

PATHWAYS

Crossing the Narrow Bridge with Rebbe Nachman and His Students

PARASHAT BEHAALOTEKHA • 5776 • VOL. 6 NO. 35

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Who Goes First?

By Yossi Katz

HAVE YOU EVER heard someone say, “Nobody goes to that restaurant; it’s too crowded.” Or, “Don’t go near the water till you’ve learned how to swim.” While these may be cute sound bites, what would you say after comparing the following two verses?

God says, “Return to me, and I will return to you” (Malachi 3:7). We say back, “Return to us, and we will return to you” (Lamentations 5:21). There seems to be a misunderstanding about who goes first. This may even be problematic, considering that we want to be reunited with our Creator.

This is not just a theological problem. It’s actually our constant experience, and something that if we can’t make peace with it, it will forever stunt our spiritual growth. Similarly, our *parashah* describes the creation and lighting of the Menorah. God tells Moses that the Menorah should be “hammered work of gold, from its base to its flower” (Numbers 8:4). This meant that the form of the Menorah had to be carved out of a single piece of gold. This whole process was very perplexing to Moses, so he turned to God. God said, “Throw the gold into the fire and the Menorah will emerge” (*Bamidbar Rabbah* 15:4).

When it came time to light the Menorah in the Holy Temple, the western light would still be miraculously aflame since the previous night. The Kohanim would use the western light to kindle the other lamps, and only then would they extinguish and rekindle the western light (*Menachot* 86b).

The entire episode of the Menorah is very difficult to understand. God asks that it be constructed in a

superhuman way and Moses is basically forced to ask God to create it. Next, the Menorah is kindled in a miraculous way. So why was God involving us in the first place? Why didn’t He just create and light the Menorah miraculously?

We have the same question about life itself. We want to serve God, we want to create a strong relationship with Him, but we have issues and are stuck in many ways. We want to scream out, “If everything is from You anyhow, then please take me out of here!” But God answers back, “Return to me, and I will return to you.” Yet we are stuck. We need His help. We can’t do it without Him, so what does He expect of us?

He expects us to grab the western light that He lit, and use it to light the other lamps. He wants us to throw the gold into a fire and watch a Menorah emerge. True, He is standing behind creation and our every experience, but He endowed us with the mission of grabbing the flame and spreading the light, of grabbing our innermost desires and expressing the words to convey that every aspect of our life is a manifestation of His desire.

There is no contradiction between these verses. Much like the western light, it is always God who begins and God who ends. We lack the inner strength and power to do anything on our own or to truly get out of our troubles, but that is not what God expects. His sole desire is for us to realize our shortcomings, problems and issues, and connect those to Him. To live with the consciousness that everything we experience is an opportunity to turn to Him and share our deepest yearning for Him. And as we return to Him, we become conscious of Him, so that He simultaneously returns to us. We have returned in unity to our Creator. Amen.

Based on Likutey Halakhot, Hilkhot Kriat Shema 5

Steer Clear!

By Yehudis Golshevsky

WHEN BRESLOVER CHASSIDIM would find one of their number on the margins of a conflict or controversy, they would offer gentle rebuke to discourage the friend from getting involved. “Rebbe Nachman once said, ‘In the ultimate future, there will be kings and leaders of nations who will want to avoid fighting any wars. All they wish for is peace and tranquility. They will not be able to do this, however. They will be grabbed by the hairs of their head and forced to fight against their will!’”

The same holds true for every conflict. Even though many people prefer peace, each side feels the need to convince others to join the fray, arguing endlessly until they feel they have convinced the wretched person to endorse their side. They desperately want to rope even the most passive person into their disagreement. We all need to keep this in mind and avoid taking sides in any argument, ignoring whatever pressures one may have to bear.

The chassidim would continue, “You might wonder how to steer clear of dispute. The answer is to simply flee the scene of the conflict! If you can’t run away, be careful to never express an opinion that seems to take one side over the other. Doing so can cause endless, unnecessary slander and heartache. It is so easy to take sides and become part of a dispute which really has nothing to do with you!”

Breslover chassidim were no strangers to opposition, so it seems difficult to understand how they managed against their opponents without arguing. Earlier chassidim laid out a general plan for dealing with those times when one’s commitment to the Rebbe’s path is under attack: “Unless you are certain that your words will make a positive impression, it is better to remain silent in the face of adversity. Better to swallow your words and silently bear insult than to amplify your negative traits by engaging in a fight.”

Reb Aharon Kiblitser said about an elderly man who had passed away, “Although he was persecuted by others, he never fought against anyone his entire life.” This is high praise for a human being: to have lived without conflict in a world that is fraught with fighting and hatred.

Based on Siach Sarfey Kodesh IV:92, VII:147, VIII:117

SIDEPATH

Advice (Likutey Etzot) translated by Avraham Greenbaum

40. One should be very careful never to say anything that implies even a slight lack of faith, let alone complete disbelief. Even if you believe in your heart, you should never express disbelief even as a joke. This is very damaging to your faith. Even as a joke, it is forbidden to say anything that implies disrespect of God (*Likutey Moharan II, 44*).



41. It is far better to have simple-minded faith than to believe in nothing at all. When your faith is simple-minded, you may even believe things that are not true. But at least you will also believe in the truth. If you reject all simple-mindedness you may end up rejecting everything, and you will become totally cynical. Then you won’t even believe in the truth (*Rebbe Nachman’s Wisdom #103*).

42. Perfect faith is when you believe in God without any sophistication at all – without signs or miracles, speculation or philosophy. Your faith should be simple and pure, like that of women and simple folk (*ibid. #33*).

43. There are people who are well versed in Torah and still have no belief in God ... Keep well away from these people. The rabbis warned us that the very breath of their mouths can be harmful to honest people and can arouse their sexual desire. Such scholars are themselves usually sexually immoral (*ibid. #106*).



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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.