

## SESSION SEVEN



## atchmaker, Matchmaker: *Crossing Delancey*

Feature film, 1988

Director: Joan Micklin Silver

Screenplay: Susan Sandler

Isabelle Grossman: Amy Irving

Sam Posner: Peter Riegert

Anton Moss: Jeroen Krabbe

Bubbie: Reizl Bozyk

Hannah Mandlebaum: Sylvia Miles

Length: 97 minutes

This appealing film is part *Fiddler on the Roof*, part *Sleepless in Seattle*.

The trajectory of presentations of romantic love in films is interesting to follow, and provides many surprises. In the 1960s and 1970s, at the height of the greening of America, as baby boomers battled against parental and other establishments, romantic lovers often rejected overbearing families (*The Graduate*). Rebelling against the cult of virginity epitomized in earlier films starring Doris Day, cinematic romantic love in the 1970s often followed upon, rather than preceding, sexual involvement (*John and Mary*). In the 1980s, as feminism became a truly grass-roots movement, romantic love often took a back seat to personal development and independence (*An Unmarried Woman*).

Today, the pendulum often seems to have swung backward, in films that capture a kind of yearning for gentle love affairs built on friendship (*Big, When Harry Met Sally*). The friendly lovers featured in such films today do not battle familial disapproval; indeed, they are sometimes brought together by family members. Movies such as *Crossing Delancey* are typical of this trend, depicting characters who do not know themselves well enough and do not face themselves honestly enough to make good romantic choices, and thus find themselves better guided by friends and family. While a century ago in *The Imported Bridegroom* Flora fought energetically not to have her choice of romantic partner determined by her father, family involvement in romantic choices is sometimes portrayed in contemporary films as a desirable development.

When an interfaith marriage occurs in recent movies celebrating ethnic families, the moral weight of the movie does not lie with the brave and romantically independent couple but with the larger body of the family itself. The

**Bubbie:** *If I'll wait for you, you'll never do it.*

**Izzy:** *What are you talking about?*

**Bubbie:** *You. I'm talking about you.*

**Izzy:** *Bubbie, this is not the way I live. This is 100 years ago.*

**Hannah:** *A girl your age, after all. How old are you?*

**Izzy:** *Thirty-three.*

**Bubbie:** *None of your business!*

**Hannah:** *I got some nice boys. Fine, respectable boys.*

couple has done the “right” thing, according to the emotional tenor of many recent movies, when they recognize their inexorable loving links to the family unit and stop trying to tear free of its demands. The spouse of differing heritage is subsumed into and becomes part of the familial whole. In comparison, two decades ago Brenda Patimkin’s moral failure occurs precisely because she is unwilling or unable to break free of her family’s clutches.

*Crossing Delancey*, Joan Micklin Silver’s charming comedy, is one more manifestation of this cinematic trip back to the familial future. Izzy, the heroine, is a modern woman with a whole world of choice open to her. But romantic love, long the supreme symbol of individual freedom, blossoms only when it accepts a vulgar, gluttonous *shadchante* (female matchmaker) and a sly, lovingly manipulative grandmother – played by the late Reizl Bozyk, a star of the Yiddish theatre – as its handmaidens. On its own, romantic love seems to yield only the shallowest and most disappointing, exploitative affairs.

All the women in this movie yearn toward family. Izzy (even the name recalls her roots in immigrant American life, with all of the Isaacs who were transformed into Isidores by Irish first grade teachers) is a sensitive, literary, attractive young woman who imagines that artistic excellence is the best qualification in a lover. When Izzy’s tradition-minded grandmother and Hannah Mandlebaum, a Lower East Side matchmaker, arrange a meeting between Izzy and a pickle-manufacturer, Izzy resists mightily. She assures her grandmother that she has plenty of good friends and doesn’t need a man to make her life meaningful. In the world of feminist individualism, when Jill Clayburgh was *An Unmarried Woman*, this sentiment was the punchline. But Izzy’s contemporary friends, in contrast, have other ideas. One openly declares she is looking for a sweet, old-fashioned boy. To her, the pickle man looks like the man of her dreams. Another friend tires of waiting for an appropriate husband and has a child on her own.

The film perfectly creates different milieus in the same city, with authentic sights, noises, and even aromas. The action moves between two worlds Izzy frequents: Uptown, site of her rent-controlled apartment and the literary bookstore where she works, and Downtown – below

**Izzy:** *Listen. I didn't have anything to do with this. It wasn't my idea.*

**Sam:** *You feel funny, bub?*

**Izzy:** *This isn't the way I live.*

**Sam:** *How do you live?*

**Izzy:** *For one thing I don't live down here. I live uptown. A million miles from here.*

**Sam:** *This isn't your style?*

**Izzy:** *It's not my style.*

**Sam:** *Sometimes you can change your style.*

Delancey Street – where she frequently visits her spirited grandmother. Each world holds the possibility of a very different romantic choice for Izzy.

