

SESSION TWO



Mother and Her Sons: *Mirele Efros*

Feature film, 1939
 Director: Joseph Berne
 Screenplay: Ossip Dymow

Mirele: Berta Gersten
 Shaindel: Ruth Elbaum
 Shalman: Moshe Feder
 Yosele: Albert Lipton

Length: 80 minutes

Mirele Efros might not seem like the stereotypical Jewish mother – she’s making business deals, not chicken soup – but her character is based on reality. *Mirele Efros* began as a stage play (by the great Yiddish playwright Jacob Gordin) in Poland and the United States in 1898 and was made into a talking film – in Yiddish with English subtitles – in the United States in 1939. Often nicknamed “the Jewish Queen Lear,” this film captures conflicts between generations, genders, and educational and socioeconomic levels in ways that do indeed echo some of the motifs of Shakespeare’s famous drama. (More modern viewers have facetiously suggested that it might alternatively be nicknamed either “the daughter-in-law from hell” or “the mother-in-law from hell,” depending on one’s sympathies.)

Its setting in the Old World at the end of the last century provides a kind of benchmark for the changes that would be wrought in America. Mirele, the protagonist, is introduced to the audience as an attractive, hard-working middle-aged widow. She’s a superorganized, competent, and dignified businesswoman. Mirele is absolutely dominant in her household. With the respectful propriety appropriate to a spiritual aristocrat, she gives orders to her business manager, Shalman, who, in turn, treats her with respect as he follows her orders. The details of her daily life are made simpler through the ministrations of her long-time friend, Machle.

This is a world of quiet religiosity, of compassion, and of order, a world that Mirele made and rules. Every person who deals with Mirele knows that her word is as good as gold, from the peasants who grow hay to Jewish communal dignitaries; every business detail is handled with honesty, kindness, firmness, and dispatch. Mirele’s two sons, however, know little about this world; she keeps

them totally away from the business realm. Although she means to protect them, their ignorance of the tremendous effort and skill necessary to maintain Mirele's orderly world returns to haunt this protective mother in the future.

Mirele has chosen as a bride for Yosele a girl she says is from a poor but respectable family. Shaindel is first seen sitting and brushing her hair, looking longingly at Yosele's photograph. The picture of girlish sweetness, Shaindel clearly regards herself at this point as a kind of Cinderella, Yosele as Prince Charming, and Mirele as a beneficent fairy godmother. Unfortunately, Shaindel's parents also regard Mirele Efros as a fairy godmother who will relieve them of all their financial problems.

After the wedding, Shaindel and her family return to the big city with Mirele and her sons. The bride and her family are openly critical of the way Mirele conducts her business, and demand that the sons be given their share of their dead father's inheritance. Mirele lets them in on a family secret: Her sainted husband died and left her not with an inheritance but with an enormous load of debt. Through years of her own hard work and struggle, she paid off every ruble he owed.

Moved by her beloved son Yosele's obvious misery, Mirele capitulates to their demands and signs over all her business and personal possessions to her children. Shaindel and her parents take over the running of the business, and, although her father seems to know about Jewish prayer and Jewish tradition, their lack of honesty and reliability quickly run the business into the ground.

The "King Lear on the heath" rift occurs when the Jewish hospital committee comes to Mirele's house to collect a pledge from her. Shaindel refuses to give the committee any money, although Mirele had promised it to them. Shalman saves her by falsely claiming that Mirele had lent him money, which he is now donating to the hospital committee in her name. Mirele asks Yosele for the money when they leave, so she can pay Shalman back. He reveals to her that he has no money; he has signed it all away to his wife. Mirele is forced to plead with Shaindel, who brutally turns her down, openly glorying in her victory.

Mirele leaves her home and turns again to Shalman, asking to work for him. As time passes, she does as

Mirele: *Then I still have a good bead.*

Shalman: *All Grodno says it's the head of a cabinet minister.*

Mirele: *Is that a compliment to cabinet ministers or an insult to me?*

well for him as she once did for herself and she regains much of her self-esteem. Meanwhile, the ugly aftertaste of remorse poisons the family relationships in Yosele and Shaindel's household.

At last, facing the Bar Mitzvah celebration of their son, Shaindel, Yosele, and the boy plead with Mirele to join them for this happy occasion. Mirele at first refuses each one of them, reminding the weeping Shaindel that when Mirele's life was on the line, Shaindel showed her no mercy. But certain words come back to haunt her: Shaindel has admitted that Mirele seemed like too much competition for Yosele's affections; her grandson has refused to keep his Bar Mitzvah gift if she would not come, accusing her, "What have I ever done to hurt you?" At the pivotal moment, Mirele arrives at the party. Shown to her old seat of honor, she is greeted with affection.

