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THE "DREAM-TALKS" OF NAHMAN OF BRATSLAV

Rabbi Nahman of Bratslav (1772–1810) is known to students of Jewish literature as a spinner of fantastic yarns. His collected *Tales*, his most famous writings, combine folk motifs, biblical images, and kabbalistic symbols to create works of a startling mythic profundity. Master of a small but intensely loyal band of Hasidic followers, Nahman managed to transcend the literary conventions of that movement, offering his teachings garbed in fantastic narrative as well as in traditional homiletics.

Among his blessings Nahman was able to count a faithful disciple, Nathan of Nemirov, a man of humble spirit but of considerable literary talent. The disciple outlived his master by some thirty-five years, a period he devoted wholly to the dissemination of his master's teachings and the building of an ongoing Bratslav community. Believing every word that had issued from his teacher's mouth to be of ultimate mysterious significance, Nathan recorded, amid his several memoirs of the master's life, a series of dreams that Nahman shared with him over the seven-year period he served as his secretary. These dozen dreams, some recalled in bare outline, others presented in amazingly whole and detailed form, serve as a fascinating source for the literary and psychological biography of the master who told them to his disciple in the relative innocence of pre-Freudian times.

Nahman's tales have frequently been described as a foretaste of that

literary vision later to be associated with the writings of Franz Kafka. The reader of these dream narratives will find much of that Kafkaesque landscape already outlined in them. The comparison of Nahman's dream accounts—assuming them to be precisely that—with the tales he created while in a waking state will be interesting and unexpected documentation of the influence of the unconscious on at least one author of fantastic literary fictions.

The Hebrew original in which the dreams were recorded (of course, like the *Tales*, they were first told orally in Yiddish) is found in the first part of *Hayyei MoHaRaN* (The Life of Rabbi Nahman). This collection of memoirs was left among Nathan's unpublished papers and was brought to press by his disciples in 1874. Interestingly, the chapter in which the dreams are contained is entitled *Sippurim hadashim* (New Tales), and interspersed among dreams it contains several parables and tales of an entirely self-conscious and didactic character. The voice in the dream narratives alternates between Nahman's own first-person recollection and the third-person account, printed here in italics, of the disciple who recalls his master's narration. The parenthetical remarks are probably also by Nathan, although some may have been added by the final editor, Rabbi Nahman of Cheryn. The materials in square brackets and footnotes have been added by the translator.

Introduction and translation by

ARTHUR GREEN

I

In the year 5565 [1804–5] I was standing leaning against a table while bathing in the sea. All the nations and their kings stood and stared in amazement. This was the Table of Kings, the Sea of Wisdom. They expected me to reveal wisdom that even . . .

II

(The year 5567 [1806–7] in Bratslav, during the week of Vayehi. After I had recited the sanctification of the moon on my own, he said to me, "Had you been joyous, it would have done the world a lot of good." Then he told me this, that he had seen in a dream:

A large troop of soldiers was walking by, and behind them flew birds, a vast array of birds. I asked the person next to me, "Why are the birds flying behind them?" He replied, "They are there to help the soldiers." When I asked how they could be of help, he continued, "These birds give off a certain fluid that causes the enemy troops to die. In that way they are helpful to the soldiers." I was troubled by this response. The soldiers they are supporting are also nearby. When they give off that fluid, it could also harm them. Then I saw the birds coasting down to the ground until they were all walking right behind the soldiers. As they went they picked up round things, which weren't food. I wondered how the birds were keeping up with the soldiers. Surely a man walks faster than a bird. What were they gathering? I was told that these were the source of that fluid that killed the enemy troops. *(Several points were difficult for me, but I don't remember them.)*

I went into an enclosed place, and I found a very low doorway. I entered and lay down; it was a dark room, with no windows. I had gone

in seeking to hide, and did. All the birds came in after me. I tried to chase them out, shooing them with my hands, but there was a cat standing outside. Birds run away from cats, and that was why they had all come into the room. Because of the cat all my shooing did no good at all. "Why had they come here?" I asked. "Due to their pox," they replied. "Why was that?" "The fluid used to kill the enemies was derived from their pox." "Might not they also die of this pox?" Indeed they did, and the place where their bodies fell would become especially contaminated.

