

## 395. THE SABBATH BRIDE

Every seventh day her coronation takes place. Before the start of the ceremony, the dwelling place is prepared like the chamber of a Bridegroom set to receive his Bride. Meanwhile, the Bride herself remains alone, separated from the forces of evil. There she adorns herself with a crown for the Holy King, and prepares herself for their union. Then, as the Sabbath begins, the radiant Bride is escorted by angels on high and Israel below, and she is ushered into Israel's abode, to be in their midst. There she is crowned by the prayers of the holy people, and they, in turn, are adorned with new souls, so that they all are united above and below.

This describes a mythical ceremony that is part coronation and part wedding between God and His Bride, the *Shekhinah*. The union, clearly intended to be understood as a sexual union, between God and His Bride, comes close to portraying them as independent mythic beings. This one passage from the *Zohar* can be subjected to many interpretations. It might be viewed as a union between two of the ten sefirot, those representing the marriage of the King and His Bride. At the same time, it is also an enthronement myth as well as a wedding. This heavenly ceremony is paralleled on earth by the ritual of *Kabbalat Shabbat*, going out to greet the Sabbath Queen at the beginning of the Sabbath. The Ari and his followers wore white, and left the city of Safed to go out into the fields to welcome the Sabbath Queen. Thus heaven turns to earth and earth to heaven, and they meet in a rare union of peace, which is the Sabbath. See the next entry, "Greeting the Sabbath Queen."

### Sources:

*Zohar* 2:131b, 2:135a-b, 3:300b-301a.

### Studies:

"The Aspect of the 'Feminine' in the Lurianic Kabbalah" by Yoram Jacobson.

"Coronation of the Sabbath Bride: Kabbalistic Myth and the Ritual of Androgynisation" by Elliot R. Wolfson.

## 217. THE SEVEN HEAVENS

There are seven heavens. The first serves to renew the work of Creation every day. The second is that in which the sun and moon and stars and constellations are set. In the third millstones grind manna for the righteous. In the fourth is the heavenly Jerusalem, where the Temple and altar are built. There Michael, Israel's guardian angel, makes offerings. In the fifth heaven there are companies of the ministering angels who are silent by day and utter divine songs at night.

In the sixth heaven are stored the treasuries of snow and hail, and the lofts of dews and raindrops, the chambers of whirlwind and storm, the cave of vapor and the doors of fire. The seventh is the highest heaven, *Aravot*, where are found the treasuries of peace and blessing, the souls of the righteous and the souls not yet created, as well as the dew with which God will revive the dead. So too are there many kinds of angels, the *Ofanim* and the *Seraphim* and the holy living creatures and the ministering angels. And the Throne of God, high and exalted, dwells over them all.

In Jewish lore, the basic concepts of heaven and hell are elaborated, describing seven levels of heaven and seven levels of hell. In fact, there are also seven levels of the earth. The seven heavens are identified as *Vilon* (Curtain), *Raki'a* (Firmament), *Shehakim* (Clouds), *Zebul* (Lofty Dwelling), *Ma'on* (Dwelling), *Makhon* (Residence) and *Aravot* (Highest Heaven). This myth of the seven heavens attributes a specific function to each one. In more general terms, the souls of the righteous are said to ascend from the lower heavens to the higher ones as they become worthy of them. The higher the soul ascends, the closer it comes to God and to the palaces of the patriarchs and sages that are found in the highest heavens. According to Rabbi Meir ibn Gabbai in *Avodat ha-Kodesh* 27, the soul does not ascend to the highest heavens on the first attempt. Accustomed to living in the darkness of the body, it cannot endure the brilliance of the divine light. Therefore the soul stays in the lower *Gan Eden* until it gets used to this light, and then it ascends on high.

*Sources:*

*B. Hagigah* 12b-13a; *Avot de-Rabbi Natan* 37.

*Studies:*

*Jewish Mystical Testimonies* by Louis Jacobs.

## 227. WOMEN IN PARADISE

There are six palaces in Paradise where the souls of the righteous women make their home. Each of these righteous women has a palace of her own. In each chamber there are beautiful canopies, with angels set over them, and every day they are crowned with the radiance of the *Shekhinah*.

