

Stories for you to savor over Shabbat and Sunday

# Is Britney Spears the Esther of our time?

## NEWS

Trump's antisemitism envoy leaves a polarizing legacy as Biden prepares new pick

For some Haredi Jews, donating money to Covid victims is easier than social distancing

## CULTURE

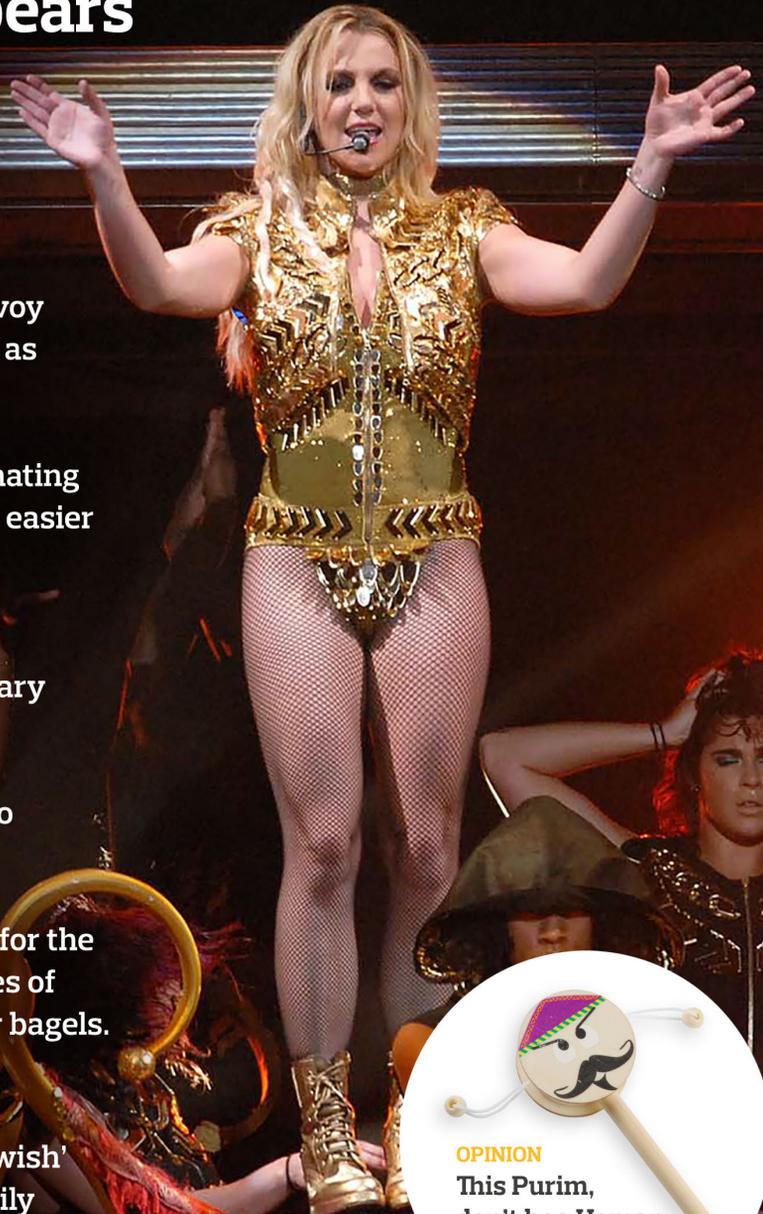
Woody Allen's extraordinary violence, laid bare

The 9 Bible characters who should be canceled

'Jesusland' won't be good for the Jews. But the 'United States of Canada' might be good for bagels.

## LETTER FROM L.A.

The 'Super-gay, super-Jewish' Ari Gold's friends and family remember the late pop star who embraced both identities



**OPINION**  
This Purim,  
don't boo Haman

News

# Trump’s antisemitism envoy leaves a polarizing legacy as Biden prepares new pick

By Arno Rosenfeld

At the height of the debate over Israel’s possible annexation of the West Bank last summer, J Street, the liberal pro-Israel group, was urging followers on social media to write to Senators opposing the move.

Elan Carr, the State Department’s envoy to combat antisemitism, jumped in to [take exception](#) to J Street’s use in a Tweet of a photo of then-President Donald Trump and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu speaking at the White House as Jared Kushner and two other Jewish advisers looked on. “How dare @jstreetdotorg use this picture in this context,” Carr said in a message from his government Twitter account. “Their imagery uses #Antisemitism and crude anti-Semitic conspiracy theories to advance their agenda.”

It was a bold accusation to lob at a Jewish organization widely accepted within the country’s liberal mainstream. “It came out of the blue,” Jeremy Ben-Ami, J Street’s president, recalled in an interview. “It was kind of an astonishing use of that office to attack domestic political critics of the administration.”

But the attack on J Street fit a pattern for Carr, a former gang prosecutor who Trump named to fill the envoy role in 2019. In less than two years in the role, Carr expanded its mandate to include domestic antisemitism and adopted a controversial set of views about what anti-Jewish bigotry looked like and approach to stopping it.

As President Joe Biden prepares to nominate a new envoy in the coming weeks, Carr’s tenure shows how one of the federal government’s most powerful bully pulpits for opposing antisemitism can be used to shape the terms of the fight.

“He helped redefine the job,” said Matt Brooks, director of the Republican Jewish Coalition.



## Hard-charging envoy

Carr, the son of Israeli immigrants, entered the job with a [wide-ranging resume](#). Fluent in both Hebrew and Arabic, he helped create the Israeli public defender system as a legal adviser to the country’s justice ministry in the 1990s. Having joined the U.S. Army shortly before the 9/11 attacks, Carr served as a counterterrorism officer in Iraq, where his grandfather had been among the Jewish leaders targeted in show trials around the founding of the state of Israel.

He returned home to Los Angeles, and worked as a Los

Angeles County deputy district attorney, then ran for an open Congressional seat in the Los Angeles suburbs in 2014. It was a Democratic district and Carr lost by nearly 20 points, but the campaign drew national attention, including the backing of casino mogul [Sheldon Adelson](#) and [Mitt Romney](#). Carr lost again in a county supervisor race two years later.

In a 2014 article, Washington Jewish Week [labeled Carr a rising star](#) who, “through energy, fundraising abilities and disciplined public adherence to the GOP’s message,” could become the new Jewish face of the Republican Party.

Meanwhile, Trump had let the envoy role, which Congress created in 2004, sit empty for the first two years of his term. After dozens of Jewish groups helped [advance federal legislation](#) that would have formed an appointment, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo named Carr envoy in February, 2019. His appointment was welcomed by mainstream Jewish groups and Carr, who ran as a moderate in his political campaigns, quickly pledged to “fight all forms of Jew hatred, regardless of the ideological clothing it wears.”

