

On a Friday night in the middle of July, Congregation Kol Shalom hosted more than a few dozen parishioners from **Holy Family** Catholic Church in Davidsonville, Maryland. (great name)

These Christian Congregants have visited our synagogue three times over the last few years and we visited them once in August, 2016.

They initiated the visits, even our visit to them, and I think I know why.

Quite simply, they understand how their religious tradition is based on ours.

If they are our cousins, we are the older cousins.

They know we came first, and we are still around.

To put this in a more modern scientific model, we and they might share **more than a bit of religious DNA.**

They know, that part, perhaps even a large part of who they are derives directly from **our** ancestors.

Their visits to us, represent a method of investigating their spiritual origins.

Think of it as a low tech format for ancestry.com.

I'm certain that most of you have seen the ancestry.com commercials on television.

They are really quite well done and I find them fascinating.

And of course the commercials we see always show someone who is quite surprised by the results.

Did you see the look in that one man's face when he learned that a significant percentage of his DNA shows up as European Jewish?

I don't know if he is more happy or upset, but I do know it's just about the last thing he expected.

Let me get back to that Friday night visit from Holy Family Catholic Church in July.

After the service that evening there was one woman present who recently discovered that her DNA ***indicated a significant*** genetic component of ashkenazic Jewry.

She mentioned how she wanted to learn more and discover what she could about her Jewish ancestry.

I believe she came that evening in part to determine whether she could find a sign from God, that would lead her more directly on this path.

I actually find this whole phenomenon, this investigation of religious identity based upon genetics and DNA, quite fascinating.

I am tempted to sign up for DNA testing through ancestry.com.

I think I know my ancestry probably goes back many generations in Poland?

Most likely what would show up is that I have a high percentage of Ashkenazic Jewish DNA?

Isn't it amazing that they even have a category such as Ashkenazic Jewish.

I mean do they have a Greek Orthodox, or a Southern Baptist, or Midwestern Methodist category?

I get it and understand that DNA could be a decisive determinant in the Ashkenazic/European portion of this designation.

It makes sense when we are talking about geographic ethnicity – he's Italian, she's Polish, they are German or Eastern European.

In these instances we are referring to ethnic identity determined in part by generations of geographic, cultural and biological characteristics.

While I identify and relate to my family's Eastern European origin, ***it is the Jewish part of the Ashkenazic/Jewish category*** that means the most, that has the longest history, that allows me to feel at home in any synagogue throughout the world.

But I become perplexed when trying to figure out how DNA can identify religious identity?

Perhaps it is the case that basically /DNA – it does not apply!

I predict the more carefully we learn how to measure and evaluate what genetics mean to our identity as human beings, the more it can be used to pinpoint aspects of our ***Jewishness, the less valuable*** it will be in determining our identifications as Jews.

There are probably many **more millions of people in the world** who have measurable percentages of Jewish DNA than we imagine.

We have been around for a long time and we have lived everywhere.

There is probably a little Jewish DNA in most people, whatever that means, and the truth is, so what?

Yesterday, I mentioned how the Rosh Hashanah Torah readings are framed with the birth of Isaac mentioned at the beginning of the reading for day one, and the birth of Rebecca mentioned at the end of the reading for today.

They represent the first couple who are Hebrews, who together share our ancestral faith throughout their marriage.

When Abraham sends his servant to find a wife for Isaac, genetics are important to Abraham – only go to people from my homeland, to find a spouse for my son Isaac.

Do not do so here in the land of the Canaan.

Clearly, genetics was an important component of this shidduch.

Genetics wasn't all of it – Abraham's servant wanted a sign and the sign was the performance of a mitzvah of Chesed – kindness!!

So genetics are not exclusively important - after all, Joseph married an Egyptian, and Moses married a Midianite, and King Solomon married everyone.

If genetics are exclusively decisive, how could we ever allow anyone to convert to Judaism, to choose to be a Jew?

After all, we don't get to choose our DNA, our genetic composition, do we?

If so, why am I not 4 inches taller, with an IQ 20 points higher?

I can't determine my genetics, yet I can choose to be fully Jewish, no matter my genetics.

And yet, somehow Jewishness shows up as a DNA percentage for some people who investigate their Jewish genetic ancestry.

Let me share with you something you know, which is most amazing.

When a person converts to Judaism, he or she chooses a Hebrew name.

And for ever after, when **that person** is called to the Torah, he/she is called by that name, son/daughter of Abraham/Sarah.

If genetics are so determinate in our Jewish identity, how can that be?

How can someone who comes from a different culture, and biological genetic makeup, suddenly designate himself or herself as a descendent of Abraham and Sarah?

And you all know the answer is because genetics do not alone determine ancestry, lineage, or spiritual heritage.

Here is how that happens – here is how someone who converts and chooses to be Jewish, legitimately can identify himself or herself as the child of Abraham and Sarah.

It happens when ***you act in ways that are modeled*** by Abraham and Sarah and their descendants.

That is when Abraham and Sarah become your ancestors, and it has nothing to do with genetics, and everything to do with the special history of our faith.

Let me share with you a story as told by Rabbi Yissocher Frand from Baltimore.

