

Chapter 1

Know Your History

How do we know Jesus was Jewish? He lived at home with his mother until he was thirty, went into his father's business, and had a mother who thought he was God.

—Really old joke

When I had babies, I hated being called Mama. (When the pediatrician airily did it—or called me Mother or Mommy—I wanted to use the snotsucker bulb on him.) I think to a degree I disliked it because it negated me as a person. It turned me into the vessel, the baby wearer, the stroller pusher, the milk source. It made me feel like a featureless feeder from a sci-fi flick. But I also shuddered because I had internalized certain stereotypes about what being a Jewish mother, specifically, meant.

The Jewish mother stereotype isn't pretty. It depicts someone needy, neurotic, clingy—a guilt-shooting laser whose entire identity comes from her children (preferably her son who is a doctor and her daughter who marries one). I

had to process why, precisely, the words *Jewish mother* made me shudder—why I’d personalized this stereotype. I had to learn what the truth was, and where the cliché came from. For us to understand why Jewish parenting has worked so well throughout history—and has been so underheralded as the reason for Jews’ outsize success—we need to look at who the world thinks the Jewish mother is. Then we can look more closely at who she really is and what she’s done so right.

Today, the most prominent old-school Jewish mother might be Kyle Broflovski’s mom, Sheila, on *South Park*—fat, loud, with a New Jersey accent and helmet hair, perpetually spluttering in outrage, “What, What, WHAT?” and kvetching about anti-Semitism. Then there’s Judith Light’s narcissistic, neurotic Shelly Pfefferman on *Transparent*, and Tovah Feldshuh’s mother to Rachel Bloom’s *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend*, belting an aria of criticism and guilt (“By the way you’re looking healthy / and by healthy I mean chunky / I don’t mean that as an insult / I’m just stating it as fact . . . I see your eczema is back!”). Until 2015, there was Howard Wolowitz’s mother on *The Big Bang Theory*, a guilt-hurling, soul-crushing, son-infantilizing, housecoat-wearing, Yiddish-inflected force of nature, perpetually bellying at her progeny from somewhere offscreen.

These characters come from a long tradition of funny and not-so-funny jokes and stereotypes. Today, we Jews are primarily perceived as regular boring white people, but once we were considered pre-Tiger-Mother Tiger Mothers. Back in the day, Catskills comics got endless material from the notion of Jewish mothers as suffocating, whining, melodramatic, demanding grief givers.

MARJORIE INGALL

Q. What did the waiter ask the table of Jewish mothers?

A. Is ANYTHING all right?

A Jewish mother is walking down the street with her two little sons. A passerby says, "Oh, they're so cute! How old are they?" The Jewish mother responds, "The doctor is three and the lawyer is two."

Q. Why do Jewish mothers make great parole officers?

A. They never let anyone finish a sentence.

A lot of these Jewish mother jokes have the schtick rhythms of the Borscht Belt, a lost world of Jewish resorts where many American comics got their start or performed regularly. (Among them: Woody Allen, Lenny Bruce, Rodney Dangerfield, Phyllis Diller, Jerry Lewis, Zero Mostel, Carl Reiner, Don Rickles, Joan Rivers, and Jerry Stiller. To name a few.) But while performers in these hotels mocked Jewish mothers, the hotels themselves were often *run* by Jewish mothers. That's where we start to see the truth behind the stereotype. And that's what I think is worth emulating.

A QUICK PRIMER ON THE HISTORICAL (NOT HYSTERICAL) JEWISH MOTHER

For great swaths of Jewish history, men studied and women worked.

Jews valued brains because brains were all we had. We were a wandering people. Throughout recorded history, pretty much every time Jews got comfortable, they wound up getting booted from whatever country they were liv-

MAMALEH KNOWS BEST

ing in. Jews were expelled from England in the thirteenth century, France and Hungary in the fourteenth, Austria and Spain and Portugal in the fifteenth, just for starters. Hasidic folktales are full of wanderers, of lessons taught in motion. So much of Jewish identity has been tied to feeling homeless, worrying about where it's safe to lay one's hat. The anxiety is right there in our ancient texts, and it's in what actually happened to us throughout history. Every period of comfort and luxury was followed by a massacre or an expulsion. Jews learned that it was difficult to trust good times and good things.

