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## A History of Jewish Mothers on Television: Decoding the Tenacious Stereotype

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A mother goes into her son's room. "You've got to get up for school, Bernie."  
Bernie pulls the blanket over his head, "I don't wanna go to school."  
"You have to go," the mother says.  
"I don't wanna. The teachers don't like me, and all the kids make fun of me."  
The mother pulls the blanket down. "Bernie, you don't have any choice. You have to go to school."  
"Yeah," Bernie says. "Give me one good reason!"  
"You're fifty-two years old and you're the principal." (Telushkin, 1992, p. 38)

The stereotype of the overbearing, over-involved, suffocating Jewish mother has been a television staple since the beginning days of broadcasting in the 1940's and 1950's. (1) Molly Goldberg, the "gold standard" for the Jewish mother, is originally portrayed as the buxom and benevolent meddler who can solve all problems by mixing common sense, a considerable dab of compassion, and predictable wisdom. Although a "hovering" mother, she is lovable and respected. This portrait of the Jewish mother dramatically changes in the situation comedies of the 1970's when she becomes a devouringly negative, albeit loving, presence in her daughter's or son's life, well represented by Ida in *Rhoda* and Sylvia in *The Nanny*. The enduring stereotype continues into the 21<sup>st</sup> Century in a character such as Susie in *Curb Your Enthusiasm*.

In decoding the politics of representation of this archetype and the ramifications for its sustainability, a multiperspectival approach reveals a complex picture of historical contexts within which the Jewish mother icon is gradually implanted into the American public's consciousness. The first key factor is the life inside the shtetls (small villages) of Eastern European Jews and the ethos that over 2 million Jewish immigrants bring to the United States from 1880 to 1920. From the 1940's onward, the "mother figure" is dissected by psychologists and writers. And with the rise of Second Wave feminism she becomes an increasingly ambiguous figure often blamed for her old-fashioned attachments to family. The Jewish mother is an ideal scapegoat to blame for the tumultuous uncertainties of gender roles after the 1960's. Perhaps the

most significant perpetrators of the Jewish mother are the predominantly Jewish writers and comedians of the 1940's and 1950's who interpret the shtetl mentality and expand upon it for an American audience. These male writers are supported by Jews who own and run the three stations, CBS, NBC and ABC. This male hierarchy creates an environment for the promulgation of a specific Jewish mother type which continues into the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

### **INFLUENCE OF THE SHTELTLS ON THE STEREOTYPE**

Eastern European Jews lived for centuries in small villages known as shtetls “within the area stretching from the eastern borders of Germany to the western regions of Czarist Russia, embracing Poland, Galicia, Lithuania, White Russia, the Ukraine, Bessarabia, Slovakia and the northeastern regions of Hungary” (Zborowski, 1962, p. 12). In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, half of the Jewish population of the world lived in this (Baum et al., 1976). Shtetl life has frequently been portrayed in such works as *Fiddler on the Roof* as a harsh, but idealized life of family, community, and commitment.

And no more important figure has been depicted than the shtetl *yiddisheh mamme* (Jewish mother), the stalwart foundation of the family, without whom the family could not survive. This is the mother figure that represents maternal instinct by “providing physical, psychological or spiritual nourishment to others” (Bolen, 1985, p. 172). She is the maternal archetype who will stand by her child, no matter what happens. Her love is always available and it is unswerving. According to Zborowski (1962), a Jewish mother expresses this love for her children in two ways: “by unremitting solicitude about every aspect of her child’s welfare, expressed for the most part in unceasing verbalization” and “by constant and solicitous overfeeding” (p. 293). The constant verbalization is not a negative attribute of the mother, but rather a style of Jewish communication in which every issue (except, of course, sex) is discussed,

argued, analyzed and considered from all possible perspectives. “The domestic version of *pilpul* (2) closely follows the pattern of the yeshiva” (Zborowski, 1962, p. 301). The mother is not castigated for this behavior but merely represents another member of the family who constantly questions as a form of familial interaction.

Due to the real dangers of persecution of the Jews in their shtetls, it becomes even more important for the family unit to avoid as much hostility and potential internal disintegration as possible. Thus, the questioning and bickering about all issues is not a form of family dysfunction but, on the contrary, a mechanism to protect family members from far more devastating consequences in the outside world. For example, during Czar Nicolas II’s reign, violent pogroms occurred in 1881-1882 resulting in Jews not being able to buy or rent land in rural areas and eventually forcing Jews to leave and resettle in urban locations (Baum et al., 1976).

