

Something Ain't Kosher Here!

The Rise
of the
"Jewish" Sitcom



Vincent Brook

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1: Introduction

(... "Yisrael" ["Israel"], the very name of our community, meant "Godwrestler"—a name won in pain and wounding long ago. For now, we can leave this discovery, this uncovering, within parentheses. Soon enough, as I tell this story, it will leap into its bright and central place.)

—Rabbi Arthur Waskow, *Godwrestling 2*

The period from 1989 through the early 2000s has seen an unprecedented upsurge in American television sitcoms featuring explicitly Jewish protagonists (e.g., *Seinfeld*, *Brooklyn Bridge*, *The Nanny*, *Mad About You*, *Friends*, *Dharma and Greg*, *Will and Grace*).¹ A comparative increase in Jewish representation in non-sitcom genres has taken place in this period as well, contributing to an overall "Jewish" TV trend.² However, for reasons pertaining to the historically dominant status of the sitcom in American television programming and the historically dominant role of Jews in American popular comedy, this book, while not ignoring non-sitcom "Jewish" representation, will focus on that in the sitcom.

I define particular sitcoms, or other television shows, as "Jewish" if their protagonists are ethnically marked through a stereotypically Jewish surname (e.g., Jerry Seinfeld, Dharma Finkelstein), through explicit narrative references to their association with Jewishness (e.g., their partaking in Jewish rites or rituals, dialogue allusions to their Jewishness), or, as has increasingly been the case, through their having been conceived as Jewish by the show's creators although they may not be perceived as such by the show's viewers (e.g., Rachel Green in *Friends*). Jewish themes need not be treated on the shows, nor will protagonists be held to any rigorous standard of religious affiliation or ethnic consciousness. The quotes around the word "Jewish" acknowledge the constructed and highly contested nature of Jewish identity generally, as well as the tenuous, largely inferred, and increasingly "virtual" nature of Jewish televisual representation specifically.

By this or any other definition, the question remains: Why has a trend in sitcoms with identifiably Jewish main characters occurred at this particular historical moment, and what is the significance of this phenomenon, for Jews and non-Jews? The trend can be explained partly as a response to changing industrial conditions in American television, partly as a complex negotiation of assimilationist and multiculturalist pressures specific to the American Jewish experience. While appearing to be a breakthrough in Jewish representation, the trend also points to a renewed crisis in Jewish identity formation, which, in turn, reflects a broader struggle over incorporation and diversity in U.S. television and society.

Jews' comparatively recent widespread acceptance in mainstream, white America has come at a moment when identity politics and multiculturalism have put a premium on difference. These opposing integrationist and separatist tendencies have not only reinforced but also threatened Jews' historically unique insider/outsider status in American society, upsetting the delicate balance between the senses of "sameness" and of "otherness" that has been a defining component of American Jewish identity. Conflicting forces have also beset the U.S. commercial television industry, itself disproportionately represented (in terms of executives and creative personnel) by Jews.³ The technological revolution and the business restructuring in the TV industry over the past twenty years have led to radical audience fragmentation that appears to correspond, at least rhetorically, with the multiculturalist ethos of differentiation and diversity. At the same time, continuing capitalist imperatives to maximize market share have fueled contrary pressures to amalgamate entertainment platforms and to aggregate audience appeals. Thus, both American Jews and the "Jewish" television industry, if not U.S. society as a whole, have found themselves increasingly at cross purposes, torn by contradictory drives to differentiate yet also to incorporate, to assert independence yet also to reconstruct consensus. As NBC West Coast President Don Ohlmeyer stated in 1998: "There is no 'audience' anymore. There are 200 different segments of the audience, and the goal is to try and pull together as many different segments and aggregate them at one time with something that they collectively want to experience. That's what programming is about today: providing a collective experience."⁴ To determine how the construction of this "collective experience" relates to the representation of Jewishness in the Jewish sitcom trend is another of this book's aims.

JUSTIFYING THE JEWISH SITCOM TREND

My claim that the period from 1989 through the early 2000s signals a new trend in Jewish sitcoms is based on a quantitative comparison of situation comedy series featuring explicitly Jewish protagonists, over the entire history of American prime-time television up to mid-2002. Within this schema, a sitcom is defined as a thirty-minute episodic comedy series, with or without an accompanying audience response track. These criteria, which are consistent with those employed by the two major American television reference texts, *Total Television* and *The Complete Guide to Prime-Time Network and Cable TV Shows*,⁵ eliminate one-hour Jewish "dramedies" such as *thirtysomething* (1987–1991) and *Northern Exposure* (1990–1995), yet allow for the inclusion of pre-laugh track shows such as *The Goldbergs* and of cable shows that consciously eschew the laugh track such as *Dream On*, *The Larry Sanders Show*, *Rude Awakening*, *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, and *State of Grace*.

My choice of 1989 rather than 1987 (when *Harry* premiered) for the trend's onset is based on three factors. First, *Harry* was only nominally Jewish and was short-lived, lasting less than a month. Second, 1989 saw the premiere of not one but three sitcoms, compared to seven in toto over the previous forty years. Finally, one of the three new shows, *Chicken Soup*, caused a major Jewish controversy, and the other two, *Anything But Love* and *Seinfeld*, were hits, with *Seinfeld* going on to become not only the most popular comedy series of the 1990s (according to the Nielsen ratings) but also the "decade-defining" one (according to the popular and trade press).⁶

The period from 1989 through the early 2000s also clearly fulfills three of the main criteria for an historical trend: continuity, comparative longevity, and rising momentum. At least one Jewish sitcom has premiered each year during this period: two each in 1993, 1994, 1995, and 2000; three each in 1989 and 2001; four each in 1990 and 1998, and five in 1992. By the 1992–1993 season, eight first-run Jewish sitcoms were airing on prime-time TV; by the 1997–1998 season, as many as nine. By 1999, no less than twelve 1990s Jewish sitcoms, counting reruns, were airing on network and cable stations, according to the *Los Angeles Times* TV listings.⁷ All in all, by my count, thirty-three sitcoms with Jewish protagonists made their way onto America's television screens from 1989 to 2001 (not to mention reruns of popular 1970s Jewish shows such as *Rhoda*, *Barney Miller*, *Welcome Back, Kotter*, and *Taxi*, and even *The Goldbergs* on the Jewish Television Network [JTN]). (See Table 1.)

A review of the Jewish and general journalistic discourse over the 1989–early 2000s period indicates increasing awareness of a shift in Jewish televised representation. In early fall 1989, just as *Chicken Soup* and *Anything But Love* were debuting and a pilot for *The Seinfeld Chronicles* had appeared, Alan Abbey of the *Jewish Journal of Greater Los Angeles* was still asking why there were “so few Jewish characters on TV.”⁷⁰ By March 1990, however, Judd Hirsch was commenting in an interview on the “reemergence of Jewish characters on TV,” and later the same year *New York Times* media critic John J. O'Connor concurred that “strongly identified Jewish characters are showing up on TV.”⁷¹ The makings of a full-fledged trend were evident as early as 1992 to *Newsweek's* Joshua Hammer and John Schwartz, whose article “Prime-Time Mensch” heralded a plentiful “new breed” of Jewish leading men on television.⁷² For trend watchers, 1993 was a banner year: Lynn Elbers (in *TV Times*) remarked on “the superficiality of the trend”; Albert Auster (in *Television Quarterly*) wrote of the “outpouring of [not always positive] Jewish images onto American television screens”; Jonathan and Judith Pearl (in the Jewish journal *Moment*) identified “a plethora of prime-time shows featuring Jewish themes and characters”; Terry Barr (in *Studies in Popular Culture*) analyzed “the abundance of Jewish characters on current network TV shows”; and Risa Whitney Gordon (in *Jewish Exponent*) claimed “the list of shows plugging into the [Jewish intermarriage] formula is so extensive it reads like a week's *TV Guide* listings.”⁷³ The trend's persistence was documented in 1996 by Michael Medved (in *Moment*) and Susan Kaplan (in the Jewish newspaper *Forward*), and was extended in 1998 by Joyce Antler in her anthology essay “Jewish Women on TV: Too Jewish or Not Enough?”⁷⁴ Finally, as if to grant institutional cachet to the Jewish TV trend, the Museum of Television and Radio in fall 1998 sponsored a seminar and panel discussion on the subject, featuring prominent Jewish TV writers (Marshall Herskowitz, Carol Leifer, Jeff Melborn, and Jan Oxenberg) and a noted academic (David Marc).⁷⁵ Another industry-oriented panel dealing with the topic, titled “Jews in Television,” was organized by the American Jewish Committee, the University of Southern California (USC)'s Annenberg School of Communication, and the Jewish Television Network in early 1999.⁷⁶

PERIODIZATION AND GENRE

To explain the emergence, identify the features, and describe the significance of the Jewish sitcom trend, this trend must be contextualized in relation to the pretrend period. Given that this context expands the number of Jewish

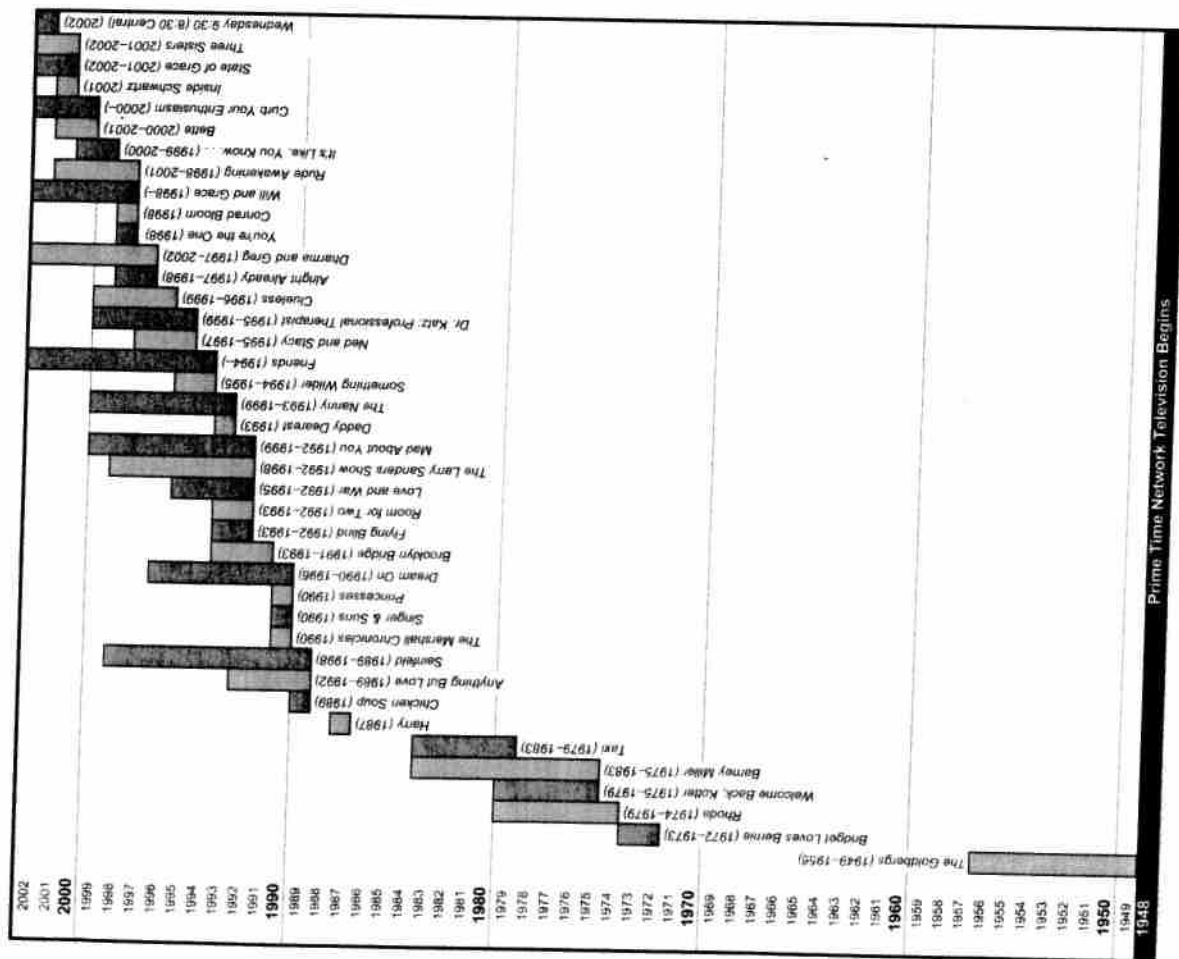


Table 1: Timeline of "Jewish" Sitcoms (1948–2002)

sitcoms available for study to thirty-nine, I have narrowed the scope to a selection of paradigmatic sitcom texts. These "primary" texts include, from the pre-trend period, *The Goldbergs*, *Bridget Loves Bernie*, and *Rhoda*, and, from the trend, *Chicken Soup*, *Brooklyn Bridge*, *Singer & Sons*, *Dream On*, *Anything But Love*, *Princesses*, *Seinfeld*, *The Nanny*, *Mad About You*, *Friends*, *Dharma and Greg*, *Will and Grace*, and *Rude Awakening*. My analysis is further facilitated through a breakdown of the trend period into three overlapping yet distinct chronological phases. This methodology is not intended as definitive and is undertaken with full awareness of its potential to oversimplify, arbitrarily categorize, and underestimate the unevenness of historical development. Post-structuralist caveats notwithstanding, a graduated time line remains an invaluable analytical tool for ordering complex phenomena and revealing historical patterns.

The first phase (1989–1992) covers Jewish sitcoms that premiered during the onset of the trend through the emergence of *Seinfeld* as a breakthrough hit and dominant cultural force. The second phase (1992–1998) deals with Jewish shows that emerged "under the influence" of *Seinfeld*, a period that extends from *Seinfeld's* attainment of mega-hit status through the end of its original run. The third (and ongoing) phase (1998–early 2000s) includes "Jewishcoms" that developed more under the sign of *The Nanny* (a second-phase show) than of *Seinfeld* while also moving into previously uncharted terrain. (See Table 2.)

So much for establishing a Jewish sitcom trend, but why the sitcom? Why privilege this television genre over the medical, legal, or crime drama, for instance, which have featured Jewish characters, occasionally even Jewish protagonists (Dr. Aaron Shutt in *Chicago Hope* [1994–], Tess Kaufman in *Reasonable Doubts* [1991–1993], Judge Joe Rifkind in *100 Centre Street* [2001–]). The Museum of Television and Radio panel discussion referred to "Creating Jewish Characters for Television," not just sitcom characters. Two of the writers on the panel, Herskowitz and Melborn, developed their characters in hour-long comedies: *thirtysomething's* Michael and Monica Steadman for Herskowitz; *Northern Exposure's* Dr. Joel Fleischman and *Picket Fences' Attorney Douglas Wambaugh* for Melborn.¹⁶ Of these, *thirtysomething* and *Northern Exposure* can even be considered breakthroughs for having featured Jewish protagonists in regular dramatic roles, a rarity not only for Jews but for minorities in general.

Yet it is precisely the exceptional, and still comparatively rare, nature of the non-sitcom Jewish protagonist (twelve in all of U.S. television history, nine during the trend) that argues for such characters' ancillary rather than primary sta-

Table 2: Phases of "Jewish"-Trend Sitcoms (1989–2002)

First Phase 1989–1992	Second Phase 1992–1998	Third Phase 1998–2002*
Chicken Soup (1989)	Flying Blind (1992–1993)	Alrgh! Already (1997–1998)
Anything But Love (1989–1992)	Room for Two (1992–1993)	Dharma and Greg (1997–2002)
Seinfeld (briefly <i>The Seinfeld Chronicles</i>) (1989–1998)	Love and War (1992–1995)	You're the One (1998)
The Marshall Chronicles (1990)	The Larry Sanders Show (1992–1998)	Conrad Bloom (1998)
Singer & Sons (1990)	Mad About You (1992–1999)	Will and Grace (1998–)
Princesses (1990)	Daddy Dearest (1993)	Rude Awakening (1998–2001)
Dream On (1990–1996)	The Nanny (1993–1999)	It's Like You Know... (1999–2000)
Brooklyn Bridge (1991–1993)	Something Wilder (1994–1995)	Bette (2000–2001)
	Friends (1994–)	Curb Your Enthusiasm (2000–)
	Ned and Stacey (1995–1997)	Inside Schwartz (2001)
	Dr. Katz: Professional Therapist (1995–1999)	Three Sisters (2001–2002)
	Clueless (1996–1999)	State of Grace (2001–2002)
		Wednesday 9:30 (8:30 Central) (2002)

tus in relation to “Jewish” TV.¹⁷ That is, non-sitcom Jewish protagonists and other characters in episodic series do not constitute a trend; they do, however, contribute to and enhance a trend undeniably associated with the sitcom.

