

## Article

# Tracing Jewish Ancestry and Beyond—Exploring the Transformative Impact and Possibilities of the Documentation of Jewish Records Worldwide (DoJR) Project

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**Abstract:** This article analyses the transformative impact of the Documentation of Jewish Records Worldwide (DoJR) project, launched in 2017, on Jewish genealogy. Jewish genealogy, deeply rooted in centuries of tradition and cultural significance, transcends mere ancestral tracing, embodying a comprehensive exploration of Jewish history and heritage. The DoJR project represents a monumental shift in this field, aiming to compile a comprehensive, freely accessible online catalog, JCat, of every existing document of every Jew who ever lived. This endeavor reshapes our approach to Jewish genealogy and profoundly deepens our understanding of Jewish history. This article delves into the historical context of Jewish genealogy, tracing its evolution from ancient times through various challenges, including the Holocaust's devastating impact on Jewish genealogical records. It highlights the pioneering efforts in the field and the modern advancements that have facilitated the growth of Jewish genealogy, including DNA testing and digital technologies.

**Keywords:** DoJR; Jewish genealogy; Jewish heritage; AI HTR; handwriting recognition; Jewish historical records; history of Jewish genealogy; AVOTAYNU



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## 1. Every Jew That Ever Lived

Exploring Jewish lineage and heritage transcends a mere pastime.<sup>1</sup> It is also more than finding the names of one's ancestors, however important these names are.<sup>2</sup> Instead, it is a profound journey into history, a quest to connect with one's roots, and a dedication to preserving a collective past.<sup>3</sup> Researching one's forbears can be a healing and distressing undertaking.<sup>4</sup>

Jewish genealogy, rich in history and tradition across millennia, is distinct in the world of genealogical research.<sup>5</sup> In 2017, the field witnessed a groundbreaking development with the initiation of the Documentation of Jewish Records Worldwide (DoJR) project.<sup>6</sup> This ambitious initiative aims to uncover and document every available record of every Jew who has ever lived. According to an estimation by Prof. Sergio DellaPergola, approximately 120 million Jews have possibly lived from Abraham's time to the present, with half of them becoming part of the Jewish population through birth or conversion between 1500 B.C.E. and 1700. The other half did so 300 years from the 18th century to today. This model does not account for the descendants of those who ceased to be Jewish, which, if included, would significantly increase the numbers.<sup>7</sup>

The project aims to aggregate all Jewish records into JCat, a comprehensive, freely accessible online searchable catalog. This endeavor is poised to revolutionize the landscape of Jewish genealogy, offering a new dimension to our understanding and methodology in tracing Jewish ancestry, history, and heritage. This article focuses on an in-depth analysis of the DoJR project, exploring its historical roots, innovative tactics, and influence on Jewish genealogy. Additionally, it aims to provide insights into how DoJR is revolutionizing Jewish

genealogy by amalgamating traditional methodologies with modern techniques, turning the search for ancestral knowledge into a global collaborative pursuit.

## 2. Historical Context and the Evolution of Jewish Genealogy

In examining the Documentation of Jewish Records Worldwide (DoJR) project and its profound impact on Jewish genealogy, it is imperative to contextualize its emergence within the historical trajectory of Jewish genealogical research. Jewish genealogy is not a recent phenomenon but has roots in ancient times. The Torah and other antique Jewish texts are replete with genealogical lists, signifying the importance of lineage and heritage within Jewish culture.<sup>8</sup> These records were not merely chronological listings but served multifaceted roles, from establishing tribal affiliations and priestly lineages to maintaining land rights and religious responsibilities. Keeping these genealogies was a matter of cultural importance and a legal necessity, deeply intertwined with Jewish identity and religious practices, including the transference of knowledge. As Anthony Joseph stated, “In Jewish tradition, genealogy is rooted in the very origins of the people itself since Genesis is devoted to the lineage of the Patriarchs. The very definition of who is a Jew, while not capable of being reduced down to a single concept, is not the case of those born into the faith requires matrilineal proof of identity.”<sup>9</sup>

During the medieval and early modern periods, Jewish communities dispersed across Europe and the Middle East faced unique challenges in maintaining genealogical records. Many Jewish genealogies were orally transmitted, with written records often being lost or destroyed due to persecution and migrations.<sup>10</sup> Despite these obstacles, some Jewish communities managed to maintain detailed records, including synagogue registries, community ledgers, and even personal family manuscripts. These documents provide invaluable insights into the lives and movements of Jewish people during these turbulent times.<sup>11</sup>

The 19th and 20th centuries marked significant shifts in Jewish genealogical research, primarily influenced by mass migrations. As Jews moved across continents, fleeing persecution and seeking better lives, their genealogical trails became increasingly complex and dispersed. This era witnessed the fragmentation of Jewish family histories, making tracing lineage more arduous. However, it also spurred interest in genealogy to preserve connections with lost homelands and dispersed family members. Thus, the modern era of Jewish genealogy began taking shape with the efforts of pioneering individuals and organizations.

