

REBBE  
NACHMAN  
AND  
YOU



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AND  
YOU

HOW THE WISDOM OF  
REBBE NACHMAN OF BRESLOV  
CAN CHANGE YOUR LIFE

BY  
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## INTRODUCTION

WE'VE NEVER SEEN anything like it in the Jewish world. Rebbe Nachman of Breslov left no successor to his Chassidic movement, yet two centuries after his passing, more and more people are becoming his followers! They come from all sectors of humanity—from the seeker to the indifferent, from the complacent to the antagonistic, from the observant to the atheist—and from all over the globe—from North and South America, Europe, Africa, Australia and Asia.

To where do they come? To Uman, a small city in the Ukraine that still resembles a 19th-century town with its rundown houses and rationed food, water and gas for nearly 90,000 residents. The grave of Rebbe Nachman, located near the old market section, is the site of the annual Breslov Rosh HaShanah *kibutz* (Jewish New Year gathering). Here tens of thousands of people study Rebbe Nachman's teachings and try their best to connect with God through Torah study, prayer, and just "being there" with all those who are seeking a similar spiritual experience.

And what an experience it is!

In 2012 some 30,000 people danced, sang and prayed, twenty-four hours a day, in the synagogues and streets surrounding Rebbe Nachman's grave. The energy was electric, the joy unsurpassed, as each participant soaked up enough spiritual energy to last the rest of the year.

What is it that causes this outpouring of spiritual energy to come to a head in such a faraway and backward locale? What power brings people to leave family and friends and abandon the comforts of home? What is it about Rebbe Nachman and his teachings that invokes such dedication and devotion on the part of his followers to spend Rosh HaShanah with him in minus-one-star accommodations?

And perhaps a more powerful question: Why has Rebbe Nachman become a household word? After World War II, there were maybe 150 Breslover Chassidim worldwide—about ninety in Israel, ten in North America, and maybe fifty who survived the concentration camps and the Soviet NKVD purges of Jews and Judaism. In the 1950s, when I drew close to Breslov, there were very few people in North America who had even heard of Rebbe Nachman or his teachings. Even in the 1960s there were maybe a few hundred Chassidim around the globe. Who are all these people who now come to Uman?

This book was written to address the modern-day phenomenon that is Rebbe Nachman. Who is Rebbe Nachman? What is it about his teachings that excites and motivates people to ask for more? How can a 19th-century Chassidic master from a small town in the Ukraine have so much impact on people in the 21st century? Where is Uman and what is the significance of the pilgrimage

to Rebbe Nachman's grave? And are Rebbe Nachman's teachings so relevant that I, too, can benefit from them in the here and now?

This book is your introduction to Rebbe Nachman and the Breslover Chassidim. It explains how the movement spread to become the powerful force it is today, with historical data on Reb Noson, the Rebbe's closest disciple. Most importantly, it explains many of Rebbe Nachman's teachings and ideas and their practical relevance in today's world. This is because Chassidut is not just a path in life—it is the way to live a *fulfilled* life, no matter where you live and no matter what you do.

Rebbe Nachman's genius lay in his ability to show future generations the way to live life to the fullest, giving people the tools to do it for themselves. The Rebbe fills our “tool bag” with such basic concepts as joy, simplicity and faith; explains how we can use the tried-and-true tools of Judaism—Torah, prayer and *mitzvot*; outlines the strengths and weaknesses each person has at his or her disposal; and describes the challenges that we face on a daily basis. The Rebbe also speaks often of the Tzaddik—the spiritually moral individual who can illumine the path for many others.

Our Sages teach, “Open up to Me an opening like the eye of a needle, and I will open up for you openings through which oxen and carts can enter!” (*Shir HaShirim Rabbah* 5:3). This book opens up a whole new approach to life in the 21st century, infusing us with the hope that we *can* overcome the obstacles that stand between us and the life we really want to lead. With Rebbe Nachman as our guide, let's discover the path to physical, emotional, spiritual and financial success.



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*Chaim Kramer*

Sivan 5753/May 2013

LET'S  
GET  
ACQUAINTED

**REBBE NACHMAN AND** his main disciple, Reb Noson, lived at a time of great challenge for the Jewish people. Beginning right after the Partitions of Poland in the 1790s, the Russian Czars began issuing decrees to draft Jewish boys into the Russian army for a period of twenty-five years in an attempt to cut off the next generation from any association with Judaism.

The government also began forcing secular education on schoolchildren, alienating youngsters from their Jewish roots. The Czars formed the cruel boundaries of the infamous Jewish Pale of Settlement, banishing Jews from the rural areas and packing them into the cities, where they lived in extreme poverty, having their livelihoods taken away from them.

These decrees, in turn, set the stage for the communities to withdraw into themselves, setting the learned against the ignorant, the *mitnagdim* (opponents of Chassidim) against the Chassidim, the Chassidim against themselves, and, worst of all, Jew against Jew.

Under those conditions, could a rebbe and leader arise who could face these problems head-on and offer encouragement even in the worst of times? Could there be someone to offer comfort to parents whose children were forcibly removed from their homes, and solutions to spiritual alienation? Challenging the cacophony of atheism, is there a voice that rings out with faith and truth to lead the people to God in the wilderness of the “enlightenment” and heresy?

The answer is, “Yes!” In such a world, there is still hope, there is a ray of light. Let's meet Rebbe Nachman and Reb Noson, and discover how we, too, can learn from them.

# 1

## WHO IS REBBE NACHMAN?

REBBE NACHMAN WAS the great-grandson of Rabbi Yisrael, the Baal Shem Tov (Master of the Good Name), founder of the Jewish revival movement known as Chassidut. Rebbe Nachman's mother, Feiga, was the daughter of the Baal Shem Tov's daughter, Adil. His father, Rabbi Simchah, was the son of Rabbi Nachman Horodenker, one of the Baal Shem Tov's closest disciples.

With Chassidut, the Baal Shem Tov revolutionized Jewish life in 18th-century Europe. Until that time, Jewish life centered around the analytical study of Torah, Talmud and other religious texts. Poor and illiterate Jews who were cut off from this scholarship by the demands of working for a living began to be swayed by breakaway Jewish groups and assimilation. The Baal Shem Tov recast the service of God from a scholarly to an emotional and even mystical experience. Through everyday parables masking deep Kabbalistic concepts, he made Judaism something everyone could understand and appreciate. He restored the common man's self-worth by emphasizing the joy that God takes in our simple devotions, such as prayer and acts of kindness.

While the Baal Shem Tov inspired his disciples to create their own Chassidic courts, his influence had begun to wane by the time of Rebbe Nachman's birth. It was up to the Baal Shem Tov's great-grandson to re-infuse Chassidut with spirit and fervor, and he did so in a unique way.

Rebbe Nachman was born in 1772, twelve years after the Baal Shem Tov's passing, in the western Ukrainian town of Medzeboz. The Rebbe had two brothers and a sister. During his childhood, many Chassidic masters would come to visit the grave of the Baal Shem Tov in Medzeboz and they would stay in the Rebbe's parents' house. Rebbe Nachman was deeply inspired by these great leaders to become an outstanding Tzaddik and Torah sage himself. He acquired his first disciple on his wedding day in 1785. Subsequently he became known as a mystic, teacher and storyteller, and eventually a well-known Chassidic master in his own right.

After his marriage he moved to the eastern Ukraine, settling in Ossatin. In the early 1790s he moved to nearby Medvedevka, where he began to attract a devoted following. In 1798-1799, at the height of the Napoleonic wars in the Middle East, he made his pilgrimage to the Holy Land. Returning first to Medvedevka, he moved shortly afterwards to Zlatipolia in 1800. Around this time Rabbi Aryeh Leib, the Shpola Zeide, mounted a bitter campaign of opposition to Rebbe Nachman and his "brand" of Chassidut. This forced Rebbe Nachman to move to Breslov in September 1802.

It was right after Rebbe Nachman moved to Breslov that Reb Noson, who lived in nearby Nemirov, became his student. Reb Noson began to record the teachings and conversations that are Rebbe Nachman's legacy to this day.

The Rebbe furthered the goals of the Chassidic movement by translating the esoteric teachings of the Kabbalah into concrete, practical advice that anyone could use to better his or her own life. Rebbe Nachman knew and could cite any verse or teaching from the entire lexicon of Jewish wisdom—the Tanakh, the Mishnah, the Talmud, the *Zohar* and the Kabbalah—to develop his lessons. In addition to his formal teachings, the Rebbe told stories that contained the deepest mysteries of Torah. He said, “I see that my Torah teachings do not reach you; I will begin telling stories.” Rebbe Nachman’s innovations in delivering Torah discourses via his intricate lessons, as well as the stories that he told, made him a unique figure in the spread of Chassidut.

Though young in years, the Rebbe was wise to the true meaning of life. He spent much of his time immersed in Torah study and went to great lengths to perfect his character traits and his awe of Heaven. Through his devotions, the ways of God became absolutely clear to him at a young age, and he wrote many pages of advice and counsel to help other people develop for themselves a strong and satisfying relationship with God.

Rebbe Nachman lost his wife, the mother of his eight children, to tuberculosis in 1807. He remarried shortly after. In the late summer of 1807 Rebbe Nachman himself contracted tuberculosis, a disease that ravaged his body for three years. Knowing his time to leave this world was imminent, he moved to Uman in the spring of 1810. Throughout that summer he grew very weak. Despite his illness, his hundreds of followers came to be with him for the annual Rosh HaShanah *kibutz*. He gave over his last lesson on that Rosh HaShanah. A couple of weeks later he passed away, on 18 Tishrei 5571 (October 16, 1810),

at the age of thirty-eight. He was buried in Uman the following day.

The Rebbe's two sons and two of his daughters died in infancy; he was survived by four daughters. Without sons to succeed him, it was natural that his Chassidut would die out with its leader. But Rebbe Nachman had a secret that ensured the continuation of his teachings and the growth of his following for generations to come. That secret was his main disciple and scribe, Reb Noson. In the next chapter we will meet the man who guaranteed the survival of Breslov Chassidut for hundreds of years, up to and including our present day.

# 2

## WHO IS REB NOSON?

IN JEWISH HISTORY, every great teacher became that way because he had at least one able student who was able to receive and absorb that knowledge and, later on, disseminate it for future use. After all, without students—and more specifically, *the* student—why would he be known as a great teacher?

About nine miles (fifteen kilometers) from Breslov (a full day's journey by horse and wagon in Rebbe Nachman's time) lay the city of Nemirov, home to Reb Noson Sternhartz, a budding young Torah scholar born in 1780. Reb Noson was the son-in-law of Rabbi Dovid Zvi Ohrbach, the foremost *halakhic* authority of the western Ukraine (Kaminitz-Podolia).

Rabbi Ohrbach was a leading opponent of the Chassidic movement, as was Reb Noson's immediate family. Still, Reb Noson was drawn to the teachings of Chassidut. When Rebbe Nachman moved to Breslov in September 1802, Reb Noson traveled there and was deeply impressed by the teachings and sincerity of Rebbe Nachman and his followers. He immediately began to record the Rebbe's teachings. Later Rebbe Nachman himself asked Reb Noson to record his teachings, saying, "We have to be

grateful to Reb Noson, for without him, not one page of my teachings would have remained!" (*Tzaddik* #369).

For the next eight years until Rebbe Nachman passed away, despite all the opposition he faced from his family, Reb Noson became a frequent visitor to Breslov and drew ever closer to the Rebbe. He recorded Rebbe Nachman's lessons, conversations and stories, and observed the Rebbe up close, from which he later wrote the biographical information that we have. Also during that time, Rebbe Nachman instructed Reb Noson to begin writing his own original discourses and prayers. Reb Noson proved himself to be a deep thinker, a prolific writer and a caring and sensitive soul.

Eventually Reb Noson's wife and family acknowledged the positive impact that Chassidut was having on him and withdrew their opposition to Breslov Chassidut. Reb Noson's second son, Reb Yitzchak, became one of his father's most avid disciples. For some twenty-three years until Reb Noson's passing, the two carried on a voluminous correspondence, discussing and strengthening each other in Rebbe Nachman's teachings. These letters were later collected and published as *Alim LiTerufah* (Leaves of Healing), available in English from the Breslov Research Institute as *Eternally Yours*.

When Rebbe Nachman passed away in 1810, Reb Noson was perfectly qualified to succeed him. But he preferred to remain the *de facto* leader, publishing all of the Rebbe's works and guiding the Breslover Chassidim to fulfill the Rebbe's directives. He traveled hundreds of miles each year by horse and wagon to visit and encourage Breslover Chassidim living throughout the Ukraine, and wrote many letters strengthening them to keep following Rebbe Nachman's path.

