MOLLY GOLDBERG: A 1950s Icon

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Gertrude Berg invents the character Molly Goldberg and forever after people think of Berg as Molly Goldberg. “Gertrude Berg, who created Molly, wrote all her lines, played her for two decades on radio and another five years on television.” (Hinckley, 2002) Who was Gertrude Berg/Molly Goldberg and how did she so effectively represent the hegemonic ideologies of the 1950s? First, she glorifies one of the values so pervasive in America: motherhood. This buxom and benevolent meddler who can solve problems by mixing good common sense, a considerable dab of compassion, but most of all wisdom becomes an archetype for motherhood during this era. Along with motherhood she celebrates the family unit and the need for family to work together to protect each other. She also embodies a sense of hope and goodness that Americans believe about themselves, that this land is generous enough to accept and embrace “the other” without restrictions.

GERTRUDE BERG/MOLLY GOLDBERG

According to Joyce Antler “Berg was probably the first woman to write, produce and star in her own TV vehicle.” (Antler, 1998, p. 97) She was born in 1899 in Harlem of Eastern European immigrants who owned a small summer hotel in the Catskills. As Berg was growing up she wrote scripts to entertain her parents and their guests. At the age of fourteen she created a character named Maltke Talnitzky who later morphed into Molly Goldberg, an amalgam of Berg’s mother and grandmother Czerny. Her first attempt at writing about Maltke is The Other Woman. When Maltke’s husband wants to leave her, she pleads her case in court against the other woman by explaining, “My face is not on top of such a long neck but it’s a face, no?...So the legs are a little short, the knees maybe knock a little but who listens? There’s a few lumps here and there and the waist isn’t so ay, ay, and the dishwasher eats off the nail polish, but whose fault is that? And if I’m not stylish can I help it if skinny dresses don’t fit me? Did I ask for what I look like? I’m a woman, plain everyday woman, and you think my husband is such a Beau Brummel he needs something better? He doesn’t. Believe me. For the kind of man he is, I’m good enough.” (Berg, 1961, p. 155) Thus begins Berg’s writing career which spans over half a century.

Molly Goldberg, with her malapropisms, cadence and unique syntax, offers a comical approach to family life in the 1950’s. Berg tells Morris Freedman in 1954 that “you’ll notice there’s no dialect, just intonation and word order. A question at the end of a statement, ‘So you are coming already?’ Sometimes it’s a matter of literally translating a Yiddish idiom, like ‘Throw an eye in the refrigerator.’ “(Freedman, 1954, p.360). “If it’s nobody, I’ll call back” or “Give me a swallow, the glass.” (Hinckley, 2002) She herself is not an immigrant but in order to maintain the accuracy of her dialogues she

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frequently visits the lower East Side in New York and listens to the conversations of the shoppers and peddlers.

MOTHERHOOD

With all of her faults, the lovable Molly Goldberg is the representation of the shtetl mother in America and the Demeter woman, the mother archetype who provides and gives and takes care of others. “Molly Goldberg possesses many of the traits that are traditionally associated with the Jewish Mother: being warm, motherly, resourceful, nurturing and problem-solving and on the flip side of this picture, being overbearing and inescapable.” (Pearl, 1999, p. 86) She represents a large-spirited woman, who, regardless of her obvious Jewishness, is attuned to the problems of all mankind and definitely wants to help resolve the issues. According to Charles Angoff, Molly is “the Mixer and the Fixer….whose heart bleeds for every unmarried girl and starving butcher and lonely grocer and who is as quick as the proverbial lightening in concocting ideas to get the ‘right’ girl and ‘right’ man together, to straighten out family squabbles, to help out a reformed thief”. (Angoff, 1951, pp. 12-13) And she goes about solving these problems with obvious cleverness, humorous self-deprecation, devoted commitment, determination and most of all prodigious strength.

FAMILY

From its inception, according to Lynn Spigel, people believe that television will bring families closer together because the children will want to stay at home and watch TV with their parents. It is going to be an activity that everyone can share. And there is growing concern in the 1950s that the “American” family values are increasingly being dissipated by diversity within the society.

