

Arthur Kurzweil:

Genealogy as a Spiritual Pilgrimage

The following has been excerpted from the Malcolm R. Stern Memorial Lecture given at the 14th Summer Seminar on Jewish Genealogy, Washington, DC, June 28, 1995.

I am thinking about Malcolm Stern. I miss him. How thrilled Malcolm would be if he were here tonight! I teach a lot of introductory classes on Talmud. Often people who come to me say, "I don't do **mitzvahs**. I'm not that kind of a Jew." My first reaction when someone says that to me is, "Did you kill anybody yesterday?" "No." "Well, you're not supposed to; you did a **mitzvah**. It says, 'Thou shalt not kill.' You didn't. You performed a **mitzvah**." I say to the person, "Did you smile at anybody today?" "Oh, sure." "Well, it says in the Mishnah that when you greet somebody, you are supposed to greet them with a smile. So every time you smile, that is just as much of a **mitzvah** as the kosher food that you might or might not be eating."

I am thinking about the **mitzvahs** that we do as genealogists. It seems to me that every step of the way when we pursue our genealogical research, we are involved in **mitzvahs**. Who more than we honor the elderly? Who more than we reach out to the elderly people in our family and our communities and make them feel like we need them - because we do. And what is that but a **mitzvah**, to honor the elderly. Who more than we ask questions? The Talmud consists of questions, thousands of ways of asking different questions. Did you ever ask the question, "Where did you get that information from?" Well, there is a little code word in the Talmud for the question, "Where did you get that question from?" And who has perfected the art of asking questions more than we have?

Who has perfected the art of being humble, that personality trait of Moses that we say was his great trait of humility? What greater act of humility can there be than to go to someone and say, "I don't know something you know that I need to know. Let me ask you a question?"

Who like we genealogists performs the **mitzvah** of ahavat Yisrael, the love of the people of Israel, which really means tolerance. What Jews in the world are more tolerant than Jewish genealogists? Why are we tolerant? We are tolerant because we learn that on this branch of the family there are Galicianers, and on this branch there are Litvaks, and on this branch there are assimilated Jews and on this branch there were intermarriages! And we see that each of our families really is everybody, and in the process we become tolerant.

Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz wrote a guidebook for newly observant Jews, a book called *Tesuvah* (published by Free Press). This is a book written by an orthodox rabbi about how to become more religious. Chapter 10 in that book is on doing your genealogy as the tool to get more connected to your heritage. Who more than we have discovered that? Who more

than we have discovered that the older people in our neighborhoods and in our families are the people we need when we ask them to translate something for us, when we ask them any kind of question? What a beautiful **mitzvah** it is that act of kindness to tell somebody, "I need you;" to tell somebody, "You can help me; you are important to me."

How about cemeteries? How many of us have been in cemeteries that nobody has been in for years and years and years, and you get there and have that sense that the reason that people chipped away at those stones and wrote those letters and words is because you were going to get there one day, and you were going to read that inscription and perform the **mitzvah** of honoring the dead. Who more than we have performed that **mitzvah** of going to those cemeteries and honoring our deceased and our past?

Who more than we understand what Maimonides meant in the Mishnah Torah, when he asked if you only have enough money to teach yourself or your children, who do you teach first? The answer is that you teach yourself first. You don't send your kids to Hebrew School. You go, and then you teach your children.

Who more than we are involved with adult Jewish education involved with it ourselves and pursuing our own Jewish education independently as adults and doing what Maimonides said centuries ago: You don't first give somebody else the opportunity to educate themselves Jewishly, you take that opportunity yourself. And you perform the **mitzvah** of Jewish education, participating yourself.

Who more than we have performed the **mitzvah** of remembering? Just of remembering. Twice a day Jews say the Shema. And when we say the Shema in the morning and the evening, one of the things we are supposed to have in our minds is to perform the **mitzvah** of remembering. To fulfill the **mitzvah** of saying the Shema is not just to say a bunch of words. It is also to consciously remember.

