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M.A. Thesis/Jewish Studies

My thesis addresses the topic of Jewish men in media; specifically, the legacy of the schlemiel. It is comprised of eight chapters: Stereotypes and the Feminization of Jewish Men; The Evolution of the Schlemiel; Hollywood and the Jews; The Afikomen Syndrome Redux: Jews on TV 1949-1966; Jews and TV 1972-1999; Woody Allen: Neurotic, Inadequate and Successful: The Rise of the Modern Schlemiel; Seinfeld: "It's Gold, Jerry, Gold!"; and Larry David: Truth and Consequences. The goal of the thesis was threefold: to discuss the images of Jewish men in television and film, the self-censorship by film and television studio executives and the social coding it necessitated, and to end with three specific schlemiels – Woody Allen, the Seinfeld characters and Larry David – to illustrate how such comic imagery played out in the media and on the Jewish consciousness. Books, periodicals, films, TV shows and radio interviews were used as source material. I hope this thesis furthers the discussion of Jewish imagery in pop culture and reveals the tensions and triumphs Jews have experienced on the American cultural landscape.

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**The Jewish Man in Media:
The Legacy of the Schlemiel**

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**Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of
Requirements for Masters of Arts in Jewish Studies**

**Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion
Jewish Studies Department
New York, NY**

**August 29, 2003
Advisor: Professor Wendy Zierler**

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Prologue	1
Chapter I: Stereotypes and the Feminization of the Jewish Man.....	3
Chapter II: The Evolution of the Schlemiel.....	11
Chapter III: Hollywood and the Jews.....	20
Chapter IV: The Afikomen Syndrome Redux: Jews on TV 1949-1966.....	31
Chapter V: Jews and TV 1972-1999.....	41
Chapter VI: Woody Allen: The Rise of the Modern Schlemiel.....	47
Chapter VII: Seinfeld: "It's Gold, Jerry, Gold!".....	54
Chapter VIII: Larry David: Truth and Consequences.....	70
Bibliography.....	76

Prologue

“In meetings, people still ask, ‘Is it good for the Jews?’ There is this sense we are an endangered minority, and, if we stick our necks out, we are going to be in deep trouble, because historically that was true.”

– Marshall Herskovitz, co-creator of “thirtysomething” (1981)¹

For a Jewish audience, finding Jews on television and film is like searching for the Afikomen – the essential piece of matzo hidden at the Passover seder. It must be found to finish the ritual meal – but you have to know where to look for it. Like intrepid explorers, Jews scanned the media in search of themselves. Since much has been written about the televised images and stereotypes of Jewish women, this thesis will focus solely on the image of *Jewish men*. And the images are complicated: Sometimes Jewish actors play non-Jews who are clearly Jewish, such as Carl Reiner portraying Alan Brady (read Sid Caesar) in “The Dick Van Dyke Show.” Or non-Jewish actors, such as David Birney, played a Jewish cab driver in “Bridget Loves Bernie.”² Other times we hit the jackpot – Jerry Seinfeld plays Jerry Seinfeld, a Jewish comic from New York.

Jews, of course, take special pleasure in seeing themselves on screen – it validates their existence in America. And we are famous for delighting in revelations that actors were or are Jewish. John Garfield. Edward G. Robinson. Michael Landon. You’re kidding! Harrison Ford? Who knew?

¹ David Zurawik, *The Jews of Prime Time*, p. 15

² Ibid. p. 98

But when a skit, a parody of a game show, called "Jew/Not-a-Jew" appeared on "Saturday Night Live," the public reaction was negative and instantaneous. It showed pictures – from Sandy Koufax to Penny Marshall – and asked who was and wasn't a Jew. Many decried it as anti-Semitic, not only Jewish organizations but even the president of NBC, Brandon Tartikoff's mother.³

The real-life celebrity game of "Who's a Jew?" is a challenge. Imagine how much more confusing it is to identify fictional characters as Jewish when writers obfuscate their ethnic background. What were the consequences of Jewish men being *overtly* absent from our cultural radar? What were the tip-offs they were even there? And once the Jewish man emerged on big and small screens alike, what did he look like?

The most visible Jewish male image in the late 20th century was the *schlemiel*, a comic figure. This character, a staple of Eastern European folklore, was transformed into a stereotypic Jew in American pop culture. The following chapters will discuss Jewish stereotypes, the historic feminization of Jewish men and the *schlemiel*'s impact on Jewish identity. Also addressed: the assimilationist dreams of the movie moguls, the self-censorship by Jewish television studio executives and the Jewish coding it necessitated.

My thesis will end with a discussion of three *schlemiels* – Woody Allen, the "Seinfeld" characters and Larry David ("Seinfeld," "Curb Your Enthusiasm") – to illustrate how such comic imagery played out in the media and on the Jewish consciousness.

³ Ibid. pp.2-3

Chapter I: Stereotypes and the Feminization of the Jewish Man

"If you have a character who is a Jewish character but who doesn't exhibit one of those traits that people identify with some of the stereotypes, then how would you know the character is Jewish?"⁴ — Donald Ohlmeyer

The quickest way to introduce ethnicity is via stereotypes – which have valid theatrical purposes. They are recognizable traits or figures that immediately define a character. Once introduced, exposition is established. For vaudeville acts and early silent films, stereotyping was used as shorthand. Even in psychology, stereotypes are a quick-hit way to understand the larger world. Political writer Walter Lippmann wrote in 1922 that stereotypes were "an aid to the bewildering effect of trying to see the world steadily and as a whole."⁵ Much later, Patricia Erens said she hoped her book, *The Jew in American Cinema*, which goes into exhaustive detail about Jewish character types in film – from the early years through the 1980s – "will increase sensitivity, not in an effort to eliminate stereotypes, but rather to increase the range of types available."⁶

The downside of these representations is their inflexibility. They undermine the complexity that is the true essence of human beings. Consider the etymology of the word itself: *stereo* is the Greek for solid, and *type*, mechanical repetition, inflexible.⁷

Stereotypes perpetuate social mythologies; they are dangerous when used as tools to demonize and degrade social groups and encourage negative imagery.⁸ These

⁴ Jews in Prime-Time Television Conference, 2000

⁵ Patricia Erens, *The Jew in American Cinema*, p.23

⁶ Ibid. p.28

inflexible impressions can imprint on the unconsciousness of a viewer portraits so inflammatory they can serve as justifications for violence. At the same time, they are internalized by the ethnic group, often resulting in a lack of self-worth and self-hatred.

Given the massive reach of film and television, the concern about circulating hurtful images is pronounced. Frequently, employing stereotypes, albeit with a humorous topspin, can be a defensive measure. That defensiveness took several forms. Often, Jews, specifically the Hollywood moguls and network executives, took that defensiveness one step further: They rarely presented images of Jews at all. Or, Jews "cultivated self-deprecating humor as a means of ingratiating themselves in dealings with potentially hostile out-group members."⁹

As viewers search for the Afikomen, stereotypes point one in the direction of Jewish characters or the writers' Jewish sensibilities – with a proviso: It will be familiar, and most importantly, non-threatening to the non-Jewish world.

"Every stereotype is Janus-faced. It has a positive and a negative element, neither of which bears any resemblance to the complexity or diversity of the world as it is."¹⁰ The positive element is taken by the [former] outsiders as their new definition. The negative aspect is that the group turns on itself, assigning these once-hated traits to landsman less fortunate than themselves. (For instance, German Jews were quick to distance themselves from Eastern European Jews.)

⁷ Richard Freadman, "Love Among the Stereotypes," eds. Avner Ziv and Anat Zajdman, *Semites and Stereotypes*, p.108

⁸ Ibid. p.109

⁹ Carolyn Miller, "Are Jews Funnier Than Non-Jews?" eds. Ziv Avner and Anat Zajdman, *Semites and Stereotypes*, p.60

¹⁰ Gilman, *Jewish Self-Hatred*, p.4

Jewish humor is at once self-wounding and self-healing. We can laugh at our own idiosyncrasies. At the same time, if the imagery is affectionate rather than loathsome, it affords a sense of recognition and acceptance.

In short, stereotypes define us, limit us and, if they are positive, liberate us. For Jews, it is a complicated game. Either we are visible and stereotyped or evident but not labeled as Jews. And though many contradictory stereotypes abound – Jews can be both Communists and rich capitalists – in comedy there is one recognizable stereotype that defines the Jewish male: the schlemiel.

In order to understand the schlemiel, the comic fool, it helps to know its genesis. The inculcation of non-aggressive behavior into the socialization of Jewish men served two important purposes. In the second century C.E., the Romans defeated the Jewish state. As a minority in a hostile environment, the rabbis were compelled to find ways of preserving their uniqueness, as well as the corporeal existence of the community. By redefining the assumption of Jewish masculinity, they were able to accomplish this feat.¹¹

The failed revolt by Simon Bar Kokhba in 135 C.E. was a clear sign that the Jews were outnumbered. Facing insurmountable physical odds, the rabbis believed survival against oppressors would only be possible through spiritual resistance and a strong sense of communal attachment.¹² To reduce the social acceptability of violence as an option, the rabbis “replaced the classic patriarchal definition of masculinity, man-as-macho fighter, with the alternative definition of man-as-scholar.”¹³ Violent behavior was discouraged – both as a response to incitement by the prevailing culture or to incidents

¹¹ Ibid. p.6

¹² Aviva Cantor, *Jewish Women/Jewish Men: The Legacy of Patriarchy in Jewish Life*, p. 81

¹³ Ibid. p.92

within the population. "Jewish society needed an image against which to define itself and produced the "goy" – the hypermale – as its countertype."¹⁴ The Jewish world needed to be a haven from external persecution. A feeling of responsibility for all Jews was encouraged, based on two primal tenets. The Jews received the Torah as a *group*, indicating the community, not just the individual, has a special relationship with God. In addition, the Kabbalists promoted the concept of bringing "national and universal redemption."¹⁵ On a more practical level, a whole village could be killed as a result of the actions of one Jew.

With that in mind, even the difference in a handshake between non-Jewish men (vigorous) and the idealized Jewish scholar (tepid) can be seen as subversive. The handshake was supposedly a custom begun by knights. "The *yeshiva bokhur* extends the right hand with limp wrist for a mere touch of the other's hand."¹⁶ The initial encounter between a Jew and non-Jew is an occasion for showing "resistance to the models of manliness of the dominant faction."¹⁷ Sadly, what began as spiritual resistance degenerated over the centuries into a weakened persona. The effeminate implication of this gesture fed into the feminizing image of the Jewish male, which dominated 19th-century Europe.

Rather than look to commercial success for validation, Ashkenazi Jews deemed Torah study and Halachic argument as the physical banner of achievement. "The alternative Jewish form of maleness was known as *edelkayt* (literally, "nobility," but in Yiddish "gentleness and delicacy"); its ideal subject was the *yeshiva-bokhur* (the man

¹⁴ Daniel Boyarin, *Unheroic Conduct: The Rise of Heterosexuality and the Invention of the Jewish Man*, p.4

¹⁵ Cantor, *Jewish Women/Jewish Men*, p.80

¹⁶ Boyarin, *Unheroic Conduct*, p.151

devoting his life to the study of Torah) and his secularized younger brother, the *mentsch*.¹⁸

The image may have been delicate, but the act of study itself could be quite combative. Recreational arguing was an outlet for aggressive behavior, utilizing verbal sparring instead of fists to win a legal argument. The community bestowed its blessing on this definition of Jewish manhood, awarding men psychological protection to withstand societal insults. Unfortunately, by making study and ritual observance the supreme expression of manhood, these areas become off-limits to Jewish women. As the Jewish man was to the majority culture, so was the Jewish woman to the Jewish man, disenfranchised.¹⁹

With the coming of the Enlightenment in Western Europe, the siren call of assimilation proved seductive. Part of the process of becoming more "like them" was to strip away obvious Jewish cultural identifiers. Instead, Jews would embrace the Christian notion of what it meant to be a man. To do this, Jewish men had to combat centuries of anti-Semitic images of themselves as women. Circumcision, a primal symbolic action for a male to become a Jew, was seen as feminizing. In addition, since the 14th century, an outrageous assumption perpetrated by the Catholic Church that "After the death of Christ all Jewish men, like women, suffer menstruation." was still believed.²⁰

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid. p.23

¹⁹ Cantor, *Jewish Women Jewish Men*, p.93

²⁰ Boyarin, *Unheroic Conduct*, p.210

Although the gentle and sedentary scholar had been an internalized positive image for Jewish men, the desire to assimilate jump-started a sense of self-hatred. In order to be considered worthy by the larger world, they were forced to reject their own values.²¹

Concurrent with the rise of nationalism in the early 20th century, Western Europe was the formation of modern anti-Semitism. The odious caricatures were not only insulting but wildly contradictory. Jews controlled politics and economics (a claim that persists to this day), yet they were "scrawny, obese, or effeminate, but in any case weak-bodied, with kinky hair, large lips, a foul odor and lecherous tendencies."²² (How one can be both scrawny and obese is never resolved, nor is the idea that Jews are powerful and parasitic simultaneously.)

Fueling the debate was Otto Weininger's 1903 *Sex and Character*, published after the suicide of the author, himself a Jew. "As there is no real dignity in women, so what is meant by the word 'gentleman' does not exist amongst the Jews. Jews and women are devoid of humor, but addicted to mockery."²³ He set out to prove that all Jews were, essentially, female, which for a misogynist, is the ultimate insult.

Zionism was "the historic break with the culture of Jewish meekness and the beginning of a tough male Jewish counterculture."²⁴ The proposal for a "Muscle-Jew" by Max Nordau came in tandem with the call for a Jewish homeland.²⁵ And as Jews supported Socialist politics in Eastern Europe, they became more aggressive and outspoken, roles that liberated men and women. Yet despite a new sense of political

²¹ Gilman, *Jewish Self-Hatred*, p.3

²² Paul Breines, *Tough Jews, Political Fantasies and the Moral Dilemma of American Jewry*, p.126

²³ Marjorie Garber, *Vested Interests: Cross-dressing and Cultural Anxiety*, p.224

²⁴ Ibid. p.30

²⁵ Boyarin, *Unheroic Conduct*, pp.76-77

urgency, the imprint on the Jewish psyche after centuries of indoctrination and persecution remained. They saw themselves as victims, not survivors.

This notion haunted the Jews who immigrated to America, including the Hollywood moguls, since they confronted a “macho” version of masculinity that accompanied the conquering of a continent. The defining American legends – Paul Bunyan, John Henry and Johnny Appleseed – are beyond mortal capabilities; they can impose their will on the landscape. These giants of prodigious deeds work with the body, not the mind, a prerequisite for an American folk hero.²⁶

Similarly, a cowboy’s physical courage, stoic dignity, self-sufficiency and penchant for moving beyond the latest civilized settlement was exalted. “He is the physical embodiment of American personhood (a euphemism for *manhood*), the corporeal reification of our obsession with independence, remaining in control of our fate and living by a code of honor having less to do with the letter of the law than with a fiercely independent sense of right and wrong.”²⁷

Individual enterprise was the path to success – a man’s masculinity was defined by being the breadwinner, as compared to “spiritual resistance by learning,” the Jewish ideal in Europe.²⁸ Newspapers publicized the same principle, be it Horace Greeley’s “Go West, young man” as part of Manifest Destiny, or later, in film, John Wayne and Gary Cooper’s lone cowboy defined the iconic American male: strong, silent and physical. Reason, scholarship and thoughtful discussion (Jewish sensibilities) are markedly absent.

