“Questions Remain”: Racialism, Geneticism, and the Continuing Lure of Jewish Essentialism

by Mitchell B. Hart

DEFINING GENETICS TODAY

Those who think about the implications of current research into human genetics and genomes speak of a “genetic self,” and of the way in which genetics has become for us the key to understanding human nature and the human soul. Accordingly, science is said to have fully replaced religion as the language with which we comprehend and explain ourselves to ourselves. Is it any wonder, writes Paul Root Wolpe, a bioethicist at Emory University, “[t]hat we have relinquished the Bible to a new set of sacred letters, which, when rearranged in the right way, when interpreted by our revered experts, when manipulated through complex rituals of micropipette, polymerase chain reaction, and delivery vector, will create the perfect life, the perfect personality, the perfect society?”

The genetic self, according to Wolpe, is an answer to the postmodern self. The genetic self is the essential self, “written into the genome.” But science also holds out the possibility of the malleable self, through technological manipulation and better science. However, Jewish selfhood, for Wolpe, stands in healthy contrast to this strong genetic essentialism. “Jews have always understood that identity is chosen, is to some degree the product of moral choice.”

Have Jews always understood identity as something that is chosen? That is, to put it in familiar terms, have Jews always come down on the side of culture rather than biology, nurture over nature? And does that really hold true today? Do Jews maintain a healthy suspicion or even repudiation of genetic
essentialism? Or do many of them, as I argue in this essay, embrace genetics as a true and meaningful way of discovering, or we might say both rediscovering and constructing, a Jewish identity? And if this is so, then how might we begin to account for this? What is it about what I will call “geneticism” that is so attractive? What epistemological and cultural needs does it fill? And how do we square this recent Jewish enthusiasm for geneticism with the history of racial, genetic, and eugenic thinking that played such a crucial role in modern anti-Semitism, Nazism, and the Holocaust? Or, as Sander Gilman asked in 2006, “What happens when a biological definition of identity becomes a compelling aspect of community self-definition? What happens when the ‘Jews’ or ‘African Americans’ or ‘Asians’ begin to think of themselves as a virtual family interconnected by their biological inheritance?”

DEBATES ABOUT INHERITANCE
Genetics and culture are usually set at odds with each other, as in Wolpe’s analysis, as strategies of identity formation: nature versus nurture, biology or environment. These are dichotomous terms, casting individual and group identities in terms of either/or. I am not speaking here of the reality of individual identity, which is no doubt a product of a combination of genetics and culture. I am referring to discursive strategies, to the stories we tell ourselves or that we are told and believe about what makes us what we are. The dichotomy between genetics and culture is a false one, of course, since the very act of constructing narratives about ourselves, including our genetic selves, is fundamentally a cultural act. Geneticism is this story about identity, history, and the present told with the tools of genetics. It is dependent on the reality of genetics and on the epistemic and scientific status of genetic research and findings, but it is different from genetics.

Geneticism emerges alongside culture (and in this I include religion or the reinvention of tradition, though culture encompasses much more) as a choice. Geneticism (rather than genetics) as a choice is not the paradox that it might at first appear. We do not, of course, choose our genetic make-up; that is, indeed, inherited. But each of us can choose to make this genetic identity (or, in this case, a “genetic identity” that has been imagined by others—scientists, scholars, journalists, religious leaders, film and television producers) part of a larger narrative about our connection, as individuals, to some collective past,
present, and future. This is an act of the imagination, even if it is constituted in part out of genetic or biological data.

In the case of the Jews, individual choice is one the hallmarks of Jewish modernity as it emerged and developed over the course of the last three centuries. Thus, for Jews, like for everyone else, choice is indeed a fundamental aspect of identity. In contrast to Wolpe, however, I would argue that this is not a choice that posits a biological determinism against an environmental or cultural determinism, in which Jews have chosen to repudiate genetic essentialism. Rather, they have chosen genetic essentialism as one possible way to tell themselves and others the story of their Jewish selves (and by implication of “the Jewish people”).

Jewish geneticism constructs its narratives out of two main realms of genetic research: medical research into genetic diseases such as Tay-Sachs and breast cancer, and DNA research into ancestry and community or belonging. The former is without doubt of enormous import in the immediate lives of large numbers of Jews, and I want to be absolutely clear that I am not suggesting a parallel or conflation between the genetics of disease and the genetics of ancestry. It is difficult, probably impossible, to argue that the former, while it can and does produce narratives of identity and community, is anything but real and the utmost import. This is not to deny that historically medicine was absolutely vital to racial and eugenic thinking, both scientific and popular. Nor does it mean that race and racial thinking play no part today in the diagnosis and treatment of disease. Indeed, an ongoing debate exists regarding the continuities and discontinuities between “the old eugenics and the new genetics.”

Much of this debate centers on questions of individual choice versus state or societal compulsion: a “liberal genetics” that developed after 1945 and was rooted in choice and the needs of the autonomous individual, and the older eugenics impelled by the needs of the society, whether authoritarian or democratic.

This essay also focuses on matters of choice but does so through the issue of ancestry. It examines the way in which Jews have taken up the genetics of ancestry and used it to construct narratives of Jewish identity that confirm or perhaps disrupt the normative Jewish story of origins, and continuity over time and place.

