

# BookMarks



## Wo-Flix

### The Women's League for Conservative Judaism Film Forum

Welcome to all of you movie enthusiasts! This issue of **BookMarks**, devoted to the new Women's League film forum (pronounced *wib-Flix* – the “o” as in women), is for you. All of the selected movies are critically acclaimed jewels. They explore a number of our Mishpachah subjects including marriage, divorce, same sex partners, adoption, bi-racial relationships, care-giving, loss and grief, celebration, and singlehood. Discussion questions are provided as a guide; but you will certainly be able to generate many of your own.

#### Programmatic Use

The **Wo-Flix** films can (and should!) be viewed in a variety of venues: sponsor an evening or Sunday morning film festival throughout the year; ask people to host home viewing sessions; create a craft-film event, where people bring projects and work on them while watching. All the films are available on Netflix or maybe in your local libraries.

Let's go to the movies  
Let's go see the stars...  
Welcome to this  
grand illusion.  
All of it's yours  
right through these doors!  
Every plot's a dilly,  
this we guarantee!  
Welcome to the movies  
wait and see...

("Let's Go to the Movies"  
from the musical **Annie**)

In the early days of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, over a hundred movie houses sprang up in New York, many of them on the Lower East Side. This inexpensive entertainment for immigrants, especially Jewish ones, provided them with both an escape and a way to blend into the fabric of the American Dream. If Jews were unable to enter the pathways of gentility through conventional ways, then, at least the movies provided them with an outlet for expressing their sense of belonging.

For the Jewish garment merchants who turned into early movie-makers and built these theaters – men like Marcus Loew, Adolph Zukor and William Fox – the movies provided empires that they could own and control. Later, when more legitimate and luxurious movie theaters developed at the end of World War I, the movie industry relocated to Southern California, where Jews like Samuel Goldwyn, Louis B. Mayer and Carl Laemmle began to craft movies that expanded on their idealized views of the American experience. And, although very few Jews actually starred in their movies, these early cinema moguls provided their audiences an image of America that reflected their recently Americanized values, traditions and structures. For them, this America would be everything that they imagined it to be.

Is it any wonder then that movies have become so much a part of the American Jewish experience?

Movies have retained their magic. Sitting in a darkened theater, munching on popcorn, we enter a world distant from our everyday experiences and imagine ourselves part of the landscape before us. We can sit at home, clinging to a movie moment that affects or transforms us in unexpected ways, and reinvent ourselves as

we wish. And we can watch that movie over and over – through the magic of technology – and claim it reflects “who we are.” We even feel qualified to analyze a director’s intention and motivation and speculate on his or her vision.

And for American Jews, the relationship with movies has still remained as intriguing today as it was so many years ago. We love our movie discussion groups – where we come together to figure out what is happening in the movie and with the characters. We often look at these movies through a Jewish lens and ask ourselves if there are themes or archetypes or plot strands that we can claim as particularly ours. And we may see recurring images that somehow unpack our own Jewish-American or American-Jewish experience in ways that we hadn’t realized before.

We should take great pride in Jewish contributions to film making. So much of its artistry reflects our love

of storytelling, a central component of so many classical Jewish works.

Movie production is an art form that requires both good writing and good story-telling. Scriptwriters, a disproportionately large number of them Jewish, were attracted to this medium because it allowed them to create a unique and humane perspective drawn from a collective historical and cultural experience. For most of Jewish history, literary production was a principle focus. We saw ourselves, as did others, as the “People of the Book,” the people of the written word.

So, sit back. Enjoy our first issue of WoFlix as Women’s League goes to the movies. And get ready for a bumpy ride as you figure out what is happening in the families at the hearts of these movies.

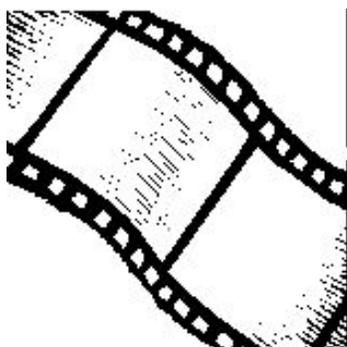
And don’t forget the popcorn!

