

# The Fallacy of Biological Judaism

By Robert Pollack

Observant Jews of centuries past understood that while being born a Jew was precious and important to one's Jewishness, it was not necessary and certainly not sufficient for a full Jewish life. The central ideas and actions of a Jew have always had to be taught and learned, never inherited. Nevertheless, until recently many reasonable people could still make the argument, in the absence of evidence to the contrary, that since Jews accept the covenants made with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the genomes of Jews must somehow be different from the genomes of all other people, containing unique versions of many genes — that is, that Jews are a biological family.

Until recent advances in DNA diagnosis allowed the question of Jewish genealogy to be asked directly, we based our claim to common ancestry on common laws, habits, language, texts and historical memories. Genes of Ashkenazi Jews are interesting to medical science, because Jews from Ashkenaz — an area that covered much of Central and Eastern Europe — descend from a rather small number of families who survived the pogroms of the mid-1600s.

Unlike asking "Are Jews a family?", as historians have traditionally done, geneticists seeking to advise Ashkenazic families are also, in passing, asking, "Do Jews all share the same versions of one or more genes?" — a question with a testable, precise answer. As no two people except pairs of identical twins have exactly the same version of the human genomic text, this claim could be confirmed or rejected by a search for versions of the human genome shared by all Jews and no other people.

Given the historical context of the Nazi "experiment," it is all the more remarkable that Jews all over the world have been flocking to the new technology of DNA-based diagnosis, eager to lend their individual genomes — each a surviving data point from the terrible experiment in negative selection — to a revisiting of this issue of biological Judaism.

At a recent meeting of the Association of Orthodox Jewish scientists and the Columbia Center for the Study of Science and Religion, it became clear that Jewish curiosity has provided sufficient genetic material to give a perfectly clear negative answer: There is no support in the genomes of today's Jews for the calumnious and calamitous model of biological Judaism. Though there are many deleterious versions of genes shared within

