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## “My religion is American”<sup>1</sup>: A Midrash on Judaism in American Films, 1990 to the Present

*ABSTRACT: In this paper I propose to analyze the religious aspects of recent American film. While the field of Film Studies has largely focused on ethnicity as an analytic category for the study of American Jewry, this paper proposes to take a closer look at the religious factor and Judaism as an American religion in American film. Over the course of the twentieth century, representations of the American Jew on film have traditionally fallen into four categories: hidden entirely; idealized and replaced by the gentile playing the Jew; stereotyped; and victimized and humiliated. Since 1990 and the advent of Seinfeld, however, representations of the cinematic Jew have entered a new phase. Not only have they multiplied, they have also taken on different forms marking, I would argue, a rupture with the past. The period has witnessed a shift towards more subtle, nuanced, playful and even outrageous representations of Jews and Judaism, including Jewish rituals and belief such as kashrut, endogamous marriage, wedding ceremonies, bar-mitzvahs, meals, and so on. This paper proposes then to examine the range, complexity and variety of representations of American Judaism in American cinema since 1990 and what they can tell us about the perception, construction and reception of American Judaism in the United States today among both Jews and non-Jews. Key films, which portray aspects of American Judaism and will be considered here, include Keeping the Faith, The Hebrew Hammer; The Big Lebowski, The Believer, Capturing the Friedmans, Lucky Number Slevin, Meet the Parents and Meet the Fockers.*

While the field of Film Studies has largely focussed on ethnicity as an analytic category for the study of American Jewry (*Jewishness*), this article explores the religious factor (*Judaism*) on mainstream American screen. It starts from the premise that there is a clear distinction between Jewishness, as ethnic identity, and Judaism, as a religion or a set of rites. Given the volume of research that has been undertaken to analyzing the Jewish contribution to film both in front of and behind the camera, it is surprising to note that to date not much work has been done on this topic, overshadowed by a tendency to focus either on the *image* of the Jew or the Holocaust on film. As a consequence, it is possible to read entire books on these subjects but with almost no references to ‘Judaism.’ An example of this is a bibliography of materials listed on the

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<sup>1</sup> Colonel Michael ‘Mickey’ Marcus (Kirk Douglas) in *Cast A Giant Shadow*, dir. Meville Shavelson, Batjac, 1966.

library website of the University of California, Berkeley under the heading 'Jews in Film and TV'. Only one item contains the word 'Judaism' in either its title or abstract: Elliot B. Gertel's *Over the Top Judaism: Precedents and Trends in the Depiction of Jewish Beliefs and Observances in Film and Television*. But while Gertel has begun to map these representations, his desire to criticize what he sees as their distortions of Judaism clouds what could have been an otherwise useful survey. To this can be added Jonathan Pearl and Judith Pearl's *The Chosen Image: Television's Portrayal of Jewish Themes and Characters* and Vincent Brooks's *Something Ain't Kosher Here: The Rise of the Jewish Sitcom* which, while they examine Judaism, as their respective titles suggest, they only do so on the small screen. In this article, then, I propose a corrective to these studies to analyze the religious aspects of recent Judaism in American fiction films and what they can tell us about the perception, construction, and possible reception of American Judaism in the United States today among both Jews and non-Jews.

### Judaism on Film: A Brief History

The first thing to note is that given the volume of American Jews who have appeared on film since its very inception, the absence of explicit depictions of American Judaism, as religion, is conspicuous and notable. This is because, as mentioned above, cinema has tended to define Jewishness in secular ethnic rather than religious terms. However, this has not precluded the inclusion of Jewish ritual, practices and beliefs, although these have tended to be used as backdrops to the main action and are often not the focus or reason of the presentation itself. Examples of this include *His People* (Edward Sloman, 1925) in which a range of Jewish rituals like the Sabbath and the kissing of the *mezuzah* are shown; *The Jazz Singer* (Alan Crosland, 1927), which is structured around various synagogue scenes, most significantly that of Kol Nidre and Yom Kippur; and *A Passover Miracle* (Anon., 1914) which features the Passover Seder as the site of redemption and reunion for a wayward son.

The latter film is almost unique in the history of Judaism on film and the circumstances surrounding its production are worth mentioning in detail here. The film was endorsed by the Bureau of Education of the Jewish Community, New York, whose advice the production company, Kalem, had sought beforehand, with the words "it would enlighten the people at large as to the significance of the Feast of the Passover" (Erens 45). Furthermore, prominent Jewish actors were contracted to play the leading roles and the film was deliberately released to coincide with the Passover holidays. As Erens points out, "Though not the first film to portray Jewish religious ceremonies, it certainly drew the most attention. The combination of accurate religious ritual and sensitive Jewish actors imbued the film with a new atmosphere

such as had never before been attained in motion pictures” (45f). It would take a long time for such a film to appear again.

Certainly, during the heyday of the Hollywood Studio System from the 1930s until the mid-1950s, Judaism rarely, if ever, emerged on screen, as the Jewish studio-heads preferred to hide their ethnic and religious heritage in attempting to widen the appeal of their products. Perhaps the most notable exceptions were *Tevye* (Maurice Schwartz, 1939) in which during a Passover Seder, an intermarried and hence estranged daughter is shown watching her family through a window and crying hysterically; the second version of *The Jazz Singer* (Michael Curtiz, 1952) which, like its predecessor, also had a Yom Kippur scene; and the film version of *The Diary of Anne Frank* (George Stevens, 1959) in which, intriguingly, the significance of the festival of Chanukah was greatly exaggerated in comparison to the original book. Where Anne Frank wrote, “We didn’t make much fuss about Chanuka[h]: we just gave each other a few little presents and then we had the candles ... Saturday, the evening of St. Nicholas Day, was much more fun” (Frank 57), the film, in contrast, dwelt on Chanukah at some length while ignoring St. Nicholas Day. Approximately eleven minutes of screen time was devoted to it, and it became, in the words of Judith E. Doneson, the “dramatic climax in the film” (74).

