

## SESSION EIGHT


 rap-Up

The seven films in this course cover a wide range of settings, content, and time frames, as they deal with issues of Jewish identity. Yet while Tevye of *Fiddler on the Roof* is, first and foremost, a “real Jew,” and Michael Kaye, an adult at the conclusion of *Avalon*, is a “real American,” they have much in common.

The following questions look across the films to inspire thinking about our past and our future, how we live our lives and how we would like to live, how to be Americans and how to be Jews.

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- ◆ As we become “more American,” is it inevitable that we become “less Jewish”?
- ◆ Characters like Judah Rosenthal in *Crimes and Misdemeanors* and Lenny Kravitz in *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz* don’t stop being Jewish by virtue of their ideas or the fact that they no longer embrace their Jewish identity. In contemporary times, what defines membership in the Jewish community? Who decides?
- ◆ What can replace immigrant memory as a unifying force among American Jews?
- ◆ Many significant changes, whether situational, psychological, or attitudinal, occur over the course of most of the films (i.e., the *Avalon* neighborhood changes, Tevye’s daughters grow more self-confident, many of the characters become more “Americanized”).

Is it possible to see change as it's happening, or is it only visible with the perspective of distance? How is the American Jewish community changing now?

- ◆ Once Jewish sons and daughters leave the “old neighborhood,” leave behind the Jewish lifestyle if not the values of their parents, can they ever return? Is it ever possible to “go home again”? Can those childhood experiences be recycled into a new sense of Jewish identity?
- ◆ Do you think that Jewish social values, like the pursuit of equality, justice, and world peace, can sustain American Jewry? What about other core values like support of Israel and opposition to antisemitism? How about religious practices? What do you think is essential to sustain the community?
- ◆ Several of the films deal with Jewish moral and ethical issues. Do you think of the intention to live an ethical life as a particularly Jewish concern? Or is it universal? Why are ethics and morals so important to many American Jews? Do you think Jews have a greater responsibility than others to live an ethical life?
- ◆ For Tevye and Rabbi Ben, God plays a role in their day-to-day lives. Other characters, like Judah Rosenthal or Jake Robin, might perform those few Jewish rituals they observe out of a sense of family feeling. Do they have a sense that God plays a role in their lives? Do you?
- ◆ How do issues of gender relate to Jewish identity? Do you think men and women face different challenges in forging an American Jewish identity they are comfortable with?

- ◆ If you could arrange a meeting between two characters from different films in this course, who would you select? Sam Krichevsky and Tevye? Mirele Efros and Kate Jerome? How would they relate to each other?
- ◆ Do contemporary American Jewish families face some of the same issues as families in these films, with sons and daughters wanting greater access to the mainstream culture than their parents ever considered? How are such conflicts resolved?
- ◆ Another recent trend in the American Jewish community is the “return” to Judaism movement, with many young people finding meaning in the religious practices their parents abandoned. Why do you think the search for meaning and roots is so important to many young people? As people choose to become “more Jewish,” is it necessary to give up anything?
- ◆ Orthodox American Jews can be seen as facing fewer choices about their Jewish identity than other Jews, for many decisions about how they will lead their lives are dictated by their religious beliefs. Does this make for a less conflict-filled American identity?
- ◆ How do you think issues of Jewish identity will play out in the future of the American Jewish community?
- ◆ Themes of Zionism and Israel are not mentioned in these films. How does the State of Israel affect American Jews’ sense of identity? Can one be a strong supporter of Israel and still a “real American”? Conversely, can one be a “real Jew” and uninterested in Israel?
- ◆ Do you think the latest wave of Jewish immigrants to America – those from the former Soviet Union – have to deal with the same issues of cultural loss and family

conflicts that the earlier waves of Jewish immigrants faced in their efforts to become “real Americans”?

**NOTES**

- Page 23 Irving Howe, *The World of Our Fathers: The Journey of the East European Jews to America and the Life They Found and Made* (New York: Harcourt Brace Javanovich, 1976), p. 173.
- Page 24 Hasia Diner, "Jewish Immigrant Women in Urban America," unpublished paper for the Mary I. Bunting Institute, Radcliffe College.
- Menachem M. Brayer, *The Jewish Woman in Rabbinic Literature, Col. II* (Hoboken, N.J.: Ktav Publishing House, 1986), p. 48.
- Pesachim 47a; Ketubot 61b; see Mishnah Ketubot 5:5.
- Page 25 *The Life of Glueckel of Hameln, Written by Herself* (New York: Thomas Yoseloff, 1962).
- Bella Chagall, *Burning Lights* (New York: Schocken Books, 1946).
- Chaim Grade, *My Mother's Sabbath Days* (New York: Alfred A Knopf, 1986).
- See I.L. Peretz, "A Woman's Wrath," in *This World and the Next*, trans. Moshe Spiegel (New York: Thomas Yoseloff, 1958), pp. 239-243.
- Page 26 Susan A. Glenn, *Daughters of the Shtetl: Life and Labor in the Immigrant Generation* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990), p. 5.
- Page 27 Howe, *World of Our Fathers*, p. 495.
- Page 30 Arthur Hertzberg, *The Jews in America: Four Centuries of an Uneasy Encounter* (New York: Touchstone/Simon & Schuster, 1990), pp. 214-215.
- Page 46 *Collected Plays of Neil Simon* (New York: Random House, 1991), Vol. 3, p. xviii.