Carr traveled extensively before the pandemic, and was a central feature of Trump’s Jewish outreach efforts, joining the president’s annual High Holiday call to Jewish leaders and defending the president from claims of antisemitism.

“He was very dedicated to the job,” said Deborah Lipstadt, a Holocaust scholar and professor at Emory University, whose name has been floated as a potential Biden pick to replace Carr. “He took a very holistic view.”

This winter he helped spearhead [agreements with Bahrain and Morocco](#) in which the two Arab states agreed to fight “antisemitism, including anti-Zionism and the delegitimization of the State of Israel.”

### A polarizing approach

But the two signature traits of Carr’s time as envoy – boundless energy and an expansive view of his role – joined with his understanding of antisemitism to make him a polarizing figure in the Jewish world.

Carr outlined his doctrine in a [2019 London speech](#),

arguing that antisemitism had three distinct strands: far-right “ethnic supremacist” antisemitism, far-left “Israel-hating” antisemitism and “militant Islam” antisemitism.



Courtesy of twitter

Elan Carr and his family pose in front of the Trump Heights sign in the Golan Heights at the dedication of the town named for President Donald Trump.

While he consistently declined to rank the strands by severity, Carr focused most on left-wing antisemitism, devoting the bulk of his London speech to the subject. He assigned staffers to monitor antisemitism in Middle Eastern nations and to combat the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement targeting Israel, but not to address right-wing antisemitism or white supremacy, according to an unpublished report prepared for a University of Southern California task force studying antisemitism and Israel. The draft also stated that Carr almost exclusively referred to white supremacy as “ethnic nationalism.”

Carr, who did not respond to an interview request, explained his decision not to focus on right-wing antisemitism during another event shortly after the London speech.

“When it comes to the far-right, nobody seems to be confused,” Carr said at a European Leadership Network event that November. “Everyone seems to understand what a neo-Nazi is.”

But in the aftermath of deadly shootings by white supremacists at synagogues in Pittsburgh and Poway, Calif., some critics found Carr’s focus on left-wing antisemitism strange, and said it allowed him to avoid uncomfortable questions about the Trump administration’s role in fostering right-wing violence.

At the same time, Carr frequently shined a spotlight on anti-Israel activism on college campuses that he believed crossed the line into antisemitism.

“He clearly embraced a framing that allowed him to say, ‘We’re fighting antisemitism,’” said Lara Friedman, president of the liberal Foundation for Middle East Peace. “But they weren’t fighting antisemitism in a way that pushed back against the forces that led someone in Germany to shoot up a synagogue on the High Holidays.”

Other observers chafed at another tenet of Carr’s approach – his [promotion of “philosemitism,”](#) or love of Jews – as way to counter allegations of antisemitism against Trump by talking highlighting his staunch Zionism and closeness with Jews, including Trump’s own daughter and her family.

Carr defined philosemitism as “the appreciation, respect, and affection for Jewish values and the Jewish community,” and encouraged foreign nations to “adopt philosemitic narratives.”

While Jewish communities throughout history have periodically sought to emphasize their value in society to avoid persecution, in the modern era they have typically preferred appeals to universal equality.

Jonathan Karp, a professor at Binghamton University and editor of the 2011 book [“Philosemitism in History,”](#) said that in the United States, pronounced philosemitism is most common among conservative evangelical Christians, who offer hardline support for the Israeli government and sometimes even adopt Jewish ritual practices, like wearing prayer shawls and blowing the shofar.

Karp said that the concept can be used in positive ways, but also provides cover for politicians who deal in antisemitic tropes.

“It can sometimes be the flipside of antisemitism – not the opposite, but two sides of the same coin,” he explained in an interview. “It can be used as a pretext:

‘Well, I like Jews if they stay in their place, or go to their place.’”

Brooks, the leader of the Republican Jewish Coalition, dismissed such criticism.

“Anybody who is trying to advocate against people

being philosemitic needs to do their own inward self-reflection,” Brooks said.

### Foundation for Biden

Carr’s expansion of the envoy’s role has raised its profile at a time when there is wide agreement in the Jewish community that more needs to be done to confront antisemitism but deep division over how to do so.

Congress [elevated the envoy to an ambassador-level position](#) last month, meaning whoever Biden appoints will report directly to Secretary of State Tony Blinken. The promotion could also make the office, which has sometimes flown under the radar, attractive to a more prominent figure.

“Historically it had been a bit of a staff position in the State Department and Elan really elevated it and made it a voice for our issues,” said Fred Zeidman, a prominent Republican donor and former chair of the Holocaust Memorial Council.

While Zeidman and other Republican Jewish leaders hope Biden appoints someone who continues Carr’s focus on fighting anti-Israel activism, some on the left are clamoring for someone who will use the expanded bully pulpit to reframe the fight to focus on right-wing extremism.

IfNotNow, a left-wing group devoted to ending the Israeli occupation, is [running a campaign around the nomination for envoy, which it refers to as “the most important Biden appointee you’ve never heard of.”

The organization is circulating a video on social media blasting Abe Foxman, former head of the Anti-Defamation League and one of the most-talked about candidates, as Islamophobic and too focused on defending Israel. The video was also critical of Sharon Nazarian, an ADL vice president also under consideration.

In addition to Foxman, Nazarian and Lipstadt – who is a contributing columnist to the Forward and a member of its governing association – others [being talked about for the role](#) include Mark Weitzman, government affairs director at the Simon Wiesenthal Center; Mark Levin, chief of the National Coalition Supporting Eurasian Jewry; and Aaron Keyak, Biden’s Jewish outreach director during his presidential campaign.

Morriah Kaplan, an IfNotNow spokeswoman, said the next envoy should take an expansive view of antisemitism, but one that does not focus on student activists campaigning against Israel.

“The fight against antisemitism is part of the fight for multi-racial democracy,” Kaplan said. “Elan Carr used the role primarily to attack critics of Israel.”

One aspect of Carr’s legacy that retains broad support across the political spectrum is the way he expanded the envoy’s domestic portfolio. Housed in the State Department, the role was originally created to help the government monitor international incidents of antisemitism and encourage foreign countries to intervene on behalf of Jews when necessary.

“It was a global position,” said Gregg Rickman, the first person to fill the role, from 2006 until 2009. “If there were incidents anywhere outside the country that’s where it kicked in – inside the country, it fell to the education department, the Justice department, FBI.”

But Carr, buoyed by the addition of several staff members to the envoy’s tiny office, including one focused on online threats, made events within the nation’s borders an integral part of his work. He spoke out against antisemitism on American campuses, and regularly criticized groups like J Street and Jewish Voice for Peace, a left-wing group that aggressively criticizes Israeli policy.

Zeidman, the Republican donor, cheered on this approach, arguing that while it can be politically fraught to tangle with domestic foes, it is integral to the job.

