

Steve Lipman's (*The Jewish Week*) Questions for Steve Pease and His Answers

Q. Why does a non-Jew -- a self-described "Presbyterian by upbringing, of Scots-Irish, English, and German heritage" -- develop such a strong interest in documenting Jewish achievement? In "*The Golden Age of Jewish Achievement*," you spend 620 pages citing every conceivable Jewish achievement over the last 200 years.

A. It began with simple curiosity. I have probably had more Jews in my life for longer than most Gentiles. From kindergarten through college I had lots of Jewish friends and acquaintances. At Harvard Business School, my roommate was Jewish as were three of the eight of us who shared a common bathroom. In 1972, I moved to Miami and spent six years as Exec VP working for a Jewish boss in what was then a Jewish industry (real estate information) with Jewish direct reports and competitors. As a turnaround CEO and venture capitalist I had Jewish board members, employees and CEOs of companies in which I invested. And out of that, I had and still have many close Jewish friends.

From all this, my experience was that Jews were disproportionately accomplished. I thought I could probably prove it but I had neither the time, nor the tools (the Internet).

In roughly 2003, I began to track down the data. What I found out was astonishing. The range and breadth of the achievements exceeded my expectations many times over and yet this phenomenon was little known and rarely discussed or written about. I thought it deserved a thoughtful analysis and in that, Rabbi Harold S. Kushner encouraged me and sought to have his agent and publisher work with me.

So I attempted to write the most comprehensive book on the subject ever published. In it, I did a "first cut" response to a question from Rabbi Kushner asking me to develop my thoughts about why the disproportionate record of Jewish achievements happened. All of that took 620 pages, 61 exhibits, something like 425 bio-sketches, plus a bibliography and a large index. It is the definitive "What" of Jewish achievement.

Q. Why another book, another 299 pages, on the subject?

A. *The Golden Age* devoted one chapter (of 26) to a tentative answer to Rabbi Kushner's question -- "Why do you think Jews are such high achievers?"

I thought the chapter's analysis was solid, but in the five years following publication of *The Golden Age*, much had happened both in the remarkable genetic research findings following completion the Human Genome Project as well as new studies of the importance of culture and its impact on Jews and other groups.

If the first book was the definitive answer to the "What?" question, I thought it was time to provide a definitive answer to the "Why?" question. That is the purpose of *The Debate Over Jewish Achievement*.

Q. Since you are so enamored of Jews, have you thought of converting to Judaism -- or at least keeping kosher and studying Talmud?

A. No. In the past, I have occasionally been kidded by some friends about being a “Jewish wannabe”. But after a chuckle or two, I have consistently said I don’t aspire to become Jewish. I am completely comfortable in my own skin. I am a lifelong conservative and a Republican. Though I rarely attend church, I still think of my heritage as Christianity and Presbyterian. If there is a large population of Secular Jews, I might be counted as something of a secular Presbyterian.

So kosher has no appeal. Talmud for me is more of an intellectual topic. I have never read it but I find it interesting. My paradigm for the Talmud is something of a 4,000 year ongoing religious and legal debate that, over the last 2,000 years, has been carried on in written form. As such, it is wonderful representation of intellectual dialogue, spirited and quite different opinions, and tolerance for the different points of view. It has also worked to revise the rules of the road in light of evolving circumstances. The acceptance of charging interest for loans of money is one example of that kind of Talmudic evolution.

Q. There have been many books in the last century, especially in recent decades, discussing and explaining disproportional Jewish success in many fields. What are you adding to the debate?

A. As suggested above, I think *The Golden Age* is the most comprehensive analysis ever done of the “what” of Jewish achievement. *The Debate* does the same for the “why.” Both are also different in encouraging Jews and non-Jews to learn from and emulate the high achievers. And though I did not intend for it to be so, many Jews have told me the books make them proud of their heritage (one told me he had long been ashamed of being Jewish and became proud after reading *The Golden Age*.) And in Napa, one audience member got up to praise the book and say he converted because of it. (I asked if he would like to join me for the rest of the book tour!!)

Q. A tome bragging about Jewish successes would seem unseemly, chauvinistic, if written by a Jewish author. Is it easier to get away with it if you're not Jewish? What has been the reaction to your writings in Jewish and non-Jewish circles?

