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VAYERA

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THE TRAGIC HEROES OF BRATSLAV: R.
NATHAN BRATSLAVER ON DISPUTE AND
MULTIPLE TRUTHS

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"The true tzaddikim depart, due to our great sins... and I wander to and fro, like a body without a soul, like a lump without thought, like a ship lost in the depths of the sea without a captain, while the storm wind rages at every moment."¹

Introduction

Rabbi Nathan Sternhartz of Nemirov (1780-1844) was the primary scribe and student of R. Nahman of Bratslav (1772-1810), and was essential to the expansion of Bratslav Hasidut after the death of R. Nahman at the untimely age of 38. Although R. Nathan wasn't formally considered a *Rebbe* in the traditional sense, he led the Bratslav community at a pivotal moment from an upstart movement centered around the charismatic *personality* of R. Nahman, to an established community now centered around the charismatic *ideas* of their deceased leader.

As non-*Rebbe* leaders, following the path of R. Nahman while offering contemporary interpretation and application of R. Nahman's thought, Bratslav leaders followed in the tense continuum between old and new championed by their dead *Rebbe*, who thought of his approach as a "very old path that is nevertheless completely new."² However, at times R. Nathan deviates from R. Nahman's thought. One such area regards the topics of truth and controversy. To better understand the disparity between the relationship of the teacher and the student to dispute, we will consider R. Nathan's biography, look to the texts of each thinker, and turn to Hegel's paradigm of the tragic hero.³

¹ R. Nathan's *Likkutei Tefilot*, part 1, 26a-b, prayer 13.

² *Hayvei Moharan* 392.

³ I'd like to thank Prof. Jonathan Dauber for his patient and thoughtful comments on my much-delayed first attempts at this paper, as well as Tzvi Sinensky for his critical editorial help.

Biography

R. Nathan was born in 1780 to R. Naftali Hertz and Hayeh Laneh Sternhartz in the town of Nemirov, Ukraine. His father was a well-off businessman and Torah scholar, and belonged to the Mitnagdic camp. R. Nathan was married off at thirteen to Esther Shaindel, the daughter of the Mitnaged Rabbi David Zvi Orbakh. Although R. Nathan began a devoted student and dedicated Mitnaged, the anti-Hasidic attitude with which he was raised slowly softened as he studied with a Hasidic *havruta*, R. Lipa, who opened R. Nathan's eyes to his need for increased spirituality. After this realization, R. Nathan first visited a litany of Hasidic *Rebbes* but was left unsatisfied⁴ until, in 1802, he went to Bratslav, only nine miles away from Nemirov. After hearing R. Nahman speak, R. Nathan was enraptured, and so began one of the great teacher-student relationships in the Jewish tradition. R. Nahman passed only eight years later, and during that time R. Nathan recorded his master's teachings, conversations, stories, and dreams.⁵

R. Nathan's relationship with R. Nahman caused severe tensions in R. Nathan's family, as his father-in-law, father, and wife were all opposed to his changing lifestyle, particularly the challenges that arose from his desire to spend time in the company of R. Nahman for *Shabbat* and holidays. Much of his life was spent navigating these

⁴ R. Nathan was particularly close with the *Rebbe* Reb Barukh of Mezhibyzh (who was R. Nahman's uncle) and R. Levi Yitzhak of Berditchev. However, although he was impressed by the spiritual worship he found in Berditchev, he remained unsatisfied with his own level of growth. The breaking point came when, one Saturday night, R. Nathan was at a *Melaveh Malkah* in Berditchev, when he was asked to purchase bagels for the rest of the *hasidim*. As he left, he wondered, "Is this why I was created? To buy bagels?"

⁵ R. Elhanan Nir discusses the particular emphasis in Bratslav works on death awareness, and looks particularly at R. Nahman's move to Uman at the end of his life. Among other reasons, R. Nahman explained his decision to move to this largely maskilic city as relating to his wish to be buried among those martyred in Uman in an earlier pogrom, and through this to "rectify the dead souls." Nir sees in this move R. Nahman's hope not only to rectify the "dead souls" but rather the idea of death itself. See Elchanan Nir, *Yehuda Ba-Laylah (Yediot Sefarim, 2017)*.

complex waters, although he notes that later in his life his family accepted his decision to become Hasidic.

Although R. Nathan is now remembered as the dominant student and scribe of R. Nahman, his path to ascension wasn't simple. Tensions arose soon after he met R. Nahman,⁶ and intensified in the wake of R. Nahman's untimely death in 1810, upon which Bratslav Hasidim were thrown into confusion. Some of R. Nahman's Hasidim followed other Hasidic leaders, and others wanted R. Nathan to become the second *Rebbe* of Bratslav in his own right. Amidst the storm, without a captain, R. Nathan established himself as a sort of speaker for the deceased captain, albeit not a captain in his own right. Jonatan Meir argues that R. Nathan attempted "to formulate a cohesive theology that would bind Bratslav Hasidism into a living movement, [with the hope that this activity would preserve the tradition of his teacher, and perhaps even broaden its influence,] despite its founder's demise."⁷

R. Nathan published books of R. Nahman such as *Sippurei Ma'asiyot* and an expanded version of *Likkutei Moharan*, and wrote books of his own based on R. Nahman's teachings, such as *Likkutei Tefilot* and *Likkutei Halakhot*. However, R. Nathan was insistent that everything he wrote "flowed from the incredibly exalted and awesome source... R. Nahman himself."⁸ R. Nathan's efforts paid off, and the floundering Bratslav movement attracted new, young Hasidim, and was cemented into an established Hasidic community that survived the death of its *Rebbe* and founder. However, R. Nathan's role was definitely in question, and he had to navigate the tension in his identity as he transitioned from student to student-as-teacher. R. Nathan found himself in the challenging position of being stuck between those that wanted him to formally accept the role of *Rebbe* of the Bratslav community, for living Hasidim need a living *Rebbe*, and those that rejected the possibility of any leader taking the mantle from the deceased R. Nahman.

