



THE WINGS OF THE SUN

Traditional Jewish Healing in Theory and Practice

By [Rabbi Avraham Greenbaum](#)

Section 3

Rebbe Nachman

Chapter 6

A new path which is really the old path

Besides the brief statements of the talmudic Sages about the Torah path of spiritual healing, we find little more than a few oblique hints in the Zohar and other kabbalistic texts, scattered references in later biblical and talmudic commentaries, and a variety of stories and other folklore material from different parts of the Jewish world. It was left to Rebbe Nachman of Breslov to explore this pathway fully and explain its meaning for our times.

Rebbe Nachman was born in 1772. His brief life of thirty-eight years spanned the era of the American Declaration of Independence, the French Revolution, the Napoleonic Wars and the beginnings of the Industrial Revolution - convulsive events and processes that initiated waves of political, social, economic and ideological changes that have since spread throughout the world.

The collapse of faith

As the ancient regimes of kings and feudal lords began to crumble all over Europe, so did the entire framework of beliefs and values upon which people had hitherto based their lives. Until the late 18th century the validity of religious belief was still largely unquestioned by the vast majority of people. It is true that philosophers and scientists of the "Age of Reason" had long espoused views that flew in the face of traditional faith. It was well over a century since Ren, Descartes had proposed that the entire universe could be explained mechanistically and that all natural objects were nothing but machines, including the human organism. If everything is held to be causally determined, what place is there for human freedom and morality? Such ideas were already common currency among the lettered elite of France, but it was only towards the end of the 18th century, amidst the social ferment set off by the French Revolution, that they began to penetrate the consciousness of a

wider public.

How was the new thinking going to affect the Jews? Attacks on the basic tenets of Judaism were nothing new. The Greeks, Romans, Christians, Moslems and others had repeatedly challenged the authority of Torah law, the uniqueness of God's Covenant with the Jewish People, the promise of future redemption, and so on. But their main intent was to induce Jews to abandon their own religion in favor of another. Throughout the ages there were those who succumbed to the pressures to convert, but the great majority of Jews remained loyal to their own ancestral faith.

What was unique in the challenge posed by the new philosophical outlook was that it was an assault on religious belief as such. If man is merely a machine why should he seek to curtail his natural urges? What meaning is there in his efforts to "elevate himself" to a "spiritual" plane that, according to this view, does not exist? Unlike the Christians and Moslems, the apostles of the new philosophy were not trying to force the Jews to embrace an alien religion. They were inviting them to divest themselves of religious obligation as such and become "free." The invitation was made all the more attractive by the promise that, if the Jews were to discard the practices that separated them from others, they would be able to enter the mainstream of society on equal terms with everyone else and escape the discrimination, humiliation and persecution that had been their usual lot in exile.

By the end of the 18th century assimilation was already making inroads among the Jews of France, Holland, Germany, Britain and America. But in Eastern Europe and Russia, where the overwhelming mass of Ashkenazic Jewry was concentrated, tradition was still very strong. Rumors emanating from St. Petersburg had it that the Russian rulers of the million or so Jews living in the Pale of Settlement not only wanted to encourage them to adopt gentile clothing, language and customs but also intended to force them to send their children to secular schools. However, many Jews found it hard to see this as a serious threat. It seemed unimaginable that anything could induce the bearded, ringlet-adorned Jews of the towns and villages of the Pale to abandon the traditions of their fathers.

But Rebbe Nachman knew otherwise. Again and again he said to his followers, "Great atheism is coming into the world" (Rabbi Nachman's Wisdom #35 & 220). The figure of the Sophisticate in his story of the "Sophisticate and the Simpleton" (Rabbi Nachman's Stories pp. 160-196) typified the growing number of young Jewish intellectuals who would increasingly set the tone for their fellow Jews. They felt constricted by the traditional culture of the small towns in which they had grown up. They wanted to travel the world - to Germany, Italy, France, Spain - and explore the new horizons that seemed to be opening up in science, philosophy, literature, art, music.... Having tasted the fruit of the "tree of knowledge," they could no longer accept the simple religious faith they had been fed in their childhood. "There is no King!" they declared.

Nor were they content simply to adopt this new outlook for themselves. They felt compelled to try to "open the eyes" of their fellow Jews as well and "free"

them from the "shackles of tradition." Thus intellectuals like the clique of three atheistic maskilim (literally, "enlightened") whom Rebbe Nachman befriended in the town of Uman supported and encouraged the efforts of the authorities to introduce compulsory secular education among the Jews. Rebbe Nachman saw that this would cause vast numbers of Jews to become cut off from their religious heritage for generations to come.

