

Genealogical Golems of the MaHaRaL's Family

by Neil Rosenstein

The famed MaHaRaL of Prague (Rabbi Judah Lowe, 1525–1609) was said to have constructed an artificial human being—a golem—given life by magical rites. The word is derived from the Hebrew for a lump or clod that evolved into the Yiddish for some formless thing. Perhaps, then, it should come as no surprise that descendants of this great rabbi have created artificial genealogical facts which are based on two fallacies, one about the MaHaRaL’s ancestry, the other about his descendants.

Other articles about the MaHaRaL have appeared previously in AVOTAYNU.¹ This article will discuss published mistakes claiming that the family traces back to the Davidic royal line. In addition, it will describe how major rabbinical families that traced their ancestry back to the MaHaRaL as well as the MaHaRaM of Padua (Rabbi Meir Katzenellenbogen, 1482–1565), now may be seen to have traced back only to the MaHaRaL; the lineage back to the MaHaRaM is incorrect. The MaHaRaM is the primary subject of my book *The Unbroken Chain* (1976) and I, too, fell into the same trap, not realizing that published rabbinical genealogies often are incorrect, as have many other scholars and researchers before me. This article corrects those errors.

Fallacy #1

Fallacy #1: Published genealogical sources that claim that the MaHaRaL traces back to King David are incorrect.

In 1745, a small book was published in Zolkiew, Poland, called *Mateh Moshe*. Rabbi Moses Meir Perles (Perlis or Perl's), noted Prague scribe, religious court judge and one-time private secretary of the Viennese Court Jew, Samson Wertheimer (1666–1739), was commissioned to write this book by a Rabbi Moses Katz. The 1906 *Jewish Encyclopedia* writes of Perles that “[he] was related to many prominent rabbinical families, about which he gives very valuable information in the preface to his *Megillat Sefer*.” The problem is that the information was not always correct. Given this fact, one might reasonably wonder if the facts in *Mateh Moshe* sometimes are incorrect as well.

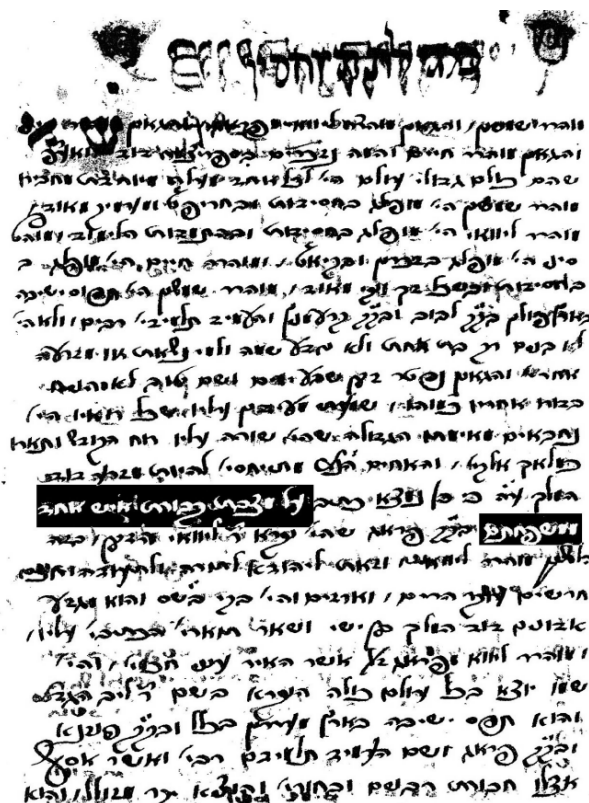
Mateh Moshe is described on the title page as “a compilation of the genealogy of R. Moses Katz, may his light shine, Rosh Yeshiva of the Przemyśl community, son of Rabbi Isaiah Katz of blessed memory, brother of the Gaon Rabbi Naftali Katz of blessed memory.” Isaiah and Naftali were the sons of Rabbi Isaac Katz who married the daughter of the MaHaRaL. Below is the text that was the beginning of the genealogical problem: that the genealogy discussed here is only conjecture without valid proof. The highlighted text says:

[illegible]

For thus is found on the tombstone of the grave of the *head of his family*, here in Prague, who was called by his name Rabbi Liwa the elder – with this language – Our Rabbi and Master Liwa...” (italics by author).

The full epitaph text then follows.

