

The Godfather Part III (1990, F)
GoodFellas (1990, F)
The Greatest Love of All (1925, F)
Household Saints (1993, F)
The Italian (1915, F)
Italianamerican (1974, D)
Italian in America (1998, D)
It's a Wonderful Life (1946)
Jungle Fever (1991, F)
Little Caesar (1930, F)
Little Italy (1921, F)
The Lords of Flatbush (1974, F)
Lovers and Other Strangers (1970, F)
Love with a Proper Stranger (1963, F)
Mac (1993, F)
The Man in Blue (1925, F)
Marty (1955, F)
Mean Streets (1973, F)
Moonstruck (1987, F)
My Cousin Vinny (1992, F)
Prizzi's Honor (1985, F)
Puppets (1926, F)
Puppets of Fate (1921, F)
Raging Bull (1980, F)
Rocky (1976, F)
Rose of the Tenements (1926, F)
The Rose Tattoo (1955, F)
Saturday Night Fever (1977, F)
Scarface (1932, F)
Society Snobs (1921, F)
The Sopranos (1999–, TV)
True Love (1989, F)
A View from the Bridge (1962, F)
When the Clock Strikes Nine (1921, F)
Who's That Knocking at My Door? (1969, F)
Wise Guys (1985, F)

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Jewish Americans

There were Jews in America long before the creation of the United States. As Howard Sachar points out in *A History of the Jews in America*, not only were there Jewish settlers arriving in New Amsterdam as early as 1654, but the crew of Christopher Columbus also almost assuredly included *marranos* (Jews who hid their religion to escape the Spanish Inquisition) and *conversos* (Jews who converted during the Inquisition). Jewish people have made a wide variety of contributions to American life and culture, including the blue jeans devised by Levi Strauss (1829–1902), the polio vaccine formulated by Dr. Jonas Salk (1914–1995), and the modern Hollywood film studios, created by men such as Sam Goldwyn (born Samuel Goldfish, 1882–1974), Louis B. Mayer (1891–1957), Jack Warner (1892–1981), and Adolph Zukor (1873–1976). In fact, there have been contributions by Jewish people to every field of endeavor throughout American history. Asser Levy's (1628–1682) early efforts to convince Peter Stuyvesant that Jewish people should have the right to settle in the Dutch colony of New Amsterdam led to a constitutional precedent of immigration law, that people of all religious extractions should have the opportunity to settle in the New World (Koppman, 35). From the scientific explorations of Julius Oppenheimer (1904–1967) to Emma Lazarus's (1849–1887) poem "The New Colossus" at the base of the Statue of Liberty, from the philanthropy and legacy of Meyer Guggenheim (1828–1905) to the sporting achievements of Sandy Koufax (b. 1935), to name but a few, there is no area of

life or achievement in the United States that has not benefited from Jewish involvement.

The first major wave of Jewish immigration to the United States took place during the period of western expansion (1880–1924), when approximately ninety thousand Ashkenazi (Jews of Eastern European descent) came to the United States from Germany and Poland. They were followed by settlers from Russia and Poland in a wave of immigrants known as the "Yiddish Migration" (Gonzalez, 352).

There were marked differences between the earlier Jewish settlers (who were not identified as arriving in an identifiable "wave"), the Sephardis (Jews of Spanish descent) and the Western European Jews, and the Jews of the Yiddish Migration. Whereas Western European Jews assimilated and blended into American society, the latter group was far more noticeably "Jewish" in appearance and tradition—in large part owing to its unfamiliarity with Western culture as well as its insular experience within ghettoized communities. Once on American shores, this community continued to be close-knit; initially, the vast majority settled in the Lower East Side of New York City. Just before the advent of World War I, nearly half of the 3.5 million Jews in America lived in New York City—the sheer number of Jewish New Yorkers (1.6 million) surpassing the population size of every major American city save for New York, Chicago, and Philadelphia (Sachar, 174).

The era of the Depression was also the start of the era of modern European immigration to the United States. This phase of immigration, from 1925 to 1945, is notable mostly for

the exodus of Jews fleeing Nazi persecution. It is during this period that an association between the Jewish people and show business was most clearly formed in the American mind. This connection was fueled by vaudeville performers such as Jack Benny (1894–1974) and Groucho Marx (1890–1977), famed radio performer Gertrude Berg (1899–1966), and Hollywood personalities such as Eddie Cantor (1892–1964) and George Jessel (1898–1981).

The next major phase of Jewish immigration to the United States was the postwar period, which lasted from 1946 to 1980. The most publicized of these Jewish immigrants were refugees from the Soviet bloc nations, although Eastern European and Israeli immigration continued. The final phase, still in process, began in 1980 and continues today. The majority of Jewish immigrants to the United States in this period have come from Israel, itself a nation of immigrants.

