

BECOMING ALIVE

One of the most celebrated days on the Chabad calendar is the eighteenth of Elul, or, Chai Elul. It is the birthday of both the Baal Shem Tov, founder of the Chassidic movement, and the Alter Rebbe, founder of the Chabad movement. Yet it was not until the sixth rebbe of Chabad, Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak, that the day became publicly celebrated. He himself learned of its significance when his father greeted him on that day with “Good Yom Tov”—the traditional greeting for a Jewish holiday.

In this talk, the Rebbe delves into a seemingly simple question: What is so special about a birthday? And what is its connection specifically with the Baal Shem Tov and the Alter Rebbe?

The Rebbe goes on to analyze the idea of a birthday, and points out the uniqueness of these two birthdays. The Rebbe also teaches us a lesson we can take from this special day and how we can experience “being born” in the mission we have been assigned in our life.

DOUBLING THE JOY

It’s not as though there is no mention of birthdays in Torah. The rabbis point out that the Jewish People were saved from Haman’s decree in the month of Adar because that was the month in which Moshe was born. And then there is the story of the Mishkan and Yitzchak’s birthday:

It was the end of the month of Adar, almost a year after the exodus from Egypt. For months, the Jews had collected materials, woven curtains, and hammered silver, copper and gold. On the 23rd day of the month, they first assembled the structure they would call the Mishkan, which means, “place of dwelling,” because there the Shechina, G-d’s presence,

would reside.

The Shechina, however, was not yet to arrive. The Jews would erect and dismantle the Mishkan each day for the next seven days before the Shechina filled its home on the eighth day, on the first of the month of Nissan. Why did they have to wait eight more days to see the reward for their labor? The Mishkan was constructed exactly the same way on the first day as on the eighth! The Midrash explains that G-d wanted to merge the joy of the Shechina entering the Mishkan with another celebration: the birthday of our forefather, Yitzchak. This was on the first of Nissan, and that is why the Shechina waited.

Now, this leaves us with a question. Is a birthday really such a reason to celebrate, that the entire Jewish nation should wait eight additional days, so that the Shechina arrived specifically on Yitzchak's birthday?

WHAT IS SO SPECIAL ABOUT A BIRTHDAY?

When seen from the baby's perspective, his or her birthday might not be a happy day at all. For nine months, he is cocooned in a safe, warm, environment. All the nutrients he needs are fed to him directly from his mother, and he lacks nothing. The minute this tiny human being emerges into the world, he cries and hollers as he greets his new environment. It is cold in the winter months and hot in the summer. Sometimes he will be hungry, or tired, and he will cry to his mother for care.

The spiritual environment of the baby changes, as well. The Talmud describes the fetus' experience during the nine months of gestation:

TEXT ONE

A candle is lit over his head, and he gazes and sees from one end of the world to the other. They (the angels) teach him the entire Torah...when he enters the atmosphere of the world, an angel comes and taps him on his mouth, and makes him forget the entire Torah.

(Niddah, 30b)

Throughout his life, this same person will attempt to relearn all that Torah, spending countless hours over its holy pages. It is most likely, however, that he will not succeed in remastering what was taught to him in his mother's womb.

Our question is now stronger: Why do we celebrate the day of birth? Why is the day the child was introduced to a spiritually and physically harsh world, a day to rejoice?

Let's examine birth from three different angles. Not only will we answer why birth is a celebrated occasion, we will see its reflection in a spiritual birth, of becoming spiritually alive.

STEP 1) BECOMING ALIVE

TEXT TWO

As long as he has not entered the world's atmosphere, he is not a living soul.

(Rashi, Sanhedrin 72b, "Yatzab Rosho")

Before it is born, the fetus develops all of its limbs and organs. They are fully functional, and the fetus can move around and use its senses to feel, hear, and even smell. Still, the Torah does not consider the unborn fetus to be a living being. True, it has already been given a soul, but it is like a seed locked in its shell. The fetus' vitality comes not through its own soul, but through its mother. Through her comes food and nourishment, a heartbeat and life.

When the baby emerges, breathing in the atmosphere for the first time, something miraculous happens. Its soul breaks through its encasement and floods the body with its vitality. Now the soul is one with the body. The baby is a separate, alive, being; and so, upon birth, the world celebrates the arrival of a new life.

