

## RABBI NATHAN OF NEMIROV

Arthur Green

**R**ABBI NATHAN OF NEMIROV (1780-1844/45), was the faithful disciple of the Hasidic master, Rabbi Nahman of Bratzlav (1772-1810) and the leader of the Bratzlav Hasidic community after his master's death. He is perhaps the greatest example of the faithful disciple in all of Jewish history. Though he was disciple and secretary to Nahman only for the last seven years of the master's life, all his remaining days were lived in the shadow of his teacher and were given over to the publication and dissemination of Nahman's teachings. Though in fact leader of the Bratzlav community, he never allowed himself to be designated as master, but always sought to remain a disciple of his own master.

Nahman of Bratzlav contracted tuberculosis in the summer of 1807, at the age of thirty-five. He immediately sensed the imminence of his death, and began to make preparations. In the spring of 1810, when he realized that the end was near, he moved from his town of Bratzlav in the Ukraine to the nearby city of Uman, the site of a particularly terrible pogrom in 1768. He felt himself called there by the martyred dead, and said that he wanted to be buried among them. His life during those last months was filled with his task of "the redeeming of souls," among the living Jews of Uman who had begun to follow the ways of Western culture and had abandoned their religion, as well as among the martyrs.

The following passage is translated from the autobiography of Nathan of Nemirov, entitled *Yemey Maharnat*, and first published in Lemberg in 1875-76. I consider it to be perhaps the most beautiful piece on *petirat zaddik* in Jewish literature.

*This translation is dedicated to the memory of my own beloved and revered teacher, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel. May his soul be bound up in the bond of life.*

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## THE DEATH OF OUR MASTER\*

Rabbi Nathan of Nemirov

IT WAS ON THE THIRD DAY of Selihot that I arrived at Uman, planning to be there for Rosh Hashanah. I stayed there, however, until he departed from us in peace, and I merited to be present at the hour of his holy and awesome death.

The first day of Rosh Hashanah that year occurred on the Sabbath; on that day he became considerably weaker and began to cough up a great deal of blood. He was quite frightened at this, especially when he saw how much blood he was losing through his cough.

It had always been his way to say words of Torah at the close of the first day of Rosh Hashanah. A great crowd had gathered in the large house which had been designated for that purpose, and the room where he was to speak was already packed with people. Evening began to fall as we waited for him to appear, but he was near death and did not have the strength to enter the room. Suddenly a message came that he had called for me. I left the crowd and went to the place where he was staying.

I found him seated on the edge of his bed, with a brass bowl beside him; the bowl was fast filling up with blood. As soon as he saw me enter, he cried out to me: "What shall I do about my teaching?" My first reaction was that there was nothing to be done; surely he could not go teach in that condition. But he persisted, saying how sorry he felt for the people who had gone through such great difficulties in order to hear him. How could he refuse them? All summer long he had been looking forward to this Rosh Hashanah, when he would say Torah in Uman. Then I understood how deeply he longed to teach. I began to say to him: "When you returned from your journey to Lemberg you were also very weak, and it seemed impossible that you would have the strength to teach. Yet on that occasion you managed to speak at great length." I kept saying things of this sort for a while, until he finally responded, "I'm willing to give my life for it." And it really was at the risk of his life that he would go to teach; he seemed about to die at any moment.

He asked me to set up his chair near the doorway to the room where he would speak, so that if he became faint we would be able to get him out of there quickly. It was no small task to move his chair from the front

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\* Edited and Translated by Arthur Green.

of the room to the doorway, since the room was so completely packed with people. But he was insistent, and said that he would not enter the room unless we moved his chair. This we did—but only with the greatest effort.

He came into the room and sat down on his chair, and all of us disciples stood around him. The room was really so terribly filled with people that it was hard to be there at all. People were climbing on top of one another; the crowding and noise were so awful that some people became faint and had to be taken out. But he sat there in the midst of the crowd, waited a while before he spoke, as was his custom, and then began to speak. . . . His voice was so low that it seemed impossible that he could go on for long. Surely it was only by the grace of God, who had compassion upon us and upon all the generations to come, that he was able to continue, as though by the most wondrous miracle. . . . When he finished, he had us sing a *nigun*, as we always did on such occasions, and he went back to his room.

