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Comparing Jewish Resources on Ancestry, FamilySearch, Findmypast and MyHeritage

by Ellen Shindelman Kowitz and Sunny Jane Morton

This article is an adaptation of a lecture given at the International Association of Jewish Genealogical Societies (IAJGS) conference, Cleveland, July 2019—Ed.

Unique tools and record collections relevant for researching Jewish ancestry are found on four major websites that offer global genealogical data. This comparative overview of Ancestry, FamilySearch, Findmypast, and MyHeritage analyzes Jewish resources across the four sites and provides tips on when searching one of the sites over another might be advantageous, including an examination of JewishGen data found on Ancestry.

Each of the sites offers unique content and tools; all continue to add new records, develop new tools and collect more user-submitted data. Each has free access options available. Most importantly, no single website has everything a genealogist needs or wants in building a Jewish family tree over time.

At the top membership levels, all the sites have features in common, including the ability to search indexed and un-indexed historical records; core record collections such as United States censuses to 1940 and the (U.S.) Social Security Death Index (SSDI); family tree building tools; and automated record hinting if one has a tree on the site.

At a Glance

A description, at a glance, can be seen in Table 1 on page 5.

Ancestry.com

Ancestry is a for-profit genealogy company based in Lehi, Utah. The precursor to the Ancestry.com website launch in 1996 was a product consisting of LDS publications on floppy disks dating back to 1990. A subscription is required to access the majority of records.¹ Ancestry has built a large Jewish collection through partnerships with JewishGen, the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM), American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, American Jewish Historical Society, and The Miriam Weiner Routes to Roots Foundation, Inc.

Ancestry and JewishGen are two separate entities that entered into a partnership in 2008, resulting in an agreement that Ancestry would host JewishGen servers, and JewishGen would provide a specified number of records to be available at no cost on both sites. For more background, see Marwell, David, "About the JewishGen and Ancestry.com Alliance." *AVOTAYNU: The International Review of Jewish Genealogy* XXIV, no. Number 2 (Summer 2008)

Begin at the Jewish research landing page, www.ancestry.com/cs/jewishgen-all, to search Ancestry's entire collection by World, North America, Europe, More

Countries, and Holocaust categories; access the Jewish Community Locator and Jewish Names Variations by Country databases provided by JewishGen; or read a "Where to Begin" essay written by Gary Mokotoff. Also available is a list of free Jewish collections that may be searched without a subscription, links to the Jewish Roots and Jewish family history message boards, and a volunteer sign-up to help index 70 million Holocaust records for the USHMM World Memory Project. An aid for finding Jewish records may be found at <https://support.ancestry.com/s/article/Do-you-have-any-tips-for-finding-Jewish-records-1460088565996-2217>.

The Ancestry Card Catalog has 370-plus databases with keyword results for "Jewish," but most are mainstream record collections. Searching for "Jewish" in the title drops results to 100-plus more relevant entries. Among the largest collections are: Jewish Given Name Variations (with 721k records); Poland, Jewish Records Indexing: (Births, 604k; Deaths, 515k; and Marriages, 272k); US Jewish Welfare Board, War Correspondence, 1917–54 (454k); East Europe, Registers and Listings from 10 Jewish ghettos, 1939–43 (339k); Austria, Vienna, Jewish Registers of birth, marriage and death, 1784–1911 (206k); Romania, Jewish Names from the Central Zionist Archives (168k) [also for Hungary, 136k]; Tashkent, Uzbekistan, Jewish Refugees Evacuated from the Soviet Union, 1941–42 (152k); Jewish Holocaust Register of Survivors Printed in *Pinkas HaNitzolim I & II*, 1945 (119k); and U.S., World War II Jewish Servicemen Cards, 1942–47 [106k]. A Jewish ethnicity option is available under "Collection Focus" when searching "Reference, Dictionaries & Almanacs."

Ancestry's autosomal DNA product provides a "European Jewish" DNA ethnicity category. An interview with Janette Silverman, "Is AncestryDNA Helpful for Jewish Genealogy?" is available through AncestryDNA Genetic Communities for Jewish heritage at <https://blogs.ancestry.com/ancestry/2017/07/21/is-ancestrydna-helpful-for-jewish-genealogy/>.