As Nadia Abu el-Haj makes clear in her study on the epistemology and politics of the contemporary Jewish engagement with genetic science, the power of what she calls anthropological genetics lies in the gift it offers of “origins”: “Not only are we (still) defined by our origins, in the rhetoric of anthropological genetics those origins never go away. The task of this science, as was the task
of various sciences before it, is to render origins legible.” The challenge, then, is how to write historical narratives out of biological data. The reward is a narrative of individual and collective identities that are politically or ideologically charged while at the same time appearing neutral because it is scientific.

In the end, both medical genetics and anthropological genetics work together to validate the task of geneticism and the idea of a Jewish genetic self. A striking example of this can be seen in the opening pages of Jon Entine’s 2007 book *Abraham’s Children: Race, Identity, and the DNA of the Chosen People.* Entine, a journalist and author, and one of the founding directors of the Genetic Literacy project, begins his book with a visit he took to Israel, “a deeply personal journey, spurred by the tragedy that DNA visited upon my family.” Many of his near relatives had suffered from ovarian and/or breast cancer, and this had not only reinforced his conviction about the significance of genetics but had sent him to Israel in search of his genetic past. Genetic differences, however slight, are highly significant; “they are defining. They contain the map of my family tree back to the first modern humans. They catalog my extended family’s vulnerability to many diseases. And they mark me indelibly as a Jew.”

While Wolpe suggests that genetics has replaced religion as the language in which we speak about identity, Entine, and many other Jews like him, demonstrate that the one has not replaced the other; rather, religion and genetics in fact validate and reinforce one another. “[T]his book suggests,” Entine writes, “that religious identity extends beyond beliefs. Our genes carry meaning. This ancient script now being deciphered is literally lifting the curtain on God or Nature’s plan. While often at odds, religion and science are spinning an interrelated narrative.” After very briefly relating the story of God’s covenant with Abraham found in the book of Genesis, Entine asks “What of this story is true? What evidence exists to support the central narratives of the Hebrew Bible . . . ? After all, no existing records other than the Hebrew Bible refer to Abraham, a sizable Israelite presence in Egypt, or even the Exodus. . . . Questions remain. Were Abraham, Moses, and David real people? What happened to the Twelve Tribes? Can some modern Jews actually trace their ancestry as Jewish priests to Aaron?”

For Entine, and professional geneticists such as Karl Skorecki, Michael Hammer, Neil Bradman among the others who have done the genetic testing on Jewish ancestry, science does not come to disabuse Jews of their sacred stories. Rather, it supplies the evidence that written or archaeological records cannot provide. Throughout his book, Entine repeats the idea that the Bible itself and other historical documents are not much help in answering fundamental
questions about Jewish identity. And while he introduces certain moments of skepticism or doubt about particular assertions and conclusions, the overall thrust of the book is that DNA holds the key to answering the crucial questions of Jewish continuity over the millenia.

Entine is certainly not alone in making such arguments. Like Entine, David Goldstein’s quest to uncover the genetic history of the Jews, and his own place in the Jewish genetic line, begins with a fascination with the State of Israel. Goldstein, a geneticist by profession, thinks of joining the IDF during Desert Storm, learns Hebrew, marries the woman who first helped him with the language, and falls in love with Israeli popular music. He learns the secret of Jewish survival and community, how the Jews “remained a people,” while attending a concert by the Israeli pop star Yehuda Poliker. “I often think back to that concert and those kids taking off their shirts and swirling them around, those Cohen Y-chromosomes and varied mitochondria that may have started there and somehow found their way back after two millennia. For me, that is still a major part of what this is all about: The imponderable magic of it all.”

Goldstein, like Entine, reminds his readers that very little is actually known about the Jews in antiquity. “Surprisingly, little is known about the ancient Hebrews.” For the most part, everything is a matter of “speculation.” This is why genetics is essential.

Goldstein’s work is a search for Jewish continuity and essential difference, maintained over thousands of years. He objects to Richard Lewontin’s influential argument that genetic variation between groups is meaningless, that race and ethnicity do not really exist and that “we are all the same.” Evidence of this meaningful difference can be found, according to Goldstein, in the genetic research carried out by Neil Bradman and his colleagues in Great Britain on the inheritance of a so-called priestly chromosome, or a variation in the Y-chromosome, which offers irrefutable evidence that present-day Cohens are genetically descended from members of the ancient Jewish priesthood, or kohanim. It was in fact research on the kohanim that, as Noa Sophie Kohler and Dan Mishmar have written, was able “to capture the public’s interest and bring genetics into the forefront of identity shaping factors.” Goldstein explores other specific examples of genetics shedding invaluable light on issues of Jewish identity and belonging, including the well-known example of the Lemba in Africa. “Beyond these more specific questions,” he concludes, “the large-scale genetic analyses that are now possible may finally allow us to address quantitatively just how separate Jewish populations have been from their host populations.” We are, Goldstein insists, in “a new age of discovery.”
Yet in the end, it remains unclear just what it is about connecting some Jews today with some Jews (or ancient Hebrews or Israelites) thousands of years ago that seems so important, to both the researchers and the subjects of the studies. An essentialist notion of Jewishness would hold that there is some unchanging Jewish essence that is ahistorical, that transcends time and place, and connects Jews one with another. Genetics, then, can serve to unveil that essence for those who were unaware of it, whether these be modern day descendants of kohanim or non-Jews who carry around “Jewish blood” or “Jewish genes” and thus, suddenly discover that they are “Jews.” While this genetic identity would appear to be a “given,” something that only needs to be discovered through genetic testing, in the end an individual must choose to participate and believe in this sort of essentialist idea of identity and community.