From the shtetl comes the mainly positive portrayal of the caring mother, always available to listen, to help, to feed, to comfort a sick child. She is the Demeter who is motivated to “nurture others, to be generous and giving and to find satisfaction as a caretaker and provider” (Bolen, 1985, p. 172). Her mothering includes the excessive offering of food which is symbolic to her, and to her family, of love. Zborowski (1962) explains that the rejection of food is interpreted as a rejection of the mother's love: “A child soon learns that he can coerce his seniors into yielding on almost any point by refusing to eat...the rejection of food means rejection of loved ones and life itself. It is intolerable and excites acute anxiety” (p. 303) Largely, though, the feeding of the child is a display of affection understood not only by the mother but the child as well.

But the negative side of the devoted mother is the obvious realization that in order for mother to serve and work so hard, she herself is giving up a lot of her life so her children will

have more than she has. Thus, for example, if food is scarce the mother unquestionably gives the child her portion. But, it is not given silently. Inherent in her acts of generosity are the twin guilt-builders of suffering and sacrifice. “Parental sacrifice is not shrouded in silence—silence is not a shtetl habit. Children are reminded constantly of all their parents have done and suffered in their behalf” (Zborowski, 1962, p. 294). Despite all the mother does and no matter how hard it is for her to continue giving, no matter the *ol fun kinder* (the yoke of children), she lovingly continues.

Along with the omnipresence of sacrifice and suffering is worry. “Worry is not viewed as an indulgence but as an expression of affection and almost a duty. If you worry actively enough, something may come of it” (Zborowski, 1962, p. 294). In many instances, shtetl life is filled with superstitious beliefs and practices, such as slapping a newborn if the baby laughs during the night so that Lilith will not kidnap the child for her own demonic reasons. Thus, by worrying about her child on a constant basis, the mother can actively counter all the evil spirits that lurk in the immediate environment. These practices start with the birth of the baby who must not be praised too much because the “evil eye” may be encouraged to cause havoc with the child (Zaborowksi, 1962).

But the worry is not necessarily interpreted by the child as an albatross, but often rather as a proof of mother’s love. She would rather be hurt, be hungry, be sick than the child. “Oh, it should have happened on me! Cries the mother whose child has hurt himself. It should be to me and not to you!” (Zborowski, 1962, p. 294) Thus, those writing about their lives in the shtetls often remember with great fondness and devotion the mothers who did so much for them.

In many ways, the shtetl mother represents the mother archetype. According to Jean Bolen (1985), the archetypal mother, Demeter, finds great satisfaction in providing food for others. Women who are “Demeter mothers” are tenacious, willing to do anything to promote

their child's well-being. Bolen feels that Demeter women primarily define themselves as maternal:

In her relationships, she is nurturing and supportive, helpful and giving. She is often Lady Bountiful, providing whatever she sees is needed—chicken soup, a supportive hug, money to tide a friend over, a standing invitation to come 'home to Mother.' A Demeter woman often has an aura of the Earth Mother about her. She is solid and dependable. Others describe her as having her feet on the ground as she goes about doing what needs to be done with a mixture of practicality and warmth. She is usually generous, outer-directed, altruistic, and loyal to individuals and principles, to the point that others may see her as stubborn. She has strong convictions and is difficult to budge when something or someone important to her is involved. (Bolen, 1985, p. 177)

What is the other side of the mother's bountifulness? What then are the child's obligations to repay the parents, particularly the mother, for the unending sacrifices she makes? The major obligation of the child is to bring *nakhes* (joy) to his mother, and, of course, to his father. *Nakhes fun kinder* (joy from the children) is the epitome of life's goodness. "Through the child's success the parent is validated, just as through his defects the parent is disgraced and condemned" (Zborowski, 1962, pp. 297-298). Defining success in the shtetl, as success in any culture, is complex and dependent upon many factors. Certainly for the daughter success is defined as marrying well, being an "efficient and skilful housekeeper...conducting a *Yiddish hoyz* (Jewish house)...keeping harmony in her family ...being the mistress of a beautiful household, a real *balebosteh*" (3) Zborowksi, 1962, p. 292). For a boy, success is defined as scholarly prowess in Jewish studies.

