

Confirming Chaim Yaakov's Father
An Example from the Lecture
"Beyond a Reasonable Doubt: Dealing with What You Know But Cannot Prove"
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Many researchers, particularly those working on very large families or single-surname projects, reach a point where a particular relationship can be deduced but cannot quite be proven. The naming patterns may be there and everything seems to fit into plausible times and places, but neither documentation nor oral testimony exists that might even remotely be considered proof.

Do you record it as fact, without evidence? Or do you leave open a question when you actually "know" the answer? If you leave it open, you leave gaps and loose ends in your genealogy for no good reason. But if you bite the bullet and call it fact, you may never re-examine the decision in light of new source material. Your research heirs certainly won't think to do so. How do you decide?

If you "know" that Reuven is the father of Shimon, do you link them as such, with a note that there is no direct evidence? Or do you leave Shimon with no father but add a note indicating that his father is almost surely Reuven?

In evaluating each individual case, I have found it useful to ask myself the following questions:

- What kind of proof might be sufficient and how likely is it that I can get it?
- Does accepting the assumption serve a purpose?
- Does what I have qualify as "beyond a reasonable doubt?"
- What other scenarios are there and how likely are they to be correct?
- Is there any conflicting evidence?
- Am I engaging in any wishful thinking?
- Are there any issues of *shalom bayit* (keeping the peace) within the family or the project?

Beyond these questions, my own policy is that after I have decided that I "know" something, I will make the link only after I have found one additional piece of supporting evidence.

This article considers an anecdote from the Pikholtz Project in an attempt to analyze one particular aspect of this dilemma, with an unexpected epilog.

The Buczacz Family

We had known for some time that a number of the Pikholtz individuals living in Israel had come from Buczacz. Shalom of Haifa and Zvi of Netanya were the sons of Avraham. Yitzhak of Haifa was the son of Mordecai. Another Mordecai was the son of Yehushua. But all these were long gone by the time the Pikholtz Project got off the ground. The next generation knew enough to confirm that Avraham, Mordecai, and Yehushua had been brothers, but no one seemed to know their parents' names. No records are available for Buczacz, so we could not do the usual research that might take us back another generation or at least give us some dates to work with.

We also had several Pikholtz descendants from Skalat who knew that the Buczacz Pikholtzes were some kind of cousins, but it wasn't anything a responsible genealogist could record in a database. Those cousins were all descended from a Pikholtz couple—Mordecai (1805–1864) and Taube (1802–1872)—and it was quite possible, even likely, that the head of the Buczacz family was a son of this couple, as well.

We also had a reference to a "R' Yakli of Buczacz" who was a Pikholtz or married to one, who had written some apparently unpublished

Biblical commentary (David Tidhar, *Encyclopedia of the Pioneers of the Yishuv and Its Builders* [in Hebrew], vol. 10, p. 3,541; Tel Aviv, 1959).

We considered that this R' Yakli may have been the father of the three brothers. He sounded like a learned man, but not one who held an official position.

Our first break came when I had a look at the grave of Yitzhak in Haifa, which commemorated his parents as well. The inscription showed that the head of the family, Yitzhak's grandfather, was Chaim Yaakov, but had no mention of his wife.

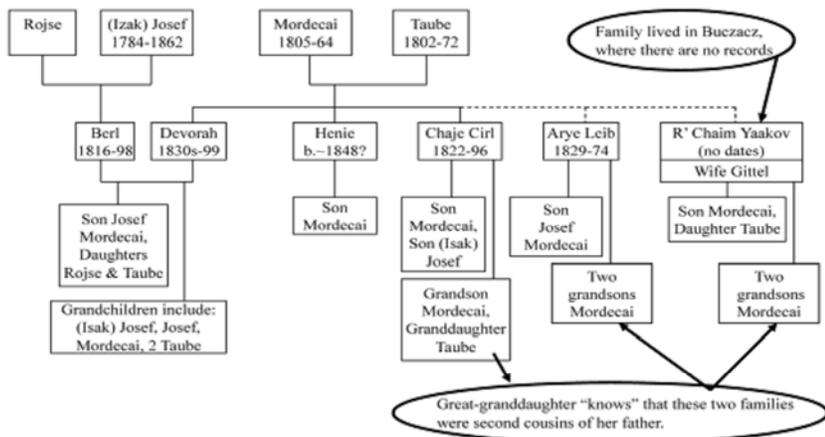
We knew it was possible that this Chaim Yaakov and R' Yakli were one and the same, but they could well have been brothers-in-law or cousins.

