

# Perpetual Jewish family traits: A key to continuity

A system of interconnected families making one united family

• ABIGAIL KLEIN LEICHMAN

Is it a coincidence that Jews named Wertheim, Wertheimer, and Werthein built unrelated business empires on four continents?

Not at all, according to research by Tel Aviv-based Am haZikaron Institute for Science, Culture and Heritage of the Jewish People, founded in 1998 to explore Jewish continuity as a scientific phenomenon.

Using an exact-sciences approach endorsed by a committee of 55 Nobel laureates, Am haZikaron (People of Memory) researchers can accomplish not only what popular genealogy services can, such as reconstructing family history, locating lost relatives, and creating visually attractive family trees. They can also reveal the unique characteristics of one's clan that have been preserved for centuries.

"If the Jewish people across generations represent a cohesive and continuous entity, then this continuity must rest on the long-term transmission of identifiable human traits," the institute explains on its website.

"Our research applies advanced statistics, pattern recognition, and trait persistence analysis – resulting in published findings that suggest certain inherited characteristics can endure within family lines for as long as 950 years."

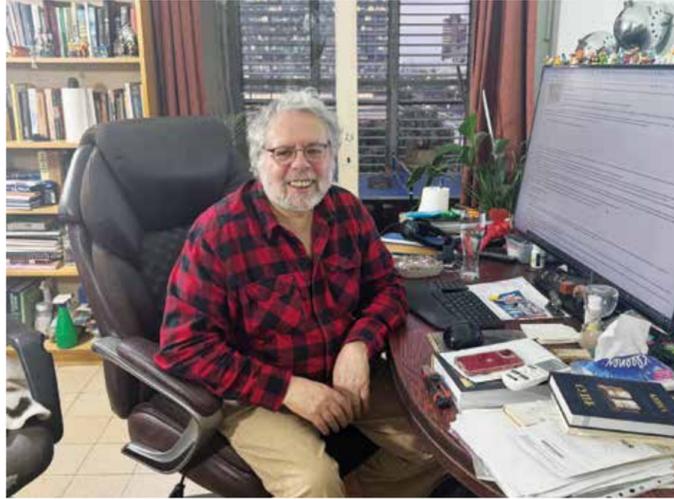
Itzhak Fouxon, a professor of physics and Am haZikaron's scientific adviser and researcher, spoke to the *Magazine* about the institute's extraordinary discoveries at the intersection of science, identity, and heritage.

The Wertheims, Wertheimers, and Wertheins are one example. Fouxon explained that DNA studies prove that these variations of the name derive from a handful of distant clans with common roots dating back 450 years.

"You see the same story in these clans: A person born to a family of modest means makes decisions that lead to building a financial empire out of nothing."

In modern times, these empires include Stef Wertheimer's Iscar Industries; Moshe Wertheim's Central Bottling Company (Coca-Cola Israel); Alain and Gerard Wertheimer's Chanel enterprise in France; American optometrist-inventor Herbert Wertheim's investment and philanthropic network; and the Argentina-based Wertheim family's global agribusiness.

"There are genetic predispositions to certain types of talents. Jewish families tend to keep the same family profile over the centuries," Fouxon said.



JONATHAN VIDGOP, founder, Am haZikaron. (Photos: Itzhak Fouxon)

This profile encompasses capabilities and characteristics affecting anything from choice of profession to migration patterns, marital patterns, habits, and hobbies. "Even when they don't know they belong to the same meta-clan, they have the same inclinations."

One might think that as each generation marries and has children, family traits become diluted over time. But the genealogy researcher said the institute's findings indicate that choice of mate isn't entirely random, either. With obvious exceptions, "If you have similar genes, you're more likely to form a couple; and as a consequence, after a few generations the traits are still there."

### What is unique about Jews

"I founded the institute because memories can disappear like sand between our fingers – and if there are no memories, we cannot be," said Am haZikaron founder Jonathan Vidgop, a prize-winning theater director, author, and screenwriter who made *aliyah* from Leningrad in 1989.

His own family tree winds across four walls of a room in Am haZikaron's Tel Aviv office and includes 1,600 individuals thus far.

"About 20 years ago, I started with 35 family members and gradually collect-

AM HAZIKARON researcher and My Jewish Roots workshop facilitator Nelly Rosenberg. (Itzhak Fouxon)



tant relatives are echoed in the writings of economic historians such as Gregory Clark, author of *The Son Also Rises*.

Fouxon noted that 11 of Vidgop's relatives became directors and 13 became writers, completely independently of one another.

"A person from a given family will have talents in a wide spectrum of activities, but it is limited," he said. "Out of an infinity of possibilities, a slight limitation can help you reach your potential, to help you determine where you are most needed in society. It's not about genetic predetermination because we have freedom of choice. We have the freedom to develop our innate talents."

Jews have always been "a collection of interconnected families, a people with an inbuilt structure. In biblical times, that structure was tribal, and each tribe was considered predestined for different things. Within tribes were *batim*, houses – families with particular capabilities," Fouxon said.

