

“[N]o culture values brain power more than Jewish culture,” writes Dennis Prager. Jewish heroes are celebrated more for mindset than muscle.

Through insight, the virtuous Joseph moved from prisoner to prime minister by understanding the logic in Pharaoh’s dream. Moreover, his plans for Egypt allow it to thrive in the coming famine.

The strongman of Biblical Judaism, Samson, died a hero, but is no model. Strong enough to wrestle a lion and fight a thousand Philistines, he is impulsive and imperceptive. He fails to understand the character of his wife Delilah until it is too late.

When the patriarch Jacob arrives in Haran, he performs a feat of strength. Jacob moves a heavy stone from a well, allowing his future wife Rachel to water her sheep. This achievement is minor compared with Jacob’s husbandry, the increase in his father-in-law Laban’s herds. The wily Laban outfoxed Yakov, no stranger to deception himself, into marrying his older daughter Leah first. Yet Jacob, with Rachel’s help, finally outmaneuvers Laban, winning his respect.

What about brains and brawn?

In the 1920s, Jewish champion Benny Leonard called boxing a chess match, intellect over brawn. The day after a fight, Leonard was back in the gym analyzing his performance and preparing for the next bout. He remained lightweight boxing champion for seven years.

Because of its defense needs, Israel encourages athletics and studies. Top Israeli leaders in industry and government have come from elite military units with rigorous physical demands, on a par with SEAL training. Sayaret Matkal, one of Israel’s special forces, requires a 75 mile march in 24 hours to graduate. Two famous alumnae are Ehud Barak and Bibi Netanyahu.

Lauren Cohen is the L.E. Simmons Chaired Professor at the Harvard Business School. He is also a championship powerlifter. In 2001, he earned a BS in business from the Wharton School and a BA in economics from the University of Pennsylvania. Four years later, by age 25, Cohen had his PhD in finance and MBA at the University of Chicago. His interest is behavioral finance, how social networks impact the decisions of financial leaders.

Cohen is a nationally recognized weight- or powerlifter. He was the 2001 United States Powerlifting Federation Collegiate National Champion. In 2014, he broke the All-Time World Record in his division with a barbell squat of 630 lbs.

Perhaps his best performance was in 2016 at the International Powerlifting Association Champion of Champions meet in Tennessee. Competition is judged through three events, the squat, the deadlift, and the bench press.

While pursuing his studies and lifting, Cohen met his wife Nicole, known around the house as Nic. They have four children, the oldest seven.

Q. At a December 17, 2016 competition, you squatted 583, bench-pressed 360, and deadlifted 610 pounds, the culmination of years of training. You won the meet. Did you also set a record?

A. I set my 2nd drug-tested all-world record in squat (583 @ 165 weight class). I lifted a total of 1,553 pounds (the first record was a squat of 630 @ 181 weight class).

Q. You belong to a temple, keep a kosher home, and send your kids to Jewish day school. Growing up in a small town in upper state New York, how did your family encourage a strong Jewish identity?

A. We did grow up in a (very!) small rural town, in which my brother, sister, and I were 60% of the Jewish population in the entire school. My parents didn't want Judaism lost on us so we were very engaged in synagogue (in a town a 30 minute drive away). We grew up in a kosher home, all holidays were observed, my father was president of the synagogue, my mother very involved in the Hebrew school, sisterhood, etc. Additionally, Hebrew school came before sports practice.

I'll never forget: my senior year of high school, I was captain of the football team, and our biggest game vs. our home-town rivals was on Rosh HaShanah. My parents didn't have to say a word. I happily spent the holiday at home with the family (which is probably why we won). What I think they did well was to create a fun and joyful Jewish home, seamlessly integrating it into our lives. Nic and I have tried our best to do the same.

Q. As a culture, Jews emphasize intellect over athleticism, Solomon over Samson. What can athletics and scholarship bring out in a person, which each alone couldn't do?

A. Honestly, I like things that are measurable - I'm an empiricist. In powerlifting and in strongman, things are very measurable. If you came to the gym last week and you could only squat 500 pounds and this week you squat 550 pounds, then you're stronger, you're better at this discipline than you were last week.

More broadly, I think there are a number of commonalities and complementarities between academic and athletic pursuits. For instance, success in both are highly dependent on self-discipline. Moreover, in both pursuits, you always know where you stand, and you always know how you can improve.

Q. At Harvard Business School, you write about behavioral finance. Does this combination of psychology and economics have anything to do with what you've learned from Judaism?

A. Look, to me, finance is not just about the numbers. I like to push intuition. Finance and economics are really about how the world works. For instance, if you understand that incentives drive behavior, you have the first – and nearly always the most important – piece to solving any puzzle of behavior. That transcends, but is certainly true within, Judaism.

Q. You promote weight lifting as good for body and mind at any age. Do you have your parents competing too?

A. The four Cohen children have been easier to persuade. The youngest is a year old and enjoys doing push-ups. A video of my three-year-old daughter squatting a five-pound bar went viral when a powerlifting competition posted it online (video link here: <https://www.facebook.com/girlswhopowerlift/videos/1852406851665303/>). The 7, 5, and 3 year old all competed.

However, it is true, too, that my parents have been persuaded to begin powerlifting, and to get onto the powerlifting platform to compete. Both of them – age 70 – now lift free weights each day together. I was a proud son and coach when I flew to their competition: they both set Personal Best lifts, and each won their age and weight-classes this past March.