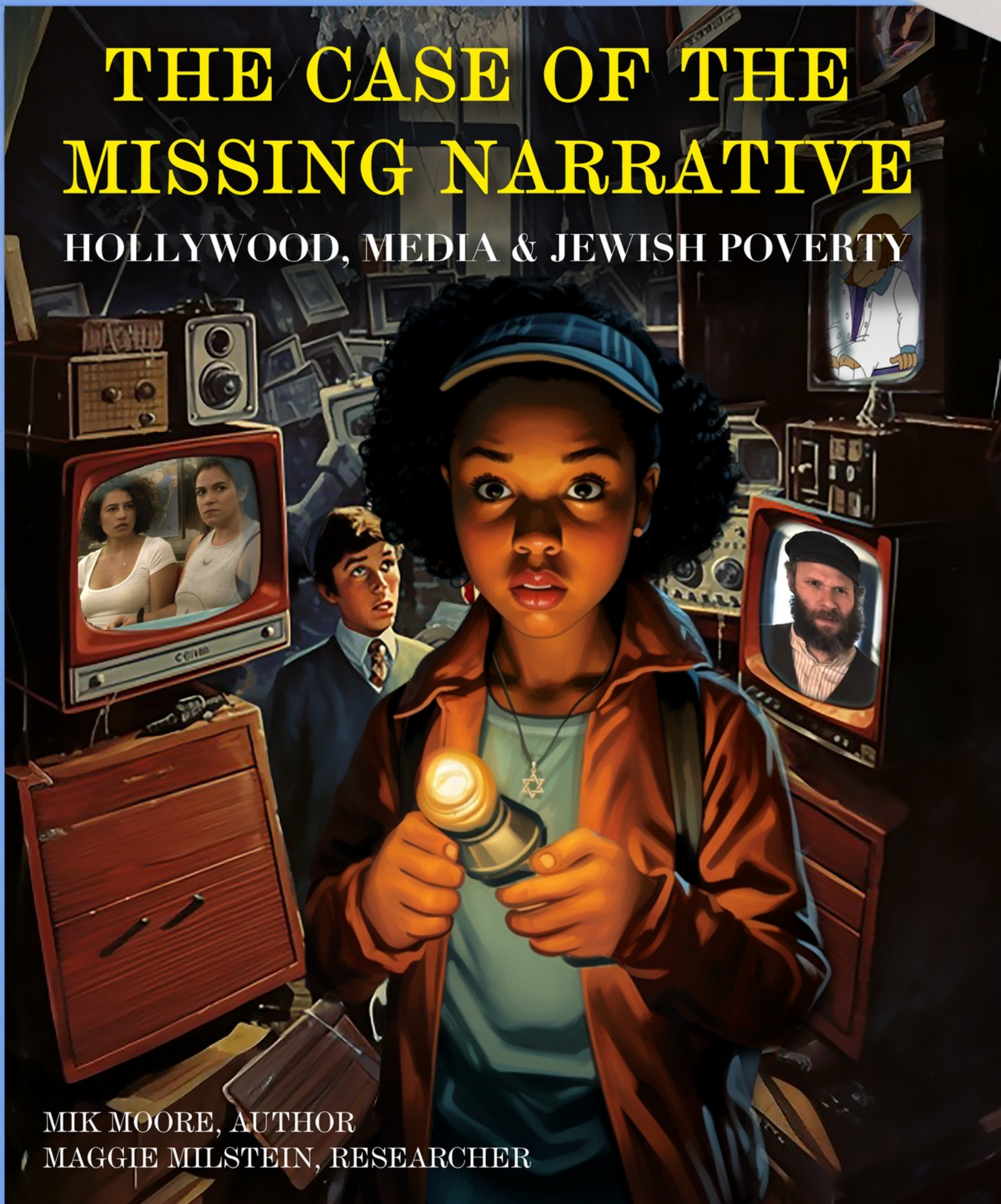
2023

THE CASE OF THE MISSING NARRATIVE

HOLLYWOOD, MEDIA & JEWISH POVERTY



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

WHAT IS THE TRUTH ABOUT ECONOMICALLY VULNERABLE AMERICAN JEWS?

According to Pew Research, more than 1 in 5 U.S. Jewish households earn less than $50,000 a year, a majority of which “had difficulty paying for medical care, their rent or mortgage, food, or other bills or debts” in the past year. We know these challenges impact a diverse spectrum of Jews, from Orthodox to “Just Jewish,” from young adults to older adults, and from single-headed households to people with disabilities.

But that information only gets you so far. Most people don’t know the statistics. And even if they did know, it probably wouldn’t matter. That’s because what people believe is shaped by something much more powerful than just the facts...

Stories.

The Fablemans

A good story will beat good data any day of the week, and twice on Shabbat.

And a good story, told and retold, again and again, will harden into a narrative. Once a narrative is established, we use it to filter new information, embracing information when it's aligned and ignoring it when it's not.

So at the behest of The Harry and Jeanette Weinberg Foundation, in order to better understand how Americans learn about economically vulnerable and poor Jews in the United States, we set out to explore the stories Americans are told in entertainment, specifically film and television, and in the news media, both national and Jewish. In total, we reviewed more than 1,000 articles, television shows, and films. Our primary focus was on the 15-year period between 2008 and 2023, but we included a selection of the most influential stories from the preceding decades.

We learned a lot.

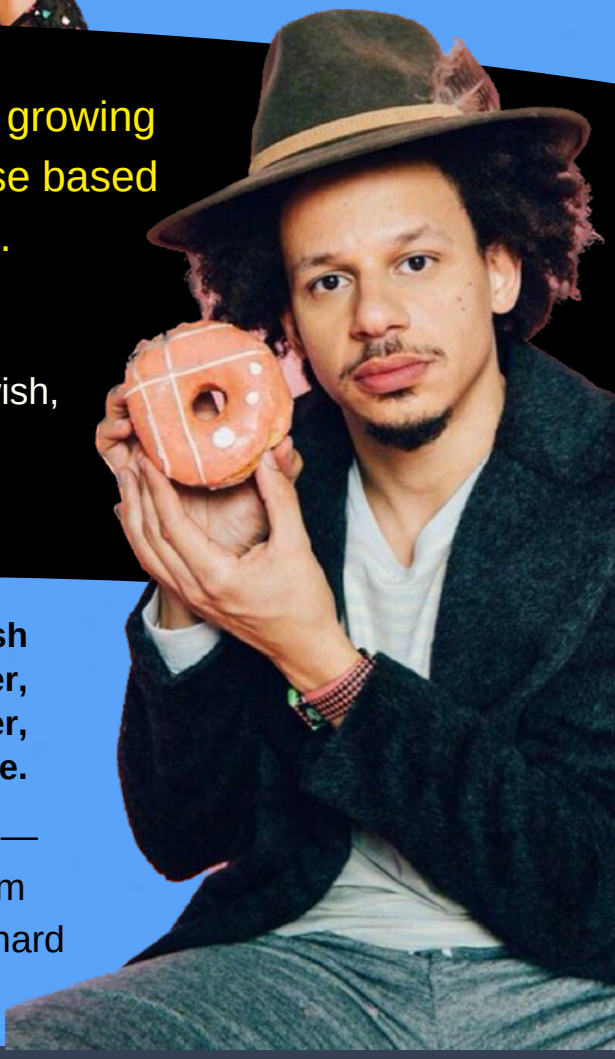
Here are a few topline conclusions:

Stories of Jews with wealth and influence are far more common than stories of Jews struggling to make ends meet; some of these stories play on antisemitic tropes.

The most common identities of contemporary Jews experiencing poverty in entertainment and the news are ultra-Orthodox, elderly, and 20-somethings.

Media and entertainment frequently overlook the growing diversity of identities held by Jews, including those based on race, ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation.

Most stories about poverty in America ignore Jews while focusing instead on communities not perceived to be Jewish, such as urban Black and Brown communities, rural white communities, and Latin American immigrants.



In film and TV, the most popular jobs held by Jewish characters are attorney, medical doctor, shopkeeper, psychiatrist, law enforcement officer, entertainer, realtor, and business executive.

The most widespread, relevant narrative we encountered — even in stories of Jewish poverty — is the American Dream narrative of upward mobility from humble origins through hard work.

Wealthy Jewish characters are 10 times more common than Jewish characters experiencing poverty.

Only 3 of 84 recent American films showed Jews experiencing poverty.

And 4 of 104 recent TV shows showed Jews experiencing poverty.

Images: Ilana Glazer in “Broad City”; Eric Andre; Tom Cruise in *Tropic Thunder*”

In presenting these conclusions, we do not suggest excluding stories of Jewish economic success from entertainment and the news.

