

ALL IN THE (JEWISH) FAMILY

Understanding, Utilizing, and Enhancing Images of Inter-marriage and Other Jewish Family Relationships on Popular Television

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The Jewish community has much to gain from an exploration and utilization of television's depictions of Jews and particularly the issues of intermarriage, assimilation, and Jewish identity. Television can be used as a resource to reach nonaffiliated Jews and to communicate ideas and values. Jewish communal leaders should help guide others to view television critically and to work to enhance positive Jewish telemages.

Neither Bridget and Bernie, nor Michael and Hope, are real people. Yet, the mere mention of their names evokes a whole cascade of vivid images — regarding interfaith marriages, children of intermarriage, and Jewish survival — in the mind of nearly everyone.

These couples are, of course, merely television characters. Yet, their enviable name recognition and the strong emotions that their names elicit are a stunning indication of the power and influence of TV images, the regularity with which such images deal with intermarriage issues, and the capacity of such images - as reflections of real-life problems and challenges - to ignite passionate reactions and stimulate new directions of debate and action on these vital and volatile issues.

As the language and lingo of television fare seeps inexorably into the national consciousness, Jewish images on popular entertainment TV (what we call "Jewish telemages") have potentially enormous influence. It is therefore vital for Jewish communal leaders, educators, and professionals to be aware of such images on an

ongoing basis and to put them to the best possible use.

The vast and ever-growing number of programs that contain, indeed feature, images and themes of Jewish life, families, relationships, and intermarriage represent a treasure trove for exploring and enhancing Jewish identity, if properly approached; it must not go unexamined and unutilized.

TELEVISION IMAGES AND JEWISH IDENTITY

Since the beginnings of television, Jewish themes and characters have been a steady element in popular TV shows, from dramas and situation comedies to miniseries and made-for-TV movies.

Through such programs — both current and past, since old shows reappear continually on cable and independent networks — vast numbers of viewers are regularly exposed to images of Jews and Jewish practices, mores, and lifestyles.

Just a few statistics need be cited to point out the unsurpassed influence of television as a mass medium. The members of a typical American household view 7 hours of TV every day, and during prime-time hours (when the popular dramas and sit-coms air), more than 95 million viewers are tuned in. Indeed, more people watch a single episode

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of *L. A. Law* than will ever see the most successful theatrical film in a movie theater. Perhaps the most stunning statistic and the one most important to our understanding of TV's impact on young people is that the average teenager, upon reaching college, has watched 18,000 hours of television — amounting to the equivalent of 2 straight years of nonstop TV viewing, 7 days a week, 24 hours a day.

The effect of all this TV viewing can be significant. Numerous studies have demonstrated that TV depictions are often absorbed and emulated by viewers and have great potential to affect their real-life behaviors, attitudes, knowledge, and understanding of the world (DeFleur & DeFleur, 1967; Gerbner & Gross, 1978; Hawkins & Pingree, 1981; Siegel, 1958). Indeed, the programs with the greatest potential to influence viewers are the popular dramas and situation comedies, which attract by far the largest numbers of viewers and which intimately involve them through drama, humor, or familiar TV characters with whom the audience identifies.

That television's ethnic images have an important effect on ethnic identity formation has also been amply demonstrated in many studies (for example, see Fairchild et al., 1986). Consider, for example, the experiences of TV director Joe Sargent, an Italian-American. Sargent, who directed two Holocaust-related made-for-TV movies ("*Never Forget*" and *Miss Rose White*), said, "Growing up not seeing myself in the mainstream media gave me a sense of being on the outside looking in. [Positive TV images] can give kids a sense of their own self-worth" (Personal communication, Joe Sargent).

When the popular drama/comedy series, *The Wonder Years*, aired a poignant and expertly done episode about a Bar Mitzvah and its impact on both the Bar Mitzvah boy and his non-Jewish friend, the response from Jewish youngsters was palpable: they were excited and felt a sudden self-impor-

tance upon seeing *their* rituals, *their* religion depicted on television. This religious rite of passage was validated on a mass medium and beamed out to both their Jewish and non-Jewish friends. Similarly, when Stuart Markowitz in *L. A. Law*, an assimilated Jew by his own admission, suddenly felt immense ethnic pride ("suddenly I felt the weight of 5,000 years of history") when confronted with anti-Semitism, many assimilated Jews responded with pride. Given the unparalleled mass audience of television, such anecdotal scenarios are likely played out on a huge scale all across the country.

Thus, depictions of Jews and Jewish life on popular TV shows influence not only non-Jewish viewers in their perceptions of Jews but — most importantly for the Jewish community — also influence Jewish viewers and their sense of Jewish identity and attitudes toward such issues as intermarriage, romance between Jews, and Jewish familial relationships. It is these Jewish televimages on popular entertainment shows then that have the greatest potential impact for the Jewish community and demand its utmost attention.

JEWISH TELEVIMAGES OF INTERDATING AND INTERMARRIAGE

Perhaps no issue in the Jewish world today is as emotionally charged and so fraught with implications for Jewish continuity as intermarriage. As a result, TV's current portrayals of intermarriage are among the most controversial of the medium's Jewish images, generating much interest and dispute.

