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All my adult life I’ve been studying the history of the Holocaust. It was not until I attended a lecture at a church in my neighborhood that I personally understood how well-meaning people can unknowingly set us on the path to another Treblinka.

Ruth Lederman Celebrates Her 100th Birthday!



Ruth Lederman turned 100 on April 30, 2010. Ruth's milestone was commemorated in Toronto with her children, grandchildren, great grandchildren, and 60 relatives and friends. Queen Elizabeth and Michelle Jean, the Governor General of Canada sent congratulatory messages. It was a wonderful occasion and a beautiful tribute to a very special lady.

Ruth was born in Ivansk (Iwaniska) on April 30th, 1910, the daughter of Eliezer (Louzar) and Elka Zalcman. Her father owned a hardware store providing small agricultural machinery and utensils. As a young girl Ruth worked in the business with her father. After her mother's unfortunate death and her father's remarriage to a woman with whom Ruth did not get along, Ruth went to live with an aunt in a nearby shtetl. Perhaps that's where she attended elementary school. She also has related how she worked in the fields of her aunt's farm picking potatoes. In those times, it was very unusual for children to receive a secondary school education. Nevertheless, this did not stop Ruth from developing into a astute business woman later in life.

In 1929, Ruth married Leo Lederman, on condition that he would take her to America. Leo, more commonly called "Lou" by friends and family, was also born in Ivansk (December 1, 1906) and worked in his father's hardware/lumber business. Their marriage took place in Apt (Opatow), not in Ivansk. As Ruth tells it, there was a very wealthy man in Ivansk who wanted to marry her. To get away from him, the couple decided to hold the ceremony in Apt and got there in a horse-drawn buggy that was driven by her grandfather.

Soon after their marriage, Lou left for Canada in search of better prospects. Ruth joined him in Toronto 5 years later when they renewed their wedding vows. Both worked in the garment trade as a cutter and sewing machine operator. Lou became a Canadian citizen on November 9, 1938 and Ruth followed on April 28, 1939, two days before her 29th birthday. They raised two children who in turn gave them 5 grandchildren and now 2 great grandchildren. Their daughter, Eleanor (Elly) Sherman is a successful business woman, the co-owner and manager of a ladies' wear boutique in Toronto specializing in swimwear and accessories. Their son, Lawrence (Larry) pursued a career in Canada's Diplomatic Service reaching the level of Consul General, Chief of Protocol of Canada while ending his diplomatic career as Ambassador to Chile in 2000.

Around 1946 Ruth and Lou launched their own store, "Eleanors Ladies Wear" on Mt. Pleasant Road in Toronto. In the '50s, "Lee-Mays Ladies Wear" was opened at Eglinton and Dufferin, in partnership with a close friend, also from Poland, Sam Meyers (the business name was derived from Lederman and Myers). Eventually, Eleanors Ladies Wear was closed and a second Lee-Mays was opened on Yonge Street, north of Eglinton Avenue.

Ruth and Lou retired from business in the early '70's, spending 6 months of the year in Miami, Florida. Lou died in 1992. They had a wonderful and rewarding life together.

Ruth remains in good health and has lived in the same condominium for the last 30 years. She now has a caregiver, but until she was 95, Ruth worked out with the TV and practiced Yoga. Her family believes this contributed to her longevity.

Ruth never thinks of herself as an old lady:

"I don't want to hear people complain. Age is not how old you are. It's how you feel and act."

All Ivanskers extend a Mazel Tov to Ruth and her family and thank Elly and Larry for sharing their Mother's birthday with us. We hope that Ruth will live "till 120", in good health surrounded by all those who love her.

The Foundation for the Preservation of the Jewish Heritage in Poland

by Monika Krawczyk, C.E.O. (Warsaw, Poland)



Dear Ivanskers,

The Foundation for the Preservation of the Jewish Heritage in Poland was established in 2002 by the Union of Jewish Communities in Poland. The mandate of the organization is to

protect, commemorate and maintain Jewish heritage sites in Poland, including 1,200 Jewish cemeteries and 200 synagogues which survived the war. Those sites are important places for Jewish memory and vital keys in understanding the once glorious history of Polish Jewry.

