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## Imitation as Flattery

It has been written that “imitation is the highest form of flattery.” The Jewish people have been imitated, excoriated, lauded, applauded, courted, and distorted.

Lately, we have heard politicians like Sarah Palin invoke the label of “blood libel” when their opponents criticize their election tactics. As most Americans have now learned, the blood libel was a horrendous defamation used against the Jewish people in the Middle Ages and in the Arab world today claiming that Jewish people use human blood in their cooking recipes or for other nefarious purposes. No matter that the Bible strictly prohibits the use of blood for eating and it is only the Jewish people who, for thousands of years, have followed those dietary laws known as kashurat.

A politician on the other side of the spectrum, Congressman Steven Cohen, invoked the name of the famous Nazi propagandist, Joseph Goebbels, in his defense of the recent health care law. The purpose of the German “Big Lie” was to encourage and justify homicide, not to address boring bureaucratic laws on health care. Congressman Cohen was guilty of the sin of trivialization.

It has been popular for some time to use the word “Holocaust,” the planned genocide of the European Jewish community, to describe virtually every unpleasant event in the world. Pro-lifers utilize the language of the “Holocaust” as does every nation justly complaining about the unfair treatment of one minority or another. School anti-bullying campaigns utilize the image of European genocide against the Jews.

The African-American Kwanza display is a Jewish menorah in disguise. A menorah is a candelabra invoking the Jewish holiday of Chanukah. Thanks to a miraculous event, defiled oil lasted for 8 days instead of only for a day when the Jews threw the Greek-Syrians out of the Holy Land.

Asian-Americans compare their academic pursuits and educational success to the Jews. The Israelis are lionized as great heroes, an inspiration for democracy and the only free people in the Middle East, while others compare them to the most evil despots who ever walked the earth.

“Imitated but never duplicated” goes the old advertising line. Perhaps the greatest Gift of the Jews, as the author, Thomas Cahill, has stated, is the Bible itself. The followers of Christianity so loved the Jewish Bible, that they adopted it and wrote their own version of The New Testament. Where did the Golden Rule come from? Jesus was, as a Jew and follower of the Hebrew Bible, familiar with the text. Leviticus 19:18 is the Golden Rule. It was the great Rabbi Hillel who told a pagan that all of the law was contained in Leviticus, “love your neighbor as yourself,” and the rest is commentary.

Unlike others, I am not troubled by this borrowing of Jewish heritage, religion, law and ethics if it can better the world. The Jews gave the world more than Albert Einstein, Sigmund Freud, Jonas Salk, Moses, Jesus, and you name it; they gave the world its moral compass which we are still arguing about today in our political wrestling ring.

A fascinating look at American political life can be found in Bruce Feiler’s book, *Moses and American History*, which traces the use and abuse of this charismatic biblical figure. Moses is found at the landing of the Pilgrims on Plymouth Rock, who considered themselves the new Israelites leaving Egypt and coming into the promised land. Moses is found in the Colony’s Revolutionary War against the Egyptian like British. Throughout the course of our tortured, interesting and sometimes mean-spirited political scene, the image of

Moses and the Hebrew relationship to divinity has been a key component. The debate over slavery, prior to the Civil War, cast the Jewish Bible in the role of both antagonist and defender of the slave holding system. The current debate over gay rights draws many of its arguments, pro and con, from the Jewish text. The reason for this ping pong game of ideas should be no surprise. The Jews passed along to the world the Ten Commandments, the rule of law, and introduced polytheists to the name of the one God.

One of the professors interviewed for the documentary recently released by the Herbert Rieders Foundation on the Judaica at the Vatican defended the Vatican's possession of almost 2,000 years of Jewish treasures by saying that the Holy See has preserved its Jewish collection and honored it. The Vatican draws its legitimacy from its connection to the Jewish people through the apostle Peter. Quite correctly, notes the renowned professor, Steve Fine, interviewed for the newly released documentary, the Catholic church is going to see itself as a blood relative of the Jewish people.

Should Jews be troubled by the theft or distortion of its images, liturgy and history? Asking the question provides the obvious answer. Each and every people is entitled to its own unique place in the world. Certainly there are no people on earth who have contributed more to the world than the tiny minority of the ancestors of Abraham. We should be flattered that the world holds our ideals, principles, and even language in such high esteem, and we must strive to educate ourselves and our neighbors to the origin of the images upon which they rely. Imitation may be the highest form of flattery, but the label on every product displays the nation in which it is manufactured.

Perhaps if we all learn to share, we will all appreciate the contribution of diversity.

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