

Dinner with the Relatives: Love and Marriage in Contemporary American Judaism

Intro

There are some who believe that authentic Jewish genius lies in the moral and legal codes of our ancestors; others, in the monotheistic impulse, or in the faith that sustained us throughout generations of persecution. Others believe that Jews have a special gift for ethics. Many believe the Jews are more ambitious and successful than others.

William E.H. Meyer Jr. in 1999 weighing in with an article “The Case of the Hollywood Jews.” Jewish screenwriters, producers and directors, he wrote, had made a concerted effort in the past 25 years to promote an image — propaganda, he called it — celebrating the accomplishments and moral rectitude of Jews.

Instead of Louis B. Mayer and Samuel Goldwyn, today we had Steven Spielberg and Woody Allen. They and other Jewish writers and directors were constantly injecting Jewish characters into plots in films as varied as “While We Were Sleeping” (1995), “A Few Good Men” (1992), “Disclosure” (1995), “Forget Paris” (1995) and “Prince of Tides” (1991), not to mention nearly all of Allen’s films or “Schindler’s List.”

Jewish characters in contemporary films played a key role in shaping the portrait of a moral America, Meyer charged. It was all part of a conspiracy to project a sympathetic image of American Jewry.

Hollywood’s version of the American dream, he noted, was actually a Jewish invention, a way for a minority with cultural power to determine how American society would view itself as well as its Jews.

‘The Suits’ & The Bottom Line

There is more than a whiff of what sounds like anti-Semitism in Meyer’s essay, but that does not rebut one of his facts, namely that in the past 25 years, Jewish characters suddenly have appeared in films, often as secondary figures carrying a particular, defining moral vision. They provide cultural ballast for the hero and implicitly for the audience as well.

It is, of course, possible to look at this phenomenon without the paranoia of an anti-Semite, without seeing the telltale fingerprints of a conspiracy. It is reasonable, for example, to assume that screenwriters and producers today have moved away from the myths and melodramas that MGM once famously rolled off the assembly line; that today more realistic portraits of American society find their way into films.

Since Jews are over-represented statistically within the professions, holding down positions of authority and leadership in medicine, law, education, psychiatry and government, the films today — partly because we demand and expect it from our mass culture — often mirror our society. Or at least the society that matches the secular experiences of Hollywood's urban writers and producers. Ethnicity has become part of a film's background today, but it has also become less defining for the professionals who make up the assimilated world of Hollywood.

Has the way that Hollywood portrays Jewish relationships and marriage become more realistic?

Fiddler on the Roof

Sholom Aleichem, on whose stories "Fiddler" is based, is often referred to as the Jewish Mark Twain. He first introduced the world to Tevye the Dairyman in 1894, dispensing the stories as individually published chapters. Sholom Aleichem's own stage adaptation has never been translated into English, so how did terms such as "*yenta*" and "*l'chaim*" become part of the American lexicon?

The Yiddish theater of Second Avenue was taking its dying breaths by 1964, when "Fiddler" opened in New York at the Imperial Theater, eventually running for more than 3,200 performances. The recent memory of that lost art form may have attracted audiences hungry to fill the void, but that doesn't account for the show's lasting appeal.

"Fiddler" certainly had all the makings of a hit. Hal Prince produced the musical; Jerome Robbins, who took Broadway by storm in 1957 with "West Side Story," directed and choreographed it. The talented cast included Zero Mostel, Bea Arthur, Bert Convy and Austin Pendleton. Then there was the 1971 movie, which starred Topol, Molly Picon, (Paul) Michael Glaser and Leonard Frey, who was promoted from Mendel onstage to Motel on film.

In the three decades since, the public's appetite for the story has not diminished. According to Music Theatre International, the licensing company whose catalogue includes such perennial favorites as "Jesus Christ Superstar," "Annie," "Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat" and "West Side Story," "Fiddler" consistently ranks among the top five shows playing in North America.

