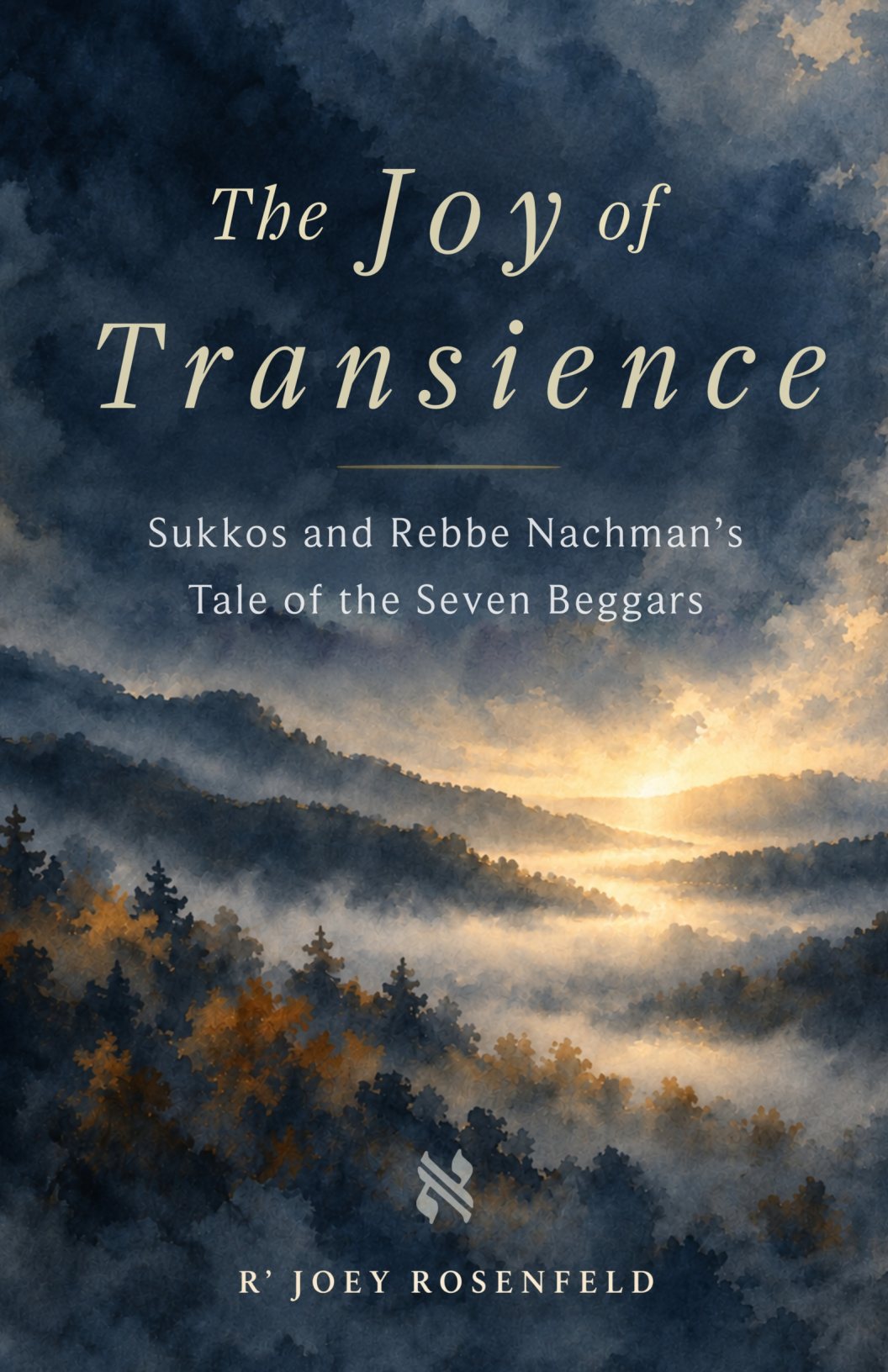




The Joy of Transience

Sukkos and Rebbe Nachman's
Tale of the Seven Beggars



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Introduction

Dwelling in the Dirt

“I will tell you how once upon a time people were joyous (from within despondency).”

It is the marriage of the lost children, a boy and a girl, who were forced to run away after some undefined event which left them lost and alone in a darkening forest. Realizing that they were all alone, they began to cry out to Hashem for help, when suddenly a stranger, a beggar of sorts, appeared in the forest offering them food and drink. After receiving help from the enigmatic stranger, the children came to realize that he was, in fact, blind. The lost children begged him to stay with them, but he refused. He simply fed them and blessed them that they should live a long life just like him.

This happened six more times; after crying out to Hashem from the darkness in the forest, the lost children were visited by another enigmatic beggar; the only difference was that each of the visitors had, what appeared to be, a different deficiency. There was the blind beggar and the deaf beggar and the stuttering beggar and the crooknecked beggar and the hunchbacked beggar and the handless beggar and the legless beggar. Each time the beggars offered them food, the children

pleaded with them to stay, but instead they each blessed the children that they should be like them before departing back into the darkened forest.

After the seventh beggar came and went, the children were left to fend for themselves, yearning and begging for sustenance everywhere they went. Joining together with a band of beggars, the boy and girl, who were lost in the forest grew older, and it was decided amongst the beggars that these two lost children should be married. But how could beggars make a wedding? From where would the sustenance arrive?

It was decided that on the day of the great fair in the city, when all members of the kingdom joined together, the beggars would come and gather leftovers from the food and drink. The beggars then dug a large pit deep into the mud that could hold up to one hundred people. They covered the pit with twigs, branches, and whatever else they could find, and the marriage of the lost children took place with great joy and illumination.

Reflecting upon their joy and the process it took to get to where they were now, the lost children remembered the early days of kindness and grace when the seven beggars visited them in the forest, offering them food and drink, blessing them that they should be like them. Craving for the days of the past, the bride and groom yearned for the beggars, and suddenly they appeared. “Here I am,” each one said, and one after another they came to offer a blessing at the wedding.

They said to the bride and groom: “Back then in the forest we blessed you that you should be like us, but now we are here to give you the gift that you should really be like us. For while it appears that we are deficient, in truth, each deficiency reflects a profound spiritual strength that must be hidden in order for it to be revealed.

“You thought I was blind, but, in truth, I simply don’t look at the darkness of this world for I am so old that I remember a blinding light from a world beyond this one. You thought I was deaf, but, in truth, I simply refuse to listen to the cries that emerge from within frustration and lack, for I have heard a song of the good life and my ears only have space for good things. You thought I was stuttering, but, in truth, I sing songs of the future, words so precise and powerful that they can’t be spoken yet. You thought I was crooknecked, but, in truth, I just know the secret of breath, the work of patience and calm. You thought I was hunchbacked, but, in truth, I simply know what it means to care for another person, to ease the burdensome weight we all walk around with. You thought I was handless, but in truth my hands are so fast that they can fix things even before they break; hands of healing that build rather than destroy.”

The above story is part of the Tale of Seven Beggars, as told by Rebbe Nachman of Breslov to his disciple Rebbe Nosson. (Regarding the Legless Beggar and his blessing, Rebbe Nachman did not complete the tale, and as per Rebbe Nosson, we must pray for the arrival of the legless beggar who will dance the dance of Moshiach ben Dovid.)

Let us understand. The joy of the wedding takes place within a pit, covered over with twigs, branches, and leaves. How can it be that the joy of unity takes place within such a sunken place, covered over with shade? How can it be that the lost children find joy again within this world?

When we look at the nature of the sukkah, we gain a little bit more insight. Like a pit dug into the mud, the sukkah is a temporary dwelling, exposed to nature and vulnerable like the dirt. Like the twigs and leaves that covered the wedding pit, we cover our sukkah with s'chach, the leftovers from last year's harvest. Like the seven beggars who came to offer their blessings, the seven Usphizin come to bless us in our sukkah. Sukkos is a time of delicate joy, a subtle and humble calmness of spirit that is joyous with its lot, both materially and spiritually. While it appears to be the opposite of what we may have expected, the transience of the sukkah, like the loveliness of the pit, can teach us a lot about being human in the service of Hashem.

Joy from Within

When Rebbe Nachman began telling this tale to Rebbe Nosson, he exclaimed, “I will tell you how once upon a time they were happy. Rav Avraham ben R’Nachman added that in truth Rebbe Nachman added the words “from within despondency.”

Rebbe Nachman is always revealing to us the secret of a joy that is built from within rather than imposed from without, the secret of endless hope which reveals that we are never more than one step away from the holy of holies, the calm joy of the soul in its illumination. When Rebbe Nosson edited Rebbe Nachman’s “Tales of Ancient Days,” he did not include the words “from within despondency,” it was only added later on in the writings of R’ Avraham ben R’ Nachman.

The question is why the shift? The Gaon and Tzaddik R’ Yitzchak Meir Morgenstern shlit”a explained that while the role of R’ Avraham ben R’ Nachman was to record everything that was said, the job of Rebbe Nosson was to reveal only that which was needed for practical divine service. When it comes to what we need to know, we need to only know the secret of joy — joyous joy — flowing from a place of enoughness and calm. But when it comes to understanding the origin of joy — the possibility of happiness in this world — it must emerge from within the darkened forest of this world, where for but a moment things appear dark, only to give way to the blinding light of faithful joy and the joy of faith.

A House in the Air

At the heart of Rebbe Nachman's tale of the Seven Beggars stand two lost children and seven beggars, each marked by a different bodily lack. The children find one another and are married inside a pit dug into the earth and covered with branches. One after another, the beggars return to the wedding and reveal that every apparent deficiency concealed an immeasurable gift. The broken figures who once appeared to possess nothing now arrive bearing gifts that could not have emerged from any ordinary form of wholeness.

The story unfolds beneath a roof that is barely a roof, inside a dwelling that is barely a dwelling. The children possess no palace, no foundation, and no ordinary protection. Their wedding takes place in a hollow covered by twigs and branches, and it is precisely there that the hidden gifts of the beggars are revealed. This image offers a way into the entire tale. The Seven Beggars is a story of what becomes possible when the structures upon which a person ordinarily relies have fallen away. It asks whether one can discover fullness within lack, permanence within transience, and a joy that does not wait for the world to become secure.

For this reason, the story can be approached through the inner light of *Sukkot*. Each of the seven beggars corresponds to one of the *ushpizin*, the seven holy guests who enter the *sukkah*. The

wedding of the lost children, held in a pit beneath a covering of branches, bears the form of the *sukkah* itself. And the deepest movement of the tale follows the movement of *Sukkot*: leaving the solid house, entering the fragile dwelling, and learning that the place that seemed to offer no ground may become the place in which faith, joy, and life are most deeply revealed.

The Joy That Stands Beside Impermanence

Sukkot is *zman simchateinu*, the season of our joy. After the exertion of *Elul*, *Rosh Hashanah*, the *Aseret Yemei Teshuvah*, and *Yom HaKippurim*, we pass from the left side of severity into the embrace of the right: *yemino techabkeini*. The clenched spirit begins to loosen. The body, heart, and mind are invited to put down their defenses and enter a place of *chesed*, openness, and *menuchah*. *Simchah* is the capacity to receive the present moment without terror, to inhabit it with an open heart, and to feel, even now, that nothing essential is missing.

Yet everything about *Sukkot* appears to undermine the very stability that joy seems to require. We leave the permanence of the house for a temporary dwelling: *tzei mi-dirat keva ve-shev bi-dirat arai*. The walls are frail, the roof allows us to see what lies beyond it, and the structure is exposed to the elements. We read *Kobelet*, whose *bevel havalim* brings us face-to-face with transience, death, isolation, and the inability of worldly achievement to provide a lasting place upon which to rest. At

the moment we are commanded to rejoice, we are also asked to remember that nothing here remains in our grasp.

These are not two teachings placed awkwardly beside one another. The *Torah* is not asking us to enjoy the festival while looking away from everything that threatens our joy. Nor does it ask us to split ourselves in two, permitting one part to feast while another part quietly trembles before the passing of all things. The contradiction itself is the entrance. *Sukkot* brings joy and impermanence into the same dwelling because its joy is born only when the instability of life has been allowed fully into the room.

This is not a compromise in which joy becomes less joyous and loss becomes less real. It is the secret of paradox, *trein hafachim be-nosei echad*: two opposites borne within a single reality without either surrendering its truth. The awareness that the moment will not last does not destroy the moment. It awakens us to enter it more completely. The knowledge that nothing can be possessed forever does not empty love of its force. It makes love fierce: *azah kamavet ahavah*, love as strong as death. Transience does not stand outside joy as its enemy. When received through *emunah*, it becomes the opening through which a deeper joy can be born.

The Space Beneath the Sechach

The first discussions of *Masechet Sukkah* ask how high a *sukkah* may be. At first, our attention is drawn upward toward the *sechach*, the covering that gives the *sukkah* its shade. Yet the language of the Gemara elsewhere brings the essence of the dwelling into sharper focus: *chalal sukkah ba'inan*. What is required is the inner space of the *sukkah*, the open, voided space contained beneath its covering. The defining reality of the *sukkah* is not only what shelters it from above, but the emptiness into which a person enters.

The *mitzvah* therefore asks us to inhabit a *chalal*. We step into a place that has not already been made permanent, explained, or secured. The empty air of the *sukkah* becomes the body of the dwelling. It is not meaningless because it is empty; its emptiness is the condition that allows another kind of meaning to emerge. We do not fill it by denying its openness. We enter the openness and discover that it can become a vessel.

This *chalal* echoes the *chalal hapanui*, the vacant space within which creation becomes possible. The *tzimtzum* does not mean that HaKadosh Baruch Hu is absent in any literal sense. The apparent void is itself a mode of concealment, a hidden presence revealed as absence. What appears empty is not outside Him. It is the garment through which a world can exist, a world in which concealment makes room for longing, choice, faith, and discovery.

The *sukkah* asks a person to meet this truth within life. There are spaces in which knowledge fails, familiar structures collapse, and meaning can no longer be taken for granted. The instinct is to flee from such places or cover them quickly with explanations. But the *chalal* of the *sukkah* teaches that emptiness need not be erased before it can be inhabited. One may breathe within it. One may find that the very place that seemed vacant is filled with the concealed breath of HaKadosh Baruch Hu.

Building Where There Is No Ground

The sages of Athens once challenged *Chazal*: *Bani lan beita ba'avira de'alma*, build us a house in the air of the world. The request was meant as ridicule. A house needs earth beneath it. It needs stones, measurements, and a foundation. To speak of a dwelling suspended between heaven and earth seems to speak of an impossibility.

Yet this impossible structure is precisely the Jewish dwelling. The first movement of Avraham Avinu is *lech lecha*: leave the land, the birthplace, and the father's house that defined you, and travel toward a land that will be shown only later. The first act is an act of exile from certainty. Avraham does not abandon wisdom; he discovers that wisdom reaches its purpose only when it opens into *emunah*. The deepest knowledge is *tachlit hayedi'ah shelo neida*, the end of knowing is to know that we do not know.

The nations of the world ask how a people can live without the ordinary ground upon which identity and certainty are built. *Klal Yisrael* answers by entering the *sukkah*. We do not claim that instability has disappeared. We build within it. We suspend ourselves between heaven and earth and discover that HaKadosh Baruch Hu is present within the *avira de'alma*, within the open air itself. The dwelling does not become permanent by ceasing to be fragile. It becomes a home because faith has learned how to inhabit fragility.

This is the meaning of *tzeila demehemnuta*, the shade of faith. The *sukkah* offers no shade of absolute knowledge. It does not promise that the mind will understand why things are as they are, when they will change, or what they will become. Its comfort is not the comfort of control. It is the quiet that comes when a person releases the demand to master existence and rests beneath a shade that cannot be grasped.

The Strength Hidden Inside Lack

This movement stands at the heart of the Seven Beggars. Each beggar arrives bearing what appears to be a defect. One cannot see, another cannot hear, another cannot speak, and each of those who follows seems diminished in a different way. Yet every apparent lack is eventually revealed as the outer form of a capacity too whole and too expansive to be measured by ordinary standards. Their brokenness is not merely repaired. It is disclosed as the concealment of another order of perfection.

This does not mean that lack is denied or renamed. The tale does not erase the contradiction by pretending that deficiency is simply completeness. It leads the listener into the inner point at which the two can be held together. The beggars are lacking and they are whole. The children are lost and they are being led. The wedding takes place in poverty, yet gifts of immeasurable richness enter the pit. Again and again, the story places us inside the paradox of the *sukkah*: apparent emptiness becoming a vessel for a presence that could not have been received in any other form.

The capacity to remain in that paradox is not passive resignation. It is the spiritual strength to stop demanding that reality become graspable before one consents to live. Human beings reach instinctively for what is solid: a definition, an explanation, a structure that will guarantee what comes next. The beggars lead us elsewhere. They reveal forms of life that exceed the measurements by which we ordinarily determine ability, success, and wholeness. Their gifts emerge from the very places in which those measurements fail.

Music from the Empty Place

The joy of *Sukkot* is expressed through the *Simchat Beit HaSho'evah*, through water, dancing, breath, and song. Its central instrument is the *chalil*, whose name carries the sound of *chalal*. Music is born because breath enters a hollow place. A person empties the breath from within, gives it to an empty instrument, and the meeting of these two emptinesses becomes melody. The hollow is not an obstacle to the song. It is what allows the song to exist.

This image reveals something essential about the joy that accompanies the tale. Joy does not always emerge after the hollow places have been filled. Sometimes it is the sound made within them. The *chalal* remains a *chalal*, but breath moves through it. Meaning does not abolish meaninglessness as though the question had never been asked. It enters the open space and transforms it into a place from which new life can be heard.

Dancing expresses the same paradox through the body. One foot stands upon the ground while the other rises from it. The dancer is rooted and suspended at once. The movement acknowledges that the ground is not possessed, that it may give way, and nevertheless the body rises into joy. The dance of *Sukkot* is not forgetfulness. It is the decision to enter the moment with greater fullness because the moment cannot be held forever.

This is the joy offered by the Seven Beggars. The lost children do not wait to recover the world they once knew before they marry. Their joy is built inside the pit. The celebration does not depend upon an ordinary house, because the beggars bring gifts that reveal another kind of dwelling. The tale itself becomes a *chalil*: a story whose hollow spaces carry a melody that cannot be produced by certainty alone.

The Palace Made Entirely of Water

The image reaches one of its most luminous expressions in the story of the handless beggar. He appears unable to touch, build, or act, yet his apparent powerlessness conceals the truest and swiftest hands. In the account through which he reveals his gift, the princess of *emunah* is hidden within a *mivtzar shel mayim*, a palace made entirely of water. It has ten walls, one within another. Its ground, its trees, and its fruit are all water. It is a palace made from the very substance that seems unable to stand.

The wonder of the palace lies in this union of form and formlessness. Water moves, spreads, descends, and refuses to hold a fixed shape. A palace stands, encloses, protects, and endures. The *mivtzar shel mayim* holds both truths at once. It is instability that has become a dwelling without surrendering its fluidity, a structure whose walls remain water. Like the *sukkah*, it is a house that does not overcome transience but is built from within it.

Those who pursue the princess cannot enter, because whoever steps inside will sink. Ordinary power cannot move through a world in which no solid ground is available. The handless beggar, however, belongs to the truth of that place. His hands are not the hands that seize and secure. His strength emerges from the union of *chochmah* and *emunah*, from knowledge placed in the service of what cannot be known. He can ascend and descend within the palace and play the song that heals the fallen faith of *Klal Yisrael*.

The palace of water is therefore not an isolated marvel inside the sixth beggar's story. It gathers the movement of the entire tale into a single image. The children, the pit, the branches, the bodily lacks of the beggars, and the gifts concealed within them all lead toward this possibility: a person can live where the mind cannot establish firm ground. One can find order within what remains fluid, presence within concealment, and the power to act precisely where ordinary grasp has fallen away.

The Permanence of the Temporary Dwelling

Yaakov Avinu travels to *Sukkot* and builds himself a house: *Yaakov nasa Sukkotah vayiven lo bayit*. The movement is striking. He enters the place of the temporary dwelling and calls it a home. The strength of a Jew is not to look at instability and deny it, nor to transform the *arai* into *keva* by stripping it of everything that makes it temporary. A *sukkah* must remain a

sukkah. Its walls are still fragile, its roof is still made of growth cut from the ground, and its air is still open to what lies beyond it.

Yet the temporary dwelling becomes the truest home when a person ceases to seek permanence where it cannot be found. The only stability available within this world is the willingness to receive its transience and to lean fully into the moment that has been given. *Simchah* draws a person out of the ruminations of the past and the anxieties of the future. It gathers the dispersed self into the life that is present now.

This is also the path of Dovid HaMelech and *Sukkat Dovid hanofelet*, the fallen *sukkah* of Dovid. Dovid possesses nothing of his own, not even the years of his life. His existence moves through falling and rising, having and not having, knowing and not knowing. Yet he reveals that a structure can be perpetually falling and still become the dwelling of *Malchut*. Its truth lies not in never collapsing, but in the life that rises from within every fall.

