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Neville Yosef Lamdan

Jewish Genealogy: From Individuals to Progressively Larger Groups:
Theoretical Questions

The International Institute for Jewish Genealogy (IJG) opened its doors at the Israel National Library in January 2006. Its mission was to advance the status of academic Jewish Genealogy through teaching and research – with a view to having Jewish Genealogy recognised as a legitimate field of Jewish Studies. We have made progress in that direction, as testified by the fact that this is already the third Congress of the World Union of Jewish Studies, at which the Institute has presented a panel (previously in 2009 & 2013). To put that into perspective, one has to bear in mind that when we set out, just over 10 years ago, the attitude to genealogy in certain scholarly circles was somewhat akin to attitudes towards astrology. Genealogy was simply not scientific! As for Jewish Genealogy in particular, *bobbe meises* - old wives' tales!

The Institute's primary strategy to challenge and change this attitude was to encourage innovative research projects of a Jewish genealogical nature and also of broad scholarly relevance, and to ensure that their conduct met the highest of academic standards. In parallel, the Institute attempted to expand the scope and horizons of Jewish Genealogy, broadly defined. We consciously moved beyond traditional genealogy, with its narrow focus on individuals and their specific families, and widened the lens to progressively larger groups – extended families, kinship networks, whole communities, segments of society and even a national Jewry in its entirety.

I shall come back to that enlargement of the field and illustrate it in a moment. However, at this stage, I'd like to indicate that, in my judgement, we at IJG are at a point where we should be taking stock and posing some fundamental questions of a practical and theoretical nature about our work. Indeed, perhaps the time has come for us to ask whether what we are doing is still Jewish Genealogy or whether our activities have not "morphed" into something else academically. I would go further and, in the light of our experience, dare to query the very nature of Jewish Genealogy and its capacity to stand alone as a sub-branch of Jewish Studies, the Institute's stated goal. These iconoclastic questions should at least be put on the table for further consideration.

Now, let me return to my main theme – Jewish Genealogy’s advance towards progressively larger groups.

An early example of IJG’s widening the scope of Jewish Genealogy is a study (2010-11) of two Hungarian Jewish families by Dr. Erzsébet Mislovics of the University of Budapest. In this study, the extended family forms the unit of analysis, in order to examine the impact of broader historical developments on them - and, at the same, the impact of the same two Jewish families on Hungarian society over several generations. Dr. Mislovics utilized detailed genealogical studies of the prominent Munk and Goldziher families in Hungary from the beginning of 18th century until the eve of World War II, in her quest to provide some answers to those questions. At the same time, she carried out an in-depth comparative study between the two families, as they ventured, tentatively at first, into Hungary’s economic, social and cultural life.

A study (2008-09) by Dr. Federica Francesconi, then of Rutgers University, on “Jewish Networks in early-modern Italy between the Mediterranean and the New World” was another step towards enlarging the scope of Jewish Genealogy. Dr. Francesconi made a genealogical analysis of archival sources to identify a significant sampling of Jewish merchant families – Italian, Sephardi and Ashkenazi - from the cities of Modena and Ancona. She then traced their familial, commercial and political kinship networks. These interwoven networks enabled the families to develop far-reaching trading routes in the Mediterranean and New World and allowed them to prosper throughout the 16th –18th centuries, while preserving their Jewish religious and cultural identity autonomously.

Next, pushing the envelope even further, Dr. Tomasz Jankowski of the University of Wrocław [*Rotslav*], carried out (2012-2013) a reconstruction of nuclear families within an entire Jewish community of some size – that of the town of Piotrków Trybunalski in the 19th century (9,370 Jews in 1897). He took a statistical database derived from municipal registrations of birth, marriage and death, and extracted from it the nuclear Jewish family trees. To these, he applied two methods of analysis. First, he employed a method of family reconstitution used widely in Western Europe (though applied before to an historical East European Jewish community), in order to observe developments within the family (from marriage until the death of one spouse) in

response to changing social and economic circumstances. Second, he investigated social networking between the families, using a research method that relates to the community as a unitary, multidimensional structure of relationships. This approach produced large-scale insights (mega-data) into personal, social and occupational relationships between families in the community.¹

