

# The Concept of Birthday: A Theoretical, Historical, and Social Overview, in Judaism and Other Cultures

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**Abstract**—In the age of social distance, which has been added to an individual and competitive worldview, it has become important to find a way to promote closeness and personal touch. The sense of social belonging and the existence of positive interaction with others have recently become a considerable necessity. Therefore, this theoretical paper will review one of the familiar and common concepts among different cultures around the world – birthday. This paper has a theoretical contribution that deepens the understanding of the birthday concept. Birthday rituals are historical and universal events, which noted since the prehistoric eras. In ancient history, birthday rituals were solely reserved for kings and nobility members, but over the years, birthday celebrations have evolved into a worldwide tradition. Some of the familiar birthday customs and symbols are currently common among most cultures, while some cultures have adopted for themselves unique birthday customs, which characterized their values and traditions. The birthday concept has a unique significance in Judaism as well, historically, religiously, and socially: It is considered as a lucky day and a private holiday for the celebrant. Therefore, the present paper reviews diverse birthday customs around the world in different cultures, including Judaism, and marks important birthdays throughout history. The paper also describes how the concept of birthday appears over the years in songs, novels, and art, and presents quotes from distinguished sages. The theoretical review suggests that birthday has a special meaning as a time-mark in the cycle of life, and as a socialization means in human development. Moreover, the birthday serves as a symbol of belonging and group cohesiveness, a day in which the celebrant's sense of belonging and sense of importance are strengthened and nurtured. Thus, the reappearance of these elements in a family or group interaction during the birthday ceremony allows the celebrant to absorb positive impressions about himself. In view of the extensive theoretical review, it seems that the unique importance of birthdays can serve as the foundation for intervention programs that may affect the participants' sense of belonging and empowerment. In the group aspect, perhaps it can also yield therapeutic factors within a group. Concrete recommendations are presented at the end of the paper.

**Keywords**—Birthday, universal events, rituals, positive interaction, group cohesiveness.

## I. INTRODUCTION

**T**HE tradition of celebrating a person's birthday has existed since ancient times. Historical evidence [1]-[4] shows that ceremonies, like birthdays, play an important role in human life. It is estimated that celebrations of a life trajectory like birthdays not only help understand the cycles of natural processes but are also vital transition celebrations in society. Depending on culture, religious beliefs and geographical location, the ceremonies are similar but also different. Eventually, the birthday event remains socially significant,

and is generally considered a festive day celebrated together with friends and family.

The law stipulates various rights according to a person's age, including the right to vote in elections, the right to marry, a permit to smoke or drink alcohol, various rights in labor law, tax law and social security law, and more. For all these rights, the determining date is the person's birthday.

The importance of birthdays has been researched from different perspectives, especially regarding children. Children's birthday celebrations have been recognized as a factor that helps children adapt to age-related biological and social changes. From the age of kindergarten, every child regularly participates in two types of events and through them experiences different aspects of social, governmental, and civic values: one is an annual celebration of national events and traditional holidays. The second is a birthday party- a celebration of age [1]-[4].

## II. BIRTHDAY: A HISTORICAL REVIEW

### A. Early Records of Birthday Celebrations

In ancient times, people did not know how to calculate dates, so they could not focus on mentioning important events such as birthdays. Over time, humans began to understand the significance of the lunar cycle and they developed customized calendars. This made it easier for them to calculate the date of birth and celebrate it. Historians have found some evidence [5]-[7] that birthday celebrations have been held and documented even before the rise of Christianity. In ancient pagan cultures, people tended to believe that evil spirits visited man on his birthday; hence they used to surround him during the celebration in order to protect him from the evil eye. These celebrations were also characterized by loud singing and noisy dancing that would drive away the evil spirits. Therefore, in those times it was not customary to bring gifts to the celebrant, only good wishes, and pure intentions [5]-[7].

During the ancient and late Roman Era, birthdays were perceived as family holidays and celebrated in an elaborate pagan-religious ceremony. The religious idea behind these birthday celebrations was related to the prevailing belief in the existence of the 'genius' which is: A cloned spiritual alter-ego from the 'other side', a personal shadow and guardian that is born with each person, lives parallel with him, in-charge of his well-being, and dies with him. On one's birthday, a person celebrated his day in a private but regular religious ceremony, in honor of that alter-ego born with him. He used to sacrifice some of the family's food in the form of a bread cake and wine, and to ask the alter-ego to fulfill his needs. On paterfamilias' birthday, the entire family celebrated in honor of

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his genius, which was considered as the guardian of the extended family. The ceremony included a cake with symbolic number of festive candles on it, drinking wine while expressing wishes and blessings, bouquets of flowers and crown decorations. Over the years, all the details of this ritual ceremony have been preserved, especially in children's birthday celebrations, yet the fundamental structure of the ceremony and its ideological meanings have already disappeared. It is now believed that the birthday celebrant is the sole focus of the celebration [8]-[12].

#### B. Popular Birthdays in World History

Document descriptions of ancient birthday celebrations were found only among kings, aristocrats, and senior officials in high society. At first, common people and especially children were unable to celebrate a birthday. The scholarly explanation for these differences is that only the nobility and aristocrats were wealthy enough to fund such parties and were considered important enough to be written about [5], [10].

Preliminary evidence for birthdays can be found in the history of Israel and Judaism; the most famous birthday in history is that of Jesus Christ. For nearly 2,000 years since the birth of Jesus in Beth-lehem, Christians have been honoring the day as Christmas. About 4,000 years ago King Pharaoh used to celebrate his birthday with a feast that he held in his court. King Herod celebrated his birthday in the company of nobles, officers, and close friends at a special dinner in the Galilee [5], [6], [13], [14].

