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## The 20th century was very good for these Jewish icons. Is the Golden Age really over?

Mel Brooks, Betty Friedan, Norman Mailer and Leonard Bernstein are the “unruly” subjects of David Denby’s “Eminent Jews.”

[Andrew Silow-Carroll](#) May 11, 2025



Betty Friedan, Leonard Bernstein, Norman Mailer and Mel Brooks are the subjects of the group biography, "Eminent Jews." (Images via Wikipedia)

Has David Denby written about an American Jewish golden age precisely at the moment it is ending?

In his new book “Eminent Jews,” Denby celebrates four leading Jewish cultural figures who emerged in the middle of the 20th century: Mel Brooks, Betty Friedan, Norman Mailer and Leonard Bernstein. All four were born after World War I and came of age after World War II; all four were secular Jews who took full advantage of the prosperity, tolerance, ambition and explosion of new media that helped turn their era into what the historian [Yuri Slezkine](#) calls the “Jewish century.”

Part biographer, part cultural critic, Denby calls the book a “group portrait of unruly Jews living in freedom.” Whether it was Brooks demolishing notions of good taste with a mocking

musical about Hitler, or Bernstein sternly lecturing the Vienna Philharmonic for not appreciating Austria's native son, the Jewish-born composer Gustav Mahler, Denby describes how his subjects overcame centuries of Jewish insecurity to assert themselves as society's prophets, scolds, satirists and teachers.

"This is what it was like for Jews to express themselves with the degree of freedom, for good or for ill, that they never had before," Denby, the longtime film critic for New York Magazine and later The New Yorker, said in an interview.

Hanging over each of the profiles, however, is the question of whether the American Jewish moment has waned. In an epilogue, Denby writes, "There was a period in the fifties, sixties, and seventies when American culture seemed almost Jewish." Contrast that with his preface, in which he warns about resurgent antisemitism and the right's flirtation with autocracy: "The death of democracy would almost certainly mean trouble for the Jews (as well as for everyone else), a minority protected in America by laws, customs, and sentiment."

From the Ivy Leagues to publishing to the national discourse, others are lamenting that a period of astounding Jewish influence and physical and emotional security has come and gone.

Denby, 81, himself came of age when all four of his subjects were at the peak of their fame and influence. As a teenager he attended a performance of a Mahler symphony, conducted by Bernstein, that he calls life-changing. He [profiled Mailer for The New Yorker in 1998](#), when the pugilistic novelist and "new" journalist was an almost tamed lion in winter. Denby was able to interview Brooks a number of times during the writing of the book, asking the now 99-year-old comic and director if he agreed with Denby's interpretation of the "Inquisition" musical number from Brooks' "History of the World Part I." (More on that in a bit.)

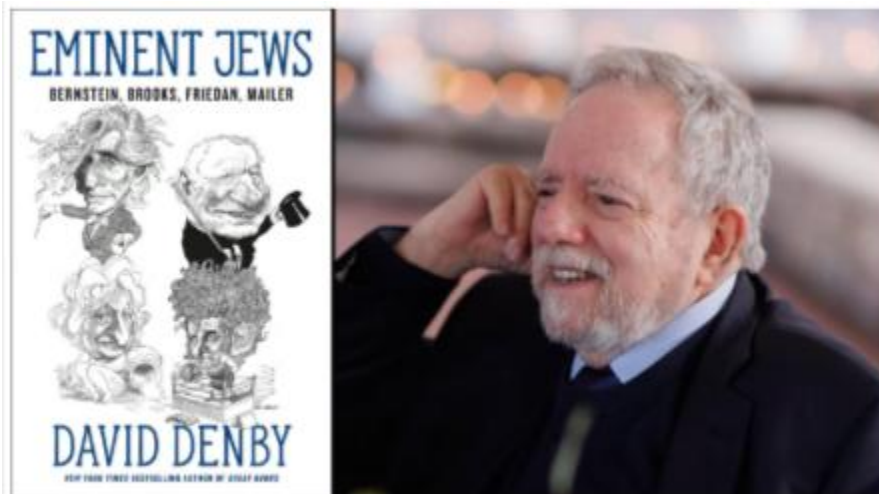
As for Friedan, Denby was 30 or so — an "unawakened male chauvinist" — when he read Friedan's groundbreaking "The Feminine Mystique," published 11 years earlier, which gave voice to frustrated suburban women who were mostly valued as homemakers, mothers and consumers.

