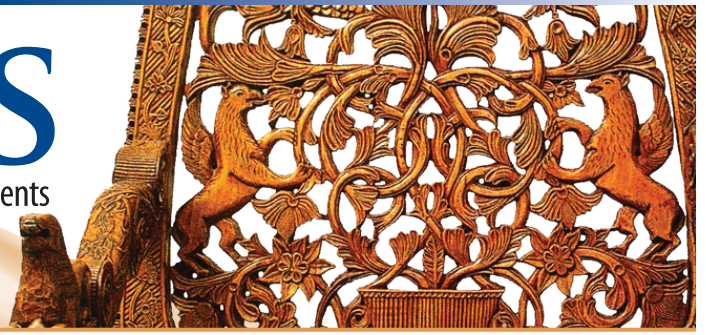


PATHWAYS

Crossing the Narrow Bridge with Rebbe Nachman and His Students

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Why Does God Punish?

By Yossi Katz

I ONCE HEARD about two Rabbis debating a very famous and difficult question: “If there is a God, why did He allow the Holocaust to happen?” One Rabbi reasoned that the state of Judaism had been in such severe decline, its very foundations threatened, that this was a deserving punishment. The other Rabbi was very upset by this and retorted, “How dare anyone say they know why the Holocaust happened and six million precious Jews perished?”

Now, I am no greater than those two Rabbis and would certainly not venture to take sides. But I do feel that the idea of a punishing God has frightened away many Jews, and should be clarified.

Let’s begin by acknowledging the explicit – namely, the verses found in Deuteronomy 28:15-69, known as the *Tochecha* (Rebuke). The Torah lists the devastating punishments that the Jewish people would endure if they strayed from the Torah’s laws. We understand that everything written there more or less took place during the period of the destruction of the two Temples. In commemoration, we are currently observing a three-week period of mourning. The concept of understanding God’s punishment and concealment is therefore absolutely relevant to us right now.

Rebbe Nachman describes a beautiful process. “When a person secludes himself with God and speaks his piece and his woes to God – confessing and regretting the enormity of the blemishes that he committed – then, likewise, the *Shekhinah* (Divine Presence) faces him, speaking Her piece and Her woes and consoling him... She consoles him [by letting him know] that She will seek strategies to correct all the blemishes” (*Likutey Moharan* I, 259).

The Rebbe is describing a process that is completely at odds with what many of us have been taught and live by. When a person confesses his or her misdeeds, God does not smack him and make him feel bad. Rather, He consoles him and expresses His woes and pains that the person is distanced from Him. How shocking! Don’t you find yourself wallowing in guilt, waiting to be buried alive by a falling anvil? But this is wrong. God doesn’t punish because He is insulted or enraged, but because He desires to be close to us! Take a step back and consider this: The Master of the World cares enough to wake me up because He wants to be close with me! He will seek strategies to help me resolve the distance between us!

Reb Noson says that on Tisha B’Av, the national day of mourning the destruction of the Temple, we aren’t really mourning the Temple’s loss. That is a historical fact. But our Sages teach, “A generation in which the Temple is not rebuilt is considered as one in which it was destroyed” (*Yerushalmi, Yoma* 1:1). The focus should be on our generation and our actions. Am I turning to God? Am I seeking the strategies to rebuild?

On Tisha B’Av we read from the Book of *Eichah*, which is spelled *Aleph-Yud-Khaf-Heh*. This is an acronym for *AYeH [mekom] Kevodo* (“Where is the place of His glory?”) Mourning means calling out to God in desperation. It’s about acknowledging that we aren’t sure how to correct our actions and change ourselves. It’s about showing the Master of the Universe that we care about our relationship with Him and are waiting for Him to console us and teach us how to be truly connected.

What it’s not about is negative guilt, distance and self-hate.

May we all merit hearing the *Shekhinah* console us. May we implement Her strategies and merit an end to our suffering and, finally, the rebuilding of the Holy Temple, speedily and in our days. Amen.

Based on Likutey Halakhot, Hilkhos Gittin

What's in a Name?

By Yehudis Golshevsky

WHEN REBBE NACHMAN's fourth daughter was born, he didn't follow the common custom and name her at the next Torah-reading opportunity. Instead, days and days went by, and he had yet to provide his newest child with a name.

The Chassidim were confused by Rebbe Nachman's strange practice, and people around Breslov began to whisper that something seemed to be wrong – the Rebbe was withholding his own daughter's name! Reb Chaikel, one of Rebbe Nachman's closest students, couldn't hold back any longer. He went to visit his mentor at home to speak openly about people's concerns.

“Rebbe, if you don't do something, people will begin to say that the Breslovers no longer name their children!” Reb Chaikel added that Rebbe Nachman already had a number of opponents who were looking for excuses to vilify his followers. Would the Rebbe himself provide his enemies with ammunition?

In later years, Reb Noson would say that Rebbe Nachman never made a fuss about something unless it was extremely important to him. Generally, if someone wanted him to do something and it didn't violate a principle of his, he would accommodate himself to their will.

Rebbe Nachman shrugged. “Nu, if you think so ... Let her name among the Jewish people be Chayah!” Reb Chaikel ran out to the synagogue to spread the news.

But later that day, unexpected news arrived from Mezhibuzh. Rebbe Nachman's mother, Feiga, had passed away. Now it all was clear! The Rebbe had only been waiting for the news to reach Breslov before he named his daughter after his beloved mother. Even if he knew by *ruach hakodesh* (Divine inspiration) that his mother was gone, he couldn't possibly give the name until the news reached Breslov by natural means.

Reb Chaikel was beside himself. What had he done?

After a time, Rebbe Nachman had another daughter, and this time he gave the name Feiga right away. But the girl died in infancy. The Chassidim would say, “Perhaps had it been reversed, and had the first girl been named Feiga and the second one Chayah [literally, ‘life’], the second daughter might have lived, too.”

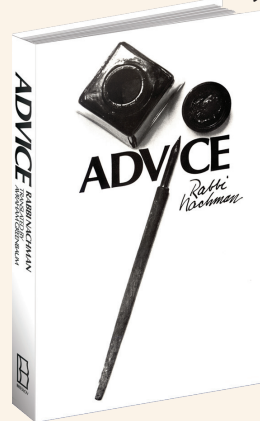
Afterward Reb Chaikel lamented, “When, oh when, will I stop mixing into the Rebbe's business?!”

Based on Or HaOrot I, pp. 220-221

SIDEPATH

Advice (*Likutey Etzot*) translated by Avraham Greenbaum

ENCOURAGEMENT. 24. The main thing is to keep as far removed from depression as possible. Depression is the reason why most people are distant from God; when they see the seriousness of the damage they did, they become discouraged. Most people give up hope for themselves completely; they pray without any devotion whatsoever and they do not even try to serve God in the ways they used to be able to. ... Follow this method of searching out the good points. It will give you a constant source of strength, and you will always be able to pray with desire, vitality and joy, and return to God in truth (*Likutey Moharan I*, 282).



25. Certain fallen souls can be revived only with special kinds of “tasty delights.” One who breaks the force of his sexual desire becomes worthy of an exalted spiritual illumination. From it are made words of nobility and truth, which have the power to revive and restore these fallen souls (*ibid.* II, 5:8,9).

26. Despair is forbidden no matter how you may have fallen. You may be lying in the lowest pit of hell, but you should still not despair of God's help in any way at all. Even there it is possible to draw close to Him, because “the whole earth is filled with His glory” (*Isaiah 6:3; Likutey Moharan II*, 7:7).

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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.

Dedicated in the Memory of (L'ilui nishmat) Yehudis bat Shimon