

## **BIRTHDAYS IN JUDAISM**

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A birthday, the day a person celebrates the anniversary of his or her birth into the world, is commemorated in almost every culture, often with a party, gifts or other rites of passage. Although the actual birth of a child and the thirteenth birthday (for a boy, twelfth for a girl) are certainly causes for great joy in Judaism, the yearly celebration of one's birthday is not found mentioned as part of standard Jewish practice and rituals in traditional Judaism. What is the view about celebrating yearly birthdays in Judaism? Is it allowed? Is it encouraged? Or is it forbidden? What are the reasons behind the traditional Jewish response in this area? Did any famous Rabbis celebrate their birthdays? If yes, how were their birthdays celebrated "Jewishly?" If not, why not? This chapter will examine the sources that will help answer these and other questions about birthdays.

### **BIRTHDAYS MENTIONED IN CLASSIC JEWISH SOURCES**

The only birthday celebration mentioned in the Torah is the birthday of Pharaoh,<sup>1</sup> which indirectly caused Joseph to be saved from jail (after two years). This happened because Pharaoh's Chief Butler was reinstated on this day and he later remembered Joseph to Pharaoh as an interpreter of dreams. However, since the only birthday commemoration mentioned in Scripture is that of a non-Jewish enemy of the Jewish people, this would seem to indicate that such a celebration is not a particularly Jewish idea. But in explaining Pharaoh's celebration, Rashi defines exactly what a birthday is and how it was celebrated then,<sup>2</sup> and Rabbi Naftali Tzvi Yehudah Berlin's commentary explains birthdays as a joyous day for the celebrant in which others try to bring him or her delight.<sup>3</sup>

Curiously, another commentary, Ibn Ezra, says that the king's birthday is "like the day he was born" and not the day of birth itself. According to him, it marked the anniversary of the day which the king ascended to the kingship and that was celebrated as the king's birthday. Ibn Ezra also says the king would call together all his servants (for a celebration?) and would give them gifts.<sup>4</sup> The idea that birthdays were celebrated on an anniversary and not on the exact date of a person's birth is not only referred to regarding Pharaoh and kings. Rashi, in an unusual explanation, states that this is how all birthdays were celebrated by the Jews in the desert after they left Egypt.<sup>5</sup> In order to answer the apparent quandary about the counting of Jewish males in the desert (between the ages of 20-60), that was precisely 650,550 both times,<sup>6</sup> even though the counting happened several months apart, Rashi points out that in that miraculous generation no one died, and that everyone's birthday was celebrated on the First Day of Tishrei,

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<sup>1</sup> Genesis 40:20

<sup>2</sup> Rashi commentary on Genesis 40:20

<sup>3</sup> Haamek Davar commentary on Genesis 40:20

<sup>4</sup> Ibn Ezra commentary on Genesis 40:12

<sup>5</sup> Rashi commentary on Exodus 30:16, with Siftei Chachamim commentary on Rashi

<sup>6</sup> Exodus 38:26, Numbers 2:32

the birthday of the world. In other words, anyone born during that year would become automatically become one year older only on the first day of the month of Tishrei, and every member of the Jewish people, therefore, celebrated his or her Jewish birthday (at that time) on the anniversary of the birthday of the world. Since each counting in the desert took place “between” two Tishreis (in the month of Tammuz right after the Sin of the Golden Calf when each Jewish male adult donated a half a Shekel, and then again in Nisan after the Tabernacle was erected), no Jewish person turned twenty or turned sixty-one in the interim.

The other references to the day of birth or birthdays in Scripture are not particularly flattering or celebratory. Ezekiel compares the Jewish people to a newborn’s day of birth, covered in blood and unattractive.<sup>7</sup> King David describes the Jewish people as the child of G-d born on a particular day.<sup>8</sup> Jeremiah curses the day he was born (for all he has suffered) and says that this day will not be blessed, and Job also curses his day of birth.<sup>9</sup> King Solomon makes light of birthdays, declaring that the day of death is far better than the day of birth.<sup>10</sup> The Midrash explains the reason for this statement, indicating that King Solomon is logically correct. Why is the day of a person’s birth celebrated since it is a day when, at the time, no one knows what (or if) this infant will accomplish anything worthwhile during his lifetime. Rather, the day of death should be celebrated because that is when the world can take stock of a person’s lifetime accomplishments.<sup>11</sup> The Midrash compares celebrating birthdays to the foolish custom of people at the docks who cheer a ship that leaves port full of people and cargo. But when the ship ends its voyage, very few people, if any, are there to greet her. This is illogical. Why should the ship leaving be cheered when no one knows if it will accomplish its mission and achieve anything? Like the day of death, the day the ship docks should be far more celebrated and cheered than the day the ship leaves port at the beginning of its journey.

