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Film Review: Yoo Hoo, Mrs. Goldberg

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Kempner, Aviva. *Yoo-Hoo, Mrs. Goldberg*. DVD. 92 minutes.

Reviewed by David B. Levy, Touro College, NYC, USA

This excellent documentary testifies to the spirit and charm of Gertrude Berg (October 3, 1899 – September 14, 1966) by retelling the life of this successful actor and writer, who pioneered women's leadership in Radio, TV, Broadway, and film. Berg wrote over 12,000 scripts as a strong independent, working mother, and wife who was proud to be a Jew at a time of mass assimilation of American Jewry.

Aviva Kempner's *Yoo-Hoo, Mrs. Goldberg* examines the life and career of Gertrude Berg. Berg pioneered the family-based sitcom format that celebrated family, motherhood, and patriotism. Berg succeeded against all odds by presenting America with an outwardly Jewish family, with Yiddish accent and customs. The documentary also shows the strength and resilience of Berg's courageous stand against McCarthyism (1950-1954) during the 2nd Red Scare, when she refused to fire her long-time co-star Philip Loeb – unfairly accused of being a communist, who resigned to prevent the cancellation of the show, and later committed suicide. Loeb was an advocate for civil rights and actors equity rights. The documentary portrays Loeb's plight with sympathy and compassion.

The Goldbergs premiered on January 10, 1949 and aired until 1955. Gertrude Berg remarkably wrote all the scripts for the character Molly Goldberg that played two decades on the radio and five years on television. She also produced and starred in these shows. This was probably “a first” for a woman in the entertainment business in America. The character Molly dispenses wisdom in the form of making *shidduchim* (matchmaking), serving as a kind of family therapist to enhance *shalom bayit* (resolving family conflicts), and even helping a reformed thief. The documentary shows that as a strong woman the character of Molly Goldberg also conveys benevolence of neighborliness, whether this be conveyed in the form of lending or borrowing a cup of sugar and the friendliness of the classic calling out “*Yoo-Hoo Mrs. Bloom*” to the neighbor across the windowsill, an urban equivalent of the inner city “backyard fence.” In 1954, when the Goldbergs are set in the fictitious suburb of Haverville, the lost closeness of neighborliness is felt as the family waits around for someone to introduce themselves to the

newly moved in family in Haverville. Ties with extended family members would often also be sundered by the moves to the suburbs of those enacting the American dream of a higher socio-economic living condition.

This is not a documentary of mere nostalgia. While no *Yiddishe Mama*, as sung in the classic Jewish film, *The Jazz Singer*, Gertrude Berg was not afraid to represent Jewish life on her programs, which at times depicted a *Pesach Seder* when a rock was thrown through the window, Rosh Hashanah, and other Jewish touch-points. She was not abashed to speak as Molly Goldberg with a Yiddish accent although she did not speak Yiddish fluently. Even in her cookbook there was room for traditional eastern European foods like *Cheese blintzes*, *Kreplach*, *Zimmes*, etc and other ethnic delicacies. The cookbook includes PTA night quick dinner recipes showing the traditional Jewish emphasis on the importance of education, which the documentary duly points out.

The documentary affirms Gertrude Berg's fierce refusal when Cardinal Spellman demanded that Berg convert to Catholicism, if he were to intervene via J. Edgar Hoover and help fellow actor and friend Philip Loeb from the Red Scare accusations. Berg resisted the communist scare and would not rat or sell her friend Philip Loeb out. Berg's *mentshlikeit* (humaneness) according to the documentary is also seen in the way she treated her secretary Fanny Merrill who was never made to feel as an inferior, but rather as an equal and friend by giving her key authority to spot talent and hire. The documentary shows that principles of moral integrity represented in the sitcom the Goldbergs manifested themselves in Berg's personal life.

The documentary also shows that Berg stood up to anti-Semitism. At a time when newspapers swept persecution of Jews in Europe to the back pages, Berg stood up against for instance Kristallnacht on Nov 9, 1938. When the TV broadcasts of Father McCoughlin were raging, the Goldbergs also ran, depicting a lovable Jewish middle class family that dispelled all demonic portraits of anti-Semites like Father McCloughlin.