The Cinematic History of Jewish Americans

Jewish American history, when explored in American film, focuses primarily on the question of assimilation versus acculturation. Films such as *American Matchmaker* (1940), *Hester Street* (1975), and *Avalon* (1990) portray Jewish lives within the melting pot of the United States and focus on how difficult it can be for Jewish people to meld into American culture. Michael Kassel finds that *Avalon*, “viewed in historical perspective . . . demonstrates that progress and assimilation had a detrimental effect on the Jewish immigrant family” (52). It is notable that assimilation is now one of the greatest worries to the Jewish community in America. Although assimilating into the anglocentric culture of the United States allowed the Jewish people to advance and progress, this advancement has eroded a unique culture, making it more liberal and secular. Furthermore, the Jews of America are different from those in other countries in that in the United States there has never been a national “Chief Rabbi” or dominant voice

who speaks for the entire Jewish community. As a result, behavior and attitudes are based more on personal choice that may change with the mores of the time. The current trend is more toward acculturation—that is, concurrent acceptance of the dominant culture of the United States while maintaining and cultivating qualities and traditions that are unique to the Jewish people. Examples of this evolution of attitude can best be seen in the various interpretations of *The Jazz Singer* (1927, 1943, 1980), wherein the main character chooses American popular music over his religion in the original film but in later versions accepts the importance of his heritage more and more; *The Chosen* (1981), which shows the differing worlds of Orthodox and Conservative Judaism at the dawn of World War II; and *A Woman Called Golda* (1982), portraying the influence that American Judaism had on the history of Israel.

Arrival to American's Shores

The earliest portrayal of American Jews in American cinema can be seen within the comedies, ghetto films, and Yiddish films of the early 1900s. The films of this period portrayed both the very isolated community of the Jewish ghettos of the new world, and the anti-Semitic views of the WASP culture in a period of great social change and “status anxiety.” These comedies included films such as *Cohen's Advertising Scheme* (1904) and *The Fights of Nations* (1907), which used a negative stereotype of the money-grubbing Jew to evoke laughter. These were not religious characters, but people with large noses and “Jewish” names who were possessed by greed. A wide variety of films during the silent era dealt with this population; a popular formula juxtaposed the immigrant Jewish and Irish populations, as in Edward Sloman's *His People* (1925), Victor Fleming's *Abie's Irish Rose* (1928), and Harry Pollard's *The Cohens and the Kellys* (1926).

The ghetto films, such as D. W. Griffith's *Old Isaacs, the Pawnbroker* (1908) and *A Child*

of the Ghetto (1910), focused on the pervasive poverty of the New York immigrants, showing that not all Jews were rich and powerful. These films also differed greatly from the early comedies in presenting a far less stereotypical image of Jews while illustrating the ways in which the people were, in fact, different from WASP America. Joseph Cohen suggests that the Yiddish films served the Jewish community as an aid to transition: “*American Matchmaker* . . . deals with the serious issue of transition in personally reconciling tradition and the modern, finding the “golden mean” between Jewish and secular identity” (41). Outside of these early efforts, this period in Jewish history has been filmed rarely; a fortunate exception is *Hester Street* (1975), an independent production directed by Joan Micklin Silver. An excellent examination of immigration and assimilation, *Hester Street* shows the toll of change not only on individuals but also on the family and tradition. It is the abandonment of his religion and tradition that dooms Yankel's (Steven Keats) marriage to Gitl (Carol Kane), not through small adaptations (such as changing his name to Jake) but major ones (such as an extramarital affair).

Assimilation into American Society

The next phase of Jewish life in the United States, between 1925 and 1945, was marked by attempts at assimilation. Immigration to the United States was a time of new beginnings, and it makes perfect sense that some of these immigrants took advantage of the opportunity to discard some of the more visible aspects of their traditions. To this end, Jewish people embraced new fields and professions, particularly in the sciences and education. But the Jews of the time also tried to maintain a low profile—as in 1939, when several influential Jewish advisors asked President Roosevelt to reconsider the appointment of Felix Frankfurter to the Supreme Court. They were concerned that such an appointment would incite a wave of anti-Semitism (Whitfield, 101). This timidity

is also fascinating, in light of how many Jewish people were in the public eye at the time, both as performers and workers behind the scenes in show business.

Jewish people also shared a rich heritage of humor. In fact, the most noticeable contribution to American society by Jews at this point was actually in the arena of light entertainment. The early “talkies” were notable for the number of dialect-oriented ethnic comedies. Parodying and emphasizing the Yiddish accent or the Germanic sentence structure became quite popular in films such as Roy Del Ruth's *Taxi!* (1932) and George Stevens's *The Cohens and Kellys in Trouble* (1933). This form of humor can also be seen in the works of up-and-coming Jewish comedians such as the Marx Brothers. It was during this period that many actors changed their names from “ethnic” to “American” forms: Muni Weisenfreund to Paul Muni, Julius Garfinkle to John Garfield, David Kominski to Danny Kaye, Betty Perske to Lauren Bacall, Bernard Schwartz to Tony Curtis. The studios insisted on these name changes, fearing that audiences would notice a growing Jewish presence in American entertainment.

