

QUANTUM HASSIDUT : HITBODEDUT IN A QUANTUM KEY

By Dr. Julian Ungar

Of the Chassidic Masters, none stand out as more iconic than Rebbe Nachman of Breslev for daring innovations in *avodas Hashem*. Much has already been written in English regarding his life and works.¹ His seminal work, *Likutey Moharan*, along with *Sippurey Maasiyot*, his “tales”, have shifted the trajectory of Jewish thought to radically new thinking about the human-divine relationship. Of all Breslev practices however, Rebbe Nachman’s method of *hitbodedut*, or dialogic meditation, appears to be the most challenging and rewarding.

According to Rebbe Nachman, *hitbodedut* should be practiced in a simple and straightforward manner, as if you were conversing with a close friend. He advised:

"It is very good to pour out your thoughts before G-d like a child pleading before his father. G-d calls us His children, as it is written, ‘You are children to G-d.’² Therefore, it is good to express your thoughts and troubles to G-d like a child complaining and pestering his father.”³

By way of practice, Breslevers follow Rebbe Nachman’s method of setting aside time on a daily basis for this dialogic meditation. However, I would like to suggest the need to stretch the more conventional practice parameters in order to fully express his conceptualization of the human-divine interaction in *hitbodedut*. Whereas much of accessible Breslev literature emphasizes the discursive aspect of the human-divine dialogue, with its emphasis on soul-searching and self-analysis, I feel insufficient emphasis has been placed on the silent meditative practices and little to no mention made of the role of *niggun* or melody in *hitbodedut*.⁴ I will attempt here to articulate a theoretical basis for the incorporation of such practice into *hitbodedut*, based on Rebbe Nachman’s teachings in *Likutey Moharan*, lessons 49 and 64.

¹ Most notably by the Breslev Research Institute headed by R’ Chaim Kramer which now has over 70 volumes on the philosophy and path of Rebbe Nachman.

² Deuteronomy 14:1

³ *Likutey Moharan* I: 52, 108, 156, 259. II: 25, 93, 95-99, 100-101

⁴ Although both silent *hitbodedut* and non-verbal/musical *hitbodedut* are discussed in the book *Where Earth & Heaven Kiss*, by R’ Ozer Bergman, Breslev Research Institute.

Let us begin with a translation of lesson 64:

“God created the world because of His compassion since He desired to reveal His compassion (*rachmonus*). And if the creation had not taken place, to whom would He have show His compassion? Accordingly He brought about the entire creation from the beginning of the highest spiritual world of *Atzilut* down to the end of the centermost point of the material world, in order to manifest His compassion.”

Rebbe Nachman begins his treatise with the notion that creation itself is an act of compassion (*rachmonus*) on the part of the Creator. His teaching mirrors midrashic and kabbalistic traditions which base this understanding on the verse, *Olam chesed yibaneh*,⁵ the “world was built on kindness.” Elsewhere in *Likutey Moharan*, Rebbe Nachman affirms compassion as fundamental to the very nature of creation. He explains the verse, “For this commandment which I command you this day, it is not too hard for you, neither is it far off”⁶ to mean that compassion is omnipresent, accessible and visible to all.⁷ Similarly, he describes the world as full of compassion; just as G-d is all-compassionate so too we must emulate Him in all our dealings.⁸ The association of compassion and creation is thus well established in the thought of Rebbe Nachman. The fact that Divine compassion is the purpose of all of creation allows us to consider its relevance to an all-encompassing view of the goal of Judaism and the purpose of life. It is no longer merely one of many positive character attributes to strive for in the religious development of an individual, but rather becomes a key element in the evolution of human-divine consciousness. It thus must also take central place in the practice of *hitbodedut*, i.e., a compassionate awareness of both self and the Divine in the dialogic process.

Elsewhere⁹ Rebbe Nachman highlights the unfolding creative process¹⁰ from the infinite unlimited light preceding creation, which places this notion of compassion in its proper

⁵ Psalms 89:3

⁶ Deuteronomy 30:11

⁷ *Likutey Moharan* 105; note how different this compares to the exposition of the same verse by the *Baal HaTanya*.

