

Don't Close the...Door: *Rugrats* and its Impact on Jewish Children

Master's Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences
Brandeis University
Hornstein Jewish Professional Leadership Program
Department of Near Eastern and Judaic Studies
Jonathan Krasner, Advisor
Ellen Smith, Reader

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts
in
Jewish Professional Leadership and Near Eastern and Judaic Studies

by
Teri L. McGuire

May 2016

Acknowledgements

I am so thankful to everyone who has helped me along the way to make this thesis a reality. They say it takes a village to raise a child, and it definitely takes at least that to craft a thesis. So much love and gratitude goes out to my friends who listened to me parse out every nook and cranny of my ideas. It is amazing to have reliable sounding boards, and I am lucky to have so many people invested in my success. A special shout out to my best friend, Aaron Fineberg, for enduring countless rants and stressful evenings with stride and always knowing how to push me to do my best.

To Professors Jonathan Krasner and Ellen Smith, thank you for listening to me complain, assisting me in thinking deeper, and pointing me in the right directions – your support and time are greatly appreciated. My deepest thanks also goes out to each author who contributed to the works I read in order to research my background material. I am indebted to the creators and whole team behind *Rugrats* who fashioned such a touching and relevant world, which I was thrilled to watch as a child, and am even more taken with after delving in deeper as an adult. The themes are relevant, the characters are (figuratively) three-dimensional, and I am honored to be able to identify with such a remarkable show. I truly feel bad for the generations of Jewish children who did not grow up with such a gift, and I hope the legacy continues on.

Last, but not least, I would like to thank my family for making this study possible. To my older sisters Erin and Kara, thanks for watching every episode of *Rugrats* with me growing up, and molding me into a true '90's kid. To my

exceptional parents Sharon Pollack and Thomas McGuire: thank you for being the best people I know, for supporting me regardless of how crazy my dreams are, and for “intermarrying.” Without your union I would not be the person I am today, and I would not have been inspired to study the minds of kids like me. This one is for you.

ABSTRACT

Don't Close the...Door: *Rugrats* and its Impact on Jewish Children

A thesis presented to the Hornstein Jewish Professional Leadership Program and
the Department of Near Eastern and Judaic Studies.

Graduate School of Arts and Sciences
Brandeis University
Waltham, Massachusetts

By Teri L. McGuire

This thesis is the culmination of a yearlong investigation into the Jewish rituals, themes, and characters portrayed in the 1991 hit children's series, *Rugrats*. By studying the era in which this show aired, closely analyzing the Jewish content of the show, and conducting interviews with individuals who had been exposed to it, I set out to determine the accuracy, relevance and impact of *Rugrats'* Jewishness. Through this qualitative study I determined that a majority of my respondents had positive associations with the television program, and saw it as an example of Jewish media that both has educational value and an association which makes them proud. Through this thesis I present the study of a popular piece of public media as an example of a growing and legitimate source of evidence and influence on perception and identity on the individuals that consume it – in this case American Jews.

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements.....	ii
Abstract.....	iv
Introduction	1
Chapter 1: Putting It All in Context: The World in which Rugrats Lives.....	10
Chapter 2: A Rugrats Passover: Let My People Learn about Passover.....	20
Chapter 3: Judaism’s Most Famous Holiday: “You Have to ‘Cha!’ When You Say It” ..	32
Chapter 4: The Santa Experience: Can You Tell They Are Interfaith?.....	46
Chapter 5: What About Every Other Day? Rugrats and Daily Life.....	48
Chapter 6: The Gift that Keeps on Giving: The Impact and Legacy.....	54
Conclusion	60
Bibliography	63
Appendices.....	65

Introduction

On the evening of April 3, 1995 my whole family gathered in our living room to watch a very special episode of *Rugrats*. The innovated children's show, which brought the newly established "First Kids Network" Nickelodeon, to new heights, was not only presenting the last episode of its third season, but also premiering a new holiday special. For the first time in the history of television, a show aimed at a children's demographic was presenting an episode devoted to a Jewish holiday. "A Rugrats Passover" brought in the most viewers in Nickelodeon history, earning a 3.1 Nielsen rating¹ and entering the homes of children and families everywhere. Just months earlier, in December 1994, Adam Sandler had addressed for the first time those who "felt like the only kid in town without a Christmas tree" in his performance of "The Chanukah Song" on Saturday Night Live! Finally, in a world where religious celebration on screen was overtaken by Rudolph, the Grinch, and Santa Claus, there was an example of a Jewish holiday special to which Jewish children could relate and enjoy.

Rugrats introduces audiences to the Pickles family who live a middle-class, 1990's suburban life, inhabiting a two-story house with a large yard, two car garage and lovable family dog. In the show's first season, the family consists of parents, Stu and Didi, and their baby Tommy Pickles. Unique in nature, the point of view of the show comes from baby

¹ Banet-Weiser, Sarah. *Kids Rule! Nickelodeon and Consumer Citizenship*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2007.

Tommy himself, who is not old enough to utter his first word to his parents, but communicates via “baby talk” with his best friends, the neurotic Chuckie, and the dirt loving twins Phil and Lil. In each episode the babies find themselves on some sort of adventure, whether it be sneaking into the basement to battle a monster or avoiding the dust bunnies that live under the bed. Yet their grand plans are too often spoiled by Tommy’s evil cousin Angelica who, as a three year old, is able to communicate with both the grown ups and the “dumb babies” as she often refers to the younger children. The childlike lens *Rugrats* implements is endearing and adds to the narrative and in-depth understanding of the characters. For the most part, the viewer sees the world through Tommy’s eyes and therefore can sometimes misinterpret the situations at hand. It is not uncommon, as we will see unfold in many episodes, for the children to mishear a word from their parents and jump to conclusions about what is happening. These misreads are usually for the viewers benefit, leading to a humor. However, a deeper meaning regarding the gaps between generations could also be interpreted. The writers seem to be making a statement about the way in which generations perceive situations differently, and misunderstand each other’s points of view.

Although the children, or rugrats, themselves are the main focus of the story, that does not mean the show is exclusively for or about children. Unlike many famous cartoons, such as *Peanuts* where adults are depicted as so inconsequential that they literally speak in gibberish and are rarely seen, *Rugrats* includes adult characters that are dynamic and relevant to the plot. As the audience gets to know the children, they also get to know their parents, and in some cases their grandparents. With the addition of Tommy and Angelica’s grandfather Lou who lives with the Pickles family, and Tommy’s maternal, Jewish

grandparents Boris and Minka, there is a wide range of generations represented. These multi-generational layers allow for viewers of many different ages. Whether you're a child, a parent, or a grandparent, *Rugrats* is filled with dynamic situations, humor, and realistic themes for the whole family.

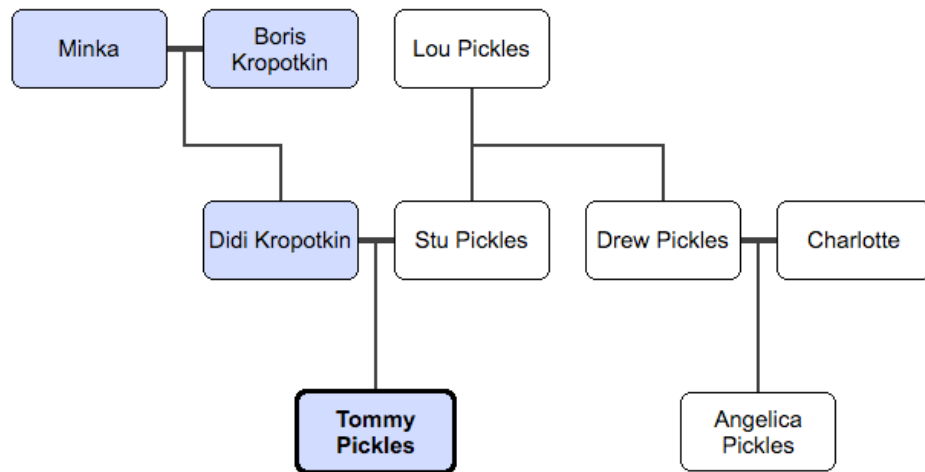


Figure 1.1 Tommy Pickles' Family Tree

Furthermore, the presence of multiple generations allows for the audience to get to know the rugrats in a deeper sense. It is through these layers of generational exposure that we learn more about the children, especially our protagonist. A look into Tommy's family tree provides an interesting look at the different forces that affect his upbringing, for instance religion. As Figure 1.1² illustrates, with one Jewish parent (Didi) and one non-Jewish parent (Stu), Tommy is exposed to family members with different beliefs and histories. These different backgrounds allow for a nuanced discussion regarding what it is like for a child to be raised in multiple faiths, as we see Tommy celebrating Christmas, Passover, and Chanukah.

² In this Figure, blue rectangles represent individuals who are born Jewish, according to Jewish law. White rectangles represent individuals who are not Jewish.

Despite the fact that *Rugrats* is a cartoon, it provides an impressive amount of realism. This aspect has a direct correlation to the personal and family lives of the show's creators: Arlene Klasky, Gabor Csupo and Paul Germain. To a large extent, the intermarried aspects of *Rugrats* mirror the lives of married couple Klasky and Csupo. Klasky, the daughter of Jewish-Russian immigrants, and Csupo an atheist born in Hungary, raised two children together, not without their struggles. However, Klasky was not the only Jewish influence at the helm. Paul Germain, the third creator, based the characters of Boris and Minka on his beloved Jewish grandparents. The personal elements and family inspiration, which channeled the creative energy of the team, made *Rugrats* an instant classic.³ The same creative team produced a handful of other shows throughout the "golden age" of Nickelodeon, all of them great successes, such as *Rocket Power*, *As Told by Ginger*, and *The Wild Thornberrys*, but none rivaled *Rugrats* in ratings, Daytime Emmy wins⁴, or box office and merchandise sales⁵.

I have no recollection of my first viewing of the historic episode that is "A Rugrats Passover." Just shy of two years old at the time, this is not surprising. However, what may be surprising to some is the member of my family who remembers the episode most vividly. My father, Thomas Patrick McGuire, who was raised Irish-Catholic, recalls seeing multiple commercials for the episode.⁶ Upon viewing these advertisements he was sure he would soon be watching this episode with his Jewish wife and three daughters who were being raised as observant Jews. However, the episode was not only of interest to him as a desire to give his children Jewish characters to relate to; he could also see himself projected

³ Klickstein, Mathew. *Slimed! An Oral History of Nickelodeon's Golden Age*. New York: Penguin Group, 2013.

⁴ "Awards." IMDb. IMDb.com, n.d. Web. 10 Mar. 2016.

⁵ Klickstein, Mathew. *Slimed! An Oral History of Nickelodeon's Golden Age*. New York: Penguin Group, 2013.

⁶ McGuire, Thomas. Personal interview. 16 Nov. 2015.

on the screen. He, just like Stu Pickles, had Jewish in-laws that bickered about everything, a wife who found Jewish tradition meaningful, and children who were being raised with Jewish tropes.

For a generation of children, the Pickles family represents the first Jewish family that was created as a television cartoon just for them. However, some might argue the term “Jewish family” is being used loosely. Tommy and his family do not exclusively celebrate Passover and Hanukkah, which is showcased in another special a year later. A season prior to experiencing “A Rugrats Passover” viewers were able to enjoy an episode titled “The Santa Experience” in which Tommy and his family celebrate Christmas. Although the family never specifically classifies itself, the normal Jewish discourse would label the Pickles as an interfaith family, or refer to Tommy as a product of intermarriage. Didi, Tommy’s mother, is the daughter of Jewish-Russian immigrants, and Stu, Tommy’s father, is a typical American man who enjoys celebrating Christmas, yet is not illustrated as partaking in any particularly religious aspects of Christianity.

In a presentation at Brandeis University about Sylvia Barak Fishman’s work *Double or Nothing: Jewish Families and Mixed Marriage* Joyce Antler postulated, that a huge percentage of Jewish individuals portrayed on television in the 1990s were part of an intermarriage. “During the 1990s,” Antler stated, “the incidence of intermarriage on television, I would guess, would be 95, 97, or 98 percent.”⁷ A viewer familiar with the popular TV shows of the 1990s would have no problem agreeing with this estimate.

Friends, Dharma and Greg, The Nanny, and Mad About You are just a few examples of 90’s hits which focused on interfaith Jewish couples. With such an influx of Jewish intermarriage

⁷ Antler, Joyce. “Double or Nothing: Jewish Families and Mixed Marriage” Brandeis University. Waltham, MA. 25 April 2004.

portrayed on television in the decade it is surprising that the reality of American Jewish intermarriage did not quite match. Antler's estimate of television intermarriages produces a much larger percentage than was reported for the actual American Jewish community in the National Jewish Population Study (NJPS) 1990, which determined that 52%⁸ of Jewish born individuals were married to a gentile.⁹ Ten years later, NJPS 2000 provided regional rates of intermarriage in which they determined a great discrepancy between the West coast and the Northeast. They discovered a 42% intermarriage rate in the West, while noting only a 25% intermarriage rate in the Northeast.¹⁰ Does the greater prevalence of Jewish intermarriage in West, where these shows are created, explain the prevalence of intermarriage on the screen? Possibly. There is no denying that the representation of Jews on television during this period did not apply to all Jewish families and individuals, however, this prevalence of intermarried couples on television represent an increase in real life intermarriage, and a generational shift in opinions of these types of unions.

