

The Next Thirty Years: Predictions of Trends in Jewish Genealogy

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The following is based upon a presentation given at the July 2015 IAJGS conference in Jerusalem—Ed.

Jewish genealogy, it may be argued, is at least as old as the Bible. Detailed accounts of who begat whom have intrigued generations of Biblical scholars. Gravestones from antiquity not only name the decedent, but often give details of his or her life and forebears, a source of genealogical information even now.

Today, our interest in Jewish genealogy is driven not only by a desire to name our ancestors, but to learn about their lives, relate family history to the events and trends of macro-history, and to connect with contemporary family members. For some, genealogy is a post-retirement activity, but, for an increasingly large number of us, it is a front-line activity throughout life. Indeed, in many schools today, children conduct genealogy projects that bring them closer to living relatives as well as to those who lived earlier.

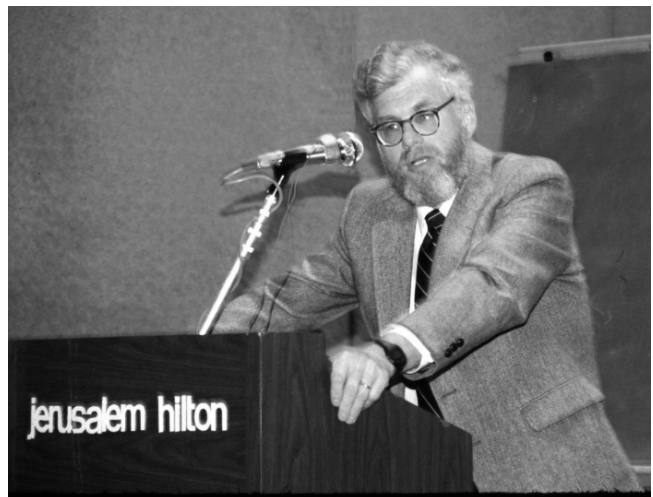
As Pope Francis recently said, “A people without roots has no future.” I can’t quite claim that he was talking about genealogy, but it does fit. Before we look at the future, though we need to set the context and look back a bit.

The first international Jewish Genealogy conference was held in Jerusalem in 1984, organized by the Jewish Genealogy Society of Greater Washington. Naomi Gershan and I co-chaired the event. About 110 people attended. The Israel Genealogical Society actually had incorporated the year before but we didn’t know that. We met Esther Ramon and some of the original members of that society during the planning for the 1984 meeting.

A now-deceased geneticist, Dr. Richard Goodman, author of *Genetic Conditions Among the Jewish People*, was one of our main speakers. DNA testing hadn’t been developed yet, but he told us that by studying the biochemistry of the blood, we can see that Jews from all over the world—Lithuania, Morocco, Greece, Iraq and elsewhere—are more similar to one another than they are to the neighbors among whom they have lived for generations.

AVOTAYNU was born at that conference and our first letter to the editor, in the July 1985 issue was from a woman named Anne Cardozo who lived in San Diego, California. Cardozo wrote that she was a *converso*, a descendant of Jews from Spain and Portugal who ostensibly had converted to Catholicism under pressure, but who had remained secretly Jewish. These are the people who were the target of the infamous Spanish and Portuguese Inquisitions. She said, “Jewish genealogy publications all too frequently ignore conversos in their listings.” She added, “Such people exist today in increasing numbers.” I will return to Dr. Goodman and Anne Cardozo a little later.

A second (after AVOTAYNU) main outcome of that



Dr. Richard Goodman

1984 summer seminar, as we called it then, was a decision to hold another “international” conference three years later in London. The international conference returned to Jerusalem in 1994, organized by the Association of Jewish Genealogical Societies, which had come into existence in 1988. Gary Mokotoff and I chaired the event, with substantial help from our Israeli counterparts. The Soviet Union had recently collapsed, and we invited our first foreign archivists—the State Archivist of Poland, Jerzy Skowronek, and the deputy director of the Ukrainian Archives. At Stanley Diamond’s request, I introduced Stanley to Skowronek and JRI-Poland was born.

This was also the conference keynoted by Itzhak Navon, fifth president of Israel. Navon, a proud Sephardi, brought with him several Israelis, all descendants of Spanish Jews who had converted to Catholicism under duress, but whose family members a few generations later had reverted to Judaism when they succeeded in escaping from the Iberian Peninsula. Navon said at that conference, “You may think that you choose to be Jewish—or not, but that is not your choice because God has chosen you to be Jewish.”

Again, a decade later, in 2004, the conference returned to Jerusalem, by then totally organized by the Israel Genealogical Society. So many people attended that we moved from the Crowne Plaza, site of the first two conferences, to the present venue. This conference almost did not occur at all. The intifada was in full swing, having begun a few years before, and some—mostly those who do not live in Israel—worried that the venue should be changed. To their credit, the local organizers decided to go ahead with the planning, even if no one came but the Israelis. Nothing bad did happen. The only remotely frightening occurrence was

a small earthquake that had a few attendees standing in the doorway of the hotel, but which most people didn't even notice.