One of our central activities is the renovation of Jewish sites in Poland, reaching places where no signs of a Jewish presence are visible today, even though they were once vibrant centers of Jewish life. A rather unique project, "*Tikun – Repair*," is being carried out in partnership with the Polish prison services. As part of their rehabilitation, prison inmates are offered the opportunity to assist in the physical renovation of Jewish cemeteries. This is the first program of its kind in Europe and possibly in the world. <<http://fodz.pl/?d=5&id=95&l=en>>

The magnitude of our work in Poland cannot be handled by the Foundation alone. We collaborate with nine other Jewish communities that are associated with the Union of Jewish Communities in Poland. Also, we are in close contact with local authorities, non-governmental organizations and Polish high schools.

The Foundation has developed a program which brings together young people from across Poland to educate them of the significant role that Jews and Judaism played in Polish life. These teens

also work on the rehabilitation of cemeteries. The project is called, “*To Bring Memory Back*” and over 100 schools throughout Poland are participating. <<http://fodz.pl/PP/?d=1&l=en>>

The Foundation would like to see world Jewry take a greater interest and responsibility in these undertakings. Ivanskers from numerous countries have contributed to this effort by renovating their ancestor's cemetery in Iwaniska. The Foundation helped in the administration and legal issues in organizing the restoration process. <<http://polin.org.pl/cities/223/galeria/6527/4/>>

The Foundation has also organized the “*Chasidic Route*” – a tourist route which runs through picturesque areas of Southeastern Poland - enabling both Jewish and general communities to become acquainted with important historical and heritage sites in this area. These sites “symbolize” 1,000 years of Judaism in Poland. Although Polish Jewry was almost annihilated during the Shoah, Jewish thought and spirituality never left us”. <<http://fodz.pl/?d=5&id=32&l=en>>

We have recently developed a web portal, “POLIN”, a self-guided, on-line tour of Jewish heritage sites. The program assists visitors in planning and personalizing trips to Poland in search of their roots. <www.polin.org.pl>

The Foundation greatly appreciates what the Ivansker community has already done to preserve and honor the memory of their ancestors buried in Ivansk or exterminated by the Nazis. But we continue to depend on your interest and your support to fulfill our commitment to safeguard the remnants of the Jewish Civilization that developed in Poland, a culture that contributed so much to our Jewish World.

The advent of the internet has greatly facilitated reaching out to friends who could take part in our efforts but do not live in Poland. I would like to invite you to access our websites for general information (<www.fodz.pl> and <www.polin.org.pl>). There you will find up-to-date reports (in English) on what we have accomplished and what still needs to be done. I'd also like to invite you to register your name on our web site (<www.fodz.pl>) to receive periodic progress reports on specific renovation or commemoration projects. In addition, you can always contact my office by email (fodz@fodz.pl), and we would be pleased to address any questions you may have about Jewish heritage and how we are trying to do to preserve it in Poland.

Of course, I also hope that you will assist us with your financial support (in any amount) because we cannot achieve our goals without it. Today's Polish-Jewish community is just too small to sustain our agenda, and we must rely primarily on funds donated by Jews and other parties throughout the world. Many of our volunteers live overseas, and some may be based in your community. If you're interested, we can arrange for volunteers to address you and your friends and explain who we are and why we need to continue our work.

I hope we can count on you to lend a hand.

With very best wishes to all of you,

Monika Krawczyk, CEO, The Foundation for the Preservation of the Jewish Heritage in Poland

Studies Show Jews' Genetic Similarity

by Nicholas Wade, New York Times, June 9, 2010

Introduction by Lorne B. Taichman, (New York, USA)

Introduction

We are fortunate to be around to witness the birth, early childhood and now the adolescent stage of a new science, genealogy through DNA sequencing. This science rests upon an analysis of our genetic material or genes. Genes are made up of DNA, a long molecule that contains a specific sequence of letters that form the instructions for our development and growth. In a sense, DNA is like a written instruction manual in which the 26 letters of the alphabet are laid out in a linear fashion setting forth the plan in words.

In DNA there are far fewer than 26 different letters but nevertheless that sequence of chemical letters instructs our living bodies. What we pass on to our children is that sequence. With each passage or generation a small number of changes occurs in the sequence, and over many generations, these changes accumulate and lead to greater and greater divergence.

