

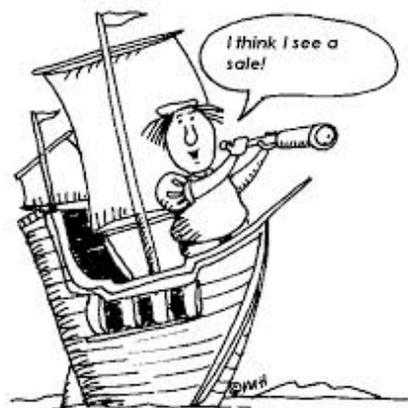
What Do Janet Yellen and Scarlett Johansson have in Common?

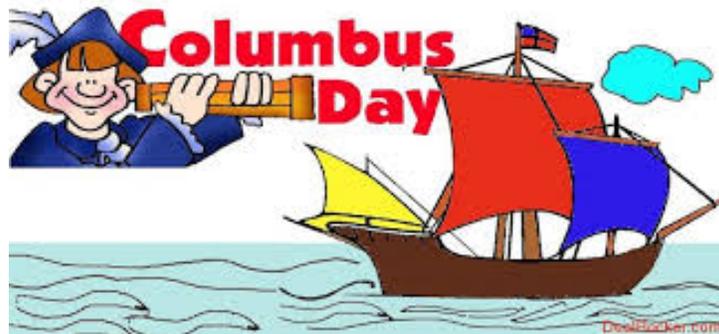
Rabbi Carl M. Perkins

Temple Aliyah

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Like many of the other holidays on the American calendar, **Columbus Day**, which we celebrate in two days, has become a day off, the anchor for a three-day weekend. Columbus Day, which since 1971 has been celebrated on the second Monday in October, commemorates the arrival on October 12th, 1492 of Christopher Columbus and his entourage on the shores of the West Indies. Here in New England, it is the quintessential opportunity to view the great foliage for which we are known. There is little if any focus on Christopher Columbus himself, and on the discoveries that made him famous—except perhaps for the silly icons of the **Niña**, the **Pinta** or the **Santa María** that adorn the ads for sales at this time of year:





And if this is true in the broader society, it is also true within the Jewish community. After all, how much interest do Jews today express in the particular Italian explorer whose voyage the King and Queen of Spain agreed to finance? Not much.

But this wasn't always the case.

This date in 1892, the 400th anniversary of Columbus' landing in the New World, was celebrated with great fanfare" all across America by Jews as well as non-Jews. (Jonathan D. Sarna, "The Mythical Jewish Columbus and the History of America's Jews," in *Religion in the Age of Exploration: The Case of Spain and New Spain*, 1992, p. 81.)

Coincidentally, as it had in 1492, the anniversary of Columbus' landing fell on Hoshana Rabbah, the last day of Sukkot. Rabbi Jacob Joseph, the then-chief rabbi of New York City, published a special prayer for the occasion in flowery Hebrew expressing gratitude not only for Columbus but also for the two Jews who, according to the prayer, accompanied him on his journey. "The prayer went on pay tribute to America's role as a refuge for persecuted Jews, it highlighted the nation's tradition of religious freedom and equality, it praised George Washington, and it closed with a blessing for President Benjamin Harrison and his government." (Sarna, p. 82)

What was that all about? Why such excitement about Columbus within the Jewish community?

The great American Jewish historian, Jonathan Sarna, argues that Jews were seeking validation and legitimization for their presence on this

continent and in this country. And so they were eager to identify with Columbus. They seized upon his story as a way of claiming their long-standing right to be here.

By the late 1800s, Columbus “had evolved in the American mind into the embodiment of the national ideal, a symbol of American achievement, progress, and goodness.” (Sarna, p. 84) “By associating themselves with him, Jews could symbolically take on these virtues, yoking together their Americanism and their Judaism, and demonstrating the historical indispensability of Jews to the whole American enterprise.” Some believed that if it could historically be proven that Jews had taken an active part in the discovery of America, ‘this fact would be an answer for all time to come to anti-Semitic tendencies in this country.’”

In fact, there *were* connections between Columbus and Jews. Rabbi Moriz Kayserling, an historian, revealed that some of those who supplied Columbus with maps, astronomical tables, and nautical instruments, some who championed his cause before the Spanish crown, and some who actually supported his journey financially were, in fact, Jews.

