

## Quantum Hassidut : Hitbodedut in a Quantum key

Of the Hassidic Masters, none more than Rabbi Nachman of Bratzlav stand out as iconic for daring innovations in avodas Hashem. Much has already been written in English regarding his life and works and the Breslov Research Center headed by Reb Chaim Kramer has now some 70 volumes on the philosophy and path of Breslov. Likutei Mehoran, his seminal life's work and his Sippurei Maasiyot, his "tales", have moved the trajectory of Jewish thought to a radically new thinking about the human/divine relationship. Of all the Breslov practices however, Rabbeinu's method of Hitbodedut, or dialogic meditation, seems the most challenging and rewarding.

Rebbe Nachman told his leading disciple, Reb Noson, that *hitbodedut* should be practiced in a simple, straightforward manner, as if he were conversing with a close friend. He also advised:

**"It is very good to pour out your thoughts before God like a child pleading before his father. God calls us His children, as it is written (Deuteronomy 14:1), "You are children to God." Therefore, it is good to express your thoughts and troubles to God like a child complaining and pestering his father."**<sup>1</sup>

By way of praxis Breslovers follow Rabbeinu's method of daily setting time aside for this dialogic meditation, however, I would like to suggest that we need to stretch the current practice parameters in order to fully express Rabbeinu's understanding of the human/divine interaction in Hitbodedut. Whereas the received canon of Breslov literature emphasizes the discursive aspect of the divine/human dialogue, I feel insufficient emphasis has been placed on the silent meditative practices and little or no mention of the role of the niggun or melody in this context. Below I will attempt to articulate a theoretical basis for the incorporation of such practice into hitbodedut, based on Torah 49 and 64.

Let us begin with a modified translation of Torah 64, provided by Rav Avraham Greenbaum.

**"God created the world out of love – in order to reveal His love – for without the creation, to whom would He show His love? Accordingly He brought about the entire creation from the beginning of the highest spiritual world of Atzilut down to the end of the center point of the material world, all in order to manifest His love.**

Rabbeinu begins his treatise with the notion that creation is itself an act of compassion (*rachmonus*) on the part of the creator. Rabbeinu is mirroring midrashic/Kabbalistic traditions which base this understanding on the verse "*Olam Chesed Yibaneh*" the "world was built on compassion" (Psalm 89:3). Elsewhere in Likutei Mehoran, Rabbi Nachman affirms compassion as fundamental to the very nature of creation. Commenting on the verse in Deuteronomy 30:11 "*For this commandment which I command thee this day, it is not too hard for thee, neither is it far off*" Rabbeinu takes the verse as meaning that compassion as omnipresent, accessible as well as visible to all. (L.M.105). Similarly, the world is described by Rabbi Nachman as full of compassion, just as God is all-compassionate so must we emulate Him in all our dealings. (L.M. II:49). The association of compassion and creation is thus well established in the thought of Rabbi Nachman. That divine compassion is the purpose of all of creation allows us to consider the relevance of compassion to an all-encompassing view of the goal of Judaism and the

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<sup>1</sup> Likutei Mehoran I: 52, 108, 156, 259. II: 25, 93, 95-99, 100-101

purpose of life. It is no longer merely one of many character assets to pursue in the religious evolution of the individual (as seen for example in the Mussar movement) but in his writings it becomes a key element of the evolution of human/divine consciousness. It thus must also take central place in his practice of Hitbodedut, i.e a compassionate awareness of the self as well as the divine in the dialogic process.

Rabbi Nachman then digresses to show the creative process unfolding from the infinite pleroma prior to creation in order to situate this compassion in the sequential order of events. This will be crucial to his argument as to where philosophical problems and so-called “heresies” originate.

