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Breslover Kabbalah in the Nursing Home

I believe that a theology or spiritual discipline is meaningful only if it makes sense, in some important way, in conditions of suffering. In the nursing home where I work as a chaplain, most residents suffer intensely in one or multiple ways. Among this population one finds incapacitating levels of disability--paralysis, blindness, deafness, advanced dementia; unrelenting and intractable pain; and emotional suffering--isolation, loss of a sense of purpose or value, hopelessness, traumatic memories, unmanageable depression, fear of impending death. Therefore, the questions posed for me by my exposure this semester to Kabbalah are: Does it have intellectual credibility in the setting of a nursing home or is it useful in practice for easing suffering? Can it help me make sense of what I encounter in the nursing home? Can it help me offer better pastoral care?

As I explore these questions, I will focus on Kabbalah as taught by Rebbe Naḥman of Breslov, 1772-1810, a grandson of the Ba'al Shem Tov. I'll rely on the transcriptions of Naḥman's teachings and prayers made by his closest disciple, Rabbi Nathan Steinharz (Nathan was known by the Yiddish name *Noson*), 1780-1844. While Naḥman's thinking was deeply mystical and allegorical, he also gave us teachings that are accessible, inspirational, and practical. It is those teachings in particular that have applicability in a setting like a nursing home and which I will talk about here. I have set out my thoughts according to certain themes one finds repeated over and over in the rebbe's thought.

~Experiencing the Presence The Kabbalists taught that there is no place in the cosmos where God is not. According to Rabbi Nathan, Rebbe Naḥman taught that "God may be found

everywhere. Even from the depths of the abyss it is possible to come closer to You, for there is no place devoid of You. "The entire world is full of God's glory."¹ Thus, God is present in the nursing home, in its corridors, at the nurses' stations, in the recreation areas and dining rooms and, most importantly, in every staff member and in every resident. God is met everywhere in the nursing home. This realization helps me to enter this place of pain and sadness not with dread but with reverence.

"Seek the sacred within the ordinary. Seek the remarkable within the commonplace."² The Holy is reflected in the objects of daily life. The contents of a resident's room, or portion of a semi-private room, is revelatory, particularly if it has been decorated not with the nursing home's standard-issue bedspread and furniture but with the resident's own things--perhaps a small bookcase, a lamp, a stuffed animal, a hand-made quilt or needle-craft pillow, a painting or statuette of the Virgin, or (and especially) photographs of parents, children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren, or of special friends or beloved pets, or of the resident when he or she was a vibrant young person. Every such object emits the warmth of a life lived, the particular personality of the resident or, if the resident is too sick to have chosen the furnishings, the love and devotion of the family members who did choose them. The living space is holy.

What about residents (and there are so many) who have no spouse, children, living siblings or other family, who have outlived their friends or who, for whatever reason, have alienated all friends and family? The living space of such a resident generally resembles a jail cell, consisting of no more than a bed, metal night stand and tray table, fluorescent ceiling light, and bare walls. This living space radiates loneliness and lovelessness, generally mirroring the emotional

¹ *The Flame of the Heart: Prayers of a Chasidic Mystic*, translated and adapted by David Sears and the Breslov Institute (Jewish Lights 2006), 14-15 (hereinafter *Flame of the Heart*).

² *The Empty Chair: Finding Hope and Joy*, adapted by Moshe Mykoff and the Breslov Institute (Jewish Lights 1994), 59 (hereinafter *Empty Chair*).

condition of the resident himself. And, yet, in its emptiness, the space radiates something more than negativity. It imparts a sense of the mystery of suffering and the endurance of the human spirit, and in its own way is a holy place.