The Seven Beggars belong to this falling and rising dwelling. Its world begins in rupture. Its protagonists are children without protection, and its teachers arrive disguised as the broken. But the tale does not lead away from those conditions toward a more conventional security. It reveals the holiness already concealed inside them. The pit becomes a wedding hall. The

beggars become bearers of blessing. The disability becomes a gift. The story becomes a vessel for a longing that continues beyond the point at which ordinary understanding falls silent.

Entering the Tale

To enter the Seven Beggars is therefore to enter the *chalal sukkah*. It is to step beneath a fragile covering and consent, for a time, to release the ordinary demand that everything be settled in advance. The tale does not surrender its secrets all at once. It asks the reader to remain with images that exceed explanation, with opposites that refuse to be flattened, and with gifts that can be recognized only when familiar measures of wholeness have been suspended.

The essays that follow seek to remain inside that space. They do not treat the story merely as a sequence of symbols to be decoded and put away. They listen to the movement that joins its many images: loss and marriage, hunger and bread, disability and perfection, emptiness and presence, water and walls, exile and home. Through each beggar and each gift, the tale opens another chamber within the palace, another pocket of air in which *emunah* can breathe.

The invitation is not to understand everything. The invitation is to allow understanding to lead toward its own horizon, to the place where knowledge becomes humble enough to receive what lies beyond it. There, within the space of *lo yode'a kelum*, not

knowing anything at all, the mind does not collapse. It becomes open. The apparent void becomes *avira dachya*, purified air, and the shade of uncertainty becomes *tzeila demehemnuta*.

This is the house that Rebbe Nachman builds in the air of the world. It stands without denying the water beneath it. It shelters without sealing us away from the sky. It gives a home to the lost and allows joy to rise from the place where certainty ends. We enter it as the children entered their wedding dwelling: beneath branches, within the earth, carrying nothing that could guarantee what will come next. And there, one by one, the beggars return.

Joy from Within Despondency

At the beginning of the *Idra Rabba*, Rebbe Shimon bar Yochai gathers his *chavraya* and asks, *Ad eimat neitiv bekayma bechad samcha?* How long will the world stand upon one pillar? How long can it continue to teeter, balancing back and forth and shaking us with it? The world must be strengthened and arranged so that it can become not merely what it is, but what it is meant to be. Yet Rebbe Shimon begins to cry: *Vai igalina, vai i lo igalina*, woe to me if I reveal these things, and woe to me if I do not.

This is the ambivalence born in the space of necessity. It gives rise to a form of a new Torah that contains within itself the uncertainty of whether it may be spoken at all. The revelation emerges from doubt and carries the doubtful character of its time. In this way, the teaching does not simply answer the doubt; it gathers the doubt into itself and elevates it. Rabbi Shimon saw the world teetering at its edge. He felt that *baal habayit dochek*, that the Master of the house was pressing. There was a *dechikah*, a constriction and intensity through which everything was felt more potently. Precisely then, Rabbi Shimon revealed to his *chavraya* the deepest secrets of *tikkun*, the rectification of the world.

Rebbe Nachman explicitly associated his own revelation of Torah with the *avodah* of Rebbe Shimon bar Yochai. As R' Yitzchak Meir Morgenstern explains in the name of the Breslover *tzaddikim*, these figures belong to the *tzaddikei hadorot*. They reveal a particular Torah not because it is intellectually stimulating, but because it has become necessary. These are teachings upon which a person's survival may depend. When the pressure rises and the waters reach a height that can no longer be ignored, the *tzaddikim* begin to reveal what could not have been revealed before.

Rebbe Nachman underwent this transition toward the end of his brief life. He lived only thirty-nine years, yet those years allowed him to see *misof haolam vead sofo*, from one end of the world to the other. His words were not spoken only for those who first heard them. As R' Nosson repeatedly teaches, they were spoken for every generation, *ad biat haMashiach*. Rebbe Nachman himself declared, *Eish sheli tukad ad biat haMashiach*—my fire will burn until the coming of Mashiach.

The Torah That Awakens Sleeping Souls

For years, Rebbe Nachman delivered teachings that were at once complex and simple, moving from the heights of the Arizal and the Chazal to the most direct and ordinary counsel. Yet in Torah Samech, the sixtieth teaching in *Likutei Moharan*, he describes a Torah higher than the Torah we ordinarily know: the Torah of *Atika Stimaah*, the concealed Ancient One, a *Torah chadashah* capable of awakening souls that have fallen into such profound sleep that nothing else can rouse them.

There are times when painful change descends upon the world and the *Malach haMavet* seems to have been unleashed. A kind of unconsciousness overtakes the individual. The heart breaks, pessimism takes hold, and a person becomes *meyaesh* of himself, of the *klal*, and of the world. Every fragment of hope appears only to fall away before the questions arising from the *chalal hapanui*: What if it is not so? What if you are wrong? What if things do not become better? What if this suffering is not a step toward something greater?

When even the irreducible remainder of the self seems to ebb away, Rebbe Nachman teaches that only the Torah of *Atika Stimaah* can awaken the soul. What is this Torah? It is *sipurei maasiyot mishanim kadmoniyot*, tales of ancient days. These stories carry us back to a time before time, while drawing that ancient time into the present. They come from a place beyond ordinary duration, where a moment can be unimaginably brief and endlessly long at once. The Torah of those ancient days is the Torah of stories.

Near the end of his life, Rebbe Nachman said of himself that he was exceedingly young and exceedingly old at the same time. He came to feel that his teachings were not accomplishing what they needed to accomplish among his *chasidim*. This is nearly impossible for us to understand. He was surrounded by *gedolei olam*, including Rebbe Nossan, and his Torah is *Kodesh haKodashim*. Yet in whatever sense such a statement may be understood, even those teachings were not awakening the souls or the world as they needed to be awakened.

Rebbe Nachman therefore announced, *Hitchalti lesaper sipurim*, I have begun to tell stories. In the introduction to the first of the thirteen tales, *The Lost Princess*, he says, *Hayiti baderech*, I was traveling along the way, and then began to tell a story.

The Road Where Stories Begin

A *derech* is the liminal space between home and the world beyond it. It awakens a sense of *tirda*, of distraction, disturbance, and uncertainty. In the opening teaching of *Resisei Lailah*, Rav Tzadok HaKohen of Lublin interprets *uvelechtech vадerech* as a time of *tirda*, distraction and heaviness. He connects this idea to the *sugya* of the *chatan*, who is exempt from *Kriat Shema* on the first night of his marriage because he is preoccupied. A *derech* already implies difficulty, concealment, bewilderment, and the loss of clarity.

Rav Tzadok teaches that this world itself is called a *derech*. This world is a road because it is a place of overwhelmingness, a space in which *tsebrochenkeit* and brokenness obscure the mind's light. He also connects this to the language Chazal use for death, *nach nafshei*: the soul has finally found rest. This world is the opposite of calmness. Only when the soul departs from it does it taste complete repose.

When Rebbe Nachman says, *Hayiti baderech vehitchalti lesaper sipurim*, I was on the road, and I began to tell stories, the setting is essential. The stories of *Atika Stimaah* awaken a person from the existential slumber brought on by confusion, anxiety, doubt, and not knowing. These are the conditions encountered upon the *derech* of life, and it is specifically there that Rebbe Nachman begins to tell his tales.

Rebbe Nachman told far more stories than the thirteen tales with which we are most familiar. Tzvi Mark's *Kol Sipurei Rebbe Nachman MiBreslov* gathers many additional stories, dreams, and fantasies. Yet among the *Sipurei Maasiyot Mishanim Kadmoniyot*, the thirteenth and final tale occupies a unique place. Rebbe Nachman began telling the tale of the Seven Beggars on Friday night, Parashat Shemini, March 30, 1809. In the Breslover tradition, and in Rebbe Nachman's own words, it is the story at the heart of all the stories. It is the story of stories.

The Story of Stories

At the end of the tale, Rebbe Nosson records Rebbe Nachman's statement that even had he come into the world only to tell this one story, his life would have had sufficient purpose. He was referring to the bare narrative itself, not to its interpretation or symbolism. This is a feverishly bewildering tale, filled with stories within stories, corners that become doorways, and doorways that become corners. Yet simply to tell it would have justified his coming into the world.

Elsewhere, *Chayei Moharan* records that Rebbe Nachman told Rebbe Nosson it would have been worthwhile to travel for days to a distant town, stand before the congregation during prayer, strike the *bimah*, and tell the bare narrative of this story in place of delivering a *shiur beiyun*.

We therefore approach the Seven Beggars without pretending to offer a definitive interpretation. The *tzaddikim* have already

cautioned that this is not the purpose of the stories. Breslover *mashpiim* traditionally read the narrative itself on Shabbat morning after *Shacharit*, without attempting to master its symbolism or force it into a thematic structure.

Nevertheless, we can listen for the moods the story evokes and for the human spaces it opens. In our own moment, we are all beggars. We are bewildered, uncertain where tomorrow's sustenance will come from, and unable to know what will happen next. The world seems always to anticipate something immense without knowing whether it will be good or, *chas veshalom*, otherwise. Like the beggar awaiting a gift, we remain in need, desire, yearning, and hope. We hope against hope and desire even when desire appears to have reached its end.

The Light Hidden Within Deficiency

At first glance, the Seven Beggars is structured by destitution, darkness, and concealment. Its world is *geferlech*: broken, impoverished, empty, needy, and anxious. It is marked by loss and homelessness, by *unheimlichkeit*, the unsettling experience of what should be familiar becoming strange. There is grief, a descent from *malchut*, and the repeated appearance of disability and weakness.

Yet Rebbe Nachman turns the appearance of the story toward its root. Rebbe Nosson often writes, *Yesh inyan shbeyit'hapech hakol*, there is a way in which everything can be transformed. What appears profoundly dark can be grasped at its source and revealed as its opposite. The darkness is not simply removed so that

goodness may replace it. That would be the path of *itkafya*, of subduing the negative. Here, the movement is *ithapcha*: the apparent deficiency itself is transformed. In the very place of disability and lack, the story uncovers singularity, power, and hope.

Torah Reish Pei Beis teaches the need to find *nekudot tovot* and to be *dan et kol adam lekaf zechut*. We must judge another person favorably and, still more urgently, learn to judge ourselves, the world, and even, *kavyachol*, Hashem favorably. This work asks us to look steadily at circumstances that appear frightening, overwhelming, and existentially annihilating, and to search within them for the point that remains good.

Rav Shlomo Elyashiv, the Leshem Shevo VeAchlamah, expressed this with singular clarity. Darkness, concealment, *safek*, worry, *bedidut*, isolation, and not knowing are all, in his vision, are all part of the *nora alilah al bnei adam*, the awesome design unfolding through human life. The Leshem lived with the Ramchal in his mind, just as Rav Kook lived with the Leshem. In their vision, however low existence appears to descend, it is perpetually being raised.

The *avodah* of Reish Pei Beit is therefore also the work of the Leshem, the Ramchal, Rav Kook, and all the *tzaddikim*: to confront darkness while believing that a movement toward light abides within it. The movement may be incremental, painfully slow, and almost imperceptible. Its outer appearance may be terrifying. Yet existence continues to move toward its ultimate *tachlit*, toward the way things are meant to be.

Entering the tales of ancient days allows us to inhabit a world of imagination for a moment and to loosen the grip of *marah shechorah*. The stories teach us to look at the world through Reish Pei Beis: to seek the *nekudot tovot*, to identify what remains present, real, and hopeful. Hopelessness may still abide, and overwhelmingness may define the hour, but a person can still say *af al pi kein*. Even here, where everything appears opposite to what we expected, points of light remain concealed within the darkness itself.

The Permission to Imagine

The stories are not limited to those capable of tracing every textual or Kabbalistic source. Certainly, countless pages can be written about their symbolism and their relationship to Kabbalah and *Midrashei Chazal*. Yet Rebbe Nachman knew that these stories were for the whole world. They are so elevated that they transcend ordinary distinctions and speak to a person wherever he may be. They are fairy tales, fantasies, imaginings born from the holy imagination of a holy *tzaddik*.

This gives us permission to imagine. We may imagine that a moment which is frightening, terrifying, and overwhelming can also be powerful, emergent, and moving toward a higher place. A story told about Rebbe Elimelech of Lizhensk, offers an entrance into this possibility.

The Shabbas That Entered the Week

Rebbe Elimelech and his brother, Rebbe Zusha, once spoke while walking along the road. On Shabbat, surrounded by their *chasidim*, dressed in Shabbat clothes and giving over Torah, they experienced the light of Shabbat on the level of *Atzilut*. The world seemed whole, unblemished, and unbroken. Yet they began to question whether that illumination was truly the holiness of Shabbat or merely the satisfaction of their own egos. Perhaps they felt elevated because the *chasidim* listened and nodded, because they wore their special garments, and because the entire gathering affirmed them.

They decided to test themselves. During the week, they would dress for Shabbat, gather their *chasidim*, conduct a *tish*, and speak words of Torah exactly as they did on Shabbat. If they felt the same ecstasy and illumination on an ordinary weekday, it would prove that their joy had never come from Shabbat at all. It would reveal that the experience was *shelo lishmah*, rooted in themselves.

They carried out the test and felt the same *bitlahavut* and *simchah* they experienced every Shabbat. The following morning, they met in alarm. Their fear appeared confirmed: all their spiritual excitement had been ego. Broken by the discovery, they hurried to their Rebbe, the Maggid of Mezritch, R' Dov Ber. They told him of their fear, their test, and its devastating result.

Before they could continue lamenting their lowly state, the Maggid silenced them. Why should they be surprised that they had pretended it was Shabbat and then felt the light of Shabbat? The power of Shabbat is so great that one can feel it even while pretending. Their weekday joy did not prove that the Shabbat experience was false. It revealed that the *koach* of Shabbat could enter even the place of imitation.

Holy imagination teaches that whether we stand consciously within holiness and comfort, or merely pretend for a moment that we are comforted and whole, the power of *emunah*, Shabbat, and HaKadosh Baruch Hu can still reach us. Even the fantastical narratives of *sipurei maasiyot mishanim kadmoniyot*, born from holy *dimyon*, can bring comfort. They can grant us a moment of being all right within a world spinning faster and faster.

As we enter the tale of the Seven Beggars, we may therefore take refuge in holy imagination. We may allow ourselves to believe, even if only in the form of an *as if*, that at the center of the world's darkness, fear, and anxiety, a process continues to move toward light.

Joy from Within Despondency

On Friday night, Parashat Shemini, in 1809, Rebbe Nachman sat in *shul*. He was already suffering from a lung disease and struggling to breathe. He knew that the end of his life was bound up with the lungs and with breath, themes that appear throughout *Likutei Moharan*.

Someone brought him a snuffbox with fragrant spices for the blessing of *borei minei besamim*. Rebbe Nosson records in *Chayei Moharan* that the box arrived with a letter explaining that it had been sent for the sake of happiness. When Rebbe Nachman heard this, he declared, “I will tell you how once they were happy. You think happiness comes from the snuff? I will tell you, *eich hayu smeichim*, how they were once happy.”

Unedited versions of *Chayei Moharan*, cited by Zvi Mark and discussed in *Biur HaLikutim*, preserve a fuller formulation. R’ Avraham ben Reb Nachman and R’ Alter Tepliker report that Rebbe Nachman said, *Asaper lachem eich hayu smeichim mitoch marah shechorah*, I will tell you how once they found joy from within despondency. The precision matters. This is not joy despite brokenness, nor joy that defeats and replaces it. It is joy emerging from the heart of brokenness itself.

We can picture Rebbe Nachman as a young man near the end of his life, still carrying an infinite task. *Nitzachti vaanatzeach*, I was victorious, and I will yet be victorious. *Gamarti veegmor*, I have completed, and I will yet complete. On that cold Friday night, he

promised to tell how people once found happiness from within despondency, and how the darkness of the world itself made possible a form of joy more powerful than the joy found in times of light.

In a time of light, light is no *chiddush*. It is obvious. The *chiddush* appears when *simchah* is outlined by *marah shechorah*, when joy takes form within despair, fear, and anxiety. The ability to discover *simchah* within hopelessness is the heart of the Seven Beggars. Its seven figures appear as creatures of deficiency, loss, desire, and absence. Yet in confronting the hidden and darker regions of human consciousness, including the natural fear of what tomorrow may bring, a person can find the materials of calm, comfort, excitement, and joy. There, too, are the weapons with which overwhelming darkness can be dispelled.

When No One Knows Who Speaks

The Seven Beggars is nearly impossible to follow. Its narrative is dense and folded into itself, almost a hyperexpression of the narrative movement of the *Zohar*, *lehavdil*. Rebbe Nachman tells stories within stories within stories until the reader no longer knows who is speaking.

The Jewish poet Paul Celan, *Hashem yikom damo*, who survived what happened yet ultimately lost his life in its aftermath, asked of *Shir HaShirim*: “who speaks to whom?” Something similar occurs when a person descends into a narrative of *kedushah* and *emunah*. The boundaries of speech become uncertain. Are we speaking while Hashem answers, or is Hashem speaking while we answer?

The loss of certainty about who speaks to whom belongs to the experience of *emunah*. It asks a person to remain in suspended knowledge, no longer demanding that rationality identify every level of the narrative, but allowing the story itself to carry him.

Before introducing the seven beggars, Rebbe Nachman gives two framing narratives. The first is the subject before us; the second leads toward the event that will send a community into the forest and leave behind two lost children. The connection between the opening frame and the later story is not immediately apparent. The transition seems abrupt, as though the tale has abandoned one world and entered another.

Yet the story is defined by the fact that it has no conclusion. Seven beggars are introduced, the final one a beggar without legs, but when the beggars later return, the seventh never arrives. The ending remains absent. Rebbe Nosson writes immediately after the tale that the *mesorah* is that only with the coming of Mashiach, *bimheirah beyameinu, teikef umiyad mamash*, will the seventh beggar appear and the story reach its conclusion. The commentators therefore teach that the opening of the tale is embedded within the ending we are still waiting to hear.

The King Who Gave Away His Kingdom in His Lifetime

The story begins with a king who had an only son and wished to transfer the kingdom to him during his own lifetime. In the Hebrew text, written by Rebbe Nosson at Rebbe Nachman's instruction alongside the original Yiddish, the words are "*Veratzah hamelech limsor hameluchah livno bechayav*", the king wished to give the kingship to his son while he was still alive.

This is not the ordinary pattern of succession. A kingdom usually passes to a child only after the king's death, when one reign has ended and another must begin. Here, however, the king offers kingship while he remains alive.

Rav Yitzchak Meir Morgenstern explains that this paradox expresses Hashem's desire to create a world in which human beings participate in creation. The son receives kingship during the lifetime of the king because we have been given a role in existence. We have the capacity to disclose kingship within the world and the responsibility to choose whether we will see light or darkness. We are entrusted with the overwhelming freedom of choosing to find Hashem.

Hashem has not died and left His kingdom behind. Our task is to find kingship within its deliberate concealment. The king has withdrawn, so to speak, not through error or loss, but so that the son may become king. A world in which human beings can recognize meaning, order, and kingship requires concealment. It requires the apparent absence of the King.

The king therefore gave the kingdom to his son and held a magnificent celebration, a royal ball. The officers, dukes, and gentry gathered, and the entire country rejoiced in the honor of the event. There were musicians, performers, and every form of festivity that might increase the joy. The celebration marked the moment when the living king entrusted kingship to his son, when Hashem, *kavyachol*, placed upon humanity the task of choosing light, penetrating darkness, making a *dirah betachtonim*, and transforming darkness into light.

The Joy That Survives the Fall

When the celebration reached its height, the king rose and addressed his son. He explained that he was a stargazer and had seen that the son would one day lose his *malchut*. The joy, comfort, purpose, and clarity of this hour would not last forever. They were vulnerable and transient, always capable of shattering. The son must never take them for granted. The king therefore gave him one command: when you fall from your reign, do not become sad. Remain joyful. Find *simchah*.

If the son remained happy, the living king would also be happy. Yet even if the son succumbed to sadness, if he could not hold fast to *emunah* when *kefirah* and *sefeikot* concealed the sun, the father would still rejoice that he was no longer king. A person unable to remain joyful after losing his kingdom had never been worthy of kingship. But if the son preserved his happiness while falling from grandeur and comfort, while clouds of confusion obscured the light of clarity, the king would be doubly happy.

The son assumed the throne and quickly appointed officers and learned advisers. Because he loved wisdom so intensely, however, he followed the path of the heretics. He became attached to what could be measured and established by reason, and the result was *yeush*: he lost hope and *emunah*.

Yet Rebbe Nachman says that the king's son remained good at his root. Faith still lived within him. At times, even in the midst of his estrangement, he would stop and ask, *Heichan ani baalam*? Where am I in the world? Where is the world? What is happening? What is the purpose of all this? What am I doing, and how is existence meant to continue? In the very act of asking *Heichan ani baalam*, his *emunah* would return. Nevertheless, the heresy again overcame him, and he fell into despondency, sadness, hopelessness, and the loss of faith.

