Where did the stereotype of the Jewish mother actually come from?
In honor of Mother's Day, a brief history of the universally recognized metaphor for nagging, whining – and unstinting devotion.

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Why has the Jewish mother been the figure that so many people love to hate, for so long? At least in the United States, she has been subject to continuing ridicule and scorn, often compared to a “vulture” (because she eats your heart out), a “Rottweiler” (because she never lets go), and even a “terrorist” – or worse (with a terrorist you can negotiate).

Nearly a century ago, the transition began from seeing the Jewish mother as a tower of strength dedicated to her family, warm and nurturing, to this comic idea of monster mother, viciously living through her children, overprotective, overwrought. She was the original helicopter mother, only far more destructive.

The stereotype of the Jewish mother, transmitted through myriad popular culture outlets and given intellectual credence by social scientists, became a universally recognized metaphor for nagging, whining, guilt-producing maternal intrusiveness. Excessive, overprotective, neurotically anxious and ever present, the Jewish mother was a convenient scapegoat for ambivalent and hostile sentiments regarding assimilation in a new society, changing family dynamics and shifting gender roles.

She became a stock figure, with every successive generation manipulating her image to suit its particular needs, even after the original reasons behind her construction had long since disappeared. It is not surprising that several contemporary studies of the negative effects of overinolved parenting point to the Jewish mother as archetypal.

Like every stereotype, the image of the Jewish mother as intrusive and all-powerful has a significant basis in reality. From Biblical times to the present, the Jewish mother made it her business to stand up for her family, herself and her people, whether against hostile enemies or the plights of poverty and injustice. It was only the extreme caricature of the Jewish mother’s indomitable that strayed from her normative behavior.

However, the Jewish mother has also been continually portrayed as an emblem of unstinting love and devotion. Her affection for her children, though bounded up in “suffering,” “worrying” and “overfeeding,” in the converging analyses of anthropologist Margaret Mead as well as countless comedians, could never be alienated. The Jewish mother’s love was “unconditional,” said Mead: “She scolds and nags, has fits when you do things to her, but ... she’s still your mother.”

Nagging, in fact, was “just another form of love-making.” And the Jewish mother did it better, thought the anthropologists – and the comedians agreed – than just about any other type of mother in the world.

Of course, both positive and negative aspects of the Jewish mother’s love and sacrifice are overblown. The mother-blame and mother-praise that distinguish this ethnic type have been factors in the depiction of mothers all over the world, if more exaggerated when it comes to Jewish ones. But the best way to understand how a Jewish mother acts and how she understands her role is to focus on the specifics of individual lives, not to accept without questioning the dominant image so rigid that it bends little through the ages.

One of my favorite Jewish mothers is the “Queen of Show Business,” Sophie Tucker, the American vaudeville, nightclub and jazz singer who was the top female entertainer in the U.S., and very popular abroad as well, for much of her 60-year career. I love how Tucker combined the contradictory images of “Red Hot Mama,” known for her brash, sultry, sexy (some say vulgar) songs (but she disagreed), and the “Yiddish Mama,” an ironic ballad she sang in memory of her own immigrant mother. The child’s fundamental desire for independence and the mother’s love pulling her back lie at the core of this plaintive melody, which pits the mother and child as antagonists in a necessary conflict over autonomy and separation. As such, it represents a universal cri de coeur.

In fact, Sophie Tucker’s mother never sat in her third-floor tenement, tragically alone, crying her eyes out after her neglectful daughter left home. She was busy raising money for Jewish causes in Hartford, Connecticut, where the family owned a restaurant. One day, when she went to see Sophie perform in a nightclub, she convinced her daughter to raise money for charity right on the spot, so Sophie began selling autographed copies of her records and her autobiography during intermissions. She claims that in this manner and through other relentless fund-raising, she raised nearly four million dollars for Israel. For Israel she was like “the clang of a fire bell to a fireman,” and she visited it dozens of times.

Sophie Tucker saw her mother as a model of strength, courage, and generosity. She mythologized her, defied her and obeyed her. Like most of us, she thought of her mother with love and gratitude, and sometimes with disappointment or anger, attitudes that reflected her own life choices as well as her mother’s. Along with a later generation of pop-culture feminists, including Judy Gold, Jackie Hoffman and Sarah Silverman, she showed us the humanity inside some of the crueler images of the stereotype (think Woody Allen or the early Philip Roth).

Jewish mothers, like all mothers, are flesh-and-blood, contradictory figures in our lives and cannot be reduced to a monolithic representation. We owe them the fullness of their complicated histories, for they have made possible our own.

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