

# Between the Heart and the Spring: Nahman of Bratslav, Paul Tillich, and the Theology of Anxiety

By Benjamin Resnick

In a well-known passage from the *Tale of the Seven Beggars*, Rebbe Nahman of Bratslav describes the pain and paradox of spiritual striving:

There is a mountain and on that mountain stands a rock and from that rock flows a spring. And all things have a heart. And likewise the universe as a whole has a heart. And this heart of the universe is a complete human form with a face and hands and feet, etc...The mountain of the rock and the spring stands on one edge of the universe and the heart of the universe stands on the other edge of the universe. And the heart stands opposite the spring, longing and yearning constantly to go over to the spring, and crying out with great desire to be united with the spring. And so too the spring desires the heart. But the heart has two weaknesses. The first is that the sun pursues him and burns him because of his longing and his desire to be close to the spring. And his second weakness stems from the pain of his longing and his desire.<sup>1</sup>

Nahman shared this parable with his followers near the end of his career, in the throes of a battle with tuberculosis that would ultimately take his life during the Sukkot festival of 1810. One can feel his urgency. The text very nearly overflows with unconsummated spiritual desire, a sense of unfinished, cosmic business. Some two hundred years later, it is still deeply evocative, a classic flight of Western spirituality.

But like Nahman himself, the parable of the heart and the spring remains a mysterious and complicated puzzle, at once a mystical reflection on the nature of religious struggle and also an existentialist fable about the theological reality of despair. And while both of these readings are, I would argue, genuinely native to Nahman's thought, it is to this second conception of the rebbe that I will devote the lion's share of what follows. The reason for this emphasis is two-fold. First, it is the experience of religious despair that provides the underlying animus for so much of Nahman's work. Second--and perhaps more importantly--it is Nahman the existentialist who, I want to contend, has the most to offer postmodern theology.

Still, before proceeding, it will be useful, at least from a heuristic standpoint, to situate ourselves in the context of what we might consider a "traditional" approach to the text. Like most all of Nahman's tales, the parable of the heart and the spring demands to be read, at first blush, in light of the dense, mythical symbology of the kabbalistic tradition to which Nahman was deeply indebted. Following in the footsteps of earlier Jewish mystics, Nahman makes extensive use of a variety of gnomic tropes that symbolize different aspects of the divine anthropos. Thus, the anatomical description of the world reflects the underlying structure of reality, which, in Nahman's kabbalistic imagination, also mirrors the human form. According to this schema, the heart and the spring--tropes that Nahman elsewhere associates with the divine attributes of *binah* (understanding) and *hochmah* (wisdom) respectively--represent distinct aspects of the Godhead, whose internal movements and erotic longings for one another comprise the underlying structure of all that is.

This reading, which was offered by the 20th century Bratslav scholar Aryeh Kaplan in the annotation to his well-known English translation of the *Seven Beggars*<sup>2</sup>, is no doubt a sensible way of approaching the text. Nahman, like all of the classical hasidic rebbes, was steeped in the

Jewish mystical/theosophical tradition - a tradition that grew from the fertile soil of medieval Neoplatonism and then, under the agency of creative religious fantasists like Moses De Leon, Isaac Luria, and a great many others, took on a life of its own. According to this strain of Jewish thought, the universe is itself the product of a series of increasingly complex divine emanations, which, like the spring, flow into creation from a sacred point of origin. Eventually, either because of a cosmic accident or because of the very nature of creation itself, the Source becomes distant from its own emanations, thus inaugurating a lengthy process of cosmic repair. For the Jewish mystic, as for the neo-platonist, the whole drama of the spiritual/intellectual life is played out against the backdrop of a baroque, yet broken, cosmic architecture, the reparation of which, through the soul's ultimate reunification with its supernal source, becomes the highest purpose of religious activity. In Nahman's language, the heart's final return to the spring represents the very *telos* of spiritual history, the supernal endgame of being itself.

