

# PATHWAYS

Crossing the Narrow Bridge with Rebbe Nachman and His Students

PARASHAT VAEIRA • 5776 • VOL. 6 NO. 12

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## “Fear” No Evil

By Yossi Katz

**ONE OF THE** most misunderstood and potentially harmful emotions is fear of God. Like everything else in the world, fear is not some unfortunate feeling, but a creation of God. The opening word of Creation, *BeReiShYT* (In the beginning) (Genesis 1:1) is an acronym for *YaREi BoSheT* (fear-humility). The purpose of Creation, says the Zohar, is for man to humble himself and appreciate God’s awesomeness by means of fear.

But when many people think of fear of God, they conjure up a vision of dark angels smacking the living daylights out of them for some misdoing. That idea is simply misplaced. True, there is punishment in store for our misdeeds; however, the punishment itself is a cleansing process for the soul and essential for our eternal life. Fear is a reminder that God has created us for a specific purpose – it’s a wakeup call to stay focused on the task at hand in order to achieve greatness.

I recently read the account of a popular Rabbi’s journey to becoming a Breslover. He describes growing up in the house of a great Tzaddik and always wanting to thrive and grow, but he was stunted by personal shortcomings. His thirst for spiritual accomplishment was so great that, at one point, he contemplated suicide. Fortunately, he came across a letter that Reb Noson had written to his own son, Reb Yitzchok:

*Pay no attention to any feelings of discouragement, and do not listen to the criticism of the Evil One and the Other Side who give reproof only in order to dishearten you and distance you from that little bit of good that you are trying to hold on to. ... A person must listen to criticism and rebuke only if it draws him closer, not if it pushes him away. I have often spoken to you about the*

*intention of the mussar literature that so harshly rebukes and belittles the reader. It is not trying to distance a person from God, but seeks to draw him closer. ...*

*A person’s every thought, word and deed has two aspects and can be an elixir of life or a deadly poison. ... You must be very careful, because much of the time [the Evil One] takes the words of the Living God and turns them upside-down and actually tries to repel and dishearten a person with them, God forbid (Alim LiTerufah, Letter #27).*

This can also be seen in our *parashah*. All the miracles and wonders that God performed in Egypt were meant to demonstrate to the world that He is in charge. Pharaoh, however, refused to recognize God. God responded by saying, “But regarding you and your servants, I know that you do not yet fear God” (Exodus 9:30). When Pharaoh finally did allow the Jewish people to leave, he pursued them to the Sea of Reeds, where God sent him to his untimely end.

The Jewish people witnessed these same awesome miracles and had a completely different reaction: “Israel saw the tremendous power that God wielded against Egypt, and the people feared God” (ibid., 14:31).

Rebbe Nachman teaches that the whole world is a very narrow bridge – but the main thing is not to make oneself afraid at all. We each experience scares in life and often live with much fear and anxiety. It is within our reach to transfer those negative feelings to a place of faith and recognition of God’s sovereignty. When we live with the constant recognition that God is in charge and that whatever He does is for our best, we are able to elevate our fears, transforming them into a positive life of purpose and meaning. Amen.

*Based on Likutey Halakhot, Hilkhos Bekhor Beheimah Tehorah 4:3*

# Enveloped in Prayer

By Yehudis Golshevsky

**REBBE NACHMAN ONCE** took one of his close students with him for an early-morning prayer session out in the field. When they reached the entry point to an old volcanic cavern half-hidden among the brush, he gestured that they should enter and do their *hitbodedut* within the deep chamber.

As soon as they squeezed into the space, Rebbe Nachman sat down on the ground and took out his small *Shaarey Tzion* prayer book, which was dearly beloved to him. It was filled with numerous additional prayers for all kinds of events and situations, which he loved to return to again and again. Rebbe Nachman began to weep over the holy words, and his student could occasionally hear his master's sighs and moans.

The disciple was rooted to the spot; Rebbe Nachman's prayers were filled with deep emotion, and it was clear that he was so absorbed in his prayer that he had forgotten about the other man's presence entirely. Hour followed hour, and Rebbe Nachman continued his devotions as though the world outside had ceased to exist. The student sat quietly to the side, enraptured.

The day had flown by when Rebbe Nachman suddenly looked up and said, "Please go outside to check the time." He thought it must be time to pray the afternoon service. To the student's surprise, the sun hadn't merely passed high noon – it was about to set! The shadows of twilight were already gathering across the fields. An entire day had passed...and neither had felt the time at all. Such was the nature of Rebbe Nachman's prayer.

\* \* \*

Rebbe Nachman once made a gift of one of his old *tallitim* to a dear student of his. As he handed the folded fabric to his disciple, Rebbe Nachman said, "May sure to take good care of this *tallit* that I'm giving you—I hope that you'll value it in accordance with its true worth. Because I tell you truly that I shed more tears begging God that I'll be worthy of grasping the essence and meaning of a *tallit* than there are threads in it!"

This anecdote confirms another statement that Rebbe Nachman made about himself: that every spiritual accomplishment he achieved came to fruition only after he poured out endless tears and prayers to God for help.

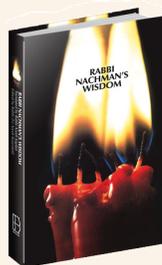
*Based on Or HaOrot I, pp. 103-104*

## SIDEPATH

*Rabbi Nachman's Wisdom translated by R. Aryeh Kaplan, zt"l*

307. Every year, people say that previous years were better and times are not as good as they were before.

The Rebbe spoke to us about this at length. He said that people might say that things were much cheaper in the good old days, but then again, people did not have as much money as they have now. A simple householder, even one living off charity, spends more today than the wealthy of yesteryear. He said, "The opposite is true. God now directs the world better than ever."



308. All this talk about the good old days is the work of the evil inclination. It wants people to speak like this to make them suffer and worry all the more about their livelihoods. It would like to make them feel that there is no

hope at all now, Heaven forbid.

This is all false. God continuously sustains the world, and people rise and fall financially in every generation. If you look carefully at any period, you will find people who were poor and had menial jobs who became wealthy. Yet they, too, claim that times are not as good as before – because they always want more. Now that they have tasted wealth, they are no longer satisfied and want more all the time. They now live ostentatiously and cannot meet their expenses, so they complain that times are not as good as before.



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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.*