

The Gifts of Judaism

For anti-semites, the desire to boycott Jewish inventions would be very difficult to put into practice. But are modern inventions our main contribution to the world? We have offered the world something far deeper.

Jewish Innovation

Good Shabbos!

I once saw a YouTube video of a religious man in Morocco attacking Arabs for wanting to boycott goods manufactured and sold by Jews. He says in his video that “If you boycott everything made by Jews, you’ll go around naked and starving.”

He lists a number of examples of goods created by Jews—starting with jeans, which were invented by a Jew named Levi Strauss in 1878. “Go ahead,” he says, “and just try to tell your kids to stop wearing jeans.

The second example he brings is lipstick. Lipstick, as it turns out, was invented by a Jew named Marcus Levy in 1915. Likewise he mentioned the ball-point pen, which was invented in 1938 by a Jew named Lazio Biro. This guy says in the video, “Why are you using ball-point pens? Just use a feather like they used to!”

The remote control devices we all use on household appliances was invented by Robert Adler, a Jew, in 1950. The pacemaker

was invented by a Jew named Paul Zoll in 1952. The guy says, “All the more so! Let’s see how long you’d last without a pacemaker!” And so he goes on listing more and more things.

And then he talks about the fact that Jews have won some 184 Nobel Prizes, when they are a total population of 13 million worldwide. The Arabs, however, consist of 1.4 billion people—yet only nine Arabs ever won a Nobel Prize.

Now for an Arab man to talk the truth like that is fine and good. But when Jews declare their pride at being the smartest and sharpest, and that they are the ones responsible for so much technological innovation, I’m not sure that doing so brings people to love the Jews. One might even argue that this causes more anti-Semitism because it arouses jealousy.

In addition, this week’s Haftorah concludes with timeless words that Jeremiah says in the name of G-d; “The wise man shall not praise himself because of his wisdom, the strong man because of his strength, nor the rich man because of his money, rather if a person wishes to praise himself, let it be through understanding and knowing Me, that I am G-d.”

Perhaps instead of being boastful, we can stress another point about our gifts to the world that are more likely to bring us respect from the world.

What needs to be emphasized, then, is not what the Jews gave the world but what Judaism gave the world—what Torah values we presented to humanity. Here are some of them.

Shabbos—the Day of Rest

On Purim, we read in the Megillah how Haman came to King Achashveirosh to convince him to “annihilate, kill and destroy” the Jews. And the Talmud tells us that Haman said to the king that he wanted to do so because they were always telling everyone, “It’s Shabbos today! It’s Pesach today! We’re not allowed to work!” (Tractate Megillah 13:2).

What the Talmud there is saying is that Haman was claiming that the Jews were always taking off for religious days and holidays: Shabbos, Pesach, etc. But what’s so bad about people who don’t work on Shabbos? After all, there are other religions, too, that have a Day of Rest. Not only that, but in Western society today, at least in the United States, there isn’t just one day of rest but two. So what was Haman so upset about?

But we see from this anecdote that this concept of a Day of Rest was not accepted widely then as it is today. Even much later than the Persian Empire, during the heyday of the Greek Empire and later, under the Roman Empire, there was no such thing as a Day of Rest. On the contrary, these civilizations laughed at and belittled the Jewish Nation for not working on Shabbos. They argued that the Jews are lazy, and that the Day of Rest idea causes deterioration and loss of productivity. It took many generations for the world to come around to understanding what a wonderful gift called Shabbos the Torah gave the world.

Equal Rights for Women

At the beginning of the Megillah, we read how Achashverosh wanted his wife, Queen Vashti, to come before him wearing her

royal crown so that the royal court and all his guests could see how beautiful she was. Perhaps rightfully so, she refused, and the king turned to his advisors on what to do with a queen who disobeys a king.

But then, an advisor named Memuchan (who was actually Haman) told the king that the queen must be impeached from her royal position since she was a bad example to the women of the kingdom. "For the queen's word will go forth upon all the women to disgrace their husbands in their eyes," meaning that all the women in the Persian Empire will take their cue from Vashti and start disrespecting their men. And so, Memuchan (Haman) argued, we need to punish Vashti so that "all the women will give respect to their husbands, from great to small."

Now let's take a look at what the Torah says about the relationship between a married man and woman.

