

# Jewish Genealogy – The Challenge before Us

## Neville Lamdan

The immediate purpose of this Symposium is easy to define. It is:

- to listen to the views of world-renowned experts on current priorities for research and teaching in Jewish Genealogy,
- to hear suggestions for practical programmes and projects in their respective fields,
- and to try to develop a set of concrete recommendations on what needs to be done.

These recommendations, in turn, should form the basis of a “work-plan” which the Institute can attempt to implement over the next 2-3 years, partly on its own and partly in collaboration with other institutions.

But if that's the immediate purpose, what's the *greater* challenge before us?

If we look beyond the immediate horizon of research and teaching, I think that that challenge can be put very simply. It is to have Jewish Genealogy recognized as a *fully fledged academic discipline*, within the realm of Jewish Studies - as a sub-branch of Jewish Studies, if you like, and as an equal partner in a wide range of other academic disciplines, going well beyond Jewish Studies.

For many here this evening, possibly most, it may be almost self-evident that Jewish Genealogy is an academic discipline. But let's be honest with ourselves – this is by no means the prevailing view at universities in Israel and around the world.

In general, the notion of Jewish Genealogy as an academic discipline is novel and is often greeted with skepticism and reserve. More often than not it is regarded as not quite serious and somehow lacking in scientific rigour. At best, it may be accepted as a methodology, a helpful analytical tool. The more extreme nay-sayers contend that:

- it is a popular activity for the masses, little more than a pastime hobby;
- it can be compared with astrology *vis-à-vis* astronomy;
- the whole field invites religious and political abuse;
- it may lend itself to racism, as happened under the Nazis.

And the fact is that, as far as we know, none of the 60 - 70 or so universities around the world with Jewish Studies programmes, teach Jewish Genealogy on a regular basis. That in itself says something - and begs the question “why not?”

It could be that in recent years attitudes may have been changing somewhat, but there is still a long way to go to make Jewish Genealogy accepted as an academic discipline in university circles.

Let's step back a moment for a little history. Although not widely known, the origins of Jewish Genealogy probably go back over 150 years to that remarkable Jewish scholar, Leopold Zunz and his intellectual circle who founded the “Science of Judaism ( “*Wissenschaft des Judentums*”). For its

time, that “science” was an innovative, critical approach to Jewish learning, which ultimately gave rise to what we would call these days “Jewish Studies”, at the academic level.

*Inter alia*, Zunz and his circle worked on Jewish Genealogy as an important field of enquiry and by inference regarded it, or sought to treat it, as an academic subject. You can find scholarly articles on Jewish genealogical topics in the circle's journal, *Monatschrift fuer Geschichte und Wissenschaft des Judentums*, which appeared in Germany for 83 years with short breaks, between 1851 and 1939. Among them is the family tree of Leopold Zunz himself, going back over 300 hundred years, to the 16<sup>th</sup> century. This academic approach gave rise to several societies for Jewish Genealogy in Germany and to some very serious publications, all tragically extinguished by the Nazis, causing a hiatus in their pioneering work.

I would contend that the real challenge before us today is to re-invest Jewish Genealogy with its one-time status as a natural and self-evident field for scientific enquiry and to strive to have it recognized as a fully-fledged academic discipline that can contribute effectively to Jewish learning. Moreover, if you'll allow me a more partisan comment, we should aim to have it accepted as a discipline that can also contribute to the future of the Jewish People as a whole, on the premiss that Jewish Genealogy constructs a firm bridge from the past to the future.

For ourselves at the International Institute, we have set our primary aims as: first, to engage in the research and teaching of Jewish Genealogy at university level; and, second to develop Jewish Genealogy into a recognized academic discipline.

That order of business - research; teaching; and recognition - is not accidental. It has been proposed very deliberately. At the same time, the sequence is not altogether easy. On the one hand, research appears to be the key to teaching and recognition. On the other, on the face of it, a “Catch 22” situation seems to arise with regard to the other two elements; one can't have academic recognition without teaching at the university level; while one can't teach at university level without recognition!

The practical question is how to break this circle? We believe the answer may be made up of various components taken in a certain sequence - so let me spell them out: we have to -

- demonstrate that first-rate research can be done Jewish Genealogy;
- publish the results (Internet, peer-reviewed journal); and thus:
- develop a track-record in the scholarly world and gain academic recognition;
- in parallel, develop curricula and technologies for teaching Jewish Genealogy at the BA and MA levels (leading to certification in Jewish Genealogy);
- encourage relevant universities to adopt these curricula and begin to teach Jewish Genealogy there as a matter of course.

With research and teaching ongoing, logically, at least, recognition as an academic discipline should be forthcoming - which, of course, is what we're aiming for. This is a process and it will take some time - in my mind, no less that 4 – 5 years, but given the extended lengths of time it usually takes for distinct academic disciplines to emerge, that estimate may be a very optimistic. As a practical matter we may be talking about 10 years or more.

Obviously, a lot turns on the orientation and quality of the research the Institute does - and how it fits into the broader intellectual climate prevailing in institutes of higher learning today. Allow me therefore to expand on this pivotal topic:

1. As for the primary focus or “locus” of Jewish Genealogy research, most would agree that we are looking at Jewish history – but not only Jewish history by any means (I’ll come back to this point). That said, it has to be stressed that we are not simply Jewish historians in the classical sense, for we are looking at Jewish history through a very different lens, a genealogical one, a prism which allows us fresh insights in Jewish history, at a very human and intimate level.

