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HASIDIC NONVIOLENCE: R. NOSON OF BRATZLAV'S HERMENEUTICS
OF CONFLICT TRANSFORMATION

by

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ABSTRACT

The dissertation presents an overlooked example of religious nonviolence, that of R. Noson Sternhartz of Bratzlav, a 19th century Hasidic thinker whose response to persecution by a rival Hasidic group was informed by classical Jewish tradition and historical antecedents, but was also radically innovative. The setting for the study is Ukraine in the years 1834-1838, a period referred to in Bratzlaver literature as the “Years of Oppression”, an oblique reference to the campaign of persecution led by a prominent Ukrainian Hasidic leader, R. Moshe Tzvi of Savran, against the Bratzlav community.

The study examines R. Noson’s written *oeuvre*, particularly his *Likutei Halachos* and his letters from the period under consideration. Through the correlation of these and other texts, a clearer picture of the anti-Bratzlav campaign, and of R. Noson’s response, emerges. Analysis of R. Noson’s theological approaches and

hermeneutic methods as they relate to his experiences as the leader of a persecuted community constitutes a central component of the dissertation.

As a result of this analysis, a new approach to conflict resolution is identified, one which attempts to integrate mystical-theological approaches and social policy. Specific issues explored include R. Noson's leadership model; the role of interpretation in the development of novel religious responses to suffering; and the creative use of human reactivity in the perpetuation of religious revival. This approach has implications for the field of Conflict Studies, which has begun to identify the need for the study of religious resources as they relate to conflict situations.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

Between the years 1834 and 1838, the Hasidic thinker R. Noson of Bratzlav¹ and his community of Bratzlaver Hasidim were the targets of a campaign of persecution by a prominent Hasidic leader, R. Moshe Tzvi of Savran. The purpose of this study is to examine the nonviolent response of R. Noson to that campaign. Jewish history is filled with instances of sectarian conflict; even in antiquity, groups with very different interpretations of Jewish traditions and texts asserted competing claims to be the authentic bearers of the covenant between God and Israel. The controversies engendered by such differences of perspective were bitter, often degenerating into outright hostility and violence. In the Hasidic milieu, as well, sectarian conflict was common; but the conflict which is the subject of this study devolved to an extent unique in Hasidic history. Bratzlav literature refers to this period as “The Years of Oppression”,² and the intensity of the events was captured by a scholar of Hasidism, who wrote, “The persecution of the Bratzlaver Hasidim at

¹ Bratzlavers generally do not refer to Noson of Bratzlav as “Rebbe Noson”, because he never claimed the title, preferring to lead his community as a disciple (see Chapter 2). I will use the abbreviated form, “R.” both for “Rebbe” in the case of Hasidic masters like R. Nachman, and for “Reb”, the more common honorific used for Hasidim, including R. Noson.

² The Bratzlavers also referred to the events as “The Great Conflict [*ha-machlokes ha-gadol*]”. Because “Years of Oppression” is the term most commonly used in Bratzlav literature for the events described herein, I will make use of the term throughout the study. In order to avoid distracting the reader, I will do

the hands of the Savraners exceeded the worst persecutions of the Hasidim by their opponents in the previous century.”³ Through an examination of the events surrounding the Years of Oppression, I will demonstrate that R. Noson drew upon his particular texts, traditions and narratives to develop a model of spiritual resistance rooted in, and specific to, the pre-modern Hasidic culture in which he lived. I will show that by theological and interpretive means, R. Noson made creative use of those religious resources, and that it was precisely the specificity of his approach that gave it credibility with his community and was a prime factor behind its success.

Here a definition of terms is in order. In order to clarify the use of “spiritual resistance” in the dissertation, it will be helpful to quote the author of a study of Hasidic resistance during the Holocaust. Although the context of his usage is radically different than that of the present study, Pesach Schindler’s definition of spiritual resistance provides us with the beginnings of a vocabulary which we can apply, in suitably altered form, to our own study.

Spiritual resistance ...refers to noncompliance with the various regulations and prohibitions aimed at destroying the religious and spiritual life of the Jew....[Its objective is] to preserve spiritual authenticity, thus countering the objectives of that which is resisted.⁴

away with speech marks from this point on.

³ Raphael Mahler, quoted in David Assaf, *Ne’echaz Ba’Svach: Pirkei Mashber u’Mvucha b’Toldot haHasidut* (Jerusalem: Mercaz Zalman Shazar, 2006), *ba’Svach*, p 180.

⁴ Pesach Schindler, *Hasidic Responses to the Holocaust in Light of Hasidic Thought*. Jersey City, NJ: Ktav, 1990). Schindler adds, “This type of resistance, though distinct from the physical kind, demanded an equal degree of dedication, raw defiance, and fortitude....”

It goes without saying that there is no comparison between sectarian, intra-Hasidic conflict, however intense, and the destruction of European Jewry 100 years later by the Nazis.⁵ However, for our purposes, the elements of Schindler's definition can be revised to encompass the subject of the Years of Oppression as follows: spiritual resistance refers to the peaceful assertion of one's religious culture in the face of pressure to abandon that culture.⁶ (Another term, "nonviolence", usually employed to refer to an active but peaceful approach to transforming unequal power dynamics, is often used interchangeably with "spiritual resistance", and will also appear frequently in the study.)⁷ Spiritual resistance treads a narrow bridge between violent reactivity and passive submission, drawing on intangible forms of power in order to overcome oppressive measures.

R. Noson's response to the persecutions of 1834-1838 exemplifies this approach. As the study will demonstrate, R. Noson was given opportunities to utilize physical, social or political power in order to overcome his persecutors, but he

⁵ Further, internecine conflict raises special problems, e.g. many of the methods by which Jews responded to outside oppressors such as assertions of chosenness, etc., do not apply when the oppressing group is also Jewish. Finally, for the Jewish victims of the Holocaust, facing the coercive power of a modern army/state, the range of physical responses was far more limited, and the use of violence was rarely an option at all.

⁶ Although both Bratzlav and Savran were Hasidic groups, Bratzlav can be accurately described as constituting a "religious culture" unique in form and significantly different from that of other Hasidic groups (see Chapters 4 and 5). Also, Schindler's reference to "noncompliance with . . . prohibitions" does not apply to sectarian conflict in which neither group had the authority to impose prohibitions. Therefore, I have substituted the word "pressure", a broader term which more aptly describes the Savraner's uses of power.

⁷ This must be distinguished from the hyphenated term, "non-violence", which simply provides a negative description (the absence of violence), and is similar in usage to pacifism, not spiritual resistance.

Scholars in the field of Conflict Studies distinguish between pragmatic and principled nonviolence, that is, the practice of nonviolence for the sake of more effective results; and for inherent reasons of principle, which may ethical, aesthetic or religious. R. Noson is clearly an example of the latter category, as his nonviolent approach is based on religious principles, but pragmatic concerns also played a role in his response. See Robert J. Burrowes, *The Strategy of Nonviolence Defense: A Gandhian Approach*

consistently refused to engage in anything remotely akin to violence. At the same time, in spite of tremendous pressure to desist from his religious activities, he asserted and expanded those activities, continuing to build the Bratzlav community through teaching, writing new interpretive and applicative works, printing R. Nachman's lessons and tales, and organizing the New Year gatherings upon which the master had placed so much emphasis, and upon which the cohesion of the Bratzlav community depended. Motivated by a theology of reliance on God, he drew on techniques and practices from his religious tradition in the crafting of his response, on the basis of which he guided his followers to pursue peace, transform anger, and never surrender to the violent pressure of their persecutors.

In his study of the dynamics of nonviolent action, Gene Sharp offers the following broad definition of successful nonviolence:

For our purposes, "success" in nonviolent action will be measured by whether the avowed goals of the nonviolent group were achieved as a consequence of the struggle, either at its end or shortly thereafter...⁸

In the case of the persecutions of 1834-1838, R. Noson's self-identified goal was to ensure the survival of Bratzlav Hasidism, what he often called "the path of our Rebbe" [*derech Rabenu*]. Survival, for R. Noson, consisted of two elements: ensuring the long-term physical survival of Bratzlav Hasidism, and maintaining the group's spiritual integrity. Although only a minority of R. Noson's followers

(Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1996).

⁸ Eugene Sharp, *The Politics of Nonviolent Action* (Boston: Porter Sargent Publishers, 1973), 766.vol. III,

remained publicly identified with him and with Bratzlav during the Years of Oppression, many Bratzlavers continued to practice surreptitiously, and the movement survived and began to expand again with the cessation of the persecution.⁹ In the long term, Bratzlav grew exponentially, first into Poland between the World Wars, then in Israel and the New World.¹⁰ And, although we do have a few recorded instances of Bratzlavers responding to attack with violence or counterattack – in contradiction to their own professed religious principles – such instances are rare. Instead, the Bratzlav Hasidim generally avoided confrontation, and in certain cases applied methods similar to those of their teacher, R. Noson.¹¹ This is an indication of the effectiveness of his approach, and of his ability to communicate his principles to the Bratzlav community.

Beyond its immediate context, the culture of nonviolence created and fostered by R. Noson impacted later generations of Bratzlaver Hasidim. This impact can be seen in a brief note from Emanuel Ringelblum's diary of life in the Warsaw Ghetto (the entry of February 19, 1941) concerning the spiritual resistance of the Bratzlaver Hasidim.

In the prayer-house of the Hasidim from Bratzlav on Nowolipie Street there is a large sign: 'Jews, Never Despair!' the Hasidim dance there with the

p.766

⁹ Note Sharp's critical qualifier ("or shortly thereafter") in defining success. Nonviolent action can not necessarily be judged by immediate results. This is a critical element in any attempt to evaluate the effectiveness of R. Noson's response.

¹⁰ Bratzlav has grown in popularity in Israel, especially, over the last decades.

According to 20th century Bratzlav sources, even some of the Savraner's descendants became supporters of Bratzlav, going so far as to travel to Uman for the annual New Year gathering.

¹¹ See Chapter 6.

same religious fervor as they did before the war.¹²

R. Noson was the precursor and forerunner to this powerful example of spiritual resistance in the face of catastrophe.

Significance of the Dissertation for Conflict Studies¹³

Although the dissertation is situated in Jewish history and thought, its significance lies primarily in its contribution to the field of Conflict Studies. The study is interdisciplinary, drawing on one literature, Bratzlav, and the methods of historical and textual analysis associated with it, to demonstrate its relevance for another literature, Conflict Studies, the concerns of which provide the framework for this inquiry. The need for such an interdisciplinary study becomes apparent when we consider that often, Conflict Studies literature discusses nonviolence in its modern forms, as well as the modern thinkers, leaders and activists who promoted it. Often these personalities, many of whom drew on religious values and texts in developing their approaches, are evaluated in purely secular, social-scientific or political terms, while the religious aspects of their approaches are ignored or discounted. This is in

¹² Arthur Green, *Tormented Master* (Vermont: Jewish Lights, 1992), p. 266. The influence and inspiration of R. Noson of Bratzlav's response to conflict on later Bratzlavers is clear, although that response developed 100 years before the destruction of European Jewry by the Nazis. However, there is simply no way to project how R. Noson would have viewed the Shoah, whether he would have affirmed his quietist approach, as some Hasidic masters did; or whether he would have radically altered his theology. In that sense, his theology and response are limited to the pre-modern Jewish universe, one radically different than the Jewish universe after the Shoah.

¹³ This study refers to the academic field dealing with conflict, conflict transformation, conflict prevention, etc., as Conflict Studies, although the field is sometimes referred to by other names as well. When the general topic of conflict and its amelioration is discussed, "conflict resolution (lower case)" is used.

spite of the fact that it was often precisely those factors which rendered their approaches so compelling to religious actors. Scholars in the field have begun to recognize this lacuna and its consequences.

The field [of Conflict Studies] has been mostly developed in Western, industrialized, secular contexts. As such it has been harder to integrate the results with a variety of cultures and religious contexts that have their roots in pre-modern categories of thinking and feeling....This has led to a relative impasse in dealing constructively with those global and domestic conflicts today that have some roots in issues of religious identity.¹⁴

As a result, they have begun to argue for the introduction of religious ideas and dynamics to conflict analysis. The present study seeks to contribute to that goal, presenting a focused example of a religious response to conflict from which we can learn broader lessons regarding a new approach to conflict resolution.

As a pre-modern religious thinker, R. Noson of Bratzlav offers a valuable perspective on nonviolent approaches to conflict, for he drew on precisely the sort of traditional narratives that are commonly sidelined in Conflict Studies circles. Unlike modern proponents of nonviolence such as Hillel Zeitlin and Aaron Tamares in the Jewish community, and Mohandas Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr., for example, beyond that community, he drew almost exclusively on the traditions, texts and practices of his religious heritage.¹⁵ He did not look to outside philosophical or

¹⁴ Marc Gopin, *Between Eden and Armageddon: The Future of World Religions, Violence and Peacemaking* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 167. See also R. Scott Appleby, *The Ambivalence of the Sacred: Religion, Conflict and Reconciliation* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1999), p. 212, in which the author refers to the study of religion and conflict as an “inchoate field of inquiry” requiring serious and sustained study.

¹⁵ Literature on Gandhi and King is copious and readily available. For a brief examination of Zeitlin and

political thought in developing his ideas or his theological innovations. In this sense, he offers an example of a relatively unadulterated religious nonviolence, one that allows us to examine a more essential form than those allowed us through modern, synthesizing thinkers. Much of the present study is devoted to addressing and analyzing R. Noson's interpretive and theological methods and their relationship to the "spiritual authenticity" of which Schindler speaks. The implications of such an examination become clearer when we think about central issues, such as the significance of purity and the suspicion of secular influence, among religious actors in conflict.

The examination of this religious mode of nonviolent spiritual resistance will aid students of Conflict Studies in advancing possibilities for deeper, more nuanced responses to conflict situations, ones that speak to the large segment of humanity that prizes their religious heritages. By bridging the internal theological reflections of a relatively unknown Hasidic Jewish thinker and the social policies that emerged from his thought, this study will serve as an example of a new approach to the study of religion and conflict, one that bridges theology and social policy. In the words of a theologian who is preoccupied with similar concerns:

[We must examine]...the interrelationship between nonviolent liberating action and the creative revisioning of the world that occurs through spiritual reflection. [This] lends itself to rethinking the classic tension between action and contemplation, especially as it relates to political decision-making...the

Tamares and their contributions to modern Jewish nonviolence, cf. Ehud Luz, *Wrestling with an Angel: Power, Morality and Jewish Identity*, trans. Michael Swirsky (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), pp. 122-129.

need for an imaginative and liberating theology of nonviolence is more prevalent than ever...Spirituality and political commitment can no longer be disjoined.¹⁶

Survey of Literature on Bratzlav

Scholars in the field of Hasidism have contributed much to the explication of Hasidic texts; to our understanding of Hasidic leaders; and to the contextualization of Hasidic theology in a broader Jewish historical view. They have focused on the Hasidic community in both social and theological terms, but have rarely examined the contribution of Hasidic thought to broad social and political issues. This is even truer regarding 19th century Hasidism, as a result of the perception of Hasidism as having devolved by that period into a dynastic movement lacking in the charisma and creativity of the founders. But as both a mystical and social revolution, elements of Hasidic thought have much to contribute to softening the bifurcation of action and reflection.

Further, studies of Bratzlav have generally focused on its founder, the fascinating figure of R. Nachman, while relegating R. Noson to the role of amanuensis. Mendel Piekarz was the first to offer a more comprehensive treatment in his work on Bratzlav Hasidism. His analysis of R. Noson's written works, particularly *Likutei Halachos*, serves to highlight the formal aspects of those works and their contribution to Hasidic thought. Chaim Kramer's comprehensive biography of

¹⁶ Belden C. Lane, "Spirituality and Nonviolence", in Angie O'Gorman, (ed..) *The Universe Bends Toward Justice: A Reader on Christian Nonviolence in the U.S.* (Philadelphia: New Society Publishers, 1990), pp. 221.

R. Nason, while written from the standpoint of a believing Bratzlaver Hasid and not an academic scholar, is an invaluable source of information on the complex life of this Hasidic thinker.¹⁷ But R. Nason of Bratzlav remains to be addressed as a serious and creative thinker in his own right.

Perhaps as a result of these trends, little has been written on the subject of the Years of Oppression or on R. Nason's creative response. Some of the studies by Joseph Weiss, Arthur Green and David Assaf have touched upon certain stages of anti-Bratzlav activity from a historical point of view, but have not analyzed the events surrounding the Years of Oppression in any depth. Tzvi Mark has addressed the possible causes of the Svranner's animosity, but not its results. In his book on Hasidic historiography and controversies, David Assaf includes a chapter concerning similar anti-Bratzlav persecutions a generation after the subject of this study, in the 1860s. This chapter draws on an account of those events written by a secularist author, who presents a unique perspective on sectarian conflict in Hasidism generally, and on the reactions to and by Bratzlav Hasidim specifically; but we can only learn so much from the events of the 1860s to our present subject. None of these authors address the Years of Oppression, a significant and formative event in the history of Bratzlav Hasidism, in any comprehensive way. As Arthur Green notes in his book on R. Nachman, "...a full treatment of [the Years of Oppression] is still

¹⁷ Kramer, Chaim. *Through Fire and Water: The Life of Reb Nason of Breslov*. Jerusalem: Breslov Research Institute, 1995.

lacking.”¹⁸

Bratzlav Hasidism and Conflict

The 20th century Bratzlav author R. Levi-Yitzchak writes:

There were many moments when the Bratzlaver Hasidim thought that our Rebbe’s way [*inyan Rabenu*] was about to end, God forbid. [This was the case,] for example, during the great conflict in the time of R. Noson. Similarly, in the time of R. Nachman of Tulchin; and when the Communists took power and announced that anyone caught and identified as a Bratzlav Hasid would be sentenced to death; and after the Second World War, when the majority of Bratzlaver Hasidim were destroyed, both in Russia and in Poland....¹⁹

Bratzlav Hasidism holds a unique position as an example of a religious community defined to a significant extent by controversy. Few other Jewish sects in the post-medieval period were so constantly dogged by conflict from all quarters. The movement and its leaders were attacked by other Hasidim, who were alarmed by what they saw as the anti-authoritarian ideology and non-normative practices of R. Nachman and his followers. Bratzlav was satirized by modernizing secularist Jews, who found the mystical anti-rationalism of Bratzlav abhorrent, obscurantist and embarrassing. And, like other Jews in Eastern Europe, this Hasidic community was negatively impacted by changing governmental policies. The 20th century text above provides a sense of the perception among Bratzlaver Hasidim of the fragile nature of their spiritual path. This sense of fragility motivated R. Noson during the Years of

¹⁸ Green, Tormented Master, p. 130, n48.

Oppression as well, causing him to dedicate himself to the survival of R. Nachman's legacy and the living community that exemplified it.

The first generation of the movement saw rising antagonism on the part of leading Hasidic masters, including R. Baruch of Medziboz (R. Nachman's own uncle) and R. Aryeh Leib, known as the Shpola Zeide, against R. Nachman, while many other Ukrainian leaders viewed his innovations with suspicion. The open warfare conducted by the Shpola Zeide in particular opened the way for future fierce attacks, establishing a precedent that would be relied upon by later critics.

The echoes of these controversies did not subside with R. Nachman's passing, and they set the stage for the second iteration of intra-Hasidic strife, that which is the subject of this study, the Years of Oppression. In a later chapter the influence of the warfare between R. Nachman and the Shpola Zeide on the Years of Oppression will be examined.

The third generation of Bratzlav saw continued violence against R. Nachman's followers in Uman and environs by followers of R. Dovid of Telna, whose ancestors had been sympathetic to R. Nachman, but who now led the opposition. Anti-Bratzlav activity was expressed in a variety of ways, some more extreme than others. Open letters calling for social ostracism, economic sanctions, the tearing of Bratzlav texts, vandalism, and physical attacks were all manifestations of the antipathy with which Bratzlav Hasidim were met. Such attacks, both verbal

¹⁹ Levi-Yitzchak Bender, *Siach Sarfei Kodesh*, vol. 5 (Jerusalem: Torat HaNetzach, 5748-5760), 184.

and physical, by other Hasidic groups, continued even until modern times.²⁰

In addition to opposition on the part of rival Hasidic groups, the Bratzlavers were not immune to attacks by leading Maskilim, secularists. An entire literature of satiric works aimed at Bratzlav exists, and it has been argued that one of these works, Revealer of Secrets, which pokes fun at Hasidism in general and Bratzlav in particular, can be considered the first Hebrew language novel. The Bratzlav communities also had to face the external pressures and persecutions faced by so many Jewish communities in 19th and 20th century Eastern Europe, first by the Czarist police and pogromists, then by the Communists (who decimated the Bratzlav community in Uman in the 1920s), and ultimately by the Nazis, who invaded Ukraine in 1941.

In a sense, the experience of this small sect is the story of Jewish communities in their diaspora wanderings writ small. The need to negotiate uneasy balances of power and make use of *shtadlanut* (appeasement and negotiation) so as not to provoke oppressive measures or violent attacks; the ways in which external problems catalyzed internal conflicts as communities developed competing responses to threats; the manner in which anger, shame and honor were negotiated; and the methods employed by the leadership in fostering a culture of peace so as not to cause escalation which could be disastrous – all of these issues and dynamics were at play in the history of Bratzlav Hasidism.

²⁰ Ibid. Tormented Master, p. 130 n48. Note Green's reference to Yudel Rosenberg rebuking young men for mocking Bratzlav as late as 1912.

Throughout each of these episodes, Bratzlav leaders and laypeople continued to develop responses that were anchored in their master's teachings. Therefore, the student of Bratzlav Hasidism has five generations' worth of material dealing with conflict and persecution at his or her disposal. The majority of material was produced by the early leaders, especially R. Nachman and R. Noson, but there is a wealth of later material, both written and oral. The focus of the present study on the second-generation conflict and its results is due in part to the fact that R. Noson was by far the most prolific author in Bratzlav literature, and because his articulation is the most systematic and comprehensive, consisting as it does of novellae, aphorisms, letters and tales. I have relied primarily on his written opus, as well as on the unpublished manuscript, *Yemei HaTlaos*, describing the events of 1834-1838 from the standpoint of the Bratzlav community; but I have not refrained from making use of later sources and oral traditions and histories when appropriate. Bratzlav, then, is an excellent example of a religious group facing persecution by its coreligionists; and the years 1834-1838 served as a laboratory in which to test the nonviolent responses to conflict developed by this religious group and its leader.

Structure of Dissertation

New ideas and attitudes emerge from the lived experience of thinking people. In presenting this study of Hasidic nonviolence, it is therefore important to anchor the ideas in the lived experience of R. Noson.

It is important to understand not only the relevant texts of a religious system but also the actual practitioners themselves.²¹

With this in mind I have constructed this study of R. Noson of Bratzlav to take into account his inner life, his struggles as a victim of persecution and as a religious leader, and the nuanced dynamics informing his approach to conflict and peace. Therefore, following this Introduction the dissertation begins with Chapter 2, a brief biography of R. Noson which, in addition to providing an account of the important events of his life and significant aspects of his personality, theology and contribution to Bratzlav Hasidism, foregrounds the role of conflict in his personal history. Throughout, the study returns repeatedly to the details of R. Noson's inner life as they impacted his response.

In Chapter 3, the study moves directly into a presentation of the events that form the setting for this study, the campaign of persecution by R. Moshe Tzvi of Savran in the years 1834-1838, scholarly theories as to its causes, the main personalities involved and a chronology of events.

Before I examine R. Noson's response to those events, and in order to provide context, I pause to present important background on conflict in the Hasidic movement more broadly. Chapter 4 provides an important context for dynamics of sectarian conflict in 19th century Eastern Europe, a context that forms the backdrop against which the uniqueness of R. Noson's attitude and response will become more clearly evident.

²¹ Gopin, Between Eden and Armageddon, p.14.

Chapter 5 consists of an examination of the most important precedent to R. Noson's response to conflict, that of his teacher R. Nachman of Bratzlav. It was on the basis of his teacher's multifaceted approach that R. Noson developed his own. After presenting an account of the role of conflict with other Hasidic leaders in his life, I identify central dimensions of R. Nachman's theology of conflict and its basis in his other aspects of his thought. This involves reconciling disparate statements on the subject of conflict, and the search for fundamental principles underlying those statements.

In Chapter 6 the study returns to an account of the events of 1834-1838, focusing here on R. Noson's nonviolent response to the persecutions, including an account of his eschewal of various forms of violence as well as his spiritual resistance. In addition, examples from the lives of R. Noson's disciples and family members of nonviolence and spiritual resistance will indicate R. Noson's influence on the next generation of Bratzlaver Hasidism.

Chapters 7 and 8 provide analysis of several important aspects of R. Noson's response. Chapter 7 is a presentation of the ways in which R. Noson approached the challenge of communicating his nonviolent attitude to his followers, especially through the uses of narrative and his interpretation of biblical exemplars and Hasidic leaders.

Chapter 8 constitutes an analysis of the methods by which R. Noson applied inherited concepts and central motifs to the unfolding situation. This is accomplished by presenting four examples of central principles informing the response, each of

which demanded a different method of application. This analysis will aid us in identifying R. Noson's relationship to tradition and creativity, including R. Nachman's influence.

The concluding chapter, Chapter 9, offers a cohesive presentation of overarching principles that emerge from the study, and a discussion of the dissertation's implications for the study of religion and conflict.

CHAPTER 2: THE LIFE AND QUEST OF R. NOSON OF BRATZLAV

This study begins with a biographical sketch in order to introduce the reader to its subject, R. Noson of Bratzlav, who is among the unique personalities of Hasidic history. He cannot be viewed as a colleague of other Hasidic masters, for he insisted on his role as disciple until his death. Yet as a disciple he led his community through crisis, developing creative approaches to the manifold challenges that arose along the way. In order to examine his responses to his persecution by the Saveraner, we must first know something of his life story.

That life story is one of a follower who, through his submission to a teacher and religious leader, became a leader. R. Noson has most often been regarded by those scholars of Hasidism who do not overlook him entirely as the student *par excellence* of R. Nachman, as the master's amanuensis, and the main proponent of his teachings. For example, Joseph Weiss' chapter on R. Noson is devoted to an analysis of the distinction between his roles of student and scribe, and these are the sole categories that appear.²² But R. Noson was a gifted and original thinker in his own

²² Joseph Weiss, "R. Noson Sternharz of Nemirov: Student and Scribe of R. Nachman", in Joseph Weiss, *Mechkarim B'Hasidut Bratzlav*, edited by Mendel Piekarcz (Jerusalem: Mossad Bialik, 1974), p.66-86.

right, whose intellectual contribution constituted the single most significant development in Bratzlav philosophy from R. Nachman's time until the present. R. Noson elaborated upon central concepts in R. Nachman's works; he composed novellae and prayers on the basis of R. Nachman's teachings, which the master referred to as "prefaces"; he created a structure and hierarchy among the master's myriad lessons that allowed future followers to enter what might otherwise have been an intimidating and complex world of thought; and he provided a model of discipleship -- and leadership -- for future generations. Although there were other followers of R. Nachman with greater seniority, it was R. Noson who emerged as the central leader of the group after the master's passing, and it was he who transformed a Hasidic sect centered on a unique religious personality into a path accessible to generations of diverse seekers. He consistently asserted the relevance of R. Nachman's teachings to every Jew, from Torah scholars to simple laborers, and this was borne out in the great diversity of converts to Bratzlav Hasidism, first in Ukraine, then in Poland, Palestine and the New World.

R. Noson's biography is also a story marked by conflict: familial, communal and, perhaps most importantly, the inner conflict of a young man of great promise torn between convention and his yearnings for spiritual fulfillment. A Bratzlav text relates a legend concerning two men, study-partners who once became so heated in their argument that they struck one another with their heavy Talmudic tomes. According to tradition, R. Noson was descended from these two men, who were brothers-in-law, and R. Nachman once remarked that R. Noson was the descendant

who would rectify their sin. The element of rectification in this tale illustrates the essential connection between R. Noson and conflict. In this chapter I will emphasize conflict in R. Noson's life, both because of this connection and because the ways in which R. Noson dealt with the many tensions and struggles in his early years supplies much-needed context to his leadership later in life in the face of communal conflict and persecution.

Literature

Material for this biographical sketch is drawn from a number of Bratzlav sources, some of them from R. Noson's own hand, others recorded by his disciples and later Bratzlav leaders. In addition to his novellae, R. Noson kept a journal, entitled *Yemei MoHaRNaT*, probably starting in 1806.²³ As Chaim Kramer, the author of the only extant full biography of R. Noson in English, notes, R. Noson covers the early stage of his life (until age 16) in only a few lines of his journal, and he describes the next 6 years of his life in a single paragraph.²⁴ The journal becomes lengthier only when he recounts his life as R. Nachman's student. From this fact and from many of his statements, it is clear that R. Noson saw his life as significant only insofar as he was connected to his master. This sense of humility and surrender to R. Nachman typifies R. Noson's role, about which he said, "I am like a pen in the

²³ Chaim Kramer, *Through Fire and Water*, p.684.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

Rebbe's hands".²⁵ In addition to R. Noson's own works I have drawn here on later Bratzlav texts including *Kochvei Ohr* and *Siach Sarfei Kodesh*, which provide important perspectives on events recorded in R. Noson's autobiographical works. Finally, the aforementioned biography by Chaim Kramer, Through Fire and Water, provided important material as well as important fundamental research into the correlation of disparate texts from R. Noson's hand.

Early Life

R. Noson Sternhartz (1780-1844) was born on January 22, 1780, the Jewish holiday of Tu b'Shvat, in Nemirov²⁶ to a wealthy family. His father, Naftali Hertz Sternhartz, was a successful textile merchant; no details are known of his mother, Chaya Lana, except for the date of her death; and he had 3 brothers and 1 sister.²⁷ As a young man with good ancestry and from a wealthy family, and in accordance with the traditional structure of matchmaking in Eastern European Jewish communities, his marriage prospects were bright. At the age of 13, he married Esther Shaindel, the daughter of R. Dovid Tzvi Ohrbach, a renowned scholar and Chief Rabbi of the townships of Mohilov, Sharograd, and Kremenetz. R. Dovid Tzvi was to become a major influence on the young groom. As was customary in pre-modern Eastern European Jewish society, the young Noson was supported by his father-in-law while

²⁵ Avraham Chazan mi-Tulchin, *Sefer Kochvei Ohr* (Jerusalem: Hasidei Breslov, 5743 (1983)), p.5.

²⁶ Nemirov was a fortress town under Polish rule until 1793. It was also the site of a particularly tragic massacre at the hands of the Haidamacks in 1648, in which some 6,000 Jews were murdered.

²⁷ Kramer, Through Fire and Water, p.11.

he pursued advanced Talmudic and legal studies, at which he excelled. Noson seemed to be on a clear track toward rabbinic leadership,²⁸ honor and worldly comfort.

The terms of his marriage contract stipulated that Noson would be supported by his father-in-law for 2 years. In that time, the young couple lived with R. Dovid-Tzvi, who was also in charge of his son-in-law's religious training. Like many other new grooms in 19th century Eastern Europe, Noson was expected to spend his time single-mindedly on Torah study, focusing primarily on Talmud and *halacha*.

R. Dovid-Tzvi's influence, however, extended beyond the scholarly pursuits so prized by Eastern European Jewish society. As a leading rabbinic figure he also provided religious instruction pertaining to ethical, philosophical and legal matters. R. Noson later recorded that during this period he was convinced of the righteousness and sufficiency of his father-in-law's classical rabbinic approach to Judaism, which included a deep antipathy toward the Hasidic movement. This sentiment was rooted, according to R. Noson's later account, in R. Dovid Tzvi's own early explorations of Hasidism. As we shall see in a later chapter, the respected legal decisor was initially drawn to the movement and its fervor, but his attitude changed drastically when he witnessed the acrimonious controversy between two Hasidic groups, the sects of Koretz and Zlotchov. This type of infighting was such a

²⁸ See Levi-Yitzchak Bender. *Diburei Emunah* (vol. 1-4), (Jerusalem: Agudat Meshech Hanachal/Even Shtiyah, 2004-7). Cf. *Diburei Emunah* 3 for a late Bratzlav tradition regarding R. Noson's early potential as a *posek* [legal decisor]. As we shall see in Chapter 8, R. Noson was offered a post as a rabbi and legal decisor of Mohilev in 1804. Although R. Dovid Tzvi pressured him to accept the position, he turned it

violation of his religious sensibilities that R. Dovid Tzvi abandoned his experiments with Hasidism and took the side of its opponents. This was perhaps the first instance in which R. Noson witnessed the deleterious effects of strife, and R. Dovid Tzvi's antipathy and its origins in his encounter with Hasidism were a central part of the young student's education. R. Noson writes about this period that, influenced by his father-in-law and teacher, he was an opponent of the Hasidic movement as well.²⁹

At that time I was a great opponent [Mitnaged] of the Hasidim, because my father-in-law was very much against them, and he often spoke of them in my presence, and in the presence of his other sons-in-law and the members of his household, saying that his entire intention in speaking of the Hasidim was to keep us away from them.³⁰

After the agreed-upon two years were complete, in the autumn of 1795, Noson and his wife returned to his father's household in Nemirov. He continued to study, and over the next few years, he also began his education in business.

At this stage of his life R. Noson appears to the historian as a young man content to follow the direction of an authority figure who could provide him with religious guidance. His relationship with his wife at this point seems to have been free of the tensions later to characterize their marriage. This was all to change as adolescence brought with it an increasing sense of dissatisfaction with his life and religious pursuits. This unease was to inform the next few years and catalyze dramatic events that would change his life.

down. Cf. Levi-Yitzchak Bender, *Siach Sarfei Kodesh*, I-175.

²⁹ Avraham Chazan mi-Tulchin, *Yemei haTlaos*, (Unpublished manuscript, 5727 (1967)), p.5ff.

The Beginnings of Dissatisfaction

From an early age R. Noson was acutely conscious of human mortality.³¹ According to a late Bratzlav tradition³² as a child, he would sit with his grandfather at the East wall of the synagogue, a mark of respect usually reserved for leaders of the community. When one of the elders failed to arrive at synagogue one day, Noson asked where he had gone. He was shocked when told that the man had died. From this moment Noson was preoccupied by questions of mortality; but only later did this preoccupation develop into a sense of the futility of worldly life. By his own autobiographical account, this led him to feelings of despair and melancholy. He began to feel listless and dissatisfied by the traditional rabbinic value-system, which privileged intellectual mastery of sources, in which he was being trained. Intense and sincere, his yearning soul in turmoil, he began to seek ultimate answers to his deepest questions.

This inner dissatisfaction led him to confide in a friend and study-partner, Lipa, who had like many other young men made forays into the alternative communities of the Hasidim. This friend tried to convince Noson that the Hasidim were worthy of his attention, that “they were men of truth, and that it was

³⁰ R. Noson Sternhartz, *Yemei MoHaRNaT* (Lemberg, 1875), p. 7.

³¹ Avraham Chazan mi-Tulchin, *Sefer Kochvei Ohr*, p. 23.

³² Avraham Chazan mi-Tulchin and R. Shmuel Horowitz, *Avaneha Barzel* (Jerusalem: Hasidei Breslov, 5743 (1983)), pp.3,6.

appropriate to come close to them”.³³ Lipa advised him to seek out Hasidic masters for inspiration and a different, perhaps more satisfying approach to the questions with which he was preoccupied. After some initial resistance, due in large part to the fierce antipathy of his family to the Hasidic movement, Noson began to travel to the courts of some of the Hasidic luminaries of the time.

Exploratory pilgrimage to Tzaddikim was a central aspect of Hasidic practice³⁴ and, like so many other young men in that time and place, R. Noson’s spiritual quest was launched with these visits to Hasidic courts. Joseph Weiss has pointed out that in many ways R. Noson’s biography was representative of other young men who became attracted to the Hasidic movement. However, his story also represents a departure from the typical patterns that have been recorded of new “converts” to the Hasidic movement, especially in the timing of his search for a master. In many cases, the period immediately after marriage, a time of vulnerability and transition (especially given the typical age of marriage, 13 or 14), was when these adolescents left their homes and became followers of the Hasidim. R. Noson, by contrast, did not begin his quest until a few years after he had left R. Dovid Tzvi. Be that as it may, R. Noson joined the ranks of pilgrims in search of a master, he who would recognize the young man’s unique soul and be able to prescribe the proper rectifications (*tikunim*) on the basis of that recognition.

³³ Ibid., p. 6.

³⁴ For an introduction to Hasidic pilgrimage, see Aaron Wertheim, “The Hasid, the Zadik, and Their Mutual Obligations”, pp. 372-400, in Gershon David Hundert, ed., *Essential Papers on Hasidism: Origins to Present* (New York University Press, 1991).

From 1796, R. Noson spent time at the courts of the Ukrainian populist leaders R. Shimshon of Shepetovka, R. Zusia of Hanipol and R. Levi-Yitzchok of Berdichev, but continued to be dogged by the sense of futility that had plagued him for months. Although he appreciated the greatness of the masters and he recognized the enthusiasm of the Hasidim, he could not find a meaningful place for himself among these devotees. An illustration of his state of mind in this period can be found in the account of his leaving the court of R. Levi-Yitzchak of Berdichev. After drawing the shortest straw to determine who would to buy food for a Saturday night Hasidic gathering, R. Noson left the prayer-house to fulfill his duty. But on his way to the market, he said to himself, “Is this why I was brought into the world – to buy bagels?!” and continued walking. This short tale is illustrative of the intensity with which the young R. Noson approached his quest, and it is typical of the impatience he displayed for trivialities in the face of his burning questions.

