IIJG and the Upcoming
Weizmann Institute Genealogy Conference
by Neville Lamdan

The International Institute of Jewish Genealogy (IIJG) is looking to the international conference on “Genealogy and the Sciences”, to be held at the Weizmann Institute of Science in December, with the greatest of anticipation. IIJG’s mission is to work to advance the study of Jewish genealogy—and genealogy in general—as recognized fields of scholarly endeavor. Hence, it sees the conference as a landmark event. By hosting the gathering, the Weizmann Institute will take the study of genealogy past a significant milestone on the path to recognition in the most prestigious of academic circles.

Not many years ago, most historians and social scientists tended to look upon genealogy with reserve. Skepticism is perhaps a better word. It was not a serious activity. It was most obvious. But so too in such areas as criminology and legal investigations, as well as in migration studies, minority and gender studies. With the advent of mega-data, mathematics, statistics, demography and population studies, to mention but a few, have been joined with genealogy. Today, the point has been reached when the Weizmann Institute of Science, a world leader in the field of scientific research, is with great breadth of vision lending its auspices to a conference on the inter-connections between genealogy and the sciences, both “hard” and “soft.” In the history of genealogy this is unprecedented.

IIJG sees itself as part of the broader process that has transformed the study of genealogy in recent years. It opened its doors at the Israel National Library in Jerusalem in 2006 with an explicit commitment “to developing Jewish genealogy into a recognized field of academic investigation, within the realm of Jewish Studies and in association with a broad range of other sciences on an interdisciplinary basis.” Its programs and activities have been aimed at broadening the horizons of Jewish genealogy and developing tools and technologies of use to Jewish family historians.

More specifically, through its research, IIJG has sought to extend Jewish genealogy beyond traditional genealogy, which tended to focus somewhat narrowly on the lineage of a single individual and his/her family. Thus, it has consciously moved into areas of wider scope and relevance. There has been a discernible progression in its researches from the family unit, through the community, to complete segments of society and even beyond. This trajectory can be illustrated through a few examples of IIJG-generated efforts.

- **At the level of the extended family:** Dr. Erzsébet Mislovics of the Hebrew University investigated the spread and influence of two leading Jewish families, the Munks and the Goldzihers, in Hungarian society, Jewish and general, from the demographic, economic and cultural perspectives from modest beginnings in the 18th century until widespread involvement on the eve of World War II.

- **At the kinship level:** Dr. Tomasz Jankowski of the University of Wrocław employed advanced methods of family reconstruction and examined multi-dimensional structures in kinship relationships in Piotrków Trybunalski, a significant town in (Russian) Poland with a sizeable Jewish population in the 19th century (9,370 Jews in 1897).

- **At a community level, with particular reference to the effects of dispersal:** Professor Eric Goldstein of Emory University studied familial and other networks within Darbenai, a shtetl (small Jewish town) in Lithuania, and also the survivability and functionality of those networks after mass emigration to North America and elsewhere before World War I.

- **At the society level:** Dr. Judith Kalik of the Hebrew Uni-
versity utilized Russian records to investigate “Village Jews” (as distinct from “Shtetl Jews”) in 19th-century Minsk guberniya. She was able to recreate the lives and lineages of a significant segment of Jewish society in the “Pale of Settlement,” which has been largely invisible to contemporary research. [See book review this issue—Ed.]

- **At the national level:** In a ground-breaking study, an international team of experts addressed, for the first time, the genealogy of a national Jewry in its entirety—in this case Scottish Jewry—from its emergence in 1817. In the process, a “Family Tree of Scottish Jewry” was generated and a new statistical and factual framework for the historical narrative of Scottish Jewry was elaborated.

IIJG believes that by consciously expanding the unit of analysis, it has demonstrably increased the range of Jewish genealogy. At the same time, in its internal debates it has pondered theoretical questions concerning, for instance, the limits of Jewish genealogy, and indeed of genealogy in general. Put simply, at what point, if at all, is a multifaceted genealogical study eclipsed by the other disciplines with which it interfaces?

The Weizmann Conference is designed to explore the interdisciplinary nature of genealogy today, to draw attention to the interactions between the various sciences and to search for further synergies and collaborative work between them. These objectives sit squarely with IIJG’s interests and thus IIJG is happy to be among the conference sponsors. Above all, it is IIJG’s hope that the conference will inspire new directions and dimensions for the future study of Jewish genealogy.

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