Albert Einstein, Natan Sharansky and Elie Wiesel

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I have a theory about Albert Einstein.

Here is my theory in a nutshell: Einstein came up with his theories of relativity because he was Jewish.

Not only because he was smart. But also davka because he was Jewish.

Einstein completed his work on his general theory of relativity 100 years ago this year. An article in Hadassah Magazine this month inspired me to talk about him. The article focused on Einstein's Jewishness. That got me thinking about Jews and our attitude toward authority.

Before Einstein, there was one way that humans understood how the world works. We all knew this one single way. Many philosophers and scientists had held the same view, explained most succinctly by Sir Isaac Newton more than 300 years ago.

Under the Newtonian understanding, objects fall toward the earth because of a force called gravity. Newton knew, as did all the thinkers that preceded Newton, that objects floating in space would move in straight lines but that they would move in orbits around heavier objects, like the moon orbiting the earth. According to all the scientific wisdom before Einstein, a force called gravity pulled the moon and all celestial objects into orbital paths. They understood that the force of gravity prevented the moon from moving in the straight line that science would expect absent gravity.

Einstein had a different idea. A radically different idea. Einstein essentially said, "Maybe so. Maybe not. But I don't think so."

Einstein said, and then proved, that gravity is not a force at all. Rather, he showed that space and time are not two independent realities. Instead, there is only "space-time."

Moreover, Einstein showed that space-time is curved in the presence of matter. This curvature affects the path of free particles (and even the path of light).

Between 1907 and 1915 Einstein worked on a theory that used mathematics to describe what had been called "gravitation." He showed that this was an effect of the geometry of space-time rather than some mysterious force operating at a distance. Einstein named his new theory the general principle of relativity.

There's more. I know this is hard stuff. But there is more.

Einstein also denied another principle that Newton and everyone before him were sure was true. That principle was that energy and mass are two different properties.

Not so. Einstein showed that one can become the other, expressed in his famous equation "E = MC squared."

I'm not going to keep talking about Einstein's theories. The subject is too complicated.

But here is the point: Einstein defied authority. The whole world knew that mass and energy were different and that space and time were different. Along came Einstein and said, in effect, "I don't think so."

Einstein defied the authority of centuries of scientific thought. He had his own idea. He had confidence in himself. He went about proving his approach. The world gradually accepted his ideas.

Take a look at the picture of him. It was taken at the party to celebrate his 70th birthday. The photographer asked Einstein to take a pose that would be appropriate for the occasion. This is the resulting photo.

The fact that Einstein was Jewish was a contributor to his defiance of scientific convention and even defiance of his birthday photographer.

Defying authority is a central characteristic of the Jewish approach to life.

We look at what is, and we say, "Maybe so. Maybe not. I'm going to figure this out for myself, and I may not agree."

For nearly 2,000 years, the Christian world demanded that we accept their views of God and the story of Jesus. We said, "Maybe so. Maybe not. I'm going to figure this out for myself, and I actually don't agree."

We continued this annoying refusal to agree despite cruel persecutions by the Church and attempts at forced conversions by Christian rulers.

Same story with Islam. Along came Muhammad in the Seventh Century. He and his followers wanted us to agree that Islam is the one true religion. We said, "Maybe so. Maybe not. I'm going to figure this out for myself, and I actually don't agree."

For this we were at best relegated to a second-class role in Muslim society and often the victims of efforts to change our minds by brutal methods. But we defied authority.

In the modern era I think of the treatment of Jews in Stalinist Russia. There the secular authorities officially banned all religion, though the Russian Orthodox Church somehow survived and now thrives. During the Stalin era there was a saying that the Russians don't believe in Jesus Christ but still they persecute the Jews because we killed him.

The Russian Jew who reminds me the most of Einstein in defying authority is Natan Sharansky.

He applied in 1973 for an exit visa to move to Israel. The authorities refused, claiming that he had information vital to Soviet national security. Sharansky thus became a refusenik and a human rights activist, working as a translator for dissident Andrei Sakharov and a leader for the rights of refuseniks.

Four years later the authorities arrested Sharansky on multiple charges including high treason and spying for the American Defense Intelligence Agency. The Soviet government imprisoned him in three different prisons over the next nine years as well as in a so-called "strict regimen colony" in Siberia. He kept himself sane during long periods of solitary confinement by playing chess with himself and by reading from a small book of Psalms that he had arranged to smuggle in.

As a result of an international campaign led by his wife, Avital, Sharansky gained his freedom nine years after his arrest. He and three low-level Western spies were exchanged for three spies being held in the West. The exchange took place on the Glienicke Bridge between East and West Berlin.

When the exchange was about to happen, the authorities said to Sharansky, "Now, listen. We are letting you go. When you get out of this van, walk straight across the bridge to the other side."

Sharansky got out of the van and walked in an exaggerated, zig-zag line, the opposite of a straight line, in a last act of defiance against authority.

Two years later he wrote his memoir of his time in prison. It's called Fear No Evil. I recommend it.

Einstein and Sharansky. Two Jews who exemplify our attitude to authority: "Maybe so. Maybe not. I'm going to figure this out for myself, and I may not agree."

