**The Stereotypical Portrayal of Jewish Masculinity on *The Big Bang Theory***

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Television continues to perpetuate negative stereotypes of Jewish men common in the United States. On the popular comedy *The Big Bang Theory* (2007-19), Howard Wolowitz, played by Simon Helberg, is an engineer at a prestigious university in southern California. Howard is also the epitome of the stereotypical Jewish male; he is thin, awkward, big-nosed, and a mamma’s boy; basically, a *nebbish*. For much of the series, thirty-something-year-old Howard still lives at home with his mother until her passing during season eight (due to the death of Carol Ann Susi in 2014, the actress who portrayed her). This type of negative portrayal of the Jewish man is not uncommon in the United States (Grinberg). Even though the presence of Jewish characters on television in the United States, including in leading roles, has increased since the 1980s (Rockler), they are still often portrayed stereotypically and negatively. According to Samantha Baskind:

Jews in American popular entertainment convey Otherness in one of three ways: by the discrimination they experienced, through flagrant stereotypes, or by concealing or merely implying their Jewishness. Since the advent of the motion picture and later television, there was little inherently positive about Jews in general pop culture. (4)

While some Jews, like Jerry Seinfeld (*Seinfeld*, 1989–98), are still widely known in popular culture, their Jewishness is almost, if not completely, hidden from the viewer. When Jewish television characters show their Jewishness, they are often depicted stereotypically.

Although seemingly harmless on the surface, the character of Howard Wolowitz is troublesome due to the messages he conveys to the viewer. Primarily, researchers have found that stereotypes on television influence people’s biases and perceptions (Ruggieri and Leebron), and this false representation of a Jewish man can affect both Jews and non-Jews alike. While many psychologists would agree that “Jewish identity is a complex, multifaceted construct that is affected by numerous influences and is content-specific” (Schlosser, et al. 54), negative stereotypes on television programs can affect how groups of people are perceived (Mastro, et al.; Punyanunt-Carter). This can then, in turn, affect the self-esteem of those being stereotyped (Martins and Harrison).

According to Judith Gerson, “biologically based definitions of Jewishness have no meaning without understanding the social and cultural forces that generate and sustain them” (13). Therefore, this article explores the depiction of Jewish male masculinity[[1]](#endnote-1) in society and on television in the United States. The inexorable link between the emasculated Jewish male and his mother is also explored in relation to the Jewish male stereotype on prime-time television programming. In addition, the character of Howard Wolowitz is discussed through a critical lens while addressing negative Jewish male representation and its potential concerns in a larger global context.

**A Brief Depiction of the Jewish Male (and His Mother, of Course)**

For centuries, Jews around the world have been persecuted and discriminated against for religious and socioeconomic reasons (Freedman; Gilman, “We”). In the eyes of many, Jews are seen as being dirty, deceitful, swarthy, ugly (i.e., having beady eyes and large noses), and even diseased (Benton; Gilman, “Jewish Noses”; Segal; Weinbaum). For Jewish men, believed to hold core values of social justice and peace (Schlosser), masculinity is also called into question. This results in Jewish men being relegated to a “stereotype in fin-de-siecle European culture of Jewish men as feminized in both body and character” (Hyman 156). In the United States, Jewish masculinity continues to be influenced by European beliefs. As such, Jewish males continue to be seen as weak, passive (i.e., unwilling to fight back), and effeminate, both physically and mentally (Grinberg; Norwood; Ravits). If that were not enough, Jewish men are also believed to be greedy, power-hungry (Berinsky and Mendelberg), and horrible at playing sports (Byers and Krieger).