Instead, we recommend complicating these narratives by supporting a wider range of stories that better reflect the diverse lived experiences of American Jews today. Philanthropy can invest in telling original stories, influencing incomplete stories being told by others, and leveraging the stories that have already been told.

We conclude this report by recommending replacing the overly simplistic American Dream and model minority narratives with a more compelling narrative of interdependence, in which the fate of Jews is tied to the fate of others, and vice versa. It is possible to replace the stereotypical narrative of Jewish wealth with a narrative about Jewish commitment to equity, in which Jews help lead efforts to address inequality and corruption, within and outside the Jewish community. It is possible to tell untold stories about how American Jews struggle to overcome the same economic barriers faced by other Americans, replacing a narrative of exceptionalism with a narrative of normalcy.

With better storytelling, a more sophisticated understanding of economically vulnerable and poor Jews in America is possible. We invite you to read on to learn more!

Mik Moore, Author

Maggie Milstein, Researcher

“As a Jew from New Hampshire I didn’t see anything in art that even showed working-class Jews...

The only time I saw Jews on TV and in movies was as scumbag lawyers and stuff. My dad’s a Boston guy. …he’s “masculine,” whatever that means. He worked his ass off every day doing a very historically Jewish job: retail, baby! …my Finding Your Roots was hundreds of years of so boring because it was just like: peddler peddler peddler cobbler peddler dressmaker.

All of this to say, people are not one thing. So it’s hard to see yourself represented in art as all one thing.”

Sarah Silverman
“The Sarah Silverman Podcast”
January 2023

INTRODUCTION

Marion Wright Edelman, the founder of the Children's Defense Fund and an advocate for racial justice and women's rights, was once asked why representation is so important. "You can't be what you can't see," she explained. Today, there are dozens of media and entertainment watchdog groups, supported by philanthropy, focused on how different communities show up in these spaces. These organizations understand the power wielded by the stories that are told about their communities, the power of the narratives these stories draw upon and shape. For the most part, their concern is focused on an absence of stories or storytellers from their community, or the presence of stories that misrepresent their community in dangerous ways. For example, the absence of stories about Black success and the presence of stories about immigrant criminality.

The Jewish community also has its watchdog groups, concerned with issues of representation. Mostly they focus on rooting out antisemitism — specifically, the defamation of Jews in media and entertainment. Like these watchdogs, we are also interested in how Jews are represented, but our motivation is a bit unconventional.

This report explores how narratives are shaping the public conversation around Jews experiencing economic deprivation in the United States.

It is important because narratives shape our beliefs and behaviors, including those of key stakeholders with the ability to impact Jewish poverty, such as policymakers, anti-poverty advocates, Jewish communal leaders, and Jews experiencing economic deprivation themselves. **To extrapolate from Wright Edelman's quote, "We won't fund what we don't see."** For many years, even while poverty among the wider US population is covered in the press and featured in our entertainment, we rarely see Jews experiencing poverty or even economic insecurity. The deeper we dug, the more we discovered other negative consequences from this narrow understanding of American Jewry, from feeding antisemitism to alienating underrepresented Jews.

As we were considering how best to assess the current narrative landscape, we quickly determined that demonstrating the absence of stories about Jews experiencing poverty would be insufficient. We needed to better understand what stories people were seeing that were shaping how they thought about the economic status of American Jews. In other words, if the data is telling us that there are few stories about poor or economically precarious Jews, what kinds of Jews are showing up in these stories? And among the stories about poverty that are being told, which are most and least likely to focus on Jews?

WHAT IS NARRATIVE CHANGE?

At the heart of this report is an audit that explores narratives about the economic status of American Jews in the news media and in film and television.

We also briefly explore how these narratives differ from or overlap with poverty narratives about other groups of Americans.

Our approach is to focus on high-impact vehicles for narratives that shape people's perspectives. Rather than attempting to document every appearance of these narratives across media, culture, and advocacy, we will focus on those appearances most likely to have a significant impact on narrative formation or retention. That means we include stories with significant reach or great depth. Because narratives take time to develop and take root across a large population, we struck a balance in the stories we examined. We tried to be more comprehensive when looking at recent stories (since 2008), but also included a select number of significant, sticky stories from the preceding decades.

Tell us if you've heard this one before. Impoverished Jewish grandparents flee Russia to come to the United States, struggling for years. Eventually they enter the middle class. In the meantime, their children graduate from a public college and grow up to become doctors and lawyers and teachers. If you hear it once, it's just a story. But if thousands of people tell that same basic story, and we read about it in books and newspapers, and watch it in movies and television shows, that story is no longer just a story.

It's a narrative.

Our goal is to survey the many stories told about American Jews, find those that have something to say about their economic status, and examine them for shared narratives.

Why are these narratives important? Because narratives serve as mental shortcuts that can bypass alternatives. Once a narrative is established, we use it to filter new information. If that information aligns with a familiar narrative, we accept it. If that information conflicts with or complicates that narrative, we often ignore or adapt it.

The Jewish story in America has helped to shape, and is shaped by, the narrative of the American Dream.

An American Tail

It is a narrative about upward mobility that celebrates individual achievement, a narrative about hard work and risk-taking, and the triumph of the meritocracy. There are other common narratives about American Jews. Some are tinged with old antisemitic tropes about Jewish greed and manipulation. Others are American narratives, including those that emphasize whiteness and immigrant exceptionalism, that appear to align with the Jewish experience. All of them come together to paint a partial picture of American Jews that is widely accepted among those without access to alternative stories or lived experiences.

METHODOLOGY

We looked at stories in television, film, and the press that shed light on the economic status of American Jews.

Here is how we approached the process of collecting data in each area.

Television

We began our research by compiling a list of every television show in the United States since 2008 with either a) a major Jewish character; or b) a significant Jewish episode or story. For this we relied on a variety of sources, from IMDb to Wikipedia to Jewish cultural news sites. There are also a number of “best of” lists focused on Jewish television characters.

After closer examination, we eliminated shows where the Jewish characters or stories were either too insignificant, or didn’t reveal their economic status. Then we added shows from before 2008 that had a large enough cultural footprint and centered Jewish characters or stories. We were left with 104 shows, including 28 from before 2008, which included sitcoms, dramas, unscripted (reality TV), animated, and more.

We identified relevant details about each show, including the class status of the Jewish characters, the size of its audience, how long it was on the air, and the key individuals on both sides of the camera. Then we took notes on the Jewish content, identifying key narratives, Jewish character archetypes, and any elements that might reflect larger trends or could help provide deeper insight into our key questions.

Film

Our approach to researching film was similar to our approach to television. We compiled a master list of films, from 2008 onwards, with significant American Jewish characters. We narrowed them down to include only the most relevant. Then we added in films from before 2008 that we believe have helped to shape how people think aboutf American Jews. We ended up with a list of 85 films.

The process of analyzing these films was the same as our approach to the television shows. We compiled the key data and then added notes on narrative trends and more. Because many of the findings for television and film were the same, we have a section here for shared findings, as well as individual sections showcasing all of the ways each medium impacts these narratives in unique ways.

Images: Cast of “Seinfeld” (left); Rachel Sennott in “Shiva Baby” (right)

Press

Photo/Courtesy JFCS

We took a different approach with our survey of the national press. Using LexisNexis, we did a keyword search of select newspapers and magazines since 2008, with a focus on articles about Jewish poverty. We added information about these articles to a master spreadsheet. Then we searched for stories featuring Jews or Jewish issues among the most popular stories of the year on national news websites. We reviewed the most important Jewish stories, as assessed and compiled by the Jewish Telegraphic Agency and The Forward. From those searches we identified the key Jewish stories since 2008 that advance a narrative about the economic status of Jews.

We also looked at the major, defining stories between 1968 and 2008 that feature Jews experiencing poverty. We limited our press research to a period within the memory of baby boomers, whereas the film and television research included some content from before 1968 that continued to reach audiences after 1968 through reruns and home video or streaming. We conducted a deeper dive into two areas of outsized press coverage we believe have a significant influence on narratives about the economic status of American Jews: extravagant b'nai mitzvah parties and political engagement by lobbyists and political action committees on behalf of individual Jews and Jewish organizations.

It was important for us to characterize the reach of these stories. Some of the articles we found appear in a single local newspaper; for example, in the metro section coverage of an anti-poverty program or a service provider in a particular city or region. Others appear in every major national media outlet. Many fall somewhere in between.

There is also a difference between an ongoing story, like the Bernie Madoff scandal, and one that only merits a day or two of relevant coverage, like the death of a Jewish celebrity. We did our best to weight these appropriately, so we could better assess the relative influence each had on advancing particular narratives.

