

Chapter Five: Clapping, Sighing, and Weeping

"It was hard to say exactly what attracted him, Wasilski reflected. "Maybe there was some *gilgul*, some reincarnation, in me that attracted me to their stories. Maybe their way of prayer. You know something of the way the Bratzlaver pray, yes? They try to spend at least an hour alone every day talking with God. 'A man who does not have an hour alone to himself is not a man,' said the rebbe." The best time for this prayer was at midnight, but, of course, this was difficult in some circumstances. But, once up, you could stay up to fulfill a custom which the Talmud ascribes to the *vatikin*, the first ones, who were careful to time the saying of their prayers with the first rays of sunrise."

(Weiner 1969: 182)

I begin this discussion of prayer among the Breslov by focusing on the three weeks that I lived in Tsvat, in their *yeshiva/kollel* [study and prayer hall] known as *Nachal Noveah M'kor Chochma* [Gushing Stream, Source of Wisdom]. I stayed in the basement, with eight other Yeshiva bochers (students) who studied with Breslov and hailed from England, America, France and Israel. I lived the Breslov prayer-life there and indeed, as mentioned above, that life started at *Chatzot* [spiritual midnight: six hours after sun-down]. We would wake up at around 2:00 or 2:30 A.M. and each person would, if they were able, go out to the fields or to the woods or to any private space, and pray alone to God. Rebbe Nachman recommended this hour of private, personal, non-liturgical prayer said in one's own language to all of his followers. *Hitbodedut*, meaning literally, 'to make oneself alone', is a form of Jewish meditation that practically informs and influences the rest of Breslov prayer life. In the case of analyzing the ritual practice of group prayer, I will focus on the tension between the aloneness of the praying individual and the togetherness of the community.

The aloneness began before the first organized prayer services of the morning. However that aloneness persisted throughout the ritual process of the three daily services (morning, afternoon, and evening). Space was made for expression of that

aloneness by the individuals praying in a group. The Breslov practice a prayer aesthetic manifested in the ritual patterning of the day and in the performance of daily prayer services that encourages and makes room for the individual to experience, connect-to, and communicate-with their God. During a given prayer service, everybody read the same prayers as the ritual progressed, but nobody said them in unison or in the same way. Some whispered the words of the prayer text, others sang them or chanted them, and still others screamed them. During a part of the daily prayer ritual known as the Amidah (the standing prayer), everybody says the blessings in silence. However, even amidst this unified silence, I could hear at different times, throughout the room, a sigh, or an "Oyy!", or hands clapping. The fact that room was given for these improvisations to take place during an organized service demonstrates one way in which Breslov culture negotiates the oft-perceived rigidity of the traditional liturgy.

The Breslovers are aware that sometimes in the practice of prayer, these improvisations can be extra-baggage, or lying performances. Therefore Rebbe Nachman both encouraged individual connection to God as well as simple-faithed practice. A leading Breslov Hasid, Chaim Kramer, talked about the balance between individual and group in prayer in his book Crossing the Narrow Bridge: A Practical Guide to Rebbe Nachman's Teachings:

"Praying with a *minyán* (quorum) is... of tantamount importance. The Talmud teaches: The prayers of the individual may be rejected, but the prayers of many are never rejected (Ta'anit 8a). One should pray with joy and happiness, even to the point of clapping one's hands and singing the words. As Rebbe Nachman said: I put great value in the Baal Shem Tov's way of praying: with exertion and joy (Tovot Zikhronot #5). However, one should not pray in a manner that disturbs others, nor use mannerisms designed to draw attention to oneself. Better to pray simply, with as much *kavanah* [intention and direction] as one can muster."

(Kramer 1989: 118)

Thus, the balance between individual expression and sensitivity toward the group is delicate, and Chaim Kramer's advice serves as evidence for a shared awareness of the interdependence between the private and public aspects of prayer.

In his book, 9 1/2 Mystics, Herbert Weiner records his encounters and experiences with different mystical and Hasidic groups. In the chapter on the Breslov Hasidim he records the story of Rabbi Wasilski, a New York Breslover whom I cited in the first quote above. R. Wasilski related the following story on prayer, which demonstrates an authentic time when the need for individual expression overrides simple adherence to ortho-praxis and to the will of the community:

