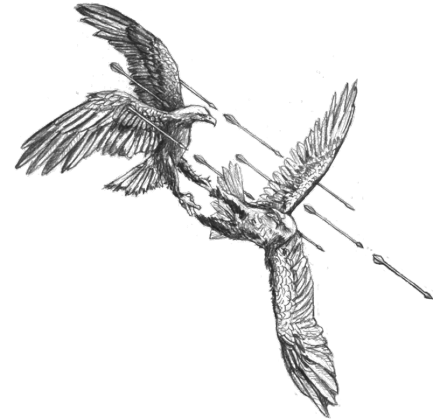




# GASHMIUS MAGAZINE

Towards a Progressive neo-Hasidism



## Reb Nachman: A Lyric Essay in Two Chapters

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February 26, 2024

VOLUME  
III

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*Translator's Note:* Hillel Zeitlin (1872-1942) might be familiar to many readers of Gashmius as one of the spiritual founders of Neo-Hasidism. Less well-known, perhaps, is his son, Aaron Zeitlin (1898-1973), whom the Nobel Prize winning Yiddish writer Isaac Bashevis Singer once called “the greatest Yiddish poet.”

Aaron Zeitlin, like his father, was a passionate and idiosyncratic mystic, influenced by modern Western literature and theology and by Hasidism and Kabbalah. But unlike his father, who was best known as a non-fiction writer, Aaron Zeitlin dedicated his literary talent primarily to poetry and drama (although he also wrote fiction and non-fiction.) During his earlier writing career, in interwar Warsaw, Aaron Zeitlin was known for combining kabbalistic themes and images with avant-garde Yiddish poetry. In 1939, he traveled the United States to oversee the production of one of his plays for New York's Yiddish theater. While he was abroad, World War II

began, and he languished from afar while his entire family--his parents, brother, wife, and son--and most of his community were murdered.

This “lyric essay,” a kind of extended poem in prose, was written after the war, when the grief and despair of Zeitlin’s losses, combined with his deep Jewish mysticism and his anguished messianic yearning, found expression in one of the great bodies of modern Jewish writing. The subject of this essay is Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav, another idiosyncratic and anguished mystic, and the great-grandson of the Baal Shem Tov, the legendary founder of Hasidic Judaism. Rebbe Nachman was known in part for his “tales,” elusive and haunting stories that expressed his profound mystical teachings. The first part of this essay is dense with imagery from them: here the characters from Rebbe Nachman’s fiction cross the border into reality in a surreal, hallucinatory piece of writing, and give way first to a vision of the Baal Shem Tov, and then to Rebbe Nachman’s psycho-spiritual anguish. If these images--the six beggars, the wise and the simple man, the lost princess--whet your curiosity, we encourage you to read Rebbe Nachman’s stories.

Rebbe Nachman was a complicated figure, whose life took place largely in states of extremity, between depression and ecstasy, between despair and messianic fervor. Aaron Zeitlin, and many other modern Jewish mystics, find in Rebbe Nachman a kindred spirit: his ability to find joy and connectedness even within the most agonizing torment and bewilderment provides a model for those who grapple with the extremities of our modern age.

This “lyric essay,” originally in Yiddish, has never before been translated. It appears in Zeitlin’s posthumous *Literarische un Filosofische Esayen* (Literary and Philosophical Essay) published in 1980. We are grateful to the Congress for Jewish Culture for granting the translation rights.

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## Chapter 1: Exposition

Reb Nachman, a young Jew with a pointed beard, stands motionless before the window of a low house next to the Uman graveyard.

He looks to be about 30 years old. He gazes at the graves and thinks about life after death.

He moved here, by the graveyard, intentionally, so that the border between worlds would always stand before his eyes.

The graveyard seems to him like an enormous tale, and the tale itself is tantamount to its teller. It opens its mouth and tells itself.

For long hours he stands at the window and listens to the endless tale of the graves.

And here come six beggars from the tale of the seven, dragging themselves between graves, stealing across the border between worlds, suddenly standing still, with their heads turned back, as they ask themselves six times:

“How can we bring the seventh beggar here?”

And somewhere far away the wise man paces, tears his hair out, quivers like a lizard on a graveyard fence. His brother, the simple one,

stands above him, and the wise one screams: "Get up, Simple Brother, have mercy!"

The princess rises from behind an epitaph and starts to set her feet down -- a tower of water looms around her, and water spins like a great water bird, and the water trees rustle a lullaby, dripping a sleeping potion over her.

The prayer leader stands on a mountain of gold. The mountain crumbles! The graves tumble down, the prayer tumbles up. The gold falls, clattering weepily, and the prayer ascends, fluttering in song.

The mountain sinks. The prayer leader flees, plucking a piece of cloud away, and in the clear void that remains behind him there rises, as if within a wheel, the face of his great-grandfather, the Baal Shem.

When the man sees him through the window, he jumps up, "You've come to your great-grandson?" he asks.

"Nachman," says the face in the wheel, "your tales have grown wings! They fly over worlds! Wherever one goes - ah, Nachmanke's tale murmurs!"

The face fuses with the wheel. The supernal wheel trembles, as if shivering, takes the shape of a cat's arched back, shrinks, and becomes one with the pale revolutions of the late autumn sun, that rotates cool and pensive over the Uman graveyard.

The man leaves the window. He stands in the middle of the room and calls to himself: "Nachman, do you hear? Your tales have grown wings!"

"Are you the river that washes away all stains?"

"You are the true tzaddik!"

"With your hands you touch all worlds!"

"Your flame will burn until the coming of the messiah!"

He feels God in all his limbs. He shudders at his own greatness.