An article describing more about the two breakdowns within the "European Jewish" DNA ethnicity category is located at www.ancestry.com/dna/ethnicity/european-jewish and is defined as:

1) "Western & Central Europe" with subcategories for Germany, The Netherlands, Belgium and Luxembourg; Poland, Slovakia, Hungary & Moravia; and Western Ukraine, Moldova & Eastern Romania.

2) "Central & Eastern Europe," which is divided into subcategories for Lithuania, Latvia & Belarus; Lithuania, Latvia, Ukraine & Western Russia; and Northeast Poland, Lithuania, Latvia & West Belarus.

Search Tip. Steve Morse has developed search tools for locating Jewish names on passenger manifests; U.S., Canadian and British census records; and a variety of New York City vital record indexes on Ancestry at his website, www.stevemorse.com. His site is free, but one needs an Ancestry account to view records.

FamilySearch.org

FamilySearch is a genealogy organization operated by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS or Mormon Church) to support the process of its members performing temple ordinances. Founded in 1894 as the Genealogical Society of Utah (GSU), it began microfilming records of genealogical importance in 1938; in 1999, a website was launched that evolved into FamilySearch.org in 2005. Access is free and available to the public regardless of religious affiliation.²

Although a Jewish genealogy Wiki, located at [www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/Jewish Genealogy](http://www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/Jewish_Genealogy), provides some research guidance, it is outdated and does not adequately describe the depth of Jewish records available on FamilySearch, JewishGen, or other significant Jewish genealogy resources.

From the top of the homepage, the Search dropdown categories include *Records*, *Genealogies*, *Catalog and Books*. *Records* has an option to search for names in indexed records or Research by location/Browse all published collections. *Genealogies* opens collections of submitted trees. *Catalog* provides access to the entire Family History Library catalog, both online and offline materials. Within an item record entry, look for links to record images. *Books* provides a search of more than 350,000 digitized book volumes. To search, use keywords such as ancestral names, towns, businesses, schools and synagogues.

The Catalog has more than 8,100 entries with the keyword *Jewish*; more than 3,000 of them link to digital content that may be viewed online. One approach is to search the Catalog by location, drilling down to a specific location to find both Jewish and non-Jewish record images in original languages that can be viewed instantly. Many of these images hold vast and valuable data that could be indexed by volunteers and added to databases on JewishGen, JRI-Poland and Litvak SIG.

Another approach is to keyword search "Jewish Records" and select the "Online" box that reveals original images of metrical books, censuses and other materials in multiple languages. Adding a country name to the search resulted in the following number of "Jewish Record" documents for each: Germany 1,850; Poland 774; Hungary 612; Ukraine 236; Austria 188; Lithuania 101; Romania 41; Belarus 36; Bessarabia 23; Moldova 23; Latvia 14; Czech Republic 14; Galicia 4; Ashkenazi 4; and Sephardic 1.

Among published digital collection titles are: Virginia, Jewish Cemetery Records Index, ca 1800–1986; Austria, Vienna, Jewish Registers of Births, Marriages, and Deaths,

1784–1911; Germany, Brandenburg, Bernau bei Berlin, Jewish Records, 1688–1872 (browse only); Hungary, Jewish Vital Records Index, 1800–1945; Italy, Mantova, Jewish Records, 1770–1899; Slovakia Church and Synagogue Books, 1592–1935; and Estonia Church Books and Synagogue Registers, 1835–1940 (browse-only).

Under the "Genealogies" drop down, a unique "Todd Knowles Collection" includes 1.4 million Jewish names compiled from LDS resources, including the Isobel Mordy Jewish Collection (England) and other sources. The collection is divided into six separate family trees defined by geography, including Jews of Africa and the Orient, British Isles, Europe, North America, South America and the Caribbean, and Southern Pacific. Enter a name and select Community Trees near the Search button. Information can be read at <https://knowlescollection.blogspot.com> and at www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/The_Knowles_Collection:_the_Jews_of_the_British_Isles

Search Tip. Steve Morse has developed search tools for locating Jewish names on passenger manifests; a variety of New York City vital record indexes; and other records on FamilySearch at his website, www.stevemorse.com.

