

SHABBAT SERMON
OCTOBER 31, 2009
RABBI MITCHELL WOHLBERG

Jewish Nobel Prize Winners; Are We Smarter?

While the awarding of the Nobel Peace Prize to Barack Obama received worldwide attention, there was another Nobel Prize winner that, for us as Jews, was worthy of note. Her name is Ada Yonath and she won the Nobel Prize for chemistry ... the first woman in 45 years to win that award. Yonath's story goes to the heart of the Jewish experience: her parents were poor, they ran a grocery store. But like generations of Jewish parents they sacrificed so that their daughter could go to school in the upscale Beit Hakerem neighborhood, so she could get the best education possible. In some ways, for us as Jews, what was most noteworthy about her winning the Nobel Prize was the fact that so few of us thought her accomplishment was worthy of note. We have become used to Jews winning Nobel Prizes. In fact, we have become used to *Israelis* winning the Nobel Prize. From a country of seven million, 9 Israelis have won the Nobel Prize ... five in the last seven years! That's more Nobel Prizes from Israel than from India, Australia, Japan and Canada. Here in the U.S. Jews constitute only around 2% of the population but account for 27% of the United States' Nobel Prize laureates. Jewish people have won 18% of all the Nobel Prizes awarded, although we only constitute 0.25% of the population! Jews greatly outnumber the quantity of Nobel Prize winners from countries like France and Germany.

Do you remember in my Rosh Hashana sermon in 2002, I said the following:

"I came across a fascinating list. It's a list of the winners of the Nobel Prize from amongst the Muslim people and the Jewish people. Amongst the Muslims, there have been 8 Nobel Prize winners: In Literature: Albert Camus and Najib Mahfooz. In Peace: Mohamed Anwar El-Sadat and Yasser Arafat. In Chemistry: Elias James Corey and Ahmed Zewail. And in Medicine: Peter Brian Medawar and Ferid Mourad. That's 8 Nobel Prize winners from a population of 1.2 billion Muslims. Now, listen to the names of the Jewish Nobel Prize winners:

Albert Abraham Michelson
Gabriel Lippmann
Albert Einstein
Niels Bohr
James Franck
Gustav Hertz
Gustav Stern
Isidor Issac Rabi
Felix Bloch
Max Born
Igor Tamm
Emilio Segre
Donald A. Glaser
Robert Hofstadter
Lev Davidovich Landau
Richard Phillips Feynman
Julian Schwinger
Murray Gell-Mann

Dennis Gabor
Brian David Joesphson
Benjamin Mottleson
Burton Richter
Arno Allan Penzias
Peter L. Kapitza
Stephen Weinberg
Sheldon Glashow
Leon Lederman
Melvin Schwartz
Jack Steinberger
Jerome Friedman
Martin Perl

That's the Jewish Nobel Prize winners . . . IN PHYSICS! Just in Physics there have been over 30 Jewish Nobel Prize winners! Over all, there have been 130! 8 from 1.2 billion Muslims. 130 from 14 million Jews." Between 1910 and 1950 Jews won 14% of all the Nobel Prizes awarded for Literature and Science, and between 1951 and 2000 Jews won 32% of the Nobel Prizes for Medicine, 32% for Physics, 39% for Economics and 29% for Science. This, despite so many of their greatest intellects dying in the gas chambers. Have you heard enough? Let me add this one. I love it! Twelve Jews have won the Nobel Prize for Literature. That's really nice. But a lot of other ethnic and religious groups can lay claim to that as well. But only Jews have won the Nobel Prize for Literature for writing in English and German and French and Russian and Polish and Hungarian and Yiddish and Hebrew! There is *something* about the Jewish people!

