Sephardic Heritage Update

***A collection of current Essays, Articles, Events and Information***
***Impacting our community and our culture***
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“Service is the rent we pay for living. It is the very purpose of life and not something you do in your spare time. Education is improving the lives of others and leaving your community and world better than you found it.” -Marian Wright Edelman

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**Book Review: Matti Friedman’s Profoundly Important Book**

By: Jack Cohen

Spies of No County: Israel’s secret agents at the birth of Israel by Matti Friedman (Algonquin, 2019) is a profoundly important book, for two reasons. First it shines light on a long-neglected subject, the actions of young Jews who were native Arabic-speakers, who came to British Mandatory Palestine to get away from Muslim domination and persecution, and to help the formation of a Jewish State that had not yet come into existence. Some of them were recruited as the Jewish State-to-be’s first spies, they knew Arabic fluently, they knew the culture of the Muslims and they could meld into Arab society and provide the embryonic intelligence apparatus of the Jewish community in Palestine with its first insights into what was really going on in Arab Palestine and those centers of Arab society Beirut, Damascus and Amman. Second for anyone who has delusions of Israeli power (on the right) or of Israel as a colonial power (on the left) it throws a bucket of cold water that must mitigate against such delusions.

These were young men who from personal experience knew deeply that they had no future in the Arab world. Any day, every day, they were insulted and spat upon by Muslim Arabs, they were barely tolerated, and they and their families could be attacked at their home or at their place of work and be dragged out into the street, beaten or killed, without any defense or justice. They were tiny minorities in Damascus, Aleppo, Baghdad, Beirut, and throughout the cities of North Africa (the Maghreb). After more than a thousands years of intolerance among the Muslims, there were barely 1 million from Morocco to Iran, far less than the number of Jews in the Middle East than at the time of the Arab conquest of Jerusalem in 637 ce. In a word these young Jews recognized their powerlessness, and saw in the eternally foretold religious promise of a return to Zion the possible means to redeem themselves and attain some degree of power over their destiny.

The book focuses on four of the 20 or so Arabic-speaking spies that were recruited to form the unit known as the “Black Unit” or the “unit of those who become like Arabs” (expressed in Hebrew by the word “mista’aravim”). They were Gamliel Cohen (alias Yusuf) born Damascus; Isaac Shoshan (alias Abdul Karim) born Aleppo, Syria; Havakuk Cohen (alias Ibrahim) born Yemen; Yakuba Cohen (alias Jamil) born Jerusalem (it is pure coincidence that three of them have the surname ‘Cohen’). Their exploits in Palestine before the State was founded and later in Beirut, Damascus and Amman are detailed in this book from personal memoires and recently declassified Israeli government files. Although they received some training they were essentially amateurs, although their commitment and their risk-taking were beyond question, and they formed the first group of spies that was later to become the Israeli foreign intelligence service, the vaunted Mossad (the Institute). Their main job was to infiltrate into Arab society, learn what was going on and what people were saying and thinking and trace troop movements and weapons caches and report back so that the Jewish leadership was better informed. They also engaged in cases of sabotage, but that was discouraged because their intelligence information was considered to be most valuable.

Their return to Zion coincided with the political movement of Zionism that sprung from the powerlessness of Jews in Christian Europe (that had recently been proven by the Holocaust of WWII). While the British tried to maintain hold of Mandatory Palestine, they came up against the anti-colonialist forces of the Jewish community there (the Yishuv) and were already in retreat soon after WWII ended. Since Britain could no longer maintain control of Palestine, it sent the issue for the UN to decide, and in a vote on Partition of Palestine into Jewish and Arab States on November 29, 1947, resolution 181 was passed. However, the Arab/|Muslim States entirely rejected partition, they wanted it all for themselves, and so they attacked the purported Jewish State immediately after the British withdrew. The Jewish minority (then ca. 650,000), surrounded by hostile Arabs and attacked by the armies of 5 Arab States (Egypt, Syria, Jordan, Lebanon and Iraq) was not expected to survive. The British High Command predicted the Jews would be defeated and massacred, and the Arabs issued blood-curdling statements, such as Fawzi al-Kaukji, Commander of the Arab Liberation Army of Palestine, who said “we will murder, wreck and ruin everything in our way.” Fortunately his army was defeated by a much smaller Jewish force and he was injured, whereupon he retired to Beirut.

One significant section of this book is devoted to what Israel was and currently is. When these young Arab-Jews, known as Mizrachim In Israel (Easterners) first arrived in Jewish Palestine they were a small minority. In effect they were used and patronized by the predominantly European Jewish (Ashkenazi) Zionists. But, with the establishment of Israel the Jews in Arab lands were both forced out by the Arabs and with the help of the fledgling Mossad managed to get to Israel (some 800,000; many of the rest moved from N. Africa to France and the USA). With this influx and their large families they soon became a majority. The tipping point came in 1977 when the “riff-raff” as the Ashkenazi ascendency called them, out-voted the Labour Party that had ruled since Independence, and voted in the right-wing Likud Party of PM Menachem Begin. It can be said that they voted against the liberal-socialists who were forever trying to assuage the Arabs and make peace (for example Defense Minister Moshe Dayan gave control of the Temple Mount to the Muslim Wakf in the expectation that they would show gratitude) and voted in the more realistic and hawkish right because they knew the Arabs better than the Ashkenazim. So Israel moved in a different direction than many of the European Zionist founders expected, with their socialist ideals and their sense of entitlement. For those who criticize Israel as a colonialist endeavor you should accept the fact that more than half of Israel’s population (55%) is descended from people who never left the Middle East, and now 74% of its population have been born in the Middle East, and aren’t going anywhere else.

For those who have seen the popular Israeli series Fauda, you may get a taste of what these Arabic-speaking Jews experienced. But, in Fauda the Duvdevan (cherry) unit goes in and out of the Arab West Bank and Gaza, while the Arabic-speaking Jews in this period were expected to live as Arabs in an Arab society for long periods of time, and without all modern means of communication. Their fate was more like that of Eli Cohen, the most famous Israeli spy, who conned the whole of the Syrian power structure for a long time, but was eventually caught and hung (see The Spy on Netflix). Of those Arabic-speakers who joined the fledgling Jewish intelligence service 8 out of 10 did not survive. They were caught out not by their ability to speak Arabic, but often by their lack of knowledge of Muslim religious customs, saying prayers or how to perform the routine ablutions (wudu). But, they learnt by mistakes and that was taken care of in time by expert training.

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**Jews With Money**

By: Felicia Herman

Nearly 25 years ago, I was one of hundreds of contributors to a massive and impressive new undertaking: Jewish Women in America: An Historical Encyclopedia. The mission was to broaden and deepen the narrative of Jews in America by filling in the longstanding blank spots in the existing historical literature. Edited by women’s history pioneers professors Paula Hyman and Deborah Dash Moore, the encyclopedia, which now lives [online](https://jwa.org/encyclopedia) at the Jewish Women’s Archive, transformed the historical narrative by placing women in their rightful place: in every nook and cranny of Jewish life, expected and unexpected, public and private.

Of the thousand entries, almost a third covered the area of “philanthropy and volunteerism.” Professor Susan Chambre’s overview of the topic explained why this made perfect sense: “Philanthropy has long been a principal vehicle for religious expression for Jewish women ... a separate sphere, an arena in which they can contribute to community life, often serving as a context for exercising influence in the larger community or society. In social settings where Jewish women have been discouraged from active or fulfilling careers in paid jobs, philanthropic work provided them with ‘invisible careers.’”

This understanding of the importance of philanthropy to American Jewish women’s lives, which informed my own graduate school research as well as two decades of work in the field, kept coming back to me as I read Lila Corwin Berman’s long-awaited history of American Jewish philanthropy, The American Jewish Philanthropic Complex: The History of a Multibillion-Dollar Institution.

Astonishingly, the book contains no mention of [Henrietta Szold](https://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/szold-henrietta), [Rosalie Solomons Phillips](https://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/phillips-rosalie-solomons), or any of the countless women, rich and poor alike, who have together given untold billions to [Hadassah](https://www.hadassah.org/about/history) since 1912, making it the largest Jewish women’s organization in the world; nothing about Hannah G. Solomon and the [National Council of Jewish Women](https://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/national-council-of-jewish-women), which predates Hadassah and is still going strong, engaging thousands of women each year in giving and in political advocacy. No consideration of the outsize role played by Jewish women philanthropists and volunteers in synagogues, schools, settlement houses, orphanages, hospitals, organizations for women and girls, and so much more.

Berman also essentially ignores the entire history of women in the Federation system. For example, we learn nothing about the women involved with the UJA Federation of New York as philanthropists and board members since its inception—women like [Alice Davis Menken](https://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/menken-alice-davis), settlement house worker, pioneer in the evolution of treatment of delinquent girls, and founder of the Jewish Board of Guardians; or [Madeline Borg](https://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/borg-madeleine), not only a Federation board member but its first woman president (in 1939) and a founder of the Big Sister movement in America; or any of the plethora of women who served on Federation boards and committees across the country, gaining increasingly public recognition for their work after the 1970s. When she discusses entrepreneurial Jewish philanthropists and foundations that gained prominence in Jewish life in the last 40 years or so, Berman gives us only a handful of men, omitting entirely the many women who have led significant foundations that have invested deeply in American Jewish communal life as well as many other issues around the world: women like [Henrietta Blaustein](https://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/blaustein-henrietta-gittelson), [Florence Melton](https://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/melton-florence-zacks), [Buddy Mayer](https://nathancummings.org/the-nathan-cummings-foundation-remembers-buddy-mayer/) (Cummings), [Mem Bernstein](https://ejewishphilanthropy.com/mem-bernstein-on-passing-the-baton/) (AVI CHAI), [Joy Ungerleider-Mayerson](https://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/ungerleider-mayerson-joy) (Dorot), and [Lynn](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lynn_Schusterman) and [Stacy Schusterman](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stacy_H._Schusterman) (Schusterman Philanthropies).

The lack of almost any numbers in the book is startling, and a clue to understanding its flaws.

Erasing women is only one way that Berman, a professor of American Jewish history at Temple University, distorts the extraordinarily complex and diverse story of American Jewish philanthropy.

For 20 years, I’ve been working in the Jewish philanthropic world, trying to amplify its strengths and address its challenges from within, especially by [expanding access](http://amplifiergiving.org/) to giving for people at all economic levels and by [supporting](http://natan.org/) transformative new initiatives. I’ve developed a profound appreciation for the very people whom Berman has eliminated from her story: the millions of givers, of all economic classes, who have been responsible for building an unparalleled system of American Jewish philanthropy over the centuries. Berman not only leaves out all these people, but also nearly everything that their energy and money has built—nearly every organization in the system—not to mention all of the emotional, psychological, sociological, civic, and religious reasons why givers might choose to devote their precious resources to Jewish communal life in the first place.

The book’s dustjacket and marketing materials promise readers a “comprehensive” history, but what we get instead is a narrow portrait of a handful of extremely rich, often politically conservative male mega-philanthropists, and a tendentious framing of philanthropic history as the solidification of a nefarious “American Jewish philanthropic complex,” echoing the grave threat of the “military-industrial complex” that President Eisenhower warned Americans about in 1961. In Berman’s telling, Jewish philanthropy is just as scary: a system designed primarily to accumulate philanthropic capital; to invest it in financial markets; to avoid taxation on it; and then to use these growing sums to coerce Jews and Americans to follow mainly right-leaning political agendas.

There are indeed many serious problems in the philanthropic sector, as Berman knows, not least because she learned it from the long list of funders and philanthropic professionals whom she interviewed for the book, myself included. Many of her interviewees no doubt told her about the ways funders and professionals wrestle constantly with questions of money, power, and impact; with the challenges facing Jewish communities around the world (including in the State of Israel); and with the need to sustain Jewish communities that are religiously, ethnically, politically, economically, and culturally diverse.

Berman acknowledges none of this. Instead, we get a grim narrative of dangerous top-down power that rhymes neatly with other contemporary explanations of America and the Jews’ place within it, where philanthropy, like many other ecosystems today, is demonized as an elite, Western, neo-colonialist, white, money-laundering charade—one more tool that the powerful use to control society, pacify the powerless, and undemocratically shape public policy around private agendas. In Berman’s version, philanthropy is just another institution of alleged privilege that must be dismantled in the name of justice.

It’s her right to tell the story this way, of course. But I feel an obligation to the millions of people who have built Jewish life in this country—women and men, young and old, right wing and left wing and everything in between—to note the book’s many omissions, inaccuracies, and distortions. As with so much academic work these days, Berman’s book uses the forms and the language of scholarship in the service of activism. It’s a slanted reading of the past designed to bolster a critique of the present. History can honorably be used to inform the present and guide the future, but only, I would argue, if the historian comes to it with a truly open mind. Anyone committed to building a thriving future for Jews in America would do well to understand not only the book’s flaws, but also the systematic distortions of reality being enforced by the broader movement of which it is a part.

In many ways, American Jewish history [begins](https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/43057824.pdf) with philanthropy, with Jewish communities taking care of their own—who else would have?—while also supporting their non-Jewish neighbors, building goodwill in a world where their survival was always precarious.

In 1654, 23 Jews arrived in New Amsterdam, fleeing the Inquisition’s arrival in their home of Recife, Brazil. They were met with a hostile reception. Governor Peter Stuyvesant requested permission from his employers at the Dutch West India Company to expel the Jewish newcomers. The company demurred, instead mandating a compromise that became known as the “Stuyvesant Promise”: The Jews could stay, “provided the poor among them shall not become a burden to the company or to the community, but be supported by their own nation.” The promise made by this small group of Jews as a condition of their settlement formed the bedrock of the Jewish philanthropic and communal infrastructure in America, which expanded in size and complexity as the Jewish population grew.

The Stuyvesant Promise remained essentially unbroken for nearly 300 years, until the Great Depression created a tidal wave of need that Jewish voluntary and philanthropic systems could no longer meet. By the 1930s, Jewish leaders and givers (including many women) had created innumerable communal organizations to attempt to meet the needs of the nearly 2 million Eastern European Jews who arrived in America between 1881 and 1921, many of whom were penniless, unskilled, and spoke no English. (These were among the “huddled masses yearning to breathe free” that Jewish poet—and philanthropist—[Emma Lazarus](https://ajhs.org/emma-lazarus-project-emmas-digital-storybook) described in her 1883 poem, “The New Colossus,” which she wrote as part of the fundraising efforts to build a pedestal for the new Statue of Liberty.) Federations had emerged in many major Jewish communities as a tool to simplify what Benjamin Selekman, a longtime Boston Federation leader, called in 1935 the “[unending and competitive money raising campaigns](http://www.ajcarchives.org/AJC_DATA/Files/1934_1935_3_SpecialArticles.pdf)“ emanating from all of those organizations. The Federations quickly assumed additional roles as centralized planners and communal conveners. The Federation model spread rapidly, eventually engaging vast swaths of North American Jews in giving to, volunteering for, and working on behalf of Jewish communal organizations.

Jewish tradition idealizes neither poverty nor wealth. It acknowledges and accepts the reality of economic inequality, yet it also [mandates care for the vulnerable](https://sapirjournal.org/social-justice/2021/05/reclaiming-biblical-social-justice/), boasting a sturdy set of laws and [principles](https://www.amplifiergiving.org/resources/jewish-texts/) around charitable activities to which everyone, high and low, is obligated. The preeminent value of tzedakah and the cultural norm that kol Yisrael areivim zeh ba-zeh—all Jews are responsible for one another—persisted in America even as religious affiliation declined. Indeed, the challenges and opportunities of Jewish life led Jews to create a unique, complicated, simultaneously harmonious and conflicted philanthropic ecosystem, one that empowered millions of givers, of all socioeconomic backgrounds, to support tens of thousands of organizations, domestically and abroad. Whether voluntarily, out of a sense of commandedness, or because of peer pressure or pride, American Jews built a philanthropic and communal infrastructure with no parallel in Jewish history.

This includes a breathtakingly diverse range of human services organizations, including Jewish alternatives to institutions that excluded Jews before the second half of the 20th century, like hospitals, orphanages, and nursing homes; institutions of Jewish religion, education, and community, like synagogues, schools, summer camps, community centers, youth groups, seminaries, and universities; mechanisms for economic empowerment like job training, English lessons, and no-interest loans for immigrants and for the poor; vehicles for the flowering of a unique American Jewish culture; organizations focused on Jewish defense, political advocacy, and relief for Jews abroad; interfaith and community relations efforts; the rescue and resettlement of Jewish refugees abroad; and the “building up” of the State of Israel and its relationship with Jews around the world.

