

IMAGINATION

written by Chaim Kramer
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Our thoughts are our closest companions. The better part of any day we spend inside our own heads – in our ideas, images and impressions, in our designs and recollections, and so on. One of the concepts which Rebbe Nachman discusses in connection with our thought processes is what he calls the *medameh* (מְדָמֶה). The root of this Hebrew word is *damah* (דָּמָה), which means to be like or resemble, and connotes the comparison of one thing to another. Therefore, the Rebbe's use of the word *medameh* might best be translated as the mind's imaginative faculty. Yet this would not give us a complete picture, because, depending on the context, Rebbe Nachman uses the word to mean either creative visualization or as what is generally termed illusion (הִלּוּזְיָה). *Medameh* as creative visualization is a quality we associate with Light and Day; *medameh* as illusion, however, we associate with Darkness and Night.

The world deceives you. Accept this from me. Do not

let yourselves be fooled! (Rebbe Nachman's Wisdom #51)

Imagination as illusion. Who hasn't, at some time in life, let his imagination run wild? When we allow this to happen, our thoughts become subject to all sorts of confusion and chaos, our minds see everything as Night. Take, for example, what happens when we let our imaginations focus on something we fear. Rebbe Nachman teaches: Most things that people fear cannot harm them. We may even clearly realize that what we fear cannot harm us, yet, we have these phobias which we cannot overcome (*Rebbe Nachman's Wisdom #83*). How many of us spend our time fretting over and fearing imagined danger? We say things like, "My entire world is black," and we really think it is, just because we've imagined the worst possible scenario and convinced ourselves of its reality. The Darkness of illusion has shut out the Light, it has closed our minds to the wisdom and understanding which would normally help us see past the situation and even resolve it. We must do everything we can to avoid such anxiety and the ensuing depression, because it is the worst mental state possible.

And it's not only through fears and phobias that illusion plays havoc with our lives. Rebbe Nachman, after delivering a lesson in which he referred to one's desires and evil inclination as illusory and dreamlike, said, "We should give the Evil One a new name. From now on he should be called Imagination" (*Likutey Moharan I*, 25:end). We imagine ourselves different than we really are: we might think we are indispensable and this leads to arrogance and strife; we might imagine our family life as okay when it is sometimes falling apart right in front of our eyes; we delude ourselves into thinking that we have, or can achieve, financial security, something which is virtually impossible. And sometimes, we even create illusions about our spiritual achievements and religious commitments. Are we really as devoted to God and to being a good person as we tell ourselves, and would have others believe? When we do the things we do, are we really being true

to Judaism? Our forefathers offered the supreme sacrifice, their very lives, to remain true to our faith. If called upon to do so, would we do the same? This is the illusory side of our imagination that Rebbe Nachman calls the Evil One. It is the *medameh* from which we must flee. As Rebbe Nachman said: The world deceives you. Accept this from me. Do not let yourselves be fooled! (*Rebbe Nachman's Wisdom* #51).

Imagination as creative visualization. There is, however, another side to imagination which, rather than deceiving us into Darkness, brings Light, wisdom and understanding into our minds. This is the quality of imagination through which we can turn even our darkest Nights into the brightest Days; it is *medameh* as creative visualization. Our Sages tell us that when Yosef was a servant in Egypt and his master's wife attempted to seduce him, he had a vision of his father's image and this saved him (*Sotah* 36b). Rebbe Nachman commented on this: How it happens that an image appears to a person is a very hidden mystery (*Likutey Moharan* I, 150).

Indeed, Rebbe Nachman himself made considerable use of the *medameh*. He told many stories, revealed numerous dreams, visions and innovative ideas – all of which display a prolific imagination and challenge even the most fertile and creative minds. And, he inspired his chassidim to follow suit. There can therefore be no doubt that the Rebbe also recognized the positive features of imagination and how it is to be used to our benefit.

Throughout the Rebbe's writings, there are references to imagination. Here are but some of his suggestions for making use of its positive aspects:

Human thought has tremendous potential. When we concentrate our thoughts on something and really imagine it to be, we can actually force the thing to happen. To accomplish this, we must visualize every step of the desired result in great detail. Diffused and generalized thought will not work. But when every faculty of the mind is intensely

focused on that which we wish to see happening, we can genuinely exert great influence on all sorts of matters in the world (*Rebbe Nachman's Wisdom #62*).

When studying Torah, imagine and plan a schedule for your studies. Picture in your mind exactly how you will go about this course of study. Visualize yourself doing it, succeeding at it, until you actually do manage to fulfill your plans (*Ibid.*).

Rebbe Nachman teaches: When we are disturbed and unhappy, we should at least *imagine* ourselves as being joyous. Deep down we may be depressed, but if we act happy, we will eventually come to genuine joy (*Rebbe Nachman's Wisdom #74*).

Developing original insights is a most desired goal of all Torah study. To be worthy of such innovative thinking, Rebbe Nachman tells us that we must use the power of imagination – comparing item to item, thought to thought (*Likutey Moharan I, 54:5,6*).

We can conclude that any aspect of our power of imagination which we use to serve God and better ourselves, has to be a positive quality. The imagination that Rebbe Nachman refers to as the Evil One, the imagination which needs to be repressed and stifled, is not the creative power that is an innate quality and asset in each of us. Rather, it is the illusory imagination that lets us fool ourselves and others, the delusive thinking that allows us to waste away our lives.

And it's worth recalling once more Rebbe Nachman's teaching: Wherever your mind is – that's where you are! Thus, it all depends on what we really want. If we really desire and think about Godliness and genuine personal growth, we can attain it. If we desire something else, and that is where our mind is, then that's what we'll achieve. If we think Night, it is Night. But if we think Day, if we think

good, positive thoughts, and continue to do so, we will find ourselves emerging into the Light.

Taken from the book Crossing the Narrow Bridge – chapter 11 – Day and Night