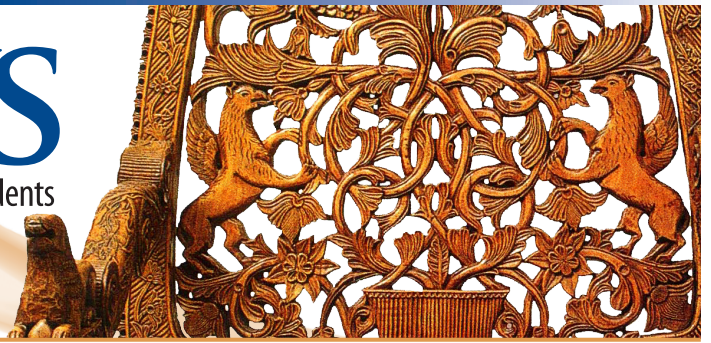


PATHWAYS

Crossing the Narrow Bridge with Rebbe Nachman and His Students

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Plagued by Darkness

By Ozer Bergman

“People could not see one another nor could anyone move” (Exodus 10:23). Ramban comments: This was not a protracted night. If it were, the Egyptians could have just lit candles! Rather it was an extremely thick, palpable cloud that descended from Heaven (see v. 21). It extended throughout Egypt, even into most hidden recesses and underground chambers. Wherever it was, it extinguished the lights.

In next week’s Torah reading (Exodus 13:18), we learn that four-fifths of the Israelites did not leave Egypt because they died during the Plague of Darkness. They died during that plague because they didn’t want to leave Egypt. Let’s digest that. They saw and heard the great tzaddik Moshe Rabbeinu; they saw the initial miracles that he performed (proving he was God’s messenger) and the first eight plagues, all of which were done for their sake; with the first plague, they were relieved of their slavery and its associated burdens; and finally, the promise of Torah and freedom awaited them. Yet they didn’t want to leave Egypt.

The “Plague of Darkness,” also known as depression, can do that to a person. It’s easy to understand why an Israelite in Egypt would be depressed. His living conditions were a cross between the Spanish Inquisition, Nazi Germany and slavery. The physical and emotional beatings were brutal and relentless. Until Moshe Rabbeinu came, there was no expectation of positive change, let alone liberty. Despite the initial notion to the contrary, that because they had suffered so horribly God would give all the Israelites a free pass to automatically “come along for the ride” to Sinai, we see that this was not so.

At the beginning of Rebbe Nachman’s tale of “The Seven Beggars,” the father-king tells his son, the newly coronated king, “I see you are destined to lose your kingdom. When you lose power, be careful not to become depressed; you must remain joyful. If you are happy, I will also be happy. But if you will be sad, then I will still be happy—because you are no longer king. If you are not able to remain happy when you lose your royal power, then you are not fit to be a king” (*Rabbi Nachman’s Stories*, p. 356). Part of the job description for “Jew” is the ability to remain upbeat even when you have to leave “Jerusalem” and “go down to Egypt land.”

While most of us have never been royals, we have enjoyed

the privilege of far-reaching autonomy, in terms of being where we want to be and doing what we want to do. Yet there are times when our choices become limited, perhaps severely. Illness and disease, financial reverses or freakish weather may not only postpone our plans temporarily. They may remove them permanently, God forbid. How do we react to losing our power? Are we fit to be royals?

We all know that the Egyptian exile still exists, just not in Egypt. Think about it. We can have contact with a genuine tzaddik, be the beneficiaries of every type of material and spiritual success, know that Mashiach is almost, almost here – and still be depressed! That dark cloud can sure descend pretty fast! If it does, God forbid, it puts out all the lights, even the ones in the depths of our hearts, and prevents us from lighting new ones.

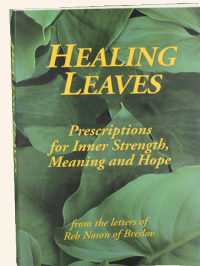
To be unable to change one’s position in the darkness of the circumstances means that one has “died in Egypt.” To be royal, to be fit to be a king, means to take charge of the situation, and to not let the situation take charge of you. This begins with deciding what attitude you want to have, because “there is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so.” If one’s ambitions are worldly, anything darker than desired will be too Egyptianly-narrow. If one has Jewish aspirations, the smallest space is infinite.