Jews such as Goldstein and Entine have clearly made a choice to embrace a narrative about self and identity that in fundamental ways makes choice about identity irrelevant. Entine, for example, insists at one point that “For Jews, ancestry is destiny. The more one tries to abandon his or her Jewish roots, the more Jewish he or she becomes.” How do we reconcile this embrace of genetic identity, this geneticism, with what the American historian David Hollinger and others have identified as post-Jewishness, the shift from Jewishness as a given identity to one of choice; or, as Hasia Diner writes, the fact that “by 2000 almost all American Jews are Jews by choice”? Hollinger, for instance, speaks of “revocable consent” as the new model of identity, for Jews and others. Jews have a choice as to “just how Jewish they want to be,” how and where and when they wish to express this, if at all. In other words, if this argument is correct, the subjective has almost completely overtaken the objective in determining Jewish identity.

Ironically, perhaps, it is precisely the subjective nature of identity building that allows for the embrace of the “objective” genetic or essentialist ethno-racial component of Jewish identity. Revocable consent produces irrevocable descent, even if those of us looking at this from a certain distance may understand the latter as a cultural and intellectual construct.

Jews and Genetics; Jewish Genetics?
Jews did not begin thinking about Jewish identity and difference in what we would call bio-genetic and essentialist terms only in the late twentieth century.
Some have argued that such a definition reaches back to ancient times, though of course the understanding of how heredity works—the language and images used to convey the idea that reproduction does in some significant way reproduce traits—changed substantially over time. European, British, and North American Jewish elites were deeply engaged in and committed to racialized research and thinking in the late nineteenth and into the twentieth century. This included racial thinking about identity and difference generally and about Jews more specifically. Jewish thinkers and leaders, as products of their time, absorbed the contemporary lessons of science, and thus spoke the language of race and eugenics. Nearly a century before Entine and others read the Hebrew Bible through the lens of genetics, an American rabbi, Max Reichler, published a book titled *Jewish Eugenics and Other Essays* (1916). Reichler drew on biblical and Talmudic examples to show that ancient Judaism had already, thousands of years ago, produced a eugenic code and system to rival the modern ones advocated by the likes of leading eugenicists Francis Galton and Charles Davenport (both of whom Reichler lauded). Eugenic principles, he insisted, were to be found in the earliest biblical accounts. “The very founder of the Jewish race [Abraham] recognized the importance of certain inherited qualities.” Hence, he insisted that Isaac’s wife come not from the Canaanites, but from “the seed of superior stock.” For the Anglo-Jewish physician William M. Feldman, writing in 1939, Jews in the ancient world had a clear-cut understanding of the principles and significance of eugenic thinking. Jews were highly concerned with remote as well as proximate genealogy, and thus “foreshadowed Galton’s law of ancestral heredity.” Ancient Jews maintained special pedigree books or scrolls “in which the genealogical trees of people were recorded.” And the Bible, of course, records genealogical tables “of such minuteness of detail as would rejoice the heart of the most ardent eugenist.” The ancient Hebrews combined “judicious selective mating with intelligent antenatal and postnatal care,” and thus “succeeded in rearing a race, not indeed of supermen, but one which is probably the most virile that ever lived, and which has survived at times when many other apparently stronger races, not subjected to anything like the same persecution and physical as well as mental stress and torture, have perished.” Judaism was so committed to eugenic principles, Feldman wrote [in 1939!], that “it is permissible for a woman to be sterilized if she is likely to bear children who are going to be tainted with physical or mental disease.” This sort of interpretation of Jewish tradition and eugenics did not vanish from Jewish scholarship with Nazism and the Holocaust.
To be sure, not all celebrations of the eugenic impulse in the Hebrew Bible and Talmud included such enthusiasm for sterilization and other negative eugenic notions. Many were often accompanied by disclaimers that the Jewish tradition repudiated these barbaric ideas. Isidore Simon, a French medical doctor and founder of the *Revue d’histoire de la Médecine Hébraïque*, insisted that, unlike the Greeks, who clearly understood the laws of eugenics, heredity, and selection, and who employed “radical methods” to insure “l’amélioration de la race,” the Hebrews “did not approve of ‘selection’ or rather, the suppression of the weak and feeble . . .” (n’admettaient pas la ‘selection’ ou plutôt la suppression des faibles . . .). Nonetheless, even Simon, writing in 1949, was quick to add that the Jewish sacred writings demonstrate an intense interest in matters “that we today would call eugenics and heredity.”