In the turn of the twentieth century United States, this negative perception began to change, at least in small doses. Due to the struggle for self-preservation, some inner-city Jewish males took up the art of fighting (boxing, in particular) because of the ever-present fear of beatings from Gentiles and anti-Semites in neighboring communities (Norwood). Many Jewish males “began to forge a new muscular identity” that helped to dispel some of the negative stereotypes of “Jewish males’ physical incapacity, cowardice, and effeminacy that dated almost from the beginning of the Second Diaspora” (Norwood 168). Many Jewish fighters were quite popular in the sport in the early twentieth century (e.g., Max Baer), and many others learned to protect themselves and their loved ones due to their newfound combative prowess; unfortunately, the notion of the hyper-masculine Jew was not widely accepted.

Jewish men were perceived by white Anglo-Saxon Protestant (WASP) society as coming from a culture that emphasized morality and literacy, which was seen as emasculating (Martel). Yet, the notion of the verbally combative intellectual Jew, especially in urban areas such as New York City, soon came to prominence (Grinberg). According to Jonathon Freedman, “In the 1950s, this model flipped around, as the de-masculinized—or at least *schlumpy*—Jewish intellectual became something of a cultural icon not despite but because of his difference from robust WASP norms of masculinity” (91). Therefore, although still not respected for their physical and emotional strength, Jewish men gained a certain level of respect for their intellectual, studious nature. Ultimately, Jewish males’ “combination of intellectualism and physical deficiencies were the subject of much early twentieth-century worrying . . . culminating in, or at least continuing through, the films of Woody Allen and the novels of Philip Roth” (Freedman 90). Even though the process of Zionism ushered in a new era of perceived Jewish toughness (Martel), this did not really affect the stereotypical representation of Jewish males in the US media.

The modern stereotypical image of the Jewish male is aligned predominantly with awkward and meek characters portrayed by Woody Allen rather than masculine Jewish athletes like Sandy Koufax (professional baseball player for the Brooklyn/Los Angeles Dodgers) and Julian Edelman (of the New England Patriots football team). There are rarely, if ever, representations of Jewish males on popular television that display a personality and physical characteristics that stray far from the previously described stereotype. One exception is Bill Goldberg, a 6’4”, 285-pound (semi-retired) professional wrestler. He is an incredibly popular wrestler who fights under his real name (i.e., “Goldberg”); his legion of fans even chant his name during his entrance to the ring. Goldberg is nothing but pure strength and aggression. Although it was asserted by Bond Benton, that Goldberg “made his Jewishness a central feature of his character without utilizing defined stereotypes” (409), the only thing that really identifies Goldberg as being Jewish is his name; he never identifies as Jewish in the ring by, for example, wearing any regalia displaying Jewish symbols. Out of the ring, he did declare his Jewishness, but it was a rare occurrence. For example, on the back-jacket cover of his autobiography, he is seen wearing a yarmulke (Goldberg and Goldberg). Goldberg even said that, “I figured the name Goldberg said it all. Hell, if I walk out there as Goldberg and you can’t figure out I’m Jewish for yourself, well, then, I’m sorry” (Spalding 2). Therefore, although Goldberg helps to break the stereotype of the weak, intellectual, office-working Jew, he could be considered an “inferred” or “crypto” Jew (Byers and Krieger). According to Michelle Byers and Rosalin Krieger, crypto and inferred Jews “are often constructed as non-Jewish on the narrative’s surface but are imbued with Jewishness through subtext or via various coded signifiers. These make up an increasing proportion of the ‘Jewish’ characters to be studied” (134). Goldberg is only recognizable as a Jew by his name, and if some do not know that Goldberg is a Jewish surname, his religious background can be, and likely is, missed.

**The Jewish Mother**

According to television stereotypes, no good Jewish boy can be discussed without his mother, and the first Jewish mother depicted on US radio, and then television, was Molly Goldberg. *The Goldbergs* (1949-54), which told the story of a first-generation immigrant family from Europe, is considered the first successful television sitcom (Brook, “Americanization”). The show focused on “the trials and tribulations of a poor Jewish family who are guided through their difficult times by a warm, compassionate, and understanding woman, Molly Goldberg played by Gertrude Berg” (Cantor 208). The (fake) Yiddish-accented Molly was portrayed as an overweight, doting, nurturing, warm, and generous working-class Jewish matriarch (Brook, “Cozy”; Ruggieri and Leebron). While a beloved television character, “[Berg’s] early portrayal of the Jewish female became synonymous with the stereotyped overweight, well-meaning, but overbearing mother” (Ruggieri and Leebron 1272).