⁸ *Likutey Moharan Tinyana* 49

⁹ *Likutey Moharan* 64

¹⁰ According to the writings of the Arizal.

context within the sequence of Creation. This will be critical to his case as to the origin of philosophical problems and so-called “heresies”.

When G-d wanted to create the world, there was no place to create it because everything was infinite. He therefore “contracted” His Infinite Light to the sides. As a result of this contraction, an empty void was formed. Within it, time and space (i.e., the finite world) were created, as explained in the teachings of the Arizal.¹¹

In this spiritual vacuum, there is an apparent absence of the Divine, including Divine speech, and existence itself—even of God, as it were! The Arizal teaches that G-d’s Infinite Light was constricted to the “sides” of a circle leaving an absence of light in the center called the *chalal hapanui* or empty void:

This empty void was essential for the creation of the world, because without it there would have been no place for creation. However, it is impossible to grasp or understand the contraction (*tzimtzum*) that brought about this void. This will only be possible in the future [when we will possess expanded consciousness] to comprehend the postulation of two opposites: existence and nothingness.

This is an essential paradox to the understanding of Rebbe Nachman. He refuses the luxury of choosing between the presence of Divine light (since how could there be any place in the universe devoid of G-d—even in this empty void!) and the apparent absence of light brought about by G-d’s “withdrawal”. He insists on two contradictory yet equally true postulates to exist side by side, which goes against Aristotelian logic as well as any other western ideas of logic. Different Chassidic masters such as Chabad, as well as the Vilna Gaon and his disciples (especially R. Menachem Mendel of Shklov) all grappled with this theological paradox. It becomes philosophically significant if not critical to understanding theodicy and the problem of evil and free will. Is G-d present, and thereby tolerating evil, or absent and thus allowing the world to function on its own?

In a sudden and dramatic turn, Rebbe Nachman then proceeds to address the origins of such philosophical inquiry. Although he continually warns his followers to be wary even

¹¹ At the beginning of *Etz Chaim*, the teachings of the Arizal compiled by R’ Chaim Vital.

of speculative texts within tradition that appear overly intellectual and devoid of faith-based non-rational thought, he now turns to these very areas of philosophical inquiry. He distinguishes between two types of inquiry (*apikorsus* or heresy). The first type can be answered rationally; the second has no possible rational response.

And know that there are two types of *apikorsus* (heresy/atheism). There is the kind of non-belief that arises out of alien systems of wisdom, of which it says, “Know what to answer the non-believer” (Avot 2:14). For there is an answer to this kind of non-belief since it is derived from alien wisdoms which arose out of the superfluities caused by the “breaking of the vessels”. A person who has fallen into this kind of non-belief should certainly flee and make every effort to escape, and indeed if he does seek out G-d he will find a way to be saved. Since these wisdoms derive from the breaking of the vessels, various holy sparks and letters broke and fell there. He may therefore find G-dly intelligence there in order to resolve the challenges posed by the kind of non-belief derived from alien wisdom.

The heresies to which Rebbe Nachman is referring exist in each one of us. They plague us precisely because the opposite of faith is doubt. He insists on discussing doubt and making it a central theological concern. In many ways he validates the life of paradoxical faith which seems to be poised on the knife edge between faith and doubt. Since language, speech and dialectics are all rooted in the Divine process used to create the world we live in, certain heresies and disbeliefs can be successfully addressed through letter-based language. This is the first type of heresy Rebbe Nachman refers to where a return to faith is possible since speech, even heretical types, contain within them fallen “sparks” of the Divine, which can somehow be rescued. Based on the Kabbalistic notion that the world was created through ten Divine “utterances,” everything in the real world thus has a source in the Divine word, even heresy! There is an escape from this heresy by a rational discursive response that will make sense to the heretic. The mere existence and use of human speech implies presence of the Divine, since the only communication that occurred between the human and the Divine was *lashon hakodesh*, or the holy language. Just as fallen sparks are a

metaphor for Divine light, so too speech is a metaphor for Divine language consisting of letters. The “breaking of the vessels” caused the scattering of Divine letters and thus speech itself. A return to faith from heresy is possible precisely because of the presence of speech per se, albeit there is a need for gathering of the scattered letters in heretical discourse. In the restoration of holy faith, the sequence of letters that form holy speech must be recovered. Rebbe Nachman claims this is possible through the Mishnaic dictum *da ma shetashuv l’apikorus*—“Know what to answer the heretic.” In other words, via debate in a knowingly discursive fashion in a dialectic through which one is prepared to answer the heretic, one recovers the holy speech and thus the holy faith. This is an act of compassion, for nothing is greater for the honor of the divine (*kavod shamayim*) than bringing back those who have strayed from holy faith. In acting compassionately, one furthers G-d’s original intent in creation.