The history of American Jewish philanthropy is not only a story about the wealthy. It is about all of us: Hadassah ladies, synagogue and JCC trustees, Federation donors, b’nai mitzvah kids with tzedakah projects, JNF tree-planters, and so much more. As the eminent historian Salo Baron put it in a 1965 speech to the New York Federation, philanthropy has been the one area of Jewish life around which an argumentative people could agree: “all Jews agreed that the sick needed care and the poor required support, and so their support became the focal endeavor of the entire community.”

Rather than tell this broad, complicated, rich story of 350 years of Jewish philanthropy in America with the enormous, interconnected web of initiatives and institutions it has built, Berman indicts the entire system through a narrow and manipulative lens, crafting a crude narrative of powerful people, institutions, and agendas—the “complex”—that have a pernicious influence not only on Jewish communities, but also on America itself. While American Jews serve merely as the designated stand-in for her real targets—American capitalism and right-leaning politics (real or perceived)—Berman trains her lens solely on the Jews, without context or comparison to any other Americans, leading to the understandable conclusion that Jewish philanthropy poses a unique, or at least disproportionate, threat to America.

One of Berman’s core arguments is that the institutions of American Jewish philanthropy are no longer interested in serving the common good, but have instead become narrowly obsessed with “capital accumulation” through the creation of endowments. “Capital accumulation” as a phrase appears in some form almost 40 times in the book; “tzedakah” appears but once, “generosity,” twice. To make her case for “a new logic of collective Jewish philanthropy oriented around accumulation, not distribution,” she simply omits, entirely, the story of the “distribution” side of the equation—nearly all of the causes that Jewish philanthropic dollars have supported. She quantifies almost none of her claims that accumulation has replaced distribution—indeed, the lack of almost any numbers in the book is startling, and a clue to understanding its flaws.

Berman focuses her discussion of endowments primarily on the Federation system, arguing that a desire to accumulate and invest capital led Jewish philanthropists and institutions to abandon the “revolving door” mode of Federation activities where donations are dispersed immediately. This shift to “accumulation,” in her telling, has turned American Jewish philanthropy into a tool just for hoarding capital. And it poses a threat to democracy itself: first, because it focuses communal attention on a small number of wealthy endowment donors, and second, because it invests their philanthropic dollars in “capitalism” (a term that appears 95 times), which, in her view, stands a priori in opposition to democracy.

The problem with this argument is that it isn’t true. The shift from distribution to accumulation simply has not occurred.

The “revolving door” of annual campaigns has never ceased to be the primary focus of Federations: Every year, the 220 Jewish Federations across North America hold annual fundraising campaigns, the proceeds of which they spend the next year, both on grant allocations to local organizations and on their own operational expenses and programs. According to the Jewish Federations of North America, this annual giving totaled about $2 billion in 2020.

The annual campaign—often just called the “campaign”—has remained the lifeblood of Federations since their inception, engaging hundreds of thousands of donors each year. Campaigns represent an enormous staff and volunteer undertaking, and they are among the Federations’ largest items of operating expense (personnel, events, direct mail, marketing materials, etc.) In fact, many people who stop giving to Federations over time do so precisely because of the continued preeminence of the annual campaign: Many donors want to have more control over where their dollars go, and they resent that part of their donation goes to the operating costs associated with raising money. (Endowment efforts, by contrast, are often cheaper than annual fundraising, requiring less staff and volunteer time—more bang for the buck and little need for ongoing relationship stewarding.)

The total assets held by Federation endowments have certainly grown over time, partly due to contributions and partly to investment returns, and it does indeed dwarf the amount raised each year through annual campaigns. But this is to be expected—and in my view, welcome: The nature of an endowment is hopefully to grow over time, so it can throw off more funds each year for charitable use. The numeric disparity is not necessarily a reflection of the system’s priorities—it’s the nature of the beast. (The book’s one chart, which compares endowment assets with annual contributions, fails to account for investment performance at all—thus implying that it is active contributions to endowments that explain the growth, when in fact the curve tracks with overall American stock market performance for the same period.)

Moreover, the basis for Berman’s position that philanthropic and nonprofit entities ought not to use capitalist tools to build their financial stability is unclear. Nonprofits and foundations have never purported to operate “outside of the world of profit and finance,” as she asserts. Rather, their proposition is that all “profits” are utilized exclusively for charitable purposes. The more their investments earn, the more they can give away. Not every problem can be solved immediately (or at all)—hence the need for stable, ongoing sources of funding. Nor does Berman offer a plausible sketch for what the world might look like if endowments didn’t exist and all philanthropic donations had to be raised every year and entirely and immediately put to use. (Anyone in the nonprofit world could tell you what that would look like: a complete disaster.)

While Berman is right that most of the money raised via planned giving and to endowments sits in investment vehicles, endowments are far from mere “capital accumulation vehicles.” [Universities](https://www.aau.edu/sites/default/files/AAU%20Files/Key%20Issues/Taxation%20%26%20Finance/MythsandFacts.pdf), hospitals, cultural institutions, and more create endowments because they promote future sustainability, which the variable, even fickle nature of annual giving does not. [Form follows function](https://www.bridgespan.org/insights/library/philanthropy/frequently-asked-questions-about-philanthropy/faq-the-philanthropist-s-dilemma-do-i-spend-down-o): Some causes will always be with us and require perennial sources of funding (arts and culture, poverty, health care, education); other problems might actually be solved with more immediate cash distributions (emergency relief, capital construction, medical research). An obvious case in point would be the COVID-19 pandemic, when many institutions were saved by being able to draw upon their endowments, and many foundations and Federations were able to [increase their giving](https://jewishinsider.com/2021/01/jewish-federations-covid-endowment/) to meet emergency needs by drawing on their endowments.

A percentage of endowment assets must be disbursed every year, and in the Federation system, endowments are put to use as a critical source of funding for the annual campaign itself. At UJA-Federation of New York, for example, the endowment is the second-largest source of funding for the annual campaign. Across the Federation system, according to the Jewish Federations of North America, endowment income and contributions from donor-advised fund holders provide half of the $2 billion that Federations distribute annually. The rest comes from the donations to the annual campaign. The “revolving door” has never stopped turning.

It’s now even possible to put invested endowment capital to use in ways that align with the mission of the institution through “impact investing”—the Nathan Cummings Foundation, for example, [announced](https://nathancummings.org/ncf-commits-to-100-percent/) in 2018 that it was moving 100% of its half-billion dollar endowment into mission-aligned investment vehicles. Berman critiques this mechanism, too, however, viewing it as “widening the scope of ... power” through investments—instead of seeing it as a way to amplify philanthropic impact and diversify the philanthropic toolbox. The one Jewish impact investing fund, [JLens](https://www.jlensnetwork.org/), comes under her withering eye just for being an investment vehicle at all, and for being against BDS. (She decries JLens for opposing divestment by “using the power of their capital to punish companies,” without noting that that is literally the purpose and tactic of divestment efforts themselves.)

Berman makes her “accumulation” argument by ignoring the “distribution” that actually exists, and she offers no quantitative evidence to back up her claims. It’s an incredible distortion.

The book’s other guiding premise is that the philanthropic “complex” has evolved into a tool that the wealthy use to disenfranchise the masses, which threatens democracy itself. By prioritizing endowments—the diversion of the financial resources of the wealthy from immediate needs into capital markets—Jewish philanthropy denies individuals the ability to influence Jewish communal life through the more “democratic” means of annual giving. In Berman’s framework, “capitalism” and “democracy” sit at opposite poles, pulling on philanthropy from either side.

As with her narrative of accumulation, however, Berman invents a narrative of disenfranchisement by simply ignoring the continuous, pervasive influences of mass giving in Jewish philanthropy. Mass giving is both a longstanding Jewish story as well as an American one. As historian Olivier Zunz notes in his [history](https://www.amazon.com/Philanthropy-America-History-Updated-Politics/dp/0691161208) of American philanthropy, mass engagement with philanthropy in America is actually what makes philanthropy an essential element of our ever-evolving democracy. “Philanthropy would not be a democratic value if it remained the domain of the wealthy,” he argues. “[W]hat gave philanthropy ... a central place in modern American life was the simultaneous creation of a people’s philanthropy—or mass philanthropy—that engaged the large American middle and working classes in their own welfare.”

In the philanthropic arena, as the saying goes, Jews are like other Americans, only more so. Philanthropic activity has served as a central expression of Jewishness in America—what sociologist Jon Woocher famously [called](https://www.amazon.com/Sacred-Survival-Religion-American-Political/dp/0253350417/ref%3Dsr_1_2?dchild=1&keywords=sacred+survival+woocher&qid=1610898334&s=books&sr=1-2) the “civil religion” of American Jews, and which historian Jonathan Sarna later [labeled](https://www.commentarymagazine.com/articles/jonathan-sarna-3/sacred-survival-by-jonathan-woocher/) “Federation Judaism.” Giving serves as an essential element of American Jewish identity and communal engagement; it has shaped the character of American Jewish life. As the few quantitative studies about Jews and philanthropy have demonstrated (like the useful [Connected to Give](http://jumpstartlabs.org/offering/research-reports/connected-to-give/) series, which I helped to advise), a higher percentage of Jews engage in charitable giving than people from other American religious groups, and Jews give more money per capita than other Americans do.

Berman simply ignores the continued existence of mass giving, never quantifying the numbers of donors in the system, past or present. (This is admittedly hard to do, but is essential to any history.) Historian Jack Wertheimer recently [estimated](https://avichai.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/Giving-Jewish-Jack-Wertheimer.pdf) that “giving by the largest 250 foundations interested in Jewish causes represents less than one-fifth of the total” of American Jewish philanthropy. The rest is given by individuals, especially those giving locally, who are the “mainstay of Jewish communal life.” In aggregate they give far more than the foundations that attract so much of the critics’ ire. “These funders of the day-to-day necessities,” Wertheimer writes, “are indispensable.” They give through Federations, foundations, community foundations, donor-advised funds, and directly from their bank accounts, supporting an immense web of institutions large and small, leaning left, right and center, and operating locally, nationally, and globally. The book says nothing about these manifold grassroots, individual and local efforts across the centuries by millions of American Jews to make change in their communities through their giving.

The other key contention within Berman’s argument about the “undemocratic” nature of Jewish philanthropy is that the existence of charitable tax deductions and exemptions makes this philanthropic dollars “public” money. American taxpayers are actually “subsidizing” charitable giving, she asserts, without being able to exercise power over where that giving goes. Yet although Berman presents this perspective as fact, it is actually simply one side of a robust [debate](https://www.philanthropyroundtable.org/almanac/article/why-is-charitable-activity-tax-protected-%28think-freedom-not-finances%29). The other side is often taken by small-government, free-enterprise, centrist and conservative thinkers. Irving Kristol summed up the other side of the argument in a 1980 [speech](https://web.archive.org/web/20171228173908/http%3A/www.philanthropyroundtable.org/topic/philanthropic_freedom/the_myth_of_the_third_sector) to the Council on Foundations:

**Under the tax laws, the contributions made to foundations are deductible from income. If you say that that money is public money, you are saying: “Well, the government has the right to all our money, but it doesn’t exercise this right at all times or in all respects. It leaves some of that governmental money for us to spend, and therefore we have public responsibility attached to that money.” ... The money [foundations] spend is private money. It is not public money. Money that the government does not take is ours.**

Berman’s claim that Jewish philanthropic funds pose a “threat” to democracy feels especially disingenuous because she only provides examples of giving that she herself appears to disfavor—especially donations relating to Israel, which she repeatedly asserts reflected the views of a few politically conservative philanthropists but not the Jewish masses. She never quantifies or provides support for this apparent disparity, and hedges her bets by alleging that philanthropists use their power to coerce the opinions of unwitting Jews.

I was left wondering whether Berman believes that philanthropy also threatens democracy when it supports, for example, causes like racial justice efforts (tens of billions of dollars given by [foundations](https://candid.org/explore-issues/racial-equity?_gl=1*gjqtx0*_ga*MTAzNjQ3NzczMC4xNjI1MDE2NzM0*_ga_5W8PXYYGBX*MTYyNTAxNjczMy4xLjAuMTYyNTAxNjczMy4w) and [corporations](https://www.wsj.com/articles/companies-have-promised-billions-toward-racial-equity-where-is-the-money-going-11608570864) in 2020); reproductive health care, which a recent [Vox](https://www.vox.com/future-perfect/2019/9/17/20754970/billionaire-philanthropy-reproductive-health-care-politics) article noted approvingly, is driven by billionaire philanthropy since government’s reliance on the “whims of the American electorate” means it can’t be relied upon to take the correct side of the issue; or even when it is given explicitly to “[rehabilitate” democracy and civic engagement](https://ssir.org/articles/entry/how_can_philanthropy_help_rehabilitate_us_democracy). Did philanthropy’s efforts in support of [the successful legalization of gay marriage](https://www.bridgespan.org/marriage-equality-movement) constitute a threat to democracy? (And why not mention the interesting Jewish philanthropy story that the charitable giving of many [wealthy, conservative Jewish capitalists](https://www.cnbc.com/2015/06/26/the-hedge-fund-managers-who-pushed-for-gay-marriage.html) fueled that movement?) Does philanthropy threaten democracy when it creates endowed chairs for professors, like the one Berman and so many of her academic colleagues hold?

Jewish givers have directed untold billions to left-leaning Jewish, American, and Israeli organizations, including Jewish feminist organizations, the Jewish labor movement, the 70 organizations that make up the [Jewish Social Justice Roundtable](https://www.jewishsocialjustice.org/), environmental and climate change organizations, and left-leaning Israel-focused organizations like New Israel Fund, JStreet, T’ruah, B’Tselem, and so on.

By ignoring the existence of left-leaning philanthropy of any sort (except for a brief, fawning story in the epilogue about a young progressive heiress who supports social justice causes, an example of what Berman calls philanthropic “reform”), Berman not only ignores what is likely the bulk of Jewish giving, but also labels outcomes of democratic choices that she appears not to like as “undemocratic”—a stance which itself stands in opposition to democratic norms.

The most egregious example of this type of distortion occurs in her discussion of Birthright Israel, the only philanthropic recipient she discusses at any length in the book. Birthright represents an apotheosis of the “complex,” in Berman’s view. Founded and funded by prominent philanthropists Michael Steinhardt, Charles Bronfman, and eventually supported heavily by the late casino owner and Republican Sheldon Adelson, Birthright’s mission—to expose its young adult participants to Israel firsthand, bolster their Jewish identity, and connect them to each other—is meaningful to Berman only insofar as it appears to manifest all of the coercive, right-leaning, Israel-supporting tropes that supposedly characterize Jewish philanthropy, but not the true views of the Jewish people.

Again, Berman’s blinkered framing distorts the story—this time, of what is arguably the most important American Jewish philanthropic story of the last few decades. Instead of exploring, for example, any of the reasons why more than 750,000 young adults from 68 countries have opted into free Birthright Israel trips over the past 20 years, and instead of analyzing the extraordinarily large and diverse set of donors of all sizes, including tens of thousands of trip alumni and their families who have chosen to support the program over this period, Berman focuses only on a tiny group of young, progressive critics who have castigated the program for a variety of perceived sins over the years, especially that it doesn’t go to the West Bank, and that it has a Republican major donor who, naturally, must be using the program to promote his right-wing agenda.

Berman implies but fails to demonstrate that these critiques are widespread. Her assertions of a “growing fervor ... from within and outside of the Jewish community” scrutinizing Birthright’s political positions or financial practices, or her references to “mounting criticism” and “rising criticism” of the program are never quantified nor even backed up by footnotes. The fact that a handful of young progressive critics created the hashtag #JewsNotFundedBySheldonAdelson is enough, apparently, to “expose the hold that Adelson exercised over American Jewish life.” And while she acknowledges that actual, empirical evidence by researchers disproves the activists’ claims that the trip makes participants “more right wing,” she nevertheless implies that the research findings are suspect because they come from a research center at Brandeis University to which Michael Steinhardt gave a naming gift in 2005.

Casting the program in this light erases the agency of everyone except for the few philanthropists and Israeli officials who created and funded Birthright, and the small band of progressives who criticize it. To acknowledge that a truly extraordinary number of people have chosen to go on Birthright trips and to support the organization with their philanthropy would be to admit that individuals and donors have minds of their own, and that huge numbers of young adult Jews, their parents, and those who give to the program, all seem to want exactly what Birthright is offering. As with so many other programs and people and phenomena touched on in this book, a genuinely interesting and complex idea is reduced to politics—and the real story, good and bad, fascinating and challenging, remains in the dark.