Izzy is infatuated with a strappingly handsome author – a man whose gentile European lineage is only slightly more striking than his narcissism. Sam the pickle man, on the other hand, while certainly pleasant to look at, is a familiar Jewish type with seemingly nothing glamorous about him. He is a thoughtful, generous, nurturing fellow who begins each day with prayers in the synagogue, chats with customers as he plunges his hands into brine, and comes to clean an old woman's apartment windows on demand. Izzy would never have discovered Sam's tender, romantic nature, his uncompromising strength and dignity, and his intelligence if her grandmother and Mrs. Mandlebaum didn't break all the rules of contemporary relationships by mixing in, by telling Izzy what she should do, by pushing, and manipulating.

In the words of Mrs. Mandlebaum: "Love comes and goes but a good business, a nice home, a man who's nice and kind, this is what counts." Mrs. Mandlebaum's words could have been a mantra for a whole line of cinematic Jewish mamas, from Mrs. Morgenstern to Mrs. Patimkin and onward. This far has the Hollywood pendulum swung, but it is unclear whether in nostalgia toward the past or wishful hopes for the future.

### **In Depth: Changing Personal Options for American Jews**

Ironically, contemporary films depict the extended family as a guiding force for the individual when, in real life, the American family seems to be fighting for survival even in its most limited nuclear incarnation, with about half of all recent marriages likely to end in divorce. Extended families are unusual today, with the generations often scattered to opposite coasts. In the movies, however, the Hollywood camera is having a love affair with the warm, loving, supportive, controlling, irritating, extended ethnic family. Such families serve as the irresistible protagonists of such movies as *Moonstruck*, *Once Around*, *Twenty-ninth Street*, *Avalon*, *Radio Days*, *Brighton Beach Memoirs*, and *Modern Love*, among others.

**Anton:** *You do have an exquisite stillness, Izzie. I've always admired that. I measure my own jangling motion against it.*

*Crossing Delancey* illustrates many, though not all, of the diverse options for personal life arrangements available to American Jews today. During the past two and half decades, the social climate of the United States has undergone dramatic changes, including a lively and much publicized “singles culture,” later marriages, smaller families, increasing divorce rates, high geographical mobility, and chronological segmentation of populations. The behavior of American Jews epitomizes many of these changes.

For American Jews, as for other Americans today, there is no one model of “the family.” Jewish families reflect, in somewhat less extreme profile, an America in which fewer than 15 percent of households conform to the model of father, mother-at-home, and children living together. Jewish households in the United States include persons who have never married, some of whom live alone, some with roommates, and some with romantic partners; the traditional, two-parent family with children; the dual-career two-parent family; divorced households without children; divorced and “blended” families; single-parent families; homosexual couples with or without children; and elderly couples or widowed elder “singles.”

For many years, the singles culture was celebrated by the media as an exhilarating, vital way of life, and singles were given the impression that their personal options were unlimited. Like others in their socioeconomic class, Jewish men born in the late 1940s and 1950s seemed uninterested in early commitments; when they did marry, they usually chose younger women rather than choosing from the larger number of unmarried women in their own age group. In addition, many more Jewish men than women intermarried, leaving a sizeable proportion of Jewish women unmarried. And the media has had a field day with studies (based on questionable statistics) whose findings suggest that single women in their later thirties and forties have little chance of getting married.

A growing emphasis on feminist aspiration, achievement, and career fulfillment also contributed to later marriage and childbearing for women. (A much-circulated cartoon features a career woman looking up and exclaiming that she forgot to have children.) Rather than viewing job skills as useful for earning money only in cases

**Hannah:** *Ya look, ya meet, ya try, ya see. Sometimes it fits, sometimes it doesn't.*

of necessity, women began to see themselves acquiring professional education and careers in much the same way as men. Jewish women, like Izzy and her friends, often postponed marriage and family.

Meeting appropriate men can be difficult. In our fast-paced, competitive, and impersonal society, it's often tough for men and women to connect. Women joke that it's far easier to find a great job than a great (single) man. And many complain about the problems the men they do meet have about making commitments.

This is the backdrop for the dilemma of Izzy's female friends in *Crossing Delancey*. Women who have postponed marriage for one reason or another often find that they feel "squeezed out" of marital choice. National data shows us that in 1990 one-quarter of Jewish women aged 35 to 44 were unmarried or divorced. And yet the data also show that highly educated Jewish women, more than other ethnic or religious groups, express the desire to have children. Some highly educated professional Jewish women have made the choice that Izzy's friend makes, to become single parents – the so-called "Jewish Murphy Brown syndrome." In fact, more than half of the women in the New York chapter of Single Mothers by Choice identify themselves as Jewish.

