

Some articles from Alon's collection on Jewish intelligence

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A conversation with Jon Entine

By David B. Green

Tags: Jewish identity, Jon Entine >>

Jon Entine is the author of "Abraham's Children: Race, Identity, and the DNA of the Chosen People" (Grand Central Publishing, 420 pages, \$28).

A Cincinnati-based journalist and professor, Entine, 55, became interested in the genetics of Jews after learning that the type of breast and ovarian cancer that had killed his grandmother, mother and aunt, and then struck his older sister, was especially common among Jewish women, and could be traced to the presence of a genetic mutation (BRCA2) preponderant among Jews. Having a young daughter himself, Entine decided to undergo genetic testing at the same time that he began to research the link between Jewish identity and DNA.

The result is the book, which may be the first to examine the history of the Jewish people with the benefit of the knowledge gained from the Human Genome Project and related research over the past 20 years. Like other populations that have remained largely closed to outside genetic influences - at least until recently - almost all Jews, no matter where in the world they now live, share certain genetic markers, suggesting that they descend from common ancestors. For example, less than a decade ago it was found that

traditional Jews who identify themselves as Kohanim (members of the priestly tribe) indeed may very well be descended from one individual who lived approximately 3500 years ago, possibly Aaron, brother of Moses. Studies have shown that approximately 60 percent of all contemporary Kohanim share a common set of genetic mutations, as compared with only 3 percent of the general Jewish population.

One chapter in "Abraham's Children" deals with the prickly question of Jews and IQ.

Entine cites many studies showing that Ashkenazi Jews have higher-than-average scores on standardized intelligence tests, and examines a variety of theories for the finding. He also discusses research suggesting that the same genetic mutations that contribute to certain intellectual abilities may also be responsible for diseases that effect neurological and brain development, including Tay-Sachs and Gaucher (as well as breast cancer), that are disproportionately represented among Jews. Not surprisingly, most of the attention that has been paid to the book has focused on this section, a source of some chagrin to Entine, who conversed with Haaretz by phone and e-mail from his home in Ohio.

Considering what a serious and provocative book you've written, you have received relatively slight coverage in the mainstream press.

Discussing the genetic distinctiveness of populations, Jews or any other group, is a hot-button issue for many news outlets. "Abraham's Children" suggests that there exist meaningful differences between populations, maybe even "races," and that's a taboo subject. It's on the edge of acceptable popular

discourse, although scientists discuss this of Nazi science hadn't been completely all the time. I think a high percentage of different than that of contemporary reviewers are Jewish and liberal, and genetics, it also was based on pseudo-liberal dogma is that we don't talk about science. It's a misplaced fear. That's like racial differences. I understand that there saying we shouldn't have studied the atom because now we have the bomb. is a traditional Jewish commitment to egalitarianism and identification with the underdog, which comes out of the Jews' But we also have nuclear energy and radiation technology. The very premise of having been discriminated against throughout so much of their history. my book is that we need to have a constructive dialogue and find the language to discuss the genetic Many Jews carry that torch of fighting revolution and human differences. That's against discrimination, I do myself, and where genetic research is headed over that's a wonderful aspect of Jewishness. next few decades, and if we can't discuss this taboo, it doesn't bode well for our

But believing that everyone should be treated fairly and equitably does not mean that everyone is created with equal abilities and characteristics. We are not blank slates for culture and the environment to write upon. We are shaped by DNA. Human groups evolved under different evolutionary pressures. We see the effects in body types and other physical features. We see it in disease proclivities. Scientists are exploring whether these group differences show up in behavior or even brain architecture.

These are controversial questions to ask, but that's what science does. Anyone who reads my book knows that I don't talk about Jewish superiority. It's absurd that some people who haven't even read the book label it as such. I hate to call this reaction political correctness, because that's such a loaded phrase. Rather, it's the belief that censorship about uncomfortable issues is acceptable. As a person committed to careful and open inquiry, and robust debate, I'm skeptical when anyone suggests that censorship is justified. Taboos end up perpetuating the worst and most simplistic stereotypes.

