

# HaModia article

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October 7, 2010

This article originally appeared in the Erev Sukkos 5771/2010 edition of the English-language version of HaModia. It is posted here with their kind permission.

Since I wrote it on the Sunday before Rosh HaShanah, less than 24 hours before my pilgrimage to Uman, prior to packing for my flight to Odessa, I thought of titling the article *Breslov in a Hurry*. Fortunately I, and Mrs. Birnhack HaModia's editor, realized that a more dignified title was needed. Nonetheless, *Breslov in a Hurry* does convey many essential points of Rebbe Nachman's teachings. So, here it is. Enjoy!

## Introduction

*Boruch Hashem* (thank God), having become acquainted with the writings of Rebbe Nachman of Breslov more than 30 years ago, I sometimes forget that there are still some people in the world who haven't heard of him. I'm then reminded of the expression, even your best friend was once a total stranger. So, allow me the privilege of introducing to you the tzaddik that Breslovers refer to with affection and reverence, Rabbeinu *zal*.

## Who Was the Rebbe Reb Nachman?

Rebbe Nachman was born on Rosh Chodesh Nissan 5532 (April 4, 1772) in Medzbuz, in the house which had belonged to his maternal great-grandfather, the Baal Shem Tov, founder of chassidus. Rebbe Nachman's father was Reb Simcha, son of Reb Nachman Horodenker (after whom Rebbe Nachman was named), one of the Baal Shem Tov's closest chassidim. Rabbeinu *zal*'s [of blessed memory] mother was Rebbetzin Feiga. Her mother was Rebbetzin Udel, daughter of the *heilge* [holy] Baal Shem Tov.

As a child, living in the house of the Baal Shem Tov, Rebbe Nachman heard many stories about the great tzaddikim from the many rebbes and ovdei Hashem who came to visit his great-grandfather's *kever* [grave]. This inspired him greatly to serve Hashem [God]. For example, in order to minimize his enjoyment of food Rabbeinu *zal* would swallow his food without chewing. He was six years old at the time. In that same period he had already begun going to the *mikveh* . Rabbeinu *zal* used the allowance his parents gave him to give *tzedakah* [charity] and to pay his tutor a bonus for each extra page of Gemara that he taught him. However, Rebbe Nachman's studies did not always come easily to him. When that was the case, he cried and prayed to Hashem until he was able to understand.

This was to become the Rebbe's way when ever he encountered difficulty in serving Hashem, whether, for example, he lost his temper, didn't daven as well as he could or simply slipped in his efforts. He would pick himself up and start anew, even dozens of times a day, when necessary. Yet, in order to hide his *avodas Hashem* [devotions], Rebbe Nachman would outwardly behave his age, even joining other children for ice-skating.

Shortly after his bar-mitzvah, Rebbe Nachman married Sasha, daughter of Reb Ephraim of Ossatin. (Ultimately, they had eight children, six daughters and two sons. Two of their daughters and both sons died in infancy.) They lived in her father's home for approximately five years, at which time Reb Ephraim re-married after being widowed. As a result, Rabbeinu *zal* moved to Medvedevka where people began to come to him. He remained there until the end of 5560 (September 1800) when he moved to Zlatipolia. Two years later Rebbe Nachman moved to Breslov where he lived till six months before he passed away.

That final half year of his life Rebbe Nachman lived in Uman. Rabbeinu *zal* intimated two reasons why he chose to die and be buried in Uman. One reason was the pogroms that took place there in 1749 and 1768. Over 20,000 Yidden were killed. Many of the martyrs left this world with unfinished business, their

*neshamos* [souls] still in need of repair. The other reason was that Uman had become a major center for spreading the heresies of the Enlightenment movement.

In part, it is in order to bring *tikkun* [repair] to those souls that needed it, and to dispel the Enlightenment heresies, that Rebbe Nachman was so emphatic that his followers come to be with him in Uman on Rosh Hashanah, even after his passing. This is why more and more keep coming, and why you are likely to know at least one of the over 20,000 people who were there this year!

### **His Writings and Teachings**

Rebbe Nachman wrote a number of *seforim* [books]. Thanks to the enormous dedication and effort of his closest *chassid* [disciple], Reb Nosson *zal*, a number of these works remain. They are *Likutey Moharan*, *Sippurey Maasios* (*The Stories of Rebbe Nachman*) and *Sefer Hamidos*. (All of these are available in English translation from the Breslov Research Institute.) Reb Nosson himself wrote *Likutey Halachos*, a commentary on *Likutey Moharan*, as well as *Chayei Moharan* (*Tzaddik*) and *Sichos Haran* (*Rabbi Nachman's Wisdom*), which provide the bulk of biographical material about Rebbe Nachman, as well as the back story of many *Rabbeinu zal's* teachings.

