

Rebbe Nahman of Breslev: an Honest Appraisal

HaRav Mikha Lindenberg

What about Rebbe Nahman is alluring to so many? Why are so many attracted to his works? What are the possible attitudes towards him and his teachings which skirt a middle path between being a “Hasid” and ignoring or rejecting his teachings? What, according to such an approach, advocated here, is the value of his teachings? With God’s help these are some the questions we endeavor to explore.

Rebbe Nahman undoubtedly was highly original in his method of exposition, and one can certainly stand in awe of the beauty and elegance of his style. It is true that to a limited extent we find expositions in Hazal based on linguistic similarities (see for example Yerushalmi Taanith 1:1 where we find an ingenious exposition by Rabi Meir based on the similarity between Duma and Roma), and similar devices for expressing ideas were employed by earlier Hasidic teachers. Yet Rebbe Nahman took it to another level, placing piece after piece as it were on a necklace in often complex but internally consistent and elegant edifices. More than perhaps any other, his teachings flow from one idea to the next in an almost stream-of-consciousness flow, but not without overall defining structure. In his method of exposition Rebbe Nahman is perhaps the most artistic of darshanim, and indeed this dazzling elegance and beauty is one factor which attracts many to his teachings. It must be said, however, that a linguistic similarity between two words which appear in disparate contexts does not make the teaching itself necessarily true. Nor, it should be pointed out, does this reflect the plain meaning of the verses employed, any more than it does when we find such a thing, albeit in much more limited and conservative form, in Hazal. Rather, this method of exposition is exactly that: a method Rebbe Nahman used to express his *own* ideas. This is of course perfectly legitimate, but the distinction must be made between the content of the teaching itself and its method of expression.

Rebbe Nahman, as a master artist and craftsman, certainly created teachings of great stylistic and aesthetic beauty, but all this does not shed light at all on the truth or value of the teaching itself one way or the other. Thus the value of, for example, clapping one’s hands during tefilla (Liqute Moharan 44) is not supported (nor is it refuted) by the ingeniousness and stylistic elegance of how Rebbe Nahman uses the sources in presenting his idea.

But before examining individual claims and teachings, we must preface any further discussion by mentioning a point made and fleshed out in great detail in the most incisive work by Arthur Greene called *The Tormented Master: the Life and Spiritual Quest of Rebbe Nahman of Bratslav*: that Rebbe Nahman’s entire corpus of teachings are to a large extent a projection of his inner life and

spiritual struggles, and the script which he crafted for himself. In content as well as flavor and tone, his teachings are very much expressions of the contours of his own inner dynamics and spiritual search. Of course Rebbe Nahman himself would have seen this as entirely appropriate, as he saw himself as the singular *sadiq* which encapsulates all the souls of the Jewish people, and as such, expressions or projections of his inner life would be broad enough for every Jew to connect to and be uplifted by.

However, this is only partially true. For example, it is clear from the chronicle of Rebbe Nahman's life by R' Nathan as well as his recorded statements and a careful reading of his teachings, that his inner life was anything but calm and static. He was given to periods of great dryness, even feelings of depression, and periods of great elation and exuberance. Significantly, and this is something which sets Rebbe Nahman apart from many of the Hasidic masters which preceded him (as Greene points out), he was greatly troubled, even tormented, by the experience of God's seeming *absence*. From a very early age he was acutely aware of the gulf between man and God, and struggled greatly to overcome this. For example, already at a young age he felt poignantly that the desires of the body form an existential curtain between oneself and the experience of God's presence, and sought to purge his body of the desire for food and later the desire for women. The fact that this quest to free himself from all vestiges of sexual desire could not be entirely successful could only add to the great dissonance Rebbe Nahman felt—a dissonance between his self-conception as *the* *sadiq* and a reality, which could not be completely suppressed, which did not always match the immaculate nature of the image. At any rate, Rebbe Nahman's inner life was certainly characterized by great flux and dramatic shifts; in a parallel vein, his spirituality was characterized by great emotionalism and reaching out to God through constant personal *struggle*. Similarly, he speaks of the importance of joy, but this takes place against a backdrop of a perception of the difficulty and bleakness of this world and the imminence of depression.