All that second night of Rosh Hashanah he was terribly weak, and his condition seemed to be growing still more dangerous. They sent for the doctor, but could not get him to come. Afterwards he said that he was very fortunate that the doctor had not been able to make it, and he said (repeating his oft-stated advice) that whoever wanted to take care of his life should never let a doctor get near him. He asked that even if he himself should call out for the doctor in his illness, they should not let the doctor in to him. Though I was not present when he said those words, I would never have let a doctor treat him. Nevertheless, on the Eve of Sukkot my objections were overruled, and the doctor was called. Who knows if that visit of the doctor did not help to bring about his death?

ON THE SECOND DAY OF ROSH HASHANAH, he did not come in to pray with us or to join us in the meal, as was his custom on that holiday. He stayed in his own adjoining room and there he prayed alone. And though he was weak beyond description in those days following Rosh Hashanah, he managed to speak to each of the people who had come to be with him, giving to each of them according to his needs. As people came to take leave of him after the holiday, he spoke to each at length. I suppose it was because of this show of strength that people did not realize he was so near death; otherwise they never would have left him. Even his own daughters and his son-in-law went home after the holiday. Had we really paid attention to what was happening, we would have realized that he lived each moment only by miracle.

He himself said to us countless times and in numerous ways that he was about to die. But we, sinful creatures that we are, could not believe

that God would take this pure light from us at such a time. We lost so much by not accepting that his death was near. How much more would we have wanted to hear from him, had we only known! But we can only give thanks to God, who in His mercy allowed us to hear sufficient teachings from our master to nourish all the future generations . . . until the end of time. . . .

On the eve of Yom Kippur, we went in to him, and he blessed each one of us, as was his custom. His appearance, however, was somehow frightening, so that an awesome sense of shame overtook us all. How hard it is to describe his face as it was at that moment of receiving his blessing, for he had a holy and awesome glow about him. Truly blessed are we, who were able to receive that final blessing from him before he died.

On Yom Kippur day, he again did not join us in prayer, but stayed in his room alone. When the day was about to draw to a close, and the time for the Neilah prayer arrived, we could not decide among ourselves who should lead the service. It was agreed that Reb Naftali and I should ask him to appoint a prayer-leader for us. . . . The two of us walked into his room, filled with trembling. (It was always that way when we sought to approach him; we would be overcome by a sense of embarrassment. How much more so at this hour of Neilah, and so close to the hour of his death.) We stood shaking at his doorstep. He turned to us briefly and asked, "Why have you come?" And we hesitatingly blurted out, "Who should lead Neilah?" At that, he waved us away with his hand, as though to say: "I have no concern for that now. Do what you want."

When we returned to his room after the fast was over, we found him very weak, and of sad demeanor. The next morning, however, his mood was improved, and he spoke joyfully with people. . . . It was on that day that he had to change his dwelling, returning to the house where he had lived before Rosh Hashanah. As we began to move his possessions into the new apartment and to arrange things in their proper order, he became especially concerned about where we should place his bed. Wherever we tried somehow did not seem right to him. Finally I tried moving a chest of drawers, and placed the bed where the chest had stood. This seemed right to him. . . . Only afterwards, when he died on that bed in that place, did I understand that the precise place where he was to die had been designated years before, and was somehow known to him.

From the day he entered this house, he ceased to smile. . . . On Thursday of that week, the day before the Eve of Sukkot, he took a turn for the worse. . . . From that moment we never left his side. That night I slept in his room and he dictated his will to me. Three hundred red rubles were to go his daughter Hayyah, his wife was to be given the value of her Ketubah, and various other provisions were to be made. Then he asked me,

"Is there anything else to be said?" But I answered, "Even this was not necessary. You are going to live to see your daughter married!" (For I did not want to let myself believe that he was really speaking of his death.) He said to me, "With God, all things are possible," for he never liked to argue about anything, and then he added, "These three years since I took ill, I've been living on miracles. . . ."