Nevertheless, in a trend that would continue for decades, in *The Diary of Anne Frank*, Chanukah became not a key specific of the Jewish faith but a signifier of American religion in general. As Doneson points out, the festival was used “to foster audience identification with those in hiding. That is, Hanukkah can be like Christmas—just a little different—an idea very much at home in the 1950s” (74). Consequently, the Chanukah prayers were conducted in English rather than Hebrew and the song ‘*Moaz Tsur*’ was changed to ‘Rock of Ages’ and also sung in English because not to do so, according to the screenwriters, “would set the characters in the play apart from the people watching them ... The majority of our audience is not Jewish. And the thing we have striven for ... is to make the audience understand and identify themselves” (qtd. in Whitfield 177). As the president of Twentieth Century Fox (the studio responsible for producing the film), Spyros Skouras, declared: “This isn’t a Jewish picture. This is a picture for the world” (qtd. in Whitfield 182). As a result, the specifically Jewish Chanukah was universalized for an American audience. Similarly, even in a film about the formative moment of Jewish nationalism and the birth of the Jewish religion such as *The Ten Commandments* (Cecil B. DeMille, 1956), the specifically Jewish elements were removed in order to broaden the story for American audiences. Thus, something as Jewish as the giving of the Ten Commandments became Americanized for not only did the gentile Charlton Heston play Moses, but also when he descended from Sinai with the two tablets, his very pose resembled that of the Statue of Liberty. Likewise in other Biblical epics, as Lester Friedman observed, “Jews generally appear as mere historical necessities

and filmmakers Henry King, Cecil B. DeMille, and King Vidor make no attempt to understand the Jews religious and cultural heritage” (146).

Then, after decades of ignoring such issues, in the 1960s Jewish American filmmakers began making movies that explored Jewish self-definition. According to Elliot B. Gertel, there was an “explosion of Jewish references, associations, and even ambivalences,” as American screens witnessed “a determined and concerted effort to stand up for Jewish identity and to throw Jewish practices back into the face of a film culture that had ignored them or shunted them aside” (2). Woody Allen, for example, made much use of *kashrut* and other Jewish ritual practices in his films: the various Seders in *Sleeper* (1973) and *Crimes and Misdemeanors* (1989) and jokes about kosher food and fasting during Yom Kippur in *Radio Days* (1987). Other Jewish religious occasions such as bar mitzvahs and weddings appeared in films like *Goodbye Columbus* (Larry Peerce, 1969), *I Love You, Alice B. Toklas* (Hy Averback, 1968), *Alex in Wonderland* (Paul Mazursky, 1970), *Fiddler on the Roof* (Norman Jewison, 1971), *The Heartbreak Kid* (Elaine May, 1972), *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz* (Ted Kotcheff, 1974), *Hester Street* (Joan Micklin Silver, 1975), *Boardwalk* (Steven Verona, 1979), *The Jazz Singer* (Richard Fleischer, 1980), *The Chosen* (Jeremy Kagan, 1981), *Yentl* (Barbra Streisand, 1983), *Driving Miss Daisy* (Bruce Beresford, 1989), *Crossing Delancey* (Joan Micklin Silver, 1989) and *Enemies, A Love Story* (Paul Mazursky, 1990) to mention just a few. Yet, these films did not attempt to explore Judaism in any depth; the trend during this period can be summed up the words of Colonel Michael ‘Mickey’ Marcus (Kirk Douglas) in *Cast A Giant Shadow* (Meville Shavelson, 1966), “My religion is American. I went to Temple at thirteen for my Bar-Mitzvah, and once it was over, I was done with the Jews.” If these Jewish filmic characters practice anything beyond that, it is encapsulated in the film *It’s My Turn* (Claudia Weill, 1980) in which the Jewish couple undergo a traditional Jewish wedding ceremony, complete with *chupah* (canopy), *yarmulke*, the bride and groom drinking from the traditional single cup of wine and the concluding ritual of the smashing of the glass, but thereafter, as Friedman points out, neither of the characters “display any outward signs of their Judaism or any attachment to Jewish culture other than their participation in this wedding ceremony” (294).

### The *Halachah* of Representing Judaism on Film

In general, however, while these films represented a welcome development from representations of Judaism which had traditionally been invisible or where represented, de-Semitized, decontextualized and universalized, they were only very occasionally realistic. Instead, surveying Judaism on film from the origins of cinema until 1990, one can discern the following general rules. First, it is true to say of many directors, that they perceive themselves

in secular, ethnic terms and that religion plays little part in their personal lives. As a result, as has been said of Barry Levinson, films about Jews are meticulously non-specific when it comes to religion. Likewise, Warren Rosenberg's observations of the same director can also be generalized to apply to Hollywood in general: few of them practice Judaism in any form and hence their oeuvres are "clearly uninformed by the practice or study of Judaism." (33, 43). Michael Taub also adds, "practically nothing ethnic/religious is passed on, neither in the form of education, nor in shared traditions" (18).

