

Celebrating your birthday the Jewish way

BY RABBI BEREL RODAL



AS A CHILD, I STUDIED IN A multicultural Jewish school in Milan, Italy. We were a nice group of friends, each from a different background. Celebrating birthdays was popular with many of my peers, but for me it was a non-issue. Birthdays were just another day.

Then my turn came. In 1988, the Lubavitcher Rebbe launched the “birthday campaign”, encouraging young and old to celebrate their birthdays with friends and family, and most importantly, with one’s self. I felt very excited – I would finally get to have a birthday party like my friends!

And I did – just with a few ‘minor Jewish adjustments’. The first year, we were still greenhorns on the birthday party circuit, so we brought some “nosh” to school, and everyone recited the brocha and some Torah verses (pesukim) in unison.

The next year, I had my party at home – but unlike the parties I was used to attending – our focus was on thanking Hashem, telling over some words of Torah, and taking on good resolutions for the coming year. Yet in no way did it resemble a sermon – the vibe was great... we all had an absolute blast.



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It is now a widespread custom among many Jews to celebrate one’s birthday with a “farbrengen”, a gathering of family and friends where words of Torah are discussed and where we inspire each other to better ourselves. So is this a new custom? To answer, I would like to bring a few points from a talk of the Lubavitcher Rebbe, where he explains the significance of a Jewish birthday based on the Babylonian Talmud (known as the

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Gemara or Talmud) and the Jerusalem Talmud (known as the Yerushalmi):

1) The Yerushalmi explains that on a person’s birthday, one’s mazal is stronger. What should one do with this extra strength? Surely we should seize this opportunity and use it in a positive way,

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adding in our Torah and mitzvot. Practically, this means:

- 1: Make an account of the past year and see where you can improve.
- 2: Give extra tzedakah (never a bad idea...).
- 3: Increase your learning of all parts of Torah.
- 4: Resolve to fulfil a particular mitzvah with greater hiddur (attention to detail) in the coming year.
- 5: Men or boys over 13 receive an aliyah to the Torah on the Shabbos prior to the birthday.
- 6: Begin reciting your ‘new’ chapter of Tehillim – if you turned 20 today, you would begin reciting chapter 21 each day for the coming year. You should also

study a few verses of the chapter with commentary and study further on each Rosh Chodesh of the year.

7: The Baal Shem Tov taught that one should wear a new garment, or eat a new fruit and recite “Shehecheyanu”, having in mind at the same time to thank Hashem for bringing you to this milestone.

2) The Gemara explains that Hashem created Adam – and each person after him – as a unique individual (unlike plants and animals) to teach us that “Bishvili Nivrah Ha’olam” – “the world was created for me”. Which in simple English means that I am the only ‘me’ in the world; therefore I am the only one that can affect the world in *my* way, because I am different from everyone else in it. So on my birthday, I celebrate my induction into my unique mission on planet Earth, making our world a home for Hashem.

Practically this means:

1: Making a gathering of family and friends to both celebrate and inspire each other to grow Jewishly.

2: To celebrate it with joy, since joy – simcha – is the best soil for growth, thereby ensuring that we will in fact follow through with our resolutions.

3: Considering one’s special strength and heightened individuality on this day, one has the power to confer blessings to those around him and one should take the opportunity to do so.

It might sound like a cliché, but it’s the truth: “A birthday is the day that Hashem decided that the world is incomplete without you.” So take the opportunity on your birthday to add your uniqueness to this world!

Jewish Life is celebrating its 4th birthday. Mazal tov! Your contribution to Jewish South Africa is unparalleled. May you continue to educate and inspire us all!

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