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**Fed By the Waters of Controversy:  
R. Nahman of Bratslav on the Dynamics of Dispute** 1  
Yehuda Fogel

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# FED BY THE WATERS OF CONTROVERSY: R. NAHMAN OF BRATSLAV ON THE DYNAMICS OF DISPUTE<sup>1</sup>

YEHUDA FOGEL

*The Rebbe said: "How could there not be opposition to me, seeing as I am traveling a new path which no man has ever travelled before. It is a very old path, in fact, and yet it is completely new.*

*- Hayyei Moharan 392*

The creation of a new path in a past-centered community will invariably encounter opposition, and R. Nahman of Bratslav's old-new path has indeed met with dispute from its 18<sup>th</sup> century origins until at least the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Such opposition is notable even in the controversy-filled world of Hasidut, in which internal and external disputes have often led to attempted excommunications, financial persecution, political intimidation, and sometimes even physical threats.<sup>2</sup> Due to the intensity of the opposition, as well as the fact that much of Bratslav writing draws upon conversations or comments of R. Nahman, early Bratslav literature is replete with references to controversy. The views of R. Nahman on these debates, and on the very notion of debate or dispute, are particularly interesting as they feature an intentional internalization of challenging external circumstances in creating a theology of controversy.

## **Background**

R. Nahman of Bratslav (1772-1810) founded Breslov Hasidut. A great-grandson of R. Israel Baal Shem Tov through his mother, Feige, Nahman was born into a Hasidic dynastic family in Mezhibyzh, Ukraine. His uncles, R. Barukh of Mezhibyzh and R. Moshe Hayyim Efraim of Sudalkov, were two of the most important Hasidic leaders of the time, and his paternal grandfather and namesake, R. Nahman of Horedenka, was a student of the Baal Shem Tov and member of his inner circle.<sup>3</sup> As the younger Nahman grew up in Mezhibyzh, a city with strong Hasidic influence where his uncle Barukh held court, Nahman was raised with a strong education in both the revealed and hidden parts of the Torah. By some accounts, he studied Tanakh, Talmud, Zohar, ethical works such as *Reshit Hokhmah*, and *Ein Yaakov*.<sup>4</sup> He embarked on midnight meditations by the grave of the Baal Shem Tov, a pilgrimage tradition he continued upon his return to Mezhibyzh.

Nahman entered an arranged marriage with a young woman named Sosia soon after his *bar mitzvah*, and, following the cultural norm, then moved to her father's village of Usyatin, some 200 miles from Mezhibyzh. In his departure to this small town, he had the opportunity to leave the pure yet pressurized air of Mezhibyzh. He later ruminated fondly about his years in

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<sup>1</sup> I'd like to thank Shlomo Zuckier, Tzvi Sinensky, and Dr. Elisha Russ Fishbane for their many thoughtful comments and valuable insights on this piece.

<sup>2</sup> See David Assaf, *Untold Tales of the Hasidim: Crisis and Discontent in the History of Hasidism* (Waltham: Brandeis University Press, 2012).

<sup>3</sup> Arthur Green, *Tormented Master: A Life of Rabbi Nahman of Bratslav*, 25.

<sup>4</sup> Green, 30.

Usyatin, [commenting](#), “How good it was for me here; with every step I felt the taste of Eden... [when I] had been alone somewhere in the woods or fields...[I] would come back to a completely new world.”

Much of what we know of Nahman’s adolescent years comes from *Shivhei ha-Ran*, a biographical work written by R. Nathan, R. Nahman’s leading student, most of which consists of quotes from R. Nahman about his early years and subsequent trip to the Land of Israel. Interestingly, although classic hagiographic writings in the Hasidic cannon tend to idealize the child *tzaddik*, often emphasizing early signs of future righteousness, this work instead emphasizes the struggles and challenges that marked Nahman’s childhood and adolescence.<sup>5</sup> For example, Nathan [writes](#) that

No act in the service of God came easily to him; everything can come only as a result of great and oft-repeated struggle. He rose and fell thousands and thousands of times, truly beyond all counting. It was terribly difficult for him even to enter into the service of God, to accept the yoke of His service. He would enter into worship for a certain number of days, then he would experience a fall.

Although wracked with failure, Nahman lived the dictum “the righteous fall seven times, yet get up” (Proverbs 24:16) on a constant basis, and the unending collapses didn’t deter the young Nahman from persisting. As Nathan writes:

He would go back, start over, and then fall again. Finally, after many such cycles, he would gain strength and decide that he would remain committed to God’s service forever, allowing nothing in the world to lead him astray. From that time forth his heart would be strongly with God, but even afterwards he would constantly undergo countless rises and falls.

It was his way to start anew each time... At times he had several such new starts within one day, for even within a single day he could fall several times and have to begin all over again.

This informs our understanding of the early roots of the ubiquity, or perhaps necessity, of inner struggle in spiritual growth in the thought and life of R. Nahman.

The ever-present specter of struggle in Nahman’s life crystallized in the event of Nahman’s journey to the Land of Israel in 1789-1790, an endeavor in which he encountered astounding challenges, and that was later portrayed by Nahman as paradigmatic of all spiritual journeys.<sup>6</sup> The obstacles Nahman met weren’t simple spiritual dilemmas or pitfalls, but fantastically complex impediments such as shipwrecks, kidnapping, pirates, storms, and wars. Commenting later on the trip, Nathan [notes](#) that

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<sup>5</sup> See *Shivhei ha-Rav*, 3, for an example of such descriptions of a youthful Shneur Zalman of Liadi.

<sup>6</sup> See Green, 63-93, for a psycho-spiritual analysis of Nahman’s pilgrimage to Israel, and an astute analogy between Nahman’s trip and coming-of-age narratives.

the power of the great obstacles which he had to overcome in going to the Land of Israel cannot be imagined, measured, or told... As he said, it would have been impossible for him to get to the Land of Israel without these degradations and this smallness (*katnut*)...the smallness and degradations saved him.