Faith at the Edge of Its Loss

This is the first entrance into the Seven Beggars: a promise that joy can be found within despondency, that *simchah* can arise in the heart of *marah shechorah*, and that comfort remains possible in a compromised and frightening world. The king tells his son that even when he loses his kingship and descends into impoverishment, fear, *gevurot*, and *dinim*, he must hold on to joy. He must act as if and employ imagination in the service of happiness.

The tale will reveal that its destitute figures, these messengers of darkness carrying unbearable light within their satchels, are not defined by their apparent inability to function. The site of disability becomes the birthplace of a deeper capacity. Doubt and *kefirah* themselves conceal the resources of faith.

The son who becomes king during the lifetime of the king is each one of us. We are charged with uncovering Hashem's light precisely where He chooses to hide it. The story unfolds at the threshold where hope and faith appear ready to disappear, because it is there that their deepest resources can be disclosed. Only then can we begin to understand Rebbe Nachman's introduction to the tale: *Asaper lachem eich hayu smeichim mitoch marah shechorah*. I will tell you how once people found joy, not despite darkness and difficulty, but from within the darkness itself.

The Marriage of the Lost

The Kingship That Must Be Lost

The tale begins with a king who transfers his kingship to his son during his own lifetime. For the prince to become king while the true king still lives, the father's kingship must become concealed. His presence must withdraw so that the prince can receive responsibility and choice. The father gives his son one demand: he must remain happy.

The demand is necessary because the prince will eventually fall from kingship. He will lose what he possesses, and the transience of all things will become unmistakable. The essential task is not to cling to kingship, power, or the belief that one controls everything. It is to discover joy in the descent from kingship, when the awareness of mastery and control has disappeared.

The true king dies, and the prince who became king in his father's lifetime begins to lose himself. He is carried away by the world's heresy, concealment, confusion, and *chakirot*, the intellectual rationalizations of everything that goes bump in the night.

Yet because goodness remains in his heart, there are moments of introspection. When the world swirls around him and the waters rise to his neck, he asks, *Heichan ani ba'olam*—where am I in the world? In those moments, he recognizes that he has lost power and descended from *malchut*, yet might still remain happy.

Ultimately, however, the *kefirah*, sadness, anxiety, and *marah shechorah* overtake those moments of *heichan ani ba'olam*. They leave no room for the question to grow, and the king becomes trapped in despondency. It is here that the second stage of the tale begins.

The Question Before the Answer

Rebbe Nachman often begins without telling us what came before. A similar pattern appears in *Likutei Moharan*, where Rebbe Nossan introduces a teaching with *anah ve'amar*, he answered and said. The phrase tells us that the teaching is an answer, but the question itself remains unspoken. At times, Rebbe Nachman begins simply with *da* or *ve-da*—know this—as though the words arise from somewhere far beyond their apparent beginning, rooted in the loftiest heights.

Perhaps the unasked question is left unstated because the teaching answers more than one particular question. Any existential quandary that disturbs a person's *menuchat hanefesh*, *bein beruchani*, *bein begashmi*, *bein beprati*, *bein bechlali*, whether spiritual or physical, private or collective, may find its answer there. These teachings are a *tikkun klali*, a general rectification, a medicine that is not limited to one specific wound. It is therefore enough to say only, *anah ve'amar*.

Rebbe Nachman uses the same device as he draws us into the next stage of the story, a dream within a dream. We descend further into the world of imagination that the tales of ancient days open before us, so that we might awaken from our own unconsciousness and slumber.

After These Things

“The day came to pass,” the story tells us, “and there was a flight from a certain country.” We are not told what caused the catastrophe. We do not know what was destroyed or what overturned the order of life. The proper name of the disaster does not matter. There was chaos, confusion, upheaval, *shevirah*, a shattering of what had been.

The Izbitzer tzaddikim note a similar silence in the opening of the *Akeidah*: *Ve’acharei hadevarim ha’eileh*, and it was after these things. The commentators explain what “these things” were, but the Torah itself leaves us with a sense of afterwardness. Something has happened, something large enough to break open the possibility of a new order. Each person can place his own story within that silence and recognize the event that forced an entire inner country to flee.

As the people ran from whatever had driven them out of their familiar world, they passed through a forest. There, amid the confusion, two children were lost: a boy and a girl, each from a different family. They were only four or five years old. They had nothing to eat, and they screamed and cried because they had nothing.

Four and Five

For the Arizal and the *mekubalim*, the difference between four and five is not merely quantitative. Four evokes the four letters of the *Shem Havayah*—*yud*, *hei*, *vav*, and *hei*—and the four worlds, extending from the origin of existence to its furthest expression, *sof ma'aseh be-machashavah techilah*. These four levels, like the corresponding parts of the self, remain vulnerable to diminishment and damage.

Yet the *mekubalim* also speak of a fifth level within the four-letter Name: the point of the *yud*, the *kotzo shel yud*. This is the *yechidah*, the singular point joined to the other four while remaining beyond them. It stands above time and above the ordinary order of things, untouched by the pollution and destruction that can reach the lower levels.

Perhaps, then, Rebbe Nachman's phrase "four or five years old" quietly offers two ways of reading the children's story. Seen through four, it is a tale exposed to brokenness. Seen through five, it opens toward what remains beyond pollution, failure, and fracture. Both readings accompany the children as they find themselves alone in the forest.

Lost in the Forest

The forest, the *ya'ar*, is a place of darkness, concealment, and bewilderment. The shadows of intertwined trees prevent a clearing of light from revealing a path. In the language of the tale, the forest evokes the frightening forces that assault a person psychologically, emotionally, and physically.

It is one thing to walk through such a place with one's parents, with the wisdom of the generations that know where to go next. It is another thing to be lost and orphaned there, without direction and without anyone to say what must be done. These children are not only alone; they have nothing to eat. Their vulnerability becomes hunger, pain, and danger.

The only thing they know to do is scream and cry. Their hunger gives birth to the cry. The awareness of lack, destitution, and powerlessness, the recognition that they have no control over what will happen next, draws a scream from their depths. They do not know to whom they are crying. Still, the threat of starvation and the terror of remaining trapped in the thicket force the cry to emerge.

Bread from a Blind Beggar

A beggar comes upon them, walking with sacks of bread. The children crowd around him and plead with him, and he gives them bread to eat. Then he asks, *Mebeichan ba'atem*, where do you come from? His question echoes the fallen king's question, *Heichan ani ba'olam*, where am I in the world? How have you come to be lost, bewildered, and starving in this thicket?

The children answer that they do not know. They know that there was a *behalab*, a terrible confusion, and that somehow they found themselves here. They cannot reconstruct the catastrophe or trace the chain of cause and effect that brought them into the forest. Their rationality cannot lead them backward to an explanation. They simply do not know, for they are little children.

When the beggar begins to leave, they ask him to take them along. In their bewilderment and impoverishment, they are ready to attach themselves to anyone who offers comfort, even a beggar. But he refuses. As he turns away, they suddenly realize that he is blind.

The one who fed them, the unexpected presence that brought comfort into the heart of darkness, cannot see. The figure in whom they hoped to place their trust appears deficient and unable to provide lasting direction. The children marvel: if he is blind, how does he know where to go?

The Faith Hidden in a Question

The story pauses over the very fact that such a question occurred to them. They were young children, yet clever enough to wonder how a blind man could find his way. Their ability to question the source of their help is itself a *chiddush*. In a world darkened by bewilderment, simply being awake enough to ask, “How can you be blind and still offer direction?” reveals an awareness that has not disappeared.

The tzaddikim of Izbitz and Radzyn teach that the emergence of a question may itself testify to a deep faith that there is an order to things. Rav Yechiel Michel Tukachinsky, author of *Gesher HaChaim*, offered this reading of the Midrash about Avraham Avinu and the *birah doleket*. Avraham saw a burning palace and asked whether such a palace could exist without a *ba'al habayit*.

The *birah doleket* can be understood as a splendid palace filled with light, whose order suggests an architect. But it can also mean a palace in flames: a world burning with suffering, where every moment brings news and struggle greater than the mind could have imagined the day before. Avraham’s question in the face of that fire reveals the belief already rooted within him that there must be an order, that the suffering, brokenness, and *shverkeit* must come from somewhere.

So too, the children’s question about the blind beggar discloses what remains alive within them. They still expect direction to be possible. Their wonder is itself a trace of faith.

A Blessing Beyond Sight

The blind beggar will not take the children with him. Instead, he blesses them: “You should be as old as I am.” He leaves them more bread and departs. The children understand that Hashem is watching over them and has sent this blind beggar to give them food.

Even in the depths of the forest, amid the residue of the unnamed catastrophe, they recognize the arrival of this deficient and unexpected guest as a gift from Hashem. The vision the blind beggar gives them is precisely the capacity to see that Hashem remains present while they are lost.

Then the bread runs out, and the children begin to scream again. Night falls, and they pass the night in the forest. In the morning they still have nothing to eat, so they cry once more.

The Beggars Who Come and Go

Another beggar arrives, this one deaf. The children speak to him, but he gestures that he cannot hear what they are saying. He gives them bread and begins to leave. Again the children ask to go with him. Their need is so great that they are prepared to throw themselves at the feet of a beggar who cannot even hear them. But he refuses and blesses them: “You should be as I am.” Then he leaves them bread and goes on his way.

The blind beggar’s arrival had brought hope. For a moment, the children felt saved. Yet the redemptive moment disappeared almost

as quickly as it came, and the children were left to cry again. The deaf beggar brought another moment of sustenance, but he too departed, leaving only bread for the present and a promise for the future.

When that bread runs out, a third beggar comes. He is tongue-tied, a stammering beggar whose words the children cannot understand, although he understands them. He also feeds them, refuses to take them with him, blesses them that they should be like him, and goes away.

The children's life in the forest moves in a rhythm of *ratzo va-shov*, advance and retreat. Despair is followed by comfort; confidence rises and then dissolves. They gather themselves and say, *Gam zu letovah*. They recognize that HaKadosh Baruch Hu governs the world through *hashgachah*. Yet a moment later they are crying again, left with only the enigmatic blessings of the blind, deaf, and stammering beggars.

Comfort does not arrive in one decisive stroke. It comes as a moment of nourishment, then recedes. Despondency returns, and hope rises again within it. A beggar with a crooked neck comes, followed by a hunchbacked beggar, a beggar without hands, and finally a beggar without feet. Each brings bread. Each blesses the children that they should become like him. Each leaves.

Finding a Way

After the final bread is gone, no new beggar appears. The children begin to walk toward a town or settlement until they find a *derech*, a path. They follow it and arrive in a town. Entering a house, they encounter a *ba'al habayit* who takes pity on them and gives them bread. They go to another house and receive bread there as well.

The children continue from house to house and discover that they can live this way. Begging was surely not what they had imagined before the catastrophe drove the country into flight. Yet within their impoverishment, confusion, and anxiety, they find a structure that can sustain them. They decide that they will always remain together, make themselves large sacks, and travel among the houses, markets, weddings, *brissim*, and every other *simchah*.

In time, they sit among the beggars of the world and become known by all of them. Everyone recognizes them as the children who were lost in the forest. Their powerlessness becomes the condition through which they continue to live. They discover sustenance within destitution and the possibility of joy after falling away from *malchut*.

This is the hidden strength disclosed by acknowledging that one cannot provide for oneself. As Dovid HaMelech, *Malka Meshicha*, says, *dal ve-ani ani*, I am impoverished and destitute, yet I am still *ani*, still myself, spelled with an *alef*. Among those who cannot live by the comfort of the sun and must move by the light of the moon, the children become known simply as the ones who were lost in the forest.

A Marriage Among the Lost

One day there is a great fair in a great city, described without a name so that each person might find his own circumstances within it. All the beggars gather there, including the two children, now known among them. The beggars decide that the boy and girl should marry one another. As soon as the suggestion is raised, it pleases everyone. A *shidduch* is made.

The match promises connection within disconnection, *yichud* within *perud*, and completion within disparity. It gives form to the promise with which the tale began: joy within brokenness, *simchah mitoch marah shechorah*.

Yet the beggars face an immediate question: how can destitute people make a wedding? They decide to wait for the king's birthday feast. They will go to the celebration, ask for bread and meat, and use the leftovers to prepare the wedding.

And so they do. The beggars gather the remnants of the royal banquet, the meat and bread left behind. Then they dig a great trench in the mud, large enough to contain a hundred people, and cover it with sticks, earth, and refuse. Inside this pit, beneath the mud and trash, they raise a *chuppah* for the two children.

Very Very Joyous

There, in the pit, they are intensely happy. In Rebbe Nachman's words, *hayu me'od me'od semechim*, they were very, very joyous. The doubled *me'od* recalls the phrase in Torah Mem Chet of the second part of *Likutei Moharan: Kol ha-olam kulo hu gesher tzar me'od me'od*. The whole world is a very, very narrow bridge.

The darkness is doubled, yet so is the joy. The wedding does not take place after the mud has dried or the refuse has been cleared away. The bride and groom rejoice within the pit itself. The place of their descent becomes the place of their *nissuin* and *yichud*.

At the height of their happiness, they remember the kindness Hashem showed them when they were lost and destitute in the forest. Their joy awakens memory. Buried in the mud, sheltered by refuse, and surrounded by the beggars who arranged their marriage, they begin to cry and yearn for the first beggar. "How can the blind beggar who gave us bread in the forest come here? How can we bring him to our wedding?"

The Wedding in the Pit

This longing completes the second movement of the tale. Every wedding has *sheva brachot*, and the seven beggars who visited the children in the forest will return to the celebration. Each will reveal the meaning of the blessing, "You should be like me." Their hidden gifts can unfold only when the bride and groom remember where they were and yearn for the ones who sustained them there.

A joy has been forming throughout the story: a *simchah*, a *nissuin*, and a *yichud* between those who were lost and seemed to have no hope. In the trench of hopelessness, they were visited by figures who inhabit that very place. The beggars carry the hope concealed within longing, the desire for what has not yet arrived but waits at the horizon of a person's life.

Before the children can receive the beggars' gifts and the seven blessings they bear, they must remember the forest: the darkness, bewilderment, *behalah*, and *bilbul*. Those very conditions create the space for their marriage. Rav Yair Dreyfus calls the story *Chatunah shel Avudim*, the marriage of the lost. The tale shows how the opposites within a life, chaos and order, hopelessness and hope, faith and heresy, joy and sadness—may meet. More deeply, it reveals the place in which they meet. The marriage takes place in a pit dug into the mud. Its roof is made from the sticks, earth, and refuse already present. The children do not demand a different landscape before they can rejoice. They remain within what is, and there they receive the possibility of *nissuin*, *yichud*, and hope.

The Gifts Hidden in Yearning

The seven beggars first appeared deficient. They seemed blind, deaf, speechless, crooked, hunchbacked, handless, and without feet. They offered gifts and then disappeared, refusing to let the children follow them and leaving only the blessing, "You should be like me." Yet they had been present all along, waiting for the children to desire them.

The yearning itself draws their gifts near. The melancholic desire for what is absent becomes the vessel through which what seemed lost can return. The children's wedding joy does not erase their abandonment in the forest; it brings them back to it with memory and longing, until the hidden kindness within that darkness can begin to reveal itself.

The first to return will be the blind beggar, who blessed the children that they should be as old as he is. His gift will disclose what it means to be old and what it means to live beyond time. By entering the tale and meeting each beggar, we may begin to uncover the gifts of the Seven Beggars within our own lives.

The Blind Beggar:

The Gift of Beginning Again

The First Guest

After the two introductory passages of Rebbe Nachman's tale, the story is ready to return to the first of the seven beggars. A catastrophe has sent an entire civilization fleeing into the forest from something unnamed and terrifying. In the confusion and overwhelming fear of that flight, two young children become lost: a boy and a girl, a young aspect of masculinity and a young aspect of femininity. Alone in the darkness, crying out for food and wondering how they will live, they encounter seven enigmatic beggars.

The first beggar is blind. The second is deaf. The third stutters. The fourth has a crooked neck, the fifth is hunchbacked, the sixth has no hands, and the seventh has no legs. Each beggar gives the children food and then moves on. The children remain together, become beggars themselves, and are eventually brought by the community of beggars to marriage.

The wedding brings great joy, but it also confronts the beggars with their own poverty. How can the lost and destitute make a wedding? They dig a pit in the mud, wide enough to hold a hundred people, and cover it with twigs, earth, and refuse. Everyone enters, and within that pit the joy is exceedingly great. The joyous union of two opposites takes place precisely in the place that seems least capable of containing joy.

This is where the story of the first beggar begins. The bride and

groom remember the kindnesses that *Hashem Yitbarach* showed them when they were lost in the forest. They begin to cry and to yearn: How can the first beggar, the blind one who gave us bread in the forest, be brought here?

The Kindness Remembered

Rebbe Nachman's language is exact: *Vebitchilu lizkor hachasadim she'asah imahem Hashem Yitbarach biheyotam baya'ar*. They began to remember the kindnesses that Hashem, may His Name be blessed, had performed for them in the forest. *Vehayu bochim vehayu mitga'agim me'od*. They wept, and they yearned greatly. *Eich lokchin lechan et habatler harishon ha'iver shebevi lanu lechem baya'ar*? How can we merit to encounter once again the blind beggar who brought us bread in the forest?

Immediately, *teikef umiyad mamash*, while they were still yearning for him, the blind beggar appeared and said, *Hineni*. Here I am. His arrival carries the sense that he was never truly gone, that he had been present all along. *Hineh ba'ti etzlechem al hachatunah*. I have come to join you at the wedding.

He then offered the bride and groom a gift: *Ve'ani noten lachem matanah laderashah sbeitheyu zekenim kamoni*. I give you a wedding gift, that you should be as old as I am. When the children first met him in the forest, they had begged him to remain with them, to protect them in the darkness, and to carry them away. He refused to let them follow him, but he blessed them that they should be as old as he was.

Now he returns to transform that blessing into a gift. *Ki vatchilah berachti etchem bazeib*. At first I blessed you with this. *Ve'achshav ani*

noten lachem zot bematanah gemurah laderashah shetibeyu chayim aruchim kamoni. Now, on the first day of your *Sheva Berachot*, I give you my old age as a complete wedding gift. I give you the ability to live it.

Within the Yearning

The first story surrounding the tale is the account of the king who transfers the kingship to his son during his own lifetime, while demanding that the son preserve his happiness even when he has every reason to be unhappy. Even in his descent from *malchut*, he must remain present to the possibility of joy within sadness. Before beginning the tale, Rebbe Nachman had said to Rebbe Nosson, *Asaper lachem eich hayu semechim mitoch marah shechorah.* I will tell you how they once found joy within bitterness, darkness, and brokenness.

The second story is the catastrophe that drives civilization into the forest. There, the two lost children encounter the seven beggars. Within the destitution each person feels according to the understanding of the heart, the beggars decide to create *simchah*. They make a *chasunah* deep in the mud, covered with refuse. They find joy in a world that appears to deny the very possibility of joy, comfort where nothing appears comforting, and life where its flame seems almost extinguished.

The location of the wedding is essential. Had a wealthy man offered the beggars a palace, they would have refused. Their place is in the mud, deep within the trenches, covered in dust, ashes, and broken things. It is there, and specifically there, that the wedding must be

made. It is there that the first beggar returns.

What brings him back is the yearning of the bride and groom. *Vehayu bochim vehayu mitga'agim me'od*. They cry for the enigmatic messenger who first offered them a taste of hope. At the moment when the hope born in the forest finally becomes a *yichud*, a marriage, they remember the time when they had been utterly hopeless. They remember the overgrowth of the forest, which concealed not only the sun but even the faint light of the moon. In the midst of joy, they remember how impossible such joy once seemed.

The blind beggar had carried within his broken satchel the promise that they should not surrender to despair. Although they were lost, although they had nothing to eat, and although everything they had known was gone, he gave them bread and blessed them with his old age. Now that the children have reached joy and *yichud*, they remember the first instant in which hopelessness opened into hope. Who was that messenger? What was the voice that taught them *ein shum ye'ush ba'olam klal*, that there is no despair in the world at all? At their wedding they need to testify that once they were broken and lost, and nevertheless they have arrived here.

Here I Am

As they cry and yearn for what appears absent, the blind beggar arrives *teikef umiyad*, immediately. The doubled language expresses more than a desire for something to happen now. It reaches for something quicker than now, for an arrival without duration or delay. It recalls the phrase the Lubavitcher Rebbe used regarding *Mashiach*: *teikef umiyad mamash*.

Rebbe Nachman does not merely say that the beggar arrives because the children yearn. He says, *betoch shehayu mitga'agim me'od acharei habatler ha'iver*: within their yearning itself, the blind beggar appears. Ordinarily, desire seems to be a cause and the arrival of what is desired a separate effect. I yearn, I express the yearning, and perhaps afterward the thing I desire will come. Here, before the desire is even fully expressed, the blind beggar stands before them and says, *Hineni*.