Findmypast.com

Findmypast is a for-profit, UK-based genealogy service owned by British company DC Thomson since 2007. First established in 1965 under the name "Title Research," it launched a pay-per-view service in 2003 and then rebranded in 2006 as Findmypast when its product line expanded. Its core collections concentrate on the former British Empire and United Kingdom, but in 2019 it expanded into Central America, the Caribbean and continental Europe. Researchers may search indexes free of charge, but a payment or subscription is required to access full data.³

Findmypast has a Jewish family history landing page at www.findmypast.com/jewish-family-history and links <https://blog.findmypast.co.uk/how-to-start-your-jewish-family-history-1406488478.html> to an article written in 2015 titled "Getting Started in Jewish Family History" that offers interesting information about Jewish immigration to England. The catalog shows only two entries with the keyword *Jewish* which are "Massachusetts, Jewish Cemetery Association Interment Index, 1853–2013" (56k) and "South Carolina, Charleston, Jewish Cemeteries, 1761–1903" (121), but 10,000 Kindertransport records list Jewish children rescued from Nazi-occupied Europe. Findmypast has PERSI (the Periodical Source Index), which includes more than 50 titles with *Jewish* in the title. Its extensive British, Irish and U.S. newspaper collections do not include any titles that include the keywords *Hebrew* or *Jewish*, but papers may report on Jewish individuals, families, neighborhoods or organizations.

Search Tip. When searching PERSI on Findmypast, search within certain periodical titles (filter by "Jewish" or "Hebrew" and select title[s]) or search by place with optional keywords such as Jewish or Hebrew to refine results.

Table 1. At a Glance

	Ancestry.com	FamilySearch.org	Findmypast.com	MyHeritage.com
Annual Subscription	\$198 - \$298 USD	Free	\$34.95 - \$239.50 USD	\$110 - \$250.74 USD
Jewish Record Highlights	370+ databases include the keyword <i>Jewish</i> but most of these are mainstream record collections; searching for <i>Jewish</i> in title drops # to 100+. JewishGen, JRI-Poland and Litvak SIG records.	Catalog has more than 8,100 entries with keyword <i>Jewish</i> , 3,000-plus links to digital content on/off site including metrical books and censuses from European countries. Todd Knowles Collection under "Genealogies" includes 1.4 million Jewish names.	PERSI (Periodical Source Index) includes more than 50 titles with <i>Jewish</i> in title. 10,000 Kindertransport records include Jewish children rescued from Nazi-occupied Europe. Catalog shows only two entries with keyword <i>Jewish</i> .	More than 10 million Yad Vashem Pages of Testimony appear as record matches. Gravestones at every cemetery in Israel are digitized, searchable, and indexed; search in English and get the image and gravestone inscription in multiple languages. Ten other entries with keyword <i>Jewish or Israel</i> .
Partnerships with Jewish Organizations	JewishGen including JRI-Poland and Litvak SIG; US Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM); American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee; American Jewish Historical Society; and The Miriam Weiner Routes to Roots Foundation	N/A	N/A	Israel Genealogy Research Association (IGRA); Israel Genealogical Society (IGS); Israeli State Archives; and Yad Vashem
DNA Test Retail (U.S. Shipping)	\$88.95 USD	N/A	N/A	\$111 USD
Jewish DNA Ethnicity Categories	Within European Jewish category, there are three regional breakdowns within "Western and Central Europe" and three additional breakdowns within "Central and Eastern Europe"	N/A	N/A	Ashkenazi, Ethiopian, Yemenite, Sephardic from North Africa, and Mizrahi from Iran and Iraq
Free mobile app	Android, iOS	Android, iOS	Android, iOS	Android, iOS

Data in chart current as of May 2019.