Yet, television's portrayal of intermarriage and all manner of interfaith romances long predates the current outspokenness on the topic and the high visibility of such recent popular shows as *L. A. Law* and *thirtysomething* that feature intermarried couples. Even the controversial 1970s series, *Bridget Loves Bernie*, the comedic premise of which was an intermarriage, was not the small screen's first approach to the

issue. As early as 1948, the first year of network television, interdating issues began to appear on popular TV programs. When the early anthology series, *Philco TV Playhouse*, aired "Street Scene," a saga of immigrant life on New York's Lower East Side, viewers were introduced to the trials and tribulations of interfaith love between a young Jewish student and a Gentile Irish neighbor.

The depictions of intermarriage and interdating parading across the small screen in the following decades and the attitudes toward such relationships inherent in these portrayals are as diverse as those expressed on the topic in the real world. They range from approbation to objection, acceptance to rejection, and superficiality to seriousness. In this section, we discuss four of TV's representative approaches to intermarriage: endorsement, objection, avoidance, and coping.

Endorsement

Perhaps the least surprising of television's attitudes toward intermarriage, given the medium's reputation as a great homogenizer, is the notion that interfaith romances are not only problem-free but that they also are in fact paragons of interfaith harmony and compromise. Driving this outlook is the familiar idea of the melting pot, in which America's varied groups coalesce into a new, seamless, and better whole — in this case, through intermarriage.

Such a scenario has been played out in numerous shows of early television in which Jewish immigrants are shown to marry other new Americans and the union is presented as a harmonious and hopeful vision — the very essence of a new America to come. Typically, the couple shares customs and merge holidays, and any controversy is wholly avoided.

Some of the TV immigrants or children of immigrants who are drawn to the path of intermarriage or interdating as a swift and inviting agent of Americanization are well-

known characters. Sammy Glick in *What Makes Sammy Run?*, Harold Sizeman, son of an immigrant garment boss in *Sizeman and Son*, and new American Hyman Kaplan in *The Education of H*Y*M*A*N K*A*P*L*A*N* dated or married non-Jewish women in TV plays of the 1940s and 1950s. The theme of Jewish immigrants effortlessly marrying out of their religion has continued in recent programs, such as the 1984 miniseries, *Ellis Island*, which follows the lives of four European newcomers finding their way in America. The Jewish immigrant among them, a former victim of pogroms in Russia, marries a Gentile woman without a murmur raised about their different religious backgrounds. In these shows, the interfaith nature of the relationship is not even addressed; intermarriage is a casual and natural process, and questions of religious differences and identity are insignificant, meriting no attention.

This matter-of-fact depiction of intermarriage as problem-free and as a nonissue has infused many modern settings as well. One of the most notable was the mid-1970s comedy series *Rhoda*, a spin-off of *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, on which the Jewish Rhoda Morgenstern had been a regular. Rhoda's much-heralded wedding — a civil ceremony presided over by a judge — was clearly the start of an intermarriage, yet the interfaith aspect of the couple's relationship and their later breakup was never featured during the series' 5-year run.

Even characters who express a connection to their Jewish faith enter into an intermarriage or interfaith relationship without concern. Last year's comedy, *Anything But Love*, featured the relationship between Marty Gold (Jewish) and Hannah Miller (non-Jewish). As they debate moving from friendship to romance (and as they eventually do), many issues of life and love arise — yet the question of religious differences entering into the equation is not raised. Although at every turn Marty

openly refers to his Jewishness, his nonconcern about interdating and intermarriage is an all-too-familiar TV depiction.

Objection

In contrast to the notion that romance between people of different faiths is the natural and accepted state, just the opposite has been suggested and even expressly stated on numerous prime-time TV shows. These impart the message that dating and marriage between individuals of different faiths are not acceptable.

Such depictions have three important aspects. First, objections to intermarriage are most often raised by family members, demonstrating how deeply the issue of intermarriage reaches into the Jewish family. As is frequently the case in real life, such crises often involve serious and explosive familial conflict, disrupting relationships between the generations and affecting a whole range of relationships, be they father-son, grandmother-granddaughter, or any of numerous combinations. Whatever the ultimate outcome, the Jewish family exerts a powerful presence in matters of interfaith relationships, bringing to bear ardent pressure against them.

Second, when TV characters express opposition to intermarriage, they are given the opportunity to voice the reason why such relationships are problematic for Jews. Although such statements are usually academic — as the TV couple goes on to wed (or date) in a scenario of love overcoming narrow ethnic concerns — the mere raising of objections at least inserts elements of Jewish concerns over intermarriage; but just how fully and fairly those concerns are expressed is an important point of concern.

Finally, at times parental objections are met with an unexpected but telling response: the children redirect accusations about their parents' own weak sense of religious identity and affiliation.

A few examples illustrate how some shows have incorporated these often

intertwining issues. The popular but controversial 1972 series, *Bridget Loves Bernie*, featured perhaps TV's best-known feuding families vis-a-vis intermarriage. Many episodes focused on the interfaith aspect of the marriage between Jewish Bernie Steinberg and Irish-Catholic Bridget Fitzgerald and the involvement of various relatives. As Bridget and Bernie prepare to wed in the pilot episode, for example, both sets of parents object to the impending union on nonspecific "religious" grounds. Although neither family is very observant, intermarriage is anathema to them both. Both families are portrayed as comical bigots but in different ways: the Fitzgeralds as genteel anti-Semites, the Steinbergs as coarse and narrow-minded. Out of this cacophony of conflict emerges the young couple as the picture of harmony, whose love defeats small-mindedness.

