

### Chapter Three: My Teacher Told Me Stories

“Remember: if Nachman bears the overarching soul that contains your soul within it, or of which your soul is but a specification, the relationship you have with him is not quite that of self and other. To say that ‘he’ is redeemer hardly means that ‘you’ are not. There is ultimately no conflict between the Nachman-centered reading of these tales and the most universal reading: as Nachman is seeker, messenger, lost prince wandering in the woods, and redeemer or repairer of the cosmos, so is all Israel (of which he stands at the center), so are all humans, and so is the one who hears the tale.” (Green 1979: 349-350)

I was sitting next to a man who introduced himself to me as Baruch during the third ritual meal of my first Shabbos with the Breslov Hasidim. He was helping me to follow the lesson that one of the Hasidim was ‘bringing down’ from *Likutey MoHaRaN* [The Collected Teachings of our Teacher Rebbe Nachman]. During the teaching he leaned over and whispered in my ear, “Maybe you’ll come to the *shul* [synagogue] this Tuesday for Stories?” He was going to give an English *shiur* [class] at seven thirty on Rebbe Nachman’s Stories, *Sipporey Meisios*. He whispered again, “It’s going to be the story of ‘the Chocham and the Tam’, ‘the Simpleton and the Sophisticate’. It’s the best of the stories!”

Storytelling is a crucial guidance technique used by Breslov. This chapter deals with Breslov’s teaching method and practice of storytelling. After providing an introduction to Rebbe Nachman’s stories given by Baruch, I will analyze certain aspects of that first Tuesday night class in order to better understand learning relationships and the learning process among this Hasidic sect. As with other ritual practices of song, prayer, and pilgrimage which I deal with in the chapters to follow, I will show how through active participation in the learning process, a person comes to understand the meaningfulness of their way. So that my readers (who don’t have the opportunity for such direct participation) may better understand the historical and cultural context for this practice of learning Rebbe Nachman’s stories, I provide the following discourse given by Baruch for one of his classes in the fall of 1996:

Baruch: Ok, we’re starting the last of the Rebbe’s stories, the thirteenth of the thirteen stories, the story of ‘The Seven Beggars’. And, for the people aren’t familiar with the *Sipporey Meisios*, so before the Rebbe started *Sipporey Meisios*, which was really only toward the end of his life...

Student: What’s *Sipporey Meisios*?

Baruch: *Sipporey Meisios*, the Stories, just Reb Nachman’s Stories translated. So the Rebbe ... The real introduction to *Sipporey Meisios* really goes with the first story because the first story is in itself an introduction to all the stories ...

Student: There's seven stories?

Baruch: There's thirteen stories. And God willing, when we finish this story and if we're still going together, so we'll do a formal introduction to the stories. Because that story goes with the torah in *Likutey MoHaRan*, torah 60, the discourse, where the Rebbe explains what *Sipporey Meisios* are. So when we get there we'll do a more thorough introduction but just for the sake of informal introduction, so when the Rebbe started to tell the stories, one of the things he said was, 'I see my torah discourses aren't working, so I'll tell you stories...' which is a kind of funny thing to say. The Rebbe was on a very high *madrega*, on a very high level, and to say that his torahs weren't working is kind of an extreme thing to say. But on the other hand, it tells you the great depth and special quality that these stories have. Now everyone knows that stories are special, that they have a certain way of getting over, of sliding in a message, but especially these stories.

The Rebbe explains there are two different kinds of stories. There are stories of *kerov shanim* [near days], which even the Rebbe says includes the story of creation, since it's within our knowledge of time, it's called *b'toch kerov shanim*. And then there's something called stories from ancient days, *m'shanim kadmoniot*, which are stories that precede creation. And these stories have such a profound effect that in essence you don't even have to explain them. They just work by themselves. Therefore, at the end of certain stories, the Rebbe gave *remozim*, just a couple of hints at what's the deeper aspects of the story. And the Rebbe said that these hints that he gave were really not necessary. It's really not necessary to know the Kabbalistic [mystical] *shoresh* [roots] of the story. The story works by itself. And what does it do? In torah 60, in the discourse, the Rebbe said when he introduced the stories, he explained that there are people who are actually serving God, learning and *davening* [praying] day and night, and yet they're asleep. They appear to be serving Hashem, but they're asleep. And the Rebbe explains how that occurred and why that is. But he says that because people who are in this state, the only way to wake them up is through these stories, stories from ancient days. And he gives the parable of a person who's blind, that you don't just take him into a bright room, you take him into a dark room and you let the light grow gradually. And he says that's the effect these stories have. It has a certain way of gradually waking a person up and bringing him back into reality.