Scientists are able to compare the DNA sequences of various groups of interest. Those groups that share many similarities are more likely to have interbred or have once formed a single common group. This would not be the case in groups where there is less similarity.

In the past this science was limited because of the difficulty and the cost of sequencing large numbers of genes. Consequently, only a relatively small number of genes were compared. But in the last several years our ability to sequence and compare large numbers of genes has increased at a phenomenal rate. That is the reason for calling this phase of the science "adolescent," to indicate this rapid growth spurt. Enhanced sequencing capability has made tracing lineage connections much more accurate and informative.

And that is what we are seeing in the two scientific articles that Nicholas Wade refers to in his commentary. As Wade explains, the data show that Jewish groups in the Diaspora share numerous genetic similarities with other Jewish groups, and to a more limited extent, with the local non-Jewish population.

In a broad sense, these are not new concepts, but the science confirms in an objective or an unbiased way what we have known based on an understanding of our history. It has also enriched that history by adding subtleties and flavors that were unknown in the past. For example, when comparing gene sequences in Ashkenazi and Sephardim Jews to various European populations, similarities were the strongest with non-Jewish populations living in northern Italy. What this suggests is that early in the Diaspora, Jews that were to form a large segment of the Ashkenazi and Sephardi populations passed through northern Italy and interbred with the local Italian groups.

As this science continues to grow and mature, we can look forward to more insights into our heritage. As the Atzmon-Ostrer team concludes: "*Over the past 3000 years, both the flow of genes and the flow of religious and cultural ideas have contributed to Jewishness.*"

Studies Show Jews' Genetic Similarity by Nicholas Wade

Jewish communities in Europe and the Middle East share many genes inherited from the ancestral Jewish population that lived in the Middle East some 3,000 years ago, even though each community also carries genes from other sources — usually the country in which it lives.

That is the conclusion of two new genetic surveys, the first to use genome-wide scanning devices to compare many Jewish communities around the world.

A major surprise from both surveys is the genetic closeness of the two Jewish communities of Europe, the Ashkenazim and the Sephardim. The Ashkenazim thrived in Northern and Eastern Europe until their devastation by the Hitler regime, and now live mostly in the United States and Israel. The Sephardim were exiled from Spain in 1492 and from Portugal in 1497 and moved to the Ottoman Empire, North Africa and the Netherlands.

The two genome surveys extend earlier studies based just on the Y chromosome, the genetic element carried by all men. They refute the suggestion made last year by the historian Shlomo Sand in his book "The Invention of the Jewish People" that Jews have no common origin but are a miscellany of people in Europe and Central Asia who converted to Judaism at various times.

Jewish communities from Europe, the Middle East and the Caucasus all have substantial genetic ancestry that traces back to the Levant; Ethiopian Jews and two Judaic communities in India are genetically much closer to their host populations.

The surveys provide rich data about genetic ancestry that is of great interest to historians. "I'm constantly impressed by the manner in which the geneticists keep moving ahead with new projects and illuminating what we know of history," said Lawrence H. Schiffman, a professor of Judaic studies at New York University.

One of the surveys was conducted by Gil Atzmon of the Albert Einstein College of Medicine and Harry Ostrer of New York University and appears in the current American Journal of Human Genetics. The other, led by Doron M. Behar of the Rambam Health Care Campus in Haifa and Richard Villems of the University of Tartu in Estonia, is published in Thursday's edition of Nature.

Dr. Atzmon and Dr. Ostrer have developed a way of timing demographic events from the genetic elements shared by different Jewish communities. Their calculations show that Iraqi and Iranian Jews separated from other Jewish communities about 2,500 years ago. This genetic finding presumably reflects a historical event, the destruction of the First Temple at Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar in 587 B.C. and the exile of many Jews there to his capital at Babylon.

The shared genetic elements suggest that members of any Jewish community are related to one another as closely as are fourth or fifth cousins in a large population, which is about 10 times higher than the relationship between two people chosen at random off the streets of New York City, Dr. Atzmon said.

Ashkenazic and Sephardic Jews have roughly 30 percent European ancestry, with most of the rest from the Middle East, the two surveys find. The two communities seem very similar to each other genetically, which is unexpected because they have been separated for so long.

