

Reconsidering the Jewish American Princess

How the JAP became America's most complex Jewish stereotype.

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Sophie Bernstein had Rainbow flip-flops, Tiffany earrings, and superpowers. She could blow out her hair to a smooth brunette sheen without any frizz or her arm getting tired. She shaved every day with a pink Venus razor that left white flares of light down her

smooth, hairless shins.

We were 12, going on 13 — or at least she was. I was just the regular 12. It wasn't a crush I had, but something more Talmudic. Over six years at sleepaway camp, she taught me the connotations of nouns — Victoria's Secret, Atlantis Resort, all the different tri-state suburbs. Our friendship felt more sacred than my own bat mitzvah would.

Our bunk at camp was a clapboard cabin with two rows of cots and tall wooden cubbies. My own cubby shelves were an unrepentant mess, prone to rejecting the tank tops and shorts that my mother had written my name in with Sharpie. Sophie — not her real name — always passed inspection. On top of her cubbies, she had a bottle of Woolite, for her delicates. Below, she kept a trove of folded pastels, claimed in her name with iron-on tags.

Sophie had no fewer than seven Juicy Couture sweatsuits: seven terry jackets and seven matching pairs of pants, inscribed on the seat with an all-caps JUICY. She wore them to special events, like camp dances, zipped with a half-inch of midriff exposed and the nickel "J" of the zipper pull supporting the shelf of her much-discussed boobs. I had boobs and a midriff too, but they looked less assured in my Old Navy dresses.

Sometimes Sophie lent me her clothes, but even then, I just felt off. She had fluent femininity, the passive grace of a native speaker. I was trying to learn the rules by rote. It was only years later, when I'd finally failed, that I came to realize, "That girl was such a JAP!"

The Jewish American Princess, or JAP, embodies both an attitude and a style of dressing. The archetype was forged in the mid-1950s, in concert with the Jewish-American middle-class ascent. Where it came from, nobody knows. The JAP has survived through an alliance with pop culture — showing her face sporadically **in books**, **in music**, and **onscreen**, even up to the present.

The JAP is neither Jewish nor American alone. She makes herself known where these identities collide in a calamity of Coach bags, upmarket loungewear, and entitled dispositions toward luxury and ease. For Jewish American girls in Jewish American

places — summer camps, Hebrew schools, the suburbs of New Jersey — her image sets forth a list of inelastic rules, a predetermined path through the dark of adolescence into the flames of female Jewish life. She is at once a real identity marker and an imagined stereotype. Like most cultural constructs that tell women how to be, her image can be freeing and oppressive at the same time.

As a philosophy, JAP style prioritizes grooming, trepidatious trendiness, and comfort. In any given season, the components of the look are drawn from a subset of mainstream fashion trends. “She buys in multiples (almost hysterically in multiples),” wrote Julie Baumgold in a 1971 New York magazine op-ed. “She has safe tastes, choosing an item like shorts when it is peaking.” JAP style is less concerned with capital-F fashion than it is with simply replicating itself.

Starting in the 1950s, JAPs favored “caches of **cashmere** and charm bracelets and pleated shirts and Pappagallos to match,” writes Baumgold. By the ’80s, according to ***The Official J.A.P. Handbook***, they’d moved on to inside-out mauve sweatshirts, leather hobo bags, and Calvin Klein jeans. Broadly speaking, across time and generations, JAPs favor loungewear and matchy-matchy sets. They wear low-maintenance clothes in high-maintenance ways, draping themselves in elevated basics, and raising them further with flat-ironed hair and workaday pieces from luxury brands (think: nylon Prada backpacks and Cartier Love bangles).

Like all the most successful slurs, the term embodies both descriptive power and judgment. (The word bears no relation to the **anti-Japanese slur**.) When JAP is utilized in its Jew-on-Jew sense — by leaps and bounds its most common application — it can serve as a means of impartial description, as well as a tool for policing other Jews. (See: “White ripped denim is the JAP look of the moment” versus “We bought a house in Westchester because Long Island was such an unbearable JAP scene!”)

If one ever self-identifies as a JAP, it is usually only temporarily, or in jest. (Filling a cart with \$30 Kérastase shampoo: “Oh, my god, I’m such a JAP!”)