In 1973, a show which depicted Jewish intermarriage, *Bridget Loves Bernie*, became the highest rated show in the history of television to be canceled. Bomb and death threats to the show's cast, crew and network, allegedly from irate members of the Orthodox Jewish community, were part of the impetus to this decision. In his book, *The Jews of Prime Time* David Zurawik claims that there is, "some consensus that the reason the series was so offensive to some Jewish groups was that it made intermarriage look too easy."¹¹ Roughly

⁸ This percentage represents a stark difference to the 17% recorded in 1970.

⁹ Kosmin, Barry A., Sidney Goldstein, Joseph Waksberg, Nava Lerer, Ariela Keysar, Jeffery Scheckner (1990). *The National Jewish Population Survey 1990*.

¹⁰ Kotler-Berkowitz, Laurence, Steven M. Cohen, Jonathon Ament, Vivian Klaff, Frank Mott, and Danyelle Peckerman-Neuman. (2004). *The National Jewish Population Survey 2000-01: Strength, challenge and diversity in the American Jewish population*.

¹¹ Zurawik, David. *The Jews of Prime Time*. Lebanon: University Press of New England, 2003.

twenty years later, *Rugrats* was embraced despite its context of intermarriage. Its impressive portrayal of Jewish themes and characters presented an important educational opportunity for Jewish and non-Jewish families alike. The fun and interactive explanation of holidays was something Jewish children could use to reinforce their understanding of their families' traditions, and also enable a non-Jewish child to use to connect to their Jewish best friend. Michael Bell, who voiced Boris, reported during an interview, "We presented the Hanukkah show to an Orthodox synagogue and they *loved* it. They roared and cheered."¹² How is this possible? How did a show about a Jewish interfaith family targeted at children get praise from the entire spectrum of Jewish audiences?

How accurately does *Rugrats* present Jewish themes and rituals? Does the show call for assimilation? Does it ignore important aspects of Jewishness or dumb them down for effect? In my experience I have seen supplementary Jewish schools use "A Rugrats Chanukah" and "A Rugrats Passover" as educational tools to tell the story of the holidays. Yet, these institutions have typically ignored the themes and mentions of the unique makeup of this family. How does this added layer affect the significance and historical perspective of these episodes? How do children of intermarriage and in-marriage react to *Rugrats*? Do they do so differently, or is there a similar response? Is the Jewish message of *Rugrats* one that the Jewish community wants portrayed or would rather forget? Does *Rugrats* have a positive, lasting, and powerful impact on those who watched it?

After completing my research, I answer this last question with a resounding "Yes." Of the twenty-five interviews I conducted about the participants' relationship with television and their Jewish identity, all but three respondents noted *Rugrats* as an example

¹² Klickstein, Mathew. *Slimed! An Oral History of Nickelodeon's Golden Age*. New York: Penguin Group, 2013.

of Jewish media from their childhood. Non-coincidentally these three respondents all grew up in homes that did not subscribe to cable television and therefore did not have access to Nickelodeon, the channel on which *Rugrats* aired. In addition, my interviews showed that half of the participants were able to recall minute details from the Jewish holiday specials, yet little about the everyday life of the characters. Overwhelmingly, the interviewees did not know that the Pickles family was intermarried; they only recalled the family as a fun, Jewish clan that acted as a reprieve from the Christmas filled alternatives. As a result of these interviews and my time spent analyzing the Jewish nature of the show, I assert that Klasky, Csupo and Germain's creation portrays an authentic 1990's Jewishness, one that is rich in meaning, dependent on the insistence of tradition, and is on the "own terms" of the individuals that practice it.

What follows is my support for these claims that exists in the forms of in-depth cultural analysis of key episodes, characters, and themes, as well as the findings of my in-person interviews completed with children who were born or came of age in the Nickelodeon "Golden Age." These participants include both children of Jewish in married families, and those who grew up in intermarried households.

This topic, although fun and of personal interest to me, is also significant from a practical and policy driven point of view. As my title implies I hope this work will show educators and Jewish leaders that they shouldn't "close the door" on the non-traditional aspects that impact a child's Jewish identity. While the *Rugrats* might seem like a trivial topic in this regard, my research has shown that this excellent and dynamic portrayal of American Jewry can lead to pride and meaning for the young people exposed to it. I hope that this portrayal, and other portrayals which share the same amount of nuance and

knowledge, can continue to be utilized to inspire young Jews to take pride in themselves as Jews, however that is defined by themselves and their families.

I set out to complete a master's thesis that would combine my interests in the culture of the 1990's, Jewish portrayals within pop culture, and the inclusion of interfaith families within the greater American Jewish community. I also embarked on this journey to learn about my topic and myself, grow, and have fun in the process. What follows is, on the one hand, the culmination of a year of hard work and determination, and on another is the capstone of twenty-three years self-reflection and discovery. I hope your reading experience is as enjoyable and fulfilling as my writing process.

Chapter 1: Putting It All in Context: The World in Which Rugrats Lives

Boris: Don't close the...

(Door closes)

Boris: ...door.¹³

The main laughs of *A Rugrats Passover* revolve around the reoccurring joke above. After a chain of events, which will be described in greater detail later, Grandpa Boris finds himself locked in the attic. Jammed from the inside, yet working perfectly from the outside, the door becomes a barrier between the old Russian-Jewish immigrant and the rest of his family on the evening of the Passover Seder. Throughout the night, character after character finds him or herself joining Grandpa Boris in the attic. As the crowd in the attic grows larger, and the chairs around the dining room table quickly empty, it becomes apparent that there is a much happier atmosphere upstairs than there is downstairs. Ultimately, the episode ends with the entire family sitting upstairs in the attic, locked in with nowhere else to go, listening to Grandpa Boris tell, in a casual manner, the story of Passover.

Is there a symbolic message we can take from this experience? As they attempt to escape the traditional, and as Stu constant complains, “boring,”¹⁴ ritual of the Passover Seder, the family members find themselves happily engaged in the story of Passover, a

¹³ *Rugrats*. “A Rugrats Passover” April 13, 1995.

¹⁴ *Ibid*.

story that the children literally see themselves as part of, when it is presented as “story time” and not attached to the ritual of Seder. What does this say about American Judaism? Is *Rugrats* painting the religion and its practices in a positive light? Or is it arguing for a more “modern,” less ritualized, American interpretation? Although it might appear as if this “storytelling” approach is antithetical to traditional ritual practice, it is actually in accordance with the core mitzvah of the holiday: “You shall tell your children [about the story of the Exodus from Egypt].”¹⁵ *A Rugrats Passover*, the first major mention of Judaism within the *Rugrats* universe, is essential to understanding the way in which Judaism, and religion in general, is portrayed to its young demographic audience. The next several chapters will examine the characters, themes, and rituals as they relate to Judaism. An exploration of the two Jewish themed *Rugrats* specials, a Christmas special, and a discussion of the extent religion is relevant outside of these themed episodes, will provide insight into the main lessons and objectives which can be gleaned from the program.

Of course, *Rugrats* does not exist in a vacuum. Before we delve into a “close-watching” of this material, we must first understand the many contexts in which this piece of fiction sits. This chapter seeks to understand the intersection in which *Rugrats* sits by exploring the following questions: (1) What was the religious climate of America in the 1990’s and how did it differ from previous decades? (2) What did Jewish affiliation look like in this decade? (3) How did the Jewish community view intermarriage at the time? And (4) How were other TV shows depicting Jews and Jewish themes? The next four sections will answer these vital questions.

¹⁵ This commandment comes from Exodus 12:8.

There's no I in Team: The Religious Climate of 1990's America

In 1998 sociologist Robert Wuthnow produced an important study of religious life in America. In his book, *After Heaven: Spirituality in America Since the 1950s*, Wuthnow concludes that "habitation spirituality," which he argues "marks out a definite place for God in the universe and narrates a sacred space where humans too can dwell and implies a sense of being at home,"¹⁶ no longer has a monopoly on the spiritual rearing of individuals. Instead, he believes it has given way to a time in which there is vast personal freedom allowed in the environment of spiritual seeking. Ultimately he argues that the religious and spiritual discourse of the era leaned more towards the ideals of humanism as opposed to universalism. People began to focus on their own spiritual fulfillment, instead of focusing on traditional religious rituals and organization.

In fact, Wuthnow argues that these institutions are not as successful as they once were. He writes, "Despite evidence that churches and synagogues are, on the surface, faring well, the deeper meaning of spirituality seems to be moving in a new direction in response to changes in U.S. culture ... [leaving] many Americans struggling to invent new languages to describe their faith."¹⁷

In his book *Restless Souls*, scholar Leigh Schmidt similarly argues that there are many alternatives to the traditional church model for those looking to engage themselves spiritually. From yoga classes and Zen meditation, to New-Age seminars and holistic workshops, there many options to quench one's spiritual thirst. He goes as far as to observe that many a 1990's housewife consulted Oprah Winfrey as their life-guru. He argues that

¹⁶ Wuthnow, Robert. *After Heaven: Spirituality in America Since the 1950s*. University of California Press, 1998.

¹⁷ Ibid.

this trend in spirituality has deep historical antecedents, as human beings embark on "a search for a religious world larger than the British Protestant inheritance."¹⁸

The American Religious Identification Surveys of 1990, 2001, and 2008 conducted by Professors Barry Kosmin, Egon Mayer and Ariela Keysar, provide important insight into the way Americans understood their relationship with religion in the 1990s. The researchers believe that, "The most dramatic changes in the balance of religious sentiments seem to have occurred during the 1990s."¹⁹ Three main changes from the 1990 survey became apparent once they began examining the 2001 data:

"(a) the proportion of the population that can be classified as Christian has declined from eighty-six in 1990 to seventy-seven percent in 2001; (b) although the number of adults who classify themselves in non-Christian religious groups has increased from about 5.8 million to about 7.7 million, the proportion of non-Christians has increased only by a very small amount – from 3.3 % to about 3.7 %; (c) the greatest increase in absolute as well as in percentage terms has been among those adults who do not subscribe to any religious identification; their number has more than doubled from 14.3 million in 1990 to 29.4 million in 2001; their proportion has grown from just eight percent of the total in 1990 to over fourteen percent in 2001."²⁰

Overall, the findings show a decrease in the religious nature of the United States, with fewer Americans reporting themselves as being Christian or affiliating with religion in general.

This decline seems to have had an impact on the children of this generation. A survey completed by the PEW Research Center in 2013 established that "Nine-in-ten Millennials say they take part in Christmas, but only four-in-ten say they do so mainly as a

¹⁸ Schmidt, Leigh Eric. *Restless Souls: The Making of American Spirituality*. San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 2005. Print.

¹⁹ Kosmin, Barry, Egon Meyer, Ariela Keysar (2001). "American Religious Identification Survey 2001."

²⁰ Ibid.

religious holiday.”²¹ These Millennials, those who grew up primarily in the 1990s, have redefined not only what it means to be of a religious faith, but also what holidays symbolize and commemorate.

At the Corner of Jewish and American: Understanding American Jewry

Unsurprisingly, the American Jewish community of the time period was also affected by this transition in spiritual life. In referring directly to the Jewish community, the 2001 ARIS survey found that the Jewish adult population that identifies with Judaism as a religion represent “53% of all adults who can be classified as Jewish. The remaining 47% of the total consisted of adults who indicated they are of Jewish parentage or were raised Jewish or considered themselves Jewish for some other reason.”²² The emphasis on Jewish communal life, which had defined the community for so many years, had receded. The 1990s bore a generation of children who did not know a world in which Jewry was not deeply integrated into American society. This is not surprising historically, as American Jewish historian Jonathan Sarna points out in his book *American Judaism*. He argues that the social upheavals of the 1960s, the decrease in antisemitism, and the decline of segregated neighborhoods allowed for Jewish individuals to be greater exposed to the American ideal of individualism.²³

This desire for an individual and humanist lifestyle led to many changes in some sectors of the American Jewish community. As discussed in the introduction, the intermarriage rate had risen rapidly in the 1970s and 1980s, and the studies likewise noted

²¹ Smith, Gregory A, Conrad Hackett, Cary Funk, Neha Sahgal (2013). “A Portrait of Jewish Americans”

²² Kosmin, Barry, Egon Meyer, Ariela Keysar (2001). “American Religious Identification Survey 2001.”

²³ Sarna, Jonathan D. *American Judaism: A History*. New Haven: Yale UP, 2004. Print.

a decline in Jewish practice. NJPS 1990 revealed that “just over half of Born Jews who married at any age, whether for the first time or not, chose a spouse who was born a Gentile and has remained so.”²⁴ The 1980s represented a time in which many Americans understood their Jewishness as one segment of a larger, multi-faceted identity. This concept only increased in popularity in the 1990s, as spirituality and moral behavior increasingly became as essential to ones motivations as their desire to preserve continuity of the Jewish culture and bloodline.