For each of his subjects, Denby identifies the Jewish energies and values that they embody, consciously or not. Brooks smuggled the exuberance of the Yiddish theater into the American mainstream; in his 2000 Year Old Man character, he portrays "the ultimate diasporic Jew," a curator of tribal memory. Friedan brought something of the Jewish prophet and liberator into her role as the founding mother of [second-wave feminism](#), as she herself once boasted: "I would not be the first in the history of the Jews to play the role of a

visionary or a prophet, a female Moses leading women out of the wilderness,” she said in 1987.

In Denby’s telling, Bernstein’s is the most complex and nuanced Jewish identity: The conductor and composer shared the liberal politics and Zionism of so many of his generation’s Jews, along with an outsider’s ambition to storm the gates, the self-criticism that is a byproduct of Jewish guilt, and, perhaps above all, a “rabbinical desire to teach anyone who would listen.”

Even Mailer, who in a long career almost never wrote about his upbringing as a Brooklyn Jew and seemed to have run headlong from whatever was expected of a “nice Jewish boy” — sobriety, fidelity, conformity — was distinctly Jewish in his rebellions. (Denby unpacks the notorious, and to many unforgivable, incident when Mailer stabbed and nearly killed the second of his six (!) wives in a drunken rage.) “A psychoanalyst would say,” writes Denby, “that by fighting middle-class Jewish habits so hard, he was in his way reaffirming them.”



David Denby calls his new book a “group portrait of unruly Jews living in freedom.” (Henry Holt and Company; Courtesy)

Denby describes the factors that made this Jewish expressiveness and astounding fame and influence possible. Children of immigrants who had gotten a toe-hold in the middle class raised their expectations for their children. (Denby, who grew up in Manhattan and got his degrees from Columbia University, writes that it never occurred to his second-generation parents that he would follow them into the garment business.) After the Holocaust, antisemitism began to fade as an impediment to Jewish ambition. By 1956, he writes, quoting the economist Simon Kutznets, the income for Jewish families was about 20% higher than the U.S. median.

Denby also writes about new media that brought his four subjects unthinkably large audiences: television, the long-playing record and the mass-market paperback book.

Economics, technology and freedom met with a distinct Jewish sensibility. “There’s nothing more acrid in Jewish manners or more contemptible than someone who has wasted his life, particularly someone with gifts,” said Denby. “There was a kind of cultural impatience derived from Jewish history and liberated by America.”

But considering that three of his four subjects are long dead and Brooks is nearly a centenarian, there is something elegiac and nostalgic about “Eminent Jews” — not unlike [“History of the World, Part II,”](#) the TV series produced by Brooks, and [“Maestro,” the Bernstein biopic](#), which both came out in 2023.

Denby’s book arrives as a new wave of antisemitism — from the right and the left — has unsettled Jews and left them doubting the security they took for granted. On the left that was these four figures’ milieu, Israel has gone from being a darling to a pariah. Jews are still overrepresented in the arts, politics and academia, but there is a sense that they aren’t as prominent as they were in the days of the New York Intellectuals — the mid-century tribe of mostly Jewish writers and critics — and the Jewish giants (Bernstein among them) who dominated Broadway.

Observers have lamented [a dip in Jewish enrollment at the Ivies](#). In 1967, shortly after the abolition of antisemitic quotas, [JTA reported that the student bodies at Columbia University and the University of Pennsylvania were 40% Jewish](#), while those at Dartmouth, Princeton and Brown hovered between 13 and 20%. In 2023, Hillel reported that Jewish enrollment at Columbia was 22.5% and at Penn 16.5%. That same year, Princeton’s student body was 9.3% Jewish and Dartmouth’s was 8.8% (Brown even rose a bit to 23.9%).

