The Jewish Mother: Comedy and Controversy in American Popular Culture.” *MELUS*. Vol. 25, No. 1 (2000): 9, 23. *Journal Storage*. Georgetown U. Library. Online. Internet Explorer. 17 Jan. 2006.

<http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0163755X%28200021%2925%3A1%3C3%3ATJMCAC%3E2.0.CO%3B2-L>

¹³⁰ *Ibid*, 9.

¹³¹ This 1927 film was pioneering for two reasons — it addressed controversial themes, such as Jewish-American assimilation anxiety, and served as the first “Talkie” (feature-length movie with audio.) Internet Movie Database. Database Search. *The Jazz Singer* (1927). 30 March 2006.

<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0018037/>

The archetype of the “Jewish Mother” as pushy, controlling, loud-mouthed, overbearing, and selfish dominates American consciousness. This stereotype evolved in the 1960s when comedians, specifically male Jewish ones, targeted their females and realized this amused and resonated with their audience.¹³² Regardless of race, religion, or ethnicity, people identified with jokes about mothers, especially ethnic ones who seemed particularly ‘out-of-place’ in America. Other ethnic stereotypes developed from the “Jewish Mother,” such as the “Italian Mother” and the “Greek Mother,” demonstrating her resonance with immigrant cultures. Although these archetypes are similar, they do have distinct ethnic differences, allowing each culture to claim their own. Created by the numerous Jewish comedians in the 1960s, the “Jewish Mother” was the first “Mother” stereotype to evolve and remains the most recognizable today.

Perhaps this humor acted as a defense mechanism against the emerging feminist movement in a traditionally patriarchal society. Perhaps the Jew’s ongoing frustration with prejudice and identity struggle led the “mother, by virtue of gender and generation,” to function “as a scapegoat for self-directed Jewish resentment about minority status in mainstream culture.”¹³³ Seemingly, both the internal and external turmoil that Jews faced with assimilation and gender roles created the “Jewish Mother” stereotype. Martha A. Ravits elaborates, “What better strategy for dealing with prejudice than to deflect it into misogyny? The outward features of Otherness —

¹³² Ravits, 5.

¹³³ Ibid, 6.

Old World backwardness, loudness, vulgarity, clannishness, ignorance, and materialism — were heaped onto the mother.”¹³⁴ Similar to the “Ghetto Girl,” this stereotype represented characteristics and mannerisms that Jewish-Americans tried desperately to cast off. Since Jewish humor received a positive response and endures today, a diverse audience, including minorities, identified with the assimilation struggle and used laughter to show their understanding and appreciation.

Mother and Son

Whether they like it or not, the “Jewish Mother’s” focus is her children, most notably her son. Mother-son relationships are complex and the “Jewish Mother” and her son are representative of these contradictions because of their love-hate relationship. In American representation, the typical dynamic between the “Jewish mother” and her son revolves around the son striving for independence and self-respect, while the mother stifles him. From there, the son becomes a “mama’s boy ... arousing anxiety and (that word most associated with her) *guilt*.”¹³⁵ Ravits continues on the mother: “She refuses to observe the boundaries between proper parental concern and overprotection ... Her voice overflows with unsealed emotion and verbal excess. She is charged both with expressing too much love, thus delaying the son’s individuation, and with expressing too much criticism, thus undermining his self-

¹³⁴ Ibid.

¹³⁵ Ibid, 11.

confidence.”¹³⁶ In her portrayal, the mother is excessive and everything she does seems extreme. This stereotype blames the mother for all her son’s faults and troubles, which exonerates the male from any responsibility. An easy scapegoat from post-WWII anxiety, the “Jewish Mother” became a crutch for both Jews and non-Jews. Taking responsibility for one’s actions was not necessary anymore because displacement of blame onto the dominant female figure proved acceptable. Still, because the mother provides her son with care and security, he is dependant on her. The Jewish male, while determined to escape from his mother, continually relies on her and gives her affection.

As females acquired more power and equality in America, Jewish males, through such outlets as comedy, continued to scorn and belittle them with negative portrayals. Prell explains:

On television, in print, in widely circulated long-playing albums, and in novelty books, she personified, often through her son’s vision of her, an American Jewish culture in transition. She was funny because she was out of place. Her excessive and dangerous nurturance held back her sons — the producers of this humor — from moving forward into adulthood.¹³⁷

The consistently harsh caricatures of Jewish women overshadowed male stereotypes from the 1960s to the present. Since Jewish men were the victims of most ridicule and prejudice in the past, Americanization produced this new trend. Further, the struggle of assimilation is often at the forefront of mother-son conflict — “All the embarrassing baggage of ethnicity — unassimilated habits, Yiddish accent,

¹³⁶ Ibid.

¹³⁷ Prell, 150.

incomplete understanding of American mores — was projected onto the mother, a representative of outmoded values ... Her backwardness threatened to prevent his acceptance in wider social circles.”¹³⁸ The dichotomy between the son who rejects his overbearing mother and the son who depends upon her became ideal for a new Jewish caricature. A tragic, yet humorous stereotype emerged from the “Jewish Mother” of the 1960s, and, almost as if female justice/vengeance, this time it was directed towards the men.

The *Schlemiel* and *Schlimazl*

The Jewish male is portrayed as less overbearing and manipulative than the female in American consciousness. This stems from the anxiety over females gaining more power in American society post-WWII. Still, unflattering stereotypes of Jewish men did surface, with comedy being its main stage. Similar to the “Jewish Mother” archetype, Jews and gentiles laughed at these pathetic caricatures. The *schlemiel* (fool) and *schlimazl* (an unlucky person) are the most common Jewish male representations, with their lucklessness, foolishness and inevitable failure.¹³⁹ Both of these stereotypes are based on the “Jewish fool” from the Middle Ages, who was “vulnerable, ineffectual in his efforts at self-advancement and self-preservation.”¹⁴⁰ The two, while similar, do have distinct differences. The stereotypes of the nebbish, neurotic *schlemiel* developed from the Hebrew phrase *shelvach min ‘el*, meaning

¹³⁸ Ravits, 5-6.

¹³⁹ Johnson, 118.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

“sent away from God.”¹⁴¹ This man is doomed to alienation, exile, pain, bad luck and a hopeless existence. He acts paranoid and frantic, which transitions effortlessly into comedy. The *schlimazl* originated from the Bible where the German and Hebrew words *sclim* (sic) (bad) and *mazl* (star) combined to create “one born under a bad star.”¹⁴² His persona is that of an ill-fated, unlucky, anxious victim, forever burdened by the *schlemiel*’s antics. Although both archetypes seem destined for failure and unhappiness, the *schlimazl* retains hope, while the *schlemiel* admits defeat. Ruth R. Wisse writes of inherent differences between these archetypes:

The *schlemiel* is the active disseminator of bad luck, and the *schlimazl* its passive victim. Or, more sharply defined, the *schlimazl* happens upon mischance, he has a penchant for lucklessness, but the unhappy circumstances remain outside him, and always suggest the slapstick quality of surprise, The *schlemiel*’s misfortune is his character. It is not accidental, but essential. Whereas comedy involving the *schlimazl* tends to be situational, the *schlemiel*’s comedy is existential.¹⁴³

Therefore, the *schlemiel* creates his own alienation and misery, while the *schlimazl* seemingly falls into bad situations. Both need each other to persist and find a strange solace in each other’s oddities. Their complimentary characteristics make this duo an ideal comedic team of pitiful fools. Comedy ‘schticks’ often involve a pair playing off each other, allowing the *schlemiel* and *schlimazl* to succeed onscreen.

Again, the blame for the *schlemiel* and *schlimazl* are attributed to the female, mainly the stifling, excessive behavior of the “Jewish Mother.” Of course, the mother

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

¹⁴² Sanford Pinsker. *The Schlemiel as Metaphor: Studies in Yiddish and American Jewish Novel*. (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1971): 9.

¹⁴³ Ruth R. Wisse. *The Schlemiel as Modern Hero*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971): 14.

is not the only scapegoat for the Jewish male's emotional problems and pitiful behavior. The other females in his life, perhaps a wife or girlfriend, may be to blame, especially if she is the materialistic, spoiled "Jewish-American Princess (JAP)."

