



2015

Book Review: On Goldman's The American Jewish Story through Cinema

David B. Levy

Touro College, david.levy@touro.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://touro scholar.touro.edu/tcl_pubs



Part of the [Film and Media Studies Commons](#), and the [Jewish Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Levy, D. B. (2015). On Goldman's The American Jewish story through cinema [Review of the book by E. Goldman]. *Jewish Film & New Media*, 3(2), 249-254.

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Touro College Libraries at Touro Scholar. It has been accepted for inclusion in Touro College Libraries Publications and Research by an authorized administrator of Touro Scholar. For more information, please contact touro.scholar@touro.edu.

On Goldman's *The American Jewish Story Through Cinema*

David B. Levy

Eric A. Goldman, *The American Jewish Story Through Cinema*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2013. 254 pp., ISBN 978-0-292-74430-1 (hc), US \$55.00; 978-0-292-75469-0 (pb), US \$25.00.

Eric Goldman's cultural case studies of nine mainstream representative films join a growing body of key studies of the American Jewish experience(s) that portray the social history of "reel Jews" and Jewish issues. The book recounts the "Zeligesque" process of mimesis, adaptation, and assimilation, as represented throughout the twentieth century through film. The book is clearly written and places its subjects in a general historical context that incorporates primary documents as well as personal interviews with filmmakers such as Barry Levinson.

Goldman's scope is limited to nine American-made films: *The Jazz Singer* (Alan Crosland, 1927), *Gentleman's Agreement* (Elia Kazan, 1947), *Crossfire* (Edward Dmytryk, 1947), *The Young Lions* (Edward Dmytryk, 1958), *The Way We Were* (Sydney Pollack, 1973), *The Prince of Tides* (Barbra Streisand, 1991), *Avalon* (Barry Levinson, 1990), *Liberty Heights* (Barry Levinson, 1999), and *Everything Is Illuminated* (Liev Schreiber, 2005). This focus allows him to illustrate themes such as coming out of the ghetto (*The Jazz Singer*); anti-Semitism in the 1940s (*Gentleman's Agreement* and *Crossfire*); "guaranteeing acceptance" (*The Young Lions*); the evolving Jewish woman as a strong, successful, assertive, and

vibrant professional (*The Way We Were*, *The Prince of Tides*); the fragmentation of Jewish life, offered as a paradigmatic sketch of the American Jewish immigrant experience (*Avalon*, *Liberty Heights*); and the new trend whereby the search for “home” in Eastern Europe’s pre-Holocaust shtetl represents the comfort of identifying with Jewish heritage, and the search for a “usable past” by which to construct a transcontinental multigenerational Jewish identity (*Everything Is Illuminated*).

Goldman’s book, which broadens our understanding of acculturated Jewishness as represented in American cinema, develops further the mid-1980s surveys of American Jewish film by Patricia Erens (*The Jew in American Cinema*, 1984) and Lester Friedman (*The Jewish Image in American Film*, 1987). However, Erens’s and Friedman’s surveys attempt to cover the entirety of American film history and deal in general outlines, whereas Goldman’s focuses on a small number of case studies that specifically raise questions about the construction of Jewish identity, assimilation, and Jewish-gentile social and economic relations. (Further recent groundbreaking work has also appeared in print.)¹

Goldman, the author of *Visions, Images, and Dreams: Yiddish Film—Past & Present* (2011), is well positioned to draw on his experience as curator of film for the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, where he supervised the preservation of archival Yiddish films. For many years Goldman also developed and moderated the film program at the Center for Jewish History and Yeshiva University, and in 2011 he served as film curator at the International Yiddish Theatre Festival in Montreal.