His appreciation of the necessity of obstacles was so extreme that he [desired](#) to put himself in danger: “Know that I want to place myself in danger, even great and terrible danger.”

In 1790, following his return from Israel, Nahman moved to Medvedevka and began to function more formally as a *rebbe* to local admirers. Here his renown grew, and he accepted the stipend that many Hasidic leaders took from their followers. In 1800, he moved to Zlotopolye, and so began what was perhaps the most conflict-ridden era of his life. Nahman’s primary antagonist was R. Aryeh Leib of Shpole, or the Shpole Zeide, as he was affectionately called, who had served in the synagogue of Zlotopolye before moving to the nearby town of Shpole. After a Yom Kippur argument in which Nahman berated the *hazan* for praying with improper motivations, the Zeide entered Zlotopolye and condemned Nahman, setting off a battle that would result in attempted excommunication of Nahman and persecution of anything associated with him or his followers. While both the actual content of the debate and its underlying factors are widely contested, it is clear that this oppression influenced many Bratslav Hasidim and Nahman.

After just two years in Zlotopolye, Nahman moved to Bratslav, and felt impacted by the difference between an accepting spiritual environment and a hostile one.<sup>8</sup> Here many of his most idyllic and optimistic thoughts were [stated](#), such as:

[If] the world...were to hear but a single one of my teachings with the melody and dance that belong to it, they would simply pass out: their souls would just leave them in this great and wondrous joy. Even the animals and blades of grass would be affected.

Although Nahman lived in Zaslowe and Uman for short periods of time, he mainly remained in Bratslav for the remainder of his life, until moving to Uman in 1810, a move that came in the wake of a house fire and a worsening medical condition. It is surprising that Nahman chose to live in Uman, a city with a strong *maskilic* influence, and in the former residence of a well-known *maskil*, Nathan Rapoport. Nahman’s disciples questioned his decision to live in a city and house of such impure enlightenment influence, and Nahman responded, [noting](#) that “since *tzaddikim* won’t come near me, I must draw these others near. Perhaps out of them I’ll make truly good people.” As so much of Nahman’s life was spent deriding *maskilic* thought, intellectualism, and the medical profession,<sup>9</sup> his choice to live in a place of such rampant

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<sup>7</sup> For perspectives on the disagreement, see J. Weiss’s “R’ Nahman M-Bratslav al ha-mahloket alav”, in *Mehkarim*, 42, who argues that the Zeide’s criticisms exacerbated or led to Nahman’s feelings of inadequacy. See also Mendel Piekartz’s [Hasidut Bratslav](#) (Jerusalem, 1972), 72, and Arthur Green’s *Tormented Master*, 103-110.

<sup>8</sup> *Hayyei Moharan* 2, 3:99.

<sup>9</sup> For more on R. Nahman’s treatment of medicine and doctors, see *Likkutei Moharan II* 1:9, much of which aligns medical treatment with a lack of faith or prayer, parallel to the rationalism and philosophy that is disapproved of throughout much of Nahman’s canon.

intellectualism, and to seek medical attention, is certainly perplexing. Nahman's rapid and radical shift in approach may indicate a need for newness and conflict that Nahman felt at this stage. After a life of conflict and ever-shifting frontiers, Nahman may have felt understimulated by the accepting environment of Bratslav. The tale of Nahman's life had been marked by emotional and spiritual extremes, often in the form of growth birthed by opposition and conflict, and the end of his life was to be no different. With this historical background in mind, we now turn to Nahman's writings on controversy. Although conceptually varied, these writings indicate that Nahman's broader views on the importance of controversy and conflict are rooted in his biography, both in his emphasis on struggles in early childhood, and on disagreements with other rabbinic leaders. His theology of conflict sees struggle as essential on the personal and cosmic planes. It is necessary both for the individual to experience inner conflicts and for these conflicts to play out on a global stage. I will present three distinct approaches of Nahman towards the necessity for *mahloket* and, using Arthur Green's model of Bratslavian psychoanalysis, will seek to understand the deeper roots from which Nahman's appreciation for *mahloket* arise.

### **R. Nahman's Writings on Controversy**

Although rabbinic and Talmudic traditions affirm the necessity of healthy debate, R. Nahman's perspective is significant both in the degree to which he spiritualizes debate as well as in his stated reasoning in doing so. A full analysis of the traditional approach exceeds the purview of the present essay, but a short survey of an oft-discussed [Mishnah](#) (*Avot* 5:17) and analysis thereof is in order:

Every controversy that is for the sake of Heaven will endure; but one that is not for the sake of Heaven will not endure. What kind of controversy is for the sake of Heaven? The controversy between Hillel and Shammai. And [what kind of controversy is] not for the sake of Heaven? The controversy of Korah...

The commentator Obadiah ben Abraham Bartenura [defines](#) an argument "for the sake of Heaven" as aiming for the truth, in contrast to an argument that stems from a "striving for control and love of victory." Should their intentions be for truth, the argument will "endure," in that those arguing will continue to exist, unlike the quick demise of Korah. Continuity of life is a worthy result of or possibly a reward for truthful debate, as the ability to continue with the creation of life amidst dispute speaks to the pure intentions of those engaged in such debate. As such, the [Talmud](#) points out that "even though these forbid and these permit, Beit Shammai did not refrain from marrying women from Beit Hillel, and Beit Hillel from Beit Shammai." Within Bartenura's scheme, the participants in the dispute will "endure," though the dispute itself may not. In contrast, Rabbeinu Yonah [comments](#) that the state of dispute will continue forever, in that "today they will argue about one thing and tomorrow about another, and argument will endure and continue between them all the days of their lives." However, Rabbeinu Yonah ultimately doesn't indicate whether such a dynamic is optimal or otherwise. Yom Tov Lipman Heller has no such ambivalence; in his [commentary](#), the *Tosafot Yom Tov*, he cites the Talmudic position that *mahloket* increased in the Jewish people because the students of Hillel and Shammai "did not study/serve as much as they needed."<sup>10</sup> He then