Even without a living rebbe, Breslov Chassidut expanded and grew. This aroused the jealousy of several of Reb Noson's Chassidic contemporaries, who felt that a Chassidic movement must have a living rebbe to guide it. The Breslover Chassidim became the object of terrible opposition and Reb Noson's life was threatened. Though the opposition grudgingly died down to some extent by the end of Reb Noson's life, it continued to percolate among both Chassidic courts and Lithuanian schools until today.

In the spring of 1811 Reb Noson moved to Breslov and established the annual Rosh HaShanah *kibutz* in Uman. By 1830 the hundreds of attendees at the *kibutz* had outgrown all the local synagogues, and Reb Noson began raising money to build a Breslov *kloyz* (synagogue), which was completed in 1834. Reb Noson merited to see the first volume of his own *magnum opus*, the *Likutey Halakhot*, printed in 1843-1844. He became very weak around Rosh HaShanah 1844 and right after Chanukah of that year, on 10 Tevet 5605 (December 20, 1844), he passed away. He is buried in Breslov.

Reb Noson's efforts and iron will carved and shaped Breslov Chassidut as we know it. By remaining completely true to his master's teachings and transmitting them faithfully, he built a movement that connects later generations directly to Rebbe Nachman himself. Reb Noson neither added to or subtracted from the ideas Rebbe Nachman taught, only expanded and expounded on them in his own writings. We can be assured that the ideas we study and find so helpful today are all rooted in Rebbe Nachman's original teachings and advice given over 200 years ago—with a freshness that makes them seem even more relevant today.

# 3

## WHAT IS BRESLOV?

BRESLOV IS THE NAME of the town in the western Ukraine where Rebbe Nachman spent most of the last eight years of his life, and which gave its name to the Chassidic movement that he founded. One can travel to Breslov today and get a good feel for what it was like to live there in the early 1800s. Aside from a few square meters of cracked asphalt and several telephone and electrical wires, the town looks exactly as it did during Rebbe Nachman's lifetime.

Breslov is sometimes transliterated as Bratslav or Braclav; it should not be confused with Bratislava in Czechoslovakia or Breslau in Germany. Breslov is situated on the Bug River midway between Nemirov and Tulchin, in the area previously known as Kaminetz-Podolia.

It was usual for Chassidic groups of Eastern Europe to take their name from the name of the town where their rebbe and leader lived. When Rebbe Nachman first settled in Breslov in 1802, he said that his followers would always be known as Breslover Chassidim. This is the case today, even though Breslov is now a worldwide

movement and there are no known Breslover Chassidim in the town of Breslov itself.

Those who study *gematria*, the system of assigning numerical values to Hebrew letters, find that the name *Breslov* suits the Breslov movement to a T. Rebbe Nachman once pointed out that the name *BReSLoV* (ברסלב) has the same letters as the Hebrew words *LeV BaSaR* (לב בשר, or לב בשר, or לב בשר—the letters *samekh* [ס] and *sin* [ש] are interchangeable). *LeV BaSaR* is the “heart of flesh” every Jew should have, as in the prophecy of Ezekiel: “I will take away your heart of stone and give you a *LeV BaSaR*, a heart of flesh” (Ezekiel 36:26). Indeed, Rebbe Nachman’s teachings have the unique power to turn a “heart of stone” into a caring, feeling “heart of flesh.”

Additionally, the name *BReSLoV* (ברסלב) has the same numerical value (294) as *NaChMaN BeN FeIGa* (נחמן בן פיגא), Nachman the son of Feiga), Rebbe Nachman’s name and matronymic. It’s as if the town was waiting for its Rebbe to arrive and, from there, spread light and knowledge to the entire world.

# 4

## WHY UMAN?

WHILE REBBE NACHMAN LIVED and taught in the town of Breslov for eight years, from 1802 to 1810, he chose to spend the last six months of his life in Uman, a small city in the Ukraine, and to be buried in the cemetery there.

Decades earlier, Uman had been the site of several massacres of Jews by the Haidemaks, a band of peasant Cossacks who overran cities, towns and villages across the entire region in their revolt against the Polish nobility. The first massacre in Uman took place in 1749, when many hundreds of Jews were murdered and part of the city was burned. Count Feliks Potacki, the landlord of the city, rebuilt Uman in 1761; he created a world-famous botanical garden known as Sofiefka Park in the north of the city in the 1790s.

In 1768 the peasants staged yet another revolt. Uman is strategically situated in the center of the Ukraine, about halfway between Kiev to the north and Odessa to the south, and is also a midpoint between east and west. In the 18th century it was a fortified and walled city and could have withstood battles for a long time.

Between 25,000 to 30,000 Jews from the surrounding areas fled to Uman in advance of the Haidemak army and secured themselves behind the city walls. But when the Haidemaks arrived, the governor of Uman betrayed the Jews and threw open the gates, resulting in a three-day massacre of well over 20,000 Jews.

Ivan Gunta, the leader of the Haidemaks, then built a canopy outside the synagogue where some 3,000 Jews had found refuge. He said that anyone who left the synagogue and converted to the Russian Orthodox Church would be spared. No Jew left the synagogue and Gunta murdered them all. Only a handful of the remaining Jews survived.

In 1802 Rebbe Nachman passed through Uman on his way to the town of Breslov. Seeing the cemetery and recognizing the sanctity of the Jewish martyrs buried there, Rebbe Nachman remarked, "It would be good to be buried here." In 1810 he chose to return to Uman to be buried among the martyrs.

Reb Noson, who shepherded the expansion of the Breslov movement after the Rebbe's passing, realized that Uman, rather than Breslov, should be the focal point of the Chassidut because the Rebbe was buried there. He invested much time and effort to encourage Chassidim to join the annual Rosh HaShanah pilgrimage to the Rebbe's grave. He also constructed a large synagogue in Uman to accommodate the hundreds of Chassidim who traveled there. In 1866 Reb Noson's main disciple and successor, Reb Nachman of Tulchin, moved to Uman permanently and led the Breslover Chassidim from there.

Besides the annual Rosh HaShanah pilgrimage to Rebbe Nachman's grave, Uman became a magnet for visitors at any time of year. Its popularity is based on a unique promise that the Rebbe made about half a year

before he passed away. At that time, Rebbe Nachman revealed the *Tikkun HaKlali* (General Remedy), the Ten Chapters of Psalms one should recite in order to rectify sexual sins. The Rebbe then testified in the presence of two witnesses: “Whoever comes to my grave, recites the Ten Chapters of Psalms and gives something to charity, I will extend myself the length and breadth of Creation for him; by his *peyot* (sidelocks), I will pull him out of Gehinnom!”

No one before or since ever made such a promise. As a result, thousands of people made the effort to travel to Rebbe Nachman’s grave in Uman. During the Communist era from 1917 to 1989, travel to Uman was restricted and anyone who was caught there risked being deported to Siberia—or worse. But come they did, and they kept coming—from Israel, England and America, where new Breslover communities were founded after the Holocaust. More and more people pounded on the gates until finally the Iron Curtain crumbled and the way was opened for all.

Today over 30,000 people travel to the annual Rosh HaShanah *kibutz* in Uman. You can find a minyan for prayers there every Shabbat. It’s never been easier to travel to Uman and reap the benefits of praying by the Rebbe’s grave.

# 5

## HOW DOES REBBE NACHMAN SPEAK TO ME?

AT FIRST GLANCE IT doesn't seem possible. How can the words of a 19th-century Chassidic master from a small town in the Ukraine speak to people living in the 21st-century metropolises of the Western world? What does Rebbe Nachman know of the modern age—its scientific and technological breakthroughs; its advances in medicine, genetic engineering and telecommunications; its phenomena of global interdependence and cyber-terrorism?

If you think that way, you don't know Rebbe Nachman.

Rebbe Nachman lived at a pivotal point in world history. Standing on the verge of the modern age, which would introduce both an industrial revolution that would totally transform the way people lived, and an ideological revolution that would shake the entire framework of beliefs and assumptions on which people had based their lives for centuries, Rebbe Nachman said, "I'll tell you a secret. A great wave of atheism is about to enter the world" (*Rabbi Nachman's Wisdom* #220). One of the Rebbe's main objectives was to throw out spiritual

life rafts to those who would become engulfed in the impending ideological torrent.

So many people who read Rebbe Nachman's works have the uncanny feeling that he is talking directly to them. With startling clarity, he pinpoints the real trials of our modern age: the breakdown in personal and familial relationships; the rising incidence of depression, anxiety and other mental disorders; the overdependence on drugs, alcohol and other soul-numbing diversions; the existential loneliness that we feel even as we are surrounded by more wealth and possessions than any generation has ever known. The Rebbe saw clearly that further sophistication is not the answer. "The greatest wisdom of all," he declared, "is to be simple." "*Gevalt!*" he cried. "Don't give up!"

Rebbe Nachman shows us how to navigate the challenges of this world and make a success of our lives. To that end, he presents both the timeless tools of Torah, prayer, *mitzvot* and charity, and his own original teachings on joy, simplicity, faith, looking for the good points, and many others. His teachings about the Tzaddik hold out tantalizing opportunities for us to infuse our lives with more holiness and morality. Throughout his writings, Rebbe Nachman always encourages, never chastises. Even to the person who feels he is so sunk in his sins that he can never rise again, Rebbe Nachman assures, "There is always hope. Every day you have the power to start anew."

Rebbe Nachman speaks to everyone who is searching for answers. Let's hear what he has to say.

BRESLOV  
BASICS

**JUDAISM HAS ONE ROOT:** the Torah. That root has its own Root, which is God. It stands to reason that since the one Torah is from the One God, there should not be variations in it—or at least not too many. Yet even a cursory glance at those who study Torah will find many paths, many interpretations and many approaches. But all Torah teachings are meant to call out, “God is One.” What makes one set of teachings more powerful than another?

Rebbe Nachman once said, “I’m leading you on a new path that is really very old” (*Tzaddik* #392). The Rebbe was a very creative thinker who was able to see everything in terms of Godliness and, at the same time, see everything from the vantage point of the human being. Using the standard works of Judaism—the Torah, Mishnah, Talmud, *Shulchan Arukh*, *Zohar* and Kabbalah—as a starting point, the Rebbe charted new paths for modern man to find physical, emotional and spiritual fulfillment in this world.

This section outlines the Rebbe’s well-known concepts such as free will, faith and truth, finding joy and peace, and how to effect a *tikkun* (rectification) for the mistakes we’ve made. He also speaks about the importance of finding the Tzaddik, the leader that we all need—after all, it was Moses who led the Jews out of slavery in Egypt, and King David who forged the Jewish people into a cohesive unit and the leading nation of its time. A leader is a leader, one who actually leads, not follows.

Each topic concludes on a personal note, offering insights and practical tips for incorporating Rebbe Nachman’s ideas into our own lives.

# 6

## WHAT IS FREE WILL?

*Someone once asked Rebbe Nachman, “What is the idea of free will?”*

*“Very simple,” Rebbe Nachman replied. “If you want, you do it. If you don’t want, you don’t do it.”*

*Reb Noson adds: “I have recorded this because it is very necessary for people to know. A lot of people are very confused because they have gotten used to their actions and are steeped in their habits for many years, and it seems to them as if they don’t have freedom to choose anymore and can no longer control their ways. But the truth is not so. Every person always has freedom to choose in everything. A person acts the way he wants to. Understand this very well” (Likutey Moharan II, 110).*

WHAT IS FREE WILL? It is the ability to choose to do whatever you wish to do, whenever you wish to do so, in any kind of situation. Knowing that you have this power, you can take any idea or suggestion that you hear and apply it for your benefit. As Reb Noson explains, free will is the most amazing power in the entire world (*Likutey Halakhot, Birkhot HaShachar 5:74*).

“What’s so amazing about it?” you may ask. Well, consider that you are a king, a ruler, or even a democratically elected leader. Of course you want people to follow you and do what you think is best for the land you rule. In that case, would you give anyone, let alone *everyone*, the power to choose to rebel against you?

But that is exactly what God did when He created the world! He entrusted man with *da’at* (intellect) and gave him several commandments to obey—without any spiritual policemen standing over him. We are allowed to do whatever we want! This is the incredible power of free will.

As with all aspects of Creation, the Kabbalah offers us a closer look at how free will came about, and Rebbe Nachman explains from this how we can apply it to our daily lives. The great Kabbalist Rabbi Yitzchak Luria (known as the ARI) describes the way God brought the world into existence:

Before all things were created...the Supernal Light was complete and perfect. It filled all existence. There was no empty space, since everything was filled with that Light of the Infinite. There was no category of beginning and no category of end.

