



THE WINGS OF THE SUN

Traditional Jewish Healing in Theory and Practice

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Chapter 8

Lemberg

Prior to his last illness Rebbe Nachman had always been very vigorous and active. He said: "It was as if someone for whom the world had tremendous need was snatched away and confined to a room high up on the third or fourth floor. 'Now you sit here!' I used to be like a busy merchant going out to the market with any number of things to do, always snatching at business opportunities. Even if they told me I needed to take a little rest and relaxation I wouldn't hear of it. I didn't know what rest and relaxation were. All the time I had to do... do...! And now I have to be careful how I eat, I have to make sure I get my sleep and so on - all because of my illness. I used to have a beautiful body. It never made demands or pushed itself forward. But now I have to be so careful...." (Tzaddik #77-78).

In the days before immunization and antibacterial drugs, tuberculosis, or "consumption" (hoost in Yiddish), was a dreaded disease. The most usual symptoms are persistent coughing, fever, night sweats and chronic exhaustion. Tuberculosis generally starts in the lungs but can spread to the gastrointestinal and urogenital tracts, the nervous system, joints, bones and skin. Reb Noson tells of Rebbe Nachman's constant coughing and weakness throughout his illness, and in one place gives a heart-rending description of one of his worst coughing attacks, in which he brought up enormous quantities of blood and phlegm (Tzaddik #116).

However, for Rebbe Nachman his illness was not a personal tragedy but an expression of the plight of the Jewish People as a whole. In the words of Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzatto, the outstanding 18th century kabbalist:

"Pain and suffering may sometimes be imposed on a Tzaddik for his entire generation. In atoning for them through his suffering, this Tzaddik saves them in this world and greatly benefits them in the next. An even higher category of suffering is that which comes to a Tzaddik to provide the help necessary to bring about the chain of events leading to mankind's ultimate perfection. Man has to undergo at least some suffering before he and the world can attain perfection.

He must be punished for his wickedness until the attribute of justice is satisfied. However, God arranged matters in such a way that select perfect individuals can rectify things for others. The only reason they suffer is because of others. The merit and power of these Tzaddikim are increased because of such suffering, and this gives them an even greater ability to rectify the damage of others. They can therefore not only rectify their own generation but can also correct all the spiritual damage from the beginning...." (R. Moshe Chaim Luzzatto, Derekh HaShem 2:3:8).

In Rebbe Nachman's own words:

"Know that while sometimes forgiveness of sins comes about through the collective merit of the community, there are times when the members of the community are not sufficiently worthy to have their sins forgiven in their own merit. The Tzaddik is then obliged to undertake to suffer for the sake of the Jewish People. ' Surely he bore our diseases and carried our pains' (Isaiah 53:4). The community in general is saved from illness but not the Tzaddik, because he undertakes to suffer on behalf of the Jewish People" (Likutey Moharan II, 8:6).

In discourse after discourse during his last illness, Rebbe Nachman spoke about the spiritual significance of the lungs. The physical life of the entire body depends upon the lungs, which bring oxygen from the air to the blood, which in turn takes it to all the body's tissues, where it is needed to produce the energy the cells require in order to function. The life of the spirit also depends upon the lungs, whose five lobes correspond to the Five Books of Moses - the Torah - and to the five divisions of the Book of Psalms - Prayer. Words of Torah and prayer are the breath of life and the essential "soul food" of the Jewish People. Rebbe Nachman saw his diseased lungs as expressing the crisis of faith that was afflicting the nation. When the "lungs" are wasted, the entire nation is in danger.

Death held no terrors for Rebbe Nachman. He said that for him it was "just like going from one room to another" (Rabbi Nachman's Wisdom #156). He explained: "If you grasp at this world, there is an agonizing difference between this world and the grave. This world is spread before you, while the grave is a tight, cramped place. But when you have purified your mind and your thoughts, there is no difference between this world, the grave and the next world. When you desire only God and His Torah, all are the same. In all three you can grasp onto God and His Torah" (ibid. #51). What haunted Rebbe Nachman was not death but the need to complete his mission - to heal the fissure between God and the Jewish People through holding out a redemptive Torah of faith and joy that would speak to those alienated from their spiritual roots.

