

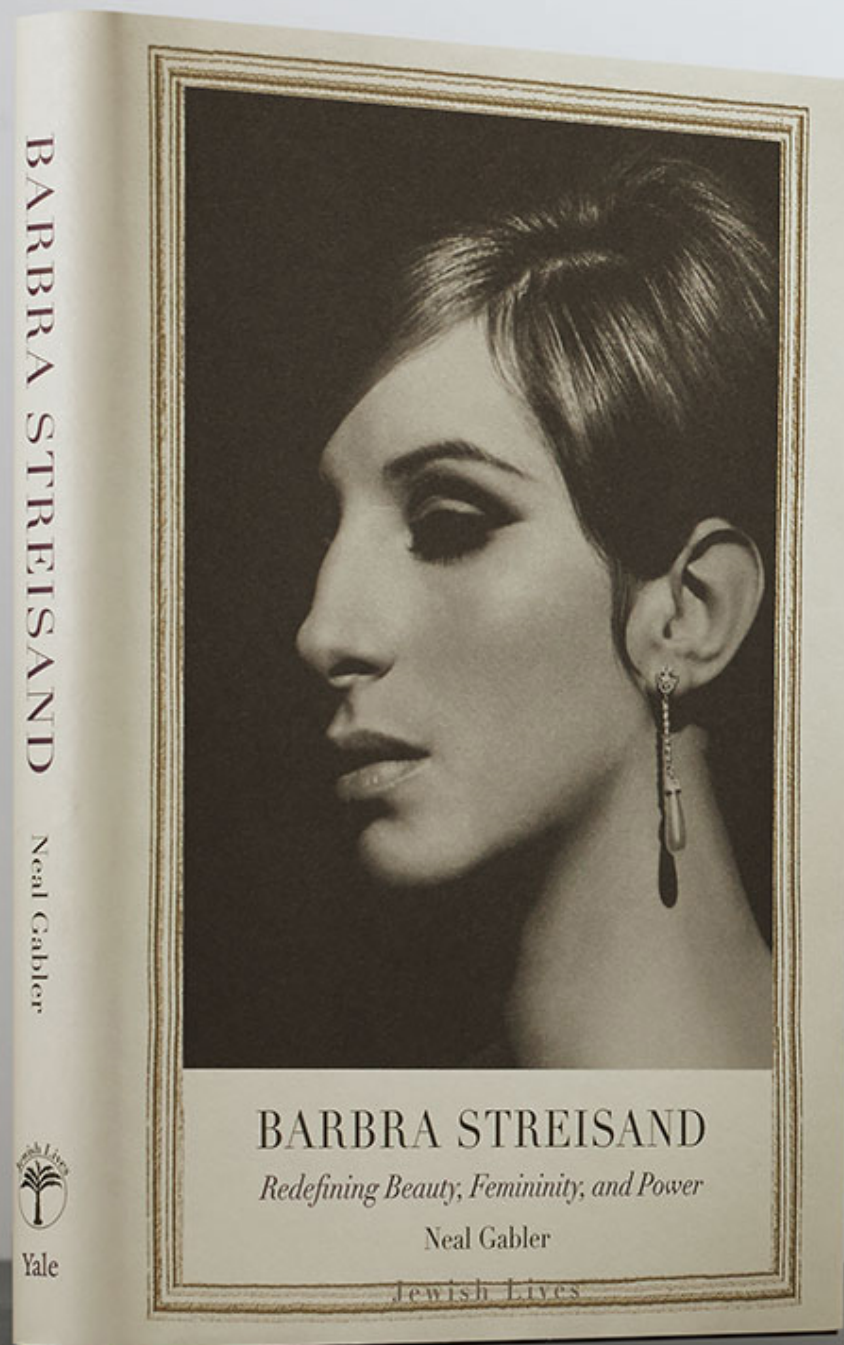
Jewish Lives



BIOGRAPHIES THAT ILLUMINATE  
THE JEWISH EXPERIENCE

## READING GUIDE

By Author Neal Gabler



# CONTENTS

Timeline	3
Discussion Questions	9
Selected Bibliography	13
About Jewish Lives	15

# TIMELINE

- December 7, 1941 Pearl Harbor is attacked and America enters World War II.
- April 24, 1942 Barbara Streisand is born, allegedly amidst the cacophony of air-raid sirens, in the Israel Zion Hospital of Brooklyn, New York, to Diana Rosen and a bookish high school teacher Emmanuel Streisand.
- August 4, 1943 While working as a camp counselor in the Catskills, Manny Streisand suddenly and unaccountably falls ill, and after retiring to his cabin, can't be roused. He dies at Fleischmanns Hospital of what is thought to be a brain hemorrhage but is later determined to be most likely an overdose of morphine administered for an epileptic seizure.
- Fall 1943 Barbara, her mother and her brother Sheldon go to live with her maternal grandparents on Pulaski Street in Brooklyn – a passage of her life that Barbara would describe in Dickensian terms.
- Summer 1948/49 Barbara is sent to a Hebrew health camp in upstate New York. Her mother arrives with a man named, inappropriately, Louis Kind, a still-married man with three children.
- 1950s Barbara attends Loew's Kings Theater on Flatbush Avenue and imagines herself on the screen.
- December 23, 1950 Diana Streisand marries Louis Kind. She is nearly nine months pregnant at the time with Barbara's younger sister Rosalind.
- May 6, 1955 After a disastrous marriage, Diana and Louis Kind separate, but not before Kind has tormented Barbara, calling her "beast."
- September 1955 Barbara enters Erasmus Hall High School, a school with a roster of distinguished alumni, but the school fails to recognize her talent.
- December 29, 1955 Diana, a frustrated singer, and Barbara go to the NOLA recording studio in Steinway Hall to record four songs. On one of them, Barbara extends the ending – a bit of idiosyncratic vocalization.
- April 22, 1956 For her 14th birthday, Barbara and a friend go to see *The Diary of Anne Frank* on Broadway, and Barbara determines that she wants to be an actress.