MyHeritage.com

MyHeritage is headquartered in Or Yehuda, Israel, and provides an online genealogy platform that was first developed in 2003. Users can create family trees, upload and browse through photographs, and search through historical records, among other features. Included are a Global Name Translation technology, which automatically translates names from 42 languages including Russian, Ukrainian, Greek, Polish, Czech, German, Hebrew, and Yiddish. Additional offices are located in Tel Aviv; Lehi, Utah; Kyiv, Ukraine; and Burbank, California.⁴

MyHeritage operates a "freemium" business model meaning it's free to sign up and begin building family trees and making matches, but in order to read full versions, confirm relationships or to contact other members, the user needs a paid subscription. Partnerships with the Israel Genealogy Research Association (IGRA), Israel Genealogical Society (IGS), Israeli State Archives and Yad Vashem provide the majority of Jewish and Israeli records.

A search of the Collection Catalog for Jewish records reveals: IGRA birth, marriage and death records, 409k; German Minority Census, 1939, 410k; *The Jewish Chronicle*,

214k; Mandatory Palestine Naturalization Applications, 1937–47, 207k; Lithuanian Internal Passports, 1919–40, 112k; List of Partisans from Belarus, 17k; Piotrków Trybunalski Poland Births, 28k, Deaths, 10k, Marriages, 4k; Yeshiva University Yearbooks, various collections; Avelim–Israeli Obituaries, 41k; and Eretz Israel Telephone Directory, 1944, 16k. MyHeritage also has linked more than 10 million Yad Vashem Pages of Testimony. These cannot be searched but appear as record matches. At this time, this list does not appear in the Collection Catalog.

Gravestones at every cemetery in Israel are digitized, searchable and indexed on MyHeritage. Although this collection is also available on BillionGraves and IGRA’s member database, a search in English on MyHeritage allows one to view the image and gravestone inscription in multiple languages. The Israel Genealogical Research Association’s (IGRA) paid database, <https://genealogy.org.il/>, has an index in Hebrew and English, but no images. A search of IGRA databases requires an annual membership with dues of 150 NIS per individual or 200 NIS per couple living in Israel, or for those overseas, \$45 per individual or \$60 per couple. Membership also confers a 25 percent discount on MyHeritage.com annual PremiumPlus membership.

MyHeritage hosts a collection of nearly 450,000 digital books and periodicals (Research>Search All Records>Books>Publication by Title). Searching that collection with the keyword *Jewish* in the title yields more than 113,000 results, including *The Jewish Encyclopedia*; *The American Jewish Yearbook*; *The Jewish Communal Register of New York City*; and *B’nai B’rith, The National Jewish Monthly*. For those with a tree on MyHeritage, automated record hinting for this collection is available with the proper level of paid subscription.

MyHeritage DNA’s ethnicity analysis includes five major Jewish groups—Ashkenazi, Ethiopian, Yemenite, Sephardic from North Africa, and Mizrahi from Iran and Iraq. A chromosome browser is available.

Search Tip. MyHeritage allows users to search passenger manifests by person “going to” or “coming from.”

JewishGen.org

JewishGen is a non-profit organization founded in 1987 as a Fidonet bulletin board for Jewish genealogy. In 1989, JewishGen moved to the Internet as a mailing list and online forum, and by 1995, JewishGen had a website. In 2003, it became an affiliate of the Museum of Jewish Heritage—A Living Memorial to the Holocaust in New York City.⁵

JewishGen has more than 30 million records, research tools, and other resources to help those with Jewish ancestry research to find family members. Databases may be searched free of charge with a guest user ID although some advanced features (including access to search functionality in multiple fields) are limited to those who donate \$100 or more annually. JewishGen’s strength is the ability to con-

nect people with the JewishGen Family Finder, discussion groups, SIGs and social media.

- Copies of a portion of JewishGen data are on Ancestry and may be searched free of charge, but good reasons exist for researching the JewishGen collections on both sites. Some databases hosted on JewishGen are not on Ancestry.com; these include the JewishGen Gazetteer, JewishGen Family Finder, FamilyTree of the Jewish People, JewishGen Memorial Plaques Database, or Jewish Records at the (LDS) Family History Library. Also not on Ancestry are discussion group archives, family pages, KehilaLinks, and full text from Yizkor Book Project translations on JewishGen.

- JewishGen offers more search options and more flexible search results for the complexities and peculiarities of Jewish names than searching through the same records housed on Ancestry.

