

A Jewish Perspective on Birthdays *Rabbi Aryeh Lebowitz*

I. Introduction. There is a common practice in many contemporary societies for people to celebrate the anniversary of their birth. The exact method of celebration ranges from simple wishes of “Happy Birthday” to extravagant parties that are thrown in honor of the event. In this essay we will analyze a number of issues relating to the celebration of a birthday. Most importantly, we will deal with the question of the significance of the anniversary of one’s birth. Should one celebrate a birthday? If so, how should it be celebrated? Are there certain milestone birthdays that should be considered more significant than others?

II. The significance of a birthday. The *Talmud Yerushalmi* (*Rosh Hashana* 3:8) records that when *Amalek* came to do battle with the Jewish people, they were careful to have those whose birthday it was, fight on the front lines. The commentator *Korban Edah* explains that on one’s birthday, he has a special *mazal* that may be helpful in an otherwise risky situation. The *Chida* (*Chomas Onach Iyov* chapter 3) points out that this is not merely a belief of the pagan nations, but is actually firmly rooted in kabbalistic sources. The *Chida* writes that on one’s birthday his *mazal* is particularly strong. Based on this idea, the great Sephardic *Chacham*, Rabbi Chaim Paladgi writes that one should give extra *tzedakah* on his birthday because the increased *mazal* of the day will allow a person’s actions to have a greater impact on his overall personality and character (*Tzedakah L’chaim*). The *Arvei Nachal* (*Parshas Shemini*) writes that when a person focuses his efforts on a particular positive character trait on his birthday, Hashem will supply extra help to continue along that path (cited by *Sefer Minhag Yisrael Torah* page 264).

III. Is a birthday cause for celebration? At the core of the issue of whether birthday celebrations are appropriate is the question of whether the day of our births is actually a happy day. The *gemara* (*Eruvin* 13b) records that there was a running dispute between the *Beis Shamai* and the *Beis Hillel* whether a person would have been better off never being born, or better off having been born. The *gemara* comes to

the somewhat startling conclusion that it would have been better for a person to have never been born. Based on this passage, *Sefer Divrei Torah* (5:88) writes that the anniversary of one's birth is no cause for celebration. To the contrary, we would each be better off never having been born.

One can take issue with the conclusion of the *Divrei Torah* on the following grounds. *Tosafos* (*Eruvin* *ibid.*) asks that this *gemara* seems to contradict a *gemara* in *Avoda Zara* (5a) that requires a sense of gratitude to our forefathers, without whom we would never have been born. *Tosafos* explains that the *gemara* in *Eruvin* deals with one who is a "regular person" who would have been better off not being born, whereas the *gemara* in *Avodah Zara* deals with one who is a "tzadik" and is therefore certainly better off having been born. Rav Hershel Schachter has understood the definition of "tzadik" in this context to refer to one who is observant in *torah* and *mitzvos*. If we were to accept Rav Schachter's definition, it is possible that an observant Jew may celebrate his birthday. In a similar vein, the *Divrei Torah* (*ibid.*) writes that a non-Jew, who is only obligated in seven *mitzvos*, and therefore has less opportunity to sin, is better off having been born. It would therefore be entirely appropriate for a non-Jew to celebrate a birthday. In general, the *acharonim* who address the issue of birthday celebrations are split as to their propriety.

A. **The opposition to birthday parties.** *Sefer Otzar Kol Minhagei Yeshurun* points out that the only time we find mention of a birthday celebration in ancient Jewish literature is by *Pharoh* making a party for his servants (*Bereishis* 40). As mentioned previously *Divrei Torah* writes that Jews have nothing to celebrate on their birthdays.

B. **Those who do not find fault with birthday celebrations.** Rav Moshe Feinstein, in the course of discussing the propriety of a *bas mitzvah* celebration states that it is no more than a glorified birthday party, which itself is only a *seudas reshus* (*Responsa Iggeros Moshe Orach Chaim* 1:104). The implication of this

statement is that while there is no reason to specifically encourage such a *seudah*, there is also no objection to it (I have heard that Rav Moshe himself used to insist that each of his grandchildren call him on his birthday to wish him well). Rav Ovadia Yosef, in addressing this comment of Rav Feinstein, writes that a *bas mitzvah* is indeed a special occasion where we celebrate a person's obligation in *mitzvos*. Furthermore, Rav Ovadia continues, even if it were nothing more than a birthday party, it would still be a *seudas mitzvah* if *divrei torah* were recited.

The *Chasam Sofer* (*Toras Moshe, Parshas Vayeira*) points out the general (non-Jewish) custom to celebrate birthdays, and claims that Avraham would make such a celebration for Yitzchak on the anniversary of his *bris milah*. (Regarding celebrating the anniversary of a *bris milah* see *Ben Ish Chai, Parshas Re'eh* 17 who composed a special prayer for this occasion.)

