

**Genius Jews and Masterful Japanese** (part one)  
The Successful Outsiders

The Jews and the Japanese Joined Modern Western Civilization  
as Outsiders and Achieved Amazing Success.

by ISE Masaomi

**1. Two Peoples Dragged Out into the International Community in the 19th Century**

In the 19th century, by dint of modern science and military force, the Western powers made rapid advances in expanding their influence in Asia and Africa. Prof. Ben-Ami Shillony of Israel's Hebrew University wrote,

In the increasingly integrated world of the nineteenth century there was no place for a detached society living and behaving according to its own rules. (Shillony, p. 58)

This was the time when the Japanese people, who had shut themselves off in their own secluded society, were first “drawn out into the open” into the international community.

In the seventeenth century no one questioned the right of Japan to close her doors to the world and no foreign country was strong enough to challenge that policy. But in the nineteenth century Japan's isolation came to be regarded as an affront to the international order, and the Western powers possessed the means to put an end to it. The refusal of one country, situated on the sea route from North America to East Asia, to trade with the rest of the world could not be tolerated by the expanding West. (Shillony, p. 57)

Japan thus gave in to the threat of Perry's “black ships” and opened up to the outside world; but there was another people who were similarly drawn out into the international community. They were the Jews.

**2. The Jews Who Emerged from the Isolation of the Ghettos**

Japan, allowed to live peacefully in an archipelago surrounded by the ocean, was more separated from the West. The Jews, however, lived their lives isolated in ghettos scattered about *within* the Western world itself.

The Jews were expelled from their homeland in Jerusalem in the year AD 70 after the rebellion against Rome that had begun in 66 was put down. During that time, the Romans either massacred or forced into slavery most of the Jewish population of Jerusalem. They destroyed the city. On its ashes a new city was established, but no Jews were permitted to live there. For a thousand years, they were shut off from their religious heartland.

The Jews dispersed to live in the many surrounding states in the Middle East, and from there they spread out around the Mediterranean region, scattering into Europe and Asia. In each of these various foreign countries, they endeavored to obtain status as “approved minorities” in exchange for professional commercial services. Even though they were successful in the lands where they were permitted to live and work, before long they suffered persecution and had to flee. They became a wandering tribe such as the world had never seen.

The Jews, unable to find a place to call their own, occupied themselves primarily with commerce. As merchants they concealed their gold assets, and when endangered they would take the assets and simply flee. Still, working in international trade was the perfect thing for the Jews who had relatives and associates all over the world.

In medieval Europe, the Jews gathered in one part of their towns and lived within that community. In the 16th century, their residences were restricted by law to these specific sections of town. These areas were called “ghettos.” The first ghetto to appear was in Venice in 1516. “Ghetto” was an Italian word meaning “foundry” because from time to time cannons were manufactured there.

After that, other ghettos appeared throughout Italy, southern France, and the German states. The Jews were similarly segregated in the majority of Islamic states, where they came to live shut up in isolated areas.

### **3. The Outsiders that Amazed the World**

With the concept of “modern nation states” that appeared during the French Revolution, all townsmen supposedly were members of the nation equally — so no race of people living isolated in distinctive cooperative systems and following their own rules would be allowed among them. The Jewish communities thus lost their autonomy and their people entered Western society individually.

In contrast to the Japanese, who were drawn out into the modern world as an already unified and established nation state, the Jews joined it individually from within. These two types of “outsiders” who newly joined the modern world demonstrated talents that astounded the West.

The Jews, who had grown proficient at dealing with the circulation of moneys and international trade, quickly grasped the important points of modern finance. But that was not all. One after the other people like the brilliant poet Heinrich Heine, the composer Gustav Mahler, the artist Amedeo Modigliani, the psychologist Sigmund Freud, the economist Karl Marx, and others appeared, making revolutionary contributions in literature, the arts, philosophy, and scholarship, and every other sphere of endeavor.

In the blink of an eye, the Meiji Restoration created in Japan in 1868 a modern country supported by a new postal system, rail system, national army and navy, newspapers, banking, a modern constitution, and free elections.