But to read Nahman's work solely as a poetic recapitulation of earlier mystical ideas is to dramatically shortchange the text in front of us. Nahman was more ambitious, his mind more restless. And the literature he left behind is much more than simply a kabbalistic paint-by-numbers.

Nahman, after all, understood himself, as did many other kabbalists throughout history, as a mythical figure. Very much like his Christian contemporary William Blake, Nahman created an elaborate mythological universe in which he himself was a seminal figure. For Nahman (and so too for his followers), his life and work represented a spiritual endeavor of the very highest order, a religious project, which sought to effect nothing less than a mythological re-ordering of reality. Though Nahman was plagued, throughout his short life, by searing moments of doubt and self-loathing, he saw himself, quite self-consciously at times, as a transformational figure in the whole history of the universe, the last reincarnation of a very great soul (that is, the soul of Moses) who had the potential to bring about the final reparation of the broken cosmos.<sup>1</sup> Thus, from the perspective of the Bratslav tradition, the inimitable life of the Rebbe, along with the literature that he left behind, are artifacts of singular significance, mystical ciphers against which the careful student might decode something of the very core of religious experience.

But what, precisely, is the spiritual vision that Nahman wants to communicate?

As in many of Nahman's tales, the mood here is one of intense personal and even existential anxiety. William Wordsworth once defined poetry as the "spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings,"<sup>2</sup> and, as a lens through which we might read Nahman's oeuvre, Wordsworth's axiom is at least as useful as earlier mystical typologies.

As one of the foremost progenitors of European romanticism, Wordsworth insisted that great art must be primarily rooted in the emotive and imaginative faculties of the individual. Reacting against the perceived coldness of Enlightenment rationalism, Romantic poets such as Wordsworth sought to restore a kind of emotional immediacy to the activity of poesis, through which the poet could literarily--or perhaps, for the more mystically inclined among them, even

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<sup>1</sup> The parity between the *tzaddik hador*--i.e. the extraordinary spiritual leader of the generation--and the redemptive, messianic figure of Moses is a theme that appears throughout the literature of Bratslav Hasidism, very often as a veiled reference to Rebbe Nahman himself. See, for example: *Likutei MoHaRan* 64 and 118.

<sup>2</sup> In his essay "The Master of Prayer," David Roskies offers a somewhat similar reading of this parable, arguing that Nahman's artistic and spiritual innovation can be located in his conception of a "Paradoxical faith that calls out for God's distance rather than His presence." There, Roskies suggests that this unique conception of Jewish spirituality reflects the experience of prayer, in the context of which the one praying

literally--recreate the world, in all of its emotive splendor and intensity. Though the poet must modulate and refine his work through careful poetic craft, for Wordsworth and his literary comrades the poetic activity was at base an act of drawing out, in which the poet taps into the hidden wellsprings of human emotion and brings forth their sacred waters.

In this vein, the baroque intensity of Nahman's own personal mythology commands, in my view, special attention, not only with respect to the content of his religious thought, but also with respect to his prodigiousness as a literary artist. Nahman is, of course, well known for his literary creativity, a feature of his religious personality that seems to have been central, particularly near the end of his life, to his conception of himself as a spiritual leader. "What am I?" he famously asked. "Only that which my soul creates."<sup>4</sup> It is under the agency of this reading that Arthur Green, in his classic biography of Nahman, suggestively wrote that "Nahman has much in common with his English contemporary William Blake, who, as a mystic living at the edge of the industrial revolution, sought to restore to his readers the life of dream and fantasy of which he felt they were being robbed at the onset of modernity."<sup>5</sup> But as of yet, to my knowledge, there has been no systematic scholarship that seeks to read Nahman's entire body of work not as the spiritual instruction of a rebbe (or at least not only as that), but rather as the mythological vision of a highly original romantic poet, a poet who, in the language of twentieth-century scholar of religion Mircea Eliade, struggled to uphold and, indeed, resurrect a mythical conception of Sacred Man.

