

RABBI NAHMAN BRATZLAVER'S CONFLICT REGARDING LEADERSHIP

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Rabbi Nahman of Bratzlav is known in hasidic literature as the great master of paradox.¹ On those issues that are truly significant to the man of faith, says Nahman, only the language of paradox can approach expression of truth. In this way Nahman is able to deal with faith and doubt, or with the alternating presence and absence of God in the inner life of the man of faith;² similarly, he knows only too well the dialectical relationship between the most subtle use of intellect and the value of utter simplicity.³ But the greatest paradox of all to Nahman, and the root of the dialectical thinking which forms the core of his teachings, is the paradox of his own self. No other hasidic master taught a doctrine that was so wholly personal; indeed, few religious thinkers in any setting have had their theological outlooks so obviously determined by the course of their own inner struggles. The superhuman demands which Nahman constantly placed upon himself, his alternating senses of personal greatness and personal failure, and the ceaseless striving for the redemption of the individual from the seemingly unbearable burden of guilt—all these proceed directly from the psychic makeup of Nahman the tortured man of faith, and all have left their mark upon the uniquely tortuous face of Bratzlav Hasidism.

I

Nahman saw his task as that of leading a revival within the hasidic movement.⁴ Growing up near the court of his uncle, the well-known

¹ This is central to Joseph Weiss' understanding of Nahman. Cf. especially his *Ha-Qushiya be-torat Rabi Nahman mi-Braslav*, in 'Aley 'Ayin, the Salman Schocken Jubilee Volume, Jerusalem, 1952.

² Thus this reader understands *Liqutey MoHaRaN* 64, a key passage in Bratzlav literature.

³ Cf. particularly the tale *Hakham ve-Tam* in Nahman's *Sippurey Ma'asiyot*, and the oft-quoted dictum of Nahman: "The end of knowledge is to know nothing."

⁴ *Hayey MoHaRaN, Sihot ha-shayakhim le-sippurey ma'asiyot*, 19.

Zaddik Baruch of Miedzybosz, the grandson of the Ba'al Shem Tov, he undoubtedly came to know at first hand the abuses of popular Hasidism. He saw the masses of simple Ukrainian Jews ever flocking to the court of the latest miracle-worker, those whom he came to call the "false Zaddikim"; he saw that the task of the Zaddik had come to be the dispensation of blessings for material gain, rather than authentic spiritual leadership. It is doubtless for such reasons that Nahman as a young man sought to avoid the role of Zaddik, one which might naturally have been expected of him as a descendant of the Ba'al Shem. It was only as that role was thrust upon him, first by a small band of followers in Medvedevka, and later by the controversy that grew up around him in Zlotopolye,⁵ that he decided to enter into it fully, and to transform the hasidic world not by flight from the dangers of "Zaddikism," but rather by elevating the concept of the Zaddik to heights previously unknown, even within Hasidism. The elevation and purification of the image of the Zaddik, with Nahman as the personal bearer of this new image, was to become the rallying-cry of Bratzlav. Here was a Zaddik unlike all the others, not simply another teacher in the school of the Maggid, nor another miracle worker seeking to outdo his competitors, but one who both in his personal qualifications and in his conception of the role was to be "something new" ⁶ in the world of Hasidism.

Needless to say, the assumption of such a self-proclaimed role could be undertaken even by the strongest of men only at the risk of paying a great psychological price. And Nahman, riddled by selfdoubt and plagued by personal guilt, was never able to assume the mantle without overwhelming ambiguity.

In searching for a theological underpinning to support the "uniqueness" of his role, Nahman chose to place great emphasis upon a distinction which already existed in hasidic thought between "the Zaddik of the Generation" and all other religious leaders.⁷ While admitting to the plurality of authentic religious teachers in any generation, and lending credence to the divine inspiration which motivates all true

⁵ *Liqutey MoHaRaN* (henceforth: *Liq.*) II:20.

⁶ *Hayey MoHaRaN* (henceforth: *Hayey*) II, *Gedulat hasagato*, 6.

⁷ *Liq.* 79. For an earlier source of the interrelatedness of Moses, Messiah, and the Zaddik, cf. Zohar I:25a-b. That passage is already interpreted by the Maggid of Mezritch to mean that "there is no generation which does not have a Zaddik like Moses." Cf. *Or Torah, Noah*.