I was terribly upset, fearing that I would die from the stench of the dead birds, for there were many of them there. I prayed to God, blessed be He, over this, and the pox passed out of them and they turned healthy. Then a single bird flew out, and all the others followed after him. A great shout broke forth in the world, "Mazal Tov! Mazal Tov!" And I too roared, "Mazal Tov!"

III

This is what he told in early summer of 5564 [1804].¹ He said, "I shall tell you what I saw, and you tell it to your children." There was a man lying on the ground, and people sat about him in a circle. Outside that circle was another, then another, and yet more. Beyond the outermost circle people were standing about, in no particular order.

The one seated (he was leaning on his side) in the center was moving his lips, and all those in the circles moved their lips after him. Then he was gone, and everyone's lips had stopped moving. I asked what had happened, and they told me that he had grown cold and died. When he had stopped speaking, so had they.

Then they all began to run, and I ran after them. I saw two very beautiful palaces, in which stood two officials. Everybody ran up to these two and began to argue with them, saying, "Why do you lead us astray?" They wanted to kill them, and the two officials fled outside. I saw them, and they seemed good to me, so I ran after them.

In the distance I saw a beautiful tent. From there someone shouted to the officials, "Go back! Collect all the merits that you have and take them to the candle that is suspended here: in that way you will accomplish all

that you need to do." They went back and gathered their merits—there were bundles of merits—and ran to the candle. I ran after and saw a burning candle suspended in the air. The officials came and threw their merits into the candle. Sparks came out of the candle and entered their mouths.

Then the candle turned into a river, and they all drank of its waters. Beings were created inside them; as they opened their mouths to speak, beings—which, as they ran back and forth, I saw were neither man nor beast—came out of their lips.

When they decided to go back to their place, they asked, "How can we?"

"Let us send someone to him who stands there with the sword that reaches from heaven to earth," answered one. "Whom shall we send?" They decided to send those newly created beings. I ran after them and saw the frightening one who reached from earth to heaven, as did his sword. The sword had several blades; one for death, one poverty, another illness, and yet more for other forms of punishment. "We have suffered so long from you. Help us now, bring us back to our place," they began to plead. (He said, "I cannot help you.") They pleaded, "Give us the blade of death, and we shall kill them." But he was not willing. They then asked for some other blade, but he was not willing to give them any. They went back.

Meanwhile, a command was issued to execute the officials. They were decapitated.

The whole thing began again; someone was lying on the ground, people about him in circles, running to the officials, and all the rest. But this time I saw that the officials did not throw their merits into the candle. They rather took their merits with them, walked up to the candle, and began to plead before it in brokenhearted supplication. As sparks from the candle entered their mouths, they once again began to plead. The candle became a river, the creatures emerged, and so forth.

"These will live," they said to me. "The former ones were condemned to death because they threw their merits into the candle and did not supplicate, as these did."

I did not understand the meaning of this thing. They said to me, "Go into that room and you will be told the meaning." As I entered, I saw an

old man, and I asked. He took his beard in his hand and said, "This is my beard, and that is the meaning of the thing." "I still don't understand," I replied. He told me to go into another room, and there I would find the meaning. As I entered, I saw it was of endless length and endless breadth, and completely filled with writings. Any place I opened any of them I found another comment on the meaning of the thing.

IV

This is what he told before the New Year of 5569, at the end of summer in 5568 [1808]. At that time the slaughterer from Teplyk had just brought him a wonderful chair. Around that time he told this vision or dream.

Someone brought him a throne² that was surrounded by fire. Everyone came out to see it, men, women, and children. As they turned to leave, bonds were created between them, and marriages were arranged on the spot. All the leaders of the generation also came to see it. I asked how far off it was, and why all these marriages had been arranged. I walked around everybody to get there, and then I heard that the New Year was approaching. I didn't know whether to go back or to stay there and was confused in my mind. Then I decided to stay there for the New Year. "With my weak body," I said to myself, "why should I go back?" So I stayed there. I arrived at the chair and saw there the true Rosh Hashanah. And Yom Kipper, the true Yom Kippur. And Sukkot, the true Sukkot. I also heard a shouting, "Your new moons and your festivals I despise!³ Why should you be judging the world? The New Year itself will judge!" All the people, including their leaders, fled from there. I then saw, engraved on the throne, the forms of all the world's creatures, each with its mate. That was why all the marriages had happened: each one had been able to find his mate. And since I had once been a student it occurred to me that the verse "His throne is sparks of fire" may be read as an acrostic for "matchmaker." The word *kursei* (His throne) also could be read as an abbreviation for Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, Sukkot. That is why the coupling of the Queen takes place on Shemini Azeret.⁴

I asked how I would earn my living, and I was told, "You shall be a matchmaker!"