The early 20th Century saw the establishment of various Jewish genealogical societies dedicated to the preservation and study of Jewish family histories. The Gesellschaft für die Jüdische Familien-Forschung (Society for Jewish Family Research), inaugurated in 1924, initiated its periodical to serve as a connecting point for Jewish genealogists and to offer a platform for their scholarly work. Its founding editor, ophthalmologist Arthur Czellitzer, emphasized the critical role of understanding one's lineage, especially for the Jewish community.<sup>12</sup> He argued that, in the absence of a unified nation or language for Jews at that time, a deep knowledge of one's ancestry could foster a connection to one's authentic roots,<sup>13</sup> transcending the potential loss of religious customs inherited from ancestors.<sup>14</sup> Czellitzer articulated in the inaugural edition that the society's foremost objective was to amass an extensive collection of Jewish family records, thereby establishing a comprehensive archive for Jewish genealogical research, an ideal not unlike DoJR's. Regrettably, this valuable collection was lost after Czellitzer, fleeing the horrors of the Holocaust, took the documents to the Netherlands, where they were destroyed. Tragically, Czellitzer himself fell victim to the Holocaust, perishing in the Sobibor death camp in Poland in 1943.

The Holocaust wrought incalculable damage to the Jewish genealogical landscape. Countless records were lost, and entire family lines were obliterated.<sup>15</sup> In the post-Holocaust era, the urgency to reclaim and reconstruct Jewish family histories became more pressing than ever.<sup>16</sup> Survivors and descendants sought to piece together the fragments of their shattered pasts, leading to a resurgence in genealogical research.<sup>17</sup> This period also saw the

emergence of new methodologies and technologies, including using Holocaust records and testimonies to trace family histories. In response to these formidable historical challenges, Jewish genealogical societies, archives, and research initiatives emerged as indispensable institutions.

Since the 1970s, Jewish genealogy has experienced significant advancements as a result of technology, access to archives, and the establishment of organizations dedicated to Jewish family history research. Establishing Jewish genealogical societies, such as the Jewish Genealogical Society (1977) and the International Association of Jewish Genealogical Societies (1988), has provided a platform for individuals interested in Jewish genealogy to connect, share research, and access resources.

Technological advancements such as digitizing historical records made it easier for researchers to access vital records, immigration records, census data, and other documents relevant to Jewish genealogy. JewishGen, founded in 1987, has become one of the most significant online resources for Jewish genealogy. It offers access to extensive databases, records, and research tools specific to Jewish family history. JewishGen's Family Finder database connects researchers with shared family interests, facilitating genealogist collaboration. Projects such as the JewishGen Yizkor Book Project have made these books (memorial books written by Jewish communities to commemorate those lost during the Holocaust) accessible to researchers through digitalization and translation. The books provide insights into prewar Jewish life and genealogical information.

The inception of Jewish Records Indexing-Poland (JRI-Poland) in 1995 marked a pivotal moment in Jewish genealogy, particularly for those tracing their roots back to Poland. Founded by Stanley M. Diamond, Michael Tobias, and Steven Zedek, JRI-Poland embarked on a mission to index Jewish vital records, revolutionizing worldwide access to ancestral information for Jewish genealogists. The project's initial phase focused on indexing records microfilmed by the Family History Library of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, covering the period from approximately 1808 through 1880. This monumental task was primarily carried out by volunteers, who painstakingly indexed the Polish language index pages found within the microfilmed record books. These early efforts laid the groundwork for an extensive database, offering insights into the Jewish diaspora's lineage through Polish territories.<sup>18</sup>

The partnership formed in 1997 between JRI-Poland and the Polish State Archives (PSA) was a significant milestone, allowing JRI-Poland access to approximately five million Jewish vital records not previously microfilmed. This collaboration expanded the database's scope and facilitated a broader understanding of Jewish family histories during a critical period. The agreement underscored the importance of digital access to historical records, setting a precedent for future digitization projects.

JRI-Poland's contribution to Jewish genealogy has been widely recognized, culminating in receiving the 2014 International Association of Jewish Genealogical Societies (IAJGS) Award for Outstanding Contribution to Jewish Genealogy via the Internet. This accolade reflects the organization's impact on the field, providing researchers, Holocaust survivors, and the public with tools to reconstruct family trees and unearth lost connections. By making previously inaccessible records available online, JRI-Poland has played a crucial role in preserving Jewish heritage and facilitating personal discoveries that bridge the past with the present.