One explanation is that they come from the same Jewish source population in Europe. The Atzmon-Ostrer team found that the genomic signature of Ashkenazim and Sephardim was very similar to that of Italian Jews, suggesting that an ancient population in northern Italy of Jews intermarried with Italians could have been the common origin. The Ashkenazim first appear in Northern Europe around A.D. 800, but historians suspect that they arrived there from Italy.

Another explanation, which may be complementary to the first, is that there was far more interchange and intermarriage than expected between the two communities in medieval times.

The genetics confirms a trend noticed by historians: that there was more contact between Ashkenazim and Sephardim than suspected, with Italy as the lynchpin of interchange, said Aron Rodrigue, a Stanford University historian.

A common surname among Italian Jews is Morpurgo, meaning someone from Marburg in Germany. Also, Dr. Rodrigue said, one of the most common names among the Sephardim who settled in the Ottoman Empire is Eskenazi, indicating that many Ashkenazim had joined the Sephardic community there.

The two genetic surveys indicate "that there may be common origins shared by the two groups, but also that there were extensive contacts and settlements," Dr. Rodrigue said.

Hebrew could have served as the lingua franca between the Ashkenazic community, speaking Yiddish, and the Ladino-speaking Sephardim. "When Jews met each other, they spoke Hebrew," Dr. Schiffman said, referring to the medieval period.

Chosen, but Not Special

by Michael Chabon, New York Times, Sunday Opinion, June 6, 2010

"GAZA Flotilla Drives Israel Into a Sea of Stupidity" declared the Israeli daily Haaretz on Monday, as though announcing the discovery of some hitherto unknown body of water. Citizens of other nations have long since resigned themselves, of course, to sailing those crowded waters, but for Israelis — and, indeed, for Jews everywhere — this felt like headline news. *

* [Editor: "The Gaza Flotilla" refers to an incident that occurred in the Mediterranean Sea on May 31, 2010. Six ships set sail from Turkey for Gaza, manned by pro-Palestinian activists. Their avowed purpose was to deliver aid to the people of Gaza and to break Israel's naval blockade of Gaza. Fearing that their cargos might contain weapons destined for Hamas, Israel Defense Forces intercepted the flotilla on the high seas. Violence erupted when the Mavi Marmara, the lead ship, was boarded by Israeli commandos. Seven Israelis were injured and nine activists were killed. Although none of the ships reached Gaza, many viewed Israel's raid as a botched attack and a public relations disaster. Michael Chabon builds on this issue to address the subject of his essay, "Chosen, but Not Special".]

Regardless of whether we chose in the end to condemn or to defend the botched raid on the Mavi Marmara, for Jews the first reaction was shock, confusion, as we tried to get our heads around what appeared to be an unprecedented display of blockheadedness. Jeffrey Goldberg of The Atlantic cast his startled regard back along the length of Jewish history looking for a parallel example of arrant stupidity and found, instead, what Jews around the world have long been accustomed to find in contemplating ourselves and that history: an inborn, half-legendary agility of intellect, amounting almost to a magical power.

"There is a word in Yiddish, *seichel*, which means wisdom, but it also means more than that: It connotes ingenuity, creativity, subtlety, nuance," Mr. Goldberg wrote. "Jews have always needed *seichel* to survive in this world; a person in possession of a *yiddishe kop*, a 'Jewish head,' is someone who has *seichel*, someone who looks for a clever way out of problems, someone who understands that the most direct way — blunt force, for instance — often represents the least elegant solution, a person who can foresee consequences of his actions."

This is nonsense, of course — nonsense to which, I hasten to assure Mr. Goldberg, I have always avidly subscribed. In the aggregate, Jews may or may not be smarter than other groups, but the evidence in favor of granting some kind of inherent or culturally determined supernatural abilities of *seichel* to the *yiddishe kop* certainly cannot be found in our history, which is littered as thickly with the individual and collective acts of blockheads as that of any other nation or people or tribe.

An honest assessment of Jewish history must conclude that even the collective act that might seem most tellingly to argue in favor of Jewish intelligence — our survival across millenniums in spite of constant hatred, war, persecution, intolerance and genocide — is ultimately just the same trick performed by our species as a whole (at least so far).

