



# **The American Jewish Story through Cinema (Jewish Life, History, and Culture)**

*Eric A. Goldman*

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Like the *haggadah*, the traditional “telling” of the story of the Israelites’ exodus from Egypt that is read at the Passover seder, cinema offers a valuable text from which to gain an understanding of the social, political, and cultural realities of Jews in America. In an industry strongly influenced by Jewish filmmakers who made and continue to make the decisions as to which films are produced, the complex and evolving nature of the American Jewish condition has had considerable impact on American cinema and, in particular, on how Jews are reflected on the screen. This groundbreaking study analyzes select mainstream films from the beginning of the sound era to today to provide an understanding of the American Jewish experience over the last century.

In the first half of the twentieth century, Hollywood’s movie moguls, most of whom were Jewish, shied away from asserting a Jewish image on the screen for fear that they might be too closely identified with that representation. Over the next two decades, Jewish moviemakers became more comfortable with the concept of a Jewish hero and with an overpowered, yet heroic, Israel. In time, the Holocaust assumed center stage as the single event with the greatest effect on American Jewish identity. Recently, as American Jewish screenwriters, directors, and producers have become increasingly comfortable with their heritage, we are seeing an unprecedented number of movies that spotlight Jewish protagonists, experiences, and challenges.

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