Contemporaneous with the book *Match Moshe* is a manuscript housed in the library of the Jewish Theological Society entitled *Megilat Yochasin* (Scroll of genealogy), dated Furth, 1768, only a 23-year difference with *Match Moshe*. Here we find a text different from that in *Match Moshe*. Instead of the head of his family, this manuscript states (on page 3) For thus is found on the tombstone of the grave of a person of his family” not “the head of his family.”



The manuscript was published by David Schweitzer in German in 1865 under the title *Stamtafel*. The German text also states “a member of the family” and not “the head of the family.”

Diese vier Coryphäen behaupteten, den Nachkommen des Königs David entsprossen zu sein, weil sich im Prager Friedhofe auf dem Grabmonumente eines ihrer Familie angehörigen Mannes, „Rabbi Dewa der Alte“ genannt, nachfolgendes Epitaph vorfand:

„Hochehrwürdiger Rab. Lewa.“

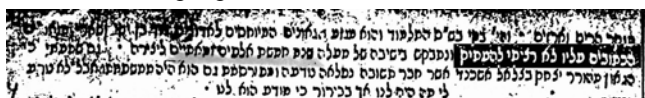
The next edition of the family genealogy appeared in 1864 in a book entitled *Megila Yochasin* by Rabbi Noach Haim Lewin of Kobryn. Here we find that the text of the first edition has evolved into different language:

ז
מגילת יוחסין
איש אחד הי' נקרא ר' חיים וויזניץ. והי' דבר נק'ק וויזניץ.
והי' אדם כבד ודיוק מפורסם. וראש שלטת יחוסו הי' לו
אביו חביו. הי' נקרא 'צמנו ר' יהודא ליוואי הזקן ועל לוח
אבן מצבתו חרות בזה הלשון. מוהר"ר יהודה ליוואי זולת ליהודה.
לחורו ולחשוד. חכם הד"ס. עוקר הרים וארזים. בקי בש"ס
התלמוד. ולא נמא כמותו בכל העולם בסריפות ובקלאות. ובזכרון.
והוא מנוח הגאונים המיוחסים לאדוניו דוד בן ישי. ואשר

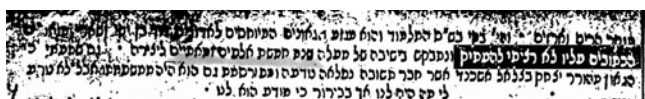
The text now says, "and the head of his genealogical chain was his father's father, who was called by his name Rabbi Liwa the elder...and upon his grave's standing stone was thus inscribed—Our Master and Rabbi Liwa..."

Two more editions of the same book followed, one in Warsaw (1889), by Lewin (again) and another in London, England (1901), by Hanoch Henoch Moses Traub of Cracow. Both of these editions have the same texts as the 1864 edition. These three later editions, however, have a corrupted text. Since the earliest edition, *Mateh Moshe*, was and remains, difficult to find (the National Library of Israel has one of only a few known copies) Perles' original genealogical statement obviously was consulted infrequently.

Let us now consider two major errors in these sources. First, as I demonstrated in an earlier AVOTAYNU article,² it was impossible for the MaHaRaL to have been a grandson of Judah Liwa the elder. Secondly, that same article shows that the epitaph in *Mateh Moshe* reads:



Thirdly Perles, without any further explanation, wrote a rather unusual comment in *Mateh Moshe*: "And the rest of what was written thereupon [the grave] I did not want to copy." In the 1864 and subsequent editions this statement was transcribed as:



As my earlier article indicated, after the stone had partly sunk into the earth, the lowermost inscribed letters were still legible as early as the 18th century (which was two hundred years after Liwa the Elder's death and the same time that Perles did his research); they showed only the letters "yud-shin-yud," (יש"י) which Perles read as "Jesse." In fact, these three letters are the last letters of the Hebrew word for Thursday, part of his death date! After I commissioned the lowermost parts of the stone to be dug clean, my assumption (that it was a date) was shown to be correct.

This clarification of the letters yud-shin-yud adds support to the counterclaim that the MaHaRaL not only was not descended from Judah Lowe the Elder, a false assumption

based on the text of the 1745 book, corrupted in later editions from 1864 onwards, but also that Judah Lowe the Elder was not even a descendant of the House of King David. This is not a negation of the epitaph's mention of his illustrious rabbinical ancestry—in general terms.

It must be emphasized that researchers who state that the Liwa epitaph has a death date of 1539 are correct; others who have changed the date to read 1439 are incorrect.³ Thus, the MaHaRaL could not have been a grandson of Liwa because the MaHaRaL was already alive in 1539 and would not have been named after a living ancestor which custom, prevalent among the Sefardim, is not done among the Ashkenazim.