The presence of Jews among the not-yet-extinct peoples of the world can no more be credited to any kind of special trait or behavior than the Tasmanians or the Taino ought to be blamed for their own eradication. In the end human survival is a matter of luck — or destiny, if you prefer — of decisions taken in distant capitals in vanished eras that bore unforeseeable fruit 200 years on, of chaotically intersecting systems of weather, metaphysics and pandemic, of the failures and weaknesses and limitations of our would-be destroyers.

We construct the history of our wisdom only by burying our foolishness in the endnotes. To imagine a Chelm — the town inhabited, according to Ashkenazi Jewish folklore, entirely by fools — requires a presumption of general wisdom elsewhere, as the proper imagining of Heaven requires an earthly realm of sorrow.

As a Jewish child I was regularly instructed, both subtly and openly, that Jews, the people of Maimonides, Albert Einstein, Jonas Salk and Meyer Lansky, were on the whole smarter, cleverer, more brilliant, more astute than other people. And, duly, I would look around the Passover table, say, at the members of my family, and remark on the presence of a number of highly intelligent, quick-witted, shrewd, well-educated people filled to bursting with information, explanations and opinions on a diverse range of topics. In my tractable and vainglorious eagerness to confirm the People of Einstein theory, my gaze would skip right over — God love them — any counterexamples present at that year's Seder.

This is why, to a Jew, it always comes as a shock to encounter stupid Jews. Philip Roth derived a major theme of "Goodbye, Columbus" from the uncanny experience. The shock comes not because we have never encountered any stupid Jews before — Jews are stupid in roughly the same proportion as all the world's people — but simply because from an early age we have been

trained, implicitly and explicitly, to ignore them. A stupid Jew is like a hole in the pocket of your pants, there every time you put them on, always forgotten until the instant your quarters run clattering across the floor.

It was this endlessly repeated yet never remembered shock of encountering our own stupidity as a people — stupidity now enacted by the elite military arm of a nation whose history we have long written, in our accustomed way, by pushing to the endnotes all counterexamples to the myth of seichel — that one heard filtering through so much of the initial response among Jews to the raid on the Mavi Marmara.

This sense of widespread shock at Israel's blockheadedness in the aftermath of the raid seemed not to be confined, in fact, to Jews. Even Israel's sternest critics will concede that the Jewish state knows how to go about the business of survival in a hostile world with intelligence, ingenuity, creativity, flexibility and preternatural control over the levers of chance and diplomacy (not to mention the global economic system and the news media). Indeed anti-Semites and the enemies of Israel have often been found among the most devout believers in the myth of seichel, of a special — O.K., a diabolical — Jewish intelligence.

For we Jews are not, it turns out, entirely comfortable living with the consequences of this myth, as becomes clear from the squirming and throat-clearing that take place among us whenever some non-Jew pipes up with his own observations about how clever and smart we are in our yiddishe kops. These include people like the political scientist Charles Murray, author of an influential essay titled "Jewish Genius," or Kevin B. MacDonald, a psychology professor at California State University at Long Beach who argues that Jews essentially undertook a centuries-long program of self-breeding, selecting for traits of intelligence, guile and skill at calculation, as a kind of evolutionary adaptation to the buffettions of history and exile.

Such claims, in mouths of gentiles, are a disturbing echo of the charges of the pogrom-stokers, the genocidalists, the Father Coughlins, who come to sharpen their knives against the same grindstone of generalization on which we Jews have long polished the magnifying lenses of our self-regard. The man who praises you for your history of accomplishment may someday seek therein the grounds for your destruction.

This is, of course, the foundational ambiguity of Judaism and Jewish identity: the idea of chosenness, of exceptionalism, of the treasure that is a curse, the blessing that is a burden, of the setting apart that may presage redemption or extermination. To be chosen has been, all too often in our history, to be culled.

This is the ambiguity that cites the dispensation of God and history, of covenant and Holocaust, to lay claim to a special relationship between Jews and the Land of Israel, then protests when the world — cynically or sincerely — holds Israel to a different, higher standard as beneficiaries of that dispensation.

