

F O U R



omfort and Challenge: The Eighties and Nineties

1981

- ◆ AIDS is officially recognized in U.S.

1983

- ◆ The Reform movement breaks with Orthodox and Conservative Judaism in declaring that a child need only one Jewish parent – either their mother or father – to be considered Jewish.
- ◆ The new English translation of the Bible, undertaken by the Jewish Publication Society, is completed.

1984

- ◆ Elie Wiesel wins the Nobel Peace Prize.
- ◆ Twenty-three are killed when a car bomb explodes in front of the U.S. embassy annex in East Beirut.

1985

- ◆ Rabbi Amy Eilberg becomes the first woman ordained by the Conservative movement.

1986

- ◆ Anatoly (Natan) Sharansky is released from Soviet prison.

1986

- ◆ The space shuttle *Challenger* explodes on liftoff, killing all seven aboard.

The final decade of the twentieth century finds the American Jewish community in an enviably comfortable position, yet facing what many consider to be perhaps its greatest challenge.

By the beginning of the 1980s, the Jewish community had become one of the wealthiest and most highly educated in America, and many American Jews had reached the top levels of their professions. Greater acceptance of cultural pluralism encouraged Jews to maintain their ethnic identity. Jewish pride was high; many public figures spoke openly about their commitment to Judaism. Much to the surprise of many observers, the eighties and nineties have witnessed a revitalization of “intrinsic” Jewish cultural patterns, which Milton Gordon defines as “religious beliefs and practices, literature, and a sense of a common past.” Among the trends that support this thrust are increases in enrollment in Jewish day schools, in the publication of Jewish literature, in the number of secular Jewish organizations that observe Jewish holidays, and in the Jewish programming offered in Jewish community centers.

Jews continue to vote largely Democratic and to uphold values of social conscience, reflecting – as Arthur Hertzberg puts it – the prophetic commandment to “do justice and love mercy” and to protect the weak “for you were once slaves in the land of Egypt.”

While a stronger sense of Jewish identity characterizes the experience of many Jews, a rapidly increasing rate of intermarriage has occasioned widespread concern about the long-term survival of the Jewish community in America. In the past few decades, intermarriage has risen steadily, with increasing numbers of Jewish men and Jewish women finding marital partners outside their religion. Since 1985,

1987

- ◆ Jonathan Pollard is sentenced to life imprisonment for spying against the U.S. on behalf of Israel.

1988

- ◆ Pan Am Flight 103 explodes over Lockerbie, Scotland, killing over 270 people.

1989

- ◆ The Berlin Wall is torn down.

1990

- ◆ Nelson Mandela is freed by the South African government after twenty-seven years in prison.

1991

- ◆ The Soviet Union dissolves.
- ◆ The U.S. fights against Iraq in the Gulf War.
- ◆ Russian-born poet Joseph Brodsky is named poet laureate of the U.S.
- ◆ The U.N. votes to revoke the "Zionism is racism" resolution.

1993

- ◆ Israel and the P.L.O., represented by Yitzhak Rabin and Yassir Arafat, sign a document of peace on the White House lawn.

1994

- ◆ Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, the Lubavitch rabbi, dies in Crown Heights, Brooklyn.
- ◆ Henry Roth breaks a sixty-year literary silence since the publication of *Call It Sleep* with his novel *Mercy of a Rude Stream*.

52 percent of Jews who married chose non-Jewish spouses, and among intermarried couples, 41.4 percent said they were raising their children in some religion other than Judaism.

Many Jewish professionals see in these numbers an unprecedented crisis and have been spearheading efforts aimed at "Jewish continuity." Dismayed by the statistics, the organized community has sought means to battle what they see as a serious problem. Rabbis and synagogues struggle with ways to deal with people already intermarried, whether to welcome interfaith couples with the hope that the non-Jewish partner might convert or at least raise the children as Jewish, or to reject them as a way of discouraging others.

Ironically, the crisis is the result of the community's success in gaining the long-desired opportunity to live in a society in which they are seen as just like everyone else. In America, Jews have been accepted. Jews wanted the option of being able to follow a Jewish life – and now many are not electing the option.

Although there have been serious instances of antisemitism around the country – arson, swastikas painted on synagogues, racial epithets in the public sphere – it is debatable whether antisemitism is growing as a national trend. The National Jewish Population Study found that 79 percent perceive antisemitism as a threat, although only 5 percent have personally experienced work-related discrimination. In *Antisemitism in America Today*, Jerome Chanes writes that the standard indicia of antisemitism – economic and social discrimination against Jews, and prevailing attitudes toward Jews – indicate that antisemitism continues to decline in the United States. He asks the question: "If things are so good out there, why do so many Jews think things are so bad?" One way that he explains the "perception gap" is that much of the anxiety Jews feel is related to their historical experience rather than the present.