The first palace is ruled by Bitiah, Pharaoh's daughter, who raised Moses as if he were her own son. She teaches the commandments of the Torah to the many thousands of myriads of pious women who are with her, and she serves as their queen. These women still maintain their human form, and they are clothed in garments of light, and there is great joy among them. Three times a day Bitiah goes to a place where there is a curtain, and bows before the image of Moses, saying, "Fortunate am I for drawing such a light out of the water."

The next palace is that of Serah bat Asher, who rules over thousands of myriads of righteous women. They busy themselves with praises of the Lord, and contemplate the commandments of the Torah. Three times a day Serah goes to a curtain and bows before the image of Joseph, saying, "Happy was the day on which I gave the good news about Joseph to my grandfather, Jacob."

The other palaces are presided over by Yocheved, the mother of Moses, Miriam the prophetess, the sister of Moses, and Deborah the prophetess. All day long the women are by themselves, as are the men, for there is a curtain spread out in Paradise that separates them. But every night they come together at midnight, for that is the hour of copulation. Then they cleave soul to soul and light to light, and the fruit of this union are the souls of those who become converts to Judaism.

The righteous women in these heavenly palaces are those who never had to suffer the pains of Gehenna. Their souls went directly to Paradise at the time of their deaths. Those whose sins require that they first be purified in Gehenna, Jewish hell, are not permitted in these palaces.

Although Bitiah, the daughter of Pharaoh, was not Jewish, she still has been inducted into the Jewish pantheon of righteous women in Paradise. Indeed, she rules over the first of six palaces devoted to the souls of righteous women. *Leviticus Rabbah* 1:3 explains that her name means “daughter of God” (*Bitiah*). According to the *Zohar*, the other women who rule over these heavenly palaces are Yocheved, Miriam, Deborah, and the four matriarchs. The last have hidden palaces within the six heavenly palaces of the righteous women. *Seder Gan Eden* adds Hulda the prophetess and Abigail to the list of righteous women.

For more on Serah bat Asher informing Jacob that Joseph was alive, see “Serah bat Asher,” p. 377.

*Sources:*

*Zohar* 3:167a-b; *Shloyshe Sheorim*; *Sefer Ma’asei Adonai*; *Derekh Etz Hayim ve-Inyanei Gan Eden*, appended to *Sefer Ma’aneh Lashon* 152; *Derekh ha-Yashar le-Olam ha-Ba* 25; *Seder Gan Eden* (version B) in *Beit ha-Midrash* 3:131-140.

*Studies:*

*Voices of the Matriarchs* by Chava Weissler, pp. 76-85.

## 277. DEMONIC DOUBLES

The kingdom of Satan is measure for measure like the kingdom of man. Every male child, when born, already has a double in the kingdom of demons. So too does every female, when she is born, have her shadow born there as well, in her precise shape and image, not unlike that seen in a mirror. And at the hour that a heavenly voice goes forth to announce that this one will be married to that one, a partner is also prepared at the same time in the spirit world. She sits and waits for him there from that time forward. And the man who is fortunate marries his partner from the family of man, but less fortunate is he who is found alone on the fourth night of the week or on the night of the Sabbath. For then he is in danger of being kidnapped by the sons of Satan, and led to a place that no man's feet should ever enter, there to marry, not his intended, but his intended's demonic double.

The Talmud explains that "Forty days before a person is born, a heavenly voice goes forth to say that this one will be married to that one" (*B. Sota 2a*). This knowledge is available to the angels, but not only to the angels—the demons, too, overhear this voice and make evil use of the knowledge they obtain. Thus, in effect, the *bashert* tradition, where a person seeks out and marries his or her "destined one," has been corrupted and effectively reversed by demons.

In *The Testament of Solomon* King Solomon forces the demon Ornasias to explain how demons are familiar with future events. Ornasias tells him that "We demons go up to the firmament of heaven, fly around among the stars, and hear the decisions that issue from God concerning the lives of men." This explains how the demons, as well as the angels, hear the heavenly voice that announces future events. Using future knowledge, demons create the demonic double of a person's *bashert* and trick people into marrying their demonic doubles. This serves to explain the many strange marriages that are found in the world.

