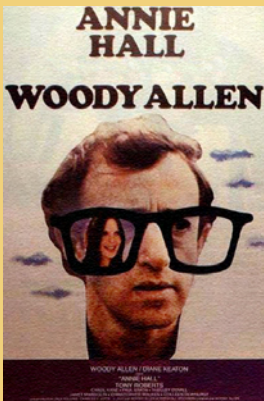




# THE AMERICAN JEWISH EXPERIENCE THROUGH THE LENS OF CINEMA



Film History  
As Haggadah



ERIC A. GOLDMAN

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**ERIC A. GOLDMAN**

**American Jewish Committee** protects the rights and freedoms of Jews the world over; combats bigotry and anti-Semitism and promotes human rights for all; works for the security of Israel and deepened understanding between Americans and Israelis; advocates public policy positions rooted in American democratic values and the perspectives of the Jewish heritage; and enhances the creative vitality of the Jewish people. Founded in 1906, it is the pioneer human-relations agency in the United States.

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AMERICAN JEWISH COMMITTEE

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Observers have commented frequently in recent years about the proliferation of Jewish images within American popular culture. Television, movies, even comic books, now routinely feature Jewish characters and themes. Often dominated historically by Jewish creators and artists seemingly either embarrassed by their Jewish identity or convinced that it would never capture the interest of the American public, popular culture remained barren of Jewish portraits for decades. Today, by contrast, virtually every popular medium contains a fair, if not disproportionate, number of Jewish personalities, humor, allusions, and even idioms.

This mainstreaming of Jews within popular culture may be attributed to the prominence and acceptance Jews enjoy within American culture generally. Never before in Diaspora Jewish history has there been a society so open and welcoming of Jewish participation as the United States has been in recent decades. Yet little attention has been paid to the quality of Jewish portrayals within popular media. What are the images of Jews and Jewish experiences, and are they depicted fairly and accurately? More broadly, to the extent that the Jewish story has permeated popular culture, what are the dominant themes and messages concerning the Jewish experience that the culture is transmitting?

To help address these questions, the American Jewish Committee commissioned Prof. Eric Goldman, a leading scholar of Jewish film, to inquire into how cinema has portrayed the Jewish historical experience. Dr. Goldman traces a rather distinct evolution in American movies. Early efforts struck the assimilationist motif. Interfaith marriage equaled a “success story” of Jews becoming Americans. Little if any attention was paid to the price of assimilation—namely, the loss of cultural distinctiveness and religious identity.

With the rise and subsequent defeat of Adolf Hitler and Nazi Germany, Hollywood began to focus on anti-Semitism. Films such as *Gentleman's Agreement* gave voice to America's rejection of anti-Semitism as morally objectionable. By the 1980s, sufficient awareness of the Holocaust had made it a primary, if not dominant, cinematic motif in portraying Jews and Judaism.

Although Jewish organizations, assuming that Holocaust remembrance would safeguard against other manifestations of anti-Semitism, generally applauded these developments, some questioned whether this focus connoted the association of the Jew with victim at the expense of far more positive narratives of Jewish achievement. For one thing, films featuring Israelis were virtually absent from the screen. The Holocaust proved to be a consensual theme within American popular culture. By contrast, films associated with Israel were considered too divisive and controversial. Even a movie such as *Exodus* noticeably lacked American Jewish heroes, notwithstanding that the historical record of the birth of Israel featured a considerable number of such individuals. The Holocaust evoked a universal theme in its representation of evil as a force that virtuous persons ought rightly combat. Cynics, of course, noted that in practice this meant that the world loves the Jew as victim, but rejects the Jew willing to defend himself.

In some respects, these films suggest a larger problem with the teaching of Jewish history. Even the best educated of Jews, to say nothing of non-Jews, continue to believe in the "lachrymose conception of Jewish history," the view that Jewish history consists of a narrative of endless pogroms and persecution. The story of Jewish destruction has become the primary image in understanding the Jewish past. Unfortunately, how Jews have died has made for a far more compelling narrative than how Jews have lived. This myopic generalization about Jewish history, slighting its rich diversity and wealth of cultural achievements, has been greatly strengthened by the dominant memory of the Holocaust as the defining moment of twentieth-century Jewish history.

Dr. Goldman does report a more positive portrait for the early twenty-first century. Films such as *Liberty Heights* and *Avalon* depict strong Jewish families. *Prime* underscores the importance of endogamy, and *Keeping the Faith* touts conversion as single-best outcome to a mixed marriage. Recent films on Israel such as *O Jerusalem* and *Golda's Balcony* hold out the promise for greater incorporation of the narrative of Israel onto the large screen.

The American Jewish Committee hopes to correct the stereotypical images Jews have of their history as a tale of unmitigated woe and replace them with a far more diverse portrait of the totality of the Jewish experience. Dr. Goldman's paper is the first of a series analyzing how the story of the Jewish past has been and should be transmitted to the Jewish public. We thank in particular long-term AJC supporter Joseph Durra, whose generosity has made this project possible.

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## **The American Jewish Experience Through the Lens of Cinema: Film History as Haggadah**

Jews have been involved in the production of motion pictures since the beginning of filmmaking in America and have also been the subject of many such films. In an industry strongly influenced by Jewish producers who made and continue to make the decisions as to which films are produced, the complex and changing nature of the American Jewish condition has had considerable impact on American cinema and, in particular, on the portrayal of Jews on the screen.

If we study the American Jewish experience through cinema's lens, we will be able to see an evolving portrait of the American Jew over the last century: where the Jew has been and possibly where he or she is going. Through movies, we can better understand who we are and what we have become as Jews in America. Film historian Peter Rollins has observed that "films can serve the student of American culture in a far more interesting way than simply as a record of visual reality, for films register the feelings and attitudes of the periods in which they are made."<sup>1</sup> In actuality, a corpus of movies records our evolution as Jews within America over the last century, and the cinema lens provides a meaningful and accurate accounting—a way of telling our story, a Haggadah (literally, a telling) of what has transpired for Jews in America and what continues to take place. In the pages to come, we will explore the American Jewish experience of the last century through a review of some of the outstanding examples of this genre.

### A New Direction in Film: Searching for a Usable Past

In *Everything Is Illuminated*, Liev Schreiber's 2005 narrative film drawn from the novel by Jonathan Safran Foer, an American Jewish young adult travels to Ukraine in search of identity and self-understanding. His search is representative of a new direction in American cinema over the last two decades—a search for roots, one might say—that has resulted in an unprecedented number of movies spotlighting Jewish events and issues and focusing on important moments in Jewish history. This is an exciting development, for cinema, as pioneer filmmaker D.W. Griffith said, “is capable of conveying a given image in many ways enormously more effectively than any mode of expression the world has ever possessed.”<sup>2</sup>

Twenty-five-year-old Jonathan Safran Foer received a great deal of attention in 2002 with the publication of his first novel, which soared to the top of the best-seller lists. Foer and wife, Nicole Krauss (author of *Man Walks into a Room* and *The History of Love*), are among a group of young Jewish writers who are dazzling readers with their talent. Just as impressive are the efforts of a cadre of capable screenwriters and actors who have decided to try their hand at producing and directing Jewish-themed films. Their creative expression appears to be a way of relaying their individual sagas, of dealing with their Jewishness. Liev Schreiber, a distinguished actor on stage and in film, is one of those talents who has used cinema as a vehicle for his own personal struggle. His story represents this new, very exciting development.

Schreiber's primary Jewish connection was through his grandfather, a 1916 refugee from Eastern Europe. Liev had no formal Jewish schooling, and his upbringing was void of any real Jewish experience, except that each year his grandfather would reintroduce him to the Jewish people at the Passover Seder. In 1993, with his grandfather's death, Schreiber struggled to find himself as a Jew, beginning the process of writing a screenplay about what it meant to return to the land of his grandfather. The effort was far harder than he had imagined. A few years into his writing, he read Foer's short story in the *New Yorker* about a boy who goes back to Ukraine

to find his roots; that short story would eventually become a novel. The two met and Schreiber found his vehicle and voice, merging his story with that of Foer. On the surface, the film seems like a simple dramatization of Foer's visit to Eastern Europe, but it is much more. The film adaptation of the novel provides a brilliant study of American Jewry's fascination with its Eastern European past and a warm rendering of what it means today to be a Jew in America. The film, shot in Rumania and Ukraine, is quirky yet smooth, affectionate yet hostile.