Meeting R. Nachman

After journeying to a number of charismatic leaders without finding contentment, R. Noson heard of a new master who had recently moved to Bratzlav, only 9 miles from Nemirov.³⁵ The proximity of the young master opened the opportunity for R. Noson to travel for brief periods and obviate the opposition of his family. His friends who were also exploring Hasidism expressed it thus: “*a pitke a Guter Yid*”: for a small amount of money one can become a “Good Jew” (a Tzaddik),

meaning that now R. Noson could now pursue his quest with relative ease. After witnessing the enthusiasm with which his friend Lipa prayed after visiting the newcomer,³⁶ R. Noson (and his friend R. Naftali) decided to visit R. Nachman as well. His first visit took place on Sep. 18, 1802, a Sunday. According to Bratzlav tradition R. Noson's visit was preceded by a dream in which a man appeared to him as he was trying and failing to ascend a ladder. The man, who R. Noson later recognized as R. Nachman, said in Yiddish: "Climb! But hold yourself!"³⁷ R. Noson took this to mean that his intense spiritual striving must not come at the expense of equanimity. Upon meeting the young prodigy, R. Nachman is reported to have said, "Now I am no longer alone".³⁸ For the next 8 years R. Noson dedicated himself to his master, recording his lessons and stories as well as his informal talks and accounts of his life.

What was it about this master that was different, and that satisfied R. Noson's yearnings? One answer lies in a central feature of R. Noson's psychological makeup, an aspect of his personality that was to accompany him to his deathbed: he was a "*baal machshava*", best translated as a cerebral person, an over-analyzer. By his own account, he agonized over decisions, engaged in constant self-criticism, and distrusted his own religious experience. As all of his early training had been in the

³⁵ Avraham Chazan mi-Tulchin, *Avaneha Barzel* p. 8.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

³⁸ According to *Avaneha Barzel*, p. 10, R. Nachman told three stories at their first meeting, one of which dealt with R. Noson's initial doubts regarding both R. Nachman and himself. R. Nachman's reassurance (through the telling of a tale) was to be a central message to R. Noson: trust me, and trust yourself. The relationship between these two modalities of faith – faith in the leader/teacher, and self-confidence -

rationalist tradition, he had thus far not found any models or methods for transcending the constant over-intellectualization which plagued him. After his meeting with R. Nachman the relationship between simplicity and depth attained a central position in R. Noson's religious outlook. Even on his deathbed many years later, he said, "I know that I fulfilled the Rebbe's advice; my only concern is that I did not do so with enough simplicity." R. Nachman offered a new approach, one deeply critical of over-intellectualism, but which did not deny it a place in religious life. The concept of *tmimut*, simplicity; the exhortation to "throw away all of one's *chochmot* [superficial knowledge]", and R. Nachman's emphasis on faith and simple joy – these provided R. Noson with a profound sense of liberation.

Of course, we cannot discount the ineffable sense of personal connection that characterized this master-disciple relationship. This finds expression in many accounts of their remarks, both to, and about, one another. Once, R. Nachman jokingly remarked to R. Noson, "I have caught you in my net!" R. Noson replied, "Tie me tightly so I cannot escape!"³⁹ We must, however, balance this very personal aspect of their relationship with a central principle taught by R. Nachman and exemplified by R. Noson concerning the role of the Tzaddik as teacher.

R. Noson's relationship with and view of his Rebbe, in contradistinction to that of many other Hasidim of other sects, can be apprehended in an anecdote

constitutes an important foundation in R. Nachman's teaching, and in R. Noson's own life and quest.
³⁹ R. Noson Sternhartz, *Yemei MoHaRaNaT*, I:26. Also see Kramer, [Through Fire and Water](#), p.146.

related to a lesson in *Likutei MoHaRaN*, Lesson 282.⁴⁰ R. Nachman taught the lesson in two parts, the second of which when he was journeying to Lemberg. According to the tale, as R. Nachman's carriage was pulling away from Bratzlav, R. Noson ran after and caught up with it. R. Nachman offered his disciple the choice of a blessing or a Torah lesson. R. Noson replied, "A blessing you will give us when you return in good health from Lemberg. For now, teach us Torah!" Populist Ukrainian Hasidic culture (as well as the majority of its counterparts in Poland, Galicia and elsewhere) was predicated on the role of Tzaddik as intercessor and font of blessings. Students and householders alike traveled hundreds of miles to receive a blessing from the Rebbe. In a sense the currency of many Hasidic communities was the blessing, and this was expressed especially in tales of the wonder-working abilities of this Tzaddik or that. R. Nachman deemphasized this aspect of the Hasidic world, preferring to influence his followers to effect changes themselves through the spiritual practices he taught. R. Noson's choice of a teaching over a blessing was reflective of his teacher's own preferences, but it also is typical of R. Noson's view of R. Nachman's importance as a teacher, a fountain of replicable practices and lessons of relevance to all types of people and future generations. As R. Noson himself remarked of this decision, "I knew that if we did not hear the lesson now it would be lost forever."

This anecdote explains R. Noson's profound commitment to assiduously recording

⁴⁰ The two-volume *Likutey Moharan* (Collected Lessons of our teacher R. Nachman), a collection of 411 lessons, was first printed in Ostraha by R. Noson in 1807. The second volume was printed after R. Nachman's death in Bratzlav under a false city name (Mohlev) to protect R. Noson's illegal press. Both volumes were later reprinted together in Lemberg (1829) and Jerusalem (1933 and 1968), among other

as many aspects of his master's life and lessons as possible.

During the period of his discipleship, he witnessed the growing opposition to the master's iconoclastic path, and R. Nachman's varied responses in the form of aphorisms, full-length Torah discourses (the common medium of Hasidic teaching), and a completely unique medium: mythical tales. As with other facets of the master's religious vocabulary, R. Nachman's theology of conflict had a great impact on the disciple, who had only the faintest anticipation – because of his teacher's predictions – of the tempest that would later affect him so profoundly.⁴¹

Familial Conflict

But R. Noson was no stranger to conflict. His first and most extended experience of conflict was within his own family circle. From the moment he was drawn to R. Nachman, he faced severe opposition from his father, R. Naftali Herz, his father-in-law, R. Dovid-Tzvi, and from his wife, Esther Shaindel. He was accused of shirking his family obligations and of rejecting the education and expectations of his parents and teachers. His family's opposition to Hasidism generally, and Bratzlav in particular, ran deep; but more to the point, they felt that he was betraying his great promise as a rabbinic authority. Joseph Weiss has written of the tension between young men who joined the Hasidim and their wives, who saw their husbands abandoning them for holidays and extended stays at the courts of their new masters.

editions.

⁴¹ Kramer, Through Fire and Water p. 46.

The wives' families often became the *de facto* representatives of the wives' interests, and they brought to bear whatever social or legal pressures they could in order to convince or force the prodigal husband to return to his familial duties (and to his senses) – or to divorce.

R. Noson faced the prospect of divorce on a number of occasions. After his conversion to Bratzlav his wife considered requesting a get, a bill of divorce. She asked her father's advice on the matter, and R. Dovid Tzvi responded with a single question, which expressed his overriding concern: "Is he still studying Torah?" Esther Shaindel replied that yes, R. Noson was in fact studying more than before his meeting with R. Nachman, and her father convinced her to work to save her marriage.⁴²

On another occasion it was R. Noson who had a choice to make. After a long visit to R. Nachman, the time had come for him to return to his father-in-law's house. R. Noson's Hasidic friends, who knew of R. Dovid Tzvi's objection to his son-in-law's involvement with Hasidism, advised him to allow his wife to return to her family alone. This would likely have eventuated in divorce. R. Noson decided not to break up his family, a decision for which he was later to express gratitude, because "Had I been half a body,⁴³ I would not have been able to receive wisdom from the Rebbe". We see here two characteristics typical of R. Noson's decision-making: first, the reluctance to allow tension to lead to irreparable schism and the

⁴² Ibid., pp. 66, 326.

⁴³ This is a Talmudic term for an unmarried person, based on Genesis 2.

search for the unity underlying conflict; second, a markedly spiritual motivation for that reluctance. Both of these traits accompanied him throughout his life, and manifested in his policies toward his opponents in the Years of Oppression.

After the Rebbe

On October 16, 1810, R. Nachman passed away at the age of 38. It was to be expected that, with the loss of the Hasidic Rebbe and no replacement to be found, the group would dissipate and eventually disappear entirely – as happened with other Hasidic groups⁴⁴. Over the next 3 decades, it was R. Noson who held the loose community of followers together through regular visits and correspondence, displaying unshakeable belief in the continued relevance of the “old-new” path of Bratzlav even after the loss of its founder, consolidating and even expanding the movement. Unlike other disciples, among them more senior disciples who had followed R. Nachman for decades, R. Noson believed that the teachings and practices taught by the master could transcend the sectarian preoccupations typical of other Hasidic groups. Bratzlav, in R. Noson's view, was not to be another in an increasingly long list of parochial sects; it was to offer a multivalent spiritual path, reconstituting fundamental religious principles, never departing from Jewish law and, defined more than anything by its practices and not its worldview, available to any Jew from any social class.⁴⁵ As we shall see, it was R. Noson who insisted, soon

⁴⁴ e.g. Berdichever Hasidism.

⁴⁵ Throughout its history, Bratzlav has frustrated attempts to define the movement by sociological

after R. Nachman's passing, that the Bratzlavers pray with the main service in Uman (as opposed to founding a schismatic synagogue). It was R. Noson who gathered the scattered Hasidim for the first pilgrimage to R. Nachman's gravesite, a journey that would become a central tradition.⁴⁶ And it was he who spent the rest of his life teaching and publishing the works of R. Nachman in an attempt to establish a unique movement: a Hasidic community without a living master.

(Although it is beyond the scope of this dissertation, it is important to note R. Noson's journey to Israel. Like his master, R. Noson saw pilgrimage to Israel as a central aspiration. We have already remarked on the centrality of pilgrimage to R. Nachman's gravesite in Uman; R. Noson's journey to Israel can be seen as a new iteration of the same concept. R. Nachman had spoken of the Tzaddik's grave as "holy with the sanctity of Israel"; R. Noson remained dedicated to R. Nachman's gravesite, but chose to journey to the source of holiness – Israel - as well. This journey held a central place in his life, as it had for his master. In both biographies we find that significant conflict and controversy arose only after the return from the pilgrimage.⁴⁷)

R. Noson's Approach to Leadership

standards, and to this day, Bratzlaver Hasidim are Ashkenazi, Sephardi, Yemenite; Israelis, Americans and Europeans; religious from birth or returnees to the faith; ultra-Orthodox and bohemian artists, etc.

⁴⁶ Kramer, *Through Fire and Water*, pp. 222ff.

⁴⁷ Whether this was a result of the expanded perception the travelers experienced through contact with new vistas or rather of changes in the culture of Hasidism in the Ukraine that took place while they were gone is not clear. It seems that in R. Nachman's case, the change was internal, and that he returned from his

R. Noson was able to negotiate the complex issues surrounding leadership and succession with grace. In other Hasidic circles, when the founder died, leadership passed to a new Rebbe, who continued to perform the roles of the previous master. In this way the community maintained continuity, although leadership styles often varied greatly from generation to generation. In the absence of a successor, Hasidic communities generally disappeared, only the master's teachings remaining in the form of books and oral traditions. The Bratzlaver Hasidim felt that they could not replace their master, who they viewed as the wholly unique Tzaddik of the generation. R. Nachman had no living sons to whom the succession might naturally fall, and even had their been a hereditary successor, how could anyone take the unique master's place? On the other hand, without some form of leadership, the community would drift apart. Indicative of the dilemma faced by the Hasidim is an account of the first Sabbath gathering of Bratzlaver Hasidim in Uman on January 6, 1811:

Suddenly they felt uncomfortable: how could they sing the opening words of *Azamer Bishvochin*, which the Rebbe always used to sing himself? As they sat there feeling their loss, R. Noson said, "This is how the *Nachal Novea Mekor Chochma* – the flowing brook, the source of wisdom' (Prov. 18:4) – who never tasted sin, would begin: *Azamer Bishvochin*...And then we would sing after him..." Everyone then joined in happily.⁴⁸

The pedagogic creativity R. Noson displayed in finding a solution to the problem of how to continue the communal life of the Bratzlavers while acknowledging the

pilgrimage intent on pursuing radical changes in the Hasidic world.

radical change represented by R. Nachman's passing is characteristic. He did so by framing the moment as a story: "This is how [the Rebbe] would begin....And then we would sing...." As we shall see in Chapter 7, the use of narrative was a central technique utilized by R. Noson in seeking resolutions to seemingly intractable problems. Through storytelling, he was able to transcend the conflict between R. Nachman's absence and his presence; respect for the master and the need to move on; and the past and the future of Bratzlav Hasidism. In doing so, he was also able to simultaneously assert his own leadership while maintaining the informal and provisional nature of that role and avoiding direct comparison to R. Nachman.

Although he assumed the central leadership role after R. Nachman's passing, at various points in his career, R. Noson refused the title of Master, even when it was offered by senior Bratzlavers. On one occasion in 1834, R. Shimon, one of R. Nachman's earliest disciples, was visiting from Israel. After hearing R. Noson teach a Torah discourse at the Sabbath table, he exclaimed, "I always thought of R. Noson as a follower of the Rebbe; now I see that he is the Rebbe himself!" Some of the Hasidim present took up the notion and began whispering to one another that "R. Noson is the Rebbe!" R. Noson, hearing this, started yelling, "I know I'm not the Rebbe! I know I'm not the Rebbe!" making explicit his rejection of the title.⁴⁹ In fact, for a period after R. Nachman's passing, R. Noson refused to "say Torah" – to share

⁴⁸ Bender, *Siach Sarfei Kodesh*, I 568; Kramer, Through Fire and Water p. 226.

⁴⁹ Kramer, Through Fire and Water p.367. Mendel Piekartz, in his *Hasidut Bratslav*, (Jerusalem: Mosad Bialik, 1972), p. 207, takes this comment as sarcasm, but it is difficult to attribute sarcasm to R. Shimon, given what we know of his personality from other Bratzlav sources.

a discourse - at the Sabbath 3rd meal (traditionally the time at which Hasidic masters did so), until, as he related, a dream in which R. Nachman rebuked him for pushing away potential followers made him reconsider.⁵⁰ He did not wear the silk garments or fur hat of a Hasidic leader, and when a follower insisted on giving him a *schtreimel* he soon managed to lose it.⁵¹ In a sense this was consistent with R. Nachman's own approach to leadership: to insist upon the autonomy of the Hasidim, that they should not seek specific advice from the leadership, which would instead provide practices and general advice which the Hasid would apply to his own life. R. Noson took this one step further, by refusing the mantle of Rebbe entirely without denying his role and responsibility for his community. This is a unique model of Hasidic leadership, one which profoundly impacted R. Noson's response to the Years of Oppression.

R. Noson's Contribution to Bratzlav Thought

Although the culture and specific emphases of the Bratzlaver Hasidim were rooted in R. Nachman's life, teachings and personality, Bratzlav thought did not remain fixed and rigid. Instead it evolved from its inception to succeeding generations, and later thinkers made their own contributions.⁵² This pattern began

⁵⁰ Kramer, Through Fire and Water p.363.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p.362.

⁵² Indeed, this is a key to the survival of Bratzlav as a coherent community, as opposed to those Hasidic groups which dissipated after the deaths of the founders. Such later Bratzlav thinkers as R. Yitzchak Breiter, R. Avraham Tulchiner (Chazan) and R. Shimshon Barski often displayed a high degree of intellectual daring in their willingness to reformulate, expand and emphasize aspects of R. Nachman's thought. Examples include R. Yitzchak Breiter's emphasis on providence as the singular foundation of R. Nachman's thought; R. Avraham Tulchiner's statement that in latter days references to the Tzaddik in *Likutei MoHaRaN* are to be taken as references to the Messiah, and his emphasis on the Land of Israel; and

with R. Noson, who elaborated and restated his teacher's lessons, often diverging from the order and language of those lessons. R. Noson's works are characterized by an intense degree of surrender to R. Nachman. This can be seen especially in his *Yemei MoHaRNAT*, which, as Chaim Kramer has pointed out, is presented as autobiographical but is essentially an account of R. Noson's experiences with R. Nachman.⁵³ R. Noson's other writings focus mostly on R. Nachman, often skirting his own inner experience. At the same time, R. Noson's presentations of his master's teachings depart in significant ways from the original lessons as taught by R. Nachman. An important example of this pattern, one that is inextricably linked to R. Noson's self-perception, concerns the Bratzlav teaching on *hitchazkut*, "encouraging the fallen".

Encouragement

In his teachings R. Nachman discussed a wide-ranging and diverse array of religious and mundane phenomena. His teachings were directed toward accomplished scholars and practitioners – of whom he counted some of his closest followers - as well as simple householders and even those who were tempted by the nascent secularist movements of the time.⁵⁴ R. Nachman's teachings often acknowledge this diversity of his intended audience by setting forth descriptions of

R. Shimshon Barski's new presentation of Bratzlav thought in his *Likutei Etzot Ivri-Taitsch*.

⁵³ The work, presented as an autobiography, actually begins in 1806, essentially ignoring R. Noson's early life, marriage and visits to other masters.

⁵⁴ Note R. Nachman's complex and controversial relationship with the secularists in Uman.

and advice for a range of experiences and levels. This is expressed in some of the dialectical notions concerning the inevitable ebb and flow of spiritual life presented, for example, in Lesson 6:4.

When one wishes to walk in the ways of repentance he must be an expert in *halacha*, and he must have 2 types of expertise: expertise in running and expertise in returning.... And this is the aspect of ‘If I go up to heaven there You are’⁵⁵ – the aspect of going up [succeeding]; ‘and if I make my bed in hell – You are here’⁵⁶ – the aspect of going out [failing].’

In this passage R. Nachman presents a program for spiritual growth both for those who are successful and for those who fail in matters of the spirit. For one who has achieved success in spiritual life there is a great danger of complacency and arrogance. R. Nachman’s directive for such a person is to acquire ‘expertise in running’, to continue to run and seek growth, to avoid complacency. This challenge is represented by the first half of the verse in Psalms, “If I reach heaven – there You are”. For one who is in a spiritually low state, on the other hand, the danger is despair. The advice for a person in such a state is to utilize ‘expertise in returning’, to recognize that (as the verse continues) ‘If I make my bed in hell – You are here’, i.e., that God can be found even in the most difficult places.⁵⁷

Both types of spiritual station are addressed at length in this lesson. But by the 4th generation of Bratzlav the presentations of such lessons in commentaries, super-

⁵⁵ Psalm 139

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Bratzlavers often assert that a precise reading of the verse indicates that it is in fact easier to find God in Hell (“here”) than in Heaven (“there”).

commentaries and anthologies almost exclusively emphasize only one part of the lesson, the discussion of ‘expertise in returning’, encouraging the fallen. The following text by an early 20th century Bratzlav thinker is typical:

And aside from what is obvious to anyone who delves into his [R. Nachman’s] works... - that there is no advice that will not be found in his holy words - he exerted himself especially to encourage and strengthen all the tired and weak souls, even those who lie below in the ‘10 crowns of filth’, who descended in their sins to hell and below, to all of them he awakens and enlivens so that they will not despair, God forbid, from God’s mercy....to all of them he revealed the advice of ‘if I lay my bed in Hell – You are here!’ as well as the aspect of ‘Awaken and rise, dwellers in the dust!’, and that God is with them in all of the places to which they descended and that even from there they can still return to Him. And he cried out in his holy voice: ‘Gevalt! There is no despair!’ And he hinted to us that his whole focus, the reason he came to this world was to rectify the souls that had fallen....⁵⁸

Although the author acknowledges that “there is no advice that will not be found in his holy words”, he isolates encouragement as the essential dimension of R. Nachman’s works, quoting only half of the verse of Psalms R. Nachman used in Lesson 6. There is no doubt that the matter of “encouraging the fallen” is an important aspect of R. Nachman’s teachings. But in those teachings there is no indication that it is *sui generis*, to be taken as a concept of a different order. Many of the very lessons which discuss encouraging those who are unsuccessful in spiritual service – including Lesson 6, as we have seen – link that discussion with the parallel challenges facing those who *have* achieved spiritual heights. In fact, R. Nachman’s

⁵⁸ Introduction to *Meshivat Nefesh*, a collection of teachings by R. Nachman and R. Noson on the subject of encouragement, compiled by R. Alter Tepliker, p. 2.

lessons address myriad and diverse spiritual and existential situations, many of which are unrelated to the motif of encouragement, covering areas such as faith, the Land of Israel, sexuality, simplicity, music and dance, imagination and the natural world; there is no indication that this concept in particular should be privileged. Further, although we have few recorded traditions from others of R. Nachman's closest students, there are indications that they further developed their teacher's approach in quite different directions.⁵⁹ In short, the teachings on encouragement are not the dominant aspects of R. Nachman's written *oeuvre*, but later generations of leaders consistently privileged those teachings as uniquely characteristic of their teacher's message.

This evolution in the perception of R. Nachman's thought was a direct result of R. Noson's influence, which was itself an outgrowth of his identity and self-perception. Lesson 6 was taken by many of R. Nachman's senior disciples as an articulation of his special place as R. Nachman's disciple *par excellence*. As we saw above, in this lesson R. Nachman spoke of gaining "expertise in running" as well as "expertise in returning", but R. Noson consistently emphasized and identified primarily with the latter aspect. For example, in his *Likutei Tfilot*, which is composed of prayers based on the Lessons in *Likutei MoHaRaN*, R. Noson sketches the contours of R. Nachman's teaching on the two existential situations a person faces in life

⁵⁹ It would appear that disciples such as R. Shmuel Isaac emphasized concepts such as purity, spiritual intensity and an uncompromising stance against illusions. Stories and traditions regarding their students provide some information as to some of the alternative ways in which R. Nachman's teachings were understood and developed. See also Kramer, [Through Fire and Water](#) for information on R. Ozer.

according to R. Nachman – ascent and retreat, success and failure - but quickly turns his attention away from the former situation, moving into a deeper and more extensive prayer regarding the latter.

...Let me merit to ascend and retreat, and I will merit to be ... an expert in running and an expert in returning, and in every place I will be able to find You, whether in an ascent or a descent, as it is written, “If I make my bed in heaven, there You are; if I etc.”....

Please, O God, have mercy on me, let memory of me arise and come before You for good... and do not let me remain trapped, God forbid, in the low and base places I have been in until now.... Have mercy and raise me up, and from the dust of my poverty and from the great extent of my baseness lift me up! ...And take me out and raise me up from today onward from all types of falls, descents and distancing from You that I have distanced myself until now....

In this prayer R. Noson begins with a straightforward presentation - in prayer form – of Lesson 6, encompassing both dimensions of “expertise in *halacha*” set forth by R. Nachman. But he devotes many more lines of heartfelt prayer to the reality of having failed in spiritual terms.

It is difficult to argue that this was a deliberate attempt to alter R. Nachman’s teachings for the purpose of some hidden agenda. From the time of his first meeting with R. Nachman in 1802 R. Noson viewed himself as a writing instrument in R. Nachman’s hand, whose job was to record and transmit the Rebbe’s lessons, which he viewed as sacred text, as faithfully as possible. A more compelling line of thinking is that such changes in emphasis were expressive of R. Noson’s perception of his master’s true intentions, both for his lessons and for his chief disciple’s creative presentation of those lessons. It would appear that R. Noson viewed R. Nachman’s

lessons as malleable, and that altering the order or emphasizing certain aspects of the lessons did not betray the intent of their author. R. Nachman himself intimated that this was a proper approach to his teachings. He began training R. Noson to record his own discourses early in their relationship, describing his masterwork *Likutei MoHaRaN* as composed entirely of prefaces.⁶⁰ In fact it was soon after he taught Lesson 6 that R. Nachman first encouraged R. Noson to exercise intellectual creativity in applying the lesson to other concepts not elaborated on in the lesson itself. As a result of this guidance R. Noson became an innovator who did not hesitate to reformulate and supplement aspects of his teacher's thought to meet the needs of his day.⁶¹ Paradoxically, R. Noson's submission to his teacher and his creative spirit were mutually reinforcing. This is a theme we will revisit, as it played an important role in R. Noson's leadership during the Years of Oppression.

It is one thing to assert that R. Noson was comfortable expressing his intellectual and religious creativity in presenting R. Nachman's teachings; it is another to identify the value or values that informed such innovation. Surely R. Noson did not innovate for the sake of innovation alone. An extensive examination of the many examples of R. Noson's departures from the original lessons in *Likutei MoHaRaN* reveals a common pattern. The value that informed his presentation of his

⁶⁰ R. Noson Sternhartz, *Shivchei v'Sichos HaRan*, "The Greatness of His Attainments", #200.

⁶¹ It is common for R. Noson to change the order of ideas in his presentations of *Likutei MoHaRaN*, for example in *Likutei Tfilos*, *Kitzur Likutei MoHaRaN* and his *magnum opus*, *Likutei Halachos*. This work in its entirety extends and applies R. Nachman's ideas in novel ways. See, for example, *Likutei Tfilos* 282, 56 and compare with the Lessons on which they are based. The training R. Nachman gave to R. Noson may also have been related to R. Nachman's reading of the events unfolding during his lifetime: with the spread of modernity most Jews would struggle to maintain even fundamental aspects of religious life, and so they

teacher's thought was compassion. Whereas R. Nachman presented his lessons for people on many spiritual levels, R. Nosen tailors his prayers and commentaries primarily for those in moments of "return", a fallen state, and so he begins with those aspects of R. Nachman's teachings which can most readily be absorbed by one who is in such a state.

R. Nachman of Tcherin, one of R. Nosen's prominent disciples⁶², offers a framework in Bratzlav terms for understanding this pattern in the introduction to his super-commentary on *Likutei MoHaRaN*:

He [R. Nachman] hinted with this [lesson] at the connection between himself and his holy student R. Nosen. For this lesson was said soon after R. Nosen's coming close to him.⁶³ And one who is knowledgeable in R. Nosen's holy writings and knew him in life and heard his holy words and discourses and is somewhat an expert in his themes and the matters that he experienced will understand in his heart and will see with his mind's eye that was truly in this category [of Joshua and encouragement]. For most of his words concern encouragement in serving God, that no person of Israel should ever give up. Rather each person from his place should seek and search for God, and this is the aspect of being "expert in returning" which is explained in the lesson supra, which is the aspect of the lower point and Joshua And truly most of R. Nosen's conversations were about this, to strengthen every soul of Israel with great and wonderful encouragement to not despair of themselves, God forbid....⁶⁴

would require a great deal of encouragement as compared with R. Nachman's immediate audience.

⁶² R. Nachman of Tcherin was the grandson of R. Aharon the Rav, a close follower of R. Nachman and the rabbinic authority in Bratzlav. This R. Nachman was also a rabbinic decisor and a prolific writer whose reflections on R. Nosen's life in light of Bratzlav teachings offer invaluable insight into Bratzlav historiography.

⁶³ Lesson 6 was given October 2, 1802, at the 3rd meal of the Sabbath. R. Nosen first met R. Nachman on September 19 of the same year.

⁶⁴ R. Nachman Goldstein, *Parparaos L'Chochma* 6:6. R. Nachman of Tcherin goes on to discuss *Likutei MoHaRaN* II:7, which was taught at the end of R. Nachman's life, and in which the master again discusses Joshua and encouragement. This lesson was understood by senior disciples of R. Nachman as a form of ordination for R. Nosen, thus formally, though implicitly, charging him with the work of strengthening and encouraging other Jews. Other authors who interpret Lessons 6 and II:7 as referring to R. Nosen are Avraham Chazan mi-Tulchin, in *Yemei HaTlaos*, p. 133; and R. Levi-Yitzchak Bender, in *Siach Sarfei*

R. Nachman of Tcherin links the concepts of Joshua, “expertise in returning” – and R. Noson himself. Those who are on a low level, far away from God, require encouragement, while Joshua is the one who provides that encouragement. R. Nachman of Bratzlav’s implication that R. Noson would play the role of Joshua to his own Moses establishes R. Noson’s special relationship not only with R. Nachman but with the idea of encouraging “every soul of Israel”. Indeed, the consistent emphasis in R. Noson’s teachings, the foundation of many of his discourses, and the repeated trope in his prayers and letters is the notion of constant encouragement and the battle against despair. Even on his deathbed R. Noson was heard to repeat the words, “The merciful who increases forgiveness”, a final instance of the type of encouragement which typified his life’s work and mission.

This singular sense of mission impacted R. Noson’s presentation of R. Nachman’s thought. It accounts for the freedom with which he often represents his teacher’s insights, and it establishes the relationship between the primary texts of R. Nachman and the secondary texts – most of which are presented as applications and not commentaries per se – of R. Noson. It is of course difficult to separate R. Nachman’s and R. Noson’s thought entirely. The young R. Noson was drawn to R. Nachman precisely because R. Nachman’s teachings were uniquely consonant with his own existential realizations regarding mortality and his personal struggles with

Kodesh, I:654, in which the author presents this idea in the name of R. Aharon the Rav. Of course, it is not clear that this interpretation was unanimously accepted.

melancholy and pessimism. Yet when we explore R. Noson as a thinker in his own right we find that, although the central motifs of his thought evolved and were transformed through his experiences with R. Nachman, R. Noson's innovations - of omission, emphasis, and the further development of his master's thought – constitute significant original contributions.⁶⁵

R. Nachman said, “Were it not for R. Noson not a single page of mine would remain.”⁶⁶ On one level this is simply a reference to R. Noson's role as the master's scribe, preserving every utterance for posterity. But this statement can also be understood – in contrast to the ways in which academic scholars such as Weiss and Green have portrayed R. Noson - to mean that it is R. Noson's intellectual and religious *creativity* which allowed R. Nachman's teachings to survive, and that it is particularly through the emphasis on encouragement and joy that the myriad other aspects of his thought might be attained. This is a significant point for our study, for R. Noson's unique ability to integrate the two modes of tradition and innovation holds one of the keys to his response to the Years of Oppression.

R. Noson's Major Works, Methodology and Worldview

R. Noson's interpretive approach relied heavily on R. Nachman's but extended it in new directions. Like his master, R. Noson found a synthesis of

⁶⁵ R. Nachman famously referred to his *Likutei MoHaRaN* as “all prefaces”, i.e., a fundamental work on the basis of which his followers were to develop their own insights. The relationship between faith in R. Nachman and religious creativity among later Bratzlavers is one of the fascinating aspects of this religious community, and will be examined later in the study (See Chapter 9).

rabbinic and mystical frameworks that could be applied to diverse and novel phenomena. Like R. Nachman, R. Nosen did not claim that his interpretations were exclusively correct. In his *magnum opus*, *Likutei Halachos*, R. Nosen offers multiple interpretations of the inner meaning of Jewish law – its symbolic or mystical significance according to Hasidic thought, especially that of R. Nachman - without contradiction. What in other works would be considered interpretive inconsistency, in *Likutei Halachos* is a celebration of the plurality of possible approaches to assigning meaning to Jewish practices. In not attempting a grand theory of *halacha* R. Nosen mirrored his teacher’s approach to offering “prefaces” upon which later thinkers could build. In addition, R. Nosen followed his teacher’s associative method, bringing motifs and concepts to bear on one another that share no common contextual connection.

At the same time, his comprehensive knowledge and talent for synthesis allowed R. Nosen to weave the disparate strands of Hasidic concepts and Jewish law in all its details into an approach that was applicable in new situations. This mirrors the classical Jewish legal process, in which basic concepts are explicated over time, foundational principles are established, and new questions are met with novel applications of inherited ideas. In *halacha*, competing opinions are preserved, and, certain general rules of decision-making notwithstanding, remain part of the canon for future application in appropriate cases. *Likutei Halachos* follows a similar arc, in

⁶⁶ Avraham Greenbaum, ed., *Tzaddik*, (Jerusalem: Breslov Research Institute, 1987), 369. See also Kramer, *Through Fire and Water*, p. 156, and Avraham Chazan mi-Tulchin, *Yemei HaTlaos*, I 30.

which basic principles provided by R. Nachman – which themselves are a composite of classical ideas – are unpacked, juxtaposed and applied to specific Jewish laws. After its publication, *Likutei Halachos* served later generations of Bratzlav thinkers as a lexicon of both spiritual concepts and methodologies of their application to Jewish praxis, both legal and social. In this sense, R. Noson drew on his early training as a halachist [legal scholar] in applying halachic methodology to mystical thought and communal practice. An oral tradition in the Bratzlav community attests to the dual nature of the Bratzlav canon, which mirrors that nature of the tradition itself: R. Nachman’s work is the “written Torah” and R. Noson’s is the “oral Torah” of the movement. This aphorism is meant to create a deliberate parallel to the traditional structure of the canon; it implies both the interdependence of master and disciple, and the simultaneous comprehensiveness and flexibility of Bratzlav texts which is characteristic of classical texts.

Conflict within Bratzlav

This flexibility notwithstanding, the Bratzlav community itself was not immune to strife. Although Bratzlav sources downplay conflict among the disciples of R. Nachman, it is clear from certain sources – as Mendel Piekartz has shown⁶⁷ – that tension and outright controversy did exist between R. Noson and other Hasidim. In particular, opposition to R. Noson’s leadership arose from within the Dashev circle, led by R. Shmuel Isaac and R. Yudel, two of R. Nachman’s earliest

disciples and themselves former leaders of esoteric circles. The two became followers of R. Nachman when he was living in Medvedevka, and after R. Nachman's passing in 1810 they led their own circle of followers. One of these followers, a R. Shlomo Reuven Zlates, was responsible for a rift between R. Noson and R. Shmuel Isaac in 1826, of which little is known. Their positions of influence made their opposition particularly damaging to the unity of the Bratzlavers and to R. Noson's position.

According to Piekarz, the first instance of controversy between the followers of R. Nachman took place in 1810, following the master's death, when R. Noson objected to the Bratzlavers praying in a separate quorum. R. Avraham Chazan (d. 1911) writes:

Once I heard from my father [R. Nachman of Tulchin, R. Noson's close student and successor] a story of the building of the synagogue in Uman (that he heard from R. Noson)... On the eve of Rosh Hashana [the time of the annual gathering at R. Nachman's gravesite] R. Yudel and R. Shmuel Isaac and other elder Hasidim, decided to pray in the place in which R. Nachman had prayed during the last Rosh Hashana of his life... But R. Noson insisted to them that he had heard R. Nachman say to him and to R. Naftali: "I want you to be mixed in among the 'world' [the larger Jewish or Hasidic community]". R. Noson therefore wanted to pray in the [non-Bratzlav] Shomrim LaBoker synagogue which had recently been built. But because the other Hasidim stood against R. Noson on this point the community decided to pray where they were... Towards evening, R. Noson's heart began to burn with pain and suffering over their disregard for R. Nachman's words... until finally he put his overcoat back on and prepared to leave to go to the aforementioned main synagogue – and not to pray at all with the students of R. Nachman. When R. Naftali saw this he was persuaded to also go to the main synagogue... and all the Bratzlaver Hasidim were so persuaded and joined him in the end.⁶⁸

⁶⁷ Cf. Piekarz, *Hasidut Bratzlav*, p. 205ff.

⁶⁸ Avraham Chazan mi-Tulchin. *Sefer Kochvei Ohr*, p. 140-142.

As a minority of one facing down older influential students of R. Nachman, R. Noson was risking the loss of the loyalty of the other members of the community, but in the end his passionate and unconditional insistence convinced the other Hasidim. This seems to have been a formative moment in his development as a leader of the Bratzlavers, and it is striking that R. Noson was willing to defect from the Bratzlav community in order to fulfill his understanding of R. Nachman's words. More to the point, he was willing to break from his particular community for the sake of being "mixed in" with the larger community.⁶⁹ From this episode it is clear that a central issue at stake in the conflict between R. Noson and the Dashev circle was the question of integration versus isolation of the Bratzlav community, which was related to ascetic vs. more accessible approaches to interpreting and presenting R. Nachman's teachings. Later the tensions within Bratzlav would come to be expressed in competing responses to the Years of Oppression (see Chapter 6).

A short time after this episode, a break with R. Naftali, his oldest and possibly closest friend, was narrowly averted.⁷⁰ Other tensions existed within the community as well. A Bratzlaver who claimed the Messiah was coming in the year 5600 cursed R. Noson for frowning upon such speculation (though the Hasid, whose name is not recorded, later apologized). And R. Aharon, another senior follower, felt

⁶⁹ This sentiment may have been rooted in R. Noson's father-in-law and earliest significant teacher R. Dovid Tzvi's antipathy toward sectarianism, discussed above. In addition, R. Dovid Tzvi's example of a halachic leader and rabbinic decisor may have influenced R. Noson, since the role of legal decisor (*posek*) often involves the search for peace between conflicting parties. In this vein it is interesting to note that R. Noson invoked that aspect of the *posek*'s role in his letter to the Savraner (see Chapter 6). The extent of R. Dovid Tzvi's impact on R. Noson has not been subject to critical inquiry and requires further study.

uncomfortable with R. Noson's openness to all sorts of students, even those who appeared unbalanced or fanatical. Chaim Kramer writes that the reason for this discomfort may have been the perception that this element would lead to greater anti-Bratzlav opposition.⁷¹ However, these issues did not lead to serious schisms within Bratzlav Hasidism.

R. Noson in the Period Preceding the Years of Oppression

By the 1830s R. Noson had accomplished much in the way of establishing Bratzlav as a viable Hasidic community. He had consolidated the movement through the establishment of the annual pilgrimage to Uman; he had engaged in the printing of R. Nachman's works; and he had raised funds to build a prayer-house so the Bratzlavers would have a space in which to gather and worship in their own way.⁷² He had traveled to Israel, fulfilling a lifelong dream of sacred pilgrimage. R. Noson had also weathered a number of dangerous storms, including challenges to his leadership by other senior followers of R. Nachman, a narrowly-averted break with R. Naftali, his oldest friend and a close follower of R. Nachman, and the ongoing marital trouble that accompanied his journey to Hasidism.

The Bratzlaver Hasidim were a tightly-knit if small community. Their

⁷⁰ Kramer, Through Fire and Water p.327-30.

⁷¹ Ibid., pp. 359-362.