**Ellen Kaner Bresnick**  
Books Chair, 2012-2014

---

## How to Select and Use a Film for a Sisterhood Program

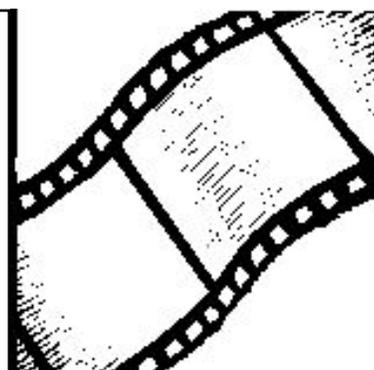
1. Carefully select the film. Is it suitable for your sisterhood membership, the age of its members and their interests? Is it too violent, suggestive, etc.? Is it too long? Are you budgeted for rental fee or purchase? Is it available through libraries or other free or inexpensive sources?
2. Preview and/or prescreen the film. A committee and moderator or discussion leader should make the ultimate decision about its presentation. Be sure it is a good, clear copy with no splices or blank spots.
3. Make sure your equipment is in proper working order.
4. Have an extension cord available, if needed.
5. If you are using a projector, have an extra projector bulb and someone around who can replace it.
6. Check the room set up:
  - Do you need a table on which to put the projector, VCR and/or television?
  - Lighting – can the room be sufficiently darkened? Where is the switch?
  - Screen; recheck TV and DVD player.
  - Proper seating – provide enough seating in a comfortable viewing area; can everyone see the screen and hear the sound?
7. Make sure you have a projectionist and possible backup person – someone to run the TV & DVD.
8. Prepare discussion questions in advance.



### Hints from Experience

Request a preview copy well in advance AND  
always place your order in writing,  
even if you call first.

Preview, PREVIEW, **PREVIEW!!!!**



## The Wedding Banquet (1993)

In this charmingly hilarious movie directed by Ang Lee, Wai-Tung Gao, a gay Taiwanese-American man living in Manhattan in a long term relationship with Simon, has never disclosed his sexual orientation to his demanding parents in Taiwan who are pressuring him to marry. His tenant, Wei-Wei, a young Chinese artist needs to marry an American citizen to obtain her green card. So, to fend off the increasing parental pressure to marry, and with Simon's reluctant approval, Wai-Tung and Wei-Wei arrange a marriage of convenience. Complications arise when the parents arrive for the wedding and a huge cross-cultural banquet is arranged to celebrate.

### Discussion Questions

1. How is communication maintained in this family? How do we keep communication lines open when family members no longer live near each other or even within the same country?
2. Do these difficulties alone explain why Wai-Tung could not tell his parents that he was gay? What is the role of communication at the end of the movie?
3. The young people agree to a wedding banquet. What does it represent for them? What does it represent for the elders in the family?
4. Why is the wedding party so interesting?
5. Do the family issues change or evolve in any way throughout the movie?

**Did you know?** *The Wedding Banquet* is the first of three movies that director Ang Lee has made about gay characters; the second is *Brokeback Mountain* and the third is *Taking Woodstock*.

## Crossing Delancey (1988)

This film, directed by Joan Micklin Silver, features Amy Irving as Isabelle, an independent, young thirty-something Jewish woman who works in a chic bohemian bookstore in New York. Her bubbie (Reizl Bozyk), increasingly distressed that her granddaughter does not have a man in her life, hires a marriage broker. Isabelle is introduced to Sam Posner (Peter Riegert), the owner of a pickle store on the Lower East Side. Unhappy about this whole situation and initially not interested in Sam, whom she regards as conventional and bland, Isabelle must decide what it is she wants out of life.

