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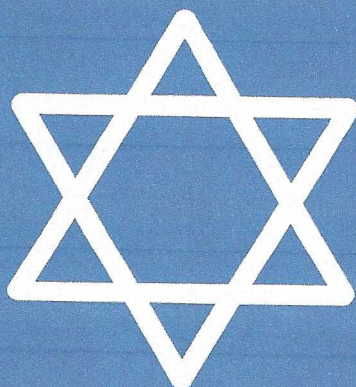
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# FIND YOUR Jewish Roots Online

Utilize the latest tools in Jewish genealogy with these top websites and online resources.

by ELLEN SHINDELMAN KOWITT



**The first steps for** finding your Jewish roots are the same as with any other ethnic group or faith: Start with the living generation and work backwards, consult with extended family, and gather civil and public records first.

But the key difference is setting your expectations. Researchers of European Jewish ancestors face extra roadblocks due to the Holocaust, pogroms, and the relatively late adoption of surnames in Jewish communities.

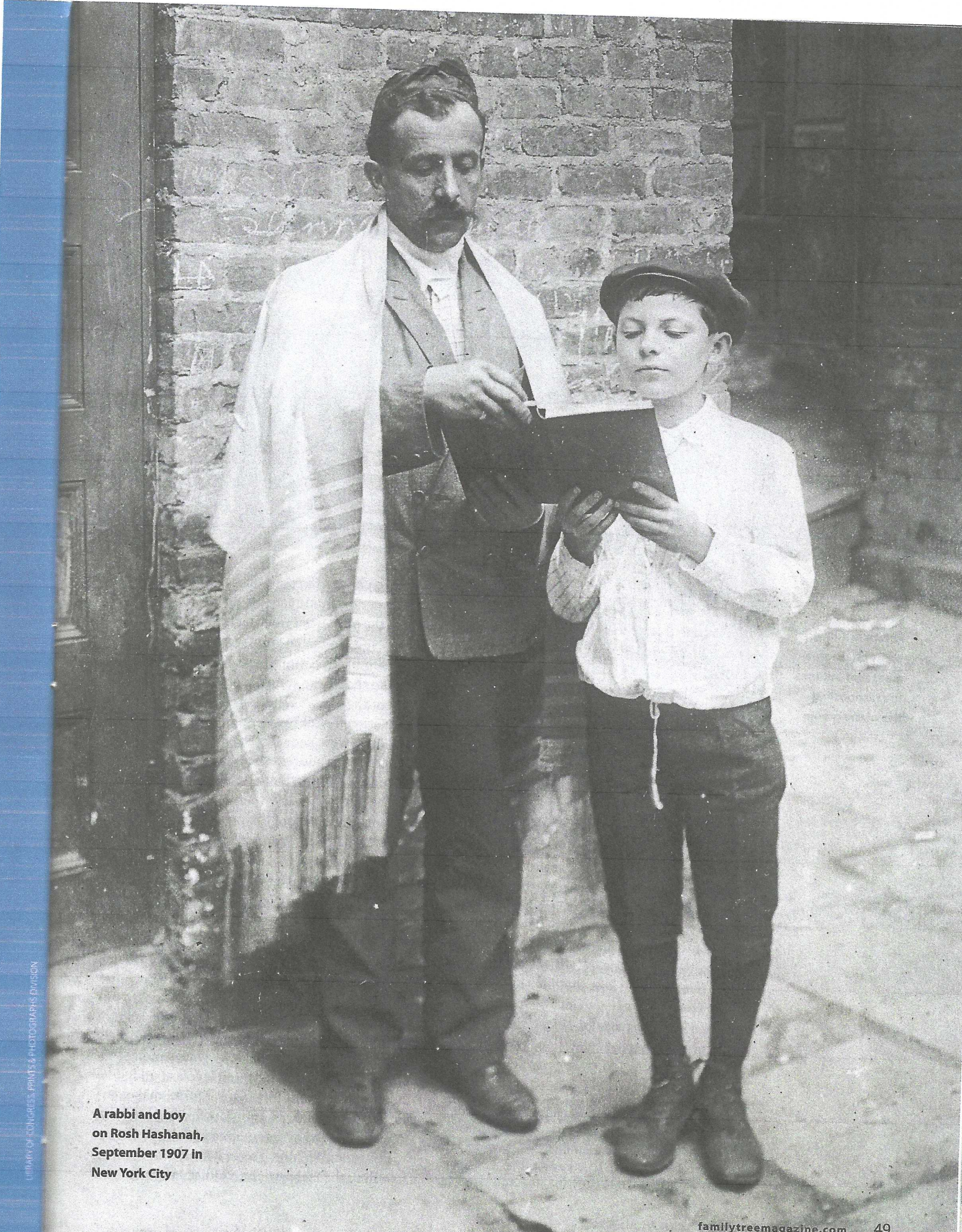
Fortunately, exciting advances in searchable databases and handy online tools have continued to emerge, making your Jewish roots more attainable than ever.