In his classic *World of our Fathers*, Irving Howe reflects on the “fractional Jew [who] may be identified by his history, by the presence of the Jewish past within him. He is a Jew in that his experience contains the possibility of linking himself with the collective and individual experience of earlier Jews.”<sup>3</sup> In an interview, Liev Schreiber revealed what brought him to develop *Everything Is Illuminated* into a film.

It really began with my grandfather. It began with a death in the family and a kind of identity crisis that I think comes with that sort of thing.... I panicked that in losing my grandfather I was losing an anchor. I was losing something that I hadn't paid enough attention to when I was younger and it was a resource that I was going to lose.... I started to piece together a picture of who he was. That brought me to this idea about the immigrant experience, and about what defines American Jewry.<sup>4</sup>

He asked himself: How did he come to be? Who were his ancestors? How might he understand his place as an American Jew juxtaposed to a world that had pretty much vanished? Just what was his connection with that world? For the film's protagonist, Jonathan, “everything is illuminated in the light of the past.” For him, as for the majority of America's Jews, the past lies in Eastern Europe. Equipped with a snapshot of his grandfather taken in the “old country,” Jonathan leaves for Ukraine in search of answers.

Jonathan calls himself “a collector.” He says that he collects “because I'm afraid I'll forget.” Collecting objects is his way of gathering and preserving memory. Prior to his departure for Ukraine, a young Jonathan is filmed in his bedroom with a wall filled with

photographs, postcards, and memorabilia chronicling his life and that of his family. The wall is rich with Jewish memories. This wall becomes Jonathan's starting point in his journey to try to understand himself and create his own history. That journey is all the more remarkable in that it not only connects past with present, but joins Old World with the New. In the 1930s, Yiddish films provided a nostalgic connection for the immigrant classes to reflect on the old country, but none of that exists here. This young Jew of the new millennium simply wants to "fill in the dots," to understand who he is and from whence he came.

In the film, Jonathan seeks the assistance of a Ukraine-based Jewish heritage tour company. In the course of his search for his grandfather's hometown, he bonds with his guide and translator, Alexander, who, ignorant of his own Jewish identity, goes through his own self-discovery. Together with Alexander's grandfather, they search for Jonathan's grandfather's hometown of Trachimbrod, which winds up being no more than the collectibles preserved by its caretaker. Still, for both Jonathan and Alexander, grandchildren of Trachimbrod who live on opposite sides of an ocean, it becomes common memory, their Haggadah to be shared with their offspring. This personal Jewish history is reflective of a new genre of American moviemaking, firmly rooted and Jewishly identified, that does not run away from its historical starting point.

It was not so for the early movie pioneers.

### Stories of Successful Assimilation

Jewish moviemakers throughout the early years of cinema, the first decades of the twentieth century, focused largely on stories of successful assimilation into American society. As Neal Gabler (*An Empire of their Own: How the Jews Invented Hollywood*) asserted in *Television's Changing Image of American Jews*, "[T]he grand theme of Hollywood, both in terms of films and in terms of the lives of its moguls, is idealized assimilation."<sup>5</sup> Such assimilation was often expressed through the intermarriage of a Jewish child with a child from another immigrant group. The resulting union celebrated the

successful melding of different ethnicities and religions, a "melting pot" producing a couple who would turn out "all-American" offspring.

Silent film was often the entertainment of choice for immigrants, since language was not a barrier; thus it was the immigrant to whom these movies were directed. Suggesting the possibility of entrée into American society on screen, these movies made the argument for assimilation seem reasonable. This view certainly reflected the sensibilities of Jewish moviemakers of the time, who desperately sought their own acceptance into America. Films like *Private Izzy Murphy* (1926), *The Cohens and the Kellys* (1926), and *Abie's Irish Rose* (1928) were representative of this genre. Each reflected belief in an America that eliminated differences and particularity and fostered acceptance. The road to success required integration and Americanization.

The multiethnic films of the silent era continued to be made into the early 1930s. As the "talkie" replaced silent cinema, success and the opportunities that America could provide continued to be a central theme. Even *The Jazz Singer* (1927), which represents the pivotal transition into sound, has protagonist Jakie Rabinowitz, son and descendant of generations of cantors, leave his Jewish home to seek America's opportunities. It shows Jakie, now Jack Robin, rejecting the limitations of the cantorate and synagogue for the chance to be "truly" successful as a jazz singer on Broadway. Along with his rejection of Jewish community comes his easy union with the non-Jewish Mary Dale. This thematic thrust reflected the life of the Jewish movie moguls, many of whom found Judaism a burden and intermarriage a way of life. This theme continued to be explored into the 1930s.

Adolf Hitler's rise to power in 1933 was not lost on American moviemakers. As Judith Doneson, author of *The Holocaust in American Film*, questions, "To what extent did Hollywood, known as a 'Jewish' industry, feel the threat to the Jews to be a major concern?"<sup>6</sup> There is little doubt of the effect, as clearly identified Jews abruptly disappeared from American cinema. Hollywood's Jewish producers



were particularly interested in taking attention away from themselves. Gone were the ethnic movies that had been so much a part of America cinema. In addition, with the creation in 1934 of the Production Code Administration, a film industry watchdog body that scrutinized films looking for, among other things, offensive references to a character's national origin, it was easy for producers to justify removing a Jewish ethnic presence from movies.

However, in 1930s Hollywood, not every movie producer was Jewish. Darryl F. Zanuck, head of production for Twentieth Century Pictures, was a shrewd producer, acutely aware of the commercial possibilities of making controversial pictures. He was attracted to a story about the Rothschild family, a pet project of actor George Arliss. As one of the few Gentile production heads in Hollywood, Zanuck was not as sensitive about Jewish visibility on the screen as were his Jewish counterparts, nor was he overly concerned about whether to produce a film on a Jewish subject. When Arliss gave Zanuck a book on the Rothschilds, he immediately turned over the project to writer Nunnally Johnson, and soon the film *The House of Rothschild* was readied for production.<sup>7</sup> Johnson was apparently awed by Zanuck's willingness to tackle a film that struggled with anti-Semitism and could, particularly given the climate, be very divisive. Zanuck's Jewish associates, such as Joseph Schenck, the first president of United Artists and later Zanuck's partner in Twentieth Century, as well as Jewish friends within the Hollywood community were far from enthusiastic. It seems clear that had Twentieth Century Pictures been run by a Jew at the time, the film would likely never have been made. Zanuck, by his very character, was no conformist, and understood that, by virtue of not being a Jew, he could take certain liberties that Jews would not take.

The timing for producing a film about the rise of an international Jewish banking family was questionable, but Zanuck was a formidable producer, undeterred by conventional wisdom. "It was 1933.... Not only were the newspapers and newsreels full of pictures of the Brownshirts on the rampage against the Jews of Berlin and Munich, but the smell of anti-Semitism reeked strongly

enough to drift across the Atlantic and be sniffed eagerly by racists in the United States.... Zanuck ... was stimulated by the prevailing conditions."<sup>8</sup> Certainly, the film's portrayal of the Rothschilds is not all glowing, but the overall feeling is one of great empathy for them and for the plight of the Jewish people. Though the description of Rothschild's *raison d'être* might leave one squirming, the film proceeds to tackle anti-Semitism in a most admirable manner. By today's standards the film is a bit clichéd, but the audience of that day was drawn to it and responded by coming to theaters in droves. The irrational hatred of Jews, seen largely through the character of the fictional Count Ledrantz of Prussia, rings clear as a repudiation of Nazi hate and a forewarning of the devastation that looms for the Jews of Europe. Nunnally Johnson's insertion of Ledrantz into the Rothschild screenplay was made to contravene any initial anti-Semitic sense that the viewer might feel toward the family. Ledrantz is also meant to connect past with present. As film historian Pierre Sorlin asserts:

Historical films are concerned with the problems of the present.... On the surface, they deal with historical events ... but from the vast range of possible choices, film-makers have singled out those characters, circumstances and dates that have a direct bearing on contemporary circumstances.<sup>9</sup>

Certainly, this was the case with Zanuck's *The House of Rothschild*.