A great strength of the book is Goldman’s tracing of the ideological tensions behind adapting a book to film. The novel *The Young Lions*, for example, was published by Irwin Shaw in 1948. Its later film adaptation involved many differences of interpretation over how to represent the plot, which followed the lives of three soldiers during World War II. Shaw bitterly disagreed with Marlon Brando’s sympathetic portrayal of Christian and with the playing down of the anti-Semitism that Noah encounters in the original book. Shaw felt Brando unjustifiably exculpated the perpetrators and bystanders in a way that did an injustice to the victims of the Nazis. The process and product of this contested adaptation would reveal a shift in the ways some Americans came to respond to images of the Holocaust. Goldman’s analysis of Jonathan Safran Foer’s novel *Everything Is Illuminated* (2002), as adapted and directed by actor Liev Schreiber, also brilliantly reveals how the author revealed what it means for an American Jew

without a known immediate connection to the Shoah to return to an annihilated European shtetl to confront “unfinished business.”

In his chapter on *The Jazz Singer* (Alan Crosland, USA, 1927), which wonderfully draws comparisons in counter-point to such anti-assimilationist Yiddish films as *The Cantor’s Son* (Ilya Motyleff, USA, 1937) and *Overture to Glory* (Max Nosseck, USA, 1940), Goldman perhaps does not devote enough attention to the significance of the earlier film’s breaking of the sound barrier, nor does he devote much focus to the four subsequent *Jazz Singer* screen versions. Goldman also, significantly, ignores both the race and intermarriage aspects of *The Jazz Singer*.

Goldman’s analysis is on more solid ground in suggesting it is no accident that several of the films he examines were directed and promoted by non-Jews. According to Goldman, Darryl Zanuck got it, for “it was his American sensitivity to prejudice that got *Gentleman’s Agreement* made” at a time when many Jewish organizations were opposed to such films, fearing they would stir up Judeophobia and more anti-Semitism.² Goldman’s chapter on *Gentleman’s Agreement* and *Crossfire* shows how the films faced political struggles within the studios before they could enter production. The fact that these two important films saw the light of day is in part owed to the advocacy of Darryl Zanuck, for *Gentleman’s Agreement*, and Dore Schary at RKO, who argued for the worth and importance of *Crossfire*, despite the fact that each film met with great resistance from Jewish organizations that felt such representations could do more harm than good.

One weakness of Goldman’s study—perhaps an inevitable one—is his insufficient analysis of Hollywood’s attempts to fully represent the radical evil of the Holocaust. However, a greater weakness, which I will dwell on here, is the limited scope of its analysis and selection of films featuring Jewish women. His two case studies of films starring Barbra Streisand are far from representative, and he might have done more to explain why he chose these two films and why he considered them game changers. Perhaps further attention to, rather than brief mention of, the film *Yentl* (Barbra Streisand, USA, 1983) would have opened up the important question of Jewish women’s learning and access to traditional Torah texts, which had been transformed in the hundred years since the *Chofetz Chaim*.³

Completely absent from Goldman’s scope is the representation of Haredi and Modern Orthodox women in film. The Ma’aleh School of Television, Film & the Arts in Israel is one organization that promotes the representation of issues of timely interest to Orthodox Jews, especially Jewish women; and Israeli films produced by the school have delved heavily into these issues. While

Goldman's scope does not cover Israeli films, I would ask why he chose not to address Hollywood films such as *The Chosen* (Jeremy Paul Kagan, USA, 1982), *A Stranger Among Us* (Sidney Lumet, USA, 1991), and *A Price Above Rubies* (Boaz Yakin, UK/USA, 1998), all of which provide further case studies of how outsiders to Orthodoxy represent Orthodoxy on the screen in American film. These cinematic portrayals assumed there was only one way to authentic Jewish observance—the Orthodox approach—and often failed to note the varieties of Jewish religious experience.

Some critics might feel that filmic representations of secular Jewish women, too, deserve more attention, as do such current Jewish actresses as Jennifer Grey, Fran Drescher, Sarah Silverman, Debra Messing, Natalie Portman, Rachel Weisz, and others. A work like Goldman's could have brought to light the marginalization of Jewish women and their stories by focusing more on women's issues, feminism, and gender questions that have increasingly captured the attention of movie makers.

