

"Once a man approached the Rebbe saying "who could ever reach your heights of piety and worship and understanding, since you have such a great and exalted soul!" and Rebbe was very upset about his comment replying "this is your very mistake that you think that the main greatness and understanding of the Tzadikim is solely from their exalted souls- but in truth each one can merit to high levels like mine to be exactly like me, for the main principle depends merely upon the level of spiritual effort with integrity"

Sichos HaRav Nachman 165

THE ART OF LISTENING DOES NOT COME EASILY THE VOICES WITHIN SEEM TO DROWN OUT THOSE VOICES WITHOUT BUT WITH PRACTICE LISTENING BECOMES AN ART. TO LISTEN TO THE OTHER... THE PATIENT... THE PERSON IN PAIN ALLOWS ME TO LISTEN EVER SO MORE ACUTELY EACH TIME...

It also allows me to hear the whispers...

For God speaks in whispers...kol demama dakka as we are told about Elijah out of the whirlwind. Whispers come to us in strange moments, subtle movements of sound across the abyss between humans. God whispers as we are told in Avot chapter 6:

R. Joshua, the son of Levi¹, said, "Every day a bat-kol goes forth from Mount Horeb, proclaiming and saying, 'Woe to mankind for contempt of the Torah, for whoever does not occupy himself in the Torah is said to be under the divine censure, as it is said, 'As a ring of gold in a swine's snout, so is a fair woman who turneth aside from discretion'²; and it says, 'And another instance of this kind of interpretation is in connecting the word [anochi] "I," the first word of the Decalogue, with the phrase: [Ana Nafshi Catvit] the tables were the work of God, and the writing was the writing of God, graven upon the tables'³. Read not charut⁴, but cherut⁵, for no man is free but he who occupies himself in the learning of Torah. But whosoever labors in the torah, behold he shall be exalted, as it

¹ R. Joshua lived about the middle of the third century.

² Bat kol (lit., "daughter of a voice" or "daughter-voice"), "a small voice," "sound," "resonance," not "echo," as it is often translated. The expression bat kol was used in place of the longer one bat kol min ha-shamayim, which is "a heavenly or divine voice which proclaims God's will or judgment, His deeds, and His commandments to individuals or to number of persons, to rulers, countries, and even to whole nations." This celestial voice was a means of divine revelation lower than that of prophecy. According to Schechter, it has two peculiar features: first, its messages are reproductions of verses or sentences from the Old Testament or from the Apocrypha, and secondly, "it is audible only to those who are prepared to hear it." See Weber, Altsynag. Theol., pp. 187-189; Low, Gesammelte Schriften, II, p. 58, n. 1; Kitto's Cyclopaedia of Biblical Lit., art. Bath Kil, and Ludwig Blau, art. Bat Kol, in Jewish Encyclopedia.³Proverbs XI, 22. The word [nazaf (nun-zayin-fey)] "censured," "placed under ban," by a form of Rabbinical interpretation known as notarikon (stenographer's method, abbreviation), is connected with the words of this verse in Proverbs: [Nezem Zahav b'aF (NUN-zayin-mem(sofit) ZAYIN-hey-bet bet-alefFEY(sofit), capitals indicating larger case Hebrew letters)].

³ Ex. XXXII, 16.

⁴ Graven. The phrase [al tikri . . . ele] "do not read . . . but" followed by a suggested reading different from the original, does not mean that the Rabbis offered an emendation of the biblical text. It was merely a change of the text for homiletical purposes. See Bacher, Die älteste Terminologie der jüdischen Schriftauslegung, p. 175 et seq.; Friedlander, Jewish Religion, p. 204, and Talmudical dictionaries, s.v.

⁵ Freedom.

is said, 'And from Mattanah to Nachaliel, and from Nachaliel to Bamot'⁶This Bat kol⁷ was interpreted in a specific way by the Baal Shem Tov who suggested that in every human heart there is a bat kol that whispers, "Return to me". Two hundred years before Freud the Baal Shem Tov was describing the tension and conflict within the human heart in an architectural map that includes an inner desire to connect to the divine, with an outer shell that prevents the inner stratum from accessing the voice from Horeb, the divine voice beckoning. The shell is the very desire for things and material worldly desire. For Reb Shimshon a pupil of Reb Nachman who commented on his master's *lekutei eitzot*, the desires and craving for things of this world are the very impediment to the ability to listen to the bat kol. (*Lekutei Eitzot* Ch 30, *Taavat Mamon*).