⁷² In spite of his principled objection to a separate synagogue, in later years he recognized the need for the community to establish its own meeting-space, both because of the lack of a large space in any of the Bratzlavers' homes, and because of the opposition the Hasidim faced when they prayed with great fervor and volume - as was their signature style - in other synagogues.

followers numbered over 100,⁷³ with centers in Teplik, Tcherin, Breslov and Uman. Due in large part to R. Noson's leadership, they had come to terms with the idea of a Hasidic community without a living master and had managed to maintain strong bonds while allowing for diversity of paths within the movement, with a number of subcultures, teachers and styles coexisting in peace and mutual respect. Economically, the Bratzlavers lived for the most part in poverty, relying on the charity of a handful of well-off followers for extra holiday expenses and the like.⁷⁴ They were also scattered throughout Ukraine, as far as Medvedevka, Dashev and Tirhovitza.⁷⁵ R. Noson's circle of students and followers⁷⁶ were devoted and willing to exert themselves for the cause of the proliferation of R. Nachman's teachings, the printing of his works, and new gatherings of the Hasidim.

In spite of these successes the position of the Bratzlav community was tenuous. Surrounding Hasidic groups displayed antipathy toward the Bratzlavers, to whom they often referred as "the *toiter* [dead] Hasidim" because of their lack of a living Rebbe, and public expressions of scorn for the iconoclastic group occasionally occurred. Some of this antipathy was rooted in the opposition of members of the previous generation of Ukrainian Hasidic masters to R. Nachman (see Chapter 5), but there were new sources and motivations for continued opposition as well. Thus

⁷³ Kramer, Through Fire and Water p.359.

⁷⁴ Avraham Chazan mi-Tulchin, *Yemei HaTlaos*, 41a. However, the Bratzlav communities in the Tcherin-Kremenchug-Medvedevka triangle were quite wealthy and well-established and were very supportive of the projects initiated by R. Noson.

⁷⁵ Cf. Joseph Weiss, *Mechkarim B'Hasidut Bratzlav*, p. 38 n. 6.

⁷⁶ Among his most devoted followers were R. Nachman Tulchiner, R. Moshe Breslover, R. Nachman of Tcherin, R. Noson's son R Yitzchok, and R Shimshon "From-the-Forest". Cf. Kramer, Through Fire and

the stage was set for the explosion of hostilities that would commence in the year 1834, a series of events the Bratzlavers would refer to as “The Years of Oppression”. The persecution they faced in those years tested the resolve of R. Nachman’s followers, as well as the leadership of R. Nachman’s chief disciple, R. Noson.

Water 359ff for further information on these followers.

CHAPTER 3: THE YEARS OF OPPRESSION, 1834-1838

The campaign of persecution led by R. Moshe-Tzvi of Savran which took place in the 1830s had antecedents both in the controversies concerning R. Nachman (which will be discussed in Chapter 5) and in the suspicion with which the Bratzlavers as a community were viewed after his death. But it differed too in intensity, extent of organization and popular support. As a result of the activities of Hasidic leaders and householders alike, legitimate critiques of the Bratzlavers' theology and behavior evolved into blanket condemnation and a full-scale campaign to destroy the sect. Testimonies concerning stone-throwing, the destruction of property, physical assaults, public humiliations and the tearing and defacement of R. Nachman's writings abound in Bratzlav sources and are mentioned in later non-Bratzlav accounts.⁷⁷ In addition to such spontaneous public acts of violence against the Bratzlavers, a concerted campaign of communal exclusion and slander to governmental authorities was leveled at R. Noson himself, leading to his imprisonment and exile. As was mentioned in the introductory chapter, Raphael Mahler noted that this campaign holds a unique place in the history of intra-Hasidic

⁷⁷ Cf. David Assaf, "'The Causeless Hatred is Ongoing': The Struggle against Bratslav Hasidism in the 1860s," *Zion - A Quarterly for Research in Jewish History*, vol. 59 (1994): p.466.

violence and sectarian persecutions as “more sadistic than any of the persecutions of the [early] Hasidim by their opponents”⁷⁸. In this chapter we will examine the central factors that informed the actions of R. Noson’s persecutors as well as present a synopsis of the events. This will serve as background to our study of the response of R. Noson of Bratzlav to these events.

Literature

We have a number of sources for the anti-Bratzlav campaign of the 1830s. R. Noson’s letters offer the most immediate account of events, and his care in distinguishing between his own experiences and the reports of other Bratzlavers in other towns is helpful in evaluating his proximity to the incidents he records. Later Bratzlav sources include *Yemei HaTlaos* by R. Avraham Chazan, *Tovos Zichronos* by R. Noson’s great-grandson R. Avraham Sternhartz and material concerning the conflict dispersed in *Siach Sarfei Kodesh*, a collection of oral traditions from a 20th century Bratzlav leader R. Levi-Yitzchak Bender. The Bratzlav accounts, both contemporaneous and following the 1830s, written as they are from within a religious community with a unique worldview, tend to emphasize psychological and personal elements of the strife. They do not generally record matters of a sociological character such as distinctions between trends in Hasidism. However these accounts provide the contours of the affair without which no analysis of its causes could even

⁷⁸ Raphael Mahler, *Dorot Aharonim* 6, p. 32, quoted in David Assaf, *Ne’echaz Ba’Svach: Pirkei Mashber u’Mvucha b’Toldot haHasidut* (Jerusalem: Mercaz Zalman Shazar, 2006), p. 180 n. 3.

begin. The oral historical material in particular, such as that recorded in *Siach Sarfei Kodesh*, offers glimpses into the particular experiences of people marginal to the narrative: anonymous householders with strong opinions concerning the conflict, young Bratzlav Hasidim whose names appear nowhere else in the literature and witnesses to the persecutions of the small Bratzlav sect.

Although we do not have access to contemporary accounts of the conflict from non-Bratzlav sources (with the exception of the few Russian court records regarding R. Noson's incarceration), extant accounts of anti-Bratzlav activities in Ukraine after R. Noson's time (circa 1864) written by Maskilim have been subjected to analysis⁷⁹. From these non-Hasidic accounts it is possible to derive information about the details of persecution of the Bratzlavers, although the main actors in the 1860s were the Telna Hasidim and not the Savraners.⁸⁰

Lacking almost entirely are sources from within the Savraner community. (This may be due in part to the disruption of that community after R. Moshe Tzvi's death, which will be discussed later in this chapter.) This presents methodological problems in determining the causes and motivations behind the opposition to Bratzlav, since sources originating in the latter camp are not free of a polemical character. For example, R. Avraham Chazan, author of the Bratzlav account *Yemei HaTlaos*, offers a view of the causes of the conflict that avoids reference to specific aspects of Bratzlav thought or practice. In his view the opposition arose mainly from

⁷⁹ Cf. David. Assaf, *Ne'echaz Ba'Svach*, BaSvach ch. 3.

⁸⁰ The HaMelitz article played into Maskilic anti-Hasidic bias. The author expresses horror at the actions of

a series of misunderstandings and personal rivalries. No doubt these played a role, but it is difficult to accept that a more substantive critique of the Bratzlavers' way of life had nothing to do with the Savraner's actions, especially in light of the charges leveled at the Bratzlavers in the previous generation. As we shall see, other Bratzlav accounts do mention some of these charges, but it is difficult to determine whether these accounts are exhaustive. Thus, attempts to provide a rationale for the Savraner's opposition to Bratzlav will be limited to theory; nevertheless, we will proceed to examine the sources.

Roots of the Years of Oppression

Although by the 1830s R. Noson had succeeded in strengthening, consolidating and expanding the Bratzlav community, the followers of R. Nachman had not escaped the echoes of the conflicts that had plagued their master for much of his adult life. Hasidim of the Ukraine remembered the intensity of the mutual antipathy of R. Nachman and the Shpola Zeide, as a result of which many Hasidic leaders took one side or another in the conflict. Bratzlav was perceived by many as unstable and iconoclastic, lacking in a proper authority figure after R. Nachman and set apart by abnormal practices. Bratzlavers were often referred to by other Hasidim as the “*toiter* (dead) Hasidim” because they followed a master who had passed away years earlier. Other Hasidim viewed Bratzlav, with its emphasis on solitary prayer and reflection, as a path that led to melancholy and the abjuration of important

the anti-Bratzlav elements. Cf. Piekarz, *Hasidut Bratzlav*, p.210.

values such as the pursuit of livelihood. R. Nachman's ambitious claims about his unique place in the Hasidic hierarchy, as well as his opinions on the role of other Hasidic leaders also struck certain leaders as arrogant and dangerous. These issues were expressed through a steady recurrence of small-scale anti-Bratzlav activities such as public name-calling and social shunning. Although there were Hasidic leaders who were sympathetic to the group, their defense did not have a considerable impact on the sentiment of the Bratzlavers' detractors. As R. Nachman himself had said, "Either my followers are correct, and I am the Tzaddik of the generation, or my opponents are correct..."⁸¹ Such was the polarized culture of perception, at least in part, among Ukrainian Hasidim, a culture which contributed to the explosion of antagonism during and after R. Noson's lifetime.

The extent to which these pre-existing factors contributed to the events of the Years of Oppression, a generation after R. Nachman's death, cannot be definitively ascertained. It is certain, however, that the general climate of suspicion in R. Noson's time did not arise from a vacuum, and that the confluence of such a climate and other issues is what gave rise to the intense antagonism displayed by the Savraner and his followers. In the case of the later Bratzlav-Savran conflict, inherited issues such as those regarding R. Nachman joined with new points of tension both personal and ideological to create an atmosphere that was increasingly hostile to R. Noson and the Bratzlav community.

⁸¹ *Hayei Moharan*, "His Awesomely Great Attainments", Section 22, #262

R. Moshe-Tzvi of Savran

In our chapter on conflict in Hasidism (Chapter 4) we will examine the contribution of various dynamics to intra-Hasidic strife. In the case of the campaign against Bratzlav in the 1830s unique factors are also at play. We will examine these factors in turn, beginning with an examination of the role of the leader and central protagonist in the campaign, R. Moshe-Tzvi Guterman of Savran (1779-1838). It is clear from the sources that many of the factors that contributed to the campaign against Bratzlav, ranging from ideological issues to personal jealousy found a home and an organizing element in the person of the Savraner. As Tzvi Mark writes regarding the role of slander in creating a virulently anti-Bratzlav climate,

...it is clear that the false charges that had no basis in fact could only be accepted by the Savraner after he had already developed an antipathy to R. Noson. It would appear that the slanderers presented their claims to the Savraner because they expected to find a sympathetic ear for their "testimonies".⁸²

If it is true that factors such as slander had a significant impact only because they were received by someone with a sympathetic ear, it is necessary to identify more fundamental causes for the Savraner's antipathy, ones that predate the proximate causes of the activities of 1834-8.

R. Moshe Tzvi was a student of two of the leading Ukrainian masters, R. Levi-Yitchak of Berdichev and R. Baruch of Medzibodz. After the deaths of his teachers he served as rabbi in Berdichev and later established himself in Savran,

⁸² Tzvi Mark, "Lamah Radaf HaRav miSavran et Hasidei Bratzlav", in *Sivan*, vol. 69, (2004), p.489.

about 45 miles south of Uman.⁸³ He was known as a great scholar with a zealous and quarrelsome personality.⁸⁴ Unlike other Hasidic leaders of his time, he did not inherit his court from his father (though his father, Shimon Shlomo, was a follower of the Magid); instead he built a new Hasidic group from nothing. Over the next decades he attracted thousands of followers, and as the centers of Hasidic activity moved from Ukraine to Poland he became one of the few remaining masters there. According to Bratzlav accounts R. Moshe Tzvi met R. Nachman in his youth. R. Nachman wanted to draw him near as a follower but the young Hasid declined the invitation. In later years, after he had become a follower of R. Baruch of Medzibodz, it is possible that the latter's opposition to R. Nachman (his nephew) influenced him.⁸⁵

The reasons for the Savraner's personal rivalry with R. Noson are not entirely clear. The two had some interaction in their youth, and R. Noson held him in high esteem, saying there was no one else with whom he could discuss certain kabbalistic concepts.⁸⁶ A brief account of one of their meetings related in two later Bratzlav texts indicates a friendly rivalry and perhaps a subtle antagonism between them.

When they were both staying at the home of R. Nesanel of Teplik, who was known for his stinginess, the Savraner asked R. Noson why he did not wear a silk garment in the manner of Hasidic leaders. R. Noson replied jokingly that it was because of R. Nesanel's miserliness. The Savraner then

⁸³ Kramer, *Through Fire and Water* p.261.

⁸⁴ He also was one of the chief opponents of R. Israel of Rizhin. See David Assaf, *Derech HaMalchut: R. Yisrael MiRuzhin u'Mkomo b'Todlot HaHasidut* (Jerusalem: Mercaz Zalman Shazar, 5757 (1997)), p 94.

⁸⁵ R. Baruch's opposition will be discussed in Chapter 5.

⁸⁶ The *sod ha-Ibur*, a complex mystical concept based on the rabbinic laws concerning the determination of the New Moon.

told R. Noson about a leading halachist whose decisions were not accepted because of his stinginess, and then said it was a secret among the great sages who this person was. When R. Noson nodded, indicating that he knew of whom R. Moshe-Tzvi spoke, the Savraner asked him to whisper the halachist's name. R. Noson did so, and the Savraner, impressed, said "You should surely wear a silk garment!"⁸⁷

The Savraner's reference to R. Noson as a Hasidic leader (as well as the latter's oblique response) and his request that R. Noson prove his knowledge of a sensitive and esoteric bit of gossip bespeak a double-edged sentiment, a mixture of admiration and jealousy. It seems that this brief conversation skirts the real issue: a comparison of the two colleagues' leadership styles. That both men had met R. Nachman but had chosen very different paths in Hasidism – R. Noson the path of disciple and R. Moshe Tzvi the path of populist leader - set the stage for their later relationship: the Savraner must have wondered at times who he would have been had he not refused R. Nachman's invitation to discipleship. The ambivalence displayed by the Savraner in this tale was reflected in his later actions and statements concerning R. Noson and the Bratzlav Hasidim.

(It is also possible that R. Noson and R. Moshe-Tzvi encountered one another later, when the Savraner was a student and R. Noson a guest of R. Levi-Yitzchak of Berdichev. If this is so, it is possible that R. Levi-Yitzchak's high regard for R. Noson, recorded in Bratzlav sources, provoked R. Moshe-Tzvi's jealousy; but this is mere conjecture.)

⁸⁷ Avraham Chazan mi-Tulchin, *Avaneha Barzel*, pp73-4 and, *Levi-Yitzchak Bender, Siach Sarfei Kodesh*, I-752.

The tension between these two contemporaries can be attributed in part to their very different leadership modes, including their differences in style and self-perception. R. Moshe Tzvi was a leader of thousands, who surely wore the silken garments of a Rebbe and gave blessings to his followers. By contrast, R. Noson refused the mantle and title of master in order to propagate R. Nachman's revolutionary teachings, and dedicated his life to serving a handful of poor, scattered but sincerely devoted followers. The distinction between the two approaches was not lost on the Savraner, who displayed a striking ambivalence toward his own style of Hasidic leadership. According to Bratzlav sources, when the Savraner heard that 80 people had joined R. Noson in Bratzlav for the holiday of Shavuos, he was furious. One of his followers said, "You had 500 people for Shavuos; why does it bother you?" The Savraner is reported to have replied: "I had 500 inn-keepers for Shavuos, but he had all God-fearing people!"⁸⁸ This remark underscores the Savraner's jealousy of the more intense and elitist mode of the Bratzlavers – the one thing this popular leader lacked.⁸⁹ The story of the Years of Oppression cannot be separated from that of the divergent paths of two young Hasidic prodigies, both of whom were disciples of leading masters of the previous generation, whose respective leadership modes reflected competing trends in Hasidism. The Savraner's frustrated attraction to Bratzlav may have been a source of his later antipathy, and it is likely that his

⁸⁸ Avraham Chazan mi-Tulchin, *Yemei HaTlaos*, p. 138. Also Cf. Kramer, *Through Fire and Water* p. 369.

⁸⁹ Interestingly, it was at this Shavuos gathering that R. Noson most explicitly renounced any claim to the title of Rebbe (see Chapter 2). Although the sources do not make mention of this, it is possible that it was this aspect of the gathering that so provoked the Savraner, whose own authority stemmed from his title.

subjective claims were closely linked to his perception of the independent and iconoclastic Bratzlavers as a threat to the future of Hasidism.

Causes of Anti-Bratzlav Campaign

Several approaches have been put forth by scholars to the causes of the persecution of the Bratzlavers and R. Noson 1834-8. Horodetzky asserted that this was merely a continuation of the opposition of the Shpola to R. Nachman (see Chapter 5). When certain Ukrainian leaders saw that in spite of R. Nachman's death, Bratzlav was continuing to spread (thanks mainly to the efforts of R. Noson) that opposition was renewed. According to this view, the Savraner played a role similar to that of the Shpola in the previous generation: that of representative of mainstream popular Hasidism.⁹⁰ Mendel Piekartz argued that at the heart of the anti-Bratzlav antagonism was the accusation of Sabbatean-Frankist influence, as evidence by the charge that the Bratzlavers denied the validity of the Oral Torah.⁹¹ Arthur Green took issue with this perspective, since (in his view) such claims made in the mid-19th century would have raised the specter of Haskalah, not of Sabbateanism or Frankism.⁹² In a later article Piekartz reasserted his argument on the presence of accusations of Sabbatean-Frankist trends in the anti-Bratzlav conflicts. But he also added a more fundamental dimension: that the Savraner saw Bratzlav as a threat to

⁹⁰ S.A Horodetzky, *Ha Hasidut V'Ha Hasidim*, p. 79, in Hundert, *Essential Papers on Hasidism*. For more on the distinction between populist and elitist Hasidism, see Chapter 4.

⁹¹ Piekartz, *Hasidut Bratzlav*, p. 68-76, 210.

⁹² Green, Tormented Master p. 106-7, 394-397 n.26.

his leadership and indeed to the entire Hasidic enterprise in his day. Notwithstanding the Bratzlav's relative lack of influence and small numbers, Piekarz writes, the Savraner was alarmed by the tremendous religious creativity of R. Nachman as well as the intense devotion of his followers. In addition the Savraner related to R. Nachman's well-known statements concerning false leaders and the need to question authority as threats to his own established rule.⁹³

The issue of Sabbatean-Frankist influence raised by Piekarz and disputed by Green echoes similar debates about the motives of the Mitnagdim in battling the Hasidim. Green's claim that charges of denial of the Oral Torah were related more to the presence of secularists than that of the descendants of earlier heretical messianic sects downplays the connections between the two streams in 19th century Jewish life in Eastern Europe. Although the secularists at times were at pains to claim descent from the rationalists of classical Judaism as well as the Mitnagdim, the polemical literature of the period indicates that traditionalists resisting the rise of the Maskilim did not always distinguish the two groups. It is therefore possible that the charges that the Bratzlavers denied the Oral Torah was simultaneously an accusation of mystical heresy and secular breaks from tradition. Bratzlav was not immune to such charges, since on the one hand, it had a powerful messianic and mystical element that was unique among Hasidic groups, and on the other, R. Nachman's ties to the secularists in Uman were well-known. As a figure of paradox who founded a

⁹³ Mendel Piekarz, "R. Noson mi-Bratzlav's Aspaklariat Sifro Likutei Halachot," *Tzion* 69, 5764 (2004): p. 203-240.

movement filled with seeming contradictions, R. Nachman was vulnerable to such two-sided attacks. This was in spite of the fact that R. Noson (and Bratzlav leaders following him) saw the movement as quite conservative in its adherence to Jewish law and tradition. R. Nachman's personal friendships with secularists did not impact his strictly negative policies concerning secular studies and philosophical speculation. But left-over fears about Sabbateanism and Frankism as well as burgeoning concerns about the increasing influence of the Maskilim made such claims particularly effective in marginalizing rival groups.

Tzvi Mark's Thesis

In addition to these factors in the evolution of R. Moshe Tzvi into the nemesis of R. Noson, another must be mentioned. The Savraner became a widower when he was 44 years old, and, contrary to Hasidic custom, he never remarried. R. Noson remarked somewhat ambiguously that this contributed to his opposition to Bratzlav. Tzvi Mark examines more recent texts of previously oral traditions – primarily from the 20th century collection *Siach Sarfei Kodesh* - to show that R. Noson prevented the Savraner from marrying R. Nachman's daughter.⁹⁴ He did so out of concern that, were R. Moshe-Tzvi to become R. Nachman's son-in-law, Bratzlav Hasidism would become deflected by a push to enter the mainstream at the cost of its authentic and unique spiritual path. According to Mark, it is likely that the reason the Savraner never remarried (in spite of the general Hasidic ethic not to remain unmarried) was

his shame at this rejection. Although this does not suffice to account for the intensity of the Savraner's opposition, it is a fascinating claim that finds some support in Bratzlav texts.⁹⁵

The most significant implications of this approach are first, that the opposition to R. Noson in the 1830s was fundamentally unrelated to that of R. Nachman's time, as is evidenced by the fact that the Savraner sought to enter the world of R. Nachman through marriage (although he declined to become a disciple during R. Nachman's lifetime) and only later became an opponent. Second, if it is indeed true that the Savraner sought R. Nachman's daughter's hand in marriage, it becomes difficult to believe that he thought of the Bratzlavers as tainted by Sabbatean-Frankist heresy. Had he such suspicions he never would have considered such a match. And R. Noson's interference with this goal accounts for the Savraner's choice to target R. Noson for persecution.

Most important, Mark's argument that by attempting to marry R. Nachman's daughter and move his base to Uman, the Savraner wished to incorporate Bratzlav into his own Hasidic empire, thus removing a threat to his leadership, fits with larger currents and patterns in intra-Hasidic conflict. Y. Hasdai argues that Hasidim and Mitnagdim developed from a common social group of mystics interested in bridging gap between rabbinic elite and masses, but that they chose different ways of doing so.

⁹⁴ Tzvi Mark, "Lamah Radaf HaRav mi Savran et Hasidei Bratzlav?" *Sivan* 69 (2004).

⁹⁵ Assaf writes that "it is difficult to see in that [Mark's argument] a reason for such a difficult conflict." (*Ne'echaz Ba'Svach* p. 180 n4) But Assaf seems to relate only to the limited issue of the Savraner's attempted betrothal of R. Nachman's daughter while ignoring the implication of such an attempt – as well

The Hasidim chose outreach, to become part of the masses and offer alternative accessible leadership, while the Mitnagdim remained within the establishment and saw the role of Tzaddik as reclusive, scholarly and mystic. This choice of the Hasidim was extended through the activities of the Great Magid who raised disciples to establish centers throughout the Eastern European Jewish world. Although there was a great degree of diversity among these students, they generally shared the common feature of offering popular leadership to the masses. This was reflected in their generally contemplative and often a-cosmic theology, and in their style of leadership and the makeup of their followers. The few examples (such as Pschyshe in Poland and Bratzlav in Ukraine) of elitist (or what Joseph Weiss called “existentialist”) Hasidic masters were, in a sense, iterations of the choice of the Mitnagdim to remain reclusive and to build concentrated communities of devotion and fervor. These masters usually abjured the role of Tzaddik as intercessor in favor of that of spiritual guide and resource, and they often emphasized Torah study as well as prayer.

As we shall see in Chapter 5 on R. Nachman’s approach to conflict, R. Nachman was the latter type of leader, emerging from the center of the Hasidic milieu – in fact from the Besht’s family – but explicitly working as an iconoclast to transcend what he saw as the complacency and excesses of the Hasidic movement, restoring elements of pre-Hasidic spirituality such as the emphasis on Torah study to

as the Savraner’s stated plan to move to Uman, the center of Bratzlav activity – as a bid for the leadership of Bratzlav and thus its neutralization.

his community of followers. He avoided giving blessings, performing miracles or even giving practical advice in the way of the populist leaders, preferring to teach (often in the language of paradox), tell mystical stories, and perform his own *tikunim* - of the living and the dead - in solitude. Some of those Hasidic leaders who were defined by the populist approach saw this as a threat to what they perceived as the path of the Besht, which emphasized communal comfort and fellowship: in short, the qualities that made Hasidism so successful as a mass movement. The Shpola Zeide was the leader whose bitter opposition to R. Nachman is most well-known. His own self-identification as a leader centered on his encounter with the Besht, and his oft-repeated comment that “I saw the Besht” indicates both his loyalty to Hasidism *qua* Hasidism as well as his suspicion of change. By the beginning of the 19th century this entrenchment was typical of the populist leaders throughout the Hasidic world.

After R. Nachman’s time the most prominent representative of the populist approach, a leader of thousands of householders, was R. Moshe-Tzvi of Savran. By then, Bratzlav had diverged even further from the mainstream of Hasidism, creating a new model of a circle of devotees without a living and accessible master. These two paths, the mass movement of populist Hasidism of the Savraner and the more complex reintegration of pre-Hasidic spirituality of Bratzlav could not have been more at odds. Mark’s claim that the Savraner’s attempt to incorporate Bratzlav into his own populist Hasidic empire, thus neutralizing a serious threat to the future of the Besht’s path, was foiled by R. Noson, provides a credible rationale for the intensity and extreme passion of the Savraner’s campaign against R. Noson, and it

accounts as well for the breadth of popular support the Savraner received from within the larger Hasidic community.

Charges and Claims

The Savraner and his followers invoked anti-Bratzlav rhetoric from the preceding generation in their attempts to isolate the Bratzlavers, and they added new charges to the litany, especially regarding R. Noson himself. These charges were designed to provoke a response among the traditional Hasidic community, and so they echoed many of the claims regarding schismatics in the previous century. The Savraner described Bratzlav as something new and unprecedented in Judaism whose innovations posed a danger to the continuity of the tradition.⁹⁶ The opponents claimed that R. Noson was acting as a false prophet who innovated new prayers and religious practices, that (like his master) he was too close to the secularists in Uman, and that the Bratzlavers were advocating secular studies (a claim that anyone with minimal knowledge of R. Nachman's vigorous critique of secular studies could not have accepted).⁹⁷ A further source of controversy was the fact that R. Noson had printed R. Nachman's mystical tales in spite of the express objections of R. Avraham Joshua Heschel of Apta, a senior Hasidic leader of the time.⁹⁸ This was interpreted by R. Noson's opponents as a provocation, a deliberate flouting of authority. The

⁹⁶ Kramer, *Through Fire and Water*, p. 452.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 457. Green, p. 127-128 n26, demonstrates the fallacy of attributing such a Maskilic position to R. Nachman, perhaps the most conservative Hasidic leader when it came to curricular secularization.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 323.

appeal of these charges to a traditional audience facing the threat of secular reform was great, and the anti-Bratzlav faction increased in size and fervor between 1834-8.

Influence of the Savraner on the Larger Jewish Community

As a result of the Savraner's activities the opposition grew exponentially. His influence was so great that the wealthy who had formerly counted themselves among supporters of R. Nachman now changed allegiance.⁹⁹ As R. Noson wrote to his son, "...Only the poor and some householders [i.e. middle-class] support us, but even they are afraid to speak up."¹⁰⁰ By way of example, Joseph Weiss traces the changes in a town that was a center of Bratzlav activity, Tirhovitza from Bratzlav-dominated to a hotbed of anti-Bratzlav sentiment and activity. One of R. Nachman's disciples, the elderly and generally well-respected Magid of Tirhovitza, R. Yekutiel, was based there. He had become R. Nachman's follower when the latter was a young man of 18, while he himself was in his 70s. His presence in the town established it as a haven for R. Nachman's followers until his death. Weiss writes,

But [Tirhovitza] was not immune [to the influence of the Savraner]. When the opposition to Bratzlav Hasidism was renewed in 1834, after the deaths of both R. Nachman and the Shpola Zeide, and the organization of the opposition was in the hands of R. Moshe Tzvi of Savran (and the war was stronger than in the days of R. Nachman, as any reader of R. Noson's letters of the period to his son R. Yitzchak will see clearly), the Magid of Tirhovitza was no longer alive and the city became one of the most dangerous places for the Bratzlavers. This is

⁹⁹ Weiss, 38n6.

¹⁰⁰ R. Nachman Goldstein, ed., *Alim L'Trufah (Letters of R. Noson)* (Jerusalem: Torat HaNetzach, 5765 (2005)), p. 38b.

clear from R. Noson's letters: 'In the city of Tirhovitza the conflict rages very much. R. Itzik, the Magid's son-in-law, fled his home, they beat one of our fellows nearly to death, and a doctor traveled there to perform a legal investigation [as an expert witness].'¹⁰¹

This is an example of the powerful influence exerted even in Bratzlav strongholds by the Savraner and his followers. Weiss points out the similar pattern that took place even in Bratzlav itself, the town in which R. Nachman spent many years and in which, in spite of the fierce hostility of the Shpola, he had lived in peace. Weiss points to this radical sea-change in public opinion in the course of only 15 years as a clear indication of the powerful influence of the Savraner.

Other Contributors to the Strife

It is characteristic of conflict in Hasidism that what became a campaign of persecution spanning major centers of Hasidic activity and large swaths of the Ukraine began within the crucible of a small number of personal interactions. In addition to the role of the Savraner, a few other people were central players in fomenting the conflict. These protagonists were often motivated by personal factors: jealousy, anger over perceived slights and simple personality clashes.

Moshe Chenkes was one of three communal leaders who welcomed R. Nachman to Bratzlav in 1802. For many years he was a follower of R. Nachman, and even after R. Nachman's death he remained close to the Bratzlavers. His second wife Elke was the sister of the rabbi of Tomoshpiel. According to Bratzlav sources,

¹⁰¹ R. Nachman Goldstein, *Alim L'Trufah*, letter 180.

the Tomoshpieler rabbi, a follower of the Savraner, became an enemy of R. Noson due to a series of embarrassing events for which he irrationally blamed the Bratzlavers who were present, especially his public failure to accomplish a circumcision in the proper way. It was this rabbi's influence on his sister that was an important factor in Moshe Chenkes' turning against R. Noson and the Bratzlavers. In addition, he was insulted when R. Noson encouraged him to make a will to provide for his family. In passing, R. Noson advised Moshe to leave some money to the Bratzlav prayer-house, and Moshe, influenced by his wife and brother-in-law, took this as a sign of R. Noson's true feelings for him: as a potential source of funds. He became one of the chief instigators of the campaign against R. Noson, although he also expressed regret for his actions on occasion.

An important actor in the persecutions was a man named Schneur, a follower of the Savraner who, in 1838, confessed to R. Noson that he had been responsible for much of the slander against him and asked for his forgiveness. Decades later, R. Noson's great-grandson, R. Avraham Sternhartz, met Schneur, who bemoaned his suffering (he was physically ill for many years and lost his wife at an early age) and attributed it to his role in fomenting the persecution of R. Noson.¹⁰² Schneur explained to R. Avraham that he had been motivated by the desire for honor at the Savraner's court.

Other characters who were similarly motivated by personal concerns include Baruch Dayan, a resident of Bratzlav who also repeated anti-Bratzlav slanders to the

Savraner; Akiva Meirches and Yitzchak Chanes, who disingenuously reported misleading statements to the Savraner, leading him to believe that R. Noson was actually committing sins;¹⁰³ and a host of anonymous residents of Bratzlav and surrounding communities who were willing to participate in street violence.

Spontaneous and Organized Violence

Spontaneous outbreaks of violence directed at a particular Hasidic group were not unknown in the history of Hasidism. Brawls in the street or attacks in the mikva (ritual bath) are recorded in the context of a number of Hasidic controversies of the first generations of the movement. The persecution of the Bratzlavers was expressed at first in such disorganized attacks, including

But with the increasing involvement of the Savraner it took a new form. In 1834, the Savraner issued a proclamation, reminiscent of those issued decades earlier by the Mitnagdim against the early Hasidim, calling on all his followers to isolate the Bratzlavers. The text of his proclamation read:

The Bratzlavers are a community of evil-doers. They themselves are sinners and they cause many others to sin.... The following is a warning as to how to deal with the Bratzlavers:

1. People must distance themselves from the Bratzlavers in every possible way.
2. Beware of marrying a Bratzlaver: they are forbidden to marry into the

¹⁰² Kramer, *Through Fire and Water*, p. 425 and 634n.1.

¹⁰³ For example, that he had eaten during the Fast of the 9th of Av while a young woman sat on his lap. That years the 9th of Av fell on the Sabbath and was delayed; and the “young woman” was R. Noson’s infant granddaughter.

community of Israel.

3. Do not send any of your children to a Bratzlaver teacher. The Torah he teaches will rot in their innards and turn them into atheists.
4. Meat slaughtered by a Bratzlaver *shochet* (ritual slaughterer) is rendered unfit to eat.
5. A chazzan (prayer leader) from this wicked community is unacceptable, as their prayers are an abomination.
6. Use the time-honored economic sanctions to break every source of income they have. It is forbidden to have pity on anyone who pities a Bratzlavers.

And may God send blessing to the work of your hands.¹⁰⁴

As Chaim Kramer points out in his biography of R. Noson, the Savraner had thousands of followers throughout Eastern Europe. Such a proclamation had the widespread effect of inciting masses of Hasidim to isolate and oppress the Bratzlavers in a variety of ways. The intensity of the invective used in the proclamation was interpreted by followers of the Savraner as well as others as blanket permission to attack individual Bratzlavers wherever they might be. There followed varied instances of persecution that causes the Bratzlavers to name these years the Years of Oppression: economic sanctions, the public vandalizing of R. Nachman's works, stone-throwing and physical assaults.

Forms of Physical Violence

Stone-throwing was a common feature of this period. Gangs of young men would throw stones at Bratzlavers walking on the streets to the cries of "Bratzlaver

¹⁰⁴ Translation from Kramer, Through Fire and Water p. 388-389. Original text in Yitzchak Alfasi, *R. Nachman mi-Breslov: His Life, Torah and Thought* (Tel Aviv: Netzach Publishing, 1953), p. 45.

dog!” Stones were thrown as well through the windows of homes owned by Bratzlavers. Public beatings of Bratzlav Hasidim were also relatively common in this period. R. Noson mentions these in letters to his son, and other Bratzlav sources paint a horrific picture of intense physical violence, with Bratzlavers beaten either for sport or until they renounced their support for R. Noson. Bratzlav sources speak of Bratzlavers publicly beaten, tied to gravestones, and dragged through the streets until they agreed to break their ties with R. Noson. In Tirhovitza, a Bratzlaver was beaten so badly that he never fully recovered.¹⁰⁵ At least one attempt was made on R. Noson’s life, and according to *Yemei HaTlaos* another resident of Bratzlav named Noson –as well as members of his family - was killed. In addition to direct physical assaults, it was a common occurrence for gangs of youths to enter the Bratzlav synagogue and tear R. Nachman’s books in front of the Bratzlaver Hasidim.

These assaults presented the greatest challenge to R. Noson’s approach to the campaign against the Bratzlavers. In the face of such physical danger and humiliation some of the Bratzlavers were provoked to violent responses. The younger followers especially had difficulty holding back from confronting their attackers, and on a number of occasions their retaliations exacerbated the situation. *Yemei HaTlaos* records a number of such incidents, including one in which a Bratzlaver hit the wife of the Tomashpiel rabbi – this in a culture in which touch between the sexes was entirely forbidden outside of marriage. It was primarily to the young Bratzlavers who faced the temptation to respond in kind to violence that R.

¹⁰⁵ Kramer, *Through Fire and Water*, p.399.

Noson addressed his many teachings on the subject of what in contemporary language would be called religious nonviolence.

Appeals to the Government and R. Noson's Arrest

Following the violent activities of 1834, the Savraner issued another proclamation giving permission to his followers to denounce R. Noson and the Bratzlavers to the government. As a result, in December 1834 his followers made a series of appeals to the Russian authorities to outlaw Bratzlav activities, and some of these men went to the governor of Bratzlav to inform against R. Noson. They tailored their charges against R. Noson and his followers in order to most effectively provoke the ire of the non-Jewish authorities.

The claims expressed in this context were often at variance with those presented before Jewish audiences. For example, the Savraner's agents attempted to convince Jewish leaders that the Bratzlavers advocated secular studies. But to the Russian authorities they argued that R. Noson was acting as a false prophet whose extreme devotion to obscurantist mysticism was against the interests of the Czar. His creation of new prayers based on R. Nachman's teachings was brought as proof of this, (as one tradition has it that only a prophet has the authority to innovate in matters of liturgy). In addition, the Savraner's supporters argued that R. Noson was establishing his own political movement, that he dissuaded his followers from contributing labor and production to the larger society, and that the Bratzlavers'

brand of ecstatic mysticism was simply a kind of veiled madness.¹⁰⁶

This led to the first arrest of Bratzlavers in January 1835 at a gathering at R. Noson's home. His manuscripts and many of his books were confiscated, and R. Noson fled to Tcherin and Kremenchug, where the opposition was less intense.¹⁰⁷ He remained there until the following spring.

An important impetus for the Russian authorities' involvement in anti-Bratzlav activity was the printing of religious books. As part of the campaign of Russification of the Jews spearheaded by secularists like Yitzchak Ber Levinson, a series of measures were enacted to restrict religious activities. These included the printing of certain Jewish mystical works such as the Zohar, Lurianic writings, R. Shneur-Zalman of Liadi's *Likutei Amarim Tanya* and R. Nachman's works. Printing these latter works was a central part of R. Noson's self-defined mission of disseminating his teacher's ideas, and his continued administration of a printing press constituted a strong element in the Savraner's charges to the authorities. The sealing of R. Noson's attic with an official police seal was the end result of the Savraner's agitation in 1835 – and the attic was where R. Noson operated his press.

In an ideologically inconsistent move – one not without precedent in Jewish history - the Savraner and his followers made use of gentile authority structures in order to curtail the Bratzlavers' activities. In this case, the irony is that without the activities of the secularists (for whom the traditional community had contempt) the

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., p. 445ff.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., P. 394.

