

Professor Richard Wiseman can tell if you're on the ball. He'll hand you a newspaper and ask you to count the number of photographs in its pages. Some folks finish the job in a few seconds while others need a couple of minutes to count all the pictures. The reason for the difference isn't that some people are better counters than others. Rather, the secret lies on page two of the newspaper where Professor Wiseman has inserted a huge message in inch-and-a-half letters:

Stop Counting -- There are 43 Photographs in this Newspaper

Believe it or not, many people actually miss this enormous headline in the paper. They're too busy counting photos to notice. The giant message isn't a trick. There are really 43 pictures in the paper. Professor Wiseman has found that if you see the announcement right away you tend to be an observant person open to random opportunities around you.

Those who pay attention are way ahead of the game. In the words of that great modern philosopher Yogi Berra:

You can observe a lot just by watching.

So. How did anyone miss the big headline on page 2?

Psychologists use the phrase *inattentional blindness* to describe what Professor Wiseman captured in his newspaper test. It's a fancy way of saying that we don't notice things when we don't pay attention. One of the most famous studies of inattentional blindness was conducted in the elevator lobby of the fifteenth floor of the Harvard Psychology Department.

One team of players wearing white shirts and another group dressed in black tossed two orange basketballs back and forth. Subjects were asked to watch a video of this ball-passing exercise and count the number of passes made by players dressed in white. After 45 seconds in one version of the video, a woman in a full gorilla costume walks right through the scene. The hairy ape is clearly visible crossing the screen for 5 seconds. Remarkably, 56% didn't even notice the gorilla right in the middle of the action. In another video, the gorilla stops, faces the camera, pounds her chest, and then marches off. The action lasts 9 seconds, but again only 50% spotted the furry ape.

How is it possible to miss the gorilla?

Professor Daniel Simons (of the Harvard study) says that the main lesson and surprise of the gorilla experiment is how easy it is to miss something as obvious as a gorilla. Distinctive and unusual objects do not automatically capture our attention.

Inattentional blindness: Something clear and obvious can be right in front of your eyes, but you might not see it. One thing that's clear and obvious but many aren't able to see is the greatness of the Jewish people and the modern state of Israel.

Why do people hate Israel?

Every year, the BBC World Service publishes a country ratings opinion survey, meant to indicate which of the world's nations are among the most popular, and which are the most disliked.

In 2013 as in years past, more than 26,000 respondents were asked to rate a list of countries as to whether the influence of those nations in the world was "mainly positive" or "mainly negative."

Israel placed fourth from last, exceeded on the negative scale only by North Korea, Pakistan, and last-place Iran.

Over the years, a poor showing by Israel has been something of a hallmark of the BBC survey. Several years ago in a similar poll conducted a few months after the IDF's Second Lebanon War offensive, Israel came in dead last, with Iran, North Korea and Pakistan not far behind.

The BBC poll raises a number of questions – not least about the poll itself, and, for that matter, the BBC. But for the purpose of our discussion let's go back to the question: Why does Israel rub so many people the wrong way? Hatred for Israel is pervasive among many Muslims, Europeans, BDS'ers (Boycott, divestment and sanction advocates), some elements of press, academia, Hollywood, and radical right and left wingers. If you think about it, isn't it really a head-scratcher?

Karl Barth, one of the twentieth century's most famous theologians, was on a streetcar one day in Basel, Switzerland, where he lived and lectured. A tourist to the city climbed on the streetcar and sat down next to Barth. The two men started chatting with each other. "Are you new to the city?" Barth asked.

"Yes," said the tourist.

"Is there anything you would particularly like to see in this city?" asked Barth.

"Yes," he said, "I'd love to meet the famous theologian Karl Barth. Do you know him?"

Barth replied, "Well as a matter of fact, I do. I give him a shave every morning."

The tourist got off the streetcar quite delighted. He went back to his hotel saying to himself, "I met Karl Barth's barber today."

This story amuses me. That tourist was in the presence of the very person he most wanted to meet, but even with the most obvious clue, he never realized that the man with whom he was talking was the prominent man himself.

Some people are slow -- or even blind -- to recognize greatness. And objectively, the greatness of Israel is plain and obvious.

Israel, the 100th smallest country, with less than 1/1000th of the world's population, can lay claim to the following:

-- Israel has the highest ratio of university degrees to the population in the world. Twenty-four percent of Israel's workforce holds university degrees - ranking third in the industrialized world, after the United States and Holland - and 12 percent hold advanced degrees

-- Israel produces more scientific papers per capita than any other nation by a large margin - 109 per 10,000 people - as well as one of the highest per capita rates of patents filed.

-- In proportion to its population, Israel has the largest number of startup companies in the world. In absolute terms, Israel has the largest number of startup companies than any other country in the world, except the US (3,500 companies mostly in hi-tech). Israel is ranked #2 in the world for venture capital funds right behind the US.

-- Israel has the highest average living standards in the Middle East. The per capita income in 2000 was over \$17,500, exceeding that of the UK. Israel's \$100 billion economy is larger than all of its immediate neighbors combined.