With all of her faults, the lovable Molly Goldberg is the representation of the shtetl mother in America and the Demeter woman, the mother archetype who provides and gives and takes care of others. "Molly Goldberg possesses many of the traits that are traditionally associated with the Jewish Mother: being warm, motherly, resourceful, nurturing and problem-

solving and on the flip side of this picture, being overbearing and inescapable” (Pearl, 1999, p. 86). She represents a large-spirited woman who, regardless of her obvious Jewishness, is attuned to the problems of all of mankind and definitely wants to help resolve the issues. According to Charles Angoff, Molly is

the Mixer and the Fixer ....whose heart bleeds for every unmarried girl and starving butcher and lonely grocer, and who is as quick as the proverbial lightning in concocting ideas to get the ‘right’ girl and ‘right’ man together, to straighten out family squabbles, to help out a reformed thief (cited in Antler, 1997, p. 236).

And she goes about solving these problems with obvious cleverness, humorous self-deprecation, devoted commitment, determination and most of all prodigious strength. All the while, her audience grows to identify with her traits and not be threatened by her ethnicity. Somehow she represents what is good in everyone and particularly the idealism that Americans of the 1950s have about themselves.

*The Rise of the Goldbergs* is a radio show from 1929 to 1946, afterwards making the transition to TV from 1949 to 1955 (Antler, 1997). According to Antler, “Berg’s genius is to wed the iron qualities of traditional East European Jewish women with a charm and humor that counteracts the threat of their power” (p. 235). Much has been written about how non-threatening this obviously Jewish family is to the Gentile public of the 1950s. Molly seems to represent a conglomeration of flawed, but lovable, characteristics that make her largely non-Jewish audience feel comfortable that she is trying desperately to be a good American. She represents to her audience the honest efforts of the immigrant extolling the virtues and blessings of the American value system, never taking for granted her great fortune to be in a country that allows “the other” a place.

Because Molly is so likable, most critics view her and her clan as excellent ambassadors for acceptance of Jews as different, but trying to be like Gentiles. But according to Friedman

(1982), “Gentiles perceive them as ‘good Jews’ who give them no reason to worry; they just make them laugh. Their exaggerated mannerism and quaint customs encourage a patronizing attitude toward America’s Jews” (p. 163).

Everyone, though, agrees that Molly is intelligent, clever and capable of meddling into everyone’s affairs in an effort to make life better for those around her. Whether the target of her loving attention is Jewish or non-Jewish, she doesn't discriminate or care. According to Molly, “You ask, you talk. People are people” or “Everybody has a heart, all you have to find is the location.”

It isn’t difficult to make the connections between the values of the shtetl mother (whether idealized or not) and Molly Goldberg. She’s very personal, talking to her audience through the window (and advertising Sanka) and always giving the audience, with her homespun philosophy, the impression that what she’s saying has depth and wisdom.

But, she is as enmeshed in the desire to achieve and get ahead as any good American. In a 1949 show at the Catskills, a vacation resort for many New York Jews, she’s the first one who wants to mix in a “different circular environment.” She’s not fooled, though, by the phonies who say they’re big shots at the Catskills; “every nobody makes himself a somebody.” Philosophically, she replies, “For two weeks everyone wants to be what they hope to be.” Thus, she can appreciate the foibles of all people, but instead of harshly judging them, she can magnanimously accept them as just being human.

Anyone can identify with the dilemma of dealing with the miserly and rich Cousin Simon. In a 1949 show, Cousin Simon thinks he’s had a heart attack and decides to give his money to his poor relations; but as soon as he gets well, he decides not to give the money after



all. Molly wisely proclaims, “Maybe there’s a Simon in every family and a little bit of Simon in everyone, waiting too long to do what we should.”

Molly knows, somehow, that as she strives to be modern, she still laments, “such a yesterday woman I am.” Husband Jake even emphasizes this by comparing Molly to the very stylish career woman, Natalie, at his work. He excoriates Molly with a rebuke, “Why aren’t you like Natalie? Her life doesn’t start and end with stuffed peppers!” But Molly triumphs again with her universal philosophy that for a marriage to succeed, it takes a lot of work—“marriage is not just an express station, where you get on the first stop and get off at the last stop...it’s local stops in between that you have to be prepared for.”

Usually Molly is right as she solves problems for not only her two children but for her husband, Jake, and their relatives as well. In a 1953 episode, Molly has her uncle, David, and Jake’s uncle, Barish, over for dinner. They immediately get into an argument as to whose son has achieved more, Uncle David’s son who is an MD or Uncle Barish’s son who is a dentist. Uncle David takes great offense when Uncle Barish calls his dentist son, doctor. Uncle David screams, “Say, ‘My son, the dentist,’ not, ‘My son, the doctor.’” Uncle Barish continues to argue with Uncle David that his son, in fact, is better than Uncle David’s doctor son: “My son provided for my future, he bought a beautiful cemetery plot for me.” The competition ensues throughout the show until Molly finally steps in and solves the dilemma by stating simply, “A doctor is a doctor and a dentist is a dentist.”