Now 30 years (actually 31) after the first conference in Jerusalem, the Jewish genealogical world is very different.

The Cloud

Our numbers have swelled enormously, and one of the main loci of our activity is the "cloud." Family trees are posted on such sites as Geni, My Heritage and Ancestry. Online databases allow us to do our research wherever we can connect to the web and sophisticated software programs are connecting families to data and to one another. More than that, those who are pursuing genealogy are a much more varied group. It is correct I think, to speak of the widening world of genealogy (and Jewish genealogy). With television programs about genealogy, we have gone mainstream.

To illustrate what I mean, I'll give the example of my younger sister, Judy, and me. I began researching our family in 1977 and scrupulously informed Judy of all my exciting finds. She was politely interested but not more than that until two summers ago.

My husband, Irwin, pursuing the genealogy of his family, by chance went to Geni where he found a connection that previously had eluded him. When my sister and her husband came to visit, Irwin got Judy onto Geni—and her reaction was startling. It was that same "hooked as if by a virus" phenomenon that had afflicted me so many years earlier. Soon after, I put her in touch with Adam Brown, a Geni curator, and Judy was happily sending me messages such as, "Did you know that we are related to Sigmund Freud by only ten steps of connection?" During the last Israeli election, she informed me that through our father we are nine connections from Yitzhak (Bougie) Herzog. My reaction to her news was much like hers had been to my excited messages to her, something like, "That's nice."

I think Judy and I represent the widening world of genealogy. My approach I call the tangled ball of yarn. A professor in graduate school once told my how-to-do psychotherapy class that patients who consult us have conflicts that might be thought of as akin to the knots in a tangled ball of yarn. Our job is to help them painstakingly untangle the knots, one by one. Jewish genealogy seems much like that to me, and perhaps that's why I fell in love with it so many years ago. I enjoy poring over archival documents, trying to figure out how one or another person is or is not related to me. After all these years, I still don't know my maternal grandfather's real family name. The brick walls intrigue and challenge me.

Judy likes what I call the amoeba approach, first suggested to me by Alain Farhi's *Les Fleur de l'Orient* website. There, anyone who is related by birth or by marriage is attached and the overall shape is an irregular blob, like an amoeba. That's what the "you are connected to Chaim Herzog or Sigmund Freud" approach feels like to me. It

does not excite my interest much at all, but my sister loves it. Some like chocolate; some like vanilla.

The point is that the Jewish genealogy world (and the genealogy world generally) has expanded so that it includes both of us—and many subsets in between. For an excellent analysis of the current state of genealogy see Marlis Humphrey's article in the Spring 2015 issue of AVOTAYNU. Humphrey has written a superb article describing where we are today and how we got here.

Avotaynu Online

All of this background brings me to how I see the next 30 years. Last summer, the same Adam Brown who turned my sister on to Geni, suggested that it was high time that Avotaynu—that is, Gary Mokotoff and I—address the changing world of genealogy and create a web presence. We inaugurated Avotaynu Online in March 2015, with Adam as the managing editor. As we created AVOTAYNU 30 years ago to meet the needs of Jewish genealogy then, we now have created Avotaynu Online in response to the new and evolving state of Jewish genealogy, one in which people who are perhaps only casually interested can browse and learn about our field, one that can do things that AVOTAYNU, as a quarterly print publication cannot do, such as print long detailed research reports, offer a platform to associates such as the Leo Baeck Institute and the International Institute for Jewish Genealogy, keep us abreast of laws that affect our access to source material and very importantly, undertake, in partnership with others, some incredibly valuable projects that could never be done without the capacity of the cloud and the crowd-sourcing, fundraising potential of the web.

Here is an example. I mentioned above that the first AVOTAYNU Letter to the Editor came from a converso who wrote of the large number of people like her who want to return to Judaism. I also described the individuals brought to the 1994 conference whose ancestors had returned to Judaism some generations after a supposed conversion to Catholicism. Remarkably, Adam tells me that in the initial three months of operation, Avotaynu Online received an unusually large number of messages from conversos eager to learn more and, often, to return to Judaism.

Interest By Conversos In Their Jewish Heritage

Those who attended the IAJGS conference in Salt Lake City in 2014 and in Boston in 2013 may have heard Genie Milgrom tell her story. Born Catholic in Havana, Cuba, she is today an Orthodox Jew, initially the result of her decision to convert when she was a young woman. Only later did she realize that she was a converso, a descendant of Jews who had ostensibly converted in Spain and Portugal centuries ago. Genie told her captivating tale in both Boston and Salt Lake City and wrote about it in AVOTAYNU. She also has written a book about her personal journey and another, detailing how exactly she did the research. Recently, both books won first place in their category in a Spanish book

prize competition and now Hollywood is talking about making a movie of her story.

