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Jewish Representation in Modern Film and Television

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World Religions

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Jewish Representation in Film and Television

The idea of representation in the media is a debate that seems to have always existed. We hear about it in the news, in reviews for films, in reasoning for cancelling or keeping shows on air. Representation is a key element of every piece of visual media and visual art, the most popular of these being film and television. As time progresses, the idea of actual, conscious, and accurate representations of cultures, race, and people groups has become more and more important to viewers. If *Black Panther* had not depicted African nations in an accurate way, or if it had not gone the extra mile by using an all black cast, with one exception, the film would not have earned any of the praise that it has gotten. Representation is precisely what makes that film so special and it is a landmark in blockbuster filmmaking.

While less overtly popular, the same concepts of representation apply to the Jewish culture. Interestingly, Jewish faith is a part of more films and television shows than most people would believe. Many films choose to depict characters of the Jewish faith. Many try to integrate Jewish culture and faith into their stories. Some have tried to depict one of the most horrific events in history, The Holocaust. People have yet to ask the question of how well these people and events are depicted. Whether or not there is genuine representation, or if the depictions of The Holocaust are simply being used to win Oscars. For the purposes of this paper, I will be using the Amazon Prime original *Marvelous Mrs. Maisel*, *Schindler's List*, *New Girl*, and *the Big Lebowski* as the main examples to discuss representation. This will not be a discussion of the

actual religion of Judaism, but instead will be an attempt to cultivate many examples of how that faith and lifestyle is integrated into our mainstream media.

The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel premiered in 2017 to roaring success. Written by Amy Sherman-Palladino, *Maisel* found itself scoring Emmy and Golden Globe nominations and wins. The television show follows Miriam Maisel finding herself becoming a popular stand up comedian in the 1960s. Maisel comes from an entirely Jewish family and seems to be a second generation Jew herself. The show, throughout its three seasons, has taken great lengths to emphasize the “Jewishness” of its setting and family. While most of the references are used as jokes for Maisel’s stand-up act, they are also used to establish the tone and characters in the show. While *Maisel* has become one of the most popular shows on Amazon Prime and on television, the representation of Jewish life and faith has not exactly struck the chords as intended.

The characters themselves, according to some negative critics, are simply stereotypes that people like to impose on Jews. The lead, Miriam, played by Rachel Brosnahan, is portrayed as the perfect, pristine, and princessy daughter who gets everything that she wants even if it is at the expense of those around her. Miriam’s father, Abe, played by Tony Shalhoub, is the stingy, overbearing father. Abe is likely to be the most common stereotype for the Jewish population, mostly being stingy about money. Finally, the last member of the family is Rose, Miriam’s mother, played by Marin Hinkle, is the stereotypical controlling and over judgemental mother. Each of the individual characters, according to many Jewish critics, never evolve beyond their basic stereotypical character traits.

In an article written by the *LA Times*’ Paul Brownfield, the show’s Jewish representation is called into question.

“However “Jewish” Sherman-Palladino wants the show to be, “Maisel” fails to grapple with the realities of the moment in Jewish American history it portrays.” said Brownfield.

The show has some passing mentions to the Holocaust, which, with the show taking place in the late 50s to early 60s, Brownfield notes that the term Holocaust didn’t come around until after that time. In Brownfield’s opinion, this reveals to us that the show may only care about “shtick, stereotypes, and self parody”.

This same sentiment is backed by Molly Pascal, who has written for The New York Times and the Washington post. Pascal agrees with the sentiments of Brownfield saying, “While such tropes produce laughs, sometimes in self-recognition, the traits perpetuate an ugly story about the nature of the Jewish people.” Pascal goes on to agree with Brownfield by emphasising the idea that the Jewish culture and faith used in the show is for nothing more than laughs.

While being interviewed for the “Jewish Telegraphic Agency”, Amy Sherman-Pallidino discussed how she had been brought up in a very similar way to the way that Miriam was brought up in the show. Her father was very similar to Miriam’s. She also argues that no matter what race, people, or culture is depicted in a film or television show, the concept of stereotypes is inevitable. However, Sherman-Pallidino believes that she has written a diverse cast of characters that are intensely integrated into the Jewish faith.

