

## Rabbi Nachman

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The Hasidic rebbe had a nightmare that he shaved off his beard by mistake. Rabbi Nachman, the Bratslaver rebbe who lived just over two hundred years ago, was regularly tormented by the tension of the sense of his spiritual mission and his fear of inadequacy. He dreamt that a decree was issued that all the Jews of a certain community were to be killed. In order to save the community, the rabbi decided that he would have to convert and become a non-Jew. He called a barber, who shaved off his beard and pe'os. Afterwards, it turned out that the whole thing was a lie; there had been no decree after all. How embarrassed the rabbi was! He could not show his cleanshaven face to his people. He wanted to run away and hide, but how could he even get out the door and hire a wagon? His disgrace would have been more awful than can be imagined. He was thus forced to dwell with a non-Jew for a while, until his beard could grow back [Green 239-40]. In another dream he was supposed to teach but once his Hasidim surrounded him he forgot all his Torah. In yet another dream, an old man brought him a holy book, which the rabbi took but could not figure out how to hold it properly. When he opened it, it seemed completely strange, a foreign language in a foreign script. He was terribly afraid, fearing his companions would desert him if they found out [Green 165-6].

There are times when we each of us experience this kind of doubt. Sometimes in our dreams, sometimes when awake, and we are afraid to speak of it. We fear that we are only pretending to be the professionals we claim to be, and that we would be terribly ashamed if and when people find out the truth about us. Sometimes it is a simpler and less existential feeling, a realization that everyone just seems to know something except me.

This past June, Alla and I visited the Ukraine. We were on a Masorti Olami group, visiting the Conservative synagogue communities in Kiev and Odessa. On one day of this too-short trip, we woke up in Kiev, boarded a small bus with our group to visit Babi Yar, site of one of the worst killings that took place in the Holocaust, and then drove on to Odessa, with a midday stop in the town of Uman to visit the grave of Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav. Of course I had learned about Babi Yar, and I was excited to see Odessa, a city of great importance in modern Jewish history as well as the place where Alla was born. But Uman? I had heard the name of Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav, but could not have told you anything about him. I knew the name Uman from the Bratslaver graffiti and signs you see all over Jerusalem that read: **נח נחמ נחמן מאומן**, a chant based on an alleged secret message from Rabbi Nachman to one of his disciples a hundred years after he died, but I thought that **מאומן** meant “believed.” I had no idea that it meant, or also meant, *from Uman*, and that Uman was a place in the Ukraine. Our guide in our group, a colleague from London, was telling us as we approached the town that there is a park nearby with a very narrow bridge that is believed to be the inspiration for the teaching that all the world is a narrow bridge, **כל העולם כולו גשר צר מאוד**. A melody started to ring in my ear that I had learned from childhood, while I looked out the window of our bus out at a very foreign land with all the signs in a foreign script that I could not read. Then our guide, my colleague, advised us, as we approached the area of the grave, that soon we would find that the signs would no longer be in Russian or Ukrainian, but Hebrew. And all of a sudden, it was as if I were back in Jerusalem. Everything was in Hebrew. Restaurants and fast food stands offering falafel, shuwarma, hamburgers and pizza. Storefronts selling Jewish ritual items and books, and hotels advertising rooms, kosher food, tours, jacuzzis and mikvehs. We exited the bus, and walked up the street, passing groups of Hasidim as well as secular Israelis looking for some kind of blessing, and we then had to divide between men and women as there were two separate pathways into the building that looked like a synagogue except that in the midst of it was the stone sarcophagus that was the grave of Rabbi Nachman. We were told that on Rosh Hashanah the town fills with tens of thousands of Hasidim and

other Israelis, because Rabbi Nachman commanded his disciples to gather around him there on Rosh Hashanah a few weeks before he died. Uman was not easy to get to when it was a part of the Soviet Union, but that has changed now, and there are, today, some 40,000 Jews gathered in that Ukrainian town (of a regular population of about 70,000) partaking in what is by far the largest Rosh Hashanah service in the world.

Who knew? Well, apparently a lot of people, but not I. A wall divides the sarcophagus so that the men and women do not even see each other although both can, from respective parts, approach the tomb and pray. When I found Alla outside the tomb she told me how a woman inside gave her this book, an English version of the *Tales of Rabbi Nachman*. That also rang a distant bell.