This approach, I would argue, carries two distinct advantages. The first is that it broadens the scope of how we might read many of the classical hasidic masters, whose work, in the context of the academy, has for the most part been the sole provenance of Judaic Studies or Yiddish departments. Reading hasidut more broadly, in close conversation with contemporaneous European literary trends, offers the student a variety of potentially illuminating points of contact, including not only earlier Jewish mystical thinkers, but also poets like William Wordsworth, William Blake, and A.C. Swineburn. Our readings will be thus greatly enriched.

The second advantage--and this one remains very close to my heart--is that it will heighten the overall visibility of classical hasidic thought, which, to my mind, has much to offer the contemporary religious landscape and, which, placed in the proper context, offers the religious comparativist a great many opportunities for meaningful dialogue and deep ecumenical encounter.

Returning now to our parable--a shining example of Nahman's poetic creativity--one gets the distinct impression that, mystical symbolism notwithstanding, the longing of the heart, as expressed by the voice of the poet, reflects a deep inner struggle. In what amounts to a classical hasidic turn, Nahman imports the mystical architecture of the kabbalah inward. The primary movement of the spiritual life becomes not a mystical ascendance into the cosmos, but rather an journey into the boundless depths of the mind of man, which, ultimately, becomes a means to the same end.<sup>6</sup> The cosmic brokenness of the universe becomes the existential brokenness of the human person. For Nahman, whose own religious psyche was fueled by his experience of God's radical absence, the heart's inability to reach the spring is itself a stark theological meditation on the potential absurdity of the human condition.

In this way, Nahman significantly prefigures a towering, romantic figure like Nietzsche, for whom the void left by God's death required an extraordinary personality--a Superman--to spring into the breach. In the world of classical hasidism, the charismatic spiritual teacher--the *tzaddik*--was just such an extraordinary personality<sup>7</sup>, though, as a number of scholars have

observed, his commitment to the community made his role rather different than that of the *Übermensch*<sup>8</sup>. However, rather than giving the impression of a *tzaddik* serving God with simple joy (as, for instance, the Baal Shem Tov has often been portrayed, perhaps erroneously, by later readers of his legacy<sup>9</sup>), Bratslav literature presents a vision of a *tzaddik* who is tortured, almost without rest, by questions of meaning and meaninglessness, a *tzaddik* whose personal, existential strife is *the* core aspect of his charismatic ministry. Thus, along with his followers, Nahman seems to have understood his own spiritual greatness precisely in terms of his ability to contend with and viscerally experience the acute sting of God's absence from the world, the yawning chasm between the heart and her supernal source. As Green argues in *Tormented Master*, Nahman experienced such intense moments of existential despair that he could not help but incorporate them into his own mythological conception of himself and the universe.<sup>10</sup> And as a Jewish thinker this makes him quite unique.

From this perspective, Nahman may indeed share more with romantic mythologizers like Nietzsche and Blake than he does with his great grandfather, the Baal Shem Tov. Indeed, the fact that Nahman, like Nietzsche, understood the extraordinary individual to be necessary *precisely* in face of God's absence is a striking affinity, which has received surprisingly little attention in recent scholarship. In order to make sense of Nahman as the incisively creative religious thinker that he was, it may be more helpful to read him in conversation with later existentialist theologians than it is to read him in his own cultural/religious context.

