

Rebbe Nachman

This Land is My Land

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It was his last summer and he knew it. The fresh air, the spacious gardens, the daily strolls in the city's outskirts, all would soon cease. Having contracted tuberculosis two and a half years earlier, every day of life was treasured as a miracle unto itself.

Rebbe Nachman had just moved to the house in which, two months later, he would breathe his last. As was customary, his followers joined him for Shabbat Nachamu ("Shabbat of Consolation"), which follows the fast of Tisha b'Av (the Ninth of Av, the day which marks the destruction of the Holy Temple). Rebbe Nachman was very weak that Friday evening and scarcely had strength to speak. Facing his followers, he said:

"Why do you come to see me? Don't you realize I know nothing at all now? At this point I am just an ordinary person! The only thing that inspires me is the fact that I have merited being in the Holy Land."

After repeating this theme several times, Rebbe Nachman proceeded to give a most beautiful lesson, expounding upon simplicity, the Holy Land and how Godliness permeates every facet of existence. Even if someone is unworthy, God is there for him, ready to reveal to him the deepest mysteries of Creation. This is because God has a Treasury of Unearned Gifts that sustains the entire world, even those people who are most distant from Him: there is always hope.

Rebbe Nachman's body was racked with pain, his breathing was laborious and he sometimes coughed up blood. He knew he was dying. Yet this lesson became a powerful source of inspiration even to the Rebbe himself. Out of his pain and suffering, in one of his darkest moments, Rebbe Nachman issued one of the most important messages of all times:

"Gevalt! Never despair! There is never a reason for despair!" (see Rabbi Nachman's Wisdom #153).

The Jewish calendar is replete with festivals and days of joy, as well as with days of mourning. One period of mourning is "The Three Weeks," which begins on the 17th of Tammuz, the day the wall of Jerusalem was breached by the Roman army 1933 years ago and culminate on Tisha b'Av, the day on which the actual destruction of the Holy Temple, and our exile, began. To commemorate these weeks of calamity, various laws and customs of mourning are enacted and several biblical excerpts of rebuke are read, as a reminder that there is much room for improvement in our lives.

But our Sages teach that suffering is not eternal, that hope is always waiting in the wings. This optimistic approach is built into the Jewish calendar; thus immediately after Tisha b'Av begins a seven-week period of consolation. During this time, the famous passages of consolation found in the book of Isaiah are read each week, to comfort the Jews and to encourage them to look forward to their return to their Land, and to a better and brighter future. On the Shabbat following Tisha b'Av, the weekly Torah portion is Va'Etchanan (Deuteronomy 3:23-7:11). That Shabbat is also known as Shabbat Nachamu, because the haftarah read that morning is, "Nachamu! Nachamu! Ami... -- Be consoled! Be consoled! My nation..." (From Isaiah 40:1).

It was customary for his followers to gather with Rebbe Nachman for Shabbat Nachamu. Throughout his years as a chassidic master in Breslov, and in his final year in Uman (where he passed away and is interred), Rebbe Nachman's disciples came from far and wide to hear his Torah teachings and to bask in his light on this Shabbat. Following the three weeks of pain and mourning, what could be more meaningful than to recharge one's spiritual batteries with hope - drawn from the very source of Creation, from the Torah itself!

However, in his last year (August 1810), the Rebbe was so ill and weak that his life seemed to mirror more the sufferings of “The Three Weeks” than the harbinger of hope and consolation. When his followers assembled for their yearly gathering, Rebbe Nachman spoke of his fragile condition. Indeed, he was so broken that he said to them, “Why do you come to see me? Don't you realize I know nothing at all now? At this point I am just an ordinary person! The only thing that inspires me is the fact that I have merited being in the Holy Land.”

Rebbe Nachman's words may seem at first glance to be a shocking complaint. The Rebbe, despite his terminal illness, was certainly aware of his astounding success, both in achieving great spiritual heights for himself and in preparing the legacy he was to leave behind. Was it pain or melancholy that moved him to make this statement?

In fact, it was neither. When we study the following (abridged) lesson we understand that this introductory comment serves as its outline. It alludes to the tzaddik; the need for Torah study; the fact that everybody, even a tzaddik, has ups and downs; the Holy Land and the need to draw upon the Treasury of Unearned Gifts in order to merit to the Land.