Interpreting these sources, however, remained difficult for most beginners. The internet has given rise to online communities and forums where Jewish genealogists can collaborate, seek advice, and share research findings. These platforms provide opportunities for networking and knowledge exchange among researchers worldwide. Finally, educational programs and genealogy conferences dedicated to Jewish genealogy have proliferated. These events offer workshops, lectures, and resources for researchers of all levels, helping individuals enhance their genealogical skills and knowledge.

AVOTAYNU, the International Review of Jewish Genealogy, founded in 1985 by Gary Mokotoff and Sallyann Amdur Sack, evolved into a publishing company dedicated to

Jewish genealogy and has played a significant role in the solidification of Jewish genealogy by publishing a range of resources, including family history books, journals, and guides to help researchers navigate complexities. An example is Rabbi Shmuel Gorr's *Jewish personal names: their origin, derivation, and diminutive forms* explain the roots of more than 12,000 personal names with English transliteration.<sup>19</sup> A more recent example is *The Jacobi Papers: Genealogical Studies of Leading Ashkenazi Families* edited by Emanuel Elyasaf, four volumes dedicated to the findings of Paul Jacobi, a founding member of the Palestine Jewish Genealogical Society when it was formed in 1937.<sup>20</sup>

The company also sponsored conferences and events, providing opportunities for genealogists to connect and share their research. Overall, it created a worldwide community of knowledge, transference of knowledge, and remembrance. The journal AVOTAYNU published numerous articles on Jewish genealogy research, methodology, resources, and profiles of notable Jewish genealogists. The journal has played a critical role in establishing Jewish genealogy as a severe field of study and has been instrumental in fostering a community of Jewish genealogists. Mokotoff became a prominent spokesperson of this group, also initiating discussions with the LDS Church in 1994 about their practice of posthumously baptizing Holocaust victims. In AVOTAYNU of Spring 1994, he wrote, "Baptism is a Christian ceremony that is particularly repugnant to Jews. It reminds us of the centuries of persecution against Jews where our ancestors were given a choice to be baptized or suffer death. His statement led to the establishment of a rule that bars baptisms of Holocaust victims except in rare cases where they are direct ancestors."<sup>21</sup>

DNA testing, including autosomal DNA, Y-DNA, and mitochondrial DNA analysis, has revolutionized Jewish genealogy research by allowing individuals to discover genetic connections, identify distant relatives, and confirm or uncover Jewish ancestry. DNA databases like 23andMe, AncestryDNA, and MyHeritage DNA have become popular tools for genealogists.<sup>22</sup>

The endeavor to elevate genealogy to the status of an academic discipline is still in its nascent stages.<sup>23</sup> This movement saw one of its early milestones in 2007, when Dr. Neville Lamdan, a founding member of the International Institute for Jewish Genealogy (IIJG) in 2004, orchestrated a seminal seminar in Jerusalem. This event laid the groundwork for academic discourse in genealogy, culminating in the publication of a booklet in 2013 by Prof. H. D. Wagner. This publication is significant, as it constitutes the initial effort to showcase a collection of scholarly perspectives within the domain of genealogy.<sup>24</sup> Moreover, the 2018 international conference on "Genealogy and the Sciences" hosted by the Weizmann Institute marked a pioneering venture in the field, distinguished by its unprecedented depth and breadth in exploring genealogy's academic and scientific facets. This conference stands out as a unique contribution to the field, pushing the boundaries of traditional genealogical research by integrating rigorous scientific methodologies and academic inquiry.<sup>25</sup>

### 3. The Pioneer Decades

Equally crucial to the growth of the discipline were the studies written by Jewish genealogy pioneers that provided valuable guidance, methodologies, and historical context for researchers tracing their Jewish ancestry. These pioneers (this concise overview is not exhaustive) have worked diligently to uncover the complex history of Jewish families, tracing their roots to understand the rich history of Jewish communities worldwide. Their books and publications have provided practical guidance and resources to those seeking to explore their Jewish family histories, and their work will continue to influence the field.

