
How Henry Kissinger Became My Cousin

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Henry Kissinger, former Secretary of State and National Security Advisor, is a distant relative of mine, a fact that is probably of considerably more interest to me than it is to him. I know that because I received no answer when I first wrote to wish him well on his appointment to high office in the Nixon administration. It took the intervention of my congressman's secretary with Kissinger's secretary to get me a curt reply acknowledging my congratulatory note. That was when I first discovered the real power in this country to be in the hands of secretaries.

Notwithstanding the rebuff (I have been rejected before) I feel a strange sense of pride in my "Kissinger Connection." It comes from the *yiches* of the implied "international connection." It comes also from the remarkable history of the Jewish people, about whose existence I never cease to wonder. Here we are, scattered throughout the world, battered by a Holocaust which destroyed one third of our population, and besieged by the pressures of intermarriage and assimilation, not to speak of continuing attacks upon us by hostile nations. Yet, we are still here — after all these centuries.

Part of the "miracle of Jewish survival" became obvious when I discovered my family history. I have a cousin in Herzliah named Martin Kissinger — a second cousin of my father's to be exact — who undertook to trace the Kissinger family tree some years ago. The result was an initial narrative history, written in German, which came into my hands in 1974. It was constructed from the memories of various family members who live in far-flung places, and from records in the archives of Roedelsee and Bad Kissingen, as well as records in the Catholic diocese in Roedelsee in the southern part of Germany. The Germans, with their penchant for organization, left accurate records going back hundreds of years.

More recently, my cousin Martin perfected that family history, updated it, and had it diagrammed so that one could quickly see who was related to whom and how. It traces the Kissinger family tree to a certain Meyer ben Loeb, who lived from 1767 to 1838, and who took the name Kissinger in 1817 — probably from the area he left to come to Roedelsee, namely, Bad Kissingen. Before then, he had grown up in a place called Klein-Eibstadt. He was apparently a teacher by profession, although in the records

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of the Catholic diocese his occupation is listed also as butcher. My cousin speculates that he may have been a *mohel* (which is not to imply that *mohelim* are butchers — heaven forbid).

It is from Meyer ben Loeb that the Kissinger family originates. It does so in two branches, for Meyer married twice and sired two separate families. From his first wife, Marianne, who died in childbirth in 1812, came two sons. The one, Loeb, became the ancestor of my side of the family. His second wife, Schoenlein, bore four daughters and six sons, only one of whom seems to have had a large family. From that prolific son, Abraham Kissinger, comes the other line, to which Henry belongs. Thus, Meyer ben Loeb was the great-great-grandfather, four generations back, of both my father, Albert, and of “cousin” Henry, although in each case the great-great-grandmother was different. Alas, my family and Henry’s come from separate branches of the Kissinger family tree. Generationally, Henry and my father are third cousins, but in truth, I suppose they are only half-cousins. And that is how Henry Kissinger became my cousin, or to be precise, third half-cousin once removed.

What was more exciting and significant than discovering the nature of our “relationship,” however, was the discovery that I come from a family of teachers, although I must admit that most of them come from the “other branch.” The discovery of so many teachers in our past somehow gives much more authority to my choice of the rabbinate as a career.

As I studied my genealogy, I began to have a remarkable feeling of family tradition, as transmitted from generation to generation. Our traceable history goes back only two hundred years, out of a four-thousand-year Jewish history — the tip of an iceberg. Yet even those few years give one a marvelous sense of the loyalty that has made for Jewish survival.

Meyer ben Loeb was born in an era when Jews first were beginning to gain some entrée into the Western world. Remember that Moses Mendelssohn, the so-called father of modern Judaism, who taught that a person could be a Jew and a Western person at the same time, lived in the latter part of the eighteenth century.

Yet, despite the seductive appeal of Western civilization, my relatives of earlier generations *did not* defect en masse, the fact that it would probably have been easier to live as non-Jews notwithstanding.

It was not until my generation that there were some seeming defections. One cousin, who was hidden with Catholics during World War II by his parents, no longer practices Judaism. Another is married to a non-Jewish girl and I do not know how he will raise his daughter. Nor dare I predict what will be in the next generation.

But so far, the family has remained remarkably Jewish. Even cousin Henry, despite his second marriage to Nancy McGuinness, has two children by his first marriage who are being Jewishly reared by their mother, also remarried, albeit Jewishly. His father, Louis, is, of course, quite Orthodox.