How can we access the whisper of the bat kol? How can we ignore our powerlessness of the desires and cravings of this world, the needs we need to be met? It has been thousands of years and we keep getting it wrong. We keep following our outer heart's desire, we are so powerless over our needs and desires, and we seem to not hear that still small voice beckoning from without. How does our tradition view this inner heart and what value does it place on its cravings and desires. I think a more nuanced view is present in the tradition that hitherto presented in sacred texts. If we dig a little bit deeper we will find it in unexpected places. In the discussion regarding the voice and cravings of the fetus we might find an unexpected treasure. *Yehavit* (ALEF-nun-alef NUN-pey-shin-yud CHOF-tof-betyud-tet YUD-hey-bet-yud-tet) "I (God) myself have written (the Torah), and delivered it," or with the words [Amirah N'imah K'tivah Y'hivah (ALEF-mem-yud-resh-hey NUNayin-yud-mem-hey CHOF-tof-yud-bet-hey YUD-hey-yudbet-hey)] "a pleasant saying, written and delivered" (*Shabbat*, 105a). See art. *Notarikon*, in the *Jewish Encyclopedia*, and Strack, *Einleitung*, p. 130. The ontological status of the fetus in the House of Secrets. The status of the fetus is first mentioned in the Midrash to Genesis 25:22 regarding our matriarch Rebecca's pregnancy. The Midrash projects the struggle between the twins in utero as that of prefiguring the struggle of two nations locked in spiritual battle. Rashi cites the Midrash (*Genesis Rabba* 63.6) where the word "vayisrotzeztu" meaning the children "struggled" (from the root letter *mmr* meaning crush) might be read as having the root letters *ritzu* as in "running" prompting the midrash to speculate that when she passed the entrances to places of Torah study, Jacob the fetus would "run" and toss about to exit the womb and when she passed the entrance to places of idol worship (what was she doing on that side of town!) Esau would toss about to emerge. In this passage the twins literally crush the mother causing so much pain that she exclaims, "if it be thus why is it that I am!" why did I pray so much for this pregnancy (Rashi) and prompting her to seek out the Lord's advice.

⁶ Num. XXI, 19 Mattanah, "gift"; Nachaliel, "the heritage of God"; Bamot, "high places." The names of these three encampments of the Israelites in the wilderness are interpreted according to their literal meanings.

⁷ Bat kol (lit., "daughter of a voice" or "daughter-voice"), "a small voice," "sound," "resonance," not "echo," as it is often translated. The expression bat kol was used in place of the longer one bat kol min ha-shamayim, which is "a heavenly or divine voice which proclaims God's will or judgment, His deeds, and His commandments to individuals or to number of persons, to rulers, countries, and even to whole nations." This celestial voice was a means of divine revelation lower than that of prophecy. According to Schechter, it has two peculiar features: first, its messages are reproductions of verses or sentences from the Old Testament or from the Apocrypha, and secondly, "it is audible only to those who are prepared to hear it." See Weber, *Altsynag. Theol.*, pp. 187-189; Low, *Gesammelte Schriften*, II, p. 58, n. 1; *Kitto's Cyclopaedia of Biblical Lit.*, art. *Bath Kil*, and Ludwig Blau, art. *Bat Kol*, in *Jewish Encyclopedia*.³Proverbs XI, 22. The word [nazaf (nun-zayin-fey)] "censured," "placed under ban," by a form of Rabbinical interpretation known as *notarikon* (stenographer's method, abbreviation), is connected with the words of this verse in Proverbs: [Nezem Zahav b'aF (NUN-zayin-mem(sofit) ZAYIN-hey-bet bet-alefFEY(sofit), capitals indicating larger case Hebrew letters)].⁴Ex. XXXII, 16.

