

# Religion, Culture and Gender Guides



The purpose of the Guides is to showcase the work of Manchester students on the theme of Religion, Culture and Gender in Britain, and provide creative, informative and critically informed resources on this theme.

**The Perception of Jewish Women in Popular Media:****'Jewish Mum of the Year', Channel Four, 2012.****George Rawlinson****'Jewish Mum of the Year': Outline and advocacy.**

The aim of the competition, launched by the Jewish News, was to find a worthy 'agony aunt' who would have her own column and respond to questions concerning Jewish mothering in the context of the modern world. To discern who among the Jewish community had the best credentials for such a role, eight Jewish mothers from the United Kingdom were selected to compete in a series of four tasks designed to test their maternal and domestic aptitude, not simply as mothers, but as Jewish mothers. The winner would ideally "synthesise thousands of years of tradition and pressure upon her to enable the continuation of the tribe in so many ways with the ability to be a star in today's life here and now,"<sup>1</sup> according to the Yiddish Scholar and Judge, Dovid Katz.

Among the contestants selected there are the secular and those of varying degrees of orthodoxy, all from a variety of different social, financial and regional backgrounds. Demonstrating this diversity, Richard Ferrer writes, "we met single mums, yummy mums, grand mums, great-grand mums, mumzillas, religious mums and really religious mums before whittling down a shortlist of 80 into the magnificent eight seen in the opening episode."<sup>2</sup> The intention underlying such diversity was to affirm to those outside of the Jewish community,

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<sup>1</sup> Channel Four, 'Jewish Mum of the Year,' series one, episode one, online video, 47:34. January 1st, 2012. [accessed 30<sup>th</sup> December, 2013]. <<http://www.channel4.com/programmes/jewish-mum-of-the-year/4od#3447482>>.

<sup>2</sup> Richard Ferrer, "Channel 4's Jewish Mum of the Year was my idea and I'm proud of it," *The Independent*, October 16<sup>th</sup>, 2012, [accessed January 5<sup>th</sup>, 2014]. <<http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/comment/channel-4s-jewish-mum-of-the-year-was-my-idea-and-im-proud-of-it-8209464.html>>.

“how completely different we all are,”<sup>3</sup> Ferrer writes, in light of what he considers to be past attempts on the part of British Television to lazily lump all British Jews together as “men with beards and women in wigs” who follow “arcane religious custom,” and are all Holocaust survivors.<sup>4</sup> Therefore the contestants were selected and the programme organised, with the fundamental intention of dispelling, rather than reinforcing stereotypes according to Ferrer.<sup>5</sup>

The four tasks consisted of organising a *Bar-Mitzvah*, Matchmaking, organising a daytrip for the elderly, and the final, the two remaining contestants hosting Friday night Dinner, or *Shabbat*, for their families, the Judges, previous contestants, and Jewish celebrities. All tasks had an intentional maternal domestic focus, not only serving the purpose of discerning who would be the most suitable agony aunt, but also giving those outside of the Jewish community an insight into the everyday lives of Jewish mothers. These tasks suitably raised issues of difference in religious practice and belief, cultural background, and gender roles between the contestants, for the purpose of presenting a pluralistic understanding of what it is to be a Jewish mother, according to Ferrer.

### **Reflecting upon this case study, in what ways might the media perception of Jewish women be understood?**

To elaborate one might question whether such a perception is reflecting the reality or reinforcing stereotypes, representative or unrepresentative. One might further question the intention underlying such media portrayals. For example, whether Channel Four deliberately portrayed Jewish women in a particular light or whether the fact of the programme being reality television rendered this inevitable, be it deliberate or not. The intention here is to present approaches from various angles, substantiated with both popular opinion and

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<sup>3</sup> Ferrer, “Channel 4’s Jewish Mum of the Year was my idea and I’m proud of it.”

<sup>4</sup> Ferrer, “Channel 4’s Jewish Mum of the Year was my idea and I’m proud of it.”

<sup>5</sup> Ferrer, “Channel 4’s Jewish Mum of the Year was my idea and I’m proud of it.”

academic research, to provide the reader with an understanding of the diversity of perspectives in relation to this topic.

