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Review Essay:
**BETWEEN ESOTERICISM AND
EXISTENTIALISM: RECENT ISRAELI
WRITING ON R. NACHMAN OF BRESLOV**

Zvi Mark, The Revealed and Hidden Writings of Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav: His Worlds of Revelation and Rectification
Trans. Yaacov David Shulman
Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter and Magnes Press, 2015

Shimon Gershon Rosenberg, *Shiurim al Likkutei Moharan*
[in Hebrew]
Ed. Netanel Lederberg
Alon Shvut: Va'ad Kitvei ha-Rav Shagar and Michlelet Yerushalayim, Vol. 1 2012, Vo. 2. 2015

As recent trends such as the massive pilgrimages to R. Nachman's grave in Uman and even the "Universal Tikkun ha-Kelali" attest, his ever-growing presence in Jewish and Israeli religious culture is an indisputable fact. Our purpose here is not to analyze the socio-religious phenomenon described above but to take a look at an accompanying literary phenomenon of note. I am not referring to the massive internal Breslov literary output, but rather to the "outsider" writings of

I have previously reviewed other works by both authors and addressed other aspects of Rav Shagar's thought. See <https://nli.academia.edu/zvileshem> where I also have an article on R. Shagar's influence on academic research on Hasidism. See also my article "Pouring out your Heart: Rabbi Nachman's Hitbodedut and its Piaseczner Reverberations," *Tradition* 47:3 (2014), 57-64. Most of Mark's previous works have also appeared in English translation. So far only two of R. Shagar's books have been translated. A volume of selected essays of his, translated by Elie Leshem, is scheduled to be released shortly by Koren Publishers.

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academic scholars of Hasidism and the religious commentaries on Breslov emanating from the *Dati Le'umi* community,¹ although the descriptive term “outsiders” will also need to be qualified as will shortly become apparent.

First let us take a quick glance at internal Breslov publishing trends. In 1928 Gershom Scholem published a thin pamphlet entitled *Aleh Shemot* which was a bibliographic listing of Breslov publications that he presented to Martin Buber on the occasion of his fiftieth birthday. The pamphlet contained a grand total of 156 items! Scholem lamented the difficulty in locating these texts, some of which he owned himself, others were owned by his friend S. Y. Agnon, and some by various Breslover Hasidim in Jerusalem. Still others were already in the possession of the National Library. Two years later, in a brief article in *Kiryat Sefer*,² when Scholem added new finds and managed to reach a total of 177 items he wrote: “And I hope that I have thus brought forth all of this hidden literature for all of those who are interested in Hasidic literature.” In those days, this was no small feat, as the bibliographer Avraham Yaari wrote in *Ha-Olam* (14-15, April 4, 1928): “The author had a hard nut to crack here, as is well known R. Nachman and his students were persecuted... many of their works were banned, and many were printed in small private publishing houses...and were lost over the years without even a single copy remaining...the author’s announcement at the beginning of the book that he found all of the books in Jerusalem is itself comforting.”³

Today the situation is radically different. The Scholem Collection alone contains 695 items that are connected with Breslov Hasidism while the catalogue of the entire National Library collection lists over 2500! While many of these items are in fact research materials, a great many are

¹ See for example: Yair Dreifuss, *Marriage of the Lost: The Tale of the Seven Beggars: A New Reading*, [in Hebrew], (Efrat: Yeshivat Siach Yitzhak, 2011), Roece Horen, ed., *Life of Yearning: New Interpretations to the Tales of Reb Nachman of Breslov* [in Hebrew] (Tel-Aviv: Miskal –Yedioth Ahronoth Books, 2010), Moshe Nahmani and Dael Rodrigues, eds., *The World Has a Heart* [in Hebrew] (Tel-Aviv, Miskal – Yedioth Ahronoth Books), 2011, Elhanan Nir, ed., *Really Alive: Five Articles from “Siach Yitzhak” in the Torah of Rebbe Nachman of Breslov*, [in Hebrew] (Efrat: Yeshivat Siach Yitzhak), 2011.

² No. 6, 1930, 39-45.