Jews in Glass Houses: Attitudes Towards Inter-marriage

To many Jewish scholars and community leaders of the 1990s, news of the NJPS survey findings were disheartening and concerning. Fear surrounded the idea of rising intermarriage rates, which could ultimately lead to fewer Jewish individuals. To the Conservative and Orthodox movements, there was no room for intermarriage within the Jewish sphere. In 1989 a question was proposed to the Committee on Jewish Law and Standards, the *halachic*²⁵, Jewish legal, decision-making arm of the Conservative movement, asking whether or not congratulations could be made public for intermarried couples getting married or having a baby. The answer was a resounding “no” in which Rabbi Jerome Epstein ruled, “Since it is the official policy of the Conservative movement and its arms including the Rabbinical Assembly and the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism to discourage intermarriage and to take steps to prevent it, it is important that no action,

²⁴ Kosmin, Barry A., Sidney Goldstein, Joseph Waksberg, Nava Lerer, Ariela Keysar, Jeffery Scheckner (1990). The National Jewish Population Survey 1990.

²⁵ The term *halacha* refers to Jewish law. Here, the term *halachic* directly refers to the Jewish legal process, one that directly impacts the way in which certain Jewish individuals live their daily life.

whatsoever, be initiated that would imply the removal of the sanction, a changing of the norm or a willingness to condone intermarriages.”²⁶

That is not to say that all Jewish institutions were as frantic over the intermarriage rate. Some communities strived to include non-Jewish spouses, such as the Reform and Reconstructionist movements, which, as Sarna points out, resulted in new heights for the Reform movement. “For the first time in more than a century, Reform in the 1990s constituted the largest religious movement in American Jewry.”²⁷ Whether their motivations came from a true belief in inclusion, or from a practical reasoning for keeping their population engaged, these communities found it possible to retain members that might have otherwise turned away from their Judaism.

In her book *Jewish on Their Own Terms*, Jennifer A. Thompson brilliantly argues that the issues that the American Jewish community assigns to intermarried couples are projections of their own fears.²⁸ She writes, “Intermarried Jews serve a symbolic function, allowing American Jews to discuss their anxieties about a perceived loss of Jewish distinctiveness amid their success in assimilating into American culture. By projecting these anxieties onto intermarried Jews, other American Jews can express them without having to recognize that they face the same challenges themselves.”²⁹ This argument emphasizes the animosity sometimes expressed towards the Jews who intermarried, as

²⁶ Epstein, Jerome. “Congratulations to Mixed Marriage Families” Committee on Jewish Law and Standards, 1989.

²⁷ Sarna, Jonathan D. *American Judaism: A History*. New Haven: Yale UP, 2004. Print.

²⁸ Thompson, Jennifer. *Jewish on Their Own Terms*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2014.

²⁹ Ibid.

well as the over-arching theme of fear of assimilation, which Thompson argues has only grown since the beginning of the twenty-first century.³⁰

The Other Jews Gracing the Small Screen

Rugrats was definitely not the only show with Jewish characters in the 1990's. In fact, Vincent Brook, author of *Something Ain't Kosher Here: The Rise of the "Jewish" Sitcom*, claims that within the time period of 1989-2001 "thirty-three sitcoms with Jewish protagonists made their way onto American's televisions screens."³¹ He studies hits such as *Seinfeld*, *Friends*, and *Will and Grace*, while also acknowledging lesser-known series such as *State of Grace*, *Clueless*, and the short lived *Princesses*.

Almost all of these thirty-three representations of Judaism tackle the idea of intermarriage in some way. Shows such as *Mad About You*, *The Nanny*, and *Dharma and Greg* represent core couples in which one participant is Jewish and one is not, while others such as *Friends* only bring up the topic of religion in relevant situations such as the winter holidays. Although some might argue that a sitcom is a strange place to delve into such serious topics as intermarriage and religious expression, Brook's argument that it is actually a natural fit. He describes sitcoms as "an ideal way of presenting unpopular or controversial political ideas, since you can sneak up on the audience and educate them

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Brook, Vincent. *Something Ain't Kosher Here: The Rise of the "Jewish" Sitcom*. New Brunswick: Rutgers, 2003.

about these ideas without their noticing it.”³² From 1989 to 2001, sitcoms constantly educated audiences on the nuance and awkwardness of intermarried family life, and the intricacies of Jewish life in general.

As David Zurawik, author of *The Jews of Prime Time*, points out, some of these protagonists were not unambiguously Jewish, yet they portrayed their characters in a way that appeared Jewish.³³ Zurawik specifically points to Paul Buchman of *Mad About You*, stating that the actor, Paul Reiser, “played” his character very Jewish, yet there was never any direct discussion of his faith, even when he gets married to his “shikza goddess”³⁴ and has a child with her.³⁵ This idea of “acting Jewish” is present throughout the history of TV, which is not too surprising, as the people in charge of the industry only really knew their own lives, the lives of American Jews. As Henry Bial writes in his book *Acting Jewish: Negotiating Ethnicity on the American Stage and Screen*, there is pride in a viewer when they believe they notice a Jewish character. He points out the tendency for viewers to attempt to “decode hidden Jewish identity,”³⁶ a pastime he argues “is itself a source of community formation for many American Jews.”³⁷

Mad About You co-creator Danny Jacobson states in an interview to Zurawik that the decision to create the series had nothing to do with a decision to express Judaism on the small screen, but to follow a trend he had seen working in Hollywood in which big name

³² Ibid.

³³ Zurawik, David. *The Jews of Prime Time*. Lebanon: University Press of New England, 2003.

³⁴ A shikza goddess is a term used to describe non-Jewish women who exude characteristics that seen by Jewish men to be quintessentially non-Jewish. These characteristics include blonde hair, blue eyes, and a demeanor that stands in opposition to the stereotypical understanding of a Jewish mother.

³⁵ Zurawik, David. *The Jews of Prime Time*. Lebanon: University Press of New England, 2003.

³⁶ Bial, Henry. *Acting Jewish: Negotiating Ethnicity on the American Stage and Screen*. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2005.

³⁷ Ibid.

comedians were being given their own sitcom. Jacobson states, “Television has always been an industry of trends that way. When you get one success, you then get multiples of it...That’s part of what is happening here...Look, Paul Reiser and me are both Jewish, we’re both from New York, we’re both married. We said, ‘Hey, let’s do a show about that’ ...We just happened to be Jewish.”³⁸

As the interview with Jacobson emphasizes, some shows of the 1990’s were not specifically about Jews, but about people. Some of these people happened to be Jewish, and some happened to exhibit their Judaism differently than others. Loud talking, bargain shopping, and intense eating portrayed Fran Drescher’s Judaism, while Jerry Seinfeld’s Judaism shown through self-deprecating humor smattered with Yiddish. Just like the American public, which it was representing and catering to, the Jews of 1990’s television were individualists, making their spiritual decisions based on what worked and proved meaningful for them.

That being said, not all viewers embrace the abundance of Jewish characters on the small screen. Zurawik writes about those who see characters such as Fran Fine and Jerry Seinfeld as “too Jewish,” a term he claims, “echoes all too loudly across the history of Jewish characters on network television in its use – most often by Jewish programmers and network executives – as a tool to distort, disguise, or altogether eliminate depictions of Jewish identity from American prime-time television.”³⁹ We will see tensions amongst the creators of *Rugrats*, their network, and its viewers, which mirror these concerns.

³⁸ Zurawik, David. *The Jews of Prime Time*. Lebanon: University Press of New England, 2003.

³⁹ Ibid.

Chapter 2: A Rugrats Passover: Let My People Learn about Passover

The plot of “A Rugrats Passover” takes place entirely in one evening as the two Pickles families, and the Finsters (Tommy’s best friend Chuckie and his father, Chaz) join Grandpa Boris and Grandma Minka at their house for the Passover Seder. How do the different members of the Pickles family prepare themselves for the Passover Seder? The stereotypical⁴⁰ Jewish grandparents that they are, Boris and Minka spend their time arguing in their thick, Eastern European accents about tradition (cue the Fiddler on the Roof music). What is this important tradition they argue over? Is it a point of Jewish law (*halacha*)? Do they discuss the order of their dinner proceedings or what a certain item on the Seder plate represents? No, instead the married couple disputes an issue that is so important it takes roots within their beloved birthplaces of Smolensk and Vilna: wine glasses. Each of them wants to use their parent’s wine glasses for the Passover Seder, and Minka refuses to use Boris’ as they are smudged from old age. Eventually, Boris proclaims, “*If you don’t do the Seder my way, then I wash my hands of the whole thing!*”⁴¹ as he leaves the room in a huff. Unbeknownst to Minka, he is actually going up to the attic to find her mother’s wine glasses.

⁴⁰ A stereotype is defined as “a widely held but fixed and oversimplified image or idea of a particular type of person or thing.” Throughout this thesis this term is used to emphasize the moments of oversimplification of certain groups of people with the idea in mind that as a children’s show portrayed via cartoon images, this medium is inevitably going to provide simplifications for the benefit of its young audience.

⁴¹ *Rugrats*. “A Rugrats Passover” April 13, 1995.

This scene sets the expectation that Boris and Minka represent classic Jewish stereotypes. The way they are illustrated is just the beginning of this expectation. Both grandparents are drawn to have large noses, and accentuated accents and hand gestures. They do not simply speak to each other; instead they bicker as they gesticulate with broad strokes. This episode is littered with questions and answers, most likely to give uneducated viewers an understanding of the holiday and Judaism in general. One topical question comes from Minka during this argument. Exasperated she asks a question many viewers might be wondering: *“Since when is spotty old glasses a part of Jewish tradition?”*⁴² We can read this question for deeper understanding. Perhaps this question was included to act as a dig at Judaism’s insistence that everything is based on tradition. As will be discussed later, the reasoning for celebrating Passover is based in the idea that Jews need to remember their history, something that Jews “have been doing...for thousands of years.”⁴³ When exactly does something actually become a tradition? And is tradition for tradition sake a good enough justification for any argument? A question of this nature provides entry points for bigger questions regarding representation of the Jewish community in a broader discourse.

Two additional opening sequences reveal the feelings of the other characters attending the Passover Seder. The first consists of guests who are not directly related to Boris and Minka. As Angelica, and her parents, Charlotte and Drew, drive to Boris and Minka’s house for the Seder the three year old spends her time making matzos into crumbs in the back seat. Unfamiliar with the food she calls them crackers. It is interesting for viewers to see this segment of the Pickles family make their way to the Passover Seder, as

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.

none of them are Jewish. Angelica and Tommy are cousins because their fathers are brothers, and Judaism is part of Tommy's identity because his mother, Boris and Minka's daughter, is Jewish. When Angelica questions their motives for attending the following conversation takes place:

Angelica: "I don't see why we have to go over there anyway, they are Tommy's grandparents, not mine!"

*Drew: Angelica, maybe you'll have fun. **Passover is a very meaningful holiday!***

Angelica: A Holiday?! Are there presents?

Drew: Well...no.

Charlotte: Passover is about something more important than presents, it's about freedom.

Angelica: Freedom? You mean like when you can do whatever you want and no one can tell you not to?

Charlotte: Well...sort of.

Angelica: (Angelica breaks up matzo crumbs and throws them around the car) I'm free! I'm free!⁴⁴

This exchange is rich with deeper meaning. As discussed earlier, the conversation is riddled with questions, just as the Passover Seder is. A unique and essential aspect of *Rugrats* is the point of view from which it comes. The creators Arlene Klasky, Gabor Csupo, and Paul Germain set out to present the world "through a baby's eyes" and they succeeded beyond measure with *Rugrats*. As this episode continues on, the main dialogue and adventure is presented through the babies' experiences and their search for excitement. Angelica, acting as a mediator who is able to communicate with both the babies and the

⁴⁴ Ibid.

grown up provides important dynamics to each episode. Here, as a member of the adult world, but definitely not an insider in it, she can be used as an entry point to ask the important questions that the audience might be wondering.

Her first question is a selfish one, but also extremely astute. Why *is* she on her way to celebrate a holiday that has no direct correlation to her parents or their ancestry? Viewers of this scene could argue that her parents are completely dismissing the question, not addressing it at all. If, like them, we ignore this burning question we can simply chalk up the answer to that of plot exposition. It is rare that Angelica is not present in an episode of *Rugrats* as she acts as the show's main antagonist and is the instigator of most plot driven aspects. In the illustration of Grandpa Boris' story, which takes place later in the episode, she is the obvious representation of Pharaoh and therefore needs to be present in the episode from the beginning.