There is one Mishna which seems to celebrate and mark the achievements of a person as part of the Jewish life cycle.<sup>12</sup> On a child’s fifth birthday, he or she should begin to study a Torah text. On the tenth birthday, the Mishna should be studied for the first time. On the thirteenth birthday, a boy begins to do mitzvot (that he is responsible for, while for a girl this begins at age twelve). On the fifteenth birthday, Talmud should begin to be studied. The eighteenth birthday is for marriage. The thirtieth birthday represents the height of strength, the fortieth represents intelligence, the sixtieth wisdom, etc. While it is not clear whether the dates are simply the general year or the very first day of that year (i.e., the person’s birthday), this is certainly the basis of the Bar and Bat Mitzvah celebrations which do indeed begin on the Jewish birthday of the boy and girl. Therefore, it is logical to assume that the Mishna intended that these other life events should commence on one’s birthday as well.

### **THE DATE OF BIRTH IS A PROPITIOUS TIME IN JUDAISM**

King Solomon states that there is a special time for birth in Judaism and a special time for death.<sup>13</sup> Just as Jews commemorate the special day of death, it is logical that they should also commemorate the day of birth. But what does this verse signify when it says that the day of

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<sup>7</sup> Ezekiel 16:4

<sup>8</sup> Psalms 2:7

<sup>9</sup> Jeremiah 16:4, Job 3:1

<sup>10</sup> Ecclesiastes 7:1

<sup>11</sup> Midrash, Shemot Rabbah 48:1

<sup>12</sup> Mishna Avot, 5:21

<sup>13</sup> Ecclesiastes 3:2

birth is a special time? Is there anything special about the day a person is born? The Talmud, Midrash and later sources seem to think so.

The Talmud and Midrash explain why the Amalekites had the audacity to fight the Jewish people when they knew that G-d protected the Jews and had saved them from the Egyptians. The Amalekites were very intelligent. They had the tradition that on a person's birthday, a human being has special protection and special luck.<sup>14</sup> Thus, they chose as soldiers only Amalekite people who had a birthday on the day that they fought the Jews. And, indeed, for a time, the Amalekites did prevail, until the Jews prayed to G-d. There is an explanation involving birthdays that relates to Haman, who was very careful about "choosing" the date (through a lottery – the Pur) for when to fight and destroy the Jewish people. When the lottery (finally) fell on the month of Adar, Haman was very happy since on the seventh day of that month Moses died, which he considered a good omen for killing Jews. What Haman did not know, says the Talmud, was that Moses was also born on the seventh of Adar, which was clearly a propitious time for the Jewish people.<sup>15</sup>

The Talmud also says, "*Ein Mazal LiYisrael*,"<sup>16</sup> which is commonly mistranslated as "the Jews have no luck." What this statement really signifies is that the fate of the Jewish people, unlike other nations in the world, is not tied to any star or "timing." While this is true for the Jewish people as a whole, it seems that the Talmud does believe that the occasion of an individual's birthday is indeed a good time that brings fortune on the person and even to the Jewish people. The Talmud says that when Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah was appointed the head of the Sanhedrin at the age of eighteen, his beard miraculously turned white overnight, making him look seventy years old, with the wisdom and experience of an older man and not a youngster. The Rabbis then took Rabbi Elazar and his opinions more seriously. One commentary explains that this miracle occurred exactly on his eighteenth birthday because birthdays are a propitious time for every person, and this day should be celebrated.<sup>17</sup>