³ *Ha-Olam* 14-15, April 4, 1928. See as well David Asaf, *Breslov, an Annotated Bibliography* [in Hebrew], (Jerusalem: Zalman Shazar Center, 2000), 9-22; Zvi Leshem and Aviad Rosenberg, *The Gershom Scholem Library: Within Jerusalem – An Exhibition from the Gershom Scholem Collection* (Jerusalem: National Library of Israel, 2012), 19. See also *The Library of Gershom Scholem on Jewish Mysticism: Catalogue* [in Hebrew], ed. Joseph Dan, Esther Liebes, and Shmuel Reem (Jerusalem: The Jewish National and University Library Press, 1999), vol. 1, 16, 660-696.

internal publications. Like Chabad Hasidism, long known for prolific literary output, space constraints have forced us to be extremely particular regarding what new Breslov publications will receive coveted shelf space in the Scholem Reading Room.

As any academic librarian can attest, the line between “primary” and “secondary” sources is a thin and blurry one and this is certainly the case today in Kabbalah and Hasidism research, where the lines between those being researched and those doing the research are themselves often blurred. Add to that the eclectic spiritual world of current Israeli Hasidism and Neo-Hasidism and publications may be difficult to classify. With this in mind I would like to explore two recent books on R. Nachman, one a recently translated academic study by Prof. Zvi Mark of Bar-Ilan University and the second by his teacher, the late Religious Zionist Neo-Hasidic thinker, R. Shimon Gershon Rosenberg (Rav Shagar).

Mark’s book, *The Revealed and Hidden Writings of Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav: His Worlds of Revelation and Rectification*, joins his previous academic studies regarding R. Nachman.⁴ Here Mark’s focus is on Breslovian esotericism combined with a penetrating analysis of the growth of R. Nachman’s reputation and the strength of Breslov Hasidism over the past few decades. Mark, as an academic with rich connections within the Breslov community, has already earned a reputation for his publication of previously suppressed works, most notably his *Scroll of Secrets* in which he revealed the secret messianic vision of R. Nachman after 200 hundred years of internal Breslov suppression. Framing the documents within the dual themes of “revelation” and “rectification,” Mark analyzes in depth the “Story of the Bread” and the “Story of Armor,”⁵ comparing and contrasting them with better known tales such as the “Guest who Came in” and portions of “The Seven Beggars.” In the first case the theme of R. Nachman’s own personal consciousness as a mystic and how the stories reflect his own development in this regard is tantamount. The latter is related, according to Mark, to R. Nachman’s rectification for nocturnal emissions via the reciting of ten specific chapters of Psalms. At a

⁴ Zvi Mark, *Mysticism and Madness: The Religious Thought of Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav*, trans. Yaacov David Shulman (New York and London: Continuum, 2009); Zvi Mark, *The Scroll of Secrets: The Hidden Messianic Vision of R. Nachman of Breslav*, trans. Naftali Moses (Brighton: Academic Studies, 2010). Mention should also be made of Mark’s authoritative edition of R. Nachman’s complete stories, *The Complete Stories of Rebbe Nachman of Breslav: The Tales, Secret Stories, Dreams and Visions* [in Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Yediot Achronot, 2014, second edition, 2015).

⁵ These two stories can be found in *The Revealed and Hidden Writings*, 32-37 and 230-232 respectively.

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certain point, this *tikkun* was conflated with another of R. Nachman's rectifications, the *Tikkun ha-Kelali*, or *Universal Rectification*, which was meant to rectify all sins, not only those of a sexual nature, and thus the *Tikkun ha-Kelali* for rectifying nocturnal emissions by reciting ten specific chapters of Psalms (the precise list of chapters was not initially widely revealed) as we know it today, was born. The rectification has widely developed, taking on a life of its own, and Mark documents innovative aspects, such as its daily recitation, its recitation also by women on behalf of the ill etc., and even the use of the text itself as a quasi amulet.