Mirele: *But you must always remain my good, loyal son Yosele.*

Yosele: *Yes, mother. How could you think anything else?*

In Depth: "Real Jewish Mothers"

In contrast to Tevye, here is the story of a matriarch. Tevye, the father of daughters, and Mirele, the mother of sons, do have much in common in the way tradition governs their lives, in spite of obvious differences due to Tevye's modest means and Mirele's wealth. Each is a doting parent, wanting the best for the children, yet slow to acknowledge that the world is changing.

Mirele is not Golde, Tevye's hard-working wife who is seen doing laundry, cooking, and preparing for the Sabbath; the self-made Mirele has help for those tasks. When contemporary people envision the Eastern European Jewish mother – and imagine the inspiration for the song "My Yiddishe Mama" – they're more likely to picture someone like Golde, but Mirele is derived from tradition too. Both women seem to possess what Irving Howe characterizes as the Jewish mother's "mixture of practical sense and emotional abundance."

In almost every detail of her existence, the character of Mirele Efros illustrates the figure of the ideal Jewish woman as she was envisioned in Eastern European Jewish life. From where does Mirele draw her strength?

Working Women

In the past, Jewish women have often worked at

nondomestic tasks both inside and outside the home. Working for pay, rather than a contemporary innovation, has been an accepted part of the lives of many Jewish women. Unlike the prototype of the shy and sequestered “little woman” that held sway in Victorian societies, Eastern European Jewish women often had a “characteristic aggressiveness and marketplace activism,” which they saw as an intrinsic part of their commitment to family and to community. In Europe, middle-class as well as impoverished Jewish women participated in acquiring the livelihood for the household. In some communities, women in elite families were encouraged to take on this responsibility exclusively in order to enable their husbands to devote their time to the study of sacred texts. Even the wives of powerful Hasidic leaders were praised for earning the livelihood of the household by becoming drapers, sugar merchants, real estate brokers, and traveling peddlers.

A myriad of cultural and historical factors contributed to the tolerance shown toward the marketplace activity of women. Jewish tradition did not set the woman on a pedestal and limit her to maternal tasks. In fact, religious texts depict active, busy women engaged in productive work. Proverbs 31 praises the “Woman of Valor” who buys fields and has vineyards planted out of her own earnings. Talmudic commentaries on the proper role for women exhibit a horror of idleness, which was seen as leading only to mischief. The rabbis assumed that women were diligent and preferred to be occupied. If one is so wealthy that one’s wife has few tasks, they advise it is better that she should knit a specific amount each day rather than remain unoccupied. A man may not prevent his wife from such work no matter how wealthy he is.

Economic realities were certainly a major factor in pushing Jewish women into marketplace activities. European Jews were frequently limited by antisemitic laws to commercial and middleman activities. Even where legal constraints were less onerous, Jews tended toward business enterprises because such activities gave them independence and autonomy. The skills of women were especially useful in family businesses and were fully utilized.

Glueckel of Hameln (1646-1724) was one such woman. A middle-class merchant in an import-export business and

pious mother of thirteen, Glueckel also wrote Yiddish memoirs which have supplied historians with one of the best pictures of the social, economic, and cultural life of Central European Jews during that time. In the twentieth century, Bella Chagall, in *Burning Lights*, recalls her middle-class mother keeping store, and Chaim Grade, in *My Mother's Sabbath Days*, elegizes his impoverished mother, who fed her children out of the proceeds from baskets of withered fruit. Many American Jews can recall immigrant grandmothers and aunts who worked as storekeepers or seamstresses, presided over orderly and hospitable homes, and often were the guiding personalities of the household as well.

Ironically, European and immigrant Jewish writers – influenced by the Jewish Enlightenment and the ideals of utopian socialist movements, and sympathetic to the plight of Jewish women – often strived to put an end to the marketplace activities of Jewish women. Stories by writers such as I.L. Peretz depict mothers overwhelmed by the burdens of earning a livelihood and raising a family, while their husbands devoted themselves to sacred study, seemingly oblivious to the needs of their wives and children. In the eyes of such writers, women were the proletariat of the proletariat, the most oppressed of all groups. They believed that the division of labor would only approach fairness when Jewish mothers were freed of the demands of labor force participation and enabled to devote themselves exclusively to domestic tasks.

Industrialization increased employment options for women both in Europe and the United States. Before emigration, with the proliferation of factory workplace settings, many Jewish girls found jobs making cigarettes, garments, and other items. Some sewed items by hand, but those who were able to learn how to operate sewing machines were considered fortunate, the elite of the industry, and generally earned higher wages. It is a mark of how accepted marketplace activity was for women – and scholarship was for men – that female seamstresses were regarded with respect among Eastern European Jews, while male tailors were often regarded with humor or even derision.