JAP is rarely used outside the Jewish world — only by goyim in very Jewish cities, and

usually playfully so. A second-degree ethnic slur, it is far too acute to be useful in places where people don't know many actual Jews. On those milk-and-meat main streets, Jews don't have midlevel designer handbags or custom window treatments; **they have horns**. There, the top-level pejorative is "Jew."

Still, to endeavor to write about the JAP feels, in some way, like a risky proposition — a boon to the rising class of anti-Semites and their claims about "globalist Jews" and Jewish money. Why pick now to salt an old wound? But the JAP, as a figure, is a paragon of nuance, as complex as the Jewishness and womanhood she draws from.

At worst, she is the **dybbuk** of the upwardly mobile, the **ever-haunting spirit** of the Jewish nouveau riche as it tries to find its place in the American class system. At best, she performs her own kind of Jewish drag, reclaiming the anti-Semitic tropes of yore as a positive ideal of Jewish womanhood. I see her as a queen of multitudinous existence.

The history of the JAP is a story of success through failure. It begins outside the United States, with an unkind ferment of older stereotypes: the non-Christian other, the **money-lending Shylock**, the petty bourgeois European **nebbish**. Over the span of about 100 years, Ashkenazi Jews — Jews from Central and Eastern Europe, who comprise the **vast majority** of today's global Jewish population — made their way **to the United States**, first with a wave of 19th-century migrants from German lands, then with the turn-of-the-century Eastern Europeans, then with those of the interwar period, and finally with the postwar Holocaust survivors.

Most of the Jews who came before World War II found themselves in working-class jobs, especially in the garment industry. In their spare time, like many other immigrant groups, they undertook the project of **becoming white**, shaping in the process their own funhouse vision of the American dream. This assimilation process involved Borscht Belt comedy, marinating chicken in dehydrated soup, and shipping upstate to the resorts of the Catskills to practice the habits of the American leisure class. (***The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel*** provides a particularly charismatic depiction of the age.)

My family history on my mom's side follows this rough trajectory. My great-great-

grandparents Elizabeth and Meyer Prager came to Philadelphia from Poland in the first decade of the 1900s. Meyer made a living selling papers from a newsstand at the corner of 13th and Market. Their daughter Jessie was born in 1916 and went on to marry Irving Buckrinsky, a teacher who changed his last name to Buck and soon after entered the real estate business.

My maternal grandmother was born in the early 1940s, under the same moon as a boom in pop culture, GI Bill funding for college educations, and a new designation called the “teenager.” She married the same year as her high school graduation and moved into an apartment in the Rhawnhurst part of Philly, paying \$90 per month in rent, plus an extra \$2.50 for the closet. My grandfather joined in the real estate business, just as waves of other Jews began to make their own white-collar ascents. Out of this tumult of class reorganization came a Jewish American mass culture.

THE JAP WAS A WOMAN WHO HAD OVERSHOT THE MARK, PILING ON THE TRAPPINGS OF THE STABLE MIDDLE CLASS LIKE SO MANY DIAMOND TENNIS BRACELETS

The Jewish novelists of the midcentury — men like Philip Roth, Saul Bellow, and J.D. Salinger — were stewards of a new Jewish American literary canon, replete with its own set of archetypes and tropes. The first was the Jewish mother figure. Consumed by her nagging, overbearing affectations, the **Jewish mother** was to blame for the persistent woes of the Jewish American male — his anxiety, his neuroticism, his own assimilation failures. Her image was designed to absorb the stigmas of the old world.

Her inverse, the JAP, was entitled and withholding, designed to take blame for the stigmas of the new. If the WASP still saw the Jewish man as nouveau riche — even after so much Americanization — then surely there must have been a third party to blame. The JAP was a woman who had overshot the mark, piling on the trappings of the stable middle class like so many diamond tennis bracelets. And so, as Eve was formed from Adam, yet another negative image of women was born from man’s insecurity about himself.

Early written records of the JAP appear first in Herman Wouk's 1955 novel *Marjorie Morningstar*, and then, more famously, in Philip Roth's 1959 novella *Goodbye, Columbus*. In *Goodbye, Columbus*, narrator Neil Klugman is a working-class Jew living with his aunt and uncle in Newark, New Jersey. He meets love interest Brenda Patimkin at the pool at Green Lane Country Club.

