



THE WINGS OF THE SUN

Traditional Jewish Healing in Theory and Practice

By [Rabbi Avraham Greenbaum](#)

Chapter 7

Rebbe Nachman's Book of Remedies

The watershed in the development of Rebbe Nachman's pathway of healing came with his mysterious and dramatic eight-month trip to Lemberg in 1807-8 (see next chapter). By then he was already seriously ill with the lung disease that was to take his life three years later. From that time on until his death the topic of healing took a central place in practically every one of his major teachings. Never was he more outspoken in his rejection of resort to medicine than in that last period of his life. But in the healing approach he took in the earlier part of his life - which is the subject of the current chapter - although he certainly put his main emphasis on the spiritual aspect, his rejection of physical strategies as a part of healing was somewhat less absolute.

In the course of Rebbe Nachman's upbringing in his parents' home he must have heard much about the healing lore of his great-grandfather, the Baal Shem Tov. We have seen that the Baal Shem Tov made use of medicines as well as spiritual healing. Although he told the Mezritcher Magid that only the healing that comes about "through words" is really lasting, some of the stories that have come down to us about his healing activities indicate that he was fully expert in herbal remedies. And so too Rebbe Nachman also showed an interest in physical as well as in purely spiritual remedies, at least in his earlier years.

We have no information about the sources of Rebbe Nachman's healing wisdom, any more than we have about the identity of those from whom he learned Torah. Unquestionably he was a prodigious student. His Torah knowledge encompassed the entire range of biblical, talmudic, midrashic, halakhic and kabbalistic literature, which contain a wealth of healing wisdom. But whether Rebbe Nachman ever read any of the secular medical literature that was available in his time is impossible to tell. He strictly forbade his followers to study works of (chakirut), philosophy and speculative science, on the grounds that they undermine people's faith in God. This prohibition included even Jewish philosophical works like the Rambam's Guide for the Perplexed, not to speak of non-Jewish works. On the other hand, Rebbe Nachman taught that the outstanding Tzaddik is obliged to delve into this realm in order to elevate Jewish souls that have become entrapped there (Likutey Moharan I, 64). There

seems little doubt that Rebbe Nachman's own reading extended to this area, but as to whether it included any medical works we can only speculate.

In one place Rebbe Nachman states that "all the medical authorities have spoken at length about how all illness is rooted in depression" (Likutey Moharan II, 24). This could be construed as a hint that Rebbe Nachman had some familiarity with medical literature, but it is hardly conclusive evidence. We know that he discussed medicine with many great doctors (Rabbi Nachman's Wisdom #50), and he could equally well have gained this information from them. Most of the medical literature at that time was written in Latin, but we have no clear evidence as to whether Rebbe Nachman read other languages besides Hebrew and Yiddish. Whether any of the Rambam's medical writings were available to Rebbe Nachman is an open question. The Rambam's technical writings were all in Arabic. Moshe Ibn Tibbon's Hebrew translation of the Rambam's Hanhagat HaBri'ut had been in existence since 1244, but while many manuscript copies have survived until today, the work was not actually printed until 1838, twenty-eight years after Rebbe Nachman's death.

One work that Rebbe Nachman may well have seen is the Sefer HaBrit of R. Pinchas Eliahu of Vilna, a comprehensive survey of what was then known in the fields of astronomy, geography, physics, chemistry and biology. It includes a lengthy section on human anatomy with various references to medical knowledge of the time. The Sefer HaBrit was first printed in 1797, when Rebbe Nachman was twenty-five, and it quickly spread to Jewish communities throughout Europe, including Greater Poland and the Ukraine.

However, speculation about Rebbe Nachman's involvement in secular studies is probably gratuitous. For it is clear that in the main, his understanding of the workings of the human body and his healing wisdom came, like the rest of his wisdom, from his study of the Torah. Rebbe Nachman himself stated that he learned all the remedies in the world from the section of the book of Joshua detailing the boundaries of the Land of Israel (Joshua 15-19). He explained that the names of all the cities in each tribe's portion are ciphers denoting the names of all the remedies in the world in all languages. The reason is that the Land of Israel corresponds to the human form and the division of the land corresponds to the divisions of the body. One tribe's portion is the "head," another's the right arm, etc. The Rebbe said that the biblical passage describing each tribe's portion contains the remedies relating to the corresponding body-part (Reb Noson's Introduction to the Aleph-Bet Book p.3).