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<sup>10</sup> See [Sotah 47b](#), which states that "From when the students of Shammai and Hillel who did not serve their Rabbis sufficiently proliferated, dispute proliferated in Israel, and the Torah became like two Torahs." Compare

points out that the text lacks parallelism, in that the Mishnah gave examples to both sides of the former dispute, Hillel and Shammai, but only one side of the latter dispute, Korah. *Tosafot Yom Tov* explains that the Mishnah intentionally omitted Moshe and Aharon, Korah's disputants, for "their intentions were for Heaven, and they had no element of acting not for the sake of Heaven." Whereas Hillel and Shammai had relatively pure intentions in the broad sense, but not in every instance and context, Moshe and Aharon engaged in debate solely for the sake of Heaven, without any other motivation. Thus even the Mishnah's paradigmatic participants in a debate of pure intent (Hillel and Shammai) are lacking in their purity of service.

This survey of interpretations indicates that the standard, traditional view is far from lauding *mahloket* as growth-inducing or faith-building! In fact, Reish Lakish is recorded in the [Talmud](#) as stating that "one shouldn't perpetuate *mahloket*, as Rav says: 'Anyone who perpetuates a *mahloket* violates a prohibition.'" Based on this Talmudic dictum, many early counters<sup>11</sup> of *mitzvot* include a prohibition of *mahloket* in their lists of the 613 biblical commandments. Maimonides may go so far as to say that disputed matters cannot be understood as stemming directly from Sinai to the same degree as undisputed matters.<sup>12</sup> In any event, the rabbinic image of debate is a far cry from Nahman's portrayal of *mahloket*.

Nahman's first and least radical approach addresses the potential for positive growth engendered by dispute. Due to the conversational origins of much of Bratslav literature, many of the comments attributed to Nahman about his disagreements are vague yet confident, such as when he [says](#) to his students "come and let us give strength to those deceptive ones, for through the *mahloket* that they have with us we arrive at great things, and they do us a great good. Through *mahloket* one comes to understand great things." This portrayal of confidence allows Nahman to take control of the narrative of debate in his inner circle, where he casts the debate not as one castigating him but as a necessary step towards understanding. Elsewhere he says that *mahloket* elevates a person, because a person is like the tree of the field (Deut. 20:19), and as a tree in the ground cannot raise itself, or grow, unless water flows over it and raises and carries it, so too "*mahloket* is called 'water'..."<sup>13</sup> This alternative to the more traditional rabbinic analogy of Torah to water perhaps reflects that *mahloket*, like Torah, is crucial not only for understanding, but for any growth.

Although disputes between the Hasidim and Mitnagdim, as well as between Hasidic groups, were ubiquitous in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, Bratslav is notable for the intensity and persistence of these disputes. The Zeide's opposition was only the first major stage of controversy for

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to *Yerushalmi Hagigah* 2:77, in which a parallel language is recorded concluding with "and they will not return to their place until the son of David comes," connoting an eventual unification of the divided nation of Israel.

<sup>11</sup> For examples, see *Sefer Mitzvot Gedolot* 156-157 and *Sefer Mitzvot Ketanot* 132.

<sup>12</sup> See Maimonides' *Introduction to the Mishnah*, 11. Part of the debate on the meaning of Maimonides here relates to the available translations, as the translation of R. Kapach and Shilat are understood to support this view, but traditionalists have interpreted Maimonides to be deriding the above view. See *Chaim Be-Emunatom*, chapter 10.

<sup>13</sup> *Likkutei Moharan* I 161, 'For Mahloket Raises a Person'. Interestingly, Nahman utilizes the human-tree imagery in other circumstances as well, such as in *Hayyei Moharan* 245: "I am a tree, pleasant and extremely wondrous, with wondrous branches, and below I am in the earth."

Bratslav *Hasidim*; a second stage began in the 1830s with the opposition of R. Moshe Tsvi Giterman of Savran, in what may have been an even more extreme conflict. The Savraner, as he was referred to, castigated R. Nathan, the student-scribe of R. Nahman and subsequent leader of the Bratslav movement.<sup>14</sup> The third stage was spearheaded in the 1860s by the Twersky families, whose followers were also notably violent in their persecution of Bratslav Hasidim praying at Nahman's grave on *Rosh ha-Shanah*.<sup>15</sup> In an attempt to explain the persistence of controversy surrounding Bratslav already in his day, Nahman [explains](#) that

all great *tzaddikim* reach their stage and stand there, and I, thank God, at every moment become another person... a *tzaddik* is called a tree, and has roots and branches, etc. Before he reaches his stage, he needs *mahloket*, as *mahloket* is like water... but I need for there to always be constant *mahloket*, as I move at every time and every moment from level to level. If I knew that I stand at this moment as I was in the hour before I wouldn't want myself in such a world, whatsoever.

While some might see controversy as necessary for a particular stage of growth, for Nahman it is an eternal necessity, propelling one's dynamic and ever-changing identity forward. In order to be forever different, forever growing, there must be constant dispute. This is tied to Nahman's deep need for newness, as is apparent in the stunning declaration attributed to Nahman that "one should never be an old person (*adam zaken*). Not a righteous old person nor a pious old person, for a person must constantly renew oneself, start anew again and again."<sup>16</sup> This conceptual link between constant renewal and dispute is the background for Arthur Green's claim that the underlying motivation in the debate between Nahman and the Zeide was a struggle in leadership of the new path of the young Nahman as opposed to the established leadership of the aged Zeide.<sup>17</sup> Green sees the dispute as a generational battle between a young upstart and the elderly holdovers of the mainstream. In any case, it is clear that Nahman understood *mahloket* to be crucial to the dynamism of his growth.