TEXT THREE

...Therefore we will rejoice in the words of Your Torah and in Your commandments forever and ever. For they are our life and the length of our days, and we will delve in them, day and night.

(Blessings of Shema, evening prayers)

Just as a human being needs a soul to fill it to be alive, a Jew needs Torah and mitzvos to spiritually charge. Without their energy, we are spiritually lifeless. We can, however, unite with the Torah in either of two ways. One manner is similar to a fetus, whose soul is detached from it. The other is similar to a person once born, whose soul has now entered within.

In the first case, you might even learn Torah and do mitzvos devotedly, enthusiastically. You could feel the surge of life, you feel inspired by the Torah. The only problem is that it hasn't become your entire being, your identity. It hasn't become your own. Just like the fetus: its life is not its own, it is its mother's. If at the end of the day you come home from Torah learning, sit on the couch and

say, "Finally, some time for myself," then the Torah hasn't become a part of you.

The second way of experiencing Torah and mitzvos is compared to birth. What is spiritual birth?

Here, the first of the two great masters born on Chai Elul, gives us insight:

The Baal Shem Tov introduced and focused on a revolutionary concept. The idea is expressed in the Baal Shem Tov's explanation of the following verse:

TEXT FOUR

"You shall know today and establish in your heart that G-d is the G-d...there is no other besides Him."

(Deuteronomy 4:35)

The Baal Shem Tov explains that this doesn't just mean that there is only one G-d. It means that there is only one real *existence*. There is *no other*, there is nothing else that exists, apart from Him. True, we find many things in the world which don't seem G-dly, but they too were created to fulfill G-d's desire. G-d wanted his commandments to be fulfilled in this physical world, and for that he created the physical body through which the spiritual soul can perform a Mitzvah.

When you throw yourself into Torah and mitzvos with this mindset, there can't be two entities—a person, and the Torah and mitzvos you're busy

with. Rather, there is only G-d, and His Torah and mitzvos, which are one with Him. When you are learning Torah or doing a mitzvah, that becomes your life and soul, so that you, too, are absorbed in that oneness.

This is “being born” in Jewish practice: When you stop being a person who does Judaism, and start being Judaism. This is just like when the baby is born and the body and soul unite. They are so merged, that we refer to them as if they are a single being. We don’t say, “my head thought,” or “my feet walked,” we say “I walked,” and “I thought.” The thing that is called “I,” the soul inside, which is the core of the human, used the feet as a tool because it wanted to walk, and used the head because it chose to ponder on an idea, but they are one.

When a Jew does a mitzva with the Baal Shem Tov’s mindset, he knows that his body is only a tool, employed to carry out G-d’s commandments in the physical world, but these tools are one with their purpose: to practice Torah and mitzvos.

STEP 2) LEARNING THE LIMBS

Being alive is not enough. The second thing that birth accomplishes is that now all the baby’s limbs and organs begin to fully function.

The Baal Shem Tov breathed a whole new charge of life, joy and enthusiasm into Jewish practice. But that new vitality was concentrated in the all-encompassing faith of the Jew.

The Alter Rebbe, the second chassidic master born on Chai Elul, taught us to see the life within each individual detail. He showed that not only does everything have one universal purpose—to serve its Creator—but that since everything is continually created by G-d, with the unique G-dly energy necessary for that particular thing, it must have a life and purpose of its own too. Therefore, the Alter Rebbe concluded, every energy and talent, indeed, every action, must express its unique purpose of creation by serving G-d in its unique way. The mind, for instance, must be used to understand G-dliness as much as possible. Furthermore, it may appreciate the G-dly presence in this world.

Now that the mind becomes alive, it affects the heart and the emotions. The emotion of love, for instance, feels that the reason G-d created love is to love G-d. The emotion of fear, and all the rest of the emotions, also become spiritually alive, expressing their unique role in G-dly service.

Together, the Baal Shem Tov and the Alter Rebbe gave us the manual for a complete spiritual birth, so that we can become one with our Torah and Mitzvos, and channel that spiritual life into each specific limb, so that each limb can be alive in its own right, and serve its specific purpose.

A HEAVENLY TEACHING

On Friday night, Chai Elul, 1892, the Rebbe Rashab’s soul visited the

Heavens.¹ There he met the Baal Shem Tov, who taught him seven lessons. The first, he taught him after the first Shabbat prayer on Friday evening. The Baal Shem Tov took a few verses from the Torah and translated them in the classical chasidic view: as lessons in the service of G-d.