### Discomfort with Jewish-Themed Films

After the 1934 release of *The House of Rothschild*, Jewish subjects disappeared from the American screen. A decade earlier, the screen had been filled with Jewish characters; now there was a dearth. Even *The Life of Emile Zola* (1937) barely reveals that the accused Alfred Dreyfus, whom Zola champions, is Jewish. Yet, as the decade came to an end, with greater awareness of the persecution of European Jewry, this attitude seemed poised to change, as several screenwriters turned their attention toward Central Europe.

Then, in the spring of 1939, before the onset of war in Europe, Anatole Litvak's *Confessions of a Nazi Spy* opened in theaters. This

film, perceived to be anti-Nazi, was seen as propaganda for American involvement in the events unfolding abroad. Such involvement in a war in Europe was unpopular with the American public, and an isolationist Congress, carefully scrutinizing what was being produced, called the producers of the film to task. Almost immediately screenplays about anti-Semitism that were being considered were put aside, never to be made into motion pictures. As world anti-Semitism became more of a concern, Jewish producers in Hollywood became much more reluctant to draw attention to themselves.

Unlike Hollywood's Jews, Charlie Chaplin, a non-Jew, proceeded with his film about Jewish persecution, *The Great Dictator* (1940), which he produced, directed, scored, and starred in. The film has Chaplin playing two parts—two look-alikes, a Jewish barber and Adenoid Hynkel, dictator of Tomania. In this brilliant tragicomedy, each takes the place of the other, with not-so-surprising results. It took a non-Jew to have the courage to make such a film, as the comfort level for Jewish producers of the day simply precluded any moviemaking on the subject. With America's entry into the war, Jewish characters finally began to emerge in a variety of war dramas, such as *The Purple Heart* (1944) and *Pride of the Marines* (1945). But the approach was still a cautious one, with the Jewish characters on screen joining others of different ethnic origins and religions to fight America's enemy abroad.

With the end of World War II, the mood of the motion picture industry began to turn away from war and victory, and there evolved a growing introspection on American life. Movies were now beginning to tackle America's problems. With the Holocaust in Europe as backdrop, anti-Semitism seemed appropriate as one of the subjects to receive attention on the American screen. However, many other considerations made it no easy task to present this highly controversial theme openly to the American movie audience. One question was whether America was mature enough to address the issue. Another was whether Hollywood's moviemakers, the majority of whom were Jewish, were sufficiently secure to tackle this controversial subject.

In late 1946, Zanuck, now head of production at the merged studio Twentieth Century-Fox, announced that he had purchased movie rights to Laura Z. Hobson's *Gentleman's Agreement*, a novel about social anti-Semitism. Zanuck, at this point still one of the few non-Jewish heads of a Hollywood studio, was excited about doing such a film. As had been the case a dozen years earlier when he produced *The House of Rothschild*, he saw anti-Semitism as an American problem, not just an issue for Jews. But Hollywood's Jewish community remained concerned about drawing too much attention to themselves. At this moment, American Jewry was experiencing a postwar "era of good feeling," so it might seem strange that resistance to the making of *Gentleman's Agreement* would come from the organized Jewish leadership. But just how secure did Jewish leaders feel about their status in America? Influential members of the Los Angeles Jewish community met at the Warner Brothers Studio with Zanuck and possibly screenwriter Moss Hart to discourage the production. Their stated fear was that by calling attention to anti-Semitism in a film, anti-Semitic feelings might be enhanced. They saw no point in raising the question in the first place. "We're getting along O.K.! Why raise the issue?" Zanuck refused to give in to the pressure.

Shortly thereafter, word got out that Dore Schary, head of production at RKO Studios, was preparing *Crossfire*, a second film on anti-Semitism. Schary also met with resistance, confronted by leaders of the American Jewish Committee. In a meeting with Schary, Richard Rothschild, an AJC professional, requested to see the script to determine whether it might be considered inappropriate. Rothschild had headed AJC's Survey Committee, which had been charged with countering Nazi and anti-Semitic propaganda, using principles of market research, just prior to and during the war. He pushed Schary to hold up production, for fear that the film might do more harm than good. Upon learning about the story, Elliot Cohen, editor of the then AJC-sponsored periodical *Commentary*, made it clear he would use the power of the press (which he later did, in a series of printed exchanges with Schary) if production of

*Crossfire* were not stopped or, at least, the main character were not changed from a Jew to an African-American. If that were not enough pressure, Hollywood colleagues threatened Scharly that they would shut down distribution of the film. But the forty-one-year-old RKO producer did not buckle under great pressure. Even a specific threat by Warner Brothers, never realized, that they would not screen *Crossfire* in their theaters did not deter Scharly.

*Crossfire* was released in the summer of 1947, and *Gentleman's Agreement* opened in theaters a few months later. *Crossfire* won the “Best Social Film” award at the Cannes Film Festival, and *Gentleman's Agreement* won an Academy Award® for best motion picture of 1947. Interestingly enough, as 1947 began, there were at least five film projects about anti-Semitism being readied for production. Only *Crossfire* and *Gentleman's Agreement* were finished; two were shelved and forgotten, and the fifth, an adaptation of Arthur Miller's *Focus*, was produced only in 2001.

### A Shift in Sensibility in the Portrayal of Jews: *The Caine Mutiny* and *Marjorie Morningstar*

What is important to note is that sixty years ago a major shift in American cinema was about to take place. Jewish movie moguls had always influenced the kinds of films being made and how Jews were portrayed. For over a quarter of a century, they pushed the notion that Jews should give up their particularity and assimilate into American society. Then, for close to a decade, as the Jewish studio heads became more and more successful and as world anti-Semitism grew, they tried to deflect attention away from themselves by making Jewish characters disappear from the screen. Now, Zanuck and the new Jewish production head Scharly wanted to put a story about anti-Semitism in the limelight. As one might imagine, Hollywood directors and other prominent Jews were not amused, as this went to the very heart of how secure they felt in American society. Were there still barriers that made being Jewish difficult? How would this impact the films being released, and how has this perception changed over the last sixty years?

The answers lay ahead: House of Representatives Un-American Activities Committee began their oversight of Hollywood, which would change moviemaking forever. Television would become a competitive force, and consequently, the movie studio system and how decisions were to be made would dramatically change.

The social message of films following *Crossfire* and *Gentleman's Agreement* dealt with issues other than Jews. Although Jewish characters appeared in many films into the late 1950s, their Jewishness, which may have been central in the original work from which the film was adapted, was made largely peripheral in the film. Two striking examples are movies drawn from novels by Herman Wouk, *The Caine Mutiny* and *Marjorie Morningstar*. In *The Caine Mutiny* novel, Barney Greenwald's Judaism flavors his every action; this motivation we do not see in the picture. Yes, Uncle Samson comes for his nephew's bar mitzvah as *Marjorie Morningstar* opens, but Marjorie's commitment to Jewish life is minimized and almost eliminated. Simply put, movie producers, even “independent” producers who were so much a part of the “new” moviemaking, were careful not to make their characters *too* Jewish.

### The Unabashedly Jewish Protagonist

Nineteen fifty-eight turned out to be a pivotal year for Jews as portrayed in movies. During this post-*Brown v. Board of Education* period, Jews in general and filmmakers in particular felt greater comfort in America, and it was reflected in the films that followed. Jews were accepted in the suburbs, and affiliation rates in synagogues tripled from what they had been in the 1930s, to close to 60 percent of all American Jews.<sup>10</sup> “Cultural assimilation” had been achieved, but as American sociologist Herbert J. Gans pointed out in his 1953 study, Jews still maintained “continued social distinctiveness.”<sup>11</sup> This distinctiveness was true not just in Gans's Chicago, but in most urban centers—certainly in the movie capital, Los Angeles. It also brought about a new kind of Jewish character whom we would begin to see in movies: the unabashedly Jewish protagonist. True, producers were far from ready to make their leading characters *too* Jewish or

“religious” (as seen in the Wouk adaptations), but they also did not shy away from characters who were clearly Jewish, as had been the case in previous decades.

