



Robert Eisen: Jews, Judaism, and Success: How Religion Paved the Way to Modern Jewish Achievement

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Robert Eisen has published an excellent book setting out a clear, cogent, and highly original answer to the question of why Jews have “become such a remarkably successful minority in the modern Western world” (back cover). The success to which he refers (and to which he wisely confines his analysis) is threefold: economic, intellectual, and artistic. Though Jews constitute a mere 0.2% of the world population, he reports them to make up 11% of the world’s billionaires, 22% of all Nobel Prize winners, 53% of winners of the Pulitzer Prize for General Nonfiction, 37% of Academy Awards for Best Director, and 14% of winners of the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction. Other statistical comparisons tell a similar story.

There have been notoriously many conspiracy-theoretic and antisemitic answers previously proposed to this question, but also several serious and intrinsically plausible ones. The best known have focused on the early spread of education among Jewish communities since the destruction of the Second Temple in the first century C.E. According to Botticini and Eckstein (2012), this education was conceived originally for religious and community-building purposes, but eventually provided Jews with the human capital to move into economically rewarding occupations to the degree that these became open to them over the centuries. Other theories have focused on the habits of mind induced by Jews’ status as outsiders to Christian societies. (Thorstein Veblen, Yuri Slezkina, and Norman Lebrecht are names associated with various flavors of this point of view.)

The originality of Eisen’s claim is that the advantages that Jews brought to their integration into modern European and North American societies were a set of specifically religious ones. Rabbinic Judaism, beginning as early as the first centuries of the Common Era, upheld four key values: individual freewill, freedom of expression, the value of worldly activity, and education as a means of intellectual fulfillment rather than just professional advancement. Over the course

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of 350 clear, well-written (and mercifully jargon-free) pages, he provides ample textual and historical evidence for the importance of these values in rabbinical teaching. They were all eventually to become associated with the European Enlightenment, but it is Eisen's contention that the rabbis got there first. He is careful not to overstate his case: such values were for a long time confined to a narrow elite, but by virtue of being affirmed early and over many centuries, they came to have a profound and pervasive effect on the culture. He acknowledges other scholars who have emphasized Jewish religious values, but he is the first to set out this particular set in such convincing detail, with such attention to the mechanisms by which they could have produced their effect.

The clarity and cogency of Eisen's argument are well exemplified by his response to the most obvious objection to his story: that most of the impressive successes of modern Jews have been achieved by individuals who were relatively, often highly secular. They had rejected many of the features of rabbinical Judaism—how can rabbinical Judaism have been the very source of their success? As Eisen points out, “it is quite common for proponents of a new cultural era to vilify the previous cultural era while unwittingly preserving some of its values” (p. 267). Similar arguments have been used (for example, by the late Larry Siedentop (2014)) to argue that Christian values were the source of many habits of mind that underpinned the European Enlightenment, even (or especially) among individuals who rejected Christianity, or at least its most traditional features. Eisen is the first scholar to my (imperfect) knowledge to apply this logic to making so precise a case for the Enlightenment-friendliness of rabbinical Judaism. He also acknowledges that it took subsequent exposure to European societies to unleash the potential of these rabbinical values—Mizrahi Jews (whose origins were in Islamic lands) showed no such rates of subsequent achievement.

If Eisen's answer to the central question of his book is indeed clear, cogent, and highly original, does that make it true? Here, we must be more careful. We must compare his answer with the best available alternatives. My only disappointment in reading this book consists in Eisen's avowed aversion to social and economic arguments that might compete with his preferred explanation. He relies on others cited in footnotes (notably Shaul Stampfer (2015)) who have criticized the Botticini–Eckstein thesis, on the twin grounds that it exaggerates the spread of education in Jewish communities prior to the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and that it fails to explain how rabbinical studies could have provided suitable training for economic entrepreneurship. He points out that the “outsider” hypotheses of Veblen, Slezkin, and others fail to explain why other excluded minorities have not matched the achievements of Jews. But, he says frustratingly little about the comparative demographic and other characteristics of these other minorities compared with the Jews.

A particularly surprising omission is urbanization. It is hardly mentioned in the book and does not appear in the index. For centuries, Jews have been far more concentrated in cities than either the populations among which they have settled or even most other minorities. Muslim traders in medieval and early modern Asia, and Lebanese traders in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Africa, are perhaps the most comparable groups, but neither group has faced subsequent opportunities comparable to

the opening of European and North American society to Jews in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Yet, navigating urban life is an educational experience, and it would be fascinating to see the extent to which minorities who have been urbanized over sufficiently long periods have been able to develop habits of mind that match those that Eisen attributes to centuries of exposure to Rabbinical Judaism. Eisen suggests that these habits of mind induce migration to urban areas and occupations, but he does not explicitly consider that migration might happen for other reasons, with the development of the habits of mind as a result. It is conceivable that urbanization might explain a substantial part of the discrepancy, while leaving the values espoused by the rabbis—especially the pursuit of intellectual study for its intrinsic value—to account for the upper tail of Jewish achievement in the scientific and artistic realms.

Still, Eisen's book will reward reading not just by historians and scholars of Judaism, but also by an educated general public. At a time when events in the Middle East as well as political developments in Europe and North America are posing new challenges to the ability of Jews and non-Jews to cohabit shared spaces, it is encouraging to be reminded just how deeply Jewish and non-Jewish cultures share values that have ancient religious roots.

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