

**The Guardian Angel that teaches, introduces, induces amnesia, then escorts us  
from this world**



Rediscovering Ancient Wisdom

**Plato's 19 Proofs of the Immortality of the Human Soul**

“Rabbi Simlai wanted to tell us that when a Jew studies Torah, he is confronted with something . . . familiar, because he has already studied it and the knowledge was stored up in the recesses of his memory.”

J.B. Soloveitchik

an·am·ne·sis

/ˌanəmˈnēsis/

noun

1. the remembering of things from a supposed previous existence (often used with reference to Platonic philosophy).
2. **MEDICINE**  
a patient's account of a medical history.

In [philosophy](#), **anamnesis** ([/ˌænæmˈniːsɪs/](#); [Ancient Greek](#): ἀνάμνησις) is a concept in [Plato's epistemological](#) and psychological theory that he develops in his [dialogues \*Meno\*](#) and [Phaedo](#), and alludes to in his [Phaedrus](#).

It is the idea that humans possess innate knowledge (perhaps acquired before birth) and that learning consists of rediscovering that knowledge within us.

Socrates' response is to develop his theory of *anamnesis*. He suggests that the soul is immortal, and repeatedly incarnated; knowledge is in the soul from eternity (*Meno* 86b)<sup>1</sup>, but each time the soul is incarnated its knowledge is forgotten in the trauma of birth. What one perceives to be learning, then, is the recovery of what one has forgotten. (Once it has been brought back it is true belief, to be turned into genuine knowledge by understanding.) And thus Socrates (and Plato) sees himself, not as a teacher, but as a midwife, aiding with the birth of knowledge that was already there in the student.<sup>2</sup>

In midrashic literature this idea is fully fleshed out in a hypostatized angelic didactic interaction with every fetus. The trauma of birth is highlighted by a trauma inflicted on the upper lip of the baby as it emerges from the womb, causing it to forget all that has been taught.

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<sup>1</sup> *Meno* (/ˈmiːnoʊ/; Greek: Μένων, Menōn) is a Socratic dialogue written by Plato. It appears to attempt to determine the definition of virtue, or arete, meaning virtue in general, rather than particular virtues, such as justice or temperance. The first part of the work is written in the Socratic dialectical style and *Meno* is reduced to confusion or *aporia*. In response to *Meno's* paradox (or the learner's paradox), however, Socrates introduces positive ideas: the immortality of the soul, the theory of knowledge as recollection (*anamnesis*), which Socrates demonstrates by posing a mathematical puzzle to one of *Meno's* slaves, the method of hypothesis, and, in the final lines, the distinction between knowledge and true belief.

<sup>2</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anamnesis\\_\(philosophy\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anamnesis_(philosophy))

R. Hanina b. Papa made the following exposition: The name of the angel who is in charge of conception is 'Night', and he takes up a drop and places it in the presence of the Holy One, blessed be He, saying, 'Sovereign of the universe, what shall be the fate of this drop? Shall it produce a strong man or a weak man, a wise man or a fool, a rich man or a poor man?' Whereas 'wicked man' or 'righteous one' he does not mention, in agreement with the view of R. Hanina. For R. Hanina stated: Everything is in the hands of heaven except the fear of God

Talmud Niddah 16b

*Lailah chooses a soul from the Garden of Eden and commands it to enter the embryo. Lailah watches over the development in the womb and shows the rewards and punishments available to the individual. Then right before birth, Lailah strikes the newborn above the lip, making it forget what was learned and creating the philtrum. Lailah serves as a guardian angel throughout a person's life and at death, leads the soul into the afterlife.*

*Among the angels there is one who serves as the midwife of souls. This is Lailah, the Angel of Conception. When the time has come for a man and his wife to conceive a child, God directs Lailah to seek out a certain soul hidden in the Garden of Eden, and command it to enter a drop of semen. At first the soul refuses, for it still remembers the pain of being born, and it prefers to remain pure. But Lailah compels the soul to obey, and that is when God decrees what the fate of that sperm will be, whether male or female, strong or weak, rich or poor, and so on. Then the angel turns around and places the soul in the womb of the mother.*

*While the infant grows in the womb, Lailah places a lighted candle at the head of the unborn infant, so he can see from one end of the world to the other, as it is said, His lamp shone above my head, and by His light I walked through darkness (Job 29:3). For nine months **Lailah** watches over the unborn infant, teaching him the entire Torah as well as the history of his soul. During this time, the evil inclination has no power over him. And before he is born, he is given an oath to keep his soul pure, lest God take it back from him. Then Lailah leads the child into the Garden of Eden, and shows him the righteous ones with crowns on their heads. So too does Lailah lead the child to the netherworld and show him the punishments of Gehenna.*



*But when the time has come to be born, the angel extinguishes the lamp, and brings forth the child into the world. The instant the child emerges, **Lailah lightly strikes the newborn above the lip, causing it to cry out.** And at that instant the infant forgets all it has learned. That is the origin of the mark on the upper lip, which everyone bears.*

*Indeed, Lailah is a guardian angel, who watches over that child all of his days. And when the time has come to take leave of this world, it is Lailah who comes to him and says, “Do you not recognize me? The time of your departure has come. I have come to take you from this world.” Thereupon Lailah leads him to the World to Come, where he renders an accounting before God, and he is judged according to his merits.<sup>3</sup>*

This myth describes the formation of a child. The soul is here revealed to have been drawn from on high and sent to this world reluctantly. Such a myth affirms the rabbinic belief in the essential purity of the human soul, which is subjected to the power of the Yetzer ha-Ra, the Evil Inclination. This myth of conception is also a reminder of God’s powerful role in every stage of our lives. A famous passage in Pirke Avot 3:1 says: “Know where you came from, where you are going, and before whom you will in the future have to give account and reckoning. Where you came from—from a fetid drop; where you are going—to a place of dust, worms and maggots; and before whom you will in the future have to give account and reckoning—before God, the Supreme King of kings.”

According to Rabbi Meir ibn Gabbai in Avodat ha-Kodesh, “Before a soul descends:

*to this world, it recognizes the Oneness of God and grasps the secrets of the Torah.” He links this intrinsic knowledge of the soul with the verse *Open my eyes that I may perceive the wonder of Your teachings (Psalms 119:18)*. These are the wonders that were apprehended before the child was born.*

Although angels are generally regarded as sexless, and some rabbinic sources say they do not procreate, almost all of them bear male names such as Michael or Gabriel and they have male characteristics. In addition, the noun, malach (angel) is grammatically masculine. **However, there is one angel, the angel Lailah, who has distinctly feminine characteristics.** This angel is responsible for the fetus, for assisting at birth, and for guiding the soul from this world to the next. In many ways Lailah is the polar opposite of Lilith, who wastes seed, is not maternal, and is bent on destruction, not creation.

While the word Lailah, meaning “night,” is masculine, the name Lailah is feminine, and the name of this angel does not end in the usual “el,” representing God’s Name. Thus, even though there is no direct evidence that Lailah is a feminine

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<sup>3</sup> Howard Schwartz: Leaves from the Garden Of Eden, Oxford University Press 1983

angel, the name Lailah and the role of the angel strongly indicate feminine characteristics.