When it arose in God’s Will to create worlds...He withdrew His Infinite Essence from the very center point of His Light. He then withdrew that Light even further, distancing it to the extremities around this center point, leaving a Vacated Space. After this constriction, there was a *place* for all that was to be created. God then drew a single, straight *Kav* (Ray) down from His Infinite Light into the Vacated Space...Through this *Kav*, the Light of God spreads forth and flows down into the universes that are located within that Space (*Etz Chaim, Drush Igulim v’Yosher* 1:2).

We learn from this teaching that God is hidden—He withdrew Himself, as it were, from the Vacated Space—yet He drew a Ray of His Infinite Light *into* the Vacated Space, which He uses to sustain all the universes, all of mankind, and all the other levels of this material world, animal, vegetable and mineral.

The concealment of God is what allows for free will. Were God to be manifest in the Vacated Space, man would have no option as to what to do. Being in God's presence at all times, man would be forced to serve Him. That kind of service would be robotic. But God wanted people to have free choice, to use their intellect to guide themselves and their lives on a path that will be good and productive. Therefore God withdrew Himself, as it were, and the universe in which we live seems devoid of Godliness. We are not robots, nor are we clones—we are thinking individuals with free will to do as we choose.

So, “Go ahead! Use your free will and do whatever you want!” But on the other hand, as we have seen, God drew a Ray from His Infinite Light that sustains all of creation into the Vacated Space. He *is* here, present at all times. So again, “Go ahead! Use your free will, because you *can* seek God and you *can* find Him!”

The Vacated Space—the world as we know it—is a paradox. God is not here, because otherwise we would be forced to serve Him. But God *must* be here, otherwise what sustains the universe? But He cannot be here! But He must be here! But He cannot be here! But He must be here!

This paradox is what gives man free will. God is concealed, yet He created man with a mind and granted him intellect. Man can choose to search for God or neglect Him, or even rebel against Him. God is, of course, here.

As Rebbe Nachman said, “God is always with you. He is near you! He is next to you! Do not be afraid!” (*Siach Sarfey Kodesh* III, #661). But He remains concealed. By searching for Him, we can find Him, for He is always close by, right next to us, actually waiting for us to turn to Him. And when we search, we find: God becomes revealed to us.

But even when God becomes revealed, man still has free will, because in essence, God is still concealed from us. Since God is Infinite, there are layers upon layers of Godliness waiting to be discovered. When a person uses his free will in the direction of searching for God, the layers unfold one by one and he finds himself drawing ever closer to God.

## WHAT DOES THIS MEAN TO ME ?

Most people think of themselves as creatures of habit, but Rebbe Nachman tells us that we needn't be slaves to our impulses. We *can* respond differently. We *can* exercise discipline. Rebbe Nachman likens self-control to a rider on a horse that has gone astray. All the rider has to do is grab hold of the reins to return it to the path (*Likutey Moharan* II, 50). As long as we keep life simple, we can maintain control over many facets of our lives.

If I'm unhappy at my job or face problems in my marriage, should I walk out? Did you ever see a baseball team walk off the field in the seventh inning when the score was against them, 13-1? Obviously not. If giving up was our reaction every time we felt despondent, not only would *we* be in hot water, but the entire world would fall apart if everybody acted

so irresponsibly. We can't just walk away from every trouble, so do we really have "free" will? The answer is, "Yes!"

Our Sages advised: Every person must say, "The world was created for me" (*Sanhedrin* 37a). What does that mean? It means that every person is important—and especially you. It's true. You come first. The world was created for you. The only thing is, as Rebbe Nachman explains, this privilege carries responsibility. Because the world was created for you, you must see to its rectification. *You* are responsible for the world (*Likutey Moharan* I, 5:1). At any and all times, you can choose to do whatever you want to do. It's just a matter of acting responsibly. It's that simple.

So instead of telling yourself, "I can't," tell yourself, "I can." In a moment, you and I and everyone else can turn our lives around. Or at least begin to turn them around. And when we apply this idea of "I can" to our work, our studies and any of our habits, we'll see that we certainly can control our thoughts, even if only for a few moments. We can seize control of our minds and focus. We can remain steadfast in our resolve.

One of Rebbe Nachman's keen insights is that a person should learn to live in the present. "Today!" (*Likutey Moharan* I, 272). By living in the present, we don't have to suffer the burden of long-term diets or devotions or commitments. All we have to worry about are our efforts for "today." Concentrating for the short term is easier; being responsible for a limited time is bearable.

It's really very simple, though admittedly not so simple after all. Many factors are involved, including how strong is your resolve to choose the right path, and

how strong is your ability to follow it through, despite challenges that seem overwhelming. But when you know and understand that it is *your* choice, stemming from your free will, that determines what happens in your life, then you have the solid foundation to face and overcome the vicissitudes of life.

And it's very helpful to remember Rebbe Nachman's statement: "Everything you see in this world, everything that is created, is all for the sake of man's free will" (*Tzaddik* #519).

# 7

## WHAT IS SIMPLICITY?

*Before he passed away, Reb Noson was heard sighing very deeply. When asked why he sighed, he replied, “I prayed as best I could, I studied what I felt I could, I performed my other devotions the best I could. I am sighing because I don’t know if I fulfilled Rebbe Nachman’s directive of simplicity as I should have!” (Oral tradition).*

OF ALL OF Rebbe Nachman’s major teachings, simplicity is probably the least understood. Yet it has a major impact on the way we live our lives.

Once, when speaking about God, Rebbe Nachman said that God is very complex—but He is really very, very simple (*Rabbi Nachman’s Wisdom* #101). As we know from the *Shema*,\* God is One, totally unique. In any number more than one, we find complexity. But when we deal with a simple, single unit, there is no duplicity and no conflicts exist. Rebbe Nachman implies that when we learn to simplify our lives, we can experience more serenity and tranquility.

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\* “*Shema Yisrael*—Hear, Israel! God is our Lord. God is One” (Deuteronomy 6:4).

If asked to describe a “simple” person, you might give a negative description, a picture of someone who is dull-witted, foolish or even imbecilic. Saying something is “simple” conjures up the image of commonplace and inconsequential at best. That is not at all what the Rebbe had in mind. Instead, he looks to the Torah’s meaning of the word “simple,” as our patriarch Jacob is described as a *tam*, a simple man (Genesis 25:27). A *tam* is someone who is unassuming, sincere, straightforward. He lacks guile and shuns twisted reasoning. Simplicity implies wholeness and singularity, suggests freedom from mixture and convolutions, and denotes something pure and unadulterated.

Nowadays, achieving simplicity can be as elusive as defining it. The glitz and glitter of new fads and designer products prevent us from appreciating and cherishing that which is unadulterated. All too often we allow our imagination to dominate our perspective of reality, letting it lead us away from the genuine and the sincere, away from the straightforward and the simple truth.

Simplicity means clarity. “I do one thing at a time. I am not under pressure to be a superman.” Every person can focus on the one task that requires his immediate attention and do what is necessary, better and faster than if he were concentrating on several things at once.

Today many psychologists and therapists counsel their clients to keep their lives simple. Instead of living in huge homes that cost a fortune to heat, or purchasing loads of clothes and utensils that clog our closets and are seldom used, they suggest we buy less and use less, saving money, space, the environment and everything else. Why do we need so many cell phones, MP3s, beepers and a whole array of electronic equipment just to keep up with

the Goldbergs and the Schwartzes? True, these gadgets make our lives easier, but at what cost?

An important caveat: Simplicity does not mean believing whatever anyone tells you and foolishly falling victim to dishonesty and falsehood. That would be gullibility, not simplicity. Our Sages warned us in this regard: Respect, yet suspect that which is unfamiliar to you (cf. *Derekh Eretz Zuta* 5). Rebbe Nachman specifically warned us to be very careful in financial matters (see *Likutey Moharan* I, 69; cf. *Rabbi Nachman's Wisdom* #281) and to be wary of placing our physical well-being and/or emotional welfare in the hands of “reliable” professionals and “tried and tested” solutions (ibid., #50). While the simple person leaves his mind open, neither forming an immediate opinion nor trying to second-guess the “true” motives of other people, he won’t gullibly subscribe to the latest advice, trend, investment or fad that comes his way. Though by taking things at face value, one may well open himself up to dubious and possibly even harmful influences, Reb Noson quotes a proverb of King Solomon: “He that follows the simple path goes securely” (Proverbs 10:9).

The rule is: Accept, but be careful. To paraphrase Rabbi Eliyahu Chaim Rosen, my *Rosh Yeshivah*: “It is a pleasure dealing with people. They are trustworthy, they are honest, they are decent people. But always remember to count your change!”

## WHAT DOES THIS MEAN TO ME ?

At the end of his story, “The Exchanged Children” (*Rabbi Nachman’s Stories* #11), Rebbe Nachman speaks of a prince who was challenged to figure out the mystery of a certain throne. Close by the throne were animals and birds carved out of wood, a bed, a table, a lamp and a chair. Having the gift of understanding one thing from another, the prince realized that the throne was a symbol of peace—but only if everything was in its proper place. He started moving things around, this item a little bit, that item a little bit, until everything was in its place. Then there emerged from the throne the most beautiful melodies of harmony and sweetness.

This is the path to simplicity: Everything in its place, everything in its own time. Instead of the convoluted, speculative paths that people often choose, try to seek the simplest solution. This way, you avoid inner conflict, for a simple, singular path has no diversity and thus offers little or even nothing to distract you. Then you can remain focused on your goals.

Rebbe Nachman was known for never forcing an issue, as if it had to be done immediately or in a certain way (see *Tzaddik* #430-435). That kind of approach never works (and also turns other people off). The simple approach *will* work. It will never work to try and lose ten pounds in a day, but little by little we can lose a few ounces until we reach our goal. It never works to try to save a lot of money in a very short period of time, but by saving a little at a time—especially with compound interest—we can amass a great deal of money. Like the prince, we should take small, effective

steps. The results are harmony within, peace at home and accord with our friends, neighbors and coworkers.

Simplicity also means breaking down goals into manageable bites. For example, a person who wants to study the entire Talmud has chosen an important goal, but it cannot be done in one day. It requires simplifying the task, one page at a time. “That’s all I need to do.” Cleaning a house for the Pesach holiday nowadays is a humongous task. But it can be accomplished, one room at a time. The same applies to learning new skills, building a relationship, and everything else you aspire to.

As you pursue the simple path, you’ll find it influences your ability for positive thinking. “After all, I *can* do this; it’s not that complicated or difficult.” If I’m not weighed down with the burden of paying an exorbitant mortgage instead of a more moderate one, because I’m not looking for the “best” or the “fanciest” (and the same applies to buying a car, furniture, appliances and so on), then I can breathe easier. I can concentrate. I can focus. I have more time and energy for the important things.

With simplicity, we have the freedom to accomplish far more than we could ever imagine.

# 8

## WHAT IS JOY?

*Rebbe Nachman teaches: It is a great mitzvah to be happy always.*

*Strengthen yourself to push aside all depression and sadness. Everyone has lots of problems and the nature of man is to be attracted to sadness. To escape these difficulties, constantly bring joy into your life—even if you have to resort to silliness (Likutey Moharan II, 24).*

YOU'D THINK THAT being told to be happy is superfluous. Who doesn't know this? Is it really necessary to coax, urge and encourage people to be happy? It's a natural desire, not one that has to be worked on. Or is it?

“True joy is the hardest thing of all,” Rebbe Nachman insists. “You must *force* yourself to be happy all the time” (*Advice, Joy 35*).

Life certainly gives us enough excuses to be worried. *How* am I going to meet the tuition payment? *What* did you say happened to the car? *Who* did you say you're bringing home for dinner?! And we're not even mentioning health issues. The list is endless. Your alternatives: joy or depression.

Depression, though, is your worst enemy. Rebbe Nachman compares depression to the bite of a serpent (*Likutey Moharan* 1, 189). Just as a serpent strikes suddenly, so does depression. All of a sudden it hits and you're left wondering how you can ever be happy again. My *Rosh Yeshivah*, Rabbi Eliyahu Chaim Rosen, used to say, "People think that difficulties are unexpected in life. They're surprised when troubles attack and sadness comes. But even if a person were to live for a thousand years, he would still have a long list of problems waiting for him. When one leaves, another is sure to follow on its heels. This is an axiom of life."