The first seeds of hope planted in the darkness have been present all along. The joy now experienced in the pit is not separate from the hope first tasted in the forest. They are the same experience unfolding. The *ga'agu'a*, the yearning for salvation, already contains a taste of salvation itself. While we wonder when we will emerge from the darkness of our own lost forest and from where our bread will come, the very questioning and longing already contain the presence for which we wait.

This is a doubled yearning: we yearn, and then continue to yearn even when the yearning has not produced any visible result. Within that longing, the blind beggar says, *Hineni*. I am here. I have not left you for a moment. I have been beside you through every step. Now he gives them more than the blessing of being as old as he is. He gives them the gift of living his old age.

The Blindness That Sees

The beggar then asks, *Ve'atem sevrurim she'ani iver?* Do you think I am blind? *Ein ani iver kelal.* I am not blind at all. *Rak shekol zeman ha'olam kulo eino oleh etzli keheref ayin.* The entire history and duration of the world does not amount to me even to the blink of an eye. *Ve'ani zaken me'od, ve'adayin ani yanik legamrei, velo hitchalti adayin lichyot kelal.* I am very old, yet I remain entirely young, and I have not yet begun to live.

His blindness is not an inability to see. He sees more deeply than anyone. The noise, terror, and overwhelming images of the world do not command his vision. The world appears before his eyes, yet its entire duration is less than the blink of an eye. He therefore seems blind to the world's suffering, distortion, and concealment, but his apparent blindness is a form of deeper sight. He sees beyond the way things appear and beyond the authority those appearances claim.

This must not be understood as a refusal to look at the world, *chas veshalom*, or as an appeal to the ignorance that calls itself bliss. Nor is it a transcendent escape into a realm of supernal clarity that leaves the broken reality of this world behind. The blind beggar sees the fiery embers of worldliness. He sees the suffering, destruction, and disheartening reality of the world, but he also sees farther than they reach.

His vision penetrates to the heart of things and discovers a light capable of undoing the darkness. The lesson is not deliberate blindness, but a sight deep enough to enter the very fabric of the world. What appears broken, divided, and confused is not the final

truth. *Al tomru mayim mayim*. Do not say that there are two kinds of water. There is unity at the heart of dispersion, a promise of truth within falsehood, and comfort within distraction.

Old and Young at Once

The blind beggar blesses the bride and groom with his old age because he has seen everything there is to see. The wrinkles of the world are present upon his face, the marks left by confronting its brokenness. He is profoundly aware of how terrible things can appear. Yet at the same time he remains young, as though he has not even begun to live.

His youth is not a denial of experience. He is still very old. He has seen the lost children, the panic of the flight, the descent from *malchut*, and every reason for *ye'ush*. Yet he retains the *temimut* of youth, the simple innocence that can still say that everything is all right. His age does not extinguish his capacity to begin.

How can he know that he is so old while remaining so young? He does not rely only upon his own testimony. *Lo ani be'atzmi omer zot, rak sheyesh li baskamah al zeh mehanesher hagadol*. The great eagle has given an approbation to his old age. The beggar therefore tells the story through which that testimony was given.

The Tower Above the Sea

Once, many people were traveling upon ships at sea. A storm arose and shattered the vessels, although the passengers themselves were saved. The survivors came to a tower and climbed inside. There they found every kind of food, drink, clothing, and all that they needed.

Every delight of the world was present.

The shipwrecked travelers decided that each person should tell the earliest thing he could remember, the memory at the very beginning of memory. Both old and young were among them, and they first honored the eldest to speak. He answered, "What shall I tell you? I remember when they cut the apple from the branch." No one understood him, but the wise people present declared that this was a very old memory.

They then asked the next eldest, a man younger than the first, to tell his story. He said, "You call that old? I remember that story, but I also remember when the candle was still burning." The listeners marveled that this was older still, and that a younger person remembered farther back.

The third person, younger than the first two, remembered when the fruit had only begun to form. The fourth remembered when the seed was being brought so that the fruit could be planted. The fifth remembered the sages, the thoughts, and the wisdom from which the seed emerged. The sixth remembered the taste of the fruit before the taste had entered it. The seventh remembered its fragrance before the fragrance entered it, and the eighth remembered the appearance of the fruit before it assumed its form within the fruit.

The blind beggar was then only an infant, the youngest among them. He said that he remembered every one of their stories. He remembered the cutting of the fruit, the burning candle, the formation of the fruit, the seed being brought for planting, and the thought from which the seed arose. He remembered the appearance,

fragrance, and taste of the fruit before they entered it. But beyond all of this he declared, in the Yiddish in which Rebbe Nachman told the tale, *un ich gedenk gornisht*. I remember absolutely nothing.

Everyone answered that this memory was older than anything they could have imagined. The youngest child remembered farther back than any of them. He remembered what had taken place earliest of all.

The Memories Before Memory

In the midst of their conversation, a great eagle knocked upon the tower. He called to the survivors, "Cease being poor. Stop living within your impoverishment. Return to your treasures and use them." He instructed them to leave the tower according to age, with the oldest departing first.

The infant, the blind beggar, was taken out first. The youngest in appearance, the one who remembered nothing, was in truth the oldest. The most aged elder was in truth the youngest. The eagle then explained the meaning of each memory.

The man who remembered the apple being cut from the branch remembered the cutting of the navel from his mother immediately after birth. The one who remembered the burning candle remembered his time in the womb, when, as *Chazal* teach, a candle burns above the child's head and he learns the entire Torah. The one who remembered the fruit beginning to form remembered the earliest formation of the body, when the fetus was only beginning to take shape.

The one who remembered the seed being brought for planting remembered the drawing down of the droplet. The one who remembered the sages and thoughts from which the seed emerged remembered when the seed was still within the mind. The one who remembered taste recalled what preceded the entrance of the *nefesh*. The one who remembered fragrance recalled the *ruach*, and the one who remembered appearance recalled the emergence of the soul.

The infant who remembered nothing was greater than them all. He remembered what preceded everything. He remembered absolute nothingness.

Return to Your Treasures

The great eagle instructed the shipwrecked travelers to return to their ships, to their bodies, which had been broken and were now restored. He blessed them and sent them back. To the blind beggar, however, he said, "You must come with me, for you are very much like me. You are exceedingly old and entirely young. You have not yet begun to live, and nevertheless you are very old. I too am very old, and I remain entirely young."

The blind beggar therefore possesses testimony from the great eagle. His age and his youth are both true. Having completed his story, he again turns to the bride and groom and gives them his old age as a gift. He blesses them that they should be as old as he is. A great celebration and jubilation fill the pit.

The eagle's first words reveal the purpose of the story: cease being poor and return to your treasures. Those who appear shipwrecked

and impoverished possess treasures they have forgotten how to use. The beggar's gift returns them to what had always been theirs, just as his *Hineni* reveals a presence that had never truly departed.

A Vision Deeper Than the World

The blessing of the blind beggar is the ability to see the world so deeply that the world itself becomes as nothing. It does not ask a person to close his eyes to brokenness, confusion, impoverishment, or pain. It asks him to see beyond the way they appear and to discover, at the heart of all things, a gift of comfort and a promise of hope.

The thicket of the forest seems to overtake everything, forcing the mind into darkness and concealment. Yet beneath that concealment there remains growth, movement, and the possibility of hope. The blind beggar sees the suffering and all that is difficult to behold, yet he knows that none of it amounts to the blink of an eye. Time does not mean to him what it means to others. He experiences the duration and transition of things from another depth.

Rebbe Nachman frequently speaks, in the name of the *Zohar*, of blinding oneself to the *chezyona dehai alma*, the false vision of this world. This blindness comes through seeing more deeply, not through seeing less. A person can keep his eyes open to the suffering of the beggars and to all that has been lost, while still knowing that everything is all right, because even after everything he has seen, *adayin ani yanik*. I am still entirely young. *Velo hitchalti lichyot kelal*. I have not yet begun to live.

The Wisdom of Knowing Nothing

The secret of looking upon a world that appears to be on fire without granting that fire the final word is to live with the awareness that one has not yet begun. Rebbe Nossan writes in *Likutey Halachot*, in his discussion of this story, that Rebbe Nachman would sometimes declare that he knew everything there was to know, and then say that he knew absolutely nothing. The two statements belong together.

We see what we see, conceive what we conceive, and think what we think, yet we can still recognize that we have not begun. Every moment and every *nekudah* of engaging with Hashem or with our own minds eventually reaches the limit of what it can contain. At that point, instead of becoming older, more broken, and more hopeless, the task is to renew oneself as though life were only now beginning.

The blind beggar is very old and very young at once. Rationality tells him that he knows how things will unfold because he knows how they have unfolded until now. Yet he suspends that certainty and enters the childlike space of *temimut*, the faithful not-knowing that can say: although every sign points toward darkness, *achshav* I begin to believe in the light.

At this moment I see the world with new eyes. At this moment I renew my vision. The past, present, and future lose their authority because I am born now. However broken and overwhelming my thoughts were a moment ago, *davka* now, *yesh inyan sheyithapech bakol*. Everything can be transformed. The previous vision may have given me the wrinkles of old age and the sense of impending darkness, destruction, and death. Nevertheless, in this moment I can become *mitchadesh* and begin again.

Today If You Hear His Voice

All that exists is the present moment and the way I choose to see the world now: *achshav, be'et hazot. Hayom im bekolo tishma'u*. Today, if you will hear His voice. The secret of remaining youthful and whole after seeing so much is the promise of renewal at every moment.

The images of this world, the *chezyona dehai alma*, insist that the past determines the present and that the present has already fixed the future. The blind beggar refuses to let those images take away his ability to become new. He remembers nothing. He places all his knowledge and rationality, all the conclusions drawn from what has already happened, into the nothingness that precedes every beginning.

He says to *HaKadosh Baruch Hu*: I do not know. I know absolutely nothing. The past does not determine the present, and the present does not determine the future. You alone can make things new. This is the old age of the blind beggar: to have seen so much and so deeply that one finally recognizes that nothing one sees contains the whole truth. The only truth is that *HaKadosh Baruch Hu* can renew all things.

This is the gift he gives the bride and groom as they discover joy within sadness, union within destitution, and celebration while buried in the mud. He gives them the ability to renew their vision at every moment, to see the world anew, and to begin a thousand times a day, as Rebbe Nachman said that he himself did.

The Gift of Renewal

Every moment says, "Lose hope," and the next moment answers that there is no despair. Even when that promise collapses beneath the force of hopelessness, another moment arrives in which one can say again, *Ein shum ye'ush ba'olam klal*. The past no longer exists. *Mah shebayah hayah*. What was, was. *Mah sheyihyeh yihyeh*. What will be, will be. This moment is a moment of *hitchadshut*.

Abba, tezaken oti lekabel, tadlik li et haneshamah. Hashem, allow me to forget the past and the future, and give me the ability to renew myself now. Let me see so far that the world's images no longer occupy my vision, until I appear blind.

The blind beggar does not deny what is happening. He knows very well what the world looks like. He simply sees deeper. He sees the promise of *hitchadshut*, the possibility of being old and young at the same time, and the freedom that comes from remembering absolutely nothing. He no longer bases the truth of the present upon the conclusions of the past. He casts himself into the *emunah* of this moment and forces hope and faith back into his life.

This is the gift offered to the lost children marrying in a pit covered with earth and refuse. The first beggar gives them the capacity to carry all they have seen without surrendering their youth, to know the world without allowing it to close the future, and to begin again now.

The next beggar will bring another gift. The deaf beggar will arrive at the wedding and declare that he is not deaf at all. He hears everything, except the sounds that emerge from lack and destitution. He has no patience for such voices. He is willing to hear only the good news of the world.

The Deaf Beggar:

The Good Life Beneath the Noise

The Second Gift

On the second day of the *sheva brachot*, the two lost children remember the deaf beggar. Their wedding is still taking place in the pit dug into the mud, beneath a covering of branches, twigs, and refuse. Yet within that darkness they have discovered a joy that does not wait for darkness to disappear, a *simchah* that rises from within *marah shechorah* itself.

On the first day, they remembered the blind beggar, who once blessed them in the forest that they should be as old as he was. When they cried and yearned for him, he appeared and gave them his old age as a gift. His blindness was not an inability to see. He saw so deeply that nothing visible could distract him from the ultimate purpose, the *tachlit*. He saw through the coverings and facades of the world to the point beneath them all: the capacity to renew oneself in every moment. Though he came from the most ancient days, he remained entirely new. The past had passed, the future was unknown, and life could be strengthened only *barega hazev*, in this moment.

Now the children remember the second beggar, the one who had renewed their hope after the blind beggar left them in the forest. The blind beggar had given them bread, but when they begged to accompany him, he refused. Their hope collapsed once more into hunger and abandonment. Then, from the heart of the same darkness, the deaf beggar appeared and fed them. They pleaded with

him as well: Stay with us. Take us with you. He too refused, but before leaving he blessed them that they should live as good a life as he did.

Years later, on the second day of their wedding celebration, they long for him again. The blessing once spoken in the forest is about to become a gift.

A Story Told to Awaken

Rebbe Nachman's apparent departures from the tale are never merely tangential. Each is a *prat hayotze min haklal*, a particular that steps outside the general theme only to disclose it more deeply. In the stories recorded by Rebbe Nosson, even the boundary between the telling and the tale begins to soften. It becomes difficult to say where fact ends and story begins, what Rebbe Nachman spoke and what Rebbe Nosson remembered. This blurring belongs to the purpose of the *Sipurei Maasiyot miShanim Kadmoniyot*, tales drawn from ancient years, from *Atik Yomin*, beyond the limits of ordinary historical time.

These stories are meant to awaken. Rebbe Nachman said that the world tells stories to put people to sleep, while he tells stories to wake them. They descend into the places where a person lies unconscious, trembling and stuttering upon the ground, and disclose a wakefulness hidden at the heart of sleep. They do not simply describe another world. They disturb the rigid border by which we decide what is real, so that a deeper reality can begin to enter our own.

Rebbe Nosson records the circumstances in which the tale of the deaf beggar emerged. In 1809, on *Leil Shabbat Parashat Shemini*, Rebbe Nachman began the story with the king who wished to transfer his kingship to his son during his own lifetime, followed by the unnamed catastrophe that drove an entire civilization into the forest. A few days later, after the astonishing account of the blind beggar and the shipwrecked sailors who disputed who was older, Rebbe Nosson came to ask for the story's continuation.

He found Rebbe Nachman eating lunch. There is something strengthening even in the simple image of a *tzaddik* eating his meal. Rebbe Nosson asked him to continue the *maaseh*, but Rebbe Nachman replied, "Remind me. Where were we?" Rebbe Nosson told him that he had been speaking of the blind beggar. Rebbe Nachman then asked for news of the world, and Rebbe Nosson began to describe what was happening in Berdychiv: wealthy and established people who possessed much, yet complained of what they lacked and could not rejoice in their riches.

Rebbe Nachman answered, “This is exactly where we were.” The news recalled the story because the world was filled with *chesronot*, deficiencies. Even those who appeared secure, wealthy, and ordered were speaking from lack. From that news, the story of the deaf beggar was born.

The Presence Revealed by Longing

On the second day of the wedding, the bride and groom begin to cry and yearn for the beggar who had fed them in the forest. *Hayu bochim umitgaagim*: they weep and long. How can he be brought here? How can the one who gave us hope when we were lost return to us now?

While they are longing, he enters and says, *Hineni*, here I am.

His arrival carries the same mystery as the arrival of the blind beggar. It is as though he tells them: I have been here all along. You thought I had disappeared, but I did not leave you for a moment. I was present through your wandering in the forest, through the years in which you became beggars, and through the strange joy of this wedding in the earth. Yet only when you asked for me, desired me, and felt my absence could my presence be revealed.

The hope, comfort, and wholeness they seek have accompanied them throughout their exile. Longing does not create that hidden presence. It uncovers it. The moment they become

bocheh umitgaagea, crying and yearning for what seems absent, they discover that what they desire has been with them all along. The deaf beggar therefore enters with the simplest and most complete declaration: *Hineni*. Here I am.

He embraces the two lost children, now bride and groom, and gives them kisses. Then he says: When you were lost in the forest, I blessed you that you should live a good life like mine. Today I give that life to you as a gift.

Deaf to the Language of Lack

The beggar then reveals the truth of his apparent disability. “You think I am deaf? I am not deaf at all. The entire world does not matter to me enough that I should hear its deficiencies.” *Kol baolam lo oleh beoznai sheeshma chesronam*.

Every voice in the world, he explains, cries out from what it needs. Each person speaks of what is missing. The world’s cacophony is composed of people announcing their own absence, pain, desire, and dissatisfaction. Even its celebrations emerge from lack, because people rejoice when something once missing has finally been obtained. The celebratory voice remains bound to the deficiency that preceded it.

The deaf beggar does not call these utterances true voices. He lives such a good life that lack does not define the reality he hears. He has no interest in surrendering his ears to speech

rooted entirely in deficiency. His deafness is therefore not the failure of hearing. It is a refusal to grant the world's language of lack the final word.

He also possesses testimony that his life is truly good. His witness comes from the land of wealth, the land of *ashirut*. Yet when he describes his own good life, he gives no account of riches. He says only that he ate bread and drank much water.

The Boasting of the Wealthy

Once there was a land of enormous wealth. Its rich inhabitants gathered and began boasting about the goodness of their lives. Each described his fortune and way of living, and each claimed to live better than the others. Their wealth signified more than financial security. It carried the feeling that everything was settled, that life was *beseder*, and that nothing essential was missing.

The deaf beggar stood among them and said, "I live a better life than all of you." His proof was a question. If any of them wished to demonstrate that his life was better, let him come and rescue a certain country whose goodness had been destroyed. The ability to restore good life would reveal who truly possessed it.

That country had once contained a wondrous garden. Every taste in the world could be found in its fruits. Every fragrance, color, form, and flower was present there. A gardener watched over it and ensured that it continued to nourish the people, who lived well through its abundance.

Then the gardener disappeared.

Without the gardener, the garden no longer produced as it had before. Still, the people survived for a time on what continued to grow by itself. The remnants of the old goodness sustained them even after the source of its order was hidden.

The Garden of Spoiled Perception

A cruel king eventually arose over the country. He could not subdue its people because the garden's remaining growth still gave them life. He therefore understood that to ruin their good life, he would have to ruin the garden. Rather than enter it himself, he appointed three bands of servants to carry out his commands.

Through their actions, the taste, fragrance, and appearance of the garden were corrupted. What had once been sweet now carried the taste and smell of a rotting carcass. What had appeared beautiful and filled with light descended into poison and darkness. The king did not merely destroy the objects within the garden. He corrupted the senses by which the people

received them. Their world could no longer taste, smell, or appear as it truly was.

The deaf beggar challenged the wealthy men: If your lives are genuinely good, help this country. If you cannot restore its garden, then the corruption you imagine yourselves strong enough to repair will instead injure you.

The wealthy men accepted the challenge, and the deaf beggar traveled with them. Along the road they continued to enjoy their fortunes, each living according to his own version of the good life. But as they neared the afflicted country, their senses began to spoil. Even before they entered its borders, their taste, smell, and vision became repulsive to them.

The deaf beggar asked how they expected to heal the country when mere proximity to it had already destroyed their well-being. Their goodness depended on circumstances too fragile to survive another place's brokenness. He then gave them his bread and water. Within that simple food and drink, they discovered every taste, every fragrance, and every beautiful appearance. Bread and water restored their capacity to perceive goodness.

Two Countries Searching for Each Other

Meanwhile, the people of the ruined garden gathered to ask how they might recover the life they had lost. They had heard of the distant country of wealthy people. Since their own country had once known goodness and the wealthy country still appeared to possess it, they reasoned that the two lands must share a root. Perhaps the people of wealth could offer them an *eitzah*, a counsel by which the garden's original goodness might be restored.

They therefore sent messengers toward the land of riches. At the same time, the wealthy men and the deaf beggar were traveling toward the ruined garden. One group went to seek help from the other, while the other was coming to prove that it could provide that help. They met on the road and discovered that each had been searching for the other.

The deaf beggar told the messengers, "I am the one you are looking for. I am the one who can help you recover the good life."

He followed them into their country. In one city, people approached one another with words of mockery. A crowd gathered, each person producing a sharper joke than the one before. Their conversation descended into *nivul peh*, degraded and lewd speech. In another city, two people fought over a transaction. They brought their dispute before a court, but after

judgment was given, neither was willing to accept it. Their quarrel continued, and the deaf beggar recognized that there was no truth in that place. Elsewhere he found forbidden and illicit relationships.

He told the people that these behaviors had polluted the taste, fragrance, and appearance of their lives. The corruption of the garden had entered their speech, their dealings, and their relationships. He taught them how to identify the cruel king's emissaries, cast them away, and restore their world. As those destructive forces were removed, the garden's goodness began to return.

