



## WoFlix 2015-2016

All of the following movies relate to this year's theme, *Nat'ah Kareem: She plants a vineyard* in some way. We can explore how behavior, deeds and life choices create legacies for the women at the core of these movies. These films not only stimulate; they also provide ample topics for conversation.

When you watch the women in these movies, ask how they each approach the issue of legacy. How do they want to change themselves and/or the world? What improvements do they make? What sacrifices and accommodations do they make to achieve their goals?

This theme also focuses on women's productivity. However these main characters are motivated, they demonstrate an understanding of what energy, drive, and commitment it takes to cultivate a vineyard.

### Programmatic Suggestions

#### Wo-Flix Film Forum

An ongoing film program is inexpensive and entertaining. Keep costs down with homemade popcorn, cookies, or other movie snacks. Encourage members to write about the movies and reflect on some of the discussions.

These movies and discussion questions would work well for ongoing Rosh Hodesh programs.

#### Brunch & Film Welcome Back

Make it potluck and show a movie. After, discuss among yourselves using the notes and questions that are provided for each of the ten movies.

#### The Help (2011)

**Synopsis:** In 1960s Mississippi, Eugenia Phalen (Emma Stone), known as Skeeter, returns from college with dreams of being a writer. When she decides to interview the black women who have spent their lives taking care of the white families in town, Skeeter finds that only Aibileen (Viola Davis) is willing to discuss her work. But as the pair collaborate, more women come forward, and as it turns out, they have quite a lot to say.

1. As the film begins, Aibileen relates that she always knew that she could only be a maid. How does this feeling impact her ability to create her own legacy?
2. What kind of mothering does the movie depict? Is it one-sided?
3. It is not insignificant that the New York editor with whom Skeeter connects is named Miss Stein and that she uses words like *chutzpah*. Why would a character like Miss Stein appear in such a film?
4. Who is the main character?
5. The act of writing plays an important role. In fact, many of these women are, in a sense, writing their memoirs. In what way does writing help the characters?
6. How do these women approach their productivity? Do they see it as something other than just their jobs?

### Interesting Facts

Kathryn Stockett's book on which this film is based was rejected 60 times before it was eventually published.

Although it's never mentioned in the movie how Eugenia got the nickname "Skeeter," in the book, when she was born, her thin, leggy appearance caused her older brother to say she looked like a "Skeeter" (mosquito).

Director Tate Taylor and the author Kathryn Stockett were childhood friends in Jackson, Mississippi.

Jessica Chastain, a vegan, ate soy ice cream melted in the microwave to gain weight for the role of Celia Foote.

Minny was played by Octavia Spencer, who also provided narration for the audiobook adaptation.

Katy Perry was almost cast as Celia Foote but had to turn the role down due to scheduling conflicts.

### Cake (2014)

**Synopsis:** Wracked by intense physical pain and the effects of a life-changing loss, Claire (Jennifer Aniston) forms an obsessive connection with the memory of Nina (Anna Kendrick), a woman in her support group who committed suicide. In coping with her traumatic issues, Claire begins a journey to reclaim her sense of self.

1. At the beginning of this movie, is Claire the kind of person who might be able to live a fulfilled and productive life? Why?
2. How does Claire cope with her pain? Is this an effective or valid presentation?
3. Why is Claire asked to leave her support group and later her swim therapy?
4. Why is she so obsessed with Nina and her actions?
5. Why is *Cake* the title of this movie?

### Interesting Facts

Jennifer Aniston needed to stop exercising for about two and a half months to play a woman addicted to painkillers. She was happy about this until she found that it affected every part of her, especially her energy level.

The story was inspired by a real life story. Screenwriter Patrick Tobin penned the movie after four of his brother's family were murdered by another family member who was taking Paxil for depression. The family sued the drug's manufacturer. In 2001 Tobin's family won the case and were awarded \$6.4 million in compensation. A jury decided that taking Paxil was the proximate cause of the deaths. The jury also found that evidence showed Paxil can cause some people to kill themselves and/or others. After the slaughter, Tobin's brother sank into a deep, suicidal depression. Realizing his brother was in pain, Patrick Tobin moved back to Montana to be with him and steer him as far away from suicide as possible.