However, if we read deeper, perhaps the creators are making a statement about the modern family dynamic. Perhaps Charlotte and Drew do answer Angelica's question. The response that it might be "fun" and that the holiday is "meaningful" could be just the reason the Pickles family is attending the evening's activities. In an American society which is much less segmented by religion than it might have been considered just a few decades earlier, it is possible that Drew and Charlotte are open to any meaningful experience they might be able to give Angelica. As they give no signs in other episodes of being a very religious family, they could be open to providing their daughter with a myriad of lessons, stressing moral and intellectual learning over personal identity building. This is interesting as it presents a sentiment which precisely the opposite of the modern Jewish trope, which preaches that Judaism is all about identity building.

As Angelica's conversation with her parents continues, it becomes apparent that our latter interpretation could be correct. Angelica immediately equates the word "holiday" with the word "presents" and does not seem to understand when her parents tell her that there are no presents included in the celebration. Here, we have a blatant representation of the American values system. Even as a three year old, Angelica understands a holiday as an opportunity to buy something or be given something. This materialistic understanding of celebration is relatively absent from Jewish holidays. However, it is important to note that to an extent Drew is incorrect to stating that there are no presents on Passover. He dismisses the concept of *afikomen* and the gifts that either belongs to the finder of the dessert, or to hider who stumps the host, depending on your family tradition. Of course, this scavenger hunt version of activities has not always been a part of Seder, but instead an element added in by American families to keep children entertained throughout the long hours. This Americanization⁴⁵ goes hand in hand with Angelica's assumptions that there should be something fun for her to do during the family gathering that should result in a present.

When Charlotte steps in to assert that the theme of the holiday, freedom, is more important than presents, Angelica once again automatically interprets the "meaning" to be one that benefits her. She does not see freedom as a value that gives one dignity, but as something that allows her to break the rules her parents set. As she flings matzo crumbs all over the family's minivan her parents simply sigh and give up any attempts to control their daughter, perhaps giving in to the Americanization that is so ingrained in her.

⁴⁵ The term "Americanization" here refers to trends discussed in Chapter 1, which illustrate the importance of holiday celebrations as entities which have decreased in religious value but for the impact on the individual.

As this conversation is going on, our protagonist's family is also making its way toward Boris and Minka's house. As Tommy sits in the back seat with a little *kippa* situated on his head, the infant listens as his parents have a "grown up" conversation in the front seat:

Stu: Deed, are you sure this whole ceremony's really necessary? It's so boring.

*Didi: Passover isn't boring; **it is a very meaningful holiday.***

Stu: Well if it is so meaningful, how come there's no presents?

Didi: Stu, the Passover Seder is a time for Jewish families to come together and retell the history of their people. We have been doing it for thousands of years.

Stu: Sounds boring to me.⁴⁶

It is both comical and significant that the same tropes, which appear in the conversation between a three year old and her parents, appear in a conversation between a husband and wife. Once again, this time from a Jew herself, we learn that Passover is a meaningful holiday (perhaps Charlotte is just reiterating what Didi had told her about the holiday?) and that it is not about presents. Of course the viewer is supposed to laugh at the fact that Stu, a grown man, is whining that this holiday is present-less, but there is definitely a deeper implication. Throughout the course of *Rugrats*'s ten-year run, Stu is only seen celebrating Christmas and embracing Didi's traditions of Hanukkah and Passover. Without even a mention of Easter or any other Christian themes, we can observe that Stu's connection to Christmas is more superficial than spiritual. An inventor by trade, he likes big, flashy displays, so it is not surprising that he embraces Christmas for all of its over-the-

⁴⁶ *Rugrats*. "A Rugrats Passover" April 13, 1995.

top decorations and celebration. To him, just as to the three-year-old Angelica, a holiday is marked by the presents you get, not the deeper meaning it serves.

The constant use of the word “meaningful” throughout this episode is almost laughable. It becomes a buzzword, just like Boris and Minka’s use of the word “tradition”. Two popular justifications used within the Jewish community are that of tradition and meaning, two terms that come up within the first two minutes of *A Rugrats Passover*. The writers use these terms as broad, over arching themes, which they apply to many different situations. Isn’t meaning an extremely personal thing? Doesn’t tradition vary greatly between different communities, families, and generations? It is unclear if the writers are making a specific statement about these concepts, or if they are just using stereotypes from their upbringings, but they certainly do embrace the constant repetition of these ideas.

As the episode continues on, the two Pickles brothers and their families arrive at Boris and Minka’s to find Boris missing and Minka hysterical, thinking that he has ran away from her after their fight. Tommy’s best friend Chuckie and his father Chaz also arrive for the Seder. Chaz greets the family by saying, “It was very nice of you to include Chuckie and I in the festivities tonight. Were not really Jewish you know, well we aren’t really anything.”⁴⁷ The scene doesn’t show anyone else’s reaction to the comment, just Chaz smiling broadly before they cut away to the kids in the other room. Chaz’s comment about not being “really anything” is an interesting counterpart to the religious expression of the Pickles family throughout the rest of the episode. It is important to note that Chuckie’s mother was never portrayed on *Rugrats*, but is mentioned, especially in a touching Mother’s Day episode and the viewers are aware that she has passed away. Perhaps there

⁴⁷ Ibid.

is a significant statement being mentioned here about religious descent and the matrilineal line. Historically, even outside of the Jewish faith where the mother has traditionally determined Jewishness, religion is known as a construct of home life, something that is greatly impacted by the maternal figure. However, regardless of the way in which Chaz and Chuckie are not religiously affiliated, it is important to note that the Pickles included them regardless. The writers seem to be inviting Chaz into this religious celebration just as they are inviting their non-Jewish viewers to it. Just because you are not Jewish does not mean you cannot enjoy this fun episode of TV.

As Chaz's questions about Boris' whereabouts bring back emotional moments for Minka, Stu wishes the Seder will just be canceled. Much to his chagrin, they decide to go along with the Seder even in Boris' absence, leaving Stu to lead the proceedings. This is fascinating, as Stu is not Jewish, and has no real knowledge of the holiday. Interestingly, in Boris' absence, the only *halachically* Jewish individuals in the house are Didi, Minka, and baby Tommy. Although the family gives off no signs of being Orthodox Jews, and therefore feeling legally bound to the idea of a man acting as the head of the ceremony, the idea of Didi or Minka leading the Seder is not even suggested. This classical representation of traditional gender roles -- prohibiting a woman from leading a religious service -- is astounding, and definitely has an implication in regards to the complicated relationship between traditional Judaism and women.

Gender is also a factor in an interesting juxtaposition between two of the characters. Amongst all of the characters there is no disparity as great as that between Charlotte and Minka. Charlotte is Drew's wife who is not only tall and blonde, but a powerful businesswoman. Throughout the series, she is almost never depicted as wearing anything

other than a business suit, and constantly has her cellphone in hand, usually attempting to create some sort of deal. Minka, on the other hand, represents a completely different type of woman. Deeply rooted in her immigrant past, she represents the stereotypical woman of her time period. With Boris gone she is hysterical, consistently breaking down into tears whenever she hears his name. Ripped of purpose while her husband is gone, she distracts herself with the only activity she is confident in: cooking for the family. This juxtaposition is just another iteration of the conflict between tradition and modern interpretations. Minka represents tradition and the old way of life, and Charlotte boldly portrays a 1990's businesswoman.

As Minka finishes making dinner, and Charlotte attempts to finalize a deal over the phone, the babies begin to get reckless and go searching for toys to play with. As Angelica joins them, they make their way up to the "attic" their misrepresentation of the word "attic" to find some toys to play with. Grandpa Boris is excited to see the *kinderlach* and warns Angelica not to close the door, right as she slams it shut. Thus is the first iteration of "don't close the....door" which repeats itself three more times as the episode continues. With nothing else to do, Grandpa Boris convinces Angelica that if she lets him tell her the story of Passover, she will learn that Passover is "the greatest holiday in the world."

As Boris begins the story, Angelica, as is natural for her character, becomes enthralled with the idea of Pharaoh who gets to rule over the land. As Grandpa Boris continues to tell the story, the audience begins to see into Angelica's imagination, where the story is unfolding with the characters of Angelica and the babies present. Angelica portrays Pharaoh, and Tommy, as seen below, receives the honor of Moses. Tommy's infant friends act as the Jewish slaves, and older toddlers like Angelica are the Egyptians.

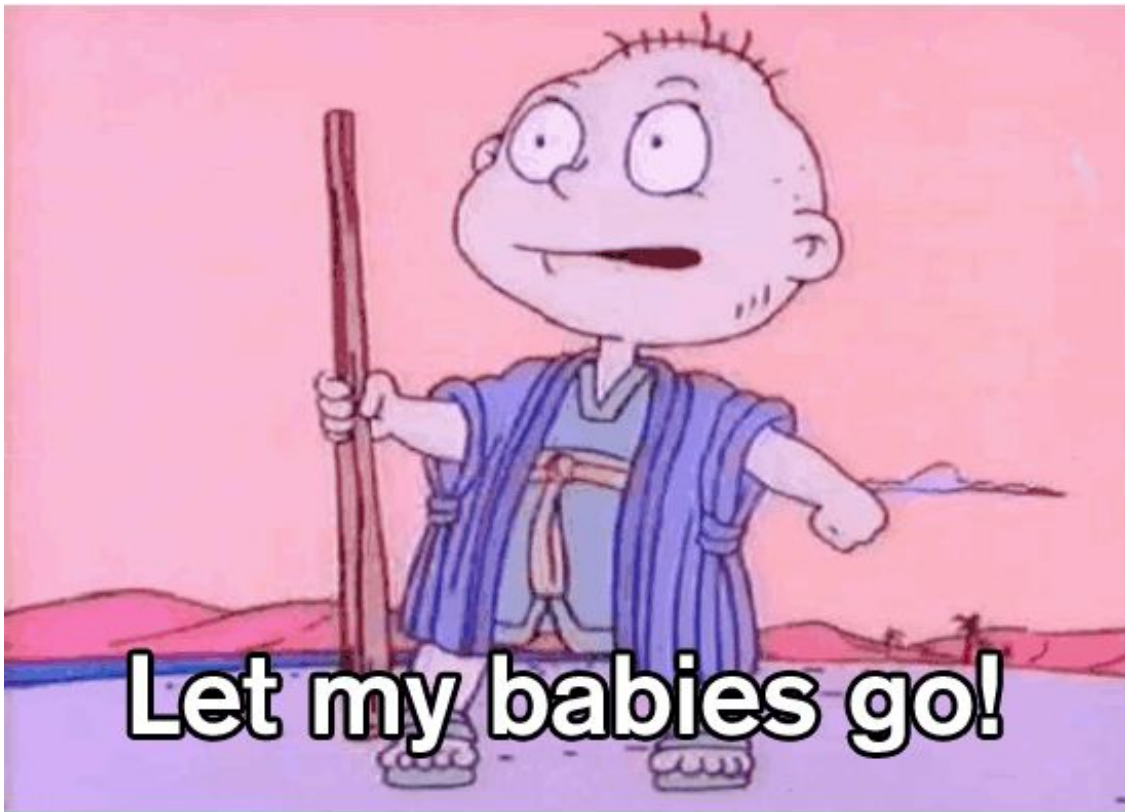


Figure 2.1 Tommy's Moses

As the children are engrossed in Grandpa Boris' story, the adults downstairs are having way less fun as Stu reads dryly from the *haggadah*⁴⁸, "The bitter herb, why do we eat it?" Didi constantly chastises him for his bored tone, and the mispronunciation of words, such as herb. One by one, the adults leave the room with the excuse that they need

⁴⁸ Book depicting the Passover story and ritual of Seder.

to check on the children. Eventually they find themselves up in the attic, and close the door before Grandpa Boris can tell them not to. However, every adult enjoys their time up in the attic, as they get involved in the story.

Minka, Didi, and Stu are the only adults left around the dining room table when they realize everyone else has disappeared. They search for everyone and arrive in the attic to find their family members gathered around Grandpa Boris. Confused, Minka starts asking questions, but Angelica shushes her, as she wants to hear the end of the story. Ultimately, Angelica, who had no desire to attend the Seder, finds herself the most engrossed in Grandpa Boris' story. "What a great holiday" she exclaims as he concludes. Didi suggests that they all go downstairs to finish the Seder. "Finish the Seder?" Grandpa Boris questions, "I just told the entire story, I say we eat." However, as they begin to make their way towards the door, the wind blows it shut. All of the characters stare at it before they decide to sit down and listen to another one of Grandpa Boris' story, this time it is also a story that takes place over Passover, but it is the story of how his parents met. As the camera zooms out, the *Fiddler on the Roof* music resumes.

A Rugrats Passover is an episode of television, which will always exist within the American Jewish education cannon. A simple interpretation, the episode does a tremendous job of telling the complex story of Passover to children. But that is not all the episode has to offer. The complexities of this episode provide rich and interesting material for an adult audience. The juxtaposition of the fun story unfolding in the attic, and the boring Seder being held on the first floor, make it hard to ignore the disparities. The creators seem to be making a statement about the melding of two generations and points of view. It is possible to find meaning and follow a traditional thought process, while also

doing something in a different way or style. Ultimately it is Grandpa Boris, who spends his opening sequence fighting for tradition, who completes the evening feeling as if the obligation of the night has been fulfilled now that he has told the full story, even if it was in a non-traditional manner. The first of the Jewish themed episodes of *Rugrats, A Rugrats Passover*, provides an entry point into an interesting and nuanced interpretation of Judaism in the suburban 90's looked like.