Patimkin, of tony, suburban Short Hills, is the nose-jobbed, Radcliffe-educated ideal of a Jewish American woman. Emotionally strategic and materially demanding, she leads a life of domesticated excess, indulging in all the "gold dinnerware, sporting-goods trees, nectarines, garbage disposals, [and] bumpless noses" that daddy's money can buy.

As she gets to know Klugman, she engages in sex to speed the transition from provided-for daughter to provided-for wife. Klugman, for his part, resents these expectations as much as he resents his inability to meet them.

Though Roth did not coin the phrase JAP, he did set the baseline from which she would evolve. In these early years, the JAP was first known as the Jewish Princess, or JP. Her existence said more about Jewish male insecurity than the actual inner lives of Jewish women.

In the eyes of men, she represented one thing; due to the inequities of cultural production, we don't know much about what she meant to women. In any case, in this first iteration, the JAP was defined by her sexual manipulation and acquisitiveness.

Depending on what you had and what she wanted, she might decide to put out, or not.

This dynamic was explained by two nice Jewish boys on a **1970 episode of *The David Susskind Show***:

DAVID STEINBERG: Well, the JP is the daughter that's been spoiled and brought up by the parents and they never quite get out of it, and they expect their husbands to cater to them in the same way that their mother and father did.

MEL BROOKS: It's codified. If you meet a Jewish girl and you shake her hand, that's dinner. You owe her a dinner. If you should take her home after dinner and rub around and kiss in the doorway, right. That's already a small ring, a ruby or something. If, God forbid, anything filthy should happen amongst you, that's marriage and the same grave. You're buried together, screwed into the earth together. They do expect a lot for a little fooling around.

A notable JAP of this formative age was the big-nosed, big-haired “Baby” Jane Holzer. A Warhol muse and the daughter of a Florida real estate investor, she **described her look** to Tom Wolfe as “just 1964 Jewish.”

The 1970s saw the rise of Barbra Streisand, a nasal-voiced, ugly-pretty **icon** for Jewish divas to come. By then, the public image of the JAP had expanded to include a full syndrome of tastes and behaviors. Sexual manipulation was eclipsed by an unfettered fetish for “daddy’s money,” or sometimes, the hubby’s credit card.

By the '70s, Jews were well integrated into the wide-wale corduroy fabric of American suburban life. If not fully “white,” then at least they’d become white enough for white flight. My grandparents moved to a detached house in Huntingdon Valley, Pennsylvania, and stocked it with three kids, three Persian cats, and a live-in maid to rake the shag carpets. They bought a boat. Like many upper-middle-class women of the time, my grandmother didn’t work; now she works as a receptionist at an allergist’s office. As she puts it, “Before my divorce, I was a Jewish American Princess. Now I’m just regular Jewish.”

As Jews continued to move up the ladder, the schedule of Jewish life cycle events offered new opportunities for Manischewitz pissing contests. The bat mitzvah, a ritual transition to adulthood, quickly became its own ritual display of wealth, demanding hand-calligraphed invitations, passed hors d’oeuvres, disc jockeys, and multiple outfit changes for the bat mitzvah girl (and her mother).

On the one hand, these expenditures proclaimed success in the American class system. On the other, so much flagrant consumption amounted to a kind of cheap caricature. The JAP transcended her literary roots to claim a new place in the popular discourse. This rise is evidenced in the **jokelore of the era**:

How many JAPs does it take to change a light bulb? One to pour the Diet Pepsi, and one to call daddy.

What does a JAP make for dinner? Reservations.

What's a JAP's favorite position? Facing Neiman Marcus.

How do you know when a JAP has an orgasm? She drops her nail file.

The Official J.A.P Handbook by Anna Sequoia was published in 1982, a Semitic response to the wildly popular WASP liturgy known as ***The Official Preppy Handbook***. The parody begins in a shtetl in Russo-Poland, where a Jewish mother dreams to herself, “Someday my daughters, and my daughters’ daughters, will wear Calvins, and live in a house with central air-conditioning.”