"With over 500 productions a year in the United States and Canada alone, you can see that we're talking six to 10 productions per state in any given year," MTI spokesman Jim Merillat said. "That's quite a feat, considering MTI has many of the most popular and beloved musical titles ever written."

That number does not include overseas productions performed, often in different languages, in Africa, Australia, Japan, Norway and South America. Obviously, nothing is lost in the translation.

"There are parallels, and some things resonate with people who are far removed from the time and place of the show," said Theodore Bikel, the current reigning Tevye, with 1,700 performances in the role under his belt.

In Hawaii, he said, "half of my audiences were not only not Jewish, they were not Caucasian," he said. "At the stage door were all these Asian faces — Japanese, Chinese, Hawaiian — and they were obviously moved by the ending of the show. I asked them, 'What does this play mean to you?' And they would say, 'Tradition. When children don't follow tradition.' Another woman said to me, 'We know what it means to be persecuted.' She was a Japanese-American.

"When we played El Paso, 70% of our audience was Mexican-Hispanic," Mr. Bikel continued. "Their response was unbelievable! They got every nuance, every joke. They were moved, and they laughed. It was as though we were playing in Brooklyn. It was wonderful."

The music also strikes a (sometimes saccharine) chord for many American Jews, conjuring images of bands playing "Sunrise, Sunset" at an older cousin's wedding or of Uncle Sidney whistling a few bars of "If I Were a Rich Man" while walking past a luxury car dealership. But even as the music might warrant a collective groan, its power is undeniable.

Since 1955, Mr. Bikel has recorded more than 21 albums, including collections of Israeli, traditional and original songs. According to him, "Fiddler" composer Jerry Bock referred to Mr. Bikel's recordings for stylistic — even melodic — inspiration as he wrote the music. One Yiddish tune in particular about a railroad man was a major influence on the title song.

Mr. Bikel described the score as "evocative of the period and of the place," but noted that the style was definitely "Broadway-ized."

An expert on the theater and literature of turn-of-the-century Russia, Indiana University professor Jeffrey Veidlinger, notes that the music in "Fiddler" "is clearly Americanized," but that "some of the motifs are drawn from authentic klezmer music. The music and dance of the wedding scene of Tsaytel and Motel largely imitate traditional weddings."

Traditional music begs for traditional instrumentation; the haunting sound of a violin is central to the imagery of the show. The fiddler image was borrowed from painter Marc Chagall, who used the precariously perched musician in his art as a symbol of the Jewish people. There is no reference to such a character in Jewish literature or folklore or in the original Tevye stories.

Mr. Veidlinger said Chagall used the fiddler "to illustrate the instability of Jewish life," a sentiment expressed by Tevye from the start when he says, "Without our traditions, our lives would be as shaky as...as a fiddler on the roof!"

Mr. Bikel put a more optimistic spin on the meaning of the fiddler. "Marc Chagall's idea was that this little figure is there, is omnipresent," Mr. Bikel said. "He represents the spirit of the Jews, fiddles away, keeping the Jewish spirit alive."

He also pointed out that Tevye is the only one who sees or interacts with the fiddler, and it is the fiddler's joining the Anatevkan on their journey to America that ensures the survival of their traditions as they are exposed to the influences of the new world.

Annie Hall

"Life is full of loneliness, misery, suffering, and unhappiness - and it's all over much too quickly," says Woody Allen at the beginning of *Annie Hall*.

Woody Allen captures the classic neurotic, paranoid, cynical, morbid, guilt-ridden New York Jewish male in his Academy Award®-winning masterpiece. Co-starring Diane Keaton as transplanted Midwesterner Annie Hall, Allen's story hilariously depicts their interfaith relationship – one that is doomed to failure by vast cultural and emotional differences.

