

Methods and Resources for Sephardic Genealogical Research: The Example of Antebi Family Research

by Dr. Elioz Antebi Hefer

The Antebi family's roots go back to the expulsion from Spain in 1492. Some members of the family settled in a small town in Turkey, Ein-Tab (the Good Fountain), known today as Gaziantep. After migrating from Ein-Tab to Aleppo, the family took the name Antebi (from Ein-Tab), and the family's original Spanish name was forgotten. Many members of this family were famous Torah scholars, rabbis and leaders of the Jewish community in Aleppo, Safed and Tiberias. This article describes the methods and resources I used in tracing my Antebi family.

Old Family Book Triggered Quest

A specific trigger often generates a genealogical quest. In my case, an old family book stimulated my curiosity. Given to me by my maternal grandfather, Jacob Mordechai Antebi, the book was *Beor Hachaim* (In light of life), written by Rabbi Chaim Capussi of Cairo, Egypt. Published in 1929, the book actually was a first print of a 300-year-old manuscript.

...an old family book stimulated my curiosity [about family history].

My grandfather especially wanted me to read some pages in the second part of the book called *Abir Ya-Akov*, which begins with a long, terrifying report written in an old Hebrew script to the Anglo-Jewish philanthropist, Sir Moses Montifiore, in 1841 by Rabbi Jacob Antebi, chief rabbi of Damascus. Later, I learned that the document lying in front of me was the true original report of the Damascus blood libel affair of 1840 in which Rabbi Jacob described the tortures he and other elders of his community had suffered during the infamous inquiry of the authorities.¹ I understood that Rabbi Jacob was a member of my maternal family, but I could not figure out the relationship between that famous man and my grandfather, who, apparently, was named after him. My grandfather also left in the book the drafts of several letters he had written to his younger cousin, Shmaia Antebi, answering questions about their mutual grandfather, Rabbi Yehuda Shabetai Rephael Antebi of Safed, born in 1809. My grandfather died about a year after he gave me the book.

I used to visit the Haifa University Library in those years and hunt for any document or book that mentioned either the Antebi family name or anyone related to an Antebi. As I grew older, I realized that the *Beor Ha-Chaim* was a family heirloom, the product of four family members three and four generations before me who had collaborated to print all family manuscripts that had been left in their possession.

The longest was the manuscript of Rabbi Haim Capussi, purchased by my grandfather's grandfather (my great-great-grandfather), Rabbi Yehuda Shabetai Rephael Antebi, in Cairo in the mid-19th century.

Peruse Large Libraries and Internet Databases

Much can be found in the libraries, even when you expect nothing. Using catalogues of books and articles to run a search on the family name, clues about family roots may emerge. Today, the Internet offers a gate to deep worlds of knowledge. Among the websites worth checking for clues to Sephardic genealogy are <www.hebrewbooks.org> and <www.seforimonline.org>. These are open, electronic, Hebrew-book libraries dedicated to rabbinical and Judaic literature from the beginning of printing in the 15th century. These provide access free of charge to entire books in which one may find important genealogical clues, especially in their prefaces. These libraries nearly match the holdings of the very expensive e-library called *Otzar Hachohma*, (The Treasure of Wisdom) <<http://otzar.biz>>. Even when they do not expect it, researchers may be surprised to find books written by scholars and rabbis who bear their own family names.

Build a Family Archive

The death of my closest family elders led me to widen my search. In doing so, I have reached distant relatives whom my parents and uncles had never known. I have sought not only older family members, but also documents, old books, and any other materials passed on from generation to generation that might help in my research.

Results have emerged gradually. Mainly, I have managed to collect family trees compiled by different branches of the family and to find diverse documents and old articles about famous family members. Some relatives are family history preservers, individuals who are conducting genealogical research for themselves. I targeted my efforts toward them, since they had the most precious family heritage collections. Five cousins—my grandfather, Ephraim Matuq Antebi, Shmaia Antebi, Baruch Antebi, and Shlomi Antebi—all tried in their later years to pass on some of the family legacy that they knew by heart. Some they have written, but most was an oral history—stories passed on from generation to generation, similar to Alex Haley's *Roots*, in which the author describes African tribal history tellers who passed on family history by heart from father to son. My family stories were about our famous rabbis. Unfortunately, as often happens, the younger generations were not eager to listen, and the family historians all died before publishing or commemorating a final version of the memo-

ries they had written.