According to Antler (1997), Molly’s continuing popularity could be summarized by understanding the following points: 1) Molly was a meddler, but a beloved one. And her motivations were strictly for the betterment of other people’s lives, not for self-aggrandizement; 2) Molly and the entire family wanted desperately to assimilate into a country that they loved;

and 3) “Because of her ethnicity she represented the American ideal of brotherly love and inter-religious cooperation” (p. 237).

Thus, Molly is the perfect role model to promote the ideology of family values in the 1950s. The hegemony of white males is reinforced by Molly’s place in the home. Even though she thinks of herself as a “yesterday woman,” she is really a perfect 1950s housewife. The conservatism of the 1950s coupled with an idealized American “way of life” is reinforced in every episode.

After Molly Goldberg’s six-year reign on television ended in 1955, with few exceptions Jewish women were not portrayed at all for 20 years. It wasn’t until Rhoda Morgenstern (Valerie Harper, who was Mary Tyler Moore’s sidekick) appeared in the mid-seventies that Jewish women in a leading role were once again depicted (Antler, 1998). And, of course, the Jewish Mother, in the character of Ida Morgenstern (played by Nancy Walker) is a prominent influence on the show.

## **FEMINISM AND JEWISH MOTHERS**

The 1970’s is a time when the ideological battleground, so contested in the 1960s, begins to surface in the depictions of the Jewish mothers. These mothers represent disharmony in the home, disjointedness between parent and child:

She was not the Yiddish Mama of the Old World, to whom immigrants longingly turned with sentimental songs and harsh comparisons to American sweethearts and wives. Rather, this representation of New World prosperity was an American-born Jewish mother who pushed, wheedled, demanded, constrained, and was insatiable in her expectations and wants. The guilt induced by the Old World was not her siren song; rather she demanded loyalty to herself and her impossible New World expectations. (Prell, 1999, p. 143)

“Activist daughters saw their mothers as negative role models...the daughters worried they might become as unhappy, frustrated and controlling as their own mothers.” (Antler, 2007, p. 105) Adrienne Rich labeled this matrophobia, fear of becoming one’s own mother.

These attitudes are exemplified in the TV show, *Rhoda*, debuting in 1994. Even in the initial episode on September 9, 1974, Rhoda (with a heavy New York accent) is visiting her sister Brenda (played by Julie K. Kavner) in New York. Both almost immediately discuss their “mother problem” with Rhoda lamenting that she’s experiencing Ma and jetlag at the same time, a combo that is sure to reactivate Rhoda’s guilt-ridden relationship with her mother. When Mother Ida breezes into Brenda’s apartment (uninvited, of course) she reiterates this motif by labeling Brenda, the daughter she has “loved and sacrificed for all my life who doesn’t want to see her mother.”

When Rhoda marries Joe played by David Groh, (October 18, 1974), she makes it very clear to her mother that she doesn’t want a big wedding. After exasperating negotiations with Ida, who unselfishly exclaims, “I’m not important, what about Pop’s feelings?” Rhoda accepts that she’s defeated (as she always is by her mother) and relents by crying, “You win, Ma!” Before they’re married, Rhoda tries to explain to Joe how inadequate she is by listing her faults: insecurity, food-obsessed, oversensitive, making it clear at the same time that these weaknesses should be blamed on her mother. Rhoda ends this litany by saying to Joe, “I feel sorry for you.”

Long after Rhoda and Joe break up, Rhoda and Brenda are coerced into going to a Friday night dinner at their parents’ house, in an episode called *Home Movies*, which aired December 4, 1977. Rhoda confesses to Brenda that she doesn’t want to spend time with the parents and Brenda retorts, “We don’t ‘spend time’ we ‘do time.’” While watching home movies of her childhood, Rhoda cries, “Ma, even then, notice, you stuffed cupcake into my mouth,” harkening

back to other episodes in which food is a prominent theme. In the *Parents' Day* episode (September 30, 1974), Rhoda asks her sister how Ma knew she had a date with Joe and Brenda replies, “She shoved donuts down my throat until I told her.” In episode after episode, though, the decoded message of the mother/daughter relationship is a complex one; neurotic but loving, overbearing but compassionate, devouring but caring.

