

Premium Jews

In American television studies Jews are generally thrown into the grab bag of white ethnics. Tony's Italian, Uncle Jesse's Greek and Krusty's Jewish. From there it's tempting to undergo an accounting process through which to determine the quantity and quality of Jewish-American TV presence. First you count up all the Jews. Then you see whether or not most of them are "good." You make sure they are smart and love their kids and you keep the stereotype police on speed dial just in case they're too smart or love their kids too much. Finally, you make sure there's a certain amount of variety in your televisual Semites. There should be some men and some women, some old people and some young, some doctors and some lawyers. Such a process done today quickly shows that while there is certainly something left to be desired in Jewish-American representation, the Jews on TV are not that different from the ones filling out their census forms.

Of course, this white-ethnic approach ignores some important things. Most obviously, I hope, is the fact that not all Jews are white. There are Sephardic Jews, Arab Jews and, yes, even Black Jews. The ethnic diversity of Jews in America pales in comparison to that of Israel, but it remains the case that not every American Jew has precious family stories about Uncle Tevya milking cows in a shtetl back in the Old Country. Even more so, there's the fact that Judaism is not an ethnicity. Sure, there is an ethnic connection between lots of Jews and, just as surely, some Jews celebrate their cultural Jewishness while remaining less enthused by what they perceive to be the more restrictive nature of Jewish practice. And no, not all Jews believe in precisely the same theological tenants. But while there is nary a cultural element that connects all Jews (try selling a loaf of gefilte fish to a Jew from Morocco), Torah resonates across the Jewish world, even if it is rejected by some of it.

So what happens if you add religion into our Jewish (and what other kind is there?) accounting of television representation? First off, you'd find that there is, in fact, a pretty wide range of religious practices among television Jews. While there has not been a main character to represent the very sizable Orthodox population in America, religious Jews do show up in shows like *Entourage* and *Curb Your Enthusiasm*. Sometimes they are smart, sympathetic characters with admirable devotion to their religion; sometimes they are comically exaggerated fanatics being mocked because they are different. But they're there. Also, programs like *Weeds* and, less recently, *Sex in the City* have devoted major plotlines to exploring complex Jewish topics such as conversion, Reform seminary admissions policies and the question of who is a Jew.

However, you may have noticed that in addition to their occasional philo-Semitism, the programs listed above have another element in common. To make some marketing guy somewhere very happy, these Jewish characters and stories are not on TV, they are on HBO (and Showtime). While this may not be a groundbreaking discovery, I submit that it also is not an insignificant one. A comparison to network television perhaps emphasizes the point. There have been a few interesting Jewish characters traveling through the airwaves over the past decade. Toby on *The West Wing* and Matt Albie on

Studio 60 jump to mind. It is even possible that someone other than Aaron Sorkin has been involved with something both interesting and Jewish. But by and large the template for broadcast Jews remains what it was for decades. They are generally denoted by names, eyewear and mannerisms, with often little to distinguish the New Yorker from the secular New York Jew and no other kind of Jew to be found anywhere.

A case in point is Howard Wolowitz, a supporting character on CBS' *The Big Bang Theory*, a reasonably intelligent show that features four nerdy geniuses riffing on stuff that TV writers probably don't know enough about to make truly effective jokes about. And if you're going to have a gang of smart guys, of course you need a Jew. So how do we know Howard feels weird when he gets greeted at Wal-Mart in December? Mostly because he is short, good at math, possesses an Eddie Cantoresque physique and has a ridiculous appetite for gentile women.

This is not the end of the world, and it may even be funny. But the question is why your antenna brings you Wolowitz while your premium cable package delivers episodes revolving around the rules of Yom Kippur. There is an obvious (though personally unconfirmed) demographic difference between the audience make-ups of the two delivery systems. Only twelve states in this nation boast Jewish populations of even 100,000, and I'm fairly confident that all of them feature relatively high HBO subscription rates. Premium channels produce programming that not only appeals to Jewish viewers but also asks non-Jews to draw on their knowledge of Judaism and then expand it by engaging with their narratives and identifying with their characters. Broadcast television largely doesn't. Far more often it serves up stagnant stereotypes to a population that, in very large part, does not interact with religious Jews on a daily basis. A divide in the nation is thereby potentially made that much more divisive.

For a long time Jewish artists worked to prove that Jews are just like Christians. HBO has been willing to show that, in fact, they're not in some important ways. This is a good point and one that may well help viewers understand the world and a subset of people who live within it.