Even the birthdays of the Patriarchs, who had died long before, were considered important enough that the dates of the dedication of both the Tabernacle and the Holy Temple were postponed only because of this reason. One Midrash says that the building of the Tabernacle was completed on the first day of the month of Adar but the entire Jewish people let the Tabernacle stay dormant and it was not dedicated or used until one month later, the first of Nisan, because that was the birthday of Isaac.<sup>18</sup> Another Midrash states that the dedication of the Holy Temple was delayed until the month of Tishrei because it was in that month that Abraham was born.<sup>19</sup> The Talmud even specifies that the moment of a person's birth gives each human being certain proclivities and personality traits.<sup>20</sup> This does not necessarily determine a person's future, especially in the moral sense, but it does give a person specific tendencies. Thus, for example, it states that if a person is born under the planetary influence of Mars (the red planet), a person will be a shedder of blood. When the Talmud asks if this means he or she will be a murderer, it answers that this is only one possibility. Other possibilities include a ritual

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<sup>14</sup> Jerusalem Talmud, Rosh Hashana 17b, Midrash Yalkut Shimoni Habakkuk 247:564

<sup>15</sup> Megillah 13b

<sup>16</sup> Shabbat 156a

<sup>17</sup> Berachot 28a with Ben Yehoyada commentary

<sup>18</sup> Midrash, Tanchuma 11

<sup>19</sup> Midrash Pesikta Rabbati 6:4

<sup>20</sup> Shabbat 156a

slaughterer, a Mohel (who performs ritual circumcision) or a surgeon, all of whom also “shed blood” in their noble professions.

As mentioned above regarding Haman, the day of death is generally considered a bad omen and the day of birth is a good omen. Therefore, in an effort to minimize the sadness and depression caused by the death of a great sage, the Talmud lists the various great Rabbis whose birthday (the day they were born) coincided with the deaths of other great Rabbis.<sup>21</sup> This was not only a statement about the continuity of the Torah and Oral traditions from one generation to the next, but also a statement of comfort in times of sadness – that the joy of birth minimized the sadness of death. Thus, Rabbi Judah the Prince was born on the day that Rabbi Akiva died. Rabbi Judah was born the day that Rabbi Judah the Prince died. Rava was born the day that Rabbi Judah died, etc.

This same idea was stressed on the saddest day of the Jewish year – Tisha B’Av. Not the day of the death of one person, but the “death” of the Holy Temple and a way of life for Jews. It was on that day, the destruction of the First Holy Temple, that the Messiah was born (which has to be understood, but is too detailed for this context).<sup>22</sup> Another Midrash says that Tisha B’Av is not a day of sadness, but, rather, a day of joy because Menachem (another name of Messiah) was born.<sup>23</sup> It was for this reason that, according to many commentaries, Jeremiah, the prophet living during the First Temple’s destruction, called Tisha B’Av a holiday.<sup>24</sup> The “holiday” aspect of this sad day is reflected by omitting of the Tachanun prayer in the day’s prayers and other optimistic customs practiced by certain individuals on Tisha B’Av after the Mincha-Afternoon prayer service – all because of the “birthday” of Messiah.<sup>25</sup> Rabbi Moshe Isserles, certainly not a mystic, codifies as Jewish law (still practiced in many Yeshivot today) that the beginning of learning for a year or long time period should take place on Rosh Chodesh, the first day of the Jewish month.<sup>26</sup> Why? It is the moon’s “birthday” each month and a propitious time to learn Torah.

The one actual birthday celebration mentioned in the Talmud is that of Rabbi Yosef, who threw himself a birthday party when he turned sixty.<sup>27</sup> When questioned why he celebrated this particular birthday, he answered that this is the year that he can no longer die from *Karet*, the punishment of an early death. But, other than the fact that the age of sixty was considered to be a very old age at that time, is there anything significant about this year as signifying the end of an early death? Perhaps if the “ideal” age for a Jew is to die at the age of 120, getting to the age of sixty signifies that a person has achieved more than half of that age. In the same vein, the Talmud says that if a person has passed more than half his or her years without sin, that person will never sin for the rest of his or her life.<sup>28</sup> In some Jewish circumstances, more than half is considered equal to the whole.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Kiddushin 72b, Yoma 38b

<sup>22</sup> Midrash, Agadat Beraishit 68

<sup>23</sup> Midrash, Esther Rabbah Peticha 11

<sup>24</sup> Lamentations 1:15

<sup>25</sup> Beit Yosef commentary on Tur, Orach Chaim 554

<sup>26</sup> Rema on Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh Deah 179:2

<sup>27</sup> Moed Katan 28a

<sup>28</sup> Yoma 38b

<sup>29</sup> Nazir 42a, Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh Deah 95:2