Modern popular films seldom portray the Jews of the 1920s and 1930s, with a major exception: gangster movies. Jewish presence in the gangster mobs of the Roaring Twenties was quite pronounced, considering the involvement of Benny “Bugsy” Siegel, the Purple Gang, and others. Films such as William Nigh's *Four Walls* (1928), Burt Balaban's *Lepke* (a.k.a. *Murder, Inc.*) (1960), Sergio Leone's *Once Upon a Time in America* (1984), and Barry Levinson's *Bugsy* (1991) highlight some of the Jewish players in organized crime. As in the case of other ethnic groups, there was no objection to this sort of presentation of the real lives of Jewish people, as opposed to the representation of more noteworthy Jewish personages—for example, in the areas of science and politics.

Although the influx of Jewish immigration did not yet affect the content of the movie industry to a remarkable degree, World War II

certainly led to changes in the theme and scope of films. One of the first productions to confront the horrors taking place in Europe was Charles Chaplin's *The Great Dictator* (1940), which included Chaplin's only onscreen performance in a clearly identifiable Jewish role. In time, depictions of World War II would lead to productions concerning the Jewish Holocaust; films dramatizing this aspect of the war have grown more numerous. Notable contributions to the genre are Alan J. Pakula's *Sophie's Choice* (1982) and Stephen Spielberg's *Schindler's List* (1993).

If there is a more modern presentation of Judaism in American film, it consists of assimilated Jews, such as the Jewish characters in *Quicksilver* (1986) and *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955). Jewish faith and culture is not a real part of the lives of these characters, and religious identity seems to be inconsequential to them. This is different from the presentation of secular Jewish characters in films such as Otto Preminger's *Exodus* (1960), which depicts the origin of Israel and focuses on secular Jewish characters rather than religious ones. *Exodus* features characters who feel passionately about their Jewish identity, though it lies in culture more than religious beliefs. More modern efforts, such as *Quicksilver*, feature characters who may be portrayed as celebrating Chanukah rather than Christmas, but their religious and cultural differences from mainstream society are normally mentioned only to serve as the springboard for a brief statement, highlighting the similarities between their religion and those of other characters. This trend may be changing, however, as seen by Jewish characters in films such as *Independence Day* (1996) and *Keeping the Faith* (2000) who practice their faith and celebrate their culture while living lives otherwise identical to those of their fellow Americans.

Acculturation

In part influenced by the horrors of World War II, Jewish people in the United States turned

toward acculturating themselves—more than assimilating—into mainstream culture. The cries of "Remember," and "Never Forget" in reference to those who died in European concentration camps forced Jewish people to focus on and embrace their differences. Although this change in behavior has increased the cultural visibility of worldwide Jewry, a further result has been more frequent acts of anti-Semitism. Jewish involvement in the creation and success of labor unions and political action organizations, such as the NAACP and the ACLU, have often equated the terms "Jew" and "liberal," which often has led to inflammatory rhetoric and violence. But anti-Semitism was being dealt with for the first time as a matter of civil rights, and civil rights were a new focus for the general population as well.

Films such as Elia Kazan's *Gentleman's Agreement* (1947) and Edward Dmytryk's *Crossfire* (1947) deal with anti-Semitism, just as later films would deal with prejudice against people of color and other minority groups. The importance of these films is the way in which they lay the blame for intolerance at the feet of those responsible, rather than on the persecuted themselves. (This notion, that members of a group should not bear responsibility for unreasonable hatred toward them, is perhaps the first educational step toward understanding of, rather than mere tolerance for, difference.)

Although many humorous films of this period had notable Jewish characters, such as Walter Hart's *The Goldbergs* (1950) and William Wyler's *Funny Girl* (1968), the majority of Jewish characters in comedic films were only incidentally Jewish. Judaism is present primarily in themes and styles of humor, in such films as Larry Peerce's *Goodbye, Columbus* (1969) and Woody Allen's *Annie Hall* (1977). In fact, all the work of Woody Allen, Mel Brooks, and Carl Reiner can be seen as defining the filmed genre of Jewish humor. The early portrayals of stereotypical Jews that focused on businessmen with thick accents changed over to the mother's boy who walks through life hampered by guilt

and attached to maternal apron strings—a character best seen in Neil Simon's two autobiographical films *Brighton Beach Memoirs* (1986) and *Biloxi Blues* (1988).