The Gardener They Called Insane

The townspeople then faced another question. How could they know who the true gardener was? How could they be certain that they were returning the garden to the right hands?

They told the deaf beggar of a man they considered a *meshugener*, someone who seemed to have lost his mind. This man had insisted all along that he was the missing gardener. The deaf beggar assured them that the one who appeared insane was indeed the true gardener. They restored him to the garden, and through him the good life returned to the country.

The deaf beggar could therefore say that he possessed testimony from the very land whose goodness he had restored. He, who

owned only bread and water, lived a better life than those whose fortunes collapsed at the first approach of corruption. His good life could enter a ruined country without becoming ruined by it. More than that, it could awaken goodness where goodness had been lost.

The Poverty Hidden Within Riches

This tale of the second beggar arises precisely when Rebbe Nosson tells Rebbe Nachman that everyone in the world is worried and lacking. The people of Berdychiv possessed wealth yet could not inhabit it. Like the rich men in the story, they had almost everything and still spoke from what they did not have.

The deaf beggar's bread and water reveal a different measure of richness. The good life does not depend upon external abundance or upon the value the world assigns to a person's circumstances. Someone may possess nearly everything the world offers, yet the voice rising from his heart may remain a voice of deficiency, jealousy, anxiety, fear, and despondency. Another person may have only bread and water, yet speak from enoughness.

The decisive question is not only what a person has, but from where he speaks about what he has. The deaf beggar's voice emerges from the knowledge that, in this moment, I am enough; I have enough; my life is enough. He does not claim that nothing is broken or painful. He refuses to let brokenness become the only language in which life can be spoken.

The Speech That Shapes a Life

Language can arise from impoverishment. A person can sigh over everything missing, express every anxiety, and seek a brief comfort from another person who speaks the same language of lack. Or speech can emerge from gratitude and wholeness. A person can say: What I have is humble. It may be limited. Nevertheless, it is what I have, and I can receive my life from within it.

The deaf beggar lives well not because he possesses everything he might need, but because what he has becomes what he needs. His gift is the capacity to say that I am enough, what I have is enough, and the place in which I find myself can be enough. Through this, inner language is transformed. Speech need not remain trapped in jealousy, desire, limitation, and fear. It can become affirmative.

Baruch sheamar vehayah haolam: blessed is the One who spoke and the world came into being. To speak this blessing is to take an affirmative stance toward existence. Everything may appear broken, imperfect, *mechusar*, and deficient. Yet when a person chooses words of gratitude, he begins to encounter the good life concealed within that very world. Speech does not deny what is missing. It opens the possibility of hearing what remains whole.

The Voice That Cannot Be Heard

Our *tzaddikim* teach that there are two kinds of voice. One is external and audible. It may begin with force and excitement, but because it depends on what is outside, it gradually fades. What once felt alive descends into exhaustion and despondency.

The other is a *kol penimah delo isbtama*, an inner voice that cannot be heard. This is the secret of the deaf beggar's deafness. Beneath the outer noise of the world lies a voice so inward that ordinary hearing cannot receive it. When a person quiets his life, his thoughts, and his mind, he may begin to hear the *kol demamah dakah*, the thin, silent sound resounding within him. That voice carries the promise of a good life.

The deaf beggar does not deny suffering or refuse the cries of broken people. He listens more deeply than the surface of those cries. Within the news, the anxiety, and the despondency of the world, he hears a promise of hope. The noises that seem absolute will pass. They will become silent. A time will come when the things that now consume our worry will no longer be present.

To listen as he listens is to hear within every spoken word an unspoken word that cannot be expressed. The *Zohar HaKadosh*, reflecting on the verse recited at the end of the *Shemoneh Esrei*, distinguishes between the words of the mouth and the meditation of the heart: *Yihyu leratzon imrei fi vebegyon libi lefanecha, Hashem tzuri vegoali*. May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be favorable before You, Hashem, my Rock and my Redeemer.

The words of the mouth are revealed. They are shaped by what we

see in external reality, and because they are measurable and expressible, they are also vulnerable to darkness and concealment. The meditation of the heart belongs to an inner voice that cannot be fully spoken. Even when outward language conveys death, darkness, and despair, the heart may still hold a hope for which it has no words.

The deaf beggar hears that hope. Beneath a person's negative speech, he hears the inward choice to believe in life. He lives such a good life that he does not require the world to provide goodness from the outside. He needs only the inner capacity to receive goodness in the present moment.

Hearing Beyond the Bad News

Because the deaf beggar listens to this inward voice, he appears deaf to every other sound. He enters the wedding on the second day of *sheva brachot* and gives the bride and groom his gift: May you live the good life as I do. May you hear beyond the bad news. May you listen beneath the world's cries of deficiency to the true voice of life, the *kol hachayim* rising from the hidden recesses of the soul.

Within what Paul Celan called the "thousand breaths of death-bringing speech", there remains a silenced voice of hope. It is the *kol demamah dakah*, the quiet sound within existence that does not compete with the world's noise and cannot be extinguished by it. Things may sound broken. The voices around us may speak only of what is missing. Yet beneath them, another voice continues to say that life is good.

This is the gift of the deaf beggar. He does not silence the world. He hears through it.

The Stuttering Beggar:

The Speech Born in the Distance

The Guest Who Had Never Left

On the third day of the *sheva brachot*, the young couple remembered the third beggar who had found them when they were lost in the forest and had given them bread. They began to cry and long for him: If only the stuttering beggar could be here.

At that moment, he appeared and said, *Hineni* - here I am.

The children had believed that the beggar who saved them in the darkness of their lostness had departed. Yet he had never truly gone. He had only been waiting for them to become *mitga'age'a* (מתגעגע), to yearn, and *bocheh acharav* (בוכה), to cry after him. Their yearning did not cause him to return. It revealed that he had been present all along.

So it is with the gifts we receive in moments of destitution. The *bit'orerut* (התעוררות), the sudden awakening and excitement that find us in times of darkness, concealment, and impoverishment, do not disappear. They remain hidden within us. Our task is to reveal that they have always been there, and yearning is the instrument of that revelation. We uncover what seems absent by desiring it, crying for it, and feeling the depth of its lack.

The stuttering beggar fell upon the children's necks, kissed them, and embraced them. He had come to celebrate their wedding and to fulfill the blessing he had given them in the forest. There he had blessed them that they should be like him. Now he offered that life to them as a gift.

The Silence of a Different Language

"You think I stutter," the beggar told them. "You think I cannot speak. But in truth, I have no speech impediment at all. Most of what is spoken in this world lacks the praise of Hashem. It is incomplete speech, language that emerges from *chisaron* (חסרון), from deficiency. Before such speech, I make my tongue stutter and stammer. I appear to have nothing to say because the language I speak is entirely different from the language of the world."

Far from being unable to speak, the beggar is a renowned orator, poet, and singer. When he recites poems and psalms or tells riddles, every creature bends its ear and draws near. All the wisdom of the world is contained within his poems and riddles. As testimony to the greatness of his speech, he invokes the *ish hachessed shel emet* (אמת של החסד איש), the true man of kindness. To understand that testimony, he begins to tell a tale.

Once, a gathering of wise men assembled, and each boasted of his wisdom. One knew how to discover iron. Another claimed the wisdom to create silver, and another to make gold. Others spoke of the weapons they could fashion, until one man declared that he knew how to make all these metals.

Then another stood and said, "I am wiser than all of you, because I am as wise as today - as wise as "(היום) *hayom*".

No one understood him, so he explained. Each of their wisdoms had been drawn from a particular day, just as each of the six days of creation revealed distinct potencies within the world. Even if all their wisdom were gathered together, however, it would not amount to one complete day, but only to certain hours. He alone possessed the wisdom of the day itself.

The stuttering beggar, who had been present, asked him one question: "Which day are you as wise as?" The wise man immediately replied, "The one who asked that question is wiser than I am."

The others could not understand this either, so they turned to the stuttering beggar. His answer opens one of Rebbe Nachman's most beautiful and painful visions of longing.

The Heart and the Spring

There is a mountain, and upon that mountain stands a stone from which a spring gushes forth. On the other side of the world is another mountain, and there lives the heart of the world. Everything has a heart, and the world as a whole has a heart. This heart possesses a complete form - a body, a face, hands, and feet - and even its smallest part contains more heart than the heart of the greatest individual.

The heart of the world continually longs to reach the spring, and the spring longs for the heart. Yet the heart suffers from two weaknesses. The sun beats upon it relentlessly, and the constant yearning for the spring exhausts it. Whenever the heart must rest and catch its breath, a great bird spreads its wings and shelters it from the sun. Even beneath those wings, while resting, the heart turns toward the spring in yearning.

From the peak of its mountain, the heart can see the summit of the other mountain where the spring flows. Why, then, does it not simply travel there? To approach the spring, the heart would first have to descend its own mountain. The moment it descended, it would lose sight of the spring. If the heart failed to see the spring for even a moment, its soul would expire. And if the heart of the world died, the entire world would cease to exist, for that heart is the source of all life.

The heart therefore cannot cross the distance that separates it from the spring. As for the spring, it does not exist within the realm of time. Time comes into being for the spring only when it receives the gift of a new day from the heart.

As each day approaches its end, the heart and the spring exchange parables and poems of love and longing. The days themselves are fashioned by the righteous men of truth. They make their way to the true man of righteousness, the man of true kindness, who creates time from their mercy and wisdom. As soon as he completes a day, he sends it to the heart of the world. The heart then offers that day as a gift to the spring upon the mountain.

The heart and the spring tell one another riddles, sing songs, and recite wondrous poems of longing and the soul's desire. The fading day departs upon the wings of their poetry. No day is identical to another. There are days of festival and celebration, days of fasting and mourning. Each day has its own song and its own poem.

The man who claimed to be as wise as the day possessed the wisdom of only one day. The stuttering beggar possesses the wisdom of all the days. He gathers the righteous of the earth and brings them to the true man of kindness, who forms days from their wisdom, riddles, poetry, and song. These days are given to the heart, which gives them to the spring. The true man of kindness can therefore testify that the stuttering beggar knows how to speak: he knows how to tell riddles, sing songs, and recite poems.

This is the ability the beggar gives the young couple on their wedding day. At once, a great joy rises among all those celebrating the wedding of the lost children in the pit dug into the mud and covered with refuse. They burst into songs of praise and dance through the night.

The Word That Must Be Said Twice

In the language of our Sages, to stutter is to be *megamgem* (מגמגם). The word seems to double *gam* (גם), meaning "also": *gam* and *gam*, the word repeated as it is in the Purim song, *vegum Charvonah zachur* (וגם חרבונה זכור לטוב) *latov*.

The stuttering beggar appears unable to express what he wishes to say. Yet the struggle to express it is itself a doubling of the word. What he must convey is too powerful to be stated once. To express it in a singular, controlled utterance would fail to contain its intensity. His word must be spoken and then spoken again. It must become *gam* and *gam*.

The world is not prepared to hear what the stuttering beggar speaks. Ordinary speech emerges from deficiency; it lacks the praise of Hashem. Yet for Rebbe Nachman, the praise of Hashem is not merely a matter of saying *modim anachnu lach* (לך אנחנו מודים). The question is not only whether the content of our words explicitly praises God, but from what inner world those words emerge.

The language of Rebbe Nachman's day was *oy vey*. It was the language of *ye'ush* (ייאוש), futility, and hopelessness. Rebbe Nachman taught that there are different ways to express hopelessness. A person can sigh from emptiness and the loss of hope, speaking words devoid of the praise of God. But hopelessness can also be spoken in an entirely different way. Rebbe Nachman screamed with a great voice, *Rabbeinu sha'ag bekol gadol*

(גדול בקול שאג רבינו): *Ein shum ye'ush ba'olam klal* (ייאוש שום אין) (כלל בעולם). There is no hopelessness in the world at all.

This cry does not deny that moments come when hopelessness appears to be the most reasonable response to what stands before our eyes. It commands us to be hopeless in a hopeful way: to take despondent speech and the sounds that rise from deficiency, and force their intensity into reservoirs of hope we never imagined. The broken language of daily life - the *tzebrochenkeit*, the sigh, the *oy vey*, the *krechts* - can become spiritual activity.

For Rebbe Nachman, the human sigh can be transformed into *tefillah* (תפילה). Spoken truthfully, the sigh can hold the delicate knowledge that although I walk along the boundary of hopelessness, I still walk with hope. I may teeter above the abyss and look directly into the possibility of despair, yet the voice that rises from that sight says only: *Ein shum ye'ush ba'olam klal*.

The sound is so powerful that it must be doubled. It must be stuttered: *Ein shum ye'ush ba'olam klal. Ein shum ye'ush ba'olam klal*.

Beyond the Death of Meaning

The stuttering beggar inhabits a world in which words no longer convey what they were meant to convey. Language has shattered into countless pieces. We hear confusion, mumbling, and stuttering; one person pushes against another, each frightened before the other. The world seems to have lost the ability to communicate anything of consequence, anything that signifies truth.

The beggar answers this collapse from within it. "You think I have lost the ability to speak," he tells us. But my lack of speech reveals that another speech exists beyond the deadly speech of the world. Meaning survives the death of meaning. Precisely where hope appears meaningless, words of hope can become meaningful.

How does he know that his stutter is not the death of speech, but its doubled power - *shnayim mikra ve'echad targum* (תרגום ואחד), a truth spoken twice because of its importance? He receives his testimony from the true man of kindness. That testimony is bound to the heart of the world and the spring emerging from the rock: two parts of existence that ache to meet, each drawn toward the other by an undying need for connection and significance.

Yet the painful truth of the tale is that the heart and the spring can never reach one another. Their words can never be entirely direct, never truly *peh el peh* (פה אל פה), mouth to mouth. We cannot perfectly convey to another what lies within our innermost heart.

We live amid misunderstanding and *bilbul* (בלבול), beneath the enduring shadow of the *Migdal Bavel* (בבל מגדל), never entirely certain that the other has heard what we meant to say.

The Gap That Gives Birth to Song

The stuttering beggar teaches that the very distance separating the spring from the heart gives birth to true speech. Words receive meaning because connection is incomplete. If the heart and the spring achieved absolute unity, distance would vanish, and with it the need for communication. Dialogue can exist only where there are two.

Our speech of longing for *HaKadosh Baruch Hu* is likewise born within distance. Our tears, cries, and sighs arise because we still inhabit concealment. We long to bridge the space between the human being and God, between our doubts and His clarity, between the heart of the world and the spring. From that distance emerge the *shirot vetishbachot* (ושבחחות שירות), the songs and praises.

Only by encountering concealment and disconnection can we enter the place of hopelessness, feel the emotions it awakens, and then emerge with the strength to cry that hope remains. My words may seem to convey nothing. They may appear to fall upon deaf ears. Where I seek communication, I may find misinterpretation; where I seek clarity, concealment. Nevertheless, the language born in the gap between Hashem and the world, between clarity and anxiety, between calm and chaos, is the language that gives us strength to connect to Him.

It is in *galut* (גלות) (that we are able to speak. In *ge'ulah* (גאולה), there is no speech, for there it is *panim el panim* (פנים אל פנים), face to face. The Alter Rebbe, the Ba'al HaTanya, reads the verse *Ken bakodesh chaziticha lirot uzcha uchevodecha* (וכבודך עוזך לראות) (as a plea: if only the way I grasped

You in exile might remain available to me in redemption. If only I might experience You in *ge'ulah* as intensely as I experienced You in *galut*.

Our relationship with Hashem is born within the irreducible distance between what we desire and what is. That absence produces our broken speech, our doubled utterances, our need to speak once and then again. Concealment, miscommunication, and brokenness become the ground from which true words of praise can rise. This is the gift the stuttering beggar brings to the children.

One True Sigh

We, too, find ourselves in the pit and the mud, searching for joy while covered in dirt, for connection in an age of disconnection, for light within darkness. The beggar asks us to accept the gift of stuttering: to recognize that precisely because I cannot speak a direct and perfect word, I must discover the imaginative speech that reaches across the unbridgeable distance between myself and Hashem.

Rebbe Nachman offers the hope that while we dwell in that void, in the *chalal hapanui* (חלל הפנוי) (that seems to separate us from

HaKadosh Baruch Hu bichvodo uve'atzmo (ובעצמו בכבודו הוא ברוך), we may merit one true sigh, one true tear, one true *krechts*. We may finally cry: *HaKadosh Baruch Hu*, gevalt, where are You? Gevalt, I am lost. Gevalt, I am trapped. Gevalt, I no longer know what to say.

These utterances are not the failure of speech. They are its deepest truth. The stuttered cry, the word repeated because one utterance cannot hold its force, reveals the heart's truest desire to connect to the source of life, to *HaKadosh Baruch Hu* Himself.

The Crooked-Necked Beggar:

Learning to Breathe

The Crooked-Necked Beggar and the Faith of Reconnection

We now continue with the *sheva berachot* of the two lost children who have found one another and are being married in a pit dug into the earth, covered with dust, branches, and dirt. On the first three nights they reencountered the blind beggar and received the gift of old age, the deaf beggar and received the gift of a good life, and the stuttering beggar and received the gift of eloquent speech. Each beggar revealed that his apparent deficiency - his *mum*, his *pegam*, his darkness or concealment - was not a deficiency at all. It was the very seat of his uniqueness.

The tale asks us to look again at the places in ourselves that appear broken, shattered, difficult, or dark. Our blindness, our deafness, and our stuttering may be the very places in which the hidden potency of the moment can be encountered. These destitute and impoverished figures, marked by deficiency upon deficiency, turn out not merely to be free of deficiency, but to possess such fullness, wholeness, and light that they can scarcely find a place within this world.

Making Space for the Apparent Deficiency

On the fourth night of the *sheva berachot*, we prepare to receive the gift of the fourth beggar: the crooked-necked beggar. To receive his gift, we must make space within ourselves for those deficiencies and pockets of negative energy that we instinctively push away, hide, or cast into the corners. When we look deeply into the concealed places within ourselves, we do not merely clean the house. We may also uncover gifts we never knew were there.

On the fourth day of the wedding feast, the young couple remembered the fourth beggar, who had given them bread when they were lost in the forest. Again they began to cry and long for him: if only the beggar with the twisted neck could be here. While they were still crying, while the longing itself was still alive, he appeared and said, "*Hineni* - here I am."

Once again, the tale reveals that within the yearning for what is absent lies the discovery that what we longed for was somehow already with us. The crooked-necked beggar says, "*Hineni*. I have come to your wedding, and I have brought you a gift: that you should be just like me. Today I give you the blessing I offered you in the forest, but now I give it to you as a pure gift on your wedding day."

The Neck That Refuses the Air of the World

The beggar continues: “Do you truly think my neck is twisted? My neck is not twisted at all. On the contrary, I have a very straight and beautiful neck. It is only that the world is filled with vanity and empty air, and I do not wish to breathe even a single breath of it. That is why my neck appears twisted.”

He then adds that he possesses a beautiful voice. With his throat he can produce all the sounds of the world - wondrous sounds beyond words - and the testimony to this gift comes from the city that was grateful to him. He begins to tell the story of that testimony, another tale nested within the larger tale.

Rebbe Nachman's story is filled with the symbols of Jewish mysticism, but even before those symbols are interpreted, it stands on its own as a profoundly romantic tale. It awakens longing and desire, yet the longing never arrives at a final satisfaction. In so many of Rebbe Nachman's stories, yearning does not reach its expected completion. There is no consummation of desire. Yet the unfulfilled desire does not produce frustration, angst, or anxiety. The yearning itself nourishes the soul.

Sustained Within the Hunger

The verse says, *Lebachayotam bara'av* - to sustain them in hunger. The ordinary reading imagines hunger followed by a satisfaction that ends the hunger. Chassidut reads the verse differently: to sustain them through hunger itself. The desire that remains unconsummated, the longing that never arrives at its intended destination, becomes the very source of vitality and sustenance.

The natural place of the soul is yearning, longing, desire, and anticipation for that which lies just beyond the horizon of the waking mind. It is never fully contained within rational expectation, yet it remains close enough to be sensed. It is anticipation without expectation: a desire that longs deeply without demanding that the object of its longing appear.

When we settle into that form of longing, we discover a unique satisfaction that remains present even within continuing dissatisfaction. Even when we feel arrested, unable or unwilling to move forward, that very stillness may offer a fullness and presence that movement and activity could never give us.

A Country Made Entirely of Music

The crooked-necked beggar begins his tale. Once there was a country in which every inhabitant was an expert in music. Young and old studied the art, and even a novice among them would have been considered a lion among the musicians of another land. The king, the wise men, and the royal musicians possessed a greatness in music beyond description.

One day, the greatest people of the country gathered to boast of their abilities. One claimed that he could play wondrously upon a particular instrument; another claimed the same mastery of a different one. One knew many instruments, while another could play every instrument in the world. One boasted that he could imitate instruments with his voice, another that he could imitate the sound of a drum, and another that he could reproduce the thunder of a cannon.

