

# “Yichus”

Category: Pekudei, Shemos, Vayakhel

*Why is pedigree an important element of Jewish tradition? Because Jewish life is passed down through the traditions of the home.*

## Pedigree vs. Competence

Yichus! Have you ever heard that word? Yichus refers to lineage/genealogy. In Jewish communities, people will take great pride in their Yichus, if they could trace their lineage back to a famous rabbi and Jewish leader. Good Yichus could help you in a myriad of ways; for a rabbi looking for a posting, being a son or grandson of a famous rabbi can be a great perk.

But how important is it that a leader comes from good “yichus”?

In Judaism we find great people who came “from nowhere,” who had no lineage—for example, Rabbi Meir, one of the compilers of the Mishnah. He hailed from a family of converts, a descendant of the Roman Caesar Nero. He was a disciple of an even more famous person, Rabbi Akiva, who himself was the son of a convert. Thus, the entire Mishnah is based upon two individuals who came from convert families.

But there’s more: In this week’s Torah portion, we read about the construction of the Mishkan, and how Moshe Rabbeinu appointed two men to be responsible for the entire building effort.

The first was Betzalel. He was the son of Uri, grandson of Chur and great-grandson of Miriam, sister of Moshe. Betzalel was thus a great-great nephew of Moshe, the greatest lineage possible. He was also of the tribe of Yehudah. Yet together with him was appointed Ahaliav son of Achisamach of the tribe of Dan. The tribe of Dan, Rashi tells us, was “the most downtrodden of the tribes, the sons of the maidservants.”

You seen, Yaakov had four wives: Rochel and Leah, and the two maidservants Bilhah and Zilpah. Dan’s was Bilhah’s son, and even when the Jews were traveling in the desert, the Torah tells us that the tribe of Yehudah traveled first—in

contrast to the tribe of Dan, which was last in line, bringing up the rear for all the tribes' camps. And here in this week's Parshah, G-d selected a representative from the most important tribe, Yehudah, the one that went first—together with an appointment from the most downtrodden tribe. Rashi (Shmos 35:34) explains: "Why did G-d do this? G-d equated Ahaliav to Betzalel, of the great tribes, for the construction of the Mishkan—so as to fulfill the verse 'And the rich shall not be recognized before the poor man.'"

G-d wanted to show that when it comes to the building of the Mishkan, everyone's the same—from the greatest of the great to the simplest of the simple. This teaches us that everyone can be a leader without "lineage" and "pedigree."

## **When Lineage Matters**

On the other hand, we also find the opposite approach in Judaism. For example, a Kohen can only be a Kohen if his father's a Kohen, in an unbroken father-to-son line going all the way back to Aharon the High Priest. Same thing with being a Levi—only one who comes from the descendants of the tribe of Levi is a Levi. In these cases, not only is lineage not ignored, but it makes all the difference. And it doesn't matter how much you pay—you can't become a Kohen or Levi.

Even more: "royalty" in the Jewish Nation only belongs to one family. It's not enough that the king has to come from the tribe of Yehudah. He must come from the House of David, from one specific family in the Jewish Nation to which royalty exclusively belongs and to no one else in the entire world—lineage in every sense of the word.

Since the time of King David, Jewish royalty has only belonged to his family. As the Rambam writes (Laws of Kings 1:8) "the main royalty goes to David." Even after monarchy ended for Jewry, an effort was always made that the leader of the nation be from the House of David.

Everyone is familiar with Hillel, the "President" of the Jewish People about 100 years before the destruction of the Second Temple. One of the reasons that he was specifically chosen to lead was because he was of Davidic lineage, and it was from him that a lineage of leaders from the House of Hillel began, a lineage that lasted about 450 years.

Even after that, the “Reish Galusa,” the Exilarch, or leader of the Jewish expatriates in Babylon, were from the tribe of Yehudah. As Rashi (Bereishis 49:10) says on the verse, “The scepter shall not pass from Yehudah”: “From David onwards, these were the exilarchs of Babylon... and the princes of Israel.”