Although Nahman established the necessity of dispute, the mechanics through which dispute catalyzes progress demand attention. Nahman outlines two different ways in which controversy effects growth. One way in which dispute advances growth appears later in *Likkutei Moharan*. Nahman [says](#) pithily that

When they object (*holekin*) to a person, they chase after him, and he runs away each time to the Blessed God. And with all that they oppose him more, he comes closer to the Blessed God, for He is in every place... it emerges that every place he runs to the Blessed God...

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<sup>14</sup> In historian Raphael Mahler's surprising words, "the persecution of the Bratslav Hasidim by the Savran Hasidim was crueler even than the mitnagedic persecution of Hasidim in the previous century." Quoted in David Assaf's [Untold Tales of the Hasidim: Crisis and Discontent in the History of Hasidism](#).

<sup>15</sup> See Assaf, 126.

<sup>16</sup> *Sihot Ha-Ran* 51.

<sup>17</sup> *Tormented Master*, 104.



In this poetically powerful piece, Nahman paints a picture of an individual running from the world towards the embrace of an all-present immanent good. The very act of running away brings one closer to God, and thus objections present the motivation to run.

In a second description of the process of growth catalyzed by dispute, Nahman continues the *mahloket*-water analogy, describing the process through which disagreement leads to growth in the entity of Torah and its scholarship.<sup>18</sup> “From every *mahloket*, a book (*sefer*) is made,” for responsa literature are legalistic works in which questions and answers are exchanged.<sup>19</sup> Through disagreements between Torah scholars, more Torah is created. However, in these circumstances *mahloket* results from a lack of faith in scholars, and is thus remedied by according honor to religious scholarship.<sup>20</sup> While this element of *mahloket* is birthed by a lack of faith in Torah scholarship as a whole, Nahman then speaks of a different *mahloket* that affects *tzaddikim*, or righteous people, whose lack of faith isn’t in Torah as a whole, but rather in their own individual Torah. He [writes](#):

There are those that have *mahloket* due to the fact that they lack faith in themselves, and they don’t believe in the originality of their own Torah... and they don’t believe that God takes great pleasure from their original ideas, and through that with which they don’t have faith in their own originality. They are lazy in their originalities, and therefore they have *mahloket* and through this they repent and return to consider their own originalities and make from this a book...

The process of repentance entails the *tzaddik* returning to the belief in his (or her) originality, and in the creative brilliance of his own Torah insights, followed by the further production of more Torah as a result of this newfound belief in self. Through self-doubt and controversy, the *tzaddik* thus comes to believe in himself more, and create more books.

This process fits well into Nahman’s larger stress on the importance of belief in the self, as is expressed in the powerful [declaration](#) that:

You must have faith in yourself. You must have enough faith in God's goodness to believe that you are important to Him. Have faith that you too are precious in God's eyes. So great is God's goodness that each and every person is great and important in His eyes. Being humble does not mean you must put yourself in a state of constricted consciousness. Constantly ask God to bring you to true humility and to have faith in yourself. Some righteous people suffer opposition only because they do not have faith in themselves!

This emphasis on belief and appreciation of the self may help explain the relevance and popularity of Nahman’s teaching in the contemporary Jewish scene, as well as the broader autobiographical affirmation of the real and present struggles of religious life. This struggle is expressed by the complexity of Nahman’s thoughts on self-belief, as Arthur Green forcefully

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<sup>18</sup> *Likkutei Moharan* I 61:5-6.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*



highlights the presence of Nahman's own feelings of doubt and inadequacy that may shape the background for Nahman's insistence on self-belief. As evidence, Green points to Nathan's [comment](#) that:

On several occasions he (Nahman) himself repeated the words of those who say that here there is no middle path. Either he is, God forbid, just as those who oppose him say he is...or, if not, he is a true *tzaddik*. In that case he is uniquely awesome and wondrous, to an extent which cannot be encompassed by the human mind.<sup>21</sup>

As such, Nahman's thoughts on the disputes that surround the *tzaddik* as stemming from the *tzaddik's* self-doubt may be at least somewhat autobiographical in nature; perhaps the controversies are his own fault, the result of not engaging deeply enough in his own wellsprings. These disputes must in turn motivate further creativity in Nahman's own Torah. This concludes the analysis of Nahman's first approach to dispute; dispute necessitates growth, either through "running away" to God, or by strengthening one's self-belief and Torah output.

In his second approach, Nahman describes *mahloket* as more than a catalyst of growth, but as a condition endemic to the life of the *tzaddik*, which demands misunderstanding in its very nature. Nahman [says](#) that

It is necessary that objections be raised with regards to the *tzaddikim*, for the *tzaddikim* are imitating God, as is known. Just as there are objections to God, so there must be objections to the *tzaddik* who imitates Him.

With regards to these objections to God he liked to say: Of course there have to be questions about Him; this is only fitting to His exalted state. For it is of the very nature of His greatness that He be beyond our minds' grasp. It is impossible that we understand His conduct with our intellect. There must be objections raised to Him... for if He conducted Himself as our minds dictate, our minds would indeed be equal to His own!

Within this framework, the necessity for controversy is not due to the potential for growth fostered by *mahloket*, but rather is a result, or function, of the inherent incomprehensibility of the *tzaddik*. As a reflection or imitator of the divine, the *tzaddik* cannot be understood, and questions and objections will therefore be raised against the *tzaddik* as an expression of the misunderstanding fundamental to the *tzaddik's* greatness. This understanding seems to be autobiographical as well, as Nahman [says](#) that "there are those who are against me yet they don't even know me at all." Throughout much of Nahman's life, he maintained a preference for the unknown over the known, for the mystical over the rational. In a classically stunning formulation, Nahman [said](#) of himself that "his non-knowledge was a greater innovation than