#### C. The Origin of the Birthday in Judaism

In Jewish religious law (*halakha*), the birthday is not considered as a traditional holiday; therefore, it does not appear in the religious calendar. Jews had to be aware of their birth date due to school-age, set in the ancient calendar, and because of commandments-day at the age of thirteen, in order to celebrate *Bar Mitzvah* ceremony on time. Apart from these events there is no other record of birthdays in the Jewish history, or a mere mention of that day. Since birthdays are hardly mentioned in cultural Christian texts either, the leading assumption is that most laymen did not know their precise age and birthdate until recent centuries. The Hebrew custom of recording birthdates, sometimes also the time of birth and death, in the family holy book, is one of the sixteenth century developments. One can learn about the increase of individualism at that time, both in general society and in private lives [10], [15], [16]. However, it is difficult to assume that there was no simple awareness of the significance of a birth date. An example of such are the words of the Italian Rabbi Menahem Shlomo [9], [10] about the customs of "Pharaoh's birthday" (The Book of Genesis) who referred to the birthday in the modern sense: "most people like a day that is payment rendered against the day that he was born, and celebrate it and make it a feast". Another example is of the Talmudic sage (*Amora*) Rabbi Yosef who celebrated his sixtieth birthday with his wife, and as many others, one can see that he remembered his birthday many years after his *bar mitzvah* ceremony [9], [10].

#### D. Birthdays in Literature, Art, and Music

The concept of a birthday has left its mark throughout history in culture and literature as well. Following [7] are few of the most familiar references for birthdays:

*The Book of Genesis* [17]: The birthday of Pharaoh, king of Egypt, was described as a time when he pardoned the minister of liquor and hanged the minister of bakers, as Joseph saw in their dreams, thus paving the way for his promotion as adviser and deputy to the king. Joseph's knowledge that this would happen "in three days" was explained by the fact that he knew when Pharaoh's birthday would be, in which the king used to judge his servants.

*Novels and fairy tales* – In Lewis Carroll's book "*Through the Looking-Glass and What Alice Found There*" [18], Hampty Dampty has a conversation with Alice about birthdays. The conversation focuses on the advantage of 'un-birthday' over birthday, since, during which one may receive gifts, compared to only one day when birthday gifts are given.

Another story that challenges conventions regarding birthday celebrations appears in the book "*Findus' Birthday Cake*" [19] written by Sven Nordquist in Sweden in the 1980s. Findus is old Patterson's cat, who is forced to celebrate his birthday three times a year. It just so happens because in Patterson's opinion it is "nicer". Patterson tries to make the event festive and meaningful, but each time he gets into trouble because of the cat's birthday celebrations. The British author Michael Bond did the same in his well-known book "*A Bear Called Paddington*" [20]. No one knows exactly when Paddington, who was found by the Brown family at a London train station, was born. The adoptive family makes a decision to "start over" and a one-year birthday is marked with a celebration for the bear. The housekeeper, Mrs. Berd, bakes a wonderful cake with whipped cream and jam, topped with one candle. She even states that bears celebrate birthday twice a year, in summer and winter, "just like the queen".

The familiar fairy tale of Hans Christian Andersen - "*The New King's Clothes*" [21] tells the story of an unwise king, who decides to celebrate his birthday in all its splendor and hold a parade and a multi-participant feast. In honor of his birthday, the king decides to order a festive costume. The tailors who arrive at his palace manage to fool him and convince him that the 'no costume' is actually a very luxurious costume. The king ended up walking naked in front of his subjects who waited in the streets to cheer in his honor.

*Art of Painting* – Carl Johan Lasch painted in the nineteenth century his "*Happy Birthday*" [22] in which children carry a greeting card and a bouquet of flowers for birthday.

*Music*- The "*Un-Birthday*" song [23] is a music piece by Mack David, Al Hoffman and Jerry Livingston, from the Walt Disney Production's album 'Wonderland'. The piece includes a sampling from the un-birthday scene in 'Alice in Wonderland'.

*Birthday Songs* – Many songs have been written over the years for the birthday celebration, both for children's and adult celebrations. Some songs even allow including the name of the celebrant in the song. There are birthday songs that are unique to the country or culture, and there are also world-famous universal songs. One of the best-known songs is

"Happy Birthday to You" [24], which has been translated and sung in various languages around the world.

### III. BIRTHDAY CUSTOMS AND RITUALS

Some of the popular birthday traditions and symbols that we see today, originated hundreds of years ago. Today, people all over the world celebrate birthdays in a similar way and perform set rituals with a universal customs, such as: making birthday cake; blowing out candles on cake while making a wish; placing a crown or flowers on the birthday celebrant's head; decorating the celebration room with flowers and balloons; and of course, the common custom of greetings and good wishes to the celebrant, either in person, over the phone, by fax or mailed telegram, and whether via Internet and social media. Overall, birthdays are perceived as good days and are marked with joy, fun and anticipation [2], [7], [8], [25]-[27].

#### A. Sources of Common Birthday Customs

The origin of birthday customs was only partially explained, as far as could be deduced from cultural stories throughout history. Here are some interpretations and explanations for the most common birthday customs [7], [10], [25], [26], [28]:

*Birthday cake* – Some believe the tradition was originated by ancient Greeks, who used to take round or moon shaped cake to the Temple of Artemis - the moon goddess. Others attribute the birthday cake custom to Germany, where they used to make bread in the shape of the baby Jesus' diapers.

