Traces of Race: Defining Jewishness in America
Sarah Imhoff

When I did a recent Google search, the first advertisement in the sidebar read “Jews: Are You Jewish?” At first glance, this seems to be an absurd question. If the ad was going to address people it called “Jews,” shouldn’t it follow that those people would consider themselves Jewish? What does it suggest about Jewish identity if a Jew wonders if she is Jewish? But upon closer scrutiny, the ad represents much more than a linguistic infelicity. It turns out that destabilizing searchers’ certainty about their Jewishness was exactly the website’s business strategy. The particular business, iGenea, is one of a growing number of mail-order DNA analysis services that markets specific packages for tracing Jewishness. These services, sometimes implicitly and sometimes explicitly, claim that a genetic map can determine Jewishness. This is, both biologically and halachically speaking, nonsense, and yet over the last ten years this gene-based mode of defining who is a Jew has become widespread in popular discourse. Where did this discourse originate? And why do people find this specious narrative so compelling?

We might anticipate that conversations about DNA would create a historically novel way of thinking about Jewishness. Yet a brief historical foray will demonstrate that the use of DNA tests to determine Jewishness represents part of a larger discourse with a long history. In its current forms, this discourse recalls racial constructions of Jewishness even while refusing the term “race.” As historians Jon Efron, Eric Goldstein, and others have demonstrated, many nineteenth century Jews used the language of race to describe their Jewishness. Since the Shoah the language of race has been a problematic way to conceive of Jewish identity, but even if the language of race has fallen out of cultural use and favor, many of the ideas connected with it persist.

In order to explore the history and compelling qualities of this specious narrative, critical race theory provides useful vocabulary. Theorist Kwame Anthony Appiah offers the term “racialism” to describe “heritable characteristics, possessed by members of our species, which allow us to divide them into a small set of races, in such a way that all the members of these races share certain traits and tendencies with each other that they do not share with members of any other race.” It is not a moral error, Appiah contends, to suggest that there are characteristic heritable traits and tendencies of races, because it does not necessarily follow that one race is superior to any other. That is, while
racialist thinking does rely on ideas about heritable characteristics and race, it need not be racist.

Racialist ideas about Jewishness—heritable characteristics, traits, and tendencies—continue to be deeply embedded in discourse about who is a Jew. Ideas about physical appearance, aptitudes and capacities, and psychological tendencies remain part of Jewish and non-Jewish conceptions of Jewishness. When dark-skinned Jews go to synagogue and are asked why they are there, when the neuroses of Woody Allen are seen as paradigmatically Jewish, even when Jews count Jewish Nobel Prize winners, these have elements of racialist thinking when they rely on ideas of heritable appearances and characteristics.

While racialist ideas underlie many cultural constructions of Jewishness, this chapter focuses on two particular contemporary American conversations about Jewishness that disclose these traces of race. First, I discuss two types of genetic testing: testing men’s Y chromosomes for the Cohen Modal Haplotype, or “Cohen gene,” and testing for genes related to diseases such as Tay-Sachs. While the former seeks to use scientific discourse to authorize identity claims and the latter seeks to be vigilant about genetic diseases, both reinforce links between physical bodies, heritable characteristics, and Jewish identity. Second, I turn to peripheral groups who make claims to Jewish identity. When popular sources present stories of Americans who identify as Jewish because of crypto-Jewish family roots, it becomes clear they use biological and geographical discourse—both essential to the social construction of race—to claim Jewish identity. Ultimately, I suggest that this appeal to biomedical criteria for Jewishness may have such appeal precisely because it offers something that looks like objective criteria for “who is a Jew” in those communities where Jewish identity has become the most fluid and contested.

DNA

From daytime talk shows to forensic evidence, DNA has become an authoritative means of confirming identity. In colloquial speech it has become a metaphor for essence: people may say that a characteristic is “in my DNA” when they mean that it is an unchangeable part of who they are. Like other communities, Jews have displayed an interest in how DNA can illuminate their health, history, and identity. Because of the relative genetic similarity within populations—resulting from historical practices of endogamy—some Jewish cases (in particular, Ashkenazim) hold special interest not only for those who identify as Jewish but also for scientists studying populations.