Savraners would have had no peg on which to hang their charges regarding R. Noson's printing activities. Chaim Kramer points out that the radical nature of the decision to inform on fellow Jews to non-Jewish authorities must be understood in the context of traditional Jewish values. According to rabbinic tradition canonized in the *Shulchan Aruch* (Code of Law)¹⁰⁸, one who hands a Jew over to a gentile authority loses one's share in the World-to-Come. The exception is a Jew who poses a serious danger to the community. It is clear from their actions that the Savraner and his followers viewed the Bratzlav community as such an extreme threat.

As a result of the false charges brought against R. Noson he faced arrest and exile. He described his imprisonment from July 14-31, 1835 as one of the most difficult challenges of this generally trying period. He was held in a cell with thieves and other criminals, and because there was an open chamber-pot in the cell he could not engage in his regular devotions. With the help of an advocate he was moved to a different cell and given pen and paper, with which he wrote a discourse which we shall analyze in the next chapter.¹⁰⁹ A bit less than a month after his release from prison (on August 26) he was exiled from Bratzlav to his hometown of Nemirov in spite of the fact that the investigator's report judged the charges against him as "inconclusive". In this time he composed numerous discourses which were later printed in *Likutei Halachos*. That year R. Noson obtained a travel permit to Uman for the annual gathering at R. Nachman's gravesite. Upon arriving in Uman he was

¹⁰⁸ *Shulchan Aruch*, Choshen Mishpat 388:9-15

¹⁰⁹ R. Noson Sternhartz, *Likutei Halachos* (vol 1-8) (Jerusalem: Agudat Meshech HaNachal, 5759 (1999)),

discovered, reported to the authorities and arrested. The intervention of the secularists in Uman (who had developed a relationship with R. Nachman and supported the Bratzlavers) saved R. Noson from the humiliation of being forced to walk alongside the prison wagon like a criminal, and allowed him to remain in Uman for the New Year holiday. He was then compelled to return to Nemirov, where he remained for three years.¹¹⁰

Easing of Tensions

R. Noson's enemies were in the midst of working toward his permanent removal to Siberia when, two years before his death, the Savraner's authority was seriously eroded due to his involvement in a controversial capital case, which raised accusations of vigilantism.¹¹¹ In 1836 the Jewish leadership in Litvenitz convinced R. Moshe Tzvi to authorize the killing of a Jewish informer, and when the Russian authorities heard of this he was forced into hiding. When the governor of Kaminetz received a letter that had been prepared at the Savraner's behest asking that the Bratzlavers be outlawed as a sect entirely, he had already seen the complaint of the family of the executed informer. His outrage at the Savraner's assertion of his own authority left the Savraner's followers dumbfounded. They relayed the governor's reaction to the Savraner, who, realizing the trouble he was in, fled first Kaminetz,

Yayin Nesech 4.

¹¹⁰ R. Noson was able to travel at various points in those three years to attend to his business, but he was unable to reside in Bratzlav until 1838.

¹¹¹ Avraham Chazan mi-Tulchin, *Yemei HaTlaos*, pp. 170ff.

then the entire Ukraine, and went into hiding, probably in Bessarabia. According to *Yemei HaTlaos* at this point the Savraner called upon his followers to desist from informing on the Bratzlavers.¹¹² The loss of the central authority figure behind the campaign against the Bratzlavers left their opponents fragmented and disorganized. With no Hasidic leader to legitimize serious acts of violence, economic sanctions and the like, conditions improved for a time. But R. Noson was unable to return to Bratzlav until 1838, when the formal charges against him in the Kaminetz courts were dropped. The death of the Savraner and other agitators in 1838 led to a further easing of the oppressive situation for the Bratzlavers.

The events of the Years of Oppression posed a two-fold challenge to R. Noson. First, he had to ensure the long-term survival, both physical and ideological, of Bratzlav Hasidism. Second, he had to do so with religious integrity. This meant responding to the actions of his persecutors without violence, and persuading his followers to follow suit. Before I present those aspects of R. Noson's response to the events recorded here, it will be useful to devote the next two chapters to a presentation of important context for that response. Therefore, the next chapter (Chapter 4) provides background on conflict in the Hasidic movement generally, an important analysis of the dynamics of sectarian conflict in Eastern European Hasidism from the time of the Besht. This presentation forms the backdrop against which the uniqueness of R. Noson's attitude and response will become evident. The following chapter (Chapter 5) consists of an examination of the most significant

¹¹² Ibid, p. 171.

precedent to R. Noson's response to conflict, that of his teacher R. Nachman of Bratzlav. These two chapters will aid us in appreciating the full implications of R. Noson's innovative response, which I will present in Chapter 6.

CHAPTER 4: THE HASIDIC CULTURE OF CONTROVERSY

The anti-Bratzlav campaign of 1834-1838 emerged from, and was informed by, a culture of controversy, the culture of Hasidism. As a victim of sectarian strife, R. Noson of Bratzlav was profoundly impacted by dynamics that developed from the earliest days of Hasidism. In this chapter, we will examine relevant patterns of Hasidic sectarian conflict in order to identify some of the fundamental dynamics that directly or indirectly influenced R. Noson. This will provide essential context for – and contrast with – R. Noson’s own approach. We will begin with a discussion of the first encounter of the movement with conflict, the vigorous opposition of the rabbinical establishment to the new Hasidic schools. Although our main focus is conflict between Hasidic groups, these early experiences of opposition from the outside influenced the ways in which Hasidic leaders and their followers approached conflict within their own camp. Following this, we will analyze some of the root cause and factors that contributed to intra-Hasidic conflict and the creation of a culture of controversy. It is this culture into which R. Noson of Bratzlav was born, and in which he faced the challenges to his leadership that provided the occasion for much of his religious creativity.

Opposition From Without

The Eastern European Jewish community in the 18th and 19th centuries was characterized by multiple conflicts and tensions between Hasidic leaders and their antagonists, and between Hasidic communities themselves. From its inception, the movement founded by Rabbi Israel ben Eliezer (often referred to as the Besht, an acronym for his nickname, “Master of the Good Name”) was marked by conflict. In the later decades of the 18th century, the Jewish people were still recovering from the physical persecutions of the Haidemacks and the devastation wrought by the mystics and false Messiahs, Sabbetai Tzvi (1626-1676) and Jacob Frank (1726-1791), both of whom apostasized, leaving behind them a trail of devastated followers and torn communities. As a result of the memory of these collective traumas, Jewish leaders viewed separatism and innovation, especially when accompanied by mystical associations, with suspicion. Even some of the Besht's closest disciples, future leaders of Hasidic circles, were originally among the staunchest opponents of the charismatic leader's innovations. R. Yaakov Yosef of Polnoye, the author of the first published work of Hasidic teachings; R. Gershon Kitover, the Besht's brother-in-law; R. Nachman Kossover, an early Hasidic thinker; and R. Dov Ber, the Great Magid, who organized the movement's evangelical phase - all provide important examples of religious leaders who were initially skeptical of the Besht’s approach, but who

became some of its principle leaders.¹¹³

Unlike these early converts to the movement, many established rabbinic leaders remained staunch in their opposition to the Besht. As the Hasidim moved outward from Podolia, where the Besht had begun his activities, the rabbinic centers of authority and Torah study, especially in Lithuania began to take notice. When, under the leadership of the Besht's disciple, R. Dov Ber, known as the Great Magid (preacher) of Mezerich (1704/1710-1772), Hasidic courts started proliferating throughout Eastern Europe,¹¹⁴ the opponents (*Mitnagdim* in Hebrew) began their counter-activities in earnest, and in 1772 in Brody they issued the first writ of excommunication against the young movement. The missive refers to a group of hypocrites called Hasidim, who spurn Torah study and hold scholars in contempt. They are described as good-for-nothings who spend their days drinking liquor, and who gesticulate wildly during prayer. The authors of the letter write that as a result of the activities of the wicked Hasidim they decided to punish the group's leaders, burn their books and, finally issue a ban forbidding them to meet for their bizarre form of prayers. The letter urges other Jewish communities to follow suit. There followed a violent campaign to squelch the nascent revival. In all, there were 3 phases of anti-

¹¹³ Hasidic sources, which have a decidedly polemical character, record tales of their conversions.

¹¹⁴ Various reasons for the movement's success have been offered. Simon Dubnov (quoted in Ettinger, p. 228) argued that Hasidism was the answer to the stress and sorrow of Jewish public life, and that it created an ideal world for the suffering Jews... "in which the despised Jew was master". Ben-Zion Dinur (Ettinger, *ibid.*, p. 228-230) argued rather that Hasidic groups represented preexisting social forces, especially "religious functionaries" such as cantors and teachers who formed a social opposition to the rabbinic elite. Shmuel Ettinger challenged these theories on the basis of evidence that early Hasidic leaders and their *Mitnagdim* did not come from the ranks of any particular social stratum. Instead, he asserted that Hasidism brought mysticism to the masses in a digestible way, and that its leaders, unlike the rabbis, were

Hasidic activity: in 1772, as a result of the establishment of a Hasidic house of prayer in Vilna (the center of rabbinic activity); in 1781, after the first Hasidic text was published; and 1796, after the Tanya, which presented a theoretical framework for future Hasidic thought, was printed.¹¹⁵ The involvement of some of the leading rabbis of the time, especially Rabbi Elijah, the Gaon of Vilna (1720-1797), lent stature to the opposition, but in spite of this the Hasidic revival thrived, gaining popular support and reaching out to centers in White Russia, Ukraine, Galicia and Poland. The growth of the movement lent weight to the concerns of the Mitnagdim, who were alarmed by the theological implications of Hasidic doctrine and practice, as well as by other factors of a more social character. We will address these in turn, after regarding the more fundamental anxiety of the Mitnagdim: the fear of sectarianism.

Fears of Sectarian Revival

Among the chief concerns of the Mitnagdim was the fear of sectarianism raised by the formation of Hasidic communities, a fear fueled by suspicion of Sabbatianism and Frankist influence.¹¹⁶ There was reason for concern given the great damage done by the Sabbatians in the late 17th century and the Frankists in the 18th century. Both groups were composed of followers of charismatic leaders who

available and not aloof. See Ettinger, pp. 228-231 in Hundert, *Essential Papers in Hasidism*.

¹¹⁵ Mordecai Wilensky, "Hasidic-Mitnagdic Polemics in the Jewish Communities of Eastern Europe: the Hostile Phase" in Hundert, *Essential Papers in Hasidism*, p. 245..

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 258-9.

initiated increasingly radical changes in Jewish practice, divided Jewish communities, threatened the authority of the established rabbinic and communal leaders, and raised messianic hopes then dashed them by converting (Sabbetai Tzvi to Islam and Jacob Frank to Catholicism). Both leaders taught versions of a doctrine of “redemption through sin”, a marriage of antinomianism and messianism which proved potent and extremely disruptive of traditional community life.¹¹⁷ In a striking example of fears of such Jewish sectarianism one leading anti-Hasidic polemicist, Rabbi Dovid of Makov, accused the Hasidim of coming perilously close to the practices of Christian revivalist sects, performing cartwheels in public, engaging in ecstatic prayer and teaching “without preparation”, i.e. in a state of inspired enthusiasm.¹¹⁸

The centrality of the Tzaddik (Hasidic leader) in Hasidic thought, whose authority stemmed not from rigorous training in Talmud and Jewish Law but from his own charisma, was of particular concern. The Mitnagdim saw the doctrine of the Tzaddik, with its overtones of a mediated relationship between people and God, as at the least akin to *shituf*,¹¹⁹ and at the worst, idolatry.

¹¹⁷ Cf. Ibid., Wilensky 260-1 on the political aspects of these schismatics, both in reference to the Jewish Kahal authorities and the non-Jewish government.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 258-9. The fact that this rabbinic figure knew of Christian sectarian practices raises questions about the extent of segregation of Jews and Christians in Lithuania and White Russia during this period.

¹¹⁹ *Shituf* is a halachic category denoting a doctrine that acknowledges God’s supremacy but pairs it with some other force. According to many classical opinions, such a doctrine is permissible for “Children of Noah”, i.e. non-Jews, but is forbidden to Jews.

The extent of the antipathy of the Mitnagdim to the Hasidim can be seen in the written words of the supreme authority of the traditionalists, R. Elijah, the Vilna Gaon, who famously went so far as to write, “If I could have, I would have done to them as Elijah did to the priests of Ba’al” (that is, utterly discredit and kill them)¹²⁰. And in 1796 in a letter to his followers he wrote, “No man should pity them and none should treat them mercifully.”¹²¹ The intensity of the Vilna Gaon’s vituperation can be understood in light of the very real anxiety, based on recent history, raised by schismatics. Relatively minor alterations in observance among the Hasidim were perceived as serious challenges to traditional values. Changes in the prayer service and liturgy, in the knives used in ritual slaughter, in dress and in customs surrounding holidays all became points of contention.¹²²

Theology

In addition to charges of Jewish sectarian influence, the Mitnagdim were suspicious of the changes in religious priorities they witnessed among the revivalists. To take a central example, the early Hasidic thinkers voiced criticism of the rabbinic establishment for defining religious accomplishment too narrowly. The simple farmer or innkeeper who was unable to read or recite sacred text experienced religious life on the margins of a culture that privileged intellectual success. Hasidic

¹²⁰ Cf. I Kings 18:1-46.

¹²¹ Wilensky, *Ibid.* 263.

¹²² In the case of the controversies over ritual knives, the Mitnagdim were motivated by economic factors as well as issues of authority. I am grateful to Professor Hillel Levine for pointing out the economic

concepts such as *avodah b'gashmiyus*, service [of God] through the physical, i.e. physical activity as religious praxis, expanded the domain of religious life beyond strictly traditional categories. The Besht and his disciples taught that one could fulfill the religious imperative to "know God" through mundane acts such as eating, drinking or sexual relations, when performed with the proper intention. This was an extension of the kabbalistic idea that "no place is empty of God" (a concept endorsed in theory by the Mitnagdim) to its logical conclusions, with sometimes radical implications for religious praxis.¹²³

The Mitnagdim viewed this sort of teaching with anxiety. In their religious view, Torah scholarship was not only the central value and the measure of religious accomplishment; it also provided an all-encompassing context for personal religious expression. The rabbinic dictum, "Turn it, turn it, for everything is in it"¹²⁴ was taken seriously by the 18th century rabbinic elite, who looked to the Talmud and legal Codes for personal inspiration as well as communal guidance. To seek religious expression beyond the clearly defined scope of Torah, through eating or sexual relations, for example, was to deny the exhaustive and exclusive nature of holy scholarship, and to compromise the clear distinctions between sacred and profane so characteristic of classical Jewish literature. To make matters worse, the Hasidic leaders' emphasis on prayer as the central religious activity in effect challenged the

dimensions to this aspect of the strife.

¹²³ Rivka Schatz Uffenheimer, *HaHasidut ki-Mistika: Quietistic Elements in 18th Century Thought* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1968), p.51ff.

centrality of Talmud study – and therefore the authority of the learned elite. This also drew the censure of those rabbis, who quoted the Mishnaic teaching that “Torah study is equal [in religious value] to all [other commandments together]”.¹²⁵ The Mitnagdim’s concern that these and other doctrines would lead to the neglect of Torah study offered a powerful motivating force in their battle against the revivalists.

The Mitnagdim expressed anxiety regarding other doctrines of the Hasidim as well. Doctrines such as “descent for the sake of ascent” (seen as a dangerous rationale for sin) and the application of Luria’s “doctrine of the sparks” (seen as fostering a permissive attitude toward this-worldly things) raised suspicions as to the true intentions of the new popular leaders, as these were theological notions elaborated upon by the Sabbateans and Frankists. In addition, the radical individualism expressed in Hasidic notions of the “root of one’s soul” whose demands must be followed unconditionally clashed with notions of conformity to Jewish law and normative behavior generally;¹²⁶ and the Hasidic emphasis on celebration and merrymaking as *modus vivendi* was seen by the Mitnagdim as a radical departure from the ascetic tendencies of many earlier Jewish mystical and ethical systems. A common element in the various critiques of the Mitnagdim was the Hasidim’s bestowal of religious value upon activities previously categorized as secular or religiously neutral (*reshut*). In addition to the notion of *avodah b’gashmiyus*

¹²⁴ *Chapters of the Fathers*, 5:21

¹²⁵ *Mishna Peah*, 1:1

¹²⁶ This trend reached its apotheosis in the teachings of R. Mordechai-Joseph Leiner of Ishbitze. Cf. Weiss,

mentioned above, the centrality of storytelling, song and dance among the Hasidim provoked the Mitnagdim's ire. Although some of these elements have antecedents in Jewish history and thought, the Hasidim gave them prominence in such a way as to constitute significant departures from the normative rabbinic value system.

Formal Concerns

Beyond the issues raised by the content of Hasidic teachings and practices, the method and style of Hasidic teaching was a departure from that of the rabbinic establishment. Although the Besht's followers made use of the traditional language of classical Judaism, they were essentially innovators who found new applications of traditional concepts in light of their vision and the needs of their communities. They did so by developing and utilizing novel modes of exegesis characterized by freedom of expression, an often associative style and a mystical worldview, often re-contextualizing biblical or Talmudic ideas and, in the eyes of the Mitnagdim, removing classical texts from their simple meaning. In doing so, they were following in the footsteps of the rabbis themselves, whose novel interpretations – which at times were very much in tension with biblical texts - became the basis for rabbinic Judaism. But the Hasidic exegetes extended the process of interpretation in unprecedented ways, making use of creative and fluid methods of reading, playing on words and even letters in their novel homiletics. These innovations reflected a mystical view of Jewish sacred text in which it is not only the meaning of the word

p.214ff, *A Late Jewish Utopia*, in *Studies in Eastern European Mysticism*.

but its form that is Revealed and therefore significant.¹²⁷ In short, the Mitnagdim took issue with both the form and the content of the new messages.

Forms of Opposition

Although the activities of the Mitnagdim were at first limited to bans, polemical writings, and economic sanctions, they quickly extended their methods, eventually resorting to bringing complaints to the non-Jewish authorities, something which was generally seen as anathema from the Jewish point-of-view, which traditionally emphasized unity in the face of external persecution.¹²⁸ The civil authorities used this opportunity to limit Jewish autonomy and authority; an unfortunate example of the impact of internecine strife on the external position of the Jews as a minority culture in exile. A particularly dramatic example of the appeal to outside authority is the imprisonment of a senior Hasidic leader, R. Shneur-Zalman of Liadi in 1798, as a result of the slander of the Opponent R. Avigdor ben Haim of Pinsk, who had lost his rabbinic post as a result of the manipulations of the Hasidim. R. Schneur-Zalman was imprisoned twice in St. Petersburg prison, but was freed after the intervention of the Russian authorities.

Easing of Tensions

¹²⁷ This view is represented as far back as the Talmud in the person of R. Akiva (and others), who famously set himself the project of explicating the significance of every “et” in the Torah. The word “et” has no semantic meaning and serves the grammatical function of indicating the object of a sentence. However, this approach was controversial. Cf. Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Heavenly Torah: As Refracted Through the*

The Hasidim sometimes reacted strongly against the actions of the Mitnagdim. They voiced their own critiques, and there were occasions in which they went still further. For example, R. Avraham Kalisker's students were rebuked by the Great Magid for "joking and mocking at the scholars". But, as Shmuel Ettinger points out, this was not the way of the movement as a whole, "which usually shunned controversy and emphasized its faithfulness to tradition in every field of life." According to Ettinger,

The movement was saved from the fate of other religious sects in similar circumstances by the fact that it refused to declare war on the whole from which it sprang. It did not regard itself as a band of saints and the rest of Israel as a "kingdom of evil"; thus it did not turn into what its opponents wanted to make it; a seceding sect cut off by both choice and necessity.¹²⁹

For example, in spite of his imprisonment through the activities of certain Mitnagdim R. Shneur-Zalman of Liadi was active in seeking reconciliation between the Hasidim and their Mitnagdim, writing letters to his slanderers and other rabbinic leaders, and encouraging his followers to seek peace.

As a result the Mitnagdim began to witness the checks the Hasidim placed on themselves, generally avoiding serious breaks from traditional observance in spite of the Hasidic trend toward innovation. After the secular authorities formally allowed

Generations From Heaven, trans. Gordon. Tucker (New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2006).

¹²⁸ Wilensky, p. 244., in Hundert

¹²⁹ Ettinger, p. 236., in Hundert

the Hasidim to hold their own prayer services in Vilna – a clear sign of their tolerance for the movement and its decentralized authority – the opposition abated somewhat. In some locales the strife abated still further over the first decades of the 19th century as a common enemy emerged, uniting the Hasidim and the Mitnagdim: the Maskilim, Jews influenced by the Enlightenment who sought, to varying degrees, the secularization of Jewish life and education.

Opposition from Within: Intra-Hasidic Strife

In the 2nd generation of Hasidism, the Magid of Mezerich was responsible for the decentralization of Hasidism, setting up “group after group with a pupil of his at the head of almost every one, with the result that after his death there was no single agreed-upon leader of the movement.”¹³⁰ From the time of this evangelical period the character of Hasidic groups was defined to a large extent by that of its leader, who tended to follow the teaching of the Besht that religious leadership must be built upon the foundations of the Tzaddik’s unique personality. When one Hasidic leader was asked why he departed from the path of his father, whom he had succeeded, he replied: “On the contrary, I *follow* my father’s path: just as he did not imitate, neither do I!”

But there was a fine line between the diversity of the Hasidic groups, which was perhaps its great strength, and schism. In the early years of the movement

¹³⁰ Ibid., p. 238.

whatever internal tensions had existed among the Hasidim had been somewhat overshadowed by the campaign of the Mitnagdim. As the external opposition abated, cracks began to appear in the seemingly unified Hasidic community. Competing claims of disciples and biological heirs; territorial issues; and vastly different ideological approaches were to play increasingly central roles in the development of controversy between sects. Indeed, many of the central foci of conflict between Hasidic groups were reiterations of the issues that had fueled the Mitnagdim' anti-Hasidic activities. The limit of Hasidic openness to multiple paths was to be tested as these and other issues led to extended internecine conflicts. Koretz and Zlochov, Medzibodz and Berdichev, Sanz and Sadigur, Kotzk and Izbizca were all notable examples of groups identifiable perhaps as much by their involvement in sectarian controversy as by their own ideologies. But those ideologies played a central role in the evolution of intra-Hasidic conflict.

Ideological Roots of Intra-Hasidic Conflict

In an essay on Hasidic sectarianism, the scholar Joseph Weiss wrote that “even in the controversies between [Hasidic spiritual leaders] which seem to have a personal basis, the theoretical motifs can be often clearly discerned.”¹³¹ That is, it is nearly impossible to remove conflict between Hasidic groups from an ideological context, as for example Simon Dubnov attempted to do with his purely economic

¹³¹ Joseph Weiss, *Studies in Eastern European Jewish Mysticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 44. Also cf. Green, pp. 96-7 for an examination of Dubnov and Heschel's competing

analysis of Hasidism. Even in those cases in which succession or territorial concerns played a part, ideology had a significant impact. This is so because for the Hasidic thinkers leadership was inseparable from ideology or (in a language more akin to their own) personal belief. It was an explicit doctrine of the Besht that policy and praxis should emerge from belief and intention. Therefore it is not surprising to find that Hasidic social policy was often a reflection of theological attitudes. Scholars of Hasidism have provided some basic ideological distinctions between Hasidic sects, and some of these evolved into internal tensions and internecine strife. Two of these defining distinctions are of particular importance to our study of R. Noson of Bratzlav.

Practical-Populist vs. Theoretical-Elitist Leadership

The first distinction, one which challenges the notion of Hasidism as a homogenous movement, is between two modes of leadership: practical-populist and theoretical-elitist. As we have seen, a central element of early Hasidism – and a departure from the prevailing *Weltanschauung* of eastern European rabbinic culture – was a reevaluation of the physical, “*avodah b’gashmiyut*”, the notion that God may be served even (or perhaps especially) through physical activities. This perspective, supported by the unique Hasidic exegetical mode, led to a culture that affirmed the place of material concerns in the life of the Hasidic community. From out of this culture there developed a form of Hasidism that centered on compassion, in which

explanations for conflict in R. Nachman’s life, as well as Green’s own assessment.

the central role of the Tzaddik was to provide comfort for and bestow blessings on followers in need. The popular leaders who represented this trend were seen as intermediaries whom one might approach for this-worldly assistance in the form of blessings for success, referred to in Hasidic literature as “children, health and sustenance”, business advice and financial help. Followers traveled to these masters in order to receive blessings or advice about the problems facing them in their lives; here the master-disciple relationship was defined by the needs of the disciple.

In contrast to this trend were those Hasidic leaders, usually of the third generation and later, who emphasized individual responsibility and who sought to create sacred communities that reflected that value.¹³² This second type of leadership was characterized by idealism, and its communities were elitist in nature. Disciples strove to conform to the spiritual path set forth by the master, and the raising of matters of a more worldly nature was frowned upon. Theurgic intervention was foreign to this style of leadership, which encouraged independence among its adherents, disciples who shared a common project of an exclusively spiritual orientation.

Tension between leaders characterized by these two approaches appears often in Hasidic history. An early example involved R. Shneur-Zalman of Liadi, the most comprehensive theologian of Hasidism, and R. Avraham of Kalisk, an extreme ecstatic who emphasized simplicity, were at odds for many years over this matter. R.

Avraham objected to the publication of R. Shneur-Zalman's Tanya, a mystical-philosophical treatise on the structure of the human soul, because "it might confuse the simple folk", while R. Shneur Zalman viewed the Kalisker's spontaneous folk-spirituality with alarm. The tension between populist and elitist came to fullest expression in their disagreements.

A generation later, the Polish master R. Yaakov-Yitzchak, known as the Holy Jew, broke from his master, the Seer of Lublin, over this issue among others. The Seer received people from all over Poland and Galicia, who came in search of blessings and guidance, and relied on the master's intervention for all manner of personal problems. His disciple the Holy Jew insisted that the function of the master was to provide a system of teachings by which the follower could orient himself in his own spiritual struggles; he viewed the bestowal of blessings for financial success as a cheapening of the great value of Hasidism. In later generations of Polish Hasidism R. Mendel of Kotzk is an extreme example of the elitist type; his opponent R. Mordechai Yosef of Izbica represents the populist mode, although he was not limited to practical leadership. The tension between these two types of leadership often gave rise to protracted conflicts between Hasidic communities.

Contemplative Mystical vs. Faith/Existential Hasidism

¹³² See also Mahler, 453ff. in Hundert

In an important essay Joseph Weiss¹³³ identified another important dichotomy in the piety of Hasidic groups, between contemplative mysticism and faith or existential piety. As examples of the two paths Weiss points to the R. Dov Ber the Magid of Mezerich and R. Nachman of Bratzlav. The Magid, we recall, succeeded the Besht and founded a school that provided training to a cadre of Hasidic leaders. In the Magid's teachings certain consistent theological positions can be discerned: God is presented as a pure, impersonal life-force (*hayus*), immanent in all creation and accessible through contemplative meditation. The goal of prayer is *devekut*, ecstatic self-negation, while the overarching goal of spiritual life is reached within the psyche of the individual adept. Messianism plays a relatively minor role in the Magid's teachings, as redemption takes place in the life of the soul.

By contrast, in R. Nachman's view God is personal, transcendent and paradoxical, and can be reached primarily through personal prayer, *hisbodedus* the central practice of R. Nachman's teaching. This type of prayer, characterized by spontaneity and the use of the vernacular, is rooted in the supplicant's own existential situation. It is highly emotional and not contemplative, and the goal is not to achieve *unio mystico* and bridge the divide between supplicant and God; it is rather to "pour one's heart out like water" into the *unbridgeable* abyss. Whereas the Tzaddik of the Magid's school of thought is conceived of as a guide to the contemplative process, for R. Nachman the Tzaddik is a paradigm of relationship – between

¹³³ Weiss devoted much of his research to presenting evidence that challenged the notion of Hasidism as a

himself and God and between himself and the disciple - who models and facilitates the disciple's relationship with God. Finally, R. Nachman's vision of the world is full of messianic fervor with universal implications.¹³⁴

Generally speaking, R. Nachman's approach can be seen as *personifying* theological values – that is, restoring the subjective element to Hasidic principles: God, evil, the Tzaddik, the supplicant are all engaged in an intimate relationship with one another. The Magid, by contrast, renders these concepts impersonal forces or, as in the case of evil, illusions. Thus the central orientation for the Magid has to do with the apprehension of transcendent consciousness. Although Weiss overstates his case, ignoring elements that soften his dichotomous typology,¹³⁵ his analysis is useful for our understanding of the types of ideological issues that became conflicts between Hasidic leaders.

The distinction between contemplative and existential types of Hasidism often coincided with tension between practical-populist and theoretical-elitist modes of leadership. This is so in large part because of the extent of the Magid's influence; it was he, after all, who raised and ordained the majority of the succeeding generation of Hasidic leaders, the majority of whom were of the practical-populist variety. By the late 18th century Hasidism as a whole was typified by the Magid's influence, but

homogenous movement. Thus, he is an important source for identifying typologies within Hasidism.

¹³⁴ Scholem famously argued that Hasidism had neutralized the Messianic component in the consciousness of its adherents, but he acknowledges the centrality of Messianic fervor in Bratzlav. Scholem's presentation of this notion in the context of an undifferentiated "Hasidism" is precisely the type of conflation of various

the rare leader whose approach departed significantly from the mainstream was generally tolerated (as a result of the Hasidic emphasis on multiple pathways of spirituality). However in certain cases leaders whose views seemed to contradict that of the mainstream – whether in regard to theology, issues of leadership etc. – were seen as threats to the Hasidic enterprise. As we shall see in a later chapter devoted to the topic, R. Nachman of Bratzlav was such a leader, whose elitist and existentialist approach to Hasidism provoked outrage among many Hasidic leaders of his day. In his case as in many others ideological tension provided the impetus for sectarian conflict within the Hasidic world. This may have been a central factor in the anti-Bratzlav campaign of the populist Savraner.

Succession

Another significant cause of intra-Hasidic conflict was the problem of succession. As Hasidism grew and spread, and as the first generations of Hasidic leaders died, the issue of the transfer of leadership became more divisive. In the many cases in which the master did not leave clear instructions as to who was to succeed him, disputes arose between senior disciples, biological heirs and sons-in-law. Other followers and financial supporters took sides, with the result that questions of leadership often ended in schism and the formation of splinter groups. The question of succession first arose after the Besht's death in 1760. This first

Hasidic schools to which Weiss objected. Cf. Gershom Scholem, *The Messianic Idea in Judaism*, pp184ff.
¹³⁵ Green, p. 331.

succession was hotly contested, with important leaders supporting competing “candidates”. This first instance of conflict over succession bore some of the dynamics characteristic of similar conflicts later in Hasidic history. Competing claims for legitimacy, mutual ideological suspicion, and the role of disciples in determining the fate of leaders appear here for the first time.

One might expect that the primary criterion for choosing a successor would be strict adherence to the approach of the previous leader, beginning with the founder of Hasidism. But the choice of the Magid showed clearly that the expectations for the new leader had little to do with conformity to the founder’s style. The Magid’s approach differed from that of the Besht both in personality and ideology. He was an organizer, not primarily a charismatic, whose thought was as orderly and comprehensive as the Besht’s had been spontaneously intuitive. Where the Besht had relied on a charismatic style of storytelling and teaching, the Magid drew on Talmudic modes of discursive thinking in presenting his orderly discourses on Hasidic philosophy.

There were other senior disciples who could claim a relationship with the Besht of longer standing, and who were closer to him in temperament and theology. That the Magid offered a well-ordered vision of Hasidism as a movement, that his background as a scholar of Jewish law and mysticism allowed him to articulate new doctrines, made him qualified to move Hasidism into its next stage; but this was no comfort to those students who viewed departures from the charismatic style of the

Besht with suspicion. They objected to his theology, his notion of a pantheistic, immanent God, his a-cosmism and the centrality of *devekut*. For example, in contrast to the Magid's approach, R. Pinchas of Koretz, a colleague more than a disciple of the Besht, insisted on simple faith and ethical self-perfection more than mystical contemplation, and his continued activities provided a foil to the Magid's school. The ideological tension between them, though relatively peaceful, foreshadowed later, more intense, internecine conflicts in Hasidism between contemplative and existential schools, especially in the Ukraine. In the case of Bratzlav, the lack of any formal succession presented a challenge to the assumptions of many leaders and householders about the structure of Hasidic communities.

Biological versus Spiritual Lineage

Under the heading of problems concerning succession, we find examples of the specific tension between hereditary claims and those of disciples. The majority of Hasidic courts in Galicia, Ukraine and elsewhere emerged from the Magid's school, and this lent a shared character to many of the Hasidic communities of the 2nd and 3rd generations. Sects that claimed descent from the Besht's bloodline were few. They included R. Baruch of Medzibodz, his brother R. Moshe Chaim Ephraim of Sydlkov, and, a generation later, R. Nachman of Bratzlav, a grandson of the Besht's daughter (and according to Bratzlav sources, his closest disciple) Adel. A telling conversation is reported between two leaders of the 3rd generation of Hasidism, R. Baruch of Medzibodz and R. Shneur Zalman of Liadi. The former was the Besht's

grandson, who, because of his pedigree, had aspirations to the leadership of the Hasidism. When he demanded the respect due his ancestry, R. Shneur Zalman replied, “I too am a spiritual grandchild of the Besht, for I am a disciple of the Great Magid, who was the chief disciple of the Besht.”¹³⁶ In later Hasidic history, including that of R. Shneur Zalman’s own group,¹³⁷ such confrontations were repeated with great acrimony, sometimes leading to schism and the establishment of new sects by either students or biological heirs of the old master.

Questions of succession account for many conflicts in Hasidism from the time of the Besht’s death even until the 21st century. Often, the acrimony engendered by such competition was passed on to later generations, so that in certain cases Hasidic sects were burdened by antipathies that predated them, and these affected their relations with their contemporaries. Inherited conflict is an important dimension of Hasidic sectarian strife, and, as we shall see, it played a part in the many controversies over Bratzlav Hasidism throughout its history.

Territorial issues

In addition to the aforementioned causes, the issue of territorial jurisdiction played a central role in internecine strife. We have made reference to the fact that from the time of the Great Magid Hasidic leaders invested a great deal of energy in

¹³⁶ *Butzina d’Nehora HaShalem* p. 5. Cf. Ettinger, p. 239., in Hundert

¹³⁷ This is the controversy over succession between the Alter Rebbe’s son and one of his close disciples, R. Aharon.

evangelizing. Hasidic literature of this period often refers to a particular area of influence as a “court”, and to a Hasidic community as “the world”, geographical metaphors that bespeak a strategic view and at times a militaristic attitude. The Magid’s emissaries established Hasidic centers in various towns and villages, and these provided them with bases of operations as well as sources of economic and social support. Hasidic leaders were mostly welcomed or invited to these centers, and an often implicit contract was entered into between master and community. In return for financial support, the community would benefit from the master’s blessings, leadership and guidance. On occasion, a leader would establish a court in spite of the opposition of the locals, who were influenced by the Mitnagdim, a rival Hasidic leader or, later, by secularists.¹³⁸ Once a court was established, a Hasidic leader could expect recognition of his sovereignty in that locale; when this was challenged by an interloper conflict often ensued.

The historian Simon Dubnov pointed out the economic nature of such struggles.¹³⁹ Hasidic masters received charity donations as well as *pidyonos*, or redemption money, used by the master to intercede theurgically on behalf of the donor and, according to Dubnov, competition arose over regional control of these economic benefits. Although this explanation fails to take into account other nuances regarding conflict in Hasidism, especially the critical role of ideology, it does identify

¹³⁸ R. Levi-Yitzchak, for example, was unable to settle in Uman, Ukraine due to the fierce opposition of the secularists.

¹³⁹ Simon Dubnov, p. 134, in Hundert

an element of such conflict that cannot be ignored. As we shall see, the most significant controversy in R. Nachman's career was precipitated by – although it cannot be exclusively attributed to - his trespassing upon another master's domain.

Special Cases: Revolution within Revolution

In addition to conflicts engendered by fundamental issues such as these, two special categories must be noted: the first is conflict within the same Hasidic group or between master and disciple. The most striking example of this dynamic is the series of breaks in Polish Hasidism, in which three successive generations of senior disciples left their masters in circumstances of hostility and established new Hasidic centers with vastly different styles.¹⁴⁰ The particulars of personality at play in these cases are beyond the scope of the present study, but it should be noted that such subjective personality clashes often coincided with more clearly identifiable ideological issues.

The second exceptional category is the establishment of schools of Hasidism that deliberately departed from what had become normative Hasidic culture. There are two well-known examples of this phenomenon: the Polish school of Pshychke, established by R. Yaakov-Yitchak, the Holy Jew; and the Hasidic community

¹⁴⁰ These were: the Seer of Lublin who left (or was driven away by) his master R. Elimelekh of Lizhensk; the "Holy Jew" who left the Seer to establish the revolutionary school of Pshychke; R. Mendel of Kotzk; and R. Mordechai Joseph of Ishbitz. The almost familial dynamics at play received fictional treatment by Martin Buber in his work *Gog and Magog*.

founded by R. Nachman of Bratzlav.¹⁴¹ The revolutionary school of Pshychke, with its shift in emphasis away from the centrality of the Tzaddik to individual responsibility and autonomy, its return to the classical value of Torah study as the primary religious practice, and its critique of practical-populist aspects of Hasidic leadership attracted many of the promising students of Polish Hasidism. Hasidic legend records a Hasidic “trial” of the school and its master, R. Simcha-Bunim of Pshychke, held at a wedding at Ostila at which many important Hasidic leaders gathered. With the elder R. Avraham Yehoshua Heschel of Apt acting as presiding judge, and over 200 other leaders present, claims and criticisms were brought against the new school and its revolutionary ways. The representative of the school¹⁴² made a good impression, and, as a result, although criticism continued, the school of Pshychke was accepted by many as a legitimate expression of Hasidic values.