What is a better vehicle for the promulgation of old-fashioned family values than The Goldbergs? This show and other fifties TV families are a “surrogate community. Television provided an illusion of the ideal neighborhood-the way it was supposed to be. Just when people had left their lifelong companions in the city, television sitcoms pictured romanticized versions of neighbor and family bonding. Mrs. Goldberg leaned out of her window to greet her neighbor, Mrs. Bloom.” (Spigel, 1992, p. 129)

According to Joyce Antler, middle-class American life is depicted in the neighborliness, the giving and taking of advice and the borrowing of a cup of sugar. The notion of a neighborhood is deliberately emphasized in the opening of the show which is an outside shot of the Bronxville apartment at 1038 E. Tremont Avenue with Molly leaning out of the window yelling, “Yoohoo, Mrs. Bloom” or convincing her audience that Sanka is the best possible beverage for everyone. The impression is that we are having an intimate conversation with a trusted neighbor. When the program moves in 1954 to Haverville, a fictitious suburban community, the camera spans the neighborhood at the beginning of every show. Whether in a New York tenement house or a spacious suburb, Molly is always your faithful and reliable friend. Also, inherent in the message is that even though a family has moved to the suburbs it’s still possible to have good neighbors and be a cohesive family. This is a deliberate and reassuring message for a
recently mobile populace anxious about the advantages of moving to the suburbs and breaking ties with extended family members.

Everyone can identify with the fighting and jealousies experienced by not only the nuclear Goldberg family but the assortment of extended family relatives. The gossip and peccadilloes of people are weekly ingredients for Berg’s show. In a 1949 episode, the miserly and rich Cousin Simon thinks he’s had a heart attack and decides to give his money to his poor relations; but as soon as he gets well, he decides not to give the money after all. Molly wisely proclaims, “Maybe there’s a Simon in every family and a little bit of Simon in everyone, waiting too long to do what he should.”

THE “OTHER” AND AMERICAN VALUES

Much has been written about how non-threatening this obviously Jewish family is to the Gentile public of the 1950s. Molly seems to represent a conglomeration of flawed, but lovable, characteristics that make her largely non-Jewish audience feel comfortable that she is trying desperately to be a good American. She represents to her audience the honest efforts of the immigrant extolling the virtues and blessings of the American value system, never taking for granted her great fortune to be in a country that allows “the other” a place. In a 1949 episode, the Goldbergs get a letter from relations in Europe that they hadn’t heard from since before the War, obvious Holocaust survivors. Molly, with her prominent pictures of George Washington and Abraham Lincoln in the living room, praises this bounteous country. “In other nations it took generations to have what we have. I never get over the wonderment of America”. According to Berg, Molly easily combines love of country and a universal religiosity. "Next to the Constitution of the United States, the Ten Commandments came first. Not only were all men created equal, they also had to honor their mother and their father. Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob interchanged easily with Washington, Lincoln and Jefferson, and the Philistines had nothing on a person who didn’t vote.” (Berg, 1961, p. 167) Because Molly is so likable, most critics view her and her clan as excellent ambassadors for acceptance of Jews as different, but trying to be like Gentiles.

Contested ideologies are becoming more prominent by the mid-1950. As the show matures, Molly becomes much less “old country” in her appearance as she dresses in a more sophisticated manner and her hair is stylish. The heavy Jewish accents disappear and the show no longer has specifically Jewish celebrations such as a Passover dinner or mention of the High Holy Days of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. Old and new political ideologies are reflected in the transformations. The Goldbergs become more affluent and move to Haverville (according to one critic, David Marc, the city of the “haves”) and no longer want to present themselves as the poor immigrant refugees. World War II has been over for ten years and the country’s tolerance for Jews and their differences may have waned. Jews, by the 1950s have begun their assimilation into the mainstream so their “customs” may not be so unique. Or it could be that Gertrude Berg decides that a new face to the show might increase its popularity with an audience that by now is accepting the suburban way of life and its concomitant isolation for the family.

As the 1950s fades, so, too does the idealized world that Gertrude Berg creates. However, love of family, magnanimous acceptance of “the other” and the sustenance of
the home environment are values that Americans still find very appealing. *The Goldbergs* will always represent “a vision of a loving family, of interdenominational brotherhood, of middle-class ideals of American life…a soul-inspiring testament to the wonder-working powers of the American way, a daily chapter in the saga of hope and perseverance that struck a profound…chord.” (Antler, 1998, p. 91) A diagnostic critique of *The Goldbergs* is not just a foray into historical nostalgia but rather a delving into what ideologies they represent and what hegemonic values are promulgated for the relationships between men and women, parents and children and families and society. It is enlightening for the modern viewer to go beyond the quaintness and the perceived outdated mores of *The Goldbergs* and decode the universal and abiding messages that are still relevant for the twenty-first century.

REFERENCES