

Jews Who Are Great and Great Jews

BY RABBI DAVID WOLPE

Each year we are privileged to see Jews accomplish extraordinary things in science, art, literature, and other subjects. Many of them strongly identify as Jews, but for many, Judaism plays little or no role in their lives. Rav Kook once asked a poignant question: When will Jews who are great also be great Jews?

It is no coincidence that Judaism has produced such a surfeit of accomplished individuals. The tradition of inquiry, of dissatisfaction with settled answers and thoughtless responses, is built deep into the Jewish tradition. The complacent mind cannot master Talmud; it is too knotty, complex and challenging. So when that training is let loose in other fields, it has a decided advantage. But sadly many Jews who are the inheritors of such riches do not understand their own debts.

When Golda Meir was Prime Minister, she tried to get Henry Kissinger to make Israel a top priority. The story goes that Kissinger sent her a letter stating: "I would like to inform you that I'm first an American citizen; second, Secretary of State; and third, a Jew." To which she responded, "In Israel, we read from right to left." She knew his responsibilities of course, but it would be wonderful if Kissinger too, realized that he owed much of the first two identities to the legacy of the third.