

## The Next Step: Jewish Genealogy Goes Academic by Gary Mokotoff and Sallyann Amdur Sack

Increasing numbers of Jews everywhere have come to realize that family history is important to the Jewish people. As one writer observed, “Without roots, there is no identity.” But much more can and should be done. Many tasks require a new status and new forms of organization. With this in mind, early this year a group of Jewish genealogists and scholars from around the world formed the International Institute for Jewish Genealogy and the Paul Jacobi Center, an academic research institute affiliated with the Jewish National and University Library in Jerusalem (JNUL).

The suffix *-ology* refers to a branch of learning; a science. That is the mission of the Institute—to make Jewish genealogy

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into Jewish *genealogy*, a bona fide scholarly discipline, a subset of Jewish studies that draws upon a multiplicity of other disciplines. As a practical matter, the Institute will seek to conduct pioneering studies into multiple aspects of Jewish genealogy. In the process, these activities will help to broaden the horizons of Jewish genealogists everywhere and to inspire them to take their own research to higher levels.

The Institute will seek partnerships and collaborative research arrangements with other institutions involved in Jewish genealogy and other relevant disciplines around the world. In Israel, those institutions could include Hebrew University and other universities with major Jewish Studies programs, the Central Archives for the History of the Jewish People, Yad Vashem and the Diaspora Museum (Beth Hatefutsoth). The Institute also will seek collaborations with universities in Europe, Australia, South Africa, the United States and Canada, as well as institutions such as New York's Center for Jewish History and the Museum of Jewish Heritage. Similarly, ways will be sought to involve the whole of the Jewish genealogy community and to cooperate with individuals and groups within it.

Through these partnerships, the Institute will draw upon the skills of other social scientists, including historians, geographers, demographers, economists, statisticians and others. In the so-called “hard” sciences, collaborations will be sought with geneticists and experts in Jewish hereditary diseases. A host of dynamic, interdisciplinary projects will result.

### Projects Envisioned

In consultation with internationally recognized specialists, the Institute will assess research priorities for contemporary Jewish genealogy. It will act on these priorities while keeping them under review and periodically revisiting them in light of new developments in the field of genealogy and the Jewish world.

One of the first efforts will be a project to assemble and catalog, on an ongoing basis, all potentially available sources of Jewish genealogical information—the most comprehensive bibliography of Jewish genealogical resources anywhere. The project will include a direct access system to every possible Jewish genealogical database and network.

Also planned is the creation of a number of products, such as scholarly standards for recording Jewish genealogies, curricula for teaching Jewish genealogy at the university level, indexes and guides to Jewish genealogical collections.

In the virtual world in which we live today, much information will be online and Internet-based. Although the Institute will sit physically in Jerusalem, the center of the Jewish world

and a major repository of Jewish genealogical resources, through the Internet the Institute will interact with the entire world. Its research products will be placed in the public domain.

### Medicine and Genealogy

Consider the potential role of genealogy in the field of medicine, genetics and DNA testing. Last year, Harvard Medical School announced a major medicine-and-genealogy project to be undertaken in Iceland. Not only is the population of Iceland small and homogeneous, but virtually all of its population maintain complete genealogies of their families. With the body of Icelandic genealogical data, researchers plan to study such diseases as diabetes, cancer, heart disease and other major human afflictions.

For centuries (until rather recently), Jews also have tended to be an inbred, homogeneous group. As a result, a relatively large number of rare genetic diseases have appeared among us. Until now, however, we have not had the benefit of a large-scale genealogy-and-medicine project.

When Stanley Diamond entered the field of Jewish genealogy hoping to trace the incidence of the rare Beta Thalassemia trait he carries and to warn other carriers, Diamond found no pre-existing body of genealogical data into which he could tap. Instead, Diamond found it necessary to create the infrastructure he needed from the ground up, the whole enterprise that came to be known as Jewish Records Indexing-Poland (JRI-Poland). (See “The Story of JRI-Poland,” AVOTAYNU, Spring 2001). Even with the help provided by JRI-Poland, however, Jews still have nothing comparable to Harvard's Iceland project.

Some years ago, Dr. Ariella Oppenheim, at Jerusalem's Hadassah Hospital, studied a rare genetic disease in an Israeli family originally from Yemen. She described the need for good, reliable genealogical data on the family (which she did not have) and expressed such strong interest in a cooperative venture with Jewish genealogists that she had Sallyann Sack talk to her department chief. Among other things, the doctors emphasized their need for reliable data, information they could trust.