Once scientists publish the results of their studies, they are out of scientific hands and available to individual authors, community leaders, businesses, and individuals to interpret with less scientific precision and more interest in broad public access and appeal. In short, looking at accounts of scientific research aimed at a general audience can disclose broader cultural assumptions. While studying the scientific data can illuminate DNA, studying the ways people discuss the data can illuminate the concerns and presuppositions of the people telling these scientific stories and reveal how they think about identity.

A number of recent genetic studies have focused on the discovery of the Cohen Modal Haplotype, a set of markers found on the Y chromosome of both Ashkenazim and Sephardim who claim to be Cohanim, or members of the priestly class. This set of studies has drawn attention for at least two reasons. First, it provides genetic evidence for the relationship of Sephardim and Ashkenazim despite centuries of separation between these communities. Second, it offers the opportunity to use genetic data to make claims about religious authority and the veracity of religious accounts of history. Religiously determined status as a Cohen depends on patrilineal lines: if a father is a Cohen, and he does not forfeit his Cohen status, his sons will also be Cohanim. Biologically, Y chromosomes are passed directly—barring any mutations—from father to son. Therefore, according to the theoretical ideal of one original priest who engendered all subsequent Cohanim, each male Cohen should have the same pattern of alleles on their Y chromosomes.

Subsequently, people have used these findings to make claims as to whether or not men are legitimized Cohanim. On the level of populations, scientists have subsequently tested the Y chromosomes of mostly nonwhite groups who claim Jewish ancestry, such as the Bene Israel of India and the Leba of South Africa. If some men within the community had the Cohen Modal Haplotype, as in the case of the Bene Israel and Leba, observers saw it as support for claims to Jewishness. Although there are certainly other contributing issues, the questioning of the legitimacy of these communities hints at social assumptions about the color of a Jew’s skin.

But even as part of the discourse among Jews with uncontested Jewish identity, DNA research serves an authorizing function for religious identity. The official Chabad website, for instance, asks: “Are these tribal affiliations just a matter of folklore and tradition? Can such claims actually be proven?” and answers, “Today they can, and the key is DNA testing.” According to Chabad’s interpretation of this DNA evidence, men can scientifically “prove” their status as Cohanim (or Levites). Here valued above “just” tradition, DNA
offers certainty. In an example from the other end of the religious observance spectrum, the secular journalist Jon Entine writes in his 2007 book Abraham's Children, “About 3 percent of Jewish males today claim to be Cohanim. But until the development of genetic genealogy, there was no way to validate those oral claims.” Entine likewise gives DNA evidence the power to “validate,” whereas religious tradition is merely a “claim.” Both Chabad and Entine take the relative frequency of a genetic marker within a population and create a narrative about the proof of Jewish religious history.

These claims, in their simplicity, purport to provide certainty. The world we live in, however, is more complicated on two fronts: the social reality and the science itself. The socially contested nature of priestly identity dates back to ancient times. In the absence of a temple, identification as a Cohen has had to rely on family oral history. When one man does not pass on identification to his male children, those descendants may not identify as Cohanim. Conversely, if someone were mistaken (or lied) about his status as a Cohen, his descendants would identify as Cohanim despite lacking the identical Y chromosome. Moreover, any expectation of homogeneity across present-day Cohanim also assumes that there was a single original male priest and that at no time was priesthood conferred upon anyone outside his hereditary line, be it through adoption into a family, as a political favor, or even by women procreating with men other than their own husbands. The likelihood of all of these assumptions holding true across centuries is quite small.

The science, too, is much messier than Chabad or Entine’s rhetoric would suggest. The word “modal” in Cohen Modal Haplotype means the statistical mode, which is the haplotype that occurs most frequently. So it is true that scientists discovered that one particular series of alleles occurs more commonly than others in men who say they are Cohanim. And it is also true that particular sequence is uncommon—although not entirely absent—outside of Jewish men. This particular DNA sequence occurred in 48 percent of Ashkenazi men and 58 percent of Sephardi men who claimed to be Cohanim. While the particular scientific studies and new developments are meaningful and while they suggest significant genetic links between Ashkenazim and Sephardim, this simply cannot constitute proof that any individual person or family is a Cohen. No good scientist would claim such a thing.

And yet plenty of other people do just that. In part because of this Y chromosome research, internet sites advertising DNA testing as a way to “help confirm Jewish heritage” or that ask “What’s your tribe?” abound. These all offer genetic testing for men that examines markers on their Y chromosomes to determine their “ancient origins.” The error here is not simply one of interpretation. This research can show genetic patterns among large proportions of people who identify as Jews, so it may help us consider a population-sized question such as “Who are Jews?” But it is simply not equipped to give us meaningful information on the individual level of “Who is a Jew?”