One of the earliest pioneers in Jewish genealogy was Rabbi Malcolm Stern, who, in 1960, with the volume of *Americans of Jewish decent*,<sup>26</sup> created "a compendium of hundreds of family trees and of a group which, in effect, constitutes a small civilization: the descendants of early American Jews."<sup>27</sup> Genealogist Dan Rottenberg considered this an excellent start of a giant jigsaw puzzle. He explained that a genealogist can fit enough pieces together, and few genealogists assemble more than the picture of their own immediate family. "They can see only the vaguest outlines of the mural we would have if we were able to fit together,

say, the family trees of everyone on earth.”<sup>28</sup> he stated in 1979 or, as the DoJR would say in the present, every Jew that ever lived.” In 1978, Stern published a comprehensive collection of genealogies of Jewish families in America, covering six hundred families from the first Jewish immigrants to the United States in 1654 to the present day.<sup>29</sup> Stern’s book was, according to Rottenberg, “a seminal work in Jewish genealogy, providing a wealth of information on American Jewish families and how they have contributed to the growth and development of the United States.”<sup>30</sup>

Daniel Rottenberg wrote a pioneering work, *Finding Our Fathers: A Guidebook to Jewish Genealogy*, in 1977. The book is a comprehensive guide to Jewish genealogy research, providing practical advice on how to trace one’s Jewish ancestry and navigate the complex maze of Jewish records. Rottenberg’s book was one of the first comprehensive guides to Jewish genealogy research, and it has helped countless people uncover their Jewish family histories. The same goes for *The Unbroken Chain: Biographical Sketches and Genealogy of Illustrious Jewish Families from the 15th–20th Century*, in which Neil Rosenstein (1976) analyzes the genealogy of prominent Jewish families over several centuries.<sup>31</sup>

In the 1980s, Arthur Kurzweil contributed significantly to Jewish genealogy. With *My Generations* and *From Generation to Generation: how to trace your Jewish Genealogy and Personal History*, he provided a step-by-step guide to researching one’s Jewish ancestry.<sup>32</sup> The book included practical advice on navigating archives, finding records, and conducting interviews with family members.<sup>33</sup> Kurzweil’s book was groundbreaking in its approach to Jewish genealogy research, and it has helped many people uncover their Jewish family histories.<sup>34</sup>

Alexander Beider’s research has been instrumental in deepening the understanding of Jewish genealogy and the origins of Jewish surnames. Beider’s books offer invaluable scholarly insights into the complexities of Jewish genealogy and onomastics. One of his most notable works is *A Dictionary of Jewish Surnames from Galicia*.<sup>35</sup> This book provides an extensive list of Jewish surnames from the Galicia region, now part of Poland and Ukraine. It comprehensively analyzes each surname’s origin, meaning, usage, and genealogical information about the associated families. This book is an essential resource for anyone researching Jewish ancestry in the Galicia region. Another of Beider’s seminal works, *A Dictionary of Jewish Surnames from the Russian Empire*, explores the history and evolution of Jewish surnames in the Russian Empire, providing detailed information about their origins, meanings, and variations.<sup>36</sup> It is a comprehensive resource for anyone researching Jewish ancestry in the Russian Empire. Beider’s other notable works include *Jewish Surnames in Prague*.<sup>37</sup> Each of these books offers a unique perspective on Jewish genealogy and naming practices, providing valuable insights into the complexities of Jewish ancestry.

In addition to his books, Beider has contributed numerous articles and papers to academic journals and genealogical publications, offering a perspective on genealogy as an academic discipline. His research has been instrumental in advancing our understanding of Jewish genealogy, surnames, and naming practices. Overall, Alexander Beider’s contributions to Jewish genealogy are significant and have played a vital role in expanding our knowledge of Jewish ancestry. His books and research are valuable resources for genealogists and historians, comprehensively analyzing Jewish surnames and naming practices throughout history.

Jewish genealogy was also shaped by pioneering women in the field. Their work helped to expand our understanding of Jewish history and culture, and their contributions have been instrumental in shaping the field of Jewish genealogy as it exists today. Miriam Weiner published several books on Jewish genealogy in Eastern Europe, including *Jewish Roots in Poland: Pages from the Past and Archival Inventories* (1997) and *Jewish Roots in Ukraine and Moldova* (1999).<sup>38</sup> Her publications provide in-depth analyses of the available archival resources and practical guidance on navigating and interpreting these records. Weiner’s work primarily focused on documenting Jewish communities in Eastern Europe, and she was instrumental in bringing attention to the importance of preserving Jewish records in the region. She traveled extensively throughout Eastern Europe, documenting cemeteries



and collecting records. Her efforts led to the creation of the *Routes to Roots Foundation*, which has since become a leading organization in preserving Jewish heritage in Eastern Europe and two seminal works.<sup>39</sup>