53.

מוהר"ר ליווא.

גוד אריה יהודה. בתורה ובתעודה. עסק בהם כלימיו.
צדקה עשה לעניי עמיו. והוא מנוח הגאונים. מעשיו היו

.... עליו חול'.... חשון ש' לפ"ק. תנצבה.

It is of interest to note the fanciful changes that we find in more recent published works, such as *Records of the Franklin Family*.⁴ This author's comments are in parentheses: In 1727 Rabbi Meir Perles . . . published a list of his (the MaHaRaL's) descendants and the positions they had occupied and states that the MaHaRaL was descended from King David . . . The line of ascent is complete in all detail to an ancestor in Prague who held the position of Imperial Rabbi (This is not stated on his epitaph; see above.) and died in 1439 (should be 1539). This Rabbi is stated on his tomb to have been a descendant of HaiGaon (this is not stated on his epitaph) . . . and it is recorded that he published the details of his ancestry for the intervening three and a half centuries. This document has disappeared, and though a search has been made for it in the Prague archives it cannot be found. (It never existed.)

Franklin further states, again incorrectly, "The document is, however, frequently quoted in ancient and modern books on the History of the Jews of Prague, and may be accepted as a reliable tradition."

Fallacy #2

Fallacy #2: Descendants of R. Naftali Katz who died in 1649 are not descended from the Katzenellenbogen family.

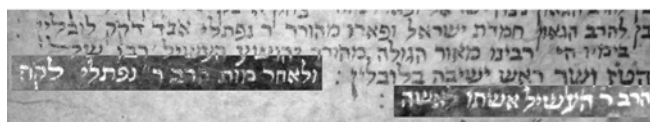
The standard sources for the rabbinic genealogy of the earliest generations of the Katzenellenbogen family list inaccurate or incomplete information that has led many researchers astray. The problem is: which of two wives was the ancestor of famous rabbinical and Chassidic dynasties? The goal here is to resolve this genealogical puzzle once and for all.

Da'atKedoshim by Israel Tuvia Eisenstadt, states that Judah Katzenellenbogen (son of Saul Wahl) had a daughter, Dinah, who was married first to Rabbi Naftali (HaKohen) Katz and then to the Rebi Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel.⁵ The source quoted is Rabbi Zvi Hirsch Edelmann's *Gedulat*

the biographies of Lublin's rabbis, *Lekorot HaYehudim BeLublin*, by Solomon Baruch Nissenbaum (with notes by Professor David Kaufmann and Dr Salomon Buber), no mention at all is made of any wives of Reb Heschel.¹²

Anaf Etz Avot by Rabbi Samuel Kahan¹³ discusses only one of Dinah's husbands, Reb Heschel who was the successor to Rabbi Naftali Katz as chief rabbi in Lublin.¹⁴ No mention is made of her first marriage to Rabbi Katz. Her epitaph in Brody, as recorded by Edelman in *Gedulat-Shaul*, states she was the wife of two Gaonim, Rabbi Naftali [...] and Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel. Furthermore, Rabbi Jacob Heilprin in his genealogy, as recorded by Professor David Kaufmann (1852–1889), states correctly that Dinah was first married to Katz and then to Heschel, as he explains in detail in *Anaf Etz Avot*.

Another source that echoes the statement that Rabbi Katz was Dinah's first husband is a handwritten *yichus* (pedigree record) which was in the possession of the Kuttner family. This document was discovered only recently (in 2012) by descendants of this family, hidden away in an inherited family book. Here we also read about their genealogy tracing back to Rabbi Katz and the MaHaRaL of Prague. The document, dated 1856, says, "after the death of Rabbi Naftali Katz, Rebi Heschel took his widow as a wife." More about this Kuttner detail is discussed below.



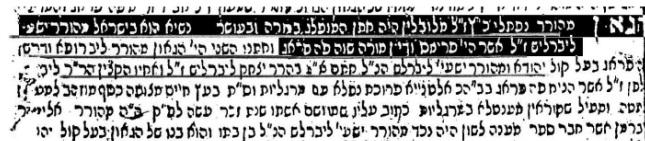
Avot Atarah LeBonim by R. Aryey Judah Leib Lipschutz, has a long discussion of Dinah and her husband R. Naftali Katz and lists their (presumed) children.¹⁵

Our challenge to these genealogical claims of parent-hood—whether from Heschel's or Katz's first or second wives—must find answers in other sources that these rabbis have overlooked. Since Dinah was considered to be Reb Heschel's only spouse, they share all their children who, therefore, descend from the MaHaRaM of Padua (and thus the Katzenellenbogen family).