This sort of acknowledgment and even enthusiasm for eugenic and genetic thinking in Judaism was already widespread in the early twentieth century, when numerous Jewish scholars, including rabbis, celebrated what they perceived to be the eugenic elements in biblical and Talmudic law, and the foresight of Moses and the rabbis in understanding the influence of genetics on the body and the mind. Thus, by the early twentieth century at the latest, significant numbers of Jewish thinkers had come to embrace elements of a genetic essentialism and determinism. In his 1903 work *Darwinismus und Sozialwissenschaft* (Darwinism and Social Science), the influential German Jewish social scientist Arthur Ruppin insisted “[w]e cannot free ourselves of [our genetic load] just as we cannot escape our own shadow by way of a leap.” Ruppin’s insistence on the inescapability of one’s genetic fate would be modified over the years as he wrote about contemporary Jewry and the myriad forces that acted upon it, chief among these global capitalism and liberalism. Nonetheless, throughout his writings he remained committed to the idea that the Jews constituted a race, both in the past and in the present; that they possessed particular characteristics on account of this; and that many, though certainly not all, of these traits, racially or genetically determined, were to be celebrated. They were, Ruppin often repeated, what distinguished the Jews from other peoples or nations and gave them what he and other Jewish thinkers at the time called the Jews’ “racial worth.”

Ruppin was hardly alone among Jewish scholars in his belief in a Jewish race, an identity that could be traced back to ancient Palestine and tracked through the diaspora into contemporary times. His and others’ insistence on such a Jewish racial identity can be explained by a number of historical factors, including the need to respond to a racialized anti-Semitism, the politics of
Zionism and assimilationism, and the intellectual and cultural validity granted racial and eugenic thinking by the scientific establishment of that period. In sum, Jewish scientists, scholars, and popularizers evinced interest in each and every scientific theory about bio-racial identity and difference, from the anthropological and anatomical to the Mendelian, blood grouping, genetics and eugenics.26

THE PROBLEMS TODAY
Perhaps it is not difficult to understand, ultimately, the attraction that racial and genetic-eugenic thinking held for Jews in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It held that attraction for large numbers of thinkers, scholars, writers and others, Jewish or not; it was normative, even mainstream, if not universal. It spoke to questions and problems regarding Jewish identity that were theoretical but also political and practical. What is perhaps more difficult to understand and explain is why this attraction has resurfaced in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Why have so many Jews embraced a set of ideas rooted in notions of inheritance and descent, ideas that no so long ago were deemed anathema, fundamental as they were to the construction of a racialized anti-Semitism and to the systematic annihilation of European Jewry?

In some ways, the factors involved in the contemporary engagement on the part of many Jews with genetic identity are not much different from the racial thinking that captured the imagination of Jews a century or more ago. Jewish geneticism, like Jewish racialism, draws from a set of general ideas, scientific theories, facts, and technologies that are ‘universal,’ and employs these to evoke and prove particular differences. In the case of geneticism, however, the desire to demonstrate particularity and difference requires that Jews, like everyone else, participate in a set of discourses and practices that are usually presented as evidence of a marked absence of difference. Thus, genetics alone is insufficient to do the sort of identity work that Jews desire; it must be wedded to myth and history.27

For instance, Jews in the United States, like others, have participated in the search for their Personal Genetic History, the search for a genetic connection with one’s Jewish ancestry among the ancient Temple priests or Kohanim. Jon Entine relates the story of how a disparate group of geneticists, in the United States and the United Kingdom, produced the data used by those Jews
who wish to trace their lineage back to biblical times; it is also used by others to “prove” the Jewish or Israeli claim to the land of Israel, since it ostensibly disproves the claim, made most recently by Shlomo Sand, that the European Jews who colonized Palestine in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were biogenetically unrelated to ancient Hebrews, and thus have no genuine claim to be returning to a land their ancestors once inhabited. The investigation into the relation of the Y-chromosome of today’s Cohens and the ancient Hebrew priesthood was, in Entine’s words, “an opportunity to examine the fate of one of Western civilization’s oldest lineages! Here was a chance to test the belief that the Jews of modern Israel were actual descendants of the ancient Hebrews, returning to reclaim their homeland after centuries in the diaspora!”

“Could anyone,” Entine asks rhetorically, “really hope to trace their ancestry back dozens of generations to biblical times? Could a distinct lineage have been maintained throughout the long exile of the Jewish people? What would confirming this connection mean to Jewish identity?” The results of the research affirmed just such a genealogical connection. “Embedded in the data was pure dynamite: almost every one of the Cohanim, regardless of whether he came from the Middle East, India, Africa, Europe, or the Americas—98.5 percent of those tested—had a signature mutation pattern. The marker was found in only about 3 percent of the general Jewish population.” 98.5% of the Jewish males tested, who claimed to be descended from the ancient Jewish priesthood, showed a distinct genetic marker that linked them with one another across geographic space and with the ancient Cohanim across the long distance of time. That this marker did not appear in the DNA of all other Jews meant that what came to be called the “modal haplotype of the Jewish priesthood” could not be explained with reference to Jewishness in general, but only with reference to the very limited genetic pool of those Jews claiming priestly descent.

