

Birthdays Are a Big Deal

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Dvar Torah



It might surprise you to know that celebrating a *yom huledes* is a fairly recent phenomenon. Many of our grandparents were not even aware of their exact Jewish birthday (and some were also unable to identify their birth year).

The Gemara Yerushalmi mentions the significance of a birthday—a person's *mazel* is more potent on that date—and there are a handful of rare reports of *gedolei Yisrael* who commemorated their birthdays. Nevertheless, the majority of *klal Yisrael* did not pay much attention to the anniversaries of their own births. Aside for the need to calculate when they reached the age of bar and bas mitzvah, their birthdates held precious little significance.

All of the Chabad *rebbeim* commemorated their birthdays, but it was mostly done in a way that would be largely undetected, and the practice was not adopted by the Chasidim.

The first time we discover a *hora'ah* to the Chasidim to take this day more seriously is in *Hayom Yom*. The Rebbe chose to include the following directive as the entry for Yud Alef Nisan (the Rebbe's own birthday):

On our birthday, we should spend some time in seclusion for the sake of recalling things from the past and carefully thinking about them. When we recall incidents that require rectification or repentance, we should do *teshuvah* and rectify them.

It took time, but the Chasidim gradually realized that a birthday should be a serious and reflective occasion. Nevertheless, it was only in the year 5748 (1988), on the occasion of Rebbetzin Chaya Mushka's birthday (25 Adar)—one month after her *histalkus* (22 Shevat)—that the Rebbe launched the “Birthday Campaign” or “Mivtzah Yom Huledes.” One month

following that, in a *sichah* on Acharon Shel Pesach (22 Nisan), the Rebbe explained the profound significance of a birthday.

A list of ten *minhagim* for a birthday was compiled and published,¹ and ever since then, celebrating a *yom huledes* with all that it entails has become part of the fabric of our lives.

In the years following the launch of the Birthday Campaign, the Rebbe shared the *Ge'ulah* perspective, explaining how to view birthdays and why they are especially important to our lives as we approach the *Ge'ulah*:

At the moment of your birth, you were pure *etzem* (essence). You were not yet defined by anything: you had no successes, no failures, no insights, no relationships, and nothing but just pure you.

At that moment, you were the *Ge'ulah* version of yourself—*etzem*.

Commemorating your birthday is your opportunity to reconnect to your most genuine self. It is your time for reminding yourself to see yourself for what you truly are: pure G-dliness. Pure *atzmus*. Nothing can break that *etzem*, nothing can tarnish it, and nothing can define it either.

Ge'ulah means to reveal that which was hidden. *Galus* is concealment, so living *Ge'ulah* means viewing things for what they truly are. That is why a birthday is so deeply connected to the *Ge'ulah*. Both are about *etzem*, and both are about perfection. A birthday and the *Ge'ulah* are about seeing yourself the way Hashem sees you, which is the healthiest way to live.

¹ The list is printed in *Sefer Hasichos 5748* (vol. 2, pp. 406–407). It is based on the Rebbe's directives in *Hayom Yom*, *Sefer Haminhagim*, the letters of *Igros Kodesh*, a *sichah* the Rebbe delivered at a *yechidus* for boys celebrating their bar mitzvah, and *sichos* delivered at the launch of Mivtzah Yom Huledes.

