

Sat 5 Sep 2009
Dr Maurice M. Mizrahi
Congregation Adat Reyim
Lunch and Learn in honor of Maurice's 60th birthday

Birthdays

Life's milestones

The Talmud says: (Pirkei Avot 5:25)

- A five-year-old begins to study Scripture
- A ten-year-old begins to study Mishna (Oral Law)
- A 13-year-old begins to observe the commandments (bar mitzvah)
- A 15-year-old begins to study Gemara (Talmud)
- An 18-year-old gets married
- A 20-year-old earns a living
- A 30-year-old attains full strength
- A 40-year-old attains understanding (binah)(may study kabbalah)
- A 50-year-old is able to give advice
- A 60-year-old attains maturity (ziknah -- seniority) -- **I have reached maturity!**

Then it gets depressing. The decline:

- A 70-year-old attains a ripe old age
- An 80-year-old still shows strength
- A 90-year-old becomes stooped over
- A 100-year-old is as if he were dead and gone from the world
 - Not very charitable, but realistic in most cases

Aging and illness

Aging and illness: Unheard of in biblical days. You always looked like a young adult and one day you died suddenly. The Talmud says:

- Until Abraham there was no old age [i.e., old age was not physically obvious]. Whoever saw Abraham said, 'This is Isaac;' and whoever saw Isaac said, 'This is Abraham.' Therefore Abraham prayed that there should be old age [so he could be distinguished from his son], as it is written, 'And Abraham was old, and well stricken in age.' [Gen. 24:1. He is the first of whom this is said.]

-Until Jacob there was no illness, [One lived his allotted years in full health and then died suddenly.] so he prayed and illness came into existence [so that one could prepare for death], as it is written, 'And one told Joseph, Behold, your father is sick.' [Gen. 48:1. He is the first of whom this is said].

-Until Elisha no sick man ever recovered, but Elisha came and prayed, and he recovered, as it is written, "Now Elisha was fallen sick of a sickness from which he died." (2 Kings 13:14) [Thus he had been sick before but recovered.] (Sanhedrin 107b):

Birthdays

Jewish tradition is silent about birthdays. To celebrate or not? Dispute still raging.

-Con: Jews should not celebrate birthdays

-Only one reference to a birthday in Tanach:

And it came to pass on the third day, which was Pharaoh's birthday, that he made a feast unto all his servants. (Genesis 40:20).

So bad guys celebrate birthdays. Then Torah says:

You shall not do as they do in the land of Egypt, where you lived. (Leviticus 18:1-3)

Does this also mean "no birthdays"?

-Mishnah refers only to the birthdays of pagan rulers, not Jews:

These are the festivities of the idolaters: Kalenda [Roman New Year], Saturnalia [late December], Kratesis [commemorates Roman conquest of Eastern countries], the anniversary of accession to the throne, and [royal] birthdays and anniversaries of deaths. [You must not participate in them.] (Avodah Zarah 1:3).

-On this basis, 19th century Russian Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Spektor (1817-96) refused to allow his community to celebrate his 50 years in the Rabbinate.

-Talmud determined that it would have been better for man not to have been born than to have been born. So should not celebrate a birthday.

Our Rabbis taught: For two and a half years Beth Shammai and Beth Hillel were in dispute, the former asserting that it were better for man not to have been created than to have been created, and the latter maintaining that it is better for man to have been created than not to have been created. They finally took a vote and decided that it were better for man not to have been created than to have been created, but now that he has been created, let him investigate his past deeds [and, if he find them at fault, make amends] or, as others say, let him examine his future actions [before committing them.] (Eruvin 13b)

-In Ecclesiastes, (old pessimistic) King Solomon said:

The day of death [is better] than the day of birth. (Ecclesiastes 7:1)

-Satmar Rebbe: No for Jews since Sinai, OK for Gentiles.

-Pro: Jews should celebrate birthdays

-Talmud (Rosh Hashanah 10b-11a): Dispute between Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Yehoshua: Were Abraham and Jacob born in Tishri or Nissan? (Thus, there must be a religious significance to birthdays.)

-Talmud: Famous rabbis were born on the day when other famous rabbis died:

For a Master said: When R. Akiba died, Rabbi was born; when Rabbi died, Rab Yehudah was born; when Rab Yehudah died, Raba was born; when Raba died, R. Ashi was born [every time on the same day]. This teaches that a righteous man does not depart from the world until [another] righteous man like himself is created, as it is said, 'the sun rises and the sun goes down' [Ecclesiastes 1:5]'...(Kiddushin 72b)

Implies birth of a good person is cause for rejoicing.