I have usually found myself quite allergic to things Hasidic or of things having to do with my Eastern European heritage. Many of you know that I love books, but whenever I came into a book about Hasidism, I stuck it on a shelf near the floor in the corner of my office which I have never really explored, or at least until I came back from the Ukraine. I then sat down on the floor of my office and found another version of the *Tales*, took it home and started reading. Then on two more occasions as I sat down on the floor of my office to further explore what was on that bottom shelf I found two more different editions of the *Tales*. I had three different translations of the famous book by this Hasidic rebbe, three books I had never opened. I felt ashamed, as Rabbi Nachman described himself in his dreams. I had books that I did not know how to open and read, just as I found myself in a strange land full of people who all understood something that I did not. Well, if Rabbi Nachman used to feel that way as well, at least I was in good company. And then I spent this summer reading about Rabbi Nachman, learning about his story, and studying his *Tales*.

He was a great grandson of the Baal Shem Tov, the original founder of the Hasidic movement. He lived in various towns and cities in the Ukraine and Galica, and took an extended journey to the Land of

Israel. He founded the Bratslav sect of Hasidim, and was so charismatic that his followers never selected another rebbe to take his place after his death in 1810. He died of tuberculosis as a 38-year-old grandfather. His fame and the legacy of his teachings have continued to grow ever since his death. In his own time, he was an independent thinker who never feared to criticize the more established rebbes in the Hasidic orbit, especially calling out corruption and hypocrisy when he saw it, even at great cost to himself. He was the Hasidic rebbe version of a maverick. And if you came wanting to hear something political from me today, that was it.

Rabbi Nachman was born in 1772. When I read that I was hit with another realization. When I sat for my orals, my Jewish history professor asked, "When does modern Jewish history begin?" There is actually an essay by a respected Jewish historian that discusses different starting points for modern Jewish history. But rather than recite the various approaches summarized in that article as my orals committee was waiting for me to do, I decided to answer as a bit of a maverick myself, and said, "1772." I remember the puzzled look of my teachers. Why specifically 1772 they asked me? Well, I explained that was the year of the first partition of Poland between Russia, Austria and Prussia, that created the social circumstances of the major Ashkenazic Jewish population caught between expanding imperial ambitions, leading to what came to be called "the Jewish Question." And in that very same year Moses Mendelssohn, the first modern Jewish philosopher, moved to Berlin to begin his career. Had I known then that that was also the year that Rabbi Nahman was born, I could have annoyed my professors even more. But what a coincidence! Rabbi Nahman, while a creative Hasidic mystic, despised the Enlightenment. At the end of his life, he moved from Bratslav to Uman because Uman had a community of *enlightened* Jews whom he wanted to work on, to save. The irony of Rabbi Nachman is that his *Tales* are incredibly modern, as they take common Russian and Ukrainian folklore material, and are ostensibly fables about non-Jews in a distant past, and yet express, through such non-Jewish language, deep Jewish lessons. There is nothing more modern than the translation of Judaism into modern language. It is what we are committed to doing

here. Let's take a moment and delve into the first and most famous of Rabbi Nachman's *Tales*, which I will tell in an abridged form:

Once a king had six sons and one daughter. The king loved his daughter very much, but one day, in a fit of anger, he shouted at her, "May the Not-Good take you." The next day his daughter vanished. They looked everywhere for her but could not find her. The king's prime minister, seeing the king's great distress, offered to go in search of the missing princess. He travelled for a very long time, through wild and barren places, until he came to a beautiful castle guarded by many troops. He walked up to the front gate and they let him in. He passed through many rooms and finally came to the throne room, where he saw a king with many attendants. Beautiful music filled the air, and fantastic delicacies were heaped upon the tables. The prime minister entered and no one seemed to notice him. He went to a corner, ate and drank, and sat down to observe the court. Suddenly, the king cried, "Let the queen be brought here!" When they brought her into the room, the prime minister immediately recognized her as the lost princess for whom he had searched so long. And when she glanced around the room and saw him in the corner she recognized him as well. She rose from her throne and went over to him.

"Do you recognize me?" she asked.

"Yes," the prime minister replied. "You are the lost princess. But how did you get here?"

"When my father cursed me, he sent me here. This is the place of the Not-Good."

"Your father is broken-hearted," the prime minister told her. "For many years he has searched for you. How can I bring you home?"