Lailah, the angel's name, likely derives from a rabbinic discussion in B. Niddah 16b, where conception is described as taking place at night. There the name of the angel in charge of conception is identified as "Night" (Lailah). This angel takes a drop and places it before God. (The Talmud Niddah 30b - adds important details about the formation of the embryo and the role of Lailah. It explains that a light shining above the unborn infant's head lets the child see from one end of the world to the other.) At the same time, an angel (unidentified) teaches the unborn child the Torah. **But as soon as the child is born, the angel strikes it on the upper lip, causing the infant to forget all he has learned.**<sup>4</sup>

דרש רבי שמלאי למה הולד דומה במעי אמו לפנקס שמקופל ומונח ידיו על שתי צדעיו שתי אציליו על ב' ארכובותיו וב' עקביו על ב' עגבותיו וראשו מונח לו בין ברכיו ופיו סתום וטבורו פתוח ואוכל ממה שאמו אוכלת ושותה ממה שאמו שותה ואינו מוציא רעי שמא יהרוג את אמו וכיון שיצא לאויר העולם נפתח הסתום ונסתם הפתוח שאלמלא כן אינו יכול לחיות אפילו שעה אחת ונר דלוק לו על ראשו וצופה ומביט מסוף העולם ועד סופו שנאמר בהלו גרו עלי ראשי לאורו אלך חשך ואל תתמה שהרי אדם ישן כאן ורואה חלום באספמיא ואין לך ימים שאדם שרוי בטובה יותר מאותן הימים שנאמר מי יתנני כירחי קדם כימי אלוה ישמרני ואיזהו ימים שיש בהם ירחים ואין בהם שנים הוי אומר אלו ירחי לידה ומלמדני אותו כל התורה כולה שנאמר ויורני ויאמר לי יתמך דברי לבך שמור מצותי וחיה ואומר בסוד אלוה עלי אהלי מאי ואומר וכי תימא נביא הוא דקאמר ת"ש בסוד אלוה עלי אהלי וכיון שבא לאויר העולם בא מלאך וסטרן על פיו ומשכחו כל התורה כולה שנאמר לפתח חטאת רובץ ואינו יוצא משם עד שמשביעין אותו שנאמר כי לי תכרע כל ברכ תשבע כל לשון כי לי תכרע כל ברכ זה יום המיתה שנאמר לפניו יכרעו כל יורדי עפר תשבע כל לשון זה יום הלידה שנאמר נקי כפים ובר לבב אשר לא נשא לשוא נפשו ולא נשבע למרמה ומה היא השבועה שמשביעין אותו תהי צדיק ואל תהי רשע ואפילו כל העולם כולו אומרים לך צדיק אתה היה בעיניך כרשע והוי יודע שהקב"ה טהור ומשרתיו טהורים ונשמה שנתן בך טהורה היא אם אתה משמרה בטהרה מוטב ואם לאו הריני נוטלה ממך

Niddah 30b

Discussion of the Talmud Passage:

Rabbi Simlai...There is no time in which a man enjoys greater happiness than in those days, as it is said, "O that I were as in months gone by, in the days when God watched over me, when his lamp shone over my head, when I walked in the dark by

<sup>4</sup> The full myth of Lailah and the formation of the embryo is found in Midrash Tanhuma-Yelamdeinu Pekudei 3.

its light” (Job 29:2,3) . . . [these are] the months of pregnancy. It is also taught the entire Torah . . . and it says, “God’s company graced my tent.” (Job 29:4) As soon as it sees the light, an angel comes and slaps it on the mouth, and it forgets the entire Torah.

(Niddah, 30b)

The identity of the baby’s tutor is entirely unclear, as the text merely states, using the passive voice, that “he is taught the entire Torah”, but no mention is made of the tutor’s identity. On the contrary, it is only at the moment of birth that an angel is first mentioned (and described as “arriving”, perhaps implying that he has not heretofore been present) and described as striking the baby “on his mouth” and causing him to forget the entire Torah.

(Maharsha understands that the angel in question is actually the Angel of Death, or the Evil Inclination (and is therefore presumably *not* the original tutor))

בפרק חלק אמרינן אימתי יצר הרע . וכיון שיצא כו' בא מלאך וסטרנו כו' שנאמר לפתח חטאת רובץ וגו'  
שולט באדם משעת יצירה דכתיב לפתח חטאת רובץ וגו' והיינו יצר הרע והיינו מלאך המות כדאמרינן  
בפרק קמא דבבא בתרא ע"ש

*A lamp is above him. He is able to see from one end of the world to the other -- "b'Hilo Nero Alei Roshi l'Oro Elech Choshech";*

*I. This is not surprising. One can see distant places in a dream.*

*3.Those are the best days -- "Mi Yitneni ch'Yarchei Kedem ki'Yemei Eloka Yishmereni";*

*I. The days that are only Yerachim (months), but less than a year, are the days of pregnancy.*

*4.The fetus is taught the entire Torah -- "va'Yoreni... Yismach Devarai Libecha Shemor Mitzvosai v'Echye";*

*I. It also says "b'Sod Eloka Alei Ahali."*

*disquisition: Why do we need the second verse?*

*iii. Answer: Perhaps Shlomo said the first verse about himself.*

*5.Once he is born, an angel slaps him on the mouth, and he forgets everything -- "la'Pesach Chatas Rovetz."*

*6.An oath is imposed on him before he is born;*

*i. "Li Tichra Kol Berech" on the day of death. "... Tishava Kol Lashon" at the time of birth.*

*(g) Question: What oath is put on him?*

*(h) Answer: "You must be a Tzadik, and not a Rasha. Even if everyone tells you that you are a Tzadik, consider yourself a Rasha; Know that Hash-m is Tahor, His servants are Tehorim, and He gave you a Tahor Neshamah. If you guard its Taharah, fine. If not, Hash-m will take it back"<sup>5</sup>q*

Whether it be “slapping on the mouth” in the Talmud version, or “lightly strikes the fetus on the upper lip” in the Midrashic version, or “slaps the baby on the upper lip” the outcome is the same, in one version a cry, in the Talmud version a forgetting of all the Torah it learned in utero.

Lailah has taught him everything he needs to know, he can see from one of the universes to the other, now he comes into the real world and must forget. What is the cry? From the slap? Or the loss of all his Torah knowledge? Who is she? This singular feminine angel? Unlike Lilith wishing man’s destruction, Lailah accompanies his embryonic development as well as escorting him at the time of death to the next world. She is his guardian angel. But closed examination of her role suggests an ambiguous role, one of guardian, teacher and protector, on the other hand a surrogate for the divine, watching the moral evolution and ultimate judgment of man.

Despite his amnesia for the womb events she asks him at death “do you remember me?

“I am here to escort you out of this world as I was to accompany you into this world.”

Even more poignant is her appearance before the Divine with the soul drop that will become forced into the drop of semen against its will and the embryo asking a foretelling of the future as to the moral destiny of this child... “will it be strong or weak? Will it be righteous or wicked?” Is she asking for informational purposes? She will not tell the embryo, for fear of removing its free will, so why the question?

More than an angel of conception she feels responsible for the spiritual outcome of the embryo, teaching it Torah prior to birth. She is the angel of conception who made a choice of a particular soul from Eden to become incarnated in a drop of semen and feels responsible for the choice since the soul is unwilling (from past experience) and remains its guardian angel throughout life. A midwife of the soul, she feels

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<sup>5</sup> Dafyomi.co.il

responsible from time of conception until death and beyond. She explains to the soul its past...prior incarnations? Prior misdeeds? Why?

Our first midrashic encounter with this guardian angel comes with the story of the Abraham wars. Abraham in Genesis prepares for battle:

**"At night [Abraham] and his servants deployed against them and defeated them"**

GEN 14:14

The Aggadah/midrash focuses on the specificity of night time as follows:

*"If I go [to battle] and am successful, I will sacrifice my two sons to thee', he vowed. But his sons heard this, so they killed him, as it is written, and it came to pass, as he was worshipping in the house of Nisroch his god, that Adrammelech and Sharezer his sons smote him with the sword etc. And he (Abraham) fought against them, he and his servants, by night [Lailah] and smote them.*

R. Johanan said: The angel who was appointed to [aid] Abraham was named Lailah [Night]. as it is written, "Let the day Yom (day) perish wherein I was born, and the Lailah (night) which said, there is a man child conceived."

