



THE WINGS OF THE SUN

Traditional Jewish Healing in Theory and Practice

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Chapter 16

The Breslover Chassidim and Medicine

To what extent did Rebbe Nachman's followers, the Breslover Chassidim, actually heed his warnings against medicine in practice? As we will presently see, his closest disciple, Reb Noson, took the Rebbe's warnings at face value, and followed them unwaveringly all his life. However, it appears that not all the Rebbe's followers were so firm in times of crisis, as we learn from Reb Noson's account of the final days of the Rebbe's life. In the fall of 1810 the Rebbe was lying sick in the town of Uman, where he was to die. On the second night of Rosh Hashanah (September 30) the Rebbe's condition became very critical. Reb Noson writes:

"A few people were with him, and they wanted to summon the doctor urgently. However they could not get him to come because it was the middle of the night. The Rebbe said, ' It is good to give thanks to God that the doctor didn't come.' He said that anyone who cared about his life should make sure not to let any doctor near him. ' Even if I myself later on give instructions to bring me a doctor, I still want you to see to it that you don't let any doctor come in to me.'

"The day before Sukkot the Rebbe was in a very serious condition, and a number of people started saying they should bring the doctor. The Rebbe himself told them to do so. I myself was completely against this, even though the people there thought the Rebbe himself was willing for the doctor to come. But I knew the truth - that he was completely opposed to it. It was just that he was forced to agree because everyone around him was saying they should bring a doctor. There was nothing the Rebbe could do to change their minds. This was the Rebbe's way. Even if he knew a particular thing was no good, if people were pressing him to do it, he would not go against them. This was why I was totally opposed to their calling him. But it was impossible to prevail, especially now that the Rebbe himself seemed to be agreeing with them and his condition was so serious. Accordingly, they summoned a doctor the day before Sukkot. If only they had not, because it did not help at all. If anything, it hastened

his death" (Tzaddik #119).

We have no information whatever as to the identity of those who were in favor of calling the doctor, though we may assume that they were probably members of Rebbe Nachman's inner circle of followers or his attendants, since presumably they alone would have had any say in the matter. They must have been aware of the Rebbe's views on doctors, but perhaps they thought his warnings did not apply at such a time of crisis, or that they should be ignored.

Reb Noson

Despite the fact that Rebbe Nachman allowed his followers to call a doctor to see him, Reb Noson was in no doubt that the Rebbe had not changed his views on doctors and medicine at all, and that his warnings applied under all circumstances. After the Rebbe's passing, Reb Noson followed his teachings to the letter until the end of his life - this in spite of the fact that he suffered from colitis for over twenty-five years.

It is told that once Reb Noson fell ill when visiting the town of Teplik. Someone called a doctor to examine him, but as soon as Reb Noson saw him, he turned his face to the wall and said, "You brought me a messenger of the Angel of Death." Another time a nail pierced Reb Noson's foot, causing him great suffering. Someone brought him a herb which was said to have healing properties, but Reb Noson refused even this, and left his foot to heal naturally (Avanehah Barzel p.43, #64).

Two days before his death, Reb Noson said: "The angel Dumah comes to a person after he is placed in the grave, splits open his stomach and throws the remnants found there on his face, as if to say, ' Here is what you desired' (Masekhta Chibut HaKever 2)." Reb Noson sighed deeply, and added, "Oy! Especially when the dead person's stomach is full of medicine, this punishment is like burning fire! Even so, Rebbe Nachman can rectify everything!" (Alim LiTerufah II, p.841)

Some of Reb Noson's strongest condemnations of medicine are found in his prayers on healing in his collected book of prayers, Likutey Tefilot, based on the teachings of Rebbe Nachman:

"Grant that through the power of our prayers we should be able to crush, humble, smash and nullify all the medicines of the doctors. Let the truth be revealed in the world: that not a single doctor in the whole world has any understanding at all of how to cure any illness. All healing comes only through the Word of God, through the prayers and supplications of the Tzaddikim, the masters of prayer, who pray for the Jewish People and conciliate You, drawing healing into the world" (Likutey Tefilot II, 1).

"Have mercy on us and save us from healers and doctors. Let us never make the mistake of putting ourselves in the hands of doctors, for they are all ' false-god physicians' (Job 13:4). The majority of

doctors are brutes with no understanding of healing whatever. With a simple error they can do tremendous damage, and the harm they do is far greater than any cures they bring about. They kill and murder souls with their very hands. More people have died at the hands of healers and doctors than from natural causes, as is revealed before You, Master of All, and as the doctors themselves acknowledge. For they themselves say that it is impossible to have a clear understanding of the art of healing - they acknowledge it, yet are not ashamed - and that it is better to keep away from medicines" (ibid. II, 1).