Because of all this, it is inevitable that Rebbe Nahman's teachings will appeal especially to certain types of people—namely, those who can relate *personally* to the sort of person Rebbe Nahman himself was. But to say that all types of people can, and indeed, according to the doctrine of the *sadiq*, *must* find themselves reflected in his teachings is simply not true. Some people are created more like Rebbe Nahman, and some less, and those who resonate less with his brand of spirituality need not feel that something is deficient in *them*. Conversely, it might behoove some to be more aware of those elements of their own personalities which attract them to Rebbe Nahman's sort of spirituality.

Nevertheless, it must be admitted that even as Rebbe Nahman's teachings are intimately bound up in his own struggles and spiritual journey, it is inevitable that the teachings of a person as brilliant, creative, and in many ways perceptive as Rebbe Nahman are bound to soar above the confines of his own self-narrative to include elements which a much broader audience can relate to and learn

from. Thus even if one is not given to that degree of tempestuous and dramatic inner life, certainly one can appreciate the value in struggling to attain a higher consciousness of God, of the value of joy, of the value in connecting to God sincerely, free of layers of abstraction and ulterior motives, to mention a few. In other words, the nature of Rebbe Nahman's personality, paradoxically, created a corpus of teachings which are very much a narrative of his own particular spiritual journey and at the same time contain many universal spiritual truths and incisive commentary on the human condition.

Significantly, what is misguided and even "blasphemous" from the perspective of many if not most Breslovers, can actually add to an appreciation of much of his works and teachings for one who does not subscribe to the notion of the *sadiq* which Rebbe Nahman espouses! For in affirming the humanity of Rebbe Nahman, we allow ourselves to appreciate much of his teachings and works because we can clearly identify in them their truth, beauty, and value. In other words, by not getting blinded by the enigma, and indeed Rebbe Nahman was an enigmatic soul, we can actually better appreciate the greatness of Rebbe Nahman the person.

This brings us to a most critical point upon which much hinges: the concept of the *sadiq* which is developed by Rebbe Nahman. To examine this more in depth, we must first show how and to what degree this concept is rooted in traditional Jewish sources. We do find in the Torah that Moshe Rabenu prayed for the people of Israel after the sin of the golden calf and God relented from destroying them. But in the image of Moshe Rabenu which is fleshed out in the sources of Hazal, the overall picture is that his relationship to the people of Israel was that of teacher and transmitter of Torah (see for example TB Eruvin 54b). Of course, Moshe Rabenu's mind and level of prophecy needed to be broad enough to receive a Torah for the entire people; nevertheless, the traditional sources do not speak of the Jewish people being redeemed through a connection to Moshe Rabenu himself, and the focus is not on Moshe Rabenu himself as an object of veneration. The idea of cleaving to Moshe Rabenu *per se*, or binding oneself to Moshe Rabenu, is entirely absent and foreign to traditional Jewish sources. The idea of the Sage as a teacher of Torah and also an exemplar of worthy traits, both regarding piety and scrupulousness in dealings with others, is certainly well founded in the literature of Hazal, and this conception continues throughout the period of the Rishonim. It is true that in Hazal we find certain men who were not known for their outstanding knowledge of Torah but rather for their *hasiduth*—their piety and scrupulousness—figures such as R' Pinhas ben Yair or R' Haninah ben Dosa, but these as well are mentioned as figures to emulate and learn from, or to shed light on a certain path in the overall Torah world, and not as "Rebbe" figures in the sense that by simple virtue of "connecting" with them one would be uplifting one's soul.

It is certainly true that Moshe Rabenu's "teachings" were unique in that they were not Moshe Rabenu's teachings but rather Divine revelation, witnessed by and attested to by hundreds of

thousands of Israelites, and therefore beyond critique. But this special place is reserved, according to traditional Judaism, for Moshe Rabenu alone, for the Torah was revealed through him to the entire people of Israel. And, it should be added, it is the Oral Torah as it is expressed throughout the generations which takes this Divine revelation and turns it into a living, dynamic system; the work of each subsequent hacham, even if highly innovative, is in a sense an extension of the original revelation.