Of the Russo–Japanese War, Shillony points out that, “when Japan defeated Czarist Russia in 1905, it was not the victory of an Oriental power over an Occidental one; but rather the victory of a more modern Japan over a less modern Russia” (Shillony, p. 63). Technological innovations such as the novel tactic of “crossing the T” with high-speed battleships, along with the increased destructive power due to skilled, high-

precision bombardment and the newly developed Shimose powder, produced the greatest victory in naval history.

In addition, in the less than half a century after the opening of Japan to the West, she showed a world leadership in fields of scientific research with bacteriologists like Kitazato Shibasaburô and Noguchi Hideyo, chemists such as Takamine Jôkichi, and others.

#### **4. The Genius Jews and Masterful Japanese**

It was in these ways that both the Jews and the Japanese amazed modern Western society — but their approaches showed distinct differences.

Whereas the Japanese tried to outperform their Western competitors, the Jews sought to revise, redraw, and replace the basic tenets of the West. The epitome of Japanese achievement was the master, at the pinnacle of Jewish success was the genius. (Shillony, p. 46)

It is precisely because there is a difference between “genius” and “mastery” that there is a reason that the Jews and the Japanese, in spite of the fact that they were newcomers, showed such an ability to amaze the Western world. It was because they had trained their high intellectual powers while in the isolated cooperative systems wherein they had existed.

Jews had long been called “the people of the book.”

Pious Jews spend most of their time in front of religious texts, reading, chanting, analyzing, discussing, and memorizing the texts and commentaries....

Young boys attended a *bet sefer* (house of the book), later called a *heder* (room), and older boys as well as young adults attended an institute of higher learning, or a *yeshiva* (literally, a sitting)....

The texts taught at all these schools were difficult; they were written in either Hebrew or Aramaic, ancient languages not spoken in daily life, and their content was often abstract, enigmatic, and argumentative. Yet Jewish men learned and memorized these texts from early childhood and trained themselves in the arduous argumentations relating to them. (Shillony, p. 46)

High-level intellects trained from infancy in this manner produced great geniuses suited to the fields of literature, the arts, philosophy, and scholarship that are found in Western society.

#### **5. The Intellectual Explosion**

The Japanese, too, polished their high-level intellects in isolation from the world.

Chinese culture entered Japan in the form of books written in a difficult foreign language and a complex script. But the Japanese exhibited an enormous interest in reading, understanding, and mastering these difficult texts and within a

few centuries learned and adopted the Chinese script, absorbed a large number of Chinese words into the Japanese language, and incorporated the great religious and philosophical systems of Buddhism and Confucianism into their own thoughts and beliefs. (Shillony, p. 47)

It is said that there were 15,000 private schools (often affiliated with temples) and academies in the whole country as the shogunate came to an end. At present there are in Japan over 23,600 elementary schools. A comparison of the number of schools shows that Japan was already academically well-developed.

The ratio of children attending school in Edo during the Kaei era (c. 1850) has been estimated at 70–86 percent. At the same time, in the industrialized cities of the most developed country — England — the student ratio was far behind Japan's at a distant 20–25 percent.

In the Tokugawa period (1603–1868), schools of various kinds flourished in Japan. Almost all male children of samurai attended government-run schools where they learned the Chinese classics, and about half of the sons of commoners attended temple-schools (tera-koya), where they learned to read and write. There were also many private academies where one could acquire a knowledge in various fields from the ancient scriptures to Dutch studies, as Western learning was then referred to. (Shillony, pp. 48, 49)

The modernization that opened up the countries of the West made use of advanced learning and rational thought to apply technology to manufacturing, the military, and so on. Modernization of the whole country would hardly advance if intellectual power was restricted and monopolized by an elite few as in Russia and China.

In their formerly shut-out societies, the Jews and the Japanese prepared their educational systems and passed such intellectual power along to large numbers of regular people. Once the gates were opened to the world at large, the extensive accumulation of intellectual power displayed an explosive power sufficient to amaze Western European society.

