

Rabbi Nachman of Breslov

Biography

- Founder of Breslover Hassidism, universally revered in Jewish world.
- Born in Medzhybizh, Ukraine, in 1772, in a Hassidic family.
- A great grandson of the Baal Shem Tov, the founder of Hassidism.
 - His daughter's daughter's son.
- Was into spiritual matters even as a child
- Paid his teacher extra, over and above what his father paid, to teach him Talmud.
- Married Sashia, a rabbi's daughter, at 13, moved in his father-in-law's house, and got his first follower, an older man, on his wedding day.
- They had 8 children, of which 4 died in infancy.
- Visited Israel in 1798, but Napoleon invaded, so he left after a few months, but not before reconciling two feuding Hassidic groups.
- Back in Ukraine, he was accused of harboring Sabbatean and Frankist views, so in 1802 he moved to Breslov, Ukraine.
- Lived there 8 years, and eventually the town name was added to his name. Extremely influential and also extremely controversial among other Hassidim and mainline Jews. People traveled far and wide to hear him.
- Moved to Uman, Ukraine, in his last year and died there of tuberculosis in 1811, at only 38.
- His wife also died of tuberculosis, in 1807, and he became engaged to another woman, but died before their wedding.
- There is an annual pilgrimage at his grave in Uman, Ukraine. (25,000 came in 2008.) They follow something he said shortly before his death:
 - If someone comes to my grave, gives a coin to charity, and recites these ten Psalms, I will pull him out from the depths of Gehinnom!... It makes no difference what he did until that day, but from that day on, he must take upon himself not to return to his foolish ways. [Rabbi Nachman's Wisdom #141]
 - Hassidim view dead rebbes as defense attorneys in heavenly court.
 - The ten Psalms are the Tikkun HaKlali or General Rectification: Psalms 16, 32, 41, 42, 59, 77, 90, 105, 137, and 150. Breslovers say them daily. Samples:
 - Psalm 16: Keep me safe, my God, for in you I take refuge. I say to the Lord, "You are my Lord; apart from you I have no good thing."

- Psalm 105: O give thanks to the Lord; call upon his name; make known his deeds among the people. Sing unto him, sing psalms unto him: talk of all his wondrous works.
- A bed in a house close to the gravesite in Uman costs \$600/day for the holiday.
- Breslover communities today can be found in many places in Israel; in Los Angeles, New York, Paris, London, Montreal, and Lakewood, NJ.

Teachings

- He combined Jewish mysticism (the Kabbalah) with Torah scholarship.
- He encouraged confiding in others to "unburden the soul and help achieve repentance and healing".
 - But he emphasized that a tzaddik cannot "absolve" sins. He blesses his community only through mitzvot. A Hassid prays only to God, not to the Rebbe.
- He rejected hereditary Hassidic dynasties: Each Hassid must "search for the tzaddik within himself". Every Jew can become a tzaddik.
 - The movement has had no single leader for 200 years.
 - His disciple Reb Nathan organized the movement after his death and published many books of his teachings.
- When he started out he fasted and denied himself pleasures. Later he preached the opposite because he saw that it led to depression and sadness. He told his followers not to be "fanatics". He told them to choose one mitzvah and be very strict about it, and perform the others with a normal amount of care.
 - Some believe he suffered from depression throughout his life. There is no evidence of this, but then such diagnoses were not available in his time.
- He urged his followers to look for the good in people; follow halacha [Jewish law] in full; live a life of faith, simplicity, and joy; clap, sing and dance during or after prayers; but still study Torah regularly.
- He never claimed to be the Messiah, although some of his followers did. (It is not uncommon for Hassidim to believe their rebbe is the Messiah.)
 - He taught that, in every generation, a tzaddik is born who could become the Messiah if conditions are right in the world.

Prayer

Four types of prayers (ways of talking to God):

1. Petition

- Protection from others ("Please keep away people who are trying to hurt me")
- Help for self ("Please help me through this crisis")
- Help for others ("Please cure my sick child")

2. Praise

- Thanksgiving ("We give thanks for Your wondrous deeds and goodness that occur at all times -- evening, morning, and noon " [Amidah])
- Praise ("The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands." [Ps. 19:1])
- Love ("Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might." [Deut. 6:5])

3. Questions

- Why is there evil in the world?

4. Chat

- Today I had an interesting experience. Let me tell you about it.

-Rav Nachman emphasized the last (like Tevye in **Fiddler on the Roof**), without discounting traditional prayers.

-He preached that to be close to God you have to speak to God "as you would with a best friend"

- in your own words,
- in your mother tongue,
- at least one hour a day,
- preferably in a natural setting, such as a field or forest, among the natural works of God's creation, to avoid man-made distractions.