In the figure of Sylvia (played by Renée Taylor), the Jewish mother of Fran in *The Nanny*, which began airing in 1993, the stereotype of the Jewish mother becomes even more congealed into a caricature, an exaggeration of materialism, consumerism, whininess, and poor taste. Fran is in her 30s working as a nanny for the three children of her employer, unmarried, British producer, Maxwell Sheffield. And Mother Sylvia is convinced that Mr. Sheffield, an upper class Brit, is the appropriate mate for her loud and brash daughter. In one episode, *Hurricane Fran*, Sylvia descends upon Mr. Sheffield, hugs him and cries out, “Hold me, don’t be such a Gentile” and later proclaims, “Why, why don’t you marry my daughter?” Sylvia dresses akin to a bad-joke prostitute, inappropriate and somehow pathetic in her search to be a part of her daughter’s courting process. It appears that the only purpose in Sylvia’s life is to get Fran married. Most analysts of TV Jewish Mothers find Sylvia to be an obnoxious and demeaning character, one of the pantheon of “neurotically overprotective, brash, and often garish mothers of the unmistakably Jewish persuasion” (Antler, 2000, p. 63).

Another Sylvia, who belongs in the gallery of Jewish Mother caricatures, is Paul Buchman’s mother in *Mad About You*. In one episode, *Bedfellows*, which aired on September 30, 1993, Paul and Helen are so distraught when they hear that Paul’s mother is coming over that they both push a bureau to the door so they can “mom-proof” the room from her invasion. When Sylvia's husband is admitted to the hospital and needs to wear a heart monitor, both Paul and his

sister, Sharon, agree that when Sylvia is in the room, her husband's heart monitor goes wild. Sharon exclaims, "Oh my God, she's going to kill him and she'll come live with me." Sharon makes it clear to Paul and her father that she's not coming this year for Thanksgiving. "I'll get a note from my doctor."

In a *South Park* episode, *Mr. Hanky, the Christmas Poo* (which aired on December 20, 1997), Kyle Brovlovski's mother, Sheila, is the whining Jewish mother who complains that she's going to the mayor to protest Christmas celebrations because "our family doesn't celebrate Christmas." A counsellor who sees Kyle proclaims his mother is "a bitch" and diagnoses him with "fecaphilia," proclaiming that he is one screwed up little kid (i.e. screwed up by his mother). At the Park Mental Hospital, Kyle sings that he is "a clinically depressed fecaphiliac on Prozac." Kyle's mother succeeds in stopping all celebrations allowing only non-Santa and non-Jesus Christmas songs. And the show ends with Mr. Hanky yelling, "Jews, you bastards, ruined Christmas. This is the one time of year we're supposed to forget all the bad stuff." Of course, the implication is that Kyle's mother has ruined the fun for everyone.

Jerry Seinfeld's mother, Helen, is another interfering and nagging Jewish Mother. George Costanza's mother (never-specifically named as Jewish), an obviously prototypical Jewish mother, is a "fingernail scrapping against the scattered life of her son, George" (Antler, 2000, p. 65). And Susie in *Curb Your Enthusiasm* continues the expected portrayal of Jewish mothers into the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Are these just a few negative examples of what otherwise may be considered rather funny, but generic, portrayals of Jewish mothers on TV? Most TV analysts do agree that the image of the Jewish mother is of one who is "manipulative, self indulgent, demanding, and

overprotective, the objectified Jewish media mother, reduced to a single clichéd essence, seems not fully human” (Antler, 1998, p. 249).

According to Pogrebrin, who examines movie portrayals of the Jewish mother, they are sometimes depicted lovingly, but “at the other end of the spectrum, this Jewish mother is a world-class guilt-tripper. Her every word sets your teeth on edge. She is crass, bullying, asexual, antisexual, and of course a food fetishist. She emasculates her husband, infantilizes her sons, overprotects her daughters, overfeeds everyone and obsesses about digestion and elimination” (Pogrebin, 1991, p. 260)

Baum et.al. (pp.236-7) concurs that “the stereotypical Jewish mother overdoes her job...Whether she is actually holding the spoon and urging them to take ‘just one more bite’ or operating through guilt...she is seen as ubiquitous and eternal from the first diaper change through the last word on the doctoral thesis.”

And Friedman (1982) agrees that “the major Jewish female role passed on from decade to decade was that of the long-suffering Jewish mother, a role that quickly degenerated into a comic cliché. Celluloid Jewish mothers worry most of the time, they sigh and cry a lot. They protect their children” (p. 162). Perhaps the most scathing comment of all comes from Maureen Rubin, a professor at California State University, Northridge: “The images of Jewish women are as disturbingly stereotypical as those of blacks on the old Amos ‘n’ Andy shows” (Rubin, 2000, p. 27).