Second, most Jewish characters on film are only "conceptually Jewish," that is, they are "literally *conceived*, more than *represented*, as Jews" (Brook 124). As a result, individuals who are neither ethnically nor religiously Jewish become *Jewish* on screen but with the result of the complete emptying out of any religious content. Thus, Jewishness as opposed to Judaism becomes a mere simulacrum (Brooks 272), as these protagonists "exhibit identifiably Jewish cultural and ethnic (although not usually religious) characteristics and were created by Jewish writers and producers, but their Judaism almost never is discussed or problematized" (Rockler 456). They are distinguishable—for those that can read the signs—by a series of *ethnic* markers such as physical appearance, names, profession, and locality. But many characters are so assimilated that we get no sign of their Jewishness other than easily-recognizable family names such as Levy and Cohen. And given that so many non-Jews often play Jews, characters don't even conform to preconceived and stereotypical notions of a "Jewish look" (even if such a thing doesn't exist in reality as Jewishness is not essentialist). Despite the appearance of a myriad of Jewish characters on screen, therefore, "viewers can attune to or disregard" their Jewishness (Rockler 456).

Third, Jews (and hence Judaism) are presented as being no different from gentiles. This leads to a focus on Jewish holidays like Chanukah as a Jewish parallel to Christmas or on Jews celebrating Thanksgiving and other American holidays. As Joel Rosenberg has put it, "Jews are portrayed as participants in an American civil religion, whose members attend either the church or synagogue of their choice but are not otherwise marked by great differences of appearance, speech, custom, or behavior" (22). Consequently, "[r]epresentations of the Jews historically have downplayed significant Jewish holidays, the issue of interfaith marriage, and other important Jewish issues" (Rockler 465). Indeed, intermarried Jews, particularly where a Jewish male is depicted as dating or marrying a non-Jewish female, are frequent on film (endogamous marriage and even mating are rare as are Jewish women who fall in love with non-Jewish men) but the problems surrounding such unions are rarely discussed in any depth. Instead, a cross-cultural love affair is the standard in which the moral of the story is "love conquers all." Films of the 1970s are particularly notable in this respect, such as *Portnoy's Complaint* (Ernest Lehman, 1972) and *The Heartbreak Kid* (Elaine May, 1972).

Fourth, film does not, nor does it often aim to, convey any sophisticated or subtle understanding of Judaism, its beliefs, rituals and practices. Secular symbols of Jewishness are ubiquitous. Film therefore fails, in general, to contextualize Judaism in any way that is historically, culturally, or religiously meaningful. Decontextualized as such, Judaism becomes very superficial, empty almost, when it is conveyed. Often Judaism is viewed from the outside so that the focus is on the subjective experiences of the gentile rather than the Jews themselves.

Fifth, where Judaism has been represented on screen, in the main, in many of the films mentioned above, the Jewish characters tend to be non-Orthodox. They are either assimilated, deracinated, or members of various non-Orthodox denominations such as Reform, Liberal and Conservative, although these are never explicitly described or delineated. It is implicitly inferable by the lack of outward markers that would identify an Orthodox Jew, such as a yarmulke, *tzitzit* (fringes), dress and clothing.

When Orthodoxy is represented, it is usually solely in terms of Hasidism since it is “the most obviously distinctive and colorful” branch of Judaism (Elber 1997). Not only does Hasidism tend to stand in as representatives of *all* Orthodoxy, often the image of the Hasidic Jew is used in several further respects: “strictly as a sight gag,” which is particularly evident in the films of Woody Allen, in particular *Take the Money and Run* (1969), *Bananas* (1971), *Everything You Wanted to Know about Sex \* But Were Too Afraid to Ask* (1972), *Annie Hall* (1977) and *Deconstructing Harry* (1997) (Miles 1996: 217 n.40); as a short hand for an instantly recognizable Jewish religious status; and as ‘a familiar cultural icon of a multi-ethnic urbanized America, one that could serve equally well an ideology of tolerance (as a sign of the thriving cultural vitality of American urban life) or intolerance (as part of the cultural detritus of a “mongrelized” America, of an imperial nation in decline’ (Rosenberg 31). The representation of Orthodoxy, particularly in the historical setting of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, is conversely prone to nostalgia, romanticization, sentimentalization and idealization as in *Fiddler on the Roof* and *Yentl* and it is nearly always represented from the *outside*, never from the perspective of the insider.

As a result, there is a simplistic filmic division between Reform and Hasidism. This is denoted by the prevalence of the use of the word ‘Temple’ used by Reform Jews to describe their synagogues and by the absence of the word *shul* used by the Orthodox to refer to theirs. There is thus no sense of the variety and complexity of American Judaism. Reform Jews are, to all intents and purposes, white, represented as no different from the vast majority of American Jewry. Their religious differences are played down and even when they are highlighted, the underlying message is that everyone is all basically the same underneath despite any outwardly different religious observances. Hasids, on the other hand, are the exotic other—almost uniformly represented as dressed in black garb and hats, with beards and

side curls. There is no sense of the sectarian divisions within these two binary opposites—from liberal, Reform, conservative and Reconstructionist to modern Orthodox, Hasidic, Lubavitch, Litvak, Gur, Polack, Neturei Karta, and Satmar—as they are all represented as being on the same continuum. Only a keen eye would be able to spot those differences even if they are represented on film. Certainly liberal or modern Orthodoxy is “rarely, if ever, portrayed on film” (Rosenberg 33) nor is there any sense of difference or distinction between Sephardic (North African, Southern European and Arabian) and Ashkenazi (Eastern and Central European) traditions. Again, American Jewry is presented as not only as ritually and theologically monolithic but as geographically homogenous, with no sense of regional distinctions, most notably East vs. West Coast, South vs. North.

