

Elevating American
Comedy

Preserving Democracy
through Humor

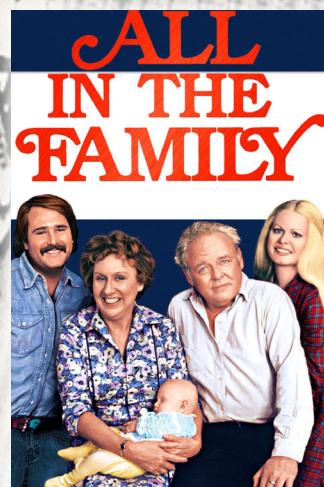
Transforming
TV for Good

HUMANISTIC JUDAISM

FALL 2025

Norman Lear

HUMANISTIC
JUDAISM'S
2025-2026
ROLE MODEL
OF THE YEAR



FEATURE

Norman Lear Loved This

BY MARTY KAPLAN

When Norman Lear hit his late 80s, people often asked him the secret of his longevity. He would mention yoga, strength training, a loving family, but his emphasis always landed on savoring the present—living “in the hammock,” he liked to put it, “between ‘Over!’ and ‘Next!’” In his 90s, as the question shifted to belief in an afterlife, his answer was, I believe in *this* life: “Is there anything more glorious than the first bite into a perfectly ripe peach?”

Asked if he believed in God, he would speak of his reverence for the birches in the woods behind The Gulley, his home in Vermont. Or marvel at how art awed him, like the poems of Robert Frost, or the paintings of Kenneth Noland, whose home The Gulley had been before him. Or recall standing “behind a couple to 300 people looking at a live performance that’s being taped, and watching those several hundred people laugh, watching them rise a little bit, and then back—I mean, just an inch out and back on a big laugh....When an audience laughs from the belly, I always think it’s the most spiritual sight outside of a church or synagogue.”

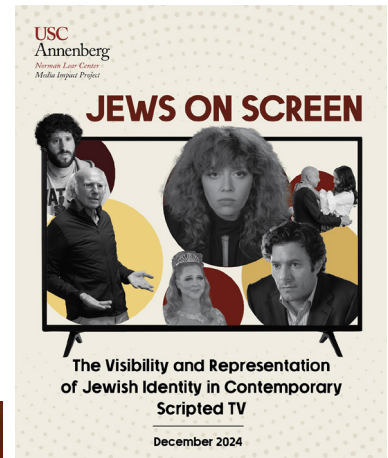
I loved Norman Lear before I knew him, when I belly-laughed at *Mary Hartman, Mary Hartman*—not among hundreds in a studio audience, but among millions in its television audience, as a graduate student in the 1970s. A quarter-century later, after careers in Washington (Vice President Mondale’s speechwriter) and in Hollywood (a Disney executive and screenwriter), I was appointed as the Norman Lear professor of entertainment, media, and society at USC Annenberg, where I founded the Norman Lear Center, and which I’ve directed for 25 years.



Marty Kaplan with Norman Lear at *Norman Lear: 100 Years of Music and Laughter*. ABC, 2022.

The Lear Center’s mission, as I put it in the early days, is “to illuminate and repair the world.” I lifted the repairing-the-world part from Judaism’s *tikkun olam*, a tribute to Norman’s philanthropic and political support for causes from human rights to the environment to corporate social responsibility. In tribute, too, to his patriotism, exemplified by his 52 bombing missions as a radio operator and gunner in World War II; his advocacy of the separation of church and state, which is the charge of the People for the American Way, which he founded in 1981; his purchase in 2000 of a copy of the Declaration of Independence struck in John Dunlap’s Philadelphia print shop on the night of July 4, 1776. He called it “America’s birth certificate,” and traveled it to 50 states to encourage voter registration by what turned out to be four million young voters.

The Lear Center pays homage to Norman’s conviction that stories matter; that storytellers have the power to inform and inspire their audiences; and that wielding that power responsibly requires no sacrifice of popular



***Jews on Screen* examines Jewish representation in scripted TV series aired between 2021 and 2022. USC Annenberg Norman Lear Center, 2024.**

success. Norman’s shows were full-on entertainment: there was no preachiness. Yet they also grappled frankly with many of the battleground moral and political issues of his time and ours. That authenticity is embodied by characters whom Americans knew then and now as family and friends, in storylines like Edith Bunker’s rape, Mike Stivic’s opposition to the Vietnam War, Maude Findlay’s abortion, and Elena Alvarez’s coming out.