*Lighting candles on the cake* - this popular custom is also attributed to the Greeks, who used to light candles on the cake taken to Artemis, to make it shine like a full moon. The Germans also used to place a large candle in the center of the cake, to symbolize the 'Light of Life'. Some believe that lighting the candles comes from the religious belief that gods live in the sky and candles light help to open the gates of heaven, so that their prayers will be heard and fulfilled. Even today, people tend to express silent wishes while putting out the candles. It is believed that blowing out all the candles with one breath brings good luck

*Placing flowers on the head* – this custom originated in a time when kings used to celebrate their birthdays by wearing new clothes with the most magnificent crown they had. Today, in order to feel like a king for one day, we adopt a custom reserved for kings.

*Birthday wishes and greetings* – popular custom stems from the magic and witchcraft rituals that were intended to thank one's guardian angel that keeps away evil and malicious spirits. The great importance given to magic words and to the removal of spell increased on a person's birthday, thus it became crucial to bless and wish well to the celebrant, to remove all evil and invite only good spirits into his life.

*Sending birthday cards* – It started in England about a century ago. The custom began when people sent apology cards for not attending the birthday party, and over the years they became greeting cards bearing birthday wishes.

#### B. Birthday Customs and Rituals around the World

Different cultures have celebrated birthdays in various ways for many decades. As aforementioned, some traditions have become universal and are quite similar in different parts of the world: birthday candles which carry wishes, birthday games that reflect the child's abilities in relation to the previous year, and birthday taps which ensure good luck for the coming year. Other traditions are more unique to a specific country or culture, geographic location, or religious belief [7], [26], [29], [30].

To highlight the prevalence of the birthday and its unique significance to people, the following review will present a variety of birthday customs and traditions, which are common in different cultures and countries around the world. It should be noted that some of the information presented here was not available in the accepted sources, such as books or research literature, since the concept of birthday was not, itself, a subject for writing. Therefore, the data were derived from as diverse sources as possible, including birthday sites, family stories, children's books, birthday booklets, etc.

The following sections were organized and written only after cross-referencing data between the various sources and the recurring stories. Some sources reviewed a variety of customs and therefore they appear at the beginning of the review, while other sources only referred to a specific culture and therefore they appear in the relevant paragraph. It may be the most extensive database, currently exists, for the birthday them.

The information in the following sections, of chapter IIIB, are compiled from [7], [25]-[36].

#### Birthdays in Africa

In some African cultures it is customary to hold a group initiation ceremony for children instead of birthdays. At a certain age, children learn the laws of the tribe, including beliefs, customs, songs, and dances. For example, members of the Masai tribe go through two stages of initiation at the ages of 13-17. The first stage lasts about three months; the boys leave their parents' house, paint their bodies white, and receive training of young warriors. During the second stage, that may last a few years, the young warriors lengthen their hair and live in a camp called 'manyatta' and practice hunting wild animals. When they are ready, they will be married and run a herd of cattle as their ancestors. The girls are initiated at the age of 14-15. They are taught by the older women about the duties of marriage and how to care for babies.

*In Nigeria* - The 1st, 5th, 10th and 15th birthdays are considered special events. On these birthdays, mass celebrations are held with over 100 guests. The birthday meal includes roast lamb or goat and a traditional rice dish called 'jollof'.

*In Guyana & Ghana* - On their birthdays, children wake up to a special treat called 'oto'. Later they have a birthday party where they eat 'kelewele'- a dish of stew and rice. The also children play a native game known as 'Ampe'.

*In South Africa* - On the twenty-first birthday, the parents give their child a key, as a symbol that he is old enough and

ready to open the door to his future.

*In Sudan* – Birthdays are celebrated mostly in large cities. The customary drink at birthday celebrations is 'karakokday' which consists of the hibiscus flowers. It is also customary to give celebrant silver coins.

*In Egypt* - The Egyptians tend to hold big birthday parties, with friends and family, so they often serve two birthday cakes, only one of them has candles. Refreshments also include cookies, individual cakes called 'ghettos', sesame sticks and sandwiches. In honor of the occasion, the houses are decorated with paper garlands called 'zeena' that look like chains of snowflakes. The first birthday of every child is celebrated with songs and dances and party decorations made of fruits and flowers, as symbol of life and growth.

#### *Birthdays in South and Central America*

In various Latin cultures when girls turn 15, a big party is held in their honor, where they dance waltz with their father and other boys. Each girl dances with 15 partners each symbolizes one year in her life. The ceremony is often accompanied by a religious ritual, which includes the custom of lighting candles. The celebrant lights her parents' candles, and they light their parents' and the rest of the family's candles. In this way the girl expresses the importance and power of her relationships with all her family members.

*In Argentina & Brazil* - The birthday child gets a pull at his earlobe, in honor of each year of his life.

*In Uruguay* - The main custom is that the celebrant blowing on the candles while the other guests cheer for him, clapping, joking, whistling loudly, and touching the celebrant's head or shoulders.

*In Puerto Rico* - The child gets tapped on the arm for each year of age. A big party is held including a formal dinner.

*In Mexico, Cuba & Panama* – It is customary to make a piñata full of sweets (paper pulp, usually animal-shaped) and hang it from the ceiling. The birthday child hits the 'piñata' while his eyes covered, until it opens and all the candy falls to the children. A lot of people are invited to the birthday party including neighbors, friends, co-workers, and family. There is also a Cuban tradition of celebrating a girl's fifteenth birthday. The ceremony is called "la fiesta de los quince años" and is like a teenage ceremony that marks the transition of girls to women who may reproduce.

*In Jamaica* - The celebrant is wrapped in flour while the guests sing and dance to the sound of reggae music.

