

Chapter Four: The Rebbe's Nigun

“The world has not yet tasted me at all. If they were to hear but a single one of my teachings with the melody and dance that belong to it, they would simply pass out: their souls would just leave them in this great and wondrous joy. Even the animals and the blades of grass would be affected: everything in the world would simply pass out of itself.”

--Rebbe Nachman of Breslov

In this chapter, I show how song is integral in the learning process among the Breslov Hasidim. I will often refer to the above quote in order to elucidate the importance of the song and dance dimensions of the lived social reality and religious practices of these Hasidim. Indeed, I encountered that reality almost as soon as I got to Israel. It was one of my first nights in Jerusalem, and I had entered the city center. Shabbos was over, and even though the next day would be a work day, the city was alive. I was at the bottom of Ben Yehuda Street, at a spot called Zion Square. A group of young men were drumming there, but soon they were drowned out by men in black and white with long beards and side curls, black velvet skull caps and black hats, who were setting up their instruments. They had a power generator that supported their P.A. system and an electric guitar and keyboard. In front of them they set up a table piled with Hebrew books. They started playing music and singing and dancing.

Some of the crowd danced with them, and some spoke and argued with them. Meanwhile the Hasidim were singing and smiling happily and talking with everybody. I looked at them and caught the sparkling eye of one older man who was standing by, watching approvingly. Another one approached me speaking Hebrew and offered me a book I couldn't read. I asked him if he had anything in English, and he went back to the table and got me a small white book titled, *Questions and Answers About Breslov*. These people were the Breslov Hasidim.

This was my first encounter with a group of people I befriended over the seven months I was in Israel. It was through studying and practicing with them that I met Baruch, who became a Rabbi, guide, and friend to me. Toward the end of my time in Israel I lived in Tsfat for a month, praying and studying with Breslov all day and every day. And it was with them that I traveled this last September, 1996 to Uman, Ukraine on Rosh Hashanah, to be with their Rebbe for the new year. Through these experiences I

learned by doing what others were doing and imitated their ways until I too came to understand their meaningfulness.

I went from listening to their music as a complete outsider to singing the Rebbe's *nigun* at the top of my lungs with the Breslov Hasidim at the end of my last Shabbos in Tsfat. It was clear that the Breslovers' music had been a powerful vehicle for me, one that brought me deeper into their community and helped me understand their ritual practices more holistically and organically. Since the importance of singing was supported by the entire community, I knew that my sense of the powerfulness of music as a learning tool was a shared one.

This is a discussion about song as a vehicle for keeping the past alive, as a way of engaging in the process of renewing tradition, as instrumental in creating a sense of *communitas*, as being intimately connected to learning, as connecting the wise and the simple, as a force that melts away those separations between self and other, and as a safe feeling way to surrender and yield to something bigger than the individual. On this, Rebbe Nachman said in other, non-anthropological words: "Music has a tremendous power to draw you to God. Get into the habit of always singing a tune. It will give you new life and send joy into your soul. Then you will be able to bind yourself to God."

The learning process however, was not all song and dance. I learned some *Halacha* [Jewish Law], Hebrew, and studied old texts. But I never got to a level of what Breslov would consider serious learning. Deep learning would include studying of the Talmud and thoroughly learning *Halacha*. My teacher Baruch made it clear that I hadn't scratched the surface of what can be learned. I am not, therefore, claiming that song helped me learn everything of the little that I know. However, without the music, and in accordance with the quote that opened this chapter, I would not have been able to 'taste' Breslov at all.

I say I learned with them. What did I ask them to teach me? I wanted to learn how to pray. I knew how to sing and they knew how to pray, so song became a crossroads where I could pray, even though I didn't know anything. Through song, they could teach me without saying anything, that is, without presenting me with verbal dogma or arguments. Rebbe Nachman himself said, "How do you pray to God? Is it possible to pray to God with words alone? Come, I will show you a new way to sing to God – not

with words or sayings – but with song. We will sing and God will understand us.”
(Kushner & Olitzky 1993: 263)

Here, Rebbe Nachman introduces us to a common form of song in Judaism known as the *nigun*, meaning ‘melody’, which is basically singing without words. He attributes to this form of song the character of legitimate prayer. Once a person becomes familiar with the custom of wordless singing, it becomes an easy way to participate and experience harmony with at least one aspect of prayer-life within a community.

Anthropologist Samuel Heilman writes in his ethnography *Synagogue Life*:

“ ... [W]hen the prayer turns into melody and song, it attracts and activates general communal involvement ... By singing together, congregants experience both sentiments of *tefila* [prayer] and awareness of one another’s presence in the *tzibbor* [assembly]. The words, along with the harmonies, serve to make one realize, not only that one is praying, but also that one is not alone in doing so.”
(Heilman 1973: 212)

When singing *nigunim*, individuals participate in a shared experience. This shared experience, like the songs they are singing, is beyond words. As Heilman suggests, song is a form of communal prayer that makes individuals realize they are praying. Thus we find song imbued with a power and force that encourages and opens people to some level of religious experience.