Mark concludes his study with a detailed account of the massive expansion of visits to R. Nachman's grave in Uman over the last few decades, especially on Rosh ha-Shana. He demonstrates that the visit to the grave was in itself conceived of as a type of rectification. Amongst the other ritual developments is the "Universal Tikkun ha-Kelali" recited en masse in Uman on the eve of Rosh ha-Shana, which is simultaneously broadcast live via the internet allowing adherents around the world to participate. Thus an initially individual rectification meant to help the penitent deal with his most intimate sins has transformed into a mass event recited simultaneously by tens of thousands of worshipers in Uman and countless others throughout the world. As Mark points out, many of those present at the recitation in Uman are under the impression that they are engaging in an ancient Breslovian rite when in fact it was only begun some twelve years ago as the grassroots initiative of a young man who was present at the time. An additional recently developed ritual in Uman is the casting of personal jewelry into the water during the *tashlikh* ceremony by young newly observant men. The tossing of their jewelry into the depths is a modern and visceral adaptation of the traditional imagery of casting one's sins into the depths at *tashlikh*. All of the above has intense messianic overtones as well. For in addition to R. Nachman's self-image as a *tsaddik* (and apparently as *the tsaddik*) and his self awareness as a mystic, he was also possessed with a strong messianic bent. Some of the suppressed stories and teachings alluded to above were suppressed precisely because of their messianic tendencies.⁶ After two centuries of fierce persecution by *mitnaggedim* and fellow Hasidism as well, today's Breslovers can only marvel at the extent to which R. Nachman has become perhaps the most famous and

⁶ Although, according to Mark, not because of alleged Sabbatian influences as claimed by Yehuda Leibes in his article *The Tikkun ha-Kelali of R. Nachman and its Connection to Sabbatianism* [in Hebrew] in his *The Secret of Sabbatian Faith* (Jerusalem: Mossad Bialik, 1995).

beloved Hasidic rebbe in the world and understand this as a sign that redemption is rapidly approaching.

A vastly different reading experience is that of the *shiurim* delivered over many years in various Israeli *yeshivot* and *midrashot*, by Rav Shimon Gershon Rosenberg (“Rav Shagar,” 1949-2007) on R. Nachman’s magnum opus *Likkutei Moharan*, in some of which I was privileged to participate.⁷ R. Shagar felt deeply connected to R. Nachman and discussions about R. Nachman’s thought feature prominently in many of R. Shagar’s books.⁸ These two volumes, comprising over 900 pages, include lectures on some fifty of the “Torot” in Likkutei Moharan in Shagar’s unique style, which combines Torah scholarship with a wide-ranging knowledge of other disciplines including existentialist and post-modern philosophy, psychology, anthropology, and literature, all of which are utilized in explicating R. Nachman’s dense and paradoxical teachings. Notwithstanding, this is anything but an academic work. Rather, what we have are *shiurim*, mostly given orally over a period of many years in a *yeshiva* setting, in which the wide range of R. Shagar’s intellectual interests became a vehicle through which R. Nachman’s unique spiritual approach is translated into language appropriate for the complex spiritual/intellectual era in which we live. As he wrote in one of his first works, “My intention has always been to move beyond the intellectual grasp of the material...to enable my students to feel the life-changing power that lies in the Torah. My efforts are aimed at finding the proper ‘language’ that will allow the translation of the words of our Sages and the Rishonim into an idiom that can be understood in our post-modern world.” Who precisely in this target audience and how did R. Shagar’s characterize his students? “I am writing for the ‘religious intellectual’ – someone who feels at home in Chasidic literature and Torah, yet also is interested in general culture” (Chance and Providence, 10-11).⁹

⁷ See my short biography of R. Shagar at the web site listed above in note 1.

⁸ See the last chapter of volume two, “Rebbe Nachman would have said,” in which he writes openly regarding his spiritual connection with R. Nachman and how R. Nachman has influenced his own religious path. A bibliography of R. Shagar’s publications is appended to his work “We Walk in Fervor” [in Hebrew], ed. Shimon Y. Deutsch (Alon Shvut: Committee for the Publication of Rav Shagar’s Works, 2008), 375-384. Many more works have been published posthumously, and are listed at the end of each new book. The current total is of some 20 volumes.

⁹ *The Human and the Infinite: Discourses on the Meaning of Penitence*, trans. Naftali Moses (Efrat: Yeshivat Siach Yitzchak, 2004), 6; *Chance and Providence: Discourses on the Inner Meaning of Purim*, trans. Naftali Moses (Efrat: Yeshivat Siach Yitzchak, 2005), 10-11.

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It would be fair to say that in order to really understand R. Shagar's unique and sometimes difficult style it is not always enough to have an "interest in general culture," it helps to have a *background* in postmodern philosophical discourse as well. In this book for example we are learning R. Nachman not only with a host of other Rebbes and Torah sources, but also with Nietzsche, Derrida, Levinas, Foucault, Freud, and Jung! And yet, what is apparent throughout is that we are not primarily engaged in the performance of an intellectual virtuoso (although that is apparent as well), but rather in a sincere and deep attempt to explain and to translate R. Nachman into formulas directly applicable to our *avodat HaShem*. Thus, in addition to unique comparisons and explications with those mentioned above, R. Shagar shares with us personal experiences and reflections, antidotes and simple advice, with the clear intention of enriching our religious lives and experiences.