*In Aruba* - Birthday kids take candy to school for their classmates and teachers. Every teacher who receives a candy gives the birthday child a symbolic gift, such as pencil, eraser, or postcard. The birthday child is allowed to wear special clothes on his birthday, instead of school uniforms.

#### *Birthdays in North America*

*In United States* – there is a traditional humorous custom called 'Punches' and its purpose is to punch the celebrant in honor of his birthday. Each punch is intended to convey a special greeting, such as: grow up, live well, get married quickly, be happy, etc. American girls celebrate the age of 16

at a "sweet sixteen" party, whose symbol is sugar.

*In some parts of Canada* – it is customary to ambush the celebrant and grease his nose as a symbol of good luck. The oiled and slippery nose prevents bad luck from catching the celebrant.

#### *Birthdays in Australia*

Barbecue parties characterize many birthdays in *Australia*, and children eat a traditional dish called 'fairy bread'. At the age of 21, the happy celebrant receives the key to his parents' house as a symbol that he is mature enough to go out and come as he pleases, and to stay out as late he likes.

*In New Zealand* – After lighting the candles on the birthday cake, everyone sings the birthday song out loud, usually without music, and then the celebrant gets a round of applause for each year of his life, and another for a happy year.

#### *Birthdays in Asia*

*In Japan* – Great importance is attached to the third, fifth and seventh birthdays. A special religious festival is celebrated every year on November 15 and all children of these ages are invited to take part in it. During this festival parents and their children pray and give thanks for the bounty that they have been blessed with. It is customary that on these birthdays the children wear a traditional outfit and have birthday parties with many guests.

*In China* – The birthday child pays respect to his parents and receives a monetary gift. Friends and relatives are invited to lunch with long noodles symbolizing longevity. Every new year everyone celebrates their birthday, even if it is not their official date of birth, since everyone grows up in one year. Birthday celebrations form a novel ritual celebration, in which the Chinese celebrate not just who and what children are, but also articulate hopes about who and what they will become. The celebration includes noodles representing long life.

*In Korea* – On every child's first birthday a big family party is held. The table is set with food and four other items: pencil, ruler, wire, and money. The baby chooses one item which predicts his future: an excellent student, good at handicrafts, long life, or financial wealth. On the sixtieth birthday, the Koreans hold a special ceremony called *Hwangap* and this symbolizes the passage into old age.

*In Vietnam* - The Vietnamese do not acknowledge the exact day they were born. A baby turns one on 'Tet' (Vietnamese new year) no matter when he was born that year. On the first morning of 'Tet', adults congratulate children on becoming a year older by presenting them with red envelopes that contain 'Lucky Money'.

*In India and Nepal* - The birthday child gets up at dawn and puts on new clothes. He kneels and touches his parents' feet as a sign of respect. They then all visit a shrine, where they pray, and the child is blessed. At school, the birthday child wears a colorful dress and gives chocolates to his classmates with the help of a good friend. In *Nepal*, It is customary to place a mixture of yogurt and paint on the forehead of a birthday child, as a sign of good luck.

### *Birthdays in Europe*

*In Germany* – As far as is known, the Germans were the first to start celebrating birthdays for their children and even gave a special name to this celebration - 'Kinderfest' (Children's Festival). Starting in the morning, the family lights candles throughout the house and only after the birthday meal will the birthday child blow on them and make a wish for the new year in his life.

*In Holland* - Special birthdays at ages: 5, 10, 15, 20, 21, are called "crown" years. During these years the birthday child receives a particularly large present. At school, the teacher prepares for the child a birthday hat, often made of paper ribbons or paper flowers.

*In Hungary* – At the time of opening the gifts, it is customary to pull on the earlobes of a birthday child and say a short rhyme, as follows: "God bless you, have a long life so your ears reach to your ankles".

*In Ireland* - The birthday boy is raised upside down and bumped to the floor as a sign of good luck. The number of bumps is according to the age of the child, plus one for extra good luck.

*In England* - Certain symbolic objects are mixed into the birthday cake while it is being prepared. For example, if your piece of cake has a coin in it- you will be rich. They also raise the birthday child up in the air and down to the floor, once for each year of age, and then "one for luck, two for luck and three for the old man's coconut".

*In Scotland* – The birthday child receives a one-pound note for each year of his age, plus an additional pound for good luck. A soft smack on the bottom is also given for each year.

*In Denmark, Sweden & Norway*- A flag is flown outside a window to designate that someone in the house is celebrating a birthday. Presents are placed around the child's bed while they are sleeping so that they will see them immediately upon awakening.

*In Norway* - The birthday child stands in front of his classmates and chooses a friend for a small dance, while the rest of the class sings a happy birthday.

*In Russia and Lithuania* - Instead of a birthday cake, many Russian children get a pie with a birthday greeting written on the icing. In Lithuania it is customary to hang garland on the house doors when someone is celebrating a birthday. The guest of honor wears a decorated sash throughout the celebration is lifted three times in a decorated chair.

### *Birthdays in Ancient Civilizations*

*In Pagan culture* - Thousands of years ago birthdays were considered a time when evil spirits were able to harm a person because on that day his life changed [5], [7]. It was believed that the only way to ward off the bad spirits is to be in the company of friends and family, whose blessings and gifts would drive them away. Another way to scare away the evil spirits was to use rattles at parties

*The Greeks and Romans* – believed that every person has a 'guardian spirit' that was present at the moment of his birth, whose role is to protect him throughout his life. For this reason, they used to celebrate birthdays with thanksgiving

ceremonies and bringing offering to the gods or to the 'guardian spirit' [5], [7].