When Judaism does appear, it is usually in terms of the Jewish character’s flight from a repressive and restrictive culture that limits his/her social mobility or marriage prospects. For example, in *Next Stop, Greenwich Village* (Paul Mazursky, 1976), the yarmulke is used to code a suffocating Jewish home life for when Larry Lapinsky (Lenny Baker) moves out of his parents’ house, he takes his yarmulke—a clear sign of Judaism—out of the drawer, contemplates it for a moment, and then throws it back into the dresser. This abandonment of the religion of his parents is completed when, on his subway ride to Greenwich Village, he places a beret on his head, itself a symbol of cosmopolitan intellectualism. Such themes are even more evident when looking at the various ways that *kashrut* has been deployed in film. It is clear that an implicit suggestion about the restrictiveness of Judaism is being made. Religious food restrictions limit gastronomic exploration, but more importantly, they can curtail social and geographic mobility, which has led many people in real life to break away from such religious sanctions. Therefore, it is not surprising to find that, in order to achieve higher social identification, Jews in film have eaten forbidden foods, as the conspicuous consumption of such food is an important indicator of status. Consequently, the consumption of such products becomes emblematic of attempts to assimilate, to move away from Jewish origins. At the same time, it suggests that Judaism is controlling and repressive.<sup>2</sup> Many films also deal with Jews looking for appropriate marriage partners among their co-religionists only to be attracted by unsuitable non-Jews, turned off by overtly Jewish characteristics.

Yet, plotlines rarely comment on American Judaism directly, preferring to use it as a means to make other comments about American Jews and their relationships with and to gentiles. Typically, in Allen’s oeuvre and elsewhere, Jewish *kashrut* practices are used to code the differences between Jews and non-Jews, even if the former are not particularly observant, such as the lob-

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<sup>2</sup> For more on this please see Nathan Abrams, “‘I’ll have whatever she’s having:’ Jewish Food on Film,” *Reall Food: Essays on Food and Film*, ed. Anne Bowers (New York: Routledge, 2004): 87-100.

ster sequence in *Annie Hall*. Since many of these films rarely comment on American Judaism they certainly do provide commentary on its adherents.

There have been exceptions to these general rules but these remain oddities. *The Chosen* is a rare example of a film that not only treats Judaism as a set of religious practices but also pays “attention to differences between Jewish communities of commitment” (Miles 85) by portraying the varieties of Jewish life in New York City, namely Hasidism and political Zionism. Margaret R. Miles considers the film “unique” in its faithful (“remarkably accurate”) representation of a Hasidic family and community (85, 89), as well for its recognition of “the philosophic and religious differences that divide Jews, rather than assuming a unified group,” as Patricia Erens has pointed out (378). *The Chosen* also stands out for being ‘entirely bounded by the Jewish world’ (Erens 378), as does *Yentl* which was released the following year. According to Joel Rosenberg, *Yentl* “reflects Streisand’s own genuine respect for the Jewish tradition” as demonstrated by “the loving camera attention on the artifacts of Jewish domestic and religious life” (33). Finally, *Driving Miss Daisy* offers a view of “a southern Judaism that differed greatly from Northern versions,” as well as a Jewish disdain for Jews who celebrate Christmas (Rowe 233).

### The Post-*Seinfeld* Era

Thus far I have dealt primarily with representations of Judaism up to 1990 to give an idea of how American Judaism has been represented on screen and to what ends. At this point I wish to turn to the period since 1990 until the present to give a flavor of how American Judaism has been used on screen. I will argue that the sitcom *Seinfeld* (NBC, 1990-1998) marked a shift in American visual culture in many ways. Since much has been written on *Seinfeld*’s treatment of Jews, Jewishness, and Judaism I will not retread old ground here,<sup>3</sup> suffice to say that in terms of Judaism it defined Jewish identity

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Albert Auster, “Much ado about nothing: some final thoughts on *Seinfeld*,” *Television Quarterly* 29.4 (Fall 1998): 24-33; Vincent Brook, “From the cozy to the carceral: trans-formations of ethnic space in *The Goldbergs* and *Seinfeld*,” *Velvet Light Trap* 44 (1999): 54-67; Irwin Hirsch and Cara Hirsch, “*Seinfeld*’s Humor Noir: A Look at Our Dark Side,” *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 28.3 (Fall 2000): 116; Carla Johnson, “Luckless in New York: the schlemiel and the schlimazl in *Seinfeld*,” *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 22 (Fall 1994): 116-24; Rosalin Krieger, “‘Does He Actually Say the Word Jewish?’ Jewish Representations in *Seinfeld*,” *Journal for Cultural Research* 7.4 (Oct. 2003); Nicolaus Mills, “So long, Jerry *Seinfeld*,” *Dissent* 45.3 (Summer 1998): 89-92; Joanne Morreale, “Sitcoms Say Goodbye: The Cultural Spectacle of *Seinfeld*’s Last Episode,” *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 28.3 (Fall 2000): 108; Barbra S. Morris, “Why Is George So Funny? Television Comedy, Trickster Heroism, and Cultural Studies,” *English Journal* 88.4 (1999): 47-52; David P. Pierson, “A show about nothing: *Seinfeld* and the modern

not just ethnically but also religiously. In one episode ('Yada, Yada, Yada'), for example, Zurawik points out that "we see Seinfeld defining Jewishness totally as a religion—as Judaism" when Tim Whatley announces that he has converted to Judaism—convert being a rare visual commodity in American visual culture (210). In the conversation that follows, Seinfeld positively accepts Whatley's religious identification: Whatley: "I'm a Jew. I finished converting two days ago." Seinfeld: "Oh, whoa, well, welcome aboard." In another episode, when Elaine rejects the amorous advances of a bar mitzvah boy, he declares: "I renounce my religion. From this moment onwards I am no longer Jewish. I quit." When his father attempts the same and she rebuffs him, he also proclaims: "I renounce Judaism."<sup>4</sup> Thus, *Seinfeld* was not just about ethnic Jewishness but religion and Judaism at the same time. In doing so, *Seinfeld* didn't just take on Judaism as a legitimate target for comedy but played it for laughs on a fairly consistent basis as it featured many attacks on Jerry's coreligionists who are identified religiously rather than simply ethnically. For instance, Jerry's finger is nearly chopped off by an eccentric *mohel* during a circumcision ceremony ('The Bris') and a rabbi with whom Elaine had sought counseling betrays her trust on national TV ('The Postponement'), to name just a few examples. *Seinfeld* was a watershed which opened up the floodgates for others to follow.