Sallyann Amdur Sack made significant contributions to Jewish genealogy, including comprehensive overviews of the archival resources available for Jewish genealogy research in Lithuania and Israel, and provided practical guidance on navigating and interpreting these records. She discovered, in the Jewish State Museum of Lithuania in Vilnius, a list of five thousand Jews killed in Kaunas (Kovo/Kowno) during the Nazi Occupation. The list is now part of Yad Vashem's Holocaust Survivors and Victims database, where Sack is mentioned as the famous genealogist.<sup>40</sup> With Mokotoff, Sack published *Where Once We Walked*, which became a staple for Jewish genealogists around the world since it offered a comprehensive guide to the towns and cities where Jews lived before the Holocaust. The book is organized alphabetically by country, making it easy for researchers to find the necessary information. The first edition (1991) covered over twenty countries and 20,000 towns. The authors spent years researching and compiling information from various sources, including archival records, historical documents, and personal accounts. Over the years, the book has been updated several times to reflect the latest information and discoveries. The second edition, published in 1999, included an additional 10,000 towns and expanded coverage to include the former Soviet Union. The third edition, published in 2002, added even more information, including new entries for previously excluded towns. In addition to the printed book, an electronic version of *Where Once We Walked* is also available. The electronic version includes all the information from the printed book and additional features such as interactive maps and the ability to search for towns by name or location. The book has been praised for its thoroughness and diligence. It is considered an indispensable resource for anyone researching Jewish genealogy, particularly those looking to trace their family's roots in Eastern Europe. Overall, *Where Once We Walked* is a testament to preserving Jewish history and heritage. The book serves as a reminder of the vibrant communities that once existed and the devastating impact of the Holocaust on Jewish life. The thought behind it is the precursor of the DoJR project in which Sack is very much involved, and this might be one of the reasons why this project recognizes the pioneers of Jewish genealogy ideals next to the project's innovative character.

#### 4. DoJR's Rationale and Framework

The Documentation of Jewish Records Worldwide (DoJR) project aims to discover and inventory every record of every Jew that ever lived, including primary and secondary records. While primary records such as vital and census data are critical for genealogists and family historians, secondary-tier records can be equally valuable in providing a more comprehensive understanding of an individual or family's history. Second-tier records can include family histories, biographies, newspaper articles, and obituaries, which may contain personal anecdotes, stories, and other details found in primary records. These records can help to fill in gaps and provide context for primary sources, offering a more complete picture of an individual or family's life. DoJR recognizes the value of second-tier records and has prioritized including them in its cataloging efforts. The project also recognizes the challenge of discovering records hidden in plain sight and the need to discover vulnerable records (also known as "Records-at-Risk") before they deteriorate or are destroyed. It aims to uncover these records, ensuring they are accessible to researchers and future generations.<sup>41</sup>

DoJR developed a comprehensive framework to classify and organize many Jewish genealogical records worldwide and to classify the facilities (custodial entities) that hold those records. Its primary purpose is to facilitate access to these records by providing a standardized and structured way to categorize them, thus managing the sheer volume and diversity of first and second-tier records and the number and diversity of the facilities that have those records in their custody. In genealogy, the term "taxonomy" may not be a common household word, but it plays a pivotal role in the project. Taxonomy, in its

most fundamental sense, refers to the science of classification. It involves arranging and categorizing objects, organisms, or information into hierarchical structures based on shared characteristics or attributes. In the context of genealogy, a taxonomy is a systematic framework used to classify and organize genealogical records and their custodians, allowing for efficient retrieval and analysis. The main categories for the record types are vital events, institution records, historical events, emigration/immigration, population and residency, government, persona, media, compiled sources, and reference tools. The DoJR taxonomy serves several critical purposes within the project:<sup>42</sup>

1. **Standardization:** By providing a standardized framework for organizing records, the taxonomy ensures consistency in record classification. This standardization is essential for making records accessible to researchers worldwide and maintaining data integrity.
2. **Effective Survey:** The taxonomy of custodial entities ensures that all anticipated types of organizations that potentially hold Jewish genealogical records are included in DoJR surveys. The taxonomy of record types provides a comprehensive checklist of record types relevant to Jewish genealogical research so that record collections are not overlooked.
3. **Efficient Retrieval:** With thousands of records scattered across the globe, efficient retrieval is paramount. The taxonomy's structured hierarchy and classification system make it easier for users to locate specific records based on their research needs.
4. **Preservation of Jewish Heritage:** Jewish genealogy is not just about tracing individual family trees but also about preserving Jewish heritage and history. The taxonomy aids in preserving Jewish cultural and historical records, ensuring they are accessible to future generations.
5. **Collaboration:** The DoJR project is a collaborative effort involving researchers, genealogists, archivists, and institutions from various countries. The taxonomy provides a common language and framework for these diverse stakeholders, fostering collaboration and data sharing.
6. **Scalability:** As the DoJR project continues to grow, scalability becomes crucial. The taxonomy can accommodate an ever-expanding dataset, allowing for the inclusion of newly discovered types of record collections.