At a time when major changes have rocked the world, long-held assumptions have been proven false: the Soviet Union, having disbanded into a number of independent republics, is no longer a threat to the United States; East and West Germany are unified; Nelson Mandela is in

1995

- ◆ The Oklahoma City federal building is bombed, and over 180 are killed.
- ◆ O.J. Simpson is found not guilty of murdering his wife Nicole Brown Simpson and her friend Ronald Goldman.
- ◆ Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin is assassinated.

power in South Africa; Arabs and Israelis are engaged in the difficult process of achieving agreements considered unthinkable just a few years ago.

Large numbers of Jewish refugees have arrived in America from the former Soviet Union. From 1980 to 1988, thirty-five thousand settled here, choosing America over Israel as a possible destination. No other wave of Jewish immigrants has included such a high number of people with advanced levels of education. Many American Jews and Jewish organizations have taken on the responsibility of helping to settle these new immigrants. Others have focused efforts (organizational, educational, and philanthropic) on the revitalization of Jewish life in Russia and other former Soviet republics, where the end of Communism has permitted a new openness and allowed, if not encouraged, new forms of observance and social activity.

The American Jewish relationship with Israel has become both closer and more complex. Toward the end of the twentieth century, American Jewish identification with the state of Israel is widespread. Israel, along with the Holocaust, has become, according to surveys, one of the defining issues for American Jews.

At the same time, the turbulent political and military situation in Israel has given rise to deep divisions among American Jews – as among Israelis. During the 1980s Israel's war in Lebanon and the uprising in the occupied territories (the Intifada) led an increasing number of American Jews to question the nature of their ties to the state. They didn't necessarily stop supporting Israel financially and spiritually, but many no longer supported without question all of Israel's policies and actions. Many Jews struggled with the question of what kind of role they, living in America, should play in Israel's political life and culture. The rift between American Jews who support different sides in Israeli politics has grown, and both groups have become more vocal. In addition, the vibrant growth and flourishing of the Israeli economy has brought some reexamination of the longstanding role of American Jews in providing financial support to the state.

The peace process initiated in 1993 has brought great hope and also significant fears about the future of Israel

and the Middle East. The prospect of returning portions of the territories conquered in the 1967 War, now home to more than 100,000 Israeli settlers, has produced profound divisions in Israeli society that are reflected to some degree among American Jews. The assassination of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin in November 1995 made clear how deep and raw those divisions are. As Israeli and American Jews enter the last half of the last decade of the century, efforts to heal these divisions have become a concern among both communities.

The American Jewish community is divided over several other key issues, including conversion, patrilineal descent, and the status of women. However, even as disagreements about policy continue, efforts to heal the rifts among the major denominations on these and other questions also continue. As historian Chaim Waxman states in *America's Jews in Transition*, "There has been an overall heightening of religious consciousness within American Judaism while, at the same time, there is much greater flexibility and acceptance of varieties of Jewish religious needs and expressions." The commitment to Jewish expression, notes Nathan Glazer in *American Judaism*, continues the overriding American Jewish concern with the survival of Jewish values and religiosity.

As the end of the century nears, the question of what it means to be a Jew in America is still being discussed. Will other issues replace Israel and the Holocaust as the focus of Jewish identity? What effects will increased interest in Jewish spirituality have on the community? Will some Jewish organizations become obsolete? What are the community's priorities as it makes efforts to pass on its heritage to the next generation?

Confidence and Change

At a time when multiculturalism has become a watchword in academia and popular culture, Jews and their culture figure prominently on celluloid. In fact, Jews in films of the eighties and nineties often function as commonplace inhabitants in a variety of diverse environments. Often they are secondary characters, but the important point is that American filmmakers apparently feel confident that their audience will not find it strange or disconcerting to

discover Jews almost anywhere. This seeming confidence echoes many aspects of Jewish life off the screen.

The films of this period contain an interesting mixture of Jews in both minor and starring roles. Jewish characters appear in some strange places, from the Orthodox Sergeant in *Fort Apache, The Bronx* (1981) to the savage beasts of *An American Werewolf in London* (1981) to the mayor's chief of staff in *City Hall* (1996). Jewish women, too, become more prominent, like the Princess-turned-soldier in *Private Benjamin* (1980), the mathematics professor in *It's My Turn* (1980), and the dying mother in *Unstrung Heros* (1995). A more disturbing trend is the appearance of negative portraits of Israel, particularly the suave Israeli assassins in *Eyewitness* (1981) and the manipulative Israeli undercover agents in *The Little Drummer Girl* (1984). One of the more controversial films of the 1980s, *Sophie's Choice* (1983), explores the Holocaust from a non-Jewish perspective, while Woody Allen's *Zelig* (1983) examines assimilation with a uniquely serio-comic slant. Taken as a whole, then, films continue the diversification of Jewish characters into different types of roles, yet this diversification is matched by films that merely recycle convenient stereotypes for comic effect.