Then, the Institute took a major step forward, which catapulted it well beyond extended families, networks and communities. It launched an investigation of a whole segment of Jewish society. The segment selected for research was that of “Village Jews” in the Pale of Settlement (as opposed to town or *shtetl* Jews). The reasons for choosing this segment were essentially two:

- i. Village Jews were a significant element of Jewish society, constituting between a quarter and a third of the Jewish population in the Pale;
- ii. Almost nothing of a scientific nature has been produced on Village Jews (even though they hold a warm, nostalgic place in Yiddish folklore, music and theatre).

The methodological problems in conducting research on this scale were daunting but the keys to it were found in:

- i. The identification and delimitation of a region that would be representative of the Pale as a whole;
- ii. The very focussed use of what we would classify as “genealogical sources”, in this case mainly 19th century Russian Revision lists.

Dr. Yehudit Kalik’s work has been completed and it is due to be published as an e-book. She will tell us more about her research, whose full title was “The Lives and Lineages of Village Jews in the 19th Century Minsk Gubernya”.

Moving on, the Institute then decided to tackle an even larger entity from a genealogical perspective – a national Jewry in its entirety – something which, to the best of our knowledge, had never been attempted before. The Jewish community of Scotland was selected for this experiment, principally because of its age (just 200 years old – in fact, exactly 200 years old) and its size (some 70-80,000 individuals over the duration), two critical parameters that made the project feasible. Additionally, almost all the relevant sources (national censuses; birth, marriage and death registrations, etc.) were available on-line and amenable to mining. At the outset, the aim was to construct a “Family Tree of Scottish Jewry” but it soon became evident that

the data being collected would allow us to trace of the origins of Scottish Jewry and produce, for the first time, accurate figures for its size, growth, dispersal, occupational patterns and even institutional development. As a result, we were able to produce a picture of the Jewish community in Scotland that has brought about a revision of the historical and social narrative of Scottish Jewry. Dr. Kenneth Collins, the project's historian, will elaborate later in this session.

And as if that experiment were not enough, IJG went on to help conceptualise and initiate another project of vaster dimensions and even greater complexity. It carries the title of the "Converso Genealogy Project: Tracking the Diaspora of New Christians". In plain language, it seeks to identify and reconstruct Marrano lineages in significant parts of the New Christian diaspora from the 15th century to the end of the 18th century. It is a truly ambitious project. Frankly, it is enormous. Prof. Avi Gross is here to explain.

As indicated earlier, I reckon that the time has come to ask some fundamental questions about what IJG is doing and indeed about the very nature of Jewish Genealogy.

For example: while the Institute clearly has greatly widened the scope and horizons of Jewish Genealogy, the question that arises in my mind is: by advancing to progressively larger groups, have some of IJG's projects not gone beyond the bounds of genealogy *per se* and do they not belong more properly to some other discipline, such as (Jewish) sociology or history? For example, the "Village Jews" project focusses on a defined segment of society; the "Scottish Jewry" study has led to a revision of that Jewry's history. Or, for instance, does a study of what happens to kinship networks when a Lithuanian shtetl empties out on the eve of World War I not relate to migration studies more than anything else? And, for that matter, what does a series of maps showing population shifts in major Jewish communities in Europe from 1750 to 1950 have to do with Jewish Genealogy at all?

The answer possibly lies in the definition of *Jewish Genealogy at an academic level*. This subject clearly cannot be limited to the mere construction of pedigrees – names, dates and line charts - as in traditional genealogy. I'm sure everyone would agree that

genealogical data are only invested with academic meaning and value, when they are contextualised within some broader intellectual framework. We are, I would contend, bringing together and “historicising” unrelated, but important, sets of facts that would otherwise remain random and go by the wayside of history or any other field of investigation – to the detriment of science and human knowledge.

