

*"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

Talmud: Yoma 84b

MISHNA: A pregnant woman, who longs for food which she smells, should be fed until relieved.

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 may ask? One fetus becomes the great Reb Yochanan and the other, a market speculator enriching himself 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 Shabtai 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.

The message seemed 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 responds 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. 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 Shabtai.

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. I wanted to suggest that 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. 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.