**When God wanted to create the world, there was no place to create it because everything was infinite. He therefore “contracted” the infinite light to the sides. As a result of this contraction, an empty void was formed within which time and space – the finite world – were created, as explained at the beginning of the Eitz Chaim of the ARI.**

In this spiritual vacuum there is an apparent absence of the Divine and therefore of even divine speech, and existence, even of God, *kivyachol*! The ARI HaKadosh suggests that the light of the infinite was removed to the “sides” of a circle leaving the absence of light in the center known by the technical term *chalal hapanui* or empty void:

**This empty void was essential for the creation of the world, because without it there would have been no place to create the world. However, it is impossible to grasp or understand the “contraction” that brought about the empty void. This will only be possible in the future. For we have to postulate two opposites: existence and nothingness.**

This paradox is essential to understand Rabbeinu. He refuses the luxury of choosing between either the presence of divine light (for how could there be any place in the universe devoid of God! Even here!) and the apparent absence of light by virtue of God’s withdrawal. He insists on two contradictory postulates equally true to lie side by side, which goes against Aristotelian logic and all other western ideas of logic. Different masters Hassidic (CHABAD) as well as the Vilna Gaon and his disciples (especially R. Menachem Mendel of Shkopf) have all grappled with this theological paradox. It becomes philosophically significant for understanding theodicy and the problem of evil and free will, as to whether God is present and thereby tolerating evil, or absent and thus “allowing the world to go on its own way.

In a sudden and dramatic turn Rabbeinu now addresses the origins of philosophical inquiry. Always warning his followers to be wary of speculative texts within tradition that appear overly intellectual and devoid of faith based non-rational thought, he now turns to those very areas of inquiry. He distinguishes between two types of inquiry (heresy), the first, which can be answered rationally and the second which has no possible response.

**And know that there are two kinds of “apikorsus” or heresy/atheism. There is the kind of unbelief that arises out of alien systems of wisdom, of which it says, “Know what to answer the non-believer” (Avot 2:14). For there is an answer to this kind of unbelief since it derives from alien wisdoms that**

**arose out of the superfluities caused by the “breaking of the vessels”. A person who has fallen to this kind of unbelief should certainly flee and make every effort to escape, and indeed if he does seek out God he will find a way to be saved. For since these wisdoms derive from the breaking of the vessels, various holy sparks and letters broke and fell there, and he may therefore find Godly intelligence there in order to resolve the challenges posed by the kind of unbelief that derives from alien wisdoms.**

The heresies Rabbeinu is speaking about occur in each of us. They plague us precisely because the opposite of faith is doubt. Rabbeinu insists on discussing doubt and making it of central theological concern. Since language, speech and dialectics all stem from the world and creation there are heresies and disbeliefs that are subject to speech and language responses. In this first type of heresy there is a “return” to faith possible, since speech and thus fallen “sparks” of the divine reside there. Based on the Kabbalistic notion that the world was created through ten “divine utterances” therefore everything in the real world has a source in creation, even heresy! There is an escape by the response to the heresy that will make sense rationally to the heretic. The presence of the divine is seen by the presence of human speech since the only communication that occurred between the human and the divine was Lashon Hakodesh, or Holy speech. The very use of speech implies the presence of the divine. Just like the sparks are a metaphor for divine light, so speech is a metaphor for divine language or letters. The fragmentation of the divine in the “breaking of the vessels” is the scattering of divine letters and thus speech. Recovery is possible precisely because of the presence of speech per se, however, heresy implies the lack of holy sequence. In recovery of holy faith the sequence of letters to form holy speech must be recovered. Rabbeinu claims this is possible by “*da ma shetashuv*”—that is, by the engagement in debate in a knowing fashion, in a dialectic in which one is prepared to answer the heretic.

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

Rabbeinu suggests there are two types of speech. Each posits philosophical questions however the first can be answered rationally, meaning within the confines of logical inquiry one can make a rational argument in favor of faith. The second type of speech projects beyond itself into areas of philosophical inquiry that test the very limits of philosophy, i.e. that have no logical answer possible. No recovery of faith is possible with this type of questioning thus allowing the human being to “fall” into the vacated space of lack of speech response and thus faith.

In the vacated space of the chalal hapanui there is no speech because the divine has absented itself and withdrawn in order to allow creation and speech to exist. In this space there is no hope for recovery of the divine presence through speech and language, there is no thinking in linguistic structures and thus no hope to recover from the heresy emanating from the vacated space. The absence of the divine in this space has no way to be articulated in language.