V

5569 [1808], the first night of Hanukkah, after the candle had been lighted.

A guest came into someone's home. He asked the householder, "How do you make your living?" The latter replied that he had no fixed source of income and that he was supported by public funds. The guest then inquired what the householder was studying, and they began to discuss it. Their conversation became intense and personal, and the householder revealed his longing to achieve some true rung of holiness. The guest agreed to teach him, and then the householder was astonished, fearing that perhaps this was no human being at all. But as he saw that they seemed to be having an ordinary human conversation, his trust was restored, and he began calling the other "my teacher." "First," he said, "I want to learn what I should do to treat you with proper respect. Not, of course, that I would really insult you. It's just so hard for a person to take proper care of such things. Teach me, then, how to treat you correctly."

"I have no time for that now," was the answer. "Another time I will come and teach you that. Now I have to leave you."

The other insisted, "This too is something I should learn about. How far am I expected to accompany you on your way?"

"Just past the doorway," was the reply.

But how shall I go outside with him? thought the householder. Now too we are together, but there are other people around. But once I am outside alone with him . . . who knows who he is? So he turned to the guest and said, "I am frightened to go out with you," to which came the reply, "If I can teach you all these things, who could stop me if I wanted to do something to you right here and now?" So he went with him out the door, but as soon as they were out the other grabbed him and began to fly with him. He felt cold, but the one with whom he flew gave him a garment. "Take this," he said, "and all will be well. You will have food and drink and dwell in your home." And they flew on.

Meanwhile the householder looked around and found that he was back in his house. He found it hard to believe that he had come home, but there he was talking to people and eating and drinking like any other person. He looked again and he was flying through the air; again and he was back at home once more, and then again flying. This went on for

some time, until he let himself down in a valley between two mountains. There he found a book that contained permutations of the alphabet. The book also contained pictures of certain instruments, and inside the instruments were letters. Each instrument also contained those letters by means of which that particular instrument could be fashioned. He had a great desire to study that book, but as he looked around he found that he was again back at home, and when he looked again he was back there in the valley. He decided to climb one of the mountains, thinking that he might see some town from there. When he reached the mountaintop, however, he saw instead a tree of gold. From its golden branches hung instruments just like those that had been illustrated in the book. Inside the instruments were those instruments [letters?] that were used to fashion them. He wanted to take one of the instruments, but he could not do so, for they were all enmeshed in the twisted branches of the tree. As he looked up he found himself at home again.

He wondered greatly about all this, not understanding how he was here in one minute but there in the next. He wanted to tell someone about it, but how do you tell people about something as unbelievable as this? Looking out the window, he saw the guest walk by. "Come in," he said, but the other replied, "I have no time, for I am going to see you."

"Even this is a shock. I'm right here and you say you're going to see me?"

"In the moment you agreed to go with me, to accompany me to the doorway, I took your soul from you and gave it a garment from the lower rung of paradise. Only the lower parts of your spirit remained with you. That is why you can be there when you turn your thoughts there; you are able to draw illumination into yourself. But when you return here, you are here."

I do not know what world he was from, though surely it was from the good. The matter has not yet been ended or concluded.