Starting a new project or returning to a stubborn brick-walled branch can seem overwhelming with so many websites to consult, but it doesn't have to be with these useful 10 websites and resources.

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**A rabbi and boy  
on Rosh Hashanah,  
September 1907 in  
New York City**

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Wedding rings sit on top of a ketubah, a Jewish prenuptial agreement that outlines the responsibilities of the groom

### 1. JEWISHGEN

No Jewish genealogy search would be complete without consulting the myriad resources located on JewishGen <[www.jewishgen.org](http://www.jewishgen.org)>. As the premier global home for Jewish genealogy, JewishGen provides free access to unique search tools and more than 30 million records, plus opportunities to connect with other researchers.

Where to begin in JewishGen depends on your family's circumstances and what research you've already done. But you can access two valuable entry points right from the home page: the Search button for Unified Search <[www.jewishgen.org/databases/all](http://www.jewishgen.org/databases/all)> across all of the site's collections, and the Discover button for the JewishGen Communities Database <[www.jewishgen.org/communities/search.asp](http://www.jewishgen.org/communities/search.asp)>. The latter identifies more than 6,000 towns and communities in Europe, North Africa, and the Middle East with various spellings or changed names. The site also has a Get Started tab that includes a link to a page for "First Timers."

You can search most collections on JewishGen by name, town or "any field." Be

sure to change the drop-down menu found in the second column labeled Search Type. You'll have the option of selecting how closely you'd like results to match your terms: phonetically like, sounds like, starts with, exactly, and so on.

Note that these sound-matching systems are not the same as the Soundex used by the National Archives for names in English. Rather, Jewish genealogists developed these algorithms to address the unique letter-and-language combinations commonly found in Jewish naming.

Know that many of the primary collections on JewishGen are indexes compiled by volunteers that point to original records. They are not consistently linked to the source material; to access original records, you might have to hire a professional or visit a repository in person. (Though often requiring significant work to obtain, original records can provide more accurate information.)

### 2. ONE-STEP WEBPAGES BY STEPHEN P. MORSE

This bountiful set of tools <[www.stevemorse.org](http://www.stevemorse.org)>, developed by Intel 8086 inventor and Jewish genealogist Stephen P. Morse, makes it easier to find records, translate foreign-language documents, and access maps and calendars.

In particular, Morse's site has aids for handling the Hebrew and Yiddish language

For more valuable web resources for researching Jewish ancestors, see <[www.familytreemagazine.com/heritage/jewish/jewish-genealogy-online-resources](http://www.familytreemagazine.com/heritage/jewish/jewish-genealogy-online-resources)>.

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(under “Dealing with Characters in Foreign Alphabets”). You can also transliterate names between English and Hebrew or English and Russian, or convert between print and handwritten language in those languages.

The calendar-conversion tool <[www.stevemorse.org/jcal/jcal.html](http://www.stevemorse.org/jcal/jcal.html)> allows conversions back and forth between the Gregorian, Julian and Jewish calendars. The latter is particularly useful for converting Jewish dates on gravestones in Hebrew or Yiddish into a secular date for retrieval of a civil death record.