It is that same attitude, in my opinion, that helps to explain why Jews make up such a disproportionate number of activists working to make this a better world. That phenomenon cannot be doubted.

Take for just one example the Civil Rights Movement seeking justice for African-Americans.

Jews were the earliest supporters of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. In 1914 Professor Emeritus Joel Spingarn of Columbia University became chairman of the NAACP and recruited for its board such Jewish leaders as Jacob Schiff and Rabbi Stephen Wise.

Kivie Kaplan, a native of Boston, joined the NAACP in 1932 and was elected to its National Board in 1954. In 1966, he was elected its President and held that post until his death nine years later. I knew Kivie when I chaired the Social Action Committee of Temple Israel in Boston in the 1960's and Kivie was an active member.

In the civil rights drives of the 1950s and 1960s, Jewish participation was all but overwhelming.

In its landmark 1954 decision Brown v. Board of Education, the Supreme Court accepted the research of sociologist Kenneth Clark showing that segregation placed the stamp of inferiority on black children. Clark's study had been commissioned by the American Jewish Committee. It appeared in Committee's amicus curiae brief. The Anti-Defamation League and the American Jewish Congress also submitted amicus curiae briefs in that case. These Jewish organizations continued to file legal briefs in civil rights cases dealing with housing, employment, education, and public accommodation. Many local and state desegregation regulations were drafted in the offices of the Jewish agencies, including in the office in Boston of the American Jewish Congress, where I served as Chair of the Commission on Law and Social Action and then as President of the New England Region.

Jewish participation in the Civil Rights movement far transcended institutional associations. One black leader in Mississippi estimated that, in the 1960s, the critical decade of the voter registration drives, "as many as 90 percent of the civil rights lawyers in Mississippi were Jewish." Large numbers of them were recent graduates of Ivy League law schools. They worked around the clock analyzing welfare standards, the bail system, arrest procedures, justice-of-the-peace rulings. Racing from one Southern town to another, they obtained parade permits and issued complaints on jail beatings and intimidation.

Jews similarly made up at least 30 percent of the white volunteers who rode freedom buses to the South, registered blacks, and picketed segregated establishments. I was privileged to know some of these early advocates of equal rights. Among them were several dozen Reform rabbis who marched among the demonstrators in Selma and Birmingham. A number were arrested, most prominently Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel.

The Jews had long since achieved their own political and economic breakthrough. Rarely had any community gone to such lengths to share its painfully

achieved status with others. But we had to act when we saw racial injustice. We said what we always say: "I see this, and I disagree. I'm not going to go along."

The roster of Jewish advocates for what is right and true against previously established norms is lengthy and distinguished. I mention only one more: Elie Wiesel.

I am thinking of the speech Wiesel delivered directly to President Ronald Reagan in 1985, opposing Reagan's plan to visit a German cemetery in the town of Bitburg where Nazi soldiers were buried.

Wiesel was then chairing the United States Holocaust Memorial Council. Reagan had invited him to the White House to receive the Congressional Gold Medal of Achievement, the highest honor that the Government gives to civilians.

Wiesel met with Reagan privately in the Oval Office for 25 minutes before they entered the Roosevelt Room together for the ceremony. Wiesel later told friends that Marshall J. Breger, a White House liaison officer for Jewish affairs, told Wiesel he had to limit his speech to three minutes and must avoid any direct criticism of Reagan. Wiesel, in a typical defiance of authority, appealed to Donald Regan, the White House chief of staff. Regan assured Wiesel he could say what he wanted.

In his speech, Wiesel, whose suffering in concentration camps as a child has served as the basis for his novels, said in a cracking voice:

"The issue here is not politics, Mr. President, but good and evil. And we must never confuse them. For I have seen the SS at work. And I have seen their victims. They were my friends. They were my parents. Mr. President, there was a degree of suffering in the concentration camps that defies imagination."

Wiesel declared his "respect and admiration" for Reagan, then added, "I am convinced, as you have told us earlier when we spoke, that you were not aware of the presence of SS graves in the Bitburg cemetery. Of course you didn't know. But now we all are aware.

"May I, Mr. President, if it's possible at all, implore you to do something else, to find a way, to find another way, another site? That place, Mr. President, is not your place. Your place is with the victims of the SS."

Reagan stared unflinching at Wiesel during the electric 10- minute speech. Afterward, the two men shook hands, and Reagan left quickly.

Asked whether he was concerned about the impression that he was giving a moral lecture to the President, Wiesel shrugged. "No, no, I am not a moralist," he said. "I am a teacher. I'm a storyteller. I have words. Nothing else. I represent nobody. All I did was give him a few words."

Reagan, in his comments during the ceremony honoring Wiesel, spoke of the horrors of the Nazi era and his commitment to Israel, to Soviet Jews and to Ethiopian Jews. He compared Wiesel to a biblical prophet whose works "will teach humanity timeless lessons." The President added: "He teaches about death, but in the end he teaches about life."

Like Einstein, we see what seems to be and wonder whether it might be different. Like Sharansky, we are all refuseniks. Like Wiesel, we speak truth to power when we can, just like the ancient prophets mentioned by President Reagan.

This legacy of defiance of authority provides yet another reason we can be proud to be Jews.