

Conclusion: Universalist Particularism

"The way that leads to God therefore leads *ipso facto* -- and not in addition -- to man; and the way that leads to man draws us back to ritual discipline and self-education. Its greatness lies in its daily regularity. Here is a passage in which three opinions are given: the second indicates the way in which the first is true, and the third indicates the practical conditions of the second. Ben Zoma said: 'I have found a verse that contains the whole of the Torah: "Listen o Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is One".' Ben Nanus said: 'I have found a verse that contains the whole of the Torah: "You will love your neighbor as yourself".' Ben Pazi said: 'I have found a verse that contains the whole of the Torah: "You will sacrifice a lamb in the morning and another at dusk".' And Rabbi, their master, stood up and decided: 'The law is according to Ben Pazi.

The law is effort. The daily fidelity to the ritual gesture demands a courage that is calmer, nobler and greater than that of the warrior. We know the prophecy of Israel made by Balaam: 'See! this people rises up like a leopard, it stands up like a lion'. The talmudist does not hesitate to link this royal awakening to the sovereign power of a people capable of daily ritual. The shudder of the leopard rising, but not rising under the yoke. The law for the Jew is never a yoke. It carries its own joy, which nourishes a religious life and the whole of Jewish mysticism."

-- Emmanuel Levinas
(Levinas 1990: 18-19)

As described in this thesis, the learning process among Breslov involves a doing of particular practices such as textual study, storytelling, singing, praying, and making pilgrimage. These practices lead a community of learners to a greater realization of their interrelatedness and interconnectedness. The statement "Do and you will understand." is the key to making sense of the universal meaningfulness behind this particularism. In the above quote, Levinas shows how the universalist particularism of orthodox practice -- which holds the ideals of faith in the oneness of God and the will to love your neighbor as your self -- is expressed through specific detailed ritual actions and adherence to the law. In accordance with Jewish tradition and this research, a community such as Breslov, continually cultivate, realize, and affirm for themselves the truth of one

God and the lived experience of "love your neighbor as your self" through their ritual observance of the 613 *mitzvot* [commandments]. Based on my fieldwork in Israel, I came to understand the goal of the Breslov learning path in terms of a commitment to work toward living in a communal state of pure relation with God and others within the particular context and parameters of Halachic Judaism.

People and their lived cultural reality are easily misunderstood from the perspective outside of their particular context and pragmatic parameters. An outsider does not have to become one of these people to understand them. He also does not have to know, believe, or understand all the dogmas of this particular group in order to feel and experience the meaningfulness of their way of life. However, the outsider does have to do what the insider does in order to really see the human familiarity of the other's seemingly alien, insane, irrational actions. I believe this to be true down to the subtlest dimensions of any cross-cultural or multi-cultural encounter between humans.

The insiders of any group have a similar responsibility to the outsiders if they want to be welcoming to the outsider at all. They must help the outsider to feel understood and recognized if they want him to be attracted to their center. However, when approached by outsiders, these Breslov are not obliged to change or compromise their rigorous adherence to the law. They are a community willing to teach their truth and share their world under the terms and conditions of Halacha. When *baalei tshuvah* come to the Breslov, they should know that the universal truth to be taught is through their particularism. If you want to learn you don't have to be different than who you are, but you do have to change your actions in order to come closer to their center. The learning process is not about losing identity, not about brainwashing, but about doing.

Rebbe Nachman has a story called "the Turkey Prince" that demonstrates the transformative process that happens when a person moves from the secular outside toward living the orthodox life of the Breslov:

"A royal prince once became mad and thought that he was a turkey. He felt compelled to sit naked under the table, pecking at bones and pieces of bread like a turkey. The royal physician all gave up hope of ever curing him of this madness, and the king suffered tremendous grief.

A sage then came and said, "I will undertake to cure him."

The sage undressed and sat naked under the table next to the prince, picking crumbs and bones. "Who are you?" asked the prince. "What are you doing here?"

"And you?" replied the sage. "What are you doing here?"

"I am a turkey," said the prince.

"I am also a turkey," answered the sage.

They sat together like this for some time, until they became good friends. One day, the sage signaled the king's servants to throw him shirts. He said to the prince, "What makes you think that a turkey can't wear a shirt? You can wear a shirt and still be a turkey." With that, the two of them put on shirts.

After a while, he signaled them again, and they threw him a pair of pants. Just as before, he said, "What makes you think that you can't be a turkey if you wear pants?"

The sage continued in this manner until they were both completely dressed. Then he signaled again, and they were given regular food from the table. Again the sage said, "What makes you think that you will stop being a turkey if you eat good food? You can eat whatever you want and still be a turkey!" They both ate the food.

Finally, the sage said, "What makes you think a turkey must sit under the table? Even a turkey can sit at the table."

The sage continued in this manner until the prince was completely cured."

(trs. Kaplan 1983 : 479-480)

This story suggests that the learning process is a healing one which involves transformation of consciousness through a change in how the turkey prince acts and not who he fundamentally is. The learning relationship that the prince and the sage develop demonstrates how a student and teacher are engaged in a kind of life dance. The two men are not just exchanging ideas. They are living together and doing the same things as each other and yet at the same

time, the sage is influencing the prince to change. It may be difficult to see the mutual free-willingness of their relationship but its important to understand.

