

S A P I R

A quarterly journal of ideas for a thriving Jewish future

VOLUME EIGHT_WINTER 2023

‘A Swinging Bunch of People’ No Longer

When and how did Judaism change from Sammy Davis Jr.’s cool to Kanye’s antisemitism?

By JOHN PODHORETZ

In the late 1950s, there was no one cooler than Sammy Davis Jr. That may seem hard to fathom for those of us who grew up during or after the revolutionary social and cultural changes of the 1960s, which made Davis’s greased hair, shiny clothes, and ring-a-ding-ding mannerisms seem dated and cringe-inducing. But Davis was, in the estimation of nearly everyone who saw him perform in person, the most talented entertainer anyone had ever seen — a singer with a gorgeous voice, a dancer of genius, and a mimic whose impersonations of other celebrities were uncanny. All that, and a certain indefinable sangfroid that peeked through even as Davis was thirsting for love and approval, gave him remarkable cachet.

Davis also became, in 1961, one of the most famous converts to Judaism in American history, if not the history of the world. And he was hardly the only celebrity convert to make headlines. Elizabeth Taylor, maybe the biggest female star of the day and perhaps of all time, had converted in 1959 between her marriages to the impresario Michael Todd — the son of an Orthodox rabbi who died in a plane crash only a year into their happy coupling — and the Catskills crooner Eddie Fisher, whose big hit was “My Yiddishe Mama.”

Taylor had herself been preceded into Judaism by Marilyn Monroe, who converted in 1956. Monroe did so upon marrying the playwright Arthur Miller, who actually cared little for his Jewish heritage and explicitly turned away from writing about Jews in 1948. But the people Monroe trusted the most in the world were Jews like

Miller — her acting teachers Lee and Paula Strasberg in particular — and she felt comforted by the religion.

It goes without saying that none of them would have dared or bothered or sought conversion if it had been inimical to their career interests, since for all three, career interests were paramount. Three generations later, we American Jews find ourselves facing a new cultural model of antisemitism. There's an argument to be made that Kanye West is a 21st-century version of Sammy Davis Jr., but while Davis joined The Chosen, West has become the most nakedly antisemitic cultural figure we've seen in American public life in a dog's age.

Sammy Davis Jr. was attracted to Judaism; West has been seduced by the oldest and most enduring hatred on earth. Why? For one thing, West may be mentally ill, while Davis most definitely was not. But West is also fashion-forward, as Davis was, and fashion-forward people have some sort of internal barometer that keeps them from going outside a boundary they cannot cross back from. That barometer helped guide West to the conclusion that he would not be in danger of seeming culturally off by expressing vile sentiments about Jewish doctors, among others. He might lose endorsements and become a font of scandal, but he wouldn't be uncool.

But for Davis, cool was his brand, and that brand was somehow enhanced by choosing Chosenness. Jews, he said, were “a swinging bunch of people.” So what was it about Judaism 60 years ago that made the Jewish people swing? And is that allure from long ago reproducible today, when Jews face a new cultural model of antisemitism? Can the old cool become the new cool? And would we want it to?

There was something culturally unprecedented about the rising status of Jewry in the period after the Second World War. Increasing Jewish success in America was an annunciation of a kind — a declaration that, especially in the wake of the

Holocaust, this remnant of a nearly destroyed civilization-within-Western-civilization would flourish in America not only as a resounding refutation of Hitler's evil designs but also as a mark of this country's goodness and charity in having fought and won the war that saved them. The hunger to contribute to the American storehouse of riches helped drive Jews to great heights. American Jewish novelists took center stage, and Jewish artists moved to the forefront of American culture — as orchestra conductors, musicians, poets, painters. But this astonishing set of achievements wasn't instantaneous. It had been built on a foundation of a half-century of quieter successes.

From the beginning of the 20th century, Jews had punched above their weight wherever they could in America, in areas such as the law and medicine. More important, they had been entrepreneurial in new industries that the old order overlooked and in which they could therefore circumvent the structural antisemitism of the older professions — in particular, the new media that took root in the motion-picture industry and in radio and television. A classic story: In 1912, a 23-year-old kid with a thick Yiddish accent named David Sarnoff was working for the Marconi Wireless Telegraph Company when messages began coming in about the disaster on the *Titanic*. It was one of the first worldwide news events unfolding in real time, and Sarnoff foresaw the future of global communications in that instant. He was there as the guiding hand over the next 15 years while Marconi morphed into RCA and then into NBC.

Whatever we are and whatever we can be, we cannot be cool. Cool has a transgressive aspect, and Jews are the ultimate A students who want to please the teacher and get in good with the administration.

It was on Sarnoff's national network, NBC Radio, that a writer and performer named Gertrude Berg created a program eventually called "The Goldbergs." It was a show about a Jewish family in the Bronx that ran daily for two decades and did as much to provide a positive image of the Jewish people for non-Jews in its time as *The Cosby Show* did in the 1980s in showing Americans what an upper-middle-class black family looked like — thereby setting the stage a generation later for the rise of Barack Obama.

Through the first half of the 20th century, then, Jews were on the rise, with many Jews involved in building the entertainment industry and mass media from scratch — in part, as I said, because there were no barriers to entry as there were almost everywhere else. They were strivers looking for ways around locked doors, and they found interior resources to chart innovative paths from a rich cultural tradition that privileged brains over brawn. But while they were rising, they were still on the outside looking in.