“We’re seeing much greater incidents of antisemitism than we had ever had before and if we don’t shine a light on it it’s going to continue to grow,” Zeidman said. “Elan was really the torchbearer for that.”

–  
*Arno Rosenfeld is a staff writer for the Forward, where he covers U.S. politics and American Jewish institutions. You can reach him at [arno@forward.com](mailto:arno@forward.com) and follow him on Twitter [@arnorosenfeld](https://twitter.com/arnorosenfeld).*

## News

# For some Haredi Jews, donating money to Covid victims is easier than social distancing

By Molly Boigon

At his fourth shiva of the last month, Yona Lunger struggled to think of a time when he had seen a person tear both sides of their clothing for the mourning ritual of *kriah*, as he had done after the coronavirus killed his mother, father, sister and brother-in-law within the span of 32 days.

The rabbis he called to ask about how to juggle the back-to-back burials and mourning rituals said they had never seen his type of loss, except for after car crashes or during World War II.

“The whole thing just doesn’t make sense,” he said in a phone interview this week from Rockland County. “It was over the top.”

Thanks to a [crowdfunding effort](#), Lunger and his family have raised more than \$740,000 as of Friday from about 8,800 people who have donated to pay for therapy, food and other costs for the three Halpert daughters – Lunger’s nieces – left behind, ages 12, 18 and 20.

The plight of the Halpert children, while not unlike other tragic tales about the virus that continues its 12th straight month of assault, has generated an outpouring of support from Haredi, or Ultra-Orthodox Jewish communities around the country and the world. The largest donations are \$25,000 and there are many small ones of \$10 or \$18. But this generosity has also highlighted a paradox: A community that invests substantial sums of money and hours of prayer after devastating losses wrought by the pandemic has frequently defied the mask mandates and social-distancing rules meant to prevent its spread, and sometimes refuses to name coronavirus as a cause of death.

“It’s as if there’s no pandemic,” said Shulim Leifer, a

lifelong Hasidic resident of Brooklyn. “The only precautions in place are to black out the windows.”

The fundraiser is running on a crowdfunding site popular in the community called Charidy, which takes a [flat rate](#) from customers for graphic design and marketing. Charidy did not respond to a request for comment. Dryveup, a similar site, operates off the same model. The Chesed Fund is a no-cost option. Some of the fundraising sites also rely on a “tip” model in which donors tack additional money onto their contributions for the crowdfunding host.

While the coronavirus campaigns are new, Haredi Jews using the internet have been bombarded weekly with fundraising requests for all sorts of causes – including job loss and sudden illness.

While some uses of the internet are forbidden in the community, fundraising for families – like using the internet to plan a wedding – is less “threatening” because it does not involve exposure to other communities or new bodies of knowledge, said Dr. Ayala Fader, an anthropology professor at Fordham University who wrote a [book](#) about Haredi Jews in the digital age.

“Give early in the day,” advised a [sidebar](#) in Mishpacha Magazine. “That way, when the endless requests come, you have an answer.”

But there are also darker campaigns like those meant to fund legal defense for accused child molesters and to fund custody battles against parents who have left the community, said Joshua Shanes, the associate director of the Jewish Studies Program at the College of Charleston in South Carolina.

The community raised more than \$1 million for an Orthodox father on [Dryveup](#) in January after his wife left the community and won custody.

“It’s a perversion of what should be a wonderful thing,” Shanes said.

The unofficial mutual aid setup of the Haredi world is one of the major benefits of the community, said academics and Haredi Jews. There are social safety nets for every need – including navigating government systems like welfare, applying to jobs, borrowing wedding dresses and getting sheets and towels for a first home.

“If you’re willing to play ball in the community, and do

what you’re told and follow the rules, there’s a support structure in place,” said Shanes. “There’s no other way to live, for most of the people, on the kind of salaries they earn without that kind of help.”

But part of the trade-off is fitting in, and with many in the community continuing to gather for synagogue, weddings and even COVID funerals without masks or social distancing, that means living life by pre-pandemic rules.

Hamodia, the popular Haredi news site, [stopped tracking](#) coronavirus victims from the community in late May. Haredi Jews who wear masks at weddings [report](#) being shamed and taunted. In conversations about the Halperets, some Haredi Jews try to deny that the coronavirus killed Mimi, Yona Lunger’s sister.

Ignoring the pandemic is the only “playbook that’s available,” said Leifer, the Hasidic Jew in Brooklyn.

“You have no choice but to forget that there’s a pandemic, and it’s some sort of abstract thing – ‘We’re going through a bad time,’” he said.

Lunger, who lives in Miami, said since arriving back in his home county of Rockland to mourn his family, he had been giving out “a ton” of masks. He said many people think since they had the virus already, they can’t get it again – his sister had it twice. He said the lack of social-distancing or mask-wearing is more about ignorance than defiance.

Lunger is planning on going ahead with his daughter’s wedding in a month. He said people will be wearing masks and there will be a testing site at the entrance of the wedding hall.

He said people should count their blessings and call their loved ones on the phone.

“I would encourage people to practice social distance, follow the guidelines, whether it’s a mask or a face shield,” he said. “There’s no question – this is real. If anyone can testify to it, it’s us.”

–

*Jordan Kutzik contributed Yiddish translation and reporting.*

*Molly Boigon is an investigative reporter at the Forward. Contact her at [boigon@forward.com](mailto:boigon@forward.com) or follow her on Twitter [@MollyBoigon](https://twitter.com/MollyBoigon).*

## Culture

# Woody Allen's extraordinary violence, laid bare

By Talya Zax

"Allen v. Farrow," HBO Max's new four-part documentary about Dylan Farrow's allegations of sexual assault against her adopted father, Woody Allen, has an almost soothing domestic aesthetic, full of long shots of rustic Connecticut homesteads and rippling lakes.

But the series, which investigates the deep and constant violence experienced by survivors of abuse, is anything but calming, because that lingering pain and domesticity are entwined. The violence visited upon Farrow is like a house, the show implies: Passive and permanent, something that must be lived within.

To answer the question on everyone's mind, yes, the series is damning toward Allen. Whether or not you come away believing he molested Dylan when she was seven – and it's awfully hard not to – the documentary is meticulous in chronicling the many ways, over decades, in which he violated the boundaries of young women and girls, particularly Dylan, whom he raised alongside his then-partner Mia Farrow.

As numerous family friends interviewed by filmmakers Kirby Dick and Amy Ziering recount, Allen coached Dylan to suck his thumb, claiming, in a chilling excuse, that the activity calmed her. He isolated her from her siblings, regularly drawing her away from them to spend time alone with him. Dylan and Mia both say that when Dylan's younger brother, the journalist Ronan Farrow, was born, Allen began to isolate her from her mother as well, working to convince her that Mia now belonged exclusively to the baby.