## **IMPLICATIONS OF NON-JEWISH AND PAGAN ORIGINS OF BIRTHDAY CELEBRATIONS**

Academics have differing views of the origin of birthday celebrations, but all of the opinions have one thing in common: birthday rituals and parties are derived from pagan beliefs and as a tribute to their G-ds. One explanation involved the Greek belief that every person had a protective spirit who watched over him or her in life, a sort of guardian angel. The birthday cake was offered to this protective G-d and the lighted tapers represented an altar to that G-d, and these candles are endowed with a special magic to grant wishes.<sup>30</sup> Another explanation involved the moon G-d Artemis, and her birthday took place on the sixth day of each month. The round cake represented the full moon and the candles symbolized the light that emanated from the moon. Still others say that the Greeks took their birthday rituals from the Egyptians. Whichever theory is correct, the question must be asked: if this is indeed the origin of the birthday celebration, then what is the implication for traditional Jews? May Jews, then, celebrate their birthdays at all?

Part of being Jewish is remaining distinctively Jewish in beliefs and actions. Therefore, the Torah forbids imitating the customs of foreign cultures.<sup>31</sup> The Mishna also associates birthday celebrations with non-Jewish kings who worshipped idols, and therefore forbids Jews to make a celebration on the day the king celebrates his birthday.<sup>32</sup> After much discussion in the Talmudic and post-Talmudic period about the precise implications of the mitzvah/sin, the Code of Jewish Law rules that any custom that was entirely pagan or idol-worshipping in origin is forbidden to Jews, even if the custom is no longer even religious today (like celebrating Halloween, for example). Similarly, if the original reason for the ritual or custom is unknown, then it is similarly forbidden (since it might have had pagan origins). However, if the custom has legitimacy in and of its own, without pagan ideas, then even if non-Jews originated the particular practice, it is not forbidden to Jews (like hairstyles of today or wearing a suit<sup>33</sup>). Would this Jewish law forbid or permit celebration of birthdays today by Jews?

Although the specific rituals may have been pagan in origin, the celebration of the birth of something or someone is not unique to idol worshippers (as was demonstrated above in sources and will be expanded upon below). Thus, the idea of celebrating a birthday in and of itself is not pagan in origin, and would be permitted from that perspective. However, the specific rituals that are associated with birthday celebration may be questionable. The use of a cake, even a round cake, does not necessarily signify the pagan origin, as many celebrations involve the baking of cakes (and a round cake is simply the standard, not due to the shape of the moon). However, the use of candles, (especially the blowing out of candles) and attaching magical powers for wishes to these candles is certainly questionable from a Jewish perspective. Therefore, one modern Rabbi forbids the use the candles in Jewish birthday celebrations.<sup>34</sup> Specifically, Jews are never supposed to blow out candles since King Solomon has taught that a candle represents a human life that should never be extinguished by blowing it out.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> *The Lore of Birthdays* (New York, 1952) by Ralph and Adelin Linton

<sup>31</sup> Leviticus 18:3

<sup>32</sup> Mishna Avodah Zara 1:3 with commentaries of Rashi and Rabbeinu Chananael

<sup>33</sup> Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh Deah 178

<sup>34</sup> "The Laws of Pesach," 2002, Rabbi Avrohom Blumenkrantz, page 206

<sup>35</sup> Kaf HaChaim (Palagi) 31:25, Proverbs 20:27

## **BIRTHDAYS ARE INDEED SPECIAL IN JUDAISM; WHY?**

The day of birth is indeed special in Judaism. But rather than acknowledge this unusual event once a year, Judaism, in a certain sense, acknowledges a person's day of birth each and every day of life! Since Judaism believes that sleep is the equivalent of one sixtieth of death, each time then that a person sleeps, he or she dies – in a symbolic sense. It is for that reason that when a Jew wakes up each morning, his very first words should be, "*Modeh Ani...* – I am grateful...,” an acknowledgement and appreciation that life has been restored (from this “dead” person) and he or she is “born anew.” It is also for that reason that a few paragraphs later the traditional Jew prays to G-d and thanks Him that his or her soul given to them today by G-d comes with a “clean slate” (by virtue of that rebirth).<sup>36</sup>