Who more than we have been perfecting the art of remembering, which, of course, is a **mitzvah** in itself. How many of us know that in the Passover haggadah, it says that we should feel as if we ourselves came out of Egypt? I want every moment of Jewish history to be a moment of my history. I want to participate in every moment of Jewish history.

Who more than we have been participating in that **mitzvah** of remembering? I have had the experience countless times that I go to a relative, that I contact somebody I know is a relative, and they say to me, "Who are you?" And I say, "I am Arthur Kurzweil," and it means nothing to them. "Yeah, but who are you?" And when I say, "I am Zalman Leib's grandson," "You are Zalman Leib's grandson!?" Suddenly they know-- "You mean your greatgrandmother was...?" Suddenly they know who you are, and they welcome you. It's, "Oh! You're Zalman Leib's grandson! Come on in."

Three times a day we Jews say a set of prayers, the Shemonah Esrei--19 blessings. We stand up straight with our feet together and in silence we imagine that we are in the inner

chamber of the King of Kings of Kings. That's the psychodrama that we participate in three times a day, to stand before God Himself and feel as if we are speaking directly to God. The first blessing of those 19 blessings is a genealogical blessing: "Barukh Atah Hashem Elokeinu Velokey Avoteinu Elokei Abraham, Elokei Yitschak, Velokey Yaakov...." It is as if you are going into the chamber of the palace of the King of Kings of Kings, and what are you saying? "You know who I am? I am a descendant of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Now you know who I am?" "Yeah, sure. Come on in." If I had just started praying.... "Who are you Kurzweil?" But when I say that I am the einicle (grandson) of so-and-so, suddenly then it is "Sure, come on in," and I feel much more welcome.

There is another **mitzvah** that is our **mitzvah**. One of the **mitzvot**, the obligation of each Jew, is something that almost nobody does the **mitzvah** of writing the Torah. Each of us is actually supposed to write our own Sefer Torah. Many authorities today tell us that not only is that impractical, but it is not even necessary. Really, the spirit of the **mitzvah** of each person writing our own Sefer Torah is really to maintain a Jewish library, to bring Jewish books into our lives and into our homes. And who more than we has personified that act of bringing Jewish books into our homes, of bringing Jewish books into our lives, filling our shelves with Jewish source material?

Mitzvah after **mitzvah** after **mitzvah**. Isn't it strange that sometimes they think that what we are doing is just putting names and dates on pieces of paper? They don't see that that has very little to do with what we are involved with. What we are involved with is **mitzvah** work on a personal level, on a family level, on a community level, on a world level. Every step of the way, what we do has to do with **mitzvot**. Who more than we understands the mystery and the importance in Jewish tradition of the power of names, of not just to jumble everybody together, but that everybody is important?

The fact of six million Jews being killed during the Holocaust is unfathomable to us, but when we have the specific names of the people in our families.... I don't know what to do with the Holocaust. Most people in the world don't know quite what to do with the Holocaust. But I think we genealogists have found out what to do with the Holocaust. We remember names. When the Nazis rounded us up, they took away our names and they gave us numbers. What we are involved with doing is taking away the numbers and giving them back their names.

Another **mitzvah** that we are involved with is the **mitzvah** of shalom bayit - peace in the house. It is a **mitzvah** in Jewish tradition to make peace in the household. I have spoken to lots of people whom nobody spoke to in 40 years because there was some kind of a fight, and no one even remembers what the fight was anymore. And who cares what the fight is about? It ends up that you are the one who made the bridge, you are the one who helped to heal the family, you're the one who helped to bring about that sense of shalom bayit.