²⁶ Jay Boyer, “The *Schlemiezel*: Black Humor and the *Shtetl* Tradition,” eds. Avner Ziv and Anat Zajdamn, *Semites and Stereotypes*, p.9

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Cantor, *Jewish Women/Jewish Men*, p.170

These factors, among many, were part of the historic backdrop facing Jewish comedians. They respond not by becoming cowboys – although Bronco Billy Anderson (Max Aronson) was the first movie-star cowboy and Jeff Chandler was a 1950s Western matinee idol, few knew they were Jewish – but by utilizing their outsider status in a satiric way. The scholarly Jew in Europe who debates Talmud is reborn, on American soil, in two distinct ways: lawyer and comic. He will parse and comment and savage American society. Some will be aggressive (Lenny Bruce, Don Rickles), others will adopt a more familiar mien: the schlemiel.

Chapter II: The Evolution of the Schlemiel

"Since Jewry's attitudes toward its own frailty were complex and contradictory, the schlemiel was sometimes berated for his foolish weakness, and elsewhere exalted for his hard inner strength."²⁹ – Ruth R. Wisse

The characterization of the schlemiel has evolved over centuries. There is one commonality – he, and until the 20th century it is always a he – comes out the worse for wear. The schlemiel is a loser. Or a holy fool. In *The Taste of Yiddish*, the schlemiel is "an inept character, a sap, and incompetent."³⁰ Although the character of the fool is a universal figure in literature, the Jewish schlemiel is an entity unto himself.

A prototype appears in a medieval story of a man named Shemuliel.³¹ The motif of the cuckolded husband, similar to Isaac Bashevis Singer's story *Gimpel the Fool* (1945), is a frequent plot device, bringing the character's ingenuousness (and questionable masculinity) to the fore. Shemuliel returns home after a year to find his wife has had a baby. Looking to the rabbi for guidance, Schemuliel is told the baby is decreed legitimate, to the derision of the townsfolk. Shemuliel becomes an archetype for one "who is involving himself in difficult situations from which he cannot extricate himself."³² What is heartbreaking is how he acquiesces to the corrupt rabbi – who should be watching out for him. The rabbi may have abrogated his responsibility to Shemuliel to

²⁹ Ruth R. Wisse, *The Schlemiel as Modern Hero*, p.5

³⁰ Lillian Mermin Feinsilver, *The Taste of Yiddish*, p.119

³¹ Sanford Pinsker, *The Schlemiel as Metaphor: Studies in Yiddish and American Jewish Fiction*, p.5

protect the child, but his action has two consequences. First, the real father escapes his obligations, and second, Shemueliel becomes the gullible fool.

Adalbert von Chamisso, a Frenchman living in Germany who felt himself a man without a country, wrote *Peter Schlemihl* (1813).³³ The term, *schlemiel*, had been listed as Jewish underworld slang before the 19th century. Why a non-Jew chose a name with such a strong Jewish association is curious. Wisse, quoting Dov Sadan in *The Schlemiel as Modern Hero*, suggests that one possible explanation for the moniker may be found in the name itself. The term "schlemiel," used in a specific way, came to "represent the man fated to be different, homeless, alien and Jewish."³⁴

Sander Gillman in *Jewish Self-Hatred* sees evidence of the schlemiel even earlier than Chamisso. In theatrical and literary satires written in the late 18th century at the beginning of the Haskalah in Germany, a schlemiel-like character was an educational device.³⁵ The goal of the *maskilim* was to educate and enlighten fellow Jews on the value of accepting the prevailing German culture. They advocated minimizing differences in behavior, such as distinctive dress, and most important, exchanging Yiddish for German.

"Schlemiels are fools who are branded with the external sign of a damaged language (Yiddish), a language that entraps them. Schlemiels are the creation of the Enlightenment. It is the Jewish enlightener's attempt to use satire to cajole the reader into not being a fool."³⁶ In these literary and theatrical works, much like the early silent films in America, the father-as-schlemiel will symbolize the old, superstitious world, which is viewed as inadequate in emerging times. What Moses Mendelssohn singled out as the

³² Ibid. pp. 4-5

³³ Wisse, *Schlemiel as Modern Hero*, p.105

³⁴ Ibid. p.125

³⁵ Gilman, *Jewish Self-Hatred*, p.109

two most detrimental aspects of Jewish life – the *mitnagadim*'s Talmudic argument for its own sake and the ecstatic superstition of the Hasidim – could be represented by this figure. Although Mendelssohn believed that a new, improved Hebrew would be the true language for the new, improved Jew, the irony is obvious: Many works that satirized the Old World would be delivered in Yiddish; the disdained language of the Diaspora doubled as a teaching tool. The upshot? The audience ridiculed an aspect of themselves.

As the century progressed, there was a conscious effort to illustrate how to avoid being a ridiculous Jew. These theatrical flourishes, instructional tales if you will, helped Jews identify the Other in themselves. Although one of the Haskalah figures held up for scorn is an observant Yiddish-speaking father, part of the mockery is directed at his obsession with the minutia of Jewish law. (Fast-forward several centuries and witness the parsing of social behavior on "Seinfeld." Or consider the overly intellectual parodies of Woody Allen, such as *Love and Death*. As the great Russian film director Sergei Eisenstein noted, "Context is everything." By the time an obsession for minutia reaches the 20th-century schlemiel, the trait is a source of pride, not disdain. Why? Because "Seinfeld" focuses on concerns everyone can relate to, versus Talmudic minutiae, which often addresses esoteric matters that beguile a select few. On the other hand, the sublime wisdom that can be mined from traditional ethics is not always found in a trivial preoccupation with social niceties.)

For many Germans of the Haskalah, the tension between tradition and modernity proved overwhelming. Although Mendelssohn retained his connection with ritual

³⁶ Ibid., p.112

Judaism, a number of his followers, including four of his six children, converted.³⁷ In reality, conversion served an economic necessity: It was the only way to ensure eligibility for certain jobs.³⁸ For many, the ticket for acceptance into "being a true German also meant being a Christian."³⁹

Either way, the balancing act was psychologically painful, contributing to ambiguous feeling about themselves and their fellow Jews. Whatever choice a Jewish man made, he would be derided. If he remained committed to tradition, he was considered old-fashioned, refusing to discard a detested status: the Other. If he embraced the non-Jewish German world, he was deemed a traitor to his heritage. The Reform Jewish movement made an attempt to straddle both worlds. Their efforts were not embraced by the larger society: The German people still found the Jew, whether they were faithful to tradition or new converts, to be hateful.⁴⁰

The German-Jewish population was small in number, urban and had daily contact with the non-Jewish world. For the Eastern European Jews, the ideas of the Haskalah presented daunting realities. Their population was more numerous, but segregated; they were subject to frequent oppression and violence. The rise of the Hasidic movement had accorded the uneducated religious worth, value previously bestowed only on those who could afford to be Talmud scholars. By stressing heartfelt prayer, the everyday language of Yiddish became an acceptable medium of religious expression.⁴¹ In addition, tales were utilized as a means of sharing spiritual messages. Rabbi Nahman of Bratslav, the

³⁷ Michael A. Meyer, *The Origins of the Modern Jew: Jewish Identity and European Culture in Germany, 1749-1824*, p.51, pp.88-89

³⁸ Ibid. p.65

³⁹ Altman, *Comic Image of the Jew*, p.139

⁴⁰ Ibid. p.140

⁴¹ Pinsker, *Schlemiel as Metaphor*, p.18

great-grandson of the founder of Hasidim, the Baal Shem Tov, defended the use of stories saying: "The world thinks that stories are useful for putting people to sleep, but I say that the people may be awakened with stories."⁴²

It is the combination of the self-mockery of the Maskilim and the anecdotal tradition of the Hasidim that led to the unique nature of Yiddish literature and the construction of the classic European schlemiel.⁴³ Neither Hasidic piety nor the secular education of the Maskilim had prevented persecution. In the chasm between the promise of a better life and the reality of daily toil, Yiddish humor was born.⁴⁴

The Yiddish novel *The Travels of Benjamin III* (1878) by Mendeley Mocher Sforim (pseudonym of Sholom Abramovitch) is a book which captures these shifts in cultural attitudes. The impetus was to educate the masses, but Mendeley ends his work acknowledging the vulnerability of the Jewish people in an environment beyond their control. The titular Benjamin is a romantic who sets out on a journey to discover the lost tribes of Israel; en route, he meets Jews who are "symptoms of his society's ills."⁴⁵ Yet when Benjamin and his companion are kidnapped for the Czar's army, his rejection of the concept of warfare marks him as crazy to the officers. They court-martial him, and he is released. Throughout the book, his character doesn't change, an inversion of the psycho-journey charted in Western literature (*The Aeneid*, *The Odyssey*). By remaining true to himself, to his humanity and "sense of his own human worth,"⁴⁶ he calls into

⁴² Pinsker, *Schlemiel as Metaphor*, p.18

⁴³ Ibid. p.24

⁴⁴ Sarah Blacher Cohen, *Jewish Wry: Essays on Jewish Humor*, p.1

⁴⁵ Wisse, *Schlemiel as Modern Hero*, p.36

⁴⁶ Ibid. p.39

doubt the prevailing culture's values. "He responds not to the question of whether classical heroism is still possible, but whether it was ever desirable."⁴⁷

This reevaluation of the Western concept of heroism is a further example of masculinity from the Other point of view. If a man is powerless, how does he validate his manhood? By rethinking the very concept itself.

On occasion, the revamp is suspect. The picture of masculinity in Sholom Aleichem's *Menahem Mendl* (circa 1913) is of the schlemiel as a female-dominated man. In this case, the protagonist's wife and mother-in-law are part of the world that conspires against him.⁴⁸ An uneasy relationship between schlemiels and women will be transported into 20th-century literature, film and television. Woody Allen's persona reveals a man not only emotionally intimidated by women, but sexually anxious as well. He gets his revenge intellectually; the men he portrays are usually smart and arrogant. (In *Annie Hall*, he pushes Diane Keaton to meet his exacting academic standards, then damns her when she surpasses his expectations.)

What allows a schlemiel to be palatable in I.B. Singer's post-Holocaust *Gimpel the Fool* is the active decision by Gimpel to accept deception as truth. He is "choosing to play the fool in order to retain his moral sanity in the face of universal cynicism."⁴⁹ What makes Gimpel different from more conventional schlemiels is that he rejects a chance for revenge. Although treated harshly, he is conscious of an ethical alternative: He chooses to do no harm.

The Jewish condition in America was less ominous than in Europe. In spite of the rise and fall of anti-Semitic occurrences, the promise of Emma Lazarus' words – "give

⁴⁷ Ibid. p.39

⁴⁸ Ibid. pp.49-51

me your tired, your poor" – fueled the hopes of immigrants and their children. Still, the ancient fears in every Jewish soul did not dock at Ellis Island. They were so hesitant to draw attention to themselves that the moguls did not manufacture overtly Jewish images in their dream factories. What they and their landmen did import was a sly, ironic humor, based on the absurd notion that they were a "chosen" people tormented by their non-chosen neighbors.

By contrast, the German immigrants, arriving decades earlier, had long accepted the assignment of a double identity. They had experience retaining the dual quality of being both a Jew and a citizen.⁵⁰ (Their quest to be seen as Jewish Germans rather than German Jews was quixotic. The Shoah revealed the truth of Germany's relationship to its Jews.)

With the rise of psychoanalysis, the concept of a passive character sustained by simple faith did not fit the American model of a strong, independent spirit. The psychoanalyst Theodore Reik declares the schlemiel "a masochistic character who has a strong unconscious will to fail."⁵¹ In response, Jewish-American writers began Americanizing the schlemiel. For instance, Saul Bellow's characters explore an accessibility to emotions that was denied the American masculine model.⁵² Phillip Roth turns the schlemiel's problems with women into misogynistic attacks, which highlights the sorry state of his own ego. Further, some critics believe Roth's writing returns the

⁴⁹ Ibid. p.61

⁵⁰ Altman, *Comic Image of the Jew*, p.198

⁵¹ Wisse, *Schlemiel as Modern Hero*, p.68

⁵² Ibid. p.82

schlemiel from "a model of humanity to a mockery of its failings,"⁵³ Alex Portnoy being the most obvious example.

Thus, the tendency of mid-20th century Jewish comedians to use the preemptive strike of self-deprecation could be interpreted as a sign of "self-hatred and fragmentation."⁵⁴ No matter how hard he tries, the Jewish man carried a sense of Otherness in him. Jewish comics such as Rodney Dangerfield – "I don't get no respect" – expressed the self-mockery felt by an "uncomfortable minority" as old as the Haskalah.⁵⁵ An article in a *New York Times Book Review* in 1968 declared this kind of humor "a form of self-exploitation that bears the same relation to Jewish identity that Stepin Fetchit once did to the Negro: lots of laughs - see Sammy Schlemiel Hate Himself in Public."⁵⁶ The schlemiel, once a foolish character for Jewish self-improvement or even a figure of inspiration, was now a tool used to belittle the Jewish male.

Was this an indication that Jews had not yet arrived in America? Though achieving economic and social status, they were unable to boast of their successes; instead, they relied on tired, worn, insulting clichés.

Take note: The schlemiel is not a single character; there are many variations on the theme. Woody Allen continues the self-loathing stereotype, but endows his shlemiel with intelligence and humor, albeit neurotic and self-deprecating. He extols the virtues of ethics and morality in his films. When Annie Hall (Diane Keaton) accuses Alvy Singer (Allen) of being like New York, an island unto himself, he shoots back: "I can't enjoy anything unless everybody is. If one guy is starving someplace, that puts a crimp in my

⁵³ Ibid. p.121

⁵⁴ Anthony Lewis, "The Jew in Stand-up Comedy," ed. Sarah Blacher Cohen, *From Hester Street to Hollywood: The Jewish-American Stage and Screen*, p.63

⁵⁵ Altman, *Comic Image of the Jew*, p.16

evening."⁵⁷ He worships literature and art. A modern, cultured man, Allen is represents a certain urban Jewish sensibility.

The apex of the happy schlemiel is Jerry Seinfeld and Larry David. Co-creators of the most lauded and successful sitcom in TV history, "Seinfeld's" namesake is a confident man comfortable with his ethnicity and his life. He mocks *others*. It is his worldview that dominates the show. The rest, as Hillel once observed, is commentary. And David, a Hollywood player who hit the motherload executive producing "Seinfeld," calls the shots. Yet he falls victim in "Curb Your Enthusiasm" to his own machinations. He is the captain of his destiny, literally. His twist on the schlemiel revisits the comic fool theme, while revealing the baser humanity we all share.