Allen plays Alvy Singer, a comedy writer who reflects on his childhood, career, ex-wives and girlfriends, and, especially, his romance with Hall. Through freewheeling flashbacks – some based in reality and others in fantasy – Singer recalls where he went wrong, and where he went right.

The relationship of the hero, intellectual Jewish comedian Alvy Singer, with gentle, white bread, "neat" Annie Hall (Diane Keaton - very young and fresh and deliciously daffy here) allows for the amusement that arises out of the conflict of their cultures and the delight of the real romance they find in each other's differences.

Keeping the Faith

Boteach on the movie:

Jews can be a strange breed. As the credits roll across the opening screens, it is clear that the majority of people behind this movie are Jewish. They can be forgiven for the shallow, ignorant, and empty stereotypes of Jews rampant in the film. We are given endless examples of pushy and dimwitted Jewish mothers, and their equally empty-headed Jewish princess daughters. We can similarly overlook the objectionable portrayal of the rabbi as someone who abrogates Jewish tradition with impunity, eating out constantly at non-kosher restaurants and bringing Christian gospel choirs to sing at his synagogue.

But what borders on the unforgivable is their portrayal of Judaism as something so alarmingly restrictive that only the power of love can redeem it.

There is a tendency in films to herald the great theme of "love conquers all." It is a sentimental theme that plays well to the masses. To be sure, this is a noble theme when portrayed in the form of racism and genocide being shattered by the bonds of love and humanity displayed by an Oscar Schindler. It is an uplifting theme in plays like "Romeo and Juliet," when the innocence of youth surmounts the accumulated prejudices of generations. But is "love conquers all" noble in every portrayal? Is it really noble when a man discards his faith, tradition, and religious commitments, all in the name of love?

It was interesting to me that Brian, the priest in the film, is portrayed as gentle and virtuous throughout the narrative. He too is tempted by the feminine charms of beautiful Abby. Yet, when Abby's rejection of him frustrates his desire to indulge his sexual passion with her, he overcomes the momentary betrayal of his beliefs and is henceforth portrayed as infinitely virtuous for doing so. Yet when the rabbi attempts to do the same--break off the relationship with his girlfriend in order to stand up for his principles--he is portrayed as unreasonable, obstinate, and difficult.

Along Came Polly

In "Meet the Fockers" he reprises the same neurotic shlemiel he first perfected in "There's Something About Mary", and one he's continued to play in movies such as "Flirting With Disaster," "Along Came Polly," "Duplex" and others. On the one hand, he's simply carrying on the time-honored tradition of the Jewish male comic, mining his sexual and psychological shortcomings for laughs. But there's also something deeper and more profound about the humiliations visited upon his characters.

It has something to do with the way in which the masculinity of these characters is repeatedly called into question, often in ways that resemble old stereotypes about the girly Jewish male. Often his movies go to great lengths to portray his character's impotency — quite literally in "There's Something About Mary," as when his genitals are caught in a zipper or he is harassed by schoolyard bullies; and sometimes psychologically, as with "Meet the Parents," in which he plays a male nurse, one named "Gaylord" no less. That Ben Stiller is a very talented physical comic, and plays his characters with a genuine degree of vulnerability and sweetness, makes many of these scenes all the more discomfiting to watch.

From "There's Something About Mary" and "Meet the Parents" to "Along Came Polly," Stiller is everybody's favorite schlemiel. Reuben Feffer, his character in "Along Came Polly," is the prototypical Stiller persona (and not coincidentally, the archetypal Hollywood Jewish male character). Reuben is an emotionally shut-down man who values extreme conformity and avoids all risks. His job as an insurance-risk analyst is emblematic of his life, and we see him avoiding subway grates (4% chance that they will collapse) and refusing to eat mixed nuts at a bar (67% of bar patrons don't wash their hands after using the restroom). After his wife, Lisa (Debra Messing) leaves him on the first day of their honeymoon for her scuba diving instructor Claude (Hank Azaria) — ostensibly because she has last-minute jitters, though Claude's large penis seems to figure