His behavior towards her was disturbing from her earliest years: The judge who settled Allen and Mia Farrow's eventual custody dispute thought so; social workers who examined Dylan in the wake of her allegations thought so; therapists thought so; babysitters thought so; the other parents at school thought so.

And most importantly, Dylan thought so.



By Kevin Mazur/Getty Images

In the few old home videos scattered through the series, Allen catches her in tight embraces. Every time, she turns to the camera with pleading eyes. If you have ever had the horrifying, queasy feeling of being trapped by someone you don't trust, you will recognize her expression. These are videos from supposedly happy times, long before Allen's affair with Mia Farrow's then-college-aged adopted daughter, Soon-Yi Previn, came to light, marking the beginning of the end for the Farrow-Allen family.

But while finding proof of Allen's alleged crime is the documentary's apparent mandate, its real focus is on how those purported actions and their aftermath shaped and continue to shape Dylan and Mia Farrow's lives. It's about the increasingly well-known trap – harder to find your way out of than an unwanted hug – that swallows women and girls who seek justice. Dylan, now 35, and Mia endlessly revisit the same choice: they can continue their fight, and face the brutal tide of hatred that meets those who challenge the image of beloved men, or choose to stay quiet, and live with the unbearable feeling of having been robbed of all control – really, no kind of life at all.

It's a paralyzing trap, and an excruciating one. By joining Dylan and Mia as they live inside it, the documentary introduces viewers to their own painful accounting, demanding we consider what kind of

response to suffering we're willing to tolerate in women, and why.

That focus can make the documentary appear unduly skewed: No one from Allen's camp is interviewed, and he and Previn, now his wife of more than two decades, this week released a statement decrying the series as a "[shoddy hit piece](#)" and alleging that its makers only contacted them for comment in the last two months.

[One of those interviewed in the series is PJ Grisar, a Forward staff writer.]

It's a flaw of the series that it doesn't provide an explanation for its unbalanced approach until later episodes, and then only implicitly, in a sequence highlighting the extreme extent to which media coverage of the scandal hewed to Allen's story until the last half-decade. It's a powerful argument for the importance of handing the Farrows the microphone. But by fumbling its presentation, the series also puts the women at a disadvantage. It gives those who buy Allen's accounting of things too broad an opening to argue that the filmmakers' bias disqualifies both their findings and the story they tell.

That's a pity, as the story is, despite being in some ways well-trod, genuinely new.

Since the #MeToo movement sparked the beginnings of a reckoning with the systemic ways powerful men escape accountability for abuse, stories of the long unfolding of trauma have become newly common. "Allen v. Farrow" builds on them in an important way: It doesn't just state the facts of the kind of trap in which Dylan and Mia Farrow found themselves, but tries to capture the pained experience, particularly for Dylan, of living in that trap every day.

Late in the series, Dylan speaks about forming bonds with other survivors of sexual abuse by family members; those connections, she says, have opened new pathways for her to understand the course of her own life. As she begins to go into more detail, her jaws start to chatter uncontrollably. She tries to subdue them, weeping with the effort.

It's the most crushing of many such moments in which Dylan, with remarkable openness, lets us see the

suffocating difficulty of living with a trauma about which everyone has an opinion. Her own body is trying to suppress her speech about it, as if aware that no outlet for what she has to say is safe.

Viewing that scene for a second time, I thought, unexpectedly, of Quentin Tarantino's two-part saga "Kill Bill." Tarantino appears in "Allen v. Farrow" by way of an old radio interview in which he mounted a defense of Roman Polanski for raping a 13-year-old girl, roughly claiming that the charge of statutory rape implied mutual consent. The movies, in which Uma Thurman gracefully slaughters her way through a host of enemies, make a fetish out of the trope of a woman seeking vengeance against the man who wronged her. [Thurman has since [alleged abuse by Tarantino](#) on the films' set.] No one who has ever seen them has rooted against Thurman's character. You want her to find the man who destroyed her life, and you want to watch her kill him.

Those movies were a phenomenon. We loved the spectacle of a fictional woman breaking out of a trap and briskly decapitating those who wished to put her back in it. But an abundance of people, watching Dylan Farrow, will find the spectacle of a real woman trying, peaceably, to find a form of justice – even if only within herself – unpalatable in its violence.

Why is Dylan's quiet struggle so difficult, for so many, to process? There are the staid, well-known answers: Misogyny; the obsessive devotion Allen has created in his staunchest fans; our general desire to sanitize the worst aspects of humanity by treating them as entertaining fictions, not everyday facts. "Allen v. Farrow" acknowledges those influences in the jeering dismissal that surrounded the Farrows' allegations against Allen, but doesn't settle for them.

Instead, it reflects on the complicated truth that no matter how thoroughly it lays out the prejudice informing the public backlash against the Farrows, that backlash will never go away.

There is a reason why the series' title positions Allen as plaintiff, not defendant: Dylan Farrow made the allegations, but Allen walked away in the position of the party whose rights were violated. The pattern

repeats: Dylan and Mia revive their allegations, even though they know they will suffer for it; Allen and his enthusiasts experience that choice as an intolerable personal blow; people are too complicated to be explained into submission. We like a saga of a woman seeking justice when it's an elaborately choreographed pageant, not when it makes us think about the ways in which we ritually ensnare each other. "Kill Bill" finds resolution in a final spray of blood: Thurman's deed is done, the stains will come out, life will move on to the next event.

It's a clean story, despite the limbs it leaves strewn about. The real quest, "Allen v. Farrow" makes clear, is nothing of the sort. And we are still not ready – likely never will be – to contend with it.

–

Talya Zax is the Forward's innovation editor. Follow her on Twitter [@TalyaZax](https://twitter.com/TalyaZax), or email her at [zax@forward.com](mailto:zax@forward.com).

Forward

## Create a Future for Courageous Jewish Journalism

The Forward is the most significant Jewish voice in American journalism. Our outstanding reporting on cultural, social, and political issues inspires readers of all ages and animates conversation across generations. Your support enables our critical work and contributes to a vibrant, connected global Jewish community.

The Forward is a nonprofit association and is supported by the contributions of its readers.

To donate online visit  
[Forward.com/donate](https://forward.com/donate)

To donate by phone, call  
**Call 212-453-9454**

### Culture

## The 9 Bible characters who should be canceled

By Mira Fox

Can Bible characters be “canceled?” This dire fate was suggested by Bill Hemmer, of Fox News, as the natural continuation of criticism of American presidents. “I tell ya, if they start canceling these American presidents, they’re going to come after Bible characters next – mark my words, right?” he warned. The topic under discussion was a [move by Chicago mayor Lori Lightfoot](#) to reevaluate the city’s monuments to ensure none are offensive; the list of monuments under scrutiny includes ones of Benjamin Franklin, George Washington and Abraham Lincoln.