- Many JewishGen databases continue to be updated on JewishGen but have not been updated regularly on Ancestry.com since 2011. The following chart shows a comparison of the number of records in four important JewishGen databases as they currently appear on those two sites.

	JewishGen.org	Ancestry.com
JewishGen Online Worldwide Burial Registry (JOWBR)	3+ million	1,195,945
JewishGen Holocaust Database	2.75 million from 190+ lists	1.5+ million from 34 lists
Yizkor Book Necrology Database	353,000 from 422 books Will continue to be updated.	196,665
Yizkor Book Master Name Index	90,000 from 132 books Will continue to be updated.	17,306

Data in chart as of May 2019.

On Ancestry, researchers can directly attach records to a family tree. On JewishGen, although one can upload a family tree in GEDCOM format to the Family Tree of the Jewish People, records cannot be attached to it. Records found on JewishGen can only be downloaded to a hard drive or mobile device.

Ancestry has divided some JewishGen databases into smaller collections. For example, the JewishGen Holocaust database includes more than 2.75 million entries from more than 190 component datasets. On Ancestry.com, these are divided into smaller collections and may be searched separately.

Final Search Tips for Finding Jewish Records on the Giants

The Big Four genealogy websites will continue to add to

their collections and toolboxes. Return often for updates and remember a few key points.

- Do not limit searches to “Jewish” collections only. For example, U.S. passenger manifests do not contain the word “Jewish” in the title, but people can be identified in the record as “Hebrew.”

- Depending on the area, Jewish community records may be included in church records.

- Add *Jewish* as a keyword to name searches for ancestors.

- Be creative searching catalogs to locate additional Jewish records. Use a variety of keywords such as Hebrew, Hebraic, Ashkenazic, Sephardic, Mizrahi, synagogue, rabbi, Israel, Zionists, labor unions, Holocaust, Shoah, as well as town names and surnames of interest.

Notes

1. Wikipedia contributors, “Ancestry.com,” *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*, <https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Ancestry.com&oldid=896196607> (accessed May 19, 2019).

2. Wikipedia contributors, “FamilySearch,” *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*, <https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=FamilySearch&oldid=897979559> (accessed May 19, 2019).

3. Wikipedia contributors, “Findmypast,” *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*, <https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Findmypast&oldid=887428069> (accessed May 19, 2019).

4. Wikipedia contributors, “MyHeritage,” *Wikipedia,*

The Free Encyclopedia, <https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=MyHeritage&oldid=897680046> (accessed May 19, 2019).

5. Wikipedia contributors, “JewishGen,” *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*, <https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=JewishGen&oldid=858236822> (accessed May 19, 2019).

Ellen Shindelman Kowitz has served in a variety of leadership positions for the International Association of Jewish Genealogical Societies, the Jewish Genealogical Society of Colorado and the Jewish Genealogy Society of Greater Washington for 25 years. She has created KehillahLinks websites and been Lyubar town leader for 22 years; coordinated yizkor book translations for Polonnoye and Novograd Volynsk; and indexed memorial plaques, gravestones, and Colorado probate records. Kowitz actively mentors and lectures and is vice president of the Colorado Association of Professional Genealogists. Kowitz lives in Erie, Colorado.

Sunny Jane Morton is editor of Ohio Genealogy News and has been contributing editor at Family Tree Magazine and Lisa Louise Cooke’s Genealogy Gems Podcast. Publications include numerous articles and columns; Genealogy Giants: Comparing the 4 Major Websites quick-reference guide; Story of My Life: A Workbook for Preserving Your Legacy; and the forthcoming How to Find Your Family History in U.S. Church Records, co-authored with Harold Henderson, CG. Morton lives in Cleveland, Ohio.

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by Gary Mokotff

This book will be a definite asset to friends/family who are interested in genealogy and those you would like to get interested in genealogy. Help someone get started.

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It describes in detail such sites as JewishGen, Morse One-Step site, FamilySearch, Ancestry.com and many others. It alerts the readers to what types of documents of their ancestors will aid in their research—such as birth, marriage, death, immigration, census and naturalization records.

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