

Meeting Esty Shushan • Exploring Jewish genealogy • National Library of Israel

# The Jerusalem Report®

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COVERING ISRAEL, THE MIDDLE EAST & THE JEWISH WORLD

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Jerusalem Rabbi Benny Lau leads the 929 Tanach B'Yachad study initiative



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ג'רוזלם ריפורט

המחיר בישראל: 21.00 ₪ באילת: 17.90 ₪

# Exploring Jewish genealogy

Your roots are not just who you are, but part of the history of a people

By Greer Fay Cashman

**FROM ITS** very beginning, the Jewish religion has placed a strong emphasis on pedigrees, be they honorable or less than honorable. Many chapters in the Bible, from even before the time that the ancient ancestors of the Jewish People were known as the Children of Israel, are devoted to who begat whom – and sometimes the list goes on for several generations.

Anyone who peruses the Book of Genesis will learn that Abraham, the patriarch of the Jewish people, left the home of his father, Terach. We are given the names of his wife, his concubines, his sons, his daughter-in-law, his grandchildren, his great-grandchildren, and other members of his extended family. Later we are given the names of Jacob's wives and concubines and those of their progeny.

All this, along with their living conditions, their feuds and their jealousies, is recorded for posterity.

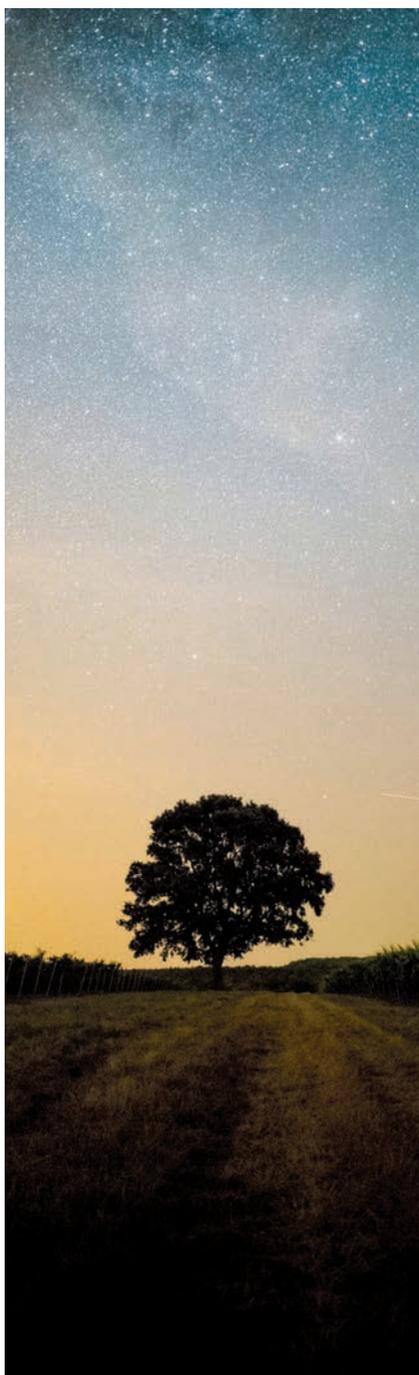
In fact, the names of leaders, prophets, judges and their enemies and descendants are recorded throughout the Bible.

After thousands of years, they may not mean much to most people, but for biblical scholars, it is of the utmost importance to familiarize themselves with all these names and their place in the human mosaic of their times.

Fast forward to the era we live in today. A random survey of passersby in the street, or passengers in a bus, or friends at a party will indicate that the majority of people may be able to supply the first names of their grandparents, but they will be stumped when it comes to their great-grandparents, unless they or a sibling or first-cousin have been named for them and also carry the same surname.

This is a matter of concern to Jewish genealogists who say that a great deal of history is lost for lack of research into family backgrounds.