### 3. ANCESTRY.COM

Ancestry.com <[www.ancestry.com](http://www.ancestry.com)> has built a large Jewish collection through partnerships with JewishGen, the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, the American Jewish Historical Society, Miriam Weiner Routes to Roots Foundation, and the Arolsen Archives.

From the site’s Jewish records landing page <[www.ancestry.com/cs/jewishgen-all](http://www.ancestry.com/cs/jewishgen-all)>, you can search the entire database or access specific collections provided by JewishGen, such as the Jewish Community Locator and Jewish Name Variations. You’ll also find links to message boards about Jewish genealogy, or a place to sign up to help index millions of Holocaust records as part of the World Memory Project.

You can also consult Ancestry.com’s Card Catalog <[www.ancestry.com/search/collections/catalog](http://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/catalog)>, which houses a list of the site’s more than 32,000 record collections. A keyword search for *Jewish* brings up more than 300 collections (most of them mainstream record collections), but a title search for the same brings up just over 100 more-relevant results.

Of course, some record sets contain large numbers of Jews but do not have *Jewish* in the title or as a keyword, making it necessary to search more broadly for collections from your ancestor’s place and time. One example is “Hesse, Germany Deaths, 1851–1958,” which includes thousands of Nazi labor and concentration camp deaths—many of them Jewish—as recorded in *Lagerstandesamt* (camp registry offices). Information can include occupation, maiden name, age, place of birth, date of birth, spouse and parents.

## Ashkenazi and Sephardic Judaism

“Ashkenazi” refer to Jews of Germanic or other Central and East European origins. “Sephardic” includes those from Spain, Portugal or countries surrounding the Mediterranean Sea including North Africa.

Worldwide, it’s estimated that 65% to 75% of Jews are Ashkenazi, 15% to 20% are Sephardic, and the remaining percentage are split among other populations, notably Mizrahi (Middle Eastern), Ethiopian, Yemenite, or Asian Jewish communities. Most Jews in the United States descend from Ashkenazi arriving after 1880, but the earliest Jewish settlers who arrived in 1654 in New Amsterdam (modern New York) were Sephardic.

*Family Tree Magazine* has articles full of detailed advice for researching the two largest groups:

#### ● Ashkenazi

<[www.familytreemagazine.com/heritage/jewish/ashkenazi-jewish-genealogy](http://www.familytreemagazine.com/heritage/jewish/ashkenazi-jewish-genealogy)>

#### ● Sephardic

<[www.familytreemagazine.com/heritage/jewish/sephardic-genealogy](http://www.familytreemagazine.com/heritage/jewish/sephardic-genealogy)>

Jewish records on the site continue to grow in size and variety. In 2020, Ancestry.com and JewishGen added a names index for 50,000 Holocaust survivor interviews held by the USC Shoah Foundation. When considering the people mentioned in the interviews, that collection totals more than 650,000 names. They link to the Shoah Foundation’s Visual History Archive portal, where you can either watch about 4,000 video interviews or see entries’ biographical pages. (I’ve got more resources for Holocaust research in the sidebar on page 53.)

### 4. FAMILYSEARCH

Among the global genealogy giant websites, FamilySearch <[www.familysearch.org](http://www.familysearch.org)> may





**A Jewish cemetery in Szczepieszyn, Poland, dating to the 16th century**

have the most nonJewish records in which Jewish families are named. Many are browse-only and in foreign languages.

The catalog <[www.familysearch.org/search/catalog](http://www.familysearch.org/search/catalog)> has more than 8,500 entries with the keyword *Jewish*, only 3,100 of which can be accessed online. One approach is to search the catalog by location, then drill down to a specific locale to find both Jewish and nonJewish original-language records that you can view from your device (as opposed to in a Family History Center). In addition to Jewish-specific records, FamilySearch has also put up many civil registration records that document all residents of an area, regardless of ethnicity or religion.