Today, unusual for an academic institution, the Lear Center embraces both research and social action. We make it easy and free for writers on shows from *Abbott Elementary* to *The Pitt* to consult experts to get facts right; we study the impact of storylines on the knowledge, beliefs, and behavior of audiences; and we work to harness the power of storytelling to hearten and heal this battered, beautiful world.

Over the years, I spent some Columbus Day weekends in Vermont at gatherings of the Lears’ friends, known as the Gulley Gang. The spirit of these annual convenings was, as E.M. Forster’s imperative put it, “Only connect!”—connect with one another; with what moves us, and the meaning we make of it; with the splendor around us; with intimations of our own mortality.

Over meals and on walks, in conversations scheduled and serendipitous, our voices mingled—theologians and comedians, poets and journalists, academics and artists, translators of Homeric epics and scholars of Gnostic gospels. What I felt in touch with there is what Ken Wilber calls “the highest

NORMAN LEAR

THROUGH THE YEARS

common denominator” of human beliefs. The intent of those long weekends wasn’t to answer questions as old as time. It was to experience asking them in the intimacy of other seekers. That experience wasn’t so much about our own religions, or our doubts about them, as about *all* religions, and the pain and longing and confusion that turn us, like the sun, toward hope.

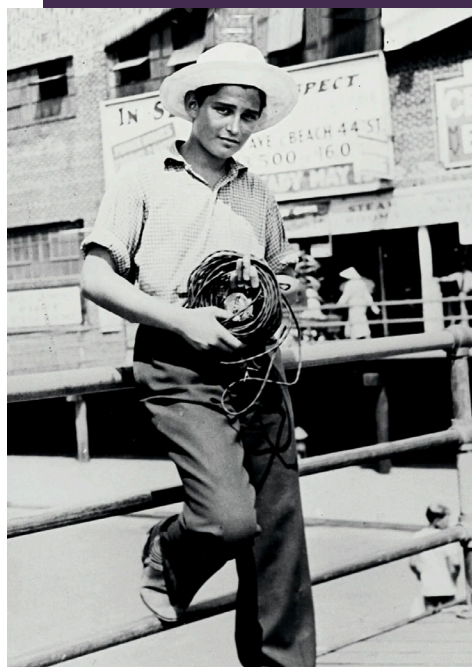
But this makes those days seem so solemn, and solemnity wasn’t very Norman. Yes, we faced off with wintry things—the woes of existence, the injustice of chance, the night thoughts that deny us rest. But that gravitas was infused with plenty of Borsht Belt *shtick*. Along with the encouragement that Norman gave us to confront our common puzzlement about the cosmos also came permission to play, to find the laughter on the flip side of fear.

Walking the Gulley’s grounds, losing and finding myself among its trees, I wondered if Frost’s time in their midst had inspired “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening.” More than once, I couldn’t help asking myself how many miles to go were left to Norman, or to the other guests of his generation, or to me.

We lost Norman at 101. When I learned of his passing, my first thought, I confess, was not *Baruch dayan ha’emet*—“Blessed is the true judge”—the blessing the Talmud teaches us to say when a not-good befalls us, and which has always rankled me by its absence of rage against the dying of the light. What came to mind instead were the words I had more than once heard Norman say when some not-good befell him. It wasn’t a blessing—it was a punch line. He said it would be fitting for his tombstone; in fact, he used it as the title of his autobiography: *Even This I Get to Experience*.

“This” isn’t death. It’s life in its totality, in all its infuriating contradictions, including its ending. I learned from Norman to find the juxtaposition of joy and dread funny. I used to think that an indifferent, capricious cosmos made nihilism unavoidable; now, I think it makes comedy indispensable. Reminds me of how Norman’s *lantzman* Carl Reiner described his morning routine: “I read the obituaries. If I’m not in them, I eat breakfast.”

Over easy, please. 🍳



PHOTOS COURTESY WIKIMEDIA COMMONS AND NORMANLEAR.COM

Clockwise from top of page:

Luring customers to Coney Island’s Paramount Pool in 1936.

Stationed in Rome during World War II.

2017 Kennedy Center Honorees, clockwise from top left: James Todd Smith (LL Cool J), Lionel Richie, Gloria Estefan, Norman Lear, and Carmen de Lavallade.