

BRET STEPHENS

Jews Were Chosen to Think

But what are we thinking about?



IN MAY, the *New York Times* published obituaries for Philip Sunshine, Peter Lax, and Richard Garwin, all of whom died within a few days of one another at the ages of 94, 99, and 97, respectively. I'm embarrassed to say that, until I read the obits, I knew nothing about them.

Sunshine, a son of Denver pharmacists who spent most of his career as a physician at Stanford, all but created the field of neonatology, developing techniques to save prematurely born babies that previously would have been given up for dead. “Dr. Sunshine helped train hundreds, perhaps even thousands, of doctors who went on to work in neonatal intensive-care units around the world,” the *Times* reported. “When he retired in 2022, at age 92, the survival rate for babies born at 28 weeks was over 90 percent.”

Lax, who came to the United States as a refugee from Hungary

in 1941, worked on the Manhattan Project as a teenager and was a pioneer in the field of supercomputing: “Among mathematicians,” the obituary noted, “he was most renowned for theoretical breakthroughs that others used to analyze specific phenomena” — from weather patterns to aerodynamic designs to the shock waves from bombs. After winning the Abel Prize (the equivalent of a Nobel in mathematics) in 2005, Lax observed that, “as mathematics develops, things are simplified, and unusual connections appear.”

As for Garwin, the Cleveland native was described by his University of Chicago mentor, Enrico Fermi, as “the only true genius I have ever met.” At 23, he drew up the design of the first hydrogen bomb, Ivy Mike, detonated on a Pacific atoll in 1952 with the force of 700 Hiroshimas. He advised 13 presidents — from Eisenhower to Trump — on subjects ranging from satellite reconnaissance to atmospheric nuclear blasts to international arms-control agreements, for which he was a fervent advocate. As a longtime employee of IBM, he also was granted 47 patents, including one for a mussel washer.



Three Jews, three professions, three life stories. Yet each of them did something that seems to be the special calling of the Jewish people: They made the world think. Is there a less surprising story? And shouldn't it at least tempt us to consider that, if Jews were chosen for anything, perhaps it was for this: to think originally and powerfully and in ways that repeatedly reshape the world's understanding of what it is and what it can become?

Month after month, year after year, in wildly disproportionate yet altogether predictable numbers, the *Times* publishes obituaries for Jews whose thinking transformed their respective fields. In May

alone, there was also Robert Jarvik, inventor of the first permanently implantable artificial heart; Jack Katz, who pioneered the graphic novel; Susan Brownmiller, the feminist author who fundamentally reshaped our understanding of the nature of rape; Marcel Ophuls, the documentarian who debunked the myth of widespread French resistance to Nazi occupation; Sybil Shainwald, the attorney who made the pharmaceutical industry pay for the cancer caused by the synthetic hormone DES; Étienne-Émile Baulieu, inventor of the abortion pill; Sholom Lipskar, the Florida rabbi who reached out to Jews in American prisons; Charles Strouse, composer of *Annie* and other Broadway sensations; Monroe Milstein, founder of the Burlington Coat Factory; Hans Noë, sculptor, architect, and New York restaurateur; Michael Ledeen, neoconservative scholar, political operator, and bridge champion; Leslie Epstein, author of the acclaimed Holocaust novel *The King of the Jews*; Robert Shapiro, marketing wizard behind NutraSweet; Judith Hope Blau, who made art from bagels; Joel Krosnick, renowned cellist; Michael Roemer, director of films that won cult followings decades after they were made; Peter David, among the most prolific science fiction and fantasy writers of our time; Lynn Freed, the acclaimed South African novelist; Stephen Mo Hanan, Broadway actor and singer; Margot Friedländer and Walter Frankenstein, Holocaust survivors who returned to Germany late in life to tell a younger generation about their ordeals.

This record of staggering achievement in so many fields almost invariably leads to the question of what, exactly, makes so many Jews so smart. It's a subject of pride, controversy, misgiving, anxiety, denial, misunderstanding, and calumny. Some Jews worry that to speak of these achievements, much less boast about them, invites antisemitism. Some non-Jews think the pride Jews take in their intellectual accomplishments signals a conviction of innate superiority over others — itself an antisemitic thought.

But whatever the consequences of wondering what makes individual Jews smart, it's simply the wrong question.