There are other reasons for granting the sitcom privileged status. First, its generic preeminence: Gilbert Seldes has called television comedy “the axis upon which broadcasting revolves.”¹⁸ Even granting that this assessment was made in 1956, its enduring validity is supported by the fact that television scholar David Marc was still using it as the premise of his 1989 sitcom study, *Comic Visions* (revised in 1997). Second, the sitcom’s longevity: While other genres have come and gone (variety show, western), gone through cycles (medical, legal, and crime dramas), or only comparatively recently emerged (dramedy, prime-time soap), the sitcom has shown resilience and popularity over time, making it an ideal model for assessing continuity and change in the TV industry and society. Third, American comedy’s archetypal association with Jews: Jewish comics dominated the “golden ages” of vaudeville, radio, and TV, both as writers and performers, and continue to dominate—as late as the 1980s, Jews comprised well over 50 percent of TV comedy writers and about 80 percent of professional comedians, according to empirical studies,¹⁹ the stand-up comic specifically, precursor to the sitcom protagonist, derives from the “toomler” (a Yiddishizing of “tumult-maker” or “tumult”)—a Jewish emcee/program director/trickster figure who flourished in the Catskills resort area from the 1920s through the 1960s.²⁰ Finally, the sitcom’s revelatory capacity: While TV comedy’s value to society, compared to that of other genres, is arguable, its singular ability to act as a barometer of society’s values is more generally held.²¹ Whether as a “reflection of a culture’s view of itself,” or as a “*via regia* into the collective unconscious of a group no less revealing than dreams are of the individual unconscious,”²² the comic form, above all others, has the uncanny aptitude for “shaping” culture and “defining” a period not only in American television history but in American history as a whole: *I Love Lucy*, *Father Knows Best*, for the 1950s; *The Beverly Hillbillies*, *The Andy Griffith Show*, for the 1960s; *All in the Family*, *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, *M*A*S*H*, for the 1970s; *The Cosby Show*, for the 1980s; *Seinfeld*, for the 1990s.

Whether the sitcom’s special capacity for reflecting cultural trends also makes it a preferred vehicle for effecting social change is a matter of some debate. In fact, the jury is fairly evenly split on whether the genre tends to act as a mechanism for resistance or for control. Control-oriented arguments are

grounded in the alleged ameliorative aspects of the comedy form in general. Commentators on Jewish humor Ruth Wisse and Esther Fuchs, for instance, contend that comedy, by “purging through laughter” and easing “the sting of economic deprivation and political oppression,” becomes “an adaptive tool” and “an enemy of progress.”²³ Extending this normative critique to the sitcom in particular, television historian Horace Newcomb holds that the genre’s formulaic structure, “ritualistic” simplicity, and lack of connection to “real world” problems works to reinforce rather than undermine the status quo.²⁴ Industrially based complaints suggest that even “relevant” sitcoms (e.g., *All in the Family*, *M*A*S*H*) “found ways to enshrine, confirm, finally to soothe even acute psychological conflicts,” or to undermine the radical outcomes to the social issues they raised by emphasizing the private over the public sphere, and individualized over political solutions.²⁵ Supporting such criticism from within the TV industry itself, *M*A*S*H* writer/producer Larry Gelbart alleged at a panel discussion on television humor that his writing team was forced to make the issues of war and death treated on *M*A*S*H* more “commercially palatable” by mixing in sex and relationships: “We [the show runners] supply a product, and if it’s the one they [the network bosses] like, then it gets made.”²⁶

Barry Curtis’s critique of the sitcom from the standpoint of audience pleasure and positioning offers a way into a specifically Jewish inflection of the issue. For Curtis, the sitcom’s political problematic lies in the genre’s tendency to provide “a position of control as a sort of guardian of the values and structures which are being transgressed. It also offers a common sense position for constructing the marginal or ‘extreme’ in terms of age, masculinity, femininity, class and so on, as laughable.”²⁷ If ethnicity is factored into Curtis’s “so on,” Jewishness can be viewed as another possible victim of and contributor to the superior/controlling “safe” subject position afforded the non-Jewish viewer.

The pro-sitcom stance tends to rest on two main assumptions. The first relies on the genre’s ontological link to the ludic, anarchic, pre-Oedipal, or carnivalesque aspects of comedy as a whole.²⁸ The second depends on a quality of subterfuge purportedly inherent to the form: precisely because the sitcom, like broad comedy generally, discourages individualistic identification with well-developed characters and is *not* to be “taken seriously” makes it an ideal means for contesting dominant cultural values and breaking normative taboos.²⁹ Actor and comedy writer Wayne Rogers (*M*A*S*H*, *City of Angels*, *House Calls*) offered “in-house” support for this view at the same panel discussion at which Gelbart appeared: “Sitcoms are an ideal form for presenting unpopular or

controversial political ideas, since you can sneak up on the audience and educate them about these ideas *without their noticing it*.”³⁰ Fellow panelist and “relevant” sitcom guru Norman Lear (*All in the Family*, *Good Times*, *The Jeffersons*) seconded Rogers’s sentiments, neatly reversing the anti-sitcom line in his assertion that the genre is especially suited to raising topics in a “nonthreatening but progressive” fashion.³¹

TV critics Dave Berkman and Josh Oretsky offer a historically based case for the potentially oppositional sitcom, with particular pertinence to the Jewish sitcom trend. For Berkman and Oretsky, the emblematic new sitcoms of the late 1980s and early 1990s—*Married . . . with Children* (1987–1997), *Roseanne* (1988–1997), *The Simpsons* (1990–), *Seinfeld*—can be seen as constituting a backlash against the happy, successful American families portrayed in the earlier era’s definitive shows, *Family Ties* (1982–1989) and *The Cosby Show* (1984–1992).³² *Seinfeld*, as the lone Jewish sitcom on this list, was also the one shown to *theorize* its oppositionality to the all-American family in its explicitly stated “no hugging, no learning” premise.

Some academic sitcom theorists, such as Marc and Jerry Palmer, fire salvos from both sides. In *Comic Visions*, Marc argues that the sitcom, as an “art of the assembly-line” and therefore “of the middle,” has considerably softened stand-up’s satiric edge and generally worked to redeem popular beliefs; yet in *Demographic Vistas* (1984), he maintains that the genre is also capable of challenging received norms and values.³³ Palmer, in *The Logic of the Absurd*, alludes in one breath to the “‘double’ possibility of the comic as conservative or subversive or both at once, depending on the audience and the context.”³⁴

My own view on the sitcom’s aptitude for impacting social change is, like Marc’s and Palmer’s, ambivalent. I agree that its derivation in comedy and stand-up has supplied the genre with a predilection for upsetting hierarchies and toppling sacred cows, and that under certain historical and industrial conditions the “creative producer” has been able to take advantage of this.³⁵ Yet the corporate media’s persistent tendency to reinforce rather than challenge dominant norms cannot be so easily dismissed. My approach in determining whether and to what extent individual Jewish-sitcoms have succumbed to or managed to transcend the genre’s institutional limitations ultimately shares much with queer theorist Alexander Doty’s multivocal position in regard to *Will and Grace*. Introducing a paper on the show at a television studies conference in 2001, Doty remarked with refreshing candor: “I come to praise *Will and Grace* as a liberal, but to critique it as a progressive. As a radical, I have no business watching it at all.”³⁶

JEWISHNESS AND MULTICULTURALISM

As the son of immigrant Jews who barely escaped Nazi Germany, yet whose Jewish credentials have been compromised in many Jews’ eyes through my infidelity marriage and minimal observance of Jewish religious ritual, I have more than a passing interest in and understanding of the multiple, contradictory, and highly contested significations of Jewishness in American society.

So, then, what is a Jew? My childhood Hebrew school teacher asked the class this question and no satisfactory answer was forthcoming, either from us or from her. Although the question was posed ahistorically, as if part of an age-old rite of passage, I have since learned that this now common query only gained currency in the Jewish Enlightenment (*haskalah*) period of the mid-to-late-eighteenth century. Western European “emancipation” decrees, made conditional on the relinquishment of marked ethnic and religious difference, ensured that Jewish entry into mainstream Christian society came at the expense of a clear and unquestioned sense of Jewish identity. “A Jew at home, a gentleman on the street” became the new, double-edged motto for Western European assimilating Jews, and what “Jewishness” was—a religion, a race, an ethnicity, a culture, a sensibility, a unique historical consciousness—became, for Jews and non-Jews, a new subject of debate.

These emergent (re)constructions of Jewish identity were further complicated over the nineteenth and twentieth centuries by the multiple (re)configurations of Jewishness within them. Religious denominations of Judaism came to include Orthodox, Reform, Conservative, and Reconstructionist, with numerous sects within some of these, not to mention organized secular movements. Despite a resurgence of Jewish orthodoxy in recent years, particularly in its most mystical expression of Hasidism, the Reform and Conservative branches remain dominant among religiously affiliated American Jews, that is, those identifying with a particular denomination.³⁷ By far the largest segment of American Jewry, however—indeed the majority according to recent surveys, at 56 percent—is what sociologist Stephen Cohen terms the religiously “disengaged,” those who do not attend synagogue or participate in Jewish activities.³⁸ Although a lack of religious or cultural involvement does not automatically translate into a lack of ethnic identification or even of religiosity, Cohen’s category does appear to describe a sizeable portion of the Jewish executive and creative personnel associated with the Jewish sitcom trend.³⁹

Jewish ethno-racial groupings (all evolving pre-*haskalah*) include Ashkenazi (Eastern European/German), Sephardic (Spanish/Portuguese), Mizrahi (Middle

Eastern/North African), and Beta Israel (Ethiopian), with sometimes fractious divisions among and within some of these.⁴⁰ Although the first wave of Jewish immigrants to America (including some of the country's earliest settlers) was predominantly Sephardic, and the second wave, in the mid-nineteenth century, was largely German, by far the largest influx was the mass migration in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries of Yiddish-speaking Ashkenazis.⁴¹ This is the group that dominated vaudeville and "invented" Hollywood, and whose second, third, and fourth generations would found the U.S. radio and television networks and usher in the Jewish sitcom trend.

"Sensibility" is always a slippery signifier, with the term all too readily sliding into stereotype. Yet stereotyping has been seminal to the formation of Jewish identity. Anti-Semitic Jewish typologies alone conjure a dizzying array of images: Judas, Shylock, Parvenu, Wanderer, Conspirator (this last paradoxically encompassing both capitalist and communist extremes).⁴² Jewish philosopher Hannah Arendt conjoins philo- and anti-Semitic inscriptions of Jewishness in her proposed binary of the pariah and parvenu. For Arendt, "All vaunted Jewish qualities—humanity, humor, disinterested intelligence—are pariah qualities; all Jewish shortcomings—tactlessness, political stupidity, inferiority complexes, and money grubbing—are characteristics of upstarts."⁴³

Arendt's dichotomy is both descriptive and prescriptive. Echoing Jean-Paul Sartre's sentiments in *Anti-Semite and Jew* (1948), Arendt believes that just as parvenu qualities all too accurately describe certain Jews, pariah qualities, which translate into ethical concern for the underprivileged and social engagement on their behalf, should be nurtured as Jews' "chosen role."⁴⁴ Isaac Deutscher's notion of "the non-Jewish Jew," theorized in his 1958 essay of the same name, similarly valorizes a secular Jewish stance of which the "epistemological advantage" derives from Jews' marginalization from Christian society.⁴⁵ Marx, Rosa Luxemburg, Trotsky, and Freud had in common "that the very conditions in which they lived and worked did not allow them to reconcile themselves to ideas which were nationally or religiously limited and induced them to strive for a universal *Weltanschauung*."⁴⁶

Whether grounding their social conscience religiously through appeals to *tzedakah* (righteous charity), *gemilut hasadim* (acts of lovingkindness) or *tikkun olam* (healing the world), or historically through invocations of the biblical prophets or post-*haskalah* Jewish involvement in radical politics and social causes, a significant number of Jews—including many associated with Jewish TV—have based their Jewish identity on some form of the Jewish "civil religion."⁴⁷ When Judd Hirsch protests that his *Taxi* character Alex Rieger was Jew-

ish because he "dealt with social issues," when Henry Winkler speaks of the essential Jewishness of Fonzi (his gentle-seeming character on *Happy Days*) arising from his "doing good deeds," when *Friends* co-creator Marta Kauffman makes a case for her show's Jewishness based not on the ethnicity of the characters but on "the ethical way we treat people, on and off the set" and actor Elliot Gould (Mr. Celler on *Friends*) argues that a deep Jewish "value system" underlies the program,⁴⁸ it is clear that the conscious Jew can be constituted independent of and occasionally in opposition to notions of formal affiliation, ritual practice, or religious belief.

Gender differences further complicate the notion of Jewish identity, with gendered stereotypes ranging from the fin de siècle feminized Jewish male to the modern Israeli "muscle Jew," and from the exotic/erotic femme fatale of Sarah Bernhardt's day to the sexually frigid (if voraciously opportunistic) Jewish Princess of the post-World War II era. This latter negative image, partly the product of internalized anti-Semitism, was popularized by Jews themselves (Herman Wouk, Philip Roth, Woody Allen), as were other denigrating postwar constructions such as the neurotic Jewish male and the overbearing Jewish mother.⁴⁹ In addition to examining how these various types have been reinforced or countered during the Jewish sitcom trend, I will propose some new, *televisionally specific* Jewish types, flattering and nonflattering, that I see emerging from individual shows within the trend period.

Historical consciousness is perhaps the most unifying principle underlying Jewishness, relating to a shared sense not only of survival but also of significant social and cultural accomplishment in the face of expulsion (diaspora), persecution (the Crusades, the Inquisition, ghettoization), and attempted extermination (pogroms, the Holocaust). In spite of this collective awareness, however, reduced anti-Semitism in the post-World War II period and the re-establishment of a Jewish "homeland" in Israel have fueled radically divergent reactions among Jews toward the belief in a common past. These opposing tendencies, which Marshall Sklare calls *assimilation* and *survivalism*, have found their most pronounced and complex expression among modern American Jews.⁵⁰

In relation to American Jewish representation, the assimilationist/survivalist binary is perhaps best exemplified in the negative identifications of "too Jewish" and "not Jewish enough." Legendarily ascribed to Columbia Studios mogul Harry Cohn in the 1930s, the "too Jewish" designation was used throughout the classical Hollywood period to express aversion to actors with stereotypical Jewish name endings (-baum, -berg, -feld, -sky) and appearance, such as, for males, short stature, big nose, baldness, or dark, curly hair.⁵¹ Such self-imposed

anti-Semitism extended into the television era, when comedians such as George Burns (Nathan Birnbaum) and Jack Benny (Benjamin Kubelsky) continued the assimilationist subterfuge, in name and deed. Even an overtly Jewish sitcom like *The Goldbergs* (1949–1956) was retitled *Molly* in its final season, when the family moved from the Bronx to the suburbs and cashed in its ethnicity at the tract house door.

Such capitulations to assimilation were countered by the survivalist tendency to preserve ethno-religious markers and to resist their atrophy or effacement in the American media. Jewish watchdog groups and media critics articulated this “not Jewish enough” perspective in their protests against the early 1970s Jewish sitcom *Bridget Loves Bernie* (1971–1972), largely over the issue of interfaith marriage. Interfaith marriage had been a prominent theme in U.S. film (and theater) going back to the silent period; the difference in the 1970s, of course, was that reality was starting to match the representation.

By the time of the Jewish sitcom trend of the late 1980s and 1990s, soaring intermarriage rates and the struggle over multiculturalism only heightened the Jewish assimilationist/survivalist debate. *Seinfeld*, for instance, would initially be rejected by (Jewish) TV executives because it was “too Jewish.”⁵² Yet by series’ end, the *Jewish Journal* would title an entire issue about the show “How Jewish Was It?”⁵³ Throughout the Jewish sitcom trend, the Jewish press, Jewish academy, and other Jewish institutions have invariably framed assessments of Jewish representation around the Jewish excess/absence binary, as the titles of various articles and events indicate. “Funny, You Don’t Look Jewish . . .” was Albert Auster’s take on the trend in a *Television Quarterly* article in 1993; “Is Hollywood Too Jewish?” was Michael Medved’s broad-brushed query in *Movement* in 1996; the Jewish Museum of New York sponsored a “Too Jewish?” traveling exhibition in 1997, focusing on Jewish representation filtered through the work of Jewish artists; Joyce Antler subheaded her 1998 anthology essay on Jewish women in TV “Too Jewish or Not Enough?”⁵⁴

By 1999, the “too Jewish/not Jewish enough” debate had reached such self-conscious proportions that it was explicitly incorporated into one of the latest Jewish sitcoms. In an early episode of *It’s Like, You Know . . .* (1999–2000), the TV-producer protagonist pitches a new cable program called *Pay per Jew*, featuring a “real” rabbi (the logic being that Jews could experience religion in the comfort of home, and at a reduced cost). Within the episode, *Pay per Jew* is tested before a multiethnic audience, which is asked: “Do you think the show is too Jewish, appropriately Jewish, or not Jewish enough?” The question, and

the responses, were funnier than those of my childhood Hebrew class, but they came no closer to resolving the conundrum of Jewish identity.

As for Jewish relations to multiculturalism, the term “multiculturalism” will be used here in a historically specific sense that differs from the notion of cultural pluralism, from which it derives yet in significant ways differs. The concept of cultural pluralism, as formulated by the Jewish social commentator Horace Kallen in 1915, celebrated ethnic difference but only as subsumed within “the Anglo-Saxon character of America.”⁵⁵ Kallen’s formulation, emerging in response to the exclusionism of American nativists, neglected political and economic inequalities and remained Eurocentric in scope.⁵⁶ Contemporary multiculturalism, in its activist political application, challenges the priority of a monolithic American identity, “highlighting [non-European] racial as well as ethnic, gendered, and sexual orientation–based diversity and claiming resources on behalf of these groups.”⁵⁷

Although many Jews (particularly feminists and gays) have embraced multiculturalism, others have responded to this movement with ambivalence and even hostility. I stop short of hostility but share some of the ambivalence, empathizing with the need to proclaim identities that have too long been discounted, distorted, or denied, but also questioning separatist social agendas that lock in identity and close off alliances with other groups.