A. My purpose is not chauvinistic or fawning. It has been to document the astonishing record and to explore why it happened. I can appreciate that it is probably better for a non-Jew to have written it, but I was not motivated by that.

I could write yet another book on the reactions to *The Golden Age*. In fact, I told a good Jewish friend I thought the title of my next book (there won’t be one), should be *Writing About Jews*. My original agent thought *The Golden Age* would have a big audience. He spent over a year presenting the book proposal to the major publishing houses. They would not touch it. The literary agent for a very prominent rabbi told me he understood what I was doing with the book. He seemed impressed, but he said he could not touch it. A very prominent head of a Jewish studies program at an important California University told me 2,000 years of Jewish history had taught Jews to keep their heads down and to quietly do their major philanthropy. Anti-Semitism was seen as too deeply ingrained to change and my book would put a spotlight on a topic that would only drive resentment.

At the same time, I made roughly 25 book presentations before more than 1600 attendees, many of them in JCCs and synagogues (including two Shabbat services). I did a Jewish Life Television interview and numerous radio interviews. I never had a negative reaction. The audiences were all positive and appreciative. They told me -and

others - that they really liked the presentations. They bought books and recommended me to other prospective venues.

I had similar reactions before non-Jewish audiences including the San Francisco Commonwealth Club.

Q. You cite stats and stories in all sorts of areas -- academia, arts and entertainment, the Olympics, science, etc. -- where Jews have excelled. What's your favorite example?

A. This may not be what you had in mind with the question, but I think my personal favorite is *The Jazz Singer*. It is my introduction to *The Golden Age* chapter on Hollywood and it describes the making of the first important "talking motion picture" and the Jewish role in inventing the movie industry.

The movie was based on a roman a clef about Al Jolson's life in which, despite all the odds, Jolson starred (he wasn't supposed to but George Jessel demanded more money when the ending was changed to have the star return to Broadway rather than take over his father's job as cantor). It was made by Warner Brothers and between the real lives of Jolson, who was a cantor's son and a secular entertainer who had four non Jewish wives, and the four Warner brothers, two of them quite religious and two of them secular, the making of the movie is as good a story as the movie itself. This was early 20th century movie making, the advent of sound, and the huge internal debates within Judaism about secularism and assimilation. It is quite a story and of course Warner Brothers remains an entertainment giant. That is largely because of the influence of the secular Jack Warner (seen by some as a "Jew hating Jew") who led the studio in those formative early years.

Q. You mention several Jewish mobsters, thugs and "key figures" in financial scandals. They also number among Jewish success stories?

A. Balance. I thought it would be unwise to not also point out the fact that Jews have been prominent in some domains about which they may generally not be so proud. But it was an interesting chapter to write and though most of us know Meyer Lansky and Bugsy Siegel were Jewish, not so many know of Arnold Rothstein, the original Jewish Godfather. And before I wrote the chapter, I had no idea Jews had been successful Caribbean pirates, in part as retribution for the Inquisition and its effects on Jews who then lived in that part of the world.

Q. You write that the Jewish people have experienced unparalleled success in the last 200 years. What has made the last two centuries a golden age for Jews?

A. Napoleon (Emancipation), Moses Mendelssohn (Reform), the Enlightenment, and Haskalah (The Jewish Enlightenment).

The Enlightenment changed the world after 150 years of religious warfare following the Reformation (which began in 1517). Science, the Arts, Reason, Dialogue, the ability for Catholics to finally sit down to explore all of this with Protestants, and then to invite Jews into the conversation; this was simply revolutionary.

As the Emancipation spread throughout Europe, Jews began to participate in secular affairs and they flourished in that opportunity. There had been some Jewish scientists

before, but they were few in numbers and not so prominent. In most of the domains I wrote about in *The Golden Age*, you could see only a few prominent Jews in the first half of the 19th Century, but by the second half they began to appear in significant numbers. By the first half of the 20th Century, Jews were prominent in many domains such as the Nobel Prizes. And despite the Holocaust they have even been more prominent after World War II throughout the second half of the 20th Century.

Historian, Paul Johnson refers to all this as “an event of shattering importance in world history.” Jewish historian Raphael Patai says, “In the wake of the Enlightenment, the suddenness with which Jews began to appear and make a mark in numerous areas is nothing short of astounding.”