In the manuscript version of Lesson 64 Rabbeinu suggests an example of such philosophical questions as the apparent eternity of the universe vs. creation. This type of philosophical question arises from the vacated space and has no answer. Once one falls into this philosophical vacuum there is no speech and thus no response to such questions of faith. In this vacated space of the *chalal hapanui* there is only silence and God's absence.

Rabbeinu says, **"The ultimate truth is that His Godliness must be present there, but it is impossible to grasp this or find God there,"** thereby demanding a paradoxical faith, not a simple faith. Complete faith means a faith that can believe in the divine in the presence of His absence. How does one achieve such a faith? Any inkling of the divine presence within the worlds is fraught with the heresies that can still be answered with speech. However the heresy that arises from the vacated space has no discursive response and requires a faith that the divine is somehow even present there. We must find the faith and belief in the light of the divine surrounding the vacated space. Though we have no experience of its existence (since by definition it is transcendent), the Jew believes that the surrounding light of the divine surrounds **even** the vacated space of His absence., He or she believes paradoxically that all the philosophical and existential problems of faith and theodicy are also grounded in the divine and will therefore ultimately have a rationale, even though God is apparently absent in the interstitial space between the surrounding **sovev** light and the immanent **memale** light.

More significant an example Rabbeinu brings is the issue of theodicy, or the suffering of the righteous. Moses asks God about Rabbi Akiva's reward, (Menachot 29b) and when shown his flesh being sold in the market place, questions divine justice: "Is the Torah and is this its reward?" Moses exclaims, and divine voice responds: "Be silent! Such is My decree! (Lit. thus arose in My thought)". The Talmud means to imply that one cannot argue with a divine decree, however Rabbeinu makes use of this Aggadah for the purposes of demonstrating that the *zaddik* Moses, will be unable to reason nor find a satisfactory answer for the reward for Rabbi Akiva's life of devotion to Torah being such an ignominious death. God instructs Moses in how to deal with such questions through "*shtika*" silence. God is telling him that there is no possible answer that might satisfy his question since his very question comes from the vacated space prior to creation. This silence is the only response to the theodicy questions of the suffering of righteous, because there is no language to convey the response to such questions that arise from the vacated space. Silence then is an appropriate response that hierarchically follows the first type of response, that of speech, which contains answers to questions arising from within creation. Silence refers to the only satisfactory response to questions that preceded creation, such as the problem of evil.

Silence implies a lack of understanding of God's ways which becomes an integral part of paradoxical faith. However this also implies an acceptance of a split within the divine, a split exposed by the presence of the vacuum and thus a fracture intrinsic to the divine. Whereas the CHABAD masters discuss the *memale* and *sovev* light at length, I know of none that make use of the split between the two types of divine light as a theological tool in *Avodas Hashem*, that is an integral part of the crisis of being human and an apparent lack of access to the divine precisely because of that split.

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

The method of Rabbeinu follows the avodah or directed path of spirituality to cross over this vacuum to access the divine that surrounds the vacated space, to somehow hold the paradoxical space between knowledge and ignorance of the divine workings in creation. Rabbeinu teaches us the path to make this fraught journey to move beyond the silence of no-knowledge. The Jewish people are able to transcend philosophical dilemmas with faith precisely because they realize the two-step process of:

1. The impossibility of discursive philosophical speculation to solve the problem of theodicy
2. The path of faith will allow them to cross the vacated philosophical space to access the surrounding sovev light of divine presence, albeit not in a rational way.. Faith is not simply a belief in the presence of the surrounding divine light, nor a negation of rational discursive philosophical thought, rather it is being present to the fullest expression of divine being which means being present to the fractured divine self. Holding the paradox of a split within the divine radically alters one's experience of the world created by such a divine as well. It is being present to the unsolvable paradox that lies at the heart of creation. Being present to the divine, which transcends the intellect and rational thought in the present, forces one to ground one's faith in a reality that transcends paradoxes as well as discursive speech and thought. It is a faith in the unexperienced surrounding light, which we believe surrounds the very vacated space of our "heretical" though understandable doubts.