“Va'Etchanan -- I pleaded to God at that time...” (Deuteronomy 3:23).

The term “Va'Etchanan” denotes that Moses pleaded with God to give him an unearned gift. Even though the righteous possess many merits of their own, they always plead with God to provide an answer to their prayers from His Treasury of Unearned Gifts. (Rashi, loc. cit.).

It was the time ordained for Moses' death. Denied entry into the Holy Land, he persisted in pleading and begging that God annul His oath and allow him to enter the Land. Although Moses was a truly righteous man, rather than enumerating his many good deeds and his untiring self-sacrifice for the Jewish Nation, he pleaded with God to grant him an unearned gift from His Treasury. Moses thus opened his prayer with the word “Va'Etchanan” -- indicating that he was seeking salvation from God's Treasury of Unearned Gifts in order to enter the Land.

Rebbe Nachman taught:

The verse states “For it is your life and the length of your days...” telling us that the Torah is our very life. Whoever distances himself from Torah distances himself from life. This idea is rooted in the Midrash which states that, prior to creating the world, God created the Torah. He then used the Torah as a “blueprint” for the creation of the universe and everything in it. The Torah thus represents the vitality of life for the Torah existed before Creation and continually sustains the world -- since all that transpires in this world can be found in some form in its blueprint. Human life as well, though of relatively short duration, is also sustained by the Torah, as the verse tells us, “it is your life...” Based on the understanding that the Torah is the essence of life itself, Rebbe Nachman poses the following question:

How can anyone possibly separate himself from Torah for even a moment? Yet it is literally impossible to be attached to Torah continually, day and night, without any interruption. Even the most diligent and devoted students of Torah must stop their studies, if only for a few moments, while they tend to their livelihoods and their other physical needs -- one must eat, one must sleep, etc. Nevertheless, Torah is life. Tending to one's material needs is tantamount to rejecting life itself. How can one separate oneself from life even for a second? Furthermore, even if one must distance oneself for a short time, who would choose to abandon Torah if only for a few moments, when in doing so one is knowingly discarding the chance to be attached to life? Since one cannot remain attached to Torah the entire time, from where does a person draw life during that time when he is distant from Torah? The answer is that while a person -- any person -- is involved in the mundane occupations of life and is thus unattached to the Torah, he becomes an “ordinary person.”

The concept of the ordinary person applies to everyone. A person could be a dedicated Torah scholar; he could be a part-time student and work part time; he might work a full day, or in other ways fill his day with anything but Torah; he could be one who denies Torah and he might even be a gentile, of the nations who never received the Torah. No matter who the person is, he must receive his life and life force from the Torah, for “it is your life.” The problem is that everyone, even the greatest tzaddik, must interrupt his studies to tend to his material needs. At that moment of interruption he is blocking his connection to life. How much more does this apply to those who have never had the opportunity to study Torah, or to those who don't even want to study it, or even to those who reject it...? There must be some type of “interface” by which an ordinary person can always be attached to Torah, even if indirectly, because without Torah a person would be cut off from life itself.

A very great tzaddik serves as this “interface” for all of humanity. For the tzaddik is always, on some level, attached to Torah, even when tending to his material needs. When he is involved in his mundane affairs, the tzaddik receives his vitality from the Torah in a concealed form. When he must interrupt his Torah study, he also becomes an “ordinary person,” but he remains intrinsically bound up with the Torah in a concealed manner. In this same concealed manner, those who are distant from Torah can also receive their vitality. But as they are distant from Torah to begin with, it is very difficult for them to receive their vitality directly from the Torah. The tzaddik is always attached to Torah, but at the same time he may become an “ordinary person.” He therefore acts as a channel: the ordinary people can receive their vitality through him, for he can “interface” both with the Torah and with them.

The Treasury of Unearned Gifts

The Talmud teaches that the world was created for the sake of the Torah. Logically then, the Torah should have been given at the moment the world was created. Yet we find that the Revelation at Sinai did not occur until the time of Moses, twenty-six generations after the world was created. The Torah is life, and yet it was not available to mankind until the twenty-sixth generation. What sustained the world until then? The answer is that in the early generations the world was sustained not by Torah merit, but through the Chesed (Lovingkindness) of God (see Pesachim 118a). That is, though Torah is the vitality of life, there is a concealed level of Torah, the Lovingkindness of God, that extends that vitality when Torah is concealed. The Rebbe now explains why this is so.