Birth is associated with daytime and conception and intimacy is associated with night time. Hypostatizing the night time into an angel is the hermeneutic move of this midrash.

R. Isaac, the smith, said: He [the angel] set into motion the activities of the night [viz.. the stars] on his behalf, as it is written, they fought from heaven; the stars in their courses fought against Sisera."<sup>6</sup>

It seems this angel was active in the night attack by Abraham assisting him in overcoming military odds.

This guardian angel watches over her conceptions. And when the time comes, she re-introduces herself and escorts mankind to their judgment. Knowing ahead of time, for she had asked before birth what the character of the child might be, she now accompanies the soul back to its origins. She also inquires as to the moral life the person has led and whether it made the right choices between good and evil. Even though the newborn has forgotten its visitations to heaven and hell, there must be a

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<sup>6</sup> Sanhedrin 96b commenting on Gen 14:14. After serving Chedorlaomer for 12 years, the cities rebelled and Chedorlaomer retaliated, capturing both and taking their people, including Lot, as booty. Abraham with only 318 men surprised them in a night raid, freeing the captives.



kind of unconscious re-remembering as it went through life or else what was the use of these intrauterine visitations and tours of heaven and hell? She obviously wished some kind of residue a kind of intuitive edge during life to choose good even though her slap had caused a moral amnesia.

(Ellen Frankel has suggested that God decides the fate of the child when it is conceived and leaves one thing undecided, whether it will be righteous or wicked.<sup>7</sup>)

The site of the lesion is most consistent with the philtrum in the following midrash.

#### אוצר מדרשים<sup>8</sup>

כיצד יצירת הולד, אמר ר' יוחנן מאי דכתיב עושה גדולות עד אין חקר נפלאות עד אין מספר, אלו גדולות ונפלאות שהקב"ה עושה ביצירת הולד. שבשעה שאדם בא לשמש מטתו עם אשתו הקב"ה קורא למלאך ... הממונה על ההריון ואומר לו דע כי פלוני מזריע הלילה יצירת האדם ואתה לך ושמור אותה מיד רומז הקב"ה למלאך הממונה על הרוחות ואומר לו הבא לי רוח פלוני ... וחוזר המלאך ומחזיר הרוח בתוך מעי אמו ומזמן שם שני מלאכים ושומרים אותו שלא יפול, ... ובבקר גומלו המלאך ומוליכו לגן עדן ומראה לו הצדיקים היושבים בכבוד ואומר לו תדע למי היה אותו רוח? א"ל לאו, א"ל אותו שאתה רואה באותו מעלה נוצר כמותך במעי אמו, וכן זה וזה ושמרו חוקי ומשפטי הקב"ה, אם תעשה כמותם אחר מותך כאשר מתו הם תזכו למעלה הזאת ולכבוד הזה כאשר אתה רואה, ואם לאו סופך לילך אל המקום אשר אראך. לערב מוליכו לגיהנם ומראה לו הרשעים שמלאכי חבלה ממרידין אותם וחובטין ומכין אותם במלקות של אש והם צועקין אוי ואבוי ואין מרחמין עליהם, ואומר לו המלאך בני הידעת מי המה אלו הנשרפין? ואומר לאו, א"ל תדע שאלו נוצרו מטיפה סרוחה במעי אמך כמוך ויצאו לעולם, אך לא שמרו עדות וחוקות הקב"ה לכך באו לחרפה זו. ועתה בני תדע כי סופך לצאת מן המקום הזה ולמות, לכן אל תהי רשע אך תהי צדיק ותחיה לעולם הבא, ומנין שכך הוא שנאמר יתמך דברי לבך שמר מצותי וחייה, ומטייל אותו מן הבקר ועד הערב ומראה לו כל מקום שידרוך כף רגלו ... ומקום שעתיד ליקבר בו ואחר כך מראה לו עולם הטובים והרעים, לערב מחזיר אותו למעי אמו וכאשר הגיע זמנו לצאת באותו מלאך ואומר לו צא כי הגיע זמנך לצאת לעולם, והוא משיב והלא כבר אמרתי בפני מי שאמר והיה העולם שדי לי בעולם אשר הייתי דר בו, ואומר לו עולם שאני מכניסך יפה הוא, ועוד שעל כרחך אתה נוצר במעי אמך ועל כרחך אתה נולד ותצא לאויר העולם. מיד בוכה הוא, ולמה הוא בוכה? מאותו עולם שהיה בו שמניחו. וביציאתו מכה אותו המלאך תחת חוטמו ומכבה הנר שעל ראשו ומוציאו על כרחו ושוכח כל אשר ראה ועוד ביציאתו הוא בוכה ולמה, מפני שמחליפין לו שבעה עולמות באותה שעה

In summary the תנחומא claims merely that the baby is struck; the Talmud places the angel's strike "on his mouth"; and the אוצר מדרשים is the most specific, placing it

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– אוצר מדרשים (אייזענשטיין) חלק א' ערך יצירת הולד עמוד רמג 8

“below his nose”. This latter detail is the apparent basis for a Jewish folk tradition that the philtrum is a mark left by the angel’s strike.

The identification of the angel(s) is further clarified by the Zohar where the masculine and feminized versions of this angel come together to herald the Exodus:

*To indicate the union which took place on that night between the Masculine and Feminine aspects in the Divine attributes, and also the same union which will take place in the future Redemption.*

*A comparison is made between leyl (masculine noun) and layla (feminine noun) "night" and is used "to indicate the union which took place on that night between the Masculine and Feminine aspects in the Divine attributes."<sup>9</sup>*

### Midrash Yelamdenu: Pikudei 3

4 אָמַר רַבִּי יוֹחָנָן, מֵאֵי דְכָתִיב: עֲשֵׂה גְדֻלוֹת עַד אֵין חֶקֶר וְנִפְלְאוֹת עַד אֵין מִסְפֵּר (איוב ט, י). תִּדְעֵ לָךְ, שְׁכָל הַנְּשָׁמוֹת שֶׁהָיוּ מִן אָדָם הָרֵאשׁוֹן וְשִׁיָּהּיוּ עַד סוּף כָּל הָעוֹלָם, כָּלֵן נִבְרָאוּ בְּשִׁשֶׁת יָמֵי בְּרֵאשִׁית. וְכָלֵן בְּגֵן עֵדֵן, וְכָלֵן הָיוּ בְּמִתְּן תּוֹרָה, שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר: כִּי אֵת אֲשֶׁר יִשְׁנֶה פֶה עִמָּנוּ עֹמֵד הַיּוֹם, וְאֵת אֲשֶׁר אֵינָנוּ פֶה עִמָּנוּ הַיּוֹם (דברים כט, יד). וְמֵה שֶׁאָמַר, עֲשֵׂה גְדֻלוֹת עַד אֵין חֶקֶר, אֵלוּ גְדֻלוֹת שֶׁעוֹשֶׂה הַקְּדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא בְּיִצִּירַת הַוָּלָד. בְּשַׁעַה שֶׁבָּא אָדָם לְשִׁמֵשׁ עִם אִשְׁתּוֹ, רוּמֵז הַקְּדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא לְמִלְאָךְ הַמְּמַנֶּה עַל הַהֲרִיוֹן, וְשִׁמוֹ לֵילָה.