Although traditional Judaism and Jewish sources do not contain a discussion of the birth of each individual, one central idea of Judaism is the birthday of the world, which is celebrated as the holiday of Rosh Hashana.<sup>37</sup> During the celebration of the birthday of the world Jews acknowledge G-d as the source of all, and G-d judges His creation. Just as the world is evaluated on the commemoration of its birthday, it is logical that each person should also commemorate his or her own individual birth on its anniversary, acknowledging G-d, and doing a self-evaluation. In fact, according to one opinion, the first day of Tishrei is not the birth of the world, but the birth of man, and that is the reason for the holiday and celebration: the birthday of mankind (as the beginning of Creation of the world was six days earlier).<sup>38</sup>

The significance of a birthday – both of the world and of man – was so important to the Rabbis that they tried to find a connection between the birthday of the world and the birthdays of the Forefathers – Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. According to the opinion that the world was created in the month of Nisan, the Forefathers were also born in that month, but according to the opinion that the world was created in the month of Tishrei, the Forefathers were born in Tishrei as well. In fact, the Talmud goes out of its way to find significant Jewish events in history to correspond to the birthday of the world.<sup>39</sup>

It is not only the birth of the world that has significance in Judaism. In every culture, including Judaism, there is great meaning attached to the birth of that nation. And there are many parallels between the celebration of the birthday of a people and the celebration of an individual's birthday. It is no accident, therefore, that the very first mitzvah-commandment given to the Jewish people was to establish a Jewish calendar, whereby the counting would commence on the birthday of the Jewish people.<sup>40</sup> One modern commentary states that it is very natural and important to commemorate all significant events in life by remembering them on the anniversary that they took place (like a birthday). That is why Rosh Hashana (the birth of the world/mankind) is significant for the Jew, as is the beginning of Nisan (the birth of the Jewish nation after the Exodus). And even the weekly lighting of the Havdalah candle on Saturday night is a weekly commemoration of G-d's creation of the world (since the beginning of

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<sup>36</sup> Berachot 57b, Daily Morning Prayer

<sup>37</sup> Abarbanel commentary on Exodus 12:2, Shulchan Aruch 592:1, Rosh Hashana Prayer book (Machzor), Shofar blowing service

<sup>38</sup> Midrash, Devarim Rabbah 1:13

<sup>39</sup> Rosh Hashana 10b

<sup>40</sup> Exodus 12:2 with commentary of Nachmanides

any day of the year as well as the first day of Creation, Sunday, begins at night in Jewish thought), and the very first element created by G-d in the world was light.<sup>41</sup>

In fact, the word “nation” came into English from the Old French word *nacion*, which, in turn, originates from the Latin word *natio* (nātiō), literally meaning “that which has been born.” This idea is borne out in the sources as well. Hosea describes the “Day of the King” which compares the anniversary of the king’s rise to power with the birth of a human being.<sup>42</sup> Ezekiel compares the birth of a nation to the birth of a baby, in the way a baby is now more independent of its mother after birth, according to one commentary.<sup>43</sup> Rabbi Tzadok compares the birth of a baby to the Exodus from Egypt and the birth of the Jewish nation that underwent great “pangs of labor” to become a Jewish people.<sup>44</sup>

### **THE SIGNIFICANCE OF BIRTH AND DEATH ON THE SAME DATE**

For all human beings, their date of birth is significant. However, for the truly righteous, states the Talmud, G-d intentionally allows them to complete their year of living, to the day, before they die. Therefore, the truly righteous die on the same date as their birth (according to the Jewish calendar).<sup>45</sup> We saw this above with regard to Moses. It was also true of King David, who was born and died on Shavuot,<sup>46</sup> Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai,<sup>47</sup> and countless other righteous individuals.