2. If we extend Jewish Genealogy to Jewish family history, as I think we must, then we progress from the individual, through the family, to the community - and at this point we are broaching the realm of Jewish social history.

3. By concentrating on the “ordinary” individual, we fit very well into a trend in modern historiography because, as you know, in recent decades history, contemporary historians are looking, more and more, at “the little people”. This does not mean that the great “makers and shakers” of history– the heroes, the villains, the statesmen, the generals and the geniuses -have been abandoned. What it does mean is that serious attention is also being devoted to ordinary men and women, on whose backs history was made. How did *they* live, how did *they* survive in a generally cruel environment, dominated, manipulated by men and forces far beyond their control? How did “marginal men” – Jews on the sidelines, under the axe of history – beat the odds, cling on, multiply and develop their own, well-defined sub-cultures, while preserving a great sensitivity to their lineages and personal pedigrees?

Let me give but one example of what I mean by our research fitting into current historiography. The backgrounds and lives of village Jews (as against town or “*shtetl*” Jews) in Eastern Europe is not adequately documented and researched. If, then, a serious study were to be made on the lives of village Jews in the Russian Pale of Settlement in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, using genealogical sources, the results would not just be valuable in themselves. They would surely find their place among wider researches into peasant life and among studies of village life in feudal societies, both Polish and Russian and possibly others.

If I may stick my neck out, I'd venture to say that most of the academic research likely to be done these days by Jewish genealogists will fit neatly into the wider body of current academic investigation – and contribute to it significantly. No less important, our research will be backed up and supported by related research being done elsewhere. In other words, our work will be very much at home in this congenial intellectual environment, which, in turn, will give it greater depth and pertinence.

4. So far I have touched on general and social history but our research will obviously link up with other aspects of Jewish history - oral history, economic history, intellectual history, military history and so on. I shall refrain from expanding on this point because tomorrow Prof. I. Bartal will deliver a paper on it - let me only say that the potential is vast.

5. More than that, Jewish Genealogy is not just allied to the humanities and the social sciences. As Professors Karl Skorecki and Daniel Wagner will argue tomorrow, serious work begs to be done in the exact and medical sciences. We, as an Institute, have to demonstrate that it can be done.

6. Additionally, like most academic fields these days, genealogy, including Jewish Genealogy, is not a “stand alone” endeavour. It is an inter-disciplinary or multi-disciplinary exercise. Indeed, I'd like to suggest that the wider study of genealogy becomes a more insightful, *only when combined* with another discipline, or when it becomes “cross-disciplinary” and “cross-cultural”. It certainly becomes a lot more pertinent and meaningful to wider academic circles.

The “inter-disciplinary” dimensions of genealogy are numerous. We all aware, for example, of the work being done between genealogy and migration studies; or in the highly fashionable field of genealogy and medical questions and, within that, genealogy and DNA studies. But think also of the potential for Jewish family history and linguistics, anthropology, ethnology, etc. – or genealogy and demography, statistics, to mention but a few. And think of Jewish Genealogy going “cross- and inter-cultural”: between *Ashkenazim* and *Sephardim*; or, indeed, between Jews and non-Jews in different historical periods.

In brief, Jewish Genealogy will readily find its place and resonate in the highly inter-disciplinary academic world we live in today. It has much to offer – *and much to gain*.

Now, if I may shift gears, a word about timing. I would contend that the Institute is not only something “whose time has come” but it is also something which has come at the right time. I need not tell this audience that, as a result of the collapse of the Soviet Union and the advent of the PC, two extraordinary things for Jewish Genealogy have happened:

- archives and primary source material, previously inaccessible, have become available;
- significant amounts of databasing of genealogical materials has been done.

[At this point, allow me an aside about databases, some of which are formidable: “databasing” in our circles often is described as “research”. Now, you’ll forgive me if I observe that it is not research in the full sense: it is, more often or not, information-gathering, sometimes with an element of translation or transcription thrown in. But it is vitally important, because it provides the academic researcher with raw material, similar to the primary sources in the archives. It cries out for scholarly research and, more than that, academic analysis.]

In brief, archives are more accessible; a growing number of databases are going on line. A growing number of qualified researchers are in the field, in both senses of the word. Nothing then could be more opportune than the Institute’s timing.

Finally, a more general remark on the Institute's proposed research:

All the work done by the Institute will have to be absolutely first-rate and capable of standing up to the highest standards of scientific scrutiny and review by peers. Anything less simply will not do. Anything less certainly not allow us to reach our goal of making Jewish Genealogy a recognized academic discipline. Indeed, it will be counter-productive.

On the other hand, I truly believe that if the Institute can do original, ground-breaking work in Jewish Genealogy in all its aspects, if it can go beyond and expand the horizons of Jewish Genealogy through multi- and cross-disciplinary endeavors, if it can move from the empirical to the theoretical, and, if it can demonstrate that Jewish Genealogy can and should be taught at the university level, then, we will indeed meet the real challenge before us and Jewish Genealogy will emerge as an independent, recognized academic discipline.

That is what I call the “greater challenge” but, as I’ve tried to make clear, much revolves on the nature and quality of the research done by the Institute. It is for that reason that we have invited to our Symposium here in Jerusalem a remarkable group of world renowned scholars in the field of Jewish Genealogy.

We eagerly await your thoughts. We very much want to hear your recommendations regarding research directions and practical projects which the Institute can address, and help us towards our greater goal: developing Jewish Genealogy into a recognized academic discipline.

Thank you very much.