However there is another kind of heresy/atheism based on wisdoms that are not wisdoms at all. It is only because they are so deep and hard to grasp that they have the appearance of deep wisdom. For example, a person might posit a false Talmudic argument, which he imagines, is exceptionally deep but, lacking the necessary scholarship, he fails to realize that his line of argument is untenable. Similarly, the philosophers pose various problems and questions that are in truth devoid of all wisdom. The problems are intrinsically non-existent, but because it is not within the bounds of the human mind to unravel them, they appear genuine.

This is Rebbe Nachman’s second type of *apikorus* or heresy distinguished by the type of questioning. Although both types posit philosophical questions, only the first can be answered since one can make a rational argument in favor of faith within the confines of logical inquiry. In contrast, the second type breaks into realms of philosophical inquiry which test the very limits of philosophy in that no logical answer is possible. This type of questioning renders the recovery of faith impossible, allowing one to “fall” into the vacated space where a response based on language doesn’t exist.

No letter-based language exists in the empty void of the *chalal hapanui* because the Divine “withdrew” in order to allow creation and even speech to exist. In this space,

there is no hope to recover from the heresy emanating from the Vacated Space since thinking in linguistic structures is impossible where speech and language are non-existent. The absence of the Divine in this space has no way to be articulated through language.

Rebbe Nachman brings an example of this second type of philosophical questioning through the paradox of the apparent eternity of the universe vs. creation.¹² This type of philosophical difficulty is rooted in the Vacated Space and has no rational answer. Once one falls into this type of philosophical vacuum, there is no language-based response to such questions of faith. There is only silence and G-d's apparent "absence".

Yet, Rebbe Nachman says, **"The ultimate truth is that His G-dliness must be present there, but it is impossible to grasp this or find G-d there."** This appears to demand a paradoxical faith, not a simple faith. Complete faith is capable of believing in the Divine despite the paradox of His apparent absence. How does one achieve such a faith? Any inkling of the Divine presence within the worlds is fraught with the heresies that are still capable of a language-based response. This is not the case with the heresy rooted in the Vacated Space. It has no discursive response, and requires a faith that the Divine is present somehow, even there. We must find the faith and belief in the light of the Divine surrounding the Vacated Space. Though we have no experience of its existence, the Jew believes that the surrounding light of the Divine surrounds **even** the vacated space of His absence. He or she believes paradoxically that all the philosophical and existential problems of faith and theodicy are also grounded in the Divine and will therefore ultimately have a rationale, even though God is apparently absent in the interstitial space between the transcendent (*sovev*) light and the immanent (*memale*) light.

Rebbe Nachman brings an even more significant example of this type of heresy with the issue of theodicy, or the suffering of the righteous. When Moses asks G-d about Rabbi Akiva's reward for a life of Torah,¹³ he is shown Rabbi Akiva's flesh being sold in the market place. Moses exclaims: "Is this the Torah and this its reward?" The Divine voice

¹² In the manuscript version of Lesson 64.

¹³ *Menachot* 29b

responds: “Be silent! Such is My decree!” (Lit., thus it arose in My thought). The Talmud implies that one cannot argue with a Divine decree, however Rebbe Nachman uses this *Aggadah* for the purpose of demonstrating that the tzaddik, who is an aspect of Moses,¹⁴ will be unable to find an answer according to human reason which satisfactorily addresses the paradox of such a “reward” for Rabbi Akiva’s devotion to Torah. By instructing Moses to be silent in the face of his question, G-d is telling him that there is no possible answer since the very essence of his question originates in the Vacated Space that preceded creation. Silence is the only response to the suffering of the righteous, because no language exists capable of conveying the response to such questions rooted in the Vacated Space. Unlike the first type of response that contains answers based on speech to questions rooted in the post-creation era, silence emerges as the only satisfactory response to questions that precede creation, such as the paradox of evil.