As a consequence, contemporary American film has *begun* to reverse, albeit not completely, the paradigm of presenting Jews on screen as discussed above to produce a multiplication of Jews on screen. Not only have they increased, they have also taken on different forms marking a departure from the past. The period has witnessed a shift towards more unselfconscious deeper, subtle, nuanced, playful and even outrageous representations of Judaism, including such Jewish rituals as *kashrut*, circumcision, endogamous marriage, wedding ceremonies, bar-mitzvahs, and festive meals. Furthermore, there has even been some extensive investigation of religious beliefs and the ideas and philosophy behind these rituals.

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comedy of manners," *Journal of Popular Culture* 34.1 (Summer 2000): 49; Robert Storey, "A Critique of Recent Theories of Laughter and Humor, with Special Reference to the Comedy of *Seinfeld*," *Interdisciplinary Literary Studies: A Journal of Criticism & Theory* (Spring 2001) 2.2: 75-92; Mary Ann Watson, "The *Seinfeld* doctrine —'no hugging, no learning'—imprints the 1990s," *Television Quarterly* 29.3 (Summer 1998): 52-54.

<sup>4</sup> Later in the episode, Elaine consults the Rabbi regarding her 'Shiskappeal' and what she can do to combat it. The Rabbi's office is decorated in a traditional Jewish style, clearly depicting religious artefacts such as the spines of the Talmud, a menorah and etchings of rabbis on the walls. After explaining her dilemma to a nonplussed rabbi, Elaine responds: "Well something's going on here because every able-bodied Israelite in the county is driving pretty strong to the hoot." The rabbi replies: "Elaine, there's much you don't understand about the Jewish religion. Did you know for example that rabbis are allowed to date?"

There are several reasons for this. First, it is a visual manifestation of the comfort of American Jewry by the late twentieth century, that Jews had arrived, and were at home in America. A new, younger generation of Jewish writers, directors and directors, who did not have to fight for their rights, entered the cultural industries of television and film and were able to express their Jewishness in an unprecedented fashion, if only as a series of ‘in-jokes’ to be read by those who understood the cultural codes. Second, these Jews felt more comfortable by the 1990s because of changes in American society. The administration of Bill Clinton had seen a softening of America’s domestic and international image and a simultaneous growth of multiculturalism at home where difference became much more acceptable. This was combined with less identification with Israel as such and a concomitant growth of pride in American Jewishness as a distinct religious and ethnic branch of Judaism. Finally, as Brook points out, there were a series of additional changes in television that paved the way for this “paradigm shift,” which he lists as: less opposition from Jewish advocacy groups, decent ratings for Jewish sitcoms, the Jewish stand-up legacy, industrial competition and programming changes (75-82).

It is to this range, complexity, and variety of representations of American Judaism on film that I now turn. In observing this shift, one can see that some of the rules outlined above have been overturned such that in the post-*Seinfeld* era film now represents not only subjective Judaic (I use this term to distinguish it from ethnic Jewishness) experiences, but also to no overt educational purpose. Jews are increasingly being identified through religious rather than simply ethnic (names, physical looks, professions, locations) markers. Film now depicts religiously significant Jewish holidays such as Yom Kippur, Passover, and the Sabbath. The specifically Jewish—as in religious—dining table becomes the arena for articulating competing versions of Jewishness. American film portrays the range of Jewish denominational affiliation (rather than just non-Orthodox and Hasidic) such that ‘multiple cultures are shown to thrive *within* Jewish life itself’ (Rosenberg 44). It has moved to a more sophisticated and/or subtle understanding of Judaism, its beliefs, rituals and practices.

### Moving Beyond the Obvious: Hasidism

Film has moved beyond using Hasidism as a cipher to present its adherents in a proliferating variety of unusual settings. *A Stranger Among Us* (Sidney Lumet, 1992), which has been described as the Jewish version of *Witness* (Peter Weir, 1985), is fairly straightforward, if not sentimental, in its representation, but like *The Chosen* before it, it provided many explanations about the Hasidic lifestyle, beliefs and customs. A more distinctive film is in Boaz Yakin’s 1997 *A Price Above Rubies*. Set in the Hassidic community of Boro Park,

Brooklyn, the film moves beyond obvious stereotype and caricature in its characterizations. Renee Zellweger plays Sonia, an attractive young Hasidic wife and mother married to a pious but unloving husband (Glenn Fitzgerald), who is too busy praying and poring through the Talmud to satisfy her needs. Her judgmental sister-in-law (Julianna Margulies) kidnaps her baby; and her brother-in-law Sender (Christopher Eccleston) is a “rare creature,” a “deeply unpleasant Jew on film,” a “snake,” an adulterer who seduces Sonia in return for a job in his jewellery business (Caplan 1999). The second time they have sex, he recites the ‘Woman of Worth’ love poem. Sender’s abuse of the poem, which is traditionally sung on the Friday night when blessing in the Sabbath, provides an ironic commentary on his Judaism, as well as providing the title for the film, as he has no qualms about using his power to gain sex from his own brother’s wife. Eventually, however, Sonia finds solace in the arms of a sensitive Catholic Puerto Rican sculptor Ramon (Alan Payne), and thus the film sticks to the paradigm of representing Hasidism as oppressive and restrictive. And even though the director insisted that the film’s main concern is societal repression, the film ends up resembling an outside critique of the Hasidic way of life. Nonetheless, while it is impossible to ascertain the accuracy of such a representation, not least since the community on which it is based is close-knit and closed to outsiders and objected to the film on the basis of seeing the sets and wardrobe alone (Elber 1997), it certainly marks a departure from the pre-*Seinfeld* era not only in its lack of cardboard characterizations but in its depiction of Hasidim as real, thinking, feeling people in a variety of everyday settings. The scenes in which Sender seduces Sonia are particularly notable for depicting Hasidim—*in flagrante delicto*—in a way that previous films have shied away from.