There are a few critics who feel that the previously cited examples are “a small portion of the varied and mostly admirable Jewish mothers portrayed on TV” (Pearl, 1999, p. 87). But the vast majority are in concurrence that the Jewish mother remains a one-dimensional figure, easily

recognized not only by her behavior, but by her dress and her nasally voice that always deteriorates into a whine.

After conducting focus group sessions on attitudes about Jewish women gleaned from TV, the Morning Star Commission in 1990 found that most saw “Jewish women as pushy, controlling, unattractive, materialistic, high-maintenance, shallow and domineering...cheap bargain hunters who nagged their husbands and spend all their time cooking and shopping” ( Focus Groups, Morning Star Commission ). Physically, they are even more repulsive, “overweight and big-nosed, sharp tongued and arrogant, scolds and henpeckers” (Antler, 2000, p. 54).

The Jewish mother portrayal can represent the nefarious side of mothering for all ethnic groups. Jean Bolen (1985) examines the “destructive” mother in her work on studying mythological goddesses to better understand elements within personalities. She describes the “maternal archetype who represents maternal instinct fulfilled through pregnancy or through providing physical, psychological, or spiritual nourishment to others” (p. 171). This goddess is Demeter “whose most important roles were as mother (of Persephone) and as provider of food (as Goddess of Grain), and spiritual sustenance (the Eleusinian Mysteries). She was worshipped as the mother goddess” (Bolen, 1985, p. 171). She is the longed-for mother that takes care of her children, but ideally in her nurturing, she helps them to grow rather than to diminish themselves.

Demeter women uniformly perceive themselves as good mothers who have the best interests of their children in mind. From the standpoint of their impact on their children, however, Demeter women seem to be either superbly able mothers or terrible, all-consuming mothers. (Bolen, 1985, p.184)

The Demeter woman is stunned when her grown children do not respond to her as she expected them to, with love and respect, and she sees no relationship between her mothering and their attitudes toward her. “With the intention of protecting her child, a Demeter woman may become

over-controlling. She hovers over every move, intercedes on the child's behalf and takes over when there is any possibility of harm" (Bolen, 1985, pp. 185-186).

The portrayal of the Jewish Mother on television strongly replicates some of Demeter's most positive attributes. Before her daughter, Persephone, was abducted by Hades, she is the devoted mother who defines herself solely through her daughter. But after the abduction, Demeter is no longer so sanguine; nothing on Earth grows and famine spreads throughout the land. Then, Demeter's negative or "destructive" traits become prominent and her children's growing independence is the catalyst for her to pull them closer to her. Similarly, the caricature of the TV Jewish Mother, although often displaying somewhat endearing traits, is largely Demeter after Persephone's abduction. Since mothers of all ethnicities can be Demeter mothers, the Jewishness of the TV character becomes irrelevant.

The perpetuation of the Jewish mother on TV personifies an ongoing conundrum as to what a woman/mother should be. Susan Faludi frequently refers to the dilemma of the women's movement and motherhood, quoting Sylvia Hewlett's indictment of the movement because feminists ignore motherhood. So why should depictions of Jewish mothers be so negative over the last 40 years? In many ways, the Jewish Mother is the personification of all the ambiguities unearthed by the feminist movement: women are too strong; they're not strong enough. Women want to be mothers; they don't want to be solely mothers. Women yearn for power; they don't want power outside of the domestic realm. Children are traumatized by their mothers; children are nurtured and beloved by their mothers. It is not coincidental that the negative Jewish mother roles blossomed in the 1960s, a time of awakening for many women, a time when castigating "powerful" women was a way to deal with the growing strength of the female population. By ridiculing her we can laugh at all women's attempts to gain power. At the same time that she has



power over her children, she is most typically unable to wield power in the public world. We can laugh at her and keep her somewhat under control as she cleverly manipulates her own miniature environment..

Dorothy Dinnerstein excoriates our society's tendency to "blame women for everything wrong about ourselves, especially that we are limited beings destined to err, decay and die" (Tong, 1998, p. 143). Mainly, we blame mothers because mothers are there when we experience some of our most painful moments, both physically and emotionally.

