

Chai Elul: The Joy of Birth



Based on the teachings of the Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem M. Schneerson
From the Sichos in English Collection

Chai Elul, the eighteenth day of Elul, is the birthday of two great luminaries, the Baal Shem Tov (b. 1698 [5458]) and the Alter Rebbe (b. 1745 [5505]), the founders of the chassidic movement in general and Chabad Chassidism respectively.¹ The Torah mentions repeatedly that the birthday of a *tzaddik* is a joyous time.² Still, we don't find that Jews customarily celebrated their birthdays as a *Yom Tov* and in a conspicuous manner.

However, with regard to the birthdays of the Baal Shem Tov and the Alter Rebbe on *Chai* Elul, the Previous Rebbe revealed in the name of his father, the Rebbe Rashab, that it is a day of rejoicing, to such an extent that we wish one another "*Gut Yom Tov*."³

Since all things relating to Torah are precise, it follows that the special joy and uniqueness of the birthday celebrations of *Chai* Elulare related not only to the Baal Shem Tov and the Alter Rebbe themselves, but also to the chassidic teachings they revealed. What is the connection?

Why are birthdays celebrated? Before a child is born it has all its needs effortlessly provided for and is protected from harm in its mother's womb.⁴ At the moment of birth, all this changes — it needs to be fed, it loses its protection, and so on.

Spiritually as well, the time of birth seems to involve a spiritual decline, for as our Sages say, "When the child is in its mother's womb ... it sees from one end of the world to the other and is taught the entire Torah. As soon as it is born ... it forgets the entire Torah."⁵

The day of birth, then, involves a tremendous descent for the child, both physically and spiritually. This being so, what reason is there for rejoicing on a birthday?

But as long as the child is unborn, it is not yet a "*nefesh*,"⁶ a complete being composed of the unity of body and soul. Though it possesses all its limbs, moves, eats, etc., the child only becomes a *nefesh* when the soul entirely enters and unites with its body; as long as the child is unborn it receives its life-force from its mother.⁷ The joy of a birthday is precisely because it is only then that the child becomes a complete and independent living entity, a *nefesh*.⁸

This explains why the concept of celebrating a birthday is brought about by the birthdays of the Baal Shem Tov and the Alter Rebbe, for the "birth" of *Chassidus* initiated a similar thrust in the world:

Exile is likened to "pregnancy" and the Redemption through *Mashiach* to "birth."⁹ Since *Chassidus* is a foretaste¹⁰ of and a preparation to the Redemption, and since spreading the wellsprings of *Chassidus* serves to bring about the Redemption,¹¹ we understood that the innovation of *Chassidus* is similar to the revelation at the time of the Redemption, the aspect of "birth."

A Jew may approach Torah and *mitzvos* in one of two ways: It is possible to perform Torah and *mitzvos* in such a complete manner that Torah and *mitzvos* provide him with spiritual life and nurture. Nevertheless, there remains a distinction between the performer and the performance — the person feels himself as a separate and distinct entity from the Torah and *mitzvos* which he performs and which provide him with vitality and succor.

This is similar to “pregnancy” in that despite the child possessing all its limbs and organs, its life and vitality is distinct from itself; it is its mother’s.

The Baal Shem Tov revealed and emphasized¹² the inner and true aspect of “there is nothing but Him,” that there exists no true entity other than G-d. Thus, there do not exist two realities — the person who performs Torah and *mitzvos* and Torah and *mitzvos* themselves — but one true reality: G-d and His Torah and *mitzvos*, which are one with Him.¹³

In this approach to Torah and *mitzvos* there is but one entity, for the person’s *entire being* is composed of his performance of Torah and *mitzvos*. Which is to say, this is similar to a “birth,” when body and soul cease to be two separate entities and become portions of the same being.¹⁴

Our Sages underscore this in their statement, “I was not created but to serve my Maker (i.e., man’s entire being and his sole purpose of creation is for the service of his Creator).”¹⁵

For in order for G-d’s will and wisdom — Torah and *mitzvos* — to be accomplished and realized, we must necessarily exist as well, and exist as physical beings. Consequently, nothing was created *for itself*; all was created exclusively to serve a specific function in accomplishing G-d’s Will.¹⁶

While man will be fully “born” and truly live his life entirely united with G-d only in the times of *Mashiach*, still *Chassidus* provides us with a “taste” of this life presently as well.

We do so by living and promulgating the teachings of the Baal Shem Tov, especially in the manner that these teachings are capable of being internalized and affecting all our soul powers, as explained in the teachings of the Alter Rebbe.

Chai Elul, then, is truly a “birth day” to be joyously celebrated.

Based on *Likkutei Sichos*, Vol. XXIV, pp. 178-183.

FOOTNOTES

1. *Sefer HaSichos* 5703, p. 141.
2. See *Tanchuma* conclusion of *Pekudei*; *Shmos Rabbah* 52:2; *Megillah* 13b. See also *Likkutei Sichos*, Vol. V, p. 86 regarding the birthdays of all Jews.
3. *Sefer HaSichos ibid.*, p. 140 and 142; *ibid.* p. 89ff.; p. 185ff.; *Sefer HaSichos* 5705, p. 122ff., *et al.*
4. See *Tanchuma*, *Tazria* 3.
5. *Niddah* 30b.

6. *Rashi, Sanhedrin 72b, s.v. Yatza Rosho*. See also *Me'iri; Sema Choshen Mishpat 425:7; Ramban, Niddah 44b*.
7. See *Sanhedrin 91b; Likkutei Sichos*, Vol. X, p. 45.
8. See also *Likkutei Sichos*, Vol. II, p. 601ff.
9. See *Torah Or 55a ff.; Toras Chayim, Shmos 96b ff.*
10. See *Likkutei Sichos*, Vol. XX, p. 173 and sources cited there.
11. *Mashiach's* response to the Baal Shem Tov when asked by him when he will arrive. See famous letter of the Baal Shem Tov, printed at the beginning of *Kesser Shem Tov*.
12. See *Sefer HaMitzvos* of the *Tzemach Tzedek, Mitzvas Achdus Havayah*.
13. *Ibid.*
14. See also *Likkutei Sichos*, Vol. XIX, p. 247ff.
15. *Mishnah*, conclusion of *Kiddushin*.
16. See also *Likkutei Sichos*, Vol. X, p. 102ff.

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