In his ethnography on ultra-orthodox Jewry, *Defenders of the Faith*, Heilman reflexively describes one such experience with song that let him slip out of his professional identity and allowed him to experience what it might feel like to be an insider. He writes:

“As we pulled out of the parking lot and began our descent toward the valley, the sun dropped quickly and soon we were all sitting quietly in the darkened bus. Then, softly at first but with gradually increasing volume, the first three rows of passengers, a group of Klausenberger Hasidim, began to sing. In time they began to clap, and soon many of us on the bus joined either in the singing or the clapping or both. For more than nine hours I had been among these people. Now in the dark, where the difference of my appearance no longer stood out, and amid the singing and clapping, I felt the barriers that always separated me from them somehow melt away – at least for the moment.” (Heilman 1992: 137)

In the context of describing a scene of pilgrimage communion experience, Heilman comments on his sense of self-surrender through singing. What is the power of song to make this professional anthropologist feel a ‘melting away’ of separation, and a sense of surrender of identity that felt good, or pleasurable even if just for a moment?

To answer this question I will provide some theoretical support for our understanding of the use of song in ritual practice. Particularly, in furthering our

understanding of some of the dynamics of song, I am interested in song's ability to melt our resistances to practical involvement with any given community. In the case of a non-religious person involving himself with a community such as Breslov, there is always on the self-defensive side, the "risk" of brainwash, and on the more mystical side, the possibility of surrender toward their particular center. When faced with the possibility of being drawn into a religious way of life, the outsider may hold onto a sense of self all the more strongly. However, when one is in the midst of a Hasidic community immersed in song, sometimes one can't help but surrender to the whole, or as Rebbe Nachman puts it, 'pass out of oneself completely'. Heilman's account of his experience on the bus provides exemplary evidence in support of this claim.

In a discussion of the aesthetic dimensions of ritual, Bruce Kapferer discusses how, within the context of Sinhalese healing ceremonies, the ritual performance of music and dance shape and give meaning to the experience. He writes, "Musical and dance form, as revealed in performance, are constitutive of subjective experience; they mold all subjective experience to their form ... A concern with the internal structuring properties of music and dance as forms revealed in performance makes possible some statements as to the parameters of experience constructed through them ..." (Kapferer 1986: 198) Kapferer is putting into words music's ability to carve out an experience that is shared and yet beyond words. He is hinting at the persuasiveness of this musical and non-verbal argument, which convinces an outsider to participate.

On the persuasive power of music and dance to allow a person to surrender to the ritual moment, Radcliffe-Brown (as cited by Stanley J. Tambiah 1979: 2-3) writes: "Any marked rhythm exercises on those submitted to its influence a constraint, impelling them to yield to it and to permit it to direct and regulate the movements of body and even those of the mind." As Tambiah notes of this statement: "The peculiarity of the force [of song] in question is that it acts upon the individual both from without (as a collective performance) and from within (since the impulse to yield comes from his own organism)." (Ibid.: 2-3) Song thus serves as a bridge between individual and group. It becomes a way for everyone present to communicate with each other at once.

It is possible to be among a group of people singing a wordless song and, because the minor tones and melodic patterns become familiar, feel like you have always known

the tune, even if you have never heard it before. Also, these melodies are usually repetitive, so they are easy to pick up. Commonly however, after hearing a song, enjoying it, and wanting to commit it to memory, the tune completely slips the mind once you are away from the ritual arena. Through repetitive practice and continual participation in the act of wordless singing, it is possible to hold on to the melodies and sing them when alone. This repetitive practice is the internalization of pattern, rhythms, and cycles. In fact, the singing memory gets better and better through time and practice, and the music is able to stay inside, or become part of the participant. I asked a number of Breslov friends in my explanation of the above phenomenon made sense or resonated with them, and they confirmed that it did. It was through the growing awareness of the importance of learning song and learning through song that I began to understand how the learning process among them worked.

Indeed, we can see the learning process of *tshuvah*, the process of turning toward a deeper center of Judaism, in a similar light. *Tshuvah* is a process of learning through experience and through practice. As mentioned above, Rebbe Nachman talked about his teachings each having a song and dance that went along with it, that when heard and seen would facilitate a complete and overwhelming understanding for the student. Similarly, a more ancient figure, Rabbi Yochanan Ben Zakkai said, “He who reads without melody and repeats without song, concerning him the scripture says, ‘Therefore I give you statutes which are not to your advantage.’” (Myerhoff 1978: 271) While I was in Tsfat learning at the Breslov Yeshivah, I always heard the students singing and chanting the Talmud, Rashi, or whatever other holy book they were reading. They would put the words of the text to Breslov *nigunim* and were not embarrassed to sing loudly, even though they were studying alone.

The Breslov Hasidim have their own traditional melodies and songs that they sing every week at Shabbos services and at the ritual meals. I noticed that some weeks the performance seemed more alive than others. Sometimes it did feel like the people singing were just performing an obligation. However, I also observed that the uninspired mode of song can actually become the very inspiration to bring things back to life. That phenomenon is testimony to the fact that there is a power in repetitive ritual practice that is interdependent with, yet not entirely determined by, the quality of the experience. In

other words, the prayers and songs don't have to be full of energy in order for them to be considered holy actions.

