

The Best Jewish TV Shows of All Time

With decades of “Jewish” shows to choose from, *Moment* had to call in the experts, Harry Castleman and Walter Podrazik, authors of *Watching TV: Six Decades of American Television* to pick the top ten.

Milton Berle's Shows (1948-1956)

Milton Berle, born Milton Berlinger, spent decades on stage before becoming TV's first superstar on *Texaco Star Theater*. Dubbed “Mr. Television,” he brought the fast-paced, smart-aleck world of Borscht Belt comedy to America's goyim. His outrageous costumes, aggressive personality and willingness to do almost anything for a laugh (even cross-dressing) were straight out of the vaudeville playbook but seemed brand new to mainstream America.

The Goldbergs (1949-1956)

Starting in 1929, Gertrude Berg's authentically crafted characters from the Bronx became America's quintessential Jewish family, transitioning effortlessly from radio to television in 1949. Familiar phrases (“Yoo-hoo, Mrs. Bloom”) and Berg's own star power as Molly made the series a CBS hit. Sadly, in 1951 *The Goldbergs* fell victim to unproven McCarthyist blacklisting of cast member Philip Loeb.

Sid Caesar's Shows (1949-1958)

Isaac “Sid” Caesar teamed with comedienne Imogene Coca and producer Max Liebman to invent live, irreverent satirical TV comedy in *Your Show of Shows*. With stellar supporting players (including Carl Reiner and Howard Morris) and Hall-of-Fame writers (including Mel Brooks, Neil Simon and later Larry Gelbart and Woody Allen), *landsmen* all, the programs created some of the decade's funniest moments, including hilarious parodies of *From Here to Eternity* and *This Is Your Life*.

The Dick Van Dyke Show (1961-1966)

Carl Reiner turned his comedy-variety résumé and personal life into this classic sitcom, drawing on his real TV work life in Manhattan and his Jewish family life in New Rochelle, New York. Although the domestic setting for Rob and Laura Petrie was not presented as Jewish, the office world was another matter. In particular, Morey (Moritz) Amsterdam as Buddy Sorrell embodied the sharp-tongued Jewish writers of Reiner's Sid Caesar days.

Rhoda (1974-1978)

Everyone *knew* that Rhoda Morgenstern was Jewish, thanks to her quick wit and New

York accent. Yet when Rhoda departed *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, returning to New York City for this spinoff, producers James L. Brooks and Allan Burns rarely made her Jewish identity explicit. One key moment comes when Rhoda's parents, Martin and Ida, first meet her new (non-Jewish) boyfriend. Martin says to Ida: “How come you didn't ask if he was Jewish?” Ida knowingly replies: “If he was Jewish, I would have asked.”



Daily Show host Jon Stewart's humor draws on generations of Jewish TV comedy

Saturday Night Live (1975-Present)

Canadian writer and producer Lorne Michaels (born Lorne Lipowitz) brought back the Sid Caesar style of live TV satire in 1975 and effectively reintroduced classic Jewish comedy traditions. Much of the original cast was not Jewish, but they recognized funny as funny. Numerous Jewish-related skits reflected their eras and included Gilda Radner touting “Jewess Jeans,” Mike Myers as “Coffee Talk” host Linda Richman and Adam Sandler performing his now-famous Chanukah song.

Seinfeld (1990-1998)

Combining a Manhattan feel, a baby boomer mind-set and a heavy dose of Jewish ethos, *Seinfeld*, labeled a show about “nothing,” was really about *anything* (waiting in line at

a Chinese restaurant or trying to find your car in a mall parking lot). The characters perfectly captured the upper-middle-class, vaguely elitist, liberal, New York, quasi-neurotic personalities of its two Jewish creators (Jerry Seinfeld and Larry David). In the world of *Seinfeld*, everybody was Jewish, or might as well have been.

Rugrats (1991-2004)

The *Rugrats* cartoon series starred five children—including half-Jewish infant Tommy Pickles—and offered “equal time” for Jewish holidays after years of Christmas and Easter cartoon specials. In 1995's “A Rugrats Passover” episode, Grandpa Boris tells the Exodus saga during a family seder and the kids imagine themselves as the biblical characters, with pushy Angelica as Pharaoh and even-tempered Tommy as Moses. This 30-minute lesson was a Passover primer for the program's gentile viewers.

Brooklyn Bridge (1991-1993)

The best Jewish series you've probably never seen, *Brooklyn Bridge* was producer Gary David Goldberg's (*Family Ties*) loving recreation of the Brooklyn neighborhood of his youth. Set in the 1950s, *Brooklyn Bridge* focused on an urban Jewish family in a world of fading ethnicity and growing assimilation, with a deft mix of realistic personalities and light comedy. The surprising gem of the series was Marion Ross as matriarch Sophie Berger, who blended force, will, pride and maternal concern into a memorably authentic figure, dominating the screen just as her character dominated family life.

The Daily Show with Jon Stewart (1999-Present)

Often cited as the most respected news anchor since Walter Cronkite despite not being a news anchor, comedian and *Daily Show* host Jon Stewart (born Jonathan Stuart Leibowitz) is so comfortable with his Jewish heritage that he easily and regularly acknowledges it. (No oblique references here.) Drawing on generations of Jewish TV comedy, Stewart delivers his “fake news” with pitch-perfect verbal and visual timing and the time-honored willingness to do almost anything for a laugh.