This remaining chapters will focus on Jewish men in media (particularly *schlemiels*) and how Jewish men internalize – and profit financially – from such imagery. While the schlemiel was a noted part of Yiddish and Jewish-American literature, his appearance on the American media radar, be it via Woody Allen or Jerry Seinfeld or Larry David, comes decades later. Before we can address their vision and impact, we need to chart the evolution of the Jewish man on the modern cultural landscape.

⁵⁶ Ibid. p.198

⁵⁷ *Annie Hall*, Woody Allen, Marshall Brickman, 1977

Chapter III: Hollywood and the Jews

"You ain't heard nothing yet."

These were the first words heard in a movie. The film was *The Jazz Singer*, and the story involved a Jewish son, Jakie Rabinowitz (Al Jolson), who rejects the life of a cantor – breaking his father's heart – to sing for a larger, non-Jewish audience. By 1927, the message was clear: Ethnicity could be discarded. It should pass away, just as Jakie's father does at the end of the movie. Indeed, *The Jazz Singer* was a model for the early 20th century struggle of an immigrant population. They confronted a tense choice: accept the lure of assimilation into secular American life or cling to an Old World religious identity. The path chosen by Jakie (now Jack Robin) was unabashedly modern: "Tradition is alright, but this is another day."⁵⁸ In fact, Jakie's choice will echo throughout the next 70 years.

To begin, Jack's choice in *The Jazz Singer* mirrored those of the studio heads, who were Eastern European Jewish immigrants. Escaping violence and virulent anti-Semitism, they sought a new Jerusalem: the American Dream. As Neal Gabler noted in *An Empire of Their Own*, "If the Jews were proscribed from entering the real corridors of gentility and status in America, the movies offered an ingenious option. Within the studios and on the screen, the Jews could simply create a new country – an empire of their own so to speak – where they would not only be admitted, but would govern as

⁵⁸ Lester D. Friedman, *Hollywood's Image of the Jew*, p.51

well. They would fabricate their empire in the image of America as they would fabricate themselves in the image of prosperous Americans."⁵⁹

Given the personal, often searing histories of these Jewish moviemakers, the desire for a safe haven was enticing. Playwright Israel Zangwill captured and promoted their version of utopia in his play *The Melting Pot*,⁶⁰ in which no persecution or pogroms could reach them. Set in New York, a Russian Jewish man and a Russian Christian woman are friends, until he recognizes her father as the leader of the pogrom against his village. Although all is forgiven in the end, the symbolism of being safe from harm is telling.⁶¹ As foreshadowed in *The Jazz Singer*, intermarriage became one of the symbols of assimilation, of being reborn as a true American. In terms of reflecting American Jewish reality, the rate of intermarriage in the 1920s was low, and generally between a Jewish man and a gentile woman.⁶²

(An interesting twist on reality: Of the films that discuss intermarriage between 1908-1915, the majority posit relationships between *Jewish women* and non-Jewish men.⁶³) Patricia Erens claims *Becky Gets a Husband*, involving Jewish Becky Cohen and Irish Tim Casey, is the earliest film version of an intermarriage.⁶⁴ Many other melodramas involved romances between rabbis' daughters and noblemen. Why the distortion of fact? Some point to the appeal to women viewers, who would respond to an

⁵⁹ Neal Gabler, *An Empire of Their Own*, pp.5-6

⁶⁰ Friedman, *Hollywood's Image of the Jew*, p.7

⁶¹ David Biale, "The Melting Pot and Beyond: Jew and the Politics of American Identity," *Insider/Outsider: American Jews and Multiculturalism*, eds. David Biale, Michale Galchinsky and Susannah Heschel, p.20

⁶² David Desser, "The Cinematic Melting Pot: Ethnicity, Jews and Psychoanalysis," *Unspeakable Images: Ethnicity and the American Cinema*, ed. Lester Friedman, p.393

⁶³ Ibid. p.394

⁶⁴ Erens, *The Jew in American Cinema*, p.38

assimilationist fairy tale. The pattern often sets up a reluctant father, representing the Old World, against the New World of a beau. This not only makes the paternal Jewish male figure look weak, but it favors rejecting the old, ethnic culture in support of a universal American norm. In addition, by having women marry non-Jews, versus Jewish men marrying non-Jewish women, ancient fears of a sexually predatory Jewish man are avoided.⁶⁵

Strangely, the intermarriage films that have remained in the public consciousness did involve relations between male Jews and female non-Jews, who were often Irish. *Private Izzy Murphy* (1926) starred George Jessel as a Russian immigrant who, while saving money to bring his parents to America, falls for an Irish girl. *Abie's Irish Rose* (1928) revisited the theme of Jewish-Irish romance and intermarriage. (This cultural pairing was rejuvenated on TV in the 1970s as "Bridget Loves Bernie.")

Of course, the quest for assimilation isn't driven solely by psychological and artistic motivation; there are sound economic rationales as well. The moguls had no wish to offend the mass *non-Jewish* audience who watched their films. Jews may be avid moviegoers – but they don't constitute a majority of ticket buyers, especially once the larger theaters had been built in the heartland.⁶⁶ With assimilation and acceptance as the goal, the movie moguls sought to create a vision of tolerance and to promote the American Dream they lived, which guaranteed success to anyone who works for it.⁶⁷

What stories did they tell? The plot lines and characters reflected the immigrant audience and their struggles in a new land. During the nickelodeon and silent film years,

⁶⁵ Dessler, "The Cinematic Melting Pot: Ethnicity, Jews and Psychoanalysis," pp.393-94

⁶⁶ Erens, *The Jew in American Cinema*, p.49

⁶⁷ Friedman, *Hollywood's Image of the Jew*, pp.61-63

the clientele were urban immigrants; many films would include stories showing the difficulties of adapting to America, adjusting to the majority culture while retaining some cultural and religious practices.⁶⁸ The products of the silent-film era were an attempt "to make Americans less nervous about Jews, and Jews more conscious of themselves as Americans."⁶⁹

(In a bizarre cultural twist, certain non-Jewish star actors were so identified with Jewish-styled films or themes, they were perceived by the public as Jewish. Case in point: Charlie Chaplin. In *The Comic Image of the Jew*, Sig Altman finds the Little Tramp "difficult to place into any other symbolic niche but that of the Jew in the Diaspora. His "threadbare elegance and precarious dignity," his "amazing agility" and "tendency to kick pomposity in the behind" are, for Altman, all signs of Jewishness.⁷⁰ Still, it is uncertain whether Chaplin was Jewish, since he never confirmed or denied the suggestion.)

As the Jewish community grappled with life in the U.S., so too, did the burgeoning film industry, often dominated by Jews, grapple with their stories. Call it a Jewish cultural tradition. Ever since the *Haskalah* enlightenment in 18th-century Europe and emancipation in France, Jews have reevaluated what it meant to be Jewish. The challenge for Jewish men in Western Europe was "to be a Jew at home and a gentleman in the street," and their immigration was eased by exposure to such intellectual freedom. At the turn of the 20th century, as Eastern European Jews poured into America, they coped with the promise of a new life as well as the psychic culture shock from *shtetl* to

⁶⁸ J. Hoberman and Jeffrey Shandler, *Entertaining America: Jews, Movies, and Broadcasting*, p.46

⁶⁹ Friedman, *Hollywood's Image of the Jew*, p.53

⁷⁰ Altman, *Comic Image of the Jew*, p.37

city. Suddenly, the push to reject language, ritual dress and religious practices was staggering. The Sabbath wasn't a universal practice; one was expected to work. It was more difficult, although not impossible, to keep ritual observances. The question was: Why would any Jewish man want to publicly appear so different and conspicuous?

The founders of the studios, meanwhile, had moved their filmmaking operations to California. They could escape Thomas Edison's proposed monopoly, which hoped to exclude the Jewish entrepreneurs.⁷¹ As a bonus, the West provided a wider vista, including better natural light and more scenery options. An important cultural footnote to the exodus: Once movies are shot outside urban/immigrant milieus, the story lines change accordingly. In addition, as sound is added to the technological advances, the options for material expanded.

Although the 1930s saw a decrease in the number of Jewish characters and themes, there was a notable exception: the Marx Brothers. Their act had been honed on the New York stage, and the comic genius S. J. Perleman wrote their first Broadway hit, *Coconuts*. The Marx Brothers, zany anarchists all, lampoon WASP snobbery and high society (*Animal Crackers*), campus life (*Horsefeathers*), politics (*Duck Soup*) and opera (*A Night at the Opera*), to name but a few of their targets. But they always side with morality – whether reuniting young lovers or saving Freedonia – and succeed in helping immigrants secure a sense of revenge against American xenophobia.⁷²

Even if overtly Jewish characters were rare, the assimilated moguls kept a connection with the Jewish community. They were often financially generous to Jewish organizations and members, if not attendees of the local synagogue. They consciously

⁷¹ Gabler, *An Empire of Their Own*, pp.57-58

⁷² Arthur Asa Berger, *Jewish Jesters: A Study in American Popular Comedy*, p.37

chose not to draw attention to themselves as an "other," nor to appear to show preference for Jewish characters or Jewish issues. After all, they were, in their view, Americans first. The goal: to keep their films as ethnic free as possible.⁷³

No matter how many Christmas trees decorated the homes of these famed studio heads, or token non-Jewish wives they married, they were often portrayed as a Jewish cabal controlling the industry – with an eye toward brainwashing the country. "Hollywood's Jewish Question" is still a controversial concept. There have been, and still are, a significant number of Jews in managerial and creative positions in the film and television industries. Ironically, this has made them more paranoid about any material deemed "too Jewish." And not without cause.

Within the past decade, there have been cries of an anti-black conspiracy from Lionel Jeffries, Pat Buchanan slamming Norman Lear for "you people undermining America's Christian values," and the claim of Marlon Brando on *Larry King Live* that movies stereotype other ethnic groups, but not Jews, because "Hollywood is run by Jews. It is owned by Jews."⁷⁴

In a 1952 article in *Commentary*, Henry Popkin commented on "the great retreat" of Jewish images from 1930s popular culture. "The American answer to the banishment of the Jews from public life in Germany was the banishment of Jewish figures from the popular arts in the United States."⁷⁵ Non-Jewish actors were hired for Jewish roles. The process of de-Semitizing the line between truth and fiction underscores a more provocative question: How does one recognize a Jewish character? What does a Jew look

⁷³ Leonard Quart, "The Triumph of Assimilation: Ethnicity, Race and the Jewish Moguls," *Cineaste* Vol. XVIII nr.4 (1991), p.8

⁷⁴ J. Hoberman and Jeffrey Shandler, *Entertaining America*, p.74

like? How do they behave? Is brilliant acting enough to portray the essence? Was Robert DeNiro convincing as a Jewish gangster in *Once Upon a Time in America*? Or does the audience know he is a Jew because they have been duly prompted.

The lead Jewish character in *Counselor-in-Law* (1933) was portrayed by John Barrymore, even though director William Wyler wanted to use a Jewish actor in this work about anti-Semitism. The producer, Samuel Goldwyn, refused. "You can't have a Jew playing a Jew. It wouldn't work on the screen."⁷⁶ The Jewish public was wary as well. "We don't want people to cling to the idea that Jews all look a certain way," said a representative of a Jewish organization."⁷⁷

As the decade continued, even minor Jewish characters disappeared from the screen, although other ethnic stereotypes remained.⁷⁸ The cause was two-fold. Global crises created financial concerns about allowing Jews screen time. American films were still procuring a significant percentage of revenue from the European market, and they walked a delicate tightrope. Ironically, no one wanted to offend those who were tyrannizing the Continent.⁷⁹ Even after the Nazi party banned all movies with Jewish actors, Jewish characters in Hollywood were not reintroduced.

More chilling were rumblings on the home front. The moguls were bluntly told that any anti-Nazi films would be seen as promoting a Jewish agenda. When an anti-Hitler film called *The Mad Dog of Europe* was proposed in 1933, Joseph Breen (head of Hollywood's Production Code) is quoted as saying, "There is strong pro-German and

⁷⁵ Henry Popkin, "The Vanishing Jew of Our Popular Culture," *Commentary*, Vol. 14, #1, July 1952, p.46

⁷⁶ Lester D. Friedman, *The Jewish Image in American Film*, p.74

⁷⁷ Erens, *The Jew in American Cinema*, p.149

⁷⁸ Epstein., *The Haunted Smile: The Story of Jewish Comedians in America*, p.98

⁷⁹ Friedman, *Hollywood's Image of the Jew*, p.84

anti-Semitic feeling in this country and because of the large number of Jews active in the motion picture industry, the charge is certain to be made that the Jews, as a class, are behind an anti-Hitler picture and using the entertainment screen for their own personal propaganda purposes."⁸⁰ The project was dropped.

Film makers were so apprehensive that the 1937 movie *The Life of Emile Zola*, which dramatized the French novelist's defense of the scapegoated Jewish Captain Alfred Dreyfus, did not contain the word "Jew."⁸¹ Anti-Semitism was gaining ground in the U.S. In 1941, aviator Charles Lindbergh Jr. could proclaim – without fear of reprisal – "the Jews' greatest danger to this country lies in their large ownership and influence in our motion pictures, our press, our radio and our government."⁸² It was only after the United States joined the Allies did films addressing the war appear. War movies would have multi-ethnic platoons, including one Jew. The battle was for America and democracy. It was still too risky to make an association between the fighting forces and a "Jewish" war.⁸³

When the war was over and the horrors of the Holocaust revealed, Hollywood remained cautious about handling Jewish issues or characters. Non-Jews initiated the two films that confronted anti-Semitism: *Crossfire* and *Gentleman's Agreement*. Why? As Edward Dmytryk, the non-Jewish director wrote of *Crossfire*, "No one could accuse us of selfish interest or religious bias."⁸⁴

An examination of these films offers interesting insights into the reappearance of Jewish men on screen. *Crossfire* (1947) is a detective story in the film-noir style. Set in

⁸⁰ J. Hoberman and Jeffrey Shandler, *Entertaining America*, pp.59, 61

⁸¹ Friedman, *The Jewish Image in American Film*, pp.78-79

⁸² Ibid. p.93

⁸³ Ibid. p.90

post-World War II Washington, the plot centers on an investigation into the murder of a Jewish man, Joseph Samuels. He appears only in flashback and through the eyes of soldiers who have been discharged. We see him first as a civilian; later, we learn Samuels was also a soldier. This indicates he, too, fought like "a man" for his country. He is portrayed as a compassionate listener and his cultured tastes are indicated by his listening to a Strauss waltz. By contrast, the other soldiers are associated with dissonant jazz and drunken rowdiness.

The murderer is portrayed as an anti-Semitic psychopath. Samuels' Jewishness is an issue because the murderer makes it the motive for his killing. The moral of the movie is delivered by the detective, who shares that his Irish grandfather was also murdered, like Samuels, at the hands of bigots. When he denounces prejudice, he says, "Hating is always senseless. One day it's Catholics, next day Jews, Protestants, Quakers. Maybe it's men who wear striped neckties." This brutal beating wasn't caused by a bad fashion choice. It was a symbol of a long-held hatred which led to the death of millions of European Jews. Anti-Semitism was defined as an insane tendency, not an ongoing problem – but kudos for addressing the issue at all.