The absence of cognitive discursive answers to questions of faith and theodicy, coming as they do from the vacated space give no relief to the seeker of rational theological responses to his search. Questions of God's goodness, especially in our post-Holocaust era, which should plague every thinking and davening Jew in his relationship to the divine, come from this lacuna in creation, this vacuum, are not answered, yet the power of the zaddik to give us the ability to hold the answers in abeyance while history progresses to the ultimate messianic era, is done without the semantic and rational mind. It comes from a compassion for creation, grounded in the very compassion by which the world was founded.

The question however persists: How are we to attain this faith that is beyond thought, beyond logic and beyond words? For Rav Alon Goshen Gottstein, there are two tools we can use to lift ourselves out of the halal panui: both silence and song are non-linguistic, or meta-linguistic, and therefore can provide an alternative to the failure of linguistic discourse stemming from the vacated space

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

For Rav Goshen-Gottstein, Rabbeinu's Torah provides insights into reflecting on God's silence. "The silence of God is grounded in creation" and "God's silence and man's silence meet in the vacated space". It follows then that questions of God's goodness and His toleration of evil have no verbal solution. "God's silence is neither the cause nor the response to these problems, rather the epistemological ground from which we perceive partially and falsely." Because we can "only think in words" we cannot

understand God's silence with words and thought. In this apparent absence of the Divine, we experience the meeting of the Divine absence in silence. One cannot traverse the vacated space without experiencing fully its effects on the soul.

However, Rabbeinu suggests the solution of traversing the Chalal Hapanui:

Tool 2: The Zaddik and Music:

**Rabbeinu tells us, "But know that certain Zaddikim who are in the category of Moses have been obliged to investigate these philosophies in order to extricate and elevate the fallen souls that have become sunk in them. Through their great sanctity these Zaddikim had the power to release these trapped souls."** Rabbeinu predicted a time of deep heresy and realized we would swim in it. We recognize that we must endure it, not avoid it.

The zaddik rescues us by a paradoxical tool! A method that defies left hemispheric discursive rational thinking. That of the niggun, the melody, the tune that transcends rational thinking. The vacated space represents the silence, the "*shtika*" of absent responses to the heretical of theodicy posed. Now the zaddik traverses the treacherous vacated space to access the surrounding light where he finds the niggun. In this light beyond, the light that transcends, there is resolution to the very questions of being and suffering, theodicy and heresy. However not in the rational manner until "*leased lavo*" the hoary future. For now the zaddik is able to find a non-rational answer, a quantum response in the vibratory energy field we call the niggun, the melody.

Our cognition of the world and its creator presents theological problems that have taxed philosophers for millennia. Rabbeinu is suggesting a more optimistic theology than even the ARI Hakadosh and the Vilan Gaon. We do have access to the infinite beyond, the surrounding light of the *sovev kol almin*, however not through discursive dialectical thought, rather through the zaddik and his vibratory energy of music, as if he is capable of "tuning in" to a vibration upon which the *sovev* light pulsates to.

The power of song the niggun is based on Rabbeinu's insistence that everything in creation vibrates to a particular frequency and melody. This includes all wisdoms and heresies. Unlike heresies that originate in the vacated space which have no words that can answer such philosophical questions because of the absence of the divine and thus speech, here the tune, the melody, the song is able to reach the surrounding light and access the divine wisdom there.

Although Hitbodedut has been practiced as described above for close to two centuries it occurred to me reading Torah 64 repeatedly over the last eight years, that Rabbeinu gave us a nuanced tool with which to aspire to and attach ourselves to the zaddik in crossing the vacated space to access the divine light of the *sovev*, where all crises of faith are resolved, albeit non rationally. How to transcribe this lesson into practice if not through the very original and unique contribution of Rabbeinu to our avodas Hashem! If not during Hitbodedut! Why settle for the first step of dialogic discourse with the divine if the ultimate

philosophical questions of theodicy remain precisely because they remain out of reach of rational response?

In Hitbodedut therefore, I believe the 3-step process must include the second step of emptying the heart of the burning theological questions, the problem of evil etc. Once one has engaged the divine in dialogue and emptied one's heart of its burdens this second stage is to be enveloped by the archetype of emptiness and void, to really experience the absence of the divine apparently present in the vacuum. In the silence of Hitbodedut we come to the very silence preceding creation, our creative thoughts, our very being. In this silence we encounter the cosmic silence of God.