IV. How to celebrate a birthday. In spite of the possible significance of a birthday, we do not find anywhere in *shas* or *rishonim* that a birthday should be marked by an annual celebration. (See, however, *Moed Katan* 28 that a 60th birthday may be cause for celebration.) However, some *acharonim* raise the issue of celebrating a birthday and look favorably on this custom. The *Ben Ish Chai* (*Parshas Re'eh* 17) records the custom to celebrate a birthday every year, and comments that it is a nice custom that he followed in his own family. It goes without saying that the notion of a "party" devoid of any torah content, where people just eat and mingle, would not have any significance from a torah perspective. How then should one celebrate a birthday?

A. **She'hechyanu.** Responsa *Ginzei Yosef* (4) writes that some "*anshei ma'aseh*" have the custom to recite a *she'hechyanu* over a new fruit or a new garment on their birthdays. Responsa *Chavos Yair* (70) writes that one should make a special *seudah* and recite *she'hechyanu* on his 70th birthday. The significance of the 70th birthday seems to be that Chazal assume that the average life span of a person is seventy years. It is therefore appropriate to

thank Hashem for having lived a “full” life (indeed, Ruchoma Shain reports that her father, Rav Yakov Yosef Herman *zt”l* held a celebration upon turning 70 for this exact reason). The *acharonim* debate whether this *beracha* should be recited with Hashem’s name (*b’shem u’malchus* – see *Pri Megadim, Mishbetzos Zahav, Orach Chaim* 444:9, and *Hagahos Chasam Sofer, Orach Chaim* 222). The *Kaf Hachaim* writes that one should recite a *she’hechyanu* on his 60th birthday as well, in celebration of the fact that he is now past the age that he would have died had he been *chayav kareis*. He does suggest, though, that this *berachah* be made on a new fruit with the intention to exempt the obligation to make the *she’hechyanu* in honor of this milestone birthday.

- B. **Torah Learning.** The *K’sav Sofer* (Responsa *Yoreh Deah* 148) writes that on his 50th birthday he celebrated by making a public *siyum* on *maseches Pesachim* and “thanking Hashem for bringing me to this point in my life, and for giving me the strength to learn and teach torah”. He also took the opportunity to pray that Hashmem should “help me continue to work for His sake and the sake of His torah... and that Hashem should be with him as He was with his forefathers in the battle to promote the growth of torah, rebuild the many breaches that have been made in the torah, and to be saved from those who speak evil of our torah”. As mentioned above, Rav Ovadia Yosef goes so far as to say that it is appropriate to have a special meal on one’s birthday where he recites *divrei torah*, and that such a meal would enjoy the status of a *seudas mitzvah* (Responsa *Yabia Omer, Orach Chaim* 6:29).
- C. **Personal reflection.** The *K’sav Sofer* also used his birthday as a time for personal reflection. *Kuntros Ohel Leah* (written by the son of the *K’sav Sofer* and printed at the beginning of *K’sav Sofer al haTorah*) records an incident when a student went to visit the *K’sav Sofer* and found him crying. The student asked his *rebbe* what the reason for his tears was, and the *K’sav Sofer* responded that it was his 54th birthday and he began to judge himself (*dan*, the Hebrew word for “judge” has a *gematria* of 54)

and realized that he has not accomplished nearly as much as he should have in his 54 years in this world. He sensed that he was lacking in torah knowledge and righteousness, and was moved to tears by this realization.

- D. **Bein Adam L'chaveiro.** Of course, the notion of respecting others and showing them that they are appreciated is a universal one, and is not limited to any single day of the year. Even so, *Responsa Aparkasta D'anya* (123) records that the *Tiferes Yisrael* insisted that his children write notes of *mazal tov* to each other on their birthdays. The custom to send a birthday card, while far from any form of halachic obligation or established custom, is a fine way to make others feel good about themselves, which is obviously a fulfillment of *V'ahavta I'reacha kamocho*.

Sefer Hakatan V'hilchosav (chapter 84) writes that the Jews of *Yerushalayim* made a birthday celebration for their rabbi, Rav Shmuel Salant, in honor of his seventieth and eightieth birthdays respectively. As a form of celebration, Rav Salant sent the amount of coins corresponding to his age to *tzedakah*.

V. Conclusion. We have explored the concept of a birthday and a birthday celebration from a Jewish standpoint. As with anything positive in our lives, we have found that our rabbinic leaders have developed uniquely Jewish ways to celebrate a birthday. Using the opportunity of a birthday to rethink our priorities, strengthen our commitment to torah, and our commitment to other people would certainly be a most productive method of celebration.