"The only way you can free me," she said, "is to choose a place and stay there for an entire year. The whole time you must long for me, thinking of nothing but your desire to free me. On the last day of

the year you must refrain from sleeping. Also, do not drink wine that day as it may make you sleep, for the essential thing is to stay awake.”

He did as the princess instructed. On the last day, on his way back to the castle, he passed by a spring whose waters looked red and smelled like wine. He tasted it and immediately fell asleep, and he slept for seventy years. A carriage came by carrying the princess, and she recognized the prime minister sleeping by the spring. She tried to wake him but could not. Then she began to cry, “How many years have you labored to free me, and you have forfeited everything because of one day! And what a pity for me too, for I have been here so many years and cannot escape!” Then she removed her kerchief from her head and wrote on it with her tears and left it beside the sleeping prime minister. Then she got back on her carriage and rode off. When the prime minister woke up he asked, “Where in the world am I?” He then saw the kerchief, and held it up to the sun to read the tearstained words: “No longer am I in the castle, but now you must search for me in a castle of pearls on a golden mountain.”

The story continues to tell how the prime minister searches for years for the princess, travelling beyond the domain of human settlement across vast deserts, and encounters non-human towering giants carrying trees, of whom he asks for directions to a castle of pearls on a golden mountain. The giants tell him there is no such place, they tell him to turn back, they mock him, but he persists in his faith that such a place exists. Finally, the third giant he encounters summons the winds, and the last wind that arrives later than the others confirms that there is such a castle of pearls on a golden mountain. The prime minister was overjoyed and the last giant ordered the wind to take the prime minister to the pearl castle on the golden mountain, and gave him a magic purse that whenever he put his hand in he would withdraw coins. The wind brought him to the castle, and he used the money from the magic purse to bribe his way past the guards and make arrangements with a wealthy man for room and board, knowing that he would have to spend time there, because he would have to employ intelligence and wisdom to free the princess. And how he freed her, Rabbi Nachman did not tell. But finally, he did free her [based on Band].

Rabbi Nachman has taken us here from fairy tale to fantasy to myth. And then he leaves us hanging at the end. On one level the story tells a well-rehearsed theme of the hero rescuing the princess. Even “Star Wars” tells that story, as Luke Skywalker labors to rescue Princess Leia and restore order to the galaxy. Rabbi Nachman’s tale starts there, and is interpreted as an allegory of his theology. The prime minister represents him, or us, each one of us or the whole Jewish people or the messiah, or all of these options. The princess represents the Shekhina, God’s dwelling presence that is in exile and must be redeemed in order for the world in all its cosmic relationships to be repaired. Nachman is drawing on the mythology of Kabbalah, that God’s essence was dispersed through the world and that the essence of God’s divinity must be sought and redeemed in order to bring wholeness to God and repair to the world. But we don’t have to go that deep to understand the reference. Three times every day the traditional Jew recites a benediction praising God for *המחזיר שכינתו לציון*, for restoring the Shekhinah, God’s presence, to Zion. With the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the Temple, God’s own presence was said to have gone into exile with the people, and throughout our long history we consoled ourselves with the faith that God was in exile with us. That prayer, from the daily Amidah, optimistically praises God for restoring the divine presence to Zion. With the restoration of God’s presence, our own fortunes will be restored as well. The land of Israel represents the mythic end of the quest, the return home to the true kingdom. Rabbi Nachman famously said, “My place is only the land of Israel. Wherever I journey, I am journeying only to the land of Israel” [Green 230].

The kerchief of tears that the prime minister finds and reads can refer to the Torah. Journeying somewhere between the castle of the true king, who is God, and the king of the Not-Good, who is in essence an element of God to whose domain the princess is banished, the prime minister has only the kerchief of tears to guide him through his increasingly taxing quest. Maybe it is the Torah. Or maybe it is a symbol of the suffering and perseverance that the Jewish people have lived through. Or maybe it is the

suffering and trials that each of us may have come through. Or are going through. And the lesson is to keep going, to keep journeying, to not despair.