## Discussion Questions

1. How does Izzie see herself? What causes her to re-examine her values and her lifestyle?
2. Why does Sam tell her the story about Harry and the hat? What impact does it have on Izzie?
3. What role does Anton play in the story?
4. How would you characterize the role of the grandmother? How much does her Jewishness affect her actions?
5. Is it too simplistic or predictable that Izzie begins a relationship with Sam at the end of the movie? Staying single or marrying Sam, are these the only two choices she has?
6. The director, Joan Micklin Silver, and the writer, Susan Sandler, provide a woman's perspective, quite rare in 1980 Hollywood. How do you think the story would be presented today?

**Did you know?** director Joan Micklin married Raphael D. Silver in 1956, and they have three daughters. Raphael's father was Rabbi Abba Hillel Silver, a highly influential American Zionist leader and senior rabbi of The Temple in Cleveland, Ohio for nearly half a century.

## Philomena (2013)

The title character (Judi Dench) is an elderly Irish woman who had become pregnant as a teenager working at a convent. The Catholic Church had the child adopted, and decades later, Philomena is introduced to Martin Sixsmith, who was a government spokesperson now working as a freelance journalist. Martin agrees to help her look for her son, and the trail takes them to the United States, and face-to-face with some long-buried secrets. All the while, the type-A Martin and the ceaselessly charming Philomena learn to trust each other.

### Discussion Questions

1. How did Philomena's family background contribute to her getting pregnant?
2. Why had Philomena never told her daughter about Anthony? What enabled her to finally talk about it?
3. How does Philomena and Martin's relationship develop?
4. What role does religion play in Philomena's life? How might the story have been different if she had been Jewish?

**Did you know?** Just as Philomena and Martin are entering Peter Olsson's home, the camera cuts to a photo of Michael/Tony. Prominently to the right of the photo is a decorative turquoise metal container with Hebrew writing. It is an etrog box used on Sukkot.

### **Ordinary People (1980)**

Beth (Mary Tyler Moore), Calvin (Donald Sutherland) and their son Conrad are living in the aftermath of the drowning death of the other son, Buck. Conrad, who had survived the accident in which his brother drowned, is overcome by grief and misplaced guilt to such an extent that he attempts suicide. After leaving the hospital he enters therapy. Beth had always preferred his brother and is having difficulty being supportive to Conrad, whom she seems to resent, increasingly for surviving. Calvin is trapped between the two, trying to hold the family together.

#### **Discussion Questions**

1. What are the primary problems for this family? Who seems most capable of dealing with the problem? Why?
2. If you had a friend like Beth Jarrett, how could you help her?
3. At one point, Cal Jarrett says that people fall apart when there's "mess" in their lives. How can we prevent it?
4. How can we make our sisterhoods and synagogues more welcoming to families that have experienced the loss of a child, mental illness, suicide, or other painful and tragic events?

**Did you know?** *Ordinary People* marked the directorial debut of Robert Redford and the acting debut of Timothy Hutton both of whom won Academy Awards. The film marked Mary Tyler Moore's career breakout from the personality of her other two famous roles as Laura Petrie on *The Dick Van Dyke Show* and Mary Richards on *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*.

### **Jungle Fever (1991)**

Jungle Fever, written and directed by Spike Lee, examines the repercussions of an interracial affair on two very distinct communities. Wesley Snipes is Flipper, a happily married and successful architect who begins an affair with an office temp, Angie (Annabella Sciorra), who comes from an emotionally fraught blue-collar Italian family. Their affair leads to an explosion on both home fronts.

#### **Discussion Questions**

1. What are some of the stressors that are put on the families? Under what circumstances can these stressful situations be overcome or controlled or alleviated?
2. Why does the idea of having children with Angie seem like such a deal-breaker for Flipper?
3. How and why does Pauly play such a prominent role at the end of the movie?
4. Is it fair to dismiss these bi-racial relationships as simply manifestations of jungle fever? Do you think there is such a thing as jungle fever or is this the ideological perspective of Spike Lee?
5. Do you think things are much easier for people in bi-racial relationships 20 years after this movie?