If we glean one lesson from *Rugrats*'s Jewish debut, it is definitely that one should not "close the...door" when it comes to Jewish history. On a metaphysical level the fact that this episode was created in the first place enforces this idea. By telling the story of Passover to a wide audience on the most popular channel for children they are emphasizing their personal belief that this story is important. Ultimately, Grandpa Boris is content with his Passover evening once he has presented his grandchild and his friends with the story of the Exodus from Egypt. This episode begins with an old couple bickering about tradition, and by the end of the episode it appears as if maybe there is a new tradition being formed for the family – one that involves an informal Seder experience. Although it is never addressed in the show, it seems pretty unrealistic that this family will ever forget the crazy Passover where they ended up locked in the attic. The creators seem to imply that tradition, although a buzzword that often refers to the past, is actually fluid and personal. While the creators present a dreary and bland Seder experience with a negative picture of stringent religious ritual, they are strongly endorsing the significance of knowing your history and passing it on to the next generation with some sort of tradition.

Chapter 3 - Judaism's Most Famous Holiday: "You Have to 'Cha!' When You Say It"

Season four of *Rugrats* premiered on December 4, 1996, and fans could breathe easier now that the Pickles family successfully made it out of the attic. Since the premiere of *A Rugrats Passover* in April of the previous year no new episodes of the show had aired, but reruns ran daily on Nickelodeon. Capitalizing on the ratings, praises, and award nominations the creators received for *A Rugrats Passover*, the first new episode released after more than a year was in celebration of yet another Jewish holiday. *A Rugrats Chanukah*, much like its predecessor, *A Rugrats Passover*, embeds the story of Chanukah into the life of our protagonist, baby Tommy.

The episode begins with the sounds of a choir singing "Chanukah Oh Chanukah" and an overlay of Grandma Minka's voice as she tells the story of a time when the Jews got along with their neighbors the Greeks. The illustrations show the expansive stone dwellings of ancient Israel while babies, here representing Jews, cohabitate nicely with toddlers, who represent the Greeks. That is, until a new King, Antiochus, comes to power and his messenger decrees, "From now on, King Antiochus says you have to wear what he wears and read what he reads, you also have to worship his gods."⁴⁹

At first glance, this depiction of the history through the imagination of the babies is simply an imitation of the way the Passover episode is presented. This is true, in terms of formula, yet by taking a closer look into the illustrations and dialogue a careful audience

⁴⁹ *Rugrats*. "A Rugrats Chanukah" December 4, 1996.

realizes an increased level of humor and word play, which is included to attract an older and more Jewishly aware audience. The opening sequence is filled with jokes for an older audience, some recognizable mainly by people familiar with Judaism. Other jokes are more widely accessible. For instance, as the messenger informs Tommy and Chuckie they can only read Greek books, he hands them a book with the word “Plato” written across it and Chuckie grows excited. “Look Tommy! A whole book about Play-Doh!”⁵⁰, mistaking the famous Greek philosopher for the beloved childhood toy that had recently increased in popularity after receiving a facelift in 1991 when it was purchased by Hasbro. The laughs for adults keep coming when Tommy insists to Chuckie that they must still read the banned *Torah* because it was a book that their “forefathers read, and our fivefathers and our sixfathers!”⁵¹ To add to the comedic effect, Tommy and Chuckie, both wearing *kippot*⁵² and *tallasim*⁵³, open the *Torah* scroll to reveal pop-up book versions of the stories of Noah, Jonah, and, with another nod to the recent Passover episode: Moses.

These little jokes are great ways of keeping the adult population engaged in the children’s show. They are also looking to provide some laughs that only the Jewishly educated would understand. We might think: Why would they try to cater to the Jewish elite? Wouldn’t that be alienating to the rest of their viewers, the majority of which do not fit into this category? These are fair questions, ones that the writers seem to have considered, because they hid their special joke so well, that many learned Jews might have even missed it. In fact, the best joke of the entire episode is not spoken, but part of the background illustrations.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² A ritual head covering.

⁵³ A prayer shawl.



Figure 3.1 *Mohel* Storefront

Figure 2.1 above shows a scene in which two of Tommy's best friends, Phil and Lil embrace the new Greek culture, dressed in Greek garb and greeting one another using the term "hail." Grandma Minka's voice-over shares, "Some people thought this new way of life was fine." The exchange is relatively inconsequential to the story, yet to a member of the Jewish elite, the illustration behind the babies is substantial and humorous. The storefront behind the twin's heads reads מֹהֵל. A *mohel* is a Jewish person who is qualified to perform a *brit milah*, a ritual circumcision. Hidden under the awning, to the left side of the scene, a smaller sign reads "Cut Rate." Here, the sign provides two different purposes. In one way, it is simply informative, letting the viewer know that the *mohel's* business is not been prosperous under the new Greek rule, forcing him to lower his prices. This is not an unimportant point, in fact, it exemplifies the point Grandma Minka makes about some people believing their new way of life was fine, they have no problem not circumcising their children. But of course, the "cut rate" sign is not simply there for this sociological

extrapolation, but for a cheap laugh. The double entendre alludes to the physical cut that is a *mohel's* job. Lets be honest, what is funnier to Jews than a circumcision joke? However, it is important to note, once again, that this is a joke only accessible to those able to read Hebrew and cognitively connect the two signs. The underlying joke provides another boost for the Jewish elite in their special connection to *Rugrats*. Here, a hit show, on a major network, is going out of its way to not simply make an “oy vey” or “schlep” joke, but a joke specifically for Jews who are deeply engaged in their culture and religion.

As Grandma Minka continues to tell the story, we learn that Tommy and Chuckie get in trouble for reading the *Torah*, so a leader emerges to fight against the Greeks. Judah the Maccabee, here portrayed by Tommy, is drawn holding a sword and a large shield with a blue Jewish star designed on it. As he goes off to face the Greek troops, he raises his sword and shouts, “A macca-baby’s gotta do, what a macca-baby’s gotta do!”⁵⁴ This line is a slight variation from Tommy’s usual adventure catchphrase, “A baby’s gotta do, what a baby’s gotta do!” As Grandma Minka continues to narrate the story, speaking of the battles Judah bravely fought in, the illustration slowly shifts from Tommy as Judah to a still picture of a storybook with an adult portrayal of the hero. As we hear Didi call, “Mom, can you come help me in the kitchen?”⁵⁵ it becomes apparent that the storytelling portion of the episode has concluded, and we are now seeing the Pickles family in their suburban home.

As Didi, Grandma Minka, and Grandpa Boris make their way into the kitchen to fry some latkes, Angelica is ecstatic to have them gone. “UGH! Finally!” she exclaims to the four babies, “Now I can watch my Christmas special in peace!”⁵⁶ As she runs off to find the TV

⁵⁴ *Rugrats*. “A Rugrats Chanukah” December 4, 1996.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

remote, the viewer is redirected to the kitchen, where Chaz, Chuckie's dad, questions the reasoning for latkes. Didi shares with him, "We fry these, and sometimes donuts, to remind us of the oil used in the miracle of Chanukah." However, Grandpa Boris has another miracle in mind, "The miracle is," he says with a mouthful of latke, "these things have clogged our people's arteries for two thousand years, yet we survive!"⁵⁷ The joke is met with smiles and laughs, and the audience is reminded of his "old country" humor.

As the scene continues, Grandpa Boris only becomes increasingly stereotypically Jewish. We learn that Grandpa Boris is to be in a Chanukah play for seniors at the synagogue later in the evening, and Boris is excited to see a newspaper article about the production, remembering that his picture was taken to accompany it, as he is playing Judah. However, he is shocked and appalled to learn that Shlomo, a man who he has known, and competed with, since he was a child in Russia, is pictured instead. Shlomo who was cast in the role of the Greek King Antiochus in the play, has apparently always tried to "one-up" Boris. Gesticulating wildly, the old man rants in his heavy accent, "I caught a smelt, he caught a sturgeon. I caught a cold, he caught the pneumonia, I start a family, he starts his fancy, shmancy business!"⁵⁸ Then, under his breath he exhales, "*gonif*" and pouts. Similarly to the *mohel* joke, the inclusion of the term Yiddish *gonif* is a joke for the Jewish insider. Unlike the commonplace Yiddish like "oy" it takes someone more familiar with the Jewish vernacular to recognize that he is referring to Shlomo as dishonest or a thief. Grandpa Boris response to Shlomo's picture, although comical, is also essential to the plot of the episode. Not only do we learn that there is a great deal of history between the men, we also learn that unlike Boris who started a family, Shlomo instead started a business. This is a dynamic

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

that will be explored in more detail later. Before the scene in the kitchen comes to a close, we hear of yet another explanation of what a Chanukah miracle could be, as Grandma Minka exclaims, “If Shlomo and Boris make it through tonight’s performance without killing each other, that will be the miracle of Chanukah!”⁵⁹

Our focus then changes back to the babies in the living room. Left to their own devices, Tommy, Chuckie, Phil and Lil eat chocolate *gelt*⁶⁰ and wonder why their *driedels*⁶¹ don’t taste like clay. But that is not all the babies are confused about. They cannot understand why they are about to be served pancakes for dinner, and are mesmerized by the *channukiah*⁶² and the many lights it gives off. Staring at the grand candleholder the children engage in the following conversation:

Lil: What is it?

Tommy: I don’t know, but every night I have to wear a funny hat while Grandpa Boris says some stuff I don’t understand and Mom lights another candle.

Chuckie: Sounds scary!

Tommy: Yeah, but then I get a present!

Lil: Maybe it’s your birfdays!

Tommy: Every night?

Phil: Maybe they are having all your birfdays at the same time.

Lil: Yeah, maybe you’re all growed up now and you gots to get a job!

Tommy: (looking down at his body) I don’t feel growed up.

Lil: Well, make a wish and lets blow them out!

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Coins, here referring to the candy version, made of chocolate and wrapped in gold colored foil.

⁶¹ Spinning tops used in the central game of *Chaunkah*

⁶² A special, ritual, candleholder for *Chanukah* which holds nine candles.

The babies then try to lift Tommy up so he can blow out the candles, which are situated on top of the entertainment center. Their attempt to get to the candles blocked the view of the TV, and Angelica who has just found the remote joins the conversation:

Angelica: Out of my way you stupid babies!

Chuckie: Hey Angelica, be nice, its Tommy's birfday.

Lil: Yeah, we were blowing out his candles.

Angelica: Dumb babies! Those candles aren't for Tommy's birthday. Those are for Cha-nukah! (The camera zooms in on her face as she accentuates the first syllable and notably spits along with it)

Tommy: Harmonica?

Angelica: Cha-nukah! You have to 'Cha!' when you say it!

(Each of the babies take turns practicing the 'cha' and we see spit fly from their mouths)

Chuckie: Angelica, what's Chanukah? (he successfully pronounces the cha sound)

Angelica: Chanukah is that special time of year between Christmas and misgiving when all of the bestest holiday shows are on TV. Now get out of my way, its almost time for The Cynthia Christmas Extravaganza Special!⁶³

There are many aspects of this scene that deserve a closer reading. First of all, it is important to note that Tommy's twin friends, Phil and Lil, join the Pickles for the celebration of *Chanukah*. Although the twins are present in the imaginary portrayal of the Passover story within the last *Rugrats* special, they are not at Boris and Minka's house for the Seder. Why are they included in the Egypt story but not for the family ritual? That question is not addressed in the episode, but the fact that they are present for *Chanukah* is

⁶³ *Rugrats*. "A Rugrats Chanukah" December 4, 1996.

telling. *Chanukah*, a much less ritually stringent holiday, might be something the twin's parents are happy to have them take part in. The Pickles are spending the evening celebrating *Chanukah* by eating latkes and visiting a carnival and play at the synagogue. Objectively this experience is more fun than the traditional Passover Seder. Perhaps the presence of the twins implies a lighter and less serious holiday. Overall, this interpretation is not incorrect. From a traditional Jewish standpoint, Passover is a substantially more significant date on the Jewish calendar, being one of the three pilgrimage festivals in the Temple time period, whereas *Chanukah* only took its current form once Jews immigrated to America and became overwhelmed by the attention Christmas received. This idea of Americanization is prominent throughout the conversations the children have. Although comical, it is not entirely unrealistic that the babies think it is Tommy's birthday. All of the signs are there: funny hats, candles, special dinners, and presents. It is only since the mid 19th century that *Chanukah* has incorporated gift giving as a key aspect, in order to make Jewish children feel better about not being able to celebrate Christmas, which had become a commercialized and consumerized holiday.