The Aleph-Bet Book

Unlike the Baal Shem Tov, there is no evidence that Rebbe Nachman ever went about as a healer. But from his early years he collected remedies of all kinds. By the time he was in his early thirties he had assembled an entire file of material. This was originally part of his Aleph-Bet Book, a collection of brief aphorisms in which he presented the distilled wisdom of the Torah on all kinds of topics, from dreams, memory and music to children, money, eating, clothing and many others. The Rebbe began compiling the Aleph-Bet Book in his youth in order to direct and encourage himself in his spiritual quest, but he kept its existence a

secret until after his arrival in Breslov in 1802. He then began dictating the work to Reb Noson at intervals, until the transcription was finally complete in 1805.

The chapter on healing, however, was an exception. Rebbe Nachman never revealed its contents. Reb Noson tells us that the Rebbe said he had as many as two hundred pages of material on healing (*ibid.*). This could well be more than the length of the entire Aleph-Bet Book as we have it today. The chapter on healing that we have contains only four items, whereas some of the other chapters in the book have well over a hundred, and the chapter on the Tzaddik has over two hundred. Reb Noson, in his biographical portrait of Rebbe Nachman, Tzaddik, states:

"On the subject of healing and medicine, the Rebbe said that the chapter on Healing in the Aleph-Bet Book originally contained all the cures in the world: there was not a single illness whose cure was not included. But he did not want this copied, and burned it" (Tzaddik #200 and cf. #380).

Like so many aspects of Rebbe Nachman's life, this "Book of Remedies" remains shrouded in mystery. We have no information whatever about the kind of remedies it contained. We know that on occasion Rebbe Nachman prescribed herbal remedies, such as an antidote to seasickness that was prepared by steeping a bitter herb known as polin in boiled wine. This was actually used by certain Breslover Chassidim in later generations when travelling at sea (*Siach Sarfey Kodesh* I-104), but we have no way of knowing if it is an example of the kind of remedies that were contained in the burned chapter on healing from the Aleph-Bet Book.

It seems unlikely that the few items on healing that Rebbe Nachman did give over to Reb Noson are in any way representative of the material he destroyed. The first item in the chapter on healing as we have it is typical of many throughout the Aleph-Bet Book that state very concisely an idea that is explored at length in one or another of the discourses in *Likutey Moharan*.

"Know that each herb has a unique power to heal a particular illness. But all this is only for the person who has failed to guard his faith and morality and has not been careful to avoid transgressing the prohibition against despising other people (*Avot* 4:3). But when someone has perfect faith, guards himself morally, and lives by the principle of not looking down on anyone at all, his healing does not depend on the specific herbs that have the power to cure his illness. He can be healed through any food and any drink, as it is written, 'And He will bless your bread and your water, and I will remove sickness from you' (*Exodus* 23:25). Such a person does not have to wait until the specific remedy for his illness is available" (Aleph-Bet Book, Healing #1).

Here we have the essence of the healing pathway that Rebbe Nachman taught in the last years of his life. These few lines are a concise statement of ideas that are explained in depth in five pages of intricate text in his discourse, "Sound the Shofar - Dominion" (*Likutey Moharan* II, 1, [see Chapter 18](#)).

The other three items in the chapter on healing in the Aleph-Bet Book as we have it are:

"Through deep contemplation of the mystical secrets of the Torah one can bring barren women to give birth and cure severe illness" (#2).

"Salty foods are harmful for tzara'at (leprosy), the remedy for which is living waters...." (#3).

"Gazing at an etrog (the citron fruit taken as one of the "four species" on the festival of Succot) is a remedy for eye pain" (#4).

We find a few more items on healing scattered in some of the other chapters of the Aleph-Bet Book. Unlike the remedy for seasickness, none of them could be called herbal. Eating small fish for fertility and avoiding garlic and onions during pregnancy and nursing are dietary recommendations, while the use of feathers by those with lung disease could possibly be regarded as a physical remedy. But all the other remedies are in the realm of *segulot*, segulot. A segulah is a strategy or practice designed to bring about a desired effect (in this case, physical healing) though it may not be susceptible to any rational explanation, as it operates on a plane beyond nature (cf. Likutey Moharan I, 21:9).