This is the ambiguity that proudly asserts the will and the obligation of Israel to be a light unto the nations, then points to the utterly evil, utterly bankrupt, utterly degraded, utterly stupid misdeeds of ship-sinking, sailor-massacring North Korea — North Korea! — in an attempt to give context to its own relatively less-evil, bankrupt, degraded and stupid behavior.

Now, with the memory of the Mavi Marmara fresh in our minds, is the time for Jews to confront, at long last, the eternal truth of our stupidity as a people, which I will stack, blunder for blunder, against that of any other nation now or at any time living on this planet of folly, in this world of

Chelm. Now is the moment to acknowledge that the 62-year history of Israel, like the history of the Jewish people and of the human race, has been from the beginning a record of glory and fiasco, triumph and error, greatness and meanness, charity and crime.

The past two decades in particular have illustrated to Jews and to the world a painful premise, but one that was implicit in the Zionist idea from the beginning: If, in the words of the 1948 Declaration of the Establishment of the State of Israel, the Jewish people have a natural right "to be masters of their own fate, like all other nations, in their own sovereign state," then the inescapable codicil of this natural inheritance is that the Jewish people, "like all other nations," are every bit as capable of barbarism and stupidity.

If Israel was, as the Zionist leader Chaim Weizmann put it, to "become as Jewish as England is English and America is American," then, like England and America and every other modern polity, Israel must slog along through history, purblind and panicky, from its founding to its ultimate fate, prey at every moment to — and, God willing, on guard against — its rich, inglorious human heritage of blockheadedness.

After my initial shock at this fresh display of foolery by the Chelmites of Jerusalem had subsided, I felt an abstract pity for the wasted dead with their cargo of lumber and delusions, for the ill-equipped, poorly led soldiers who had killed them and, running true and clear like a subterranean stream, pity for Gilad Shalit, the Israeli soldier held captive by Hamas the past four years, and his family. But I also felt a kind of grim relief, even resolve.

Let us shed our illusions, starting with ourselves, whoever we are and however august our inheritance of stupidity. Let us not forget the eternal hole in our human pocket. Let us not, henceforward, judge Israel or seek to have it judged for its intelligence, for its prowess, for its righteousness or for its moral authority, by any standard other than the pathetic, debased and rickety one that we apply, so inconsistently and self-servingly, to ourselves and to everybody else. And let us not forgive ourselves — any more than we forgive Israel, or than Israel can forgive itself — for that terrible inconsistency.

"Chosen, but Not Special"

Op-Ed Letters to the Editor, New York Times, June 8, 2010:

Michael Chabon writes eloquently about his desire for Jews and Israel to shed the idea of exceptionalism. But exceptionalism is intrinsic to almost any group, and it is a fantasy to expect a nation or a religion to shed the idea, however irrational and ridiculous, that somehow it is special.

Rather than view Jewish exceptionalism as an albatross, we should view it as a way to inspire Jews and Israel to do better and to be openly critical of events and actions that fall far short of the ideal. This ability to be self-critical is, like the belief in exceptionalism, an intrinsic part of Jewish and Israeli culture. It is precisely what is happening right now with the widespread acknowledgment that the raid on the Mavi Marmara was a tragic blunder. STUART ROJSTACZER, Palo Alto, Calif

* * *

Michael Chabon is right in one respect: Jews are like others in that every person believes that his or her behavior is rational. And Israel and its supporters must lose their sense of intellectual invincibility. Otherwise, the facts are against Mr. Chabon. The high representation of Jews in American political life (Congress, the

Supreme Court, activism across the spectrum) and among Nobel Prize winners is, whatever the causes, exceptional.

The Jews' survival as a Jewish nation after being deprived of their political and religious base is exceptional in history; it happened twice. Once might be "luck," as Mr. Chabon suggests; twice says otherwise. No, we Jews cannot rely on this exceptionalism for survival; we must realize its limits. We must take the same kind of care others should (but often don't) in making and acting on decisions. But Mr. Chabon won't convince people of that by denying reality. GABRIEL LAMPERT San Francisco

* * *

Michael Chabon inadvertently establishes a different sort of Jewish exceptionalism: we are, I believe, the most self-analytical people on earth.

