
Sichos in English Classics 31

**Timely Messages From
a Day of Great Birthdays**



18th Day of Elul, 5742 (1982)



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IN PLACE OF AN INTRODUCTION

At the Shloshim of R' Yonah Avtzon A"H, Director of Sichos in English, a resolution was taken to reprint the original weekly Sichos in English publications.

To fulfill this, a weekly booklet including a translation of a *farbrengen* as it was first published will be distributed. Our intention is to reprint the entire set in the near future.

Following the Sichos we will include an addendum with pictures, notes, and insights into the process of its publication.

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TIMELY MESSAGES FROM A DAY OF GREAT BIRTHDAYS



18th Day of Elul, 5742 (1982)

WHY IS A BIRTHDAY SUCH A BIG DEAL?

1. Today is the birthday of the two great luminaries — the Baal Shem Tov and the Alter Rebbe. Everyone celebrates a birthday — from the “heads of the tribes” to the “water drawers and woodcutters.” And although the birthday celebration of a Tzaddik is of a higher order, nevertheless all birthdays have something in common. All of us can learn something from the birthday of the two great luminaries.

Before the previous Rebbe revealed the holy significance of a birthday, it was celebrated privately by the Rebbeim. They would often devote an entire ma’amar (chassidic discourse) to the occasion. And like many customs which have been adopted publicly in later generations, the celebration of a birthday has become part of our practice. First the Jews were given the Ten Commandments, which actually innately incorporated the rest of the Torah, including the most minor customs. They were then given the entire written law, which was later expanded into the entire oral law and so on. Finally, generation by generation, more and more customs, all originating from the Torah, have become known, among them the practice of celebrating a birthday.

Why is the emergence of a person into the world cause for such celebration so many years later? While in the womb, the fetus benefits from all the amenities of his mother’s body. He eats, drinks and breathes from his mother. For many weeks he is even a complete human being, down to the smallest detail. Upon being

thrust into this world, he is immediately met by a sharp slap to ensure that he breathes properly. He must begin to fend for himself. Is it any wonder that the expression on the face of the newborn is far from a smile? What reason is there to celebrate?

When we think of the birthday of a Jewish child, the question deepens: The Talmud (Nidah 30b) tells us that during the months of pregnancy, a candle is lit on top of the fetus's head and he is taught the entire Torah! In other words, not only is there a light upon his head, encompassing him, but he is given the benefit of nine months intensive study of the entire Torah! All the Torah which must be painstakingly learnt during an entire lifetime! And when the child comes out into the world, "an angel comes and smites him on his lip and causes him to forget the entire Torah." In view of this, one would think that it is beneficial to delay the moment of birth for as long as possible, since the loss of memory occurs just prior to this.

So, why do we celebrate this occasion throughout a person's life and indeed beyond that. Physically, there is no change; the body is complete for many weeks prior to birth. And spiritually, the fetus has, seemingly, only to lose from being born.

AN HALACHIC SOLUTION

We must search for the answer in the Torah, bearing in mind that the explanation must pertain to all the segments of the Jewish People, for a birthday is marked by all. Torah is termed "the Torah of light" — it will throw light on any problem for those who gaze in it. And the simplest realm of Torah, the one which pertains to all of us, is the area of Halachah. We can learn many lessons from the discussions in Torah, from the pilpul in the Talmud, but not everyone can master all the complexities. Halachah, the clear and crisp directives of the Torah — this is the domain of everyman. Let us try to find a halachah to solve our problem.

A fetus prior to the moment of birth is considered "his mother's thigh" i.e. halachically part of his mother. Only upon being separated is the newborn baby an independent entity. Here we have a most radical difference; one second before, there was

only one entity: the mother. One second later there are two separate beings present: the mother and the baby. Before birth, the baby indeed eats, but from what the mother eats. He drinks, but from what the mother drinks. And though he desperately needs his mother's care for many years after birth, it is as a separate being. This concept has application in a number of areas in halachah.

This transformation is so radical, that notwithstanding the trauma both physically and spiritually of birth, the gaining of one's independence is such a joyous occasion, that it is celebrated year after year. The blow from the angel on the mouth causing him to forget the entire Torah, is more than worth the opportunity to learn the entire Torah with one's own power. It's worth losing the warm protection of the womb only to deal with the world on one's own terms.

