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Coffee with the Cantor Jewish Influence on Secular Society

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Jewish Influence on the Media III: Cinema

Four ways in which Judaism influences the secular cinema:

- Films about Jews or Jewish history
- Films embodying Jewish ethics (often by Jewish authors)
- Films inescapably but unconsciously Jewish
- Films from Israel

From the "Yehuda" blog...

Sunday, January 20, 2008

Myths About Judaism in Movies and Television

If you believed movies and television ...

You would think that there are two types of Jews: Hassidic Jews (black coats and hats) and secular Jews (Woody Allen and Jerry Seinfeld).

The truth is that ...

There are entire ranges of Jews who almost never appear on your TV screen, including Sephardic Jews, Modern Orthodox Jews, Hippie Jews, Ignorant Jews, Cultural Jews, and many others types.

If you believed movies and television ...

You might think that all Hassidic Jews dance around a lot, have poor social skills, talk only to other Hassidic Jews, and work in the diamond industry.

The truth is that ...

Hassidim work in many different areas, study part- or full-time, and some are not always deliriously happy to sing and dance every Friday night. Many are capable of having intelligent conversations, like anyone else. Many of them are quite educated about the world, too.

If you believed movies and television ...

You might think all non-Hassidic Jews' relation to Judaism is holding a Passover seder, lighting a menorah, not eating ham, and hiding their Jewish boyfriends or girlfriends from their mothers.

The truth is that ...

Some keep no traditions, some keep many, some wear special clothes, some don't. Some are fanatic, some are withdrawn. Just like everyone else.

If you believed movies and television ...

You would think that Jews always throw Yiddish words or expressions into their conversations. What a shainda!

The truth is that ...



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Puh-lease.

If you believed movies and television ...

You would think that all Jews eat nothing but lox, bagels, cholent, and kugel.

The truth is that ...

Some Jews cook these on occasion, but many are as likely to cook any style of food: American, Chinese, French, Spanish, Mexican, Indian, you name it. Not to mention that those traditional Eastern European foods are pretty rich in oil and sugar and now less acceptable in today's health consciousness.

If you believed movies and television ...

You would think that kosher wine means overly sweet bad wine.

The truth is that ...

Manishevitz is still selling crap wine, but there are wonderful dry and semi-dry full-bodied kosher wines coming out of Israel, France, California, Argentina, Australia, and Chile, to name a few countries.

If you believed movies and television ...

You would think that kosher food means a Rabbi blesses it.

The truth is that ...

Kosher food is nearly entirely based around not eating certain animals, ensuring the animals we eat were healthy and killed quickly, ensuring that we do not eat any blood, and not mixing meat and milk. In order to ensure that other products aren't contaminated with ingredients derived from the above sources in this age of additives, Jews who keep kosher try to buy products that had Rabbinic supervision at the plant. The Rabbi works rather like how a USDA inspector works, simply ensuring that non-kosher ingredients aren't sneaked into the foods as a cost-saving measure.

If you believed movies and television ...

You would think that whenever we make a blessing over something - wine, challah, candle lighting - that we say it in a broken and crying voice, perhaps longing for the days of our little villages in Russia.

The truth is that ...

We say blessings thankfully, devotedly, rotely, laughingly, haltingly, lovingly, silently, loudly, or however we feel depending on who we are, what we know, and how we are feeling that day.

And there were no good days in those little villages, by the way.

If you believed movies and television ...

You would think that Hannukah is a celebration of family, love, and tolerance towards our fellow Jews.

The truth is that ...

Hannukah is a celebration about religious Jews killing or driving out all the Greeks and Hellenized Jews (Jews who assimilated to Greek culture). So much for the season of tolerance and togetherness.

If you believed movies and television ...

You would think that all Jewish laws have to do with strange rituals and service to God.

The truth is that ...

Well, some do. But more than half of Jewish laws have to do with how we should treat other people, and are considered just as important, and often more important, than the other laws.

On the other hand, our devotion to God is also important, and not to be thrown away to make others feel comfortable.

If you believed movies and television ...

You would think that synagogue is a place where a cantor prays on behalf of everyone, like a church.

The truth is that ...

This is true for some Reform synagogues, but most Conservative and all religious synagogues are not like this. The cantor, or whomever is leading the service which could be any Joe Shmulik who gets



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volunteered into service, coordinates everyone to be on the same page. He doesn't pray for you; Jews pray directly to God without intervention.

If you believed movies and television ...

Jews are either very rich or very poor.

The truth is that ...

They can be, as well as every other economic means in between, like everyone else.

If you believed movies and television ...

You would think that everyone is happier when a Jew finally compromises his religion and gives in to love.

The truth is that ...

I, at least, abhor these stories. Which doesn't mean that I don't believe in love.

If you believed movies and television ...

You would think that lots of the best comedians are Jewish.

The truth is that ...

You're right.

Karaite

From: [Nehemia Gordon](#)

Date: 16 Mar 1999

I thought about it and I came up with a [movie](#) which represents Karaite values. [Dead Poets Society](#) with Robin Williams. The main principle of Karaism is that every individual is responsible to decide what is the correct thing to do based on his own interpretation of the Hebrew Bible even if this is against the way of the majority and tradition. This is also one of the central themes of **Dead Poets Society**, namely that each individual must choose his own path even if it is in opposition to the majority and what is accepted by society. This is said explicitly in the scene in which Robin Williams marches the students through the courtyard. After a minute they all start marching to the same beat even though no one told them to do so and he ridicules their conformity. This is also the theme behind the boy who wishes to be an actor. He chooses this path despite the will of his father because he feels it is right and he refuses to conform.