Now, we do find in Hazal the idea of a sadiq upholding the world through his merit; for example, R' Yohanan said that the entire world can exist even through the merit of one sadiq (TB Yoma 38b). Regarding that Sage which Rebbe Nahman saw very much as his prototype, we find (TB Suka 45b) that Rabi Shimon ben Yohai said of himself that he could exempt the world from judgment from the day it was created until now. Perhaps the most striking instance of this concept can be found in Bereshit Rabba 35:2), where Rabi Shimon declares that if there were only one sadiq for which the world would be sustained, it would be him. Furthermore, in the sources of Hazal Rabi Shimon is mentioned as being “melumad benisim”—adept in working miracles; also, the story of his period of refuge in the cave as told by the Talmud Bavli (Shabath 33b), as evinced by the appearance of Eliahu Hanavi, bespeaks a familiarity with hidden matters. Therefore, we see that it would be a mistake to claim that the sadiq concept of Rebbe Nahman does not have any precedent in Hazal, that it was crafted “something from nothing”.

However, the differences outweigh the similarities. It should first of all be noted that the parallel account in the Talmud Yerushalmi is much more prosaic and Eliahu Hanavi is not mentioned, nor does his son Elazar accompany him. All in all, we are more than entitled to prefer the historical veracity of the account in the Yerushalmi, as the sources of Eress Yisrael usually present a more historically sound version of events. More than this, the picture that emerges from Hazalic sources is that Rabi Shimon was mainly appreciated as a hacham. From the sources of Hazal themselves, there is actually no indication whatsoever that Rabi Shimon headed an esoteric school, and certainly not one from which was produced the core teachings of the Zohar. He is mentioned and appreciated for his knowledge of Torah, for being a hacham beTorah, and it is in this context that his name appears dozens upon dozens of times in the Mishnah and other works of Hazal.

But the most significant difference is in the nature of the relationship to the sadiq and the perception of his role. We do not find any trace in Hazal that Rabi Shimon's colleagues or his students venerated him in the sense of the sadiq as expressed by Rebbe Nahman—for example, considering Rabi Shimon the sole conduit through which Torah teachings reach this world. As we already mentioned above, the role of the sadiq in the traditional view is to disseminate Torah and perhaps be an exemplar of virtuous traits. If his merit sustains the world, that is a private matter. As we see time and time again, his colleagues are not expected to submit before him or accept his primacy in any way. Even his students are not beholden to accept his rulings in all cases and

contexts. Perhaps it should be added that in general the halacha does not follow Rabi Shimon but rather Rabi Yehuda. Thus while the *sadiq* concept promulgated by Rebbe Nahman can admittedly find precedent in Hazal, upon closer scrutiny the similarities are superficial and tenuous and the differences substantial.

Now, what we find about five hundred years ago, in the times of the Ari (although the advent of the Zohar provided groundwork for this), is a most far-reaching and radical development in the Jewish world: the spread of a notion that Divine revelation is progressive in the “vertical” sense; that is, that new Divine revelations can come down which although expressed as being faithful extensions of older ones, in actual fact represent in many ways new “operating systems” which claim a new source of authority in Torah. These new revelations always came to one man, such as the Ari, and were always explained through mystical claims, such as that a certain revelation came through Eliahu HaNavi. As such, through the internal narratives surrounding these revelations, they were inviolate and unquestionable. However, the break between this “hashqafa” (outlook) and traditional Judaism was striking, for traditional Judaism always gauged the veracity of a statement or teaching according to how it stood up to scrutiny in light of the written Torah and the Oral Torah as expressed by the sages we refer to as Hazal. It must be said that this relatively new “hashqafa” diverges from the more traditional approach in such a way as to be correctly perceived as representing parallel tracks. According to one, a teaching is valid if it can be defended according to the parameters of one timeless revelation and if not it need not be accepted; according to another, the teachings of a new revelation represent a new locus of authority and therefore this question never really arises. It becomes a matter of faith of course that these later teachings reflect the original revelation and indeed entire systems of historiography were crafted to explain how this is so, but in methodology and in matters of fundamental authority, and therefore outcome, the two approaches can never really be melded together.