The crooked-necked beggar stood among them and said, “My voice is greater than all of yours, and I will prove it immediately. If you are truly as musically gifted as you claim, come and see whether you can save two lands that are in terrible distress.”

The Cry of the Two Birds

He told them of two countries separated by thousands of miles. The people in both lands could not sleep. Every night at sundown, a male bird began to wail near one country, while far away a female bird began to wail near the other. The inhabitants heard the birds' weeping and joined it, until crying filled both lands. Even the stones in the walls trembled from the sound. The neighboring countries heard the lamentation as well and could find no rest.

The beggar challenged the musicians: "Since you are masters of melody and song, let us see whether you can save these countries and allow their people to sleep." They asked whether he could lead them there, and he answered that he could. They set out for one of the lands, and as they arrived,

night fell. From every house came a terrible wailing. Even the master musicians began to cry, overcome by the sorrow in the air.

They asked the beggar whether he knew the source of the sound. He told them that there were two immortal birds, one male and one female, the only pair of their kind in all the world. Once, a whirlwind had struck the forest and torn down their nest. Without the nest, the female bird became lost. She flew in search of it but could not find it, until she reached the opposite end of the world from the male bird who could not bear to be without her.

Each searched for the other, but for a very long time they could not meet. At last they built new nests at opposite ends of the world. The male settled near one country and the female near the other. Every night they called to one another, and as the hours passed, their calling became a painful wail. Each land heard one of the birds, and the inhabitants tossed and turned through the night, unable to sleep.

A Voice That Can Be Thrown Across the World

The musicians did not believe the beggar. They asked him to take them to the birds, but he warned them that they would not be able to bear the sound at close range. If the distant echo had already overwhelmed them, how much more unbearable would the wailing be beside the nests themselves?

They asked what he could possibly do. He answered that he could imitate every sound in the world and throw his voice across a great distance, so that it would not be heard where he stood but far away. He could imitate the female bird and cast her voice toward the male; he could imitate the male and send his voice toward the female. In this way he could draw them closer and closer until they ceased mourning, and the two lands would be relieved of their distress.

Still the musicians did not believe him. He therefore led them into a forest. There they heard a door opening and closing, the rattle of a lock, the firing of a hunting rifle, the hunter

commanding his dog to retrieve the game, and the dog struggling through the snow. They searched in every direction but saw nothing. Nor did they hear the sounds issuing from the beggar's mouth; every sound appeared far away. Only then were they convinced that he could imitate every sound and carry his voice across a great distance.

One of the musicians asked, "If you can bring the birds closer by yourself, why do you need us?" The beggar answered, "I can bring the birds together. But afterward I will need your help. The people of these lands are exhausted from sleeplessness, and the sadness of the night darkens their days. Once I have called to the birds and quiet has returned to the night, you must soothe the inhabitants with music."

The musicians promised that if he removed the nightly wailing, they would bring comfort to the shaken people. The beggar drew them a map and told them, "As soon as quiet is restored to the night, you will know that the time has come to play."

Learning the Song of Each One

The crooked-necked beggar knew that to draw the immortal birds together, he would have to imitate both of their songs perfectly. He therefore spent several nights listening. Once he had learned them, he traveled toward the male bird and sang the love song of the female; then he went toward the female and sang the love song of the male.

After a week, the birds were close enough to hear one another directly, and the beggar no longer needed to repeat their songs. Now that each could hear the other, they shed their grief and returned to their songs of love. As long as each heard the other's song, each felt reassured that they would ultimately be reunited.

When the masters of music returned, they discovered that the people were happier and no longer tortured by the birds' wailing. The musicians began to play, restoring joy to the world. The crooked-necked beggar concluded, "Now you see that everyone in that land testifies that I possess a beautiful voice and can imitate every sound in the world. My wedding gift to you is that you should be just as I am."

Again there was great happiness and rejoicing at the wedding, deep within the pit dug into the mud and covered with dust, branches, and refuse.

The Air That Suffocates Those Who Breathe It

The crooked-necked beggar refuses to breathe the air of the world because its breath is saturated with despondency, hopelessness, and anxiety. It is an air so negative that it paradoxically suffocates those who inhale it. He appears twisted because he will not participate in a world overtaken by shortness of breath, difficulty, and despair. Even the act of breathing such air can pollute the mind.

He therefore breathes from another source. He is willing to receive only the air that gives birth to life and hope within him. Breath occupies a remarkable place in Rebbe Nachman's written teachings and in the teachings recorded by Rebbe Nossan. Breath is the life-force of the human being: *Vayipach b'apav nishmat chayim* - at the creation of the human being, God, as it were, breathed the breath of life into his nostrils.

Just as physical life depends every moment upon inhaling and exhaling, spiritual life depends upon the same movement. We inhale sustenance, courage, and hope; we exhale those strengths back into the world and use them for our growth. Rebbe Nachman describes this as a twofold movement: inward and outward, retreat into the self and return from the self - *ratzo vashov*, running and returning.

But there are times when the atmosphere of the world has become so dark that this movement is overwhelmed. The air itself is heavy with despondency. The world cannot or will not take a deep breath. The crooked-necked beggar appears unable to breathe, but in truth he is waiting to breathe properly.

"You think my neck is crooked? You think I do not know how to breathe? I have the straightest neck there is. I can breathe more deeply than anyone. But the air of the world is so polluted and broken that I refuse to partake of it." In this refusal, he begins to teach the two children in the mud how to breathe again.

The Patience of a Deep Breath

The crooked-necked beggar not only inhales deeply; he is *ma'arich af*. He can lengthen the breath, hold it, and resist the impulse to exhale immediately. This patience overcomes the anger expressed in short, hot breaths - the *charon af* that pours from the nostrils of fury.

Even while the stormy waters of ordinary life surround us, even while the world burns in its individual and collective ways, the crooked-necked beggar teaches us to inhale and wait. He asks us to suspend the demand to understand everything rationally and to dwell for a moment within the expanding chambers of the lungs. We retreat inward in order to cultivate patience and the courage to confront a world that seems to be suffocating.

Yet his gift is not only the deepest breath and the straightest neck. His throat can also produce the most beautiful sounds in the world. The proof of this beauty is that his voice brought comfort to a city that had spent its nights sobbing and wailing.

The City That Cannot Sleep

The world is that city. Each person lies awake at night, unable to surrender to the promise of sleep, because the heart and mind remain awake with fears, images, anxieties, and concerns. Our insomnia becomes a silent wailing: woe to us, and woe to the world. This cry remains active even when the body falls asleep. It enters our dreams as longing, as the inability to reach what we seek, and as the terror of having no control over what will happen.

Even the night - the place in which we are meant to recover our strength - becomes saturated with the general sorrow of the world. As the deaf beggar taught on the second day of *sheva berachot*, all the sounds of this world emerge from deficiency. The noise of the world is born from what it lacks. The inhabitants of the two distant cities remain awake, terrified and anxious, unable to find the comfort they desperately need.

The crooked-necked beggar possesses the wisdom to recognize the source of their longing. We can see the world's crying, darkness, *tzebrochenkeit*, and hopelessness and conclude that these are merely the natural symptoms of reality: human beings encounter a world on fire, and therefore they cry. Their wailing, we imagine, has no deeper content. It is only the existential reaction to a world that has lost itself.

But the beggar, who refuses to breathe that poisoned air, says: no, *chas veshalom*. The wailing that keeps the world awake is neither accidental nor meaningless. It expresses the deepest longing present from the creation of the world until the coming of Mashiach. Our crying responds to the primordial crying of the two birds who have been separated from one another.

The Fissure Running Through Creation

Once there was connection: expression found its vessel, light found its receptacle, God, as it were, found His people, prayer found its direction, and daily life found its purpose. But since exile from the Garden of Eden, life has become deferred, *bedi'avad*, a response to a primordial rupture. The connection between Hashem and the world, between the human being and the point of desire, between intention and completion, between potential and actuality, between masculinity and femininity, expression and receptivity, light and darkness, day and night, fear and courage, happiness and sadness, brain and heart, one person and another, families, companions, neighbors, countries, and even the divided parts within a single person - all of it has been fissured into the duality in which we live.

That distance pollutes the air. It gives rise to a longing which, if not tended to carefully, carries consciousness into wailing and despair. If we forget the true source of the cry - the separation between one thing and its other - we may come to believe that sadness, breathlessness, anger, and the terrible sounds of the world are merely human responses to meaninglessness.

The crooked-necked beggar teaches otherwise. Human frailty, yearning, insomnia, and the feeling that something lies just beyond the horizon, waiting to enter the world as a surprise or a gift, all emerge from an archetypal desire shared by the human being and, as it were, by God Himself: the desire for ultimate unity and reconnection.

Mourning Because Reunion Is Possible

The birds do not cry over a relationship that once existed and will never return. They cry because they know there will be a reunion. They know there will be a marriage once again. Even if that marriage must take place in a pit buried in mud and covered with trash, branches, and dirt, reunification will come.

Their crying is therefore not the surrender of despair. It is the expression of unwavering desire: I will not stop longing, crying, desiring, or yearning for reconnection, because reconnection is the only thing in which I truly believe.

This is the crooked-necked beggar's teaching. "You think I cannot breathe? You think I cannot make sounds? I breathe the deepest breath and make the most beautiful sounds. The breath of the world mourns a connection that has been lost. My breath arises from faith in a future reconciliation, a future unity that will reveal even despair, distraction, desperation, and disunity as threads within the fabric of connection."

The Narrow Bridge Between Head and Heart

The neck is the thin bridge - the *gesher tzar me'od* - between the head and the heart. It connects the mind, with its demand to know what is above and below, to the heart, the seat of subjectivity and faith, which sees beyond rationality. The neck is the place of *da'at*, of connection, joining *shamayim* and *aretz* and restoring relationships that appear to have lost their bond.

“You think my neck is crooked because I do not understand connection? I possess the straightest neck in the world because I still believe that connection is possible. What has been untied can be tied again. What has been torn apart can be joined. A closed door can open, and an open door can close.”

The voice of the *tzaddik*, emerging from that throat, can quiet the heart of the world. It speaks to those who remain awake in existential terror and tells them that the wailing is real. It is the sound of loss, destruction, disconnection, duality, fear, and the apparent death of hope. But if we listen closely - if we hear the sound within the sound, the *Shir HaShirim*, the song that the song itself sings - we will hear yearning for reunion.

Every mournful melody contains the opening notes of the *niggun bachadash*, the new song that will emerge from the throat of the breathless, crooked-necked beggar: *Az yashir* - then I will sing.

What It Means to Throw a Voice

The beggar can throw his voice from one place to another. He can act here while the sound of his act is heard miles away. This gift embodies the willingness to believe that an action may bear no immediately visible response and yet create an effect far beyond the place and moment in which it occurred.

Rebbe Nossan and Rebbe Nachman teach that no breath, sigh, sound, cry, laugh, smile, word of prayer, word of Torah, or word of hope is ever lost. Everything remains. Every act continues, hidden within the recesses of creation and beneath that which was concealed from the six days of Creation. Everything leaves a lasting imprint, a *roshem*, upon the soul and upon the world.

This is the *emunah* of the crooked-necked beggar: I can speak here and trust that the echo will be heard miles away.

The Hairsbreadth That Contains Worlds

Rebbe Nachman tells of a broken-hearted *tzaddik* who felt unable to connect to God and entirely bereft of faith or trust. Slowly, he reminded himself of the irreducible trace of holiness within him: “I am a Jew. I possess a *neshamah*, and that alone is enough.” By holding fast to that smallest point of hope, the despondent *tzaddik*, the *ba'al hayisurin*, began to rise from the ground. He floated, then flew, passing from world to world.

All the while, he wondered how he would ever return to the place from which he had begun. Yet the air that carried him was nothing other than that slight belief in the self, the discovery described by Rav Kook: *Yesh lecha kanfei ruach* - you have wings of spirit.

Eventually the air began to fail him. His flight faltered, and he started falling toward the earth, convinced that he would land impossibly far from home. Yet when he reached the ground, he found himself apparently in the exact place from which he had departed.

He wondered how he could have traveled through worlds and returned to the same point. He took out a measuring stick and discovered that he had not landed in precisely the same place. He had moved a single hairsbreadth.

The smallest movement of the soul, the slightest grasp of hope, and the willingness to cast oneself into the abyss of faith beyond rational knowledge may travel through worlds within the spiritual and inner realms. When measured from the outside, the person may appear to have moved no more than a hairsbreadth. Yet a voice released here may already be resounding miles away.

Breathing Toward the Future

This is the crooked-necked beggar's gift: the capacity to inhale, to hold the breath, and to believe again in the promise of reunion. What has been torn apart may be sewn together. The torn fabric of experience may yet be sutured into a deeper unity.

We may not see what our hope and faith are accomplishing in the present. We may see no visible response, no measurable result, and no obvious connection between the breath drawn

here and the song heard elsewhere. Yet the crooked-necked beggar teaches us to believe that it can work, that it will work, and that even now it is already working for the future.

On the next night of the wedding feast, we will encounter the hunchbacked beggar: the one who appears crushed beneath the burden of the world, yet whose back is stronger than all others because he can carry the world's burdens, worries, and anxieties upon his shoulders. Then, *b'ezrat Hashem*, we will prepare ourselves to receive his gift as well.

The Hunchback Beggar:

The Little That Holds the Great

The Beggar Who Answers Longing

On the fifth night of the *sheva berachot*, the children remember the fifth beggar: the hunchbacked beggar who found them long ago in the heart of the forest. They had been lost, starving, crying out for food, when he appeared and gave them bread. In their desperation, they tried to attach themselves to this source of comfort, to these shoulders upon which they believed they might stand. But he refused to take them with him. He had come to save them for a day, not yet to give them anything eternal.

Years later, the children have grown into beggars themselves. They are married beneath a *chuppah* in a pit, buried in mud and covered with twigs, branches, and dirt. On the fifth day of their wedding celebration, they cry out: If only the hunchbacked beggar who saved us in the forest could be brought to us now. And, as throughout Rebbe Nachman's story, the absent one appears from within their yearning. The beggar arrives and says, *Hineni*—here I am.

It is almost as though he is telling them that what they desire so desperately need only be disclosed. They must open their eyes to

what was present from the beginning and allow their mouths to express their longing. The yearning itself becomes the place of arrival.

The hunchbacked beggar reminds the couple that, in the forest, he blessed them that they should become like him. Now the blessing can become a gift. It is no longer an abstract memory whose fading traces they are trying to inhabit. The forgotten experience returns to focus; its scattered points are gathered, and the memory becomes present once more. The children are now given the capacity to become like the hunchbacked beggar himself.

Shoulders Stronger Than They Appear

The beggar tells them that they have misunderstood his body. They believe his back is bent and his shoulders crooked, but he is not hunchbacked at all: *Eineni ba'al chatoteret klal*. The truth is precisely the opposite. His shoulders are extraordinarily strong because they possess the quality of *me'at hamachzik et hamerubeh*—the little that holds the great.

His back appears too small to carry very much, yet this minimal space can bear a weight far greater than its visible capacity. A tiny shoulder, a narrow back, somehow contains what exceeds it. The limitation of space becomes the vessel for something immeasurable.

To prove his claim, the beggar tells of a gathering in which each person boasted that he possessed this quality. One claimed that his small mind contained tens of thousands of people: their needs, actions, passions, and the events of their lives. The others laughed at him. They told him that he was nothing and that all the people occupying his mind were nothing as well.

Another described a man who lived beside a mountain and cast there the refuse of his meals and all the filth he produced. The heap became so immense that a passerby wondered where it had come from. It had all emerged from one individual. Here, too, was a kind of little that held the great, although only in the form of a small person capable of producing a mountain of waste.

Another spoke of his tiny country, whose fields and orchards yielded more fruit than could conceivably have grown within so narrow a territory. Another described his magnificent garden, into which ministers, aristocrats, and countless visitors came to stroll. At any moment, more people entered than the garden should have been able to contain.

One man claimed that his speech embodied the little that holds the great. As secretary to a powerful king, he received the petitions, requests, and praises of multitudes. The king could not attend to each person individually, so the secretary gathered all their words and transmitted them in a few carefully chosen sentences. Another claimed the same quality for his silence. He

was surrounded by adversaries who quarreled with him, confronted him, and slandered him behind his back. He answered their torrent of words with silence, and that small silence contained them all.

The final speaker said that he did not merely possess an example of the little that holds the great; he himself was its embodiment. He was small, yet he guided a poor blind man of enormous stature. Without him, the giant would stumble and fall. The hunchbacked beggar acknowledged that this last claim was the greatest of them all. The blind giant, he explained, was the moon, which has no light of its own. The moon is vast and indispensable to the world, yet it is led by one who is small. Still, the hunchbacked beggar told them, his own claim was greater.

The Tree That Has No Place

He told them of a group of people who had made a remarkable discovery. Every animal has its own patch of shade where it chooses to rest, and every bird has its particular branch upon which it perches. The group wondered whether there might be a single tree beneath which every animal would wish to lie and upon whose branches every bird could find a place. They discovered that such a tree did exist. Animals and birds of every kind gathered there, mingling and playing without harming one another. The joy of that place, they understood, must be boundless.

They longed to reach the tree, but they could not agree upon its direction. One insisted that they travel east, another west, and others argued just as strongly for the remaining directions. Then a wise man came and told them that they were beginning with the wrong question. Before asking where the tree was, they needed to ask whether they were capable of reaching it. Not everyone was worthy of approaching the tree. Only those who possessed its own qualities could enter its shade.

The roots of the tree were faith, awe of Heaven, and humility—*emunah*, *yirah*, and *anavah*. Its trunk was truth. Some members of the group possessed these qualities and others did not, but they refused to separate from one another. They waited and worked until every member had become worthy. Once they had done so, the argument over direction disappeared. Together, they set out.

After traveling a great distance, they finally saw the tree from afar. Then they realized that the tree did not occupy any space. It had no place. How could they reach something that existed beyond location?

The hunchbacked beggar had been traveling among them. He told them that he could bring them there. Even the smallest place that holds more than it should remains, in the end, a place. It may exceed its boundaries, but it still occupies space. The hunchbacked beggar embodies a more radical form of *me'at*

hamachzik et hamerubeh: he stands at the limit of space, at the threshold beyond which there is no space at all. Because he lives at that border, he can carry others across it. He lifted the entire group onto his back and brought them to the tree.

This was his proof. His shoulders could carry not only a burden larger than themselves, but human beings from place into the place beyond place. And now, beneath the wedding canopy in the pit, he gives this capacity to the young couple. The celebration swells with the joy of the gift.

The Hidden Hunchback Within Us

On the most practical level, the hunchbacked beggar represents the capacity to carry a burden greater than one's apparent capacity. Ordinarily, we measure our willingness to accept a task, a mission, or another person's need against what we believe we can contain. Some things seem manageable and others impossible, and we depend upon rational and psychological judgment to decide where our limits lie.

Yet the beggars in Rebbe Nachman's story are not seven separate, exceptional souls. As the *tzaddikim* of Breslov teach, they are seven dimensions of a single personality, and every one of them lives within us. We are all blind and deaf; we all stutter; we are all crooked-necked, hunchbacked, handless, and legless. The question is therefore not which rare individuals are capable of embodying the hunchbacked beggar. The question is whether we are willing to uncover the hunchbacked beggar within ourselves.

There is a place in the heart, the mind, and the soul that can hold what exceeds it. Paradoxically, however, a person who enters a situation determined to carry more than he can carry will simply be overwhelmed. The impossible capacity cannot be seized through force. The beggar teaches that access to it comes through the three roots of the tree: faith, awe, and humility.

Each begins with the recognition that I am not all that exists. My ego is not the sum of creation's purpose. My personal desires do not dictate how the world must answer me, nor even how I must answer the world. The self becomes capable of carrying more only when it no longer insists on occupying everything.

Faith at the Edge of Knowing

The first root is *emunah*. Faith is the willingness to surrender the demand that everything be grasped empirically and known with certainty. It is a giving over of the self to a knowledge beyond knowledge, to a wisdom that breaks the structures by which we ordinarily measure wisdom.

This is the faith Rebbe Nachman describes in the sixty-fourth teaching of *Likutei Moharan*: a leap beyond firm ground and into depths where human logic can no longer determine what is up or down, real or false, something or nothing. The act of *emunah* suspends a person in the air of not knowing.

Such faith makes the self small without destroying it. It bows before the realization that what I know and think cannot be the sole measure of all that exists. The limits of my understanding cease to be the limits of reality. In that relinquishment, a space opens for what is beyond me.

Awe Before What Exceeds Us

The second root is *yirah*, or *yirat Shamayim*. This is not the pathological fear of punishment with which religious awe is sometimes confused. *Yirat haromemut*, as it appears in the holy books and especially in Rebbe Nachman's teachings, is the recognition that something vastly greater than my constricted ego exists.

There is something larger than my private desires, anxieties, and concerns. A person can encounter that vastness in the presence of Hashem, in the expanse of the world, and even in the face of another human being. The face contains an infinity that exceeds the limits of the person before me. Emmanuel Levinas described the encounter with the face of the other as a seizure by transcendence: I am moved beyond myself and called to ask, What can I do for you?