In addition to uncovering and inventorying records, the DoJR project also works through partnerships to preserve and digitize these records. Digital archiving ensures that fragile and rare documents are preserved for posterity and can be accessed by researchers worldwide. The project's use of state-of-the-art technologies like artificial intelligence (AI) enables the project to be implemented at scale by automating record collection analysis and generation of catalog entries and associated metadata where records are already digitized. The same AI can also be used to enhance the effectiveness and reach of genealogical research, allowing for more efficient and accurate transcription of handwritten documents.

DoJR presents an integrated approach to genealogical research. The project provides a more complete picture of Jewish history and heritage by uncovering and inventorying various records. The project's efforts to preserve and digitize these records ensure that they are accessible to researchers and future generations, contributing to preserving and celebrating Jewish culture and identity and sharing many similarities with the pioneers of Jewish genealogy. Firstly, the project is driven by a profound connection to Jewish history and culture, recognizing the significance of lineage and heritage within Jewish society. Its goal of discovering every existing document of every Jew who ever lived reflects its aim to preserve and share Jewish genealogical data with future generations. Secondly, the project is committed to fostering collaboration and knowledge exchange, acknowledging the importance of working together to achieve its objectives, giving back to the community, and facilitating advancing the objectives of others. This emphasis on community-building and cooperation helps cultivate a sense of shared purpose and collective memory. Thirdly, the project is dedicated to accuracy and rigor in its research, acknowledging the importance of verifiable sources and meticulous documentation. By utilizing innovative technologies

such as artificial intelligence and digital archiving, the project enhances the effectiveness and reach of genealogical research while maintaining high accuracy and attention to detail—achieving a level of comprehensive survey that cannot be accomplished by manual methods alone. Finally, the project is patient and persistent in its research, recognizing that uncovering genealogical data demands considerable time and effort. Overall, the DoJR project is aligned with the pioneers of Jewish genealogy in its unwavering commitment to preserving and sharing Jewish genealogical data, its emphasis on collaboration and knowledge exchange, its dedication to accuracy and rigor in research, and its patience and persistence in uncovering genealogical data.

The commercialization of Jewish genealogy has created both opportunities and challenges for the preservation and accessibility of Jewish history and heritage. On the one hand, commercial genealogy companies have made significant investments in digitizing and indexing records, making them widely accessible to the public. On the other hand, commercialization has also privatized historical records, creating accessibility issues and concerns about protecting personal data. Privatizing historical records by commercial genealogy companies raises concerns about accessibility and control over Jewish history and heritage. These companies often charge high fees for access to records, creating barriers to entry for individuals and families who cannot afford them. Moreover, companies often retain ownership and control over their records, limiting public access and creating concerns about protecting personal data.

The Documentation of Jewish Records Worldwide (DoJR) project can help address these concerns by providing a free, online searchable catalog of Jewish records and where to access them, whether in commercial databases, open source and free databases, private or public archives, or any combination of the aforementioned. The project's emphasis on collaboration and community also fosters a sense of collective memory and bolsters Jewish identity, connecting Jews worldwide with their roots and spiritual traditions. Moreover, the DoJR project's commitment to identifying and preserving "Records-at-Risk" protects historical documents, including those that commercial genealogy companies and others have privatized. By focusing on identifying and preserving these records, the project ensures that they are available for future generations to learn from and appreciate. This approach is crucial and time-sensitive because many records risk being lost due to neglect, deterioration, or destruction.

## **5. Towards the Acceptance of Jewish Genealogy as a Discipline in (Digital) Humanities**

Because of its characteristics, the DoJR project could become significant for Jewish genealogists, historians, and other scholars in the humanities. The project's ambitious goal is to open new avenues for exploring Jewish history and culture, providing invaluable insights into the lives, experiences, and contributions of Jewish communities worldwide. Historians can benefit from the DoJR project by accessing primary sources that shed light on Jewish history and culture. The project's extensive catalog of records, ranging from birth and death certificates to immigration documents and synagogue records—including more than 350 types of records—provides a comprehensive and diverse resource for researchers. By examining these documents, historians can gain a deeper understanding of Jewish history, including migration patterns, community life, and the development of Jewish institutions and organizations. Moreover, the project's emphasis on collaboration and knowledge exchange fosters community among Jewish genealogists and historians, promoting interdisciplinary research and collaborative problem-solving. By bringing together scholars from different disciplines and regions, the project develops a vibrant and inclusive community of researchers, advancing our collective understanding of Jewish history and culture. In the humanities, the DoJR project still must be universally acknowledged as significant for its contribution to discovering, preserving, and promoting Jewish cultural heritage that becomes accessible and visible to a global audience. The project democratizes access to Jewish history and culture by empowering individuals and communities to rediscover and reconnect with their heritage.



