

The many unexpected secrets in our DNA

An increasing number of people are feeling a pull toward Judaism, and then finding out that they have Jewish blood

PAUL LUNGEN
plungen@thecjn.ca

From a very young age, Denis Mitchell has had an almost inexplicable affinity with all things Jewish.

Growing up in his native Trinidad, he had been raised as a Christian and he'd had no contact with the local Jewish community. He didn't even know it existed.

There were some Messianic Jews on the island, but it was the Jewish part of their message – the Old Testament – that intrigued him, not the messianic parts.

He felt a pull, and he couldn't explain why.

Over the years, he amassed a large collection of books about Israel and Judaism. In the mid-1990s, he moved to Israel for 14 months and felt right at home in the streets of Jerusalem.

Returning to the island, Mitchell tried to put this Jewish attraction behind him, but couldn't.

"I kept telling myself, I'm black, move

on," he said. But his "feeling came rushing back. It never left."

He recalled how in one of his books, a rabbi had written "about having a Jewish soul. Even if you have one Jewish ancestor, then you have a Jewish soul."

Earlier this year, a friend suggested he have his DNA tested.

Not a bad idea, he thought, but when the results came back, he was somewhat disappointed: there was no finding of Jewish ancestry.

He later heard of a company called GEDmatch, which produces more detailed results that go back further in the family tree. Earlier this spring, Mitchell sent GEDmatch a sample of his DNA and when the findings came back, he was flabbergasted.

It showed that, among the many ethnicities in his lineage, he did possess some Jewish ancestry. The results indicated that a small percentage of his ancestors were Ashkenazic Jews, and that he is one per cent Ethiopian Jew.



DNA tests have helped people piece together their family trees. SHUTTERSTOCK PHOTO

Mitchell says the results confirmed what he has always felt – that somehow, he is partly Jewish.

"It was just bizarre," he told *The CJN* on the phone from Trinidad. "I went back to what the rabbi said. Even if it's only one ancestor, the Jewish soul is transferred from generation to generation. It was my 'oh my God' moment."

There are millions of people who, like Mitchell, are curious about their past and are researching their heritage and having their DNA analyzed.

DNA testing is big business, with a variety of companies offering their services – MyHeritage, 23andMe and Ancestry among them. MyHeritage alone boasts 96-million users around the world. Ancestry claims that more than 10-million people have taken the Ancestry DNA test, while its online family history resource includes 100-million family trees.

Uri Gonen runs the MyHeritage branch just north of Toronto. He's originally from Israel and so is MyHeritage. It was founded by Gilad Japhet in 2002.

Israelis have been at the forefront of those searching out their family histories. In the early days of genealogy research, that meant filling out a family tree based on interviews with relatives and searching through immigration archives and town records in the places where the ancestors are believed to have originated, said Gonen.

In Israel, each cohort of school kids is given the task of creating their own family tree. So was Japhet, whose interest in the subject was piqued by the project. Japhet

went on to write genealogy software that permitted people to create their own family trees on their computers.

With the growth of the Internet, programs were created that allowed people to search the databases maintained by the big genealogy companies, Gonen said.

Users were also able to invite relatives to contribute to their family trees and the sharing led to more and more information about previously unknown relatives. Sophisticated algorithms were created to match the family trees generated by the various users, while at the same time permitting people to maintain their privacy, Gonen said.

It's generally the older generation, those over 50, who do most of the research. "People with children and grandchildren are more interested in their genealogy, in their heritage, their legacy, what they are leaving to their grandchildren," Gonen said.

The family trees created before the computer era generally relied on written records, such as census documents, immigration records, birth and death certificates, marriage licenses and news reports, but everything changed when DNA testing was introduced to a mass audience.

It turns out that saliva samples can tell a lot about a person, including one's ethnicity and who that person's relatives are.

With DNA testing, MyHeritage has helped many adoptees find their birth parents, having recently donating \$1 million in DNA kits for that purpose.

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Denis Mitchell

The technology has even been used in a cold case murder investigation. By uploading DNA samples from the murder scene to another company's database, it helped police find family matches that were used to track down the perpetrator, said Gonen.

For the purposes of genealogical research, DNA testing can describe one's ethnic ancestry, including distinguishing between Ashkenazic (European) and Sephardic (Iberian) Jews.

According to a spokesperson for Ancestry, "Two things generally contribute to a population sharing DNA: procreating within a smaller population due to either geographic proximity, or religious or cultural beliefs. With the Jewish population, both factors have led to shared DNA. Not only did many Jewish people originate from the same place, but much of the Diaspora continued to have children with each other, after relocating to new communities across the globe."

