

DNA tests helping to open up world and reunite families

One of the reasons DNA testing has become more prevalent in recent years is that the cost has come down considerably.

By ILANA SHTOTLAND APRIL 15, 2021



HOME DNA testing kit, with a saliva (spit or cheek swab) tube collector and return shipping box.

(photo credit: TONY WEBSTER/FLICKR)

“In recent years I’ve been busier than ever helping people locate their biological families,” says **Gidi Poraz** of the genealogy website Kav HaDorot (“Line of Generations”), who has been helping people locate family members and create family trees for more than 15 years .

Like many of his colleagues, Poraz has been overwhelmed with requests this past year from people who have taken DNA tests and are passionately searching for family members. Using DNA tests to expand one’s family tree has become much more popular in recent years, and numbers have risen steeply since the pandemic broke out.

“The number of requests I received this past year skyrocketed, since all of a sudden people had a lot of time on their hands,” explains Poraz. “They started digging through boxes that had been left sitting forgotten in their attics for decades. People have uncovered old photographs and documents that led

them to further investigations in which they've discovered new familial connections. All of the various genealogy forums online have been swamped this past year”.



נידי פורז (צילום: צילום פרטי)

One of the reasons DNA testing has become more prevalent in recent years is that the cost has come down considerably .

“Until a few years ago, DNA tests would cost hundreds of dollars, making them accessible to only a small number of people who were willing to shell out so much money for this information,” states **Janna Helshtein**, a professional genealogist and owner of DNA at Eye Level, which helps clients search for relatives using a combination of genealogy research and DNA tests.

“Nowadays, DNA tests cost only \$79 or \$99, depending on which service you use. This makes accessing information so much more affordable. I’ve even seen special offers of \$49. These kits are available in Israel, but in the US, for example, they can be purchased in most pharmacies,” she says.

“As soon as prices fell many more people began taking DNA tests, and so these companies’ pools of information have grown exponentially, making the chance of finding relatives much greater,” adds Poraz.

Helshtein, who helps Israelis become more informed about these tests through her Facebook page and YouTube channel, agrees that interest has spiked in the COVID-19 era .

“This past year, many people... engaged in genealogical and DNA research,” Helshtein notes. “This trend can be seen in all of the Facebook groups that help people find relatives, and lots of new groups have been formed recently too”.

Why would someone want to do a DNA test?

“People might want to ascertain their connection to specific people,” Helshtein says. “Or they’re interested in finding out their ethnic breakdown – in other words, the ethnicity of all your relatives going back many generations. Some people are simply intrigued by their origin. Others want to enlarge their family tree or increase their extended family.

“Sometimes, people who were adopted are interested in finding blood relatives they never knew about, including their biological parents. Many times people find out that they have lots of half-siblings, if their father had been a sperm donor. Or men who’d donated sperm approach us asking if they have any children out there. And apparently, buying someone a DNA test for their birthday has become the new trend”.

ASI NISALSON-LURIA explains, “My business closed after COVID-19 broke out and I had lots of time on my hands, so I decided to take a DNA test and find out a bit more about my roots and solve a few mysteries that I’d been wondering about for years now ”.



אסי נישלסון-לוריא (צילום: דני כתר)

The 35-year-old hair salon owner in Nahariya continues, “I’ve always been interested in my family’s origins; I even created a Facebook group called ‘Latvian Jews.’ In the past, I just never seemed to find the time. Last month, I received the results and I’ve already managed to connect with some relatives of my maternal grandmother. I’d already known about some of them, but hadn’t really been sure how we were related. Now, with the help of this test, I’ve been able to map it all out and it’s very exciting”.



Israeli law prohibits the purchase of a DNA test kit without a court order, so kits need to be purchased overseas .

“There are two companies willing to send DNA kits to Israel,” Helshtein explains. “The first is Family Tree, which claims to have 2.5 million samples of people’s DNA, and the test is done using a swab. A second company is 23andMe, which has 12 million samples, and the test is done by spitting into a tube. Then all you have to do is ship your sample directly to their lab, and your information is added to their database in the US. You can check your details online .

“There’s another company called Ancestry that has a much larger sample base – 18 million – but they don’t ship to Israel. But you can use them if you have friends or family who can bring the kit with them to Israel”.

How many Israelis already appear in these databases?

“I don’t know if anyone has looked into this statistic, but more and more Israelis are definitely searching for information about their ethnicity and family makeup,” continues Helshtein. “Anyone who is trying to add more members to their family tree knows that doing a DNA test is the best way to acquire this information. My husband, for example, who was adopted, was able to find his biological father after doing a DNA test”.

“I’ve gotten into this much more lately, especially since the cost of the tests has gone down,” reveals Poraz. “There were a few Holocaust survivors I helped to find long-lost relatives, but they were still skeptical. They said, ‘Prove it to me that these people are related to us,’ so I helped them do the DNA tests. Or other people who just want to find someone out there related to them .

“Even if no one comes up as a match now, this doesn’t mean that a year or two down the line another person who does a test might not be a match,” he notes. “Another guy wanted to find out information about his dad. He knew absolutely nothing. We found two women in the US who seemed to be related, so he did the DNA test and they did too, and they were indeed first cousins. They were all super-excited and the cousins sent him a picture of his dad he’d never seen before”.



THERE ARE still plenty of cases that have never been solved, Poraz cautions, since DNA tests are really only helpful when used in conjunction with genealogy research .

“One elderly woman was searching for relatives,” he recalls. “She’d been abandoned as a baby at a train station, so she had no idea even where to start. DNA testing can help you find people you’re related to, but it doesn’t always inform you what your exact connection with that person is”.

“I also use DNA testing more now than in the past,” says **Keren Mazuz**, an experienced private investigator who assisted on cases revealed on Tzufit Grant’s Avudim TV program, which accompanies people on their journey to find lost relatives. “I get lots of complicated cases, including people who were adopted overseas and have no information

about their biological families. Sometimes they open their adoption files and there's no identifying details about their parents. In these cases, the only lead we have to go on is DNA tests".

Can you describe one of your more interesting cases?

"There was one woman who wasn't so young," answers Mazuz. "She didn't have any information about her family. The adoption agency told her that her file didn't contain any identifying details. So she did a DNA test, and all of a sudden she had lots of relatives. She didn't find her parents, but she did find lots of other people who were happy to stay in contact with her. Of course, it's possible that someone can take a DNA test and not find any connections. But usually people find someone, even if the connection is not close. And it's certainly a great way to start looking for closer relations".

"DNA tests are a great tool for helping people trace their family roots," says **Roi Mandel**, who leads the research team at MyHeritage.com. "They are especially helpful for people who were adopted and do not have much information about the history of their biological families. But it's just one of a whole arsenal of tools that we can use to uncover details of a person's family history".



רוי מנדל (צילום: פרטי)

Recently, MyHeritage published a number of success stories about Holocaust survivors who found relatives via DNA tests – after spending decades searching .

"DNA testing is not a substitute for thorough genealogical research," Mandel emphasizes, "including collecting information from family members, accessing historical documents in archives or attics, locating pictures found in family photo albums and hearing the stories surrounding these pictures. Having the results of a genetic test does not usually fulfill a person's desire to find out who they are and where they come from, to hear stories, see pictures and understand what was important in their family's history .

"When we set out on a journey to find out where we come from, we end up discovering lots of important things about ourselves."

[Kav HaDorot articles](#)

Translated by Hannah Hochner.