The stereotype of the Jewish mother was made popular in the United States by male comedy writers during the 1960s (Ravits).[[2]](#endnote-2) Ultimately, Jewish mothers were portrayed as nagging, nitpicky, overprotective, manipulative, overbearing, domineering, pushy, guilting, and loving to an extreme (Baskind; Clanton; Ravits; Rockler). The Jewish mother loved too much and knew absolutely no boundaries in order to protect her sons. For example, Howard’s mother on *The Big Bang Theory* is never seen but always heard (literally and metaphorically). Mrs. Wolowitz is described consistently as being obese and immensely overbearing; therefore, she exudes most of the negative stereotypes of the Jewish mother.

**The Television Depiction of the Jewish Male**

According to David Buchbinder, “The representation of inadequate masculinities, and particularly of the male-as-schlemiel [inadequately or incompetently male], is hardly a new development in either film or television” (232); this has been occurring for decades and continues to this day. Characters such as the neurotic Miles Silverberg on *Murphy Brown* (1988–98), whiny Joel Fleischman on *Northern Exposure* (1990-95), and prissy and obsessive Schmidt on *New Girl* (2011-18) are just the tip of the Jewish character iceberg. While all of these characters are bright and successful in their white-collar careers, they all epitomize negative stereotypes of the weak Jewish male; they are more neurotic and whiny and less strong and outwardly masculine (e.g., in stature, attitude, career) than many other non-Jewish male characters on modern-day television.

It should be noted that comedic character portrayals on television sitcoms are often depicted stereotypically, also referred to as “stock types” (Ravits). Byers and Krieger concur: “It is true that, on television, difference often enters the text through the stereotype because the stereotype allows viewers to ‘read’ a character very quickly, in a ‘short hand’” (132); stereotypes are simply cognitive shortcuts (Valdivia). It is understood in this critique that most, if not all, television characters are stereotyped to a certain degree. While addressing Jewish masculinity on popular television, “it is not stereotypes per se that are objectionable but the constant deployment of stereotypes that serve to demean and discriminate against segments of the population” (Valdivia 170). The major issue addressed here is how the stereotypical representation of the emasculate male is detrimental to Jewish people and the perception of Jews as a whole.

As stated previously, the portrayal of the hapless, bumbling Jewish geek can be seen in many television and movie roles in recent memory. Howard Wolowitz is just another in a long line of awkward, overly sensitive, meek Jewish men in television history. For example, most of Ben Stiller’s film roles (both acted and voiced) are considered in this tradition, as well as David Schwimmer’s role as Ross Gellar on the hit comedy *Friends* (1994-2004) (Buchbinder), along with the character of Dr. John (J. D.) Dorian on the comedy *Scrubs* (‎2001–10). Their Jewishness is alluded to, perhaps inferred, but their Jewish culture and beliefs are rarely if ever displayed. Howard may wear his Jewishness on his sleeve, but he is still portrayed negatively and stereotypically.