On Friday morning, he asked us to find him a chair which would give him good support, so that he could sit up in it despite his weakness. With God's help we found such a chair and he took to sitting in it. This was truly a miracle. From that Friday morning until after the Sabbath, frail as he was, he remained seated upright in his chair. While he sat there on Friday morning, we brought him his *tallit* and *tefillin*. But while dressed in the garments of prayer, he began to vomit. He asked me to hold onto his head—and he nearly died there, right in my hands. Only by God's grace did he return to himself and he was able to go on with his prayer. From that time, he remained seated in the chair, as we stood before him for the next day and a half, watching the life ebb out of him. . . .

ON SATURDAY EVENING, the second day of Sukkot, he asked that we lay him down on his bed. He was terribly tired then, and said that he had gotten tired out by sitting so long on the chair. Then he turned to us and said, "Do you remember the story I told you when we first came to this place?" A shudder passed through me. I remembered that story very well. The Baal Shem Tov had come to a certain place, and had seen many great souls there which turned to him for redemption. And he had known that the only way he could redeem them was by his own death.

I stood there trembling as he added, "They've had their eye on me for so long already, beckoning me to this place. What can I tell you? Thousands of them, tens of thousands. . . ." He turned his face toward the wall and spread out his hands, saying, "I give my life; I am ready to accept all for Him, bless His name. . . ."

On that Monday evening, the eve of the last day of his life, his disciples Reb Naftali and Reb Simeon stood before him (for we were sleeping in shifts, so that he was never left alone), and he again spoke of the souls that longed to be redeemed, and how many there were in this place. Naftali answered him, saying, "But didn't you once tell us that the truly great *zaddik* could do it all within his lifetime?" He replied, "But then I only revealed a part of the thing to you; really one has to die to do this." He then took the key to the chest and handed it to them. "As soon as I am dead," he told them, "while my body is still lying here on the floor, you are to take all the writings you find in the chest and burn them. And be sure to fulfill my request."

The two disciples were overcome by a combination of terror and sadness, realizing that he was so directly preparing for his death. One of them whispered something about it to the other, but the master overheard. "Why are you whispering?" he said. "You can speak of my death to my face. I'm not afraid of it." And then he added, "Or perhaps you are talking about yourselves. What do you have to worry about? I am going before you. And surely if the souls of those who have never known me are calling out to me to redeem them, you who have been my disciples have no need to worry. With those others there might be some difficulty—but with me walking before you, you have no need to fear at all." And he went on speaking about those souls and about his death. . . .

If only we had been able to simply accept what he was saying—that he was indeed about to die. There was so much more that he wanted to tell us, but he was waiting for us to ask. We, however, would not let it enter our minds that he was really about to die; we only wanted him to get well, and so we asked him nothing at all. . . .

I suggested to Naftali that he get some sleep, for he had not been sleeping at all. But Naftali would not let himself leave the room. The love he felt for our master's face as it shone at that holy moment would not let him leave. Finally sleep overcame him, and both he and Simeon fell asleep there in the room. The servant and his wife were also asleep; only I remained to serve and guard our master. I stood there before him, I alone, from shortly after midnight until we saw the light of dawn. But I heard nothing from him in all those hours—all because I did not want to accept that he was dying, and I asked him nothing. He looked into me with his awesome eyes, and every look contained countless words. Now I understand so much about the looks he gave me that night, and whenever I pass through times of suffering and God saves me through His wonders, I understand that it was all there in his eyes, in the intensity with which he stared at me, for hours at a time, during that final night.

