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## BEYOND FILM: #MeJew: Antisemitism, Authentic Representation and Jewish Identity in Hollywood

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### Abstract

This is a report on the Sundance Film Festival panel from the BEYOND FILM program: "#MeJew: Antisemitism, Authentic Representation and Jewish Identity in Hollywood" which occurred in Park City on January 22, 2023.

### Keywords

Antisemitism, Representation, Judaism

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### Author Notes

Dereck Daschke is a professor of Philosophy & Religion at Truman State University and holds a Ph.D. from the University of Chicago Divinity School. Particularly interested in the intersection among religion, psychology, and wellness, his academic work over more than two decades has analyzed the transformational breakdowns and creative buildups in the form of apocalypses, mysticism, new religious movements, psychedelics, the Bible, Bob Dylan, and, of course, film. He regularly teaches "Religion and Film" at Truman and has overseen a number of student research theses that have contributed to the conversation about just why it is that movies capture our meaning-making imaginations in the way they do.

## **#MeJew: Antisemitism, Authentic Representation and Jewish Identity in Hollywood**

*“Why have Jews been left out of DEI conversations? Everyone believes Jews are vastly overrepresented in Hollywood — is that true? Why is their representation so often inauthentic, relying on caricatures at best and evil depictions at worst? How did Hollywood’s founders, escaping antisemitism, bake their complicated feelings of Judaism into so many storylines? How can we finally change the narrative so that rising Jew-hatred will be replaced with an explosion of Jewish pride?”*

In 2021, Malina Saval, a Jewish woman and Features Editor at *Variety*, wrote and published an article in that magazine titled “Too Jewish For Hollywood: As Antisemitism Soars, Hollywood Should Address Its Enduring Hypocrisy In Hyperbolic Caricatures of Jews,”<sup>1</sup> which addressed the routine reduction of Jewish representation on screen to the most conservative and sensationalistic stereotypical images, usually involving conflicts between the modern world and some form of ultra-Orthodox (especially Hasidic) Judaism. Sometimes these depictions got key facts or ideas about Jewish life and practice wrong; sometimes the issue was simply the relentless repetition of the most negative, uncompromising version of Judaism on screen, absent any other more positive and authentic varieties to counterbalance those narratives. Oftentimes these misrepresentations were created by non-Jews, but sometimes they were not, but rather the result of the immense pressures on Jews to make sure Judaism conformed to the expectations of non-Jewish producers and viewers. Saval’s critique of the industry inevitably found itself engaged in the dispiriting, ingrained antisemitic pushback that “Jews already have so much power in the media, what are you complaining about” (even to the extent of being told outright that “Jews control Hollywood” as though that were true and a source of pride).

Meanwhile, Allison Josephs, raised as a Conservative Jew who had learned a great deal of the worst stereotypes about Orthodox Jews from her father, had over the years made her own spiritual journey to modern Orthodoxy but found, like Saval, that virtually all media

representations of Judaism, especially Orthodoxy, were relentlessly negative and often outright inaccurate. She also noticed that portrayals of Islam and Muslims had drastically improved over the last several years, which she found was the result of the efforts of the MPac Hollywood Bureau, which was in consulting partnership with studios, helping get Muslim writers, producers, directors and other talents on the ground floor of the creative process. She also discovered that there was a Hollywood Bureau of the NAACP for African-American representation, CAPE for advancing Asian American and Pacific Islander representation, and so on: but no such advocacy for Jews. In fact, when Josephs began inquiring about starting such a Jewish Bureau, like Saval, she was told that it was unnecessary due to the large Jewish presence in Hollywood. Undeterred, in 2007 Josephs founded Jew in the City (JITC) Hollywood Bureau,<sup>2</sup> whose mission is to change “negative perceptions of religious Jews and making engaging and meaningful Orthodox Judaism known and accessible. This is achieved by highlighting an approach based on kindness, tolerance, sincerity, and critical thinking.”

Saval’s *Variety* article naturally caught Joseph’s attention, and the two women have made common cause to make Jewish characters in TV and film more three dimensional, leading JITC to sponsor the talk “#MeJew: Antisemitism, Authentic Representation and Jewish Identity in Hollywood” for a packed audience at Sundance this year. (In fact, Saval described one piece of activism that involved making cardboard stands of all the stereotypical Orthodox characters found in popular culture and situating them outside of NBC headquarters at 30 Rockefeller Center with the caption, “Make Us Three Dimensional.”) Josephs presented slides featuring common antisemitic tropes and other misunderstandings that she finds continue to adversely influence Jewish representation on screen, and create questions such as: whether Jews should be considered White, whether Judaism is solely a religion, whether Jews are the most successful American

minority, and whether they have they faced persecution in the US, among others. Perhaps the most telling impetus for the creation of JITC was reflected in the observation shared and affirmed by both women that in the writers' room, very often an authentic depiction of Judaism must be toned down as “too Jewish,” but when Jewish creators push back against their marginalization, they are routinely told that they have nothing to complain about since they're not a minority: thus enduring the sting of discrimination without any means of rectifying the situation.

The Q&A session was lively and somewhat contentious, as to be expected—the maxim “ten Jews, ten opinions” was cited more than once—with the major concern about the JITC being that it was advancing and advocating for only one specific kind of Judaism, namely an overtly religious Orthodoxy. But both Saval and Josephs assured the audience that effort was meant to create the conditions for realizing onscreen engaging, authentic characters from across the Jewish spectrum. As Saval herself concludes her *Variety* piece: “The simple, boring truth: Jews are human.”

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<sup>1</sup> Malina Saval, “Too Jewish For Hollywood: As Antisemitism Soars, Hollywood Should Address Its Enduring Hypocrisy In Hyperbolic Caricatures of Jews,” *Variety*, June 18, 2021. [Jewish Roles in Hollywood Are Caricatures, Which Inspire Antisemitism - Variety](#).

<sup>2</sup> Allison Josephs, “The Marginalized Group Inclusion Spaces Forgot to Include,” *Jew in the City*, Jan. 23, 2023. [Jew in the City](#)