Who has helped the libraries and archives to understand what they themselves have but we genealogists? How many times have we pointed out to the archivists and the librarians

what kinds of collections they themselves have that are important to us? I used to go to YIVO in New York years ago when Moshe Laub was the director. When I arrived in the lobby, Moshe Laub would run out of his office and say, "Kurzweil, you're the one who is giving us all the trouble." One day, Moshe Laub heard from a friend of mine who works at YIVO that I was going to Poland, to the city of Przemsyl. The next time I was in the building, he ran out of his office, and I said, "I know. I am giving you all the trouble." And he said, "No, no, no. Come into my office." He took out his wallet, and from it he took out a piece of paper that must have been 60 years old that had the address of the house in Przemsyl where he was born. He said to me, "You are going to Przemsyl; will you take a picture of the house for me?" And I said, "I thought I was the one who was giving you all the trouble." Suddenly he realized that I wasn't giving him so much trouble any more. He was a convert now. He saw. He said, "Oh, I want to give pictures to my children." And I smiled and I said, "Yes, that's what we genealogists have been doing, bothering you and your librarians all these years. We want to give things to our children. We don't want it to cut off. And you have a gold mine and we need it," and we have gotten it.

Perhaps you have read the book by the late Paul Cowen. Paul wrote a book called *An Orphan in History*, which was about Paul's own genealogical search and his reconnection with his own Jewish roots. Paul and I were neighbors on the Upper West Side in New York when he was writing that book. We bumped into each other on the sidewalk one day, and he said, "Kurzweil, you are just the person I wanted to see! I want to find out where my grandfather was born. How do I find out?" I said, "Well, where did he die?" He said, "Chicago." I said, "Get his death certificate. Often on a death certificate it will give you, if anybody knew, the place of birth." "Thank you very much." He left. I left. A couple of months later, I went to the YIVO Institute to the fifth floor to visit my good friend Dr. Lucien Dobroszycki. I walked into Dr. Dobroszycki's office, and who was sitting there but Paul Cowen. He says, "Kurzweil, you are just the person I wanted to see! I took your advice, I sent to Chicago for the death certificate. You are right. It does give the place of birth, and we are trying to find it on this map of Lithuania. We can't seem to find it." There was this big map sprawled out on the table, and Dr. Dobroszycki and Paul Cowen are looking at this map and they say, "Maybe you can help us. We have been looking for three hours to find this town. It looks to us to be something like Unkanowen." I looked at the certificate and I said, "Paul, it isn't Unkanowen; it's unknown!" UNKNOWN--Unkanowen! My one genealogical tip of the evening is, if you come from Unkanowen also, you might be related to Paul Cowen!

Some of you have known me for a long time, and you know that I had the beard long before it meant anything Jewish to me. Some of you knew me long before I put the yarmulke on my head or long before a lot of changes happened in my life. I would say without a shadow of a doubt that it was my genealogical research that affected me like Kafka's *Metamorphosis*-- you know, one morning you wake up and you're a cockroach! I hated those Orthodox Jews, and one morning I woke up and I realized that I was part of them. One of the things that my family and I did was to move to Brooklyn, and I spent a

good number of years davening (praying) with the Hasidic community in Borough Park, the Bobover Hasidim. It happens that the Bobover rebbe is Rabbi Halberstam, and I went to see him every Shabbos and danced with them and celebrated Shabbos with them week after week after week. One of my friends said to me that I ought to go and speak to him one night. And I said, "Well, how do you do it?" And he said, "Well, you get on line and you eventually get in to see him." I went there early, and I was the second person in line.