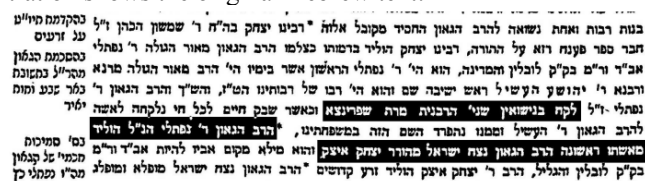
But what do we know about Rabbi Katz's marriages, and thus, which children were from which marriage? We must dig deeper for the answers to these questions. Fortunately we have a number of sources that are older than these 19th century documents, but more obscure, including rarely found books and even more rare manuscripts. One such source is the same *Mateh Moshe* discussed under Fallacy #1. Since it was published in 1745, and Rabbi Katz died in 1649, the information must be considered primary for our discussion, since these are the earliest and only original source.

Here we read that Rabbi Naftali Katz married the daughter of scholarly and wealthy "Prince of Israel, Our Master and Rabbi [Isaiah] Lieberl's (Lieberlis), of blessed memory, who was the Primator (community leader) and Teacher here in Prague." Katz's children also are listed. More impor-

tantly no mention is made at all of his second marriage to Dinah, contracted only in his old age.



Another confused source to be discussed is the introduction of an 1865 commentary on Proverbs entitled *Ma'asei Rikmah* by R. Joshua Heschel Kuttner, published in Leipzig. The author writes that Rabbi Naftali married secondly to Shprintze, and that after he died, she remarried Rabbi Heschel. Since Rabbi Naftali's second wife was Dinah it is obvious that Shprintze, daughter of Isaiah Lieberlis must have been his first, and not his second, wife. The next illustration shows the original Hebrew text:



Here in the introductory section above, the author clearly says that Rabbi Katz's children were from his first wife. It is interesting to note the difference between the Kuttner genealogies: one written by the son (the manuscript) and the other by the father (the book). The earliest genealogies are closer in time to the events recorded and, thus, likely more accurate.

One final source is found in Simon Hock's *Familien-Prags*, the epitaphs in the old Prague Jewish cemetery.¹⁶ Here we find mentioned the father of Shprintze - Isaiah son of Isaac with reference being made to the *Mateh Moshe*. Once again no reference is made to Reb Heschel. In other words, the information known to these later scholars was incomplete.

The conclusion for Fallacy #2 is that the descendants of Rabbi Naftali Katz can maintain their claim of ancestry back to the MaHaRaL of Prague, but not to the MaHaRaM of Padua, because the offspring stem from a wife who was not descended from the Katzenellenbogen line. The exceptions would be cases in which someone in a later generation married a Katzenellenbogen descendant, such as was the case of the rabbinical family of the Chief Rabbi of Edinburgh, Scotland, Rabbi Jacob Rabinowitz, 1869–1932. As a result of the discoveries outlined here, the family histories of many prominent families, rabbinic families and Chassidic dynasties must be revised. These families include Rebbe Nachman of Breslov whose grave is venerated in Uman, Chamedes and Zausmer families, Taubes and Gutstein families, the Chassidic dynasties of Leifer of Nadworna and Rosenbaum of Kretchniv, and the Chassidic dynasty of the Bostoner rebbes. Others include the Amsel family, the Margolis (Margolioth) family including the famous Efraim Zalman Margolis of Brody, the Zamosc family (including the

ABD of Hamburg Rabbi Zvi Hirsch Zamosc) and most of the Horowitz rabbinic families and Chassidic dynasties (who claim descent from the MaHaRaM Tiktin – Rabbi Meir HaLevi Horowitz—unless MaHaRaL descendants married direct Katzenellenbogen descendants. This writer has corrected these errors, which will appear correctly in the new updated third edition of *The Unbroken Chain*.