In countries with large and diverse immigrant populations, researching history can be an amazing journey through time – and an incredible lesson in geography. Each of us has four grandparents, and eight great-grandparents, and the numbers keep doubling each



DANIEL OLAH/UNSPASH

generation back that we can trace our families. In a country like Israel, it is not uncommon for someone to have a multi-national or bi- or tri-racial mix in their DNA. How interesting it is to explore how people from different parts of the world, possibly from different faiths, came together and created families.

In the early years of the state, when immigrants from Europe and immigrants from North Africa were housed side by side in transit camps where they often stayed for many months, it was natural for young people to gravitate toward each other, to fall in love, and to get married. Their children often grew up in a bi-cultural environment, because one set of grandparents practiced their North African traditions, while the other adhered to their European traditions. This included cuisine, synagogue customs, music, songs, dances, literature, and more.

What is currently of major concern to veteran genealogists who are affiliated with global Jewish genealogical societies in general, and with the L'Dor V'Dor Foundation in particular, is the saving and preserving of Jewish records from Ukraine, because with all the destruction that has been going on since the Russian invasion, there is a strong likelihood that valuable records will be lost, and with them, all evidence of important chapters in Ukrainian Jewish history.

This should be of particular interest to Hassidic movements because Ukraine was the cradle of Hassidism.

During the two and a quarter centuries of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, from 1569 to 1795, Jews were among the largest and most prominent of the ethnic minorities, flourishing culturally, wielding influence, and prospering financially.

It was during this period, in 1698, that Israel Ben Eliezer, better known as the Baal Shem Tov, was born.

Acknowledged as the founder of Hassidism, his teachings continue to impact millions of Jews throughout the world. But in particular, his teachings contributed greatly to Jewish life in Ukraine for most of the 18th century.



DANA NIEMEIER

Marlis Humphrey

But as has been the case throughout history, the more affluent and influential Jews became, the more they provoked antisemitism that was often expressed in confinement to ghettos, limitations on how they could earn their livelihoods, quota systems in schools and universities, and at its worst extreme, pogroms, massacres and dispossession of property.

Genealogy is much more than finding the names of one's ancestors and one's distant living relatives based on names on family trees.

When genealogists begin looking into their family roots, they discover amazing nuggets of history and valuable information – not just names of ancestors and distant cousins, but hereditary illnesses, character traits, racial and religious intermarriage and numerous other gleanings that had not been handed down in the oral or previously known documented history of their families.

Many people who were not particularly interested in genealogy to start with but began delving into family history in order to help a child with a school project, or to discover whether a certain illness with which they've been diagnosed was carried by other relatives in a previous generation, or to do honor to those murdered in the Holocaust eventually get hooked on genealogy when gradually overcoming some of the many challenges it poses.

Total strangers often help each other through genealogical websites and Facebook groups such as Tracing the Tribe, through which people who live in different parts of the world discover previously unknown relatives, because scattered members of the tribe are tracing a common ancestor.

The Jewish Genealogical Portal, which offers a guide to Jewish projects and resources,



IRWIN PIKUS

Sallyann Sack

advertises that it is committed to free and open discussion of all topics related to Jewish genealogy, and enjoys collaborative projects.

One of the big challenges to anyone trying to trace their roots is family surnames. For instance, in some parts of Belarus and Ukraine, the Cyrillic G is pronounced like an H, which in itself does not exist in Russian, but the G was often used for foreign words with an H sound. Thus Horowitz and Gurevitch are actually the same name. But think of all the different spellings there are for both, and that different members of the same family may have the same surname with different spellings, or they may have chosen to change the name to something more in keeping with the countries in which they lived.

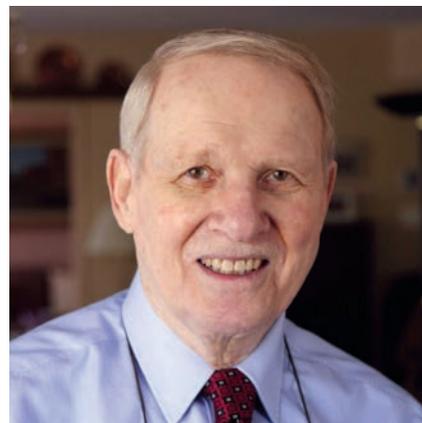
For instance, the maiden name of one of my Polish grandmothers was Joskowitz. Her brother went to Australia and changed his name to Joske. In America, other relatives changed their names to Joss and Gess, and in all probability, there were others who spelled the original name as Yoskovich, and other derivatives thereof.