For Judaism, the notion that the world is entirely governed by natural law and that humans are merely complex machines is a terrible affront to the dignity of man, in praise of whose creation the Psalmist says to God, "You have made him but a little less than the angels and You have adorned him with glory and splendor" (Psalms 8:6). Our physical nature puts us beneath the angels, but the souls that are our glory are beyond nature and higher than the angels, giving us dominion over them. Our souls are "a part of God above" (Job 31:2), and every one of our practical mitzvot and good deeds, each word of our prayers and every one of our noble thoughts set off chains of effects in the higher worlds, channeling blessing and goodness into the entire creation. To have faith in God is to have faith in ourselves and in the exaltedness of our mission. To lose faith in God is to lose faith in ourselves and in our purpose. Life becomes meaningless, absurd.

Rebbe Nachman saw the collapse of faith as the essential sickness of the age and indeed the cause of some of the most pernicious physical diseases afflicting our societies. "The main thing is faith!" he cried. "Every person must search within himself and strengthen himself in faith. For there are people suffering from the most terrible afflictions, and the only reason they are ill is because of the collapse of faith. The Torah says, ' God will send you wondrous plagues, great and faithful plagues and great and faithful sicknesses' (Deuteronomy 28:59). The plagues and sicknesses are called ' faithful' because they come on account of a lack of faith" (Likutey Moharan II, 5:1).

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The true healer is therefore the Tzaddik, the doctor of the soul, who comes to show us how to leave our doubts, confusion, darkness and despair behind and rise to ever higher levels of connection with God. The Tzaddik seeks people's good in all the worlds and wants them to enjoy the good of this world too (Tzaddik #471), which includes bodily health. A Jewish body is very precious since it is necessary for the performance of the practical mitzvot, upon which the rectification of the entire world depends. "Every person must take great care of his physical body" (Likutey Moharan I, 22:5). But the key to the health of the body is that of the soul, for it is the soul which gives the body life.

"I set God before me constantly"

It was just twelve years after the Baal Shem Tov's passing that his great-grandson, Rebbe Nachman, came into the world in 1772. He was born in Medzeboz in the very house where his great-grandfather had lived. Rebbe Nachman's father was R. Simchah, son of R. Nachman Horodenker, one of the Baal Shem Tov's closest disciples. R. Nachman's mother was Feiga, whose mother, Adil, was the Baal Shem Tov's only daughter.

From his earliest childhood R. Nachman was thus surrounded by the influence of the Baal Shem Tov. The latter's followers would regularly visit Medzeboz to pray at his graveside and used to stay in the house of R. Nachman's parents, so that the young R. Nachman saw many of the outstanding luminaries of the Chassidic movement and imbibed the tradition from them. The stories he heard inspired him to devote himself completely to the service of God. As a young child R. Nachman wanted to fulfil the verse, "I set God before me constantly" (Psalms 16:8). He would try to depict God's name before his eyes even while studying with his tutor, and was often so preoccupied that he did not know his lessons, causing his teacher great anger.

As a child R. Nachman wanted to detach himself completely from the material world. At the age of six he decided that his first step would be to stop having any pleasure from eating. Realizing that he was still growing and could not give up regular meals, he used to swallow his food without chewing it so as not to derive any pleasure from it. He continued doing this until his throat became completely swollen. Already at this age he would constantly visit the Baal Shem Tov's grave, asking him to help him draw closer to God. He would go there at night even during the great winter frosts. After leaving the grave, instead of immersing in the indoors mikveh (ritual bath), he would do so in the outside mikveh even though he was thoroughly chilled from his trip. He forced himself to do this so as to gain total self-mastery (Praise of Rabbi Nachman #1-2, #19).

At the age of thirteen R. Nachman married Sashia, daughter of Rabbi Ephraim of Ossatin, and for the next five years lived in his father-in-law's house in Ossatin in the Eastern Ukraine, where he continued with his studies and devotions. He spent long periods in the hills and forests. He engaged in lengthy fasts, often from Shabbat to Shabbat, persisting in spite of extreme weakness. At the age of eighteen he moved out of his father-in-law's house and went to the nearby town of Medvedevka, where he lived for the next ten years. He soon attracted a substantial following, including men who were leaders in their own right, such as Rabbi Yudel of Dashev, a great kabbalist, and the renowned Rabbi Yekusiel, Magid of Terhovitza, who had been one of the foremost disciples of the Mezritcher Magid and who was now an old man with authority over a region of more than eighty towns and villages.