Since all of the articles in Jewish newspapers and magazines focus on Jews, our interest here is mostly in how they cover poverty. To make sure we got a good cross section, we selected JTA, The Forward, The Jewish Press, Jewish Currents, and several regional papers. We completed a keyword search going back to 2008 and pulled all of the articles about poverty, then analyzed them, looking for shared narratives and other patterns. A total of 68 articles met our criteria.

Tony Shalhoub in “Monk”

> Sometimes the absence of a thing can tell us a lot.

The Dog That Didn’t Bark

There is a famous Sherlock Holmes story called “Silver Blaze,” in which the mystery is solved when Holmes concludes that a dog’s failure to bark at a criminal was evidence that the dog knew the criminal. In other words, sometimes the absence of a thing (a dog barking) can tell us a lot.

In our audit, we were interested in looking at the stories featuring people experiencing poverty in film, television, and the news. Who are those stories focused on? How are those stories shaping narratives about Jews through their absence from most of those stories? What are the narratives about Americans experiencing poverty that are revealed through those stories?

In news reporting and commentary, articles that address issues of poverty tend to focus on a limited number of subjects or issues. We decided to list and categorize these articles, and then examine them to see which focus on issues where Jews are, at least sometimes, the focus of the reporting. This helped us paint a picture of where Jews are absent from poverty narratives.

Other Sources

In addition to looking at primary sources, we also conducted interviews with two academics with expertise in the field: Josh Lambert, director of Jewish Studies at Wellesley College, and Jeffrey Shandler, co-author of “Entertaining America: Jews, Movies, and Broadcasting.” We reviewed a number of relevant articles, along with the books, “The American Jewish Story Through Cinema” by Eric Goldman and “Ambivalent Embrace: Jewish Upward Mobility in Post-War America,” by Rachel Kranson. Collectively, these provided additional insights into popular storytelling reflecting on the economic status of Jews in America.

Finally, many of the ideas about narrative change can be found in the 2022 report, “Funding Narrative Change,” co-authored by Mik Moore and Rinku Sen, director of the Narrative Initiative

NARRATIVE AUDIT

Entertainment (Film & Television)

For this audit, within the realm of popular entertainment we focused on narratives in film and television. There are important findings that are unique to each medium, which we will also explore. But we noticed similarities in how film and television advance narratives that shape how people think about the economic status of American Jews. We'll consider those here.

An important, but easy to overlook, finding is that Jewish characters are relatively common in both film and television. We found hundreds of Jewish characters in American films and television shows since 2008. Once we expanded our search to include the most relevant from before 2008, we ended up with almost 300 that warranted closer examination. One viewer over many years might spend hundreds of hours getting to know these Jewish characters (by way of example, the sitcoms "Friends" and "Seinfeld" have a combined running time of 145 hours). For some, this is far more time than they spend with actual Jews.

The implications here are two-fold. This is enough time spent with mostly fictional Jewish characters to influence how viewers think about Jews. However, with so many Jewish characters, it is unlikely that any one character would have too much influence. In other words, it's usually more important to look at trends across these characters than to single out individual characters. Of course, there are exceptions.

A second observation is that a relatively small number of actors play a large number of the Jewish characters. This is due in part to typecasting, in part to choices made by the actors themselves. But it is true that, for some Jewish actors, ANY character they play will be presumed Jewish, particularly by Jewish audiences, even if the character doesn't overtly identify themselves as a Jew. To take two examples from film and television: Seth Rogen and Ilana Glazer are so strongly Jewishly identified that it is hard to imagine them playing non-Jewish characters.

One viewer over many years might spend hundreds of hours getting to know these Jewish characters.

For some, this is far more time than they spend with actual Jews.

This gives a relatively small number of Jewish actors disproportionate influence over audiences' perceptions of American Jews, including Jews' economic status. The fact that both Rogen and Glazer are known for playing struggling millennials, surviving but not thriving in the modern economy, is a critical counterweight to the Jewish real housewives, for example, or Robert De Niro's portrayal of Bernie Madoff.

What are the typical roles assigned to poor or financially struggling Jewish characters?

We found they are often one of the following:

Shopkeepers and Clerks

20-somethings

Orthodox Jews

Jews from an earlier era

Images (top L to R): Adam Sandler in *The Cobbler*; Billy Eichner in “Difficult People”; (bottom L to R) Shira Haas in “Unorthodox”; Adam Goldberg in *Saving Private Ryan*

The first three character types present a contemporary Jew struggling financially. The final example, by placing its Jewish characters in the past, reinforces a powerful narrative about the American Jewish experience. It acknowledges poverty as a phase Jews went through in their first or second generation in the United States (or even earlier, when living in the shtetl), before they entered the middle class and never looked back. This narrative can blind people to the reality of the first three examples listed above.

In Los Angeles, a 2020 study of the city's Jews showed that being in an Orthodox denomination, an immigrant, a person of color, or LGBTQ, did not correlate with any significant trend in financial status. Instead, other factors correlated with a higher probability of a household struggling to make ends meet, including being between ages 41-72, having a child, not having a bachelor's degree, or being under/unemployed.

A quick survey of the most popular jobs held by Jewish characters was also revealing. The jobs included attorney, medical doctor, shopkeeper, psychiatrist, law enforcement officer, entertainer, realtor, and business executives. Almost all are well paying; several suggest significant wealth. A few are middle class. Only one — a shopkeeper — might be considered economically precarious today. Only three of 84 American films with major Jewish characters since 2008 showed Jews experiencing poverty or significant financial insecurity. Only four of 104 television shows we reviewed did. On the other hand, 24 of 84 films featured wealthy Jews, while 40 of 104 television shows did the same.

This means that for every Jewish character in film or television facing poverty, there are almost 10 Jewish characters who are wealthy! If you expand the comparison to include all of the working class and upper middle class Jewish characters, there are more than twice as many high earners. Yet according to Pew Research, in 2021 there were around an equal number of Jews making under $50,000 (21%) as making over $200,000 (23%), while 26% of American Jews had trouble paying bills at least once in the last year.

In the decades following World War II, Hollywood was pumping out popular war films. As R. Slotkin pointed out in his 2001 article, "Unit Pride: Ethnic Platoons and the Myth of American Nationality," to emphasize the diversity of the American "melting pot," these films would focus on a group of soldiers, each one representing a different American archetype. Imagine "Saving Private Ryan," Steven Speilberg's film that follows a diverse group of American soldiers on a mission during World War II, and you'll get it.

According to Sloktkin, this "expresses a myth of American nationality that remains vital in our political and cultural life: the idealized self-image of a multiethnic, multiracial democracy, hospitable to difference but united by a common sense of national belonging." Jews were an important part of America's post-war diversity.

For every Jewish character in film or television facing poverty, there are almost Jewish characters who are wealthy... yet 26% of American Jews had trouble paying bills at least once in the last year.

This multiethnic, multiracial approach was soon borrowed for other fictional workplaces, particularly those set in diverse cities, like New York or Los Angeles. The taxi company in the show "Taxi" and the classroom in the high school comedy "Welcome Back, Kotter" have eclectic and diverse staffs. So does the firm in the legal drama L.A. Law. On the other hand, shows that were conceived as Jewish-only ensembles, like "Seinfeld," or cast that way, like "The Big Bang Theory," had to diversify to be greenlit. There isn't a Jewish character on every ensemble show, but there were enough to ensure that Jews were an increasingly regular presence in most Americans' living rooms.

Ultimately, this move to include Jews in the "myth of American nationality" shaped the way many "TV Jews" were scripted. Jews had a role to play, a tile in the multiethnic mosaic.

In our interview, historian Jeffrey Shandler expanded on this idea. “In the 1970s, there was an interest in incorporating ethnic diversity in film and television, with Jews being one among many. Ethnic types become part of the story and the workplace a subject of interest. How the different ethnic identities intersect with one another becomes interesting. At the same time, you had the idea that comedies could address issues, led by [Jewish writer and producer] Norman Lear’s TV shows.”

One final observation from our research that applies to both film and television: The small number of Jewish characters of color in film and television — like Bram Greenfeld in “Love, Simon”; Cindy Hayes on “Orange is the New Black”; and Isabella Garcia-Shapiro on “Phineas and Ferb” — aren’t played by Jewish actors. At the same time, Jewish actors of color, like Zoe Kravitz, Tiffany Haddish, Maya Rudolph, Eric Andre, Daveed Diggs, and Rashida Jones, almost never play Jewish characters (Diggs’s turn as a rabbi is a welcome recent exception).