"Wasilski apologized for his sermonizing and asked permission to relate another personal anecdote. Some years ago, his little son, who was just learning to talk, had come to him in the living room of their house and said, 'Taté' (father)... 'What do you want, my child?' Wasilski had asked, but the child did not say what he wanted. He had only repeated the word *tate* in a tone 'which almost made me cry -- as if he were trying to say something. I kept on asking, What is it, *mein kind?* till I suddenly realized that he was not asking. He was saying something. He was saying, '*Tate*, I know you are there if I need you; I know you will take care of me if I'm hungry, if I'm sad.' He was telling me that he trusted me, that he was glad I was there. I forgot all about it until Rosh Hashanah, when I was praying here. I pray in a corner in the synagogue, and the prayers of the congregation are nice. They were nice and yet something was wrong -- with my own prayers. I thought to myself, here I am after so many years, of trying to pray and learn but my prayers are on a lower level than they were when I was a child in the yeshiva. I felt worse and worse, and my prayers grew more and more weak until suddenly I thought of my son. I turned to the corner and started saying over and over again, '*Tate, Tate.*' Just that over and over again. I don't remember what happened except that when I looked down, the floor was wet with tears, and I knew I had been praying.' ... But didn't all Hasidic groups agree with this emphasis of prayer, I asked?... Wasilski shrugged. He was no expert, but thought that some of them, like the Lubavitcher movement, stressed *chakira*, intellectual effort and logic. Bratzlaver, on the contrary, wanted utter simplicity and warmth of feeling."

(Weiner 1969: 183-184)

So this is one example of authentic weeping and authentic prayer that could take place within the context of Breslov organized prayer yet, here too, Rebbe Nachman warns his Hasidim about "lying" in their performance of prayer:

"When a person is saying any supplication or prayer, he must divest himself of all external thoughts, focusing his mind exclusively on the words that he is speaking before God. He should thus be like a person speaking to his friend... If he does this, his heart will be aroused until he automatically begins to weep with true tears. However, if one tries to cause himself to weep, he will not be successful in the correct manner. His very meditation will be confused by this, as mentioned earlier... If one even thinks that he will weep, this too is an extraneous thought, which destroys his mental focus. He then cannot hear what he is saying. The main thing is to speak before God in truth, without any other thoughts in mind at all. If one is then worthy of weeping, it is fine, and if not, not. But he should not confuse his meditation with this. (Likutey Moharan Tinyana 95)."

(Translated by Aryeh Kaplan : 23)

Depending on the context, the persuasiveness, or authentic feeling of the prayer experience may or may not occur. Thus, there seems to be a fundamental insecurity on the part the individual praying which may manifest in confusion, depression (as with Wasilski), false tears, or forced mannerisms (as with claps or sighs).

Anthropologist Riv-Ellen Prell addresses that insecurity of the prayer participant in terms of the unreliability or risk of the prayer experience. She writes:

"Because language is so important for praying, prayer is vulnerable to emptiness or 'ossification.' As a fixed form, liturgical language is constantly repeated without necessarily communicating much beyond words. That is what differentiates liturgical and every day language. The more conventional a set of utterances is, the less likely it is to communicate intention. In addition, liturgy is ultimately both reliable and unreliable. Its unchanging language, a reliable formulation, posits relationships with unseen, transcendent beings, whose responses are unreliable. Hence, those who pray are constantly at risk in their experience."

(Prell 1989: 172)

The delicacy, or "risk", is further increased when we go beyond the text to consider the group dynamics, and the fuller performative context in which the individual prayer act takes place.

In his book, Beyond the Text: A Holistic Approach to Liturgy, liturgist Lawrence A. Hoffman introduces the notion of a "liturgical field" to describe that expanded performative context which includes the prayer books, the individuals praying from them, and the community praying in some culturally specific and traditional, choreographed yet improvised form. Hoffman writes: "the community at prayer [is involved in] an activity that I understand as organized around a set of relationships between people and their neighbors, people and their holy texts, people and their God. The totality of all these relationships constitutes the liturgical field. (Hoffman 1987: 150)." As the field widens and deepens, more variables constitute the drama of the ritual performance. In order for a participant to become familiar and comfortable walking in the Breslov liturgical fields, one must be in some kind of a relationship with the members of the community, with the *siddur* [prayer book], with God, and of course

with Rebbe Nachman. There are very practical ways in which these learning and dialogical relationships are formed.

Thus, relationships with the members of the community are formed through living, praying, and learning with them. The learning relationships between teacher and student, master and disciple, Hasid and Hasid that I have focused on are an essential element in integrating the meaningfulness of the Breslov liturgical field. Indeed, Martin Buber saw that without the ability to relate to fellow humans, a person will not be able to pray at all. In Hasidism and Modern Man, Buber writes, "Man cannot approach the divine by reaching beyond the human; he can approach Him through becoming human. To become human is what he, this individual man, has been created for. This, so it seems to me, is the eternal core of Hasidic life and of Hasidic teaching. (Buber 1958: 42)."