My research efforts focused on trying to reach material they left and, as much as possible, make photocopies. Fortunately, their children cooperated. I obtained access to personal documents and biographies and was able to reconstruct the family story with their help. In those years, it felt as if I were collecting rather than reading and processing, but I was impelled by the feeling that I was racing against time. If I did not push my quests, I would lose precious memories and biographies that would soon be forgotten.

Later I compared the stories with historical records and documents (e.g., census records) about the same events. For example, since the Rabbi Jacob Antebi mentioned above was the chief rabbi of Damascus at the time of the famous blood libel in 1840, many historical records exist regarding that affair. From these I gleaned several genealogical facts about his family.

My private family archive collected over the years includes prayer books, manuscripts, and antiquaria that belonged to my rabbinical ancestors. I had none of these when I began my research.

As the information was accumulating, I made a strategic decision to concentrate on the oral stories, namely to concentrate on heritage rather than on building an enormous family tree—and while researching family ties—not to focus any further on the most ancient roots of the family tree. I decided that building large family trees would consume precious time, and it seemed better to deal with the frame instead of the essence. My advice to those seeking Sephardic origins is to do the same—preserve first-hand written memoirs, collect family manuscripts and old documents, and photocopy those that cannot be borrowed. Sephardim used to leave valuable family data in comments on the inner bindings of books, or pass on some oral tradition through family poems, family stories, and so forth.

Look for old family prayer books. Sometimes these books were even written and published by family members, and they may have biographical remarks or dedications written on the inner side of the book binding that supply valuable genealogical clues.

Be sure to check book bindings. Sephardic families customarily covered their prayer books with older torn pages or sacred documents that could not be thrown away. This was a variety of *geniza*, a special burial place for used prayer books and Torahs, thus preserving the pages within the book binding. Of course, only a book and paper restoration specialist should attempt to separate the various layers of the bindings, which at times may be more valuable and precious than the entire book itself. Thus I found, in a manuscript cover written by my great-great-grandfather, a letter written to his father-in-law!

Living in a Computerized Era—The Internet

At the beginning of my genealogical study in the early 1970s, photocopies were rare and expensive, smelled of chemicals, and faded over time. Libraries lacked photocopy

machines, and I usually had to copy by hand and summarize my findings—as researchers had done for many years. Today, most homes have at least one personal computer and are connected to the Internet. Many printers can make photocopies, and digital cameras can capture documents clearly and sharply in their natural color.

The information revolution has opened wide possibilities for everyone to access rare manuscripts and books and to search remote databases easily from their homes and at their own convenience. The following are valuable databases:

- The full encyclopedia written by David Tidhar, *Pioneers of the New Israeli Settlement*, is uploaded on the web and may be searched for names. <<http://collections.tourolib.org/gsdll/cgi-bin/library?a=p&p=home&l=he&w=utf-8>> also <<http://tinyurl.com/yzmoc7e>>.

- An archive of all papers in Hebrew on Jews beginning in the mid-19th century is free and accessible at <<http://jpress2.tau.ac.il/Default/Skins/TAUHe/Client.asp?Skin=TAUHe&enter=true&sPublication=DAV&Publication=DAV&Hs=advanced&AW=1250400950546&AppName=2>> also <<http://tinyurl.com/yzufmdv>>.

- Full documentation of Tel Aviv University's project on the Jews in Islamic countries is open to inquiries at <<http://jic.tau.ac.il/>>.

- Israel Genealogical Society has dedicated much effort to computerize censuses and archives, free to the public at <www.isragen.org.il>. A search in its "British Protégés and Subjects 1839–1914" database revealed that my great-great-grandfather was registered in Alexandria, Egypt, in 1872 with his wife and five children, a bit of evidence that has shaken all family traditions about his year of birth and the birthplace of his children.