Nehemia Gordon

The Karaite Korner, Jerusalem, Israel



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From Kathryn Bernheimer. The 50 Greatest Jewish Movies: A Critic's Ranking of the Very Best. Secaucus, N.J.: Carol Publishing (1998)

R ank	Movie Title (Year)	Director	R ating	Religious Affiliation of Director
1	The Chosen (1981)	Jeremy Paul Kagan	P G	Jewish
2	Fiddler on the Roof (1971)	Norman Jewison	G	
3	Schindler's List (1993)	Steven Spielberg	R	Judaism
4	Shoah (1985)	Claude Lanzmann	N R	
5	The Jazz Singer (1927)	Alan Crosland	N R	
6	Annie Hall (1977)	Woody Allen	P G	Jewish (raised Orthodox); agnostic
7	Funny Girl (1968)	William Wyler	G	Jewish
8	Gentleman's Agreement (1947)	Elia Kazan	N R	Greek Orthodox (lapsed); Communist
9	Exodus (1960)	Otto Preminger	N R	Jewish
10 1	Ben-Hur (1959)	William Wyler	N R	Jewish
10 1	The Ten Commandments (1956)	Cecil B. DeMille	G	Episcopalian
11 1	Crossing Delancey (1988)	Joan Micklin Silver	P G	
12 1	The Golem (1920)	Paul Wegener; Carl Boese	N R	
13 1	Au Revoir, Les Enfants (1987)	Louis Malle	P G	Catholic (lapsed)
14 1	Almonds and Raisins: A History of the Yiddish Cinema (1988)	Russ Karel	N R	
15 1	Enemies, a Love Story (1989)	Paul Mazursky	R	Jewish
16 1	The Great Dictator (1940)	Charlie Chaplin	N R	Anglican; agnostic
17 1	The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz (1974)	Ted Kotcheff	P G	Jewish (?)



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8	1	Blazing Saddles (1974)	Mel Brooks	R	Jewish
9	1	Chariots of Fire (1981)	Hugh Hudson	G	P
0	2	Body and Soul (1947)	Robert Rossen	R	N Jewish
1	2	The Pawnbroker (1965)	Sidney Lumet	R	N Jewish
2	2	Goodbye Columbus (1969)	Larry Peerce	G	P Jewish
3	2	Bugsy (1991)	Barry Levinson	R	Jewish
4	2	Cabaret (1972)	Bob Fosse	G	P
5	2	Crimes and Misdemeanors (1989)	Woody Allen	G-13	P Jewish (raised Orthodox); agnostic
6	2	The Last Angry Man (1959)	Daniel Mann	R	N
7	2	The Outside Chance of Maximilian Glick (1988)	Allan Goldstein	G	
8	2	The Revolt of Job (1983)	Imre Gyongyossy; Barna Kabay	R	N
9	2	Homicide (1991)	David Mamet	R	Jewish
0	3	Madame Rosa (1977)	Moshe Mizrahi	G	P
1	3	Driving Miss Daisy (1989)	Bruce Beresford	G	P
2	3	Reversal of Fortune (1990)	Barbet Schroeder	R	
3	3	Europa Europa (1991)	Agnieszka Holland	R	practicing Catholic
4	3	The Big Fix (1978)	Jeremy Paul Kagan	G	P Jewish
5	3	Broadway Danny Rose (1984)	Woody Allen	G	P Jewish (raised Orthodox); agnostic
6	3	Julia (1977)	Fred Zinnemann	G	P Jewish
7	3	Marathon Man (1976)	John Schlesinger	R	Jewish
8	3	A Majority of One (1962)	Mervyn LeRoy	R	N Jewish



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9	3	Oliver! (1968)	Carol Reed	G	
0	4	Down and Out in Beverly Hills (1986)	Paul Mazursky	R	Jewish
1	4	Holocaust (1978)	Marvin Chomsky	R	N
2	4	Dirty Dancing (1987)	Emile Ardolino	G-13	P
3	4	The Front (1976)	Martin Ritt	G	P Jewish
4	4	Biloxi Blues (1988)	Mike Nichols	G-13	P Jewish
5	4	The Diary of Anne Frank (1959)	George Stevens	R	N
6	4	Shine (1996)	Scott Hicks	G-13	P
7	4	Daniel (1983)	Sidney Lumet	R	Jewish
8	4	Yentl (1983)	Barbra Streisand	G	P Jewish
9	4	The Young Lions (1958)	Edward Dmytryk	R	N
0	5	Marjorie Morningstar (1958)	Irving Rapper	R	N

Another list:

- Schindler's List
- Crossing Delancey
- The Diary of Anne Frank
- [Fiddler on the Roof](#)
- The Merchant of Venice
- Gentleman's Agreement
- Salah Shabbati
- Driving Miss Daisy
- The Eternal Jew ([Nazi](#) propaganda film))
- Exodus (1960 story based on the novel by Leon Uris about Jews going to Israel on the the ship named *Exodus* following the [Holocaust](#))
- Masada
- Private Benjamin
- Chariots of Fire
- The Chosen
- Funny Girl
- Goodbye, Columbus



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- I Accuse!
- The Wall
- Yentl
- A Stranger Among Us
- Avalon
- Out of the Ashes

Other films of interest:

Holy Rollers
The Infidel
A Serious Man
Dinner for Schmucks
Trembling Before God
Bent
Paragraph 175
Arranged
Kadosh

25 Essential Jewish Movies: bangitout.com

Posted by [Ron Reed](#) on 5/16/10 • Categorized as [Essays](#)

At bangitout.com Jordan Hiller writes about films from the perspective of their relevance to Jewish culture. In December 2009 he completed a series on “25 Essential Jewish Movies,” a curious list including not only films that offer substantial insights into his faith community, but also films with peripheral interest, admitted poor quality, or even title he finds particularly offensive or annoying for reasons relating to faith.