Bearing in mind that the Hasidic movement from the outset upheld this idea of progressive Divine revelation and sources of authority, we can return to what we mentioned earlier, that traditional Judaism never made connecting to a holy man per se a virtue in the vicarious sense. Yet a significant feature of the Hasidic movement, especially in certain of its branches (for example, the Hasiduth of R’ Elimelech of Lizhensk), was exactly that: the Rebbe served as conduit to God, and the Hasid benefitted greatly from the very fact of a relationship with a *sadiq*, the Rebbe. It is true that the Hasidic movement legitimized a certain type of sage (the pious man who cleaves to God but is not necessarily among the highest tiers of scholars) as worthy of veneration, something which had been arguably underemphasized for centuries beforehand. On the other hand, in the nature of the relationship with the Rebbe, Hasidism broke ranks with traditional Judaism to a greater or lesser degree depending on the school of Hasiduth. It did this by emphasizing the spiritual benefits accrued to the Hasid by the very virtue of being a Hasid of a certain *sadiq* or Rebbe. In other words,

the connection itself uplifts the Hasid spiritually, and the person of the *sadiq* becomes an object of veneration. In its more extreme forms, the *sadiq* becomes more than human, a kind of demi-god.

Now, if Hasiduth altered the role of the Sage by adding the element of benefitting spiritually (and it should be added at times materially as well) by the very fact of being a Hasid, Rebbe Nahman took this notion further in several fundamental ways. First of all, he promulgated the idea of *the sadiq*, the one, singular *sadiq* which is the head and leader of all the *sadiqim* of the generation (and perhaps all generations). For example, in *Liqute Moharan* 20:1 we find that the *sadiq* is the conduit by which Torah teachings are accessed in the world. In another place, and it is important to place this teaching in the historical context of the Messianic endeavors and fervor in Breslov which failed to produce tangible fruit, Rebbe Nahman presents the idea that the *sadiq* can be a leader of all others even if this is not apparent outwardly; inwardly, however, on a spiritual level, they are all subservient to him (*Liqute Moharan* 56:1). Many times does Rebbe Nahman speak of “the *sadiq*” or “there is a *sadiq*”, and it is quite clear that he is referring to himself.

In fact, it seems that Rebbe Nahman considered this sort of self-commentary which he shared with his followers to be of utmost value. In other words, through speaking about himself—and it does seem Rebbe Nahman throughout his life was fascinated, and at times overwhelmed, by his complex and enigmatic personality—he was providing his followers with a most precious gift.

But what perhaps most characterizes the nature of this radical development is that according to Rebbe Nahman, the *sadiq* is invested with what can be called a redemptive role. That is, in connecting to the *sadiq*, his followers cleanse their souls and “redeem” themselves in a spiritual sense. This central feature of the relationship to the *sadiq* appears in many of Rebbe Nahman’s teachings and statements, including his *Tiqun haKelali* and the famous declaration that if one would visit his grave in Uman, say these ten Psalms, and give some money to *sedaqa*, he would span the length and breadth of creation to aid him, even pulling him out of *Gehenom* by his peeth. This comes close enough to the Christian notion of being “saved” that one is entitled to wonder whether some Christian influence is not here in evidence. In truth this phenomenon is not unique, and indeed we see over and over again that great *hachamim* were influenced by the prevailing modes of thought of their time and place. This is said not to denigrate Rebbe Nahman, but as a corollary of the simple fact that he was human and human beings do not live in hermetic isolation from their surroundings.

To sum up and conclude this point: unless one accepts the doctrine of the *sadiq*, Rebbe Nahman can be seen as a *hacham* among others. This means that we need not feel compelled to accept everything stated by him, any more than we need feel compelled to accept everything in Rambam’s *More HaNevuchim* or any number of profound works which were produced by great, revered *hachamim*. Although some Breslovers will undoubtedly object to the idea that Rebbe Nahman was indeed human and need not be related to as a kind of demi-god, a thoroughly *human* approach to

Rebbe Nahman can actually enhance one's appreciation for him. In other words, such an approach makes the unapproachable approachable and gives it human warmth and recognition, allowing us to *feel* for Rebbe Nahman the *man*. This is done admittedly not on his terms, but on the terms we would afford any great Torah personality.

