

# **Neurology & Pain Management**

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## **Reb Nachman on the Hiding God: Dancing with the Pain at the Footstool of God. 8.6.07**

...As it states in the verse “and all Thy people are saints<sup>1</sup>, they will inherit the earth” (Isa 60:21) and it also says there “and the earth is My footstool” (ibid 66:1) referring to the Shechina which is inclusive of all the 10 sefirot...

Tikkunei Zohar Intro.

*The infinity of space and time separates us from God. How are we to seek for him? How are we to go toward him? Even if we were to walk for hundreds of years, we should do no more than go round and round the world. Even in an airplane we could not do anything else. We are incapable of progressing vertically. We cannot take a step toward the heavens. God crosses the universe and comes to us.*

*Over the infinity of space and time, the infinitely more infinite love of God comes to possess us. He comes at his own time. We have the power to consent or refuse. If we remain deaf, he comes back again and again like a beggar, but also, like a beggar, one day he stops coming. If we consent, God puts a little seed in us and he goes away again. From that moment, God has no more to do; neither have we, except to wait. We only have not to regret the consent we gave him, the nuptial yes. It is not as easy as it seems, for the growth of the seed within us is painful. Moreover, from the very fact that we accept this growth, we cannot avoid destroying whatever gets in its way, pulling up the weeds, cutting the good grass, and unfortunately the good grass is part of our very own flesh, so this gardening amounts to a violent operation. On the whole, however, the seed grows of itself. A day comes when the soul belongs to God, when it not only consents to love but when truly and effectively it loves. Then in its turn it must cross the universe to go to God. The soul does not love like a creature with created love. The love within it is divine, uncreated; for it is the love of God for God that is passing through it. God alone is capable of loving God. We can only consent to give up our own feelings so as to allow free passage in our soul for this love. That is the meaning of denying oneself. We are created for this consent, and for this alone.*

*Divine Love crossed the infinity of space and time to come from God to us. But how can it repeat the journey in the opposite direction, starting from a finite creature? When the seed of Divine Love placed in us has grown and become a tree, how can we, who bear it, take it back to its origin? How can we repeat the journey made by God when he came to us, in the opposite direction? How can we cross infinite distance?*

*It seems impossible, but there is a way—a way with which we are familiar. We know quite well in what likeness this tree is made, this tree that has grown within us, the most beautiful tree where the birds of the air come and perch. We know what is the most beautiful of all trees. “No forest bears its equal.” Something still a little more frightening than a gibbet—that is the most beautiful of all trees. It was the seed of this tree*

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<sup>1</sup> Or possibly transl. as “righteous”

*that God placed within us, without our knowing what seed it was. If we had known, we should not have said yes at the first moment. It is this tree that has grown within us and become ineradicable. Only a betrayal could uproot it.*

*When we hit a nail with a hammer, the whole of the shock received by the large head of the nail passes into the point without any of it being lost, although it is only a point. If the hammer and the head of the nail were infinitely big, it would be just the same. The point of the nail would transmit this infinite shock at the point to which it was applied....*

*He whose soul remains ever turned toward God though the nail pierces it finds himself nailed to the very center of the universe. It is the true center; it is not in the middle; it is beyond space and time; it is God. In a dimension that does not belong to space, that is not time, that is indeed quite a different dimension, this nail has pierced cleanly through all creation, through the thickness of the screen separating the soul from God.*

*In this marvelous dimension, the soul, without leaving the place and the instant where the body to which it is united is situated, can cross the totality of space and time and come into the very presence of God.*