In a book where I found myself profoundly affected by nearly every page it seems almost impossible to choose a "representative" Torah to share in this article. Via Likkutei Moharan, R. Shagar manages to touch on such diverse topics as intention in prayer, academic Jewish studies, imagination, the "Disengagement" from Gush Katif, the dispute between the Lubavitcher Rebbe z"l and R. Schach z"l, romanticism in marriage, equanimity, free will, meditation, service through corporality, "dati-hiloni" relations, and eating disorders. The shiurim are presented more or less as they were initially delivered in yeshiva; after a brief statement (by the editor) of the main topic, the Torah being explicated is presented one section at a time, followed by R. Shagar's discourse. As *Torot* in Likkutei Moharan often cover a wide range of seemingly disconnected topics that R. Nachman referred to as *behinot*,¹⁰ much of the discussion is centered on explaining how these diverse topics really do make sense together, and it is often in these seams that R. Shagar is able to inject profound teachings of his own regarding R. Nachman's relevance to our own current spiritual reality.

As an example, let us briefly review the commentary to R. Nachman's 36th Torah, *be-Karov ali Mere'im*, here retitled as *Tikun ha-Kelali ve-Kabalat Ol Malkhut Shamayim* ("The General Rectification and Accepting the Yoke of the Heavenly Kingdom").¹¹ This discourse (alluded to above in our discussion of Mark) was delivered by R. Nachman in 1801 or 1802, and deals with the interdependence of improper sexual desires

¹⁰ See *Chayai Moharan* 350: "My Torah is all *behinot*." But see also *Sibot ha-Ran* 200: "My Torah is all introductions (*hakdamot*).

¹¹ Volume 2, 68-83.

and heretical thoughts, and how they can be rectified through the general rectification of accepting the Yoke of Heaven and the rectification of *Da'at* (consciousness). In light of the intensification of ills in our society in both the sexual and the theological realm, R. Shagar points to this discourse as being extremely pertinent to contemporary spirituality and its discontents.

For R. Nachman, both “the desire for adultery” and the problem of heresy are functions of problems in the realm of faith and especially in the Jew’s connection to foreign culture (“the seventy languages”) to the extent that his basic Jewish identity is compromised. In the realm of sexuality there exist both holy relationships and sinful ones. Both are an outgrowth of various manifestations of one’s *Da'at*, which in Kabbalistic thought implies integrated knowledge which is parallel to sexual connection, as in the verse *And Adam knew his wife Eve*.¹² The solution is not to be found in asceticism, but rather in a certain refining of the sexual drive and channeling it as holy energy.¹³ As R. Shagar explains: *to maintain the deeper aspects of the covenant within sexuality, sensitivity to the other, to guard the face of the other. Therefore rectifying Daat is rectifying adultery, which is essentially the building up my own ego at the expense of the other. Nonetheless, the goal of rectified sexuality is not the extinction of the Yetzer, since the Yetzer represents one’s drive toward unity. The goal is rather to sweeten the Yetzer with Chesed. If this sweetening does not take place...we are left feeling empty and frustrated* (vol 2, 72). All of the above has ramifications in the realm of theology and Torah study as well, since they too are a function of *Daat*. In R. Shagar’s formulation, *One who is not rectified in the realm of sexuality...is incapable of reaching clarity and to focus when learning Torah* (73). Again, the solution is not to be found in renouncing sexuality, rather what is called for is a very delicate balance: *The process of refining cannot be achieved via force and compulsion, but rather by including the Yetzer in the good. If we completely annihilate the Yetzer we are in danger of losing our vitality. On the other hand, if we succumb too much to our desires we risk falling and the loss of Daat*. All of this has implications for Torah study as well, since *we can find many places where Chazal described our relationship to Torah in sexual terms* (74). After a long digression in which R. Shagar compares all of the above to Freud’s conflicting

¹² Genesis 4:1.