Abu el-Haj has shown clearly that the impulses driving this research are complex: personal, religious, political, and economic. My interest here is in exploring further the attraction that genetic ancestry holds not for producers or distributors of genetic research and testing, but the consumers, and considering its significance culturally. What, we might ask, does the search for a link to the biblical past actually provide evidence of? It may be that geneticism offers evidence of identity and difference, but this may not be the sort of identity and difference the individual is after.

Genetic history seems to de-emphasize national boundaries and histories. Genetic material does not remain confined within national borders, certainly not in a world in which migration and resettlement are such
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commonplace phenomena. Genetic material drifts, it travels. What relation, then, does genetic history have to national history? What impact does it have on the categories historians employ to narrate the story of the Jews in a particular country or region? Is genetic history a parallel history? A shadow history? How is it to be integrated into the larger narrative?

The problem or challenge does not lie at the level of discourse. As a more or less coherent interpretive framework, with its own ideological impulses, its own method and foci, etc., genetic history can be fairly easily integrated into the intellectual and cultural history of the Jews. As a collection of narratives it can be situated at the “end” or actually the contemporaneous moment of a long history of narratives about Jews that have used the findings of biologists, geneticists, statisticians and other scientific researchers, and produced accounts of the Jewish past and present. DNA, rather than blood or anatomical traits, is now the material that reveals the secrets of collective Jewish identity; proponents of genetic narratives would insist that this is a genetic, rather than a racial, identity being revealed.

Nonetheless, contemporary geneticism resembles earlier racial thinking in some significant ways. Personal Genetic Histories, like racialized narratives, depend on history; that is, on historical narratives, memories, imagery. There exists an assumption of historicity; genetic histories make a claim about the very real connection of the present and past, and in order to do this they of course must assume the historicity of the past. The notion of the historicity of the past might seem like a tautology. However, in certain cases the reality of “the past” that is claimed is highly contentious. For instance, genetic histories seek to demonstrate a connection between Jews living today and figures from the ancient biblical narrative, including the patriarchs. Historians are hardly unified in their opinions on whether such figures existed, on just when the Bible offers us reliable historical evidence and when it must be taken as mythological. Yet, genetic histories, as they must, assume the historicity of the Bible, including the most problematic books such as Genesis and Exodus.

At the same time, the genetic impulse seems to bypass historical change, leaping back as it does over thousands of years to construct or discover a material link between the present and distant past that is immutable: mitochondrial DNA and the Y-chromosome, both of which are passed down unchanged over the generations.

One of the effects of this construction of a Jewish identity rooted in genetic continuity is the erasure of actual historical difference, of the enormous transformations wrought by the passage of time that produced the profound
difference between “Jews” (Hebrews) of the Temple period and Jews today; suddenly invisible is just how utterly strange many of the ancient biblical or Hebrew practices appear. The Temple must have been, in practice, an awe-inspiring and horrendous place: the severe hierarchy of priests and Israelites, the brilliance of the architecture, the gold and silver, jewels, etc., the sights, sounds, and especially smells of daily sacrifice—the blood, offal, waste, screams of the animals. Since Jews, like anyone else, are the beneficiaries of the long civilizing process, in which the individual and social thresholds of disgust have been heightened and deepened, producing a fundamental transformation in psychological and emotional structures, we can assume that our distance and alienation from the day-to-day reality of Temple life would be profound, even if we obviously remain intellectually fascinated by the ancient world’s radical difference.

We might play the game of mentally imagining ourselves in the Temple, lining up to offer some sacrifice to Jehovah; but most of us, as civilized beings in the twenty-first century definition of the term, would probably decline the opportunity to actually live then and there. Our ability to tolerate that physical, material environment would simply not exist, much in the same way, as Huizinga pointed out, a medieval man or woman could not bear to live amidst the ordinary noise of a modern city.

All this raises again, at least for me, the question of what Jews today are connecting to when they celebrate their genetic descent from and continuity with this ancient Jewish world? Perhaps, though, this desire for a noble genetic ancestry has less to do with ancient Israel and more to do with contemporary America. I would argue that the search for and belief in a genetic connection with the ancient Kohanim offer not evidence of a genuine connection with “ancient Jews,” but rather unequivocal proof of one’s own national identity, for instance Americanness; additionally, it displays an Americanness that is of a certain economic or occupational niche. It is the desire for ancestral knowledge and connection that is the genuine, or at least certain, connection here; but it connects the seeker not to some (mythical or actual) ancient past, but to an American present in which all types of individuals appear in need of this genetic knowledge. As one recent discussion on this general phenomenon put it, it is clear “that an increasing number of members of new world populations are seeking more information on their Old World ancestries.” A genetic connection to the ancient priesthood offers a certain pedigree. Just as important, there is nothing in this genetic particularity that violates the American racial identity of Jews as White. One can continue to enjoy the benefits of American
whiteness while simultaneously enjoying the cultural capital that comes with genetic particularity.

One large question for historians, anthropologists, social scientists and others in general is “why this desire?” Is it a product of availability? Is it that the technology that is fast becoming available in the form of affordable ancestry-testing kits is in fact producing the desire and legitimacy of the knowledge it creates?

Before suggesting some possible reasons based on the content of geneticism, I want to point out two major contextual differences that might help explain this resurgence of a genetic Jewish identity.