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<sup>21</sup> See *Hayyei Moharan* 262. Contrast this with other statements of Nahman indicate that Nahman thought of himself as wondrous, such as *Hayyei Moharan* 245: "I am a tree, pleasant and extremely wondrous, with wondrous branches, and below I am in the earth." However, in line with Joseph Weiss's assertion that Nahman may have introjected the Zeide's claims about him, the presentation of both options may reflect a deep ambivalence about whether Nahman was indeed the *tzaddik* he purported to be. See J. Weiss's "*R' Nahman M-Bratslav al ha-mahloket alav*", in *Mehkarim*, 42.

his knowledge.” This approach is founded upon the principle that ‘the purpose of knowledge is non-knowledge,’ a concept ubiquitous throughout Kabbalistic and Hasidic literature but emphasized particularly in Bratslav literature.<sup>22</sup> Nahman’s larger sentiment can be summed up in the statement that “I do not want to believe in a God I understand,” and, as such, objections are perceived as an outgrowth of essential incomprehensibility.<sup>23</sup> However, Nahman notes that even incomprehensibility is incomprehensible, as although one can realize his or her own ignorance in one area, there is always a higher level that has not yet been touched.<sup>24</sup>

Nahman’s third approach to dispute understands *mahloket* between scholars to be a crucial aspect of the creation of the world. Through the intellectual empty space, the vacuity of existence, that exists between Torah scholars in dispute, the world was able to be created, for if not for (perceived?) emptiness of divinity the world would be overcome with the Infinite Light. Similarly, Nahman [says](#) that

if all Torah scholars were as one, there would not be space for the creation of the world, but only through the *mahloket* between them, as they disagree with each other, and each draws himself to a different side, through this an empty space is created between them.

Unity of Torah understanding is thus parallel to the grand unity of Divinity that has the capability of overwhelming the world. In the separation of opinions, which parallels the constriction of light, the world is able to exist, and scholars are able to continue creating worlds through the words of their mouth.<sup>25</sup> This passage appears in *Likkutei Moharan* 64, a much-discussed piece in which Nahman discusses the *Hallal ha-Panuy*, the vacuity of existence in which God’s (non)existence is necessary for the existence of the world. As such, this approach to *mahloket* is the most theologically grand of Nahman’s, as *mahloket* is now important not only for the growth of an individual or of a group but for the creation of the entire world.

As so much of Nahman’s life was replete with debates, disputes, and controversies, it is no wonder that the topic appears so extensively throughout Bratslavian literature. In the

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<sup>22</sup> See Tzvi Mark’s “The Ultimate Purpose of Knowing is that We Do Not Know”, in [Mysticism and Madness: The Religious Thought of Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav](#), (London and New York: Continuum, 2009), for a thorough analysis of this term in Nahman’s thought. This set of ideas relates to fideism, literally ‘faithism’, the doctrine that maintains that faith is superior to rationalism in reaching truths, which fits with Nahman’s insistence on simple faith over rationality. However, non-knowledge as telos deviates from fideism, as the goal is not a knowledge/truth attained via faith/belief, but rather attaining a sort of impossible non-knowledge.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> *Sihot Ha-Ran* 3. Nahman writes that He writes that “the ultimate goal of all knowledge of God is to realize that one knows nothing. Yet even this is unattainable...He does not know enough about the next level to begin to realize his ignorance. No matter how high he climbs, there is always the next step. A person therefore knows nothing: he cannot even understand his own ignorance. For there will always be a level of ignorance beyond his present level of perception.”

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

following particularly powerful piece in *Sihot Ha-Ran*, Nahman discusses the cosmic ubiquity of *mahloket*. He [points](#) out that

The world is full of *mahloket*. These disputes are between the nations of the world, as well as between cities, between houses, neighbors, and every man and his wife...Know that every debate between man and his family, etc., is also the very *mahloket* that is between kings and nations...and even if one doesn't want to dispute and wants to sit in silence and serenity, he is forced to be as well in *mahloket* and wars.

This is also true of a nation that wants to sit in peace, and doesn't want any war, still, it is forced into war against its will, for [other nations] claim it is on their side, until it is in the war...

And therefore at times when a person sits alone in the forest, it is possible for him to go crazy. This happens because he is alone, and he contains all of the nations of the world inside himself, and they are fighting with each other, and he has to change at every time to the aspect of each nation...and because of this it is possible to go completely insane...

However when one sits among people, there is room for the war to express itself in others, in his house and neighbors... And when the messiah comes, speedily in our days, then all types of *mahloket* will be nullified, and there will be great peace in the world...

In this unifying cosmic vision of *mahloket*, all disputes are played out in every possible dimension. A given conflict can be an inner conflict, as well as the dispute between nations. Because of this, conflicts that remain internal, bottled up, can cause insanity. *Mahloket* demands expression, and is endemic until the Messianic age, at which point it will be annulled. In his assertion that peace will eventually prevail, Nahman shifts our understanding of *mahloket* from a cosmic necessity of eternal proportion to one of temporal proportion. None of the various approaches to the benefits of controversy surveyed above assert that dispute is temporally bound, or is fundamental only in exilic life. Rav Nahman introduces the understanding that *mahloket* will eventually give way to peace. As ever-important as *mahloket* may be in this stage of the world, on the personal, national, and cosmic levels, Nahman claims that peace will yet prevail. Nahman [says](#) that it is only

Through the spread of peace the whole world can be drawn to serve God with one accord, because when people are at peace with one another they talk to each other about the true purpose of the world and its vanities...

But when there is no peace in the world, and worse still, when there is strife, people are not open with one another and never discuss the true purpose of life. Even when someone does discuss it, his words do not penetrate the hearts of others, because they have no interest in discovering the truth but only in winning the argument. They are aggressive and full of hatred and envy. When a person wants to win an argument, his ears are not open to the

truth. The main reason most people are so far from God is that divisiveness and strife are so widespread today through our many sins.