Various passages in Reb Noson's collected letters in *Alim LiTerufah* give us a clear picture of how he actually followed Rebbe Nachman's teachings on healing in practice. In 1823, thirteen years after Rebbe Nachman's passing, Reb Noson wrote to his childhood friend, Reb Naftali (1780-1860), who was Rebbe Nachman's closest follower after Reb Noson:

"As regards the news that you have been suffering from pain in your eyes, I will certainly pray for you. From this you will see and understand how important it is to keep away from doctors. I have already prepared a prescription to send you. The entire prescription is: (1) Don't take any medicine; (2) Don't take any medicine; (3) Don't take any medicine. And you most certainly should go to the mikveh [ritual bath]. And God will have mercy on you and quickly send you complete healing from Heaven" (*Alim LiTerufah* #3).

It appears that Reb Naftali nevertheless decided to seek some kind of medical treatment. Perhaps he thought that Rebbe Nachman's warnings against doctors were to be understood as applying only to medical problems in the interior of the body, just as Rabbi Avraham Ibn Ezra had made a distinction between internal and external problems. If so, Reb Noson told Reb Naftali that this was not the case:

"I am very upset about the pain in your eyes, but I am absolutely amazed that you have been prepared to go after 'false-god physicians' and receive medical treatment in Heisin for your eye pain - and the doctors only harmed your eyes with their treatments! I am surprised you did not remember the holy words that came from the mouth of our holy Rebbe, who said that one should go to any extreme to avoid all medicines and medical treatment. I imagine you probably think the Rebbe's words do not apply to eye pain, but the truth, my beloved friend and brother, is that you are mistaken" (ibid. #4).

One of Reb Noson's letters to his second son, Reb Yitzchak (1808-71), gives a revealing insight into how Reb Noson sought to inculcate Rebbe Nachman's teachings on healing in those he believed he could influence, despite the fact that many of the people around them did not agree. On this occasion another of Reb Noson's sons, Reb David Zvi (c.1819-c.1855), was sick, and apparently Reb Yitzchak was taking care of him. Reb Noson writes:

"You can imagine my anguish... but I have trust that God will send perfect healing to my son David Zvi very quickly. It could be that he needs to have a good sweat in order to get better and have life and joy (cf. Likutey Moharan II:6). You already know that you should not resort to any physical medicines, neither those prescribed by a physician nor popular remedies. Don't listen to the cries of your wife and friends, or even to the saintly Adil [Rebbe Nachman's daughter]. Just bear lovingly the suffering you have to go through because of their cries, but don't listen to them at all, though if they insist that you apply a simple hot water enema or a castor-oil suppository, you may be forced to do this if they pressure you with their cries, as you realize. And salvation and healing will come from God" (ibid. #239).

We see that Reb Noson had the wisdom to show flexibility when he saw that the opposition of surrounding family to Rebbe Nachman's pathway would be too strong. When Reb Yitzchak's little daughter was suffering from some kind of abscess, Reb Noson wrote:

"You yourself can understand that even at this stage I myself would not agree to call a doctor. But in this case it will be hard to stand up to the rest of the household and avoid calling the doctor. Still, don't let this upset you, because God has the power to heal even if a doctor is called! God's ways are far beyond us. But you should make every effort to persuade the doctor to use medicines as little as possible. But if it should happen, God forbid, that the doctor wants to cut there, see that you make every effort to dissuade him, because I do not agree with this at all. Instead, ask him to see if he might not be able to soften the spot with some kind of medication. Salvation and mercy are from God, and He will send your daughter complete healing from Heaven very soon" (ibid. #189).

In his own household, Reb Noson would not brook doctors or medicine at all. Once, while traveling away from home, he wrote back to his son, Reb David Zvi, who lived with him:

"I was very grieved to hear of your anguish over your wife's weakness, and I hope that God will send her complete healing from Heaven quickly and without resorting to medicines or any other tricks. Give a very strong warning to my entire household to be sure not to use any old wives' remedies on her or to give her medicines prescribed by doctors. For all of them are lies and falsehood. They won't help and they won't save. On the contrary, they are very harmful.

"One should rely on God alone, ' Who formed man in wisdom and created in him many openings and cavities... Who heals all flesh and does wonders.' He alone is the true, faithful, loving Healer. It is He who sends pain, and He who binds up wounds, He and none other. I have already spoken about this a great deal in the name of our Master and Teacher, of blessed memory, but I see that there is still a

need to talk about this a great deal. Hopefully my words will help save souls. At least in my own household I am not willing to let in the medicine of any ' false-god physician.' I want to fulfil what I heard from Rebbe Nachman's holy lips. He said, ' What does one do when one is in a forest? There one has to rely on God alone because there is nothing else to do' (Rabbi Nachman's Wisdom #50). My hands are stretched out to God, and I pray that He will send help very quickly and heal her and let her recuperate very speedily. Amen. So may it be His will" (ibid. #391).