### **Ruth, Emma, and other contestants: Affirming notorious stereotypes**

In the first episode, Jewish television presenter Vanessa Feltz describes the excessively maternal nature of the Jewish mother, saying “the umbilical cord is made of reinforced concrete, steel, and chopped liver, chicken soup.”<sup>6</sup> Entertainer, Uri Geller, elaborates further, “they want to smother you and love you, hug you, kiss you.”<sup>7</sup> The impression one gets of a Jewish mother from such portrayals is that of a loving, albeit overbearing caregiver, having little time or interest for anything other than domestic work and raising the children. Such a claim is further substantiated consistently throughout the series, by the very maternal and domestic tasks the contestants compete in as well as the personalities of the individual contestants themselves. All of them maintain that they would do anything for their children, around whom their lives revolve. Even when not expressed verbally, the programme itself rarely portrays the mother in and of herself, instead depicting her with her children or other contestants. In so doing, the programme defines the contestants by their roles and responsibilities. Examining a popular ‘training manual’ for the Jewish mother produced in the 1960’s, detailing “seven basic sacrifices to make for your child,”<sup>8</sup> one of them being ‘Don’t let him know you fainted twice in the supermarket from fatigue. (But make sure he knows you’re not letting him know),’<sup>9</sup> one may be inclined to agree with this statement.

Similarly, John Crace of *The Guardian* writes, ‘it looked very much as if the producers had gone out of their way to find extreme examples of every Jewish stereotype: the bling

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<sup>6</sup> Channel Four, ‘Jewish Mum of the Year,’ series one, episode one.

<sup>7</sup> Channel Four, ‘Jewish Mum of the Year,’ series one, episode one.

<sup>8</sup> Roberta Mock, “Female Jewish Comedians: Grotesque Mimesis and Transgressing Stereotypes,” *New Theatre Quarterly*, Volume 15: Issue 02, May 1999, pp. 99-108, p. 100, [accessed January 7<sup>th</sup>, 2014].

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S0266464X00012793> .

<sup>9</sup> Mock, “Female Jewish Comedians: Grotesque Mimesis and Transgressing Stereotypes,” p. 100.

princess, the control freak, the ultra-orthodox, the smotherer, the delusional, the neurotic.’<sup>10</sup> Indeed, one of the contestants, Emma, describes herself in her introduction as a ‘Jewish Princess.’<sup>11</sup> This is a notorious Jewish stereotype of the materialistic, sex-crazed, and above all, demanding westernised Jewish woman,<sup>12</sup> of which even Jews themselves poke fun at as evidenced by Jay Allen’s *Five Hundred Great Jewish Jokes*.<sup>13</sup> The contestant Ruth, in her religious conservatism as evidenced by the covering of her hair and stricter adherence to segregation laws, coupled with her conscious sense of difference from wider, non-Jewish society and even from other contestants such as Emma, could arguably embody the stereotype of the ‘Ultra-Orthodox’. Following the dispute between Emma and Ruth the outside observer may indeed receive the impression that, as Emma says in reference to Ruth, they’re ‘two different people from two different worlds... I don’t think she’s in touch with people, especially normal Jewish people.’<sup>14</sup> Although a portrayal of such radical difference may be a means of dispelling stereotypes, as is Ferrer’s aim, it arguably simplifies such distinctions through portraying such extreme difference. David Hodari, writing for *The Jewish Chronicle*, elaborates upon this when he writes, ‘there may be modern yummy mummies alongside relatively backward, sheiteled ones, but all this programme does is split the "contestants" into two vague blocks - judgmental tradition and sneering modernity.’<sup>15</sup>

### **Reinforcing, or dispelling stereotypical perceptions of Jewish women?**

However, it is Ruth who questions, “‘what’s a typical Jewish mum? Yes I’m Jewish, I’m religious, yes I gave my daughter values, but I hope that I am different, everybody in their

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<sup>10</sup> John Crace, “TV review: Jewish Mum of the Year; Fresh Meat; Nurse Jackie,” October 9<sup>th</sup>, 2012, [accessed January 7<sup>th</sup> 2014]. < <http://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2012/oct/09/jewish-mum-of-the-year>>.