The cosmic necessity of disputes mandates controversy, but at the time of messianic peace, harmony and amity will reign supreme, with a renewed possibility for true conversation. The appreciation Nahman developed for *mahloket* over his short, but intense, controversy-filled life bows before his dream of the open communication and universal worship of God that peace brings. Perhaps Nahman, from within his own introjections and intentionalizations of the struggles that defined his life, was conscious of his barely whispered hopes and dreams of a simple peace, for a life free from argument, dispute, and inner struggle. Perhaps Nahman, the complex figure that urged simplicity, prayed for the controversies of his own disputes and struggles to be forgotten in the arrival of the universal peace of the messiah.

In line with Nahman's request for his Torah to be tied to prayers, let us connect his dreamful prose of peace to the poetry of a later dreamer, to whom the hope for realized unity in a world of *mahloket* is [called for](#) with powerful urgency; "let it come, like wildflowers, suddenly, because the field must have it: wildpeace.

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# WILL WE SUPPORT THE DAY SCHOOL OF TOMORROW?

HILLEL DAVID RAPP

There has been a lot of ink devoted to proposing ideas for using philanthropic dollars to lower the costs of Jewish education. These ideas include raising subsidy dollars, [soliciting endowment funds](#), [coordinating estate and life insurance gifts](#), and other ideas in this vein. The problem with all these ideas is that they assume the next generation of schools will function in more or less the same way as they do today. The conversation tends to assume that the economic model and structure of schools generally, and Jewish schools in particular, will not change.

But there are compelling reasons to consider that we may be on verge of a major shift in education broadly that will completely reshape the learning, content, method of delivery, metrics for success, and economies of scale in education. Jewish Education will not be immune to these changes and could stand to benefit from a model that can provide a superior product at a significantly lower cost.

## **The Future of Education**

On the surface this is hard to imagine. The school as an economic model and its basic curricular content has not changed all that much in the last 100 years. Chances are that a young person in school today is learning the same basic topics in math, science, English, history, and Judaic Studies that her parents studied. Even as schools have expanded curricular offerings, the core curriculum is largely the same. If the system hasn't changed for so long, why would it change now?

Yet when we consider that nearly every industry has experienced or is poised to undergo significant disruption as a result of disintermediating technological advances, there is no reason to assume education will be an exception. We can already see the beginning of this trend. There used to be several intermediaries between a learner and knowledge, such as schools, publishers, teachers, etc. Today, technology has made vast amounts of knowledge directly and broadly accessible. Indeed, a growing crescendo of voices has been advancing this idea. To paraphrase a few popular thinkers such as [Sir Ken Robinson](#), [Sal Khan](#), and [Yuval Noah Harari](#), the current model of education was built to serve the needs of a society built on the industrial revolution and not the needs of today, let alone tomorrow.<sup>26</sup>

In the current model, students are sorted and advanced by age, as if the most important purpose of learning is to graduate a new crop of workers each calendar year. Those who can master the material taught before an arbitrary date in June are designated as high performers relative to their peers, opening opportunities to accumulate credentials and move to the next stage of education. Those students who can't master the material but can muster a passing grade—the C and D students—are moved along for a time with the clear message that the doors of academic advancement will eventually be closed. And then there are those whose academic struggles mean that the doors are closed almost immediately. You easily get the feel

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<sup>26</sup> For more on this see:

<https://www.cjnews.com/perspectives/opinions/can-jewish-schools-take-a-lesson-from-a-tomato-company>.

that we are educating to fill the hierarchy of the industrial machine, from executive to mid-level management to the worker on the factory floor.

To take this one step further, until recently, the only way to make education broadly available and economically scalable was to put one teacher in charge of a large group of students. Success had to be narrowly defined to focus on a standardized curriculum with achievement measured against the other individuals who happened to be born in a twelve-month period of the same year.

To be fair, today, growing awareness of the multifaceted needs of students has generated large investments in additional personnel and technological resources to assist the teacher and student with learning. Schools have been racing to get students on devices, flip classrooms, and add innovative courses. But this has the feel of a square peg in a round hole, as teachers need to maintain fidelity to a fixed curriculum and grading scale while accommodating broadly different learning needs and skill levels. The result is a tug of war between the student needing to conform to the learning being offered, and the school offering the learning each individual student needs.

In addition, schools have also always been excellent institutions of socialization and, in this regard, division by age group makes a lot of sense. Schools take responsibility for more than just knowledge; they also form the first communities with which young people identify. They are the place where children learn to live with each other, bond over shared ideologies and interests, and conform to the standards of behavior needed for cooperation and collaboration. But this also has its downside, as large investments in student programming, clubs, and activities have stretched students thin and nearly eliminated what was left of adolescent free time.

With regard to Jewish Day School in particular, all these additional investments—adding more educators with broader expertise to serve learning, student programming teams to provide excellent socialization, administrators to coordinate the complexities, and development teams to pay for it all—leaves us with a 100-year-old model that has been souped up for today's children, but comes with a souped up price tag, too. Instead of working to sustain this system, we should be thinking about redesigning a better system. Along these lines, the edifice of our broader education system may be beginning to show cracks.

Let's start with undergraduate universities, the primary destination of the educational journey for most students and the reason for our course structures and grading metrics. Until recently, a university served two important purposes in preparing a young person for his or her future. First, it provided access to knowledge and ideas that were otherwise unavailable to the average person. Second, it provided a fertile ground for effective socialization and the skills needed to begin to engage effectively with others.

Already, universities have lost their monopoly on the first role. Knowledge and ideas are freely available to anyone with a device, an internet connection, and some self-discipline. Even as universities can still claim a unique role as a socializing force, that place is challenged by a generation growing up on social media and redefining the social landscape.

It's no wonder tech giants like Google and Facebook don't seem to care if their engineers have a degree from a prestigious university, or even if they have any degree at all. This is not because they don't believe in the value of higher education, but simply because they have learned that a prestigious degree is not nearly as good a signal of success as the internal tests and interview methods they have designed to evaluate talent. What's to stop other companies from following suit? As the cost of education grows and the amount of freely-available knowledge grows, students are bound to opt for free knowledge and, as such, companies are bound to realize the pool of talent is larger if they don't narrow their job searches to elite university graduates.