You can find other resources through the Help Center <[www.familysearch.org/help/helpcenter](http://www.familysearch.org/help/helpcenter)> using a keyword search on *Jewish*. You'll find a variety of online lessons,



Jewish names can complicate your online search. See my guide to Jewish surnames at <[www.familytreemagazine.com/heritage/jewish/jewish-surnames](http://www.familytreemagazine.com/heritage/jewish/jewish-surnames)>.


webinars with handouts, and FamilySearch Wiki articles <[www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/Jewish\\_Genealogy\\_Research](http://www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/Jewish_Genealogy_Research)> on various Jewish genealogy topics.

Another notable feature is the Todd Knowles Collection, a compiled source that includes records for more than 1.4 million Jews in 170 countries. Particularly strong for British Jews, the collection is part of the Genealogies database, accessible from the drop-down menu. None are incorporated into the FamilySearch world tree; you have to search the Genealogies separately.

Keep in mind that not all of the records used in the Knowles Collection are available on FamilySearch, and there is no comprehensive list of sources publicly available at this time. But some primary sources include the Isobel Mordy Collection, vital records from the old Great Synagogue of London and Bevis Marks Synagogue, and Jewish burials from Turkey, Egypt, Latvia and England (including Willesden and Hoop Lane Cemeteries in London and Southern Cemetery in Manchester). Find more information at <[knowlescollection.blogspot.com](http://knowlescollection.blogspot.com)>.

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## Exciting advances in searchable databases and handy online tools have continued to emerge, making your Jewish roots more attainable than ever.

### 5. MYHERITAGE

Another global megasite, MyHeritage <[www.myheritage.com](http://www.myheritage.com)> has records both of specific Jewish populations as well as records from wider society. You can browse its catalog here <[www.myheritage.com/research/catalog](http://www.myheritage.com/research/catalog)>. Many of the Jewish and Israeli records on MyHeritage (which is based in Israel) come from partnerships with the Israel Genealogy Research Association (IGRA), the Israeli State Archives and BillionGraves <[www.billiongraves.com](http://www.billiongraves.com)>.

One of MyHeritage's strongest assets is a Global Name Translation technology, which automatically translates names from 42 languages including Russian, Ukrainian, Polish, Czech, Hebrew and Yiddish. This allows searching in one language and receiving results in another—no other genealogy giant offers this.

Notably, MyHeritage (thanks to a partnership with BillionGraves) has digital records of 95% of gravestones in Israel's cemeteries, searchable and indexed <[www.myheritage.com/research/collection-10147/billiongraves](http://www.myheritage.com/research/collection-10147/billiongraves)>. And because of MyHeritage's translation technology, you can search in English for names in this database, and images of gravestone inscriptions can be viewed in multiple languages.

### 6. ONLINE FAMILY TREES

With a discerning eye, you can build upon the research of other genealogists in online tree databases. These trees come in two varieties: "one-world" family trees such as FamilySearch, Geni <[www.geni.com](http://www.geni.com)> and WikiTree <[www.wikitree.com](http://www.wikitree.com)> that thousands of users collaborate on together, and trees created by individual users on sites like Ancestry.com, JewishGen's Family Tree of the Jewish People, and MyHeritage.

Both types of trees have their pros and cons, but you must critically approach either before accepting information in them as fact. Did the user(s) provide citations for names, relationships, dates and places? Is there an attached record (or other evidence) you can

## Resources for Holocaust Research

All was not lost in the Holocaust. Primary Shoah-era resources for tracing victims and survivors are found online at:

**Arolsen Archives** <[www.arolsen-archives.org/en](http://www.arolsen-archives.org/en)>

**JewishGen Holocaust Database** <[www.jewishgen.org/databases/holocaust](http://www.jewishgen.org/databases/holocaust)>

**US Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM)** <[collections.ushmm.org/search](http://collections.ushmm.org/search)>

**USC Shoah Foundation Visual History Archive** <[sf.usc.edu/what-we-do/collections](http://sf.usc.edu/what-we-do/collections)>

**Yad Vashem Central Database of Shoah Victims' Names** <[yng.yadvashem.org](http://yng.yadvashem.org)>

**Yahad-In Unum** <[yahadmap.org/#map](http://yahadmap.org/#map)>

*Family Tree Magazine* has a guide to Holocaust records at <[www.familytreemagazine.com/heritage/jewish/holocaust-records-genealogy-guide](http://www.familytreemagazine.com/heritage/jewish/holocaust-records-genealogy-guide)>.

review and evaluate yourself, or did the user rely on an index?