The DoJR's use of citizen science has several benefits. First, it allows for a significant increase in the amount and diversity of data available for research.<sup>43</sup> Second, it provides an opportunity for individuals worldwide to participate in an important project and contribute to preserving Jewish history and culture. Third, it fosters a sense of community ownership and engagement in the project, leading to a higher level of participant investment and commitment. Overall, the use of citizen science by the DoJR is a powerful approach that allows for a more inclusive and collaborative approach to genealogical research. Furthermore, the project's use of cutting-edge technologies, such as artificial intelligence and machine learning, introduces new efficiencies in archival research, enabling researchers to analyze and interpret large volumes of data quickly and accurately. This technological innovation enhances the effectiveness and reach of genealogical research and contributes to developing new methodologies and practices in the humanities.

The Documentation of Jewish Records Worldwide (DoJR) project could also be significant for DNA researchers, as it provides a rich tool for exploring the genetic history of Jewish communities worldwide. By combining genealogical records with DNA data, researchers can gain insights into the genetic makeup of Jewish populations, including migration patterns, genetic diversity, and ancestral origins. The project's extensive catalog of genealogical records provides a valuable resource for DNA researchers, enabling them to reconstruct family trees and trace the genetic ancestry of individuals and communities. By analyzing the DNA of individuals with shared genealogical ancestry, researchers can identify genetic markers and mutations specific to Jewish populations, providing clues about their genetic history and origins. Moreover, the project's emphasis on collaboration and knowledge exchange fosters community among DNA researchers and genealogists, promoting interdisciplinary research and collaborative problem-solving. By bringing together experts from different fields and regions, the project develops a vibrant and inclusive community of researchers, advancing our collective understanding of Jewish genetic history. By combining genealogical records with DNA data and using advanced technologies, researchers can gain insights into the genetic makeup of Jewish populations, contributing to our understanding of their migration patterns, genetic diversity, and ancestral origin.

Pursuing Jewish genealogy through the DoJR project deserves recognition as a unique and independent discipline within the digital humanities. This is due to the project's reliance on a rich tradition of research and scholarship in Jewish genealogy, which has historically employed traditional and digital research techniques. Jewish genealogy demands a comprehensive understanding of Jewish history, customs, and practices. It involves curating, examining, and interpreting genealogical data, such as family trees, historical archives, and related materials. Recently, digital technologies have completely transformed genealogical research, and the DoJR project is at the forefront of this revolution. The DoJR project is an interdisciplinary endeavor that leverages knowledge and skills from diverse fields like history, computer science, and archival studies.<sup>44</sup> The study of Jewish genealogy through the DoJR project is an independent and distinctive discipline within the digital humanities, rooted in a strong tradition of research and scholarship.<sup>45</sup>

## 6. The Intersection of Tradition and Innovation

The project stands at the intersection of tradition and innovation and embodies the essential continuity of Jewish culture and identity while introducing a paradigm shift in our Jewish history and heritage. At the heart of DoJR lies the concept of *Yizkor*, a remembrance of the deceased in Jewish tradition. The project's focus on *Yizkor* reflects the importance of memory and heritage within Jewish society. In this sense, DoJR embodies the continuity of Jewish culture and identity, connecting past generations to present and future ones. Similarly, the Torah contains genealogical lists that signify the role of family history in establishing tribal affiliations, priestly lineages, land rights, and religious responsibilities. The Torah's emphasis on genealogy reflects the importance of lineage and heritage within Jewish society, highlighting the continuity of Jewish culture and identity. In this sense,

Jewish genealogy is deeply embedded in Judaism's rich history and culture, reflecting the centrality of memory and heritage within Jewish society.

By embracing the principles of Yizkor and the Torah, the project embodies the essential continuity of Jewish culture and identity while introducing a paradigm shift in how we understand and approach Jewish history and heritage. The DoJR project's transformative impact on Jewish genealogy initially redefines how we conduct surveys for relevant record collections across a previously unapproachable number of facilities and how we catalog the collections for meaningful searches by researchers with diverse research objectives. DoJR's transformative impact on Jewish genealogy shapes Jewish history by preserving and documenting the history and heritage of the Jewish people, shedding light on previously unknown individuals and untold stories, and providing a powerful tool for individuals to connect with their roots.