The "Jewish-American Princess" (JAP)

In the 1960s and 1970s, the young, Jewish female transformed from a plain, overshadowed figure to the flashy, spoiled "Jewish-American Princess (JAP)."¹⁴⁴ Similar to the "Jewish Mother," the JAP was a construction born from assimilation and Americanization. The clash between old traditions and new opportunities led to a stronger, more demanding female figure, which intimidated the males. In the 'old world,' the Jewish daughter followed her mother's footsteps, being responsible for chores, errands, and taking care of the men in the family who pursued the coveted education.¹⁴⁵ Upon immigrating to America, academic and social opportunities arose for Jewish men, as well as women, which altered gender roles. The "Jewish-American Princess" stereotype resembled the "Ghetto Girl" of earlier in the decade, but she has significantly infiltrated and affected American consciousness far beyond other images.

The "Jewish-American Princess" represents the hopes and dreams of earlier Jewish generations, including economic, professional and social success. When Jewish parents realized the abundance of opportunities for their daughters in

¹⁴⁴ Prell, 178.

¹⁴⁵ Leslie Tonner. *Nothing But the Best: The Luck of the Jewish Princess*. (New York: Coward, McCann & Geoghan, 1975): 17.

America, they took advantage of that, no longer only focusing on the education and career of their sons. Leslie Tonner writes of the parents, “They would give her not only good schools but also fine clothes, music and dancing lessons, culture, all the correct finishing touches. The real key to the Jewish Princess is found in the change in parent’s attitudes.”¹⁴⁶ Subsequently, a high-achieving, educated, confident female developed in America. This successful woman was not welcomed in American culture, since she threatened the males, and the stereotype of the JAP materialized.

The JAP is a negative, offensive portrayal of a Jewish woman. She is “spoiled, pampered, overbearing, snotty, materialistic,”¹⁴⁷ rigid and whiny, with no redeeming qualities. A woman of no substance, her hobbies include shopping, grooming, and whining. The same nasal-inflected voice of the “Jewish Mother” is projected on the JAP, but instead of inflicting guilt, she inflicts emotional (and financial) pain upon her loved ones. The JAP is an imaginary construction that does not resemble the typical Jewish-American female post-WWII. The main discrepancy is financial — JAPS are characterized as financially dependant on their fathers or husbands, while, in reality, Jewish woman were becoming increasingly independent when this stereotype emerged. Prell elaborates on the irony, “Women created fear and anxiety as a result of their autonomy, not their dependence ... in 1990 nearly 57 percent of Jewish women eighteen and older were in the paid labor force ... Jewish women aged 25 to 34 with no children participated ... at nearly the same rate as men

¹⁴⁶ Ibid, 18.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid, xi.

of these ages.”¹⁴⁸ Nevertheless, similar to the “Jewish Mother,” the *schlemiel*, and the *schlimazl*, the JAP resonated with Jews and non-Jews and became a staple of Jewish identity.

The JAP, unlike any other Jewish stereotype, became a marketable commodity. “For much of the 1970s and 1980s, American Jews found this representation of their recent affluence available in multiple forms — including jokes, joke books, greeting cards, T-shirts, jewelry, novelty dolls, handbooks, magazine articles, comedy routines, and novels.”¹⁴⁹ Further, the JAP appeared on television and film, which exemplified her excessive manner and garish dress. There was a mixed response to this commercial success, some thinking it offensive, some humorous, and some accepting. In the 1980s, Jewish girls had grown up with the image, so they emulated the JAP.¹⁵⁰ The “Jewish-American Princess” seemed glamorous and glitzy for young girls and an easy way to get ‘Daddy’s’ attention. Consequently, reality began to mirror the representation, with teenage girls acting materialistic, spoiled and whiny. Still, the majority of Jewish females resented and rejected this unflattering stereotype.

¹⁴⁸ Prell, 201-202.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid, 178.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid.

Chapter 4: Jewish Representation on Television

The Legitimization of Television

Male and female Jewish stereotypes have haunted Jews for centuries, but upon immigrating to and assimilating in America, old and new stereotypes developed. From 1948-1955, television became a “dominant mass medium,”¹⁵¹ which exacerbated negative images of Jews, since television representations validated the stereotypes. Previously, the radio had been the only source of in-home news and entertainment, but now a ‘box with pictures’ took its place. At first Americans were skeptical of this new technology, as they had been with prior technologies, such as film and radio — “Machines provided leisure, comfort, and the possibility of progress, but they also suggested an end to nature and the ‘natural’ order of things both at home and in civic life.”¹⁵² Also, the TV seemed a potential threat to the family unit, affecting interpersonal relationships and familial value systems. Because of its centrality in the home, this medium is unlike any other and has a strong power to influence people. Cultural theorist David Morley examines “domestic media/mediated domesticity” in his book, *Home Territories: Media, Mobility and Identity*.¹⁵³ Morley argues that “the integration of television viewing into the spatial

¹⁵¹ Lynn Spigel. *Make Room for TV: Television and the Family Ideal in Postwar America*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992): 189.

¹⁵² *Ibid*, 46.

¹⁵³ David Morley. *Home Territories: Media, Mobility and Identity*. (London: Routledge, 2000): 86.

geography of the home constitutes a core part of how household life is organized ... the ‘physics’ of television as material and symbolic object in the home” and “the symbolic centrality of the television set as a sacred physical object ... is perhaps worth noting.”¹⁵⁴ The dominance of television over the family unit, as well as American culture seems prevalent in today’s rhetoric, but post-WWII, these anxieties subsided and television was welcomed into people’s homes.

Americans could not resist this new, exciting technology and, rapidly, TV became a popular commodity. Lynn Spigel writes of the television boom, “Between 1948 and 1955, television was installed in nearly two-thirds of the nation’s homes, and the basic mechanisms of the network oligopoly were set in motion. By 1960, almost 90 percent of American households had at least one receiver, with the average person watching approximately five hours of television each day.”¹⁵⁵ With the inundation of TV into people’s homes, this technology became a staple of American culture and its representations resonated with the audience. Unlike other ethnic groups, such as blacks and Hispanics, Jews appeared on television at its advent because Jews were already veterans of the entertainment industry. Primarily producers, studio-heads and comedians, Jews smoothly transitioned from the theatre and film to television.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid, 91, 90.

¹⁵⁵ Spigel, 1.

The History of Jewish Humor

Historically, Jews have dominated the American entertainment industry. Whether it is through theater, film or television, there is a significant representation of Jews. In its nascent stage, the entertainment business proved a risky pursuit, but immigrant Jews were desperate for employment in a field not operated by gentiles and prejudice, so they flocked to showbusiness.¹⁵⁶ Yiddish theatre in the Lower East Side was one of the earliest venues for Jews in entertainment.¹⁵⁷ At first Yiddish theatre was considered ‘low brow,’ but eventually it became a legitimate source of American entertainment.¹⁵⁸ Jews flocked to these vaudeville shows, which encompassed the Yiddish language and distinctly Jewish humor. Their comedy often focused on stereotypical portrayals of Jews, neuroticism, Yiddishkeit,¹⁵⁹ and self-deprecation because these characteristics of Jewish humor appealed to audiences and molded a niche for Jews, especially in times of adversity. Also, making fun of themselves eased the fears of gentiles that viewed Jews as power-hungry, dangerous people. Further, Jews always had a special relationship with humor that formed from a resistance to adversity and a defense mechanism to anti-Semitism in the Old World. Upon immigrating to America, Jews brought their humor into the theatre, then the movies, and then television.

¹⁵⁶ Lester D. Friedman. *Hollywood's Image of the Jew*. (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1982): 7.

¹⁵⁷ *Entertaining America: Jews, Movies, and Broadcasting*. Eds. J. Hoberman and Jeffrey Shandler. (New York: The Jewish Museum, 2003): 29.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid.

¹⁵⁹ *Yehudishkeit* (Yiddishkeit) is the Yiddish word for ‘Jewishness,’ the emotional, rather than religious tie to one’s Jewish heritage. Sarna, *American Judaism*, 45-46.

In the pivotal book on Jews in the film industry, *An Empire of Their Own: How the Jews Invented Hollywood*, Neal Gabler explains how the Jews created Classical Hollywood cinema. With economic success came anti-Semitism, and again Jews found themselves encountering discrimination. Gabler writes, “Jews produced movies. ‘Of 85 names engaged in production,’ a 1936 study noted, ‘53 are Jews. And the Jewish advantage holds in prestige as well as numbers’ ... their dominance became a target for wave after wave of vicious anti-Semites.”¹⁶⁰ To counteract this adversity, Jews pursued comedy, where they found a more positive, accepting response. By making various races, religions and ethnicities laugh, Jews could relate to ‘others’ in an unthreatening environment. Hundreds of famous comedians, from the early variety shows to present stand-up and sitcoms, were Jewish, including the 1940s and 1950s legends, Milton Berle, Sid Ceasar, Jack Benny, Groucho Marx, George Burns, Eddie Cantor and Danny Kaye.¹⁶¹ Today, Jewish comedy persists with comics such as Mel Brooks, Woody Allen, Paul Reiser, Adam Sandler, and Jerry Seinfeld ruling showbiz.

