Judaism: An Incubator for Creativity

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The current world is one of information-overload and hyper-stimulation. In this increasingly changing and competitive world, the stakes are high. Being creative gives you the competitive advantage. The fastest and best innovators thrive and survive, and creativity is the key factor. In this article, I propose and will provide support for the argument that Jews historically have been highly creative, and that they are currently very creative in many endeavors.

Jews are creative and use their creativity to innovate and improve the world. The title of this journal is "Conversations," discussions among people. The concept of conversation is an example of Jewish creative dialogue and learning. This article will examine how the practice of Judaism leads to high-order thinking and creativity. I will discuss the roles of prayer, Jewish education, and self-examination, as tools to become a better and more creative person. The final section of this article provides methods the reader can use to enhance creativity. Each person reading this article probably uses these methods to some degree already; but by articulating the strategies, readers can consciously apply them and enhance their work and personal lives.

Jews Beat the Odds in Terms of Achievement

I nostalgically recall the 1960s when I attended University of California at Berkeley. It was the end of my senior year, and I was having coffee with two Jewish friends with whom I had grown up. In fact, we three students were the only Jews in our public school class in Sacramento, California. We lived in the Jewish part of town and went to Hebrew School together. In those days Sacramento was a

relatively small town, and the Jewish population was small as well. What are the odds of three students getting into and succeeding at one of the most challenging Universities in the United States? In Berkeley they do that thing with freshmen: “Look to the student on your left, and now look to your student on the right. Only one of you will graduate.” Fifty percent of freshman students flunked out before their junior year, and only about one-third of entering freshman graduated. Jews were only about 3 percent of the population of California, yet they far exceeded that percentage at UC Berkeley.

The 1960s was a time of change, and Berkeley students were leading this change. Jewish students were major players in the student movements. These movements were driven by social concerns such as free speech, antiwar efforts, equal rights, and unionization of farm workers. The leaders of the student movement as well as the student activists had vision and determination. They wanted a better world, and they would work toward changing the status quo to make a world that was as fair and just as possible. They were practicing *Tikkun Olam*. Many of the leaders of these student groups were Jewish, including Abbie Hoffman, Jerry Rubin, and Bettina Aptheker.[1]

What was true in the 1960s and throughout Jewish history is still true today. Jews are creative and take the lead. Currently Israel, where Jews flourish and prosper, offers so many examples of creativity. Most significantly, Israel is a world leader in the high-tech industry, medicine, and military technology. This little country is in a very dangerous part of the world and has few natural resources. Yet this small Jewish country soars in the marketplace of the world.

The list of Jews and creativity would consume a complete article in itself. Therefore, I am going to choose just a few examples that illustrate Jews and creativity.

Military. In terms of military technology, Israel has developed the Iron Dome and the Eitan. The Iron Dome can intercept short range rockets, and the Eitan is a drone spy plane.

Medical. As for medical technology, my husband and I just benefited from Israel’s innovative and technologically advanced medical services. We were in Hashmona'im, a small Yishuv in the middle of the country. My husband went to the Urgent Care Center in Modiin, which uses the most current technology and Telehealth system.

High Tech. As for the high-tech industry, many of the major international high-tech companies have located in Israel because of the well-educated, highly competent, and intelligent workforce. For overall brain power, just look at the number of Jewish Nobel Prize winners for examples of Jewish outstanding achievement. The Jews have produced many great thinkers and world changers.

Jews can generate creative concepts, and translate them effectively into economic gain and professional achievements. They succeed in the current global market because they are able to produce a high rate of questions and ideas, they have the ability to overcome obstacles, and they have skill set to translate those ideas into marketable products that solve real-world problems. Creativity drives the engine in many areas such as the arts, writing, music as well as business and commerce to mention only a few spheres of interest. Personally, I have found that parenting and family matters benefit from creative thinking.

Jews are economic catalysts not only of the current millennia but throughout the ages. There are many examples where Jews have been invited into countries and usher in an economic Golden Age. When Jews are expelled, the country’s economy goes from boom to bust. Many times the Jews are invited back. Currently, Harbin, China is trying to attract Jews in hopes of regaining economic prosperity for their city. In the early 1900s, Jews were invited to come to Harbin. Jews came and with the Jews came economic prosperity. The Jews were forced to leave in the 1950s, and Harbin has experienced economic decline.[2]

Why are Jews high achievers and leaders? *Lama lo*! or in English, why not!

How Practicing Judaism Enhances Creative Thinking

The skill sets and brain power that Jews develop by practicing Judaism can be generalized to achievement in scientific, intellectual, artistic, and business scopes of practice. One of my professors at Teachers College, Columbia, Mel Alexanberg, described the shared cultural underpinnings of Jewish life as Jewish metacognition.[3] Jews are exposed to a shared intellectual and value system, which are Torah and Talmud.

