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**“Some Thoughts on the Images
and Stereotypes of Jews in Film”**

**by Daniel Segan
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“I am a Jew. Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions? Fed with the same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject to the same means, warmed and cooled by the same winter and summer, as a Christian is? If you prick us, do we not bleed? If you tickle us, do we not laugh? If you poison us, do we not die? And if you wrong us, shall we not revenge?”

Whether we like it or not, Shakespeare’s character Shylock is a lingering image of a Jewish character. It is also undeniable that this classic character has formed generalizations that may have morphed into more recent stereotypes of Jews. Deep into the 20th century, the images of Jews became aligned with Shylock’s portrayal. Fagin in *Oliver Twist* and of course, Tevye in *Fiddler on the Roof* reinforced this one-dimensional image of a Jew. However, many contemporary films have reflected a more comfortable attitude toward being Jewish, expanding the characters into multi-dimensional people rather than the narrow stereotype of the past. My major paper will examine some of the common images and stereotypes formed through the portrayal of Jews through film and literature and how they have changed over time.

It might be more obvious to some than others as to why I chose this topic. Since I was going to spend considerable time reading and researching I wanted to combine my examination of Judaism with one of my passions. Tennis, baseball and singing didn’t compare to my love for movies.

I searched for articles that examined Judaism and film, and when I found information on stereotypes formed by film, I got excited. I have always been intrigued with stereotypes of Jews and wondered in what ways film reinforces or challenges the way people view Jews. As a kid in Bay Ridge I encountered the power of prejudice and stereotypes since classmates thought I was so different due to my pride in being a Democratic Jew and not a Catholic Republican like everyone else. Before they even got a chance to know me they formed a negative opinion.

Movies are a powerful and popular source of images for all ethnic groups, races, cultures and religions. When a movie characterizes a Jew, positive and negative stereotypes are formed, often reinforcing current beliefs. It is important to bear in mind that for some people, visual images through film are the only contact they have if they do not know or regularly interact with Jewish people.

As I mentioned before, the image of Jews in literature (and later on the stage) began with Shylock. In *The Merchant of Venice* young Basanio, son of Antonio, needs a loan of 3,000 ducats to impress an heiress of Venice. Antonio arranges for a short term loan from the Jew, Shylock.

Actually many times in the play Shylock is simply referred to as The Jew! Now, Shylock and Antonio have their history of hatred. Antonio patronizes and treats Shylock horribly because he is a Jew. Due to Shylock's hatred for Antonio, the bargain stated that the 3,000 ducats must be repaid in 3 months or Shylock will exact one pound of flesh from Antonio.

In Shakespeare's world Jews were looked down on and were limited to only a few jobs, including money lending. Shylock's character exemplifies the image of the Jew as revengeful. Shylock's hatred for Antonio blinds him. After a while, it wasn't about the 3,000 ducats, it was about revenge and getting his pound of flesh. This film portrays Shylock as an angry and heartless man. The other image that was forged for centuries in our Jewish identity is our relationship to money. This relationship has been transformed into Jews being cheap or selfish with their money.

Whatever Shakespeare believed, it is clear that Shylock promotes an anti-Semitic image. He is not a man who happens to be Jewish, his Judaism defines him. He is a representative of his religion. He has a narrow sense of justice, a love for money, a thirst for revenge, and an ugly long nosed appearance. This is the image European gentiles traditionally assigned to Jews. The portrayal of Shylock reflects the traditional gentile image of Jews as dirty, debased, and animalistic.

In the film, *A Price Above Rubies*, we watch a free spirited Hassidic woman, Sonia, who is married to a scholar- so what is new? She longs to escape the restrictions of the Hassidic community, into which she was born. - that's new. Sonia's husband is in love with God more than with her - he doesn't have the time to attend to her needs. This story is mostly about how Sonia begins to question her restrictive Hasidic life.

Like in the *Merchant of Venice*, the image of Jews remain narrow - long beard, simply dressed and separated from the rest. The film presents an image of loyal Jews -where God is more important than anything else in their lives. What may be unusual is the film's emphasis on the restrictions some women experience and the limitations on their power. Many gentiles who believed the Hassidic community was perfect might find this film to be unique.

Like most films or art, the images and the meaning they carry depends upon the way the audience perceives it. Interpretations can form stereotypes. People who don't know any better may believe that all Jews are Hassidics, trapped in an extreme fundamentalist world. An understandable stereotype would be around the idea of Jews looking to God for guidance and never abandoning their beliefs and traditions. If this film was shown to an audience who already held a negative opinion of the Jewish community, this film would be accused of airing our dirty laundry, potentially reinforcing negative stereotypes.

Unlike Shylock and Sonia, Chaim Potok's novel *The Chosen* - begins to challenge the one dimensional image of Jews.

The Chosen is a story of friendship between 2 Jewish teenage boys in Brooklyn in the 1950's. Danny Saunders is from a Hassidic community where he is surrounded by God, rabbis and scholars. Ruvin Malter is growing up in a secular household also believing in God without dictating all the rules of life. Their friendship was rooted in a baseball rivalry which later became a powerful bond that not even traditions could break. In the end, Danny, the Hasidic friend attends a secular college to study psychology, while Ruvin wants to become a rabbi.

This film adds range to the Jewish image. It opens up the image of Jews to include those who are secular while showing Hassidic Jews as athletic and open to change. However, even though this film addressed diversity within the Jewish community, it still presents Jews as only interacting with other Jews.

Besides the images or stereotypes of a restrictive Hassidic community, I was impressed by how the characters were trusted to make good judgments. There is a certain point at which you can decide your own destiny as opposed to others choosing it for you as shown in *Price Above Rubies*. This idea of making choices and taking responsibility for one's life- even set within this religious world- has great appeal to humanistic Jews like myself who identify with taking charge of our lives. *The Chosen* continued to suggest the narrow world of Hassidic life but also the willingness to adventure out.

