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Over the Top Judaism: Precedents and Trends in the Depiction
of Jewish Beliefs and Observances in Film and Television,
and: Entertaining America: Jews, Movies, and Broadcasting
(review)

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munities. In this regard, the extensive index provides an excellent resource for knowledgeable researchers looking for specific information.

Finally, what I perhaps enjoyed most about reading this volume were the gems of historical trivia that complicate stereotypes of Jewish insularity and passivity in the region. I learned, among other things, that Jewish merchants were involved in the selling of booty captured by pirates in the Maghreb (p. 36), that the lyrics of Egyptian diva Umm Kulthum were translated into Hebrew and incorporated into liturgical poetry (p. 91), and that Yom Kippur was at one point declared an official holiday in Tunisia (p. 456). These are the kinds of memorable facts that point researchers in productive directions and that provide instructors with vivid examples of the complexity of modern Jewish history in the region.

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Over the Top Judaism: Precedents and Trends in the Depiction of Jewish Beliefs and Observances in Film and Television, by Elliot B. Gertel. Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2003. 316 pp. \$45.00.

Entertaining America: Jews, Movies, and Broadcasting, by J. Hoberman and Jeffrey Shandler. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003. 336 pp. \$52.50.

Coinciding with the 350th anniversary of American Jewry, a spate of books about the Jewish contribution to American popular culture has been published.¹ The companion volume to the Jewish Museum's impressive exhibition

¹For example, from 2003 to 2004, the following books on the role of Jews in various facets of American popular culture have appeared: Michael Alexander, *Jazz Age Jews* (Princeton, 2003); Scott R. Benarde, *Stars of David: Rock 'N' Roll's Jewish Studies* (Hanover, NH, 2003); Vincent Brook, *Something Ain't Kosher Here: The Rise of the 'Jewish' Sitcom* (New Brunswick, NJ, 2003); Paul Buhle, *From the Lower East Side to Hollywood: Jews in American Popular Culture* (New York, 2004); David Desser and Lester D. Friedman, *American Jewish Filmmakers*, 2nd ed. (Urbana, 2003); Ben Furnish, *Nostalgia in Jewish-American Theatre and Film* (New York, 2004); Jack Gottlieb, *Funny, It Doesn't Sound Jewish: How Yiddish Songs and Synagogue Melodies Influenced Tin Pan Alley, Broadway, and Hollywood* (Albany, NY, 2004); Andrea Most, *Making Americans: Jews and the Broadway Musical* (Cambridge, MA, 2004); David Zarawik, *The Jews of Prime Time* (Hanover, NH, 2003).

Entertaining America is the best place to begin an exploration of this topic. Its insightful essays, plentiful photographs and posters, and timelines span the century from the displacement of Yiddish vaudeville theatres by nickelodeons and movie houses to President Clinton's close relationship with Jewish Hollywood stars. The articles go beyond the usual adulation of Jewish celebrities to an analysis of what was distinctly Jewish, if anything, about their performances and productions, and of how American Jews embraced these figures to bolster their own ethnic pride or prove how well integrated Jews had become in American society.

Let me confine this review to just a few of the subjects covered in this diverse collection. Although many scholars of American Jewry have interpreted the anarchic humor of the Marx Brothers as an expression of Jewish resentment against Gentile authority in the Diaspora, the group rarely employed Jewish references in their films. That Jewish and Gentile fans of their comedy assigned a Jewish meaning to it tells us more about how each perceived the status of Jews in America and less about the madcap genius of Groucho and his brothers. Similarly, identifying a style of humor, personality quirks, or a passion for justice with Jewish culture, Jews have claimed that fictional characters like George Constanza of the *Seinfeld* show and Gentiles like Charlie Chaplin were Jewish.

The evolution of *The Goldbergs* mirrored the rise and fall of ethnic radio and television programs. The radio series premiered in 1929. Although radio executives worried about alienating listeners with the Yiddish-inflected dialogue and references to Jewish customs, this saga of first generation Americans preserving their traditions while struggling to rise above their origins struck a responsive chord among millions of listeners who empathized with the challenges the Goldbergs confronted regardless of their religious background. Gertrude Berg hailed from an acculturated family and spoke unaccented English, but she emulated the *Yiddishkayt* of her grandparents and the Lower East Side. During the 1940s *The Goldbergs* inspired a syndicated comic strip, a Broadway play, and a television series that ran from 1949 to 1956. From 1952 on, the show gradually succumbed to pressure from its corporate sponsor General Foods. It fired Philip Loeb, who played Papa Jake, for his alleged communist sympathies, eschewed political subjects, and minimized its Jewish content. In its last season, the series, now renamed *Molly*, moved the family from a flat in the Bronx to a house in the suburbs. These developments reflected the shift away from early television's adaptations of radio or movie hits about minorities like *Amos and Andy* (1949–1951) and *Mama* (1949–1957) to white middle-class sitcoms like *Father Knows Best* (1954–1960) and *Leave It to Beaver* (1957–1963).