It was from Medvedevka that Rebbe Nachman set out on his pilgrimage to the Holy Land (1798-9). Not long after his return he moved to the nearby town of Zlatipolia, where he spent what he described as "two years of hell," because shortly after his arrival there, Rabbi Aryeh Leib, the "Shpola Zeida" (1725-1812), who was by that time the oldest surviving chassidic leader, began his

relentless persecution of Rebbe Nachman. In the fall of 1802 Rebbe Nachman, then aged thirty, moved further west to the town of Breslov and was immediately joined there by the twenty-two year old Reb Noson Sternhartz (1780-1844), who became his closest disciple and recorded almost all of his extant teachings. Rebbe Nachman spent most of the next eight years in Breslov, before finally moving to the town of Uman, where he died on 18 Tishri 5571, October 16, 1810.

Asceticism and beyond

Many people will find Rebbe Nachman's self-mortifying practices quite shocking. Eating without chewing, immersing in the freezing cold and lengthy fasts are hardly practices most people today would consider conducive to sound, robust health even in an adult, let alone in a child of six! Not surprisingly, Rebbe Nachman was very thin, and one of the doctors who saw him during his last illness commented that by nature he had a strong, healthy body, but that he had broken it by his devotions (Siach Sarfey Kodesh III-162; Avanehah Barzel p.67 #44). Are these examples of the pathway of health Rebbe Nachman is recommending?

The only way to begin to understand such practices is in the context of the Jewish tradition of asceticism as expressed in the devotional literature in which Rebbe Nachman immersed himself from his boyhood onwards. Works like the Reishit Chokhmah of R. Eliahu de Vidas, which he read and reread, teach that while the body is the means through which the soul achieves its purpose in this world, bodily cravings for gratification over and above what is necessary for normal functioning are an obstacle to spiritual growth and must be conquered.

But what is normal functioning? How far is one supposed to go in denying one's bodily appetites? Strictly speaking a Jew is obliged to abstain only from what is forbidden by Torah law. For the rest, he may indulge himself in all permitted pleasures. But the spiritual seeker soon comes to understand that the pursuit of physical gratification interferes with the quest for spirituality. The higher the levels of spiritual perception and holy spirit one aspires to, the greater the mastery of the body that is required. Rebbe Nachman sought to follow the kabbalistic path of devotion to the ultimate degree, even to the point of self-sacrifice.

To those who are strongly attached to their physical pleasures, fasting and other forms of self-denial seem like nothing but a recipe for misery. However that is not necessarily the way they are experienced by spiritual adepts. In his story of the "Master of Prayer," Rebbe Nachman tells us that the Prayer Master's band of disciples spent their time engaged only in prayer, song and praise to God. For them, "fasting and self-mortification were better and more precious than all worldly enjoyment. They would have greater pleasure from fasting or self-mortification than from all worldly pleasures" (Rabbi Nachman's Stories p.283).

Nevertheless, it is true that for most people such practices would only lead to depression. Rebbe Nachman understood this, and recognized that, although

asceticism had been an integral part of the classic kabbalistic path of devotion, it was no longer appropriate in his time, as people lacked the power of endurance possessed by earlier generations. Did that mean that henceforth the heights of devotion would be inaccessible to all but a minute number of spiritual supermen? Rebbe Nachman was determined to find a new pathway that could lead people to the most exalted spiritual levels without the misery of onerous penances, fasting and the like. This indeed was why he demanded so much of himself, like an explorer who stretches himself to the limit in order to benefit others. He said:

"I am constantly working to open up a path in places that were previously desolate wilderness. I have to cut down all the obstacles blocking the road. There are gigantic trees that have been growing there for thousands of years. They have to be cut down. I have to go back and forth again and again, cutting and cutting, in order to prepare a public way for everyone to go on" (Tzaddik #235).

The path Rebbe Nachman found was that of simplicity and joy. He told his followers: "I will lead you on a new path which no man has ever traveled before. It is really a very old path and yet it is completely new" (Tzaddik #264). Rebbe Nachman's pathway does not veer from a single detail of the Code of Jewish Law. The point is to live this code as a vital, joyous pathway of spiritual growth and ever deeper connection with God. The foundation of this connection is simple, direct communication with God in our own words, cries, shouts and songs. The Hebrew word for this is *hisbodedus*, which literally means "making oneself alone." It signifies separating oneself from other people and activities for regular periods of meditation, introspection and private prayer.