Throughout the 20th century, such societal conflicts as immigration, assimilation, the Great Depression, two World Wars, the change in gender roles, and technological advances caused anxiety and unrest in America. Naturally, Americans looked to comedy to ease their tensions, and Jewish comedians, who embodied

¹⁶⁰ Neal Gabler. *An Empire of their Own: How the Jews Invented Hollywood*. (New York: Anchor Books, 1988): 2.

¹⁶¹ Sig Altman. *The Comic Image of the Jew: Explorations of a Pop Culture Phenomenon*. (Rutherford, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1971): 186.

tragedy and persistence, responded. Lawrence J. Epstein writes, “The comedians offered audiences consolation through laughter in times of distress ... the comedians gave their audiences a weapon, characteristically satire, to confront life’s unfairness ... American society turned to the Jews to use humor in order to deal with its own anxieties and to vindicate its desires.¹⁶² For people of diverse race, religion, and ethnicity, Jewish comedy addresses the conflicts and obstacles of everyday life through jokes and characteristics, with which others, especially minority groups, can empathize. Ironically, marginalization and prejudice shaped Jewish comedians and their humor, enabling the material to resonate with various minorities. Laughter over being ‘crushed by world’ found Jews a home in entertainment and became a tool for navigating the unknown and inhospitable place called America. However, early on, exploiting cultural “Jewishness” and excluding religious Judaism became the key to achievement in the industry.

Jewish humor may be defined in various ways. A joke told by a Jewish person does not automatically make it Jewish, but then the problem arises as to what characteristics do fit this categorization. Rabbi Joseph Telushkin addresses ‘Jewishness’ and Jewish humor in his book, *Jewish Humor: What the Best Jewish Jokes Say About the Jews*. He writes:

What makes a joke Jewish? Obviously, it must apply to Jews, but more significantly, it must express a Jewish sensibility ... Jewish sensibility, however, concerns precisely those subjects and values that receive disproportionate attention among Jews. Antisemitism, financial success,

¹⁶² Epstein, xi, xiii.

verbal aggression, and assimilation are all particularly significant in Jewish life.¹⁶³

While Rabbi Telushkin has a valid perspective, it does not address the essence of Jewish sensibility. “Subjects and values” that are significant to Jews are aspects of Jewish humor, but the comedy encompasses more cultural connection, emotion, and spirit. In addition, the usage of language, such as Yiddish, adds a distinct element to Jewish humor that cannot be replicated. “Yiddishisms” or Yiddish phrases/idioms, such as *oy vey* or *mazel tov*, are often woven into Jewish jokes. Often, Jewish comedians chose Yiddish words because the “sound of the word itself was funny,” and audiences began to identify Yiddish with comedy.¹⁶⁴

The “Jewish Sitcom”

The Goldbergs (1949-1956)

Post WWII, the “Jewish” sitcom, a television show that encompassed Jewish humor, characters, and themes emerged in 1949 with *The Goldbergs* (1949-1956).¹⁶⁵ In 1929, this show began as a NBC radio series and, because of its popularity, became a television sitcom two decades later.¹⁶⁶ *The Goldbergs* focused on a Jewish, working-class family struggling to build a life in the Bronx. The family-based sitcom revolved around Molly Goldberg (Gertrude Berg), her husband Jake (originally Philip

¹⁶³ Rabbi Joseph Telushkin. *Jewish Humor: What the Best Jewish Jokes Say About the Jews*. (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1992): 16-17.

¹⁶⁴ Epstein, xvii.

¹⁶⁵ Brook, 21.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid.

Loeb),¹⁶⁷ their teenage son and daughter, Sammy (Larry Robinson) and Rosalie (Arlene McQuade), and Uncle David (Eli Mintz).¹⁶⁸ As a pioneering ethnic sitcom, *The Goldbergs* addressed immigrant problems of the time, such as assimilation anxiety, especially regarding ‘old world’ parents and their Americanized children. Molly, Jake, and David spoke with heavy Yiddish accents and followed traditional Jewish customs, while Sammy and Rosalie conducted a more secular life, including typical American schooling, extra-curriculars and social events.

In every episode, a new dilemma arose, and Molly, clever and resourceful, solved it. Molly Goldberg epitomized the lovable “Yiddishe Mama” of the pre-WWII era, instead of the overbearing, negative stereotype portrayed on “Jewish” sitcoms today. As ‘Matriarch-extraordinaire,’ she was a “*yenta* (busybody), a matchmaker, head of the household and the voice of reason ... When things didn’t exactly go her way, she’d philosophically sigh, ‘Come will and come may, I must face it.’ Her broken English peppered with endearing old world malapropisms.”¹⁶⁹ Because of its resonance with immigrant culture, this “Jewish” sitcom charmed the American audience, and “the show rated seventh overall for the 1949-1959 television season.”¹⁷⁰ Further, Molly, with her down-to-earth, comforting demeanor and skillful solutions to domestic problems, appealed and related to Jews and non-Jews. Thirty

¹⁶⁷ The Jewish actor Philip Loeb was blacklisted for “subversive” communist activity in 1950. Gertrude Berg, although not Jewish herself, resisted letting go of Loeb, but because of “economic pressure,” she succumbed. Four years later, unable to find work, he committed suicide. Ibid, 32.

¹⁶⁸ Marla Brooks. *The American Family on Television: A Chronology of 121 Shows, 1948-2004*. (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2005): 21.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid, 20.

¹⁷⁰ Brook, 21, 27.

years later, Clare Huxtable from *The Cosby Show* (1984-1992)¹⁷¹ won over her audience — crossing racial and religious lines, both Molly and Clare were regarded as strong, respectable mother figures, instead of solely Jewish or black matriarchs.

The Goldbergs paralleled “Jewish” sitcoms of the present in its exclusion of religious themes. Today, “Jewish” sitcoms focus primarily on “Jewishness,” or the cultural aspects of Jews, rather than Judaism as a religion. Still, one particular episode did address religion, which, while admirable, may have been too risky for the sitcom. On October 5, 1954, the “Yom Kippur” episode aired, in which the entire episode is devoted to the Yom Kippur holiday and its traditions.¹⁷² Being the ‘Day of Atonement,’ where Jews ask forgiveness for those they have hurt over the year, Molly dutifully asks her neighbors to forgive any ‘unneighborly’ behavior and explains to Mrs. Silverstone, “This is the kind of holiday when people have to ponder. It’s a time when people ask for forgiveness, darling.”¹⁷³ This didactic and somewhat preachy dialogue has not been heard since on a “Jewish” sitcom, making it a pivotal television moment.

Later in the episode, the family attends synagogue and the camera focuses on the separation of the males and females, suggesting it is an Orthodox service. David Zurawik writes, “The cantor is singing ‘Kol Nidre,’¹⁷⁴ and the camera moves slowly

¹⁷¹ The Internet Movie Database. Database Search. *The Cosby Show* (1984-92). 30 March 2005. <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0086687/>

¹⁷² David Zurawik. *The Jews of Prime Time*. (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 2003): 45.

¹⁷³ Ibid, 46.

¹⁷⁴ Prayer that begins the night service of Yom Kippur. (Tracey R. Rich. Judaism 101: “Yom Kippur.” *JewFAQ.org*. 1995-2001. Online. Internet Explorer. 2 April 2006.

up and down the rows of men on the main floor, showing the faces of old men and young boys standing side by side, suggesting generational continuity.”¹⁷⁵ The blatant attention to Judaism and its values and customs is significant since this may have been the only exposure that most of the American audience ever had to the Jewish religion. During a time when Jews were not fully accepted in American society, this episode proved bold. The Yom Kippur service lasts six minutes and 9 seconds, a significant portion of the episode, and has never been replicated on a “Jewish” sitcom.¹⁷⁶ At the end of the show, Molly addresses her audience and wishes them God’s blessings and a good holiday, another rarely-seen occurrence.