Does the fact that Rebbe Nachman succumbed to his illness at the age of only thirty-eight in any way invalidate his healing pathway? That he died young says very little in itself. In his thirty-eight years he achieved far more than most people could achieve in multiple lifetimes. But what about the fact that he did

not "recover" from his tuberculosis? Is his pathway of healing through faith and joy to be judged as a failure on the grounds that he was unable to heal himself?

Was it even possible that he could have recovered from a disease that in those days was invariably fatal? Presumably Rebbe Nachman believed that it was possible, at least in principle (see Sichot HaRan #157). He said: "I believe that God can turn a triangle into a square, for God's ways are hidden from us. He is omnipotent and nothing is impossible for Him" (Tzaddik #407). It is quite unlikely that medicine as known at that time could have brought about a complete remission, and in any case Rebbe Nachman did receive medical treatment in Lemberg, as we shall presently see. But should he have been able to do better through spiritual healing?

If healing is understood to mean nothing but a complete and permanent reversal of physical illness, it is true that Rebbe Nachman was not cured, though he did survive for a full three years despite several extreme crises in which he came very close to death. But healing means more than physical recovery. True healing means living one's life to the fullest up to the very last moment. In this sense Rebbe Nachman was healed, because he refused to allow his physical limitations to turn him into an invalid.

He continued his spiritual quest just as he had done throughout his life, constantly moving forward as fast as he could, never standing still for a moment. He turned his very illness into a means of self-elevation. Many of the greatest treasures that he left to posterity date from this last period of his life, including all his longer stories and many of his most outstanding discourses in Likutey Moharan, which contain priceless, life-giving spiritual guidance and encouragement for generations to come. Since his illness was ultimately the illness of the Jewish People, it was not possible for his body to be healed. The rectification that had to be accomplished could come about only through his death. But out of his very illness and suffering Rebbe Nachman forged the healing pathway that could bring succor for the wounds of the nation.

"I will tell you the beginning of my journey"

In the late summer of 1807 Rebbe Nachman married his second wife, and soon afterwards celebrated the Days of Awe in Breslov. With all his followers gathered at his side, Rosh Hashanah was always the high point of the year for him and the occasion for some of his greatest discourses. This Rosh Hashanah Rebbe Nachman already knew that a long journey lay ahead of him. He intended to leave for Lemberg (Lvov), the capital of Galicia, directly after the conclusion of Succot.

It would be a long and difficult journey from the Russian Ukraine to an area of Poland that was then ruled by Austria. The whole of Europe was in the grip of the Napoleonic Wars. It was to be one of the most dramatic journeys of Rebbe Nachman's life, and one that was to have the utmost significance for the development of his teachings on healing. But as yet he had no idea how his journey would end. He was very sick and weak. Would he ever return to Breslov and see his followers again?

Rebbe Nachman's journey to Lemberg was a mission for the sake of the future of the Jewish People. In the words of Reb Nachman of Tcherin (1825-94), outstanding scholar of the third generation of the Breslov movement:

"Rebbe Nachman saw with his holy spirit that atheism and skepticism were destined to attack the Jewish People. In Lemberg he worked to subjugate these trends. When he returned from there he raised a bitter cry about the atheism that was spreading throughout the world. Today we can actually see how everything he predicted has come about. The cancerous disease of atheism and unbelief is everywhere. The main thrust of the attack is on the young. From their earliest years they are brought up to be skeptical about the teachings of our Rabbis. The Rebbe labored to rectify this situation, and this was the purpose of his journey to Lemberg" (Parpara'ot LeChokhmah on Likutey Moharan I, 282).

For Rebbe Nachman, his mission had already begun that Rosh Hashanah, while he was still in Breslov. The discourse he gave ("Rabbi Shimon rejoiced," Likutey Moharan I, 61) was a kind of last will and testament to his followers, emphasizing the importance of faith in the Tzaddik and of spreading his teachings through the printing of books. The true Tzaddik attains the supreme wisdom of the Torah, through which all conflicts and contradictions can be resolved and sweetened. In a pointed hint to his chassidim, Rebbe Nachman quoted the saying of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai: "For us, everything depends upon (chavivuta), mutual love" (Zohar Bamidbar 128). Love between chassid and chassid and between Jew and Jew would be the remedy for conflict within the Jewish People and in the world as a whole, bringing unity and joy - all through faith in the Tzaddik. Three weeks later, on Shemini Atzeret - just two days before he was to leave Breslov - Rebbe Nachman gave the discourse that he saw as the most fundamental of all his teachings, and one that is also basic to his approach to health and healing: "Azamra - I will sing!":

"Know that you must judge all people favorably. Even in the case of a complete sinner, you must search until you find some modicum of good by virtue of which he is not a sinner. By finding this small amount of good and judging him favorably, you really do elevate him to the scale of merit, and you can then bring him back to God.

