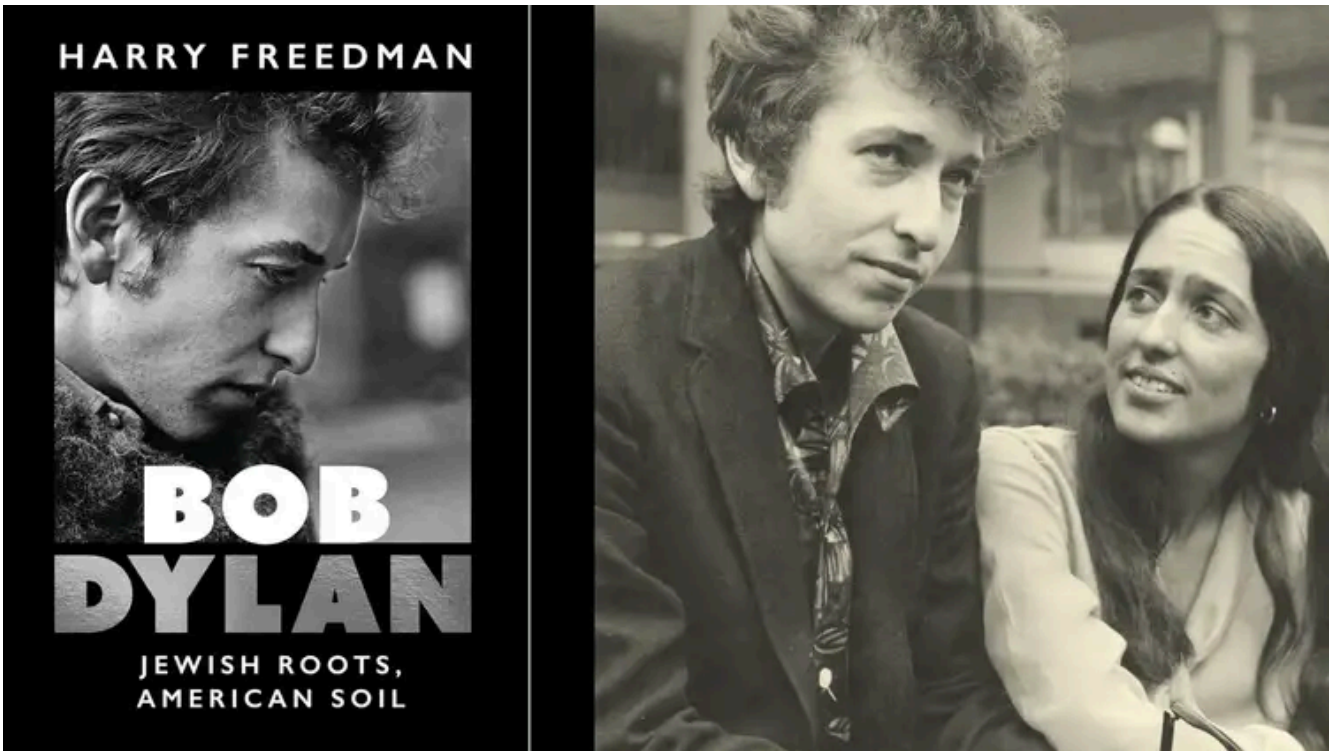
Life

Bob Dylan: Jewish Roots, American Soil review: ‘Tangled up in clues’

This new book about the search for the real Dylan could be more enlightening

June 8, 2025 22:33



Enigmatic: Bob Dylan with singer-songwriter Joan Baez

By **Jenni Frazer** 2 min read

There’s no doubt Harry Freedman’s new book on Bob Dylan benefits

But where James Mangold’s Oscar-nominated film suggests to uninformed audiences that the infamous heckle of “Judas”, when Dylan moved from acoustic guitar to electronic music, took place at the Newport Folk Festival, Freedman devotes his final chapter to the event. All true Dylan fans know, as Freedman explains, that the cry took place at Manchester’s Free Trade Hall in 1966.

And 1966 is where Freedman’s exploration of the life of Dylan, né Robert Zimmerman from Hibbing, Minnesota, ends. Before that he gives us a fascinating social history taking in many of the volatile upsurges of twentieth century American society. Anyone hoping to learn more about Dylan’s brief flirtation with Christianity, or his even more recent dance with Chabad Judaism, is going to be disappointed.

Privacy

Instead, Freedman — whose chapter headings regularly drop, in true Dylan stye, the final “g”, so that we have “Startin’ Out” and “Protestin’” — doesn’t have a lot to go on, other than the claim that Bob Dylan changed his name because he hated being identified as a Jew. The change took place, Freedman tells us, in the few short months that Dylan spent at the University of Minnesota before he dropped out.