Some people say, isn't population genetic research akin to Hitler's medical program? That's absurd. Even if the goals

Why do you feel this is so important?

The implications of this knowledge are vast for the curing of diseases. Genetic diseases result from mutations - mistakes in the human genome. They originate in one person. If that person lives in a population isolated by geography (Icelanders), cultures (Gypsies), or religion (the Amish, Parsis and Jews for example), then they quickly spread to others in that group. Western Africans were one of the most insular populations in the world until the slave trade. Jews are a genetic goldmine. Even though they are scattered around the world, their cultural and religious traditions have, until recently, resulted in a close, almost tribe-like, insularity. Since the founding of Ashkenazi Jewry a thousand or so years ago and until recent decades, the rate of non-Jewish lineages that have slipped into the Jewish gene pool, per generation, is estimated at 0.5 percent.

When the first sketch of the human genome was revealed in 2001, president

Clinton declared that all humans were 99.9 percent the same, implying that genetic differences between populations were trivial. I call that the "Kum Ba Yah" phase, because scientifically, that statement didn't mean very much. After all, humans and apes are almost 99 percent identical, too. Recent, more sophisticated genetic research is telling us that each population is distinguished by chunks of genes called haplotypes. This is where human differences are found - superficial characteristics, but deeper ones too, including behavioral and disease differences. Some of these gene sets distinguish Jews - that is, we can look at the DNA and tell from haplotype chunks who's a Jew.

This research is going to continue because it's essential to cracking the origins of diseases. In the near future, we're going to learn a lot about human differences. I thought that Jews would be the most likely to embrace this news because of the vast potential benefits to humankind. But I have found a great reluctance to discuss the subject for fear that the science may be misused.

Your first book was "Taboo: Why Black Athletes Dominate Sports and Why We're Afraid to Talk About It." Now you write a book about the Jewish "race" and Jewish IQ. If anything, these seem like sensationalistic subjects, natural best sellers.

On the contrary. I address these issues because I'm a responsible journalist, not to pander to readers. If I had left out the Jewish IQ material from "Abraham's Children," I believe it would have been an instant best seller.

When "Taboo" was published, in 2000, it was one of the most frequently reviewed books of the year, and it got many great

reviews. But it was only a minor bestseller. Some people didn't believe discussing human differences, as apparent as they are on the playing field, is appropriate.

With the new book, my publisher and I were very concerned that the focus would shift from the main theme of the book - the epic story of the founding peoples of Judaism and Christianity - to the side issue of IQ. It's too early to tell how the discussion will unfold. There is such a thing as liberal censorship when it comes to acknowledging the genetic basis of IQ. In a recent series of articles, William Saletan [of Slate magazine, who has also written about Jews and genetics] called it "liberal creationism."

Isn't there something ironic in your reporting this at a time when Jews in the U.S. have an unprecedentedly high intermarriage rate?


Because of intermarriage, we are losing our genetic distinctiveness. I am concerned about Jews losing their cultural distinctiveness, yes, but we can be proud and appreciative of the threads of Judaism, which includes our ancestry, even if Judaism as a tribal religion is disappearing.

"Tribal" makes it sound primitive, don't you think?

Not at all, it just literally refers to the fact that the ancient Israelites were members of the same tribe, who lived together in a small region. At that time in history, all religions were tribal. It just means that we had common ancestry. Judaism is the only major surviving tribal religion in existence.

But in some ways it's good that we're going to lose our genetic distinctiveness -

we are becoming Jewish "mutts" - because it gives us what geneticists call "hybrid vigor." From a purely medical perspective, intermarriage will help weed out some Jewish genetic disorders that have destroyed so many lives. It's affected me personally: My daughter is a "mutt." And because of that, she has only a 50:50 chance of carrying the "Jewish" breast cancer mutation. I'm an optimist. Jewish history will always be a part of our culture, and Judaism as a religion will survive in some form. DNA is one important way of preserving, forever, our tradition

Comment by [Jon Entine](#) 
[2007-11-01 02:37:39](#)

Sorry I was away for the debate for so long. I've been on the road, talking about Abraham's Children.