Based on Sippurei Ma’asiot (Rabbi Nachman’s Stories), “The Seven Beggars.” A gutn Shabbos! Shabbat Shalom!

HEALING LEAVES

FROM THE LETTERS OF REB NOSON OF BRESLOV

Compiled by Yitzchok Leib Bell



Always try to be happy. How delighted I was to read that you are happy! Thank God. May it always be so, my son! May you always be full of joy! We must always be inspired by the joy of being a Jew. We should feel infinite pleasure over this. We have merited to be of the seed of Israel! God has given us

His Torah and the holy commandments! “Happy are we, how good is our portion!” (*Letter #6*)

Have Faith in Your Prayers

by Yossi Katz

“Because the world was created for my sake, I must constantly look into and consider ways of making the world better; to provide what is missing and pray on its behalf” (*Likutey Moharan* I, 5:1).

We all want and need different things. Sometimes those things are spiritual, like feeling close to God or working on our character traits. Sometimes they are physical needs, like a working car or a reasonably-priced home. Whatever we need, Reb Noson teaches that prayer is the way to bring about a manifestation or “birth” of these blessings into our lives. But doesn’t this sound too easy? Not really. To be able to pray for what we need and actually receive these blessings, we must first have *emunah* (faith) in God’s ability to grant us these blessings – and also believe that in His great compassion, God listens attentively and answers all of our prayers.

*We have all been answered before.
May we all be answered once again!*

According to the *Shulchan Arukh* (Code of Jewish Law) a firstborn child receives a double portion of his parents’ inheritance. Reb Noson explains that mystically, the concept of “firstborn” refers to bringing about a birth of something new. As we have seen, prayer is the source of all blessing/newness in this world. The double portion of the firstborn reflects the two components of prayer: praising God and asking for our needs. How much faith we have in our prayers being accepted by God determines the results of our prayers; therefore we must recognize God’s great compassion before we can ask. But it’s not until we have actually prayed sincerely for something and been granted our request that we can start to develop true faith in prayer. Our new confidence in our future prayers is forever rooted in that original “firstborn” prayer. For that reason the firstborn receives the double portion in order to bring about its success.

The firstborn of Egypt represent the opposite spiritual force, the blockage of prayer. Their mission is to convince us that even once we have succeeded with our prayers and are ready to live a life of *emunah*, we can forget and even deny God’s blessings. In Egypt, their force was so potent that it overwhelmed the Jewish prayers.

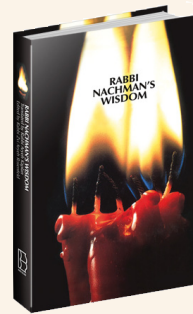
After all of the plagues, Pharaoh still refused to surrender until God killed the firstborn of Egypt. Then the Jewish prayers of those many bitter years of exile were set free and we were finally redeemed. We always remember the redemption from Egypt before we recite the *Amidah* prayer – reminding us that yes, we have all been answered before! May we all be answered once again! Amen.

Based on Likutey Halakhot, Hilkhot Nachlot 4

SIDEPATH

Rabbi Nachman’s Wisdom translated by R. Aryeh Kaplan, zt”l

5. The Rebbe emphatically denounced all books dealing with philosophy. All that philosophy can do is to build propositions based on logical arguments in a vain attempt to arrive at some conclusion. But wisdom such as that of the Torah is not found there at all. The Rebbe said that one who knows nothing of such books, but walks a simple path and fears God’s punishment, is fortunate.



When a person becomes involved in philosophy, his mind becomes filled with doubts and questions. These reinforce man’s inborn wickedness — i.e., his nature to be drawn to worldly temptations. This can be overcome only through the fear of punishment. Only then can he actually begin to serve God. But philosophy raises doubts and questions that strengthen one’s natural inclination towards the desires of this world.

This is why we never find a person who has become upstanding and God-fearing through the study of philosophy. Although such works do contain some discussion of good traits and the like, they add up to nothing. One loses much more than he gains, as the end result is great confusion.



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P.O. Box 5370 • Jerusalem, Israel • 972.2.582.4641
P.O.B. 587 • Monsey, NY 10952 • 1.800.33.BRESLOV

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The photo on the front is a close-up of Rebbe Nachman’s chair, which is displayed in the main Breslov synagogue in Jerusalem.