Sources:

*The Testament of Solomon 20; Tzefunot ve-Aggadot.*

## 288. THE LIGHT OF GEHENNA

Sometimes a light issues forth from Gehenna into the Garden of Eden. This is a sign that God has accepted the grief of one of the souls that is being punished. The soul's contrition warrants its entry into the Garden of Eden, where its suffering is transformed into delight.

This myth is in direct contrast to "The Darkness of Gehenna." It shows that God continues to monitor the grief of the sinners in Gehenna, and that He is prepared at a moment's notice to accept deeply felt repentance to free those sinners from the punishments of Gehenna. In contrasting Gehenna with the Christian concept of hell, it is important to note that the punishments of hell are supposed to last forever, while the time the soul of a sinner spends being punished in Gehenna is limited to a maximum of twelve months. And ultimately, when the Messiah comes, Gehenna will cease to exist.

Sources:

*Zohar 2:211b; Tzidkat ha-Tzaddik 153; Toldot Ya'akov Yosef; Sifram Shel Tzaddikim.*

## 290. THE INHABITANTS OF GEHENNA

The souls of the wicked descend below to Gehenna, as it is said, *The spirit of the beast goes downward to the earth* (Eccles. 3:21). This includes the utterly wicked in Israel and the wicked among the nations of the earth. Both will go down to Gehenna, as it is said, *The wind shall carry them off, and the whirlwind shall scatter them* (Isa. 41:16).

This myth answers the question of whether the punishments of Gehenna are limited to Jews, or whether they apply to the wicked of other nations. Here both are described as being punished in Gehenna.

*Sources:*

*Ecclesiastes Rabbah* on Ecclesiastes 3:21; *Eliyahu Rabbah* 18:108-109; *Eliyahu Zuta* 11:192.

## 293. THE FATE OF SLANDERERS

What is the fate of slanderers? When slander, spread about the earth, mounts even to the throne of glory, destroying angels descend at God's command and seize the slanderers and throw them into the furnace of Gehenna.

But Gehenna objects, saying, "The tongue of a slanderer reaches from earth up to the heavens. The entire world cannot stand him. First send your arrows at him, and then I will receive him, as it is said, *A warrior's sharp arrows, with hot coals of broom-wood* (Ps. 120:4)." Then those who slander are hung by their tongues and subject to all the tortures that Gehenna has to offer.

The most despicable figures in Gehenna are the slanderers. Not even Gehenna, personified here, can bear their presence. So Gehenna insists that God punish them first, and then Gehenna will receive them, according to the verse *A warrior's sharp arrows, with hot coals of broom-wood* (Ps. 120:4). Here the "coals of broom-wood" refers to the punishments of Gehenna. For another example of the personification of Gehenna, see "Gehenna Seething," p. 238.

Note that the sinners are cast into the furnace of Gehenna, where the hottest flames of Gehenna are burning. This is to demonstrate the seriousness of their sins.

*Sources:*

*Eliyahu Rabbah* 18:108

## 294. SABBATH IN GEHENNA

Even the wicked in Gehenna enjoy a respite on the Sabbath. Every Sabbath eve, when the day becomes sanctified, the angel in charge of souls announces, "Let the punishment of the sinners cease, for the Holy King approaches and the Day is about to be sanctified. He protects all!" Instantly all punishment ceases, and the guilty have a respite. The sinners who observed the Sabbath are led to two mountains of snow, where they remain until the end of the Sabbath, when the angel in charge of the spirits shouts, "All evildoers, back to Gehenna—the Sabbath is over!" and they are thrust back to their former place in hell. Some of them, however, take snow with them to cool them during the six days of the week, but God says to them: "Woe to you who steal even in hell!"

But the fires of Gehenna do not come to a halt for those who never observed the Sabbath. Since they did not observe the Sabbath before, they have no respite. An angel whose name is Santriel, which means "God is my Guardsman," goes and fetches the body of the sinner from the grave. He brings it to Gehenna before the eyes of the guilty, and they see how it has bred worms. They know the soul of such a sinner has no respite from the fire of Gehenna. And all those guilty who are there surround that body and proclaim over it: "This person is guilty, for he would not regard the honor of his Master, he denied the Holy One, blessed be He, and denied the Torah. Woe to him! It had been better for him never to be created and not to be subjected to this punishment and this disgrace!"

