

Rebbe Nachman: Questioning the Void

...While true that for R. Nahman, the spiritual seeker is incessantly bombarded by the difficulties and paradoxes that interrupt any static system of meaning, thus implicitly relating the spiritual experience to what has been described as the existentialist worldview; the existentialist outlook is mitigated by the spiritual and religious faith that imbues the suffering and doubt with meaning. In this sense following the scholarship of Zeitlin and Mark, R. Nahman's thought represents a radically personal and creative continuation of the Jewish mystical tradition as opposed to a sharp deviation from the mystical and spiritual context that defines Hassidic thought. For R. Nahman the *kushiyot* that remain unanswerable become a spiritually fecund idea by propelling the spiritual seeker into the space where rationalism, speech, and certitude no longer represent the apex of the spiritual experience. The ontological questions, predicated on the paradox of the vacant space- the impossible union of something (*yeish*) and nothing (*ayin*)- demand that the individual relinquish their positivistic reliance on knowing for the sake of a more dynamic form of nonknowing, or faith (*emunah*). For R. Nahman as we shall see, this form of apophatic nonknowing becomes a yearning for that which remains interminably elusive and is often represented through prayer, (*ba-kasha*, lit. asking) song (*niggun*) or silence (*shtikah*).

After defining the two modes of questioning in discourse sixty-four, R. Nahman continues and describes how the spiritual seeker is to deal with the *kushiyot* of the *chalal ha-panui*:

"rather through faith (*emunah*) the Jewish people (*yisrael*) traverse (*ovrim*) all the wisdoms, and even over this form of *apikorsut* that stems from the *chalal ha-panui*, because they have faith in God without any philosophy (*chakirah*) or wisdom (*chochmah*), rather with perfect faith...and through faith, the faith they have in God that He fills all worlds (*mimaleh kol almin*) and He surrounds all worlds (*sovev kol almin*)...only it is not possible to grasp this and to find God there [in the vacant space], therefor they traverse (*ovrim*) all of the wisdoms and the *kushiyot* and the *apikorsut* that stems from the *chalal hapanui*, for they know with certainty that it is impossible to find an answer, for if they were to find an answer for them, meaning, that they were to find God in them [the *kushiyot* of the *chalal ha-panui*], then there would be no *chalal ha-panui*, and there would be no capacity for the existence of creation... Therefore the Jewish people are referred to as those-who-traverse (*ivri'im*), on account that they traverse, with faith, over all the wisdoms, and even over the wisdoms that are not wisdom (*chochmot sh-einam chochmot*), that is, the the second form of heresy that stems from the *chalal ha-panui*. Therefor God is referred to as the God of the *ivri'im*, from the

language of “beyond the river” (*ever la-nahar*), the language of sides (*tze’da’din*), that is, that His Godliness also surrounds the *chalal ha-panui*, that comes through the act of Divine contraction (*tzimtzum*), as he contracted His light to the sides. Therefor the Jewish people are referred to as *ivri’im*, because through their faith, that they have faith in God the God of the *ivri’im*, they traverse all the wisdoms and that which is not wisdom, that is, the second form of heresy...”

Here R. Nahman makes clear exactly what is unanswerable within the ontological question. To reconcile the essential paradox upon which existence stands- namely the impossibility of God’s presence and the equal impossibility of God’s absence- would mean the foreclosure of that which keeps existence open. An answer (*teshuvah*) would imply a return (*teshuvah*) to the origin in which the question no longer exists. If one were to rationally prove that Divinity is found within the void of the Divine, the vacant space necessary for the other-than-God would retroactively fold upon itself thus invalidating the entire basis of existence. Remarkably, R. Nahman suggests that the spiritual seeker himself is aware of the impossibility of the answer, thereby calling upon the individual to engage a mode-of-being that transcends the ontological question through a transitive act. In order to traverse the questions of the vacant space the spiritual seeker must move beyond rational thought and engage the way of faith (*emunah*). Through faith, the individual facing the ontological antinomies conjures up the capacity to concurrently move through and beyond the impossible paradox that marks the *chalal ha-panui*. This form of faith is unique in that it does not repress the unanswerable questions; rather it demands the simultaneous recognition and subversion of these antinomies. By enabling the individual to traverse the void, both the question and the reprieve that comes with the faithful ignorance of the question remain in dialectical play. This open-ended suspension of the dialectical movement between question and closure places the spiritual seeker at the threshold of the void as well as the secure clearing of faith. This is implied in R. Nahman’s evocation of the term *ivri’im* that stems from Abraham’s appellation *ivri* that was given on account of his being “on the other side of the river (*ever la-nahar*). As Pedaya points out, the root word *avar* (traverse) implies a certain liminality in which the subject is situated at both the point of departure and the intended point of arrival. This ambiguous space is similarly symbolized by the word *ibbur* (pregnancy), which shares a root with *iv’ri*, in which the demarcations separating internality and externality are diminished. By traversing the unanswerable questions of the vacant space with faith, the spiritual seeker remains, paradoxically, on both sides (*tze’da’din*) of the void. For R. Nahman, *emunah* does