It's a cycle. Something unexpected happens and we get annoyed. The doldrums and depression, still mild, are on the horizon. We're already less tolerant of whatever happens next. Naturally, we anticipate everything going wrong. And it does! At the same time, we get angry, experience greater failure, become more depressed, and feel more discouraged and lethargic. The serpent of sadness has struck and its poisonous venom of depression begins to spread without our being aware of what actually happened.

Interestingly enough, depression, sadness and suffering are necessary ingredients in the world. Our Sages state, "Whoever mourns Jerusalem will yet share in its rejoicing" (*Ta'anit* 30b). Without experiencing sorrow and mourning, there is no way for us to appreciate its opposite. We have nothing with which to compare our happiness. Therefore we experience suffering. Only then can we know the true taste of joy. And because some sadness and suffering is necessary, Rebbe Nachman urges us to strive for joy. We have to use all our strength to attain happiness, since only by being happy will we have

the necessary faith, courage and strength to face our sorrows and burdens and overcome them.

## WHAT DOES THIS MEAN TO ME ?

Joy puts you on the fast track to achieving any goal you desire. Therefore Rebbe Nachman emphasizes the importance of being joyous at all times. While it's easy to be happy when you feel good and things are going smoothly, what should you do when you don't feel happy and there's nothing to be joyous about? Rebbe Nachman offers these suggestions for getting back on track:

**FORCE YOURSELF.** The importance of joy is so great that you should make every effort to be happy. This can be compared to a group of people who are dancing in a circle while a sad person looks on. They reach out and pull him in to join them, whereupon he leaves his depression off to the side. However, when the newcomer stops dancing, his depression returns. Though the few minutes of joy are valuable, still, it would be better to bring the depression itself into the circle of happiness and keep it there (*Likutey Moharan* II, 23). Forcing yourself to be happy will eventually turn the cause of your unhappiness into a real source of joy.

Someone once asked Reb Noson how he could be happy when he had so many problems and difficulties. Reb Noson answered, "Borrow the happiness!" (*Siach Sarfey Kodesh* 1-736). When it comes to money, we rarely hesitate to borrow against future earnings. Well,

## WHAT IS JOY?

sadness makes a person feel he's missing something. The thing to do, as Reb Noson advises, is to borrow from whatever you can think of that makes you happy. Besides, there's a big difference between owing money and owing happiness. When money is paid back, it hurts a little. But with happiness, when we pay it back, we have happiness again. Forcing joy and happiness actually pays fantastic dividends!

**FAKE IT.** Even if you don't feel happy, you can fake it. Pretend to be happy. Who says that if you're feeling down, you can't smile? We fake a smile often enough when trying to be polite; why not now? Try it. A smile, even a pasted-on grin, is contagious. Not only will it make others happy when they return your smile, but as studies show, smiling relieves tension and really does make your outlook on life a lot brighter (cf. *Rabbi Nachman's Wisdom #43*).

**REMEMBER YOUR GOOD POINTS.** Another way you can become joyous when depressed is by acknowledging that you have at least some good within you. Even if you can't find anything good in yourself, you still have what to be happy about: "I am a Jew!" (*Likutey Moharan II, 10*). Simply be happy that you can feel proud and joyous about your heritage, which is not even your own doing, but a gift from God (more about this in Chapter 11, "What are the Good Points?").

**SING, PLAY MUSIC AND DANCE.** Music clears the mind and makes us happy. Music has the power to help us pour out our heart before God. It also has the power to sharpen our memories and enable us to concentrate on our goals (*Advice, Joy 14-15*). Therefore Rebbe Nachman says it's a very good habit to inspire ourselves with a melody. The spiritual roots of music

and song are quite exalted and can arouse our hearts and raise our spirits (*Rabbi Nachman's Wisdom* #273).

The Rebbe also talks about the special power that dancing and clapping have to make us happy and mitigate the negative things affecting us (*Likutey Moharan* I, 169). It is customary in every Breslov synagogue to dance each day after the morning and evening prayers. Many Breslover Chassidim dance after learning together, and some even dance daily by themselves. It's a sure-fire way to arouse feelings of joy and happiness.

DO SOMETHING SILLY. In talking about making every effort to be joyous, Rebbe Nachman said this even includes resorting to acting a bit silly. The price one pays for a little silliness is far less than the price of depression and lethargy.

Echoing the message found in Chapter 6 about free will: There is joy, there is depression. Which path do I choose? Rebbe Nachman says it depends on how you view yourself. If you look for the good, then you think good, things are positive and you can be joyous. The opposite is also true. So choose happiness.

Reb Avraham Chazan commented, "If Rebbe Nachman taught that it's a great mitzvah to be happy always, then we must believe that there is what to be happy about!" (*Rabbi Eliyahu Chaim Rosen*).

# 9

## WHAT IS PEACE?

*There is peace that lacks a mouth. And there is a peace that has a mouth (Likutey Moharan I, 57:8).*

PEACE IS ONE OF those things that everyone wishes for and few people actually experience. We all want world peace, peace in the Middle East, peace on the home front and peace between brothers. Everyone wants a peaceful life. Who needs aggravation, enmity, deceit or underhanded dealings? But invariably, life is more about war than peace. Why do strife and conflict flare up so quickly?

Rebbe Nachman explains that it all starts with the individual. If we lack inner peace, the whole world becomes fragmented. If we possess inner peace, then tranquility and harmony spread throughout the world.

How does this work? The Rebbe explains that all strife is identical. We may think that our neighbors aren't talking to each other because one slighted the other, or that two nations are squabbling over a piece of land, but in reality all strife stems from people's different and/or opposing traits. As Rebbe Nachman puts it:

The friction within a family is a counterpart of the wars between nations. Each person in a household is the counterpart of a world power, and their quarrels are the wars between those powers. The traits of each nation are also reflected in these individuals. Some nations are known for anger, others for bloodthirstiness. Each one has its particular trait. The counterparts of these traits are found in each household.

You may wish to live in peace. You have no desire for strife. Still, you are forced into dispute and conflict. Nations are the same. A nation may desire peace and make many concessions to achieve it. But no matter how much it tries to remain neutral, it can still be caught up in war. Two opposing sides can demand its allegiance until it is drawn into war against its will. The same is true in a household.

This is because man is a miniature world (*Zohar* III, 33b; *Tikkuney Zohar* #69, 100b). His essence contains the world and everything in it. A man and his family contain the nations of the world, including all their battles (*Rabbi Nachman's Wisdom* #77).

It's even worse for a person who lives alone. Rebbe Nachman says that a man living in isolation can go insane from the effect of all the warring nations within him. While someone who lives among family and friends can express the nation's battles through his interactions with other people, the man who lives alone must play the role of all the nations. Each time a nation is victorious, he must change his personality, which can drive him insane.

Now we understand why war is the norm. Our different personalities naturally lead to conflict, and that creates friction both among the people we live with and people we've never met. However, if man is a microcosm of the world, the reverse should also be true. And it is. If each of

us could attain inner peace, we could bring peace to the world at large!



REBBE NACHMAN FURTHER teaches that there are two kinds of peace. “Peace that lacks a mouth” is a cease-fire. It’s peaceful, it’s quiet, there’s no active shooting off of the guns (or the mouth) and attacking people. But it’s not a very comfortable situation. People who aren’t engaged in active combat may still harbor some pretty nasty feelings about each other, and lack of communication can lead to serious breaches of the peace. The optimal kind of peace is “peace that has a mouth.” Dialogue takes place, compromises are reached, nations join together, and people even celebrate with each other.

The Hebrew word for peace, *ShaLoM* (שלום), comes from the same root as the word *SheLeiMut* (שלמות), “completeness” or “perfection.” Peace implies a unity, where everyone or everything is together as one. When we are focused on unity, we can be as dissimilar as we want, because we are at peace (see *Likutey Halakhot, Prikah u’Te’inah* 4:23).

## WHAT DOES THIS MEAN TO ME ?

Inner peace is a truly remarkable achievement. The person who is comfortable with himself and feels at ease with whatever situation he finds himself in can accomplish tremendous things during his life. Just examine the fellow who is comfortable with himself: he exudes self-confidence, is a pillar of strength, and emerges as a sea of tranquility amid

all the tumult around him. Because he is willing to avoid combative situations, even when it might seem to be to his detriment, he emerges from every fracas unscathed. As he radiates that inner peace outwards, influencing those around him, eventually he can spread peace far and wide.

How we can acquire inner peace for ourselves?

The Talmud relates that Rabban Gamliel once saw a ship go down at sea with its travelers, among them Rabbi Akiva. A short while later Rabbi Akiva came before Rabban Gamliel, who was very surprised to see him. Rabban Gamliel asked, “How did you survive?” Rabbi Akiva replied, “I found a block of wood and held on tightly. And for each wave that swept over me, I simply bowed my head.”

My *Rosh Yeshiva*, Rabbi Eliyahu Chaim Rosen, often told this story and explained that a block of wood represents silence. We are in the sea of life and floundering because of all the waves that overwhelm us. The trick to survival is to act like a block of wood that is silent—it cannot reply to any insult or demeaning comment. Additionally, we must learn to “bow our heads” before each wave—this helps us duck below the radar of wars and unwelcome situations. Then, when the wave passes—as it always does—we can pick up our heads and go forward.

This is a most wonderful piece of advice on how to attain inner peace. When we face a combative situation head-on, usually we are standing in harm’s way. But if we “roll with the punches” and avoid getting into arguments, we can emerge unscathed or with a minimal amount of damage.

## WHAT IS PEACE?

Rebbe Nachman adds that certain Jewish practices are especially helpful for attaining inner peace and promoting peace in the world. They are:

- Giving charity
- Studying *halakhah* (the Jewish legal codes)
- Safeguarding one's moral purity
- Increasing one's fear of Heaven

The highest peace is the peace between opposites. You know the kind of person we're talking about—he just has to look your way and your skin starts crawling. The next time you meet someone who makes you uncomfortable, try to think of ways for the two of you to get along. You'll be doing a huge service both for your own, inner peace and for the world peace we all long for. When you overlook other people's shortcomings and look for the good in them, you will be at peace with everyone.

# 10

## WHAT IS SUFFERING?

*When asked how things are, a person should reply that they are going well, thanking God for his situation even if things are actually very difficult. If he does this, then God says, "This is what you call good? I'll show you what good really is!" (Siach Sarfey Kodesh 1-32).*

SOMETIMES LIFE SEEMS to be little more than an endless stream of problems to solve and obstacles to overcome. Whether our difficulties are personal, communal or national, there seems to be no escaping them. Occasionally their sheer number or weight causes a person to lose faith. Why does God send difficulties our way?

Many philosophers have pondered the conundrum: How can a loving God inflict suffering on His creatures? Or as more than one contemporary observer has phrased it, "Why do bad things happen to good people?"

In Jewish thought, difficulties and misfortune are not "bad" or punishments, but challenges. Challenges are the primary vehicle for testing our mettle and seeing what we're really made of. In the field of health and exercise, everyone knows, "No pain, no gain." If you don't sweat

a little when you work out, pushing yourself a little bit further than you did yesterday, you'll never get fit. Similarly, if God wouldn't put us in difficult situations—or even oppressive and crushing situations—we would never build our spiritual muscles and find out what we're capable of achieving.

Difficulties also force a person to cry out for relief—which is exactly what God is waiting for. God wants a personal relationship with each one of us, and the relationship can't be just one-way, with God giving and giving and us taking and taking. When God gives us something to cry about and we cry out to Him, we take our relationship to the next level.

How can we be sure that it's really God Who's behind our difficulties? It sure seems like it's that obnoxious downstairs neighbor who keeps us up all night with his raucous music, or that conniving coworker who keeps reporting our every misstep to the boss in the hope of getting us fired and him promoted. Where is God in the equation?

A young man once came to me bemoaning his life. He was born somewhere in Kansas and had a standard, non-Jewish education in public schools. At twenty-five, he discovered his Jewish roots. "What happened to the twenty-five years of my life that I lost?" he demanded. I asked him, "Who put your soul in Kansas?! It was God Who placed you there, knowing beforehand how you'd grow up. Your life begins when you are cognizant of God and that He is the Master Chess Player moving us, the pieces, around the board." The same is true for all of us. When we are ready to accept that God is behind the bad times as well as the good, then we can actually see our life experiences falling into an amazing pattern, making

us aware that there is Somebody behind all the problems (and successes) in our lives.