In contrast, Jewish concerns about intermarriage were expressed with a fair degree of cogency (given the constraints of dramatic television) some years later in a made-for-TV movie about the life of master magician Harry Houdini (born Eric Weiss). This movie focused less on his feats of illusion than on his personal life, particularly his intermarriage and the ensuing strain in his relationship with his mother. Eric's ties to his mother Cecilia are portrayed as especially warm and close until his secret marriage to the Catholic Bess is revealed. Then, Cecilia erupts with tears and tirades, explaining to the perplexed Bess: "Look at me! I'm 5,000 years old, from the time of Abraham. You think that's nothing? Five thousand years — the same people! Who else can say it? Do I have to tell you what it cost us? With fire they tried to finish us, with swords, with guns, with hate. You think I want to see them do it with love?" When the couple marries in church, Cecilia shuns Bess, and relations with her son remain strained.

Although Cecilia's statement is also accompanied by melodramatic hysterics ("Your father is turning in his grave"; "To

the day I die, I'll never forgive you"), this depiction is noteworthy for two reasons. It offers a clear explanation of why intermarriage is so painful and problematic for Jews, and it depicts a character who remains steadfast in her unwillingness to go along with what she believes to be calamitous for Jewish survival. Moreover, Cecilia's rejection of Bess cannot be construed as bigoted, since she clearly explains the historic and religious objections to intermarriage and its threat to Jewish survival and states that she would welcome Bess if she converted.

Reference to Jewish survival was uttered by a stern father figure in the 1985 miniseries, *Evergreen*, which followed four generations of a Jewish immigrant family. Here, the Jewish parent invokes the Holocaust, then brewing in Europe, to dissuade his son from intermarrying: "Right now in Germany, our people are being persecuted for no reason, and this world does nothing — it doesn't care.... We are a proud, strong people who enrich this world, and our religion is what unifies us; it's what keeps us together, and it's what keeps us strong." Yet, as the father is portrayed as increasingly unyielding and harsh (and ridden with guilt after his son is killed), his deeply felt objections to intermarriage seem to be deliberately undermined and cast as strongly prejudiced.

At times, such generational roles are reversed, as in the 1986 made-for-TV movie, *Mrs. Delafield Wants to Marry*. In a switch on the conventional set-up in which parents decry the interdating of their offspring, here the children resent their parents' interdating. Rich, Protestant widow Mrs. Margaret Delafield weds Jewish doctor Marvin Elias over their offspring's objections — objections cast as particularly derogatory and bigoted.

An interesting and revealing twist on generational inversion appeared on the series, *Archie Bunker's Place*. Ironically, in one episode the Jewish Murray Klein, Archie Bunker's business partner, is

interdating and fears his mother's wrath while seeking her acceptance; in another, the focus is on Murray not as a child, but as a father — and as such he displays a wholly different attitude. Viewers learn that when his daughter Beverly married a non-Jew years earlier, he boycotted the wedding and severed his relationship with her. Both episodes are resolved through speeches about harmony and the insignificance of differences among people, and reconciliations abound. Yet, the distinctive note is the apparently contradictory roles borne by Murray, who is at once a fearful, interdating son seeking his mother's approval and a disapproving father rejecting his intermarried daughter. His dual characterization telescopes the different attitudes toward intermarriage that TV characters often assume based on their stage of life and the metamorphosis some undergo as they move from one stage to another.

Parental objections were a major component in the portrayal of one of television's odder interdating couples — the 52-year-old Jackie Fisher and his younger Irish-Catholic neighbor Maddie Pearce, featured in the popular but short-lived 1989 comedy series, *Chicken Soup*. The couple faces typical, growling displeasure from both sides, but Jackie is most fearful of his mother's reactions. Timidly, he tells her that "Maddie and I are going to be a couple," and she reacts with great dismay. When Jackie tells her, "I don't understand you, you're not even that religious," she offers a telling reply: "There is something inside me that was passed down 5,000 years ago, and I thought I gave it to you. But who knows? These days with the DNA and the RNA and the genes and the clones — sometimes it's hard to know what's happening." Her assumption is that knowledge of and devotion to Judaism will somehow magically be passed down genetically, despite the fact that Judaism is neither practiced nor taught at home. In response, the child rightfully questions the parents' justification in objecting to

intermarriage when they themselves have lacked any strong Jewish identity or affiliation or observance all their lives. This portrayal suggests that the role of family can be effective in preventing intermarriage, not when expressing objections to interdating at the time it occurs but in cultivating earlier a sense of Jewish identity.

Seventeen years earlier, this important but rarely discussed aspect of intermarriage was exposed in the premier episode of *Bridget Loves Bernie*. When Bernie Steinberg's assimilated parents — who apparently raised their son without any Jewish religious education, observance, or allegiance — are confronted with his impending intermarriage, they suddenly make a frantic grasp for a mantle of Jewishness. Bernie brings Bridget home for dinner on Friday night and encounters, evidently for the first time in that house, Shabbat candles, pronouncements that the family is Jewish, and the telling of jokes in Yiddish. Puzzled and angry, he cries out in disgust: "I don't believe this. I've lived with you people all my life. Now why all of a sudden is everyone being so Jewish?" Such sentiments, in nearly the same words, were expressed just this season by an interdating young Jewish girl on the drama series, *I'll Fly Away*.