In his description of the third ritual meal of Shabbat, Samuel Heilman addresses these issues of song, tradition, and the ritual process. He explains how the third meal comes at the end of the 25 hours of Shabbat, when many people are exhausted and barely have the energy to bring the ending rituals to life. Using Geertz's categories, he writes:

“... [F]or the tradition to live – to act not only as a model *of* a way Jews have defined themselves for generations but also as a model *for* the maintenance of continuity – the songs must not simply be repeated; they must be recited with the enthusiasm of a first-time experience. That of course is the paradox that everyone who strives actively to maintain traditions encounters. What is repeated becomes routine and sometimes even banal. And that precisely is the dilemma of *haredim* like the Reb Arelach [and Breslov]: how can they sing these same songs exactly the same way each week, yet always with feeling? From whence comes the fervor – *hislahavus*, the Hasidim call it – when they are tired and drained? Can the zeal of a beginning come in the twilight of the day? ... Here is precisely where the children play a crucial role. For them the tradition is new; in them the fires of enthusiasm burn more powerfully. They know (because they have been taught) that the repetition is crucial. For them the ability to repeat is evidence of their initiation and belonging. It is the stuff of familiarity but not yet of routine. Their singing is filled with fervor – even if it is immature fervor, unenhanced by a deep understanding of the poetry or the mystical and religious themes embedded in it. And that ardor, enthusiasm, and youthful zeal that emanates from the heart of the room where the youngsters sit seems to be what moves the hearts of the others in song. As the children sing louder, so do their elders. And slowly but surely the room becomes filled with the voices of both as each feeds on the other's feelings. ‘And a little child shall lead them. (Isaiah 2:6).’”

(Heilman 1992: 156 – 157)

Heilman's model of the interaction between elders and the children in this ritual process can be used to better understand the power of song in tradition and the learning process. The children in this case would be people like me, and the elders would be people like my teacher Baruch. There has to be some kind of process of reciprocal energizing that goes on, similar to the one that Heilman describes. This is another example of the reciprocity of learning relationships that I mentioned in the chapter on paradigmatic relationships.

Finally, I will deal with a song of the Breslov that connects all the levels I have been discussing: *The Rebbe's Nigun*. This melody has been passed down through the generations of Breslov Hasidim and they sing it every third meal before learning from Rebbe Nachman's main work, *Likutey MoHaRaN*. “This *nigun* is utilized as a focusing device, awakening one's faculties for deeper spiritual understanding.” (Ben Zion Solomon 1992: 97) More than that, it is a living connection to the Rebbe, who died almost 200 years ago. “This was the *nigun* that was sung by Rebbe Nachman under the *chuppa* [wedding canopy] of his daughter Sarah in Medvedevka on Rosh Chodesh Nissan

5563 (March 24, 1803). With this *nigun* the Rebbe summoned all the ancestors of the bride and groom, including the three Patriarchs, from the other world.” (Ibid.: 97). Such a statement is evidence for the faith Breslovers have in the immense power of the Rebbe’s *nigun*.

“Our *nigun* is in an adventurous “*Ahavoh – Rabboh*” mode and can be heard as having three parts with a form:

|| A | B | C | B ||
 || aa | bbc | dd | bbc ||

A begins on the tonic with a leap upward of a minor sixth followed by a stepwise descent and return to the fifth. The second phrase begins by leaping another fifth, exploring the upper regions of the mode and returning to the fifth. This suggests aspirations for a spiritual ascent, which, though not immediately and entirely successful, results in some achievement. Now from this new height another even higher aspiration is launched but fares not as well as the first. The *B* section of the *nigun*, more conservative in its contour, moves quite comfortably in the middle range with emphasis shifting from the subdominant to the third. Thus the first aspirations have become the present reality. The emphasis on the fourth brings with it a tendency toward a natural seventh, which is not in the mode. This is exploited further in the next phrase of *B* when, after a retracing of the melodic boundaries of *B*, we descend to the lower octave with a semi-cadence on the natural seventh, and then on the tonic. Now suddenly in *C*, our second aspirations of *A* become a stable reality. The heights of the “*Ahavoh – Rabboh*” mode become the melodic turf for a graceful stepwise melody that cadences on the fifth with enough self-assurance to repeat itself with more intensity. This episode is followed by a return to the *B* section verbatim, except that in performance the tempo is now more brisk and the feeling more triumphant. All in all, this *nigun* is a musical and spiritual workout.” (Ibid.: 97)

The Rebbe’s Nigun is indeed a haunting melody, and the intention is clearly focused on tapping into Rebbe Nachman’s spirit. Sitting in the giant marble-floored prayer hall in Tsfat overlooking the mountains, watching the sun go down, the *nigun* would start. People’s eyes would close, their bodies would sway, their countenances would shine, hands would clap, the volume would rise, they would sing intensely, slowly. It was time to hear a teaching from their Rebbe. Could this be the melody and dance that accompany Rebbe Nachman’s teaching such as those he mentions in the beginning quote of this chapter? It’s a taste at least.