

Making Jewish Education Personal: The Value of Family History Projects

Jeffrey Schrager



What would you guess is the most popular hobby worldwide? If you're like me, your answer will range from some sort of athletic activity to a variety of collecting. While actual data with which to crown an ultimate champion hobby is hard or impossible to come by, many have pointed to a surprising answer: genealogy. Dating back to a boom in the 1970's and the *Roots* phenomenon, genealogical research has spread across the world and various media. On television, you can watch as celebrities trace their roots on *Who Do You Think You Are*, and, during the commercial breaks, see advertisements for Ancestry.com and similar sites. Online, the genealogy revolution has been nothing short of epic as the business has grown to a net worth of \$1.6 billion.¹ Ancestry has become one of the largest subscription services on the internet,² and Israeli company MyHeritage has made great strides, claiming the title of "most popular family network site."³

Genealogy has been part of the Jewish educational world for at least two or three generations. Many of us compiled a family history project at some point in our educational careers, and the Israeli education system mandates that the *Shorashim* project be completed around the *Bar/Bat Mitzvah* year. While I applaud the sentiment behind these assignments in their usual form, I feel such projects frequently lack the rigor and excitement that can actualize the potential inherent in Jewish education. We have an opportunity to simultaneously meet high educational standards while connecting Jewish students to their pasts.

Over the last several years, I have assigned family history projects to a wide variety of students in various settings, and I wish to share some of the particulars that may be reaped from such a project. Elsewhere I have written before on the more general goals and concepts behind a family history project.⁴ Here I would like to address some of the details of such a project, including a description of the assignment, the general educational goals met, and the Judaic educational goals ideally reached.

The Project

I would like to briefly discuss some of the basic guidelines involved in a family history project. I should state from the outset that looking at

Before moving to Israel, Jeffrey Schrager was the Middle School Judaic Studies Coordinator at the Akiba Academy of Dallas, TX. He founded L'dor Vador to promote the use of Jewish genealogical research in Jewish education after seeing dozens of students "light up" and find meaning in their family history research. jschrager@ldor-vador.org.

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the process is far more important than focusing on the product. For obvious reasons, students generally work alone. Even in the case of twins, I have encouraged each student to conduct his/her own research, as it maximizes the first-hand engagement each student has with his/her past. The type of research I am advocating also usually requires students to have reached early adolescence. Programs such as the My Family Story program available through Beit Hatfutsot in Tel Aviv serve as an excellent entree to Jewish genealogy for younger students and should be viewed as a good first step toward the type of project I am describing.

Students use websites, primarily Ancestry or MyHeritage, to investigate the various branches of their family trees. One of the main distinguishing features of the type of project I am discussing is the emphasis placed on research. I know; we can already hear the groans elicited at the mere mention of the dreaded “r” word. For this reason, teachers should emphasize the fact that students will be essentially finding out about themselves, while using powerful technology to accomplish their goals. Marketing strategies aside, students almost universally discard any preconceptions about research following their first discovery.

One of the greatest challenges of such a project lies in teaching students how to effectively go about researching, and what sorts of documentation they require. Educators frequently overestimate students’ skills in this area and projects suffer accordingly. I have found that students frequently panic when they are confronted with large amounts of information, not knowing how to focus on salient details. Through this project, students learn how to organize their information and how to proceed when reaching inevitable brick walls in the path of their search. As a whole, the more effort exerted in their search, the more closely they identify with their ancestors.

Oral histories, whether gathered through interviewing grandparents in person or talking to family over the phone are, perhaps, the most powerful means of connecting with one’s roots. Preparation and focusing on specific types of questions might seem self-evident, but many students struggle without a discussion of interview procedures in class. Students should be reminded that they are not after just dates and facts, but also need the stories their relatives can tell them. Personally, I assembled a veritable sea of data on my family tree, but hearing my grandfather’s first cousin describe his childhood apartment was much more powerful.

As the process moves forward, and students gather more information about their families, every lesson becomes contextualized. No longer do we discuss the immigrant experience as a broad concept; we talk about the immigrant experience of their grandparents. A lesson on the Lower East Side instructs students to find addresses their ancestors occupied, and buildings can often be viewed using Google Street View. In Europe, nationalities, events, and border changes become personal. And students confront not just the enormity of six million Jewish deaths, but also must face the silence of family tree branches cut short.

In terms of a final product, I have found that in most cases the more general the assignment the better. If our overarching goal is for our students to have a face-to-face encounter with their roots, such an experience must take place on their terms. Some students prefer to simply present their family tree as a whole. Others focus on one branch or family, while some may choose an in-depth biography of one ancestor. Whatever the case, students must design some sort of display that represents their search. Students have made books, board games, posters, and much more, and several former students have commented how gratified they are to have put together so much information. One student, who focused on her great-grandmother, went to a family

reunion, project in hand, a year after her great-grandmother had passed away, preserving her memories for an entire family.