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Mid<sup>9</sup>

R. Johanan asked: Why is it written: *Who doeth great things past finding; yea, marvelous things without number (Job 9:10)*? You should know that every soul, from Adam to the end of the world, was formed during the six days of creation, and that all of them were present in the Garden of Eden and at the time of the giving of the Torah, as it is said: *With him that standeth here with us this day, and also with him that is not here with us this day (Deut. 29:14)*. What is the meaning of *Great things past finding out*? It refers to the great deeds the Holy One, blessed be He, did in the formation of the embryo. At the time that a man is about to have intercourse with his wife, the Holy One, blessed be He, informs the **angel** in charge of conception, whose name is Lailah.<sup>8</sup> The Holy One, blessed be He, says to her: Know that on this night a person will be formed from the semen of a certain individual known to you. Guard this drop of semen, take it into the palm of your hand, and sow it on the threshing floor, in three hundred and sixty-five parts. And she would do so. She took it into her hand and brought it at once to Him who had said *It hath been already (Eccles. 1:10)* and said to Him: "I have done all that You have commanded. Here is the drop, what have You decreed concerning it?" The Holy One, blessed be He, forthwith decreed concerning the semen what its end would be, whether male or female, weak or strong, poor or rich, short or tall, ugly or handsome, heavy or thin, humble or haughty. He decreed concerning everything that would happen to it except whether it would be righteous or wicked.<sup>2</sup> That choice alone he left to the individual, as it is said: *See, I have set before thee this day life and good, and death and evil (Deut. 30:15)*.

ומביט ורואה מסוף העולם ועד סופו. נוטלו המלאך משם ומליכו לגן עדן ומראה לו הצדיקים יושבין כבוד ועטרותיהם בראשיהם. ואמר המלאך לאותו הרוח, תדע לך מי הם אלו. אומר לו הרוח, לא אדוני. חוזר המלאך ואומר לו: הללו שאתה רואה, נוצרו בתחלה כמותך בתוך מעי אמן ויצאו לעולם ושמרו התורה והמצוות, לפיכך זכו ונזדמגו לטובה זו שאתה רואה. דע לך, שסופך לצאת לעולם. ואם תזכה ותשמר התורה של הקדוש ברוך הוא, תזכה לך ולשיבה של אלו. ואם לאו, דע וראה שתזכה למקום אחר.

He looked about and peered from one end of the world to the other. The angel took him and led him into the Garden of Eden and showed him the righteous ones sitting there in honor, with crowns on their heads. The angel said to him: "O soul, do you know who these are?" And the soul replied: "No, my master." Whereupon the angel told him: "These that you see were formed at first, like you, in the womb of their mothers, and then went out into the world. They observed the Torah and the commandments, and therefore were deserving and were selected for this beautiful place that you see. Know that when you leave this world, if you are worthy and keep the law of the Holy One, blessed be He, you will merit sitting among these. But if not, be assured, you will be assigned to another place."

ף מגיע זמנו לצאת לאויר העולם. מייד בא אותו המלאך ואומר לו באותה שעה, הגיע זמנו לצאת לאויר העולם. והוא אומר לו: למה אתה רוצה להוציאני לאויר העולם. אומר לו המלאך, בני תדע שעל כרחי אתה נוצר ועכשו דע שעל כרחי נולדת ועל כרחי אתה מת ועל כרחי אתה עתיד לתן דין ותשבון לפני מלך המלכים הקדוש ברוך הוא. ואינו רוצה לצאת משם, עד שמכחו ומכבה לו את הנר שהוא דלוק על ראשו ומציאו לאויר העולם בעל כרחו. מייד שוכח התינוק כל מה שראה ביציאתו וכל מה שהוא יודע. ולמה התינוק בוכה ביציאתו. על מה שאבד מקום הנחה והרחוה ועל העולם שיצא ממנו

When at last the time arrives for his entrance into the world, the angel comes to him and says: "At a certain hour your time will come to enter the light of the world." He pleads with him, saying: "Why do you wish me to go out into the light of the world?" The angel replies: "You know, my son, that you were formed against your will; against your will you will be born; against your will you will die; and against your will you are destined to give an accounting before the King of Kings, the Holy One, blessed be He". Nevertheless, he remained unwilling to leave, and so the angel struck him with the candle that was burning at his head. Thereupon he went out into the light of the world, though against his will. Upon going out the infant forgot everything he had witnessed and everything he knew. Why does the child cry out on leaving his mother's womb? Because the place wherein he had been at rest and at ease was irretrievable and because of the condition of the world into which he must enter.

לסוף הגיע זמנו, בא לו אותו המלאך ואומר לו: תכירני. אומר לו: הן. ואומר לו: למה באת לי היום מכל שאר הימים. אומר לו המלאך, כדי להוציאך מן העולם, כי הגיע זמנו להפטר. מייד מתחיל בוכה ומשמיע קולו מסוף העולם ועד סופו. ואין הבריות מפירין ולא שומעין את קולו, חוץ מן התרנגול בלבד. ואומר למלאך, הלא כבר הוצאתני משני עולמות והכנסתני בזה העולם. ואומר לו המלאך, והלא

כָּבַר אֶמְרָתִי לָךְ, שְׁעַל כְּרַחֲמֵי בּוֹצְרֶתְךָ, וְעַל כְּרַחֲמֵי בּוֹלְדֶתְךָ, וְעַל כְּרַחֲמֵי אֲתָהּ חַי, וְעַל כְּרַחֲמֵי אֲתָהּ מֵת, וְעַל כְּרַחֲמֵי אֲתָהּ עֲתִיד לָתֵן דִּין וְחֶשְׁבוֹן לְפָנַי הַקְּדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא.

Finally, as his end draws near, the angel comes to him and asks: “Do you not recognize me?” And he answers: “Yes, but why do you come to me on this day of all days?” The angel replies: “To take you from this world; the time of your departure has come.” He begins to cry out immediately, and his voice can be heard from one end of the earth to the other, but no one recognizes or heeds his voice except a crowing cock. He says to the angel: “Have you not already taken me out of two worlds and brought me into this one?” And the angel responds: “Did I not tell you that you were formed against your will, that you were born against your will, that you would live against your will, and that ultimately you will have to render an accounting before the Holy One, blessed be He, against your will?”

A darker version of the angelic influences in the womb is seen the Zohar to Ruth. Here the possible dangerous angels are evoked by sin. These angels are called “nights” or night angels with their destructive fire power.

### **The Zohar Chadash Ruth 1:1,8**

זהר חדש מדרש רות מאמר נר"נ ונשמה לנשמה ונ"ר הבהמית (112)



פֶּתַח וְאָמַר, מַה הוּא דְאָמַר, (ש"ש ב) הֲרֵאִינִי אֶת מְרֵאִיךָ. כִּד יִתְעַבֵּיד  
בַּר נֶשׁ מְטִיפָה, בְּשִׁלְיִיתָא דְאִמְיָה, כְּמָה דְאִתְרַבִּי, אָעִיל בֵּיהּ הַקְדוּשׁ בְּרוּךְ  
הוּא זְעִיר זְעִיר רוּחָא וְנִפְשָׁא. וְנַר יְהִיבַת עַל רִישֵׁיהּ בְּלִילְיָא. שְׁנַאֲמַר, (איוב  
כ"ט:ג') בְּהֵלוּ נְרוֹ עָלַי רֵאשִׁי. וְעִמּוּדָא דְנְהוֹרָא בִּימָמָא, שְׁנַאֲמַר ק (שמות  
י"ד:י"ט) וַיִּסַּע עִמּוּד הָעֲנָן וְגו', וְלִילְיָהּ בְּעִמּוּד אִשׁ כּו' לְלַכֵּת יוֹמָם וְלִילְיָהּ.  
וְשְׁנַאֲמַר, (משלי ו:כ"ג) כִּי נַר מִצְוָה וְתוֹרָה אֹר.

וְאוֹלְפֵי לֵיהּ כָּל אוֹרֵייתָא. וְאוֹלְפֵי לֵיהּ כָּל פִּיקוּדֵי. וְיִמְרוּן לֵיהּ, חֲזוּ, דְדִין הוּא  
דְרָךְ עֲקֻלְתוֹן, דְאִיתְקַרִי לִילְיָהּ. וּבְאַתְרָא הַדִּין יַעֲלוֹן כָּל נִפְשָׁתָא דְאִינְשָׁא.  
שְׁנַאֲמַר, (איוב ג:י"ט) קָטָן וְגָדוֹל שָׁם הוּא וְעָבַד חֲפָשִׁי מְאֹדוֹנִיו.