VI

5569 [1808-9]. He dreamed that there was a Jewish community whose leader was an important public figure. A decree was issued that all the

Jews be killed. The leader decided that he would become a gentile. He called in a master barber, who shaved off his beard and forecurls. Then it was found out that the whole thing had been a lie, that there was no such decree at all. How shamed that leader was! He was unable to show his face in public. He had to uproot himself and flee. But how could he put his head out the door? How could he hire a wagon? A terrible disgrace really beyond all description. He finally had to go live with a gentile for a while, until his proper beard grew back, and so forth.⁵

VII

5564 [1803-4]. On the holy Sabbath eve, after Kiddush, a dream I saw.⁶

I was in a certain city, which in the dream appeared to be very large. A *tsaddik* of olden times came along, one who was considered a very great *tsaddik*. Everyone was going out to him, and I too went along. Then I saw that when they reached him, everyone passed him by and nobody stopped to greet him. It seemed that they were doing so intentionally. I was most astonished at their audacity, for I knew the man to be a great *tsaddik*. Then I asked how it was that they had the nerve not to greet such a man. I was told that he was indeed a great *tsaddik*, but that his body was made up of various unclean parts, despite the fact that he himself was a great man. He had taken it upon himself to redeem this body, but since "one should not greet one's fellow man in an unclean place," no one offered any greeting to him.

VIII

On a weekday. I dreamed and saw a wedding; at which there were many brides. Among the brides there was one in particular who seemed to be the most important. There was an orchestra playing music. Then a door was opened and they went into a yeshiva. A great throng gathered there. When I saw how many there were, I wondered how I could ever press my way into such a crowd. Somehow I managed, and I was standing over them. The dean of the yeshiva was studying with them, the Torah was

given glory, and the brides went on dancing. Especially that most important bride was dancing there. Each time the band played a melody, she would follow them by singing it herself. The Torah was given great glory there; I was amazed at all that glory. I spoke with some people I knew there and said, "Have you ever seen the Torah receive such?" It seems that they were studying the plain meaning, the exoteric Torah. There were rabbis among them, and the books too indicated this. There were great books there belonging to that branch of study.

IX

Kislev 5570 [December 1809]. Here in Bratslav.

I was sitting in my house, and no one came in to see me. Finding this surprising, I went out into the other room, but there too I found no one. I went to the main house, and 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 a third was acting rudely toward me. Some of my own people were there among them, acting rudely and whispering about me. I called one of my disciples over and asked him, "What is this?"

"How could you have done a thing like that?" he answered. "Committed such a terrible 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 that 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. So 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 matter 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, announcing, "I have something to say to you." I went to talk with him, but he immedi-

ately began to berate me, "Could you have done such a thing? How is it that you were not ashamed before your ancestors, Rabbi Nahman [of Horodenka] and the BeSHT? And have you no shame before the Torah of Moses? Or before the patriarchs? Do you think you can stay 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 still 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'm such an exile in this world, at least I'll have the world to come." But he answered, "Paradise you expect? There won't 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 alone, 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 came to fear that we would forget our learning altogether, so I asked the one who brought our provisions to obtain some holy book from the town 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, they wouldn't give it to me." I was terribly distraught over that; here I was, a wanderer with no books, in danger of forgetting all my learning.

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 that 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 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—only then would I 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. 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 rest, came to me, reciting over me the verse, "The fruit of the land shall be pride and splendor" [Isaiah 4:2]. They said to me, "On the contrary, we shall take pride in you." They brought all my disciples and children back to me (for my children, too, had cut themselves off from me). And they continued to speak to me, reversing all that had been said. If a man who had transgressed the entire Torah eight hundred times over could toss his head back with the bitterness [of remorse] that I felt in that moment, surely he would be forgiven. . . .

X

Monday, the twenty-fourth of Iyyar 5570 [spring 1810], in Uman. He told me of a dream he had had that night. He saw that there was a wedding, and he too went to attend it. He knew the bridegroom by name. He looked and saw there a person from the world to come, one who had died already. He was surprised and thought to himself, "If people see him there will be a great commotion." He knew the dead man's name as well, but he said that both the bridegroom's name and the dead man's name were not just names, but Names, pointing to something mysterious, like holy names. Then everyone saw the dead man. "But this man is dead," I said to them. "Nevertheless," they said, and it didn't seem to them at all out of the ordinary. Then I decided to go to a synagogue there, from which I'd be able to get a better look at the wedding. I wound my way around there like this—and he used his finger to show how he did it—and I got to the synagogue. There they were singing to the bridegroom in these words: Ein bocher is er, ein khosn is er, "a young man is he, a bridegroom is he." I knew the melody; it was a pleasant and joyous tune. I looked out from the synagogue. But then I didn't like it there either, so I went home. When I arrived at home I found the bridegroom lying on the ground. I awakened him saying, "They're singing all these songs to you and you are lying here?"

