

## Insight for \$21

Yichus is the Jewish term for genealogy, although it is often used in the sense of blue blood. When one claims to have yichus, usually that means descent from a rabbinical family (although I have heard it used for families where the men were kohanim<sup>1</sup>).

I have always been interested in my family history. When I began my study of my family history, I drew charts in a spiral notebook. In 1984 I began to use a genealogical computer program. The program was selected based on the ability to add custom fields, and I added occupation, college degrees, yahrzeit date<sup>2</sup>, religious preference, and former surname. After hearing that others were also tracking Hebrew name, I quickly added that as well. I knew that my father had had a younger sister Sadie, who died at two of whooping cough. But storage space was still at a premium, and I did not want to "waste" the space required for a whole record, for a child who died in infancy. So I merely added her to both of my grandparent's records as another child, with a note saying that she had died at age two of whooping cough. This was all that I knew about Sadie. Once I asked my grandfather why he and grandma had not had other children. He replied that he was not going to have other children, when he was unable to keep the ones that he had alive. Clearly Sadie was a painful topic, so I did not ask him anymore.

The level of Jewish observance and comfort with Judaism was very different between my maternal and paternal grandparents. My mother's father, my zeidi, was very comfortable with Judaism. He was angry with HaShem for the holocaust, and not as observant as he had been in Poland, due to the necessity of earning a living. But it was clear that he was most comfortable speaking Yiddish and living in a Jewish neighborhood. Although according to my mother, when she was about twelve, the family decided not to continue to keep kosher, zeidi was most comfortable in a kosher environment. His beloved wife Sarah died two days after Purim, during the depths of the depression, leaving him with the responsibility of raising their youngest child Lillian, who was then, nine. Sidney, the oldest had just married, and my mother was a college student at that time. He was raising Lillian on a Jewish collective farm in Wisconsin; they had only one set of dishes and silverware. The dishes were glass and most of the time, they ate dairy. If they had meat, it was a chicken that he slaughtered himself, according to halacha<sup>3</sup>. There was also a flowerpot filled with earth on the windowsill, where the silverware was scrubbed after a meat meal. Lillian did not realize that they were still kosher.

Zeidi also thought that it was important that we know our yichus or roots and he wrote out the family history in Yiddish in 1954, going back to his grandparents. Because Sarah was no longer living, he wrote out her side as well, going back to her grandparents. This story spent a paragraph or two describing the personalities of the people involved including their libraries (whether all the books were Jewish or some were secular).

When I was growing up, it was zeidi who led the Pesach Seders (and often with no English), and I remember him asking me if I would like a book on Judaism for my

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<sup>1</sup> A Kohen is a descendant of Aaron the high priest, the brother of Moses.

<sup>2</sup> Yahrzeit date, the anniversary of a death on the Jewish calendar on which days run from sunset to sunset.

<sup>3</sup> Halacha –Jewish law.

high school graduation present. I still have my autographed copy of *The Philosophy of Judaism*, by one of the editors of the Forwards, which he read daily. The Shabbos before our wedding, he and Sidney came to shul for the aufruf<sup>4</sup>. The gabbai<sup>5</sup> asked if he were a Kohen or a Levi, and he responded that he was “gar nish”<sup>6</sup>. My Uncle Sidney quickly said that he was a Kohen, and after some discussion, zeidi agreed to put the rimmomim back on the Torah after it was read. He still knew all the prayers by heart, and I watched him, watch Jim and shep nachas<sup>7</sup>.

One lasting effect from my mother’s family of origin was that we did not celebrate Purim, beyond a Sunday school party, when I was a child. I once asked my mother why we did not celebrate Purim, and her response was that it was because of the timing of her mother’s death (two days after Purim). Later, prior to her own death, mother said that perhaps the ignoring of Purim was a mistake.

Contrast this with my father’s family. When I was growing up grandpa (HC) was quite a philosopher, but not very Jewish in words or actions. My grandmother Tillie, his wife, bought kosher meat (to patronize the Jewish butchers) but did not keep kosher. Grandma did not work on Yom Kippur<sup>8</sup> and one of my earliest memories is that of attending Yom Tovim<sup>9</sup> (probably Rosh Hashanah) services with her. Grandpa did not attend religious services, except when there was a special family event. He liked to read inspirational books (many were very non-Jewish), and he, unlike my zeidi, preferred to be in a non-Jewish neighborhood. Strangely, because of his preference (and the fact that he was a builder by profession), I grew up in a non-Jewish neighborhood in Detroit, while he and grandma lived in a Jewish one. Grandma still cared about Judaism, she was concerned when Jim and I said that we were getting married (our surname is a difficult one in a Jewish world), but any opposition evaporated on Friday night, when Jim made Kiddush. Grandpa never made any comments.

My grandfather, Herman Charles Meyer was the youngest of five children born to Fishel and Rebecca Meyer. Fishel was the son of Joseph Perchik of Odessa. Fishel and Rebecca left Russia in fear of the pogroms. Fishel bought papers, which allowed him to avoid Czarist conscription and to enter the US (in 1884) under the name Fishel Meyer. His wife Rebecca and their eldest child Esther came about 1887. The other four children, Jack, Henry, Dora and H.C. were all born in Albany, NY about two years apart. My great-grandparents were illiterate, hard working, and superstitious (according to family members).

My father, Fred, was a scientist who had no time for organized religion, yet he did have a traditional Bar Mitzvah. In fact, it was the way that he was prepared for the Bar Mitzvah that turned him away from organized religion. He said that he was learning to read and understand Hebrew, when his parents became fearful that he would not be "ready in time". They yanked him out of the program to put him under the tutelage of an

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<sup>4</sup> The aufruf (call up) is when the groom to be is called to the Torah in honor of the upcoming wedding.

