

# QUESTIONS & ANSWERS

## A conversation with Jon Entine

Author of a new book about the genetic history of the Jewish people

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.

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

**A** 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 all the time. I think a high percentage of reviewers are Jewish and liberal, and liberal dogma is that we don't talk about racial differences. I understand that there is a traditional Jewish

commitment to egalitarianism and identification with the underdog, which comes out of the Jews' having been discriminated against throughout so much of their history. Many Jews carry that torch of fighting against discrimination, I do myself, and that's a wonderful aspect of Jewishness.

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



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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 of Nazi science hadn't been completely different than that of contemporary genetics, it also was based on pseudo-science. It's a misplaced fear. That's like saying we shouldn't have studied the atom because now we have the bomb. But we also have nuclear energy and

radiation technology. The very premise of my book is that we need to have a constructive dialogue and find the language to discuss the genetic revolution and human differences. That's where genetic research is headed over next few decades, and if we can't discuss this taboo, it doesn't bode well for our being able to deal with the revelations that are already rolling out of the Human Genome Project.

**Q** Why do you feel this is so important?

**A** 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 ge-

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.

**Q** 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.

**A** 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."

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

**A** 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.

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

**A** 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.

David B. Green