### **WHY SHOULD AND SHOULDN’T JEWS CELEBRATE BIRTHDAYS TODAY?**

Even for those who do not merit death on the same date as their birth, the day of birth itself gives special merit to each individual. The idea of making wishes and G-d granting those wishes on a person’s birthday is already alluded to by King David, as he immediately follows the words “day of birth” with “Ask Me and I will give to you” in the Psalms. This clearly indicates that the day of birth is indeed “special.”<sup>48</sup> According to Chidah, the “Mazal” on the day of one’s birth (see above) is extremely strong and healthy, indicating it is a special time.<sup>49</sup> One Midrash says that because people are so grateful that they completed an entire year of living (i.e., reached their birthday), they are very happy and it is very appropriate to make a party.<sup>50</sup> Rabbi Ephraim Greenblatt describes the various celebrations in Jewish history on the birth of certain children, including Isaac and Moses, and then says it is appropriate to celebrate one’s birthday.<sup>51</sup> Rav Tzadok writes that even though at a baby’s birth one does not know the future and what will become of the infant, each human being has a certain innate holiness that will eventually be revealed, and therefore it is appropriate to celebrate one’s birthdays.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Haamek Davar commentary to Exodus 12:2

<sup>42</sup> Hosea 7:5 with commentary of Metzudat David

<sup>43</sup> Ezekiel 16:4 with Malbim commentary

<sup>44</sup> Pri Tzadik “*Et Ha-Ochel*” 14

<sup>45</sup> Rosh Hashana 11a

<sup>46</sup> Shaarei Teshuva, Orach Chaim 494

<sup>47</sup> Pri Tzadik, Lag B’omer 1

<sup>48</sup> Psalms 2:7-8 with commentary by Raha”k

<sup>49</sup> Sefer Chomat Anach, Kohelet 10, Job 3

<sup>50</sup> Midrash Sechel Tov 40:20

<sup>51</sup> Revevot Ephraim 4:240

<sup>52</sup> Yisrael Kedoshim 8

Despite the positive statements about birthday celebrations in Judaism mentioned above, numerous Rabbis and sources are vehemently opposed to the celebration of birthdays by Jews. One Talmudic source gives a philosophical reason. Beit Shammai and Beit Hillel argued for two and a half years about whether it would have been better or worse if man had not been created. The final conclusion is that it would have been better if man had not been created, and, therefore, it would have been preferred if each human being had not been born. (It is beyond the scope of this volume to explain the deeper meaning of this statement.)<sup>53</sup> Thus, based on this statement, there is no positive reason to celebrate an individual's birth or the anniversary of that birth, one's birthday. Another argument against commemorating birthdays was alluded to above. If it was, in ancient times, non-Jewish pagans who instituted birthday celebrations, why, then should Jews celebrate their birthdays? Furthermore, since birthday celebrations are not mentioned anywhere (except for one lone Talmudic reference) in all classic Jewish sources, then this ritual is obviously not something Jewish and should not be practiced today.<sup>54</sup>

Another Rabbi explained why birthday celebrations are inappropriate for Jews, but are nevertheless quite proper for non-Jews.<sup>55</sup> Since Jews have been given so many commandments (613) and can more easily fail than succeed in fulfilling them, this is why it is better for a Jew not to have been created – since the odds against him succeeding are very high. Thus, celebrating the day of birth is not appropriate. But for non-Jews who have to fulfill only seven commandments (of Noah) to achieve the World to Come, it is far easier to succeed, and, thus, for them, a day of birth is an event to be celebrated. In 1889 in the city of Kovno, the people wanted to make a joyous celebration for their Rabbi, Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Spektor, on his fiftieth anniversary as Rabbi of the city. Not only did he decline, but he stated that this type of celebration or any birthday commemoration is forbidden for Jews. His son said that this practice was just copying non-Jews, as monkeys copy what they see without any understanding.<sup>56</sup> Rabbi Eliyahu David Rabinovits Te'omim, known as Ha-Aderet, (1843-1905) concurs and “cursed” those who wished him a “happy birthday.”<sup>57</sup> He used some of the same arguments cited above, as well as the Midrash comparing the day of birth, before a person accomplishes anything, to the foolish celebratory sending off a ship, when in reality the coming in of the ship or the death at the end of a person's life should truly be celebrated for its accomplishments.<sup>58</sup>

### **WHY SHOULD JEWS CELEBRATE BIRTHDAYS TODAY?**

On the other hand, many contemporary Rabbis, as well as leading Rabbis from the previous generations, have disagreed with the above analysis, and openly encouraged Jews to celebrate their birthdays in the right way and for the right reasons. Rabbi Chaim Dovid HaLevi (1924-1988), Chief Rabbi of Tel Aviv, writes that in modern times there is no prohibition for Jews to celebrate their birthdays in a family context since it is logical to be appreciative to G-d for extending one's life for one more year.<sup>59</sup> In previous generations, when idol worship was connected to this ritual, it is understandable that there might have been objections, but that is no longer the case today. A birthday party with a mitzvah meal and words of Torah turns this ritual into a holy event. Rabbi Ovadiah Yosef (1920-2013) permitted all birthday celebrations as

