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# VALERIE HARPER'S RHODA WAS A STRONG JEWISH ROLE MODEL

By **Annette Poizner** - September 6, 2019



Valerie Harper, left, with Cloris Leachman and Mary Tyler Moore on the set of the last episode of the show.



With the death of Valerie Harper on Aug. 30, the world paid homage to a very special woman. Colleagues remember her as truly kind, not the diva that she might have become given the fame she accomplished. The public remembers the courage and optimism she role modelled in going public with the cancer that ultimately took her life. Jews remember her as unequivocally pro-Israel, noteworthy given the sensibilities of others in Hollywood. And, of course, everybody remembers Rhoda Morgenstern, the flagrantly Jewish television role that bought her fame.

Last February, I fell and landed on the couch for months, nursing a broken ankle. With neither a television nor the patience to watch one, I wondered how to pass the time. Only one show called to me – “Why am I eating this? Why don’t I apply this directly to my hips?” Rhoda was as punny as always. But I found new appreciation for what its producers had achieved.

Of late, psychologist Jordan Peterson has brought attention to the “map of meaning,” an inner map of reality that each person first builds and then harbours, using it to navigate reality. This map is nested in the subconscious. Peterson points out that culture helps us shape our map of meaning by embedding lessons and implicit learnings in fables or myths. Peterson deconstructs classic fables or movies and can show useful life lessons embedded



within. Of course, we can think of any number of shows which communicate values that are wanting, to say the least.

When I revisited *Rhoda*, though, it was now clear, taking a page from Peterson, that the show was a purveyor of the Jewish map, a worldview that has helped generations weather ordeals and still come out laughing. By way of example, Rhoda role modelled a Jewish vocation: wordplay used to uplift virtually any interaction. Responding to the new tenant’s silly overture to take a bath with him, Rhoda pauses, then deadpans, “I don’t rub a dub dub with a shlub.” Mary Tyler Moore taught us how to warm the room up with a smile. Rhoda taught us, as the poet Jane Kenyon advises, “to have good sentences in our ears.” Especially funny ones.

The show exemplified the Jewish map in so many ways. It normalized the banalities of the human condition, depicting a difficult character-disordered mother, ongoing food addictions, struggles finding dates, the laundry list of insecurities, the snafus that inevitably occur, the stuff of life. Humour would be the balm to weather it all, that, with a good strong dose of family values: the priority of respecting parents, the loyalty of two sisters lovingly bonded in what biblically might be called a Rachel – Leah dynamic. Rhoda, desired by men, Brenda, her younger sister, not so much, together role modelling a relationship characterized by affection, support, wit and teamship.

If the writers provided a clever script, it was the players that brought their warmth and humanity to the cause. In a YouTube clip showing Harper and stage sister Julie Kavner interviewed by a talkshow host, you see the same dynamic at play – Kavner, self-deprecating and Harper, reaching out and touching Kavner’s knee, warmly reassuring and encouraging. “There it is! I knew it,” I thought. “These women brought themselves to the show, two beating hearts. Two gut neshamos.”

A couple of months ago, Harper’s husband reached out to the public for financial support. Medical expenses had depleted their coffers. Fans donated \$66,000 – hardly enough to pay round-the-clock caregivers and cover expensive medication. Within no time at all, though, Go Fund Me abruptly stopped collecting donations. I can’t prove it, but I bet my bottom dollar that an angel donor stepped in; maybe the immensely private multimillionaire Julie Kavner who’s made her fortunes doing voice work on *The Simpsons*. And if I was right, it would prove my point – the show, the writers, the actors – were living emissaries of the Jewish map, motored by a warm-heartedness that infused the production, showcasing an injunction that has kept the Jewish people going for millennia: she who laughs – lasts. We can be grateful to Valerie Harper for her contribution to that most worthwhile project.

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Annette Poizner is a registered social worker and author of, "Maps of Meaning: A Practical Summary & Workbook for Using Jordan Peterson's Insights to Sort Yourself out."