Many films released so far in the nineties downplay or completely ignore Jewish culture, even when the central figures are Jewish. So, for example, director Barry Levinson never examines Bugsy Siegel's background in *Bugsy* (1991), nor does Bill Duke explore the ethnicity of the corrupt lawyer in *Deep Cover* (1992). Similarly, two films made about older Jewish women, *The Cemetery Club* (1992) and *Used People* (1992), have Jews as central characters, providing no connections between their ethnicity and their daily actions. The same might be said about the Jewish gangsters in *Billy Bathgate* (1991), the Jewish family in *Mermaids* (1990), the bickering Fiffers in *Scenes from a Mall* (1991), or the extended family in *Avalon* (1990).

A countervailing trend remains equally evident, with films that openly tackle Jewish issues. For example, *Stranger Among Us* (1992) is set in the Hasidic community, and *Zebra Head* (1992), explores the romance of a Jewish boy and his black girlfriend. Antisemitism, too, is

addressed in several films, including *School Ties* (1992), *Reversal of Fortune* (1990), *White Hunter, Black Heart* (1990), and *Mrs. Parker and the Vicious Circle* (1994). The Holocaust is the subject for such movies as *Reunion* (1991), *Swing Kids* (1993), *Shining Through* (1992), and the powerful *Schindler's List* (1993). These films all confront decidedly Jewish issues and present Jewish characters who are shaped in one degree or another by the fact of their ethnic/religious heritage. Unlike many films of earlier eras, they reflect the notion that Jews are not like everyone else, that they respond to the world – and it to them – based on conceptions related to Jewish life.



The Chosen

Feature film, 1982

Director: Jeremy Paul Kagan
Producers: Edie and Ely Landau
Screenplay: Edwin Gordon

Danny Saunders: Robby Benson
Reb Saunders: Rob Steiger
Reuven Malter: Barry Miller
Professor Malter: Maximillian Schell

Length: 108 minutes

The Chosen presents a complex portrait of Jewish life in America, and it ranks as one of the most interesting pictures about Jews ever to emerge from Hollywood. Based on Chaim Potok's best-selling novel, the story recounts the growing friendship between two teenage boys: Danny Saunders, the brilliant son of a charismatic Hasidic rabbi, and Reuven Malter, the scholarly son of a secular, intellectual journalist.

Set in 1940s Brooklyn, Jeremy Paul Kagan's movie is a fascinating and intricate study of Jews confronting each other as near strangers and moving toward true understanding. At first, Reuven seems to have far more in common with American gentiles than with the black-clad Danny – heir to his father's leadership of their Hasidic sect – whom he sneeringly describes as “stepping out of another country.” Soon, however, the two draw closer together out of a common love of learning. Danny helps Reuven understand his heritage, and Reuven aids Danny's secretive study of psychology. Their friendship revolves around their intellectual struggles to make sense of the world and of the meaning of being Jewish after the devastation of World War II. The lives of their families intersect in complex ways over the years, and the film ends with each of the young men coming of age in his own way, and moving ahead to advanced study.

The Chosen is probably the most “Jewish” commercial movie ever made in that it delves deeply into religious aspects of Judaism, portraying philosophical and theological questions and depicting Jewish customs and traditions. Kagan carefully explains each item he introduces, a tactic which slows down the film's pacing, but his insistent faithfulness to Potok's book makes the picture reverberate with authenticity. Scenes of Torah learning, a traditional Hasidic wedding, and synagogue services have not been standard fare for Hollywood. The crucial issue here is Kagan's refusal to apologize for the

Reuven: *Even though Danny and his team lived within five blocks of us, it might have been five thousand miles.*

film's ethnicity, through which he develops the larger themes of youthful rebellion, painful adolescence, father/son conflicts, true friendship, and familial love.

The film also juxtaposes two different father/son relationships. Mr. Malter is an ardent Zionist and a modern Jew. His forum is the newspaper, not the synagogue. Though his involvement with helping to create a Jewish state is considered laudable within the film, it forces him to ignore his son and eventually culminates in a physical breakdown. Conversely, Reb Saunders totally rejects the notion of a secular Jewish state; instead, he concentrates his energies in the religious realm, guiding his congregation through problems in both daily life and the Torah. To teach his brilliant son the value of compassion, Reb Saunders uses the technique of "silence," essentially denying Danny any type of emotional support. Though at first glance these two fathers seem totally different, they both sacrifice a typical father/son relationship for a greater ideal.