Rebbe Nachman adds an intriguing observation: Even in the midst of the worst misfortune, we can see evidence of God's kindness! (*Likutey Moharan* I, 195). In every distress, God offers us some measure of relief. For a dialysis patient who must come three times a week to the hospital for hours-long treatments, it may be a nurse who goes out of her way to make sure he has a comfortable pillow and his favorite reading material by his side. For many a grieving child, there is the knowledge that "we did what we could" and that his parent's suffering wasn't an extended battle for endless years, or that the pain was minimal. And even if things are very, very difficult, we know that they could always be worse. That thought alone provides great consolation.

Reb Noson suffered terrible opposition during the years 1834 to 1838 when he served as the de facto leader of the Breslover Chassidim after Rebbe Nachman's passing. At times, his life was in actual danger. As a result of this persecution, Reb Noson suffered loss of income, personal abuse, imprisonment and, eventually, three years of forced exile. Yet, through it all, he repeatedly writes in his letters to his followers, "Although we suffer, God has always favored us with His kindness. We have merited seeing much good granted us by God, even in the midst of our terrible distress."

What did Reb Noson mean by "God favored us with His kindness"? His enemies wanted to have him exiled to Siberia, but he was exiled only to a nearby city. His opponents tried to stop the spread of Rebbe Nachman's writings, yet Reb Noson was able to teach. Though his persecutors did what they could to prevent him from

receiving financial support, Reb Noson was helped by several of his followers and was able to get by. For each instance, he credits God's kindness for his ability to survive despite the overwhelming opposition.

Difficulties are hard. Difficulties are frustrating. But difficulties are not a reason to throw up our hands and give up on God—or ourselves. For difficulties are nothing more than a spiritual elevator that takes us higher and higher.

## WHAT DOES THIS MEAN TO ME ?

Every single person possesses deep reservoirs of inner strength that he or she can tap into when life gets difficult. How do we know this? Histories and biographies are full of stories of regular, everyday people who had their backs to the wall, people forced into the worst situations, who nevertheless managed to bounce back and survive. These people succeeded because they didn't give up when difficulties assailed them. Neither should we.

For Rebbe Nachman, one of the most difficult times in his life was two months before he passed away from tuberculosis. For three years, the disease ravaged his body and drained him physically on a daily basis. At that moment when all seemed dark and all the moods blackened with despair, he gave his famous call: "There is no such thing as despair!" "*Gevalt! Zeit aich nit meya'esh!—Gevalt!* Never allow yourselves to give up!" (see *Likutey Moharan* II, 78:7).

Reb Noson writes that Rebbe Nachman said these words with great strength and with deep feeling,

proclaiming to all that there is never a reason for despair. You can always find at least a ray of God's infinite kindness, and you can always experience a glimmer of His endless compassion. You can always find God wherever you look for Him.

So the next time you're confronted by difficulties, large or small, remember Rebbe Nachman's call: "Never despair! Never give up!" Close your eyes, take a deep breath, and consider your options—because you do have them. Say a prayer to God to help you succeed in this situation He's put you into. Even if all the exits seem blocked, use your inner strength to cope with situations you cannot change.

Our souls are a part of God; it is His "breath," as it were, that breathes life into us at all times. Being aware that you are in God's presence can give you that extra lift in times of need and imbue you with the necessary strength to forge ahead.

This is as Rebbe Nachman said: "God is always with you. He is near you! He is next to you! Do not be afraid!" (*Siach Sarfey Kodesh* III, #661).

# 11

## WHAT ARE THE GOOD POINTS?

*God's way is to focus on the good. Even if there are things that aren't so good, He looks only for the good. How much more do we have to avoid focusing on the faults of our friends? We are obligated to seek only the good—always! (Likutey Moharan II, 17).*

MORE THAN ANY other generation, 21st-century man is plagued by low self-esteem. Despite all our achievements in science and technology, a high standard of living and free education, most people are not happy. They think that the next gadget, the next vacation or the next home-redesigning project will do the trick, and they go for that...but still they're unhappy. Depression and suicide are at an all-time high. Is there any way out?

Yes, says Rebbe Nachman. The very fact that you are alive shows that you are of utmost importance. God loves you. He loves you as if you are His only child. You are the apple of His eye. Our Sages teach, "Every person must say, 'The world was created for me'" (*Sanhedrin 37a*). This means that I am the reason why God created the entire world. I must have worth. I am important, and I can be the good person that I aspire to be.

We actually have the power to raise ourselves and others to our position of true importance. In one of his most important lessons, called *Azamra!* (I Will Sing!),\* Rebbe Nachman explains that if we look for the good in others, we can even elevate a sinner to the side of merit. How does this work? It means looking and searching for the teensiest bit of good that a person has ever done—be it holding open a door for an old lady or giving a penny to charity—and then looking for another bit, and another. By keeping at it, we can bring merit to anyone—even ourselves.

The faculty of judgment is one of man’s most powerful tools. If we really knew just how powerful, we would certainly be more careful about how we use it. Elsewhere Rebbe Nachman teaches that judging others can destroy the world. If a person finds fault with another, this judgment can condemn the condemner (*Likutey Moharan* I, 3). Think about it! Your evaluation, opinion and judgment of others has the power to either elevate you or degrade you.

The problem is that criticism comes easy—too easy. We can always find fault in what others do or fail to do. Or as a friend of mine once said, “If only we were as quick to praise and thank our wives and other family members as we are to criticize them when things aren’t what we expected!” If, in our judgment, we find the good points and focus on the positive, we can bring the entire world to the side of merit and worthiness. But if we find fault and focus on the negative, we can bring the entire world to the side of demerit and unworthiness. This is why we must always try to look for the good in others,

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\* This lesson is developed at length in a separate publication, *Azamra!* published by the Breslov Research Institute.

even in the worst person we know. Such emphasis on positive traits affects each person, as Rebbe Nachman teaches, “Favorable judgment actually elevates a person to the side of merit.”

“But what about myself? I know what makes me tick. And believe me, there’s no way—no way!—that I can honestly say that I’m okay, too.” Too often we come down very hard on ourselves. “I’m no good! I messed up! Look what I did, again! Idiot that I am!” and so on. We become angry instead of tranquil. We become agitated instead of confident and controlled. Not the best way to be happy, or to strive for goals and accomplishments.

Even people who on the outside seem self-confident and generally positive about themselves, when pressed, will admit that they find it hard to judge themselves favorably. They know themselves too well and, basically, their self-evaluation may be accurate. Their good deeds may be driven by ulterior motives and improper thoughts. Yet within their flawed behavior there must be *some* good, some positive aspect. They should focus on that good, find another, then another—until they elevate themselves to the side of merit.

## WHAT DOES THIS MEAN TO ME ?

One of the main reasons people get depressed is failure. A business deal you’re working on falls through, a relationship you’re trying to develop doesn’t work out. “I’ve failed again,” you tell yourself. Stop right there! Being pessimistic just opens the door to further failures. What else can you do? You can find a good point. Recharge yourself with optimism and

positive thinking. You do have valuable qualities! You can succeed! Adopting this attitude will help you recover from any setback. Even in those areas where things were going all wrong, you'll encounter success.

Reb Noson not only studied Rebbe Nachman's teachings, he lived them. He translates the lesson of *Azamra!* into practical guidance for better relationships with family, friends and neighbors—indeed, with whoever we come in contact. Imagine, a majority of all arguments in the home (the most common and often the most harmful form of disagreement) would be eliminated instantly if only we could get ourselves to see the good points and focus only on the positive qualities in our spouses and children. Focusing on the good will turn your life into a purposeful life, a responsible life, a life of contentment and fulfillment. In short, if you are always looking for good, you will draw goodness and kindness into your life.

While you're looking for the good points, you might be surprised by just how many you discover. Reb Noson explains that whenever someone loses something important, he goes looking for it. He searches high and low, and eventually he finds it. Often, in the course of the search, he comes across other "lost" items, things he'd "forgotten" about and didn't remember that he still had. It's the same for someone who looks for his good points. In the course of his search, he inevitably comes across other "long-lost" tidbits that are his and his alone. Much to his surprise, he finds that he has a lot of "little good qualities" within him (*Likutey Halakhot, Birkhot HaPeirot* 5:4).

Once a fire swept through part of the town of Breslov. Passing by the site, Reb Noson and his

## WHAT ARE THE GOOD POINTS?

followers spotted one of the distraught homeowners. Although crying bitterly, he was sifting through the rubble of his destroyed house in the hope of finding something, anything, that he might use to rebuild his home.

Reb Noson said, “Do you see what he’s doing? Even though his house has been destroyed, he hasn’t given up hope. He’s collecting whatever might be useful for rebuilding. The same is true when it comes to spirituality and even emotional stability. The evil inclination fights against us, trying to destroy whatever holiness we’ve built up by getting us to do something that goes against God’s will. Even so, when we are knocked down and all seems hopeless, we must never give up hope. We have to pick up a few good points and collect them together from amid the sins. This is *the way to draw close to God*” (*Kokhavey Or*, p. 78).

# 12

## WHAT IS STARTING ANEW?

*The essence of living is to begin anew each day. Chai (Hebrew for “living”) also means “fresh” (Likutey Halakhot, Basar b’Chalav 4:12).*

MEMORY MAKES US HUMAN. If we didn’t have a memory, we would wake up each morning without recalling who we are or what we’re doing in this world. Come to think of it, that might not be such a bad idea.

In Rebbe Nachman’s worldview, every day is like a clean slate, a chance to start anew. Because we have the ability to forget, we can leave all our bad decisions and embarrassing mistakes where they belong—in the past. Now we can approach our work, our hobbies and our relationships with other people and with God with freshness and zest.

“Most people think of forgetting as a serious drawback,” Rebbe Nachman explains. “But to me, it has a great advantage. If you did not forget, it would be utterly impossible to serve God. You would remember your entire past, and these memories would drag you down and not allow you to raise yourself to God. Whatever you

did would be constantly disturbed by your memories of the past. The past is gone forever and never need be brought to mind. Because you can forget, you are no longer disturbed by the past.”

Most people are distressed by past events—a slip of the tongue, a humiliating situation, an angry retort. We’re also embarrassed by the serious mistakes we’ve made, whether financial, emotional or even accidental, such as breaking an arm. “What if...?” becomes the normal mindset and we never seem to extricate ourselves from the merry-go-round of thoughts like, “What if I had done this?” or, “If only I had said that.”

The litany of worries over whether we did something wrong or neglected something important interferes with getting things done in the here and now. It affects our ability to form new relationships (“What if I say something stupid like I did last time?”), pursue new business opportunities (“If they find out how I messed up before, they won’t want to work with me”), and even pray to God properly (“Why should God listen to me when I have so many sins and shortcomings?”). The best advice for putting these worries to rest is simply to forget. As soon as an event is over with, says Rebbe Nachman, forget it completely and never think about it again.

Of course we do have an obligation to make amends for our past misdeeds. With the help of a rabbi or spiritual mentor, we can embark on a program of *teshuvah* (repentance) to rectify any moral failings we’ve had vis-a-vis God or our fellow Jews. But we shouldn’t let our past failings cripple us with self-recrimination and second-guessing. We can start anew, every day!

In the future, God will let everyone remember everything, even if it was forgotten during his lifetime (see

*Zohar* I, 185a). This is also true of all of life's lessons that a person heard but didn't understand. In the World to Come, everything will be comprehended (*Tzaddik* #388).

## WHAT DOES THIS MEAN TO ME ?

Nothing weighs down a person more than worrying about past actions that he can never take back or change. The secret to dumping that “excess baggage” and making a success of our lives is to forget the past and start anew. We should acknowledge that we are human, we are subject to error, and yet we can move on and accomplish bigger and better things. And we are precious enough in God's sight that He will always accept us whenever we return to Him.

Therefore, make every day count. Allow yourself to look forward to a life of accomplishment and joy. When you awake in the morning or plan your schedule, anticipate the positive ways you can conduct your professional and personal activities. Think of ways to improve your relationships and even put aside old grudges. When new opportunities present themselves, try approaching them with the excitement and creativity you always wished you had.

Starting anew gives you the courage to take chances and be an “original.” Despite my shortcomings and past failures, I can be a new person, I can be original in my approach. But I never tried this or did this before? No matter. Today I can start anew (see *Likutey Moharan* I, 272). Rebbe Nachman once said about himself, “That a single word does not leave my lips without some

innovation—that goes without saying. But not even a breath leaves my lips without originality!” (*Tzaddik* #384).

Also, take time to recall all the joy and good you’ve ever experienced. That is using memory at its best and fosters positive thinking and creativity. It also helps you draw on your inner reserves of strength, always hoping for the good to emerge.