One website, which partners with a company offering DNA testing, says: “Many people from non-Jewish families ask themselves, ‘Am I Jewish? Am I Hebrew?’ The fascinating scenario this website narrates demonstrates a different, although related, sort of error. At base, it is one of logic: there are two different definitions of what it means to be a Jew here. As a DNA testing service, it claims a relationship between Jewish heredity and Jewish identity. If a person were “from a Jewish family,” she would therefore be Jewish. If she were “from a non-Jewish family” and had not converted, she would not. So how could she wonder if she were Jewish? Where would that “Jewish DNA” come from, if not her family? (The website does not market itself to people who were adopted, although adopted persons are a category that demands more attention and research in analyses of Jewish identity.) The website conflates a genetic definition of Jewishness (“Am I Jewish?”—take a DNA test to find out) and a religious or cultural one (“from a non-Jewish family”). In this way, Jewishness is being arbitraged by the very assumptions of heredity, which is tied to geographic origin, even while disavowing its dependence on racialist definitions.

GENETIC-LINKED DISEASES
A similar medicalizing discourse about Jewishness and DNA exists around genetic diseases, such as Tay-Sachs, Gaucher’s, and breast cancer associated with BRCA1 and BRCA2 mutations, all of which have higher incidences in Ashkenazi Jewish populations. In contrast to studies on the Cohen Modal Haplotype, research on these conditions with genetic factors has a direct application to the health of individuals and their potential offspring. As a result, the cultural conversation about these diseases has been quite beneficial. Therefore, the goal of this critical analysis is not to suggest that genetically linked disease research or its publicity is not desirable, but rather to point to the ways it is historically and discursively connected to racialist constructions of Jewish identity.

The organization Dor Yeshorim, which describes itself as the “Committee for the Prevention of Jewish Diseases,” implicitly constructs the meaning of Jewishness in its description of genetic diseases and Jewishness. When (mainly
Orthodox) Jewish couples consider dating, its service offers genetic screening, which seeks to prevent "Jewish diseases," as if diseases themselves had cultural or religious affiliation. The Dor Yeshorim website lists genetic conditions that are more common in Ashkenazi populations, those "Jewish diseases," but it also explains: "If an individual has a family history of a genetic disease, even a "non-Jewish" one, Dor Yeshorim recommends that they be informed of this, as well." The language of "Jewish diseases" is by no means limited to Dor Yeshorim; it is commonplace in media and even medical clinics. By naming genetic diseases "Jewish" and "non-Jewish," this discourse effectively aligns particular kinds of genetic material, diseased bodies, and Jewishness.

This discourse also conflates Jewishness and the possession of Ashkenazi heritage and therefore marginalizes non-Ashkenazi Jews. "The Dor Yeshorim screening program is most effective with those of entirely Ashkenazic descent. Anyone with even a small heritage other than Ashkenasic heritage (even one grandparent) may experience reduced reliability. (This may be of special concern to those with Sephardic or Geirim [ Converts] in their background)." Here, then, when "Jewish diseases" have become the focus, Jewishness becomes concentrated in the sectors of the Jewish community most associated with those diseases—here, Ashkenazim. This discourse has real effect beyond the text on websites. The Victor Center for the Prevention of Jewish Diseases likewise tests only for "Jewish Genetic Diseases (JGD)," which it seamlessly equates with "Ashkenazi Jewish Genetic Diseases (JGDs)." Even the acronym introduced for each is identical: JGDs. The Victor Center does not test for genetic disorders found with greater frequency within Sephardi communities. Sephardi individuals and couples have reported going for genetic counseling and being tested for being carriers of diseases prevalent in those with Ashkenazi ancestry simply because they were Jewish. Sephardim, converts, and their descendants are outliers; they seem to be special cases of Jewishness.

When and how did medical discourse become a significant way to construct the meaning and authenticity of Jewishness? Despite the newness of scientific procedures like DNA testing, determining Jewishness using "medical" or "scientific" means is by no means new. And, while the content and methodology of what counts as legitimate science and medicine have undergone significant changes, throughout American history medical discourse has contributed significantly to the social construction of individual and group identities. The influence and scope of medical discourse has waxed and waned and worked differently during different eras. Today, medical discourse has a significant voice, but does not dominate the chorus of the construction of Jewishness.

