

Integrating the Rational and the Mystical: The Insights and Methods of Three Hassidic Rebbeim

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Introduction

The leading figures of *hasidut* combined rational analysis of the human condition with their own mystical insights. Through this synthesis they emerged as masters of psychological methods with which they served G-d and guided their followers.

The rationalist strain in Judaism identified religious truth with the faculty of reason and the use of logic. Thus, Maimonides has been described as "... the typical rationalist, in that rational understanding stands immeasurably higher for him than the experiences men have through feeling and intuition."¹

It is more difficult, however, to define "mysticism" in the Judaic context. Still, Louis Jacob's definition is a good start:

"Jewish mysticism can be defined as that aspect of the Jewish religious experience in which man's mind is in direct encounter with God."²

In this essay, I examine three seminal figures in the Jewish mystical tradition: Rabbi Nahman of Bratslav, Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liady and Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson.

¹ Borchsenius, Poul. *The History of the Jews*. Simon and Schuster, New York: 1965.

² Jacobs, Louis. *The Schocken Book of Jewish Mystical Testimonies*. Schocken Books, New York: 1996.

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Rabbi Naḥman of Bratslav

Rabbi Naḥman of Bratslav (1772-1810), a great-grandson of the Besht, has rightly been termed “The Tormented Master.”³ As Naḥman’s biographer, Arthur Green, notes, “the most essential religious reality for Naḥman was always the realm of his own inner struggle” (Green 40). Indeed, in a letter written to his own disciples Naḥman alluded to his struggle against “... the very jaws of the wicked Samael...” who had “[gnashed] his teeth at me” (*Hayyey Mo-HaRaN* 6, cited in Green p. 229). And yet, we need to examine a striking paradox in a man whom Green (298) describes as “...a deep and thoroughgoing anti-rationalist.” On the one hand, it is true that for Naḥman, the essence of religion is *faith*, not reason or logic. Naḥman tells us, “One really has to cast aside one’s mind, throwing off all cleverness, and serve God in simplicity” (*Liqqutim* II 5:15). Green sees this process of “setting aside...one’s intellect”—*histalequt ha-mobin*—as an essential part of Naḥman’s world view.

However, Green also recognized Naḥman’s “penchant for paradoxical thinking.” Despite Naḥman’s espousal of “simple faith” (*emunah*) he tells us that “...the primary essence of man is his *comprehension*, and wherever one’s *reason* is focused, there one has his being... whatever deficiencies a person suffers... they all stem from a lack of knowledge... similarly, anger and cruelty result from a lack of comprehension...” (*Liqqutei Moharan* 21, pp. 241-42; italics added).⁴ Also, in the realm of emotion—particularly when it came to the crushing bouts of depression he suffered—Naḥman is surprisingly “rational.” As Green puts it, in his later years Naḥman:

“...is not going to let his illness get the best of him. The threat of depression is a real one...He seeks to escape it by reasserting his own ability to *maintain willful control over his own mind*. He contrasts himself with those who ‘do nothing to help themselves,’ who do not work to fight off the depression that engulfs them...” (Green 245; italics added).

³ Green, Arthur. *Tormented Master: A Life of Rabbi Naḥman of Bratslav*. Schocken Books, New York: 1981.

⁴ Bokser, Ben Zion. *The Jewish Mystical Tradition*. The Pilgrim Press, New York: 1981.

Indeed, Naḥman himself tells us, during this period, that "...the reason why people remain far from God is that their minds are not settled. They do nothing to help themselves in this regard..." (*Liqqutim* II: 10).

How can we help ourselves? Naḥman's counsel is strikingly similar to that of modern-day cognitive-behavioral therapists such as Albert Ellis⁵ and Aaron Beck.⁶ Naḥman tells us:

"Rather than falling into despair over his shortcomings, [Man] must seek out positive elements in the totality of his being and judge himself favorably on that basis. Such an attitude brings one to the joy necessary to serve God" (*Liqqutei Mobarán* 282, as cited by Lieber, p. 27.)⁷

Naḥman's advice is fundamentally *cognitive* and *rational*; our self-esteem and mood are dependent upon *judgment* and *attitude*. To be sure, we may draw close to G-d by means of simple faith and the "setting aside" of intellect. However, we surmount our despair by *thinking* our way out of it.

Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Lyady

Rabbi Shneur Zalman (1745-1813) was a contemporary of Rabbi Naḥman. His magnum opus, the *Tanya* (*Sefer Shel Beinonim*), formed the basis for the Ḥabad Lubavitch movement (Bokser 210). On the one hand, we find in RSZ's writings many references to "the soul's yearning to cleave to God," [*Iggeret haKodesh* 18] "the return of the soul to its divine source," [*Tanya* 26] and many other ideas found in the Jewish mystical tradition (Bokser 218-219). RSZ, however, developed his own strain of *hasidic* thought that incorporated strong rationalist elements. For example, RSZ modified the concept of the *zaddik* (the righteous or saintly individual) so that it was seen "...in terms closer to the classic conception of the rabbi as a teacher and a guide, but not as a channel of divine grace" (Bokser 210).