The movie also forced Aniston to face her biggest phobia – drowning. She said that she “has a thing about being submerged from childhood” when she drove her tricycle into a pool and sunk to the bottom .

### **Under the Tuscan Sun (2003)**

**Synopsis:** When Frances Mayes (Diane Lane) finds out her husband is cheating, her life is turned upside down. To bring her out of her depression, her best friend, Patti (Sandra Oh), encourages Frances to travel to Italy. Once there, Frances decides to stay and buys a villa as the catalyst for recreating her life and herself

1. Why does Frances find it hard to believe that she will be happy again? What does she think will make her happy?
2. What role does friendship play?
3. How does her behavior change over the course of the movie?
4. What does Frances find out about herself through writing?
5. What are the life lessons that she learns? Who or what teaches her these lessons?
6. What do you think is the most significant change or accomplishment in Frances?

### **Interesting Facts**

Kate Walsh plays the significant other of Sandra Oh; both went on to play doctors in Grey's Anatomy (2005).

Seeing Jeffrey Tambor on screen as the divorce lawyer was cut from the film at Tambor's own insistence. Tambor was so impressed by Diane Lane's performance that he insisted that the scene would have more emotional impact if his character remained unseen.

The elderly owner of Bramasole, grateful for a sign that Frances is the "right" buyer, cries out, "Grazie, Santo Francesco!" when a bird defecates on Frances' head. "Santo Francesco" is Saint Francis, the patron saint of animals.

Zeus, the art model, was fully nude during filming. Digital underwear was added in post-production to avoid an R-rating.

The German couple who tries to buy Bramasole was edited into a French couple in the German dubbing of the movie.

Every time a group of nuns is seen, they are eating: first at the market, then sitting on a terrace and finally during the wedding.

## **The Woman in Gold (2015)**

**Synopsis:** Helen Mirren stars in this true story of one Jewish woman's battle to recover her family's possessions that had been stolen by the Nazis during World War II. In particular, she strives to regain one very valuable painting with tremendous personal meaning. Ryan Reynolds stars as her lawyer, who also is transformed as a result of this case.

1. Why does Maria Altmann pursue the paintings that her family once owned? What is the primary force governing her actions?
2. What kinds of internal conflicts does she face? How does she reconcile these conflicts?
3. Who else faces conflicts?
4. It seems clear that the paintings must be given back, so why is there so much conflict for everyone involved?

## **Interesting Facts**

Gustav Klimt was known as a playboy, taking many, many lovers. It is possible he seduced the lovely Adele Bloch-Bauer, the woman in the portrait, during one of those long portrait sessions. If there was an affair, it was probably short-lived.

Klimt painted two commissioned portraits of Adele. In the first, she looks incredibly sensual with her full red lips, come-hither eyes and bare shoulders surrounded in gold leaf. The second portrait, painted five years later, shows a more matronly woman, her body covered up to her neck, and her luscious black hair concealed beneath a hat, suggesting to some art historians that any passionate feelings had fizzled out.

The famous portrait took Gustav Klimt three years to complete.

The odd, tangled way in which Adele is clasping her hands is an effort to hide a misshapen finger that might have belied the perfect image of youthful feminine beauty. Adele was 25 years old when the painting was commissioned.

The best view of the painting is from below. Maria Altman's lawyer, E. Randol Shoenberg, told the *Times of Israel* that viewing the painting in person is a totally different experience than looking at a print. "If you go down on the ground and you look up, it changes the whole picture."

## **Belle (2014)**

**Synopsis:** This is the true story of an illegitimate bi-racial woman who played an important role in the history of Great Britain. Dido Elizabeth Belle (Gugu M'Batha Raw), born to a British admiral and a former slave he loved, is brought up as an orphaned, beloved member of her father's aristocratic family in 1770s Jane Austen-era England. The movie shows how Dido's relationship with the great-uncle who raised her, William Murray (Tom Wilkinson), first Earl of Mansfield and the Lord Chief Justice of Britain, influences his rulings that later led to the end of slavery in the British Empire

1. What are some of the key issues that Dido's great-uncle must confront as he judges the case? Do these issues apply in contemporary society?