Lesley Anderson, a genealogist and family historian with ancestry.ca, said the company is constantly updating its database, as information is collected through biological samples and by the more traditional methods of data gathering.

"I've been interested in this ever since I was a child. I was the first born Canadian in the family," she said. "It was personal, to learn who I came from, who I am."

She's seen some of that same attitude in Ancestry's clients.

"We're all disconnected now. Our families are different than what families were years ago. People want to feel connected to something deep and ancient," she said.

Today, DNA testing is so exact that Ancestry's data analysis can pinpoint a person's background to any one of 380 regions in the world. In Ireland, a DNA test can even place a person's origins down to the county level, she added.

Despite that specificity, Anderson said that almost no one's DNA derives solely



Carol Brook

from one group.

"There isn't a pureness of any race. I'd be surprised if there was 100 per cent of anything," she said.

Anderson said that DNA, especially when combined with family trees, "is a great tool to start discovering those stories and connecting with relatives."

Carol Brook, 65, is a native of Montreal who has lived in the Greater Toronto Area for 22 years. She admits to a longstanding interest in family research and discovering cousins she had previously been unaware of.

"I had pieced a family tree together like the pieces of a puzzle," she said.

Even before the computer age, her maternal grandmother had been researching family histories, to try to get to the bottom of a family mystery. Brook's great-grandfather had left the family when she was five years old, and her grandmother always wondered what had become of him.

Through research on the Internet, she was able to trace part of his life back to Austria, and found unknown relatives in the United States, with whom she exchanged family information.

Then, in 2016, she had her DNA tested through Ancestry. When the findings were linked to her family tree, more matches began rolling in.

With the DNA findings, she was able to double the number of known relatives around the world.

She learned of relatives in the United States, Europe, Saskatchewan and even in South Africa – about 50 or 60 in all.

"Genealogy research, for me, is very addicting – and exciting," Brook said.

"It's really connecting relatives together," she continued. "It's learning about their lives. It's learning about who I am and the connection to them. It's bringing their legacy forward."

Her family tree now contains 472 names. One branch, the one that is not Jewish, goes back eight generations, to 1668. The



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**Lesley Anderson
Genealogist**

Jewish branches generally go back to the 1840s, though one branch of the family goes all the way back to the 1760s in Russia.

Janis Cutler Gear, 56, has also dug deeply into her family history. Gear, who lives in New Jersey, was adopted as an infant by a Jewish family and grew up in a heavily Jewish neighbourhood in Westchester, N.Y.

"I never felt wanting of anything," she said. "I loved my parents and they loved me."

As an adopted child, however, she was curious about her biological parents.

"I made up a story that they were killed in a fire, or they would have kept me," she said.

When she asked her adoptive mother, with whom she was very close, about her heritage, "She said you're Jewish. You're a Jewish princess like me."

A year or two after her mother passed away and with her curiosity unsatisfied, her husband bought her a MyHeritage DNA kit as a birthday present.

Eager to learn the results, Gear completed the test and mailed it in. When the report came back, she was stunned.

"The results came back 47 per cent Ashkenazi Jewish," she said, which meant that one of her birth parents was Jewish. "Part of me was German on the other side."

"It was strange," she said of learning the results. "I'm not living a lie. I am what I am."



Uri Gonen

She found a second cousin, who informed her about her larger birth family.

She then uploaded her results to MyHeritage's extensive database, which allowed her to track down her birth father, who is still alive in the western United States.

It turned out that she was born out of a very casual and fleeting relationship. Her mother put her up for adoption, because, at the time, there was a social stigma against single motherhood.

Over time, she found many other blood relatives. She's in touch with her birth mother, who lives four hours away, but is in denial, Gear said.

"She was very embarrassed by the whole thing. She didn't tell her parents. I'm in contact with my birth mother and we're getting to know each other privately."

She's also been in touch with her birth father, who is surprised that she was raised Jewish.

At the same time, "My adoptive father has been hurt by the whole thing," she said.

After he lost his wife, Gear's adoptive mother, she was his only close family "and he thought I was trying to find a new family," she said.

Still, for Gear, "It's changed my life and the perspective of who I am. It makes me appreciate my birth parents and my adoptive parents more."

Mitchell's DNA results were also life-changing.

"I am still shaking my head," he said. "I cannot tell you how bizarre it is. The rabbis really were right, the Jewish soul does not die. In as much as I tried to bury this feeling, to deny this feeling, to say it cannot happen to me, it is a fact."

In recent years, he's learned that there is a small Jewish community in Trinidad, likely dating back to the Expulsion from Spain in 1492. "They told me that if you shake someone's family tree far back enough, a Jew will fall out," Mitchell said. ■