Much of Twitter has already pointed out that there’s irony in Hemmer referring to biblical figures as “characters,” as implying they are fictional is already an affront to those who believe in the literal truth of the Bible.

This is a fair point, but it misses the real issue – the Bible is full of canceled people. Leaders, everyday folk, even whole cities and tribes at once. God loves canceling people! Lot’s wife? Being turned into a pillar of salt is pretty canceled, not to mention Sodom and Gomorrah. Adam and Eve? Basically the definition of being kicked out of society, aka canceled. Cain? Literally given a mark of shame! Also, everyone before Noah was canceled pretty decisively. That’s not even an exhaustive list of cancellations in Genesis, much less the rest of the Bible.

But Hemmer has inspired me to think more deeply. God and all the biblical authors may have missed some folks. Who else should have been canceled? I knew I got a Master’s degree in religion for a reason.

Disclaimer: This should not be taken as a complete list, and I’m not even touching the New Testament. In any case, canceling is really a communal activity so I’m just getting the ball rolling. The project is in your hands now.



### 1. Jacob/Israel

I'm sorry, I know he's the father of the Jewish nation, but Jacob is a terrible person. He manipulated his own twin into trading a bowl of lentils for his birthright, and then tricked his blind and dying father so he could steal Esau's blessing as well.

Even if we forgive those trespasses because he was probably a teenager, there's the whole question of marrying sisters. This was admittedly not all his fault – Laban also tricked Jacob – but he doesn't seem to have been particularly nice to Leah, plus there's the whole blatant favoritism among his kids. A terrible father *and* husband! Every time you think he's turned over a new leaf, he lies to someone again.

Esau, on the other hand, has been unfairly canceled and doesn't deserve the hate he gets from Jewish tradition, which often accuses him of violence. He seems like kind of a blockhead, but also generally a nice dude. He works hard to bring home good food to his ailing father and even forgives his conniving brother. Justice for Esau!

### 2. King David

Look, David makes a lot of very human, selfish mistakes, but he is a sympathetic character – we have the whole book of Psalms full of his songs and poetry, and he explains and regrets many of his trespasses. He's relatable and flawed and human. But also he just

kept doing terrible things!

I'd say the biggest no-no here is the whole situation with Batsheva [as immortalized by Leonard Cohen in "Hallelujah"]. I don't really care how much you regret and apologize for sleeping with someone's wife, impregnating her and then sending her noble husband to the front lines of a war so that he will die without ever finding out what you did. Sorry, some things are just too bad to come back from.

### 3. Mordechai

On Purim, we're supposed to get so smashed that we can't tell the difference between Haman, the villain in the book of Esther, and Mordechai, the hero. Except, first of all, by all rights Esther should be the hero. But also, they're less different than you'd think.

First of all, Mordechai basically sold his niece as a concubine, and moreover as a concubine to a non-Jewish king and has her pretend she isn't Jewish! I'm the product of an intermarriage myself, but for such a proud Jew as Mordechai, that seems in exceptionally poor taste. And then, in retaliation for Haman's attempt to slaughter all of the Jews, Mordechai got King Ahasuerus to let him and his fellow Jews kill anyone they found threatening in the city, leading to 75,300 deaths. Two wrongs do not make a right, Mordechai!

### 4. Jacob's sons, except Joseph and Benjamin

There are 12 of them – the 12 tribes of Israel, of course, all lauded forebears of the Jewish people. But, as is the case with their dad, I'm not sure we should be so proud to own them.

Their sister, Dinah, was raped, which is bad, and it is good that they rescued her. But – and I'm going to simplify this situation to use the ethics of the time, which would probably not have taken Dinah's desires into consideration – he also wanted to marry her, which should have fixed the situation. This guy was in love with Dinah and willing to do anything to marry her, so the brothers demanded everyone get

circumcised in order to marry their sister. And then they slaughtered them! Which, incidentally, probably doomed Dinah since it's unlikely she could have found a new marriage after that.

Also – and this is a biggie – they sold their own brother to Egyptians as a slave and possibly to be killed because they were jealous of a *coat!* Accusations of human trafficking are a classic reason for cancellation these days, unfortunately, whether it's Jeffrey Epstein or Ghislaine Maxwell, and I don't see why Asher, Naphtali, Simeon and friends should not go down with them.

## 5. Sarah

My main beef with Sarah is her handmaiden, Hagar. She gave her slave to her husband as a surrogate, which raises some hairy questions about consent (which would also apply to Rachel and Leah, incidentally); if you're unfamiliar, this practice inspired the dystopian show "The Handmaid's Tale."

But then, to make matters worse, she threw Hagar and Ishmael, the son she had forced on her and then adopted as her own, into the desert with nothing to save them just because she miraculously got pregnant herself and was jealous about inheritance. First of all, she had already committed to adopting Ishmael and that is truly abusive parenting. Secondly, it was attempted murder. God saved them, but that doesn't excuse Sarah.

## 6. Jeremiah

This is a classic reason for cancellation – getting caught saying something gross about women, particularly women's sex lives. In this case, his rape-y and sexist statement was immortalized in the Bible. "I, too, stripped back your skirts over your face" he says in Jeremiah 14:26-27. "I behold your adulteries, your lustful neighing, the depravity of your whoring." Even accounting for the fact that it's a metaphor (about Jerusalem), it's unacceptable. There's probably more examples, but Jeremiah is a long book.

## 7. Ezekiel

Same things as Jeremiah, pretty much exactly. Stop making metaphors about women "whoring" you guys! There are so many other ways to call things bad that don't slut-shame or denigrate sex work – which, incidentally, seem to be considered a totally fine a profession in the Bible.

Specifically, Ezekiel 16 goes on at length with a metaphor about harlotry, with choice accusations such as "you sullied your beauty and spread your legs to every passerby" and "you played the whore with them but were still unsated." Nope!

A lot of the prophetic books talk like this, but both Ezekiel and Jeremiah are really long ones, so I'm going to call them out specifically.

## 8. Whoever wrote Ecclesiastes (unknown, possibly Solomon)

This one is not a metaphor – he's just poetically philosophizing about life, as he does. And, he muses, "Now, I find woman more bitter than death; she is all traps, her hands are fetters and her heart is snares."

He's not calling out a specific ex, which I guess I could forgive him for because we all get upset after breakups. But he's just talking about women, at large, being evil, and that's not really OK.

Ecclesiastes is admittedly a pretty ambiguous book of the Bible, so I might get called out here for totally misunderstanding this, but I still think it's a dangerous phrase to put out into the world and have people take the wrong way. If you meant something else, say that! You brought this on yourself.

## 9. God

I know, bold. But also the obvious answer, right? For the global pandemic, if nothing else.