In Edward Dmytryk’s *The Young Lions* (1958), adapted from Irwin Shaw’s novel, Noah Ackerman is meek and of slender build, but he is strong-willed. When he is abused by his fellow soldiers in the barracks and money is stolen from him, he demands to know who the thief is so that he may defend his honor. “I demand satisfaction!” states Ackerman. Though beaten up badly in three successive weekend fistfights that follow—with the toughest guys in the barracks—he continues to fight for his right to be there. In the fourth and final fight, he defeats his last opponent, earning the admiration and acceptance of his bunkmates, and the stolen money is returned to him. Although set before and during World War II and written as the war came to a close, the film clearly reflects the period in which it was made; it’s clearly about the Jew of the late 1950s.<sup>12</sup> Observed Pierre Sorlin in *The Film in History: Restaging the Past*, “History is no more than a useful choice to speak of the present time.”<sup>13</sup> Ackerman is a member of his unit, lives in the barracks like everyone else, even has a bunk next to men from all parts of the country. But do they include him? Not really! Noah Ackerman truly symbolizes the American Jew, distinct and different, secure in his Jewishness, aware that he has “rights” as an American and ready to fight for them—and boy, does Ackerman fight!

But there is another side of Noah Ackerman, showing the evolving Jew, just starting to break into the mainstream of society. He is the young man who falls in love with Hope Plowman, the gentle non-Jewish woman who invites Noah to New England to meet her father. Hope has not only accepted him, but has fallen in love with him. Joined by her father at the bus station to meet Noah, Hope waits until the last possible moment to share an unknown fact, “He’s Jewish, father.” Mr. Plowman, taken quite by surprise, leaves Hope behind and invites a lone passenger off the bus to take a walk through the town with him. “That’s Jack Marshall’s. I went to school with his father—my father with his father. Virgil Smith’s law

office—one of his people did the legal work when they incorporated this town—1750.” When they reach the cemetery where Hope’s mom is buried, director Dmytryk cleverly reverses the camera angle to show a fence that visually separates the two men from entering the cemetery. “That’s the family plot. Seven generations of Plowmans there!” Plowman is all but saying to Noah that he is unwanted and is trespassing. All the while, we hear a church choir in the background singing a Christian hymn welcoming all to church. This is one of the most intriguing moments in the film, long before Ackerman will take on the barracks bullies. “Anybody from town asked to marry Hope, I’d say, ‘Come up to the house. We’ve got turkey for dinner!’” Plowman pauses. “I never knew a Jew before!” Will the Jew be invited to dinner, to join in the Ackerman feast? And for turkey—the all-American feast? Yes, it is 1958 and the Jew has finally been invited to the American table.

That same year the story of the Dreyfus case also came to the American screen. One could understand France’s fascination with *L’affaire Dreyfus*; its political explosiveness made it a favorite for French filmmakers since its first treatment by Georges Méliès in 1899. But American moviemakers were also fascinated by Dreyfus’s trial and imprisonment, which had been the centerpiece of *The Life of Emile Zola* (1937). José Ferrer chose to remake the film, now entitled *I Accuse!*, from a screenplay by Gore Vidal. Whereas the earlier film focused its attention on the journalist Zola, without giving any clear sense of Dreyfus being Jewish, Vidal moves quickly to make Dreyfus the Jew the core player in this version. Except for the fleeting word “*Juif*” which is seen in a French paper amid whispered mention of Dreyfus’s religion, the word “Jew” is barely heard in the 1937 film. In contrast, the anti-Semitism of 1890s France is very much in evidence in Ferrer’s film. Though the latter film emphasizes Dreyfus’s being falsely accused not because of his religion but rather because of the political and military maneuverings of his day, the anti-Semitism witnessed on the streets is palpable. Clearly, events of the day, such as the Communist investigations by Senator Joseph McCarthy, impacted Ferrer’s decision to create a film about the

“wrongly accused.” But in the Ferrer film, the Jewish character of Dreyfus is an important and well-developed element. Like *The Young Lions*, this 1958 film is unafraid to make anti-Semitism a key issue with which to be reckoned. The Jewish aspect of history was finally finding its expression in American cinema, and the Jew of 1958 was both unapologetic and unafraid to claim his proper place in America.

### *Exodus* and the Portrayal Of the Unambiguously Heroic Israeli

As 1960 came, Jews found themselves far more secure and suddenly more visible in most walks of American life than ever before. Various barriers had fallen and with them, the timidity of the early post-war period seemed to disappear. A few Jewish moviemakers even turned their attention to the new State of Israel. With the groundbreaking release by Otto Preminger of Leon Uris’s *Exodus*, Israel and, with it, the Holocaust became central themes in Hollywood. Not only did Preminger introduce the story of Israel’s birth, but Holocaust survivors were portrayed on screen. As Leonard Fein put it, “The coincidence in time between our learning the full dimensions of the European tragedy and our rejoicing at Israel’s independence has irretrievably linked the two events.”<sup>14</sup>

With the exception of Edward Dmytyk’s adaptation of Michael Blankfort’s *The Juggler* in 1953, the Shoah had been pretty much a taboo subject in Hollywood. *The Diary of Anne Frank*, shorn of much of its Jewish character, had reached the screen in 1959. The previous year, *The Young Lions* contained a scene in which American servicemen (including Ackerman) liberate a concentration camp. Now Preminger, in one film, coupled the birth of the State of Israel with the horrors of the war. It was a groundbreaking moment for American Jewry, reflecting how they felt both about their relationship with Israel and about themselves as Jews. Howard Morley Sachar points to 1960 as a turning point for American Jewry, with John F. Kennedy’s endorsement of Israel as a factor in the 1960 elections, bringing about “a decisive shift in relations, equally with American Jews and Israel.”<sup>15</sup>

*Exodus*, and images of Israel in general, provided something that previous films on Jews had not—an attractive, strong, and bold Jewish presence. Paul Newman’s Ari Ben Canaan is handsome, blue-eyed, and muscular. As critic Omer Bartov notes, “[T]he familiarity that American viewers may have felt with this kind of hero, who conformed to the rules of Hollywood cinematic characterization, may have been paralleled by the reaction of Jewish audiences, especially in the United States, who were finally provided with a Jewish character who was so recognizably and unambiguously heroic.”<sup>16</sup> The American character in the film is Kitty, the blonde Gentile nurse who will eventually become Ari’s love interest. In this way, Preminger and Uris connect the Israeli Jew with all Americans, a stylistic device aimed at keeping the story from becoming too particular, making it appealing for a broad American audience.

These new Jewish-Israeli heroes of the 1960s were also seen in *Tobruk* (1967), where World War II Palestinian Jewish soldiers take the lead in blowing up a German munitions depot. *Cast a Giant Shadow*, a film about David Marcus, the American officer who was brought to Israel to help train the new Israel Defense Forces as the 1948 War of Independence broke out, was made a year earlier.

Interestingly, each of these three films was made prior to Israel’s lightning victory in the Six-Day War in 1967, and the only American Jewish hero in the bunch is Marcus, who seems heroic only after he puts on an Israeli uniform. Certainly, in the actual *Exodus 1947* events, we have brave American Jews who brought the ferry-turned-freighter from Baltimore to the port of Marseilles to transport Jewish refugees to Palestine and were aboard the ship when it was boarded by the British; one was even bludgeoned to death by a British sailor. But neither in Uris’s book nor in Preminger’s movie does such an American character appear. Though America may have been ready for “foreign” Jews who stood up for themselves, filmmakers seemed to feel that the time was not right for full-blown American Jewish heroes.