Zaddikim,⁸ Nahman nevertheless asserts that in each generation there is a single figure who stands in the place where Moses stood in the generation of the Exodus and where Messiah will stand at the end of time. That single Zaddik (who may at times even be a hidden figure) has a role qualitatively unlike that of all the others.⁹ He stands cosmologically at the center of the entire human race. His is the general soul of that generation, of which all others souls are merely specifications. Thus all men can find themselves in him; it is through contact with him that all souls may gain enlightenment.¹⁰ It is in this sense of the cosmology of mystical leadership that the figure of Rabbi Simeon bar Yohai, as seen through the eyes of the Zohar, exercised particular fascination for Nahman. While Moses served as both prophetic and temporal leader of his people, Rabbi Simeon worked purely as a teacher within a small circle of disciples, and was nevertheless the "great light" of his times. Nahman identified deeply with this figure, to the point where he came to see his own soul as that of Rabbi Simeon bar Yohai reincarnate.¹¹

The figure of the Zaddik, however, as conceived by the framers of kabbalistic myth, is more than that of "teacher" or "spiritual guide." As the heart of mankind he is the link between the upper and lower worlds, the channel through whom all blessings flow.¹² Combined with that aspect of divinity in which God is known as the "cosmic Zaddik (*zaddiqo shel 'olam*)," the earthly Zaddik becomes the *axis mundi*, "the pillar upon which stands the world."¹³ This parallel between the human Zaddik and God as Zaddik is greatly emphasized in Nahman's writings, perhaps to an extent previously unknown in Jewish literature. Like God above, the Zaddik is transcendent and mysterious in his ways; no man can ever comprehend him fully.¹⁴ When hasidic disciples tell tales in praise of their master, they are imitating the angels who sing the praise of God.¹⁵ The Zaddik's need

⁸ *Liq.* 79; II:8,8; *Hayey, sihot ha-shayakhim la-torot*, 36.

⁹ *Liq.* 192.

¹⁰ *Liq.* II:72.

¹¹ Piekarz, *Hasidut Bratzlav* (Jerusalem, 1972), pp. 13-15. Cf. also the manuscript of Nahman of Toherin, published in *Sipurim Nifla'im* (B'nei Beraq, 1960/61), p. 166, where this "secret" is quite openly revealed.

¹² *Liq.* 240.

¹³ *b. Hag.* 12b.

¹⁴ *Hayey* II, *gedulat hasagato*, 3, and frequently throughout Bratzlaver writings.

¹⁵ *Liq.* 29, 2.

for the external trappings of fine garments and respectable surroundings (though Nahman was hardly guilty of excesses in these areas) is justified by comparison with God's need for the "ostentatious" miracles of the Exodus, to convince Israel to approach Him.¹⁶ Most significantly of all, God and the Zaddik are seen as proper objects of the same paradoxical faith. Though the powers of both God and Zaddik may be hidden behind the misleading veils of ordinary reality, it is they alone who have true "kingship," and it is faith in both of them, in the very face of their seeming powerlessness, that lies at the core of the radical assertion of faith which is so central to Bratzlav.¹⁷

The figure of God as Zaddik, however, also has a particular symbolic meaning within the kabbalistic picture of the upper worlds. The term Zaddik, when applied to God, is a reference to the ninth of the ten Sefirot, or manifestations of the Godhead, which make up the kabbalistic world. In one of the most widespread images of Jewish mystical literature, the upper nine Sefirot are outlined in the bodily (though incorporeal) form of Primordial Man, while the tenth Sefirah, the Shek of Israel (*Malkhut*) by which it will be able to have the harshness *hinah*, is their receptive feminine counterpart. According to this symbolic understanding, the Zaddik as the ninth Sefirah represents the phallus of Primordial Man, through which all the blessings of the upper Sefirot are united and flow into the Shekhinah.¹⁸ This "sign of the covenant," as the mystics often call it, represents both potency and chastity to the kabbalist's mind. The Biblical Joseph is seen as the ideal type of this Zaddik, because he was able to resist the temptations of Potiphar's wife.

Rather few kabbalists cared to draw out the parallel between God and the earthly Zaddik in this area. The use of phallic imagery in describing the earthly Zaddik would have been so fraught with erotic dangers as to horrify most kabbalists. Nahman, however, is very much concerned with the sexual role of the human Zaddik. Rabbi Simeon bar Yohai, as the ideal type of the Zaddik, was himself the "bow of the covenant"¹⁹ and was thus able to affect *tiqqun ha-kelali*, the total redemption of man which is only possible through the redemption of human sexuality. Since Nahman's soul is none other than

¹⁶ *Hayey, Uman*, 17.

¹⁷ *Liq. 56; Hayey, 'i erot*, 24.

¹⁸ For a discussion of the history of the Zaddik concept, cf. Scholem's essay "Zaddik, der Gerechte," in his *Von der mystischen Gestalt der Gottheit* (Zurich, 1962).

