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# How Jews change the world

It comes as no surprise that two Jews, Bourla and Zaks, are spearheading two COVID-19 vaccines to which many may one day soon owe their lives.

By **SHLOMO MAITAL** DECEMBER 22, 2020 12:28



British author Norman Lebrecht faces the media holding his Whitbread Book of the Year Award entry, 'The Song of Names,' in London in 2003. (photo credit: REUTERS)

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## The Jerusalem Report

A Greek Jew, two Turkish-born Germans, a Lebanese Armenian and an Israeli walk into a bar.

Actually – not a bar, but a research lab. And it's not a joke. It's about brilliant people, all of them émigrés, some Jewish, whose vaccines will hopefully save countless lives in Israel and the world.

And there is a back story – about a century of Jewish genius that changed the world. It is recounted brilliantly by Norman Lebrecht, a British journalist and novelist, and graduate of Bar-Ilan University, in his book *Genius and Anxiety: How Jews Changed the World, 1847-1947*.

Let's begin with the [vaccine](#).

On Friday, November 13, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu signed a deal with the giant US pharmaceutical company Pfizer to purchase millions of coronavirus vaccine doses. It was only days after Pfizer announced clinical trials showed the vaccine was 90% effective at preventing COVID-19. Later reports raised its effectiveness to 95%.

Pfizer's CEO is Albert Bourla. Bourla is Jewish. He was born, raised and educated in Thessaloniki, in northern Greece. He left Greece with his wife when he was 34.

In early 2020, Bourla pushed to accelerate Pfizer's development of a possible vaccine against [COVID-19](#). He did this in partnership with the German company BioNTech, founded by a Turkish-born married couple, Dr. Ugur Sahin, 55, and Dr. Ozlem Tureci, 53, who were educated in Germany, where they now live and work. Bourla boldly ordered preparations for production to begin, well before approval from the US Food and Drug Administration.

Dr. Noubar Afeyan, 58, is co-founder and chairman of the biotech company Moderna. Afeyan is Armenian, emigrated from Lebanon to Canada and eventually did his doctorate at MIT. His company Moderna was born in the famous MIT lab of Prof. Robert Langer.

Moderna's chief medical officer is Dr. Tal Zaks, an Israeli who completed his M.D. degree at Ben-Gurion University of the Negev. Like the Pfizer-BioNTech version, Moderna's COVID-19 vaccine, too, has proven highly effective in clinical trials. Dr. Zaks believes the initial doses will arrive in Israel in early 2021.

Now, back to the back story – how Jews changed the world during the remarkable one hundred years, 1847-1947, according to Lebrecht. Lebrecht begins his book with the Communist Manifesto, published in London by Marx and Engels in 1848, and ends in 1947 with the birth pangs of the State of Israel.

From 1820 through 1924, an unending flow of Jews made their way to America from Europe, ending in a massive surge of immigrants in the early 1900's. My mother and father were among them, driven by economic hardship, persecution, and the huge political upheavals of the 19th century.

Millions of European Jews left their towns and villages and embarked on the arduous journey to the goldene medina of America (and Canada), where Jewish genius flourished. It is fascinating that a similar massive wave of emigration – a million Russian Jews who emigrated to Israel – fueled the growth of Israel's hi-tech industry, from 1990 to 2000.

After you read this book, it comes as no surprise that two Jews, Bourla and Zaks, are spearheading two COVID-19 vaccines to which many may one day soon owe their lives.

I interviewed Lebrecht by email. Here are his responses to my questions.

*You are widely known for writing about music. How did you come to write about how Jews in general changed the world? Was it perhaps because of your book about the Jewish composer Gustav Mahler? Mahler was Jewish, but very remote from Judaism.*

I have written two books about Mahler, in 1987 and 2010. In both, I dealt with specifically Jewish aspects of his life and work that had not been treated before. Judaism was integral to Mahler. His conversion to Christianity did not inhibit Judaism's influence on his life and music in ways too numerous to describe here.

But that is not the reason I wrote *Genius and Anxiety*. The anomaly that Jews, constituting a fraction of one percent of world population, should be responsible for almost half the breakthroughs in society, arts and the sciences between the middle of the 19th and 20th centuries, was a question that had preoccupied me for half my adult life. I had to try to explain it." [There were about 3 million Jews in 1847, out of a world population of 1.2 billion – or 0.25%].