"And so too you must seek out the good in yourself. It is a known principle that one must take care to be happy at all times and keep well away from depression. Maybe when you start looking at yourself, it seems as if you have nothing good in you at all. Even so, you must not allow yourself to become discouraged. Search until you find a little bit of good within yourself. You may start to examine it, only to see that it is full of blemishes and devoid of purity. Even so, how is it possible that it contains not a modicum of good? You have to search until you find some little good point in yourself to restore your inner vitality and attain joy. In just the same way you must carry on searching until you find another good point in yourself, and then another....

"When a person refuses to let himself fall but instead revives his spirits by searching out his positive points, collecting them together and sifting them from the impurities and evil within him, through this melodies are made. He can then pray and sing and give thanks to God" (Likutey Moharan I, 282).

The teaching of "Azamra" was a further step in Rebbe Nachman's mission. Not only is the search for the good points in others and in ourselves the basis of chavivuta, mutual love between Jew and Jew. It is also the foundation of genuine faith, which means not merely belief in God "out there," but faith in the Godliness within ourselves and those around us. Each one of us is God's precious creation. We are important in God's eyes. Flawed as our efforts to act right and do good in the world may often be, every one of them is cherished in God's eyes. Even the tiniest modicum of goodness can become a pregnant point of connection with God, leading to abundant joy, song, ecstatic prayer and complete teshuvah, return and restoration.

The teaching of the good points lies at the very heart of Rebbe Nachman's pathway of healing through joy, and it was also the key to his remedy for the atheism he saw spreading through the world. For in the words of R. Nachman of Tcherin, "When a person first starts having doubts and atheistic ideas, in most cases it is because of the demoralization he experiences when he starts thinking about his sins. This makes it hard for him to remain firm in the Torah path and cheer himself up with the good points he still has in him. In the end he falls away completely, becomes caught up in totally bad ways, loses all faith and turns into an atheist" (op. cit.). Showing people the way to discover their own true value was Rebbe Nachman's medicine for the demoralization that lies at the core of the vicious cycle of sin and alienation from God.

Immediately after the conclusion of the festivals, Rebbe Nachman set off hurriedly for Lemberg. Reb Noson and his lifelong friend, Reb Naftali, went running after the Rebbe's carriage, and caught up with it as the horses labored up a hill.

"We stood there in front of the Rebbe and he gave us a kindly look. ' Which would you prefer,' he said, ' a blessing or a Torah teaching?' ' Give us the blessing when you come home safe and well from Lemberg,' I answered. ' But for now, teach us Torah!' - for I knew that if we didn't hear it at once it would be lost forever.' He said, ' I will tell you the beginning of my journey'" (Yemey Moharnat 23a).

It was then that Rebbe Nachman revealed the concluding section of his teaching "Azamra," which speaks of the Tzaddik as the one who has the power to gather all the good points that are to be found in every Jew, even those who have rebelled against the Torah. The teaching of "Azamra," foundation of Rebbe Nachman's pathway of health and healing, was indeed the "beginning of his journey" - because Rebbe Nachman's trip to Lemberg was a mission of healing for the entire Jewish People. At the conclusion of the teaching, the carriage moved off, taking the sick, weak Rebbe Nachman on his way to Lemberg.

Lemberg

The largest city in Eastern Galicia, Lemberg had been a transit center for trade between the orient and the west. Jews had lived there from time immemorial. The town had been a center of Shabbatean activity, and in 1759 was the scene of a major disputation between the Rabbis and the followers of the neo-Shabbatean Jacob Frank, after which over five hundred Frankists were converted to Christianity amidst great pomp and ceremony. The partition of Poland in 1772, the year of Rebbe Nachman's birth, placed Lemberg under Austrian rule. Although this led to an artificial curtailment of its role in trade, it had important effects in other directions.