*Hinduism* – the Hindu tradition includes 'Samaskara'- a childhood celebration that allowed families to gather and mark the growth and development of children, in transition from stage to stage. Among the common childhood ceremonies [37]-[40]: '*Jatakarma*' – a birth ceremony, during which the mother and baby are given a bath, followed by passing lighted pieces of birch bark around the child's head and all present. This is done by the midwife, while she repeatedly blesses: "happiness and more children to you". '*Namokrona*' – a naming ceremony held twelve days after the baby birth. This ceremony is both a religious and social event; The '*male's first haircut*' – after the first birthday; '*Ear piercing*' - the upper-part of right-ear of Brahmin children was pierced when they were six years old; And last, the '*sacred thread*' ceremony which is the most important Initiation, since it marks the end of childhood.

### *Birthday in Israel*

The state of Israel has also developed its own unique tradition for birthday celebrations. The Zionist leadership established the form of celebration in kindergartens according to the European model, as part of an overall effort to create a new "Zionist nation" with its own ceremonies. Kindergarten birthday parties have been, and still are, perceived by educators as a powerful tool of socialization. Gardeners refer to birthday parties as festivals, each of which focuses on one child becoming a "hero of the day". All these activities together create a festive atmosphere whose basic message is that it is worthwhile and good to grow older and mature. Following are some common Israeli birthday customs: The birthday is celebrated with friends and family, sometimes even at work. The refreshments include a birthday cake decorated with candles as the number of years of the celebrant, plus extra candle "for next year". The celebrant blows off the candles while expressing a silent wish in his heart. The celebrant gets presents from close friends and family members, and everyone wish him a good life, up to one hundred and twenty years old (or up to 100 and feel like 20 years old). On children's birthdays, guests lift the celebrant with his chair, as the number of his years, plus once "for next year". During the party it is customary to sing familiar birthday songs. In a "round" year in which we celebrate a decade, the event is especially large and happy [2], [15], [41], [42].

In conclusion, the tradition of age-celebrating seems to be preserved over years in world's cultures, along with its customs and symbols. Some customs are universal, and some are unique to a specific culture, but all are used to celebrate a person's age. However, in the modern era that sanctifies consumer culture and wealth, the birthday celebration has also become a sign of socioeconomic status and social prominence. In Western countries today, one can see glorious, expensive, and exaggerated birthday events that perpetuate the consumer culture [43]. Despite this, at any birthday celebration, exaggerated or ordinary, the celebrant receives a familial and

social message about being important. This is done through the common customs and symbols, which make that day special and put the celebrant at the center.

#### IV. BIRTHDAYS IN JUDAISM

The previous review presented the birthday customs and their origins from all over the world. A comprehensive analysis of the literature on this subject has revealed that the concept of the birthday has been extensively reviewed in Judaism and it is even attributed a unique historical, religious, and social significance. It should be noted that there are observant Jews who prefer not to celebrate their birthday, because it is a "Gentile custom" that began in ancient Egypt and they rely on Pharaoh's birthday as evidence. On the other hand, many sources can be found in the Torah literature (Jewish Bible) on the value of birthday, and even Chabad stream of Judaism considers it a day of repentance. The following review cites many of the Jewish religious writings, but due to the length of the references and their unique language, it was decided to present only the main contents, accompanied by selected quotations whose wording is easier to interpret and understand [9], [14], [44], [45].

##### A. Origins of the Jewish Custom

The custom of marking birthdays relies on two events in which Israel had salvation via a birthday; one source (in the words of Sages - Shabbat Tractate) tells that Jacob, our ancestor, was supposed to descend to Egypt wearing iron chains, and this was prevented after Joseph the righteous became deputy to King Pharaoh. It occurred following his interpretation of the Pharaoh's dream about his Ministers, during his birthday. Thus, it was interpreted that Pharaoh's birthday led to the salvation of the people of Israel. The second source (also in the words of Sages - Megillah Tractate) tells about the miracle of Purim (A Jewish holiday) – The evil Haman wanted to kill all the Jews during the month of Adar (February-March) which is considered unlucky for the Jews, since Moses died in that month. Haman failed to carry out his plan and the salvation was credited to the fact that that month was also the time of Moses' birth. Therefore, it was extrapolated that Moses birthday brought salvation to Israel [14]. These stories have led Jews to mark, in Bible study and a commandments meal, the birthday of the righteous, even those who died long ago. This custom is very common today, as written (Megillah Tractate): "It is customary for Hassidic Jews that the birthday of a righteous man, even after his death, is a great day, just as Haman tried but failed to harm the Jews, because he did not know that Moses was born on that month.. and this proves that the birthdays of righteous men, even after their deaths, are great days" [14].

##### B. Birthdays as Lucky Days

According to Judaism, a person's good luck controls and helps him on his birthday, as is written: "*A man does not fall easily on his day of origination*" [46].

Based upon this idea, various rabbis wrote and clarified that a birthday can cancel out negative decrees and that it is a day

of success and good luck, and a person should not worry that something bad will happen to him on that day. The story of Amalek is provided as evidence of such, since during a war he would place, on the front lines, the soldiers who were celebrating a birthday. This is how he managed to overcome his enemies, since the fortune of the birthday celebrants increases that day [9], [14].