In the early twentieth century, medical discourse played a pivotal role, one whose categories and associations—even if they are self-concealing—continue to operate in modern medicine. United under the heading of science, racial and medical claims sorted and categorized bodies and people in American society. The early twentieth century is neither the beginning nor the end of the story of the racial and medical construction of Jewishness, but it is the most salient for the understanding of contemporary Jewishness for two reasons: the prominence and the pervasiveness of scientific medical discourse. First, during the early twentieth century, the science of medicine and race contributed to policy on immigration, education, social work, reform movements, and dozens of other arenas. Second, racial or medical classification was diffuse: it contributed much of the significant framework for popular discussions and assumptions about Americanization, nationalism, citizenship, gender, race, and even economics. The explicit presence of medical discourse on an intellectual and national policy level and its implicit presence on a popular level demonstrates its importance for structuring the national imaginary. In fact, this early twentieth century medical-racial imaginary played such an important role in the construction of Jewishness that it has not all together disappeared.

The term "race" here connotes more than antisemitic fantasies. The early twenty century construction of race differed substantially from our contemporary notions. As Eric Goldstein and others have demonstrated, American Jews themselves used the language of race to articulate their individual and communal identities. Race, in its historical context, is more than just a four-letter word: it stands for a concept that both Jews and non-Jews deployed to encompass everything from a dizzying combination of physical attributes like skull shape, nose size, and height to social attributes like language, degree of aggressiveness, and intelligence, to political attributes like nation of origin and ability to Americanize.

A longer argument would trace the historical genealogy of an array of nervous diseases, cancer, diabetes, and others, as Sander Gilman has shown in several essays. Here I will focus on Tay-Sachs for two reasons: first, it has continued to be constructed as a "Jewish disease," and second, its history is easier to trace because, unlike other "nervous diseases," Tay Sachs continues to be a scientifically operative medical category. In the early twentieth century, the idea of "Jewish diseases" was actually a constellation of mutually reinforcing medical constructions: Tay-Sachs, neurasthenia, hysteria, other "nervous diseases," weakness, smallness, and superior intelligence were all considered Jewish traits. It is the discourse of racialism and race science that constructed
this constellation, which still echoes today when Dor Yeshorim discusses “Jewish diseases” and Jews who suffer from “non-Jewish diseases.”

Tay-Sachs, although a fatal childhood disease rather than a nonfatal disease affecting adults, was also caught up in the association of Jews and nervous diseases. Sometimes called “amaurotic familial idiocy” in the early twentieth century, Tay-Sachs was connected specifically with the Jewish race (which was, and sometimes continues to be, associated exclusively with Ashkenazim). One physician explained, typically: “We know that it is inherited, that it is a familial affection and that it occurs practically exclusively in the Hebrew race. I have on my records fifteen cases, and every one, without exception occurred in Russian Jews. But we do not know why.”

According to one medical text, Dr. Sachs himself noted its “limitation to one race—the Hebrew.”

The Jewish race and Tay-Sachs were so intimately connected in the medical community that when a physician described a case of a non-Jewish child who seemed to have all of the symptoms of Tay-Sachs, he called it “juvenile familial amaurotic idiocy,” which he differentiated from Tay-Sachs because of the “lack of Hebrew blood.”

The coexistence of racial and historical reasoning resulted in a circular medical reasoning (wherein only Jews get Tay-Sachs, so it can’t be Tay-Sachs if they are not Jewish) that not only associated but also identified the Jewish body with Tay-Sachs.

These medical constructions continue to shape popular discussions of Jewishness. When popular news articles—like a February 2010 article in the New York Times Health section—explain genetic testing, they commonly use three examples: Tay-Sachs in Jews, sickle-cell anemia in blacks, and cystic fibrosis in whites. Although these articles discuss the diseases in genetic terms, they still rely on the logic of race when they create a structure in which “blacks,” “whites,” and “Jews” occupy parallel positions.

In 1998, when a Maryland boy became sick and began to regress developmentally, the diagnosis of Tay-Sachs was delayed because both his parents were of Irish, not Jewish, descent. Even though significant non-Jewish populations in New Orleans and Montreal have significant numbers of individuals carrying Tay-Sachs mutations and although the number of children born with it annually is now in the single digits, it remains a “Jewish disease” in the cultural imagination.