At the IAJGS conference last summer in Salt Lake City, Neville Lamdan (chair of the International Institute for Jewish Genealogy [IIJG]) and I asked Milgrom what her dream is. She answered that, as a result of publicizing her story, she has heard and continues to hear from countless others in the same situation as hers had been. They have a family tradition that they were Jews who converted under duress but continued to try to maintain aspects of their Judaism. Milgrom had the resources to spend great sums of money and devote several years to her personal pursuit. Most people do not have this luxury. Her dream now is to make it possible for others to do what she did.

One statistic holds that there are about eight million conversos alive today who are halachically Jewish—that is, descended through the maternal line from a Jew who con-

I believe that genealogy has established a role in mainstream Jewish life

verted. Others who are not on a straight maternal line but have a converso heritage are estimated to number about 20,000,000. Interestingly, Milgrom estimates that, despite the large numbers today, the original number of converso families actually was quite small—only about 200.

Milgrom has submitted a detailed proposal for a project to the IIJG. This would be a multi-year, highly sophisticated undertaking, and enormously expensive—but eminently able to be done if the funding can be found. In essence, the goal of the project would be to locate all of the Inquisition documents scattered all over the world from Spain and Portugal to Latin America and as far away as Goa in India.

In addition, the project would collect a huge variety of additional related data. The end result would be a series of databases available online that would link up with each other, allowing one to search not only known names, but the aliases, relatives, places of residency and more. People with known converso lineage would have the opportunity to upload their trees and try to match them with other existing trees and genealogies and thereby join them all together in a converso network. Remember, Milgrom estimates that originally the number of Converso families was only about 200.

The major obstacle is funding something that we likely would not even contemplate undertaking without Avotaynu Online. But now, with the reach of the Internet, we hope and believe that the Institute can find enough partners to make this possible.

One more note about Milgrom's findings. Remember Dr. Richard Goodman's pre-DNA 1984 talk on the biochemistry of Jews all over the world? Here is a small example of what we might see moving forward. As part of her research,

Milgrom took FamilyTree DNA's Mitochondrial MEGA test. As is the company's practice, she also received a list of individuals with whom she matches. One was a man living in Brazil. Milgrom spoke to him and learned that he also believed he was descended from conversos; he had tried to trace back as she had done, but could not do it. Instead, he simply (like Milgrom earlier) had converted to Judaism. With the material she had, Milgrom was able to show this man that they share a 14 times great-grandmother and prove that he also was halachically Jewish even before he converted.

Avotaynu Online is still evolving but it is clear already that sponsorship of major projects, whose scope was impossible up to now, is going to be one of its most important functions. Another project of Avotaynu Online is the major Jewish DNA census project that Avotaynu Online is sponsoring. We encourage all to see the details published at AvotaynuOnline, www.avotaynuonline.com.

What Will Happen in the Next Thirty Years?

In sum, what do I see as the trends for the next 30 years? Some readers may remember the late Yankee baseball catcher Yogi Berra, known for his quirky sayings, one of which is "Predictions are very dangerous especially about the future." With that caveat, I'll give it a try. I believe that genealogy has established a role in mainstream Jewish life, and the numbers of those who will engage in some form of it will continue to grow. The forms of the engagement will be the "tangled ball of yarn," "amoeba" and all variations in between. Some, like Sarah Lipes, whose articles appear in AVOTAYNU, will continue to drill deeply into archival holdings, creating new and essential databases to form the backbone of our research. The discovery of new records created for a variety of purposes—governmental, corporate and private—seem to continue without end. (*To this end, see Jay Berkovitz's article on pinkassim—community registers—in this issue.*) While we have become quite familiar with the traditional tools of genealogical data analysis, we should not be surprised if new analytic techniques emerge—for example, techniques for matching data in various databases and for better identifying and reducing errors in existing datasets.

Most of all though, I think that the cloud and DNA are going to combine to be the cutting edge of where we go next—hopefully to a DNA census of the Jewish people and to the ability to welcome back into the fold the descendants of Jews who became conversos 500 or 600 years ago. In other words, issues that concerned Jewish genealogy 30 years ago—such as conversos and genetic similarities still concern us and increasingly so. Now, with tools we did not have then, we can take these studies to results we never dreamed possible then and still can't fully appreciate even now.

I suppose that 30 years from now, someone will critique these predictions. Fortunately, I likely won't be around to listen to them, but I could imagine someone saying that I just didn't think big enough. As Theodore Herzl said, "If you will it, it is no dream."