Writing about topics like Jews and money is always a challenge, and I agree with Berman’s assertion, early in the book, that Jewish historians ought not to shy away from studying and writing about challenging topics that might be interpreted negatively by ill-intentioned readers. It’s somewhat shocking, then, to read a book that at every turn seems to take the path most likely to lead readers in the direction of antisemitic interpretation.

In a book that makes the important argument that the Jewish engagement with the American state has not received enough attention, Berman nevertheless relates the history of this engagement in a way that takes Jewish behaviors so out of context as to make them seem unique—even dangerously so. For example, she clearly has a bone to pick with American tax laws around charitable giving, but rather than take that issue up with America, she focuses only on the ways that Jews seemed to have disproportionately shaped and taken advantage of those laws for their own gain. She offers no points of comparison with the activities of other ethnic or religious communities, nor does she ask how, if at all, the actual substance of Jewishness—religion, culture, sensibilities, community—is relevant to the story.

I’m not accusing Berman of antisemitism. What I am saying is that for an American Jewish historian, she has bizarrely framed her book so narrowly as to make it very easy to draw conclusions that reflect extremely poorly upon the Jews alone, since she fails to put Jewish behavior in any kind of broader context. Berman creates the impression that Jews were disproportionately fixated on “capital accumulation,” without discussing the rise of endowments in the nonprofit sector writ large; and that Jews disproportionately advocated for—and influenced—American policy on charitable giving, tax reform, and Israel, without discussing whether Jews acted differently than any group in the American system seeking particular political or economic outcomes. (Walt and Mearsheimer’s The Israel Lobby makes an obligatory appearance in the footnotes.) It is thus easy to conclude that Jewish philanthropy disproportionately threatens American democracy.

What conclusions are readers supposed to draw? The “complex,” as Berman describes it, pulls together all of the favorite bogeymen of our time, and her claims about its influence echo a number of classic antisemitic tropes. The lack of any discussion of Jewishness—of the ways that actual Jewish ideas, values, or social constructs, might have been relevant to the history of Jewish philanthropy—only makes the drawing of nefarious conclusions more inevitable. The only motivations mentioned in the book are a desire for money and power: We’re offered no other sense of why Jews, qua Jews, would have acted in this way.

This problem emerges most vividly in an extensive discussion of the midcentury efforts of tax attorney Norm Sugarman to preserve tax deductions and exemptions for charitable activities. Sugarman apparently had a profound and unique impact on the Tax Reform Act of 1969, but Berman never explains why Sugarman’s Jewishness is relevant to the story, nor does she discuss any other actors in what is, ultimately, a complicated but normal process of policy advocacy in the American democratic system.

“Sugarman was nearly peerless in his commitment to opening new channels for private capital to flow toward philanthropic ends,” she writes, without telling us anything about his peers. “[He] worked with remarkable speed and vigor ... crafting models for legal reform by enacting them preemptively,” she tells us, without noting that this is the way that policy change is made. “[H]e enlisted his clients and friends, many of them important Jewish leaders, to use whatever resources they had to tip the political balance to allow philanthropic capital to operate free of government interference or regulation.” Important Jews tipping political balances sounds pretty dastardly, but she offers no sense for how many Jews were in on this plan, whether they were representing personal, institutional, or communal interests; whether Sugarman was representing Jewish organizations in this work; and how it is even relevant that some of his friends and clients were Jewish.

[Elsewhere](https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/ajs-review/article/jewish-history-beyond-the-jewish-people/32DA6EAE4A57691F9D7114374CB411D) Berman has theorized about the value of disconnecting the idea of “Jewishness” in history from actual Jews. I want precisely the opposite: some concrete, evidence-based understanding of why, exactly, Sugarman’s Jewishness mattered. Although he is one of the few named actors in the book, and the only one who isn’t a wealthy philanthropist, we learn nothing about Norm Sugarman as a person. Why did he allegedly devote his life to creating vehicles to incentivize Americans, some of them Jews, to give to charity? Was it only because, as Berman asserts, he believed the “very purpose” of the Congressional regulations was to create “capital-rich futures for public charities”? That’s not a bad goal, in my mind, but is this really what got Norm Sugarman up in the morning, not least as a Jew? Might he not have also been motivated by, say, a desire to make the world a better place?

Indicting what is, in the end, the American system—capitalism, philanthropy, tax policy—by scrutinizing only the activities of Jewish groups and individuals as if their goals or behaviors were somehow unique, and alleging an obsession with capital accumulation without a concomitant discussion of its distribution, is dangerously distorting. This approach leaves the impression that American Jews, whether acting under Jewish auspices or not, operate in ways that pose a unique threat to America.

Why would a well-respected American Jewish scholar like Berman write history this way?

Earning a Ph.D. in American Jewish history from Brandeis taught me that the back-and-forth of scholarly argument over time—discovering new information, making new arguments, agreeing and disagreeing—moves us ever closer to an apprehension of the truth. Embracing diverse views has become a hallmark of my career, where I’ve worked on local and national models of collaborative giving that bring people together to give together—to radically different kinds of organizations—across social, political, religious and ethnic divides. Working closely over 20 years with colleagues of all backgrounds has strongly reinforced my appreciation for the power of heterodoxy and diversity, and dissuaded me from viewing the world through a purely political lens. (No doubt some will argue that these associations in the philanthropic sector invalidate my critique; I invite them to engage instead with my ideas.)

In America’s top colleges and universities, however, where Berman has spent her career, [viewpoint diversity](https://www.insidehighered.com/views/2018/10/08/why-its-vital-academe-have-more-viewpoint-diversity-opinion) has been replaced with [political homogeneity](https://nationalaffairs.com/publications/detail/the-disappearing-conservative-professor), and “seeking truth” seems to have been abandoned in favor of “speaking truth to power.” Since the 1980s, the creeping takeover of the academy—and now much of K-12 education as well—by postmodernism has led to a growing rejection of the previous scholarly ideal of objectivity and an embrace of the marriage between scholarship and social activism. Since the majority of professors on American university campuses lean quite left, that activism winds up being pretty one-sided. I wonder how many casual readers of history books today know that the rules have changed so thoroughly—and that the turn to [activism](https://imaginingamerica.org/what-we-do/collaborative-research/online-learning-and-tools/the-activist-academic-engaged-scholarship-for-resistance-hope-and-social-change/), nearly always left-leaning, is fundamentally reshaping the very institutions, like the [university](https://www.amazon.com/Tenured-Radicals-Politics-Corrupted-Education/dp/1566637961), that originally rose to prominence precisely because they were expected to prize and reward dispassionate, objective, scientific, and well-reasoned analysis and debate?

Jewish studies is far from immune from these trends, as a growing tendency among Jewish studies scholars to issue open letters on current [events](https://israelpalestinejs.weebly.com/), and the very existence of the [Jewish Studies Activist Network](https://tinyletter.com/jsan) (on whose Coordinating Committee Berman sits), clearly demonstrate.

There’s nothing wrong with activism, but I believe that the marriage between scholarship and activism is dangerous, especially when a scholar’s biases and agenda are not put front and center. Readers need to understand the assumptions and beliefs that shape—and too often distort—the questions that scholars ask and the conclusions that they reach. The British historian Richard J. Evans warned about the ways politics can undermine scholarship more than 20 years ago in his critique of postmodernism, In Defense of History: “[P]olitical commitment, freed by postmodernist relativism from the shackles that normally bind historians to the facts” can produce “a deeply flawed work which clearly distorts or misinterprets the source material in the service of present-day ideology.”

While I very much appreciate the perspective that an outsider to the system can bring, there is a fundamental clash, in my view, between the deconstructionist approach of postmodern academics and the constructive, productive work of day-to-day philanthropy. Deconstructionists don’t offer many solutions: Their work is to take things apart, and they seldom suggest practical ideas for putting things back together. Philanthropy, on the other hand, searches for and creates solutions for the problems and opportunities facing real people every day, building systems to care for people in the real world, right now. It’s far from perfect; but it is a reflection of the diversity and complexity of the millions of people who engage with it every day.

One solution that Berman and I agree on is that building a strong future for Jewish philanthropy requires the inclusion of many more people in philanthropic activity. But we clearly differ in our understanding of what “democratizing” philanthropy means. Berman’s focus is on “[participatory grantmaking](https://static1.squarespace.com/static/56abab9d8b38d4b28f7d183e/t/5e139d721db9945228788173/1578343795532/LC-DemocratizingAJP_121219.pdf),” which does nothing to enlarge the philanthropic pie, but simply gives power to different people to decide where other people’s money should go. (Notably, she wrote that particular monograph while on a fellowship created by Jewish megadonors, who were very open to funding a scholar like Berman to develop an innovative idea to change Jewish philanthropy.) There’s nothing wrong with this idea in theory, but one wonders where it ends: Do I get to decide where Berman gives her money, and she, mine? Are Orthodox, or politically conservative Russian, Mizrachi and Sephardi Jews included in the groups that would be tapped to sit on decision-making boards in this more participatory philanthropic system?

Rather than give some people control over other people’s money, I prefer that we empower many more people to give to whatever causes inspire them. This is pluralism and democracy: I want to grow the pie, not redistribute the pieces. To add many more voices, opinions, value systems, and passions to the conversation, not to take decision-making power away from some. I think this is an existential need for philanthropy and for our country more generally: more people empowered, more people engaged, more people devoting their time, attention, and dollars to the causes and issues they care about.

The cynical notion that “philanthropy” is only for the rich, that the wealthy have a harmful agenda, and that small amounts of money can’t make a difference against a juggernaut of capitalist megadonor power prevents people from seeing that giving at all levels can make real change. The zero-sum view of how power works in philanthropy and in society is profoundly disempowering, leading to a culture of complaint and a sense of victimization, rather than fostering engagement in the necessary project of making constructive social change.

What’s especially frustrating about this misguided take on a critically important subject is that we live in a moment where philanthropy’s value has never been more apparent. Last spring, the Jewish communal world seemed on the verge of catastrophic organizational collapse. All institutions were forced to close; earned income evaporated instantly; the stock market crashed: unemployment soared to levels not seen since the Great Depression. Jewish leaders, including me, [feared the worst](https://www.tabletmag.com/sections/community/articles/donors-awaken).

But the apocalypse didn’t happen. Government loans to nonprofits had a huge impact—the first time that most Jewish organizations had ever gotten U.S. government funding, thanks to lobbying [efforts](https://jewishfederations.org/about-jfna/washington-dc/advocacy) by the Jewish Federations of North America and other nonprofit advocacy groups to have nonprofits included in the Small Business Administration loans. But on the ground, in Jewish institutions and homes across the country, something even more significant took place: a groundswell of Jewish givers, in partnership with tens of thousands of hardworking communal professionals, kept Jewish institutions alive. We live in a moment where philanthropic vitality not only sustains a diverse ecosystem of communal institutions in normal times, but has also seen it through one of the greatest challenges any of us have ever faced.

Berman and I also agree that we need a flourishing literature about American Jewish philanthropy (and more philanthropists, foundations, and philanthropic institutions should preserve their archives for research). Were her book but one of many diving into this enormous and complicated topic, it would bother me much less; it would take its place on a shelf of diverse works from multiple perspectives and disciplines, telling many different kinds of stories. But for now, we only have Berman’s jaundiced take, a sweeping indictment that aligns with contemporary academic trends, yet fails to engage with nearly the entire history she purports to examine. In writing the story in this fashion Berman does a disservice to the millions of Jewish givers who have allocated billions of dollars for charitable purposes and supported countless Jewish philanthropic efforts to make the world a better place. Jewish philanthropy—a system that belongs to all of us—deserves better.

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**It’s the Liberalism, Stupid**

By: Liel Leibovitz

What exactly is wrong with America, and how do we fix it?

That, with slight variations, is the question constantly nipping at our heels these days, asked by friends and colleagues, entertained at dinner parties, floated around on podcasts and in opinion pages. Analyses of what precisely is broken vary, as do prescriptions for a cure, but a strong consensus remains solid among our best and brightest—the problem is that liberalism has come under attack, and the solution is to restore it to its old glory.

In this telling, the history of the past 30 or so years in America goes something like this: Once upon a time, back in the halcyon days of the 1990s, America was great, because Americans all observed a shared creed called liberalism. This relaxed civil religion nurtured our individual liberties and kept us honest, hardworking, and good. It gave us civil rights and gay marriage, Tom Hanks and Sesame Street, bipartisanship and Teach for America. And it would have bloomed eternal if the barbarians hadn’t shown up one day to sack our glittering Rome.

Who, exactly, are those modern-day wreckers of civilization? Again, many of our intellectual betters are certain they have the answer: The barbarians are Marxists, extreme leftist agitators here to replace our sacred liberal order with a pagan religion of their own, complete with a set of rituals (taking a knee) and articles of faith (gender is fluid). Our mission, therefore, is to resist these savages at every turn, and do whatever we can to turn the clock back and reinstall liberalism as our exclusive and infallible operating system.

It’s a compelling story, complete with deliciously malicious bad guys and wonderfully virtuous sheriffs counting the minutes to High Noon. It’s also, alas, entirely wrong. Liberalism, to keep with the Hollywood imagery, isn’t the damsel in distress, hogtied and left on the train tracks; it’s the mustache-twirling villain whom we must defeat if we are to survive.

Take a moment and read that last sentence again. If you were raised in America and attended any school here in the last, say, 50 years, this sentence—liberalism is the source of our woes—makes about as much sense as saying that Mr. Rogers is a sadistic serial killer, or that bald eagles ought to be shot on sight. It sounds not only sacrilegious but outright stupid, a proposition so far-fetched and so far removed from everything we understand to be at America’s core as to merit not a second more of consideration.

In large part, that’s because we, as a poet who was no great fan of the Jews once [neatly put it](https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/poems/44212/the-love-song-of-j-alfred-prufrock), measure time in coffee spoons. We arrive into this world screaming, and understand before too long that what separates us from other living things around us is the unshakable awareness of our own mortality. This, in turn, puts us into a fraught relationship with time itself, our great nonrenewable resource, which explains why our language is thick with expressions like “time is money” or “a stitch in time saves nine,” which comically betray how poorly we understand the essence of the torrent against which we all futilely swim. To us, 50 years is a long time; 350 years a virtual eternity. Go tell that to a mountain, say, and if you listen carefully, you’ll hear a soft, stony snicker.

And so, because we treat time in this particular and charmingly solipsistic way, we believe that the history of the last few centuries, a period we sometimes call the Enlightenment, is not so much history as human destiny. We cannot imagine the Enlightenment as an era, and are even less capable of contemplating it coming to an end—for if it does, what’s to become of the many bounties it bequeathed us, from stable democracies to lifesaving science?

These are fair reservations, but as we attempt to stumble back and see the liberal order’s virtues, let us catch a glimpse of its vices as well. The world into which Rousseau and the other founding fathers of the Enlightenment emerged was one governed by a simple philosophical proposition, cultivated for centuries by religions of all sorts. It was this: Man is capable of both great good and great evil (see under: Cain and Abel), which is why we, poor souls, are constantly in need of moral instruction to help keep us on the up and up. “Moral instruction” being the sort of medicine that can, if administered imprudently, do more damage than good, it is therefore a good idea to entrust its development and application to the cautious wisdom of the ages. Enter tradition, a way of life that allows for gradual change but holds that, when faced with a thorny new problem, first look to your grandmother for advice, because there is nothing all that new under the sun.

Against this, the Enlightenment offered a radical countervision. Man, it argued, was born good; it was only the oppressions of coercive institutions that drove him to contemplate and commit evil deeds. Benjamin Franklin, for example, was riffing on this idea of the Noble Savage when, observing the Iroquois, he noted in 1770 that “… the Care and Labour of providing for artificial and fashionable Wants, the Sight of so many Rich wallowing in superfluous Plenty, whereby so many are kept poor distress’d by Want. The Insolence of Office, the Snares and Plagues of Law, the Restraints of Custom, all contribute to disgust [the Indians] with what we call civil Society.”

How, then, to keep civil society from making us ungood? Enter the social contract, liberalism’s mighty engine. Willingly sign away a host of your innate rights, and in return the authorities—the king, the president, a majority of your peers, whatever—will protect you and safeguard all of your other rights.

For a while, the Enlightenment did alright for itself and for us, in no small part because it was never allowed to run rampant. Other, older, sturdier forces—the family, mainly, but also the church—threw around their own familiar weight, reminding us every so often of the limitations of radical individualism and social contract theory. We might be enlightened human atoms in our laboratories and offices, but the majority of our lives were spent swimming within the older and deeper currents of family, community and religious life.

