

# Women & Breslov

written by breslov.org

March 24, 2014



Once Rebbe Nachman asked his followers: “Why don’t you make your wives *chasidistehs*?” (*Siach Sarfei Kodesh* 2, 1-14). (In Yiddish, “*Chasidistehs*” means “women Chasidim.”) Breslov tradition tells us that Rebbe Nachman affirmed the unique spiritual talents and sensitivities of women. He saw to it that his daughters were well educated in various areas of Torah, and he praised them highly for their spiritual qualities (his daughter Sarah in particular). Indeed, Rebbe Nachman once said of his daughters that he “took their souls from the World of *Atzilus*” (“Divine Emanation,” also called the “World of Oneness”) (*Chayei Moharan* 274).

Although it would be intellectually dishonest to depict Rebbe Nachman (who passed away more than 200 years ago) as a precursor of the modern feminist movement, it would be equally

wrong to assume that the Rebbe viewed women as “second-class citizens,” whose religious pursuits were restricted to baking kugel and cleaning up the debris after Shabbos. Rebbe Nachman’s express wish that his followers instruct their wives in the ways of Chasidus shows that it is entirely legitimate for women to follow his path of Divine service. This path may be described according to several basic points:

## **Prayer**

Rebbe Nachman declared: “*Gohr mein zach iz tefillah...* My main ‘thing’ is prayer” (*Si’ach Sarfei Kodesh* 1, 492; also cf. *Likutey Moharan* II, 93). This is a universal practice that women also can relate to—especially the practice of *Hisbodedus* (secluded meditation and prayer), which Rebbe Nachman extolled as “higher than everything” (*Likutey Moharan* II, 25). Ideally, *Hisbodedus* entails going out to the fields or forests at night, and speaking to G-d for an hour in one’s own words. Women, however, should be careful to practice *Hisbodedus* in safer surroundings, such as at home or in the back yard, and not expose themselves to danger. If it is hard to find time (and energy) in the evening, one may practice *Hisbodedus* during the course of the day—even while performing household chores.

Rebbe Nachman praised women who go to shul and take part in the public prayers (*Siach Sarfei Kodesh* 2, 1-663). In addition to reading the prayers in the Siddur, many Breslover women recite Reb Noson’s *Likutey Tefilos*, as well as other collections of prayers and techinos (supplications). The Breslov Research Institute (BRI) has begun to translate the complete text of *Likutey Tefilos* under the title, *The Fiftieth Gate*. So far, three volumes have been published. Shorter excerpts from Reb Noson’s prayers have been translated as *The Flame of the Heart* and *Entering the Light*, also published by BRI.

It is a time-honored practice for married women to pray for

their families and for the entire Jewish people especially while lighting the Shabbos or Yom Tov candles. Some Breslover "*Chasidistehs*" have the custom to add an additional prayer at that holy time that Rebbe Nachman's light fill the world.

## **Torah Study**

Although halakhically women are exempt from the obligation of Torah study, in today's Orthodox Jewish world women are encouraged to study all parts of Torah relevant to their spiritual needs. This includes Tanach and its commentaries, Midrash, Halakhah, Mussar, and Chasidic works. Historically, Breslover women began to read the *Sippurey Ma'asiyos*, Rebbe Nachman's thirteen mystical stories, as soon as they were published in 1816. Indeed, during his last years the Rebbe had said that he wanted women to do so, also declaring his stories to be a segula (mystical remedy or charm) for those unable to conceive children (see *Likutey Moharan* I, 60).

Rebbe Nachman lived before there was a modern yeshivah system (which began with Rabbi Chaim of Volozhin in 1803, just seven years before Rebbe Nachman's passing) or religious schools for girls and women (which began with Sarah Schenirer in 1915 and soon led to the modern Beis Yaakov movement). Moreover, with the exception of the first edition of *Likutey Moharan*, published in 1808, his printed works were not available until after his passing. (He didn't have a website, either.) Thus, we assume that his encouragement of his followers to teach their wives was not meant to restrict the study of his teachings to married women.