THE LESSON FOR US IN OUR DAILY LIVES

Rashi, citing a verse in Deuteronomy (26:17), states: “[The Torah] should be considered new each and every day.” Each day should be seen as an independent, newborn entity, and all the accomplishments of the previous days should be seen as a fetus before birth. The newborn does not rely on his seemingly towering accomplishments prior to birth. He immediately begins to assert his independence. So also in our daily service of Hashem. If we rely on yesterday's accomplishments, we will be eating, as it were, free bread. Every new day that is “born” in our lives, must be asserted as an independent unit, using past endeavors as a springboard to higher things. “Man is born to labor” (Job 5:7). Each day must be developed. One cannot argue: “I am versed in the entire Torah; I have accumulated great spiritual wealth! Now is the time for me to rest.” The answer to this is emphatic! All that you have mentioned belongs to yesterday! Yesterday you put all your effort into it. But what about today?! Today is a new era, an opportunity for new achievement. Will you accomplish the dictum “Man is born to labor” by resting on yesterday's laurels?! No! Your

past accomplishments are indeed yours but they belong to the past. Now is the time to build anew.

This is a lesson for all those who claim that they are complete in their Torah learning. They want only to review what they have learnt, despite the importance of constantly widening one's horizons. They argue: "Why should I labor? I am a Torah expert well versed in the intricacies of the Torah? I went to sleep with thoughts of Torah and I even had Torah dreams! What more do you want of me?!"

To which the whole idea of a birthday has the emphatic answer: Despite the fact that a human being learnt the entire Torah; he was physically complete; he ate, drank, and moved about like any one of us; nevertheless we still make a fuss about that moment when he is called upon to stand on his own two feet.

The practical lesson for us is clear: When we are called upon to do a good deed, we cannot retort that we've done enough good and now is the time to rest. This is simply a misconception. Yesterday's work is there but it has no bearing on today's requirements [cf. the Baal Shem Tov's interpretation of the phrase (Shacharis Prayer): "who in His goodness renews each day, continuously, the work of creation." He explains that G-d actually created the world anew every moment. With this in mind, it will be easier for us to constantly strive to accomplish something new every moment, for we now live in a new world with new requirements!]

May we merit the transition from golus (exile), which is likened to pregnancy, to geulah (redemption) which will be the birth of a new era, very soon, in our days.

THE ABILITY TO IMPACT

2. There is another aspect to the whole idea of birth: From the moment of birth, the baby begins to have an impact on the world around him. Either he causes a commotion, in which case those around him attempt to pacify him, or he smiles and causes happiness all around. While concealed in the womb, the fetus eats, drinks and moves, but privately; his body is complete but only he

has any benefit from this. When does he begin to interact with his surrounding environment, even prior to being able to speak? When he emerges from his private quarters of nine months.

Of course his ability to interact undergoes various stages of development. He goes from strength to strength until, as our Sages (Bava Basra 156a) put it: “At the age of twenty he can sell the property of his father” — showing a greater degree of ability to work with the world around him in a responsible way. Similarly with regard to the point discussed in the first sicha: Independence is indeed gained upon being born, but that independence is manifested in an increasingly intense manner as the years go by: At the age of six a child becomes less economically dependent. At the age of twelve or thirteen, it is the time of bar/bas mitzvah. At the age of twenty “he can sell the property of his father” and so on throughout one’s life.

The purpose of our existence is after all, to create a dwelling place for G-d in this world. In this there are also a number of levels. By the virtue of the newborn’s very existence he is creating a dwelling place for G-d, for a certain law of the Torah immediately goes into effect: His life must be saved even if it means transgressing another mitzvah. However, this passive creation of a dwelling place cannot be compared to the active efforts of the older child and ultimately those of the adult.

It is also obvious that the dwelling brought about by an ordinary Jew, cannot be compared to that created by one of the “heads of the tribe” — the leaders. They certainly are able to bring G-d’s desire to expression on a more profound level. This is all the more true of the neshamoh — soul — of the Alter Rebbe, one of the celebrants of today’s birthday, which was a neshamoh chadoshoh — a new soul. It had never before descended to this world! And now the time had come for such novel things to be achieved, that a new soul was needed. And the soul of the Alter Rebbe was summoned to give new meaning to the concept of a dwelling place for G-d.

From all this we can understand the reason for great celebration on this day. For by virtue of their greater powers than

the ordinary man, the two luminaries were able to accomplish so much more by their birth.

As stated above, the Baal Shem Tov and the Alter Rebbe, whose birthdays are today, were called the “Two Great Luminaries.” When Moshe Rabbeinu was born we are told in the Torah (Exodus 2:2): “she saw him that he was goodly.” On which the Talmud comments (Sotah 12a): “When he was born the entire house was filled with light.” This means that as soon as Moshe was born, he had an effect on the world — the house was filled with light.

What is light? It does not change the form or substance of anything. It merely shows where or what something is. When it is dark in the room, one sees nothing more than vague outlines. And one certainly cannot differentiate between colors. Light changes this and comes to reveal what is present and which form it takes.