Most American Jewish entertainers attempted to broaden their popular appeal by Anglicizing their names or assuming uniquely American roles like the cowboy played by Bronco Billy Anderson who was born Max Aronson, or the jazz singer Al Jolson. As cultural pluralism gradually has replaced the melting pot as the ideal for American society, Jewish performers have displayed their ethnicity more overtly. American Jews have gauged the level of their acceptance in the United States by milestones like the selection of Bess Myerson as the first Jewish Miss America in 1945 or the popularity of personalities whose Jewishness was evident in their appearance and mannerisms like Dustin Hoffman, Woody Allen, and Barbra Streisand. Following in their footsteps, today's Jewish stars like Fran Drescher, Howard Stern, and Adam Sandler flaunt their Jewish traits as integral to their public image.

Hoberman and Shandler's inclusion of contemporary writing about Jews in show business makes their book an even more valuable resource. Excerpts from Henry Ford, William Shaefe Chase, and Father Coughlin testify to the virulence of antisemitic accusations directed against Hollywood in the interwar years. Articles from the souvenir program for *The Jazz Singer* illustrate why the play and film resonated with immigrant audiences whose aspirations matched those of Jack Robin. A manual perpetuated immigrant stereotypes by instructing actors how to speak with a Yiddish accent. The *Modern Screen* piece about Marilyn Monroe's conversion to Judaism before marrying Arthur Miller reminds readers that Gentile celebrities before Madonna have turned to Judaism out of expediency or for spiritual meaning.

Unlike *Entertaining America's* broad scope and multiple perspectives, Eliot Gertel's *Over the Top Judaism* is narrowly focused on exposing how cinema and television champion intermarriage, distort Jewish beliefs and rituals, stereotype Jewish parents as overbearing, or spoof bar-mitzvahs and weddings as orgies of conspicuous consumption. Gertel detects examples of such defamations not only in well-known motion pictures and television programs, but also in obscure ones. The caricatures he describes certainly exist, but are they maliciously targeted only at Jews or a more general manifestation of a secular culture that finds humor in anything related to sexuality like circumcision, that favors individual choice over collective loyalties, that lampoons the hollowness of materialism even as it promotes it, and that honors the ethics of religions but abhors their practices? Taking jabs at ethnic chauvinism, family enmeshment, religious customs, and the materialism of upwardly mobile groups has been a staple of films and television programs like *All American Girl*, *Everybody Loves Raymond*, *The Fresh Prince of Bel Air*, *The Jeffersons*, *Moonstruck*, and *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*. These series and movies affectionately highlight the tensions between primary group affiliations and traditions and how

individualism blurs the ethnic, racial, and religious boundaries that the former seek to maintain.

Gertel's dour observations are not always accurate or consistent. He cites the Americanization of *The Goldbergs* without mentioning how Jewish the show had been until 1952. While he praises the Jewish Theological Seminary's production *Saying Kaddish* as a sincere effort to portray the soul searching done during *shiva*, he dislikes the show's pat ending. Without any convincing proof, he insinuates that *Keeping the Faith*, one of the few movies to advocate spirituality as an antidote to an obsession with career advancement, treats the priest played by Edward Norton Jr. more positively than the rabbi played by Ben Stiller. Gertel considers the undeservedly neglected film *The Plot Against Harry* as one of the most "Jewish" films ever made because it affirms Harry's *teshuvah*. Harry undoubtedly comes off as a real *mensch* despite his criminal record, but his repentance results from a near fatal heart attack and not from any religious revelation. Finally, the brash black pilot in *Independence Day* was Will Smith and not Eddie Murphy. The difference between these two books is that the first applies historical and sociological analysis to understand a topic that is a product of these forces; and the other is a Judaic exegesis of media creations whose purpose is to entertain rather than preach.

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American Judaism: A History, by Jonathan D. Sarna. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2004. 490 pp. \$35.00.

In *American Judaism*, Brandeis University scholar Jonathan Sarna has produced a marvelous survey that masterfully recounts the history of Jewish religious life in America and in the process provides much insight into other aspects of American Jewish history as well. Sarna's book opens with a consideration of the colonial era, when synagogue and community were more or less coterminous, and it follows the saga of American Judaism all the way to the beginning of the twenty-first century, touching in its final sections on such contemporary issues as the impact of feminism and the quest for spirituality among American Jews. The excellence of Sarna's volume has been recognized by the National Jewish Book Awards, which named *American Judaism* 2004's "Jewish Book of the Year."

Sarna's decision to concentrate on religion in exploring the Jewish experience in the United States differentiates his text from similar surveys and gives