



*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

BAMIDBAR > Pinchas

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July 14, 2012

Pinchas

How Important is Yichus?



Meaningful Sermons *“Words from the Heart Enter the Heart”*

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ABSTRACT

Would you allow your child to marry a grandchild of an idol-worshipper?

How important is *yichus* (pedigree)? Some people are so consumed with family lineage that it determines who they will or will not marry. When does obsession with *yichus* spill over into discrimination? Are all people equal or are some more equal than others? Is enlightenment exclusive only to a select few? Is there such a thing as objective elitism or is it only an illusion of the elite?

Some interesting insights into the answers to these questions come from this week's Torah reading where we focus on the theme of *yichus*, namely the mixed lineage of Pinchas - whose paternal grandfather was Aaron, the High Priest, while his maternal grandfather was an idol-worshipper.

This sermon demystifies the mystique behind *yichus* and analyzes the delicate balance between the sanctity of every individual, the recognition of the limitations of the masses and the qualities of gifted individuals. And it concludes that although we are all challenged by our own narcissism and therefore have a need for enlightened leadership, we still must fulfill our destiny to make the world a better place - for this is the purpose for which we were created in the divine image, the greatest lineage of all.

HOW IMPORTANT IS YICHUS?

Is Judaism Elitist?

1. Select Few

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Some interesting insights into the answer to these questions come from this week's Torah reading where we focus on the theme of *yichus*, namely the mixed lineage of Pinchas – whose paternal grandfather was Aaron, the High Priest, while his maternal grandfather was an idol-worshipper.

Don't know what that means? Well, let me tell you...

Yichus is what Tevye the milkman (of "Fiddler on the Roof" fame) was referring to when he complained to God:

"Dear God, you made many, many poor people. I realize, of course, that it's no shame to be poor. But it's no great honor either! So, what would have been so terrible if I had a small fortune? Would it have upset some great eternal plan if I were a wealthy man?"

Tevye could have added: "If you didn't bless me with wealth, why didn't you at least give me *yichus*?"

Literally, *yichus* means a pedigree, distinguished birth, special lineage. But it means much more in Yiddish culture, as a proud Yiddishe grandmother, cradling both her cheeks, exclaims at the wedding of her grandchild:

"Oy! You should see how handsome is the choson of my einikel (the groom of my granddaughter)! And *yichus* – gevald, such *yichus*; don't ask..."

Or when someone proposes a match, and the question is asked: “And is she beautiful? Does she have money?” The answer that often satisfies is: “She has *yichus*.”

You get the idea.

Yichus is that intangible which many people value for no other reason than image, yet, on a positive note, *yichus* also demonstrates “good blood,” or “cherished genes.”

2. The Torah View

But how does the Torah relate to this *yichus* thing? On one hand, it seems that the Torah values *yichus*. On the other hand, the very founding father of Judaism, Abraham, had none to speak of. (After all, his father was an idol-maker.)

This week’s Torah reading can help us unravel this contradiction.

To begin, when the Torah introduces the zealot, Pinchas, it makes a point of giving us his lineage all the way back to his grandfather, Aaron, the High Priest. And then God repeats that lineage when speaking to Moses.¹

The great 11th century Torah commentator Rashi explains why:

The tribes would humiliate Pinchas by saying that he stems (on his mother’s side) from an idol worshiper and that he murdered a Jewish leader. The Torah therefore comes to establish his *yichus* (on his father’s side) – that he was related to Aaron the High Priest, brother of Moses.²

What does this mean? If Pinchas’ ancestor was an idol worshiper how does it help him to emphasize that Pinchas also had good genes?

¹ Numbers 25:7-11.

² Rashi on Numbers 25:11.

3. Living Up to Great *Yichus*

A humble grandson of a great Rebbe once said, in response to being asked why he doesn't live up to his great *yichus*:

"I heard from my father that *yichus* is like a bunch of zeroes. If they follow a number then each 0 multiplies the number by ten. If no number precedes them, a bunch of 0's add up to one big zero."

[Use with discretion:] Or as the macabre joke goes: *Yichus* is like a potato. The best part *ligt in der erd* (is buried in the ground)...

