

Being Part of Jacob

Stories about Jacob are also stories about Jews.

וְאַתָּה יִשְׂרָאֵל עַבְדִּי יַעֲקֹב אֲשֶׁר בָּחַרְתִּיךָ, God says in Isaiah, “And you are Israel, my servant, Jacob, whom I have chosen, seed of Abraham, whom I loved” (Isaiah 41:8). In this text, as in many others, the name “Jacob” is used to refer to all the Jews. Thus a few chapters later in Isaiah: “And now, thus says the Eternal, the One who created you, Jacob, and who formed you, Israel. Do not fear, for I shall redeem you. I have called you by name; you are Mine” (Isaiah 43:1). And other examples abound.

So this week’s Torah portion, which introduces the character of Jacob, is also an origin story for the Jews. Isaac marries Rebecca and prays for her to become pregnant. When she does, God tells her, “Two nations are in your womb” (Gen. 25:23); and soon she gives birth: first to Esau and then to his twin brother, Jacob. Jacob convinces his brother to sell his birthright for a bowl of stew and later steals his blessing by masquerading as Esau at their blind father’s deathbed. When Esau vows revenge, Rebecca convinces Isaac to send Jacob away – to her birthplace in Haran – and Isaac sees Jacob off with a new blessing of his own.

These early stories – and several of the later ones – give us pause. Jacob is a trickster, even a cheat; *this* is our namesake and the founder of our people?

The answer, again and again in our tradition, is yes. As God says in the book of Malachi: “‘I have loved you,’ says the Eternal. ‘Yet you say, “How have you loved us?” Was not Esau Jacob’s brother?’ says the Eternal; ‘yet I loved Jacob’” (Malachi 1:2). Yes, Jacob lies and steals and looks out mainly for himself – but God loves him anyway. How profound is this promise of love, a powerful reminder that our own failures and faults could never turn God away.

And yet the question remains: How do we Jews, countless centuries later, find our own way into this special love? On what basis do we claim our stake in Jacob’s promise? In other words: What makes us – what makes *anyone* – Jewish?

Often, we say that Jews descend from other Jews. Or, to be traditional about it, Jews descend from Jewish mothers. We imagine a long line of ancestry pointing back, if not to Jacob himself, then to those who first called themselves *Y’hudim*, Judeans, or Jews. This common genealogical pool has inspired many in today’s world to take an interest in Jewish genetics. Services like 23andMe and AncestryDNA test for genetic

markers common to Ashkenazi Jews; and the so-called “Cohen haplotype” reveals a genetic connection among Kohanim, Jews who descend from the ancient priestly caste. According to Michael Gottlieb, former Associate Director of Science at the Foundation for the National Institutes of Health, “the revolution in genetics and genomics is telling us a lot about ourselves as the Jewish people, including our documented history, our migration patterns in the diaspora, our biology and clinical conditions, and, questionably, our relationship to Judaism.”¹ In other words, we can learn a lot about where Jews came from – about where *we* came from – by looking at our genes. The principles of Jewish descent, seen through the lens of modern genetic science, reveal biological links among many diverse members of this large extended family.

But that’s only one part of the Jewish story. Look again at Jacob and Esau: Here are two people with virtually identical genes, the Bible’s first set of twins.² Yet one is *in*, and one is *out*. They both descend from the same parents, so this origin story suggests that genetics can only be part of the story of Jewish identity.

Indeed, the possibility of conversion defies the notion that Jewishness is simply inherited. In the Bible, women, in effect, became Children of Israel by marrying Israelite men; and in the paradigmatic story of Ruth, we discover the possibility of choosing to join the Jewish people. For the Rabbis, voluntary acceptance of mitzvot made a person completely Jewish regardless of their heritage, demonstrating that Judaism is not, essentially, biological.

What, then, do we do with Jewish genetics? Evolutionary biologist Richard Lewontin suggests that ties to distant relations can tell us about people we once were connected to, but it’s important not to lose sight of all the intervening history that took place between the generations: “what is, on one hand, an advantage for historical information about an ancestor in the remote past is devoid of information about subsequent history, a history that may dominate the present.”³ In other words, we may know or discover that a long-ago relative was Jewish; but the choices they made and the choices and circumstances of the generations in-between matter a lot. Indeed, if we put too much emphasis on genetic ties to Jewishness, we might overshadow the crucial aspects of identification, conversion, and choice that contributes to being Jewish. As scholar of religion Rachel B. Gross writes:

¹ “The Molecular Genetic Basis of Jewish Geography” (Sinai and Synapses, <https://sinaiandsynapses.org/content/the-molecular-genetic-basis-of-jewish-geography/>).

² The Torah will name one other pair of twins, Judah’s sons Peretz and Zerah (Gen. 38:27-30). Midrash will also identify several other sets of twins (https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/3840320/jewish/Twins-in-the-Bible.htm), including, in a few sources, Rachel and Leah. Seder Olam Rabbah (2nd/3rd century CE), based on math related to Leah and Rachel’s imagined ages at their deaths, suggests that they were twins (section 2). As well, R. Baruch HaLevi Epstein (1860-1941) in his *Torah Temimah* suggests that the extraneous word “two” in וּלְלֶכֶן שְׁתֵּי בָנוֹת, “Laban had *two* daughters” (Gen. 29:16) “teaches that they were equivalent” (מורה שהן שוות).

³ “Is There a Jewish Gene?” (*The New York Review*, Dec. 6, 2012, <https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2012/12/06/is-there-a-jewish-gene/>)

While DNA testing can broaden who is included as a Jew, it also establishes boundaries, raising questions about the Jewishness of converts to Judaism or those adopted into Jewish families. DNA testing cannot tell you if you identify as Jewish, but it can be one tool among many in interpreting the role that ancestry plays in your identity.⁴

All this to say that, like Jacob himself, we become Jews not only through our ancestry but also through our relationships: Our relationship with God, yes, but also our relationship with others in this sacred family as well as our relationship with Jewish culture and tradition. Genetics and genealogy can inform the way we identify, but they alone don't make us Jews.

So it is *as Jews* that we read ourselves into stories about Jacob. Jacob and his many wives and numerous children become our mythic ancestors when we receive those stories as scripture. We need not literally descend from Jacob to belong to the House of Jacob – and even if we *do* possess longstanding Jewish lineage, there's still more work to be done to establish and affirm our Jewish identity, as Jacob himself models in our texts.

The story of Jacob and his family ties is also a story about ourselves. As many of us prepare for holiday gatherings in the week ahead, may we also be mindful of the significance of family – both biological and chosen. May we take inspiration from Jacob that our identity is more than the stuff of our cells, and we may we commit ourselves to making the most of our relationships of meaning and connection.

⁴ “Can you tell if you're Jewish from your DNA?” in *Judaism in Five Minutes* (Equinox 2025, p. 161).