However, by 1968, as the war in Vietnam escalated and there were riots on college campuses and in the streets of inner cities, this period of Jewish heroes came to an end with *The Fixer*. In this film,

a Russian Jew, not an American Jew, becomes the center of a struggle against czarist bigotry and treachery. John Frankenheimer's adaptation of Bernard Malamud's novel has the simple tinkerer, thrown in jail for allegedly killing a Christian child, meeting his jailer wearing *rfillin*, prepared to fight as Jew. Is he supposed to be Mendel Beilis fighting anti-Semitism in the infamous 1913 blood libel trial? Whether historically accurate or not, the film successfully conveys the growing persecution of Jews in Russia at that time and reflects the emergence of the Soviet Jewry movement in the late sixties. Is *The Fixer* just a replay of the Dreyfus story in another form? The film ends as the "fixer" marches up the steps of the regime's court building as a cause célèbre buoyed by world support, ready to seek justice as a Jew. No American Jews on the screen at this time were making such demands, but, as the Black Power movement grew, Jews started to come forward, albeit guardedly, to assert their own identity.

### **The Jewish Antihero: Jewish Self-Hatred or Honest Introspection?**

By 1969, Philip Roth's writing ushered in the period of the Jewish antihero, with the cinematic version of *Goodbye, Columbus* creating as much of a stir as the literary version had a decade earlier. Director Larry Peerce's striking portrayal of a Jewish *simcha* left audiences across America in stitches, while many Jewish filmgoers cringed with embarrassment. The Jew in America had finally arrived socio-economically, and we were seeing that portrayal on the large screen. This time it wasn't film studio heads who were feeling self-conscious, but rather a sizable proportion of the Jewish audience, who felt ill at ease and humiliated. Was this "hidden" anti-Semitism, as some speculated? Were Roth and Peerce (son of cantor and opera star Jan Peerce) self-hating Jews?

During this time, films portrayed Jewish gluttons at weddings and bar mitzvahs, Jewish men lusting after Gentile women, and even movie moguls symbolically throwing bagels at non-Jews. *Goodbye, Columbus* and films of this ilk, such as Elaine May's *The Heart-*

*break Kid* (1972) and Howard Zieff's *Hearts of the West* (1975), struggled with American Jewry's discomfort with its newfound acceptance. As Lester Friedman points out in *Hollywood's Image of the Jew*, "These films attest to the Jews' growing stature in American society and to the centrality of the Jewish experience within the American experience of the sixties."<sup>17</sup> As Jews moved closer to the center of American society, they felt more comfortable scoping their own distinctiveness. With this new standing in America, the safe anonymity that previous generations of Jewish filmmakers had so meticulously cultivated would evaporate.

With the 1970s, Hollywood opened up American society to greater introspection. This new license for reflection broke down barriers in all aspects of filmmaking. As for the characterization of Jews, film historian Patricia Erens notes, "[M]any Jewish observers were fearful, as in the past, that the new openness would result in a backlash, and that, by allowing negative Jewish portrayals, disreputable characters, and anti-Jewish sentiments, films would stimulate negative attitudes."<sup>18</sup> This was never the case. With anonymity gone and license given for self-examination, a new group of Jewish moviemakers set out to elucidate the Jew's place in America.

Perhaps most representative of this period is Sydney Pollack's *The Way We Were*, based on a screenplay by Arthur Laurents. The film focuses on the relationship between Katie Morosky (Barbra Streisand) and Hubbell Gardner (Robert Redford). Katie is a curly-haired Jewish woman active in politics and protest. Hubbell has Hollywood looks, is quite athletic, and is striving to be a writer. They are drawn to each other, and that attraction eventually leads to their involvement and marriage. Each is so different from the other, not just in religion, politics, and interests, but in matters of conscience and even food. "What's the matter? You don't like my pot roast?" Katie wants to change the world, while Hubbell is simply trying to find a niche for himself as a salaried writer. They are very much the American Jew and non-Jew of the 1970s, now able to interact freely and come together. In 1920s movies, Jew and Gentile intersected, often in an adverse environment, to blend into the

American “melting pot.” Now, in 1970s motion pictures, there was an assumption that free choice is at work, and there is no reason why they could not be together. Yet Laurents and Pollack characterize Katie and Hubbell as being too different from one another for the union of Jew and non-Jew to work. Even though Morosky is ready to iron her hair and give up ethnic New York for L.A., it will not be enough.

Two decades later, in *The Prince of Tides* (1991), Streisand would play Dr. Susan Lowenstein, a successful New York psychiatrist who encounters Tom Wingo (Nick Nolte), a non-Jewish football coach from the “tides” of Carolina. The two are brought together by the mental illness of Tom’s sister, whose alter ego is identified as a Holocaust survivor. Tom is captivated by Susan, even coaching her son in the art of football; the metaphor of making the Jewish youth more athletic, more American, is striking. In the 1973 *The Way We Were*, Katie is the “outsider” drawn to the “all-American” man. Eighteen years later, in *The Prince of Tides*, the same all-American man, from the heartland of America, now becomes the “outsider” as he encounters New York. There he becomes enamored of a very accomplished doctor, a Jewish woman, who represents what America has come to define as success. Through these two screen portrayals by Barbra Streisand, in her own right a success story as vocalist, actor, and film director, we see over the intervening eighteen years the transformation of the Jew from outsider to insider. By the 1970s, Jews in America had established themselves. Their entrée, over the next two decades, would move them from “outsider” status to the center of American society. American cinema recorded that passage.

### Woody Allen’s Struggle with his Jewish Identity

From earliest cinema, the Jew had been portrayed as an “outsider” in America. Even as late as 1958, it is no mistake that director Edward Dmytryk shows Noah Ackerman as the lone passenger getting off the bus from “beyond.” With church bells ringing, Noah arrives in “Christian America” to meet Hope’s dad, in a town where no Jew

had ever before been seen. Over the next twenty years, this characterization would dramatically change. One filmmaker who has struggled with this question, from his earliest years of making movies, is Woody Allen. Allen has wrestled deeply with his Jewish identity, in particular his own ambivalence at being born Jewish. That disquiet has made Allen’s film work so important in understanding the Jew in America.

In *Love and Death* (1971), set during the Napoleonic era, Allen plays the part of a youth more interested in collecting butterflies than in warring or getting drunk. In the service of his native Russia, as a draftee serving the czar, he is portrayed as far below others in his ability as a warrior. In *Sleeper* (1973), he is thrust into the future, where his being “different” makes him a target for arrest. Upon capture, a social worker begins the process of getting him to fit into society. In an effort at his “assimilation,” he is brought to Ginsberg & Cohen, computerized Jewish robots, who are to complete the process of making him homologize by providing clothing that will “fit.” However, the robots—the “perfect” Jews—fail in their efforts. In each of these Woody Allen films, general society fails to allow a misfit, or an outsider if you will, to fit in.

Allen often likes to assume the role of odd-man-out, as he grapples with his Jewishness and his need and desire to “join” the mainstream. In *Annie Hall* (1977), where he pairs himself with Protestant Annie, his presence at Easter dinner prompts him to represent himself visually in Hasidic garb to portray how uncomfortable he feels in their midst. In contrast to how willing Mr. Plowman (*The Young Lions*) was to invite Noah for “turkey,” Annie’s mom makes him feel all the more awkward and unwanted with her “dynamite ham.”

Finally, in *Zelig*, Allen gives his strongest representation of what he believes it is to be a Jew in the world—to be like a chameleon taking on the aura and identity of the environment around him. With a Frenchman, he speaks perfect French; with psychiatrists he is able to discuss Freud; with Chinese, he takes on Oriental characteristics. He lacks his own identity, and like the Jew in history, he assumes the identity of his surroundings. For Irving Howe, who

appears in the film as himself, Allen's Zelig is a prototype of the Jew.

In later films, Allen's Jewish irresolution would evolve into self-reflection or outright acceptance of his Jewishness. In *Deconstructing Harry* (1997), he inserts a dialogue with his Modern Orthodox sister about what it means to be a Jew in America. By the very inclusion of the scene, we understand that, unlike in his earlier films where he sought options outside Judaism, he seems to have accepted his "Jewish lot," albeit while continuing his self-analysis. A certain level of Jewish acceptance and even peace have entered Woody Allen's cinematic world. Just as other American Jewish filmmakers have found themselves more comfortable with their Jewish identity as America transitions into the next century, so has Woody Allen.