Unlike our passage in the Talmud we have both typologies represented together simultaneously in the womb crushing! the mother with competing claims and movements depending on where she was passing geographically out there in the world. But like our passage the notion of pre-birth cognition is accepted as already in the womb each fetus expressed its own desire and prefigured its preference for Torah study versus idol worship.

The Yalkut presses this idea even further (Shimoni 110) using the root letter rzz to mean struggling with one another in the womb and fighting over the inheritance of two worlds this world and the next world. In this Yalkut passage the battle over spirituality and physicality, over the world of spirit and that of mere physical single worldliness is going on within her womb between the fetuses. In the Psalter the word beten connotes the womb and the idea of formation by God within the womb is specifically mentioned in such psalms as 139; 13-16 13; 'For you have formed my insides; you knit me together in my mother's womb.' "Tesukeini bebetten imi" You wove me in my mother's womb...the formation of the human body is compared to weaving or another interpretation "you spread me out" with the root being suca like a tree the skeleton spreads out dividing into branches. (See Job 10; 11). 14; I will praise you; for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Marvelous are your works! And my soul knows that right well. The psalmist understands and is aware of the mystery and wonder of the miracle of fetal development. 15; My frame was not hidden from you, when I was made in secret, and finely wrought in the depths of the earth. The womb here is compared with the earth and the secrets, as used in rabbinic term for womb as beis hasetarim the house of secrets⁸ 16; (K) Your eyes saw my unformed substance; and in your book all things were written; also the days in which they are to be fashioned, and for it too there was one of them. (Already when my body as just a heap of flesh You had already had recorded in Your book the size and shape of my organs and vital forces.) all this was predetermined.

Already in the Psalter the psalmist had notions of predetermination of the form and function of the body within the womb. Rashi in a brilliant interpretive move commenting on the Mishna regarding feeding a pregnant woman on Yom Kippur; Talmud: Yoma 84b MISHNA: A pregnant woman, who (craves for food which she) smells, should be fed until relieved. Rashi comments, "the fetus smells the smell of food and (it is) he who craves (mitaveh) and were she not to eat both would be endangered." Rashi apparently without support suggests that the fetus is the agent of craving and that were she not to eat he both she and the fetus would be endangered. For Rashi the craving originates in the fetus that is apparently unaware of the day of Yom Kippur.⁹ Whereas the halacha is clear in this mishnah the Talmud proceeds to tell us a remarkable anecdote.

TALMUD:

It happened to a pregnant woman that she smelled food. They came to ask Rebbe. He said: Go, tell her in a whisper, today is the Day of Atonement. They did thus, and she became composed. Rebbe said of this child the verse: "Before yet I had formed thee in thy mother's body I knew thee." Jeremiah [I. 5] That child became R. Johanan. The same accident happened to another woman. They came to ask R. Hanina. He said the same; but it availed not. He said of him the verse: "The wicked are estranged from the womb"; Ps.[lviii. 4] This child became Sabbathai, who used to buy fruits to sell in time of dearth (and this is forbidden in Palestine). What about free choice you

⁸ Exodus R. 10:3, Lev. Rabbah 16:8, T.B. Hullin 72, 129, Niddah 42b.

⁹ The Rosh applies this to non pregnant people. Anyone who has a craving so intensely his face changes color becomes endangered and requires feeding. The Rishonim argue as to whether a pregnant woman may eat if only her fetus is in danger (Rosh, Ran Poras Yosef).

may ask? One fetus becomes the great Reb Yochanan and the other, Shabetai the market speculator enriching him at the expense of others by hoarding goods when product was available then selling at times of great lack. Surely some measure of spiritual effort play no role in this narrative. If Reb Yochanan was predestined to become the great sage because of his behavior in the womb and Shabetai the reverse what does this aggada tell us about human choices?