The Goldbergs started to lose its appeal in the mid-1950s. Critics marked the sitcom, “too Jewish,” with mother Molly Goldberg’s “Yiddishisms, neighborly chats, and gefilte fish”¹⁷⁷ overly identifiable as Jewish. In an effort to save the show, producers tried to “Americanize” the Goldberg family and emphasize their “whiteness” by moving them to the suburbs and shifting the focus of the show from the “too Jewish” Molly to other less ethnic characters.¹⁷⁸ A complete transformation occurred from a show about Jews to a sitcom about an all-American family with aspects of ‘Jewishness.’ Brook elaborates, “They [the Goldbergs] were no longer a bridge to the white suburban middle class; they had *become* that class. The American Dream they had they had so ardently sought — and sold — had enfolded them ... *The*

<http://www.jewfaq.org/holiday4.htm>)

¹⁷⁵ Zurawik, 46.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid, 47.

¹⁷⁷ Brook, 22.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid, 35.

Goldbergs, in its 1955-56 season, was for all intents and purposes a new show.”¹⁷⁹ From *The Goldbergs*, producers learned that audiences could accept shows about ‘Jewishness,’ as long as they did not focus on religion or seem overly ethnic. Two decades passed before the next “Jewish” sitcom aired, although Gertrude Berg tried unsuccessfully to revive her character in the 1960 *Molly Goes Too College*.¹⁸⁰ When “Jewish” sitcoms made a comeback, they encompassed Jewish sensibility and humor, but never crossed the line to Judaism and spiritual ideologies. *The Goldberg*’s shift from an ethnic show to a white, “All-American” show parallels the constant struggle of Jews in America. Shedding Jewish values and ties for more conventional American customs seemed essential to survive on and off-screen.

The 50s and 60s: Where are the Jews?

For two decades “Jewish” sitcoms disappeared from television. Although it remains a mystery why this period excluded Jews from the popular medium, many scholars attribute this phenomenon to the audience’s rejection of ethnic sitcoms and desire to return to white, “All-American” shows. Zurawik writes,

There is some consensus among television historians and analysts that the 1950s and 1960s were a time in which all forms of ethnicity were essentially excluded from a prime-time landscape that became overwhelmingly suburban, white, middle-class, and Protestant, reflecting larger social trends. *Leave It to Beaver* and *Father Knows Best* are the series most often cited to make the case.¹⁸¹

¹⁷⁹ Ibid.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid, 44.

¹⁸¹ Zurawik, 48.

This argument is flawed considering other ethnic sitcoms with minority characters aired during this period. Examples include *I Love Lucy* (1951-1957) with the Cuban-American Ricky Ricardo (Desi Arnaz), *The Danny Thomas Show/Make Room for Daddy* (1953-1965) with the Lebanese Danny Williams (Danny Thomas) and *Car 54, Where Are You?* (1961-1963) with the Irish Francis Muldoon (Fred Gwynne).¹⁸² Indeed, other ethnic minorities were appearing in sitcoms and finding success, but still the Jews were absent.

Another theory that Brook introduces suggests that during these decades Jews pursued and thrived in other cultural pursuits, including “expressionist painting ... night-club entertainment ... folk and rock ‘n’ roll ... literary accomplishments.”¹⁸³ Instead of looking to the newest medium of television, Jews were enjoying their newfound acceptance in diverse vocations, some of which they had previously been excluded. Further, Jews “playing Jewish types (George Segal, Elliott Gould, Barbra Streisand, Woody Allen, Richard Benjamin, Dustin Hoffman),” in the movies, with “big nosed, kinky hair, and nasal New York accents ... were now ‘in.’”¹⁸⁴ At this time, Jewish thespians launched their careers, acquired fame and remain staples of the movie industry to the present. While there is no definitive explanation for the absence of Jews on television, the “Jewish” sitcom did reemerge in the 1970s, but as a less ethnic genre than *The Goldbergs*.

¹⁸² Ibid, 50-51.

¹⁸³ Brook, 46.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid, 47.

Rhoda (1974-1979)

As a spin-off of the popular sitcom, *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* (1970-77), *Rhoda* aired from 1974-1979.¹⁸⁵ Not as popular as its predecessor, *Rhoda* still appealed to audiences and enjoyed a long run. Although the character of Rhoda Morgenstern (Valerie Harper) played the “nasal-inflected Jewish Woman in Search of Marriage ... New York Jewish ‘wry’ to Mary Richard’s white-bread, Minnesota WASP”¹⁸⁶ in *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, she transformed in her new sitcom as ‘less Jewish.’ Because it attracted past audiences, *Rhoda*’s ‘Jewishness’ and Jewish humor sustained thematically throughout *Rhoda*, but her character shed physical and behavioral characteristics of being Jewish. Brook writes:

Rhoda’s writers did strive for a certain Jewish ‘sensibility’ — a strong sense of family, *Rhoda*’s self-deprecating humor, her warmth and sensuality — but the show’s overall Jewishness ‘was just set dressing’ ... Just two months into her own series ... shed of her Ugly Duckling *zaftigkeit* (fleshiness — okay for a Jewish mama, not for a wannabe wife), *Rhoda* ... was exchanging vows ... with the Italian-Catholic construction-company owner.¹⁸⁷

A writer on the show explains that ethnicity and ‘Jewishness’ were marginal aspects of *Rhoda*’s character, never meant to dominate the plotline.¹⁸⁸ In addition, *Rhoda* could not address Judaism or seem “too Jewish,” ensuring not to offend, and therefore, hold onto the mass audience. Since the cancellation of *The Goldbergs*, “Jewish” sitcoms erred on the side of caution in order to stay afloat.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid, 54.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid, 54-55.

¹⁸⁸ Zurawik, 179.

Admittedly, *Rhoda* was not considered a “hit,” but the show “lasted five years, which is a highly respectable run for network television.”¹⁸⁹ Typically, five or more years are a successful run for a sitcom. “Although it was up against popular Monday night Football, *Rhoda* won its time slot ... 50 million viewers were said to have watched the wedding ... yet *Rhoda* seemed less appealing as a married woman than as a feisty, angst-ridden single one.”¹⁹⁰ *Rhoda*’s likeable characteristics, including *chutzpah*, are those associated with Jews, demonstrating the audience’s attraction to ‘Jewishness.’ But, the toned-down version of the character demonstrated that some Jewish sensibility portrayed on television was acceptable, but not too much and definitely no Judaism. Seemingly, the newfound formula for sitcoms including ‘Jewishness’ and excluding Judaism allowed *Rhoda* to appeal to diverse viewers.

Through the 1970s and 1980s, “Jewish” sitcoms were sparse, but they did not disappear altogether. Such shows as *Barney Miller* (1975-1983) and *Taxi* (1978-1983) could be categorized as “Jewish” sitcoms because they both had Jewish protagonists and Jewish discourse. In one episode of *Taxi*, a person walks into the garage and asks about the grumpy cabbie Alex Rieger (Judd Hirsch), “Who’s this, the Jewish Defense League?”¹⁹¹ Still, although there were Jewish nuances intertwined in these shows, the sitcoms played down their ethnic roots and marginalized Jewishness. Executives did not place emphasis on Jews in their shows, most likely because they wanted to avoid any controversy that would lower ratings. Brook suggests that

¹⁸⁹ Ibid, 184.

¹⁹⁰ Antler, 36-37.

¹⁹¹ Brook, 63.

“advocacy group pressures, anti-Semitic sensitivities, and the commercial imperatives of an advanced capitalist TV industry” contributed to the quasi-Jewish shows of the period.¹⁹² This marginalization occurred until the 1990s when a surge of “Jewish” sitcoms changed the television landscape for Jews.

The Surge of the “Jewish Sitcom” in the 90s

Seinfeld (1989-1998)

In 1989, the introduction of *Seinfeld* changed television sitcoms and their relationship to Jews.¹⁹³ The role of Jews and ‘Jewishness’ on television shifted and the 1990s saw an influx of shows based on Jewish humor and ‘Jewishness.’ America had a love affair with the antics of Jerry Seinfeld (himself), George Costanza (Jason Alexander), Elaine Benes (Julia Louis-Dreyfus) and Cosmo Kramer (Michael Richards) throughout the 90s.¹⁹⁴ These characters became guests in our homes every Thursday night for a decade, albeit self-deprecating and neurotic ones. Professor David Zurawik writes of *Seinfeld’s* immense popularity:

Seinfeld found the largest audience of any network series during the entire decade and made Thursday nights on NBC the most profitable evening in the history of network television at the peak of the show’s popularity. And, in terms of sociology, what about the profound relationship that many viewers in the twenty million or so households that tuned in to *Seinfeld* every week formed with this TV Jew and his New York friends?¹⁹⁵

¹⁹² Ibid, 65.