The surviving teachings on healing in the Aleph-Bet Book are a tiny fraction of the original material. Why did Rebbe Nachman decide to destroy all the rest, especially if, as he said, it "contained all the cures in the world"? Was it because he feared that people lacking true faith would try out the remedies, and if they saw no results they would blame the remedies and despise Torah wisdom, while if they were healed it would encourage them to apply these remedies mechanically without having faith that God is the Healer? If this was the reason, Rebbe Nachman's burning of his earlier teachings on healing was similar to Hezekiah's concealment of the Book of Remedies! Hezekiah did not want people to rely on the particular means through which healing is channeled, but rather to turn to God in faith, prayer and teshuvah. This is in fact the essence of Rebbe Nachman's healing pathway as expressed in the later teachings that he left for posterity, having "put away" his own "Book of Remedies."

Remedies from the Aleph-Bet Book

"Small fish are conducive to fertility" (Conception #3).

"Pregnant and nursing women should not eat garlic and onions" (ibid. #4).

"A woman whose children die in childbirth should place an apple on her head" (Children #32).

"It is helpful for a woman who has suffered miscarriages to go about with a magnet and also a piece of wood from a tree growing over the grave of

the Tzaddik. She should also give charity" (Miscarriage #2).

"Feathers of wild birds are helpful for those with lung disease and are conducive to strengthening the life force" (Segulah #1).

"Where somebody has suddenly been struck dumb, a kosher slaughtering-knife should be passed over his mouth" (ibid. #9).

"For someone suffering neck pain, it helps to weep over the destruction of the Holy Temple" (ibid. #9).

"Blessing the New Moon helps heal those with weak vision" (Vision #3).

"The Midnight Lament over the destruction of the Temple helps those with weak vision" (ibid. #4).

The power of words

Rather than prescribing specific cures for people, Rebbe Nachman wanted them to awaken their own spiritual healing powers. This was true even on occasions when he did offer a segulah. We see this in the way he dealt with a nine-year-old boy who had a slight fever. Eventually Rebbe Nachman gave him a remedy, but not before speaking to him at length.

The boy was a very fearful child. The Rebbe said to him, "Why are you afraid now? Think how afraid you'll be when they take you out to the cemetery and leave you there alone! Everyone will go off and leave you there lying among the dead. Today you're afraid to go out alone at night. What will you do then?" Rebbe Nachman continued along the same lines, and then asked, "Who in the world wants to burn himself with his own hands? When you sin it is as if you burn yourself with your very own hands, because eventually you will receive the hard, bitter punishment for sin. Surely you care enough about yourself not to burn yourself with your own hands?"

Only after this talk did the Rebbe give the boy a segulah for his fever. It was to take dust that had been trodden into the threshold and place it in a pot on the fire until it became bleached. The dust was to be put on the boy's side, and then he would be healed (Tzaddik #490). Reb Noson writes: "When this boy grew up, the words the Rebbe spoke to him remained inscribed on his heart.... From this we can see the way the Rebbe would look at even a young child and seek to imbue him with heavenly awe in order that he should begin to learn how to serve God" (ibid.).

Clearly Rebbe Nachman saw this boy's fever as being bound up with his fearfulness, which is why he spoke to him the way he did. More than this, he

thought of ailments that most people today would consider primarily physical as being essentially spiritual, and he sought to correct them at their very roots. There were times when he did this through words of Torah.

The first occasion we explicitly hear of his channeling healing through a Torah teaching was in January 1805, when he was visiting Medvedevka for Shabbat Shirah. His daughter Chayah, who was then in Medvedevka, was suffering from a stye on her eye that had left her almost blind. Rebbe Nachman was informed of this upon his arrival in the town. In the discourse he gave that Shabbat (Likutey Moharan I, 62) he included a discussion on a passage in the Zohar which speaks about "the beautiful maiden who has no eyes" (Zohar II, 95). "And through this," writes Reb Noson, "she was healed." Reb Noson continues:

"When the Rebbe returned home, he told me this story himself, and I understood from his holy gestures that he found it wonderful that he had brought her healing through the words of his discourse. Whatever happens to people involves many mysteries, because nothing happens without a reason. The greater the person, the more far-reaching the implications of what happens to him. The level of the Rebbe's holy offspring was in the most exalted realms. Everything that happened to them involved great battles, because the implications went so far" (Tzaddik #152).

