

SHALOM ZACHOR - THE ACTION PLAN

by Rabbi Yehudah Prero

At the end of the Parsha of Lech Lecha, we read of Avraham being commanded to circumcise himself as well as all males at the age of eight days. There is a tradition amongst many communities to have a Shalom Zachor, a special "meal," on the first Friday night of a newborn boy's life. This Friday night celebration accordingly always proceeds the Bris Milah, the circumcision.

The Rema in the Shulchan Aruch, the Code of Jewish Law, (Yoreh De'ah 265:12) writes: It is customary to make a festive meal on the Shabbos eve after the birth of a baby boy. . . and this meal is a Se'udas Mitzvah (a meal conducted in conjunction with the performance of a Mitzvah).

Why is there a custom to make this meal? The Talmud (Niddah 20b) states that when a baby is in the womb, "he is taught the entire Torah. However, as soon as he enters the air of this world, an angel comes and strikes him on his mouth, causing him to forget the entire Torah." The Taz, in his comments on the Rema's statement, writes that this passage in the Talmud is the source for the custom. Because the baby forgot all the Torah he learned, he is akin to a mourner. Just as we visit a mourner in his home to comfort him during the mourning period, we visit the child as well.

Why do we visit the child particularly on Shabbos? Rav Yaakov Emden writes that this meal is traditionally called a "Seudas Zachar," "The meal of the male." Rav Emden posits that in this context, "Zachar" is not to be defined as "male." "Zachar" is a homonym, and it is the other meaning of the word that is being referred to. "Zachar" is to be translated as "remember." As we mentioned, we have a meal to bring together people to comfort the child on the loss of his memory of the Torah. Hence, this is a meal of remembrance. We conduct this meal specifically on Shabbos, Rav Emden says, because we find the use of the word "remember" by Shabbos - "Remember the day of Shabbos to sanctify it."

The point of the "Se'udas Zachar" is to recall the knowledge of Torah that the child had before he was born. The purpose for having such a meal can be better understood when we analyze the source of the custom, the passage in the tractate of Niddah cited above. The Eitz Yosef, in his commentary on the Talmud, poses an obvious question: What is the point of teaching the unborn child the entire Torah if he is going to forget it all before being born? If the instruction is for naught, then why bother?

The Eitz Yosef quotes another commentator, the Alshich. In our prayers, we find the request "V'sein chelkeinu b'torasecha," "and give us our portion in your Torah." This request implies that we have a

portion of the Torah that has been previously designated for us. The Alshich explains that this, in essence, is true. The souls of each and every person in the nation of Israel were present by the giving of the Torah at Sinai. Therefore, all of our souls actually received the Torah, and hence we all can lay claim to a part of the Torah. The Talmud in the tractate of Megillah states that if an individual tells you that he has toiled in the Torah and found it, he should be believed. The Talmud deliberately uses the term "found," as the study of Torah is like the search for a lost item. You had something, you lost it, and you endeavor to find it. Each of us was given the Torah and the knowledge contained within, and we strive to "find" it by learning the Torah. The fact that we know what we are looking for, because we once owned it, makes our efforts to retrieve the item that much easier than a quest for the unknown.

The same is true, the Eitz Yosef says, by the child. If the child was not taught the Torah while in the womb, he would not be able to acquire his portion of the Torah, regardless the extent of effort exerted. If the child was taught the Torah and allowed to remember it, no toil would be needed, and the entire system of reward and punishment, under which the world exists, would be effectively annulled. Therefore, the child is taught the Torah. The child is given the background, the basis needed for the study of Torah. The child is caused to forget the Torah, so that he must strive for excellence during his life and toil to recapture that which he lost, earning Heavenly reward with each iota of effort and accomplishment. The Eitz Yosef concludes that the Torah learned in the womb, although not retained, effects the child. That to which a child is exposed impacts the inner fiber of the child, even though the child is not dot actively doing something. The exposure to the Torah alone forms the foundation for a life in which the Torah plays the primary role.

The fundamental importance of the pre-birth Torah study is appropriately recalled after a child is born. The reason why it is recalled stems directly from the philosophy behind "remembering." As Rav Yaakov Emden wrote, we find the term "remember" used in conjunction with Shabbos. The Sefer HaChinuch explains what it means to "remember the Shabbos day to sanctify it." Through our active sanctification of the Shabbos (by making Kiddush, preferably over wine) we inspire ourselves to recall the greatness of Shabbos, and it causes us to firmly establish in our hearts the belief in the creation of the world. . . With our rest on the seventh day, we remind ourselves of the process of creation, and all who ask 'What is the reason for this rest?' will, as a result of this, strengthen within themselves a true and strong belief in G-d and the order of creation."

The Talmud (Menachos 43b) writes that "remembrance leads to action." On Shabbos, we are commanded to specifically **remember** the Shabbos so that it will lead to action, that being to bring us to strengthen our belief in G-d. On Shabbos, on the day when we are commanded to remember, we come together after the birth of a baby boy. The baby has lost his memory of the Torah. We gather to remember this Torah, not for the sake of remembering what has been lost, but rather to remember so as to inspire action. The Eitz Yosef explained that all the child is exposed to impacts him. The child is exposed to a gathering in which we are to remember the Torah study of the child

and therefore attempt to inspire the child to take action: to spend his life involved in Torah, engaged in reclaiming his portion of the Torah. This meal, the Se'udas Zachar or the Shalom Zachar, is not merely an occasion on which we eat, drink, and celebrate the birth of a baby boy. It is our opportunity to impress upon the newborn what he must accomplish in his life, by recalling the treasure he lost so that he is inspired to find it.

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