

## THE CONTINUING REDEMPTION OF RABBI NAHMAN

### A Review Essay\*

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EVERY HISTORICAL FIGURE, once death has condemned him to the shadows of the past, is in need of some redeemer who will allow him to live again in the minds and hearts of some later generation by studying his life and teaching him to others. This is true even of would-be redeemers: their unfulfilled dreams of redemption, consigned to oblivion by death and by the passage of time, call out for some latter-day redeemer who will discover them and give them new life.

Of the many dreamers of redemption in Israel's history perhaps none has had such good fortune in this regard as Rabbi Nahman of Bratslav, the tormented hasidic visionary of the early nineteenth century who saw himself as the central figure of an unfolding messianic drama. When his life was cut short by tuberculosis (he died in 1810 at the age of thirty-eight), he left behind him—in addition to a rich literary legacy—a faithful disciple, Nathan of Nemirov, who saw to it that his master's name would not be lost to history. For a period of thirty-five years after Nahman's death, Nathan edited, published, and disseminated the teachings of Bratslav, and led a small and often persecuted band of followers who remained loyal to the master's memory. Nathan's followers are the spiritual—and in many cases familial—ancestors of the Bratslav Hasidim of today, who are centered around their yeshivah in Jerusalem where the master's empty chair holds the place of honor next to the *aron kodesh*. Shunning contact with the outside world and having some of that particular suspicion of strangers which a long history of persecution lends to a religious sect, they have maintained themselves proudly but have had little influence beyond their immediate circles.

Almost a century after his death, however, Nahman's fortunes took a great turn for the better. Two of the most profound religious figures of early twentieth century Jewry almost simultaneously rediscovered Nahman,

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\* *Mehqarim be-Hasidut Bratslav*, by Joseph Weiss, Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 1974, 282 pp.

and took to translating his insights into a more contemporary idiom. For Western Jews, Martin Buber became the great interpreter of the master of Bratslav. Beginning with his translation of Nahman's *Sippurey Ma'asiyot* in 1906, Buber made it known to both Jews and non-Jews that Nahman was a major figure in the spiritual legacy of Israel. For the Jews of Eastern Europe, Hillel Zeitlin provided the access to Nahman's teachings. In a series of articles and monographs culminating in a posthumously published biography in Yiddish (New York, 1952), Zeitlin poured great depths of passion and insight into his understanding of the Bratslaver. While both Buber and Zeitlin were romantics, and their work on Nahman is far from what would today be called critical scholarship, it is thanks to them that the name of Nahman is well-known in non-hasidic circles; and that his life has become the object of poetry, fiction and theatre:

Nahman has also merited a third great 'redeemer' in the twentieth century, in the person of the late Joseph Weiss, whose recent untimely death was a great loss to the world of Jewish scholarship. In a series of essays published in scholarly journals and *Festschriften* in the fifties and sixties, this leading student of Gershom Scholem undertook the first serious historical research on Nahman and his thought, paving the way for all future understanding of Bratslav Hasidism. Now Mendel Piekarz, himself the author of a collection of studies entitled *Hasidut Bratslav* (Jerusalem, 1972), has rendered us the great service of collecting Weiss' published studies in this area, adding to them several previously unpublished pieces which were a part of Weiss' literary estate, and presenting them in a single volume.

### *paradox and irony*

THOUGH HIS CAREER WAS DEVOTED TO HISTORICAL RESEARCH rather than to the elaboration of an original theology, Joseph Weiss was a religious thinker of great profundity. His essays on the spiritual history of early Hasidism (aside from Bratslav), most of which were published in English in the *Journal of Jewish Studies*, remain the most masterful attempts by any modern scholar to penetrate the depths of that complicated and ever-fascinating phenomenon. His greatest work, however, was that which he devoted to Nahman. Understanding from within his own complex and often tormented inner life the great sufferings which Nahman describes as the lot of the true *tzaddik* (and perhaps of any serious religious human being), Weiss proposed the critical tools of paradox and irony as the keys to unlocking Nahman's complex oeuvre. While Nahman claimed that with regard to himself there was no middle path—one either had to believe that he was the greatest of the *tzaddikim* or the worst of sinners—Weiss showed that in fact Nahman held both of these beliefs about himself, and that all of his

life's work was an attempt to encompass this duality. Torn by conflict, guilt, and self-doubt from within, and battered by the fierce opposition of some of the leading *tzaddikim* of his day, Nahman saw himself at once both as sinner and as *tzaddik*. It was in an ever-intensifying spiral of self-depreciation and self-aggrandizement that Nahman produced his highly complex and tortuous image of the *tzaddik*. Modern-day preachers, even those who make no claim to the mantle of *tzaddik*, could do well to learn from Nahman's doubts concerning his role. In one place he writes of

*a very wealthy man who possessed tens of thousands (of rubles). He published an announcement to the effect that whoever needed to borrow money should come to him for a loan. Of course such an offer will find many takers, and indeed a great number of people did borrow from him. The rich man kept a record-book of all his accounts. One day he took that ledger in his hand and began to look through it. He realized that although he had invested a great deal of money in these loans, not a single one of his debtors had bothered to pay him back. He was of course upset about this, and he became deeply troubled.*