¹⁹³ Ibid, 6.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid, 100.

¹⁹⁵ Zurawik, 202-204.

Seinfeld's 'Jewishness' and humor molded the show and permeated, either directly or indirectly, throughout each episode. Mainstream audiences were attracted to *Seinfeld* because its focus on 'Jewishness,' rather than Judaism, was approachable and less intimidating than religious themes. Joyce Antler problematizes 'Jewishness' and Judaism on *Seinfeld* and other "Jewish" sitcoms, "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."¹⁹⁶ While 'Jewishness' was the core of *Seinfeld*, the sitcom did rely on mocking Jewish religious practices and many of its 'shticks' revolved around Judaism.

In the episode, "The Bris," Judaism is portrayed in a negative, foolish way.¹⁹⁷ Jerry and Elaine are asked to be the godparents to their Jewish friend's new baby girl. This responsibility requires Elaine to find a *mohel*¹⁹⁸ and Jerry to hold the baby during the circumcision. They complain about these duties and when the event occurs, disaster ensues. The *mohel* is a neurotic, unstable *meshugganah* (crazy person) who yells at the guests and cuts Jerry's finger off during the ceremony. He inappropriately rants, "I could've been a Kosher butcher like my brother ... money's

¹⁹⁶ Joyce Antler. "Not 'Too Jewish' for Prime Time." *Television's Changing Image of American Jews*. Eds. Neal Gabler, and Frank Rich, and Joyce Antler. (New York: The American Jewish Committee and The Norman Lear Center, 2000): 70.

¹⁹⁷ *Seinfeld*, Season 5.

¹⁹⁸ Professional Circumciser for a *bris*, which is the Jewish circumcision ceremony for male babies. Jonathan and Judith Pearl. (*The Chosen Image: Television's Portrayal of Jewish Themes and Characters*. (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 1999): 30-31.)

good!” and has no remorse for his foul behavior.¹⁹⁹ This representation of a Jewish figure is not only inaccurate, but may be offensive for Jews. The absurd ceremony of the *Bris* belittles Jewish religious practices and conveys *Seinfeld’s* apathy at ridiculing Judaism. *Seinfeld’s* treatment of Judaism is common for “Jewish” sitcoms throughout the 90s — they either mock it or ignore it.

Another example of ridiculing the Jewish religion occurs in the episode, “The Yada Yada,” where Jerry’s dentist converts to Judaism, but Jerry suspects he did so to have access to the Jewish jokes.²⁰⁰ Jerry becomes angry and confides in a priest (irony noted). When asked if the conversion insults Jerry as a Jew, Jerry replies, “It offends me as a comedian!”²⁰¹ This answer portrays Jerry’s mentality as a secular Jew focused more on his career than his religion. With its humorous spin, this episode portrays the serious act of conversion and Judaism trivially. Further, the religious themes in the episode, especially conversion, are mocked and unfairly represented as insignificant. Except in the case of the Yom Kippur episode of *The Goldbergs*, in the rare instances that religious topics appear on 1990 “Jewish” sitcoms, they are either derided or trivialized.

Generational gaps are portrayed on *Seinfeld* and other “Jewish” sitcoms, often juxtaposing the main characters’ parents and relatives as the stereotypical, ‘old-world’ Jews with the ‘Jerrys’ and other ‘Baby Boomer Jews.’²⁰² In the episode, “The

¹⁹⁹ *Seinfeld*, Season 5.

²⁰⁰ *Seinfeld*, Season 8.

²⁰¹ Brook, 104.

²⁰² Zurawik, 214.

Pony Remark,” Jerry, his parents and Elaine are attending a celebration dinner for his great-Aunt Manya’s fiftieth anniversary dinner.²⁰³ Jerry exclaims at the dinner table, “I hate anyone who ever had a pony when they were growing up!” His great-aunt Manya, with her heavy Eastern European accent and cold demeanor replies obstinately, “I had a pony.” She continues in her broken English, “When I was a little girl in Poland, we all had ponies. My sister had pony, my cousin had pony, so what’s wrong with that?”²⁰⁴ Jerry tries to back-peddle his way out of the conversation, but to no avail. Manya stomps out of the room. While the other relatives at the table give him disapproving looks, Jerry digs himself deeper by declaring, “Of all the pictures I saw of immigrants on boats coming into New York harbor, I never saw one of them sitting on a pony!” Later in the episode, Manya passes away suddenly and everyone blames Jerry and his pony remark.

This episode encompasses ‘Jewishness,’ with Manya’s *zafitigkeit* (fleshiness) and Polish accent, and Jerry’s mocking of the Jewish ‘peasants from the old country.’ The pony is a symbol of the difference between Jewish culture in the past and today. When Manya was young, a pony represented working-class identity, while, for Jerry, the animal is a symbol of affluence and vanity. The dissonance between the younger and older generations are blatant with no hope of reconciliation. Jerry even goes so far as to consider not attending the funeral because it overlaps with a baseball game, demonstrating his disrespect for his elders and indoctrination into American culture.

²⁰³ *Seinfeld*, Season 2.

²⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

Jewish immigrants and older generations are marginalized and mocked relentlessly throughout *Seinfeld*. Further, ridiculing ‘old world’ Judaism seems to be a trend in “Jewish” sitcoms, as well as in real-life. Brook writes, “When Seinfeld mocks rabbis or *mohels*, it is partaking of this tradition” of “‘enlightened’ Jews poking fun at ‘backwater’ Jews of the *shtetl* ... Old World and New World cultures in turn-of-the-twentieth-century America, emphasized cynicism and verbal wordplay.”²⁰⁵ Is television reflecting reality or reality reflecting television? ‘Jewishness’ and Judaism as depicted on sitcoms may be a mirror of societal discourse or vice-versa.

The *Schlemiel* and *Schlimazl* on *Seinfeld*

Jewish stereotypes are a significant aspect of *Seinfeld*. Besides minor characters with Jewish characteristics, two key players, George and Jerry, epitomize the *schlemiel* and *schlimazl*. Played by the Jewish Jason Alexander (born Jason Greenspan),²⁰⁶ George represents the neurotic, paranoid loser who always gets into trouble and drags others down with him. Supposedly of Italian descent, George uses gestures, intonation, expressions, physical appearance, personality and attitude that are stereotypically Jewish and epitomizes the “crypto-Jew,” a non-Jew who is regarded as Jewish by viewers and creators alike.²⁰⁷ In “The Ex-Girlfriend,” these characteristics appear when George finally breaks up with his clingy girlfriend. As he

²⁰⁵ Brook, 115.

²⁰⁶ The Internet Movie Database. Database Search. Jason Alexander. 30 March 2006.

<http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0004517/bio>

²⁰⁷ Antler, 44-45.

tells Jerry, he engages in a triumphant, gloating victory dance, while muttering Yiddish.²⁰⁸ His gestures and movements could be straight out of Tevye's dance in *Fiddler on the Roof*, with its traditional Jewish-Russian squats, elevated arms, snapping and Yiddish. Ironically, the script for *Seinfeld* instructs George to enter and dance "around the room like Zorba [the Greek]."²⁰⁹ Further, in numerous episodes George uses "Yiddishisms," such as *oy* and *meshugganah*.

Additionally, George's parents, Estelle and Frank Costanza (played by Estelle Harris and Jewish comedian Jerry Stiller)²¹⁰ are portrayed as stereotypical overprotective, nagging, Jewish parents. Mrs. Costanza, especially, looks and acts like an archetypal "Jewish Mother," with her roly-poly frame and overbearing demeanor. In one episode, Mr. Costanza addresses the ambiguity of George and his parents in regard to 'Jewishness:' "I think we're a Jewish family living under the Witness Protection Program under the name Costanza."²¹¹ Regardless of his stated race, religion or ethnicity, George is a *schlemiel* and represents the negative Jewish male stereotype that flourished post-WWII. Masked in humor, audiences laughed at his antics and, by default, his 'Jewishness.'

Jerry is a different type of Jew on *Seinfeld*. Although he is the only character actually identified as Jewish, he epitomizes the 'new 90s Jew.' J.J. Goldberg elaborates on this developing type, "It's a Baby Boomer Jewishness: at home in

²⁰⁸ *Seinfeld*, Season 2.

²⁰⁹ *The Seinfeld Scripts: The First and Second Seasons*. (New York: HarperPerennial, 1998): 165.