Some Ashkenazi Jews narrate their experience with genetic links to breast cancer in a similar way. “What’s Jewish about breast and ovarian cancer?” asks one slide at GeneSights: Jewish Genetics Online Series. In its online booklet “Your Jewish Genes,” the Jewish women’s cancer support organization

Sharsheeret asks: “What’s Jewish about hereditary breast cancer and ovarian cancer?” In his 2008 Abrahamic Children: Race, Identity, and the DNA of the Chosen People, journalist and researcher Jon Entine wrote of the BRCA gene mutation in a personal vein: “The only thing that can be said with near certainty is that it’s a tragic marker of our family’s Jewish ancestry.”

In what sense does this genetic mutation “mark” Jewishness? Only 2 percent to 3 percent of Jews carry this gene. Non-Jews also carry it, although at lower rates than Ashkenazim. Sephardim carry it no more than their non-Jewish counterparts. Genes, explains Entine, “catalog my extended family’s vulnerability to many diseases. And they mark me indelibly as a Jew.”

What does it mean for Jewish identity if genes and diseases mark a person “indelibly” as a Jew? This language ties disease, harmful genetic variation, and Jewishness into a single definitive concept.

This history of medicalized identity demonstrates the social construction of both race and bodies. In Birth of a Clinic Michel Foucault situates modern medicine as part of a social discourse that does not merely describe bodies but constitutes their meaning. Since the nineteenth century, Foucault claims, “[The medical] gaze is no longer reductive, it is, rather, that which establishes the individual in his irreducible quality. And thus it becomes possible to organize a rational language around it.”

The medical gaze, then, has become a way of instantiating and explaining the person’s essence and therefore identity. To clarify: this view of social construction does not insist that DNA is nothing more than a fancy of social discourse. Nor does it, as David Goldstein supposes, support the claim that “we are all the same” because the social scientific interpretations of “race and ethnicity are biologically meaningless.”

It does, however, claim that despite any objective claims and rational language of science or medicine, the social meaning of bodies is always contextual and historically contingent. That is, neither race nor ethnicity has any meaning outside of a social context.

Is DNA the same thing as race? Must any correlation between DNA and Jewish ancestry necessarily lead to racist constructions of Jewishness? Of course not. But current discourses rely on biomedical logic to determine who is Jewish. And, much of the contemporary discussion about Jewish DNA relies on (and sometimes reproduces) the history of the idea of a Jewish race and perpetuates one sort of racist definition of Jewishness. Individual Jews or Jewish communities might distance themselves from claims that Jews constitute a race; however, even as people consciously deny the category of race they situate themselves within its history.
CRYPTO-JEWS

There is some research to suggest that people who identify as hidden Jews use a variety of ways of describing their experience: spiritual, mystical, and religious, and with richly narrated connections to history and culture. The accounts of other anthropologists studying various communities of anusim [individuals forced to abandon Judaism] provide similar accounts of spiritual identification, family lore, and shared customs. When asked about their Jewishness, many people say “just felt” Jewish or tell tales of their family’s customs such as avoiding pork and cooking only flat bread around Easter time. Much popular American media picks up on these facets of identity when it tells the stories of those who believe they are descendants of anusim, but the narrative frequently also emphasizes connections to DNA.

For instance, a New Mexican Catholic priest who claims crypto-Jewish heritage has become something of a media darling. Father Bill Sanchez learned of his heritage by taking a DNA test, but he claims long term spiritual feelings of connection to Judaism. When Jon Entine wrote about Sanchez, he latched onto how genetic Jewishness fulfilled and confirmed more spiritual or ritual ties to Jewishness. Entine quotes Sanchez as saying, “I’m just acknowledging that fact, that spiritual fact, within myself. But now it has a literal reality as well. It’s embedded in my genes, my DNA.” However, when the LA Times ran a story about Father Sanchez and several other people who believed they had Sephardic ancestry, titled “Clearing the Fog over Latino Links to Judaism in New Mexico,” it cleared no fog about Jewish identity. It instead told a series of stories: one of a Catholic family that “spun tops on Christmas, shunned pork and whispered of a past in medieval Spain,” another of a man who says finding out the results of his DNA test “was like coming home for me”; and a third about a man who said, “When I found out about my roots, I went to the library and my world opened up... I have reclaimed my life. I live a Jewish life now.” Father Sanchez explained, “I have always known I was Jewish; I can’t explain it, but it was woven into who I was.” He continues his role as priest and also wears a Star of David. Rather than “clearing the fog,” the storytelling reinforced the existence of competing narratives of Jewishness—biological, historical, cultural, geographic, ethnic, and religious—all the while supposing they presented no conflict.