Then he is silent. He wants to hear the echo of his own words. The attentive, probing silence explodes, and again the fire-red lips glow with words that demand expression, words that are full of the pride and the sadness of Ben-Yosef, who died too soon:

“Who do you battle? Me? What do you think, Shpoler Zeyde? That you know me? You all battle somebody else! Someone who isn’t me!”

He bursts into laughter.

“With their own hands, they carved a man up, and they quarrel with him! They delude themselves that the man is me, Nachman of Breslov!”

Again he examines the silence.

Deep weeping tremors through him.

Yes, he is the river that washes away all blemishes, but must he not wash away his own blemishes every moment, every moment standing on this border?

He is the simple one who strides across the iron bridges of faith, but is he not also the wise one who, because of his intelligence, remains stuck in the mud, and must cry out a great cry?

The tempest of his wisdom roars within him. The wise one interferes with the simple one’s affairs.

He who a moment before had felt with all his flesh and blood, with all his limbs, how deeply he is rooted in the soil of eternity -- he is assaulted by distance, and the wildness of his suffering is so powerful that he could saw a saw apart with his teeth.

Then, when Reb Nosson of Nemirov quietly opens the door of the room with the single window set in the wall like the tear duct in a hidden, supernal eye -- Reb Nosson sees him:

With his face to the ground, Reb Nachman lies outstretched on the floor. He rolls in the dust, tears at his flesh, kicks his feet and weeps like a man being flogged.

He sobs:

“Look! The worst heresy that has ever been heard -- it must go through me. The most anguished tear that a girl with no dowry has ever wept into her pillow - it must flow through me. And when she calls to her beloved in her mind -- her call must pass through me. And the Jews Khmelnitsky hacked into pieces with his sword -- through whom can their mutilated souls go? Through the lonely Reb Nachmanke! I myself am nothing piled on nothing. I am the open street. The harder my cleverness gets, the easier I become. Who can apprehend the greatness of my nothingness? What am I? Who am I? I am mud that wallows in mud. I am the dream that a dream dreams. I am so much nothing that nothing is everything next to me. To what end did you create me, and why was I granted skin and bones?”

Reb Nosson stands by a wall, trembling with fear. He listens and is terrified to reply.

Reb Nachman does not feel the other man's presence in the room. He scratches the floor with his fingernails, and his suffering cries out from him, all the endless human suffering.

Reb Nosson holds his breath.

The window before them wants to run away.

A black sheet covers the graveyard; it looks like a long, black stretcher bearing a corpse. Evil autumn winds carry the stretcher to a coffin which the clouds have quickly glued together.

The Rebbe himself speaks like this -- what should the student say?

His fingertips fidget and he flees, disturbed, into the graveyard, throws himself upon a grave, and lies there, motionless.

He waits for Reb Nachman's words and screams to clear away like a rainstorm, and for the evil heart of the clouds to be cut by the diamond rainbow of the Rebbe's new tale.

Who knows?

Perhaps they will yet have the merit of hearing from the Rebbe's mouth the end of the tale of the seven beggars.

Perhaps the pure waters of compassion will grow stronger and Reb Nachman will reveal to the world the secret of the seventh beggar, who has not yet arrived.

And then perhaps he too, the loyal scribe, Reb Nosson, will be able to grasp the truth of how it is possible to feel joy at that wedding in the graveyard which nobody alive attends except for him, the Rebbe Reb Nachman.

## **Chapter 2: Apotheosis**

Souls all around, an edifice of desiccated souls!

You are like streets that lead nowhere, confining streets, streets in desiccated cities.

But you!

You harbor-souls, souls with access to the sea!

I compare your journey to streets in a port city, wherever they go, wherever they veer - they always meet eye to eye with the sea, and run to it as they return.

You are a port city, whose every street has the endless blue ribbon of the sea as a fellow traveler.

The sea's ribbon is your crown, that straight line that does not want to end.

With arduous transparency it embraces your head.

O, souls compared to a port city! Ships sail from you to lands that have not been discovered yet.

Guests arrive at your shores, from islands that are on no map.

They bring strange spices with them, and the fragrances of distant, foreign winds.

And those island winds meet, inside you, with the winds of total desiccation.

Inside you they meet, the opposing winds -- winds of earth and winds of far-off places -- and storms erupt, the kind of storms port cities know.

A storm over the walls and roofs of a dryland city is different, and a storm in a city by the sea speaks different words, in a city where opposing winds come together and separate anew.

Soul of Reb Nachamn! In you - all the joys of the Baal Shem Tov; in you - all the mortifications of the Ari.

In you dawns battle dusks.

In you distances fight proximities.

And wherever people do not meet your word, Reb Nachman - just look at the blue sea's line, the line that never wants to end.



## Glossary:

Term	Definition
<i>Lehavdil</i>	Lit. "to separate, to distinguish," it is said colloquially when drastically changing topics
Khmelnitsky	<p>"Bogdan Khmel'nitsky was the leader of the Cossack and peasant uprising against Polish rule in the Ukraine in 1648 which resulted in the destruction of hundreds of Jewish communities; later hetman of autonomous Ukraine and initiator of its unification with Russia... It is impossible to determine accurately the number of victims who perished, but it undoubtedly amounted to tens of thousands; the Jewish chronicles mention 100,000 killed and 300 communities destroyed."</p> <p><a href="https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/chmielnicki-khmelnitski-bogdan-x00b0">https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/chmielnicki-khmelnitski-bogdan-x00b0</a></p>
Apotheosis	the highest point in the development of something; culmination or climax. (Oxford dictionary online)