

# PATHWAYS

Crossing the Narrow Bridge with Rebbe Nachman and His Students

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## Get Smart

By Yossi Katz

AS I'M SITTING in the airport terminal waiting for my flight home, I can't help but notice the incredible amount of technology being used all around me. Just about every person is browsing on a smartphone, tablet or laptop. These devices are our connection to the internet and to a vast "web" of information about anything and everything.

An outside observer, or perhaps even our own grandparents, would assume our generation to be the most intelligent and, accordingly, happiest ever. But guess what? Despite all the technology and innovation, life doesn't seem to be any easier to make sense of – or to live through. Though our generation is able to explain how and why things happen, people are as desperate for direction and meaning today as ever before. How is it possible that civilization has advanced so much technologically, yet made no progress in understanding the most basic question, "What's it all about?"

The critical flaw in the advancement of civilization can be traced back to a moment in our *parashah* when God is about to share with mankind the blueprint of the universe: His holy Torah. He asks the nations of the world whether they would like to receive this knowledge. The nations proceed to ask God what is written in the Torah, and, upon hearing some of its restrictions, astonishingly reply in the negative. Why would they decline the opportunity to finally gain the key to understanding life's greatest mysteries? Because they couldn't help themselves. Although their question seemed fair and logical, it placed an insurmountable barrier between finite mankind and infinite God. They had put their human intellect forward, and were now limited by it. There was no room left to explore the great and wondrous things that lay beyond the pale of human understanding.

The Jewish People, in contrast, had an entirely different attitude. They said, "We will do and then we will understand." But how is that even possible? Don't you first need to know what you're agreeing to before you accept? In truth, the Torah actually says that the Jewish People replied, "All that God has said, we will do and then we will understand." They already knew what was written in the Torah. But if that were true, then what was so great about their response? And why do our Rabbis teach that they were worthy of receiving the Torah because of their response?

The answer is that the Jewish People were the humblest of all people, and therefore they were willing to forgo imposing their intellectual limitations on God. Their faith in God empowered them to let go and open up their minds to the awesome, infinite knowledge that lay beyond. They were willing to first "do" what was required, and then wait until they would be blessed with "we will understand." Thus, they were the ones who became known as the "Generation of Knowledge."

All of the incredible inventions in our world, from the time of the Industrial Revolution until today, have not brought a real solution to our woes and pains because they fail to acknowledge that no matter how smart or advanced we become, we still remain mere mortals with an extremely limited viewpoint. God has created everything for a very specific purpose. Everything we experience and endure has tremendous potential for growth. However, not only will man never access this knowledge, but the false assurance of Western "progress" serves only to reinforce his limited viewpoint.

The Torah is called an elixir of life. It contains tools that give meaning to our every interaction. By humbling ourselves and living a life of faith, we can receive the Torah anew today just as yesterday. We, too, can say, "First we will do, and then WE WILL understand!" Amen!

*Based on Likutey Halakhot, Hilkhos Nefilat Apayim 4*

# Praying Like a Child

By Yehudis Golshevsky

**REBBE NACHMAN'S DEEP** yet completely simple and straightforward immersion in prayer was a wonder to those who were close to him. He prayed in a brokenhearted way, begging for mercy with total self-effacement, like a young child pleading with his father.

Once, when a young man came to the Rebbe to ask for guidance in his private prayers, Rebbe Nachman demonstrated...

"Master of the universe! Please have mercy on me! What will become of me in the end? Is this how I'm going to spend my life? Is this the life that I was created for?" This was how Rebbe Nachman prayed—simply, directly, feelingly—and this is how he taught his students to do *hitbodedut*. To speak one's innermost heart and yearning out before God just as one would with his most trusted friend.

During the final Rosh HaShanah of his life, Rebbe Nachman was already in residence in Uman. He was deathly ill with the tuberculosis that would take his life. He was so debilitated that he could barely leave his bed. His family and students were in constant attendance, trying to alleviate his suffering and hoping to hear his words, and to see him take a turn for the better.

At the time, the Rebbe's grandson Yisrael was with him in the house. The four-year-old was known to be especially clever. Once, as little Yisrael walked by his bed, Rebbe Nachman called out, "Yisrael! Please pray that I'll have relief!"

"Of course!" answered the child. "But first, give me your gold watch!"

Rebbe Nachman smiled and said to his disciples at the bedside, "See – the child already speaks like the tzaddikim do! He knows to ask for an object from the petitioner, so that he can perform a soul-redemption when he prays!"

Rebbe Nachman dutifully removed his watch and handed it to little Yisrael. The boy solemnly accepted the item. Then he turned aside and said, "HaShem! HaShem! Please make my grandfather well!"

Everyone laughed at his childish simplicity in prayer. But Rebbe Nachman didn't even smile.

He gestured toward his little grandson and said emphatically, "Do you see? To pray, one must speak with the utmost innocence and simplicity, just like a little child who asks something of his father!"

*Based on Or HaOrot I, pp. 113-115*

## SIDEPATH

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

308 (continued). This world was always filled with worries and suffering. Things have not changed. It is written, "In sadness, you will eat" (Genesis 3:17), and, "By the sweat of your brow, you will eat bread" (ibid., 3:19). This was decreed since Adam's sin and there is no place to escape. These worries and pains destroy a man's life; the only shelter is God and His Torah.



The Mishnah teaches, "Thus is the way of Torah: Bread with salt you shall eat, measured water you shall drink, on the ground you shall sleep, and a life of privation you shall live, while in the Torah you shall toil. If you do so, 'You will be happy, and it will be good for you' (Psalms 128:2). 'You will be happy' – in this world – 'and it will be good for you' – in the World to Come" (Avot 6:4).

People find this difficult to understand. After telling us the struggles we must endure – "bread with salt you shall eat" – how can the Mishnah state, "You will be happy" – in this world"? Many writers attempt to resolve this by way of homily, but their explanations remain strained.

In fact, there really is no question. If you have eyes to see and a heart that truly understands the world, you know this. If you have absorbed the wisdom contained in the Rebbe's awesome teachings, you know the truth. The Mishnah means exactly what it says.



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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.*