Now, when Reb Noson came actually to print these stories, it was already after the Rebbe passed away. And the Rebbe had said to Reb Noson clearly that he wanted it printed, and even told him how to print it, like this edition with the Hebrew at the top and the Yiddish at the bottom. Nevertheless, Reb Noson had extensive opposition from very big people, very big people. And the opposition was because of the Kabbalistic secrets that are revealed in these stories. In this particular story that we're going to learn, so, Reb Noson wasn't present when the Rebbe started the story. And when he heard the story second-hand from his friend Reb Naftali, who just came and told him the first part of the story because this story was said in segments, Reb Noson said, 'I stood there trembling, in amazement.' He was literally trembling. And I really don't think that even though we're going to learn the story and see a drop of its greatness, I don't know if we're going to get to the level of trembling. And the reason is because Reb Noson even said, 'We had heard many stories from the Rebbe, but never had we heard a story like this.' Because Reb Noson, when he heard the story, he heard with different ears. He was a master in Kabbalah himself, therefore every word that he heard, was kind of different. Every word was a code word for Reb Noson. Therefore he trembled when he heard the story.

In fact, there's an interesting side story. There's a man that some you might know, Elyah Sukkot. He's an artist, and a long, long time ago, he made a coloring book out of the first story for kids, with the story, and pictures to color. Now, at the time, he was learning at a Kabbalah yeshiva, a Sephardi Kabbalah yeshiva, and the Rosh Yeshiva's name is Reb Atiyah. And he's a young man, but he's a student of Reb Shrav Yalom v' Shalom, and he's a great Kabbalist. And it just so happens that he had rented the apartment from his Rosh Yeshiva, and the Rosh Yeshiva came by with his kids to pick up the rent and Elyah Sukkot gave them both, the little kids, a coloring book, for a present. Anyway, the next day, he came to the Yeshiva and Reb Atiyah, who wasn't familiar with Reb Nachman's work, said, 'You should know that EVERY SINGLE WORD IN THAT BOOK IS THE DEEPEST SECRETS OF KABBALAH!' That's what he said

[Baruch Laughs] In the coloring book! You hear? The coloring book, because it was the stories of Reb Nachman.

So therefore, these stories, when they were first printed they, especially from the generation of Reb Noson, they had people who could read a story like Reb Atiyah, and could see right away that it's Kabbalah revealed, and it's not *beseder* [it's not ok, not proper, not in order]. So Reb Noson had great opposition, but nevertheless, in the introduction to *Sipporey Meisios*, he justifies his printing and he says that these stories, the essence for us, the essence of these stories, are the *mussar*, the lessons of character traits that we get out of the story. And for this alone, it's worth printing the stories. Not only that, a person can even tell them over to his children. And that's the way we know today that the stories; I say them over the Shabbos table. The kids, all the kids know the stories, and they really do provide a great vehicle for getting over these ideal concepts of *mussar*. And that's what we're gonna try to focus on in this *shir* [class] ...

Student: You're saying that just telling the stories, you don't have to have a *shir* in other words, you can just tell the stories over and you don't have to have a *shir* on the meanings of the stories.

Baruch: Right, right ...

Student: The listener will get it slowly?

Baruch: They will have their cosmic effect, and to understand them is also nice ...

