

CLAL on Culture Archive

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Why Jews Drive Big Cars

By Daniel S. Brenner

The scenes from England -- a nation brought to a halt over "petrol" -- have once again set me off in a rage about the SUV-crazed world this has become.

A moment of nostalgia:

Back in the oil drought of the '70s, when even numbered license plates were jockeying with odd for a trip to the pump, my grandfather was tooling around Miami in his Caddie. As he enjoyed his ten miles per gallon, there was an outcry against reliance on foreign oil, and reluctance by the automobile and oil industry to do anything substantive about it. At that time, as I understood it, the "Arabs" were the official and unquestionable enemy of the Jewish people. This was before Sadat shook hands with the peanut farmer from Georgia, and all the rest of the diplomacy in its wake.

I found this unsettling -- the Arabs sold the oil and the Jews drove the big cars. The big American cars. My family was a Dodge family. Twelve miles per gallon. Highway.

Soon this culture broke down and before you knew it, the Schraders bought a Toyota (a Supra with a sunroof!). "Could it be a mitzvah to get 25 miles per gallon?" we asked. Others switched to Mercedes (diesel, of course, reasoning that the Arabs were now greater enemies than the Germans).

Jews were caught between loyalty to America and the newfound mitzvah of efficiency. Every family has a story here, and probably knows someone who refused to give up a Caddie, Lincoln, or Park Avenue. Even the Lubavitcher Rebbe was given a Cadillac, maybe in an effort to gain some absolution for some poor El Dorado driver.

Fast forward to today and the whole picture has changed. We are still dependent on foreign oil, mostly from Arab nations, but the Saudis and Kuwaitis are seen as American allies. Israel is a military power, and the Jews are buying American cars again not because they are patriotic, or because the cars have become efficient, but because you need one monster of a 4x4 to have a sense of security on the freeway. And the Jeeps, the Explorers, and the Durangos do just that.

Now our enemy is much harder to battle. The danger we all face is the escalating level of gas related toxins, and the skyrocketing level of cancer and other complications we are beginning to see as a result.

So how Jewish is it to drive a big car? In the short term, we value automobile safety. But down the road a few years we have a responsibility to change this culture and the public policy, which favors more oil consumption.

I hope that by the time I tell my children about my grandfather's Caddie, they'll have to go to an antique auto show to see anything like it.



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