

PATHWAYS

Crossing the Narrow Bridge with Rebbe Nachman and His Students

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The Greatest Revelation

By Yossi Katz

DO YOU EVER find yourself saying, “I really messed up! I blew it! What a missed opportunity!” Those negative emotions plant themselves in our brains and nag at us constantly, especially at this time of year.

We’ve just finished observing Pesach and rediscovering that we are a Godly People. We realized that we’re not really enslaved to our lusts and deficiencies, and that we can achieve true freedom from everything that weighs us down. In order to actualize these revelations, God gave us a 49-day period during which, by counting each day and taking advantage of its special spiritual potential, we receive the necessary “soul correction.” We rise one level each day, moving from the 49th level of impurity to the 49th level of holiness and beyond.

You may wonder if this process is just a fairy tale; after all, you’ve never felt yourself either physically or spiritually leave the servitude of Egypt or advance towards the towering spiritual heights achieved at Sinai. Because of the physical nature of our identities, it’s extremely difficult to perceive the levels we achieve in our souls. Most of what we attain comes through having faith in the processes prescribed by our great Rabbis. Only after we’ve left this physical world do we truly experience and appreciate how much every single good action or thought is worth! But sometimes, if we’re very sensitive to our growth and can identify the small, positive changes, we can glimpse the very real changes that take place in our souls.

But what if I messed up? What if I didn’t take advantage of Pesach, the Counting of the Omer, or any other opportunity for connection with God?

This week we celebrated *Pesach Sheini*, the Second Pesach, perhaps the most unique holiday on the Jewish calendar. For most people, it just meant eating more matzah (as if we hadn’t eaten enough already) on a regular weekday. But for those of us seeking a second chance, it’s an eye-opener.

The Torah recounts that when it was time to bring the first Pesach offering in the desert, some Jews weren’t able to participate because their “souls were impure” (Numbers 9:6). Simply understood, they had come in contact with a corpse. But these Jews were not satisfied with being exempt. They complained to Moses, “Why should we be left out?” (ibid. 9:7). Moses relayed their request to God and, shockingly, God agreed. A new mitzvah was added to the Torah! From then on, “any man whose soul is impure or who is on a distant path” (ibid. 9:10) could bring the offering on the Second Pesach.

This proves that there’s no such thing as despair! As Rebbe Nachman taught, if you believe that you can damage, believe that you can fix. Even if someone missed out on Pesach because he was sunken in impurity or imperfection, he can still eat matzah on a regular day! A Jew should never feel that he is too distant; his negative feelings should only prompt him to cry out to God, “Where are You? I don’t want to be left out!”

Furthermore, our descent actually becomes the means to reveal God’s presence. By finding God even when we feel total spiritual disconnect, we reveal that God is right there with us! This revelation is a new Torah insight of the highest caliber.

Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai was once overheard criticizing the Roman governors of Israel. The Romans decided to punish him with death, so he fled and lived in a cave for 12 years with his son, Rabbi Elazar. During this period, the two did nothing but study Torah day and night. Finally, the Caesar died and the decree was cancelled. But after being secluded with the Torah for so many years, Rabbi Shimon and his son viewed the mundane world that they encountered upon their re-emergence from the cave as incredibly vain.

When they saw men tending the earth, they asked, “Are these people crazy? They are trading Torah, which is eternal, for something of fleeting importance.” Anger blazed from their eyes and consumed the vanities of

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this world. A heavenly voice called out, "Have you come to destroy My world? Go back to your cave!" They were forced to spend another 12 months in the cave before coming out again.

Now, emerging as the sun was setting at the onset of Shabbat, they saw an old man running with two bundles of *hadassim* (myrtles). They asked him why he needed them. He replied that he wanted their fragrance for the honor of Shabbat. Why two bundles? they wondered. He explained that one was for the positive commandment of *Zakhor* (remember the Shabbat) and the other for the negative commandment of *Shamor* (guard the Shabbat). The simple actions of the old man taught Rabbi Shimon and his son the essence of a Jew and his eternal love and connection to God and Torah.

The story of Rabbi Shimon alludes to his great mission. While he was able to probe the depths of the Torah and its secrets, he also learned not to judge the world negatively from his elevated level. His mission was to reveal that the most hidden and elevated Torah teaching demonstrates that a Jew is always connected to God, no matter who he is and what he may have done.

Rabbi Akiva also mastered the secrets of the Torah, so much so that even Moses couldn't understand why the Torah wasn't given through him (see *Menachot* 29b). But Rabbi Akiva's Torah remained in its lofty, remote state. It was for this reason that Rabbi Akiva's students did not treat each other with the necessary degree of respect. Rabbi Shimon was the *tikkun* for this. He was able to reveal that the essence and source of Torah is the unity and bond between God and each Jew. The greatest secrets teach us that we can always connect and discover the Godliness within every place and every Jew. This is the essence of the *Zohar* and the life of Rabbi Shimon.

And this is why Jews travel from around the world to be with Rabbi Shimon on his *yahrtzeit*, Lag BaOmer. On a *yahrtzeit*, the tzaddik ascends to an even higher place in Heaven – and, as Rabbi Shimon teaches, the tzaddik is now able to reveal more than ever that God is with us always, no matter where we may be.

Based on Likutey Halakhot, Geviyat Chov MeHaYesomim 3

SIDEPATH

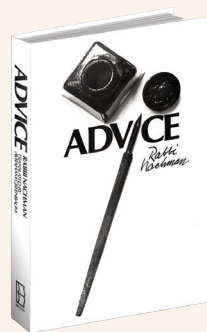
Advice (Likutey Etzot) translated by Avraham Greenbaum

TRUTH AND FAITH. 32. Faith contains the power of growth. A person with perfect faith will grow and develop in his devotion to God no matter what he may have to go through. Regardless of the obstacles or difficulties he may encounter, nothing will throw him off course. He will accept whatever he experiences with patience. People who are put off by the obstacles and difficulties that confront them when they try to

serve God have a certain lack of faith. They are left with a feeling of heaviness and depression, a lack of enthusiasm.

Why is it that people don't make real efforts to draw closer to those who lead lives of piety and justice? If they really had faith, they would run to them as fast as they could. Why do people not pray properly? If they

had genuine faith, they would really believe that God stands over them while they are praying and hears every word that emerges from their lips. Then they would pray with tremendous fire and yearning. But instead they are listless and depressed. It is because they lack this real faith. That is why they are far from the Tzaddikim, from the pious and just, and from true devotion to God. When a person has genuine faith, nothing can stand in his way. No matter what happens, he will grow in the service of God (*Likutey Moharan* I, 155).



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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.