<sup>11</sup> Channel Four, ‘Jewish Mum of the Year,’ series one, episode one.

<sup>12</sup> Mock, “Female Jewish Comedians: Grotesque Mimesis and Transgressing Stereotypes,” p. 100.

<sup>13</sup> Mock, “Female Jewish Comedians: Grotesque Mimesis and Transgressing Stereotypes,” p. 100.

<sup>14</sup> Channel Four, ‘Jewish Mum of the Year,’ series one, episode one.

<sup>15</sup> David Hodari, “Channel Four and a Cartoonish Stereotype,” October 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2012, [accessed January 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2014]. < <http://www.thejc.com/campus/campus-comment/87763/channel-four-and-a-cartoonish-stereotype>>.

own way should be different.’<sup>16</sup> This statement appears to be entirely in accordance with the programmes professed aim, to dispel stereotypes and to question the assumptions of what it is to be a ‘typical Jewish mum’, even though it has been voiced by one seen by some to embody the notorious stereotype of the ultra-orthodox. Furthermore, in briefly examining Ruth’s background as one who became more orthodox later in life, a ‘returner’ or *ba'alot teshuva*, one may argue that, rather than embodying a stereotype, Ruth’s character and the way in which she lives is reflective of the reality for many *ba'a lot teshuva* among the Jewish community. By reiterating her difference, and admitting that she and Emma are from completely different worlds, her position is perhaps a demonstration of Adrienne Baker’s statement, that ‘to become Orthodox is to estrange oneself from the dominant culture and to embrace a different set of values, rituals and a way of life.’<sup>17</sup> She adheres strictly to *halacha*, believing that it is her obligation to follow the law instituted by God as outlined in the Torah, according to her.<sup>18</sup> She is *sheiteled*, wearing the wig, and, much like the other contestants, perceives the family as central, as Baker writes concerning *ba'a lot teshuva*, ‘Orthodox family life seems to have a particular appeal for women.’<sup>19</sup>

### **The triviality of reality television or the gravity of sexist media representation:**

In approaching this question of media perception of Jewish women, one might also question the capacity for reality television to adequately represent any marginal group, let alone Jewish women. Indeed, as Rachel Shukert of *Tablet* writes, referring to *Jewish Mum of the Year*, ‘it purports to cast a new light on a hidden or misunderstood subculture yet by definition is forced to select its participants from a subculture all its own: people who are

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<sup>16</sup> Channel Four, ‘Jewish Mum of the Year,’ series one, episode one.

<sup>17</sup> Adrienne Baker, ‘Aspects of Orthodoxy,’ in *The Jewish Woman in Contemporary Society: Transitions and Traditions*. (Macmillan, 1993), p. 118.

<sup>18</sup> Channel Four, ‘Jewish Mum of the Year,’ series one, episode one.

<sup>19</sup> Baker, ‘Aspects of Orthodoxy,’ p. 116.

willing to appear on reality television.<sup>20</sup> The personalities of those belonging to such a subculture, Shukert writes, are characterised by, ‘the entitlement, the unwavering sense of rectitude, the horrible sense that someone, somewhere might be getting attention that should rightfully be yours—that only belongs on the TV screen.’<sup>21</sup> This considered, it is arguably no surprise to some that the portrayal of these Jewish women would be unrepresentative of the majority, depicting instead the ‘borderline personality disordered and blatantly unhinged.’<sup>22</sup> By virtue of such a programme being entertainment, its contestants’ capacity to entertain and shock the public may be favoured over their ability to adequately represent the female Jewish community. Hodari highlights this inconsistency when he writes, in reference to Ferrer, ‘the Jewish News editor claimed to be fed up with shows about Jews which peddled "lazy clichés" while simultaneously highlighting the need for "Oy My God" prime-time moments that one wouldn't normally find in unwatched documentaries.’<sup>23</sup> This considered, one may interpret *Jewish Mum of the Year's* depiction of Jewish women not as reflective of the media’s actual perceptions of the female Jewish community, but rather as an attempt to entertain Jewish and non-Jewish audiences with those they deem to be precisely unrepresentative and entertaining. Although, to some it may be a mistake to trivialise such portrayals as being simply light humour. Shukert criticises the programme’s ‘blatant sexism of the Jewish Mother stereotype.’<sup>24</sup> Though contestants such as Lesley arguably question such a stereotype, she was judged out of the competition in the first episode for failing to bake satisfactorily. One may question whether the programme is prescriptive rather than descriptive of how Jewish mothers and Jewish women are in reality, being initiated and organised predominantly by men. Margaret Marshment emphasises the danger of this, writing, ‘it is in men’s interests, as