So what did Rebbe Nachman teach? Rebbe Nachman taught so much, the most we can do in a magazine article is summarize some the major themes. Let's begin with the one he felt was the most critical: *emunah* [faith].

"*Kein yiush iz gor nisht farhanden!* There is no such thing as despair!" Rebbe Nachman spoke these words just two months before he passed away. Included in this declaration is a whole *mesechta* (tractate) on *emunah*. There is no such thing as despair because Hashem is constantly creating the world anew; your situation can change for the better in a moment. There is no such thing as despair because Hashem is continuously taking

loving care of you, doing everything for your best interest.

This point is so important it bears a bit of elaborating. Many people have had the question, during the *Yomim Noraim* [Days of Awe. from Rosh HaShanah through Yom Kippur, inclusive] or some other time of the year, of why Hashem keeps them around. The answer Rebbe Nachman provides is that every Jew has at least one good point. That good point may be a favor that he did or a kind word that he said. It may be a temptation overcome, a whispered prayer or even just a thought, a desire to do something Jewishly. To Hashem not only is the good point important, but that you are doing it is also important.

In fact, your *emunah* in yourself has to be so strong that you realize that whether you are one of thousands of Yidden in a major Jewish megalopolis “just like everyone else,” or the only Jew in a 1,000-mile radius, even the smallest mitzvah you do is vital to your destiny, the welfare of the Jewish people and Hashem’s ultimate goal. Yes, Rabbeinu *zal* teaches, you are that important.

There is also no despair because the Torah underlies every detail of Creation. So no matter where and no matter what, you can have instant contact with the Torah. There is no such thing as despair because, as Rabbeinu *zal* said, “If you believe you can destroy, believe that you can fix.” And what we can’t fix on our own, the super-tzaddikim, the likes of Rebbe Shimon bar Yochai, the Arizal and the Baal Shem Tov, can fix.

As long as we’ve mentioned tzaddikim, let me share a story with you. I was once teaching a class to people who had some knowledge of Rebbe Nachman’s teachings. I asked each of them to state the one thing that he felt was the most important. One young man replied, “Find yourself a tzaddik.” In many ways this is correct.

With the exception of Avraham *Avinu* [our Patriarch], no Jew

has ever learned about God on his own. He has had a parent, or some sort of teacher or perhaps only a book. But somewhere along the line he has had someone to show him how to be a better Jew. Even if one has outgrown any number of early teachers, the tzaddik Rebbe Nachman encourages and enjoins us to find is more than a teacher, mentor or guide. To Rebbe Nachman, a true tzaddik, the rebbe that one should attach himself to, is a healer of the *neshamah* [soul].

One who is honest with himself will admit that his *neshamah* is ill in many ways. One may suffer in various degrees from the diseases of jealousy, anger, stinginess, pettiness or gloom. Although a person needs to eat, have money and establish a family, many become addicted to the pleasure of food and physical contact, or the power and prestige of having wealth. A tzaddik can heal us, says Rebbe Nachman, if we choose to have the *emunah* to follow his *eitzos*, his advice and counsel, on how to deal with the physical and mental challenges of life in the context of keeping Torah and mitzvos.

Even those who haven't heard of Rebbe Nachman, have heard of the (unofficial) Breslov motto: "*Mitzvah gedolah l'hiyos b'simcha tamid*. It is a great mitzvah to constantly be upbeat." Why did Rabbeinu zal emphasize the importance of *simcha*? One reason is that he was well aware of the troubles and suffering that people endure: marital discord, financial and physical woes and emotional pain to name a few. He himself lost four children in infancy, was widowed and in the last three years of his life suffered the ravages of tuberculosis. In Rebbe Nachman's teachings *simcha* is not a luxury or a bonus—it's a vital necessity!

One area of life that Rebbe Nachman foresaw would become more and more difficult for people to deal with is in matters pertaining to *kedushah* [sanctity], that is *shmiras habris*, protecting the bond we have with Hashem. If one is not careful, this temptation steals one's time, heart and mind so that nothing will be left with which to enjoy the pleasure of

Torah and *tefilah* [prayer]. But even if one has failed in this area of life, Rebbe Nachman said there is hope. One should go to the *mikveh* and say the *Tikkun Haklali*, the set of ten *mizmorei* [chapters of] Tehillim, which he prescribed. The ten *mizmorim* are: 16, 32, 41, 42, 59, 77, 90, 105, 137, 150.