With Avraham, the first time we read about an argument between a husband and wife in the Torah is when Sarah asks him to "banish this maidservant and her son." The Torah tells us, "and the matter seemed very bad in Avraham's eyes." But then G-d intervenes in their disagreement and says, "Everything that Sarah says to you, listen to her voice" (Bereishis 21:10-12). So in the first dispute between husband and wife in the Torah, G-d takes the woman's side.

With Yitzchak, at the engagement of Yitzchak and Rivkah, we read how the family left the decision whether or not to get engaged to Yitzchak in Rivkah's hands. "Let us call the maiden

and ask what she says” (Bereishis 24:17). To that verse, Rashi adds, “From here we learn that you do not take a woman in marriage without her knowledge.” To this day, there are places in the world where young girls are forced into marriage against their will. But the Torah, over 4,000 years ago, established that it’s forbidden to marry a woman if she doesn’t want.

With Yaakov, when he lived in Lavan’s house, G-d came to him and said to him, “Return to the land of your fathers and to your birthplace, and I shall be with you”—G-d Himself commanded him to return to the Land of Israel. But before Yaakov even took a single step, he called in his wives Rochel and Leah and told them that G-d had commanded him to return to the Holy Land. And only after Rochel and Leah gave their consent, “All that G-d said to you, do!” (Bereishis 31:17), only then did Yaakov leave Padan Aram on his way to the Holy Land.

And so too when G-d gave the Torah, He sent Moshe to first speak to the womenfolk: “Thus shall you say to the House of Jacob [which refers to the womenfolk], and speak to the Sons of Israel” (Shmos 19:6). G-d first requested the women’s agreement, and only then did He turn to the men.

This idea that women have an equal say to men, and that you need to respect a woman’s say, did not exist among other nations until relatively recently in history. Who created this line of thinking that one must respect women’s wants? The Torah.

Civil Rights

When did the “enlightened” world come to the conclusion that having slaves is a bankrupt idea? Only about 150 years ago.

Until then, even in the United States, the freedom of millions was negated. America even needed a civil war to change that.

In the Torah, right after the Exodus from Egypt, after G-d takes the Jews out of the “House of Slaves,” He commanded the Jews in the Torah that it is forbidden to take a man as a slave against his will. “One who steals a man and sells him shall surely be put to death” (Shmos 21:16). But that’s exactly what slavery was: Over all the years and decades and centuries that slavery was commonly accepted and normal practice in the world, slave dealers would kidnap people in Africa and sell them in America.

But more than that, even a man who willingly sells himself as a slave must go free after six years according to Torah law—because the Torah doesn’t want people to be slaves for life, and said so over 3,000 years ago.

Monogamy

Having only one lawfully wedded wife is something that even today is only accepted in Western countries. In the Arab world, men marry more than one woman to this day.

But even at the beginning of the Book of Bereishis, in the story of Genesis, the Torah tells us, “Therefore let a man abandon his father and his mother and cleave to his wife and be one flesh” (Bereishis 2:24). True, the Torah doesn’t forbid marrying more than one woman. But this verse gives us the Torah perspective, and we see that this is how our Patriarchs actually lived.

Avraham was married to one woman, and he lived with her for decades. It was only when he saw that she couldn’t have

children that she advised that he marry Hagar, her maidservant, so that Hagar could function as a sort of surrogate mother for her and give birth to a baby for her. But who was, and remained, Avraham's wife? Sarah. And so, at the very moment things didn't work out, Hagar was kicked out of the house by Sarah.

What's more, Yitzchak—who had children from Rivkah—never married any other woman. (As for Yaakov, he at first planned to marry only Rochel. And the end, though, Lavan tricked him and so it turned out that he also married Leah. And then, when Rochel saw that she was not able to bring forth children at all, she followed in the footsteps of her grandmother Rochel and presented her maidservant to Yaakov as a surrogate. Leah then did the same thing, and so it turned out that Yaakov was married to four women. But the original plan was to marry only Rochel.)

We see the same thing with Moshe Rabbeinu, who was married only to Tzipora, or Aharon HaKohein (Aaron the High Priest), who was married to just one woman. And what's more, as a general rule with the Kohein Gadol, the law is that the Kohein Gadol can't be married to more than one woman. (Rambam, Laws of Forbidden Relationships, 17:12.)

Ladies and gentlemen, let's leave what the Jews have contributed to the world to the non-Jews to count. As the verse states, "May a stranger praise you and not your mouth" (Proverbs 27:2). Our mission is to tell the world not what Jews have contributed to the world but what Judaism has contributed to the world—how the Torah influenced the values and

behaviors of every nation on earth.

Good Shabbos!