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<sup>53</sup> Eiruvin 13b

<sup>54</sup> Otzar Kol Minhagei Yeshurun, page 60

<sup>55</sup> Sefer Hakatan ViHilchotav 24:1

<sup>56</sup> Otzar Kol Minhagei Yeshurun, page 60

<sup>57</sup> Tefillat David, page 204

<sup>58</sup> Midrash, Shemot Rabbah 48a

<sup>59</sup> Responsa Asei Lecha Rav, 3:21

long as the purpose is to honor G-d and the festive meal is a mitzvah meal with words of Torah.<sup>60</sup> He further added that the famous Ben Ish Chai (1834-1909) was in favor of a yearly birthday celebration. Rabbi Moses Feinstein discouraged a public observance of birthdays in the synagogue, but certainly permitted birthday rituals in one's home.<sup>61</sup> Many other Rabbis also encouraged or permitted Jews to celebrate their birthdays, and several prominent Rabbis actually celebrated their birthdays publicly in various ways. It should be understood that all birthday celebrations mentioned refer to the date of a person's birth on the Jewish calendar, not the secular calendar.

### **WHICH GREAT RABBIS CELEBRATED JEWISH BIRTHDAYS?**

In the Lublin Yeshiva in 1931, all the students signed a "birthday wish" to their Rosh Yeshiva-Head of the Academy, Rabbi Meir Shapira, and the entire Yeshiva gathered for this purpose. Thereafter, every year on the seventh of Adar – the Rabbi's birthday (as well as the birthday of Moses) – the administration of the Yeshiva found an "excuse" to organize a gathering of all the students on this date in order to intentionally honor the birthday of their Rosh Yeshiva. This practice of celebrating Rabbi Shapira's birthday continued even after he died.<sup>62</sup> In a similar manner, when the prominent Jerusalem Rabbis gathered in 1906 to honor the accomplishments of the Chief Rabbi, Rabbi Shmuel Salant, they intentionally timed the gathering to coincide with the Rabbi's 90<sup>th</sup> birthday, and his birthday was publicly celebrated by all. (According to one eyewitness, Rabbi Chaim Berlin brought a cake with good wishes written in Hebrew.)<sup>63</sup>

One of the most interesting Heads of a Yeshiva who was outspoken about the issue of birthdays is Rabbi Abraham Schreiber, known as the Ketav Sofer (1815-1872). Based on a phrase in the Torah that G-d will "fill your days", Rabbi Schreiber writes that a Jew is obligated to count his or her days (i.e., commemorate birthdays), count how many years have passed, in order to be diligent in the service of G-d and to prepare for the Next World.<sup>64</sup> One source states that on his birthday each year, the 7<sup>th</sup> of Tishrei, Rabbi Schreiber would learn with his students and complete the written Torah.<sup>65</sup> But another source, reported by one of Rabbi Schreiber's students, states that when that student awoke early on the Rabbi's birthday and visited him early in the morning, Rabbi Schreiber was reciting the Psalms and crying non-stop. When asked why he was crying, Rabbi Schreiber replied that on this day, his birthday, he would take stock of his life, and would always come up "short" because he felt he never reached his potential. But, the student continued, the idea of commemorating one's birthday was crucial in giving thanks to G-d for the length of one's life, and this birthday celebration was even more important than prayer for guaranteeing that life would continue until the next year.<sup>66</sup>

In addition to these Rabbis, it has been reported (orally) that in his later years, Rabbi Yisrael Meir Kagan (1838 -1933), known as the Chafetz Chaim, celebrated his birthdays in order to publicize the rewards of refraining for Lashon Hara-Evil Speech. It was well known in Chabad Chassidut that birthdays are special and should be celebrated. Rabbi Menachem Mendel

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<sup>60</sup> Responsa Yabia Omer, Orach Chaim 6:29

<sup>61</sup> Responsa Igrot Moshe, Orach Chaim 1:104, 4:36

<sup>62</sup> Sefer Yeshivat Chachmei Lublin, pages 101-102

<sup>63</sup> Otzar HaChesed Keren Shmuel, page 36

<sup>64</sup> Exodus 23:25-26 with commentary of Ketav Sofer

<sup>65</sup> Minhagei Chatam Sofer 7:14

<sup>66</sup> Responsa Kinyan Torah Behalacha 3:21, Toldot Arugat HaBosem, page 298

Schneerson (1902-1994) commemorated his birthday publicly each year, and it became a Lubavitcher custom to compose a song in honor of this occasion, with words taken from the Psalm whose number corresponded to his birthday year (words from Psalm 72 on his seventy-second birthday, for example).