Does this mean that Jews are smarter? Does this mean that genetically Jews are wired differently? There are some who say just that! Ernest van den Haag, a noted philosopher and sociologist, wrote a book in the 1970's entitled, "The Jewish Mystique" where he attributed the Jews' intellectual superiority to genetics. He pointed out that in the Middle Ages the brightest Christians became priests and they did not reproduce. The brightest Jews became rabbis (thank you, Dr. van den Haag!) and married the brightest women and had many children, thus reproducing our superior genetic pool. But, of course, not everyone goes along with this. Alan Dershowitz, a noted Jewish spokesman, in his book, "The Vanishing American Jew" says of van den Haag's theory, and I quote: "Even if true, it has no contemporary relevance . . . today's rabbis are not necessarily the smartest Jews." (Thank you, Mr. Dershowitz!) And yet, as recently as a few years ago, Charles Murray, the sociologist who wrote the oft-quoted and respected book, "The Bell Curve," in a Commentary Magazine article entitled, "The Jewish Genius," wrote that there is only one way to possibly explain the exceptionalism of the Jews, and he concluded with the words: "They are God's chosen people."

It's nice to think that we are racially and genetically superior but the reality is, the Jews are not a race. And once you get someone claiming that our genes are superior, it can give rise – it DID give rise – to those claiming, as the Nazis did, that our genes are inferior.

And yet, you should know that this argument in regard to whether Jews are smarter . . . whether Jews are different . . . is one that finds sources in Jewish tradition as well. Yehuda Halevi, the great Jewish poet, philosopher and mystic - and a great number of Jewish mystical thinkers – strongly believe that the Jewish soul is different than the soul of non-Jews. To put it into contemporary terms: our hard drive is different! And while Judaism is open to converts, the converts' soul can never attain the level of that of a Jewish soul. Maimonides completely rejects

this, and he bases his thinking, in part, on a phrase found in this morning's Torah portion where we are told that Abraham and Sarah came to the land of Israel and took along with them "*et hanefesh asher asu b'Charan* – and the souls they made in Charan." What does it mean "the souls they made in Charan?" Some say this refers to their servants, but others say that it refers to people who Abraham and Sarah had converted to their way of thinking; people who they had taught and had come to understand the belief in the one God. From here we see, in Maimonides' words: "Abraham, our father, is the father of those of his descendents who are proper and follow in his ways and father of his disciples, they being all converts who convert." Jews-from-birth and Jews-by-choice ... we are all descendents of Abraham. Jewish identity is not a matter of genes, and that in fact, there is no difference in the "hard drive" of a Jew and a non-Jew. The only difference may be in the "soft ware" – in the wisdom we acquire. Maimonides was basing his thinking, in large part, on the thought of Aristotle, who speaks in terms of the soul's "acquired wisdom." That is how one becomes wise ... it's not in your genes ... it's acquired through study and learning. And Jews, of course, have always been at the forefront of just that!

And that is why I find it upsetting every time I read of another rabbi in the ultra-Orthodox community who comes out banning use of the Internet because of the dangers that it can bring into your home. Of course there are dangers and we must guard against them. But this can't put us into a position like those of many Yeshivot in the ultra-Orthodox neighborhoods of Lakewood, New Jersey that will not allow a student into their school if their parents have the Internet. This approach bothers me because it is so un-Jewish! The Jews have always been at the forefront of technology and communication. We were one of the first to use an alphabet. In fact, the very word "alphabet" according to some, comes from the first two letters of the Hebrew alphabet – the aleph and the bet. There can be no doubt that Jewish society was the first in which every individual was able to reach their potential through direct access to knowledge. In the 15th century one of the greatest of all technologies was introduced, that of the printing press. How do you think Jewish society reacted ... Orthodox Jewish society? Well, listen to these words from Herald of Destiny written by the Orthodox historian, Rabbi Berel Wein: "Wherever the general printing press appeared the Jewish printing press was not far behind ... tens of thousands of Jewish books were printed and disseminated ... the hunger for knowledge, especially for Torah knowledge – the hallmark of the Jewish people – was appeased by printed books. The printed word would now assume an aura of authority and even holiness amongst Jews ... no other invention would ever prove to be as useful to Jewish survival and Torah development as the printing press."