(These matters are very obscure. Afterward our master himself said that it was indeed a wonder, with them singing so much to him over there, that he should be lying here. Most obscure and esoteric.)

In the dream it seemed that the place where the synagogue was had one name, while that where his home was had another.

(He said that he knew and had forgotten. But I don't know whether that referred to the melody of the dream or to these place-names. But the names of the bridegroom and the dead man he said that he still remembered.)

XI

I heard from one of our people that the master once told him this story on the eve of Yom Kippur, after the atonement ceremony.

He saw that he was walking in a forest, a great and thick forest that seemed to have no end. He sought to retrace his steps, but just then a man came to him and told him that this forest was indeed without end, and that for this reason it was impossible to ever traverse it. All the vessels in the world, he told him, were made from this forest. And then he showed him a way out.

After this he came upon a river, and he wanted to reach its end. Again a man came to him and told him that he could not do so, for this was an endless river, and that everyone in the world drank of its waters. But here too he showed him a way.

He then came to a mill that stood upon the riverbank. Someone came and told him that this mill was grinding meal for the entire world. He then came back into the woods, and there he saw a blacksmith, sitting in the forest and working at his craft. He was told that this smith was forging vessels for the entire world.

The matter is most obscure. (It also has not been recorded completely. Much was forgotten, as it was not written down in its proper time.) He said on that occasion, "Most people tell a tale, but I saw a tale." May God grant us the merit to understand his holy awesome words.

XII

Thursday in the week of Vayelekh, between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur in 5570 [1809]. Here in Bratslav. He told us that he had a dream but did not

know its meaning. One of our people had passed on. He already had died, but he [our master] had not yet known about it. In his dream he saw everyone standing about him, taking leave of him as they did after Rosh Hashanah. The man who had died was also standing there, and our master asked him why he had not come for Rosh Hashanah. He answered, "But I have already passed on." I said to him [the master recounts], "For this reason? And is a dead man not permitted to come for Rosh Hashanah?" The man was silent. Because some other people had spoken to me about faith, I discussed faith with him as well. (*Our master apparently understood that he had fallen from his faith.*) I said to him, "And is there no one in the world but me? If you have no faith in me, join yourself to some other *tsaddikim*. Go to them if you still believe in them." "Whom should I approach?" he asked me. It seems to me that I said, "Go to this one," pointing out some famous leader. He replied, "I am far from him." "So approach someone else," I said to him, and I listed all the famous ones before him. But he said that he felt distant from each of them. I said to him, "Since you feel so far from them all and have no one to approach, better that you stay where you were and become close to me again." "You?" he replied. "From you I feel very far."

It seems to me that it was midday, that the sun was directly above our heads. He raised himself up into the air until he had risen to the sun. He proceeded along with the sun, descending bit by bit, finally reaching earth again just as the sun set. But he continued traveling with the sun until, at midnight, he was directly parallel to me from beneath. At midnight the sun is just in a line with a person's feet. When he was so far down that he was directly beneath me I heard a voice shouting to me, "Did you hear how far I am from you?"

I do not know the meaning of it.

NOTES

1. See my extended discussion of this dream and the teaching that accompanies it in Arthur Green, *Tormented Master: A Life of Rabbi Nahman of Bratslav* (University, Ala.: University of Alabama Press, 1979), 198ff.

2. Hebrew *kise* does not distinguish "chair" from "throne."

3. Isaiah 1:14. The dreamer has arrived at God's own version of the festivals

and looks down from the heights on their merely human counterparts below. The festival of Rosh Hashanah (New Year) was of particular importance to Nahman and figures in several of the dreams. As we shall see in a later dream (no. 12), the disciples were required to be present with Nahman for this occasion.

4. The day following the Sukkot festival, and the conclusion of the festive season. The "coupling of the Queen" is a kabbalistic reference: the male and female principles within God are united as the festival draws to a close, the offerings and rites of the preceding days having warded off those forces that would prevent or harm such a union.

5. Cf. Green, *Tormented Master*, 239ff. The present translation corrects my possible misinterpretation of the leader's motives in that earlier rendition.

6. On this and dream 9, see Green, *Tormented Master*, 165ff.

RABBINIC FANTASIES

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