*Among those who had borrowed from this rich man, there was a certain fellow who had lost all of the capital in a business venture, and had no way to pay back his loan. He felt terribly worried about this, and decided that he had to confront the rich man face to face, telling him all that was in his heart . . .*

*The rich man said to him: "What do I care about the paltry sum you owe me? It makes no difference to me whether you pay it back or not, when I consider the tens of thousands which I am owed altogether. What I would rather have you do is go around to all my debtors, reminding each of them of his debt and asking him to pay. Ask them why they haven't paid me yet; even if you can get each of them to pay a small percentage of his loan, it will still come to several thousand times more than what you yourself owe me . . ." (Hayey MoHa-RaN, avodat ha-Shem)*

In this and countless other parables, homilies and tales, Weiss has shown that the figure who stands at the center is always none other than Nahman himself. Nahman is a person for whom all understanding is self-understanding; his sermons as well as his tales are an utterly personal form of theologizing. The *tzaddik*, whose disciples were known as *vidduiniks* because they confessed their sins to him, in fact turns out to be the greatest confessor of all, as he masks even the most brutally honest degrees of self-revelation behind the veil of his tales and sermons. This is the greatest of Joseph Weiss' methodological insights into Nahman, developed most fully in "Rabbi Nahman on the Controversy Concerning Himself" and "Studies in Rabbi Nahman's Self-Image," both of which are included in the present volume. This insight opens the way to all further biographical research into

Nahman, which must first and foremost be based upon a careful reading of his own writings.

The most profound single piece in this collection, "The 'Question' in Rabbi Nahman's Thought" (perhaps *kushiya* would be better translated here as 'paradox'), was also the first of Weiss' articles on Bratslav, published in the Salman Schocken Jubilee volume in 1952. Though stylistically quite difficult, it is a brilliant tour de force of historical scholarship and theological profundity, and deserves to be much better known. In the opinion of this reader it ranks with Scholem's classic "*Mitzvah ha-Ba'ah ba-Averah*" as a historical essay which serves to expand our notions of what Judaism is, and has important implications for all further Jewish theology. More than any other figure in pre-modern Judaism (and here we see him living at the edge of the modern era), Nahman is one who knows and lends articulation to man's experience of the absence of God from the ordinary course of human affairs. Ever struggling with the meaning of this admission, Nahman postulates a paradoxical theology which claims that true faith can only exist in God's absence, and that it is only in man's seeming alienation from the Creator that he can begin to tap his true reservoirs of spiritual strength. Weiss' explication of this intense paradox is at times truly terrifying—something which can rarely be said of a scholarly essay on the history of theological ideas.

#### *as existentialist*

OF THE NEW PIECES INCLUDED IN THIS VOLUME perhaps the most interesting is a brief treatment of "*Kiddush ha-Shem* and Sacrificial Death" in Nahman's thought. Elsewhere designating Nahman as an 'existential' thinker and contrasting his thought with the more contemplative tendencies of the Miedzyrzec school of Hasidism, Weiss has now provided some biographical background for this mode of thinking. Like such Western figures as Kierkegaard, Unamuno and Kafka—all of them central figures of existentialism in religion and literature—Nahman was constantly preoccupied, at least from adolescence, with fear of death. Ultimately he was able to resolve this fear only by a glorification of his impending death, seeing himself as a sacrifice whose demise would be of redemptive value to those around him. This motif deserves much fuller development; it is the opinion of this writer, which I hope to demonstrate elsewhere, that Nahman considered himself to be none other than Messiah ben Joseph, who will have to die in the battle against the forces of evil before the final redemption may be proclaimed. In any case, the motif of the *tzaddik's* death as providing vicarious atonement or at least redemptive power for those who are to follow—an idea which seems so strange to most Jewish ears—is clearly documented in Bratslav.

IN A VOLUME SUCH AS THIS there are necessarily many controversial points with which other scholars may have some argument. My most serious historical squabble with Weiss is over the controversy which surrounded Nahman in his lifetime. Following in the footsteps of Scholem, Weiss is one of the most avid Sabbatian-hunters since the days of Sasportas and Emden. Though he himself has shown that the single 'document' which claims that Nahman was accused of Sabbatian heresy is an utter fraud (p. 26 ff.) he nevertheless persists in holding onto this cherished notion, as does Piekarz in his own book. In fact there is no documentary evidence for such a claim. In an editor's note to the present volume (p. 60) Piekarz notes Weiss' unpublished view that every mention of the name Jacob in Nahman's writings is a secret reference to Jacob Frankl. Perhaps it would have been better to have left such a wild claim unmentioned. Nahman's last child, born in the fall of 1806, was a boy named Jacob. Would even Weiss have dared to dream that Nahman would have named a child after the most hated of all apostates? Even Weiss' assertion that Nahman's very frequent references to a *zaken* are always to be taken as barbs directed toward his archenemy, the *tzaddik* Aryeh Leib of Shipola (called the *Zeide-zaken*), are at times taken too far. As Piekarz himself has noted elsewhere, Weiss' attempts to find consistency and system in Nahman sometimes caused him to go astray.

Despite these and a few other debatable points, we have before us a collection of studies on a great master, written by one who himself was a master of subtle understandings and deep psychological insight. They deserve to be studied carefully by all students of Jewish history and theology, as well as by others who enjoy seeing how exciting scholarly research may be and how a master scholar is able to infuse the past with new vigor, allowing it to live again.

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