

TAZRIA: YICHUS by Rabbi Bernard Berzon, z"l

- Nisson Shulman. Adapted from a sermon by Bernard Berzon. Pride in pedigree: important if you earn that pride. The Jewish attitude - "If a person is worthy, you preceded all of creation. If you are unworthy, a flea was created before you" (Vayikra Rabbah, 14).

TAZRIA METZORAH, YICHUS

(adapted from a sermon by Bernard Berzon, z"l)

Most people are proud of their pedigrees. Even in this sophisticated and cynical age YICHUS is valued. We often hear people boast of a distant relative who was or is a famous rabbi, of a grandfather who was a Talmudic scholar, of an uncle who achieved great distinction, or a grandmother who devoted herself to Jewish and benevolent causes.

Charles Lamb told of a man he knew who considered life worthwhile only because his wife was descended from a famous family. This was the solitary star in that man's firmament. Otherwise his life was dull and obscure, plagued by ill health, poverty, drudgery. His wife's pedigree served him as a substitute for wealth and good health.

We even want the pets we buy to be highly pedigreed. The other day I heard about a snobbish woman who came to a pet shop to buy a dog. She liked one of them, but hesitated because she was not sure it had just the right pedigree. Finally the dealer managed to assure her, saying, "Madam, that dog's pedigree is so long, that if he could talk he wouldn't speak to either of us!"

There are those who question, however, the wisdom of attaching so much importance to YICHUS in our day. They feel that it is not in harmony with the democratic ideal, which stresses that each individual be judged solely on his or her own merits.

The Jewish attitude is expressed in a pointed observation in the Midrash on this week's Torah reading: "If a person is worthy, they are told, 'You preceded all of creation.' If a person is unworthy, they are told, 'A flea was created before you!'" (Vayikra Rabbah, 14).

An ancient pedigree is important only if it serves as an inspiration to the individual, if it prods him or her to emulate the fine example of forebears. But if a person is unworthy, they are to be reminded that yichus - in and by itself - means little. The flea and the worm have been on this planet longer than man.

This thought can be applied to many institutions and individuals. We know that individuals and organizations in England and America had successfully prevented refugees from the Nazis from landing on their shores. England accepted some in the "Kindertransport", but America accepted none, even though those immigrants were harmless children. In America one of the most vociferous against any Jews entering was an organization called Daughters of the American Revolution, a group that took immense pride in the fact that many of their members were descendants of early American families, and that some of their ancestors landed at Plymouth Rock on the Mayflower. To the Daughters of the American Revolution I would give the answer, "Look here, the Red Indians are greater MEYUCHASIM than you. They were in America long

before the Mayflower. To the many legislators in America and England who sought to refuse pitiable refugees, the Midrash declares, "The flea was created before you and has greater YICHUS than you have"!

When a nonentity boasts of the good family from which he or she stems, they make themselves ridiculous. The question should not be, "Can we be proud of our ancestors", but rather, "If our ancestors were alive today would they be proud of us?"

Alexander Dumas, the famous French writer, was a quadroon. One of his grandfathers was Black. An insolent reporter took the liberty of questioning him rather too closely about his genealogical tree. "You are a quadroon, Mr. Dumas", he began. "That I am sir", quietly replied the author. And your father? "My father was a mulatto", was the answer. "And your grandfather?" "A Negro", replied the author, his patience beginning to wane. "And may I ask who your great-grandfather was?" "An ape, sir!" thundered Dumas. "An ape! My pedigree begins where your pedigree ends!"

The Jewish people have a long lineage and a long history. Some of us, especially priests and Levites, can trace paternal ancestry back to Abraham. But only the worthy, those who live in accordance with the teachings of the patriarchs and the prophets, have a right to be proud of their line. To those who live unworthily, one is tempted to say, "Why do you go back to Abraham? Why not to Terach his father? Terach is more of an ancestor to you than Abraham will ever be!"

Yes, YICHUS is significant if it impels us to copy the finest learning and service of our forebears. Let the memory of KEDOSHIM UTEHORIM - of saints and martyrs and heroes of our people - inspire us to greater service, deeper faith, nobler conduct.