<sup>5</sup> Gabbai – synagogue host, who arranges for the honors during the Torah service.

<sup>6</sup> Yiddish, meaning absolutely nothing, in this case a give-away, since the appropriate response would be Israel.

<sup>7</sup> An expression that translates roughly as “show pride and pleasure”

<sup>8</sup> Yom Kippur, the day of Atonement occurs on the 10<sup>th</sup> of Tishri

<sup>9</sup> Yom Tovim, literally the good days, here refers to the high holidays of Rosh Hashanah, the New Year, and Yom Kippur

old man, whose only concern was that my father memorize the prayers and the half Torah<sup>10</sup> (without understanding). As a result my father had no contact with Judaism between his Bar Mitzvah and Hillel at college.

My grandfather was not one to speak about his family, so I contacted an elderly cousin, who detailed many of the family relationships. She gave me a wealth of information including the Hebrew names of my grandfather's siblings: Esther, Aaron Jacob, Herschel and Devorah, and family photographs. She had grown up with her grandparents and was the one to tell me that I would never find any naturalization papers, because they never became citizens. Later I learned that my grandparents were part of the census undercount; apparently they were afraid of the census taker (after all they left Russia on false papers!). Although I knew that they were in the US before 1900 they did not show up on the census until the 1920, when they were living with Esther and her husband in Detroit.

When I asked my grandfather for his Hebrew (or Jewish name) he replied "Shyka". Later I learned that Shyka was a diminutive of Ishayah or Isaiah. My daughter Rivka, who is married to a mashgiach<sup>11</sup> and very observant, remarked that this was a very "frum"<sup>12</sup> name and it was a strange name for my very non-observant grandpa. But I never saw or questioned the inconsistencies.

As I continued to work on the family genealogy, one big hole in my knowledge was Sadie. I did not have her date of birth or death, or where she was buried. I generally tried to ask the same question many times, trying to jog memories. But grandpa was not approachable on this issue, and my father was too young to have known anything. I had asked where Sadie was buried and no one seemed to know, although mom seemed to think that it was somewhere south of Detroit. Later, I found that I had made a cryptic note from a phone call that said Inkster. I still have cousins in the Detroit area and I wrote a large number of cemeteries without success, including the ones in Inkster. I had thought that Sadie was born about 1917, since my father was born in June of 1915, and since I was told that she died at 2, I figured that she died about 1919 (and probably no earlier than 1918). Adding to this, I have photographs on the wall in my home of my father at about 3 and Sadie at about 6 months. Since they looked like they were taken at the same time, it reinforced my belief that she was probably born in 1917.

On my last genealogical research trip to Salt Lake, I looked in the Michigan records for her death (or birth) without success; however a fellow genealogist mentioned that the state would search for you (I had thought you needed an exact date). So after I returned home, I obtained the forms to request a copy of a Michigan death certificate. I paid for a search of the years 1917-1921. About ten days later by return mail, I received her death certificate. The death certificate had her name as Sadie Meyers instead of Sadie Meyer. She was born on August 12, 1916 (much closer in age to my father than I thought), and died on September 16, 1917 of bronchopneumonia (which often follows whooping cough). It also showed that the body was taken to Westwood (a Jewish

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<sup>10</sup> Half Torah- the portion from the Bible excluding the first Torah (the first five books), that either relates to a holiday or to the Torah portion for the week.

<sup>11</sup> Mashgiach one who supervises food to make certain that it is kosher and that all of the required laws are followed.

<sup>12</sup> Frum — religiously observant, in this case a name used by religiously observant Jews.

cemetery in Inkster) on September 18, 1917. I entered the data into the computer and then I went to HaYom to get her yahrzeit date, which was the 29<sup>th</sup> of Elul 5676 and went to bed.

In the morning, I woke with insight. Later I double checked the time of death, I had originally read it as 4:55 PM, but on closer inspection it was 11:55 PM, and the yahrzeit date was 1 Tishri 5677, the first night of Rosh Hashanah. The doctor, who was not Jewish, filled out the death certificate on September 17<sup>th</sup>; but the undertaker who was Jewish collected body was taken on September 18<sup>th</sup> (after dark, I'm sure). Perhaps grandpa was the shomer<sup>13</sup>, and did not leave the hospital until after the Yom Tov. But combining Sadie's death with the High Holiday tephillot<sup>14</sup> was clearly a tremendous source of pain for my grandpa. On Rosh Hashanah and on Yom Kippur the Usanah Tokev prayer (On Rosh HaShanah it is written and on Yom Kippur it is sealed \_ who shall live and who shall die) is chanted. This must have been intolerable. The juxtaposition of Sadie's death and this prayer, which is often introduced with a gory story about Rabbi Amnon of Mainz who composed it while dying; explains why grandpa looked outside of his religious heritage for inspiration, and how a man with a "frum" name could become so a-religious.

In fact, it is a wonder that my father even had a Bar Mitzvah. I'll bet that it was not my grandparents who were concerned that father would not have been ready for his Bar Mitzvah, but his superstitious old world grandparents, who were both still living in June of 1928.

Four essential ingredients were necessary to come to this insight. First is the concept that the timing of certain nodal events (birth, marriage and deaths) can influence religious observance. Second is the actual death certificate. The third required element is the knowledge of the Jewish calendar, along with a program to translate dates. Fourth is the knowledge that comes with our level of observance of Judaism, in this case the knowledge of the contents of the High Holiday prayers.

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<sup>13</sup> Shomer – guard. A Shomer stays with the body from death to burial, usually reading Psalms.

<sup>14</sup> Tephillot - prayers