

# Oh My Mama: The Script as Teaching Tool

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*Dear Abby: Since I was a child, I've wanted to be a performer. My mother says that since I am not beautiful, I will never make it. To be blunt, with my nose, I'd have to make a career of playing Cyrano ...on principle, I want to be who I am, not change to fit someone else's idea of beauty. But for the sake of my career, should I save up for a nose job? Barbra Streisand.*

No, Dear Abby never received such a letter. But it did appear in **Dear Columnist: Letters from Jewish Women in the Media**, a 1980's script for the Ramat Zion Sisterhood (Northridge, CA) in which creator Julie Steinschreiber offers imaginary letters to Dear Abby and Ann Landers. The letters reflected contemporary women's issues such as self-image, family relations, professional choices, and personal and health crises.

In its day the script was queen. A sizable percentage of all sisterhood meetings involved these carefully crafted dramatic or oratorical works, highly formalized, peppered with casts, costumes, readings from classical texts, poetry, music, and musical parodies.

The mid 20th century saw an enormous expansion of Conservative synagogues, and with them, sisterhoods. By the 1960s, the process of Americanization was complete and Jews, in general, had entered the middle class. For the most part, women did not work, but rather devoted

themselves to home, family and domestic gentility. The sisterhood offered an important outlet where they could gather with like-minded friends, have fun and aspire to leadership positions.

Sisterhoods provided opportunities for personal growth and artistic expression and were an important locus for Jewish education. And the script became a principle tool for study and even a feminized sermonic model. They were dead serious, value laden and often erudite. Over the years, Women's League members wrote hundreds of scripts focusing on virtually every area: Bible, Talmud, holiday observance, prayer, halakhah, theology, mitzvot, food, music, Israel, patriotism, family, poetry, human rights, and even terrorism.

Some were short and pithy, with only one or two readers. Others were more ambitious. Always, the intention was to educate, to stimulate and to inspire. The presentations perhaps were meant to simulate an afternoon at the theater, only a touch more homegrown and with an unabashedly didactic intention.

The earliest scripts from the 1950s and '60s, the subject here, focused on being a good Jewish housewife – knowing about kashrut and prayer and holiday observance – and maintaining Jewish identity under the threat of assimilation. This subject was revisited time and again.

Dora C. Greenberg loosely based ***Tending Her Altar*** (1960) on the Women's League publication *Jewish Home Beautiful*. For Greenberg, the task of making a Jewish home was sacred. "With woman as priestess to tend to its altars, each home is a Temple, each hearth a shrine."

In ***Our Daughters – Our Hope for the Future*** (1963, Mrs. S. Gershon Levy) a mother is satisfied that, in encouraging her daughter to become a bat mitzvah a decade before her wedding, she assured her success as a

“future wife and mother in a Jewish home.” She is thankful that she provided her daughter with “the appropriate tools to be a good Jewess.”

Sadie Rose Weilerstein, the creator of K'tonton, weaves together the stories of **Three Rachels** from different eras: the matriarch Rachel, Rabbi Akiba's wife, and Rachael Blowstein, poet of pre-State Palestine.

Weilerstein writes: *“There is no generation without an Abraham, an Isaac, or a Jacob, so says midrash.... and there is no generation but has a Sarah, a Rebekkah, a Leah or Rachel. Today we shall tell you of three Rachels..”* But the matriarch's valor is attributed to having died giving birth to Joseph, becoming an icon for those who die in childbirth. Rabbi Akiba's wife sacrifices status to marry, and then sacrifices contentment to allow her husband to study; the poet glorifies Israel's pioneers and their goals. The script concludes: “Mother Rachel welcomes back all returning children; Rachel, the wife of Akiva lives in every school and every scholar of Torah; Rachael the gentle poet lives in the songs of Israel.” Their accomplishments are to nurture their men and make them successful.

A similar message is found in ***Mother of the Year*** (1959, Rabbi and Mrs. Noah Golinkin), celebrating Sarah, Jocheved, Mathilde Schechter, and the mother of Chaim Nachmin Bialik. But the focus is on the men the women support: Isaac, Moses, Bialik, and Solomon Schechter.

Sylvia Seldin, Doris Cooper and Zita Berg depict how women changed throughout the century in ***Style Show for Jewish Living*** with costumed models on one side and old photos projected onto the other. A photograph of a grandmother from the 1920s (in long dress, apron, covered head) is contrasted with the grandmother of today “in stylish pantsuit.” The last images contrast a turn of the century bar mitzvah boy with a bat mitzvah girl who sings, to the tune of *I'm Just a Girl Who Can't Say No*:

*Move over boys, you're not alone  
Girls now are having their say  
They study Hebrew, learn to chant  
Preparing for Bat Mitzvah Day ...*

*Here's to a long and happy life...  
No need to plan too far ahead....but  
You'll make a good Jewish wife!*

In the early 1980's script **My Bubbe's Miseh** (Zelda Wolf Jacobs), family members question their grandmother on her personal story (miseh). The younger women caution (to the tune of *Dayenu*):

*Use the sterling not the stainless  
Who said polishing is painless?  
Rinse the crystal, just a bissel, dayenu  
Press the cloth, the cutwork lace one  
Who says entertaining's great fun,  
clean the oven, don't you love 'em, dayenu*

Even as the women question their grandmother about her hardships they marvel at her unflagging dedication to tradition. The discussion concludes that the enticements of assimilation are merely superficial attractions. Their bubbe's hardships are internalized as their own, and her resolve is theirs as well.

**Tanta Mim** (Mrs. Adolph Felder, Mrs. Joseph Kingsley and Mrs. Sam Weber) is based loosely on Auntie Mame. Auntie Mim is colorful, charismatic, unconventional, and larger than life, ever the truth-teller and rebel. But unlike Mame who tells her young charge "Life's a banquet and most poor suckers are starving to death," Auntie Mim arrives in the nick of time to solve the problem of Jewish assimilation. Her prescription is to

observe more mitzvot, go to shul, observe kashrut, and be loyal to Jewish tradition. Auntie Mim's seemingly counterculture persona is just a thinly veiled idealized Jewish mother.

Regardless of the context, there is always the conundrum of the Jewish mother. In ***Dear Columnist***, Beverly Sills asks how to deal with her two disabled children. Dear Abby responds: *"You have too many things on your mind right now. Do not punish yourself about your children's disabilities. Maybe you should retire from your singing career to raise your children. Be strong. You will survive your grief."*

I wonder if Dear Abby would have counseled Mr. Beverly Sills to retire from his job. In the next issue of *New Outlook*, we will examine how the Jewish wife and mother traded in her rolling pin and tea service for a tallit and personal achievement.