Historical differences further fuel Jewish wariness toward multiculturalism, for while the challenge to white, Christian hegemony resonates for Jews, who have suffered more than their share of persecution and exclusion, Jewish achievement of a high level of social emancipation in America tends to valorize rather than challenge Enlightenment ideals. Additionally exacerbating the relationship is the aggressive stance of many multiculturalists, particularly some African Americans, who have not only placed Jews in the “enemy” camp by virtue of Jews’ investment in and absorption by the white middle class, but also have singled out Jews for special criticism — “criticism that is sometimes hard to distinguish from anti-Semitism.”⁵⁸

A subtler form of discomfort with the multiculture comes from American Jews’ sense of themselves as occupying, to a greater extent than ever, what David Biale, Michael Galchinsky, and Susannah Heschel call “an anomalous status: insiders who are outsiders and outsiders who are insiders . . . a boundary case whose very lack of belonging to a recognizable category creates a sense of unease.”⁵⁹ Jewish occupation of this “liminal zone” has historical antecedents. One could even say that Jews’ survival as a marginalized group over the centuries

has been predicated on their ability “to establish themselves close to centers of power and negotiate between competing elite and popular forces.”⁶⁰ Indeed, Jews’ role in the entertainment industry would appear to serve as a paradigmatic example of such negotiation between marginalized groups and the majority culture.

What is unprecedented, however, is the extreme form this historical insider/outsider dualism has taken in contemporary America. Never before have so few obstacles existed to Jews’ attainment of political, cultural, and economic power; yet this unparalleled opportunity has created vexing contradictions in Jewish self-consciousness. Identification with the majority, although welcomed on one level, clashes with Jews’ converse desire to preserve their identity as a minority, an identity further challenged by the reluctance of other ethno-racial minorities (and of the government agencies that serve them) to admit Jews into the multicultural fold. The source of this exclusionary bias can be traced, as with identity politics, to the end of the civil rights era, when the breakdown of the black-Jewish alliance, and Israel’s victory in the Six Day War, transformed the Jewish image for many radical minority groups from pariah to parvenu, in Arendt’s sense, and from fellow aggrieved underdog to imperialist bully. Israel’s invasion of Lebanon in 1982 and the Palestinian intifada of 1987, coupled with the continued socioeconomic rise of Jews in America, reinforced tendencies to exclude Jews from the multiculturalist project. At the same time, the distress of many U.S. Jews (including myself) over the changing Israeli image, exacerbated further by the second intifada, beginning in 2000, has intensified their desire to identify with the oppressed rather than the oppressor, thereby problematizing their comparatively privileged status in mainstream America. The resulting struggle for American Jews between majority (assimilationist) and minority (multiculturalist) pressures constitutes, in my view, a primary sociocultural determinant of the Jewish sitcom trend, and of the conflicts and contradictions in Jewish representation I see negotiated in the trend’s textual regime. Unpacking the terms of this negotiation, and weighing its comparative benefits and costs—culturally and politically, for Jews and non-Jews—is another of this book’s prime concerns.

ETHNO-RACIAL FORMATION

My theoretical framework derives, at its most rudimentary level, from a synthesis of constructs drawn from Michael Omi and Howard Winant’s *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1990s* (1994) and David

Hollinger’s *Postethnic America* (1995). Omi and Winant define *racial formation* as a “socio-historical process by which racial categories are created, inhabited, transformed, and destroyed.”⁶¹ Racial formations do their ideological work through historically situated *racial projects* “in which human bodies and social structures are represented and organized.”⁶² In their capacity to reorganize and redistribute resources along racial lines, racial projects are necessarily linked to the evolution of hegemony, in Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci’s sense of the organizational structures, overt and covert, of dominance and control within a particular society.

While Omi and Winant apply the concept of racial formation exclusively to a historical consideration of American racial categories, a related notion—*ethno-racial formation*—can be applied with equal saliency to matters of ethnicity. As Hollinger suggests, this expanded term further benefits from its ability to better reflect “our understanding of the contingent and instrumental character of [both ethnic and racial] categories . . . [and] to acknowledge that the groups traditionally called racial exist on a blurred continuum with those traditionally called ethnic.”⁶³ Hispanics, for example, despite their previous official and self-conceptions as non-Anglo white, have, since the 1970s, for purposes of resource allocation, gained recognition as a disadvantaged, nonwhite minority.⁶⁴ Jews, conversely, though once regarded as a “people of color,” now revel in (even as they wrestle with) their widespread acceptance by and self-recognition as the white majority.

An *ethno-racial project* could thus be imputed to the Jewish sitcom trend and, given Jews’ substantial involvement in the television industry and the television industry’s pervasive influence on American society, certainly linked to the evolution of hegemony. Of course, the evolving nature of multiculturalism, on which Jews base their concomitant claim to marginality, complicates such a straightforward analogy. Partly through the success of its own “counter-hegemonic” ethno-racial project, partly through co-optation, multiculturalism itself has become increasingly mainstream. Formed initially in resistance to the discourse of whiteness, multiculturalism to a significant degree has penetrated this discourse, making considerable (if still insufficient) progress in terms of resource allocation in such areas as academia, the media, and the arts. Indeed, in those areas most dependent on government funding, such as nonprofit cultural activities, non-Jewish minorities have often gained control of both the purse strings and the political agenda.⁶⁵ Such control, often at the expense of Jews, points to a demarcation of class as much as ethnicity, making class another important factor to consider in analyzing the assimilationist/multiculturalist

dialectic. As for the co-optation of multiculturalism, one need look no further than the 2000 presidential election, in which Republican nominee George W. Bush campaigned under the multicultural banner on behalf of his “compassionate conservative” agenda and, as President-elect, led off his cabinet appointments with a parade of blacks, Hispanics, and women.

Conceptualizing the Jewish sitcom trend as an ethno-racial project allows for its historicizing, both televisually and societally, within hegemonic and “counter-hegemonic” constructions of ethnicity and race. Such a conceptualization also encourages an ideological analysis that links the representational (specific TV shows) and the institutional (the organizational structure of the TV industry)—a linkage that has particular resonance in a medium noted (in both the Jewish and non-Jewish popular imagination) for its preponderance of Jewish executives and creative personnel.

The relationship between Jewish and other ethno-racial formations is not only parallel but intersectional. In nineteenth-century Europe, Jewish difference had been mapped across a geography of race; specifically, Jews' racial otherness was frequently traced back to black Africa, with Jews' putative blackness ascribed to race mixing.⁶⁶ Michael Rogin has shown how this racialized legacy contributed to Jewish immigrants' appropriation of blackface minstrelsy in American vaudeville theater and film (cf. *The Jazz Singer*, 1927). Such appropriation, Rogin argues in *Blackface, White Noise*, while expressing empathy for a kindred “racial” other, also served as a significant means for Jews to differentiate themselves from blacks and to proclaim their own whiteness at the expense of African Americans.⁶⁷

The pursuit of assimilation through the mobilization of production as well as performance modes grounds Neal Gabler's pivotal analysis of Jewish influence in the film industry, *An Empire of Their Own: How the Jews Invented Hollywood*. Insecure about their otherness and obsessed with achieving respectability in mainstream American society, Jewish immigrant moguls, according to Gabler, built their dream factories on the basis of an idealized, compensatory vision of the American Dream.⁶⁸ This motivation and modus operandi can be ascribed, mutatis mutandis, to the first- and second-generation immigrant Jewish founders of the U.S. radio and television industries, NBC's David Sarnoff and CBS's William Paley.⁶⁹

The apparent realization of the “melting pot” ideal has been charted by Karen Brodtkin's *How Jews Became White Folks and What That Says about Race in America*, which demonstrates how post-World War II restructuring of ethno-racial formations finally granted Jews and other previously racially stig-

matized European immigrants unqualified entry into the white middle class.⁷⁰ This “whitening” process for Jews was furthered by the staggering postwar increase in the interfaith marriage rate, which, to the considerable alarm of Jewish survivalists, soared from under 2 percent in the pre-World War I period to a stunning (if disputed) 52 percent by 1990.⁷¹

“Whiteness” thus not only emerges historically as the pivot of ethno-racial identification for American Jews; the entire Jewish assimilationist project can be usefully subsumed under George Lipsitz's notion of “the possessive investment in whiteness.” A psychosocial process whereby Americans are encouraged to attain at all cost, and remain true to, “a [white] identity that provides them with resources, power, and opportunity,” the “possessive investment in whiteness” is grounded in the ethno-racial projects of Native American genocide, of slavery and segregation, of immigrant restriction, and of colonialism.⁷² Moreover, according to Lipsitz, this phenomenon has in some ways even increased over the past half-century. From the New Deal era onward, discriminatory federal housing and highway policies, trade union priorities, urban renewal, and bank and insurance company redlining have furthered white privilege. Ameliorated though far from eradicated by the civil rights movement, racializing tendencies were revived in the 1980s and 1990s by the anti-multiculturalist, “color blind society” rhetoric and agenda of the Reagan and Bush administrations. As Lipsitz states, “Regressive policies that cut federal aid to education and refused to challenge segregated education, housing, and hiring, as well as the cynical cultivation of an antiblack consensus through attacks on affirmative action and voting rights legislation clearly reinforced possessive investment in whiteness.”⁷³

Jews as a group were no great friends of Reagan or Bush (having traditionally voted heavily Democratic).⁷⁴ Yet in the 1980s and 1990s, Jews found themselves, for the first time in modern history, according to David Biale, “doubly marginal: marginal to the majority culture, but also marginal among minorities.”⁷⁵ Jewish “double marginality” is qualitatively different from that which has been attributed to combinations of non-Jewish minorities—e.g., black working-class women, Hispanic lesbians. For these overdetermined minorities, “double” or “multiple marginality,” however pronounced, is also unidirectional, away from the mainstream but toward a haven among the respective outgroups. For Jews, estrangement from both the center and the periphery leaves no place to go *and* no place to hide. This is not to claim greater sympathy for Jews, whose marginality is substantially cushioned by comparative class privilege. Jewish “double marginality” is unique, however, in a way that bears

directly on the ethno-racial formations affecting the Jewish sitcom trend. For although the trend would appear, on its face, to contradict Lipsitz's notion, pointing to a possessive investment in Jewishness rather than in whiteness, a closer examination reveals a complex negotiation of ethno-racial projects at work during the trend period.

The fact that in the 1990s and early 2000s, for the first time in television history, large numbers of explicitly Jewish protagonists and other Jewish characters have been populating American sitcoms and (to a lesser degree) other generic TV forms, appears to have served both the Jewish assimilationist and the Jewish multiculturalist projects. Precisely by declaring their multicultural otherness, yet also by flaunting their assimilated whiteness, Jewish sitcom characters (and, through them, Jewish TV executives and creative personnel) have had it both ways: appealing to and appeasing the differentiating as well as the "collectivizing" forces within the American televisual institution and society.

However, the Jewish sitcoms themselves are not entirely of a piece with such an apparently duplicitous strategy. In some ways foregrounding, in other ways masking, diluting, or even rejecting traditional markers of Jewishness, the Jewish sitcom trend takes a contradictory and occasionally even contestatory stance toward Jewishness, pointing to a renewed and heightened crisis in Jewish identity and representation and in the ethno-racial project that helped bring about the trend. Jewish investment in whiteness, the trend seems to be saying, while paying substantial dividends, also came at a price. Struggling to reconcile a history of oppression with recent, unparalleled success, Jewish TV, like the American Jewish community, seems to have found itself, in Brodtkin's resonant phrase, "wrestling with whiteness."⁷⁶

2: The Americanization of Molly

Mama darling, if I'm a success in this show, well, we're gonna move from here. Oh, yeah, we're gonna move up into the Bronx. A lot of nice green grass up there and a lot of people you know . . . there's the Ginsbergs, and the Gutenbergs, and the Goldbergs—oh, a whole lotta Bergs, I don't know 'em all.

—Al Jolson, in *The Jazz Singer*

Viewed at the start of regular prime-time broadcasting in 1948 by only a tiny segment of the population, TV by the mid-1950s had become a fixture in American homes and stood poised for its first radical shift in program forms and industrial practices. From a largely "live" broadcast medium centered in New York City, television switched almost overnight to a filmed programming format dominated by the Hollywood majors. Anthology dramas and variety shows gave way to westerns and other action series; ethnic working-class comedies were overtaken by relentlessly white, middle-class, suburban sitcoms; performance-driven modes and women-centered material were phased out in favor of a patriarchal discourse articulated in the classical Hollywood style.¹ Of all early television programs, few participated in this mid-1950s transformation more fully, or illustrate its salient features more succinctly, than the first Jewish sitcom, *The Goldbergs* (1949–1956).

The first successful sitcom on television,² *The Goldbergs* had derived from a longtime popular radio series. The show was rated seventh overall for the 1949–1950 television season,³ and a movie version called *Molly*, released by Paramount in 1951 and starring the TV cast, was "the first video show to receive theatrical treatment."⁴ As for the radio program, it first aired on NBC in

1929 as a 15-minute nightly serial called *The Rise of the Goldbergs*, gradually changing in the 1940s from a family melodrama into the newly popular sitcom form.⁵ Radio, TV, and film versions were all created and written by Gertrude Berg, who also starred as Molly Goldberg, the cuddly, Yiddish-accented matriarch of an upwardly striving Jewish family living in a cramped tenement house in the Bronx.⁶ When Molly and family moved in 1955 to a spacious house in the fictive upstate suburb of Haverville (as opposed to *Have-not-erville?*), the show's narrative premise seemed to have been fulfilled. This apparent nod to the Goldbergs' good fortunes, however, was largely a reaction to the show's sagging ratings and the changing TV times. Not only were the suburban episodes the first of the former kinescoped sitcom to be shot on film in the classical style, the show's ethnic flavor and working-class milieu were instantly homogenized by bland, prosperous Haverville.

An additional, ethnically specific factor in the show's blanching was the Jewish-dominated entertainment business's time-honored aversion to being "too Jewish." According to *Goldbergs* coproducer Chermey Berg, son of Gertrude, it was network executives, not his mother, who dictated the show's suburban diaspora. Ashamed, he said, of their own Jewishness, these men "had a fit about the show being Jewish. They wanted the Goldbergs to be the O'Malleys and it just couldn't be done." Indeed, Molly's Yiddishisms, neighborly chats, and gefilte fish seemed out of place in the WASPish enclave, and banished completely were the star's intimate tenement-window monologues delivered in direct address to the television audience. Minus the monologues and with a family that suddenly flocked, *Father Knows Best*-style, around Papa Jake on his return from work (work which, after all, had blessed them with their bountiful new surroundings), thoroughly domesticated Molly was no longer even the center of the Goldberg universe. When *The Goldbergs* was cancelled, the termination must have seemed somewhat of a mercy killing to the show's faithful.

What an ethnic working-class sitcom would have trouble being transferred to Eisenhower Era suburbia is not surprising; neither is the fact that the sitcom called upon to carry out such a patently assimilationist project would be Jewish. It was, after all, Jewish American playwright Israel Zangwill's influential 1908 drama *The Melting Pot*, about the interfaith romance of a second-generation American Jew and the daughter of an anti-Semitic baron, that first articulated, in popular form, the ideology upon which America's grand narrative of assimilation was built.⁷ Of course, U.S. Jews historically have not only reinforced but also challenged ethno-racial accommodation, as another Jew's, Horace Kalten's, "cultural pluralist" alternative to Anglo-Protestant conformism bears out.⁸

Extreme ambivalence over assimilation has been an enduring feature of American Jewish life since the great immigrant wave at the turn of the century, and this internal conflict was basic to the culture from which *The Rise of the Goldbergs* radio series emanated.

The first great novel of American Jewish experience, Abraham Cahan's *The Rise of David Levinsky* (1917), a bildungsroman about an immigrant Jewish Babbitt (five years before Sinclair Lewis's WASP rendition), was a cautionary tale of the cultural and spiritual irreconcilability of Eastern European and American ways of life.⁹ Anzia Yezierska's popular fiction of the 1920s similarly presented second-generation Jewish immigrants "as trapped between two worlds, helpless in a kind of liminal void, overwhelmed with terrific shame" over their uncouth, Yiddish-speaking parents.¹¹ Donald Weber has shown how much of early-twentieth-century Jewish humor arose as a way to mediate the anxieties of intergenerational intercultural conflict. The "Cohen on the Telephone" stage and filmed monologues of the 1910s and 1920s, featuring George Sidney, drew on vaudevillian stereotypes and heavy dialect to mock the "mishearings/misreadings" resulting from exchanges between an immigrant Jew and an American gentile.¹² Comic writer Milt Gross skewered immigrant life and speech in his collected sketches *Nize Baby* (1926) and *Dunt Esk!* (1927), material that Gertrude Berg, on the verge of launching her radio series, found "very revolting."¹³ Indeed, for Weber, Berg's sympathetic portrayal of immigrant life was created in staunch reaction to the wickedly parodic Jewish popular culture around her. Her entire career in radio and television, Weber asserts, "amounts to a gigantic effort to bridge the space between these dual ethnic and American identities, to soften the jagged edges of alienation through the figure of Molly Goldberg and her special accommodating vision—a vision of a loving family, of interdenominational brotherhood, of middle-class ideals, of *American life*."¹⁴

The very title of the radio series, *The Rise of the Goldbergs*, seems to confirm Weber's assessment, as does the fact that the Jewish radio family had rehearsed the TV family's move to the suburbs by briefly moving to the Connecticut town of Lastonbury in 1939.¹⁵ However, the radio Goldbergs' suburban transplantation can also be seen as historically prescient.