Aside from Rebbe Nachman's stories, a good place to begin studying his teachings would be the booklets "Outpouring of the Soul," translated by Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan, and "Restore My Soul" and "Azamra," translated by Rabbi Avraham Greenbaum. More advanced are *Likutey Eitzos*, translate as "Rabbi Nachman's Advice," and *Sichos HaRan*, translated as "Rabbi Nachman's Wisdom." These works are available through the

Breslov Research Institute's website: [breslov.org](http://breslov.org). Rabbi Greenbaum's "The Essential Rabbi Nachman" is another useful collection, which is available as a free download via his website: <http://www.azamra.org/essential.shtm>

## **Family Life**

Like *Chava* (Eve) in the Garden of Eden, a Jewish wife is called upon to be an *eizer k'negdo* (Genesis 2:18), a faithful partner to her husband, respecting and supporting his efforts in Avodas Hashem. This is an important part of her Divine service, for which she receives Heavenly reward (*Kesubos* 62b; *Nedarim* 50a; *Berachos* 17b). No less importantly, she should instill in her children *emunah* (faith) in Hashem and the tzaddikim, as well as good traits such as honesty, diligence, patience, *derekh eretz*, etc. More effective than a mother's words is her personal example. Thus, a woman should approach raising children as an important vehicle for her own spiritual development. Rebbe Nachman once remarked that hearing stories of tzaddikim at home as a child made an indelible impression upon him (*Sichos HaRan* 138). It is extremely beneficial for mothers to read such stories to their children. In addition to many popular collections of Torah tales, a number of colorfully illustrated Breslov storybooks are available.

## **Tzedakah and Chesed**

Our sages declare the defining traits of the Jewish people to be "compassion, modesty, and kindness" (*Yevamos* 79a). Jewish women of all ages are renowned for their deeds of chesed (kindness), especially by visiting the sick and by showing hospitality to guests. The latter is considered to be an even higher level of charity than giving a poor person money, because it is a more immediate and direct way of benefiting the receiver (*Ta'anis* 21a). Once the Rebbe discussed the loftiness of the mitzvah of hospitality with his daughter, Sarah. A young married woman, she worried about her ability to

fulfill this mitzvah properly. Observing her anxiety, her father added, "And what does it take to show hospitality? Another *shtik'l kollitch*—a slice of Challah—and a little more tablecloth!" (*Avanehah Barzel, Sichos V'Sippurim miRabbenu zal, 2; Siach Sarfei Kodesh 2, 1-97*).

## **Rosh Hashanah – Uman**

Some newcomers to Breslov assume that the Rosh Hashanah gathering in the city of Uman, near Rebbe Nachman's gravesite, was always a "for men only" event. However, prior to the Stalinist purges, women also attended prayer services in the Breslover Kloyz on Rosh Hashana, as well as on Shabbos and the Yomim Tovim. In fact, it was the personal custom of Rav Avraham Sternhartz, the Baal Tokei'ah and Baal Musaf, upon leaving the synagogue to offer holiday greetings to the women waiting outside for their husbands, sons and brothers (who presumably took longer to exit the sanctuary downstairs). The main reason women today are discouraged from traveling to the Rosh Hashanah gathering in Uman is because under present circumstances, it would be impossible to accommodate large numbers of women without serious breaches of *tzniyus* (modesty). According to Breslov tradition, the participation of the men who join the Rosh Hashanah gathering in Uman brings blessings to their wives and families (as well as the entire Jewish people); there has never been the same imperative for women to leave their homes as for men. However, beginning with the independence of Ukraine during the early 1990s, groups of women began to travel to Uman frequently throughout the year, where they, too, recite the *Tikkun HaKlalli*, the ten psalms prescribed by Rebbe Nachman as a vehicle for teshuvah and to heal the soul. Although most women's groups come from Eretz Yisrael, travel arrangements from America can be made through Nesia Travel, operated by Mrs. Miriam Fried (herself a Breslover who has traveled to Uman many times), 1661 43rd St, Brooklyn, N.Y. Tel. 718-633-3800.

## **Torah Classes for Women**

Concerning Abraham and Sarah's mission to bring the entire world to serve the One G-d, our sages explain that Abraham taught the men, while his wife Sarah taught the women (Rashi on Genesis 12:5). Without a doubt, this arrangement is best. However, it is not always possible. Thus, in today's Orthodox communities, including the Breslov community, men often teach classes for women. For example, the late Rabbi Gedaliah Kenig of Jerusalem, leading disciple of Rav Avraham Sternhartz, taught groups of newly observant women at his home in Me'ah She'arim prior to his passing in 1980. His sons, Rabbi Elazar Mordechai Kenig and Rabbi Ephraim Kenig of the Tzefat Breslov community, continue to do so, as does Rabbi Noach Cheifetz of Yerushalayim. Also, the late Rabbi Tzvi Aryeh Rosenfeld, another student of Reb Avraham Sternhartz and pioneer of Breslov outreach in America, taught women. Rabbi Rosenfeld's example has been followed by his sons-in-law, Rabbi Chaim Kramer of the Breslov Research Institute, and Rabbi Noson Maimon of the Vaad Olami D'Chasidei Breslov, as well as his other students today.