not negate the ontological question by advocating an anti-rationalist outlook; rather it moves through and beyond the impossibility of an answer, thereby bringing the individual face to face with a reality that is partially built upon the impossibility of its own existence.

Facing the vacant space in which the unanswerable questions form the ontological type of *apikorsut*, the spiritual seeker is called upon to engage a faith that simultaneously negates the drive for totalized knowledge while affirming a nonknowing that can withstand both answerable and unanswerable questions. By acknowledging, traversing and faithfully accepting the absolute question, the spiritual seeker mimics the Divine act of creation in which the ontological paradoxes of something and nothing (*yesh v'ayin*), infinity and limitation (*ein-sof v'tzimtzum*), surrounding and filling (*sovev u'mimaleh*) were traversed, for which God is referred to as God of the *ivri'im*. Furthermore, the individual who lives the question, to borrow Rilke's term, may now fully express the desire (*ratzon*) and yearning (*hish'to'kikut*) that is invoked in the absence of a totalized system in which the object of desire- namely, absolute knowledge- can be grasped. For R. Nahman, the *teshuka* that is born vis-a-vis the unanswerable question becomes the vehicle by which the spiritual seeker may arrive at the telos (*tachlit*) of the spiritual path, that is, the apophatic nonknowing that is disclosed when knowing dissolves.

At times, on an existential level, the ontological antinomies that permeate reality throw the spiritual seeker into a state of doubt (*sfei'kot*) in which the hope for spiritual redemption is emptied. R. Nahman describes this harrowing encounter with the place-of-absence in discourse twelve, printed in the second volume of *Likkutei MoHaRan*, titled "Where is the place of Your Honor" (*ayeh mikom kevodo*). This space of concealment, which for R. Nahman is rooted in the "concealed utterance" (*ma'amar satum*), is devoid of any centering point through which the individual may regain spiritual standing. As one enters these "places of impurity" (*mi'komot ha-mi'tunafim*) where the "honor" (*kavod*) and presence of God is silenced, they face the frightening reality of God's delimitation (*gevul*). These "dwellings of foreign worship" (*batei avodah zarah*) are formed through transgressive acts (*aveirot*) thus creating a space-of-otherness in which the honor of God is withheld (*kvodi li-acher lo l'tein*). When one finds themselves in this space of "great stumbling and mistakes" (*ta'utim u-michsholot rabbim*), nothing but a primal questioning that stems from "great confusion" (*bil'bu'lim*) can redeem the individual. To escape this space of concealment, the spiritual seeker is called to question (*sho'el*), request (*mi-vakeish*) and seek out (*mi-chapeish*) the impossible presence of God that must- paradoxically -permeate the void of God. For R.

Nahman this questioning act in which the individual cries out “where” (*ayeh*) is not aimed towards any specific destination or answer; rather, the act of ontological questioning itself elevates and redeems the spiritual seeker from their personal abyss. As R. Nahman writes:

“we find then, that when one seeks out and asks “where” is the place of Your Honor, through this [act] itself they return and ascend to the elevated honor, that is the aspect of “where”, for from His great concealment and occlusion God enlivens (*mi-chayeh*) these places, and now as a result of falling there, and [the individual] asks “where” is the place of Your Honor, through this he returns and connects (*mi-daveik*) himself to there, giving life to his fallenness, and he ascends in all matters of ascension.”