**Did you know?** "Jungle fever" is defined by Spike Lee as the sexual attraction between members of two races.

### **Kramer vs. Kramer (1979)**

Ted Kramer (Dustin Hoffman) is a career man for whom work comes before family. Totally overwhelmed by life, his wife, Joanna (Meryl Streep), leaves him and their young son, Billy. Ted must learn to adjust his life to these new responsibilities. When Joanna resurfaces and wants Billy back, Ted refuses to give him up, so they go to court to fight for the custody.

#### **Discussion Questions**

1. What does Ted mean when he asks, "How much courage does it take to leave your child?"
2. This movie won Oscars for best picture, actor, supporting actress, director, and screenplay. Why do you think that it was so well received and would it receive the same accolades today, 35 years later?
3. Do the issues Ted confronts as a single parent with a wife/mother who has walked out differ from when a husband/father leaves, or a wife/mother dies? How have these values changed since 1979?
4. How do you feel about Joanna's actions? Would you consider her courageous?
5. Can you identify with any of the characters? How might you have identified with Joanna in 1979, when the movie was made?

**Did you know?** Meryl Streep wrote her own courtroom speech on writer-director Robert Benton's suggestion, after she told him she wasn't satisfied with the way it was originally written.

### **700 Sundays (HBO, 2013)**

*Billy Crystal's 700 Sundays* is a one-man performance based on his family memoir that broke box office records and earned him a special Tony Award. He again shows his rare gift for storytelling, taking an Eisenhower-era childhood that was both ordinary and exceptional at the same time, and rendering it universal. Whether or not your own experiences overlap with Crystal's, his family reminiscences will strike a chord.

#### **Discussion Questions**

1. How does Crystal feel about his family and extended family? Is he dealing in stereotypes in any way?
2. How do his feelings change about his family?
3. Do you need to be Jewish to appreciate this production?
4. What is the impact of the show as a monologue?
5. How does the staging help Crystal present what he wants to show about his family?

**Did you know?** *700 Sundays* takes its title from the one-day a week when Billy Crystal and his siblings had unrestricted access to their dad, who often held down three jobs. Seven hundred is Crystal's rough tally of how many of those days he shared with his father before his sudden death in 1963.

### **Brighton Beach Memoirs (1986)**

Originally a play by Neil Simon, set in the Brighton Beach section of Brooklyn in 1937, this coming-of-age comedy focuses on Eugene Morris Jerome, a Jewish-American teenager, besieged and beleaguered by everything around him. Whenever his mother calls him, his name comes out as "Eugeeeeeennnnnnne..." Eugene goes through puberty, sexual awakening and a search for identity as he negotiates complicated family relations and events.

#### **Discussion Questions**

1. What is the role of tradition in this family?
2. Why does Eugene suggest creating a radio program, "The Family Hour"? In what ways is his family important to him?
3. What is life like for widows? Why?

4. At one point, Mr. Jerome says, "If you didn't have a problem, you wouldn't live in this house." Is his assessment accurate?
5. How do the family roles change? What is the effect of these changes on the members of the family?
6. What is the impact on the family dynamic of having extra relatives living in the house? Is it surprising when the family agrees that somehow they must make room for relatives who have fled 1940's Europe?

**Did you know?** *Brighton Beach Memoirs* is the first of Neil Simon's unofficial autobiographical trilogy. It was followed by *Biloxi Blues* and *Broadway Bound*.

### **The Savages (2007)**

Jon and Wendy Savage (Philip Seymour Hoffman and Laura Linney) are siblings who are alienated from each other and from their father, Lenny. When Lenny's girlfriend dies, Lenny, with rapidly progressing dementia, cannot care for himself. Despite the fact Jon and Wendy have not spoken to their father for 20 years, and he is more demanding than ever, the siblings feel obliged to take care of him. Now they must come to terms with new and painful responsibilities even as they struggle with their own personal demons and relationship with each other.