The case of Bratzlav, the Hasidic community at the center of this dissertation, will be examined in depth in a later chapter. It is important to note, however, that both Pshychke and Bratzlav had as central elements of their respective revolts against the Hasidic establishment the return to Torah study as a central religious value. It is a historical irony that, whereas the Mitnagdim attacked the early Hasidim for neglecting Torah study, certain later Hasidic leaders attacked these two schools of

¹⁴¹ See Raphael Mahler, “Hasidism and the Jewish Enlightenment”, p. 453, quoted in Hundert, *Essential Papers*.

¹⁴² Most likely R. Yitzchak-Meir, known as the “Chidushei HaRim”, after his best-known work.

thought and their representatives for betraying the character of Hasidism by returning to Talmudic study.

Hasidic Approaches to Conflict: Masters and Disciples

Thus far we have seen some of the causes of conflict both between Hasidic and Mitnagdim and within the Hasidic movement. Many of the motivating factors of the opposition to the Hasidic movement were internalized to the point that accusations leveled by one Hasidic leader against another are at times indistinguishable from the attacks of the Mitnagdim against the early Hasidim. As a result of all this, the Hasidim faced the test of responding to conflict early on and throughout its history. We have yet to examine the responses of the Hasidim to attacks whether by external Mitnagdim or other Hasidim. What emerges from such an examination is a profound discrepancy between the theology of Hasidism and the perspectives of its leaders on the one hand and the actions of the movements' adherents on the other.

The Besht had taught love of all Jews (*ahavas Yisrael*) as a cardinal precept by which his followers were to live their lives. Indeed, the foundational insight of the Hasidic movement was that it is precisely through diversity and the honoring of the subjective that God is to be served. One has only to follow the root of one's soul with authenticity¹⁴³ and commitment in order to fulfill one's mission in life. The Besht

¹⁴³ Although the Hasidim had no term that correlates exactly to "authenticity", many of their teachings are concerned with "*atzmiyus*" or independence and the avoidance of imitation, as well as *kavannah*, inner

went further, arguing for a positive place for controversy while abjuring hatred in any form. His teaching on the rabbinic phrase, “Moshe received the Torah at Sinai” that “Moshe” is an abbreviation for the Hebrew words “*Machloket Shammai Hillel*”, meaning, “controversy between Shammai and Hillel”, meant that the differences of opinion and perspective characteristic of those two first century Sages were inherent to the revelation of Torah at Sinai and constitute an essential component of the Jewish legacy. Unlike other classical thinkers who tried to explain the ubiquity of controversy in the Mishna and Talmud as a result of forgetfulness, exile or the loss of the purity of transmission of tradition, the Besht affirms controversy as necessary, *a priori* and positive. Therefore, he posited, disagreements must never be accompanied by anger or hatred, for the expression of dissent is in fact the highest expression of revelation: it is holy work.

This sentiment was echoed by later Hasidic masters as well, but this did not always translate into practical policy towards Mitnagdim from outside or from within Hasidism. The pacifistic elements of the Besht’s teachings did not always preclude instances of belligerence among his followers. An example of this is an anecdote concerning R. Nachman Kosover, a student and close companion of the Besht. When challenged as to his departure from the classical rabbis’ style of prayer, he brazenly remarked, “Who says they are in paradise?”¹⁴⁴ This combative retort must surely have provoked his traditionalist critics, and it bespeaks his willingness

intention. I use the term advisedly on this basis, although this requires further consideration.

¹⁴⁴ Ettinger, p.136-138.

(perhaps even his eagerness) to do so. The Hasidim were ready and willing to assert the validity of their innovative approach, and this often translated into an aggressiveness that represents a departure from the Besht's discouragement of antipathy in strife.

The tension between the theology of Hasidic leaders and the actions of Hasidic followers is exemplified by a tale concerning the Hasidim's response to the first writ of excommunication by the Mitnagdim in 1772. In spite of the more conciliatory teachings of their masters some of the younger Hasidim responded to the anti-Hasidic activities. A late letter of R. Schneur Zalman describes the Magid rebuking his student R. Avraham of Kalisk for mocking the Mitnagdim. This brief narrative displays the tension between master and disciple that became typical in later Hasidic history. The Magid's disapproval of his students' reactivity was not enough to prevent such actions from taking place, which (as he likely foresaw) merely served to escalate the tensions between the two groups. Shmuel Ettinger writes of "two separate moral systems – that of the zaddik and that of the public as a whole" among the early Hasidim, and this can be said to apply as well to Hasidic attitudes toward conflict.¹⁴⁵ The leaders adhered to some of the central tenets of the Besht and early Hasidism, many of which were in fact logical outgrowths of Talmudic and kabbalistic ideas of the unity of Israel. The moral system of "the public as a whole", however, was very different, and often appears to have been informed less by Hasidic doctrine than by all-too-human reactivity in the face of aggression. In

responding to the Mitnagdim, the Hasidim did not always limit their responses to spontaneous outbursts; they also engaged in religious activities such as bans and polemics and even at times resorted to complaints to the secular authorities. All of this was done in spite of some of the basic principles taught by their own leaders: love of all Jews, fellowship, and equanimity in the face of attack.

Perhaps as a result of witnessing the Magid's rebuke, R. Shneur Zalman of Liadi, one of the most prolific writers and primary spokesmen of the Hasidim, tried to effect reconciliation with the Mitnagdim from 1772 until the controversy eased decades later.¹⁴⁶ His writings to the Mitnagdim pleaded for an end to their campaign against the Hasidim, and his letters to his own followers called for them to avoid antagonizing the Mitnagdim and to give all due respect to the Gaon of Vilna, "a great Sage in Israel".¹⁴⁷ Of the differences between the two camps' polemical literature, M. Wilensky wrote:

....Written reaction on the part of the Hasidim is more restrained and its writers avoided being dragged into using the harsh and provocative language found in the Mitnaggedic writings, including those that were penned by the Gaon of Vilna. The Hasidic authors ... concentrated on the heart of the matter and did not write on petty things as did many of the Mitnaggedic writers.¹⁴⁸

It would appear that R. Schneur-Zalman learned the lesson of his master the Magid and resolved not to make the mistake of reacting to opposition as his companion

¹⁴⁵ Ettinger, *ibid.*, p. 236.

¹⁴⁶ Wilensky, p. 246.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

had.

The evolution of R. Schneur-Zalman from a youthful student of the Magid to an older, perhaps more thoughtful leader working for reconciliation underscores the difference in perspective between a Hasid and a Hasidic leader. This difference can be seen repeatedly throughout Hasidic history to the present, when, for example, bitter conflicts between rival Hasidic groups are belied by the warm mutual regard of their respective masters.¹⁴⁹ The theological perspectives of its leaders provided conciliatory material that was invoked most often by leaders in their struggles to minimize intra-Hasidic conflict, even as the actions of their followers fed fuel to the fire of such strife.

R. Noson of Bratzlav, the Disciple-Leader

Where sectarian conflict resulted from competing claims to succession, issues of territory or ideological differences, the Hasidim exemplified some of the most extreme forms of internecine strife in Jewish history. Excommunications, economic boycotts, appeals to secular authorities, slander, and occasional physical assaults were not unheard of in the course of these conflicts. The impact of the early opposition from the rabbinical establishment on Hasidic attitudes toward dissenting groups, as well as the departure of Hasidic followers from the more pacific examples

¹⁴⁸ Ibid.

¹⁴⁹ Cf. Mintz, *Hasidic People: A Place in the New World*. In the case of Bratzlav there is a sub-literature dedicated to such examples of leaders of antagonistic groups confessing their true (positive) feelings toward Bratzlav. The reliability of these accounts notwithstanding, they offer a glimpse into a Hasidic

of their own masters, led to the development of a culture of conflict among many Hasidic communities, including those in Ukraine who opposed R. Nachman of Bratzlav and his followers. Therefore a major challenge facing Hasidic leaders was to persuade their followers to abjure violence in the face of strife and persecution.

It is against this backdrop that we must understand the subject of this dissertation, R. Noson of Bratzlav. As a leader of perhaps the most beleaguered of Hasidic communities his task was twofold: to maintain communal cohesion in the face of persecution, and to persuade the Bratzlaver Hasidim to remain loyal to their Rebbe's teachings regarding peace and non-reactivity to attacks. R. Noson's conversion to Hasidism allowed him to gain access to the resources of the leaders of the movement, whose conciliatory attitudes toward conflict were to be of great use to him in his own leadership role. And, as a unique leader, one who *led as a disciple* of R. Nachman, it is my contention that he was uniquely suited to the task of mediating the peaceful vision of the Tzadikim with the harsh realities of the Hasidim.

attempt to distinguish the attitudes of masters and followers among rival Hasidic groups.

CHAPTER 5: R. NACHMAN'S THEOLOGY OF CONFLICT

Any study of R. Noson of Bratzlav's response to conflict as it emerged from the Years of Oppression must take into account the most significant source on which he drew: his master's multifaceted approach to the subject. R. Noson drew on his Rebbe's authority and experience of conflict as expressed in his teachings and personal conversations in constructing his own religious perspective on sectarian strife. R. Nachman's teachings and the master-disciple relationship provided scaffolding for his sometimes daring interpretation of events. Most significantly, his lessons and informal asides, diligently recorded by R. Noson, gave him spiritual direction and practical guidance for transforming conflict during the difficult days of the 1830s. On this basis R. Noson developed his own approach to conflict, often quoting R. Nachman verbatim and using his lessons as the basis of a shared language with which to guide the other Bratzlaver Hasidim. He derived inspiration from the life of R. Nachman, which he viewed as a form of novel sacred history, and he drew strength from his teacher's deathbed promise that "they will pursue you and pursue you, but in the end you will win".¹⁵⁰ In order to understand the roots of R. Noson's approach to conflict, then, we must turn to R. Nachman's experience of conflict and

the theologies of conflict he developed and employed as a result.¹⁵¹ Studies of R. Nachman's thought by Joseph Weiss, Arthur Green and others will inform this analysis, and in addition we will explore material from sources within the Bratzlav oral tradition that have generally escaped inclusion in discussions of R. Nachman and conflict.

In his short life, R. Nachman of Bratzlav entered into conflict with many of his contemporaries, Hasidic leaders whose approach to the path of the Besht differed in significant ways from his own. Conflict and its implications were central motifs in the first teachings the young R. Noson heard from R. Nachman in 1802. At the time, R. Nachman was already embroiled in the major conflict of his career, with the Shpola Zeide (1725-1812), the elderly Hasidic master who represented popular Ukrainian Hasidism. Later other Hasidic leaders would take sides against the younger leader, and even his uncle R. Baruch of Medzibodz (1753-1811) would turn against him. As a result of his embattled position, conflict played a more significant role in R. Nachman's thought than it did in that of many other Hasidic masters.

Literature

¹⁵⁰ Avraham Chazan mi-Tulchin, *Yemei HaTlaot*, p. 184.

¹⁵¹ Arthur Green speaks of R. Nachman's "theology on the principle of conflict" (Green, Tormented Master p. 115). He emphasizes certain teachings and sayings of R. Nachman while ignoring others. There is no inherent reason that these sources should be taken more seriously than others, as they all appear in the primary sources of Bratzlav – *Likutei MoHaRan*, *Sichos HaRaN*, etc. I have tried here to avoid the temptation of privileging certain texts over others, and have offered a broader view of R. Nachman's approaches.

In an article titled, “R. Nachman of Bratzlav on the Opposition”,¹⁵² Joseph Weiss examined R. Nachman’s perspective on the opposition he faced through the lens of one autobiographical source, a dream recorded in a section of *Hayei MoHaRaN* called “New Stories”. While this text provides an intimate view of R. Nachman’s self-image during a critical time in his life, it bears witness to only one psychological aspect of his life: the negotiation of guilt and shame. Weiss argues that the Shpola’s opposition played into R. Nachman’s own sense of unworthiness as a Hasidic leader. Weiss explicates R. Nachman’s sense of religious guilt and social shame, but his emphasis on the autobiographical nature of R. Nachman’s teachings ignores the many sources in his works which offer a broader view of conflict, one in which the master’s personality does not play an exclusive or even dominant role.

Building on Weiss’ work, in his biography of R. Nachman, Arthur Green explores the conflicts in which the master was engaged as well as his theology of conflict. Green follows Weiss in linking the intellectual history of Bratzlav with R. Nachman’s biography, but he broadens the psychological perspective to include what he sees as R. Nachman’s increasingly extravagant claims to be the one true Tzaddik of his generation (*Tzaddik HaDor*). According to Green, at the heart of R. Nachman’s many conflicts with other Hasidic leaders was his psychological need for constant controversy. According to this theory, R. Nachman deliberately entered into conflict in order to shore up his own identity as a leader, an identity which was threatened by

¹⁵² Weiss, in *Mechkarim b’Hasidut Bratzlav*, p. 66-86.

internal tension and insecurity. In the face of external conflict and persecution, Green argues, R. Nachman's inner demons were calmed. In this view conflict is a catalyst for a kind of identity formation, a forum for the sublimation of inner struggles.¹⁵³ In support of Green's explanation, it would not be surprising for a man raised within a religious revival movement tested in the crucible of fervent opposition to associate conflict with creative growth.

The problem with these approaches is that Weiss and Green view R. Nachman's theology through the lenses of biography and psychology, respectively. While it is true that R. Nachman's life and his thought are deeply intertwined, it is also clear from a plethora of statements R. Nachman made that his lessons were intended to be read and understood beyond the framework of his biography¹⁵⁴. To assert the relevance of a pre-modern thinker's psychology to an understanding of his work is certainly legitimate; but such an assertion must maintain a degree of tentativeness lest one's modern categories and conceptions obscure a clear perception of the subject. This point lies at the heart of both Pinchas Sade's sharp critique of Weiss' analysis, in which he maintains the latter scholar related to R. Nachman as a

¹⁵³ Kramer,¹⁵³ *Through Fire and Water*, p. 115.

¹⁵⁴ On the claim of the universality of his lessons cf. for example: R. Noson Sternhartz, *Hayei MoHaRaN* 2:23, 49 "The whole world..."; *Sichos HaRaN* 249; Avraham Chazan mi-Tulchin, *Yemei HaTlaot*, p. 188; *ibid.*, p. 203: "Once, men came to hear his Torah. They said, 'What is there in such lofty Torah for us?' He was very annoyed by this and said 'Anyone who cannot find himself in my Torah is a heretic!'" Interestingly, one of the sources for the link between R. Nachman's teachings and biography is a statement by R. Avraham Peterburger, R. Nachman's scribe before R. Noson's arrival. He said, "...it is known that every lesson he [R. Nachman] said was mainly about himself and his insights at that moment..." The possibility exists that the tension between the two approaches – one, that R. Nachman's teachings are to be taken as primarily autobiographical, and the second emphasizing the universal applicability of those lessons – is an outgrowth of the tension between the distinct approaches of R. Nachman's two scribes; but this would require further study.

“psychiatric patient” rather than as a “religious genius”,¹⁵⁵ and Mendel Piekarz’s critique of both Weiss and Green for imposing the limiting frame of biography on the literature R. Nachman produced.¹⁵⁶

Further, in the context of this study of R. Nachman’s preeminent follower, to disregard later Bratzlav thinkers’ attitudes towards their master entirely is to lose a significant interpretive tradition and context for R. Nachman’s teachings. Without exception such thinkers saw R. Nachman’s thought as both relevant and interpretable independent of his psychology. To view R. Nachman’s attitude toward an issue of such central importance as conflict exclusively through a biographical or psychological lens is to handicap one’s examination from the start. If we wish to arrive at a clear sense of this thinker’s own ideas, rather than ask “What subconscious motivations were driving him to say X?” we had better ask “What did he say?” Therefore, in this chapter I will avoid the methodological restrictions of biography and psychology that limited previous examinations of R. Nachman’s thought. Instead I will draw on a wide range of teachings in order to examine R. Nachman’s approaches to conflict on their own terms, the terms in which R. Nason would have viewed them.

Conflict in R. Nachman’s Life

The series of conflicts between R. Nachman of Bratzlav and other Ukrainian

¹⁵⁵ *Tikun Halev*, Jerusalem, 1982, p. 261

¹⁵⁶ “*Zaddik l’Bnei Ha-Olam Ha-Chadash?*” in *Tarbiz* 51 [1982] p. 154-157

Hasidic leaders between the years 1802-1810 constitute an important chapter in his life.

In the previous chapter on conflict in Hasidism I discussed the distinctions between different streams of Hasidism provided by Joseph Weiss. Although Weiss places Bratzlav firmly in the camp of existential-elitist Hasidism, in many ways Bratzlav frustrates attempts at classification, as it differed from other Hasidic communities of both types both in ideology and social structure. At the same time R. Nachman leveled harsh critiques at some of the leading representatives of popular Hasidism in Ukraine. To R. Nachman the emphasis of many Hasidic leaders on the bestowal of blessings for worldly success was a distraction from the true goal of life, personal spiritual growth.¹⁵⁷ R. Nachman played the part of the young “prophetic” challenger to a Hasidic establishment that had in his view unfortunately digressed from the revolutionary spiritual idealism of his great-grandfather the Besht. “It is forbidden to be old!” he cried, and those leaders whose authority stemmed from their seniority and traditionalism - foremost among them the Shpola – came under attack.¹⁵⁸ In Green’s words,

Hasidism in its original heyday had been a movement characterized by a certain degree of religious rebellion, an attitude for which it had been severely persecuted.... By Nachman's time Hasidism was well on the road

¹⁵⁷ Cf. Kramer, *Through Fire and Water* p.364 on this. Other Ukrainian leaders including populists, such as R. Mordechai of Chernobyl also complained about the lack of spiritual focus among their followers.

¹⁵⁸ Cf. R. Noson Sternhartz, *Hayei MoHaRaN*, “machlokes” 4, in which R. Nachman draws a parallel between his own experience and the radical nature of the biblical Abraham’s career. According to this passage the patriarch reached out only to young people, for “the old ones were already entrenched in their mistaken ways and it was impossible to reach them.”

toward becoming that conservative force which it was to prove itself to be by the latter part of the nineteenth century.¹⁵⁹

According to Green, whereas the Shpola Zeide, the oldest living master whose claim to fame was that he had met the Besht, felt that “the essential revolution had been completed”, R. Nachman felt that the movement had “grown soft and overly accepting of its own inner abuses”¹⁶⁰, and that the initial revolution was in danger of being replaced by hypocrisy and indulgence. What for the Shpola was the completion of the Besht's project was for R. Nachman compromise and complacency. This ideological difference regarding the future of Hasidism and its leadership went beyond the conflict with the Shpola, involving other leading Ukrainian masters, and it is essential to our understanding of the ubiquity of conflict in R. Nachman's career.

The Conflict with the Shpola Zeide

The conflict with the Shpola arose when R. Nachman moved to Zlatipolia in September 1800, a village 28.5 kilometers from Shpola and a place historically associated with his leadership (the Shpola had been the beadle there for 8 years). It is likely the Shpola experienced this move as a threat to his territorial authority. When R. Nachman was critical of the hypocrisy he saw among certain local communal leaders they complained to the Shpola, apparently inflating their grievances with slander. The Shpola arrived soon after and spoke out against R. Nachman, and

¹⁵⁹ Green, p. 104.

physical violence between their respective followers was narrowly averted. Thus began the conflict that was to accompany R. Nachman to the end of his life. In 1802 the Shpola attempted to have R. Nachman excommunicated but did not receive the needed support from other Hasidic leaders, and in fact many of them defended R. Nachman. However, the conflict between the older and younger masters did not subside, and after 2 years which R. Nachman referred to as “double hell” (a reference to the tradition that the wicked remain in hell for up to 1 year) he left Zlatipolia for Bratzlav on the recommendation of his uncle. He was to remain there until near the end of his life, but the echoes of the opposition he had faced continued to sound.

Other Conflicts

If this was the most prominent, intense and extended conflict of R. Nachman’s life it was not the only one. Other Hasidic leaders expressed concern over his iconoclasm and departures from the normative teachings and practices of the leaders who emerged from the Magid’s school. The Magid had taught a brand of Hasidism predicated on the notion of God as immanent life-force. In his teaching, the primary goal of spiritual life was *devekut*, *unio mystico* with God. In Joseph Weiss’ terms, the Magid represents a “piety of contemplative mysticism”. R. Nachman, by contrast, portrayed God not as an impersonal life-force (*hayut*) but as an intensely personal yet distant father. Many of the practices he taught were ways of dealing

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 105.

with this distance by bridging the gap between God and man, most prominently through unmediated personal prayer (*hitbodedut*). Weiss uses R. Nachman as the example of “existential piety” or “piety of faith”, a very different type of Hasidism from that taught by the Magid.

We must recall that the world of Hasidism was one in which seemingly subtle doctrinal differences were seen as tremendously significant, and they were therefore common sources of contention. R. Nachman’s pathos, his acute awareness of the gap between God and man, his teachings on the centrality of the Tzadik and his unique form of seemingly secular, phantasmagorical storytelling all struck some Hasidic leaders as deviant and dangerous. With the Shpola’s prompting, these leaders added their voices to the criticisms leveled at R. Nachman.

In addition, R. Nachman had criticized a number of prominent Ukrainian Hasidic leaders on various issues, including their claims to supernatural visions.¹⁶¹ Most shockingly of all in the early 1800s R. Nachman had taken the unprecedented step of befriending the secularists in Uman¹⁶², something which drew criticism from

¹⁶¹ In January, 1800, R. Nachman criticized the Rebbes of Neskhez and Olek regarding their visions. See Aryeh Kaplan, *Until the Mashiach: R. Nachman’s Biography: an Annotated Chronology* (Jerusalem: Breslov Research Institute, 1985), p. 57.

¹⁶² These meetings took place in August 1801. These maskilim were Chaikel Hurwitz (1750-1822) author of *Tzafnas Paneach* on the discovery of America, Hirsch Ber Hurwitz, who later became a professor at King’s College under the name Herman Bernard, and Moshe Landau. The latter two were students of Naftali Hertz Wiesel, a prominent student of Moses Mendelssohn and author of *Yain Levanon*. The three were active in promoting secular education among Jews in Ukraine, and, according to Hasidic sources, had prevented R. Levi-Yitzchok of Berdichov and R. Yaakov Shimshon of Shepetevka from settling permanently in Uman (See Kaplan, *Until the Mashiach*, p.188). As we shall see in Chapter 6, because of their relationship with R. Nachman, they supported R. Noson in the period in which he was persecuted by the Savraner.

other Hasidic masters and followers. Finally, he and his uncle and ally R. Baruch of Medzibodz had a falling out in the summer of 1803. (The reasons for this falling out are unclear.) R. Baruch was a prominent Hasidic leader, and as the grandson of the Besht and the proprietor of the Hasidic center at Medzbidoz he held a central position in the Hasidic hierarchy. The loss of his support was a significant blow to R. Nachman's political fortunes.

R. NACHMAN'S ATTITUDES TOWARD CONFLICT

Throughout the course of his career, as a response to his experiences of conflict, R. Nachman developed and elaborated a series of teachings on conflict between Tzaddikim, the pursuit of peace, and persecution. R. Nachman of Bratzlav did not express his insights in systematic ways, nor did he develop them through discursive reasoning.¹⁶³ Instead, his *oeuvre* is marked by an associative method and intuitive thinking, as well as a multiplicity of perspectives on the many subjects he addresses. As Arthur Green wrote:

In light of... stylistic considerations, it is clear that any attempt to treat themes in Nachman's writings systematically must be approached with the greatest trepidation. If intuitive flashes based upon a particular series of scriptural associations lie at the base of each teaching, is one justified in using one of those teachings to explain another, in which the threads that compose the fabric of thought are in fact quite different?¹⁶⁴

¹⁶³ As did his contemporary R. Shneur Zalman of Liadi for example. For a comparison of the two styles of thought and exegesis, cf. Green, p. 288-9.

¹⁶⁴ Green, p. 289. An early 20th century Bratzlav thinker and author, R. Avraham (Tulchiner) Hazan argues in a similar vein in his list of general principles for studying *Likutei MoHaRaN*. See also *Biur Halikutim*, Preface: "18 General Principles for Studying *Likutei MoHaRaN*".

However, Green qualifies this concern with seeking an overly systematic understanding of R. Nachman's thought as follows: "If Nachman is to be taken seriously as a thinker, one must [at some point] ask: 'What does Nachman have to say? There are moreover, certain central themes that confront the reader repeatedly in Nachman's writings, and thus demand such general treatment.'"¹⁶⁵ Conflict, which appears in more than 40 lessons in *Likutei MoHaRaN* as well as in other works,¹⁶⁶ certainly constitutes one of these central themes.

Two Attitudes toward Conflict in R. Nachman's Thought: the Negative

Approach

The chief difficulty in approaching R. Nachman's attitude toward conflict lies in the existence of seemingly contradictory statements on the subject in *Likutei MoHaRaN* and elsewhere. In a number of lessons R. Nachman sees conflict as problematic or evil. Its source lies in the "blood that has not yet been purified through holy service (*avodat Hashem*),¹⁶⁷ in hunger and lack,¹⁶⁸ in the biblical strife of Korach,¹⁶⁹ or even in Satan himself.¹⁷⁰ It poses great dangers to service of God, particularly to speech (including prayer and Torah study), the essential expression of

¹⁶⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶⁶ *Sefer HaMidot* has an entire section dedicated to the subject of "merivah"; *Hayei MoHaRaN* as well devotes a section to the experience of conflict in R. Nachman's life, and *Sichot HaRaN* makes reference to conflict on a number of occasions as well.

¹⁶⁷ R. Nachman of Bratslav, *Likutei MoHaRaN*, 75.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid. 39.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid. 46.

spiritual life according to R. Nachman.¹⁷¹ Other negative comments include: “Through conflict heretical thoughts befall the righteous”,¹⁷² when a person faces strife “he can experience a downfall from his spiritual level”¹⁷³ and “leaders become famous before their time”,¹⁷⁴ and as a result of strife between leaders “no one knows where the truth lies”.¹⁷⁵ One who engages in conflict becomes like Datan and Aviram, biblical characters who represent fomenters of strife for its own sake.¹⁷⁶

Amid this catalogue of the negative consequences of conflict can be found some of the central issues with which R. Nachman wrestled both personally and intellectually throughout his life: confusion about which leaders and which path of spiritual life to follow; the existence of false leaders; the problematic of fame and its concomitant responsibilities and distractions¹⁷⁷; and perhaps most significantly the loss of the faculty of speech. In R. Nachman’s thought speech is the foundation for all religious life. The “old-new path on which our ancestors walked” is the path of prayer, renewed through R. Nachman for the generations facing the challenges of atheism in the period preceding the Messiah’s arrival. Statements such as “The main thing is to pray and learn and pray” and “Our power lies only in our mouth” underscore the centrality of verbal expression in R. Nachman’s thought.¹⁷⁸ One who

¹⁷⁰ *Sefer HaMidot* 66

¹⁷¹ R. Nachman of Bratslav, *Likutei MoHaRaN*, 239. “As a result of conflict one cannot speak”.

¹⁷² *Ibid.*, 251.

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*, 258.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, II:20.

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, II:78.

¹⁷⁶ *Sefer HaMidot* 84

¹⁷⁷ Cf. Green, p. 113 for a discussion of this struggle.

¹⁷⁸ Bratslav literature is replete with references to the power and importance of speech. Discussions of

is unable to pray can simply repeat the phrase “Master of the Universe” until his or her heart responds and spontaneous prayer follows. To be unable to pray at all is to be paralyzed spiritually, for without prayer one cannot even express one’s yearning for improvement and salvation. In this view conflict threatens the very foundation of spiritual service and must therefore be overcome and eradicated.

The Positive Approach

On the other hand, there exist numerous statements in R. Nachman’s works to the contrary: conflict serves a positive function, and it is often a result of God’s direct intervention in situations requiring strife for various reasons. Conflict is a catalyst for growth, and R. Nachman uses the simile of water to examine it.

Conflict lifts a person, for “a man is a tree of the field” (Deut.20). For a tree that lies in the earth cannot lift itself up except with the arrival of flowing water, which lifts and raises the tree. And conflict is called water, as it is written, “They surrounded me like water all day long....” (Ps.88).¹⁷⁹

And in a similar but explicitly autobiographical vein:

All the great Tzaddikim reached their levels but remained there. But I, thank God, in every moment become a different person. For the Tzaddik is called a tree.... Every Tzaddik faces opposition before he grows.... The Sages said, “Controversy is like water”. Just as water is necessary for a

hitbodedut, the concept of *malchut peh* are ubiquitous. An entire book, *Hishtapchus HaNefesh*, on the subject of personal prayer was published in 1914. Anecdotally, when a young Polish yeshiva student and later Bratzlav leader, R. Eliyahu Chaim Rozen, arrived in Uman, the center of Bratzlav activity in the early 1900s, the head of the circle, R. Avraham Chazan, greeted him with the following words: “Why aren’t your lips moving?!” Taking R. Nachman’s teachings to their logical endpoint, *constant* sacred speech was an ideal for this Bratzlav thinker. (Heard from Gedaliah Fleer.)

¹⁷⁹ R. Nachman of Bratzlav, *Likutei MoHaRaN*, 161

tree to grow, strife is necessary for the Tzaddik to grow; and constant growth requires constant opposition.¹⁸⁰

In addition, “There are levels that are impossible to reach without opposition”¹⁸¹; and “Through conflict one can renew Jewish law”.¹⁸² Conflict serves to obscure holiness, hiding it from “outside forces” (*chitzonim*) that would parasitically nurse from its light.¹⁸³

The Tzaddik brings down abundance from heaven. But if he is famous this becomes impossible. So God sends another leader who opposes him, and this provides concealment so that he can continue his holy work.

In a further development of the concept of conflict as a form of concealment, a Tzaddik who is capable of drawing non-Jews closer to God requires opposition in order to succeed, since “We do not accept converts in the Messianic era”¹⁸⁴ because their motives are suspect. But in a time of suffering one who throws in his or her lot with the Jewish people is accepted. Similarly, the Tzaddik who suffers is able to inspire others to repentance and conversion – and their decisions to repent or convert will be without ulterior motives.¹⁸⁵ Conflict also

¹⁸⁰ *Tzaddik*, p. 401

¹⁸¹ R. Noson Sternhartz, *Hayei MoHaRaN*, 402.

¹⁸² *Ibid.*, 288.

¹⁸³ R. Nachman of Bratslav, *Likutei MoHaRaN*, 88. The concept of *chitzonim* was developed by R. Isaac Luria. According to this doctrine, even elements of holiness are in danger of being co-opted by evil forces. This concept drew on the medieval notion, taught by Nahmanides among others, of the “wretch in the realm of Torah” (*naval b'rshut haTorah*). The Lurianic idea paved the way for the Hasidic development of meta-halachic levels of discourse: if even a holy act may contribute vitality to evil, then protection must be sought in an entirely different level of human activity, for example intention or prayer. Cf. Green, *Tormented Master*, pp. 294-295.

¹⁸⁴ Talmud Bavli..

¹⁸⁵ *Sefer HaMidot*, B:18, *Likutei MoHaRaN*, 228.

serves the function of mitigating harsh decrees (*hamtakat hadinim*),¹⁸⁶ and at times a Tzaddik will oppose another person for the latter's welfare.¹⁸⁷

In a striking teaching,¹⁸⁸ R. Nachman goes so far as to link conflict to creation. Drawing on Lurianic creation imagery¹⁸⁹, R. Nachman asserts that the space between antagonists parallels the primordial void (*chalal panui*) in which the initial creation of the universe took place. It is only because two people disagree that there can be such a space; were they to hold identical positions there would be no room for innovation. In the space between them a new world is created through speech, but this speech must not overburden the capacities of the space: too much speech leads to the type of cataclysm described in Lurianic kabbalah as the breaking of the vessels, in which God's light shattered, leading to the fallen state of creation and the existence of evil. Elsewhere R. Nachman speaks enigmatically of "male and

¹⁸⁶ The concept of *dinim*, harsh decrees originating in the feminine, left, Gevurah dimension of the Godhead, is rooted in Lurianic kabbalah. In Hasidic thought, a primary role of the Tzaddik is to act as intercessor, "sweetening" the harsher decrees of heaven on behalf of the Hasidic follower.

¹⁸⁷ R. Nachman of Bratslav, *Likutei MoHaRaN*, 241, 277. A Bratslav source offers the notion that R. Baruch of Medzibodz saw himself as consciously using conflict to benefit R. Nachman. In *Tovos Zichronos* by R. Avraham Sternhartz (a great-grandson of R. Noson), a conversation between R. Baruch and his sister Feige – R. Nachman's mother - is recorded. When Feige asked him why he was persecuting her son, R. Baruch replied, "I see that the world is not ready for his great light, and I am providing a cover for him". This fits nicely with R. Nachman's teachings on conflict as a beneficial tool in the hands of a sympathetic Tzaddik. We cannot know whether this is a later Bratslav tradition attempting to portray an important Hasidic leader as more sympathetic than was the case, or whether this tale is historically authentic. In any case, this portrait stands in stark contrast to Bratslav portrayal of the Shpola, to whom positive motives are never attributed. See R. Avraham Sternhartz, *Yerach HaEsanim, Imros Tehoros, Tovos Zichronos* (Bnai Brak: Gedaliah Aharon Kenig, 5711 (1951)), 5/9.

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid.* 64:4

¹⁸⁹ R. Isaac Luria rendered a creation myth that is a departure from the Genesis account. God exists everywhere ("No place is empty of Him"), and so had to contract Himself to create a space in which Creation could take place (*tzimtzum*). Once this was accomplished, God sent beams of light into Vessels inside the Void (*chalal*). But the light was too intense and the Vessels broke (*shevirat hakelim*), thus leading to the existence of evil (*kelipot*). Cf. Gershon Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York: Schocken Books, 1995),.

female sexual arousals” in the transmission of Torah. When there is a dispute between sages, a conception may take place, and one must not interfere lest that new birth be prevented.¹⁹⁰

The unequivocally positive view of conflict that it is in the spaces between opponents that the world continues to exist and new worlds are created begs the question: How can we understand such radically divergent attitudes toward conflict originating in the mind of one man? Is conflict satanic or divine, creative or destructive?¹⁹¹ Does it damage the adept’s spiritual standing or does it enhance it? We must look for an answer in a less prominent teaching of R. Nachman, one that is not included in *Likutei MoHaRaN*.

Conflict as an Essential Principle

This lesson, printed in *Sichot HaRan*, a collection of later teachings and informal talks, holds a special place in our discussion. In this lesson, R. Nachman made the assertion that conflict is bound up with the nature of reality itself.

The whole world is filled with strife. There are wars between the great world

¹⁹⁰ *Sefer HaMidot* B:22. In a more esoteric statement, R. Nachman says that conflict exists in order to keep “male kings” and “female kings” separated, lest the world be destroyed (*Sefer HaMidot* A:64). Perhaps this is a reference to two styles of leadership, one characterized by transmission of Torah and the other by its receipt (male and female, respectively, in kabbalistic language).

¹⁹¹ One might seek a resolution to this seeming contradiction in an important distinction between types of conflict which obtains in R. Nachman’s thinking. Strife between Tzaddikim is *sui generis*, and R. Nachman discusses many of the positive attributes of conflict in that context. It is not clear that those attributes would apply to an instance of conflict between two antagonists who are not “wholly righteous”. But the discrepancy between positive and negative attitudes toward conflict in R. Nachman’s thought cannot be resolved simply by distinguishing different types of actors. Many of the negative dimensions of conflict apply equally or more to Tzaddikim, and many of the positive aspects are presented without any mention of Tzaddikim.

powers. There are conflicts within different locales. There are disputes within families. There is strife between neighbors. There is conflict within a household, between husband and wife, parents and children. Life is finite; people die each day. Every day death comes closer. But people continue to fight and forget their true goal in life. All strife is identical. The friction within a family parallels the strife between nations. Each person in a household is the counterpart of a world power, and their fights are the wars between those powers.... You may wish to live in peace, but you are forced into conflict. It is the same for nations, which might wish to avoid war yet still become caught up in war. Two other powers might demand its allegiance until it is forced to choose a side and join the war.... A man living alone can become insane. Within him are the warring nations. His personality is that of the victorious nation. Each time a new nation is victorious he must change completely, and this can drive him insane. He is alone and so cannot express the war within him. But when he lives with people these inner battles are expressed toward family or friends.... When the Messiah comes, all wars will end. The world will then have eternal peace.¹⁹²

Unlike the numerous texts from *Likutei MoHaRaN* that we have quoted above, R. Nachman's description of conflict in this text from *Sichot HaRaN* is value-neutral. Conflict is described as neither negative/satanic nor positive/divine, nor does R. Nachman allude to its positive or negative consequences. Conflict simply exists, and as an integral part of creation it can be negotiated but not abolished absolutely. Here R. Nachman asserts the inherent nature of conflict. "A man living alone can become insane": conflict does not rely for its existence on competing claims, frictions between multiple parties over resources or ideology¹⁹³ or any other human motive or non-human force. It does not "take two to tango", because conflict is rooted in the very fabric of creation, and so it is more fundamental than the realm of interpersonal

¹⁹² *Sichot HaRaN*

¹⁹³ Cf. Hector Avalos, cf. *Fighting Words* (New York: Prometheus Books, 2005) for a cogent argument for a

interaction. In fact “all strife is identical”- there is no inherent difference between inner and outer strife, it all has the same origin in the nature of reality itself. Only when the order of things is replaced by the new eschatological order will conflict cease: “When the Messiah comes all wars will end”.

In light of this teaching it becomes clear all the reasons for conflict put forth in the sources mentioned above, both negative (impure blood, hunger, the strife of Korach, etc.) and positive (e.g. with the intention of sweetening harsh decrees or providing concealment for holy work) are in actuality contingent. It is not that conflict is inherently negative or positive; it is a neutral force which has the potential to manifest as either positive or negative. Conflict exists as a primal force in nature *in potentia*; it is activated and expressed through other phenomena or motives. These other causes determine the nature of the conflict, i.e. whether it will have negative or positive consequences for those involved. But conflict as a force built-in to creation itself predates these causes. The obvious question is: What determines in which form conflict will appear? The answer lies in R. Nachman’s theory of interpretation.