It would have been easier had the prime minister not fallen asleep on the appointed day. And what a sleep it was! In the full story that I abridged for you, it actually happens twice, two years in a row. And each time the princess cries that had he only stayed awake he could have rescued her. He enjoys food and drink in the castle of the Not-Good, and we dare not ask what that was like for the princess, except what we know, that she yearns to return to the true castle. The merriment, we are told, was illusory of captivity. Surely we can all relate to moments when we seem on the surface to have it all and yet we are on the inside still unhappy. And then, by the stream of wine, he drinks and sleeps. Bratslav tradition tells us that that day was Rosh Hashanah. There is a custom, in fact, to avoid napping on Rosh Hashanah. Did you all hear that? We are not supposed to be napping now. The origin of the custom is an old saying that if one sleeps on Rosh Hashanah so will one's angel of fortune, one's mazel, be sleeping. The prime minister sleeps for seventy years. But when he wakes up the princess is still out there somewhere. Seventy years in Jewish tradition makes one think of the seventy years of the first, Babylonian exile. That should be exile enough. Psalm 126, the Shir Hama'alot that we sing before the Grace after Meals on Shabbat, begins: "When God returned the exiles to Zion it was as if we had been dreaming," that is, sleeping for seventy years. It would be nice to sleep through the tough parts of life, and be awake just for the good parts.

The idea that the prime minister should have stayed awake on Rosh Hashanah to save the princess is that on that day, had he merited it, if we merit it, redemption will come. It is the consolation that follows upon the heels of suffering. Our liturgical calendar connects Rosh Hashanah back seven weeks to the fast of the ninth of Av, the fast day in the summer that marks the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem. For seven Sabbaths between Tisha b'Av and Rosh Hashanah we read a haftara selection with a message of consolation and hope. The first of those seven Sabbaths is called Shabbat Nachamu, the



sabbath of consolation. On that day in the Ukrainian town of Uman in 1810, Rabbi Nachman gave his last great sermon. "Gewalt!" he screamed at his Hasidim. "Do not despair! There is no such thing as despair!" That lesson of their rebbe was remembered by the Bratslavers. They inscribed it on a large sign in front of their synagogue in the Warsaw ghetto in 1941 [Green 265-6].

How do you translate "Gewalt"? "Oy"? One of my roommates in rabbinical school used to walk through our apartment at the worst hours of the night and would suddenly scream, "Gewalt!" Was he a serious theologian or a raving lunatic? I wasn't sure at the time, and neither have been many who have considered Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav.

But Rabbi Nachman does scream out to console us. To awaken us from our slumber as Maimonides says that the shofar is meant to do for us on Rosh Hashanah. To encourage us to take to hold of the kerchief of tears, so that tears of despair can be turned to tears of joy. To know that while all the world is a narrow bridge, the key is to not despair, והעיקר לא לפחד כלל.

In that same town of Uman, in June of 2018, there was only one restaurant open on the street that looked like little Jerusalem. Apparently, June is the off season. It would have been bustling with business yesterday. Actually you can search on google for videos of Uman Rosh Hashanah 2018 and see the masses dancing in the street. But in June there was one restaurant open, an Israeli style over-the-counter grill, and all of a sudden there were thirty people all looking to be served at once. Then I felt I was truly back in Jerusalem, shoving my way in a line and yelling in Hebrew. And it did smell like paradise. But then the leader of our group was giving us the look insisting that we needed to get back to the bus immediately. For some reason everyone else had been served and was on their way and I was still waiting for the food. I felt again like the rebbe with no beard. How was I left alone? How did they all figure out how to get lunch and I did not? And what would Alla say if I turned back empty-handed? A Bratslaver hasid was working behind the counter, in a white robe and a special large white knit Nachman kippah,

and with a long beard that somehow did not catch fire over the coals of the grill. I managed to get a very delicious lunch for Alla and myself, and was then insisting to him in rapid Hebrew that he permit me to pay immediately because I had to go as my bus was leaving. The man behind the counter, with the white robe and kippah and long beard, then smiled and responded to me in a warm but unrushed Hebrew: "Don't worry. They will not leave without you. You are important."

We are all important. That is the lesson of Rosh Hashanah. Don't fall sleep, don't waste our lives, because the world depends on each of us! Gewalt! The prime minister did not despair because he knew that the princess was counting on him. The king was counting on him. The world was counting on him. We are each of us that prime minister. We are each of us Luke Skywalker. We are each of us Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav.

Rabbi Nachman did not finish the story for us. He did not tell us how the prime minister rescues the princess. Because he could not. Only we can do so. But he knew that the princess would be rescued.