For one thing, the Austrian authorities encouraged assimilationist tendencies in their Jewish population. By the time of Rebbe Nachman's visit in 1807-8, Lemberg's Jewish community, which numbered over 18,000, already included a group of maskilim. Under the influence of the notorious Naftali Hertz Homberg (1749-1841), whom the Austrian authorities had appointed as superintendent of the Jewish schools in Galicia, Lemberg had four boys' schools, three girls' schools and a teachers' seminary run according to his principles, which included a prohibition against the use of the Hebrew language and the censorship of traditional texts. Lemberg later became one of the major battlefields in the conflict between observant Jews and the proponents of assimilation.

Another effect of Lemberg's annexation to Austria was that it became a major center for Jewish doctors. Until the end of the eighteenth century the medical schools of Poland and Russia were closed to Jews, and those wishing to study medicine were obliged to travel to Italy. However the Edicts of Tolerance issued by Emperor Joseph II of Austria starting in 1782 gave Jews admission to Austria's medical schools. These had become the most progressive in the whole of Europe ever since the Empress Maria Theresa had brought leading alumni of the University of Leiden to reorganize medical teaching in Vienna. Austrian doctors were among the first to popularize use of the thermometer in medicine and pioneered the procedure of percussing the chest (tapping with the fingers) to diagnose abnormalities of the thorax. Vienna's famous Allgemeines Krankenhaus teaching hospital became a model for all Europe.

All this encouraged intelligent young Jews who were disenchanted with the traditional Jewish occupations of trade, estate management, distilling and tax collection to enter the field of medicine. As a major Jewish population center, Lemberg boasted a large number of doctors, so many, in fact, that they were divided into two camps locked in dispute over how to treat various diseases (Rabbi Nachman's Wisdom #50).

Compelled from on high

Did Rebbe Nachman journey to Lemberg purely for the purpose of receiving medical treatment?

Reb Noson writes:

"The Rebbe himself underwent medical treatment in Lemberg, but this involved deep mysteries. It was not for medical treatment that he made this trip but for deep reasons known only to himself. His intentions were as hidden and mysterious as they were on his journeys to Kaminetz, Novorich and Sharograd. All the Rebbe's travels involved awesome mysteries hidden from all human eyes. Who can unravel the mystery of his travels? Everything the Rebbe did involved impalpable secrets. The same is true of his journey to Lemberg. Once he was there, he was compelled from on high to accept medicines, for reasons known only to himself" (ibid.).

We can perhaps gain a glimmer of insight into Rebbe Nachman's reasons for accepting treatment from a comment he himself made:

"I cannot describe the suffering I endured there - spiritual suffering, needless to say. I received medical treatment. I used to drink (hina). The people living where this plant grows are total unbelievers. They say, ' There's no law and no Judge.' I used to take other remedies grown in other locations where there are different kinds of heresy. When all these drugs came inside me, they turned into whatever they turned into" (Tzaddik #78).

(It seems likely that hina is quinine, which at that time was used as a remedy for malaria, a disease that affected much of Europe. Quinine is derived from the bark of the cinchona plant. The name quinine comes from the quina quina plant, which was mistaken for cinchona.)

The editor of Tzaddik explains:

"The drugs from each location all had to come into his stomach in order for the atheism of the place to be crushed. This was true of several drugs. From this it is possible to gain a little understanding as to why the Rebbe submitted himself to medical treatment, although there were other hidden reasons, as there were behind all his actions. His advice to other people was very emphatically to keep away from doctors and medical treatment!" (ibid.).

It is a strange paradox that Rebbe Nachman received treatment in what must then have been one of the most progressive medical centers in Europe, only to go on to attack doctors and medicine more vociferously than ever before. We might therefore ask whether another of his reasons for taking treatment was that he wanted to penetrate to the very core of the developing medical orthodoxy, since it was destined to become the ascendant healing paradigm in the new world that was coming into being. In many ways it was the complete negation of the healing paradigm that Rebbe Nachman championed. Was it that he wanted to know what he was fighting against, even if it meant learning it on his very own flesh?