The Rabbi from Lobavitch, who led the Chabad movement for over 44 years, also left his followers a legacy of joy and instructed them on how to celebrate birthdays. The Rabbi explained that birthday is a type of inception point that constitutes the unique chance in life for every person to fulfill his mission. "*Birth is God's manner of expressing that you matter*" said the Rabbi, and therefore a birthday is an important event that should be celebrated, that we should be thankful for, and that we should use to reflect on how we are fulfilling our destiny. He instructed his students to celebrate this day with joyfulness and happiness of *Tora and mitzvah*, and even recommended a 'Revelation of Joy' by holding a celebration with many guests in the company of family members and friends in order to make important decisions on that day with joyfulness. The common birthday blessing in Israel, "that you should live to 120 years old" comes from the Book of Genesis [7], [45], [47], [48].

##### C. Birthday as a Private Holiday and Family Day

A person's birthday is perceived in Judaism as his own private holiday (good day). Torah scholars made sure to mark their birthdays each year, As written: "And it is customary to make every year the day of birth a good day, and it is a beautiful sign, and so it is customary in our house", and also: "This is the joy of the birthday every year, because this is the day when an independent living reality was created" [45], [49].

Some refer to the birthday not only as a good day, but even as everyone's private New Year's Day (or *Rosh-Hashanah* in Judaism). That is, the birthday is also an opportunity for introspection and reflection of the person, regarding everything he has done in his life and everything he undertakes for the future to come: We examine our accomplishments and failures, and set goals for the future. Whether a birthday is a person's private New Year's Day or a private holiday, it is a special day for a person, and it is best suited for self-reflection with his maker. There is evidence for this idea as well: "One should learn to recognize the graces of God, which created him and raised him and granted him another year of life, since when he was born he did not have the mental capacity to recognize his greatness. But, since each year of growth adds to one's life experience and wisdom, and one should allow his heart to awaken and thank God for the privileged to live until his birthday, and reflect of his deeds during the past year" [14], [44], [47], [48].

The birthday is also considered in Judaism as an opportunity for family cohesion. An example can be learned from the touching birthday story of the son of one of the greatest Torah scholars. The son spent an entire day with his father on his birthday, unlike other days when the father is



busy and short on time. According to Jewish religious law, or *halakha*, parents are obligated to give charity on their children's birthdays, as well as to acknowledge the great happiness they have been blessed with. They should understand that God entrusted them with a gift - a supreme soul in a holy body - and trusted them to guard it well by providing education in the right way [14], [49].

#### *D. Milestone Birthdays in Judaism*

Judaism marks specific birthdays, which are considered milestones in a person's life. Each such birthday is defined according to the age-task, achievements, and goals [9], [14], [16], [50], [51], as follows:

*Thirteen Years Old for Obligation* – One is obligated by the Torah and commandments (mitzvot). At this age, a young man celebrates his Bar Mitzvah (girls celebrate their Bat Mitzvahs at age twelve).

*Eighteen Years Old for marriage* – The age at which one may marry.

*Twenty-year-old to pursue* - At the age of twenty, a person is at a crossroads regarding his future, and Sages determined that the path one chooses becomes his entire life. At this age, the person is punishable even by the heavenly Court.

*Thirty Years Old for Strength* – When a person reaches age thirty, he already had ten years of experience fighting the evil instinct, so he already decided about his spiritual path.

*Forty Years Old for Wisdom* – At the age of forty, a man's mind and opinions are mature. As written: "After his thirties have mostly passed, and his structure is beginning to ruin and the strength of his flesh is waning – the strength of his mind is fortified and purified" [14].

*Fifty Years Old for Advice* – The fiftieth birthday, beyond the semantic significance of "Jubilee years", is also an important milestone in an adult's life. In order to grant advice, one must be wise and experienced, and those who reached fifty have life experience and still have their mental abilities intact, so their advice encompasses both aspects.

*Sixty Years Old for Old Age* – A person who reaches age sixty has entered the world of old age, not at the physical aspect but rather "old age in wisdom". As written, "At the moment that one's corporeal strength is weakened, his mental strength grows more and more" [14].

*Seventy Years Old for Elderly* – On one's seventieth birthday, it is customary to hold a festive meal to express thanks that the person has reached that age.

*Eighty Years Old for Bravery* – If one reaches age eighty he is brave, meaning, he has strength and a brave temperament that help him live eighty years. Also, at the age of eighty, a person's physical desires and bad instincts are already at rest, and therefore he is worthy of granted a spiritual bravery.

#### *E. National Birthdays in Israel History*

The birthdays of central figures in the history of Israel receive a special mark in the Hebrew calendar, sometimes as a Memorial Day or holiday. Following are some examples of such birthdays [14]:

*Herzl Day* – The birthday of Benjamin Ze'ev Herzl, the

visionary of the State of Israel.

*Science Day* – The birthday of Albert Einstein, the famous Jewish scientist.

*Birthday of Isaac* – The birthday of Isaac, one of the Jewish patriarchs, is a day of celebration, emphasized in Jewish law.

*Birthday of Moses* – The birthday of Moses is a day of gaiety and joy in Jewish law, because it protected the Jews in various events already mentioned here.

*Birthday of King David* – King David was born during the Pentecost (Jewish religious holiday), and therefore every year while reading the biblical story of Ruth, it ends with a mention of David's birth, to remind his birth with joy and happiness.

*Birthday of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai* – The "Lag Ba-Omer" celebrations (Jewish religious holiday) are full of joy, also because it is the birthday of Shimon bar Yochai.

So far, the concept of birthday has been defined through the customs and rituals that characterize it. The significance of birthday in various global cultures, and in Judaism in particular, was also reviewed. The importance of the day was also demonstrated by mention unique birthday events, which are celebrated as holidays around the world. Now, after laying the conceptual and historic foundation of the birthday, the review will also survey the implications of the day, from a psychological and social perspective.