In contrast, *The Hebrew Hammer* (Jonathan Kesselman, 2003) stars Adam Goldberg as the eponymous Brooklyn-based Hasidic crime fighter, Mordechai Jefferson Carver. Clearly modeled on Shaft, Carver is depicted as a Hasid in his dress and observance but *Hammer* self-consciously and ironically both plays with and rejects a whole range of Jewish stereotypes. Carver himself manifests every Jewish neurosis: he is allergic to dust, he has a taste for Manischewitz (Black Label) and he can’t handle too much pressure. On the other hand, *Hammer* explodes the anti-Semitic canard that Jews, in particular Orthodox Jews, are physically weak and cowardly. Carver is represented as a sexy and powerful Jewish action hero who, in the one of the film’s best sequences, enters a neo-Nazi dive bar and pulls out two shot-guns with the words “Shalom, muthafuckers” before proceeding to destroy the place. The intention was not to depict Hasidim as intellectual, weak and scholarly but to reverse such stereotypes in an act of re-appropriation.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Another interesting representation of Hasids, as gangsters, in the film *Lucky Number Slevin*, dir. Paul McGuigan, Capitol Films, 2006 is discussed in my forthcoming “From Jeremy to Jesus: the Jewish Male Body on Film, 1990 to the Present,” *Male Bodies in Global Cinema*, ed. Santiago Fouz-Hernández (London: IB Tauris).

Finally, *Pi* (Darren Aronofsky 1998) introduced Hasidic concepts, in particular, Kabbalah, gematria, and Torah codes. A group of Hasidim led by Lenny Meyer are engaged in mathematical research in the Torah, deriving from the belief that it is a string of numbers that form a code sent by God. They are searching for a 216-digit number that is repeated throughout the text of the Torah and which they believe is the true name of God. The film is rich in religious Jewish imagery: Hasidic dress, synagogue interiors, and other Jewish ritual items figure frequently. There are even quite detailed discussions about the nature of the name of God, Jewish history and belief, and the messianic age. At one point in the film, the protagonist, a tortured mathematics genius, Max Cohen, meets Lenny who explains to him the significance of a daily Jewish ritual that is rarely depicted on film: the wearing of Tefillin.

LENNY MEYER: Do you practice?

MAX: No, I'm not interested in religion.

LENNY: Have you ever heard of Kabbalah?

MAX: No.

LENNY: Jewish mysticism.

MAX: I'm sorry, I'm very busy.

LENNY: I understand ... it's just that it's a very exciting time in our history. Right now is a critical moment in time.

MAX: Really?

LENNY: Yes, it's very exciting. Have you ever put on Tefillin? Tefillin. You know Tefillin. I know it looks strange. But it's an amazing tradition that has a tremendous amount of power. It's a mitzvah for all Jewish men to do. Mitzvahs, good deeds, are spiritual food for our hearts and our heads. They purify us and bring us closer to God. You want to try it?

Lenny later takes Max to a synagogue where he teaches him to put on the Tefillin and to recite the correct blessing in Hebrew. (This integration of Jewish and kabbalistic symbols in the film, specifically one of the seventy-two names of God and the wearing of Tefillin, was later, coincidentally, echoed by Madonna in her video for the James Bond film, *Die Another Day* (2002), all part of the mainstreaming of Kabbalah popularized by Yehuda Berg of which Madonna is the most high-profile exponent.)

The film's representation of religion stands out in several respects. First, it attempts to engage with, in a serious fashion, Hasidic beliefs rather than simply presenting them as oddities, curiosities ripe for visual humor; indeed, their worldview is explained in some detail with little or no gloss and simplifications. *Pi*'s director explained that the message of the film was that "you shouldn't spend all of your time searching for God in this lifetime. The beauty

is in the chaos. It's about enjoying life—which is also a Chassidic message” (Medved). Second, there is no sentimentalization in *Pi* for these Hasids are determined, aggressive even, in their desire to obtain the true name of God. At one point, they rough up and kidnap Max. As Aronofsky himself put it, “I wanted to make a movie about God, math and badass Jews.” Finally, they are not simply represented as ‘the other’, for not they are not entirely other-worldly. They are shown using the most modern methods available to them to achieve their goals. They drive cars, use computers, and generally engage with technology. Overall, then, according to Michael Taub, “bearded Jews are no longer comical and marginal figures, but three-dimensional characters who command the audience’s attention and, occasionally, even its sympathy” (36). As a result of these changes, therefore, one gains a greater understanding of the Hasidic lifestyle, beliefs, and customs than ever before.

### The Other Side of the Equation: Non-Orthodoxy

Alongside more subtle and diverse representations of Hasidism, are those of other denominations of Judaism. In 2002, the first Hollywood Chanukah film to compare to the classical Hollywood Christmas films had been released: Adam Sandler’s *Eight Crazy Nights* (Seth Kearsley). Another Adam Sandler film, *I Now Pronounce You Chuck and Larry* (Dennis Dugan, 2007), even features a gay Jewish wedding. In *Kissing Jessica Stein* (Charles Herman-Wurmfeld, 2001), the Jewish family dining scenes on the Sabbath and other festive occasions become an arena where the Jewish daughter strives to assert her lesbian sexuality against the obvious wishes of her parents who use these same mealtimes to try to match her with more suitable partners.