Those are still estimable percentages for a tiny minority, but combined with [falling Jewish achievement in high school science competitions like the Regeneron Science Talent Search \(formerly known as the Westinghouse Science Talent Search\) and the Physics Olympiad](#), they have some observers lamenting that the Jewish century is over.

On May 18, [the Center for Jewish History in New York will host a day-long symposium, “The End of an Era? Jews and Elite Universities.”](#) Its website says the event was inspired by “the recent surge of antisemitism on American college campuses,” referring to the backlash against Israel and Zionists, especially after Oct. 7, 2023. “I’ve watched the rise — and now the erosion — of a historic bond between American Jews and the universities they helped shape,” Martin Peretz, the symposium chair and the ardently pro-Israel former publisher of The New Republic, said in a news release.

In an Atlantic essay last year, "[The Golden Age of American Jews Is Ending](#)," Franklin Foer argued that Jews are no longer enjoying an "unprecedented period of safety, prosperity, and political influence." Instead, he writes, the "Golden Age of American Jewry has given way to a golden age of conspiracy, reckless hyperbole, and political violence, all tendencies inimical to the democratic temperament. Extremist thought and mob behavior have never been good for Jews."

And it's not just pro-Israel hawks and liberal centrists who see signs of Jewish decline. Peter Beinart, writing from the perspective of a Jewish left that is challenging the very premises of Zionism, argues that Jews who support right-wing figures because they are more pro-Israel than those on the left are complicit in undermining the open societies in which Jews have flourished. "We don't have to ally with MAGA thugs because racists are Israel's most reliable friends," he writes in a new book, "Being Jewish After the Destruction of Gaza."

Others are writing about the Golden Age in ways that draw a stark distinction between the epic Jewish and immigrant energies of the last century and the inevitable complacency and self-satisfaction of this one.

Last month, in the New York Review of Books, feminist writer Vivian Gornick, 89, wrote of her time at [the City College of New York, when it was an engine of Jewish working class and middle-class achievement](#). The Jewish students at City College were "in fact no more intellectually gifted than the sons [and after 1951, the daughters] of any of the other immigrant cultures," she writes. "They were, however, famously the progeny of a culture that characterized itself as the People of the Book, fiercely motivated by an inherited reverence for learning coupled with a passion for either getting on in the world or changing

the world.”



Leonard Bernstein conducting a rehearsal in one of the “barns” at Tanglewood Music Center in Western Massachusetts. (BSO Press Office)

Similarly, literary scholar Ruth Wisse, in [a lively online class on the New York Intellectuals that she has been teaching for the conservative Tikvah Fund](#), seems to quietly lament what America, and its Jewish community, has become. “By the 1940s Jews were not only writing the patriotic songs of America and making Christmas movies, but definitively interpreting America to itself... and interpreting Jewishness to themselves as well,” she says in the course introduction. “It was a very exciting time in our intellectual life, and we will see how it evolved, and also we will think about whether we can ever hope to see its likes again.”

Denby thinks it is too soon to draw such conclusions, and notes that Jews, who make up 2.4% of America’s population, still have “an extraordinary influence on economics, politics, on the public discourse.” Some of that influence, he notes, may not even be something they desire: He worries that the Trump administration’s battle with universities, with the stated aim of fighting antisemitism, is turning the Jews into the “heavies” in the culture wars.

He also wonders what his three deceased subjects would have made of Donald Trump — especially Mailer, who found his own voice covering the political upheavals of the 1960s and who, Denby writes, anticipated “the great divide between rural and urban America, between the aggrieved and the elite.”

Denby is confident that Jews will continue to flourish, especially if they heed the lessons of Mel Brooks. Denby suggests (and got Brooks to agree) that the “Inquisition” skit — in which the torture of Spanish Jews is staged as a Hollywood musical comedy — has an implicit

message: Despite the suffering they endured, Jews need to put aside their fears and self-pity and forge ahead.

“If the book has a message, it is, ‘be not afraid.’ These four were not afraid of anything,” said Denby. “It might not be the Golden Age the way it was in the ‘60s and ‘70s, but I would not underestimate the amount of strength in the Jewish community.”