Because our experience of being mothered has been so overwhelming and even terrifying, Dinnerstein described our transition from infancy to adulthood as the slow and painful process of rejecting the mother, of devaluing women and things female. On account of his sexual dissimilarity to his mother, a boy can make this break completely, thereby realizing his desire for independence, for omnipotence. On account of her sexual similarity to her mother, however, a girl can never totally break from her mother. (Tong, 1998, p. 147)

Watching the interaction between Jewish mothers and their children offers an ideal portrait of the playing out of these dilemmas. As boys continue to struggle with "total helplessness" towards their mothers, they try desperately to curb any infiltration of feminization (Tong, 1998, p. 300). Susan Faludi (1998) explores some feminized roles of the male Citadel students and their enormous fears concerning the acceptance of women as classmates. Replete with examples of these fears, Faludi discusses the propaganda that is used against men who object to the Vietnam War. These war dodgers are castigated as "feminized Peter Pans clinging to Wendy's skirt" (p. 300). Thus, the men are:

Stigmatized as unmanly. This supposed plague of the "soft male" would be invoked by Robert Bly three decades later as a central tenet of his "Iron John" men's movement, attended by so many middle-aged, baby-boom men—momism had led to radicalism had led to patricide had led to feminization. (Faludi, 1998, p. 300)

Once again, mom is upbraided for her deleterious influences on her sons.

## **MALE WRITERS AND JEWISH OWNED NETWORKS**

One final factor in decoding the Jewish mother stereotype is the influence of male writers, comedians and particularly male founders and owners of the three major broadcast networks, CBS, ABC and NBC. Until 1986 William Paley is founder and owner with controlling interest in CBS. It is well known that he felt deeply ambiguous about being a Jew. David Sarnoff, founder of NBC, retired in 1970. And Leonard Goldenson is the top officer at ABC from 1953 to 1986. (Zurawik,2003, p.7). A “1983 survey identified 59% of TV’s elite producers as Jewish while a late 1970’s study found that more than 50% of all primetime TV writers were Jewish with the figure among comedy writers even higher.” (Brook, 2003, p.59)

Arguably, the males running these stations are uncomfortable presenting Jewish characters, period, from the early days of television (post Molly Goldberg’s departure in 1955) until the mid-1970’s and that when these ethnic characters do appear the mother-figure represents an ambivalence they feel towards their religious heritage. Many researchers explain the longevity of the negative image of the mother by emphasizing the need for the Jewish male to shed his shame for not being a Gentile on to his mother who has locks him into an eternal struggle with his Jewishness. By portraying her in often such a disgusting fashion he can explain to his audience, but mainly to himself, that it really isn’t his fault that he’s so neurotic. Writers and comedians notoriously perpetuate the obnoxious stereotype particularly from the 1960’s to the present. “Comedy is in large part responsible for making the negative Jewish mother stereotype so pervasive and disproportionately popular.” (Antler, 2007, p.5) And “by remembering their mothers, writers and comedians called forth the entire body and folklore with which they identified, but often with nostalgia-tinged ridicule and hostility.” (Antler, 2007, p.120)

Sophie Portnoy, the prototypical Jewish mother is a character in Philip Roth's *Portnoy's Complaint*, published in 1969. She is the personification of many Jewish mother stereotypes – interfering, destructive and ultimately the cause of her son's (Alex), anxieties and depression. Sophie, the notorious and ubiquitous Jewish mother, concerns herself with every aspect of her son's life, be it his grades, his friends, and even his excrement. Chagrined because her boy has diarrhea, she screams that he is stuffing himself with *chazerai* (junk food) and laments, "What are you trying to do, what are you trying to prove, that you should stuff yourself with such junk when you could come home to a poppy seed cookie and a nice glass of milk?" But Sophie never just focuses on the specific event, but rather catapults all activity into her guilt-obsessed parenting philosophy. "Alex, why are you getting like this, give me some clue? Tell me please what horrible things we have done to you all our lives that this should be our reward?" (Roth, 1969, pp. 24-25).

As the Jewish male struggles for assimilation into the longed-for Gentile world, "these stereotypical women represent the anxiety, anger and pain of Jewish men as they negotiate an American Jewish identity. Jewish women, in these stereotypes, symbolize elements of 'Jewishness'... to be rejected" (Fishman, 1998, p. 5). And the male writers who create these characters can use them as "cultural decoys" (Fishman, 1998, p. 7), so that they can not only deal with their own paradoxes and ambiguities as to what their identity is, but they can also be free to jettison the deplorable traits onto women.

According to Paula Hyman:

Faced with the need to establish their own identities in societies in which they were both fully acculturated and yet perceived as partially Other because they were Jews, Jewish men were eager to distinguish themselves from the women of their community, whom they saw as guardians of Jewishness. The negative representations of women that they produced reflected their own ambivalence about assimilation and its limits. (Hyman, 1998, p.5).

