A Chosen Calling
Jews in Science in the Twentieth Century
Noah J. Efron

Scholars have struggled for decades to explain why Jews have succeeded extravagantly in modern science. A variety of controversial theories—from such intellects as C. P. Snow, Norbert Wiener, and Nathaniel Weyl—have been promoted. Snow hypothesized an evolved genetic predisposition to scientific success. Wiener suggested that the breeding habits of Jews sustained hereditary qualities conducive for learning. Economist and eugenicist Weyl attributed Jewish intellectual eminence to "seventeen centuries of breeding for scholars."

Rejecting the idea that Jews have done well in science because of uniquely Jewish traits, Jewish brains, and Jewish habits of mind, historian of science Noah J. Efron approaches the Jewish affinity for science through the geographic and cultural circumstances of Jews who were compelled to settle in new worlds in the early twentieth century. Seeking relief from religious persecution, millions of Jews resettled in the United States, Palestine, and the Soviet Union, with large concentrations of settlers in New York, Tel Aviv, and Moscow. This shared experience—of facing the future in new worlds, both physical and conceptual—provided a generation of Jews with opportunities unlike any their parents and grandparents had known. Science was central to their dreams of creating new worlds—welcoming worlds—for a persecuted people.

"Noah Efron's A Chosen Calling is a fresh and ambitious exploration of the enthusiasm with which Jews have celebrated science, and of the legendary distinction with which they have practiced science in three major domains . . . Efron shows that in all three cases, Jews brought to their novel circumstances a drive for full participation in a world where they had been denied that participation, and he shows, further, that the universalist ethos of science provided a uniquely powerful means of participating."—David A. Hollinger, University of California, Berkeley