Evidently the Rebbe understood that his daughter's eye ailment was an expression of a flaw on the spiritual plane, and it was this that he sought to correct through his discourse.

Another occasion when Rebbe Nachman channeled healing through a Torah teaching was almost a year and a half later, on the festival of Shavuot 1806. Shavuot was one of the fixed times for Rebbe Nachman's followers to gather at his side. One man came with his daughter, who was epileptic. Her fits came at regular intervals. In Rebbe Nachman's Torah discourse that Shavuot (Likutey Moharan I, 29) he included a discussion of epilepsy, in the course of which he quoted the verse, "She has fallen but will no more; rise, O virgin of Israel" (Amos 5:2 according to the talmudic interpretation in Berachot 4b). The expected time for the girl to have a fit passed without incident, and from then on she was cured (Tzaddik #146 and Rabbi Gedaliah Koenig).

We also hear that while Reb Noson was in Breslov for Rosh Hashanah 1807, news came that his wife, who had stayed in Mohilev, was dangerously ill with no one to take care of her. Reb Noson told Rebbe Nachman, who gave a lesson the following morning that included healing as one of its themes and also discussed the concept of Shabbat as the "wife of all Israel" (Likutey Moharan I, 277). Reb Noson's wife recovered. People in Mohilev criticized Reb Noson for having left his wife alone in order to be with Rebbe Nachman, but Reb Noson saw things differently: "If my wife remained alive, it was all through the prayers and holy Torah of the Rebbe" (Yemey Moharnat I, 26). Reb Noson writes: "Countless times we saw before our eyes how things which were happening in the world, and especially to the Rebbe's followers, were all included in his discourses. Through his Torah teachings he drew sweet, salutary influences into all aspects of the world, both in general and in particular, spiritually and physically" (Tzaddik #390).

Besides Torah teachings, Rebbe Nachman's main weapon in the fight against illness was prayer. Essentially he saw illness as a heavenly decree, but "repentance, prayer and charity remove the evil of the decree" (from the High Holiday liturgy).

Rebbe Nachman's earliest follower was Reb Shimon. Once Reb Shimon's son was critically ill and he asked Rebbe Nachman to use his special abilities to pray for the child. Rebbe Nachman did not respond. Reb Shimon understood this to mean that the situation was very desperate. When he came home he told his wife, "If you want a live child, don't go to sleep tonight." The whole night Reb Shimon's wife stood over the child's cot weeping and crying for her son. When Reb Shimon went to the Rebbe the next morning the Rebbe said, "Until now I did not fully appreciate the power of a woman's prayers. The decree that the child would die was already sealed, but she, with her simple prayers, not only won him life but long life at that! Do you see the power of prayer?!" Reb Shimon's son recovered and lived for close to a hundred years (Siach Sarfey Kodesh 1-100).

Heavenly decrees

Rebbe Nachman was no stranger to illness either in his own life or in the lives of his immediate family. Besides his final illness, he himself suffered a number of bouts of serious illness, including one during his trip to the Holy Land in 1798, and another in the spring of 1807. Of his eight children, four - two boys and two girls - died in infancy or early childhood. His first wife, Sashia, died of tuberculosis at the age of thirty-four in 1807. Needless to say, Rebbe Nachman did not view any of these tragedies in a medical context. He saw them all as being sent from heaven for mysterious reasons which had to do with the very intensity of his efforts to bring redemption into the world.

This is evident in comments he made when his granddaughter was stricken with smallpox in the summer of 1805, shortly after two of the greatest spiritual triumphs of his life: his revelation of the Tikkun HaKlali, the General Remedy, and his handing over of the manuscript of his major Torah discourses to date for binding. He poured out his anguish over his granddaughter's illness to Reb Noson, who writes:

"The Rebbe then spoke of how God's ways cannot be understood. Once the holy Ari (Rabbi Yitzchak Luria, 1534-72) lost a son. The Ari said this happened because of a secret teaching he himself had revealed to Rabbi Chaim Vital (see Shevachey HaAri, Warsaw 1875 p.11b f.). In fact the Ari had no other choice: Rabbi Chaim Vital had pressed him greatly and the Ari was therefore compelled to reveal the secret, because he himself had said that the only reason he came into this world was to rectify Rabbi Chaim Vital's soul. He was therefore compelled from on high to reveal this mystery at Rabbi Chaim's request. But despite having been compelled, the Ari was still punished for what he did. These are ways of God that cannot possibly be grasped by the human intellect.