Underlying these exchanges is the sense that the acquisition of religious identity is a lifetime enterprise of conscious involvement and not a biological fiat, as envisioned by Jackie Fisher's mother. Such programs have the potential to arouse parents by pointedly raising questions about why their children should *not* want to intermarry and how — if there is no example to follow — Jewish identity is to be transmitted. Although these TV parents learn too late that their children are unlikely to develop a deep commitment to Judaism if it is virtually absent from the home, their confrontation with this notion can impart important messages for others.

Avoidance

Not all shows touching on interfaith romance culminate with an intermarriage. In several programs, the notion that Jews are to marry only within their faith is presented as so axiomatic that there is little explanation and few objections need be raised. Intermarriage is simply avoided through one of two possible means: a break-up of the relationship or a conversion by one of the parties.

Jewish partners have broken up interfaith romances for religious reasons on such shows as *The Golden Girls* and *The Days and Nights of Molly Dodd*. On an episode of the family drama, *Our House*, an uncle recounts how his niece — from an Orthodox family — sought his intervention in ending her relationship with her Gentile boyfriend. This implied role of family in dissuading intermarriage surfaces in many such depictions of break-ups, as well as in those in which conversion is raised as an option.

Several episodes of the 1980s hit series, *Hill Street Blues*, for example, followed the budding romance between SWAT team commander Howard Hunter and Jewish nurse Linda Wolfowitz. When Howard proposes marriage, Linda demurs, explaining, "My parents are very Old-World, and I just could never marry anyone they disapprove of." Pressed by a disappointed Howard on the nature of their disapproval, Linda states coyly, "We're of different faiths...." but then brightening, adds, "Of course, there is a way — you could convert!"

Although their relationship fizzles and Howard Hunter does not convert to Judaism, TV viewers met a character who did so in the short-lived but highly acclaimed drama, *A Year in the Life*. At first, Lindley Gardner, a young woman and member of a sprawling Seattle family, is seen cheerfully converting to Judaism (teaching her family Yiddish phrases) as she prepared to marry the Jewish Jim Eisenberg. However, a

subsequent episode presents a sensitive and searing portrait of some of the challenges engendered by conversion and an exploration of Jewish identity in a conversionary marriage.

The first rumblings of trouble surface when the Eisenbergs are being interviewed to enroll their baby daughter, Ruthie, in a gifted toddler program. When the starch young woman interviewer asks the parents if they are "white," Jim, who has approached the whole session with a relaxed, satiric sense, replies, "Well, we're *Jewish* white." Quickly, a very serious Lindley adds, "*Jim* is — *I'm* not. I mean I'm a converted Jew." Jim is suddenly, visibly distressed by Lindley's dissociation from Judaism. Apologizing the next day, she explains that "it's still kind of new to me."

Yet, the unresolved issue of the speed and comfort level with which she is entering what is for her a new world of Judaism continues to arise and plague the couple. When Lindley fails to attend Ruthie's baby-naming ceremony in synagogue, leaving Jim to participate alone, his constrained patience turns to unbridled anger. In the ensuing explosion between the couple, Jim questions Lindley's commitment to her conversion, exclaiming that "You are backing out of something that you have put absolutely no effort into." Sorting out her feelings during a calmer moment the following day, Lindley recounts a mountain climb from her childhood as an allegory for her hesitant steps toward Judaism. As a terrified child, she had stood frozen, unable to move despite all cajoling and hand-holding. Not until she closed her eyes to both "where I'd been and where I was going" and focused on taking one step at a time, did she move on from that spot. As Lindley recalls, "It wasn't that I didn't want to climb the mountain — I did." The recounting seems to be for Lindley not so much an explanation to Jim as an enunciation of her strategy by which to find her own strength and inspiration. In a concluding scene, viewers peer into a private

moment as she takes Ruthie in her arms and reads to her the words of the baby-naming ceremony welcoming the infant into the covenant of Israel. Unseen by the two, Jim watches quietly.

Such a rare and moving portrayal is important for three reasons. First, it raises conversion as an alternative to intermarriage. Second, it illustrates that conversion is not a simple process, but portrays it in a realistic way, complete with trials and tribulations, as the couple faces the challenge of forging a common ground from their two different worlds. Last, it offers a picture of these difficulties being dealt with and overcome — if through a hard, step-by-step process — and of a Jewishly committed family emerging from a conversionary marriage. In light of the soaring rate of intermarriage and the studies indicating that couples in conversionary marriages and their children are far more likely to be Jewishly identified and involved than intermarried couples and their children (Mayer, 1983), such a portrayal, offering a view of interfaith romance not as a negative force for Jewish diminution but as a positive element in its growth when conversion is an option, takes an added importance.

Coping

Most current TV programs depict intermarriages not as breaking up or averted by conversion but as proceeding, yet with problems. In a refreshing dose of reality, many shows depict the special difficulties and religious searching engendered by an interfaith relationship. Most often, it is the birth of a child or discussing how to raise children that is the catalytic flashpoint for TV's intermarried couples (along with the Christmas-Chanukah issue, which is often related).

Like Murray Klein, many TV characters shun admonitions of previous generations about the dangers and problems of intermarriage, denouncing such views as close-minded, old-fashioned, irrelevant, and representative of a past from which they

want to break — until they themselves become parents. Suddenly, they become that past and their children the future through whom their own heritage and identity will be transmitted or not. Suddenly, intermarriage and questions of religious identity matter to them.