Harnessing online and digital resources can already provide cheap, easily accessible knowledge, but it's only when we can marry those resources to intelligent organization and delivery systems that can observe learning, understand student needs, and adjust content and delivery accordingly that we can create a truly useful digital education product. At this point, a talented classroom teacher is still the primary asset in providing education. But the trajectory of advances in artificial intelligence suggest the role of the teacher may change in ways that will fundamentally impact the nature of classroom and school as we know it. Now, let's explore some these changes in the context of Jewish education in particular.

### **The Future of Jewish Education**

So what does all this mean for the future of Jewish education?

Let's begin by identifying what Jewish Day Schools are meant to accomplish, which today is an exceptionally broad mandate. In their best version, they are meant to provide knowledge, skills, and training in General Studies at or near the level of equivalently priced private schools. Students are expected to gain entrance to top universities and be well prepared to succeed. Add to that a full Judaic Studies curriculum that is also meant to provide knowledge, skills and training in Judaic content but with the added need to inspire and ignite Jewish passion and pride. Finally, Jewish schools are meant to provide socialization and acculturation within the Jewish community so that graduates will always see a Jewish home and community in their futures.

As a community, we find ourselves asking: what type of philanthropic investments can support such a broad mandate for the next generation?

When we generally consider the potential disruptions to education as outlined above, the potential applicable benefits for Jewish education should give us pause before making major funding commitments supporting the current model. If tomorrow's school will be something fundamentally different, investment in the future based on needs of today's school will, I think, amount to throwing good money after bad. Raising an endowment meant to support talented and pricy Heads of School, administrators and educators comprising roughly 80% of budgetary commitments could be unnecessary in a school without age divisions, classrooms, or frontal teachers.

If we really want to create a better and cheaper school, I would suggest an investment model built on venture philanthropy instead of charity. For starters, these investments could be focused in three key areas of development that will facilitate some of the disruptions and



infrastructure needed to advance change and bring Jewish families a better product at a lower cost.

### **I. Artificial-Intelligence-Supported Online Learning**

Imagine if classroom teachers had machines that could tell them precisely how much focus and attention each student was investing at a given moment during class. This would be a powerful tool. A teacher could quickly remind a student who was fading to come back on task, or ask a provocative question to re-engage the student with the lesson. But, ultimately, if the material chosen or method of instruction fails to engage the student, it's only a matter of time before attention slips away again.

Instead, what if the teacher could draw on thousands of available lessons and methods of delivery, and provide individual packages to each student? What if these lessons could be delivered while monitoring student attention in order to determine which content and method best suits each student's learning style and interest? Of course, a human teacher couldn't possibly do that. However, a computer algorithm coupled with a biometric eye sensor built into the screen camera could conceivably have no problem providing such customized educational feedback.

While this investment is not particular to Jewish education, this type of development could not only cut back on the expense of teachers, administrators, and student support professionals, but it could achieve far better learning outcomes and superior diagnostics. Until this point, the best educational assessment can only identify the psycho-educational issues that may interfere with the delivery of standard curricular content. But it cannot also provide the precise lesson and teaching style to mitigate those issues with immediate and ongoing measures of successful implementation. An AI-driven online education could easily do everything from the educational assessment to solving for a student's particular learning needs.

When we consider the broad mandate Jewish schools carry, a superior education at a fraction of the cost offers the possibility of a sustainable model far less reliant on philanthropic giving.

### **II. Significant Increases in Content Development for Judaic Studies**

Online education only becomes a differentiator in educational outcomes when it can outperform a human teacher in providing customized and creative content. Right now, if I wanted to learn about the French Revolution, I could run a search and there would be hundreds of lessons and videos instantly available to review, including videos with excellent production value that can rival the most charismatic history class. However, if I wanted to learn the first *sugya* in *Sanhedrin*, there is some content online but few video lessons, and nothing that would come close to being in class with an excellent teacher.

The Jewish community does not lack great educators. An exceptional Gemara teacher with a talented production team could design a "Crash Course" type series on the first chapter of *Sanhedrin* for some initial investment and would produce superior content for hundreds of Jewish schools around the world without any ongoing expense.

### **III. Decoupling the Social from the Academic**

Jewish schools often function as an awkward marriage between camp and school. As far as I can tell, this is a marriage of convenience. If our children are going to spend the better part of their days in one place because of the demands of a dual curriculum, and they are already grouped with their peers and friends, then it makes the most sense to provide trips, *Shabbatonim*, color war, *hagigot*, and other programs during that time.

These programs are critical in cultivating a sense of communal identity and socialization, and instilling in our young people Jewish purpose and pride. But they don't really have anything to do with the goals of an academic program designed to build certain aspects of knowledge and critical thinking skills. Color War will not do much to help a student decode a *pasuk* and understand the positions of Rashi and Ramban, much as biblical reading skills will not be much help in leading an incredible team cheer. But these goals will be forced to compete for time and attention packed together in a long and overscheduled day.

An alternative model could separate these two agendas with time to spare. An AI-driven online educational program not hindered by the skill-gaps in traditional age groupings, or the divided attention problems of frontal teaching, will presumably afford students the opportunity to learn in far less time. Imagine a group of Jewish High School students finishing their daily studies at 3:00pm in a school that provides AI-supported individualized education and skill based collaborative learning. With the extra time these students are ready to join with their peers and head over to their local shul, Bnei Akiva, NCSY or another Jewish youth program for hours of activities and socialization unencumbered by periods and bells. These informal educational programs can provide better, more *hashkafically* targeted Jewish communal socialization.

Investments in these three areas could lay the groundwork and procure the path for Jewish education to undergo transformative changes ahead of the curve.