“To say, “oh, Jewish stereotypes,” well, what are you talking about? Because we have an educated Jew, we have a woman who was happy to be a mother, we have another woman striking out as a stand up comic, and, you know, Susie Myerson’s a Jew! We’ve got a broad range of Jews in there.” -Sherman-Pallidino

Pallidino is clearly incredibly confident in her defense of *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel*. That being said, it seems that the evidence is stacked against her. Many other articles have been

written of the same idea as the two I've discussed here. It seems that *Maisel* may miss the mark when it comes to representation. In my personal opinion, I believe that the characters on *Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* evolve far beyond their stereotypical beginnings. All three family members undergo character changes that, to me, move them out of being stereotypes and allow them to be fully fledged Jewish characters, and are good representations of people in the Jewish faith.

Surprisingly, the sitcom *New Girl* is one of the most common shows to come under scrutiny for Jewish representation, as the writers constantly use faith to fuel its jokes. Schmidt, one of the show's main characters, is a self made, incredibly successful, Jewish man. While he makes passing references to his Jewish background often, the bulk of Jewish mention is through jokes directed at Schmidt. The most common of these jokes are about Schmidt's appearance.

"Has anyone ever told you that you look like a Jewish Kennedy?"

"You're really sexy for a Jew."

"How do I look? How Jewish? I mean like good Jewish or bad Jewish?"

"I'm having my teeth shaved by a 25th of an inch. Fawn thinks that I have the teeth of an immigrant. She says every time she looks at me, all she can see is Fievel Mousekevitz singing 'There Are No Cats in America.' Those little mice Jews."

These are all jokes that are made at the expense of Schmidt's appearance. Note that all of the jokes are negative towards the idea of a "Jewish appearance".

While sitcoms are not unlikely to lean on having characters from the Jewish faith, for example, the *Seinfeld* is considered to be the most Jewish sitcom, although it has very few overt references to any actual Jewish practice. *Friends* is another great example of a sitcom with Jewish characters. Three of the six main characters of *Friends* are Jewish, however, none of

these characters really express ideas or are shown practicing the Jewish faith. *New Girl* chooses not to have subtle mentions of Judaism, nor do they choose to allow Jewish faith to simply be a part of the character, but instead to have the Jewish faith of the character be the butt of the joke.

So, with these examples, it's hard to pinpoint what the best way to depict Jewish life and faith is. If a director or writer tries to fully integrate one of their characters into the Jewish faith, they often end up being accused of stereotyping. However, if they only use Jewish culture as the means of a joke towards a character, then the writers are accused of portraying Jews as the simple butt of a joke. So what is the ideal way to depict a Jew on film? Molly Pascal, a writer mentioned earlier in this essay, seems to have cracked the case.

Pascal mentions that she is Jewish in her article and that her experience with Jewish culture in a lot of different media has left her "feeling queasy." She notes that "It's often too easy to determine that a character on TV is Jewish: Does their last name end in -stein or -berg? Do they have a big nose? A big mouth? Are they wealthy? Stingy? Neurotic?" However, Pascal explains that there is one character in *The Big Lebowski* that hits the mark perfectly.

Pascal's favorite Jewish character in film is Walter Sobchak. The khaki wearing, cursing, shouting Vietnam veteran played by John Goodman. Walter is not someone that would be pegged as Jewish if someone took one look at him. This idea tracks with the other main characters in *Lebowski*. In the film, the two main characters get caught up in a kidnapping plot, when they simply want to play in a bowling tournament. The Dude (Jeff Bridges) needs his rug replaced after it is destroyed by The Big Lebowski's thugs. In the process, Walter decides to try to help his friend exact justice. Sobchak's two best friends The Dude and Donny Kerabatsos (Steve Buscemi) never mention his devotion to the Jewish faith. Sobchak does not have any of

the stereotypical features often associated with Jews. He doesn't wear a kippah, instead he wears a khaki bandana. He also does not have a beard, Sobchak's beard is not very pronounced.

When the date of the next round of the friends' bowling tournament is posted, Walter gets incredibly upset because the bowling tournament is happening on Saturday. This means that it is happening on the Sabbath, or the Jewish day of rest. Walter begins to yell about the fact that he "doesn't f***ing roll on Shabbos". He then explains to his two friends, who clearly do not understand, that he doesn't ride in a car, handle money or turn on the oven. Later in the film, Walter gets even more angry because he has to break his day of rest to go pick up The Dude.