One potentially fruitful point of contact is the great 20th century theologian and existentialist philosopher Paul Tillich, with whom, I would argue, Nahman shares certain deep-tissue similarities. For Tillich, who was both an ordained Lutheran minister and an accomplished religious philosopher, mature or "absolute faith" is only possible when traditional ideas about divinity wither away. In his broadly influential *The Courage to Be*, Tillich argues that contemporary god-language must reckon with the fact that the all-powerful, personal God of theism has been rendered conceptually untenable by the whole history of philosophy in the modern West, beginning with the likes of Spinoza and ending with the likes of Nietzsche. It is only by incorporating such knowledge into his religious psyche, Tillich suggests, that postmodern man--thus bereft of spiritual meaning--can fully access with what he calls the "God Above God," an English phrase that has an evocative, if most probably coincidental, parallel in the ancient Hebrew *El Elyon*. This God, Tillich insists, must not be understood as a discrete identifiable being, but rather as coterminous with being-itself. We must, says Tillich, recognize our frailty and finitude. We must feel the full embrace of existential despair. And then we must nonetheless reaffirm our participation in the great and undeniable drama of the fact that we *are*. When we accept, whether stoically, sadly, or joyfully, the very reality of our being, we arrive at "absolute faith." We become aware of "the God who appears when the God has disappeared in anxiety and doubt."<sup>11</sup> Thus, in Tillich's scheme--and so too in Nahman's--Faith is the individualdualability to find the hidden ground of meaning through an emotional, intellectual and, finally, *religious* reckoning with utter meaninglessness.

This is, it strikes me, a potentially rich theological approach for a whole host of postmodern Jews--not to mention spiritual seekers of other persuasions--who are hungry for a spiritual connection to their people and to their God, but for whom the God of theism is an impossible intellectual or emotional proposition. But, Nahman's work notwithstanding, this line of thought has not made serious inroads into Jewish theological speculation.

From a history of ideas standpoint, it is not entirely surprising that modern Jewish thinkers have largely sidestepped the kinds of existential questions that, since Nietzsche, have animated their Christian brothers and sisters. To some extent this evasion might be

appropriate. After all, from a Christian perspective, the death of God--quite literally in the person of Jesus Christ--is built into religious experience. It is a necessary precursor to human salvation and the engine that drives all subsequent theological inquiry. For postmodern Christian theologians such as Paul Tillich, the death of God in the Nietzschean sense is but the latest stage in the Christological drama and God's apparent absence from the world is the very thing that makes religious life possible.

As a Christian, Tillich inherited a rich theological language of despair, under the aegis of which he could say that genuine religiosity "mediates a courage which takes doubt and meaninglessness into itself."<sup>12</sup> And although he insists that his conception of religious courage is "without a name, a church, a cult, [or] a theology," he nonetheless argues existential anxiety can only be mediated by "the Church under the Cross, [...] the Church which preaches the Crucified who cried to God who remained his god after the God of confidence had left him in the darkness of doubt and meaninglessness."<sup>13</sup> In language that is startlingly reminiscent of Nahman's, Tillich recasts the figure of Christ on the cross, forsaken by his Father in heaven, as the paradigmatic avatar of the postmodern man, who must bear the cross of existential anxiety and despair. The gospels become a reflection on the ultimate meaninglessness of the human condition and the loss of final salvation. Jesus becomes the Stranger.

Admittedly, this is not a Jewish way of talking. In his essay from *Commentary* magazine, *The Condition of Jewish Belief*, Chaim Potok advances the well-heeled Jewish argument that Nietzsche poses no threat to Jewish theology because Jewish religion does not require the belief in "an old man with a long, white beard who dwells in some distant heaven."<sup>14</sup> And he is right. Jewish religion does not *demand* such a belief (though there are a great wealth of traditional sources which advance just such theological imagery). But regardless, the question of God's death strikes yet a deeper chord, because the death of God hypothesis is not simply about dismantling theological anthropomorphisms. The death of God is about the death of *theism*. It is about the erosion of transcendent, saving Truths--Jews call them *mitzvot*--that order human life and comfort us in our moments of frailty. For the traditional Jew, it is these Truths (and only these Truths) that can break the shackles of profane time, in which she is frail and finite, and usher in sacred time, in which she is timeless. The idea of the death of God speaks to this Jewish conception of divinity just as much as it speaks to Christ on the Cross. To recast the discussion in Nahman's terms, the death of God is the moment when the spring dries up completely, the moment when the heart finally dies of exhaustion.

