

PATHWAYS

Crossing the Narrow Bridge with Rebbe Nachman and His Students

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Why Does God Punish?

By Yossi Katz

A FEW DAYS AGO, I heard about two Rabbis debating a very famous and difficult question: “If there is a God, why did He allow the Holocaust to happen?” One Rabbi reasoned that the state of Judaism had been in such severe decline, its very foundations threatened, that this was a deserving punishment. The other Rabbi was very upset by this and retorted, “How dare anyone say they know why the Holocaust happened and six million precious Jews perished?”

Now, I am no greater than those two Rabbis and would certainly not venture to take sides. But I do feel that the idea of a punishing God has frightened away many Jews, and should be clarified.

Let’s begin by acknowledging the explicit – namely, the verses found in Deuteronomy 28:15-69, known as the *Tochecha* (Rebuke). The Torah lists the devastating punishments that the Jewish people would endure if they strayed from the Torah’s laws. We understand that everything written there more or less took place during the period of the destruction of the two Temples. In commemoration, we are currently observing a three-week period of mourning. The concept of understanding God’s punishment and concealment is therefore absolutely relevant to us right now.

Rebbe Nachman describes a beautiful process. “When a person secludes himself with God and speaks his piece and his woes to God – confessing and regretting the enormity of the blemishes that he committed – then, likewise, the *Shekhinah* (Divine Presence) faces him, speaking Her piece and Her woes and consoling him... She consoles him [by letting him know] that She will seek strategies to correct all the blemishes” (*Likutey Moharan* I, 259).

The Rebbe is describing a process that is completely at odds with what many of us have been taught and live by. When a person confesses his or her misdeeds, God does not smack him and make him feel bad. Rather, He consoles him and expresses His woes and pains that the person is distanced from Him. How shocking! Don’t you

find yourself wallowing in guilt, waiting to be buried alive by a falling anvil? But this is wrong. God doesn’t punish because He is insulted or enraged, but because He desires to be close to us! Take a step back and consider this: The Master of the World cares enough to wake me up because He wants to be close with me! He will seek strategies to help me resolve the distance between us!

Reb Noson says that on Tisha B’Av, the national day of mourning the destruction of the Temple, we aren’t really mourning the Temple’s loss. That is a historical fact. But our Sages teach, “A generation in which the Temple is not rebuilt is considered as one in which it was destroyed” (*Yerushalmi, Yoma* 1:1). The focus should be on our generation and our actions. Am I turning to God? Am I seeking the strategies to rebuild?

On Tisha B’Av we read from the Book of *Eichah*, which is spelled *Aleph-Yud-Khaf-Heh*. This is an acronym for *AYeH [mekom] Kevodo* (“Where is the place of His glory?”) Mourning means calling out to God in desperation. It’s about acknowledging that we aren’t sure how to correct our actions and change ourselves. It’s about showing the Master of the Universe that we care about our relationship with Him and are waiting for Him to console us and teach us how to be truly connected. What it’s not about is negative guilt, distance and self-hate.

May we all merit hearing the *Shekhinah* console us. May we implement Her strategies and merit an end to our suffering and, finally, the rebuilding of the Holy Temple, speedily and in our days. Amen.

Based on Likutey Halakhot, Hilkhos Gittin 3

HEALING LEAVES

FROM THE LETTERS OF REB NOSON OF BRESLOV

Compiled by Yitzchok Leib Bell



The main reason a person comes into this world is to overcome barriers and to come up against doors of bronze and bars of iron in his search for God. The only way to break through them is with will and longing and intense desire. (*Letter #110*)

A Ray of Light

By Nachman Futterman

TODAY NACHMAN FUTTERMAN lives in Jerusalem with his wife and children. His search for spirituality began in the 1970s, when he experimented with Eastern yoga and then connected with an interfaith rabbi who was good friends with a swami. Afterwards he joined Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach's synagogue on the Upper West Side. He visited Israel for the first time in 1984.

Of course, I was planning to go to the Kotel (Western Wall) for Shabbat. After all, the Kotel is the holiest place in Israel, which is the holiest country in the world. I was really looking forward to the experience.

I remember going to the Kotel, walking up to a minyan, and then feeling as if I were being pushed away. I walked up to another minyan, and again I felt as if I were being pushed away. This kept happening again and again. I got to a point where I turned to God and said, "Maybe I don't belong here."

I walked away from the Kotel and started crying. I had traveled so far to come to the holiest of places and I was not comfortable praying there! It occurred to me that perhaps this whole religious thing was not for me.

When I was really at the end of the end, I noticed the section of the Kotel that is inside a tunnel. I felt as if there was a ray of light emanating from there. Something was drawing me, beckoning me to enter. I went inside and saw two old men with white beards and *shtraimels* singing the Breslov song "Sab'einu (Sate us)." Their faces were shining! I was mesmerized.

As I was standing there, a stranger (who later became a good friend of mine) patted me on the shoulder and asked, "Do you know who these guys are?"

"No, who are they?" I asked.

"They're Breslover chassidim. Would you like to meet them?"

I did. I told him that I was staying at the King David Hotel. We made up for him to meet me and my friends on Shabbat morning to take us to the Breslov shul in Meah Shearim.

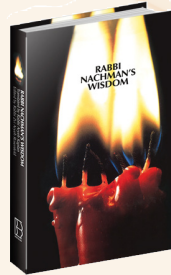
That Shabbat, we prayed *Shacharit* in the Breslov shul and ate lunch with Reb Moshe Bienenstock. That was my first Shabbat in Israel. God had brought me straight to Breslov. It was most amazing.

From "Rebbe Nachman and the Knights of the Rosh HaShanah Table"

SIDEPATH

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

254. Speaking of the holiness of Shabbat, the Rebbe said: Shabbat is like a lavish wedding. People are dancing and rejoicing with the greatest ecstasy. A man stands outside (looking in). He dresses himself in his best clothing and rushes to the wedding. He wishes to enter and join the festivities. But one needs great merit even to look in through a tiny crack.



255. It is much easier to give advice to someone else. When you need advice, it is very difficult to give it to yourself.

After much deliberation, you may decide that one way is the best. You have many reasons and arguments to support this. But as soon as you make up your mind, other considerations enter, tearing down the basis of your original decision. Now it seems that the exact opposite is true.

Fortunate is the person who is worthy of God's complete counsel. He will then do what is proper and not lose his world in vain, Heaven forbid.

256. The Rebbe highly praised the *piyut* of *Akdamut*, which is chanted before the Torah reading on Shavuot. He said, "People are so accustomed to and steeped in good things that they do not realize the greatness of the praise of God in the *Akdamut*. If you were to know the high level of the *Akdamut* together with its customary melody, then you would know how wondrously unique it is. *Akdamut* is a song of *cheshek* – of love and devotion."



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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.