

## **A Jew's Response to Being Part of "The Jews"**

*Written by Rabbi Katie Bauman for Temple Israel, Memphis, TN: Delivered on 6-11-10*

In 1898 in his essay entitled *Concerning the Jews* Mark Twain wrote, "If the statistics are right, the Jews constitute but one percent of the human race. It suggests a nebulous dim puff of star dust lost in the blaze of the Milky Way. Properly the Jew ought hardly to be heard of, but he is heard of, has always been heard of."[\[1\]](#)

Twain went on in this article to list the many accomplishments of the Jews of his time and throughout history. When he said, "The Jew is heard of," what he meant was that Jewish individuals have, throughout the history of Western civilization and especially in America, made a name for themselves through their intellect, their ingenuity, their success in their professional fields and their contributions to whatever society it was that they lived in, whether by choice or forced relocation.

Yes, I agree with Twain. We are "heard of," especially this week. But we are heard of right now not for our individual accomplishments but rather for our characteristics, attributes, and actions as a people. More attention is paid to us as a collective group because we now have an official player on the world stage. The Jewish State has brought Jewish peoplehood to the forefront of the discussion. However we may or may not think of ourselves this way, many in the world right now – many in our own country – both Jews and non-Jews, see us not as individual Jews but as members of a Jewish people.

The world is still reeling from last Monday's violent incident 40 miles off the coast of Gaza. There has been article after article about the event itself and its aftermath that has seemed to bring out disturbingly militant hostilities toward Israel that we all hoped weren't really there.

Commentator after commentator has weighed in on what actually happened on that boat, on the justifiability of the Israeli, and I might add Egyptian, blockade of Hamas controlled Gaza, as well as Israel's very legitimacy as a sovereign nation. We all struggle to come up with a response to the violence that occurred on that boat at the hands of the activists aboard as well as the Israeli soldiers. We struggle to respond with compassion as well as integrity. For both these responses – compassion and integrity – are what is befitting our identities as Americans and Jews.

But that is not the only way we were heard of this week. On June 4<sup>th</sup>, Michael Chabon, acclaimed Jewish author of *The Amazing Adventures of Cavalier and Clay* and *The Yiddish Policeman's Union*, wrote an Op-Ed in the New York Times entitled "Chosen but Not Special."[\[2\]](#) Chabon's thrust was that Jews tend to pride ourselves on being clever, smart, and able to make just the right moves that allow us to conquer our enemies, armed with no more than our astounding intellects. Chabon argued that the flotilla incident destroyed those illusions, and perhaps that was for the best. He called for us to stop expecting Israel to be run by geniuses, simply because they're Jews, and rather apply to her the same standard we apply to ourselves and all the other blockheaded countries of the world. (His words, not mine.)

And there's more. On Wednesday, the Times published an article that explained the results of a genetic study indicating that most Jews are more closely related than we might have previously thought; that any two Jews are 10 times more closely related to one another than any two randomly selected people in the general population. To put it in more concrete terms, that Ashkenazi and Sephardic Jews are still only related as distantly as 4<sup>th</sup> or 5<sup>th</sup> cousins.[\[3\]](#)

Yes, this week the Jew, as Twain wrote, or rather the *Jews* are "heard of," whether we want to be or not. So what are we to do? What kind of response does that invite from us, part of the Jewish people and representatives of it in our own lives? The six million Jews in Israel are struggling for their lives, and many individuals in Gaza are as well. We six million American Jews are not. How do we deal with that reality and respond to each other with compassion and integrity, in a way that honors the memory of another six million Jews whose children are both there and here? And more importantly, how do we deal with it in a way that is befitting our Jewish identities that are so vital to molding Judaism's future?

This challenge was described by Rabbi Marc Rosenstein, a leader of our Reform movement in Israel and director of the Hebrew Union College's Israeli rabbinic program in Jerusalem. Rabbi Rosenstein writes:

*The more difficult challenge, it seems to me, is what faces Diaspora Jews, who do not have the same level of commitment and risk as the citizens of the state, yet as Jews find it difficult simply to disengage and claim to the world that they have nothing to do with Israel's decisions and actions. And even if they want to, it is not clear that the world will let them... I don't speak for the state, he writes. Nor do you. Yet, somehow the state speaks for all of us willy-nilly, and none of us can escape some degree of responsibility for trying to steer it in the right direction, or at least for trying to figure out what the right direction is.*[\[4\]](#)

That, I believe, is what we are to do. We six million strong in North America have a responsibility and opportunity to be there for our family in a time of crisis, to offer support to Israel even as we offer our honest assessment of mistaken and ill-conceived actions. We must listen to Israel's story as she tells it even as we listen to our own media's assessment of it. This Jewish State needs our love as Jews because we are, in fact, a family. And Israel also needs our integrity and compassion as Americans, attributes we have gained from being a part of building a strong democracy for the last 234 years. We've had our struggles in this country and somehow been able to survive them and come out stronger because of them. That is the gift of our experience, and Israel needs our guidance just as we need hers.

I know that many are here tonight dealing with personal struggles as well as coping with those of our people. But Rabbi Rosenstein's words speak to all the struggles we encounter in our lives. I'll close with this prayer based on his wisdom and that of our tradition:

May each of us, as Americans, as Jews, as human beings, never cease to try to figure out what the right direction is and steer our communities and ourselves in that direction. That is our calling, as it says in Psalm 34. God, help us to continue to seek peace, to pursue it relentlessly, and may our Jewish family be a force that gives us the strength to do so.

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[1] For the full text of Mark Twain's article, see <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/1898twain-jews.html>

[2] <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/06/06/opinion/06chabon.html>

[3] <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/06/10/science/10jews.html>

[4] [http://urj.org/learning/teacheducate/publications/galilee/?syspage=article&item\\_id=42661](http://urj.org/learning/teacheducate/publications/galilee/?syspage=article&item_id=42661)