Jews may have an outsized share of the most brilliant minds, leading to exceptional contributions in abstruse fields such as medicine, physics, and math. Yet there are plenty of Jews whose exceptional achievements in their respective fields weren't the result of Garwin-grade intellects. Jews also have a culture that, for centuries, has prized literacy, numeracy, and educational attainment. Then again, so do many other cultures, with vast populations that swamp whatever advantages Jews might enjoy, proportionally, in raw intelligence.

A better question, or set of questions, would have less to do with Jewish brains than with Jewish *thought*. To wit:

- Is there a specifically Jewish way of thinking, born of religious heritage and social practice, that confers advantages when it comes to noticing hidden connections, latent possibilities, underlying patterns, and unexpected solutions?
- Is the Jewish account of the universe—physical, moral, and temporal—coherent and therefore intelligible?
- Does the Jewish practice of analogical reasoning diagnose problems and illuminate solutions in ways that other forms of logic do not?
- Do Jewish parents tend to instill in their children habits of conversation, learning, and argument—including an open-ended attitude toward thorny questions, a tolerance of dissenting opinions, and a willingness to question received wisdom—that help turn them into intellectual trailblazers?

- Has Jewish tradition valorized mental virtues over physical ones, moral conscience over social prestige, ingenuity over power, underdogs over overlords, nerds over jocks?
- Do Jewish stories underscore, more than other ethnic and religious traditions do, the importance of independent thought, freedom-seeking, personal conscience and agency, and resistance to tyranny?
- Have Jewish stories that offer role models of courageous and smart women inspired future generations to maximize the opportunities available to women to lead, serve, and forge new pathways?
- Is there something about a history of repeated exile (and the perpetual threat of exile) that puts a premium on knowledge, wits, and enterprise as the most portable of goods?
- Did a Jewish emphasis on literacy, starting early in the Diaspora, lead Jews to settle in cities and pursue learned professions? And did Christian and Muslim restrictions on what Jews could and could not do, economically speaking, further push Jews into those professions?
- Does devotion to the written word, the practice of close textual analysis, and a belief that every detail, even the smallest, is potentially significant — what the biblical scholar James Kugel calls “omnisignificance” — help train minds to become more probing and precise?
- Does familiarity with different cultures and fluency in multiple

languages — Maimonides, Isaac Abravanel, Joseph Nasi, and Henry Kissinger all come to mind — deepen an understanding of how the world works and how best to operate in it?

- Has discrimination required Jews to work harder and smarter, and have centuries of persecution made Jews more sensitive to bigotry and alert to political danger?
- Does the diasporic experience of having one foot in a mainstream culture, and another foot out of it, help Jews see things that others living wholly within that culture might not — including social injustices hiding in plain view and business opportunities that others fail to notice?

The answer to all of this is: Of course. Whatever case there is to be made about the benefits that come when smart people mate with other smart people, the secret sauce of Jewish intellectual achievement does not lie in biology. It lies in Jewish ideas, role models, practices, and historical experiences. It's in the independent-minded examples of Abraham, Joseph, and Moses. It's in the prophetic tradition of speaking truth to power: Elijah's rebuke of King Ahab, Amos's rebuke of the hypocritical rich, Jeremiah's rebuke of the warmongers. It's in the respect that the House of Hillel accords the House of Shammai. It's in argument for the sake of heaven. It's in the Talmud and the study of Talmud. It's in reverence for Rashi and Rambam, Buber and Scholem. It hangs between Portnoy and Sammler, the morally shocking and the morally shocked. It's in the pious irreverence of Job and the impious irreverence of Lenny Bruce. It's in the ideological feuds between anti-Stalinist Alcove No. 1 and Stalinist Alcove No. 2 at City College, Edward Teller and Robert Oppenheimer, the Podhoretzes and the Trillings. It's on the journey from Lisbon to Amster-

dam, Genoa to New York, Odesa to Tel Aviv. It's in the recollection of former homes and homelands, and the adaptation to new ones. It's in the perpetual tension between Jewish endurance and Jewish precarity, stretching memory and heightening awareness of both the joys and menaces of life.

In sum, it's in the spirit and method Jews rely on to approach the tasks of inquiry. For all the obvious exceptions to which one can point (from Spinoza's excommunication in the 17th century to Haredi schools that barely teach science in the 21st), Jewish life tends, on the whole, to foster habits of mind that encourage people to ask, explore, and debate fundamental questions on nearly every conceivable topic without too much fear of reaching unexpected, undesirable, or forbidden conclusions. That spirit of openness, that freshness, that willingness to reexamine things at their foundations may not be unique to Jews. But it is characteristic of Jews in a way it hasn't been in cultures where second-guessing is treated as impudence, disagreement as treason, and dissent as heresy.