## V. BIRTHDAY AS A MARK OF TIME AND SOCIALIZATION

### *A. Birthday as Mark of Time*

To understand the concept of birthday, one must coordinate several independent systems, that is, birthday involves social, cultural, and biological aspects, which are all interrelated with time (episodic, cyclical, and linear time) [2], [3], [52]-[55]. *Socially*, a birthday usually involves a party that focuses on him. In *episodic time*, it is also a public occasion in which the social status of a person changes; A 6-year-old child becomes a proud 7-year-old on that special day. However, birthdays are not celebrated at any chosen time, but only on the date of birth, because this is the cultural construction of time as a *cyclical system*. A birthday, with its entails change in status, constitutes a ritual milestone that takes place in the present and connects the past and future. This special day marks the passage of time, and is also a consequence of the *biological* maturation, growth, and aging that ties humans to *linear time*.

An Israeli study [2] that examined the development of children's understanding of birthdays, found that a child's early perception is wholly social and independent. Children perceived birthday parties as conferring a new age, and young children believe that age can be affected by doubling or skipping birthdays. The mature conception is socially based, but it is integrated with the irreversible and independent biological growth, and the cyclical aspect of time.

### *B. Birthday within the Cycle of Life*

Birthday notes the moment that one entered the world. This moment is filled with great hopes, inter-generational renewal, and new life. For the mother, the birth itself marks the beginning of a transition period and reintegration into ordinary

life, a kind of social return from childbirth. Most often, the transition is marked by ceremonies for the newborn child to highlight both the separation from mother's body, and entry of the child into the world. Incorporation involves being accepted into family, extended family, tribe, or clan through naming ceremonies, ritual nursing, circumcision, or baptism [27], [51].

A Birth date enables the individual to construct his private year, from one birthday to the next. These years are the chronological durations of his autobiography, and often the temporal divisions of the self and the self-awareness as a historical creature [3], [53], [56].

The Hindu tradition includes "Samskara"- rites of passage which note the growth and development of a person, cleanse his body, bless him, dignify the soul, and soften the personality. According to this tradition, a person goes through four life stages called "Ashrama" on his way to the final objective of spiritual release, called the "Moksha". Each stage involves a specific age-task, a custom that increases the significance of one's birth date. The first stage is "Brahmacharya" - a stage where some young men begin prolonged study of sacred scriptures. The second stage "Grihastha" is when the young man marries and builds a family. The third stage, called "Vanaprastha", is a stage of retirement which arrives when a man's grandson is born (The eldest son of his eldest son). The fourth stage is called "Sannyasa", the stage of retirement, which a person can reach only after fulfilling his familial obligations, usually on his sixtieth birthday [37].

### C. The Social Message of Birthdays

Birthday activities carry social messages, composed of three main aspects, which reflect the birthday's role as a socialization tool in the process of human development, education, and psychology - The uniqueness of man, reclassification by age, and the continuity of time [3], [57]-[59]:

*The uniqueness of a birthday child* is expressed in the room architectonics, in the decoration, in songs, and in the gifts. This process is related to the development of ego mechanisms (thinking, perception, reality critique, etc.), connected with growth and maturity. In this sense, the birthday ritual serves as an "educational catalyst" in the development of individual identity. At a birthday party, only one child gets to be the center of attention. The essence of the day is his separate existence, marking his birth as a unique and independent person. The birthday ritual places the child at the center of attention throughout the day, as the "only player in the ring", while everyone showering him with positive reinforcements and expressions of acceptance and appreciation. From this respect the birthday helps to develop the child's individual identity.

*Reclassification by age* is used to immediately relate the development of self-identity to obligations and rights that accompany the change in numerical age. The transition to a new age indicates new stage in life, development, and growth. Each passed year is added to the celebrant age and makes him more mature, stronger, and more skilled. This is an important

stage in the cognitive development of a child, as well as his or her general maturity. This is also reflected in birthday wishes, which often become a statement of social expectations directed at the growing child. The assimilation of *time continuity* is also an essential part of self-awareness and autobiography. The birthday is a private and personal holiday which reflects a specific event in his individual time-continuum. In this sense, the birthday reflects an educational concept that directs the child to internalize the *time continuity* and to link between times: past-present-future. Accordingly, the birthday ceremony combines elements from the three tenses: The past - is expressed in the family and child stories. The present - is expressed in the festive ritual of the current birthday. The future - is expressed in a series of blessings and wishes for the future of the celebrant. Thus, the birthday ceremony weaves together the past, present and future as a cohesive and continuous experience, that enables the sense of continuous existence.

Katriel [52] and Sirota [60] also refer to an individual's date of birth as a cultural event and marking time for social groups. For that matter, birthdays also deal with the social dynamics of group interaction and the ways in which relationships become more visible than before. A birthday ceremony can be considered a symbol of changing children's attitudes and changes in social and societal ways. Being invited to a birthday party seems to symbolize personal fulfillment and social integration, and it can define and identify the children's place as a social actor in this process. Often, they function relationally in promoting solidarity through family and social circles. In familial contexts, they also carry an important social role. Birthdays can be a cultural event for transmission of norms and rules about belonging and emotions expression.

Rancew-Sikora & Remisiewicz [61] analyzed the interaction organization in a family ritual and the modes of children's participation in it, focusing on the first birthday celebration. They assumed that family occasions represent distinctive cultural meanings, interaction orders, and characteristic, like blowing out candles on the cake or giving/making wishes. The birthday party is considered an embodied ritual interaction, in which family members defined the role of a child. The authors claimed that family ceremonies are important because the family is a collective unit and family processes providing meaning to repetitive activities. For example, for the ritual interaction, the mother has to divide her attention between the cake, the child, and the other participants simultaneously, ensuring the child's comfort and safety, controlling his behavior, being busy with the cake and candle, regulating an appropriate distance between the cake and the child, and so on. Sociologically, the group decides to what extent the organizers count on other participants' shared attention and responsibility for the child's involvement. In anthropological terms, the role of the cake with the candle is seen as a symbolic artifact, which helps focus the collective attention during the ritual interaction. Interactively, considering the social meanings of the ritual, the small child is also considered as an integrator of the group (on festive occasions).