²¹⁰ The Internet Movie Database. Database Search. Jerry Stiller / Estelle Harris. 30 March 2006.

<http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0005467/> / <http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0364680/>

²¹¹ Brook, 107.

America, taken for granted, more than a little ambivalent. [Jewishness is] as much a part of them as family, sex and work, and just as ripe for satire. There's nothing worshipful there. You can take it or leave it. Most of us loved it."²¹² This aptly describes Jerry's Jewish sensibility and connection to his Jewish identity. Jerry dates gentile women, eats pork and enjoys Friday nights out. Similar to many Jewish-Americans today, Jerry does not practice Judaism as a religion, but does identify ethnically as a Jew. Also, Jerry may choose to be an 'us' or a 'them,' which is an identity struggle that affects present Jews in America. David Marc writes, "He walks a balancing act of personal identities ... Jerry the American, one of TV's 'us,' a televisually acceptable, conventionally well-dressed, SWM ... Jerry is ... also one of 'them,' a New York Jew, a sarcastic wisecracking cynic with an overbite ... who can be funny, weird, exotic, obnoxious or whatever adjective a Jewish Rorschach test compels."²¹³ Seemingly, negotiating one's Jewish and American identity is the key to acceptance and success in America. Jerry's carefully constructed identity appeals to audiences because it does not cross the line of being "too Jewish."

On *Seinfeld*, Jerry represents the Jewish stereotype of the unlucky, anxious *schlimazl*. He constantly finds himself in ridiculous, humiliating situations, such as wearing a pirate-like "Puffy Shirt" in an interview with Bryant Gumbel on national

²¹² J.J. Goldberg. "Seining Off." *The Jewish Journal of Greater Los Angeles*. (15 May 1998). Online. Internet Explorer. <http://www.jewishjournal.com/home/searchview.php?id=5335>

²¹³ David Marc. *Comic Visions: Television Comedy and American Humor*. (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, Inc., 1997): 200.

TV.²¹⁴ Jerry seems to step into these absurd circumstances, making him the perfect *schlimazl* to George's *schlemiel*. Antler comments on Jerry and George's relationship to each other, "Jerry needs sidekick George to remind him of his Jewish identity; 'hopelessly nebbishy,'²¹⁵ George is a *schlemiel* and a *schlimazl* by dint of his neuroses and physical traits."²¹⁶ While Antler argues that George encompasses both Jewish male archetypes, so too does Jerry. The characters play off each other and acquire characteristics of each other — most of which are unflattering stereotypes of Jews.

Throughout its nine-year run, *Seinfeld* was a television triumph. Journalist Cindy Sher writes of the "Seinfeld"-ization of America, demonstrating its importance to American culture, concluding that this phenomenon corresponds to 'Jewishness' as a secular sensibility.²¹⁷ A rabbi accurately informed Sher, "When being Jewish is just about being Jewish religiously, it's a dead spiral ... When being Jewish is about the sensibility — about being human — it's unbelievably staggering."²¹⁸ *Seinfeld* and other "Jewish" sitcoms validate this idea. The 'Jewishness' of *Seinfeld* appealed to a vast amount of viewers because of its connection to people of differing ethnicities and religions, as well as the ever-evolving Jewish population.

²¹⁴ *Seinfeld*, Season 5.

²¹⁵ Marc, 201.

²¹⁶ Antler, 45.

²¹⁷ Cindy Sher. "Unmasked: How Hollywood Revealed and Embraced Jewish Identity." *Jewish United Fund/Jewish Federation of Metropolitan Chicago News*. (2 April 2003). Online. Internet Explorer. 2 April 2006. http://www.juf.org/news_public_affairs/article.asp?key=3993

²¹⁸ Ibid.

The “Jewish-American Princess” on *The Nanny* (1993-1999)

From 1993-1999, Fran Drescher played the openly Jewish nanny to the elite, conservative Sheffield family. This character, with her flashy style, high-pitched nasal voice, heavy New York accent, and obsession with shopping, was representative of the “Jewish-American Princess.” A first for primetime television, Drescher did not shy away from her Jewish identity and portrayed the ‘positive’ aspects of her ‘Jewishness’ to her audience.²¹⁹ She even brings out humane aspects of the typically negative JAP, showing vulnerability and depth. Underneath Drescher’s materialist tendencies and shallow demeanor is a sharp-witted, compassionate woman who brings flare and warmth to the stuffy Sheffield household. Further, the show encompassed many positive aspects of ‘Jewishness,’ such as family values, and historical and cultural facts about Jews. In addition, Yiddish is prevalent throughout the show, with Drescher teaching to the Sheffields, as well as the television audience, the meaning and significance of the language. The sitcom has an appealing didactic quality, which does not become preachy.

Hired by British Broadway Producer, Maxwell Sheffield (Charles Shaughnessy), as a Nanny for his three children, Fran Fine (Drescher) moves into the mansion and changes the family’s lives with her ‘ethnic flavor’ and fun-loving

²¹⁹ Sheli Teitelbaum. “Oy to the World.” *The Jerusalem Report*. (21 April 1994): 44. *ProQuest*. Georgetown U. Library. Online. Internet Explorer. 5 Feb. 2006.
<http://proquest.umi.com/pqdlink?index=5&did=462002981&SrchMode=1&sid=3&Fmt=3&VInst=PROQ&VType=PQD&RQT=309&VName=PQD&TS=1145383213&clientId=5604>

persona.²²⁰ Originally from the lower-class, heavily-Jewish Flushing, Queens, Fran is “crass, gauche, whining, materialistic, manipulative, addicted to food and shopping.”²²¹ Her ‘Jewishness’ permeates throughout the show, with “Yiddishisms,” frequent visits from her “pushy, nosy, compulsive-eating [Jewish] mother,” Sylvia Fine (Renee Taylor),²²² constant *noshing* and *kibitzing* (gossiping), and, of course, loud-mouthed, gaudy behavior. There is no hiding or marginalizing the ‘Jewishness’ of this show, distinguishing it from previous “Jewish” Sitcoms such as *Rhoda* or *Barney Miller*. *The Nanny* marked a transformation on television sitcoms where blatant ‘Jewishness’ and Jewish themes were acceptable. Still, the show never directly focused on religious Judaism, which remains taboo to this day.

Fran Fine had distinct characteristics of the JAP, but she also transformed this stereotype to make it a more accessible and likeable character. While JAPs are associated with spoiled, high-end upbringings, Fran came from a lower middle-class family in New York. Indeed, she is materialistic and adores money, but she does not have excessive finances, albeit working for the Sheffields aids in her consumerist desires. Also, the stereotypical JAP is frigid and lacks sexual interest, which does not describe Fran, the ultra-sexy, self-proclaimed temptress. These anti-JAP characteristics humanize this Jewish woman, as well as dispel constructed stereotypical myths. But, at the same time, Fran acquires older Jewish female stereotypes, including the “Ghetto Girl” and the “Young Jewish Women in Search of

²²⁰ Brooks, 200.

²²¹ Zurawik, 185.

²²² Brooks, 199-200.

Marriage.” Brook writes, “The Ghetto Girl’s coarseness and vulgarity were further betrayed by the nasal tones and shrill expression of her voice, rendering her even more unacceptable to ‘good society.’”²²³ Instead of dispelling negative representations, Fran inadvertently constructs a new stereotype, which combines the JAP, the “Ghetto Girl,” and the “Young Jewish Women in Search of Marriage.” Seemingly it is a 90s Jewish female stereotype — one that is materialistic, crass, loud, middle-class, sexual, and desired. While this construction has redeeming traits, such as compassion and cleverness, the persona’s negative qualities are dominant. Regardless of tweaking and adapting these characters, representations of Jewish females on television remain derogatory, perhaps because that is what society expects and will pay to watch.

Similar to *Seinfeld*, *The Nanny* mocks Judaism, Jewish rituals, and traditions. Fran and her mother are secular Jews, but the show’s constant demonstration to the audience of the Fine’s lack of religion becomes conspicuous and overbearing. In one episode, “The Cantor Show,” Fran suggests the cantor at her mother’s synagogue try out for Mr. Sheffield’s musical.²²⁴ When he gets the lead role, the cantor leaves the synagogue, making the congregation furious at Fran and Sylvia. They are ‘banished’ to the back row of the temple where Sylvia pulls out a bacon, lettuce and tomato sandwich during services. Fran asks, “At temple?” and her mother replies “Nobody

²²³ Brook, 141-142.

