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WHAT YOU MIGHT DISCOVER USING A GENEALOGY HOME-TEST KIT

Dear Friends,

If you've taken a genealogy test at home, you are in good company. In 2018 alone, over 12 million in this country have used home-test kits to get information about their genetic past. My sister Ziva is one of them.

She and I speak a few times a week, but she forgot to mention to me that she had spit into a vial and sent off her saliva to be analyzed. Until she received her results. At that point, she texted them over to me. And just like that - without any warning - I got information about our forebears, which I hadn't asked for. Frankly, I was disappointed and a bit annoyed (I'll explain why a bit further).

Still, the experience started me thinking about the test's appeal. Why is it so popular? What are people hoping to find? I posed the question to my Facebook friends and received some interesting answers.



Beth – who grew up in Seattle - told me that when her ancestors came to this country 150 years ago, they spread out across the continent. Her own grandparents did not pass down the stories of where they came from, and how they got out west. “There is a sense of displacement,” Beth writes, when you don't know “the path your ancestors took” to get to where you are.

In the face of mobility across vast distances, and a longing to know our historic family journeys, genetic testing can fill in some of these gaps.

In addition to tracing geographic origins, test kits – like Ancestry and 23andMe – allow users to upload their genealogical information into vast data-bases. Sophisticated search engines offer the possibility of connecting to long-lost relatives. “It's fascinating,” one of my friends explained, “and fun!” another reported.

American's sense of isolation has been well documented by social scientists. Discovering distant cousins reminds us that we are each but a single node in a vast network of human relations. For those who have few close family members, such revelations can be particularly powerful.

In the Jewish press, stories of family-discovery often focus on Holocaust survivors who have found relatives (or descendants of those relatives) believed to have perished. Of course, not all are so lucky. My friend Irwin, a child of two Holocaust survivors who lost their family-members, grew up with no extended family at all. He has done genetic testing in the hope of finding some familial connections. Alas, the tests have turned up little. “I can only do this research in little chunks,” Irwin told me. The implications of aloneness and loss are difficult to bear.

On a lighter note, several of my Ashkenazi Jewish friends took ancestry tests hoping to uncover some colorful surprise in their family past. Bobby – a university student who is studying for an MS in Spanish Language Education – told me he was hoping he might find some family connection to the Iberian Peninsula. (He did not). My friend Nathan – who bears a resemblance to Tevye in *Fiddler on the Roof* – was also hoping to find out some surprising news. Perhaps he would learn that he is “part Mongolian or Biafran or something.” As it turned out, Nathan is Ashkenazi all the way down. “Yawn,” he exclaimed in his Facebook post.

Personally, I like boring. I grew up knowing that my grandparents all immigrated from Eastern Europe, and always had a strong sense of my deep connections there. When genetic testing started gaining popularity a few years ago, I resolved not to do it. If I happen to have some ancestral link to another part of the world – far from Eastern Europe – I simply did not want to know. I have no desire for genetic color, or geographical variety. I want solid roots and clear ties to place. Put my past in some hamlet in an I.B. Singer story, and I am happy.

Then, with no warning, my sister waltzed into my imaginary family-shtetl and told me that we had a Finnish great-great-grandmother! I was not happy with this news.

My biologist friends have since assured me that there is plenty of room for imprecision in the test results. So, I am not rushing out to learn Finnish or how to prepare *poronkaristys* (reindeer meat served with mash potatoes)

Instead, in honor of my sister Ziva’s visit in a couple of weeks, I plan to whip up some lokshen kugel and gefilte fish. We’ll pair the meal with few shots of slivovitz, and have some good laughs together watching Sid Caesar re-runs.

- Want to learn more about genetic home-test kits, and how they can help with your genealogical research? [Register for upcoming lecture, “DNA 101”](#) with genealogist Lara Diamond in conjunction with Jewish Genealogy Society of Cleveland

Best,
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