ליברלש

4055 ש"נ אדר, חנה זת הר"ר יצחק
— חשת אשר כ"ץ חלפן.
1185 ש"ח שמועון זר אהרן — לורנא
נרצנן.
1124 ש"פ? ו' ז' שצט, היק' כ' יודא נקרא
ליצרון זן הרר יצחק ז"ל⁽¹⁾ —.
713 ש"ץ? צצצט ה' תמוז, צ'ס' ל'ו'ס
5684 י'צ'א לפ"ק, הנעלה כ"ה יצחק
ליצרלש זן האלוף הנדומס
הקלין הראש ונהר"ר יסעי
ליצרלש, זן כ"ה שנים.
1023b ת"ד האל' הנהר' הקלין ונ' יסעי⁽²⁾
צבאר"ר יצחק ז"ל⁽³⁾.

(1) [הוא ר' ליברמן חלפן אשר נדב
את הפרכת הנפלא בב"ב אנ"ש עיי' לעיל
צד 132 הע' 1].
(2) [הוא חותנו של הנאון ר' נפתלי כ"ץ
מלובלין ור' מאיר פערלס יקראהו במגלת
יחוסו של מדר"ל מפראג המופלג בתורה
ובעושר נשיא הוא בישראל מהו' ישעיה
ליברליש ז"ל אשר היה פרימוס ודיין מו"ש פ"פ
.. חתם את עצמו בהר"ר יצחק ליברליש ז"ל].

Rabbi Heschel was the son of R. Jacob who is recorded to have married Deborah, daughter of Rabbi Meir Wahl Katzenellenbogen.¹⁷ If this is correct, then his descendants are all part of this same family, irrespective who Rabbi Heschel's wives were.¹⁸

The following list is presented to help more clearly understand the spousal relationships and their time frame.

- Reb Heschel was born about 1590/1600 and married first about 1620 to an unknown first wife. They had children from this marriage.

- Rabbi Naftali Katz was born about 1600 and married first about 1620 to Shprintze, daughter of R. Isaiah Lieber-

lis who died in 1640 (only nine years before his son-in-law who died young in 1649). They had children from this marriage.

- Rabbi Katz's wife died young, in about 1645, at which time he married Dinah Katzenellenbogen who was born about 1620/25. This was her first marriage. They had no children.

- After Rabbi Katz died in 1649, Dinah married a second time, about 1650, to Reb Heschel. At that time she was in her twenties and he was already in his fifties (or more). This fits well with the family story recorded in *Gedulat Shaulof* how Dinah cherished the hope of marrying this sage who had been accustomed to visit her home and having proposed to him, he married her and they probably had issue, in addition to those from his first marriage. The existing historical record does not reveal which children were from her second marriage to Reb Heschel.

Notes

1. Volume XXII, 3, 29 (2008).
2. Ibid.
3. Muneles, Otto, *Epitaphs of the Ancient Jewish Cemetery of Prague*, The Israel Academy of Science and Humanities, Jerusalem, 1988, 135, #37 and Lieben, Koppelman, *Gal-Ed (Grabsteininschriften die prager ifr. Alten Friedhofs)*, Prague, 1856. 21, #53.
4. Franklin, Arthur Ellis, George Routledge & Sons, Ltd., second edition, London, 1935, 3.
5. Published in St. Petersburg, 1897–98, page 91.
6. Footnote on page 24b, published in London in 1854.
7. Avotaynu XIV, 2, 25 (1998).
8. *Be'er Yitzchak* by R. Isaac of Posen (Machon Yerushalayim; Jerusalem, 1982), responsum by Reb Heschel..
9. Published in 1776 in Berlin.
10. By Hillel Magid-Steinschneider, Vilna, 1900, 15, footnote 2.
11. Eisenstadt, I.T., *Da'at Kedoshim*, St. Petersburg, 1897–98, 200.
12. Published in Lublin in 1900.
13. Published in Cracow in 1903.
14. Page 16, #56.
15. Published in Warsaw in 1927, section at the end – *Shalsholet HaYochasin*.
16. Published in Pressburg in 1892, page 188.
17. *Da'at Kedoshim*, 90.
18. Avotaynu XXII, 2, 26 (2006).

South African-born Neil Rosenstein, M.D., is a retired surgeon who lives in Elizabeth, New Jersey. In 1977, he founded the Jewish Genealogical Society, Inc. (New York), first located in Elizabeth. As a result of more than four decades of investigative study of rare books and manuscripts, Dr. Rosenstein has accumulated a vast collection of material on Jewish genealogy, especially in the field of rabbinical dynasties. He is the author of many works on the subject, his magnum opus, The Unbroken Chain was first published as a single volume in 1976. An expanded two-volume second edition appeared in 1990. He currently is preparing a multi-volume third edition.