

PATHWAYS

Crossing the Narrow Bridge with Rebbe Nachman and His Students

PARASHAT RE'EH • 5776 • VOL. 6 NO. 45

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Shame On Me!

By Yossi Katz

IT'S THAT TIME of year again: National Teshuvah Month, aka Chodesh Elul. In “honor” of this special time of year, Breslover Chassidim customarily study Lesson #6 of Rebbe Nachman's *Likutey Moharan*. I highly recommend it, as it provides the necessary framework to achieve a real and productive *teshuvah*.

My own recollection of this time period while at yeshivah was of a frightful period in which we were under immense pressure to cram in the perfect month of religious achievement in order to “stand” a chance while standing before God on Rosh HaShanah, the Day of Judgment. The mere mention of the word “Elul” would send a shiver down my spine. Now, Rosh HaShanah is certainly no joking matter and the judgment is very real. But in order to properly understand this day, let's look at what *teshuvah* is really all about.

People usually translate *teshuvah* as repentance. I think that definition works very well with the unsophisticated version that I witnessed as a youth. I remember seeing people with an expanded edition of the *Al Chets* that are recited on Yom Kippur. This looked something like a phone book. Yeshivah boys would stand for hours reciting every single entry, making sure they technically covered all points of any possible transgression. I think they felt like they had truly repented. While I appreciate their sincerity and can't say that I had their stamina, Rebbe Nachman describes something very different.

Have you ever seen an animal wear a medal, the latest hairstyle, or Air Jordans? Humans do, because we have the desire to feel important; we crave honor. This stems from our very makeup: our souls were taken from beneath God's Throne of Honor and want to be elevated back to their source. But Godly honor is not easy to achieve. First we must utterly humble and

nullify ourselves before God. Since this is hard to do, it's easier to seek out base forms of honor like ego, pride and selfishness.

Teshuvah literally means “return” and is the process of approaching God. The laws of *teshuvah* require a person to feel shame about his or her misdeeds. Rebbe Nachman expands on this concept, explaining that we have this experience any time we hear our shame, yet remain silent. This could be our boss yelling at us, our spouse accusing us, or our friend insulting us. All these are Heaven-sent opportunities that provide us with the means to negate our ego and allow God in, initiating the process of ultimately returning to Him. By remaining silent, we acknowledge that we were insulted because of our inflated ego, and welcome the opportunity to nurture a healthy self-worth based on our spiritual greatness rather than something that others think of us.

Even more relevant is when we insult ourselves. Often we make spiritual goals and plans, and guess what? Things don't go the way we expected. We feel down and beaten, ready to throw in the towel. *Teshuvah* is about accepting failure and still believing in change. I can be happy with my efforts and take joy in knowing they are meaningful to God, no matter whether I reached my goal yet or not. This demonstrates that my *teshuvah* was not an act of spiritual egotism, but was truly for the sake of Heaven. Only this is real growth and change. Only this allows us to serve God in every situation that life throws at us.

Shame is a beautiful device, but unfortunately is becoming endangered. It is difficult to swallow only if we have an inflated ego and can't accept that we all make mistakes and look forward to becoming better people. But shame is the hallmark of a Jew. If we truly desire closeness to God, we should lovingly and “shamelessly” embrace it.

Based on Likutey Moharan I, 6

Getting to Uman

By Gedaliah Fleer

TODAY IT TAKES just a phone call to a travel agent to join the more than 35,000 people who spend Rosh HaShanah beside Rebbe Nachman's gravesite in Uman. It wasn't always that easy. Between World War II, when the Nazis made Uman "Judenrein," and the fall of Communism in 1989, Breslover Chassidim ventured to the *tziyun* (gravesite) at the risk of being caught and exiled for "religious subversion." Reb Gedaliah Fleer, the first American Breslover to penetrate the Iron Curtain and reach Uman in the early 1960s, describes the way it was:

In 1948, eleven chassidim traveled independently to Uman to pray together with the Jews who had returned to that city after the Holocaust. This pilgrimage continued until the 1970s, when most Breslover chassidim were able to emigrate to Israel.

Although they had reached the *tziyun*, Breslover chassidim still faced enormous difficulties to fulfill Rebbe Nachman's will. Every so often they were forced to change the location of their services, and Reb Yitzchak Zelig had to change his residence on several occasions. He was not frightened, however, since he was already an old man and the government usually did not bother with older Jews who insisted on remaining religious.

The chassidim traveled vast distances to reach the *tziyun*. By this time, most Breslovers lived in Tashkent, Bukhara and other remote regions, where the authorities more or less ignored the population's religious beliefs. The trip from Tashkent to Uman took almost a full week. Other chassidim lived even farther away in Prunzi, Georgia, not far from Uzbekistan. To avoid traveling on Shabbat, they would first journey to Tashkent (a distance of 400 km, approximately 250 miles) and from there to Moscow, Kiev and, finally, Uman.

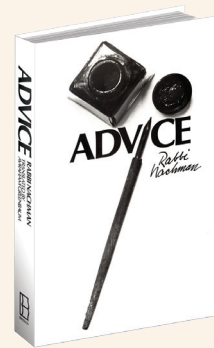
Throughout most of the year there was no communication between the far-flung communities of Breslover chassidim. Just before Rosh HaShanah, however, the chassidim would make their way to public phones (fearing that someone might be listening in on their home lines) and call Reb Michel Dorfman, the de facto head of Breslover Chassidut in Russia, to clarify the details of the upcoming *kibutz*. Reb Michel would send an inspiring letter to those who lived in remote areas, reminding them of the importance of spending Rosh HaShanah in Uman and encouraging them to join the *kibutz*, despite all the hardships involved.

From "Against All Odds"

SIDEPATH

Advice (Likutey Etzot) translated by Avraham Greenbaum

EATING. 16. The bodily sustenance we take in can harm the spiritual sustenance of the soul. Eating and drinking can harm our capacity to experience the awe of God. Awe is the "sweet savor" which sustains the soul. The Tzaddik understands how to guide Israel. By learning from him and following his guidance, we give strength to the spiritual and counter the effects of our physical sustenance (*Likutey Moharan* II, 7:10).



17. The act of eating plays a vital part in refining and purifying the creation. The food we eat is refined and elevated when it is transformed into the beautiful words that we speak: the blessings we make over the food itself, the prayers we offer, our words of Torah, and all the other devotions we are enabled to perform by the nourishment

we derive from the food. One should keep this in mind as one eats. Then one's food becomes "incense," as it were. One will find true joy and make a crown of lovingkindness and mercy for the King of Peace, as it is written, "Go forth, O daughters of Zion, and gaze upon King Solomon" — *ShLoMo*, he to whom peace, *ShaLoM*, belongs — "even upon the crown wherewith his mother hath crowned him in the day of his wedding, and in the day of the gladness of his heart" (Song of Songs 3:11; *Likutey Moharan* II, 16).



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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.