

Yizkor: Jewish DNA

Category: Holidays, Yom Kippur

What is it that connects Jews from all over the world?

Gene Testing

Good Yom Tov!

Do you remember the craze of 23andMe?

Well, 23andMe is a genetics company that offers home testing of your DNA—and it's become very popular. The test costs under \$100 dollars. You order the test, spit into a small container and ship it off to a laboratory—where they map your personal genome and tell you all about your ancestry. With the test, you can find out what percentage of your genes are Ashkenazic Jewish, European, or whatever. And in fact, people sometimes find out that they are several percentage points of various nationalities that they would have never thought of.

In addition to that, 23andMe (which is named for the 23 chromosomes of each cell) will also compare your DNA to others in their giant DNA database of other customers (anonymously, of course)—and if they come up with someone who has the same genetic profile as you, or one that is very similar, it's a sign that that individual very well may be a blood relative.

Along those lines, there was a story going around the media some time ago about a man who discovered that he had a daughter whose existence he knew nothing about—simply because he took a 23andMe test.

In a related vein, a Chabad colleague told me how one of his congregants took the test together with his own brother. Well, after a short time, the man's brother called him and told him dejectedly, "The whole thing is bogus!" Why so? "Because they told me that my results prove that I have a brother named John Smith!" But when the man heard that, he started laughing—admitting that when he had sent in his sample, he had submitted it under the alias, "John Smith." Upon hearing that, the man's brother declared the opposite—that that proves that the test is in fact accurate.

Now, people have even suggested to me that I take the 23andMe test myself, but I passed—for starters, I don't want to find out that I'm 73 percent Ashkenazi Jewish, 21 percent ethnic Russian, and six percent who knows what.

But the real reason it bothers me is that I might accidentally discover another bunch of cousins. Thank G-d, I'm blessed with quite a few of those already, and I'm not looking for any more! For me, it's a case of "leave good enough alone".

Is There a Jewish Gene?

My friends, it may be true that there is an Ashkenazi gene. Science has discovered that Jews whose ancestors came from Eastern Europe share very similar genes that are distinct from all other Eastern European nationalities.

Still, scientists say that there's no such thing as a "Jewish gene."

An Ashkenazic Jewish gene, yes—that can be identified from a distance...but a single gene shared by every single Jew does not exist.

Why is that so? It's true that the Jewish Nation comes from a specific race, from one clan. But Judaism is not racist. Judaism is prepared to accept any individual who is prepared to convert under Jewish law and accept upon himself or herself the Jewish religion. It does not matter what that person's skin color is, what extraction he or she comes from, and what part of the world that person originates from. If he or she converts by Jewish law, he or she will be accepted by the Jewish Nation with open arms. As the Rebbe says in a Sichah (Sichos Kodesh Vol. II, pg. 474, Chof Av, 5732): "According to Judaism, race is a non-issue—any gentile who converts by Halachah becomes a Jew." And without a doubt, in the course of the generations, millions of converts joined the Jewish Nation—and all of them are equally Jewish as the rest of us despite certainly not sharing the same genes.

What indeed unites the Sephardic Jew with the Ashkenazic Jew, or the Jew from Poland with the Jew from India?

Well, the answer for that, my friends, can be found right in the heart of Likutei Amarim, the first section of the Tanya—in fact, in Chapter 32 (which in Hebrew is "lev," or "heart"). There, Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi, the founder of Chabad,

writes: “It is on account of this common root in the One G-d that all of Israel are called ‘brothers’—in the full sense of the word.”

Every Jew has a soul that is truly “a part of G-d above”—and it is that spiritual DNA that we all equally share. Every single Jew, no matter who he or she may be, has this unique bond with G-d like that of a child to a parent—and it is that that we all share; this special love, this attraction to G-d. This is what connects and unifies us.

A Spiritual Gene

But if being Jewish is not a matter of race, then how is it that we say at the start of each Amidah prayer: “Blessed are You, G-d, our L-rd, and L-rd of our Patriarchs, the L-rd of Abraham, the L-rd of Isaac and the L-rd of Jacob”? How are exactly are they our fathers if we are not their biological children?

The Tanya explains that Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov bequeathed to us not a biological inheritance but a spiritual inheritance that we carry within. Regarding Avraham, it is said, “Avraham, ohavai”—Avraham, my beloved. Avraham symbolizes the character trait of love for G-d—“the hidden love present in the heart of all Jews, which is an inheritance to us from our Patriarchs,” as Chapter 18 of the Tanya explains, and indeed, love for every human being. Avraham taught us how to love.

Next, Yitzchak symbolizes the trait of fear—the fear of G-d which includes a certain measure of respect for G-d. Out of respect for G-d, we don’t do things against His Will—what the Jewish lexicon otherwise calls “Jewish guilt,” referring to the idea that if you don’t do something Jewish, it internally bothers you. And the same thing applies with respect to other people. It’s not enough to love the other—to have to respect the will and the individuality of the other, too.