Let me put the question in another way, moving outside genealogy. Does a demographic or a statistical study metamorphose into something else, when the author analyses and interprets his/her data in a wider context, be it historical, sociological, mathematical or whatever? Surely not! And that, I suggest, is the answer with regard to scientific studies in Jewish Genealogy. They are not some kind of larvae, as it were, that develop in maturity into something else.

Another question: we tend to see merit in the notion that Jewish Genealogy is a multi-disciplinary activity and therefore is very much in step with current academic trends. Indeed, a leading American genealogist, Thomas W. Jones,² has produced a list of nearly 50 academic disciplines with which genealogy, of any kind, may be associated and perhaps should be coupled. Hence a question arises as to whether Jewish Genealogy can, in fact, stand alone and ever be a sub-branch of Jewish Studies in its own right, as aspired to by the Institute. If I may re-frame the question: does a minor discipline (in this case genealogy) forgo its identity to a major discipline in a multi-disciplinary study? I’m sure this question has been debated in other frameworks. But it bears re-consideration in the present context, especially as there are still those who hold that genealogy, rather than being an independent field of activity, is little more than a tool or methodology that has its uses in a large number of independent disciplines.

Pursuing this point – whether genealogy is an independent discipline or not - one accepted measure for an academic area to qualify as independent and self-standing is that it has a theoretical base. Theories of history, sociology, economics, mathematics, physics, etc. etc. abound. However, it is hard for me at least to envisage a “General Theory of Jewish Genealogy” (or any genealogy for that matter). One can ask whether classical “Rise and Fall” theories,³ or Darwinian theories of evolution and survival of the fittest apply to families and genealogy as a whole? Perhaps one of the many theories currently in vogue in modern sociology would be pertinent – for

instance, “Network Theory”, which derives from endless chains of relationships, as indeed characterize families; or “Grounded Theory”, where the theory is induced *ex post facto* from the data themselves, especially mega-data (that are now also attainable in genealogy)? Or, at another level, are there mathematical formulae that can predict descendancy or dispersal patterns over a number of generations?

Alternatively, perhaps an over-arching theory of Jewish Genealogy is not called for? After all, one wonders if there is a comprehensive theory of Gender Sciences or Computer Science, although the validity of the fields is not open to question. Or perhaps Jewish Genealogy has to be studied scientifically over an extended period, before its theoretical basis can be perceived and formulated, as was the case with economics and other disciplines that only came into their own in the 19th century and beyond?

In that case, perhaps some general definition of the humanities or social sciences – such as, “the study of people and their relationships and interactions in history and society” - may suffice. That would simply render Jewish Genealogy a sub-branch of the human or social sciences, without a theory of its own *for the time being*.

There are several other fundamental issues of this nature which could be raised. At this stage, however, I would prefer to leave the questions I have posed on the table to be mulled over while we listen to the other speakers in this panel – hopefully to be discussed at a later stage.

¹ IJG sponsored other projects of similar scope, also with the aim of widening Jewish Genealogy’s horizons - for instance,

- On extended families: “A Genealogically-Centred Approach to the Historical Geography of Eretz Yisrael: Case-studies of the Moyal and Chlouche Families in Jaffa during the late Ottoman and British Mandatory Periods”, by Prof. Ruth Kark of the Hebrew University and Dr. Joseph Glass of Centennial College, Toronto.

- On networks: “The Ties that Bind: Jewish Kinship Networks and Modernization in Darbenai [a shtetl in Lithuania] and its Diaspora”, by Prof. Eric Goldstein of Emory University, Atlanta.

- On communities: “A Genealogical History of the Jews of Pinczow (Poland) in the 18th & 19th centuries”, by Prof. Heshel Teitelbaum, University of Ottawa.

² Thomas W. Jones, “Post-Secondary Study of Genealogy: Curriculum and Its Contexts,” *Avotaynu: The International Review of Jewish Genealogy* 23 (Fall 2007): 17–23; paper originally presented at the September 2006 symposium of the International Institute for Jewish Genealogy in Jerusalem, archived online at IJG’s website (<http://www.ijg.org/Documents/jones.pdf>) and reproduced in *Avotaynu on Line* [n.d.].

³ Cf. Edward Gibbon, *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (London, 1776)