**The Wolowitz Conundrum**

*The Big Bang Theory* (CBS 2007-19) went off the air in spring 2019 as the number one sitcom on US television, and it held that position for most of the previous eight years (Fitzgerald). The show revolves around four brilliant and socially awkward university scientists: the “intellectually gifted theoretical physicist Sheldon Cooper, his roommate applied physicist Leonard Hofstadter, astrophysicist Rajesh Koothrappali, and engineer Howard Wolowitz” (McIntosh 195-96). Sheldon, Leonard, and Rajesh all hold PhDs, while Howard has a Master’s degree in engineering from MIT; therefore, he often is mocked and ridiculed for not having a PhD like his peers. All four friends enjoy playing fantasy board games together, watching *Star Trek* and other sci-fi films, and hanging out at the local comic book shop. Howard is the only Jewish person out of the four Caltech scientists (Uliss). The additional female characters on the program—Penny, Bernadette Rostenkowski-Wolowitz, and Amy Farrah Fowler—are the love interests of Leonard, Howard, and Sheldon, respectively. All the women are portrayed as Christian, which is interesting to note since the actors who play Amy Farrah Fowler (Mayim Bialik) and Bernadette Rostenkowski (Melissa Rauch) are actually Jewish in real life. Be that as it may, Howard is the only major Jewish character in the popular show.

Before even seeing the character of Howard Wolowitz on screen, the viewer is provided with subtle messages about Howard’s character. First, the name Wolowitz is troublesome. For this surname, coincidentally or not, has “wallow” in it, which reeks of the whiny, wimpy Jewish male stereotype. People who wallow are not active doers; they are passive complainers. For those viewers knowledgeable of Jewish names, especially Ashkenazi-esque nomenclature, Wolowitz is a dead giveaway of Howard’s Jewish background. When Howard is then seen on screen, one can understand how he portrays the ultimate Jewish male stereotype. Howard is a “physically small, even timid, man who is awkward around women, often exaggerating his masculinity and prowess, and who still lives with his overbearing mother” (Clanton 1).

Howard demonstrates his lack of masculinity repeatedly throughout the series, so much so that it would take another article to provide all of the examples. For example, Howard can best be described as creepy, slimy even, in his early interactions with women. During season two, in an episode called “The Vegas Renormalization,” Howard has intercourse with a woman he meets on a road trip to Las Vegas; when Howard finds out that the woman is a prostitute and is just providing him with the “Jewish girlfriend experience” (with accompanying fake New York accent), he gleefully has sex with her anyway because his friends have already paid for her services.

During an episode in season three called “The Creepy Candy Coating Corollary,” Howard has “his first date with his future wife, Bernadette, [and it] goes horribly until they start bonding over how overprotective their respective mothers are” (Clanton 2). Therefore, Howard is unable to charm Bernadette with his own personality; it takes complaining about his mother for them both to find a common interest. Furthermore, in his relationship with Bernadette, Howard is still dominated by a woman. Although not as heavy-handed as Howard’s mother, Mrs. Wolowitz, Bernadette still controls Howard’s actions. Creepily, Howard also feels that when Bernadette gets angry and yells, sounding just like his mother, she sounds sexy. Somehow, Howard does not make the connection between the similar vocal tonalities of his wife and mother.

In season four’s episode “The Alien Parasite Hypothesis,” Howard and his best friend Raj argue over which of them would be best suited as the superhero and which would be the sidekick; so, in order to solve their dispute, they decide to wrestle for the title of lead hero. While circling each other on the wrestling mat, Howard brags about taking a karate lesson when he was eleven, yet he shows his innate fear and weakness when he never actually makes contact with Raj during the whole proceeding. He is all talk and no action.

In season six, during an episode titled “The Decoupling Fluctuation,” Howard is harassed and bullied by his fellow astronauts while on a mission to the International Space Station. His fellow astronauts even nickname Howard “Fruit Loop” due to an overheard conversation between him and his mother regarding the breakfast cereal Fruit Loops. Howard is too scared to confront the bullies, who call him names and even draw on his face with marker while sleeping, so he complains instead to his wife and mother via Skype in his search for solace.

Lastly, in the season eight episode called “The Expedition Approximation,” we find out that Howard has to earn stars on a “chore chart” created by his wife in order to purchase desired items on eBay (e.g., *Star Trek* collectors’ plates). Although it has been common knowledge for several seasons that Bernadette earns much more money in her research position than Howard, we find out that he receives an allowance from his wife for completing his chores at home. Therefore, Howard falls prey to several other weak male stereotypes—not only does he make significantly less money than his wife, he is also treated like a child for not being a productive and strong spouse.