I also wonder whether the scope and breadth of Goldman's book might have benefited from a chapter on biblical epics on the American screen, such as *David and Bathsheba* (Henry King, USA, 1951), *The Ten Commandments* (Cecil B. DeMille, USA, 1956), and *Samson and Delilah* (Cecil B. DeMille, USA, 1949).

What Goldman has constructed is a coherent interpretation of the facts. His frame of reference, however, is neither comprehensive nor exhaustive. His choice of films reflects his ideological bias, revealing his interpretation of "the changing situation of the American Jew in the last century" (ix) to offer a construction of the evolving portrait of the American Jewish experience that emerges from within the purview of his own cultural eyes. Goldman's concluding findings are that a new direction in American film has been initiated by American Jews' "searching for a usable past" (xi, viii) and representing a new level of comfort in exploring their Eastern European roots in a search for home.

Goldman coherently argues that his nine examples illustrate that, "in the first half of the twentieth century, Hollywood's movie moguls, most of whom were Jewish, shied away from asserting a Jewish image on the screen for fear that they might be too closely identified with that representation."⁴ However, over the next two decades Jewish movie-makers became more comfortable with the concepts of a Jewish hero and an overmatched, yet heroic, Israel. Jewish filmmakers even began to air their Jewish "dirty laundry" on film. In time, the Holocaust assumed center stage as the single event with the greatest effect on American Jewish identity. And recently, as American Jewish screenwriters, directors, and

producers have become increasingly more comfortable with their heritage, we are seeing an unprecedented number of movies that spotlight Jewish protagonists, experiences, and challenges.

Goldman's analysis within his given framework can offer insights. He indeed shows how Jews became "white folks" without making a spectacle of themselves. But his book ultimately calls for a more thorough project, to widen the scope. Perhaps a multivolume encyclopedia could better treat the many experiences of the variegated and diverse American groups of Jews represented in film. There is more to the Jewish experience than the differences between Ashkanazic and Sephardic, *Mitnagdic* and Hasidic, Israeli and *Galuti*, politically liberal and politically conservative, religious and secular. Samuel Friedman's book *Jew vs. Jew: The Struggle for the Soul of American Jewry* (2000) suggests that the rifts among various Jewish communities in America are deep seated and problematic. Similarly, there is no one Jewish experience in American film that is homogenous and uniform. There are only interpretations that construct the images of the Jew, Jewish issues, and Jewish experiences on film.

David B. Levy. Touro College, New York. DavidBLevy@msn.com

Notes

1. Two exemplary studies include Nathan Abrams's *The New Jew in Film: Exploring Jewishness and Judaism in Contemporary Cinema* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2012), and Omer Bartov's *The "Jew" in Cinema: From The Golem to Don't Touch My Holocaust* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005). See also two anthologies: Lawrence Baron, *The Modern Jewish Experience in World Cinema* (Lebanon, NH: Brandeis University Press/University Press of New England, 2012), and Daniel Bernardi, Murray Pomerance, and Hava Tirosh-Samuelson, *Hollywood's Chosen People: The Jewish Experience in American Cinema* (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 2013). Other studies include Steven Carr, *Hollywood and Anti-Semitism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); Neal Gabler, *An Empire of Their Own* (New York: Anchor Books, 1988); and Sarah Cohen, ed., *From Hester Street to Hollywood* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1983).
2. Quote from interview with Goldman by George Robinson, "Lens on American Jewry," *Jewish Week*, June 27, 2015, www.thejewishweek.com/news/short-takes/lens-american-jewry.

3. See Esti Rosenberg, “The World of Women’s Torah Learning: Developments, Directions, and Objectives: A Report from the Field,” *Tradition* 45.1 (2012): 13–36.
4. Quoted from the book’s promotional catalog blurb.