Finally, we come to Yaakov, who symbolizes the character trait of rachamim, or mercy. Mercy begins where love ends—even when you’re not up to loving someone, you can have mercy on someone. And so you still work with that person.

And it is these wonderful traits, love, fear and mercy, that were given to us by Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov—and this is our spiritual DNA that connects each

Jew to the other.

We've all had something like the following experience happen to us: You'll be on a flight or a cruise and your spouse will say something like, "I think that couple sitting right there is Jewish!" And then a day or two later, you bump into that couple again and somehow, you figure out that they are indeed Jewish, too. Now, what exactly it is that singles them out from everyone else around? That's something that's hard to explain—but it's a fact. We Jews are different. You'll find us anywhere in the world but despite that, we're still different (and we manage to find each other!).

The Jewish Nation invented globalization before the word even existed—we are a nation without territory and borders; there is some spiritual gene that connects and binds us all.

A Jewish Trust

A Chasidic Jew named Max Cohen, who lives in England, opened a business in Bangladesh. He found a Muslim partner in that country and together, they started a successful enterprise. The partner who lived in Bangladesh managed the day-to-day operations, and Mr. Cohen would fly in regularly on the direct Manchester-Bangladesh route.

Well, one day, Mr. Cohen met a rabbi in Manchester, and when he told him about his business in Bangladesh, the rabbi told him that he should know that there was a Jew who lived here in Manchester named Kevin Weit who lives in Bangladesh today. There, the rabbi continued, Mr. Weit represents a business whose headquarters is in England—and so, if Mr. Cohen would have the opportunity, the rabbi asked him to try to connect with him and perhaps draw him a bit closer to Judaism.

So Max Cohen visited Bangladesh one or two times, but for various reasons, he did not succeed in meeting Kevin Weit. One day, Max and his Muslim partner flew to a major convention in Germany to man their company booth. One afternoon, Max Cohen was at the booth by himself; his Muslim partner was not there at the moment. Suddenly, a man showed up and asked him, "Do you live in Bangladesh? It can't be that I'm the only Jew there!" Max Cohen gladly shook his hand, introduced himself and asked the man, "And what's your name?"

Well, the man answered, “Kevin Weit.”

Max immediately told him that a rabbi in Manchester had told him about him a long time ago. “I tried to locate you there but I had no success—but I’m very happy to meet you here!”

While they were speaking, the Muslim partner showed up. Max wanted to introduce them to one another—but the partner then said, “I know Kevin! He’s one of our suppliers!” It turned out that the two knew each other for quite some time. And then, Max Cohen happily said to his Muslim partner, “You do know that Kevin is Jewish, too, don’t you?”

When Kevin heard that, he practically froze in place. He had lived in Bangladesh for ten years and had never revealed that secret to anyone. He reasoned that in a Muslim country, it’s best for no one to know that he was Jewish—but here, in one second, the Chasidic Max Cohen blew his cover! But what’s done is done, and there was no going back—and so they departed on friendly terms.

One year later, the company that Kevin represented in Bangladesh suddenly went bankrupt.

However, the laborers in the local factory wouldn’t hear of it—they just wanted to get paid! Kevin Weit was in his office on site, virtually taken hostage by the employees, who informed him in no uncertain terms that he wasn’t going anywhere until they got their cash.

So he called his boss in England, who told him, “Listen—the company no longer even exists! I’m sorry, but I can’t help you.” Kevin Weit found himself in a very difficult situation.

Sitting in his office, he thought, “Who could save me now?” He called his Muslim acquaintance, Max Cohen’s partner, and told him the situation. He asked him for a loan so that he could pay his workers, and he promised him that when he’d get back to England, he’d pay him back. To his joy, the Muslim partner agreed to loan him the cash.

In fact, the Muslim man came personally to the factory with the cash, freed him from his workers, and then took him to the airport, bought him a plane ticket and escorted him to the plane. Before they parted ways, the partner told Kevin, “I did

all of that for you because you're Jewish and I can rely on you to return the money."

Well, when he got back to England, his first phone call was to Max Cohen—thanking him for having informed his partner that he was Jewish! Today, Kevin Weit lives in Shanghai, China, where he is affiliated with the Chabad center run by Rabbi Shalom Greenberg. (Thanks to Rabbi Avraham Greenberg for this story.)

Thank Your Parents

My friends, we have a unique gift from G-d that binds us all. And we should not be embarrassed by this gift. On the contrary—we must be proud that we are Jewish. And when we are, it will specifically be the non-Jews who value us, respect us and even expect more from us, because we are children of Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov.

We now stand just before the Yizkor prayer, in which we connect with our parents. So at this opportunity, it is incumbent upon us to thank them, not just for the genes they gave us but so much more—for having given to us the most valuable gift of all: our Jewish DNA.

Good Yom Tov!