From there, the *J.A.P. Handbook* — which is marvelously and cheaply **available on used book sites** — presents a masterful birth-to-death exegesis on all things JAP, including JAP names (Rachel, Jamie), JAP colleges (American University), JAP pastimes (skiing, Quaaludes, going to the hairdresser), JAP illnesses (anorexia, dysmenorrhea), JAP hospitals (New York’s Mount Sinai), and, most importantly, JAP brands (Mercedes, Rolex, Fiorucci, Neiman Marcus, Filene’s, Paul Stuart, Calphalon, Cuisinart, K-Y, Rossignol, Adidas, Tic-Tac, and Harvard).

Toward the end of the decade, the JAP caught her biggest break yet in 1987’s *Dirty Dancing* — not as the Peace Corps-bound, corner-averse Baby, but rather her uptight sister Lisa Houseman. The following year, an article in the Washington Post detailed a spate of real-life **“JAP-baiting” incidents**. At the University of Maryland, an ad for housing had warned “NO JAPS.” At George Washington University, students were reprimanded for a talent show trivia sketch called “JAPoordy.”

The Jewish feminist magazine *Lilith* ran a special issue on the trend. In **one analysis**, writer Sherry Chayat describes the caricature of the JAP as pouting, complaining, cajoling, and manipulating, with an “oversized Benetton sweater” and “skinny pants tucked into bulky socks and high-top Reeboks.”

To explain why this look might be subject to disapproval, she cites a study from an academic journal on verbal abuse: “Like the gays and feminists, as long as they kept quiet, Jews were O.K. When Jews become more obvious, when they deviate from the ‘norm,’ they’re seen as obnoxious.” Such judgments, she noted, could be equally found

in the mouths of Jewish and gentile haters.

Throughout these JAP debates of the late 1980s, my parents were students at George Washington University. My dad was a brother in the Jewish fraternity ZBT, and my mom rushed the sorority Sigma Delta Tau, which some joked stood for “Spending Daddy’s Trillions.” They met at a frat party and were married in 1990, in a taffeta-heavy wedding planned almost entirely by my (not-always-underbearing) grandmother. I was born on New Year’s Day 1992.

The first years of my life were spent in a new construction townhouse in Feasterville, Pennsylvania, a second-tier JAP suburb about 45 minutes from Philadelphia. The nearest first-tier JAP suburb, the unincorporated community of Holland, was only one zip code away. When my parents first went to look at the house, the agent had called the address Lower Holland. Only after the papers had been signed did they learn that “Lower Holland” was a made-up designation. Irrespective of this fact, our neighbors were still Jews.

IN THOSE FIRST FAILED EXPERIMENTS WITH FEMININITY, JAP STYLE OFFERED AN ACCESSIBLE SCRIPT

Our house had been the developer’s model home and so came pre-furnished in the home decor of the day, which might best be described as *Flashdance* meets Washington Redskins-style racism. It was there, among the plaster cacti and the pink-and-mint urns of the American Southwest, that I celebrated my first few Hanukkahs. My brother was born in 1995 and circumcised in the living room, under an airbrushed painting of a Navajo woman. We went to temple preschool and day camp in the summer. I didn’t know anyone who celebrated Christmas.

In her 1971 New York magazine op-ed, Julie Baumgold explains how the image of the JAP is enshrined through a pipeline of Jewish institutions. She describes Jewish life as a pinball game, a pleasant cycle of recapitulation, handed down with only minor variations:

Once that princess pinball was whacked out of her slot, she hit the top of the board and tumbled down, hole to hole — the schools, the Houses of Worship, the Junior Holiday and Varieties, the Blind

Dance, the camps, the tour of California, the tour to Europe, the college, the marriage, then — thwock — out comes a new princess-pinball and she drops into the last hole and people rub their eyes a few times at Riverside Memorial.

If we had not moved from that Feasterville house, I imagine my life might have followed this path. But in 1998, my mom got a new job teaching third grade in a barely Jewish farm town on the Delaware River. We moved into a new construction, single-family home on a cul de sac in Doylestown, Pennsylvania — a step in the direction of the upper middle class, but two steps back from Zion. Our new temple, with the heavy-handed name of Temple Judea, was a motley agglomeration of about 200 Jewish families, led into hostile territory by jobs at the nearby Merck corporate campus. In school, I could count the other Jews on one hand. There were never enough to sustain a JAP contingent.