–

*Mira Fox is a fellow at the Forward. You can reach her at [fox@forward.com](mailto:fox@forward.com) or on Twitter [@miraefox](https://twitter.com/miraefox).*

## Letter from L.A.

# The 'Super-gay, super-Jewish' Ari Gold's friends and family remember the late pop star who embraced both identities

By Esther D. Kustanowitz

When he died on Valentine's Day 2021 after a battle with leukemia, pop singer and LGBTQ+ activist Ari Gold left behind a legacy of love and pride in both his gay and Jewish identity.

"He was a gay icon from a frum background," said producer Howard (Zvi) Rosenman, a longtime friend of the Gold family and a mentor to Ari. "He was an amazing guy who had wider influence than you'd think."

Rosenman knew Gold since the ascendant pop star was 17. "He became beyond the beyond. People went crazy for him. He was like the Elvis Presley of gaydom."

Gold's dual embrace of his Orthodox Jewish and gay identity was clear at the "intense" Zoom shiva held for him, said Rosenman. About 100 visitors logged on, Rosenman said, including "big famous drag queens with long nails and eyelashes, and rabbeim," or rabbis. [rabbis].

While the late pop star show was often photographed without his shirt, he was seldom photographed without a Star of David, a chai necklace, or some other indicator of his Jewish identity.

Rabbi Amichai Lau-Lavie, founding spiritual leader of Lab/Shul NYC, recalled having met Gold "on some dance floor or party" in the early 2000's, where a shirtless Gold was "flaunting his chai."

"I thought to myself, how radical it is to be so proud of who you are on so many levels," said Lau-Lavie. "To be super proud of being Jewish in the gay context, where that was not always cool, and to be super-gay in the Jewish context, especially the modern Orthodox one where we both came from, was definitely not always very cool."

Lau-Lavie called Gold "a trailblazer for these type of intertwined identities of pride."

Idit Klein, President and CEO of Keshet, an organization working for LGBTQ equality in Jewish life, remembered Gold's performance at one of the organization's first fundraisers, more than a decade ago.

"He was a striking sight in a spiked leather collar and bodysuit," Klein said. "He was unapologetically, gloriously proud to be a gay Jew. That feeling radiated from him and inspired everyone in his presence."

A native New Yorker and fourth-generation Lower East Sider, Ari Gold grew up in the Orthodox Jewish community of Pelham Parkway in the Bronx. As a child vocalist he sang on over 400 TV and radio jingles and on the Diana Ross record "Swept Away," and voiced animated characters for Jem and the Holograms and Cabbage Patch Kids. As a Billboard Top 10 recording artist, he sang in more than 40 U.S. states, and set records for No. 1 songs on Logo, once even displacing Madonna.

Gold came out in the 1980s.

"When he came out, it was like a bird out of a cage," said his mother, Lynn Gold, who identified herself as Modern Orthodox and politically conservative. "He went wild, clubbing and performing, that was his world. My husband and I thought, if we can't fight him, join him, and we started going to these clubs and saw him performing. We saw a lot of drag queens. Ari was so honored, he would make a big fuss from the stage, 'My parents are sitting right there.' He was so proud that he had this parental support."

When her son encountered former yeshiva kids who identified as gay, she added, Gold urged them "to integrate their Jewishness and not throw it away. I felt that was his purpose."

"Ari was all about love and compassion," wrote Gold's older brother, comedian Elon Gold in an Instagram post. "Proud to be gay. Proud to be a Jew. He passed away on Valentine's Day. A day in which humanity celebrates love. He had nothing but love for all. And I have and always will have nothing but love for my brother, Ari."

-

*Esther D. Kustanowitz is a freelance writer, editor and consultant based in Los Angeles.*

## Culture

# ‘Jesusland’ won’t be good for the Jews. But the ‘United States of Canada’ might be good for bagels.

By PJ Grisar

In a coup to graphic design sure to baffle cartographers, Andrew Torba, CEO of the far-right social media platform [Gab](#), has laid out new borders for the United States, which he re-dubbed “Jesusland.”



The map, which reduces the landmass of the U.S. by roughly a quarter by cutting off New England, the Tri-State Area and Maryland to the East; whole slabs of the Midwest and the entire Western Seaboard, is a head spinning rendering of the America Torba wants. Not since [C.J. Gregg gazed upon the Peters Projection](#) have we been more disturbed by a rendering of our country.

So, who is the map good for – if not the state of the Union – and is it good for the Jews?

## THE WINNERS:

### Canada

Capitals of industry and entertainment, from New York to Illinois and California, are absorbed into Canada’s provinces to form the United States of Canada. Whether or not that means they enter the Commonwealth is an open question. Canada gains the entirety of the Great Lakes and manages to keep contiguous borders (minus its addition of sunny Hawaii and its previously retained islands). It’s really a net gain – especially since Canadians can now reclaim Seth Rogen by swallowing up LA.

### Bagels

The debate between Montreal and New York holed bread need no longer be an issue of national pride with the advent of Jesusland. Instead, it becomes a playful competition between Canadian countrymen with all the good bagels now originating from the U.S. of C. Recipes – and maybe even some of that vaunted New York water – will be able to travel unimpeded and the state of the art can be improved. [Sorry to Jesusland, which will have to subsist mainly on sad rolls with holes and no decent schmear.]

### Sketch Comedy

Canada lost some of its brightest lights to the lure of 30 Rockefeller Center and wherever they filmed “In Living Color.” With the annexation of much of the U.S., Lorne Michaels has no choice but to make “Saturday Night Live” a Maple Leaf property. Jim Carrey once more becomes a native Canadian son. Mike Myers may be good again. With this momentous shift, SCTV and SNL may join forces, saving both franchises from obsolescence.

### Christian Theocracy

Kinda goes without saying.

### Israel

A lot of Jews will probably make aliyah once Jesusland is established. And even if they don’t, Jesusland will

likely be quite friendly given that its likely Evangelical leadership need Jerusalem for their end game gambit.

### THE LOSERS:

#### The Church of Latter Day Saints

At first glance, renaming America Jesusland would seem to appeal to a people whose theology places Jesus as preaching to a lost tribe of Israel in the Americas. But in this arrangement, Mormons also lose Upstate New York, Joseph Smith's site of revelation. They do keep Utah and Missouri, where Jesus is supposed to have his second coming. Win some, lose some.

#### The Democratic Party

I mean...

#### The U.S.

I am not in any way an economist, but Jesusland appears to be sacrificing a huge chunk of its erstwhile GDP by jettisoning Blue States (or at least SOME of the states that voted Blue in 2020). There may be a great diaspora following this proposal, but the fact remains that Silicon Valley and Wall Street and Hollywood have infrastructure ready to go and many might opt to stay put rather than face whatever fresh hell "Jesusland" may be.