### Films Focusing on the Holocaust

By 1967, possibly as a consequence of losing its underdog status in the Six-Day War that year, Israel ceased being a popular subject for American moviemakers. Within a few years, the antiheroes introduced by Larry Peerce, Elaine May, and Howard Zieff took central stage as cinema's new Jews. However, by the end of the 1970s, with the presentation of the 1978 NBC miniseries *Holocaust* on television, the Shoah suddenly attracted everyone's attention. The importance of that television event cannot be overstated in raising awareness of the subject of the Shoah to the American public and to the world. As television critic Frank Rich noted, "It is to television's credit that it tackled the subject of the Holocaust at all when so many of the other mass arts would not."<sup>19</sup> What would follow was the creation of a new genre in Hollywood filmmaking—the Holocaust movie. American producers had largely avoided the topic prior to 1978. As noted earlier, American filmmakers from 1934 until the beginning of the war had stayed away from Jewish subjects, certainly avoiding the issue of Jewish persecution. After the backlash caused by release of *Confessions of a Nazi Spy* in 1939, any project still under consideration to show Nazi persecution was dropped, with Chaplin's *The Great Dictator* being the only picture produced. Even after Pearl Harbor, as film historian Ilan Avisar points out,

"[T]here is a striking avoidance of any explicit presentation of the Jewish catastrophe during the course of the war."<sup>20</sup> In fact, many films misrepresented the actual events as they were unfolding.

Certainly some Holocaust-related narratives were screened in American theaters in the years that followed the war. Fred Zinnemann's *The Search* (1947) tracked a group of refugee children to a UNRRA home; and in 1953, *The Juggler* focused on the plight of a survivor who comes to Israel after the war. *The Young Lions* (1958) showed not only the liberation of a concentration camp by American forces, but the sensitivity that Americans would show in dealing with survivors. *The Diary of Anne Frank* followed, and *Judgment at Nuremberg* (1961) focused attention on war crimes. Sidney Lumet's independently made *The Pawnbroker* (1964) studied a survivor's pain and suffering as he tries to balance his past with his present. *Ship of Fools* (1965) and *Cabaret* (1972) gave a flavor of life in pre-World War II Nazi Germany. A decade later, filmmakers looked at war criminals at large and their activities in films like *The Odessa File* (1974), *The Marathon Man* (1976), and *The Boys from Brazil* (1979). Despite Holocaust themes like these tackled in American movies, one must note that before 1978 no American narrative filmmaker dared enter the forbidden terrain of the actual suffering of Jews during the war years.

In anticipation of the telecast of *Holocaust*, the educational materials prepared and the explosion of press and articles not only about the miniseries, but on the Shoah as a whole was unprecedented. The impact of this information blitz and of the series itself was far greater than anyone would have imagined beforehand. *Holocaust* garnered praise from most circles, but encountered great opposition from the survivor community. Jeffrey Shandler noted that the miniseries engendered "extended discussion."<sup>21</sup> Most vocal was Elie Wiesel, who wrote in the *New York Times* of the movie, "untrue, offensive, cheap ... an insult to those who perished and to those who survived.... Auschwitz cannot be explained nor can it be visualized."<sup>22</sup> The author of the *Holocaust* screenplay, Gerald Green, replied in print, but dramatist Paddy Chayefsky's rejoinder was



probably most on target when he stated, “Trivialization *is* television.”<sup>23</sup> With the broadcast of the miniseries the next year in Germany and the documented “public good” created here and around the world, Holocaust-themed movies became an unobjectionable genre of movie-making.

Even though the taboo had been lifted from making films about the Holocaust, it took several years before Hollywood producers were ready to make them. In the meantime, films from France, Italy, the Netherlands, and Great Britain, which prior to the early 1970s had largely ignored the Shoah, made their way to American theaters. Documentary filmmakers here began to explore the subject seriously, but it was not until the late 1980s that the Holocaust film in America would truly become a genre of its own. Events like the arrest of Klaus Barbie in 1987 and the war crimes trial of John Demjanjuk of Ohio that same year brought the Holocaust again to the attention of Americans. By 1989, there was an explosion of films on all aspects of the Holocaust: Costa-Gavras would bring us *Music Box*, the story of a American lawyer who struggles with the accusation that her father is guilty of war crimes. Paul Mazursky, drawing from a novel by I.B. Singer, looked at the life of a survivor now living in New York in *Enemies: A Love Story*. Robert Young explored the life of a Greek Jewish boxer incarcerated in Auschwitz in *Triumph of the Spirit*. HBO released Brian Gibson’s *Murderers among Us*, a narrative about the life of Simon Wiesenthal. The Holocaust movie fit nicely into the Hollywood movie model—with the need for a good guy and bad guy.

By this time, Jewish movie producers felt very much at home portraying Jews on screen. Nevertheless, in “post-Entebbe” America, despite admiration for Israel’s lightning hostage rescue on America’s bicentennial birthday, dealing with Israel was found to be too controversial, and tackling other moments in Jewish history was deemed irrelevant. Costa-Gavras learned this when his *Hanna K.* (1982) was panned as being too pro-Palestinian. Even with Steven Spielberg’s *Munich* (2005), a portrayal of an Israeli death squad’s efforts to assassinate individuals responsible for the murder of the Israeli athletes at

the 1972 Munich Olympics, the Jewish community was divided as to whether Spielberg’s treatment was sufficiently pro-Israel. In contrast, the subject of the Holocaust supplied the ingredients needed to provide a successful and nondivisive movie. Holocaust themes could also be seen as not necessarily specific to the Jewish experience, but rather universal in their representation of evil.

The Shoah became firmly affixed on the American cultural map, and as Peter Novick, author of *The Holocaust in American Life*, wrote: “The culmination of the process was Steven Spielberg’s 1993 *Schindler’s List*, which benefited not just from the director’s mega-reputation but from the fact that it appeared in the same year that the Washington Holocaust Museum opened.” Indeed, just as the TV miniseries *Holocaust* had drawn so much press and garnered so many awards in 1978, so in 1993 “public officials from the president on down were so actively promoting Spielberg’s film.”<sup>24</sup> *Schindler’s List* proved there was a sizable audience for this genre of film, that it could make money and receive critical acclaim; the film garnered several awards, including the Academy Award® for Best Motion Picture. To be sure, the film had its detractors. Claude Lanzmann, whose nine-and-a-half-hour-long French documentary *Shoah* documented survivor testimony in a manner that shook Western cineastes, charged that the Spielberg film “commits a transgression by trivializing the Holocaust, thereby denying its unique character.”<sup>25</sup> Again, the questions of representation and trivialization were debated, as many questioned the filmmaker’s right to recreate reality in narrative film. German documentary filmmaker Michael Verhoeven went even further: “Cinema can only approximate reality,” he insisted. “The more perfectly cinema is able to imitate reality, the more questionable I find it—particularly with this subject.”<sup>26</sup>

There is little doubt that Holocaust cinema was successful not only in getting the attention of the American audience but in contributing to their moral education. However, some scholars, such as Peter Novick, questioned the value of Holocaust awareness to provide a usable moral lesson. Writes Novick, “There are surely those who are turned around by the experience, emerge with altered val-

ues or perspective, just as no doubt there are those who had this kind of experience with *Schindler's List*. But how many? ... But to go from that to the notion that visitors are in any sense different after the encounter—that they have in any worthwhile sense ‘learned lessons’—seems to me to confuse an admirable aspiration with actual or attainable accomplishment.”<sup>27</sup> However you evaluate the moral impact, it has been exciting to see American Jewish filmmakers come forward as Jews ready to delve into the subject of the Shoah. This kind of Jewish outpouring on the part of Hollywood movie-makers is unprecedented. Over the last two decades, the Holocaust has been a dominant theme in movies and on television. In this regard, some have expressed concern that for too many Jews, the Holocaust and its commemoration have become the new essence of Judaism. Jewish film festivals, which have spread to over 120 communities across North America, have a substantial number of films on the Holocaust as part of their repertoire, sometimes more than half. Where are the films on other aspects of Jewish life?