So this duality — uncommon success without elevated social standing — made Jews seem admirable examples of an American ideal. They were self-made men,

and if they could do it despite their social handicaps, maybe everyone else could, too. They knew something valuable, and that something valuable came from the thing that made them different — their Jewishness, their Judaism. And the difference remained the point, as well as a spur to the resentment Jews could incur.

According to her friend Paula Strasberg, Marilyn Monroe said, “I can identify with the Jews. Everybody’s out to get them, no matter what, just like me.” Elizabeth Taylor told her biographer Kitty Kelley, “I felt terribly sorry for the suffering of the Jews during the war. I was attracted to their heritage. I guess I identified with them as underdogs.” And Davis told Mike Wallace in an hour-long interview that Jews and blacks had similar histories as oppressed people who found means to overcome adversity. In 1948, in *Commentary*, James Baldwin described a Sunday service in which a Harlem preacher condemned the Jews for denying Christ and said they deserved the suffering that has been their lot. The strange effect of his condemnation on his African-American congregation: “Though the notion of the suffering is based on the image of the wandering, exiled Jew, the context changes imperceptibly, to become a fairly obvious reminder of the trials of the Negro, while the sins recounted are the sins of the American republic. At this point, the Negro identifies himself almost wholly with the Jew.”

We need to capitalize on the century of Jewish-American achievement as a form of cultural self-defense—and use, on our own behalf, the very power the West and others are so disgusted by.

These three celebrity conversions took place just before the barriers to entry against Jewish participation in the most elite American institutions came crashing down. The Ivy Leagues lifted their quotas on Jewish admission. Law firms and brokerages and banks and corporations became hospitable to Jewish professionals. Jewish presence and participation in all walks of American life are now taken almost entirely for granted — and when Gentile celebrities today convert upon marrying Jewish spouses or promise to raise their kids as Jews, it's a matter only of delighted note to pop-culture-mad Jews happy to claim Zooey Deschanel or Michelle Williams or Quentin Tarantino as one of our own.

Which means that secular or mildly observant Jews can no longer claim to be outsiders in American culture. We may not have our Christmas mornings booked, and we may not paint Easter eggs, but we are not on the sidelines any longer. In fact, as shown in the disgraceful lack of Jewish participation in the lawsuits targeting the new Ivy League discrimination against Asians — a recapitulation in almost every respect of the barriers put up against us once upon a time — many Jews are themselves now beneficiaries of the ancillary boons that come from

generations of elite education and professional networking, boons that they do not wish to sacrifice.

Therefore, whatever we are and whatever we can be, we cannot be cool. Cool has a transgressive aspect, and Jews are the ultimate A students who want to please the teacher and get in good with the administration. Nor can we hope to win over the likes of West with efforts to convince him that Jews also have a history of oppression, and that Jews today are under a new kind of threat — a threat that he himself represents in part. Indeed, West’s own conduct shows how potentially double-edged the undeniable Jewish success in non-Jewish America might be in the long term. Throughout history, Jews who have made their mark in Diaspora societies have seen their unexpected prominence used as a weapon against them. America has been different from every other place Jews have lived since the birth of Christ, in no small measure because protections of individual liberty and religious liberty are the country’s foundational writ.

But America is more than just its government. There is a continuity between Kanye West — the billionaire son of a college professor — and a teenage thug on the streets of Brooklyn who comes up behind a Haredi Jew and punches him in the head. They are hearing and responding to cultural whistles inaudible to Americans who live where the transmission frequencies are within recognizable boundaries — just like the supremacists who have shot up three synagogues over three years in Pennsylvania, California, and Texas. That is another difference in the makeup of American culture from what it was three generations ago. Subculture hatreds have a means of organizing themselves as they never have before.

As Dara Horn and others have pointed out, Jews generate particular sympathy from non-Jews when they seem weak, or when they’re killed solely for the crime of being Jewish. There is a strange but alluring temptation, therefore, to lean into the victimization of Jews over the past few years as a means of producing a more favorable atmosphere, the sort that might cause a West to consider conversion

rather than becoming a modern-day mouthpiece for the ideas in *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*.

But this would be exactly the wrong tack to take. For one thing, it would be a disgraceful way to respond to the violence being done to Jews today, and an intellectually indefensible way to instruct young Jews on how to respond to attacks on their identities as Jews. Instead, we need to capitalize on the century of Jewish-American achievement as a form of cultural self-defense — and use, on our own behalf, the very power that the West and others are so disgusted by. Just to offer a few possibilities: Rather than thinking efforts to combat Jew-hatred are best managed by nonprofit organizations excessively concerned with their own internal dynamics, Jews should go subject by subject, building coalitions of interest based on specific issues rather than the nebulous whole of “fighting antisemitism.” Localize things rather than fund nonprofit bureaucracies that do little but pay their staff to take lengthy vacations and participate in diversity, equity, and inclusion conferences.

Ad hoc gatherings of activists and donors at the local level can demand the enforcement of laws in cities where the laws are now being ignored, and demand increased police presence in neighborhoods where Jews are at risk — and do so in the only way that works politically, by threatening politicians with resources spent against them if they fail to do so. When antisemites on college campuses say that Zionists are believers in an oppressive philosophy, take the fight to them by throwing historic Jewish indigeneity in the Holy Land back in their faces — and, again, use the community’s very sizable resources to throw money at this argument.

We don’t need to be cool. We need to be self-confident and angry and unashamed about using whatever power we have accrued to ensure that the demons of history do not emerge here. *