*It is at the intersection of creation and its Creator.*

Simone Weil

Our lives then can only grow through the tearing of the flesh. *Moreover, from the very fact that we accept this growth, we cannot avoid destroying whatever gets in its way, pulling up the weeds, cutting the good grass, and unfortunately the good grass is part of our very own flesh, so this gardening amounts to a violent operation.* There can be no gentle path when it comes to growing this seed within. Gardening requires pruning which is painful. Sweetening of the harsh decrees is the kabalistic term by which the Tzaddikim use for this process. *How can we cross infinite distance?* This question haunts all of us especially now some 70 years after her Weil's death when the specter of a post-holocaust nightmarish world of pain and suffering seeps into our religious consciousness and prevents us from abandon and the luxury of experiencing the sublime. Where do we begin this journey and where and how can we allow this seed to grow, the earth and nutrients being so toxic. The virtual realities of the powerful combination of media-medical-industrial-pharmaceutical (not to mention military) complexes with their politicians in their pockets makes only for more and more powerlessness in our ability to actual influence ourselves or our environment. The intrusion of the culture, media and net into our consciousness and our imagination is now so powerful it is almost impossible to resist someone else's narrative. I sometimes wonder whether my thoughts belong to the socio-economic local culture in truth, and whether I am a mere reflection of that class. So to actually create individual meaning and make sense of one's own individuality becomes a more and more feint hope. In a deep Torah Reb Nachman teaches us the way of paradox in encountering these painful experiences in the flesh and teaches us a method of resistance to the powerful influences that destroy individual imagination which is at the center of faith and worship.

### **From Reb Nachman's teaching Shabbat Parshat Eikev (1806)**

...for there are two types of "sweetening of the harsh decrees"

The first being prior to the onset of suffering whereby one averts the decree so that they will not descend upon him, and the second type of sweetening is the full acceptance of the suffering and the decree by raising them and acceptance in full joy so that they will not go empty-handed.

One can know (if the suffering is from God when) by asking the Tzaddik for an *eitza* (advice) and nevertheless the suffering comes upon one, then for sure it

comes from God. However if one does not ask the Tzaddik then one will never be sure that these *dinim* (harsh decrees) come from the other side...

The main principle of raising the suffering is to accept them with much joy for this is (by definition) their sweetening. For suffering is a great gift and very sweet once he has endured them because God Himself contracts (*metzamtzem*) His Shechina (Divine Presence) within the suffering.

For God loves each and everyone with a great love and a strong love so that when suffering and pain descend upon a person then so to speak his own soul is no longer responsible as if the suffering takes over his soul. Then God Himself contracts His divinity into these sufferings and thereby gives him the strength to accept them with love and desire in order to achieve the (ultimate) goodness and the great thing sweetness as honey.

So too should he also think how all these sufferings have to do with the vanities of this world which is really worthless as long as he directs his mind to the ultimate purpose of everything what is their real purpose and in particular meditate on the fact that God is concealing Himself in that particular suffering. When God contracts Himself into the suffering as above, and for the sake of His Godliness the person accepts the suffering with love and raises this suffering he thereby sweetens the harsh decree in the aspect of *legs* (the feet of a matter that carries it higher like a transport mechanism). Which implies the **raising to the level of dancing**; meaning accepting everything in the dance (the bringing of joy into the dance) brings joy to his actual suffering (paradoxically) which resides (metaphorically speaking) in the legs (*raglin*) of the matter.

As it is written:

“And the land is My **footstool**”

So that when one injects joy into one's suffering one raises the *raglin* ones feet and **this is the meaning of (true) dance**; meaning raising the *raglin* out of pure joy so that even though the strict judgment has been passed God forbid, he is able to make it vanish...

And this is the **meaning of dancing meaning the legs actually hear the joy** and accept the joy so that they elevate him and dance with him thus reaching the revelation (exposure) of his Godliness...the dancing with the feet and footstool are closely related as if we too mimic the Divine resting feet with our dancing.

This Torah speaks about suffering, faith, dance and paradoxical transformation. The yardstick by measuring as to whether one is able to reify the pain and suffering is the very creative dancing that is expressed in the pain. The bringing of joy, paradoxical though it may be, into even the lower aspects of the human frame i.e. the legs, into a dance effects a change in the body dynamic and creates a new space by which to see reality. The dancing effects a change in the spirit and the spirit causes the dance to continue. The footstool citation from Isaiah seals the teaching by midrashically serving as a bridge to God Himself. For our access to God seems to be the footstool by which God sits on a throne but the footstool is placed down here on earth and by dancing with our mirrored feet we too have access at least to His footstool, meaning to Him.