I'm actually flabbergasted that anyone would suggest that the hundreds of studies that show, definitively, the huge genetic component of IQ, are unscientific or racist. What planet do you live on? Studies of identical twins reared apart show without question that nature plays the smallest role in shaping IQ. The link between IQ and performance—not just in school/universities but in life, is incredibly strong. The US military has long used IQ tests as a essential basis for accepting or rejecting recruits—and assigning people to different career paths. They've found huge correlations between IQ tests and performance.

Let me state this clearly: You would be hard pressed to find a top flight psychometrician who rejects the clear link between genetics and IQ.

As for the issue of Ashkenazi Jewish IQ, that too is unquestioned. Ashkenazi Jews score higher on IQ tests...as much as a standard deviation higher than average—an astounding figure. This is a fact.

Are there cultural reasons for it? Well, there are no quality empirical studies that I've been able to find that persuasively show that culture/environment alone can significantly raise IQ scores, despite the dissimulation that usually accompanies discussions of this issue.

Culture does play a huge role in shaping gene evolution however. The spread of the lactose tolerance mutation has occurred in cultures in which people drink milk and consume cheeses. There are African tribal communities, side by side, one that's lactose tolerant and one that's lactose intolerant. The difference? The lactose tolerant ones, such as the Masai, have long had a tradition of goat herding and consuming dairy products. **That contributed to better health and allowed the mutation to become fixed in that community.**

The genes that impact any other behavior or characteristic, including what we call "intelligence," would be subject to similar evolutionary pressures. Ashkenazi Jews have had a consistent culture linked to book learning since at least the end of the first millennium (Sephardic Jewry had it, but that tradition collapsed during the extended period of the persecution of Jews in Iberia after the "Ornament of History" period in early medieval Spain). Sons and daughters of rabbis and money lenders were married to the 'best and the brightest' and had more children than the less successful Jews. That's how the genes spread.

There may very well be another genetic component as well: Three American scientists — none of whom is Jewish — has proposed a testable theory that certain genetic diseases arose in Ashkenazi Jews because the same genes are responsible at least in part for intelligence. The study says that as many as 19 disorders, divided into two categories—spingolipid disorders such as Tay-Sachs and Gaucher, and DNA repair disorders such as breast cancer and Bloom syndrome —provide the benefit of increased intelligence, despite their negative effects. They promote the growth and interconnection of brain cells. These disease mutations were not passed out of the human genome because their negative effects were counterbalanced by “positive selection.”

Is this theory correct? We don't know for certain. But it is parsimonious based on the known facts—far more so than the 'it's all culture' explanation, which is farcical. It's a testable thesis, though it's not on the front burner considering the far more important issues that could be tested.

I will tell you this: in researching “Abraham's Children,” I could NOT FIND ONE geneticist who dismissed this theory out right—not in candid conversation. Almost none would put their name to that, however (though a few have done so and are quoted in my book).

However you think about this thesis — and it's not mine, but a team led by Henry Harpending, a University of Utah geneticist — it's a serious one and worthy of scientific scrutiny.

Facts like these may pose a problem for many people whose desire it is to believe that equal capacities and abilities are a universal heritage of humanity. That may well be so...but simply wanting that to be the case is not enough. That is not science.

Jon Entine

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*Pingback by [Eye on DNA Headlines for 8 November 2007](#)
2007-11-08 13:04:47*

[...] up on one of the most popular posts at Eye on DNA, Jon Entine's write-up of his book Abraham's Children, William Saletan explores Jewgenics further in [...]

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*Comment by [Yale Richmond](#) ↗✉
2007-11-14 00:49:42*

Jon, I heard your talk at AEI and am reading your book, but frankly you make too much of the Kazars and their supposed “mass conversion.” People

rarely converted en masse. It was usually the rulers who converted and the rest of the people remained largely immune to the new religion. Even in Russia, long after the rulers converted to Christianity, the bulk of the people practiced various forms of paganism.