For many centuries in many countries, Jews were forbidden to own land, barred from many professions, subject to discriminatory laws and taxes. When circumstances are awful and uncertain, the things you can rely on are internal: wit, literacy, and spirituality. So men studied—doing the thing that Jews truly cherished. Which is great, but someone had to put bread on the table. That meant that while men were scholars, women were often the breadwinners. In tough times, mamalehs stepped up.

But times were not always tough. While most people (Jews included) think of Jewish history as an endless string of pogroms and persecution, there were numerous time periods in various countries in which being a Jew did not suck. In these good times, Jewish women owned property, pleaded causes in court, created art, wrote their own prayer books, ran big businesses. They raised children who became prominent philosophers, composers, novelists, merchants, scientists, philanthropists.

In the sixth and fifth centuries BCE (Before the Common Era—many Jews don't use the term "BC," what with Christ not being our particular guy) some Jews lived pretty

luxurious lives. Egyptian Jews had snazzy homes, were worldly and acculturated lives, and liked nice clothes. Jews in Jerusalem muttered that they were insufficiently religious and too prone to intermarry. (Muttering about other Jews being insufficiently religious is still a common Jewish pastime today.) Similarly, at different times in Persia, the Hellenistic world, Spain and Portugal, Germany, France and England, Jews lived urban and urbane lives in which they associated with their non-Jewish neighbors and enjoyed the fruits of majority culture.

Jewish women had political and economic power from the very beginning of recorded history. On the Egyptian island of Elephantine, a woman named Mibtahiah, born in 476 BCE, owned her own house. She married twice and allowed both husbands to use her home, which was sweet of her.

In wildly different environments—both hostile and welcoming—Jewish mothers managed to support their families, emotionally and economically, and raise impressive, creative, highly educated, and ambitious kids. They were clearly doing something right. Don't we want to do the same?

THE AMERICAN JEWISH MOTHER

Yet somehow, after World War II, the Jewish mother became an object of mockery. A confluence of factors was responsible: Jews started to move to the burbs, the promised land of lawns and *goyim*. Jewish sons began to learn to talk like cultured Americans while their (superembarrassing) mothers retained their ethnic Old Country speaking rhythms. Jew-

MAMALEH KNOWS BEST

ish mothers reeled from the horrifying news of the deaths of six million Jews overseas and reacted, perhaps, with more than usual clinginess toward their own children.

Indeed, I don't think you can overstate the psychological repercussions of the Holocaust. Jews throughout the country saw the gulf between their own affluent lives and the recent obliteration of Jewish worlds an ocean away. There's a kernel of truth in many stereotypes . . . including that of the Jewish mother. I'm certainly willing to believe that Jewish mothers in the 1950s and 1960s clung a little more tightly to their children. I suspect that post-Holocaust anxiety was part of why the Jewish mother became a caricature, paired with American Jews experiencing a time of increasing suburbanization, assimilation, and Jewish economic advancement.

But the stereotype *really* gained traction because of the changing media landscape. American Jewish male writers—freed in an age of antiheroic literature to tell their own kinds of stories—created squawking, controlling Jewish mother characters. TV picked up the stereotypes and broadcast them further. In the 1950s, 77 percent of American households purchased their first TV. Suddenly Jewish boys with mama issues had what today's media *machers* call a platform.

This time period also coincided with the rise of the nebbishy, antiheroic voice in fiction. Suddenly a lot of youngish Jewish male writers had the voice and opportunity to express their own autobiographical *mishegas* about their mothers. Writers like Herman Wouk, Philip Roth, and Saul Bellow and jokesters like Woody Allen and Jackie Mason wrote with varying levels of sexism and conflicted feelings about their moms. Basically, here we have a bunch

of nerdy guys coming of age in an era in which Jews are rapidly melded into wider society while still feeling like outsiders. In their books and comedy routines, they created semiautobiographical characters and literary stand-ins who yearned for a less annoying, less domineering, less kvetchy mom who was better able to “blend.” They frequently blamed women for their own feelings of displacement and inadequacy in America.