The notion of God hiding in the very suffering and pain is nowhere expressed as in Torah 115 of his main work Likutei Mehoran. In this radical Torah the Rebbe speaks about the Children of Israel “standing from afar” (Exodus chapter 20) whereas “Moses drew near to the darkness where the Lord was situated”. The plain meaning of the verse suggests that Moses found God in the darkness whereas the natural reaction was seen in the behavior of the people who distanced themselves by standing afar. In this Torah Rebbe works this verse in a midrashic style of paradoxical reading. He claims initially how God loves His people yet He also loves justice. So how does He reconcile the two...by hiding Himself in the very suffering a person must endure and

thereby remaining accessible even in the darkest places. Reb Nachman finally claims that access to God is *only* possible in this manner, by the spiritual discipline of exposing God's hiddenness in one's suffering.

## **From Torah I: 115, Likutei Mehoran**

### **“Only through the obstacles can one come close to God”**

For he who has walked the path of materialism all his life and subsequently he becomes inflamed and desires to walk in the path of God, the Midas Hadin (the aspect of strict judgment) accuses him and prevents him from walking that spiritual path of God. And it invites spiritual obstacles. Now God desires only to do kindness so He hides Himself, as it were, inside the obstacle. If a person is sensitive and meditates on the obstacle he will find God there, as it states in the Talmud Yerushalmi (Palestinian) Taanis 80a  
“If a person asks you ‘where does your God reside’ tell him ‘in the big city of Rome”

For God loves justice (mishpat) and he also loves Israel, however His love for Israel is greater than His love of justice, so when the Midas Hadin accuses someone for not being worthy to come close to God, to prevent him from following the path of life and come close to the true Tzaddik and the path of truth; now God loves justice thus He is duty bound to permit the placing of obstacles to prevent him from the path of life, according to his past evil deeds and according to due process and justice being served. For He cannot pervert justice for He loves justice. (God is thus fulfilling His love of justice and making sure justice is being served in the world by preventing this sinner from access to the spiritual life). However in truth He also loves Israel and that love of Israel is greater than his love of justice so what should He do? For He has to allow the process of justice to occur and permit the obstacles to be placed because of the decree upon the person because of His love of the pursuit of justice!

Nevertheless in truth to its innermost core (emes leamito) His will and desire is for man to draw close to Him for He Loves Israel more than justice. Therefore the Lord gives permission to invite the obstacles **but He Himself hides Himself as it were, in the center of the obstacles.**

So anyone who is spiritually sensitive can find God within the obstacles themselves, for in truth there is no real obstacle in the whole world since in the midst of the obstacle God is hiding all along.

**And only through the path of overcoming obstacles alone can one really come close to God for there He is hidden...**

And this is the meaning of the verse in Exodus: “Moses drew near to the darkness where the Lord was situated however the people stood form afar”  
Moses realized that God was hidden in the darkness of the fog so he drew close whereas the people thought that God was far removed from obstacles.

In this beautiful and healing Torah Rebbe tells us that it is only in the obstacles that one can come close to God for paradoxically in this world the only place to find Him is in the pain and suffering and the dark places.

Through the paradoxical act of faith, by believing in coming closer to God wherever and whenever that may be, despite the lowly level or the lowly place, despite everything including the very feeling of distance and need and desperation in calling out to God in such extremis, the

Rebbe claims God is hiding specifically in such places out of His love for us so that we may gain access through this Divine love.

It follows then that our response and our spiritual practice must be equally paradoxical. That we too must dance despite our pain and suffering and elevate ourselves and our spirit through the mystical dance whereby the legs elevate so to speak the spirit by engaging in a dance ritual despite the pain. The evocation of paradoxical joy in the midst of such suffering allows for the presence of God to become exposed since the “shechina rests only on those in joy.”