The third step comes with the assistance of the zaddik. The melody and niggun is the gift that comes from the sovev light and fills the emptiness of the vacated space. In Torah 49 Rabbeinu suggested that too much "enthusiasm"<sup>2</sup> is frowned upon by Rabbeinu since it produces nothing out there in the real world.<sup>3</sup> The Lord wishes good works and building a world of compassion that is not compatible with the mere "inflammation" of divine desire of the heart. This too must be emptied, however laudable, for the slow methodical progressive and painful building of the heart and the world from nothing. It seems that we are being asked to rebuild our emptied hearts each time anew. This forces the heart muscle to become active and exercised, which builds compassion. Hitbodedut, the process of emptying then filling the heart with compassion anew, becomes the tool to increase compassion in the world.

Applying Lesson 64 to Hitbodedut then, we come to a unique new understanding of our relationship to the divine! Taking Rav Goshen Gottstein's analysis of the lesson as a graduated spiritual ascent from speech to silence to song, we too humbly recommend the same approach in Hitbodedut. It works in the following way.

### **Step 1: Speech:**

In this first step we articulate as Reb Noson recommends, pouring our hearts out to the Ribbono shel Olam with all our material and spiritual needs. This step is as the conventional approach to Hitbodedut outlined in such English works such as Rabbis Kaplan, Greenbaum, Bergman and Kramer. We discover our unique "heresies" by articulated soul searching to reveal the questions of theodicy and doubt that plague us.

### **Step 2. Silence:**

In this step we realize that our fundamental questions border on the second type of heresy/apikorsus and the problem of evil. We come to realize that above all our local worries *begashmiut* and *beruchniyut* is the current crisis of faith of our generation, the post Holocaust crisis that eclipses the Aggada of Moshe Rabbeinu and Rabbi Akiva a thousand times. When we are told that a million and a half babies

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<sup>2</sup> Originally, an **enthusiast** was a person possessed by a god. Applied by the Greeks to manifestations of divine possession, by Apollo (as in the case of the Pythia), or by Dionysus.

<sup>3</sup> I am reminded of similar directives in the Franciscan tradition as well as in Mahayana vs Tantric paths of Buddhism.

were burned killed and gassed, all prior categories that attempted to answer these age old questions of *zaddik v'ra lo* were smashed to pieces.<sup>4</sup>

We are baffled like the Piacetzna Rebbe<sup>5</sup> without his holy faith and fire however. We, the generation after, are left dumbfounded and dead in our tracks as we attempt to dialogue with the divine kivyachol in Hitbodedut. What a chutzpah! We fall silent. We enter into that space of the chalal hapanui the vacated space where language becomes impossible irrelevant and ineffective. In this step we stand in silence before the Holy silence of God, before His silence as he commanded Moses "*shtok*". We feel the presence of the divine in His very absence.

### **Step 3: Hiskashrus to the Zaddik**

In this final step we realize our poverty of spirit as we drown in the free fall within the vacated space of not knowing. In this space known elsewhere as the "Dark Night of the Soul" we are rescued by our hiskashrus to the Zaddik. We identify with his niggun and in the melody we lose our sense of self and are uplifted by the hope for a future understanding and the refuge of knowing the zaddik was able to cross over this dark night of the soul to the other side where, accessing the surrounding light of the sovev he was able to find a non-discursive response to the very question of history and redemption.

I believe that Rabbeinu would expect nothing less from us than to follow his Torah especially one of the most enigmatic lessons of Likutei Mehoran. Torah 64 brought me to Breslov. Lesson 64 remains the most powerful response to the Holocaust as well as the most significant and strongest reading of the Ari z'l since the Gra. Nothing since Torah 64 compares to its majesty and breath taking theological daring. It is quantum Hassidut compared with the prior "Newtonian" worldviews hitherto.

I feel strongly that we need to incorporate Lesson 64 into our avodas Hashem specifically Hitbodedut.

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<sup>4</sup> Here I follow the advice of Harav Dovid Weiss Halivni in his memoir from Auschwitz and his introduction to the Machzor Flossberg produced by Yad Vashem.

<sup>5</sup> Eish Kodesh, translated as "Holy Fire" by Hershy Worch.