

Jacobi Absolute Generations Scale

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A major goal of the International Institute for Jewish Genealogy and Paul Jacobi Center is to develop scientific research tools and technologies for the use of Jewish genealogists and social scientists generally.

One such tool for which there has long been a compelling need, is a standard chronological system to record generations on family trees. Additionally, there has been a need for a system that permits the synchronization of generations within kinship groups and their harmonization with other family trees, whether related or unrelated, and with wider frames of reference, both historical and societal.

The "Jacobi Absolute Generations Scale", devised by the late Dr. Paul Jacobi almost half a century ago, fully answers these various needs and is thus recommended by the Institute for general use.

This paper begins by addressing areas illustrating some of the problematics involved, both in enumerating the generations using the "Relative Generations" system and in identifying individuals bearing identical names within them.

A. "Relative Generations"

The simplest way to register generations on a family tree is to define the length of a generation as 25 or 30 years, and then to tie individuals on the tree to a recognized dating system, such as the Julian, Gregorian, Hebrew or Muslim calendars. Unfortunately, this arbitrary approach is inadequate from a number of perspectives, starting with the fact that it depends on knowledge of years of birth and death of individuals on the tree, and these facts often are unknown. As a result, family historians, in grappling with the problem, often adopt a different approach. They opt to designate generations by the number of generations known to them, generally assigning the number 1 to the earliest generation recorded on their particular tree.

Despite the *prima facie* logic of this system of "relative generations," it can lead to confusion, inconsistencies and even errors. One obvious danger may be demonstrated in the case of a family historian who fixes the third generation back (the earliest known to him) as number 1, while another researcher of the same family, who has traced the common lineage further back in time, assigns the number 1 to the fifth or even the fifteenth generation back. The resultant confusions are self-evident.

However, the potential pitfalls associated with this system run deeper. To cite but two problem areas:

1. Homonymous individuals

In certain Ashkenazi Jewish traditions, it is customary to memorialize deceased relatives by calling new-born children after them. While several considerations may come into play in selecting given names, a first son is very often named after his grandfather or, if the latter is still alive, after his great grandfather. Other children, both male and female, are named in accordance with various conventions and, in some communities, in a well-accepted (though not iron-cast) order. These customs lead to regular, consistent naming patterns, usually repeating themselves in every third generation and often throughout parallel branches within the same family.

Since family historians frequently use naming patterns as a guiding light to fix generations in time and to determine the relationships between individuals, the recurrence of people with the same given name – known as “homonymous individuals” - in a single family lends itself to misidentification and outright mistakes. The problem may be compounded when the same naming pattern is found in another, unrelated family that bears the same surname, sometimes in the same community.

Among Sephardim, especially Ladino-(Judeo-Spanish) speaking Jews, it has been, and to an extent it still is, the custom to name a child in honor of maternal and paternal grandparents, even while they are still alive. Again, the same names may appear many times within a single timeframe, and not in clearly defined generations, thereby increasing the risk of errors in identity.

2. Married names

In Jewish usage, women tend to be recorded as “so-and-so,” the daughter of “so-and-so” [her father], wife of “so-and-so.” Although in some cases this form of appellation may help identification, it frequently leads to confusion, given the multiplicity of the same masculine name in repeated generations within a given family. The problem is compounded by the propensity for cousins to marry cousins in certain Jewish societies.

These factors complicate and hinder comparisons between independently produced family trees, especially where the "relative-generations" system is used for recording purposes. Harmonizing such trees and reconciling inconsistencies between them is far from easy, while the establishment of complex family relationships becomes all the more difficult the longer the lineages. Errors are hard to spot and "skipped generations" may be overlooked, with all the attendant genealogical blunders likely to arise therefrom.

In brief, the "relative generations" system can become an obstacle to serious genealogical research. Attempts to synchronize the arbitrarily numbered generations with a standard time-line may not lead to accurate correlations. Hence, the historical background and cultural context surrounding an

individual may be skewed and marred by anachronisms or the opposite (“prochronisms”). Equally, the influences on his behavior and life choices, his educational and occupational opportunities, residential possibilities, communal affiliations and societal networks, and migrational decisions, to mention but a few aspects of life relevant to the genealogist, may be improperly understood and even totally misinterpreted.