in somehow as well — he begins to date Polly Prince (Jennifer Aniston), an old friend from grade school. If Lisa is a controlling, domesticating nightmare, Polly is a free spirit who can't remember appointments, has survived a series of messy relationships and whose apartment looks like a ramshackle secondhand store after a busy Saturday sale. "Along Came Polly" follows the conventions of the screwball romantic comedy, from "Bringing up Baby" through "Annie Hall": The main characters get on each other's nerves, runaway-bride Lisa returns and asks to be forgiven, Reuben is driven crazy by Polly's madcap ways and she, in turn, runs away because she can't deal. But in the end Reuben learns to express his emotions and take risks, Polly learns to be responsible and all is right with the world.

"Along Came Polly" has all the earmarks of a routine, bland Hollywood comedy. But what distinguishes it — and makes it disagreeable — is its relentless portrayal of Reuben as not just a schlemiel, but as an arch-neurotic, hypochondriacal, diseased, emotional mess, all of which seems directly related to his Jewishness. We've seen these depictions before, from Eddie Cantor in "Whoopie!" through Jerry Lewis in everything, to Woody Allen in most of his films. But there is a major difference here. In "Whoopie!" and "Annie Hall," the heroes' neuroses and bodily infirmities are defining characteristics, but they are also essential to their charm. In "Along Came Polly," Stiller's bodily malfunctions are not charming (although they are put to comic use) but are instead symptomatic of deep emotional and psychological problems. Cantor and Allen were always proud of being who they were (and even used their quirky infirmities to their advantage), but Stiller seems to want and need to become someone else, to be "cured."

"Along Came Polly" goes to (comic) lengths to portray Stiller's dysfunctional body. A five-minute scene of him on the toilet (after Polly brings him to an unsanitary "ethnic" restaurant) is a replay of a scene in "There's Something About Mary," in which his penis is caught in his pants zipper. It creates a level of effective comic anxiety, but ultimately feels degrading — and not just to Reuben, but to Stiller as a performer. The film is so obsessed with Reuben's contempt for his own body that it can only reflect this in his relationship to all of the other male characters in the film: He is nervous around Claude's penis, upset by the intestinal eruptions of his boss Stan Indursky (Alec Baldwin), repulsed by the hirsute body of a fellow basketball player, Dustin (Judah Friedlander), and disgusted by the inconvenient bodily functions of his best friend, the aging teen actor Sandy Lyle (Philip Seymour Hoffman). The end result is that "Along Came Polly" continually manifests distaste for the (often-Jewish) male body. And the fact that, at the film's end, Reuben discovers a new sense of emancipation and walks naked on a Caribbean beach hardly makes up for what preceded it.

Film Scenes

Fiddler on the Roof---Tevye is asked if he loves his wife, and he responds with - What's love?

Scene 4 – “Matchmaker”

Woody Allen—Annie Hall --- Allen visits Hall's family for dinner and imagines himself morphing into a Hasidic Jew.

Scene 22 - “Meeting Annie's Family”

The Birdcage ---- The young couple comes over to the boy's parents' house where there is a gay disco.

Scene 19 – “Mrs. Coleman”

Keeping the Faith ---- Ben Stiller is a young rabbi who brings a black gospel choir into the conservative synagogue. The priest and the rabbi are both interested in the same girl.

Scene 4 – “Packed House”

Fools Rush In ---- The boy visits the girl (Salma Hayek)'s Mexican parents. They are superficially different culturally, but that doesn't matter because love will conquer all.

Scene 10 – “Family Dinner”

Along Came Polly --- First scene, there is a Jewish wedding. Ben Stiller is very risk adverse and meets and marries a Jewish girl, but the wedding lasts less than 24 hours.

Scene 2 – “Reuben's Wedding”

Meet the Parents

Scene 5 – “Dinner with the Folks”