Every ordinary person -- whether he be a Torah scholar who momentarily refrains from Torah study or any other ordinary person -- based on the degree to which he is attached to the Torah, receives his vitality from that same lovingkindness of God which sustained the world prior to the Giving of the Torah at Sinai. Receiving one's vitality through that lovingkindness is tantamount to receiving from the Treasury of Unearned Gifts.

For there is indeed a Treasury of Unearned Gifts from which anyone who is lacking merit can receive a gift. But that Treasury is certainly not available to the wicked for, if it were, the very fact of their receiving a gift, notwithstanding their unworthiness, would make them appear more meritorious than the righteous [who had to earn their reward]. Thus the wicked certainly cannot benefit directly from that Treasury. Instead, the Treasury of Unearned Gifts is reserved for the tzaddik -- when he becomes an “ordinary person.” (And the general populace of ordinary people, including the wicked, receive their vitality from the Treasury of Unearned Gifts, through the tzaddik.)

This concept relates to the spiritual sustenance of the early generations of the world. At that time, the Torah had not yet been given and so people could not have been involved in its fulfillment. Instead, the inhabitants of the world were engaged in derekh erez (literally “the way of the land,” referring to the building of the world, trade and commerce, etc.). Our Sages teach that “Great is derekh erez, for it preceded the Torah by twenty-six generations.” Interaction between people, accompanied by respect and courtesy, is a manifestation of kindness, comparable to that Lovingkindness which God bestowed upon the world during that time when He sustained it even without Torah. That life support was a gift from God, a gift from His Treasury of Unearned Gifts. In the same way, one who is currently distant from Torah receives his vitality from that same source.

Some questions are begging to be answered at this point. Isn't it the Torah that sustains us? If Torah is life and without it one is distant from life, how then, practically speaking, were the early generations sustained? Who drew from the Treasury then for all those “ordinary people?” How is the Treasury available to us, the “ordinary people” of today? Rebbe Nachman continues: The world was created with “Ten Sayings” which correspond to the Ten Commandments, which in turn include the entire Torah. We find, therefore, that the essence of the Torah was present in the world from its inception, albeit in a concealed form. This concealed Torah corresponds to the Treasury of Unearned Gifts, and it is this that sustained the world prior to the Revelation.

The Talmud points out that the words “And God said” appear nine times in the account of Creation and it is these “sayings” which brought the entire world into being. But our Sages tell us that there were actually “Ten Sayings” with which God created the world. The Talmud resolves this contradiction with the explanation that the word “Bereishit” (“In the beginning”) is a “concealed saying.” That is, although we do not find the words “And God said” before the mention of the initial act of Creation, nevertheless, since all Creation came about through “sayings,” Bereishit is also reckoned a “saying.” Thus the Torah, which corresponds to the Ten Sayings through which Creation took place, did indeed exist in the world from the moment of Creation. But the Torah that was present at that time corresponds to the “concealed saying,” hence that Torah is the “concealed Torah”; that is, it was present in every aspect of life, but it was

concealed. We see then that the concealed Torah was found everywhere within the activities of derekh erez that were taking place then -- in everyone's work, in all their deeds, in every aspect of their lives -- in order to sustain life. This was God's gift to the world from His Treasury of Unearned Gifts; it was the means by which the world was sustained even when people were unable to apply Torah to their own lives.

The same principle is true today as well, although we already have received and possess the Torah. Through the Treasury of Unearned Gifts, which emanates from the Lovingkindness of God, a person can receive vitality even though he may be distant from the Source of Life. However, it is only the tzaddik who, even in the most trying of times and circumstances, can remain constantly attached to the Torah. This tzaddik is able to experience Torah even in its concealed form, hidden within derekh erez, in the countless mundane circumstances of life. This is because the tzaddik always prays that God grant him favor from His Treasury of Unearned Gifts. Through his prayers, the tzaddik merits that Treasury, and can experience God's Lovingkindness, which sustains life even when one is distant from Torah. Therefore, the more a person attaches himself to the tzaddik (through studying his teachings and following his advice), the greater is the degree of sustenance and life which he can draw, through the tzaddik, from the Treasury of Unearned Gifts.