¹⁹ *Liq. 29,2*.

that of Rabbi Simeon, the veiled reference to himself is quite clear. Turning to the Zaddik for help or for advice is subject to sexual symbolism "when one receives advice from a man, one is receiving his seed... and the advice of the Zaddik is the seed of truth."²⁰ One turns to the Zaddik for redemption from sin, for the Zaddik is *tiqqun ha-kelali*, that total redemption which is focused on sexuality.²¹

This is not to imply that there is an openly prurient fascination in Nahman's view of himself as Zaddik. The chastity component is very central to Nahman's thinking in this entire cluster of ideas; he says clearly that the only true test of a Zaddik's authenticity is degree of sexual purity and abstinence.²² With regard to himself he says repeatedly that he has overcome all sexual desire.²³

II

The image of the Zaddik as redeemer from sin takes a central place in the world of Bratzlav Hasidism. While other Zaddikim generally spoke more in terms of the Zaddik as intercessor in prayer or as guide in the soul's attempt to achieve closeness to God, the greater preoccupation with sinfulness in Bratzlav placed the Zaddik primarily in the role of redeemer. In one of his most beautifully drawn parables Nahman speaks of the souls of men as trees and grasses growing in a field, and of the Zaddik as "Master of the Field" who can "concern himself with their redemption." This Zaddik must be a man of great strength and wisdom, one who is able to "gird his loins" to become Master of the Field, willing to risk even death in the battle for the redemption of human souls.²⁴ While only the very greatest of Zaddikim can complete their redemptive tasks within their own lifetimes, death

²⁰ *Liq.* 7,3.

²¹ *Liq.* 29, 10. Interesting psychological light may be shed on such passages by comparison with the material discussed in N.O. Brown's *Love's Body* (New York, 1966), pp. 126ff.

²² *Hayey* II, 'Avodat ha-Shem, 149; *Liq.* II:72.

²³ *Hayey* II, *Yegi'ato ve-tirhato*, 4: "For one who knows a bit of the greatness of God... this is no trial at all. For me there is no difference between man and woman; I see the lust as I am seeing you now (with detachment)." This assertion is frequently repeated.

²⁴ *Liq.* 65,1. The motif of Zaddik as redeemer is also quite clear in several of the *Sippurey Ma'asiyot*.

appears as no barrier to the ongoing work of the Zaddik-redeemer.²⁵ While this work of redemption is seen in the first place as the redemption of the soul from sin, particularly sexual sin, as has been said above, it goes on to include a more general sense of *tiqqun*, which constantly points to the preparation of the soul and the world for the coming of Messiah.

In this latter sense Bratzlav forms a particularly radical departure in the history of Hasidism. While scholars have traced the historical roots of the hasidic Zaddik back to the Sabbatian Messiah,²⁶ and while the Ba'al Shem Tov himself was concerned with the redemption of the dead as well as the living, no other hasidic school allows itself to be overwhelmed by the messianic urgency of the Zaddik's role. The overall tone of Hasidism, surely by the time of the Maggid of Mezritch is that of a distinctly non-millinarian movement. With the advent of Nahman, the messianic fervor that had been largely sublimated by his predecessors breaks out once again, and the spiritual life of Bratzlav is unmistakably colored by the particular penitential urgency of the Last Days.

This is not necessarily to say that Nahman believed himself to be Messiah. While some have argued in that direction,²⁷ the matter cannot be definitively concluded. Too much of the debate on that question rests upon conjecture as to the alleged contents of writings that were destroyed on Nahman's own orders, and on the meaning of the rather curious censorship of texts which is exercised by the Bratzlav Hasidim. One can however say that at very least, as the true Zaddik of the last generation, Nahman saw himself as the great and final pre-messianic redeemer. He spoke of the publication of his teachings as "the beginning of redemption."²⁸ He knew when Messiah was to come, and saw

²⁵ The deceased Zaddik can continue to work for the redemption of the living, while the living Zaddik may also concern himself with those who have already died. The Ba'al Shem Tov was concerned with the souls of the dead (*Shivhey ha-BeSHT*, ed. Horodezky, p. 64); the theme of the Zaddik continuing his work after death is found in Zohar 3:220b, and its role in Hasidism is discussed by Weiss in his "Reshit Zemihatah shel ha-Derekh ha-Hasidit" *Zion*, 16 (1951), pp. 74f. For Nahman's views on this, cf. *Hayey II*, 'Avodat ha-Shem, 150.

²⁶ Weiss, *op. cit.*, Scholem, *The Messianic Idea in Judaism*, New York, 1971, pp. 197f.

²⁷ The latest study of this material by Mendel Piekartz, *op. cit.*, pp. 56-82, seems to indicate that Nahman was more concerned, with *bringing* messiah than with *being* messiah. Cf. also Weiss' article on *Megilat Setarim* in *Qiryat Sefer*, v. 44, pp. 179ff.