The film differs from the novel in its handling of the boys' different Jewish backgrounds. In the novel, distinctions are drawn between Reuven's modern Orthodoxy and Danny's ultra-Orthodoxy; it is a conflict between tradition and modernity. Together, Reuven and Danny unite Jewish traditions of secular social involvement and spiritual Torah scholarship. Each enriches the other, with great impact. Thus, Judaism adds to American life via Danny's decision to study psychology at Columbia University, and American life alters traditional Judaism through Reuven's choice to become a rabbi. Danny's refusal to become a rabbi, a decision that breaks a five-generation tradition, is not seen as a rejection of Judaism. Rather, it is an affirmation of Jewish freedom of choice: the battle of the son to become a man who honors his religion and his heritage by asserting his uniqueness and using his God-given intellect to better mankind.

In *The Chosen*, Judaism and Americanism are not mutually exclusive goals; in fact, one nurtures the other so that both grow and prosper. The characters in this film are American Jews seen equally clearly as Jewish Americans.

Reuven (to Danny): *You look like you walked out of another country. You play baseball like Babe Ruth. You talk like you're from outer space.*


While You Watch, Consider . . .

- ◆ How does the relationship between Danny and Reuven evolve?
- ◆ How is the Hasidic world depicted?
- ◆ How are Jewish women portrayed in the film?
- ◆ What is the significance of the opening scene, with boys from the two groups engaged in the great American pastime, baseball?

Reuven: *There's a story in the Talmud about a king who had a son who went astray. The son was told to return to his father. The son said: "I cannot." The father sends a messenger to say: "Return as far as you can – and I will come to you the rest of the way."*

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- ◆ How does the depiction of Jewish religious rituals in this film compare to those shown in *The Jazz Singer*, *Goodbye, Columbus*, and *Enemies, A Love Story*? In particular, how does the wedding scene here compare to those in *Goodbye, Columbus* and *The Frisco Kid*?
- ◆ Compare the life of Jews depicted in the 1940s with those depicted in the 1920s (*The Jazz Singer*), in the 1950s (*Marjorie Morningstar*), and the 1960s (*Goodbye, Columbus*).
- ◆ How do Reuven and Danny redefine Jewishness for themselves? In general, how do young people go about defining their relationship to Judaism? What are the most important factors in forming a Jewish identity?
- ◆ When the boys meet they find some aspect of the other mysterious, even ridiculous, yet some of the strangeness of the other's world is appealing. How do they incorporate what they learn from each other in their evolving identities?
- ◆ How can the contemporary religious and secular Jewish communities learn from each other? How can strife between the different denominations be minimized?
- ◆ How has American Zionism changed since the 1940s? How does the evolving relationship between Israeli and American Jews influence Jewish identity?
- ◆ What is the significance of the title? What does "chosenness" mean in traditional Jewish thought (for instance, the perception of the Jews as the "chosen people")? What does it mean for each boy? For you?



Enemies, A Love Story

Feature film, 1989

Director and Producer: Paul Mazursky
Screenplay: Paul Mazursky and
Roger L. Simon

Herman: Ron Silver
Masha: Lena Olin
Tamara: Anjelica Huston
Yadwiga: Margaret Sophie Stein
Rabbi Lambert: Alan King

Length: 119 minutes

Enemies, A Love Story explores complex Jewish issues connected to the horrors of the Holocaust. Based on Nobel Prize winner Isaac Bashevis Singer's 1972 novel – his first book exploring a post-Holocaust world and his first set in the United States – the film's black comedy revolves about one man and three women irrevocably altered and affected by the trauma of surviving the Holocaust.

The film adaptation by Mazursky (and cowriter Roger Simon) of Singer's novel remains extremely faithful to its original source. One is struck by how carefully the filmmaker transposes Singer's exact language into dialogue and his verbal pictures into visual representations. Yet one particular image clearly demonstrates Mazursky's sense of visual analogy: the Wonder Wheel, a gigantic Ferris wheel dominating the Coney Island landscape. Here the director subtly uses a concrete image to communicate an abstract idea present throughout Singer's work, the cyclical nature of history and the persistence of evil:

The idle promises of progress were no more than a spit in the face of the martyrs of all generations. If time is just a form of perception, or a category of reason, the past is as present as today. Cain continues to murder Abel. Nebuchadnezzar is still slaughtering the sons of Zedekiah and putting out Zedekiah's eyes. The pogrom in Keshniev never ceases. Jews are still burned in Auschwitz. . . .

At various points throughout the film, Herman stands motionless, staring out the window of the cramped apartment he shares with Yadwiga, mesmerized by the hypnotic lights and perpetual rotations of the Wonder Wheel. Mazursky even concludes the film with an image of a still-revolving mechanical ride.