Jews have a dialogue with God. It is through speaking to God and debating God's response that a moral, ethical, and survival system was and continues to be developed. Jews are the "People of the Book." Books are words and words are symbols. Words have meanings, various meanings. Study Judaism and you are exploring multidimensional symbolic concepts. This includes multiples levels of ideas and information. There is thinking, exploring, and conceptualizing in an ever-evolving interaction of ideas and points of fact. Through this process, Jews developed a highly sophisticated strategy that involves complex reasoning.

Jewish education emphasizes asking questions, learning more, and then refining concepts and ideas. Jewish learning trains techniques in acquiring information, integrating the information, and generating new and innovative thought or concepts. Jews continue to refine their ideas by constructing new interpretations and theories. This is a continual process where existing information and theories inform emerging concepts.[4]

Throughout the centuries, yeshivot and synagogues have been centers where Jews immerse themselves in complicated interactive information systems and challenge the construction of these information systems, accessing their higher-order thinking. Jews are driven with a passion to question and then seek answers through studying the Torah.

Rabbi Marc Angel has often pointed out that "The Torah is an inexhaustible source of wisdom."[5] The fundamental basis of talmudic discourse is to question. Each Jew is free to develop his or her own unique multilevel information storage base, skill and mental proficiency to recall symbolic code, and apply and use that information. Each Jew develops innovative conceptual schema, and eventually, new realities**.** Jews are trained to suspend judgment and live with ambiguity as they think through their ideas and concepts. As time progresses, the examination of text and communicating with God through prayer establishes an ever-evolving value system. In my dissertation, I examined creativity in the Hassidic community in terms of an individual in interactions with mental stimulation, and related this interaction to creative productivity. I was able to document notable creativity in the Hassidic community.[6]

Jewish creative abilities skill sets learned through Judaism can be used in other areas of work. That is why Jewish scholars have soared in many business, academic, and artistic disciplines. Jews are exercising and building their mental capacity through studying Torah. Jews ask questions and wonder why. Jews construct complex mental systems which are reciprocal exchanges between the individual in interaction with environmental stimulation to solve real-world problems.

The next section describes strategies for enhancing creativity. These techniques are taught in traditional Jewish education.

Jewish Techniques for Enhancing Creativity

Immerse yourself . Jews immerse themselves in study. They ask questions. Succeeding in any intellectual frontier requires immersing yourself.

Throw yourself into your work. Learn as much as possible. Always question. Access the most current information. Acquire as vast a body of facts and opinions that you can. All that you are learning is fascinating. At times you can feel overwhelmed with all the information. Learn to live with ambiguity. The process of generating order out of all the information leads to innovation. You know that you have immersed yourself in the problem when you are engrossed and totally consumed by the question.

Be passionate. Jews historically have been passionate and committed to their religion, to understanding God's message. The world is fraught with many problems and difficulties. God asks that meaning be sought after through study of Torah and Talmud. Being passionate and intently committed to seeking meaning and truth in life can be applied to any other areas of study.

Take on the study of a topic that is compelling to you. You have strong and intense feelings. The topic cries out to you, and all kinds of question soar in your head as you seek a deeper understanding. There is a problem that can be solved, or just another step can be taken in solving a problem. You know that you are passionate when your mind drifts to the question, concept, problem, uncertainty, or difficulty. You are on a quest and feel a sense of being driven to learn more and more. You are on unconventional ground. You do not know the answers, and there is a thrill to the work. There are more questions than answers.

Attach yourself to a community. Jews build communities, and live and work together. Jews develop support systems and rules and principles which enhance their lives. Jews are always engaged in vibrant groups to learn and reexamine the religious texts. Each person sustains and builds their conceptual understanding by examining multiple and often contradictory concepts from others in the group, from revered wisdom of our sages, and from current thinkers. Jews are life-long learners; and when applied to other disciplines, leads to creativity in those disciplines.

Surround yourself with amazing people. Examine the work of people you admire, and have them review your work. Build your conceptual framework on the shoulders of giants in your area of study. Do not be afraid to hold contradictory theories in your brain at the same time. You know that you are part of a community of amazing people when these people stimulate your thinking. These amazing people have ideas and information that is helping you move your concept forward. When you are with these people in discussions, you feel your creative juices flow. These people do not have to agree with you. If fact, it is far more important that they challenge your thinking than rubber stamp your theory.

Often people are considered successful when they reinforce the status quo in their field. They do not challenge the accepted conceptia. Do not mistake success, such as fame and fortune, for innovation. Most of the time and most people doing creative work have a unique vision. This puts creative people outside the mainstream. Being outside the mainstream can be difficult. Do not measure your work in

terms a yardstick from the mainstream. Rather, evaluate your work in terms of the amazing people that you have surrounded yourself with, and measure your success by accomplishing your goals. The best of all possible worlds is to have the support of amazing people, accomplish your goals, and become rich and famous.

