

BIOLOGICAL DISCOURSE AND AMERICAN JEWISH IDENTITY

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For a century preceding World War II, the dominant worldview in Europe and the United States divided people into racial groups, each with defined physical and mental traits that were viewed as biologically determined. Scientists argued that individuals' skin color or facial structure disclosed their internal characteristics such as intelligence and even social values. Since the defeat of Nazi Germany, however, the idea of a Jewish race has been largely discredited among scientists, social theorists and producers and consumers of popular culture. Hitler's reliance on racial notions of Jewishness to justify his extermination policy made any application of the term "race" in reference to Jews appear sinister and anti-Semitic. After World War II, racial distinctions referred to color only while "ethnicity," a new term that highlighted cultural differences, defined Jews and other white European groups.

Even though the idea of Jewish racial identity has been delegitimated, contemporary American Jews persist in relying on biological discourse to understand their Jewishness. In *The Jew Within: Self, Family, and Community in America* (2000), sociologist Steven M. Cohen and religious studies scholar Arnold Eisen argue that moderately affiliated Jews manifest a high degree of tribalism, a sense that Judaism is in their blood. Within the last few years, *Lilith*

magazine had two articles on the growing numbers of infertile Jewish couples who are seeking Jewish women's eggs for in vitro fertilization not for religious reasons but to maximize the chances that their children would resemble them. Similarly, in her

inalienable nature of their Jewishness. If it is surprising that unaffiliated Jews emphasize biological essentialism as the basis of their Jewish identities; it is even more surprising that adult children of intermarried parents would view their Jewishness as an ascribed identity. The availability of options is clearly central in families where more than one religion is present; nevertheless the majority used some form of biological language to discuss their Jewish identities. Our interviewees often employed the rhetoric of genetics to describe how being Jewish is an internal and essential part of their identities. In fact, the genetic essentialism of their Jewish identities led some, including adult children of intermarriage, to question whether

or not a person could convert and become "really" Jewish. The biologically innate nature of Judaism was reinforced by our respondents' claim that Jewishness is revealed through distinctive identity markers such as intellectual attributes or typical Jewish physical features. Comments about innate Jewish intelligence as well as about hair, eyes, and noses surfaced often in the interviews.

As sociologists, we are interested in hereditary traits not because they are intrinsically significant but because in their narratives the unaffiliated Jews and children of intermarriage repeatedly used biological terminology. In reality,



Jews, race, and genes in the headlines. Courtesy of *The Forward* and Michael Lerner.

survey of contemporary texts such as encyclopedias and the "Jewhoo" website, historian Susan Glenn argues that editors of encyclopedias and biographical reference books employ "blood logic" in their selection of subjects. For example, the editors of an encyclopedia on American Jewish women included as Jews people whose parents were both Jewish even if they had rejected Jewish identity or converted to another religion.

In our recent study of adult Jews who had never affiliated with a synagogue and of adult children of intermarriage, we repeatedly heard from our respondents a strong emphasis on the inherent,

Jews are heterogeneous in regards to type of hair, eye color, and nose shape. In a 2002 interview with *The Forward*, Sander Gilman, author of *The Jews' Body*, rejected all stereotypes about the Jewish

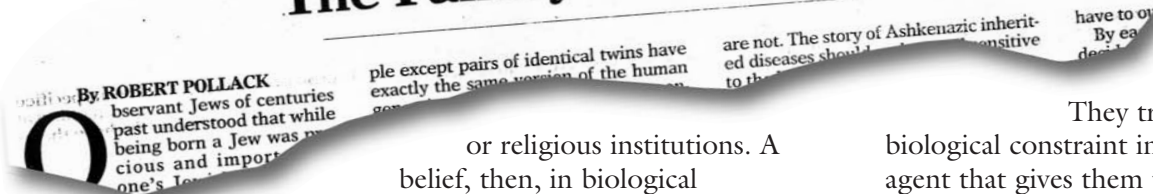
nose except one: "In 35 years of

working on this topic, I have never seen a Jew without a nose." There is no such thing as a Jewish gene and since Judaism is a religion that accepts converts, Jewishness is not a biological construct. Yet, despite

Jewish than those who intermarry, and Jewish activists are not more Jewish than are Jews who do not affiliate with any ethnic

hereditary inborn traits, our interviewees interpreted Jewish genetics as providing them with a large endowment of

The Fallacy of Biological Judaism



or religious institutions. A belief, then, in biological uniqueness offers an ethnic anchor when boundaries between Jews and non-Jews blur. As American Jews increasingly live in communities where intermarriage is commonplace, and ritual observance and institutional affiliation are

possibilities. They transformed biological constraint into a social agent that gives them the freedom to choose to be Jewish even if they do not believe in the religion or observe traditional rituals. Over and over again, they weaved together contradictory beliefs about biological determinism and individual autonomy to create a new discourse of "genetic freedom."

IF JEWISHNESS IS A MATTER OF GENES, THEN ORTHODOX JEWS ARE NOT MORE JEWISH THAN SECULAR JEWS, ENDOGAMOUS JEWS ARE NOT MORE JEWISH THAN THOSE WHO INTERMARRY, AND JEWISH ACTIVISTS ARE NOT MORE JEWISH THAN ARE JEWS WHO DO NOT AFFILIATE WITH ANY ETHNIC OR RELIGIOUS INSTITUTIONS.

these realities, essentialist understandings of Jewishness are alive and well and remain socially significant. Why has Jewish biological discourse persisted into the twenty-first century?