The popular narrative about American Jews, reinforced by film and television, is that Jews are a European ethnic group, like Italians or Irish, and are therefore white. This story effectively erases non-white, non-Ashkenazi Jews, while reinforcing a racialized American Dream narrative that assumes upward mobility. In the United States, we understand that racial minorities suffer economic penalties due to racial bias.

When American Jews are only seen as white, audiences assume that racial bias never negatively impacts the economic status of American Jews. On the other hand, audiences can see that poor Black and Brown characters are not white, and they assume these characters aren’t Jewish. To the extent that much of the storytelling about poverty (particularly poverty in big cities) is racialized, Jews are excluded from those poverty narratives. At the same time, storytelling about white poverty is focused on rural areas and small towns, communities that are outside of the dominant contemporary Jewish narratives.

Let’s consider the places we see white poverty in film and television. A quick scan reveals quite a few examples: “Shameless,” “Maid,” “Stranger Things,” “Malcolm in the Middle,” “Outer Banks,” “South Park,” “Inventing Anna,” “Mare of Eastown,” “All-American,” “Euphoria,” “Breaking Bad,” “Hunger Games,” “Anne with an E,” “Justified,” “American Vandal,” “Friday Night Lights,” “Two Broke Girls,” “The Last of Us,” “Umbrella Academy,” “Jessica Jones,” “Where the Heart Is,” and “Anywhere But Here.”

It’s worth noting that there are Jewish actors playing characters experiencing poverty in several of these: “Two Broke Girls” (Kat Dennings), “Stranger Things” (Winona Ryder), “Shameless” (Emmy Rossum), “Where the Heart Is” and “Anywhere But Here” (Natalie Portman), among others. Yet none of these characters, or any in the other examples listed, are Jewish. The “poor white trash” archetype, which applies to many here, almost universally excludes Jews.

In film and television, the narrative deck, as it were, is stacked against stories in which contemporary Jews suffer from poverty.

Let’s look at some of the unique findings for each medium.

Image: Daveed Diggs in “Extrapolations”

Television

How influential is television on American audiences? Consider this: 80% of Americans watch television every day, for an average of three hours. Over the course of a year, that's more than 1,100 hours. In a lifetime, it adds up to eight years of television. It is the thing we do most often, outside of sleep and work.

We want to better understand how Americans' beliefs about the economic status of American Jews are influenced by what they see on television, in ways that are distinct from how they are influenced by what they see in film. Our focus here is on the 15,000 hours of television they have watched since 2008.

After analyzing the Jewish characters and storylines on 104 shows, here is what we found.

Children's television is one of the few places where the Jewish characters are more likely to have "regular" jobs, like working in retail or at the town dump. It is likely that the creators are very sensitive to the role they play introducing children to different kinds of people, often for the first time. At the same time, they want to make sure viewers from different backgrounds, including Jews, don't see themselves as stereotypes. Finally, it's worth noting that the class implications of certain jobs may be lost on children, who might think working at a dump sounds really awesome.

There are a few recent examples of popular television shows that feature Jewish families (or families that include Jews) that lose all of their wealth and are forced to grapple with their new reality. This redemption narrative is fairly common in American storytelling. It is not surprising that it has manifested in Jewish stories that track the American Dream narrative, of success through hard work and bootstraps capitalism. More broadly, these are "fish out of water" stories, where wealthy people don't know how to deal with the kinds of challenges most people take for granted.

"Schitt's Creek" and "Arrested Development," both scripted comedies, feature wealthy Jews who have lost everything and work (or scheme) to redeem themselves. In the 1990s, the character Rachel Green on the smash hit comedy "Friends," who was raised in a wealthy Jewish family on Long Island, is cut off by her parents and has to get a waitressing job at the local coffee shop, Central Perk. In all three of these shows, the fathers (more than their kids) are the most identifiable Jewish characters, played by identifiably Jewish actors: Rob Leibman, Jeffrey Tambor, and Eugene Levy.

Image: Cast of "Schitt's Creek"

Suggesting, as these shows do, that the redemption narrative may be a Jewish story likely does more to reinforce tropes of Jewish wealth than to open our eyes to Jewish poverty. The natural state of these characters is wealth; poverty is a detour, and often a brief one. Only in “Schitt’s Creek” do the characters experience genuine deprivation, with substandard living conditions and struggles to find employment. A different take on the “riches to rags” story is the CBS comedy “Two Broke Girls,” where one of the main characters is from a poor family while the other was raised wealthy. Both work as waitresses struggling to get by. From our perspective, the show is a missed opportunity, since Kat Dennings, a Jewish actress, plays the raised-poor character who isn’t written as Jewish.

Reality television has become one of the medium’s most popular genres, spanning a wide array of realities. While there are a few reality shows about working class communities, like “Long Haul Truckers” and “Deadliest Catch,” those are not the places you’ll find Jews. Instead, check out the “Real Housewives” series, which focuses on a small number of wealthy women in different American cities and has included several Jewish women over the years. Or watch one of the many shows about high-end real estate. Or the “Shahs of Sunset.” Or “My Unorthodox Life.” Or “The Bachelor” (finally!).

It is possible that the wealthy Jewish women (and the few Jewish men) of reality television do more to shape viewers’ narratives about American Jews than some of the scripted Jewish characters. As much as reality shows are selectively edited, the participants are real people, who often show up in the news once they’ve been introduced on the small screen. Their glamorous real lives get much more attention than the real lives of more ordinary Jews, much less Jews experiencing poverty.

Another quality unique to television is the sheer number of hours of storytelling in a single show. This means television provides a greater opportunity to feature Jewish characters and storylines that explore the Jewish identity of those characters. Films may choose to skip over a scene where the Jewish identity of a character is revealed, or to exclude the character altogether. A television show has the luxury of time; a character’s Jewish identity may not be revealed until the fifth episode… or even the fifth season!

It’s not uncommon for an episode to be devoted to a Jewish ritual (wedding, funeral, b’nai mitzvah, Shabbat) or a Jewish relationship, usually featuring an older Jewish family member. Up until recently, episodes like these were common ways for a mainstream network show to introduce audiences to an unfamiliar culture or community. A show like “High Maintenance,” about a Jewish weed dealer in New York City, does something similar with subcultures, including one episode about formerly Orthodox Jews. This approach placed added weight on these very special episodes to communicate something important about this community; you won’t be surprised to learn that they rarely highlighted the economic struggles of a Jewish character or family member. At the same time, television shows with a significant Jewish focus are rare.

Image: Cast of “My Unorthodox Life”

Film

Useful statistics on the movie-viewing habits of Americans are hard to come by. One widely cited, and widely dismissed, suggests that the average American will watch 5,000 movies during their lifetime. Predicting the future of our film-watching habits feels impossible. In-theater viewing has been declining for years, accelerated by the COVID pandemic. At the same time, with the rise of streaming options, most Americans have easy access to thousands of movies with the click of a button from the comfort of their home, or, really, anywhere.

Before VHS tapes, movies were only available in the theater, which meant that if you missed seeing a film when it came out, it was likely that you would never see it. Since the advent of tapes and discs for rental or purchase, older films could be viewed again and again, while new generations could be entertained by movies that came out before they were born. Streaming increased access exponentially.

All of this creates a challenge for us, as we consider the role of film in disseminating narratives about the economic status of Jews that have influenced Americans today.

For many years, one way film contrasted with television was that film actors were more likely to embody a particular character "type" while film directors were more likely to stick with particular themes. This is important for our analysis, because each era has a few Jewish actors and directors who tend to play Jewish characters and tell Jewish stories. These individuals have a disproportionate influence on public perceptions of Jews.

For example, in the 70s and 80s, Woody Allen, Mel Brooks, Barry Levinson, and Barbra Streisand were among the most important mass audience Jewish filmmakers and performers. The stories they wanted to tell, and the characters they created, had a huge impact on which Jewish narratives were most prominent. Audiences knew they were Jewish and often assumed the characters they played, and the stories they told, were also Jewish. In our analysis, in addition to going wide and reviewing the range of films with Jewish characters and themes, we also go deeper into a few of the more influential Jewish filmmakers and actors, folks that often or always play Jewish characters or create Jewishly infused content. Today, these include the Coen Brothers, Seth Rogen, Adam Sandler, Joey Soloway, Judd Apatow, Steven Spielberg, Sarah Silverman, Darren Aronofsky, Rachel Weisz, Natalie Portman, Sacha Baron Cohen, Stan Lee, Ben Platt, and Tony Kushner.

After analyzing the Jewish characters and storylines in more than 150 films, here is what we learned.