"Hisbodedus is the highest level of all. It is greater than everything else. You must fix an hour or more to go off by yourself to some room or meadow and express your thoughts and feelings to God. Appeal to God with every kind of argument and endearment. Plead with Him to bring you to serve Him truly. This conversation should be in your own native language. Pour out your whole heart to God, including your regrets and contrition about the past and your yearning to come closer in the future, each person according to his level. Make sure you get into the habit of practicing this regularly for an hour every day. Then be happy for the rest of the day.

"This is the best way of coming close to God because it includes everything else. No matter what is lacking in your spiritual life, even if you feel totally remote from God, talk it out and ask God to help you. Many well-known great tzaddikim have said that they achieved their levels only through this practice. Any intelligent person can see the supreme value of hisbodedus. It is something that everyone can practice, from the smallest to the greatest. Everyone can talk to God and thereby reach the highest levels" (Likutey Moharan II, 25).

Rebbe Nachman told his followers not to fast. True, the body is gross, strong

and forceful, and a formidable obstacle to spirituality. But instead of wearing it down with fasting and self-mortification, they were to master it with holy words (Tzaddik #443). Rebbe Nachman himself said, "If I had understood the power of hisbodedus earlier in life I would never have wasted my body through fasting. The body is too important a tool for serving God to have been subjected to such a strenuous discipline" (Hishtapkhut HaNefesh, Introduction).

Taking responsibility

Chassidism had restored to the forefront of Judaism the concept of the Tzaddik as a spiritual leader who guides people in healing the maladies of their souls and fires them to serve God. It was an ancient idea: after the exodus from Egypt the Jewish People "believed in God and in Moses His servant" (Exodus 14:31). Since that time every age had its leaders. When the Rabbis taught that one must submit oneself to a teacher (Avot 1:6) it is clear that this meant more than just a professor from whom one would gain information, but rather a saintly individual whose conduct and bearing would serve as an inspiring example of living Torah even in his most intimate personal activities (cf. Berakhot 62a).

The Baal Shem Tov and his disciples were charismatic figures who galvanized whole communities into new religious fervor. But by Rebbe Nachman's time the passion of the chassidic movement had cooled somewhat. The outstanding leaders of the first and second generations were often succeeded by children and grandchildren of lesser calibre who tended to institutionalize chassidic practice. Whereas the original adherents of the Baal Shem Tov had turned to him for inspiration to lead them to greater heights of spiritual achievement, more and more people now looked to their rebbes for quick, miraculous solutions to financial, health and other problems.

While deeply respectful of the outstanding chassidic leaders of the time, Rebbe Nachman was scathingly critical of mere wonder-rebbes, or "false leaders," as he called them. He himself was highly unconventional. He rejected the outer trappings of a chassidic court. He went without a large entourage and often traveled incognito. People did come to him to intercede on their behalf for children, healing, livelihood, etc. and he certainly had the power to bring about miracles. However for Rebbe Nachman, the true miracle is when a person wakes up spiritually and works to develop his own latent powers.

Rebbe Nachman once said to his followers: "The only thing that gives me any pleasure is when I see one of you showing his attachment to the Torah and serving God. I could have been a famous leader just like all the other rebbes whose chassidim come to them without knowing what they've come for. They come and go and have no idea why. But I never wanted any of this. My only concern is to get you to come closer to God. If you want to know what's precious to me, it's when I see the poorest beggar going about with a torn hat, torn clothes and torn shoes, serving God. I beg of you: be good Jews!" (Tzaddik #335).

If Rebbe Nachman emphasized the importance of attaching oneself to a

Tzaddik, it was not as a "mediator" who could somehow free us of our responsibility to do our own spiritual work. The role of the Tzaddik is to teach us what to do and how, leaving us to actually do it. Attachment to the Tzaddik means setting aside preconceived ideas about how to find God and surrendering oneself to the Tzaddik's teachings, immersing oneself in them, pondering them and, most important, practicing them, even when unable to see where they are leading - much like a patient who persists in following a trusted doctor's prescriptions to the letter even if the treatment is sometimes bitter and protracted.