Of course, in Nahman's mythological universe, we are not yet there. The spring is flowing, if inaccessible, simultaneously the heart's greatest desire and also her greatest source of weakness. What is particularly striking about Nahman's theology is his contention that the radical absence of God is a *structurally necessary* component of the spiritual life. It is the twin reality of desire *and* distance that animates Nahman's conception of Jewish religious experience. For Arthur Green--to whom my present reading of Nahman owes a great debt--it is this vision of paradoxical religious longing (developed both in our parable and elsewhere) that ultimately distinguishes Nahman from his spiritual and intellectual forbearers. Through his use of religious paradox, Nahman reveals himself as utterly unique on the landscape of 19th century Hasidut, a tortured figure who--despite living a life that we might, somewhat anachronistically, call *haredi*--hovers on the very edge of modernity.

And what finally makes Nahman's work brilliant is precisely its willingness to take existential despair seriously as a mode of religious experience. For Nahman, doubt is neither a problem to be explained away nor a religious challenge to be transcended in a Kierkegaard-like leap of faith. Rather, it is an indelible aspect of religious striving itself. As he taught his

followers, the assimilation of doubt--the *makkif*--into one's spiritual consciousness is crucial to genuine religious growth:

For wisdom is the aspect of *makkif* [doubt, challenge, insoluble difficulty], i.e., that which is impossible to assimilate into one's inward understanding. For the *makkif* is external and internal wisdom receives its life force from the *makkif*. And know that this is the crux of the ability to choose right from wrong [...i.e.] when the *makkif* is assimilated inward human wisdom grows.<sup>15</sup>

Nahman borrows the term "*makkif*" from an earlier stratum of the rabbinic canon. In both the Talmud and in Lurianic Kabbalah the word, which stems from a Hebrew root meaning "to encircle,--can refer to various features of the cosmological scaffolding that *surrounds* God's presence. Here, however, as Arthur Green has observed<sup>16</sup>, Nahman repurposes the *makkif* in a very creative way. For Nahman, the *makkif* no longer encircles God, but instead encircles the religious consciousness of man. In an interpretive move that is paradigmatically hasidic--and also more than a little Hegelian--Nahman describes spiritual striving as a dialectical process through which the spiritual seeker (the "*tzaddik*," in the classical hasidic lexicon) encounters and then inwardly imports a series of *makkifin*, or attacks upon his faith. It is only by absorbing these attacks, by reckoning with moments of meaninglessness, that he can enlarge himself spiritually. And as the *tzaddik* grows in wisdom, the *makkifin* only get more difficult until, depending on Nahman's mood, his spiritual quest either opens out onto a supernal knowledge of divinity, onto a world of unending light and understanding, or until his sense of his spiritual powers becomes so debased, the sting of doubt so intense, that he realizes he will never be able to understand anything at all. And for the *tzaddik* the process can never end, because in Nahman's mind the world is in fact sustained by the *makkif* itself. Circling back to the parable of the heart and the spring, we can now understand its heartbreaking resolution:

And when the heart needs a little rest, a great bird spreads his wings over him and shields him from the sun, and thus he has a little relief. But even then, in his moment of rest, he looks towards the spring and longs for him. But why, if he longs for him so deeply, does he not go over to the spring? The reason is that were he to come close to the mountain he would not be able to see and gaze upon the flow of the spring, and were he not to gaze upon the spring he would die because his very life issues from the spring. When he stands opposite the mountain he is able to see where the spring gushes forth from the head of the mountain; however, as soon as he approaches the mountain the fount is hidden and he can no longer see the spring and thus he would die. And if the heart were to die then the entire universe would die, for the heart is the life force of all being and nothing can exist without the heart.<sup>17</sup>

