

ACHIEVEMENT • MEMOIR

What's behind Jewish intellectual achievement?

By CHRIS LEPPER

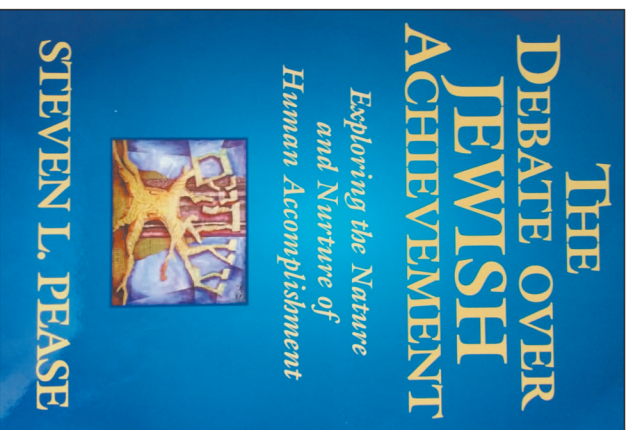
JIN Assistant Editor

Six years ago, businessman-turned-author Steven Pease published a remarkable book, *The Golden Age of Jewish Achievement*, a compendium that convincingly chronicled the disproportionate level of Jewish accomplishment in virtually every area of human endeavor.

That was the “what” of the author’s objective. The current book, *The Debate Over Jewish Achievement*, seeks to find and isolate the “why.”

Pease, a bright and perceptive writer, has his own theories about this. In a nutshell, he hypothesizes that centuries of hard-earned mental discipline through Torah, Talmudic and rabbinical studies uniquely prepared the Jewish mind for demanding tasks in realms beyond religion.

These tasks began to become manifest in the early 19th century, when the Enlightenment opened doors to Jewish thinkers — most importantly in the arts and sciences — that had heretofore been closed to them.



child development and sociology — and wisely leaves the ultimate conclusions to his readers.

Although obviously fascinated by Jews and Jewish culture, Pease comes from a non-Jewish background and assures his readers that he is “not aspiring to become Jewish.” His sole objective, he writes, is “encouraging human achievement.”

In other words, what Jews have accomplished, despite millennia of persecution and oppression, can provide valuable lessons for the human race in general.

“Jewish culture is unique,” the author writes, “but its elements are not. We can learn from them.”

After that, look out. Jewish achievement suddenly found itself on the fast track. Pease’s theoretical foundation, of course, is much deeper and more complex than that. He explores such areas as “epigenetics,” a relatively new science that seeks answers from both nature and nurture in characterizing and gauging human development.

He does not, however, limit his research to those areas most likely to support his own theses, nor does he insist that his own take on such questions is the only valid path. Pease examines current research in a variety of fields — genetics, neuroscience, evolutionary psychology,

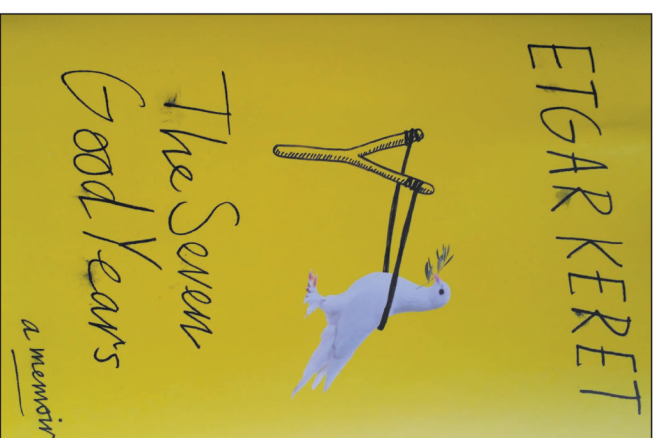
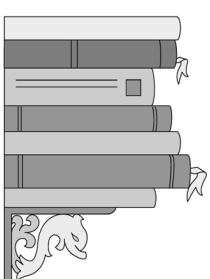
ing collection of brief memoirs, quite often, is sharp wit, self-deprecating humor, biting social commentary, irony — all of it liberally seasoned with the sort of cynicism and sarcasm that only Israelis seem to possess.

But what the reader actually gets from reading these vignettes is something else entirely, just so long as he or she is willing to read between Keret’s lines.

There, in the white space between the actual words, just beneath the cloud cover that hovers over the author’s prose, one can find warmer and more meaningful things — compassion, sadness, warmth, transcendence, love of country, love of people.

The magic of Keret’s writing, both in fiction and non-fiction, is the way he eschews artifice and grandiloquence, opting instead for straight talk and honesty, yet still manages to attain his literary payoff.

The payoffs he achieves in *The Seven Good Years* — the climatic punches that his vignettes revolve around and aspire to — tend to be subtle upon their first reading, but like a subtle melody they tend to stick around in one’s head, revealing themselves in their own good time. While Keret’s medium



THE DEBATE OVER JEWISH ACHIEVEMENT:

Exploring the nature and nurture of human accomplishment
By Steven L. Pease
Deucalion Publishing, 299 pp.
SONOMA, CALIF.

THE SEVEN GOOD YEARS A Memoir

By Efgar Keret
Riverchad Books, 171 pp.
NEW YORK