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<sup>20</sup> Rachel Shukert, “You Never Call, You Never Watch,” *Tablet*, November 9<sup>th</sup>, 2012, [accessed January 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2012]. < <http://www.tabletmag.com/jewish-arts-and-culture/116171/you-never-call-you-never-watch>>.

<sup>21</sup> Shukert, “You Never Call, You Never Watch.”

<sup>22</sup> Shukert, “You Never Call, You Never Watch.”

<sup>23</sup> Hodari, “Channel Four and a Cartoonish Stereotype.”

<sup>24</sup> Shukert, “You Never Call, You Never Watch.”

a group, for women to be confined to the domestic sphere... it renders women dependent on men, identifies women with the 'natural' world of the family.' Certainly, one could argue that the image of the 'domestic goddess' is strongly promoted in *Jewish Mum of the Year*, thereby reaffirming the subordination of women. Acknowledging that the winner is given a position where she may advise and council other Jewish women as an 'agony aunt', being the standard by which other Jewish women are judged, one may argue that *Jewish Mum of the Year* is promoting an ideal towards which other Jewish women should aspire, yet is 'encouraging a division of labour that favours men and disadvantages women.'<sup>25</sup>

### **Conclusion:**

In examining *Jewish Mum of the Year*, one may understand its portrayal of Jewish mothers in all their diversity as a means of dispelling stereotypes and encouraging a more pluralistic understanding of the Jewish community. In contrast, such diversity may be understood as showcasing a variety of stereotypes, from the Jewish Princess to the *Frum* Ultra-Orthodox, which only serves to reinforce negative caricatures rather than dispel them. Reflecting upon the lens through which we observe these Jewish mothers, that of reality television, one may find such caricaturing unsurprising, given the fact that such a genre attracts those extroverted personalities with entertainment-value who want to be on television, inevitably rendering the contestants unrepresentative of the majority of the female Jewish subculture. Though one may trivialise such perceptions as light humour, their potential to reinforce sexism and the subordination of women through the Jewish mother stereotype, according to others, to some, should not be underestimated.

### **Glossary of terms**

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<sup>25</sup> Margaret Marshment, 'The picture is political,' in V. Robinson & D. Richardson, editors, *Introducing Women's Studies*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn., 1997, Chapter 6, p. 127.



**Ba'alot Teshuva:** The Hebrew feminine singular and plural term for a woman who has 'returned' to Orthodox Judaism later in life, though not necessarily from an Orthodox background.

**Bar-Mitzvah:** A Jewish rite of passage signifying a male Jew's transition from a boy into a man, performed on the boy's thirteenth birthday.

**Frum:** A Yiddish term for one who is born into Orthodox Judaism and maintains their practice, not to be confused with *ba'a lot teshuva*.

**Halacha:** The Jewish Law established, formulated and refined by the Rabbis in their interpretation of the Torah, strictly adhered to by Orthodox Jews as the code of living and ceremonial practice.

**Shabbat:** The holiest day of the Jewish week, the seventh day, on which no labour is permitted.

**Torah:** The fundamental, foundational narrative of the Jewish people, often defined as the first five books of the Tanakh, or this including the Rabbinical commentaries constituting the Talmud and Midrash. It is considered to be the Divinely inspired Word of God by Orthodox Jews.

### **Annotated Bibliography:**

**1. Baker, Adrienne, 'Aspects of Orthodoxy,' in *The Jewish Woman in***

***Contemporary Society: Transitions and Traditions*. (Macmillan, 1993):**

A lecturer in Women's studies in Birkbeck College, London University, and researching issues of concern to Jewish women as a member of the Chief Rabbi's working party, she may be considered an authority on Jewish women, and this book demonstrates the scope of her knowledge. 'Aspects of Orthodoxy' has been a

particularly useful chapter, providing a detailed outline of the experience of Orthodox Jewish women of varying degrees of practice.

