

## All in the Family

By Yitzchok Adlerstein

**T**he young boy wanted desperately to comfort his mother. She stood in front of their house, which was fully engulfed in flames. "It's not all our belongings that I cry for," she told her little one. "Those can be replaced, *b'ezrat Hashem*. One article cannot, and it is the pride of our family. It is our *shetar yuchsin*, the family tree that traces our history back for hundreds of years, and shows all the Torah giants and luminaries that make our family important."

Resolutely, the boy looked at his mother. "Don't worry, Mama. I'll write you a new one."

The child grew up to become Rav Yonoson Eybeschutz, one of the greatest *roshei yeshivah* and *talmidei chachamim* of the eighteenth century, whose works are a staple in Torah diets today.

Most of the rest of us will not attain the fame of Rav Yonoson. Writing a family tree will mean researching the past, rather than banking on others recognizing our names 300 years from now.

It will not take you long to figure out how satisfying, rewarding and Jewishly fulfilling genealogical research

---

*Rabbi Adlerstein leads an animated life directing an educational outreach program for the Simon Wiesenthal Center in Los Angeles, and serving on the editorial board of Jewish Action.*

can be. History comes alive. You see patterns of planting roots, and of voluntary and forced migrations. You participate in the pathos of early deaths, of widows raising families, of families separated by the exigencies of warfare and societies hostile to Jews. What better way to teach children to value their place as the next link in a long chain of *mesorah*, than to demonstrate who their forebears were and where they led lives of Jewish significance?

Where, then, can one find a web site which will allow one to enter some family names, scroll and click a bit, and watch a beautiful family tree emerge in a few seconds?

The answer is simple. Nowhere. Genealogical research takes time, effort and persistence. The Internet gets you into places that used to require a plane ticket and a personal visit, but there are no real shortcuts. For this assessment to fully sink in, go to

<http://www.jewishgen.org/infofiles/faq.html>. A rich and detailed FAQ (Frequently Asked Questions) gathers much of the information you will need to begin the work yourself, complete with lists of books, organizations, web sites, links and essential advice. (While this is a great place to start all research, many of the tools assume Ashkenazic or European ancestry. Resources specific to Sephardic ancestry are gathered

at a different site, <http://www.ortho-help.com/geneal/sefardim.htm>).

If you want to splurge on having someone else do the work for you, there are people who do this kind of work for a living. You can find a list of those who specialize in Jewish genealogy at <http://www.jewishgen.org/jgsla/apg.htm>.

Most of us, though, will roll up our sleeves and try it ourselves. A good genealogical software product is an essential tool for recording and organizing the fruit of your labor. Such a program will have you start with a single person, and prompt you to add parents, siblings, spouses and children. It will guide you up and down the family tree, allowing you to add information (when available) about places of residence, dates of birth, marriage and death, occupation and more.

Most people will go with Family Tree Maker, the industry leader. For us, it will fall short. Virtually all information more than a generation or two old will not be in English. Chances are that several languages will be involved, certainly including Hebrew. Many of the dates you gather will have two forms—Jewish and secular. You need to be able to store information in a multilingual format, and convert dates between different calendars. One product on the market essentially takes Family Tree Maker,

and allows for some Hebrew input.

**Dorotree** (Davka, \$59, PC only) will do much more. It will, of course, allow for Hebrew input (even if you don't have any other Hebrew programs) alongside Latin-lettered input. It will suggest ways of converting names between languages. Multiple report formats will allow you to print zoomed-out trees of many generations, or focus on a smaller chunk of time. If you wish to share your tree with the entire world, it will output into a GEDCOM format, which is the standard protocol for sharing information with other genealogists. When you find out that there is a branch of the family in Brazil, you can easily trade information by sending your tree in Portuguese. (It will handle Spanish and Italian as well, but not Cyrillic, Arabic or Farsi characters.) Help files are ample and well designed.

Will Dorotree prove to be a software version of the treadmill, purchased in a burst of righteous motivation, but soon turning into a stationary reminder of our inability to see things through? No way. If you lose enthusiasm for the serious research of your roots, Dorotree is well worthwhile having around just to manage essential family information, like keeping track of names and birth dates of cousins, grandchildren, etc. (I tried doing this in a makeshift fashion on my PDA, but with an expanding family, *baruch Hashem*, quickly found this too cumbersome.) Dorotree allows me to store the information in a highly intuitive manner, and to also attach photos and notes about what a grandchild weighed at birth, or the names of spouses of the siblings of a son-in-law. I would love to see some future version coordinate with other information managers, so that warnings could pop up a week before the birthdays and anniversaries of selected people. Dorotree's primary purpose, however, is allowing the storage of genealogical information, and it does this efficiently.

## Making it Count

Each year, remembering becomes a

front-burner issue. Between Pesach and Shavuot, we eagerly count towards receiving the Torah anew, hopefully marking off our personal progress from physical to spiritual freedom.

For those with a sense of humor—and more importantly, for those who wish to share the *mitzvah* of counting the Omer with those who might need a bit of encouragement with contemporary flavor—there is a new virtual string to tie around your finger to remind you to do your daily counting.

When Brian Rosman lived in Israel, he got a double kick out of watching *The Simpsons* on cable TV with his young daughter. He was drawn by the material, and found it even funnier when keeping an eye on the Hebrew subtitles. Back in the Boston area, he coupled his experience with inspiration coming from a paper *sefirah* calendar, originated by an acquaintance. Thus was born a rather unique web site, dedicated to the furtherance of a *mitzvah* not well known outside of Orthodox circles. Go to

**<http://jvibe.com/homer>** and you too will be introduced to *Sefirat Homer!*

You can print up daily or weekly calendars, complete with a host of Simpson characters modified to reflect their apparent conversion to Judaism. (They are funnier and cleverer than you might anticipate!)

You must use the site with caution. Some of the explanatory material that accompanies the graphics reflects Reconstructionist thought, although Brian was inclusive enough to link to some very kosher Orthodox commentary, clearly labeled as such. This adds just one more layer of unorthodoxy to a site which was nonetheless enjoyed by many Orthodox correspondents who got back to Brian with their thanks. (I turned one of the opening screens into my wallpaper throughout the *sefirah* period, and was greeted by a very effective reminder from a stern-faced Bart Simpson every time I started my computer.)

If you need something unusual to jog your memory each day, this may just do the trick. 