Rebbe Nachman went so far as to say that if one will come to his grave, give even a minimal amount of money to *tzedakah* on his behalf and say the *Tikkun Haklali*, Rebbe Nachman will do the person a favor in return. He will do whatever it takes to pull the person out of Gehinnom! This is why hundreds and hundreds of people go to Uman throughout the year, not just for Rosh HaShanah.

Rebbe Nachman once said, "*Gor mine zach iz tefilah!* My entire mission is prayer!" Lesson after lesson in *Likutey Moharan* contains much advice on how to *daven* [pray] better. For example: how to better prepare one's mind and heart in order to better focus on what you are saying while you are saying it, how to overcome and eliminate foreign thoughts, how to foster the feelings of shalom and *ahavas Yisroel* [love for fellow Jews] that need to precede the actual *tefilah*, etc.

The most essential teaching of Rabbeinu zal is that of *hisbodedus*. Simply defined, *hisbodedus* means talking to Hashem daily, in your own words, in your native tongue about anything and everything that's on your mind. These are not meant as a substitute for the *tefilos* Chazal [our Sages, o blessed memory] instituted. They are meant, in part, to supplement them. (The Chofetz Chaim in Chapter 10 of his *Likutey Amarim* also encourages talking to Hashem in one's own words.) However, *hisbodedus* is not "another thing to do." *Hisbodedus* is meant to let us know in a very real way that Hashem is always, always near you, next to you and by your side. Rebbe Nachman stated openly that every Jew, no matter how great or small, should do *hisbodedus* every single day.

Those who are familiar with Rebbe Nachman and Breslov are

quite aware of Rabbeinu zal's emphasis on *tefilah*. What many of them are unaware of—including many newcomers to Breslov!—is that Rabbeinu zal stresses constantly the importance of *limud Torah* [Torah study], both *iyun* [in-depth] and *bekius* [breadth, "well-readness"]. The most important thing to study, he taught, is *Shulchan Aruch* and *halachah* [Jewish law]. One can choose other areas of Torah study depending on one's bent and inclination, but daily study of *halachah* is an absolute must. Ideally, one should study *halachah* in depth, but at the very least one must know the final *p'sak* [decision] so that he knows how to conduct himself.

Rebbe Nachman teaches that the study of *halachah* undoes the confusion caused by the sin of Adam and Chavah. Furthermore, the more clarity one has in knowing what is permitted and what forbidden, the greater feeling of clarity one has when *davening* that Hashem is right there listening.

Rebbe Nachman said it was a mitzvah *gedolah* to sharpen one's mind though *limud Torah b'iyun*. However, he cautioned us not to out-smart ourselves. When it comes to learning, learn as much as you can, as well as you can. But when it comes to doing mitzvahs, do them *b'temimus u'p'sheetus*, simply and straightforwardly, without trying to be smarter than Chazal, the *Shulchan Aruch* or the tzaddikim. Savor Shabbos and *yom tov* [holiday] treats, and sing a lot *zemiros* [songs], even if you're not the best singer. In a nutshell: Enjoy being a Jew!

Finally, in an understated, but quite pointed teaching to his chassidim, Rebbe Nachman made a statement regarding himself. He said that it wasn't due to his being a descendant of the Baal Shem Tov or being gifted with a lofty *neshamah* that he succeeded as much as he did in becoming a great tzaddik. It was due to one thing and one thing only: hard work.

## **His Petirah**

Rebbe Nachman was *niftar* [passed away] two-hundred years ago

on the fourth day of Sukkos, 18 Tishrei 5571 (October 16, 1810). In the previous Elul, while discussing his imminent demise, the Breslover chassidim asked Rabbeinu zal what they should and to whom he would entrust them. "Just stay together and you will be good Jews. Not only that, but you can be tzaddikim, for Hashem will certainly grant me that things will be as I wanted. *Ich hob ois gefirt, un vell ois firren!* I have accomplished and will accomplish!" May his zechus protect us and all of *Klal Yisroel* [the Jewish people]. Amen.

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Author's Note: I apologize to my co-Breslovers: I know there are other key points in Rabbeinu zal's teachings that needed to be made, like *Tikkun Chatzos* [the Midnight Lament] and judging every Jew favorably, including oneself! But I was asked to write this article shortly before departing for Uman, and even after some *hisbodedus* I couldn't figure out how to say more in the limited space allotted to this feature. I haven't even packed for Uman yet!