

I want to share with you a Fantasy of Creation, from a midrash called Yetzirat haValed, which probably dates from the eighth century. It is a midrash about the beginning of pregnancy.

At the hour that a man comes to bed with his wife, the Holy Blessed One says to the angel in charge of pregnancy, "Mr. X is emitting human seed, and you, go and guard that drop, collect it in a cup"

He brings it before the Holy Blessed One, who decrees whether it will be strong or weak, tall or short, male or female, foolish or wise, rich or poor, but not whether it will be righteous or wicked, as it is written, "Everything is in the hand of heaven except the fear of heaven."

Immediately, the Holy Blessed One says to the angel in charge of the spirits, "bring me soul X." It comes before the Holy Blessed One, who says, "Go into that drop."

The soul opens its mouth and says, "Master of the Universe, the world that I have been in since I was created is fine for me. If you please, do not make me enter into this stinking drop, for I am pure and holy." The Holy Blessed One says, "the world that I am making you enter is better than the world where you have been, and when I created you, I created you especially for this drop" and places it in the drop against its will.

The angel returns the spirit into the belly of its mother and invites two angels to guard it so that it doesn't fall out. They leave a lamp lit over its head . . . and it sees from the beginning of the world until its end.

In the morning the angel takes it to paradise and shows it the righteous sitting in glory, and says, "The one that you see in such glory and exaltation was created like you in the belly of its mother, as was that one and that one, and they observed the laws and rules of the Holy Blessed One. If you do as they did, then, after you die, you will merit this glory and exaltation which you see, if not, then your end is to go to the place which I will show you."

In the evening he takes it to hell and shows it the evil ones whom the angels of suffering are beating and hitting with rods of fire. They are yelling, "Oy Vavoy," but nobody has compassion on them. The angel says to it, "Know that these were created from a stinking drop in their mother's belly and went out to the world. They didn't observe the laws of the Holy Blessed One and so they came to this shameful end. And now, my child, know that your end is to die. Do not be an evil one, but be righteous and live in the next world."

He journeys with it from morning till evening and shows it every place that its foot will walk and where it will live and where it will be buried In the evening he returns it to the belly of its mother"

The fetus stays [there] nine months. And when it is its time to go out, the same angel comes and says to it, "The time has come for you to go out to the world," and it says, "I already told the [Blessed Creator] that I felt fine in the world in which I was

living. He said, 'The world that I am bringing you into is beautiful and, moreover, against your will you are created in the belly of your mother and against your will you are born and go out into the world.' " Immediately it cries, and why does it cry? For the world which it was in. And when it comes out the angel lifts it under its nose and puts out the light over its head and brings it out against its will and it immediately forgets everything (Tikva Frymer Kensky, "Motherprayer," page 32-33.

There is a lot in here that would surprise many Jews. You mean we believe in Heaven and Hell? We believe in the survival of the soul? We believe in life after death? We believe in life before birth? Before conception? These are, however, authentic Jewish beliefs.

The Jewish belief in the nature of the body-soul experience seems to envision the body as a brief blip in the life of the eternal soul. It's a ride on a roller coaster or a ferris wheel - it's fun, scary at times, it might seem too short, it's more fun to experience with another person; and when it ends, the ride is over. You don't get a second chance, or maybe you do -- we speak of *תְּחִיַּת הַמֵּתִים*, the resurrection of the dead, and there are also Jewish mystical beliefs in the second chance of reincarnation.

Rabbi Ellie Spitz, in his book "Does the Soul Survive," writes about presenting a High Holiday sermon on the topic of the survival of the soul before a group of rabbis. One senior colleague responded to the sermon with a trace of annoyance, "Isn't such a faith in survival of the soul dangerous?"

Rabbi Spitz' answer was yes. "Faith in the survival of the soul," he said, "might lead to magical thinking, the belief in an ability to defy reality, and an unrealistic holding on to departed loved ones."

I would add that it can also lead to a devaluation of life - being willing to give up one's life too easily in exchange for the promise of the next world. Clearly, some expressions of Islam encourage suicide bombers by teaching that their soul will survive and be richly rewarded for their action.