In fact, Rabbi Kayserling showed that Columbus’s reward was paid out of funds expropriated from Jews expelled from Spain in 1492, and that the same source – not the Queen’s *jewels*, as popular myth had it, but her *Jews* – would defray the costs of his second voyage as well.

But the *piece de resistance* was the speculation that Columbus was in fact a Jew.

(Question: How many people here today have wondered about that? How many people have believed it to be true?)

The man who first promoted this idea was in fact not a Jew, but a Spaniard by the name of de la Riega. He claimed to have found documents that showed that Columbus was really a secret Jew, he had been born in Spain, not Genoa, and he had spent a lifetime concealing his real identity. (p. 86) This theory peaked during the 1930s. A whole range of proofs was put forward, based, frankly, on a lot of evidence.

First, there was evidence based on Columbus's family name, which was "Colon." This was a name held by many Jewish families.

Second, Columbus employed and enjoined upon his descendants an unusual, mystical signature, written in the form of a triangle:

.S.
.S. A .S.
X M Y
Xpo FERENS

Some saw this as somehow an allusion to the Kaddish prayer. This has been discredited, but the encoded signature has heightened the aura of mystery, and helps explain why the theory of Columbus's converso origins continues to elicit support today. (p. 87).

Third, Columbus placed a cryptic monogram at the top left corner of some of his intimate letters, the ones he wrote to his children. Some, looking at this, see the Hebrew letters "*bet*" and "*heh*", an abbreviation of "*barukh ha-shem*," or "blessed be God's name." Not everyone agrees, but it is intriguing.

Fourth, Columbus couldn't speak Italian very well. Yet he was supposedly born in Genoa, Italy. He spoke Castilian, a Spanish dialect, much better. Some say that at the time Castilian was a language conversos (Jews who had converted to Christianity but who secretly continued to engage in Jewish practices) spoke.

Fifth, like many Spanish conversos, Columbus was highly secretive and took pains to conceal his background – suggesting that he had something to hide.

There are other clues: Although Columbus's voyage was due to begin on August 3rd, 1492, Columbus insisted that his entire crew should be on board ready to sail on August 2nd, the last day that Jews were permitted to reside in Spain according to the terms of the expulsion decree issued by Ferdinand and Isabella. And in his report back to Ferdinand and Isabella, Columbus took note of the expulsion of the Jews on the very first line.

His family's occupation was weaving, associated with Jews. He fraternized with Jews, had some knowledge of Jewish mystical sources, and occasionally linked his experiences to events in ancient Jewish history and even left a small legacy to a Jew.

Notwithstanding all of these intriguing clues, Jewish historians conclude that we simply don't know whether or not Columbus was a Jew. Jonathan Sarna quotes the great historian Samuel Eliot Morison who, in his 1942 biography of Columbus, wrote, "There is no more reason to doubt that Christopher Columbus was a Genoese-born Catholic Christian, steadfast in his faith and proud of his native city, than to doubt that George Washington was a Virginian-born Anglican of English race, proud of being an American." (Sarna, p. 91)

Be that as it may, I can clearly recall, as I was growing up, hearing Jews say things like, "Maybe, *maybe*, Christopher Columbus really *was* Jewish." I'm sure I'm not alone. There seems to have been a strong desire on the part of many, many Jews to claim him as our own.

By 1992—which I realize is long before today's bar mitzvah and his classmates were born—things had changed dramatically. By that time, it was beginning to dawn on Americans that perhaps not everyone identified—or would *want* to identify—with Christopher Columbus. That year, *Moment* magazine reminded its readers that Columbus's so-called "discovery" was "disastrous" for the native population, leading to millions of deaths, and that, in addition, the explorer introduced slavery into the New World. "Do we really want to claim Columbus?" *Moment's* editors asked. In *Hadassah* magazine, Professor Judith Elkin wrote, "The search for Jewish ancestry for Columbus is particularly untimely now, when Native Americans are drawing our attention to the genocide that paved the way for the creation of our New World."

And so interest in the Jewishness or lack thereof of Columbus has dissipated.

In an article he wrote on the subject, Professor Sarna concludes by saying that, notwithstanding the lack of clarity, there remains at least one good reason to care about the century-long obsession with

Columbus' putative Jewish past and that is that it may tell us a lot about the way we American Jews think about ourselves. The way that we have linked ourselves to the nation's founding myths speaks volumes about American Jews, our loyalties and our insecurities.