In *Gentleman's Agreement*, (1947) the lead, Gregory Peck, is a gentile pretending to be a Jew. A crusading reporter, Peck is writing an expose on anti-Semitism and goes undercover to capture the cruelty and hypocrisy behind America's melting-pot ethos. An apocryphal story is told regarding a stagehand's reaction to the film. He reportedly said, "I'm always going to be good to Jewish people because you never can tell when they will turn out to be gentiles."⁸⁵ In its eagerness to prove how much Jews resemble everyone

⁸⁴ Ibid. p.124

⁸⁵ Erens, *The Jew in American Cinema*, p.180

else, *Gentleman's Agreement* allots no time for the ways in which they might be different.⁸⁶

It may just be coincidence, but the House Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC) witch hunts, which began in 1947 and hit its lethal stride in the 1950s, caused another period of Jewish self-censorship. The association between Communism and Jews, starting with Sen. Estes Kefauver and the subsequent Rosenberg executions in 1953, terrified the studio heads. HUAC, championed by the noted anti-Semite Joe McCarthy, endorsed the blacklisting of actors, directors and writers, many of whom were Jewish.

The 1960s brought major changes to the film studio system. The corporate system of ownership (the moguls sold their empires to conglomerates) de-personalized decisions about content. Studio owners, once Jewish entrepreneurs who fretted about how Jewish they would appear, were now faceless corporations indifferent to Jewish paranoia.

Jews, meanwhile, were growing increasingly comfortable in the U.S. As second- and third-generation Jews were coming to maturity, they began to revisit their identity. Prompted by the revelations of the Holocaust and Israel's victory in the 1967 and 1973 wars, American Jews reevaluated their relationship to Judaism and the Jewish people. Without a ritual life or a community, what did it mean to be a Jew in late-20th-century America? The question of what is "Jewishness" took on a new urgency. The issue was complex, and the definition unclear. Was it "a religion, a race, an ethnicity, a culture, a sensibility, or a unique historical consciousness?"⁸⁷ Is it from descent (hereditary) or

⁸⁶ Ibid. p.177

⁸⁷ Vincent Brook, *Something Ain't Kosher Here: The Rise of the "Jewish" Sitcom*, p.11

consent (choosing to participate)?⁸⁸ And how is this Jewishness envisioned? What does it look like?

Film offered an opportunity to re-introduce Jewish male actors and characters. In the 1960s and 1970s, *The Producers*, *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz* and *Play it Again, Sam* begin their re-entry into pop culture. The latter film is the most significant for the purposes of this paper, because it marks the debut of the most recognizable Jewish male character, the modern schlemiel. The actor, writer, director who embodies him is Woody Allen – and his influence is striking.

Woody Allen, like Larry David and Jerry Seinfeld on television, is clearly an *American Jew*, whereas the Hollywood moguls strove to be seen as simply *American*. Their identity is never in question. They may wrestle with keeping a Jewish identity in a Christian culture (David), be proud yet conflicted (Allen) or tweak the classic *schlemiel/schlimazel* of Jerry and George (“Seinfeld”), but they don’t hide who they are.

To fully appreciate the artistic milieu these three performers inherited, we turn to an examination of television and the Jews.

⁸⁸ Lester Friedman, “Celluloid Palimpsests,” Friedman, ed. *Unspeakable Images: Ethnicity and the American Cinema*, p.19

Chapter IV: The Afikomen Syndrome Redux: Jews on TV 1949-1966

"We were proud of being Jewish, but after World War II and the Holocaust, we didn't want to give the anti-Semites any more ammunition."

– Carl Reiner appearing on MSNBC and explaining the lack of overt Jewish characters on television in the post-war era. (2003)

There are a number of important differences between the film moguls and television networks. The creators of the three networks were Jewish men, but their backgrounds were very different from the Hollywood moguls. William Paley of CBS and Leonard Goldenson of ABC were born in America to wealthy families. David Sarnoff started as an office boy for Marconi Wireless Telegraph Co. and rose to become chairman of the board of RCA/NBC.⁸⁹ Yet their reluctance to feature Jewish characters was as pronounced as the moguls before them.

For example, ponder William Paley's resistance to "The Goldbergs." Radio was a prime source of material for the burgeoning television industry, replete with familiar and well-loved characters. Chosen carefully, they could cross over into a visual medium. Plus, there was a market for ethnic programming. "Mama" (1949-1957) was about a Norwegian family in San Francisco, and there were a number of shows about working-class Italian families.⁹⁰ "Amos and Andy" (1951-1953) portrayed African Americans in stereotypical ways. As the NAACP wrote in 1951, "All the characters are either clowns

⁸⁹ Neal Gabler, *Television's Changing Image of American Jews*, p.4

⁹⁰"The Goldbergs," *Entertaining America*, p.120

or crooks; all Negroes are shown dodging work of any kind; millions of white Americans see this Amos and Andy picture of Negroes and think the entire race is the same."⁹¹

In spite of the offensive nature of the portrayals, the show remained in syndication until 1966.⁹² Clearly, ethnic portraits are a hazardous endeavor, but the networks were willing to take the chance.

In fact, television lent itself to what Neal Gabler calls "idealized pluralism. This is not that everyone is allowed to be whomever he or she wants to be. You're allowed be the stereotype that white Americans want you to be."⁹³

CBS' Paley remained opposed to including "The Goldbergs" in the lineup, though he refused to give reasons for his decision. It may have been a hit radio program, but only the insistence of the sponsor, General Foods, brought the show to air in 1949.⁹⁴ Producer and star Gertrude Berg, a noteworthy aberration in the all-male domination of television production and character visibility, fought to retain the essence of the Jewish flavor of her fictional family.⁹⁵ The overtly Jewish elements included Berg's portrayal of Molly Goldberg, who spoke with a pronounced Yiddish accent. The location of the program in the Bronx was an additional indication of her ethnic identity. Molly's husband, Jake, works in the garment district, which reads Jewish. A remarkable addition was the occasional inclusion of episodes about Jewish rituals and holidays.⁹⁶ A television program dealing with Yom Kippur would not appear again until four decades later – on *Northern Exposure*.

⁹¹ NAACP "Why the 'Amos 'n' Andy Show' Should Be Taken Off the Air," Aug. 15, 1951 <http://www.amosandy.com/Review%20Articles/naacp.htm>

⁹² Alex McNeil, *Total Television*, p.35

⁹³ Gabler, *Television's Changing Image of American Jews*, p.11

⁹⁴ Zurawik, *Jews of Prime Time*, p.19

⁹⁵ Epstein, *Haunted Smile*, p.144

Berg was scrupulous about what kind of Jewish content would be included. The participation of Jews in various social issues was marked, but with the repressive political climate, these were perilous times to draw attention to progressive causes. Although there was an episode called "The Rent Strike," the plot resolution between the Goldbergs and the landlord was brought about by Molly's cooking, a feminine answer to a political problem. "Unions, politics, fund-raising, Zionism, socialism, inter-group relations, I don't stress them ... The Goldbergs are not defensive about their Jewishness or especially aware of it. I keep things average. I don't want to lose friends," she told *Commentary*.⁹⁷

Her caution was prudent. The fate of Philip Loeb, the actor who played Molly's husband on "The Goldbergs," indicated Jewish vulnerability in the media. Loeb had been smeared in the anti-Communist publication *Red Channels*. This paperback, which listed actors and writers thought to be Communist sympathizers, had a large number of Jewish performers in it.⁹⁸ Although Berg fought for Loeb to remain, the series was dropped from CBS. NBC refused to air the program with Loeb still in the role. In 1952, the part was recast.⁹⁹ Loeb's exit also signaled a decline in Jewish male power on the show. Jake began as a strong, if blustering male figure, but with Loeb's departure, he degenerates into "a passive, subordinated, weak father."¹⁰⁰

With the heightened red baiting of the Rosenberg trial in 1951, the association between the words "Jew" and "Communist" brought renewed internalized fears of anti-

⁹⁶ Brook, *Something Ain't Kosher Here*, p.33

⁹⁷ Donald Weber, "Goldberg Variations," *Entertaining America*, pp.119-22

⁹⁸ Epstein., *Haunted Smile*, p.146

⁹⁹ Zurawik, *Jews of Prime Time*, p.42

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.* p.39

Semitism. The Holocaust revelations were not that far in the past. Could it happen here?¹⁰¹

Television, which broadcast the HUAC hearings, needed to create hours of programming for the embryonic medium. Besides radio, the pool of local talent was filled by vaudeville performers. A new form of program, "vaudeo" (industry for vaudeville on video), was a natural.¹⁰² Movies were considered the medium of the past, symbolically and literally. It is rehearsed and put on film to be seen at another time. Early television was new and often telecast live. The programmers relied on "spontaneity, visuality and intimacy."¹⁰³ Although certain radio programs that relied on scripts made the transition, the real energy came from comics who had honed their skills on the stage, especially the Borscht Belt, another clue to an identifiable Jewish association.¹⁰⁴ With a dearth of Jewish presence on film, "the Jewish comic was the spearhead for the Jewish return to the media."¹⁰⁵ But except for "The Goldbergs," any hint of Jewishness was hidden. The Afikomen Syndrome had resurfaced – this time on television.

Jewish identity was signaled via clues – viewers just had to recognize them. The very nature of the performers' personas were based on certain rhythms of speech and exaggerated gestures. An example is Milton Berle's reign as "Mr. Television." Starting with *Texaco Star Theater* in 1948, his variety program format was a televised vaudeville show – and a smash hit. His popularity was so immense, he is believed to have been responsible for a steep rise in television sales. Berle was a fast-talking, show-biz jolt of

¹⁰¹ Susan Murray, "Ethnic Masculinity and Early Television's Vaudeo Star," *Cinema Journal* 42, no. 1 (2002), p.108

¹⁰² Ibid. p.97

¹⁰³ Ibid. p.97

¹⁰⁴ Ibid. p.101

¹⁰⁵ Altman, *Comic Image of the Jew*, p.7

energy, but his acts were devoid of Jewish content or direct reference. In fact, he found “Jewish” vaudeville routines offensive, claiming, “I never used ethnic material, it’s very anti-Semitic.” He would throw in a Yiddish word, but the clue to his Jewishness was represented by a brash, urban sensibility.¹⁰⁶ As with radio, “urban” was becoming a code word for “Jewish.”

That was Berle’s downfall. While television was an urban commodity, his *schtick* was golden. As more televisions were purchased in suburban and rural areas, his ratings dropped. By 1956, Middle America just didn’t “get” him.¹⁰⁷

By contrast, Jack Benny’s Jewish background was buried, which may have lead to the longevity of his TV career (1950-1965). The construction of his show – Benny playing “himself” – would be a model for both “Seinfeld” and “Curb Your Enthusiasm.” Benny was careful about being ethnically unidentifiable, both in his lack of an accent and by incorporating Christmas episodes into his programs. This may have ameliorated the potential anti-Semitism of his *schtick*: the Jew as cheapskate. He claimed his character was based on a stock vaudeville routine and not taken from anti-Semitic stereotypes.¹⁰⁸ Although there were episodes about dates with Hollywood actresses, he remained a bachelor. His vanity about his age, his mincing walk and his signature hand to cheek radiated an indeterminate sexuality.

Interestingly, films of this era were presenting the masculine iconography of the tough guy, embodied by John Wayne and Humphrey Bogart. On television, less physical entertainers, such as Berle and Jack Benny, were accessible and therefore welcomed into

¹⁰⁶ Epstein., *Haunted Smile*, pp.130-34

¹⁰⁷ Ibid. p.134

¹⁰⁸ Ibid. p.47

the home.¹⁰⁹ Their role as spokesmen for sponsors also required a personality the audience could trust.

But as Shakespeare noted, "there's the rub": The traits that could make one trustworthy could also be seen as feminizing the Jewish man. Sadly, demasculizing Jewish men has been a common occurrence in European history. As Marjorie Garber points out, "The Jewish man seen as 'effeminate' as well as 'degenerate' has a long and unlovely history."¹¹⁰

Little wonder that one of the charges leveled against Jewish men was a "feminized masculinity." Being physically assaulted by pies and powder, even in the name of comedy, could be interpreted as "subjugating." It made the recipient, in this case Berle (the non-threatening persona of "Uncle Miltie"), a less-than-masculine presence.¹¹¹ I would disagree, pointing out that pies are regularly thrown indiscriminately in Keystone Kops films without denigrating a specific ethnic group. Sometimes, a cream pie is just a cream pie.

Still, Berle's most notorious routine was dressing up in women's clothes; he even appeared on the cover of *Newsweek* as Carmen Miranda.¹¹² Once, outfitted as a bride, he enters batting his lashes and swinging his hips, then lowers his voice to a "masculine" register and talks about the difficulties of marriage from the man's point of view.¹¹³ This could be seen, as Garber does, as empowering, since Berle is owning the image of a cross-dressing/feminized Jewish man by choosing to wear the dress.¹¹⁴ (In 1989, Berle

¹⁰⁹ Murray, "Ethnic Masculinity," p.99

¹¹⁰ Garber, *Vested Interests*, p. 224

¹¹¹ Murray, "Ethnic Masculinity," p.107

¹¹² Epstein, *Haunted Smile*, p.133

¹¹³ Murray, "Ethnic Masculinity," p.104

¹¹⁴ Garber, *Vested Interests*, p.233

suggested that his drive to extramarital affairs was proof of his heterosexuality.¹¹⁵

Another explanation for his notorious womanizing could be overcompensation for being seen as feminized.)

Berle changed more than his clothing; he spoke, as did Jerry Seinfeld years later, in a high-pitched voice. When Jerry gets angry, his voice, which rises several octaves, is at its most comedic. It is funny, but it contributes to the feminization of the Jewish man. (Jerry admits in one episode that because he is thin and neat people mistake him for gay.)

