

PATHWAYS

Crossing the Narrow Bridge with Rebbe Nachman and His Students

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The Simple Truth

By Yossi Katz

OUR PATRIARCH JACOB is referred to as “the perfect one.” He was so great that our nation took its name from him, Israel. He also fathered twelve sons who were each worthy enough to found his own “tribe of God.”

But according to our modern definition of perfectionism, perhaps Jacob should have been nicknamed “the average one.” The Torah calls him “*ish tam*” (Genesis 25:27), which can be translated not only as complete or wholesome, but also as simple and unassuming. Aren’t these contradictory terms? Doesn’t Western civilization teach us that sophistication and rigorous investigation are the true ingredients to success and perfection?

Abraham, Jacob’s grandfather, was the pillar of kindness. His tent was always open to guests; loving-kindness was his tool in spreading monotheism. Nevertheless, Abraham fathered a son named Ishmael, whose descendants did not follow in his ways. Isaac, Jacob’s father, excelled in the attributes of strength of character and sheer determination; he was able to willingly submit himself to be sacrificed on the altar. But he, too, bore an unworthy son named Esau.

Growing up in the righteous home of Isaac and Rebecca, Jacob and Esau seemed pretty similar at first. Rashi exposes Esau’s hidden flaw. Esau would ask, “Father, how do we tithe salt and straw?” (Rashi, *ibid.*). Isaac thought that Esau was being scrupulous in his observance of the commandments. Esau’s tactics not only show him to be a cunning liar, but they also identify the source of his downfall.

Salt and straw are two items that are exempt from tithing. Just as Ishmael had inherited Abraham’s excess kindness and allowed it to influence him to act in evil ways, so too, Esau had inherited Isaac’s superfluous strength and harshness. He was not satisfied with humbly taking up his true calling as a partner with Jacob, but wanted to go above and beyond, to strive for something exceptional. His excessive personal demands led him to miss out entirely on both this world and the World to Come.

Esau’s attitude is the precursor for the philosophy of his descendants and much of our “modern world,” who claim that the Torah is too hard to keep. In fact, if one can’t experience joy in the simple performance of the mitzvot, even when they are done without deep understanding or additional halakhic stringencies, then indeed, the Torah becomes too difficult to keep.

Rebbe Nachman tells us a story about a simpleton (*Rabbi Nachman’s Stories* #9). The simpleton was a simple shoemaker; although he knew how to craft shoes, they looked downright embarrassing. Because of this, he was unable to earn the same living as his competitors. When his wife pointed this out to him, he replied, “That is their business and this is my business.”

Simplicity and perfection are not contradictory; they are actually one and the same. Every day when we say the *Shema*, we declare that God is One. Isn’t one the simplest number? The key to wholesomeness and growth isn’t questioning and doubting, but appreciating everything in life for what it is. Simplicity means learning to focus on the facts on the ground, not being sidelined by what we don’t know. This is true genius.

Technology and information superhighways can be tremendous tools, but more often than not, they hijack our short-term memory. We tend to become paralyzed and unable to value what’s right in front of us. May we merit focusing on counting our blessings and becoming aware of our existing abilities and opportunities, for then we will not only accomplish what we need to, but we will actually find true fulfillment in our lives. Amen!

Based on Likutey Halakhot, Matanah 5

HEALING LEAVES

FROM THE LETTERS OF REB NOSON OF BRESLOV

Compiled by Yitzchok Leib Bell



Do not worry and do not be sad! God will never abandon His people, and those who take shelter in Him will certainly never be faulted. (*Letter #238*)

Return to Sender

By Yehudis Golshevsky

ONCE, A YOUNG Jewish man from Tulchin became enamored of the new works of the secular *Haskalah* (Enlightenment movement) and decided to pursue their worldview. Unfortunately, soon after the advent of the *Haskalah*, it became clear that such an immersion nearly always led to the abandonment of Jewish observance in any form. After a period of time, this young man dropped mitzvah observance entirely and was far from Torah. Not surprisingly, he decided to go to Berlin, the birthplace of the *Haskalah*, to learn under its masters who lived there.

The cheapest way to get to Berlin from Tulchin was by post-chaise (the mail coach). Travelers purchased tickets in the post office and waited for the appointed time to depart, much like those who wished to take a train.

The postmaster in Tulchin was Reb Yitzchak, son of Reb Noson. As the young man was about to pay for his ticket, he spotted Reb Noson, who had just arrived to visit his son. The young man was very impressed with Reb Noson's appearance. He asked Reb Yitzchak, "Who is he?"

"That's my father," Reb Yitzchak answered.

"Can I speak to him?"

"Of course."

The young man approached Reb Noson and the two began talking. It was not long before the young man began to have second thoughts about what he had felt was the path of his truth. He decided to forgo his trip to Berlin and stay with Reb Noson instead. This young man did complete *teshuvah* and, over time, grew into an exemplary Jew.

Reb Noson was always thankful for this encounter. Even though he had acquired so many merits from his Torah learning and devotion to God, he said that this life-changing meeting – as well as the patience he had showed the scribe known as "*der Deutscher*" (described in *Pathways*, *Parashat Vayeira*), easing his return to Torah – were a never-ending source of joy and comfort to him.

He said, "I will yet stand proud before the Throne of Glory because I brought back two people who were so severed from their roots: the Berliner and *der Deutscher!*"

Based on Siach Sarfey Kodesh II:618b

SIDEPATH

Rabbi Nachman's Wisdom translated by R. Aryeh Kaplan, zt"l

175. The Rebbe said: I do not understand how tzaddikim make a *pidyon* (redemption) and intercede on behalf of another. There are twenty-four Heavenly courts. When a person presents the redemption, the tzaddik must know in which court the person is being judged. If he does not know, he may intercede and bring the redemption to one court while the person is actually being judged in another.



I know all twenty-four courts. I can appeal a case from one court to another. If I do not agree with the judgment of one court, I can ask that it be judged in another court. Going from one court to another is certainly beneficial. No matter what the final outcome, the sentence is still delayed. Because of this delay, the sentence can be reduced because of some merit on the part of the defendant. Even if this does not help, I can still appeal directly to the King.

176. Before his pilgrimage to the Holy Land, the Rebbe said, "I cannot sleep. Before I fall asleep, all 600,000 letters of the Torah come and stand before me."

177. The Rebbe once encouraged one of his followers to be happy. He said, "You should rejoice in God. Even if you don't realize God's greatness, you can rely on me. For I know His greatness." The Rebbe then quoted the verse, "For I know that God is great" (Psalms 135:5). He said, "You should also rejoice in me, that you are worthy of having a Rebbe like me."



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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.