The citation Rebbe uses for his proof text is the verse from Isaiah 66:1:

“This is what the LORD says: “Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my **footstool**. Where is the house you will build for me? Where will my resting place be?”

In the following pericope Reb Hershey introduced me to a radical hidden Midrash Achbir cited initially by Targum Yonatan Ben Uzziel but fully opened by the medieval commentator Chizkuni (13<sup>th</sup> Century French Rabbi) I cite this text which triggers a midrash on the **footstool** of God because I believe that it closely parallels this notion of seeing God in the pain. The text originally was used to justify God’s partiality to the Israelites by reminding Him of their suffering but Hershey stretches far beyond the confines of the exegetical moment or even the triggers of the words that are punned and places it squarely in the mystical tradition by which the suffering of God is the very building block of creation as used in Sefer Yetsirah the Book of Creation.

### Rabbi Akiva’s Midrash

Reb Hershey quoted a daring Midrash brought by Chizkuni on Exodus 24:10:

וַיִּרְאוּ אֶת אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל; וַתַּחַת רַגְלָיו, כְּמַעֲשֵׂה לִבְנֵת הַסַּפִּיר, וּכְמַצְעָם הַשָּׁמַיִם, לְטֹהַר. “And they saw the God of Israel; and there was under His feet the like of a paved work of sapphire stone, and the like of the very heaven for clearness. “

“Rabbi Akiva said ‘the servants of Pharaoh were stressing the Israelites to produce the brick components in double quantity than hitherto. Furthermore they restricted access to straw so that they were forced to scavenge straw in the desert and such material was filled with thorns and thistles, which pierced their heels so that their blood mixed with the cement. And Rachel the granddaughter of Methuselah was about to give birth and was working the cement mixing process with her husband when the delivery took place suddenly and the child got mixed up on the cement and she shrieked over her child and her cries ascended to heaven before the Throne of Glory whereupon the angel Michael descended and took it and brought it up to the Throne of Glory and made it into a brick and place it under the foot of the Holy One Blessed be He” this is what is meant by

“Under His feet the like of a paved work of sapphire stone, and the like of the very heaven for clearness.”

/ωτυχβχυ ωτρνχ – κτραη ηωκτ ,τ υτηηυ )η( κφκ ρφηβ ρηπξ ηητα ηηκυ ζνγαχ ηνυαχ ,κφ, ηηφ τυωυ ιχκ ηηφ ρηπξ ωζυ ρυφα ρηπξ αη – ρηπξω βχκ ωαγνφ /κφκ ρφηβ τυωα υχ ινηξ λκ ι,βυ ρζφ οστ /ορωψ,υ ωργχγ φυρυ χη,φσφ οηββγν οηρυωψυ οηφζ οωαφ οηναω ωτρν τυω ρωυψκ οηναω ομγ υωυ υ