Rabbi Yehudah said: "After the Sabbath goes out the angel comes and takes that body back to its grave, and both the body and the soul are punished, each in its own way."

And all this takes place while the body is still well preserved. But once the body is decayed, it no longer suffers all these punishments. The guilty ones are punished in their bodies and their souls, each with a suitable punishment, so long as the body in the grave is intact. But when the body breaks down the punishment of the soul ceases. He who must leave Gehenna leaves, and he who must find rest has rest—to each is done what is suitable for him.

So great is the redeeming power of the Sabbath, that even the souls being punished in Gehenna are allowed to rest on the Sabbath, until the close of the Sabbath. As *Tola'at Ya'akov* puts it, "*Din*—harsh justice—is banished on the eve of the Sabbath, even from the sinners in Gehenna. For the Sabbath protects the cosmos. But on Saturday night *Din* is restored to its station. A herald cries out: '*Let the wicked be in Sheol*'" (Ps. 9:18). In addition to a reprieve on the Sabbath, *Zohar* 2:150b lists further reprieves on new moons and festivals.

For a folktale about Sabbath in Gehenna, see "Three Stars" in *Gabriel's Palace*, pp. 227-228. See also "Sabbath in Gehenna" by Isaac Bashevis Singer's in *The Death of Methuselah and Other Stories*, pp. 212-219.

Sources:

*Pesikta Rabbati* 23:8; *Orhot Hayim*; *Zohar* 2:151a; *Tola'at Ya'akov* 58b; *Sha'ar ha-Gemul*; *Nishmat Hayim* 1:12, 1:14; *Sefer ha-Zikhronot* 15:7.

### 300. THE MESSIAH IN HELL

When Rabbi Joshua ben Levi found himself in the Garden of Eden, he decided to explore it as completely as he could. One by one he explored the nine palaces of the Garden of Eden, until he came to the palace of the Messiah. He recognized the Messiah by the splendor of his aura. There he saw how the patriarchs and kings came to the Messiah every Sabbath and holy day and wept, because it was not yet time for him to go forth into the world.

When Rabbi Joshua came before the Messiah, the Messiah said, "How are my children faring?" And Rabbi Joshua said: "Every day they await you." Then the Messiah gave a great sigh and wept.

After that the Messiah showed Rabbi Joshua all of the earthly garden and the heavenly one as well, and revealed the greatest mysteries to him. But when Rabbi Joshua asked to be shown hell, at first the Messiah refused, for the righteous are not permitted to behold hell. But when Rabbi Joshua told him that it was his intention to measure hell from beginning to end, the Messiah agreed to take him there.

So it was that Rabbi Joshua followed the Messiah until they reached the fiery gates of hell. When the angels guarding the gate saw that the Messiah was with him, they admitted him at once. Everywhere they went, Rabbi Joshua saw the punishments of hell, where avenging angels smite the wicked with flaming rods, and throw them into fiery pits, and after that hang them by their tongues, or by the organs with which they committed adultery. And although Rabbi Joshua tried to measure the compartments of hell, he found that they were boundless, as was the suffering of the wicked. But whenever the wicked in hell saw the light of the Messiah, they rejoiced and cried out, "There is the one who will bring us out of here."

This myth about the descent of Rabbi Joshua ben Levi and the Messiah into hell builds on the talmudic account of Rabbi Joshua's highly irregular entrance into the Garden of Eden. See "Rabbi Joshua ben Levi and the Angel of Death," p. 206. There Rabbi Joshua is portrayed as fearless, and here he asks the Messiah, whom he meets in heaven, to show him hell. The Messiah finally agrees and they descend to Gehenna together. Rabbi Joshua tries to measure the compartments of Gehenna, but discovers that they are boundless, i.e., that they can contain any number of sinners. However, this visit serves to give hope to the sinners of Gehenna, who acclaim the Messiah as the one who will free them from there, since one of the traditions about the coming of the Messiah is that all those being punished in Gehenna will be raised from there to Paradise. The Messiah described here is Messiah ben David, the celestial Messiah, who lives in a heavenly palace and will only descend to earth when the time is right for the footsteps of the Messiah to be heard.