Until, that is, the church and the family began suddenly and precipitously losing ground. Why that happened is the subject for several weighty tomes, but the numbers don’t lie: Membership in houses of worship this year [dipped](https://news.gallup.com/poll/341963/church-membership-falls-below-majority-first-time.aspx#:~:text=WASHINGTON%2C%20D.C.%20%2D%2D%20Americans'%20membership,2018%20and%2070%25%20in%201999.) below 50% for the first time in American history; so has the [number](https://www.city-journal.org/decline-of-family-loneliness-epidemic?wallit_nosession=1) of American children who can expect to spend their entire childhood with both biological parents. And they’re the lucky ones, simply by virtue of being born. During the pandemic, when American couples spent unprecedented amounts of time indoors together, birth rates continued to plummet, last year hitting the [steepest annual decline](https://thehill.com/homenews/state-watch/559781-pandemic-baby-bust-births-drop-by-fastest-rate-in-50-years) in 50 years. Liberalism, left unchecked, has become what it was always angling to be: a social death pact, leaving its adepts without the motivation to reproduce themselves.

Liberalism finally got what it always wanted: a gaggle of detached and uprooted people, alone and scared witless, seeking solace, and suspecting that someone, somewhere is out to get them.

Talk to liberalism’s defenders—in academia, science, media, the arts, or politics—and they’ll give you some version of the following defense of the faith: Liberalism works because it is a healthily skeptical system that rejects all measures of bullshit and focuses instead only on what can be empirically proved. Everything else, all the juju of those benighted bobos who claim to know what the Big Man in the Sky wants them to think, eat, and do, is all rot. The system’s chief virtue is that it liberates human beings from the shackles of the false and malignant beliefs that religion once foisted on benighted believers.

Except that liberalism, of course, is itself a form of religious belief, and has been from the very first. As Williams College professor Darel E. Paul [wrote](https://www.firstthings.com/article/2021/06/atheists-against-antiracism) recently in the Christian magazine First Things:

**We know this not only from the works of liberal philosophers, but more importantly from actually existing liberalism, the everyday beliefs and practices of liberal societies. Liberalism has an anthropology, a vision of the human person as bearing the capacity and the obligation to become a radically autonomous individual beholden to no moral authority save that which he has chosen through a fully rational and constantly reenacted choice. Liberalism has a mythos, with the State of Nature, the Social Contract, the Original Position, the Dark Ages, the Wars of Religion, the Triumph of Reason, and Progress making up its narrative. Liberalism has an ethos: a humanitarian impulse toward the eradication of physical and psychological suffering. Liberalism has a politics: a limitless expansion of legally codified rights defined and defended by a representative state …**

Is it any wonder, then, that said state is ascendant and now busy policing any and all virtues and vices, whose number would appear to be infinite? And is it really surprising that, left without any other way of adjudicating moral and ethical matters, liberalism now resorts to the one thing it was ever truly good at, namely mediating quibbles between various parties seeking power? Now that we all live in broken homes, avoid houses of worship, and spend much of our time alone, staring at screens, liberalism finally got what it had always wanted: a gaggle of detached and uprooted people, alone and scared witless, seeking solace, and suspecting that someone, somewhere is out to get them. Call it woke culture if you’d like, but it’s nothing more than the Enlightenment’s apotheosis—and it’s exactly why folks everywhere from Warsaw to Wisconsin are voting for candidates who promise little more than a swift kick in the pants to the liberal order.

Of course, our smarties are slow on the uptake. These hopelessly educated and tragically remunerated cats still believe that America is, as the political scientist Michael Millerman recently put it on Twitter, a collection of classrooms: If you don’t like the action over at 502, where they teach leftism, move over to 503, where they profess conservatism. It takes little more than a casual glance and an ability to drop the ossified and useless terms that helped previous generations chug along to understand that “conservatism,” as we understand it, is a sub-Reddit of classical liberalism. It doesn’t much matter whether you identify as a Republican or a Democrat, or subscribe to The Wall Street Journal or The New York Times. For all the real differences between them, Edmund Burke’s reserved table at the Capital Grille is just across the dining room from Thomas Paine’s.

The way out of this morass isn’t to choose a slightly different flavor of a fermented mess. It’s to opt for a different system altogether. Which one? That’s easy: the one that always wins. The one that has seen a long parade of empires rise and fall. The one that kept at it as isms flared and burnt out. The one that still has us today praying in precisely the same words our ancestors did two millennia ago. The one that survived, either because it was astonishingly lucky or inherently true, whichever better suits your sensibilities.

Don’t get me wrong: this is in no way an insistence that to survive the tsunami of stupid you must begin immediately living your life as an observant Jew, though some, myself included, find meaning and joy in practicing some parts of the religion more or less as Zayde and Bubbe did. But it is an invitation—an exhortation—to understand that the solution to liberalism isn’t to debate it on its own terms or to ask politely that it be slightly less steely when it cuts us. Because the liberal answer will always be: Too bad for you. The rules are the rules.

The only way to be free of liberalism’s rules is to find a different place to stand. To posit, and embrace, an alternative—and superior—set of values, which allows to look down from the mountaintop on the legions of miserable, lonely, loony souls, and be infinitely glad that you are not one of them. Too bad for you, pal.

To the incoherent yowls of critical race theory that require public confessions and assign guilt on the basis of 19th-century pseudoscience, we can say that our system of justice, the one rooted in the words of the Hebrew prophets, is better, which is why it—and not some soulless and mindless academic dross—inspired every civil rights leader who mattered, from Sojourner Truth and Frederick Douglass to Martin Luther King Jr. To the ninnies who march around blindly with the banner of equity, we can say that we don’t believe in equity—that’s part of your messed-up belief system. We believe in excellence, the simple idea that allowed minorities in this country, Black and white alike, to smash the ceilings that kept them cowering, and realize the fullness of their own God-given human potential. To the slicksters who chew our ears off ad infinitum by counting how many millionaire women of color are on the cover of the latest glamour magazine, we say politely that our tradition teaches us to care for the poor, and that, not being rank racists or silly sexists, we don’t much care if the poor are male or female, Black or white, male or female, down the block or across the country. Our religious tradition is better at handling these questions and quibbles if only because it has done so, successfully, for 2,000 years, which is a major leg up on liberalism’s mere three centuries or so.

So what’s wrong with America these days? It’s liberalism, stupid. And how do we fix it? By doing exactly [what Uncle Sam recommended](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4QY4d-LrBEo) we do in that 1975 hot dog commercial: Answer to a higher authority.

*From Tablet magazine, July 27, 2021*

**Review Essay: Stan Lee, Marvel’s Ringmaster**

By: J. Hoberman

In the universe of superheroism, hyperbole is the coin of the realm. “The Galactus Trilogy,” a much admired comic book saga published by Marvel in 1966 and taking up three issues of *The Fantastic Four*, is a not untypical tale of superlatives multiplied and obliteration avoided, emblazoned with the warning “If This Be Doomsday!” The planet-devouring Galactus is poised to consume Earth’s “elemental energies.” Diverted at first by a benign supernatural entity named Uatu the Watcher, who exists to observe the development of the human race, Galactus is betrayed by his herald, the Silver Surfer, a metallic creature nourished, like Galactus, by cosmic energy. This allows the Human Torch (a member of the titular Fantastic Four) time to zip from Earth to Galactus’s home planet and return with the Ultimate Nullifier, a grenade-shaped gizmo described as “the universe’s most devastating weapon,” which is sufficient to convince Galactus to leave Earth alone.

The demiurge behind Galactus, Uatu, the Silver Surfer, the Human Torch, and the Ultimate Nullifier was the story’s writer, Stan Lee. No superhero was more admired than he. Lee, the top editor at Marvel Comics, was instrumental in creating the Fantastic Four, Spider-Man, the Hulk, and dozens more. He was born Stanley Lieber in 1922. As recounted in *True Believer: The Rise and Fall of Stan Lee*, Abraham Riesman’s biography, Lee was a relentless self-promoter—a professional mythographer who sought to make himself a mythic figure, though he was modestly pleased to be described as the “Jewish Walt Disney.” Lee became famous in the mid-1960s and enjoyed maximum visibility during the confused final decades of his life (he died at age ninety-five in 2018), at precisely the time that his best-known characters—Spider-Man, the Avengers, and the Black Panther—bestrode the world’s movie screens like so many caped colossi, all long beyond his control.

The comic book industry was largely created by first-generation Americans. Lee’s Romanian immigrant father was a fabric cutter in New York City’s garment industry; the family struggled during the Great Depression. Skipping grades, the faster to finish his education and get a job, Lee attended DeWitt Clinton, a huge all-boys public high school in the Bronx that produced many distinguished alumni. Lionel Trilling, Irving Howe, A.M. Rosenthal, and William Kunstler were graduates. Lee’s classmates might have included the future playwright Paddy Chayefsky, the disgraced studio boss David Begelman, the *Get Smart* actor Don Adams, and (before he dropped out) the champion boxer Sugar Ray Robinson, as well as Richard Avedon and James Baldwin. Lee worked on the school literary magazine, less as a writer or editor than a self-appointed publicity director.

Three older Clinton graduates—Will Eisner and the creators of Batman, Bill Finger and Bob Kane—were pioneer comic book artists. Lee, who briefly attended City College, joined that business in his late teens, hired as a gofer by a family relation, Martin Goodman, the proprietor of a small outfit, Timely Comics. “The comic book industry, driven almost exclusively by volume, fashioned itself after that other bastion of industrious immigrant Jews—the garment business,” Liel Leibovitz writes in his biography *Stan Lee: A Life in Comics*. As with the garment industry, cartoonists were paid by the piece and often took their work home. Trafficking in fantasy, comics were also a bargain-basement version of the Hollywood dream factory. Goodman was a movie mogul writ small whose greatest star was Captain America, a two-fisted, anti-Nazi Superman knockoff created by the team of Joe Simon and Jack Kirby. Lee ran errands for Simon and Kirby, then in their twenties, entertaining or annoying them by playing the ocarina. “One day I made his life,” Simon later maintained. “I gave him a text page to do in *Captain America*.”

Thus Lee became a junior writer at Timely. He rose in importance after Simon and Kirby were fired by Goodman for secretly moonlighting for the competition, National (later DC) Comics. Kirby (born Jacob Kurtzberg), a tough Lower East Side street kid who would perfect the most explosive style in action comic books, always believed that Lee had reported them to Goodman. True or not, Lee benefited from their departure when he was installed, at age nineteen, as Timely’s new editor. Enlisting in the army some eighteen months later, he wrote training films and equipment manuals, designed posters and war-bond promotions, and received a crash course in advertising and publicity.

Back home after the war, Lee had little interest in remaining in comics. He imagined developing a line of educational textbooks but stuck with Timely, where he functioned as a competent editor, managing his artists and adopting or discarding various trends as the wartime superheroes were displaced by westerns, romance comics, “true crime” stories, high school antics, and tales of funny animals, as well as the horror comics associated with the EC company; these and other violent comics precipitated a congressional investigation and brought about the Comics Code and the revival of the clean-cut superheroes that had flourished during World War II. Lee married and moved to suburban Long Island, freelancing newspaper comic strips, advertising copy and possibly radio scripts, and self-publishing several books of humorously titled photographs.

“I was probably the ultimate, quintessential hack,” he later recalled. In the late 1950s Kirby returned to Timely, soon to be renamed Marvel, with enormous consequences for himself and the industry. Asked to develop a multi-character superhero series comparable to DC’s popular Justice League of America, Lee and Kirby came up with the Fantastic Four—a team consisting of the elastic Mr. Fantastic, Sue Storm aka the Invisible Girl, her kid brother the Human Torch, and an irascible, golem-like creature called the Thing. They saved not only the Earth but Marvel as well.

The first issue of *The Fantastic Four*, published in late 1961, was distinguished by Kirby’s dynamic page breakdowns, Lee’s overwrought writing, and a distinctive attitude. Superman was bland. These superheroes were recognizably human—a bickering, borderline dysfunctional unit that inspired a new sort of hyperbole. Leibovitz considers the first issue of *The* *Fantastic Four* to be a pop-cultural landmark, the comic book equivalent of *Citizen Kane* or *Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band*. In his history of American comic books, *From Aargh! to Zap!* (1991), the cartoonist Harvey Kurtzman—inventor of the self-referential comic *Mad* and no friend of Lee, with whom he had worked at Timely in the 1940s—more prosaically explained its novelty. *The Fantastic Four* “combined melodramatic punch with extravagant drawings in a way that no other comic book had ever done. Exploding as it did in a field almost completely lacking in vitality, [it] became a national sensation.” Given the group’s quarrelsomeness with one another and angsty ambivalence about their own superpowers, the series had aspects of soap opera. It also sparked an essentially unresolvable debate among fans as to whether Lee or Kirby was the principal author.

By the third issue, Lee was promoting *The Fantastic Four* as “The Greatest Comic Magazine in the World!!” It was followed in 1962 by *The Incredible Hulk*, featuring a nuclear scientist transformed, à la Jekyll and Hyde, into a tormented monster not unlike the Thing, and then by the brawny Norse god Thor. (Both were drawn and almost certainly conceived by Kirby, who identified with the Hulk and did more for Norse mythology than any artist since Fritz Lang, if not Richard Wagner.) They were followed by the most famous Marvel creation, Spider-Man, whose debut as the cover story in *Amazing Fantasy* was, according to Leibovitz, the best-selling comic book of the 1960s. DC’s lachrymose Superboy notwithstanding, previous superheroes, if not their sidekicks, were almost always grown men (or, more rarely, grown women). Spider-Man was a teenage nerd, an insecure, lower-middle-class kid given an arachnid power to scale buildings and trap villains in his web.

Spidey—as Lee encouraged fans to call him—was drawn in a relatively ascetic expressionist style and largely written by the reclusive Steve Ditko. Himself a teenaged comic book devotee as well as a follower of Ayn Rand, Ditko was also responsible for a second great hero, the master occultist Doctor Strange. Other characters arrived in 1963, including two more superhero ensembles, the mutant X-Men and the Avengers (whose members included the Hulk, Thor, and Iron Man), both drawn by Kirby and written (or perhaps outlined) by Lee. The so-called Marvel Method involved the brainstorming of a story idea between Lee and the artist, who turned these ideas into a storyboard, complete with notes for dialogue. Lee would then provide the narrative voice by editing and elaborating on the artist’s notes.

In addition to Kirby’s visual élan and Lee’s gift for facetious rhetorical embellishment, Marvel Comics had the benefit of Lee’s genius for promotion. Under his guidance, Marvel marketed not only their characters but the men who created them. Channeling the hyperventilating tone of Golden Age radio serials, Lee was Marvel’s spokesman, giving credit to and bestowing colorful soubriquets on the artists, including himself, at the beginning of each story. The first issue of *The Incredible Hulk* announced a new letters page. Marvel readers were encouraged to participate in what amounted to a mass cult that Lee called “the Merry Marvel Marching Society.” Such strategies were not new. Walt Disney had created a Mickey Mouse Club. *Mad* magazine and the EC horror comics that preceded it directly addressed their readers, presenting the staff writers and cartoonists as a wacky artistic collective. But Marvel fandom was promoted as something like a cause. Paradoxically, the comics were mass culture as counterculture.

As with the science fiction pulps of the 1930s, Marvel’s letters page inspired discussion and prompted explication. Declaring and addressing a “brand new breed of reader,” Marvel made heroic nerds and made nerds heroic. As noted by Matt Yockey in his introduction to the scholarly anthology *Make Ours Marvel*, “Marvel’s success in the 1960s was strongly dependent on its constant self-promotion as an iconoclastic publishing house, its stable of outsider heroes, and its address to readers as collaborators.” Moreover, the comic books were self-reflexive—Lee and Kirby both appeared as themselves in issue 10 of *The Fantastic Four*. In another issue, as the Thing and the Human Torch flee across a collapsing dam pursued by a deadly iron ball, the Thing jokes that “this is so stupid it could only happen in a comic book.”

Even more importantly, the comics were mutually referential. Early in his career, Spider-Man attempts to join the Fantastic Four (and is disappointed to learn that it is a nonprofit group). Marvel was less a series of discrete publications or superheroes than a virtual universe with its own laws and history. (Conveniently, most of the superheroes seemed to live in New York City.)