# TIMELINE

- Summer 1956 Barbara convinces her mother to let her join a small theater company in Malden Bridge, New York, where she appears in two plays.
- 1957 Barbara convinces acting teacher Alan Miller to let her work at the Cherry Lane Theater. She takes her first acting classes with Miller.
- January 26, 1959 By taking a double load of classes, Barbara graduates early from Erasmus Hall, fourth in her class, and moves to Manhattan to take on the theater world.
- Winter 1959/60 Barbara sees *The Sound of Music* while ushering at the Lunt-Fontanne Theater and decides to audition for the role of Liesl. She is turned down, but the casting director Eddie Blum encourages her to keep singing.
- May 1960 Barbara is cast in *The Insect Play* at the Jan Hus Playhouse, playing a butterfly. She meets fellow actor Barry Dennen, who becomes a romantic interest, but more importantly becomes a mentor to Streisand, teaching her about culture, and about music, introducing her to Billie Holiday, Edith Piaf, Peggy Lee, and Judy Garland.
- July 2, 1960 Barbara launches her singing career when Dennen encourages her to enter a talent show at The Lion, a nightclub in Greenwich Village. She wins, beginning a string of victories at the club. Later that same night, at the Pam Pam restaurant, she redubs herself “Barbra” because the loss of the second “a” makes her different.
- May-September 1961 As her reputation grows, Barbra appears regularly at the Bon Soir and the Blue Angel nightclubs.
- November 29, 1961 Barbra auditions for the role of Miss Marmelstein for the Broadway show, *I Can Get It for You Wholesale* and lands it. She winds up stealing the show, and the heart of the show’s young male lead, Elliott Gould.
- May 29, 1962 Barbra appears on “The Gary Moore Show” and sings a dirge-like rendition of “Happy Days Are Here Again,” which will become one of her signature songs.
- September 1962 After great resistance, Columbia Records head Godard Lieberson finally signs Barbra to a record contract. She takes less money in exchange for greater creative control.
- February 21, 1963 Columbia releases *The Barbra Streisand Album*, which her manager Marty Ehrlichman calls the “turning point in her career.” It wins her Grammys for “Best Female Vocalist” and “Best Album.”