*Sources:*

*Sefer ha-Zikhronot* 21:1-11; *Orhot Hayim*; *Aggadat Bereshit* 51a-b.

### 303. PURIFIED SOULS

When the process of purification has been completed, the chief angels take a soul out of Gehenna and lead it to the Gate of Paradise. There they say to the angels standing guard: "This soul was broken after its ordeal in the infernal fire, and now it has come to you pure and white."

Then God causes the sun to penetrate the firmament and shed its rays on that soul and heal it.

The purpose of Gehenna is to purify the souls of sinners so that they can be permitted to enter paradise. This myth demonstrates how a soul is taken out of Gehenna. Note that this purification process is clearly described as a painful one, where the soul is purified in the fires of Gehenna.

*Sources:*

*Zohar 2:211a.*



### 304. HOW THE DEAD SEE THE DEAD

The day a person dies is the day of his judgment, when the soul parts from the body. A person does not leave this world until he sees the *Shekhinah*, accompanied by three ministering angels, who receive the soul of a righteous person. These angels examine a person's deeds, and insist that a person confess to all that the body has done with the soul in this world. After this confession, the soul of a righteous person rejoices in its parting from this world and looks forward with delight to the world to come. For when God takes the souls of the righteous, He takes it with gentleness. But when He takes the souls of the wicked, He does so through cruel angels, as it is said, *Therefore a cruel angel shall be sent against him* (Prov. 17:11).

After a man dies he can be seen by all the others who are dead. To each of them he appears as they last saw him alive: some see him as a youth, others as an old man. For the angel who guards the dead makes his soul assume these various forms so that all should recognize him by seeing him just as they saw him in life.

However, if a man is condemned to punishment in Gehenna, he is enveloped in smoke and brimstone, so that none of those being punished can see the punishment of any other. Thus none are put to shame, except for those who have put others to shame.

This description of a man seeing the *Shekhinah* as he dies is based on Exodus 33:20: *No man shall see Me and live*. The three angels who accompany the *Shekhinah* are identified as the three angels who visited Abraham in Genesis 18:2.

It is characteristic of Jewish myth to describe in great detail unknown realms, such as heaven, hell, or what comes to pass when a person leaves this life. Here the dead are said to see each other exactly as they appeared when they last saw each other alive. This explanation of how the dead see and recognize each other solves the problem of a person's changing appearance by aging.

Sources:

*Sifre on Deuteronomy 357; Midrash ha-Ne'elam in Zohar 1:98a; Sefer ha-Zikhronot 11:6.*

## 250. THE CREATION OF THE ANGEL OF DEATH

Some say that the only thing created on the first day of creation was the Angel of Death. How do we know this? By the word “darkness” in the verse *Darkness was over the face of the deep* (Gen. 1:2). But others say that when God created the world, there was no Angel of Death.

So when was the Angel of Death created? Some say it was at the time of the sin of Adam and Eve, for the serpent was the Angel of Death, and it caused death for the entire world. But others say that the Angel of Death did not come into being until Cain slew Abel, for until then no one had died, and there was no need for such an angel. Then God transformed Cain into the Angel of Death, as punishment for having slain his brother, and that is how the Angel of Death came into being.

Cain served as the Angel of Death for one hundred and thirty years, wandering and roaming about, accursed. After the death of Cain, Lamech took his place as the Angel of Death.

This myth attempts to determine when the Angel of Death was created based on the appropriate biblical episode. Because the serpent in the Garden of Eden led Adam and Eve into a sin that brought about mortality, it is identified in the *Zohar* as the Angel of Death. (*Zohar* 1:35b also identifies the serpent as Satan and as the *Yetzer ha-Ra*, the Evil Impulse that entices a person to sin and afterward rises up before the heavenly court to accuse the sinner.) Likewise, because Cain was the first murderer, *Midrash Tanhuma* identifies him as becoming transformed into the Angel of Death. Cain’s descendent, Lamech, who was said to have accidentally slain Cain, is also identified as one who took on the mantle of the Angel of Death. See “The Death of Cain,” p. 451.