Perhaps the rationale for omitting such films as *Ushpizin*, *Munich*, or *Defiance* (while including *The Unborn* or *Go For Zucker*, for example) is simply that he’d already written about them. Maybe “Another 25 More-Or-Less Jewish Movies” would have been more apt a title. But I’m picking nits: it’s a fun list, and I’ll provide links to his other pieces at the bottom of the article.

1. [Fiddler on the Roof](#) (Norman Jewison, 1971)

“With each musical number, another integral and eternal aspect of Judaism is pondered, explored, and expressed with passionate flourishes. With *Matchmaker*, the so-called *shidduch* crisis comes to mind. *To Life* evokes our most elemental prayer in this world; to recognize that every organic instant is a *nes* and cause for celebration. But likely the most memorable tune and performance from the entire nearly three hour epic is Israeli actor Chaim Topol as Tevye’s rendition of *If I Were a Rich Man*. No single song encapsulates the wild tempest of the Jewish experience better. Not many compositions can at the same time convey a deep longing for God, a saintly faith-based approach, a melancholy sort of optimism, and a turgid existential philosophy, all while being essentially about a pitiable monetary necessity.”



2. [**Schindler's List**](#) (Steven Spielberg, 1993)

"Some might argue that Schindler's List is not a Jewish film. It is technically about a heroic gentile who risked much to save Jews, and secondarily about a demonic regime that slaughtered our people unreservedly and without conscience. There are Jews in the movie, most prominently a tactful accountant played soulfully by Ben Kingsley, but Jews mainly function as referents for either gracious saving or heartless destruction."

3. [**Waltz With Bashir**](#) (Ari Folman, 2008)

"Besides the phenomenal artistic and narrative achievement of Folman's movie, the outlying issue the film raises is one often heard and discussed. Can Israel fight its wars, exist as a confident and secure nation, while at the same time maintaining a "Jewish" code of morality. Are Israelis ever permitted to acknowledge guilt or shame over their actions without either compromising the integrity of the nation or risk being dubbed apologists? Which is the lesser evil? Can the men and women killing and dying for the country and muddling through war after war emerge sane after all they are required to see and do? Can we indeed grant them the solace of confession? Can a country without an inch to give ever apologize?"

4. [**The Frisco Kid**](#) (Robert Aldrich, 1979)

"*The Frisco Kid* has the feel of an artist's charmingly naive youthful indiscretion. One would think that the cinephile fantasy pairing of Gene Wilder and Harrison Ford as unlikely traveling companions in the old west, where the former plays Avram Belinski, a Polish Rabbi, and the latter, Tommy Lillard, a bank robbing bandit, would be possible only as a fortunate quirk, a providential misstep in the early, unsteady careers of both. . . . The almost impossible to believe truth is that *The Frisco Kid* hit theaters in 1979. Gene Wilder had already been a household name from such classic comedy gems as *Blazing Saddles*, *Young Frankenstein*, and *Silver Streak*. . . . The entire civilized world recognized Mr. Ford as laser for hire rake Han Solo. . . . Robert Aldrich was a sixty year old professional veteran filmmaker credited with directing over thirty films including *The Dirty Dozen*, *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane*, and *The Longest Yard*."

"I mention all this . . . so that when anyone watches or re-watches this joyful little movie in wonder, they can adequately marvel at the uncommon innocence and unselfconscious humility of it. . . . One would guess that since the movie is so thematically off the grid and clearly close to someone's heart, that the men behind it would be Jews seeking to express a fondness for their heritage. Not the case. Aldrich, nor writers Michael Elias and Frank Shaw are members of the tribe."

5. [**A Stranger Among Us**](#) (Sidney Lumet, 1992)

"An interesting story revolving around the shocking murder of a young *chasid* who works in New York's Diamond District. The investigation is conducted by Detective Emily Eden, a troubled soul in need of substance. . . . Without clichéd protests or patronizingly comedic montages, she winds up undercover as a chasid and living with the Rebbe's family. . . . Though the crime's resolution is excitingly handled and surprising enough, such temporal trifles pale in comparison to the mysteries *A Stranger Among Us* seeks to explore. Like the mystery of a tremendously warm, divinely invigorating *Shabbos*, or the mystery of our devotion to God who we do not see over human beings who may be right in front us."



6. [Homicide](#) (David Mamet, 1991)

"If you read Mamet's *The Wicked Son* (2006), his stream of consciousness rant about anti-Semitism, Jewish destiny, and our eccentric God, you would know that Mamet, not easily discernable as a Jew based on his work (unlike, say, Woody Allen or Neil Simon), is quite smitten with his Judaism. Despite a professional choice to write mainly about other topics, Judaism consumes him. So much so and with such passion and zealousness that it appears in his personal life he constantly walks the line between crusader and madman. . . . Watching the film is truly like experiencing the ebbs and flows of Mamet's raging inner storm. Sometimes his pulp, clever writing takes over, sometimes his Jewish compulsions win the day. The effect is jarringly uneven. We are asked to believe a range of premises just before they are discounted by a drastic, unsubstantiated turn of events."

7. [Brighton Beach Memoirs](#) (Gene Saks, 1986)

"One preeminent Jewish dilemma raised by Mr. Simon is that of assimilation. While the Jerome's are by no means religious (though Mrs. Jerome encourages her husband to go to shul and pray when the flurry of tribulations arrive), there is certainly an overarching message of 'We are better off keeping to ourselves.' Simon does somewhat present a counterargument, but the well established law, as was undoubtedly impressed upon him, remains."