In his tendency to be surrounded by controversy, R. Nathan continued the path of his master, R. Nahman, who was tangled for most of his tragically short life in constant *mahloket*. David Assaf notes that although disputes between Hasidic groups, as well as between Hasidim and Mitnagdim, were common in the nineteenth century, the controversy around Bratslav is notable both for the consistency and intensity of the disputes.⁹ Assaf identifies three major waves of opposition to Bratslav.¹⁰ The first was led by R. Aryeh Leib (1724-1811), better known as the Shpole *Zeide*, whose opposition to R. Nahman was an early motivation for the theologizing of dispute in Bratslav thought. The second wave began in the 1830s, and was spearheaded by R. Moses Tzvi Giterman of Savran. The third was led by the Twersky families, whose Tolne Hasidim were

⁶ Although R. Nathan's status as primary scribe is often thought to have developed naturally, R. Nahman had a scribe before R. Nathan, and Mendel Piekarcz sees in this transition early tensions over the role of R. Nathan in the circle of R. Nahman. See Mendel Piekarcz's *Hasidut Bratslav* (Jerusalem, 1972).

⁷ Jonatan Meir, "R. Nathan Sternhartz's *Liqqutei Tefilot and the Formation of Bratslav Hasidism*," *The Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy*, (2016): 69.

⁸ Sternhartz, *Alim L-trufah*, 22b, letter 45; 100a, letter 230.

⁹ See David Assaf's *Untold Tales of the Hasidim: Crisis and Discontent in the History of Hasidism* (Waltham: Brandeis University Press, 2012), 126.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 126.

particularly violent in their persecution of Bratslavers praying in Uman on Rosh HaShanah. While the persecutions of the third wave were cruel, it was the Savraner's censuring of the Bratslav community still reeling from the death of R. Nahman that was the most aggressive.¹¹ Bratslavers were also targeted by *maskilim*, who created a satirical literature that often critiqued Bratslav.¹²

In the twentieth century, the embattled community faced the same existential threats¹³ as the rest of the Jewish community, but ultimately the Bratslav community survived the harsh years of the Soviet Union and the Holocaust, shifted to Israel, and has since enjoyed an explosion of popularity, thanks both to the *Ba'al Teshuvah* movement and the increasing place of spirituality in the Orthodox communities in America and Israel. Although there has been no Bratslav leader with the caliber or centralized support of a R. Nahman or R. Nathan in centuries, there has been continued communal leadership. Ariel Burger theorizes that the ongoing communal continuity of Bratslav Hasidut is due in part to following the leadership model of R. Nathan: in marrying extreme fidelity to the thought of R. Nahman with creativity and newness, Bratslav leaders succeeded in bringing the *Rebbe*-less community to the twenty-first century.

R. Nathan on Dispute

R. Nathan's considerations of dispute are complex, and are intricately connected both to his understanding of truth and his own life. In a portion of his *Likkutei Halakhot* that is ostensibly on *Hilkhot Ribbit*, R. Nathan dedicates a lengthy analysis to the subject of truth. One

¹¹ The motivations of the Savraner are hard to precisely determine. Zvi Mark utilizes later oral traditions to argue that after the death of the Savraner's first wife, the Savraner wished to marry R. Nahman's daughter, but R. Nathan prevented this from happening. This marriage would have potentially had the effect of folding the Bratslav community into the more mainstream Hasidic community of Savran. See Mark's "Why did the Rav of Savran Pursue the Hasidei Bratslav?" *Sivan* 69 (2004). The ferocity of the anti-Nathan opposition is acknowledged even by Hasidim of other traditions; Dr. Ariel Burger cites the comment of a twentieth century *Rebbe* that "no one experienced such persecution [by other Jews] as King David - and R. (Nathan) of (Bratslav)" (quoted in Burger, "[Hasidic Nonviolence: R. Noson of Bratslav's Hermeneutics of Conflict Transformation](#)," Boston University PhD Diss. (2008): 193). Burger explores this comparison in great depth, and finds particularly ripe meaning in comparing R. Nathan to King David.

¹² [Joseph Perl](#) was one such writer, and wrote a parody of the newly published stories of R. Nahman, adding R. Nahman's "[Tale of the Lost Princess](#)" with a disguisedly mocking "Tale of the Lost Prince." See Jeremy Dauber's "Looking at the Yiddish Landscape: Representation in Nineteenth-Century Hasidic and Maskilic Literature" in Katz, Steven T. *The Shtetl: New Evaluations*. (New York: New York University Press, 2007).