Eventually, the conversation turned to methods of genealogical research and standards of evidence. At this point, Sack felt a twinge of discomfort, thinking of her earliest genealogical research. The whole field of Jewish genealogy was brand new in the late 1970s; Dan Rottenberg and Arthur Kurzweil had just published their pioneer texts. Sack was so thrilled to learn that her roots could be uncovered that she paid little attention to documenting sources. Like many “newbies,” she could not begin to imagine that she would ever forget even one atom of a detail, so engrossing was this hobby. On the other hand, neither did she imagine that anyone ever would be interested in standards of evidence.

Many other genealogists have been more careful early on than Sack was, but plenty are in her corner, too. We genealogists have poured endless energy and ingenuity into unearthing and creating research resources, but with the exception of the few professionals among us, we have not tended to focus much on documentation and standards of evidence. When Douglas Goldman established the Douglas and Lisa Goldman Genealogy Center (more commonly known as the Dorot Center) at Beth Hatefutsoth, he decided to accept all family trees that were submitted. Goldman told AVOTAYNU that he would make no attempt to check the research, but would let each submitter be responsible for the accuracy of the data entered. When the International Association of Jewish Genealogical Societies (IAJGS) and JewishGen founded the Family Tree of the Jewish People, they adopted Goldman's approach.

Medical investigators and researchers from other disciplines interested in using our data will need to know what data they can trust. Among its early projects, the Institute expects to focus on the creation of scholarly standards of research, documenta-

tion and recording for Jewish genealogical studies.

#### Jacobi Material: Exceptional Value

Some of the genealogies that go back furthest in time are the Ashkenazi rabbinical lineages. Many of these lineages were researched by the late Paul Jacobi, who bequeathed an especially valuable data source for demographers, historians and others—in addition to medical researchers. Jacobi's manuscripts and research papers form the Jacobi Center at JNUL, now merged with the Institute. Indexing and publication of the Jacobi data will provide an invaluable resource not only to geneticists but also to Jewish historians, sociologists and demographers. Jacobi carefully cited his sources, but his work is complex and some of his conclusions are open to question. When funds permit, the Institute will offer fellowships to graduate students interested in working on the Jacobi material and rabbinical genealogies in general, with a view to reconciling ambiguities, extending the research and publishing the results.

Here and there a few university courses on Jewish genealogy have started to appear. Currently, one is being taught at Haifa University, but by and large the Jewish academic world has not yet recognized genealogy as a legitimate subject of scholarly study. The task of the Institute will be to achieve that recognition. In that regard, the story of American Jewish history serves as a lesson. In this issue, Christine Crandall discusses the early years of the American Jewish Archives. She says:

Jacob Rader Marcus...was a ground breaking force in the development of the American Jewish Archives. In the 1940s and 1950s, as the AJA was being established, Marcus had to fight against the perception that American Jewish history was not a legitimate field of history in the eyes of mainstream historians.

Marcus achieved his goal; American Jewish history is now a recognized subject of academic study. Through the Institute, the same will become true of Jewish genealogy and family history. Eventually undergraduate and graduate students will elect Jewish *geneology* as their primary field of study within the area of Jewish studies.

#### Relationship of the Institute to the Organized Jewish Genealogical Community

The Institute will complement the work of the current organized Jewish genealogical community, separately and in parallel. To date, almost all organized Jewish genealogical activity has been performed by volunteers, individuals who pursue the study as a hobby. The Institute will be a full-time academic venture. Just as professional Jewish historians use the resources of the American Jewish Archives for their research, we envision all those who are engaged in Jewish genealogy, at every level, availing themselves of the Institute's research products and benefitting from its projects.

#### Institute Founders

Founding members of the Institute include Alexander Beider (Paris, France), Claire Bruell (Auckland, New Zealand), Sophie Caplan (Sydney, Australia), Stanley Diamond (Montreal, Canada), Alain Farhi (London, England), Anthony Joseph (Birmingham, England), Professor Ladislau Gyémánt (Cluj, Romania), Professor Dov Levin (Jerusalem, Israel), Gary Mokotoff (Bergenfield, New Jersey), Sallyann Amdur Sack (Bethesda, Maryland) and Mathilde Tagger (Jerusalem, Israel). Chanan Rapaport, Director of the Paul Jacobi Center, also joined as a member of the Founders Committee. Sack is the Committee Chair.

The Institute is the brainchild of Ambassador Neville Lamdan, recently retired as the Israeli ambassador to the Vatican and a seasoned genealogist with a doctorate in history from Oxford. Ambassador Lamdan has agreed to serve as the Institute's first Director. He also has contributed to this article. To correspond with the Institute, send e-mail to [info@ijg.org](mailto:info@ijg.org).