While there are more Jewish characters on television than in film, there are many more films that are centered around Jewish themes. This is connected to an observation we made earlier about how television, with its many hours of storytelling, is more likely to have a Jewish character or feature a Jewish ritual or lifecycle event. The flip side of this is that films, because they must pack an entire story into a couple of hours, are more willing (and likely) to focus narrowly on a single incident or community. For a film to be successful, it only needs people to watch it once. A television show needs people to come back, week after week.

Adrien Brody in *The Pianist*

Before Netflix brought Israeli television to American audiences, there were almost no shows available in the United States that focused on Jews, much less about American Jews and Jewish life (with a handful of exceptions, like “The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel” and “Transparent”). Yet there are countless films that center American Jewish stories, including “A Simple Man,” “The Pawnbroker,” “Goodbye, Columbus,” “Hester Street,” “Annie Hall,” “The Frisco Kid,” “The Chosen,” “Brighton Beach Memoirs,” “Dirty Dancing,” “Radio Days,” “Crossing Delancy,” “Avalon,” “School Ties,” “A Stranger Among Us,” “A Price Above Rubies,” “Liberty Heights,” “Keeping the Faith,” “Wet Hot American Summer”… you get the idea.

Most of these films, like most television shows, don’t feature, much less center, Jews experiencing poverty. Those that do are usually set in the past, or outside of the United States. However, what films lose in reach, when compared to television, they make up for in depth. Those films that DO center Jews experiencing poverty, like “Hester Street” or “Pi” or **“**An American Tail**,”** often provide a nuanced, well-rounded picture. And there are fewer and fewer of these films being made. Only one has been made since 2008, with only a handful that revolve around Jewish characters clearly struggling financially, and many of those are slacker-stoners played by Seth Rogen.

An aside about Seth Rogen

In his films, he has played:

- A stoner who lives off of disability payments
- A stoner who is a process server
- A stoner who works in an electronics store
- A broke barista who gets into porn to pay his electric bill
- A struggling comedian working in food service
- An unemployed former reporter, and a pickle factory worker

It should not come as a surprise that the contemporary Jewish actor most identified with playing Jewish characters barely getting by financially went to a Jewish socialist summer camp.

One of the most prevalent and damaging poverty narratives in the United States divides the poor into deserving and undeserving. It is a narrative about agency and individual responsibility, in which we empathize with those who are poor through no fault of their own, or who we perceive as working hard to move up the economic ladder. Jewish poverty, and white immigrant poverty in general, is notably less pathologized than Black and Brown poverty. Struggling Jews are rarely portrayed as hard drug users or dealers, as welfare recipients, as street criminals, as unhoused, as negligent parents. Jewish poverty is rarely shown as multi-generational, and, relatedly, educational achievement is emphasized.

News

According to a 2022 study by the Medill School of Journalism, “Since 2005, the country has lost more than one-fourth of its newspapers and is on track to lose a third by 2025.” Jews make up 2% of the population in the United States, roughly the same as Native Americans. It’s fair to wonder just how much news coverage could possibly be focused on such a small community, particularly as the industry appears to be in free fall.

Or, for our purposes, just how important is the press, Jewish and otherwise, to shaping narratives about the economic status of American Jews?

Based on our research, despite the downturn, it’s still pretty important.

There are a few reasons for this. The first is that, despite the industry struggles, news and opinion media have retained an enormous audience. Seven of the top 50 most-visited websites are news sites (the others are largely search engines, social media sites, and porn). Americans spend, on average, more than an hour a day reading, watching, or listening to the news.

In our research, we found that while it is uncommon for the national press to focus much attention on Jewish communal issues outside of Israel, it receives more than its fair share. At the same time, coverage of individual Jews in positions of prominence is common. Finally, there remains a robust Jewish media ecosystem, covering both local and national Jewish news for an audience of committed readers.

Based on our audit, we found a number of important similarities between national and Jewish press coverage that impacts how we think about the economic status of American Jews.

There are relatively few mentions of Jews struggling with poverty in both the Jewish and the mainstream press. Using the Lexis search engine and focusing on newspapers and magazines based in the United States, we found 2 million stories that included Jewish keywords, but only 50,000 stories that spoke about poverty or economic hardship directly. This seemed promising, until we drilled down a bit.

The top outlets with articles triggered by the keywords “Jewish” and “poverty” were The New York Times (3,282), Los Angeles Times (1,476), Sun-Sentinel (Fort Lauderdale) (960), University Wire (950), The Forward (893), The Jerusalem Post (885), Washington Jewish Week (781), Newsday (New York) (692), and The Miami Herald (668).

These articles were overwhelmingly focused on things other than poverty among American Jews. In a review of all 40 New York Times stories from 2023 flagged by our search, not one was about Jews experiencing poverty today. The most common, and relevant, articles were obituaries of Jews who grew up in poverty, and accomplished enough in their lives to merit a Times obituary. Once again, these stories reinforce a popular narrative, in which poverty existed in the Jewish past, not the Jewish present.

Once we narrowed down the search, the stories we found were usually about one of the following:

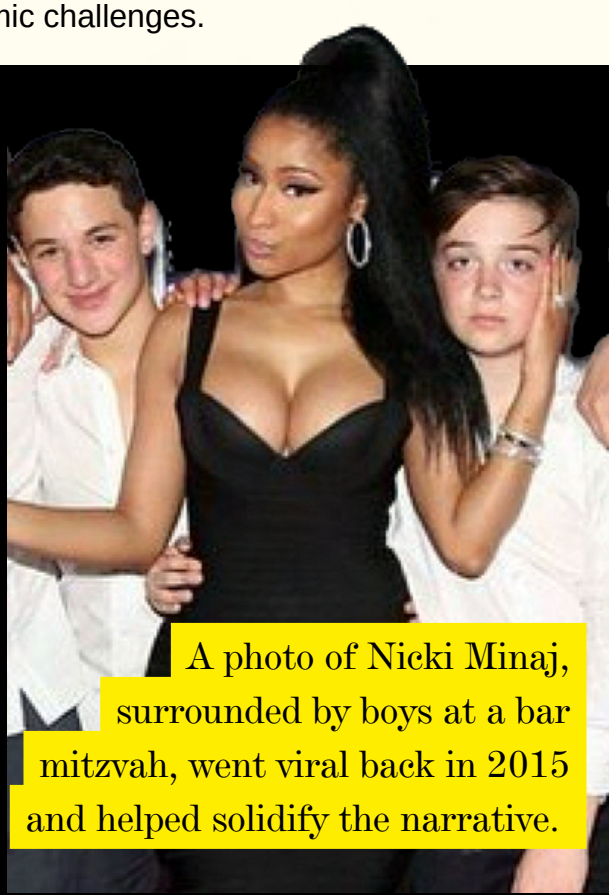
- Coverage of the work of Jewish social service agencies
- The impact of an economic downturn on Jews
- Misuse of public funds designated for low-income people
- Jewish immigrants struggling to adapt
- The elderly living on fixed incomes

Stories about efforts to subsidize Jewish programs, like **summer camp** and **day school**, weren't explicitly about poverty but did speak to both the community's economic diversity and its commitment to need-based support. These kinds of articles appeared, on average, around once a month. The difference between national and Jewish press coverage of these issues is a matter of degree more than kind.

Much more common were stories that suggest Jewish communal wealth and influence, either directly or by implication. The big stories about Jews or the Jewish community in the national press overwhelmingly advance a narrative of Jewish success in politics, business, entertainment, philanthropy, and government. The only major, national countervailing stories in the news, going back several decades, are the arrival of Jews from the former Soviet Union, the biography and persona of Bernie Sanders, and critical stories about improper use of public funds by Orthodox Jewish communities. Beyond these stories, which received repeated, ongoing coverage across many major outlets, we found consistent, one-off coverage of how particular Jewish communities were impacted by a poor economy or other economic challenges.

There were two kinds of stories that jumped out at us because they were so common and because they advanced powerful, unhelpful narratives. **Looking just at print news since 2008, we found more than 100 articles about b'nai mitzvah party blowouts, often featuring celebrity performers and other extravagences.** These articles typically appeared in gossip columns or entertainment news sections, giving them a wider reach than more traditional subject matter.