¹³ R. Levi Yitzchak Bender, a 20th century Bratslav leader, says: "There were many moments when the Bratslaver Hasidim thought that our *Rebbe's* way was about to end, God forbid. For example, during the great conflict in the time of R. Nathan. Similarly in the time of R. Nahman of Tulchin, and when the communists took power and announced that anyone caught and identified as a Bratslav Hasid would be sentenced to death, and after the Second World War, when the majority of Bratslaver Hasidim were destroyed, both in Russia and Poland." See R. Levi Yitzchak Bender, *Siah Sarfei Kodesh*, cited in Ariel Burger, note 19.

primary anchor text for R. Nathan's analysis is the midrashic tale that discusses a dispute that occurred between God and the angels about whether man should be created:

R. Simon said: In the time that the Holy One Blessed be He created the first Man, the angels gathered in groups, clusters. Some said "Do not create" and some said "Create." This is what is written (Psalms 85:11), "Charity and Truth meet, Righteousness and Peace kiss." Charity says to create, for he [man] will do kindness. Truth says not to create, for he is entirely falsehoods...What did the Holy One Blessed be He do? He took Truth and cast it to the ground, as it is written (Daniel 8:12), "And truth was cast to the ground." The servicing angels said before the Holy One Blessed be He..."Let truth rise from the earth," as it is written (Psalms 85:12), "Truth from the ground will grow"... R. Huna the *Rabbah* of Tziporen said that as the servicing angels were adjudicating and dealing with each other, the Holy One Blessed be He created him. He said to them, "What are you adjudicating? Man was already created!"¹⁴

R. Nathan displays dazzling intellectual scholarship and creativity in his analysis of this text, and is troubled by the possibility of a clash between the attribute of truth and God. How can God disagree with truth? Is God not true? What does it mean to have a truth separate from God? In considering truth, R. Nathan turns as well to the *gemara's* (*Sanhedrin* 97a) discussion of the troubling future of truth in the (pre-)messianic era:

And the truth will be lacking, as it is stated: "And the truth is lacking [*ne'ederet*], and he who departs from evil is negated" (Isaiah 59:15). What is the meaning of the phrase: And the truth is lacking [*ne'ederet*]? The Sages of the study hall of Rav said: This teaches that truth will become like so many flocks [*adarim*] and walk away. What is the meaning of the phrase: "And he that departs from evil is negated?" The Sages of the study hall of Rabbi Sheila said: "Anyone who deviates from evil is deemed insane by the people."

In this clever reading, the Sages of the school of Rav read *ne'ederet*, which denotes lacking on the simple face of the text, to denote flocks, which has the same *ayin-dalet-reish* root. Within this framework, the truth deficit of the end of days is a breakdown of the singularity of Truth into multiplicity.

In interpreting these provocative texts, R. Nathan distinguishes between two forms (or elements) of truth. One truth is eternal, divine, unified, and objective, the other limited, partial, this-worldly, and subjective. In his words, there are "two types of truth: there is 'truthful Truth,' in which one grasps the matter as it is, and there is another truth, which has intentions in truth, but in which one errs."¹⁵ The limited truth was "cast to the ground" during the episode of the creation of man, and will "walk in flocks" in the pre-messianic era. This is to say that the truth as we perceive it is limited, as "the real Truth is impossible to know," and as such is claimed to be different by many. The issue that arises is when we confuse the two truths, and

¹⁴ *Bereishit Rabbah* 5:5. See also the Mishnah (*Sotah* 9:15), which says "In the *ikveta di-meshiha* insolence will increase... fearers of sin will be despised, and the truth will be lacking..."

¹⁵ *Likkutei Halakhot: Yoreh Deah, Hilkhoh Ribbit* 5:10.

think that the limited, subjective perspective with which we see is the fuller objective Truth¹⁶:

the foundation is that truth shouldn't get in the way of the truthful Truth, because the distance that each one has from the *etzem ha-emet la-amito* is due to truth itself, just as we see that the entire dispute is through truth, that the Mitnagdim say that they have the truth. And so it is in every generation, and especially in the generations that are close to us, as the dispute of the Mitnagdim on the Hasidim... a debate that touched the heart, and many souls were stuck in this, and how many husbands and wives separated due to it, and how many people lost two worlds through this, as is known to those that know that which happened in these generations...

and the foundation of all disputes is through 'truth' itself, because we know that that great 'learners' that argued on the great Hasidim, were also righteous and truthful *tzaddikim*, and their entire debate...was only because of truth, that the great learners said that they have the truth and the great Hasidim are far from truth, because they violate the Torah of truth, just like I personally heard many times from their objections (and particularly from my father-in-law the *Gaon ha-tzaddik Mareinu ha-Rav Dovid Zvi zt"l*, who was a great *tzaddik*, as is known, and disputed the great Hasidim, and all was because of the 'truth' of his)...¹⁷

R. Nathan identifies the cause of the incendiary and damaging conflicts between the Hasidim and Mitnagdim as this misunderstanding of the partiality-in-multiplicity of mundane truth claims. Both groups think themselves to have the Truth, while in reality each has only truth. R. Nathan sees this narrative in the account of the creation of man as well:

And all of this happens because of the argument between the groups of angels, that the attribute of truth itself was against the creation of man... Because even truth itself can't grasp the truth of the essence of God, and the same way that it [truth] can't grasp God's essence, so too it can't grasp the depth of His knowledge, because God and His knowledge are One, and there is the foundation of *emet la-amito*.