-He called it "**hitbodedut**" ("self-seclusion"). It is central to his thinking. He described it as follows:

It is very good to pour out your thoughts before God like a child pleading before his father. God calls us His children, as it is written [Deuteronomy 14:1], 'You are children to God.' Therefore, it is good to express your thoughts and troubles to God like a child complaining and pestering his father.

-As one commentator described it:

During a session of hitbodedut, the practitioner pours out his heart to God in his own language, describing all his thoughts, feelings, problems and frustrations. Nothing was viewed by Rebbe Nachman as being too mundane for discussion, including business dealings, conflicting desires and everyday interactions. Even the inability to properly articulate what one wishes to say is viewed as a legitimate subject to discuss with God. One should also use the opportunity to examine his behavior and motivations, correcting the flaws and errors of the past while seeking the proper path for the future.

-Debbie Friedman wrote a beautiful song about hitbodedut, called "You Are the One (Reb Nachman's Prayer)":

You are the One, You are the One,
For this I pray:
That I may have the strength to be alone
To see the world, to stand among the trees,
And all the living things.

That I may stand alone, and offer prayers and talk to You
You are the One to whom I do belong
And I'll sing my soul, I'll sing my soul to You
And give You all that's in my heart.
May all the foliage of the field,
All grasses, trees and plants,
Awaken at my coming, this I pray,
And send their life into my words of prayer
So that my speech, my thoughts and my prayers will be made whole,
And through the spirit of all growing things
And we know that everything is one,
Because we know that everything is You.
You are the One, for this pray
I ask You, God, to hear my words
That pour out from my heart; I stand before You;
I, like water, lift my hands to You in prayer.
And grant me strength, and grant me strength to stand alone
You are the One to whom I do belong
And I'll sing my soul, I'll sing my soul to You
And give You all that's in my heart.
You are the One, for this I pray,
And I'll sing my soul to You.

Some Sayings

-A man should perform all the mitzvot through love of God, without knowing the reason for them. When goodness becomes habitual, God will disclose to him the secret reasons.

-Don't be a fanatic. Serving God is not fanaticism. Those who run after worldly goods are the true fanatics. The world will consider you a lunatic if you abandon all worldliness in your quest for the Godly. This is said to be fanaticism. Yet even this is not necessary. You can serve God with restraint. [Rabbi Nachman's Wisdom p 159].

-It would be enough if we were worthy of keeping all the Torah's commandments according to the law, without going beyond it... True devotion consists mainly of simplicity and sincerity. Pray much, study much Torah, do many good deeds. Do not worry yourself with unnecessary restrictions. Just follow the way of our forefathers. [Rabbi Nachman's Wisdom, pp. 370f].

-A man who says: 'This tradition is good, and this one is not' destroys the wealth of the Torah.

-A mitzvah that costs money is worth more than one that costs nothing.

-When two mitzvot come before you, perform the one that requires more control of your impulses.

-Don't ask the Lord to change the laws of nature for you.

-Knowledge that is paid for will be remembered longer.

-The prosperity of a country is in accordance to its treatment of the aged.

-Whoever is able to write a book and does not, is as if he had lost a child.

-Feel no sadness because of your evil thoughts; it only serves to strengthen them.

-If you feel no joy when you are beginning your prayers, compel yourself to be joyful and real joy will follow. A joyful melody is of genuine help.

-When there is no reason to smile, put a smile on your face and God will give you every reason to smile.

-Maintaining a state of happiness is the "foundation of all of Jewish observance."

-His most famous saying:

Kol ha-olam kullo gesher tzar meod, v'ha'ikar lo l'fached klal

The whole world is a very narrow bridge, and the main thing is not to be afraid

-A song with these lyrics came out during the 1973 Yom Kippur war, when Israel was in grave danger of being overrun by Arab armies. It was actually sung by Israeli soldiers while crossing the Suez Canal into Egypt on pontoon bridges.

That operation allowed Israel to prevail and win the war:

When Sharon began his advance toward the bridgehead on the canal, the Bratslaver song was suddenly broadcast from his command over the radios and intercoms of all the attacking tanks. This electrified their crews, who soon joined in the singing themselves as they headed for battle, until the song turned into a Tank Corps chorus and the atmosphere became one of riding to a celebration rather than to possible death or maiming. It was soon after that the song became number one on the unofficial hit parade,

with people humming it to themselves everywhere. [By Philologos, *The Forward*,
February 21, 2003]

(Sing "Kol haolam kullo", in bencher, p 27)