**Representation of Judaism**

In *The Big Bang Theory*, there are sporadic references to Judaism, such as Howard inviting (or rather, nagging) a date over for Shabbat dinner, Howard’s Bar Mitzvah and the savings bonds that were bought for him, as well as an occasional sprinkling of Yiddish (e.g., *putz* and *fakakta*). Mrs. Wolowitz’s cooking, her brisket in particular, is also a topic that arises every now and again. Unfortunately:

in spite of the increased presence of Jewish references and the knowledge of Judaism the series assumes on the part of the viewer as compared to previous television series, *The Big Bang Theory* doesn’t depict Judaism as serving as a resource for action, identity, or meaning-making for Howard. (Clanton 1)

Judaism and Jewish concepts are just a means to a punchline on the program, with many of the jokes coming at the expense of Howard’s relationship with his mother. The loud, apparently obese woman is never actually seen on the show, yet her booming voice is heard throughout the house. According to Dan Clanton Jr., Mrs. Wolowitz has a loud, “grating, nasal, New Jersey-esque, always screaming voice” (2). Once again, Howard’s mother epitomizes the negative Jewish mother stereotype, including the traditional, east coast, New York/New Jersey accent.

The series creator of *The Big Bang Theory*, Chuck Lorre, has said in interviews that “Wolowitz is based on [my] own Jewish background as well as that of [Simon] Helberg” (Wills 1). Lorre went on to say, “Things are loud in a Jewish household . . . That’s just the way we talk . . . That was the fun of creating that off-camera mother. That’s how communication happens in some households, and it’s normal in that house” (Wills 1). It is completely acceptable and understandable that Lorre would use his own personal background and experiences to create a television series. The issue is that in a program created by a Jewish man, the one Jewish protagonist is portrayed stereotypically as both weak and a mama’s boy.

All the male characters on *The Big Bang Theory* are quirky and nerdy, yet none of the other characters of Sheldon, Leonard, or Raj fall into prescribed stereotypes based upon their race, ethnicity, or religion. While Sheldon is eccentric and appears to suffer from various neuroses and personality disorders (e.g., it has been debated whether he is on the autism spectrum) (Winston), he is not characterized by his religious/ethnic beliefs. Sheldon is an agnostic who was raised Evangelical Christian in the heart of Texas, and his character revolves around his eccentric behavior and lack of understanding of social interaction. Leonard’s religious background is Christian, yet his character is not framed by his religious beliefs, which only really emerge during Christmastime anyway (e.g., in the form of a tree and presents). Raj, originally from India, is a self-professed Hindu, yet his character revolves around his social anxieties (in the earlier seasons) and his continued lackluster love-life. His religious beliefs arise occasionally (e.g., in his discussion of his love of hamburgers in “The Thanksgiving Decoupling”), yet his Hinduism plays no real part in his represented persona. The character of Howard Wolowitz breaks from the program’s lack of focus on religious identity.

Wolowitz is different from the other characters in that he is simply seen as the stereotypical Jewish male. Although Howard is talented at playing the piano, has been to the international space station, and knows Stephen Hawking (as shown in “The Hawking Excitation”), he is still the epitome of the weak Jewish male. His character revolves around his weakness and his subordination to women, and most, if not all, of his comedic scenarios are due to his meek character traits. For example, in the season four episode “The Robotic Manipulation,” Howard borrows a robot from the Jet Propulsion Laboratory and must be rushed to the hospital because the machine “somehow” gets latched onto his penis. While he has a brilliant mind, Howard’s social ineptitude with women and overall *nebbish*-ness (i.e., his timid or submissive character) lead to his comedic flair. Due to the heavy focus on Howard’s Jewishness, his character is seen as Jewish first and nerdy scientist second. This perpetuation of negative Jewish male (and female) stereotypes come at a cost, to both Jews and non-Jews alike.