Other studies [62]-[64] have examined the impact of social and family expectations, and the relationship between birth dates (holidays and festivals versus simple weekdays) and social status. The results indicated a disproportionate number of people born during holiday weeks, such as Independence Day, Christmas, and New Year's Day. It was also found that high ranking clergy were more likely to be born on December 25th. The results suggest that the link between a birthday and an important national holiday improves a person's image. Such a link may be formed by parents, who believe that a significant date of birth will give their children an extra advantage in life. These may even be "forged" biographies. Either way, once a holiday-birthday link is established, the effect of self-fulfilling prophecy is set, and man creates something special for himself.

#### *D. Birthday as an Experience of Belonging and Importance*

Birthday is a familial and social event, which symbolizes group belonging and consolidation. Birthday celebrants often expect others to remember this day and celebrate with them, as an expression of their love and affection. It is generally accepted for parents to celebrate their children's birthdays and for adults to celebrate their spouses or friends' birthdays. Over the years, birthdays have become a truly special day and real holiday in kindergartens, and it is a personal, important, and exciting day for each child. It is a day when only he is unique and special, a day when he is the center of attention, more special than the other children. During this day, the child does not need "special achievements" to gain a positive attention or to be at the center. This is a day to celebrate the childbirth, a natural event for which everyone gathers at a party in his honor [65]-[67]. This is an important step in developing a child's personality, cultivating his self-esteem and confidence. Knowing that he is valuable, not by any achievement and deed, only by being himself, and for that he has a natural right to get respect, love, and unconditional acceptance. The birthday is a day when the child's sense of belonging and importance are nurtured, by conveying messages as: "you are special", "you are necessary", "you are important" - just for being you. The repeated appearance of these components in a group interaction during birthdays enables the celebrant to absorb positive feelings about himself [65]-[67].

The study of Levin-Agmon and Weinstein [53] also emphasized the contribution of birthday celebrations in generating a sense of belonging. Their research was conducted among Holocaust survivors. The survivors are characterized by a deep sense of loneliness, both from traumatic experiences of loss and abandonment, and from the isolation they felt upon their arrival in Israel. The results showed that a birthday celebration, within a group process, created an experience that emphasizes the triumph of life and survival, and the ability to evolve and create despite age. The birthday celebration gave them back a familial atmosphere and sense of belonging. This is due to the supportive environment and the intimate atmosphere in the group, which created a feeling of "togetherness".

Hospice volunteers at Buffalo have also reported birthday

celebrations as a significant and invaluable event for celebrants [68]. Thanks to a volunteer program, hundreds of terminal patients celebrated birthdays there with their loved ones. For them it is a moment to be cherished, and at the end of life they appreciate the importance of this day. At this point in their lives they already realize that this is one of their last opportunities to celebrate with the people they love. The families respond with immense gratitude and genuine surprise. Celebration and anticipation are often the response when birthday is planned, both with celebrants and families and the volunteer staff. For them, it is celebrating-life, a celebration that also gives meaning to the end of life.

Another study [69] examining the relationship between birthday parties for homeless children, family functioning, and parent wellbeing in homeless families, showed a significant contribution of birthday celebrations. Often, the experience of homelessness presents a significant barrier to family functioning and interrupts regular family routines. In this study, shelter residents who received monthly birthday party for children had higher levels of happiness. The satisfaction with the birthday parties showed correlations between levels of hope, happiness, and parental empowerment. Results point toward the value of continuing family routines, such as annual birthday celebrations, to help mitigate the stressors and disruptions of families.

## VI. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Birthday ritual is a universal event, mentioned from ancient times in history. Early birthday celebrations were available only for nobles, but over the years the birthday celebration has become a world-wide tradition. Some of the popular birthday traditions and symbols that we see today originated hundreds of years ago and are quite similar in many cultures around the world. However, some customs are more specific to a certain country, geographic location, or religion.

The birthday is also extensively reviewed in Judaism and it is evident that it is attributed a unique meaning of historically, religiously, and socially aspects. It is now considered as a lucky day and a private holiday. The concept of birthday has left its mark both in literature and art, as well as in social and developmental psychology, which present his role as a marking time in the life-cycle and a tool of socialization, in the process of human development.

A birthday is also a familial and social event and a symbol of group cohesion, being a day to cultivate a sense of belonging and of importance. The re-appearance of these elements in group interactions during birthday enables the celebrant to absorb positive impressions about himself and his life.

The worldwide recognition of the unique importance and significance of birthday, together with its positive psychological implications, leads us to think differently about birthdays.

The main insight that emerges from this paper is that the birthday tradition must be preserved and maintained, while understanding its significant contribution to the empowerment of the individual. Another conclusion is to assimilate the

birthday ceremonies in various educational activities, in counseling intervention programs and, especially, in group processes. It can also be integrated into task groups in workplaces and organizations.

All this lays an interesting basis for a broad study of the birthday's implications on individuals, families, and a variety of groups. One can examine the individual's sense of empowerment, his self-efficacy, group cohesion, and even the therapeutic factors within a group. All this and more can be an outgrowth of the birthday concept.

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