Mazursky, with Singer as his guide, demonstrates no desire to shock with visceral images. He reaches for something far more subtle: the indelible mark such a horrific experience leaves on a person's everyday

Tamara: *Who's the lucky woman who's taken my place, Herman?*

existence. Initially, this manifests itself in a feeling that one is not part of this world and is, in fact, a ghost. All these characters at one time or another express this sentiment. "Anyone who's gone through all that I have is no longer part of this world," Herman tells Rabbi Lambert, who rejects Broder's point of view as unnecessarily pessimistic and accuses him of merely "playing a role." In so doing, Lambert represents those American Jews who never personally experienced the Holocaust and thus can never fathom the psyches of those who did. He becomes another of those blustering American pragmatists who blithely advise their European brethren to forget about the past and get on with their lives. Such trite phrases seem to Herman a blasphemy on the ashes of the tormented. For Herman, Masha, and Tamara remain haunted by the knowledge that a seemingly safe world, in which the rules appear clear and understandable, can suddenly change into a hostile, life-threatening place of horror, where neighbors become oppressors and friends become informers.

In the book and the film, the conflict between faith and doubt is unrelenting. It's a religious, not secular, issue. The characters, all of whom have suffered at the hands of the Nazis, acknowledge their ambivalence about accepting any easy description of a benevolent God. Masha, for example, argues that "If God allowed the Jews of Europe to be killed, what reason is there to believe he would prevent the extermination of the Jews in America? God doesn't care." The equally tormented Tamara believes that "the merciful God in whom we believed does not exist. . . . If God was able to watch all this horror and remain silent, then He's no God." Traumatized by the death of her children, as well as those others who went to their deaths like saints, Tamara believes that souls exist; it's God who doesn't. Only the simple Yadwiga maintains an uncritical acceptance of divine existence and providence, beseeching Herman to help her convert to Judaism and to conceive a child with her. These acts mirror both faith and hope, as she strives to side with the persecuted rather than the oppressors and to bring new life into a world obsessed with the dead.

Herman, in his typical uncertainty, veers from one set of beliefs to another. At first, he rebels against anything

Herman: *I bear my father talking. "What have you accomplished? Everyone in Heaven is ashamed of you."*

Jewish, ignoring the Sabbath and telling Yadwiga that "there is no God . . . and even if there were, I would defy him." He does fast on Yom Kippur, but will not attend religious services because he can't bring himself to be like one of those "assimilated Jews who only go to synagogue once a year." Slowly, he changes his position. He admits that there may be a God, but that He is quite powerless: "If a God of mercy did exist in the heavenly hierarchy, then He was only a helpless godlet, a kind of heavenly Jew among the heavenly Nazis."

Mazursky's characters all invent and reinvent their identities as they play various roles. As they ceaselessly shift from one set of values and one set of priorities to the next, they create and then reformulate ever-changing collages of ethical positions, points of view, and emotional ranges. They all wrestle with how to handle the social liberation so intrinsic to American life, so omnipresent in the postwar age. "The most difficult thing to do," Mazursky told an interviewer, "is to laugh with compassion." Such a goal, in many ways, represents one very Jewish perspective on the world.

While You Watch, Consider . . .

- ◆ What strategies does each character (Herman, Tamara, Yadwiga, Masha) employ to deal with the legacy of the Holocaust in their daily life?
- ◆ How does Mazursky incorporate images of the past with those of the present?
- ◆ What areas of hope do Mazursky (and Singer) provide in this story?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Herman: *Maybe your mother's better off. She didn't have to make any more decisions. That's the advantage of being dead.*

- ◆ Discuss the constant talk of suicide that pervades this movie. How does it help structure the work? Why do you think that Masha finally does kill herself, while the others go on?
- ◆ What role does deception play in the film? Does the Holocaust experience justify employing deception as a strategy for living?
- ◆ Is Herman's disappearance at the end of the film an act of cowardly desertion or moral courage?
- ◆ How are American-born Jews depicted in contrast to Holocaust survivors? Do you think that someone born after the Holocaust can understand the enormity and horror of the event?
- ◆ What is the role of children in the film? Why are children so important?
- ◆ Many Holocaust survivors have lost their faith; others embrace tradition. Can you feel empathy with both points of view? Is it possible to give up on religion and still feel very Jewish?
- ◆ Does the film adequately explore the question of faith after the Holocaust? If you were making a documentary film, rather than one based on a novel, how would you approach the issue?



Crimes and Misdemeanors

Feature film, 1990

Director: Woody Allen
Screenplay: Woody Allen

Lester: Alan Alda
Cliff: Woody Allen
Hally: Mia Farrow
Dolores: Anjelica Huston
Judah: Martin Landau
Jack: Jerry Orbach
Rabbi Ben: Sam Waterston
Miriam: Claire Bloom

Length: 104 minutes

Religion is a structuring principle in *Crimes and Misdemeanors*, where the main character agonizes about the absence of Judaism's principles in today's world. In this film, Judaism is very present (although some of the theological musings seem more Catholic than Jewish in tone), as Allen attempts to explore its meaning and value in contemporary American life. He also poses some troubling questions.