In Kabbalah, including the variety of Kabbalah taught by Naḥman of Breslov, a close connection is understood to exist between the performance of *mitzvot* (ritual and ethical commandments), particularly the *mitzvah* of *gemillut ḥasadim* (loving acts), and the "unification" of God, with consequent benefit to all humankind. Kabbalists further understand that our loving acts constitute a primary means by which we may apprehend God in our midst. As Rabbi Nathan put it, "May we become one with You through the performance of Your holy *mitzvot*, which are conduits for Your Oneness."³ Perhaps this is why I sense God's Presence whenever I observe a staff member's solicitousness toward a resident, or a tender glance between a resident and a family member.

Gestures of kindness can have a transforming impact. Sometimes a resident recounts for me the gentleness with which a particular nursing aide dressed her that morning, or the warmth of the night nurse who administered a sedative and sat by the bedside chatting companionably until the drug began to take effect. While it may sound odd to describe such an event as an irruption of the Divine into this world, to me that is precisely what it is. The proof is the wonder and sense of spiritual uplift in the resident's voice or facial expression as she describes those precious moments.

~*Suffering* Rebbe Naḥman had a distinctive theology of suffering. He taught that God wills our suffering, for through suffering on earth, just as through suffering in *Gehinom*, we are purified of our sins and imperfections so that upon death we may enter *Gan Eden*. For that

³ *Flame of the Heart*, 73.

reason, one must have faith that everything that happens to us, even terrible suffering, is for the best, since it is sent to us by God, and God's sole interest is our good.

All suffering is sent from God intentionally for your own ultimate good, whether to remind you to return to God, or to cleanse and scour you of your sins. If so, the suffering is really very beneficial, because God's intention is certainly only for good. Whatever evil and suffering you go through, God forbid, if you will look at the ultimate goal--God's purpose--you will not experience it as suffering at all.⁴

This teaching I do not personally accept. I cannot believe that a loving God causes suffering. As I see it, God created a world containing not only goodness and beauty but also a great many dangers--pathogenic microbes, geological faults, hurricanes and tsunamis, as well as human beings who are subject to anger, hatred, and blinding self-centeredness and, consequently, are capable of great cruelty; having created this world, God, for reasons that constitute the ultimate mystery of life, left the world to function on its own.

However, there are aspects of the Breslover ideas on suffering that do speak to the conditions and people I encounter in the nursing home (and in life generally). For instance, while I cannot conceive of God as deliberately causing suffering for any purpose, including purification, it is an observable fact that suffering does frequently purify us. Suffering has the potential to increase compassion, refocus attention from transitory things to more enduring values, and, ironically, enhance one's ability to experience joy. "One has to shed tears before one can develop new

⁴ This teaching is found in the rebbe's major discourse on suffering called "The Garden of Souls," which Rabbi Nathan collected in a volume called *Likutei Moharan*, I:65. This teaching and the entire discourse are contained in Avraham Greenbaum, *Garden of the Souls: Rebbe Nachman on Suffering* (Breslov Research Institute 1990), 44 (hereinafter *Garden of the Souls*).

If suffering is for our good, why, then, asks Naḥman, do we experience it as pain? Because our *da'at*--our divine understanding--is deficient. "But when understanding is present and one keeps one's attention on the ultimate goal, one does not feel pain and suffering at all." *Garden of the Souls*, 44-45.

Torah ideas of real worth," said Rebbe Naḥman.⁵ Suffering can make us more fully human. And in doing that, it brings us closer to God.⁶

A serious danger of the rebbe's belief that suffering is for the good is passive acceptance of evils that could be alleviated or eliminated. In the nursing home, however, where due to the ravages of age residents are unable to eliminate or even relieve much of their suffering, acceptance is appropriate--indeed, it is essential--for maintaining mental health and, ultimately, finding peace. A teaching of the rebbe's is relevant here:

"Love your fellow (Re'echa) like yourself; I am God." (Leviticus 19:18) The Hebrew words [meaning love your neighbor] can be read "Ve-ahavta le-Ra'echa kamochoa ...", meaning "love your bad ..."--i.e., accept your suffering and all the bad things which happen to you with love.⁷

The ground of Rebbe Naḥman's thinking about suffering is his belief about what awaits us after death: a garden suffused with light and filled with joy. The belief that suffering here on earth prepares us for the world-to-come offers *hope*. The notion of a paradise to which we are bound, a place where death will be swallowed up forever and God will wipe the tears off all faces (Isaiah 25:8), if it does not make sense of suffering, provides an antidote to despair. To fall into despair, Naḥman tells us, is "like losing one's freedom, like losing one's self."⁸ Despair is the greatest enemy, and nursing home residents are easy prey to it.