I will continue where Baruch leaves off to tell part of the first story that I learned with him, 'The Simpleton and the Sophisticate.' The story was essential in forming my relationship with Breslov because Baruch taught it in a way which encouraged me to continue on the learning path that Judaism calls *tshuvah*. That kind of encouragement is the desired effect of these stories for all who listen. For instance, when Rebbe Nachman himself was about to tell the first of his thirteen stories, 'The Lost Princess,' he commented, "While on my journey I told a story. Whoever heard it had a thought of *tshuvah*." (Kaplan 1983: 31) Also Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan comments that 'The Simpleton and the Sophisticate' is particularly appropriate for beginners when he writes, "This story is unique insofar that it can be understood in its most simple sense from the beginning to the end. Perhaps this is most fitting, since the hero of the story is the Simpleton, who took everything at face value, without probing beneath the surface." (Kaplan 1983: 140)

The story is about two men who were old friends. Both came from the same hometown but one stayed there while the other left to travel the world. The one who stayed in his father's house was the Simpleton and he lived his life as a shoemaker, poor but happy and content. The one who left home to travel the world was the Sophisticate. The Sophisticate grew very wise in his journeys and became a professional in medicine and in diamond cutting and in philosophy. Despite his knowledge and skills, the Sophisticate was not happy at all and was never satisfied. Meanwhile, the Simpleton

continued making his shoes. Even though he could only make one pair a day, and an imperfect pair at that, he was thrilled by his work.

As the story goes on, it becomes clear that these two characters represent conflicting aspects of our psyche. In telling the story, Baruch used the relationship between the Simpleton and the Sophisticate to teach lessons about life on the religious path and the special character trait of simplicity and joy that one must maintain in order to survive on that path. The lessons Baruch taught from the story were orientational in terms of the religious path of *tshuvah*. I will focus on two points of the story that came up on that first Tuesday night which demonstrate this orientational quality. For this, I will elaborate on more of the story's narrative.

First, it came up in the story line that people saw a certain wisdom in the Simpleton's efforts and would sometimes come to talk to him. He would talk to anybody, but he was hurt by the people who would come just to make fun of him. When his visitors came he would say to them, "You want to talk? I'd love to talk ... just don't make fun of me." That is to say, the Simpleton knew that people saw him as a fool and even though it hurt his feelings when people ridiculed him, he still enjoyed sharing his world with those whom he trusted.

Baruch pointed to this "I'd love to talk, just don't make fun of me" aspect of the story because it captures a sense of the experience that many *baalei tshuvah* have in that it is hard for them to find people who want to understand what they are going through. People involved in *tshuvah* often desire to share the stories of their experiences, yet feel frustrated because they can't share the process with anyone who won't make some kind of fun of it. This sense of isolation on the spiritual path can be captured in those words, 'just don't make fun of me,' and that is why Baruch commented on them when he came to that part of the story. Baruch would highlight certain lines of the story in order to guide students through potentially confusing dimensions of religious cultural life, and this practice of guidance was essential to the learning process, as I will further demonstrate below.

Another important scene Baruch chose to highlight and comment on also concerned the Simpleton. As explained above, the Simpleton was a shoemaker who slowly and painstakingly made his imperfect shoes. Because of his imperfect practice, he

made very little money. However, though he and his wife were very poor, he was perfectly content and rejoiced in each pair of shoes that he finished. He would exclaim, “What great profit! I’ve finished this pair!” One time, his wife heard him and, rather frustrated, commented, “What are you so happy about? All the other shoemakers around you make many times more shoes than you each day. They make so much more profit and are much more successful with their trade.” He shrugged his shoulders and replied, “*Zeh Meish Shelo, V’Zeh Meiseh Sheli.*” [“That’s his story, this is my story.”] Baruch paused here and said, “This is so Breslov! If you want to know something about Breslov Hasidim, remember these words, ‘That’s his story, this is my story.’”

Baruch went on to explain this line, encouraging me and the others listening to say this line to ourselves whenever we found ourselves comparing our levels of religious practice to those of the people around us. He talked about how easily beginners get overwhelmed by all that they don’t know. They get frustrated because they only see the imperfections of their prayers or their Hebrew skills. This is especially true in the Breslov *shul*, where an adult who is a beginner to Judaism could find himself standing next to a ten year old kid who is reading a mile a minute and knows the prayer book almost by heart, line for line. Meanwhile, the beginner may find himself totally lost in the prayer service and barely stumbling through the English translation. This can be an embarrassing and frustrating experience that happens all the time and in many different situations.