We thus see that the concept of lineage is alive and well in Jewish tradition too—which is not understood. Why must the king be from the House of David? What’s so bad if he’s a man of the people with the appropriate qualities to be a leader? Why specifically lineage?

## **The Seder Tradition**

As we approach the holiday of Passover, people begin to plan their Seders. In a normal year, everyone tries to spend the holiday with family or friends. Nobody wants to mark Passover alone. Why is it customary to celebrate Passover in large groups?

The explanation is that the Passover Sacrifice, the *Korban Pesach*, was brought on Passover eve—and all its meat had to be eaten before midnight as the Torah itself states: “Do not leave of it until morning.”

That’s why the Torah advises what to do if one family alone can’t eat an entire sheep. “If the household is too small for a lamb,” which Rashi explains to mean “that they can’t eat it without leaving leftovers,” then “let he and his neighbor adjacent to his house take [one lamb together]...” (Shmos 12:4)—the Torah says, recruit a few more people until you’re sure you’re able to finish all the meat that night. That’s why they would make a “*Chaburah*”: a group of Jews who’d get together to celebrate *Pesach*. This formed the tradition of lots of Jews celebrating Seder night together, which is how it’s done to this day.

## **Don’t be a Convert**

Along come the Talmud (Tractate *Pesachim* 91b) and the Rambam (Laws of the Passover Sacrifice 2:4) and say something interesting: “A group cannot consist completely of converts.” When a Passover group is formed, one needs to make sure that it’s not all converts, because they may either adopt a stringency that invalidates the sacrifice or they may be overly lenient and thus invalidate the

sacrifice. In any case, they may not make an exclusive group.

But why? What's behind this idea?

How does every Jew know how to run a Seder? Because he saw his father running a Seder, and he also remembers his grandfather running a Seder. That's why he follows in their footsteps and tries to emulate them.

Converts, on the other hand, never saw anyone run a Seder. They have no cultural Jewish background. It very well may be that they've learned all the laws, but they've never seen them in action, which is why they're liable to make mistakes—because it's not enough to read the books. You need to actually see how it's done, which is why “an all-convert group” can't make a Seder alone.

A doctor may be a world-class genius who remembers every detail of every medical book—but he'll never get his medical license if he doesn't do his internship for a few years under other doctors. Only after he sees how others do it is he allowed to do something himself.

None of us here would want to be the patient of a dentist who never actually witnessed how to work with teeth and who only learned from books. It's the same thing with Judaism: to know how to run a Seder, it's not enough to read the books—you need to see it with your own eyes over the course of several years.

The same is true of other Jewish customs: In order to be king or leader, it's not enough to be a fabulous speaker or towering vision—you need experience too; you need to grow up in the palace to see and learn how one actually leads. Theories are not enough.

It's also the same with being a Kohen. The Rebbe explains that the reason that lineage of the Kohen and the Levi goes after the father and not the mother is because we're dealing with the “job” that that Kohen must fulfill. That's why “there's no better education than an education based on living example, on personal experience and personal conduct.”

And this holds true not just for kings and Kohanim, but for rabbis too. Besides being learned and tested and getting all the best diplomas, in addition to all that, there's something called apprenticeship—the rabbi, after all the tests and exams, must actually spend time with another rabbi to learn practical rabbinics.

It's not enough to know all the books—one needs to see how a rabbi actually lays down the law. He needs to be there when questions come in, listen to the questions the rabbi asks, pay attention to how he sifts out the details and listen to the answer—and eventually the rabbi will pose the question to him and ask, “Well, what do you say? How would you rule on the issue?” This apprenticeship is so important that the Talmud (Tractate Sotah 22a) says “One who read and learned and didn't apprentice himself under Torah scholars is an ignoramus.”

From all of that we see how important experience is.

My friends: For our children to be Jewish, it won't be enough for them to learn the traditions in Hebrew school. It needs to come with their lineage. They need to learn it at home. If your home with have a strong foundation in Jewish practice, your children will view it as a tradition which should never be broken.