When I was little, my Bubbe had a book called *How to Be a Jewish Mother*, first published in 1965. It was by a humorist named Dan Greenburg, and as a little kid I thought it was hilarious. I liked the pictures, depicting what to wear to go in the water so as not to drown and how to make a wildly overstuffed sandwich so your children do not starve. There were sections called “Making Guilt Work,” “The Technique of Basic Suffering,” and “Seven Basic Sacrifices to Make for Your Child.” (Greenburg’s book pointed out, just as this one does, that “you don’t have to be either Jewish or a mother to be a Jewish mother. An Irish waitress or an Italian barber could also be a Jewish mother.” Jewish motherhood is a philosophy, not an identity!) The book offered advice like “Let your child hear you sigh every day; if you don’t know what he’s done to make you suffer, *he* will.” And “Don’t let him know you fainted twice in the supermarket from fatigue. But make sure he knows you’re not letting him know.”

From the ’50s to the ’80s, pop culture was full of jokes like these, snarking at Jewish mothers for being overprotective, ethnocentric, and full of braggy bloviation about their spawn. Such jokes reflect American anxiety about values, and it’s always easy to blame the mother. Are we worried that children are too materialistic? Are we freaked about our compatriots not being religiously observant enough? BLAME

MAMALEH KNOWS BEST

THE MOTHER! (Needless to say, “blame the mother” is not an exclusively Jewish response. Recall the Cleveland police officer whose social media response to the death of local twelve-year-old, toy-gun-holding Tamir Rice was “Raise your kids not to play with fake guns, you stupid bitch.”)

To be fair, Jews have often been embarrassed and horrified by women in general, not just mothers. (Go, us.) The very entertaining historian Jenna Weissman Joselit has written about Jewish anxiety regarding the “Ghetto Girl”—a tacky, working-class young woman wearing too much makeup, too obsessed with clothes, talking too loudly. There are references to her as early as the turn of the twentieth century. The bestselling (secular Jewish) novelist Fannie Hurst blamed the Ghetto Girl’s brassiness on “the vivid, aggressive temperament and imagination of the Jew.” And yet! Even these janky, classless types often managed to rise above their station, to the bafflement of the haters. “When I go down to the East Side and look upon those pasty, white faces and hopelessly vulgar, stupid dresses,” Hurst wrote loftily, “I am filled with wonder and admiration that these girls, with all their vulgarity, should rise to the heights that some of them do and be so great in achievement.” Being horrified at young women’s clothing and manners and shocked at their accomplishments never goes out of style.

The Ghetto Girl stereotype evolved into the Jewish American Princess stereotype . . . which is the flip side of the Jewish American Mother stereotype. Folklorist Alan Dundes, who studied jokes related to both, referred to them as the JAM and the JAP. The JAM was extravagantly self-negating, obsessed with feeding her family, unable to let go of her progeny. The JAP was all about glittering surfaces—selfish, shallow, emotionally uninvested in her fellow human

beings, obsessively manicure oriented. (*What does a JAP make for dinner? Reservations.*) Opposites, see? But both the JAM and the JAP were emotional and economic vampires, and both were a reflection of ingrained misogyny.

Because weirdly, as jokes and books that mocked insular, tribal, nonworking Jewish women proliferated, Jewish women's participation in the labor force actually *rose*. Sociologist Riv-Ellen Prell noted that in 1957, 26 percent of American Jewish women between the ages of 25 and 34 and 34 percent of women between the ages of 35 and 44 were in the workforce. In 1990, 76 percent of women between the ages of 25 and 34 and 75 percent of women between the ages of 35 and 44 were in the workforce. What this means is that while Jewish men were portraying Jewish women as dependent moochers, Jewish women were actually returning to the workplace, which is where, over the span of world history, they spent much of their time anyway.

YOO HOO, MRS. GOLDBERG!

You know who didn't mock Jewish mothers? *Jewish mothers*. The earliest Jewish mother in American pop culture, Molly Goldberg, was created by a woman, Gertrude Berg, and was portrayed with far more affection—both on the radio from 1929 to 1949 and on TV from 1949 to 1955—than the later, more grasping and grotesque Jewish mothers created by young Jewish men.