8. [Yentl](#) (Barbra Streisand, 1983)

"Barbra Streisand, as writer, director, producer, vocalist, star, and all around supernatural force behind the adaptation of Isaac Bashevis Singer's short story about a young independent Jewish woman who poses as a male yeshiva student to fully realize her love of Talmud, deserves all the credit and all the blame for the charming yet disturbing, courageous yet shallow, poignant yet somehow uninvolved film experience that is *Yentl*."

9. [A Serious Man](#) (Joel & Ethan Coen, 2009)

"*A Serious Man* not only acutely conveys an abundance of data about cultural and religious Judaism, it undoubtedly will be a very different audience experience for Jews and then for everyone else. Different to a point which makes it difficult to comprehend how a non-Jewish viewer would relate to the material. It's like trying to surmise how a non-Jew would react to a steaming bowl of *chulent*."

10. [The Prince of Egypt](#) (Brenda Chapman, Steve Hickner, Simon Wells, 1998)

"If DreamWorks were more confident and less wary of Disney's shadow, *The Prince of Egypt* would undoubtedly have been a better movie. When trying to be something it is not, the film wanders aimlessly like Hebrews through the desert. But it is those thrilling instances of purity ("Rameses! Let my people GO!") which shine on, haunt, and remain with us after the closing credits. As Jews, we are inclined to constantly seek out inspiration in order to keep our faith through this Diaspora, and *The Prince of Egypt*, missteps and all, is a more than valid resource. Next Passover/Easter, when *The Ten Commandments* is solemnly aired to mark the season, avoid it like the plague and make *The Prince of Egypt* a bold new tradition."

11. [Once Upon A Time In America](#) (Sergio Leone, 1984)

"We get De Niro, James Woods, William Forsythe, and other mean looking gentile actors portraying characters with the names like David Aaronson, Max Bercovicz, Phil Stein, and Patsy Goldberg. These soulless Yids are then put through the motions of mob movie standards, with their polished, respectable



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façades barely hiding the bloody chaos of political corruption and precarious tooth and nail survival. But is that it? Is there no greater comment in relation to what Jews bring to the organized crime table? So they hang out in a restaurant where stars of David decorate the glass windows and they avoid attending services to burn and pillage the neighborhood. Are such atmospheric details (or indicators) the final word on Judaism for Leone and his movie (which was based on the novel *The Hoods* by Jewish gangster Harry Goldberg)? The answer is yes and no.”

12. ***Inglourious Basterds*** (Quentin Tarantino, 2009)

“When the elderly orthodox couple in front of me on the ticket line for Quentin Tarantino’s latest was asked what movie they were interested in seeing, I experienced a moment of depraved glee. The man – white shirt, black pants, white beard, big black velvet yarmulke, placid face straight off a Rebbe card – was compelled to answer the box office attendant, “Two for ***Inglourious Basterds***, please.” Hence the first hint that Tarantino’s so called “Jewish Revenge Fantasy” had awakened something extraordinary in a people. Yes, the theatre filled up with a diverse crowd, plenty of young folks simply looking for a wicked starburst of entertainment, but there was also a remarkably unconventional Jewish presence. Groups of older, possibly European immigrants who surely passed on ***Reservoir Dogs*** and ***Pulp Fiction***. Modern orthodox couples with their teenage and adolescent children who likely did not organize similar family outings to ***Kill Bill*** Volumes I and II. It was evident that ***Inglourious Basterds*** had achieved religio-cultural requirement status among many Jews, like ***Schindler’s List*** did when it came out in 1993. Jews were being drawn to it like moths to a flame.”

“It seems from the buzz emanating from Jewish enclaves that ***Basterds*** has been unofficially deemed an important film (“Did you see it yet?”), whether as an educational endeavor (exemplified by the chaperoning of children way too young for the content), a potential source of pride, a necessary cathartic release, or quite possibly just another one of our many *chukim*. And it accomplished all this, I contend, with audiences never fully realizing what the film was essentially supposed to be about or the filmmaker’s intention.”

“Whether art can transform into something it was not originally meant to be based on the beholder’s perspective leads us to the obvious follow-up question: Does ***Inglourious Basterds*** live up to a people’s widely varying and arguably irrational expectations? Is it the fulfillment of a holy commandment that some are hoping for it to be?”

13. ***Operation Thunderbolt*** (“Mivtsa Yonatan” Menahem Golan, 1987)

“If not for some minor (but moving) Judaic references and the fact that the events depicted actually occurred, ***Operation Thunderbolt*** would have been considered just another example of the many similar low budget action flicks produced in that distinct era. It would never have received an Oscar nomination for Best Foreign Language Film or, more importantly, evolved into the Jewish summer camp/ fast day staple which it has become (along with its red blooded 1977 American version, ***Raid on Entebbe***). So why all the reverence for ***Thunderbolt*** by camp activity coordinators everywhere?... It really boils down to two of those moving Jewish moments mentioned earlier. There is the extended utterly soul collapsing look that a Holocaust survivor passenger delivers to the German terrorists as they call out his name and urge him to follow his fellow Jews into a separate room. Clearly reminiscent of the selection process by Nazis in the concentration camps...and yet the survivor stares, steams, eyes bloodshot and pained, and he marches on in compliance. The scene speaks volumes about the mentality of the oppressed Jew. The



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other moment is quite simply framed, but it really amounts to everything. It sums up the movie, the history and miracle of the nation of Israel, Jewish resurgence in the 20th century, the invisible hand of God, and all matters in between. . . .”

