

By Rabbi  
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## **CHICKPEAS AT A SHALOM ZOCHOR**

**Based on the Hashkafa of HaRav Shimon Kessin, SHLIT'A**

**In Memory Of**

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Our people know how to party!! Thus, we have the age-old adage describing our nation: "We were attacked, we went to war, we won, now let's eat!!" The fact that we have a Shalom Zochor upon the birth of a boy, on a Shabbat Friday night in advance of his Brit Milah is only natural. Chazal provide numerous reasons for this celebration, all of which cannot compare to the reality that if there is a reason to thank Hashem Yisborach for the birth of a child, then why not express this over desert on a Friday night. There is one strange addition to this popular minhag, one that does not really fit with the theme of the night. A Shalom Zochor is not complete unless there are chickpeas on the table. Classically, the reason we serve these is as a sign of mourning for the Torah the infant boy lost a few days earlier. This requires clarification!! We have a Halacha – "Ain osin Mitzvot chaveelot chaveelot" – we don't bundle Mitzvot together. This is the reason why, at a wedding ceremony, there are two cups of wine, one for each part of what was once two distinct and separate ceremonies: Erusin and Nissuin. If we don't mix joyous events, then how do we come to integrate aveylut, mourning into the simcha that is a Shalom Zochor?!

There is a vivid memory that always brings a smile to me. Years ago, when my oldest daughter was expecting her first child, she was getting ready to travel to Chicago to join her husband's family for Pesach. I wished her a good trip and a Chag Sameach, expressing that this Pesach will be unlike any other that she has ever experienced. She asked me the logical question: Mah Nishtana, why will this Pesach be different than every other one I've celebrated? I encouraged her to be sensitive to the fact that for the first time, there is a Malach Hashem inside of her learning with her unborn child. While she will be going through the Hag-gadah with her family, that angel will be learning all the Torah related to Yetzias Mitzrayim with the gifted child she was carrying. This was something not to be taken lightly!! Most pregnant women throughout the world carry and support their unborn child. Jewish women are supporting a fully operational "Bait Midrash" as their child develops. If you encounter a woman who, at the end of her pregnancy cannot wait to deliver, encourage her to be patient. The last thing any of us wants to do is rush the Malach. The task of learning their Torah has to be completed.

As cute as all of this is, there is much more to a Shalom Zachor than meets the eye. It is important that we understand what's going on in the womb, why we're born into this world as infants and ultimately, why learn Torah if we are destined to forget it as we enter this world?

Adam and Chava were created as twenty-year old adults. Having not yet sinned, the pains associated with pregnancy, labor and birth were not known. Raising our children to adulthood was not part of Hashem's original program. A woman would become pregnant, give birth within a very short time, (a matter of hours) and the child would grow into adulthood virtually before their eyes. What we can infer from here is that infancy is a punishment of sorts, and indeed it is. When the primordial snake was seducing Chava to eat from the aitz ha'daas, the tree of knowledge, the nochosh said, "Because the L-rd knows that on the day you eat from it, your eyes will be opened, and you will be, "K'Elokim", like the L-rd, knowing good and evil", (Bereshit 3:5). To Chava, being like Hashem sounded like a major upgrade, causing her to examine the opportunity before her with the wrong eyes and mindset in place. Chava indulged herself, then forced her husband to do the same, thereby violating the only Mitzvah they were commanded to observe. (It is interesting to note that had Adam and Chava not eaten from the tree, with the first Shabbat, Adam would have become Mashiach ben Dovid and the zichuch process transforming Olom HaZeh into Olom HaBah would have begun. Adam and Chava did not have to do anything active for this messianic privilege to become a reality. There Mitzvah was one of a "shayv v'al ta'ase". Sit still and don't eat from that particular fruit. If this is what a passive Mitzvah can achieve, imagine what we