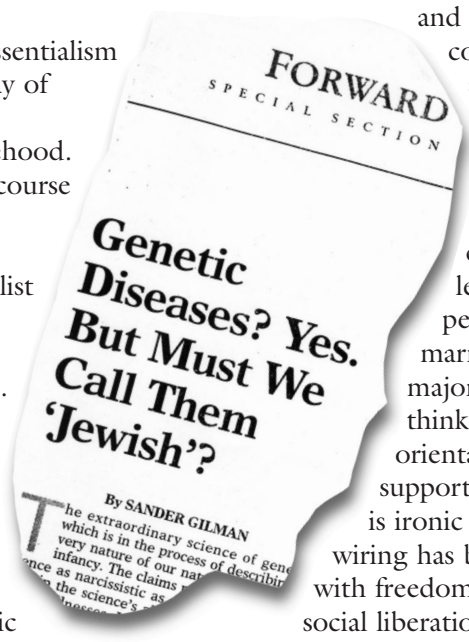
Genetics may be viewed as a concrete, certain, logical, and comforting answer for Jews seeking to understand what it means to be Jewish. It also allows Jews to claim a Jewish identity without having to participate in any religious rituals or practice. Furthermore, the belief that Jewish identity is inalienable reassures Jews that their Jewishness is absolute and cannot be increased or lessened by any level of practice or belief. If Jewishness is a matter of genes, then Orthodox Jews are not more Jewish than secular Jews, endogamous Jews are not more

declining, genetic essentialism offers a powerful way of claiming a link with tradition and peoplehood. While biological discourse provides Jews with meaning and community, essentialist understandings of Jewishness do not disrupt everyday life.

Some observers may view our respondents' emphasis on biology as evidence for a kind of "genetic fatalism" that has become a convenient and powerful way to remove responsibility for human behavior. But far from claiming to be helpless in the face of their

American Jews are not the only ones to employ this discourse of genetic freedom. The shifting terminology from "sexual preference" to "sexual orientation" suggests that homosexuality is not a choice but an immutable part of one's being. Within the gay community, genetic determinism frees people from social expectations and offers a

compelling argument for liberation. Of Americans who believe that sexual preference can be altered, less than 20 percent support gay marriage, whereas a majority of those who think that sexual orientation is inborn support gay marriage. It is ironic that genetic wiring has become associated with freedom, autonomy and social liberation.



Although previous generations of Jews struggled to become "white folks" indistinguishable from the dominant majority group,

contemporary American Jews are claiming difference, including genetic difference, to separate themselves from white Christians. Having no other option but to check off the “white” box on various forms has become emblematic of how Jews are assumed to be white. Not being able to distinguish themselves from white Christians leaves Jews few options to assert their Jewish identities proudly. The scientific language of heredity has become a convenient and powerful strategy that legitimates notions of exceptionalism and allows Jews to be special and not just “vanilla.” If Jews are genetically distinct in terms of looks and intelligence, then they are *ipso facto* not white.

Just as race science had once validated the concept of a Jewish race, modern science gives credence to the idea that there is a biological basis to Jewishness. We are living in an age of genetics where we regularly read about discoveries related to the power of genes. According to scientific reports, there are genes that predispose people toward certain diseases, weight gain, alcoholism, and cigarette addiction, and there are genes that influence whether an individual has artistic abilities or will be homosexual. A recent finding reported in the June 15, 2006 edition of the *New York Times* under the title “That Wild Streak? Maybe It Runs in the Family” even links risk-taking behavior to a gene.

Concomitant with the burgeoning expansion of the field of genetics, this microscopic unit has become idealized and mythologized in American pop culture, books, films, soap operas, cartoons, magazines and everyday conversations. “It’s in my genes,” people shrug in explaining why they are afraid of roller coasters or why their houses are cluttered. For sociologists Dorothy Nelkin and Susan Lindee,

the gene has become a “cultural icon,” viewed as the primary determinant of human traits, both physical and behavioral.

Three weeks after the *New York Times* article on the possible link between risk-taking behavior and genes, the newspaper published an article exploring how race may be implicated in genetic differences that affect people’s health. Both the general and Jewish presses report on “Jewish diseases” including Tay-Sachs, breast and colon cancer, as well as schizophrenia and bipolar disorder. Although researchers are careful to point out that the data on illnesses demonstrate correlations rather than causal factors, and to assert that there is no such thing as a “Jewish gene,” many American Jews nevertheless believe in the genetic basis of their Jewishness.

Although race science lost its validity and “race” disappeared as a term for self-definition among American Jews, the idea that Jewish identity is primordial persists in contemporary America. Jews continue to believe that their Jewishness is both hereditary and permanently fixed. Whether Jews employ the rhetoric of genetics—as they do in contemporary America—or rely on terms such as blood and race—as they did during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—their understandings of Jewish identity rely on biological discourse. By substituting new terminology but maintaining a biological emphasis, race, albeit an illegitimate basis for making a Jewish identity claim, has become relegitimated.

We do not reduce Jewish identity to biological factors. Choice, of course, is central to any discussion of American ethnicity and religion. America offers a supermarket of religious alternatives in which a person can switch denominations, freely choose which rituals to practice

and whether or not to engage with any religious traditions. The existence of four branches of American Judaism—Reform, Conservative, Reconstructionist, and Orthodox—as well as Hanukkah bushes and Jewish Buddhists testify to the salience of choice in American Jewish life. We argue, however, that for contemporary American Jews, being Jewish is not only about choice, a sacred American ideal, but is also perceived as an ascribed identity that is a matter of biology and genes. The emphasis on choice may be less true for groups for whom religious and ethnic identities are intertwined, such as Jews. How to be Jewish is a matter of choice. Whether or not to be Jewish, however, is often perceived as a given and hence as a biological imperative. American Jews, who are both an ethnic and religious group, face the challenge of balancing their fundamental American belief that they are free to pick and choose among a variety of identities and practices with their conviction that an essential Jewishness is part of their very nature.

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