14. [*Life Is Beautiful*](#) (Roberto Benigni, 1997)

“*Life is Beautiful* is often described as a fable because in actuality, the mysterious providential strokes of fate which Guido enjoys tend to fall on the wrong side of possible. It is also incredibly light hearted (in a most seductively amusing way) despite the severe material. The manner in which Guido’s fortune is manifest, in both the labor camp and prior thereto, is certainly the stuff of quasi-fantasy. If there are breaks to be caught even in the face of imminent destruction, Guido seems to have been gifted a magical net. Call the film a fable if you will, but the result of Guido’s faith and wild efforts are of no consequence to me. Whether his desperate attempts to shield his son from even a fraction of the pain and anguish surrounding them succeed is utterly irrelevant to the grandeur of this once in a decade masterpiece. The message of *Life is Beautiful* cannot be limited by its level of credibility. As parents, Benigni exclaims, we must try and try and keep on trying until that final breath is rudely demanded from our bodies. That is the only viable option for the sake of our precious children. So after seeing *Life is Beautiful*, I ask myself that same old question: What will I do?”

15. [*Go For Zucker*](#) (Dani Levy, 2004)

One sure giveaway that Dani Levy’s *Go For Zucker* was made with some orthodox chefs in the kitchen is that during a scene depicting Shabbos morning services, the chazan and congregation abstain from using God’s name when reciting the Shema (instead they go with “Hashem,” a permitted alternative). There is well-informed talk of mincha and ma’ariv, milcheig and fleishig, a merrily sung bircas hamazon, and plenty about sitting shivah. Luckily, as someone with a yeshiva education, I’m familiar with these terms so an elucidation of the specifics was not needed, but *Go For Zucker* – an inexact translation of the actual German title (*Alles auf Zucker!*) – seemingly requires of the audience an experiential familiarity with modern German sociology, and as someone with a yeshiva education, I was lost. Clearly, the film which essentially swept Germany’s most prestigious film awards in 2005 has more depth than I am able to give it credit for. Germans take their art seriously and *Go For Zucker*, without the proper insight and intelligence, comes off as a scattershot, rather trying comedy, and not a particularly funny one at that. “What the movie actually shows is a repulsive orthodox family replete with fat, piggish, money obsessed wife, attractive, strange, slutty daughter, reclusive, socially retarded son, and obstinate, hot-headed father. Jackie must contend with this motley crew while attempting to avoid shivah and play in a high stakes billiards tournament. His go-to (and always side-splitting) routine to get out of the three aggravating Shs (Shul, Shivah, and Shabbos) is to fake a heart attack. If this film’s intention was to bravely provide showcase for Jews to return to mainstream German entertainment, I’d say it missed the mark. Better to assume it rather reminded the good Aryans why they desired to be rid of us in the first place. Goebbels would have found the depiction of Jews in *Go For Zucker* promising.”

16. [*God Is Great, I’m Not*](#) (Pascale Bailly, 2001)

“Michele approaches her religious education (and eventual conversion classes) with such enthusiasm, passion, and curiosity, that it actually allows orthodox Judaism to appear an attractive alternative for the young and trendy. Writer Alain Tasma provides very insightful dialogue for Michele to chew over as she competently charges through the process. . . . She is on a mission. She’s got the soul of



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a fanatic. And like all fanatics, unfortunately, the infatuation with an of-the-moment ideal or cause is merely a reflection of whichever influence was transmitted and received most recently. Michele is God is Great's focal character and she is sprightly, lovely, and sympathetic, but we can't learn anything essential from her, so we must move on to Francois. . . ."

17. [*The Unborn*](#) (David S. Goyer, 2009)

"Why is *The Unborn* an essential Jewish film considering how oddly vague it is in terms of actual Judaism (Casey, though technically Jewish, deals with her situation as if an outsider)? The answer is that *The Unborn* marks a defining moment in modern Jewish history. With *The Unborn*, apparently, it officially has become kosher for movies to commercially exploit the extermination and torture of six million Jews."

18. [*A Price Above Rubies*](#) (Boaz Yakin, 1998)

"*A Price Above Rubies* is as much about harshly judging a woman for intolerably giving up on her family and religion as it is about admiring her for avoiding tragedy and choosing life. My estimate is that Yakin (fiendishly) roots for the latter reaction, though he provides convincing evidence to support both."

"Yakin makes sure that we have bearded, payesed, black hat wearing, Torah learning, Shabbos celebrating devils so that his audience can go home sniping, "See, those orthodox Jews aren't such good people after all!" Which is a fair conclusion because the premise is correct, but Yakin's argument is presented with such blind rage and fury that his little film goes from sensitive and perceptive to sensational and scandal-mongering very quickly."

19. [*The Jazz Singer*](#) (Alan Crosland, 1927)

"The Jazz Singer may well have resulted when a bunch of fat cat Jewish moguls stuck their necks out about eighty years ago and declared, 'Momma, Poppa, remember all the stuff that you taught us was important about where we come from – our life and the length of our days and all that pious stuff Zadie, the Rebbi's shamesh, did for the poor – well, we may act like we forgot all about it (and we'll most assuredly forget about it during the after party), but we just gambled our reputations on making this movie to let you know, and to let our people know for all time, that deep down we didn't forget.' I think The Jazz Singer is a shallow attempt by a powerful group of straying Jews to clear their consciences."

20. [*The Governess*](#) (Sandra Goldbacher, 1998)

"There are achingly beautiful symbols of traditional Judaism in the film. Whether it be Rosina's lighting of Yom Tov candles and the spare Seder she conducts in the dimness of her room with joyful memories of her aunts attempting to eat eggs dipped in salt water dancing through her head. Or her lingering after the Cavendish's leave church so she can utter a lonely, bitterly sincere Shema (as the film begins in a lavishly ornate synagogue with the Shema being read). Or, most hauntingly, as the girl, so far from home, so confused by her Gentile surroundings and the feelings raging inside her, wraps herself in her father's tallis as if a comfort blanket and rocks on her bed whimpering prayers to her father's God."