B. "Absolute Generations"

Aware of these difficulties, the late Dr. Paul Jacobi (1911-1997) developed an alternative system for registering generations, now known as the Jacobi “Absolute Generations Scale (JAGS). In this system, genealogists employ an absolute time line that is stable, recognized and linked directly to the years as enumerated in the accepted system in use in the Western world today (“BC” and “AD”, or, for Jews and some others, “BCE” and “CE”).

On the basis of his extensive genealogical knowledge and experience, Jacobi determined the average span of a single generation as 75 years, with each successive generation set to follow the previous one at intervals of 30 years. Thus, on the basis of the Common Era dating system:

- “Generation 1” is fixed as 2040–1965 (a period of 75 years).
- Working backwards, “Generation 2” begins 30 years earlier and covers the period 2010–1935.
- Successive generations are counted retrogressively every 30 years prior to 2010.

With the designation of the current generation as “Generation 0,” Jacobi’s absolute generational scale for the last 900 years is as follows:

0	=	1995-2070	11	=	1665-1740	2	=	1335-1410
1	=	1965-2040	12	=	1635-1710	23	=	1305-1380
2	=	1935-2010	13	=	1605-1680	24	=	1275-1350
3	=	1905-1980	14	=	1575-1650	25	=	1245-1320
4	=	1875-1950	15	=	1545-1620	26	=	1215-1290
5	=	1845-1920	16	=	1515-1590	27	=	1185-1260
6	=	1815-1890	17	=	1485-1560	28	=	1155-1230
7	=	1785-1860	18	=	1455-1530	29	=	1125-1200
8	=	1755-1830	19	=	1425-1500	30	=	1095-1170
9	=	1725-1800	20	=	1395-1470	31	=	1065-1140
10	=	1695-1770	21	=	1365-1440	32	=	1035-1110

Jacobi consciously drew his scale back to “Generation 32” (1035-1110) which corresponds with the life of the great Jewish biblical and Talmudic commentator, Rashi (1040-1105).

Theoretically, Jacobi’s scale could be extended back to the dawn of recorded history, or indeed of history itself, but Jacobi preferred not to be drawn into unnecessary theoretical discussions over when history began and, according to whose historical tradition. As a practical matter, he regarded it as sufficient to use the scale as it is, since scientific Jewish genealogy scarcely pre-dates Rashi.*

An individual, who lived the larger part of his life within the time-frame of a given generation, is designated as belonging to that generation. Thus, the outstanding Jewish scholars Samuel Eliezer ben Judah Halevi Edels (1555-1631) [the “Maharsha”] and Maimonides (1135-1204) [the “Rambam”] belong to generations 15 and 29, respectively. Within each absolute generation, the scale allows for flexibility. On occasion, it is necessary—and possible—to split a generation or to skip one. For example:

- •A man lived from 1725 to 1755 and had a son who lived from 1744 to 1790. Both belong to Generation 9. For the sake of clarity, however, the father should be assigned to Generation 9*b* and the son to Generation 9*a*.
- A woman lived from 1775 to 1830 and had a daughter who lived from 1815 to 1890. The mother belongs to Generation 8, but the daughter to Generation 6—hence the need to skip a generation in this case.

When the need eventually arises, the scale can be extended forward in time by adding Generation–1 (2100–2025), Generation–2 (2130–2055), and so on.

Conclusions

Several advantages arise from adopting the Jacobi Absolute Generations Scale (JAGS).

- First and foremost, the JAGS offers a standard chronological system to record generations on family trees and to synchronize them within kinship groups.
- Every individual on a specific family tree—and on parallel trees drawn up independently—can be assigned to an absolute generation.
- An individual’s generational position is identical on all trees, thereby providing positive identification when trees are compared, merged or interchanged.
- The JAGS minimizes the possibility of misidentification and of coalescing discrete individuals bearing the same given name and patronym.
- The JAGS readily illustrates anomalies, requiring further investigation, such as a married woman whose father was born in generation 12, but whose supposed husband was born 100 years earlier, in generation 15.
- It sometimes suggests solutions to these anomalies because facility in using JAGS leads to an ability to place an individual in his correct generation, even in the absence of precise dates of birth and death for the individual concerned.
- The JAGS indicates the precise time-frame in which a person lived the majority of his life and thereby places him in the correct historical context, even when some vital genealogical information is lacking.
- Assignment of an absolute generation to all family members reveals who an individual’s contemporaries were, both within his own family and beyond. The JAGS permits the reconstruction of generational relationships even when full genealogical information is missing. For