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# **TORAT HAR SHMUEL**

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can accomplish by performing an active Mitzvah with proper Kavannah!) One of the punishments Chava received was the pain associated with raising children, and this is the reason infancy exists. What Hashem was saying to Chava was the following. "Since you wanted to be like Me, I'll give you a taste of what My Reality is all about." In Hashem's world of Infinity, His reality can be described in three words: "Ain Od Milvadee – there is nothing but Me". Hashem does not simply exist. He **IS** existence. (An entire Sefer can be written on those three words.) Within that world, that endless expanse, the Infinite Unity that is Hashem is ever-present in Perfect form. A newborn infant is a corrupted (zuhamah) form of ain od milvadee. He/she is totally isolated in a world in which the child is the sum total of the reality it is associated with. He/she does not know its mother or father. In fact, the child does not even recognize that the hand at the end of the arm that is waving around belongs to him/her. They are in a state of total isolation, much the same way that Hashem's Infinite Reality is incomprehensibly isolated from the world He created, and we live in. The obvious difference is Hashem is fully aware and active in our world from which He withdrew (tzimtzum) to allow for our existence. That is the difference between the Reality of our King of kings and the corrupt and fixed isolation that defines the ain od milvadee of a newborn. Chava teaches us to be careful what we wish for and, more importantly, to know our place. No one possesses the right to want to be G-d because no one in the history of mankind, (and I include Moshe Rabbeinu and Rebbe Akiva along with our Avot), can begin to fathom even the slightest portion of what His Reality encompasses. This is how we understand infancy within the lifecycle of the human race.

How do we understand the gestation period of a woman from the moment of conception to forty weeks? Science has provided us with great detail regarding how a fertilized egg becomes a child capable of living outside of its mother's womb. The design of this process authored and controlled by Hashem Yisborach openly testifies to the Infinite Truth of Hashem's Wisdom. The proof: Considering all the things that can go wrong as a child develops and is born, it's amazing how often everything goes right. The precision of something as basic as cell division is mind-boggling. If one DNA strand moves in the wrong direction, the consequences can be catastrophic. Nonetheless, most of the time, everything happens as it should. The question that ethicists have been dealing with for centuries is what the status of this mass of new life is as it grows into a child. Is it simply that – a mass, or is it a human being? If we apply the reason for the chickpeas to this question, we can easily conclude that not only is this unborn child a person with all the rights and privileges that comes with persona, this unborn child has to possess a soul along with the mindful capacity to learn Torah. If this were not true, Hashem would not assign an angel to waste its time teaching a biological mass Torah. The only heter for abortion in the Torah world is if

the unborn child becomes a "rodaif", a threat to the life of its host mother. The unborn child's status as a human being has never been the focus of any Halachic question as it relates to abortion. Is the life of the mother threatened or not? That's where the issue begins and ends.

Let's take this issue to the next level. If there is an angel teaching the unborn child Torah, then we must conclude that something in the way of a Neshama must be in the womb as the child develops. The body develops physically while said soul develops spiritually. (I'm not qualified to discuss the impact "Gilgul Nefashot" has on this reality.) The body develops along biological lines while the soul matures along the line of Torah spirituality. There is an interesting Vilna Gaon (Commentary on Mishlei 16:26), that explains something different than we're used to hearing. He says that the Malach does not teach the child "Kol HaTorah Kulo" as many think. What that Malach does is to set the bar of Torah potential for that unborn child by teaching him everything he is capable of learning in his lifetime. This reflects the famous Chazal that expresses that, after we pass on, when we come before the Heavenly Court, we will not be asked, "Why were you not like the Avos or Moshe or Aharon"? We will be asked, "Why were you not you"? As per the Vilna Gaon, the theory of who we are capable of becoming is designed in the womb. That potential is fulfilled before we are born. Our job, our goal is to relive that process in dynamically based real time, in a place we call "Olom HaZeh". We begin as infants in the corrupted state of ain od milvadee and mature to a point where we can comprehend the Infinite Truth of Ain Od Milvado as it applies to Hashem Yisborach. In fact, there are four stages of development that every person matures through: Ain od milvadee, yaish od milvadee, yaish od Milvado and ultimately, Ain Od Milvado. We understand numbers one and four. Stage two of yaish od milvadee is when the infant becomes a child and recognizes his/her family. The child sees itself as the – milvadee - the focal point, the center of attention because of the way those around him react to his behavior. The slightest gesture can make a grown person laugh, cuddle with him, a whole host of emotions that one would never exhibit in an adult setting. As the child grows into young adulthood, from Bar/Bat Mitzvah until the age of twenty, milvadee becomes Milvado. There is family, friends, a growing social network – and Hashem Yisborach who is above everything. By this time, the focus should begin to shift to achieving a sophisticated understanding of Hashem Yisborach, one that can precipitate a strong and vibrant Dveykut. By age twenty, the concept of Ain Od Milvado should begin to crystallize to the point that people see within us, via our behavior, the reality that this concept takes life in our Middot and daily life. (Rov Kesin teaches that every non-organic psychological disorder can be based in the fact that the person is stuck in one of the first three