"From what the Rebbe said we could understand that the same was

true of him. Both he and his children had suffered greatly, and this all happened because he was involved in bringing us closer to God. God certainly desired this, and the Rebbe had no other choice. It is written, 'He thinks thoughts that the outcast not be banished' (Samuel II, 14:14). God wanted the Rebbe to bring the 'outcasts' back to Him, but still, the Rebbe had to suffer because of this. This is God's incomprehensible way" (Rabbi Nachman's Wisdom #189).

In the spring of 1805 Rebbe Nachman's first son, Shlomo Ephraim, was born. Rebbe Nachman had tremendous hopes for his son, but some time during the first year of his life Shlomo Ephraim contracted tuberculosis. This happened soon after Rebbe Nachman had handed over the manuscript of his "Burned Book" (see next chapter) to two of his closest followers with instructions to travel from town to town reading a little section in each one. Rebbe Nachman asked Reb Noson to pray for his baby son, saying, "I knew when I handed the book over to those two that they [the accusing forces] would brace themselves for an attack on this little baby...." (Tzaddik #74).

In the summer of 1806 Rebbe Nachman himself traveled to the Baal Shem Tov's grave in Medzeboz to pray for his son. He remained at the graveside for a very long time, but he knew that his prayers were fruitless. Shlomo Ephraim died while Rebbe Nachman was on the road from Medzeboz to Breslov. He later spoke of the greatness the child could one day have achieved, and likened his death to that of the Ari's son, who died because of the secret his father had revealed. Rebbe Nachman said to his followers, "I am suffering because of you. The holy Ari was punished for revealing one secret mystery. How much more is this true of me, seeing that I have revealed so many secrets like these" (Rabbi Nachman's Wisdom *ibid.*).

The following winter Rebbe Nachman's second son, Yaakov, was born, but died not long afterwards. By then the Rebbe's wife, Sashia, had already been sick with tuberculosis for some time. At the end of that same winter, in March 1807, Rebbe Nachman went on a mysterious journey to Novorich, Ostrog and a number of other cities in the area northwest of Kiev. While traveling, he sent his attendant, Reb Shmuel of Teplik, back to Breslov to bring his wife to Ostrog, where he intended to have her examined by a doctor. In a letter to his followers in Breslov he wrote, "Encourage my wife to come to me, for the wife of one's youth is impossible to replace" (Alim LiTerufah #1).

It is something of a mystery why Rebbe Nachman was willing to have his wife go to a doctor, seeing as he had already expressed his opposition to doctors and medicine, though not as vociferously as he was to do after his trip to Lemberg (Rabbi Nachman's Wisdom #50). In Jewish law one of a husband's obligations to his wife is to heal her (Shulchan Arukh, Even Ha'Ezer 79:1). Was it that Rebbe Nachman felt that even though he had no faith in medicine himself, he should still leave no possibility untried? Or could it be that his wife was the one who wanted to consult a doctor, and that Rebbe Nachman had no desire to oppose her wishes in a matter that concerned her very life?

Even so, it is highly doubtful whether Rebbe Nachman saw any hope in consulting a doctor. Before despatching Reb Shmuel of Teplik to Breslov, Rebbe

Nachman made some cryptic remarks to him that are barely comprehensible in themselves but do nevertheless give some indication of his attitude: "Tonight I have been busy with a book of remedies, even though medicines are nothing. But the wife of my youth is not here. From meizar [the Aramaic word for medicine] will be made Mezritch. From there go to Ostrog and from there to Breslov for my wife in order to bring her there to be treated" (Tzaddik #60).