# TIMELINE

- May 12, 1963 Barbra appears on “The Dinah Shore Show” where President John F. Kennedy sees her and invites her to appear at the White House Correspondents Dinner on May 24. She meets the President.
- August 1963 Barbra opens for Liberace at the Riviera in Las Vegas. The audience turns on her until Liberace decides to do the opening number and introduce her himself.
- September 13, 1963 Barbra marries Elliott Gould in Carson City, Nevada.
- 1964 The Beatles arrive and transform popular music.
- March 26, 1964 *Funny Girl* opens on Broadway with Streisand in the title role as Fanny Brice. She receives 23 curtain calls, and a star is born. Two weeks later she is on the cover of *Time*.
- April 28, 1965 After signing Barbra to a 5-year \$10 million deal, CBS airs Barbra’s first TV special, “My Name is Barbra,” which wins five Emmys including one for Outstanding Performance.
- April 13, 1966 After closing in *Funny Girl* on Broadway, Barbra opens in the London production. The next week, she and Gould announce they are having a baby.
- December 29, 1966 Son Jason Gould is born.
- May 10, 1967 Barbra arrives in Hollywood to shoot the film *Funny Girl* under the direction of William Wyler.
- June 17, 1967 During a break in shooting of *Funny Girl*, Barbra performs before 135,000 people for “A Happening in Central Park,” which is taped for a CBS special to air in September.
- February 13, 1969 Barbra and Gould announce their decision to separate.
- April 14, 1969 Barbra wins the Oscar for Best Actress for her performance in *Funny Girl*. She shares the award with Katharine Hepburn in a rare tie.
- December 17, 1969 The film version of *Hello, Dolly!* opens, starring Barbra.

# TIMELINE

- June 1970 Barbra enters politics by campaigning for congressional candidate Bella Abzug.
- February 1, 1971 Columbia releases Barbra's first rock-pop album, "Stoney End," in which, at Columbia's urging, she tries to contemporize her sound.
- Summer 1973 While pondering hairstyles for her next film, *For Pete's Sake*, Barbra meets hairdresser Jon Peters, and the two begin a romance that will have a profound effect on her career as Peters assumes the role of manager.
- October 16, 1973 *The Way We Were*, starring Barbra and Robert Redford opens, for which Barbra will be nominated for an Oscar. The film will be considered a classic, while her recording of the title song will become one of her most popular records.
- December 18, 1976 *A Star is Born* opens. Despite horrendous advance press, due in part to Barbra and Jon Peters producing it, it will be Streisand's biggest commercial hit to date. The following March, Barbra will win her second Oscar, for Best Song, for "Evergreen." She will also win two Grammys for it.
- October 1, 1980 Columbia releases *Guilty*, a collaboration between Barbra and the Bee Gees' Barry Gibb. The title song is a hit, as is the album.
- November 16, 1983 *Yentl*, based on an Isaac Bashevis Singer story, premieres. This has been Barbra's passion project for more than a decade. It is also her first time directing a film.
- February 16, 1984 Despite glowing reviews and two Golden Globe awards, Barbra is not nominated for an Academy Award for Best Director, presumably as punishment for her hubris.
- November 4, 1985 Columbia releases "The Broadway Album," an album of Broadway standards. Despite the company's attempts to discourage Barbra from recording it, it becomes one of her best and best received recordings, reaching number one on the Billboard chart. She will also win a Grammy for Best Female Vocalist the following February – her 8th Grammy.
- September 6, 1986 Barbra hosts the "One Voice" concert to raise funds for various charities and six Democratic senatorial candidates. It is her first live performance in thirteen years.