Years ago, I saw a funny TV commercial in which a young radio operator with the German coast guard gets a distress call. "Mayday! Mayday! ... We're sinking, we're sinking!" pleads a desperate voice from the stricken vessel. "What are you sinking about?" replies the linguistically challenged operator. It was an ad for Berlitz, the language-education company.

So: If Jews were chosen to think, what should we be thinking about?

Three things, mostly, two of them familiar. First, it's to think about being a holy nation. This requires more than following a script or deferring to authority; it demands insistent reflection. What is the maximum size of an eruv? Why do we hang mezuzot a certain

way? How do we know when a war is just? Judaism is an invitation to puzzle our way through a faith of caveats, complications, and contentions.

Second, Jews think about repair. Whether it's Jarvik designing an artificial heart or Friedländer teaching a younger generation of Germans about the horrors their grandparents inflicted on her — all this mending of what is broken and straightening of what is crooked has been the worldly work of exceptional Jews ever since their ancestors were freed from the ghettos and fled the shtetls. This should not compete with the requirement of being a holy nation. It extends and, in many ways, completes it.

But there's a third topic. That's the thought we must devote to our survival, as people and as Jews.

Ever since I first read *Not I: Memoirs of a German Childhood*, the German historian Joachim Fest's memoir of growing up in Berlin in the 1930s and '40s, I've been haunted by a line that Fest attributes to his father, Johannes, a philosemitic schoolteacher who detested the Nazis and paid dearly for his convictions. The elder Fest had a clear idea of where his Jewish friends had gone wrong politically: "They had, in tolerant Prussia, lost their instinct for danger, which had preserved them through the ages."

For years, I thought the line applied powerfully to American Jews but not at all to Israeli Jews. Then came the self-inflicted wound of judicial reform followed by the catastrophe of October 7, and it shook my thinking: How much rot was there inside the citadel? Events since then have restored my confidence, but only partially. The Israeli security establishment showed, after its debacle, that it remains the most tactically brilliant force in the world today. But, as of this writing, it remains unclear whether Israel can capitalize on its achievements. Does it know how to end Hamas's reign in Gaza? Or convert its military success against Tehran into diplomatic achievements in Riyadh

and other Arab capitals? Or win back liberal Westerners who have soured on the Jewish state?

The answers to those questions are for another essay. But raising them illustrates how much work remains to be done, in Israel and the Diaspora, on this third, essential, subject for Jewish thought. Should we bid for the world's empathy and pity, or for its awe and respect? Will we survive by proving our moral worthiness in our communities, and in the community of nations, or will we survive by demonstrating our fearsomeness and disdain for fatuous moral scolding? Will Jewish life flourish when it's more in step with the societies that surround us, or more out of step with it? Does Israel have better options in the Middle East than to kick cans down the road—perpetually postponing the day of reckoning with the Palestinians, Haredi enlistment, and even Iran's nuclear programs if the regime should succeed in restarting them? Or is can-kicking the best a country of Israel's size can do while it hopes for a fortunate turn of events?

An even larger question hangs over these: Has the classical liberalism of democracy and civil liberties, its institutions and habits, reached the limit of its utility for Jewish survival? Or does it remain our ultimate hope? That's the difficult and uncomfortable question that thoughtful Jews will have to grapple with over the widest range of issues: free speech, surveillance, migration, religious freedom, military policies, and so on. At what point, if any, does freedom become a mortal threat to survival? Or is it the cause of freedom itself that offers us the deepest reason to struggle to survive?



These issues matter to all people. Right now, for all its many errors and shortcomings, Israel is furnishing a model to the rest of the world: a democracy that can have bitter domestic debates even as it unites to

fight enemies on multiple fronts; citizens who will protest their leaders while still being ready and willing to fight in their army; a prime minister who will submit to the demands of a courtroom even as he runs a government; a nation that is willing to endure ostracism and calumny if that's the price of survival. There are profound lessons in this, above all for a West that increasingly seems indifferent to the future of freedom, the requirements of its own civilization, and the ways in which that civilization is being threatened from within and without.

But those aren't necessarily the lessons that will win the day. If Jews are in fact chosen to think, it means also that we've been chosen to remember — and memory, for us, is frequently bitter. So let's ponder this: Without thinking well about survival, there can be no thinking about holiness or repair. A lesson, there, for the most observant and progressive alike.

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