¹³ R. Shagar also wrote a number of significant essays regarding sexuality, modesty, marriage, and *brit* as well as a book of wedding homilies titled *Beloved Friends* [in Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Maskil, 2011), co-authored with R. Yair Dreifuss, who served together with R. Shagar as head of *Yeshivat Siach Yitzchak*, where he continues as rosh yeshiva today.

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“Pleasure Principle” and “Reality Principle,” and brief digression regarding eating which has numerous parallel issues to sexuality,¹⁴ R. Shagar returns to R. Nachman’s proposed solutions to the above conundrum. The first is the acceptance of the Yoke of Heaven. R. Nachman’s writes: *When reading the first verse of the Shema one closes his eyes...for the recitation of Shema and Baruch Shem is the rectification of illicit sexually fantasies.* How does this process work and why is closing our eyes significant to it? R. Shagar explains: *The goal of accepting the Yoke of Heaven is not to force the law upon the Yetzer but rather to rectify the sexual drive at its source...* In order to do so we need to understand more about how R. Nachman understands the nature of sexuality: *Sexuality is understood by R. Nachman as a motion that originates in one’s imagination which creates a consciousness of dualism. Thus sexuality represents the yearning for unity to break down the loneliness of the human condition via connection and closeness* (78). The process R. Nachman is describing is one in which *accepting the Yoke of Heaven is an inner decision of loyalty, the realization that we are not alone, but rather exist in connection with the Creator...in light of this the sex drive doesn’t disappear, rather it is elevated to the realm of the sacred and brings one to greater vitality.* This process is crucial since the alternative is very dangerous: *this point of freedom is crucial, for compulsion may serve to further empower illicit sexual desires and the result of “breaking the Yetzer” may be to create “two yetzers” instead.* What is needed is to *set a place for sexuality, just as we set a place for prayer* (79).

R. Shagar’s next step is to contrast this approach of R. Nachman with that of the Baal Shem Tov’s technique of the sublimation of foreign thoughts by elevating them to their pristine and holy source.¹⁵ Here again he returns to the significance of closing one’s eyes: *In this Torah of R. Nachman the instructions are different; he doesn’t attempt to uplift sexuality to its source. Rather the uplifting is via the vehicle of accepting the Yoke of Heaven...not by contemplating earthly beauty and transforming it to abstract beauty,¹⁶ but...by exiting the situation by closing eyes...the goal is to open one up to a different place of closeness and unity...of intimacy within Jewish existence, Torah and Mitzvot...bringing one’s desires to a positive and balanced place* (80).

¹⁴ See R. Zaddok ha-Kohen, *Kuntres At ha-Okhel*, 2-3.

¹⁵ *Baal Shem Tov al ha-Torah, Amud ha-Tefilah* 96-124.

¹⁶ See *Ohr ha-Meir, Chayah Sarah*, s.v. *v’evaer*, in the name of the Magid of Mezeritch.

R. Shagar continues by discussing a second technique of R. Nachman's for uplifting wayward sexual fantasies, that of weeping at the time of accepting the Yoke of Heaven as a process of purification.¹⁷ We will not discuss this point except to mention a parenthetical note of R. Shagar's: *Weeping and sadness regarding one's spiritual state purify him and allow him to get a fresh start. We should open up this option as well even though it is not very acceptable in our circles* (81). This, as part of a *shiur* given in a *Yeshivat Hesder*, is an interesting example of R. Shagar's willingness to push his students in spiritual directions that were quite unusual in his circles, to say the least.

In conclusion R. Shagar comes back, as he often does, to the significance of the lesson for Torah study: *R. Nachman returns to the topic of Hitchadshut HaTorah. This renewal means to create a new vessel for the light of the Divine. In order to achieve this renewal we need to enter the realm of the languages of the nations which are rooted in sexual desire, for it is this desire that can give us the push to achieve renewal. However, if one is not successful in rectifying his desires, the new Torah is in danger of becoming "sam hamavet, chalila"* (83). Here as well, in typical Shagarian form, we see at once a call to seeming radicalism, combined with a clear warning as to the dangers inherent in the improper use of his teachings. There are those in the *Dati Le'umi* world have been quick to point to seeming religious failures on the part of some of R. Shagar's disciples, who perhaps rejoiced at his radical teachings which neglecting to heed his clear warnings and boundaries, but that is a topic for another essay.

¹⁷ Weeping has a long history as a mystical practice. See Moshe Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1988), 75-88.