Yale Richmond

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Comment by [Jon Entine](#) 
[2007-11-14 13:21:39](#)

Hi Yale,

I'm thrilled that you're reading the book but perplexed by your post. As I write on page 213, after discussing the Khazarian thesis: "There is absolutely no credible evidence supporting the popular belief that Khazarians converted en masse to Judaism." I couldn't be more direct than that.

What I do say is that there is credible evidence for a conversion of a segment of Khazar's, probably the nobility. It shows up in the Levite lineage. One possible explanation is that the nobility bought their way into Levite status during a conversion. That's what Karl Skorecki tends to believe. I happen to be R1a, a Levite Khazarian line.

Jon Entine

<http://nymag.com/nymetro/news/culture/features/1478/>

Jewish education

How Education Shaped Jewish History, 70-1492," by Maristella Botticini and Zvi Eckstein, Princeton University Press, 344 pages, \$34.95

The intellectual success of the Jews in the modern era and their prominence in occupations in the realms of commerce, medicine and finance since the Middle Ages are among the most challenging mysteries in the long history of the Jewish people.

Zvi Eckstein and Maristella Botticini present in their book "The Chosen Few," recently translated into Hebrew by Inga Michaeli (Tel Aviv University Press), a revolutionary thesis about the development of the Jews' relative advantage in occupations that necessitated literacy and education: After the destruction of the Second Temple in Jerusalem in 70 C.E., the survival of the Jewish religion demanded that every Jew learn to read and write, and acquire knowledge-acquisition skills; whoever was unable to do so – became assimilated. Thus, out of necessity, the Jews found themselves possessed with skills that proved critical for their economic development.

From the time of the Babylonian exile, in the sixth century B.C.E. until the destruction of the Second Temple, Judaism rested on two main pillars: the rituals carried out at the Temple and the reading of the written Torah. A small elite of priests headed the Temple, and Torah study was also the province of a very few. The Roman conquest of Jerusalem and destruction of the Temple at once switched Judaism's "center of gravity" from the priesthood in Jerusalem to a growing community of rabbis and scholars – that is, from *beit hamikdash* to *beit hamidrash* (from the Temple to the religious study hall).

In the absence of an actual tangible center of ritual, Judaism's survival then became contingent upon its ability to create an alternative that could adapt to the tough new conditions. The reading and studying of the Torah by every Jewish man – this constituted the foundation of the Jewish people's existence from that point on. To ensure continuity, every man was tasked with the duty of imbuing his sons from a young age with the ability to read and write. That was indeed a revolutionary development in a world in which a majority of whose inhabitants were illiterate.

All this is well known, but what is less clear relates to the unforeseen consequences of this dramatic development, both for Judaism and for the mutual relations between its adherents and their surroundings. Instilling literacy and teaching Torah entailed high expenditure (the book contains

relevant and interesting data and estimates of such), but at the same time, in the first centuries after the Second Temple's destruction, most Jews were still engaged in farming, and thus lived in poverty and hardship. How could a simple Jewish farmer in some Galilee village in 200 C.E. bear the cost of educating his sons? And what did he get out of it?

This was a central existential dilemma that burdened Jews in that period: to bear the financial burden of education and thereby cleave to Judaism, or to benefit from the immediate saving of such expenditures, and thereby forgo Judaism. Simple economic logic predicts that such a fateful decision would be made according to each person's relative advantage and preferences. Obviously, Jews whose affinity for their religion was weak to begin with, or those who had difficulty learning, would be tempted to choose less difficult alternatives.

In other words, common sense says that part of the Jewish people would assimilate, and therefore the population would gradually decrease. And indeed, in the time of the Talmud (the third through sixth centuries C.E.), two distinct patterns emerged: On the one hand, heightened literacy among the Jewish community, whose economy was largely agriculturally based. And, on the other hand, a slow but evident process of religious conversion (primarily to Christianity), and in its wake a dramatic shrinking of the Jewish population – from approximately 5.5 million circa 65 C.E. to just 1.2 million in about 650. Epidemics and massacres also contributed to this, but these factors account at most for only about half of the steep population decline.