At age 8, I was sent off to sleepaway camp, where I roomed with a cabin of other Jewish girls. The **Jewish camping movement** is a hybrid outgrowth of a slew of Jewish cultural projects: urban social and moral reform, Zionist education, denominational training, and the general acculturation to American-style leisure. In modern times, these camps have come to serve as a stabilizing force in a diffuse diaspora, forging links between far-flung Jewish communities and facilitating a fun, if not aggressively gendered, form of Jewish socialization.

At camp, the infallible Sophie Bernstein and I spent hours straightening each other's hair with a tool of totemic importance: the \$200 Chi ceramic flat iron. (Burnt hair will always be the smell of adolescence.) There, I learned what a blow job was, how to do a smoky eye, and that one could only be counted as fat if one's tummy stuck out farther than one's boobs. For me, this folk knowledge brought both comfort and distress. At 12, I yearned to be any kind of normal. In those first failed experiments with femininity, JAP style offered an accessible script.

Like the JAPs that came before, the JAPs I came to know in the mid-aughts preferred a semi-arbitrary assortment of normative status symbols: the Coach wristlet, the Tiffany heart tag bracelet, the Hard Tail or So Low fold-over pants, the Seven for All Mankind

jeans. There were also camp-specific JAP artifacts, like Softe gym shorts (pronounced “saw-fees”), Floatee flip-flops (made from pool-float material), and the Undeiband (a headband that was meant to resemble an underwear waistband).

For me, finding ways to obtain these items felt more like a matter of survival than self-expression. When at last I achieved the velour Juicy sweatsuit, it felt like a kind of teen enfranchisement. My sweatsuit was black, with the classic J-shaped zipper pull. Putting it on in front of the mirror, I admired the plane of my latke-flat ass, emblazoned with the oxymoronic phrase “Juicy.” In those early years of identity formation, Juicy held a space for my future sense of self.

With the ascendance of Juicy Couture, JAP style was finally dictating the mainstream. The brand was founded in 1997 by Pamela Skaist-Levy and Gela Nash-Taylor, two California Jews who were **mythologized** on their sweatsuits’ tags as simply “Pam and Gela.” At first, Juicy had one core product: the two-piece unit of leisurewear, which retailed for around \$100 per piece. The outfit was beloved by Jews and goyim alike — notably **Madonna**, circa her studying Kabbalah (that is, Jewish mysticism) phase.

Like the image of the JAP herself, Juicy was both sexy and casually withholding. Later, the brand would release T-shirts, emblazoned with mall-rat empowerment slogans like “Juicy Couture for Nice Girls Who Like Stuff.” In some of these slogans, the word “Juicy” behaved as a kind of indirect synonym for Jewish, as in “Juicy American Princess,” or “Everyone Loves a Juicy Girl,” a take on the popular **ethnic pride T-shirts of the time**.

The first-wave JAPs had certainly been flashy, but Juicy Couture embodied these ideals with a tone of winking self-awareness. Leaving behind its faux pas past, nouveau riche had become a status symbol.

But like the Second Temple itself, all holy things must eventually turn to dust. By September of my seventh-grade year, Juicy Couture had begun to appear at discount stores like Saks Off Fifth. After eighth grade, I stopped going to camp and spent subsequent years leaving JAPdom behind, moving first toward an impossible mode of WASP beauty, then in the direction of agnostic subcultural fads like “indie” and “scene.”

This is not the case for every JAP. Adult JAPs are found in all realms — real estate,

dermatology, law, child-rearing. New JAPs enter the world every day.

In 2014, Juicy Couture began **to shutter** its retail outlets. That was the year I graduated college and started to embrace other Jewish ideals: the 19th-century Freudian neurotic; the effete coastal homosexual; the communist, reptilian enemy of the state. Those experiments continue, in some form, to this day.

Yiddish has the phrase *shanda fur die goyim* to describe a Jew who misbehaves in places and ways that gentiles can see. Somehow foreign words make space for the tangled-up parts of diaspora living. But JAP is a tiny American coinage, a kind of linguistic Coach wristlet, if you will. For its relative size, it holds quite a lot: millennia of persecution, centuries of adaptation, the whole of the Western sexist tradition, and a landfill somewhere, filled with velour. ■

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