If Jews are again being racialized or geneticized, it is important to note that for the most part, it is Jews choosing to racialize themselves; it is not being done to them, and when it is—by non-Jewish researchers, for instance—it is within a very different, and we can agree, far more benign environment than central Europe in the early twentieth century. The point hardly needs making that genetic testing or screening for breast cancer in twenty-first century North America or Great Britain is not the same thing as genetic experimentation done on Jews and others during the 1930s and 40s. And, as we shall see, while there are interesting and important continuities between the older racial search for Jewish origins and identity and current genetic narratives, the discontinuities are just as if not more significant.

True, many Jewish thinkers, and probably not a few other Jews, chose to racialize themselves in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. While the reasons for this were complex and multifaceted, without doubt one of the main motivating factors was reactive, the need to respond to the negative images and ideas produced by antisemites using racial arguments. A Jewish racial discourse about Jews was in part a direct response to an anti-Semitic racial discourse about Jews, a discourse that used racial and genetic arguments to challenge the self-understanding of Jews. Racial antisemites challenged the Jews’ understanding of themselves as members of the nation-state, as members of a civilized and cultured faith and fate community, and at times as members of the human family. While there are undoubtedly still antisemites out there who continue to maintain that the Jews are not legitimate members of the nation-state, that at best they ought to be second-class citizens, such opinions are clearly understood to be objectionable and illegitimate by the vast majority of citizens. Indeed, any public pronouncement deemed anti-Semitic in terms of challenging the rightful place of the Jews in the country is immediately denounced by politicians and those in the media. This is true regardless of the
changes brought about by the ability of anyone with a computer and access to the internet to express a negative opinion about Jews.

Thus, unlike in the early twentieth century, the current Jewish engagement with genetics, and a revived sort of ethno-racial definition of Jewish identity, cannot be explained in part as a response to anti-Semitism. Indeed, what might be most startling and revealing is that personal DNA testing that tells a particular consumer that he or she has “Jewish genes,” is more often than not embraced as provocative in a good or productive way. It allows that person to embrace and celebrate their own previously unknown diversity in a culture that places great value on such diversity. Thus, we might suggest that for both Jews and non-Jews, geneticism in this regard participates in and extends the construction of America as a multicultural society.

The other major point of difference, related to the first, between the racialized discourse about Jews in the early twentieth century and the geneticized discourse of the early twenty-first is the social and cultural position of the Jewish researcher or scientist. While Jewish scientists were certainly active participants in European and Anglo-American research and teaching institutions in the first half of the twentieth century (or at least until racial laws passed in the 1930s in Germany and elsewhere in Europe forcibly removed Jews from such positions), their numbers and influence were nonetheless limited in significant ways by their Jewishness. Certainly, when it came to fields central to the interests of race scientists and eugenics, the Jewishness of a researcher raised questions about objectivity and self-interest on the part of biased, often antisemitic commentators. This stands in stark contrast to the world of research and teaching in which Jewish scientists find themselves today. The visible presence of Jews in major and minor universities, research labs, hospitals, etc., is indisputable. In the context of this discussion, this matters because it may help us understand and explain the ease with which so many Jews appear to accept and employ genetic research related to questions of Jewishness.

The relative numbers of Jews involved in science is a matter not only of knowledge but also of power. What gets written and disseminated about Jews, like any other group, in respected scientific journals and then in popular forums, is of course the product of a whole host of factors—intellectual, cultural, and political. Just as, if not more, important is what is deemed unacceptable. This changes over time, a process again that has much if not more to do with external pressures as it does with shifts in scientific knowledge. The increased presence of Jews (or Blacks, women, or other historically marginalized groups) on academic faculties and in research institutions means a greater voice in
editorial choices. Surely, at least some of the unproblematic acceptance that many Jews evince towards genetic research aimed at Jews must reside with the belief, even if subliminal, that a community of scientists in which Jews are fully a part will not or cannot be turned to nefarious purposes. Nonetheless, we still ought to reflect on the position of the Jewish geneticist vis-à-vis the scientific research about Jews and genetics. Is the story these scientists tell with DNA and the genome more objective, less imbued with personal bias, desire, or fantasy, than earlier scientists, including both Jews and nativists, bigots, and antisemites?

Like Jewish racial thinking in the early twentieth century, Jewish geneticism necessarily participates in the larger, general intellectual, social, and cultural environment from which it emerges. It makes use of contemporary technologies of testing and advertisement in order to make the search for one's ancestry faster, cheaper, and more easily amenable to producing “communities” that connect an individual biologically across time and space. Dory Fox has shown in ample detail the ways in which American Jews have utilized home testing DNA kits and popular forums such as Youtube to construct genetic narratives that reveal or reinforce identity. “Reveal videos,” as Fox calls them, allow individuals to confirm or discover their Jewish ancestry after making use of recent DNA testing kits available for home-use.34

