

PATHWAYS

Crossing the Narrow Bridge with Rebbe Nachman and His Students

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The Land of Desire

By Yossi Katz

WHY ARE THINGS so difficult? Why can't life just be "easy-breezy"? These are normal and essential questions to ask. If we want to be a little more sophisticated, we could add, "if God only wants to make my life better, shouldn't the things I want and desire be so much easier to come by?" Instead, it seems that whenever we want to do the right thing or improve in a certain area, everything is thrown against us at that precise moment.

Before taking us out of Egypt, we were promised that we would be redeemed and brought to the Promised Land, a land "flowing with milk and honey." Gathered near the border of the Land of Israel, moments away from realizing the culmination of our incredible redemptive process, we sent scouts to study the nature of the land and its dwellers.

Initially, they reported back very positive news: "We came to the land to which you sent us, and it is flowing with milk and honey, and this is its fruit." But then things took a turn for the ugly: "However, the people who inhabit the land are mighty, and the cities are extremely huge and fortified, and we even saw the offspring of the giant" (Numbers 13:27-28).

Essentially, they were reporting the truth. On the one hand, the land was exactly as promised; they even brought a large fruit to demonstrate this. But they were also very troubled: If this was the land we were destined to receive, why in the world would God place such tremendous obstacles in our way? For Heaven's sake, there are giants dwelling in the land! How can we ever hope to conquer it? While the scouts' face-value observations were on target, they completely misunderstood the true essence of the Land of Israel.

We refer to Israel as *Eretz Yisrael*, the Land of Israel, but why? We don't say the Land of America or the Land

of Japan. There is a good reason for this. The Hebrew word *eReTz* (land) comes from the same root as *RaTzon* (desire or will). *Eretz Yisrael* is a source for accessing personal will, desire and passion in life. Both *eReTz* and *RaTzon* come from the root *RaTz* (run). When one merits to attach himself to *Eretz Yisrael*, his personal willpower can run wild. The sweet fruit of the land that the Torah so praises represents the spiritual love and desire that can be absorbed in this place. However, God first places great obstacles in the way.

The reason for the obstacles is simple. They challenge us to dig deep within ourselves to discover our inner willpower. They force us to realize just how much we want that end goal. Like a wife who desires that her husband display a vibrant interest in her, God desires an intimate relationship with us. Therefore He gives us various opportunities to demonstrate our profound desire for Him. By cultivating our innermost desire for Him, we nullify ourselves and unite with His Oneness, to the place of the *Raava d'Raavin*, the Will of Wills. Once there, we are naturally infused with an even greater desire for Him.

The Jews stood gazing at the land in the near distance. This was the moment they could express their deepest yearning to finally realize their dream. The obstacles were meant to push them to turn to God with an awesome, burning hope and desire, so they would become unified with His Will. The land of desire would become the most desired, its spiritual potential fully realized and experienced. But the scouts did not understand this, and were instead overcome by the obstacles.

As we read about this tragedy once more, may we merit to see our own obstacles for what they truly are and express our great yearning that we all return home, to the place of His true desire. Amen!

Based on Likutey Halakhot, Birkhot HaRei'ach 5

Too Easy

By Gedaliah Fleer

WHEN RABBI AVRAHAM STERNHARTZ was the Rav of Kremenchug, the head of the community once urgently knocked at his door. Some soldiers had arrived, demanding 50,000 rubles for the release of two Jews. If the community didn't pay the ransom by evening, they would kill the hostages.

"This certainly warrants my attention," cried Rabbi Sternhartz. "It's a great mitzvah to redeem a captive Jew!"

He hurried to the home of one of the wealthy residents. "How much do you want me to give?" the man asked. "Ten thousand rubles," replied Rabbi Sternhartz. "What?" exclaimed the wealthy man. "For such an important mitzvah, you're only asking for 10,000? I will give you 20,000!" At the next house, Rabbi Sternhartz asked for 5,000 rubles and the wealthy benefactor gave him 10,000. This scenario repeated itself at almost every house he visited, until he had accumulated the entire 50,000 rubles in a short time.

But before delivering the ransom to the soldiers, Rabbi Sternhartz told the community head, "Give all the money back to the donors."

"What about the captured Jews?" the community head exclaimed.

"Take ten strong boys from the yeshivah and let them pretend they're delivering the money," Rabbi Sternhartz advised. "Instead, they will attack the soldiers and free the hostages."

The community head was shocked. Such behavior could result in a pogrom. "Whenever you have listened to me in the past, I have not been wrong," Rabbi Sternhartz said. "Now, do what I say and God will assist us."

The community head accompanied the ten boys to the village square and watched as they attacked the soldiers. The soldiers screamed and begged for mercy. "The Jews ruin everything," they sobbed. "We were walking peacefully when we met these two Jews who suggested that we pretend to hold them for ransom and split the profits." The two Jews and the soldiers were chased out of town in disgrace.

Afterward the community head visited Rabbi Sternhartz. "We always realized you were a true tzaddik, but we never knew you were a prophet!" he said.

"I'm not a prophet," Rabbi Sternhartz replied. "But I learned from my teachers that a mitzvah never comes easily. When I was able to collect the money so quickly, I realized that this collection was not for a mitzvah."

SIDEPATH

Advice (Likutey Etzot) translated by Avraham Greenbaum

PRIDE & HUMILITY. 1. The humility of the Tzaddik brings him to the level of Nothing. This is what gives him the power to atone for sins (*Likutey Moharan I, 4:7*).

2. A person who is truly humble becomes stripped of all his material aspects and merged with the Infinite. He then attains the awareness of how everything that happens to him is only for his benefit. To know this is to taste the life of the World to Come (*ibid. I, 4:9*).



3. Pride brings poverty (*ibid. I, 4:8*).

4. Humility is the foundation of true repentance. The essence of repentance is to feel your own lowliness and insignificance, to be aware of the wrong you have done, and to understand that even the suffering and murderous opposition you may have to encounter in your quest for the truth are perfectly just (*ibid. I, 6:2*).

5. A person may have fasted a great deal and undergone harsh personal discipline and self-mortification. Even so, he should not arrogantly assume that he has attained the level of a Tzaddik, with the power to bring about redemptions or accomplish great feats through prayer. ... Instead, he will turn to the true Tzaddik to ask him to intercede on his behalf; he will bind his own prayers to the Tzaddik, and in this way he will restore prayer to its rightful place, which is with the true Tzaddikim (*ibid. I, 10:4*).



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PO Box 5370 • Jerusalem, Israel • 972.2.582.4641

PO Box 587 • Monsey, NY 10952 • 1.800.33.BRESLOV

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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.