

This World

Picture the scene- a young mystic approaches his teacher. Seeking advice, or insight- in truth what he sought is not known nor does it matter- the student carries his burden to the teacher.

“Our master, may his memory be a blessing, answered and said: everyone says that there is this-world (*olam ha-zeh*) and the world-to-come (*olam ha-bah*). Regarding the world-to-come- we believe that there is a world-to-come; it is possible that this-world exists as well in some realm, because here it appears to be hell, for everyone is filled with interminable suffering. And he said: this-world does not exist at all.”

These words, recorded by R. Nosson of Nemirov in the name of his teacher R. Nachman of Bratslav remain one of the most ambiguous statements uttered by the rebellious mystic who, 200 years after his passing, remains shrouded in mystery.

Had R. Nachman, the teacher who traded intellectualism for fantasy; the tormented soul who outlawed sadness; the youthful spirit who challenged the old, had he given up hope? Skeptical at first, doubt turns to certitude as this ancient soul *paskens*: “this-world does not exist at all”.

If postmodernism simplified to the extreme, as Jean Francois Lyotard wrote, represents “an incredulity toward metanarratives” then R. Nachman is postmodern. By subverting the common equation- knowledge of this-world/belief in the world-to come- R. Nachman calls into question the basic framework upon which our creaturely perception rests. That which is hidden is known, and that which is known is hidden.

If existentialism, per Jean Paul Sartre’s locution, sees “existence preceding essence” as its theoretical basis then R. Nachman is an existentialist. Something exists. And it is filled with suffering. What this something is, we cannot be sure. Whether it is this-world (*olam ha-zeh*) or hell, it makes no difference, it is (*es gibt*). The essence, or meaning that we apply to the real-of-existence is of a secondary nature. The belief in the world-to-come, the spiritual narratives that we believe, they are not the difficult part. Those are the dreams of transcendence that assuage the suffering that abounds. What is difficult, says R. Nachman, is the here and now. To equate this-world with hell, to see only the absence (*he’edar*) that is *gehinom*, is to free existence from the garments of order.

If ethics, as Emmanuel Levinas screamed over and over, is to have one's subjectivity held in abeyance by the need of the other then R. Nachman is ethical. The awareness of the other's suffering, the destitution of the other as preceding the formation of the subject shatters the previous certainty of this-world (*olam ha-zeh*). The "interminable suffering" of others puts the world into question for R. Nachman. Can this be the world of which it is written: And God saw all He had created, and it was very good? Perhaps not. Certainly not. For R. Nachman, like Levinas, it is not enough to accept this-world, to be and to dwell in this-world; one must be interrupted by the face of the other. One must question the very grounds that enable the suffering condition. "It is possible that this-world exists as well in some realm, because here it appears to be hell..."

If human subjectivity is shaped through the triad of the real, imaginary and the symbolic as psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan would have us think, then R. Nachman is Lacanian. At the level of the symbolic the world-to-come is a simple belief. We live our lives in the hopes of producing a space in which we may enjoy the fruits of our labor. Thus the apparent suffering of this-world is mitigated through the desire for that which is always coming, *olam ha-bah*, interminably coming. At the level of the imaginary we are forced to engage the split that occurs when our self-conscious beliefs are shattered in the mirror of reality. Here *olam ha-zeh* is questioned; does it even exist? Perhaps. But certainly not here. At the level of the real the structures of belief, of possibility open up unto the chaotic Nothing that murmurs beneath. There, at the level of the real, R. Nachman has no doubts: "this-world does not exist at all".

If Hassidut, as the Baal Shem Tov taught, begins with the ability to tear oneself away from the known, to throw oneself beyond the threshold into the abyss of the unknown, then R. Nachman is Hassidic. Exhausted by the spiritual slumber that he saw in the world, his colleagues as well as himself, R. Nachman rebelled against the spiritual bourgeoisie. Attacked for his youthful dissent, R. Nachman disconnected himself from the known, choosing the ghosts of sinful souls over those of the rabbinic elite. No longer beholden to the multitudes perception of this-world- for him that was hell- R. Nachman inhabited a world unto to itself, an ancient world where fantasy and dreams ruled supreme. Killing himself from this-world to live in a world beyond limit. Perhaps that is why his Hassidim are known as the dead.