Walter Rathenau, a German Jew later to become the foreign minister of the Weimar Republic, sought, like Weininger, to position himself as a Jewish outsider. "The way Jews supposedly spoke, with a break in the voice and a sing-song manner, set Jewish men apart, and linked them with feminized males or castrates. The Jewish "break in the voice," like the "soft weakness of form," "femininity," and "Orientalism" of the Jewish man, were attributed by Rathenau to inbreeding and separateness. This vocal quality was one of the identifying stigmata of the homosexual; the connection between Jewishness and "perversion" was further "proven."¹¹⁶

Similarly, Uncle David from "The Goldbergs" is often cited as an example of the feminization of the Jewish man in media. As described in *The Jews of Prime Time*, the character is primarily seen wearing an apron and doing the household chores. He is described as having a "hangdog, head-bowed look" when in Molly's company.¹¹⁷

Clearly, the image of Jewish men is complicated and problematic. Other times, the Jewish male is hidden – the Afikomen waiting to be found. Occasionally, he hid in plain sight. The audience just had to be hip to the program; meaning, they had to be

¹¹⁵ Murray, "Ethnic Masculinity," p.109

¹¹⁶ Garber, *Vested Interest*, p.226

savvy detectives. For instance, where the show took place, specifically, urban settings. Press materials and magazine articles would divulge that the comedian had grown up in the Bronx or the Lower East Side, which indicated they were Jewish. Descriptions of close-knit extended families seemed to signal a Jewish background. Or there would be a clear indication: George Burns' and Gracie Allen's mixed marriage was public knowledge.¹¹⁸

By 1955, television's influence had changed the fabric of American life. Families were sitting together watching the one television set.¹¹⁹ Having programs about them made sense, for example, *Father Knows Best* and *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet*. The right-wing's obsession with a Jewish/Communist conspiracy was offset by revelations at the Nuremberg Trials, the popularity of *The Diary of Anne Frank* and the weekly acceptance of Jewish comedians into America's homes. All contributed to reduced signs of anti-Semitism as indicated by polls taken in 1956.¹²⁰

At the same time, there was growing interest in American-Jewish literature from authors like Saul Bellows (*The Adventures of Augie March*, 1953, *Herzog*, 1949) and Philip Roth (*Goodbye, Columbus*, 1959). Yet on television, the obvious Jewish performers faded away. It pays to remember the fate of Sid Caesar, whose "Your Show of Shows" (1950-1954) was initially successful (and counted Mel Brooks, Larry Gelbart, Woody Allen, Neil Simon among its writers). *Shows* employed Yiddish in sketches and parodied operas, foreign movies and ballets. So inspired was its sensibility that many critics believe it set the standard for all future comedy writing.

¹¹⁷ Zurawik, *Jews of Prime Time*, pp.32-34

¹¹⁸ Murray, "Ethnic Masculinity," p.105

¹¹⁹ Epstein, *Haunted Smile*, p.136

¹²⁰ Ibid. pp 136-37

New Yorkers may have loved Caesar's comedy, but the network executives were less than enamoured of his ratings. In their eyes, "Your Show of Shows" failed to gain traction in the heartland. Considered too urban, it was dropped by NBC. What next?

From a sponsor's point of view, a taped suburban sitcom reflecting the demographics of the new audience was attractive. Compare this with the improvisational, live and urban variety shows and the choice is clear.¹²¹ In addition, the growing salaries of vaudeo stars and guests were reaching astronomical amounts.¹²²

Thus, television went in search of suburban motifs, and struck gold in 1961 with "The Dick Van Dyke Show," the brainchild of Carl Reiner. Its inception is a case of art imitating life – with a catch. Reiner was among the many brilliant comic minds in Sid Caesar's writing stable. With such ripe material from Caesar's frantic backstage, Reiner wrote an autobiographical show that portrayed the home life of a writer on a "Show of Shows"-type comedy. A pilot was shot, called "Head of the Family," starring Reiner – and it didn't fly. He was told to revamp it – "de-Jewishize" it – and a talent search offered either Johnny Carson or Dick Van Dyke in the lead. Reiner admits that Van Dyke was a funnier choice. This was an example of the maxim: write Yiddish, cast British.¹²³

While the recast lead could not be Jewish, the co-worker and sidekick for Dick Van Dyke was Buddy Sorrell, played by Morey Amsterdam. Although his ethnicity is never mentioned, he was depicted as the "human joke machine," a short, dark wisecracking New Yorker.¹²⁴ In the fifth season (1965-1966), a plot revolves around

¹²¹ Brook, *Something Ain't Kosher Here*, p.34

¹²² Murray, "Ethnic Masculinity," p.115

¹²³ Zurawik, *Jews of Prime Time*, pp.52-53

¹²⁴ David Marc, *Comic Visions: Television Comedy & American Culture*, p.91

Buddy sneaking away to prepare for his adult bar mitzvah.¹²⁵ The Afikomen has been found, and Jews in the audience can *schep naches* (to draw pleasure).

¹²⁵ Zurawik, *Jews of Prime Time*, pp.54-57

Chapter V: Jews and TV 1972-1999

"When as a kid you don't see your life represented on screen, it made me feel there was something not quite mainstream about being Jewish in America. Television is such a mainline into American democracy that if you're not on it, you don't exist."¹²⁶

– Frank Rich

There are stories about an apocryphal research study relayed to writers who were pitching new series to CBS. It claimed "American viewers simply would not tolerate divorced people, people from New York, men with mustaches, and Jews."¹²⁷ Somehow, the last three categories were associated with each other. This edict was considered gospel from 1969 until the late 1980s.

Oddly, in 1972, CBS decided to reject its own conventional wisdom. The sitcom "Bridget Loves Bernie" presented an updated version of the 1926 silent film *Abie's Irish Rose*. Bernie was a poor Jewish cab driver who marries an upper-class Irish-Catholic woman, Bridget. There was no need for coding, the conflict depended on Bernie being Jewish, but the stereotypical behavior and assumptions of Jewish ethnicity abounded.

Minor key music plays as the couple visits Bernie's family on the Lower East Side. His mother is serving gefilte fish and Danish, while the entire family is loudly talking at the same time, sprinkling generous amounts of Yiddish into the conversation. The parents, in later scenes, are coarse; and the mother is cast as over-emotional and over-protective, stereotypes at once familiar and offensive.

¹²⁶ Frank Rich, *Television's Changing Image of American Jews*, p.14

¹²⁷ Zurawik, *Jews of Prime Time*, p.58

The Jews are portrayed as "cheap, pushy and lacking in social graces," and Bernie's father is often shown in front of Bridget's family, hat in hand. For the wedding, aunts, uncles and cousins, instead of the immediate family agreed upon, are foisted on Bridget.¹²⁸

What outraged the Jewish community was how casually intermarriage was approached, and how easily Bernie's Jewishness was dismissed. After 16 years without a strong Jewish male character on television, America saw Bernie allow himself to be religiously neutered, read emasculated. In spite of denials by CBS executives, the protests appeared to have had the desired effect: the fifth most-popular show of the season was cancelled.¹²⁹

A troubling pattern is established for television with "Bridget Loves Bernie." (The Jewish man's obsession with non-Jewish women was a standard in American-Jewish literature (Philip Roth); film also furthered this theme, witness Charles Grodin and Cybill Shepherd in *Heartbreak Kid* (1972). Indeed, the explosion of TV intermarriage plots in the 1990s is surprising – until one learns who wrote the shows. Many television writers and producers were intermarried. And as Liberty Godshall, co-writer with her Jewish husband of *thirtysomething*, said: "[We] used these stories to talk over our marriages, what we fight about and what we secretly cry over."¹³⁰ In truth, intermarriage is a difficult and searing subject. Dramas can explore the struggle, while comedies, by contrast, use it for laughs. The religious conflict only heightens the humor.

¹²⁸ Zurawik, *Jews of Prime Time*, pp.83-95

¹²⁹ Brook, *Something Ain't Kosher Here*, p.51

¹³⁰ Zurawik, *Jews of Prime Time*, p.105

More to the point, because Bridget loves Bernie, the Jewish man is suddenly *socially* validated. He gains status; a higher-class non-Jew deems him marriage-worthy. Through her attention, he achieves greater importance.¹³¹

After "Bridget Loves Bernie," the visibility of lead Jewish male characters is blurry. For example, Gabe Kaplan stars in "Welcome Back, Kotter" (1975). We surmise that Kaplan is Jewish. He is bespectacled with dark curly hair. His character returns to his Brooklyn high school (second clue), now considered an inner-city area, to teach a remedial class of tough kids. His social responsibility is another indication he is probably Jewish – but it is not stated. Ironical, insofar as the secondary characters, affectionately known as "sweat hogs," have clear ethnic identities. Of note is Juan Epstein, a Jewish Puerto Rican. Much is made of his violent nature, but it is assumed to be from the "Puerto Rican" side of the family.¹³²

Or take the case of "Barney Miller." Hal Linden, who played Barney, a detective in charge of a New York police squad, is hyper-ethical. That, coupled with the sole announcement he is indifferent to Christmas because he is Jewish, marks his otherness.¹³³ The show's creator, Danny Arnold, admits he was circumspect about identifying Barney's ethnicity: "We never said Barney was Jewish, and we never said he wasn't. We deliberately gave him an ethnic/nonethnic name."¹³⁴ Both Kotter and Miller are from New York and wear mustaches – two shibboleths that spell Jewish. Their unspoken

¹³¹ Maurice Berger, "The Mouse that Never Roars," Norman L. Kleeblatt, ed., *Too Jewish? Challenging Traditional Identities*, p.103

¹³² Zurawik, *Jews of Prime Time*, pp.101-102

¹³³ Terry Barr, "Stars, Light, and Finding the Way Home: Jewish Characters in Contemporary Film and Television," *Studies in Popular Culture* 15, no. 2 (1993), p. 90

¹³⁴ Brook, *Something Ain't Kosher Here*, p.61

identity was, according to CBS' research study, a giveaway to the American viewer.¹³⁵

By the 1980s and early '90s, Bill Cosby, Roseanne Barr and Tim Allen had enormous success crossing over from stand-up to sitcoms. Since Jewish stand-ups had been working the comedy circuit, the studio executives decided to take a chance on Jewish characters again.¹³⁶

In order to put the enormous popularity of "Seinfeld" in perspective, and to demonstrate how it broke the mold of "The Cosby Show," "Roseanne" or "Home Improvement," an examination of another Jewish male who hit the sitcom jackpot is in order. Ironically, while individual Jews succeeded, Judaism got short shrift. "TV presents Judaism as a kind of salad bar of holidays and customs that Jews can pick and choose from at will. And not as a coherent system of morals, ethics and traditions that constitute a way of life and faith."¹³⁷

For example, what is to be made of Paul Buchman, the character played by Paul Reiser in "Mad About You"? A case of the Afikomen hiding in plain sight, but unwilling to come out of its cover? Co-creator Danny Jacobson claimed Paul Buchman would be comfortable in his Judaism. He may be, but his Jewishness is never mentioned. Instead, he's a New Yorker, a filmmaker and has an obsessive, overbearing mother. Even when

¹³⁵ Zurawik, *Jews of Prime Time*, p. 103

¹³⁶ Brook, *Something Ain't Kosher Here*, p. 76

¹³⁷ Albert Auster, "Funny, You Don't Look Jewish ..." The Image Of Jews on Television, *Television Quarterly* Vol XXVI, no. 3, (1993), p. 74

he and his non-Jewish wife have a child, there is no discussion of how she will be raised.¹³⁸

Paul's family, much like Bernie's two decades earlier, must stand in for his Jewishness. The actor playing Paul's father appeared in the television show "Brooklyn Bridge" as a Russian-Jewish immigrant. Here, he speaks without an accent, but the cross-program reference, assuming you have watched the show, is expected to explain and support Paul's ethnicity. To put any doubts of his Jewishness to rest, Mel Brooks appears as Paul's uncle.¹³⁹ The question remains: Do Jewish actors on television have the obligation to keep Judaism front and center? Or is Paul Buchman more representative of American Jews than we'd like to believe?

Still, it is problematic that no aspect of Jewishness or Jewish consciousness enters the character's life. Reiser plays an assimilated, disconnected Jewish man. He avoids identifying as a Jew, save for his fast-talking mannerisms, his family and his stereotypical neurosis. Producer Barnet Kellman remarked: "Reiser never wants religion and religious differences specifically mentioned on that show. I don't think it's because he's afraid of it, by the way, and I certainly don't think that he wants to pretend that he's anything *but* Jewish. I just think he doesn't want it to be the issue ..."¹⁴⁰

The kicker is Reiser's fulfillment of the ultimate Jewish male stereotype of the late 20th century. Paul Buchman is a perfect example of a "validated male Jew."¹⁴¹ Self-deprecating, filled with anxiety and uncertainty, it is his calm wife, Jamie (Helen Hunt), who coolly organizes and comforts him. She, the non-Jewish woman, makes the child-

¹³⁸ Zurawik, *Jews of Prime Time*, p.156

¹³⁹ Ibid.

¹⁴⁰ Brook, *Something Ain't Kosher Here*, p.123

¹⁴¹ Berger, "The Mouse that Never Roars," p.102

like Paul into a man. Paul's "Jewish" emotionalism and neurosis is pitted against Jamie's WASP-like restraint. (If television is primarily a delivery system for advertising, i.e. the promise of transformation into eternal bliss (buy this car and you will be happy forever), pitching intermarriage as the way Jewish men gain acceptance into mainstream American life has troubling implications.)

Paul is a sweet, smart, funny, ethical guy. And he has a deep love for his wife. In fact, he is the kind of Jewish man forever portrayed as a "good catch" for a husband.¹⁴² His 2003 version is Mark Feuerstein, who plays Jake, a cute, lovable, Jewish TV station owner in *Good Morning, Miami*. Like Reiser, Feuerstein is romantically validated by his love for a non-Jewish woman.

By contrast, Jerry Seinfeld's Jewishness is never in doubt. He dates Jews and non-Jews throughout the show's nine-season run. True, he is a serial dater, but the only time he actually gets engaged on the show – to Janeane Garofalo – she's understood to be Jewish, since she is billed as the female Jerry. The four actors – Michael Richards, Julia Louis-Dreyfus and Jason Alexander – are all Jewish in real life. And all four *read* Jewish. Only one character, however, actually *is* Jewish for the purposes of the show.

¹⁴² Brook, *Something Ain't Kosher Here*, p.102

Chapter VI: Woody Allen: Neurotic, Inadequate and Successful: The Rise of the Modern Schlemiel

"I have frequently been accused of being a self-hating Jew, and while it's true I am Jewish and I don't like myself very much, it's not because of my persuasion."¹⁴³

– Woody Allen

While Bellow's books explored the emotional sensitivity of Jewish men, Woody Allen's stand-up routines exposed vulnerable cracks in the postwar era, when his nervousness mimicked the public's. John Lahr wrote: "He started mass-marketing his anxieties."¹⁴⁴ Woody Allen is the uncovered matzo on center stage, and his anxiety about being Jewish is pivotal to his persona. "The Jews, separated from others by religion, diet, dress and much else, were for Allen a metaphor of his own feelings of anxiety."¹⁴⁵

What makes his comedy work is the aura of sincerity he exudes. The stage became a psychiatrist's office, with the audience overhearing – and sometimes sharing – his intimate insecurities. In the 1960s and '70s, the pill and the growing sexual revolution meant sex was a hot topic, but few men could claim to be smooth, confident and successful in bed. Allen often verbalized the rampant insecurities men felt, yet were loath to admit. Plus, his high-culture name-dropping, Kafka, Tolstoy and Nietzsche, made viewers feel intellectual by proxy, and reinforced the idea that to be as cosmopolitan as Allen was, by definition, to be literate.