וְאַחֲזִיין לֵיהּ, בְּעִמּוּדָא דְאִשְׁתָּא, דְהִיא עַל רִישֵׁיהּ, כְּמָה דּוּבִין וְנִמְרִין וְאַרְיִין  
וּמְלָאכֵי חֲבֵלָה דִּיתְבִּין תַּמָּן. וְכִלְבָּא תַּמָּן, וְעַל דָּא אָמַר דָּוִד, (תהילים  
כ"ב:כ"א) הֲצִילָהּ מִחֶרֶב נִפְשִׁי מִיַּד כָּלֵב יְחִידָתִי. וְדִין אִתְרָא הוּא חֲשָׁף,  
וּמְלָאכֵי חֲבֵלָה קָרוּן לְהוֹן לִילוֹת. וְעַל דָּא אָמַר, מִפְּחַד בְּלִילוֹת. לִילוֹת מִמֶּשׁ  
אַקְרוּן.

וְיִמְרוּן לֵיהּ, אִם תִּזְכֶּה לְמִצּוֹת, כָּל מִצְוָה וּמִצְוָה, יַעֲבֹדוּן לָךְ מִינָהּ מְלָאךְ  
טוֹב. וּבְעֵידוֹן דְתִיעוּל בְּאַתְרָא הַדִּין, וְתִזְכֶּה לְמִצּוֹת, יִמְרוּן, סוּלוּ סוּלוּ פִּנּוּ  
דְרָךְ הָרִימוּ מְכֻשׁוֹל מְדָרְךָ פְּלוּנֵי דָא, וְלֹא יִשְׁלֹטוּן עָלֶיךָ מְלָאכֵי חֲבֵלָה.

## **The Legends of the Jews, Louis Ginzburg**

*The care which God exercised in fashioning every detail of the body of man is as naught in comparison with His solicitude for the human soul. The soul of man was created on the first day, for it is the spirit of God moving upon the face of the waters. Thus, instead of being the last, man is really the first work of creation. This spirit, or, to call it by its usual name, the soul of man, possesses five different powers. By means of one of them she escapes from the body every night, rises up to heaven, and fetches new life thence for man. With the soul of Adam, the souls of all the generations of men were created. They are stored up in a promptuary, in the seventh of the heavens, whence they are drawn as they are needed for human body after human body.<sup>19</sup>*

*The soul and body of man are united in this way: When a woman has conceived, the Angel of the Night, **Lailah**, carries the sperm before God, and God decrees what manner of human being shall become of it—whether it shall be male or female, strong or weak, rich or poor, beautiful or ugly, long or short, fat or thin, and what all its other qualities shall be. Piety and wickedness alone are left to the determination of man himself.*

*Then God makes a sign to the angel appointed over the souls, saying, “Bring Me the soul so-and-so, which is hidden in Paradise, whose name is so-and-so, and whose form is so-and-so.” The angel brings the designated soul, and she bows down when she appears in the presence of God and prostrates herself before Him. At that moment, God issues the command, “Enter this sperm.” The soul opens her mouth and pleads: “O Lord of the world! I am well pleased with the world in which I have been living since the day on which Thou didst call me into being. Why dost Thou now desire to have me enter this impure sperm, I who am holy and pure, and a part of Thy glory?”*

*God consoles her: “The world which I shall cause thee to enter is better than the world in which thou hast lived hitherto, and when I created thee, it was only for this purpose.” The soul is then forced to enter the sperm against her will, and the angel carries her back to the womb of the mother.*

***Two angels** are detailed to watch that she shall not leave it, nor drop out of it, and a light is set above her, whereby the soul can see from one end of the world to the other. In the morning an angel carries her to Paradise, and shows her the righteous, who sit there in their glory, with crowns upon their heads.*

*The angel then says to the soul, “Dost thou know who these are?” She replies in the negative, and the angel goes on: “These whom thou beholdest here were formed, like unto thee, in the womb of their mother. When they came into the world, they observed God’s Torah and His commandments. Therefore, they became the partakers of this bliss which thou seest them enjoy. Know, also thou wilt one day depart from the world below, and if thou wilt observe God’s Torah, then wilt thou be found worthy of sitting with these pious ones. But if not, thou wilt be doomed to the other place.”*

*In the evening, the angel takes the soul to hell, and there points out the sinners whom the Angels of Destruction are smiting with fiery scourges, the sinners all the while crying out Woe! Woe! but no mercy is shown unto them. The angel then questions the soul as before, “Dost thou know who these are?” and as before the reply is negative. The angel continues: “These who are consumed with fire were created like unto thee. When they were put into the world, they did not observe God’s Torah and His commandments. Therefore, have they come to this disgrace which thou seest them suffer. Know, thy destiny is also to depart from the world. Be just, therefore, and not wicked, that thou mayest gain the future world.”*

*Between morning and evening the angel carries the soul around and shows her where she will live and where she will die, and the place where she will be buried, and he takes her through the whole world, and points out the just and the sinners and all things. In the evening, he replaces her in the womb of the mother, and there she remains for nine months. When the time arrives for her to emerge from the womb into the open world, the same angel addresses the soul, “The time has come for thee to go abroad into the open world.” The soul demurs, “Why dost thou want to make me go forth into the open world?”*

*The angel replies: “Know that as thou wert formed against thy will, so now thou wilt be born against thy will, and against thy will thou shalt die, and against thy will thou shalt give account of thyself before the King of kings, the Holy One, blessed be He.” But the soul is reluctant to leave her place. **Then the angel fillips the babe on the nose, extinguishes the light at his head, and brings him forth into the world against his will. Immediately the child forgets all his soul has seen and learnt, and he comes into the world crying, for he loses a place of shelter and security and rest.***

*When the time arrives for man to quit this world, the same angel appears and asks him, “Dost thou recognize me?” And man replies, “Yes; but why dost thou come to me to-day, and thou didst come on no other day?” The angel says, “To take thee away from the world, for the time of thy departure has arrived.” Then man falls to*

*weeping, and his voice penetrates to all ends of the world, yet no creature hears his voice, except the cock alone.*

*Man remonstrates with the angel, “From two worlds thou didst take me, and into this world thou didst bring me.” But the angel reminds him: “Did I not tell thee that thou wert formed against thy will, and thou wouldst be born against thy will, and against thy will thou wouldst die? And against thy will thou wilt have to give account and reckoning of thyself before the Holy One, blessed be He.” 20<sup>10</sup>*

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<sup>10</sup> 19. Tan. Pekude 3, where the statement occurs that all souls are but part of Adam’s soul. Comp. Tan. Ki-Tissa 12; ShR 40. 3. This view which is probably of Christian origin (comp. I Cor. 15. 22, and Rom. 5. 14, as well as Tertullian, *De Anima*, 40), plays a great part in the Kabbalah, which speaks of the sparks of Adam’s soul forming the souls of later generations. A different view is given in BR 8. 8, where it is said that God consulted the souls of the pious concerning the creation of man; comp. Excursus I. The abode of the souls of the unborn, according to Hagigah 12b, is the seventh heaven (in this passage the souls are differentiated from the spirits; comp. the preceding note); but according to Tan. Pekude, loc. cit., it is in paradise. Yebamot 62a and parallel passages speak of a <sup>1</sup>Wg where the soul of all future generations are preserved. It also has the additional remark that the Messiah will not come until this <sup>1</sup>Wg is emptied. According to the traditional interpretation, <sup>1</sup>Wg denotes a promptuary (comp. ‘Aruk, s. v.). See further 2 Enoch 23. 14; and 58.5 (here an abode of the souls [spirits?] of animals is likewise spoken of); Apocalypse of Baruch 23. 5; 4 Ezra 4. 35. According to another view, this <sup>ò</sup>Wg is identical with the “curtain” (dwgrp) before God’s throne (frequently mentioned in the Talmud), on which all souls are “painted”; comp. ‘Aruk, loc. cit.; Zohar II, 96b, and the quotation, from a work of R. Eleazar of Worms (Rokeah), by R. Joseph Jabez, at the end of the latter’s work Ma’amar ha-Ahdu.

