

PATHWAYS

Crossing the Narrow Bridge with Rebbe Nachman and His Students

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A Fight to the Finish

By Yossi Katz

THE DRAMA HAS been simmering for a lifetime. Twin brothers who grew up in the same home to the same parents could not have been more different. One was destined to become the father of the twelve tribes and the Jewish people, the other to be the patriarch of mighty nations like Rome. In our *parashah*, Jacob, on the run for years, is finally forced face his brother, his own survival questionable. But before they meet, Jacob faces a major struggle with a mysterious “man.” Our Sages reveal his identity as Esau’s guardian angel, the embodiment of his very spirit.

Although the angel tries to physically assault Jacob, the essence of their fight and Jacob’s struggle is really about the underlying spiritual warfare that will take place until the end of days. The Jewish people would rise to awesome heights and build the Holy Temple in Jerusalem, but this would seem like only a moment in time compared to the lengthy exile at the hand of the Romans.

Each of us faces daily troubles, hardships and struggles, causing us tremendous pain and suffering. The prophet says, “In all of your troubles, He suffers” (Isaiah 63:9). We experience so much pain precisely because of the exile; our discomfort is a sign of God’s exile from our nation. We share part of His pain and exile through these tribulations.

By fighting with the root of the Jewish people – Jacob – the angel had the power to affect our future. Therefore he prolonged the struggle throughout the long, dark night. He hoped to terrify Jacob’s descendants by forcing them into a lengthy and dark spiritual exile. He thought that when they experienced God’s great distance, they would submit themselves to sadness and depression. This state is the greatest threat to one’s

spirituality, as it brings a person to lose himself and try to find fulfillment in ulterior evil passions and lusts. Since a person can never truly be satisfied by these, a cycle is created in which he feels even more despondent and then sinks even lower in his quest for fulfillment.

This is the situation we find ourselves in today. Overwhelmed by our own personal struggles, we are then besieged by society’s ideas and false solutions, yet often we feel too weak and distressed to search for real answers. But Jacob’s characteristic was truth. No matter how much darkness surrounded him, he was always able to struggle and continue on because his inner point of truth shone forth and declared, “I know that I am the chosen one of God. I know that I have been given a heavenly soul. I know that the redemption will eventually come and, by standing strong, God’s plan will be revealed to all and the truth will be known.”

This point of truth is also embodied in each one of us, the descendants of Jacob. By remembering who we came from and how special we are, we can raise our spirits and perform every mitzvah with great joy. We can always remind ourselves, “I am the son or daughter of the King of all kings. How fortunate am I!”

Some of us may have been injured in this process. There is still hope. Jacob’s sciatic nerve was damaged in his fight with the angel. This nerve travels all the way down into the feet and is symbolic of our times, the period before the arrival of the Mashiach called *ikvesa d’meshicha*, the “heel of the Mashiach.” Esau launches his last-ditch assault at the darkest time in order to thwart the arrival of the Mashiach. However, by bringing ourselves to great joy through our inner truth, we can leap to victory and will ultimately be healed.

Thus Jacob was named Yisrael — the first three letters, *yud, sin, reish*, can be rearranged to spell *ShIR*, song. Through feeling great joy in our connection to God, we can begin to sing and defeat Esau once and for all. Amen!

Based on Likutey Halakhot, Birkhat Hodaah 6

Neither Rain, Nor Sleet, Nor Snow...

By Gedaliah Fleer

MANY OF THE Breslover chassidim who lived in Uman in the twentieth century were meticulous about practicing *hitbodedut* in the fields and forests at night, in fulfillment of Rebbe Nachman's advice.

Led by R' Elyakim Getzel, a descendant of Rebbe Nachman, a group of *ovdim* (devotees) would gather at midnight and go down to the river to immerse, breaking the ice to use the river as a mikvah. Their greatest worry was finding the hole in the broken ice again in order to re-emerge from the water. They would take along bundles of straw and make fires on the riverbank so they would not freeze when wet. Afterward, they would spend many hours in *hitbodedut* in the forest before returning to town in time for the morning prayers.

One icy night, even colder than the usual sub-zero Ukrainian temperatures, nearly everyone in the group was unwilling to go out to the forest. Only R' Elyakim Getzel and R' Hirsch Leib Lippel ventured forth. With gusting winds piling the snow several feet high, eventually R' Hirsch Leib could no longer keep pace and retreated. R' Elyakim was the only one to forge ahead, performing his devotions alone in the forest.

As heard from R' Hirsch Leib Lippel

* * *

R' "Shabsi" Breslover awoke very early and was one of the first to arrive in synagogue every morning, even in the freezing Ukrainian winters – and even when he was in his mid-eighties!

When asked about it, he said it would certainly be easier for him to stay in bed under the covers in the early morning in such freezing temperatures. "But when I wake up," he explained, "I hear a voice telling me to remain in bed and go back to sleep. I ask myself, 'Who is telling me this? Why, it is my evil inclination!'" Then I reflect, "But he is as old as me, and he's already on the job! So I jump out of bed right away and come to synagogue!"

Rabbi Eliyahu Chaim Rosen

SIDEPATH

Advice (Likutey Etzot) translated by Avraham Greenbaum

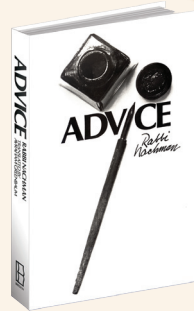
UNDERSTANDING. 38. The greater a person's understanding, the easier it is to make a living. The more one lacks understanding, the more he must struggle and labor for his income (*Likutey Moharan I*, 56:6).

39. The more understanding, the more peace. For strife, anger and unkindness are rooted in lack of understanding. The more understanding, the more love, kindness and peace. Through this comes healing (*ibid.*).

40. When a person is angry, his understanding is withdrawn and the image of God disappears from his face. He no longer has the face of a man (*ibid. I*, 57:6).

41. In order for a man's understanding to develop, he must pay attention to three things. He should teach what he knows to others and draw them under the wings of the Shekhinah. He must cultivate the fear of sin over and above his learning. And he must be careful about the way he communicates what he knows to others so that his words will be words of grace. Then his words will not be despised. His understanding will bring him the three blessings of food, drink and clothing (*ibid. I*, 58:5).

42. One whose understanding is developed to perfection has the power to draw even the weakest among Israel to the service of God and crush the enemies who chase after them and oppress them. He has the power to expound original Torah ideas on Shabbat (*ibid.*).



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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.