- Sephardic Jewish genealogical resources at <www.sephardicgen.com>

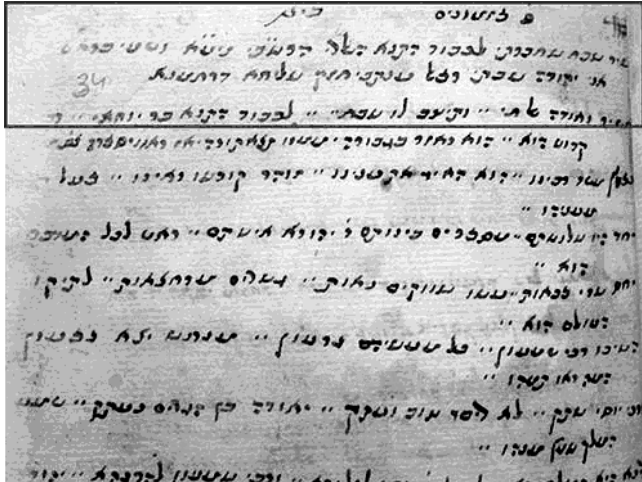
- Jewish Gen, <www.jewishgen.org>

- A concentrated search engine using a joined search in many databases at www.myheritage.co.il. This site enables users to enter a family tree and (at times) automatically find relatives on other trees uploaded there.

Examine All Data Carefully

All genealogical evidence should be examined carefully; any word might be important. For example, in *Beor Hachaim*, (*In the Light of Life*), publisher Rabbi Abraham Jacob Antebi wrote a preface briefly mentioning his family, including father, brothers, and nephews, with a few words about their life status. The preface is only two pages long. The price of the printed word was very high then, and it seems that each word was carefully chosen. I have learned a great deal from a careful reading of that preface.

Another example is the 150-year-old manuscript of Rabbi Yehuda Shabbetai Antebi, my great-grandfather. This sentimentally valuable manuscript includes *piyutim* (liturgical poems) that superficially might seem irrelevant to genealogical research. I, on the other hand, invested con-



Handwriting of the author's grandfather's grandfather beginning with a small preface which says, "A song I have written for the holy rabbi Shimon Bar Yohai and my name is in the initials. I am Yehuda Shabetai Rephael Antebi Hazaq Shelicha Derachmana (=emissary).

considerable time to research those piyutim, to understand them and their origin. Of the 170 liturgical poems in the manuscript, only four were written by Rabbi Yehuda Shabetai, differentiated by two short sentences detailing the circumstances of the writing and by an acrostic of his full name. One of those poems had an acrostic that means "I am Judah Shabetai Rephael Antebi emissary for the *Golah* (Diaspora Jewish communities)," thus providing proof of the oral tradition of emissary voyages that Rabbi Yehuda had undertaken.

The information revolution has embraced ancient Jewish liturgics. In the 1970s I longed to meet an expert who could help me understand the manuscript with its poems, and perhaps to learn the *massoratic* (traditional) way to sing them. It was difficult to decipher the handwriting, and none of my family elders had knowledge of the melody used for the poems 150 years ago. Today one can enter the site "An Invitation to a Piyut," <www.piyut.org.il> and find thousands of nearly forgotten ancient liturgical poems and even their traditional old music. I have found approximately 50 to 60 percent of my ancestors' poems there.

Interpreting Old Family Documents

Most Sephardim today do not speak their ancestral language or write as their ancestors wrote. Sephardic Jews in Arab countries spoke Arabic; those who lived in Greece spoke Greek; and so on. As a high school student, I made considerable effort to read and write Arabic, feeling that it might help me get closer to my ancestral culture and perhaps in the future to understand my ancestors' personal documents.

Sephardic Jews used a unique Hebrew cursive handwriting—an ancient style called *hazzi kulmus* (literally, half a pen) in Hebrew and, in Arabic, *nuss alam*. It is a compli-

cated style that combines letters and apparently was influenced by Arabic cursive script, but has different rules and different letter shapes. The very name of this special script reflects the tools used in writing it—a short bamboo quill pen with a sharpened edge that is dipped into ink.

Fascinated by that ancient handwriting, I asked my grandfather to teach me how to read and write it when I was about 13 years old. He began with the alphabet, but unfortunately died soon after, leaving me with the puzzle. Most Jews around the world today have forgotten this handwriting, which the great Sephardic figures Rabbi Moshe ben Maimon (Rambam) and Rabbi Abraham Ibn Ezra used a thousand years ago. I, therefore, have made special efforts to learn this handwriting and understanding how to decipher it. At times, items are written in shorthand and require experience and skill to read. Another key element in deciphering is the language. Whether the language is Arabic, Hebrew, or Aramaic changes the difficulty.