"This is an essential idea for how the Jews survived. We are a scattered people with different cultures and languages, yet we truly depend on each other and survive as one connected system, where the parts depend on the whole and the whole depends on the parts," he said.

"It is our core mission to understand this – to understand what is unique about the Jewish people via what is unique about the families who comprise the Jewish people."

Prof. James Heckman, winner of the Nobel Prize in Economics in 2000 and member of the institute's Endorsement Committee, expressed the project's significance this way: "The heredity of the individual weaves into the history of the collective. From the dust of forgetfulness,

ed more. I am continuing to discover relatives," he said.

Since many American and Latin American Jews descend from Russian-speaking ancestors, it's a priority to make the institute accessible to English speakers and, in the future, Spanish speakers.

"I am convinced that Jews are one united family, regardless of our countries of origin," Vidgop said.

Fouxon leads comparative statistical studies of family trees, results of which have been published in peer-reviewed scientific journals. The institute's findings on regularities across generations of dis-



PROF. ITZHAK FOUXON, scientific adviser to Am haZikaron.

the Am haZikaron project creates a meaningful narrative."

### My Jewish Roots

One of Am haZikaron's objectives is to develop national consciousness and reconnect modern Jews with the heritage and history of the Jewish clans from which they descend.

A variety of privately and grant-funded projects help accomplish this goal.

Over the past decades, about 60,000 young Jews visiting Israel through programs such as Birthright, Naale Elite Academy, and Masa, as well as new immigrants in municipalities such as Afula, Rehovot, Ashkelon, Ra'anana, and Kiryat Gat, have delved into family history in Am haZikaron's My Jewish Roots workshops.

In the first half of the two-hour workshop, professional actors guide participants in dramatizing pivotal scenes from Jewish history. The second half features a talk with a family history expert. Everyone receives a pre-prepared printed certificate of his or her family origin based on a genealogical study of his or her last name.

Nelly Rosenberg, a Russian-speaking researcher and workshop facilitator for Am haZikaron, said the sessions "always touch something very personal in people." That includes herself. She recently met someone at a My Jewish Roots workshop from her own family line, which traces its roots back to the Alter Rebbe, the founder of Chabad. The new-found relative was excited and surprised to learn that many of their mutual cous-



MY JEWISH ROOTS workshop participants receive certificates of origin describing the history behind their family name. (Courtesy Am haZikaron)

ins had been living in Israel since 1948.

"These discoveries make people rethink their connections," said Rosenberg.

Marina, a member of a new immigrants group in Bat Yam that participated in My Jewish Roots, said the experience led her to realize that "each of us is a cog in the great machine called clan, family, and surname. And all these mechanisms together form a cog in the machine – the Jewish people. And how important this tiny cog is to the life and functioning of this machine!"

"A huge thank you to all the institute staff for their work, their passion, and their determination, for investing in the preservation and prosperity of our people, and for sharing your knowledge with every cog," she wrote to the organization.

Fouxon said the institute started with Russian-speaking Jews "because they often come to Israel with no connection to Jewishness besides knowing that a grandparent was Jewish. They need to understand how they count, how they belong. Knowing about one's roots can make life more meaningful. They can see that their existence is not random."

Some workshop participants prove to be descendants of King David – who was, Vidgop noted, the great-grandson of the convert Ruth. Jews by choice are an



A SECTION of Jonathan Vidgop's family tree on the walls of the Am haZikaron office in Tel Aviv.

essential part of the system, he said.

"Converts who enter the Jewish people do not enter randomly; there are no coincidences here. The convert does not dilute the discoveries of family regularity at all, because the convert becomes a part of the family."

### From the dust of forgetfulness

The institute's current projects include collecting testimonies from Diaspora Jews about how they experienced and reacted to the events of Oct. 7, 2023.

"The only parallel seems to be a similar project for September 11, yet what we went through was much stronger," said Fouxon, pointing out that many Jews' worldview was changed by Oct. 7, with some being moved to make *aliyah* or join the IDF.

Another project involves translating the institute's Russian-language history of the pogroms during the Russian Civil War, 1918-1921, which claimed 300,000 Jewish lives. Many of those victims were relatives of the two million Jews who fled the Russian Empire in that time period and started families in North America or

Palestine (see link below).

In addition, the institute's foundational research volume, *Ethnos of Millennia*, was recently translated from Russian into English for future publication. Containing the centuries-long history of 63 Jewish clans, this work earned Vidgop awards for his contributions to furthering an awareness about Jewish heritage.

Fouxon emphasized that the Am haZikaron Institute also promotes *aliyah* and family reunification by securing documents for repatriation and helping individuals locate relatives.

"We call on English-speaking Jews to write to us so we can reunite those who want it with their Russian-speaking family," the genealogy expert said. "The last time this connection was strong was the moment American Jews fought to make the USSR let the Jewish people go. I hope these times of unity may return." ■

The page on Lviv regarding the Russian pogroms can be seen in English at: [pogrom.amhazikaron.org/en/mestechki/lviv/](http://pogrom.amhazikaron.org/en/mestechki/lviv/).

For more information, go to: [amhazikaron.org/en/](http://amhazikaron.org/en/).