In the end, the true *tzaddik* must face and live with the ultimate *makkif*, namely, the paradoxical fact that God must be utterly absent from the world in order to make room for differentiated existence in the first place. It is this absence that fuels the fire of religious longing and it is this longing that ultimately sustains the spiritual endeavor. God may not be dead, but He remains fundamentally inaccessible, even to the *tzaddik*.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> In his essay "The Master of Prayer," David Roskies offers a somewhat similar reading of this parable, arguing that Nahman's artistic and spiritual innovation can be located in his conception of a "Paradoxical faith that calls out for God's distance rather than His presence." There, Roskies suggests that this unique conception of Jewish spirituality reflects the experience of prayer, in the context of which the one praying is comes face to face with the great chasm that separates her from God. While this approach strikes me as

In the history of modern Jewish theology Nahman very nearly stands alone in his willingness to engage with, and ultimately accept, the potential absurdity of the existential condition. Being a Jew, Nahman teaches, means leading a life of constant spiritual growth, constant striving in the face of problems that are insoluble by their very nature. Thus, a spiritual reckoning with despair becomes the highest form of worship. This is may be a sobering thought, but it is also an invigorating one, one that affirms the necessity--and the sanctity--of human struggle. As the rebbe writes at the end of our parable: "This is the reason that the heart can never approach the spring. All he can do is stand opposite, longingly, and call out."

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<sup>1</sup> *Sippurey Ma'asiyot*, my translation.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Kaplan's commentary in: *The Seven Beggars and Other Kabbalistic Tales of Rebbe Nachman of Breslov*. (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2005), 32.

<sup>3</sup> Wordsworth, *Preface to Lyrical Ballads*.

<sup>4</sup> *Hayyei HaRan, Seder nesiato le'erezt yisrael*, 5:19

<sup>5</sup> Arthur Green. *Tormented Master: A Life of Rabbi Nahman of Bratslav*. (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing, 1992), 343.

<sup>6</sup> The impulse to psychologize certain metaphysical and theosophical formulations found in earlier kabbalah is a trend in Hasidism that has been noted by many scholars. See, for example: I. Etkes. *The Besht: Magician, Mystic, and Leader*. (Waltham, MA: Brandeis UP, 2005), 147.

<sup>7</sup> For a fuller discussion of Nahman's affinity with Nietzsche see: Samuel Abba Horodetzky. "Rabbi Nahman, Romanticism, and Rationalism." *God's Voice from the Void: Old and New Studies in Bratslav Hasidism*. Ed. Shaul Magid. (Albany: State U of New York, 2002), 268.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.* See also: Golomb, Jacob. *Nietzsche and Zion*. (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2004), 172.

<sup>9</sup> Etkes, *ibid.*, pp.131-135. Etkes demonstrates, convincingly, that although joy was indeed central to the Baal Shem Tov's conception of worship and *devekut*, he was--like his great grandson Rebbe Nahman--very often troubled by his inability to maintain his states of spiritual elevation in perpetuity.

<sup>10</sup> Green, pp. 120-123.

<sup>11</sup> Paul Tillich. *The Courage to Be*. (New Haven, CT: Yale UP, 1952), 190.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 188.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 188-189.

<sup>14</sup> Chaim Potok in: *The Condition of Jewish Belief; a Symposium*. New York: Macmillan, 1966, p. 177.

<sup>15</sup> *Likutei MoHaRan*, 21, my translation.

<sup>16</sup> Green, pp. 292-294.

<sup>17</sup> *Sippurey Ma'asiyot*, my translation.

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quite on target, here, in light of the teaching from Likutei MoHaRan, I wish to emphasize additionally that the experience of God's absence is not only a feature of prayer and religious longing, but is also built into the very structure of reality as expressed in Nahman's treatment of Lurianic theosophy. See: Roskies, David. "The Master of Prayer." *God's Voice from the Void: Old and New Studies in Bratslav Hasidism*. Ed. Shaul Magid. Albany: State U of New York, 2002, p. 95.