Silence implies a lack of understanding of G-d’s ways, which becomes an integral part of paradoxical faith. However this also implies an acceptance of a paradox within the divine, a perceived split exposed by the presence of the vacuum and thus a fracture considered intrinsic to the Divine, *chas v’shalom*. Whereas core Chabad teachings discuss the immanent (*memale*) and transcendent (*sovev*) light at length, I know none that utilize the division between the two types of Divine Light as a theological tool in *avodas Hashem*, presenting it is an integral part of the crisis of being human, including an apparent lack of access to the Divine precisely because of this split.

The people of Israel transcend all the philosophical problems and atheistic ideas that derive from the empty void, because they know that it is impossible to solve them. This is why the people of Israel are called Hebrews (*Ivrim*), from the Hebrew root *oveir*, to pass over or transcend.

Rebbe Nachman’s method presents a directed path of spirituality to cross over this vacuum enabling one to access the Divine that surrounds the Vacated Space. This somehow holds the paradox between knowledge and ignorance of the Divine process of

¹⁴ That is, the tzaddik who has reached the category of self-negation and universality associated with Moses, the “teacher of all Israel.” In kabbalistic works, Moses personifies *daat*, divine knowledge.

creation. He reveals a path to make the tenuous journey of moving beyond the silence of non-knowledge. The Jewish people are capable of transcending philosophical dilemmas with faith precisely because they realize this two-step process:

1. The impossibility of discursive philosophical speculation to solve the problem of theodicy.
2. The ability to traverse the Vacated Space via a pathway created by faith. This allows them to access the encompassing and transcendent light of Divine Presence, albeit in a non-rational way.

Faith is not simply a belief in the presence of the transcendent Divine light on one hand, nor a negation of rational discursive philosophical thought on the other. Rather it is a complete acceptance of the fullest expression of the Divine being which means being present to the apparent Divine fracture. Holding the paradox of a perceived split within the Divine radically alters one's experience of a world created by such a Divine being as well. It is being present to the unsolvable paradox that lies at the heart of creation and to a G-d, Who transcends intellect and rational thought. This thereby forces one's faith to be grounded in a reality that transcends paradoxes, as well as discursive speech and thought. It is a faith in the unexperienced transcendent light, which we believe surrounds the very vacated space of our "heretical" yet understandable doubts.

The seeker of rational theological responses finds no relief to their search for answers to questions of faith and theodicy because they are rooted in the Vacated Space and therefore have no possible cognitive or discursive response. Especially in a post-Holocaust era, questions of G-d's goodness, which plague many thinking and davening Jews, come from this lacuna in creation and remain unanswered. However, the power of the tzaddik gives us the ability to hold the desire for answers in abeyance while history progresses to the ultimate messianic era. This feat is accomplished without the semantic and rational mind and stems from a compassion for creation, grounded in the very compassion through which the world was built.

Yet the question persists: How are we to attain a faith beyond thought, logic and words? For Rav Alon Goshen Gottstein, [whose writings greatly influenced my understanding of

this lesson from Rebbe Nachman]¹⁵ there are two tools we can use to lift ourselves out of the Vacated Space of radical doubt: silence and song. Because they are both are non-linguistic, or meta-linguistic, they can therefore provide an alternative to the impossibility of linguistic discourse stemming from the Vacated Space.

Tool 1: Experiencing the Silence: Being fully present to the Absence of the Divine

For Rav Goshen-Gottstein, Rebbe Nachman's Lesson 64 provides insights into reflecting on G-d's silence. In his book on about Rebbe Nachman's teaching, he writes, "The silence of G-d is grounded in creation" and G-d's silence and man's silence meet in the Vacated Space." What this means is that there is no language-based response to questions of G-d's goodness and His toleration of evil. G-d's silence is neither the cause nor the response to these problems, rather the epistemological ground from which we perceive partially and falsely. Because we can only think in words, we cannot understand G-d's silence with words and thought. In this apparent Divine "absence" we experience the meeting of the Divine absence in silence. One cannot traverse the Vacated Space without fully experiencing its effects on the soul. We are being asked by Rebbe Nachman to somehow meet the Divine in the very silence of the paradoxical absence of the Divine!