Those with a strong faith in a loving God and an afterlife seem to be protected, at least to a significant extent, from despair. Interestingly enough, I find that even residents who profess to have no belief in God do have an expectation of dying into a restful, pain-free place where they

⁵ *Likutei Moharan*, I:262, cited in *Garden of the Souls*, 31.

⁶ The sages taught: "This world is compared to an ante-room that leads to the world-to-come. Prepare yourself in the ante-room, that you may be worthy to enter the main hall." *Pirkei Avot*, 4:21.

⁷ *Likutei Moharan*, I:165, cited in *Garden of the Souls*, 70.

⁸ *The Empty Chair: Finding Hope and Joy*, adapted by Moshe Mykoff and the Breslov Institute (Jewish Lights 1994), 100 (hereinafter *Empty Chair*).

will be reunited with loved ones. This expectation needs to be affirmed by the chaplain again and again because it brings hope.

For Rebbe Naḥman, prayer should be the first response to suffering. "Never despair of crying out, praying and pleading with God. Keep at it until you succeed; until the Nearness you long for is yours," he taught.⁹ The type of prayer Naḥman had in mind was solitary prayer. But in a nursing home solitary prayer is just one more form of solitariness, and solitariness is a major cause of residents' suffering. When a chaplain prays *with* a resident, the supplicant has a companion on his journey; the companionship of another human being helps *in itself* to assuage the pain of being alone, and, in my experience, also helps in some mysterious way to bring the supplicant to an awareness of God's Presence and the conviction that God cares.

~Joy and alleviating depression Rebbe Naḥman teaches that joy is absolutely essential to a productive spiritual quest:

Always remember: Joy is not merely incidental to your spiritual question. It is vital. Nothing is as liberating as joy. It frees the mind and fills it with tranquility.¹⁰

Depression does tremendous damage. Use every ploy you can think of to bring yourself to joy.¹¹

May my heart light up with joy for the sake of Your Name, until the joy spreads to my hands and feet, and I clap and dance in holy ecstasy. Thus, all harsh judgments will be overturned, and love and compassion will prevail.¹²

Help me know the ways of true joy, that I may enlist all depression to join the dance of my gladness. Thus may all forms of sadness, all sighs and groans, be transformed into joy. Through joy, may I draw into myself the life force of holiness¹³

⁹ *Ibid.*, 111.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 99-100.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 109-110.

¹² *Flame of the Heart*, 37.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 31.

Merciful One, ... Who redeems us through joy, instill joy in our hearts. [We] are to strengthen ourselves with joy. At times we must force ourselves to be happy; for the essence of the soul is joy.¹⁴

What is "joy" in a nursing home, where the cause of suffering is old age, from which none of us recovers. I think that in the context of a nursing home joy is the absence of negative emotions like anger, bitterness, disappointment, and fear.

One of the chaplain's major tasks in any health care setting, but especially in a facility where suffering people often live for many years and from whence they will not depart except through death, is to facilitate the alleviation of at least some of the negative emotions that interfere with achieving acceptance and peace. For such people, acceptance and peace are the greatest blessings--i.e., the greatest joy--that the very old or very sick can experience.