This prime importance of human relationships involved in group prayer experience is what Hoffman calls "the master image of community". "By community as master image," Hoffman continues, "I mean Victor Turner's liminal *communitas*, a cultural setting in which class structures are removed, social distance dispelled; where Buberian dialogue leads us to discover that, as Buber would have it, we discover the Eternal Thou in our relationships with every other Thou. (Hoffman 1987: 168)." While I was in Tsvat, I lived, prayed and learned with the Breslov. When I prayed, I tried to participate as much as I could and when I learned with people, I would learn about prayer. I learned the *halachas* [laws] and their Hasidic interpretations with Yaakov, I learned Rebbe Nachman's story "The Master of Prayer" with David, and I learned other practical details from Yosef.

But not all learning about prayer was done through dialogue. In order to learn Hitbodedut and how to talk to God alone, at midnight, in the darkest hour, this had to be done individually and experientially. In practice, Hitbodedut is one way in which Breslov adds a deep individual dimension that goes both beyond the text and the community to their liturgical field. The practice of meditation is not disconnected from

the community, or from their rebbe. It is part of their culture. These Hasidim are following the advice of their master, they are encouraging each other to go off and be alone, and that alone experience then comes back and influences and informs the group experiences. To give an idea of the kind of prayer that might be said or emulated by a Breslov Hasid engaged in Hitbodedut I include here a prayer composed by Rebbe Nachman, translated by Herbert Weiner:

*Master of all the worlds, Fountainhead of all happiness...
Help me to immerse my meditation and all the impulses of my heart,
and the depths of my thoughts in the mysteries of joy...
And grant, O my creator,
That I believe with complete faith that all fires of suffering
And all the nine measures of destitution and illness and pain,
and the heaps of trouble in this world,
and punishments in the next world, and
All the deaths --
That they are as nothing
As absolutely nothing
Against the wondrous joy of clinging to Thy Godliness,
And the sweetness of the Torah...
Therefore does my prayer stretch itself before Thee,
My Father in Heaven,
Save me and help me from this moment to be alone in the fields every night...
To cry out to Thee from the depths of my heart...
To set forth all the burdens and negations that remove me from Thee,
Light of Life.
And give strength to strengthen myself in spite of everything --
To strengthen myself with great happiness,
With happiness that has no end,
Until my heart lifts up my hands to clap, to clap, to clap,
And my legs to dance until the soul swoons, swoons, swoons.
And help me ever to make a new beginning and to be a flowering
well of Torah and Prayer,
To work always with quickened spirit,*

*And to stand with powerful strength against the scoffers and mockers,
Who go about in our days -- days of double darkness...
But oh, against all the troubles and burdens,
Thy joys, and Thy delights, are strong and powerful...
Oh our great Father, home of delights and wellspring of joy.*

In fact, there is a wealth of recorded Hitbodedut-type prayers in Breslov literature that can be found in Hebrew, English, and other languages. This is an original Breslov set of liturgy that the individual may pray alone and in a way that encourages a feeling of spontaneity and familiarity.

Nonetheless, true Hitbodedut prayer practice and experience should be performed alone. One of the Breslovers at Tsvat who learned with me while I was there told me in broken English: "If you can, wake up in the middle of the night and find a private place to sit where its dark, sit there and don't say anything for a while. But listen to your heart. Soon you will hear words to speak, and it will be as if they are coming from some place higher. It will be like its not even you speaking."

It took me weeks before I felt like I could practice Hitbodedut with any kind of soulful satisfaction. That kind of satisfying Hasidic prayer experience came only after repeated practice of waking up with the rest of the young men at midnight, praying the regular services with them, and living their life. Not everyone was able to get up and do it all the time, but even so, there is a joke that says, "A Breslover is someone who sets his alarm for two in the morning." The joke is significant because it shows the strong willingness of the community to get up at the darkest hour to pray alone.

I have been talking about the tensions between the individual and the group in the Breslov liturgical prayer field. Even when the individuals return to the prayer hall from their midnight meditations to pray with the community, that tension remains. As Prell suggests:

"Above all, prayer, even in its prescribed communal setting requiring the individual to participate in the community, to recite certain prayers, to say 'amen' to the prayers of

others, and to hear the Torah read, was an individual act. Hence, Jewish prayer was built on a tension between the private and the public, the individual and the communal, the spontaneous and the standardized. That tension is maintained rather than resolved in the worship service."

(Prell 1989: 182)

While the tension may be inherent and necessary, Breslovers enact a culturally specific aesthetic for the liturgical field that determines the appropriate quality of that tension. This aesthetic helps determine when a person is being overly individualistic in relation to the group and the tradition. For Breslov, the aesthetic seems to encourage individual expression, manifested in such practical forms as clapping, sighing, and crying. Yet even with this generous allowance for aloneness in the presence of the community, the organized, communal, and textual elements are not threatened but rather intensified and radicalized. Nowhere is this more true than in Uman, Ukraine, where, every year the Breslov Hasidim travel on pilgrimage to see their rebbe for Rosh Hashanah.

