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ברוקלין, נ. י.

By the Grace of G-d
25th of Cheshvan, 5735
Brooklyn, N. Y.

Mr. Mordecai Shoul Landow
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Greeting and Blessing:

As I inquire periodically from our mutual friends about you and your family, I was pleased to receive word about your recent birthday.

No doubt you know that Chasidim observe special customs in connection with a birthday. These also reflect the significance of a birthday in Jewish life.

In general, these customs comprise three items: 1) an Aliyah (being called up to the Torah) on the preceding Shabbos, if at all possible, 2) additional Torah study on the birthday itself, 3) an extra donation for Tzedoko on the birthday - if a weekday, or before or after, if it occurs on Shabbos.

Needless to say, Jewish customs are meaningful in many ways. It would take us too far afield to mention more than one aspect in regard to each of the above three customs.

The Aliyah to the Torah, ~~which is~~ on the preceding Shabbos, which is by way of a preparation for the birthday, emphasizes that with each birthday the Jew rises to a higher spiritual level. This is indicated also by the word Aliyah ("going up"). And although the term also refers to the physical ascent of actually going up to the Bimah which is on a higher level than the floor of the Shul, its real meaning is the spiritual aspect. Indeed, it is precisely because of the spiritual ascent (achieved through the reading and study of the Torah) that the Bimah is elevated.

The particular relevance of the birthday is this: a person, of course, grows physically and mentally from day to day and from year to year, so that in some respects the person is not exactly the same today as the day before. Certainly in the spiritual sphere the birthday is meant to bring about an essential (not merely superficial) change, since on that day his Mazel is renewed. By that is meant, as the Gemoro expresses it מְזִלֵּי חַיִּים, the "root" of the soul, which remains attached to its Source On High, while only an extension of the soul, as it were, descends into the body and vitalizes it. For, obviously, the soul which is eternal and part of "real G-dliness" could not be wholly confined within the body, any more than G-d Himself could be confined within the world He created. And just as G-d is both in the world and beyond it (immanent and transcendent), so it is

in regard to the soul and body. Therefore, when the birthday comes, the Jew is expected to ascend to a higher level in an essential way, namely by strengthening the very root of the soul, when, as a matter of course, the change is felt also in the "lower" aspect of the soul that vitalizes the physical body. Such a change can be achieved only through Torah, which is "our very life and the length of our days."

The second observance - an increase in the actual Torah study - follows the first, but in a more tangible way, namely the study of the Torah with understanding and comprehension, so that it permeates the mind and is reflected in actual living experience in the daily life.

The third item - the giving of Tzedoko - signifies the giving of oneself, both of body and soul. Since a person consists of both body and soul, his growth and advancement has to encompass both the spiritual and the physical. If the Aliyah and Torah study primarily reflect the spiritual, the giving of Tzedoko reflects the physical and material, namely the sweat and toil of earning money, which is then converted into something spiritual and sacred, since it is dedicated to a sacred cause, as indicated by the term "Tzedoko."

Being kept informed by our mutual friends about your consistent advancement both spiritually and materially (in matters of Tzedoko), there remains for me only to express the hope that since your recent birthday, you have been doing this with even greater inspiration and joy, and that the advancement is evident in both quality and quantity.

With blessing,

M. Schwartz