A few prominent women teachers of Breslov Chasidus include Mrs. Rena Rochel Silber, formerly of Far Rockaway and now of Eretz Yisrael; Mrs. Esther Leah Marschette of Boston; Mrs. Talya Lipshutz of Tzefat; Mrs. Debbie Shapiro of Yerushalayim; Mrs. Chani Kass of Yerushalayim; and Mrs. Yehudis Golshevsky of Yerushalayim, among others.

In the merit of studying and following the teachings of the tzaddikim, may Hashem's promise speedily be fulfilled in us, "I will pour out My Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters will prophecy" (Joel 3:1), amen.

## **Stories**

Rebbe Nachman's mother, Rebbetzin Feige (d. 19 Adar 5561/1801) was a grand-daughter of the holy Baal Shem Tov, and the sister

of Chasidic masters Rabbi Baruch of Medzibuzh (author of *Butzina D’Nehora*) and Rabbi Moshe Chaim Ephraim of Sudilkov (author of *Degel Machaneh Ephraim*). Her brothers held her in such high regard that they called her “Feige the Prophetess.” It is said that the Baal Shem Tov taught his daughter, Rebbetzin Udel, certain combinations of Divine Names (*yichudim*) by which she could commune with his soul after his passing. She, in turn, passed down these *yichudim* to her daughter, Rebbetzin Feige.

After marrying Rabbi Simcha, a son of Rabbi Nachman Horodenker who had been raised by the Baal Shem Tov, Rebbetzin Feige inherited the Baal Shem Tov’s house in Medzhibuzh. There, Rebbe Nachman, as well as his brothers Yisrael and Yechiel Zvi and his sister Perel, were born and raised (*Nevei Tzaddikim*, p. 10).

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According to tradition, it once happened that Rabbi Simcha, an ascetic who spent much time practicing hisbodedus in the forests and fields, did not return home for several weeks. As Shabbos drew near, Rebbetzin Feige attempted to use her knowledge of Divine names to find her missing husband— but to no avail. At last, she fell asleep. In a dream, her mother, Rebbetzin Udel, appeared to her, accompanied by the Matriarchs Sarah, Rivkah, Rochel, and Leah. “Don’t worry,” they told her. “Your husband will be home for Shabbos.”

Then they guided her to the heavenly “Chamber of Souls,” where she beheld the resplendent soul of the Baal Shem Tov. Walking on, she was shown an even more luminous soul.

“Who is that?” she asked.

“This soul will be given to you,” they replied.

Returning home, she found that her husband had already arrived, safe and sound.

"What happened?" she asked.

"It was getting close to Shabbos, and I was lost in the woods, far from home," he explained. "Then, suddenly I found myself here in Medzhibuzh!" Rebbetzin Feige went to the mikveh that night, and conceived the child whose soul she had already seen: Rebbe Nachman (Until the Moshiach, pp. 324-325).

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Rabbi Simcha and Rebbetzin Feige were renowned for their hospitality. Disciples of the Maggid of Mezeritch and the Toldos Yaakov Yosef, as well as many simple good Jews, often traveled to Medzhibuzh to pray near the Baal Shem Tov's grave. They knew that they could always refresh themselves from their journey at the home of Rabbi Simcha and Rebbetzin Feige. Rebbe Nachman later remarked that the company of these worthy guests made a profound impression upon him as a child. The stories of tzaddikim they told entered his heart, and inspired him to strive for the spiritual heights (*Nevey Tzaddikim*, p. 12; *Sichos HaRan* 138)

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During the last year of her life, on Rosh Chodesh Elul 5560/1800, Rebbetzin Feige attended the wedding of Rebbe Nachman's daughter Udel to Rabbi Yoska, son of Rabbi Avraham Dov of Chmelnick. (The latter was a prominent disciple of the Maggid of Mezeritch and Rabbi Yaakov Yosef of Polonoye.) She mentioned that she saw the soul of the Baal Shem Tov at the *chupah* (wedding canopy) (Chayei Moharan 114). Some say that due to his mother's great spiritual merits, the Rebbe asked that his followers refer to him as "Nachman Ben Feige" in their prayers or when submitting *pidyonos* (requests for Heavenly intercession).

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Someone once asked Rebbe Nachman why the Baal Shem Tov held



his daughter, Rebbetzin Udel, in such high esteem. The Rebbe explained, "My great-grandfather greatly admired his daughter because all day long she went about with a heart full of yearning for G-d, and constantly asked herself, 'What can I do to please the One Above?'" (*Siach Sarfei Kodesh* 11, 1-72).

