

Just Between Us

Readers are invited to use this forum to express personal views and address issues of concern to fellow Jews.

The Yichus Factor

By R. Rosenfeld

At a recent Shabbos table, the conversation turned to kindergarten applications. My hostess, Sara, apprised us of the situation. “The application requested the grandparents’ names, where they *daven* and all kinds of things. What does that have to do with my child’s eligibility for pre-school?” What indeed, we all wondered, knowing that three out of four of Yitzy’s grandparents were deceased. Would their past synagogue affiliations still matter? Although Yitzy’s credentials were intact, the consensus of the table was that Jewish schools whose application process followed such guidelines, were inappropriately screening prospective students based on *yichus*.

Yichus is loosely translated as good, Jewish, untainted, illustrious ancestry, preferably with some rabbis nestled in the branches of the family tree. People to whom *yichus* is very important cite various reasons for their beliefs, such as compatibility of background, morals and comfort levels, as well as providing a shield for their children from secular or even non-Jewish family influences, which are deemed negative or harmful. But has this issue been taken too far by some segments of the religious world?

On one level, one can appreciate a yeshivah’s desire to enroll kids from “good” families, in which case it should suffice to see how the parents rear their children. On the other hand, if a child is not from a “good” family — whether that means reli-

giously, emotionally, financially, racially or otherwise — shouldn’t he or she be given the opportunity to attend a “good” school? Have we become so elitist? Can a child not be deemed “good” if he has a good heart, a good mind or a good desire to study at this particular school? Must the student body be completely homogeneous? Cannot we instill the value of “*kol Yisrael areivim zeh l’zeh*” in our children?

There are those who argue that *yichus* is not a factor at all. Not wanting to second-guess the schools, several administrators were confronted regarding this issue. One claimed that the schools’ purpose in inquiring about grandparents’ synagogue affiliations was for potential fundraising. This argument, however, would carry more force had the addresses been requested, rather than the affiliations.

The other, more cogent argument is that these questions are necessary to weed out non-Jews. It would seem though, that were a non-Jew to enroll his child in a religious Jewish school, he would most likely falsify application information. There should be alternate, improved methods to verify a child’s authentic Jewish background which at the same time, would ensure privacy and regard the feelings of *baalei teshuvah*. A discreet interview, for one, would more successfully weed non-Jews out, as well as prevent private family history from being recorded and stored in school files.

People today do not all fit into the “proper” social circles. In today’s pre-Messianic age of the *baal teshuvah* movement, an entire group of people

who ought to be applauded for turning their lives around are being penalized for not coming from proper ancestry. Ironically, many *baalei teshuvah* do indeed have rabbinic ancestry dating several generations back, despite the fact that religion got watered down or skipped over several generations. Nevertheless, they are having difficulty getting into the schools of their choice. They are pained by their difficulty with finding spouses. *Shadchanim* (matchmakers) will often pose the question “What kind of family are you looking for?” rather than, “What kind of person are you looking for?”

People who are loath to date *baalei teshuvah* feel so regardless of any other facts pertaining to them. It does not matter how many years they have been observant, how moral or learned they are, or whether their families are supportive or not. People fail to consider what *baalei teshuvah* have sacrificed to reach the point they are at or to find what the rest of us have been handed at birth. Choosing a marriage partner is a personal choice of utmost importance and lifelong consequences, but assumptions are all too often made ahead of time. If after dating, a couple discovers they are not compatible, at least a fair chance would have been given for each party to assess the other.

Gwyneth Paltrow, an Oscar award-winning actress, has *yichus* most *yichusniks* would kill for, yet her lifestyle is completely contrary to Torah values. I’ve heard several rabbis state that ancestors are all like zeros unless you make yourself a worthy “one” before

R. Rosenfeld is a freelance writer living in New York.

them and give the zeros value.

Alternately, a young man whose father was employed as an idol manufacturer would not stand a chance with the *yichusniks*— even if his name turned out to be Avraham. The Passover Haggadah reminds us yearly, “In the beginning, *our* ancestors were idol worshippers.” All of us have that *yichus*

Our Biblical history is replete with stories of our forefathers and leaders and their questionable family connections. Moses grew up in an Egyptian royal family. Jacob’s twin brother was evil, as were Rachel’s father and brother. Would any of them merit a spot in little Yitzy’s kindergarten class? Would a matchmaker turn them away?

The Torah constantly reiterates that the leaders of our nation were great in spite of their unfavorable backgrounds or deficiencies. Again, Moses led the Jews out of Egypt despite his speech defect and his converted wife. King David was a lowly shepherd and a descendant of Ruth the Moabite. Gideon came from the poorest and youngest family of Menashe. The Torah repeatedly enjoins us to humble ourselves, to remember that we were strangers in the land and to show compassion to converts, widows and orphans — all of whom lack a strong Jewish family anchor. In today’s age, this would include extending compassion to *baalei teshuvah* or others who may not fit the exact model of contemporary observant life.

I fear observant Jews often fail to espouse the doctrines that Judaism promulgates. Perhaps the following thought will help strengthen our resolve to improve our attitudes. Consider three couples: Yehudah and Tamar, Ruth and Boaz, David and Batsheva. All three liaisons were shrouded by controversy and questionable family connections, yet all three unions were necessary and will ultimately produce the Messiah. There is a lesson to be learned from this and it would bode us all well to heed it. A person’s intrinsic value as a Jew should be the measure of his worth, rather than a *yichushe* may not live up to. 