Also consider how conflicting information is dealt with. Collaborative family trees generally have a moderator who steps in to resolve disputes based on the strength of supporting evidence. But family trees created by individuals do not, and (in fact) one database can have multiple family trees for the same person—each with different details about his life.

On the other hand, because *anyone* can add to collaborative trees, the data there could be more easily corrupted by false information than in one personal, relatively tamper-proof tree.



## 7. ONLINE NEWSPAPERS

Seasoned genealogists know the wealth of information that can be found in newspapers. Obituaries are perhaps the best-known family history feature, but you can also find details about your ancestors in gossip columns, birth or marriage announcements, and even general news stories.

Other genealogical golden nuggets are more colorful. For example, the Yiddish version of the US *Forward* newspaper (also known as *Forverts*, formerly *The Jewish Daily Forward*) published “A Gallery of Missing Husbands” in the earlier 20th century, meant to advertise men who had deserted their families. In addition to photographs, entries generally included full name and any aliases; age; place of origin; city of disappearance; year or time frame of disappearance; occupation; and year or time frame of immigration.

This gem has been indexed and is available on JewishGen’s USA Database <[www.jewishgen.org/databases/USA](http://www.jewishgen.org/databases/USA)>, where you’ll also find indexes to Jewish papers ranging from Boston to Houston to Chicago.

Kenneth Mark’s Ancestor Blog lists additional places you can find Jewish newspapers <[www.theancestorhunt.com/blog/historic-jewish-american-newspapers-online](http://www.theancestorhunt.com/blog/historic-jewish-american-newspapers-online)> from more than two dozen US states. Access to many of them is free, though the page also links to Jewish newspapers on subscription sites such as Newspapers.com <[www.newspapers.com](http://www.newspapers.com)>, Genealogy Bank <[www.genealogybank.com](http://www.genealogybank.com)>, and ProQuest <[www.proquest.com](http://www.proquest.com)>.

The list focuses on American newspaper collections, but also links to Compact Memory <[www.compactmemory.de](http://www.compactmemory.de)> (German-language Jewish periodicals from German-speaking countries, circa 1806 to 1938) and Tel Aviv University and The National Library of Israel’s Historic Jewish Press collection <[www.nli.org.il/he/discover/newspapers/jpress](http://www.nli.org.il/he/discover/newspapers/jpress)> (published in various countries, languages and time periods; the site itself is in Hebrew).

## 8. BLOGS AND SOCIAL MEDIA

Thanks to the internet, help is only an email or Facebook post away, making it easier than ever to network with other researchers. The JewishGen Discussion Group <[groups.jewishgen.org/g/main](https://www.facebook.com/groups/jewishgen.org/g/main)>, for example, features

threads from nearly 20,000 members on topics such as gravestone translations and surnames. And Ancestry.com has its own Jewish roots message board <[www.ancestry.com/boards/topics/religious.jewish.jewish-roots](http://www.ancestry.com/boards/topics/religious.jewish.jewish-roots)>.