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Rebbe Nachman once said: "My daughters have *ru'ach hakodesh*, which is close to prophesy. And I'm not talking about Sarah at all!" (*Chayei Moharan* 583).

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In the winter of 5565 (1805), the Rebbe traveled to Medvedevka for "Shabbos Shirah (Beshalach)," as was his custom, in order to visit his Chasidim and to give a Torah lesson. At that time, his four-year-old daughter Chaya, who was then in Medvedevka, developed sties on both eyes and could barely see. Upon his arrival, the Rebbe was informed of her condition. He then gave the discourse, "And G-d led the people circuitously..." (Exodus 13:19), later published as *Likutey Moharan* 1I, 62. This lesson cites a teaching of the Zohar (Mishpatim, 95a) about a "beautiful maiden who has no eyes." Through this, his daughter was healed (*Chayei Moharan* 26).

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In the year 5565/1804, the Rebbe's daughter Miriam married Rabbi Pinchas Segal of Volochisk. The *Chasan* (bridegroom) was a son of Rabbi Leibush Segal, the Rav of Volochisk and a disciple of the Maggid of Mezeritch. On the Shabbos before the wedding (Parshas Noach, Rosh Chodesh Cheshvan), the Rebbe danced all day long. In *Chayei Moharan*, Rabbi Noson remarks that never did he see the Rebbe dance the way he danced that Shabbos.

The Rebbe drank a little wine, as is customary in celebrating a coming wedding. At one point, he supported himself on his

disciple, Rabbi Yudel, and continued to dance. They were singing a very beautiful and inspiring melody, which was one of awe. The Rebbe danced to this niggun. (Usually when he danced, it was to a niggun of inspiration and awe. According to tradition, this was the melody that Breslover Chasidim still sing for "*Rosh Chodesh bentchen*" / the blessing of the New Month.) The Rebbe also said that this melody is one of "calling and summoning"; it is used to call everyone to gather for the wedding ceremony. They were calling the souls of all the family's holy ancestors: the Baal Shem Tov, Rabbi Nachman Horodenker, and the Rebbe's mother, Rebbetzin Feige. As the Zohar states, the souls of departed relatives all gather together at a wedding (Pinchas, 219b, 220a).

During the Third Meal, the Rebbe sat with the entire company, and led the singing of "*Bnei Heichalah*." He remarked, "One who knows how to drink can atone for sins." Then he delivered a profound discourse on this subject, later published as Likutey Moharan I, 177 (*Chayei Moharan* 117).

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Rebbe Nachman's daughter Sarah married Rabbi Yitzchok Isaac, son of Rabbi Leib Dubrovner of Kremenchug. Although the Rebbe was already living in Breslov, the wedding took place in Medvedevka on Rosh Chodesh Nissan 5563/1803 (which was Rebbe Nachman's birthday). After ceremony they spoke about the Moshiach, and the Rebbe hinted that he would be one of the newly married couple's offspring.

On Shabbos Sheva Berachos, during the Third Meal, the Rebbe delivered the lofty discourse, "He set a tent for the sun in their midst" (Psalms 19:5), later published as Likutey Moharan 1, 49. (When the Rebbe first gave over this discourse in the presence of the bride and groom, he began with the last half of the verse: "And he will come forth like a bridegroom from his wedding canopy.") This lesson weaves together the concepts of Nissan, Sarah, Yitzchak, a bride, a wedding, Shabbos, and

the Moshiach.

Rebbe Nachman danced at great length before his daughter Sarah. In praise of the Rebbe's dancing, Reb Noson states: "Whoever did not witness his dancing never beheld goodness in his life. Although many tzaddikim have fulfilled the mitzvah of 'dancing before the bride,' the Rebbe's dancing was beyond compare. Everyone present surely was moved to genuine repentance for all his sins" (*Yemei Moharnat* 3; *Chayei Moharan* 116).

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Once the Rebbe wrote a letter to his daughter Sarah expressing his great love and affection, and saying how he longed to have her at his table, so that he could gladden himself with her company each day, and receive wisdom and fear of Heaven from her words. He concluded, "You are like a myrtle in the wilderness that has no one to appreciate its pleasant fragrance"

A number of the Rebbe's followers were present when Sarah received this letter. One of them told Rabbi Noson that after she read it, she broke down and began to cry in front of them, saying, "I must have fallen to a very low level for my father to praise me so much to my face." For the Rebbe would praise a person to his face if he felt that the person had fallen from his previous level and needed encouragement (*Chayei Moharan* 581, 582).