ησφ κτραη ,τ ιηφνυ ιηεφυσ υηω ωγρπ ησγγ τχηεγ ωρ ρντ /ωβχκ ιυακ ρηπξω ,βχκ ρφτ ρχσ /ιχυκ ιυ  
 ακ – ,βχκ  
 αε ααυεκ οηφηρμ υηωυ ιχ, οωκ οηβ,υβ υηω τκ οηρμνωυ υβ,, οηβχκ ιφυ, ρντβα κπφχ οηβχκ ιφυ, ο  
 ωκ ,υαγκ  
 κφρρυ εψηψχ χργ,νυ ξξυχ,ν οσω ωηωυ οωηχεγ ,τ χευβ αεω ωηωυ οηβερχυ οημυε τκν ωηω αε υ,υτ  
 υ ρχσνχ  
 ω,ηωυ ιχκνω ογ χργ,βυ ωηγνν σκυω τμηα σγ ωκγγ ογ ψηψχ ,ξνυρρ ,σκκ ωρω ω,ηω φκαυ,ν κα υβχ  
 ,χ  
 ιχκν υ,υτ ωαγυ συχφω τξφ ηβπκ υωκγωυ υωκψβυ κτφην σρηυ συχφω τξφ ηβπκ ω,εγμ ω,κγυ ωβχ κ  
 γ,εγμ  
 ρηπαν ,ηαγβα ωβχκ αυρηπ /ρηπξω ,βχκ ωαγνφ υηκδρ ,φ,υ ρντβα τυω εω∇χεω κα υηκδρν ωψνκ υ  
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The implied meaning of sapphire is *sh'fir* or placenta (a pun) and the meaning of *leveina* (brick) is *livnas* or paved way (pun). The Midrash is clearly connecting the glorious revelation of God to the priests in exodus with the horrific entombing of a newborn into a brick used by the Israelites in their slave labor. Michael the angel places this brick as the footstool to remind the Lord of the child's suffering.

This dark Midrash connects the description of the sapphire blue footstool seen by the elders with the placental bloody brick enclosing the corpse of the newborn baby. The sublimity of the divine throne is matched by the gritty and grotesque image of a child inside and mashed in the bloody mixture of cement and flesh. The cries and screams of the mother's pain reaches to the highest realm of heaven even the throne itself whereupon the angel Michael grabs the very brick and brings it up to the throne as the embodiment of both the child as well as the mother's suffering and tears. By placing it under the feet of God, so to speak, Michael has accomplished the raising to consciousness of the screams of the mother to a real and bodily plane. The very footstool that comforts and supports the legs of the Almighty will always remind Him of the child within and the mother survivor's pain. And midrashically speaking this was the footstool the elders beheld when seeing the divine throne. They saw the divine being reminded of the suffering of His people. They saw the Almighty leaning on the very suffering of His people. Yet they beheld this vision whilst dining with the Lord. And this is the very translucent brick that the angel Michael points to when other angels protest as to the preferential treatment the Israelites received before crossing the Red Sea:

“Both those are idolaters as well as these (Israelites!)”

In response to such a profound indictment the angel Michael points to that same brick serving as a **footstool** to remind the Lord of the sacrifice and maternal pain the Israelites suffered in Egypt. Such Midrashim tend to deflect the criticism away from the Israelites precisely by focusing on their martyrdom. Yet I see in the Midrash brought by Chizkuni (nowhere else cited as far as I could search) a much more radical theological statement. But first Hershey's interpretation:<sup>2</sup>

“The Book of Formation (Sefer Yetzirah) begins with the 32 pathways and the ten sephirot... Now it is written

“And they saw the God of Israel; and there was under His feet the like of a paved work of sapphire stone, and the like of the very heaven for clearness. “ Ex 24:10,

The (Chizkuni) Midrash is the basis for our understanding of the concept of the sephira, which is the building block of the universe. These are the stones out of which the throne of the Almighty is

<sup>2</sup> Sefer Yetzirah, Worch, Jeremy Herschel: forthcoming publishing.

built “and beneath His feet were a brick fashioned out of sapphire (sh’fir).” In this prophecy the elders along with Moses and Aaron were granted a prototype vision of the celestial throne ahead of Ezekiel and Isaiah later on. Just as with this brick so with all bricks the universe is built out of are in fact these sephiroth.

...in essence they are made of the pain and the wailing of the mother grieving for the doomed child of her womb trampled and trodden into clay and sludge. No the entire universe is but the pain and grieving of God who is as it were, at the same time mother child, brick and king, as it is written “ In all their anguish is his anguish” (Isa. 63:9.)<sup>3</sup>.

For Reb Hershey the brick represents the anguished object of the mother’s cries and by placing at the footstool of the Almighty they are a constant reminder of His identification with the pain of existence, the world He created which is full of suffering and innocent suffering at that. But Hershey stretches this even further by insisting that the very foundation of creation was a painful anguish that was built into the very building blocks of the creation, the bricks of the pained mother as she birthed the child trampled into the brick. God at the core of creativity is pain and anguish.