Lee had not just developed “a brilliant strategy for next-level storytelling,” Riesman writes, “but an even more brilliant marketing ploy.” Himself something of a silver surfer, catching and riding the next wave, Lee further benefited from a larger cultural shift, predicated on the canonization of the hitherto déclassé. Marvel’s rise coincided with a nostalgic appreciation (as well as a market) for old comic books. Comics were being extolled, not altogether ironically, as America’s authentic mythology. By the time a slightly younger Bronx boy, Jules Feiffer, published his coffee table book *The* *Great Comic Book Heroes* in 1965, American painters like Andy Warhol, Roy Lichtenstein, and Peter Saul had been taking comic book heroes as their subjects for several years. After Lichtenstein appropriated a Kirby panel from *The X-Men* for his 1963 painting *Image Duplicator*, Lee hopped on the bandwagon, proclaiming each new Marvel comic book “A Marvel Pop Art Production.” Meanwhile, Marvel’s revisionist attitude toward superhero-dom was vulgarized by the self-parodic *Batman* television show that ran for three seasons starting in 1966, its running joke predicated on the absurd spectacle of costumed super creatures capering about in the “real world.”

Batman may have been a Pop Art icon; Spider-Man et al. were something else. In April 1965 the writer Sally Kempton reported on the Marvel phenomenon in a prescient article in *The Village Voice*: “College students interpret Marvel Comics. A Cornell physics professor has pointed them out to his classes. Beatniks read them.” (True: a few years later, Michael McClure paraphrased an incantatory line—“Before you can pry any secrets from me, you must first find the real me”—from *Strange Tales* number 130 in his once-scandalous play *The Beard*. Another beat poet, Ira Cohen, incorporated the Silver Surfer in a handcrafted book of Tibetan woodcuts printed in Kathmandu.) From my perspective as a high school kid in Queens, Kempton’s piece gave the *Voice—*rather than Marvel*—*credibility, although I was less taken with my fellow Queens adolescent Spider-Man than with Ditko’s trippy “Master of Black Magic,” Doctor Strange, a denizen of Greenwich Village.

Some months later, *Esquire* magazine published a list of the twenty-eight top student icons, which included Spider-Man and the Incredible Hulk alongside Bob Dylan, Malcolm X, and Fidel Castro. The next year, *Esquire* ran eight student exegeses under the subheading “What did Dostoevski know? The true message is carried by Marvel Comics, twelve cents an ish.” The same issue had a piece on a more literary campus craze, namely the passionate enthusiasm for J.R.R. Tolkien’s Middle-earth, which was even more redolent of a reaction to what Max Weber had called the process of “disenchantment”—stripping the world of its gods and demons. (The fanatical devotion prompted by the late-Sixties television show *Star Trek* is another parallel development.) Without belaboring the point, one can understand the appeal of such fantastic cosmic struggles to those who had grown up in the shadow of nuclear Armageddon. Magical thinking, however campy, was a respite from rational “thinking about the unthinkable.” The same year that poets and beatniks attempted to levitate the Pentagon, the Berkeley-based protest-acid-rock group Country Joe and the Fish threatened to recruit the Fantastic Four and Doctor Strange to rid the world of LBJ. (Marvel being Marvel, the band was rewarded with a cameo in a 1969 issue of *Nick Fury, Agent of SHIELD*.)

Marvel also attracted the attention of European filmmakers. Both biographies recount the story of Federico Fellini sweeping into the Marvel offices (although Riesman churlishly maintains that Lee had no idea who Fellini was, and other Marvel employees supposedly had to alert him to the flamboyant foreigner’s identity). Alain Resnais, a more serious fan not just of Marvel but of comics in general, was keen to collaborate with Lee. The two worked on several projects, including an apocalyptic interplanetary romance and ecological parable involving a garbage heap come to life. Neither came to fruition, but Resnais did give Lee a cameo in his segment of *L’An 01*, a 1973 anthology film based on the work of the French cartoonist Gébé, the editor in chief of *Charlie Hebdo*. This was the first but not the last of Lee’s on-screen appearances.

Lee was a friendly person, and performing was central to his persona. Indeed, after Ditko left Marvel in 1966 and Kirby defected to DC four years later, the only character Lee continued to develop was “Stan Lee” (by then his legal name). He made scores of campus appearances and in January 1972 booked himself into Carnegie Hall for a one-night-only live show. Riesman describes the event, conceived as a tribute to Lee’s genius, as a humiliating disaster in which Marvel employees were drafted to dance in Fantastic Four costumes while artists drew and the great man read aloud. Despite prompting, the bored audience declined to join him in singing “The Merry Marvel Marching Song.” Leibovitz prefers to concentrate on the poem Lee wrote for the occasion and recited onstage with his wife and daughter, an ambitious doggerel dithyramb called “God Woke” that pondered the relationship between a creator and his creations.

Riesman and Leibovitz cover much the same ground, but to read their books simultaneously is to invite whiplash. Leibovitz, who draws heavily on Lee’s autobiographical writing, is worshipful. Riesman is relentlessly debunking, if not desecrating. Leibovitz credits Lee with reawakening “America’s moral imagination.” Riesman hammers on the notion of Lee as a credit thief. Published as part of Yale’s Jewish Lives series, Leibovitz’s book presents Lee as the contemporary equivalent of Harold Bloom’s J: Spider-Man is “a direct descendant” of Cain, Mr. Fantastic is “a nuclear age Hasid,” Iron Man embodies “a stern reminder, drawn from the core of Jewish theology, that redemption comes only when human beings get together and pursue common goals.” With regard to *The Fantastic Four*, Leibovitz writes, “anyone with even a hint of familiarity with the Bible would recognize the pattern of the flawed and conflicted leaders wrestling with their stiff-necked people.” Lee’s comic books are like Bob Dylan’s songs, “an ongoing dialogue with the artist that mirrors the ancient Talmudic logic of constant conversation.”

Riesman makes no such elevated claims, although he may be said to contribute to the conversation when he notes that, while Lee’s immigrant parents were observant Jews, Lee himself “felt no kinship with the Jewish community and was allergic to the very idea of religion.” Riesman is most insistent in questioning Lee’s integrity, specifically with regard to Kirby, considering it “very possible, maybe even probable, that the characters and plots Stan was famous for all sprang from the brain and pen of Kirby,” adding that “it’s already provable that Stan lied blatantly and often about Kirby’s contribution to their comics together.”

Leibovitz attributes a *pintele yid* to Kirby as well, writing that his 1940s creation Captain America “suggests a deeply Jewish sensibility coming to the fore, a sensibility rarely before seen in comics,” while Riesman waxes biblical in cautioning that the reasonable assumption that Lee and Kirby were jointly responsible for the creation of the Fantastic Four and other Marvel characters is a “Solomonic splitting of the baby.” Perhaps the two biographies should switch titles. *Stan Lee: A Life in Comics* is the work of an acolyte, while *True Believer*, titled after Lee’s term of address for Marvel fans, has the thunderous sweep of a Kirby epic, beginning with the Romanian pogrom that traumatized Lee’s young father and ending with the pitiful *Götterdämmerung* of Lee’s last quarter-century.

*True Believer*’s final third is dedicated to this slow cataclysm. The comic book market collapsed in 1995. Marvel declared Chapter 11 bankruptcy and Lee retired as publisher, remaining as chairman emeritus with an annual salary of $1 million. In 1998 he created Stan Lee Media (SLM) in association with a practiced con artist and convicted felon named Peter Paul, who promoted SLM as “the successor to Disney as a global lifestyle-brand content creator, producer, marketing and distribution company.” Paul was sketchy, but so was Lee, who essentially sold his own intellectual property twice, assigning his work to SLM in perpetuity even while negotiating a deal with Marvel to forgo the same rights, titles, and interests.

As the titular head of SLM, Lee created a new fan club, SCUZZLE, and brainstormed a cartoon character, Stan’s Evil Clone. He took warm but fruitless meetings with fellow pop luminaries like Michael Jackson and Francis Ford Coppola as SLM entertained objectively terrible plans to expand into India, enter a partnership with professional wrestling, promote SCUZZLE features like “the Grooviest Girl-Friend of the Week,” and make movies about supermodels. “There was always a deal pending,” one SLM employee told Riesman, “but the deals never materialized.” One can view this as a pathetic attempt at what Warhol called “business art” or perhaps the failure of Lee’s magic touch. Kirby compared Lee to Sammy Glick, the unscrupulous go-getter of Budd Schulberg’s Hollywood novel *What Makes Sammy Run?* But in his final years, Lee seems more like Arthur Miller’s tragic Willy Loman, a salesman desperate to be liked.

Lee was SLM’s single greatest asset, appearing at comic conventions where fans lined up for hours to buy his autograph at $100 a scrawl. Ethical problems arose once Paul became involved in campaign fundraising for Al Gore and Hillary Clinton, and his record was exposed by a *Washington Post* gossip columnist. Recapitalization proved impossible. SLM suffered from the dot-com contraction and accusations of stock manipulation. By 2001 Paul was out and SLM gave way to the limited liability corporation POW (for “purveyors of wonder”), an entity Riesman bluntly describes as “a largely criminal enterprise” accused of “routinely ripping off investors, lying to shareholders, entering the stock market through an illegitimate merger, and committing bankruptcy fraud.” Even so, Lee continued hatching ideas.

Taken as a whole, POW’s proposals suggest nothing so much as the nightmarish mass-cultural mishmash parodied in Richard Kelly’s mock comic book film *Southland Tales*. There was *Stripperella*, an animated cartoon with an ecdysiast secret agent voiced by Pamela Anderson, and a superhero comic starring Ringo Starr. Lee variously floated alliances with Hugh Hefner (*Hef’s Superbunnies*), Arnold Schwarzenegger, and the National Football League. He endorsed a Stan Lee YouTube channel, a new iteration of the Fantastic Four to be called *Stan Lee’s Mighty 7*, and a Stan Lee Signature Cologne. Most were nonstarters, the rest were failures—a stark reminder that Lee’s most creative period had been the early 1960s, when, working with Kirby and Ditko, he had developed the Marvel Method.

Still, the brand proved impervious. A flurry of movies based on Marvel characters became hits, notably *X-Men* (2000) and *Spider-Man* (2002). Lee had no stake in these, yet thanks to his cameo appearances in subsequent Marvel movies, his attendance at their red-carpet premieres, and his presence at comic book conventions, he would be more celebrated and visible than ever—even though he sued first Marvel and then POW, and his last years were clouded with allegations of elder abuse by caretakers and hangers-on, including his daughter.

Stan Lee’s life was nearly over, yet his time had come. There is a sense in which the so-called Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) is the culmination of a trend that is close to half a century old. Established action genres like westerns, war movies, and private-eye films had pretty much lost their relevance by the end of the 1970s. Meanwhile, beginning with *Jaws* and *Star Wars* in the mid-1970s, Hollywood became increasingly dependent on blockbusters and franchises, as well as international audiences. The deal was sealed twenty years later with the advent of computer-generated imagery in *Jurassic Park* and the Pixar animation *Toy Story*. The cultural cynicism associated with Vietnam and Watergate subsided. Reenchantment—the restoration of the ancient world’s gods and demons—ruled. Fantasy qua fantasy, which is to say the magic of special effects, was the movie industry’s new reality. Harry Potter, Tolkien adaptations, computer animations, and revivals of Superman and Batman dominated the box office for the first dozen years of the new millennium.

In 2009 the Walt Disney Company purchased Marvel for $4 billion (just over half of what the company paid for Pixar, although roughly the amount Disney would, three years later, pay George Lucas for the *Star Wars* franchise) and set about elaborating Marvel’s nascent “cinematic universe,” the movie equivalent of the cross-referenced comic books and self-enclosed world that made Marvel’s reputation. The MCU fully arrived with *The Avengers*, the box office champion of 2012 and, no less significantly, the first Hollywood production since the events of September 11, 2001, to revel in the truly spectacular, wholesale destruction of Manhattan. Two subsequent MCU productions, *Avengers: Infinity War* and *Black Panther*, were the number one and two top-grossing films of 2018, the year Lee died.

Perhaps Lee *was* the Jewish Walt Disney, an internationally known brand whose associated characters lived on beyond the life of their skillful promoter. But a half-century after his death, Disney represented much more than Mickey Mouse or Disneyland. As the Disney Company all but cornered the market in American popular culture—something perhaps beyond Lee’s wildest imaginings—it became so voracious that, like the planet-devouring Galactus, it swallowed the Marvel universe whole.

*From The New York Review of Books, August 19, 2021*

**Uncritical Race Theory**

By: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

Let me say at the outset that Critical Race Theory is a dangerous, completely unsubstantiated pseudo theory of race that has now become dogma in academia. It, along with the equally false theory of Intersectionality, are the most serious threats to the sanity and unity of the United States since the Civil War. They are responsible for the current woke idea that the USA is systemically racist. And it is responsible for the increase in Jew-hatred that is discriminating against Jewish students and businesses across the country. And yet to dare to say so invites unbelievable counterattacks that impugn one’s integrity, honesty, and humanity.

The USA, like any other country, has its rich, poor, privileged, and disadvantaged, of all races and colors.  Of course, each country in its own way and degree. There are huge gaps between the rich and the poor and it is a problem that must be taken seriously. But it will not be achieved by stressing victimhood, any more than it has solved the Palestinian problem.

The theory claims that all whites are systematic racist and colonial oppressors and responsible for all the ills that have befallen the black community. This then links to the theory that all oppressed peoples share a common disadvantage and suffer in precisely the same way by similar forces. Yet one is prepared to lump Islamophobia with racism and sexism on what basis do they exclude anti-Semitism except as they define it. As if Muslims or Blacks would accept a Jew defining them?  And to make matters worse these misplaced and inaccurate theories have precipitated the largest amount of Jew-Hatred since Hitler and Stalin.

Every single, empire, every people black, white, Christian, Muslim, Asian and Western, and many years ago Israelite, has at some stage been colonial and oppressive to some degree. Some have managed to overcome disadvantages by being proactive. Others have fallen back on dependency and made a virtue out of failure.

There are pockets of racism. But does this mean that every institution in the USA is staffed by people who hate and discriminate against minorities or majorities?  The changes that have taken place over the past fifty years have been enormous. Huge swathes of the Black population are now wealthy members of the middle and upper classes right up to the Presidency. How can the USA be systematically racist if it voted twice for Obama and where black men and women are heads of some of the biggest companies and institutions in the land?

It is true that the promises made at the time of Independence, the Civil War, and the Second World War, to all citizens, were not kept and it took time until they were forbidden and prosecuted legally. Just as progress advanced slowly and unevenly after Washington, Abe Lincoln, Roosevelt, Kennedy, and L.B.J. Johnson. Public attitudes often take too long to catch up with morality.

Jim Crow, practical segregation into ghettos with limited funding and opportunity have been exacerbated by penal laws and systems from legislators, including black ones, struggling with crime, drugs, and integration, which have ended up targeting minorities. But the USA now, overwhelmingly and despite pockets of resistance, accepts integration, inter-marriage, and embraces the philosophy of rectification. Instead of trying to be a melting pot, it has come to accept and even encourage minorities to adhere to and celebrate their own cultures even when they either help or inhibit advancement.

The challenge is how to address poverty and disadvantage. But one cannot treat all minorities as poor and all the same. Is the black son of a Nigerian prince not privileged? Should he be given a place at Harvard rather than a poor white or a brilliant Asian? Should black millionaires be given reparations? Some cultures and people within societies respond violently to disadvantage and prejudice and others do not. Should we reward them both in the same way? Then why be law-abiding if one can get away with crimes because of one’s race? All blanket solutions have failed. One cannot expect all humans to be the same. Only civil law can and should treat everyone as equal. And black mayors have been no more or less successful than white ones.

The issue is not confined to the USA. In Britain, a Government Commission to examine white privilege was set up, and has it has just reported back. It was headed by, Tony Sewell, born in London to Jamaican immigrants in 1957 of African origin.

Mr. Sewell reminds us of how racist Britain was in the 1950s. There were signs in windows with rooms to let saying “**No Dogs, Jews or Blacks**.” But now, fifty years later, he says “Britain has come a long way.” It has absorbed a higher proportion of immigrants from all around the world, of all races and religions, than in any century in its history.

I recommend the film series “**Small Axe**” by Steve McQueen (no, not the Hollywood actor), which graphically describes the racism endured in the 1950s by Caribbean immigrants. Racism in the UK police continued into the nineties. But things are continually improving.

Sewell took a fact-based, as opposed to an activist political approach to the issue now and avoided the pitfall of seeing it through the prism of white advantage. Precisely because there are poorer disadvantaged whites too. And because there are differences between all racial and ethnic groups in education, health, prosperity, and crime often influenced by culture, geography, country of origin, wealth, and education.