Rabbi Frand claims this story really happened because he heard it directly from the Rav (rabbi) in Hollywood, Florida who is quoted in the story.

A Jewish man from Israel comes to South Florida to raise money so he would be able **to marry off his daughter**.

He makes the rounds in Miami Beach, North Miami Beach, Fort Lauderdale, Hollywood, Hallandale and all the other Jewish communities in the area.

When he is finished, he rents a car and sets off to visit several Jewish communities along the East Coast on his way up north to New York.

As he is zipping along the interstate through the state of Georgia, he is pulled over by a state trooper for speeding.

"License and registration," says the trooper.

The man hands over the papers, and the trooper examines them carefully.

"Israel? Y'all from Israel?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, I'm afraid I can't just write out a summons. Can't exactly expect y'all to come back to Georgia for the hearing can I? Y'all have to go straight to the judge right now."

Two hours later, the judge issues a fine of \$175 for speeding, to be paid on the spot.

The man sighs heavily. He opens his money pouch and takes out a thick wad of cash, over \$10,000. He grudgingly peels off the appropriate number of bills and hands them to the judge.

The judge's eyes bulge in astonishment. The interstate between Florida and New York is one of the most notorious drug trafficking routes in the United States. Surely, this man with the Israeli passport and the sack of cash must be a drug runner.

"Excuse me," says the judge, "where did you get that money, sir?"

"I collected it," says the man.

"You collected it?" the bewildered judge asks. "What does that mean?"

"You see, your honor, I live in Israel. I have a daughter to marry off, but I have no money. How am I going to make a wedding and buy her the things she needs to get started in life? So I

came to Florida and went to different Jewish people and asked them to help me out. And that is how I collected this money."

"You expect me to believe this?" says the judge. "You come across the ocean, go to strangers and ask them to help you pay for your daughter's wedding and you come away with a sack of cash? Is that what you're telling me?"

"Almost, your honor," says the man. "They're not strangers. They are fellow Jews."

The judge shakes his head. "I'm not buying it. Unless you can come up with affidavits that you came by this money honestly, you're not going anywhere.!"

In desperation, the man calls the Rav in Hollywood, Florida, who had been very kind and helpful to him. Close to tears, he describes his predicament.

The Rav springs into action. He collects affidavits from rabbanim in the different communities and faxes them to the court in Georgia. The judge is convinced, and he allows the man from Israel to continue on his way.

The state trooper, however, still finds the story too outlandish to believe. He places a telephone call to the Rav in Hollywood, Florida.

"Let me get this straight," he says. "This guy, y'all don't know him, right?"

"That's right," said the Rav. "Never met him before."

"He comes door-to-door and he asks for money?"

"That's right."

"And everybody gives him a donation?"

"Right again."

"Because he says he has a daughter in Israel that's getting married?"

"That's right."

"What's so special about this guy?"

"Nothing," says the Rav. "We have Jewish people in need coming to us all the time. We do this all the time."

There is a brief silence on the other end of the telephone.

"You know," the state trooper finally says, "I joined the wrong religion."

You might be thinking that the reason so many fellow Jews came to help this man in need of raising money, to marry off his daughter, was because that's what Jews do – we reach out, especially to one another, in times of need.

That is apparently the lesson Rabbi Fran chooses to emphasize at the end of the story – "we have Jewish people in need come to us all the time. We do this all the time."

That thought is correct, but there is more behind the story and Rabbi Frand certainly knows it. I will explain it now.

There is passage from the Talmud included in our early morning daily prayers.

This HH Day Machzor has other passages which are more specific to the holidays, but both of the regular Sabbath siddurim, and our daily weekday Siddur include the passage which begins, "these are the days that yield immediate fruit and continue to yield fruit in time to come."

And then, some of our most beautiful and well known mitzvot - Commandments are listed, including honoring parents, performing deeds of kindness (Gemilut Chasadim), providing hospitality, visiting the sick – these are all wonderful things to do, but they are all also mitzvot.

And you know what else is there, right in the middle of the text, "***helping the needy bride.***"

The reason so many people responded to this man in need is because to do so in this case, to help a needy bride, ***is a specific mitzvah – commandment from God.***

It is more than just a nice thing, or being friendly, or generous.

It is fulfilling God's will because you are commanded to do so.

Our religious tradition is very clear on how to achieve a status of holiness in our lives - being born Jewish is not enough.

Each of us, those of us born as Jews, those of us who convert to become Jewish, each of us must choose to perform Jewish acts and those acts when performed properly lift our lives for toward holiness –

Baruch Atah Adonai - Blessed are You O Lord, our God, ruler of the universe, --- Asher kidshanu Mitzvotav – who made us holy through God's Mitzvot and commands us **to act in ways** which demonstrate we are JEWISH!

When we agree on the mitzvot to perform, which anyone can ***choose to be commanded to perform***, then it is not our genetics which make us holy.

It is rather, how we act, how we bring God's holiness into the world – it is what we do, ultimately that matters.

It is not our genetics but rather our heritage which clearly makes us family.

And our heritage is determined by the mitzvot we perform together.

That more than anything else, qualifies us here at congregation Kol Shalom, along with Jewish communities all over the world, to be included as part of our *holy family*.

Shana Tova to all.