But once truth descends from God to the angels, the depth of His knowledge is hidden, because the depth of His knowledge in *emet la-amito* is hidden from all... and only the souls of the true and great *tzaddikim* merit through their actions and worship to grasp the knowledge of God in truth, as is their primary reward.¹⁸

The angelic attribute of truth understood only a portion of the full Truth, and was thus capable of disagreeing with God's decision. In order to avoid the easy error of over-valuing our own truths, R.

¹⁶ I have chosen to capitalize R. Nathan's use of Truth when he refers to what we will come to understand as his "first truth", which is the "truth as it is." It is this singular Truth that R. Nathan identifies with the "truthful truth," the divine truth.

¹⁷ *Likkutei Halakhot: Yoreh Deah- Hilkhoh Ribbit* 5:10.

¹⁸ *Ibid*.

Nathan advises that we too “cast truth to the ground,” and realize the fallibility of what we think of as truth. In a gorgeous hermeneutical move, R. Nathan aligns this with Moses’s breaking of the *lukhot* at Sinai. Facing the betrayal of the Jewish people at a most critical juncture for their relationship with God, truth would seem to dictate that there could be no possibility of return, that God’s anger would overwhelm the nascent nation. At that perilous juncture, Moses threw the apparent truth to the ground, and prayed to God on behalf of His people. In this, Moses was able to connect to the elusive ‘truthful Truth,’ which R. Nathan sees as paradoxically inaccessible and accessible:

And then God taught [Moses] the order of the prayer, and organized before him the thirteen attributes of mercy, and there He revealed to him the ‘truthful Truth’ (*emet la-amito*), that the essence of His Truth is the abundance of mercy and compassion and great is His kindness for eternity, that it never stops, for this is the essence of the Truth, as it says there “God, God, Merciful and Compassionate Lord... and Truth.” The aspect of “merciful and compassionate”... this is the essence of the truth of God, that His mercy never ends, no matter what happens, prayer, pleading, screaming, and supplication will always work. For all this is the opposite of the truth of the angels, who according to their own truths spoke...¹⁹

Faced with some of the vicious internal ideological opposition, R. Nathan chose not to demonize the other, nor to ‘other’ the other. In fitting with his admonitions to his followers not to place his persecutors in *herem*, or to respond with violence to violence, R. Nathan sought to take the high road by transcending dispute.

In order to fully appreciate the uniqueness of R. Nathan’s approach, it is important to consider how his teacher, R. Nahman, related to the controversy surrounding him. In facing the persecutions of the Shpole *Zeide*, R. Nahman equivocated. At times, he talked about the importance of ongoing *mahloket* to motivate growth, likening controversy to water that feeds the tree of growth.²⁰ At others, he seemed mired in self-doubt, indulging in ‘either-or’ considerations of his righteousness.²¹ He saw controversy as ubiquitous to the world and endemic to the reality of the true *tzaddik*, 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.”²² R. Nahman punned on the name of the Shpole *Zeide*, and often

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ [Hayyei Moharan](#) 401: “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 this 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.”

²¹ [Hayyei Moharan](#) 262: “On several occasions he [R. 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.”

²² [Likkutei Moharan](#) 61:5.

discussed what he called *mefursamim shel sheker* or *tzaddikei sheker*, the false leaders who seem righteous to the outside observer.

In his discussions of truth in [Likkutei Moharan](#) 51, R. Nahman also struggles with the relationship between unity and multiplicity, repeating again and again that “in truth all is one,” even among the seeming many-ness of this world. Truth is thought of as being part of an oblitative unity, one in which there is no deviation of time, of space, and of matter, all of which are part of a greater unity. The very perception of difference occurs because of the exile of truth, which results in things seeming different. R. Nathan cites this teaching as an anchor text for his teaching, but is notably different in both form and content. R. Nahman focuses on the unified aspect of Truth, an aspect that is in intimate conversation with the multiplicity it unites, but is a unity nonetheless. This unification is rooted in a pre-creation order of existence, in which there was no discrimination in time, place, or substance, a pre-multiplicity unity that then devolved. In contrast, R. Nathan deigns to focus instead on the fragmented nature of truth, in which there are multiple truths, albeit limited truths.

Broadly, I see three broad deviations in which R. Nathan diverges from R. Nahman: the inaccessibility of Truth, the place of faith, and the singularity of truth. For R. Nathan, the inaccessibility of truth is a fundamental aspect of truth, and the awareness of this is key. R. Nahman has no such emphasis. For R. Nathan, one overcomes the limitations of subjective, fragmented truth and reaches the unity of the full Truth only through radical faith, a faith that God’s mercy overwhelms the indications of His Torah about the many seeming truths of the limits of His mercy. For R. Nahman, truth leads to providence, which leads to the unified truth. And although both R. Nahman and R. Nathan agree that ‘in truth all is one,’ R. Nathan continues to draw complicated webs of association and distinction between different layers and configurations of truth, between objective and subjective truth. In contrast, R. Nahman is consistent in his continued emphasis on the unity of all truth.

