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Can We Prove Descent from King David?

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A great many families—rabbinic, Chassidic and non-rabbinic—claim descent from Rashi, the most famous of all Talmudic scholars. This subject has been extensively discussed in *Avotaynu* by Neil Rosenstein and others. Many families have gone farther and have claimed descent through Rashi to King David. This article will examine the credibility of the claims to descent from King David.

One of the earliest claims to descent from King David is found in the genealogy discussed in detail in *Mishpachat Luria*, by Abraham Epstein (Vienna, 1901). The relevant reference states that before his death, Yehiel Luria told his nephew, Moses Enosh, that he had a yichus brief (pedigree scroll) going back to Johanan Ha-Sandlar. Johanan Ha-Sandlar lived in the second century CE, was a Tannah of the Mishnah, and was considered a descendant of King David. (A tannah was a sage from the time of Hillel until the compilation of the Mishnah in the first and second centuries CE.) This record “was lost in the Swiss War, and Johanan Luria mourned the loss of his yichus brief more than the material goods he was robbed of.” A footnote on page 18 dates this war in 1499. Anton Lourie repeats the above story in his *Die Familie Lourie* (The Family Luria) (Vienna, 1923) on pages 8 and 13, but says that it was a war that took place in 1475. For our purposes, the difference in dates is immaterial.

In *Seder Ha-Dorot* (The Order of Generations) (Zhitomir, 1867), R. Jehiel Heilprin claims descent from Jehiel, the father of Solomon Luria (MaHaRaSHaL), from Rashi, and from the Tannah Johanan Ha-Sandlar. This claim is made on the title page; in Part II, page 201, under the entry “Rabbi Johanan Ha-Sandlar” and again in the section on books under “Lulaot Ha-Shir” (page 60). He gives no details.

More detailed references are found in *Maalot Ha-Yuchsin* (Degrees of Descent), by R. Ephraim Zalman Margolioth of Brody (Lemberg, 1900). It includes a fractional genealogy “from the Tannah Johanan Ha-Sandlar to Rashi to Rabbi Solomon Luria to the author of *Seder Ha-Dorot*.” (Heilprin) The part relevant to this article shows a succession of about a dozen generations from Johanan Ha-Sandlar to Rashi with a few gaps between them. (See *Avotaynu*, Vol. VII, No. 2, page 20.)

Although the names listed may be those of historical figures, they and their



King David (illumination from the medieval period)

relationships cannot be relevant to an argument purporting to provide a linkage between King David and Rashi. Simple arithmetic shows why. If one assumes an average of 25 years per generation, 12 generations will account for about 300 years. Johanan HaSandlar lived about the year 140 CE. Rashi was born in 1040, a difference of about 900 years. The dozen generations listed by Margolioth above account for only about 300 years, leaving gaps of about 600 years, or about 24 generations. The difference in time between Rashi and King David would be about 2,000 years, and one would need about 80 generations of fathers or mothers, and sons or daughters, to piece together a chain of descent. A number of rabbinic genealogies have quoted this fragmentary genealogy to support their claim of Davidic descent.

In his *Responsum No. 29*, Rabbi Solomon Luria listed a long sequence of rabbis, some of whom were related, including a number of Rashi's ancestors. The list goes back a few centuries before Rashi, but there is no reference to descent from King David or from Johanan Ha-Sandlar. It may be found in *The Responsa of Solomon Luria* (MaHaRaShaL), by Simon Hurwitz (New York, 1938, pages 84–85 in Hebrew, pages 146–151 in English). Other authors have mentioned Rashi's descent without details (Chaim J.D. Azulai in *Shem Ha-Gedolim*, Jerusalem, 1774) or listed as many details (gaps and all), notes, explanations, etc., as they could gather (Arieh Leib Lifshits in *Avot Atarah Le-Banim*, Warsaw, 1926). None have offered proof.