²⁸ *Hayey II*, *Ma'alot torato*, 7; Piekartz, *op. cit.*, pp. 66f.

himself and his family as so intimately connected with that event that the death of his son in 1806 delayed the Coming.²⁹ As Weiss and Piekarz have shown, he seems clearly to have believed at some point that this child was to be Messiah.³⁰

This belief in the imminence of Messiah and the sense of his own role as redeemer seem to have grown hand in hand in Nahman's mind during the early years of the nineteenth century. It is significant to note that when he undertook his journey to the Land of Israel in 1798, he did not speak of it at all in millinarian terms.³¹ In a later statement to his disciple Nathan of Nemirov, Nahman attributes the beginning of his interest in the "redemption of souls" to his days in Zlotopolye, where he lived from 1800 until 1802.³² It was in the spring of 1802 that his daughter Sarah was married, and at the wedding Nahman spoke to his disciples of the coming of Messiah, perhaps hinting that he was to be born of that union.³³ While the specifically messianic fervor reached its peak in 1806, as Piekarz has demonstrated, Nahman's sense of himself as redeemer remained undiminished until his death in 1810. Surely one of the most moving scenes in all of hasidic literature is depicted at Nahman's deathbed, as his disciples ask him: "Did you not tell us that the truly great 'Master of the Field' could complete the task within his lifetime? And if that is so, how is it that you are dying with the work left unfinished?" And Nahman had to admit to them that he had not told them the entire story at that time, and that in his case death would indeed be required.³⁴ He spoke of himself in those later years as a "river which purifies all stains,"³⁵ and constantly hinted at how much more he could reveal and accomplish, if only his generation were worthy.³⁶ His move from Bratzlav to Uman in the last months of his life, when he was already fast losing his battle against tuberculosis, was an attempt to broaden the field of his re-

²⁹ *Yemey MaHaRNaT* (B'nei Beraq, 1955/56), p. 20; Wiess, *op. cit.*, p. 282; Piekarz, *op. cit.*, pp. 69, 79.

³⁰ Weiss, *op. cit.*, p. 285, n. 15.

³¹ *Hayey, Eretz Yisra'el*, 5-7.

³² *Hayey, Meqom yeshivato*, 11; *nesi'ato le-Navritch*, 2. It is interesting to note that the one passage of Nahman's teachings from long before the journey to Palestine which is preserved (*Liq.* 96, dated in *Hayey, torot*, 59), is concerned with the much more conventional hasidic motif of *devequt* and distracting thoughts, rather than with *tiqqun*.

³³ *Hayey, Meqom yeshivato*, 13.

³⁴ *Yemey MaHaRNaT*, p. 80. The conversation is here paraphrased.

³⁵ *Hayey, Uman*, 5; *Hayey II, ma'alat ha-mitqarevim*, 92.

³⁶ *Hayey, Eretz Yisra'el*, 12; *Hayey II, gedulat hasagato*, 54.

demptive efforts, both among the "heretics" whom he had befriended in that city, and among the martyred dead who lay in the cemetery where he had chosen to be buried.

There were times when Nahman seems to have been deeply convinced that he was indeed fit for the role which he had chosen. He sees himself as a figure surrounded by impenetrable mystery, as one who would never be fully understood until the end of time. With an audacity typical of such periods of elation, he once told the Rav of Bratzlav: "I love you so much that I wish you be granted the power in the world to come to understand my mundane conversations!"³⁷—the implication clearly being that his deeper teachings would never be understood, even by so beloved a scholar. Though his was the most ancient of religious paths, it was also completely new; he was the Abraham of his generation, winning souls for God in a way that the world had never known.³⁸ At such times he spoke of himself as one who had overcome all self-doubt, as one who was fully prepared to handle the task that lay before him. "I used to think it was my evil urge which said to me: 'No one can lead the young as well as you!' But now I know clearly that I am the single leader of this generation in the world, and that there is no leader like me."³⁹ He records a dream or vision in which he sees himself standing at the "royal table" and swimming in the "sea of wisdom," as all the kings of earth come to stand before him, hoping that something of his mystery will be revealed to them.⁴⁰

While such a "unique" figure may nominally claim to respect the authenticity of other religious teachers, the emphasis of his teaching is clearly upon the singular quality of his own mission, even at the expense of all others. Thus he allows himself to say that *all* men are in need of his leadership, even the greatest of Zaddikim. While others may have greater apparent success at achieving fame in this world, when they arrive at the "world of truth" all will long for his teachings.⁴¹ The ability of other Zaddikim to bring about material blessings by the power of their prayers is a matter for derision at the hands of Nahman; this power only confirms their lower status: "The king has two sons; one is wise, the other stupid. He places the stupid son in charge of his treasure-house, while the wise son is given no particular

³⁷ *Hayey II, 'Avodat ha-Shem, 63.*

³⁸ *Hayey II, 'Inyan ha-Mahloqet, 1-3.*

³⁹ *Hayey II, Gedulat hasagato, 18.*

⁴⁰ *Hayey, Sippurim, hadashim, 1.*

⁴¹ *Hayey, Eretz Yisra'el, 19-20.*

office in the kingdom, but always sits at the king's side." When asked why he has arranged things in this manner, the king replies: "Is there any greatness required to take treasures that are already laid out, and distribute them to the world? My wise son sits at my side, thinking thoughts and giving counsel that I myself could not come upon. By his counsel I come to conquer lands of which I would know nothing, were it not for him. And it is from these lands that all my treasures are derived..."⁴² As the true Zaddik, Nahman does not waste his efforts on such lesser activities as the distribution of petty blessings; his task is the much greater one of bringing the world to God, of making His kingdom a reality in the world of men.