However, Rebbe Nachman also suggests a solution for traversing the empty void of the Vacated Space:

Tool 2: The Tzaddik and the Niggun

Rebbe Nachman tells us, "But know that certain tzaddikim who are in the category of Moses have been obliged to investigate these philosophies in order to extricate and elevate the fallen souls that have become sunk in them. Through their great sanctity, these tzaddikim have the power to release these trapped souls."

During his lifetime, Rebbe Nachman predicted a deep heresy would flood the world in the future. From this, we recognize that being unable to avoid it, we must endure it. No

¹⁵ Alon Goshen Gottstein "Speech Silence and Song: Epistemology and Theodicy in a Teaching of R. Nahman of Breslav" *Philosophia* 30 (1-4):143-187, 2003.

greater compassion exists than the rescuing of the souls floundering in the vacated space, no greater act of *imitato Dei*.

The tzaddik rescues us through a paradoxical tool! He utilizes a method that defies philosophical discursive rational thinking: the *niggun*—a melody that transcends rational thinking. The Vacated Space represents the silence (*shtika*) of absent responses to the “heretical” questions of heresy posed. The tzaddik traverses the treacherous Vacated Space to access the surrounding light where he finds the *niggun*. In this transcendent light beyond, there is current rational resolution to the very questions of existence and suffering, theodicy and heresy. At least for now, the tzaddik is able to find a non-rational answer, a quantum response in the vibratory energy field we call the *niggun*, or the melody. Musical vibratory energy becomes the very tool whereby the tzaddik is able to reach those sensitive souls burdened by questions of suffering like *Moshe Rabbeinu*. In the music, there is an apparent paradoxical refuge which touches the very core of compassion of the universe.

Our cognition of the world and its Creator presents theological problems that have taxed philosophers for millennia. Rebbe Nachman is suggesting a more optimistic theology than even the Arizal or the Vilna Gaon. We are able to access the infinite surrounding light of all the worlds (*sovev kol almin*), he claims, however not through discursive dialectical thought. Rather our access is through the tzaddik and his vibratory energy of music, as if he is capable of “tuning in” to a vibration consonant with the frequency of the transcendent (*sovev*) light.

The power of song (*niggun*) is based on Rebbe Nachman’s insistence that everything in creation vibrates to a particular frequency and melody, including all wisdoms and heresies. Unlike heresies that originate in the Vacated Space which have no words that might answer such philosophical questions because of the absence of the divine and thus speech, here the *niggun* is able to reach the transcendent light and access a compassionate Divine wisdom found there.

On A Practical Note:

Although *hitbodedut* has been practiced as a dialogic discourse with the Divine for close to two centuries, it occurred repeatedly to me over the last eight years of reading Torah 64 that Rebbe Nachman gave us a nuanced tool with which to aspire to and attach ourselves to the tzaddik in crossing the Vacated Space in order to access the transcendent Divine light. This is where all crises of faith are resolved, albeit non-rationally. How can we translate this lesson into practice if not through the very original and unique contribution of Rebbe Nachman to our *avodas Hashem*—particularly during *hitbodedut*! Why settle for the first step of dialogic discourse if the ultimate philosophical questions of theodicy stubbornly linger precisely because they remain out of reach of rational response?

Therefore, I believe the *hitbodedut* process must include a silent step of emptying the heart of burning theological questions, including the problem of evil, etc. Once one has engaged the Divine in dialogue and emptied one's heart of its burdens, this second stage is to be encompassed by the experience of emptiness and void—the apparent absence of the Divine in the vacuum. In the silence of *hitbodedut*, in the command of *Shtok!* “Be silent!”, we come to the very silence that preceded creation, our creative thoughts, the stillness at the core of our very being. In this silence, we encounter the cosmic silence of G-d.