**Television, Stereotypes, and Perception**

According to Dominique Ruggieri and Elizabeth Leebron, “television remains a primary source for entertainment for millions of Americans, whose opinions of women and ethnic groups are influenced by character portrayals on television” (1266). For those people who watch television programming on a regular basis, stereotypical (i.e., often biased and unfavorable) portrayals of women and people of color have a significant influence on the viewing audience (Arendt and Northup; Martins and Harrison; Mastro et al.; Mastro et al.; Punyanunt-Carter). TV stereotypes may influence interpretations and biases against Jews in the real world (Ruggieri and Leebron).

It is important to note that the United States is not alone in its use of negative stereotypes in television programming: “The tendency to negatively depict and underrepresent ethnic, national and religious minorities in media has been documented in many countries” (Tukachinsky et al. 34), such as the portrayal of Muslims in the United Kingdom and Arabs on Israeli television. That being said, there appears to be little to no available research that studies the influence of stereotypical Jewish television characters on both Jewish and non-Jewish viewers in the United States. Therefore, it is important to review how negative stereotypes of minoritized groups on television affect white television viewers as well as people of color themselves.

For example, research has found that when white people in the United States view even a minimal amount of negative portrayals of Latinx people on television programming, they perceive Latinxes more negatively (Mastro et al.). With regard to African-American characters on television, Narissra Punyanunt-Carter theorizes that negative portrayals of “African Americans on television may have an influence on viewers and their perceptions about African Americans in general” (251). A 2015 study found that regular, long-term exposure to negative stereotypes of specific racial groups on television news programs appears to create negative “implicit attitudes” (i.e., involuntary gut responses) about those groups with the program viewers (Arendt and Northup). In other words, how minoritized people are represented on television news and programming affects how viewers’ social realities are constructed (referred to as “cultivation”) (Ibrahim and Wolf). Research has shown a correlation between negative representation of racial and ethnic groups on television and negative perception of those groups (Arendt and Northup; Hurley and Jensen; Mastro et al.; Punyanunt-Carter).

While there are few studies pertaining to Jewish perception based on television programming, because of the previous research it is possible, if not probable, that viewing negative stereotypes of Jewish males on US television programs influences viewer perception of Jewish men, and in the case of *The Big Bang Theory*, Jewish women (mothers) as well. The continued portrayal of both the wimpy Jewish male and the overbearing Jewish mother can send (not so) subtle messages that Jewish men are emasculate, whiny, and hypersensitive, while Jewish mothers are loud, obnoxious, and overly critical. It is important to note that since the election of Donald Trump as President of the United States in November 2016, incidents of antisemitism, including verbal/physical harassment and threats, vandalism, and assault, have increased (Anti-Defamation League). Data show that, “The American Jewish community experienced the highest level of antisemitic incidents last year since tracking began in 1979, with more than 2,100 acts of assault, vandalism and harassment reported across the United States” (Anti-Defamation League).

There has been a large increase in both racist and antisemitic vandalism and graffiti across the country (Memoli), described as “a level of bias not seen in the U.S. for decades” (Associated Press). Therefore, since data have shown that antisemitism is on the rise in both the United States and around the world (Berg; Kaplan; Noble; Potok; Sokol), stereotypical Jewish representations on television programming is of great concern due to its potential influence on Jewish perception.