Although the full picture of R. Nahman’s perspective is as complex and triple-sided as the man himself, it clearly differs from the understanding presented by R. Nathan, in which there is theological space for the rightness of both sides. In R. Nathan’s challenging web of associations, truth is subjective and limited, multiple and exiled, and can be equally held (although in partiality) by multiple parties of a conflict.²³ However, the time will come in which the underlying unity of all truth will become clear, and until then

²³ In the kabbalistic framework the first Truth parallels the masculine *Tiferet*, and the second truth parallels the feminine *Malkhut*. As *Malkhut* is associated as well with the *Shekhinah*, the feminized aspect of God associated with the Earth, it comes as no surprise that R. Nathan cites the [Zohar](#)’s comment that God is known through the personal ‘evaluations’ that we make of Him. Based off the verse “and her husband is known in the gates,” the *Zohar* creatively utilizes the dual meaning in the word ‘*sha’ar*’, which connotes gate in Hebrew, but evaluation in Aramaic, to creatively state that the ‘husband’, referring to the masculine element of God, *Kudsha Berikh Hu*, is known according to the *sha’ar*, the evaluation, estimation, or perhaps even imagination, of each person. This is to say that God is known in the subjective experience to the degree that one knows Him, the relative quality of one’s God-consciousness. In the *Zohar*’s words: ““and her husband is known in the gates”: This is *Kudsha Berikh Hu*, that He is known and cleaved to each according to the evaluation of the heart, each one as is able to cleave spirit with wisdom. And to the degree to which one evaluates in their heart, so too He will be known

The main thing is to fill the blemish of the moon, which is to connect and unify the sun and moon together, which is to connect the two names, the Tetragrammaton and *Elokim*...to connect the two aspects of truth, which is to elevate and clarify the truth clothed in this world, which is a *behinah* of the light of the point of truth of each person of Israel, which is an aspect of 'window', 'moon', and *malhut*, to connect, attach, and unify with the essence of the light of the Truth, because *in truth of truths all is one... Then the truth will be totally complete.*²⁴

Between R. Nahman and R. Nathan

Rabbi Dr. Alon Goshen-Gottstein and Rabbi Dr. Ariel Burger appreciate this gap between the teacher and student, and consider the disparity through the use of differing intellectual frameworks. Goshen-Gottstein considers R. Nathan's theory of multiplicity of truth as a potential source text for the possibility of interfaith dialogue:

Both R. Nahman and R. Nathan provide us with approaches that can be translated to the concerns of truth and the interreligious situation. For R. Nahman, truth is grounded in the order beyond creation. As such it transcends all multiplicity, including the multiplicity of religions. Where through reflection and mystical experience one can rediscover this higher metaphysical ground is where religions can meet...

R. Nathan offers us another lesson. For R. Nathan, it is not the quest for the highest truth-the Truth beyond- that could provide the formula for interreligious harmony. Rather it is the recognition that truth cannot be attained and that other values are superior to truth-beyond truth. It is God's will that we live in peace and compassion with one another, and focusing on truth ultimately goes against the very foundations that make it possible for humanity to exist, imperfect as it is. God does not will truth, nor can we attain it. God's highest purpose, the ultimate truth, points to compassion and to peace as the guiding values of life, and consequently these should also govern interreligious situations.²⁵

As Goshen-Gottstein is the director of the Elijah Institute, and a leading thinker on the crossroads between Judaism and other religions, the lens through which he views this text is particularly significant. Goshen-Gottstein also sees this piece as a test case for a broader model of R. Nathan's deviations from R. Nahman, which he thinks is largely identified by an increased "emphasis on faith, rather than truth."²⁶

in the heart. And due to this, 'known in the gates' refers to evaluations..."

²⁴ *Likkutei Halakhot: Yoreh Deah- Hilkhoh Ribbit* 5:10. While there is a lot to unpack in this heavy associative web, this short passage gives some of the flavor of Bratslav teachings, which are often highly dynamic, associative, and complex, while simultaneously being affirming and inspiring.

²⁵ Goshen-Gottstein, Alon. "The Truth Beyond and Beyond Truth - Religious Truth in Teachings of the Breslav Tradition and Their Contemporary Interreligious Application." Unpublished.

²⁶ "This move is representative of his position as the disciple who sees himself as secondary to the great master and his direct insights.

Burger looks at this piece not through the lens of interfaith relationships, but that of conflict studies. Burger is an artist, author, and teacher, and received his doctorate on R. Nathan working under Elie Wiesel. Fascinatingly, in that dissertation, Burger looks at R. Nathan's theorizing about truth and conflict as reflective of a Hasidic model of "spiritual non-violent protest." Burger more broadly sees the emphasis in R. Nathan's works to be on *hithazkut*, or encouragement:

An extensive examination of the many examples of R. Nosen's departures from the original lessons in *Likkutei MoHaRaN* reveals a common pattern. The value that informed his presentation of his teacher's thought was compassion. Whereas R. Nachman presented his lessons for people on many spiritual levels, R. Nosen tailors his prayers and commentaries primarily for those in moments of "return," a fallen state, and so he begins with those aspects of R. Nahman's teachings which can most readily be absorbed by one who is in such a state.²⁷

Although Burger identifies in R. Nathan multiple individual approaches to conflict resolution, he sees in R. Nathan's distinction between subjective truth and objective truth, or the 'first truth' and the 'second truth,' a method of conflict resolution that allows space for communal *hithazkut*, encouragement in the direction of their path, while still allowing space for the other. In this, R. Nathan avoids the dangers of triumphalism and ideological over-confidence, and instead invests his *Rebbe's* erstwhile followers with a sense of humble confidence. As a religious model of non-violent conflict resolution, R. Nathan invests theological meaning into the contraction of truth claims and recognition of the broader, unifying, divine Truth. In considering the analyses of Burger and Goshen-Gottstein, I find Hegel's portrayal of the tragic hero to be a meaningful lens through which to better appreciate R. Nahman and R. Nathan.