The face of another carries a trace of the face of God, the *pnei Hashem*. It interrupts the ego that fears only for itself and calls us toward *tzedakah*, *chesed*, righteousness, welcome, and the creation of room for what is unfamiliar. Awe is therefore

another movement of self-minimization. I become smaller before what is greater, and precisely through becoming smaller I become capable of receiving it.

Humility Without Self-Erasure

The third root is *anavah*, humility. Humility must not be confused with self-negation. It does not require judging oneself harshly, denying one's strengths, or pretending there is nothing good within. My *Safta*, may her memory be a blessing, used to say, in a form better expressed in Yiddish, "Do not make yourself small; you are not that great." Self-denigration is not humility. As the *tzaddikim* teach, speaking *lashon hara* about oneself can be among the harshest forms of destructive speech.

Humility means recognizing that although I experience myself as the center of the cosmos, every person I encounter stands at the center of a cosmos of his or her own. I am charged to say that the world was created for me, but the person beside me is charged with the same declaration. The one who seems peripheral in my life experiences me as peripheral in theirs.

My desires are real, but they do not establish the laws of another person's world. My emotions and needs do not dictate the structure of reality. Once I understand where my self ends, I can make room for someone else to begin.

Making oneself small does not mean becoming deficient. It does not deny our strengths, our emotions, our power of speech, or our ability to matter in the lives of others. It means diminishing the amount of space our presence demands. We learn to be *metzamtzem* ourselves. Just as God, so to speak, contracted Himself in order to make room for creation, we imitate that movement by making room for the other.

Every person remains present in fullness. Every person's desires possess their own holiness: *kulam kedoshim*. The task is not to erase the self but to reduce its footprint. When we bend our backs, breathe inward, and create space for what lies beyond our own minds, we are given the ability to carry more than we could physically, emotionally, or psychologically hold before.

The Shabbat I Tried to Possess

Something changes when a person recognizes that a life directed only by personal desire will continually collide with walls. The problem is not that we are unworthy of attaining what we desire. The problem is what happens when our desire becomes the ruler of the day.

After an extraordinarily long, exhausting, difficult, wonderful, and beautiful week at home with young children, amid all the shifts and transitions from what we once knew into what is true now, Shabbat arrived. All I wanted was my *Kabbalat Shabbat*: to sit alone in my office, facing my *sefarim hakedoshim* and the

faces of *tzaddikim*, quieting the world and entering the atmosphere of Shabbat.

In my determination to reach that holy space, I behaved like a madman. I yelled at my children. I needed them to get to bed, and I became impatient and frustrated. I demanded that everyone around me conform to the conditions I believed I required in order to welcome Shabbat.

As I began to recite the chapter of *Tehillim* that the *chasidim* and the Baal Shem Tov taught us to say before *Kabbalat Shabbat*—*Hodu laShem*—the truth became painfully clear. This is the source from which we learn *Birkat HaGomel*, the blessing recited at the passage from constriction into expansiveness. Yet I wondered why I could not settle into Shabbat, why I could not receive its gift of transforming the silence of ignorance into faith.

Then I realized that I had served myself throughout the day. I had decided that private prayer, alone with my holy books, was what needed to happen. My supposedly spiritual desire had become self-serving, and I had forced its demands upon my children.

I apologized to my wife and admitted that I had behaved irrationally. She answered with what seemed to her the simplest truth in the world: stop thinking about yourself and think about them. Think about the children and the needs of others,

and everything becomes easier. I could only answer that I had a room filled with Kabbalistic and Chasidic works devoted to reaching the place she had described so naturally. Clearly, I still had work to do.

Becoming Small Enough to Carry

That moment revealed the prayer of the hunchbacked beggar: the prayer to make oneself smaller, even to become nothing. When we loosen our grip upon the day and stop requiring life to obey the shape of our personal expectations, we discover capacities we did not know we possessed.

Within the constricted consciousness of ego, we remain limited to the space we occupy and to the power that naturally belongs to us. But when we make room for the other, every human encounter becomes a messenger announcing that something larger than the self exists. The face of another person, especially the face of the stranger, reminds the soul that the world is more expansive than its private fears. Our task is to move with that reality instead of forcing upon it our fantasies of mastery and control.

The hunchbacked beggar can carry others beyond space because he occupies so little of it himself. The tree to which he carries them offers shade to every creature. It is a messianic place of unity in which each being finds the protection it needs from the dangers and anxieties of the world. Difference does not

disappear there, but difference no longer produces fragmentation. Distinction becomes the source of beauty, like an image created through the meeting of many colors.

We yearn for that tree, for a single shade spacious enough to shelter us all, the *tzila demeheimanuta*, the shade of faith. But one cannot reach the place beyond space while insisting upon occupying all available space. The journey from location to non-location, from rational mastery into the surrender of faith, depends upon becoming an *anav*: limiting one's footprint, relinquishing the need to be recognized, and accepting the quiet role of a vessel through which others may receive what they need.

When the ego grows silent, the light of Hashem can pass through acts of kindness, attention, and room-making. When another person's needs can help determine the course of the day, we become capable of carrying far more upon our backs. The smaller we make ourselves, until only the irreducible sliver of self remains, the more room we discover for others. In that near-invisibility, we can carry one another toward the promised shade.

The Heart Beyond Place

Rebbe Nachman teaches: *Mi sbeyesh lo lev, ein shayach lo makom klal*, for one who has a heart, the category of place no longer applies. Wherever I truly am, there I am; wherever my thoughts are, there I am. When the heart contains *rachamim*, when it makes room for another, it ceases to demand a particular location because it has opened into a place beyond place.

This is the impossible space of the *Kodesh HaKodashim*, where *makom ba'Aron ein min hamiddah*, the place of the Ark, was not included in the measurement. The Ark occupied space without occupying it. It was present without being contained by presence, visible within its invisibility. It became great by making itself small.

The *avodah* is to open the heart to the presence of the Holy One, who is called *HaMakom*, the Place of the world. At a house of mourning, when another person's loss displaces our ordinary self-concern, we say, *HaMakom yenachem etchem betoch she'ar aveilei Tziyon viYerushalayim*. May the true Place comfort you among the mourners of Zion and Jerusalem. In the face of suffering, I recognize that I do not occupy the center. What matters is that I become present for the other.

One who possesses such a heart can encounter the infinite anywhere. It does not matter whether a person is with family for Sukkos or alone, where one expected to be or somewhere entirely unforeseen. When the heart opens to human vulnerability and embraces the other without demanding that its own needs fill the space, every place touches the place beyond place.

When Compassion Redeems Love

The prayer to receive the hunchbacked beggar's gift concludes in a teaching of the Maggid of Mezeritch, recorded in the Tanya and explored deeply in the holy works of the Gerrer Tzaddikim. The verse in Yeshayahu speaks of *Yaakov asher padah et Avraham*, Yaakov who redeemed Avraham. Chronologically, the statement is impossible. Yaakov was not yet born when Avraham needed rescue.

The commentators connect the verse to Avraham's being cast into Nimrod's fiery furnace. Avraham was saved because Yaakov would one day descend from him. Yet the deeper question remains: why should the future Yaakov redeem the present Avraham?

Avraham is the archetype of *chesed*: love, generosity, expression, and movement toward the other. His tent stands open on every side. Yet unbounded giving can lose the capacity to distinguish, offering love even where it cannot be received rightly. Yaakov

represents *rachamim*, mercy, compassion, and empathy. He is the capacity to look upon another person and recognize that I can share the burden. Even when I have not lived the identical experience, I can locate within my soul a pattern that allows me to stand beside the one who suffers. I can become a *makom* of *nechamah*, a place of comfort, and help carry another toward the place they need to reach.

What happens when love dies, when its natural movement toward the other falls away? Love is then redeemed by compassion. If I cannot find the power to embrace another through love, I can still look into the other's face and recognize our shared humanity. Just as I struggle, so does the other. Just as I emerge from a history, so does the other. Just as the human condition cuts through me with anxiety and fear, so does it cut through the person before me.

Empathy makes room where spontaneous love no longer can. It allows me to carry another person by making myself smaller. In that smallness, I become *me'at hamachzik et hamerubeh*: a little that holds more than I ever imagined possible.

The Gift and the Prayer

The hunchbacked beggar does not teach us to deny our limits or crush ourselves beneath impossible burdens. He teaches us where an impossible capacity is born. It begins when faith loosens our demand to understand everything, when awe

awakens us before what exceeds us, and when humility creates room for another person's world. It becomes compassion—the willingness to bear a life that is not our own.

This is the gift he gives the children beneath their canopy, and it is also our prayer: to become small without disappearing, humble without self-contempt, and open without losing the truth of who we are. May we learn to bend our backs in a way that reveals their hidden strength. May we become the shoulders upon which others can rest, and may we carry one another toward the tree that has no place, beneath whose shade there is room for every living soul.

The Handless Beggar:

The Hands That Became Faith

The Beggar Who Returns From Longing

On the sixth night of the *sheva berachot*, we approach what is both the completion and the arrested completion of Rebbe Nachman's tale of the Seven Beggars, the *Shivah HaKabtzanim*. Once again, the children remember the handless beggar who found them when they were lost in the forest. He had offered them food and hope, told them that they could not follow him, and then disappeared. Now, years later, the children are being married in a pit dug into the mud and covered with branches, twigs, and garbage. They yearn for him, cry for him, and desire his return.

On the sixth day, the handless beggar answers them as all the beggars before him had answered: *Hineni*, here I am. He emerges from within their yearning, as though the yearning itself has brought him into presence. He reminds them that when they met in the forest, he blessed them that they should become like him. Now, at their wedding, he comes to transform that blessing into a gift.

"You believe that my hands are stumps," he tells them, "but in truth they are perfect. I have extraordinarily powerful hands. I

do not use their strength for anything in this world because I need it for another purpose.” The world sees an absence of hands and assumes powerlessness. The beggar reveals that what looks like weakness is a strength being preserved for something beyond the ordinary work of the world.

The Princess at the Castle of Water

To prove the power of his hands, the beggar tells of a king who desired a princess. The king devised many plots to capture her and finally succeeded in bringing her to his side. One night, however, he dreamed that the princess rose and killed him. He awoke startled, and the dream troubled him deeply. The soothsayers and wise men of his palace told him that the dream meant exactly what it appeared to mean: the princess would indeed kill him.

The king could not decide what to do. He could put her to death, but that would cause him pain. He could banish her, but after all his effort to obtain her, he could not bear the thought that another man might have her. If she came under another’s protection, she might return to kill him; yet if she remained in his court, he feared that she would kill him there. Suspended in this fear, he could neither hold her nor release her.

As his fear deepened, his love for her diminished. Gradually it disappeared, and she, in turn, ceased to love him. Eventually she came to hate him and fled the palace. The king sent scouts to

search for her, and they returned with the report that she had taken refuge near a castle made entirely of water.

The castle was surrounded by ten walls of water, one within another. Its ground was water, its gardens were water, and its trees and fruit were water. Its beauty required no description, for a castle made entirely of water was itself a wonder. Yet no one could enter it. Anyone who attempted to pass through its walls would surely drown.

The princess circled the castle as the king approached with his army. Seeing them, she chose to run into the water. She preferred drowning to being captured and forced to return, and perhaps, against all reason, she might survive the waters and enter the castle. When the king saw her running, he commanded his soldiers to shoot. If she died, he thought, so be it.

The princess was struck by ten kinds of arrows, each tipped with a different poison, but she continued toward the castle. She passed through the gates of all ten walls and reached the innermost court, where she collapsed into a deep faint. The king and his soldiers pursued her into the water, but they drowned.

The Boasts of Powerful Hands

The handless beggar once told this story to people who had been boasting about the strength of their hands. Each described a feat that seemed to prove his exceptional power. One claimed that his hands were so strong that he could catch an arrow after it had been released from its bow and retrieve it even after it struck its target.

The beggar asked what kind of arrow he could retrieve. There were ten kinds of arrows, each smeared with a different poison, each inflicting its own form of injury, and each more powerful than the last. The man named the single kind of arrow over which he had power. “If you can retrieve only one kind,” the beggar told him, “you certainly cannot heal the princess.”

Another man claimed that when he received, he was actually giving. Every gift he accepted was itself an act of charity. The beggar asked which of the ten kinds of charity he could give. The man answered that he gave a tithe, one part in ten. “Then you certainly cannot heal the princess,” the beggar replied, “for you can penetrate only the first wall that surrounds her.”

A third man boasted that by placing his hands upon the heads of the world’s leaders, he could bestow the wisdom they needed. The beggar asked which of the ten kinds of wisdom he could impart. When the man identified only one, the beggar told him that he could not know the princess’s pulse. There were ten

kinds of pulse, and a person who possessed only one kind of wisdom could understand only one of them.

Another claimed that his hands could restrain a storm and turn it into a gentle breeze. The beggar asked which of the ten winds he could master. When the man named only one, the beggar told him that he, too, could not heal the princess. Her healing required ten kinds of melody, and he could play only one.

Then they turned to the handless beggar and asked what he could do. He answered that he possessed every power they had claimed, together with all the powers they lacked. Each of them held only one tenth of the strength of which he boasted. The beggar possessed the other nine parts as well, and only a person with all ten forms of power could heal the princess completely.

The Power Hidden in Handlessness

The beggar could pass through all ten walls of water. Those walls were like the waves of the sea standing upright, held in place by the wind. He could retrieve all ten arrows from the princess's body, feel all ten forms of her pulse with his ten fingers, and heal her through ten kinds of melody. This was the testimony to the true power of his hands. Having revealed it, he turned to the bride and groom and said, "Today I give this to you as a wedding gift." The joy of the wedding feast became greater than ever.

This is where the sixth day ends: *Ve'atah ani noten lachem zot bematanah*—and now I give this to you as a gift—*vena'aseh sham simchah gedolah vechedvah rabah me'od*. A great joy and an exceedingly deep gladness arose there. The final word, *me'od*, carries the intensity of the gift. Yet the tale itself remains unfinished. There is no seventh day of the feast, for on that day Rebbe Nachman ceased telling the story.

Rebbe Nachman related this part of the tale on the sixth of Nisan, while his home was being cleaned for Pesach. He had left his house and traveled to the home of the Rav of Breslov, where his students gathered around him. Rebbe Nosson records the setting, though no one remembered precisely how Rebbe Nachman began this sixth day of the story. What remained was the strange conjunction of leaving one's house for Pesach and revealing the gift of the handless beggar.

Hands represent power. *Yadayim askaniyot bem*: hands are occupied with work. They express the human capacity to labor, craft, plant, build, and bring things into actuality. With our hands we grasp the world, subdue it, use its materials, and transform them into something beautiful. Hands are the visible instruments through which a person appears to exercise mastery.

The handless beggar overturns that appearance. “You think I cannot work in this world,” he tells us. “You see powerlessness

where my hands should be. On one level, you are correct, but not because I am weak. My strength is needed somewhere else. It is needed for something larger than this world, or more precisely, to draw what lies beyond the world down into the world.” His hands seem broken only because their power cannot be measured by ordinary accomplishment.

The Poison Carried by Every Arrow

The ten arrows represent the difficulties that pierce human life and history. Each carries its own poison and inflicts its own form of harm. There is hopelessness, despondency, self-judgment, temptation, jealousy, honor, anxiety, sadness, lostness, and the many variations of brokenness within the soul. We are struck from different directions, and no two wounds feel exactly the same.

Life is not merely compared to a war. It is, as the opening of the Ramchal’s *Mesilat Yesbarim* teaches, an entrance into a battle that has already begun. Arrows come toward us from every side.

Each bears its own *sam hamavet*, its own poison, and each enters the soul differently. One person is wounded by fear, another by shame, another by desire, and another by the conviction that nothing can ever change.

The handless beggar says that he can rescue the world from every one of these poisons. His remedy is not a *tikkun prati*, a

private rectification directed toward one arrow or one wound. It is a *tikkun klali*, a general remedy. He does not address only the scattered symptoms of suffering; he descends toward the root from which their many forms emerge.

There are people trained to address a particular problem, offer insight within one area, or sustain a person through one kind of pain. Their work may reach one arrow, one wall, one pulse, or one melody. The handless beggar speaks of another power: the ability to see the general darkness that colors the windows of the soul, to grasp the *shores* of negativity itself, and therefore to transform it at its root. If the root can be reached, the problem need not remain a collection of endlessly recurring symptoms.

The General Remedy of Emunah

The general remedy is the gift that has sounded throughout the story of all the beggars: *emunah*. It is faith beyond rational understanding, the willingness to release the demand that reason explain and secure everything. It is a learned unknowing that carries a person into the womb of faith, where life can still be held even when one does not know why, how, when, or where comfort will come.

This *emunah* does not explain away the poison. It does not claim that pain is unreal or that the arrow never entered. It sustains the belief that even here, within what cannot be understood, things have not fallen outside the possibility of

goodness. This undying faith beneath experience is what allows the handless beggar to retrieve all ten arrows.

The beggar never claims that he can stop an arrow before it is released. He does not even claim that he can prevent it from striking and causing harm. To imagine a spiritual teacher or a spiritual attitude that eliminates the sting of human life would be magical thinking at best and heresy at worst. The story does not deny suffering in order to offer hope.

Its claim is more difficult and more powerful. Even after the arrow has been shot, even after it has entered the princess and spread its poison, it can still be withdrawn. A remedy can arrive after the wound. We often assume, consciously or not, that a remedy has value only when it prevents pain, and that any suffering proves that no true remedy exists. The handless beggar teaches that healing after the *makkah*, after the blow has already fallen, may disclose a deeper power.

Such a remedy restores hope to the hopeless, light to those who have lived in darkness, closeness to those who feel far away, faith to the faithless, and comfort to those who have suffered. It descends to the bottom of the barrel and declares that this, specifically, is where it has come to work. *Af al pi*, although the person has suffered and feels lost, *af al pi ken*, nevertheless, it is precisely here that healing can begin.

Hope That Survives Its Own Absence

The remedy acknowledges the poison's sting and the reality of the wound, yet it does not surrender to despondency when it sees that the arrow has already been fired. It can pull the arrow out after the damage has been done. This is the impossible hope Rebbe Nachman seeks to give: a hope that persists through darkness and even through the felt annihilation of hope itself.

Within hopelessness, *ein shum ye'ush ba'olam klal*: there is no despair in the world at all. As long as a person is speaking, breathing, walking, or doing anything, the possibility remains that goodness can emerge within the experience and from it. Hope does not depend upon pretending that the wound never occurred. It begins where that pretense has become impossible.

The princess is all of us and none of us. She is humanity, *Klal Yisrael*, the world, the universe, and every individual heart in its despondency and longing. She is also the princess with whom Rebbe Nachman opened his *Sippurei Ma'asiyot*, the princess who was lost and then saved. We are told that she was saved, but the tale refuses to tell us how.

That enigmatic ending opens the heart to a salvation that emerges from not knowing. The princess was certainly saved, yet the manner of her rescue remained hidden. This uncertainty opens the dreamscape of Rebbe Nachman's stories, where light and darkness exchange places, where what is high becomes low

and what is low becomes high, and where the ordinary coordinates of reason no longer determine what is possible.

Here, in the tale of the Seven Beggars, we hear how she is saved. The handless beggar completes the earlier story by drawing every kind of poison from the princess. He knows that despondency, shame, sadness, fear, anxiety, and hopelessness arise from a shared root: an absence of *emunah*, or perhaps not its absence, but the need for still more *emunah*. The work of life is *noch emunah*, more faith. Every moment asks us to draw more of it into ourselves.

When the Hands Become Faith

The handless beggar appears powerless in this world because his power has been reserved for something else. We, too, admit that we are powerless and that our lives have become unmanageable. In the face of that powerlessness, the one thing available to us is to draw *emunah* into our hands.

The Torah says of Moshe Rabbeinu, *vayehi yadav emunah*, his hands were faith. His hands were not working the ground or displaying the human power to master the world. They became vessels through which he revealed that although he appeared to possess power, he willingly bowed before the One who possesses all power. He surrendered his strength to the source of faith.

When our power becomes faith, the hands we imagined were our own begin to appear handless. This is not the collapse of strength but its redirection. The person no longer worships his own capacity. What seemed to be powerlessness becomes the opening through which a greater power can enter.

The handless beggar heals the princess by understanding the ten pulsations of the body, which are also the ten melodies of the world. Human experience does not produce one unbroken, consonant sound. Music is born through the meeting of consonance and dissonance: chords that rise and carry the soul upward, and chords that pull it back toward the earth, toward difficulty and pain.

The Melody Between Opposites

The beauty of music comes from an unresolved encounter. Consonance offers sequence, coherence, and the sense that one thing leads naturally to another. Dissonance reminds us that nothing fits so easily. Music holds sense and the loss of sense, wisdom and the undoing of wisdom, faith and heresy, hope and hopelessness, light and darkness, without forcing them into a false resolution.