Can a person in advanced old age review one's life, reassess what one has valued, reconsider the choices one has made, forgive oneself and others? My experiences at the nursing home have persuaded me that it is never too late to do so, at least for so long as a person retains his or her cognitive faculties. The Breslover belief is that in order to change, the only necessity is willingness. "May we never succumb to thinking of ourselves as old or incapable of change," says Rabbi Nathan; "rather, may we be bold as a leopard and light as an eagle, swift as a deer and strong as a lion, to carry out the will of our Father in Heaven."¹⁵

Alleviating sadness that persists despite effective pain management and/or psychotropic medications is a real challenge. After all, depression is objectively reasonable in the face of permanent disability, isolation, complete dependency on others, and the resulting loss of personal dignity and sense of self-worth. Many residents feel abandoned by their families, and many feel themselves (correctly, oftentimes) looked down upon or mistreated by staff. "Why would you

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 33-34.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 40.

ever want to spend time with *me*?" is a question I am asked disturbingly often. In this regard Nahman has a helpful teaching: "Always look for the good in yourself. Focus on that good, highlight it, and turn even depression into joy."¹⁶ It is the chaplain's job to repeatedly remind residents of their good qualities and strengths and gifts. It is remarkable how bringing to mind those aspects of themselves elevates them in their own eyes and relieves sadness, at least temporarily.

~*Finding peace in nature* Breslover spirituality emphasizes nature as a place for meditation and prayer. In natural surroundings, life is simpler--and richer--as our material needs and worries fade. In nature we can take restorative pleasure in God's creation. "Come, Beloved, let us go out to the field; let us lodge in the villages. Let us arise early to go to the vineyards; let us see if the vine has blossomed, if the tender grapes have opened, if the pomegranates have sprouted. There I will give my love to You. " The speaker of these verses (7:12-13) of *The Song of Songs* is understood by the Kabbalists to be God: God beckons us to the fruitful spaces to meet God and enjoy God's beauty and fullness. "Master of the Universe," Rabbi Nathan prays,

Let me seclude myself in meditation and prayer ..., going out to the fields to meditate among the trees and grass, pouring out my heart in prayer. ... All the trees and plants of the field will merge with my words and prayers.¹⁷

And Rebbe Nahman: "As often as you can, take a trip out to the fields to pray. All the grasses will join you. They will enter your prayers and give you strength to sing praises to God."¹⁸

Weather permitting, I take residents outdoors as often as possible. I push their wheelchairs up and down the sidewalks bordering the facility, directing their attention to the sensations of touch (wind on the face and in the hair), hearing (birdsong and the whooshing of the breeze

¹⁶ *Empty Chair*, 33.

¹⁷ *Flame of the Heart*, 57.

¹⁸ *Empty Chair*, 80.

through the trees), sight (the blue of the sky and movement of the clouds, the multiple greens of the grass, bushes, and tree foliage, the shapes and colors of the hostas and flowers), and smell (the fragrance of flowers; if it is newly-mown, the grass; if it is autumn, that indescribable autumny fragrance in the air). I remember the value of mindfulness for quieting thoughts and enhancing sensory perception. So I pause over and comment on the plants in the gardens-- platelike yellow achillea, impatiens of varying intensities of purple, the periwinkle blue of the star-shaped cranesbill, the cobalt of spiky, tall Russian sage, and the varying shapes and sizes of hosta leaves. Flowers that have a pleasant aroma I pick for the residents to smell. Hearing, touch, and smell are particularly important senses on which to focus with blind residents.

Invariably, after a walk in the gardens residents tell me that they feel *refreshed*; and I know that they are referring to the effect on their hearts and spirits.

~*The four worlds* Rebbe Naḥman taught the Kabbalistic principle that the cosmos consists of four co-existing worlds: *Olam ha-Asiyah*, the material world that we humans inhabit, the physical world of action; *Olam ha-Yetzirah*, the world in which the Divine acts in history; *Olam ha-Bri'ah*, the realm of God's creative energy and of the angels; and, finally, *Olam ha-Atzilut*, the wholly spiritual realm, which is comprised entirely of God. These worlds are ascending levels of being, from what is seen to what is unseen, from the bounded and historical to the boundless and eternal.