Facebook groups are active and filled with thousands of armchair experts offering expertise and opinions, though you’ll need a (free) Facebook account to access them. Some highlights include:

- Tracing the Tribe <[www.facebook.com/groups/tracingthetribes](https://www.facebook.com/groups/tracingthetribes)>
- Jewish Genealogy Portal <[www.facebook.com/groups/jewishgenealogyportal](https://www.facebook.com/groups/jewishgenealogyportal)>
- Jewish DNA for Genetic Genealogy and Family Research <[www.facebook.com/groups/dnahelpjewishjourney](https://www.facebook.com/groups/dnahelpjewishjourney)>
- Jewish Task Force—Daughters of the American Revolution <[bit.ly/jewish-task-force-dar](https://bit.ly/jewish-task-force-dar)>
- JewishGen on Facebook <[www.facebook.com/jewishgen.org](https://www.facebook.com/jewishgen.org)>

Many bloggers also offer free advice on Jewish genealogy topics, often through a personal lens. Superstars include Philip Trauring’s “Blood and Frogs: Jewish Genealogy and More” <[www.bloodandfrogs.com](http://www.bloodandfrogs.com)> and Lara Diamond’s “Jewnealogy” <[larasgenealogy.blogspot.com](http://larasgenealogy.blogspot.com)>. The Israel Genealogy Research Association has a list of other blogs <[www.genealogy.org.il/resources/blogs](http://www.genealogy.org.il/resources/blogs)>.

## 9. SOCIETIES

If you prefer face-to-face contact (with a mask, of course), consider attending the annual conference on Jewish genealogy hosted by the International Association of Jewish Genealogical Societies <[www.iajgs.org](http://www.iajgs.org)>. IAJGS is an umbrella organization for dozens of Jewish genealogy societies in 17 countries <[www.iajgs.org/membership/member-societies](http://www.iajgs.org/membership/member-societies)>, and its well-attended conference offers a variety of lectures, workshops, special exhibits and volunteering opportunities. Visit <[www.iajgs2021.org](http://www.iajgs2021.org)> for information on the 2021 conference, currently scheduled for early August in Philadelphia.

Local genealogy societies, too, have increased their online presence since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. Many offer free webinars (or webinars for dues-paying members); keep up with offerings at Conference Keeper <[www.conferencekeeper.com](http://www.conferencekeeper.com)>.



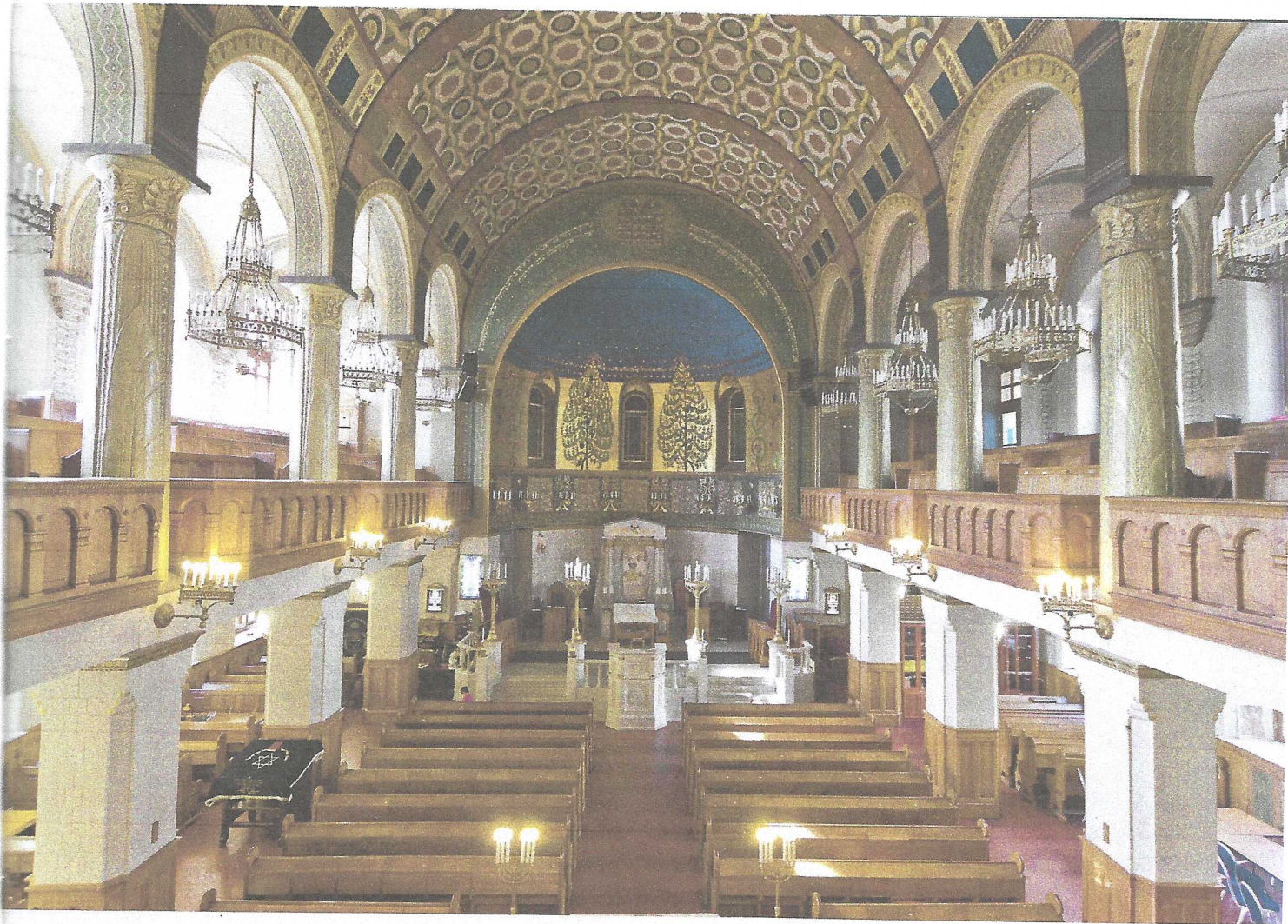
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**The Moscow Choral Synagogue in Russia, completed in 1906**

