

PATHWAYS

Crossing the Narrow Bridge with Rebbe Nachman and His Students

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In the Know

By Yossi Katz

KNOWLEDGE, WISDOM, EDUCATION ... these are the cornerstones of a typical Jewish upbringing. Almost as soon as a Jewish baby is born, his or her parents have already established a college fund. This reminds me of a joke: A Jewish mother is walking down the street with her two little boys. A passerby sees the children and remarks, “What adorable children you have. How old are they?” The proud mother replies, “The doctor is seven and the lawyer is five.”

But is knowledge truly everything? And should measuring our lives based on “what we know” be the guiding principle for our children and ourselves?

To answer this question, we turn to our *parashah*. Over the past few weeks, the Torah has recounted numerous incredible miracles. First we read about the Ten Plagues devastating mighty Egypt and bringing about the release of the Jewish People. Now free, the Jews must travel through the Sinai desert on their way to the Holy Land. God leads them with a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. The battered Egyptians decide to give it one more shot and pursue the Jews into the sea. The sea supernaturally splits and the Jews cross on dry land. The Egyptians, in hot pursuit, meet the sea-wall as it comes crashing down on them.

The Talmud testifies to the awesome level of the Jewish People at this time: “What a maidservant at the sea saw, Yechezkel ben Buzi [the prophet Ezekiel] did not see in all his days” (*Mekhilta*, Rashi 15:2). Let’s ponder the depth of this statement. Ezekiel was a very great prophet; his most famous vision was that of God’s “Chariot” (Ezekiel 1). This vision was so great that our Rabbis warned, “The Act of Creation can be taught to just one student at a time, but the Chariot cannot

be taught at all. It must be studied alone, and then only if the student is wise and understands on his own” (*Chagigah* 11b). Despite Ezekiel’s lofty vision, he did not reach the exalted level of the simple maidservant at the sea!

After all these miracles, and considering the incredibly elevated level of the Jewish People, the Torah states, “And Israel saw the great hand which the Lord had used upon the Egyptians ... and they *believed* in God and Moses His servant” (Exodus 14:31). At this point, wouldn’t just “believing” be preposterous? Moreover, the verse seems to imply that their knowledge led to their faith. Doesn’t belief apply only to something that you can’t experience for yourself?

Rebbe Nachman teaches that the essence of knowledge is to know that you know nothing at all. Yes, the Jews had seen the “hand of God” – but the more they saw, the more they appreciated God’s greatness and acknowledged the limitations of personal knowledge. Knowledge and education are important as a means, not an end. The purpose of expanding our knowledge is to strengthen our faith in God. After all is said and done, all roads lead to faith and the existence of the ever-present Creator. Therefore the greatest thing we can do is to fortify ourselves with simple faith in God and his true Tzaddikim.

Living with faith means living a God-centered life. It means living with the awareness that everything we experience is being orchestrated by God Himself. And it means perceiving that we must always have faith, because no matter how much we know about God, we realize our insignificance vis-à-vis His greatness and rulership.

Rebbe Nachman said, “The world considers faith a minor thing. But I consider it an extremely great thing” (*Rebbe Nachman’s Wisdom* #33).

Based on Otzar HaYirah, Emunah 82

Look for the Good in Others

IN HIS LESSON "Azamra!" Rebbe Nachman teaches how important it is to look for the good in others. Our Sages told this story to illustrate what it means to judge someone favorably:

A man from the Upper Galilee hired himself out to an employer in the south for three years. On the day before Yom Kippur he said to his employer, "Give me my wages so I can go back to my wife and children."

"I have no money," the employer replied.

"Then give me fruit," the man said. "I have none," came the reply. "Then give me land." "I have none." "Then give me livestock." "I have none." "Then give me pillows and bedding." "I have none."

Bitterly disappointed, the man took his belongings and returned home empty-handed.

A few weeks after Sukkot, the employer took the man's wages in his hand along with three donkey-loads of food, drink and delicacies, and traveled to the worker's house. After they had eaten and drunk, he paid the man and asked, "When you said, 'Give me my wages,' and I said, 'I have no money,' what did you suspect me of?"

"I thought that perhaps an opportunity had arisen to buy merchandise cheaply, and you had used the money for that," the man replied.

"And when you said, 'Give me livestock,' and I said, 'I have none,' what did you suspect me of?" "I thought that perhaps your animals were hired out to others at the moment."

"And when you said to me, 'Give me land,' and I said, 'I have none,' what did you suspect me of?" "I thought that perhaps your land was being leased out to others."

"And when I said, 'I have no fruit,' what did you suspect me of?" "I said, 'Perhaps his fruit has not been tithed.'"

"And when I said, 'I have no pillows and bedding,' what did you suspect me of?" "I said, 'Perhaps he dedicated all his possessions to Heaven.'"

"That is exactly what happened!" the employer said. "I vowed away all my possessions because of Hyrkanus my son, who does not learn Torah. But when I went to my friends in the south, they absolved me from my vows. As for you, just as you judged me favorably, the All-Present will judge you favorably" (*Shabbat 127b*).

SIDEPATH

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

308 (continued). In the holy *Shelah*, we find a verse:

Ein rega belo pega

Ein sha'ah belo ra'ah

Ein yom belo reses ve'ayom

There is no moment without its torment

There is no hour that is not sour

There is no day without dismay

Fortunate is the one who flees from the struggles of this troublesome world for the toil of Torah. He will be "happy and prosperous" – happy in this world and prosperous in the World to Come.



The person who says, "The former times are better than these," and worries and is constantly anxious about his finances, accomplishes nothing. His attitude causes him to struggle more and more to earn a living and waste his days in worry and vexation. This foolishness keeps him from

Torah and prayer, and regarding his end, it is written, "He takes away nothing for his effort" (Ecclesiastes 5:14). It is also written, "For in vanity he comes, and in darkness he leaves" (*ibid.*, 6:4).

If you have eyes to see and a heart to understand, you will perceive that the past had as much suffering and troubles as the present. Look in books written hundreds of years ago and you will find that their authors also suffered from poverty and endured the most difficult struggles just to earn a livelihood. This did not deter them and they still wrote many holy books.



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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.

Dedicated in the Memory (L'Ilui Nishmat) of Yehudis bat Shimon