### **Possible Objections**

Of course, we can anticipate a series of possible arguments against the vision laid out here. For one, some might express concern that this model will involve fewer teachers who can remain on our schools' payrolls. Indeed, any time we invest in something that has the potential to fundamentally disrupt a market, we are broaching the territory of creative destruction, whereby there will be some real human costs that come along with the creation of something better and cheaper. With that said, I think that teaching, as a profession, will be a big winner through this type of change. The largest savings will come from significantly scaling back on large, expensive and cumbersome administrative structures, student programming and staffing, and student support needs. There will be fewer teachers overall, but the skills required to meet the demands of a new model will enable a winnowing of the professional ranks to the most highly skilled and best compensated educators.

An additional question might be posed against the proposal to decouple Jewish academics from socialization: doesn't such a move merely shift the economic burden from one place (schools) to another (shuls)? Yes, parents would have a new fee to pay for Jewish socialization and communal identity via some external youth organization. But I would consider a few important points here.

Firstly, the budgetary needs for programming are hugely impacted by economies of scale in a totally different way than education. It is far more efficient to run a shabbaton or trip for 500 students than for 50. In the current model, the population of students in need of programming is divided into schools based primarily on academic and financial needs. In a decoupled model, students are free to join whatever organization suits their overall hashkafa and provides the right creative and social outlets for them at a cost that is more transparently reflective of the service provided. This should allow for much larger groupings under, say, a Religious Zionist or Neo-Chassidic or *Frum Yeshivish* focus.

Secondly, I think a lot of this cost can be absorbed in shul membership. Shuls are already aligned more closely on considerations of socialization and communal belonging, and they have buildings that are largely available for use. Finally, if nothing else, this bifurcation allows parents to make genuinely informed decisions about where to invest their limited resources. Maybe one parent is focused on knowledge and less on socialization, while another parent is willing to make use of publicly funded education for knowledge provided that these opportunities for socialization are available.

### **Outlining the Economic Benefits**

Finally, it is worth elaborating with greater precision the economic benefits of this proposed model. Schools, as they are currently structured, benefit from the typical dynamics associated with economies of scale. That is to say, the larger the school, the more efficiently it can run. In the current structure, consolidation would likely benefit most Jewish schools from a pure cost savings perspective.

But all that is due to the fact that the current model is built on a goal of delivering education to the “average” student in a given age group. So a class of 25 is certainly more cost effective than a class of 10, a student support professional with a portfolio of 50 students is more cost effective than of 15 students, and an administrative structure working on programming and scheduling for 1000 students is more cost effective than for 300 students. Now, there is undoubtedly a threshold that would lead to diseconomies of scale (ie less efficiency with size), but I am not aware of too many Jewish schools today that would save money by splitting into two or more schools.

However, once we move away from the model of teaching to the average, or teaching to the curve, and we build a model of education based on individualized mastery of curricular content without the conflicts of student programming, we see a much different picture of where the savings accrue and a new analysis for the costs/benefits of scale emerges. For example, a Jewish high school could open tomorrow serving a cohort of 65 students that costs roughly \$13,000 per student and has teachers making \$140,000 per year, among the top earners in their field. But the job of a teacher in this new school would be considerably different than a typically structured Jewish High School.

Let’s assume the school hired 5 educators that broadly cover the following disciplines: Judaic Studies, Math, Science, Engineering, English language and literature, and Social Studies. These educators are hired based on 3 core criteria: Their ability to observe, curate and communicate. In other words, they need to be able to observe student learning and properly diagnose areas for improvement, curate content that speaks to those needs and to effectively facilitate education through clear and understandable communication. Their job would be to

provide packages of digital content culled from online resources or otherwise prepared on their own and delivered to students who advance based on a skill acquisition measure instead of their average in a course of study. These educators would facilitate group discussions, experiential learning, co-curricular programs and hands-on engagement to complement and enhance the digital content and skill packages they have curated.

If you think about it, a full time teacher in the classical school model can end up teaching almost double the total number of students and make thirty to forty percent less, watering down a school's competitive hiring ability and the amount of individual learning that takes place. The classic model also prioritizes a teacher's communication ability (keeping a large group engaged) at the cost of spending time observing learning and curating content. A teacher who is preparing packages of content in advance—drawn from online resource or prepared individually—for much smaller groups, say 6-10 students each, based on their particular skill level will yield a greater focus on individual learning needs and should provide better outcomes.

Now, for the back of the envelope savings. Five educators for 65 students making \$140,000 per year totals \$700,000 in personnel costs. If you assume that all other costs stay the same (ie facilities, materials, etc.), those typically represent about 20% of a school's budget, which would mean an \$850,000 operating budget for this cohort and a cost of \$13,000 per student. I actually think it could be closer to \$12,500 per student when you make the necessary adjustments in considering that a school built on this individualized model will not require the same overall square footage and classroom space of a typical school.

What you have likely noticed is that this school has no administration, support, or programming staff. The idea here is to marry the most talented educators available on the market with the best resources available online and keep the operational needs minimal enough that these well-compensated educators can handle the support, scheduling, parent communication, etc. generally covered by additional staffing.

Even as I am suggesting we rethink our future minded investments in education, it is worth noting that what I lay out in the example school above could happen tomorrow without a single penny invested in AI supported learning or increases in online Jewish content. However, those investments would make this model considerably more effective, and provide the particular investment needed to secure an educational product that is far superior to what a student receives in the classical model, and at less than half the current cost. This is exactly where our investments will yield the most significant future payout. Investment in the areas upon which a new education model can emerge are investments that are transformative, self sustaining, and can avoid much of the ongoing needs for philanthropic support that each school faces.

What I am advocating for here is that we rethink how we solicit and donate within Jewish education for the long term. There is always fundraising to keep the lights on and the teachers paid that is undoubtedly more critical to our immediate needs. But when we begin to discuss multi-million dollar endowments and long term sustainability, I believe, that investing long-term resources today to prop up yesterday's school misses where our needs will be in the future. These changes in education are likely happening regardless of what our

community does, but targeted investment in these trends now could accelerate, focus, and enhance the educational and economic benefits for our community.

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