Educational Benefits

While space constraints prevent me from an exhaustive discussion of the possible educational benefits of undertaking a family history project, I would like to outline just a few areas in which such a project can supplement and enrich students' breadth and depth of knowledge.

First and foremost, a family history project contextualizes a variety of content areas. As already discussed, when coupled with learning about events and movements in Jewish history, genealogy harnesses a unique power to illuminate the minds of students. However, it also serves to teach the importance of contextualization in general, and the virtues of placing oneself within that which is being learned. When this is emphasized to students, they can understand how to fully engage any subject they learn, from the sciences to the humanities, by creating this transformative form of relevance. Instead of the model by which teachers try to make information relevant to students through bringing it to their level or relating it to their experience, a tendency that often cheapens learning, we, as educators, can make subjects truly relevant by placing our students at the heart of the subject matter.

In terms of potential concrete skills learned, perhaps the most important is the assessment of information and its relevance to one's search. As an example, when looking at an original United States census document, students can be overcome by a virtual deluge of data. Documents record the value of one's home, birth countries of individuals and their parents, their education, their salary, and many other details of varying importance. While all of this information is valuable in some way, not all of it is created equal. Students are taught how to look for the information they require, and leave the remainder for a later date. Perhaps as a result of Google and similar searches, students frequently panic when encountering information other than what they are seeking. Internet genealogy research demands a discerning eye, scanning results and information for the nuggets that can inform one's search.

Genealogy, in fact, is a wonderful model for learning in general. Any researcher will tell you that the search takes tremendous patience. The process frequently yields more benefits than any concrete product. In fact, it could safely be stated that family research can never end, just as learning has no finish line. There is always one more branch or generation that can be understood, or more information gathered about a person or family. And there are so many different perspectives that can be employed in viewing one's family tree. A scientifically inclined student can examine their family's DNA or genetic profile. Students can write narratives of their families, while others can try to understand the culture and towns from which their ancestors sprang. Linguists can study Yiddish or Ladino, and artistically inclined individuals may examine the art or music from their grandparents' worlds. Their final projects can cater directly to their particular strengths resulting in the best possible differentiation. Students learn persistence, patience, and resilience constantly.

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Jewish Educational Benefits

With all the benefits mentioned, the most important advantage of family history projects lies in its effect on students' relationship with Judaism. For the past several years, I have distributed a Jewish values questionnaire on the first and last days of class. Students are asked to record their inclinations on a variety of Jewish issues, including synagogue attendance, the importance of ritual observance, and basic Jewish pride.

Each year, several students identify themselves as either neutral or hostile to Judaism at the beginning of our lessons, and, by the end of the year, they put themselves on the favorable end of the spectrum. While not claiming to have done a scientific study, we must take note and duplicate efforts whenever we see adolescents professing an increased attachment to Judaism. I should note that the students taught were from a variety of backgrounds and families, and they experienced increased enthusiasm for Judaism across the board.

I attribute this trend to several factors, but I will discuss the two I feel are the most important. We live in an increasingly global society, and, for all its advantages, it has become more difficult for students to find their place in the sea of differences they encounter. Family history projects not only build the students' sense of self, but also connect them to a circle going back generations and reaching across oceans. This holds true in both theory and practice. Students not only discover their roots, but also find relatives of all ages and backgrounds across the world. Finding family in Israel can be of particular importance and opens a new avenue through which our students can connect to the Land, State, and people of Israel.

Most importantly, a family history project articulates to our children why they receive a Jewish education. It impresses upon them the awesome legacy that is theirs to continue and transmit to their children. Whether explicitly or not, students must question why their family is Jewish and why it has been important for them to continue their heritage.

Teachers must guide them to have this internal dialogue, asking them to question why their ancestors opted in to Judaism when, in many cases, walking away would have been easier. One concern many feel before embarking on such a project is whether families with non-Jewish ancestry can benefit. Personally, as I am just such an individual, I find family history even more engaging as I ask constantly how my *entire* family contributed to the Jewish personality I have become.

Despite its popularity, genealogy is rarely seen as a viable means through which we can connect our students to their past. Perhaps because the word evokes an elderly person sitting in a library to many, or perhaps because the "ology" suffix alone turns so many away, but I have tried to explain how such an important project could be used in every Jewish school across the world. Such a project will not yield results for one year or class alone. Rather, it has the potential to energize students for the remainder of their lives, forging a life-long commitment to exploring their Judaism more fully. ♦

Footnotes:

1. <http://abcnews.go.com/Business/genealogy-hot-hobby-worth-16b-mormons/story?id=17544242>
2. <http://corporate.ancestry.com/press/press-releases/2002/10/second-largest-hobby-in-america-millions-of-americans-do-it-every-day/>
3. <http://blog.myheritage.com/media-kit/>
4. See my article in *HaYidion*, the journal of RAVSAK at <http://www.ravsak.org/news/714/221/Everything-Old-is-New-Again-Using-Genealogy-in-Jewish-Day-Schools/d,HaYidion#.UsOrjNJFRXE>