As some of you might know from some of the things I have written, it happens that my great-great-great-grand- father was a Hasidic rebbe. He wrote a book, and the introduction to the book was written by the great-grand- father of the Bobover rebbe. Before I went in to see him, a friend of mine who is a Bobover Hasid said, "You don't just go in there to shmooze; you have to have something on your mind, so maybe you should think of something to talk to him about." So I thought about it, and I had three questions that I wanted to ask him. I walked into the rebbe's office and I had a piece of paper with my children's names on it because I wanted him to make a blessing for the children. I gave him the paper, and the Bobover rebbe is holding my hand; he's sitting and I am standing, and my first question to him was going to be, "Why am I here in your office? Why am I in your office and not somebody else's office? There are so many rebbes; why am I here?" I didn't get a word out of my mouth. He looked at me and he said, "So you are wondering why you are here. You are wondering why you are in my office and not somebody else's office." He said to me, "I want to tell you something very important." This 80-something-year-old man with piercing eyes--beautiful man, his face shines with light said to me, "I want to tell you something very important. There is no such thing as a coincidence." He let go of my hand, and he pulled out the five books of Moses, the Chumash, and he flipped through until he came to where it tells about Abraham sending his servant Eleazar to find a bride for his son. And the Bobover rebbe showed me in the commentary that if you read the sentence a certain way, it reads, "They planned to meet by chance." The rebbe looked at me and he said, "How could they plan to meet by chance? Either they planned to meet, or it's a chance." He said, "That's the point. You think you wandered into this rebbe and not another. There is no such thing as a coincidence." Any of you, by the way, who believe that there is such a thing as coincidence haven't been doing much genealogical research, because they happen so often that after a while, you just don't believe that it is a coincidence anymore.

The second question that I wanted to ask him was, "What do I do with my sins?" As a Jew who is learning more and more, I realize every day what I did wrong yesterday. I am accumulating all this knowledge of what I did wrong yesterday, so I wanted to say to the rebbe, "What do I do with my sins?" I didn't get a word out of my mouth. He looked at me and he said, "And stop worrying about your sins." Honestly, this happened! He said, "Don't worry about your past and don't worry about your future. Just worry about your **mitzvahs** in the present. **Mitzvahs** in the present are going to take care of your past, and they are going to take care of your future."

The third question I was going to ask him was if he had any advice for me. I didn't get a word out of my mouth, and he said to me, "I'd like to give you some advice." And then he gave me some advice. For some of us, this is a path that leads us closer to Jewish tradition. And in Brooklyn, as our children began arriving, we realized that the apartment was too small and we had to move. I said to my wife, "I don't care where we move as long as we stay on the F train," because the F train was, at that time, the best subway line there was. The air conditioning usually worked in the summertime, and if you took the F train from Brooklyn to Manhattan every morning and returned every evening, you could have a minyan on every car. There are men studying Talmud, and there are women reading psalms. It's like Jewish Disneyland, and I liked being among them. My first Talmud teacher taught me that it says in the Talmud that you are not supposed to go two cubits--which is from the tip of your elbow to the tip of your fingers--with a fellow Jew without talking Torah. And here I am, sitting every morning and every evening in the subway not talking to anybody, because in the New York City subway system, the etiquette is that you don't talk to anybody. There I am every morning and every evening with all these fellow Jews, and nobody is talking to anybody, and I'm thinking about the Talmud telling me that I've got to talk to people--and I can't get up the courage to do it. Well, every morning and every evening on the subway I spent my time reading my favorite book in the world. It's called *The Thirteen-Petalled Rose* (Jason Aronson), a 180-page book about Jewish thought, written by Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz. One evening going back to Brooklyn, I am reading this book, and a Hasid is sitting next to me, about 70 years old, with the whole get-up--and he is reading the *New York Post*. The *New York Post* is a rag. When you read the headline in the *New York Post*, you are sure that didn't happen. I am feeling very good about myself, because I am this assimilated kid from Long Island who didn't have much of a Jewish education, and I am reading this interesting book on Jewish theology by the great Rabbi Steinsaltz of Jerusalem, and here's this Hasid reading the *Post*! I wanted to talk to this Jew. I finally got up the nerve and I said, "Excuse me. Did you ever see this book?" And he looked at the beginning of the book, and he said, "I don't look at books unless they have at least two *haskamahs* (approbations)." Those of you who have done genealogical research on rabbinical lines know that a *haskamah* is a genealogical tool. In the old country and in this country, if you write a book, you want to get someone to say, "This is a kosher book." In most rabbinic books, you have at least two *haskamahs*. The reason why they are genealogical tools is because they usually say "So-and-so, who is the author of this book, is the son of So-and-so, the grandson of So-and-so, who came from this town," so I knew *haskamahs* from genealogical research. When this Hasid said, "I don't look at books unless they have two *haskamahs*," I wanted to say to him, "Where is the *haskamah* on the *New York Post* thank you very much?" But then he surprised me when he said, "But you know, it isn't really that important. What is the book about?" I said, "It is a basic introduction to Jewish thought," and I opened to the table of contents and I said, "There is a chapter called Torah and one called Mitzvot and a chapter called Holiness. In fact, I have a question for you." I said, "Could I ask you a question?" And this Hasid put down his *Post* and said, "Yes." I said, "I would like to read a passage from this book to you"--on the F