Religious identity comprised one of the central and ongoing story-lines of the recent popular series, *thirtysomething*. For the series' hero, assimilated Michael Steadman, being intermarried was never a problem; his wedding to the non-Jewish Hope was one of those paeans to interfaith unions, with a rabbi and a priest presiding. Yet, with the birth of his first child Janey, Michael begins a soul-searching and often turbulent questioning about his own religious identity and his place in the link of Jewish generations.

In two separate TV seasons of *thirtysomething*'s Christmas-Chanukah episodes, Michael undergoes crises of religious identity and spiritual soul-searching brought on by the "December dilemma" and his recent fatherhood. In the earlier episode, unsettled by Hope's grand preparations for Christmas, Michael tells a friend, "It's just so weird. I love Christmas, I do. I used to. I used to love it with Hope, but now...." His friend knowingly completes the sentence, "A tree's not just a tree." Suddenly, the Christmas tree in his home severs him from both his past and his future: "I see it in my living room. I see my grandfather rising up from the grave and having another heart attack. Now there's Janey. What do I want to tell her about who I am? What if she totally loves this? I don't know where that leaves me." Now, in this new context of parenthood, Michael grasps for some Jewish identity and its expression on grounds that are new and uncharted to him. Ensuing tensions erupt, the couple argues (Michael is angry that Hope wants a Christmas tree when they had agreed in an earlier compromise not to have one; Hope acridly reminds Michael that he hasn't "set foot in a temple" for as

long as she's known him), and they must renegotiate all the rules for a harmonious intermarriage that they had laid down in calmer and simpler times.

This episode was notable for showing, with a reality and harshness uncommon for television, some of the difficulties of intermarriage and the profound capacity of the holiday season and the birth of children to elicit religious searching in a previously untroubled intermarriage. Yet, by program's end, all difficulties seem to dissipate, resolved in an O'Henry-like fashion. As Michael, in a turnabout, arrives home with a Christmas tree to surprise Hope, he finds her waiting to surprise him — as she lights a Chanukah menorah while holding Janey in her arms.

When Christmas and Chanukah rolled around the following year, viewers saw an intensification of Michael's religious explorations, brought on by another holiday season and compounded both by the *yahrtzeit* of his father and Hope's involvement in a car accident. Deep existential angst prods Michael to have bizarre dreams involving Christian holiday symbolism (set in the 1960s comedy classic, *The Dick Van Dyke Show*) and to enter a synagogue. There he converses with a kindly, elderly rabbi (who appeared in his dream as Santa Claus) in an exchange of double entendres alluding to his sense of estrangement from Judaism. Michael departs, still feeling detached, an outsider to Judaism, until news that Hope is pregnant causes him to ponder further. He believes in God, he says, but adds that intermarriage vastly complicates this — because "which God, who God, where God?" Compelled to make a choice, Michael takes a leap from the status of outsider to that of insider, choosing to continue his expression of religious identity from within Judaism. In the episode's final scene, he returns to the synagogue and enters the sanctuary where he hears the *kaddish* described as a "solemn testimony to that unbroken faith which links the generations one to another." He joins in

reciting the prayer, memorializing his father, and linking himself to his people's history and destiny.

Michael's evolution toward a closer Jewish identity continued in the show's final season, which saw the birth of his son. Although *thirtysomething's* earlier approaches to intermarriage explored the dilemma of how two religions might reasonably coexist within a marriage (the Steadmans managed by agreeing to have a *menorah* and a Christmas tree side by side), this episode seems to suggest that such religious intermingling is no longer tenable. The catalyst is the issue of a *brit milah* for the baby boy. The decision of whether to ritually circumcise the infant, in accordance with Jewish law and in keeping with a tradition that has a powerful pull on Jewish life, calls upon Michael to resolve within himself the question of whether he actively identifies as a Jew and to what degree he will partake in Jewish rituals as an outward sign of that identification. For Michael, it is an intense search, and he veers between equivocation and determination in his quest for answers. Ultimately (with prodding from an initially resented interloper), the ceremony takes place at the Steadmans' home, with friends and family joining in what is shown to be a moving and joyous occasion. In its public declaration of Jewish identity as expressed through this rite and in the notable absence of any "counterbalancing" Christian one (indeed, Hope did not even express interest in any), the Steadman home seems to have made a quantum leap toward being a Jewish household.

For other current intermarried TV couples, viewers see none of the agonizing decision making and soul searching, but do learn of decisions to raise the children as Jewish. On the comedy series, *Cheers*, intermarried Gentile Frasier Crane tells his drinking buddies (as he prepares for the *brit milah* of his newborn son), "I can't tell you how much it means to us. As you all know, I was raised without a religious tradition,

and I'm determined my son shall not be similarly deprived. I'm so grateful to Lilith [his wife] and her Jewish faith for providing Frederick a heritage of spirituality."

A similar decision was made by the leading couple on *The Commish*. At "holiday time," Rachel Scali reassures her concerned young son David that her husband does not miss having a Christmas tree, that the couple had lengthy discussions before they were married about the importance of their children's religious identity not being confused, and that they had agreed that David would be raised Jewish. Later, David and his non-Jewish father light the Chanukah candles together.

The determination to raise children of intermarriage in a single faith represents an important evolution from some of television's earlier solutions to the issue. One popular and, of course, ludicrously simplistic and fantastical solution is that of twins. On *Bridget Loves Bernie*, after the families feud over how the as-yet-unborn Steinberg children will be raised, Bernie suggests that the couple will bear twins so that one can be raised Catholic and one Jewish. This projected scenario came to pass in *Little House on the Prairie*, when the intermarried Percival and Nellie Dalton do have twins and decide to raise the boy as Jewish and the girl as Christian. The notion of raising each child in a different faith was advanced in the *Archie Bunker's Place* episode about Murray's intermarried daughter. When she tells her father the names of his grandchildren, Miguel and Rebecca, the implication through the use of one Hispanic and one Hebrew name is that both faiths are being represented.