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Sarah was often ill. Her suffering deeply pained the Rebbe, who often spoke of it. Once the Rebbe came to visit, and found her greatly distressed by a toothache. "Even if it is difficult, you must force yourself to be happy," the Rebbe told her. Then he explained that by vividly imagining being joyous, she could come to experience true joy—so much so that she would want to dance. Through this, she would be cured.

Sarah took her father's advice to heart. Closing the shutters of her house, she began to dance. Before long, the pain had disappeared (Until the Moshiach, p. 334).

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Another time when Sarah was ill, Rebbe Nachman suggested that she picture herself as better off now than before she fell sick. This, too, seemed impossible to Sarah, whose anguish gave her no peace. Still, the Rebbe asked her to follow his instructions. "The power of thought is very great," he explained. "By thinking positively, you can actually turn your situation to the good" (also see *Sichos HaRan* 62, 74) (Until the Moshiach, p. 334).

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On yet another occasion, the Rebbe came to visit Sarah, only to find her bedridden and in agony. Rebbe Nachman listened intently to the details of her sickness, sharing her grief. Then he fell asleep. His great-grandfather, the Baal Shem Tov, appeared to him in a dream and told him not to worry. He quoted the verse, "Great deliverance He gives to His king, and shows steadfast love to His anointed one— to David and his seed forever" (Psalms 18:51). The Rebbe understood this to mean that Sarah's illness could be cured by telling her a story about an act of deliverance that G-d had performed for a tzaddik. Upon awakening, the Rebbe sat beside his daughter, and told an awesome story about the Maharsha (Rabbi Shmuel Eliezer Eidels, 1555-1622, author of a famous commentary on the narrative portions of the Talmud). As soon as he finished the story, Sarah arose from her bed, having recovered completely. Subsequently, she told the same story to other sick people, and they, too, returned to health (also cf. *Likutey Moharan* I, 234; *Sichos HaRan* 138) (Until the Moshiach, p. 334).

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Sarah's son Yisrael was born while Rebbe Nachman was visiting Kremenchug. The Rebbe waited for several weeks until his daughter gave birth. His solemn demeanor throughout this time betrayed his constant anxiety for the well-being of his daughter and the unborn child. However, after the birth he became extremely happy, asking that all the lights be lit and a punch of wine and honey be served. On the eighth day, the child was circumcised, and the Rebbe remained elated all day long. It pleased him that several people mentioned to him that the child had the same name as the Baal Shem Tov: Yisrael ben Sarah (*Yemei Moharnat* 17; *Chayei Moharan* 151).

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When the Rebbe was severely ill, he asked Sarah's three or four year old son, Yisrael, to pray for him. The little boy replied, "Give me your watch, and I will pray for you!" At this, the Rebbe said, "You see, he's already a Rebbe, because he tells me to give him something in order for him to pray!" The Rebbe then gave him his watch. The little boy took it, went aside, and began to cry, "G-d! G-d! Let my Zeideh (grandfather) be well!" The people standing nearby found this humorous. However, the Rebbe said, "This is how we must entreat G-d. What other way is there to pray?" That is, we must pray to G-d with the greatest simplicity, like a child before his father, or a person speaking to his best friend (*Chayei Moharan* 439).

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Rebbe Nachman said: "As to what will become of me, I have no idea. But this much I have achieved with the Almighty: our righteous Moshiach will be one of my descendants." The Rebbe said this publicly. He asked that we honor and respect his daughters, because they were "precious trees that would give forth rare and goodly fruits." He also said that he had taken his children from the World of Atzilus (Divine Emanation)—the highest spiritual level (*Chayei Moharan* 279; *Yemei Moharnat* 17).

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The Rebbe's attendant, Reb Shimon, came to ask his master to intercede in Heaven for his infant son, who was deathly ill. Rebbe Nachman, however, did not respond. Forlorn and without hope, Reb Shimon returned home. His wife understood the implications of the Rebbe's silence. Yet instead of yielding to despair, she sat at the infant's crib throughout the night, praying tearfully for the life of her child.

The next morning, when the Rebbe saw Reb Shimon, he exclaimed: "Look at the great power of prayer: Last night the decree had been sealed. But because of your wife's prayers, not only will your son recover, but he has been granted long life." And, indeed, Reb Shimon's son lived to be nearly one hundred years old (Avanehah Barzel 60, p. 39; also cf. Siach Sarfei Kodesh 2, 1-100).

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A follower of Rebbe Nachman once asked how he might strengthen his emunah. The Rebbe replied, "We can learn to have emunah from the women" (oral tradition heard from Rabbi Nasan Maimon).

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