He argued forcibly that Britain, for all its limitations, is not institutionally racist and where it discovers any example of it, the system sets out to combat it. In return for his objectivity, he has been abused by all those NGOs and academics who have a vested interest and make a living out of racism. He has been called a race traitor, an Uncle Tom, a Nazi propagandist, and a member of the KKK. Anyone who tries to modulate the narrative is condemned as racist. And in the USA, any such opinion automatically condemns one to suffer retaliation from the woke mob.

I was brought up in a house where, as Martin Luther King said, people “were not judged by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character.” I never heard a word from my parents disparaging anyone of a different race or color. What I must apologize for I cannot comprehend. And I refuse to. But I do strongly insist on the removal of anyone who is racist from any public position whatsoever. But if we are really honest, we should do this to those who hate Jews too. But by now we Jews know this will not happen.

The politicization of racism has become a scam to raise huge amounts for vested interests. It is all about money and has less to do with truth. America for all that it has done positively for so many, instead of being a source of pride is excoriated. Patriotism, once its strength is now seen as a betrayal. This campaign smacks of Marxist dogma, doublespeak, and dishonesty. Every society including our own has been guilty in some way of prejudice and preferences. The challenge is how to improve and repair, positively, not negatively. To look fairly at the abuses on all sides. No one is perfect.

 I sense a reaction bubbling up beneath the surface. I hope I am right. Although the running dogs of Critical Race Theory will do whatever they can to suppress it. The fact is that forcing people to think that there is only one way to think, has never succeeded in the long term. In the end, it is our duty to change laws where necessary. That is what matters not, censorship. If Safe Spaces are necessary, they should exist for everyone, including Jews, not only the “holier than thou.”

*From author website, July 23, 2021*

**Ayaan Hirsi Ali's "Prey": Condemning Islam, Glorifying the West**

By: Sonja Zekri

Under fire for plagiarism, Germany's leader of the Green Party Annalena Baerbock took a defensive tone, insisting that her writing wasn’t "non-fiction". Non-fiction, it is generally agreed, requires certain standards as far as due diligence and verifiability are concerned. Similarly, Ayaan Hirsi Ali’s latest book cannot be considered a work of non-fiction. So what is it that she’s written?

Her footnotes, at least, are without reproach. Theystretch to fifty pages at the back of *Prey*, including references to Samuel Huntington, Alice Schwarzer and Kamel Daoud. Ali makes frequent reference to her own speeches. She has taken great pains; the subject is clearly important to her.

Born in Somalia in 1969, [Ayaan Hirsi Ali](https://en.qantara.de/content/ayaan-hirsi-ali-the-only-real-muslim) escaped a forced marriage by fleeing to the Netherlands, where [her collaborator on the 2004 film *Submission,* Dutch director Theo van Gogh was later murdered by a Salafist.](https://en.qantara.de/content/interview-khaled-choukat-the-murder-of-van-gogh-was-a-real-catastrophe-for-us)She now lives in the United States. She is subject to police protection and is still concerned above all with one issue: [the danger posed to the West by Islam](https://en.qantara.de/content/europe-germany-and-abendland-angst-in-the-name-of-christendom) or, more precisely, the danger posed to Western women by Muslim men. *Prey* is an update following the influx of refugees in 2015. Put bluntly, Ali’s thesis is "everything that was bad has grown worse since 2015".

**Statistics carry little weight when sloppily applied**

Much that you might recognise from similar titles can be found in this book: lamenting the dangerous naivety of the West, an attitude of concerned admonishment, the advantage of knowledge as a Muslim insider, and, of course, statistics. But page-long notes do not guarantee scientific validity, just as statistics carry little weight when sloppily applied.

Ali begins with AfD politician Beatrix von Storch’s claim that illegal immigrants committed 447 murders in Germany in 2017. The Federal Ministry of the Interior has only noted 27 murders or attempted murders by illegal immigrants, writes Ali, but "if you include all those seeking asylum and refugees", the number actually amounts to 447. Of course, if you counted all crimes committed by all migrants to the country since the currency reform, you could certainly come to an even more alarming conclusion.

A study carried out by the Federal Ministry for Families in 2004 examining [violence against women](https://en.qantara.de/topics/sexism-and-violence-against-women) found that Turkish and Eastern European women were subjected to physical violence with particular frequency. Ali’s conclusion on the matter is as follows: "Even before the 'mass migration' from 2009 to 2018, the violence exacted upon women in the Muslim population in Germany was cause for concern". And what about the women from Eastern Europe?

 In 2005, the probability of an immigrant in Sweden being suspected of a sexual offence was five times higher than that of a 'native' Swede. But the question as to what degree of this translates to actual crimes, and what is pure prejudice, is something Ali neglects to touch on.

One could continue in this vein, straightening out all the crooked curves, laying down selective evidence provided by statistics piece by piece, if the methodological deficiencies weren’t similarly alarming elsewhere. There may be a certain logic to using Tubingen's mayor Boris Palmer as key witness for 'problem cases' among asylum seekers ex officio ("They have no respect and feel no gratitude towards German society").

But what proof are the observations of a pensioner who makes a hobby of attending court proceedings in Munich and claims that "lots of asylum seekers and refugees appear in court charged with violent assault"? How credible is the testimony of an Afghan ex-police officer quoting a Syrian man who is supposed to have said, "Someone should keep an eye on us [immigrants] (…). We can’t handle this much freedom"?

**Injustice towards women only matters when Muslims are involved**

For [Ali](https://en.qantara.de/content/ayaan-hirsi-alis-controversial-theories-on-islam-hailed-as-a-female-luther), that’s all there is to say. The influx of "unmonitored" Muslim immigrants – "uninhibited young men" – endangers the West’s accomplishments for women, Ali claims, such as equal rights, social mobility and visibility in the public sphere. Ali’s verdict on the Islamic world is scathing, and her essentialism is wide-reaching, treating the centuries-old schools of Islam as if they have undergone no development in any country anywhere; it is misleading that she presents countries such as [Saudi Arabia](https://en.qantara.de/dossier/saudi-arabia) and [Iran](https://en.qantara.de/dossier/iran) not as extremes, but as future scenarios for Europe, glorifying Western society as she does so.

Her enthusiasm is sometimes comical. 39-year old Oldenburger, Nicola, describes herself as a previously open and trusting person, but claims that, after unpleasant encounters with Muslims, she has begun carrying pepper spray in her bag and avoiding certain routes. Ali meets Nicola "in her beautiful living room", dressed in a floral-patterned blouse, her chestnut hair "piled up in a chignon", her young son playing on the floor. They "seemed to me like the epitome of modern Europeans: the husband participates in raising the children and supports his wife’s career," Ali writes. Make what you will of white mainstream society – it doesn’t merit this level of kitsch.

The worst thing about Ali’s book, however, is not passages like these, nor her forays into Islamic theology, nor her supposed discovery of a "conspiracy of silence" when it comes to the danger posed by Muslim men – as if this were actually a taboo, as if the most liberal women in Germany could claim not to have been gripped by various fears for some time now. No, the worst thing about *Prey* is its misogyny.

The [Me Too](https://en.qantara.de/content/metoo-and-muslim-women-danish-author-sara-omar-breaking-taboos-for-muslim-women) movement? Too much noise about "the misdeeds of a few hundred prominent men". Feminist efforts to "end the patriarchy" or achieve equality in the labour market? Merely "elite concerns". Only Ayaan Hirsi Ali herself knows about "the daily life of the average woman", but she doesn’t want to mock the feminists of today, she wants "to wake them up", a desire somewhat reminiscent of the sense of mission exhibited by conspiracy theorists.

First and foremost, Ali writes[, all women must have the right](https://en.qantara.de/dossier/gender) to live free from violence, and one might agree wholeheartedly, if she didn’t flagrantly leave out the greatest danger women face: every day in Germany, a man will attempt to kill his wife, girlfriend or former partner and this is consistent across all of society, all classes, religions and ethnic groups.

Experts agree that attention given to crimes is greater if the perpetrator is Muslim, [a refugee or a migrant](https://en.qantara.de/dossier/migration-in-germany) and the crime can then be interpreted as an expression of a "backwards, patriarchal culture". If the perpetrators or victims are of German descent, however, the act of femicide is romanticised; authorities, legal figures and the media speak of a "family tragedy", "domestic violence", and "crimes of passion". As politologist Mokika Schroettle writes, "culture is usually just the culture of others".

Ali’s interpretation of events bears the marks of an obsession. Injustices perpetrated against women only matter to her if Muslims are involved. All other violent assaults and disadvantages are not worth mentioning when measured against the brilliant accomplishments of the West. It also serves to solidify power structures. It’s not pleasant, but nor is it uncommon for women to engage in misogynistic politics.

Ayaan Hirsi Ali does not want to be reduced to her life story; her demands are not personal, but universal. This eliminates any mitigating circumstances. *Prey* is an outrage, though admittedly a lucrative one. There is a huge market for books that stoke the furore of criticisms of Islam.

To put this theory to the test, may I suggest another two titles which could prove popular with the public: "Why Muslims are to blame for climate change" and "Islam makes you fat".

*From Qantara, July 23, 2021*

**How Racist Is America?**

By: David Brooks

One question lingers amid all the debates about critical race theory: How racist is this land? Anybody with eyes to see and ears to hear knows about the oppression of the Native Americans, about slavery and Jim Crow. But does that mean that America is even now a white supremacist nation, that whiteness is a cancer that leads to oppression for other groups? Or is racism mostly a part of America’s past, something we’ve largely overcome?

There are many ways to answer these questions. The most important is by having honest conversations with the people directly affected. But another is by asking: How high are the barriers to opportunity for different groups? Do different groups have a fair shot at the American dream? This approach isn’t perfect, but at least it points us to empirical data rather than just theory and supposition.

When we apply this lens to the African American experience we see that barriers to opportunity are still very high. The income gap separating white and Black families was basically [as big in 2016 as it was in 1968](https://www.cnn.com/2020/07/05/politics/inequality-black-americans-civil-rights-economic-progress/index.html). The wealth gap separating white and Black households [grew even bigger](https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2020/06/04/economic-divide-black-households/) between those years. Black adults are over [16 times more likely](https://www.brookings.edu/research/long-shadows-the-black-white-gap-in-multigenerational-poverty/) to be in families with three generations of poverty than white adults.

Research shows the role racism plays in perpetuating these disparities. When, in 2004, researchers sent equally qualified white and Black applicants to job interviews in New York City, dressed them similarly and gave them similar things to say, [Black applicants got half as many callbacks or job offers](https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2915472/) as whites.

When you look at the data about African Americans, the legacies of slavery and segregation and the effects of racism are everywhere. The phrase “systemic racism” aptly fits the reality you see — a set of structures, like redlining, that have a devastating effect on Black wealth and opportunities. Racism is not something we are gently moving past; it’s pervasive. It seems obvious that this reality should be taught in every school.

Does this mean that America is white supremacist, a shameful nation, that the American dream is just white privilege? Well, let’s take a look at the data for different immigrant groups. When you turn your gaze here, the barriers don’t seem as high. For example, as Bloomberg’s Noah Smith [pointed out](https://noahpinion.substack.com/p/hispanic-voters-and-the-american) recently on his Substack page, Hispanic American incomes rose faster in recent years than those of any other major group in America. Forty-five percent of Hispanics who grew up in poverty made it to the [middle class or higher](https://money.cnn.com/2018/06/22/news/economy/hispanic-social-mobility/index.html), comparable to the mobility rate for whites.

Hispanics have lately made astounding gains in education. In 2000, more than 30 percent of Hispanics dropped out of high school. By 2016, only 10 percent did. In 1999, a third of Hispanics age 18 to 24 were in college; now, nearly half are. Hispanic college enrollment rates [surpassed](https://www.bloomberg.com/opinion/articles/2020-10-06/hispanic-american-incomes-rising-faster-than-any-other-group-s) white enrollment rates in 2012.

The Hispanic experience in America is beginning to look similar to the experience of Irish Americans or Italian Americans or other past immigrant groups — a period of struggle followed by integration into the middle class.

A [study](https://scholar.princeton.edu/sites/default/files/lboustan/files/w26408.pdf) by scholars from Princeton, Stanford and the University of California at Davis found that today’s children of immigrants are no slower to move up to the middle class than the children of immigrants 100 years ago. It almost doesn’t matter whether their parents came from countries from which immigrants are mainly fleeing misery and poverty, or from countries from which immigrants often arrive with marketable skills, children of poor immigrants have higher rates of upward mobility than the children of the native-born.

This economic success obviously does not mean immigrant groups do not face hardship, bias and exploitation. Almost every immigrant group in American history has faced that. It just means that education and mobility can help overcome some of the effects of this bias. According to that same study, immigrant groups are largely doing well because they come to places where opportunity is plentiful. They are not so much earning more than those around them, but earning more along with those around them.

Economic progress is one thing. What about cultural integration?

A landmark 2015 [report](https://www.nap.edu/catalog/21746/the-integration-of-immigrants-into-american-society) from the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine found that the lives of immigrants and their children are converging with those of their native-born neighbors, in good ways and bad. This pattern applies to how well educated they are, where they live, what language they speak, how their health is and how they organize their families. A [study](https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0002716219856878?journalCode=anna) by a Brown University sociologist, for example, found that Mexican immigrants are learning English at increasingly higher rates and growing less isolated from non-Mexican Americans.

Rising intermarriage rates are one product of this integration. According to a 2017 Pew Research Center [report](https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2017/05/18/1-trends-and-patterns-in-intermarriage/), about 29 percent of Asian American newlyweds are married to someone of a different race or ethnicity, along with 27 percent of Hispanic newlyweds. The intermarriage rates for white and Black people have roughly tripled since 1980. More than 35 percent of Americans say that one of their “close” kin is of a different race.

Blending identities is another sign of this integration. There was an idea going around a few years ago that America was about to become a majority-minority country. This would be true only if you rigidly divided Americans into white and (with one drop of nonwhite blood) nonwhite categories.

But real humans are very quick to adopt multiple and shifting racial identities. The researchers Richard Alba, Morris Levy and Dowell Myers suggest 52 percent of the people who self-categorize as nonwhite in the Census Bureau’s projections for America’s 2060 racial makeup will also think of themselves as white. Forty percent of those who self-categorized as white will also claim minority racial identity.

In an [essay](https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2021/06/myth-majority-minority-america/619190/) for The Atlantic, they conclude: “Speculating about whether America will have a white majority by the mid-21st century makes little sense, because the social meanings of white and nonwhite are rapidly shifting. The sharp distinction between these categories will apply to many fewer Americans.”

When you look at the data across groups, a few points stand out.

First, you can see why some people have issues with the phrase “people of color.” How could a category that covers a vast majority of all human beings have much meaning? The groups that the phrase attempts to bring together have different experiences and even face different kinds of bias. Perhaps this phrase covers over real identities instead of illuminating them.

Writing in GQ, Damon Young [argues](https://www.gq.com/story/author-damon-young-on-bipoc-phrasing) that the term “people of color” has become a linguistic gesture, “shorthand for white people uncomfortable with just saying ‘Black.’” In The New Yorker, E. Tammy Kim [argues](https://www.newyorker.com/news/annals-of-activism/the-perils-of-people-of-color), “‘People of color,’ by grouping all nonwhites in the United States, if not the world, fails to capture the disproportionate per-capita harm to Blacks at the hands of the state.”

Second, it’s certainly time to dump the replacement theory that has been so popular with Tucker Carlson and the far right — the idea that all these foreigners are coming to take over the country. This is an idea that [panics a lot of whites](https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0956797614527113) and helped elect Donald Trump, but it’s not true. In truth, immigrants blend with the current inhabitants, keeping parts of their earlier identities and adopting parts of their new identities. This has been happening for hundreds of years, and it is still happening. This kind of intermingling of groups is not replacing America, it is America.

Finally, it may not be accurate to say that America can be neatly divided into rival ethnic camps, locked in zero-sum conflict with each other. The real story is more about blending and fluidity. I’m just one guy with one (white) point of view. But my reading of the historical record suggests groups do well by mingling with everybody else while keeping some of their own distinct identities and cultures. “Integration without assimilation” is how Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks put it.

**The interwoven reality of America defies simple binaries of white versus nonwhite. Over the last several years Raj Chetty and his team at Opportunity Insights have done much of the most celebrated work on income mobility. They find that, indeed, Black Americans and Native Americans have** [**much lower rates of mobility**](https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2018/3/21/17139300/economic-mobility-study-race-black-white-women-men-incarceration-income-chetty-hendren-jones-porter) **because of historic discrimination.**

But Chetty’s team emphasizes that these gaps are not immutable. If, for example, you use housing vouchers and other grants to help people move to high-opportunity neighborhoods with low poverty rates, low racial bias and more fathers in the neighborhoods, then you can help people of all races lead lives with higher incomes and lower rates of incarceration as adults.