In the grand scheme of eternity, the time in the body is such a brief gift that we ought to treasure each moment. In our tradition this does not, however, mean "Eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we may die" in the mode of Epicurus. The difference between our belief and the Epicurean belief is the existence of God. The book of Ecclesiastes, from which we read on Sukkot, says:

Only this, I have found, is a real good: that one should eat and drink and get pleasure with all the gains he makes under the sun, during the numbered days of life that God has given him; for that is his portion (Ecclesiastes 5.17).

We conclude the "*al cheit*" confessional prayers of Yom Kippur with the following admission:

"My God! Before I was formed, I was of no worth. And now that I have been formed, it is as if I was not formed."

Rav Kook interpreted this passage in a novel fashion. He understood the prayer as an

introspective insight into the meaning of our existence.

"Before I was formed, I was of no worth." Clearly, before I was born I was not needed in this world. I was of no worth, for nothing required my existence. There was not yet any purpose to my existence, there was no mission for me to fulfill. Since I was not yet needed, I was not born in a previous generation.

"And now that I have been formed .." Since my soul has entered the world at this point in time, it must be that now there is some mission, some goal for me to accomplish. Some aspect of the world needs me to correct it and complete it.

And yet - *"it is as if I have not been formed."* Were I to dedicate my life towards fulfilling the purpose for which I was created, this would confirm and justify my existence. But since my actions are not in accordance with my true goal, I am not accomplishing my life's mission. And if I am not fulfilling my purpose in life, my very existence is called into question.

If I do not accomplish the purpose for which I was placed in this world, then I have reverted back to the situation preceding my birth, when, since I was not needed in the world, I was not yet formed. Thus, even *"now that I have been formed, it is as if I was not formed."* [adapted from Rav Kook, Olat Re'iyah vol. II, p. 356]

What is our purpose? How do we know the precise reason for which we are placed on earth? This is the \$64,000 question, and there's no simple answer. The path for finding an answer is to find your passion - what the combination of your body and your soul does best. When you find your purpose (or purposes), you will be drawn like iron filings to a magnet.

I do believe that a life can be tragically cut short, before achieving its full purpose. However, I also believe that as long as we are alive, we have not yet completed our purpose. There is no such thing as being too old or too sick to have a purpose for one's life. What did that fantasy of creation teach us?

Remember that your soul once understood the world "from its beginning to its end." You have a lifetime to recover this knowledge - you ought never be too old, too young, or too busy to devote part of your day or week to exploring your place in the world.

Remember that your soul never wanted to go into your body. Your soul thought it was too good, too refined, to be trapped in a dirty, stinking, body. But this world is a wondrous place. A story is told about Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, one of the great rabbinic leaders of 19th century Germany, who, despite his frail health toward the end of his life, decided to go on vacation in the Swiss Alps.

His students asked him - why are you making this trip? His response was: I have this feeling that after I die, and I am called in before God, I'm sure one of the questions that God will ask me is: So nu, Shimshon - you lived so close...did you ever get a chance to see my Alps?

You may also have heard the story that is told of the great Hasidic Reb Zusia who was dying and all his students were gathered around him, praying and crying. Then

Zusia himself began to cry and one of his students said, "Reb Zusia, why are you crying? You have lived a righteous life, you have raised up students, and you will be received into the world to come."

Reb Zusia answered his students, "I am crying because now I understand that, if God will ask me: Zusia, why weren't you like Moses? I'll have a ready answer - God, you didn't give me the potential you gave to Moses.

If the Almighty will ask me: Zusia, why weren't you like Maimonides? I will also have a ready answer - God, you neither gave me the gifts nor did you place me in a position similar to Maimonides.

But the Master of the Universe will not ask me these questions. He will ask: Zusia, why weren't you like Zusia? Why didn't you fulfill the task that only Zusia could have fulfilled? It is of this question that I am in dread - and if I will be asked it, I shall have no proper response!"

May your soul have a full 120 year ride in your body. May those years be healthy and strong. May you value each of those years to their fullest. And when it comes time to leave the body and return to Paradise, Gan Eden, may angels guard and protect you, may they light your path and may you be able to say to God that you fulfilled the purpose for which God matched your soul and body.