2. Why does Dido not tell anyone until much later that the brother of her fiancée physically hurt her? Even on the day on which she breaks her engagement, she does not mention this physical attack. Why?
3. Why did the family change her name from Belle to Dido?
4. One of the movie's themes is the need to break rules when it matters. In what situations might you have to break rules in order to achieve a goal?

### **Interesting Facts**

The French servant who became her husband, John Davinier, was transformed into an abolitionist firebrand who obliterates her complacency and challenges the Lord Chief Justice to do the right thing. This made for a better story-line.

Belle's last known descendant, her great-great-grandson Harold Davinier, died childless in South Africa in 1975

This film was the first of its kind to portray someone from a mixed-race/black background with an aristocrat.

### **The Prizewinner of Defiance, Ohio (2007)**

**Synopsis:** Evelyn Ryan (Julianne Moore) worked hard to create clever advertising jingles for contests to support her family of twelve during hard economic times. This true story focuses on Evelyn's wins and her personal successes, especially those related to her children, despite a difficult marriage to an emotionally abusive, alcoholic man (Woody Harrelson).

1. Besides providing economic freedom for the family, what does Evelyn's jingle-writing do for her? What is there about writing that helps Evelyn cope?
2. How is it possible that Evelyn rarely shows any negative emotions?
3. Evelyn seems to handle her husband's jealousy. In general, how should one handle jealousy when one partner is more successful than the other?
4. Why does Evelyn gravitate toward the contest-winner group? What do they represent?
5. What lessons does she teach her children?

### **Interesting Facts**

They got it right for Kelly to drink Diehl Beer, but the brewery closed in 1954 and he is still drinking it in 1963.

Evelyn finally meets up with fellow contestants sometime in the summer of 1963, when Dortha gives her an entry form for a Dr Pepper contest. But a close-up of the form has a space for a ZIP code, which did not appear on order blanks until well into 1964 or even later.

The all-weather pith helmet that the mailman wears would not be introduced until the 1980s. Though pith helmets have existed since the 1840s, they were made of cloth or cork. He was obviously wearing a modern plastic one.

Ray the mail man is under dressed for that era, with short-sleeved shirt; he should have been similarly dressed like the milkman: jacket, tie and hat.

## Still Alice (2014)

**Synopsis:** Alice Howland (Julianne Moore in her Oscar-winning Best Actress role) is a linguistics professor who receives a diagnosis of early onset Alzheimer's disease when she starts to forget words. As she struggles to stay connected to who she is, her family members are tested and her sense of well-being greatly challenged.

1. Why is it so difficult for people to believe a diagnosis like Alice's? What does it do to their ability to make plans? How does it affect Alice's productivity?
2. What is the effect on the family members when a disease has genetic or familial roots?
3. Why does Alice say she wished she had cancer instead?
4. What kinds of legacies does Alice attempt to impart?
5. At the movie's end, what makes her still Alice?

## Interesting Facts

Maria Shriver, an executive producer of the film, is the author of the children's book *What's Happening to Grandpa*, inspired by her father, R. Sargent Shriver, and his struggle with the disease

Co-director Richard Glatzer had Lou Gehrig's Disease. He used a special I-PAD program to answer questions by typing with his big toe on his right foot. He died on March 12, 2015.

This film was part of the data stolen in the Sony Pictures hacking incident. Once it was leaked onto peer-to-peer file-sharing websites, it was downloaded by an estimated 103,000 IPs, and ultimately it was formally released a month ahead of schedule.

## Wild (2014)

**Synopsis:** After years of reckless behavior, heroin addiction and a broken marriage, Cheryl Strayed (Reese Witherspoon), with absolutely no outdoor experience, makes a rash decision to hike 1100 miles as a way of recovering from the recent death of her mother. Driven by sheer determination, she conquers her fears and goes farther than she ever dreamed possible.