Rebbe Nachman teaches that every morning upon arising, a person should immediately “recall” the World to Come (*Likutey Moharan* I, 54:2). By focusing on the true goal of life in this world—the reward for our good deeds that awaits us in the World to Come—we can overlook and even forget the frivolities of this world. We can add that this is a reason why we recite the *Modeh Ani* (I Thank You) prayer upon awakening. Singing God’s praises first thing in the morning focuses our attention and builds our anticipation for the true good that lies in store for us!

# 13

## WHAT IS TRUTH?

*Truth will sprout from the earth (Psalms 85:11).*

*Reb Noson once remarked on this verse: Planted seeds must be nurtured, guarded and watered in order to grow properly. So too, truth must be carefully guarded and nurtured so that when it sprouts, it will emerge in its perfected form (Ma'asiyot u'Meshalim, p. 40).*

TRUTH IS A WONDERFUL IDEAL. But just start talking to a few people and you'll begin to wonder where the truth really lies. Everyone believes his idea is the correct one and her solution is the right one! We tend to see things from our own perspective, and that is *my* truth. But then the other person sees things from his perspective, which is *his* truth. The problem with truth is that it can be only one thing: the truth!

Rebbe Nachman explains that there are many lies, but there is only one truth. You can call a silver cup, "a silver cup." That's the truth. But if you use any other description, like "a gold cup," "a copper cup," or "a paper cup," it's not the truth. Either it is what it is, or it isn't. That's the truth.

So the truth is always one. But each person has a different perspective of truth, which stems from the fact that God, Who is One, created each of us differently. Since each of us is very different from the next person, we each have varying perspectives of the truth.

Reb Noson explains that since each of us sees things differently, then we *all* have truth, which is why we can each present our views truthfully. The real problems arise when we do not accept the validity of another person's view—which, according to him, is also the truth. Then strife enters the picture: as each person stands on his perspectives, the gaps between people become wider and more diversified.

This is the origin of all the arguments that exist in the world. Each person “knows” he is right and that automatically and by extension the other cannot be right. Or as Rebbe Nachman says, “The characteristic of victory does not allow for truth. To prove his point, a person will never allow another view to enter his mind” (see *Likutey Moharan* I, 122).

Our insistence on the truth—“our” truth—actually brings about the negation of truth, along with strife and the accompanying falsehoods, misrepresentations and rationalizations that distance us from the truth even more. For when we try to embellish the truth, or adapt it or anything else, we enter into distortions and lies, and we can actually sink into horrific quagmires. What's most frightening is that we do it to ourselves!

It might be that little white lie that we said in order to protect ourselves from embarrassment. It might be a little “alteration” that we added to the story so that we look good in other people's eyes. Or it might be a whopping tale to save our job, our marriage, or whatever

else feels important to us. No matter how you cloak it, it's a falsehood. (Our Sages teach that for the sake of peace, one is permitted to change his story [*Yevamot* 65b]. But one must be careful with the alterations, lest he fool himself, too!)

Notice how little effort it takes. After all, it's just a few words. But let's compare it to highway driving. You're on the expressway and take the wrong exit. Now you're lost and trying to get back on the right road. But you take a wrong turn, then another and another. You lose time, you lose patience; frankly, you're off the path and whatever happens, you're lost.

Truth is God and truth is light, the proper and illuminated path. Any veering from that path leads a person astray. If we distort that path even a little, it will lead us to many other and different pathways in life that prove disastrous. Rebbe Nachman teaches that falsehood damages one's sight, physically and spiritually (*Likutey Moharan* I, 51). A lie can damage one's sight so that he does not see the consequences of his words or actions. This leads him to say things that are harmful to himself or to others. Another falsehood can "blind" the person and the chances of error increases manifold.

Someone pointed out to Reb Noson a leading *maskil* (follower of the Enlightenment movement) in town who left the path of Judaism. Yet this person never, ever, told a lie. "See how honest and upstanding he is?" he said. Reb Noson replied, "Maybe he never tells a lie. But he is living a lie!" (*Oral tradition*). Truth and falsehood have their individual values and purposes. But as Reb Noson is implying, be careful how you use them. They can make—or break—your life.

## WHAT DOES THIS MEAN TO ME ?

Rebbe Nachman and Reb Noson often speak about truth and how we must seek it at all times. The way to go about this is to seek “its face.”

Everything is identifiable by its face. Just as you would identify a person or an item by looking directly at it, look at yourself and your actions with absolute honesty. Ask yourself, “Is this who I really am, or is this just a face that I present to those around me?” “What is it that I really want out of life?” And, “What am I prepared to do to make myself a better person?” Truth is readily definable, as long as we look it straight in the face. We have to be willing to seek and search for what truth is and then, when we see it, to accept it (even if it’s not to our liking it at first). It is, after all, the truth.

Have you ever said, “I don’t need that extra piece of cake”—and then gone ahead and eaten it anyway? Have you ever told yourself, “I can’t afford that”—and then booked that luxury vacation or bought that expensive car? Being honest with yourself doesn’t mean never indulging, but you must go in with both eyes open and be ready to face the consequences of your decisions.

In the physical realm, being honest with yourself means taking care of your body, not eating to excess or consuming unhealthy foods, and avoiding drugs. It means exercising and doing things that are beneficial for your body. That is being honest. The simple reason is that the body cloaks the soul and without proper maintenance, the soul cannot serve God.

The same idea of honesty applies to the emotional realm. When we’re upset with a child, we may get

angry or even fly into a rage. But to what benefit? What can be gained by anger? What will the child learn from it? The same applies to husband-wife relationships and dealings with siblings, friends and coworkers. Do we choose hate over love, depression over joy, obsession over calm? If we get into the habit of always asking ourselves, “What is the necessity or reality of this?” then we are being honest with ourselves.

Honesty is most important in the spiritual realm. No one will know if you’re just acting the part except you—and God. Ask yourself, “Are my prayers up to par? Am I really striving to have a relationship with God? Or am I a creature of habit, without feeling any life or emotion in my devotions?”

Without honesty, there is no growth—physically, emotionally, spiritually or financially. But when we look for truth, we are taking a “reality check” at just about every step, and know in which direction we’re headed in all of life’s challenges.

When we bring truth into our lives, we draw light into our lives. And, by association, we draw God into our lives! (see *Likutey Moharan* I, 9:3). Our whole outlook changes as we redirect our perspective to a higher and deeper level. Truth is the foundation on which all else depends.

# 14

## WHAT IS FAITH?

*Rebbe Nachman teaches: Faith is like a beautiful palace with many beautiful rooms. One enters and wanders about from room to room, from hallway to hallway... From there one walks on in trust...then further and further. How fortunate is he who walks in faith! (Tzaddik #420).*

*Rebbe Nachman said, "Others consider faith a minor thing. But I consider it an extremely great thing" (Rabbi Nachman's Wisdom #53). When the Rebbe told Reb Noson to record his own discourses, he said to him, "In your writings, every word should be measured. But when you come to the topic of faith, let your pen flow!" (Rabbi Eliyahu Chaim Rosen). The importance of faith is unparalleled. Without it, we cannot enter the realm of spirituality. With it, we can attain the highest of levels.*

FAITH IS THE FOUNDATION of the world. More specifically, it is *the* fundamental principle of Judaism, Torah, and even of humanity itself. At the beginning of time God placed faith into all of Creation, as it is written, "All His work is with faithfulness" (Psalms 33:4). Therefore, there is no one alive who doesn't have faith in something or

someone, and throughout life we are constantly being asked to corroborate that faith: “Do I have faith in my spouse, my neighbor, my child, my grocer, my stockbroker? Are they deserving of my trust?”

All business is ultimately conducted through faith. When examining merchandise you’re interested in purchasing, you ask the price. Do you buy it? If you believe that the merchant’s price is fair, you do. If you suspect there’s something wrong or you simply don’t trust the merchant, you don’t. Even chairmen of multinational conglomerates must place their faith in their assistants’ reports, in the work of people they trust. We can’t survive in this world without the attribute of faith.

Generally speaking, the term “faith” applies to what we do not know or cannot understand. We do not need faith to say that the four-legged piece of wood in front of us is a table, or that the four walls surrounding us form a room. We see it. We know it. And we do not need faith to be convinced that if we stick our finger in a fire, we’re going to get burned. We feel it. We know it. Faith becomes necessary only when we cannot directly experience the object with our senses or understand the reason for doing something.

This easily applies to our relationship with God, Who is beyond us and right next to us at the same time. Rebbe Nachman teaches that there’s a glorious world out there—and a super-benevolent God in charge of it all. But He conceals His presence from us to give us free will. If we remain steadfast in our faith in Him, then as soon as we pierce the veil and say, “I know you’re there, God! I believe in you!” then all the concealments fall away and we feel God as never before.

But this faith must be nurtured. We’ve been tested

again and again, and we will be tested again in the future. The whole world is really a testing ground in which obstacles and challenges exist solely to see how we will respond and what choices we will make. Sometimes the tests are financial, sometimes physical, and at other times our emotions are put on the chopping block. And our spirituality is continually bombarded by outside influences that challenge the very core of our beliefs.

Rebbe Nachman once encouraged a man who was greatly confused about his beliefs. The Rebbe told him, "All of creation came into being only because of people like you. God saw that there would be people who would cling to our holy faith, despite suffering greatly because of the confusion and doubts that constantly plague them. He perceived that they would overcome these doubts and strengthen themselves in their beliefs. It was because of this that God brought forth all creation." After hearing this, the man was greatly strengthened and unperturbed whenever he had these confusing thoughts (*Rabbi Nachman's Wisdom #222*).

Having faith is one thing. Keeping it is another. But we have to have faith anyway, as mentioned above, since somewhere along the way we require faith. If so, Rebbe Nachman is teaching us to always strengthen ourselves in faith. It can be done. And it is most rewarding.

Even if we don't understand it fully, it will become clear later on. Reb Noson explains that faith and knowledge are two sides of the same coin. We begin with faith, which eventually culminates with knowledge and understanding of what we believe in. With this understanding, we are ready to make the next leap of faith to ascend to a higher level of faith! (*Likutey Halakhot, Cheilev vaDam 4:2*).

## WHAT DOES THIS MEAN TO ME ?

With faith, one has a life. Whatever goes wrong, the person has consolation in knowing that God is behind it and he can take solace in His Creator. He also has hope and faith that everything is for the best and will eventually turn out good. On the other hand, without faith, where does a person turn in time of need? In times of trouble? (see *Rabbi Nachman's Wisdom* #51, #101).

Reb Noson lists four types of faith that we should try to cultivate:

- Faith in God
- Faith in the Torah
- Faith in the Tzaddikim
- Faith in yourself

FAITH IN GOD means believing that He exists, He is Omnipotent, He guides the world with Divine Providence and oversees all that is happening. Someone as All-Powerful as God certainly has the power to grant your requests and prayers. But you have to believe it! Otherwise your prayers won't be nearly as effective. How will you ever establish a relationship with God if you don't have that kind of faith in Him?

FAITH IN THE TORAH means believing that the Torah provides us with the correct parameters for dealing with life. For this reason, we must place great emphasis on simply observing Torah laws. By having faith in Torah and *mitzvot*, we will begin to understand the importance of following the Torah and see the positive influence it has on our lives.

On the other hand, abandoning faith in the Torah—

and especially the Oral Law—leads to catastrophic results. Throughout Jewish history, breakaway sects have caused many difficulties for the Jewish people. These include the idolaters during the First Temple, the Sadducees of the Second Temple, the Karaites in the Geonic period (beginning around 600 C.E.), the apostates of the medieval era, and groups up to our own day that choose to negate the Oral Law. Yet rather than spawn new movements with lots of followers, these splinter groups inevitably die out, because they are detached from the Torah, the source of life (see *Likutey Halakhot, Halva'ah* 4:8).

FAITH IN THE TZADDIKIM means placing our trust in the unique individuals in each generation who achieve great levels of piety in their relationship to God, and are thus able to bring God's word back to those of lower spiritual consciousness (see Chapter 17, "What is the Tzaddik?"). In fact, the Tzaddikim are such lofty examples of religious devotion and moral purity that God often lets them be the conduit for blessing to the world.

FAITH IN YOURSELF is so important that without it, the other three areas of faith will always be lacking. Reb Noson explains that self-faith involves:

- Believing that I, as an individual, am very important in God's eyes.
- Believing that no matter how far I may be from God, I have the power to return to Him.
- Believing that no matter how I presently conduct my life, I have the inner strength to change my habits.
- Believing that I have the self-confidence to deal with others.