train winding its way to Brooklyn. Steinsaltz writes: It has been said that each of the letters of the Torah has some corresponding soul. That is to say, every soul is a letter in the entire Torah and has its own part to play. The soul that has fulfilled its task, the soul that has done what it needs to do in terms of repairing or creating its own part of the world, this soul can wait after death for the perfection of the world as a whole, but, he says, not all souls are so privileged. Many souls stray for one reason or another. Sometimes a person does not do all of the proper things. Sometimes he misuses forces and spoils his portion, spoils the portion of others. In such a case, the soul does not complete its task and may even itself be damaged by contact with the world. It has not managed to complete that portion of reality which only this particular soul can complete and therefore, after the death of the body the soul returns and is reincarnated in the body of another person and again must try and complete what it failed to correct or it injured in the past. I said to this Hasid, "Do we believe in this?" He said, "Sure." I said, "Jews believe in reincarnation? I never heard of it." He said to me, "Well, where did you get your Jewish education?" And I told him that I didn't get much of a Jewish education, and I began to tell him about the kind of a household that I grew up in and about the struggles that I have had personally in connecting myself back to Jewish tradition, and he looked at me as if to say, "So now you are asking me why you never heard of this?" He said, "Yes, this is truly part of Jewish tradition." We began to talk more as the train went into Brooklyn, and I was telling him more about my troubles and more about my problems. At a certain point, this Hasid looked at me and said, "You know, you are luckier than I am." I said, "I am luckier than you are? I just got finished telling you all my troubles. I just got finished telling you that I didn't receive a Jewish education as a kid, and you're telling me that I am luckier than you are? How is it possible?" And he said, "Every Jew, every person, is connected to God by a rope." He was talking metaphorically. He said, "Sometimes that rope breaks, as in your case, but when you take that broken rope and you tie it together, you are closer than you were had the rope not broken. So you are closer than I'll ever be." I learned a couple of things from that episode.

Number one, my Talmud teacher is right; you shouldn't go two cubits without talking Torah with somebody else

The second thing that I learned from him sums up the whole of my genealogical experience. It's been a process of grabbing hold of those two pieces of broken rope and somehow tying them together again. The Talmud says that when the Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed, the survivors of that cataclysm had to say to themselves, "What are we going to do? Is this the end, or do we rebuild?" The Talmud says that when the Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed, then the Jews did their family trees. Now as a student of Talmud and a student of Jewish genealogy, I was quite intrigued to see that it says that when the Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed, the Jews did their family trees. A commentator makes the observation, as we know so well, that sometimes if you want to go forward, you first have to go backward. You see where you are coming from, and you know where you are going. Thank God we are here today as Jews, because our ancestors who survived that

cataclysm did their family trees. I believe, as I am sure you do, that we are in that same kind of situation today. We are a rebuilding generation. We come after two of the worst moments of Jewish history--one, of course, the Holocaust when a third of our people were murdered and two, the mass migration of Jews when our families were torn apart. There is probably not a family here this evening that if you go back two or three generations, you will not see that family torn apart--brothers and sisters never saw each other again, husbands and wives, grandparents and grandchildren. And I believe that in the same way that the Talmud says that when the Temple was destroyed, they rebuilt by doing their family trees, in our generation we have the same task. As a rebuilding generation, we are doing our family trees to rebuild, to put the pieces back together again, to take that shattered people and to bring them back together again. Our work is **mitzvah** work. I think we are doing a good job.

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