Even those who do not claim crypto-Jewish status have begun to use narratives of anusim and DNA to help understand their own Jewish identity. In his Am I a Jew? Lost Tribes, Lapsed Jews, and One’s Man’s Search for Himself, Theodore Ross explores his own complicated relationship with Jewishness.

His mother decided to pretend that they were Episcopalian when she was nine-year-old Theodore moved to the Gulf Coast. When Ross tells the story of his “search for himself,” he credits stories about crypto-Jews with the initial spark: “My reckoning with the self began at my laptop when I came across an odd little children’s book. Abuelita’s Secret Matzah,” the story of a family of anusim in the American Southwest. Ross narrates his subsequent journey to discover different ways of being Jewish, but he begins and ends with people who identify as crypto-Jews. His narrative journey dedicates an entire chapter to the academic-turned-popular debates about haplogroup research.

One of Ross’s interviewees, Alan Tullio, explained that he had been raised Catholic but “suffered from Jew envy” for as long as he could remember.” He grew up with many Jewish friends, attended a largely Jewish school, and was raised in kinship . . . an attraction” to Jewish religious rites and practices. After many years of learning about Judaism, Tullio eventually converted with a Conservative rabbi. Tullio told Ross that he “had no doubt that the spark was inside him, although whether he understood it as DNA or as a metaphor for his lifelong attraction to the religion was unclear. He had tended to it, he said in his own time and in his own way, and now finally, it had burst into flame. ‘And the flame,’ he said, ‘is Judaism.’” Tullio describes his own relationship with Jewishness as a relationship with Judaism, as an interior disposition that needed tending. In Ross’s interpretive hands, however, an inner relationship with Judaism becomes connected to DNA, even when both Tullio and Ross know that the professional genealogist came up with no conclusive evidence of Jewish ancestry.

Dell Sanchez, an author who himself identifies as crypto-Jewish, likewise puts heavy narrative and evidential weight on DNA studies in his Our From Hiding: Evidence of Sephardic Roots among Latinos. He writes “While I am not a molecular scientist or DNA expert I must say that I do administer a DNA test project in direct conjunction with the Family Tree DNA laboratory in Houston, Texas. My role is to put into layman’s terms what Sephardic DNA experts are saying in scientific terms which are too complicated for nonscience to comprehend.” In his quest to prove the legitimacy of crypto-Jews in the American Southwest, Sanchez positions himself as knowledgeable guide and interpreter. In order to do so, he interprets what select “Sephardic DNA experts” have found. Furthermore, he positions theses DNA studies as uniquely authoritative when he explains that some Latino have attempted “to find records, archives and reliable genealogies that might reveal their true Jewish heritage.”
attention to the complexity of social and religious definitions of Jewishness, the question of who is a Jew can seem unanswerable or hopelessly contingent.

In the face of this uncertainty, biomedical discourse and interpretations of scientific claims can function as a substitute for religion or even seem to trump religious claims. For those who do not assent to the supremacy of halacha, religious boundaries of Jew and non-Jew can be quite permeable, as Mara W. Cohen Ioannides suggests in her research on congregational rules and traditions about the position of non-Jews. And even for those who do hold halachic definitions above all others—as the rabbinate in Israel does, for instance—examples of disagreement about particular cases and policies abound. Racist definitions in the guise of genetic language can seem to replace this complexity with the certainties of science.

Instead of grappling with the meaning of the religious identity of a priest like Father Sanchez who wears a Star of David around his neck and claims his Jewishness and Catholicism simultaneously, popular interpretations of DNA can answer that he certainly is Jewish. The LA Times article referred to his Jewishness as if it were unequivocally determined: “After watching a program on genealogy, Sanchez sent for a DNA kit that could help track a person’s background through genetic fingerprinting. He soon got a call from Bennett Greenspan, owner of the Houston-based testing company. [Greenspan asked] ‘Did you know you were Jewish?’”44 The article reproduces what seems to be a shared assumption of Greenspan and Sanchez: the results of a DNA kit can produce definitive knowledge about Jewishness. The formulation “Did you know you were Jewish?” posits the answer as an objective fact to be known and suggests that the truth about Jewishness resides not in religious practice or identity, but in a sequence of chemical bases. Here scientific claims supersede religious authority.