Most Israelis couldn't care less whether we are any better, smarter or more persecuted than other nations. All we ask is this: know that any other nation faced with a neighboring government that has vowed to wipe it off the map would respond in exactly the way we have. DANIEL REIFMAN Yad Binyamin, Israel,

* * *

The headline on Michael Chabon's essay should be reversed to read "Special, but Not Chosen." We secular Jews do not derive the view that Jews are more intelligent or creative than non-Jews from the religious theory of a people chosen by God, or from the endurance and survival throughout history of the Jewish people against all odds.

Instead, we note the number and proportion of the Jewish population who have achieved brilliance and excellence in science and in the arts, as compared with the number and proportion of non-Jews who have done the same - a comparison that is factually indisputable. MILDRED REIN Chestnut Hill, Mass

* * *

In debunking Jewish intellectual exceptionalism, Michael Chabon misses the larger point. We expect better of Israel because we expect every responsible government to behave sagely and morally. An impossible benchmark, yes, but one that is completely unrelated to Israel's status as a Jewish state.

JACOB GERBER Riverside, Conn

* * *

Michael Chabon does not distinguish between being a Jew and the process of living a life of Jewish tradition and teachings. He seems to repeat a popular conflating of Jewish "chosenness" with Jewish exceptionalism. Jews were not chosen for privilege, wealth and achievement; these are available to anybody, not just Jews.

Rather, Jews were chosen by God for the responsibility and obligation to receive, carry, study and live Torah, including both the moral and religious laws of Judaism.

Sadly, ever larger numbers of people who identify themselves as Jews become less and less observant of Torah and Jewish tradition. That makes Jewish people as a whole become ever less exceptional. Yet that in no way prejudices the right of Jews to defend themselves whether in Israel or in the diaspora.

DAVID HELLER Potomac, Md

* * *

[e-News Editor ... And now my favorite ...]

I respect the brutal bluntness in Michael Chabon's essay that some Jews may think they're smarter than everyone else. Of course we're not!

But how can he convince my 82-year-old mother without tearing her heart out?
STEVEN COHEN New York

The First Step on the Road to Another Treblinka

by Norton S. Taichman, (Narberth, Pennsylvania, USA)

Scholars have explored the root causes of anti-Semitism that inexorably resulted in the enslavement and extermination of millions of our people during WWII. The history of European Judeophobia or the “roads” that terminated in places like Treblinka developed over hundreds, even thousands, of years. For me personally, the initial step on the road that could conceivably lead to another Treblinka began in a church, just a few blocks from where I live.

In 1972, I accepted a position at the University of Pennsylvania. My family moved from Toronto into our “new” home (it’s over 100 years old) in Narberth, Pennsylvania. Narberth is a tiny borough (population 5,000-6,000) located outside Philadelphia. It’s a wonderful place for families, and unlike the big city, it’s a safe and quiet oasis. People from all walks of life reside here, and it’s not unusual for succeeding generations to remain in town to raise their own children. (I have a son and daughter who have done that.) Although Jews are a small minority in Narberth, their numbers are growing because of the unique environment and because we are surrounded by communities offering a rich assortment of Jewish facilities and organizations.

For such a small place Narberth has 6 churches. After living here for about 3-4 years I spotted an announcement in our local newspaper. It went something like this:

UNITED METHODIST CHURCH OF NARBERTH

**INVITES THE COMMUNITY TO
A LECTURE SERIES
ON THE HOLOCAUST**

EVERYONE IS WELCOME

The church is a 5-minute walk from our house, and I turned out for the first lecture.

The program was held in the church basement in a room seating about 40 people. I had the impression that everyone knew one another and that I was the only “stranger” there... and certainly the only Jew. Feeling somewhat insecure, I sat at the back of the room. The pastor, whose name I don’t recall, took to the podium. He impressed me as a pleasant, gregarious individual who recognized everyone in the room, except me.

For his initial lecture the pastor focused on the religious roots of the Holocaust. Although it’s almost 40 years since that night in the Methodist Church, I still retain the substance of what he said ... to paraphrase:

The Holocaust was one of the most terrible episodes in human history. Contrary to what you may think it did not begin in 1933 when Hitler was elected Chancellor of Germany. It began thousands of years earlier when we Christians began to vilify Jews because they were not like us. Over time, Jews were collectively accused of every imaginable crime: they murdered our Lord; they poisoned our wells; they sucked our children's blood; they preyed on the poor; they sought to undermine the Church and seize the nation's wealth; they were disloyal, and on and on. In short, they were agents of the devil, and we'd be better off if we could get rid of them.