Use your mind's eye. Jews pray as part of their life. When Jews are praying, they are also imagining and envisioning. The Jewish experience is thinking of what I am now and what I can become, as I strive to be a better person in the image of God. Most significantly, Jews are seeking clarification and testing themselves as to the progress that they are making towards becoming a better person according to God's guidance. Using your "mind's eye" is necessary for novel ideas and innovative solutions.

You want to envision and imagine; and to do this, you use your mind's eye. This well-honed skill is transferable to the development of innovative products and marketing. It is a process of taking complex situations and making sense out of them. Essentially, you are using your imagination to see the whole problem and the end resolution to the problem. Once you are able to envision, the abstract problem can be broken down into steps. Each mini-step resonates throughout the complex problem and has an impact. When using your mind's eye, you can match the impact of the mini-step to the goal of solving the problem. You know that you are using your mind's eye when each mini-step moves you closer to a solution to your problem. Or on careful examination, the mini-step created obstacles to your solving your problem. Every mistake or misdirection offers you the opportunity to rethink the problem and redesign your next step. It provides you with fuller information, more questions, and guides you on your next step. Each mistake is a gift.

Be aware/be in the moment. Praying is a conscious experience that makes actions intentional. When praying with intention, you are in the moment. Kavanah is praying with intention and being aware. You will be more creative in your work when you are aware, present, and in the moment. You should be consciously aware and use the information that you have to produce a clearer understanding of the concept that you are studying. You should be alert and have your mental faculties at their peak performance. All your actions are deliberate and cognizant. All the information that you have gathered facilitates your knowing as much information as possible. Your mind is aroused. It is a dynamic process. You are interacting with the information and using the feedback to refine your thinking. You are in the moment.

Be resilient. Jewish people have had to struggle to survive. They have had to be better than the average guy. Often they have had obstacles that would overwhelm others. Throughout history Jews have experienced misfortune and have recovered and persisted. Jews do not have a choice whether to be resilient. If they are not resilient, they will be destroyed. For periods of time, Jews have been relatively successful in many countries, which are known as Golden Ages. Then crash, the world comes down around them. Jewish history teaches a series of punishing events. Jews have a long memory of all the calamities, yet they pick themselves up and rebuild their lives. I have heard Jewish holidays described as a narrative: they tried to kill us, we won, and now let's eat. In the face of overwhelming obstacles and repeated failures, the resilient people go forward and possibly achieve their goals. The choice is be resilient and possibly succeed, or give up and assure failure.

Resiliency is recovering from disappointment and managing frustration. Each failure provides the opportunity to recover and keep going. When treading on new ground, you may come to dead ends. Your strength to bounce back will help you keep going even when you are discouraged. Your will

know that you are resilient when you are completely defeated, when you blunder and achieve disaster. Yet each obstacle only makes you more determined. You go back for a deeper understanding of what happened, and what went wrong. Despite the setbacks, you try something different. You are imagining a possible different outcome. If you experience only success, then you are not challenging yourself.

Conclusion

Again, I am brought back to the day I sat with my Jewish childhood friends having coffee in Berkeley 1968. Was it by chance that we all succeeded? No, it was not by chance because the Jewish rate of success challenges the probability it was simply by chance. Was it the Jewish education at Hebrew School, or living in a Jewish community, praying, Jewish family values, or our connection to our synagogue? The answer is all of the above and a resounding yes to the great achievements of the Jewish People. There is a shared metacognition. Jewish metacognition is a shared set of symbols, values, and thinking strategies, that trains creativity.

Take a moment. How has your practice of Judaism enhanced your creativity? In terms of the Jewish concept of always trying to improve yourself, what strategies can you use to be more creative? How does your experience with Jewish thought and creativity help you contribute to improving the world?

Notes

1. Mendes, P., '"We are all German Jews": Exploring the Prominence of Jews in the New Left', *Melilah* 2009/3.
2. Hadassah Magazine February/March 2011, pp. 40-48.
3. Conversations with Mel Alexanberg. He was my dissertation advisor in the late 1970s.
4. Miran, MD, Miran E., & Chen, N., *DESIGN OF LIVING SYSTEMS IN THE INFORMATION* AGE: Brain, Creativity and the Environment. Eds. Joseph Seckbach ORIGIN(S) OF DESIGN IN NATURE: *A Fresh, Interdisciplinary Look at How Design Emerges in Complex Systems, Life* [ODIN] volume to be published.

5. Angel, M. Angel for Shabbat, Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals, USA, 2010.

6. Miran, E. The Ecology of Creativity. *Dissertation*. Teachers College, Columbia,