instance, if an individual can be located in generation 26, one may reasonably assume that his father belonged to generation 27, his children to generation 25 and his grandchildren to generation 24. The subsequent discovery of a critical piece of vital statistical information almost invariably substantiates these assumptions, proving the reliability and value of the scale.

- Finally, use of Jacobi's Absolute Generations Scale points the way to the creation of a common terminology and chronology between genealogists and researchers from other scientific disciplines, as well as scholars from diverse cultures, speaking different languages.

In the light of these advantages, the Genealogical Institute highly recommends that Jacobi's scale be adopted as widely as possible.

Dr. Neville Lamdan, the Director of the Institute, contributed to this article.

 * For those seeking greater historical depth, herewith the Jacobi Absolute Generations Scale drawn from "Generation 0" to "Generation 101" (-1049 – -970), during which time, according to tradition and to many Biblical archaeologists, King David is held to have lived.

0	=	1995 - 2070									
1	=	1965 - 2040	26	=	1215 - 1290	51	=	465 - 540	76	=	-285 - -210
2	=	1935 - 2010	27	=	1185 - 1260	52	=	435 - 510	77	=	-315 - -240
3	=	1905 - 1980	28	=	1155 - 1230	53	=	405 - 480	78	=	-345 - -270
4	=	1875 - 1950	29	=	1125 - 1200	54	=	375 - 450	79	=	-375 - -300
5	=	1845 - 1920	30	=	1095 - 1170	55	=	345 - 420	80	=	-405 - -330
6	=	1815 - 1890	31	=	1065 - 1140	56	=	315 - 390	81	=	-435 - -360
7	=	1785 - 1860	32	=	1035 - 1110	57	=	285 - 360	82	=	-465 - -390
8	=	1755 - 1830	33	=	1005 - 1080	58	=	255 - 330	83	=	-495 - -420
9	=	1725 - 1800	34	=	975 - 1050	59	=	225 - 300	84	=	-525 - -450
10	=	1695 - 1770	35	=	945 - 1020	60	=	195 - 270	85	=	-555 - -480
11	=	1665 - 1740	36	=	915 - 990	61	=	165 - 240	86	=	-585 - -510
12	=	1635 - 1710	37	=	885 - 960	62	=	135 - 210	87	=	-615 - -540
13	=	1605 - 1680	38	=	855 - 930	63	=	105 - 180	88	=	-645 - -570
14	=	1575 - 1650	39	=	825 - 900	64	=	75 - 150	89	=	-675 - -600
15	=	1545 - 1620	40	=	795 - 870	65	=	45 - 120	90	=	-705 - -630
16	=	1515 - 1590	41	=	765 - 840	66	=	15 - 90	91	=	-735 - -660
17	=	1485 - 1560	42	=	735 - 810	67	=	-15 - + 60	92	=	-765 - -690
18	=	1455 - 1530	43	=	705 - 780	68	=	-45 - + 30	93	=	-795 - -720
19	=	1425 - 1500	44	=	675 - 750	69	=	-75 - 0	94	=	-825 - -750
20	=	1395 - 1470	45	=	645 - 720	70	=	-105 - -30	95	=	-855 - -780
21	=	1365 - 1440	46	=	615 - 690	71	=	-135 - -60	96	=	-885 - -810
22	=	1335 - 1410	47	=	585 - 660	72	=	-165 - -90	97	=	-915 - -840
23	=	1305 - 1380	48	=	555 - 630	73	=	-195 - -120	98	=	-945 - -870
24	=	1275 - 1350	49	=	525 - 600	74	=	-225 - -150	99	=	-975 - -900
25	=	1245 - 1320	50	=	495 - 570	75	=	-255 - -180	100	=	-1005 - -930
									101	=	-1035 - -960