

How full is your family tree?

Genealogy Fun

"Genealogists are sort of stereotyped as little old ladies in tennis shoes," Joe Cahn, reference librarian at the Denver Public Library, says. "I'm a little middle-aged man in sandals. But I think it's a great hobby for any age."

Recently, Cahn was the featured speaker at a monthly meeting of the Jewish Genealogical Society of Colorado, "City Directories: New, Old & Worldwide."

Attendees were offered information concerning Colorado's abundant genealogical resources, as well as techniques for researching one's own family history.

Cahn says he has always been interested in his own family genealogy, but didn't truly immerse himself in it until graduate school.

"There was this misapprehension," he

By
SHANY KUKAWKA

DNA MARKERS GET INTO THE ACT

explains, "that Jewish genealogy was impossible."

Not anymore.

Cahn dates the current rebirth of Jewish genealogy back to the 1980s, along with the publications of books such as Dan Rottenberg's *Finding our Fathers*, and Arthur Kurzweil's *From Generation to Generation*.

"Regular people — those who aren't Mayflower descendants — got interested in genealogy as a hobby after "Roots" was televised." In recent years, the increasing availability of technological resources has coincided with an increasing interest in tracing one's family history.

Cahn says he has found much interest among Jewish communities in particular. "It's exploded."

Some of this interest may be due to the publications of studies conducted in the

1990s regarding the "kohen gene."

"New techniques for studying DNA were developed," Cahn explains. "These techniques allowed geneticists to isolate DNA markers, which are inherited along the male line."

Research subjects included many men who claimed to be *kohanim* from all over the globe. The studies indicated, with a 'disproportionate frequency,' that these men shared a common genetic marker, indicating that they shared a common ancestor — presumably, Aaron the first *kohen*.

"In a certain sense," Cahn says, "the publication of these genetic studies — which resulted in a lot of press — substantiated [Jewish] claim to being a distinct people."

Cahn himself became curious enough to take the genetic test that determines whether one shares this particular gene, and the scientific likelihood that one is only a *kohen*.

Cahn grew up having been told that he was a *kohen*. He knew that the name had originally been Cohen but that family had changed it upon moving to US from Britain around the turn of the twentieth century.



'Kohanim,' priests of the Holy Temple

However, with some research he found that Cohen had not been the original name. In the 1880s, his family had moved to Britain from Poland, where their surname had been Domb. Unsure, then, of whether he was a true *kohen*, Cahn took the test. It determined that he did indeed have the *kohen* genetic marker.

"Genealogy isn't for everyone," Cahn admits. "But because it's about you, about your family, it's got a special feel."

Tracing one's family lineage, however,

is a daunting task "You start with what you know," Cahn says. "That's the most fundamental principle."

"If you're lucky enough to have elders in your family who are still around, you sit them down with a cup of tea, and you talk — well, you listen. If your family saved documents over the years, you're lucky. It helps to be organized. It also helps to have a good memory, but you don't have to."

According to Cahn, some families can be traced back through a remarkable number of generations. "It's entirely possible to trace rabbinical families all the way back to Rashi," he says.

Cahn describes the greater genealogical community as being "very generous." People want to help each other, volunteer information and share their knowledge. "The whole thing is about sharing information," Cahn says. "I can't tell you how many e-mail friendships I've developed over the years."

"It's kind of like an incurable disease. People just get bit by it, and they can't stop."

Individuals interested in pursuing their own genealogy should go to www.jewishgen.org.