As Karen Brodtkin has shown, changes in U.S. government policy beginning in the early 1940s would undergird both suburbanization and the prospects for socioeconomic advancement of European ethnics, largely at the expense of blacks, Hispanics, and Asians. This Eurocentric shift was a radical break from the attitudes against European immigrants in the early twentieth century,

gruous with middle-class comfort. Nor would Papa Jake Goldberg's small-time dressmaker occupation and his penchant for leading rent strikes (1949 episodes) have bolstered middle-class identification. Even *New York Herald Tribune* columnist Anton Remenih, who presumably should have known better, situated the show, in 1952, not in the Bronx but in the decidedly working-class Lower East Side.²⁰ And while Weber claims that "the video and manuscript evidence" confirms the Jewish family's middle-class status,²¹ Molly's lament to the audience in a 1949 episode begs to differ:

I could tell you stories, but my situation is desperate. We must find a larger apartment. We are four people in four rooms. Sammy [the son] sleeps in the living room. . . . It's a situation not to be envied, believe me. Come will and come may, we are at the crossroads of the parting of the ways. So, we are looking for a bigger apartment. If you hear of something, let me know, and I'll do vice versa. Believe me, I'm not making a Rocky Mountain out of a molehill.²²

Perceptually, discursively, and textually, then, a solid case can be made for retaining Lipsitz's "working-class" model for the show, at least in its New York City phase.

Other ethnic working-class sitcoms that aired around the time of *The Goldbergs* (again following Lipsitz) include *Amos 'n' Andy* (about African Americans in Harlem), *Hey Jeannie* and *The Honeymooners* (Irish working-class families in Brooklyn), *The Life of Riley* (working-class migrants to Los Angeles), *Life with Luigi* (Italian immigrants in Chicago), and *Mama* (Norwegian immigrants in turn-of-the-century San Francisco). As for the commercial and artistic contradictions of these programs, Lipsitz suggests: "The relative economic deprivation of ethnic working-class households would seem to provide an inappropriate setting for the display and promotion of commodities as desired by the networks and their commercial sponsors. Furthermore, the mass audience required to repay the expense of network programming encourages depiction of a homogenized mass society, not the particularities and peculiarities of working-class communities."²³ In terms of social trends, the presentation of ethnic families in urban, working-class environments occurred "at the precise historical moment when a rising standard of living, urban renewal, and suburbanization contributed to declines in ethnic and class identity."²⁴

Some of the dissonances between *The Goldbergs'* ethnic working-class aspect and the commercial, artistic, and historical context can be explained by the show's radio pedigree. *The Rise of the Goldbergs* radio serial had been

attitudes that had gained social legitimacy through the "scientifically racist" theories of eugenicist Madison Grant. Grant hierarchized Europeans in descending order from the superior Nordics to the increasingly inferior (and lower-class) Alpine, Mediterranean, and Slavic (read Jewish) "races." The 1940 census, which dropped these pseudoscientific classifications as well as those between native and immigrant Europeans, also crucially expanded the notion of whiteness to include Jews securely for the first time. Other race-based policies and practices followed: the National Highway Act of 1941, which laid the groundwork for (mainly white) suburbanization; the G.I. Bill of Rights of 1944, which disproportionately helped those servicemen of European origin get college educations and low-interest home loans; discriminatory real estate practices such as restrictive covenants, redlining, and blockbusting, aimed primarily at "people of color." In its entirety, Brodtkin asserts, this World War II and postwar ethno-racial project amounted to a massive "affirmative action" program for, primarily, Euromales.¹⁶

SUBURBAN DIASPORA: CONTEXTUALIZING THE ETHNIC WORKING-CLASS SITCOM

George Lipsitz provides further socioeconomic context for understanding the rise not only of *The Goldbergs* but of the ethnic working-class sitcom in general. In his seminal study of the ethnic working-class comedy, "The Meaning of Memory: Family, Class and Ethnicity in Early Network Television," Lipsitz relies heavily on *The Goldbergs* to support his thesis that this subgenre of the sitcom served an important "legitimizing function" for American television and society in the postwar years. Such a function, for Lipsitz, helps explain the emergence of this subgenre at a time such a form would appear to have defied "the commercial and artistic properties of the medium," as well as "the dominant social trends of the period."¹⁷

Before applying Lipsitz's thesis to *The Goldbergs*, it is necessary to scrutinize his placement of the show in the working-class category. Some other analysts of the show, notably Weber, find it, to the contrary, "thoroughly middle-class—in style, tone, content, and characters."¹⁸ Coproducer Cherney Berg in our interview supported this view, stating that the Tremont Avenue section of the Bronx where the Goldberg family purportedly resided for the bulk of their television existence was "a respectable, middle-class neighborhood."¹⁹ Whatever the "facts," perceptions differ. To audiences unfamiliar with New York City, the cramped tenement-house setting of the show hardly would have seemed con-

second only to *Amos 'n' Andy* in ratings and staying power, and continued to run concurrently with its TV spin-off into the 1950s.²⁵ The tendency for new media to build on their forebears and to privilege the proven over the untried has been extensively documented. For Lipsitz, however, more was at work—and at stake—than historical precedent or institutional conservatism. The ethnic working-class sitcoms, he argues, “arbitrated complex tensions caused by economic change in postwar America. They evoked the experiences of the past to lend legitimacy to the dominant ideology of the present. In the process they served important social and economic functions . . . most significantly, as a means of ideological legitimization for a fundamental revolution in economic, social and cultural life.”²⁶

Shows like *The Goldbergs*, in other words, served to bridge the gap between Depression-era and postwar America. Their special function was to negotiate the transition from an economy of scarcity to one of abundance, from quasi-socialist cultural ideals based on mutuality and collectivity to retrofitted capitalist ones driven by image-conscious consumerism.²⁷ As Berg said of her character, “Molly became a person who lived in the world of today but kept many of the values of yesterday. She could change with the times . . . but she had some basic ideas that she learned long ago and wanted to pass on to her children.”²⁸ Indeed, *The Goldbergs'* essential narrative conflict is between novelty and tradition, Jewish and mainstream American ways, with a willingness to compromise and an abiding faith in familial love providing the ultimate solution. Thus, in one episode, Molly, socially excluded due to her ignorance of the latest Latin dance styles, takes lessons and—with the help of her immigrant brother, Uncle David—steals the show (May 4, 1954). In another, Molly and Jake, upset over their children's early marriage plans, realize they must “let them do what they want with their lives” (May 11, 1954). All problems, even economic deprivation, are surmountable, the program contends, through love and family solidarity.

The “legitimation” thesis would thus seem well served by *The Goldbergs*—certainly during the family's sojourn in the Bronx/“Lower East Side.” Following the family's exodus to Haverville, however, the Lipsitzian line starts to unravel. For with the change in setting and in telefilmic style comes a change in ethno-racial project. Neither economic deprivation nor ideals of mutuality and collectivity are the defining characteristics of the Goldbergs in their suburban diaspora; keeping up with the Joneses rather than commingling with their Jewish tenement-house brothers and sisters has become their guiding principle. The ethnic working-class sitcom, perceptually or otherwise, no longer

describes *The Goldbergs* in its final season; a generic sea change has occurred, largely a function of the radical shift in mid-1950s American television, which fully “embourgeoised” *The Goldbergs* and replaced the ethnic working-class sitcoms as a whole with the white suburban “middle-classcom.”²⁹

INVESTING IN WHITENESS: BUYING AND SELLING THE AMERICAN DREAM

To fully exploit the commodity culture at a time of extreme economic and social change, postwar American television, as Lipsitz has shown, also “had to address some of the psychic, moral, and political obstacles to consumption among the public at large.”³⁰ One method of overcoming these obstacles, marketing guru Ernest Dichter proposed, “consisted of identifying new products and styles of consumption with traditional, historically sanctioned practices and behavior.”³¹ Here again, the ethnic working-class family, as a link between modern and traditional values, provided an ideal vehicle for the transmission of the consumerist ethos.

Nowhere is this mediation of conflicting ideals more clearly enunciated than in *The Goldbergs'* “integrated commercial.” An extension of radio techniques, and quite common in early television, the integrated commercial served to facilitate “flow” from sponsor to story and encourage identification between spokesperson and product. For the TV version of *The Goldbergs*, Gertrude Berg developed a unique variation featuring an intimate, highly self-reflexive framing device. At the start of each episode (pre-Haverville), Molly raises a window shade, sticks her head out the window and addresses the viewer, delivering a commercial message woven into the fictional narrative. The suturing process is extended filmically to the enacted story by a match cut to the apartment's interior. At the close, the process is reversed, with Molly—and camera—returning to the window, where she weaves the just concluded episode into another commercial (see Figure 1). This self-reflexive device, though textually disruptive, also encourages identification with a “real, live” presence, while its hard-sell advertising stance is softened by Molly's Old World warmth and charm—a classic application of Dichterian theory.

When sponsorship switched from Sanka coffee to RCA television sets in 1952, *The Goldbergs'* self-reflexive structure was expanded to *mise-en-abyme* proportions, like a double-mirrored image receding to infinity.³² In one episode, for example, Molly stands at her window, introducing us—via filmed cutaway—to an RCA representative standing beside a bank of TV sets depicting



Figure 1. Mediating ideals: Molly Goldberg (Gertrude Berg) delivering one of her window monologues cum "integrated commercials."
(UCLA Film and Television Archives)

Molly Goldberg at her window.³⁵ The blurring of old and new, theatrical and real, is almost postmodern in its implications, extending to the hyper-realization that sponsor RCA is the parent company of the show's network, NBC. When Rybutol (a division of Vitamin Corporation of America) became sponsor in 1953, Sanka subtlety and RCA sophistication gave way to the unmitigated hard sell. When Molly picks up a vitamin bottle from her window sill to make her pitch (intercut with close-ups of the bottle), the line between Jewish mama and corporate huckster begins to bleed. Of course, such televisual hemorrhaging can also be taken as a sign that the ethnic working-class sitcom was catching up to the times. A product that once had to be camouflaged or hyper-realized could now be openly embraced; unabashed consumerism was becoming the American way.

Conversely, as the Americanization of Molly proceeded, her commercializing function actually receded. By the time *The Goldbergs* had migrated to Haverville in 1955, Molly's onscreen testimonials were history, replaced entirely by filmed spots. Yet the TV star's structured absence from the commer-

cial discourse should not be taken as a slackening of consumerist fervor. To the contrary, the move to the white-bread suburbs signaled not merely a crossing of the bridge between immigrant and mainstream American worlds but a burning of the bridge as well. In "Moving Day," the episode that marks *The Goldbergs'* departure from New York City, Molly is overjoyed at the thought of her new tract home. "Sixteen salt-boxes on one block and all the same!" she beams to her tenement neighbor. Molly readily sells all her old furniture (called "junk" by Jake and the children), secure in the knowledge that she can buy a new set on installment.³⁴ As if to make the sell-out complete, she is even willing to part with some heirlooms. The only prominent artifacts that make the move intact are the portraits of Washington and Lincoln—coded as patriotic and assimilationist, not personal or religious, symbols. In "Treasury Book," the first episode in their new Haverville home, the Goldbergs get suckered into buying coupon books, and all except Jake go on a shopping spree. Yet what begins as a capitalist critique (Jake: "They made you think it was your decision [to buy] when it was really theirs!") ends with Jake jumping onto the consumerist bandwagon with the rest of the family. Adding to the advertising overkill, an end-title informs us that the Goldberg's new furniture has been supplied "courtesy of Macy's." Who needs Molly to peddle products, the "new, improved" *Goldbergs* seems to be saying, when the program itself has become one long commercial? By the mid-1950s, it would appear, American television felt capable of dispensing with Dichterman deceptions and ethnic working-class shills. Or, alternatively, as part of American society's increasingly overdetermined ideology of consumerism, the deceptions had become an open secret and the shills had joined the main act.³⁵

A DOUBLE ROLE: AUDIENCE IDENTIFICATION AND STAR PERSONA

In shedding the integrated commercial, *The Goldbergs* was actually following an industrywide trend, prompted partly by the mid-1950s rise of the Hollywood telefilm, partly by the networks' desire to assume greater control of programming. The effort to elide television star and sponsor had always been fraught with contradictions, however, as had similar efforts in radio. TV and radio stars were perceived as less glamorous, less possessed of "aura," than their Hollywood counterparts.³⁶ This facilitated their roles as hawkers of household products aimed at the average person, yet still required a balancing act between product identification and star credibility.

There were major fissures in Gertrude Berg's star facade, which are important to explore if we are to understand the Jewish protagonist's function in early TV, and in relation to the Jewish sitcom trend. Berg was indeed a Jewish mother of two children (an older son, a younger daughter, as in the series) who had grown up in East Harlem, New York. There the resemblance ended. A Columbia University graduate and second-generation American, Berg was hardly prone to malapropisms and spoke without a trace of a Yiddish accent. Although plot lines had Molly striving (and failing) to acquire culture, Berg and her chemical engineer husband were "ardent students of the arts," possessing "original works of Millet, Picasso, Rembrandt, and Lautrec."³⁷ Far from stuck in a cramped tenement house, upgraded at long last to a modest tract home, the Bergs moved freely between a luxury apartment on Park Avenue and a seven-room country house. Perhaps most interestingly, as the above information gleaned from contemporary press reports indicates, Berg—and, one must assume, her publicity agents as well—made little effort to hide the disparity between working-class Molly and Gertrude the "millionaire."³⁸

That some discomfort, even confusion, with the disparity reigned is evident in the extratextual discourse of the time. Most columnists played up the kinship between star and fictional personae: Sidney Skolsky emphasized Berg's "lack of glamour"; Hedda Hopper found Gertrude "a great deal like the plain, amiable Molly she portrays"; the *Los Angeles Examiner* asked, "Where does the lovable little Bronx busybody end and her actress-writer begin?"; the *Herald Tribune's* Remenih admitted that Berg had "exchanged her woolen shawl for a mink stole," but quickly added that "Molly from the Lower East Side is still Gertrude's best friend."³⁹ *TV Guide* had the most difficulty separating Berg from Goldberg. In August 1953, the TV character is granted off-screen life in an article titled "Molly Goldberg's Summer Recipes," featuring recipes for borscht and blintzes.⁴⁰ In May 1954, Berg appears from behind her alter ego but only partially, as she's lumped with a group of other TV/real-life mothers to show how "just like us" they really are.⁴¹ In August the same year, a less egalitarian side of Berg is revealed. She's now described as a "modish writer-actress who commutes between swank diggings in Manhattan and Upper Westchester, New York. Her real-life neighbor—a considerable 'Yoo-Hoo' away—is Tallulah Bankhead."⁴² Photos show Berg discussing cooking with Bankhead's maid and sipping what looks like a martini with Tallulah beside the pool. All three articles are puff pieces, of course, but it isn't at all clear which puff *TV Guide* would have us inhale. Jack Benny, Danny Thomas, George Burns, and Gracie

Allen all openly played themselves as stars, yet they were careful to be identified primarily with television or night clubs rather than with the movies, and to distance themselves from Hollywood glamour. As Denise Mann observes, "The Hollywood star's association with consumer excesses and ostentatious behavior ran counter to fifties ideals of homogeneity and equal opportunity for all."⁴³

Yet perhaps that was precisely the point. Conspicuous consumption, once reserved for the rich and famous, was suddenly being reconstructed as everyone's birthright. As Erik Barnouw points out about mid-1950s TV marketing: "Every manufacturer was trying to 'upgrade' American consumers and their buying habits. People were being urged to 'move up to Chrysler' . . . A dazzling decor—in drama and commercial—could show what it meant to rise in the world."⁴⁴ Berg's radio series was originally titled *The Rise of the Goldbergs*, with "Goldberg" itself translating from the German as "mountain of gold"; Jewish sitcom and American consumerist project were tapping the same mother lode.

In terms of gender construction, too, the three *TV Guide* articles are telling. For if the schizoid images of Molly and Gertrude are spliced together, they actually merge into a montage of the idealized mid-1950s American woman: nurturing mother; contented housewife; and—with all that alleged prosperity and leisure time—even neighbor to the stars (if Molly can do it, why not us?). Further, by superimposing lowly character and lofty star, disparities of identity are dissolved in the televisual discourse just as distinctions of ethnicity, race, and class were disappearing from American television screens, subsumed under a homogenized "national culture." A response to "cold war fears and organizational complexities" and to "a shrunken sense of individual mastery," a national cultural ideal emerged in the 1950s, observes Roland Marchand, that permeated American consciousness and life.⁴⁵ Tastes in food, furniture, clothing, and recreation were becoming identical, with merchandizing consultants beginning to talk about a "standard middle-majority package."⁴⁶ An ideology of "classlessness" was propounded, which, although "classlessness" was purportedly all-embracing, served to marginalize and diffuse notions of economic and ethnic difference.⁴⁷ From a commercial standpoint, as we have seen, Molly Goldberg had always been an anachronism, a slice of kosher nostalgia recuperated for socioeconomic purposes; by the mid-1950s, however, the Jewish working-class mama from New York City had outlived her usefulness. It was time to trade her in for a new model.

DIVORCE, MCCARTHY-STYLE: ANTI-COMMUNISM, RELIGION, POLITICAL ECONOMY

In August 1949, with *The Goldbergs* set to appear on television for the first time, Gertrude Berg was reportedly doubly troubled. With her radio voice finally to be matched to a nationally recognizable face, she feared that her “unmasking” would make it harder to eavesdrop on Lower East Side pushcart markets “to pick up dialect and color”; worse, she worried that her “old friends [might] resent the innocent duplicity she had practiced.”⁵⁴ Just a couple of years later, the situation would be reversed and the duplicity would be less innocent. Thanks to anticommunist paranoia, it was Berg herself who would have to fear being revisited, by her own “ex-husband.”