An important film for Allen, partly because of this coming to terms with Judaism, *Crimes and Misdemeanors* is also significant as a serious film containing a leading Jewish character (although the film does have Allen's signature comic touches). Allen wrote and directed serious films before this one (like *Interiors*, 1978, and *Another Woman*, 1988), but the focus was always on female, non-Jewish characters. His films with Jews were comedies. Certainly Allen believed that any film starring himself had to be a comedy, so that *Crimes and Misdemeanors*, a serious film with a Jewish protagonist, needed someone else to play the lead. It fell, therefore, to Martin Landau to inhabit an archetypically Jewish character, but to lend him serious, even tragic, overtones.

Clearly deriving his title from Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, Allen sets *Crimes and Misdemeanors*, however, in a Jewish milieu. Like Dostoyevsky's tormented hero, the well-to-do ophthalmologist-protagonist of Allen's film is obsessed by a powerful loss of faith, gripped by a compelling existential angst, and possessed by a profound sense of guilt. A murderer like Dostoyevsky's Raskolnikov, Dr. Judah Rosenthal neither seeks nor finds Christian redemption, but he is "saved" in a far different manner. Moreover, he actively recalls his Jewish upbringing and Judaic background as he engages in spiritual and intellectual dialogues with a sympathetic and deeply faithful rabbi. That Judah does not "return" to Judaism, or alternately, is not punished for his crime says something

Ben: *I couldn't go on living if I didn't feel with all my heart a moral structure with real meaning and forgiveness and some kind of higher power. Otherwise there's no basis to know how to live.*

about Woody Allen's continuing doubts about the existence of God and the meaning of existence, as well as his ambivalence and struggle with the beliefs of his ancestors.

Judah Rosenthal struggles to make sense of his life through his past. Thus, at a moment of intense guilt after he has arranged for his mistress's murder, Judah returns to his boyhood home in Queens. Here he remembers a typical family gathering, a Passover seder. Significantly, the scene, at least in Judah's memory, revolves around his father and his aunt arguing with each other but directing their arguments to him. Their debate represents a symbolic battle for Judah's soul between faith and cynicism. Judah's father, Sol, quietly and insistently proclaims his faith in God against all secular doubters. His aunt May, on the other hand, invokes the searing memory of the Holocaust as proof of God's absence. To Sol's assertion that God sees everything and will punish the wicked, Aunt May incredulously cries, "Oh, who, like Hitler? Six million Jews burned to death and he got away with it!" Sol will not hear of doubts, but Judah, his son the scientist, the sophisticated rationalist, remains plagued by doubts.

Yet if Judah goes unpunished for his crime and seems to take a grim satisfaction in proving his father's faith unjustified, his stance does not go entirely unchallenged. Ben, a rabbi, sadly goes blind despite Judah's best efforts to prevent it. He reminds Judah of Sol. Ben's faith in God permits him to maintain a firm belief in moral structure, in a life with real meaning and significance. Ben makes explicit his belief in eternal verities; Judah rejects these beliefs when his crime remains undetected. When the blind rabbi dances with his daughter at her wedding, his sadly triumphant promenade can be seen as both the height of rational folly and the sublime faith in God's goodness.

The events described thus far are the "crimes" implied by the title. The "misdemeanors" are equally significant. Although Judaism does not function so clearly in this portion of the picture, it is still Jewish in sensibility. Both Cliff, a documentary filmmaker and something of a schlemiel, and Lester, a successful television producer, represent Jewish involvement in the entertainment industry. Moreover, Cliff's documentaries represent the

Judah: *God is a luxury I can't afford.*

Jewish concern for social justice. Even more to the point, his latest project, a documentary on philosopher Louis Levy, foregrounds the Holocaust and makes explicit the search for values and meaning via Levy's monologues. Cliff desires a relationship with Hallie, a gentile woman, while he is in the process of breaking up with his Jewish wife. The film is a complex portrait of the urban milieu, the confused and confusing state of middle-class existence, Cliff's own deteriorating marriage, his sister's disastrous date through the classified ads, Judah's adultery, Lester's womanizing. It is a contemporary portrait of a secular Jewish community enmeshed in a state of ambivalence and moral ambiguity.