The main thing, Baruch told us, is to remember those words, “That’s his story, and this is my story.” That is to say, the ten year old has his story. He grew up in Israel, in an ultra-orthodox home, going to religious school all his life. It’s no wonder he is how he is. We, on the other hand, have a different story. For instance, I hardly knew anything about my tradition until I started learning about Judaism in college. I could barely read Hebrew because I never went to Sunday School. It is no wonder I was wherever I was, in all my imperfections. “That’s his story, this is my story.” Baruch was telling us, “This isn’t a spiritual race. This is a road you are walking on. You are where you are, and you should rejoice in every step you take. You can only make one pair of very imperfect shoes a day, and everyone around you seems to be making ten and bringing in way more profit. But, ‘That’s his story, this is my story.’ Do not despair!”

On one level what was transmitted and conveyed was a story by Rebbe Nachman. However, on another level there was more to this encounter than Baruch just saying the words to listeners. We were his students, he was handing it down to us, feeding us the right formula, deciding how to constrict the wisdom within the tale. He was taking into account that I was brand new to Hasidism and needed to hear gentle and encouraging words or else I would walk out as easily as I walked in.

Those two lines, “I’d love to talk, just don’t make fun of me” and “That’s his story, this is my story,” were engraved into my heart and mind ever since that first session. Besides capturing important aspects of the *tshuvah* experience, they also serve as good examples of what the Breslov Hasidim mean when they say that the individual words of these stories contain worlds upon worlds of meaning. As demonstrated by Baruch, they can be used to highlight allegorically important aspects of the Breslov social world I want to describe. In telling me the story, my teacher wanted to give me an orientation to his world. He pointed to these parts of the story as if they were the north and south arrows on a compass.

Indeed, the stories almost always engender a sense of spiritual journey or quest for all those engaged, whether they be the readers, the listeners, the teachers, the students, or the characters themselves. Arthur Green gives an account for this questing aspect of Rebbe Nachman’s tale in his biography *Tormented Master*:

“If there is any single feature about Nachman’s tales, and indeed about Nachman’s life as well, that makes them unique in the history of Judaism, it is just this: their essential motif is one of quest. Nachman, both as teller and as hero of these tales, is Nachman the seeker. He has already told us, outside the tales, of his refusal ever to stand on any one rung, of his call for constant growth, of his need to open himself up to ever-new and more demanding challenges to his faith. The tales now affirm this endless quest, as we see their central figure searching for the *shekhinah* [God’s presence], wandering through the woods or sailing the seas, stumbling through the kingdom of lies, or sailing through the air to reach the tree of life. The sojourns of Nachman’s heroes are more than the wandering of the Jew in exile. Here . . . , the bleakness of exile has been uplifted and transformed into the exhilarating adventure of quest.

What is this quest that so fills Nachman’s life, finding such poignant portrayal finally in the *Tales*? We may call it a search for God by one who felt himself alone, a search for language and self-expressing by one who felt himself unwillingly locked into an inner silence. Each of these is a partial way of approaching that which is essentially unapproachable, the quest that, like the *shekhinah*, is filled with all meanings because it can be limited to no one specific meaning. Nachman was one who defined his life as that of a seeker; for such people it is usually only in irreducible sacred symbols or in the ultimate profundities of silence that the object of their search can be defined. To ask the seeker: ‘What is it that you are looking for?’ is already to misperceive totally the nature of the search.” (Green 1979: 366-367)

With storytelling as with the Torah studying that I explored in the last chapter, turning toward the text as a Thou that you can relate with and learn from, is what

constitutes learning. A learned person is someone who can relate to the tradition as Thou, as something alive and renewing. Breslovers read from the same Rebbe Nachman's stories again and again and yet the learning process never ends. It just gets deeper. Do and you will understand that the learning process is a type of pilgrimage toward deeper levels of existence for the sake of simply being and not toward higher levels of sophistication or achievement. Indeed, that kind of understanding is one of the most important lessons that the story of "The Simpleton and the Sophisticate" has to teach.