That said, we can now give some examples of what, according to the approach espoused here (based on this author's perception), we can and ought to appreciate and learn from, and what we might be better off not accepting:

--Rebbe Nahman surely fit into the school of strong anti-rationalists. However, in decrying a rational inquiry into Torah and the misswoth and instead insisting on what he calls "simple" faith, Rebbe Nahman overstates his case. The Rambam in More HaNevuchim fully admits that basic tenets of belief such as belief in God are adhered to through faith and are impermeable to rational proof and disproof. The Rambam doesn't believe in God because he can prove God's existence rationally. Beyond this, it is simply not true that rational inquiry ought to be rejected entirely, or that one must discard one's critical faculty. This is tantamount to saying that a car designer took great pains to create a certain highly complex part of the car so that the owner could throw it away. One cannot ignore or stifle this element of the human being, and one need not pretend that doing so is a "higher path".

Now, the sort of philosophical inquiry which Rebbe Nahman was witness to among the more radical elements of the eastwards encroaching Haskalah put everything on the table, even assuming a-priori certain conclusions. But as far as integrating elements of rationalism into Judaism per se is concerned, an honest appraisal of human nature yields the unavoidable fact that we must not "throw the baby out with the bathwater". Rational inquiry can actually serve to *enhance* faith and greatly enrich our understanding of Torah; conversely, a blanket insistence on simple faith and artificially lobotomizing the human being can result in a brittle, stultified, immature faith.

--Rebbe Nahman focused a great deal on sexual purity, or "guarding the berith". In his teachings, a highly ascetic sexual ethos emerges in which spilling seed, even inadvertently, is a major spiritual calamity. Sexual desire, as evinced by several of his teachings and his own struggle to annul this urge, is something which stands as a block to spirituality. However, upon looking into the sources of Hazal, a very different picture emerges. We find (Talmud Bavli Nedarim 20a) that the halacha is that a man may do whatever he wishes with his wife—even to the extent of relations "by way of limbs" (as long as this does not entail a systematic avoidance of *peru u'rvu*), and this is codified by the Rambam and Rosh, and is also a position we find among the baale haTosefoth. Regarding spilling seed, the Talmud Yerushalmi (Yoma 8:1) mentions that on one Yom Kipur, Rabi Yose ben Halfetha was seen immersing privately because of a seminal emission. This account is brought to prove that it's permitted to immerse for an emission one has during the night of Yom Kipur—inadvertently, since marital relations are forbidden on that night; as the Talmud says, certainly

Rabi Yose did not have relations with his wife before Yom Kipur and simply forget to immerse. What is significant for us here is that the Talmud mentions this account in passing and the fact that one of the greatest of the Tanaim had a seminal emission at night is not regarded as something strange, shameful, or spiritually catastrophic. Rather, it's spoken of as a normal occurrence. It is true that in TB M' Nidah 13a we find that someone who holds his member while urinating is as one who brings a flood to the world, and other statements which bespeak a more ascetic approach to sexuality. As is often the case, we find multiple streams of thought in the literature of Hazal, and it is often not a simple task, if indeed possible, to distill one uniform approach. Yet on balance, it is fair to say that the dominant stream reveals a realistic, down to earth, non-obsessive attitude towards sexuality. When we look at Tanach this is only compounded, as what we find from many examples is an ethos of sexuality which is at the same time moderate and also accepts the sexual urge as a normal, healthy aspect of human nature even for the greatest of personalities. The author of this article would argue that such an approach is much healthier as a general model, and obsessing about sexual purity and the evils of spilling seed has had vastly detrimental consequences for the Jewish people, among them widespread sexual repression.

--A theme which permeates Rebbe Nahman's works is the idea that mundane acts can effect great cosmic rectifications. The idea that through our avodath HaShem (Divine service) we effect cosmic rectification is not one Rebbe Nahman created. Indeed it is a central tenet of the Qabalah of the Ari. What Rebbe Nahman did was to extend this greatly to include the realm of non-missswah activities such as clapping hands during prayer and dancing. Furthermore, in many statements recorded by his faithful disciple R' Nathan, Rebbe Nahman gives the impression of one whose every movement and word was informed by layers of hidden meaning. Nothing he did was without unfathomable cosmic import. Although this capacity is reserved for the greatest of *sadiqim*, nevertheless the effect of this pervasive idea is to promote a consciousness by which every mundane act is invested with all manner of hidden meaning. The effect of this in its more extreme forms is an inability to deal with life in a realistic and proactive way, as even simple acts become imbued with great cosmic import and mystical, theurgic means to affect reality supplant this-worldly endeavor.