I will discuss the pilgrimage in much greater depth in the next chapter. However, for the purposes of this chapter on prayer, I will include a collection passages from Allison Ofanansky's article in *The Jerusalem Post* October 5, 1996 edition on this year's Breslov pilgrimage which exemplifies one of the radical and intense ways in which individual and community prayer needs are balanced:

"Uman, the burial place of Rabbi Nachman ben Simcha, spiritual leader of the Bratzlav hassidim, has drawn larger crowds each year since 1988, when the Soviet Union allowed the first group to come for Rosh Hashana... 'That first year, 250 men crowded into a small hotel in Uman,' said Eliahu Reiter from Safed, who has gone for the past six years. 'This year 7,000 people came. Near the grave. Near the grave is a warehouse that seats 4,000 to 5,000 uncomfortably. There was a 5,000-man *minyán*. It was like thunder.'... prayer definitely features as the main activity in Uman... 'From the time you get there its non-stop,' said Baruch Shaver, also of Safed. 'You pull into Uman in the middle of the night and first thing you take a dip in a ritual bath. Penitential prayers start at 3 in the morning.' On Rosh Hashana, he said, the morning service started at 6:30 and lasted nine hours. There was an hour and a half for the meal, then it was time for the afternoon prayers... 'This was the first year I made the whole prayer,' said Daniel Yedidya Abitbol, a Moroccan-born Jew who has been to Uman five times. 'It's very long. It's a marathon.'... Bratzlav hassidim are known for their fervor in prayer. The men don't just stand, swaying and reading from a prayer book. They sing, dance, yell, laugh, cry. 'One year, Rosh Hashana went right into Shabbat,' Shaver said. 'We started singing *L'cha Dodi*. A room packed with 3,000 men [and the] singing went on for over an hour. There was no room to dance, but people were dancing anyway. People were jumping up and down, hats were being thrown in the air, people were hugging each other.'... 'Every time I go there, my heart just opens up,' said [Ya'akov] Gable. 'You feel like you're talking right into God's

ear.'... 'If 7,000 people go, or if 7,001 go, it's a completely different thing in terms of what the tzaddik [Rabbi Nachman] can do for us in this world,' said Yoseph Efrati, Rochel Fruma's husband... 'How and why and what we don't know. We just have to believe.' (Ofanansky 1996: 21)."

Clearly, the article above offers evidence for the radical nature of the Breslov liturgical field in Uman. The Uman pilgrimage is the ultimate community and individual experience for these Hasidim. It is an act that radicalizes their sense of community and identity, their connection to their master, and of course to their God. It is both an individual act of faith and a communal affirmation of faith to experience the Uman pilgrimage. The cultural enactment of this pilgrimage adds a deep and important dimension to the Breslov liturgical field that continues to be a powerful influence on their prayer life for the rest of the year.

Through forming relationships with Breslov teachers and community members, participating in their prayer-life, practicing their way of Hitbodedut, and thus becoming more familiar with the landscape of their liturgical field, a person is able to draw closer to their center, to their rebbe, and 'merited' to experience the Uman pilgrimage for myself. In the Ukraine, I witnessed the tension between radical individual spiritual expression and dramatic collective performance of organized ritual. I wrote the following in my journal while I was on my way home from the pilgrimage which demonstrates what this chapter has discussed:

"I got the sensation while I was in Uman that I was among a different species on a different planet. There was something about the beards and the peyot and the costumes and the body motions, the swaying, the hand movements, the facial expressions, the body positions, the way of walking, and the whole aura of these people that made me sometimes see them as different creatures. There was a part of me that could see them as prayer machines, learning machines. These folks are easy to dehumanize. They are easy to romanticize. They, with their amplification of drama and romance and yet... what can I say? I stood in a crowd of young men my age bawling their eyes out at the Rebbe's grave. Everywhere people were crying, old and young. There was wild singing, wild praying. Five thousand in a room. We were one of the biggest prayer groups in the world this Rosh Hashanah. When some five thousand voices praise God in unison at the top of their lungs during mourner's kaddish or when they all become dead silent in anticipation of the blowing of the Shofar, its very dramatic and powerful. There's no denying it. Its an amazing and awe inspiring human event. And its interesting now to recall my encounters there with all the familiar faces. With each one I was able to have some kind of dialogue. I realized I knew a lot of people in this Breslov world. I was at least on some level a part of the community. I felt my bonds to these people. That feeling of connection and bonding had to do with the antistructural nature of pilgrimage but it was also more specific than that. I knew these guys. I had learned with them and depending on whether they were from Jerusalem or Tsvat, I knew their localness. I sat next to Baruch when we would pray.

Many times I would look over while he was praying and he would be either laughing or crying. I couldn't tell. It was probably both."
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