The success of the Holocaust movie in the 1990s was also not lost on film producers and observers. Over that time period, many films that dealt with the Shoah garnered Academy Awards®, from narratives like *Schindler's List*, *Life Is Beautiful* (Italian), and *The Pianist* to documentaries such as *The Long Way Home* and *One Day in September*. Was it coincidence, guilt on the part of Academy voters, or just quality cinema? Whatever it was, that award-winning trend seems to have changed these past five years, as films such as Tim Blake Nelson's *The Grey Zone* (2001) about life around the crematoria and the German-made *Downfall* (2004) focusing on Adolf Hitler may have gone a bit too far. Certainly, today's environment for making Holocaust films in America is not as friendly as before, and that may not be all bad.

### Nostalgia and Positive Jewish Identity Movies

Over the last forty years, the story of the American Jew reached the screen in a variety of narrative genres other than the “antihero” movies that began in 1969. Several “nostalgia” films found their way

into movie houses in the 1970s, such as Joan Micklin Silver's *Hester Street* (1975) and Jan Kadar's Canadian-made *Lies My Father Told Me*, made the same year. Each dealt with immigrant life at the turn of the century: *Hester Street* with New York, *Lies My Father Told Me* about Montreal. Other movies such as Jan Kadar's *The Angel Levine* (1971) and Roberta Hodes's *A Secret Space* (1979) tackled questions of belief and Jewish spirituality. Jeremy Kagan's *The Chosen* (1981), based on the novel by Chaim Potok, struggled with the pulls of particularism and religious observance in postwar America, as did Eli Cohen's Canadian-made *The Quarrel* (1991), based on a Chaim Grade short story.

There were even movies like Robert Aldrich's *The Frisco Kid* (1979) that used comedy to tell the story of the Jewish love affair with America. *The Frisco Kid* is unique in featuring a rabbi who arrives on the East Coast in the late nineteenth century and must make his way to San Francisco to assume his pulpit. On the way west, he encounters outlaws, Indians, and a series of other mishaps that serve as his introduction to America. All along, he keeps his faith and refuses to divest himself of the Torah that he is carrying to his congregation. Can the Jew keep his faith in America?

This theme was emblematic of a new Jewish thrust in American cinema beginning in the 1980s. At this time, Howard Zieff directed *Private Benjamin* (1980), about a Jewish woman who only succeeds in fulfilling herself when she leaves behind her overly protective and affluent Jewish world. Benjamin never rejects her Judaism (she only marries Jewish men), nor does she change her name to gain entrée into America (here represented by the U.S. Army). Still, it becomes clear that had she stayed in her own sheltered Jewish world, she could never have achieved what she did. Richard Fleischer's *The Jazz Singer* (1980), with Neal Diamond, adapted from previous versions of the film, reworks the story of the cantor's son who wants to be “successful.” Each version shows the son leaving home and having a relationship with a non-Jewish woman as he tries to find his way to American success. What's new in this film is that he blesses the Sabbath candles with his non-Jewish woman friend, trying to show that

while he may be seeking success, he is not abandoning his faith. Just before the now successful star is to perform, he goes to synagogue to reaffirm his Jewishness. Jewish filmmakers of the 1980s continued to struggle with issues of inclusion, but not at the expense of their Judaism.

In *Avalon* (1990), writer-director Barry Levinson paints a superb portrait of the American Jewish immigrant experience in the early part of the twentieth century, from the arrival of Jews on these shores to their adaptation to the American way of life and their struggle to claim a slice of the American pie. *Avalon* depicts the unfolding of a new American Jewish society in formation. Sam, the patriarch of the family, tells a powerful history of one Jewish family in Baltimore, but we never find out where he, or even his father who is brought by the family to America a decade later, comes from. It is somehow inconsequential, because this is an American story, drawn from memory. As modern Jewish historian Ben Halpern observed about this foreshortened view, it is the “one-generation experience of the immigrant ghetto, known from its very inception to be out of the frame of history and culture.”<sup>28</sup> There is no “before they came to America”; we know what happens after, and the “before” is of no consequence. Whereas Yiddish filmmakers in 1930s America would often evoke Eastern Europe in their story lines, rarely has an American mainstream moviemaker introduced a foreign starting point in an American Jewish saga. For Sam, his story and his world begin with his arrival in America, and this moment of beginning becomes the underlying oral narrative as it is told and retold over the course of the film.

What’s ominous about *Avalon* is how devoid of Jewish ritual or Jewish symbols the film is. These are clearly Jews, but they do not celebrate their Jewishness nor represent it in any way. Still, this lack of Jewish visual cues does not mask how authentically Jewish this film is. It is a motion picture about Jews assimilating into America, Jews for whom America has become their religion, and about how a new set of rituals, history, and memory is passed down to the ensuing generations. This core theme is captured by one phrase that kept

recurring in Levinson’s head: “If I knew things would no longer be, I would have tried to remember them better.”<sup>29</sup> This is one of the last things that the aging patriarch Sam tells his grandson as the film comes to its conclusion.

In 1999, Barry Levinson revisited his hometown of Baltimore in *Liberty Heights*. This time, he places the story at a point in history after the elimination of the urban immigrant ghetto. It is 1954, and the Jew is now ostensibly an integrated member of American society. *Liberty Heights*, seemingly beginning where *Avalon* left off, is about distinctions and barriers that were very real in the post-World War II era. Jews have begun to move to the suburbs, where there are fences and limits that regulate access. This film focuses on Jews who want to cross the tracks and move in and out of their suburban ghettos. In contrast to *Avalon*, this is a film steeped in Jewish moments. There is a Shabbat dinner, Rosh Hashana services, and a strong evocation of Jewish identity. While on one level *Liberty Heights* is a study of the liberties that two sons take in breaking down social and racial boundaries, it is also a look at a Jewish family with strong Jewish traditions, values, and history.

Toward the conclusion of *Liberty Heights*, three Jewish boys go to the local swim club with pliers to pull down the sign that reads, “No Jews, Dogs and Coloreds.” It is a moment of Jewish assertion of power and determination, as we watch them walk defiantly into the club and onto the dock of the swimming area. As the three take off their shirts, each sports a letter drawn on his chest, together spelling the word J E W. Whether this is Levinson’s rendering of the historical era of the 1950s or a statement of identification for today is left up to the viewer. In *Avalon*, the immigrant Jew struggles with his or her entry onto the American stage and how that arrival would affect family. In *Liberty Heights*, the immigrant memory has faded. In both of his films, Levinson’s search for memory, not dissimilar from the journey begun by Liev Schreiber in *Everything Is Illuminated*, speaks to the essence of how Jewish history is being mediated in American cinema today. Each of the Levinson films serves not simply as a record of visual reality, but also as a register for the feelings

and attitudes of the 1990s. As film historian Pierre Sorlin points out, “We know that history is a society’s memory of its past, and that the functioning of this memory depends on the situation in which the society finds itself.”<sup>30</sup> As the 1990s began and came to a close, Barry Levinson gave us two powerful Jewish historical film texts with which to better understand who we were and who we are. He, along with Schreiber and a growing number of American Jewish filmmakers, provides new cinematic canvasses from which we can draw greater clarity about the events that shaped and continue to fashion who we are as Jews in America.

### Films of Jewish Acceptance and Affirmation

Jewish films made over the last decade have generally conveyed a sense of Jewish connectedness. The Jew is out there, in the real world, meeting and interacting with all kinds of Americans and often developing relationships with people of other faiths. At the same time, there is a strong inherent sense that getting into such relationships are not at the expense of one’s Judaism. In Daniel Petrie’s *The Assistant* (1997), adapted from the Bernard Malamud novel, Helen Bober, despite the strong protest of her parents, is attracted to the non-Jewish Frank Alpine. Yet, after a series of events, it becomes clear that they cannot remain together unless he converts to Judaism. In Edward Norton’s *Keeping the Faith* (2000), a rabbi falls in love with a non-Jewish woman. They truly love each other, but the rabbi is clear that his “faith” is a “great part of who he is” and unless she can accept that, they have no future. As the film ends, we are led to understand that she is studying for conversion.