# TIMELINE

- December 25,1991 *Prince of Tides*, adapted from Pat Conroy's novel, opens, starring Barbra and Nick Nolte. It receives favorable reviews, and gets Barbra a Directors Guild nomination, though she will be snubbed once again by the Oscars.
- 1992 Barbra performs at fundraisers to aid Bill Clinton's presidential campaign. She will later perform at his inaugural.
- December 15,1992 Barbra signs a comprehensive contract – films and recordings – with Sony for \$60 million.
- June 29, 1993 Barbra releases her 50th album, *Back to Broadway*, which opens at number one on the Billboard chart.
- January/July 1994 Barbra tours for the first time in nearly a decade. "Barbra the Concert" will air on HBO that August, drawing the highest ratings on the cable network for a concert special to that point. It will also win her a Peabody Award.
- February 3,1995 Barbra speaks at the Harvard Kennedy School of Government to a packed house.
- July 1, 1996 Barbra meets actor James Brolin at a party and begins a romance.
- November 10, 1996 *The Mirror Has Two Faces*, Barbra's third directorial effort, premieres. It stars Barbra and Jeff Bridges.
- July 1, 1998 Barbra and James Brolin marry at her Malibu estate.
- December 31, 1999 Barbra performs two concerts at the MGM Grand, once again, under the title "Timeless," then announces a "Timeless" tour.
- 2000 Barbra receives the National Medal of Arts from President Clinton.
- November 26, 2002 Barbra releases an album of "Duets" with famous collaborators, including Frank Sinatra, the closest thing to a male equivalent to her.
- December 17, 2004 *Meet the Fockers*, featuring Barbra as Ben Stiller's mother, premieres. It will be the most successful film of her career commercially.

# TIMELINE

- 2006 Barbra decides to tour again, largely to raise money for various causes. The 20-concert tour grosses \$92 million.
- 2007 Barbra, for the first time, performs in continental Europe.
- 2008 Barbra receives the Kennedy Center Honors.
- 2012 Barbra makes her last film to date, *Guilt Trip*, with Seth Rogen.
- 2012 Barbra launches the “Barbra Live Tour,” which includes her first performance in Brooklyn since she was a child performing on her stoop.
- 2014 Barbra’s album *Partners* hits number one on the Billboard chart, giving her a number one album in six different decades – the only artist to have done so.
- January 2017 Barbra speaks at the Women’s March in Los Angeles.



# DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

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## To begin the discussion:

Barbra Streisand is one of the most polarizing entertainers. People seem either to love her or loathe her. Where do you stand? Why do you think Streisand is so divisive a figure?

## Introduction:

1. In the introduction, the case is made that Streisand is one of those rare entertainers, like Marlon Brando, Elvis Presley and the Beatles, who is “revolutionary” – who changes her art and her culture. Do you agree? If so, in what ways do you think Streisand transformed music, film and culture?
2. One observer called her the “Jackie Robinson of female Jewish performers,” which is quite a statement. Does Streisand deserve that accolade? What barriers do you think she broke and how important were they?
3. Streisand is unmistakably, pridefully Jewish. How powerfully do you think her Jewishness figures into her art and her popularity? In what ways?

## Chapter One: Mieskeit

1. Streisand’s father Emanuel died when she was an infant, and she would say thereafter that there was a “gaping hole somewhere.” How significant do you think the death of Manny Streisand was in shaping Streisand and her persona? When we ponder what force or forces drove Streisand, was this a central one? Do you think Streisand was always seeking compensation for the love and attention her father’s death denied her?
2. It is virtually impossible to discuss Streisand without discussing her appearance. No major star, certainly no romantic star, had ever looked like her. How much of a role do you think her feelings about her looks played in both her desire to be a star and in her ultimate success in becoming one?

## Chapter Two: Chutzpah

1. Streisand had nothing if not chutzpah. She kept pushing even when she was insulted and humiliated. Where do you think that chutzpah came from? How could she keep going in the face of such opposition, including her mother’s opposition? Do you think she was fueled by resentment?
2. Streisand developed not just her voice, but a persona: the “kook” persona. Why do you think she chose this way to present herself to the public? How carefully constructed do you think it was, and how much did it contribute to her growing popularity?
3. Streisand’s first two breakthroughs were Miss Marmelstein in *I Can Get It For You Wholesale* and Fanny Brice in *Funny Girl* – two homely Jewesses. Could Streisand have made it any other way? Was the only passage to stardom through the portal of her Jewishness?

# DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

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## Chapter Three: Tsezingen Zikh

1. Early in her career, Streisand seemed to have a hard time winning over gentile audiences. Liberace had to front for her when she opened for him in Las Vegas. Since her voice was unmistakably great, why do you think gentile audiences were resistant to her?
2. Streisand had, and continues to have, a large and enthusiastic following among gay people. It is entirely possible she would not have a career without them. To what do you attribute the relationship between Streisand and the gay community? What is the affinity between them?
3. Streisand possesses, undeniably, one of the great voices of popular music, but it wasn't her voice alone that has made her exceptional. Here is an experiment: Listen closely to a Streisand recording, say, "People," and then ask yourself, what makes her so distinctive, so pathbreaking, so great? Is there something "Jewish" in the way she sings that you can identify?
4. Streisand is often linked with Frank Sinatra as the greatest female and male popular vocalists. What similarities do you find and what differences? How did each redefine popular singing? How did each relate to his/her ethnicity?

## Chapter Four: Bien Aktrise

1. The role of Fanny Brice in *Funny Girl* would become not only Streisand's catapult to stardom, but also the template for just about every other role she was to play. The role could not have been a better fit. To what extent do you think our knowledge of Streisand's own personal struggles informed her career and her success? And how much of that success is defined by being the girl whom, as she once said, wasn't asked to the prom?

## Chapter Five: Holivaud

1. With the success of *Funny Girl*, which landed her on the cover of *Time*, and then the movie version, Streisand also became a fashion icon. In the book's subtitle, "redefining beauty" is listed as one of her accomplishments. Do you think this is accurate? In what way would you say that Streisand revised our definition of female pulchritude? How much do you think conventional ideas of beauty actively worked against Jewish women, and how much of this was anti-Semitism?
2. Even as Streisand was becoming the biggest female star in film, in no small measure by riding her Jewishness, some Jewish critics were castigating her for not being Jewish enough, not particularized enough. (See Felicia Herman's criticism on page 127). Do you agree that Streisand soft-peddled her Jewishness even as she was peddling it?

# DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

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## Chapter Six: Supervuman

1. Streisand arrived at the confluence of two great movements: civil rights and feminism. In what sense, if any, was Streisand a beneficiary of these movements? To what degree was Streisand a feminist icon that helped drive the movement and become a living symbol of female empowerment? To what extent did she redefine femininity?
2. As Streisand entered the political arena and became increasingly vocal on political issues, she received tremendous blowback. Johnathan Yardley of the *Washington Post* criticized her for “mistaking emotions for ideas,” as if non-pundits had no right to express their views. Should Streisand have stuck to music and film, or were her political views valid? What role should entertainers play in our political culture?

## Chapter Seven: Shaygetz

1. *New York Times* critic Manohla Dargis once wrote that what Streisand did was “turn a Jewish woman into a sex symbol.” How true do you think this is? But even as a sex symbol, Streisand’s films usually pair her with a gentile, and this was generally true in her personal life as well. How much of her appeal is a function of romantic wish fulfillment on the part of the audience? And how much is it a function of our knowledge of her moral superiority over more conventionally beautiful and often vapid stars? (Think here of *The Way We Were*, which is about her moral superiority.)
2. In her films, Streisand seldom winds up with the man at the end. Why do you think this is so? What do you think it says about Streisand and about the Streisand persona?