Some fortunate families may still have documents that date back to the time of the Ottoman Empire. Not only written in Turkish, documents also are written in special official, decorated Arabic letters. The Foundation for the Advancement of Sephardic Studies and Culture (FASSAC) at <www.sephardicstudies.org> has published an article by David Sheby providing tools, techniques, and resources for researching genealogy in Ottoman Sephardim documents <www.sephardicstudies.org/cal.html>. The article includes illustrated examples.

Community Books—*Pinkasei Kehila*— for Sephardic Communities

Contrary to a popular misconception, several Sephardic communities created community books, including for example, Syrian Aleppo, which had recorded documents and family data. These records were created primarily for religious purposes, for example, proving that Jewish men were circumcised, and documenting their marriage agreements (*pinkasei ketubot*), divorces and so forth. Some of these rabbinical notebooks have been preserved, and family data may be retrieved from them. Two examples are illustrated, including two manuscript notebooks written in Aleppo by circumcisers Rabbi Yeshaia Dayan and Rabbi Yitzhaq Dayn (father and son), active from the 19th century to the beginning of the 20th century. They have written and documented each circumcision made by them and have included the dates and parents' names. Only four copies of these precious notebooks are known to exist, which are in the hands of private owners.

The listings apparently are being edited and prepared for publication by Jerusalem publisher Machon Haktav.

Searching for my ancestors in these notebooks, I made an astonishing discovery—not all Antebi from Aleppo were related. Rather, I found about a dozen different Antebi sub-groups listed as, for example, Shamaia-Antebi, Tuwash-Antebi, Cohen-Antebi, Za-atargi-Antebi, Antebi-Ades, Antebi-Tabush, Levy-Antebi, and so on. The owner of the

manuscript copy, Rabbi Yizthaq Zaafrani, well trained in reading *Hazzi-Kulmus* script, has assured me that those are not the surnames of both parents but, rather, a single family name—evidence that not every Antebi is related by blood to others with the same name.

The families documented in the *Pinkasei Hamila*, (Registry of Circumcisions) have preserved their original name alongside the Antebi “nickname.” It is clear that they are not related since some are Cohens and others are Levi families. The register also shows that my family (listed simply as Antebi with no second names) has lost its original family name, if, in fact, it ever existed.² Since the evidence discovered in the circumcision register, I only accept someone as a new family member if he or she can show the exact ancestral relation to our known family tree.

Another example is rabbinical books that recorded 19th-century Sephardic marriages in Jerusalem, kept in the Sephardic Jewish Archives—today in the city hall archives of Jerusalem. The person in charge of the archive is R. Ephraim Levy.

Other examples may include burial dates and places on the Mount of Olives Cemetery in Jerusalem documented in old published books of *Helkat Mehokek* or documented in manuscripts held privately by the descendants of gravediggers.

Indexes, Catalogues, and Encyclopedias on Sephardic Jews

Some books provide valuable data about important Sephardic figures and their families. Genealogists should consult these books even if they do not know of scholars or rabbis in the family. Frequently one is surprised. The following books include thousands of family names and names of Sephardic rabbis across the generations:

- *Lakdoshim Asher Baaretz* (For the holy people who are in the Land of Israel), by Rabbi David Lanaiado. The Aretz “initials mean “*Aram Zova*,” a name by which Jews called ancient Aleppo. In the years before the State of Israel was established, Rabbi Lanaiado scanned the Sephardic Jewish cemeteries in Arab countries in such places as Aleppo, Beirut, Cairo, Damascus, and Safed; documented the gravestone inscriptions; and added his own knowledge of books and essays that the deceased had written. He also has included his personal recollections about family ties as well. This work cannot be replaced; many of the gravestone inscriptions he has commemorated were destroyed by time or/and by hostile authorities.