Berg was the matriarch of *The Goldbergs*, a fictional Jewish family led by a strong mother. Molly Goldberg was a busybody, but she was kind and a problem solver—the warm, competent head of a functional, loving family. She

MAMALEH KNOWS BEST

wasn't a supporting character, like later Jewish mothers on TV (such as Sophie Steinberg on *Bridget Loves Bernie*, Ida Morgenstern on *Rhoda*, Helen Seinfeld on *Seinfeld*, Sylvia Buchman on *Mad About You*, Sylvia Fine on *The Nanny*, and Bobbi Adler on *Will and Grace*). She was the *lead*. And I don't think it's accidental that her creator was female. That's precisely why she wasn't a cartoon, why she had so much more nuance than her successors in televised Jewish momdom. There's a Yiddish proverb that says, "A Jew is 28 percent fear, 2 percent sugar, and 70 percent chutzpah." That's Mrs. Goldberg. The caricatures who followed her lacked both the sweetening of sugar and the humanizing of fear. They were 100 percent *chutzpah*—mostly chutzpah that wasn't cute or charming. It wasn't aimed at helping their kids; it was narcissistic.

Hey, writers are as lazy as anyone else. (I know this for an actual fact.) Once the notion of the grasping Jewish mother had gained pop culture traction, it became shorthand—a frequently misogynistic way to telegraph *annoyingness* and *otherness*. To be fair, mothers of a zillion cultures have been portrayed as noodgy and overbearing. We've seen demanding and withholding Tiger Moms, domineering and high-pitched black moms, hectoring and screeching Hispanic moms. Apparently lots of guys have mommy issues. Yet the Jewish stereotype has gained more traction because Jews own the media. (I'm kidding.) (Mostly.)

PUT DOWN THE LIVER

Perhaps the biggest single high-culture source for the Jewish mother stereotype is Philip Roth's novel *Portnoy's Com-*

plaint. It's hard to explain to a non-Jew just how much resonance this book has, and how much it has infuriated and distressed generations of Jewish women. (The book has its fans, of course. But as with the *Twilight* saga and *The Fountainhead*, there's no accounting for taste.) An NPR story on the book's fortieth anniversary noted, "*Portnoy's Complaint* did for the Jewish mother what *Jaws* did for the shark: Took an already frightening creature and made it even scarier."

The portrait of Sophie Portnoy solidified the notion of the Jewish mother as a horrifying force of nature, the most helicoptery of helicopter parents. She demands to see her adult son's bowel movements, kvetches endlessly, tries to control his romantic life, refuses to give him any kind of adult agency.

The book turned truth into a cartoon. Back when Jewish mothers lived in *shtetls* (small, pre-Holocaust Eastern European towns), to be a good *balaboosta*, a competent manager of the home, the Jewish mother had to be on top of everything—finances, budgeting, cooking, cleaning, child-rearing, marketing, perhaps running a business. Being in charge got things done. Being retiring and delicate did not. But Roth turned a grain of truth into a monstrosity. Sure, this is just one character in one book, but its influence is outsized.

THE TROUBLE WITH BEING HAPPY

Today, American Jews seem to be living in the promised land. We win big literary awards and have cool jobs. People in this country have not tended to dump us in mass

MAMALEH KNOWS BEST

graves. Jews have been granted dominion over their historical homeland, too; the modern State of Israel was founded in 1948. (By the by, we are *not* talking Israeli politics in this book. You want that, go read something else.) For a people who've spent thousands of years seeing themselves as wanderers, what does it mean to have a home? Can we actually chill out? And if we're actually in a place of ease and comfort where we can have meaningful leadership roles, how do we maintain the energy, creativity, and drive that fueled us for so much of our history as a people in exile? Can Jewish parenting continue to transmit the kind of solid values and flexible thinking that has served Jews well in an ever-changing, uncertain world? Are we doomed to lose the values and attributes that have made us so accomplished and innovative for generations?

There are people who have no clue that there even *is* a Jewish mother stereotype. In America today, Jewish mothers have become just plain American mothers. Through the inevitable march of time and acculturation, the JAM—along with the Ghetto Girl and the JAP—has receded from popular consciousness. The Jewish mother as mythic figure and punch line faded away pretty much around the time *The Nanny* went off the air.

Tiger Mothers have taken the Jewish mother's place in the cultural firmament, as yet another immigrant generation struggles to find its place in America. Chinese Americans are pretty much where we Jews were forty years ago. This means there's a new female locus of love, suspicion, fear, and resentment. While part of me is bummed to hand over the comedic reins to other groups (especially since we never even *saw* a wedding between a Jewish man and a Jewish woman on a sitcom until *Will and Grace* in 2002, let

alone got to watch a youngish, non-harridan-esque Jewish mother raise her kids—come on! It’s too soon for us to go!), the rest of me is fine with spreading the comedic wealth.