-- Israel is the only liberal democracy in the Middle East. A story appeared in this week's St. Louis Jewish Light: "Arab Israeli woman takes top honors at Israel's Master Chef competition." Can you imagine a headline announcing a Jewish chef winning a national competition in any Arab or Muslim country?

-- In 1984 and 1991, Israel airlifted a total of 22,000 Ethiopian Jews at risk in Ethiopia to safety in Israel.

Relative to its population, Israel is the largest immigrant-absorbing nation on earth. Immigrants come in search of democracy, religious freedom, and economic opportunity

-- When Golda Meir was elected Prime Minister of Israel in 1969, she became the world's second elected female leader in modern times.

-- When the U.S. Embassy in Nairobi, Kenya was bombed in 1998, Israeli rescue teams were on the scene within a day - and saved three victims from the rubble. .

-- Israel has an irrepressible spirit. In 1991, during the Gulf War, the Israel Philharmonic Orchestra played a concert wearing gas masks as scud missiles fired by Saddam Hussein fell on Tel Aviv.

-- Israel has the world's second highest per capita of new books.

-- Israel is the only country in the world that entered the 21st century with a net gain in its number of trees, made more remarkable because this was achieved in an area considered mainly desert.

-- Israel has more museums per capita than any other country.

-- Israel's proclivity for medical research is well known. Givun imaging developed the first ingestible video camera, so small it fits inside a pill. Used to view the small intestine from the inside, the camera helps doctors diagnose cancer and digestive disorders.

-- Teenagers, take note: A new acne treatment developed in Israel, the ClearLight device, produces a high-intensity, ultraviolet-light-free, narrow-band blue light that causes acne bacteria to self-destruct - all without damaging surrounding skin or tissue.

-- Israel has the highest percentage in the world of home computers per capita. The cell phone was developed in Israel by Motorola, which has its largest development center in Israel. Voice mail technology was developed in Israel.

All the above has been achieved while Israel was engaged in regular wars with an implacable enemy seeking its destruction, and an economy continuously under strain by having to spend more per capita on its own protection than any other country on earth. All this from a country just 66 years young (this week) having started off life on a very frontier-like basis, whose population had mostly just emerged from the devastating World War II years.

If so, why the hatred?

Prejudice against or hatred of Jews, aptly described as 'the longest hatred', has plagued the world for more than 3,000 years. You name 'em, they've hated us. Why?

A Jewish man is sitting on a bench reading his newspaper when an anti-Semite approaches him and says, "You know, all the world's problems are because of the Jews."

The Jewish man looks up and replies, "And the bicycle riders."

The anti-Semite replies befuddled, "Why the bicycle riders?"

The Jewish man responds, "Why the Jews?"

Rabbi Berel Wein writes that the world is accustomed to the specialness of the Jewish people. It is the source of all the anti-Jewish rhetoric and behavior that has gone before us and continues so prevalently

in our time. The world's opinion is summed up in the famous doggerel "How odd of God to choose the Jews." It is the oddity of the Jews being somehow "chosen" that drives many of the other peoples of the world to be aggravated and frustrated by us.

So, the statement that appears in the Talmud, "Why was the mountain called Sinai?.... is because *sinaah* – mindless unreasonable hatred - descended upon the world." This viewpoint is chillingly reflected by a statement attributed to Adolf Hitler:

The struggle for world domination is between me and the Jews. All else is meaningless. The Jews have inflicted two wounds on the world: Circumcision for the body and conscience for the soul. I come to free mankind from their shackles.

It all started at Sinai. All the other reasons are excuses and smoke screens. *Inattentional blindness* prevents recognition of the obvious; the greatness of Israel and of the Jewish people.

Not everyone has inattentional blindness when it comes to Israel, as this final story shows.

A colleague of mine ('Rabbi Chaim') told the story of the occasion he had a college roommate from China ('Li') whose command of spoken English was passable but needed work on reading and understanding. Therefore, Li took it upon himself to improve his English by reading daily the Washington Post.

One day, Li asked Rabbi Chaim,

"Is Canada another name for Israel?"

"Why would you think such a thing, Li?"

"Well, each day I see the country 'Israel' mentioned in the paper, but I can't find it on a map. Since Israel appears so often, it must be a very large country. 'Canada' is a large country. Is it possible that here in America they call 'Israel' by the name 'Canada'?"

Rabbi Chaim smiled, took Li to a globe, and showed him where Israel was located -- a country so small that its name was written in the Mediterranean Sea. Astonished, Li said,

How can such a small country be mentioned in the news so often? How many people live in Israel?

When Rabbi Chaim told Li that Israel contained about 5 million people, Li said,

There was recently a census back home in China where they found that my country has a population of 1 billion, plus or minus 50 million. Do you realize, Rabbi Chaim, that more than 10 times as many people in Israel are lost in China? And yet, they have such an outsized impact and influence on the world? Israel must be a very special country!

We remind non-Jews of the blessing G-d gave to Abraham: *Those who bless you, I will bless.* A friend of Israel, is a friend of G-d.

And to Jews we say: *M'kamacha Yisrael, goy echad b'aretz? Who is like Israel, a unique nation upon the earth?*

You can observe a lot by just watching. Look at Israel. Be inspired. Be in awe. And be thankful.