The role of *Goldbergs* patriarch Jake Goldberg had been portrayed by actor Philip Loeb for the TV show's first two years. Loeb, a union leader and social activist, had played supporting roles on the *Goldbergs* radio show since the 1930s, costarred in the 1948 stage and 1951 movie versions of the series, and was voted “TV's Favorite Dad” for 1950 by the Boys Club of America.⁵⁵ To American Business Consultants, and its anticommunist publication *Red Channels*, however, Loeb was a dangerous subversive.⁵⁶ Whatever the truth or relevance of the allegations, a listing in *Red Channels* could be a career killer; in Loeb's case, it would be more than that. Although she initially resisted network/sponsor pressures to remove Loeb, pressures she openly branded as blacklisting, Berg ultimately “succumbed to economic pressure” when her new network, NBC (replacing CBS), claimed *The Goldbergs* was unsponsorable with Loeb on the payroll.⁵⁷ Four years later, unable to find adequate work and with his mentally ill son's medical bills mounting, Loeb committed suicide in a New York hotel room.⁵⁸

Progressive politics and working class solidarity had been an important element of Jewish identity in the historical period and New York location from which *The Goldbergs* emerged, and the show had not been averse to portraying these. “Part of the convincing authenticity of *The Goldbergs*,” Lipsitz states, “came from actors and writers who developed their skills within the Yiddish theater and the culture that supported it. An organic part of that culture included political activists, including Communists, socialists, and antifascists.”⁵⁹ In 1939, *The Rise of the Goldbergs* radio show had run a series of broadcasts responding to the recent *Kristallnacht* in Nazi Germany, in which Jews had been massacred and their shops and synagogues destroyed by rampaging mobs. In one broadcast, the *Goldbergs'* Passover *seder* is interrupted by a stone crashing

through their apartment window. Molly, in a trembling voice, comforts the children and urges Jake to continue chanting, which he does as an anonymous narrator concludes ominously: “And so the quiet of the Passover service is broken by Madden's group. Libby and Madden are still under arrest. Tune in tomorrow . . .” (April 3, 1939). This episode occurred before the series was transformed into a sitcom, but its courage and forthrightness is still remarkable—especially given the high level of Depression-fueled anti-Semitism at the time.⁶⁰

Ten years later, on TV, in a two-part serial (September 5 and 12, 1949), deteriorating conditions in the Goldberg apartment building lead to a rent strike organized by a rabble-rousing Jake (played by Philip Loeb). Although political activism subsequently ebbed due to the Loeb affair and general anticommunist hysteria, religious “activism” did not. Passover *seders* and the Jewish High Holidays, as they had been on radio, were regularly featured on the television show.⁶¹ As late as 1954, the *Goldbergs'* last year in New York City, a show held on Yom Kippur eve concludes with a service in an Orthodox synagogue (April 5, 1954). The Torah is displayed and a cantor chants the *Kof Nidre*, as the pious congregation, including the *Goldbergs*, participate in the ritual. Following the somber five-minute scene, Molly appears at her apartment window and simply says good night—minus commercial message.⁶²

The Yom Kippur and other religious episodes can be seen, on the one hand, as a 1950s response to what Allen Gutman has termed the “postwar revival of peoplehood,” a nationwide reawakening of ethnic awareness that manifested among Jews primarily through renewed religious expression.⁶³ On the other hand, far from contradicting the tenets of assimilation, such revived religiosity was viewed by Jewish theologian Will Herberg as an expansion of its parameters into a “triple melting pot” of *Protestant, Catholic, Jew*—the title of Herberg's 1955 bestseller that celebrated American Jewry's purported entry into the religious mainstream.⁶⁴ Indeed, for sociologist Herbert Gans, the Jewish revival was not a real revival at all but rather a manifestation of “symbolic ethnicity,” a superficial but clearly visible form of religious expression that second-generation Jews hoped could compensate for a more meaningful but rapidly fading ethnic distinctiveness.⁶⁵ *The Goldbergs'* televisually (re)constructed religiosity, from this standpoint, appears to add another layer of (dis)simulation to the process. “Symbolic” or not, however, the Yom Kippur episode's unabashed homage to Judaism (and nominal slight to consumerism) was a rather defiant gesture at a time when McCarthyism and the move toward a “national culture” were far from America's only deterrents to nonconformity.

Changes in technology and the political economy had significantly increased the pressure to eschew controversy and follow the “golden mean.” By 1951, the coaxial cable had been laid across America, interconnecting the country and allowing for nationwide feeds of New York-based live programming. In 1952, the four-year Federal Communication Commission (FCC) freeze on licensing new stations was lifted, further expanding television’s reach and broadening its audience base beyond the Eastern urban centers that had provided the main viewership for shows like *The Goldbergs*. Also in 1952, the National Association of Broadcasters (NAB), responding to public concern and congressional hearings on the adverse effects of television on children, adopted stiff self-censorship directives along the lines of the Motion Picture Production Code. Meanwhile, sales of television sets soared, rising from less than one percent penetration in 1946 to 65 percent in 1955. Networks and sponsors, hoping to tap the burgeoning mass audience, adopted a marketing strategy aimed at the largest consuming group, the middle-class family, and the prime consumer within this group, the housewife. As Leonard Goldenson, head of ABC during this period, infamously stated: “We’re after a specific audience, the young housewife—one cut above the teenager—with two to four kids, who has to buy the clothing, the food, the soaps, the home remedies.”⁶⁰ Termed, with chilling precision, “dead-centrism,” this broad-based strategy aimed at the lowest common denominator (LCD) of the American audience spelled curtains for the once wildly popular Milton Berle-style variety show with its ribald humor and borscht-belt shtick. Just as Jewish vaudeville-turned-movie comics like Eddie Cantor had been de-Semitized to accommodate the mass audience during Hollywood’s transition to sound,⁶¹ mid-1950s TV’s homogenizing trend did not bode well for a Jewish working-class sitcom with orthodox religious inclinations like *The Goldbergs*.

MOTHER KNOWS BEST? “BERG-LARIZING” THE DOMESTIC MELODRAMA

In 1954, the first “original” television sitcom produced by a major Hollywood studio, *Father Knows Best*, hit the air.⁶² Besides signaling a wholesale shift to the Hollywood-produced telefilm as network TV’s preferred production mode,⁶³ *Father Knows Best* was also the first in a new type of white, middle-class, suburban sitcom that Nina Leibman has shown to be, at heart, “domestic melodrama.”⁶⁴ Decidedly more situation than comedy, privileging classical

narrative over vaudeville-style performance, such TV “domestic melodramas” emphasized familial love and relationships, moral transgression and moral lessons—invariably imparted by dear old Dad. A host of imitators followed, including *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet*, *Leave It to Beaver*, *The Donna Reed Show*, and, I would suggest, *The [Haverhill] Goldbergs*.

As we have seen, by the time Molly and family moved to Haverhill, the legitimating function ascribed to them by Lipsitz had essentially been completed. They were no longer a bridge to the white suburban middle class; they had *become* that class. The American Dream they had so ardently sought—and sold—had enfolded them. Robbed of its singular bond to Molly Goldberg as narrator/audience confidant, and of its ethnic working-class environment, *The Goldbergs*, in its 1955–1956 season, was for all intents and purposes a new show. Even the program’s title reflected the change, curiously alternating, with no apparent rhyme or reason, between *The Goldbergs* and a new title, *Molly*.⁶⁵ In one sense, of course, attempting to replace a distinctly Jewish name with a more generic one was entirely in keeping with the leveling trend of the *Father Knows Best* era. In another, it seems cruelly ironic that Molly should finally achieve “proprietary status” (in terms of the title) on a show that essentially was being “taken from her” (in terms of subject positioning). Indeed, the new title can be viewed as an oscillating signifier for “the return of the repressed,” with the repetition of *Molly* in bold letters at the head of alternating shows serving, like a blinking neon sign, to disguise/display her character’s demoted or, at best, decentered relationship to the program.

The marginalization of Molly extended into the diegesis. Entry into the fictional story, pre-Haverhill, was always televisually motivated by Molly’s turning from the window into the living room and thus always included her in the first diegetic image. In its suburban incarnation, Molly still plays a significant role in the action but the narrative frequently begins on, and revolves around, other characters: Jake, Uncle David, the children, even (decidedly secondary) cousin Harold. Material prosperity has been achieved at Molly’s expense, it would seem; indeed, if *The Goldbergs* was turning into *Mother Knows Best*, it was only with a question mark added. Such textual displacement of the housewife/mother figure was symptomatic of mid-1950s TV’s move away from women-centered sitcoms like *I Love Lucy* to the male-dominated/children-centered “domestic melodrama.” The “domestic melodrama’s” suppression of women, in turn, can be seen as a culmination of mounting American misogyny, which already in the 1940s had begun typecasting women as domineering

wives and permissive mothers, holding them accountable for everything from emasculated husbands and delinquent children to laying the groundwork for the international Communist conspiracy.⁶⁶

Although Jews had been linked even more perversely than women to Communism, anti-Semitism in post-World War II America, while certainly not disappearing, became, for a variety of reasons—postwar prosperity, a decline in immigration, awareness of the Holocaust, fallout from the fight against fascism—less socially respectable.⁶⁷ Of course, greater mainstream tolerance of Jews—as of all ethnic and racial minorities—came with a price: assimilation. Assimilation meant the “melting pot,” by the 1950s synonymous with the white, suburban middle class.

“Dead-centrism,” in both American society and TV, thus assured that *The Goldbergs’* entry into Haverville would be conditioned on a diffusion (definition?) of ethnicity. To begin with, all the (recognizable) Jewish neighbors—Mrs. Bloom, Mrs. Herman, Mrs. Cohen—are gone, replaced by the denominationally neutral (but decidedly un-Jewish) Mrs. Carey, Mrs. Peterson, Mrs. Van Ness. An attempt is made to revive Molly’s “Yoo-hoos” (her neighborhood gossip sessions), but suburban expansiveness frustrates the effort. In their apartment building, Molly and her women friends appeared in their respective windows across a narrow air shaft, all in the same shot—indicating relative poverty, but also mutuality and community (see Figure 2). When Molly tries to “mix” with the nextdoor neighbors in Haverville, the interaction has to be expressed through intercutting—signifying greater privacy, perhaps, but also comparative isolation and detachment (Figures 3 and 4). Additionally, major opportunities to deal with Jewish issues are either not taken or consciously avoided. When (in the episode “Social Butterfly”) Molly is initially rejected by her neighbors—through misunderstanding, not anti-Semitism—one would think that someone in the family might have suggested such a disturbing possibility. Although anti-Semitism was in abeyance in 1950s America, it had not been banished: university-admission, bank loan, and real estate practices still discriminated against Jews.⁶⁸

Further ethno-religious denial in the Haverville *Goldbergs* is evinced when Molly switches from one butcher to another, both having predominantly non-Jewish clientele, with no concern shown over kosher meat preparation (“Die Fledermaus”). Not only had the New York City *Goldbergs* patronized kosher butcher shops, but writer-director Berg had even insisted that they be depicted “as authentically as those [actual ones] in the Bronx.”⁶⁹ Most glaringly, when daughter Rosie suddenly becomes obsessed with her “ugly” nose and insists on



Figure 2. Material deprivation, but intimacy: Molly “mixing” with her Jewish tenement neighbors. (UCLA Film and Television Archives)

having plastic surgery, this obvious invitation to confront ethnic stereotyping in the non-Jewish neighborhood is refused (“Rosie’s Nose”). No Passovers or Yom Kippurs are observed, at least none that we see or hear about; in fact, one wonders whether a synagogue even exists in the Springfield-like town, or whether the homogenized *Goldbergs* even care.

Still, in other ways, Haverville is also “Berg-larized.” Molly and Uncle David’s Yiddish accents are as thick as ever, and her malapropisms just as pun-gent. The vaudeville-inspired sexual innuendo they had always expressed (and which has been scarcely acknowledged by other commentators) persists despite the suburban atmosphere: “This is not the Bronx, where I can be *delivered* [regarding grocery delivery];” “This is the man [referring to a concert maestro] who’s going to *conduct* us tonight;” “Yes, you’ll be my *correspondent* [meaning writing the landlord a letter];” “Jake, be friendly, be a *hostess*.” Perhaps out of discretion, these “Freudian slips” are treated as throwaways, eliciting neither audience response (the show had no laugh track) nor character reaction (family and friends act blasé; others, polite). Molly’s faux pas leave the

new neighbors unfazed also, at least once she wins back their good graces, along with an appreciation of ethnic difference — not on gentle terms (she tries consulting an etiquette book), but by wowing them with her homemade strudel and *tsimis*. Even her “Yoo-hoos,” while no longer a reflection of working-class solidarity, do serve to open up and humanize the hermetically sealed suburban environment.

Wider fissures are evident in regard to gender relations. We have seen that Molly’s once central role has been significantly reduced in the show’s Haverville format, whereas Jake’s star has risen, in the *Father Knows Best* mold. Yet relinquishing the spotlight, especially when much of it had reflected onto the sponsor, can also bring a measure of independence, as can being cast adrift in new surroundings and a new sitcom form, especially when that form — the “domestic melodrama” — offers, by its entrenchment in the hegemonic order, a site of potential resistance to that order. As John Ellis notes in regard to the melodramatic form in general, “[I]t is capable of producing situations that cannot receive a satisfactory resolution: both desire and social constraint cry out to be appeased in this genre.”⁷⁰ Much of the sociosexual irresolution in the TV “domestic melodrama” specifically, Leibman suggests, stems from the disparity between the seeming banality of the sitcom situations and the explosive reactions they produce, a disparity often more pronounced in the TV “domestic melodrama” than in its filmic counterpart.⁷¹ Two Haverville episodes of *The Goldbergs*, in particular, appear to reinforce Leibman’s contention.

In the first of these, “Molly’s Pocketbook,” Molly is given a new pocketbook for a solo overnight bus trip to visit a relative. What begins as an adventure turns into a *film noir* thriller when the pocketbook of a woman Molly meets on the bus is stolen. Rather than call the police, Molly and the other woman decide to play detective, ultimately discovering the “stolen” pocketbook — in Molly’s suitcase. Molly claims there has been a mix-up, since both the other woman’s and her own (now missing) pocketbook were identical, but she is incarcerated and has to be bailed out by Jake. In the end, Molly’s pocketbook is found and she is exonerated. Her last line: “And to think, I almost had a record!”

Leaving aside the Freudian implications (pocketbook as female sexual symbol, asserted but then suppressed), the “dominant reading” is clearly regressive in terms of gender relations. Molly’s brush with empowerment has ended in disaster, teaching both her and father/husband Jake a cautionary lesson: Mother/wife is best left at home, holding the apron not the purse strings. Yet, in probing deeper (something the “domestic melodrama” often invites), fault



Figures 3 and 4. Material comfort, but isolation and detachment: Molly interacting with her non-Jewish suburban neighbors.
(UCLA Film and Television Archives)

lines in the feminine mystique are revealed: Wasn't that a wild ride Molly was on, and survived, largely through her own pluck and perseverance? And don't we bet—and wish—she'd give it another whirl, Lucy-style, if given half the chance? Sure beats mopping floors and ironing underwear! Then there's the enigmatic last line, "And to think, I almost had a record!" Another quasi-malapropism, with a kernel of wisdom beneath—yet without a laugh track or character reaction to tickle us, it hardly comes across as a joke, at least not in the classic sitcom sense. What reverberates is ambivalence, both dread and disappointment at the unrequited flirtation with criminality. Transgression against male hegemony is dangerous, the punch line implies, yet also titillating. Further oppositional potential is implicit in the episode's overblown nature, the hyperbolic representation of the seemingly inconsequential that Leibman finds endemic to the "domestic melodrama." Having a harmless housewife's bus trip end in the jail house is not only narratively excessive—crying out for appeasement of desire and social constraint, in Ellis's terms; it's a definitive case of the punishment exceeding the crime, a *textual injustice* exposing structural deficiencies in *The Goldbergs'* suburban middle-class world.

The injustice is compounded and the Freudian implications foregrounded in the second episode, "Dreams." Here the conflict revolves around neighbor Mrs. Van Ness, a woman well-versed in the Freudian lexicon who has appointed herself the community's resident psychoanalyst. Finding avid "clients" in her fellow Haverville housewives, Mrs. Van Ness uncovers a cauldron of frustration and discontent. Molly's dreams, for instance, reveal that she is "sublimating her personality." "You're too intelligent to be a *hausfrau*," Mrs. Van Ness insists. "You should get out into the world!" When Molly and the other women begin acting on Mrs. Van Ness's advice, a feminist revolt breaks out. Molly dumps her housework onto Uncle David and gets Jake to increase the maid's visits to two times a week. When another of Molly's dreams indicates that she is "imprisoned by her inhibitions" and "bursting with the desire to express" herself, Molly seeks to "fulfill her potential" by learning to sing, dance, and play the piano. In the end, of course, Mrs. Van Ness goes too far. When she claims that Molly really hates her husband and children and even entertains a death wish, a counterrevolt ensues—mounted by Jake and Uncle David, but finally joined by Molly as well. Mrs. Van Ness is banished back to her kitchen along with the other women, and Haverville's patriarchy is restored.

Although hegemonic resistance, as in "Molly's Pocketbook," is ultimately punished and contained through a regressive moral lesson and classical narra-

tive closure, the ideological fault lines exposed in "Dreams" are even more pronounced. An entire neighborhood of women, not just one housewife, challenge the system this time, and their rebellion is overt, not just implied. As for textual excess, if an amateur shrink can foment revolution at the drop of an inhibition, can the kitchen be expected to contain it for long? Yet "Dreams" is more than just a prescient, if covert, critique of patriarchy; it is a veritable compendium of mid-1950s suburban middle-class concerns. The demonizing (and trivializing) of Mrs. Van Ness, the self-proclaimed psychiatrist, is an obvious slap at the advice-peddling "expert," as well as a ringing condemnation of Freud—both pet peeves of mainstream 1950s America.