The Challenge of Interpretation

The main method by which, according to R. Nachman, one may cause strife to manifest positively can be found in the principle of interpretation. R. Nachman offered a general teaching describing the fundamental orientation of an “Israelite”¹⁹⁴

definition of conflict on the basis of scarcity.

¹⁹⁴ A deliberately chosen term for a Jew, this word evokes the etymological root (which is prominent in

to his or her world. In the first lesson printed in *Likutei MoHaRaN*, R. Nachman teaches that one must regard all phenomena, all encounters, primarily as events requiring interpretation.

For the Israelite must always seek [to understand] the wisdom in every thing, to connect to the knowledge and wisdom that lies in every thing.... This wisdom leads one to God....¹⁹⁵

The fundamental orientation of an Israelite to life is that of interpretation. Just as a text is interpretable and bears messages for its readers, so life itself, every moment and encounter bears a message to the one who is open to reading it. This is because God is the source and author of all events. Further, God is not only ultimately responsible for everything, God is also calling out “from within the cloud of darkness”¹⁹⁶ of this-worldly events. To heed and respond to this call is the task of the Bratzlaver Hasid. Every encounter hides a message; every message has its origins in God, the source of all meaning; and all situations therefore offer the spiritual seeker ways to find God. R. Nachman casts the Jew as the quintessential exegete, seeking meaning in every thing.

The Interpretive Key to Conflict

In addition to the general notion of approaching life as an interpreter, R.

Genesis Ch. 32 in which Jacob’s name is changed to Israel) of “wrestling” or “struggling”. Elsewhere in *Likutei MoHaRaN*, R. Nachman uses other terms to refer to Jews.

¹⁹⁵ R. Nachman of Bratslav, *Likutei MoHaRaN* 1:1.

¹⁹⁶ *Ibid*, 115.

Nachman taught that conflict situations require more specific guidelines for interpretation. In the fifth lesson in *Likutei MoHaRaN*, taught originally on the first New Year holiday after R. Noson met him, R. Nachman discusses conflict between Hasidic leaders.¹⁹⁷ After discussing the responsibility of each person to pray for the world as a whole, he analyzes the implications of this responsibility.¹⁹⁸ In the course of this analysis, R. Nachman offers a spiritual rationale for the problematic of strife between Tzaddikim.

When you hear arguments between Tzaddikim, know that you are being made to hear rebuke for having caused blemish in your thoughts....

Here, in the first articulation of a theory of conflict that R. Noson heard from R. Nachman, the master argued that conflict between Hasidic leaders bears messages for the observer, who, upon witnessing such strife, is meant to engage in introspective self-criticism. In this lesson R. Nachman is giving practical advice as to the direction of interpretation one should take when encountering the seeming ethical aberration of conflict. Such an encounter does not have to lead to a dismissal of the antagonists (as R. Noson's father-in-law had concluded), but can actually

¹⁹⁷ R. Noson said years later that this lesson gave him direction throughout his life, and that the discussion of conflict in particular was directed to his own doubts. We must recall that R. Dovid Tzvi, R. Noson's father-in-law and his earliest teacher, became a vigorous opponent of the Hasidim as a result of the infighting between Hasidic leaders he witnessed. As a result of his influence, the young R. Noson had resisted his friends' encouragement to explore the Hasidic communities for some time. R. Noson was also disturbed by the opposition of the Shpola Zeide to R. Nachman, and this discourse gave him guidance for dealing with his questions.

¹⁹⁸ He also discusses decrees against the Jewish people at a time in which the Czarist government was considering drafting a law requiring Jewish children to join the army, thus ensuring their alienation from Jewish traditions. This law was postponed at this time, but was eventually put into practice 25 years later as

strengthen one's inner spiritual growth by casting light on places in need of improvement. In a sense R. Nachman is offering his students a specific interpretive key to conflict. A true interpretation of conflict is one that is oriented inward, and leads to introspection and self-scrutiny. Only after such an orientation is accomplished can one turn one's attention to questions of external policy.

This lesson is directed toward those who witness conflict between Tzaddikim. For those personally involved in conflict, however, such a conscious act of interpretation is often very difficult. While an actor in conflict might recognize that the antagonism he faces has its ultimate origin in God, and that it therefore bears a message for him at once relevant to and beneficial for his inner life, he may still have difficulty transcending the immediately painful and threatening reality posed by his antagonists. Human reactivity to assault, defensiveness in the face of aggression is a natural character trait. How then is one to transcend these reactions?

Closing the Eyes

One answer lies in the concept of *bitul*, variously rendered as self-negation, -transcendence or -surrender. The concept appears in many of R. Nachman's lessons; I will use Lesson 65 of *Likutei MoHaRaN* because of it integrates a number of concepts of direct relevance to our discussion. In that lesson, in the course of a discussion on the experience of suffering, R. Nachman writes that the true nature of

the Cantonist Decrees. This is one of many example of the way in which R. Nachman constructed his spiritually oriented discourses on the basis of current events.

reality, even in moments of suffering, is absolutely good.

For in all the sufferings that pass over a person, God forbid, if he looks to the *tachlis* they are not bad at all, but they are great favors, for all suffering comes from God...whose will is certainly to bestow good....

The term used here, *tachlis*, is a central motif in Bratzlav literature. It denotes both the chronological end-point and ultimate purpose (*telos*) of things. The sense of the term in this passage is that God's goodness will be finally and fully revealed in the Messianic era. Although in the world-as-it-is that goodness is hidden from sight, it is possible to apprehend the *tachlis* even before the End of Days. In this lesson R. Nachman distinguishes between suffering, which is a form of experience, and pain, a function of perception. The *pain* of suffering stems from a lack of perception of God's ubiquitous beneficence. When one looks upon the *tachlis* this pain is replaced with great joy as the sufferer recognizes the ultimate benefit of his suffering.

The difficulty in this process is one of perception, and R. Nachman provides a model, drawn from everyday experience, for overcoming it. This model is the phenomenon of the common human reaction of closing one's eyes in response to physical pain. In R. Nachman's view this reaction is an attempt to see beyond the immediate situation, in very much the same way that one might squint to see something in the distance. This is a focusing action in which the capacity for sight, which might become dispersed by objects in the close or middle distance, is concentrated into a sharp beam that can reach greater distances. Closing one's eyes tightly in a moment of physical pain is the human being's attempt to perceive the

tachlis, the ultimate good which exists in the far future.¹⁹⁹

Similarly, when one wishes to perceive the *tachlis* one must close one's eyes...for the light of the *tachlis* is far indeed from a person, and it is impossible to see it except through closing the eyes. Thus one must close one's eyes completely, to shut them with great force, and even to push against them with the hands, and then one can see this *tachlis*....Then one can see and apprehend the light of the *tachlis* which is all good, and then the suffering will be nullified [mevutal], for the suffering comes mainly from being distant from the *tachlis*.

This apprehension constitutes *bitul*, negation, as worldly phenomena are incorporated into the unity of the *tachlis*. Through this apprehension the pain of suffering is attenuated and replaced by expanded consciousness. One is able to reach beyond the surface of reality to the unity and goodness which will be revealed in full and eternally in the end of days.

However, human perception of the *tachlis* is temporary and not sustainable. It is in the category of “*ratzo vashov*”, “running and returning”, ebb and flow. What then is the benefit of the perception of unity behind the appearance of suffering?

And afterwards, even though he returns from the *bitul*, it leaves an impression, and through the joy of recognizing the goodness in suffering one comes to novel Torah insights.

The experience of perceiving the *tachlis*, the unity and total goodness which underlies every experience of suffering, although not sustainable, impacts human perception in this world. When one opens one's eyes and returns to normal consciousness an

¹⁹⁹ In this lesson we encounter a common feature of R. Nachman's teachings: the blurring of the distinction

impression is left, and this affects one's response to suffering, engendering religious creativity. Bringing transcendent awareness of the *tachlis* - teleological awareness - into the realm of practical action is R. Nachman's program for transforming suffering.

If we apply this teaching on suffering to the situation of conflict, a method for transcending reactivity emerges. Through *bitul*, awareness of the problematic nature of conflict is replaced by apprehension of its divine origin and constructive purpose, as well as the apprehension of the oneness underlying conflict.²⁰⁰ Conflict may in one sense be satanic, but in Jewish tradition Satan too is a messenger of God.²⁰¹ The challenge for one involved in conflict is to see the conflict situation in the broader context of divine providence, and on the basis of this perception to replace reactivity with spiritual creativity. The impression left by the apprehension of the oneness behind conflict ultimately helps one to find creative approaches to its transformation.

In light of these concepts, the contradiction between R. Nachman's negative and positive assessments of conflict with which we began this discussion may be better understood as encompassing a dynamic process that takes place in the consciousness of actors in conflict. R. Nachman's descriptions of the negative aspects of conflict are relevant to the experience of conflict before the act of "closing one's eyes" and apprehending transcendent reality. His positive view of conflict as

between space and time. *Likutei MoHaRaN* II:61 is based in its entirety on this conflation.

²⁰⁰ I will deal at greater length on this dimension of *bitul* in Chapter 9.

²⁰¹ This typically Jewish view is opposed to the Christian view (held by Christian thinkers from Augustine to Milton) of Satan as a rebellious or fallen angel, a view never endorsed by Jewish tradition.

originating in divine providence, as allowing for creativity, a “cover” for holiness and constant growth is descriptive of conflict from the standpoint of the change in consciousness he refers to as *bitul*. *Bitul* allows an actor in conflict or a persecuted victim to transcend reactivity and develop creative new interpretations that will bring him or her closer to God.

We have discussed R. Nachman’s descriptive statements regarding conflict, and have provided a framework in which the seeming contradictions between his negative and positive assessments of the phenomenon can be better understood and a coherent picture of his attitude can be seen. The perspective gained from our analysis accounts as well for many of R. Nachman’s prescriptive statements on conflict, which directly influenced R. Noson’s response to the Years of Oppression. Based on our analysis so far, it should not surprise us to find an emphasis on [minimizing strife] throughout R. Nachman’s printed teachings on the subject of conflict. We will turn now to a teaching that is representative of this approach, one which played a dominant role in the history of Bratzlav and conflict.

Lesson 6

In 1802, when R. Noson arrived for the first time at R. Nachman’s court, he heard a discourse which was to serve decades later as the single most important teaching on conflict. R. Noson later printed the teaching as Lesson 6 in *Likutei MoHaRaN*, and it examines the concepts of honor, repentance, and the relationship

between Moses and his disciple Joshua. (Bratzlav tradition presents the latter aspect of the teaching as a reference to R. Noson's future role as R. Nachman's central disciple.²⁰²) In this discourse R. Nachman asserts that encountering humiliation offers a unique opportunity to achieve true repentance:

The essence of repentance is: when a person hears his humiliation he is silent and still.... And when a person comes to purify himself and repent, then he is in the state of 'I am ready to become'.

R. Nachman draws on an earlier kabbalistic tradition that the evil inclination (*yetzer hara*) is located in the left side of the heart. He adds that by remaining silent in the face of humiliation, one turns DaM (blood) into DoM (silence), thus, in R. Nachman's words, "slaughtering the Evil Inclination". R. Nachman classifies one who succeeds at this in the language of the Talmud as belonging to the category of "those who hear their humiliation and do not respond".²⁰³ Rather than react to the external enemy, one who encounters opposition must remain silent and engage in an inner transformation.

R. Nachman continues that this inner transformation is comprised of two parts. The first is the "slaughtering of the Evil Inclination", moral and ethical purification. Humiliation provides an opportunity for self-improvement, which is accomplished by overcoming and transforming the natural response, anger. The

²⁰² At the end of his life, R. Nachman affirmed this reading when he referred to R. Noson as "Joshua". He also told R. Noson that "whenever master and disciple come together, they enter the category of Moses, Joshua and the Tent of Meeting" (*Hayei MoHaRaN*, "sichos hashayachos l'Torot" 128).

²⁰³ TB Shabbat 56b.

result of this self-purification is a new openness to transformation, expressed in the language of the *Zohar* as, “I am ready to become”. By this, R. Nachman refers to a state of liberation from self-definition: one is ready to become anything. The potential for growth and true repentance in this state is unlimited, and so the experience of humiliation offers perhaps the greatest potential for spiritual growth and transformation. This is why R. Nachman refers to the process of remaining silent in spite of humiliation as “the essential repentance”.

The role of honor and shame in modern conflict situations in particular has been well-documented.²⁰⁴ In the case of the Bratzlavers and their Hasidic antagonists, R. Nachman provided guidance for the victim of humiliation and attack in negotiating his own honor/shame dynamic. R. Nachman’s direction to remain “silent and still”, meaning both refraining from responding and maintaining an inner silence, preempts the natural human response to react defensively to attack. By reminding his followers of the spiritual dimensions of the moment of humiliation, R. Nachman provides a broader context in which silence plays a positive role in one’s inner growth. The rewards of such silence are prodigious, so the Bratzlaver Hasid had profound motivation not to react to humiliation.

Lesson 6 is the outstanding example of R. Nachman of Bratzlav’s nonviolent approach to facing opposition. It became a kind of shorthand for this approach, as

²⁰⁴ For example, in the 20th century Mohandas Gandhi leveraged the British authority’s sense of shame to push them out of India, and Martin Luther King, Jr. applied similar tactics in the civil rights struggle in the U.S. In both cases, the shame of the oppressor was manipulated to great effect by leaders of liberation movements.

evidenced by a moment recorded in an account of R. Noson's difficulties with the Savraner Hasidim in the 1830s. In 1835 informers convinced the authorities to arrest R. Noson in Uman, where he had journeyed for the annual New Year pilgrimage. The police arrived on a Tuesday night and found R. Noson praying at R. Nachman's gravesite. As he was led away by the police to the sounds of the jeering of the Savraner's followers, R. Noson cried to the other Bratzlaver Hasidim: "Lesson 6! Lesson 6!" No Bratzlaver lifted a finger to throw a stone.²⁰⁵

²⁰⁵ Kramer, Through Fire and Water p.438.

CHAPTER 6: R. NOSON'S NONVIOLENT RESPONSE TO CONFLICT

In earlier chapters we have surveyed the significant antecedents to the events of the Years of Oppression; we have analyzed the major influences on R. Noson in matters relating to the experience of conflict and opposition, especially the theology of R. Nachman; and we have seen the role of conflict in R. Noson's life. Now we come to the heart of the matter: R. Noson's actual response to the persecutions of the Savraner. This chapter and the next will deal directly with the subject. In this chapter I will present the central elements of R. Noson's nonviolent response, and in the next chapter I will examine the principle methods by which he educated and inspired his followers to follow suit.

Throughout the events of the 1830s, R. Noson was faced with choices involving the use of force. In this chapter I will present R. Noson's responses to the challenges facing his community, focusing on his choice to reject violence of any sort in favor of faith practices. His attempt to persuade the Savraner of his friendship and his disavowal of physical, political or social violence will constitute the evidence of R. Noson as a practitioner of religious nonviolence which is at the heart of this dissertation.

R. NOSON'S NONVIOLENCE

The challenge of communal survival in the face of the campaign to destroy the Bratzlaver community was accompanied by the internal trial of maintaining religious integrity by eschewing violent reaction. R. Noson once remarked that he suffered more from his friends than his enemies during the Years of Oppression,²⁰⁶ because those friends sought to convince him to retaliate, which would have been a betrayal of R. Noson's religious values. As an outgrowth of those values, at various critical moments during the Years of Oppression, R. Noson rejected options of retaliation or violence, both physical and political. In the previous chapter we saw how, as he was led through the streets of Uman on trumped-up charges of breaking parole, R. Noson called out to his followers and fellow Bratzlavers to remember *Likutei MoHaRaN* Lesson 6, in which R. Nachman taught the importance of remaining silent in the face of humiliation. At times, the temptation to fight back against the opponents proved to be too strong for some of the Bratzlaver Hasidim. But R. Noson consistently rejected such options, even when they were suggested by his allies. This rejection applied not only to physical violence but also to more subtle forms of power, including the socio-religious pressure of the types used by the Mitnagdim against the early Hasidim, and appeals to governmental authorities.

Rejection of Physical Violence

The most obviously problematic form of reaction for R. Noson was physical violence. R. Noson's rejection of physical violence was unqualified, but the temptation faced by the Bratzlaver Hasidim sometimes proved to be too much. Even before the Years of Oppression, when anti-Bratzlav sentiment existed but had not yet devolved into an organized campaign of persecution, this problem existed. I have mentioned the episode in 1830, at the wedding of Moshe Chenkes' daughter, when the Tomoshpiel Rav and his wife began loudly insulting R. Noson. A Bratzlav Hasid could not contain himself and slapped the Rav's wife.²⁰⁷ The result was that the Tomospieler redoubled his efforts to influence those around him, including Moshe Chenkes, to oppose R. Noson. The lesson was not lost on R. Noson, who, in addition to his principled objections, understood that violence would only lead to more violence. During the crisis of the 1830s he became visibly upset when any Bratzlaver Hasid was provoked to retaliate against the antagonists. For example, on one occasion in the fall of 1834 a young student of R. Noson named R. Shimshon was so disturbed by the vicious mockery of the Savraners that he responded with his fists. A fight broke out and was interrupted (fortunately for the outnumbered Bratzlaver Hasidim) by the police. A deeply disturbed R. Noson rebuked R. Shimshon for allowing himself to become provoked and drawn in to the trap of anger. In the circumstances it was only human to react; the spectacle of Bratzlavers being publicly ridiculed, baited and assaulted was common, and difficult to ignore.

²⁰⁶ Ibid., p. 387.

²⁰⁷ Ibid., p.353.

But R. Noson demanded more of his community. Of R. Noson's attempts to guide his followers away from reactivity Chaim Kramer writes,

R. Noson repeatedly cautioned his followers against answering their opponents. Why should they allow themselves to become further embroiled in strife when it could only deflect them from their search for truth?²⁰⁸

The absolute commitment to religious principles, to the "search for truth" was an expression of R. Noson's devotion and commitment to his teacher's path. He would allow nothing to impede that search or distract from it.

Rejection of Ban and Verbal Violence

Physical violence was not the only weapon available to those involved in Hasidic sectarian disputes. In 1835 R. Yudel, a senior follower of R. Nachman,²⁰⁹ pronounced a ban of excommunication (*cherem*) against the Savraners and their allies at the grave of R. Nachman in Uman.²¹⁰ R. Noson objected to the ban, saying "This is not the way of the Rebbe". R. Noson's objection is noteworthy when we recall the ubiquity of bans and counter-bans in the struggles between the early Hasidim and their opponents. R. Noson's objection to this traditional socio-religious weapon was a unique departure from the typical dynamics of Hasidic history. In light of the

²⁰⁸ Ibid., p.354.

²⁰⁹ As was mentioned in Chapter 2, R. Yudel, together with R. Shmuel Isaac, led his own circle of followers, the Dashev circle, both before and after R. Nachman. The tension between the Dashev circle and R. Noson after R. Nachman's death has already been discussed. R. Yudel's authority stemmed in part from the fact that, at the end of his life, R. Nachman bestowed upon him the spiritual gift of performing *pidyonos*, or theurgic acts on behalf of others.

²¹⁰ Levi-Yitchak Bender, *Siach Sarfei Kodesh*, I:769. R. Noson's objection parallels the Magid's warning to

tensions within Bratzlav (see Chapter 2) between R. Noson and the Dashev circle, his comment is even more striking, because it indicates his willingness to criticize senior members of his own community for the sake of a broader construal of community, one which included the Savraners.

Beyond the context of a formal ban, R. Noson objected to negative speech concerning the opponents. On one occasion he rebuked a Bratzlaver Hasid for speaking critically of the Savraner, warning him that it would negatively impact his own spiritual life.²¹¹ He went so far as to rebuke his family for speaking ill of the opponents, and in doing so he spoke one of the most radical nonviolent statements of the period.

They are our brothers. Eventually they will be rectified. We ourselves will have to seek remedies for them!²¹²

This assertion of the essential brotherhood of Bratzlavers and their antagonists is perhaps the most far-reaching of R. Noson's statements regarding the conflict. As we shall see in Chapter 9, the recognition of a unity underlying opposition was central to R. Noson's views on transforming conflict.

Rejection of Governmental Intervention

At crucial moments in the Years of Oppression, R. Noson refused offers of

his students not to enact a counter-ban against the Mitnagdim in 1772. Cf. ch. 4.

²¹¹ Levi-Yitchak Bender, *Siach Sarfei Kodesh*, I:774.

²¹² Kramer, *Through Fire and Water* p.412

help by sympathetic and influential secularist Jews, expressing his wish to rely only on God, for “it is better to be the pursued than the pursuer”.²¹³ As Chaim Kramer writes, “If R. Noson had given Moshe Landau [an influential secularist supporter] permission he could have routed all the opposition.”²¹⁴ The fact that he had recourse to options involving the exercise of power is essential to a correct understanding of R. Noson’s response. He was not simply a powerless victim; he consciously chose to reject opportunities that would have ended the persecutions quickly because of his religious principles. The element of conscious choice in rejecting force is what renders his response a unique example of nonviolence, as opposed to victimhood or martyrdom, both of which were common Jewish responses to persecution throughout history.

There are a number of important examples of his consistent refusal to make use of legal mechanisms and influential connections to strike back at the Savraners. When his opponents submitted false charges to the authorities, R. Noson told his followers not to file counter-claims, but only to submit statements of the Bratzlavers’ own innocence.²¹⁵ This refusal to engage in the kind of disputation typical of 19th century sectarianism was based on principle, especially that “God seeks the pursued”; it also was based on good strategy, in that R. Noson did not wish to add momentum to an intensifying conflict. This combination of principle and pragmatism was typical of R. Noson’s thinking during the Years of Oppression.

²¹³ Ibid., p.626 n.10; p. 633 n.5

²¹⁴ Ibid., p. 418.

When R. Noson was imprisoned the investigator blocked bail which was illegal, constituting clear evidence that he was working for the Savraners and not the government – i.e. that he was influenced by bribes. R. Noson’s followers asked whether they should submit a complaint against him, which would have effectively neutralized him as a player in the anti-Bratzlav campaign. R. Noson refused, saying:

Even if our request is granted, who knows what the enemies will think of next? They have money and they will do everything they can to vindicate the investigator, and then he will seek revenge and the situation will be worse. Our main weapon is prayer...²¹⁶

In autumn of 1834, R. Noson was approached by Hirsch Ber Hurwitz, one of the leading secularist intellectuals in Uman, with an offer of political intervention.²¹⁷ Hirsch Ber, we recall, was one of the Maskilim befriended by R. Nachman when he moved to Uman in 1808. He was also well-connected to Czarist authorities, and so his offer carried real weight. R. Noson declined, saying, “First, I do not want to exacerbate the situation [by resorting to help from external sources], and second, it is better to be the pursued and not the pursuer, for ‘God seeks the pursued’”. He also quoted Psalms 109: “I am prayer”, as a justification for relying solely on faith and religious techniques. More than a year later, on May 1, 1835, Moshe Landau, an influential doctor and Hirsch Ber’s brother-in-law, made a similar offer. Again R. Noson refused, although in this case Moshe Landau’s presence in Bratzlav

²¹⁵ Levi-Yitchak Bender, *Siach Sarfei Kodesh*, 245.

²¹⁶ Avraham Chazan mi-Tulchin, *Yemei HaTlaos*, p.165; Kramer, , *Through Fire and Water* p.426.

²¹⁷ *Sipurim Niflaim*, p.9.

intimidated the opponents somewhat.²¹⁸ As mentioned above, if R. Noson had allowed it, these influential allies could have silenced the opposition or at least seriously circumscribed their activities, but he was willing to forego the advantage for the sake of his nonviolent principles.

Seeking Peace

In winter of 1834, after the Savraner publicly called upon his followers to hound the Bratzlavers in a proclamation sent to various Ukrainian communities, R. Noson made a last effort to avert catastrophe by writing directly to R. Moshe Tzvi.²¹⁹ He addressed a heartfelt written plea to the Savraner for a face-to-face meeting to resolve the issues between them. In this letter R. Noson made use of a number of distinct arguments, asserting his innocence of all the claims against him, appealing to the friendship he and R. Moshe Tzvi of Savran had shared in their youth when they both were searching for a Hasidic master to follow, and invoking other Hasidic authorities who approved of R. Nachman's works. He expressed himself with a combination of humility and righteous candor, using his entire arsenal of arguments and persuasion to put an end to the strife. The editor of R. Noson's letters, R. Nachman of Tcherin, prefaces this letter with the following:

²¹⁸ Kramer, Through Fire and Water p.418.

²¹⁹ In another context, responding from a Birmingham jail to the critique of white clergymen to nonviolent activities in Alabama, Martin Luther King, Jr. wrote that "Negotiation ... is the purpose of direct action". He proceeded to define his entire project as an attempt to convince the oppressor to come to the negotiating table, to begin a dialogue with the oppressed. When a persecutor fails to consider such a dialogue "direct action" – nonviolence – becomes a means of persuading him to do so.

This is the letter that our Teacher, the famed rabbi etc., our master the rabbi R. Noson of blessed memory, sent to the Rav of Savran in this year [1834] in order to quiet the strife and to rescue his life and the lives of those who followed him, to save them from life-threatening pursuit that occurred then. But it was not effective, for the words did not enter his [the Savraner's] heart due to the quantity of slander that he had been told. "Were it not for God who was with us to help us" and saved our lives from the pursuers; "Blessed is God Who did not give us as prey for their teeth".²²⁰

The letter itself begins with a long series of honorifics in a tone of humility.

From afar I call for peace, from the hyssop in the wall to the cedar of Lebanon, behold he is the holy and famed rabbi, whose name is known in Judah and in Israel, the strong pillar, the strong hammer, man of God, 'Holy! is said of him'; to him silence is praise [i.e. there is no limit to his praises], the honor of the holiness of his name, our master the rabbi Moshe Tzvi may his light shine.

I include this long greeting for two reasons. First, it follows a form typical of a missive written by a humble petitioner to a great rabbi. Second, in spite of this there is a subtle undertone of righteous zeal. The opening line, "From afar I call for peace", sums up the purpose of the letter even before the greeting. And the reference to Judah and Israel can be taken as double-edged: on the one hand it is simply a reference to the extent of the Savraner's fame. On the other hand, the biblical kingdoms of Judah and Israel exemplified the first national schism in Jewish history. The reference would not have been lost on the Savraner, and nor would the question

²²⁰ The letter appears in R. Nachman Goldstein, *Alim L'Trufah*, Letter 164. It is not clear how it was included in the book, as it was sent to the Savraner and it is doubtful that R. Noson would have kept a copy. It is possible that one of the descendants of the R. Moshe Tzvi of Savran who, according to *Siach Sarfei Kodesh*, later became sympathetic toward the Bratzlavers (of whom there were several) returned the letter to R. Nachman of Tcherin, who collected R. Noson's letters over the course of several years for publication.

it implies: who represents Judah, and who Israel? For it was the kingdom of Judah, led by scions of David, which received the blessing of God. The subtlety of this opening is typical of the letter as a whole: a humble tone with oblique references to the strongest arguments R. Noson could muster against the actions of his persecutors. I will quote at some length from R. Noson's letter to convey a sense of its tone and major points.

It is not the custom for an insignificant person to send greetings to the great, but for the sake of peace which our Sages spoke of so highly... I decided to go beyond the normal protocol. I am undecided as to whether to write, for who knows whether my words will enter your pure heart? For our Sages said that 'a covenant was sealed [that slander will be accepted]'; but I must do my part no matter what. And so I will send these words in order to rescue my soul and the righteous souls of those who depend upon me, and since my master is wise... he will understand that these words are true and sincere....

I recall and am shocked that, as we have heard in our lands, our opponents rely on your words... but most of the fomenters of strife are as distant from you as they are from us, as the wise one must know.

Now... let not innocent blood be shed in Israel, for they are already spilling our blood with terrible humiliations that are unprecedented, and they throw stones and dirt, and they have no pity on the young or elderly....

Let my master note that his way has always been to seek peace. Even as a legal decisor he has often had to let the guilty free [in monetary disputes] in order to foster a compromise. And how much more so [*kal v'chomer*] in such a case as this of an enormous dispute, which threatens lives and is a disgrace to God's Name – for they tear the holy books of R. Nachman and step on them and throw them into the trash. Has this ever been heard before? And they do not even look inside the books to see whether they deserve such treatment!

And the followers of R. Nachman who learn his holy works, which have spread throughout the lands and have been widely accepted, when they see the extent of the brazenness of the shameless of our time...they are committed to remain silent. But the opponents are not satisfied with this silence, and they raise their hands against our community who are poor and pursued. As a result even they [the Bratzlavers] are unable to remain silent, and they react with all their strength because they are so embittered....and

therefore the battles increase in a number of cities. Is it possible to foment, God forbid, such antagonism?

Here, R. Noson attempts to differentiate between those responsible for acts of violence and the Savraner himself: “most of the fomenters of strife are as distant from you as they are from us, as the wise one must know”. This of course is wishful thinking, as the Savraner was indeed responsible for encouraging such acts, but, displaying a psychological acuity R. Noson is offering the Savraner a graceful exit from the situation he has created. His appeal to the Savraner’s responsibility as a communal leader and judge is accompanied by an impassioned description of the actions of the opponents.

In addition, R. Noson expresses a central concern: that the Bratzlavers not be driven to further acts of retaliation. He can only control his community to a point; the intensity of the opposition will naturally provoke his followers into action, which will only serve to further the damage done. As we have seen, a central concern for R. Noson was that his followers not be driven to violence, thus compromising their spiritual integrity. In his letter to the Savraner he expressed the idea that, as a prominent communal leader, it was the Savraner’s responsibility to bank the fires of strife, if only for the sake of the well-being of the larger Jewish community: “Is it possible to foment, God forbid, such antagonism?”.

Later, the letter takes a more personal turn.

You know that I have sacrificed everything to follow R. Nachman. I visited the Berdichever, the Chmelniker, R. Shalom of Probisht and many other Hasidic leaders and they all drew me near with great love and affection.... After [I became R. Nachman's follower] their love for me grew even more, for they saw that I had changed for the better, to more assiduously study Torah and prayer with God's help, and all of them sent regards to R. Nachman through me. And today I am older than 50 years [R. Noson was 55 at the time], and I have busied myself with R. Nachman's holy books for more than 32 years, and I merited to print them a number of times with the approbations of the great leaders of our people....

This line reminds the Savraner of the approval that major Ukrainian Hasidic leaders of the previous generation felt toward R. Nachman and his teachings. The Savraner, R. Noson seems to be saying, is siding with the Shpola Zeide (who is referenced elsewhere in the letter) against the majority of the Tzaddikim. It also subtly reminds the Savraner of the friendship he and R. Noson shared in their youth when both were engaged in visiting different Hasidic masters in search of their respective true teachers. This personal appeal is followed by a reference to a central motif in R. Noson's approach to the persecutions: *nirdaf*, the pursued.

What can I say? God has found our sins. But "God seeks the pursued", even when a Tzaddik pursues a wicked person"....

This is R. Noson's trump card. Under the circumstances it would be difficult to argue that the Bratzlavers were not the victims, and the rabbinic dictum is clear: the pursued, by nature of being pursued and regardless of their moral standing, are in God's favor. If the Savraner insists on continuing in his campaign against R. Noson

and his followers he will only improve their spiritual standing.²²¹

The letter continues with R. Noson's rueful acknowledgement that it is not possible for him to speak to the Savraner face-to-face due to the antipathy of the latter's followers, and he signs off in a humble vein similar to that of the opening of the letter.

Although, as R. Nachman of Tcherin pointed out in his preface, the letter went unanswered, it is a significant dimension of R. Noson's response to the Years of Oppression. In addition to the rejection of violent options (which constitutes a negative response) R. Noson's response found positive expression in this attempt to communicate directly with the Savraner. In making this attempt he truly was "seeking peace and pursuing it", using all the persuasive tools at his disposal to try to effect change in the leader of the opposition. He was motivated by this principle to do all he could to prevent any escalation of the violence, which he recognized would threaten both the long-term survival and spiritual integrity of his community.

Spiritual Resistance

R. Noson was not just a quietist, passive in the face of attack. In addition to his rejection of violence in all its forms, as well as his efforts to seek peace through direct communication, he exercised another form of power, which we may call spiritual resistance. In the introductory chapter a text from Pesach Schindler led us to a working definition of spiritual resistance as "the peaceful assertion of one's

²²¹ The concept of the *nirdaf* and R. Noson's novel applications will be examined more fully in Chapter 8.

religious culture in the face of pressure to abandon that culture.” Throughout the Years of Oppression, R. Noson invested great effort in increasing the quantity and quality of religious practice among his followers in spite of the tremendous pressure of the persecutions, disseminating R. Nachman’s teachings and consolidating the Bratzlav community. In a letter written at the height of the persecutions he wrote:

I do not know what my opponents think they will achieve by chasing me out of Bratzlav. Wherever I go I will speak to people about God and I will reveal the Rebbe’s teachings... Wherever I go, people will become true Bratzlaver Hasidim.²²²

This was an outrageous claim, given the circumstances in which it was written. In R. Noson we find an important example of the intimate relationship between an insistence on nonviolence and fruitful communal activism. The energy conserved by his decisions not to go on the offensive against the Savraner and his followers was channeled toward religious creativity, and the years 1834-1838 were a particularly prolific period for this religious leader, teacher and writer.

A primary medium through which R. Noson, the author of the controversial prayer-collection *Likutei Tfilos*, expressed this creativity was prayer. As Chaim Kramer writes, “His main weapon was prayer. His daughter, Chana Tsirel, said that the *chatzos* [midnight] prayers her father recited during the Years of Oppression were so intense that she never heard anything like it.”²²³ Even during the period in which he was imprisoned in the summer of 1835, R. Noson adhered to a rigorous schedule

²²² R. Nachman Goldstein, *Alim L’Trufah*, Letterletter 174.

of prayer.²²⁴ After his release from prison he wrote a letter to his son R. Yitzchok in which he articulates the centrality of prayer especially in time of crisis:

We have nothing to rely upon but God's great mercy and the merit of the true Tzaddikim...on this we can always rely. We must never give up hope and we must never cease praying and crying out to God. In the end He will save us...²²⁵

He recited Psalms throughout this period, often quoting from Psalm 109:4. There the Psalmist speaks of his suffering at the hands of his enemies, who falsely accuse him and seek his destruction. "In return for my love they hated me; but I am prayer". Defiance of the oppressive measures of his enemies went hand-in-hand with surrender to God; these two modes were mutually reinforcing dimensions of R. Noson's response to persecution.

In addition to his prayer life R. Noson kept a strict regimen of Torah study. In prison he requested books, pen and paper, and was given them after some of his followers bribed the warden. Torah study was for R. Noson a deeply creative act. He once said "I could not find anything new to say today; I had to squeeze a new idea out of my little finger".²²⁶ In his view study without new insight was sterile, and during the 1830s he continued to produce written novellae. In discourses printed in *Likutei Halachos* we find a series of lessons produced while R. Noson was in exile,

²²³ Kramer, *Through Fire and Water* p.419.

²²⁴ Ibid., p.410.

²²⁵ . Nachman Goldstein, *Alim L'Trufah*, Letterletter 194.

²²⁶ Levi-Yitchak Bender, *Siach Sarfei Kodesh*.

and one written when he was imprisoned.²²⁷ In these lessons he discusses, among other topics, finding the strength and determination to stand up against one's enemies;²²⁸ the importance of patience in the face of oppression and the need to turn only to God for help;²²⁹ and the power of the ritual bath to mitigate harsh decrees.²³⁰ (During this period R. Noson made use of the ritual bath more than at any other time of his life.)²³¹ In this way R. Noson turned to religious creativity, translating the events and difficulties of his life into religious language, both in writing and through oral teachings to his followers.

R. Noson also worked to provide support and encouragement for those followers, many of whom were also facing severe forms of persecution in their various towns. In letters he admonished the Bratzlavers not to give up, to increase their dedication to their chosen path, to pray more, and even to find joy in the fact that they are not among the persecutors of the true Tzaddik. Chaim Kramer writes that "He continued speaking to and encouraging those of his followers who still dared to come to him...." In a letter to his followers he wrote,

By the law of nature there is no way we can withstand these assaults. None of us has the strength to pray and cry out to God the way we should in the face of such an onslaught. But we are trying, and we must continue to do our part, for God hears the prayers of every Jew.²³²

²²⁷ For a concise chronology of discourses written during the Years of Oppression see Kramer, Through Fire and Water pp. 419ff.

²²⁸ R. Noson Sternhartz, *Likutei Halachos, Basar b'chalah* 5.

²²⁹ *Ibid.*, *Taaroves* 5.

²³⁰ *Ibid.*, *Hechsher kelim* 4.

²³¹ Levi-Yitchak Bender, *Siach Sarfei Kodesh*, I:679.

Of his efforts he remarked, “Outside there is a raging fire. But inside, the factory of Yiddishkeit continues to produce!”²³³

The spiritual resistance exemplified by R. Noson was reflected as well in a personal moment that took place during this difficult time. Soon after R. Noson was released from jail in July 1835, he married off his son R. Dovid Tzvi. Almost penniless, still beset by his enemies, he nevertheless invited other Bratzlavers to join him for the wedding. Together with them R. Noson celebrated joyously, singing and dancing, for hours. He later wrote that this was “a wonder, considering the suffering we have gone through”.²³⁴

The choice to eschew external force, such as bans of excommunication and governmental intervention, is one aspect of R. Noson’s nonviolent response to the Savraner’s provocations. The choice to engage with greater diligence in the defining activities of a follower of R. Nachman, praying, studying, teaching, writing, encouraging, leading, and even rejoicing constitutes an exercise of spiritual power. These two dimensions together comprise an example of nonviolent spiritual resistance. R. Noson never forgot that no matter the extent to which his community was outnumbered, no matter how much physical, social economic or political power the Savraner and his followers had, he had power as well. This was the power to interpret events in light of his authentic spiritual principles, and on that basis to redirect anger and reactivity toward greater religious commitment and creativity. R.