What is more, some authors have rhetorically replaced theism with DNA. Jon Entine even uses language reminiscent of the biblical God when talks of “the tragedy that DNA has visited upon my family.”45 The complexity of theology and ritual has been replaced by a scientific language of DNA, which promotes a sense of certainty and authority. In The Wandering Gene, Jeff Wheelwright refers to ATGC, abbreviations for the four chemical bases that comprise DNA, as “the body’s tetragrammaton.”46 Going beyond this metaphor, Wheelwright makes science’s supplanting of religion explicit: “By looking at a sufficient number of locations in people’s genomes, science would be able to tell the religious authorities who was a Jew and who was not. . . . Tests like this exist today and are starting to be used, and sharp tongued
prophets of genetics are being heard too." wheelwright personifies science, which can "tell" religious authorities who is and is not Jewish. Science would thereby overtake the authority and function of religious law. From another ideological standpoint, even for those authors who continue to be observant Jews, the science serves an authorizing function. Yaakov Kleiman uses DNA not to supplant religious narratives, but to corroborate them. "These genetic research findings support the Torah statements that the line of Aaron will last throughout history: The Kohanim have passed the test of time and tradition. And tradition has passed the test of science." Even for Kleiman, who holds halachah as authoritative, tradition is still put to the "test" of scientific inquiry when it comes to understanding Jewishness.

The impression of certainty and authority that accompanies biological research—in contrast to the complexity of religious, social, or ethnic definitions—arises clearly in recent popular scientific publications and media reporting. In 2012, geneticist Harry Ostrer published a book titled Legacy: A Genetic History of the Jewish People, which uses genetic research to discuss the idea that there is a "biological basis of Jewishness." When Jon Entine reviewed Ostrer's Legacy in The Jewish Daily Forward, it bore the title "Jews are a 'Race,' Genes Reveal." In his preface, Ostrer privileges genetic research as the answer to the question of who is a Jew: "At last one could confront head-on the often debated question of whether Jews constituted a race, a people, or a genetic isolate." In this formulation, scientific studies of DNA are the proper means to determine who Jews are; DNA meant that one could answer the question "head on," whereas presumably other means of discussing Jewishness are oblique or incomplete. The Ha'aretz review touted the triumph of scientific methods over those other methodologies of imprecise reconstruction: "Fortunately, re-creating history now depends not only on pottery shards, faded manuscripts, and faded coins, but on something far less ambiguous: DNA." For the reviewer, material culture and texts produce "ambiguous" knowledge, but DNA produces something much more certain.

The opening sentence of Legacy declares: "In June 2010, I published an article that demonstrated a biological basis for Jewishness." Ostrer's scientific research is impeccable, but his interpretation here is misleading at best. A "basis" is a foundation and an essential component. DNA simply cannot be the foundation of Jewishness because there is no genetic sequence found in all Jews but in no non-Jews. Perhaps DNA could become the essence of Jewishness, but not without radically changing who is and is not considered Jewish. Individuals who consider themselves Jewish but do not have whatever DNA sequence would be used to adjudicate Jewishness (the Cohen Modal Hypothesis? Or Sachs? A different marker common to the Mediterranean?) would suddenly find themselves missing the "basis" for Jewish identity. People who converted away from Judaism, or had the genetic marker but did not identify as Jewish, would suddenly find themselves labeled Jewish.

Ostrer explained that Legacy sought to make the science accessible to the public and thereby make the conversation about DNA and Jewishness more informed: "This overheated discussion in the press without dispassionate analysis of scientific observations proved to me that a popular book about Jewish population genetics might tone down the debate into a more thoughtful realm." If "dispassionate analysis" and toned-down rhetoric was the goal, why would Ostrer phrase his conclusion in such a provocative way? After the preface, Legacy becomes a clear and accessible text that carefully explains the current genetic research and how it can be interpreted.

Ostrer's Legacy thereby demonstrates the appeal of a narrative of objective verification of Jewish identity. In order to interpret the complex scientific data, he makes declarations about "head-on confrontation" and "dispassionate analysis" and the resulting "biological basis of Jewishness." For American Jewish communities that witness and participate in continuing debates about who is a Jew, who can decide who is a Jew, and what criteria constitute Jewishness, this biological language seems to offer objectivity and certainty. All of the discourse that hangs Jewishness on the peg of genetics, however, can and has subtly reinforced a racialist logic of Jewish identity.