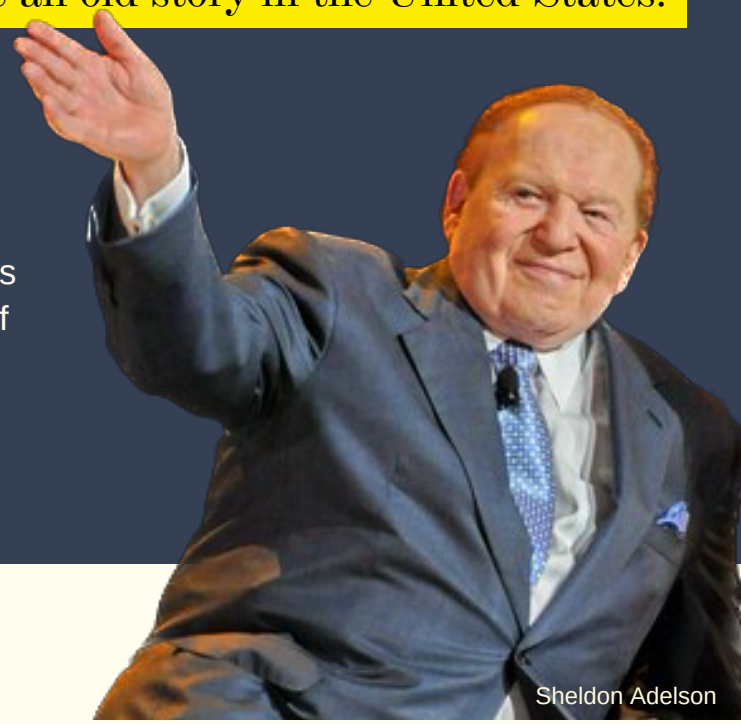
So many famous musicians have been hired to perform at b'nai mitzvahs in real life that we found this as a storyline in not one, but two, different recent television shows. "Dave" on Hulu and "Atlanta" on FX, scripted series about rappers, have similar storylines in which the stars are hired by wealthy parents to entertain pre-teen children (and impress the adult guests).



A photo of Nicki Minaj, surrounded by boys at a bar mitzvah, went viral back in 2015 and helped solidify the narrative.

Over-the-top expenditures by the rich are an old story in the United States.

Our country's dominant narrative about wealth is celebratory; we admire people who make money because we assume it is the result of hard work. The myth of the self-made man is seductive. We also believe it is our duty to spend our money; conspicuous consumption, in the American imagination, is a way of celebrating success. A counternarrative—grounded either in religious notions of modesty and frugality, populist anti-elitism, or progressive concern over wealth disparities—has trouble competing.



Sheldon Adelson

Another extremely common story, likely to have a disproportionate impact on narratives about the economic status of Jews, focuses on the influence Jewish donors, PACs, and other organizations have on the political and electoral processes. Jewish organizations are very involved in high-profile lobbying and, especially recently, election work. Individual Jews, including many who are leading philanthropists for Jewish causes, like Sheldon Adelson and Bernie Marcus, are regularly covered for their political work. Almost all are supporters of Israel.

The number of articles focused on this space is almost too high to measure. By way of example, since 2008, there have been more than 23,000 articles in newspapers and magazines in the United States that mention AIPAC. United Democracy Project, a super PAC founded by AIPAC before the 2022 election, has already been mentioned in almost 400 articles, with its massive spending the focal point of many.

One positive narrative activated by all of this content is rooted in the story of America as a participatory democracy. Engagement in politics can be heartwarming, even inspiring: democracy as a peaceful way to resolve differences that might otherwise lead to civil war, coups, and instability.

But this is not the dominant narrative. Money in politics may be ubiquitous, and protected by multiple Supreme Court decisions, but the popular story is that it is corrosive and corrupting. According to this narrative, people (and companies) who spend money on lobbying and elections do so to buy politicians or capture decision-makers.

The coverage of both b'nai mitzvah parties and donors to our political parties can, and likely does, activate antisemitic narratives around Jewish wealth and power. Because these narratives are so deeply embedded, they undoubtedly influence the assumptions Americans make about the economic status of American Jews. If Jews are so rich, they can't be poor, this narrative suggests. **In other words, the story of American Jews is a story of prosperity, which aligns with antisemitic narratives about Jewish wealth and influence, which come together to obscure the reality of Jewish poverty.**

At the same time, news coverage of antisemitism, which is a significant part of the Jewish news landscape, plays a complicated role in this space. It likely generates sympathy for Jews and advances a narrative in which Jews are, in certain ways, a vulnerable minority. But Jewish poverty in the U.S. is not caused by antisemitism. Therefore, coverage of antisemitism can reinforce beliefs about Jewish success, either by amplifying antisemitic ideas about Jewish conspiracy or by showcasing Jewish influence through the effectiveness of the community's response. For example, an article about Tucker Carlson's invocation of the Great Replacement conspiracy, in which Jews are alleged to support immigration as a way to replace white people in the United States, can spread the conspiracy it is covering. In press coverage of the Jewish communal response to Kyrie Irving's decision to promote an antisemitic film, the Anti-Defamation League's success in punishing Irving reinforced some observer's beliefs in undue Jewish influence.

Taken together, stories of antisemitism and narratives of Jewish wealth interact in ways that compound the harm to Jews, while erasing the reality of Jews who are struggling to make ends meet.

Tucker Carlson

Our research confirmed that there aren't many stories about Jews experiencing poverty, and there are too many stories about Jews and Jewish institutions with money and influence. But we wanted to dig a bit deeper. If there aren't a lot of stories about Jews experiencing poverty, which stories about poverty were being told, and about whom? This could help us consider how to incorporate Jewish stories into pre-existing coverage.

Initially, we had assumed that we wouldn't find many articles about poverty, but that was not the case. The relatively small number of stories about Jewish poverty was not a function of the lack of press coverage of poverty, it was the function of the way Jews fit into coverage about poverty.

To figure this out, we broke down the big poverty news stories of the past 50 years into four categories: stories about poor people, stories about the bad economy, stories about exploitative businesses, and stories about poverty-focused government programs. We then listed out the primary kinds of stories and considered how many of these stories are largely about communities other than Jews. As you can see below, only one-third of these stories are likely to ever mention Jews struggling with poverty.

The category with the largest number of stories that feature Jews are those about poverty-focused government programs. All of the stories in this category, except welfare / welfare reform, feature Jews. This is in part a reflection of the fact that Jewish social service agencies, which provide government-funded services, receive press coverage. We also noticed articles about ultra-Orthodox communities utilizing government housing and education programs, often to meet their communities' particular needs.

The two other kinds of stories that featured Jews among those impacted by poverty were stories about an economic disruption, and stories about student debt. For example, during the Great Recession, we saw press coverage of Jewish neighborhoods where the crash in the housing market had caused significant economic pain. There have been hundreds of stories in recent years about student debt, particularly as the debate about loan forgiveness took center stage. It was not surprising to see Jews, who are disproportionately represented in higher education, showing up in some of those articles.

As you can see from the graphic below, twice as many kinds of stories about poverty basically never mention Jews. For example, the category of stories about exploitative businesses includes articles about undocumented workers, de-unionization, the rise in low-wage service jobs, stagnant wages, and the concentration of wealth. A century ago, Jewish workers and the unions and other organizations that represent them were an important part of this narrative. Today, they are absent. Jews are also missing from most stories about poor people. Our understanding of what an individual experiencing poverty looks like is disproportionately shaped by these stories about homelessness, illicit drug use, and mass incarceration.

To put it another way, the places where poor Jews show up avoid most of the truly damaging narratives, which dehumanize the poor and pathologize poverty.

POVERTY STORIES COVERED REGULARLY BY THE PRESS

Stories about POVERTY-FOCUSED GOVERNMENT PROGRAMS

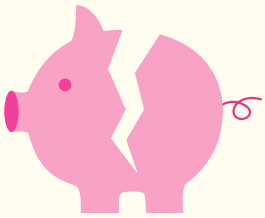
Medicare/aid, Social Security
Health care / bankruptcy
Welfare / welfare reform
Education vouchers / grants
Housing

Stories about EXPLOITATIVE BUSINESSES

Undocumented workers
De-unionization
Rise in low wage service jobs
Stagnant wages
Concentration of wealth