#### Israel

A lot of Jews will probably make aliyah once Jesusland is established. And even if they don't, Jesusland will likely be quite friendly given that its likely Evangelical leadership need Jerusalem for their end game gambit.

#### Jesus

I can't speak for the Nazarene, but I'm not sure he'd want his name attached to a landmass he never visited or knew existed and whose national development is a direct result of colonialism. He'd probably also be more than a bit irked by the regular misunderstanding of his teachings, complexion and frame of reference as a first century Jewish man. But that's beside the point.

#### Jews

A place called Jesusland doesn't sound super friendly to a landsman, American, Canadian or otherwise. But hey, prove us wrong.

-

*PJ Grisar is the Forward's culture reporter. He can be reached at [Grisar@Forward.com](mailto:Grisar@Forward.com).*

### Opinion

## This Purim, don't boo Haman

By Amichai Lau-Lavie

Purim is back, a year after many of us gathered in person for the last time, with very different masks on.

Jewish communities all over are rising to the challenge of a virtual Purim with wonderful expressions of creativity and care, as we continue to struggle with the challenges of COVID-19, as well as with our increased awareness of other, related, plagues like systemic racism, poverty and climate crises.

Can we use this holiday of transformations to change our public lives and rituals for greater good?

More specifically: What will it take for us to let go of symbols that perpetuate divisions, so that we can build the kind of kinder world we all aspire to?

I write, of course, of the grogger.

I don't want to be a Purim party pooper. But precisely because of the year of epic proportions we've lived through, our Purim could use an adjustment.

Do we really want to continue booing the bad guy?

My 10-year-old kid and I decorated groggers last week, covering the wooden hand-shaped clappers with glittery nail polish. We started talking about why and how we use these things: Every time we hear the name of the bad guy who tried to kill our ancestors, we boo, clap and jeer. We live in a time of growing divides, with violence and bullying an increasing part of what passes as public discourse. It's worth asking what happens when we so eagerly celebrate the demolition of someone "other" than us – yes, even if they've tried to perpetuate grievous crimes against us.

What happens if we dial it down?

The noisemakers we gleefully use to drown out the name of Haman the oppressor represent a wounded side of our collective psyche we may be better off to set aside, at least for now. That's particularly true as booing Haman is often the most boisterous, most beloved part of Purim celebrations. Why do we focus on booing the bad guy, instead of cheering for the

brave queen? What if we flipped the script?

Yes, booing Haman offers a powerful, cathartic outlet for a people who have lived through countless threats and persecutions.

But for the centuries of the practice's existence – it's been around since the Middle Ages – there have been no small number of rabbinic voices who have disliked it for various valid reasons.

And outside of rabbinic debates, our booing of Haman has very real consequences.

On Purim, 1994, an Israeli doctor, Baruch Goldstein, killed 29 Palestinians and wounded many more while they were praying at a sacred site. In his suicide note, Goldstein linked his heinous attack to the command to blot out Haman in every generation. Abhorrently, his grave is today a pilgrimage site revered by many Jews – including some of the current leaders of the Religious Zionist party about to enter the Israeli Knesset. Prejudice is increasingly part of the Israeli and Jewish mainstream. It cannot be disconnected from the simple act of booing.

We must learn from these episodes: Focusing exclusively on those we see as enemies, and creating a culture in which we mock them, only harms us. We should ask again, even when it comes to Haman, what can we do to de-escalate the violence, to start healing wounds, to build bridges?

Refocusing will play into the best of what Jewish tradition has to offer. Our rituals have always evolved and grow towards more moral justice and human dignity. Purim 2021 offers us a needed nod towards our human responsibility.

Instead, each time we hear Queen Esther's name, let's cheer her on, honoring the bravery that led her to risk her privilege and safety for the sake of others in need. Let's celebrate our pride at what and who we are. Let us, like her, take on responsibility and repair, commit to healing, to loving and to fixing what we can, and still have fun. A happy, healthy, hopeful Purim to all.

-

*Rabbi Amichai Lau-Lavie is the Founding Spiritual Leader of Lab/Shul NYC.*

**The views and opinions expressed in this article are the author's own and do not necessarily reflect those of the Forward.**

## The Schmooze

# Is Britney Spears the Esther of our time?

By Irene Katz Connelly

The year was 2004. I was nine years old, and my access to pop culture was, in a word, limited: I consumed only the most age-appropriate public television programs and labored under a delusion that car stereos were exclusively intended for playing the "1776" soundtrack.

But when Britney Spears got hitched in a pair of blue jeans, I somehow still found out about it.

I have no idea how news of Britney's [short-lived Las Vegas marriage](#) made its way to me. But I clearly remember concluding, like every callous tabloid and talk show host, that she was "crazy," out of control, a walking contradiction to the household maxim with which I grew up: "Think for yourself."

That didn't mean I didn't love her. I begged my parents for her CDs. I mouthed her lyrics, cryptic but obviously transgressive, on the bus. With my best friend, I devoured the music video for "Baby One More Time," in which Britney, dressed as a sexy schoolgirl, struts the halls of a pretend campus. We imitated her by choreographing our own dance routines, which we then forced our nonplussed mothers to watch.

Dancing to Britney was thrilling and extremely weird, because she was both a role model and a "bad influence." In her music videos, she presented one vision – romanticized, alluring, intimidating – of what it meant to move through the world in a female body. And I, as a future woman, had to decide how to relate to it. Would I be best served by emulating this archetype or repudiating it? What kind of statement would I be making, either way? In Britney, I was looking for some sort of parable. But I grew out of my choreography phase before I could find it.

I revisited that childhood moment with the release of "Framing Britney Spears," a New York Times documentary about the incessant and exploitative media coverage that eroded the pop star's mental