What has made for that loyalty, I'm not sure. That it is there, however, is dramatically evidenced in my family tree. One sees it in the transmission of first names, some of them out-and-out German, but many of them obviously Jewish. At the very time when the ghettos were opening, Meyer ben Loeb, who was not only prolific but pious, was naming his children Isaac, Nathan, Abraham, Esther, Salomon, and David, names which still recur in later generations.

Last names, of course, do change, both through the marriage of the daughters and through conscious acts. Our name became Kingsley in 1940, two years after we came to America, at a time when German-sounding names were not popular here. So my father and my uncle "anglicized," using a name suggested by a cousin who had come to America from Germany via England, where he stayed with someone named Kingsley.

Somehow I have always felt bad about that even though I had nothing to do with it. Knowing that third cousins in Israel also changed their names has not lessened the discomfort. Their desire was undoubtedly also to make a "new start" and to move beyond their Germanic ancestry by Hebraizing their name. They simply took the first, middle, and last letters of Kissinger and made Keynar, probably related to *kinor*, or "violin." While I am not happy about the result, I accept the reality, knowing that the practice is a common and legitimate one, both here and in Israel. In any case, it is too complicated to change back, and then too, "what's in a name?" The roots are well sunk, and the tree which Hitler sought to cut down has given birth to new saplings — appropriately in the two centers of Jewish life.

Not all of the Kissingers were as fortunate as my family here or that of our Israeli cousins, however. The family tree conveys that message too. In microcosm it shows the enormity of the effect of the Holocaust on our people. The diagrammed portion alone does not, perhaps, sufficiently tell the story. While it clearly shows the dead ends, of which, alas, there are all too many, it doesn't give the reasons for them. To be sure, it doesn't take great intellect to figure out that some of those dead ends resulted from offspring not marrying, others from the fact that no children were born, and still others from premature death. But when one reads the narrative together with the genealogical tables, one discovers another dimension with which all Jews of our time live — the stunning effect of the Holocaust on our generations.

Firsthand, I knew only of a single grandmother who was sent away in 1942. Fortunately, the rest of my immediate family had the foresight and means to leave in time.

But I discovered so many who did not leave — who perished; mothers and daughters, fathers and sons. Here was Joseph, a grandson of Meyer's, a teacher, four of whose five children were killed by the Nazis. Here was Jette, a granddaughter, three of whose five were killed. Here were great-grandchildren Ferdinand and Julius, again teachers, who perished.

Multiply those statistics by other families. Reflect on how many stumps

of trees remain which will never be sources of new seedlings. Reflect on all of the children who will never be born and whose names will never appear on a genealogical table.

Yet we did survive. And here is one more interesting aspect of the genealogy. Many settled in *Israel*, and live there today, as indicated above, rearing their children in that free and Jewish environment. What would we have done or do without Israel? Other considerations aside, a look at the narrative of the genealogy gives dramatic evidence of how important that land was and is to our people and its life. Here strangely, it is my side of the family, from Meyer's first marriage, that has produced the Zionists. One of my father's brothers settled in Palestine, in fact, and died there before Israel was reborn a state.

Not that I don't have relatives all over the rest of the world too, I discovered, from South America to South Africa, to Switzerland, to Sweden, Portugal, and all the way south to Australia. If ever you had doubts about whether or not we Jews are an international people, just look at your own genealogy and I'm sure the doubts will vanish. The term "wandering Jew" is not the product of an idle imagination. It is based on solid reality caused by the fact that we have time and again been driven out of places that we thought were hospitable to us and forced to seek places of refuge — and to those places, especially the United States of America, we are profoundly grateful.

But when the moment of truth comes, it is only Israel that is truly our own. We've done well elsewhere. But I wonder if there is any place in the world that offers quite the sense of inner security that comes from knowing you are with your own. And somehow, there must be a meaning in the fact that of all the Kissingers, it is one who lives in Israel, where ultimately we find our original roots, who took the initiative to trace our modern roots.

To end where I began: The great miracle is that we are here; that we can talk about our lineage, our origins, our roots; that we can *qvell* over the fact that we have an unbroken history as a people that binds us together, regardless of where we may be living at any moment in time.

The reason for this is precisely that we have always been motivated by two foci. We have had a sense of *history*; a sense that our past has meaning and is worthy of our efforts to learn it and to perpetuate it.

But the other reason is that we have also had a sense of destiny; of a future that was special; of a role that was unique; of a task that needed fulfilling — to make the world better.

It is undoubtedly the greatness of our yesterdays that poses both the challenge and the possibility of an even greater tomorrow.