TV has portrayed the children of intermarriage as well. Almost always, they are shown to have a strong affinity for Judaism. Unfortunately, such romantic portrayals — bespeaking a mythic notion that no matter how far removed one is from Judaism, the pull of one's heritage is an unstoppable, natural force that will have its day — have little basis in reality, where

children of intermarriage display minimal Jewish identification and expression (Mayer, 1983).

Ambiguity of TV Messages About Intermarriage

In a multitude of settings and scenarios, popular television's frequent portrayal of interfaith romances reveals a widespread awareness and self-consciousness about the subject. The many sides to the issue portrayed on TV mirror its complexity, the widely differing opinions about it, and the variety of passionate approaches to dealing with it. Indeed, the steady focus on the topic of intermarriage throughout the history of popular television reflects its position as a major issue in Jewish life.

The ambiguity of messages that imbues TV's intermarriage themes complicates the question of their impact, but rightfully acknowledges the difficulty of the issue and the diversity of those it concerns. Indeed, the different depictions seem to speak to different levels of commitment and awareness. The ideal Jewish picture, on both television and in reality, of Jewish-Jewish couples leading fully Jewish lives has found expression on the small screen. In other scenarios, where an intermarriage does take place, strong advocacy of endogamous marriages is often given voice.

Yet, increasingly, such scenarios are ever more distanced from reality, as the rate of intermarriage in America's open society soars. Although TV portrayals opposing intermarriage remain important, keeping resonant the Jewish ideal of endogamous marriage, other programs that are more in tune with the reality of intermarriage offer more realistic solutions and approaches. In the world of *thirtysomething*, an emergent Jewish identity materializes in raw fits and starts from an intermarried household. For those for whom such a scenario may come across as "too Jewish," a show like *L. A. Law* offers a thoroughly assimilated and intermarried Jewish character who still finds the need to grapple with his Jewish

identity. Such programs carry an implicit advocacy for reaching out to intermarried Jews by suggesting that such individuals bear an ineradicable Jewish identity that is willing — and even driven — to find some kind of expression. Finally, the conversion scenario that informs *A Year in the Life* offers a view of conversion to Judaism as a positive and desirable alternative to interfaith marriage. Given the unabating rise of intermarriage, such a perspective may be increasingly embraced, rendering its further exploration on popular TV timely and relevant.

Together, the many and varied popular television programs about intermarriage underscore and contribute to the complexity and controversy of the subject. In their own way, they have become a dynamic part of the ongoing debate on this vital issue.

UTILIZING JEWISH TELEVIMAGES

The use of television by those in positions of leadership in many spheres of American life is already well underway; we in the Jewish community cannot be left behind.

Television's reach into the most fundamental areas of our national discourse and its use as a means of corralling opinion were vividly illustrated in recent presidential politics, most starkly by the headline-grabbing Dan Quayle-Murphy Brown brouhaha. Yet earlier, when President Bush called for "an America that rejects...the tide of incivility and the tide of intolerance," he utilized basic, direct, and TV imagery to get his point across: "We need a nation closer to *The Waltons* than to *The Simpsons*" (Rosenthal, 1992). Democratic challenger Bill Clinton reacted to a political commercial in which actor Carroll O'Connor endorsed a rival's tax plan by stating that "Carroll O'Connor of Beverly Hills, California, is going to make a killing out of [this] tax; Archie Bunker of Queens, New York, is going to get the shaft" (WABC-TV, April 5, 1992). By invoking images that people can readily identify and identify *with*, those in leadership positions gain an

added ability to communicate with and therefore reach their intended audience.

The challenge before the Jewish community is to do likewise when so much depends on our ability to reach out to people. It is a choice between television obliviousness or literacy, between a limited or enhanced ability to reach others, between a Tower of Babel phenomenon or the common languages of communication.

We can best utilize the rich and growing storehouse of popular television's Jewish images by making TV viewing an active, selective, and beneficial process.

Awareness

The Jewish community has much to gain from an exploration of and utilization of television's depictions of Jews and Judaism. It can be enriched by the fresh perspective of how TV portrays current Jewish problems and possibilities and what that portrayal reveals about the contemporary American Jewish experience, a subject that has received attention from every angle save for its depiction on television.

Of great concern to the Jewish community are the issues of intermarriage, assimilation, and Jewish identity. Television's in-depth and serious portrayals of these matters and the questions they raise can be enlisted as a resource for reaching nonaffiliated Jews, who often see themselves depicted on today's most popular TV shows.

The power of the visual image, of television drama, in today's video age (particularly for young people raised as the video generation) cannot be overstated. Using television as an educational tool can be a most enjoyable method — for both student and teacher — of communicating ideas and values. After all, the centrality of the "enjoyment" factor in achieving educational goals was recognized centuries ago by Rabbi Judah Hanasi, who taught that "Only the lesson which is enjoyed can be learned well" (*Avodah Zarah*, 19a).