It is in part this very intensity with which he views the cosmic importance of the true Zaddik that creates one aspect of Nahman's conflict with the *public* role of Zaddik in his own life. The Zaddik who is "seated at the side of God," parallel perhaps to the "messiah who receives all prayers" and brings them to God,⁴³ is one who relates to the world from above; he does not allow his energy to be dissipated by daily contact with human beings and their merely human problems. But as the true Zaddik, Nahman has also allowed himself to act as a Zaddik in the social sense of that term, requiring by definition real human concern and responsibility. This latter aspect of his role eats away at his own spiritual intensity and his ability to maintain the private devotional life which lies at the core of his work as *mystical* redeemer.⁴⁴ Nahman is quite convinced that the only real test of the religious life is in *hitbodedut*, in that which transpires when one is alone with God.⁴⁵ If this is true for everyman, how much more is

⁴² *Hayey, Sippurim hadashim*, 20.

⁴³ *Liq. II:1*. It should be noted that the parallels to Eastern Christianity which scholars have seen in Hasidism are particularly pronounced in Bratzlav. Worthy of particular mention in this connection is the statement (*Sipurim Nifla'im* p. 19) that Nahman's soul is unique in that it did not taste of the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge, i.e., that he was uniquely free of "original sin." Torsten Ysander has already pointed to the fact that among the sectarian Dukhobors in eighteenth century Russia, the leader of the sect was seen as the incarnation of Christ for his particular generation. (*Studien zum Beschtschen Hasidismus*, pp. 378ff.). This entire question, including the possible penetration (perhaps through Sufism in the Near East?) of the Indian concept of *Avatar*, bears further investigation. Needless to say, the great emphasis placed upon faith and the struggle for faith in Bratzlav is also reminiscent of aspects of Christianity, though it seems here to be an independent development.

⁴⁴ *Hayey, Meqom yeshivato*, 4.

⁴⁵ *Hayey II, Ma'alat ha-hitbodedut*, 2.

it true for the Zaddik of the generation, who is the root of all souls, the link between God and His world! The real work of *tiqqun*, as viewed by the mystic, is ultimately contemplative. Though the redemption of living souls must necessarily involve relationship with them, they are ultimately brought back to God by being included in the Zaddik's prayers. And yet that very relationship, seen here as essential to his work, keeps Nahman from being the retiring contemplative he would have fancied himself. No wonder that he points to his closest disciples and calls them murderers! ⁴⁶ For by making him their master, they have forced him into a kind of mutual humanity which no longer allows him the luxury of utter detachment.

The greatest regret of Nahman's life was that he allowed this to happen to him. In his youth, when he had not yet been pressed into leadership, he wanted to be a *nistar*, a "hidden one," travelling about the world as a beggar, not revealing his true nature to anyone.⁴⁷ He acted out this fantasy on his mysterious journey to Navritch in 1807, and throughout his life he toyed with the idea of fleeing his disciples and going off to live in hiding.⁴⁸ Even in the last months of his life, after his arrival in Uman, the dying Nahman speaks of feeling trapped by communal responsibilities, and longs to flee his disciples.⁴⁹

The sense of the overbearing burden of his role as Zaddik is nowhere more clearly drawn than in his parable of the heart and the blood, told to his disciples on the Hanukah preceding his death:

When a person is afflicted by illness, the most affected area is his heart. For the heart is the most knowing and sensitive of the organs, as scripture says: "The heart knows the self's bitterness" (Prov. 14:10). The heart is the seat of understanding, and thus it feels suffering most keenly. But in this moment of crisis, all the blood in the body gathers together and rushes in to the heart, just as in the time of communal sorrow, all will rush in to the wise man, to seek his counsel... This great onrush of blood threatens to flood the heart, and then the heart is under great pressure and its suffering is only increased. Not only does it have its own worry as the most sensitive of organs, but it is also overwhelmed by the threat of being

⁴⁶ *Hayey II, Gedulat hasagato*, 23.

⁴⁷ *Hayey, megom yeshivato*, 8. On the higher status of hidden Zaddikim, cf. Scholem, *op. cit.*, p. 255. Scholem's comments are particularly appropriate to the conflict of Nahman. Cf. *Liq.* 243 and *Hayey, torot*, 40.

⁴⁸ *Hayey*, in the letter appended to the chapter concerning his journey to Navritch; *Hayey II, gedulat hasagato*, 19: "He thought that he would take his wife and go to live in some far-off place, hidden from the world. Sometimes he would go out to market to have a look at the world—and to laugh at it"!