In other words *yichus* does not compensate for one's deficiencies. Great lineage without one's own virtues and efforts can be quite empty.

True, that good lineage can often "redeem" a person in difficult situations - hence the concept of *zechut avot*, the merit of our ancestors, which is never eradicated - yet, that merit is a blessing from Above. But, we cannot simply depend on *yichus*; we must do our part in living up to our lineage.

Like Pinchas, each of us has two sides. We have great lineage traced directly to our ancestors, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel and Leah. Yet, we also have other "blood." It is our choice to determine which one will control our lives; what direction our actions will take.

4. Free Will

We must believe in free will; we have no choice. - Isaac Batshevis Singer

Free will remains the unwavering foundation of life. Nothing - including either a good or bad pedigree - impedes our free choice.

True, *yichus* can help us, just as other inherited traits may create predispositions and more conducive conditions, but we all have our strengths and our challenges to overcome.

After all, a person may have excellent *yichus*, even have grown up in a home that provided a strong education, yet still make terrible choices that hardly reflect his illustrious background. Conversely there are those that have reached great spiritual heights through their own efforts, without any obvious positive roots.

In short, every Jew has great *yichus* (as we invoke on our prayers: we are children of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, Sarah, Rivkah, Rochel and Leah) even if it may stem from many generations back, and every Jew (as indeed every person) has unique challenges.

So though it was true, as the tribes claimed, that Pinchas descended from an idol worshipper on his mother's side, yet through his selfless and courageous actions in taking the initiative, Pinchas earned his right to be identified with his father's side, his distinguished ancestor Aaron the High Priest.

5. The Mistake of the Tribes

The mistake of the tribes was the sin of elitism – the misconception that lineage alone determines one's destiny ... that Pinchas, originating from a pagan, was doomed to an inferior position, regardless of his righteous behavior.

But the Torah tells us that it does not work that way.

Take the great Moses: Notwithstanding their great pedigree (from the tribe of Levi), it was not Moses' children but Joshua who succeeded him.

6. He is My Child...

Rabbi Mordechai Mentlik, the late Rosh Yeshiva of Central Lubavitcher Yeshiva told the following moving story:

In late summer of 1949, a student in the yeshiva got engaged to a fine young woman from a very prestigious family in Boro Park, New York. The new groom, who came from a rather simple family, arrived at the engagement party with his parents. From the attire of his father it was very apparent that he was a blue collar worker on a farm in the Midwest. Besides for his uncouth clothing and workman's boots, he had earth under his fingernails.

When the grandfather of the bride – a highly distinguished Rabbi who as patriarch of the family had the final word about everything – entered the room and gave one look at the groom's father, he called in his children and made it unequivocally clear that this *shidduch* is “not for us...” Despite the bride's protestations the engagement was called off then and there, leaving the groom devastated!

Erev Yom Kippur, just before Kol Nidrei, Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak Schneersohn, the previous Lubavitcher Rebbe, summoned the Rosh Yeshiva Rabbi Mentlik. “The Rebbe,” related Rabbi Mentlik, “was sitting in his chair all dressed in white, ready to enter the holiest day of the year. He was glowing, looking just like a ‘malach Hashem Tzevokos’ (a Godly angel).

“The Rebbe told me the following words [in Yiddish]: ‘Right after Yom Kippur please go visit HaRav Pardes in Boro Park, and tell him that I said that ... [this and this student], the prospective groom for his granddaughter, is *meiner a kind* (my child).

“I had no clue as to what the Rebbe was talking about. But as soon as Yom Kippur came to a close I traveled to Boro Park, asked to see HaRav Pardes and delivered to him the Rebbe's message: ‘The Rebbe asked me to tell you that this student is *meiner a kind*.’

“Upon hearing the Rebbe's words, HaRav Pardes exclaimed: ‘*Mit aza mechuten vel ich zich nischt dengen*’ (I won't disagree with such a relative by marriage)....”

The engagement was reinstated and the new couple built a beautiful family, that today is comprised of many special children, grandchildren and great grandchildren, who are beacons of light in their respective communities.

