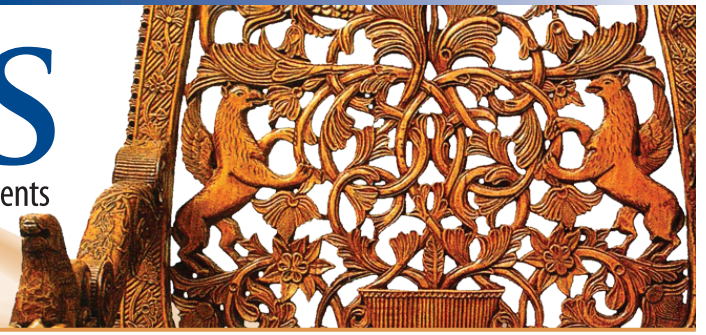


# PATHWAYS

Crossing the Narrow Bridge with Rebbe Nachman and His Students

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## Count Me In!

By Yossi Katz

**THE THREE MOST** frightening letters in the English language are I-R-S. Soon it will be “that time of year” again. The tax-return strategy I’ve heard whispered about most often is: “Keep out of trouble, don’t raise any red flags, and try to blend in.”

What does this have to do with our *parashah*? Rashi explains that if the Jewish people need to be counted, the best way to go about it is to have each Jew donate a half-shekel, and tally up the coins. Counting the Jews directly can be calamitous, because singling out individual Jews risks subjugating them to the evil eye. God therefore commanded the Jews to be counted via the half-shekel (see Rashi on Exodus 30:12).

If we know that counting the Jews is a bad idea, why bother? If Jewish unity is such a great, protective force, why not stick together and keep out of trouble? The answer is that inasmuch as the Jewish people are one, every Jew is unique. Every Jew counts! We are all given individual tasks in this world. (These are often represented by the things we struggle with; we were brought to this world specifically to improve in these areas.)

This is why each of us has our own name. A Jewish name alludes to the areas in which we have the potential to excel. According to the Arizal, the name that parents give their child in this world is the name by which God in the upper worlds calls that child’s soul (see *Sha’ar HaGilgulim*, Introduction #23).

One of the greatest spiritual dangers we face is when we compare ourselves to others. Although we’re taught to see the good in our friends, and to emulate their good behavior, we also have to realize that we’re not them!

It’s great to be inspired by others, but that inspiration should be used to encourage us to deal with our own challenges, not to copy others.

At their source, all Jews are aflame in their desire for Godliness. The reason we struggle to connect to God is not because of lack of interest, but because we want too much to connect. We often think, “If I can’t achieve such and such a level, or do a mitzvah in a certain perfect kind of way, why bother?” Acknowledging that we each have a unique mission and purpose, and that this is specifically why we can’t do things perfectly, we can finally begin to serve and connect to God.

In the Mishkan (and later the Beit HaMikdash), it was possible for each Jew to gather together as one but to remain their unique selves. The Mishnah records a wondrous event that regularly took place in the Beit HaMikdash. Although the Jews stood tightly pressed together, they were able to bow down with ample space between them (*Avot* 5:5). Thus, each person could recite his own confession without his friend hearing it (*Vayikra Rabbah* 10:9).

This is why the Jews were commanded to count themselves using half-shekel coins, which were donated for the upkeep of the Mishkan. A “shekel” can be translated as a “measure.” Yes, we stand together as one Jewish people, but our greatness can never be counted unless we each take full measure of our own unique qualities and mission.

*Based on Likutey Halakhot, Tefillat Minchah 7:14*

# An Otherworldly Contract

By Chaim Kramer

ONCE RABBI LEVI YITZCHAK of Berdichov went traveling to collect money to marry off an orphan girl. He came to an inn where a group of sinners were playing cards. When Rabbi Levi Yitzchak asked them for charity to help the young bride, they began mocking him and asking what they would get in reward for the mitzvah.

“*Olam Haba* – the World to Come!” he replied.

One man in particular was very derisive and said, “I have no place waiting for me there, anyway!” Then, to add insult to injury, he told Rabbi Levi Yitzchak, “But I will give you all the money you need for her dowry if you sell me your *Olam Haba*!”

Rabbi Levi Yitzchak immediately jumped at the opportunity and wrote out a contract. The surprised man agreed and signed, giving the rabbi all the money needed to make the wedding.

When the man returned home, he began laughing at what he considered a silly transaction. His wife asked him what had happened, and when he told her, she became livid. “Your *Olam Haba*?” she screamed. “What little you may have, you *sold* it?” After a heated argument, she forced her husband, much against his will, to return to Rabbi Levi Yitzchak and ask him to cancel the contract.

Rabbi Levi Yitzchak, of course, refused at first. The man pleaded, but Rabbi Levi Yitzchak kept on refusing. Finally the man begged, “You can keep all the money, but please, please, give me back my portion in the World to Come!” Rabbi Levi Yitzchak then agreed.

With the contract annulled, the man asked Rabbi Levi Yitzchak how much of a portion he, the man, had in the future world. Rabbi Levi Yitzchak replied, “When you first sold me your portion, it truly was not worth very much at all. But now that you’ve donated that sum to marry off an orphan girl, your portion is very, very great indeed!”

*From “More Blessed to Give: Rebbe Nachman on Charity”*

## SIDEPATH

Advice (*Likutey Etzot*) translated by Avraham Greenbaum

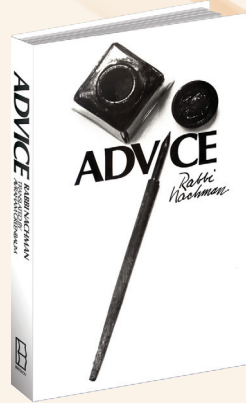
**AWE AND DEVOTION.** 4. Attaining true fear and love of God is possible only with the help of the tzaddikim of the generation (*Likutey Moharan I*, 17:1).

5. Fear of Heaven is the foundation for sanctifying the way one speaks and using the Holy Tongue perfectly.

But to reach this level of fear, it is necessary to journey to the tzaddik in order to hear words of truth directly from his lips. It is not enough to study mussar literature – works giving guidance about spiritual development. When a person hears a tzaddik, the actual words of the tzaddik possess a quality of perfection. They are uttered with true fear of Heaven, and this is the

foundation for the fulfillment of the covenant and achieving moral purity. Even if a person hears what the tzaddik said from the lips of someone else who himself heard the tzaddik say them, it still does not help as much, because the words have descended from their original perfection. In order for the words of the Holy Tongue to possess perfection, they must be heard from the lips of the tzaddik himself (*ibid. I*, 19:3, 9).

6. Having a sense of shame is the basis for attaining fear of Heaven. One must feel ashamed before God – so ashamed that one could not possibly sin. To have a sense of shame is a very high level (*ibid. I*, 22).



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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.*