In Jay Roach’s *Meet the Fockers* (2004), perhaps a modern-day rendition of *The Cohens and the Kellys*, an “all-American” family comes to Florida to meet their future Jewish in-laws. What is particularly fascinating and representative of the Jewish situation today is that the (all-American) Byrnes couple is accepted in by the Jews, the Fockers, not the other way around. Here it is the non-Jews who are assimilated by the Jews. Most recently, in Lisa Metzger’s *Prime* (2005), the Jewish therapist mother keeps reminding her son that

he must reconsider his relationship with a non-Jewish woman. The difference from films of a generation earlier is that the son affirms that his Judaism is of great importance to him and that he has no desire to give it up.

The meaning in Jewish ritual and celebration is the central theme of Salvadore Litvak’s *When Do We Eat?* (2005). In this film focusing on a dysfunctional family’s Passover Seder, the viewer follows their search for meaning and history through celebration. A similar theme surfaces in Scott Marshall’s *Keeping Up with the Steins* (2006), a portrait of Jewish affluence and of contemporary American Jewish life. Just what is the importance of a bar mitzvah? Is it a vehicle for showing off how successful one has become in America or is it a moment that has a serious spiritual dimension? Benjamin’s decision to make the Jewish nature of this rite of passage central to his celebration rather than the party celebrates and affirms Judaism. His decision contrasts sharply with what Jewish moviemakers created in the late 1960s and 1970s when “coming of affluence” was the central theme of Jewish American cinema.

In Judd Apatow’s *Knocked Up* (2007), the “guys” get together at a bar, ostensibly to meet women. Ben (Scott Rogen) relates how good he feels, having screened Steven Spielberg’s *Munich* the previous night. “I haven’t seen it since it came out.... That movie has Eric Bana [referring to the Avner character] kicking ass. Through every movie with Jews, we’re the ones getting killed—*Munich* flips it on its ear.... If anyone gets laid tonight, it’s because of Eric Bana and *Munich*. You guys—I’m glad I’m Jewish!” Such an interchange on screen would have been unimaginable a decade earlier. Apatow has no qualms putting out on the screen that these young men are Jewish and proud of it.

In addition, as twenty-first-century Jews in America, Apatow’s characters seem totally comfortable in any environment, certainly sitting at a bar with non-Jews. They are Jewish in America in a new way that is overt and “in your face,” with no intention of hiding it. In fact, when Scott’s friend, the only non-Jew of the group, chimes in, “You guys. I’m glad I’m not Jewish,” Ben responds, “Yeah, so are

we! You weren't *chosen* for a reason," deriding him for not being good enough. In an interview shortly before the film's release, Apatow remarked:

I didn't set out to make the movie too Jew-centric, to create a word for this conversation. But Seth is a Jewish guy and all his friends are Jewish, at least the ones I cast in the movie, so I thought it'd be funny that they talk about it, because it's truthful to their experience.... I didn't want to shy away from it. I thought it was fun not to shy away from it. That these young Jewish guys are proud to be Jewish and they talk about *Munich* and their Jewfro hairstyles and that it's all O.K.<sup>31</sup>

This new Jewish comfort level is indicative of the new generation of American Jewish moviemakers and most possibly a new generation of American Jews.

### Film as a Reflection of the Changing Experience of American Jews

A review of the Jewish experience as portrayed in American films is reflective of the changing realities of Jews in America. In the first three decades of the twentieth century, when the majority of American Jews were learning to adapt to a new way of life in a new country, Hollywood films focused on the assimilation process and the avenues for integration of Jews into mainstream American life. These films, both the silent and early sound pictures, laid out a schematic for intermarriage and universalism. In response, the Yiddish pictures of the same era fostered tradition and weighed in heavily for particularism within an American framework. Jewish cinematic portraits in silent cinema were many, but with the coming of sound, they were greatly diminished, disappearing by the mid-thirties.

By World War II and the ten-to-fifteen years that followed, Jews stood side by side with non-Jews in the trenches and in everyday postwar life. Just as Judaism had joined Catholicism and Protestantism as one of America's great religions, so had the Jews joined the ranks of Americans. Most representative of this period was the

1952 adaptation of Samson Raphaelson's *The Jazz Singer*, directed by Michael Curtiz. In this remake of a 1927 film, gone are the immigrant observant father and the "break-away" son, replaced by a well-spoken father and son, both graduates of Yale.

Over the next thirty years, as Hollywood's Jews struggled with their newfound acceptance as Jews, cinema reflected that struggle and, with it, a sense of discomfort with this new status in America. From the late 1950s into the early 1980s, Hollywood first put forward a series of "non-American" Jewish heroes who would not be threatening, and then followed these with over a decade of American Jewish antiheroes like those portrayed in *Goodbye, Columbus* and *Portnoy's Complaint*.

During the past twenty-five years, with a new generation, American cinema and the producers who make movies have come to terms with the "unabashed" Jew. Unlike the generation that preceded them, the Jewish moviemakers of the last quarter of a century have been forthright about their Jewishness. The Jewish characters they have developed on-screen are comfortable as Jews, not having to convert, assimilate, or hide their Judaism. This tendency is reflective of a greater comfort level by the current generation of Jewish moviemakers, possibly hastened by Steven Spielberg's stepping forward to make *Schindler's List* in 1993. This tendency has certainly accelerated over the last decade. Barry Levinson would begin and end his 1999 film *Liberty Heights* on Rosh Hashana, whereas nine years earlier *Avalon* had been pretty much devoid of anything visibly Jewish. Paul Mazursky, whose pictures over forty years of filmmaking certainly contained characters whom one understood to be Jewish, would make *Yippee* in 2006 about his own Jewish journey to Eastern Europe. Jeremy Kagan, who in 1981 directed *The Chosen*, would finally return to a Jewish subject picture with *Golda's Balcony* in 2007.

In the new century, Jewish life, history, and heritage have taken center stage in cinematic portrayals of American Jewish life. Movies have generally celebrated Jewish life and experience. In addition, with a greater comfort in tackling the topic of the Holocaust on-

screen, the Shoah is being seen as one of the paramount events of human and not just Jewish importance. Even films on Israel, which for nearly thirty years were all but taboo, have resurfaced, with the arrival in theaters in late 2007 of Elie Chouraqui's *O Jerusalem* and Jeremy Kagan's *Golda's Balcony*.

What is even more interesting is that a movie like *The Heartbreak Kid*, a self-deprecating 1972 film written by Neil Simon about Jewish characters, when remade in 2007 has no Jewish anti-heroes and is, in fact, devoid of Jews. There seems to be a greater sensitivity to Jews, possibly fostered by the abundance of Holocaust films produced these last years, or possibly the result of greater tolerance in society in general. This, together with the relative ease of being Jewish in America today, seems to leave moviemakers disinterested in mocking their Jewishness, and instead, more interested in reaffirming it. American cinema's newfound comfort with Jews is reflective of both the acceptance and acceptability of the Jew in American life.

With new technology providing for unprecedented access to moviemaking, a new generation will hopefully continue to use cinema as a vehicle to search for meaning and history in their Jewish lives. The popularity of Jewish film festivals and of neighborhood art cinemas has allowed for greater exhibition of independent Jewish films. Just as important, we are seeing filmmakers interested in dealing with their Judaism on screen and an audience interested in Jewish movies and ready to support them. As American Jews have found acceptance and financial security in today's America, their Judaism, as seen more and more on the screen, seems to be something that they hold to be precious and valued—something to be kept, preserved, and shared.

## Notes

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7. George Mosley, *Zanuck: The Rise and Fall of Hollywood's Last Tycoon* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1985), p. 140.
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10. Arthur Hertzberg, *The Jews in America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997) p. 311.
11. Herbert J. Gans, in Elliot E. Cohen, ed., *Commentary on the American Scene: Portraits of Jewish Life in America* (New York: Knopf, 1953), p. 221. Though Gans is specifically writing about Park Forest, a Chicago suburb, his analysis is certainly applicable here.
12. It must be pointed out that Edward Anhalt's adaptation of the 1948 Irwin Shaw novel reflects societal changes between the time Shaw penned the novel (in part during the war) and when the film was released a decade later. Americans related to Germans differently in the two decades. America's relationship with Germany had changed significantly in the fifties, as West Germany had become a close ally in the Cold War.
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