7. Today's Debate

Today, the age-old debate continues to rage whether all people are actually equal, or are some more equal than others.

The argument goes that “the masses” are followers, interested primarily in their own survival and pleasures, and are in need of the few gifted individuals who are blessed with the vision and wisdom of leadership.

Even America, which cherishes the freedom of the individual and declares, “all men are created equal,” established the Electoral College, in the belief that individuals would be too partisan and limited to directly elect the President. Instead, the select electors, who are the most knowledgeable and informed individuals from each state, represent the general population, and they have the power to select the president based solely on merit and without regard to state of origin or political party.

Throughout history this same debate has manifested itself in many shapes and forms.

- Through the centuries, monarchs and clergy claimed the privilege of “divine right,” contesting that they were blessed with being chosen by God to lead – that they were more equal than others.
- On a humorous note for example, in the 1960s there was a debate amongst two enlightened individuals, whether a certain substance that induced a psychedelic state should be distributed to the masses or should be reserved just for the elite, who would appreciate and not abuse it.

Even the great Maimonides wondered about the role of the masses who pursue their personal comforts and pleasures instead of an enlightened life of wisdom and virtue. He asks in the Introduction to his commentary on the *Mishne* that the pursuit of wisdom is the purpose for which man was created, so why does it remain the path of the few?

Maimonides goes on to explain that the role of the masses is to serve the needs of the few enlightened people of wisdom and virtue, and to also populate the world so that it is not desolate. Yet, clearly this cannot be the full explanation, especially taking into consideration that *every* human being has a divine calling in the world.

8. Delicate Balance

This week's Torah reading helps us fill in the blanks by illuminating for us the delicate balance between the sanctity of the individual, the recognition of the limitations of the masses, and the necessity for responsible leadership.

The first thing we must know is that every person was created in the divine image, and thus has a unique and indispensable role to play. Even if one is not the "enlightened type," his or her divine contribution can manifest itself in other ways. All people are expected to live up to their destiny – to the utmost of their ability and opportunity live a life of wisdom and virtue.

In addition, each of has been blessed with a powerful heritage and excellent pedigree – going back all the way to our Creator, who is our very Source.

³The exact words of the Rambam: Know that our fathers who came out of Egypt were mostly idol-worshippers in Egypt... until God sent Moshe Rabbeinu... and gathered us in under the wings of the Shechinah, us and all proselytes, and established one Law for us all. So let not your lineage (yichuscha) be light in your eyes; if we [Jews by birth] are descended from Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, you are descended from He Who spoke and brought the world into being.

Maimonides writes to Ovadiah, the Ger, that his lineage goes directly to God, and is therefore far superior to a lineage that stems from human beings, even great ones.³

At the same time, we also face the challenges of survival and the inclination to protect our own immediate interests – a drive which can be laced with narcissism, self-preservation, and which tempts us to overlook our higher calling.

While it may be true that some people lean more toward the former and others toward the latter, it is nonetheless true that we all have elements of both. And so we find that enlightened leaders can often be quite selfish, while the simple masses can often be quite noble.

9. The Paradox

Indeed, the paradox is apparent in the following quotation from the Book of Jeremiah regarding the Messianic Age:

[Declares the Lord:] “I shall put my teaching in their inward parts and write it in their heart ... They shall no longer teach one another ... saying ‘know God,’ for they shall *all* know Me – from the least of them to the greatest of them.”⁴

Note that Jeremiah alludes to a distinction between “the least of them” (“*ketanom*”) and the “greatest of them” (“*gedolom*”). Why? Because diversity will remain even at the End of Days – then, there will still be both young and old, small and great, yet each will know God, for God’s essence will permeate each according to his/her level.

We see here equality yet distinction.

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⁴Jeremiah 31:32-33.

Given, that we are not yet in Messianic Age, and we still are challenged by our own narcissism, we have a greater need for leadership today. However, individual responsibility – and human diversity – is still part of our present reality.

So, despite the dual forces tugging at us in two opposite directions, the most important message of all is this: The choice is yours.

So choose wisely. Amen.