

LOOK AT WHERE WE COME FROM

Zechus avos and the potential within us

By Rabbi Yehuda Zev Klein

“We are Your children. We are mishpacha.”

THE QUESTION OF ZECHUS AVOS

During the Aseres Yemei Teshuvah, we say Avinu Malkeinu. We call Hashem Avinu—our Father.

We mention the awesome event of the Akeidah. We invoke zechus avos. We remind Hashem where we come from.

We say, “Hashem, we are Your children. We are mishpacha. We come from Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov. We are heimish.”

So let me ask you a question.

THE COURTROOM

Imagine you are a judge in a criminal courtroom, and two people come before you. They are both accused of the same crime—bank fraud, insurance fraud, or running a Ponzi scheme.

One person comes from a prestigious family. He went to Harvard. He grew up in a privileged neighborhood. His father is a senator. His mother is a prominent lawyer. His grandfather is the president of an Ivy League university.

The other person grew up in a broken home, in tremendous poverty. He was raised by a single parent, lived in a crime-ridden neighborhood.

Who would you be more lenient with?

I would imagine the second person.

He grew up with difficult circumstances. We can understand how he got here.

But the first person?

We tell him Look at where you came from. Look at the opportunities you were given. You should have known better.

So why do we invoke zechus avos during the Aseres Yemei Teshuvah?

Wouldn't our prestigious ancestors make our expectations even greater?

Let me share with you a remarkable story.

A REMARKABLE STORY

There was a man by the name of John H. Johnson. He died in 2005. Against all odds, he became one of the most successful magazine entrepreneurs in America.

He grew up in great poverty. He was raised by a single mother. He struggled in school, and by the time he reached the eleventh grade, he was ready to drop out of high school.

But he told his mother that he would take the SAT at the end of the year.

He didn't expect to do well.

He just took the test because he promised his mother.

A few weeks later, the results arrived.

Johnson looked at the paper and he was stunned.

His score was 1480 out of 1600.

His mother knew him well. She asked him:

“John, did you cheat?”

He said, “Mom, I promise, I did not cheat.”

And then something remarkable happened.

Something inside him changed.

He began thinking:

“If I'm capable of a 1480, maybe I'm capable of much more than I ever thought. Maybe I have abilities that I never realized I had. Maybe I have the potential to accomplish something great.”

And his behavior changed.

He stayed in school, and during his senior year, he began taking his classes seriously. He distanced himself from his old crowd. He surrounded himself with the top students in the school.

His teachers and classmates began noticing the transformation.

He graduated high school, went on to college, earned a degree, got married, and eventually built a remarkable career.

He established Johnson Publishing Company, created two highly successful magazines, and became one of the most successful magazine entrepreneurs in the country.

He eventually became the first Black American to appear on the Forbes 400 list.

THE LETTER FROM PRINCETON

So you're probably thinking:

What an inspiring story of a brilliant young man who simply needed something—to help him discover his potential.

But that is not the most astonishing part of the story.

Twelve years after that fateful SAT exam, Johnson received a letter from Princeton, New Jersey.

He put it next to all the other junk mail.

The next day, his wife asked him:

“Aren't you going to open that letter?”

So he opened the letter.

The letter explained that the SAT board periodically reviews its testing procedures. During one such review, they discovered that Johnson had been among a small group of students who had received incorrect scores on their SATs.

His score was not 1480. It was actually 740.

Wow.

SO WHAT CHANGED?

So let's think about this.

The score that Johnson believed had changed his life...was never his real score.

But it changed his life? Why? Because his perception about himself changed.

He began acting like someone who was capable of a 1480.

He took his education seriously.

He changed his friends.

He pursued opportunities.

He made choices that reflected a new belief about himself.

And perhaps this is why we invoke zechus avos.

WHAT ZECHUS AVOS MEANS

On Yom Kippur, we are standing before the ultimate Judge. We know our mistakes. We know our failures. We know that we have not lived up to everything we could have been.

But we remind Hashem:

“Look at where we come from.”

We come from great stock.

We come from Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov.

**We have something great inside of us. We are not 740,
we are 1480.**

Maybe we haven't accessed it yet.

Maybe we haven't lived up to it.

But we have not forgotten that it is there.

And when we invoke zechus avos, we are reminding Hashem, and ourselves, of our great potential.

**So we tell Hashem—“Don't judge me only by where I am today.
Remember where I come from—and remember where I can still go.”**

So please don't give up on us and grant us a good year.