conferencekeeper.org>, which offers a free weekly newsletter about upcoming events.

## 10. DNA TESTING

Autosomal DNA tests, which have exploded in popularity in the past several years, can also provide hints about your Jewish heritage. Ashkenazi, Sephardic and other Jewish population samples—see the sidebar on page 51 for more on this distinction—have been collected by the major DNA testing websites, meaning you'll likely be able to see them in your ethnicity estimates.

Ethnic-origin categories vary from company to company. AncestryDNA, for example, breaks its "European Jewish" results into a handful of subregions <[www.ancestry.com/dna/ethnicity/european-jewish](http://www.ancestry.com/dna/ethnicity/european-jewish)>, while LivingDNA <[www.livingdna.com](http://www.livingdna.com)> offers no special designation for Jewish ancestry.

And the companies' samples will continue to be refined as databases grow, meaning your results may change over time. For example, MyHeritage DNA <[www.myheritage.com/dna](http://www.myheritage.com/dna)> added a new Genetic Groups feature in December 2020—including 55 Jewish Genetic

Groups. Four of those were for Ethiopian Jewish communities, a reported region that's currently unique to MyHeritage DNA.

Researchers who have Jewish ancestry outside of Europe will face additional difficulties. At time of writing, MyHeritage DNA and Family Tree DNA <[www.familytreedna.com](http://www.familytreedna.com)> are the only services of the "Big Five" that provide regions for Sephardic Jewish, Mirazhi (Middle Eastern) Jewish and Yemenite Jewish. ●

**Ellen Shindelman Kowitt** currently serves as director of JewishGen's USA Research Division and is National Vice Chair of a DAR Specialty Research Jewish Task Force. She frequently lectures and teaches about Jewish genealogy resources and methodology. A list of her speaking topics is available at <[www.ellenkowitt.com](http://www.ellenkowitt.com)>.

**tip**

Download your raw DNA results, then reupload to another company's database (free for most features) to gain more insight into your ethnicity results. We have tips at <[www.familytreemagazine.com/dna/results/transfer-dna-results](http://www.familytreemagazine.com/dna/results/transfer-dna-results)>.