- *Yehudei Hamizrach Beeretz Israel* (Oriental, i.e., Eastern Jews in Eretz Yisrael), by David Moshe Gaon. Gaon, a researcher of Sephardic families and culture, dedicated his life to writing this two-volume book in which he details all he knows about many Sephardic families (especially in the second volume). Originally published in 1929, the Gaon family printed a second edition in 1999 in response to numerous requests. Both volumes

may be read on the web at <www.hebrewbooks.org/36725> (first volume) and <www.hebrewbooks.org/36724> (second volume).

- *Toldot Hachmei Yerushalaim* (History of the religious authorities in Jerusalem), by Rabbi Eliezer Rivlin. Although not restricted to Sephardic Jews, this book includes many generations of Sephardic rabbis who lived in Jerusalem.

- Lexicons of Sephardic Jewish surnames include *Discovering Your Sephardic Ancestors and Their World*, 2d ed., by Jeffrey S. Malka. The most amazing discovery came to me once by looking at an Arab surnames lexicon (written in Arabic) at a fair in Haifa. There I found the Antebi family name, including the explanation of Ein-Tab origins.

- *Otzar Hashira Vehapiyut* (Thesaurus of medieval Hebrew poetry), by Israel Davidson, 1924, is a four-volume encyclopedia of interest to people who possess old poetry manuscripts written by family elders. This thesaurus may help locate the poem, its writer, and the time of writing. Any additional information may contribute to understanding more about the family’s history. The entire encyclopedia is mounted on the HebrewBooks website, e.g., vol. A, <www.hebrewbooks.org/21706>; vol. B, <www.hebrewbooks.org/21333>; vol. C, <www.hebrewbooks.org/21606>; vol. D, <www.hebrewbooks.org/21648>.

- *Shluchoi Eretz Israel Ledorotam*, (Emissaries of Eretz Yisrael throughout the generations), by Abraham Yaari. If a family knows of an ancestor who has served as an emissary to the *Golah* (Diaspora), look for his name in that book. The information Yaari publishes about the emissaries is important and interesting. A fully documented listing of emissaries from Jerusalem only is published at the end of the second volume of Gaon (above) in <www.hebrewbooks.org/36724>.

In spite of the existence of the Internet, the number of publications of such indexes, catalogues, and encyclopedias has increased and not diminished, as one might expect. New publications of this type include:

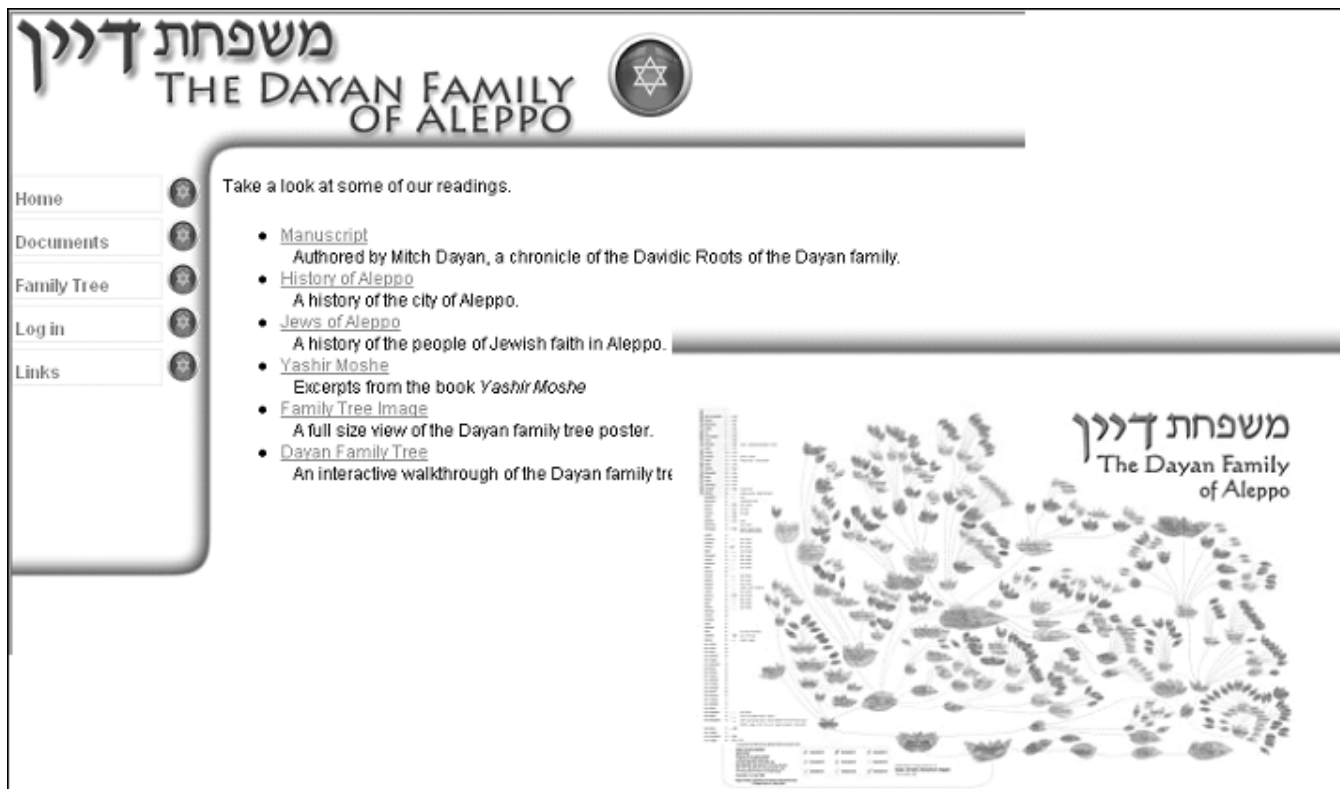
- *Arzei Halevanon* (Cedars of Lebanon), by Rabbi Shimon Vanunu, is a huge, four-volume encyclopedia devoted solely to Sephardic rabbis. Published in 2007, it is the largest work on the subject.