1. How much help does Cheryl need along the way? What does this imply about our frequent attempts to go it alone? How do we know when and whom to ask for help?
2. How do we prevent ourselves from making foolish mistakes as we undertake the difficult journeys in our lives, symbolic and otherwise?
3. Can too much preparation prevent us from reaching our goal, or is this much preparation necessary?
4. How does the death of someone important affect our ability to carry through on our goals?
5. What is Cheryl's goal? Is she successful? Does she consider herself productive?

## Interesting Facts

The film is set in 1995 (see the Jerry Garcia death newspaper headline) yet Cheryl is reading *Gone Girl* (published in 2012).

Early in her hike, as Cheryl is howling along with coyotes, a distinctive round-topped rock spire is visible in the distance. This is the iconic Monkey Face tower at Smith Rock State Park in central Oregon; however, at this point in the film, Cheryl is still supposed to be in California.

In one scene, Cheryl is pumping water through a First Need water filter. The water in the bottle is hopelessly muddy and dirty, and she adds iodine to make it drinkable. The filter shown will actually

produce clean, clear and immediately-drinkable water, free of bacteria and protozoa without any need for further sterilization, even from a very muddy source. It is good product placement, but a poor plot angle for the manufacturer.

### **Baby Boom (1987)**

**Synopsis:** Diane Keaton stars as J.C. Wiatt, a successful New York career woman married to her job. Her life takes an unexpected turn when a distant relative dies and leaves J.C. an unusual bequest, a baby girl. This comedy shows how J.C. copes with these very significant changes in her life.

1. What plans does J.C. have for her life? Has she built in any opportunity for changes or detours?
2. How does she handle things when she meets Elizabeth? Would she have predicted that she would have reacted this way? Why?
3. What does she come to value?
4. What would she say her legacy is at the end of the movie?
5. In 1987 when this movie came out, could women have it all, according to the movie? Can women have it all by 2015 standards? And, is having it all really success?

### **Interesting Facts**

At the end of the film, the credits list "For Annie", who is the little girl sitting in the vet's office at the end (with her dog). This is actually Annie Meyers-Shyer, daughter of the director Charles Shyer. In Disney's 1998 version of *The Parent Trap* (1998), which was directed by Charles Shyer's wife, Nancy Meyers, the twins played by Lindsay Lohan were named after the real Annie Meyers-Shyer and her sister, Hallie Meyers-Shyer. However, at the end of this film, the credits list "For Hallie" instead.

Writer-producer Nancy Meyers once said of this film: *"Our movie is about someone who never planned on motherhood. The comedy comes from J.C.'s ineptness to deal with this surprise. Ten years prior [c. 1977], Baby Boom would have probably starred a man, because it is only recently, with the great female drive toward careerism and success, that it would be believable a woman could be so ill-prepared for motherhood."*

### **Norma Rae (1979)**

**Synopsis:** Based on a true story, this movie focuses on Norma Rae Webster (Sally Field in an Oscar-winning performance), a Southern millworker who discovers a power within herself that she never knew she had. With the guidance of a New York unionizer (Ron Leibman), and with increasing courage and determination, Norma Rae organizes her fellow factory workers to fight for better conditions and wages.

1. How does Norma Rae respond when she realizes that Reuben is Jewish? Why is it that Jews were so involved in labor organizing?
2. How does Norma Rae respond when she gets a promotion? Why does she respond this way?
3. Why was the first unionizing meeting held at an African-American church?
4. What groups did Norma Rae have to fight to get the union going? Why?
5. How does Reuben get people involved? How does Norma Rae get people involved?
6. What other ills does she attempt to cure? Why?

7. What is the power behind the song “It Goes Like It Goes” at the beginning and end of the movie? How does it illuminate aspects of Norma Rae’s growth?