R. Nathan and R. Nahman as Tragic Heroes

In his *Aesthetics*, George Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770-1831) suggests that the tragic hero is one torn between tension-inducing opposing claims.²⁸ This is a conflict between right and right, moral claims of equal weight, and not between right and wrong. The issue stands in the rigidity and exclusivity of each claim, with neither accepting or limiting their own truth claim to make room for the possibility for the other. For Hegel, the debilitating tension is due to the rigidity and exclusivity of each side:

It is also a position that serves a pedagogical function. It presents a virtue that an entire community can practice, even when they cannot attain the rare heights witnessed in the scriptures, that reflect R. Nahman's own experiences. Thus if R. Nahman's teaching... assumed truth was within reach and that one could somehow attain the pre-created state...this emphasis [of R. Nathan] gives way to the recognition that truth, in its higher sense of ultimate truth, is beyond us." See Goshen-Gottstein, 22.

²⁷ *Burger*, 42-43. Burger turns as well to *Likkutei Moharan* 2:7, which discusses Joshua and *hithazkut*, and notes that this lesson was understood by the students of R. Nahman to be "a form of ordination for R. Nathan, thus formally, though implicitly, charging him with the work of strengthening and encouraging other Jews."

²⁸ G.W.F. Hegel, *Hegel's Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, trans. T. M. Knox. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1975).

Tragedy is the conflict of two substantive positions, each of which is justified, yet each of which is wrong to the extent that it fails to either recognize the validity of the other position or to grant it its moment of truth...²⁹

Thus, for Hegel, the paradigmatic tragedy is Sophocles' *Antigone*, in which Antigone seeks to bury her brother Polynices, whom King Creon, the successor to Polynices' throne, decreed may not be mourned. Antigone is thus torn between the human law of King Creon, and her sense of morality, which demanded a proper burial for her brother. In R. Nathan's life, this tragedy of right vs. right is expressed through the competing claims of Mitnagdim and Hasidim, of R. Nahman and R. Nathan's own family. The issue isn't in the moral ambiguity of rightness, but rather the abundance of rightness, in that all sides that pull at the hero are true and right. But if the Greek tragedy is marked by the fundamental flaws of the operating actors, doomed to live the mercurial decisions of plotting deities, the tragic heroes of Bratslav choose to live differently. Hegel's framework enables us to more vividly portray the broader contours of the difference in persona between teacher and student.

R. Nahman's double-guessing presupposes a singularity of rightness, in which R. Nahman is either completely right or completely wrong, and at no point countenances the possibility of multiple rights. But R. Nahman's double-guessing also indicates a deep humility of position, a humility that allows that perhaps, just perhaps, he may yet be wrong. R. Nathan cuts a stunning contrast in his deep appreciation for the multiplicity of possible rights.

As tragic hero, R. Nahman lives in the tension, lost and found in the constructive power of conflict, but ultimately elevated in the process.³⁰ R. Nathan is a tragic hero in that he is also pulled between right and right, but in contrast to his teacher, R. Nathan chooses to self-contract and "recognize the validity of the other position." R. Nathan resolves the tension between multiple sides in affirming the partiality of his truth claim, which like all truth claims of this world, is lacking, and portrays only a part of the picture. However, R. Nathan then transcends the possibilities considered by Hegel, in rejecting the terms of dispute. Instead of only delimiting his own claim, or dying by force of the tension, he chooses to reshape the discussion, away from truths, all of which are limited and partial, in favor of faith, through which one can possibly come to Truth. Instead of demonizing the other, like R. Nahman, R. Nathan chose instead to broaden the terms of conversation, allowing equal space for the truth claims of Savran and the truth claims of Bratslav to coexist. R. Nathan transcends the tragedy, but R. Nahman lives it.

In dealing with Bratslav Torah, we consider the wishes of R. Nahman, for his *torot* to be translated to practice, to be thought about along with the proper *niggun* and dance. We consider his wish that Torah not remain locked in the intellectual prison of the mind, but reach the heart as well, and therefore consider the human impact of the above set of teachings. In conflicts with others, and the self, it is often much

²⁹ Mark W. Roche, *Introduction to Hegel's Theory of Tragedy*, 12.

³⁰ In Hegel's words (quoted by Roche, 13): "That is the position of heroes in world history generally; through them a new world dawns. This new principle is in contradiction with the previous one, appears as destructive; the heroes appear, therefore, as violent, transgressing laws. Individually, they are vanquished; but this principle persists, if in a different form, and buries the present."

easier to accept the theoretical possibility of duality in narrative from afar. Two hundred years after the conflict, it doesn't take much courage to consider the truth of the Savraner's claims, but within our own conflicts this is often much more challenging. When facing conflicts in the home, in the stunning immediacy of our own relationships, it takes humility and courage to move past a discourse of truth and falsehood, of rightness, to relationships of faith and trust. May we be blessed with the paradoxical faith in our own truths, along with the humility to realize the partiality of our truths, and the possibility of the truths of others, to ultimately make way for the coming of the great peace, one that comes "[not the peace of a cease-fire, not even the vision of the wolf and the lamb, but rather as in the heart when the excitement is over...](#)"³¹