The Documentation of Jewish Records Worldwide (DoJR) project is a monumental undertaking representing a significant milestone in Jewish history. The project aims to discover and document every existing document of every Jew who ever lived, compiling a comprehensive inventory of Jewish genealogical data. This ambitious endeavor ensures that no one in the Jewish community will ever be forgotten, preserving the memory and heritage of the Jewish people for future generations. In this sense, DoJR is a building, a house, and a family home for the future. It provides a platform for Jewish community members to connect with their roots, fostering a sense of belonging and connection to their ancestral past. Moreover, the project shapes Jewish history by preserving and documenting the history and heritage of the Jewish people and shedding light on previously unknown individuals and untold stories. This approach ensures that future Jews have access to an unparalleled wealth of information about their ancestors, communities, and cultural heritage. The DoJR project is a monument of the Jewish People worldwide, representing a unique intersection of tradition and innovation deeply rooted in Jewish society's rich history and culture. By embracing the principles of Yizkor and the Torah, the project embodies the essential continuity of Jewish culture and identity while introducing a paradigm shift in understanding and approaching Jewish history and heritage.

The DoJR project ensures that no one in the Jewish community will ever be forgotten, preserving the memory and heritage of the Jewish people for future generations. It is a powerful and transformative initiative that shapes Jewish history and culture, providing a comprehensive and accessible repository of Jewish genealogical data. The project represents a living testament to the enduring legacy of the Jewish people, ensuring that their rich and vibrant cultural heritage will continue to be celebrated and remembered for generations to come. It has become a landmark in the Jewish history itself. The formation history of the DoJR would, therefore, require a monograph, taking advantage of the fact that oral history is still possible.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> (Glenn 2002).

<sup>2</sup> (Glenn 2002; Leissner 2001).

<sup>3</sup> (Commentary Magazine 1980).

- 4 <https://www.dojrww.org> (accessed on 1 February 2024).  
 5 (Rottenberg 1977).  
 6 DoJR—L’Dor V’Dor Foundation (LDVDF).  
 7 (DellaPergola 2024).  
 8 (Joseph 1994).  
 9 (Joseph 1994, p. 111).  
 10 (Lohrmann 2000; Englisch and Allert 2002).  
 11 (Malka 2002, 2022).  
 12 (Czellitzer 1909, 1934).  
 13 (Brenner and Penslar 1998).  
 14 (Gausemeier et al. 2020, p. 29).  
 15 (Gordon 2016).  
 16 (Stein 2009).  
 17 (Wenzerul 2014).  
 18 (Diamond 2016).  
 19 (Gorr and Freedman 1992).  
 20 (Elyasaf 2019).  
 21 [Elder J. Richard Clarke] “In light of the concerns raised in your letter, we have reviewed our procedures regarding temple  
 ordinances for the dead and have adopted the following refinements: first, that temple ordinances be performed only at the  
 request of family members; and second, that family members wishing to perform such ordinances also have permission from the  
 nearest living relative before proceeding”.  
 22 (Smolenyak and Turner 2004).  
 23 (Kluveld 2020).  
 24 (Wagner 2013).  
 25 (Weizmann Institute of Sciences, Rehovot, Israel 2020)  
 26 (Stern 1960)  
 27 (Rottenberg 1979, pp. 127–29).  
 28 (Rottenberg 1979)  
 29 (Stern 1978)  
 30 (Rottenberg 1979, pp. 127–29).  
 31 (Rosenstein 1976, 1990).  
 32 (Kurzweil 2004)  
 33 (Kurzweil 2004)  
 34 (Kurzweil 2004)  
 35 (Beider 2004)  
 36 (Beider 1993, 2008)  
 37 (Beider 1995, 1998)  
 38 (Weiner and Polish State Archives 1997; Weiner 1999).  
 39 (Stern 2006).  
 40 (Central DB of Shoah Victims’ Names—Record Details n.d.)  
 41 (Humphrey et al. 2020; Humphrey and Stein 2021).  
 42 <https://dojrww.org/taxonomy/> (accessed on 1 February 2024).  
 43 <https://dhjewish.org/> (accessed on 1 February 2024).  
 44 Veidlinger (2013), (Digital Judaica n.d.)  
 45 [https://en-humanities.tau.ac.il/diaspora/Eng\\_A\\_World\\_Beyond\\_Website\\_Launch](https://en-humanities.tau.ac.il/diaspora/Eng_A_World_Beyond_Website_Launch) (accessed on 1 February 2024).

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