A century after Jewish matchmaking was in full bloom, computer-assisted and other types of matchmaking have become big business in American life, and recent movies such as *The Imported Bridegroom* and *Crossing Delancey* pay homage to the positive potential of the arranged marriage. Despite the bad press that the notorious "fix-up" receives in each generation, significantly, recent scientific data show that meeting through family and friends is still the single most effective way for Jews to meet other Jews.

Some researchers are attempting to delve into the possible reasons for attenuated singlehood among American Jews. Psychologist Esther Perel, for example, does workshops with New York Jewish singles who harbor what she calls "toxic feelings" about Jews of the opposite sex. She has found that many American Jews remain single for a long time because they have deep-seated hostilities toward Jewish women or men, yet they are uncomfortable about the idea of intermarriage. Unable to resolve their

**Sam:** *This is what I've been waiting for. You don't know how I was about tonight. I was off the ground. No one could talk to me. I was making wrong change all day. I was so happy I was going to see you that I made a special bracha for the occasion. I said the prayer for the planting of new trees. Don't ask me why. (He kisses her). How should I talk to Isabelle?*

conflicts, such singles continue to date non-Jews almost exclusively, but do not marry them. Perel suggests active communal intervention in the form of workshops and public awareness of destructive stereotypes, such as the “Jewish American princess,” the “Jewish mother,” and the “Jewish mama’s boy.”

Some people believe the line of the old song that “Fate supplies a mate,” that someone out there is their *beshert*, their intended one. Others feel that it’s a matter of being open to possibilities – and having some good luck and good timing. Matchmakers, dating services, friends, and community-organized programs can encourage the process. The next step – deciding whether to marry someone – is a problem many single woman would love to have.

Both in films and in real life, American Jews today have discovered that choices, romantic or otherwise, are bounded by circumstances. Erotic attraction may be a necessary but not a sufficient basis for long-term commitments. Opposites may initially attract, but living with a person with whom one does not share a value system can eventually turn into a chilling situation. Interfaith romances may bring with them an extra set of problems, especially when children are born.

Marriage is a serious matter, and it changes – forever – the composition and texture of our lives. Every romantic choice is a gamble of sorts; there are no guarantees and no insurance policies available. Grandmothers like to say that “nothing in this world is certain.” In selecting a partner, a certain leap of faith is required. Our grandmothers’ wisdom would also advise us to base our leaps on reality – not chemistry.

Thinking about and discussing romance, our own and that of others, is fascinating, because it holds the potential for fulfilling some of our grandest dreams.

The characters presented in this series are an interesting assortment of strong-minded individuals, all looking for love. Imagine if Neil Klugman were introduced to Izzie Grossman, if Hubbell Gardner dated Annie Hall, and what Hannah Mandlebaum the matchmaker would do if she could get her hands on Alvy Singer.

**While you watch, consider:**

- ◆ How different is Izzy's view of the world from her grandmother's?
  
- ◆ What do Anton and Sam each represent to Izzy?
  
- ◆ How does the movie present single life?
  
- ◆ What's your opinion of the role of matchmakers?

**DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

- ◆ Like Izzy's friends, many young Jewish women who see the film would be pleased to meet someone just like Sam. Why?
- ◆ What do Anton and Sam represent to Izzy? Are they familiar figures in our own lives?
- ◆ Sometimes Jewish men and women may wish to find partners who are Jewish, but it does not happen. What do you think are some of the reasons for this? Does it matter? Can (or should) anything be done about it?
- ◆ In contemporary America, it is estimated that for every two marriages one ends in divorce. What does this say about our belief in the primacy of romantic love? Are we following it too closely, or not closely enough?
- ◆ What may we (or our children) seek in selecting a Jewish partner? What, if any, difference do we think it makes to marry a Jew?
- ◆ What can be done to try to make it easier for Jewish men and women to meet, get to know each other and choose to pursue a Jewish life?

**SUGGESTIONS FOR READING AND VIEWING****Books and stories**

- ◆ Bayer, Linda. *The Blessing and the Curse*. New York: The Jewish Publication Society, 1988.
- ◆ Blankenhorn, David, Steven Bayme, Jean Bethke Elshtain, eds. *Rebuilding the Nest: A New Commitment to the American Family*. Milwaukee: Family Service America, 1990.
- ◆ Genovese, Elizabeth Fox. *Feminism Without Illusions: A Critique of Individualism*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991.
- ◆ Goldstein, Rebecca. *The Mind-Body Problem*. New York: Dell Publishing Company, 1983.

**Films**

*Once Around*  
*Moonstruck*  
*An Unmarried Woman*  
*Modern Love*