¹⁴³ Woody Allen, "Random Reflections of a Second-Rate Mind," *Tikkun*, p.15

¹⁴⁴ Gerald Nachman, *Seriously Funny*, p.533

¹⁴⁵ Epstein, *Haunted Smile*, p.190

Allen's comedy routines have a signature physical style. His droopy face, thinning hair, thick glasses and fumbling fingers give him a sad, pathetic air. Allen delivers his lines occasionally touching his temples with the tip of his fingers and then spreading his hands towards the audience, as if offering his very thoughts.¹⁴⁶ His routines vary from descriptions of being physically humiliated ("I'm not really the heroic type. I was beat up by Quakers.")¹⁴⁷ to ruminations on metaphysical concepts ("The universe is merely a fleeting idea in God's mind – a pretty uncomfortable thought, particularly if you've just made a down payment on a house.")¹⁴⁸

"Woody Allen's screen persona was built on the problematic nature of Jewish male sexuality. He usually manages to get the girl by stumbling on a combination of wit, vulnerability and sensitivity. These characters also implicitly criticize the machismo of the typical American male."¹⁴⁹ Box office figures don't lie, but I take exception to the author's designation of "sensitivity." Allen seems all too fixated on the bedding aspect, whereas outside the bedroom, he is controlling and arrogant. (Moreover, women rarely register his on-screen lovemaking among their sexiest moments.)

Indeed, Allen's preoccupation with sex continues Philip Roth's Jewish male identity crisis. That he is unable to maintain a relationship and is often sexually humiliated marks Allen as a grandson of the European schlemiel.¹⁵⁰ His humiliation is twofold: Sometimes it endears him to audiences; at other moments, it annoys us.

¹⁴⁶ *The Ed Sullivan Show*, Undated. Jewish Museum collection

¹⁴⁷ *Sleeper* (1973), Woody Allen, Marshall Brickman

¹⁴⁸ Pinsker, *Schlemiel as Metaphor*, p.164

¹⁴⁹ Sonya Michel, "Jews, Gender, American Cinema," eds. Lynn Davidman and Shelly Tenenbaum, *Feminist Perspectives on Jewish Studies*, p.257

¹⁵⁰ Epstein, *Haunted Smile*, pp.189-90

As Fielding Mellish in *Bananas* (1971), he seduces Nancy (Louis Lasser) only to discover she no longer wants him; he is too immature. "How," he asks? "Well, emotionally, sexually and intellectually." "Yeah, but what other ways?" He may lose the girl – for awhile – but at least he scored. In the end, he gets her back, and enjoys having their nuptial sex broadcast by Howard Cosell.¹⁵¹ What wins her over is happenstance: persistence coupled with a misguided sense of his political worth. (Why attractive non-Jews (Lasser, Keaton, Muriel Hemingway, Mia Farrow) would be drawn to Allen is complicated. His on-screen persona is also his own creation: He writes the scripts. Off-camera, Jewish men have long been touted as good husbands. But the cultural reasons they double as shiksa magnets are complicated and the subject of a separate paper.)

The recurrent theme of a Jewish man being drawn to a non-Jewish woman, the *shiksa*, is a staple in Allen's films. The historic reasons are myriad, including the demonization of Jewish women. In addition, Sam Girgus has noted, "It represents a kind of 'conquest' of the dominant culture that has kept the Jew at the margins."¹⁵²

Annie Hall (1977) is a particularly apt example. Alvy Singer (Woody Allen) has been married twice – both times to attractive, intelligent, ambitious Jewish women. His first wife, Allison, is writing her thesis on "political commitment in 20th-century literature." When they meet, he immediately defines her Jewishness the way the larger world has traditionally defined their mutual Otherness:

"You're like New York, Jewish, left-wing, liberal, intellectual, Central Park West, Brandeis University, the socialist summer camps and the father with the Ben Shahn

¹⁵¹ *Bananas*, Woody Allen, Mickey Rose, 1971

¹⁵² Richard Freadman, "Love Among the Stereotypes, or Why Woody's Women Leave," Avner Ziv and Anat Zajdman, eds. *Semites and Stereotypes: Characteristics of Jewish Humor*, p.110

drawings, right, and the really, y'know, strike-oriented kind of, red diaper, stop me before I make a complete imbecile of myself."

"No, that was wonderful. I love being reduced to a cultural stereotype."¹⁵³

Allison is even sexually available, a feature that contradicts the predominant and offensive stereotype of Jewish women as frigid and withholding. It is Allen's character in *Annie Hall* who becomes sexually inhibited.

Annie, by contrast, is the initial pursuer. Alvy may fumble live lobsters and resist going to the country, but he wins the girl. And voilà! Centuries of stereotypes are inverted. Suddenly, "the schlemiel is not even a true schlemiel. The direction of Jewish fantasizing has been reversed. The ordinary Jew feels that he's more attractive as a schlemiel than as a smoothie. His klutziness is within the reach of us all."¹⁵⁴

Here is the irony: Alvy wins only to lose. Not satisfied with his pretty, but insecure and intellectually deficient Midwestern girlfriend, Alvy remakes Annie into the image of the Jewish women he divorced. He insists she take adult-education classes and convinces her to start therapy. Once she reaches a level of confidence, she realizes Alvy is holding her back, emotionally and creatively, and stifling her sexually.

Allen's inability to sustain parity with women is repeated throughout his oeuvre. In *Manhattan* (1979), Allen plays Isaac Davis, 42, who is involved in a creepy paternalistic relationship with Tracy (Mariel Hemingway), 17. Not only does she achieve her independence from him, but throughout the film, she is the more mature of the two. Then, guilty that he is sleeping with a teenager, Allen finds a woman his own age – and

¹⁵³ *Annie Hall*, Woody Allen, Marshall Brickman, 1977

¹⁵⁴ Robert Leslie Liebman, "Rabbis or Rakes, Schlemiels or Supermen? Jewish Identity in Charles Chaplin, Jerry Lewis and Woody Allen," *Literature/Film Quarterly* p.200

avenges Shemuliel's medieval cuckold by having an affair with his friend's girlfriend. His friend, Yale (Michael Murphy), the epitome of WASP privilege, has been replaced by a small, unattractive Jewish man.

Yale, of course, has cheated on his wife, something Allen finds abhorrent. Trying to excuse his behavior, Yale insists, "You are so self-righteous, you know. I mean we're just people. We're just human beings, you know? You think you're God." To which Isaac counters: "I gotta model myself after someone."¹⁵⁵ (His retort is a throwback to the Haskalah schlemiel, a vehicle to promote Jewish self-improvement.)

Allen also quietly subverts the physical inferiority of the schlemiel. True, he jokes about his lack of machismo, but at a trendy party in *Manhattan*, he is quick to take up arms against the modern Jews' most notorious oppressors, the Nazis.

Isaac: "Has anybody read that Nazis are gonna march in New Jersey? I read this in the newspaper. We should go down there, get some guys together, y' know, get some bricks and baseball bats and really explain things to them."

Party guest: "There is this devastating satirical piece on that on the "Op Ed" page of the *Times*. It is devastating."

Isaac: "Well, a satirical piece in the *Times* is one thing, but bricks and baseball bats really get right to the point."¹⁵⁶

This exchange is both humorous – a delicious dig at intellectuals and a reinforcement of the American schlemiel's most enduring trait – Allen is bold enough to suggest physical force, will rely, in the end, on wit, not weaponry.

¹⁵⁵ *Manhattan*, Woody Allen, Marshall Brickman, 1979

¹⁵⁶ *Manhattan*, Woody Allen, Marshall Brickman, 1979

By the time *Annie Hall* wins its Best Picture Oscar, America is enjoying a new respect for Woody Allen, writer and filmmaker. Earlier films in which he portrayed a failed bank robber (*Take the Money and Run*), a health-store owner (*Sleeper*) or a product tester for a large corporation, (*Bananas*) have been supplanted. Now, he is playing a fictionalized version of his artistic persona: a neurotic, artistic New York Jew.

The stereotypes that become code for a Jewish character on television are spelled out by Alvy in *Annie Hall*: "Don't you see the rest of the country looks upon New York like we're left-wing, Communist, Jewish, homosexual pornographers? I think of us that way sometimes, and I live here."¹⁵⁷

In 1977, Richard Dreyfuss in *The Goodbye Girl* beat out Woody Allen for the Best Actor Academy Award for *Annie Hall*. The previous year's nominations included Robert DeNiro in *Taxi Driver* and Sylvester Stallone for *Rocky*. There was a clear distinction between Jewish male characters (urbane, verbal, insightful) and the non-Jewish ones (psychotic killers, loser boxers who win by being pummeled nearly to death.) Given a choice, who would you rather be: Travis Bickle or Alvy Singer?

The joke that ends *Annie Hall* neatly sums up Allen's singular philosophy on life: "Doc, my brother's crazy. He thinks he's a chicken." "Well, why don't you turn him in?" asks the doctor. "I would, but I need the eggs." "Well, I guess that's pretty much how I feel about relationships," muses Allen. "They're totally irrational and crazy and absurd and, I guess we keep going through it because most of us need the eggs."¹⁵⁸

¹⁵⁷ *Annie Hall*, Woody Allen, Marshall Brickman, 1977

¹⁵⁸ *Annie Hall*, Woody Allen, Marshall Brickman, 1977

Perhaps Allen's schlemiel's "optimistic pessimism"¹⁵⁹ explains, in part, his popularity. Like his European counterparts, even when life defeats him – he loses a job or a woman – he can take comfort in a moral refuge. (For instance, in *Crimes and Misdemeanors*, Allen plays a documentary filmmaker obsessed with truth. He's nemesis, Alan Alda, is an Emmy-winning TV producer famed for silly, innocuous sitcoms. Hired to direct a short piece on his life, Allen equates him with Benito Mussolini and Frances the talking mule. Alda, pompous and womanizing, is mocked by the little guy. In the end, Alda may get the girl, but Allen gets the audience.)

During centuries of persecution, Jews clung to the *Pirke Avot*, convinced that ethics, coupled with choseness and covenant, separated them from their persecutors. It gave them solace, a sense of superiority in the face of unremitting cruelty.

And his schlemiel descendants – Jerry Seinfeld and Larry David – will proceed along similar lines – with a caveat. They critique their own morals, or lack thereof, as well as the external world's. But unlike Allen, whose personal travails eroded much of his artistic integrity, Seinfeld and David will triumph precisely because they do not confuse honesty with popularity. They live for the punch line.

¹⁵⁹ Erens, *The Jew in American Cinema*, p.8

Chapter VII: Seinfeld: "It's Gold, Jerry, Gold!"

"The Jews have arrived in the sense that they are seen as representing average Americans. We no longer are asking, 'What will the anti-Semites say?' But the flip side is the show also reflects how Jews have lost their uniqueness. "Seinfeld" accurately reflects a lack of purpose and spirituality in the life of most American Jews today." ¹⁶⁰

– Rabbi Harold Shulweis

If sexual neurosis and angst define Woody Allen's identify in relation to an incomprehensible universe, Jerry Seinfeld is the "anti-Woody."¹⁶¹ Attractive and adept with women, his character doesn't struggle with metaphysics.¹⁶² His battlefield is more personal: He chronicles everyday life.

In 1988, NBC offered Jerry Seinfeld, a successful stand-up, a shot at prime time. Seinfeld, in turn, contacted Larry David, a comedian from New York. David was infamous for walking off stage during a performance if the audience didn't laugh enough. Jerry was Mr. Nice Guy; Larry was Mr. Dyspeptic. Both "shared a fascination with the small conundrums of daily life."¹⁶³

The story of how a television program starring a self-declared New York Jew finally debuted on television, in spite of CBS' infamous research (which was accepted by all network execs) was bottom line: Neither Seinfeld nor David cared if the show

¹⁶⁰ Rebecca Segall and Peter Ephross, "What Did 'Seinfeld' Say About the Jews?" *The Jewish Journal Archive*, May 15 - May 28, 1998
http://www.jewishjournal.org/archives/archiveMay15_98.htm#top

¹⁶¹ Nachman, *Seriously Funny*, p.534

¹⁶² Epstein, *Haunted Smile*, p.246

happened. Stand-up was their first love. When the two pitched their concept – “what a comedian does offstage, and where a comedian gets his material” – the network asked them to change characters and locate it out of New York. Larry David’s response mimics George Costanza’s in the episode “The Pitch”: “This is the show, and we’re not going to change it.”

Tough talk, considering NBC president Brandon Tartikoff hated the pilot, declaring it “too New York Jewish.” Rick Ludwin, head of late-night programming, disagreed. “Not being from New York and not being Jewish, it struck a chord for me.” Ludwin ordered four episodes.¹⁶⁴ The sensitivities between the two men – one Jewish, one non-Jewish – resemble the production history of the 1947 films *Crossfire* and *Gentlemen’s Agreement*.

In return for his approval, Tartikoff insisted that only Seinfeld, already established as a Jewish comedian, could remain a Jewish character. George Louis Costanza (Jason Alexander), Elaine Benes (Julia Louis-Dreyfus) and Cosmo Kramer (Michael Richards) were conceptualized as Jews, written by Jewish writers and played by Jewish actors. To follow Tartikoff’s instructions, however, they were to be de-Judaized whenever possible.

In “Seinfeld,” Jewish identity was such an integral component of the characters, the writers were compelled to provide a gentile background for each. Example: Kramer has volunteered to organize a Jewish singles’ evening. He asks Elaine to come. She quickly announces (as we know from her shiksa-appeal encounters) that she is not Jewish. Kramer replies, “Well, neither am I.” Except for this lone comment, Kramer

¹⁶³ Lynn Hirschberg, “... So What’s to Become of Our Jerry?” *Vanity Fair* (May 1998), p.243

¹⁶⁴ Ibid.

could be seen as a Jewish bohemian, a goofy schlemiel as compared to George's conniving version. Tartikoff was trumped: The "non-Jews" were as Jewish as Jerry.

Indeed, "Seinfeld's" staggering success (1990-1999) not only contradicted the "research" that had ruled American television for decades, it mainstreamed Jewish humor in the heartland. Set in New York, with a self-identified Jewish male lead, it was a hit. To top it off, the show broke a cardinal rule of television. The reigning dictum was to create characters the audience would want as friends. "Seinfeld's" inhabitants "were not necessarily people you'd want to hang out with, but their misadventures were addictive watching."¹⁶⁵

In short order, the focus of the show shifted from Seinfeld's monologues to becoming "a show about nothing," which is to say, a show that explored everything. Nothing was too large – love, death – or too small – phone etiquette or how to eat a candy bar. The plots became devices to portray "the minutiae and the minor annoyances that define our everyday lives."¹⁶⁶ It married Seinfeld's observational talents with David's twisted, dark view of life and people.