21. [*Pi*](#) (Darren Aronofsky, 1998)

"The most shockingly insightful Jewish bit built into the film comes when Max is dragged before a Rebbi who claims the two share the same last name. We are awakened to the fact that Max is a descendent of priests and that maybe, just maybe, he is not simply a raving lunatic, but a chosen one, given a divine



message. Maybe math is God's language and if we can break the code we can comprehend Him and His universe."

22. [**The Chosen**](#) (Jeremy Kagan, 1981)

"The plot is tough to swallow and the filmmaking style seems straight out of 1970's porn, but The Chosen is actually about Judaism. That takes guts. Special interest Jewish films are a dime a dozen but take away the ones that deal with Israel, the Holocaust, and what are deemed to be Jewish themes (cranky, old people in Florida, neurotic, rich people in New York), we are left with very little. The Chosen is a rarity of immense proportions. It shouldered its way into the popular consciousness, perhaps with a few concessions and a straining dramatic license, but nonetheless it remains a thoughtful, provocative engagement of legitimate issues relating to Judaism, the ancient, ever evolving religion. Potok took something typically kept for Shabbos table banter and made it into art, made it into a public challenge. Somewhat exploitative, but courageous nonetheless. For that alone, The Chosen deserves to survive and be forced upon our children for many generations to come."

23. [**The Merchant of Venice**](#) (Michael Radford, 2004)

"With all the concentrated faithfulness to Mr. Shakespeare, the film naturally retains its chief ambiguity and the reason for its eternal appeal and fascination amongst the sons and daughters of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. As long as The Merchant of Venice is read or performed, its audience will ponder the question: Is Shylock the Jew a villain to be reviled or a tragic figure to be pitied (or perhaps even a pugnacious scrapper to be admired)? . . . Good old Bill Shakespeare has certainly left us a legacy."

24. [**Europa Europa**](#) (Agnieszka Holland, 1990)

"Now we have the genre called the Holocaust movie and it too has a formula. Nazi rise to power in 1930's Europe, restrictions on Jews, ghettos, concentration camps, mass deaths and mass suffering, greed, hate, martyrdom, sacrifice, and last but not least...survival. Someone always survives. The story always centers on some form of Jewish humanity overcoming devastating odds to emerge from the ashes whole. With all the Holocaust movies released, not a single one dares to end things with the ultimate finality of all consuming death as the torture porn flicks produce with assembly line confidence. This despite the Holocaust being in essence entirely about racking up body counts and piling up corpses."

25. [**Exodus**](#) (Otto Preminger, 1960)

"The screenplay for Otto Preminger's 1960 film about the labor pains and eventual muddled birth of the State of Israel was adapted from the epic 1958 novel written by Leon Uris. The name of the film, and many will tell you the story itself, was adapted from the work of a mysterious, but ultimately purposeful God of many names."

[Courage in **Doubt** and **Defiance**](#)
[Holocaust Denial in **Adam Resurrected** and **The Reader**](#)
[**The Band's Visit**](#)

[**Praying With Lior**](#)
[**Ushpizin**](#)



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[***The Statement***](#)

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[***The Pianist***](#)

[***From My Jewish Learning***](#)

Films and television shows are comfortable with Jewish themes and characters--and, often, with distorting Judaism.

By [***Rabbi Elliot B. Gertel***](#)

Reprinted with permission from [***Over the Top Judaism: Precedents and Trends in the Depiction of Jewish Beliefs and Observances in Film and Television***](#) (University Press of America).

For more than a quarter of a century, a lot of movies and TV programs have been obsessed with Judaism. One can argue that many American Jews were infatuated first with film and then, simultaneously, with television. The movies, and then television, have imposed standards, aesthetics, values, and even vocabulary that American culture, including American Jewish culture, had to engage, whether in imitation, protest, or adaptation. Yet such engagement, for all of its occasional valor, has not been without distortion of Judaism, of Jewish teachings and observances.

[***The Goldbergs Become Molly***](#)

At first these seductive media mesmerized Jews. But Judaism was left alone. It was kept offstage, to the side, as a precious relic or heirloom. One thinks of the 1950 film, *Molly*, originally entitled *The Goldbergs*, and based on the famous television series of that name.

Gertrude Berg assumed her classic TV role as Molly Goldberg, beloved Jewish matriarch. Most of the film came across as a rather general nostalgia for European parents, not much different from the *I Remember Mama* genre. Toward the end one sees covered *challah* rolls and Shabbat candles, though the actual rituals are only suggested and not performed.

It was a bold statement in the 1950s just to show *challah* and Shabbat candles at a time when the name of the film had to be changed from *The Goldbergs* to *Molly*. For most of the Jewish audience, the immigrant experience and the close-knit family were still realities, and there was no need to translate or to fill in between the lines. Likewise, the presence of ritual objects in the homes of parents was still



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widely taken for granted. (By the 1970s, ritual objects in film and TV began to be more the domain of immigrant grandparents.) Just the image of a Sabbath table spoke volumes more than any dialogue.

In the 1960s and 1970s, however, depiction of Jews and of Jewish practices became more aggressive, more pointed. There was a determined and concerted effort to stand up for Jewish identity and to throw Jewish practices back into the face of a film culture that had ignored them or shunted them aside. The irony was that the “film culture” consisted of many Jews who had been embarrassed about delving into their heritage, but now sanctioned, with a vengeance, an explosion of Jewish references, associations, and even ambivalences.