## **6. Pride in One's Own Cultural History Used as a Weapon**

Though the Jews and Japanese “joined” the modern Western world, they did not abandon their own cultural traditions and suddenly appear on the scene as Westerners. Quite the opposite; the secret of their success upon entering modern Western society was that they made a weapon of taking pride in their own culture and history.

Moses Mendelssohn (1729–86) was one who played a major role in the Jews joining the modern West. He was the grandfather of the composer Felix Mendelssohn.

Originally was brought up with a traditional Jewish education, Mendelssohn then received a Western education, mastering German, Latin, Greek, English, and French. He became a leader in the German enlightenment, but he did not cut himself off from orthodox Judaism.

Mendelssohn maintained that Jews had to embrace Western civilization and add to it Jewish culture, and that with the two together they could live abundant lives. At the

same time, he intended a renaissance of ancient Jewish culture and produced works written in both classical Hebrew and modern German. The revival of classical Hebrew opened the door for the renaissance of the Jewish people in the 19th century.

Joining modern Western society while holding on to their own cultural backbone — neither secluding themselves within their own distinct national culture nor abandoning it — had a great influence on the Jewish way of life afterward.

Heinrich Heine, said to have been the greatest poet in German literary history, was baptised a Lutheran at the age of 27, but he took pride in his Jewish heritage throughout his whole life.

The greatest theoretical physicist of the 20th century, Albert Einstein, also was proud of being a Jew. He was a Zionist, and hoped for a restoration of the Jewish homeland in Palestine.

## **7. Restoration Movements Legitimizing Change by Invoking Ancient States**

Mendelssohn's opinion was in line with the Japanese idea of "*wakon yōsai*," which called for "a Japanese spirit with Western knowledge." The Japanese, too, would preserve their "Japanese spirit" as their cultural backbone while adopting the modern Western civilization with "Western learning."

On March 14, 1868, Emperor Meiji issued his Charter Oath — a five-point proclamation on the nature of his new government — at the Shishinden in the Kyoto Imperial Palace. This written oath expressed the goals of the Meiji Restoration. Its fifth point was, "knowledge shall be sought throughout the world so as to strengthen the foundation of imperial rule"; that is, "knowledge shall be sought throughout the world" meant learning from modern Western civilization to build up the "foundation of imperial rule."

That Emperor Meiji swore a sacred oath showed the manner of Japan's original government to begin with. The Meiji Restoration that he indicated at was not a "revolution" — a repudiation of the past — but in fact a "restoration."

Both Zionists and Meiji leaders tried to build a modern state by resurrecting an ancient past. Zionists rejected the recent past of exile and persecution in favor of a biblical era, a time that Jews enjoyed political sovereignty. Meiji leaders rejected the recent feudal past in favor of the early Heian period of a millenium earlier, when the emperors supposedly ruled in fact as well as in name. Thus both Zionism and Japanese nationalism were movements of restoration, invoking antiquity to legitimize change. (Shillony, pp. 88, 89)

## **8. Pride in Their Own Historical Cultures**

Even if one could catch up with the West by forgetting one's own traditional culture and becoming an instant dyed-in-the-wool Westerner and studying Western civilization, a masterful person could not surpass the originators as a master of something; nor could a genius open up some new field of endeavor.

The thing that supported the astonishing successes of the genius Jews and the masterful Japanese as they were taking their place as "newcomer outsiders" in modern

Western civilization was that they held on to the backbone that was their pride in their respective histories and cultures.

At the same time, however much each person learned from the West, it would not benefit the whole if he was to use it solely for his own benefit. Pride in one's nation's history and culture gives rise to a sense that the individual is part of the group — a sense of compatriotism. It produces a desire to work for the development of the nation as a whole rather than the individual. The successes of the Jews and the Japanese in the modern world are the result of their grounding in this sense of compatriotism.

Locked away in their respective secluded worlds, the Jews and the Japanese both brought about not just a high level of intellectual power, but also love for and pride in their own histories and cultures.

Shillony, Ben-Ami. *The Jews and the Japanese: The Successful Outsiders*. Charles E. Rutland, VT and Tokyo: Tuttle Co., Inc., 1991.

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<http://www2s.biglobe.ne.jp/~nippon/jogindex.htm>