Abstract: The several texts presented here are from the teachings of Rebbe Nachman of Bratslav (1772-1810), great-grandson of the Ba’al Shem Tov, and one of the very most significant figures in the history of early Hasidism. They are from part two (tinyana) of Nachman’s most important published collection of teachings, Liqquetei Moharan. These passages each address the subject of melancholy—marah shechora in Nahman’s language—as well as its antidote, joy, simchah. While the avoidance of sadness, and the cultivation of joy, are common motifs in classical Hasidism, Rebbe Nachman’s discussion of them deserves special attention in any consideration of the role of emotions in Hasidic culture. This is due to the fact that Nachman speaks of these particular emotions in elaborate, intense, and highly distinctive ways. They are absolutely central to his teachings about the nature of human life, religious faith, and the life of the spirit. We see in these passages Nachman’s conviction that joy is a critical feature in “settling the mind” and conducting oneself in the proper way, a way of coming close to God. It’s opposite, despair and depression, serve to imprison an individual psychically and spiritually. One must be “forced against his will” to take hold of depression and transform it into joy.

My presentation asks several questions, reflecting a variety of approaches to seeking to analyze and understand these teachings. 1) Given that we know so much about Rebbe Nachman’s personal and emotional life, how do these teachings reflect his own existential and psychological struggles? What role, in other words, did his turbulent personal life play in his views about the imperative to transform sadness into joy and calmness of mind? 2) In view of the fact that early Hasidic teachers were generally interested in these themes, how do Nachman’s teachings both reflect and stand out from the broader Hasidic culture of which he was a part? 3) How do these teachings constitute not only a set of spiritual ideals and values, but also a set of social practices? What can we say about the ways in which these practices are social constructions, that is, cultural values and practices intended to create expectations for behavior in the context of interpersonal relations and the social and religious life of Hasidic community?

This presentation is related to the following texts:
Liqqutei Moharan Tinyana (part II), sections 10, 23, 24


Bibliography:


Arthur Green, Tormented Master, A Life of Rabbi Nahman of Bratslav (Schocken Books, New York, 1981)


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Text I: Rebbe Nachman of Bratslav, Liqqutei Moharan (Tinyana), section 10

The reason why people remain far from God, may He be blessed, and do not draw closer to Him, is only because their minds are not calm (yishuv ha-da’at). And they fail to settle their minds down. The main thing is for a person to strive to clarify in his mind that there is no ultimate meaning to our passions and to those things that bind us to this world. [When a person realizes that this is true of] all such passions, both physical desires and those external to the body, such as one’s personal honor, then he will certainly return to God.

However, be aware that depression (marah shechorah) prevents a person from guiding the mind in the directions that he desires, and makes it difficult to compose himself. It is only by means of joy that a person is able to direct his mind where he wants, and in this manner to settle his mind. For joy represents the world of freedom, as in “For in joy will you go forth” (Is. 55:12). It is by means of joy that an individual becomes free (ben chorin) and goes forth from exile. Thus, when the mind is bound to joy, that mind becomes free and is no longer in exile. Then that liberated mind can be guided by his will and become settled . . . For when it is in exile, it is unable to achieve a state of calm, as our Sages, may their memories be blessed, taught (Bab. Talmud, Megilah 12b) with respect to Ammon and Moab who remained in their place [i.e. remained stable] because they were never exiled, as it is said, “Moab has been at ease from his youth” (Jer. 48:11).

Text 2: Rebbe Nachman of Bratslav, Liqqutei Moharan (Tinyana), section 23

Concerning joy, [consider this] parable: Sometimes when people are rejoicing and dancing, they grasp a person from outside [the circle], one who is sad [be-atzvut], and press him against his will into the circle [machol] of dancers, and force him to rejoice with them. It is the same with joy; for when a person is happy, his depression (marah shechorah) and sufferings (yisurim) stand off to the side. But the higher level is to struggle and to pursue that very depression, and bring it also into the circle, so that one’s sorrow and woes will flee on account of joy. For at the moment of joy, sorrow and woe stand to the side, as stated above . . . For [indeed] there are [kinds of] sorrow and woe that are [manifestations of] the Other
Side, and do not wish to be bearers of holiness; thus, they flee from joy, but one must force them into [the sphere of] holiness, that is, into joy, against their will, as I have stated.

**Text 3: Liqqutei Moharan (Tinyana), section 24**

It is a wondrous precept to always be happy, and to make every effort to prevail over sadness and depression with all one’s strength. And all the illnesses that a person experiences are only a result of imperfect joy, for there are ten types of song, which are each [different] aspects of joy, as it is written “Upon a ten-stringed instrument . . . For You caused me to rejoice by Your deeds . . . “ (Ps. 92:4-5). These ten types of song enter into the ten different pulses (of a person’s body), endowing them with life. Therefore, if there is a fault or imperfection in the joy, which is the same as the ten types of song, then the ten different pulses becomes irregular due to the flaw in the ten types of song, which is joy, as stated above.

For all the different kinds of illness are contained within the ten types of pulses. In the same manner, all the various types of song are contained within the ten types of song. The illness that arises corresponds to the flaw in that [particular aspect of] joy and song. Distinguished physicians, too, have spoken at length about this, namely, that all illness is a result of depression and sadness.

But joy is a great healer! In the future joy will increase greatly. For this reason our Sages, of blessed memory, said: “The Blessed Holy One will head the circle (choleh) of the Righteous Ones (tsadiqqim) in the time to come” (Jer. Talmud, Megillah 2:4). That is, He will form a circle dance (machol) for the Righteous Ones, and He, the Blessed One, will be at the head of the circle.

For the Divine Presence hovers above the head of the one who is ill, as our Sages, of blessed memory, expounded (Bab. Talmud, Nedarim 40a): As it is stated, “God sustains him from upon the sickbed” (Ps. 41:4). For the sick person has no vitality at all; it is only the Divine Presence that gives him life.

Thus, in the future, all sickness will be remedied by way of joy. And then God will head the circle (choleh, that is, be head of the machol, the circle dance) because joy is the remedy for the one who is ill (choleh). This is the reason that joy and dance are called choleh, because they are the remedy for illness (chola’at).
Section 10

Liqqutei Moharan Tinyana

Section 23

Section 24
מצטער על האを目指.ול אתה לך ממקולול המשמח. כי ישי שדר מזג זגה שמחות, כמא
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