B'nai Jeshurun בני ישרון

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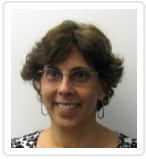

Denise Waxman
Director of Communications
x 275
EMAIL DENISE

Ruth the Moabite, David the King, and the Fallacy of Biological Judaism

By Robert Pollack | Issue Date: April 2010

Why are we commanded (Devarim 16:11) to celebrate Shavuot by rejoicing with "… your male and female slave … and the stranger, the fatherless, and the widow in your midst"? Why include them? Are we not different from them—surely the stranger is not in our biological family? Were such strangers not among our enemies in the opening of Bemidbar?

As a geneticist who studies DNA, I am happy that our texts make clear we should not worry so much about our biological families in these matters: David, the king and the herald of our Messiah, is himself the descendent—twice!—of women who were fatherless, strangers, and widows.

Tamar was the first. She and Yehudah were parents to Peretz. From Peretz came Hezron, from Hezron came Ram, from Ram came Amminadab, from Amminadab came Salmon, from Salmon came Boaz.

Ruth was the second. She and Boaz were parents to Obed. From Obed came Jesse, and from Jesse came David Ha'Melekh.

While we wait to learn who will come from David's line to bring us a final redemption, let us consider that it might not be too early, even now, to draw some lessons from his decidedly non-royal family tree.

From any one person to another unrelated person, about one letter in a thousand, more or less, will be different when their three-billion-letter DNAs are compared. There is no biological data in support of the notion of being a Jew solely through the inheritance of a single specific DNA sequence, nor will there ever be such evidence. There is no chance of some human genomes being Jewish and others not; biology makes all people truly equal.

Though not by DNA, we Jews are capable of becoming distinctively different from other people. We can become different because all people—whether son, daughter, male, female, Levite, stranger, fatherless, or widow—are born with a brain that can learn and teach and change its mind, all without any change in DNA. Experiences of the first two years, before language emerges, lay down much of the stable circuitry of the thinking brain. From the emergence of the mind in infancy and even after these formative years, the brain forever retains plasticity in its circuits.

It never loses the capacity to link past with present experience by what we sense as familiarity. Brain-cell connections are made and broken throughout life; these are experienced variously as sensation, perception, memory, repression, and—for my argument's sake, most importantly—as ongoing teaching and learning.

From the Jewish perspective in particular, genes cannot propel us toward religious pursuits and experiences. Consider the following quote from the Rambam, "Mishneh Torah," Hilchot Talmud Torah, Chapter 3:

> Three crowns were conferred upon Israel: the crown of Torah, the crown of priesthood, and the crown of royalty.
>
> Aharon merited the crown of priesthood, as [Numbers] states: "And it will be an eternal covenant of priesthood for him and his descendants after him."
>
> David merited the crown of royalty, as [Psalms] states: "His seed will continue forever, and his throne be as the sun before Me."
>
> The crown of Torah is set aside, waiting, and ready for each Jew, as [implied by Deuteronomy]: "The Torah which Moses commanded us is the inheritance of the congregation of Jacob." Whoever desires may come and take it.

Rambam then goes on to make the point in his own special way. He says that when hiring a teacher of Torah for yourself or your child, you should give a learned mamzer precedence over an ignorant man, even if that ignorant man happens to be the Kohen Gadol himself.

Rambam is pushing a point, to make a critical differentiation. By distinguishing the availability of the "inheritance" of Torah, from the father-to-son inheritance of priestly obligations and privileges, and from the royal prerogative to pass a Jewish kingdom to one's child, he is telling us that no aspect of Jewish life available to him was biologically inherited. The inherited priesthood needed a context of Temple sacrifice, the Davidic reign needed a royal family at the head of a Jewish nation. In his time Jews had neither; they did, of course, have Torah.

But by "Whoever desires may come and take it," Rambam is saying not only that the Crown of Torah is not inherited, but also that

no aspect of one's wish to receive the Crown of Torah can be inherited either. Both are wholly a matter of choice and the will to follow Torah at each generation; neither is at all a matter of biological inheritance.

So, to return to Shavuot, the Book of Ruth teaches us that even the Davidic line— with all it implies for our future—emerges by teachable and learnable action, not through DNA.

This allows us to make the assumption (precious to us as Jews) that free will must remain undiminished for all time, so that when one chooses a forbidden act, one may then nevertheless, upon reflection, choose the work of teshuvah. That is the significance of the emergence at the end of the Book of Ruth, of the story of Tamar and Yehuda, the ancestors of Boaz and, through Ruth, of David himself.

When Yehudah realizes that the woman he thought was a prostitute—whom he has made pregnant, and whom he is prepared to have burned to death—is in fact the widow of his sons, he says, "She is more in the right than I, inasmuch as I did not give her to my son Shelah." And the text goes on to say, "And he was not intimate with her again." Yehudah's tshuvah, Tamar's honesty and courage, Boaz's kindness, and Ruth's simple vow that "Your people are my people and your Lord is my Lord," are unexpected acts of free will.

Shavout teaches us that biology without free will leaves us with nothing to forgive, nothing to teach, no chance for reinterpretation at a later date and, most important of all, no chance for tshuvah on the part of anyone.

Robert Pollack *is Professor of Biological Sciences and Director, Center for the Study of Science and Religion, Earth Institute, Columbia University. Professor Robert Pollack and his wife Amy have been members of BJ since 1994.*

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