

## **The Practice of Breslov Chassidus - Rabbi Dovid Sears**

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### **The Practice of Breslov Chassidus**

Rebbe Nachman clearly states that his teachings are intended not only for b'nei aliyah, those of the highest spiritual accomplishments, but for everyone, even if you find yourself down in the trenches battling the Evil Inclination - even if you think you lost the battle long ago. This being the case, how can the non-tzaddik or average person relate to Rebbe Nachman's lofty teachings and actually apply them to everyday life? In other words, how does Breslov Chassidus "work"?

Several attempts have been made to present the Breslov path as a formal dogma and a prescription of specific spiritual practices in order to simplify what at first glance may seem to be a highly esoteric literature. First among these attempts were Reb Yitzchak Breiter's *Seder HaYom* and *Sheva Amudim* (translated into English as: *A Day in the Life of a Breslover Chassid* and *Seven Pillars of Faith*), written in Poland before the Holocaust. More recently, Rabbi Chaim Kramer wrote *Crossing the Narrow Bridge*, using Rabbi Breiter's works as points of departure and expanding upon them. These important books have reached many people who otherwise might not have discovered Breslov Chassidus.

However, neither Rabbi Breiter nor Rabbi Kramer would wish to limit Rebbe Nachman's awesome and wondrous path to an inventory of beliefs and practices, however skillfully presented. With all the benefits these books afford, they remain introductory works that were never meant to eclipse the core of Rebbe Nachman's teachings, his *Likutey Moharan*. Studying, practicing, and learning to

see the world through the teachings of *Likutey Moharan* is how Breslov Chassidus works.

### **What is Likutey Moharan?**

There is no polite, diplomatic way to say it: *Likutey Moharan* is simply incomparable to anything else in Chassidic literature -- or, for that matter, any literature. It is neither a textbook nor a commentary, but a revelatory work. The discourses or lessons (which Breslov Chassidim call "Torahs") contain Rebbe Nachman's perceptions of the essence of reality, garbed in lower levels of wisdom and packaged in a way that will enable the worthy student to gain access to these perceptions in a manner appropriate to the student's capacity and spiritual level. Thus, each discourse is a complete path, tailor-made to every student in every moment, in a manner we cannot begin to fathom.

The main prerequisite to the study of *Likutey Moharan* is that the student must be willing to put aside his or her own preconceptions and believe in the truth and holiness of the path of the teacher: Rebbe Nachman.

Again, one may ask. "How?"

Rebbe Nachman passed away at the age of thirty-eight in the Ukrainian city of Uman in 1810. How can you have a teacher who is no longer living as a physical presence in the world?

In fact, this question and answer are not unique to Breslover Chassidus. The Sages of the Talmud teach us that by studying the teachings of a tzaddik, "his lips

murmur in the grave." Through contemplating the works of a tzaddik -- any tzaddik -- one establishes a spiritual bond with him that transcends the limits of this world. They also observe, "The tzaddikim are even greater after death than in their physical lifetime." Similarly, the *Zohar* states, "The tzaddikin who have died are present in this world to a greater extent than when they were alive."

This means that though his writings it is possible for Rebbe Nachman to teach those living in the world today, just as he taught his disciples in the villages of Ukraine during his physical lifetime. If approached in the proper way, the Torah discourse becomes a "merkavah," a spiritual vehicle to lift us up from the dust of this world and initiate us into an experience beyond words: the lucid perception of Godliness that Rebbe Nachman wishes to share.

### **How to Study Likutey Moharan**

It must be acknowledged that many of Rebbe Nachman's lessons are quite opaque. To even begin to get a handle on what is being said, one must study the relevant sections of Reb Noson's *Likutey Halakhos*, as well as the primary Breslov commentaries such as *Parpara'os L'Chokhmah* and *Bi'ur HaLikkutim*, etc., until the text becomes more clear. One must study a given Torah discourse again and again, reflecting on its possible meanings, becoming attuned to its nuances, and hearing its "music." Rebbe Nachman recommends that we choose a single Torah and "live with it" for several months, until we are ready to move on to the next lesson.

