

# PATHWAYS

Crossing the Narrow Bridge with Rebbe Nachman and His Students

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## Follow the Leaders

By Yossi Katz

**THIS WEEK'S PARASHAH** begins by recording our nation's first descent into the darkness of exile. The place of this exile, Egypt, was called *Mitzrayim* (straits). This fittingly describes the core difficulty of exile, the feeling of being squeezed and suppressed, and not knowing where to turn or how to free oneself. While the story of our descent into servitude and its many chapters is retold, at each point a great many hints help us deal with these challenges.

In fact, the very first passage that describes the descent contains the key for how to escape it. The Book of Exodus begins, "And these are the names of the sons of Israel who came to Egypt" (Exodus 1:1). The Torah goes on to list Jacob and his descendants. Why was it necessary at this point to repeat the names of Jacob's offspring? Because it was precisely and only these Tzaddikim, Jacob's *mitah sheleimah* (completely holy progeny), who were able to draw down God's Presence into the world. Because they led the descent into Mitzrayim and spiritually established themselves there, we were assured that a Godly awareness and connection could be had even in the most dreadful and gloomy circumstances.

The importance and greatness of the Tzaddikim is not limited to paving the way for us in the spiritual worlds, but actually reaches us on the most personal of levels. The Torah recounts the actions of two noble women who saved the Jewish baby boys from death, Shifrah and Puah. Rashi identifies them as Yocheved, the mother of Moshe, and Miriam, Moshe's sister. If they were so heroic, why doesn't the Torah say their real names?

Although Yocheved and Miriam were the ones who saved the day in this particular case, on a deeper level

the Torah is hinting to the work of all the true Tzaddikim. The Tzaddikim of each generation are called "Hebrew midwives" (ibid. 1:15) because they enable us to rise to the level of "giving birth" to spiritual actions like Torah study and good deeds.

Our Rabbis explain that "Shifrah" means to beautify, since she would beautify the newborns, and "Puah" means to soothe and coo, which she would do with the crying babies (*Sotah* 11b). Just like the newborn child emerges filthy from the womb, often times we feel soiled and contaminated. By teaching us that we still have many good points, the Tzaddikim renew and redeem us to the point that we feel truly beautiful. And even when we are fussy, complaining and crying that we are hopeless, that we've made too many bad choices and life seems to have gotten the better of us, the Tzaddikim coo and cuddle us. They constantly seek to encourage and pick us up by reminding us that our every action and good thought is precious. That each little positive thing we can do is valuable and worthwhile. That we have the opportunity to be born anew and start again right now, no matter what we might have done in the past.

However, the Other Side will not concede to any of this, because it knows that the moment we realize that rebirth and renewal is God's truth, it loses. Therefore Pharaoh, the embodiment of evil, commanded the Egyptians to murder the Jewish newborns. His strategy was for us to continue living a life of the past, filled with remorse, sadness and guilt. As long as we feel this way, we are stuck in his Mitzrayim, squeezed and persecuted.

Thankfully, we have the Tzaddikim to lead us out. May we hear their call, study and apply their advice, and connect ourselves to them in every way so that we may ascend from our personal states of exile even today. Amen!

*Based on Likutey Halakhot, Techumim 6*

# Noah's Ark in Russia

By Gedaliah Fler

*Before the Communist Revolution, Uman was a well-known, oft-visited city that boasted a large medical school, a world-famous botanical garden, and the gravesite of Rebbe Nachman of Breslov. For more than a century after the Rebbe's passing in 1810, his followers regularly undertook the long journey from their homes in other parts of Russia to pray at the Tzaddik's grave.*

*But with the rise of Communism and the suppression of religious life in Russia, pilgrims to Uman began to be harassed and even imprisoned by local police. On one of his attempts to reach Uman in 1963, Gedaliah Fler met some of the Russian Jews who, despite government harassment, managed to keep the flame of Judaism alive.*

AS SOON AS Reb Michel Dorfman and I entered Rabbi Yehudah Kalasher's house, I beheld a person from another time and place. Though it was strongly discouraged and at times even against the law, Rabbi Yehudah retained his Chassidic dress – down to his long beard and curled *peyot*. Off to the side, I observed two boys, aged seven or eight, holding a conversation in Yiddish. They studied at home with a private tutor instead of attending the non-Jewish government school. To keep his grandchildren at home, Rabbi Yehudah had arranged for a doctor to write a note stating that they were too sick to attend school.

Rabbi Yehudah stood up for me and then started a conversation in Yiddish. He kept an extremely high standard of *kashrut*; no processed foods entered his home. He offered me something to eat and we drank a toast together. Reb Michel said that he was going to find Reb Shika, and asked us to wait for him.

Soon Reb Michel and Reb Shika joined us. Reb Shika made a strong impression on me. He was of medium build, with a short beard and a slightly hunched back. All his clothes were white – shirt, pants, coat, hat, everything. When he entered the room, he seemed to exude a quiet but pervasive presence.

For me, it was an emotional experience to speak with a group of Russian Jews. We had so much to say to each other that we soon concluded that it would be impossible for everyone to speak at once. Since Rabbi Yehudah was the most accomplished Torah scholar among us, he was asked to speak first.

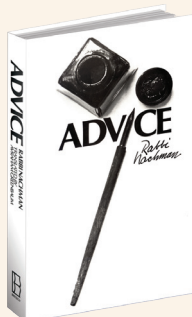
*to be continued...*

## SIDEPATH

Advice (Likutey Etzot) translated by Avraham Greenbaum

**THE COVENANT.** 16. One who is pure and masters the Holy Tongue can interpret dreams, like Joseph did (Likutey Moharan I, 19:4).

17. The Tzaddik is one who has attained perfect purity and mastery of the Holy Tongue. Only through the words of his lips can you yourself achieve that mastery and thereby free yourself of all your desires. But you must actually go to the Tzaddik and hear the words from his lips yourself. It is not enough to read his teachings or even to hear them secondhand from someone else. His holy lips are a fountain flowing with the fear of Heaven. His words are the foundation of the holy Covenant.



They are the comprehensive tikkun (ibid. I, 19:9).

18. Because of the desecration of the holy Covenant, a sword is let loose in the world (ibid. I, 20:10).

19. Crying out loud is a remedy for sexual impurity and can bring an illumination of *da'at*, perception and understanding of Godliness. Therefore guarding against impurity elevates the mind to higher levels (ibid.).

20. The original exile in Egypt was the result of the abuse of the Covenant. The redemption from Egypt was a tikkun for this. The wine of the four cups that we drink on the first nights of Passover symbolizes *da'at*, perception and understanding of Godliness. Drinking the wine is a tikkun for the distortion in our consciousness which stems from sexual impurity (ibid.).



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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.*