But this obstacle course has also been overcome, and there are online guides listing original family names and their variations.

The spelling obstacle also applies to obscure villages that have similar names with a single letter differentiating between the two. People searching for information may be looking at data related to the wrong village, because they are not aware of another that may include an additional letter that somehow is not part of its pronunciation.

The most important characteristics in pursuing genealogy are patience and perseverance.

The interest in genealogy is evidenced by the International Association of Jewish Gene-



EGAN OWEN

Stanley Diamond

alogical Societies, which is an umbrella body comprising more than 90 Jewish genealogical organizations worldwide – and there may be others that have not joined.

Prior to the war in Ukraine, one of the useful sources of information was the Ukrainian Jewish Heritage broadcasts, which were privately funded by the multinational Ukrainian Jewish Encounter comprising Ukrainian expatriates and their descendants. The aim was to promote mutual understanding between Ukrainians and Jews.

Whatever was online before the war remains there, but it is not certain to what extent the broadcasts have continued to function.

For the L'Dor V'Dor Foundation to accomplish its mission, it engages in research and promotes development education and awareness projects. While Ukraine currently occupies its attention, its global project is the documentation of Jewish records worldwide.

The idea is to document beyond birth, marriage and death records. For instance, beyond an actual death record that provides the name of the deceased and when he or she was born and died, more detailed information may often be gleaned from tombstone inscriptions, which list next of kin as well as parentage.

The IAGS and Avotaynu have wide-ranging information in their JCat catalogs that are freely accessible.

The Foundation also encourages the use of DNA tests as a shortcut to genealogical research. The Jewish romance with DNA started more than a quarter of a century ago, when a young American Jew in desperate need of a bone marrow transplant was unable to find a suitable match in the US. He turned to Israel, and thousands of people instantly showed up at points where blood samples were being



taken. Happily, the life of that young man was saved, and his plight led to the establishment of the Ezer Mizion bone marrow registry, the largest in Israel and among the largest in the world, with more than a million registrants.

It was quickly realized that DNA testing could often determine a person's geographic origins, and could also lead to family reunions, thus providing a faint ray of hope for child Holocaust survivors who had been too young to remember anything about their biological families, but who were haunted by curiosity as to where they came from and who were their real parents.

On a happier note, DNA testing has enabled relatives from different branches on a family tree to find each other and share information.

L'Dor V'Dor CEO Marlis Humphrey says that the foundation is largely an outgrowth of Avotaynu, which was founded by veteran genealogist Sallyann Amdur Sack in 1985.

Miami-based Humphrey, who likewise has many years of genealogical research to her credit, is also IAJHS co-chair, chairs the Florida State Genealogical Society, is a member of the National Genealogical Society, the Association of Professional Genealogists, the Federation of Genealogical Societies, and is actively involved with several other similar organizations.

Sack got bitten by the genealogical bug in 1977, when her teenage daughter bought her a book on the subject as a gift. Sack eventually wrote extensively about her genealogical journeys, and founded the International Institute for Jewish Genealogy, the Jewish Genealogical Society of Greater Washington, the IAJG Avotaynu, and the International Review of Jewish Genealogy. In addition, she edits various genealogical publications, and also teaches genealogy.

"Sallyann arrived at the notion that there were many tier-two records (other than vital records certifying birth, marriage, and death) out there that we don't know much about," says Humphrey. "She observed that those records are often richer in information and context than vital records, and moreover, they often were the missing piece that led to many brick wall breakthroughs as she has seen throughout the years from her vantage point within the pages of Avotaynu. Sallyann reached out to me while I was president of the IAJGS, suggesting that IAJGS should take on this challenge to find such records."