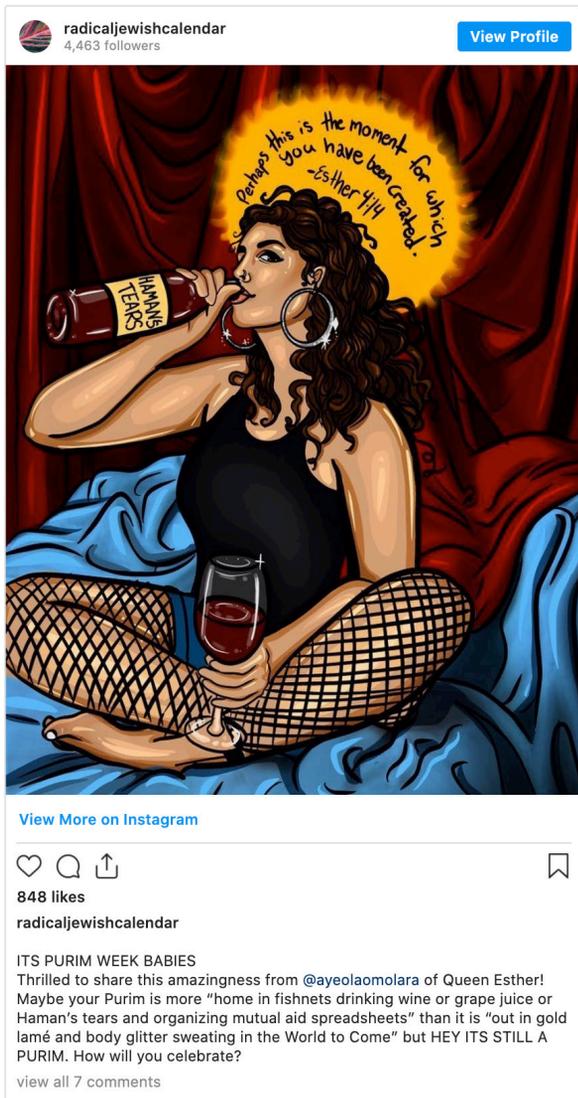
health and precipitated the controversial conservatorship that now governs her life. I doubt that Samantha Stark, the film’s director, timed its release to coincide with Purim, but the documentary has undoubtedly arrived in time for hamantashen season. Maybe that’s why the singer’s legacy seems to echo that of another woman whose sexuality has beguiled and discomfited for millennia: Esther.

what could be better? The Talmud elevated Esther at the expense of Vashti, her predecessor, who was banished by Ahasuerus after refusing to dance naked for his friends. In [centuries of commentary](#), she emerges as Esther’s sexual foil, a licentious woman in whom malice and sexuality were inextricably entwined.

But Vashti’s disobedience, her refusal to make herself sexually available, made her a compelling figure for feminists [as early in the 19th century](#). As her star rose, Esther’s fell. The deployment of feminine wiles, no matter how noble the ends, was outmoded and unfashionable; As Rabbi Susan Schnur [wrote](#) in a 1998 feature for Lilit, Esther’s intercession with Ahasuerus only showed that she had “no power for herself.”

Recently, feminists have returned more sympathetically to Esther. In the wake of #MeToo, some have [pointed out](#) that she was a victim of what we would now call sexual abuse. (Like many other Jewish kids, I learned in Hebrew school that Esther competed in a beauty contest to win Ahasuerus’s hand; in fact, the Megillah describes something more like sexual trafficking.) Others see her as a canny strategist, someone who embraced her sexuality not to please men around her but to achieve her own ends.

Britney has spent far less time than Esther in the public eye. But, albeit in a much-condensed timeline, her image has undergone a similar series of reversals. As a young star flashing her midriff in “Baby One More Time,” she telegraphed a brand of femininity – sexually “pure” yet available for public consumption – that has retained popularity since Esther’s day. Like Esther, she suffered a fall from favor when people started to see her as contravening, rather than reinforcing, preferred norms. For some, she typified the disintegration of so-called family values: decrying Britney as a bad influence in 2003, Kendel Ehrlich, then the first lady of Maryland, [said](#) she’d “shoot” Britney if given the opportunity. For women craving a less completely sexualized pop culture, derision for Britney also came easily. I was one of them – by the time I was a teenager, my days of dancing to “Baby One More Time” were a mere pitstop in the feminist autobiography I was crafting for myself.



In her own time and long after, Esther’s use of beauty and charm to save the Jews constituted a [model of womanhood](#). Possessing feminine virtues in abundance, she used them as directed by the men around her to strengthen the position of her people –

Now, the tide has turned once again. A grassroots movement going by the hashtag #FreeBritney is advocating for the end of her conservatorship. After watching “Framing Britney Spears,” hundreds of celebrities and ordinary people posted in solidarity. Even Britney’s former boyfriend, Justin Timberlake, who for years boosted his own profile with locker-room jokes about their relationship, issued a [mealy-mouthed apology](#).

As Esther has come to embody modern feminist concerns, current commentators now see in Britney’s life hallmarks of both agency and abuse. “Framing Britney Spears” steers towards the former narrative, portraying Britney as knowingly and unashamedly embracing her own sexuality in a way that uplifted female fans. Reflecting on her popularity, Times critic Wesley Morris hypothesized that “it isn’t the sex part that seems cool. It’s the control and command over herself and her space that seems cool.” Women like Mara Wilson and Tavi Gevinson, both of whom who enjoyed-slash-endured fame at a young age, critiqued that perspective. In an [essay for The Cut](#), Gevinson argued that it’s hard to see much personal agency in the story of a teenager navigating “an economy where young women’s sexuality is rapidly commodified until they are old enough to be discarded.”

Changing perceptions of Esther reflect social change, but they also demonstrate our tendency towards totalizing narratives about women – our desire to reduce a complex character to an empowered agent or a passive victim, to assert once and for all that female sexuality is suspect or sacred.

The beauty in Britney’s un concluded story is that it refutes the notion that we can find moral parables in women’s lives. After finishing “Framing Britney Spears,” I watched the “Baby One More Time” music video for the first time in over a decade. It’s a cultural artifact in which a young woman both refracts and riffs on old tropes. It’s a performance that highlights an artist brimming with talent and poise, yet obviously enmeshed in a money-making apparatus that must complicate her every action. It will not tell you anything about what kinds of women think for themselves.

Watching Britney dance, I thought of the impossibility, in a culture with such stern and conflicting ideas of how a woman should be, of neatly categorizing one’s actions as “empowered” or “disempowered.” I thought of the unending analysis of her outfit, which is not dissimilar to the suspicious way I interrogate my own quotidian choices – how I dress, how I walk, button up, button down. Like most other women, I make these little decisions constantly. I’m usually happy with them. But I don’t quite know how much personal agency is involved, and I doubt I ever will.

If there is some sort of “meaning” in Britney’s life and work, it’s one that’s simultaneously sobering and freeing. It’s something that I must have sensed as a nine-year-old, gyrating ungracefully to her music with trepidation and delight: There’s no way, in this world, to swivel your hips without subtext.

–  
*Irene Katz Connelly is a staff writer at the Forward. You can contact her at [connelly@forward.com](mailto:connelly@forward.com). Follow her on Twitter at [@katz\\_conn](https://twitter.com/katz_conn).*

Forward

## Create a Future for Courageous Jewish Journalism

The Forward is the most significant Jewish voice in American journalism. Our outstanding reporting on cultural, social, and political issues inspires readers of all ages and animates conversation across generations. Your support enables our critical work and contributes to a vibrant, connected global Jewish community.

The Forward is a nonprofit association and is supported by the contributions of its readers.

To donate online visit  
[Forward.com/donate](https://forward.com/donate)

To donate by phone, call  
**Call 212-453-9454**