20. Tan. Pekude 3, and as an independent Midrash entitled *Yezirat ha-Walad* (“creation of the embryo”) in *Abkat Rokel*, whence it was republished by Jellinek in *BHM I*, 153–155. The latter scholar added a second midrashic treatise giving more material about the physical nature of man and the “creation of the embryo” from *Likkute ha-Pardes* 4d–5b, which is partly of the same contents as that of the first treatise. *Yerahmeel* 10, 19–23, is identical with Tan., loc. cit. As to particulars, note the following. On the angel *Lailah* (“night”) and his functions, comp. *Niddah* 16b; *Sanhedrin* 96a; ‘*Aseret ha-Dibrot* 79; footnote 98 on p. 195. In *Zohar II*, 11a–11b, it is *Gabriel* who is in charge of the soul; comp. also *ibid.* 96b. That everything is predestined by God, except man’s moral freedom, is also found in *Ketubot* 30a; *Apocalypse of Baruch* 54. 15. Comp. the references given by Charles, ad loc., to Josephus and other sources. There is also a statement that a few days before the birth of a male child a heavenly voice announces: That woman is destined to become his wife, that house or that field will belong to him; comp. *Sotah* 2a and *Mo’ed Katan* 18b. On the view that marriages are made in heaven, see further *Yerushalmi Bezah* 5, 63a (bottom); *WR* 8. 1; *BR* 68. 4; *PK* 2, 11b–12a; *Tan. Ki-Tissa* 5; *Shemuel* 5, 62. See also *Abrahams, J.Q.R. II*, 172–177=Book of Delight, 172–183. On the predestination of the intellectual and other traits of man, comp. *Yelammedenu* in *Yalkut II*, 916 on *Job* 28. The differentiation of the sex of the embryo, according to the Kabbalists, is brought by the angel *Sandalfon*; comp. *Yalkut Reubeni*, *Lev.* 12. 2. **The refusal of the soul to enter the embryo is already presupposed in *Abot* 4 (end). The two heavenly companions of the soul are naturally the guardian angels of every individual person, who are frequently alluded to in Jewish, as well as in Christian, literature;** comp. *Berakot* 60b (top); *Shabbat* 119b; *Ta’anit* 11a; *Tan. WaYeze* 3; *Matthew* 18. 10; *Hermas Pastor*, *Visio*, V, 6. 2; *Clemens Alexandrinus*, *Stromata*, 6. 17; *Justin Martyr*, *Dialogue*, 5, and 2 *Apologia*, 5; *Athenagoras*, *Legatio*, 10. 20; *Visio Pauli*, 14; *The History of Joseph the Carpenter*, 13. In the Jewish sources (comp. *Shabbat* and *Tan.*, loc. cit.; *ER* 18, 100; *Tehillim* 104, 440) the doctrine of the guardian angels appears quite early with a rationalistic explanation. In view of *Shabbat* loc. cit., *Maimonides*, *Guide of the Perplexed*, III, 23, is certainly correct in asserting that the ancient Rabbis understood these guardian angels to represent the good and evil inclinations. It is interesting that *Hermas Pastor*, loc. cit., represents practically the same conception. Directly dependent on *Maimonides* is *Zohar*, I, 144b, 165b, 191a; II, 41b–42a; III, 106a. Here and there the view is found, both in Jewish and Christian sources, that every man has only one guardian angel; comp. *ER*, loc. cit., and *Kimha Dabishuna* on the *piyyut dja μϋρμωα* (morning prayer of the Day of Atonement); *Visio Pauli*, loc. cit. The prevalent opinion, however, is that there are two guardian angels; comp. the sources quoted above, and *Eusebius*, 689a, as well as text on p. 92. **That the angels who accompany man testify before God concerning his acts is found not only in *Ta’anit*, loc. cit., but also in 2 Enoch 19.5. Here also belong the remarks about the angels who come to God to plead for a man if he is good, and about those who accuse him if his conduct is bad; comp. *Tehillim* 94, 418; *Mishle* 11, 70. Hence the statement that man’s actions, his limbs and his soul are his witnesses;** comp. *Ta’anit*, loc. cit.; ‘*Aseret ha-Dibrot* 79; *Sifre D.*, 307. *Midrash Tannaim* 187; *Tan. B. I*, 21: When a man is about to die, God appears (the appearance of God is mentioned also in *Sifre N.*, 103), and says to him: “Write down all thy deeds, because thou art about to die now.” The man then writes everything down, and signs it with his hand. On the last day of judgment, God will produce these books, and a man’s actions will be shown to him. Comp. also *Shabbat* 32a, which reads: A man’s good deeds are his *Parakletin* (“defenders”) at the heavenly court. **To the oldest sources, where guardian angels are mentioned, belongs 2 Maccabees 3. 26; Comp. also note 12.—According to *Niddah* 30b, the soul of the embryo knows and sees everything, and hence the corresponding statement in ‘*Aseret ha-Dibrot* 79** Comp. further *Mishle* 2, 49; *Tan. B. III*, 32; *WR* 14. 8–9. On the relation of this conception to the Platonic doctrine of anamnesis, comp. *Güdemann*, *Religionsgeschichtliche Studien*, 7, seq., and *Joel*, *Blicke*, I, 118–119. The kabbalistic treatment of this Platonic doctrine appears in *Ziyyoni*, *Hayye Sarah* (beginning). On the idea that every man has a place in paradise or hell after death, according to his deserts, see *Hagigah* 15a; 2 *Enoch* 49; *Tehillim* 21, 239; *Apocalypse*

I am struck by the dialogue between man and his angel, his recognition of her at the end of his life and his resistance to leave this world. The point of course is the notion of reward and punishment however there is a tragic quality to mankind being thrust into this world against the soul's wish to remain in the heavens and its pleading before the divine to reconsider. God consoles the soul by insisting that this world is actually better, although the soul remains unconvinced and is forced into the sperm.

While in the womb this unconscious soul is shown the gates of heaven and hell in order to motivate it towards the good and to give fair warning as to the consequences of misbehavior.

At birth the baby cries for having lost “a place of shelter and security and rest.” It is a cry for a lost world. An anxiety for an imminent world of exposure, insecurity and unrest.

The resistance continues even at birth with a prescient knowledge of what is about to occur, never again protected by the warmth of the womb, sheltered and protected, it resists.

Is it possible that the “tribulations of birth” or the birth pangs represents the pain inflicted on the mother by a resistant fetus? If the cry is one of resistance so too must the difficulty of the birth passage. Maybe the fetus remains reluctant to emerge until the last ago agonizing push by the mother to expel it. The birth as an expulsion from the garden of the womb.