The Way We Were

All of this came to a head in the 1973 film, *The Way We Were*, starring Barbra Streisand and directed by Sidney Pollack. The well-known singer-actress was taking her stand that ethnic women with a not-so-typically-Hollywood screen look, in this case Jewish women, can successfully chase after matinee-idol Gentile men.

Whatever one thinks of Streisand’s “cause,” it should be noted that *The Way We Were* was one of the first portents that Judaism would not go untouched or unscathed in the process of the new Jewish self-determination, even self-infatuation, in filmmaking. In one scene in *The Way We Were*, Streisand’s character presents her Gentile lover (played by Robert Redford) with a typewriter and calls it a “Rosh Hashanah present.” One can imagine Gentile viewers wondering at the time whether Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year, was a time when they should be sending gifts to Jewish friends.

One can safely assume that at the time, Jewish viewers were savvy enough to realize that Streisand and Company were inventing this gift as an inside joke to make the point that the public ought to realize that Jews have holidays other than Hanukkah. This was their way of “opening up” Judaism. Little did they know that they were starting a trend that would become widespread and shameless--namely, the concoction, or, more often, the corruption, of Jewish customs and observances under the rubric of “creative media writing.”...

Paradoxically, such retreading of Judaism, even when misleading, represented the height of comfort with Judaism in the general culture, on the part of both Jewish and non-Jewish writers and producers. It also revealed an antipathy on their part toward religious Jews that rivaled and even exceeded early Hollywood denigration of Jews as ridiculous or embarrassing.

The acceptance, in the 1980s, of Judaism as a prominent theme in television and in the movies did not come without baggage or cost. The new emphasis on “interpreting” Jewish ritual practices provoked both caricature or censure of Judaism.

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From All About Jewish Theatre

The "Jew" in Cinema: From The Golem to Don't Touch My Holocaust

By Maria Diemling

Maria Diemling is Senior Lecturer in Religious Studies at Canterbury Christ Church University (United Kingdom). Her research interests include Jewish-Christian relations and Jewish social history in early modern German lands. She has published on Jewish converts, Christian ethnographic writing of Judaism and is currently working on perceptions of the "Jewish body" in the Early Modern Period.

Jewish [film festivals](#) have in the last decades sprung up from Romania to Los Angeles and the variety of "Jewish topics" in films, both by Jewish and non-Jewish [film-makers](#), is staggering. This interest in the representation of Jewish experiences is matched by the popularity of university courses on films that explore various aspects of Jewishness. [Omer Bartov's](#) study of representations of Jews in film is thus very timely. The author presents a fascinating and lucid analysis of numerous films from an impressive range of periods, genres and languages. Soviet, Polish, Czech, German, French, Italian, Israeli and Hollywood movies, both lesser known Art House films and successful [blockbusters](#), are carefully embedded in their specific historical context. A respected historian of the Nazi period who has also published on the questions of memory and representation, Bartov is particularly strong when discussing the representation of the Holocaust in film.

Bartov is interested in the "manner in which the cinematic 'Jew' reflects the popularization, transformation, resistance to, and reintroduction of anti-Semitic imagery" (p. ix). He discerns the motif of the Jew as perpetrator, as victim, as hero and as anti-hero and argues that these four stereotypes are related to each other, go back to the earliest day of cinema, follow a certain chronological order and were influenced by and perpetuate traditional prejudices about Jews.

The first chapter on the cinematic representations of the "Jew" as perpetrator begins with a discussion of the intriguing and ambivalent *The Golem* (1920), which depicts Jews both as perpetrators and victims according to Bartov's typology. While the film acknowledges the difficult condition of a minority community under an unpredictable ruler, it employs powerful and lasting stereotypical notions, such as the Jew as a dangerous outsider, the uncanny power of Jewish transformation, coupled with a belief in an unchangeable Jewish essence and the fear of the poisoning results of Jewish-Gentile sexual relations. Bartov notes that Paul Wegener, who played the Golem in this film, later made Nazi propaganda films, and it is this genre that very persuasively introduced anti-Semitic constructions to a mass audience, most notably in Veit Harlan's *Jud Süß* (1940). Bartov detects striking structural parallels between *The Golem* and *Jud Süß* and argues that the anti-Semitic potential of the first was fully realised in the latter. An interesting aspect in the reception of this notorious Nazi film is the fact that the German actor Ferdinand Marian, who played Süß by adopting "Jewish" behaviour and appearances, received fan mails from German women for this particular performance. Werner Krauss played all the other major Jewish parts in the film, and was praised in the film programme for this impressive demonstration of "his art of transformation". These director's decisions curiously reflect the core message of this film: at the [heart](#) of these representations, explicitly expressed in the dialogue in the [movie](#), lies the fear of Jewish transformation. Apart from depicting the Jew as having the power of uncanny transformation into a Gentile while retaining his essential "Jewishness", *Jud Süß* presents a number of features that occur in numerous later films.



Those include the image of the "Jews" as parasite and rootless cosmopolitan, the sexually charged "Jew" who pollutes Gentile women and is a threat to a pure race, the notion of the greedy "Jew", sucking the blood out of hard-working honest Gentiles, the cunning "Jew", the destructive "Jew" and the notion of a Jewish world conspiracy.

Andrezej Wajda's *Land of Promise* (1974) is just one example that demonstrates the persistence of such notions. While not setting out to be an anti-Jewish propaganda film, it perpetuates disturbingly anti-Semitic stereotypes. Feasting on scenes like that of a hot-blooded Jewish temptress whose appetite in food is as insatiable as it is in sex and who brings destruction to all men involved, the film contrasts impoverished Polish nobility with corrupt, foreign and rootless Jews.

