

[Pesach 2012 – Oil or Occupation](#)

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

In [an article in the New York Times](#), Thomas Friedman quotes an Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) study showing that there is a negative relationship between the money countries extract from natural resources and the knowledge and skills of their high school populations. In other words, the fewer natural resources, the harder you have to try.

So when we Israelites celebrate Passover we should thank Moses for taking us right instead of left, bringing his people to the only country in the Middle East without its own oil. "Today," says Andreas Schleicher, who oversees the exams used by the OECD, "Israel has one of the most innovative economies and its population enjoys a standard of living most of the oil-rich countries of the region are not able to offer." And the foreign countries with the most companies listed on the NASDAQ are Israel, India, Singapore, Taiwan, and other countries that cannot live off their natural resources.

The number of Israeli Nobel Prize winners is rising all the time and the world-class technological campus New York is setting up will be a joint venture between Cornell and Haifa's Technion. The Weizmann Institute is one of the world's most successful in melding scientific innovation with commercial applications. Israeli creativity in almost every sphere—from cinema and the arts to scientific, medical, and digital—is immeasurably higher than almost every country, apart from the obvious giants.

Thanks for the plug, Mr. Friedman. But there are also cultural and historical factors, which he doesn't mention. Cultures that blame someone else, that always look for scapegoats instead of getting on with solving their problems, are one obvious factor in the Middle East. And having to move, often at the drop of a sword, forces one to be nimble and resourceful. Too much bedding down in one place breeds complacency and acceptance. Ironically, we have to thank the continuous and never fading anti-Semitism for spurring us to counteract our enemies and to make sure we survive. A religion that encourages literacy, study, and intellectual challenge helps too. When we sit down at the Seder we ask, we challenge, and we use our brains, not just our stomachs. It is gratifying to know that despite our very small numbers so many think we control the world. If only. But perhaps if we really did, we would soon sink into mediocrity, like the British Empire.

However, there are two caveats that worry me. The first is education. In Israel the standard of state education has been falling catastrophically over the years. There is an endemic shortage of teachers, and, with a few notable exceptions, Israeli state schools are not impressive. Education is not funded as much as it needs to be if Israel is to survive. The situation has been disguised, because hundreds of highly educated Russians have joined the economy. But the crisis in Israeli schools is a far greater problem than its politicians seem to realize.

A great deal of attention is focused on the absence of secular education in the rapidly expanding ultra-Orthodox community in Israel today. It is true that without science and mathematics they will not become rocket scientists. But on the other hand, unlike many secular school kids, they do receive rigorous intellectual training, if of a different sort. A Talmudic education certainly hones their brains; even if that brain power will be turned to commerce and law, it still represents a fund of mental skills that can be harnessed if circumstances require it.

Another saving grace is that large amounts of money go to the military. In fact, the army is probably the most effective institute of education in Israel because it selects the brightest of its recruits from all over the country for technical jobs the military really needs now, as warfare has become more advanced and computerized than ever. Much of Israeli innovation comes from the military or ex-military. The sad fact is that in all countries a large proportion of the school population wastes a lot of their school time. At least in Israel the obligatory military service offers a second chance to a lot of talent that otherwise would be lost.

The second factor that worries me is the age-old Jewish worship of the Golden Calf of materialism. The disease is not only endemic in the secular world. Israelis have more in common with the icons of Hollywood than they do with other Jews. Even in the religious community, money has come to rule, everywhere from rabbinic dynasties down (or up). This pursuit of mammon not only degrades morally, but also spiritually. The great advantage Israel always had was idealism, but money eats away at idealism like locusts.

Israel's biggest enemy is overconfidence, as both the Yom Kipur War and the Second Lebanese War proved. An ineffective political system that attracts the lower rather than the higher levels of intellect and morality does not inspire confidence. If the system can call on a Stanley Fischer to take the financial system by the scruff of the neck, why cannot someone do it on an educational and social level?

In theory, Pesach should be reminding us of our spiritual values. But, in fact, it has become the acme of vulgar materialism, a time when religion becomes associated with luxury cruises, hotels, and self-indulgence. I wonder how Moses, celebrating a Pesach of modest food, the bread of slavery, in simple travelling clothes, heading out of a corrupt materialistic society towards a promised land of moral integrity and purity, would think of us nowadays.