In my search for texts that fit a post-Holocaust age nothing fits better than the image of this child-filled translucent brick. The word *lavan* means white possibly translucent, which further pushes the image into a voyeuristic punning of brick and see-through. The mother witnesses the birth of her child then mashed into this see through brick. We know only too well the concentration camp industry surrounding the use of human skin and limbs for manufacturing lampshades and soap so the horror of this image is not so foreign to us born a generation after.

We know of kabalistic texts that speak of creation as the expunging of evil from within the divine but this is the first commentary that dares to suggest that creation is the very suffering of evil by the creator Himself. God as it were, must Himself endure the act of creating the world, using those building blocks of pain and anguish, and live with the implications of misery and suffering mothers watching their newborns tortured.

I believe that it is no accident that Rabbi Akiva is the author of this Midrash. For as we have noted elsewhere he is the epitome of *martyrology for the sake of heaven*.<sup>4</sup>

I believe that this midrash echoes the paradox of suffering whereby we too are being asked to place our biography of suffering and illness, our own “bricks”, entombing the childhood of our dreams lost and dead within the brick, at the footstool of God and place it there with each of our own spirit guides be they Michael or other angels, carefully and respectfully, begging the almighty to take notice of our suffering and our mother’s pain. By placing it specifically under His feet we are also making the sacrifice of acceptance that His guidance and Providence we surrender to, despite our protests kicking and screaming. That the **brick-as-footstool** represents our surrender to His world and His will yet connected to Him even supporting Him. Our suffering paradoxically supports His legs at the throne level. As in Torah 115, Reb Nachman claims He hides within the obstacles and sufferings of man, because of His love for us. So too here His **footstool** represents His connection to our suffering.

The feet that ordinarily might dance now rest on the **footstool**. We are therefore enjoined to paradoxically dance with our pain elevating the pain and suffering beyond the local experience and to a higher level, the footstool of God. By dancing we obligate Him to somehow get off His footstool and participate in redeeming and saving us.

Yet Hershey’s reading puts God squarely in the center. It is really all about Him after all, whereas I still seem to hanker after an I-Thou approach where we are the midrashists attempting to still make sense of this world and find in its very core in its creation the sense of tragedy and pain that will eventually play itself out in the generations that suffer. Hershey would say that I am still

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<sup>3</sup> A punning on the word *lo* meaning “no” and *lo* meaning “his” without the aleph.

<sup>4</sup> For further discussion of this topic see my essay on Rabbi Akiva and suffering 6/07.

placing the ego in the center of the circle and he is correct. I have not as yet reached that level of selflessness. He is also correct that as long as we place ourselves in the center, we must take the blame. Which leads me to the recovery aspect of this sacred text.

These two texts force me to reconstruct my image of my Higher Power and my willingness to endure and suffer illness and pain. Rather than the big CEO in the sky or even the white-bearded Sage I must begin to develop a more mature and even mystical image of my Lord. He is surely Present to the now and the pain and He surely cares. So my task is to “turn over” even this to Him at the center, since this is really all about Him and this is really His story not mine. Beyond that it is no longer up to me to solve all the theological and philosophical issues that arrest my relationship. It is as the Rebbe says unknown until the future. (Torah I: 64 Lekutei Mehoran). So rather than being paralyzed by the philosophical conundrums I must begin to exercise the “faith muscle” in my heart. By surrendering even the brain and the mind to the relationship aspect I am able to feel once more. Loving is more important than being right someone once told me and applied here my job as a creature born to die and born to slowly feel the body decay and wither my job is remain in relationship with my God. The work is the discipline to resist the mind and the games the mind plays.

Even more I must begin to train the mind to see God in the pain of the now and the anguish for He is mother and child, brick and king.