The unique relationships *Chanukah* and Christmas share is seen throughout the entire episode and is best exemplified through Angelica's definition of *Chanukah* as, "that time between 'misgiving' and Christmas when all of the best TV specials are on." As the episode progresses, Angelica will remain determined to watch her favorite Christmas specials, although she is forced to go to the synagogue and spend time with her Jewish family members. This plot point is just one example of how the writers highlight the interfaith aspect of the Pickles family. Unlike other television shows of the time period, they do not allow the intermingling of these two celebrations to be overly simplified. It is

through Angelica's insistence on acknowledging Christmas throughout the *Chanukah* episode that we are reminded that there are underlying issues when a family does not have a homogenous background. Furthermore, Angelica's explanation of the holiday exemplifies the inability for Jewish families, who associate with the greater American culture, to ignore Christmas. Regardless of your practice as a Jew, you cannot help but notice how *Chanukah* is overshadowed by the grand and wide-scale celebrations of Christmas. Finally, it is important to recognize that Angelica's constant mention of Christmas specials is an acknowledgement of the fact that media during the winter months is monopolized by Christmas. By making it a focus of their *Chanukah* episode, they are showcasing how important it is for this episode to exist and provide an alternative for the children who do not have a Christmas tree or a spot on Santa's naughty or nice list.

There is also an essential linguistic layer to this exchange, particularly regarding the pronunciation of the "cha" sound. The attention the writers give to the correct pronunciation of *Chanukah* is comical, yet telling. The guttural "ch" sound is an essential part of the Hebrew linguistics system, present in a wide array of common Hebrew terms. Angelica's instruction to "cha when you say it" is not just an instruction for the babies, it is also a learning opportunity for non-Jewish audiences around the United States who are watching this episode. Knowing that this sound is not common to the English vernacular, the writers use humor to introduce the sound in an intentional way, and create a more inviting experience for the non-Jewish audience.

The presence of intermarriage in this episode is once again addressed as we see Tommy's non-Jewish father and Grandfather down in the basement working on a large *menorah* for the *Chanukah* play. Stu, an inventor, is adding many additional sounds and

lights to the electric *menorah*. When his father, Lou, asks why he's going overboard to put this together Stu answers, "I want Tommy to be proud of his heritage! And besides, I want to show Didi I'm really supportive of *Chanukah*." If we remember from the Passover episode, Stu was not nearly as enthusiastic about taking part in the Seder. Perhaps his new excitement for a Jewish holiday is a result of the disappointment his previous attitude gave his wife, or perhaps he simply finds *Chanukah* to be more fun. Regardless, his actions show that he is committed to being a supportive father and husband. However, his good intentions blow up, literally, in his face as he attempts to turn on the *menorah*⁶⁴ and not only blows a fuse in the basement, but causes an explosion and small fire he needs to extinguish.

As this is happening, Didi and her parents are preparing the children to leave for the synagogue, and call down to Stu and Lou to see if they are ready. As Stu frantically tries to put out the fire he calls up, "You go on ahead Did, it needs a few minor adjustments, I'll meet you at the Church!" Catching his mistake, Lou shouts at his son, "It's a synagogue, *Chanukah* boy!" and Stu response by hitting himself in the head and mumbling, "Right, right. I knew that!"⁶⁵ Here, with Stu's Freudian slip, the interfaith aspect is accentuated yet again. The default place of worship for most American families is a church, so Stu will have to train himself to use the word synagogue effortlessly. This exchange is especially interesting because it appears that Didi does not hear the mix up, so we do not know what type of reaction it would have elicited from her. Would his actions, or his words have more significance for her? This question is left unanswered.

⁶⁴ A ritual candleholder, which actually refers to a holder of seven candles, but is commonly misused to refer to the *hanukkiah*, the nine-pronged holder specifically for *Chanukah*.

⁶⁵ *Rugrats*. "A Rugrats Chanukah" December 4, 1996.

The plot moves forward as they leave for Beth Shalom Jewish Center and the children misunderstand yet another rant by Grandpa Boris and believe that he refers to Shlomo as the “meanie of *Chanukah*” when he was really pointing to his picture and complaining about the way the man is explaining the meaning of *Chanukah* in the article written about the play. The children decide that they need to protect Grandpa Boris from the “meanie of *Chanukah*” and vow to do so by doing what the teacher does to the “meanie” at daycare: put him down for a nap. As they arrive at the fair, it is filled with latkes, driedels, and fun photo booths and the babies look around excitedly before embarking on their mission. As they try to find the meanie so they can put him down for a nap, Angelica is in search for a TV so she can watch her Christmas specials. Her journey takes her into the sanctuary where she mistakes the ark for an entertainment center and has to avoid a conversation with the Rabbi about the importance of *Torah* learning. Her insistence to find a bit of Christmas, even in a room full of *Chanukah* fun emphasizes the prominence the former holiday has over the latter.

Meanwhile, Boris and Shlomo have a tense encounter back stage, and everyone wonders where Stu is with the *menorah*. As the writers cut to Stu and Lou in the car with the *menorah* strapped on top, Stu complains about the immense amount of traffic. However as the camera pans out we learn that they have unknowingly joined a Christmas parade and are inching down the street – yet another example of how Christmas impedes the celebration of *Chanukah*.

Attempts by the babies and Angelica to fulfill their individual goals land them in the synagogue’s daycare center, anxious to escape. As the babies explain what they are attempting to Angelica, the devious girl, convinces them that what they really need to make

the meanie nap is a TV, because whenever Grandpa Lou watches TV he falls asleep. Now that she has the babies on her side in attempts to find a TV, they climb on top of one another to escape the daycare and find a janitor sleeping in front of a portable TV. As they grab it and make their way back to the auditorium, we see that the play has not gone as planned, and a fight between Boris and Shlomo has gotten them kicked off the stage. The two men bicker behind the curtain as the children arrive carrying the portable TV. They begin to fight over it as Tommy tries to give it to the meanie so he will nap, and Angelica wants it for her Christmas special. The TV drops and breaks. Angelica breaks down into tears and Shlomo doesn't know what to do to console her, telling Boris he knows nothing about kids because he and his wife were never able to have any, and that he is jealous of Boris for being able to start a family. He turns to Boris and admits that he should have let him have the role of the King because he has "not one to share tradition with anyway."⁶⁶

Now feeling bad for his old friend, Boris convinces Shlomo to cheer up the kids by reading them a story, the story of *Chanukah*. The scene that follows mirrors the majority of the "Rugrats Passover" episode, where we see the story of a holiday being directly transmitted from one generation to another. As he finishes the story, Shlomo takes out a *menorah* to explain to the children the true meaning behind it. As he begins to light the candles he explains, "The menorah is like the night light of our people. In times of darkness it shines on the whole world, reminding us not to be afraid to be different or to be proud of who we are."⁶⁷ Here, the creators mention in passing the horrors that have befallen the Jewish people. It is only in America in the 1990s, and the immediate past decades, that Shlomo is able to make this declaration. The generation that grew up watching *Rugrats* is

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

one of the first to feel completely integrated into American society without any serious concerns of persecution. The fact that this line is uttered on a popular TV show, being watched by people of all backgrounds, ethnicities, and religions emphasizes that the Jewish people have found a positive home in 1990's America, and the children watching it can be proud of this fact.

As this is all happening behind the curtain, in front of it a choir sings "Chanukah oh Chanukah," until Stu arrives with the big menorah and they are rushed off. However, as with most of Stu's inventions, it still does not work. Another small explosion it results it pulls down the curtain and reveals Shlomo, Boris and the children sitting together. In order to save the moment, Boris stands up and begins to talk as if their reveal was planned. It is he who has the line that sums up the point of the entire episode as he speaks directly to the play audience, and subsequently the viewers at home. "And may it be our sincerest *Chanukah* wish that our *kindelach*⁶⁸ will continue to carry the light of our people for generations to come." Boris then puts his arm around Shlomo as he perfectly chants the blessing over the candles. This direct sentiment from the writers surrounding the importance of the continuing of the Jewish people for generations to come, especially in this episode so riddled with interfaith aspects, is addressing the imperative of intermarriage not being a barrier to the goal. As Stu is committed to allowing Tommy to be proud of his heritage, he does his best to support the *Chanukah* celebration, instead of impeding it. It appears that the episode seems to acknowledge that there are a great deal of hurdles for intermarried families, but that does not exclude them from the ultimate goal: Jewish continuity.

⁶⁸ Yiddish word for "children"

The episode concludes as Tommy looks up and sees his Grandpa and the meanie getting along and exclaims to his friends, "It's a mirable!" With his mispronunciation of the word miracle, Tommy becomes the last of the Jewish characters to give his own definition of what the miracle of *Chanukah* is. The fact that all four Jewish characters had something to share on the matter, whether silly or traditional, emphasizes the role that miracles play in the celebration of the holiday and the ability and prerogative for all Jews to interpret the holiday and define the holiday's personal and communal meaning. The episode provides the lingering message that there are many miracles in the Jewish history – including sheer survival against the odds -- and it is important that Jews take this lesson to heart.

Chapter 4- The Santa Experience: Can You Tell They Are Interfaith?

As we have just explored, “A Rugrats Chanukah” is interspersed with the presence of Christmas. Knowing this, it might appear logical that the Christmas themed episode of *Rugrats* would follow a seemingly similar trajectory. However, the only specifically Christmas based episode, which appears midway through the show’s second season, does not reveal at all that the Pickles family is intermarried. In fact, throughout the episode, there is no mention of the Jewish religion at all. The episode, which is not called A Rugrats Christmas, but “The Santa Experience” focuses on both Pickles families (Tommy and his parents and Angelica and hers) and their decision to spend Christmas in a cabin in the woods with the Finsters (Chuckie’s family) and the Devilles (Phil and Lil’s family). Although Lou, Tommy’s non-Jewish grandfather is present for the *Chanukah* episode in addition to Tommy’s Jewish grandparents, Lou is the only grandparent in the Christmas special.

Although The Santa Experience is a holiday special, it shares very few similarities with the specials we have discussed thus far. While we see Beth Shalom Jewish Center in the Chanukah episode, there is no mention of a place of worship in this Christmas episode. The Pickles do not go to Church, discuss Jesus or view a nativity scene. There are no religious rituals or crosses or angels. In fact, the Pickles house is not even decorated for Christmas although it is revealed the holiday is just a few days away. It is not until they arrive in a cabin in the woods that they chop down a tree and decorate it.

Most notably, this episode differs from the Jewish holiday special in the fact that it does not tell the story of the holiday. Whereas the children and the audience learn the stories of Chanukah and Passover, this episode does not inform either party of the story of Christmas. Instead of having Tommy portray Jesus and Angelica the Virgin Mary, the episode includes no mention of any historic or religious figures. Instead the entire episode revolves around the existence of Santa, and how to get ones self on his nice list. To the Pickles family, Christmas is a great time to be with family, play in the snow, and exchange presents. Then again, this should not be surprising to us. This is the way that television portrayed the normative Christian family in the 1990s.

The same goes for the lack of holiday story in the episode. Because the majority of the American population celebrates Christmas it does not need explaining. We do not need Tommy and his friends to act out the story of Christmas for us, because the average American either knows it, or disregards it simply to partake in a secular celebration of presents, family, and togetherness. Perhaps it is unfair to compare “The Santa Experience” to “A Rugrats Chanukah” and “A Rugrats Passover” because the former is less of a holiday episode and more of an exploration of the winter season. Therefore, a transition to the discussion of religious expression outside of these holiday specials is in order.

Chapter 5- What About Every Other Day? Rugrats and Daily Life

Having discussed three holiday episodes of *Rugrats*, a question emerges: What about everyday life? Does religion have a place in other episodes of this show? The answer is a complicated one. No other religious celebrations are portrayed within the *Rugrats* universe in the original series' nine season run. Outside of cultural and historical holiday episodes, which center on Kwanzaa, Thanksgiving, and a very tear-filled Mother's Day (in which Chuckie tries to remember his deceased mother), *Rugrats* does not delve into specific celebrations. Instead, the majority of *Rugrats'* episodes ignore religion all together, and simply depict the crazy adventures Tommy and his friends embark on.

Furthermore, outside of the Chanukah and Passover episodes, the Pickles family does not "read Jewish." In fact, the only hints at Tommy's Jewish heritage present themselves in the episodes of the show that Boris and Minka are present for. Surprisingly, of the one hundred and sixty-six episodes of *Rugrats*, Boris and Minka are only seen in fifteen. Discounting the two Jewish holiday specials, there are only thirteen episodes, which feature the grandparents from the old country. In these thirteen episodes, there is not explicit mention of the elderly couple being Jewish. Of course the couple "reads Jewish" with their signature music and constant bickering and Yiddish muttering, yet the word "Jewish" never comes up. A better understanding of how the creators portray Boris and Minka can be gained by a closer look at two episodes where they are the most relevant: "Tommy's First Birthday" and "Chuckie Gets Skunked".