TEXT FIVE

And it will be, when you come into the land which the Lord, your God, gives you for an inheritance, and you possess it and settle in it, that you shall take of the first of all the fruit of the ground, which you will bring from your land, which the Lord, your God, is giving you. And you shall put [them] into a basket and go to the place which the Lord, your God, will choose to have His Name dwell there.

(Deuteronomy 26:1-2)

The Hebrew word for land, *eretz*, is derived from the same root as the word *desire*. The Baal Shem Tov interpreted the verse as follows: When a Jew “comes to desire,” when he is inspired by a strong urge to connect with G-d, this is in fact an inspiration from above, a gift which “your G-d gives you for an inheritance.”

What happens next? “and you possess it and settle in it.” Don’t let it be an inspiration that evaporates

1 This story was told by the Previous Rebbe to his students in Otvosk, Poland, in 1936. See *Likkutei Sichos*, volume 9, page 338.

quickly because it did not become integrated within you. Settle it in you, “put them into a basket.” Let yourself internalize this inspiration, and have it penetrate your mind and heart so that it can change your life and have an everlasting effect.

It’s not a coincidence that the Baal Shem Tov chose to teach this to the Rebbe Rashab specifically on Chai Elul. With this instruction, he hinted to the theme of the day, and the reason the two great masters were born on that day: the necessity for inspiration in Judaism, to become “alive,” and the next necessary step of channeling it into the mind and heart.

STEP 3) MAKING A DIFFERENCE AROUND YOU

The Baal Shem Tov took the verse in Deuteronomy a step further. He taught: When you are struck with this inspiration to reconnect to G-d, and you allow that inspiration to resonate in your mind and heart, that inevitably leads to an additional step—the third step of birth:

A baby is born, and she immediately begins to affect her surroundings. Her smile brightens everyone’s day. Her presence, alone, makes her mother rejoice. When she opens her eyes, or wiggles her toes, everyone who sees claps and celebrates. This is just the beginning of the baby making her difference in the world—a feat that can be accomplished only once she is born.

Spiritually speak, as well, you know you’re alive when your presence makes a difference. This, explained

the Baal Shem Tov, is hinted in the end of the second verse: “and go to the place which the Lord, your God, will choose to have His Name dwell there. Wherever you might travel, don’t think you are there just for business or for a vacation. G-d directs every move that we make, bringing us wherever we are for a specific reason. The true reason you find yourself wherever you might be, is because this is the place which G-d chose to have you visit. The reason G-d leads you to this place is to have His name dwell there; you are there to make G-d known in that place, by speaking some words of Torah, and by doing a mitzvah.

Just as that little baby began affecting her surroundings as soon as she was born, so will you transform the world once you achieve a spiritual birth. When you “come to the desire,” the desire to connect to your G-d, and you take that desire and “put it into a basket,” you will th

THE ULTIMATE BIRTHDAY

TEXT SIX

Exile is compared to a pregnancy. The redemption days of Moshiach, which will be soon in our times, is compared to birth.

(Torah Ohr, 55a)

Chasidic writings teach that the ultimate “spiritual birthday” will only take place in the future redemption, “exile is compared to pregnancy and redemption is compared to birth.”

Why is exile is compared to pregnancy? Because just as the fetus’ brain does not function fully, in the time of exile our understanding of G-dliness is limited. Compared to the vision in the days of the temple, we are blind to G-dliness. Only when Moshiach takes us out of exile, will we open our eyes once more. In addition, the awareness that there is nothing but G-d Himself will be realized in its completion in the future redemption. The true purpose of every being will come to light, and we will all see that G-d is the only One.

May we merit to the arrival of Moshiach quickly in our days, now.

*Based on Likutei Sichos 24, Chai Elul
Reworked by Shimon
& Chaya Dubinsky*

Visit jnet.org/chai and answer these questions and your name will be entered in a Duch and prize drawing.

1. Describe one of the comparisons between the birth of a baby and one's spiritual growth.
2. Name one of the special contributions to Judaism that the Baal Shem-tov and/or Alter Rebbe introduced.
3. What personal lesson did you learn from this Sicha?

The Hebrew Sicha begins at the back of the booklet.