In addition, stereotypical and/or negative representations of particular groups on television affect one’s sense of self. For example, repeated exposure to stereotypical portrayals of Native Americans, such as sports mascots and characters in television and film (e.g., Disney’s *Pocahontas*), has been found to have negative, harmful consequences to one’s self and community worth (Fryberg, et al.). Research found that exposure to television programming predicted a decrease in the self-esteem of all children except for white males. Therefore, it appears that when non-white children view racial stereotypes repeated on television, the children compare themselves to the images they see, which in turn negatively affects their self-esteem (Martins and Harrison). It is possible to infer that viewing negative stereotypes of the emasculate, Jewish male on television programs has the power to not only negatively affect how non-Jews perceive Jewish people, but it can also harm the self-esteem of Jewish children. According to Ibrahim and Wolf:

As members of the Jewish community and non-Jewish people are exposed to television images that are reinforced through the ever-expanding newer electronic media, the cumulative effect of these messages is to more powerfully influence Jewish identity and the feelings of exclusion from society expressed by these Jewish people. The result of this situation is that distorted media images create a situation whereby people who are unfairly represented struggle to find their own identity. (305)

It is often believed that “some Jewish males absorb a kind of cultural low self-esteem: that we are weak and *nebbishy*” (Pfefferman). This was definitely true for the author growing up, despite living in a city with a substantial Jewish population. It was not until the emergence of wrestling superstar Bill Goldberg in the late 90s that the author felt empowered by a masculine, Jewish male figure; unfortunately, this was not until he was in his mid-twenties. According to Schlosser, “It could be argued that every American Jew goes through the process of learning (and hopefully unlearning) internalized antisemitism [defined as having negative feelings and thoughts about one’s identity as a Jewish person] by being raised and/or living . . . [in] the United States” (428). It is possible then that the perpetuation of the negative male image on television in the United States contributes to the potential Jewish males’ feelings of low self-esteem (i.e., internalized antisemitism).

**Conclusion**

Gerson posits that “we cannot conceptualize Jewish identity without gender. Jewishness is always gendered” (13). Therefore, *The Big Bang Theory*, the most popular comedy on television in the United States, is concerning and problematic for several reasons. Howard Wolowitz, the only Jewish central character on the show, is represented as the prototypical Jewish male; he is thin, gawky, weak, and domineered by women. Martha Ravits asserts, “The acceptance and popularity of Jewish humor in the entertainment industry—stand-up comedy, film, television, recordings, and literature—have contributed to the Jewish minority’s increasing sense of security and success in the United States” (29). While true to an extent, Jewish humor, and the use of harmful stereotypes to convey that humor, does not come without a cost. A large body of research shows that stereotypes on television can negatively skew the perceptions and self-esteem of the viewer. Since Jews are such a small percentage of the US population (2.1 percent) (Sheskin and Dashefsky), it is likely that many people believe the stereotypical depictions they see on *The Big Bang Theory* since they do not know any Jewish people in real life. Whether Jewish people in Hollywood are perpetuating a stereotypical view of Jewish life, as in the *Big Bang Theory*, or others are doing it for them, the misrepresentation of Jewish men and women is harmful for both Jews and non-Jews alike.

It is not lost on the author that “most situation comedies focus on superficial problems and are usually not created with the intent of contributing to political and cultural debates” (Rockler 454). Many US television comedies do not claim to address any real complex issues or concerns in society (e.g., the possible lack of people of teachers of color at Howard’s university, based on frequent scenes in the faculty cafeteria). If television comedies do approach any pertinent or contentious issues in society, they are often surface level at best. Yet, in order to break the negative stereotype of the weak, Jewish male, which continues in popular US television programs like *The Big Bang Theory*, something needs to be done in the television industry. Although, according to Ravits, “It is hard to fight oversimplification and stereotyping with more nuanced interpretations” (20), television creators and writers need to take the lead to break the perpetuation of negative stereotypes aimed at Jewish people. If they do not, it is possible that the depiction of the Jewish male (and his mother) will continue to be seen negatively in US society—now that is just *farkakt*.

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1. The definition of masculinity varies widely. For this article, masculinity is defined as being strong, both physically and emotionally, confident, and competent. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. A literary example of the Jewish mother stereotype can be found in *Portnoy’s Complaint* by Philip Roth (1969). [↑](#endnote-ref-2)