Rashi wrote extensively. From commentaries on the Bible and the Talmud, to responsa, to a prayerbook (*Siddur Rashi*), even to piyutim (religious poems that he composed after the slaughter of sages in the First Crusade of 1096). It is worth noting that neither Rashi nor any of several generations of his descendants mentioned anything about descent from King David or from the Tanna Johanan Ha-Sandlar.

It is clear that none of the authors mentioned above have provided definitive proof of Rashi's descent from King David.

KARO

Sefer Toledot Ve-Niflaot Maharal (The Book of History and Wonders of the Maharal), by Meir Perles (Bilgoraj, 1911), has a footnote to the genealogy of Judah Loew, the Elder, of Prague (died in 1440), the great-great-grandfather of the MaHaRaL of Prague (Judah Loew, ben Bezalel, 1525–1609). It says: "The son of Judah's sister was the gaon (religious authority), Avigdor Karo ABD (av bet din, i.e., chief judge), Prague, uncle of Joseph Karo, author of *Beit Yosef* (Joseph's House) (of which *Shulchan Aruch* was an abbreviated version), and father of the gaon Judah Karo ABD Glogau, father of the gaon Joseph Karo who was ABD in 20 communities...." Assuming that this is historically correct, the Karo line would be included in the discussion of the claim of Davidic descent pertaining to the Judah Loew family.

More details may be found in the genealogy of the Karo family appended to *Ayil Ha-Milum*, by Arieh Leib Karo (Krotoszyn, 1815). (Ayil is the acronym of Arieh Yehuda Leib.) This genealogy goes back to the Tannaim "Nachonia, son of Hakanah, son of Tzuf, son of Efrati" of the 2nd and 3rd centuries.

There is also a handwritten Karo manuscript in English that has virtually the same information. What matters here is that neither goes back to the Davidic family.

The yizkor book of Lenczyca, *Sefer Lintchitz*, by Rabbi Isaac Yedidya Frankel (Israel, 1953), has a chapter entitled "Genealogy of the Holy Family Karo" (pages 42–43). It starts immediately with, "King David, his son Solomon, his son Rechobeam..." and so on down to modern times. It has no dates, only a few bibliographical references to the Bible and Talmud, and nothing in it can be considered proof.

YAHIA-CHARLAP

Yahia is Arabic for Chiya, which is Aramaic for Chaim. The Ibn-Yahia family derived the name from Chiya al-Daudi. "Ibn Yahia" means "descendant of Yahia" (or Chiya); "al-Daudi" means "the Davidic" (descendant). We recall that Chiya al-Daudi, who died in Castile in 1154, was a descendant of the Babylonian-Persian-Iraqi Exilarchs.

In *Jüdische Familien-Forschung* (Jewish Family Research) (Berlin, 1924–1938), the early journal of Jewish genealogy in Germany, there are several articles that discuss descent of this family from King David (pages 261–4, 441–2, 457–462, 486–497 and 538). The most interesting part is a list of generations entitled "The Yahia Document." It starts with King David, goes to Berachya (450 BCE), and then there is a gap from 450 to 320 BCE. It resumes from Chisdia (300 BCE) and continues to David ben Zakkai, the exilarch in Iraq who died in 940 CE. Then there is a big gap with a few uncertain generations, and the list continues from Chiya al-Daudi (1090–1154) in Spain. The "Ibn Yahia" is changed to "Don Yahia"—this part of Spain is now under Christian rule. The "Dons" continue to Don David (born in 1580) in Turkey, the last of the Yahia line on this list.

About 1550, a Polish branch appears with Eliezer Charlap. "Charlap" is an acronym with several versions. According to one, it derives from "Chiya Rosh Le-Goley Portugal" (Chiya, head of the exiles from Portugal). Another one is "Chiya Rosh Le-Goley Polin" (Chiya, head of exiles to Poland, or Chiya, the first of the emigrants to Poland). Still another is "Chiya Rosh Le-Galil Polin" (Chiya, the head of the region of Poland). There are explanations for each of the versions, but since proof of descent is the issue at hand, these interpretations are omitted.