A Jew, however, must not be satisfied with merely revealing the truth. It is demanded of us that we actually become “partners with G-d in the creation.” Not like a partner who only has an equal share in the business, but like a partner who had the same hand in building the business as his counterpart! Because of this, he feels free to make improvements and innovations as he sees fit. This is the nature of our partnership with G-d; He has given us the power to bring about profound changes in the creation by our actions and good deeds.

CREATING LUMINARIES FROM A YOUNG AGE

This is why the Baal Shem Tov and the Alter Rebbe are called the two luminaries. A luminary is the source of the light and not merely that intangible phenomenon which reveals what is already there. And this is why they are called the two great luminaries, since the changes that they were responsible for were great ones, lasting throughout subsequent generations. Their deeds shone brightly and their influence was everlasting. When they taught their students they made sure that not only would their teaching never be forgotten but that their students would in turn teach others.

What does this all mean for us? How can we hope to learn anything from the exalted behavior of the two great luminaries? Indeed, the Shulchan Aruch (Yorah Deah ch. 242) rules that one who compares himself to Moshe, deserves a fine. On the other hand we have the following passage in the Talmud (33b): “It says in the Torah (Deut. 10:12): ‘And now Israel what does the L-rd your G-d ask of you but to fear?’ Is the fear of heaven such a little thing? Answer: Yes, for Moses it was a small thing.” Now, the Alter Rebbe in Tanya (ch. 42) poses the following question:

“How does this resolve the difficulty? Were not these words addressed to all of Israel and not just to Moshe?” To which he answers: “Present in the soul of every Jew is an aspect, a spark of Moshe Rabbeinu, hence the demand to the Jews of all generations is justified: ‘What does G-d ask of you but to fear him.’ By virtue of that part of Moshe, every Jew has the power to fear G-d. This is true of all the leaders in each generation as well, who impart a little of their spirit to all the Jews.”

So, although we would not dare to compare ourselves to these great pillars of Torah, we can nevertheless be expected to follow in their footsteps and to learn something from their ways. Their birthday has relevance for even a small child!

The lesson is: It is folly to wait until the child has reached the age of understanding, to properly devote oneself to his education and general upbringing. The time to pay the utmost attention to this is when the child is born and immediately begins to make his presence felt. It is then that the parents must be careful in their behavior, careful in what they feed the child and so on. And when their child reaches his first birthday, the parents should give charity on his behalf and reflect on the wonderful gift that G-d gave them. They must make themselves worthy of the trust G-d put in them, in giving them this precious gift. The birthday of their child is the most fitting time to renew this trust and intensify many times over the effort they put into their child’s education.

The following story is related in the Talmud (Yoma 47a): “Kimchis had seven sons and all of them became high priests. When the sages asked her why she merited such a great reward, she replied: ‘All of my days, the walls of my house did not see my

hair,” And because of her great modesty she merited such great sons. From this we see that a seemingly obscure deed (she was careful even when only the walls could see her hair!) can have such a lasting effect on one’s offspring. Everything in the Torah has a lesson. The clear purpose of this story is to illuminate the correct path for every parent, that every deed has a lasting effect on the most prized of their possessions, their children.

Referring to a previous point we discussed: The Rambam says (Laws of Kings ch. 11 para. 1) that the verse (Numbers 24:17) “There shall come a star out of Ya’akov” refers to Moshiach. The Talmud Yerushalmi declares that this verse refers to every Jew! These two insights are reconciled thus: Every Jew, regardless of his standing, has a spark of the Moshiach permeating his soul. It is up to him to bring that spark to the fore by demonstrating the burning desire for the advent of Moshiach. We must say: “We want Moshiach Now!,” not waiting for translation into another language, but in English which, for whatever reason, is our mother tongue. In other words, we show that the desire for Moshiach is something close to us.

We will then merit that all the sparks of Moshiach will be gathered into one brightly burning flame illuminating the darkness of golus, and we will be blessed with “And all the Jews had light in their dwellings (Exodus 10:23)” with the coming of our righteous Moshiach.



Dedicated to the Lubavitcher Rebbe

*whose teachings and example are a
never-ending source of life for all mankind.
May we continue in his paths, and complete
the mission with which he has charged us:
to make the world conscious of the imminent Redemption
and to prepare an environment
in which this ideal can be realized.*



& In Memory of

Malkah bas Uri ה"י Kaiser

On the occasion of her Yartzeit
12th Day of Elul

&

Chaya bas Moshe ה"י Stein

On the occasion of her Yartzeit
19th Day of Elul



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