#### **Discussion Questions**

1. What is the significance of the title?
2. Why haven't Wendy and John communicated with their father?
3. How do their communication skills affect their interpersonal relationships?
4. What do they learn about being caregivers? What are the major differences in the way each approaches their father and his treatment?
5. Does their father's death bring them together or did something else?

**Did you know?** Writer/Director Tamara Jenkin's offbeat indie drama, starring Laura Linney (receiving her third Academy Award nomination) and Philip Seymour Hoffman, became a critical success after screening at numerous film festivals, including Sundance and the Toronto Film Festival. Jenkins was nominated for an Academy Award for Best Original Screenplay.

## Any Day Now (2012)

In the 1970s, Rudy, a gay entertainer, takes in Marco, a 14-year-old neighbor with Down Syndrome left alone by his mother, Marianna, when she is arrested. When Family Services intervenes and removes Marco to foster care, Rudy enlists Paul, his partner and an assistant district attorney, to help gain custody. The two coax Marianna into signing the temporary guardianship papers and all is well until their relationship is called into question by the court system. The two find themselves spiraling into a legal battle to become permanent guardians of the endearing boy who shows them both the joy of what it means to be a parent.

### Discussion Questions

1. What kind of issues does Rudy experience and how does he handle them?
2. What kinds of issues does Marco face? How does he handle these issues?
3. Why is it that Rudy, Marco and Paul can come to love and respect each other as a family?
4. In what ways have attitudes, issues, problems, and laws changed since the 1970s?
5. How does the title of the movie relate to its ending?

**Did you know?** *Any Day Now* was inspired by a court case involving a pair of gay foster dads in Key West, Florida, who embarked on a legal fight to adopt two sons.

## Silver Linings Playbook (2012)

After a stint in a mental institution, former teacher Pat Solitano (Bradley Cooper) moves back in with his parents and is obsessed by his desire to reconcile with his ex-wife who has a restraining order against him. His parents' home is not an easy environment in which to heal. His father (Robert DeNiro) is equally obsessed by sports and gambling. Things become even more challenging when Pat meets Tiffany (Jennifer Lawrence who won a Best Actress Oscar for this role), an eccentric but captivating girl, recently widowed, with problems of her own.

### Discussion Questions

1. What negative triggers exist in Pat's life? How does he attempt to control them?
2. What coping mechanisms does the family employ when Pat comes home from the hospital? How successful are they?

3. What makes Pat's relationship with Tiffany so different?
4. What role do sports and dance play? Can they be utilized in the same way in real-life?
5. How are the family members characterized? Are they helpful; are they counterproductive?

**Did you know?** Director David O. Russell was drawn to the story because of his own son who is bipolar and has OCD. It was the first film in many years to capture Oscar nominations in the top five categories.

## Hannah and Her Sisters (1986)

Written and directed by Woody Allen, *Hannah and Her Sisters* enjoyed wide critical and financial success and was the recipient of many awards for acting, directing and writing. It is about an extended and extremely dysfunctional theater family, containing many narrative strands of difficult relationships, spousal discord, sibling rivalry, adultery, and complicated dating scenarios. The story takes place between two Thanksgiving celebrations, when Hannah's husband (Mia Farrow and Michael Caine) falls in love with her sister Lee (Barbara Hershey), while Hannah's hypochondriac ex-husband (Woody Allen) rekindles his relationship with her sister Holly (Dianne Wiest).

### Discussion Questions

1. How does Allen portray the various relationships between parents, siblings, spouses, friends? Which are portrayed sympathetically?
2. How does the viewer's attitude toward the various personalities and events change throughout the movie?
3. What is the significance of the two Thanksgiving dinners?
4. Woody Allen said he was inspired to write this film after re-reading *Anna Karenina*. Tolstoy opens his novel with the line: "Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way." How would you apply Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* quote to this film?

**Did you know?** After the film's release, there was movement afoot to make Allen's script the first screenplay to be nominated for a Pulitzer Prize.