²³² R. Nachman Goldstein, *Alim L’Trufah*, Letterletter 174.

²³³ Levi-Yitzchak Bender, *Siach Sarfei Kodesh*, I-757

Noson understood the events of the 1830s in religious terms: the opposition was an expression of God's will, and, although often painful, it was ultimately for the good. To react to the opponents would be to miss the opportunity hidden in this suffering, the opportunity to grow spiritually, to come closer to God. Lesson 6 and its sister-concepts, such as the demand that one be humble in the face of one's enemies, the centrality of prayer, especially personal prayer (*hitbodedut*), in transforming conflict, and judging one's enemies favorably provided the framework for R. Noson's own response. It was from these elements that he constructed his nonviolent response to oppression.

Impact on Followers and Others

The impact of R. Noson's decisions on his community and beyond was profound. Even some of his antagonists were moved by what they perceived as his holiness. For example, in 1835, Moshe Chenkes and other opponents convinced the head of the army unit stationed in Bratzlav to set up a boot factory in R. Noson's home in order to inconvenience him. The timing could not have been worse for R. Noson, for Passover was coming and he needed to thoroughly clean his entire home and remove any *chametz* (leavened items). When the time came for the traditional search for *chametz*, the artisans were still at work in R. Noson's house, but he recited the blessing with great intensity and began to search by candlelight. The workers were so awed by his blessing that "they told him to search wherever he wanted and

²³⁴ R. Nachman Goldstein, *Alim L'Trufah*, Letterletter 191; Kramer., Through Fire and Water p. 423.

not to think of them at all”.²³⁵ And when he was arrested (on false charges) for traveling to Uman during his exile, R. Noson was led through the streets like a common criminal to the head officer of the local government offices. When the officer saw R. Noson’s face, he said, “I can see from your face that you are a religious person”, and proceeded to unshackle him.²³⁶ A Savraner Hasid named R. Yonah refused to participate in attacks on R. Noson. When the Savraner Rebbe challenged him, the Hasid explained that he lived next door to R. Noson, and heard his recitation of the *tikun chatzos*, the midnight prayer. He was so moved by the prayer he heard at night that he could not bring himself to “throw stones” during the day.²³⁷ Even Schneur, who, as mentioned in Chapter 3, was responsible for much of the slander against R. Noson, later apologized for his role in the persecutions. Although he was motivated in part by his wife’s mortal illness, which he attributed to his past misdeeds, this does not diminish the intensity and sincerity of his remorse. In a letter to his son in 1838, R. Noson describes the dramatic moment of Schneur’s apology.

He ascended to my attic room, fell at my feet and began kissing them so that I felt his kisses [through my shoes]... And he asked me for forgiveness with tears running down his face, and he said “I have sinned, all the slander was through me, what can I do, forgive me”....And he promised that if he could do anything to fix what he had done he certainly would so, and that he would work for my benefit with all his might.²³⁸

²³⁵ Kramer,²³⁵ Through Fire and Water, p. 411.

²³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 438-9.

²³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 384.

²³⁸ R. Nachman Goldstein, *Alim L'Trufah*, Letter 258. Also see Kramer,Through Fire and Water, p. 634-5, n.1.

R. Noson follows this account with the remark that “Would that all our enemies appease me in this way, for their eternal benefit.”

The impact of R. Noson’s responses to the events of 1834-1838 on his followers was perhaps more long-lasting. As a leader he offered them a role model who exhibited unshakeable faith, loyalty to the path of R. Nachman and a commitment to spiritual nonviolence. His refusal to give up on the goals and nonviolent principles by which he lived made it possible for his followers to do likewise. Evidence of this impact can be found in anecdotes, recorded in Bratzlav literature, concerning family members and students of R. Noson during the Years of Oppression and afterward.

For example, R. Noson’s son, R. Yitzchok, to whom the majority of R. Noson’s letters are addressed, was married to a woman who belonged to the anti-Bratzlav camp. At one point it seemed that R. Yitzchak was about to lose his job due to the slanders of the Savraner’s followers, and he was afraid to return home to his wife. R. Noson encouraged him to do so, and to remain silent no matter how bitterly she might harass him. Following his father’s advice (which of course was based on his own experience of conflict and R. Nachman’s Lesson 6), he did so, and soon returned to normalcy.²³⁹

R. Nachman of Tulchin, perhaps R. Noson’s closest disciple (and the one R. Noson appointed to lead the Bratzlav community after his death), was guided by his

teacher's nonviolent resistance throughout the Years of Oppression and much later as well. R. Nachman spent much of that period on the run from his home,²⁴⁰ where the persecutions were so intense as to pose a clear danger to such a prominent Bratzlaver. (Other Bratzlavers also fled their homes to avoid the persecutions.) Many stories are recorded of this period of wandering, in which R. Nachman was often forced to hide the fact that he was not only a Bratzlaver, but a close follower of R. Noson. An indication of R. Nachman's adoption of his teacher's attitudes can be found in a conflict that occurred within the Bratzlav community a decade later, after R. Noson's death in 1845. As was mentioned above, R. Noson had made it known that R. Nachman of Tulchin was to follow him as leader of the community. Yet over the year following R. Noson's death, another Bratzlaver Hasid, R. Nachman Pesachl's, began to behave in the manner of Tzaddikim, thus making an implicit claim to the leadership. Some younger members of the community followed him, but many others, including the elder Hasidim, wished to honor R. Noson's deathbed appointment of R. Nachman Tulchiner. When one of these implored him to publicly object to the pretender's claims, R. Nachman replied, as his teacher had done approximately ten years earlier, "'God seeks the pursued' – even if the pursuer is righteous and the pursued is wicked".²⁴¹

Although the pressures were very great, a handful of Bratzlavers were able to remain publicly loyal to R. Noson. Among these were R. Shmuel Weinberg and R.

²³⁹ Avraham Chazan mi-Tulchin, *Avaneha Barzel*, p. 75.

²⁴⁰ Cf. R. Nachman Goldstein, *Alim L'Trufah*, Letter 175.

Avraham Weinberg, influential Bratzlaver Hasidim whose support aided R. Nosen in times of crisis, especially during his imprisonment in 1835. Also, a certain R. Yitzchak delivered flour to the Bratzlavers in spite of the Savraner's proclamation forbidding anyone to sell or give them food of any sort.²⁴² There are other examples, including some from the 20th century,²⁴³ but perhaps the most dramatic story concerns a student of R. Nosen named R. Mordekhai of Tulchin, during the Years of Oppression. Here is Chaim Kramer's description of the event which gave him his nickname, from Through Fire and Water.

He was beaten and dragged to the center of the market-place, where he was made to stand on a stone and told to curse R. Nosen. Despite the blows raining down on him, R. Mordekhai stood on the stone and sang out, "And Mordekhai would neither bend nor bow!" (Esther 3:2).

From then on the loyal Hasid was called "*R. Mordekhai lo kara*" ("R. Mordekhai did not bend") by admiring Bratzlavers. What is noteworthy about this tale, aside from the loyalty and self-sacrifice evidenced by its protagonist, is the method by which he resisted his tormentors. In referring to the biblical verse concerning his namesake, R. Mordekhai was following his teacher, R. Nosen, who often made use of verses or

²⁴¹ Avraham Chazan mi-Tulchin, *Avaneha Barzel*, p. 91ff. Kramer, Through Fire and Water pp. 400-408.

²⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 397.

²⁴³ For example, the preface to the English edition of R. Nosen's letters includes the story of R. Matisyahu Barzeski, a leading Polish scholar who came across R. Nosen's letters. He was moved and amazed at the letters from 1835 written during the period of his incarceration and at the height of the Years of Oppression. As a result of this literary encounter, R. Matisyahu became a Bratzlaver, moved to Uman and eventually became a leader of the Bratzlav community. It is a bitter irony that his move to Uman, inspired by R. Nosen's prison letters, indirectly led to his eventual exile to Siberia in 1939, during the Stalinist purges.

narratives in order to further his agenda of spiritual resistance.²⁴⁴ For, in addition to the influence of personal example on his followers, R. Noson explicitly attempted to educate and inspire them to nonviolence using traditional Jewish texts and narratives. The next chapter will serve to examine this essential aspect of his approach.

²⁴⁴ Perhaps as a result of the impact of R. Mordechai's defiance, much of the Bratzlav literature describing the Years of Oppression, particularly *Yemei HaTlaos*, uses the language of the Purim story to describe the actions of the Savraner. Quotes from the *Book of Esther* appear verbatim, with only the proper names modified, e.g. from "Achashverosh" to "the Rabbi of Savran".

CHAPTER 7: R. NOSON'S EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP

The extent of R. Noson's accomplishment in eschewing violent retaliation against the followers of the Savraner can be judged by the abundance of examples from the history of Hasidism of such retaliations. In Chapter 2 we recounted R. Noson's father-in-law's disenchantment with the Hasidic movement as a result of the ubiquity of infighting he witnessed. In Chapter 4 we saw that the students of the Magid of Mezerich gave in to the temptation of a counter-ban against the Mitnagdim in spite of their teacher's disapproval. R. Noson offers a singular example of a Hasidic leader who responded in a nonviolent manner to the harsh opposition facing himself and his community. In the last chapter we examined aspects of this nonviolent response; in this chapter we will analyze the central factors in his educational leadership which allowed him to communicate his nonviolent vision to his followers, the Bratzlaver Hasidim, in order to persuade them to reject violent retaliation.

This was arguably the more difficult challenge, as R. Noson's own choices – to reject uses of force, to write directly to the Savraner and to pursue spiritual resistance – emerged from his own faith and value-system and took place within the

arena of his own agency. The greater test of his leadership was his ability to frame painful attacks, ugly accusations and public humiliations in such a way that the Bratzlavers, especially the *yungerleit* (the young men of the community) would identify with pacific values and disavow violent reprisals. Yet R. Noson felt prepared for the task. He once described himself as the rhetorician (*melitz*) in one of R. Nachman's stories,²⁴⁵ whose speech is so powerfully compelling that he can express the truth of God in words. It can indeed be said that all of his influence was through words: writing R. Nachman's lessons and stories, his biography, letters, prayers, discourses spoken in company or written. In the educational project facing him, too, R. Noson made use primarily of words in order to encourage, inspire and guide the Bratzlaver Hasidim toward spiritual nonviolent resistance.

Meaning and Optimism

A major challenge for R. Noson during the years in which Bratzlavers consistently faced ridicule and defamation was to reinforce his community's faith in itself and commitment to the path taught by R. Nachman. When local townspeople in Uman, Tulchin and Nemirov hurled epithets at Bratzlaver Hasidim ("Bratzlaver dog!" was a common one), the object of ridicule was faced with two temptations: to disavow his identity, or to react with anger. Neither of these was a positive response from the standpoint of R. Nachman's teachings. When, in 1834, followers of the Savraner began assaulting Bratzlavers publicly and demanding that they renounce

²⁴⁵ The *melitz* [orator, advocate] is one of the King's servants in the story Master of Prayer.

their allegiance to R. Noson, the challenge was rendered more acute.²⁴⁶

Therefore, one of R. Noson's main tasks in this period was to shore up their identity in such a way that his followers could transcend the options of attack or retreat. He did this often, especially in letters written to the Bratzlavers, by finding encouragement in the face of the suffering of his Hasidim, and often in the suffering itself. R. Nachman had taught the general principle that all setbacks exist in order to bring one closer to the desired goal. In one teaching he based this on a rabbinic gloss on the verse which describes Pharaoh's pursuit of the Israelites at the Red Sea. The Talmudic rabbis note a grammatical idiosyncrasy: it is written that "Pharaoh brought near" instead of "Pharaoh drew near" to the Israelite camp. The rabbis comment that through his pursuit he caused the Israelites to reach out to God for help – thus, he "brought [them] near [to God]". R. Noson applied this exegesis to the Bratzlavers' antagonists.²⁴⁷ His letters to his son and other Bratzlavers are filled with statements to the effect that "All of this is happening to awaken us to start again to come close to God,"²⁴⁸ and "The purpose of all this is to arouse us to greater prayer."²⁴⁹ In these lines and in many others R. Noson provided his followers with positive interpretations of the painful events of the 1830s. He encouraged them to recognize that their suffering did not contradict God's love for them; in fact just the opposite was true, as it was designed to awaken them to "start again to come close to

²⁴⁶ Avraham Chazan mi-Tulchin, *Yemei HaTlaos*, p. 150; Cf. Kramer, Through Fire and Water p.399-401.

²⁴⁷ Cf., for example, R. Nachman Goldstein, *Alim L'Trufah*, Letters 75 and 98.

²⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 167

²⁴⁹ *Ibid.* 172

God” and to “greater prayer”. An outgrowth of the general emphasis on the *tachlis* in R. Noson’s teachings, this message to the Bratzlav community was intended to restore a spiritual perspective to the suffering of the Hasidim.

...See how they pursue a person at all times, especially one who wants to come close to holiness. All we have are the few good points we grab every day through crying out, prayer, learning, will, yearning and good desire, and through whatever mitzvot we merit to do: charity and acts of kindness.²⁵⁰

In this letter R. Noson reminds his readers to focus their energies on spiritual resistance, on increasing their religious activities, and not to become enmeshed in reactions to their opponents’ assaults.

R. Noson’s logic in these passages is very similar to that of classical Jewish theological responses to suffering at the hands of non-Jewish oppressors. Jewish victims of the Crusades or the Inquisition also found solace in the fact of their innocence of blood-shed. They also saw in their suffering a sign of their chosenness, as “God is exacting with his loved ones.” In his study of Jewish identity and power from antiquity to modern times Ehud Luz writes,

When Jews experienced shame and guilt, they interpreted them in terms of their own autonomous values and not those of their oppressors. This made it possible for the Jews to claim victory even when they had ostensibly been defeated, for it was not they who were humiliated but their persecutors. In the words of the poet, ‘The disgrace is not yours but your tormentors’.²⁵⁰ Seeing themselves this way enabled the Jews to disregard the world of the gentiles, with all its glory and supposed honor, and to feel absolutely superior to their social and cultural surroundings. Thanks to this self-image, they were able to retain their self-respect and dignity despite being

²⁵⁰ R. Nachman Goldstein, *Alim L’Trufah*, Letter 193.

an oppressed and humiliated minority.²⁵¹

This passage could just as well describe the situation of the Bratzlavers in the 1830s (and indeed, throughout much of their history). In much the same way that Jewish leaders were so often called upon to transform the shame of suffering into a sign of election, R. Noson had to do the same thing for his community. The essential difference, of course, is that the Bratzlavers experienced oppression by their coreligionists. Claims of innate difference or theological distinctions between Jews and gentiles could not be invoked, nor could Jewish election be called upon. Instead R. Noson had to construct a new distinction between those who were attached to and those who opposed the True Tzaddik.²⁵²

By creating such a distinction R. Noson interpreted the public beatings of Bratzlavers, the economic sanctions, the name-calling, etc. as a sign of the great worth of their religious project.²⁵³ Decades before R. Nachman had encouraged an attitude among his followers of “holy pride”, *azut d’kedusha*, in one’s spiritual path. Near the end of his life, after years of opposition, he remarked to his followers, “What have we to be ashamed of? The whole world was created for us!”²⁵⁴ Now R. Noson attempted to bolster the pride of his community in their unique style of

²⁵¹ Luz, p. 33-4.

²⁵² As the study will show, this distinction was not categorical; R. Noson affirmed the interdependence of the two sects even as he appealed to the distinction between those who follow the True Tzaddik and those who do not.

²⁵³ It must be noted that this interpretive response was credible only for pre-modern cultures (including those which maintained pre-modern views until the 21st century). With the rise of modernity, basic concepts of human dignity, self-esteem, honor and shame were irrevocably transformed. See Luz, p. 35 ff.

²⁵⁴ R. Noson Sternhartz, *Hayei MoHaRan*.

worship, in their fervor, and in their intimate connection with R. Nachman in spite of the mockery of the Savraners.

“I am crying with joy that in this hiding-inside-hiding we merited to know the truth of the point of truth...”²⁵⁵ “From the extent of the opposition you can understand the level of the desired.”²⁵⁶ “Thank God we were saved from being among the opponents of the Rebbe!”²⁵⁷ “We can have joy in the realization that at least we are not R. Nachman’s opponents!”²⁵⁸

The Bratzlavers could find joy in the fact that at least they were not on the side of their oppressors, that rather than battling the True Tzaddik they followed him, that instead of trampling his books they studied them. And the intensity of the opposition was an indication of the preciousness of the goal: to truly live according to the teachings of R. Nachman.

R. Noson shared this optimistic view with his followers, even at the height of the strife of the 1830s. A common trope in letters of the period is: “You know the trouble, but I have to tell you about the salvations within the trouble itself!”²⁵⁹ In a letter to his son R. Yitzchak R. Noson celebrated the fact that “I was at the R. Nachman’s grave and *mikva* and they didn’t kill me!”²⁶⁰ This ferocious optimism, in addition to being a source of strength for R. Noson during the Years of Oppression, allowed him to model for his followers a method of transcending reactions to opposition and persecution.

²⁵⁵ Ibid.

²⁵⁶ Ibid., 173.

²⁵⁷ R. Nachman Goldstein, *Alim L’Trufah*, 156

²⁵⁸ Ibid., Letter 166.

Together with this optimism we find in R. Noson's letters a related type of guidance having to do with fear. In response to the concerns of his friends and followers in 1835, after attempts at physical assault were made on R. Noson and his family, he wrote:

Concerning your worries and fears for me because of the enemies' terrorizing me: you have reason for your worry, and you should indeed increase your prayers on my behalf. Nevertheless, from the tone of your letters it appears that you are worrying excessively, and you are not seeing the salvations, miracles and wonders that are happening already, and especially the wonders that God is doing for us now, in the midst of this oppression....²⁶¹

Following this injunction R. Noson proceeds to list many examples of positive things that occurred during his imprisonment and exile, for instance that he was able to take his holy books with him when he left prison. These seemingly minor moments of relief were for R. Noson material for his communiqués with the other Bratzlavers, in which he tried to show them how one might see and celebrate the good, even in the midst of suffering.

NARRATIVE

Straightforward, frontal affirmations sufficed to encourage the Bratzlavers; the educational goal of transmitting his nonviolent values to his community required a greater variety and depth of communication techniques. R. Noson made use of many

²⁵⁹ Ibid., Letter 168.

²⁶⁰ Ibid., Letter 172.

methods in accomplishing this, the most novel of which involved the careful use of traditional narrative to communicate his values in response to the persecutions. In making use of biblical and other stories R. Noson was following a tradition of using exemplary figures of the past as symbols of holy behavior in the present. R. Noson's repeated reference to biblical figures and others who experienced persecution at the hands of their coreligionists was critical in persuading the Bratzlavers to take the hard road of introspective nonviolence. In the following pages, we will examine R. Noson's use of narrative.

Power of the Narrative Form

R. Noson's goal was to persuade the Bratzlav community to eschew violence in favor of spiritual resistance. In order for the Bratzlavers to listen and internalize his message R. Noson knew he had to make use of traditional language, the shared discourse of this community. Since antiquity that traditional language was comprised of two dimensions, *halacha*, or legal discourse, and *agada*, narrative. While the two "dialects" of Jewish thought are interwoven in the Bible and Talmud, post-Talmudic Jewish intellectual history saw a bifurcation of the *halacha* and *agada* and a privileging of *halacha* (in the form of response and codes) over *agada*, which was reserved for homiletics. Nevertheless, the use of narrative played an important role in the transmission of ethical values that could not be expressed in legal terms. It was because of its profound resonance with traditional Jews that R. Noson turned to

²⁶¹ Ibid., Letter 171.

agada (narrative) in seeking to persuade and inspire his community to adopt nonviolence.

From the time of the rabbis, biblical figures were seen as exemplars of holy behavior. These figures were often reinterpreted in light of current concerns, often in unabashedly anachronistic ways. An example of this that will provide some context for R. Noson's use of biblical figures for his purposes is the rabbinic manipulation of David, a figure of great significance to R. Noson. While the biblical account in the Books of Samuel and Kings paints a portrait of a multi-faceted leader, a warrior, poet and lover, it does not describe David as a legal authority. Yet the Talmudic rabbis adopt him as a symbol of the Torah scholar who spends his days determining vexing cases of marital purity law.²⁶² This well-established form, the reinterpretation of biblical figures to serve contemporary agendas, served as an important and credible precedent for R. Noson in the 1830s. His use of the language of narrative was even more effective because it took place in a Hasidic milieu, in which storytelling had an especially prominent role.

The Hasidic Restoration of Narrative

In addition to the fundamental challenge to the established Jewish leadership posed by the early Hasidim, the movement asserted a restoration of the narrative element, long marginalized, to Jewish intellectual culture. This was expressed through the use of storytelling as a dominant religious tool. Although there were

Hasidic leaders who were also halachists²⁶³ and the movement as a whole avoided antinomianism, the vast majority of Hasidic writings are homiletic in nature. Storytelling was a primary means of communication and the transmission of teachings among the early Hasidim, and the Besht told stories - and stories were told about him. Many of the tales of the conversion of opponents to Hasidism relate the central role of stories in their transformations. The Hasidic tale became a new genre of Jewish literature, with a heroic protagonist, the Tzaddik, accomplishing feats of spiritual strength for the benefit of Israel and to hasten the coming of the Messiah. A common complaint of the Mitnagdim was that the Hasidim wasted their time telling stories about the various Tzaddikim rather than engaging in the age-old activity of Talmud study. This charge was often true, as the Hasidim indeed viewed storytelling as a sacred activity.

R. Nachman's Theology of Storytelling

R. Nachman took this positive attitude toward storytelling to new levels. First and foremost he created and told tales that are *sui generis* in Jewish literature. His stories are populated by fantastic creatures, and there is little indication that their setting is a Jewish or Eastern European milieu. R. Nachman viewed tales as a way of “enrobing” mystical concepts, i.e. at once revealing and concealing potent esoteric Torah: “In former generations, when mystical concepts were discussed, they were

²⁶² TB Brachot 7a.

²⁶³ R. Schneur Zalman of Liadi and R. Chaim of Sanz were two Hasidic leaders who were also known for

discussed in this form [story form].”²⁶⁴

Accompanying these tales, of which thirteen were seen as canonical, was a creative theology of narrative, recorded in various sayings and most substantially in *Likutei MoHaRaN* Lesson 60.

...For there are people who sleep their days away, and even though it appears that they serve God and study and pray, still God does not take pleasure in their service, because all of their service remains below and does not rise....And when someone falls asleep he loses his face...and the seeking of his face depends on the fixing of the heart.... And one must awaken [such a person] from slumber, but it is impossible to awaken him – he must awaken himself. But at the moment that he would awaken himself he still remains asleep without external help. Therefore, at the moment when he begins to awaken, one must show him his face....And when one wants to show him his face and awaken him from sleep, one must clothe his face for him in stories, lest the sudden light [of direct revelation of Torah] blind him; and lest the Outside Forces take hold of it [the light]; and so that the Outside Forces that are already there will not prevent his awakening.

Thus, R. Nachman’s view of storytelling transcends the transmission of content, however esoteric. It encompasses theurgic healing, the activity of a Tzaddik who liberates the slumbering follower who has literally “lost face”.²⁶⁵ Ora Wiskind-Elper, in her study of R. Nachman’s tales, notes that “this revolutionary notion, that the

their roles as halachic decisors.

²⁶⁴ Note at end of “Tale of Exchanged Children”.

²⁶⁵ In the same lesson, R. Nachman goes on to distinguish between two types of stories: those that are “under the years” and those that are “from ancient days”. In other language we might refer to these categories as “tales” and “myths”, the former being localized in space and time, while the latter are not. “Stories from ancient days” are more powerful stimulants than tales that are “under the years”, among them the typical Hasidic story concerning a particular Tzaddik. R. Nachman’s thirteen canonical tales are in the category of myth. What is noteworthy about this distinction is that certain narratives fit into both categories. Localized narratives defined by time and place may simultaneously represent myths, in a way similar to that in which the rabbis read biblical figures in new light. This appears to be a primary way R.

process of spiritual enlightenment is necessarily effected, not by philosophical arguments, but by fictions born of imagination – this notion is the foundation stone of R. Nachman’s entire *oeuvre*.²⁶⁶ Wiskind-Elper relates this view of stories to the structure of R. Nachman’s tales themselves. R. Nachman’s view that stories are more than relations of events accounts for some of those aspects which are incomprehensible from a purely literary perspective. To use a metaphor R. Nachman often used to describe the work of the Tzaddik, as a doctor carefully mixes and measures the ingredients of a medicinal potion, the sacred storyteller will carefully weigh and choose those elements of a story which will cause the resuscitation of those trapped in spiritual or moral slumber.

This background is essential to an understanding of R. Noson’s use of narrative in response to the Years of Oppression. As a leader who had inherited a rich narrative tradition from early Judaism, given pride of place by the early Hasidim and taken to new heights and depths by R. Nachman, his challenge was to provide a credible narrative frame that would encourage nonviolence among his followers. He found this credibility by drawing on traditional figures from sacred text who would serve as archetypes for the Bratzlaver Hasidim, who were particularly susceptible to the call of stories.

R. Noson’s Use of Narrative During the Years of Oppression

Nachman viewed classical figures: as both ethical exemplars and symbolic archetypes for esoteric ideas.
²⁶⁶ Ora Wiskind-Elper, *Tradition and Fantasy in the Tales of R. Nachman of Bratslav*, (Albany: SUNY

The Bratzlavers faced the challenge of isolation, of being a despised minority. This was a position the Jews as a whole had often occupied throughout their exile, and just as they found comfort in the “portable homeland” of text, so R. Noson wanted to provide his followers with a sense that, in spite of their low status in 1830s Ukraine, they were a part of a timeless community. He created such a sense among his followers with statements like this:

There is no orphaned generation, and every Tzaddik certainly has power to turn the whole world to the good. But the main obstacle is simply the great opposition that exists in each generation on the True Tzaddik of the generation. As we find in all the generations always that there was always great opposition to the True Tzaddik who worked to bring people close to God – again him strife increasingly arose...as we find with all the previous generations. For Abraham our father worked constantly to convert people and he faced tremendous strife his entire life. And when he came to Israel there was famine, and they said it was his fault (as is brought in the Midrash)... And Isaac too faced opposition from the Philistines. And especially Jacob our father who was pursued by Laban and Esau and he faced hatred and persecution his entire life. And David as well, who was overwhelmed by strife all the days of his life – from Saul the king, Doeg, Achitofel, Sheva ben Bichri, and all the nations opposed him and he had many wars in his life. And it is similar in every generation. And Moses our Teacher also experienced great opposition... the opposition of Korah, Dathan and Aviram, etc. And also on Isaiah there was conflict and on the other prophets and Tzaddikim there was great conflict in every generation. And this is the main obstacle to the Tzaddik restoring the whole world to the good. For if they had peace with him and knew and believed that he is a True Tzaddik and seeks their good and love and eternal success they would certainly come close to him and hear his true words, and he would speak to their hearts and explain the truth to them. And he would give them good counsel on the way to come close to God, and the whole world would surely return in truth to God through him. But because of the conflict they do not listen to him at all, and even if they do hear one word it does not enter their hearts. Thus the main reason that the world does not

Press, 1998), p.220.

come close to God is the lack of peace.²⁶⁷

In this paragraph R. Noson follows the style of classical commentators. The example cited before of the rabbis emphasizing David's role as legal decisor, ignoring other significant dimensions of his biography, is a precedent for R. Noson's reading, in which he isolates the role of conflict in the lives of patriarchs and prophets to evince the ubiquity of conflict and its detrimental role in the messianic process ("to turn the whole world to the good"). This survey of biblical figures who experienced conflict conveys a strong message: if the Bratzlavers are a small minority now, they share the experience (and by implication the support) of Tzaddikim of other generations. Accompanying this notion was a practice R. Nachman had spoken of, which R. Noson developed and disseminated: the reading of names of Tzaddikim. R. Noson compiled a list from biblical, Talmudic medieval and Hasidic works of names of holy men to be recited by Bratzlaver Hasidim. Although this is not made explicit, it would seem that this practice might have served the purpose of emphasizing the existence of the timeless community – of which the Bratzlavers were to see themselves as a part. In common parlance we might say that R. Noson is telling his followers: "You are in excellent company. That the majority of Ukrainian Hasidim are against you does not mean you are in the wrong."

R. Noson made reference during the Years of Oppression to a number of biblical figures who experienced conflict and persecution: Abel, Abraham, Joseph

²⁶⁷ R. Noson Sternhartz, *Likutei Halachot, Karcha* 3:11.

and his brothers. All of these biblical figures serve as important symbols for R. Noson: Abel is the victim of the first act of violence; Abraham serves as the paradigm of independent thought; and Joseph is the first figure to experience hatred from within his own community (or, in his case, his family). From each of these figures there emerged several important models for spiritual resistance. For the sake of clarity, I will limit myself to a discussion of two examples of his use of biblical figures, one serving as a negative prototype of the Savraner and all persecutors, the other as a positive exemplar for the Bratzlavers to emulate. These are the biblical Korach and David.

Korach as Paradigmatic Antagonist

The biblical *Book of Numbers* records a series of crises involving challenges to the authority of Moses. The chief antagonist within the Israelite community is Korach son of Yitzhar. Accompanied by his followers Korach publicly challenges Moses' leadership, accusing him of nepotism and self-interest. His end in the biblical account is gruesome: the earth swallows him and his followers alive. For generations of commentators Korach served as the paradigm of illegitimate opposition to true leaders. Basing himself on a statement by R. Nachman²⁶⁸ R. Noson writes:

...Every opponent of the true Tzaddikim and their followers in every generation has within him sparks of Korach.... The aspect of Korach is awakened in each generation, and many many people gather together to oppose the holy gathering, and it is not enough that they do not join in

²⁶⁸ *Sefer HaMidos*, "machlokes".

trying to bring souls together: they work hard to prevent this and to distance people one from another.... Even those opponents who spend their time in Torah and prayer, because they oppose the Tzaddik, they are distancing themselves from oneness.²⁶⁹

The opposition facing the Bratzlavers is an extension of that of Korach against Moses, and, by implication, the Savraners of the world embody elements of that biblical strife. This notion of the embodiment of ancient events in contemporary dynamics follows the common rabbinic view of history as composed of repeating paradigmatic forms, and it serves to place current difficulties in the context of a traditional view of history. The last line of this passage is clearly a reference to Hasidic opponents of the followers of R. Nachman, who live by traditional values but miss the essential point of following or at least tacitly accepting the Tzaddik. Korach, in spite of being a leader, a prince and a head of the Sanhedrin (high court) fell into the trap of opposing Moses, the true Tzaddik of his time. His opposition provided a significant model for R. Noson in helping his followers come to terms with the seeming contradiction of a traditional Hasidic leader opposing R. Nachman. The Savraner was a prominent Hasidic leader, not some ignorant householder; how could he oppose the true Tzaddik? Based on traditional uses of biblical narrative, R. Noson offers his followers the notion that contemporary instances of persecution are simply instantiations of old archetypes: Korach, too, was a learned and accomplished leader. This implicitly sends the message that even though the Bratzlav community is in the minority

²⁶⁹ R. Noson Sternhartz, *Likutei Halachos*, *Pru U'rvu/Iishut* 5:5. Also cf. *Otzar HaYirah* "machlokes" 55,

they are on Moses' side, R. Nachman's side: the right side.²⁷⁰

A Discourse Written in Exile

As we saw in Chapter 2, R. Noson was forced to flee from Bratzlav in 1835. His exile lasted until 1838, and during that period he continued in his activities to the extent possible: writing, teaching and holding Hasidic gatherings. That we can place some of R. Noson's discourses in *Likutei Halachos* chronologically we owe to a few personal notes included in the work. For example, at the beginning of Laws of Fish 5 we find a note that states:

With God's help, 5595 Teves [January 1835], [the town of] Tcherin, during the tumult and flight, God have mercy.

In other words, this discourse was penned after R. Noson fled Bratzlav but before he was officially placed under house arrest in Nemirov in 1836. The discourses following this one were written over the next years, while R. Noson was still in exile. We know from R. Noson's letters that the ideas included in his discourses usually were transmitted verbally as well, usually at the Sabbath or holiday table. Therefore we can assume that ideas recorded in R. Noson's written work, particularly *Likutei Halachos*, were shared with Bratzlaver Hasidim during the Years of Oppression, and served to guide them through the difficulties

in which R. Noson's disciple further expands the notion of Korach as symbol of strife.

²⁷⁰ This point is strengthened by the well-known midrash which states that the Israelites had no idea whether Korach or Moses was the true leader. This discourse invokes their doubt, which parallels the doubt

- both internal and external – facing them at this time.

Many of R. Noson's writings produced during his exile address the important question of the religious meaning of the persecutions. This question must have vexed some of the Bratzlavers, who sometimes expressed the sort of righteous anger and moral indignation awakened among victims of persecution. In a discourse written in during the Years of Oppression R. Noson discusses the true, spiritual causes of the oppression, interpreting it as an expression of God's love for the followers of the true Tzaddik.

This is the reason for the great noise and fury that arises at all times against those who seek the truth – especially now - because the acts of the generation are not fitting, yet there are truth-seekers who want to come close to the truth, and God wants to bring them close even though they are as they are [i.e. on a low spiritual level], but it is not possible to do so except from very far away... and that is only possible through tremendous yearning and will...therefore they are sent strife and opposition to the point of threatening life.... One can only break through such obstacles with great self-sacrifice and commitment.... And we have none to rely on but our Father in heaven, who knows the secrets of hearts, and that we want only the truth of the truth, and truth is one....²⁷¹

According to R. Noson, the underlying reason for the opposition is that the Bratzlavers seek to grow in holiness in spite of their shortcomings. The challenge embedded in such an attempt is daunting, as it were, even for God. The only way to overcome the difficulty is through great yearning, which is increased through exposure to opposition. This idea is rooted firmly in R. Nachman's Lesson 61, in

some of the Bratzlavers might have felt as well regarding their leader.

²⁷¹ R. Noson Sternhartz, *Likutei Halachos, Hechsher Kelim* 4:23.

which he discusses the relationship between obstacles and the development of human will in similar terms. Here we find a central aspect of R. Noson's response to the persecutions of his enemies, one that appears throughout his written works of the period: what may be referred to as the internalization of power. He describes the cause of the opposition as originating in those who seek the truth – the Bratzlavers themselves. The opponents are only messengers, expressions of a cosmic dynamic that is a natural result of flawed human beings seeking God. Therefore, blaming the opponents or reacting with violence is futile; the only way to peace is through “great self-sacrifice and commitment”, i.e. inner work, yearning, self-scrutiny followed by self-improvement.

At the same time R. Noson acknowledges the responsibility of those who cause harm to innocent people. He refers to these persecutors as “wicked ones” who wish to prevent Jews from serving God through Torah study and prayer. Were their goal to be attained, R. Noson asserts, “the entire creation would return to chaos and void.”²⁷² No less than the fate of the universe is at stake in this intra-Hasidic struggle, and its well-being is at risk only because of the pride of men. The fact that these fomenters of strife seem to succeed, living in peace and comfort as well as a sense of moral rectitude, adds insult to injury. On this point R. Noson writes,

Even though we see that years pass and they [the persecutors of the righteous] still do not fall, even so we believe that every day they experience

²⁷² Ibid, 49.

a spiritual downfall [which is more significant] through the purification of truth that attends each day. And surely their defeat in this world will come as well.²⁷³

In this passage R. Noson offers reassurance to his followers that there is a “Judge and justice” and that the wicked will get their just desserts. That will be achieved not through the violent activities of the persecuted followers of the true Tzaddik but through the natural evolution of truth.

For every day the world is completely renewed.... And the primary renewal of creation is the clarification of truth from falsehood that happens even in the depths of bitter exile, even in the midst of the sufferings and persecutions that overwhelm the righteous pursued.²⁷⁴

Each day brings the world closer to the ultimate revelation of truth that will define the Messianic era. Although the persecuted followers of the Tzaddik, the Bratzlavers, are now in the midst of intense suffering and humiliation, their liberation inheres in the fabric of creation itself, which is characterized by continuous renewal and the gradual and progressive emergence of truth. Evil, pride and hatred have only temporary power; righteousness, humility and compassion endure forever.

However, R. Noson distinguished between the leaders of the opposition who were motivated by negative character traits and their legions of misguided followers, who had become convinced of the righteousness of their cause

²⁷³ Ibid., 4:48.

²⁷⁴ Ibid.

because of the charisma or authority of leaders like the Savraner. His condemnation was reserved for the former: not all were equally culpable; not all were threatening creation itself; not all must experience a downfall. This is where R. Noson utilizes the figure of Korach as a symbol for the oppressors of the Bratzlavers.

...for Korach placed doubt and heresies in the minds and hearts of most of the Israelites, with the result that it became very difficult for them to come close to holiness... and Moses prayed 'God of the Spirits, shall one man sin and all the congregation suffer?' and it is difficult to understand this, for many of the Israelites were involved in Korach's opposition to Moses, to the point that almost everyone was against Moses, as Our Sages have said.... But Moses begged God to look with mercy and see that the main source of all the opposition was from Korach who was jealous of Moses and Aaron due to his pride... while the rest of the Israelites are worthy of compassion [for being swayed or fooled by Korach].

This passage, written at the height of the Years of Oppression, can be seen both as a condemnation of the Savraner for fomenting harmful strife as a result of his personal jealousy and at the same time as a call for compassion for those of his followers - the majority of the opponents - who were swayed by his authority. Just as Moses prayed for the masses of Israelites who (according to rabbinic tradition) opposed him, so R. Noson argued that the Bratzlavers must pray for many of the stone-throwing, epithet-spewing Ukrainian Hasidim who had been swayed by the Savraner.