Stories about THE BAD ECONOMY

Dying Industries
Economic disruption
Global trade



Stories about POOR PEOPLE

Cycle of poverty stories
Homelessness
Drug use
Mass incarceration
Student debt

Conclusions From Audit

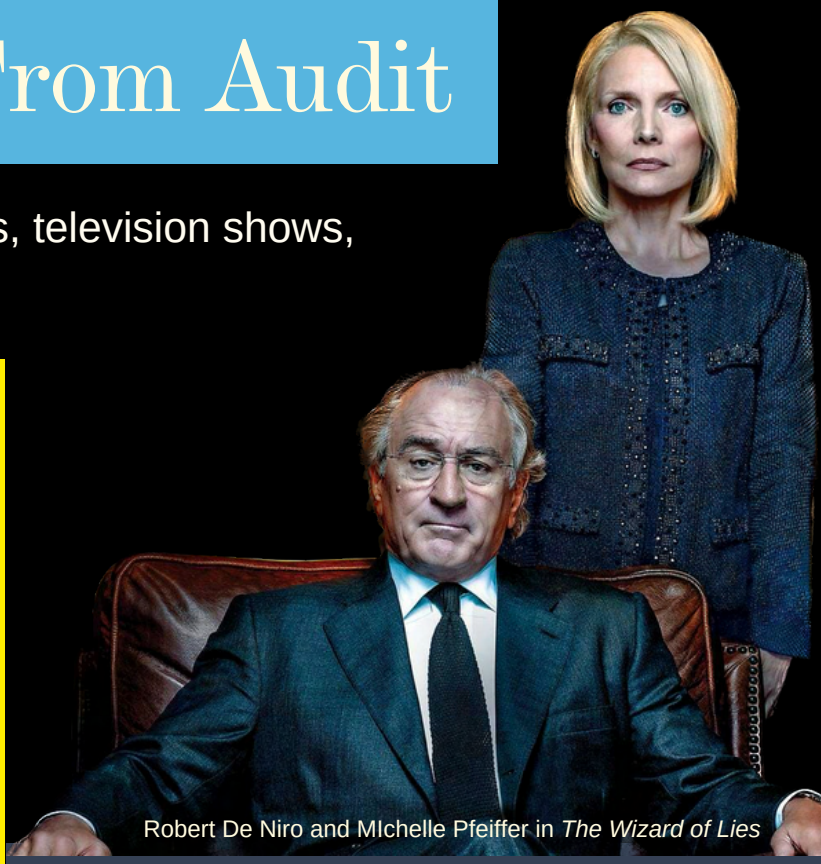
After reviewing more than 1,000 articles, television shows, and films, what can we conclude?

While Jews experiencing poverty are not the focus of many stories, either in the press or in popular entertainment, they are not completely absent in those spaces. These representations, real or scripted, are enough to give some shape to public conceptions of Jews who are poor or struggling.

The three most common representations of these Jews are as ultra-Orthodox, elderly, or 20-somethings. Because Jewish 20-somethings tend to lack Jewish distinctiveness, they are less likely to come to mind as an archetype of Jews experiencing poverty. Among the elderly, Holocaust survivors, a distinctively Jewish subset, fit more easily into our Jewish poverty archetype than other elderly Jews. Ultra-Orthodox Jews, who are extremely distinctive Jewishly, and are often portrayed as poor or in need of government assistance, are the most common archetype of the Jewish poor.

It's no coincidence that Tevye, from "Fiddler on the Roof," is likely the most famous poor Jew Americans are familiar with. "If I Were A Rich Man," which has been part of the cultural consciousness for 60 years, is undoubtedly still shaping the dominant narratives about Jewish poverty.

Chaim Topol in *The Fiddler on the Roof*



Robert De Niro and MIchelle Pfeiffer in *The Wizard of Lies*

Stories of Jews with wealth and influence are almost ten times more common in entertainment than stories of Jews unable to make ends meet. The narratives advanced by these stories are harmful and distorting: the former by tapping into antisemitism and the latter by overshadowing the reality of many American Jews.

We found a wide variety of stories that connect American Jews with wealth and influence. Sometimes, the Jewish identity of those involved is obvious to Jews but unknown to non-Jews. So we focused on stories where Jewish identity is overt and intertwined with wealth. We did a deeper dive on two stories that were particularly common; stories about extravagant b'nai mitzvah parties and stories about Jewish lobbying and electoral giving.

In film and television, most Jewish characters aren't billionaires, but they are definitely part of the professional class. Lawyers and doctors, businessmen and entertainers are the norm. Contemporary Jews without a college education, still a demarcation line between the upper and lower classes, are rarely seen.

The principal narratives in the press and popular entertainment that impact how Americans think about the economic status of American Jews range from unhelpful to dangerous. The most dominant narrative we encountered is the American Dream narrative, a story of upward mobility from humble origins through hard work. Even many of the examples from entertainment of Jews experiencing poverty advance this narrative, by placing Jewish poverty at the beginning of a multi-generational process toward prosperity.

Richard Schiff in “The West Wing”

A second relevant narrative, which builds on the first, is that American Jews are white, and were part of the mass wave of European immigrants who arrived around the turn of the 20th century. This narrative of whiteness erases large numbers of non-white Jews and recent immigrants, and excludes Jews from many of the racialized tropes about poverty in America. We also found examples of the model minority narrative, which characterizes as exceptional the success of certain groups (typically Jews and Asians) who, according to the narrative, achieved success despite facing bigotry and hardships (as opposed to, you know, those other minorities).

There were a few narratives in which Jews were featured prominently, yet it wasn’t clear if those narratives had become associated with Jewishness. The slacker narrative, in which aimless 20-somethings (recently, millennials) are too stoned or lazy to succeed in work and life, was well and often represented by Jewish actors. The redemption narrative, where the very rich lose everything and are forced to work their way back up the economic ladder, also did not, in our view, become a particularly Jewish narrative.

There are many kinds of stories about poverty in America, both in the press and popular entertainment, that never or rarely mention Jews, while focusing instead on a small number of stigmatized communities. These include urban Black and Brown communities, rural white communities, and Latin American immigrants.

We found that Jews were represented in news articles about government anti-poverty programs, like Medicare, but were almost completely absent from articles about poor people or about those impacted by exploitative businesses. Stories about poor people tend to focus on the ways in which they can disrupt the lives of the non-poor; stories about people who are homeless or drug users or impacted by mass incarceration. Articles about exploitative businesses present the victims in a much more favorable light, yet also rarely mention Jews; the subjects are usually immigrants. With no Jews appearing in so many categories of storytelling about those experiencing poverty, despite the reality that Jews also experience homelessness, abuse drugs, and go to jail, it would be difficult for Americans to see Jewish poverty as a problem.

CHANGING THE NARRATIVES

As we noted earlier in this report, we are not suggesting that stories of Jewish economic success be excluded from entertainment and the news. Instead, we are seeking to complicate these narratives by telling a wider range of stories that better reflect the diverse lived experiences of American Jews.

If that is our goal, how do we go about achieving it?

How to change the narratives

The simplest way to think about interventions in the narrative process is to break the storytelling process down into three parts. At each stage, philanthropy can invest in ways that will tell the untold stories about the range of narratives about the economic status of American Jews. **The three approaches include telling our own stories, influencing stories being told by others, and leveraging the stories that have already been told.**

In 2007, unhappy with the stories being told in the Israeli press, businessman and philanthropist Sheldon Adelson started a free newspaper, Israel Hayom. Over time it became the most widely read newspaper in Israel, which has enabled it to influence many of the dominant narratives in Israeli life. This is a dramatic, but not unique, example of how investments in storytelling vehicles can shape and shift narratives. In the United States in 2004, Jeffrey Skoll, a successful businessman and philanthropist, founded Participant Media, a production company dedicated to social impact filmmaking. Through movies like “An Inconvenient Truth,” “The Help,” “Spotlight,” and “Denial,” Participant Media has impacted narratives about issues like climate change, domestic work, sexual abuse by priests, and antisemitism.

For the most part, philanthropy sets its sights a bit lower than Adelson and Skoll. Some foundations will make grants to pay for reporters to cover a particular beat, or will run fellowships to support artists working on a new play or film that speaks to a shared concern. The advantage to intervening this early in the creative process is that it provides the funder with the most control over the stories that are told, and the narratives they seek to shape. The disadvantage is that it is expensive to create original content.

Another way to invest in narrative change is by influencing the stories others are already telling. In news and entertainment, thousands of stories are being told every year; the opportunities to shape those stories are significant. Many watchdog organizations get involved at this stage of the process. They learn about a new film, or television program, or investigative article that is addressing an issue they care about, and they ask to meet with the creative individual or team behind it.

Often advocates are accompanied to their meetings with creators by issue experts, including people who have lived experience that can inform the storytellers. One goal of this is accuracy, but it can often lead to memorable, narrative-shifting stories.

The organization Define American, which is interested in telling stories about immigrants to the United States, was once asked to help the NBC hit comedy “Superstore” with a storyline in which a character comes to terms with his undocumented status. The writers were hoping to wrap up the storyline in a few episodes, with the character becoming a citizen; Define American explained that this was impossible. Instead, the organization helped the writers craft a multi-season story arc for this character, which culminated in his deportation by ICE.

The Jewish community intervenes in this way too, but not often. A new organization, Jew In the City, which is interested in the depiction of Orthodox Jews, recently set up a Hollywood bureau to address issues before they reach the big or small screen.

Finally, philanthropy has realized the importance of lifting up the stories that are aligned, in order to maximize their cultural and narrative impact. The challenge is finding content worth uplifting; this is particularly true for stories about Jews experiencing poverty, which are few and far between. That said, too often the good stories that are told don’t reach nearly as many people as they could.