“Tommy’s First Birthday” is the pilot episode of *Rugrats*, which aired on August 11th, 1991. A party for Tommy’s first birthday acts as a great backdrop for the meeting point of all of the *Rugrats*’ characters. As everyone gathers, presents in hand, to celebrate Tommy’s first year of life, Didi is frazzled, convinced that a bad party will signal her failure as a mother. The last guests to arrive are Didi’s parents, who notably arrive present-less. As they enter, Minka pinches Didi’s face and gives her a large kiss on forehead. The pair then rushes over to shower Tommy with their love. As we view Boris and Minka through Tommy’s eyes, all we see are their pursed mouths as they smother him with kisses. As they pick him up and give him a look over they mutter a string of Yiddish words like *bubbeleh*⁶⁹ and *kindelach*.⁷⁰

This initial scene illustrates Boris and Minka in the outfits that they will continue to wear throughout the series. In the first episode Boris is drawn wearing a dark blue suit with a pocket square. Later on in the series the color of his suit jacket sometimes changes, but the professionalism of his wardrobe does not. Ultimately his wardrobe choice emphasizes his age and the respect the rest of the family gives him. Minka’s outfit is a bit more significant. Tommy’s grandmother wears a purple blouse and a knee length navy skirt, but most importantly she wears a white apron. In the Passover and Chanukah episodes this is not strange, as Minka is depicted primarily in the kitchen either preparing for the Seder or making *latkes* for the family. However, the fact that she wears her apron to her grandson’s birthday party is a blatant emphasis by the creators that Minka’s place, like the place of traditional Jewish women, is in the kitchen.

⁶⁹ A Yiddish diminutive usually translated as “sweetie.”

⁷⁰ A Yiddish term meaning “child.”

Minka's cooking is actually the center point of another *Rugrats* episode. The title of "Chuckie Gets Skunked" is pretty self-explanatory. When Chuckie is sprayed by a skunk and continues to smell after multiple days, the parents try different remedies to cure him. While the men are busy covering Chuckie in mud, Minka calls to let the Pickles family know she will be bringing a pot of borscht over for dinner. Stu is dismayed by this news, complaining that the concoction tastes like purple glue. When Didi's parents arrive with dinner and they learn of Chuckie's predicament the following exchange occurs:

Boris: Oy yoyoyoyo, What's that smell?

Minka: Sha! Boris, I told you not to make any more remarks about Didi's housekeeping!

Didi: What about my housekeeping, Dad?

Stu: Actually it's Chuckie, he had a little encounter with a skunk and we can't seem to get rid of the smell!

Boris: So he stinks, children are supposed to stink, it's the way of the world. In the old country we grew up sleeping with the goats, you think we didn't stink a little?

Didi (to Stu) Don't listen to him. He actually came from a very well to do family, he wouldn't know a goat if it bit him.

Minka: There's an old Russian remedy for skunk, come with me.⁷¹

This conversation pokes fun at the classic hyperbolic nature of the elderly. By saying he used to sleep with the goats, Boris is essentially making a joke akin to "When I was your age we walked 15 miles in the snow just to..." Even though Didi undercuts Boris' story, it does not take away from him making similar comments in other episodes. Regardless of what type of family he came from, Boris insists upon discussing "the old country" any

⁷¹ *Rugrats*. "Tommy's First Birthday" August 11, 1991.

chance he can. What is most significant about this exchange is Minka's last comment. Her suggestion is not a "Jewish remedy" but a "Russian" one. Here, the creators make a conscious decision to downplay Boris and Minka's Jewish identity. Outside of the episodes directly targeting the Jewish population, it becomes apparent that the writers are downplaying the Jewish aspects. They allow Boris and Minka to "read Jewish" for those who will recognize it, but they are unwilling to make it the forefront of the show's identity.

However, it wasn't until an outside source pushed back on the existence of the characters that they received even less airtime. In 1998 after *Rugrats* had been on the air for seven years and inspired multiple children's books and comic strips, the Anti-Defamation League's Abraham H. Foxman put out a statement arguing that, "The caricature of Grandpa Boris is reminiscent of stereotypical Nazi-era depictions of Jews."⁷² In his statement he referring specifically to a comic strip (Figure 5.1) that illustrated Boris reciting the mourners *kaddish*⁷³ while Tommy looked on saying, "Boy this must be a really good story, everybody knows it." Although the content of this comic strip was problematic, the greater concern of the ADL, once this was brought to public discourse, became Boris'

⁷² "Press Release - Nickelodeon Assures ADL It Will Never Run Character or Specific Comic Strip Offensive to Jews Again." 20 Oct. 1998. Web. 10 Mar. 2016.

⁷³ A prayer in traditional Jewish liturgy said by those who have lost a close relative within the year, or on the anniversary of their death. A sacred prayer, it is said to lift the soul of the person it is being said in honor of to the world to come.

appearance.

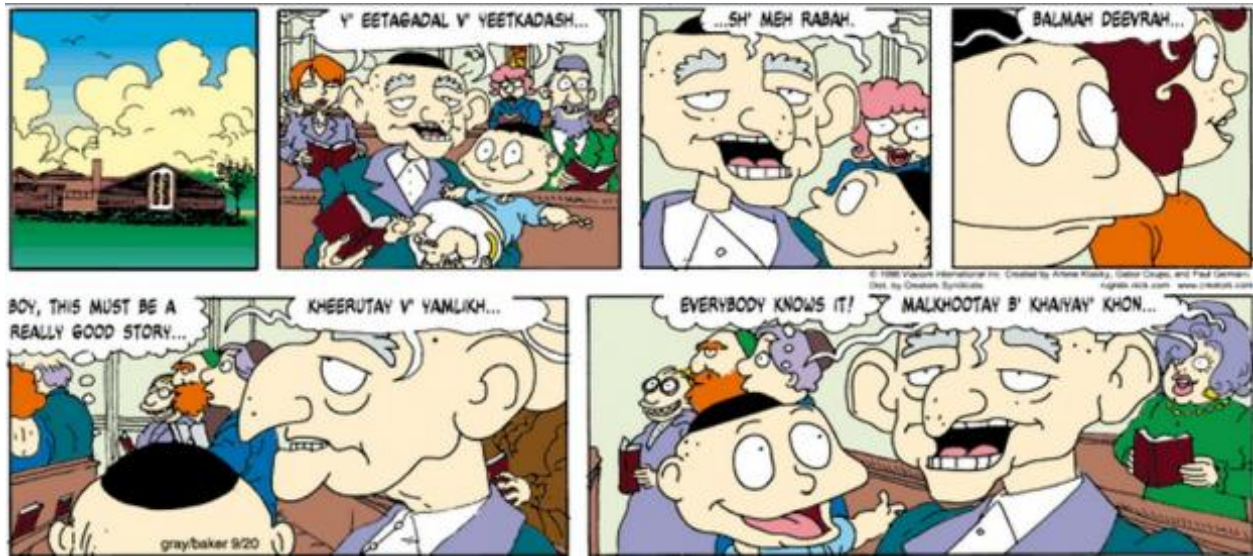


Figure 5.1 Mourner's Kaddish Comic Strip

This led to a great deal of confusion for the cast and writers of *Rugrats*. Creator Paul Germain insists, “Boris and Minka were based on my grandparents...we were all Jewish and were doing the older generation. Michael Bell (Boris) was doing it, Melanie Chartoff (Minka) was doing it, and I was writing it...I thought, “Maybe *you* think he’s a stereotype. I’m doing my grandpa.”⁷⁴ Bell had a similar reaction to the backlash. Bell reminisced, “That was inane and a waste of time. *I’m Jewish!* That’s what my grandfather looked like! They come from small communities; they were not beauties.”⁷⁵ Chartoff, on the other hand, took the opinion more seriously, as her own mother agreed with it. “According to my mother, it resembled anti-Semitic caricatures promoted by the Nazi propaganda film *The Eternal Jew* that she had seen as a young girl. She thought I was parodying her late mother, a pudgy, uneducated Austrian *bubbie*. I shared her fears with the staff – comprised of lots of

⁷⁴ Klickstein, Mathew. *Slimed! An Oral History of Nickelodeon’s Golden Age*. New York: Penguin Group, 2013.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

reformed Jewish folk – who didn't want to back down from what we felt were affectionate and distinct portrayals rather than hostile stereotypes."⁷⁶

The network offered an apology for the offensive portrayal. In a letter to the ADL Herb Scannel, the President of Nickelodeon wrote, "... to your point that the television character of Grandpa Boris may not translate well into a comic strip, we agree. In order to prevent any potential misinterpretation, the Grandpa Boris illustration will no longer be used in the comic strip series."⁷⁷ Although the formal apology did not specifically discuss art forms other than the comics, the writers of the series ceased using Tommy's Jewish grandparents. With Boris and Minka's departure from the *Rugrats* universe came the departure of the Jewish soul of the show.



Figure 5.1 Boris and Minka

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ "Press Release - Nickelodeon Assures ADL It Will Never Run Character or Specific Comic Strip Offensive to Jews Again." 20 Oct. 1998. Web. 10 Mar. 2016.

Chapter 6 – The Gift that Keeps on Giving: The Impact and Legacy

New episodes *Rugrats* were produced from 1991-2004, with reruns running daily for those years and the four years that followed. A spinoff series titled *All Grown UP!* ran from 2003-2008 and showed the babies ten years later as pre-teens, exploring the trials and tribulations of middle school. Viewers who are awake in the wee hours of the morning and have access to channels such as Nicktoons or the new portion of programming on TeenNick called The Splat can see episodes of both series weekly. In addition, the entire series of *Rugrats* is available for streaming on Hulu. Along with its title of Nickelodeon's second longest running show of all time (only usurped from first place by *SpongeBob Squarepants* in 2012) *Rugrats* is the proud owner of four Daytime Emmy Awards, six Kids' Choice Awards, and its own star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame. The scope of *Rugrats* fame did not only apply to the small screen. The series inspired two world-wide movie releases, a cereal, children's books, hundreds of toy ventures, and several video games.

It is safe to say that for children who grew up in the 1990's and their parents, *Rugrats* was a household name. After exploring the ways in which Judaism was portrayed on such a public platform for children, I was curious to discover if and how this program affected the Jewish identity and upbringing of those who encountered it.

Respondent Make-Up

In an effort to determine the possible impact of the original *Rugrats* series, I facilitated twenty-five interviews with individuals somehow affiliated with the Brandeis University campus. Some were students, both undergraduate and graduate, while some worked in some capacity for the university. Although their Jewish backgrounds, geographic origins, and ages differed, they all shared a common bond of self-identifying as Jewish. Respondents differed in levels of Jewish observance and in affiliation to specific streams of Jewish practice. Respondents included representatives from the Reform, Conservative, and Orthodox movements. Of the twenty-five respondents, ten respondents had only one Jewish parent, while fifteen had two Jewish parents. Participants ranged in age from 18-31, with the average respondent age being 23 years old. Although the interviewees were raised all over the United States, they all grew up in a major city or in a suburb of one. All of the respondents had frequent interactions with other Jews throughout their childhood, some through connections to synagogues and day schools, and some through camp, youth group and family. The template used for these interviews can be found in the appendix.

Caveats:

I find it important to note here that there are many aspects of this study that could have skewed my findings. First, it is important to note that Brandeis University is a campus known for its commitment to Jewish learning and experience. Therefore, as students or employees of the university, it is probable that these individuals are more connected to their Judaism than those who do not affiliate with such a university. Furthermore, the fact that everyone interviewed has, or is in the process of getting, at least a bachelor's degree

shows this study is skewed towards an educated and privileged sub-set of the Jewish community.

Participants in these interviews either responded to a flyer displayed around campus, or were referred by a friend who responded to one of these flyers. The flyer, attached as Appendix B, could have specifically attracted those had a predisposition for the topic, and therefore might have more passionate responses than others might have, especially considering that I did not provide any incentive for participating. Finally, it should be noted that this is a fairly small sample size, one that might not expertly represent the entire population's opinions on the topic.

Findings:

I present three main findings from my interviews: (1) *Rugrats* had a lasting impression on my participants, as of the twenty-five interviews I conducted about the participants' relationship with television and their Jewish identity, all but three respondents noted *Rugrats* as an example of Jewish media from their childhood. (2) The Jewish holiday specials had more impact on Jewish participants than non-Jewish themed episodes, as about half of the participants were able to recall minute details from the Jewish holiday specials, yet little about the everyday life of the characters. (3) There was no significant difference in way children of intermarriage and in-marriage related to the material, as none of the interviewees knew that the Pickles family was intermarried.

Of the twenty-five interview subjects, only three did not mention *Rugrats* when presented with the question, "When you think of Jewish characters and shows, who and what do you think of?" This 22-3 majority provides insight to the impact *Rugrats* had on

this population. Without coaxing many respondents provided a sentiment similar to the following one, provided by a 22 year old originally from the Boston area, “Oh, I had the orange VHS tapes for the Passover and Chanukah episodes of *Rugrats*. My sister and I watched them a bunch.” Five respondents specifically alluded to the orange nature of the *Rugrats* VHS tapes, the color of all VHS tapes released by Nickelodeon as opposed to the classic black tape. Other respondents recalled their love for these episodes or simply shared, “I’m pretty sure the *Rugrats* were Jewish, I watched a lot of *Rugrats*.”

