

# PATHWAYS

Crossing the Narrow Bridge with Rebbe Nachman and His Students

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## Let's Be Honest

By Yossi Katz

SHAVUOT IS AN interesting holiday. On the one hand, we celebrate having received the Torah from God's very mouth. This would seem to indicate that our relationship with God was absolutely faithful and strong. Yet just a short time later, the Jewish People violated one of the Torah's most important precepts by making the Golden Calf.

We do not shy away from celebrating Shavuot even though the joy of the main event was marred. Human actions are expected to be far from perfect and many of the Torah's most valuable lessons are learned from our deficiencies. Our main challenge is to grow from these lessons and not be buried by them.

In a similar vein, this week's *parashah* discusses the *Sotah* woman. If a husband becomes suspicious of his wife and warns her not to seclude herself with a certain man, and she nevertheless chooses to do so, she is brought before the Kohen to be "investigated." This priestly investigation involves bringing a barley meal-offering, and she is required to drink from the "bitter waters." Through the drinking of the waters, her guilt or innocence is proven (see Numbers 5:11-31).

Even if she is found innocent of her husband's major accusation, the Torah still considers her at fault for secluding herself with the other man. The description of the *Sotah* begins, "Any man whose wife goes astray" (ibid., 5:12). The word *tiSTeH* (goes astray) has the same letters as *ShoTaH* (idiot). Rashi explains that one does not sin unless a spirit of folly first enters into him or her. Someone with true reasoning would never fall to such temptation.

By secluding herself with another man, the *Sotah* did something born of complete folly; therefore she must bring an offering consisting of animal food. Just as animals act only according to their impulses, without any higher reasoning, so has the *Sotah* woman. The *Zohar* (*Raya Mehemna, Emor*) explains that just as the *Sotah* is tested through barley, so too, the Jewish people are tested through the barley of the Omer-offering.

By bringing the Omer-offering, we are identifying with the *Sotah* woman and with the personal deficiencies in our relationship with God. We are saying, "We, too, have secluded ourselves with temptation and mindlessness; we, too, have sunken to very promiscuous places. However, by waving the Omer-offering in every direction, we demonstrate that God still surrounds us and we reaffirm that our relationship is still faithful and strong."

Interestingly, even though the *Sotah* is at fault for secluding herself, now that she is proven innocent, she is rewarded. Our Rabbis teach that whatever childbearing issue she had beforehand will now be reversed. For example, if she previously bore children with much pain, she will now be blessed with easy pregnancy (see *Sotah* 26a). The great embarrassment she experienced while being investigated serves as an atonement for her wrongdoing, and her wrongful act is transformed for her merit.

We all mess up. Making mistakes is part of human nature and allows for our free will. Only our souls, which are forced to live within the confines of the human body with all of its desires and physical necessities, can give God the ultimate *nachas*. If we are honest, and are able to own up to our many faults and challenges, then our shame and embarrassment serve as a catalyst for blessing and our eventual success. However, if we are unable to be honest about our deficiencies and life challenges, then just like the *Sotah* woman, we will eventually be forced to drink of the bitter waters of life and our end will not be so sweet. May we all merit serving God with truth, amen!

*Based on Likutey Halakhot, Birkhot HaPeirot 5*

## HEALING LEAVES

FROM THE LETTERS OF REB NOSON OF BRESLOV

Compiled by Yitzchok Leib Bell



The main thing is for you to have the belief in yourself, like my belief in you, that you can still make a new start now. (Letter #253)

# Down With Negativity!

By Yehudis Golshevsky

AT TIMES REBBE NACHMAN reminisced about the challenges he faced in his spiritual growth in his youth. He would speak about the obstacles he had faced, the times he felt he wasn't progressing despite his strong desire to learn and connect with God. Even so, he always encouraged himself and refused to give up. Early in his life, he developed the habit of always making a fresh start.

That kind of thinking is rare in young people – both because it doesn't come naturally to them, and because the adults around them don't encourage them to think that way. Even with Rebbe Nachman's mature way of thinking, he felt that an outside source of support would have helped him immeasurably in his youth. As he put it, "If only I had had someone to encourage me not to give in, telling me to make every effort, no matter what ... I would have accomplished in a day what took me a year!"

Negative thinking is so pervasive. It's all too easy to sap ourselves of vital energy as we focus on our faults and failings. Hyper-focusing on what's broken gets in the way of making the repairs. Rebbe Nachman strongly advised against wallowing in that kind of self-censure. "Don't let your smallness get in the way of your greatness!" he would cry.

If someone really is trapped in negative behaviors, from where should he draw the encouragement to shake them off? Rebbe Nachman taught that even such a person should never give up. Instead, he should delve into the ideas that the Rebbe shared in the lesson Azamra! (I Will Sing!) (Likutey Moharan I, 282). Rebbe Nachman enjoined his followers to live by this teaching.

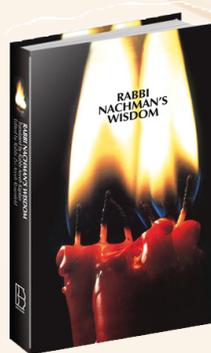
Once, one of Rebbe Nachman's students appealed to him for help in changing his negative attitudes and actions. "How am I ever going to get out of the mess that I'm in?" he asked. Rebbe Nachman replied, "You need to do whatever good you can. As long as you persist in doing whatever good you can – as long as you're diligent at it – the bad will eventually fall away and only the good will remain."

*Based on Shivtey HaRan #6; Siach Sarfey Kodesh II:34*

## SIDEPATH

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

233. The Rebbe said, "You must pray for everything. Make it a habit to pray for all your needs, large and small. Your main prayers should be for fundamentals – that God help you in your devotion, that you be worthy of coming close to Him. Still, you should also pray even for these other things"



I once had a slight need for some insignificant thing. When I mentioned it to the Rebbe, he said, "Pray to God for it."

I was quite astonished to learn that one must pray to God even for such trivial things, especially in a case where it was not even a necessity. Seeing my surprise, the Rebbe asked me, "Is it beneath your dignity to pray to God for a minor thing like this?"

234. The Rebbe often encouraged people to seclude themselves in meditation and conversation with God. "Even if many days and years pass and it seems that you have accomplished nothing with your words, do not abandon it. Every word makes an impression. It is written, 'Water wears away stone' (Job 14:19). It may seem that water dripping on a stone cannot make any impression. Still, after many years, it can actually make a hole in the stone.

"Your heart may be like stone. It may seem that your words of prayer make no impression on it at all. Still, as the days and years pass, your heart of stone will also be penetrated."



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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.*