Pascal closes by saying that Sobchak doesn't check a single box in the area of being a stereotypical Jew in appearance or practice. Instead of the character being overtly and comically Jewish, Sobchak's faith is completely integrated into his character and doesn't need to have his faith constantly brought up. Pascal believes that this is the kind of Jewish character that needs to be in the media now.

I want to switch gears a little bit. The depiction of Jewish culture is, in my opinion, one of the most unique struggles in the media. Many of the cultures that we have studied during this semester of World Religions have not experienced a catastrophic event like the Jews faced in the 20th century. The Holocaust, being one of the most unique events in history and the religious reasoning behind it, is something that inevitably was being to hit the big screen. The question, however, is how to do this successfully.

Schindler's List was and is one of the most influential Holocaust films ever put to screen. While many writers and directors had tackled the event before, Spielberg brought a unique flare to the event. *Schindler's List* was not received with unanimous praise, as it was criticised for not being properly handled. Some critics called it "Spielberg's Holocaust Park" claiming that he was

romanticizing the event and wasn't taking it seriously. Many people also believed that Spielberg only made this film to score a directed Oscar. They had a lot of evidence for this case as the film took home 7 Oscars, including Best Picture. A German newspaper called *Die Welt* said that it was "the fantasies of a young boy from California who had never taken an interest in the Holocaust or the Jews before." 27 years later, however, Schindler's List is unanimously regarded as one of the most, if not *the most*, accurate and realistic depiction of The Holocaust ever put into theaters.

Spielberg, however, proved himself to be more than hungry for an Oscar by what happened after making this film. When people started seeing the film in theaters, viewers would come up to Spielberg and say "Have I got a story for you." These viewers revealed themselves to be survivors of the Holocaust. Spielberg decided to document all of these stories the only way he knew how, through video. 55,000 survivors of The Holocaust came to Spielberg with their stories. Through all of these stories, Spielberg created the Shoah Foundation through the University of California. It serves as one of the largest video-audio collections of its kind in the entire world. Through a director's desire to represent this major event in Jewish history, one of the most significant collections of Jewish culture and history was born.

Moving forward in time, many other films have been made about The Holocaust. One of the most unique films about the event is 2019's *Jojo Rabbit*. This film was directed by the Jewish New Zealander Taika Waititi, who actually plays Hitler in the film. *Jojo Rabbit* follows a ten year old boy living in Nazi Germany as he tries to navigate World War II. He discovers that there is a Jew hiding out in his own home and he has to decide whether or not to turn her in or protect her. During the film, Jojo learns what it means to love and he learns to respect people that are

different from him. The person that teaches Jojo what love is and that Jews are not evil or monstrous is the girl hiding out in his house.

Jojo Rabbit was not received with as much immense praise as *Schindler's List*. Being a satirical comedy, people were incredibly put off by the light and whimsical nature that Waititi chose to present the material. However, Jenny Singer from "The Schmooze" argues that *Jojo Rabbit* is exactly what Jewish culture needs right now.

Waititi chooses to build up the people who were oppressed in The Holocaust by showing how strong they were even in the face of horror. Elsa, the Jew hiding in Jojo's home, shows bravery and strength. Waititi chooses to show the humanity and power of the Jews, even in a teenage girl like Elsa. "But Waititi gives Elsa the fierce, funny humanity rarely granted to people society sees as victims, including Elsa's obvious doppelgänger, Anne Frank."

These two films, *Schindler's List* and *Jojo Rabbit* are completely different in almost every way, except perhaps, the way that counts. Both films choose to give realistic depictions of the horrors of the Holocaust and of World War II while simultaneously empowering the Jews that escaped as well as those who couldn't.

Jewish representation in television is an art that is hit or miss. Sadly, the most common result is a miss and a complete misunderstanding of the actual lives of Jewish people. However, it is apparent that when it does hit its mark, the result is one often worthy of immense praise and recognition (*Schindler's List's* seven Oscar nominations). Representation for Jews is definitely in its early stages, currently being used as comedic fuel or as an incorrect remembering of history, but with the work of people like Steven Spielberg, Taika Waititi, and even Amy Sherman Palladino, the Jewish faith, I believe, will soon be able to reach a level of representation that will satisfy those who have lived inside that culture for their entire lives.

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