

Zehut**IDENTITY**

What does it mean to become a “Jewish adult”?

When I sit with a child on the cusp of becoming bar or bat mitzvah, I often ask, “What makes you *you*?”

At only twelve, they usually respond with a blank stare. When pressed, they offer their after-school classes, sports, or hobbies. It’s a good starting point, and no doubt these activities say a lot about who they are as seventh graders.

But I invite them to go deeper. Not just to name the things they do, but to tell me the stories of who they are—the hurdles, happy places, quirks, and superpowers that have shaped them. And this always elicits very different answers.

“I’m a good listener.”

“I know how to make people laugh.”

“I am a connector of friends.”

I tell the students, “Knowing what makes you you is at the heart of what it means to become a Jewish adult. While a bar or bat mitzvah means coming to the age of responsibility for the commandments, these are not simply about fasting on Yom Kippur or lighting candles on the Sabbath. The overarching demand of Judaism is that you partner with God in making this world a little bit better. And the true obligation of becoming a Jewish adult means figuring out the particular job that you’re on this earth to do.”

I remind each young person in front of me, “There has never been another person exactly like you, and there never will be again.” If they can absorb that *no one else* has their distinct talents and hurdles, maybe they can see why they’re so needed in the world.

This tale of a Hasidic rabbi named Zusya captures the challenge of this mandate.

Rabbi Zusya, a gentle, open-hearted man, lived a humble existence. But Zusya died having felt constantly deficient and inferior. When he came before the heavenly tribunal, Zusya cried, “I am unworthy, for I was not like Moses, the prophet. Nor Jeremiah, the writer. Nor Akiva, the scholar.” And the heavenly voice replied, “That is not the concern. Zusya, *why were you not more Zusya?*”

In other words, don’t measure your worth by anyone else’s; the yardstick is only you. Not your profession, your income, what you look like. The Hebrew word for “identity” is *zehut*. It comes from the simple *zeh*, meaning “this.”

Your identity is *this*.

Your zehut is your distinctiveness, grounded in celebrating your “this”—meaning what exists, who you are—not “that,” meaning that other person over there.

So much in our society and media is constantly urging us to compare ourselves to everyone else, to obsess over our deficiencies—all the things we don’t possess, cannot do, or are not good at. Self-esteem gets suffocated by self-criticism. But our eccentricities, and, yes, the things we’re convinced we lack, are the very qualities that forge character and make us singular. They enable us to do what only each of us can do. When we stand before the heavenly tribunal, it might be easy to feel as inadequate as Zusya if we look at those we admire and expect ourselves to be like them. But we won’t be asked why we weren’t that. We will be asked why we weren’t this.

Zechut. Your “identity” in Hebrew is *thisness*.

You are the only version of *this*. Embrace it.