The Holy Land

Rebbe Nachman then explores further the idea of the Treasury of Unearned Gifts as it parallels the concept of the Holy Land: When the tzaddik is on the level of an ordinary person, he draws his vitality from the derekh erez which, Rebbe Nachman explains, is the path (the "derekh" to the Land "erez," i.e., the Holy Land).

The essential sanctity of the Holy Land is rooted in the Act of Creation. The Torah begins with the account of Creation to show that God created everything and that the Land is His, to give to whomever He desires. If the nations of the world claim that the Holy Land is theirs, the Jews can point to the Act of Creation; the world is God's and by His Divine Will He gave the Holy Land to the Jews.

The sanctity of the Holy Land stems from the fact that God incorporated within Creation the intention and the potential for the Jews to conquer the Holy Land, thereby revealing His Kingdom. In this sense, the sanctity of the Holy Land is rooted in the "Ten Sayings," in the Concealed Torah, and in the derekh erez -- all of which are facets of the Treasury of Unearned Gifts which sustains life when people are not connected to Torah. Thus, the derekh erez in which is concealed the Treasury of Unearned Gifts also refers to "derekh to Eretz," the pathway to the Land, the Holy Land.

After imparting this lesson, Rebbe Nachman began to speak freely with his followers about some of the concepts presented. He spoke about ordinary people -- those who are overly busy with their livelihoods; and he spoke about those who do not know how to study Torah. He also spoke of those who are very distant from God, those who are engulfed in the quagmire of materialism. He alluded to himself, who was physically broken, and to others like himself; and he also discussed those who feel lost, emotionally haunted or spiritually starved. And he said:

"Never despair! There is always hope!" "Despair does not exist!"

The Rebbe then explained that the Treasury of Unearned Gifts, the concealed Torah which sustained the world when the Torah was not yet formally revealed, is always present in this world. It is always available to us through the tzaddik who draws upon that Treasury of Unearned Gifts to sustain all those multitudes who fall into the broad category of "common, ordinary people." No matter how low a person has descended, even if he has fallen to the lowest depths of existence where despondency and despair overwhelm him, he must remember: "Despair does not exist!" He can draw strength and inspiration, for since there is no such thing as despair, there is always hope! "Never despair!" For even in the darkest moments of life, the concealed Torah is always present to sustain a person. One can always draw upon God's limitless Treasury. The Rebbe then spoke about the great value of simplicity -- for the Treasury of Unearned Gifts is manifest only through the straightforwardness of the ordinary person. Generally, people tend to rationalize their lives, behavior and attitudes, citing various sophisticated ideas, and these "paths of thought" have complicated their lives. Sophisticated philosophies have too many "intersections," and they all too often mislead people; when caught in a web, people can rarely see or sense the correct, direct path out of their difficulties. The Rebbe always advised people to steer clear of sophisticated lifestyles, for they are convoluted paths. It is better to seek simple, straightforward paths, the path of the "ordinary person," the path of hope, the path from which one can always draw upon the Treasury of Unearned Gifts. Rebbe Nachman concluded his lesson with the verse, "Fortunate is he who walks in the path of

simplicity.” This Treasury is there for the asking. It is there for the one who pleads, “Va’Etchanan<M> -- I plead to You, God. Grant me a gift from Your Treasury of Unearned Gifts” (Likutey Moharan II, 78).

As we have just seen, the Holy Land and the Treasury of Unearned Gifts are basically the same concept. The Land is ours, it is a gift from God to us. What we need to do to attain and retain the Land is adopt the simple, straightforward approach -- simply stated, “This Land is My Land.” We might all be only ordinary, common people, but we most certainly can draw upon the greatest strength and Treasury that exists -- the Gift of God. Despite all the sophisticated physical warfare and media presentations that imply exasperation and total frustration of the situation in the Holy Land, Rebbe Nachman’s rallying cry, “Never despair!” “There is always hope!” “Despair does not exist!” rings with a greater truth than all the other forces combined. We need but rely upon His Treasury to witness the derekh to the Eretz open up before us (much as the earlier Jews witnessed the Splitting of the Sea). Speedily, in our days, Amen.