⁴⁹ *Hayey, Uman*, 12, 29.

drowned in blood! That is why the heart beats so loudly when a person is in trouble: the heart is trying to shake itself loose, to rid itself of all that blood...⁵⁰

The parable is most telling. Nahman, racked by the sufferings of his worsening tubercular condition from within, and by the fierce controversy surrounding him and his followers from without, feels unable to bear the pressure of the demands made upon him by his role as a public figure. His own disciples are "drowning" him; he feels his own spiritual concerns being flooded out of his life in the face of the concern he has to feel for the needs of others. In the same period of his life, he tellingly quotes a passage which must have had great significance to him, from Rashi's commentary to Numbers 11:28. When the charismatic spirit accidentally comes to rest on Eldad and Medad, Joshua turns to Moses and says: "Give them communal responsibilities, and they will be silenced!"⁵¹

The heart is drowned in blood. The prophet is silenced by responsibility. And yet what is the heart's task, if not to pump blood through the body? Why does the prophet live if not to instruct his people? Ultimately Nahman had to ask himself: Why do I live, if I cannot bear the burdens of my role? Here the conflict of Nahman with regard to leadership is seen in yet another aspect. He was not only the retiring contemplative seeking to withdraw from public life. He at times had a sense of himself as an abysmal failure, as one unfit even to lead his little band of followers, let alone to "rule the world." At such times he mourns his generation as one bereft of *any* leader; his is a wilderness in which there is no Moses.⁵²

IV

The fact is that Nahman's periods of elation and self-confidence alternated with moments of the most bleak and overwhelming depression. It is to the great credit of Nathan of Nemirov and his disciples that the record of these depressions has not been totally expunged from the traditional biographies. Indeed, it is this awareness of the reality of depression and struggle in the life of their master that allows

⁵⁰ *Liq.* II:2,2.

⁵¹ *Liq.* II:1. 7. Rashi's interpretation is quoted from *b. San.* 17a.

⁵² *Liq.* II:39.

them to legitimize the existence of struggle in their own lives, lending to the hasidim of Bratzlav an unusual measure of human depth and understanding.

States of elation and depression would sometimes alternate for Nahman within minutes. In one moment, records Nathan, his teacher would reveal teachings the like of which the world had never heard, while in the next moment he would be overcome by unbearable sadness, and proclaim that he knew nothing at all, that he did not even know how to begin to become a Jew.⁵³ He knew that his own gloomy countenance was a poor model for his followers, whom he urged to "struggle for joy with all your strength."⁵⁴ He was possessed with an overwhelming sense of the power of melancholy to destroy one's life; it was undoubtedly because of his own tendency in that direction that he advised others to be especially wary of depressions. At such times he spoke of himself as a "lost sheep," longing to return to the fold⁵⁵—a self-image diametrically opposed to that of the "Master of the Field," who can bring back all those souls who have wandered astray! Even daily prayer was a terrible struggle for Nahman at times; once, when unable to pray, he called out to Nathan: "Why do I have to struggle so hard in all that I do, as though it were costing me my life!"⁵⁶

These periods of depression were not the product of Nahman's later years, brought on by physical illness or by the conflict surrounding his work. They were with him throughout his adult life, and seem to have their origin in his adolescent years. It is when speaking of those years in Nahman's life that Nathan most emphasizes the great struggles he had in the service of God. Every day was filled with spiritual rises and falls, and the battle against utter despair was a constant companion. Each of thousands of attempts to enter into the service of God ended in failure, and the young Nahman would have to start

⁵³ *Hayey, torot*, 24, *Uman*, 31; *Hayey II, Ma'alot torato*, 2. Nathan's description of his master's depressed states is found in his *Liqutey Halakhot, Hilkhhot tefilin* 5:5, and is discussed by Piekarz, *op. cit.*, p. 42.

⁵⁴ On the struggle for joy in Nahman's teachings, cf. *Liq. II*:23-24. On the differences between his own constant struggle and the easier path he recommended to his followers, *Hayey II, 'Avodat ha-Shem*, 141. He advised them not to copy his apparent gloom, which was to be accounted for partly by the descent of his family from the Davidic line, which still bore the gloomy countenance of the Psalmist! (*Hayey II, Yegi'ato ve-terhato*, 6-7.)

⁵⁵ *Liq.* 206; *Hayey, Torot*, 59.