- Believing that I, too, have the ability to become a Tzaddik.

Rebbe Nachman teaches that an important practice in strengthening self-faith is to repeat over and over, “I believe in God!” as in the verse, “I will make known Your faith with my mouth” (Psalms 89:2; *Likutey Moharan* II, 44).

Armed with faith—in God, in the Torah, in the Tzaddikim and in ourselves—we can always find an outlet for our emotions and feelings, and always find ways to better ourselves and repair any wrongdoings of the past. We can face the future with confidence, knowing that we stand on the solid foundation of faith.

# 15

## WHAT IS THE COVENANT?

*The main way to draw close to God is by guarding the covenant (Likutey Moharan I, 29:4).*

THE COVENANT, OR *BRIT*, refers to the pact that God made with Abraham, the first patriarch of the Jewish people. God said, “This is My covenant that you will keep, between Me and you and your children after you: Every male must be circumcised” (Genesis 17:10). The mitzvah of circumcision is the sign of the deal that God made with Abraham and his future offspring, the Jewish people. God promised to be true to the Jewish people, never abandoning them for another nation, and the Jewish people, in turn, promised to be true to God. Unlike a business deal, where if one side pulls out, the other side is absolved of its commitment, a covenant is eternal. Even if the Jewish people renege on their promise (which, unfortunately, they did several times in their history, opting to serve idols rather than God), God will never back out on His end of the deal.

We see that despite their occasional lapses in faithfulness to God, the Jews have always kept the mitzvah of *brit milah* (literally, “covenant of circumcision”) no matter

what. Many nations—ancient Greece, ancient Rome, Spain during the Inquisition, Nazi Germany—tried to force the Jews to give up this practice, but they held on tenaciously, showing their willingness to be killed rather than forsake the covenant. Even today, as secularism has swept through the ranks of world Jewry and left many ignorant of the most basic tenets of our tradition, circumcision is still one thing that all Jewish boys have in common. Deep down, a Jew senses his unique connection to God (see *Shabbat* 130a).

The great medieval commentator Rashi explains that the sign of the covenant was established in a place where one can differentiate between male and female (Rashi on Genesis 17:14). On a deeper level, the sign of the covenant teaches us that parameters should be set between male and female. When these parameters are honored and guarded, a special relationship of mutual honor and respect evolves between a married couple.

Marriage and fidelity to one partner are seen as almost a joke in contemporary society. “Why wait?” and “Just do it” are the mantras of the sexual gurus of the modern age. A man would have to be blind not to notice the skimpy new fashions, the suggestive pictures in print and online media, and the alluring music that blares from every car and shop. Sex is seen as a casual thing, something to try on and discard like a pair of socks. It’s no wonder that by the time young men and women decide to get married, their heads are filled with so much trash and indecency that they find it hard to concentrate on their spouse and his or her needs.

Our Sages refer to marriage as *KiDuShin* (קידושין), from the Hebrew word *KoDeSH* (קדש), “holy.” The union between husband and wife is meant to be an act of

respect, endearment and holiness. When the couple focuses on each other to the exclusion of all others, the Divine Presence resides between them (cf. *Sotah* 17a). That is, a certain karma can be felt in their home that allows peace and harmony to exist and affects all the members of the household. The sanctity of attitude towards the relationship heightens one's awareness of one's mate.

The organ on which the *brit milah* is performed has another, even more important function: the ability to initiate new life. This is the reason God commanded Abraham to perform a circumcision on himself before he fathered Isaac, so that Isaac would be born in a state of holiness. The *Zohar* emphasizes that the thoughts and attitudes of the parents at the time of the marital act have a very telling effect on the child that will be conceived (*Zohar Chadash* 15a). Rebbe Nachman adds that by sanctifying the marital act, the parents can draw a bright and illumined soul to their child, a soul that contributes to the child's greater development, growth and abilities in later years (*Likutey Moharan* I, 14:4). Unfortunately, the reverse is also true.

The importance of guarding the covenant plays a major role in Rebbe Nachman's teachings. Someone who does not guard his sexual purity, but indulges in every lust and pleasure that the world has to offer, will never be able to have a successful relationship with God, Who represents the ultimate in holiness and purity. This is as the verse states, "Speak to the Children of Israel and say to them, 'Be holy, because I, God your Lord, am holy'" (Leviticus 19:2). The *Zohar* (II, 3b) refers to a blemish of the covenant as a "lie," because that person has lied to God in his relationship with Him; he has taken the God-given power of creating life and used it falsely, in a wrongful

relationship. If you want Godliness, you can't indulge in every lust. It's that simple.

Rebbe Nachman explains that there are three levels of existence: sanctity, purity and impurity (*Likutey Moharan I*, 51:2). We live in an impure world where all types of lust surround us. We can either give in and become impure like our environment, or we can strive for the sanctified. And know that there exists a path that is very close to sanctity yet allows a person to have his cake and eat it, too. That is the level of purity. As long as we control our desires, we fulfill the teaching, "Sanctify yourself with what is permitted" (*Yevamot 20a*).

Rebbe Nachman says, "All Jews are called Tzaddikim in that they are circumcised" (*Likutey Moharan I*, 23:10). The merit of the covenant of circumcision is very great; it is enough to earn a Jew the distinction of holiness and the accolade of Tzaddik. The Tzaddik is the epitome of sexual morality and, as a result, has a closer relationship to God than the average person. Just as the Tzaddik has the special power to raise all those around him, bringing them to a heightened awareness of God and His teachings, a person who guards his covenant can raise himself and many others to a heightened awareness of honesty, decency and purity.

One who makes the effort to guard his covenant shows what he considers important in life and displays his fortitude in following through on his claims and intentions. Such a person attains honor and respect (cf. *ibid.*, I, 11:3); he is also more open to earn a better livelihood, since he exudes a sense of honesty and trustworthiness (cf. *ibid.*, I, 29:5). By guarding the covenant, he also merits peace; there's no web of lies to weave around the life he leads (cf. *ibid.*, I, 33:1).

It's not easy—not at all. But being able to walk around with your head held high, radiating goodness and trustworthiness, will make you feel good about yourself your entire life.

## WHAT DOES THIS MEAN TO ME ?

Guarding the covenant means living with focus, clarity and purpose. Instead of being bombarded by sights and sounds that drag us to places we never thought we'd go, we are in control. We can choose what to do and reap the benefits of those decisions in terms of more holiness and more purity. Though we may fear that we will “turn into a monk” if so many casual relationships are proscribed to us, the opposite is true. When we commit to one person, investing all our focus and desire into that one spouse alone, we will find it even more liberating and satisfying because of unity of purpose.

Rebbe Nachman's approach to guarding the covenant makes it very simple for us. There are things that are permitted, and there are things that are forbidden. There are also temptations that crop up and can lead us on an immoral road and way of life. When we concentrate on doing everything it takes to guard our covenant, we will automatically live a life of morality. As we do so, we will automatically be drawing closer to God and earning His blessing.

These specific things are musts when it comes to guarding the covenant:

- Marrying someone who is Jewish
- Avoiding sexual relations with a menstruating woman

- Avoiding extramarital affairs
- Avoiding homosexual relationships
- Refraining from masturbation
- Guarding one's eyes from indecent pictures and displays

The last item on the list may come as a surprise. If I'm working so hard on having the right relationships and avoiding the wrong ones, why can't I take a peek now and then? I promise nothing will happen!

Are you sure? The eyes are the windows to the world. This means that the way a person looks at things is the way they will be transmitted to his mind and, in turn, become the director of his actions. By internalizing lust, we fill our minds with thoughts that aren't healthy, for the mind as well as for the body. Our Sages teach that the seed is drawn from the entire body and the more it is spent, the greater the toll it takes on the body by weakening it (cf. *Niddah* 43a; see *Orach Chaim* 240:14). Physiologically speaking, by guarding the eyes and acting in a way that is morally correct, a person protects and sustains his bodily fluids so that his "natural juices" remain until a ripe old age.

So it develops that guarding the covenant is helpful to one's physical well-being as well as mental stability. It leads to a moral life, a firmness of resolve, the ability to see things through to their conclusion (because one has a solid foundation), and reliability in all facets of life. And when we realize that the covenant parallels the *sefirah* of *Yesod* (see Charts, p. 183), it takes on a whole new meaning. The Hebrew word *Yesod* means "Foundation." Living morally means building a solid foundation for one's entire life.

# 16

## WHAT IS A TIKKUN?

*If you believe it is possible to destroy, believe it is possible to repair (Likutey Moharan II, 112).*

ALL IS FINE AND GOOD if one can maintain a moral life. But what if a person fails or succumbs to temptation when trying to pray, to avoid non-kosher food, or to guard the covenant? Is there any hope? Can he ever rectify what he did wrong?

Just as in “real life,” mistakes are made that must be corrected, so too, in spiritual life, errors are made and, sometimes, God forbid, even intentional sins are committed. The ARI speaks of the damage caused by sin, which empowers the forces of evil and is the source of all suffering—illness, natural disasters and all kinds of damage. Is there a way to fix these, too?

The answer, says Rebbe Nachman, is a resounding “YES!”

The Hebrew word *TiKkuN* (תיקון) means “repair,” “rectification,” and “preparation.” *LeTaKeiN ma’akhalim* means to prepare food (for a meal); we perform various other *tikkunim* to prepare ourselves for the day ahead, like

brushing our teeth and taking that daily dose of caffeine in our morning coffee. The rest of our day appears to be filled with *tikkunim*, in terms of both preparing for and fixing what goes wrong at the office, on our errands and in our personal relationships. What about *tikkunim* in the spiritual realm?

Rebbe Nachman speaks often of *tikkunim*. He speaks of *tikkunim* for souls, he speaks of repentance as a *tikkun* for sin, and he revealed the *Tikkun HaKlali*, the General Remedy, which he explains as a general *tikkun* that can effect rectification for any and all individual blemishes (*Likutey Moharan* I, 29:3). Rebbe Nachman always holds out hope even for someone who committed the worst acts, and states emphatically that one can always repent and return to God. Always. Even from the worst sins, even from the lowest levels. Surprisingly, Reb Noson adds that Rebbe Nachman taught that sometimes a person's sins are so powerful that when he recognizes his folly, that very recognition leads him to repentance. Then, everything he did wrong can be transformed into *mitzvot*! (see *Likutey Halakhot, Birkhot HaRei'ach* 4:2).

God is always with us; He permeates every nanometer of existence. When we seek Him, we're bound to find Him, somewhere, somehow. But when we err (or worse), we lose that contact, much as a person who makes a wrong turn ends up in unfamiliar territory. Our Sages say, "When a person sins and then repeats the sin, he begins to think it's permissible" (*Kiddushin* 20a). Then he asks, "Where is God?" I might not see Him or feel Him, so I am distant. Can I ever return to Him?

Rebbe Nachman teaches that at that very first moment when a person thinks of God, saying, "God! Where are You?" he immediately connects with God and can

now begin his return to Him. For although he may think that he is eons distant from God, God is really right next to him! He just wasn't aware of it. But the minute he calls out, "God! Where are You?" he makes contact and will find that God is with him at all times, in all places, even in the filthiest of places, even in the worst situations (*Likutey Moharan II*, 12).

This idea applies to everything a person has ever done throughout his entire life. We can always call out to God from wherever we are. Rebbe Nachman said, "God is always with you. He is near you! He is next to you! Do not be afraid!" (*Siach Sarfey Kodesh III*, #661). This applies to every misdeed, every wrongful act, every evil thought and every wrongful word. And we may be pleasantly surprised by the outcome. Our Sages teach, "When a person repents out of fear of God, then his sins are re-evaluated from intentional sins and are calculated only as accidental sins. But when a person returns to God out of love, then all his sins are transformed into good deeds!" (*Yoma* 86b).

How can that be? Transforming sins into good deeds? But when one serves God out of love, he invokes the attribute of *AHaVaH* (אהבה), "love," which in Hebrew has the same numerical value (13) as *EChAD* (אחד), "one." All becomes a unity, all becomes one—one with God.

This is what is meant by a *tikkun*. A person can fix many things. It begins with his repentance, his turning towards God, which has a tremendous effect on minimizing or even completely erasing his sins. A *tikkun* is the means of rectifying what we did wrong. It is something we can do, it is something we must do. And it is something that Rebbe Nachman taught us is in our power to effect!