--The doctrine of the *Simsum* (literally, contraction) in the Qabalah of the Ari posits that God (or the Infinite Light of God) retracted in order to make "room" for created reality. There developed two distinct ways to understand this. One related to the *Simsum* as a kind of grand illusion for our sake, but in actual fact the Divine Light (or even God Himself) did dwell in the cleared-out space; the most extreme expression of this outlook can be found in the *Tanya* of R' Shneur Zalman of Liadi, a contemporary of Rebbe Nahman. In the other school of thought, *Simsum* was taken much more literally. It should be pointed out that this divide does not neatly follow the contours of the Hasidic/non (or anti)-Hasidic split, and indeed we find exponents of both views in both camps. Rebbe Nahman was one who took the *Simsum* very seriously. We already mentioned how from an early age Rebbe Nahman was plagued by the seeming distance of God and strove with great effort

to cross this existential chasm. However, the starting point of this quest was one of Divine distance, not Divine immanence. This of course fits well with a more literal understanding of Simsum, which Rebbe Nahman upheld. In this, Rebbe Nahman diverged from his Hasidic predecessors, who tended to emphasize Divine immanence and devequth (“cleaving” to God). In other words, the earlier Hasidic masters’ teaching were predicated upon the view that Divine distance is a finely veiled illusion that can easily be pierced. For Rebbe Nahman it was not so. He rejected the notion that by mouthing a few platitudes one can come to true God-consciousness. Rather, God-consciousness can only be attained through great striving and effort. Although the intense and often arduous tone of this striving as he expresses it is very much a reflection of his own journey and need not be imposed on every Jew and even every sincere, serious spiritual seeker, it can nevertheless be said that the basic conception he was working with is a much more *honest* appraisal of reality. For the world is a place in which God’s presence and providence is not generally self-evident. And, most importantly, true spiritual attainments do require great work and effort.

--Rebbe Nahman taught that avodath Hashem should be sincere and real. He emphasized greatly the value of building a *personal* relationship with God. Avodath Hashem and particularly prayer should be passionate and exciting, not an exercise in rote. His teachings on hithbodeduth, of seclusion and pouring one’s heart out to God in one’s own words, undoubtedly built on precedents in earlier sources, and yet the emphasis on this practice, as well as the style and tone with which it is presented, are highly innovative. Much can be said about integrating this concept into one’s avodath Hashem, both within the structure of the formal prayers instituted by Hazal and without.

--It should be mentioned that Rebbe Nahman emphasized that a Jew should be well-versed in the fundamental works of traditional Judaism—Tanach, Mishnah, and Talmud, and that one must study the Shulhan Aruch (and presumably its surrounding literature), the halachic compilation which he considered of the greatest authority. While the authority of the Shulhan Aruch as a basic canon of Jewish Law is another topic, we can certainly appreciate Rebbe Nahman’s exhortation to be a competent Jew, both on its own terms and as a counterweight to the more imaginative, inspirational elements of his teachings and Judaism in general. In a pithy line, he exclaimed, “the Hasidim say: prayer, the Misnagdim say: study. I say: prayer, and study, and prayer”.

--The quality of Rebbe Nahman’s literary output from an aesthetic standpoint is on par with the Zohar, especially the Tiqune HaZohar. For one who appreciates aesthetics and artistry, his works, not least among them his famous stories, can evoke great pleasure and admiration.

--It is no wonder that Rebbe Nahman’s emphasis on joy and not giving into despair, and on tenacity in overcoming obstacles, are an inspiration to many.

To sum up: as with the teachings of any hacham, one is entitled to not accept everything. Furthermore, as has been pointed out by Rabbi David Bar-Hayim, the idea that *the* way to God is

through one particular individual is foreign to authentic Judaism. Yet even if one does not accept every teaching as “Torah from Sinai” nor subscribe to the *sadiq* doctrine, Rebbe Nahman cannot be ignored by a serious *hacham*. His works are relevant not least because they garb teachings of value in a way which is clearly relevant to many modern Jews, and perhaps modern man in general.