Perhaps it was the influence of Alex Haley's *Roots* (1977) more than any other novel or film that focused the interest of all Americans upon the details of their heritage—and this focus is plainly visible in films dealing specifically with Judaism. Joan Micklin Silver's *Crossing Delancey* (1988) and Barry Levinson's *Avalon* (1990), as noted earlier, deal with the old world intruding on the new, considering which was "better," and how the similarities of these worlds bridge the generations.

From Stereotype to Character

The film industry has progressed from showing Jewish characters as mere stereotypes to

fully formed characters who are just as capable as anyone else of committing heresies and heroism. But it must also be noted that, even today, films are aimed at a general audience. For example, in Brenda Chapman and Steve Hickover's animated film *The Prince of Egypt* (1999), Moses leads the Hebrews out of Egypt and beyond; although the story's conclusion may allude to the religion to come, Judaism per se is never explicitly explored or mentioned. The question must be raised: Why create a film about one of the most defining moments of a people without exploring its spiritual significance? In a country that gives "to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance," as George Washington wrote in his famous letter to the Touro Synagogue of Rhode Island in 1790, perhaps it is time for a change.

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Bugsy (1991, F)
The Chosen (1981, F)
Cohen's Advertising Scheme (1904, F)
The Cohens and the Kellys (1926, F)
Crossfire (1947, F)
Crossing Delancey (1988, F)
Exodus (1960, F)
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The Fights of Nations (1907, F)
Funny Girl (1968, F)
Gentleman's Agreement (1947, F)
The Goldbergs (1950, F)
Goodbye, Columbus (1969, F)
The Great Dictator (1940, F)
Hester Street (1975, F)
His People (1925, F)
Hollywood: An Empire of Their Own (1997, D)
Independence Day (1996, F)
The Jazz Singer (1927, F; 1943, F; 1980, F)

- Keeping the Faith* (2000, F)
Lepke (a.k.a. Murder, Inc.) (1960, F)
Old Isaacs, the Pawnbroker (1908, F)
Once Upon a Time in America (1984, F)
The Prince of Egypt (1999, F)
Quicksilver (1986, F)
Rebel Without a Cause (1955, F)
Roots (1977, F)
Schindler's List (1993, F)
Sophie's Choice (1982, F)
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Mexican Americans

Before the Spanish conquest of Mexico in 1521, an assemblage of diverse indigenous societies developed alongside one another in what is now considered North America. Spain saw America as a land to be colonized, and, after conquering the Aztecs, Spanish forces allied with some Native American societies and began establishing New Spain. Spanish-sponsored explorations sought out fabled riches and new settlement locations in what is now the southwestern United States, but in the process they encountered and battled more Native American tribes, including the Apache and Pueblo peoples. Over the next three centuries; although the Spanish throne ruled the land and its imperial power grew, intermarriages between Spanish colonialists and Native Americans spawned significant political, social, and racial mixtures, the phenomenon called *mestizaje*.

By the time Mexico had gained its independence from Spain in the early 1820s, other European immigrants had begun trekking across the ever-growing United States in fulfillment of Manifest Destiny, some homesteading in the Texas portion of the Spanish empire. In 1836, perhaps carried by the spirit of the Alamo, Texas won independence from Mexico and, along with much of the adjacent territory, including portions of New Mexico, Arizona, California, Utah, Nevada, and Colorado, became part of the United States in 1848 with the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. In one stroke of the pen, natives of the region became U.S. citizens. Politically, a new identity was formed: what came to be known

as the Mexican American or, later, Chicana and Chicano. More importantly, this political event made possible a new cultural enterprise, progressively evolving as *chicanismo*. Echoing Octavio Paz and José Vasconcelos, Arnoldo Carlos Vento and other Chicano historians argue that the definitive characteristic of Chicano culture is its existence in between dominant cultures, assembling the very best of the divergent American cultures into *movidas* or modes of survival (281). In its mixture historically are various Native American, Iberian Spanish, Moorish, Celtic-Gaelic, Jewish, and colonial Mexican influences, all of which play a part in Chicano identity in the face of the larger American society.

Feature films made in the United States have chronicled Mexican American history and Chicano culture in many ways. The earliest period is marked by some social problem melodramas and many westerns that often misrepresented U.S.-Mexican themes and characters, stressing an assimilationist view. After World War II and reaching a fevered pitch in the late 1960s and 1970s, militarist and nationalist separatism marked a new generation of Chicanos and Chicanas who fought for their social rights and expressed the significance of their cultural background; some films treating this period revise cultural statements made by earlier films and social histories and highlight issues of concern often overlooked by studio fare. Finally, from 1980 to the present, films depicting Mexican Americans have crossed over into the mainstream while at the same time allowing mainstream culture to cross over to Mexican