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of Baruch 23. 4; comp. especially the elaborate amplification of Hagigah, loc. cit., in Hasidim 36. The idea that an angel causes the soul to forget everything, when it enters this world, is derived from Niddah 39a, where it is emphasized that the heavenly hosts adjure the embryo with the following words: “Be pious and not wicked; but when the world regards thee as pious, it shall appear to thee as though thou art wicked. Know that God is pure, His servants are pure, and thy soul is pure. If thou keepest it pure, it is well for thee; otherwise it will be taken away from thee.” On the loud weeping of the dying, compare with Zohar I, 98a (Midrash ha-Ne'elam) and 79a, call the moment of death “the great judgment” for the individual, in which the soul acknowledges everything it has done during its life. For this point in the older sources comp. Sifre D., 307; Midrash Tannaim 187; Tan. B. I, 21.—The words of the angel of death are taken almost verbatim from Abot 4 (end). The motive of refusing to die plays an important part in the legends concerning Abraham and Moses (comp. Index, s. v. “Abraham,” “Moses”), and is also found in Christian legends; comp. Louise Dudley, Egyptian Elements in the Legend of the Body and Soul, 151, seq. The dependence of the Christian on the Jewish legends, and not on the Egyptian, as Dudley assumes, appears quite clearly from the passage of Visio Pauli 4, which Dudley, 27, is unable to explain. The angels who took away the soul of the sinner say to him: “As for that from which thou departest, again wilt thou return unto it.” This Christian source quotes almost verbatim from Abot loc. cit., though the words do not fit into the description of death in Visio Pauli. Almost all men (comp. Index, s. v. “Death by Kiss”) die by the “sword of the angel;” nevertheless the death of the pious is painless, that of the wicked is painful. Comp. the following passages where details concerning this point are given: Berakot 8a; ‘Abodah Zarah 20b (here two different views are blended into one: 1) the sword of the angel of death; 2) a drop of venom, bitter as death, from the angel's hand causes death); Tehillim 11, 102–103. In the last passage it is also said that the soul is removed from the body, whereas the spirit (=wind jwr) remains at the tip of the nose after death until the corpse becomes putrefied, whereupon it is removed by the angel Duma into its proper place, paradise or hell. On the various souls which man possesses, comp. note 18. The older sources (Yerushalmi Mo'ed Katan 3, 82b; Tan. Mikkez 4; comp. further Shabbat 152a) maintain that the soul during the first three days hovers about the dead body, in the hope that it will be resurrected, and it leaves it mournfully when putrefaction has set in; comp. John 11, 39, and Bousset, Religion, 341, note 1, as well as Zohar III, 53a, and notes 139–140.



So, the angel in charge of the fetal development in actuality presides over the unwilling soul, the unwilling fetus and eventually the unwilling aged person on his or her deathbed. Is she benevolent or an agent of the divine?

Man remonstrates...” from two worlds did you take me...” man blames the angel for having forced him against his will and now once more for causing his death. Man has no control over his beginnings nor his endings, he is thrust into this world and is thrust out of this world. He has no control over his beginnings nor his endings.

I like David Flatto’s analysis and the contrast between the Greek and Talmudic notion of anamnesis, especially the use of the Job citation which adds the dimension of the tragic.

### [David Flatto’s analysis:](#)<sup>11</sup>

*Once having mastered the entire Torah, the newborn loses all knowledge, and now has to begin the process of “retrieval” of prior wisdom. In a beautiful account of this process, Rabbi Soloveitchik helps characterize the nature of this learning: R. Simlai wanted to tell us that when a Jew studies Torah he is confronted with something which is not foreign and extraneous, but rather intimate and already familiar, because he has already studied it, and the knowledge was stored up in the recesses of his memory and became part of him. He studies, in effect, his own stuff. Learning is the recollection of something familiar.*

*One is reminded, by sheer terminological association, of the Platonic doctrine of anamnesis.*

*My only quibble with this formulation is that the similarity here is far greater than a terminological coincidence, and cuts to the essence of the underlying idea. Both Plato and Hazal assume that in a pre-natal state a person had a perfect conception of the truth (or the forms), which was severely eroded at the moment of birth. Therefore, learning consists in a lifetime attempt to restore this prior knowledge. Indeed, other Jewish studies scholars dating back to the nineteenth century have noted this profound parallel between Hellenistic and Rabbinic thought. In Ephraim Urbach’s words:*

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<sup>11</sup> <http://bdld.info/2014/05/11/of-mentors-metaphor-memory-and-memo/>

*In the motif of the unborn child's knowledge of the Torah and his forgetting it upon being born, scholars, since Jellinek, have discerned the ἀναμνησις of the Platonic myth...*

*In all, Athens and Jerusalem share an essential view of pre-natal life, the idealization of pre-natal knowledge, and especially the characterization of study as retrieval.*

*Yet despite these profound resemblances, the core conceptions of Greek and Rabbinic thought are actually dramatically different—a point which only becomes apparent by focusing more carefully on this same foundational myth. To appreciate this distinction, it is worth briefly pondering the Platonic doctrine of recollection.*

*The essence of this Platonic idea is relatively straightforward: Plato posits that the psyche or soul has pure apprehensions of the ideal forms. Once the soul is imprisoned within a physical frame, this perception is severely impaired. A human being can only perceive a shadow of the ideal forms and must utilize his rational faculties to try to transcend these limits and acquire a greater understanding of the truth. This process is repeated in successive incarnations until man succeeds in permanently acquiring a lasting apprehension of the truth. Thus, the process of recollection aims to comprehend the truth by rising beyond the limits of temporal life and escaping the trappings of the human existential condition.*

*At first blush, Hazal would seem to echo this idea by describing the fetus's tenure in idyllic terms that surpass a person's life experience, "And there is no time in which a man enjoys greater happiness than in those days..." Having previously mastered the entirety of Torah, a human will tirelessly strive to approximate his prior wisdom, evidently aiming to heal the rupture of entering a human form. **Moreover, the biblical verses from Job which are a subtext to this Talmudic passage seem to reflect precisely this sentiment. Of course earlier in this biblical book (chapter 3) Job bluntly curses the day of his birth, and according to Hazal's daring reading of Job 29, he again expresses a similar yearning to return to a pre-natal existence (not just the days of youthful innocence, which is the simple sense of the verses).***

*But the Talmud's invocation of verses from Job—voicing a cry of tragic suffering—surely is grounds to pause.*

*For Job's desperate mindset can hardly be thought of as representing a paradigmatic attitude. Likewise, a closer reading of this passage points away from Job's sentiments, and its Platonic resonances.*

*A seeming inconsistency in the Talmudic description of the fetus provides an important hint along these lines. While the thrust of the passage underscores the all-inclusive knowledge of the fetus, the initial characterization of the fetus in the passage suggests otherwise. The opening lines compare the fetus to a folded writing tablet, or ledger (unlike, e.g., Mishnah Avot 3:16 which refers to an open writing tablet), a tabula rasa which has yet to be opened for inscription. Within the womb, the fetus is a fresh ledger with no content.*

*Considered alongside the continuation of the passage, with its depiction of the fetus mastering Torah and wisdom, this portrayal makes little sense. Why is the ledger folded and blank, rather than open and thoroughly scrawled with Torah content?*

*On closer inspection, these two images are reconcilable, and revealing. For the notion of a ledger is used in rabbinic literature to describe the record of a human being's deeds. Since the fetus in utero lies in a pre-natal state, this is necessarily empty. In contrast, the child's wisdom bank is full to capacity.*

*The dichotomy between knowledge and action is crucial for perceiving the deeper message of this Talmudic account of the fetus. It affords the key to understanding the decisive, concluding lines of this passage, describing the final interaction between the angel and the fetus immediately prior to birth:*

*It (=the fetus) does not emerge from there before it is made to take an oath... What is the nature of the oath that it is made to take? Be righteous, and never be wicked...*

*Administered at the culmination of the angel's tutelage, the oath presumably epitomizes the main charge to the emergent newborn. Nevertheless, the oath's curious formulation is far from obvious. Against the backdrop of the angel's intensive Torah instruction which has just been erased, one would imagine an oath to adjure the newborn to resume his Torah study.*

