

Re-Collecting Life

Rabbi Simlai delivered the following discourse: What does a fetus in the womb of its mother resemble? The fetus is like three-fold ledger that stays folded up. The fetus' hands rest on its two temples, its elbows on its knees, and its heels against its buttocks. Its head lies between its knees, its mouth is closed and its navel is open. It eats what its mother eats and drinks what its mother drinks but produces no excrement because otherwise it would kill its mother. As soon as it goes forth into the air of the world, however, that which has been closed is opened and that which has been open is closed. Otherwise, the fetus could not live one single hour.

A light burns above its head and it gazes—able to see from one end of the world to the other. There is no time during which one abides in greater happiness than during those days. At that time one is taught the entire Torah. But upon entering the air of the world, an angel appears, strikes it on the mouth and makes it forget the entire Torah.

The fetus does not leave the womb until it is made to swear an oath. What is the oath it is made to swear? “Be righteous, not wicked.... Always bear in mind that the Holy One is pure, that his ministers are pure, and that the soul that he placed in you is pure.” (From Babylonian Talmud Niddah 30b)

Before the formation of the embryo in its mother's womb, the Holy One decrees what it is to be in the end—male or female, weak or strong, poor or rich, short or tall, ungainly or handsome, scrawny or fat, humble or insolent. He also decrees what is to happen to it. But not whether it is to be righteous or wicked, a matter that he places solely in the power of a person. He beckons the angel in charge of souls and says to him: “Bring me such-and such- a soul, which is in the Garden of Eden; it is called So-and-so, and its appearance is thus-and-so.” At once, the angel goes and brings the soul to the Holy One. When the soul arrives, it bows and prostrates itself before the king who is the king of all kings, the blessed Holy One. In that instant the Holy One says to the soul: “Enter the drop that is in that angel's hand.” The soul opens its mouth and says: “Master of the universe, the world in which I have been dwelling since the day you created me is enough for me. Why do you wish to have me, who am holy and pure, hewn from the mass of your glory, enter this gross drop?” The Holy One replies, “The world I will have you enter will be more beautiful for you than the one in which you have dwelled. Indeed, when I formed you, I formed you only for this drop.” With that, the Holy One makes the soul enter the drop against its will. Then the angel returns and has the spirit enter the mother's womb. Moreover, two angels are designated for the soul to guard it so that it will not leave the embryo or fall out of it. There a lamp is lit over its head and it is able to look and see from one end of the world to the other...

Then the angel strolls with the soul from morning 'til evening and shows it the place where it is to die and the place where it is to be buried. The angel continues strolling with it throughout the world, showing it the righteous and the wicked, finally having shown it everything. In the

evening the angel returns the soul to its mother's womb and there the Holy One provides bolts gates for it. The embryo lies in its mother's womb...

In the end, its time comes to go forth into the world. The same angel appears and says to the soul: "Your time to go forth into the air of the world has come." The soul says: "Why do you wish to take me out into the air of the world?" The angel says: "My child, know that you were formed against your will; know, too, that you will be born against your will, will die against your will, and against your will are to give an account to and reckoning before the king who is king of kings, the blessed Holy One." But the soul refuses to go out of the womb so that the angel has to strike it and put out the lamp that has been burning over its head, and then he brings it forth into the world against its will. Instantly, the infant forgets all that had been seen and known. Why does the infant weep upon going forth? It is because of the world now gone.

When it is time to die, the same angel appears and asks: "Do you recognize me?" "Yes, but why did you come this day and not on any other day?" Says the angel: "To take you out of the world—your time to depart has arrived."...

That person pleads with the angel: "You have already taken me out of two worlds and made me enter this world." The angel responds: "Have I not told you that you were formed against your will, were born against your will, were alive against your will, and against your will are destined to give an account and reckoning before the blessed Holy One?" (Midrash Tanhuma, Pekudei)