Today many Jews are using genetic knowledge and technologies to discover or invent (depending on one’s take) physical, biological connections to other Jews, either in the present or in the near or far-distant past. But, again, should we not pause and consider how curious it is that many Jews are increasingly turning to ancestry and “bloodlines” as evidence of identity and belonging? After all, even if we leave aside the central role that such ideas played for racial ideologies and regimes in the early twentieth century, for centuries before this it was notions of ancestry and blood, pure or impure, that justified the exclusion of Jews from “respectable” realms of society. By no means am I questioning the truth of genetics, or more specifically the importance of genetic research for understanding and treating disease. My interest is in the meaning individuals and groups assign to certain types of genetic research. In this, then, we can identify a deep continuity between racialism and geneticism. Racial thinking, including racism, is not the mere recognition of anatomical or physiological differences; those exist, as anyone can see. Racial thinking is assigning meaning and significance to such differences: insisting that skin color or other physical traits signify differences at the mental or moral or spiritual levels, and then creating hierarchies of worth. Genetic identities and differences exist, of
course, as biological realities. However, the meanings assigned to this, and the
narratives one might then construct around these biological realities, is some-
thing else. We might say that genes don’t announce their own significance or
meaning; these must be constructed and created.

What, then, is the attraction and benefit for Jews in a genetic under-
standing of Jewish identity, one that takes ideas of a Jewish ancestry reaching
back to biblical times seriously? Perhaps the great attraction for some Jews of
a genetic definition of Jewishness is that this then becomes an identity that
is truly given and, at the same time, can never be lost or forfeited. It is truly
given, and a given, because it is passed on from one’s ancestors—it is literally
what you are, since it resides within you—in blood, genes, DNA, molecular
make-up. It is as fundamental or essential as individuals get. This is an ideal
notion of Jewish identity for Jews who have never been or have ceased to be
Jewish in observance (though this is not to say that observant Jews cannot or
do not participate in geneticism; they are certainly involved in medical genet-
ics). There is nothing that needs be done or indeed can be done when identity
is defined genetically. In this way, as in others, today’s geneticism mirrors or
echoes earlier racialized definitions of Jewish identity. Nor can this identity
be lost or lessened, regardless of what the individual does or believes. It is not a
matter of doing or believing. The mitzvot don’t matter; neither would religious
conversion, or unbelief. In addition, genes are portable, like the Torah. They
do not depend upon any particular place or piece of land, any particular city
or country for their validity. Perhaps for Jews who may have some connection
with the land and state of Israel, but who cannot or will not live there, a genetic
definition of Jewishness offers an ancestral link to the “homeland” without the
burden of actual residence.

Another of geneticism’s great attractions is its invisibility. Older nine-
teenth century notions of race insisted on external anatomical traits such as
skin color, nose shape, eye color or hair texture as essential markers of identity,
revealing, as it was believed they did, some “inner” spiritual or moral qual-
ity or characteristic. By the early twentieth century, this anthropological and
psychological definition of racial identity was being challenged and eventually
supplanted by Mendelian genetics, at least in the realm of scientific discourse.
Genes reside inside the body, invisible to others yet always present. Genetic
identity is pliable as a marker. It can be deployed or articulated by the indi-
vidual when desired, ignored or even denied if necessary (at least for now).
Again, in the context of the American racial system, the vast majority of Jews
can enjoy the benefits of Whiteness, yet claim a Jewishness distinct from that
Whiteness when desired. A genetic Jewishness, invisible yet always present, does not disturb this on-going negotiation of identities.

**FACTICITY**

One of the profoundest challenges in all this is that, for us, genetics is *true*. It does not matter in the end whether we accept that it is true in some absolute objective way or in the Rortyian sense of being true because as a community or society we accept it as true. In either case, in the early twenty-first century, genetics is true for us. It is true in the same way physics is true for us when we board an airplane: whether we understand how the laws of physics allow engineers to construct planes that fly, they do, and this knowledge works in the world. We are compelled by its facticity. The laws of physics are visible in their application, and thus they are true for us. So, too, genetics. An individual’s genetic load is a reality whether one believes it or not. However, as so many commentators and critics have pointed out, the truth of a science, the fact that it works in the world, in no way means that it is morally neutral, let alone “good.” The complicated history of eugenics/genetics is one of the clearest examples of this.

In the end, what *is* the problem or danger with continuing to think with blood or genes? Clearly, it makes a great many people, academics included, quite nervous. But why? The first quick impulse of many, if not most of us, will be to invoke the recent past; in the case of the Jews, the European past. As we all know, in the middle of the twentieth century Jews, Slavs, Roma and Sinti, Jehovah Witnesses, gays, members of suspect or oppositional political groups, criminals, prostitutes, the mentally and physically ill—all were targeted in the name of racial or genetic purity. Many of these groups themselves were not “racial” even by the definition of the period, a definition that itself was quite fluid and confusing; yet, in one way or another these groups were deemed to pose a threat to the social and racial body of the German Volk, the *Volksgemeinschaft*. At the heart of the Nazi racial project was not only a preoccupation with a mythical German racial past but a purified racial future, a Nazi racial empire that relied on scientific inquiry into genetic descent and eugenic policies and practices.