²²⁴ *The Nanny*, Season 3.

can see us here ... I could throw a luau.”²²⁵ Not only do the Fines disparage the synagogue by eating during the service, but they bring a non-kosher pork product (bacon) into the sacred space, as well. The scene portrays Fran and Sylvia as tasteless, disdainful Jews, and treats Judaism insensitively.

Throughout *The Nanny*, frequent references to Fran’s love of pork and non-kosher food are made, as if to remind the audience that she is not “too Jewish.” Even in the first episode of the show, “The Pilot,” Fran emphasizes her family’s penchant towards non-Kosher food. On her first morning as the Nanny, she announces to the Sheffields at the breakfast table, “Well, I got a sista who’s a caterer. She does a *Porqo de Pruno* — that’s French for Pork and Prune — not only delicious, but a natural digestive.” This statement, not only indicative of Fran’s poor manners and crass speech, is the first of many instances throughout the sitcom where secular ‘Jewishness’ tropes Judaism. While *The Nanny* was pivotal in portraying Jews as human beings and shedding light on positive aspects of ‘Jewishness,’ the show still followed the unspoken rule for “Jewish” sitcoms — avoid being “too Jewish.” Even as the show found a loyal audience and high ratings in the mid-late 90s, ‘Jewishness’ was tolerable, but not Judaism.

The “Jewish Mother” on TV

The stereotypical “Jewish Mother” is ever-present in “Jewish” sitcoms. She is not the ‘star’ in any particular show, but does tend to steal the scene when she enters.

²²⁵ Zurawik, 190.

Executives may consciously keep this archetype from starring in her own sitcom because that would be “too” Jewish, since the “Jewish Mother” epitomizes the most extreme, brazen characteristics of ‘Jewishness.’ There would be no marginalizing the “Jewish Mother,” so she must be constrained to a supporting role. Although “Jewish Mothers” do not have a show to themselves, they consistently appear in “Jewish” sitcoms. While she frequents the sitcom scene, television critic, John J. O’Connor notes the exaggeration in her representation. Television is

curiously partial to neurotically over-protective, brash and often garish mothers of the unmistakably Jewish persuasion ... Sure, caricature is endemic to prime time, but why do Jewish mothers seem to have a monopoly on its more extreme forms? ... Too many Jewish mothers ... become props for humor that often teeters on outright ridicule or even occasional cruelty.²²⁶

O’Connor realizes the overly harsh portrayal of the “Jewish Mother,” which comes from years of construction of an absurd, easily-ridiculed stereotype. Further, the “Jewish Mother” acts as a scapegoat on television for familial problems and the more outlandish she is, the more characters, and even the outside audience, feel it acceptable to mock and laugh.

On “Jewish” sitcoms of the 1990s, several prominent “Jewish Mothers” are notable. Such women include Seinfeld’s mother, Helen Seinfeld (played by Liz Sheridan), Fran Fine’s mother, Sylvia Fine (Renee Taylor) from *The Nanny*, Paul Buchman’s mother, Sylvia Buchman (Cynthia Harris) from *Mad About You*, Grace

²²⁶ John J. O’Connor. “This Jewish Mom Dominates TV, Too.” *The New York Times*. (14. Oct. 1993, late ed.): C20. *LexisNexis*. Georgetown U. Library. Online. Internet Explorer. 17 Jan. 2006. http://web.lexis-nexis.com/universe/document?_m=64108ad044a45f121894c7187eb269ce&_docnum=11&wchp=dGLbVlz-zSkVA&_md5=15997900dc28bd6a784568db6b869b54

Adler's mother, Bobbi Adler (Debbie Reynolds) from *Will & Grace*, and George's mother, although supposedly Italian, the epitome of the "crypto-Jewish" mother, Estelle Costanza (Estelle Harris).²²⁷ Each of these mothers are loud-mouthed, meddlesome characters who invade upon their children's lives. They are portrayed with no sense of boundaries and manipulative tendencies towards their offspring. Often a visit from one of the 'Sylvia's' causes anxiety and turmoil in the child's house demonstrating the negativity of their presence. One of the more offensive "Jewish Mothers," Estelle Costanza is described severely, but accurately, "You want guilt? She owns a 'mutual fund' of it, trading shares for shame and embarrassment. Estelle Costanza loves her son so much it hurts — everybody. It's no wonder that he's bald. His hair couldn't survive the heat of his mother breathing down his neck."²²⁸ "Jewish Mothers" endure the worst representations of Jewish females on television. Perhaps mothers are easy prey for ridicule because audiences of all races, religions and ethnicities can relate to this familial anxiety.

Statistics demonstrate that 1990s "Jewish" sitcoms attracted mass audiences. For example, "During the 1996 season ... *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."²²⁹ While 'Jewishness' and Jewish stereotypes are prominent

²²⁷ Antler, 65.

²²⁸ Michael Elkin. "Mother's Daze: What to get Mrs. Costanza of 'Seinfeld' for Sunday? How about a new son!" *Jewish Exponent*. Vol. 201, No. 19. (8 May 1997): 1x. *ProQuest*. Georgetown U. Library. Online. Internet Explorer. 2 April 2006.
<http://proquest.umi.com/pqdlink?index=6&did=481382681&SrchMode=1&sid=1&Fmt=3&VInst=PRQD&VType=PQD&RQT=309&VName=PQD&TS=1145382469&clientId=5604>

²²⁹ Antler, 39.

on these shows, Judaism is only mocked and marginalized. Further, no main characters are “too Jewish,” often playing down their stereotypical Jewish characteristics. It seems that the producers, writers and actors in “Jewish” sitcoms are blatantly aware that cultural ‘Jewishness’ couches religious Judaism in non-threatening terms, which is vital to keep multicultural audiences watching.

Chapter 5: 'Jewishness' as America's Ethnicity

Jewish identity and its representation in the media, especially television, continue to evolve. In the past, Jews were viewed in society as an inferior minority, often scapegoated, persecuted and exiled from their diverse homelands. Although others labeled Jews as a race, often black, Americans in the 20th century considered Jews white. Due to a broader understanding of race, religion, and ethnicity, classifying Jews as a race has finally been discredited. Presently, it seems that, in America, Jews and non-Jews alike have embraced Jews as an ethnicity, emphasizing their cultural traits and values, rather than only their religious beliefs. In fact, as I have demonstrated here, television, as a medium that reflects and shapes American society and its values, focuses on the ethnic qualities of Jews. Ironically, television goes even further and often attributes Jewish traits and characteristics to its sitcom characters, even if the characters do not specifically identify as Jews. The phenomenon of “crypto-Jewishness,” in which a non-Jewish character acquires culturally-Jewish sensibilities by viewers and creators alike, has become prominent on television sitcoms. Marie Barone (Doris Roberts) from *Everybody Loves Raymond*,²³⁰ Karen Walker (Megan Mullally) from *Will & Grace*,²³¹ and Estelle Costanza (Estelle Harris) from *Seinfeld* could be considered “crypto-Jews.” Vastly different than the past in society, when Jews were disliked and degraded, today it is

²³⁰ The Internet Movie Database. Database Search. *Everybody Loves Raymond* (1996-2005). 30 March 2006. <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt115167/>

²³¹ The Internet Movie Database. Database Search. *Will & Grace* (1998-2006). 30 March 2006. <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0157246/>

‘en vogue’ to emulate ‘Jewishness,’ in the media, as well as in reality. Some examples of mainstream acquisition of ‘Jewishness’ are using Yiddish phrases and engaging in such events as “A Jewcy Chanukah.”²³²

Seinfeld’s Costanza family is the epitome of “crypto-Jews.” Audiences assume they are Jewish because they represent Jewish archetypes, especially George and his mother as the neurotic *schlemiel* and overbearing “Jewish Mother.” The supposedly Italian ethnicity of the Costanzas is never emphasized on the show because it is insignificant. Regardless of their scripted ethnicity, the Costanzas represent Jewish characteristics and stereotypes, which symbolize to the audience their ethnic “Jewishness.” Television characters transform into who their audiences want them to be, and, George, as an example, season after season, emulated cultural ‘Jewishness.’