In the second chapter, which discusses representations of the Jew as victim, Bartov makes the observation that there is a complex link between the Jew as perpetrator in anti-Semitic films and the Jew as a victim. Zionism drew heavily on anti-Semitic notions of Jewish Diaspora life to press for a "normalisation" of the "Jewish condition" in a politically independent Jewish state.

A very different attempt was made in the years after World War II by American moviemakers who acknowledged both American anti-Semitic prejudice and the catastrophic results of racial hatred in Europe. Elia Kazan's *Gentleman's Agreement* (1947) deals with the effects of anti-Semitism and resulting [discrimination](#) by depicting the experiences of a non-Jewish journalist who poses as a Jew when commissioned to write an article on anti-Semitism in American society. While he does not adopt any "Jewish" mannerisms, people begin behaving towards him differently. The film raises challenging questions of Jewish identity, when religious affiliation is no longer a valid marker of group identity, and critically examines American post-war social prejudice.

Good intentions can still lead to problematic representations. Bartov discusses *Jew-boy Levi* (1999) as exemplary for films that "have tried to provide a sympathetic view of the 'Jew' as victim and in the process have fallen into the trap of anti-Semitic representational discourse" (p. 105). He argues that interpretations like these show to what extent anti-Semitic images have "polluted our representational universe", leading to anti-Semitic caricature when attempting to create an "authentic" Jewish cattle-trader.

While notions of "heroic Jews" date back to the Bible, the sheer scale of destruction caused by the Holocaust led to a surge in the representation of the "Jew" as a victim following World War II. However, as Bartov argues, the enormity of destruction also demanded the need for the creation of heroic Jews. Chapter 3 discusses some intriguing forms of the representation of the "Jew" as a hero. Analysing the controversial *Life Is Beautiful* (1998), Bartov sees in the figure of the Italian-Jewish waiter Guido a hero, who, out of love and devotion to his small son, uses his wit and imagination to secure the child's mental and physical survival. Bartov stresses the importance of humour and fantasy as a strategy, if not for survival, then for maintaining a sense of normality and humanity in Jewish tradition and notes that this film succeeds more in creating a fantasy than those which pretend to be authentic depictions of an indescribable reality.

Under the heading "Protean heroes", Bartov examines also Radu Mihaileanu's *Train of Life* (1998), which, framed as a fantasy, depicts the Jewish inhabitants of a small Shtetl, who decide to organise their own transport to the East towards the Red Army to avoid deportation to a death camp. As a "self-acknowledged fantasy" (p. 137), the film recaptures visions of escape and rescue harboured by persecuted Jews during the Holocaust and can therefore be regarded as truthful. Another interesting aspect of this film is that it deals with transforming identities: in order to survive, some of the Jews of this Shtetl had to acquire the qualities of the Nazis and had to behave towards their fellow Jews accordingly. Bartov



sees the heroism portrayed in the film as the quality of remaining loyal to Judaism, for example, by wearing a kippah under the officer's cap.

The NBC television miniseries *Holocaust* (1978) is widely acknowledged to have changed public attitudes about the responsibility for the persecution and murder of Europe's Jews in Germany, but its value in a satisfying representation of the historical events leading to the Holocaust often has been dismissed. Bartov persuasively argues in his extensive discussion of this series that it succeeded both in humanizing the Jewish victims and in describing how an individual gradually turned into a mass murder. He praises it as establishing a "definition of heroism that turns on its head the conventional view of Jews as passive victims and Germans as in some sense heroic if tragic fighters" (p. 211).

Chapter 4 analyses representations of the "Jew" as anti-hero, as a result of a certain backlash of earlier presentations of the "Jew" as a perennial victim or superhero. Moshe Mizrahi's *Madame Rosa* (1977) features a retired prostitute and Holocaust survivor who takes care of the children of sex-workers. Bartov asserts that "the film shatters all the taboos and stereotypes associated with the depiction of Jewish victims" (p. 229) and regards it as an outstanding example of the "cinematic unravelling of the survivor/non-survivor, or Jew/non-Jew, dichotomy that haunts representations of the "Jew" in film (p. 238).

A lengthy discussion of Asher Talim's *Don't Touch My Holocaust* (1994) concludes the book. Based on Dudi Maayan's play *Arbeit macht frei vom Totland Europa*, the film conveys a vivid impression of its audacity, which challenged Israel's memory culture and Israel's ambivalent relationship to Holocaust survivors and Arab-Israeli citizens, and demonstrates the extreme lengths of physical and mental pain bordering on self-destruction the actors were willing to go for. It explores the links between contemporary Israeli identity and past atrocity. The characters of the play/film link the survivor with the second generation, the Holocaust with the Israeli identity among Mizrahim and between the Holocaust and Israeli Arabs. According to Bartov, this is a film about ownership: "Whom does the Holocaust belong to and what are the implications of owning it?" An interesting observation is that by contrasting the Talim's documentary with a German film made about the same play, Bartov [shows](#) the limitations of understanding the other side which is present in both cinematic representations based on the same play.

This book will be of interest to many readers beyond historians, film buffs and scholars of Jewish Studies. It is also a perceptive cultural history discussing Jewish identity in the modern world. Bartov's strength as a historian lies in the brief, but insightful sketching out of the historical context in which the films discussed are situated. He does this particularly well for movies dealing with the Holocaust and for Israeli films. The lack of jargon and theoretical analysis may disappoint some readers with a particular interest in film discourse theories, but it makes the book immensely readable and accessible for anybody wishing to explore the representation of Jews in a very popular medium. The range of films discussed by Bartov is impressive. While the index is helpful, an appendix listing the films and their production details would have been useful.

The "Jew" in Cinema: From [The Golem](#) to [Don't Touch My Holocaust](#) by [Omer Bartov](#)