The story goes that a Chiya came from Iraq to Poland about 1020 after the martyrdom of his father. The above list shows a gap of about 500 years until the reported appearance of the first Charlap, Eliezer ben David (born 1550). The last Charlap on this list is R. Eliezer Zvi Charlap (born about 1780–90). As we can see, the Charlaps are not descendants of the Yahias, but of an early Babylonian-Iraqi branch.

Some of that is reported by Gedaliah ibn Yahia (1515–1587) in *Shalshet Ha-Kabbalah* (The Chain of Tradition) (Venice, 1587) and by Eliakim Carmoly in *Divrei Ha-Yamim li-Bnei Yahia* (History of the Yahia Family) (Frankfurt am Main, 1850). Gedaliah ibn Yahia goes back to about 1055 CE to Yahia ibn Yaish, apparently the founder of the family. Carmoly does not go earlier than about 1200, the time of Nassi Don Yahia. Some of the later descendants changed their name from Don Yahia to Donkhin.

In one of the above articles, Rabbi Benzion Don Yahia Donkhin (ca.1927) reports that he saw two genealogical tables. One was in *Migdanot Eliezer* (Eliezer's Gifts) (Warsaw, 1890) and in *Hod Tehilla* (The Glory of Praise) (Warsaw, 1899), both by Rabbi Eliezer Tzvi Charlap of Mezerich (died 1849). The other table was in a Hebrew journal, *Knesset Hagdolah* (Warsaw, 1899), in which was printed a copy of an old manuscript signed by Rabbi David, son of Gedaliah ibn Yahia, author of *Shalshet Ha-Kabbalah*. Both lists had a succession of names going back to King David. A large part of each list included names from the Babylonian-Persian-Iraqi period, discussed in the genealogy of the family of Judah Loew the Elder. While we can accept these lists as authentic, we cannot consider the questionable parts as satisfactory proof of Davidic descent. Indeed, the authors of the articles discuss a number of contradictions and inconsistencies in dates and relationships.

SASSOON

The Sassoon family has been referred to as being of Davidic descent. In *The Sassoons* (New York, 1968) Stanley Jackson writes:

Small colonies (of Jews) have settled from antiquity in India and China, but Baghdad remained the nerve center of the exiled. Over 40,000 were living in the city by the 12th century, and the Sassoons were among an elite who claimed their pedigree from King David himself.... Among their ancestors were the Ibn Shoshans, princes of the community in Toledo, Spain.... As early as the 17th century, a scholar and mystic of Venice, Abraham Sason, proudly claimed descent from Shephatiah, the fifth son of King David.... The first member of the family of whom there is any significant documentary evidence was Sason ben Saleh, born in Baghdad in 1750, who was the Chief Banker and had the honorary title of Sheikh, and became in 1778 Nassi (Prince of the Captivity) of the Jewish community.

We do not know of any other sources about their descent that could prove their claim. Neither Chaim Bermant's *The Cousinhood* (MC, 1972) nor Cecil Roth's *The Sassoon Dynasty* (London, 1941) does so.

ABRAVANEL/ABARBANEL

Encyclopaedia Judaica (Jerusalem, 1972) reports that:

the family, first mentioned in 1300, attained distinction in Spain in the 15th century..., Don Isaac Abravanel (1437-1509), finance minister to the Kings of Portugal, then Spain, then Naples, wrote in his memoirs: "All my forebears, descended from King David, son of Jesse of Bethlehem, were worthy leaders of our people." (Volume II, page 102)

I have not found sources going far enough back to support the claim of Davidic descent.

CONCLUSION

The bottom line is: King David had a number of wives and concubines, and about two dozen children are mentioned in the Bible. King Solomon "had seven hundred royal wives and three hundred concubines" (I Kings 11:3). One can only imagine how many children he had. After nearly 3,000 years, there may be an untold number of their descendants. There is a fair possibility that you and I may be among them. All we need is good evidence and records that go back that far and give convincing proof of our claim. So far, available records cannot do it. Some individuals rely on tradition and faith to back their claim. More power to them. The rest of us may have to wait for that promised descendant—the Messiah.

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