

PATHWAYS

Crossing the Narrow Bridge with Rebbe Nachman and His Students

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Actualize Potential

By Ozer Bergman

“We were slaves to Pharaoh, but Hashem our God took us out with a strong hand and an outstretched arm ... Initially, our ancestors were idol-worshippers, but now the Omnipresent has drawn us near to His service” (*Pesach Haggadah*).

If there was ever an obstacle to holiness, being in exile is it. You, me, every Jew you see – we’re burgeoning with yearning, wanting to put our Jewish drive into something *kadosh* (holy, sacred). But we’re stymied. Every which way we turn, something gets in the way. Sometimes it’s a distraction that causes us to temporarily forget our goal. Sometimes our animal desires swallow up our Jewish ones, so that the latter are forgotten. Occasionally it’s a practical obstacle: a lack of money or health, God forbid. It could even be a literal roadblock.

Humans being what they are, many of us just shrug and say, “Wasn’t my fault. What could I have done? I wanted to be a learned tzaddik, but life (in-exile) got in the way.” Some may even excuse themselves by relying on the Talmudic dictum, “One under duress is exempted by the Compassionate One” (*Nedarim* 27a). To that I say, “Listen, pal. That doesn’t cut it. If Avraham Avinu (our Patriarch) had had an attitude like that, we would still be in the Ur of the Chaldees.” Why?

Potential is good, but it’s not enough. Unborn potential is a denial of creation’s purpose – namely, the good of enjoying God-consciousness. A potential nation dedicated to God’s service is wonderful; a real people that can run with the idea is better. God also had to deal with exile as an obstacle to holiness. In Egypt we were like a calf in its mother’s womb: we loved idolatry and were dependent on Pharaoh. The *Mai HaNachal* comments on this lesson: Every human being is meant to actualize potential, being and in so doing becoming a co-creator with God in bringing the unfinished work in the world to completion.

The core of the Pesach Seder is *Maggid*, the telling of the Exodus story. History is written by the victors; the inconvenient truth is often erased or whitewashed. Yet truth and honesty are essential for turning potential into actual. *Maggid* uses honest speech. We own up to who we are, warts and all, as well as praise God for keeping His word despite the “obstacles” He faced. This honest retelling of our history is

crucial to our future exodus. Just as a person cannot improve unless he admits his faults, we cannot be redeemed until we admit that our faults “are not in our stars, but in ourselves.”

Turning potential into actual also entails having a livelihood (aka paycheck). A person who is dependent on others for money (like a politician) or honor (like a politician) cannot be honest. Everything he does will be to win favor from others (*Rabbi Nachman’s Wisdom* #47). Earning our own paycheck also helps us develop potential because it keeps us from anger and its cousins: jealousy, resentment, antagonism and bitterness (among others). This whole family works at keeping us distracted from what we accomplish. The Israelites left Egypt laden with wealth so they would have fewer obstacles to developing their potential as co-creators.

Based on Likutey Moharan I, #66

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That’s all, folks. Farewell, and thank you for reading what I’ve written over the years. (We started in winter 5756/1996-97 as I recall.) It’s been a good run. Many thanks to Chaim Kramer for providing the opportunity. Thanks most of all to the One Who Lives Forever for allowing me to be a pen in Rebbe Nachman’s hand (*The Aleph-Bet Book, Ga’avah* A:15). If you look hard enough, you may find me on that Internet thing you’ve heard about.

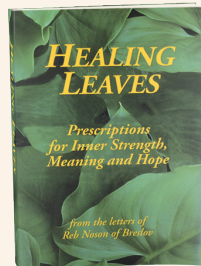
A kosher und a freilekhen Pesach!

Chag kasher v’samei’ach! A kosher and joyous Pesach!

HEALING LEAVES

FROM THE LETTERS OF REB NOSON OF BRESLOV

Compiled by Yitzchok Leib Bell



This is the key: we must eradicate and banish all the questions, confusions and convoluted calculations from our hearts and just do what we can to seize all the good we can, be it little or much. We must persist in our good yearnings and desires, and rely on the power of the true tzaddikim, trusting that they will certainly complete for us

that which they have started. (*Letter* #233)

The Only Way Out

God knew that certain of the Jewish children were not worthy of being redeemed. They were just not ready. So when the enslaved Jews failed to produce their quota of bricks, these children were thrown into the walls (*Sanhedrin* 101b, 103b; *Aderet Eliyahu, Nitzavim* 29:17).

As they lay dying, near-corpses, crushed under the weight of the wall above, their groans ascended to Heaven. Though these children did not merit Redemption, their groans certainly hastened it (*Yalkut Shimoni; Pirkei d'Rabbi Eliezer* #48).

Scripture uses the term “groan” in reference to a *chalal* (corpse) (*Shemot Rabbah* 1:34; *Ezekiel* 30:24). *Chalal* has another meaning, “void” – namely, the Vacated Space. God created a level of existence where He appears not to exist. It’s a paradox. God must exist everywhere. Nothing can exist without His permeating Presence. Yet these voids do exist, and they are not just esoteric concepts (*Likutey Halakhot*,

*Believe God is right here.
With you. Wherever you are.*

Minchah 7:22). They can be a dire reality in our lives. They are the spiritual/emotional “black holes” of life.

These are the situations in which we feel estranged from God, filled with questions and contradictions about ourselves, about Him, about Providence. Why did God do this to me? Why do I suffer like this? Why did He allow me to do what I did? Is there any hope for me? Looking into the depths of our souls, we see only a vacuum. Who am I?

We have fallen into the Vacated Space. Found ourselves in a void. Ask no questions in this non-place, in this seemingly Godforsaken place. God’s presence here, as everywhere, is imperative – but a paradox nonetheless (*Likutey Moharan* I, 64).

There is only one way out. We must search for God despite His “absence.” We must cry out to Him, and groan from the pressure of our suffering. Where God has concealed Himself, we must reveal Him (*ibid.*, II, 12). Believe God is right here. With you. Wherever you are.

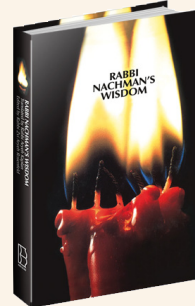
Those Jewish children in Egypt had fallen into the Vacated Space. There are Jewish “children” today who still suffer in those very same spiritual voids. *Yehi Ratzon* – May the groans of their search make the “children” of today worthy of redemption. May they show us the yearning for God hidden beyond the void. And may God, in their merit, hasten the Final Redemption. Amen.

Excerpted from The Breslov Haggadah

SIDEPATH

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

20. When you are always happy, it is easy to set aside some time each day to express your thoughts before God with a broken heart. But when you are depressed, it is very difficult to seclude yourself and speak to God. You must force yourself to always be happy. Especially during prayer, you must force yourself to be joyous.



The Rebbe said that true happiness is one of the most difficult things to attain in serving God. Another time he said that it seems impossible to achieve happiness without some measure of foolishness. One must resort to all sorts of joking and foolish things if this is the only way to attain happiness.

When a person attains true joy, then God Himself watches him and protects him from sexual defilement.

21. On Rosh HaShanah, one should be wise and think only good thoughts. We should keep in mind only that God will be good to us.

One must be happy on Rosh HaShanah, and yet one must cry.

On the first day of Rosh HaShanah, one should speak as little as possible. The Rebbe said that a great leader must be even more careful about this.



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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.