

בס"ד

Shluchim Sermons



Vayikra

# A Lineage That Matters

*Why are Jews so obsessed with genealogy? Is Yichus really meaningful?*

## “Yichus!”

Lineage has always been important to Jews. That’s why genealogy has always been a subject of interest, especially in generations past when a marriage match, or Shidduch, would be suggested. People would ask, “What is his Yichus?” Yichus means heritage, pedigree or lineage. “Where does this young man come from?” It wasn’t just about parents and grandparents; they might look into his family tree going back ten generations.

And, of course, we find a source for this custom in the Torah.

In the beginning of the Torah portion of Toldos, we are told, “Yitzchak prayed to G-d for his wife’s sake because she was barren, and G-d answered him.” On this verse, Rashi comments: “G-d responded to him and not to her because the prayer of a righteous person who is the son of an evil person does not compare to the prayer of a righteous person who is the son of a righteous person.” This tells us that when a person approaches G-d to request something, he ideally should have more than just his own merits—his ancestors’ merits will be of benefit to him as well.

We find a similar story in the Talmud—a story that is also connected to the holiday of Passover.

The Talmud (Tractate Brachos) tells us a story that occurred after the Destruction of the Second Temple, when the leader of the Jewish People was Rabban Gamliel.

After a certain incident occurred, Rabban Gamliel was removed from his post because he had caused embarrassment to the great Rabbi Yehoshua. They tried to find someone else to fill his place as leader, so they considered appointing Rabbi Akiva — also a great leader and fitting for the position — but they were afraid to do so for the following reason: They feared that Rabbi Akiva didn't have ancestral merits, because he came from a family of converts, so perhaps Rabban Gamliel would pray to G-d out of pain of being impeached—and G-d would then punish his replacement with death, thus causing Rabbi Akiva to die because of Rabban Gamliel! Instead, they appointed Rabbi Elazar Ben Azarya, who was a tenth-generation direct descendant of Ezra the Scribe, the great historical leader of the Jewish people.

From here we see that lineage is something important—and perhaps even very important.

One of the great Chassidic leaders of old-time Poland, the Ruzhiner Rebbe of righteous memory (Rabbi Yisroel Friedman, 1796-1850), at the engagement party of each of his children, would stand up and list his lineage going back to the Maggid of Mezritch, Rabbi Dov Ber, the second leader of the Chasidic movement.

At one such engagement, the Ruzhiner got up and did his usual thing—and when he finished, he turned to the father of his new son-in-law or daughter-in-law and said, “Nu? Now it's your turn!” So the father said: “My father was a shoemaker. He taught me that everything ripped or broken could and should be fixed.” When the Ruzhiner heard this, he said, “Good enough! That's a great pedigree!”

In some cases, Jews celebrated another, unique, type of lineage:

Traditionally, we Jews have always treated orphans very nicely, helping them, pitying them and constantly giving to them—to the extent that there’s an old Eastern European Jewish saying, “It’s a good thing I’m an orphan.” This is because an orphan is treated like a VIP, and a very special VIP at that. The Torah itself tells us that anyone who mistreats an orphan and causes him to pray to G-d, G-d immediately hears the orphan’s prayer, because G-d is called the Father of All Orphans.

When Rabbi Shmuel of Lubavitch, the fourth Lubavitcher Rebbe (1834-1882), became engaged to his future wife, Rivkah, who had been orphaned of both her father and mother, Rivkah’s older sister met with Tzemach Tzedek to wish him mazel tov. She said to the Tzemach Tzedek, “You have very impressive lineage from your fathers. But our lineage comes from the Father of All Orphans Himself!” The Tzemach Tzedek was very moved by her remarks.

All these stories show us that we Jews have always been busy with our lineage. But lineage is not everything.

## **It’s Not About Yichus!**

We now find ourselves in the month of Nissan, when the Mishkan was dedicated. We read in the Torah that when our ancestors built the Mishkan, G-d told Moshe to appoint two men to build it. One was Betzalel — who had very impressive lineage. He was of the Tribe of Yehudah, and moreover, his grandfather Chur was a nephew of Moshe himself; Chur was killed while trying to prevent the Jews from creating the Golden Calf. Thus, Betzalel came from a very prominent family.

However, Betzalel’s partner in building the Mishkan was Ahaliav of the Tribe of Dan.

The Tribe of Dan was generally considered the least pedigreed Tribe of the entire Jewish Nation: Later in Jewish history, the infamous Statue

of Michah was created by a member of Dan, and in the times of the evil Jewish king Yeravam, members of the Tribe of Dan worshiped golden calves set up by Yeravam in their territory.

Despite all this, G-d appointed Ahaliav to build the Mishkan together with Betzalel—to show everyone that who you are is not determined by your lineage, that anyone could reach the highest levels without the merit of his fathers and grandfathers. Sometimes it's harder to do—but it's always possible.

Much later in Jewish history, there was a prophetess named Devorah. She was one of only seven Jewish women who became prophets and leaders of the Jewish people. The Midrash tells us that the reason she merited prophecy was solely on the merit of her worthy deeds.

All this tells us that while lineage may be a good thing, it is only an enhancement. As my grandmother used to tell me, yichus is like a blanket: when you have a living, warm person under the blanket, the blanket warms up—but when there's nothing under the blanket, the bed stays cold. The blanket can't heat itself up—it only protects existing heat.

## **Its a different Yichus!**

But in today's generation, we have a new category of lineage.

One of the great Chasidic leaders, Rabbi Naftali of Ropshitz (1760-1827), once sat surrounded by followers, students and visitors, and sang the praises of his lineage. In great excitement, he burst out saying, "I don't believe that there's anybody whose lineage is greater—and if there is, on the contrary! I want to know him!"

At that point, a simple Jew stood up in the last row and said, "Rebbe! I have greater lineage than you!" So Rabbi Naftali asked him in astonishment, "Great! Tell me how so!" So the Jew answered, "Rebbe: I am the only one in my family who puts on tefillin."

Rabbi Naftali responded with great emotion and said, “Indeed, you are greater than me. You have greater Yichus.”

In our generation, in which so many Jews don’t even know who their grandfather was and have no connection to their heritage, true lineage is not who your ancestors were, but rather, who you are. If you are the only one who puts on tefillin, or the only one in your family who lights Shabbos candles or who eats kosher, you create our generation’s heritage. You are the one who makes all of us proud.

To further illustrate this point, here’s yet another story. I know some of you are thinking, “Oh, no, rabbi—not another Chasidic Rebbe story!” Well, yup, here’s another one: this one is about the Maggid of Mezritch, whom we mentioned before.

When the Maggid was five years old, his family home burned down to ground. His mother stood by weeping uncontrollably. Nobody could comfort her. Her little son Dov Ber came along and asked her, “Mommy, even though the house burned down, do you really need to cry so much? We were all saved, and we’re all alive and well! So what is so terrible?” So his mother replied, “My dear son, I’m not crying about the house. We had a book of genealogy in our home with a family tree that traced our family back to Rabbi Yochanan HaSandlar, the student of Rabbi Akiva. It is this loss that I am crying about!”

So her son said, “Don’t worry, Mommy—I’ll start a new family tree.”

Today’s young generation, today’s youth, who discover Judaism and jump into it with such love and enthusiasm—we can be sure that they’re starting new dynasties that we can only be proud of.