

Earl Raab

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THE VISIBLE JEW

Last Sunday provided another testimonial to the visibility of the Jews.

The leading articles in the *New York Times* Book Review section were these: a big novel about American Jews by a Jewish novelist; a collection by Irving Howe, one of America's prominent Jewish intellectuals; three books about Einstein, with appropriate Jewish references; an autobiography of an adventurer, whose "parents were Polish-Jewish immigrants"; an autobiography by TV magnate Paley, "raised in a well-to-do Jewish family in Chicago"; a book about businessman Samuel Bronfman, described as "some kind of Jewish elf"; two books about the Nazis and Nazi criminals; and three books about non-Jews.

The Jews make up one or two per cent of the English-speaking world. Yet in that week, over 60 per cent of the most prominent books published in English were directly about Jews; and that figure does not include the books about the Nazi era.

The disproportion is staggering, of mythic proportions. History has thrown the Jews center-stage, as a diaspora community; as a nation; and as a far-flung galaxy of separate individuals. Presumably stimulated by stress, by insecurity, by marginality, by necessity, and often by historical traditions, Jews burst out of the enlightenment starring as writers, critics, intellectuals, social activists and scientists in the Western world. Other Jews, stimulated and limited by the same forces, became the "visibles" in the business world: middlemen, the businessmen "on the street," managers and proprietors of the marginal and highly publicized industries such as television and movies; and disproportionately members of the visible professions, attorneys and doctors.

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Meanwhile, Jewish communities, wherever they existed -- except in Israel -- have usually been the "peculiar" communities, the minority communities, and, despite everything, the non-melting communities. And Israel is placed in much the same boat in the modern Middle East, and at the center of the tinder-box.

The results are, of course, mixed. On the part of the rest of the world there is alternately awe, respect -- and hatred when things go wrong. "Visible" is not good to be when things go wrong.

There are all kinds of off-shoots. When asked, Americans tend to grossly over-estimate the size of the Jewish community. They tend, of course, to grossly over-estimate the extent of Jewish "power," in business, politics and communications. They tend to "expect more" from the Jews. For example, they don't blink much of an eye at exposés of systematic torture in Iran, Nicaragua or Syria. They expect that. But they are highly titillated by any hint that some torture may have sometimes been unofficially committed by some Israelis. That would be "news." Such reaction is a burdensome compliment.

And there is a tendency to over-estimate Israel's power and invincibility. One Israeli defense official said recently: "The Americans think we're the Mighty Mouse of the Middle East. Or maybe it's Superman. They think we're invulnerable; we don't. Do they understand the threat against us? No."

Since the 1973 Middle Eastern war, the Arab nations have spent about 48 billion dollars on arms, compared to Israel's expenditure of about 8 billion. The Iraqis have doubled their ground forces and their air force, added a thousand tanks and armored personnel, increased their surface to air missiles from 3 to 50, tripled their helicopter fleet. Syria has added a thousand new Soviet T-62 tanks, and

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substantially increased its air power. Jordan has doubled its combat planes. But Israel's image of strength and invulnerability is still more "visible" to the world's eye than all of that.

Indeed the total high visibility of the Jews in the Western world, from prominent individuals, to prominent communities, to Israel's modern and biblical image, all combine to give the world -- and some Jews -- an exaggerated sense of the Jews' security. There is also the matter of short memory.

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