

On these pages you will find an outline of the course, with synopses of each chapter and the main points that are covered in the discussion questions for each session.

The Jewish Image in American Film: A Century of Jewish Characters and Themes

by Lester D. Friedman

Note: We have included a large number of films in this curriculum, to allow sites flexibility in programming. For sites that do not wish to present the entire curriculum, these are some options: offering two films from each time period; offering only the first half of the course, or the second half; offering the first half of the course in one semester and the second half in the following semester.

This course explores images of the American Jewish experience through a chronological examination of films and their trends, and raises intriguing questions about Jewish life in America, past and present.

The overall questions the course addresses include:

- How authentic are Hollywood's images of the Jewish people?
- How have screen images of Jews evolved over the decades?
- What do filmmakers say about the American Jewish experience through their films?

The Introduction discusses the theme of assimilation in American Jewish cinema, the influence of American culture on Jewish identity – and vice versa – and films as subjective expressions of the times in which they are produced.

ONE**From Silents to Sound: The Early Decades**

This section covers film history through the thirties. The films of these decades were influenced by immigration and the rise of Jewish producers in Hollywood, culminating in the “Golden Age” of lush musicals and escapist dramas of the Depression era.

His People is a 1925 silent film about immigrant life. Its characters contend with conflicts between Old World traditions and New World opportunities, relationships between Jews and gentiles, and success and assimilation in America.

Key topics include:

- The nature of relationships between Jewish parents and their children.
- How religious Judaism comes to be replaced by secular “Jewishness.”
- How the film’s Jews and non-Jews view each other.

The Jazz Singer, made in 1927, was the first movie to offer spoken dialogue. The film presents Al Jolson as a famous jazz singer and son of a cantor who must choose between his new-found American fame and the traditions of his Jewish heritage.

Key topics include:

- How religion functions within the context of the film.
- The conflicts between Judaism and secular goals in our lives.
- The role of music in the Old and New World.

Street Scene is the 1931 film version of Elmer Rice’s Pulitzer Prize-winning play. It portrays urban life for Jews and their non-Jewish neighbors, focusing on interfaith relationships, generational conflicts, and socialism.

Key topics include:

- The relationships between the various neighbors and the similarities and differences in the experiences of different immigrant groups.
- The role of women in the film.
- The connections between social class, antisemitism, and assimilation.

TWO

War and Peace: The Forties and Fifties

For many Americans, these decades reflected an era of conformity and shared ideals which were reflected in the wartime propaganda films of the forties, and in the relatively “safe” and assimilated films of the fifties.

The Purple Heart, produced in 1944, is typical of the war film genre. This film details a fictionalized Japanese trial of American fliers accused of being spies.

Key topics include:

- The relationship between Jewish identity and military service.
- The film’s use of ethnic stereotypes.
- How patriotism is depicted.

Gentleman’s Agreement is a 1947 film that portrays the experiences of a gentile journalist who decides to pose as a Jew to write a series about antisemitism in America.

Key topics include:

- The different reactions of Jews and gentiles to antisemitism.
- The nature of American antisemitism.
- Contemporary examples of and possible solutions to antisemitism.

Marjorie Morningstar, the 1958 film based on Herman Wouk’s novel, traces the rite of passage of a Jewish heroine from naive girl to sophisticated woman through a tale of her romance with aspiring director Noel Airman.

Key topics include:

- The portrayal of Jewish mothers in this and other course films.
- How the role of the family has changed through the decades.
- How this film might be updated to be more relevant today.

Exodus, released in 1960, is based on Leon Uris’s novel about the founding of Israel. It follows the adventures of Zionist Ari Ben Canaan and American gentile Kitty Fremont as they fight for the creation of the Jewish state.

Key topics include:

- The relationship between religious and secular Jews.
- The role Israel plays in the identity of American Jews.
- How this film is viewed today in light of recent events in Israeli history.

THREE

Times of Turmoil: The Sixties and Seventies

These decades, as reflected in its films, represent a time of unprecedented social change in America, during which many assumptions and values were called into question in both the private and public realms.

The Producers is Mel Brooks's 1968 comedy about a Broadway producer's attempt to make money by purposely presenting a bad play, *Springtime for Hitler*, which becomes a smashing success.

Key topics include:

- The propriety of presenting the Holocaust in a humorous way.
- Whether comedy can or should transcend boundaries of "political correctness."
- The relationship of Jews to "mainstream" American culture.

Goodbye, Columbus is a 1969 film based on Philip Roth's novella, detailing the stormy summer romance of Neil Klugman, a discontented Bronx librarian, and Brenda Patimkin, a spoiled college student.

Key topics include:

- The nature and definition of Jewish "self-hatred."
- How American Jewish life has changed throughout the century.
- How women are portrayed in this and other course films.

Hester Street, produced in 1974, is based on an Abraham Cahan story about the immigrant experience in New York's Lower East Side. The film follows an Americanized Russian immigrant and his newly arrived wife and son as they try to adjust to life in the New World.

Key topics include:

- How this portrayal of ghetto/immigrant life compares to earlier films in the course.
- What is lost and what is gained in the process of Americanization.
- The role of Yiddish in the film.

The Frisco Kid is a 1979 Western about a Polish rabbi on his way to San Francisco and the cowboy who helps him adjust to frontier life.

Key topics include:

- The confrontation of Old World values and the New World frontier.
- The connections between the various ethnicities portrayed in the film.
- The evolution of the relationship between the rabbi and the cowboy.

FOUR**Comfort and Challenge: The Eighties and Nineties**

In the films of these decades, Jewish characters are more prominent and are portrayed in a variety of diverse environments. At the same time, the characters' ethnicity is often problematic, reflecting the growing impact of assimilation at the end of the century.

The Chosen is a 1982 film based on Chaim Potok's best-selling novel. Set in 1940, it tells the story of a growing friendship between two teenage boys – one the son of a Chasidic rabbi, the other the son of a secularized intellectual.

Key topics include:

- What the most important factors are in defining a Jewish identity.
- How American Zionism has changed through the century.
- What “chosenness” means for the Jewish people.

Enemies, A Love Story is a 1989 film based on the novel by Issac Bashevis Singer. Set in 1950s America, it revolves around one man and three women (two of whom are his wives) irrevocably affected by the trauma of surviving the Holocaust.

Key topics include:

- The role of faith and religion after the Holocaust.
- The role of deception in the film.
- The contrasting depictions of American-born Jews and Holocaust survivors.

Crimes and Misdemeanors is a 1990 Woody Allen film that explores the lives of two extended families as they grapple with questions of morality and theology in contemporary America.

Key topics include:

- Whether the ethical questions raised by the film are specifically Jewish.
- The role of God in the lives of American Jews.
- The contrasting values of the film's characters.

Homicide is a 1991 film about a tough inner-city cop who has buried any traces of his Jewish heritage and uncovers an antisemitic conspiracy during a routine homicide investigation.

Key topics include:

- How the film's various ethnic minorities define themselves and each other.
- The film's portrayals of what it means to be Jewish in the modern world.
- How to handle situations in which loyalties to Judaism and to America might conflict.