He then asked me to take him back to his bed. . . . When I lifted him up and put him down on the bed, he said to me: "Slowly, slowly. . . ." And then he added, "I'm getting heavy now, so you have to be careful." (For the dying do get heavier as the life-force passes out of them.) Again he was telling me how close he was to death, and again I refused to listen. I said to him, "Master, take a little something to sustain yourself." He asked for a bit of tea with an egg yolk in it, which was supposed to reduce his cough. I gave him a bit of water and he washed his hands before drinking the tea which I had prepared. He found it too hot, however, and he was very careful not to drink hot things, lest they bring up the blood again. For the blood had indeed stopped coming several days before

his death. I poured the tea from one glass into another to cool it, but he still found it too hot. This went on three or four times, until finally he took it, recited the blessing, and drank. I stood there with him until the dawn, feeling somehow happy that I had had the chance to serve him in this way. Usually he wanted only the household servants to wait on his personal needs; it was a rare gift that I had been able to serve him all these hours. Of course I did not know that on this very day the Lord would take our master. Rather at that point I really thought that he would live.

WHEN DAWN BROKE and the others were awakened, I left to go to the *mikveh* before my prayers on that fourth day of Sukkot. Upon my return I found him sitting up on the bed, wrapped in his *tallit* and saying his prayers. He then took the *lulav* and *etrog* in his hands and with the prayerbook of the Arizal resting on his knees, he recited the *Hallel*. When he came to *Hoshanot* he raised his voice a bit, so that his prayers could be heard throughout the house. Happy are the eyes that saw him, happy are the ears that heard his prayers, on that last day of his holy life. . . .

A short while later, he was seated on his chair, but life was quickly passing out of him. People were standing over him with various kinds of fragrant spices, to restore his soul. God had also caused a certain man from Tirkavitze to be there on that day and he was attending to him above all the others. (Here, too, there is a tale to tell, for our master had already promised this man that he would be present on the day of his death.) When I saw the scene, I told them to put him to bed immediately, but our master himself waved me aside. Only a bit later, when I saw that sitting up was totally impossible for him, did I repeat my words. This time he was silent and did not resist. The man from Tirkavitze took him in his arms and laid him on the bed. As he put him down, I took his holy hand in mine, first as in a greeting, but then in embrace, as a sign of the bond between us.

He lay on his bed, dressed in a fine silken garment, which he had asked Reb Simeon to put around him. He asked that his sleeves be buttoned, and when a bit of his shirtsleeve still showed out from under his coat, he motioned that it be set right. He then asked that we wash off his beard, for there was a bit of blood stuck to it. He lay there in great freedom.

He took a bit of wax between his fingers, and began to roll it, absorbed in thought. He often did this toward the end of his days, rolling wax between his fingers as he thought. Even in this last hour of his life, his mind occupied with some unknown thought, he lay there skillfully and gracefully rolling the wax between his fingers. . . .

It took about three hours from the time he was laid down on the bed. . . . The house was filled with people who had come to honor him. When

they saw that the end was near, they began to recite the *maavar yabok*, the verses one recites at the death of a *zaddik*. It then seemed that he was already dead, and the people began to weep. I cried out, "Master! Master! To whom do you leave us?" He heard our voice and awoke, turned his face to us as though to say: "God forbid! I'm not leaving you!" But just a bit after that, he died and was gathered unto his people, in holiness and purity, with no confusion of mind and without the slightest gesture, with an acceptance that was awesome and wondrous. All those who stood about him, the leaders of the burial society among them, said that they seen many who had passed on in pure and conscious ways but they had never seen a death like this.

NOW ALL THIS IS TOLD only according to our understanding. As to the true meaning of his death—there are no words to describe it, for it surpasses all understanding. Only those who know a bit of his greatness, who have read his holy books or have heard his stories, will begin to realize that his death was completely unique. There was never any like it, nor will there ever be. How shall we speak? What shall we say? What shall I say to the Lord, who gave me the gift of being there as his holy soul passed out of him? Had I only come into the world for the sake of this moment, it would have been sufficient.



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Volume XXVIII, Number 1

Fall 1973, תשל"ד



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