The film “Roma” and the television show “One Day at a Time” both benefited from philanthropic support. “Roma,” a film about domestic workers, partnered with the National Domestic Workers Alliance to connect its storytelling with the real life stories of workers. “One Day at a Time,” which was rebooted in 2017 starring a Cuban-American family, was so poorly promoted by its network that a foundation spent money to publicize the series, in order to help it build an audience and stay on the air for longer.

With reporting, organizations that work on particular issues are often involved in both shaping and promoting stories. Recently, in the Jewish community, the group YAFFED invested resources to promote New York Times coverage of yeshivot that failed to provide students with an adequate secular education.

Either way, the creation costs are borne by private interests, while philanthropy uses smaller sums to make the most of the opportunities these stories present.

To shift the narrative about Jewish poverty in America, we think it’s worth looking for opportunities to fund better storytelling, particularly by creators and journalists from outside the dominant groups, and promote aligned stories when they appear. These should be aimed at reaching both the most engaged Jews, who are decision-makers in the community, and the wider Jewish community, which can only be reached through popular media and entertainment outlets. At the moment, there are so few stories about Jewish poverty that it’s imperative to prime the pump and establish a pipeline.

So what would that look like?

What are our new narratives?

Let's assume the principal narratives we want to challenge are the American Dream narrative, the model minority narrative, and the narrative of Ashkenormativity (in which the largely Ashkenazi wave of European Jewish immigrants from 1880-1920 is the default American Jewish experience). In addition, we are confronted with antisemitic narratives about Jewish wealth and power, which can overlap with uplifting narratives about Jewish success and influence. What are our alternatives and how do we tell those stories?

The great wave of Jewish immigration that ended around 1920 anchors many of the core narratives about contemporary Jewish life. It reinforces ideas about Jewish whiteness. It obscures other waves of Jewish immigration and the more recent racial diversification of the community. And it is foundational to the story of universal Jewish achievement from one generation to the next, proof positive of the viability of the American Dream.

Examples of this in entertainment range from sci-fi movies, like Independence Day, to racial dramas, like BlacKkKlansman. We can replace the narrative of Jewish wealth with a narrative about Jewish commitment to equity, in which Jews help lead efforts to address inequality and corruption, both within and beyond the Jewish community. We see this in news coverage of Jewish social service or advocacy efforts. And we can tell stories about how American Jews struggle to overcome the same economic barriers faced by other Americans, replacing a narrative of exceptionalism with a narrative of normalcy. As noted earlier in this report, Seth Rogen and Ilana Glazer specialize in characters (and public personas) that are imperfect, relatable, every-Jews.

To advance these narratives, philanthropy's best options may be sponsoring news beats at select media companies and making targeted investments in aligned creators. The benefit of sponsoring a media company-based position or platform focused on Jewish poverty is that it will lead to a net increase in the amount of storytelling about Jewish poverty. It's true that it is more difficult to determine the narratives advanced by this poverty coverage, although selecting an aligned grantee helps. But given how little we see currently, this feels like a top priority.

At the same time, investments in aligned creators could produce stories not currently being told about Jews experiencing poverty. These can be the stories we believe will shape new narratives about Jewish poverty, while dismantling existing, unhelpful — even dangerous — narratives. Stories about Jews who came as refugees from Ukraine or immigrants from Arab countries; stories of non-white American-born Jews; stories of Jews living in small or rural communities. Stories about Jews just getting by who learn to see their fate intertwined with others. Stories about the struggles Jews face on the economic margins, due to student loans, single motherhood, health care expenses, and housing insecurity. Stories about Jews who can't afford to join a synagogue or otherwise participate in much of Jewish life because it is out of reach financially.

We can also do more to amplify aligned narratives, to make the most out of the stories that are already being told. Impact producers could be helpful here, by connecting content to the right audiences in order to create educational and engagement opportunities. For example, we have seen a significant increase in the reach and impact of documentary films over the past 20 years because philanthropy has made a concerted effort to underwrite not only a film's production, but also its impact production.

Documentaries are not the only opportunity. As we noted earlier, foundations have been very creative about how they help lift up the most aligned stories. Books, television shows, web videos, storytellers, comedians; all are places we can find stories with the aligned narratives we identified. At the same time, if philanthropy is investing in creating content, promoting that content is critical, particularly on social media where it's possible to reach mass audiences. Unfortunately, this is often the place where funders fail to follow through.

Philanthropic investments like these have borne fruit in recent years—seeding, shaping, and promoting storytelling to advance powerful narratives about Muslim and Native Americans, whose populations are similar in size to American Jews.

The Jewish community has the chance to build on what we have learned from their experiences, and to move us closer to seeing American Jews in ways that reflect all of our diversity and complexity.

To learn more about this report and how TEN is working to address Jewish poverty, please visit jfunders.org/TEN

ADDENDUM

Films and TV Shows from "The Case of the Missing Narrative" Data Set

Film

A Price Above Rubies
A Serious Man
Ali
American Gangster
American Hustle
An American Pickle
An American Tail
Annie Hall
Armageddon Time
Avalon
Battle Of the Sexes
Biloxi Blues
BlacKkKlansman
Brighton Beach Memoirs
Bros
Cafe Society
Call Me By Your Name
Casino
Crimes and Misdemeanors
Crossing Delancey
Deconstructing Harry
Denial
Dirty Dancing
Do Revenge
Don't Mess with the Zohan
Drive
Driving Miss Daisy
Eight Crazy Nights
Enemies, a Love Story
Everything is Illuminated
Funny Girl
Funny People
Garden State
Hannah and Her Sisters
Hubie Halloween
Indignation
Inglorious Basterds
Justice League
Keeping the Faith
Keeping up with the Steins
Knockaround Guys
Knocked Up
Liberty Heights
Licorice Pizza
Long Shot
Mank
Mean Girls
Menashe
Milk
Neighbors
Neighbors 2
Nick and Norah's Infinite Playlist
Once Upon a Time in America
One of Us
Pi
Pineapple Express
Private Benjamin
Quiz Show
Radio Days
Reality Bites
Requiem for a Dream
Rocky 2
Saving Private Ryan
School Ties
Shiva Baby
Slums of Beverly Hills
The Birdcage
The Chosen
The Fabelmans
The Godfather, Part II
The Hangover
The Interview
The Meyerowitz Stories
The Night Before
The Social Network
The Trial of the Chicago Seven
The Unborn
The Week Of
The Wolf of Wall Street
This Is 40
This is the End
Tropic Thunder
Uncut Gems
War Dogs
Wet Hot American Summer
You People

Television

American Crime Story: Impeachment
Angels in America
Arrested Development
Arthur
As Told by Ginger
Barefoot Contessa
Better Things
Beverly Hills 90210
Big Mouth
Boardwalk Empire
Broad City
Brooklyn Nine-Nine
Buffy the Vampire Slayer
Buying Beverly Hills
Cheers
Children's Hospital
Community
Crazy Ex-Girlfriend
Curb Your Enthusiasm
Deadwood
Difficult People
Entourage
ER
Family Guy
Fleishman is in Trouble
Freaks and Geeks
Friends
Ghosts (USA)
Girls
Glee
Gossip Girl
Grace and Frankie
Grey's Anatomy
Hey Arnold!
High Maintanance
Hill Street Blues
Homeland
House
How I Met Your Mother
Hunters
Keeping Up with the Kardashians
Kim Possible
Law and Order
Lizzie McGuire
Love is Blind
Mad Men
Million Dollar Listing Los Angeles
Million Dollar Listing New York
My So-Called Life
My Super Sweet 16
My Unorthdox Life
Nathan for You
NCIS
Never Have I Ever
New Amsterdam
New Girl
Numbers
Orange is the New Black
Pepper Ann
Private Practice
Ray Donovan
Real Housewives of Beverly Hills
Real Housewives of New York
Reboot
Rhoda
Royal Pains
Russian Doll
Schitts Creek
Seinfeld
Selling Sunset
Sesame Street
Sex and the City
Shahs of Sunset
South Park
Succession
Superstore
Taxi
The Bachelor
The Big Bang Theory
The Equalizer
The Goldbergs
The Good Doctor
The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel
The Millionaire Matchmaker
The Nanny
The OC
The Patient
The People v OJ Simpson: American Crime Story
The Plot Against America
The Politician
The Rehearsal
The Rugrats
The Shrink Next Door
The Simpsons
The Stain
The West Wing
The Wire
The Wonder Years
The Wonder Years (2022)
Transparent
Unorthodox
Welcome Back, Kotter
Will & Grace

Complete list available at tinyurl.com/missingnarrative