- *The Rabbinical Literature of Aram Zova (Aleppo) Scholars*, by Dr. Yaron Harel, explores all published books of Aleppo rabbis ever printed

- *Aleppo, City of Scholars* by Rabbi David Sutton, based upon *LaKedoshim Asher Ba'aretz* (For the holy people that are in Eretz Yisrael), by Hacham David Lanaiado; edited and expanded by Rabbi David Sutton. Published in 2008, this book brings to the English reader all the work of Rabbi Lanaiado mentioned above and even augments it with new supplements.

Specific Articles about Ancestral Community Life

Try to locate every book or article related to Jewish communal life in the city of origin/interest. Although not



Home page of the Dayan family of Aleppo. There are numerous Sephardic family trees on the Internet.

necessarily relevant to one's family, small details may help push research further. This supplemental effort may answer to the "Paraeto Law," that is, you may spend 80 percent of your energy to find these books for a maximum of an additional 20 percent of discoveries. As an example: In a new book on Egyptian Jews, from a new series by Yizhaq Ben Zvi Institute publishing house, *Jewish Communities in the East in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*, I incidentally discovered a photograph of my grandfather's workplace in Cairo that I had never imagined I would see.

Two such informative papers that may contain valuable genealogical data are an article by Abraham Cohen Tawill on the immigrant Sephardic Jews who arrived at Aleppo in the 16th century following the order of expulsion from Spain. Another article is "Events of Damascus Jews" written by Eliezer Rivlin and Yosef Yoel Rivlin, which lists all families who lived there. It can be fully downloaded at <www.hebrewbooks.org/36782>. In it are interesting details of Jewish families living in Damascus in the 19th century.

Reach Out to Others

Through the years of researching and collecting family material, I have always made summaries of my findings and sent them to family members. In addition to sharing family heritage findings, it is important to have the family history details preserved in other "back-up" places. The new era of the web has widened the possibilities. Those who are technically and financially capable, might consider building a

family website. But even without that, one can reach previously unimagined destinies and possibilities all with one click of a button. For this purpose I have used file-sharing sites with high options and capabilities. One may choose among several alternatives.