Berg was an innovator and enabled the first broadcast of a *Pesah Seder* on the air. This *Seder* received warm appreciation from Catholic listeners who characterized their listening experience as if being "swept away." She was a pioneer for presenting a human side to ethnically Jewish Americans. She dispelled vices of greed by depicting true joy in a Jewish family, and not as₂

Citizen Cane would have it possessing things. The documentary notes that Berg once remarked that a “man on a desert is nothing but a man near another human being should be a *mensch*.” The film goes on to cite FDR remarking, “I did not get America out of the depression, but rather it was the Goldbergs (sitcom) that got Americans out of the depression.” The documentary points out that Eleanor Roosevelt and Molly Goldberg were the two most recognized women in America at the time. Berg’s programs on the radio and TV transcended Jewish ethnicity and spoke to all religions, races, and economic groups irrespective of difference in income, race, ethnicity, geography, and social status because they were undergirded by an eternal enduring human quality.

The documentary mentioned that Molly Goldberg represents a new kind of Jewish American mother, as a second generation descendent of American immigrants. As noted before, this image of the Jewish mother is warm, welcoming, motherly, resourceful, sensitive, nurturing, full of practical wisdom, and problem solving with know how, and on the flip side being over bearing and inescapable. Molly comments in one episode that marriage is meant to be a lasting journey which is a (committed) “first and last stop, but with many exciting local stops as well.” Such creative metaphors give Molly Goldberg tremendous communicatory ability to convey profound ideas even through the medium of comedy.

The span of the TV sitcom represented the American dream, not just the Jewish American Dream, of how a middle class family eventually moves from the Bronx to the suburbs, as a statement of “we made it in America.” Once the TV sitcom became set in suburbia, the characters lost their Jewish accents. Once the program moves to the fictitious suburbs of Haverville, the family has gained the image of keeping up with the Joneses but has lost much of its ethnic flavor and Jewish neighborhood. There is no place now for Molly Goldberg to greet her neighbor by yelling out of the window “Yoo-Hoo Mrs. Bloom.” Close friendship and neighborhood was substituted with unfriendly reclusive neighbors and grass lawns. This “making it” however is bitter sweet, as beautiful synagogue architecture of urban environments was replaced with prefab God boxes, and there were often no side walks to walk to *shul* and Jews became even more Americanized.

A great strength of the documentary is demonstrated in brief clips of interviews with a diverse range of people including family members, such as grandson Adam Berg, grandson Henry Schwartz, and grand daughter Anna Schwartz. Also interviewed are fans such as Howard Langer, fellow actors such as Larry Robinson and in place of Eli Mintz (who played Uncle David) his articulate daughter, and actors, Madelaine Gilford, Arlleen McCade, Anna Berger, producer Garry David Goldberg, screenwriter Margaret Nagel. Also interviewed are historians like Joyce Antler, entertainment scholars such as Larry Thompson, biographer Dr Glen Smith, friends such as Judith Abrams, and even Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsberg. These interviews refer to the importance and significance of Gertrude Berg, not just in the TV sitcom the Goldbergs, but as a model for a strong Jewish entrepreneurial woman with great drive, who worked hard and was successful against all odds.

One interviewee in the documentary compares Berg to a modern day Oprah Winfrey of her day. Like Oprah, she was immensely successful for instance appearing in two Vaudeville tours where she grossed \$10,000 per week. After the Goldbergs, Berg went on the road with *the Matchmaker* and starred in the Broadway hit *Majority of One*. Her starring in *Mrs. Chico goes to College* is also a sketch of a strong Jewish mother. who after raising her children leaves the nest to go back to College.

The documentary tackles real suffering and its psychological effects. For example, it comes up that Gertrude Berg's own mother Donna lost a son to illness, suffered from mental illness and depression later in life, and was institutionalized. The film notes her mother was like a sister to her. One interviewee offers a psychoanalytic insight into psych-drama, saying that Gertrude acted out an ideal harmonious family unit as a form of escape from her own personal tragedy.

The documentary also tells the personal side of how Berg met the love her life, the brilliant Louis Berg from England, who won a scholarship to Cooper Union College and with whom she fell in love with at the age of thirteen and later married when she was eighteen. Louis encouraged her interest in high culture such as opera, art, and literature although she never became a snob of lower brow culture. Thus, Gertrude Berg would choose the high culture of Beniamino Gigli Enrico Toselli's serenade to be the theme song of her TV Sitcom.

In all of Berg's success, she never let the success go to her head in a solipsistic way, always understanding that 'eating off of gold plates does not make the food taste better.' This ability to convey wisdom via humor was Gertrude Berg's greatest gift. More importantly, the moral content of Berg's humor was to appreciate the little things in life. She aspired to make the world better through her art, always conscious that one's most important 'asset' is the humaneness by which one strives to sensitively and compassionately treat and relate to other people. The documentary successfully succeeds in bringing out this most noble legacy of Gertrude Berg as a credit to women, Jews, artists, and all Americans.