Perhaps this ambivalence and ambiguity stem from a lack of faith. Certainly the question of faith, as we have seen, is strongly sutured into the film. On the other hand, Allen wonders if we are all quite literally blind to the world around us. No American film of recent memory is so carefully and clearly symbolic as *Crimes and Misdemeanors* with its major motif of sight and sightlessness. Central to this motif is Judah's own career as an ophthalmologist, an eye doctor. In addition, more than once Judah recalls his father at prayer in the synagogue and his father's claim that "the eyes of God are on us always." Perhaps, he tells the crowd gathered in the film's first scene, that is why he became an eye doctor. The belief that God sees all initially prevents him from contemplating Dolores's murder, and then plagues him after the deed is done. Judah goes to her apartment after her murder and looks into Dolores's dead, sightless eyes and remembers her belief that the eyes are the windows of the soul.

The question of whether God sees all is further symbolized through Ben finally losing his sight. Judah, the eye doctor who launched his career under the impetus of a desire to explore whether or not God sees, cannot see any meaning in his own life. Similarly Cliff, the documentary filmmaker whose job is to see the truth in people and in society, can see no meaning to his life after Hallie marries Lester; nor can he understand or see what she values in him. Thus Allen brings Judah and Cliff together in the film's final scene to commiserate with each other over their inability to see any purpose in life. But it is the rabbi,

who retains his faith while losing his external sight, whose dancing image dominates the film's final frames.

While You Watch, Consider . . .

- ◆ How is the motif of sight (seeing and blindness) used in the film?
- ◆ Which of the misdeeds are “crimes” and which are “misdemeanors”?
- ◆ If Judah could relive his life, do you think he would make the same choices?
- ◆ Which character's worldview is closest to your own?

Judah: *What do you mean? People carry awful deeds around with them. What do you expect him to do, turn himself in? I mean, this is reality. In reality, we rationalize. We deny or we couldn't go on living.*

Professor Levy: *Human happiness does not seem to have been included in the design of creation. It is only we, with our capacity to love, who give meaning to the indifferent universe.*

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- ◆ How does Rabbi Ben compare to other rabbis seen in this series, Avram in *The Frisco Kid*, or Reb Saunders in *The Chosen*? How similar are their visions of Judaism?
- ◆ How would you characterize Cliff, Judah, Lester, and Ben? What are their values, their worldviews? Can they be seen as four different kinds of individuals? Four different kinds of Jews? Where does Louis Levy fit in?
- ◆ Several sibling relationships are depicted in the film. Is there something particularly Jewish about them?
- ◆ What does the film say about Woody Allen's view of middle-class, middle-aged Jews? Do you think there is truth in his vision?
- ◆ Are the ethical questions raised by the film particularly Jewish, or are they universal? How might religious and secular Jews react to the film? How about Jews and non-Jews?
- ◆ Do you think that many American Jews have a sense of God being in their lives, in a sense, watching over them? If they did, would they act differently?

Homicide

Feature film, 1991

Director: David Mamet
 Producer: Michael Hausman and
 Edward R. Pressman
 Screenplay: David Mamet

Bobby Gold: Joe Mantegna
 Tim Sullivan: William H. Macy
 Dr. Klein: J.S. Block
 Ms. Klein: Rebecca Pidgeon
 Chana: Natalija Nogulich

Length: 102 minutes

The most controversial film to emerge from the American Jewish cinema so far in the 1990s is director David Mamet's *Homicide*.

Its protagonist, tough inner-city cop Bobby Gold, long ago buried any traces of his ethnic heritage. Yet during a seemingly routine investigation of the murder of an elderly Jewish pawnshop owner, which takes him away from another case he is on the verge of cracking, Gold uncovers a series of puzzling clues that suggest an antisemitic conspiracy. Looking deeper into the woman's death, Gold is drawn into a world of Jewish scholarship and mysticism as well as murder. His investigation becomes an all-consuming personal crusade.

In an interview, Mamet revealed his intentions: "This is a story about belonging. . . . It is based on my experience and the experience of a lot of my friends who grew up not feeling sufficiently Jewish or American, which is also Bobby Gold's problem. To the non-cops he's a cop, but to the cops he's a Jew." Such a bold statement provides clear evidence of why this film inspired such passionate defenses and outraged attacks, particularly within the Jewish community. Some castigated Mamet's portrait of Bobby Gold as simply another blatant example of bitter Jewish self-hatred. Others, however, applauded the writer/director's honesty, as he deftly fashioned a complex, multifaceted Jewish protagonist.

Homicide raises a multitude of unpleasant issues, particularly for comfortably assimilated Jews who rarely question their status within American society. Specifically, Mamet explores the complicated issue of divided loyalties: what happens when public duty conflicts with private convictions. He also suggests the heart of the assimilated Jew's nightmare: being singled out and excluded for being different, not really part of the national fabric.