It seems to suggest that the future ability to abide by Halacha and even great Talmudic scholarship and piety is predetermined from within the womb. The text talks of 'whispering' as if the fetus is being told of the sacredness of the day, not the pregnant mother. If so we have our philosophical conundrum. The craving fetus caused the mother to desire food on the holiest day of the Jewish calendar when fasting is one of the five penitent acts. Rebbe understood intuitively that this craving was not from her but from the fetus. In an act deigned to curb the craving of the fetus he recommended, "whispering" to the child through the ear of the mother. The Talmud in Bava Basra discusses the legal status of the fetus in tort law. It seems that the majority opinion holds it is not of the mother and has a status of its own more associated with the father. The fetus has its own desire and own rights and has an ontological status independent of the mother legally and socially, now also psychologically. The whispered message seems to have been received in our aggadic story and the fetus stopped causing the craving in the mother. Rebbe then embarks on a midrashic interpretation of the verse in Jeremiah where God already had sanctified him for prophecy in the womb. The plain meaning of the verse seems to teach the Providential nature of God's choice as prophet using the womb as the symbol of how far back the decision and choice was made for this child. But Rebbe re-interprets the verse to mean that the child in question the fetus with the craving had already been sanctified by its own decision to respond to the sanctity of the day and stop the craving. Indeed Rebbe's prediction turned out to be accurate for this fetus became none other than Reb Yochanan.

I believe that it was this Midrashic turn that prompted Rashi to make such a bold statement as to the origin of the craving. Reb Hanina has a similar case but the outcome was the mirror image. The child did not listen to the whisper and Reb Hanina used a different verse from Psalms predicting the wicked outcome, which happened. His fetus, which continued to crave food ended up as the wicked market manipulator and speculator Shabetai. Notice all this aggada is not referring to law. For the Mishna had already granted a pregnant woman license to eat on Yom Kippur if held by a craving. We are talking about a maaseh an anecdotal story in the genre of piety Midrashim that talk beyond the letter of the law. In this short passage the philosophical issues of freedom of choice are challenged by this aggada, which seems to be quite sensitive to the tension between nature and nurture and seems to err on the side of nature. It turns out that this baal hamidrash felt that most of our spiritual genetics can be predicted already in the womb. How we will turn out and how we will fare in scholarship in piety can be tested in the womb. The motif of the mother grasped by the fetus with a craving is a motif that psychologically typifies most of us. We are powerless over certain things in our lives and despite all our efforts we seem to respond to certain cravings despite our best intentions to resist. We all have a fetus within that demands and cajoles an inner child that is wounded and demanding, over whom we cannot say no to. Notice the Rosh applies the case of the pregnant mother to all persons with a craving. Only a Rebbe can whisper into our ear quietly "it's Yom Kippur" and find a resonance possibly in the needy child within and stop the incessant craving and addiction. And to the extent we are constitutionally able to listen is the extent we can overcome the craving and become great. I believe it is in the listening to the whisper that the key to this aggadic teaching lays. One fetus listened and the other refused. That alone determined the outcome later on in life.

In our struggles Reb Nachman teaches us that inner struggle is at the very core of the religious experience and (as quoted in the preface) that alone determines how high a spiritual level we may achieve. It is only through the struggle however it is also a guaranteed result, NOT dependent upon genes or soul makeup rather solely dependent upon the inner struggle over those cravings (of the inner child) that determines where we will achieve spiritual greatness. The theme of fetuses resurfaces in the writings of Hassidut. The Chasidic Master Rabbi Naftali Tzvi Horowitz of Ropshitz (1760-1827) is said to have declared that before he was born, an angel showed him two contradictory lists of rules for the conduct of life. For example, in the first list he read that a person must be single-minded toward achieving personal goals, whereas in the second list he read that a person must always put another's needs before one's own.

In one list, humility was advised, in the other, a bold and audacious spirit. One list counseled living in austerity; the other castigated those who would deny themselves the pleasures of this world. The Ropshitzer went on to recount many further contradictions, and said that he recalled being lost in thought, contemplating how hard it was to find a way of life in which these contradictions would be resolved. Suddenly, he heard the words: "Mazel Tov! A child is born." He explained that since then, his life had been an ongoing effort to find the way to follow both sets of rules, however contradictory. I loved this anecdote since it validates the struggle itself between the voices in utero. The "angel" shows him lists of meritorious conduct that contradict one another.