## WHAT DOES THIS MEAN TO ME ?

Rare is the person who goes through life without inadvertently saying the wrong thing—some gossip (or slander), mockery, profanity, that little white lie (or the big whopper), flattery, and so on. How about getting angry and embarrassing others? When it comes to *mitzvot* like observing Shabbat and Jewish festivals, how many people are so well-versed in the laws, bylaws and additional subsections to the laws of these holy days that they can say they never transgressed any of them? Then there are those who succumb to temptation and eat something forbidden or commit a sexual sin, whether of thought, word or deed. How can we fix those mistakes?

We all know that a sin can be erased through repentance. But the holy writings question how this works, since a sin might have been committed in a certain place at a certain time, and now, years later, the person is far from the “scene of the crime” in both time and place. For example, an employer was incensed at a secretary and humiliated her in front of the whole office. The secretary quit and moved to a faraway city. Years later, the boss wants to rectify what was said or done wrong, but has no idea where the secretary lives. What if she’s no longer alive? Can that sin ever be erased?

Rebbe Nachman teaches that yes, each person can effect a *tikkun* for his sins. There are ways and means that a person can turn to God to effect rectification, though some cases are more difficult than others. Still, it is possible, depending on the level of regret and repentance. It needs some effort, crying and begging

God for forgiveness, but it can be done. A problem does develop when another person is involved—for example, if we embarrass someone or speak slander against him—for then we must ask forgiveness from him, too. Even if that person has moved far away or passed away, we can still effect forgiveness. If a person asks enough, God will see to it that the injured party will forgive.

Even sexual sin—and especially masturbation, which is considered the worst possible sin (see *Even HaEzer* 23:1)—can be rectified. Towards this, Rebbe Nachman said, “This sin has been with us since Adam (see *Eruvin* 18b). All the Tzaddikim throughout all the generations have worked on finding a rectification for this sin. God helped me and I totally grasped the solution. Rectifying this matter by reciting the Ten Psalms [the *Tikkun HaKlali*—see p. 114] is something completely new, an outstanding innovation, and a wonderful and awesome remedy”. He explained that Psalms are comprised of the Ten Types of Song, which are the most powerful force to bring a person back to God (see *Rabbi Nachman’s Wisdom* #141; *Rabbi Nachman’s Stories* #13, the Sixth Day).

Many Breslover Chassidim make it a daily practice to say the *Tikkun HaKlali*. Their reason? If Rebbe Nachman taught that the *Tikkun HaKlali* helps to rectify even after a sin, how much more effective would it be if we recite the *Tikkun* before the sin! This practice can also work for you. The more we seek a *tikkun* for our wrongdoings, the greater our chances of making it happen.

But what if our repentance falls short, or we don’t feel it’s been effective? This is another reason why we

need to be attached to the Tzaddikim (see Chapter 17, “What is the Tzaddik?”). The Tzaddikim are constantly seeking ways to rectify all sins, even the worst sins, and are always working to bring everyone to a state of perfection. When I turn to God and rely not on myself (who has erred) but on those Tzaddikim who were always righteous and know how to serve God, and I accept their teachings and try to follow their guidance, then even if I am found wanting, what else could I have done to rectify my ways? By attaching myself to the Tzaddikim, it is possible to repair everything. Literally everything!

Fortunate is the person who recognizes his errors and repents, thereby effecting rectification for his sins. For all of them!

# 17

## WHAT IS THE TZADDIK?

*The Tzaddik is the foundation of the world* (Proverbs 10:25).

AT THE BEGINNING OF Creation, God created light and then differentiated between light and darkness (Genesis 1:4). Indeed, God created many opposing forces and gave man the free will to choose between them: to choose light over darkness, right over wrong, good over evil. God's purpose in Creation was for man to consider and define for himself the correct route to choose in every situation.

Though many attempt to follow the path of true righteousness, few succeed in overcoming the attractions and temptations of this world. God knew that this would be so. He knew that most men would succumb to temptation, some more, some less—but He also knew that a few would triumph and withstand all temptations. These few are the symbol of light and the epitome of what man can achieve.

The concept of the Tzaddik, or righteous individual, has always been a part of Judaism and appears throughout

our holy writings. To wit:

- For the merit of even one Tzaddik, the world was created (*Yoma* 38b).
- God decrees and the Tzaddik has the power to nullify the decree. But, the Tzaddik decrees and God fulfills his decree (cf. *Mo'ed Katan* 16b).
- Not only are Tzaddikim able to nullify decrees, but they are afterwards blessed for this (*Zohar* I, 101b).
- If the Tzaddikim would so wish, they could create worlds (*Sanhedrin* 65b).
- Tzaddikim draw down and reveal God's Divine Presence in the world (*Shir HaShirim Rabbah* 5:1).

Some Tzaddikim are predestined for greatness from the time of Creation. Their righteousness—which in any case they have to establish through their own good deeds—is given to them so that they can perform a certain mission for God. Other individuals rise to the level of Tzaddik by overcoming their physical desires and devoting their entire lives to God. They earn the title on their own.

When someone suggested to Rebbe Nachman that he had achieved all that he did because of his exalted soul, the Rebbe seemed very annoyed. “This is the trouble. You think that Tzaddikim attain greatness merely because they have a very great soul. This is absolutely wrong! I worked very hard for all this. I put much effort into attaining what I did...it is because of the devotions and the efforts I put in” (*Rabbi Nachman's Wisdom* #165).

The best way to describe the Tzaddik is as a bridge between the physical and the spiritual. Having subdued his natural desires and negative character traits in his quest for holiness, he transcends the physical and is

capable of grasping what spirituality is really about. With this mastery, he can take the most wondrous aspects of Godliness and bring them down to a level that the simplest person can relate to. Some Tzaddikim convey their knowledge to us through their teachings, others through their deeds. Observing the Tzaddikim, either through their spoken or written lessons, helps us understand what is important.

Because he has one foot in this world and one foot in Heaven, the Tzaddik is an intermediary between us and God. Of course, no Jew (or anyone else) needs an intermediary between himself and God, for he can always search for and seek out God, and he can find Him. But the Tzaddik has already found God and therefore, to put it simply, he knows the way to find God. This means he is the ideal leader and guide to teach us whatever we need to know for our own pursuit of Godliness.

Unfortunately, the term “intermediary” has been twisted and misused by those who do not, or cannot, understand who the Tzaddik is. They cast aspersions on and question the validity of his role. In doing so, they mislead people and draw them far away from the Tzaddik. This did not begin with the advent of Chassidic Tzaddikim. Already in biblical times we find that “the people mocked the messengers of God” (II Chronicles 36:16). These “messengers” were none other than the Tzaddikim and prophets of that generation. Then, as now, people had no conception of how great these leaders were. They thought themselves capable of choosing their leaders (as is done in “democratic” countries) and of knowing the correct path in life. This attitude caused the destruction of the Temple and the beginning of our long exile.

To avail ourselves of the guidance and direction that

the Tzaddik has to offer, we must “bind” ourselves to the Tzaddik. This means following the Tzaddik’s example and accepting his advice. Rebbe Nachman explains that the key to achieving spirituality is listening to the Tzaddik—to everything that he says—and not deviating from it by an iota. Just accept his teachings with full faith and simplicity (*Likutey Moharan* I, 123). When we do what the Tzaddik says and as he does, we become attached to him spiritually, and then we ourselves become Tzaddik-like (*ibid.*, I, 7:4). Thus, a person who follows his rabbi or Chassidic master becomes bound to that *rav*. Following Rebbe Nachman’s advice attaches the follower to Rebbe Nachman.

Even after a Tzaddik passes away (such as in the case of Rebbe Nachman), one does not have to sever his relationship with the Tzaddik. For one who is completely holy, death as we know it has no effect over him (*Zohar* II, 174a). The Tzaddik’s power and influence are even stronger after death, since his physical body no longer encumbers him.

For this reason, it is an ancient Jewish custom to visit the gravesites of Tzaddikim and pray there for God’s salvation for personal difficulties as well as for the salvation of Israel (*Orach Chaim* 581:4). Among the graves of Tzaddikim with which you may be familiar are the graves of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai in Meron, Rachel’s Tomb outside Bethlehem, the Cave of Machpelah in Hebron where the Patriarchs are buried, King David’s Tomb on Mount Zion, and the graves of many of the Talmudic rabbis located throughout Israel. The grave of one of most famous Tzaddikim, Moses, was hidden by God. The Talmud explains that if the location of Moses’ grave was known to man, the Jews would go there to pray—and

they would immediately be redeemed from exile! (*Sotah* 14a; *Eyn Yaakov*, *Sotah* #54).



REBBE NACHMAN TEACHES that there are many good and righteous Tzaddikim in this world. But in every generation, there is one unique individual called the True Tzaddik who is the real leader of the Jewish nation (see *Likutey Moharan* I, 66:4). He is there for everyone—for each person on his or her own level—and he can guide each individual on the path he or she needs to live a full life. This applies not only to spiritual living, but to physical, emotional and financial circumstances as well.

In the nascent days of the Jewish nation, the True Tzaddik was obviously Moses, who spoke with God directly and diligently taught His Torah to each and every Jew. Other leaders of exceptional caliber include Rabbi Akiva, Rashi, the ARI, the Baal Shem Tov, and so on. Breslover Chassidim consider Rebbe Nachman to be a True Tzaddik—not only for his generation, but for generations to come.

Ask anyone who has been touched by Rebbe Nachman's teachings what inspired him to study Breslov writings and he'll answer, "Rebbe Nachman speaks to me directly." One present-day Breslover summed it up this way: "I find it absolutely amazing that the words of someone who lived in the late 18th and early 19th centuries in Eastern Europe can, 200 years later, relate directly to someone such as myself, a product of 21st-century Western civilization." Rebbe Nachman's teachings are universal, covering the entire spectrum of Judaism. They maintain their freshness and are inspiring; they give hope and encouragement, assurance and motivation to anyone and everyone, from all walks of life.

Open any book of Rebbe Nachman's teachings and you'll find advice for countless situations. The Rebbe always seems to have something to say for what you're going through right now. Review that same material some time later, when other concerns occupy your thoughts, and you'll find in it an entirely new set of directions—advice specifically applicable to your new situation and circumstances. This is difficult to explain to anyone who has never studied Rebbe Nachman's works. His teachings are bottomless wellsprings, ever-flowing brooks of life and vitality. We need only avail ourselves of them to benefit from their amazing resources and counsel.

Rebbe Nachman said, "I am a river that cleanses from all stains" (*Tzaddik* #332). Whoever has taken the Rebbe's advice and spoken to God in *hitbodedut* (see p. 113) knows the wonderful sensation of being able to open his heart and pour out his innermost feelings. He knows that no matter where he is, God is with him, waiting for him to come closer. He also knows that no matter how bad things get in life, there is that reservoir of inner strength to rely upon, because Rebbe Nachman called out, "Never despair! There is always hope!" When his days in this world are done, he can always rely on the strength and power of the True Tzaddik to argue his case before the Heavenly Court. And he knows that in the end, the True Tzaddik—Rebbe Nachman—will help to cleanse and rectify his soul.

## WHAT DOES THIS MEAN TO ME ?

So there is a Tzaddik who is very great and has wellsprings of teachings and advice to offer. How can I benefit from this Tzaddik? What does being attached to this Tzaddik mean to me on a personal level?

First of all, just knowing about such a Tzaddik is of great benefit. Everyone who is in a position of responsibility knows the importance of having someone to depend on in all situations. This very great Tzaddik is available to everyone, offering advice and counsel in all times of need. On a personal level, one's burden is somewhat lighter.

A person who is attached to such a Tzaddik gains so much more. When we recall the days of Moses or King David, we envision the glory days of the Jewish nation. This is because these great Tzaddikim, if they are not hindered by opposition, bring out the best in each person and enhance the individual's pride in himself and what he can accomplish (see *Likutey Moharan* 17:1). These Tzaddikim know each person's "pressure points" and which buttons to push in order to get the person on the express train to success. (One of Rebbe Nachman's major themes is how to recognize one's greatness and capabilities, yet remain humble.) Everyone can accomplish great things, but the true leader is the one who understands each individual and can match the best advice in Torah with that person's unique needs.

In order to find the True Tzaddik, the one who will best lead you on your spiritual path, you must search for him. Just as you would pursue the perfect mate,

hunt for a top job, or search out the right home, so too, you must expend great effort to find your true leader. This might mean searching and seeking, again and again, for the spiritual teachings that quench the thirst of your soul.

Additionally, you should pray to God to direct you to the truth, to find the True Tzaddik. The means for seeking the Tzaddik are limited by one's knowledge. Whatever you understand of spirituality will guide you to what you think is right. Yet prayer can bring you to a higher level. It can elevate you far above your capabilities and enable you to find the True Tzaddik.