

8. “Expand the Circle, Lift the Spirit”

Likkutei Moharan #23 (second section)

Rabbi Nahman of Bratslav, 1772-1811



Synagogue2000

Nahman of Bratslav

Rabbi Nahman of Bratslav was the great-grandson of the Baal Shem Tov, the founder of Hasidism. He lived and taught in villages in the Ukraine before settling in Bratslav. Rabbi Nahman’s teaching grapples with the uncertainties of existence. Nothing, for Nahman, was certain—not even the certainty of his faith. At every moment it was established, and at every moment it was tested. Such inner turmoil lends itself to mood swings, and Nahman’s spirits sometimes hurled from ecstasy to despair. Nevertheless, he held firm to the principle that the only truth is the Truth of the Holy One, evident always and remarkably in the every aspect of Creation. In this case, nothing and no moment could be devoid of God’s presence; everything and every moment can only be an expression of God’s Divine Being. Thus, according to Nahman, despite all of our struggles and suffering, there can be no moment in which we should not rejoice in God.

This is the background of our text. Nahman sought always to direct his followers to find the capacity to experience the joy of living in God’s presence. That is not to say that he denied suffering or that he ignored it. Rather, he sought to transform sadness and struggle into Joy, a joy at once sublime and filled with the reality of all aspects of life, including its pain.

Song and dance, so much a part of the Hasidic tradition, were tools by which Nahman made his way toward Joy. “The only way to detach oneself from the world and to approach the Almighty is through song and dance,” he is reported to have said. This teaching underlies his subtle lesson on transforming dark moods and sad thoughts. It also opens up an avenue through which we might consider how we can transform our own lives and the lives of those around us.

Rabbi Nahman’s stories and parables were originally told in Yiddish. His associates and disciples later wrote down what they remembered, translating them into Hebrew. There is no record of Nahman’s words as they were originally spoken.

“Expand the Circle, Lift the Spirit”

LIKKUTEI MOHARAN #23 (SECOND SECTION)

Regarding Joy, here is a parable. Sometimes when people are rejoicing and dancing, they see someone on the side who is sad or in a dark mood, and they grab the person and bring the individual into the circle. In that way they lift the person’s spirits, even against the person’s intention or will, and the sad one comes to rejoice with them.

This is true regarding our own disposition regarding Joy. When we have raised our spirits to the level of Joy, we may find that sometimes despondency and dark moods may still be skulking around at the edges. We can attain to an even higher level of experience if we would actually try to pursue our darker sentiments, to bring even them into our Joy, such that even our dark moods will be transformed into Joy.

Our goal should be to turn all of our sadnesses and dark moods into Joy, just as we would want to bring the one sitting on the side into the circle, and through the great joy and delight of the dance change the worries, sadness and dark mood into exultation. We need to grab our sadness against its own will to bring it into Joy.

Rabbi Nahman told his stories and lessons in Yiddish; his disciples wrote them down as best they remembered them and later the stories were translated into Hebrew. While this is a translation of the Hebrew, we do not present it because the Hebrew does not represent the original.



Probing the Text

1. How many levels of Joy does Rabbi Nahman perceive?
2. As presented here, what is his conception of Joy? Do you have a sense of ever attaining this type of Joy? Is it realistic to seek this sort of Joy?
3. Role-play the story. What is the inner dynamic, what are the feelings of the “one sitting on the side”? How does she react at first to being brought into the circle? What brings about the inner change that Rabbi Nahman describes? Does it always happen? What is the motivation of the ones in the circle who reach out to bring others in? How are their feelings affected by the inclusion of the sad person in the dance?
4. Rabbi Nahman speaks of “despondency and dark moods skulking around at the edges.” What might be the basis for these moods? Are they internally or externally generated?

Ourselves and Our Congregations

1. What activities in your congregation are analogous to the circle of dancers in Rabbi Nahman’s parable? Who are the dancers, and who sits on the side? What do you think is the mood of the people sitting on the side? What keeps them out of the circle?
2. When have you sat on the side? Did you want to be brought in? How have you felt when someone tried to bring you in?
3. Looking deeper, talk together about the flow of joy and dark moods in your life. Do they appear in equal measure? Do you expect one or the other more? How do you feel when you are filled with joy and the people around you are glum? How do you feel when you are in a dark mood and the people around you want you to be happy with them?
4. In the passage that follows the selection above, Rabbi Nahman says, “It is a great *mitzvah* to experience Joy always, to overcome and cast away sadness and dark moods with all your might. For, whatever ails us comes from some defect or deficiency in our experience of Joy.” In the course of life together in a congregation, there are certainly moments when we will by nature and circumstances be sad: death and bereavement, illness, crises in the larger community, etc. What would be the character of a congregation that, even in these moments, displayed itself capable of “experiencing Joy always”? How would other people who are not familiar with the congregation respond to such a community?

For Further Study

Arthur Green, *Tormented Master: A Life of Rabbi Nahman of Bratslav*. Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights, 1992.

Nahman of Bratslav, *The Tales*. Translation, introduction and commentaries by Arnold J. Band. New York: Paulist Press, 1978.