### **WHAT IS A “JEWISH” BIRTHDAY CELEBRATION?**

What constitutes a uniquely Jewish ritual in celebrating birthdays? The Rabbis mentioned above certainly did not make themselves a birthday cake and blow out the candles. What, then, did they do to celebrate their birthdays? How should a believing Jew today make his or her birthday celebration “special” and “Jewish?”

Rabbi Moshe Chagiz, who lived in the 1700’s, encourages every Jew to take a new fruit or piece of clothing on his or her birthday and recite the “*Shehechyanu*” blessing on it, having in mind also the birthday, since this blessing thanks G-d for reaching this moment in time. And from the age of 70, a special festive meal should be eaten each year on one’s birthday, especially if the person is a Torah sage.<sup>67</sup> Similarly, Rabbi Yair Bachrach (1638-1701) seems to say that the *Shehechyanu* blessing may be recited outright for someone celebrating his 70<sup>th</sup> birthday, but an accompanying meal may not be obligatory. Therefore, it is preferable to include words of Torah at the feast, which turns any meal into a seudat mitzvah—a Jewish ritual meal.<sup>68</sup> This sentiment is also echoed by Rabbi Yosef MiBagdad,<sup>69</sup> who says that the birthday boy or girl should have the birthday in mind when reciting the *Shehechyanu* blessing on a new fruit or new clothing.

Rabbi Hillel Posek adds that since each Jew already has special favor on his or her birthday, this day should be dedicated completely to G-d, in an effort to annul any evil decrees against that person. In addition, since there is a general Jewish concept to perform a commandment as early as possible, the commandment to become more spiritual and dedicate oneself to G-d should be undertaken at the earliest possible time in each person’s year – on his or her birthday, the very first moments of that person’s year.<sup>70</sup> One modern Rabbi<sup>71</sup> gives several other possible suggestions and customs for celebrating a Jewish birthday. One suggestion is that the birthday person should complete a Talmud tractate or the Written Torah, as we saw above with Ktav Sofer (Rabbi Schreiber). Tiferet Yisrael told his children that after he died they should begin the practice each year of writing birthday wishes to each sibling. (Perhaps this was the first birthday card.) Another custom for a “Jewish” birthday should be to give extra Tzedaka-charity on this day. It became a custom by Rabbis in Jerusalem to honor a great Rabbi by sending a donation to a worthwhile cause on his birthday – the amount would be the specific number of that birthday in Tzedaka (\$90 on his ninetieth birthday, for example). They did this for both Rabbi Salant and Rabbi Sonnenfeld.

The book of Chabad customs cites a number of distinctly Jewish birthday customs.<sup>72</sup> It mentions giving the birthday man an Aliyah to the Torah either on the day of his birthday or the Shabbat beforehand (if the Torah is not read on the birthday), a custom that is practiced in

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<sup>67</sup> Leket HaKemach 131

<sup>68</sup> Responsa Chavot Yair 70

<sup>69</sup> Ben Ish Chai, Parshat Rosh 17

<sup>70</sup> Responsa Hillel Omer 139

<sup>71</sup> Sefer HaKatan VeHilchotav 24:1

<sup>72</sup> Sefer Minhagim Shel Chabad, *Inyanim Shonim*, page 81

many Jewish communities today. It also mentions giving extra Tzedaka-charity on one's birthday, learning extra Torah on this day and that the birthday person, like Rabbi Schreiber (above), should take time for introspection and self-analysis of the past and commit to changes for the future. In 1988, Rabbi Schneerson inaugurated a "Jewish Birthday Campaign" and asked that each birthday person utilize this most special day in life to its utmost. It should become a day to recommit to the mission that G-d entrusted to each Jew, by bettering and sanctifying oneself and the world around each person.

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