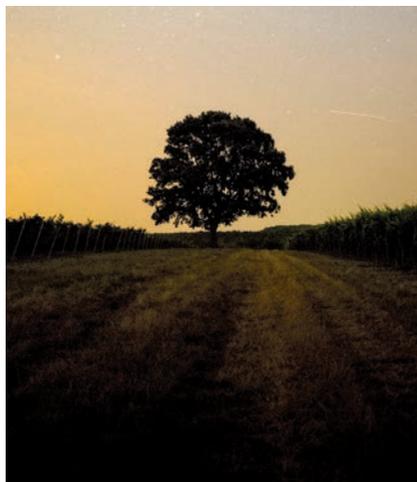
At the same time, Humphrey was leading the IAJGS in its strategic planning. "We were looking for an important project to fill a gap in

Jewish genealogy where we could make use of the assets we bring to the table: the army of Jewish Genealogical Society volunteers (a collective membership of about 10,000), and the experts we convene at the IAJGS annual conference every year."

Meanwhile, Stanley Diamond, founder of JRI-Poland who has been the most prolific and experienced in American Jewry's genealogical community in making records searchable and accessible (6.2 million records in 27 years) also recognized that researchers had only witnessed the tip of the iceberg in records discovery and accessibility, and had countless experiences of finding records hidden in plain sight.

"We three came together and more fully explored the nature of the gap and what could pragmatically be done about it," Humphrey continues. "The Documentation of Jewish Records (DoJR) Worldwide project was launched as a strategic initiative of the IAJGS in 2017. We had a hiatus for personal reasons at my end. We resumed in 2019 with a business plan for the board of the IAJGS, and had our proof of concept in the archives of Poland and Ukraine in early 2020. We have been operating on all volunteer power. We knew from the start that in order to build the infrastructure for such a large-scale and complex project, we would need an organizational structure with fundraising capacity and governance beyond what IAJGS could provide.

"With the proof of concept complete based on survey work in Poland and Ukraine, early survey work in Australia and Venezuela under way, user interviews to understand the requirements for JCat (the catalog we are creating) complete, JCat prototyping under way, and now working on training the Artificial Intelligence engine to read a third language, we are at an important juncture that requires



us to establish DoJR under a new organization that can support DoJR in this next stage of growth."

This led to the founding of L'Dor V'Dor in October 2021.

Asked from which country the foundation receives the most information, the surprising answer was Australia, which has a large intake of Russian immigrants who are required to supply a lot of details about themselves and their families before Australia gives the green light to their applications. Australia is also very good about supplying details to individuals or their heirs about what is in their files. Here again, I have to cite my own family. I knew roughly when my parents came to Australia, but needed more detailed information about their Polish background before I could claim my inheritance share from my grandfather's estate. A letter from Jerusalem to Canberra resulted in all the required information in just over a week, and included the name of the ship on which my parents had sailed from Poland to Australia. Thus the Russian Jews living in Australia were able to receive copies of their files that contained valuable information about their lives in the former Soviet Union. It would have been impossible to get such information from Russia.

Using artificial intelligence, foundation volunteers have been able to read Russian and Polish handwritten documents that date to 1815 with a rate of 5% for character errors. The AI engine is currently being trained to read Yiddish handwriting, and once that is accomplished, it will be trained to read Ladino. As for manual work, during its pilot project in Kielce in Poland, the foundation came across previously unknown books recording the names of residents who had lived there in the mid-1700s.

Long before Spain and Portugal began issuing passports to people who could prove that they descended from Jews expelled from Spain and Portugal more than 500 years ago, Genie Milgrom of Florida, who was raised Catholic, began exploring her ancestry, partially because she never felt comfortable in her Catholic skin. She discovered her Spanish-Jewish roots many years ago, and has now gone back 33 generations, with her descent coming from women all the way, which would make her halachically Jewish. But just to be 100% sure, she went through an Orthodox conversion, and is dedicated to helping other Crypto Jews to regain their Jewish identities. Her extensive database will eventually be incorporated into DoJR. ■