At the same time, one must engage in the practices discussed in a given Torah in order to understand its words. For example, in *Likutey Moharan* II, 4, Rebbe Nachman discusses the cosmic effect of breaking our innate cruelty and selfishness, and giving *tzedakah* (charity). By actually giving *tzedakah* in this

way, as the Rebbe recommends, we become powerfully connected to what the Rebbe is saying; thus, we create vessels with which to receive deeper levels of insight into the Rebbe's discourse.

Another principle found in the Breslov oral tradition is that each Torah contains the necessary *segulos*, the intrinsic spiritual properties, to impart the higher perceptions it discusses. This principle teaches the student to be attentive to what the Torah says and what it does not say, as well as to heed carefully its practical advice. Every facet of the discourse is perfectly fashioned to accomplish its purpose.

This reflects Rebbe Nachman's statement, "My Torahs are made entirely of *hakdamos* (introductions and prefaces)." Everything is connected to everything else, in an integrated whole. It follows that each part ultimately must be understood in terms of the whole - and each instruction must be followed to reach the goal.

### **Living the Teachings**

Thus, we see that the study of *Likutey Moharan* is not merely an intellectual process, but a means of spiritual transformation. In addition to textual study and engaging in the requisite practices, we begin to see the world in a different way. We begin to live with *Hashgachah Pratis* (Divine Providence), using the Torah discourse as a lens through which to perceive the hidden messages God constantly sends us.

This often may take rather dramatic forms. Therefore, it is useful to keep a daily journal of "meaningful coincidences" and how they relate to the Torah we are

studying and our reflections on its meanings. This synchronicity can manifest itself in such an encompassing manner that the world we experience seems to become a commentary on the Torah discourse and not the other way around.

Another essential part of studying *Likutey Moharan* is to engage in *hisbodedus* -- spontaneous meditation and prayer, preferably at night in a quiet, natural setting. We should devote this special hour to contemplating the discourse with which we are presently occupied, reflecting upon how it relates to the events of the previous day and praying in our own words for illumination and guidance.

Becoming skillful in this process is one of the main purposes of an authentic student-teacher relationship. For nearly two decades I have witnessed how my personal teacher HaRav Elazar Mordechai Kenig, *shlita*, of Tzefat, Israel, impeccably exemplifies living with the lessons in *Likutey Moharan*. Whatever happens to him reflects the Torah in which he is immersed. The *chiddushim* (original teachings) he conceives spring forth from the discourse, and the "meaningful coincidences" one observes in his presence are nothing short of astounding. I have heard Breslover Chassidim speak in similar terms of other venerated teachers.

Reb Noson states emphatically that it is not enough to study texts and interpret them according to your own understanding. You must search for a more advanced *talmid* (follower of Rebbe Nachman), rooted in the Breslov *mesorah*, who can serve as a living spiritual advisor. However, finding a qualified teacher with whom you can develop a rapport may prove to be quite a challenge, especially if you do not live in Israel, near the centers of today's Breslov community. Nevertheless, this difficulty should not prevent the beginner from embarking on the path. The *Mishnah* states, "Appoint for yourself a teacher, and acquire for yourself a comrade..." Even while you are still searching for a teacher,

at least find a study partner, and pray to be privileged to find the right teacher. And if a study partner is hard to find -- practice *hisbodedus* for that too!

"Whoever wishes to follow the spiritual path must remember this well," Rebbe Nachman declares. "Encourage yourself, do the best you can to serve God, and rest assured that sooner or later, after however many days or years, with God's help you surely will enter the Gates of Holiness."

If we are determined, we will succeed, no matter what our past failings may have been, for this is what God truly desires. "Ultimately everything will be transformed to the good."