Jason Alexander even admits he based his character on the king of paranoia, neuroticism, and Jewish humor — Woody Allen.²³³ As inspiration for George Costanza, Allen seems fitting because both exude stereotypical Jewish traits. Using the blatantly Jewish Allen as his model, instead of a more subtle persona, Alexander understood that his character would be considered ethnically Jewish. This conscious

²³² Jewcy is a group that throws Hanukkah celebrations for young Jews through “celebrity-filled” events. These productions are filled with “R-rated” humor, kitschy activities and dancing. Jewcy is just one of many groups to have developed in the 21st century that throw parties for youth. (Stephanie Rosenbloom. “A Happy Hipster Hanukkah.” *The New York Times*. (15 Dec. 2005, late ed.): G1. *LexisNexis*. Georgetown U. Library. Online. Internet Explorer. 17 Jan. 2006.

http://web.lexis-nexis.com/universe/document?_m=3e94aa266caf1f609bdd3b9f78d1e678&_docnum=1&wchp=dGLbVtz-zSkVA&_md5=85deb21231a2decfe768b1f048c11cc9

²³³ Brook, 106.

decision demonstrates that Alexander believed a stereotypically Jewish character, with all its flaws, would appeal to the masses. Much of his portrayal was humorous and eccentric, which allowed audiences to laugh at, but still identify with the character. Indeed, George's positive reception with audiences and the extreme success of *Seinfeld* proves that "Jewishness" could be considered America's new ethnicity.

Perhaps 'Jewishness,' in fact, has become the marker of all ethnicity in 21st century America. People relate to Jewish cultural aspects and feel 'safe' in acquiring these characteristics. It seems that the Jewish ambiguity with race, religion and ethnicity makes Jews vulnerable and accessible as a people, who represent many minority identity struggles. Further, the history and connection of Jews with humor may serve as a model for the masses, easing people's anxiety in the face of adversity. Immediately recognizable to the audience because they rely on ingrained stereotypes, "crypto-Jews" appear often on sitcoms adding humor and drama with their paranoia, *kvetching*, or guilt. While the characters do not identify as Jews, certain markers signify their ethnic 'Jewishness.' As demonstrated by "Jewish" sitcoms over the past fifty years, 'Jewishness' resonates with diverse ethnicities.

However, Samuel Freedman finds this universality of 'Jewishness' problematic. He writes, "But once intermarriage is rampant, once bagels outsell doughnuts, once 'Seinfeld' is a hit even in Boise, then Jewishness as ethnicity, as folk culture, as something separate and divisible from religion, is ceasing to exist in any

meaningful way.”²³⁴ This perspective is legitimate — when cultures are appropriated, they are in danger of losing significance, and culture may not ultimately replace religion as the central identity for Jews. Nevertheless, as religious identification declines, cultural or ethnic identification must suffice.

Is it inappropriate for other races, religions and ethnicities to emulate ‘Jewishness’ or is this a marker of tolerance and acceptance. Events such as “A Jewcy Chanukah,” with its kitschy games and celebrities might even seem to mock Judaism, its traditions, and holidays. Still, these celebrations educate and excite younger Jews about their background, which is positive for Jewish sustenance. While Freedman has a valid perspective on the possible threat to Jewish sustenance when others emulate and appropriate their culture, Jeffrey Peck’s opinion that representation and emulation of Jews, even if they are not “real Jews,” is more positive than none at all, is valid, as well.²³⁵

There is no question that representations are important for cultural sustainability. Although many images, especially in the media, are negative and constructed, through a mixture of imagination and reality, representation plays a vital role in cultural discourse. Representations may maintain the memory and honor the history of a group of people long after those people are gone. For instance, the victims of the Holocaust will not be forgotten as long as depictions of them are circulated in the media. The memory of these people can only survive throughout the

²³⁴ Freedman, 338-339.

²³⁵ Peck, *Being Jewish in the New Germany*, 2.

generations from portrayal and imagery. Further, representations evoke curiosity and awareness of diverse cultures in people who may not have direct exposure to a given culture. Indeed, while the representations may be flawed, it is better to have them than not.

While stereotypes and “crypto-Jews” are constructed and exaggerated images of people, they still may be used to fuel interest in other culture’s customs and ritual, which may lead to higher levels of knowledge and tolerance. Foucault argues that discourse is the only way to create meaning, making communication imperative to cultural sustenance.²³⁶ Hall elaborates on Foucault’s theory, “Representation is the process by which members of a culture use language ... to produce meaning ... It is us — in society, within human cultures — who make things mean, who signify.”²³⁷ Without representation, there would be a lack of cultural discourse, which would create more ignorance and fear of the ‘other.’ People attach their own biases and give particular meaning and significance to images, which could be considered negative in that it fuels stereotypes and false ideas, but also may be a positive, constructive means of cultural communication.

I do not agree with scholars that believe the unflattering, biased media representation of Jews will lead to Jewish extinction. On the contrary, as noted above, it may be all we have in the future. This position seems extreme since Jews have endured much harsher adversity and persisted in their existence. Still, the portrayal is

²³⁶ Hall, 45.

²³⁷ Ibid, 61.

a threat to Jews, as demonstrated by America's increasing intermarriage rates (about 50% in 2006),²³⁸ lower percentage in giving and volunteering to Jewish causes ("most Jews are giving less than 1 percent of their annual income to Jewish philanthropies ... less than a third of Jewish households volunteer time for Jewish and non-Jewish causes"),²³⁹ and decreasing Jewish cultural and religious identification. Sarna writes:

Two interrelated and highly contentious statistics count for Jews above all the rest: their absolute numbers in America and their rate of intermarriage. Measures of survival on the one hand and of assimilation on the other, these numbers have fostered anew the great fear that has accompanied Jews throughout their American sojourn: the fear that the melting pot would subsume them, that they would disappear as a people.²⁴⁰

Further, younger Jews are identifying less with their Jewish heritage. Stephen Whitfield writes, "Whether the criterion is synagogue affiliation, or devotion to the welfare of Israel, or awareness of the terrible price that the Holocaust exacted, younger Jews have been pulled by the heartstrings of peoplehood much less than their parents or grandparents."²⁴¹

²³⁸ Barkat, Amiram. "Greater Tel Aviv replaces NY as world's largest Jewish city." *Haaretz.com*. (17 Jan. 2006). Online. Internet Explorer. 2 April 2006.
<http://www.jewishagency.org/JewishAgency/English/Home/About/Press+Room/Jewish+Agency+In+The+News/2006/1/jan17hz.htm>

²³⁹ Mordechai Rimor and Gary A. Tobin. "Jewish Giving Patterns to Jewish and Non-Jewish Philanthropy." *Faith and Philanthropy in America: Exploring the Role of Religion in America's Voluntary Sector*. Eds. Robert Wuthnow and Virginia A. Hodgkinson and Associates. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1990): 141, 160.

²⁴⁰ Sarna, *American Judaism*, 357.

²⁴¹ Stephen J. Whitfield. "The Future of American Jewry: A History." *American Jewish Year Book 2004*. Vol. 104. Eds. David Singer and Lawrence Grossman. (New York: The American Jewish Committee, 2004): 15.

While extinction does not seem a real threat, assimilation, intermarriage and changing perspectives on religion have negatively affected the Jewish population in America. Although never a high percentage of the population, Jews had their peak in the 1940s comprising 3.63-3.68 percent of the total American population and, since then, steadily decreased to 1.9-2.2 percent in 2000.²⁴² Television representation of Jews, especially stereotypes portrayed in sitcoms, has not helped the Jewish population in America, but the media cannot be blamed as the sole cause of this decline, either. Representations of Jews, as of any race, religion, or ethnicity, are essential, as discussed above, but working to alter these negative stereotypes may be beneficial for Jewish sustenance, as well.

Yudit Kornberg Greenberg maintains that Jewish survival depends upon fluidity and progressiveness. She writes, “What our crisis demands most of all is a fluidity in our sense of identity and an openness to difference, rather than maintaining an insistence on a narrowness of views and firm boundaries.”²⁴³ Indeed, tolerance and flexibility are imperative to the future of the Jews, but the consequences of media representation and stereotypes must be considered, as well. Nevertheless, the popularity of “Jewish” sitcoms in the 1990s and the increase in “crypto-Jewishness” indicates that ethnic “Jewishness” is an integral part of American society. Jewish representation is abundant in the media, and while many are exaggerated and

²⁴² Sarna, *American Judaism*, 357.

²⁴³ Yudit Kornberg Greenberg. “The Choosing, Not the Chosen People.” *Jewish Identity in the Postmodern Age: Scholarly and Personal Reflections*. Ed. Charles Selengut. (St. Paul, MN: Paragon House, 1999): 15.

unflattering portrayals, their presence is essential for intercultural communication. In an ideal world, media representation of diverse races, religions and ethnicities would be fair and accurate, but until then, dialogue and discourse of these portrayals must suffice.

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