Sources:

*B. Avodah Zarah* 22b; *Genesis Rabbah* 21:5; *Exodus Rabbah* 30:3, 38:2; *Numbers Rabbah* 23:13; *Midrash Tanhuma-Yelammedenu*, *Bereshit* 11; *Zohar* 1:35b; *Me’am Lo’ez Bereshit* 1:5.

## 252. RABBI LOEW AND THE ANGEL OF DEATH

One night, not long before the Holy Days were to begin, Rabbi Loew glimpsed a light in the synagogue across the way, and he wondered who might be there at that hour. He left his house, and as he approached the synagogue he saw through the window a strange figure standing at the pulpit. The closer Rabbi Loew came, the more sinister did the figure seem, and suddenly Rabbi Loew realized who it was—the Angel of Death—and at the same time he came close enough to see the angel sharpening a knife over a long scroll on which many names were written. Rabbi Loew was pierced with terror and resisted a powerful impulse to run away. But a moment later he became calm and self-possessed, and he knew what he had to do. As silently as possible he opened the door of the synagogue and came up behind the dreaded angel. All at once he snatched the long list out of the angel’s hands, tearing it away from him, and ran from the synagogue to his home, where he threw the list into the flames and watched until every scrap of it had burned to ashes.

Now the plague had begun to spread in the city, and that was the list of victims the Angel of Death had come to take in one fell swoop. Now only those on the piece of the list left in his hands fell victim to him; all the rest were spared. But among those on the list was Rabbi Loew, and it was he, above all, whom the deadly angel was determined to capture.

Rabbi Loew, who could read the lines of the future, knew that the angel would try to snatch him to seek revenge. But Rabbi Loew used his powers to avoid the angel, much as King David had done, studying Torah day and night. For the Angel of Death is forbidden to take a man while he is engaged in the study of Torah. Yet even so, the angel found a ruse by which to capture him. He hid in a rose of great beauty that grew in the garden of Rabbi Loew's grandson. One day the boy picked the rose as a gift for his grandfather, and as he held it in his hands to present to Rabbi Loew, the rabbi perceived the presence of the dark angel, hidden in the rose. Then he did not hesitate, but accepted the gift from his grandson, for he knew that if he did not, the boy's life would be endangered. But no sooner did Rabbi Loew take it in his hand than the Angel of Death struck him like a serpent and snatched his soul.

The most famous tale of an encounter with the Angel of Death is that of King David, found in the Talmud. Here David learns that he is fated to die on a Sabbath. Knowing that the Angel of Death is forbidden to snatch a man while he is studying, David spends every Sabbath immersed in study. In frustration the Angel of Death creates a ruse by shaking a tree outside his study, and when David goes out to investigate, the angel snatches his life (*B. Shab. 30a-b*). A common theme found in folklore is that of the snake hidden in a rose, who bites the one who picks it. Such a theme is found in "The Princess and the Rose" in the medieval collection *Sefer Sha'ashuim*.

Another key legend of an encounter with the Angel of Death is found in the pseudepigraphal text *The Testament of Abraham*. Here the Angel of Death disguises himself as a young man of mild appearance, but reveals his true appearance when Abraham demands it. The description of its terrible face is one of the most horrible to be found anywhere. It is such a face that overwhelms the father and mother in "The Bridegroom and the Angel of Death" in *Hibbur ha-Ma'asiyot ve-ha-Midrashot ve-ha-Aggadot*. In this story, the next of kin of the bridegroom all offer to take his place to spare him being snatched by the Angel of Death, until the moment of truth, when all back out, except for the bride, who so impresses God with her willingness to die that both bride and bridegroom are spared. See "The Bridegroom and the Angel of Death" in *Gabriel's Palace*, pp. 162-164.

A major study of the legends of the Angel of Death was undertaken by Haim Schwarzbaum in the last years of his life. Professor Dov Noy tells the story that he once asked Schwarzbaum why it was taking him so long to finish his book on the Angel of Death. Schwarzbaum replied that he believed the Angel of Death would prefer to take him after he had finished the book, and that is why he was taking his time. Unfortunately, he died before the book was completed.

Sources:

*Die Legenden der Juden; Die Wundermanner im Judischen Volk.*

## 240. THE ANGEL OF CONCEPTION

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.

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.