For me, the four worlds of Kabbalah loosely (but meaningfully) correspond to the four floors at the nursing home where I work. The first floor contains a short-term rehabilitation unit, for people who are essentially mobile and cognitively intact but whose bodies are recovering from various illnesses or surgeries so that they can resume their lives outside a nursing home. The

patients in the rehabilitation unit may have significant physical limitations but they remain pretty firmly rooted in the world of *Asiyah*.

On the second and third floors of the nursing home reside individuals who can no longer care for themselves due to multiple physical disabilities and/or significant dementia. The majority of these residents are mobile to some degree, getting around either with walkers or (chiefly) propelling themselves in wheelchairs, and are sufficiently intact cognitively to recognize and enjoy the company of family and friends, eat without help, and listen to the radio or watch television; some are capable of playing cards or bingo or attending religious services. But on the second and third floors there are also individuals whose cognitive faculties are so impaired that they do not know where they are or the identity of family or staff, and they may be stuck in some memory--occasionally pleasant but more often unpleasant or even traumatic. In the middle, so to speak, are those residents who are no longer mobile; some can be gotten out of bed and some cannot, or at least do not, get out of bed at all. Many of the non-mobile still have sufficient cognitive ability to meaningfully converse or to read or listen to a radio or watch television. And many, like their more active fellow residents, still harbor the resentments, anxieties, and concerns that accumulated over their long lifetimes.

Also on the home's second and third floors are a substantial number of blind or mostly blind people as well as many who are deaf. The blind and the deaf are, not surprisingly, extremely isolated from the other people residing or working at the nursing home, and have very limited levels of independence.

The residents of the second and third floors can be understood--and appreciated and loved--as straddling the worlds of *Yetzirah* and *Bri'ah*. They are no longer firmly rooted in the everyday world of *Asiyah*, yet the things of this world continue, on the whole, to matter to them--the

quality of their food, their health, whether they won anything at bingo, the attitudes of the staff, and the attentions of their family and friends, if they have any. Yet each of them is acutely conscious that the Angel of Death is approaching, and each, in his or her own way, is emotionally and spiritually preparing for that encounter. In other words, these residents have one foot in the lower worlds and the other foot in the higher worlds.

On the fourth floor of the nursing home there are two units. One is a "regular" unit, home to many of the most severely disabled and demented residents. The other unit is the "memory care" unit, which houses Alzheimer's patients at the furthest extreme of cognitive loss. This is a locked unit, although not many patients are likely to escape unaided since most of them are too confused to do so. Some few respond with a smile to a hug or the stroking of cheeks or hair. Many, however, appear entirely impassive or uncomprehending. The patients in the memory care unit are often thought of as the living dead.

We on the outside of the memory-care unit generally perceive (perhaps because we are socially conditioned to do so) the progression into disability and dementia as a descent to a lower state of being. With Alzheimer's dementia, neurons die and the brain shrinks until those facets of ourselves enabled by the brain, namely, language, reasoning, sensory processing, memory, and thought--in short, consciousness--cease to function. We usually see the loss of consciousness as the loss of self. However, we could understand consciousness to be only one of several manifestations of self, or put Kabbalistically, as a garment of the soul. Thus, as dementia progresses, the garments of the soul--physical mobility, memory, language, etc.--fall away, revealing pure soul. In this understanding, a dementia patient is making not a descent but an *ascent* toward pure being in God, the realm of *Atzilut*.

To see advanced dementia this way transforms how one experiences the presence of seriously demented persons and how one interacts with them. In the presence of someone existing in the realm of *Atzilut*, I feel awe. The awe arises, I think, from the almost visceral sensation of the nearness of the Divine realm and from the certain knowledge that I too am destined for that place.¹⁹

~*Devekut* *Devekut*, cleaving to God, has become an important practice for me since coming to the nursing home. As I get into my car to drive to the home, close the door, and turn the key in the ignition, I begin to leave other thoughts behind me. I cultivate the sense that, as I drive closer and closer to the nursing home, I am coming closer and closer to God.