The reaction in "Dreams" against Freud, from a Jewish standpoint, is worth examining in greater detail. Although Freud's Jewishness, unlike Hollywood's, was rarely grounds, at least in America, to attack him or his theories, the preponderance of Jews among the founders and subsequent practitioners of psychoanalysis, and the notion of the "talking cure" as a surrogate for the Catholic confessional, had led to a branding of modern psychology in general as the "Jewish science."⁷² Berg's aversion to the controversial Freud (quite popular among other—disproportionately Jewish—artists and intellectuals), like her earlier distancing from the "wickedly parodic" Milt Gross, can thus be seen as another form of Jewish accommodationism. Let us not forget that the Freudian acolyte in "Dreams," Mrs. Van Ness, is clearly marked as non-Jewish. As for Berg's personal distaste for Freud, one need only look at the introduction to her autobiography (published in 1961): "Sometimes I get the feeling that Dr. Freud himself invented mothers and fathers for their children to hate. If I had ever met the gentleman, I'm afraid I would have set psychoanalysis back fifty years. I adored my parents. On the other hand, I don't feel I have to make a production of it."⁷³

What undermines Berg's case against Freud in "Dreams," of course, is that she makes such an overproduction of it. The conflation of subconscious release and near-lethal revolt is (in a sitcom, at least) unquestionably (pardon the expression) of paranoid proportions. It also clearly displaces onto psychoanalysis many of the criticisms aimed at 1950s women themselves: the emasculation of men (Uncle David's "feminizing"); juvenile delinquency (who's going to take care of the kids?); and even associations with Communism (Mrs. Van Ness's underlying message as: Housewives of Haverville unite—you have nothing to lose but your inhibitions). Ultimately, however, we are left, as with "Molly's Pocketbook," with the disquieting sense that the episode "protests too much," that in dumping all the world's problems onto poor Mrs. Van Ness, a solution

to those problems is being deferred—at Haverville's, and American society's, peril.

Of course, two subversive Jewish sitcom episodes do not a TV, much less a societal, revolution make. The general thrust of mid-1950s America and American television was overwhelmingly inimical to interventionist maneuvering on issues of ethnicity, class, or gender. *The Goldbergs'* move to Haverville in 1955 and official cancellation in 1956 were, far from an anomaly, part of an industrywide trend toward elimination of the urban, ethnic working-class sitcom that had flourished in early TV. Of the other major examples in this subgenre, *Life with Luigi* had left the air in 1952, *Amos 'n' Andy* in 1953; *Mama*, like *The Goldbergs*, was cancelled in 1956, and *The Honeymooners*, in 1957. Although it lasted until 1958, *Life with Riley's* Los Angeles tract-home environment had only tenuously qualified the program as an urban sitcom to begin with, and *Hey Jeannie* must be considered a generic "straggler" for its comparatively late TV start (1956) and finish (1960).

However, *The Goldbergs*, while certainly capitulating to the homogenizing forces of mid-1950s television and society, also "fought back." Molly and family were Americanized, yet their neighbors were, to a certain extent, "Jewitized." Molly lost her window monologue, but she was also encouraged "to get out into the world." The women of Haverville were punished for seeking greater parity with men, but their dissatisfaction was acknowledged and to some extent redeemed. Assimilated into the suburban middle class and absorbed by the *Father Knows Best*-style sitcom, *The Goldbergs* relinquished its working-class roots and denied much of its Jewishness. But the program also tapped oppositional strands in the "domestic melodrama" to occasionally plead, however ambivalently, a progressive case. Which of these forces would gain the upper hand, in relation to Jewish images on TV, is indicated in part in the fact that it would be another fifteen years before the Jewish-dominated television industry would again chance a prime-time episodic series featuring an identifiably Jewish protagonist.

3: The Vanishing American Jew?

Ethno-Racial Projects in the Post-Goldbergs Era

But as for you [the Israelites freed from Egypt], your dead bodies shall fall in this wilderness. And your children shall be shepherds in the wilderness forty years, and shall suffer for your faithlessness, until the last of your bodies lies in the wilderness.

—Numbers 15:26

Jews are not alone among self-conscious minority groups in being concerned about ethno-racial survival. However, for Jews, historically one of the smaller groups, such concerns are paramount. Today, Jews make up about six million people, or 2 percent of the population, in America; worldwide, about fifteen million people, or 0.3 percent.¹ In 1948, the philosopher Simon Rawidowicz emphasized Jews' perennial obsession with extinction in an essay, in Hebrew, "*Am ha-Holekh va-Met*" ("The Ever-Dying People"). From the Talmudic scholars onward, Rawidowicz contended, "there was hardly a generation in the Diaspora period which did not consider itself the final link in Israel's chain."² Whether from tragedy or success, extermination or assimilation, Jews, in Ellen McClain's words, "have considered themselves to be terminal for four thousand years."³

Occasionally, Jewish survivalist angst, ever simmering on the edges of Jewish community debate, erupts into a crisis. One of the more volatile of these occurred in the 1960s, fueled by a series of late-1950s population studies. These studies—alarming for some, perhaps comforting for others—held broad enough interest for *Look* magazine to base a 1964 cover article on them, "The Vanishing American Jew." The article reported the findings of a

national population survey by sociologist Donald J. Bogue that Jews' low birth rates meant they were "scarcely reproducing themselves."⁷⁴ Several studies pointed to a "soaring intermarriage rate" among third-generation Jews, and, perhaps most significantly, according to Erich Rosenthal's survey, "about 70% of the children of mixed marriages were not being raised as Jews."⁷⁵ Altogether, Arthur Jacobs, administrative secretary of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, concluded, "Jews could fade from 2.9% to 1.6% of the U.S. population by the year 2000."⁷⁶ As an apparent response to and antidote for this latest Jewish identity crisis, Rawidowicz's "Ever-Dying Jew" was reprinted in English in 1967.

Going unmentioned in all the brouhaha, however, was another "crisis" of Jewish survival, survival on America's television screens. No Jewish sitcom, or other episodic series, had aired on any major network since the demise of *The Goldbergs* in 1956. (Gertrude Berg's 1960 comeback attempt in the proposed *Molly Goes to College*—playing the even more homogenized Molly Green—never materialized.) Gone also by the late 1950s were the Jewish-hosted, Yiddish-spiced variety shows that, together with live anthology dramas, had dominated early TV—for example, Milton Berle's *Texaco Star Theater* (1949–1953, reprised under various titles until 1959); Sid Caesar's *Your Show of Shows* (1950–1954, reprised until 1958); *The Colgate Hour*, hosted by Dean Martin and Jerry Lewis (1950–1955); Jack Carter's *All-Star Revue* (1951–1953); *The Martha Raye Show* (1954–1956).⁷⁷ Although two implicitly Jewish comedy series, *The Jack Benny Program* (1950–1965) and *The Joey Bishop Show* (1961–1965), made it into the 1960s, Benny's and Bishop's Jewishness, like George Burns's (*The Burns and Allen Show* [1950–1958]), remained "closeted," undisclosed.⁷⁸

Jews didn't vanish completely from American commercial television, but a certain ghetto mentality prevailed. TV producers began adopting quotas for Jewish characters, according to Simon Wincelberg, a prominent Jewish TV writer at the time: "They rationed you: one Jewish character a year."⁷⁹ Among the more memorable was Wincelberg's own Nathan Shotness, a Russian Jewish immigrant who traded Talmudic wisdom with the offbeat, white-knight protagonist Paladin on the popular western series *Have Gun Will Travel* (1957–1963). A handful of anthology, dramatic, and comedy series had occasional episodes with Jewish characters and/or Jewish themes.⁸⁰ A few sitcoms even featured regular Jewish characters, such as Al and Charlotte Schnauzer of *Car 54, Where Are You?* (1961–1963) and Buddy Sorrell of *The Dick Van Dyke Show* (1961–1966). An extratextual aspect of the latter program, however, reinforces

the sense of an overall downward trend in Jewish televisual representation from the fall of *The Goldbergs* onward.

The Dick Van Dyke Show was originally conceived by Carl Reiner as an autobiographical riff on his days as part of the now legendary *Show of Shows* writing team, which included Mel Brooks, Neil Simon, and Woody Allen. Intended to star Reiner himself as an explicitly Jewish writer, a pilot episode of *Head of the Family* actually aired in 1960. When the show died on the vine in the sitcom-poor, action-series-sated period, Reiner was persuaded not merely to de-Semitize the show (tone down its Jewishness) but to de-Judaize it ("convert" its Jews to non-Jews).⁸¹ The role of the writer protagonist, Rob Petrie, was thus handed to the WASPish-Dick Van Dyke, and the Sid Caesar-inspired comic, though played by Reiner, was given the distinctly Irish-sounding stage name of Alan Brady. Petrie's writing partner Buddy Sorrel (Morey Amsterdam) remained the sole relic of the show's originally intended (and factually grounded) Jewishness. Ethno-racial and historical violations notwithstanding, the de-Judaized show became one of the decade's more beloved and popular series.⁸²

Jews' "disappearing act" on episodic American television after an initial strong visibility is strikingly reminiscent of a similar shift in the American cinema of the 1930s and 1940s. Following a spate of classical Hollywood features in the 1920s in which Jews were prominently, recognizably displayed, culminating in the epochal *The Jazz Singer* (1927), a virtual banishment of recognizable Jews from U.S. movies occurred from the early 1930s to the end of World War II, a period Henry Popkin has called the "Great Retreat" in Jewish cultural representation.⁸³ Significantly separating the cinematic and televisual de-Judaizing trends, however, are the contrasting socioeconomic and cultural conditions informing the two historical periods. Whereas virulent Depression- and Hitler-fueled American anti-Semitism moved Jewish moguls to avoid Jewish movie depictions in the 1930s and 1940s, the retreat from Jewish TV images from the late 1950s through the 1960s occurred during a time of unprecedented prosperity and declining anti-Semitism.⁸⁴ Indeed, the postwar years that Irving Howe describes in general as a "philo-Semitic" period⁸⁵ burgeoned in the 1960s into what Albert Goldman has christened "the Jewish Decade": "Benefiting from universal guilt over the murders by the Nazis, stiffening in fresh pride over the achievements of the State, Israel, reaping the harvest of generations of hard work and sacrifice for the sake of the 'children,' the Jews burst suddenly into prominence in a dozen different areas of national life. They became the new heroes of commerce, art and intellect."⁸⁶

Although Jewish achievement was noteworthy in all the arts, from abstract expressionist painting (Franz Klein, Mark Rothko, Helen Frankenthaler, Adolph Gottlieb) to night-club entertainment (Lenny Bruce, Mort Sahl, Shelly Berman, Nichols and May) to folk and rock 'n' roll (Bob Dylan, Leonard Cohen, Simon and Garfunkel), literary accomplishments were perhaps the most extraordinary and, overall, the most explicitly Jewish. Figures such as Saul Bellow, Joseph Heller, Norman Mailer, Bernard Malamud, and Philip Roth not only dominated American letters, but their novels and those by Herman Wouk, Leon Uris, Irwin Shaw, Wallace Markfield, and Bruce Jay Friedman caused Jewishness by the 1960s to become, in Robert Lowell's words, "the theme of our literary culture."¹⁷

This new Jewish tendency in American literature led directly to an upsurge in Jewish American cinema not seen since the 1920s. Beginning in 1958, according to film historian Patricia Erens, "a series of films appeared, dealing with Jews or with Jewish life, which affected the image of the Jew for the next two decades."¹⁸ Almost all these films (e.g., *Marjorie Morningstar* [1958], *Me and the Colonel* [1958], *I Accuse!* [1958], *The Diary of Anne Frank* [1959], *The Last Angry Man* [1959]) were based on novels or plays written by and/or adapted for the screen by Jews.¹⁹

The civil rights and ethnic pride movements of the late 1950s and 1960s further enhanced the move toward ethnic specificity (if "black is beautiful," why not Jewishness?), while the folk revival of the period accentuated ethnic "authenticity" in cultural expression. Social analysts began referring to "pluralism" rather than "assimilation" to describe (and idealize) American ethno-racial development, and Nathan Glazer and Daniel P. Moynahan reported in *Beyond the Melting Pot* that ethnic groups were proving "unmeltable."²⁰

This tilt toward ethnic specificity, while generated and carried along by the overall particularist causes of the mid-to-late 1960s (Black Power, women's and gay liberation, Chicano and American Indian movements), also had a uniquely Jewish historical component, the Six Day War. A turning point in Jewish identity for both Jews and non-Jews, Israel's stunning military victory in 1967 transformed the world's image of the Jewish state and, by association, of Jews as well. For centuries the Jewish people and Jewish males in particular had been cast as undersized, feminized, flat-footed weaklings, an image that the alleged passive submission to the Holocaust had only reinforced. While modern Israel's founding in 1948, through an impressive military effort, had significantly altered this image of the Jew as perpetual victim, Israel for the next nineteen years had still seemed an embattled underdog hanging by a thread, "a

tiny, helpless outpost surrounded by powerful enemies who might destroy it at any moment."²¹ The Six Day War didn't necessarily reduce the sense of Israel's precariousness—in fact for many Jews it actually exacerbated such a feeling—but it utterly annihilated the notion of Jewish helplessness. As then community activist, later American Jewish Congress leader Jacqueline Levine put it: "Israel made us all stand a little taller in 1967."²² The Zionist image of the Muscle Jew, a counter to the belittling, anti-Semitic constructions of the past, had now been fully realized. Although many Jews would soon recoil at the new macho ideal, both psychosexually and politically, the immediate impact of the astounding Israeli military triumph was to infuse a broad spectrum of the American Jewish community with a sense of ethnic pride and self-awareness.²³

Reflecting the overall and Jewish particularist trends, American films of the 1960s increasingly gave full expression to explicitly Jewish characteristics and gave rise to new Jewish character types. Again largely drawn from literary sources (Wouk's *Marjorie Morningstar*; Roth's *Goodbye, Columbus* and *Portnoy's Complaint*; Woody Allen's plays, short stories, and comic persona), the most prominent and enduring of these were the Jewish American Princess, Overbearing Jewish Mother, and Neurotic New York *Schlemiel* (lovable loser/fool, generally male). Although causing consternation in some Jewish circles, these negative characterizations nonetheless demonstrated a new willingness and ability on the part of Jews to cast a critical eye on aspects of Jewishness and to present a more inclusive picture of Jewish life. Jewish actors certainly benefited from the increased acceptance if not commercial cachet of particularism, with many rising to stardom playing Jewish types (George Segal, Elliott Gould, Barbra Streisand, Woody Allen, Richard Benjamin, Dustin Hoffman).²⁴ Big noses, kinky hair, and nasal New York accents, Carl Reiner's included, were now "in"—at least in the movies.

If a particularist Jewish ethno-racial project had begun by the 1960s to impact American cinema and, indeed, much of American culture, why did this project bypass (or was it bypassed by?) that culture's dominant popular medium, TV? Why does sociocultural reflectionism in general fail so miserably to map Jewish televisual representation in the post-Goldbergs, pre-Bridget Loves Bernie era?

Much of the answer is to be found in the contrasting institutional structures and commercial imperatives driving the film and TV industries during this period. Faced with the loss of its preeminent position as a mass entertainment medium to TV, the fragmented Hollywood film industry turned, from the 1950s onward, increasingly to using focused demographic surveys and targeting

its product to select audiences, particularly youth. The newly consolidated American commercial television industry, on the other hand, partly due to sponsor pressures and stricter governmental control, partly due to continued reliance on generalized surveys and nationwide ratings, persisted in prime-time programming geared to an undifferentiated mass audience and the entire family. This meant more sensationalist, yet also more challenging, fare for the movies, continued LCD/LOP (Lowest Common Denominator/Least Objectifiable Programming) for TV.²⁵ Thus while Hollywood was industrially predisposed to countenance, if not to encourage, the emergent cultural pluralism of the 1960s, TV was stuck with what Michael Elkin calls "video assimilation—a byproduct of the melting pot with much of the uniquely [ethnic] qualities boiled away."²⁶

Ironically, then, just as the broader U.S. culture was embracing Jewish artists and intellectuals as "truly American," under the rarified rubric of modernism, television, "the most popular art," was rejecting them as "not American enough" for mass consumption.²⁷ Besides the institutional logic, a politically unconscious anti-Semitism appears to undergird this contrast between the Jew as high-cultural icon on the one hand, mass-cultural reject on the other. Relegated to the elitist fringes, Jewish artists and intellectuals, whatever their cultural distinction, were rendered further from the norm and therefore also less threatening, at least to the supposed average American, than if allowed into the nation's living rooms and shown to be "just like us." A Jew in the arts, a gentleman at home, had become American popular culture's neo-*hashtalah* injunction.

"RELEVANT" AND MATERIAL: MAKING THE WORLD SAFE FOR BRIDGET LOVES BERNIE

Another sea change in television's industrial practices and programming forms occurred around 1970. Unlike the radical changes of the mid-1950s that homogenized and ultimately undid *The Goldbergs*, however, this new paradigm shift actually encouraged ethno-racial specificity. The crucial factor in this transformation was a move in the viewer ratings system that dictated advertising rates, and therefore also programming decisions, from one based on *overall* numbers to one relying on *demographics*. Pioneered by Paul Klein, NBC's vice-president in charge of "audience measurement," the new demographic assessments focused on viewers' age, gender, and location as the main determinants in consumer decisions. When it was discovered that young, urban adult viewers (especially women) aged 18–49 "were the prime consumers of the

types of goods advertised on TV," this new "quality" demographic became the prime target of a new program form that Jane Feuer has termed "quality TV."²⁸

The rapidity and extent to which the "quality" approach was adopted by the American television industry is evident from the prime-time scheduling shift of the dominant network at the time, CBS. From a 1969–1970 slate of long-running "hayseed" shows that appealed mainly to older, middle-American audiences—*Mayberry R.F.D.*, *The Red Skelton Hour*, *The Beverly Hillbillies*, *The Glen Campbell Goodtime Hour*, *Hee Haw*—CBS under President Bob Wood switched by 1972–1973 to the young, hip, urban shows that would define the decade and redefine TV—*All in the Family*, *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, and *M*A*S*H*.²⁹ Dubbed "relevant TV" by critics pleased to see a form of programming speaking more directly to the times, these series were joined by myriad spin-offs and additional series that pushed the socially engaged agenda into the ethno-racial arena. An unprecedented number of these "ethnicons" featured African Americans: *Sanford and Son*, *The Jeffersons*, *Good Times*, *What's Happening!!* while *Chico and the Man* became the first prime-time Hispanic series in the history of American TV.³⁰ And, in *Bridget Loves Bernie* (1972–1973), TV Jews made a comeback (see Figure 5).