You know which society did not accept the innovation of Guttenberg? Muslim society! In 1485, a decree by the Ottoman sultan banned this new invention on the grounds that it would be sacrilegious to use the Arabic language in mechanical equipment. For centuries printing in Arabic was illegal. It is said that when Napoleon arrived in Egypt in 1798 Cairo had no printing presses. The Muslim world to this day has not fully recovered by passing up the new technology. Are we – as Jews – to make that mistake today? Are "the people of the book" not going to be the "people of the e-book?"

The proclamation of these rabbis banning the use of the Internet perhaps proves that Alan Dershowitz is right ... maybe the rabbis today are not the brightest, although I would point out to you that Ada Yonath, the Nobel Prize winner's father, was a rabbi. But I think that all of us should keep in mind the blessing a Jew is supposed to recite when coming into the presence of a wise person. Jews so admire and respect wisdom that when we are in the presence of a wise person, Jewish or non-Jewish, there is a blessing we are supposed to recite where we thank God: "*Shechalek mei'chochmosmo l'vasar v'dam* – who has given a portion of his knowledge to the

human being.” Note what that blessing says: that God has given a *portion* of His knowledge, not all of it. No one knows it all! Not even rabbis! Our ancient sages were smart enough to teach: “*Chochmo b’goyim taamin; Torah b’goyim al taamin* – If someone says there is wisdom amongst the nations of the world, believe them. If they say there is Torah amongst the nations of the world, don’t believe them.” Yes, we Jews have a monopoly on Torah, but not on wisdom. Not even rabbis.

No matter what anyone tells you, I tell you:

- Rabbis do not understand the uses of technology as well as computer and social scientists do.
- Rabbis do not know as much about science and creation as biologists do.
- Rabbis do not know how to handle issues of sexual abuse the way psychologists do.
- Rabbis do not know about issues of war and peace the way diplomats and political scientists and military strategists do. *They* don’t know it all ... and neither do the rabbis!

Look at Judge Richard Goldstone, the highly respected jurist, who chaired the United Nations Human Rights Commission’s investigation of the Gaza war. After reading the resolution that the United Nations passed regarding his commission, he said that he was shocked that the U.N. only condemned Israel and not Hamas. He’s shocked? This from a bright man! What did he expect? The U.N. ALWAYS only condemns Israel and not the Palestinians!

Indeed, it has to be pointed out that Ada Yonath, the Nobel Prize winner in chemistry recently stated that Israel should release all the Palestinians prisoners that it is holding ... that way the Palestinians would no longer be motivated to kidnap any Israeli soldiers. You have to win a Nobel Prize for that kind of warped thinking? You really think that releasing prisoners will stop the kidnappings, when in the past releasing terrorists only had them turn around and perpetrate more crimes against Israel.

Yes, even the wisest sometimes aren’t very wise. Wisdom is good ... wisdom is great ... and it is nice that Jews have always pursued it. But let us also remember that wisdom is not enough. Every day in the Silent Devotion the first thing we ask of God is for wisdom; but not just for wisdom but also for insight and discernment. Wisdom, in and of itself, is not enough. Wisdom must be used wisely and that is the challenge for all of us – Jews and non-Jews, Nobel Prize winners and noble people. It is that which made Abraham the man that he was, and it was that which caused God to say of Abraham what we hope in each generation we as Jews fulfill: “And I will make of thee a great nation and I will bless thee and in thee thy name shall be blessed.” And let us say “Amen.”

Follow “What the rabbi is reading” at: rabbiwohlberg.wordpress.com and on Twitter: twitter.com/rabbiwohlberg

Sermons/103109

© copyright 2009 by Rabbi Mitchell Wohlberg. All rights reserved.

www.bethfiloh.com