Judaism is used complexly in *School Ties* (Robert Mandel, 1992), the first Hollywood movie to deal with anti-Semitism since *Gentleman’s Agreement* (Elia Kazan, 1947). When working-class Jew David Greene (Brendan Fraser), a gifted football player, wins an athletic scholarship to a private New England prep school, the school officials go to great lengths to hide his religious identity. David is encouraged to do the same. David’s willingness to be flexible on this issue allows him to assimilate into the school culture (even if ultimately this desire for ethnic and religious invisibility is unsuccessful) but only at the expense of his ethnic/religious identity. At the same time, however, David is not represented as simplistically abandoning his Judaism. While he does play football on Rosh Hashanah, against his father’s wishes, later that night he feels guilty and sneaks into the chapel to pray while the other students sleep. He is overheard by the headmaster as he recites the prayer *Avinu Malkenu* (‘Our Father Our King’). Since this is a Hebrew prayer and David can read it from the prayer book, this marks him out as a traditional Jew. Since he does not wear a yarmulke nor have any ‘particular eating habits’ he is certainly not Orthodox. Thus, in addition to

various ethnic markers such as his name and his wearing of a Star of David, Greene is defined through a religious practice which is pronounced enough to be envisaged negatively as a barrier to social mobility and advancement, as well as a distancing device from his fellow peers most of whom are bigoted if not outright anti-Semites.

*The Believer* (Henry Bean, 2001) is even more unusual in its representation of Judaism. Like *School Ties*, this film is also concerned with anti-Semitism. In it a young Orthodox Jew, Danny Balint (Ryan Gosling), remarkably not-Hasidic, rejects his upbringing and background, and in externalising his internal self-hatred becomes a neo-Nazi. Yet, he still retains a reverence for Jewish learning and texts. The film presents fairly accurate critiques of Judaism's belief system. Indeed, the film is perhaps an attempt to understand the inner workings of Judaism and how one individual can turn its injunctions into a form of self-hatred. In doing so, it offers uncomfortable images: a skinhead wearing a *tallit* (prayer shawl) and leading the *shul* service on Rosh Hashanah; a neo-Nazi, in a 'Sieg Heil' salute, chanting Hebrew words. The synagogue scenes are also unusual. While the community represented are shown as Orthodox, in terms of dress (white shirts, *tzitzit*, yarmulkes) and in terms of the educational environment shown in the flashback scenes of the protagonist's early life, there is mixed seating in the synagogue and women are shown wearing both yarmulkes and prayer shawls, a practice typical of Reform Judaism. Yet, the services are conducted entirely in Hebrew and terminology like *daven* (to pray) is used which usually denotes Orthodoxy. Either this is an inaccuracy or represents a more egalitarian, in gender terms at least, form of modern Orthodoxy. An even more arresting image appears in the film *Down in the Valley* (David Jacobson, 2005) when a modern-day urban cowboy (Edward Norton) is shown sitting in synagogue while Hasidic Jews, wearing their tefillin and *tallit*, pray in Hebrew: his white Stetson standing out in stark contrast amongst all those black hats. Although this initially resembles a visual joke, this film is unquestionably serious (in fact, the first serious film featuring a Jewish cowboy since 1912), especially when it is revealed that the cowboy himself is a deluded ex-Orthodox Jew, defined by his now-lapsed religious practice rather than any other visible ethnic or cultural markers of which there are none.

Finally, I shall end with one example which belongs to an older paradigm in filmmaking. *Keeping the Faith* (Edward Norton, 2000) uses numerous devices that serve to reinforce the theme that Progressive or Conservative Jews and Catholics are basically alike. It parallels the story of *The Jazz Singer* in having an interfaith relationship at its heart and even using *Yom Kippur* as the moment that Jake (Ben Stiller) uses his sermon to declare his love for his non-Jewish girlfriend Anna (Jenna Elfman). Melanie J. Wright finds "[t]he film's attention to duty and aspects of religious ritual" is "fairly unusual" but she goes on to say that "its own form of 'comparative religion' risks ignoring the specificity of religions' distinctive content" (135). But where the twist

comes, and one which might reflect the post-1990 era, is that Anna has in fact been secretly attending conversion classes and Jake will, finally, marry a Jewish woman. Nonetheless, Anna's journey to Judaism is marked by its absence—it is not shown, thus denying a valuable opportunity to meaningfully engage in the process of conversion and dispel a commonly-held myth that Judaism does not accept converts. Instead, as Wright points out, "*Keeping the Faith* thus presents religious conversion as a rather simplistic joining of a community or acquiring of an identity" (138).<sup>6</sup>

## Conclusion

Given the new liberties taken with Judaism on film in recent years it strikes me that American Jews have become not only very comfortable with their religion but are extraordinarily self-confident about it, too. What was once said about *The Producers* (Mel Brooks, 1968), that it conveys "considerable cultural confidence—loud and proud" and is "a rebellion against invisibility" (Hoberman 229) is applicable to a great range of filmic texts since 1990. At the same time, an increasingly multicultural America seems to be far more receptive and tolerant of such imagery, particularly in what many feel to be the more openly religious society that has emerged since 2001. And if I have only focussed on mainstream American fiction films for the purposes of this article, then it is possible to argue that documentaries in recent years have pushed the boundaries even further.<sup>7</sup> In this article, I have tried to bring together a small selection of films as a step towards beefing up the study of visual American Judaism, giving some illustrative examples of the rich selection of films to be productively researched further. I have only scratched the surface here, but as Elliot B. Gertel has earlier shown, there is clearly plenty of material for further exploration, and I hope that, in the future, the links between film, American Studies, and Judaism as Judaism, will be confronted in more depth.