The sage says, "What makes you think that you will stop being a turkey if you eat good food? You can eat whatever you want and still be a turkey!" and thus offers a challenge to the prince that the prince does not have to accept. It is the same as when Baruch said to me in Uman, "Its ok for you to feel that you can't live the life I'm leading. You can feel that its impossible for you right now to feel the truth of my way of life. But you cannot say that the reason is because my way isn't true. You are responsible for the distance you keep."

When an outsider takes responsibility for the distance he keeps and based on that responsibility accepts the challenge to come closer to the Breslov in a respectful way, he will discover some counter-intuitive insights into the way they live their life. As I have demonstrated through the chapters "Paradigmatic Relationships", "My Teacher Told Me Stories", "The Rebbe's Nigun", "Clapping, Sighing, and Weeping", and "Pilgrimage: Uman Uman Rosh HaShanah!", their way is not the dogmatically ideological and black and white way it appears to be from the outside.

In "Paradigmatic Relationships" I show how the practice of studying Torah is a process of turning to the text as Thou. Torah learning is cyclical and leads to a stronger sense of connection to the ancestors of that holy text, and thus a stronger sense of collective memory and collectivity with those who are engaged in studying the same text. The chapter on storytelling then showed how the Breslov use one such text (*Sipporey Meisios*) not only to form a stronger collectivity but also to guide individual seekers. The guidance offered through telling these tales works to lead newcomers and veterans through the mazes and pitfalls involved in doing *tshuvah* and walking the Halachic spiritual path.

The chapters on song and prayer elucidate the dynamic and dramatic performative aspects of ritual which go beyond the symbolism of the text to a wider liturgical field. The nigun is a Jewish way to wordlessly pray, while Hitbodedut is a Jewish way to be alone with God outside of the prayer book. In both, I explored the relationship between individual and community prayer and the tension involved between the need for self-expression or private experience and the needs of the group. That tension is one of the forces that contribute to the dramatic quality of their religious rituals and one that energizes their daily practice.

The chapter on pilgrimage was an experimental way of demonstrating the realization of "do and you will understand". The journal entries communicate some of the more communitas-like dimensions of the journey to Uman. People told each other their stories and spoke with each other as comrades even if they didn't know each other. When the old rabbi sitting next to me on the bus to Uman rested his head on my shoulder while taking a nap, I couldn't help but notice the anti-structural quality of such a scene. I left the two days spent in prayer during the actual Rosh HaShanah silent, empty, without analysis, and unaccounted for. What can I say? I was praying.

I can say though, that through participant observation among Breslov, I have come to understand the entire learning process among them as a mental, spiritual, emotional, and physical pilgrimage toward a Judaic center. These Hasidim had God and Torah and the people of Israel at their center, but the living center was their Rebbe. The Breslov are Rebbe Nachman's Hasidim, and he is for them, a *Nachal Novea M'kor Chochma* [gushing stream, source of wisdom].

To get closer to Breslov is to mentally, spiritually, emotionally and physically get closer to their Rebbe. "The true community" writes Martin Buber, "does not arise through peoples having feelings for one another (though indeed

not without it), but through, first, their taking their stand in living mutual relation with a living Centre, and, second, their being in living mutual relation with one another. The second has its source in the first, but is not given when the first alone is given. Living mutual relation includes feelings, but does not originate with them. The community is built up out of living mutual relation, but the builder is the living effective Centre. (Buber 1958: 45)" Relating with Breslov is relating with this living effective center of their community

Rebbe Nachman himself describes the particular dimensions of that center and the one living in the middle of it. With the following words of the Rebbe, I conclude. They come from one of his stories called "the Humble King". They were the first of his words I had ever read. I had never heard of Rebbe Nachman before and I had no idea a community of his Hasidim still existed:

"At the center of all the countries of the world there stands a certain country. That country includes all other countries within it. Within that country there is one city, and that city contains within it all the cities of all the countries of the world. Within that city there is a single house that contains within it all the houses of all the cities of all the countries in the world. Within that house there lives one man, and he contains within himself all the people in all the houses of all the cities in all the countries in the world. And that man laughs at the entire world."

(trs. Green 1992: xiv)

Do you trust that laughter? I mean, is it possible for a rational being to have faith in the wisdom of that kind of center and the one laughing from within it. Can you hear the joy in that laughter? I mean, is it possible to understand how this laughter is not a mocking laughter but a healing one. This thesis argues, "do and you will understand." In other words, hearing and appreciating the joy in that laughter comes through the learning process of *tshuvah* which requires learning through doing and coming to faith through practice. When Baruch said, "you are responsible for the distance you keep," I think he was saying that if you

are not willing or able to live his way of life, don't judge it or think that you can say what it is. If you are willing however, there is a space for you -- *even today, if you but heed His call .**

* A reference to psalm 95, verse 7: "For He is our God and we can be the flock of His pastures, and the sheep in His charge -- even today, if we but heed His call."