-The Ben Ish Chai [famous 19th century rabbi Yosef Chaim from Baghdad, Iraq, 1832-1909]: [Ben Ish Chai, Year 1, Parshas Re'eh 17]

-Birthday celebrations are allowed

-On that day one enjoys special protection and mazal (luck)

-Anniversary of circumcision should also be celebrated – marks when one entered the covenant. (Abraham himself followed this custom.)

-Lubavitcher Rebbe: Celebrate all birthdays

-Some say: Some birthdays should be celebrated, but not all:

-Bar mitzvah: Celebration is just custom (milestone is automatic)

-Any years beyond 60 are a special gift from God and must be celebrated

-It says in Job:

You will come to your grave in ripe age [Job 5:26].

-Talmud: It means age 60: The word for 'in ripe age', 've-khellach', has numerical value 60) [ve-khellach 2 + 20 + 30 + 8].

(Moed Katan 28a)

-Talmud (Moed Katan 28a) says that Rabbi Yosef (4th century Babylonia) had a party for fellow rabbis on his 60th birthday to celebrate his having passed the age of 'karet'.

Meaning: If you have transgressed any of 36 specific commandments, on purpose, and it was not brought to justice by a human court, and you did not confess and repent, then God will punish you directly, usually by sudden and premature death, and your soul will be off from the World to Come. This decree is called 'karet' (excision).

You can never be sure WHEN karet was being applied, but people suspected that dying young, defined as being before the age of 60,

was due to karet. After 60 you were not liable for karet, and sudden death is just a merciful 'kiss of death' by the Shechinah -- the best death one could wish for. So reaching 60 **is** cause for celebration!

-Not all rabbis agreed. Raba said (still Moed Katan 28a):

[Length of] life, children and sustenance depend not on merit but [rather on] mazal [luck]. For [take] Rabbah and R. Hisda. Both were saintly rabbis. One master prayed for rain and it came, the other master prayed for rain and it came. [God granted both their prayers.] [Yet] R. Hisda lived to the age of 92, [but] Rabbah lived [only] to the age of 40. In R. Hisda's house there were 60 marriage feasts, [but] at Rabbah's house there were 60 bereavements.

-So some rabbis modified the meaning of dying young (STILL Moed Katan 28a):

-Said R. Ammi, Why is the account of Miriam's death placed next to the [laws of the] red heifer? [Numbers 20:1] To inform you that even as the red heifer afforded atonement [by the ritual use of its ashes], so does the death of the righteous afford atonement [for the living they have left behind].

-R. Eleazar said, Why is [the account of] Aaron's death closely followed by [the account of the disposal of] the priestly vestments? [Numbers 20:26,28] [To inform you] that just as the priest's vestments were [means] to effect atonement, so is the death of the righteous [conducive to procuring] atonement.

-It says in Psalm 90:

The days of our years are 70, or even by reason of strength 80 years (Psalms 90:10).

So Talmud suggests from that that reaching 70 or 80 is cause for celebration. (Moed Katan 28a -- still!)

-17th century German Rabbi Jair Hayyim Bacharach wrote a list of which celebrations have religious significance. Reaching 70 is one of them.

-Many Hasidim celebrate every year the birthday of their Rebbe.

-Workaround (clever):

Finish studying a Talmud tractate every year on your birthday, and therefore celebrate with a siyyum (meal of completion). (Rabbi Avraham Shmuel Binyamin Sofer (1815-1871) in his Responsa Ksav Sofer, Yoreh Deah §148; also his father, Rabbi Moshe Sofer, in his Yalkut Shimoni, Prophets, §301).

-Solves problem, avoids taking sides AND encourages study!

-I just finished Tevul Yom, shortest tractate in Talmud

-At age 10 begin 63 tractates, so finish at age 73 at 1/year, enough for a lifetime of study and birthdays!

-Resolution

- Birthday celebrations now the norm among Jews. Practice copied from non-Jews, but does not directly contradict Jewish values.
- Many congregations offer special prayers of thanksgiving for people who turn 70 or 80. (Even 83, the age of the "second Bar Mitzvah".)
- Customary birthday wish: "Ad me-ah ve-esrim", i.e., 'May you live to be 120' (the age at which Moses died (see Deuteronomy 34:7)).

After death

- Why do we remember the dead on their death days (yahrzeits), rather than than on their birthdays?
 - Don't we want to celebrate the day when God gave us this person, rather than the day God took him away ?
 - No rationale known for a fact. Speculation:
 - To be different from Gentiles (e.g., Pharaoh), although no injunction against remembering the dead on their birthdays
 - On day of birth, have accomplished nothing; on day of death, have accomplished what one is remembered for
 - The righteous are considered alive even after they are dead, and the wicked are considered dead even in their lifetimes (Berachot 18a-b)