2. **Crace, John, "TV review: Jewish Mum of the Year; Fresh Meat; Nurse Jackie," October 9<sup>th</sup>, 2012, [accessed January 7<sup>th</sup> 2014]. <**

**<http://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2012/oct/09/jewish-mum-of-the-year>>:**

John Crace, a frequent reviewer for *The Guardian* is not an authority in Judaism or on women's issues, in contrast to Adrienne Baker. Nor is his writing intended for Academia. That said, his criticisms of *Jewish Mum of the Year* reflect popular opinion, particularly with regards to stereotyping, shared by David Hodari and Rachel Shukert, and as a media critic he has a degree of authority in this regard.

3. **Ferrer, Richard, "Channel 4's Jewish Mum of the Year was my idea and I'm proud of it," *The Independent*, October 16<sup>th</sup>, 2012, [accessed January 5<sup>th</sup>, 2014]. <**

**<http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/comment/channel-4s-jewish-mum-of-the-year-was-my-idea-and-im-proud-of-it-8209464.html>>:**

Richard Ferrer has been Editor of the Jewish News for three years and writes extensively as a Journalist on current affairs concerning the Jewish community. In this, he may be considered a spokesperson for the Jewish community, or certainly an informed observer and commentator. His value, and the value of this article, to the topic concerned is that he defends the programme in response to popular criticism by those within the Jewish community, such as David Hodari and Rachel Shukert, and those outside of it such as John Crace. Through reading this article, one gains an understanding of the initial motivations behind producing the programme.

- 4. Hodari, David, "Channel Four and a Cartoonish Stereotype," October 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2012, [accessed January 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2014]. < <http://www.thejc.com/campus/campus-comment/87763/channel-four-and-a-cartoonish-stereotype>>:**

David Hodari, a student of History in his final year at the University of Nottingham, is not an authority as a media critic like John Crace, nor as a authority within the Jewish community on Jewish issues, yet the views expressed in the article in *The Jewish Chronicle* were useful in gaining a better understanding of popular opinion in relation to the case study.

- 5. Marshment, Margaret, 'The picture is political,' in V.Robinson & D.Richardson, editors, *Introducing Women's Studies*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn., 1997, Chapter 6:**

Margaret Marshment, a Senior Lecturer in Media and Cultural Studies at Liverpool John Moores University, may be considered an academic authority on issues concerning women's representation in the media, as evidenced by her article cited here. This work was most useful, as it not only described the numerous ways in which women are presented in the media to their detriment, but also proposed why this was the case. Her theories are most importantly applicable to this case study and enrich one's understanding of the topic with which it is concerned.

- 6. Mock, Roberta, "Female Jewish Comedians: Grotesque Mimesis and Transgressing Stereotypes," *New Theatre Quarterly*, Volume 15: Issue 02, May 1999, pp. 99-108, p. 100, [accessed January 7<sup>th</sup>, 2014].**

**DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S0266464X00012793>:**

Roberta Mock is Associate Dean of the Faculty of Arts at the University of Plymouth and publishes articles focussing on gender, sexuality and performance. Having also written the book, *Jewish Women on Stage, Film, and Television*, one may assume that

she is an informed source on issues concerning Jewish women and their presentation in the media. The article focussed on her was useful in that it described common Jewish stereotypes, that of the Jewish Princess and the Jewish Mother, both applicable to the examination of this case study.

- 7. Shukert, Rachel, “You Never Call, You Never Watch,” *Tablet*, November 9<sup>th</sup>, 2012, [accessed January 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2012]. < <http://www.tabletmag.com/jewish-arts-and-culture/116171/you-never-call-you-never-watch>>:**

As a *Tablet* Magazine columnist on popular culture and author, Rachel Shukert’s understanding of reality television in particular and its limitations in representing minority subcultures was useful in representing a nuanced approach to the limitations of representation inherent in programmes such as *Jewish Mum of the Year*, whilst also reflecting popular opinion in her criticism of stereotypes and of the potentially sexist stereotype of the Jewish Mother.