Reb Noson withstood awesome tests in heeding Rebbe Nachman's warnings against medicine. In 1840, Reb David Zvi was seriously ill and in constant pain. For one period of forty-eight hours he thought he was going out of his mind because of the pain and lack of sleep. Reb Noson was extremely worried about him, yet he wrote to Reb Yitzchak: "My eyes are only to God, and my hands are stretched out waiting for His abundant kindness and mercy" (ibid. #296). Reb Noson asked the Breslover Chassidim to pray for Reb David Zvi. Later on, when he was feeling better, Reb Noson wrote to Reb Yitzchak:

"You can understand the terrible anguish I went through from Wednesday morning before dawn up until the small hours of Friday morning - almost two full days. All the time David Zvi was lying on his sickbed screaming and crying bitterly. From time to time he would stop, and then he would start screaming again. The whole family was standing there with me, shaking and desolate. What I went through is impossible to describe. But I was unwilling to take action of any kind. I just relied on God alone. Several times I prayed to God. Even though I saw that I had still not accomplished anything, because he would start screaming with pain again, even so I made a determined effort to carry on praying. The same thing happened several times. Eventually God had mercy, and at last he fell asleep for several hours.... What can I tell you, my dear son? We must be very strong, and pray about everything in our lives. It is useless to rely on any other stratagems" (ibid. #297).

The later Breslover Chassidim

For Reb Noson's closest disciple, Reb Nachman Chazan of Tulchin (1814-1884), following Rebbe Nachman's teachings to the letter was a matter of pure faith. Reb Nachman's son, Reb Avraham, a towering scholar, was sickly from childhood. He was most particular about avoiding unhealthy foods. He said: "Since the Rebbe warned us against doctors and medicine, we have an obligation to make every effort to eat only healthful foods" (Siach Sarfey Kodesh #3-539). Reb Avraham generally avoided doctors, but as we have noted (p. 205), he is known to have gone for dental examinations on the grounds that dentistry does not come within Rebbe Nachman's prohibition against doctors (Siach Sarfey Kodesh III-446).

Even with advances in medical knowledge, leading Breslover Chassidim in later generations still avoided doctors. One of Reb Noson's grandsons, Reb Michel

(Reb Yitzchak's second son, 1837-1917) was very sick as an old man, but refused to call a doctor. His family tried to persuade him to do so, but he slammed his hand down, saying, "If we go to the Rebbe and don't carry out what he taught, why are we going to him?" (R. Levi Yitzchak Bender). Reb Avraham Sternhartz (1862-1955), a great-grandson of Reb Noson and leader of the fifth generation of Breslover Chassidim, also avoided doctors all his life. It is told that when he died in Jerusalem at the age of 93, no doctor was willing to issue a death certificate stating the cause of death, because Reb Avraham had never been under a doctor's care. Only with the intervention of Chief Rabbi Isaac Herzog, who had the highest regard for Reb Avraham, was a doctor persuaded to issue the necessary authorization for burial (R. Nachman Burstein).

Until today some Breslover Chassidim refuse to submit to medical treatment under any circumstances. However, they make no efforts to influence others to do the same, since they recognize that only those steadfastly devoted to Rebbe Nachman's spiritual pathway in all its details can rely on faith and prayer alone for healing. One of the main foundations of Rebbe Nachman's pathway is moderation and holiness in the satisfaction of material needs, which itself helps avoid many of the health problems related to excessive indulgence.

Among the majority of modern-day Breslover Chassidim, the tendency is to avoid medicine for minor problems like colds and 'flu, etc., but to consult doctors about more serious conditions. Leading elders of the movement have undergone surgery for problems ranging from hernias to cancer. When in need of a doctor, Breslover Chassidim endeavor to follow Rebbe Nachman's advice to "make sure you choose the very best!" (Siach Sarfey Kodesh I:8). And even when submitting to medical treatment, they try to remember constantly that any cure is in the hands of God, and prayer, charity, introspection and repentance are at the very heart of the Jewish way of healing.

A good reason to go to a doctor

R. Matis Cohen, a well-known Breslover Chassid in Uman in the early 1900's, once fell ill and went to a doctor for treatment. When someone said to him that this was against Rebbe Nachman's teachings, R. Matis replied, "It would hurt me far more to lose so much time waiting till I heal by myself without going to the doctor - not being able to study Torah would be far more painful to me than any physical suffering."

Siach Sarfey Kodesh V-249

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