The reality of America encompasses both the truth about structural racism and the truth that America is a land of opportunity for an astounding diversity of groups from around the world. There’s no way to simplify that complexity.

Last week I saw a young Black woman wearing a T-shirt that read, “I am my ancestors’ wildest dreams.” I took her message as a statement of defiance, pride, determination and hope. If you can keep discordant emotions like that in your head, you can get a feel for this discordant land.

*From The New York Times, July 23, 2021*

**What’s Ripping American Families Apart?**

By: David Brooks

At least 27 percent of Americans are [estranged](https://news.cornell.edu/stories/2020/09/pillemer-family-estrangement-problem-hiding-plain-sight) from a member of their own family, and [research suggests](http://jpbsnet.com/journals/jpbs/Vol_3_No_2_December_2015/4.pdf) about 40 percent of Americans have experienced estrangement at some point.

The most common form of estrangement is between adult children and one or both parents — a cut usually initiated by the child. A [study](https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4507812/) published in 2010 found that parents in the U.S. are about twice as likely to be in a contentious relationship with their adult children as parents in Israel, Germany, England and Spain.

The Cornell sociologist Karl Pillemer, author of “Fault Lines: Fractured Families and How to Mend Them,” writes that the children in these cases often cite harsh parenting, parental favoritism, divorce and poor and increasingly hostile communication often culminating in a volcanic event. As one woman [told Salon](https://www.salon.com/2017/05/14/im-an-orphan-even-though-my-mothers-still-alive/): “I have someone out to get me, and it’s my mother. My part of being a good mom has been getting my son away from mine.”

The parents in these cases are often completely bewildered by the accusations. They often remember a totally different childhood home and accuse their children of rewriting what happened. As one cutoff couple [told](https://aeon.co/essays/modern-culture-blames-parents-for-forces-beyond-their-control) the psychologist Joshua Coleman: “Emotional abuse? We gave our child everything. We read every parenting book under the sun, took her on wonderful vacations, went to all of her sporting events.”

Part of the misunderstanding derives from the truth that we all construct our own realities, but part of the problem, as Nick Haslam of the University of Melbourne has suggested, is there seems to be a generational shift in what constitutes abuse. Practices that seemed like normal parenting to one generation are conceptualized as abusive, overbearing and traumatizing to another.

There’s a lot of real emotional abuse out there, but as Coleman put it in an [essay](https://www.theatlantic.com/family/archive/2021/01/why-parents-and-kids-get-estranged/617612/) in The Atlantic, “My recent research — and my clinical work over the past four decades — has shown me that you can be a conscientious parent and your kid may still want nothing to do with you when they’re older.”

Either way, there’s a lot of agony for all concerned. The children feel they have to live with the legacy of an abusive childhood. The parents feel rejected by the person they love most in the world, their own child, and they are powerless to do anything about it. There’s anger, grief and depression on all sides — painful holidays and birthdays — plus, the next generation often grows up without knowing their grandparents.

No one even thought to measure family estrangement until relatively recently. Coleman, the author of “Rules of Estrangement,” argues that a more individualistic culture has meant that the function of family has changed. Once it was seen as a bond of mutual duty and obligation, and now it is often seen as a launchpad for personal fulfillment. There’s more permission to cut off people who seem toxic in your life.

Becca Bland, founder of the British support and advocacy group Stand Alone, told the BBC: “Now I can put my needs first rather than trying to fix things beyond my control. But, yes, I’m angry I didn’t get the mother I wanted.”

The meritocracy and high-pressure parenting are also implicated here. Parents, [especially among the upper-educated set](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/posteverything/wp/2019/02/22/feature/how-economic-inequality-gives-rise-to-hyper-parenting/), are investing more time and effort in their kids. A 2012 [survey](https://iasculture.org/research/publications/culture-american-families-national-survey) from the Institute for Advanced Studies in Culture found that almost three-quarters of parents of school-age kids said they eventually want to become their children’s best friend.

Some kids seem to think they need to cut off their parents just to have their own life. “My mom is really needy and I just don’t need that in my life,” one Ivy League grad told Coleman. In other cases, children may be blaming their parents for the fact that they are not succeeding as they had hoped — it’s Mom and Dad who screwed me up.

I write about this phenomenon here because it feels like a piece of what seems to be the psychological unraveling of America, which has become an emerging theme of this column. Terrible trends are everywhere. Major depression rates among youths aged 12 to 17 rose by almost 63 percent between 2013 and 2016. American suicide rates increased by 33 percent between 1999 and 2019. The percentage of Americans who say they have no close friends has quadrupled since 1990, according to the Survey Center on American Life. Fifty-four percent of Americans report sometimes or always feeling that no one knows them well, according to a 2018 Ipsos survey.

I confess, I don’t understand what’s causing this. But social pain and vulnerability are affecting everything: our families, schools, politics and even our sports.

A friend notes that politics has begun to feel like an arena where many people can process and regulate their emotional turmoil indirectly. Anxiety, depression and anger are hard to deal with within the tangled intimacy of family life. But political tribalism becomes a mechanism with which people can shore themselves up, vanquish shame, fight for righteousness and find a sense of belonging.

People who feel betrayed will lash out at someone if there is no one there to help them process their underlying hurt. As the Franciscan friar Richard Rohr wisely wrote, if we do not transform our pain, we will most assuredly transmit it.

*From The New York Times, July 30, 2021*

**Can the Left Regulate Sex?**

By: Ross Douthat

There is a harrowing [story](https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2021/07/26/the-german-experiment-that-placed-foster-children-with-pedophiles) in The New Yorker that everyone should grit their teeth and read. Written by Rachel Aviv, it tells the story of how a respected German psychologist named Helmut Kentler decided to foster neglected children with pedophiles, how he ran this experiment with government support for decades after the 1960s, and how it created exactly the kind of hells you would expect.

It seems almost impossible that this really happened. But the past is another country, and Aviv explains with bracing clarity how the context of the 1960s and 1970s made the experiment entirely plausible. The psychological theory of the Sexual Revolution, in which strict sexual rules imposed neurosis while liberation offered wholeness, was embraced with particular fervor in Germany, because the old order was associated not just with prudery but with fascism and Auschwitz.

If traditional sexual taboos had molded the men who built the gas chambers, then no taboos could be permitted to endure. If the old human nature had ended in fascism, then the answer was a new human nature — embodied, in Aviv’s account, by “experimental day-care centers, where children were encouraged to be naked and to explore one another’s bodies,” or appeals from Germany’s Green Party to end the “oppression of children’s sexuality,” or Kentler’s bold idea that sex with one’s foster children could be a form of love and care.

All this was part of a wider Western mood, distilled in the slogan of May 1968: It is forbidden to forbid. In those years famous French intellectuals [petitioned](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2001/feb/24/jonhenley) to decriminalize pedophilia, while America had its own squalid forms of predation, whether in rock-groupie culture or Roman Polanski’s Hollywood. But Aviv’s story suggests that the Germans, never a culture for half-measures, took these ideas toward a particular extreme.

That today the readers of an impeccably progressive magazine recoil in horror from that extreme is, among other things, proof that revolutions don’t move in one direction — you can climb back up a slippery slope, you can break a taboo and partially rebuild it.

But in its retreat from the [Polanski era](https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/14/opinion/sunday/1970s-weinstein-sexual-predation.html), its concession that sometimes it’s OK to forbid, cultural progressivism entered into a long internal struggle over what its goal ought to be — to maximize permissiveness with some minimalist taboos (no rape, no sex with children) or to devise a broader set of sexual regulations that would reflect egalitarian and feminist values rather than religious ones.

This tension is visible all over recent history. The mood in which liberals defended Bill Clinton’s philandering was an example of the more permissive option. The mood of the #MeToo era, which condemned cads as well as rapists, is an example of the more regulatory approach.

The temporary alliance between anti-porn feminists and social conservatives in the 1980s was regulatory, while the rise of “sex-positive” feminism was permissive. The way that same-sex marriage was championed as a conservative and bourgeois reform was more regulatory; the shift toward emphasizing the fluidity and individuality of sexual identity was more permissive.

But if the tensions are longstanding, how they’re worked out is becoming more important, as social conservatism ebbs and progressivism’s cultural dominance expands. Progressives are not quite in the cultural position that Christian churches once occupied in this country, but they are close enough that the question “how should the left regulate sex?” increasingly implicates our whole society.

In general the recent trend has been toward more regulation: The sexual-assault tribunals on college campuses, the changing rules of workplace harassment, the new politesse surrounding pronouns and sexual identity. Part of this reflects a pattern often observed by conservatives, in which certain forms of sexual liberation seem to require more micromanagement than the old “thou shalt nots” — like the rigor required to distinguish supposedly empowering “sex work” from the exploitative variety, or purportedly egalitarian pornography from the misogynist or pedophilic sort.

But this regulatory mood is contested and unstable. Last month there was an [internal progressive debate](http://bostonreview.net/gender-sexuality/joseph-j-fischel-keep-pride-nude) about whether, now that Pride parades are essentially part of a new civic religion, their kinky side should be sanitized for kids, or whether encountering B.D.S.M. is a [healthy part](https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2021/06/29/pride-month-kink-consent/) of a queer-affirming childhood. In New York’s mayoral race, the allegations of sexual misconduct against Scott Stringer helped derail his campaign but also exposed [progressive discomfort](https://www.thenation.com/article/politics/scott-stringer-allegations/) with the stricter forms of #MeToo orthodoxy.

I don’t know how long the current period of progressive cultural power can last. But so long as it does, these debates will continue, because the regulation of sex is an inescapable obligation of power.

So progressives will continue to teeter between two anxieties. On the one hand, the fear of turning into the very Puritans and Comstocks they brag of having toppled. On the other, the fear of Helmut Kentler’s legacy, and liberation as a path into the abyss.

*From The New York Times, July 25, 2021*

**Get Ready for the 'No-Buy' List**

By: David Sacks

By any standard, David Sacks is a super successful entrepreneur and venture capitalist. He’s invested in companies including Airbnb, Bird, Eventbrite, Facebook, Houzz, Lyft, Palantir, Postmates, Reddit, Slack, SpaceX, Twitter, and Uber. Now he’s a general partner at [*Craft Ventures*](https://www.craftventures.com/).

But that’s not the reason to listen to him. It’s because he’s deeply insightful and consistently ahead of the curve on issues including [*free speech and Big Tech*](https://davidsacks.medium.com/the-speech-cartel-b3f5555f7787), how to amend [*Section 230*](https://medium.com/craft-ventures/section-230-mend-it-dont-end-it-e33799a43a5f), San Francisco’s [*meltdown*](https://davidsacks.medium.com/the-killer-d-a-54d4c4a5135f), and more. You might remember his name from [*this column*](https://bariweiss.substack.com/p/what-should-be-done-to-curb-big-tech) I wrote a few months back.

I don’t typically recommend Twitter to anyone I like. But if you’re already there, I strongly suggest [*following David*](https://twitter.com/DavidSacks).

—BW

When I helped create PayPal in 1999, it was in furtherance of a revolutionary idea. No longer would ordinary people be dependent on large financial institutions to start a business.

Our democratized payment system caught fire and grew exponentially with millions of users who appreciated its ease and simplicity. Traditional banks were too slow and bureaucratic to adapt. Instead, the revolution we spawned two decades ago inspired new startups like Ally, Chime, Square, and Stripe, which have further expanded participation in the financial system.

But now PayPal is turning its back on its original mission. It is now leading the charge to [restrict](https://www.usatoday.com/story/tech/2021/07/26/paypal-adl-collaborate-cutting-off-funding-hate-groups/8092628002/) participation by those it deems unworthy.

First, in January, PayPal [blocked](https://www.ctvnews.ca/sci-tech/paypal-blocks-site-that-helped-raise-funds-for-those-who-attended-u-s-capitol-violence-1.5262925) a Christian crowdfunding site that raised money to bring demonstrators to Washington on January 6. Then, in February, PayPal [announced](https://www.foxnews.com/tech/conservatives-call-for-paypal-boycott-after-ceo-admits-splc-helps-ban-users) that it was working with the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) to ban users from the platform. This week the company announced it is [partnering](https://www.adl.org/news/press-releases/paypal-partners-with-adl-to-fight-extremism-and-protect-marginalized) with the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) to [investigate](https://www.reuters.com/business/finance/paypal-research-blocking-transactions-that-fund-hate-groups-extremists-2021-07-26/) and shut down accounts that the ADL considers too extreme.

Why is this a problem? Isn’t it perfectly reasonable to make sure bad actors don’t fund hate through these platforms?

I’m a Jewish American who has special appreciation for the ADL’s historical role as a watchdog against antisemitism. Whether it came from the Aryan Nation or the Nation of Islam, the ADL did admirable work in combatting it. But the ADL has changed. Like the Southern Poverty Law Center, the organization has [broadened](https://www.foxnews.com/us/southern-poverty-law-center-which-frequently-targets-conservatives-accused-by-staffers-of-spreading-intolerance) its portfolio from antisemitism (or racism in the SPLC’s case) to cover what it considers to be “hate” or “extremism” in general.

The new ADL [opposed](https://www.adl.org/news/press-releases/adl-response-to-the-presidents-nomination-of-judge-brett-kavanaugh-to-serve-as) the Supreme Court nomination of Brett Kavanaugh because of his “hostility to reproductive freedom.” It [partnered](https://www.jns.org/adl-ceo-under-fire-for-partnering-with-sharpton-in-advocating-facebook-boycott/) with such beacons of philosemitism as Al Sharpton ([you read that right](https://www.tabletmag.com/sections/news/articles/al-sharpton-jonathan-greenblatt-adl)) to boycott Facebook for allowing “hate speech on their platform.” It [opposed](https://www.adl.org/news/press-releases/adl-troubled-by-omb-memorandum-on-critical-race-theory-trainings) Trump’s executive order banning Critical Race Theory in federal government training. And it [called](https://www.newsweek.com/orthodox-rabbis-defend-tucker-carlson-charges-anti-semitism-anti-defamation-league-1583706) for Fox News to fire Tucker Carlson for his comments on immigration.

Whether one agrees with any of these positions is beside the point. The point is that the ADL, like the SPLC, now weighs in on issues far beyond its original purview.

Just as there is no set definition of “hate speech” that everyone agrees upon, the definition of a “hate group” is nebulous and ripe for overuse by those with an agenda. So it should come as no surprise that the ever-increasing list of suspects has [grown](https://apnews.com/article/ae439e16db5641c3b1380f4190c7638c) from unquestionable hate groups, like neo-nazis and the KKK, to organizations who espouse socially conservative views, like the [Family Research Council](https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/group/family-research-council), religious liberty [advocates](https://www.splcenter.org/news/2020/04/10/why-alliance-defending-freedom-hate-group), and even groups concerned with [election integrity](https://www.splcenter.org/hatewatch/2017/05/16/trump-appoints-hate-group-figures-voter-fraud-commission).

The reclassification of political opponents as hate groups has been enabled by expansive redefinitions of terms like racism, segregation and white supremacy. When “segregation” can be [used](https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/26/nyregion/school-segregation-new-york.html) in The New York Times to describe a 70% Asian school like Stuyvesant; when the notion of color-blindness is [considered racist](https://andrewsullivan.substack.com/p/dont-ban-crt-expose-it-2d9) by influential intellectuals like Ibram X. Kendi; and when “white supremacy” has been used to describe any support for any policy that can result in disparate outcomes, then a broad range of organizations can be lumped in with truly vile ones. Until now, these over-categorizations were largely a case of rhetorical hyperbole in academic debates. Thanks to Big Tech, they are now being operationalized.

I have no desire to defend genuinely hateful or extremist groups. Indeed, when I was COO at PayPal, we regularly worked with law enforcement to restrict illegal activity on our platform. But we are talking about something very different here: shutting down people and organizations that express views that are entirely lawful, even if they are unpopular in Silicon Valley.

As with the censorship of speech, financial deplatforming often begins as something that seems narrow and reasonable — who wouldn’t want to ban the Oath Keepers or Proud Boys? But once the power is granted, it metastasizes into widespread use.

We have watched this unfold with online censorship. Many cheered the decision by the largest social media companies to kick President Trump and his most rabid supporters off their platforms after January 6. They cheered even louder when Apple, Google, and Amazon [deplatformed](https://www.cnn.com/2021/01/09/tech/parler-suspended-apple-app-store/index.html) Parler, the one speech platform that didn’t ban Trump. In defense of these policies, we were told that these were private business decisions made by companies that had every right under both the First Amendment and Section 230 to police speech on their platforms.