"George [Costanza] is the dark side of Larry, and Larry is the dark side of Jerry," says former "Seinfeld" writer Peter Mehlman. "Larry is very in tune with his own deepest, darkest, most embarrassing thoughts – and he's utterly unabashed about sharing them."¹⁶⁷ "Seinfeld" ripped the lid off America's id, revealing private preoccupations

¹⁶⁵ Francis Davis, "Recognition Humor: 'Seinfeld' Shows Why Television is Today's Best Medium for Comedy," *The Atlantic Monthly*, Dec. 1992

¹⁶⁶ Arie Kaplan, "Wizards of Wit: How Jews Revolutionized Comedy in America, Part II," *Reform Judaism*, Vol. 30, No. 4 Spring 2001, p.12

¹⁶⁷ Joshua Hammer, "The Other Costanza," *Newsweek*, Jan. 12, 1998, p.57

which had never been aired on television. The show "exposes the human destructiveness and lack of principle and morality that exist to some degree in all people."¹⁶⁸

What made these revelations palatable was the clever use of the schlemiel. He returned as an educational device, a tool for self-mockery that examined the social values and rules of etiquette in 20th-century America. George and Jerry, the schlemiel and the *schlimazel*, represent stock characters in Jewish lore.

The schlimazel had always been linked to the schlemiel. The name – *schlim* is German for "under" and *mazel* is Hebrew for "luck" – illustrates his plight. Brought together, the character is born under an unlucky star. No matter what he does, it will turn out wrong.¹⁶⁹ The definition joins the two in their *tsuris*. "The schlemiel spills the soup, the latter is the one into whose lap it falls. The schlimazel's problems are situational, he runs into bad luck. The schlemiel's comedy is existential, deriving from his very nature in its confrontation with reality."¹⁷⁰ By contrast, "the *schlimazel* is a combination of strengths and weaknesses. He is just a man, but a man with the potential for better."¹⁷¹

But in a post-Holocaust world, the pair no longer believe there is something – God – bigger than themselves. They do not cling to faith, despite all travails. In "Seinfeld," everything is the result of human agency. George is still plagued by *Sturm und Drang*, but the audience knows he brings much of his troubles on himself. The enemy is within. Together, the daring duo are a shlemiel and a schlimazel for modern Jews.

¹⁶⁸ Irwin Hirsch and Cara Hirsch, "'Seinfeld's' Humor Noir: A Look at Our Dark Side," *Journal of Popular Film and Television*, Vol. XXVIII nr.3 (Fall 2000) pp.116-123

¹⁶⁹ Pinsker, *Schlemiel as Metaphor*, p.6

¹⁷⁰ Ibid.

¹⁷¹ Boyer, "The *Schlemiezel*: Black Humor and the *Shtetl* Tradition," p.5

Clearly, the "Seinfeld" ensemble has skillfully blended aspects of both. Their character traits – narcissism and selfishness being top contenders – intertwine with bizarre bouts of misfortune. The modern twist is how often it is caused by someone else's actions. For instance, in one episode, Elaine is too self-involved to deliver Jerry's mail. Since neighbor Babu's visa renewal was accidentally placed in Jerry's mailbox, he doesn't receive the vital papers in time – and is deported. When George loses his glasses, he claims to see Jerry's girlfriend with cousin Jeffrey. Jerry, upset that she is cheating on him, angrily confronts her. Once George gets new specs, he realizes his mistake. But it's too late. Jerry loses a lovely woman (much as Othello loses Desdemona to Iago's accusations) because he trusts the wrong person. Then there's Kramer.

Banned from Joe's fruit stand for challenging the quality of his peaches, he gets Jerry banned as well. What has Jerry done? Gone shopping for Kramer. But Joe, realizing the duplicitous arrangement, takes umbrage. Every action has consequences. "Despite the seemingly indomitable individualism attached to postmodern American civility, "Seinfeld" comically argues that even small unrelated acts do matter, and thus have undeniable social effects for others."¹⁷²

Jerry's schlemiel/schlimazel is based on character; more specifically, his overarching character defect, his emotional restraint and passivity. Here again, Seinfeld upends a Jewish stereotype. Far from being overly emotional, like Paul Buchman in "Mad About You," he is emotionally understated. He is professionally successful and dates attractive women. But he can't commit to a relationship, and he refuses, unlike Woody Allen, to explore his neuroses. Consider the episode when Jerry's date points out

¹⁷² David P. Pierson, "A Show About Nothing: 'Seinfeld' and the Modern Comedy of Manners," *Journal of Popular Culture*, Summer (2000) 34:1, p.57

that he never gets angry. She encourages him to get upset. Once he starts, the floodgates open. Not only does he rage at everything, he feels profound loss and depression when she leaves him. "What's this wet salty stuff coming from my eyes?" he asks Elaine. For the rest of the show, he is warm, compassionate and even proposes to Elaine, his ever-present ex-girlfriend, with whom he enjoys a close friendship. It is only when George confesses his dark secrets, at Jerry's prompting, that Jerry, scared straight, returns to his normal state, announcing, "I'm cured." Seinfeld has neatly turned the tables on another Jewish stereotype: The guy who needs therapy. Unlike Allen, who freely admits he's addicted to the process, Seinfeld refuses introspection. He's an urban Jew who *doesn't* visit his analyst weekly. (He'll discuss among friends; he won't lay himself bare.)

Of course, George Costanza is a schlemiel tailor-made for the therapist's couch. Indeed, he is the *epitome* of a schlemiel, but by all textual references, he is not Jewish. Not technically. In actuality, there is such Jewish coding, you would think this Afikomen is *shmura matzo*. George's "Italian" parent's home smells of kasha, and he can offer only prune juice when he invites a girl over to their house. Most telling, his parents bring a marble rye from Schnitzer's when visiting their future in-laws – and angrily take it back when it isn't served. Once again, food is used as evidence of ethnicity.

George's parents, in Queens, are always arguing at high volume. Here are echoes of "Bridget Loves Bernie," as well as many Woody Allen representations of Jewish family life. George's Yiddish-inflected, energetic speech patterns, accompanied by broad hand gestures, speak of a certain New York Jewish type. What other ethnic group would ask a friend, "When do you start worrying about nose hairs?"

But the pièce de résistance of George's ethnicity is his frequent whine, "Why me, God?" – a cry heard throughout Jewish history. George's evocation of this existential question may address several sources of woe – be it his participation on the foundation board that honors his dead fiancée or the unavailability of a parking space – but his sense of being persecuted is wholly genetic. Or as Jerry Stiller explains, "I think we're a Jewish family living under the Witness Protection Program under the name Costanza."¹⁷³

George is devious, has a raging libido and is a supreme example of arrogant low self-esteem. There is one theory for the denial of George's Jewish ethnicity. "Placing George as non-Jewish would deflect potential criticism of presenting such an unpleasant, selfish, cheap and unattractive man as a Jew."¹⁷⁴

As in the standard schlemiel formula, George doesn't get what he wants – no matter how sly the machinations (his American entrepreneurial twist). His core nature doesn't change, personifying Larry David's mantra: "No hugging, no learning."¹⁷⁵ Unlike the various schlemiels from the Eastern European tradition, he isn't naïve or innocent. Sanford Pinsker's description of the schlemiel describes George's greedy nature precisely. "When a schlimazel's bread-and-butter accidentally falls on the floor, it always lands butter-side down; with a schlemiel, it's much the same – except that he butters his bread on both sides first."¹⁷⁶

Why did the audience respond so favorably to "Seinfeld" rather than cringe in disgust? "Who among us has never felt persecuted or screwed over, has never worried

¹⁷³ John Carman, "Nothing More to Show: He Giveth and Taketh Away," *San Francisco Chronicle*, May 4, 1998 p.D1

¹⁷⁴ Ibid. p.107

¹⁷⁵ Virginia Heffernan, "Life after 'Seinfeld,'" *The New Yorker*, October 28, 2002

¹⁷⁶ Pinsker, *Schlemiel as Metaphor*, p.2

that they were out of the loop, has never tried to get a “deal,” has never obsessed over microscopic annoyances and imagined slights, has never been petty, selfish, vain, self-defeating or weak-willed?”¹⁷⁷

“Seinfeld” told a basic truth: Life isn’t easy. It is annoying, difficult and ironic. The trick was to make it funny. This understanding has always been a part of the Jewish humor cauldron. Only now, it dovetailed with an American audience willing to see itself candidly – and laugh in recognition. Wasn’t that the purpose of the earlier schlemiels? To show a side of ourselves we didn’t want to see?

Cosmo Kramer, on the other hand, with his manic physicality, is a schlemiel with simple goals. He is “a come-along guy,” happy to help out his friends. He’s willing to pretend to be Elaine’s lover to deceive her psychiatrist. He agrees to sabotage the merchandise at Putamayo because Elaine got ripped off. Kramer is also a free spirit who lands on his feet, even if he leaves destruction in his wake. Complicated and inconsistent, Kramer is admittedly self-serving. But unlike George, we can forgive, as Jerry does, his lunacy.

Sometimes he is painfully honest, as in the episode when he tells George’s girlfriend to get a nose job, and changes her life. Now a beauty, she leaves George, precisely because he refused to tell her the truth about herself. Conversely, when his new phone number is similar to MovieFone, he pretends to be the recorded voice, looking up the information for strangers rather than calling the phone company and repairing the problem. He may take Jerry’s newspaper to do this good deed, but he still elects to help others.

¹⁷⁷ Joyce Millman, “Cheerio, Seinfeld,” *Salon*

Kramer treats us to the occasional moral/ethical moment. It is Kramer who believes "Good manners are the glue of society, Jerry. If you don't want to be a part of society, why don't you get in your car and move to the East Side!" The irony is that the Upper East Side is considered the purview of "high society," where Jews were traditionally barred. The West Side was for the Jews; Park Avenue was a WASP stronghold. In Kramer's worldview, the West Side, where they live, is the true homeland.

Moreover, it is Kramer who safeguards Rachel, Jerry's kosher girlfriend, from sampling lobster. "Not on my watch," he explains. For Kramer, who admires her piety, helping her stay true to her religious beliefs is a *mitzah*, even if he doesn't know the term.

Indeed, the way "Seinfeld" men interact with women is a welcome departure from the earlier incarnation of the schlemiel. Whereas Woody Allen was clumsy, nervous and would often lose the girl, George succeeds – at least temporarily – in dating and bedding a surprising number of pretty women, considering his personality. (My opinion: wish fulfillment on the part of the writers.) What traces of the 19th-century schlemiel remain is the tendency for the women to dominate the men, whether forcing them to participate in an activity or insisting they stay in a relationship they would rather end.

Remember, we are in a Seinfeldian universe – and the nuances – and contradictions – are many. George's relationship with Susan is a notable examination of inverting stereotypes. When they first meet, she is a network executive; he is pretending to be a writer. In subsequent episodes, she will endure Kramer vomiting on her, Kramer burning down her father's cabin and George's affection costing her a top job. She is blonde, rich and assumedly, could have her pick of beaus. And she picks him. Is he grateful? The psuedo Jew selected by the upper-class WASP? He not only postpones

their wedding by manipulatively using a "crying technique," but he shows absolutely no grief when she accidentally dies from his cheap, poisonous envelopes. (Apparently, a freak demise is preferably to confrontation.) Still, George gets his comeuppance. Appointed to serve on the executive board of the Susan Ross Foundation, he discovers just how rich she was. Town houses, a Hamptons beach house, art work, all would have been his had the marriage taken place.

George, though, has one final use for Susan – he exploits her death for pity. It allows him to get dates with models, women understood to be beyond his social reach. (Larry David will revisit this impulse in "Curb Your Enthusiasm." He uses his mother's death to get out of going to a bat mitzvah and to guilt his wife into sex.)

Kramer and George are a variation on the *luftmentsh* (air man) "who live on air, and give themselves over to schemes that have no substance."¹⁷⁸ Kramer has no visible means of support, but helps himself to the food and supplies in Jerry's apartment. George is incapable of holding a permanent job. His longest employment is with the New York Yankees. George is such a loser he can't even get fired when he wants to. (He is ostensibly offered a better position at the New York Mets.) At each outrageous action, owner George Steinbrenner construes George's antics as advantageous to the team. George wears Babe Ruth's uniform, smearing jelly on this historic item. Steinbrenner sees this as a symbolic gesture to move from glorifying the past into living in the present. George streaks across the field during a game wearing a flesh-colored body suit. He is duly embraced as the new mascot.

On another occasion, George has a special desk constructed in his office so he can take hidden naps. If there's a way for George to avoid work, he will find it. Of course,

this, too, shall backfire. Waiting for George in his office one day, Steinbrenner hears the ticking of his alarm clock. Not only does the bomb squad cut the desk in half, but in future, all desks will be glass, sans drawers. George's sleeping days are over.

George's sense of accomplishment is also based on trivial values. Jewish mothers may dream of their sons being doctors and lawyers; George's mother has to settle for a son whose expectations are far lower down the social scale: winning a videogame. George and Jerry visit a Queens pizza parlor they frequented in high school. There stands "The Frogger," where George's score is still the highest. George has an epiphany, which summarizes his true membership in the realm of the schlemiel. This score *is* the greatest achievement of his life. He is determined to buy The Frogger so his initials will endure for posterity. The challenge? If the machine is unplugged, the score will disappear.

George wails, "Why must there always be a problem! You'd think once I could get a break. I'm never going to have a child. If I lose this "Frogger" score, that's it for me. GLC must live on."

As the battery to the machine begins to run down, there is an electrical outlet available across a busy four-lane highway. "I've been preparing for this my entire life," George realizes. As the camera observes from above, mimicking the view of a video-game screen, the audience watches as George slides the machine through traffic, dodging between cars, in exact maneuvers needed to triumph at "Frogger." Success! That is, until he hits a curb. As a huge truck comes barreling down the street, George leaps to the sidewalk just in time to prevent his own demise, but the Frogger, eternal proof of his competence, is smashed. Game over.

¹⁷⁸ Pinsker, *Schlemiel as Metaphor*, p.13

What do we make of Jerry? As the only out Jew, he is a welcomed antidote to the whiny, neurotic, wimpy and intermarried Paul Buchman of "Mad About You." Seinfeld acknowledges being Jewish; Buchman is more reticent. Although Jerry dates non-Jewish women, he shatters the customary pattern by dating *Jewish* women as well. Indeed, the episode of Elaine's "shiksa appeal" is framed in a mocking way. The Jewish men want to maul her; they don't, like Paul Buchman, want to marry her. In a radical move, Jerry even dates Rachel, who keeps kosher. True, they neck at *Schindler's List*, but their roundly condemned lust creates a dialogue about appropriate and inappropriate behavior.

Such discussion only promotes the role of Jewish comics as critical cultural commentators.¹⁷⁹ Jerry and George (and Larry David in "Curb Your Enthusiasm") are constantly trying to understand the rules of society. "The main characters are continuously preoccupied with discerning, following and sometimes evading the complexity of social manners that exists both within and outside their own social group."¹⁸⁰ All four wrestle with what is appropriate and inappropriate behavior, be it ethical concerns – Can you date your girlfriend's roommate if you like her better? Can you mug an old lady for a marble rye to help a friend? – or simple matters of etiquette – Do you need to call in a thank-you for a favor if you're already expressed gratitude?