Q. Standing on one leg, what's your explanation of Jewish success -- nature or nurture?

A. Mostly nurture, and by that I mean Jewish culture.

Q. You write that "we" -- everyone, apparently -- "can learn from their story." *What* can people learn from the Jewish record of success?

A. As a group, Jews are the highest achievers of the last 200 years, but they are not the only ones. In the '70s and '80s the offshore Chinese were remarkable high achievers. More recently, many Asian cultures are becoming high achievers. The Mormons have been very successful as were the 18th and 19 century Scots, the 17th century Dutch, and many others. What seems clear are the common cultural threads many of them have shared. Most placed a huge premium on education. The Jews made education mandatory after the Roman Conquest. Most placed a premium on rationality. They believe they can influence their own destiny. (They are not helpless victims deserving of entitlements.) They tend to defer gratification and see that as mature behavior. They treasure family, believe in the importance of work, treasure merit, and on and on. In essence what we can learn, promote and emulate are the cultural values shared by all these groups.

Q. You use a fluid definition for Jewishness. Have you found a record of achievement among "half-Jews" (one Jewish parent), people adopted into Jewish families, those who have converted to Judaism, or those who don't identify as Jewish?

A. I have not specifically looked at half-Jews. Nonetheless, I was surprised that secular Jews tend to be high achievers even though they rarely belong to a denomination. In my mind the key issue is not the strength of their religious affiliations, but the strength of their cultural values and beliefs such as “It is what you do in this life that matters.” Heads in the audiences for my talks routinely nodded in affirmation whenever I described that as an important Jewish cultural value.

Q. Religious readers might feel you pay little attention to a theological explanation for Jewish success -- G-d's promises in the Bible to bless the Jewish people. What role does this play in your explanation of Jewish success?

A. I think the religion has been important. It was the accession of Rabbinic Judaism after the Roman Conquest that led to making education mandatory for Jews. And in the United States, Reform Jews, Conservative Jews, Modern Orthodox and Secular Jews are college graduates at more than twice the national average. Religious holidays are

largely family affairs for Jews and the religion has placed a premium on family and a healthy lifestyle. It has also placed a premium on ethical behavior and a sense of responsibility as well as social activism and philanthropy.

But I do not ascribe disproportionate achievement to God making Jews his chosen people. I agree with those who feel "chosen" refers more to Jews sense of duty to help others. And I no more think God has directly caused Jews to be high achievers than I believe he delivered them into the Holocaust as punishment for their sins or those of their ancestors.

Q. You write that "ultra-Orthodox Jews," who "have almost no interest in secular achievements" seem to be outliers in many measures of worldly achievements. In other words, it doesn't pay to be too religious?

A. No, I would not describe it that way. I would say that if you don't accept the Enlightenment, Haskalah, science, evolution and similar ways of thinking, you shut yourself off from the modern world, secular education, and secular achievements. My understanding is that the Modern Orthodox remain quite religious and yet they are actively engaged in the secular world. Former Senator Joseph Lieberman comes to mind. But the low rates of college graduation and high rates of poverty among some denominations suggest to me they do not share some of the values I associate with the disproportionate rates of Jewish achievement described in my two books.

Q. On the other hand, on the very next page, you express the concern that Jewish achievement "might dissipate as Jews become increasingly secular." So it doesn't pay to be too non-religious?

A. I think what I have been trying to say is that I am less concerned about the growing numbers of secular Jews than the assimilation of Jews. A close friend told me of a recent trip by nine couples to Israel with their bar mitzvah and bat mitzvah kids. Of the nine, seven were Jews married to non-Jews. But all nine couples are highly educated as are their kids. They are successful, bright, outgoing and responsible. In short they share all the cultural values described in both books. And as I have said above, my sense is that the Modern Orthodox are very religious and quite successful.

Q. You work as a CEO and venture capitalist. Are you more likely, while wearing those hats, to look for Jewish employees or partners?

A. Not really. As a CEO and VC, I was looking for the best person for the job. I wanted talent, experience, insight, intelligence, people skills, things like that. As it turns out by dint of education, motivation and other cultural phenomenon, Jews are more likely to be among those considered, but I never considered Jewishness as a screen or basis for making a decision.