## Chapter Eight: Rediscovering lugent

1. In the 70s and 80s, Columbia Records, Streisand’s label, kept pressing her to modernize her sound, revise her work. She did so, sometimes with less than satisfactory results. Do you feel that Streisand became a dinosaur? We think of great artists as being eternal, but is she?
2. Streisand’s version of *A Star is Born*, in which she not only starred but which she produced with her new boyfriend Jon Peters, was heaped with abuse long before it was finished and released. How much of the abuse she received here, and would continue to receive as she took more control of her career, was resentment over a woman having the audacity to assume traditionally male roles, and how much was just a resentment of Streisand’s own overpowering personality? And, finally, how much of it was anti-Semitism against a “pushy” woman who seemed to check all the boxes for a Jewish Big Mouth?
3. Did Streisand finally help redefine power in Hollywood by helping to empower women?

# DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

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## Chapter Nine: Macher

1. With *Yentl*, Streisand finally did what she was destined to do: direct. But before she took the reins herself, she had made her best films with Jewish directors. What affinities do you observe in her work with those directors? Do you think they saw something in her that gentile directors did not or could not?
2. *Yentl* is, like nearly all of Streisand's films, a film of dichotomies – here, basically male and female. Streisand seems fascinated with dichotomies – male and female, gentile and Jew, morality and aesthetics in *The Way We Were* – and the difficulty, if not impossibility of reconciling them. Her films, as disparate as they are, bear a continuity of themes. Which of these would you identify as being Streisandesque? Or put another way, what would you say are the dominant themes of Streisand's career?

## Chapter Ten: Tsufidnkeit

1. For years now, Streisand has been in a kind of exile, returning to the stage infrequently. She has always had a rather complicated relationship to her audience. Now that she seems happily married and content, do you think she owes us anything more than what she has already given us? Or has she finally found what she had been searching for?

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# ABOUT JEWISH LIVES



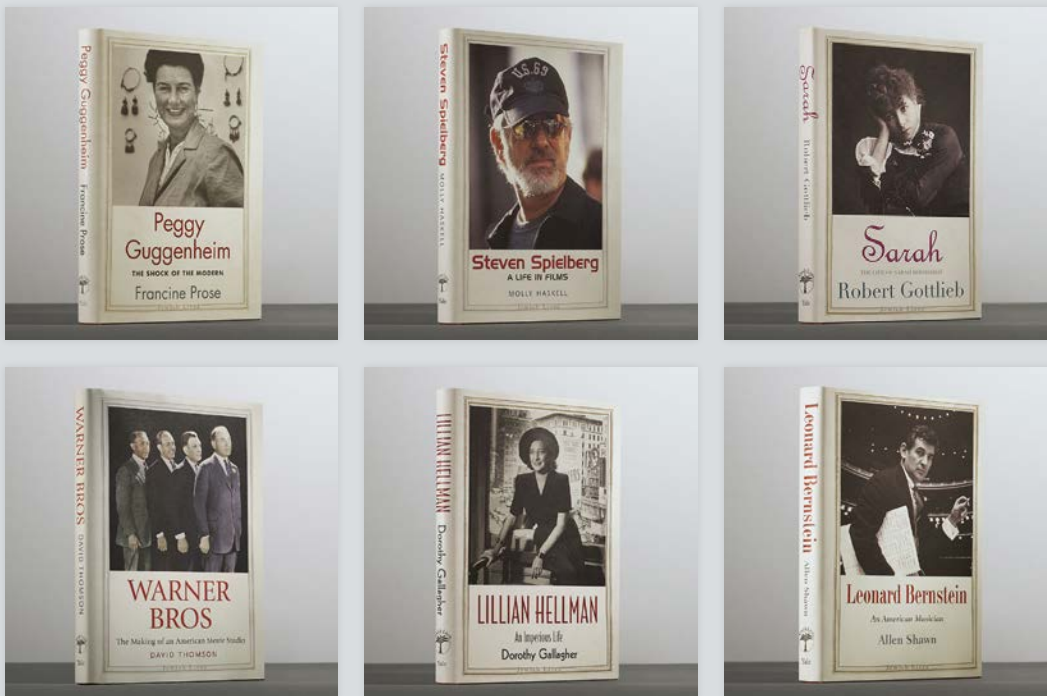
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