Critical Television Viewing

We are not arguing for *increased* TV viewing, but for *better* TV viewing. Jewish communal leaders, once sensitized to the importance of television and the use of its Jewish images, can act to guide others to view television critically and productively. Doing so can help ensure that the hours spent viewing will not be wasted, that some positive learning experience can emerge from TV watching, and that viewers will learn to watch television programs actively and with an eye toward Jewish ethics and values, thus forever changing the way they view TV.

Critical viewing consists of both carefully selecting the TV shows to be watched and infusing the hours spent in front of the small screen with thought and analysis. It combines the activities of viewing and thinking. A practical means of eliciting critical viewing is to provide viewers with questions and ideas to contemplate while viewing or discussing a specific TV program. A valuable resource for informed viewing of Jewish televimages is the *Jewish Televimage Report*, a monthly publication of the JTRC, providing information, news, and analysis about past, present, and upcoming TV shows that contain Jewish televimages.

With an awareness of the relevant popular TV shows featuring Jewish themes, such as interfaith romance, Jewish familial relationships, and Jewish identity, a rabbi, educator, or other communal professional could encourage his or her congregation, students, or clients to watch the show. The professional could moderate a discussion about critical issues even before the show is broadcast, providing historical background and religious insights and exploring the issues' implications for the Jewish community. Viewers could be given a guideline for critical thought offering questions and ideas for them to consider as they watch the show. Postviewing discussions could be held to follow up the critical viewing activities.

Using television programs as an educational tool can be encouraged in other ways. Communal professionals can infuse their work with references to TV, whether in sermons, writings, classes, or counseling as a means of reaching people in a nonthreatening way through familiar, comfortable issues. Courses, seminars, workshops, and discussion groups in synagogues, Jewish Community Centers, schools, and even in the home can focus on Jewish telemovies.

A vigorous use of these creative approaches would enable Jewish communal professionals to transmit our age-old traditions and values through contemporary, accessible culture. Rather than scoff at the language of TV and assume that it cannot convey anything of value, we should recall the admonition of Maimonides who stated, "What is of value must be transmitted — in whatever language" (*Commentary on the Mishna Avot*, 1:17).

ENHANCING JEWISH TELEMOTES

In addition to using and reacting to television images, a proactive stance is essential; that is, activities that can help bring about more positive Jewish telemovies. The television community, to a far greater extent than is generally realized, is receptive to such input when it is given within the guidelines of the approach suggested below.

Indeed, in this era of heightened ethnic awareness and sensibilities, community attitudes toward Hollywood's TV productions can have great impact — positive or negative — on the success of a show. There is a sensitivity among both Hollywood's creative forces and network executives to viewer feedback, whether in the form of ratings, advertiser support, individual letters, or the voices of grassroots organizations dedicated to tracking and influencing the presence, absence, and nature of specific images on TV. Although complex ratings systems are heavily relied upon by the networks to determine a program's life or death on the air, other forms of registering

opinion, easily within any viewer's reach and power, are also quite influential and are indeed taken most seriously by the industry. Consequently, it is incumbent upon an attentive public — on whose behalf the airwaves are operated — to take advantage of these avenues of expression to voice legitimate and considered opinions and suggestions, accolades, and concerns.

Letter Writing

One means of doing so is through letters to television executives and creative forces and to the *Jewish Telemovies Report*, which is widely known in the industry as a voice of concern about Jewish telemovies.

To maximize the effectiveness of letters, writers should take up pen not only when there is a negative image to criticize but also when there is a positive one to praise. By doing so, complaints are perceived more as thoughtful criticism and less as an expression of knee-jerk negativism that is all too pervasive and easy to dismiss. One should also consider that the portrayal of Jewish characters with stereotypical or negative traits is not necessarily wrong or harmful. The world has its share of overbearing Jewish mothers, unscrupulous Jewish lawyers and doctors, and Jewish criminals; their total absence from TV would project as false a picture as would their exclusive presence. Naturally, focusing on these kinds of characterizations should be avoided in favor of greater diversity and depth.

Dialogue with Hollywood

Organizations concerned about such social issues as drunk driving, violence, and safe sex and about the portrayal of such constituencies as blacks, women, and homosexuals have all made their voices heard in Hollywood on behalf of their causes. Yet, there was no full-time, ongoing, and focused attention to the depiction of Jewish themes and characters on popular entertainment TV programs until the establishment of the

Jewish Teleimages Resource Center (JTRC), the only entity wholly dedicated to exploring, evaluating, and enhancing Jewish televimages. Based in Queens, New York, the JTRC pursues these goals through such activities as lectures nationwide, a monthly newsletter and other publications, ongoing research, and creative engagement with the television community.

We have encountered a welcome and growing receptivity to Jewish televimage issues among both Jews and non-Jews in the television industry. Contact with TV's non-Jewish creative forces stimulates in them an awareness of concerns about Jewish televimages, often leading them to seriously consider the Jewish community's interests and reactions. Indeed, the JTRC has been approached for consultation on the inclusion of Jewish themes in popular entertainment TV programs.