The final step comes with the assistance of the tzaddik. The melody (*niggun*) is the gift that comes from the transcendent light and fills the emptiness of the vacated space. Too much enthusiasm,¹⁶ however laudable, is not appropriate in the spiritual process since it “produces” nothing out there in the real world. It must also be emptied to allow the slow methodical, progressive, and painful building of the heart and the world from nothing. G-d desires good deeds and building a world of compassion, something incompatible or sufficient with the transitory “inflammation” of the heart for the Divine. It seems we are asked to rebuild our emptied hearts anew each time. This forces the “heart muscle” to become active and exercised, which builds compassion. *Hitbodedut*, the process of emptying then filling the heart with renewed compassion, becomes a

¹⁶ *Likutey Moharan* 49

vehicle to increase compassion in the world. (The Rebbe of Piacetzna speaks similarly of faith as a spiritual muscle to be exercised to prevent “atrophy”).

By applying Lesson 64 to *hitbodedut*, we now come to a unique new understanding of our relationship to the Divine! Taking Rav Goshen Gottstein’s analysis of the lesson as a graduated spiritual ascent from speech, to silence, and then to song, we too humbly recommend the same approach in *hitbodedut*:

Step 1: Speech:

As Reb Noson, the student of Rebbe Nachman recommends, the first step consists of pouring out our hearts to G-d to fill our every material and spiritual need. This is the conventionally understood step to *hitbodedut* outlined in many English-translated works.¹⁷ We discover our unique “heresies” through articulated soul-searching and self-analysis to reveal the questions of theodicy and doubt that plague us. Questions of the first order heresy are answered in this step by rational and well-tried responses of tradition. **When we are told that a million and a half babies were burned killed and gassed some 70 years ago in Europe, all prior categories that attempted to answer these age old questions of *zaddik v'ra lo* were smashed to pieces.** [nothing changed—it is the same question]

Step 2. Silence:

In this step we realize our fundamental questions, such as on the problem of evil, border on the second type of heresy/*apikorsus* rooted in the Vacated Space before creation and are thus unanswerable. We come to the realization that even beyond all of our personal, physical, and spiritual concerns is the current crisis of faith of a post-Holocaust generation.

We are baffled like the Piacetzna Rebbe¹⁸ albeit without his holy faith and fire. As the generation “after” we are left dumbfounded and dead in our tracks in any attempt to question and dialogue with the Divine in *hitbodedut*. What a chutzpah! We fall silent. We enter into that Vacated Space where language is rendered impossible, irrelevant and ineffective. In this step, we stand in silence before the holy silence of G-d, the same

¹⁷ Such as in the works of Rabbis Kaplan, Greenbaum, Bergman and Kramer.

¹⁸ *Eish Kodesh*, translated as “Holy Fire” by Hershy Worch.

silence as when He commanded Moses, “*Shtok!*” “Silence!” We feel the presence of the Divine mystery in His very absence.

Step 3: *Hiskashrus* to the Tzaddik: Song

In this final step, our poverty of spirit is apparent as we drown in the free fall within the Vacated Space of non-knowing. It is in this space we are rescued by our bond (*hiskashrus*) to the tzaddik. As we identify with his *niggun*, we lose our sense of self in the melody and are uplifted by the hope of understanding in the future, as well as the refuge in the knowledge that the tzaddik was able to cross over this dark night of the soul to the other side. He accesses the transcendent light to find a non-discursive response to the very question of history and redemption. We somehow tap into the music of our own souls having identified with the tzaddik and his compassionate desire to rescue us from the free fall of a nightmarish nuclear world of darkness.

I believe Rebbe Nachman would expect nothing less from us than to follow this Torah, one of his most enigmatic lessons of *Likutey Moharan*, Lesson 64. This lesson was the single most important text that drew me to Breslev. In my opinion, Lesson 64 remains the most powerful response to the Holocaust as well as the most significant and strongest reading of the Arizal since the Vilna Gaon. Nothing compares to its majesty and breathtaking theological daring. It is “quantum chassidut” compared to all prior “Newtonian” worldviews until now. I am convinced that we need to incorporate Lesson 64 into our *avodas Hashem* and more specifically, into our practice of *hitbodedut*.