

PATHWAYS

Crossing the Narrow Bridge with Rebbe Nachman and His Students

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What Do You Know?

By Yossi Katz

WE LIVE AT a time when information is free-flowing and readily available. If you want to know how to fix the leaky sink in the bathroom, google it. Want to finally learn to play guitar or speak French? Google it.

Yet Rebbe Nachman teaches that the main knowledge is realizing that you know nothing at all. This advice is very difficult for the modern mind to comprehend. It would be one thing if, in nineteenth-century Ukraine, they had limited access, but the Rebbe implies that the greatest knowledge is actually knowing how much you don't know, and that applies even today.

The Rebbe teaches this in the context of perceiving the Divine. God is so immeasurably great that, when one does merit to experience just a little of His greatness, he begins to understand that God is so much greater than he previously thought. I once met a doctor who was a *baal teshuvah*. He told me that he decided to become religious while he was a young medical student, when a discovery was made that revealed a new, deeper layer in the workings of the human body. This soon-to-be doctor had a background in science and found this to be puzzling. He said to himself, "If they just now discovered this deeper layer and the human body is so much more sophisticated than previously thought, how many more layers are still undiscovered? And who created these?" The young medical student now understood how little he knew and set out to learn more.

The *Zohar* teaches that God, the Torah and Israel are all one. Just as the Divine is beyond the pale of human comprehension, so too is the greatness of each individual soul. Even the soul of the lowliest Jew is uniquely great, and because of this, we have no perception of what takes place with each of us in our lives and where our awesome final destination will

be. But we do know that each day God deals with us in the most incredible ways, and in His lovingkindness seeks to constantly bring about our salvation. This is the meaning of the verse "The kindnesses of God never cease...They are new every morning; great is Your faithfulness" (Lamentations 3:22-23). Even when God is hidden and life seems difficult, we can use our faith to strengthen our knowledge that behind the scenes, He is orchestrating the most incredible process with each one of us.

Life's process was the great challenge that Abraham faced. On the one hand, he was promised the Land of Israel and that his descendants would live there. Yet he was told to offer up his son as a sacrifice. On the third day, Abraham actually came face to face with this: "He saw the place from a distance" (Genesis 22:4). What place did he see? He saw the future Holy Temple, the place of his offspring's spiritual fruition – but, at the same time, he was to slaughter his only son! Could salvation be any more distant?

Sometimes we realize the kindnesses that God has showered down on us and this reinforces our faith in our ultimate salvation. For example, maybe we were finally able to pray with real connection, but soon enough experienced a blockage and felt distant again. This process is very confusing to us and these conflicting feelings can cause us to get lost along the way. We must always remember Abraham's simple faith in God. There is a method behind this perceived madness. Although we have experienced God's kindness, the more we experience of Him, the more we are to understand that we really know nothing at all. If He has distanced Himself from us, it must be that this, too, is meant to ultimately draw us close.

Just like our father Abraham, if we can visualize the distant salvation and not be distracted by the immediate conflicting illusions in our mind, we will arrive at the most incredible destination. Amen.

Based on Likutey Halakhot, Shiluach HaKen 5

Different Strokes for Different Folks

By Chaim Kramer

IN UMAN, REBBE NACHMAN spent time with the local *maskilim* (Jewish assimilationists) as well as with his Chassidim. Though people wondered about his motives, the Rebbe's whole mission with the *maskilim*, as with all Israel, was to implant faith and Torah. But he understood their outlook and attitudes, and used a very different approach with them.

While warning his followers to stay well clear of them, he himself would speak with them for hours. The *maskilim* enjoyed his company and visited him often. They discussed every subject under the sun...except Torah, which the Rebbe studiously avoided.

The Rebbe described one of these *maskilim*, the atheistic Hirsh Ber, as the "head of the snake" (evil incarnate) of the generation. But as time went on, Hirsh Ber – who had vowed never to even think of God – said, "I feel compelled to say there is a God!"

During one of their visits, Rebbe Nachman was playing chess with them. In the middle of the game, Reb Noson and Reb Naftali came in. Their awe and respect for the Rebbe made the *maskilim* feel somewhat embarrassed about their own casual behavior with him.

The Rebbe then told them a story about a king who had a good friend with whom he used to play chess. They would become so absorbed in the game that the king forgot he was a king and his friend also forgot he was playing against the king. Sometimes the king won, sometimes the friend.

Once the royal ministers entered, showing all the respect and awe due to a king. The friend became ashamed of his casual behavior and asked the king for forgiveness. The king told him, "That's not your business. With them, I manage countries. With you, I play chess."

Rebbe Nachman then pointed at Reb Noson and Reb Naftali and told the *maskilim*, "With them, I govern countries. With you, I play chess."

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Rebbe Nachman's efforts bore fruit. The time the *maskilim* spent with the Rebbe that summer brought them a little closer to Judaism. When the Rebbe passed away, Reb Noson was crying bitterly over his loss. Hirsh Ber said to him, "You miss the Rebbe? I miss the Rebbe! If the Rebbe had lived longer, I would have repented and become a truly God-fearing Jew."

From "Through Fire and Water"

Dedicated in the Memory of (L'Ilui Nishmat) Yehudis bat Shimon

SIDEPATH

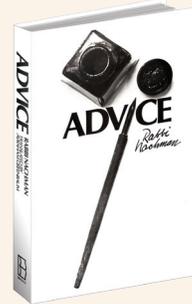
Advice (Likutey Etzot) translated by Avraham Greenbaum

LAND OF ISRAEL. 18. Genuine enlightenment and wisdom come only in the Land of Israel. But even the Jewish people outside the Land have the power to draw enlightenment and wisdom from there. Every single Jew has his share in the Land. According to his share, so is the wisdom he draws from the Land.

But those who insult the honor of the Almighty, God forbid, are cut off from the radiance of the Land of Israel and they fall into the mentality of "outside the Land," which is one of conflict and divisiveness. This is the source of all the conflicts and divisions which have become so rampant (Likutey Moharan II, 71).

19. The enlightenment which can be achieved in the Land of Israel possesses the quality of "pleasantness" – the pleasantness of Torah, all of whose ways are peace. Giving charity, and especially charity for the Land, forges a vessel with which to receive this pleasantness. Then one can rise above the mentality of "outside the Land."

But the more deeply people sink into this mentality because of irreverence, the more difficult it becomes to extricate them from it, and this alien mentality can even begin to infect the Land of Israel itself. Instead of peace, there is conflict even in the Land of Israel. This is the reason why today the divisions in the Land of Israel are as deep as they are outside it (ibid.).



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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.