Among television's Jewish producers and writers are found varying degrees of Jewish consciousness. Although some may deny any special feelings or responsibility for the Jewish images they create, most readily and even proudly acknowledge it. Producer Joshua Brand (creator of *St. Elsewhere* and *Northern Exposure*), writer Shimon Wincelberg (creator of a TV western's first-ever Jewish character, in *Have Gun, Will Travel*), and actor Ron Rifkin (who played kippah-clad public defender Ben Meyer in *The Trials of Rosie O'Neill*) are examples of those who bring their Jewishness to their television work, draw upon it, and speak openly about it (*In the Spotlight*, 1991 & 1992). Others, similarly proud of their Jewish ties, have expressed very strong feelings on some sensitive issues — whether pro-Israel or anti-intermarriage — but only off the record. Rather than undermine their important positions in the Hollywood community by pushing unpopular beliefs, they prefer to move delicately and to infuse their work subtly with the messages they hope to convey. Still others are quite open about the influence of their personal lives

upon their work. Executive producer Steve Kronish, who is intermarried but is raising his children as Jewish, created a parallel scenario on *The Commish* in a desire to make a statement that "a mixed marriage can have a viable Jewish side, and it doesn't always have to disappear — if people don't want it to. You *can* raise a child in the Jewish faith, if both parents are behind it. It isn't easy, but it can be done" ("TV's 'Holiday Season' Fare," 1991).

Given this intimate connection for many TV writers and producers between their lives and their work, one must naturally take a sensitive approach while at the same time forthrightly discussing with them such delicate issues as intermarriage. Indeed, the preponderance of intermarriage on television reflects its prevalence in the Hollywood community; at 70%, Los Angeles has the country's highest rate of intermarriage.

By the very existence of dialogue between the JTRC and television's creative forces, the latter are encouraged to consider their Jewishness and how it relates to their TV work, their consciousness is raised, and their thoughts on Jewish issues and Jewish televimages stimulated, leading, it is hoped, to more thoughtful depictions of Jewish televimages. It was toward this end that the JTRC instituted awards to honor TV's top Jewish themes and characters and the creative forces behind them. These awards, for which members of the JTRC are eligible to vote, provide viewers with yet another means of expressing their opinions and influencing Jewish televimages.

Tackling Images of Intermarriage

Because TV's many depictions of intermarriage and interdating arouse concerns that TV promotes and legitimates such relationships, some believe that such images should not appear on the small screen at all. Besides being an unrealistic expectation (television has depicted such relationships since its earliest days), such a TV tableau would be a distortion and denial of today's reality in which intermarriage rates are now

at 52% (Kosmin et al., 1991).

Surely, however, much can be done to help ensure that such depictions are approached with an awareness of the real challenges and issues involved in such relationships, rather than simplistically glossing over them. Television has come a long way from the solution of twins on *Bridget Loves Bernie* to the soul-searching on *thirtysomething* and *A Year in the Life*, and such progress should be welcomed and encouraged.

There is, however, a serious problem in the *preponderance* of television's intermarriage images to the near exclusion of Jewish-Jewish relationships. For television nearly always to depict romantically involved Jews in interfaith relationships is indeed inaccurate, imbalanced and, possibly, harmful. Where are images of the other nearly 50% of Jews who *do* marry within their faith? Programs where Jews happily date and wed Jews, where conversion to Judaism is an acceptable and even welcome alternative to intermarriage, and where Jewish families are not some exotic prop are in fact underrepresented on TV.

The same holds true for programs in which Jewish concerns about intermarriage are expressed. Although such expressions usually manage to nip at the edges of the serious Jewish difficulties with intermarriage — raising questions about Jewish survival and continuity — only on occasion are they stated with full cogency and sympathy. In television's dialectic of both endorsing and challenging intermarriage, any such concerns often end up appearing antiquated and close-minded, having been uttered and given "equal time," it seems, merely to be countered and overcome by triumphant lovers. Most offensively, Jewish objections to intermarriage are frequently cast as parallel to Christian anti-Semitism, which is shown almost invariably to be the motivating factor in Christian objections to intermarriage (also an objectionable generalization). This facile but false symmetry — equating Jewish concerns

about intermarriage to religious bigotry — overlooks the unique Jewish objections to intermarriage.

That television almost always raises such objections in some form is a good start: it recognizes intermarriage as an area of deep Jewish concern. Yet, the Jewish point of view on such matters should be given a more intelligent and coherent voice. Let TV characters express the uniquely Jewish concern about intermarriage: that as a tiny people, who for millennia tenaciously sought to preserve and transmit a rich but always imperiled culture, religion, and particular way of life, Jews have a heightened fear of demographic diminution and wariness of marrying out.

Fear of extinction, however, should not be the only reason cited. (That is the typical line of objection, as when the father in *Evergreen* cited the Holocaust). Jews, on TV no less than in real life, need to be defined by and to project a sense of what is positive and rich in their heritage, religion, and culture, a compelling and joyous reason for remaining Jewish — not a mere fear of losing some ill-defined or amorphous unknown.

Progress in these important spheres would go a long way toward enhancing Jewish televimages.

CONCLUSION

In the mid-1950s, famed playwright Paddy Chayevsky, who penned numerous TV plays, wrote, "It may seem foolish to say, but television, the scorned stepchild of drama may well be the basic theater of our century" (Clum, 1976). As we approach the close of the 20th century, television is in some sense the "basic synagogue of our age," the communal arena where, for many otherwise unaffiliated and disconnected Jews, pervasive images shape religious sensibilities and ethnic identity.

For further information about the *Jewish Televimage Report*, write to JTRC, 43-23 Colden Street, #21B, Queens, New York 11355.

For such Jews, as well as for others who are involved and affiliated, television has become a vital medium and means of helping achieve for today what has been a Jewish goal in every age — to help stimulate “a real thirst, a seeking, a searching for that bigger thing — the Judaism of tomorrow” (Benderly, 1927).

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