

Rabbi Dovid Sears – The Seven Beggars' Wondrous Gifts – Part I

written by breslov.org

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This essay is based on Rabbi Nachman of Breslov's "Tale of the Seven Beggars," which was translated and annotated by the late Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan in "Rabbi Nachman's Stories" (Breslov Research Institute, and subsequently republished separately by Jewish Lights by special arrangement with BRI). I surely couldn't begin to do justice to the Rebbe's masterwork here, and therefore recommend that anyone who is unfamiliar with the full story get a copy of the book and read it. Then what we have written should be less obscure – even though the entire subject is extremely obscure!

When faced with the blandishments of olam hazeh (or sometimes just the thought of them), Breslover Chassidim typically caution each other with a one-word reminder: "Tachlis!" – meaning "Don't forget the true goal!" As Rabbi Nachman observes (Likkutei Moharan I, 268): "If a person doesn't consider the tachlis, of what purpose is his life?" Life is not a cosmic accident! It has a God-given purpose, which we must not lose sight of.

What is the nature of this tachlis? In the same lesson from Likkutei Moharan, the Rebbe states what may seem to be obvious, at least to his immediate circle of followers: the purpose of life in this world is to serve God. But he also explains that our divine service, though surely its own intrinsic reward, goes hand in hand with another dimension of the tachlis – at the level of consciousness. This is the da'as, or higher awareness, associated with the "Future World." As the famous prophecy goes: "The knowledge (de'ah, a

construct of da'as) of God will fill the earth like the water that covers the sea" (Isaiah 1:9). This is the Jewish equivalent of enlightenment in its most universal aspect. For the da'as of the "Future World" will reach all beings on all levels, from the highest to the lowest, like the vastness of the water in the prophet's metaphor (for more on this subject, see the end of Likkutei Moharan I, 21).

In Likkutei Moharan II, 19, the Rebbe brings out another facet of this idea, telling us that this higher awareness is attained by performing the mitzvos and serving God with simplicity and faith, the cardinal virtues of his path. Clearly, the two dimensions of consciousness and action are inextricably connected. He similarly states at the beginning of Likkutei Moharan II, 37: "The main purpose is only to labor and proceed in the ways of God for the sake of His Name, in order to merit to recognize God and know Him. This is the tachlis – and this is what God desires: that we perceive Him."

He adds that this goal must not be approached in a materialistic way, but in keeping with the deepest longing of the soul. "One person might labor all of his days and pursue worldly desires in order to fill his belly with them," he explains, "while another might strive to attain the World to Come – but this, too, is called 'filling one's belly.' For he wishes to fill his belly and gratify his desire with the World to Come! The only difference is that he is a little wiser than the first . . . However, I don't choose to emulate either of them. All I want is to 'gaze upon the pleasantness of God' (Psalms 27:4)."

Thus, the "Future World" is not just the spiritual equivalent of cashing in our chips after a lucky day at the casino. It is actually the culmination of our avodah (spiritual effort): the experience of "gazing upon the pleasantness of God." This may be attained by the meritorious after death, as well as by the tzaddikim even in this world. It is The Gemara (Berachos 17a) says as much when it cites the custom of the sages to bless

each other with the words: "May you behold your Hereafter (olam habah) in this life!"

Olam habah is more than a future realm or state of being, but a sublime perception that may be experienced here and now by the tzaddikim – and by those who are attached to them. One way we can achieve this, the Rebbe tells us, is by conquering our anger with compassion (Likkutei Moharan I, 18). In so doing, we transcend our innate selfishness and get in touch with a greater reality – the transpersonal, integrated reality that is so vividly perceived by the tzaddikim. Another way is by heeding the guidance and advice of the tzaddikim, which not only sets our feet in the right direction, but also establishes a spiritual bond between us and the awesome sages who prescribed such holy advice (Likkutei Moharan II, 39).

Rabbi Nachman talks about the primacy of this relationship with the tzaddikim as it bears upon our reaching the true goal of life in his tale of the "Seven Beggars," the culmination of the thirteen mystical stories for which the Rebbe is best known. The narrative is too lengthy and complex to retell here, but we can summarize a few of its key features: after a storm wind ravages the world, turning sea to dry land and dry land to sea, two little children, a boy and a girl, escape into a vast forest. There, hungry and thirsty and frightened, they encounter seven wandering beggars, who appear one after the next each day, and give the lost children bread and water, as well as a blessing. The nature of these blessings is that the children should become like their benefactors in a particular way. For each beggar possesses a physical disability – one is blind, one is deaf, etc. – but the seeming disability masks an awesome holy power. These blessings are assurances that the children will one day acquire the same lofty spiritual levels. Eventually, the homeless boy and girl find their way back to civilization and join a band of wandering hobos, who adopt them and look after them.

These beggars represent the great tzaddikim throughout

history, who sustained us again and again during our long and bitter exile; while the lost children represent the male and female aspects of the Jewish people (or maybe the Jewish people, represented as the groom, and the Shekhinah / Divine Presence, represented as the bride). The seven blessings, and subsequently, seven gifts, are that the children should become “just like” their nameless benefactors. This echoes the Rebbe’s declaration (Chayei Moharan 269), “I can make you tzaddikim ki’moni mamash, just like me!” On the one hand, this sounds pretty democratic: it means that we can all get there. On the other, it indicates that everything essentially depends on the tzaddik, who confers his attainments upon those who follow his guidance.

What are the wondrous blessings and gifts that the children in the Rebbe’s story receive? We will describe the Seven Beggars’ wedding presents in the second part of this posting, and in so doing, try to get a clearer picture of what is meant by the “tachlis” in spiritual terms.