⁵ Ellis, Albert and Harper, Robert A. *A Guide to Rational Living*. Wilshire Book Co., No. Hollywood: 1975.

⁶ Beck, Aaron T. *Cognitive Therapy and the Emotional Disorders*, 1979.

⁷ Lieber, Moshe. *The Pirke Avos Treasury*, Mesorah Publications, Brooklyn: 1995.

In his spiritual practice, RSZ can certainly sound quite “mystical” emphasizing intense catharsis and penitence. Thus, Foxbrunner tells us that Zalman advocated:

“...weekly or monthly periods of introspection and self-berating that, ideally, were to culminate in a tearful outpouring of the heart. This weeping was intended simultaneously to purge the soul of its spiritual guilt and of all its worldly worries; it would then be capable of serving God with unadulterated joy.” (Foxbrunner 115)⁸

Yet, RSZ paid high tribute to the role of the intellect. This is especially true in his depiction of the struggle between the “divine soul” and the “animal nature” inherent in all human beings. Foxbrunner tells us:

“...it is clear that in *Tanya* (and in some discourses) the emotions are generally *caused and completely controlled by the intellect*. A mind engaged in contemplating sublime matters will eventually bring forth sublime emotions. Conversely, the powerful, untamed physical passions generated by the animal soul may always be *tamed and sublimated by the intellect* of its divine adversary.” (Foxbrunner 102, italics added).

Indeed, in *Tanya* (chapter 12), RSZ writes:

“...as soon as there rises from his [the *beinoni*, or “intermediate” person] heart to his mind some animosity or hatred, God forbid, or jealousy or anger... his mind *exercises its authority and power over the spirit in his heart*, to do the very opposite and to conduct himself towards his fellow with the quality of kindness...” (*Tanya* 12, section 8, as translated by Steinsaltz p. 286; italics added).⁹

However, RSZ’s concept of the emotions does not necessarily pit them against the intellect. His view is more subtle. In certain instances, the intellect or rational faculty actually *gives rise to intense emotion*, albeit of an exalted type. Thus, in *Tanya* (chapter 3), RSZ tells us that:

⁸ Foxbrunner, Roman A. *Habad: The Hasidism of R. Shneur Zalman of Lyady*. Jason Aronson, Northvale: 1992.

⁹ Steinsaltz, Adin. *Opening the Tanya: Discovering the Moral and Mystical Teachings of a Classic Work of Kabbalah*. Jossey-Bass, 2003

“...when the intellect in the rational soul deeply contemplates and immerses itself exceedingly in the greatness of God...there will be born and aroused in his mind and thought the emotion of exalted awe...his heart will glow with an intense love like burning coals...with craving...towards the greatness of the Blessed Infinite.” (Steinsaltz 97)

Thus, the rational and emotive faculties are not necessarily adversaries, so long as the object of the intellect is “the greatness of God.”

Finally, like Rabbi Nahman and other *hasidic* masters, Rabbi Shneur Zalman seems to have been concerned with combating *depression*. RSZ distinguished between what he called “dejection”—what modern-day psychiatrists might term, “major depression”—and “bitterness.” Whereas dejection is a crippling emotion that “inhibits Service” bitterness is a form of “active dissatisfaction” with one’s shortcomings (Foxbrunner 122). Bitterness, in this sense, is a kind of goad to self-improvement. It is not unlike the modern cognitive psychologist’s instruction to the depressed patient; e.g., “Write down all the things that you’d like to change about yourself, and then some practical ways you might bring that about.” This instruction is provided in a context that also emphasizes self-acceptance—*distinguishing the individual’s self-defeating actions from his or her ultimate value as a human being* (Ellis and Harper).

Similarly, Foxbrunner writes that “RSZ devotes much attention to psychological strategies for dealing with periodic depression. These episodes were to be *examined* and their nature determined...” (Foxbrunner 120). Then, the individual could begin to alter his thinking so as to alleviate the depression. For example:

“...sadness arising from one’s apparent spiritual weakness—the inability to suppress profane thoughts, for example—could be overcome by simply accepting one’s lot... as one of the vast majority of men whose purpose in life is constantly to struggle with profane thoughts, speech, and actions naturally arising from the animal soul and the *yetser bara* [evil impulse].” (Foxbrunner 120)

In effect, Zalman is advocating *self-acceptance* and the avoidance of unrealistic, perfectionistic thinking. This is essentially a *change in one’s belief system* though it occurs in the hothouse atmosphere of “self-abasement and self-effacement” sessions (Foxbrunner 121). These are akin to what the narcissistic individual undergoes—often pain-

fully—as his grandiosity and self-involvement are gradually confronted in psychotherapy.

Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson

Known simply as “the Rebbe,” Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson (1902-94) was head of the Lubavitcher movement for forty-four years. The Rebbe is of course squarely within the Jewish mystical tradition. Indeed, according to the summaries of the Rebbe’s talks provided by Rabbi Simon Jacobson, the Rebbe emphasized that “...to begin to understand G-d... we must learn to go beyond our own mind, our own ego, our own tools of perception.” Furthermore, “... to look for G-d with our eyes, with our intellect, with our logic, would be like trying to capture the sun’s light in our hand.” (Jacobson 214).¹⁰

And yet—once again, we see in the Rebbe the magnificent paradox of our greatest spiritual leaders. For like his predecessor, Rabbi Shneur Zalman, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson also draws on traditional sources of Jewish “rationalism”. (It is intriguing that the Rebbe studied mathematics and science at the University of Berlin and the Sorbonne). Also, in the tradition of his ḥassidic forebears, the Rebbe was intensely interested in how we cope with pain and suffering, fear and anxiety. To those of us in the mental health profession, some of the Rebbe’s advice might well have come from a handbook on cognitive-behavioral therapy. For example:

“To defeat depression, you must introduce a fresh perspective to your thinking. You must begin to replace troubling, destructive thoughts with positive, constructive ones. Think good and it will be good. This is not foolish optimism; this is recognizing the goodness within even a seemingly bad situation...” and “...the moment you look fear in the eye, it begins to crumble. Use your intellect to harness your emotions...” (Jacobson 141).

Cognitive-behavioral therapists often use a technique called “reframing,” in which the patient’s mode of seeing a predicament is altered by means of a new cognitive “schema.” In this regard, consider the Rebbe’s approach to the following case:

¹⁰ Jacobson, Simon. *Toward a Meaningful Life: The Wisdom of the Rebbe Menachem Mendel Schneerson*. William Morrow, New York: 1995.

“...a woman came to the Rebbe for a blessing for her father, who was depressed that he had to spend the High Holidays in a hospital. The Rebbe smiled and said, “Tell your father that he should finish the mission he was sent to the hospital for, to inspire the others there to intensify their spiritual commitments. Then he will be released.” (Jacobson 92)

Indeed, by redefining the problem—not, “hospitalized and depressed,” but “hospitalized with a mission”—the Rebbe acts in the manner of the cognitive therapist: “The real-life problem itself has not been changed, but the therapist assists the patient to view it from a different perspective so that it no longer appears insurmountable.” (Wilkes 197).¹¹

Similarly, with respect to physical pain, the Rebbe tells us that “...we must challenge our own intentions... [and] do everything possible to not let our emotions overwhelm us... we shouldn’t allow our *aberrational thoughts* and doubts in response to pain to become the new norm...” (Jacobson 127, italics added). The person in pain needs “...to broaden his perspective...” realizing that “pain is an opportunity for growth...” and a “...test that examines how consumed you are with material comfort as opposed to spiritual growth... [Pain is] a challenge to be met with intense determination...” (pp. 131-32). Of course, this is no easy task. The Rebbe tells us that, “Realigning your perspective on life...cannot be done easily. It takes discipline... [and] the concentrated efforts of study, prayer, and good deeds” (Jacobson 129-130).

Conclusion

As Rabbi Lawrence Kushner¹² (p. 159) facetiously put it, “If anything, Jewish mystics are tediously rational.” Yet the three leading figures of *hasidut* examined in this essay each achieved a synthesis of the mystical and rational, albeit in somewhat different ways. Nahman— notwithstanding his anti-rationalist bent—understood that human

¹¹ Wilkes, TCR & Belsher, G & Rush, AJ & Frank, E. *Cognitive Therapy for Depressed Adolescents*. The Guilford Press, New York: 1994.

¹² Kushner, Lawrence. *The Way into Jewish Mystical Tradition*. Jewish Lights, Woodstock: 2001.

suffering stems from a *lack of knowledge and comprehension*. Nahman deals with his own bouts of depression by maintaining willful control over his own mind. Rabbi Shneur Zalman, while emphasizing the need for intense catharsis and penitence, acknowledged that human emotions are generally caused and controlled by *the intellect*. Rather than seeing a conflict between reason and emotion, RSZ saw the intellectual faculties as nurturing the emotions. Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson argued that to understand G-d, we must go beyond our own minds and egos. At the same time, the Rebbe realized that to defeat depression, we must introduce a “fresh perspective” to our thinking—remarkably in concert with modern cognitive-behavioral therapists.

Indeed, it seems appropriate to conclude with a vignette from the Rebbe, emphasizing not mystical emotions, but the primacy of our cognitive faculties:

“A revered rabbi, when he was very near death, asked that he be moved into the study hall where he delivered his discourses. “I am going to heaven,” he told his follower, “but I am leaving you my writings...” When his son heard these words, he began to weep. His father, weak with illness, turned to him and said, “Emotions? Emotions? No. Intellect, intellect.” From that moment on, his son remained steadfast, thinking only of the life of his father’s eternal soul” (Jacobson 120). 