The first Jewish episodic series since *The Goldbergs*, this intermarriage sitcom about a Jewish young man and an Irish Catholic young woman was a curious way to attempt a re-Judaization of prime time. It is not that the intermarriage theme was an unfamiliar, or historically unpopular, one to Jewish or non-Jewish audiences, but, previous to the 1960s, exogamy had not been a major Jewish concern. *Bridget Loves Bernie* was essentially an updating of the 1924 Anne Nichols play *Abie's Irish Rose*, which had spawned a host of imitators and itself been adapted for the big screen in 1928 and again in 1946.³¹ TV had dealt with the Jewish outmarriage theme as early as 1948, the first year of network television, and on occasional episodes and anthology dramas thereafter.³² Until the 1960s, the frequent and generally favorable depiction of intermarriage in American film and television may have reflected the reality of the American film and television communities, but for the Jewish American populace as a whole, intermarriage rates in the century's first six decades had never exceeded 10 percent (and hovered around 5 percent as late as the mid-1950s).³³ As we have seen, however, the Jewish survivalist crisis of the 1960s was sparked by reports of mounting intermarriage rates, with some estimates putting these nationally at over 20 percent in 1965 and rising.³⁴ Imagine the reaction, then, when hard on the heels of the 1970 National Jewish Population Survey's reported 32 percent rate,³⁵ Bernie Steinberg (David Birney), the first regular Jewish



Figure 5. The first Jewish "intermarriage.com": *Bridget Loves Bernie's* Bridget Fitzgerald (Meredith Baxter) and Bernie Steinberg (David Birney).
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televisual protagonist in sixteen years, was romancing and marrying Bridget Fitzgerald (Meredith Baxter)—not only happily but on a prime-time network show.

The response from virtually the entire spectrum of American religious Judaism was instant and resoundingly negative, with the liberal American Jewish Congress spearheading the protest.³⁶ Jewish leaders met with CBS officials and demanded that *Bridget Loves Bernie* be withdrawn, one rabbi threatened to organize a boycott, and the show's producers reportedly even received bomb threats.³⁷ Producer reaction to the vocal opposition was initially bewildered. Speaking to the program's Jewish antagonists as well as to the broader media-effects crowd, John D. Mitchell, president of Screen Gems, the show's supplier, stated, "While we recognize that interfaith marriage is a reality in today's society, I don't for a single moment believe *Bridget Loves Bernie* is advocating it or that any couple would be influenced by it."³⁸

That the show was indeed "advocating" intermarriage was only part of the problem for organized American Jewry. Of even greater concern was the glib

manner in which the sensitive theme was treated. Although earlier filmic and televisual presentations had occasionally shown intermarriage as painless and even "as a welcome solution and a kind of salvation for . . . oppressed minorities," none had both endorsed the practice and also mocked a basic tenet of Judaism by making its abrogation seem "chic."³⁹ As Rabbi Balfour Brickner, spokesman for the Synagogue Council of America, complained, "The program treats intermarriage in a cavalier, cute, and condoning fashion, and deals with its inevitable problems as though they're instantly solvable."⁴⁰ A case in point was the intermarried couple's pat answer to the prickly question of in what faith to rear the children: They simply hoped to have twins (as Abie and Rose had done) and split the difference. Adding insult to injury, for many protestors, was the "loud and vulgar" portrayal of Bernie's parents and extended family.⁴¹

Receiving less publicity than the issues of intermarriage and negative stereotyping but more troubling to some Jewish critics was "a new kind of crisis" the show exemplified: hyper-assimilation. For Robert J. Milich of *The Jewish Spectator*, *Bridget Loves Bernie* accurately conveyed the sense that "the state of being Jewish has become so attenuated that for many the very term 'intermarriage' has no meaning."⁴² The union of the "identical" Bernie and Bridget no longer posed a threat for Jews or Catholics, in this view—whatever specificity the religiously and ethnically neutered couple had to lose had already been lost.⁴³ Further, not only had Bernie, like most of the third-generation American Jews he represented, been de-Semitized, but his second-generation parents' ethnicity had been rendered atavistic. "Why are you suddenly acting so Jewish?" Bernie asks of his abruptly Yiddish-spouting, matzah ball-serving family at the dinner intended to introduce them to his betrothed (September 16, 1972).

In spite of the intermarriage, stereotyping, and assimilation issues (although sparked by these), *Bridget Loves Bernie* was a major success. Enviously "hammocked" on Saturday night between mega-hits *All in the Family* and *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, the sitcom was the most highly rated new show on TV, ranking fourth, some weeks, among all TV series, and fifth for the season.⁴⁴ At the end of March, however, at the height of the Jewish protest and the show's popularity, CBS announced that *Bridget Loves Bernie* would not be renewed for the next season. Defying credibility with the aplomb of a presidential press secretary, CBS President Wood explained that the decision to cancel the show was "absolutely removed, independent, and disassociated from criticism of the show from some Jewish groups."⁴⁵

THE PRESSURE TO PRESSURE: THE RISE OF MEDIA ADVOCACY GROUPS

Just as the attempt at a Jewish sitcom was part of the overall TV industrial turn to "relevance" and ethnically specific programming, the reaction of Jewish advocacy groups to *Bridget Loves Bernie* was part of a larger trend. The settlement of the landmark WLBT case in 1966, after a decade-long struggle, finally granted minority groups the right to challenge the renewal of station licenses by the FCC, thereby establishing these groups' power to influence broadcast decisions. The WLBT case sparked a movement for media advocacy among those segments of American society in which minority consciousness had been raised by the civil rights movement. As a result, according to Kathryn Montgomery, "virtually every ethnic group" (in addition to women and gays) "mobilized against prime-time TV" by the late 1960s and early 1970s.⁴⁶ Ironically, Jews found themselves at both ends of the protests. In 1972, the same year Jewish watchdog groups were taking issue with *Bridget Loves Bernie*, Domingo Nick Reyes, head of the National Mexican-American Anti-Defamation Committee (NMAADC) began attacking Jews for their alleged industry control. Raising the specter of anti-Semitism that had stalked Jews since the earliest days of Hollywood, Reyes declared, "The pattern of institutional racism is perpetuated by one ethnic minority. The Jews have an overconcentration of power."⁴⁷ Although another Hispanic leader, Mario Obledo of the Mexican American Legal Defense and Education Fund (MALDEF), later "deflected Reyes's racial rhetoric to a more generalized 'white America,'"⁴⁸ the episode illuminated the insider/outsider dilemma that would increasingly haunt Jews in the decades to come.

Although it rolled with the rising media advocacy tide, the Jewish campaign against *Bridget Loves Bernie* must also be seen in the broader historical context of Jewish image surveillance. Organized monitoring of Jewish *film* images actually extended back to the preclassical period. Taking its cue from the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People's (NAACP's) protests of D. W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), B'nai B'rith had agitated successfully for removal of anti-Semitic images in Griffith's *Intolerance* (1916), and later organized a boycott of Cecil B. De Mille's *The King of Kings* (1927) because it treated historic Jewish authorities "with hatred and contempt."⁴⁹ The latter incident led to a "formal relationship" between B'nai B'rith and the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America (MPPDA), whereby the Jewish group would serve as the "official consultant" to the

MPPDA on films with Jewish content.⁵⁰ Despite cooperation between the two groups throughout the 1930s and 1940s, however, the advent of the Production Code (Hollywood's official self-censorship guidelines), written in 1930 by prominent Catholics and administered from 1934 on by another Catholic, Joseph Breen, assured that the preponderance of Jews in Hollywood notwithstanding, "the American Jewish community was not able to exercise the kind of control over the film industry that other religious groups did, especially American Catholics."⁵¹

Partly to rectify this situation, the Motion Picture Project was established in 1947 by the National Jewish Community Relations Advisory Council (NCRAC), a powerful coalition of Jewish groups formed in 1944. The first standing committee devoted to the surveillance of ethnically specific film images, the Motion Picture Project's primary function was to "'deal with problems arising from defamatory and stereotypical characters of minority groups, primarily Jewish,' to encourage positive images wherever possible, and to serve as an information agency to aid studios in accurate presentations."⁵² Even *The Goldbergs*, in its cinematic variant, came under the Project's scrutiny, over the question of negative stereotypes. John Stone, head of the Project, negotiated this issue with Paramount Studios before the 1950 release of the film version. Presaging and perhaps establishing a model for *The Goldbergs* in its Haverville incarnation, the movie's title was eventually changed from *The Goldbergs* to *Molly*, although its New York City setting and other Jewishisms remained true to its radio and TV forebears.⁵³

In the context of *Goldbergs* producer Cherney Berg's complaint about TV industry pressure to tone down the 'TV series' ethnicity, the Motion Picture Project's assimilationist agenda appears to have dovetailed with that of the nation as a whole, if for ethnically specific reasons. The Project's sensitivity to demeaning stereotypes, although legitimate, also reflected first- and second-generation American Jews' defensiveness over anti-Semitism, a defensiveness reinforced so recently by the Holocaust. As Mendel Silberberg, a major force in the Project, cautioned in 1947, "It would be unfortunate if Hollywood were to place too much emphasis on Jewish issues."⁵⁴

The Motion Picture Project was dissolved in 1967. Erens attributes its dissolution to the watchdog group's "success," which she ascribes to several factors: the effectiveness of director Stone; the commercially based desire on the part of Hollywood producers to offend as few people as possible; and the fact that "most production heads were Jewish and thus concerned about the popular response toward Jews."⁵⁵ Since, as we have seen, Jews' numerical dominance

within the film industry did not always translate into Jewish control over movie images, there are two other likely causes for the Project's dissolution—the demise of the Production Code in 1966 (it was replaced by the ratings system in 1968), and the Six Day War. Who needed to police American Jewish images, the Project's leaders may have reasoned, when the Israeli military had shown the world the consequences of messing with the Muscle Jew? In any event, by the time of the Project's disbanding, its “too Jewish” ethno-racial project had tilted back to the dialectical opposite, “not Jewish enough.” And it was on this basis—“quality TV,” “relevance,” and cultural pluralism notwithstanding—that the “Jewish” sitcom *Bridget Loves Bernie* ultimately ran aground.

REACTING TO RHODA: TOO JEWISH OR NOT JEWISH ENOUGH?

The long and vigilant legacy of Jewish image monitoring in general, and the virulent reaction to *Bridget Loves Bernie* in particular, makes *Rhoda*'s prime-time existence, much less its survival for five comparatively controversy-free years (1974–1979), all the more perplexing. Spun off from the hugely popular *Mary Tyler Moore Show* (1970–1977), *Rhoda* starred Valerie Harper (a non-Jew, as was Bernie portrayed David Birney) as a dark-complected, nasal-inflected Jewish Woman in Search of Marriage. At least this was the stereotypical role she had played for four years on *Mary Tyler Moore*, as the New York Jewish “wry” to best buddy Mary Richards's white-bread, Minnesota WASP. Just two months into her own series, however, and telegenically shed of her Ugly Duckling *zaffigkeit* (fleshiness—okay for a Jewish mama, not for a wannabe wife), Rhoda Morgenstern of the Bronx was exchanging vows—not, mind you, with some nice Jewish doctor or lawyer, but with the Italian-Catholic construction-company owner Joe Girard (played by the Jewish David Groh). As for the wedding itself, potential religious conflict was papered over by having a generic justice of the peace perform the ceremony (Bridget and Bernie had eloped to avoid dealing with the issue).

While furor over *Bridget Loves Bernie* ended the series, however, *Rhoda* sailed through its highly touted, ratings-record-smashing intermarriage episode (“*Rhoda's Wedding*,” October 28, 1994)—and the televised intermarried life to follow—with nary a peep from Jewish image protectors.⁵⁶ Even Rhoda's TV parents, as opposed to Bernie's, were remarkably sanguine about the whole affair. Papa Morgenstern (Harold Gould) seemed completely unfazed, while Rhoda's “noody” Jewish mama Ida (the non-Jewish Nancy Walker), though

clearly displeased, was unable to express her tortured feelings except through a displaced late-night bout of vacuum cleaning (“Parent's Day,” September 30, 1994).

Why Ida Morgenstern may have felt compelled to hide her ambivalence over her daughter's intermarriage is understandable. Less immediately explicable is organized American Jewry's failure to respond to the sitcom's insouciant treatment of the intermarriage theme. Perhaps most confounding is the lack of discussion in the Jewish academic or popular discourse, then or since, concerning organized Jewry's silence on the intermarriage issue in *Rhoda*. An occasional commentator has groused over *Rhoda*'s intermarriage treatment per se: TV critic Joel Siegel wondered, five years after the end of the series, whether “Rhoda's Jewishness may have gotten chopped up in one of the food processors she received as a wedding gift”; Jonathan and Judith Pearl expressed regret (in 1999) that “the interfaith aspect of [Rhoda and Joe's] relationship was never featured in the series' five-year run, nor did it figure in their breakup after two years of marriage.”⁵⁷ Yet no one has asked the basic question: Why, on *Rhoda* but not on *Bridget Loves Bernie*, did Jewish media monitors let the intermarriage issue slide? (Figure 6.)

Separate interviews I have held with Allan Burns, *Rhoda*'s co-creator (with James Brooks), Charlotte Brown, the show's executive producer, and Triva Silverman, one of the show's main writers, shed light on the question. A fundamental difference between the two shows, both Brooks and Silverman point out, is that while *Bridget Loves Bernie* was premised on intermarriage, *Rhoda* was not. Rhoda herself—a familiar, much beloved character from her days on *Mary Tyler Moore*—was the crux of the sitcom. *Who she was* rather than *what she did* was of primary importance on this, as on most other Brooks/Burns “character-driven” shows (e.g., *Mary Tyler Moore*, *Phyllis* [1975–1977], *Taxi*). And what Rhoda was was only “incidentally” Jewish in the first place, according to Brown, and by conscious choice of the largely Jewish creative team (“Allan was our ‘court goy’”). *Rhoda*'s writers did strive for a certain Jewish “sensitivity”—a strong sense of family, Rhoda's self-deprecating humor, her warmth and sensuality—but the show's overall Jewishness “was just ‘set dressing’—Ida's brisket, her plastic on the furniture.”⁵⁸ Indeed, it was this “not Jewish enough” characterological quality rather than Rhoda's intermarriage that caused what little flak the show encountered from the Jewish community. Brown recalls, for instance, a West Los Angeles congregation asking her and star Valerie Harper “whether we couldn't make Rhoda ‘more Jewish.’”⁵⁹ Despite the creative team's professed lack of interest in exploring Rhoda's ethnic



Figure 6. Masquerading as Jews, and as non-Jews: Rhoda (the non-Jewish Valerie Harper) and gentle husband Joe Girard (the Jewish David Groh).

(“RHODA” © 1974 Twentieth Century Fox Television. All rights reserved)

identity, however, I would argue that it is, perhaps even more than her character's popular pedigree, precisely her Jewishness that explains the discursive reticence in regard to her, as opposed to Bernie's, intermarriage—her Jewishness, that is, combined with gender.

Based on the Jewish tradition of matrilineal descent, an intermarrying Jewish man is inherently more problematic, from a survivalist standpoint, than an intermarrying Jewish woman. According to the matrilineal principle, the children of an intermarried Jewish woman are considered Jewish, while those of an intermarried Jewish man are not, and they can only reclaim their Jewishness through formal conversion. In 1968, the liberal but comparatively small Reconstructionist movement decided to recognize patrilineal descent as well, but it wasn't until 1983 that the much larger Reform movement openly adopted a similar measure, though only when the children would be raised as Jews.⁶⁰ Conservative and Orthodox denominations have remained steadfastly matrilinealist.⁶¹ Thus while matrilinealism, however challenged, remains the majority

position for religiously affiliated Jews today, it would have been even more widely accepted at the time of *Bridget Loves Bernie* and *Rhoda*. Practical realities, supported by the Jewish Population Survey of 1970, further suggested that an intermarried Jewish mother was a greater guarantor than an intermarried Jewish father of Jewish continuity. The survey found that while 33 percent of the children of intermarried Jewish fathers were raised non-Jewish, those of intermarried Jewish mothers “were typically raised Jewish.”⁶² Narratively speaking, therefore, whatever remained of Rhoda's Jewishness had a much better chance of being “passed on” than had Bernie's, making Rhoda, if not exactly a positive role model for Jewish survivalism, far less of a threat.