AN AFTERTHOUGHT: THE FUTURE OF RACE AND RACIALISM

We think of race as an amalgam of traits: genetic, national origin, historical, cultural, even dispositional or related to capacity, as well as physical appearance including height, facial features, and skin color. Here we see definitions of Jewishness related to genes; we can all come up with examples of Jewishness as dependent on each of the other categories: history, culture, innate capacity (there are even scientific studies "proving" connections of DNA, Jewish intelligence, and Jewish disease), whether someone "looks Jewish." So if people define Jewishness according to the same categories that people define "other" races, why not talk about the Jewish race? Several reasons: first, skin color continues to be a primary way of identifying race in America, and Jews are not associated with a distinctive skin color. Second, too many, discussion of Jews as a race smacks of antisemitism and evokes associations with genocide. As a term, then, "race" conjures up images of racism with devastating consequences.
Nevertheless, many racial assumptions and categories have continued to operate in the social meaning of Jewish bodies and identities.

So would it be wise to return to using “race” as a category for identifying Jewishness? No. In fact, the example of Jewishness points to the imprecision surrounding the discourse of race in its wider cultural usage. If “race” connotes a combination of genetics, history, geographic origin, and physical traits, what information can it provide, apart from providing an easy hang for stereotypes? What I am suggesting is that we acknowledge that much of contemporary American discourse about Jewishness relies on racist definitions. And once we acknowledge that these definitions have no firm, objective, unchanging reality apart from social context, we can see that these racist discourses may be of limited utility when discussing Jewish identity.

NOTES

1 As of June 2013, the following websites offer services tailored specifically to questions about Jewish DNA: Dnaspectrum.com, 23andme.com, genebase.com, jewishdnaproject.com, familytreedna.com (partners with JewishGen), dnaconsultants.com, and igenea.com.

2 Claiming to adjudicate Jewishness by DNA also raises all sorts of questions: Does this delegitimize the Jewishness of converts and their children? People who are adopted and their progeny? Does it make people who have voluntarily converted from Judaism to Christianity, Islam, or another religion still Jewish?

3 For a clear and concise description of the biological evidence, see Wesley Sutton’s contribution to these proceedings.


13 Ibid.


15 There is greater genetic diversity across Sephardi populations, and therefore genetic screenings are most effective when targeted to a geographical area, for instance, Syrian or Iranian Jews. Even the diseases more commonly found in Sephardi populations—those that the American Sephardi Foundation lists as “Sephardic recessive disorders”—are also common in populations across the Mediterranean and North Africa and are therefore not “Sephardi diseases” or “Jewish diseases.”


17 I do not claim that discourses of medicine and race worked to construct Jewishness alone or even that Jews were the primary object of most racial or medical interest. The scientific literature and popular conversations targeted many immigrant “groups,” and Jews were neither the most discussed or the most maligned. My interest here, however, is in the construction of Jewishness, so I concentrate on its relationship to science and medicine.


19 There is a rich literature on race in early twentieth century America. See, for example, Matthew Frye Jacobson, Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998).


21 The physical, mental, and emotional states associated together under the heading “neurosyphilis,” for instance, no longer constitute an ailment with social or medical recognizability.

22 Pediatrics (Pediatric Publishing Company, 1912), 42.
30 Ibid., 8.
33 When the *New York Times* interviewed Rabbi Josef Elstein, for instance, he said: "I am a Holocaust survivor. I was born in the middle of the second World War. I hope that I am not a suspect for practicing eugenics. We are trying to have healthy children." "Testing Curbs Some Genetic Diseases," *The New York Times* (February 17, 2010).
35 He was profiled in the *LA Times* and interviewed for numerous radio shows. See also Dell Sanchez, *Out from Hiding: Evidences of Sephardic Roots Among Latinos* (New York: iUniverse, 2010).
37 David Kelly, "Clearing the Fog over Latino Links to Judaism in New Mexico," *LA Times* (December 5, 2004).
39 Ibid., 197–99.
40 Ibid., 203.
41 Sanchez, *Out from Hiding*, 41.
42 Ibid., 49.
44 Kelly, "Clearing the Fog."
Who Is a Jew?
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