⁵⁶ *Hayey, Torot*, 10.

again from the very bottom of the ladder.⁵⁷ "Heaven and hell are in this world," he later proclaimed.⁵⁸ Indeed, he had known them both, and had known how rapid the transition from one to the other could be. Once he exclaimed to his disciples, who were ever fascinated by the beauty of his teachings: "I am a great and beautiful tree with most wondrous branches—but at bottom I lie in the earth!"⁵⁹

A particularly valuable source for achieving some psychological insight into Nahman is provided in a collection of several dreams which he told to Nathan, and which the disciple faithfully recorded as a part of his account of Nahman's life. One dream in particular, which he had in December of 1809 (the same month in which he told the parable of the heart and the blood!) seems particularly instructive for understanding Nahman's depressions. As such, this dream is worthy of presentation in its entirety:

I was sitting in my house, and no one came in to see me. I found this surprising, so I went out to the other room, but there too I found no one. I went to the main house, then to the House of Study, but they too were empty. I decided to go outside, and there I found groups of men standing about in circles and whispering to one another. One was mocking me, another was laughing at me, and still another was acting rudely toward me. Some of my own people were there among them, being rude and whispering about me. I called one of my disciples over and asked him: "What is this?" He answered: "How could you have done a thing like that? How could you have committed so great a sin?" I had no idea what all this mockery was about, so I asked that fellow to gather some of my disciples together. He walked away from me, and I did not see him again.

I decided there was nothing to be done, so I sailed away to a far-off country. But when I arrived, I found that even there people were standing about and discussing this thing; they knew about it there too. Then I decided to go off and live in the forest. Five of our people gathered around me, and together we went off to dwell in the woods. One of the men would periodically go into town to fetch provisions for us, and on his return I would ask him: "Has the thing quieted down yet?" But he would always answer: "No, there is still a great commotion about it."

While we were there, an old man came calling for me, saying: "I have something to say to you." I went to talk with him, but he immediately began berating me: "Did you do such a thing!? How is it that you weren't ashamed before your ancestors, Rabbi Nahman (of Horodenka) and the Besht? And were you not ashamed before the Torah of Moses? Or before the patriarchs? Do you think you can stay

⁵⁷ *Shivḥey ha-Raṅ*, 5-16. This passage contains a highly significant account of Nahman's personal struggles.

⁵⁸ *Ḥayey, Torot*, 13. Cf. also the addendum to *Liq. 22*.

⁵⁹ *Ḥayey II, gedulat hasagato*, 5. While Nathan quotes this statement in Hebrew, the Yiddish original obviously concluded with the phrase *lig ikh in dr'erd*, which is considerably more pungent than the Hebrew translation.

here forever? You don't have much money, you know, and you're a weak man. So what will you do? Don't think you can flee to yet another country—for if they don't know who you are, they won't support you, and if they do know who you are, they'll know of this thing too." Then I said to him: "Since I am such an exile in this world, at least I'll have the World to Come." But he answered: "Paradise you expect? There won't even be a place in hell for you to hide, not for one who has desecrated God's name as you have!" I asked him to leave me, saying: "I thought you were here to comfort me, not to increase my suffering. Go away!" And the old man left.

Since we were living there in the forest for so long, I became afraid that we would forget to study altogether, so I asked the one who brought our provisions to obtain some sacred book from the city on his next visit. But when he returned, he had no book with him. "I couldn't dare say for whom I wanted the book," he explained, "and without saying for whom I wanted it, I could not get the book." I was terribly distressed about that: here I was, a wanderer with no books, and in danger of forgetting my studies altogether.

Meanwhile, the old man returned. This time he was carrying a book under his arm. I asked him: "What's that you're carrying?" He told me it was a book, and he handed it to me. I took it from him, but I didn't even know how to hold it, and when I opened it, it seemed completely strange to me: a foreign language in a foreign script. I became terribly upset, for I feared that my own companions would leave me if they found this out. The old man then began to speak to me again as he had before, asking me if I was not ashamed of my sin, and telling me that there would be no place in hell for one like me to hide. But this time I responded: "If one who came from the upper world were to tell me such things—then I would believe them!" He said: "I am from there." And he showed me a sign.

I then recalled the story of the Besht who, when he heard he was to have no place in the World to Come, said: "I love God without the World to Come!" I tossed my head back with tremendous remorse. And as I did so, all those before whom the old man had said I should be ashamed, my grandfathers and the patriarchs and all the others came to me... and if a man were to transgress the entire Torah eight hundred times, but could then throw back his head with all the remorse I felt at that moment, surely he would be forgiven...⁶⁰

This product of the last year of Nahman's life weaves together many themes which must have plagued him: the opposition of his enemies, his loneliness, his states of depression when he felt that he knew nothing at all. But pervading the dream most basically is an overwhelming sense of guilt. The real cause of Nahman's suffering is an unbearable burden of guilt, an unyielding awareness of his own sinfulness. Nahman himself says quite clearly in another context that the only real suffering in the world is that occasioned by guilt. "All

⁶⁰ *Hayey, Sippurim hadashim*, 11. See the discussion of this dream by Joseph Weiss in *Studies in Mysticism and Religion* (Scholem Festschrift), Hebrew Section, pp. 101-113.

the sufferings of the world are nothing, when compared with the heavy burden of sin."⁶¹

What is the sin which tormented Nahman so terribly that he should have seen himself cast out of the world and rejected by his own disciples? In the dream itself, of course, Nahman does not ask what it is that he has done. While he at first claims to know nothing of it, he rather seems to take his guilt for granted, as though it concerned a secret sin well-known to him alone. While it might be possible to claim that he is referring to the sin of a messianic claim, it hardly seems that his own disciples would mock him of that account. From what we know of their veneration of Nahman, some at least would have accepted such a claim from him. Nor does the sin of associating with heretics, which was to become a matter of public scandal some months later, seem to fit the dream. That was a public matter, and here we are quite clearly confronted by a secret sin. This particular burden of guilt is well-known to Nahman, and his dream fantasy he imagines what would happen if the world were to know of his transgression.