In other gender-specific ways, Rhoda served as a proactively positive Jewish role model. Given that the Jewish Princess stereotype of the possessive, demanding woman had come into vogue in the 1970s, the fact that Rhoda resisted its pejorative pull was itself significant.⁶³ As *Jewish Journal* columnist Marlene Marks reminisced in 1991: “Rhoda, still lovingly remembered by the mass of American women, Jewish or not, between 30 and 50, proved there was more to the Jewish woman than the stereotype. She was not a princess. She was not a shrew. Yes, she was an underdog, but not a loser.”⁶⁴ Second-wave feminism, itself spearheaded by Jewish women (Betty Friedan, Gloria Steinem, Bella Abzug, Phyllis Chesler, Letty Pogrebin), also positively influenced Rhoda's character, as series writer Silverman recalled: “Rhoda's rise in self-confidence paralleled women's rising self-confidence in general due to the women's movement, and this was reflected in all the show's women, not only Rhoda.”⁶⁵

Overall, however, discursive assessment of *Rhoda*'s media effect on and for Jewish women, and Jews as a whole, was and remains decidedly mixed. Most problematic to critics at the time was not Rhoda herself but her mother, who exemplified the post-*Goldbergs* shift from the nurturing Yiddishe momme to the overbearing American Jewish Mother stereotype popularized (predominantly by men) in Jewish writing, nightclub acts, and movies. The ability of TV to focus on unflattering Jewish traits could also be seen, as in the movies, as a healthy development. Albert Auster alluded to this view in referring to *Rhoda* as “at the cusp of a sea change in the depiction of Jews on American television. At once thoroughly assimilated, there was about her, as well as her mother and sister, reminders of some of the negative traits ascribed to Jews.”⁶⁶ In lieu of a balance of more flattering traits, however, and given that *Rhoda* was the most explicitly Jewish show on TV, negative stereotyping tended generally to be too much of a bad thing. Silverman relates how she attempted to counterbalance

such criticism by inserting something about seemingly well-adjusted Mary Richards feeling that she has been “screwed up” by failing to live up to the all-American *Ozzie and Harriet* model. “But the network dropped it because it may have been hurtful to the real Ozzie and Harriet.”⁶⁷

To some, Rhoda herself was the problem. Anthropologist Riv-Ellen Prell, at a 1999 panel discussion on Jewish women, pointed to the show’s opening credits sequence as a key to Rhoda’s Jewish character. Patterned after that of the series’ progenitor *Mary Tyler Moore*, the sequence closes with Rhoda tossing her cap, Mary-style, high into the air. Unlike Mary, who ends up smiling up at her cap “caught” at the peak of its flight in freeze frame, Rhoda smiles, then frowns, as she fails to catch her cap and it falls to the ground. Underdog and loser, *Rhoda*’s opening implies — indeed emphasizes, when repeated week after week.⁶⁸ For Jewish writer Francine Prose, Rhoda is not only de-Semitized but the very essence of assimilation. In her 1974 short story “Electricity,” Prose has her female protagonist describe her sister as “assimilated to the point of Jewishness, like Valerie Harper playing Rhoda.”⁶⁹ TV historian Howard Suber, in a 1975 article in *Davka*, likened Rhoda’s “nominal Jew” to Diahann Carroll’s “nominal black” in the series *Julia* (1967–1969). Rhoda had been allowed to be more Jewish on *Mary Tyler Moore* “to balance Mary’s WASPishness, but then she was de-Jewed on her own show.”⁷⁰ Or as Rick Mitz puts it, comparing *Rhoda* to a 1966–1971 non-ethnicom starring Marlo Thomas, “[Rhoda] went from being *That Nice Jewish Girl* to *That Girl*.”⁷¹

Indeed, the most explicit treatment of a Jewish issue in regard to Rhoda occurred not on *Rhoda* at all, but on *Mary Tyler Moore*: in a 1972 episode, “Some of My Best Friends are Rhoda,” Mary claims to be Jewish to counter the anti-Semitism of a Rhoda-rejecting WASP “friend.” Of added interest is the fact that this most Jewish of Rhoda-involved episodes was conceived by “court goy” Burns, and was pushed through, claims Burns, over the strong objections of Jewish co-creator Brooks.⁷² Brooks’s aversion to the episode allegedly stemmed from his credo of privileging character over social issues, but it is hard not to discern in the defense of his “house style” at least a vestige of the discourse of “too-Jewishness.”⁷³

If self-defensiveness did influence Brooks’s response, there would have been ample grounds, not only historically but from recent personal experience. Brooks and Burns’s pitch of the *Mary Tyler Moore* concept (which conceived Mary as a divorcee) had met with initial resistance from top CBS brass. One network executive, apparently still operating under the theory of ex-programming head Mike Dann, held that Mary and Rhoda were both unacceptable because

they cumulatively violated three of Dann’s four principles, which were that national TV audiences would not accept series characters who were divorced, from New York, Jewish, or have moustaches.⁷⁴ Left unspoken about the last three objectionable categories was their redundancy, since “Jew York” and even facial hair were all related, at least in some executives’ minds, to Jewishness.⁷⁵ Similarly avoided, and of even greater relevance to the decision-making process, was the fact that all *four* taboos applied to most of the executives in attendance at the pitch meeting. Not only were these men, and a large number of executives of the other two networks, Jewish,⁷⁶ but so were all three networks’ CEOs (Bill Paley of CBS, David Sarnoff of NBC, and Leonard Goldenson of ABC). As for creative personnel, Muriel Cantor’s 1983 survey identified 59 percent of TV’s “elite producers” as Jewish, while a late-1970s empirical study by Juliet Lushbough found that more than 50 percent of all prime-time television writers were Jewish, with the figure among comedy writers even higher.⁷⁷

As it had with the American film industry, at least in the industry’s “golden-age” (1930–1946), the statistical fact and popular perception of Jewish “over”-representation in the U.S. television industry exacerbated the tendency toward Jewish “under”-representation on TV screens. The aversion, based on marketplace and Jewish pressure-group considerations, to Jewish TV images was compounded, in cultural critic Todd Gitlin’s words, “by self-protectiveness against any real or conceivable anti-Semitic charge that Jews are too powerful in the media.”⁷⁸ This self-protectiveness persisted, moreover, even as commercial considerations in relation to ethnic pluralism were revised upward and anti-Semitism, by most measures, was revised downward.

Sensitivity to anti-Semitism was difficult to discard partly as a result of its stubborn tendency to arise when least expected, frequently in high profile. The Ocean Hill–Brownsville incident of 1968, in which an attempt by blacks to control a New York City school district erupted into vicious anti-Semitic rhetoric, marked a clear break in black-Jewish relations and the onset of a period of increased black anti-Semitism. In the 1970s, black leader Jesse Jackson revived the canards both of Jewish control of the media and of Jewish control of the government, the latter canard existing since the time of Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s purported “Jew Deal.”⁷⁹ Jackson’s twist was to uncover a Jewish cabal in the Nixon administration led by the president’s chief aides, John Ehrlichman and Robert Haldeman — both actually non-Jews.⁸⁰ Nixon himself was busy insulting and slandering Jews, calling them “kikes” in private, and in a newspaper interview baldly declaring that “the Jews in the U.S. control the entire information and propaganda machine, the large newspapers, the motion

pictures, radio and television, and the big companies.”⁸¹ Taking the cue from his commander-in-chief, Attorney General William Saxbe in 1974 publicly attributed the decline in Communist groups in the U.S. to the changed attitudes of “the Jewish intellectual, who [in the 1940s and 1950s] was very enamored of the Communist Party.”⁸² The most outrageous and widely publicized calumnies came the same year from the chair of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General George S. Brown, who casually remarked that not only did Jews own all the banks and newspapers in the country (Jews actually owned 3.1 and 8 percent, respectively) but Jewish influence in Congress was “so strong you wouldn’t believe.”⁸³

Added to this domestically oriented anti-Semitism, coming mainly from the right, was an anti-Israel strand, coming mainly from the left. Largely a product of the Black Power and other ethno-racial projects of the late 1960s and 1970s, this line tended to identify the Israel of the Six-Day and 1973 Yom Kippur Wars as “the enemy,” commensurate with the United States of the Vietnam War as an imperialist subjugator of Third World peoples. American Jews, both as bourgeois capitalist arrivistes and as Israeli blood relations, were guilty by association.⁸⁴ Even Jewish feminists found themselves increasingly unwelcome in the movement they had helped form, victims of a similarly skewed associational logic that equated Jews with Zionism and Zionism with racism.⁸⁵

WHO IS A JEW . . . ON TV? (RE)DEFINING THE JEWISH SITCOM

While the inhospitable climate toward Jews in some American circles might have made the (already overdetermined) reluctance of Jewish TV executives to foreground Jewish characters understandable, it did not make it justifiable—at least for some Jewish critics at the time. Evoking the spirit of cultural pluralism, Suber, in a 1975 article titled “Hollywood’s Closet Jews,” lambasted Jewish film and TV executives for continuing to “pass” as non-Jews, symbolically and literally, in their de-Judaizing and de-Semitzing of the media. The 1970s had seen a revolution in minority representation on television, Suber contended, with more major ethnic characters appearing on prime time than ever before. He went on to list the spate of series starring or featuring African Americans (eleven shows), Italian Catholics (three), Asians (two), Chicanos, Irish Catholics, Greeks, Poles, Swedes, and Eskimos (one each). But where were the Jews? “De-Jewed” *Rhoda* was about it, unless one counted the character Fish (Abe Vigoda) on *Barney Miller* (1975–1982).⁸⁶ Would-be Jewish shows

Enter Horowitz and *The Law* (the latter starring Judd Hirsch) had been scrapped. Even the hit series *Kung Fu* (1972–1975) had been de-Judaized, Suber claimed, with the mentor role originally conceived as a Hasidic *rebbe* ultimately changed to a Chinese martial arts master.⁸⁷

In another article written the same year, however, Suber contradicts, or at least qualifies, his argument about de-Judaizing. Titled “Television’s Interchangeable Ethnic,” this piece decried the homogenizing tendencies of *all* ethnic television depictions, not merely Jewish ones. Likening TV’s then current “obsession with minorities” to Hollywood’s rash of pluralist platoon movies during World War II, Suber found “that it didn’t really matter which ethnic groups were represented. . . . Characters ‘happened’ to be Jewish, or ‘happened’ to be Polish, or ‘happened’ to be black . . . as if by accident.”⁸⁸ *Barney Miller* was the definitive example of the platoon approach, with the police precinct standing in for the military unit and exhibiting the same multi-ethnic configuration: one black, one Asian, one Puerto Rican, one Pole, one Jew. As in the platoon movies, *Barney Miller*’s, and TV’s ethnics generally, seldom appeared in a manner that had “anything to do with their number, their historical importance, or their relation to the society itself.” TV’s “accidental minorities” remained “like colorful locations or weapons . . . interchangeable.”⁸⁹ (Figure 7.)

For minorities of color, of course, ethno-racial distinctions, no matter how interchangeable, were at least unmistakable. For TV Jews, however, no longer even constructed religiously as Jews, one almost had to, as did Terry Barr, “catch an individual evening’s program even to realize that characters were Jewish.”⁹⁰ *Barney Miller* and *Welcome Back, Kotter* (1975–1979) offer cases in point. *Barney Miller* was, and continues to be, regarded in the bulk of the Jewish discourse, Suber’s included, as a quintessentially de-Judaized show. This view was given added weight by series creator Danny Arnold’s oft-cited claim that, in the face of network resistance to the casting of mustachioed (aka Jewish) Hal Linden as Barney, “we deliberately called him Miller because it was an ethnic/nonethnic name. . . . We never said Barney was Jewish and we never said he wasn’t.”⁹¹ Yet someone at some point apparently decided to drop the facade: for a brief moment on one Christmas episode, Barney “came out,” explaining that his lack of enthusiasm for the holiday resulted from his being a Jew.⁹²

Determining *Welcome Back, Kotter*’s Jewishness, or lack thereof, is more problematic. Generally ignored in discussions of Jewish shows, *Kotter* isn’t even mentioned in Jonathan and Judith Pearl’s *The Chosen Image* (1999), an encyclopedic compendium of Jewish TV images. Barr, on the other hand, regards the eponymous (and mustachioed) Gabe Kotter (Gabriel Kaplan) as,



Figure 7. Interchangeable ethnics: *Barney Miller's* Barney (Hal Linden, fourth from right) and his multiethnic "platoon."
(Copyright © 2007 ABC Photography Archives)

unlike Barney Miller, "obviously Jewish."⁹³ Although Barr provides no substantiating episodes on this, my own anecdotal research has supplied one. According to the recollections of television scholar Allan Campbell, one program found high-school teacher Kotter and his wife, Julie (Marcia Strassman) embroiled in an off-screen argument at their New York apartment. As Kotter yells out, "I married a yutz!" (Jewish slang for "jerk"), Julie hollers back: "And I married a Jewish Prince!"⁹⁴ In addition, one of Kotter's "sweat hogs" (the nickname for his special education class of multiethnic misfits), Juan Epstein (Robert Hegyes), is a Puerto Rican Jew (or half-Jew), and another, Arnold Horshack (Ron Palillo), is "possibly a Jew."⁹⁵

Similar grounds, both discursive and textual, lead me to consider *Taxi* (1978–1983) a Jewish sitcom as well. Although this show too is not identified as Jewish in *The Chosen Image*, Elkin, as well as Hammer and Schwartz, regard the show's lead character, Alex Rieger (played by Judd Hirsch), as Jewish.⁹⁶ At least two episodes, again according to informant Campbell, support this contention. In one, a visitor to the cabbie garage asks about the gruff Rieger:



Figure 8. Contemplating Jewishness: *Taxi's* Alex Rieger (Judd Hirsch).
(TAXI Copyright © 2002 Paramount Pictures. All rights reserved)

"Who's this, the Jewish Defense League?" and, in another, a potential renter of Alex's apartment takes Alex for a Jew and, asked why, answers, "Either that or you're descended from penguins." (Figure 8.)

These admittedly tenuous Jewish designations are not meant to be picayune but rather to point up both the fragile nature and the peculiar problematic of Jewish representation in American television. Indeed, it is precisely the simultaneously foregrounded and disguised ethno-racial dynamic of cultural pluralist shows such as *Barney Miller*, *Welcome Back, Kotter*, and *Taxi*—in which the quasi-Jewish protagonists' backgrounds are left the haziest of all the ethnically specified characters'—that speaks most directly to the contradictions of 1970s Jewish televisual representation.⁹⁷ Further, as broad as my determinations of Jewishness in television sitcoms may appear, still broader ones could easily be, indeed have been, applied. Adopting the notion of an antic and cerebral Jewish "style" to television comedy, Erik Breitbart has deemed Sgt. Bilko of *The Phil Silvers Show* (1955–1959), and even the de-Judaized *Dick Van Dyke*

Show—with endorsement from Dick Van Dyke himself—as essentially (if secretly) Jewish.⁹⁸ The idea of a Jewish “sensitivity” in *The Odd Couple* (1970–1975) is supported by Neil Simon’s claim that he was “writing Jewish” in the original play by giving character Felix Unger “Jewish idiosyncrasies, phraselogy, martyrdom, self-pity.”⁹⁹ And if de-Judaized Jewish actors such as Bea Arthur of *Maude* (1972–1978), Peter Falk of *Columbo* (1971–1978), and Jack Klugman of *Quincy, M.E.* (1976–1983), have been “perceived as Jews” on their shows,¹⁰⁰ then Penny Marshall and Cindy Williams of *Laverne and Shirley* (1976–1983) certainly should be. Despite the eponymous duo’s apparent identity as working-class Italian (Laverne DeFazio) and Irish (Shirley Feeney), the two women regularly refer to themselves in the opening credits sequence as *schlemiel* and *schlimazl*—Yiddish terms for two traditional types of comic fool. Even Jew-baiting Archie Bunker of *All in the Family* (1971–1983) becomes a “closet” or “crypto” Jew in that he was patterned after creator Norman Lear’s father and “there were probably four people living in [the Bunkers’ hometown of] Queens who weren’t Jewish.”¹⁰¹

The concept of Jewish “passing” can of course be taken too far; Jane Feuer’s claim that (real-life Catholic) Bob Newhart of *The Bob Newhart Show* (1975–1979) is Jewish¹⁰² both is unsupported textually and was flatly contradicted by the show’s co-creator Burns in our interview. Then again, if for some, as Ellen Schiff proposes in relation to American drama, *anything written* by a Jew can be considered Jewish,¹⁰³ then can’t *all sitcoms*, created as they have been mainly by Jews and appearing exclusively on Jewish-dominated TV networks, be considered Jewish as well?

I have rejected this latter extreme as a basis for my analysis not because it is necessarily invalid—women, gays, and people of color have adopted a similar strategy to reclaim the historical contributions of their previously ignored or slighted groups. For a “less-aggravated” minority like the Jews, however, who by the 1970s were no longer “fighting for a place in the sun,”¹⁰⁴ such a compensatory strategy seems but the philo-Semitic flipside of the Jewish conspiracy theories. In addition, like these theories, the broad-brush approach can lead to absurd extremes, such as a recent documentary on Jews in Hollywood, *Hollywoodism: Jews, Movies, and the American Dream* (1998), which purports to uncover Jewish connections in everything from cavalry-and-Indian westerns to *The Wizard of Oz*. More fundamentally, the all-is-Jewish schema tends to preempt representational distinctions and thus to shut off further discussion (if all is Jewish, case closed).

Seeking to tease out rather than essentialize the meanings and functions of

Jewishness, my Jewish sitcom approach has chosen a dialogical course between the all-is-Jewish and almost-nothing-is-Jewish camps. And, as I have attempted to show, Jewish television images from the 1950s through the 1970s were a product of complex, often contradictory socioeconomic and cultural forces operating within the Jewish community, the Jewish-dominated television industry, and American society. At times reflecting, at times resisting, yet ever negotiating among these varied forces, Jewish sitcoms moved from an initial philo-Semitic phase and subsequent Great Retreat to a mild revival in the cultural pluralist, “relevant” 1970s. This revival was severely circumscribed, to be sure, by advocacy group pressures, anti-Semitic sensitivities, and the commercial imperatives of an advanced-capitalist TV industry that remained the site, in Gitlin’s words, “of the great drama of assimilation.”¹⁰⁵

To offer a final assessment of Jewish televisual representation through the end of the 1970s, one might reverse Edith Bunker’s famous quip in an episode of *All in the Family* about the social progress of African Americans—“They’ve come a long way . . . on TV!”—and conclude about America’s Jews: “They’ve come a long way . . . except on TV!”