"My soul cleaves to You; Your right hand supports me." ... Help me to cleave to You in all circumstances, ever mindful of Your presence, in purity and holiness. May my heart be directed toward this goal, always to remain bound to You.²⁰

Help me to recognize my own smallness and always remain aware of Your Presence, for without God it is impossible to lift a hand or a foot. In all my deeds, even while eating and drinking, help me to cleave to You [M]ay I hold fast to You and never forget You.²¹

When I strive to cleave to God, I center myself, shed the trivial, and make myself more available to the needs of others. Moreover, if I can succeed in my effort to cleave to God, perhaps I will

¹⁹ Interacting with people who have advanced dementia was a scary prospect for me when I first began working as a chaplain. Where was the *person* inside the broken shell of a body? How could I communicate with someone for whom communication was impossible? Could I tolerate the *silence*?

"No thought can grasp You. 'Unto You silence is praise,' for You are above all blessings and praises," taught Rebbe Nachman. (*Flame of the Heart*, p. 80) Silence is a fully appropriate way to interact with one who no longer understands words, who is approaching the condition of pure soul. Silence, accompanied by the holding of the individual's hand or an arm around her shoulders, is how love makes itself felt in such circumstances. Silence is a tribute of deepest respect.

²⁰ *Flame of the Heart*, 49.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 53.

bring with me a resonance of God's Presence when I enter a room to visit a resident. That is my fervent hope.

~*Faith* Rebbe Naḥman proclaimed faith to be essential to the spiritual life. He advised building faith not only in God but also in oneself.²²

Affirm your faith in yourself:

~ I believe that I am very important in God's eyes.

~ I believe that I can return, no matter how far I've strayed.

~ I believe that I have the inner strength to change.

~ I believe that I can become truly devoted and close to God.²³

In general, I consider it arrogant, not to mention futile, to try to convert someone to a belief in God if he or she has none. I have observed that as people without faith grow very old they generally tend in one of two directions. They either find their atheism confirmed by the felt injustice of pain, disability, and loss. Or, as worldly concerns fall away, together with physical energy and the ability to engage in customary activities, they begin to experience a sense of "something more." It would be insulting to speak of God to the former type of people--they have drawn their own conclusions from life, which are due complete respect. However, for the latter type of people, Naḥman's teaching about faith in oneself can be helpful. The teaching highlights the value of the individual and the inner strengths we retain even after the body has failed us. Such faith can increase optimism, a sense of self-worth, and acceptance of being in a nursing home. And a feeling of closeness to God can ease the fear of death.

I find that many, many people *want* to believe in "something more." The simplicity and accessibility of this teaching of Rebbe Naḥman's can help create a bridge between the nay-saying brain and the yea-saying heart.

²² *Empty Chair*, 68.

²³ *Ibid.*, 69.

~*Conclusion* My exposure this semester to Kabbalah has deepened my spiritual sensitivities. How can I harness those deepened sensitivities to benefit the people I encounter at the nursing home? "The light of the Infinite One is without form and only takes shape--for good or bad--in the recipient," teaches Rebbe Nahman. "Therefore it is up to us. We have to do our best to shape God's light into blessing."²⁴ It is for me to give shape to the light I experience so that I may become a deeper listener and have greater empathy for the suffering persons I serve. May I learn to empty myself so as to become a vessel that receives light from above and warms others with it.²⁵ "Enlighten me with holy wisdom, with understanding, and with knowledge, so that I will be able to radiate spirituality and shine forth to others."²⁶

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 57.

²⁵ *Your Word is Fire*, edited and translated by Arthur Green and Barry W. Holtz (Schocken 1977), 12.

²⁶ *The Flame of the Heart*, 39.