Our next discovery tied up some of the loose ends. In the Pages of Testimony at Yad Vashem, I learned that the three Buczacz brothers had a sister Rivka who married a man from Radauti, Bukovina, and that this couple had living descendants. One of those was able to confirm that R' Yakli was the same Chaim Yaakov and also told us that Chaim Yaakov's wife was Gittel. No one had any idea when Chaim Yaakov had lived and died, as no one seemed to have been named for him.

By this time I knew that Chaim Yaakov had had a daughter Taube and a son and two grandsons named Mordecai, so it seemed reasonable to think that his parents were Mordecai and Taube. At this point, the family looked like the diagram on the following page.

It was looking good, but still not good enough to consider making a decision.

I next turned to Tom Weiss, who had photographed all the remaining



stones in the Buczacz cemetery. I had helped with the translations, so Tom had given me a copy of the *Excel* file for the whole lot. Some of the stones showed surnames, but there were no Pikhholzes. I searched for “Given name = Chaim Yaakov” and found one. The father was Mordecai and the year of death was 5671 (1910). There was no indication of age, no mention of his wife, nothing that said he had come from Skalat. Nor was a Gittel buried in the area. The name Chaim Yaakov ben Mordecai was what I wanted, but this was just a circular proof, demonstrating nothing. The inscription, however, was fascinating:

A pure and honest man, a Hassid
 And Gaon, Rav R' Chaim Yaakov
 ben R' Mordecai z"l died
 11 Mar-Heshvan 5671
 A humble man from his youth
 Dedicated all his days to Torah
 He was an instructor in Israel
 But due to his great modesty
 Never wanted a position for himself
 And did not want to use the Torah
 As an axe to dig with.
*[a Talmudic expression
 meaning that he did not use
 Torah to make a living]*
 He taught his sons to fear God
 A generous man, whose house was
 Always open to everyone. His soul
 Ascended to Heaven in holiness
 And purity. *[blur that is probably age]*
 May his soul be bound in life

This sounded to me like Tidhar’s very brief description of R’ Yakli, especially the bit about not using the Torah as an axe to dig with. That brought me to where I was sure this was our man, but I had no direct proof. I was at the point of the dilemma described in the introduction. I could record Chaim Yaakov as the son of Mordecai and Taube, but if I did so, no one would ever revisit the matter in light of new developments. I consulted with the six living great-grandchildren, some of whom had lived in Buczacz and who might have visited the grave or at least had some notion when Chaim Yaakov had died. But they knew nothing.

I was sure this was right, but according to my own rule, I needed one



more piece of supporting evidence. I was stymied, and worse, I had no way to try to move this forward. End of story? Was this to be an example of knowing yet having to live with the uncertainty? It certainly looked that way.

Epilog

About a year later, I received an e-mail from a genealogist friend here in Jerusalem, Rabbi David Shapiro, who works with manuscripts professionally. He was transcribing and translating from Yiddish the notes of a rabbi who had lived in the United States until his death in 1974. R’ David sent me the following quote from the manuscript.

My grandfather’s daughter was matched with the son of R’ Chaim Yaakov Pikhholz of Buczacz, a leaseholder in a village near Buczacz. R’ Ch[aim] Y[aakov] is a recognized Torah scholar and an authority on *halacha*. He even authored a book on the subject of the laws of *treifus* of broken bones, and even contested the opinions of the *Levushei Srad* (whose book on that subject is considered authoritative). He was offered a position as a rabbi in Buczacz, but disdained the burden of public service and the rabbinate, and chose to work in the fields. In fact his sons literally worked in the fields like peasants despite the fact that they were all Torah scholars who worked in the fields all day, returning home at night to learn *gemara* and [commentaries].

R’ David agreed with me that this description fit hand in glove with the inscription on the gravestone.

This still does not qualify as proof by the standard definition, but it is enough for me to formally list Chaim Yaakov Pikhholz as the son of Mordecai and Taube.