In any event, Rebbe Nachman tried to remain faithful to his own saying, "I don't hold by doctors. But if you're going to go, make sure you choose the very best!" (Siach Sarfey Kodesh I:8). He wanted his wife to be seen by the renowned Dr. Guardia (or Gordon), Rabbi Aharon ben Shimon Rofey, who having been physician to the Mezritcher Magid was held in high esteem in chassidic circles. But for reasons unknown, his wife did not want treatment from Dr. Guardia and asked to travel to Zaslov, where she had family. In Zaslov she at first showed signs of improvement, but soon afterwards she began to languish and died on the eve of Shavuot, June 11, 1807, with Rebbe Nachman at her side.

Rabbi Aharon ben Shimon Rofey (Dr. Guardia) d. 1810

Born into a Jewish family in Prussia, Dr. Guardia strayed from his religious roots, eventually becoming court physician to the King of Prussia. Once the king paid a state visit to Vilna, bringing his physician with him. It happened that a prominent member of the Vilna Jewish community, who was a follower of the Mezritcher Magid, was seriously ill. The town doctors despaired of helping him but his family asked that the visiting king's physician be brought to see him. Miraculously the man was healed. Afterwards he mentioned to Dr. Guardia that some time before he became sick, his Rebbe, the Magid, had told him something that he could only now understand: it isn't the medicines that bring healing, but each doctor is accompanied by a unique angel of healing, while the greatest of doctors is accompanied by the Angel Raphael himself. [The Angel Raphael is charged with healing the sick.]

These words of the Magid aroused the Jewish spark in Dr. Guardia, who requested a period of leave from the Prussian Court in order to visit the Magid. When he arrived, the Magid said, "I've been waiting so long for you to come. I will heal your soul, and you, my son, heal my body." The doctor decided to stay with the Magid, and from then on devoted himself with all his heart and soul to Torah and prayer, becoming a tzaddik and a Torah scholar. He was known as Rabbi Aharon ben Shimon Rofey. After the death of the Magid he settled in Ostrog, where he spent his entire day in the synagogue engaged in Torah and prayer. Anyone in the region who was in need of treatment knew where the doctor was to be found. Whenever he was called to attend the sick he removed his tallit and tefilin, paid his doctor's visit, and then returned to his Torah study (from The Magid of Mezritch by

Even before his wife's death Rebbe Nachman himself had gone through a bout of illness in Zaslov (Tzaddik #56). We do not know what it was, but evidently it was quite serious. In a letter to his followers in Breslov he asked them to pray for him.

"I shall not write the details of my illness in order not to make my mazal worse. I only ask that you pray for me in each and every prayer, and don't forget all the good that I have done for each one of you until now. It is possible that God will allow me to live, and you will be able to receive even more good from me. Remember how I found each of you when I came to Breslov, and how much energy, spiritual and physical, I have expended on your behalf. It is therefore only proper that you should now likewise pray for me and ask God to ' heal me and show me the pleasure of His splendor'" (Alim LiTerufah #1).

In a letter to his son-in-law, R. Yoske, husband of his daughter Adil, Rebbe Nachman wrote from Zaslov:

"I should also like to inform you that I am not making use of medicine, for God has helped me and has not taken His beneficence and truth from me" (ibid. #2).

In a second letter to his followers, he writes:

"Let me also tell you that I am now quite healthy without having resorted to any physical cures" (ibid. #3).

In the same letter, he said to his followers:

"What I ask of you is that my toil and labor on behalf of each one of you should not turn out to have been in vain. For I have taken my life in my hands for the sake of your souls. God is the righteous one, it is I who did evil. It was my own deeds which caused my suffering, the death of my precious children, the opposition and the accusations. But I know full well that it was also the work which I did with you to extricate you from the teeth of Satan that caused him to sharpen his eyes upon me and grind his teeth against me" (ibid.).

Rebbe Nachman later told his followers that it was their prayers that had brought about his recovery from illness in Zaslov (Tzaddik #63) - but not for long. Satan's vice was tightening on Rebbe Nachman. In the summer of 1807 he left Zaslov and went to Brody, where he became engaged to his second wife. From there he returned to Breslov, but on the way back he started coughing, and he knew at once that this was a sign of the illness he would die of. He lived for another three years, which he said was a miracle. But from this time on he began talking about his death (Tzaddik #58-59).

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[AZAMRA HOMEPAGE](#)

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