By stereotyping the Jewish mother, the male writer projects a dichotomous view of himself. Is he “Other” or is he mainstream? If he too is Other, then he really has no power in the world (Carr, 2001). The male writer may be projecting onto the Jewish mother all of the characteristics that he hates in himself. Davidman & Tenenbaum (1994) reiterates the anguish that 3<sup>rd</sup> generation Jewish sons feel about assimilation and what responsibilities they have to carry on their heritage. By vilifying their mothers, some of the burdens of these religious and cultural demands can be alleviated.

It has traditionally been up to the Jewish mother to promote and maintain in the family a Jewish way of life, an attachment not only to religious practices, but to cultural practices as well. What could account for young Jews increasingly marrying out of the religion and rejecting their Judaism? The Jewish mother is an easy target as experts blame her in “her suburban world for the many crises American Jews faced” (Prell, 1999, p. 151). The Jewish mother is too domineering, thus causing her poor husband and her children to submit to all of her demands, both emotionally and economically.

Some have suggested that the Jewish mother stereotype is the result of overt anti-Semitism, not only the Jewish male’s version of self-hatred. As more and more Jewish families penetrate the formerly white, Protestant suburbs in the 1950s and 1960s, fears of Jewish contamination grow. Jewish children infiltrate the suburban schools, bringing with them their aggressive and alien behavior. “If what made Jews dangerous was their polluting children, then families were the source of suspicion, and Jews saw in the personification of that family—the Wife and Mother—a parochialism and excess that they called on to explain their troubles....Gentiles blamed Jewish children and by extension their families” (Prell, 1999, p. 163). With this idea, the continuation of the negative Jewish Mother stereotype is a necessary and

continuing aspect of the anti-Semitism that pervades American society. Some would argue that the Jewish mother image on TV and other media gets transformed from a laughable caricature into a “kind of pathology” (Fishman, 1998, p. 10). “Judging from what many of our writers and cultural observers have been telling us for some decades now, being a Jewish Mother is not only no honor, it is really a disease ...without a cure”(Prell,1999,p. 163).Why is the purveyor of this incurable disease Jewish? Some writers would look to Freud for an explanation of the roots of the “disease.” Jewish women are “excluded from the 'heart' of traditional Orthodox Judaism, from the mandatory communal prayer and study which is the Jew's primary mode of expression and commitment, and therefore from an active religious role” (4) (Roith, 1987, p. 89). Consequently, she needs to fulfill her religious and intellectual requirements largely by living vicariously through her sons, often by resorting to skilled manipulation of her children and husband. The son often becomes her only vehicle to salvation.

The fact that legal, political, and religious authority resides in the men, together with the concomitant assumptions about women, ensures that the power of the woman is often a more subtle affair which, under certain unfavorable circumstances may be comprised of emotional and psychological pressures: that is manipulative strategems, such as emotional blackmail and masochistic threats mobilizing guilt, anxiety, and other pathological defenses. (Roith, 1987, p. 103)

## **CONCLUSION:**

By examining the history of television Jewish Mothers much is revealed about mothering and attitudes about it in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. Despite all the progress of women in the last 50 years or, perhaps because of all the progress, mothers in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century are still being bombarded with ambivalent messages about their capabilities to parent effectively. The underlying message is that they are doing something wrong, that they are “malfunctioning” or even “pathological” mimicking the behavior of the Jewish mother. According to Joyce Antler

(p,236), “intensive mothering, helicopter or hovering motherhood or simply the new momism... promotes ... parental overwatchfulness” in an effort to guarantee the “social and emotional growth of their youngsters”. Judith Warner in her book *Perfect Madness, Motherhood in the Age of Anxiety*, harkens back to the Jewish mother stereotype when she claims that “we coddle our children when they are little, supplying them not just with love but with a nonstop amniotic bath of praise and stimulation, because, we hope, this will give them the “right start” in life”(Warner, 2005, p. 225). The Jewish Mother, an icon of contradictions and negative mothering, is certainly not vanishing and will most likely be a part of media culture for many decades to come.

## ENDNOTES

1. This paper is revised and expanded from a previous article on Jewish mothers.
2. According to Leo Rosten , *pilpul* is a form of debate, “an inflated form of analysis...used in Talmudic study; i.e. unproductive hair-splitting that is employed not so much to advance clarity or reveal meaning as to display one’s own cleverness” (Rosten, 1968, p. 292).
3. A *balebosteh* is a superb homemaker, a wonderful cook and an excellent housekeeper.
4. Orthodox Jewish women, for example, are not allowed to read the Torah in the synagogue, cannot be a part of a religious quorum for worship which requires ten men, cannot become rabbis, cannot start divorce proceedings, cannot be a witness in a Jewish court of law and must maintain distance from men in menstruation (Roith, 1987)

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