*Something along the lines of, 'Be wise, and never be foolish.' Instead, the baby is charged to be righteous, not wicked. In a deliberate shift, as the baby prepares to enter the world, the angel emphasizes a distinctive goal. The ultimate lesson of the angel focuses on acting righteously, rather than on mastering Torah knowledge, as this constitutes the newborn's supreme task.*

*Moreover, this cardinal assignment is only possible outside of the womb.*

*Notwithstanding the utopian image of life in the womb—where illumination, wisdom and happiness are achieved—the purpose of life cannot be accomplished in the womb.*

*For one thing that one cannot be inside the womb is righteous; or wicked for that matter, either. These latter epithets are only assigned based upon how one lives—one's concrete actions, in the face of moral choices—after exiting the womb.*

*As the Talmudic passage underscores by citing Genesis 4:7 (“as it is said, sin coucheth at the door...”), weighty moral hazards await the fetus outside the womb. But only when navigating in such a landscape, can a person prevail and achieve righteousness or wickedness. After immersing the purified soul in the well of Torah, the newborn is properly oriented to successfully engage in a world full of challenges and adhere to his oath of righteousness.*

***Thus, the focus of the rabbinic legend of the fetus is not to highlight perfection within the womb, but the challenging call that beckons beyond it. For human beings were essentially created for the precious, if formidable, mission that only begins after departing the womb. Unlike the Platonic ideal of escaping the prison of the body in order to achieve transcendent contemplation, the Rabbinic ideal anticipates an inspired, but pulsating, human being, leading a righteous life of worldly actions.***

End Script: the Chassidic Rebbe Reb Elimelech of Lizensk makes use of our midrash in a radical new way:

**Rabbi Elimelech of Lizhensk explicitly argued that if we hadn't learned Torah before we entered the world it would be impossible to grasp it now.**

#### **ספר נועם אלימלך – פרשת ויקרא**

וזהו ושמעה קול אלה פירוש שדומה לו כאלו שומע עתה מחדש קול האלה והשבועה כנ"ל # והוא עד הוא לשון התראה מלשון העדותי בכם כו' ופירושו הוא כך מה הוא הדבר שמעיד ומתרה בהצדיק לעוררו שיחרד לבבו ומפרש הכתוב והוא עד רוצה לומר זה הדבר המתרה להצדיק דהיינו או ראה או ידע ע"ד שפרשתי כבר שהנשמה קודם יציאתה לעולם מוליכין אותה בכל עולמות ומלמדין אותה כל התורה ואחר כך בא מלאך וסטרן על פיו כדאיתא בגמרא וכל זאת למה # אמרתי כבר באריכות השורש הוא לסיבה הזאת שמראין לו כל עולמות הוא למען שיוכל אחר כך להשיג העולמות ולעבוד

בהם להשם יתברך ברוך הוא ולהשיג התורה שלמד ואילולי זאת שמראין לו כנ"ל לא היה יכול להשיג כלל וכלל לא התורה ולא העולמות העליונים רק על ידי הרשימה הנרשם בו קודם יציאתו לעולם על ידי זה יכול אחר כך להשיג # ואם לא היה נשכח ממנו כל מה שראה ולמד לא היה לו שום שכר בעבודתו:

On the verse (LEV 5:1)

א וְנִפְשׁ כִּי-תִחַטָּא, וְשָׁמְעָה קוֹל אֱלֹהִים, וְהוּא עֵד, אוֹ רָאָה אוֹ יָדָע; אִם-לוֹא יִגִּיד, וְנִשָּׂא עֹוֹנוֹ. **1** And if any one sin, in that he heareth the voice of adjuration, he being a witness, whether he hath seen or known, if he do not utter it, then he shall bear his iniquity;

Meaning as if he were to hear afresh the voice of the oath and the adjurement. And the nature of the warning is as in testimony as follows: for what is the main warning the Zaddik? I have already explained that the soul prior to its emergence into this world is led through all the worlds and it taught the entire Torah, **after which an angel comes along and smacks him on the mouth.** The reason to do this is so that he after he emerges into this world he may grasp all those the worlds (from recollection) and be able to serve God even through those worlds as well. And also grasp the Torah that he had already learned. Had it not been for this fetal introduction he would be incapable of grasping the Torah nor the upper worlds. Only through the residue (impression) made upon him as a fetus can he even grasp what was learned in utero. And if not he would forget it completely all that he learned and saw and would have no reward in his worship.

#### ספר נועם אלימלך - ליקוטי שושנה

משוך חסדך ליודעיך וצדקתך לישרי לב # ומתחילה נפרש הפסוק שאמר יעקב אבינו עליו השלום ידעתי בני ידעתי שהוא מלות כפולות # ועוד שהיה לו לומר יודע אני כו' אך נראה דהנה הנשמה שהיא תחת כסא הכבוד אז היא יודעת להשכיל כל התורה כדאיתא בגמרא ומלמדין אותה כל התורה כולה וכיון שיצא לאויר העולם בא מלאך וסטרו על פיו # ויש ליתן טעם לשבח לזה שמתחלה מלמדין אותה ואחר כך המלאך סטרו ונ"ל שמתחלה הנשמה ששוכנת תחת כסא הכבוד ולמען לא יהא לה נהמא דכסופא היא נבראת כידוע וזהו ההכרחי ללמדה כל התורה כולה כי אילולי זה לא היה באפשרי להנשמה בבואה אל הגוף החומרי להתגבר עליו לשבר תאוותו וההכרחי ללמדו כל התורה שעל ידו יכול לשבר כח ותאוות הגוף. ועוד אם לא היו מלמדין אותה לא היה באפשרי לקבל וללמוד אחר כך את התורה לכן מלמדין אותה מתחילה כדי שאחר כך בנקל תוכל לקבל וללמוד התורה # א

Let us first interpret the verse that Jacob of blessed memory said to Joseph, "I have known my son I have known" which is a redundancy and a double expression of "I know" moreover he should said "I know" in the present tense.



To explain, the soul is under the throne of glory where it knows to understand the whole Torah, as the Talmud elaborates, “and the soul (in utero) is taught the entire Torah, and since it emerges into the world an angel comes along and strike it on the mouth whereupon it forgets...we need to give a reason why the teaching then the forgetting...it seems to me that initially the soul resides under the throne of glory in order that it will not partake of the bread of shame/embarrassment when it emerges into this world, from such an exalted place, it is imperative to teach it the entire Torah, for if not, it would be unable to to enter a physical body and overcome and break its animal urges, so it is taught the Torah to enable it to vanquish the desires of the flesh. Furthermore had it not been taught the Torah prenatally, it would be unable to accept and study post-natally, therefore it is taught from the initial conception so that later it can accept it and learn ti with ese.

#### **ספר נועם אלימלך - ליקוטי שושנה**

ועוד אם לא היו מלמדין אותה לא היה באפשרי לקבל וללמוד אחר כך את התורה לכן מלמדין אותה .  
# מתחילה כדי שאחר כך בנקל תוכל לקבל וללמוד התורה

Furthermore were it not taught the Torah before birth, it would be incapable of learning later on therefore we teach it form the start (in utero) in order for it to receive Torah and learn it with ease.



## **References:**

*B. Niddah* 16b, 30b; *B. Sanhedrin* 96a; *Midrash Tanhuma-Yelammedenu, Pekudei* 3;  
*Zohar Chadash* 68:3; *Sefer ha-Zikhronot* 10:19-23;  
*Be'er ha-Hasidut* 1:216; *Aseret ha-Dibrot* 79;  
*Avodat ha-Kodesh*, Introduction; *Nishmat Hayim* 2:18;  
*Anaf Yosef* on *B. Niddah* 30b;  
*Amud ha-Avodash* 103b;  
*Avkat Rakel* in *Beit ha-Midrash* 1:153-155;  
*Likutei ha-Pardes* 4d-5c; IFA 4722, 18976.