My choice was "Scribd," a large, potent, free sharing site. It does not limit the size of uploaded material or free use time, and it is fully open to the public. If desired, one also can choose to upload files but have them remain private for family members only. In the uploaded material I always put my name, e-mail address, and other full contact information. Since having done this, I have been contacted by distant relatives whom I have never met, as well as individuals who are unrelated but are interested in the material and want to contribute their knowledge of some matter. I have received greater genealogical contributions from total strangers than from close family relatives. My full family story and heritage is uploaded and presented for all in Scribd, entitled "Back to Ein-Tab." <www.scribd.com/doc/2241427/-The-Antebi-Family-Heritage> (Hebrew)

For the past three years, I have sent family heritage papers by e-mail—a type of family genealogical magazine that I write periodically in which I tell about my findings. By so doing, I am connecting family members to a shared heritage of stories and history which otherwise over time would fade into distant memories.

About my mailing list—I am widening my audience. I don't limit my newsletter to family members. Every legiti-

mate person who finds interest in the subject will be included. Today my readers include around 140 people, among whom are rabbis, book authors, webmasters, historians, genealogists, representatives of Syrian Jewish communities in Israel and abroad, as well as family members. The wider the circle, the greater the likelihood of receiving new details, testimonials, and links to discoveries about the researched family. The Antebi Genealogical Page I distribute by mail. All my previous papers are uploaded on Scibd as well as <www.scribd.com/people/documents/276628/folder/22778>.

Find Other Sephardic Family Sites on the Web

In addition to being inspirational and motivating to others, Sephardic websites may become a valuable resource. Remember that Sephardic Jews tended to marry other Sephardic Jews and generally did not mingle with Ashkenazic Jews (and vice versa).³ Family sites usually include a search engine that allows family members to locate themselves in the huge family tree database. Use the search engine to run searches on your family names. Perhaps somewhere in the past the two families had a marriage link. Three fine examples of such sites are the Rivlin family site <www.rivlinfamily.com/>; the Dayan family site, a highly respected Aleppo family with a documented relationship to David, King of Israel <www.dayanofaleppo.org/>; and the Farhi family site <<http://www.farhi.org/genealogy/index.html>> which is called "Les fleurs de L'orient" (Flowers of the East).

On the Farhi family site, for example, the entire Antebi family tree appears, since back in the early 19th century Rabbi Jacob Antebi's daughter (Marhaba Antebi) married a son of the wealthy Jew, Yehuda Aslan Farhi. Therefore, I can refer people who come and ask for genealogical relations in the Antebi family to the tree built on the Farhi's

site. This site includes several other Sephardic families as well. The webmaster and owner of the site, Alain Farhi, is always willing to help and even refer new people who reach his site with questions about the Antebi family history.

Notes

1. The blood libel was an accusation against a certain Jew that he murdered a Catholic priest. Through torture, a confession was taken from the Jew as well as from other prominent Jews of the community.

2. The entire book (in Hebrew) now may be downloaded free of charge at <www.hebrewbooks.org/31477>.

3. An exception, however, was Rabbi Jacob Antebi who lived in the middle of the 19th century. Considered a hero during his lifetime and role model to others, he became very close to Ashkenazic rabbis and even married his daughters to their sons.

Dr. Eliaz Antebi Hefer is a public health physician in the Israeli Health Ministry. He is also a senior lecturer at Yezreel Valley College. In 1993, he was awarded by Israel's Minister of Education a prize for Jewish cultural research. His first-born child is the 12th generation of the Antebi family. He lives in Kiryat Tivon.

Now in Second Edition – 88 More Pages!

Sephardic Genealogy – Second Edition:

Discovering Your Sephardic Ancestors and Their World

by Jeffrey S. Malka

Winner: Best Judaica Reference Book (2002) by the Association of Jewish Libraries. At last! A guide to researching Sephardic ancestry. In this profusely documented work, Malka explains how to trace Sephardic ancestry through archives as ancient as 12th-century Spanish notarial records or as recent as today's country repositories. Taking us on a journey traversing environments as diverse as the Amazon Basin or the Ottoman Empire, the author discusses Sephardic history, their various diasporas and where to find their records. The origins of Sephardic surnames and clues derived from their origins and meanings are clearly explained, and an extensive bibliography is provided for additional study.

7"x11" 472 pages hardcover
\$45.00 + shipping

To order:

- Call our order phone at 1-800-AVOTAYNU (1-800-286-8296).
- Order from our web site — <http://avotaynu.com/books/Sephardic.htm>