Making It in America

In the United States, Jewish women actively sought employment outside the home. They became extremely active and influential in some industries, especially the garment industry, because they possessed useful skills and enthusiastic attitudes. As Susan Glenn points out, “Jewish women brought with them a well-developed craft pride and a sense of competence that stood in sharp contrast to the stereotypical images of female workers as insecure, unambitious, and apathetic toward their jobs.”

Single women commonly did factory work, while married Jewish women often did piecework at home, laboring long hours at the sewing machine; some took in boarders; some ran dry goods and grocery stores to help support their families. When married women ran stores or took in boarders, however, they often reported to census takers that they did not work; in the minds of such women and their families, “working” implied employment in a factory or other nonhousehold-connected setting.

Indeed, a curious transformation took place in the minds of American Jewish immigrants with regard to the propriety of married woman working. Within American society, unemployed married women were accorded great respect as domestic paragons, following the Victorian model of “the angel of the hearth.” In non-Jewish, established American culture, women who worked outside the home were the object of pity, their husbands of scorn. A competent husband, it was felt, should earn enough money so that his wife could devote herself to domestic life and need not supplement the household income. This was the inverse of the ingrained Eastern European Jewish attitude which gave the domestic woman little societal prestige but valued her marketplace activity, which freed her husband and sons for sacred study. Women like Mirele Efros, hard-working, disciplined, and controlling, may have been the ideal in Jewish communities of the past. In America, however, they were to be regarded with very different eyes indeed.

In recent times, the outlook toward work outside the home has changed again. Work is valued not only for its financial aspects but for the satisfaction and spiritual gains

Committee member: *What do you do with yourself?*

Mirele: *I make preserves and feed my ducks, so that my son's mother-in-law can eat them.*

that accompany pursuing a professional interest. Many contemporary Jewish women, like women across America, struggle with the conflicts of balancing home and work lives.

The Real Mirele

Viewers may differ in their opinions about whether Mirele is an admirable person. She can be seen as the best and the worst of Old World ways. Indeed, she's complicated, and, to a contemporary viewer, something of an unusual person. Even with her impressive business success, Mirele is still a woman of tradition, adhering to established patterns of Jewish family life. Her conflicts with her son and daughter-in-law are ultimately about the breakdown of tradition. As Howe has written, "Mirele represents the conserving strength of the past, which alone has enabled the Jews to hold together." At the end of the film, there's a hint that Mirele will once again rally that strength for the benefit of her family.

While you watch, consider:

- ◆ Which characters do you most identify with or feel compassion for?
- ◆ Do you think of Mirele as a typical Jewish mother, or something more unusual, even exotic?
- ◆ Other than the Bar Mitzvah and wedding scenes, how do you know this is a Jewish film?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- ◆ How does Mirele the matriarch compare with Tevye the patriarch?
- ◆ How do the ways in which Mirele and Shalman show their religious fervor compare to the ways in which Shaindel's father shows his religious feeling?
- ◆ What characteristics of Mirele seem attractive and admirable, and what about her less than admirable?
- ◆ In today's world, we might find Mirele's exercise of power and demands for loyalty to be excessive. What are some of the demands made by parents in today's Jewish families? How do we balance family requirements and individual desires?
- ◆ Mirele is both mother and mother-in-law. If she is a typical Jewish mother, is she also a typical Jewish mother-in-law? Is the role of mother-in-law changing in contemporary times?
- ◆ What kinds of relationships do we hope to have with our in-laws? How might this be affected by the religious affiliation and involvement of the families (e.g., whether Jewish or non-Jewish, Orthodox, nonobservant, etc.)
- ◆ How do contemporary professional Jewish women cope with the pressure to advance their careers in the workplace and maintain some sense of being a "Jewish mother" at home?
- ◆ Is adherence to traditional family structure – with parents making important decisions, as Mirele did – part of the key to the survival of the Jewish people? What happens when this structure breaks down?

Shaindel: *If I was too hard, it was for your happiness and mine.*

Yosele: *You may have meant well but you didn't make me happier by it.*

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

- ◆ Asch, Sholem. "Warsaw," in *Three Cities*. New York: Carroll & Graf, 1983.
- ◆ _____. *The Mother*. Translated by Nathan Ausubel. AMS Press, 1930.
- ◆ Davis, Natalie Zemon. *Women on the Margins: Three Seventeenth Century Lives*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995.
- ◆ Grade, Chaim. *My Mother's Sabbath Days: A Memoir*. Translated by Channa K. Goldstein and Inna H. Grade. New York: Knopf, 1986.
- ◆ Glenn, Susan. *Daughters of the Shtetl: Life and Labor in the Immigrant Generation*. New York: Cornell University Press, 1990.

Films

A Brivele der Mamen (1938)

Mirele: *Good children, bad children – but children, after all.*