

NOT LETTING INTELLIGENCE GET TO OUR HEADS

by Rabbi Avi Shafran

More than a few Jewish mouths curled into smiles at the recent news out of the University of Utah. Researchers there suggested that natural selection may have resulted in enhanced intellectual ability among Jews of Ashkenazic, or eastern European, background.

The theory was proposed in a paper published in Cambridge University's Journal of Biosocial Science that sought to better understand the prevalence of certain genetic disease among Ashkenazic Jews. It is accepted science that unfortunate genetic heritages, like the disproportionate occurrence of certain diseases, can reflect beneficial genetic legacies --in other words, that genes coding for such diseases may have persevered in the gene pool precisely because they code as well for some advantageous characteristic. Sickle-cell anemia, for instance, a hereditary disease markedly common among people of African ancestry, has long been linked to a gene that confers protection from malaria.

Might there be some hidden benefit, the researchers asked themselves, some fortunate "flip side," to the propensity for hereditary diseases like Tay-Sachs and Gaucher that are uncommonly common among Ashkenazic Jews? It turns out that those diseases (and two others disproportionately afflicting Ashkenazic Jews) affect cells' management of chemicals known as sphingolipids. And there is apparently some evidence that sphingolipid disorders promote the growth and interconnection of brain cells.

The Utah researchers posited that the roots of a connection between sphingolipid disorders and intelligence might lie in the fact that Jews were

relentlessly persecuted in Europe for nearly a thousand years. Barred over those centuries from professions like farming and crafts, they were forced into managerial and commercial professions, which required more brain than brawn. Thus, the scientists hypothesized, those who survived long enough to leave more offspring (and to provide them their genetic legacy) were, increasingly, those of more formidable intellect.

The researchers might also have considered the fact that Jews have traditionally valued Torah-scholarship and, therefore, scholars -- who, too, may have lived longer as a result, and had more children to whom to pass their genes.

The entire theory, of course, is speculative. Although Harvard University cognitive scientist Steven Pinker called the paper "thorough and well-argued, not one that can easily be dismissed outright," others were less impressed. Dr. Andrew Clark, a population geneticist at Cornell University referred to the argument that sphingolipid disorders are associated with intelligence as "far-fetched." What is more, the theory does not address the formidable abilities of non-European Jews, like those whose roots lie in the Iberian Peninsula, North Africa or Arab lands, whose intellects and acumen are likewise well documented over history and readily apparent in the contemporary world.

Its veracity aside, though, the study's speculation is dangerous. Not because, as Professor Pinker put it, "It would be hard to overstate how politically incorrect this paper is." And not because it might give anti-Semites grist for their rants about Jews being "different" and, of course, plotting to take over the world. No, its danger lies in its potential to lead us Jews ourselves astray, by enticing us to view intellect as inherently important.

That Jews value intelligence is a truism, to be sure. Those of us who remain faithful to the Jewish religious tradition pray for wisdom, and consider the intellectually demanding study of Torah a high and holy calling. And even Jews who turn to other disciplines, more often than not, seek to exercise their gray matter rather than their biceps.

But neither logical thought nor creativity is what ultimately matters, at least from a truly Jewish perspective. Our religious tradition, to be sure, teaches us Jews that we have been chosen by G-d -- but we cannot know why, only what for: to serve Him.

The Torah does refer to the Jewish people as "a wise nation" but also as a stubborn one, and, at times, worse. Jewish tradition considers the Jews' ultimate saving grace to be its Biblical forebears' dedication to G-d. Similarly, the sages of the Talmud did not generally stress inherent abilities -- mental or otherwise -- but rather the choice to utilize whatever blessings we have. Their honorifics customarily ran not to words like "genius" or "brilliant" but to ones like "righteous" and "G-d fearing."

Brights are certainly useful, and even can even be meaningful, at least in a practical sort of way. So, though, can a host of other human traits, like artistic aptitude or musical talent. Anything -- even physical prowess, beauty or wealth -- can be turned to good use. It is, however, only their usefulness that makes them truly valuable. No inherent worth inheres in them; their value is in their potential, in their ability to be recruited for a higher purpose.

Modern society's world-view, of course, leaves precious little room for the idea of living to serve the Divine. Possessions -- both the materialistic and the less tangible sorts alike -- may be what the wider world celebrates. But that doesn't change the Jewish equation.

And so the recent study should not cause us Jews to smile. It should, rather, make us furrow our brows, in thoughtful consideration of the true import of intelligence.

It should impel us to teach our children, whether they are grappling with school, marriage or children of their own, that it isn't genius that most matters but generosity; not the clever who deserve praise but the conscientious. Let us teach them, in other words, to not let intelligence go

to their heads, when only goodness, in the end, is important.

And let us internalize that truth, no less, ourselves.

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