

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.

Real Americans: The Evolving Identities of American Jews

by Sylvia Barack Fishman

This course explores what it means to be an American Jew; the role of tradition, the effects of assimilation, and the ways in which Jewish identity has been shaped by immigration to America.

The overall questions the course addresses include:

- How do we define an “American Jew”?
- How are we to understand intergenerational conflict within Jewish families?
- What role has economics played in the changing identities of American Jews?
- How has the majority culture affected the American Jewish experience?

THE INTRODUCTION discusses how the seven films in the course portray the tensions that arise from trying to balance traditional Jewish values with a changing secular society in both Europe and America. Such tensions raise questions as to the nature of Jewish identity. How is this identity defined? Is it determined only by birth, or also by practices and behaviors? These films reflect the changing relationships of American Jews to their heritage, their families, and the larger society.

SESSION ONE

Tevye: A Father and His Daughters: *Fiddler on the Roof*

This 1961 musical is set in turn-of-the-century Russia and is based upon the Tevye stories of Sholem Aleichem. The film details the everyday life of Tevye, the dairyman, and his family of five daughters. Tevye and his wife Golde must contend with challenges to traditional Jewish values resulting from the changing attitudes and practices of the “outside” world.

“In Depth” explores the ways in which the Tevye story has been interpreted from the Sholem Aleichem tales to the Yiddish screen to Hollywood and what these various interpretations say about the changing face of American Jewish identity.

Topics explored in the questions include:

- The ways in which Judaism is transmitted between generations, and the particular role of marriage in this transmission.
- The Jewish values and traditions that we have lost and retained.
- How traditions can be reinvented, and whether they have to be “old” to be authentic.
- The relationships between Jews and non-Jews in today’s world.

SESSION TWO

A Mother and Her Sons: *Mirele Efros*

This 1939 Yiddish film is often called “the Jewish Queen Lear” because of its portrayal of a matriarch and her stormy relationships with her children. It is the story of an Old World businesswoman who loses the control of her estate to her son and daughter-in-law.

“In Depth” explores the changing history of Jewish women in the work force. Discussions include the value placed on women’s work in European Yiddish culture, and the tensions between job and family that Jewish women continue to face.

Key topics include:

- The comparisons between Tevye and Mirele, particularly their demands on their children, and the role of the traditional family structure in maintaining Jewish identity.
- The roles of mother and mother-in-law and how stereotypes affect our perceptions of these roles.
- The challenges of balancing family requirements and individual desires.
- How contemporary professional Jewish women deal with the dual pressures of the workplace and maintaining a Jewish home.

SESSION THREE

The American Dream: *The Jazz Singer*

This 1927 film 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.

“In Depth” addresses the conflicts inherent in the immigrant experience as the younger generation seized opportunities presented to them in America, and how these opportunities,

in turn, shaped new Americans' attitudes toward the Old World past and the New World future.

Key issues addressed include:

- The contrasting values of the Old World and America.
- The different roles of traditional Jewish mothers and fathers.
- The aspects of Jewish heritage that may be lost in the desire to become a "real American."
- How we may have experienced and resolved tensions between American secular society and our Jewish traditions.
- How this story might be updated to be relevant today.

SESSION FOUR

North of the Border: *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz*

This 1974 Canadian film tells the story of Duddy Kravitz, a young man living in Montreal's Jewish immigrant neighborhood who longs for financial success regardless of the ethical compromises it might entail.

"In Depth" explores the roots of Duddy's ambitions and the ethical positions of the male role models in his life, as well as the complex nature of antisemitism.

Topics explored in the questions include:

- The nature of parent-child relationships.
- The difficulties North American Jews face in adhering to Jewish traditions while attempting to become "insiders" in the larger society.
- Whether the pursuit of economic success is specific to Jews, or to immigrant groups in general.
- The meaning of Jewish values in the contemporary world.

SESSION FIVE

Brooklyn Nostalgia: *Brighton Beach Memoirs*

This 1986 film is based on a semiautobiographical Neil Simon play. The film portrays the daily lives of an extended Jewish family trying to make ends meet in 1930s Brooklyn.

"In Depth" explores traditional gender roles within Jewish and American families, the working class American Jewish experience, and how Jews have related to other ethnic groups in similar economic situations.

Key issues include:

- The ways in which children are expected to “honor” their parents, and whether this is more or less difficult for children today.
- How contemporary Jewish families imagine their sons’ and daughters’ futures.
- The differences in the “Jewish” and “American” ways of handling conflicts between personal desires and family loyalties.
- The reasons Jewish writers tend to remain “outsiders.”

SESSION SIX

A Question of Faith: *Crimes and Misdemeanors*

This 1989 Woody Allen film explores the lives of two extended families as they grapple with questions of morality, theology, and the nature of life itself.

“In Depth” discusses some of the moral dilemmas various characters face, including questions as to the existence of God, rationality versus faith, and the necessity of religious structure in leading an ethical life.

Key issues addressed:

- How we are to judge someone who behaves immorally, and whether we have the right to make such judgment.
- The possibility of being moral without being religious.
- How social action may reflect Jewish values.
- How American Jews view God.

SESSION SEVEN

Making It in America: *Avalon*

This 1990 film traces the history of the Krichinsky family from their arrival as immigrants in Baltimore through their success and dispersal.

“In Depth” explores the problems of assimilation, including the loss of Jewish identity, and the importance of family in transmitting both memories and heritage.

Topics addressed in the questions:

- The similarities and differences among Jewish-American immigration stories.
- Whether material gains may lead to losses in other areas.
- The ways in which the Jewish-American immigrant experience is both similar and unique compared with the experiences of other immigrant groups.
- The long-term effects of the dispersal and break-up of Jewish families.

SESSION EIGHT

Wrap-Up

This final session looks across the films to address the various ways in which Jewish identity is presented.

Key issues addressed:

- What it means to be Jewish; what it means to be American.
- What replaces immigrant memory and heritage among contemporary American Jews.
- The nature of Jewish ethics and values in the New World.