<sup>6</sup> Further examples of non-Orthodox Judaism on film, specifically *Independence Day*, dir. Roland Emmerich, Centropolis, 1996; *The Big Lebowski*, dir. Joel Coen, Polygram, 1998; and *Serenity*, dir. Joss Whedon, Mutant Enemy, 2005, are discussed in my chapter, "From Jeremy to Jesus."

<sup>7</sup> In *Capturing the Friedmans*, dir. Andrew Jarecki, HBO, 2003, a documentary charting the decline of a Jewish family when the father, Arnold, and youngest son, Jesse, are accused of sexually abusing dozens of young boys who came to the Friedman home for computer classes, traditional Jewish family scenes, in particular the Passover Seder, serve as the backdrop to the crumbling family's last weeks together as captured on 8mm videotape. *Trembling Before G-d*, dir. Sandi Simcha Dubowski, Cinephil, 2001 is another documentary which charts the experiences of gay and lesbian Hasidic and Orthodox Jews and the problems they face.

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- Annie Hall*. Dir. Woody Allen. Rollins & Joffe, 1977.
- The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz*. Dir. Ted Kotcheff. Astral Bellevue, 1974.
- Bananas*. Dir. Woody Allen. Rollins & Joffe, 1971.
- The Believer*. Dir. Henry Bean. Fuller, 2001.

- The Big Lebowski*. Dir. Joel Coen. Polygram, 1998.
- Boardwalk*. Dir. Steven Verona. Straford, 1979.
- Capturing the Friedmans*. Dir. Andrew Jarecki. HBO, 2003.
- Cast A Giant Shadow*. Dir. Meville Shavelson. Batjac, 1966.
- The Chosen*. Dir. Jeremy Kagan. Chosen Film, 1981.
- Crimes and Misdemeanors*. Dir. Woody Allen. 1989.
- Crossing Delancey*. Dir. Joan Micklin Silver. Warner Bros., 1989.
- Deconstructing Harry*. Dir. Woody Allen. Doumanian, 1997.
- The Diary of Anne Frank*. Dir. George Stevens. Twentieth Century-Fox, 1959.
- Down in the Valley*. Dir. David Jacobson. Element, 2005.
- Driving Miss Daisy*. Dir. Bruce Beresford. Majestic, 1989.
- Eight Crazy Nights*. Dir. Seth Kearsley. Happy Madison, 2002.
- Enemies, A Love Story*. Dir. Paul Marzursky. Morgan Creek, 1989.
- Everything You Wanted to Know about Sex \*But Were Too Afraid To Ask*. Dir. Woody Allen. Rollins & Joffe, 1972.
- Fiddler on the Roof*. Dir. Norman Jewison. Cartier, 1971.
- Gentleman's Agreement*. Dir. Elia Kazan. Twentieth Century-Fox, 1947.
- Goodbye Columbus*. Dir. Larry Peerce. Willow Tree, 1969.
- The Hearbreak Kid*. Dir. Elaine May. Palomar, 1972.
- The Hebrew Hammer*. Dir. Jonathan Kesselman. Intrinsic Value, 2003.
- Hester Street*. Dir. Joan Micklin Silver. Midwest, 1975.
- His People*. Dir. Edward Sloman. Universal, 1925.
- I Love You, Alice B. Toklas*. Dir. Hy Averback. Warner Bros./Seven Arts, 1968.
- Independence Day*. Dir. Roland Emmerich. Centropolis, 1996.
- I Now Pronounce You Chuck and Larry*. Dir. Dennis Dugan. Universal, 2007.
- It's My Turn*. Dir. Claudia Weill. Columbia, 1980.
- The Jazz Singer*. Dir. Alan Crosland. Warner Bros., 1927.
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- The Jazz Singer*. Dir. Richard Fleischer. EMI, 1980.
- Keeping the Faith*. Dir. Edward Norton. Spyglass, 2000.
- Kissing Jessica Stein*. Dir. Charles Herman-Wurmfeld. Fox, 2001.
- Lucky Number Slevin*. Dir. Paul McGuigan. Capitol, 2005.
- Next Stop, Greenwich Village*. Dir. Paul Mazursky. Twentieth Century-Fox, 1976.
- A Passover Miracle*. Dir. Anon. Kalem, 1914.
- Pi*. Dir. Darren Aronofsky. Harvest, 1998.
- Portnoy's Complaint*. Dir. Ernest Lehman. Chenault, 1972.
- A Price Above Rubies*. Dir. Boaz Yakin. Channel Four, 1998.
- The Producers*. Dir. Mel Brooks. Crossbow, 1968.
- Radio Days*. Dir. Woody Allen. Orion, 1987.
- Sleeper*. Dir. Woody Allen. Rollins & Joffe, 1973.
- School Ties*. Dir. Robert Mandel. Paramount, 1992.
- Seinfeld*. 1990-1998. Writ. Larry David and Jerry Seinfeld. NBC. Castle Rock, 1990-1998.
- Serenity*. Dir. Joss Whedon. Mutant Enemy, 2005.
- A Stranger Among Us*. Dir. Sidney Lumet. Hollywood, 1992.
- Take the Money and Run*. Dir. Woody Allen. ABC, 1969.
- Witness*. Dir. Peter Weir. Paramount, 1985.
- The Ten Commandments*. Dir. Cecil B. DeMille. Motion, 1956.
- Tevye*. Dir. Maurice Schwatz. Mayman, 1939.
- Trembling Before G-d*. Dir. Sandi Simcha Dubowski. Cinephil, 2001.
- Yentl*. Dir. Barbra Streisand. Barwood, 1983.