Another film that protests against the one dimensional image of Jews is *School Ties*. This film begins to suggest that being Jewish is not a look or pattern of speech but simply something that defines you. The main character is not religious yet he is proud of his Jewish identity. *School Ties* is the story of a high school senior who adventures out into the world of Catholic schools in the 1950's. David Green is an athletic, tall and good looking kid who is recruited by an all boys Catholic boarding school to help their football team defeat a cross town rival.

David, a working class Jew, is different from his wealthy, Christian peers, However, he's good at making friends, so he is able to blend easily into the crowd. He must hide his Judaism for fear of the anti-Semitism that lurks in some students and the institution's leadership.

When cheating is exposed, David's being Jewish is also exposed and the anti-Semitism he feared emerges. In the end, his character is redeemed and the anti-Semitism loses its force. David Green is Jewish but that is not what defines him.

Another film that stretches the image of Jews is *Munich*. *Munich* is Steven Spielberg's interpretation of the Israeli assassination team that hunts down those associated with the 1972 Olympic terrorists. This movie casts Jews as aggressive and strong, but different than Shylock's anger and strength. In *Munich*, in order to defeat the terrorists, they had to become the very thing they were trying to eliminate. What stood out for me was the moment in which their personal morality conflicted with their loyalty to their country. They had to make tough choices

While in *Merchant of Venice*, Shylock claims he was, "taught by Christian example" that when wronged, you shall exact revenge. The characters in *Munich* became blinded by their hatred and couldn't see that what they were doing was morally corrupt.

The image of Jews in *Munich* is completely secular - they were proud Jews who appeared ordinary. That was one of the scariest ideas of *Munich*, that one's identity was hidden.

Without diving into any of their films in particular, it is impossible not to mention Woody Allen and Mel Brooks in a paper on Jews in film. They contributed to the expansion of the Jewish image by mocking anti-Semitism. But in 1998, when I was only three, a new generation of Jewish writers and film makers were hatching their own version of Jewish images.

Harry Medved, a journalist for the Jewish Journal, said that “While mainstream Hollywood has been leery of taking on Jewish characters and topics - the Holocaust being the exception - a new generation of independent directors is turning the cameras on their heritage.”

In the same year that Renee Zellweger played a sexually frustrated Hassidic wife in *A Price Above Rubies*, Ben Stiller was a heroine addict and TV writer in *Permanent Midnight*. Other films like *20 Dates*, *Wild Man Blues*, *Obsession*, *Knocked Up* and *American Gangster* offered a new brand of Jew.

Lenard Maltin believed that “The proliferation of Jewish characters is a positive thing...It asserts that we exist and that we are part of the fabric of American life.” Together these films presented a multi-dimensional image of Jews.

Early in 2007, in the comedy hit “*Knocked Up*”, Seth Rogan and a bunch of his friends, nearly all of them Jewish, are hanging at a night club, talking about seeing the film *Munich*. Seth Rogan’s character says “You know that movie with Eric Bana kicking butt...in every movie with Jews, we’re always the ones getting killed, and “*Munich*” flips it on its ear... If any of us gets lucky tonight it’s because of Eric Bana.” This scene shows how comfortable our generation is with being Jewish. And how movies take on a life of their own.

According to Lisa Rivo, the director of the National Center for Jewish Film at Brandeis University, “This generation is more self-accepting, and that has to do with the comfort level Jews feel in America; they are more comfortable in general with being Jewish.”

Finally I want to say a few words that illustrate Jewish filmic images in my lifetime.

Adam Sandler’s movie *Don’t Mess With the Zohan* is the typical Sandler film with his frat-boy stupidity and toilet humor, but not the typical Jewish film. Zohan is a totally confident Jew with a big sexual firepower and the ability to kick anyone’s butt. Putting aside how horrible and a waste of time this movie is, it’s important to focus more on his character and how that reflects on Jews. As much as *The Zohan* defies the “anxious, neurotic, not very attractive, short with glasses, whines too much, urban Jew“, he does fall into the stereotype of a macho Israeli.

In the film “*American Gangster*” Russell Crowe plays Richard Roberts, a police detective who proudly wears a Jewish star around his neck. This is an example of someone who is transparently Jewish yet his Judaism doesn’t dominate his character.

In “*Nick and Norah’s Infinite Playlist*” actress Kat Jennings is not only a self-identified Jew, but easily the coolest kid in the room. Woody Allen’s effort to create the image of Jews as quirky and strange are stomped on by her character. The common theme in these three films is how ordinary and secular Jews can be. Being Jewish is important but not so obvious.

It makes sense that for me, I look upon the traditional Jew as unusual and not completely accurate. I am fortunate to have grown up in a time that is much more accepting of different races and ethnicities. I have also grown up watching films where religion is mentioned as a part of one’s identity, but does not define their complete character.

I started off observing movies where the Jew was so obviously Jewish through appearance, voice, and manner. In many of the older films, Jews were portrayed as one-dimensional. Over time, filmic images reveal Jewish characters who break the mold, overturn the stereotypes, and stretch the

imagination of what it means to be Jewish.

In recent films and on television, one's Jewishness is not so apparent. It is not expressed as positive or negative, just simply Jewish, conveying that religious affiliation is less relevant. I think the idea of presenting a diversity of Jewish images is an advancement over the limited way in which Jews were portrayed.

But still I wonder, Is it better that in films today being Jewish is part of who you might be but does not define your complete character? Some would argue, we run the risk of becoming completely assimilated and disappear into American culture. I would say, the image of Jews should encompass all dimensions of our large Jewish community, What do you think?