Unlike the pericope in the Talmud passage the fetus does not know which way to turn since both lists seem plausible and come from an angel so have authority. In the Talmud passage the response of the fetus is characterized by a biblical citation, one from Jeremiah (read midrashically of course since the plain meaning had to do with his calling and sanctification for the role of prophet even prior to birth) the second more in line with the verse although even here Midrashic license is used since the wicked stray from emergence from the womb i.e. as soon as they are born is different from within the womb i.e. as a fetus. In both responses by the fetus the verses applied by Rebbe and Reb Chanina respectively are Midrashic interpretations used to predict the outcome in adulthood. Clearly the passages quoted reveal a highly developed notion of pre birth cognition consistent with modern science:

- Baroness Greenfield, a professor of neurology at Oxford University and the director of the Royal Institution, said there was evidence to suggest the conscious mind could develop before 24 weeks, the upper age where terminations are permitted. Although she fell short of calling for changes in the abortion laws, she urged doctors and society to be cautious when assuming unborn babies lacked consciousness. "Is the fetus conscious? The answer is yes, but up to a point," she said. "Given that we can't prove consciousness or not, we should be very cautious about being too gung ho and assuming something is not conscious. We should err on the side of caution." Last year, a Daily Telegraph straw poll found many neurologists were concerned that fetuses could feel pain in the womb before 24 weeks after conception. Many believed fetuses should be given anesthetics during a late abortion, after 20 weeks. Some also believe pain relief should be given for keyhole surgery in the womb. Abortions are allowed up to 24 weeks in Britain, but are rarely given so late. Around 90 per cent of the 175,000 planned terminations that take place each year in England and Wales are in the first 12 weeks of pregnancy. Around 1.5 per cent - or 2,600 - takes place after the 20th week. Terminations after 24 weeks are only allowed in exceptional circumstances if, for instance, the mother's life is threatened. Lady Greenfield is skeptical of philosophers and doctors who argue that consciousness is "switched on" at some point during the brain's development. She believes instead that there is a sliding scale of consciousness and that it develops gradually as neurons, or brain cells; make more and more connections with each other. In 2001 a Medical

Research Council expert group said unborn babies might feel pain as early as 20 weeks and almost certainly by 24.

They called for more sensitive treatment of very premature babies, who often had to undergo painful procedures like heel pricks and injections. We have had to revise our Victorian notions of responsibility and the nature\ nurture debate ever since molecular biology has redefined the limits of choice and the overwhelming genetic predisposition to disease and psychological character has slowly become mapped. It turns out that we cannot escape the struggle between choices and that despite the in utero aspects of predetermination we too must exclaim like the Ropshitzer "Mazel Tov it's a baby" and just get on with life post utero, struggling as bets we must with moral choices and challenges facing us daily.

Our inner fetus represents that inner self that can go either way, towards the pleasures of this world or the spirit. The whispering voice attempts to influence the inner self but the uterine wall or the shell of the outer self interrupts this flow and makes its own demands. The task at hand is to become better listeners to the bat kol, the inner voice that beckons, to be receptive to the whispers...the whisper that takes so many shapes and forms, the setting sun, the starry night sky, the wind in the leaves of an oak tree playing it like a symphonic work, the wet soft feel of grass under the barefoot, the gray threatening skies over lake Michigan on a cold Monday morning, the absolute quiet of the evening in the fields of Rennssalaer.

Yes the Rebbe whispers into the outer shell and the inner heart may or may not hear the bat kol, the voice. Through our daily rituals and ablutions we slowly become more sensitive to that voice from without however still and silent so that our inner selves listen and become more distracted from the yearning and cravings of this world. 1R. Joshua lived about the middle of the third century. 2Bat kol (lit., "daughter of a voice" or "daughter-voice"), "a small voice," "sound," "resonance," not "echo," as it is often translated. The expression bat kol was used in place of the longer one bat kol min hashamayim, which is "a heavenly or divine voice which proclaims God's will or judgment, His deeds, and His commandments to individuals or to number of persons, to rulers, countries, and even to whole nations."

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