In the case of the Jews, their danger to the superior German race and Volk stemmed from the Jews’ own purported degenerate racial nature.
Hundreds, thousands of books and articles were published, in many languages, over a century and a half, in which scientists and scholars probed not just the difference, but the pathological difference and inferiority of Jews and others. In the nineteenth century, this Jewish difference was visible; physical traits marked the Jew. The twentieth century witnessed a gradual, at times contentious and not universal, shift to genetics as the means of identifying Jewish difference. Ultimately, racial discourse, either anthropological or genetic or a combination of both, disseminated the belief that Jews, and members of other suspect groups, were a danger in one way or another to the health of the nation. Solutions to the “problem” posed by so-called degenerate, impure races and social groups were proffered—the best known among them was eugenics or racial hygiene—and in those countries in which a sympathetic political party came to power, such policies were put into place by governments.

All of this is well-known; indeed, it might be all that many people know of the 1930s and 40s in Europe. The impulse to invoke this past and then to insist that bio-racial thinking, broadly defined, contains within it, essentially, the potential for oppression, violence, even genocide, and is, therefore, illegitimate is tempting. But is it convincing? What counts today as racial thinking? Is the search for ancestral Jewish DNA “racial,” and if so, is it harmful in some way, if not at present then perhaps in some unforeseeable future?

Perhaps it is the medical side of this research that should concern us more? Certainly, those concerned with the social and ethical implications of genetic research invoke the history of eugenics and racial experimentation and label the new genetics as a “backdoor” to a neo-racism and eugenics. As Gilman has asked, “What happens when the ‘Jews’ or ‘African Americans’ or ‘Asians’ begin to think of themselves as a virtual family interconnected by their biological inheritance? And what happens when the markers for such affiliation are shared diseases?”

Already in the 1950s (in some cases as early as the 1930s), scientists launched a concerted attack on racialism, separating biology from culture, and over time insisting on the “unreality” of race as a determinant of intellectual, spiritual, or cultural achievement or potential. Nonetheless, the shift from race to genetics has, it seems, brought biology and culture back together for many people, some geneticists included. On the one hand, the human genome research project seems to have demonstrated that human beings are overwhelmingly similar in their genetic make-up, and that “race” is all but meaningless in a biological sense. On the other, the genetic difference or variation, albeit small, is being used to mark off population groups—African, Asian, European,
North American—and “reinscribe” race as real and meaningful through “ancestry-informative markers.”

The lure of essentialism is beguiling: the notion that one’s identity, and one’s belonging to a longer history and a larger group, reaching back perhaps to antiquity, an identity that can be demonstrated by objective factors, rooted in biology, and revealed by science, is powerful. Those such as Entine and Goldstein don’t deny that there is more to Jewish self-understanding and identity than simply genetics; history and culture certainly play a part. Yet these are not sufficient. Nor it seems is Judaism, the belief in and observance of mitzvot and the communities formed around this. Genetics, it seems, is necessary in the case of ancestral DNA testing to verify or reinforce the bonds, or for some, to discover or reveal an ancestry previously unknown.

In the end, Entine, Goldstein, and other Jews who have embraced genetics as the key to Jewish identity are indeed correct in arguing that this identity is a product of a combination of history, environment, culture, and biology. But I would argue that the relationship between these various factors, and especially biology and culture, hinges on a culture of geneticism far more than it does on the biological. The biology of genetics must be folded into the culture of geneticism: the narratives Jews are constructing with the given genetic data, and the ways in which this new knowledge is used to reinforce and remake identities. Genetics is real, and the variations and differences produced by genetic inheritance are real. However, as with “race”—i.e., anatomical or phenotypical traits and differences—whether or not one assigns meaning to genetic variation, the meanings assigned, and the stories one tells, are what ultimately matter. And this is a matter of choice.
Notes


2. Wolpe, “If I Am Only My Genes,” 221.

3. Ibid., 223.


5. Though of course genetic and medical technologies have made external intervention, i.e., genetic manipulation, increasingly possible, so that the line between individual choice and genetic make-up is no longer necessarily absolute.


9. Ibid., 5.

10. Ibid., 8.

11. Ibid., 8. It is worth pointing out that Jews are hardly alone in embracing this sort of discursive strategy in which ethno-religious texts and history are juxtaposed with science, and end up—even if unintentionally—mutually reinforcing the other. Arguably, whether aware of it or not, Jewish geneticists and others are probably working off of a discursive script developed by Christian European and Anglo-American elites. Thus, Entine and others are part of a much larger story of Western secularization and the central role played by religious texts and ways of thinking in the secularization of racial thinking. For an extended discussion and analysis, see Terence Keel, *Divine Variations: How Christian Thought Became Racial Science* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2018).


15. Ibid., 3.

16. Ibid., 9f.

17. Noa Sophie Kohler and Dan Mishmar, “Genes as Jewish History? Human Population
18. Goldstein, Jacobs’s Legacy, 119.
23. For a more recent example see the article by the eminent Jewish historian of medicine Fred Rosner, “Judaism, Genetic Screening and Genetic Therapy,” The Mount Sinai Journal of Medicine 65, nos. 5–6 (October/November 1998): 406–13.
27. See Abu el-Haj, The Genealogical Science, on this process, and the technologies and economics involved.
29. Entine, Abraham’s Children, 74.
30. Ibid., 65.
31. Ibid., 78–79.
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