Instead Freedman is forced to speculate on what it might have been like growing up as a young Jewish boy in a small American mid-West town, because Dylan only mentions the word once in his autobiography Chronicles once—“and that is in reference to the Pope”. One startling fact to emerge, however, is that Abe and Beatty Zimmerman invited 500 people to young Robert’s barmitzvah — and 400 of them turned up. Not bad, as Freedman observes, for a small town with only 280 Jews.

Privacy

In Mangold’s film the young Dylan tells an early girlfriend that he had spent time travelling the country and working with carnivals, a claim she clearly does not believe. Freedman is kinder to the young Dylan than he might deserve, excusing his frank lies about his background as follows: “If anything might cause us to regard Bob Dylan as a Jewish mystical dreamer, it is his erosion of the boundaries between observable and potential realities.” I’m not sure I buy that line.

Elsewhere there is a slight whiff of desperation and occasional high comedy, as Freedman is at pains to tell readers about each and every person of Jewish heritage who crossed Dylan’s path during his early attempts to break in to the music scene in New York’s Greenwich Village. A litany of managers, club owners, and musicians flood the pages, from business manager Albert Grossman to the wonderfully fake singer Ramblin’ Jack Elliott. He turned out to be Elliott Charles Adnopoz, a Jewish doctor’s son from Brooklyn, whose entirely invented biography as a mid-West cowboy apparently had Dylan rolling on the floor in fits of laughter on learning who Ramblin’ Jack really was. Dylan laughing? You might as well say Garbo.

Privacy

There is a bit of an “aha” moment as Freedman recounts that Dylan’s first wife, Sara Lownds, was a nice Jewish girl, precisely the sort his parents had always wanted him to marry. And we also learn that Dylan and his younger brother David Zimmerman had jointly bought an estate in Scotland in 2006, which they owned for 17 years.

But unless you are desperate to learn about Dylan’s platonic love affair with the singer Woody Guthrie, or how he was influenced by folk singer Pete Seeger, or that he played with, or was a contemporary of, Jewish musicians such as Phil Ochs, Al Kooper or Mike Bloomfield, for Jewish readers this is not one of Freedman’s most enlightening books. He does his best, but Dylan’s is not a generous story in terms of a Jewish inner life. He probably lied so much about his background over the years, that even he is unlikely to be sure what is truth and what is fiction. Even Mangold, after the release of

Privacy

A Complete Unknown, told one reporter that Dylan had asked him to include an entirely made-up scene — just out of pure mischief.

Bob Dylan: Jewish Roots, American Soil by Harry Freedman

Bloomsbury

Topics: BOOKS BOB DYLAN

Privacy

More from Life

More from Life →



FIDDLER ON THE ROOF

Fiddler on the Roof’s golden couple: ‘Our Tevye and Golda chemistry is real’

By **John Nathan** 7 min read

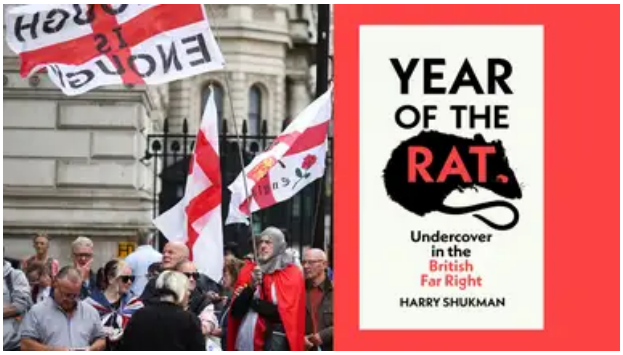


TRAVEL

Move over Napa – it’s all about Santa Barbara

By **Anna Pointer** 5 min read

Privacy



BOOKS

Year of the Rat review: 'proof the threat to British Jews from the far right never went away'

By **David Bennun** 3 min read



DOCUMENTARY

'They would call me a Jewish dog, a Jewish pig and spit on me'

By **Nicole Lampert** 6 min read

THE JEWISH CHRONICLE

Become a member

Support our work

About us
Advertising
Archive
Our Team
Cookies
Write a letter to the editor
Contact Us
Privacy Policy
Terms & Conditions

Never Miss a Story

Sign up to The Jewish Chronicle Daily News and get updates right in your inbox.

Privacy

Email

Enter your email

Editor's picks

01 Fiddler on the Roof's golden couple: 'Our Tevye and Golda chemistry is real'



02 'They would call me a Jewish dog, a Jewish pig and spit on me'



03 Fiddler on the Roof review: 'As joyous as it is necessary' ★★★★★



04 'I thought I absolutely hated being a mum and was a failure of a woman'



05 Is your child anxious? Vanessa Feltz's daughter can help



Privacy