Gold, who has devoted himself to being an outstanding

police officer – his specialty, hostage negotiation, has earned him envious nicknames like “the mouth” and “the orator” – comes to realize what’s underneath his bravado. Though proud of his physical daring and of his ability to talk his way out of situations, he eventually understands that both skills represent ways to prove himself. He’s an outsider trying to fit in, and willing to risk his life to do so.

Mamet persistently calls Gold’s sense of his own Jewishness into question. Early in the film an African-American politician calls him a “kike,” an epithet repeated several times throughout the picture. But it is Gold’s rejection by the other Jews, those he sarcastically calls “my people,” that stings him the most sharply. When, for example, the Klein family converses in Yiddish, he cannot understand what they are saying and must ask for help. Later, after overhearing him mock her family and her faith, Dr. Klein’s daughter confronts him about his lacking Jewish identity. When an Orthodox Jew shows him a Hebrew passage, Gold sheepishly admits that he can’t read it. “What are you then?” asks the man. Of course, Gold has no answer to any of these questions. He is a man trapped between the public and the private self, the demands of his job and the call of his heritage.

Nowhere does Mamet develop this conflict more sharply than when Israeli secret agents demand that Gold retrieve a list of those who smuggled guns during the 1948 War of Independence. “Be a Jew” they tell him. Gold, however, insists that he is a “sworn police officer” and that the list is evidence that he cannot remove. “Where are your loyalties?” they ask him, stating the central question of the film. He can only respond that he has “sworn an oath” to be a police officer. Yet, in the very next scene, Gold slides his shield into his pocket and blows up a toy store used as a front for printing antisemitic materials. Such an act puts him in a decidedly vulnerable position, as the Israeli agents threaten to blackmail him unless he provides them with the list.

Homicide thus forces viewers to consider their deepest connections both to their country and to their religious heritage, here represented by the state of Israel. Gold wrestles with the demon of divided loyalties and reaches deep within himself to choose a suitable course of action.

Prisoner: *Would you like me to tell you the nature of evil?*

Gold: *No, because if you did I’d be out of a job.*

Sullivan: *How come you always got to be the first one through the door?*

He does what he believes is the right thing to do, but, consequentially, betrays his Irish partner (who, despite their ethnic differences, is his true friend) and commits a crime. In the final ironic moments of the picture, it seems that any choice results in a form of isolation.

While You Watch, Consider . . .

- ◆ How does Detective Gold relate to the other men in the Homicide division?
- ◆ How do the various ethnic minorities define themselves, and how are they defined by others?
- ◆ Is Gold heroic?

Dr. Klein's daughter: *You're a Jew and you're talking that way in the house of the dead. Have you no shame? Do you hate yourself that much? Do you belong nowhere?*

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- ◆ How does Gold's "crime" compare with Judah's (in *Crimes and Misdemeanors*)? Are the two men at all alike in their ethics or their Jewishness?
- ◆ As with *Goodbye, Columbus* and *The Producers*, *Homicide* has been attacked as an example of Jewish self-hatred. Would you agree with this charge?
- ◆ Is the message about Israel, particularly the connection of American Jews and the Jewish state, at all similar in this film and *Exodus*?
- ◆ What causes the dramatic reversal in Gold's feelings, when he begs the Israeli agents to let him "be part of this"? How would you define "this"?
- ◆ What differing notions of what it means to be Jewish in the modern world – particularly as a citizen of the United States – does Mamet express here? Do you think that he believes a Jew will always be an outsider in this country? Would you agree?
- ◆ Can you think of contemporary situations in which individuals face a difficult choice like Gold's, where their loyalties to Judaism and America might conflict? Where would you say one's first loyalties should be? Can breaking the law ever be justified?

NOTES: The Jewish Image in American Film

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- Page 29 Garth Jowett, *Film, the Democratic Art* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1976), p. 326.
- Page 35 Eugene Wong, *On Visual Media Racism: Asians in American Motion Pictures* (New York: Arno Press, 1978), p. 157.
- Page 50 Philip Roth, *Reading Myself and Others* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1975), pp. 137, 146.
- Page 53 Arthur Hertzberg, *The Jews in America* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1989), p. 346.
- Page 54 Greeley, quoted in Gladys Rosen, *Jewish Life in America: Historical Perspectives* (New York: Ktav, 1978), pp. 35, 39.
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Mel Brooks, *History of the World, Part One* (New York: Warner Books, 1981), p. 3.
- Page 72 James Yaffe, *The American Jews* (New York: Random House, 1968), p. 9.
- Page 76 Hertzberg, *The Jews in America*, p. 379.
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- Page 79 Chaim Waxman, *America's Jews in Transition* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1983).
Nathan Glazer, *American Judaism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972).
- Page 86 Issac Bashevis Singer, *Enemies, A Love Story* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1972) p. 165.