The three respondents that did not discuss *Rugrats* all classified their upbringing as “Orthodox” and noted that their childhood home did not have cable television. As a result, these individuals did not have the ability to watch *Rugrats*, a show that aired on Nickelodeon, within their own home. One respondent, a twenty-eight year old male originally from the Baltimore area, expressed his lack of connection to television growing up, due to his lack of exposure to shows he could relate to. He recalled being the most engrossed with *Mighty Morphin Power Rangers*, and the way his obsession with the superhero show grew once he learned that the creator, Haim Saban was Israeli. His television habits become much more pronounced as he grew older and had autonomy over which shows he watched. He found himself watching shows such as *Srugim* and *The Big Bang Theory*, which had many Jewish characters. When asked why he chose those shows he responded, “When there are Jewish characters it’s so much easier to bond with them and I care more about their stories...there’s a feeling of kinship.” This respondent’s feelings might not correlate directly to a positive association with *Rugrats*, but implies a larger theme surrounding the important role Jewish television characters play for Jewish individuals.

Of those who recalled the *Rugrats* as a Jewish TV show of their childhood, it was striking how much the holiday specials came up in conversation. When prodded to discuss what they remembered from the show, most respondents immediately discussed the humor of everyone being stuck in the attic, or the significance of having a Chanukah episode to watch. However, details regarding characters that were not present in these episodes, such as the family dog Spike, were not ones that the respondents could quickly recall. One 19 year old from Florida said, “It was really cool that they went to synagogue like I did and that they had old grandparents who fought and spoke in Yiddish some times.” It is also important to note that not all respondents remember relating so well to the Jewish nature of this show. One 22 year old from the New York area who went to a Conservative Jewish day school and was well educated from a young age recalls watching the *A Rugrats Chanukah* at perhaps seven or eight years old, “Their Jewish identity was much different than mine – they struggled with it but [those] aspect[s] of it were like ‘duh’ to me.” To this respondent, a self-defined member of the Jewish elite, the aspect of Judaism the special shared were too simplistic to be relatable.

Overall, I could not determine a difference in the way children of intermarriage and children of in married families responded in their interviews. Across the board, interviewees were excited to speak about their Jewish upbringing. This might be because all of my respondents self-identified as Jewish, regardless of their family background, so it could be argued that these individuals did not grow up as “typical children of intermarriage” might. None of the respondents expressed having any knowledge that Pickles family was intermarried. When asked why they thought it was not on their radar, many suspected that they were too young to pick up on that aspect. One respondent, a 31

year old, originally from Milwaukee was troubled by my question, stating, “I always know when people [on TV] are Jewish, but I don’t think I pay attention to the aspects that some might say make them ‘less Jewish’ or a ‘bad Jew’ or something like that.” It seemed like the positive associations with the series were easily available to these viewers as young people, yet a more nuanced understanding was not accessible.

The cultural analysis I provided in the first five chapters of this volume reference the unique commentary *Rugrats* provides on intermarried Jewish life in the 1990s. Prior to my interviews, my hypothesis was that there would be a significant difference between the way children of in-marriage and intermarriage responded to this material. However, with the aspect of intermarriage having gone unnoticed by the individuals I interviewed, regardless of their religious upbringing, it has become apparent that my hypothesis was incorrect. Instead, my findings seem to have provided a more powerful conclusion. I believe that the fact that the Pickles family was able to “read” as an in-married family shows that the distinction between certain in-married families and certain intermarried families is not actually that significant. “A Rugrats Passover” and “A Rugrats Chanukah” represent a Judaism that is relatable for a wide variety of Jewish audiences. As a television show for children it is not surprising that the cultural markers I analyze in earlier chapters are easily overlooked by the target audience. That being said, further research into these participants’ parents and their reasoning for encouraging this program for their children could lead to a different result.

Conclusion

In *Introducing Media Studies: A Graphic Guide* Ziauddin Sardar provides the needs that he believes media fills for human beings. One of the many needs he provides is “personal identity.”⁷⁸ He expands upon the idea by stating that through media each of us has the ability to, “assess and locate our own selves against the social world.” I grew up in a household where the TV was always on and I am not ashamed to admit that, even in this work of scholarship. I never viewed television as an impediment to my learning or development. Instead, I saw it as the very opposite. Every night during dinner my family sat down to watch *Jeopardy!* together, from which I learned tangible knowledge. Every week we also sat down to learn moral lessons from shows such as *7th Heaven* and *Boy Meets World*. In my most formative years, when I learned who I was and who I wasn’t, my family’s four televisions were gateways to a world that represented people just like me, and those who could not be more different. Although I learned and grew from exposure to many different kinds of programs, there were very few expressions of characters that I could point to and say, “Hey, that’s kind of like me!” but *Rugrats* was one of those examples.

Did the Pickles family exactly mirror mine? No. The differences are vast. I grew up with two older sisters, I was actively involved in a Conservative synagogue and religion played a greater role in my life than in Tommy’s. My grandparents weren’t only old Jews

⁷⁸ Sardar, Ziauddin. *Introducing Media Studies, A Graphic Guide*. London: Icon Books, 2012.

who bickered, but survivors of the Holocaust. But those differences did not matter. What mattered to me was that there was a Jewish family on TV who was more like me and less like everyone else. They were less like all of my Christian friends at my public school, and less like all of the Jewish people I knew, who had two Jewish parents and no question of who they were. *Rugrats* made me feel special and relevant to the Jewish discourse in a truly positive way. Studying the show as an adult, with much more life experience, and understanding of the subject matter, I found myself appreciating the series even more. Overall, *Rugrats* shares with Jewish families that remembering our heritage and the aspects that united us as a Jewish people is more important than the aspects that divide us. Ultimately, I hope the key aspect of my research that stands out is the decision to not close the...door, to be open to this interpretation of what Judaism is, and the relevance it still has.

My research suggested that Jewish individuals who grew up in the 1990's associate *Rugrats* with the Jewish media they are familiar with. My analysis of this series provides reasoning to argue that the series had many nuanced elements that made it a relatable and compelling piece of the Jewish television cannon. I believe that this unique series should be made available broadly to Jewish children and families as an aid to their Jewish education and Jewish identity building, as the show accurately portrays not only the stories of these holidays, but the ritual practices associated with them.

My investigation of *Rugrats* was by no means comprehensive. Upon completion of each chapter I thought of the myriad of other issues and themes to discuss, and it is unfortunate this study only allowed for a year of research and discovery. Further research can and should commence as questions still remain. How do non-Jewish audiences relate to this material? How do parents feel about this material? How can it be used in an

educational setting? Could it be utilized for inclusion of intermarried families? Are there individuals who received their education on these holidays solely from watching these episodes? All scholarship provides not only compelling answers, but also more compelling questions.

Bibliography

- Antler, Joyce. "Double or Nothing: Jewish Families and Mixed Marriage" Brandeis University. Waltham, MA. 25 April 2004.
- "Awards." IMDb. IMDb.com, n.d. Web. 10 Mar. 2016.
- Banet-Weiser, Sarah. *Kids Rule! Nickelodeon and Consumer Citizenship*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2007.
- Bial, Henry. *Acting Jewish: Negotiating Ethnicity on the American Stage and Screen*. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2005.
- Brook, Vincent. *Something Ain't Kosher Here: The Rise of the "Jewish" Sitcom*. New Brunswick: Rutgers, 2003.
- Buckingham, David. *Small Screens: Television for Children*. New York: Leicester University Press, 2002.
- Buhle, Paul. *From the Lower East Side to Hollywood*. New York: Verson, 2004.
- Dalton, Mary M. and Laura R. Linder. *The Sitcom Reader*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005.
- Epstein, Jerome. "Congratulations to Mixed Marriage Families" Committee on Jewish Law and Standards, 1989.
- Gabler, Neal, Frank Rich, and Joyce Antler. *Television's Changing Image of American Jews*. New York: The American Jewish Committee, 2000.
- Gertel, Elliot B. *Over The Top Judaism*. Lanham: University Press of America, Inc., 2003.
- Hayes, Dade. *Anytime Playdate: Inside the Preschool Entertainment Boom*. New York: Free Press, 2008.
- Klickstein, Mathew. *Slimed! An Oral History of Nickelodeon's Golden Age*. New York: Penguin Group, 2013.
- Kosmin, Barry A., Sidney Goldstein, Joseph Waksberg, Nava Lerer, Ariela Keysar, Jeffery Scheckner (1990). The National Jewish Population Survey 1990.
- Kosmin, Barry, Egon Meyer, Ariela Keysar (2001). "American Religious Identification Survey 2001."

Kotler-Berkowitz, Laurence, Steven M. Cohen, Jonathon Ament, Vivian Klaff, Frank Mott, and Danyelle Peckerman-Neuman. (2004). *The National Jewish Population Survey 2000-01: Strength, challenge and diversity in the American Jewish population.*

McGinity, Keren. *Marrying Out: Jewish Men, Intermarriage and Fatherhood.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014.

McGinity, Keren. *Still Jewish: A History of Women and Intermarriage in America.* New York: New York University Press, 2009.

Miller, Toby. *Television Studies: The Basics.* New York: Routledge, 2010.

"Press Release - Nickelodeon Assures ADL It Will Never Run Character or Specific Comic Strip Offensive to Jews Again." 20 Oct. 1998. Web. 10 Mar. 2016.

Rugrats. "A Rugrats Chanukah" December 4, 1996.

Rugrats. "A Rugrats Passover" April 13, 1995.

Rugrats. "Chuckie Gets Skunked" December 2, 1992.

Rugrats. "The Santa Experience" December 6, 1992.

Rugrats. "Tommy's First Birthday" August 11, 1991.

Sardar, Ziauddin. *Introducing Media Studies, A Graphic Guide.* London: Icon Books, 2012.

Sarna, Jonathan D. *American Judaism: A History.* New Haven: Yale UP, 2004. Print.

Schmidt, Leigh Eric. *Restless Souls: The Making of American Spirituality.* San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 2005. Print.

Thompson, Jennifer. *Jewish on Their Own Terms.* New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2014.

Wuthnow, Robert. *After Heaven: Spirituality in America Since the 1950s.* University of California Press, 1998.

Zurawik, David. *The Jews of Prime Time.* Lebanon: University Press of New England, 2003.

Appendix A

Name:

Date of Interview:

Duration of interview:

Age:

Place of Growing up:

- Purpose: This interview is integral to the formation of my masters' thesis. I am looking to understand how our identity as Jews is shaped by the Jews portrayed through the media during our childhood. The purpose of this particular interview is to obtain some basic information about your upbringing, your current identity and what media influences had the greatest impact on your childhood.
- Confidentiality: Your views will be combined with those of others. Nothing will be reported that identifies an individual. We do not use names of individuals in any of our reports. Anything that cannot be masked in this way is not reported. I will be taking notes throughout to assure that I accurately capture your views. The notes are for the purposes of the study only and will not be shared with anyone outside of my faculty advisors. (Give them that form to sign)
- Outline: We're going to cover three topics: (1) your Jewish upbringing, (2) how you classify your current Jewish identity (3) the Jewish media influences you can recall of your childhood.

Questions:

Jewish Upbringing

A. How would you characterize your home in terms of "Jewishness"? [Probes: Are both of your parents Jewish? What were rituals followed in your household? What denomination, if any, did you affiliate with?]

B. How did you feel about your "Jewishness" as a child? [Probes: Did you enjoy the Jewish activities you took part in? What are fond memories you associate with Judaism and your childhood]

Current Jewish Identity

A. How would you classify your current relationship with Judaism? [Probes: What organizations are you involved in? What aspects of your daily life are Jewish?]

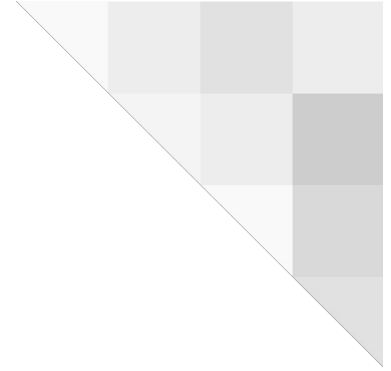
Media and Jewishness

A. What were your favorite TV shows and characters as a child?

B. Were these characters you related to on a personal level? Why or why not? [Probes: did they share personality traits? Religious beliefs? Race? Gender?]

C. When you think of Jewish characters and shows, who and what do you think of? Did you relate to them? Does anything stand out?

Appendix B



Do you have a favorite Jewish TV Character?

Are you willing to help a fellow student with research?

How do Jewish themes in the media affect the Jewish identities of children?

I need your help to figure that out!



Please consider donating your time...

to help me gather information for my thesis research!

Contact:

Teri McGuire
Expected MA/MA: 2016
Hornstein Jewish Professional Leadership Program
Near Eastern and Judaic Studies Department
tmcguire@brandeis.edu
(917) 613 - 6955

If you have any questions about your rights as a research subject, please contact the Brandeis Institutional Review Board at irb@brandeis.edu or 781-736-8133.