"The tongue of the wise brings healing"

Rebbe Nachman never wrote a systematic presentation of chassidic thought. He taught a pathway, but his way of communicating it was by speaking face-to-face with his followers. He would chat with them, discourse, throw out pithy aphorisms and tell parables and stories about princesses, giants, beggars, demons, magic stones, exotic sea voyages, conversations between the sun and the moon.... His informal discussions - filled with sharp images, brilliant turns of phrase, novel perspectives on familiar ideas and a devastating honesty - focus especially on the practical "how to" of prayer, meditation, faith, joy, celebration of Shabbat and the festivals and a host of other topics (see Rabbi Nachman's *Wisdom & Tzaddik*).

Five or six times a year all the Rebbe's followers gathered at his side, especially on Rosh Hashanah (the Jewish New Year). He would then discourse to them more formally, often for several hours. His Torah discourses, which were transcribed by Reb Noson, are collected in *Likutey Moharan*. Each one stands by itself as a separate teaching exploring in depth a particular facet of the spiritual journey. What should we do to make our prayers acceptable? What is the way to come to perfect repentance? How can one accept that everything that happens is for good? How can one taste the inner light of the Torah? What is the pathway to inner peace and universal peace? These are but a few of the themes of his teachings.

In each discourse Rebbe Nachman elucidates the practical steps that lead to the spiritual goal under discussion. With the utmost subtlety he builds the discourse brick by brick, explaining an idea, introducing a second and showing its connection with the first, then bringing in a third, then a fourth, and so on - until a breathtaking edifice is revealed: a complete spiritual pathway. At every turn in the argument Rebbe Nachman brings supporting texts drawn from all over the Bible, Talmud, Midrashim, Codes, Zohar and the Lurianic kabbalah. His use of his sources is as novel as it is brilliant, yet his purpose is not to make a display of Torah acrobatics, but rather to elucidate the foundations of what are first and foremost practical spiritual pathways.

Explaining the craft of the Torah sage, Rebbe Nachman says:

"All medicines are made by combining specific quantities of various medicinal herbs which are then steeped or boiled together. Each herb has its own unique properties, and several herbs must be mixed

together to produce a compound that has the power to cure the illness. In other words, the power of a given medicine derives from the way it is compounded. This gives it a new power over and above the properties of the individual herbs of which it is composed. Only through the power of the compound is the illness cured. For this reason the doctor has to be an expert who knows how to produce the right compound. Someone who is not an expert might take herbs with curative powers and still not achieve anything because he does not understand how to combine them.

"In the same way, the Torah has a cure for everything, as it is written, 'It is health to all his flesh' (Proverbs 4:22). But only the Sages of the generation understand the Torah, because they are entrusted with the key to its interpretation, i.e. the thirteen rules by which the Torah is expounded. From the Torah itself it is impossible to understand anything without the guidance of the Sages of the generation, who explain the true meaning. For the Torah is 'poor in one place and rich in another.' The Sages select, mix and combine Torah teachings, using what is said in one place to throw light on the meaning of something said elsewhere, in accordance with the thirteen rules. They subtract from one place and add somewhere else in order to discover the true meaning (Bava Batra 111b). Even though the Torah writes such and such, they subtract a letter or a word here and add it somewhere else, thereby interpreting the Torah in accordance with what they know from tradition.

"This is the reason why someone who despises a Torah sage has no cure for his wound (Shabbat 119b), because the cure that comes from the Torah can be received only through the Sages of the generation, who have been entrusted with the power to interpret the Torah. They know how to combine the letters of the Torah - and as explained above, the power of any medicine depends upon how the ingredients are combined.... Therefore the healing power of the Torah depends on the Sages of the generation: it is through their knowledge of how to interpret the Torah and combine its letters that all the compounds of medicinal herbs that depend upon the Torah receive their power.

"The main thing is to have faith in the Sages and to take care to give them due respect, honor and reverence. Even if a person considers something they teach to be incompatible with what appears to him to be explicitly stated in the Torah, and he thinks them to be contradicting the Torah, God forbid, he must nevertheless have faith that they are certainly correct and that their teaching is in full accord with the Torah, because the Torah has been entrusted to them. For example, the Torah seems to state explicitly that 'he must give [the sinner] forty lashes' (Deuteronomy 25:3). Yet the Sages teach that the penalty consists of thirty-nine lashes and no more (Makkot 22b). For the Sages knew - according to the rules of interpretation which they received by tradition - that the required number of lashes is thirty-nine. One must therefore have faith in the Sages and put aside one's

own opinions. One must rely only on the Sages, because the interpretation of the Torah has been entrusted to them" (Likutey Moharan I, 57 end).

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[BACK TO WINGS OF THE SUN HOMEPAGE](#)

[AZAMRA HOMEPAGE](#)

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