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OPINION

Op-Ed: The disproportionate success of Jews in America

By Steven L. Pease · May 27, 2010

SONOMA, Calif. (JTA) -- When I was a kid, the prospect of catching polio was terrifying. We could not dive into a public swimming pool for fear we would spend the rest of our lives in an iron lung. Two Jewish doctors vanquished that disease and removed such fears forever.

Dr. Jonas Salk and Dr. Albert Sabin are but two of the Jews we honor in celebrating Jewish American Heritage Month.

America has been blessed with many waves of immigrants from all over the world who have made our nation the most successful in history. This success has drawn these immigrants with its promise of living free and making one's own way, and perhaps achieving and contributing great things.

During Jewish American Heritage Month in May, we honor our Jewish countrymen. Their numbers are small, roughly 5 million or 6 million in a country of more than 300 million.

The first Jews arrived in 1654 fleeing the Inquisition. They insisted on, and were granted, full citizenship. One hundred of their successors fought in the Revolutionary War and one -- Haym Solomon -- helped secure vital financing for George Washington's Revolutionary Army.

Waves of succeeding Jewish immigrants helped build American industries and culture, and our way of life.

Jews built the majority of our great retailing institutions like Macy's and Bloomingdales. Even today, more recent names such as Home Depot and Costco have their roots in Jewish merchants.

Our garment industry, with names like Levis, Ralph Lauren, Calvin Klein, Donna Karan and others, changed the United States from a country in which garments were made by hand, one at a time, into the world's leader in ready-to-wear and high fashion.

Our computers, with names like Dell, software from giants like Oracle, search engines like Google, and social media like Facebook, share the legacy just as Intel and Qualcomm chips and technologies are inside so many of our computers and cell phones.

The three largest broadcasting networks -- ABC, NBC and CBS -- were built from the efforts of two visionary Jewish entrepreneurs, David Sarnoff and William Paley. Sarnoff in particular saw the potential to convert "wireless," then used for ship-to-shore communications, into a "broadcast" medium distributed via a "network."

The technology for making movies was invented by the non-Jewish Thomas Edison, the Lumiere brothers and others, but it was Jewish entrepreneurs who saw the potential to create an industry, making feature-length films, distributing them internationally, and building and sustaining the studios. From that arose the vital role played by Jewish movie producers, directors and actors.

So many of the most important U.S. newspapers and book publishers came from or were shaped largely by Jews -- notably The New York Times, the Washington Post, Random House, and Simon and Schuster. And in winning 51 percent of the Pulitzer Prizes for non-fiction, we confirm the importance of Jews in news reporting.

History shows that if we attend a symphony, one-third of the time the conductor will be Jewish. And if we watch the

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annual ceremony for the Kennedy Center honorees, we will be celebrating the fact that the same is true for more than one-fourth of our most important performing artists.

In medicine, law, science, politics and education, the leadership, innovation and hard work of Jews have benefited us all. And if they have been successful as entrepreneurs, disproportionately represented among the members of the Forbes 400 and as CEOs of the Fortune 500, that achievement is outstripped by the fact that in philanthropy -- particularly for secular causes such as education, medicine and the arts -- Jews are even more philanthropic than they are wealthy.

Finally, when the underprivileged in America have needed help, Jews have been there. Julius Rosenwald, who built Sears Roebuck, was responsible for the construction of more than 5,000 schools for blacks throughout the American South when he found conditions appalling.

That Jews were attracted to America is a testament to its greatness and hospitality to all immigrants. That they have repaid our welcome and relative freedom from discrimination with great achievements and contributions is equally clear.

The huge premium Jews have placed on education, on rearing strong families, their push for innovation and entrepreneurship, tolerance for differing opinions, accountability for one's performance in this life, and their sense of duty to help make the world better (tikkun olam) are but a tiny sample of cultural values that they have added to our melting pot.

Jews have enriched America and deserve being celebrated during Jewish American Heritage Month.

(Steven L. Pease, a venture capitalist and community activist, is the author of "The Golden Age of Jewish Achievement: The Compendium of a Culture, a People, and Their Stunning Performance." He is not Jewish.)

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