

Take a census of the entire assembly of Bnei Yisrael according to their families, according to their father's household. (1:2)

The census of *Klal Yisrael* which was carried out individually for each *shevet*, tribe, in accordance to their pedigree i.e. their father's *yichus*, lineage, carries a powerful connotation for the Jew. Knowing and acknowledging our past is critical. Understanding, appreciating, or, at times, coming to terms with our roots is part of our Jewish responsibility. Whether one hails from an illustrious lineage or from less-than-ordinary pedigree, he is part of *Klal Yisrael*. Thus, he is charged with the mission of spreading and glorifying Hashem's Name in the world. A fascinating *Chazal* (*Yalkut Shemoni* 684) addresses *Klal Yisrael's* lineage and its significance vis-à-vis receiving the Torah. When Hashem gave the Torah to *Klal Yisrael*, the nations of the world complained: "Why the Jews and not us?" (I think they were more concerned with "Why the Jews?" than with "Why not us?") They had no use for our Torah and would not observe it. Nonetheless, if a Jew possesses something, they feel compelled to issue their objection.) Hashem countered to the nations' complaint with a challenge: "The Jewish People presented their *Sefer Yichusin*, Book of Lineage, depicting from where they descended. Where is your *Sefer Yichusin*?"

The question is obvious. The nations of the World also have their *yichus*. In *Sefer Bereishis*, the Torah details the lineage of *Bnei Yishmael* (*Bereishis* 25:12) and *Bnei Eisav* (*ibid.* 36:1). Furthermore, what role does *yichus* play in receiving the Torah? Does Torah apply only to those who are pedigreed? *Horav Nosson Gestetner, zl*, explains that while the nations also have *yichus*, their relationship to their *yichus* differs greatly from our relationship with our *yichus*. With regard to the nations, each ensuing generation feels that (and acts as if) they are more advanced intellectually and culturally than their predecessors. They consider themselves more knowledgeable and more accomplished than their forbears. *Klal Yisrael's* perspective on the past is diametrically opposed to such a misguided perspective. We are not ashamed of our "grandfathers." Indeed, we venerate the previous generations and envy their achievements.

Chazal (*Shabbos* 112b) say, "If the previous generations were like angels, then we are like people. If the previous ones were like people, then we are like donkeys." The *Chasam Sofer* offers a practical explanation of *Chazal*. It depends on how we view our forebears. If we understand and appreciate that they were on a more exalted level than we; if we view them with awe, as if they were like angels, then we are at least on the level of human beings. If, however, we view the prior generations as being human beings, ordinary men, then we are no different than donkeys. A Jew views the past with respect. Those who lived before him, lived in a different era, they did not have access to the multiple conveniences to which we are privy – yet, they accomplished so much and became so much closer to Hashem.

When a Jew presents his *Sefer Yichusin*, it is with a sense of deep pride. He realizes that he descends from men and women who sacrificed to be observant, who studied Torah amid great

deprivation, who clung fast to the traditions upon which they were raised: traditions, values and beliefs which were transmitted to us, their heirs. Every Jewish activity should be carried out *l'ba'is avosam*, to their father's house, asking oneself: "When will my actions reach the spiritual level of those who preceded me?"

If I may take advantage of my writer's license, I would like to embellish this idea. First, a question: What does one do when his forebears were quite distant from religious observance, when their moral and ethical standards left much to be desired? Should he be proud and view them as angels when, in fact, they certainly were not? I think *Chazal* are teaching us a lesson in perspective: how a Jew views parents and grandparents, and how one who was not nurtured on Torah views his predecessors.

Understandably, honoring one's parents is a difficult *mitzvah* to fulfill. While we understand that we owe so much to our parents, there are those (among us) who do not look at it the same way. They are products of angry, depressed – sometimes hostile – parents, parents who took out the brunt of their hostility on their children – and on each other. They see only the mistakes their parents made in raising them, the poor decisions they made for themselves, which the children had to suffer through.

These feelings of discontent have merit, but, unless one is guided by the Torah, he will fall prey to the misguided self-centered outlook that prevails in the secular world. (Noticeably, I did not write "non-Jewish," since, as noted earlier, without Torah, one's perception of right and wrong, appropriate and inappropriate, moral and immoral, is distorted and self-serving.)

Parents are human beings who are subject to human frailties and foibles. Parents have to navigate life with its many hardships. Some are more successful than others. Some have a better coping mechanism than others. At the end of the day, it is wrong to the point of arrogance to judge parents. Unless you have "walked a mile in their shoes," you have no right to judge. Furthermore, we often forget how we acted as children. Yes, some children "surprisingly" have the capability of bringing out the worst in their parents.

Chazal teach us not to judge. It is as simple as that. If anything, judge with a positive, validating outlook, one that excuses, not blames; justifies, not disproves. *Rav Yitzchak Rubin* relates a story which has probably happened numerous times. Sadly, it is often brushed under the rug, because children refuse to acknowledge their continuing error and would rather arrogantly blame their parents than find some way to validate their behavior. *Rav Rubin* was being *menachem avel*, comforting a bereaved, *Chasiddishe Yid* whose father had passed away. The deceased was not a religious man, and he was not happy when his son decided to become *frum*, observant. "Not happy" minimizes the father's attitude. He made his son's life miserable and placed obstacles in his way at every juncture. He could not tolerate his son's decision to become *frum*, but to become *Chassidish*, with the accompanying garb, was too much to swallow. Despite his father's machinations, the son grew up, successfully became an educator in a prestigious *yeshivah*, and

raised a beautiful *Torahdik* family.

After *Maariv*, the grandson asked to speak about his late grandfather. He had not had the opportunity to share his feelings at the funeral. Instead, he would do so now, before those who had gathered for *nichum aveilim*. The young man, an accomplished Torah scholar learning in *kollel*, spoke movingly of his grandfather's *middah*, character trait, of *simchah*, joy. He was a man who always laughed and enjoyed bringing joy to others. Whoever met him walked away with a smile on his face. What a wonderful *middah* to which one should aspire! As the grandson spoke eloquently, selecting his words carefully to emphasize his love for his grandfather, his father, the son of the deceased, sat with tears flowing freely down his face onto his gray beard. So many years had passed during which his relationship with his father was, at best, strained, and now, listening to his son speak, he was finally able to view his father from an illuminating, positive vantage point.

After the *shivah*, Rav Rubin's friend (the father) opened up to him in order to somehow shed light on his behavior. Growing up, becoming *frum*, raising a family – all without interacting with his father in the proper manner that a son should act is difficult, to say the least. Hindsight presents a better, more encompassing, view. In this instance, the son looking back was now seeing his relationship with non-observant parents differently. He said, "All through my life I was frightened. Through no fault of their own, my parents were uninformed concerning *Shabbos* and *Yom Tov*. While other children had *zaidys* and *bubbies*, my children had a grandpa and grandma. We had no shared *Pesach sederim*, no special *Yom Tov* gatherings, no sitting in shul together. Furthermore, they had no filter on their conversations. They never spoke of anything inappropriate, just nothing to which *Chassidishe* children are exposed.

"I felt guilty because it was all my fault. I was the one who decided to become *frum*, thus thrusting my future children and my parents into an uncomfortable situation. When I heard my son speak during the *shivah*, however, I realized in retrospect that good had emerged from what I had thought was 'bad.'" At least this son had the courage to concede his error.