stages. The disorder keeps him from moving forward.)

The question that begs to be answered is why go through the trouble of learning Torah in utero if we're destined to lose at birth? HaRav Yosef Soloveichik, ZT'L, shines a light on this entire process with his answer. He correctly explains that it is easier to relearn something that one has forgotten than to learn something anew. What this means is that although on the conscious level, our ability to recall what we learned before our birth appears impossible, there is a subconscious place in our spiritual memory bank where all of this beautiful Torah is imprinted and stored. All we need to do is put forth the effort to retrieve it. The obvious question is how do we understand pursuing this goal over a lifetime in light of the reality that it was accomplished the first time around in forty weeks? The answer comes down to one word: Interference. While in the womb, there are no distractions, no outside challenges. We're in a Bait Midrash custom made for each of us to accomplish the task at hand. Once we're born, we are forced to begin again at a place below ground zero, infancy, for the reason explained above. From there we slowly mature to a point where we acquire the tools to learn – mental development, reading, writing, understanding and comprehension – and from there begin to build a knowledge base upon which our Torah learning is built. The other major advantage that exists in the womb is in the nature of the teacher – an angel!! The greatest teacher cannot begin to compare to an angel and the advantages of the environment the developing child and his/her teacher finds themselves in. A classroom with twenty to thirty students cannot compare to the one to one, student/teacher ratio present in the womb. It's no wonder that so much can be achieved during this gestation period!

Taking all this into account, it's no wonder chickpeas are eaten at a Shalom Zochor. Many say it's for the Torah the child

lost as the upper lip is pinched. I've never seen anything that

explains the relationship between pinching the lip and why it causes one to lose their Torah. If asked to speculate as to the connection, I would opine that while in the womb, there is an ongoing exchange – questions, answer, clarification, etc. – between the Malach and the Talmid. There is a reason Onkelos describes the ability to speak as "Ruach M'Malaloh", a heightened spirit. It enables the mind to express its thoughts to another person. The child leaves the womb having achieved so much through this vibrant exchange and a pinch on the lip renders him/her a silent infant. Talk about going from one extreme to the other!! Perhaps from here we can extrapolate that the child may not lose his Torah. Due to the environment and the angelic teacher, their Torah may be learned at a higher, more sophisticated level that requires extraordinary effort to duplicate in this world. Maybe that loss of madrayga in Torah, that level of learning is the mourning, the aveylut we have to confront at birth. Historically, the only learning environment that came close to this were the forty years our people were in the Ananay HaKavod, that spiritual womb in the desert. Everything physical was provided for them as is provided for the unborn child, and they could devote themselves entirely to learning with none other than Moshe Rabbeinu.

My grandson's Shalom Zachor was last Friday night, and B'Ezrat Hashem Yisborach, he will continue to improve in health so his Brit Milah will be this Sunday. Then the real work begins – raising him in Torah, Mitzvot and Ma'asim Tovim so that in his own unique way, he can achieve his special level of Dveykut with Avinu She'ba'Shamayim. May all of us be zoche – together – to share good news and joyous occasions, most importantly, the Geulah we all await.