### **Interesting Facts**

The film is based on a real-life campaign at J.P. Stevens Mill in Roanoke Rapids, North Carolina. Norma Rae is based on Crystal Lee Sutton, and Reuben Warshowsky on Eli Zivkovich, a 55-year-old former West Virginia coal miner. Some events are re-created verbatim in the movie, including Norma Rae holding up the "UNION" sign and the plant workers shutting down their machines, and Norma Rae waking up her children to tell them about her relationships with their fathers.

Sally Field struggled so hard not to be put in the police car that she broke the rib of an actor playing one of the policemen.

Sally Field and Beau Bridges researched their roles by working in a factory.

Marsha Mason, Jane Fonda, Faye Dunaway, and Jill Clayburgh all passed on the title role.

### **Erin Brockovich (2000)**

**Synopsis:** Based on a true story, Julia Roberts earned an Oscar for her portrayal of Erin Brockovich, a twice-divorced mother of three who sees negligence and injustice when a community’s water is poisoned by the local power company. Despite all the odds against her, Erin fights for the people who are seriously ill or dying to recoup some of the costs to deal with their illnesses. In the process, she gains a renewed sense of her own worth and value.

1. How does Erin’s view of herself at the beginning of the movie change by the end? What causes her to change?
2. What traits enable her to be successful?
3. What makes her want to pursue the Hinckley case?
4. How does her being fired impact on her ability to make a difference?
5. For whom is she leaving a legacy? In what way?
6. What are some of Erin’s values? Do any of them change or do they always stay the same?

### **Interesting Facts**

George, the biker boyfriend played by Aaron Eckhart, was based on Erin Brockovich-Ellis's Mexican-American biker boyfriend Jorge. Erin and Jorge did break up, but he did not leave her life. He was hired as a full time live-in nanny for Erin's children for several years, paid for by the law firm so that she would have more time to devote to her work.

Julia Roberts received an unprecedented salary for her lead role, making her the first woman to break the \$20 million barrier.

As of 2003, Erin Brockovich-Ellis was still with Ed Masry's law firm and had been given the title Director of Research.

The real Erin Brockovich-Ellis actually got sick from the chromium poisoning she was investigating. Steven Soderbergh decided to leave that aspect out of the film as it would make Erin out to be too much of a martyr.



## **Places in the Heart (1984)**

**Synopsis:** Edna Spalding (Sally Field in an Oscar-winning role) is a widow with small children in 1930's rural Texas who is struggling to survive on her cotton farm. Moses, a wandering black laborer, helps her for a while as does Mr. Will, the blind brother-in-law of the man whose bank holds the mortgage on the farm. Despite all odds and all of their respective difficulties, this varied group becomes a family as they work together to save the farm.

1. How does the title relate to the theme *Nat'abKarem*?
2. How does Edna change over the course of the movie?
3. In what way does her planting at the beginning of the movie change from that at the end of the movie?
4. When her sister washes Edna's husband's body after he is killed, what are the similarities to Jewish burial customs?
5. How does Edna influence her sister, her children, Moses, and Mr. Will? Do they ever become productive?
6. Why do characters like Edna's husband, the young black man who killed him, and even Moses appear in the church at the end of the movie?
7. What do you think is the message at the end of the movie?

## **Interesting Facts**

Sally Field's heartfelt Oscar acceptance speech has often been misquoted. Here it is verbatim: "*This means so much more to me this time, I don't know why. I think the first time I hardly felt it because it was all too new. But I want to 'thank you' to you. I haven't had an orthodox career. And I've wanted more than anything to have your respect. The first time I didn't feel it. But this time I feel it. And I can't deny the fact that you like me... right now... you like me. Thank you.*"

Director and screenwriter Robert Benton set the film in his birthplace of Waxahachie, Texas, in 1935, three years after his birth.

This movie is part of a mini-cycle of farming movies that all debuted in 1984: *Country* (1984), *The River* (1984) and *Places in the Heart* (1984). All three were nominated for the Best Actress Academy Award with Sally Field beating out Jessica Lange and Sissy Spacek from the first two films respectively.