THERE IS an interesting theory about the origins of extraordinary Jewish achievement, by Maristella Botticini and Zvi Eckstein, *The Chosen Few: How Education Shaped Jewish History, 70-1492*. [See "The Chosen Few", the Report, September 9 2013]. They write: "The destruction of the Second Temple in 70 C.E. transformed Judaism from a cult based on ritual sacrifices to a

religion whose main norm required every Jewish man to read and study the Torah in Hebrew and to send his sons to school or synagogue to learn to do so. The unifying force of the Temple was replaced by the unifying force of Torah. But this meant every Jew had to be literate, to know the Torah. As a result, Jews were literate when others were not. This gave Jews a comparative advantage in the burgeoning commercial economy, in "crafts, trade, commerce, moneylending, banking, finance and medicine". A voluntary diaspora occurred when Jews dispersed in search of worldwide opportunities."Jews simply got a big head start.

*So, what is the Lebrecht explanation?*

I am concerned here only with this specific period, 1847-1947, which was also the period of greatest creativity in human history. Why the Jews played such a large role is rooted in a collective cultural unconscious - a common way of thinking - allied to a constant fear of disruption, as I explain in the book.

*When anyone writes about how a specific religious and cultural "tribe" excels, there are cries of racism. Have you faced such criticism? If so, how do you respond?*

On the contrary, reviews of the UK and US editions by non-Jews have been very positive, some with an air of near-astonishment, indicating that previous historians had not connected the dots between the vast number of Jews who were active in the period. There is nothing racist in stating that Jews have been awarded one-fifth of the Nobel prizes in science. That's a fact. What lies behind that phenomenon is what prompted me to write the book.

The only criticism I have faced on this score has been from some Israeli interviewers who wanted to know why I regard Jews who converted as remaining part of the Jewish cultural unconscious.

LEBRECHT RECOUNTS the genius of such well-known figures as Marx, Freud, Einstein and Kafka. But there are great many other Jewish geniuses in his book, far less well-known. Among them: Karl Landsteiner, whose research enabled physicians to transfuse blood without endangering patients' lives; Paul Erlich, pioneer of chemotherapy, who found a cure for syphilis; Magnus Hirschfeld, among the earliest advocates for homosexual and transgender rights; and my favorite, Rosalind Franklin, whose X-ray diffraction images of DNA at King's College, London, led Crick and Watson to their pathbreaking discovery of the DNA double helix. Franklin was only 37 when she died of ovarian cancer; the many X-rays she absorbed in her lab may have been a factor. Had she lived, she should surely have shared the DNA Nobel.

I can't resist giving a plug to the Jewish mother theory of genius, by the legendary Israeli entrepreneur and angel investor Yossi Vardi. Jewish mothers push their children to aspire to greatness and to genius, he explains.

They do, indeed; I had one. But I fell short. My son is a doctor, my mother would say – but not the kind that helps people.

Isadore Rabi, son of Russian émigrés, credited his mom with his Nobel Prize in physics. When he used to come home from school, she did not ask him what he learned that day, but rather asked, “what good questions did you ask in school today, Isadore?” Later, Rabi's good questions helped led him to discover nuclear magnetic resonance – the foundation of today's lifesaving MRI imaging devices.

The Talmud is full of argumentative Rabbis with good questions – and we Jews have been arguing and imitating them for at least two thousand years.

Lebrecht explains in his book that if Jews excel in various professions, their excellence is in general a result of culture, not DNA. Bitter experience has taught Jews to think differently from others and maybe to think more deeply than others. He observes that Mahler used to say, Jews are like swimmers with short arms, they must invest twice as much effort to reach safe shores. And anxiety, Lebrecht writes, impacts Jews just as the tax collectors did in Egypt – it spurs them to acts of genius.

More than a few of those in the book, Lebrecht notes, fit this elusive category – men and women who find the strength, in a time of crisis, to forge new paths in superhuman ways, with incredible genius for action and invention. Some are born geniuses; others, he notes, have genius thrust upon them at a certain point in their lives.

Is that, in fact, the story of the two “Jewish” vaccines?

*The writer heads the Zvi Griliches Research Data Center at [S. Neaman Institute](#), Technion and blogs at [www.timnovate.wordpress.com](#)*

### **Genius & Anxiety: How Jews Changed the World, 1847-1947**

Norman Lebrecht

Simon and Schuster, 2019

432 pages, Amazon \$25.95

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