As proof of that, let me ask the following question: True, we no longer seek to prove that Columbus was a Jew. But have we really moved beyond the era in which we did? Have we moved beyond claiming famous, iconic figures as our own, thereby demonstrating that we feel truly secure and at home here in America?

I don't think so.

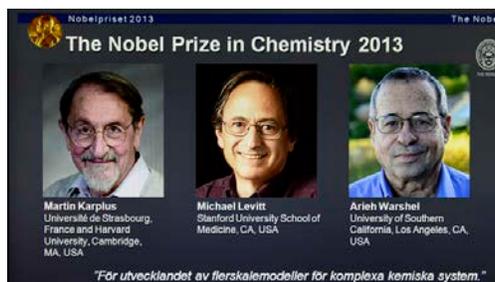
Let me give you three examples:

First, President Obama's choice to head the Federal Reserve Bank, **Janet Yellen**.



She may one day become the first female to head the Federal Reserve, but she'll hardly be the first Jew. She follows Ben Bernanke, Alan Greenspan, Arthur Burns and Eugene Meyer. (She would be the fifth out of fifteen, fully one-third.) Now, on the one hand, you can say, "See, we Jews have made it!" But if we have, why are we going out of our way to take note of it? Why are we so proud of it?

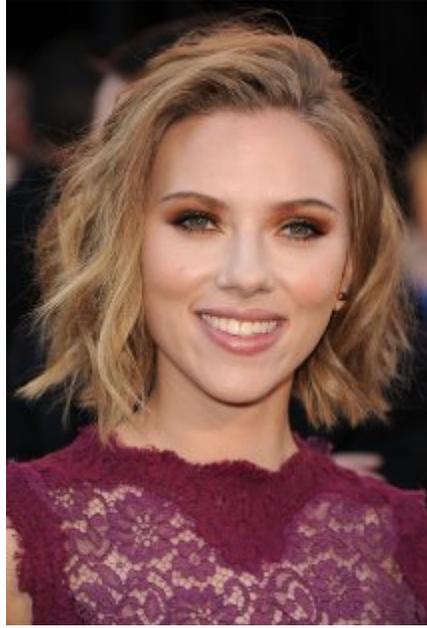
Second, consider the three men who just won the Nobel Prize in Chemistry.



Come on! Looking at the pictures of Martin Karplus, Michael Levitt and Arieh Warshel, how could Jews not instinctively feel drawn to claim them as our own? **Martin Karplus** fled as a child to the United States from Nazi-occupied Austria; **Arieh Warshel** was born on a kibbutz in Israel and fought in the '67 and '73 wars; and **Michael Levitt**, originally from South Africa, became an Israeli and taught at the Weizmann Institute for most of the 1980s.

Finally, I'm sure that most Jews are aware that **Scarlett Johansson** has at least one thing in common with **Janet Yellen** and those Nobel Prize winners, namely, that she is also a so-called "MOT"—i.e., a member of the tribe. Like **Mila Kunis**, another beauty who was also recently highlighted in Esquire magazine, and **Natalie Portman** (opposite whom Kunis starred in "The Black Swan"), and others as well, she identifies publically as a Jew. Whether or not most Americans are conscious of that identification, I'm sure that most Jews are.





And that tells us something about ourselves. On paper, we may have made it. We may have racked up hundreds of Nobel Prizes. We may have achieved tremendous economic, political and social accomplishments in our society. And we should be proud of that.

But we are also aware that as Jews we are vulnerable, because we have always been on the move. Our history is that of voyages, not all of them voluntary. Ever since Abraham got the call, and ventured forth from his homeland, from his father's house, to a new land, we have been doing the same. Some of our voyages, like those of Columbus, we have initiated. Some have been in pursuit of fame or fortune. But others have been like those of the many, many Jews who left Spain for good in 1492, no longer at home in their homeland.

Whether or not Columbus was a Jew, we certainly are, and today is as good a day as any to reflect on what a privilege that is, and what a wonderful heritage we have inherited. Today is as good a day as any to reflect not so much on how we've been treated but on what we stand for and what we live for and the kind of world we want to sustain and maintain.

We have a right to claim famous Jews as our own and a right to be proud. But let's not let it go to our heads.

Shabbat shalom, and Happy Columbus Day!