I think, though, the dearth of Jewish characters on network TV, despite the huge number of Jewish TV writers, is an indication that we’re not quite sure who we are. We have spent so much time measuring ourselves against the majority culture. When we lived in a country and an era that was relatively accepting, we struggled to balance our Jewish identity with our participation in the wider world. When we lived in places and eras that hated us, we tried to keep our heads down, keep the faith, and do what we had to do to survive. Now, in a country and time of relative comfort, we’re struggling to figure out who we’re going to be in the next few generations. It’s up to us Jews to be sure we don’t slack in transmitting our historic values to our kids, giving them the tools they need to be successful. It’s on us to continue to choose to be a “light unto the nations,” the prophet Isaiah’s term for the Jewish people’s importance as role models for others. Right now, I’d argue that many Jews are losing touch with the morals and processes that have made our kids so successful in creative and scientific fields, in business, in journalism. We’re forgetting what we once did that made our children do so brilliantly, in so many different cultures and countries, often while facing anti-Semitism and poverty.

But this isn’t a book just for us. You don’t need to be an Orthodox Jew or even a person who believes in God to raise a family with traditional Jewish values. Each of the following chapters of this book talks about what Jewish mothers

MAMALEH KNOWS BEST

have done over time to raise moral kids who can thrive in a complicated world.

MIXING IT UP CAN BE GOOD FOR EVERYONE

My daughter Josie, at age two, wailed, “This is a catastrophe!” when our cat was dying. That was, indeed, a catastrophe. Jews have often worried that the future as a whole is a catastrophe. Many have predicted that living in a pluralistic world will cause the Death of the Jewish People. In 2013, the Pew Research Center released a report on the state of American Jewry that made many Jewish leaders run around squawking like Chicken Little. While the huge survey found that American Jews overwhelmingly said they were proud to be Jewish and had a strong sense of belonging to the Jewish people, many said they considered themselves Jews only by ethnicity or culture. Lots of us are no longer so into ritual or texts. And certainly—though not for the first time in our long history—rates of intermarriage are up. Yet I’d argue this doesn’t spell the end of Judaism, or of Jewish values. In *’Til Faith Do Us Part*, a study of interfaith marriage, Naomi Schaefer Riley found that the *mother’s faith* was the biggest factor in determining how families raised their children. A third of kids in interfaith families were being reared in their mother’s religion, while only 15 percent were growing up in their father’s.

Mothers have power. Women tend to be more religious than men (which is why Judaism, a largely home-based faith, has been not only practiced but also transmitted by women). Women are much more likely to go to religious

services than men. And because mothers tend to be in charge of kids' schedules, women are the ones who ensure that religious education takes place.

I think living with diversity is good for us. Our once insular world is full of cracks, and as Leonard Cohen said, "That's how the light gets in." Being open to pluralism can lead to tolerance, a broader perspective on culture, greater human understanding. It's important for Jews—and people of all backgrounds—to know their history, stories, traditions, foods, music, art. Those who aren't Jewish can look to their own culture and family background for inspiration, while adapting Jewish values for raising modern kids. Just as an Irish waitress or an Italian barber can be a Jewish mother, so can anyone adapt Jewish tricks for raising flexible, quick-thinking, literate, open-minded kids. There are specific elements of Jewish child-rearing I think can be helpful to parents of all backgrounds, and they're what the rest of this book will explore.

If your own religious background doesn't feel relevant to your values, you still have family history to mine: How did your parents and grandparents and great-grandparents' views of the world affect your attitudes toward education, politics, conspicuous consumption, volunteering, people who aren't just like you? How do you want to emulate past generations . . . or how do you intend to be sure you don't, if you're not proud of your family's past? The storytelling we'll talk about in Chapter 7 can be a way to share family history, writ small or large, as well. Think about the Jewish value of *chutzpah*: smart-assedness, assertiveness, spunk, challenging authority, being willing to raise eyebrows and be a troublemaker. Independent thinking has served Jews well when authority couldn't be trusted. It's still what helps

MAMALEH KNOWS BEST

people create new scientific paradigms and forms of artistic expression today.

The stereotype of the Jewish mother was a product of a very particular place and time. It's not a reflection of five thousand years of Jewish history. Glückel's values—education, spirituality, honesty, and independence—are a better reflection of the teachings of the Jewish mother across time. These are the values all parents should emulate.