Encounter with Islam

In the mid-seventh century, there was an historic encounter between the Jews and then-ascending Islam. That encounter was destined to strengthen the literacy revolution that had taken root centuries earlier among the Jews, and to channel it in unexpected directions. The immense Muslim empire that arose after the prophet Mohammed's death sprawled from the Iberian peninsula all the way to India and China. Within it was inculcated not only the religion of Islam but also a dominant language, Arabic, new institutions and laws. The empire's growth led to the development of many new industries, commerce expanded and new cities were erected.

This tremendous wave of globalization and urbanization sparked increased demand for educated professionals with intellectual skills. The effect these changes had on the Jews was dramatic: Between 750 and 900, nearly all the Jews in Mesopotamia and Persia – some 75 percent of world Jewry at the time – left farming, moved to the big cities of the Abbasid Caliphate, and began to specialize in an array of literacy- and education-based professions, which were much more lucrative than farming. This change in the employment structure of the Jewish people occurred even before any legal restrictions were imposed on them with regard to land ownership.

In their book, Eckstein and Botticini therefore come up with an original and bold answer to the great historical question of why the Jews became a people of merchants, tradesmen, grocers, bankers, scholars and doctors. Not because of injunctions or necessity, they contend, but rather due to a clear, relative advantage that they developed over centuries as a result of a traumatic event – destruction of the Second Temple – that led to an effort to the endowment of literacy among every Jew. That process prepared the Jews to take on key roles within the awakening economy of the Muslim empire, since their skills were well suited to the needs of a burgeoning urban and global world.

The Jews went out in search, metaphorically, of the America of those days, immigrating to locales where their skills made them highly sought-after, such as Yemen, Syria, Egypt and the Maghreb, and later on to Western Europe. Belonging to a collective with a strong identity enabled them to maintain inter-regional ties regardless of where they resided, and also to enforce contractual agreements from afar – something that was very helpful in commerce.

This can also explain the dizzying success of the Jews in professions related to the credit and financial markets. In the 12th-13th centuries, moneylending was already a typical Jewish occupation in England, France and Germany, and also their main profession in Spain, Portugal, Italy and other Western European lands.

The explanation put forward here contradicts the prevailing view that the Jews of Europe in the Middle Ages specialized in moneylending because they were barred from membership in craftsmen's guilds, and because Muslims and Christians were forbidden to lend money with interest. "The Chosen Few" argues that the Jews in Western Europe willingly specialized in that profession and in banking because they had the right skills and conditions: the ability to read and write, mathematical prowess and institutional means to enforce contracts; capital that was initially amassed from their work as merchants and craftsmen; and unprecedented networks that enabled them to communicate with each other throughout the Diaspora.

The third historic event that had a profound effect on Judaism was the Mongol invasion of the Middle East, something that surprisingly is not emphasized in the least in Jewish history books. The Mongols invaded Persia and Mesopotamia in 1219; the conquest reached its apex with the sacking of Baghdad in 1258. Thus collapsed the urban and commercial economy of the Abbasid Caliphate, and the economy of Mesopotamia and Persia regressed to the agricultural stage that had characterized it in the past. Consequently, a large proportion of the Jews in Persia, Mesopotamia, and even Egypt and Syria, were forced to abandon Judaism and convert. The religious norms, and especially that which called for educating one's sons, once again became an intolerably expensive burden, and quite a few Jews converted to Islam.

As a result of this, the world's Jewish population shrank by a substantial rate and reached an unprecedented low at the end of the 15th century. In other words, history proves that the same mechanism presented here could operate in the opposite direction, too, in view of an external shock – in this case, the Mongol conquest.

Eckstein and Botticini display the power of combining progressive economic thinking with in-depth, comprehensive historical research. This is a trailblazing, original, illuminating and horizon-broadening book, one that might alter our perception of ourselves and our place on history's stage. It may also help us divine what can be expected from the changes occurring in the Jewish world today.

Prof. Manuel Trajtenberg is an economist. He headed the committee that was appointed following the wave of social protest in 2011.

What Makes Jews So smart?

<http://www.haaretz.com/weekend/1.539425>

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ashkenazi_Jewish_intelligence