During his stay in Lemberg, Rebbe Nachman was in a very critical condition. Reb Noson writes:

"For a long period he was only able to lie on one side and he found it impossible to lie on the other. Afterwards God worked miracles and wonders, and he began to improve a little. Suddenly one night he turned onto his other side and was able to lie on it. He said this improvement owed nothing to the doctor. In fact what had happened was that someone had come that night and told him there was a decree in heaven that he should lie on his right side, and he did indeed lie on his right side as he had always done (cf. Ezekiel 4:4-8). It had been a long time since he had been able to do this. The person who came to him that night was the famed and saintly R. Aharon of Tetiev (d.1827), grandson of the Baal Shem Tov" (Tzaddik #65).

Rebbe Nachman said that during the time that he was unable to turn onto his other side, there was one period when he suffered continuous pain and inflammation for three days. When he related this, he said, "But then I cried out to God differently!" (Siach Sarfey Kodesh 1-98).

The Burned Book

One day in the early spring of 1808 the Rebbe went into a private room and there he wept and wept. He called for Reb Shimon, who was attending him.

Reb Noson relates:

"With tears running down his cheeks Rebbe Nachman sighed and said: ' I have no one to ask for advice.' The Rebbe told Reb Shimon that in his house in Breslov was a book he had written, for the sake of which he had lost his wife and children. For this book they had died, and he himself had sacrificed himself greatly. Now he did not know what to do. He saw that he would be forced to die there in Lemberg. Only if this book were to be burned could he survive. It caused him great anguish to think of burning this awesome and holy book, for which he had sacrificed himself so heavily. [This work was known to the Breslover Chassidim as Sefer HaNisraf, the "Burned Book," which Rebbe Nachman had dictated to Reb Noson at intervals between 1805 and 1807 and had given to two of his other followers to read extracts in various towns, see above p.71.] There is no way of communicating the exaltedness of this book. If it had survived, everyone would have seen the greatness of the Rebbe with their own eyes.

"Reb Shimon answered him: ' If there are any grounds for supposing that your life depends on this, there is no doubt that it would be better to burn the book so that you should remain alive.' The Rebbe said, ' At least my time would be extended. But even so, it would be very painful for me to burn it. You don't realize the preciousness and holiness of this book. I lost my first wife and my children for it. I have endured terrible sufferings for it.' The Rebbe wept and wept. Afterwards the doctor came to the house. Reb Shimon and the Rebbe were still talking. Reb Shimon told the doctor how worried he was about the Rebbe crying like this at a time when his condition was so

serious. The doctor was shaken by the sight of the Rebbe. He spoke with him a little and left.

"After this Rebbe Nachman and Reb Shimon continued talking. The Rebbe wept even more than before. Finally he said to Reb Shimon, ' If that is the case, here is the key to my drawer. Go quickly. Hurry! Don't delay! Hire a carriage and go straight to Breslov. Don't let the rain and snow hold you up. Go as fast as you can, and when you get to Breslov take two books. One of them is lying in my drawer, the second is in my daughter Adil's chest. Take them and burn them. For God's sake be as quick as you can.' The Rebbe warned Reb Shimon not to try to be clever and hide a part of the book instead of burning everything.

"Reb Shimon hired a carriage and left immediately. But when he came to Dashev, which is close to Breslov, Reb Shimon suddenly fell ill. He was laid up in bed and simply could not get up. He realized that this was the work of the Evil One, who wanted to prevent him from carrying out the Rebbe's instructions. We had already discovered that anything the Rebbe told us to do was attended by countless obstacles, especially something as important as this, on which the Rebbe's very life depended.

"Reb Shimon gave orders that they should carry him out to the coach, lay him down inside and press on to Breslov. He was determined to make for Breslov as long as he had any life at all. All he could think about was to get to Breslov, where at least he would be able to tell someone else to burn the books in his presence. They put him into the carriage and he hurried on towards Breslov. As soon as he arrived he recovered. He took the two books and burned them both" (Tzaddik #66).

When Rebbe Nachman originally dictated the Sefer HaNisraf to Reb Noson, he said to him, "If only you knew what you are writing." Reb Noson replied, "I really have no idea at all." Said Rebbe Nachman, "You don't even know what it is that you don't know!" (ibid. #67). We too are in the same position. We have no idea what was lost to the world when the Sefer HaNisraf was destroyed. But Rebbe Nachman himself survived, and was able to go back to Breslov. And Reb Noson writes: "After his return from Lemberg, the Rebbe found a path and spoke in such a way as to ensure that his light would never be extinguished. The Rebbe himself said, ' My fire will burn until the Mashiach comes'" (ibid. #126).

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