GOD IS OTHER PEOPLE

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In The Zohar, or the Book of Splendor, is named for the inner dimension of reality, which Kabbalah identifies with the divine. The book instructs its readers to encounter this hidden splendor and recognize God in it, a meeting that leads to enlightenment. One of the great contributions of the Zohar is the perception that the divine interpenetrates life itself, including individual people, in their relationships with the world and with others. Contrary to mystical modes of consciousness that seek to break with the world and transcend it, the Zohar proposes a relationship with the divine that connects the earthly and supernal realities. The journey to God, according to the Zohar, passes through interpersonal relationships: from a couple's intimate bond to the mundane interactions between the individual and the community. Much of the book consists of conversations between friends, who encounter the Torah through studying, traveling, and generally spending time together. Quietist outlooks, by which one walls oneself off from the world, are foreign to Judaism – and particularly to the Zohar. The crucial point is that transcendence lies within life, not beyond it.

Shattered Vessels, Broken People

At the end of the *parsha* is the story of the *Akedah* (the binding of Isaac). The Torah does not say why God decides to test Abraham, and both the Midrash and the Zohar attempt to explain what transpired beforehand. The difference between the Midrash's straightforward explanation and the Zohar's esoteric approach can help elucidate the novel message of Kabbalah. Both interpretations explain the test of the *Akedah*, which ultimately brought Abraham closer to God, as a reaction to Abraham refraining from giving something to God and thus damaging his relationship with Him. Consequently, Abraham is tested with the ultimate demand – to give his only son. Let us look over the sources to see how they characterize Abraham's earlier sin and the thing that he refrained from giving.

Here is the Midrash, as quoted by Rashi:

"After these things" ([Genesis 22:1](#)): Some of our sages say ([Sanhedrin 89b](#)) [that it happened] after the words of Satan, who was accusing and saying, "Of every feast that Abraham made, he did not sacrifice before You one bull or one ram!" [God] said to him, "Does he do anything but for his son? Yet, if I were to say to him, 'Sacrifice him before Me,' he would not withhold [him]."

³¹ Yehudah Amichai, "[Wildpeace](#)."

According to the Midrash, Abraham celebrates Isaac's weaning, but does not offer God a sacrifice of thanks. Abraham's sin is forgetting to show gratitude to God. Satan seizes the opportunity and describes the error as the symptom of a rift between Abraham and God, who thus decides to test Abraham with the *Akedah*.

The Zohar has a different interpretation:

Rabbi Shimon opened, saying: Whoever rejoices on the festivals without giving the blessed Holy One His share – that evil-eyed Satan hates him and accuses him and removes him from this world.... The share of the blessed Holy One consists in gladdening the poor as best as one can. For on these days the blessed Holy One comes to see those broken vessels of His. Entering their company and seeing they have nothing to celebrate, He weeps over them – and then ascends to destroy the world! Many members of the Academy come before Him and plead: "Master of the universe! You are called Compassionate and Gracious. May Your compassion be aroused for Your children!" He answers them, "Do not the inhabitants of the world realize that I based the world solely on love? As it is written: I said, 'The world shall be built on love (Psalms 89:3).' By this the world endures." (Zohar, *Hakdamot* 10b)

Later, according to the Zohar, Satan arrives at Abraham's celebratory banquet disguised as a pauper. No one notices him, and he comes before the Lord to denounce Abraham: "Master of the universe, You called Abraham 'My beloved' ([Isaiah 41:8](#))? He held a feast and gave me nothing, and nothing to the poor." Abraham's is a social transgression: he disregards the poor. Unlike the Midrash, which focuses on the direct dialogue between Abraham and his Maker, the Zohar takes in the entire human vista, where the encounter with the infinite God takes place.

Here, the idea of "shattered vessels" is described as the cause of all privation. Prior to it, everything was harmonious, and the vessels received direct divine light; however, a fault in the process of Creation caused the vessels to shatter, and their sparks to be strewn throughout the cosmos (thus turning the entire cosmos into a divine space). Humanity's purpose is to repair the vessels, and to reveal and raise up the sparks. The shattered vessels are people; each contains a lost divine spark. The individual is repaired through contending with human want, which is in fact divine want. The Zohar explains that in giving to the poor one is not merely fulfilling an interpersonal *mitzvah*, but rather giving to God Himself. The human realm and its privations are part and parcel of the divine realm, and Abraham's status as God's beloved thus depends on his treatment of the other, of the poor.

The social implications of the myth of the shattering of the vessels are further elucidated in the thought of one of the preeminent kabbalists of the twentieth century, Rabbi Yehuda Ashlag. To him, the shattering of the vessels is an expression of the damage wrought by an unjust distribution of wealth, a reality that corrupts the world, including the rich. In 1958, then-prime minister David Ben-Gurion wrote to Yehuda Tzvi Brandwein, a close disciple of the rabbi: "[Rabbi Ashlag] asked me on many occasions after the establishment of the state whether we would institute a communist regime." Later, when he learned of the atrocities perpetrated in the Soviet Union, he

became disillusioned with communism and renounced his vision of a just distribution that could be effected through politics.³²

Happiness and Wealth

It is relatively simple to give alms to the poor, but the Zohar's demand extends further: one must bring them joy as well. According to the Zohar's broader definition of social justice, social responsibility is not merely economic; it has to do with human interaction. As Douglas Adams put it in the foreword to *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*:

Most of the people living on [the planet] were unhappy for pretty much all of the time. Many solutions were suggested for this problem, but most of these were largely concerned with the movement of small green pieces of paper, which was odd because on the whole it was not the small green pieces of paper that were unhappy.³³

A similar attitude emerges from the story of Satan disguising himself as a pauper who is ignored at Abraham's party. In addition to railing at the food that he is denied, he fumes at the experience of alienation. The Talmud ([Bava Batra 9b](#)) says that it is preferable to comfort the poor with words than to give them alms.