From countless other passages in the literature of Bratzlav, it becomes quite clear that the sense of sin which constantly oppressed Nahman was that very sin which he had claimed to have overcome altogether: sexual desire.

The works of Nahman are pervaded by concern with sexuality and its evils. Sexual desire is the "root of the evil urge,... the root of defilement."⁶² As we have seen above, the true test of the Zaddik is only that of overcoming sexual lust. While Nahman himself claimed to have done this, the later Bratzlav tradition seems more realistic when it says that Nahman *sought* to uproot all sexual desire, but, alas, "nature cannot be changed."⁶³ His adolescence was a period of terrible sexual trials, and he did not emerge from them psychologically unscathed. It seems clear that the violent ups and downs of his adolescent piety were occasioned in large part by sexual fantasies which constantly interrupted his attempts at devotion.⁶⁴ While it is impossible to know definitely the particular nature of his sexual problems, certain insight may be gained from a careful reading of *Sefer ha-Middot*, which he

⁶¹ *Liq. II:7,3.*

⁶² *Liqutey 'Etzot, Berit, 2*, and frequently in Bratzlaver literature.

⁶³ Quoted from Abraham Ḥazan, leader of the Bratzlaver hasidim in the early part of the twentieth century, by Nathan Zevi Koenig in his *Neveh Zaddiqim* (B'nei Beraq, 1968/69), p. 79.

⁶⁴ *Shivhey ha-RaN*, 16-18.

composed in his adolescence.⁶⁵ Later in life, Nahman compared the overcoming of desire to the process of tanning a hide: "Even after the hide has been thoroughly worked over, a bit of its stench remains... even if the smallest bit of desire remains with you, all your lusts will return... the body has to have desire worked out of it so fully that you can turn it over and see that it is completely clean on all sides..."⁶⁶ Yet when confronting himself rather than prescribing for others, Nahman undoubtedly had to confront the fact that "nature cannot be changed."

Of course the role which Nahman had set out for himself forced him to keep this burden of lingering sexual guilt a well-guarded secret. The Zaddik of the generation, he who in his own person has to symbolize the "guardian of the covenant," cannot admit to his own inadequacies in this uniquely vital area. One who claims that "any child who is brought to me before the age of seven will remain free from sin until his marriage"⁶⁷ can never share with anyone his own sexual torments.

This understanding brings us to the core of Nahman's conflict concerning his fitness for leadership. It was his own struggle with sexuality which caused him to define the Zaddik as one who had been victorious in that particular struggle. As he allowed himself to be cast in the role of leader of the great and final hasidic revival, he was forced to identify himself with that Zaddik. And yet he knew, throughout his life, that he could not live up to his own criterion. This burden of secret guilt, which he could share with no one but God, was the greatest single source of his depressions, and tortured him even in his dreams. It was first in response to his own torments, that he established the *tiggun ha-keleli* text, that collection of Psalms which Bratzlav Hasidim to this day recite as an antidote to sexual guilt. Yet his own burden was never relieved in a way that allowed him to feel that his claim to be Zaddik was wholly honest.

There remains only the final paradox. Nahman was convinced that this burden of sin was what prevented him from doing his work as redeemer. Yet who can say that his very power as Zaddik was not nourished and deepened by his own constant sense of inadequacy? Nahman's

⁶⁵ Of particular interest might be such passages in *Sefer ha-Middot* as qv. *hirhurim*, 39, 58, 82; qv. *ni'uf*, 1, 4, 39, and 72. The frequency and stringency of these warnings seem to seek some explanation.

⁶⁶ *Hayey II*, *Yegi'ato ve-tirhato*, 5.

⁶⁷ *Hayey II*, *Avodat ha-Shem*, 71. The phrase "until marriage" makes it seem clear that the reference is to sexual sin.

greatest innovation in the life of his disciples, his insistence that they spend an hour each day in spontaneous broken-hearted conversation with God, could only have been created by one who himself was in need of limitless unburdening of spirit. Who but Nahman, with all his torments and conflicts, could remain the personal master of generations of hasidim who know with him that "There is nothing so whole as a broken heart?"

TEXTS AND RESPONSES

STUDIES
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ON THE OCCASION
OF HIS SEVENTIETH BIRTHDAY
BY HIS STUDENTS

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