Rebbe Nachman repeatedly associates music with the *Levi'im*. The *Levi'im* represent constriction and boundary. They guarded measures and limitations, ensuring that nothing moved beyond its rightful place. Music arises in the same movement: a force surges outward, is restrained, returns into itself, and then reaches forward again.

This is the movement of *ratzo vashov*, running and returning. Its friction gives birth to the *niggun*. We rise and fall, and even after rising we may fall again. Within descent there may be ascent, and within ascent another descent. The rational mind cannot master these reversals, but melody can hold them.

The ten melodies teach ten ways of meeting the paradoxes of life. They allow room for the conflicting movements of the heart without demanding that one cancel the other. This capacity of *niggun* is how the handless beggar heals the princess and draws the poison from all ten arrows.

To face despondency, heresy, loss of faith, brokenness, and sighing, a person must hear the songs hidden within the brokenness of the world. He must become an instrument, an empty vessel through which the air can pass and create sound. The word *chalil*, flute, shares its root with *chalal*, emptiness or void. Only what has been hollowed can receive breath and turn it into music.

We breathe into the empty vessel and make sound. We expire in order to inspire. The handless beggar's *emunah* knows that concealed within the ten forms of poison are ten possibilities of melody. That knowledge gives him the power to enter the castle of water and rescue the princess.

The Palace With No Dry Ground

To understand the palace of water, we return to a teaching of Rebbe Nachman's grandfather, the Baal Shem Tov. The Baal Shem Tov told, in several forms, of a king who expelled his son from the palace after the son had done something terribly wrong. The child never ceased yearning to return to his father's throne room, to the place of comfort, kindness, and *rachamim rabim*, the abundant mercy that descends from *Atik Yomin*, the Ancient of Days.

The father also longed for his son and suffered in his absence. Yet for the palace, the kingdom, and existence itself to remain, there had to be reward and punishment, right and wrong, limit and expression, prohibition and permission. The king therefore surrounded the palace with walls, fierce animals, threatening guards, and many terrors that seemed to prevent the child from returning.

The son sent soldiers toward the palace. Some reached the first barrier and fled, saying, *Ich ken nisht zayn*, I cannot go on. Others reached a second barrier before fear overwhelmed them. Only the son continued to approach the walls that stood between him and his father.

As he came closer, the dread of death and destruction intensified. Yet when he finally crossed the first barrier, it was revealed as an *achizat ha'eynayim*, a deception of the eyes, an

image of fear that had seemed solid only while he stood before it. With renewed courage he approached the next barrier, and again the waters seemed to rise to his neck. He felt that he could neither climb nor move forward. When he crossed it, this wall too was disclosed as a mirage.

The barriers had been real until the moment he passed through them. The movement through them revealed what they were. Slowly, the child crossed every imaginary boundary and returned to his father. A profound joy filled the world as father and son were reunited.

The castle of water confronts the handless beggar with the same terror. No one believes he can enter. There is no dry ground, nowhere to stand and nothing to grasp. A person cannot say, "I am secure here." The threat is suffocation, drowning, and the loss of every familiar source of comfort.

The handless beggar enters because he understands that walls of water are not walls in the ordinary sense. He sustains himself with the breath he has preserved for this moment, with the *emunah* that he can survive even when the water reaches his throat. The waters rise and fall; moments of comfort alternate with moments of abandonment. Still, he believes that he can breathe within breathlessness and hold faith even when faith appears swallowed by the sea.

Ten Psalms Against Ten Poisons

Within the palace, the beggar looks at every poison and sings its song. He draws faith back into the world by taking each form of despondency and transforming it into melody. This is what Rebbe Nachman brought into the world through the *Tikkun HaKlali*, the ten *kapitlach Tehillim* he revealed near the end of his life, just as this tale was told near the end of his life.

The ten psalms speak the languages of pain and suffering and transform them into words of praise and expression. Ten poisons become ten forms of strength. The wound is neither concealed nor denied; it is given a voice and, through that voice, becomes song.

Only when we relinquish the imagined strength of our hands and recognize that we are handless do we discover *vayehi yadav emunah*, hands that have become faith. *Beyad hanevi'im adammeh*: through the prophets, imagination is given form. When we release control and accept our powerlessness, *yesh inyan sbeyithapech hakol*—there is a power through which everything can be transformed. An *emunah* enters the soul and turns powerlessness into a strength greater than anything we could have imagined.

The handless beggar offers this as a wedding gift. He gives the children the ability to breathe beneath the water, to pass through walls that appear impenetrable, and to swim through

waves that seem impossible to cross. He does not remove the sea. He gives them hands of faith with which to enter it.

The Joy Found in the Pit

The children become truly happy. Their story began with loss: abandoned in the forest, starving, crying, and dependent upon beggars who appeared only long enough to keep them alive. They grew into beggars themselves and embraced a life of yearning, dependence, and not knowing where the next day's food would come from. Yet it is precisely there that they discover joy.

They find it in a pit dug into the earth, buried in mud, covered with trash, and surrounded by deformed beggars and impoverished people. This is the promise with which Rebbe Nachman opened the tale: *Asaper lachem eich hayu smeichim mitoch marah shechorah*—I will tell you how they were joyous from within despondency. The story comes from the ancient days to reveal a joy found within the loss of hope and power.

At the beginning of the tale, the king gives his kingship to his son while he is still alive, but he asks for one promise. When the son descends from *malchut*, becomes impoverished, and loses his kingship, he must remain joyful. If the loss of power destroys his joy, then he believed that the power of his hands was truly his, and he was never worthy of kingship.

When a person discovers joy even in the loss of *malchut*, hope, and control, another freedom becomes possible. He reaches the place of *Ich ken nisht zayn*—I cannot do it—and turns toward Hashem: You must do it. His hands cease to be instruments of self-worship and become hands of *emunah*.

From that surrender comes the exceedingly great joy described by the word *me'od*. It is the joy of the bride and groom in the pit, beneath the mud and the branches, surrounded by everything that appears broken. There, where human power has fallen away, the handless beggar gives them the strength he had saved for another world: the power to draw what is beyond the world into this one, and to find joy beneath the branches, twigs, and garbage.

The Legless Beggar:

The Tale That Was Never Told

The Empty Engraving

Beyond the written ending of Rebbe Nachman's tale of the Seven Beggars lies a territory that is difficult to enter. It is a phantom space, carved out by *Rabbeinu* and yet left empty: an engraving whose form is created precisely by what is absent. The story leads us toward this space, prepares us for it, and then refuses to fill it.

From its opening, the *ma'aseh* is framed by the demand to remain joyful when kingship disappears. A king gives the kingdom to his son during his own lifetime, but on one condition: even when the prince descends from *malchut*, even when he loses the comfort, authority, and power placed in his hands, he must remain *be-simchah*. Yet the prince falls. He descends into sadness, *marah shechorah*, *kefirot*, and the collapse of hope and faith.

The story then opens again inside an unnamed catastrophe. An entire civilization flees into the forest, leaving a young boy and girl lost among the trees. Starving and destitute, they cry from the most impoverished place within the soul, the place that has nothing left with which to speak except its cry. This is the

tefillah le'ani described by the *Zohar HaKadosh*: the prayer of the impoverished person, which rises higher than every other prayer because it comes from the nothingness of the self.

In response to that cry, seven enigmatic beggars appear. They are creatures of the night, figures of *chisaron* who seem marked by every form of deficiency: the blind beggar, the deaf beggar, the stuttering beggar, the crooked-necked beggar, the hunchbacked beggar, the handless beggar, and the legless beggar. Each one gives the children enough food for that day, offering a moment of hope without remaining to guarantee the next. The children eventually grow into beggars themselves, strong precisely in their acknowledgment of powerlessness.

A Wedding Beneath the Earth

In the heart of this darkness, a wedding is made. The two lost children are joined, and what had been separated is brought into *yichud*. Yet the wedding is celebrated not in a palace but in a deep pit dug into the wet mud, covered with branches, refuse, and earth. There, within the crevice of worldly existence, an immense joy is found.

The seven days of celebration become the return of the beggars who once sustained the children in the forest. They now return to give wedding gifts, and each reveals that the disability attributed to him was only the visible surface of a higher capacity. What the world read as deficiency was the hidden site of his strength.

The blind beggar gives the gift of old age, which is really the power to remain young and renew oneself at every moment. The deaf beggar gives the good life, rooted in his refusal to hear the world's lack. The stuttering beggar reveals speech so powerful that ordinary language cannot contain its gratitude to God. The crooked-necked beggar gives breath and song. The hunchbacked beggar teaches how to become small enough to carry more than one could otherwise hold. The handless beggar reveals that his power has been reserved for the place that most needs it: to save the princess, the Jewish soul, the burning ember of hope and faith within every heart. His seemingly broken hands can draw out the arrows and poisons of worldliness and enter the palace of water without being drowned.

After six gifts, the movement of the narrative teaches us to expect the seventh. The legless beggar should return. His apparent deficiency should be overturned, and his gift should complete the celebration. Instead, there is silence.

The World Is Speaking of the Seventh Day

We are given only the frame of what might have happened. Rebbe Nachman told the tale near the end of his short life, as tuberculosis was taking his breath. Each time Rebbe Nossan and the *chasidim* wanted him to continue, they would speak before him about the news of the day. The events of the world would awaken the next stage of the story.

After Rebbe Nachman completed the account of the sixth day, the day of the handless beggar, the companions again told him what was happening in the world. He answered, *Ha'olam medabrim meha-ma'aseh shel yom hashvi'i*, the world is speaking of the tale of the seventh day. Nevertheless, *lo siprah, velo zachinu lishmo'a*: he did not tell it, and we did not merit to hear it. After that final *Pesach*, while traveling with Rebbe Nosson to Uman, Rebbe Nachman said that they would not merit to hear the story until *Mashiach* came.

The world, then, is already speaking the tale, but the tale itself remains untold. This is more radical than the ending of the Lost Princess. There we are told, *besof hotzi'ah*, in the end, he took her out, but we are not told how. An ending is given, even if the path toward it remains concealed. In the tale of the Seven Beggars, the ending does not appear at all.

For those who mocked *Chasidut*, and Breslov in particular, such unfinished stories seemed to confirm their contempt. They called the Breslover *chasidim* the *toite chasidim*, the dead *chasidim*, and dismissed the tales as foolish narratives without conclusions. Yet, as Zvi Mark observes, the absence of an ending eventually turned from an apparent deficiency into one of the story's deepest strengths. Its lack of closure opens imagination and wonder. It beckons the listener to enter the tale rather than remain outside it. More than two centuries later, we are still waiting, still wondering, still listening toward the silence.

A Yearning for the Untold Story

Zvi Mark brings a particularly piercing literary response under the title *Ga'agu'a le-sippur shelo suppar*, a yearning for the story that was never told. It is a poem by Itzik Manger, the Yiddish poet who also found himself abandoned within a forest of hunger and dread, a forest bearing the names Auschwitz and Treblinka, among the other places where the Jewish people were forced to reveal an irreducible point of hope within hell.

Manger addresses the missing figure: Kabtzan ha-shevi'i, siyem ha-sippur, seventh beggar, finish the tale. We are the last listeners. So many Jews did not merit to hear its conclusion. Why wait any longer? Seventh beggar, you too are silent. The clouds thicken and sink lower, hiding the sun. We are waiting. Tell the story, because perhaps it will soon be too late. Who will remain to hear it?

The plea reveals something essential about Rebbe Nachman's stories. He began telling tales when he felt that his Torah was no longer accomplishing the *tikkun* it needed to accomplish. He would tell tales of ancient days in order to awaken a Jewish soul that had fallen into a sleep so deep that familiar Torah could no longer reach it. When the Torah of the past no longer ignites the soul, and the Torah of the present can no longer awaken it, one must reach toward the Torah of the future: the Torah of *Atika Stima'ah*, described in the sixtieth teaching of *Likutei Moharan*. It is ancient because it comes from a depth so primordial that it is rooted in the future itself.

These *sippurei ma'asiyot mishanim kadmoniyot*, tales from ancient years, awaken what is ancient within each of us. They can reach even souls that appear to have no access to Torah. The continued yearning of poets and secular Jews for the seventh beggar testifies to this power. Even far from the explicit language of Breslov, they still demand the story's conclusion.

The Palace of Revealed and Hidden Torah

Rebbe Nachman's corpus is itself a many-leveled palace. Rebbe Nossan asks us to imagine rooms that seem to have no doors or windows, only to discover a trapdoor into a basement; the basement somehow leads to an attic, the attic opens onto a balcony overlooking all of Yerushalayim, and another passage descends again into a room of refuse. One wanders through hidden pathways and finds pockets of energy, despondency, and hope. Rebbe Nachman's teachings and *bechinot* form a house in which one can become lost.

Within that palace are many forms of Torah. There is the written Torah of *Likutei Moharan*, the recorded conversations of *Sichot HaRan*, and the biographical and autobiographical fragments of *Chayei Moharan*, which approach the mystery of who Rebbe Nachman was. There are the aftereffects of his Torah in his *talmid*, through *Likutei Halachot* and *Likutei Tefilot*. There are stories, teachings, conversations, and recollections. There are also teachings that never reached us openly.

The *Sefer HaNignaz* was written and then commanded to be concealed until the coming of *Mashiach*. The *Sefer HaNisraf* was written and then burned before Rebbe Nachman's death. The *Megillat Setarim*, the Scroll of Secrets concerning the end of days, was spoken and hidden. Each of these entered the world before being withdrawn. Revelation came first, followed by concealment. That sequence creates the spiritual psychology of hide-and-seek: if something once existed here, one may feel compelled to search for it, even while knowing that it remains inaccessible.

The tale of the seventh beggar is different. It was not written and concealed, spoken and hidden, or placed in a chest to await a future revelation. It was never told. We are not standing before a hidden object whose location we do not know. We are standing before a silence.

Perhaps the only faithful response would be to sit before that silence. Our task, as my friend and *rebbe* Micha has insisted, is *shtikah*. We do not know who the seventh beggar is, what his gift is, or what his story would have revealed. Many writers, religious and secular, have attempted to complete the tale with their own poetic endings, and *kulam kedoshim*. Still, one must resist pretending to know what Rebbe Nachman refused to tell.

Yet we are a *dor mechutzaf*, a generation of audacity. Through *akshanut de-kedushah*, sacred stubbornness, and *azut de-kedushah*, holy boldness, we may stand at the boundary of the silence and contemplate what the non-ending itself asks of us. We cannot tell the seventh beggar's tale. We can, however, listen to what is born from not knowing it.

I Have Finished and I Will Finish

Throughout *Chayei Moharan*, Rebbe Nosson confronts the approaching death of his *rebbe*. Rebbe Nachman was only thirty-eight, yet he had seen *mi-sofa de-alma ad sofa de-alma*, from one end of the world to the other. Like the blind beggar, he could say, *Ani zaken me'od ve-adayin ani yanik*: I am exceedingly old, and yet I remain an infant who has scarcely begun to live.

As the illness worsened, Rebbe Nosson asked what would become of Rebbe Nachman's promises, visions, and hope for redemption. Rebbe Nachman himself had understood the meaning of his first renewed cough: this would be his end. Even his disease belonged to the story, and he seemed to know the movement of that story from its beginning.

His answer to Rebbe Nosson was *Gamarti ve'egmor*—I have finished, and I will finish. The sentence holds two endings. There is *gamarti*, the apparent conclusion: I have completed the tale, given what I came to give, and reached the boundary of

what can be said. The story of the handless beggar has been told; there is nothing more. Yet there is also *ve'egmor*: the first ending is not the final ending. Another completion will be born from the completion already reached.

The missing seventh day embodies this paradox. The beggars have gathered for the wedding in the earthen pit. Six gifts have been given, and the narrative seems to have reached its limit. At the very place where we feel that limit, Rebbe Nachman leaves open the possibility of a deeper ending. When a person reaches the *sof*, when possibility appears exhausted and hope can expand no farther, the absence of the conclusion becomes its own teaching.

Rebbe Nachman asks us to encounter the nonending as an ending. He does not spare us the experience of closure, concealment, or hopelessness. He brings us to the point at which there seems to be no gift left to receive and no story left to tell. Only there can we hear the demand *asur lehit'ya'esh*: it is forbidden to despair.

Then comes the hint: the world is already speaking of the seventh day. At the apparent limit, a hope appears that can live beyond hopelessness, a beginning born after the end. *Sofa na'utz bit'chilato*, the end is embedded in the beginning. When Rebbe Nachman says, "I will tell no more," the silence itself tells us that his ending is not yet an ending.

The Hope That Survives Hopelessness

This is the secret of *ein shum ye'ush ba'olam kelal*: despair does not exist at all. The ending offered to us becomes the birthplace of a beginning that has not yet been told. We cannot know the ending, cannot force it into language, and cannot secure tomorrow in advance. Yet from within that limitation comes the Torah of *Atika Stima'ah*, so ancient that it gives birth to the future and teaches that another beginning waits beyond what has ended.

Rebbe Nachman expressed the same paradox in the words *nitzachti va'anatzach*, I have been victorious, and I will be victorious. If the victory has already been won, why must it be won again? Because we must not bow to false endings. There is a hope that survives hopelessness and a completion that exceeds the first completion. *Gamarti ve'egmor* means that a finished thing may still contain a future.

This pattern echoes an ancient distinction: *ad ve-ad bichlal* and *ad velo ad bichlal*. One can reach the limit without including it, or reach the limit in a way that passes through and contains it. Even the cantillation of Torah distinguishes between a *pesik*, an interruption, and a *sof pasuk*, the true ending of the verse. The first stop is not always the final one.

The same resonance lies between *sof*, an ending, and *saf*, a threshold. *Megillat Esther* is described as *sof kol hanissim*, the end of all miracles, yet Purim exceeds the apparent end of the festivals. Bigtan and Teresh are *shomrei hasaf*, guardians of the threshold through whom the entire space of the Purim miracle begins to unfold. As Rav Tzadok HaKohen of Lublin observes, the ending and the threshold nearly share a language. The *sof* is not only where something ceases; it is the edge at which one stands before what has not yet entered.

The untold ending of the Seven Beggars may therefore remind us that even when the story is over, there remains a space beyond endings. Yet this must remain an interpretation of the silence, not a claim to possess the missing tale. At the threshold we may gather possibilities, but we may not mistake them for what Rebbe Nachman withheld.

The Beggar Who May Teach Us to Dance

One possibility appears as a *remez*, never as a definitive conclusion. Rav Menachem Froman, Rav Adin Steinsaltz, and Rav Shagar each hinted that the legless beggar may come to reveal the power of dance, the power of *rikud*. R' Yitzchak Meir Morgenstern *shlit'a* and Rav Avraham Tzvi Kluger *shlit'a* have allowed the possibility of imagining the legless beggar declaring, like those before him: "You think I have no legs? I have legs unlike anyone else." If so, perhaps his gift would teach *Bnei Yisrael* how to dance.

The symbolism of the seven beggars offers one path toward this possibility. The beggars correspond to the seven lower *sefirot*: *chesed*, *gevurah*, *tiferet*, *netzach*, *hod*, *yesod*, and *malchut*. They also correspond to the seven shepherds: Avraham, Yitzchak, Ya'akov, Moshe, Aharon, Yosef, and Dovid. The seventh beggar would therefore belong to *malchut* and to Dovid HaMelech, Dovid *Malka Meshicha*.

To understand *malchut* is to understand impoverishment. *Malchut* possesses nothing of its own. It is empty of independent content, pure self-nullification, receiving only what is placed within it. Dovid HaMelech can therefore say, *Ki dal ve'ani ani*—I am poor and impoverished—and identify himself with the *even ma'asu habonim*, the stone rejected by the builders.

In exile, *malchut* is described by the words *ragleha yordot mavet*: her legs descend into death. As the lowest rung, the place where light seems to expire, her feet touch darkness, mortality, the end of vitality. We walk there: *Gam ki eilech begei tzalmavet lo ira ra*. The road of life passes through the valley of the shadow of death, and Rebbe Nachman began telling stories while knowing that death stood close beside him.

Dancing on the Abyss

If we are to understand the joy of dance, we must also understand the anxiety of living in this world. To dance is to relinquish the ego's demand for control and allow the body to move. Yet this release occurs while we are *omed al hasaf*, standing at the threshold, above ground that may at any moment open into nothingness. In the language of Dovid HaMelech, we dance on the abyss.

The image appears in the account of Dovid HaMelech and the *tehom*. Dovid sought to investigate the abyss embedded in creation. In his wisdom and holy foolishness, he opened its depths, and the waters threatened the structure of existence. He then recited the fifteen *Shir HaMa'alot* so that the waters would descend again. On the same *daf* in *Masechet Sukkah* appears the joy of the *Simchat Beit HaSho'evah*, the dancing of Dovid HaMelech in the *Beit HaMikdash*. The two scenes belong together: Jewish dancing is dancing with awareness of the abyss beneath us.



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