"Seinfeld" writer Larry Charles told *Entertainment Weekly*, "I would compare writing "Seinfeld" to writing the Talmud – a dark Talmud. You have a lot of brilliant minds examining a thought or ethical question from every possible angle."¹⁸¹

¹⁷⁹ Jon Stratton, *Coming Out Jewish: Constructing Ambivalent Identities*, p.297

¹⁸⁰ Pierson, "A Show About Nothing," p.50

¹⁸¹ Mike Flaherty and Mary Kaye Schilling, "The Seinfeld Chronicles," *Entertainment Weekly*, May 30, 1997, p.24

Indeed, Jerry and George are obsessed with the minutia of ordinary interactions: Why should someone feel compelled to bring wine to a party if they prefer Pepsi? Can you tape a conversation to see if people are talking about you? Is it acceptable to eat an éclair out of the trash? Imagine two yeshiva *buchers* debating the famous story of the brick in the rabbi's oven. Does one suspect brick render the oven unkosher? If George and Jerry lived in Poland 200 years ago, that is the discussion they would have. Today, they worry about social obligations: What makes an action right?

Equally important, they don't shy away from provocative taboo subjects, which are always on the radar screen. "Seinfeld" is not a comedy of manners, as such; it is a comedy about the experience of civility.¹⁸² Its brilliance was not using topics such as orgasms or masturbation for shock value; they were props to mine the depths of human experience. How do men, specifically Jerry and George, know if a woman has truly enjoyed sex? How long after sex do you wait before breaking up with a woman? These are topics people are usually afraid to broach. "Seinfeld" addresses vulnerability and insecurity as a matter of course.

In the tradition of Jewish comics and writers who were unafraid to take on political correctness, they, too, satirize society. Handicaps, sexual preference, sensitivity to ethnicity are grist for the humor mill. After all, for "Seinfeld's" Fab Four, political correctness was "another social obstacle for its characters to contend with."¹⁸³

A brilliant example of giving political correctness a well-earned *zetz* is the episode in which an NYU reporter thinks George and Jerry are lovers. They both vehemently deny it, but quickly amend, "not that there's anything wrong with it." The

¹⁸² Stratton, *Coming Out Jewish*, p.283

¹⁸³ Pierson "A Show About Nothing," p.60

show's handling of Jerry and George's friendship occasionally deals with the issue of homoeroticism – “not that there's anything wrong with it” – perhaps as the continuing feminization of the schlemiel. In the “mimbo” (a male bimbo) episode, George develops a crush on Tony, Elaine's very macho, but not-very-bright boyfriend.

Jerry is no above suspicion, either. To convince their janitor that Newman isn't having an affair with his wife (which will result in Kramer being evicted), Jerry claims the fur coat that Newman gave her is his. He looks mincing and campy, and Kramer mocks him as a “fancy boy.” Adding to his shame, he's carrying “the man bag,” which he's forced to describe to a police officer as his purse when a mugger steals it.

In another episode, George falls in love with a woman Elaine calls a “lady Jerry.” Teased by his friends, he denies the connection, frantically trying to find something in common with her besides a mutual love of gum. Looking at her, he muses, “So what if she looks like Jerry? I could have everything with Jerry, but because it's a woman, I could have sex with her and have everything I wanted.” But when she cuts her hair, mimicking Jerry's shape, George flees in terror. Similarly, George gets exceedingly agitated when, during a massage given by a man, “It moved.”

Of course, the biggest breakthrough on Seinfeld is Jerry's religion. But how does Seinfeld conceive his Judaism? The episode “Yadda, Yadda, Yadda” examines some of the feelings Jerry has about being Jewish. Jerry's dentist, Tim Whatley, has converted, and immediately jokes he's had a “Jewish workout” – a sit in the sauna. Jerry becomes convinced the sole purpose of Whatley's conversion was to tell Jewish jokes. Jerry confronts Whatley at his next dental appointment, “Tim, do you think you should be making jokes like that?”

Whatley declares, "Why are you so defensive? It is our humor that has seen us through 3,000 years." "Five thousand," Jerry corrects, with a reaction of disgust. Jerry is unhappy that Whatley could claim Jewish cultural and ethnic identity overnight.¹⁸⁴

Caveat: This episode does not address the *practice* of Judaism. (Talmudically, the motive for a conversion does not effect its validity. If someone converts, the law prohibits distinguishing between Jews by birth and Jews by choice.) When Jerry reveals his discomfort to a priest, he asks, "And this offends you as a Jewish person?" Jerry replies, "No, I'm offended as a *comedian*."¹⁸⁵ True, his response may seem flip; conversion is a highly charged issue. But it underlines a basic point about Seinfeld. To paraphrase Descartes: He jokes, therefore he is.

The issue of who is a Jew is a controversial one. The disputes over matrilineal descent, the recognition of non-Orthodox conversions and the accepting of the mitzvot are fierce arguments within the Jewish community. Raising the question of whether being Jewish is a matter of nationhood, ethnicity, religion or history on national TV is a far cry from the days when Jack Benny hurried to buy Christmas gifts. Bravo, Seinfeld.

Jerry Seinfeld is secure in his Jewish identity, even as he mocks religious professionals. The portrayals of a rabbi and a *mohel* in "Seinfeld" are singularly unappealing. The mohel is so obnoxious and nervous he cuts Jerry's finger during the circumcision. The rabbi, played with a voice of sing-song silliness, breaks the confidence of Elaine's pastoral counseling session. In fairness, the priest also breaks his vow of confidence in the "Yada, Yada" episode. Bottom line: nothing is sacred.

¹⁸⁴ Zurawik, *Jews of Prime Time*, p.213

¹⁸⁵ Epstein, *Haunted Smile*, p.246

Happily, Jerry is, on balance, a nice Jewish boy. We like his parents and his Uncle Leo. Abraham Foxman, national director of the Anti-Defamation League, says the Jewishness of the "Seinfeld" characters was worn "comfortably and naturally on their sleeves."¹⁸⁶ Best of all, Seinfeld sets the tone. All who enter his domain are judged by his standards. Jerry's schlemiel is not the same as Woody Allen's or Paul Buchman's. He is confident capable, physically fit, cares about his appearance and is never cheap. He is generous to his parents, sending them on trips to Paris or buying them a new Cadillac. Jerry, Kramer, George and Elaine can parse the peculiarities and passions of life, but it's clear who's in and who's out. And in this smash hit of all times, Jewish sensibility, however imperfect, rules.

¹⁸⁶ Rebecca Segall and Peter Ephross, "What Did 'Seinfeld' Say About the Jews," *The Jewish Journal Archive*, May 15 - May 28, 1998

Chapter VIII: Larry David: Truth and Consequences

"If Jewish humor originally came out of oppression, "Curb Your Enthusiasm" burlesques what happens when a self-hating Jew becomes rich and successful: he still feels rotten about himself."¹⁸⁷ – Andrew Billen

German-Jewish playwright and director Bertolt Brecht was renown for provocative fare. His most famous plays – *Mother Courage* and *Three Penny Opera* – acted as an antidote to what he dubbed soporific theater, work that lulled the audience into accepting the status quo. Brecht preferred to strip theatrical devices and remove sentimentality from his characters. And his in-your-face productions successfully attracted a following, no small achievement in Depression-era Europe.

It may not be readily apparent to American viewers, but Larry David's "Curb Your Enthusiasm" pays homage to Brechtian ideals. David plays a disagreeable, semi-likeable schlemiel whose *raison d'être* is exposing the flaws in people and society.

"He's less funnyman than agent provocateur. And he's dedicated to continually thwarting the comfort of his audience – something that separates him from every other performer on TV."¹⁸⁸

Indeed, David's HBO program, shot in a cinema-verite style, is the most authentic example of reality TV. Even as savvy viewers laugh at his travails and are disgusted by his outrageous behavior, he delivers stun gun jolts of self-awareness. This is not a feel-

¹⁸⁷ Andrew Billen, Notes on Larry David Head to Head: Flea and a Louse, *New Statesman*, March 3, 2003

¹⁸⁸ Adam Sternbergh, "Must-See Anti-TV," *Saturday Post (Canada)*, February 8, 2003, p. SP1

good sitcom; this is the dark side of human behavior, refracted through the lens of a Jewish comic. And, like Brecht, Larry David enjoys critical acclaim and garners industry approval; "Curb Your Enthusiasm" was nominated for 10 Emmys in 2003.

Since the program runs on a cable network, David has more creative leeway than when he was writing "Seinfeld." His "character," named Larry David, is George Costanza to the nth power. Actor Jason Alexander admits that his interpretation of George was based in large part on David and Woody Allen.¹⁸⁹ But unlike Costanza, David is no Afikomen disguised as Italian. He is an unapologetic, if conflicted, Jewish man.

A clear sign of his Jewish visibility is his approach to Christmas, the benchmark for charting Jewish performers' comfort levels about their ethnic identity. For instance, Jack Benny participated in Christian culture by shopping for Christmas presents, positing it as an *American* rather than a religious holiday. On "Seinfeld," the Costanzas (the Afikomen family) eschew Christmas and observe "Festivus." Created by George's father, the "religious observance" comes in the form of a psychological free-for all, what Mr. Constanza dubs "the airing of grievances" – an opportunity to recount all the ways they've disappointed each other over the year. It may not be Chanukah, but it sounds quintessentially Jewish to me.

¹⁸⁹ Brook, *Something Ain't Kosher Here*, p. 106

David, in contrast, illustrates the tyranny of Christian culture. His ineptitude at the Christmas tipping ritual reveals the forced, artificial nature of the tradition, as well as an example of his inability to grasp the rules of society. What is the appropriate amount? Who do you have to tip? Of course, he mishandles the process, inducing bad feelings instead of glad tidings.

When his non-Jewish wife (yet another intermarried couple) decides to celebrate Christmas at their house, his dislike of the holiday is apparent. Having a Christmas tree in his home makes David uncomfortable. "I'm a Jew. It's bad luck. My guy may think I'm switching," indicating his notion of a Jewish God. As he tells Jeff, his Jewish friend and business manager, "There's nothing worse than Jews with trees." David's feeling is: "Let them keep their holiday." But the apex of his irreverence for Christmas is a slick bit of comedic inversion: He eats the cookies his sister-in-law has baked. Unbeknownst to him, she's fashioned them into a nativity scene. "You ate our lord and savior!" she screams. "He looked like a monkey," David shoots back. One can't help but suspect he's both turned the ancient blood libel on its head and satirized the commercial aspects of the holiday all in one fell swoop.

Plus, when his sister-in-law's Jewish fiancé is about to be baptized, he asks his wife, "Why do Christians take everything so personally with Christ? Not only do you have to worship him but everyone else has to, too." In fact, David stumbles on the baptism and wrongly assumes a man is being drowned. So, like a good Samaritan, he rushes in to help. Later, David denies deliberately trying to sabotage the rite, but is so moved by the Jewish family's gratitude, he preens at his inadvertent meddling. As befits the Davidian/Seinfeldian universe, the interruption has altered events. The fiancé has had

a personal revelation – “I’m Jewish and that’s okay.” The engagement is off. Score one for the Jews.

Protective of Judaism among gentiles, David freely expresses his annoyance with Jewish attitudes. While whistling Wagner, he is accosted by a Jewish man and accused of being a self-hating Jew. David’s response echoes Woody Allen’s claim in *Tikkun*, “I may hate myself, but not because I’m Jewish.” When David is asked, “Where is your Judaism?” his reaction is to call out “Where are you, Judaism?” as if summoning his pet dog.

David’s Jewishness is more primal: It defines his being. His closest friends are Jewish – his manager, Jeff, and comedian Richard Lewis, who has parlayed neurotic Jewish shtick into a career. When he decides to meditate, David’s mantra, “jai ya,” quickly morphs into the tune for “dreidle, dreidle, dreidle.” Even the ring of his cell phone chimes “Hava Nagilla.” (And it jingles during a Christian Science prayer group, a touchy-feely exercise in faith over reason that fills him with horror.) David is clearly the first Jew on television to send up Christianity. In his eyes, it is almost atavistic, unworthy of serious attention.

David is both a proud Jew and a classic schlemiel. Reminiscent of Allen, he’s neither attractive nor physically fit. He avoids sports and the outdoors. Clever quips, carefully placed infra digs, double as armor and sword. Indeed, “Curb Your Enthusiasm” offers a schlemiel for the 21st century. He is rich and successful, but imbued with a darker edge. David revels in the inappropriate aside; he – and by extension – we are unmasked as selfish, narcissistic and lazy. Every action has an equal and opposite reaction. Much like in “Seinfeld,” a world he co-created, “the pebble of a mishap dropped into a pond

ripples and builds to a tsuris tsunami."¹⁹⁰ Funny, unlucky and wholly human, David's schlemiel proves that money does not buttress failure, a departure from previous incarnations.

David tries to do the right thing, but frequently ends up the comic fool, punished for his mitzvot. Feeling responsible for getting a nanny fired, he finds her a new post. She repays his kindness by attacking her new employer. Hoping to score points with a friend's wife, he warns her of an impending terrorist attack, only to ruin his own wife's benefit when everyone (mistakenly as it turns out) leaves town. In one of "Curb's" most poignant episodes, David brings dinner to the chauffeur waiting in the car. The simple, kindly gesture goes terribly awry: Larry gets arrested for stealing silverware, and the judge decrees he must wear a sign that reads: "I Steal Forks From Restaurants." As luck would have it, the president of CBS sees him, thereby putting the kibosh on their upcoming TV project.

It's no coincidence that in the final episode of "Seinfeld," the characters are condemned for doing "nothing" as a poor schnook gets car-jacked. Doing nothing *is* something – in this case, it is illegal and punishable. In "Curb," David's moral lesson is harsher. Doing good is not always equated with an ethical high ground. Often, it ends in ignoble defeat.

We've come full circle: A medieval Shemuliel must support a child he has not fathered. Centuries later, Larry David will navigate the treacherous waters of social interaction, trusting a self-determined moral compass without the assurance of success.

¹⁹⁰ Raab, "What's Not to Like?" *Esquire*, March, 2002, Vol. 137 issue 3, pp.142-47

Yet, in classic Jewish style, he knows there is only one path to follow – that of righteousness. Even if, in his case, it leads him astray.

*

Postscript: The Afikomen has appeared. The broken pieces, hidden from view, have been found. At the Seder, the matzo starts as the bread of affliction. When it's eaten at the end of the festive meal, it is the bread of liberation. Similarly, the schlemiel can be transformed from a subject of self-hatred to a study in self-knowledge. Jerry Seinfeld and Larry David have championed overt Jews on television. Their contemporaries, Ben Stiller, Adam Sandler and Jon Stewart, are equally comfortable and open about their Jewishness. (Stewart was chosen as sexiest comedian by *New York* magazine, making the smart, wise-cracking Jew who still enjoys taking a swipe at himself, an object of desire.¹⁹¹ Stiller was tapped as a sexy star on the cover of *Details*.) Both Stiller and Sandler are box-office success stories, while Jon Stewart's "The Daily Show" is a huge hit on Comedy Central. All are proof positive that the fears of the moguls have dissipated. Jewish men may still play loveable schlemiels, but they are now masters of their domain.

¹⁹¹ "Sexy in the City," *New York*, August 11, 2003, p.30

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