

PATHWAYS

Crossing the Narrow Bridge with Rebbe Nachman and His Students

PARASHAT VAYECHI • 5776 • VOL. 6 NO. 10

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What's Winter All About?

By Yossi Katz

HERE ON THE East Coast we've had an unusually mild winter so far. This is particularly relevant to me because aside from more than "slightly disliking the cold," I have always found the connection between the Jewish calendar and the weather to be fascinating and enlightening. Being that the weather has indeed been so cooperative, I recently took a walk to enjoy nature and reflect on some of these connections.

I must begin by admitting that I felt a bit guilty for having such a negative attitude toward winter. After all, a Jew is supposed to be happy always, and God created this season, too! Admittedly, there must be some great hidden meaning behind it.

Spring is the time of year where things begin to thaw. Plants are planted, grass begins to grow and people dig out of their winter hideaways and finally emerge. Spiritually, spring is a time of new beginnings.

Summer is a time of great activity. The days are long and the weather is warm. People seem to have boundless energy to run about and do whatever they've wanted to do all year.

Fall is a time of culmination. The produce is finished growing, we harvest our fruits and vegetables, put everything away and otherwise get ready for the long winter months ahead.

What's winter all about? On the outside, everything is dead, the nights are long and cold. The animals (and some people) hibernate and the birds (and some people) fly south and abandon ship. For those of us stuck here in the "winter wonderland," what is our *raison d'être*?

In the town of Breslov, the long winter nights were actually called the *goldeneh nacht* (golden nights). The sun would set early and the Breslov Chassidim would

recite the evening prayers and quickly go to bed. The long nights afforded them the ability to get some sleep while still providing plenty of quality quiet-time for meditation and study before the morning prayers. This spiritual hibernation was much praised and cherished by the Breslov Chassidim.

The solitude and slow pace of the winter is not a sad or depressing time, it's an opportunity to cozy up and focus solely on your *neshamah* (soul) and your own spiritual needs. It's a time when you can develop your unique spiritual identity, getting to know your true self and growing confident in your ability to connect to God in all seasons.

In our *parashah*, Jacob blesses each tribe according to its exceptional characteristics. Yissachar receives the blessing, "Yissachar is a bony donkey, crouching between the boundaries." This tribe was unique because they spent their lives studying Torah. They are therefore considered to be a tribe of Tzaddikim. In Hebrew, the name *YiSSaChaR* can also be read as *YeSh S'ChaR* (there is reward).

These Tzaddikim descend to even the lowest levels to teach us that our actions are worthy and desirable in the eyes of God. Even if we feel as materially shallow as a donkey, still, we are worthy. After all, we are not like a flabby donkey but rather a bony donkey. Rashi explains that this donkey is bony and strong because it bears the yoke of Torah. Even if I am steeped in materialism and bad habits, nevertheless, I am a strong donkey, I can serve God and do some measure of good the way I am. Yes, there is awesome reward for my actions!

Furthermore, even in the thick of the cold winter or in any challenging time that bounds us in and surrounds us, we have the ability to "crouch." No matter how unconnected or threatened I may feel, I can always subjugate myself to the warmth of the Torah. Right now is the perfect time to develop those feelings!

Based on Likutey Halakhot, Pesach 9

On the River

By Yehudis Golshevsky

NEAR THE TOWN of Medvedevka, Ukraine, was a village called Husyatin. It was surrounded by the green fields and grazing flocks that characterized the region, and the Zbruch River, bounded by forests and farmsteads, flowed nearby. In that small village, the newly-married Rebbe Nachman (who was then barely into his teens) lived with his young wife in the home of his in-laws, studying Torah while his wife's family supported the new couple.

During that time, Rebbe Nachman continued to practice his personal devotions in secrecy, preferring that his in-laws and other members of the community think he was like all the other young men, and maybe even more frivolous than that. He would go for solitary walks along the riverbank, among the cattails and reeds, spending hours in private communion with God. He would often take a small boat out on the water and allow it to drift into the growth along the bank, so he could be hidden under a canopy of branches and leaves while he poured out his heart before his Creator.

Sometimes, when the wind and the current were strong, Rebbe Nachman's small craft was in danger of capsizing. In later years, the Rebbe would use that image to help his students understand what it means to pray with all your heart:

“When you stand before God to pray for your needs, to be saved from your lower nature which always lies in ambush, you should feel as though you're like a man alone in a tiny boat on the open sea, with the abyss right below you, ready to swallow you down ... When your prayer emerges from that sense of imminent danger, the crying out is completely different—it bursts out of the heart with heat and honesty.

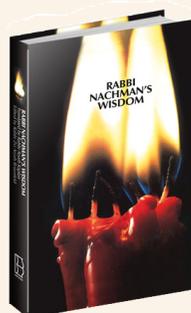
“And the truth is that this is the nature of our situation as human beings here in this world –always hovering between heaven and earth, like a craft tossed up and down on a stormy sea. We are suspended over the abyss, and the wind is high ... the danger is great ... and our only hope is to cry out, and cry out to God for help!”

Based on Or HaOrot I, pp. 103-106

SIDEPATH

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

303. The Rebbe once spoke to me about the folly of sexual desires. He said, “One who occupies himself with lewd thoughts is a fool. Even the most ordinary person would not want to be caught doing this. Even if he has no fear of sin, he still has no desire for the shame of being caught with another woman. So why engage in lustful thoughts? Why trouble your soul for nothing?”



We have spoken of the fact that every person can control his thoughts and direct them as he wishes. Accept this advice and you will be worthy of eternal pleasure.

304. The Rebbe ridiculed the sexual desire, quoting the words of the morning prayer, “Do not bring me to a test or to disgrace.” He said, “*Ader a nisayon, ader a beziyon* – Either a test, or else disgrace.” That is, if you do not pass the test, you will come to disgrace.

The Rebbe said, “People are so bound up with their bodily desires, and tied to this one in particular, that it does not help when you explain how base this is. On the contrary, the more you speak of it, the more lewd thoughts they have. Therefore, in most cases, it is best not to even begin to think of it at all.”



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The photo on the front is a close-up of Rebbe Nachman's chair, which is displayed in the main Breslov synagogue in Jerusalem.