Sadly, discussions of social justice, even when they stem from good intentions, tend to be reduced to questions of money and budgets, and end with the usual sigh over poverty reports. The question of happiness is missing from the economic equations, seemingly highlighting one of the great gaps in the communist idea: that in addition to a redistribution of wealth, there must be a redistribution of happiness. Even some immensely wealthy people are profoundly unhappy, shattered vessels that must be repaired. To paraphrase the popular Israeli singer Muki, "Everybody talks about money, nobody talks about happiness." A correct social outlook should seek a way to make all human resources, physical and spiritual alike, available throughout society. Spiritual resources in this context are intimacy with other people, inclusion of the other, happiness, responsibility, giving, and spiritual aspirations.

The key to happiness lies not only with heaven; we must not forget that we are responsible for the world. The verse "The world shall be built on love" is generally interpreted as a request that we make of God, but the Zohar interprets it as a statement about human responsibility. The existence of the world depends on us, on the kindness and compassion that we show to one another. Divine reality, the Zohar reminds us, is constructed by man.

Hospitality and God

Before the Torah tells of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, it relates the following:

Abraham shall surely become a great and mighty nation, and all the nations of the earth shall be blessed in him. For I have known him, to the end that he may command his children and his household after him, that they may keep the way of the Lord, to do righteousness and justice. ([Genesis 18:18–19](#))

³² Micha Odenheimer, "Latter-day Luminary," *Haaretz*, December 16, 2004, <https://www.haaretz.com/latter-day-luminary-1.144149>.

³³ Douglas Adams, *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* (London: Pan Macmillan, 2009), 8.

God chooses Abraham because he believes in his ability to raise his progeny in the way of the Lord, the way of righteousness and justice. But Abraham's message to the world is that the benefits of righteousness and justice should extend to the other as well – not only to one's family and friends. The novelty of that message is driven home by the context: the verse appears just before the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, and serves as an introduction of sorts to that episode. True to form, Abraham tries to convince God to commute the sentence ([18:23–25](#)): "And Abraham drew near, and said: 'Wilt Thou indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked?...shall not the judge of all the earth do justly?'" In his outcry, Abraham emphasizes that righteousness and justice are God's paths, in which he, Abraham, treads and which he perpetuates in the world.

Abraham's conception of the other stands in stark contrast to the prevailing attitudes in Sodom. In an earlier episode ([14:21](#)), the king of Sodom makes a proposal to Abraham that at first blush seems admirable: "And the king of Sodom said unto Abram: 'Give me the persons, and take the goods to thyself.'" Ostensibly, he is a wonderful leader, ceding the money because people are more important. But his true meaning is deeply sinister: he does not consider himself responsible for non-citizens of Sodom, who, like Lot's guests, are fair game for unthinkable savagery. The *Beit HaLevi* contrasts Lot's hospitality with that practiced by Abraham. Lot, he writes, is prepared to forfeit his life for his guests, but only because he knows they are messengers of God. But Abraham is unaware of their identity; he is under the impression that they are wayfarers, and yet his tent remains open to them. Food is served, water is proffered to the parched vagabonds to drink and to wash their feet, and a true encounter ensues.

The Talmud ([Shabbat 127a](#)) makes the astounding assertion that "hospitality to wayfarers is greater than welcoming the presence of the *Shekhina*" – the human is placed above the divine. The Zohar teaches us that hospitality is itself a welcoming of the *Shekhina*.

Abraham's turn toward the radically other resonates in the modern philosophies of Martin Buber and Emmanuel Levinas. Buber's dialogic approach is founded on "I-thou," rather than "I-it," relations. I-thou relations facilitate a genuine connection between people based on the understanding that it is only through the other that one is constructed as a spiritual personality. Buber's insight was sown by tragedy. At the turn of the twentieth century, he was engaged in the study – both academic and practical – of Eastern religions. One day, while Buber was meditating, one of his students approached and asked to speak to him. Buber ignored the student. On the next day, he learned that the man had taken his own life. Buber, who blamed the student's death on his own aloofness and excessive pursuit of detachment from the world, decided to change, and began to develop his dialogic philosophy.

Levinas, a French-Jewish philosopher, sought to gaze into the face of the other and through it find himself. According to him, God is the "ultimate other," that which is diametrically opposed to myself. The individual's task is to open up to the human infinity before him.

The philosophy of Levinas is especially germane to the Israeli experience. The Israeli "other" is anyone who is not "us," who does not look like "us" or speak "our" language. A glance at those who reside in Israel's "backyard" is enough to drive home the extent of the country's tribalism and social alienation. Our approach to other religions and nations outside Israel is equally lacking. The true challenge of our time is to look kindly upon those others who are lost in the Israeli public space.

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