Then, a couple weeks ago, White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki casually [announced](https://www.newsweek.com/biden-administrations-admission-theyre-flagging-content-facebook-sparks-furor-1610257) that the Biden administration has been flagging and reporting posts on Facebook, YouTube, and other platforms for removal as Covid-19 “misinformation” (another term with a changing and ever-expanding definition). She even [said](https://www.forbes.com/sites/petersuciu/2021/07/16/misinformation-the-white-house-and-jen-psaki-didnt-actually-call-for-censorship-of-social-media/?sh=a4b20325b39c) that when one tech company removes a post, they all should do it, implying that the White House is centrally coordinating a blocklist across social media properties.

The suppression of speech by the government is blatantly unconstitutional under the First Amendment. Given that both Congress and the administration are threatening Big Tech companies with antitrust lawsuits and the repeal of Section 230’s liability protection, it’s disingenuous for Psaki and others to claim Big Tech is doing this policing entirely of their own accord. How could they object when the administration and Congress have hung the sword of Damocles over their heads?

The harm is compounded when the loss of speech rights is followed by restrictions on the ability to participate in online economic activity. Within days of the Trump-Parler cancellations, most of the finance tech stack ([Stripe](https://www.cnbc.com/2021/01/12/stripe-and-paypal-halt-payments-for-trumps-campaign-and-supporters-capitol-riots-shopify-fintech.html), Square, PayPal, [Shopify](https://www.forbes.com/sites/siladityaray/2021/01/11/stripe-joins-shopify-gofundme-and-other-businesses-in-cutting-ties-with-trump-campaign/), GoFundMe, and even enterprise SaaS company [Okta](https://www.cnbc.com/2021/01/13/okta-ceo-todd-mckinnon-parler-not-even-trying-to-suppress-threats.html), which wasn’t used by anyone in the events of January 6) declared they were canceling the accounts of “[individuals and organizations connected to the [Capitol] riot](https://www.nbcnews.com/business/business-news/too-little-too-late-extremism-experts-criticize-payment-companies-n1253982).”

Now PayPal has gone much further, creating the economic equivalent of the No-Fly List with the ADL’s assistance. If history is any guide, other fintech companies will soon follow suit. As we saw in the case of speech restrictions, the political monoculture that prevails among employees of these companies will create pressure for all of them to act as a bloc.

When someone mistakenly lands on the No-Fly List, they can at least sue or petition the government for redress. But when your name lands on a No-Buy List created by a consortium of private fintech companies, to whom can you appeal?

As for the notion of building your own PayPal or Facebook: because of their gigantic network effects and economies of scale, there is no viable alternative when the whole industry works together to deny you access.

Kicking people off social media deprives them of the right to speak in our increasingly online world. Locking them out of the financial economy is worse: It deprives them of the right to make a living. We have seen how cancel culture can obliterate one’s ability to earn an income, but now the cancelled may find themselves without a way to pay for goods and services. Previously, cancelled employees who would never again have the opportunity to work for a Fortune 500 company at least had the option to go into business for themselves. But if they cannot purchase equipment, pay employees, or receive payment from clients and customers, that door closes on them, too.

What the woke Left doesn’t seem to realize is that the sort of economic desperation they seek to inflict on their enemies is exactly what produced Trump in the first place. In the wake of Trump’s 2016 victory, many in Washington and Silicon Valley were too busy blaming social media to consider how the policies they had supported in favor of globalization and free trade had hollowed out the industrial base that many working-class Americans depended on for good jobs. Trump channeled the anger of these desperate voters to win crucial swing states in the Rust Belt. These disaffected voters resented the cadre of managerial, media, academic, and governmental elites who acted as if they had a monopoly on truth, morality, and decency. Trump, the outrageous, uncouth billionaire with ridiculous hair, was the perfect avatar of their desire to stick it to them.

Trump is gone, but the resentments he exploited to come to power remain. And now we have this unholy alliance of tech and government coming together to ban “misinformation” and “hate,” which they — and they alone — get to define. What an ideal formula for spreading and deepening these preexisting resentments.

If we continue down this path, a far more dangerous demagogue could emerge. I implore my successors at PayPal and other Big Tech companies to stop throwing kindling on the fires of populism by locking people out of the online public square and the modern web-based economy. Silenced voices and empty stomachs are fuel for the very extremism you claim to oppose.

If you really believe our democracy barely survived a stress test these last several years, and don’t wish to subject it to another, the last thing you should do is create hordes of desperate people, denied a voice and livelihood, and primed to be rallied to a future autocrat’s cause.

*From Common Sense with Bari Weiss, July 30, 2021*

**Kanye West Unveils ‘Donda’ Album, With a Verse From Jay-Z**

By: Jewel Wicker

ATLANTA — A man who is rarely short on words, Kanye West didn’t even have a microphone.

Premiering his new album, “Donda,” in front of a packed crowd at the Mercedes-Benz Stadium here on Thursday night, the rapper, who has become known as much for his failed [presidential run](https://www.nytimes.com/2020/09/16/us/politics/kanye-west-president-2020.html) and [his pending divorce](https://www.nytimes.com/2021/02/19/style/kim-kardashian-kanye-west-divorce.html) as his music, chose not to say a single thing.

Dressed in a red jacket with matching pants, West walked around on a white tarp, delivering outsize gestures and dance moves to his new music for less than an hour before leaving. It was a decidedly different tone from his previous public listening sessions, including [one he held in 2016 at Madison Square Garden](https://www.nytimes.com/2016/02/12/arts/music/kanye-west-yeezy-season-3-life-of-pablo.html) before the release of “The Life of Pablo.” For much of the night, West stood in the center of the stadium’s football field, in the middle of a spotlight, surrounded by fog. When he walked around the venue, he spent a good portion of his time in front of the section where his four children with Kim Kardashian, North, Saint, Psalm and Chicago, were seated. Despite the fact that she has [filed for divorce from West](https://www.nytimes.com/2021/04/01/style/laura-wasser-kim-kardashian-divorce.html), Kardashian and her sister Khloe were also in attendance.

“Donda,” West’s 10th studio album, was scheduled to be released by G.O.O.D. Music/Def Jam Recordings on Friday, but it did not appear at midnight, when new music typically reaches streaming services, and still has not surfaced. Representatives for West did not respond to requests for comment about the plan for the album’s release.

The album, his first [since 2019’s “Jesus Is King,”](https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/25/arts/music/kanye-west-jesus-is-king.html) was named after the rapper’s late mother, Donda West, who began her career as a professor at Morris Brown College in Atlanta in the 1970s. Kanye West was born in the city during this time, although the family would eventually relocate to Chicago. His mother died in 2007 from complications related to plastic surgery. Presumably in honor of her Atlanta ties, West gave 5,000 tickets to Thursday’s listening session to faculty and students at historically black colleges and universities in the city, including Morris Brown, Clark Atlanta, Morehouse and Spelman.

Fans were given few details about “Donda” before the event, and the excessively loud speakers at the stadium made it hard to decipher lyrics or other key details. What was clear from the public listening session, which also streamed live via Apple Music, was that the album continued to explore themes of religion both sonically and lyrically, and featured a bevy of guest artists, including a new collaboration with Jay-Z.

The lyrics from “Donda” seemed to have little to do with the rapper’s late mother directly, although the album does feature her voice in a few interludes. (“No matter what, you never abandon your family,” she says at one point.) The first track that was played during the event featured West repeatedly chanting “We gonna be OK” over an organ as the crowd illuminated the stadium with cellphone lights. Even on the more boastful songs (“Excuse my manners, I got status. Excuse my problems, I got commas”), there were still heavy nods to his Christian faith. One hook from the album featured the lyrics “I know God breathed on this,” as well as the cheeky lyric “God the father like Maury.”

While an official track list has not been released, the songs played during the listening session featured guest appearances from rappers including Pusha T, Lil Baby and, perhaps most surprisingly, Jay-Z. Despite their close relationship early in West’s career, they had been open about the strain in their friendship in recent years. The new collaboration teased a “return of the throne,” nodding to the pair’s joint album “Watch the Throne” a decade ago. One Jay-Z lyric appeared to reference West’s [onetime support for President Trump](https://www.nytimes.com/2016/12/13/us/politics/kanye-trump-tower-visit.html): “Hold up, Donda, I’m with your baby when I touch back road/told him stop all of that red cap, we goin’ home.”

A few lyrics on the album seemingly nod at his separation from Kardashian, including one where West pleads, “I’m losing my family.” Elsewhere he raps, “Single life ain’t so bad.”

It is unclear if the songs played at the event represent the entirety of “Donda.” West, who appeared to still be working on the album in the hours leading up to the event, according to his social media, is known to make changes to projects up until they are released, [and sometimes afterward](https://www.nytimes.com/2016/02/21/arts/music/kanye-west-life-of-pablo-tlop.html). (Jay-Z’s verse was [recorded at 4 p.m. on the day of the listening session](https://twitter.com/Young_Guru/status/1418400356808200198), according to Young Guru, the rapper’s longtime recording engineer.)

The crowd for the event packed the Atlanta stadium, where there are no restrictions on crowd size despite the Covid-19 pandemic. Attendees were given paneled posters that featured a blurry image of the rapper and his mother. The back of the poster included instructions on how to transform it into a fan, as well as the words, “Mom West was a remarkable woman and a role model who we all loved dearly and cherished. We are fortunate that our lives crossed paths.” Merchandise with a childhood photo of West’s mother was also available, in addition to a beige long-sleeve shirt that featured the name of the album, the date and a Mercedes-Benz logo.

Although it had only been announced three days earlier, the listening session attracted fans from outside Atlanta, too, including three friends from Madison, Wis. The trio said they traveled from Madison to Milwaukee at 3 a.m. to catch a 5:30 a.m. flight to Atlanta.

“Kanye’s the best producer/rapper out there,” Sam Brink, 22, said. “That justifies the money” the friends spent to attend, he added. Even before the event began, he said he had high expectations for the album and hoped it would be released as scheduled.

“I’ll put it this way, if it doesn’t drop, we’re flipping cars,” Brink said with a chuckle. By the time the friends were headed back to Wisconsin on an 8:30 a.m. flight Friday morning, there was still no sign of “Donda” on streaming services.

*From The New York Times, July 23, 2021*

**We Still Don’t Know What’s on Kanye’s Mind**

By: Mustafa Abubaker

It all started in Vegas last Sunday, when [Kanye West](https://www.rollingstone.com/t/kanye-west/) hosted an invite-only listening party for his 10th studio album, [*Donda*](https://www.rollingstone.com/t/donda/)*.* It came as a surprise to fans who have been eagerly awaiting the rapper’s next move ever since it was reported that he was recording new music in Mexico the previous March. By midweek, calls were made, photos were posted, and an album teaser featuring Sha’Carri Richardson and a new song called “No Child Left Behind” was released. Before we knew it, we had a *Donda* listening party slated for a sweltering summer night in [Atlanta](https://www.rollingstone.com/t/atlanta/). Tickets were as coveted as you’d expect. And Kanye donated thousands of free passes to six black colleges in Atlanta: Clark, Morehouse, Spelman, Morris Brown, Morehouse School of Medicine, and ITC.

On the night of the show, the city was abuzz. There was traffic everywhere and a number streets were blocked off. There were the obligatory hustlers charging $40 for parking spots 10 minutes on foot from the Mercedes Benz Stadium. And if you actually drove a Mercedes, you were able to park for free in a lot right next to the stadium. It appears Kanye somehow managed to breathe life into the “Send It Up” lyric “Can you get my Benz in the club?”

Before most people took their seats, we were thrust into a capitalist onslaught at the merchandise table. There was just a single item available, a long-sleeve T-shirt featuring Donda West’s childhood photo, for $120. The first round sold out quickly, despite there being a two-per-customer limit. One man, who had come in from North Carolina, managed to secure a shirt and declined offers of up to $500 for the piece. There was a second round of merchandise set up shortly thereafter — the long-sleeves now went for $100.

Speaking of clothes, half of the crowd looked like they were going to Fashion Week in Paris and the other half looked like they grabbed the first thing in their closet. There were Yeezy slides, vintage Maison Margiela coats, Giuseppe shoes, and Fashion Nova dresses. People wore quite a bit of Heron Preston and Amiri, too. When the lights finally went down, nobody’s outfit mattered. Though the crowd seemed at least partially curious as to what Kanye himself would wear. Indeed, ever the nonconformist, out came Kanye on a 90-something-degree night wearing a bright-red puffer coat from his upcoming Gap collection. Phones flashed from all directions. Everyone is, of course, recording the exact same video.

The show was slated to start at 8 p.m. but was delayed until 9:50 p.m. We realize later that this was partly because 2Chainz was backstage recording a verse. From the center of the stadium, Kanye appeared like a red dot in a minimalist sea of white, which one imagines is Ye’s platonic aesthetic ideal. He would play the album straight through, occasionally approaching the floor of the packed arena, serving as his own hype man. The show was a kind of ecclesiastical experience. It started with a soulful song, on which Kanye’s voice can be heard repeating “We’re gonna be OK,” as if it were a mantra from a life coach. He plays a song that may or may not be called “Remote Control,” which sounds closer to *808s & Heartbreak* Kanye, when he made “RoboCop” and “Paranoid.” People loved it. You could hear cheers throughout the stadium.

A quote from the Gwendolyn Brooks poem “Speech to the Young” booms over the speakers. “Even if you are not ready for the day, it cannot always be night,” the voice proclaims. West would deploy the soundbite to echo throughout the stadium twice this evening. And despite only briefly appearing on the Pop Smoke song “Tell the Vision,” Kanye lets it interrupt the *Donda* experience for a moment, an appreciated tribute.  There was a song featuring Travis Scott and Baby Keem that easily felt like one of the more accessible and modern songs on the album. There’s also an impressive Playboi Carti feature about midway through. Lil Baby appears on a track, and when it comes on, Kanye proceeds to walk to the middle of the stadium field with his hands in the air during the rapper’s (quite good) verse.

Another gospel-themed song finds Kanye with his hands and knees on the ground. There are chants of “Yeezy, Yeezy, Yeezy!” throughout the audience. Then, Kanye’s hands are up, but he remains on his knees, praying. “Make me new again, last night doesn’t count,” he sings on the track. The show seemed like a merging of Kanye’s now-infamous Sunday Service series and his even more infamous The Life of Pablo premiere at Madison Square Garden in New York. Part church, part concert, part merch peddling. Except there was a lingering uneasiness. Throughout the night, Kanye’s body language spoke volumes. He’s moping, his shoulders are slumped, and his face is cast downward. He was on his knees praying, and sometimes on both his hands and his knees. His happier moments found him half-jogging across the floor. But you get the sense that there’s something troubling Kanye, and it’s easy to speculate on what that might be. One notable moment came around the seventh song, on which West sings about “losing my family” with an emotional tenderness that cuts deep. One song features a recording of his daughter North pleading with him not to leave, and was probably the most hard-hitting moment on the night.

Jay-Z appeared at the end of the album for a verse that, like that of 2 Chainz, apparently came at the 11th hour. Jay and Kanye have famously not been on great terms since the whole Trump thing, and Hov doesn’t hold back. On his verse, he admonished Ye like an older but loving sibling. “I told him to stop all that red cap, we going home,” Jay raps. “This might be the return of the throne. Hova and Yeezus, like Moses and Jesus.” It was like the second coming. One fan noted, “The Hov verse put the icing on the cake.”

After the show, reactions were mixed. “It was an amazing experience. Kanye is the GOAT,” one attendee said. “I feel like I was in heaven. I felt the spirit. I feel like he’s free,” said another. At least one Kanye fan was concerned. “He’s not better without Kim. It made me mad when he started singing that song about this family falling apart,” they said. Kim Kardashian was in attendance last night, providing at least some hope that the two might move on amicably. “I thought it was the best way to hear an album for the first time,” another fan noted. “I feel music, I don’t listen to it. It made it easier to feel the music.”

Donda, however, remains to be seen. The last-minute tinkering suggests an album might be several more days — or weeks — away, in typical Kanye fashion. The listening event, though full of spectacle, did little in offering insight into where Kanye is now. He’s notably been out of the public eye, adorned in a mask when seen out, and he doesn’t address the sold-out crowd for the whole evening. If he’s letting the music do the talking, Donda raises more questions than it answers.

*From Rolling Stone, July 23, 2021*

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