The Church ostracized these people as inferior, unrepentant and unwelcome intruders. We forced them to live apart, sometimes in ghettos. We restricted their access to trades and professions and robbed them of their possessions. We humiliated them and when all else failed, we took to forced conversions, violence, expulsion and even putting them to death.

Nazism and other forms of virulent political and philosophical anti-Semitism could not have taken hold without the anti-Jewish foundation established and perpetuated by the Church over centuries. As Christians we must weep with our Jewish brothers and sisters for what we did to them. As individuals we must accept the Jewish people as equals in the sight of God and as human beings who deserve our respect and our love. And we must stand up against any attempts to denigrate or discriminate against them.

I could not have been more pleased with the pastor's thoughts. In fact, during the lecture we established eye contact. He looked at me several times, as if seeking my approval, and I obliged by nodding in agreement with many of his assertions. He even asked if I knew something about a Nazi concentration camp whose name he had forgotten. I was familiar with the place and provided some details of where it was and what had gone on there.

As the lecture was drawing to a close, I fully intended to introduce myself to the pastor and tell him how much I appreciated his talk. But in the final moments he said something that erased everything that came before:

My friends, Christians bear a heavy burden for what we've done to our Jewish neighbors. To make amends we have a duty to change the course of history by tearing down the barriers and the prejudices that we erected against the Jewish people. And while we seek to change and atone for the past, we must never lose sight of our mission to bring the Jews to Christ.

The concluding statement turned my mind upside-down. I could not think clearly and hurriedly left the church without engaging the pastor.

The following morning, I mustered my courage and contacted the pastor by telephone.

Briefly, our conversation went something like this: (MP= Methodist Pastor; NT= Norton Taichman)

NT: Good morning. This is Norton Taichman. I live in Narberth and attended last night's lecture. I was sitting in the back of the room.

MP: Good morning. Thanks for calling. What did you think of the evening?

NT: I'm Jewish and I thought you did a great job in summarizing how the church contributed to the development of anti-Semitism. I also valued your comments that Christians need to abandon their long-held intolerance against Jews and treat them as human beings.

But I must tell you that I was very disturbed by your closing remarks.

MP: What do you mean?

NT: Despite what you said earlier you ended by saying that it was the duty of Christians to convert the Jews.

MP: Yes, but why did this upset you?

NT: Well, I can see this stance as the beginning of a road that could ultimately lead to another Holocaust.

MP: (alarmed) Oh my! Please believe me. I never for a moment meant to suggest that. I hope no one else interpreted what I said in that manner.

NT: Of course I know that's not what you meant. But don't you see that if you try to convert me you're really saying that I am not as good as you....that I am less of a person and less worthy of your love and respect?

MP: But it's our mission; it's what we're commanded and committed to do!

NT: I have no fear of you ever trying to hurt us. But what of those who are not as generous in their attitudes? Those who unknowingly or knowingly are willing to go beyond simple attempts at persuasion and resort to defamation and violence when I refuse "to see the light"?

MP: (almost pleading) As I said, it's our mission!

NT: Yes, but that's exactly the problem!

At this point we began to repeat ourselves and nothing changed on either side.

Both of us were frustrated and thankful when the conversation was terminated.

I never returned to the United Methodist Church to finish the lecture series.

I have no doubt that the pastor was a sincere, good-hearted person.

But sometimes even decent, honorable people just don't get it.

[Editor: Several weeks ago I told Arthur Zimmerman (Toronto) about this experience. He asked, "Why don't you publish it in the e-News?" It had never occurred to me, and I thanked him for the idea. Arthur also commented on the piece before it was ready. Arthur has always been a good friend of The Ivansk Project.]

[I'd like to thank our "Web Master", Laurie Naiman, who established and maintains our web site and who proof-read this issue of the e-Newsletter. My wife Louise also cast her eyes on the material...and she was obeyed.]