Praying on Behalf of Enemies

Elsewhere this distinction is extended further. In the last chapter we saw that R. Noson rebuked his family for speaking ill of the Savraner, saying that “They are our brothers. Eventually they will be rectified. We ourselves will have to seek remedies for them!”²⁷⁵ This spontaneous statement is expressed at greater length in a discourse in *Likutei Halachos*. R. Noson writes,

Many people lost both worlds by adhering to conflict with the true righteous God-fearers, for in every place there is strife there is a spark of Korach, who was lost. Yet in the end even they will be sought, found and fixed, *mainly through the service of these righteous ones themselves whom they opposed and pursued*, [italics added] for the main trait of these holy ones is their constant yearning for greater levels and they are never satisfied... they seek lost things and find them and raise them up. And in the end they will seek and find and raise up all the lost things, including the lost ones who opposed them and were lost. This is what Our Sages said “In the future the lost ones of Korach will be sought”: just as David was sought (by God) so also these will be....”²⁷⁶

R. Noson adds a critical new element to his educational agenda: the Bratzlavers must recognize their responsibility for their enemies’ ultimate welfare. One can imagine a young Bratzlaver Hasid, fresh from an encounter with stone-throwing Savraner Hasidim or worse, experiencing the natural human emotions that arise in the face of attack, joining R. Noson at the Sabbath table and hearing this discourse. This imaginary Hasid would see the challenge before him – to work for the good of his enemy, to see his enemy as “lost” instead of evil – as a religious task like others R. Noson would have set before him. The likelihood is that such a Hasid would have

²⁷⁵ Kramer, *Through Fire and Water* p.412.

²⁷⁶ Ibid., 199-200, R. Noson Sternhartz, *Likutei Halachos Umnin* 4:35.

prayed instead of plotted revenge. Teachings such as these led to the lack of substantial violent activity on the part of the Bratzlavers.

David as Paradigm of the Righteous Victim

In addition to R. Noson's use of Korach as a negative paradigm of contentiousness, he sought positive exemplars of seekers of peace in spite of persecution. In the biblical figure of David, R. Noson found an ideal symbol who could serve his educational purposes. Drawing on sections of the *Book of Psalms*, secondary midrashic texts, and (to an extent) the biblical account of David's life in *Samuel* and *Kings*, R. Noson finds in David the prototypical victim of oppression who maintained his spiritual integrity through reliance on prayer.

In the bible David's life is laden with the experience of persecution, first by his predecessor the mad king Saul, then by others, including Saul's advisor Doeg, and later by his own son Absalom. These episodes are in addition to his wars with external enemies, particularly the Philistines, whose incursions into Israelite territory are a constant threat to Judean autonomy. David is portrayed in the Bible as a warrior-poet who is forced to battle implacable enemies while facing a series of betrayals within his own community and family. R. Nachman had taught that the Psalms were David's spontaneous prayers, his *hitbodedut*, later recorded in book form.²⁷⁷ The *Book of Psalms* provides the reader with an intimate record of David's

²⁷⁷ The Psalms can be viewed as a model for R. Noson's *Likutei Tfilos*. The stylistic influence of the Psalms on R. Noson's prayers is a topic worthy of further study.

outcries, which are linked through textual cues to biblical episodes, as for example in the case of Psalm 3, which begins with the words “A song of David, when he fled from his son Absalom”. The next verse sets the tone of the Psalm: “God! How many have arisen against me!” For R. Noson this and similar texts captured the sentiment he wished to convey to his followers. The central tension facing the Bratzlav community - between the nonviolent attitudes they espoused and the righteous indignation they felt at the injustices perpetrated against them found both a powerful precedent and an eloquent voice in David.

Reinterpreting David: From Warrior to Paragon of Peace

We began this examination of R. Noson’s pedagogic use of traditional exemplars in educating his community toward nonviolence with a text from *Likutei Halachos* in which he discusses the ubiquity of opposition to the Tzaddikim throughout history. David is enumerated there as a Tzaddik who faced many forms of strife, especially by other Jews.

There is no orphaned generation, and every Tzaddik certainly has power to turn the whole world to the good. But the main obstacle is simply the great opposition that exists in each generation to the True Tzaddik of the generation. As we find in all the generations always that there was always great opposition to the True Tzaddik who worked to bring people close to God – opposition increased against him.... And David as well, who was overwhelmed by strife all the days of his life from Saul the king, Doeg, Achitofel, Sheva ben Bichri, and all the nations opposed him and he had many wars in his life. And so it is in every generation.²⁷⁸

²⁷⁸ R. Noson Sternhartz, *Likutei Halachos* Karcha 3:11

The notion of David as a righteous man constantly attacked by enemies needs little elaboration; this is more or less the biblical account of David's life. It is the portrayal of David as a paragon of peace which requires new interpretation.

The problem with using David as an exemplar of peace is that, although the Psalmist speaks of peace, in the biblical account he is often portrayed as a mighty warrior who is not reluctant to spill blood. In fact, according to *I Chronicles*, verse 22, David was unable to build the Temple of God because his hands were red with the blood of his enemies.²⁷⁹ Although no honest interpreter could ignore the militant aspects of David's personality, R. Noson softened those aspects by making use of Hasidic reinterpretations of David's wars. Pesach Schindler described this method of rereading as follows:

... Scriptural references to physical resistance are spiritualized. For example, "Israel's warfare with Amalek is [in essence] a battle with the *yetzer hara* [man's evil inclination], [according to R. Yakov Yosef of Polnoya]....

The term *milchamah* (war) is also associated with the process of prayer. In this vein, R. Nachman of Bratzlav spiritualizes the verse "When you go out to war against your enemies...and you take some of them captive":

"For he [the enemy] is the *yetzer hara* [evil inclination]..."²⁸⁰

An example of R. Noson's use of this approach can be found in his interpretation of a typical verse in Psalm 119 in which David prays for salvation from those who would oppress him: "Sweeten Your servant for the good, let not

²⁷⁹ In that verse, God censures David for "shedding blood abundantly and making great wars." It is because of his military past that David is not allowed to build the Temple of God. That task is left to his son Solomon, the etymology of whose name is related to the Hebrew word for peace.

wicked ones oppress me”. R. Noson’s interpretation, following a spiritualizing trend in Hasidic hermeneutics, casts the verse in a new light.

[David means] “Let not the wicked oppress me”, which is the Other Side and the Husks who oppress the souls, God forbid.... All this David prayed for very much to God to be saved from oppression and theft and violence of the Husks, which are the Evil Inclination and its armies who oppress - God forbid - the souls in their sins and who remove their holy garb until their faces change [with shame] and they no longer recognize their preciousness and [as a result] they confuse good and evil....for David the King had faith that as a result of his many prayers God would save him... and return him to his rightful place.²⁸¹

In characteristic Hasidic fashion R. Noson portrays David as engaged in a military campaign against spiritual, not political foes. In a similar vein he reads specific narratives from I *Samuel*, including the account of David’s defeat of Goliath, in purely spiritual terms.

And this is the aspect of David... who had a great war with the Head of the Snake [a kabbalistic term for the forces of spiritual evil], Goliath... in order to raise up and strengthen the will of those who have fallen...²⁸²

These interpretations serve to deemphasize the military aspects of the biblical account in favor of a quietistic portrayal of David. Instead of presenting a model of military heroism, R. Noson presents his followers with an exemplar of a spiritual type of power, who, though confronted by external enemies, recognizes that the true war is fought against the Evil Inclination or forces of evil.

²⁸⁰ Schindler, Pesach, *Hasidic Responses to the Holocaust*, in *Light of Hasidic Thought*, p. 109.

²⁸¹ R. Noson Sternhartz, *Likutei Halachos*, Birchas Hashachar 3:3

This view of David is consonant with the emphasis in R. Nachman's teachings on internalizing strife, transforming external persecution into internal process (as in Lesson 6), and with R. Noson's principled spiritual and nonviolent worldview.²⁸³ It finds support in many verses in the *Book of Psalms*, for example Psalms 44:6-7, which states: "With Your Name we will defeat our enemies; for I will not trust to my bow and my sword shall not save me". In addition to negotiating the different portrayals in *Psalms* and *Samuel/Kings*, this interpretation allowed R. Noson to hold David up to his followers as a model of the uncompromising search for peace.

In a similar vein, David's statement in Psalms 120:7 that "I am peace; but when I speak they are for war" was adopted by R. Noson as a kind of rallying cry to his followers to embrace peace in spite of the activities of their enemies. The phrase appears prominently in several prayers in R. Noson's *Likutei Tfilos*. Here is one example in which R. Noson adopts David's complaint as his own:

Master of the Universe, have mercy on me and save me from strife and conflict, for You know my heart: in truth I do not want any conflict at all, for who am I to engage in conflict with any person in the world? They are all better than I beyond measure. But You know the great extent of conflict that has spread in the world to the point that even one who desires peace is opposed, as it is written: "I am peace, but when I speak they are for war".²⁸⁴

²⁸² Ibid., *Birchas Hashachar* 5:62.

²⁸³ In his recently published edition of the *Megilat Setarim*, R. Nachman's esoteric text regarding the end of days, Tzvi Mark shows that R. Nachman interprets the final wars of Gog and Magog in purely spiritual, not military terms. This likely served as a precedent and an inspiration for R. Noson's interpretive method. See Tzvi Mark, *Megilat Setarim: He-Hazon Ha-Meshichi Ha-Sodi shel R. Nachman mi-Bratslav* (Tel Aviv: Hotza'at Universitah Bar-Ilan, 2007).

Similar uses of the verse appear in other prayers such as this one:

...For You know that I truly want peace and truth so much, and what can I do if there are those who hate and oppose me for naught. "I am peace, but when I speak they are for war." Merciful One, have mercy and pity on me and on all those who want to come closer to the ways of holiness in truth, against whom are arrayed haters with no cause who pursue them in all sorts of ways, and who grind their teeth against them for no reason. Have mercy on us... and save us from them....²⁸⁵

R. Noson's re-interpretation of David in his own pacific image provided him with a powerful exemplar which he could offer his followers. David, as progenitor and archetype of the Messiah, is a model whose every deed, including his pursuit of peace in spite of constant persecution, would be seen by Bratzlaver Hasidim as worthy of emulation.

David as Poor Man

In addition, R. Noson found in David the paradigmatic supplicant who begs God for help in avoiding being provoked by enemies. This is based on the recurring representation in Psalms of David as a pauper. The Psalmist repeatedly refers to himself in this way, asking God for help or salvation because he himself has no resources and is therefore incapable of escaping the clutches of his enemies. In such statements as "And I am a poor man, a pauper... You, my God, do not delay"²⁸⁶ and "A prayer of David: Incline Your ear to me, answer me, for I am a poor man and a

²⁸⁴ R. Noson Sternhartz, *Likutei Tfilos*, 141.

²⁸⁵ *Ibid.*,107.

pauper”,²⁸⁷ the text conveys the image of the Psalmist as helpless and totally reliant on God for salvation. In Psalms 109:16 this motif is linked to that of pursuit, a significant metaphor for R. Noson: “Because they have not remembered [God’s] kindness, they pursue the wounded poor man to kill him”. The poor man, devoid of physical strength or political power, has no recourse other than repentance, turning to God.

In a similar way, R. Noson describes David praying in the language of the rabbis, “Let my soul be as dust to all”, and understands this to be a prayer to remain silent in the face of the curses and humiliations of enemies.²⁸⁸ Again we find the internalization of power: just as R. Noson has David praying to overcome his anger, so in the same discourse he described the cause of the opposition as originating in those who seek the truth – the Bratzlavers themselves. The opponents are only messengers, expressions of a cosmic dynamic that is a natural result of flawed human beings seeking God. Therefore, blaming them or reacting with violence is futile; the only way to peace is through “great self-sacrifice and commitment”, i.e. inner work, self-scrutiny followed by self-improvement. As David says, “You know that God will do justice to the poor man, and will give a verdict for the pauper.”²⁸⁹ It is God, not the victim, who will apply judgment to the oppressors.

²⁸⁶ Psalms 40:18.

²⁸⁷ Ibid 86:1.

²⁸⁸ R. Noson Sternhartz, *Likutei Halachos, Hechsher Kelim* 4:19 (based on Ps. 31, 68 and on Lesson 6)

²⁸⁹ Ibid., 140:13.

I Am Prayer

Encouraging his followers to avoid violence was not enough; R. Noson had to offer them an alternative activity into which they could pour their energy and emotions. He offered them prayer. R. Noson's own reliance on prayer found an echo in the Psalms of David, who wrote "Prayer to God is my life".²⁹⁰ In *Likutei Halachos* R. Noson made the striking statement that "David is prayer": his whole life, even those aspects that appeared to be mundane, was an expression of prayer.²⁹¹ It is no surprise therefore that R. Noson viewed David, traditionally the author of Psalms, as a model for the Bratzlavers with regard to prayer.

The difficulty implicit in prayer as a response to suffering is that with a minimum of self-scrutiny one might easily be led to the conclusion that one is unworthy of having his prayers accepted by God. In response to this R. Noson wrote:

For King David teaches us to rely only on God... for there is no strength to our prayers alone to save us every moment of every day from that which threatens us physically and spiritually.... How is it possible for flesh and blood, especially the weak among us who have already fallen spiritually so much, to save themselves? Therefore [David] asks [God]: "Be my sanctuary", for only You are a sanctuary for me to hide me from the plots of enemies.

In other words, David, the poor man of Psalms, models an attitude of utter reliance on God. Interestingly, R. Noson is implicitly distinguishing two types of

²⁹⁰ *Psalms* 42:9.

²⁹¹ R. Noson Sternhartz, *Likutei Halachos, Matanah* 5:7.

prayer: prayer based in personal merit, which is limited in its effectiveness by the spiritual standing of the supplicant; and a sort of begging-prayer, in which the supplicant turns fully to God. It was this latter form of prayer with which R. Noson identified closely. His adoption of Psalmic language throughout the Years of Oppression was an expression of this identification. In a note at the end of a discourse in *Likutei Halachos* written just after many of his books and novellae were confiscated by the police R. Noson wrote:

May God return our losses and silence the opposition. They are as many as the hairs of my head, and they give me hate in return for my love. But I am prayer.²⁹²

It was this attitude that R. Noson wished to encourage among his followers.

That R. Noson saw David as the prime exemplar of the path he tried to teach his followers is fitting. Both men experienced extreme forms of persecution by coreligionists who challenged their legitimacy and even at times their sanity. Both relied primarily on spiritual practices, particularly prayer, in overcoming their difficulties. And both saw the true arena as internal, while external foes merely served to offer spiritual opportunities to come closer to God. As a 20th century Hasidic leader, the Alexanderer Rebbe of Bnei Brak, remarked, “No one experienced such persecution [by other Jews] as King David – and R. Noson of Bratzlav.”²⁹³

²⁹² Ibid., *Shechitah* 5.

²⁹³ Heard from Rabbi Eliyahu Godlevsky, a contemporary Bratzlav teacher and a student of R. Levi-Yitzchak Bender who lives in Bnei Brak, Israel.

USE OF HASIDIC HISTORY

In addition to his use of biblical figures in providing context for his followers, R. Noson brought their attention to more recent aspects of their collective memory: the opposition of the Mitnagdim to the early Hasidim, and the intense conflict between R. Nachman and the Shpola Zeide. Both of these histories existed in recent memory and offered vivid examples to the Bratzlaver Hasidim of the extent of antagonism faced by powerful role models. It must be recalled that both the Bratzlaver and the Savraner Hasidim traced their Hasidic lineages from the R. Israel the Baal Shem Tov, though through very different channels,²⁹⁴ and in fact the antagonism between the two groups can be seen as a battle for legitimacy between these two types of lineage (see Chapter 4). R. Noson's references to the Besht as a victim of persecution achieved the goal of portraying the Bratzlavers as the true inheritors of the Besht's legacy: witness the similarity of the persecution faced by the founder of Hasidism, so often considered the source and measure of Hasidic legitimacy, and the followers of R. Nachman!

The Experience of the Early Hasidim as Model

The intensity of the opposition of the Mitnagdim to the early Hasidim was part of the history of the movements' founder (see Chapter 4), and R. Noson made frequent comparisons between those events and those of his time in order to

²⁹⁴ While the Savraner's lineage was through disciples of the Besht, R. Nachman's connection was primarily familial through his maternal line. There is little doubt that this difference contributed to the

underscore the shared nature of the experience of persecution.

...For time flies away and our days are as a passing shadow, and soon everything will be gone and forgotten... and anyone who stands in his place and remains loyal to our Master and Teacher and studies his works will be fortunate.... And there was also opposition in earlier days when the Baal Shem Tov illuminated the world, and such things are passing over us as well....²⁹⁵

In addition, the history of opposition to the Besht offers reassurance that eventually salvation and relief will arrive.

...They sin against the honor of God, the Besht and his students and the Rebbe. And even though the conflict now is greater, God's salvation is also here [as it was for the early Hasidim].²⁹⁶

A challenge to this assertion is that R. Noson could not but acknowledge the greater intensity of the antagonism of the Savraners as compared to that of the Mitnagdim. But this does not deter him; in fact, he incorporates the discrepancy into his argument.

And if our humiliations are worse in certain ways, precisely from this we can understand the greatness of our aspiration.²⁹⁷

Not only does the Besht provide a model of the persecuted righteous; the Bratzlavers compare favorably to him, as is evidence by the greater intensity of persecution they

radically divergent developments of the two schools of thought.

²⁹⁵ R. Nachman Goldstein, *Alim L'Trufah*, Letter 169.

²⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, Letter 162

²⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, Letter 162

face. As the rabbis said, “According to the pain is the reward.”

Additionally, the Besht provided R. Noson with a response to a specific and pressing problem: the misrepresentations of R. Nachman’s teachings by the Savraner and his followers. The opponents were wont to misquote statements from *Likutei MoHaRaN*, or to quote R. Nachman’s words out of context. This presented a problem for the Bratzlavers, whose faith in their Rebbe may have been subtly threatened after hearing such claims. R. Noson responded to this issue in a letter to R. Shmuel Weinberg, one of his supporters in Bratzlav.

I received your letter... and in the matter of the false interpretations of the “words of the Living God” I already heard about this and it came as no surprise. For I have heard for years that the opponents find a place to err and to reinforce their opposition, for “in the way one wants to go, there is he led”. And the Torah has two powers: “If one merits, it is an elixir of life; if not it is poison”,²⁹⁸ and anyone can find in the Torah what he seeks. As we have seen, the heretics explain the essence of the Torah of Moses in their own distorted ways. How much more is this true of other holy works, especially in latter days with reference to the books published by the Baal Shem Tov and his students, in which the opponents found [what they sought]. Even though among them were righteous and learned men, still they dug and found things according to their will, as if God forbid the students of the Besht, who are called Hasidim, wrote things against the Torah, God forbid....

R. Noson offers the example of the misrepresentations of the works of the early Hasidim by the Mitnagdim as context and comfort to his supporters. The distortions of the words of R. Nachman that the Bratzlavers hear in the mouths of their adversaries are nothing new. Just as the Bratzlaver Hasidim would not doubt the

²⁹⁸ TB Kidushin 30

authentic holiness of the early Tzaddikim (and nor would the Savraner Hasidim), so they now would have no cause to doubt that of R. Nachman. In short, R. Noson offered his followers the model of the Besht, the universally accepted (among the Hasidim) leader who in his own day faced challenges similar to those faced by R. Noson. This is yet another example of R. Noson's appeal to historical precedent and inherited narratives in his attempt to provide a meaningful framework that would effectuate the survival of Bratzlav Hasidism and foster a culture of nonviolence among its adherents.

R. Nachman's Life as Sacred Narrative

R. Noson viewed the time in which R. Nachman lived as a sacred epoch. Art Green has drawn a connection between this view and similar ones recorded in the Zohar regarding the time in which R. Shimon bar Yochai was alive. Green writes that this view led to R. Noson's urgency in recording even seemingly trivial details of his master's life, for

...the secrets of R. Nachman's lifetime are to sustain the future world much as the great revelations of the earlier master, some seventeen hundred years previously, by his reckoning, had helped to sustain the world through the entire history of Israel's suffering and exile.²⁹⁹

As a form of sacred history, R. Nachman's life provided R. Noson with prototypical material that could be followed as a model. R. Noson viewed the specific events of his master's biography as containing cosmic significance for future generations,

including his own. This view extended to the presence of conflict in R. Nachman's life; just as R. Nachman faced the unprecedented opposition from other Hasidic leaders, his followers must encounter the same type of opposition. R. Nachman's life provided an almost mythological landscape, and his experience of conflict provided a context for his followers' confrontation with opposition. Just as R. Nachman relied on prayer, so should the Bratzlaver Hasidim. Just as R. Nachman won out in the end, expanding his influence in spite of setbacks, so would the Bratzlavers survive as a community to share their master's teachings with later generations.

The Continued Power of the Tzaddik

Faith in the Tzaddik was one of R. Nachman's [fund principles] important teachings. On a personal level R. Noson drew strength from his master's words, spoken decades before: "They will pursue you and pursue you and pursue you...But God will finish for you." Throughout the Years of Oppression R. Noson quoted R. Nachman's assurances to his followers in an attempt to strengthen their resolve in the face of opposition. At the same time, R. Noson avoided any pretense of knowing how salvation would come: "God will certainly finish and we will be victorious. How will He do it? That I don't know."³⁰⁰ It was in the tension between his faith and his very human experience of uncertainty and suffering that he was able to lead his beleaguered community, neither losing touch with their experiences of suffering nor

²⁹⁹ Green, p. 9, 14.

³⁰⁰ Levi-Yitchak Bender, *Siach Sarfei Kodesh*, I 625.

surrendering to despair.

R. Nachman was more than a model for R. Noson; he was a constantly felt presence even after death. In a letter to his son written in 1837 R. Noson responded to his son's distress at the ferocity of the antagonism he was facing as a Bratzlaver. R. Noson writes,

'It is not an empty matter for you' that we merited to know of him [R. Nachman] and his holy teaching, for he is our life and the length of our days. Praise God we certainly have on whom to rely: *as was his strength then so is his strength now - and more and more! - to protect us from all our enemies and to save us in physical and spiritual matters.* (italics added)³⁰¹

This assertion that R. Nachman, although no longer present in the flesh, still has power over events in this world is consonant with earlier classical, kabbalistic and Hasidic teachings about Tzaddikim. The Talmudic teachings that "even in death Tzaddikim are called alive"³⁰² and that "Tzaddikim are greater in death than in life"³⁰³ were taken seriously by the early Hasidim, who related to deceased masters as intercessors and spiritual guides. R. Noson invoked these teachings to assure his followers that R. Nachman was still an active presence in the world. He pioneered the practice of regularly visiting R. Nachman's grave in Uman, and he wrote often of the strength he gathered there even during the height of the opposition. His view of R. Nachman as still very much present, though no longer alive in the flesh, underpinned many aspects of his response.

³⁰¹ R. Nachman Goldstein, *Alim L'Trufah*, Letter 237.

³⁰² TB Brachot 18.

R. Noson relied on the events of R. Nachman's sacred biography as a foreshadowing of his own and other Bratzlavers' experiences. This provided him and his followers with the reassuring context of precedent. And, because R. Nachman himself presented his own biography as a reiteration of prototypical Jewish narratives, drawing parallels between his life and mission and those of the 2nd century mystic R. Shimon bar Yochai, the biblical Abraham, who "stood on one side of the world alone", and David in his fugitive state, R. Noson was inspired to draw parallels between his own life and such exemplars as well. This technique as well as his other uses of narrative all contributed to the transmission of his nonviolent message to his community. This transmission was not entirely successful, as some Bratzlavers did react violently on occasion. But as a group, the Bratzlav Hasidim maintained an essentially peaceful approach to the Savraners. This was in large part due to R. Noson's talent for drawing on traditional texts, narratives and exemplars in creative and directed ways, in order to further his educational goal: to inspire his community to the nonviolence in which he was so invested. This talent for negotiating tradition and creativity will be the subject of our next chapter.

³⁰³ TB Chulin7b. Cf. Also R. Noson Sternhartz *Likutei Halachos*, hechsher kelim 4.

CHAPTER 8: R. NOSON'S INTERPRETIVE METHODS

R. Noson's multifaceted response to the actions of the Savraner (both in its outward political form as discussed in Chapter 6 and in his educational leadership as discussed in Chapter 7) can be characterized as the creative application of received concepts and attitudes to the challenge of conflict. In the last chapter we examined the methods by which R. Noson creatively interpreted traditional narratives in order to create a culture of nonviolence within Bratzlav Hasidism. Equally essential to his goal was the creative application of received ideas, concepts and motifs to new situations. His methods of applying such ideas were distinct from his uses of narratives, and therefore require their own analysis. In this chapter we will examine these methods by analyzing four fundamental motifs that appear in R. Noson's writings. Each of these required and therefore represents a different method for actualizing inherited notions; together they will give us clearer picture of the relationship between tradition and creativity in R. Noson's response to the Years of Oppression.

Azamra: the Test of Application

We begin with the most conservative example of R. Nosen's application of received ideas, his use of a concept taught by R. Nachman in *Likutei MoHaRaN* Lesson 282, given in the Fall of 1807. Among the over 400 lessons³⁰⁴ in *Likutei MoHaRaN*, this lesson held a special place in R. Nosen's thought.³⁰⁵ The lesson, titled "Azamra" ("I will sing")³⁰⁶ centers on seeking positive aspects of others', and one's own, nature and behavior. Whereas classical Jewish teachings³⁰⁷ assert the concept of judging others favorably as an ethical ideal, R. Nachman adds a mystical dimension, stating that through judging others favorably one actually causes a transformation in the subject of one's scrutiny. The lesson begins as follows:

Know!³⁰⁸ That one must judge every person on the side of merit. And even one who is a completely wicked person, one must seek and find in him some little bit of good, in which little bit he is not a wicked person. And through finding in him some good and judging him on the side of merit one lifts him truly to the side of merit, and one may be able to cause him to repent....³⁰⁹

³⁰⁴ There are 411 lessons in total in *Likutei MoHaRaN*, 286 in the first edition and 125 in the second. These include a number of shorter discourses similar in style to many of those found in *Sichos HaRaN* and *Hayei MoHaRaN*.

³⁰⁵ R. Nosen's attitude toward this lesson was based in part on that of R. Nachman, who generally encouraged his followers to "go with" a particular lesson for a few months at a time, integrating the contents and viewing other texts and situations through its lens. But he told his followers that they should do the same with Lesson 282 for their entire lives.

³⁰⁶ From Psalms 146, a verse which R. Nachman uses as a centerpiece of the teaching as follows: the "good points" one seeks, finds and gathers constitute the notes of a musical scale, with which one can sing to God, i.e. experience joy.

³⁰⁷ Notably Chapters of the Fathers 1:6.

³⁰⁸ Bratzlav oral traditions understand the phrase "Know!" with which R. Nachman begins certain lessons in *Likutei MoHaRaN*, to mean that the lesson is unprecedented. Here, although the notion of judging others favorably is found in traditional sources (cf. previous note), R. Nachman's elaboration is highly innovative and must be understood on its own terms.

³⁰⁹ R. Nachman spoke of himself as a leader and healer of both the living and the dead. He justified his move to Uman in the last years of his life because it was the site of a terrible massacre, and there were souls of the Jewish dead in need of rectification. In that context he spoke often of the difficulties in effecting lasting change among the living, who, unlike both angels and the dead, have free will. However, through focusing on "good points" one does cause an objective change in his condition ("And through finding in

This teaching is not limited to the interpersonal domain; it is meant to be applied also to oneself:

And so must a person find in himself. For it is known that a person must be careful to be joyful always and to remove himself very far from depression (as is explained in our works a number of times). And even when one begins to look at oneself and sees that there is no good in him and he is full of sins, and the *baal-davar*³¹⁰ wants to cause him to fall thru this into depression and bitterness God forbid, even so it is forbidden to fall because of this, but he must search out and find in himself a little bit of good....

R. Noson occasionally interjects editorial comments in *Likutei MoHaRaN*, usually in order to clarify obscure points. In his comments on this lesson, he does not limit himself to such clarifying remarks, instead writing at length of the importance of this lesson.

Our Rebbe (his memory is a blessing) enjoined us very much to go with this teaching, for it is a great foundation for anyone who wants to come closer to God, and not to lose his world [the World-to-Come]³¹¹ completely (God forbid). Because most people who are far away from God, the main reason for their distance is bitterness and depression when they become depressed when they see how great is the damage they have cause with their actions, each person according to what he knows of his own pains.

him some good and judging him on the side of merit one lifts him truly to the side of merit”). Even so, “one *may* be able to cause him to repent”, for the subject is still free to choose good or evil. In other words, R. Nachman asserts a distinction between one’s standing in the accounting of merit and demerit, and repentance. Many earlier Jewish thinkers, in contrast, presented these categories as part of a unified system.

³¹⁰ R. Nachman’s common term for Satan and the Evil Inclination. The term can be translated as either “master of words” or “disputant”, as in a legal case.

³¹¹ This is a play on a rabbinic tale of a sage referring to another man’s private property as “Land which is not yours” and public property as “Land which is yours”. R. Noson, following R. Nachman, often refers to this world as “a world which is theirs”, while “his world” is a reference to the World-to-Come in which each person will come into his or her true inheritance. See, for example, R. Nachman Goldstein, *Alim L’Trufah*, Letter,270.

And because of this they become disappointed and most of them despair of themselves completely, and as a result they do not pray with intention at all, and they do not do even what they could still do. Therefore a person must be very wise in this matter, for all the disappointments, even though they stem from actual falls that he has experienced, still the disappointment, depression and bitterness are all the work of the Enemy [the evil inclination or negative forces], who weakens him and wishes to make him give up completely (God forbid). Therefore one must strengthen oneself very much to go with this lesson, to seek and search in oneself at every moment for some little bit of good and good points, and through this he will enliven and rejoice himself and he will remain hopeful for salvation, and he will be able to sing and praise God....

These remarks are consistent with R. Noson's general emphasis on encouragement, which we noted in Chapter 2. This practice is "a great foundation for anyone wishing to come closer to God" because it allows for the maintenance of the will to holiness in spite of experienced failures. R. Nachman taught that "The main thing is the will (*ratzon*)" - in this case the will to holiness.³¹² Practical action is significant not only because Jews are commanded by God to fulfill certain precepts and avoid others but because it provides a formal structure for a deeper goal, the will to holiness. Therefore, the challenge facing the Bratzlaver Hasid is to nurture and protect this *ratzon* in spite of the setbacks, sins and failures he or she might experience. Seeking, finding and contemplating the "good points" enables one to do that.

Throughout his many writings R. Noson built an extensive intellectual edifice

³¹² "The main thing is *ratzon*; for who can say that he truly serves God, who is infinite?" R. Noson Sternhartz, *Sichos HaRaN*. In R. Nachman's thought, attempts to accomplish anything spiritually are limited; all one can do is develop, strengthen and harness the desire for spirituality. The Besht and other early Hasidic thinkers made similar assertions, especially in their emphasis on the significance of *kavvanah* – intention. R. Nachman goes further in providing an extensive practice in light of his theology of the centrality of will.

for this approach,³¹³ even beginning his *Likutei Halachos* with an application of the lesson to the first law in the *Shulchan Aruch* (Code of Jewish Law). After quoting at length from the section of Lesson 282 which speaks of finding good points in oneself, R. Noson writes:

This is an aspect of waking up from slumber. When one sees that he is far from God, this is an aspect of sleep, which is 1/60th of death.³¹⁴ And when he seeks and searches and finds in himself some good point still, and he enlivens and causes himself to rejoice and wakes himself up to serve God through this, this is an awakening from slumber....³¹⁵

What follows is an application of the practice of finding good points to the traditional Jewish order of the day, the daily prayer service in all its details and other aspects of common Jewish life. This comprehensive application bespeaks R. Noson's view of "finding the good points" as the foundation for all religious life. R. Noson once remarked on the extent of his accomplishment in this area that "...I can find good points even in someone who transgressed entire Torah 800 times."³¹⁶ Based on this teaching, throughout his life R. Noson displayed a profound optimism in the face of difficulties. And his belief that things would turn out well, that God was behind the events, both positive and negative, was a constant source of strength to his followers as well.

³¹³ Other expressions of the lesson can be found in the writings of later Bratzlav thinkers, *including 7 Pillars of Faith* and *Biur Halikutim*.

³¹⁴ TB Brachot.

³¹⁵ R. Noson Sternhartz, *Likutei Halachot*, 1:1.

***Azamra* during the Years of Oppression**

This essential concept played a central role in R. Nosen's response to the events of the 1830s. Lesson 282 gave him a scaffold on the basis of which he could provide encouragement to his followers. In Chapter 7 I discussed this encouragement, which involved celebrating even modest achievements and small salvations, at some length. Beyond this, *Azamra* also fostered an attitude of generosity towards enemies which helped R. Nosen to judge his opponents favorably in spite of their belligerence.

During the Years of Oppression, R. Nosen began to apply the teaching of *Azamra* to his opponents, and he communicated the need to do so to his followers, both verbally and in writing. He argued on the basis of Lesson 282 that whatever positive traits could be found among his enemies were significant, no matter the evil for which they were responsible. An example of this attitude took place in 1834, when the Savraner ordered his followers to refuse to sell any food supplies to the Bratzlavers. One of the original instigators of the opposition, Moshe Chenkes, owned and operated a flour mill. When one of his employees provided flour to R. Nosen, Moshe refused to fire him in spite of his own antagonism to the Bratzlavers. R. Nosen commented on this that Moshe Chenkes would still get his reward for charity "in spite of himself", for "the Rebbe already told us that there is always a spark of goodness, even in the midst of wickedness."³¹⁷ This is a reference to the line in

³¹⁶ Levi-Yitchak Bender, *Siach Sarfei Kodesh*, I:591.

³¹⁷ Ibid., *Siach Sarfei Kodesh* I:763, 766; R. Nosen Sternhartz, *Sichos HaRaN* 78; Kramer., [Through Fire](#)

Lesson 282 in which R. Nachman taught that “Even one who is entirely wicked... how is it possible that he has not done some little good in his entire life?” The doctrine, elaborated by Bratzlav thinkers from R. Noson and on, that one’s good deeds are unaffected by the evil surrounding them originated in Lesson 282. This perspective allowed R. Noson to see his persecutors as part of his world, and this translated into his personal practice. For example, in a letter to his son he wrote that he consistently prayed for Moshe Chenkes.³¹⁸

The way that R. Noson brought the teaching of *Azamra* to bear on his conflict with the followers of the Savraner was straightforward. The Years of Oppression tested R. Noson’s profession of faith in the significance of Lesson 282, because it offered opportunities to seek and find good points in his persecutors. But those years did not test his capacities for creativity in applying it, because R. Noson was able to do so without the need to alter, extend or reconstruct it. His use of the notion of *Azamra* is, therefore, an example of the most conservative of his methods of interpretation: effective application, not interpretive innovation.

***Tachlis*: from Moral Spur to Encouragement**

Our second example of R. Noson’s methods of application of received ideas is typical of his general emphasis on encouragement.³¹⁹ In his application of the

and Water 397; Avraham Chazan mi-Tulchin, *Avaneha Barzel*, p. 52.

³¹⁸ R. Nachman Goldstein, *Alim L’Trufah*, Letter 171.

³¹⁹ See Chapter 2, in which we noted that one of R. Noson’s major contributions to Bratzlav Hasidism was his selective expansion of those aspects of R. Nachman’s teachings concerning encouragement.

concept of the *tachlis* he followed the same pattern, reconstituting the concept to provide comfort and consolation to his followers.

Even as a child R. Noson was preoccupied with the idea of death.³²⁰ This acute awareness of mortality led him to a spiritual search that eventuated in his becoming R. Nachman's follower. Under his teacher's guidance a vague, if poignant, sense of unease developed into a coherent religious concept. R. Nachman used the language of the *tachlis* to describe the ultimate purpose of life, upon which the consciousness of the Bratzlaver Hasid is to be focused as often as possible. An example of this emphasis is R. Nachman's teaching that the first thought one should have upon awakening is of the Next World (*Alma D'Ati*), and that this provides an orientation for the entire day.³²¹

Following this and other teachings concerning the injunction to remain aware of the *tachlis*, the culture of Bratzlav developed a strong focus on mortality. Many statements of R. Nachman enjoin the hearer or reader to recall that "One day you will have your feet to the door", i.e. your body will be laid out in traditional Jewish fashion in preparation for burial. The Master of Prayer of R. Nachman's story by that title uses similar language to persuade those living a life of foolishness to see the error of their ways and return to a life of truth. The concept of the *tachlis*, then, generally represented an argument for increased spiritual effort and for the

³²⁰ See Chapter 3.

³²¹ Note that this is the most common use of the term in R. Nachman's writings. The reference to *bitul el ha-tachlis* as ultimate good and ultimate unity in Lesson 65 (quoted in Chapter 5) is an exceptional case which refers to the ultimate end-point, beyond individual mortality. The distinction between the two uses

abandonment of trivialities. The tone most often associated with the term is one of reprimand and admonition. But R. Noson took the concept in a very different direction.

R. Noson's Use of the *Tachlis* during the Years of Oppression

Although at times R. Noson also referred to the *tachlis* in the traditional, admonitory way, he also found in it a novel source of solace and strength. For example, in December 1834 when, at the behest of his opponents, the Russian police ransacked his home and confiscated his printed material, his students entered the house hours later to find R. Noson in a state of utmost concentration. He was reciting a Mishna from *Chapters of the Fathers* over and over:

Those who are born will die, those who die will live again, and the living will be judged. To know and make known that He is their Maker, He is their Judge, He is their Witness, He is their Prosecutor....³²²

At this vulnerable moment, when his home was violated and his irreplaceable manuscripts confiscated, the notion of his own mortality, rather than serving as a reproof to awaken him, served as consolation.

A similar account is recorded concerning another occasion, in April 1835, when there was a major altercation between followers of the Savraner and some Bratzlaver Hasidim outside R. Noson's home, as a result of which a number of

can be found in yet another lesson, R. Nachman of Bratslav, *Likutei MoHaRaN*, II:33.

³²² *Chapters of the Fathers*, 4:22; Cf. Kramer, Through Fire and Water p. 393-4.

people on both sides were arrested. Although R. Noson was not involved in the episode, his opponents had him arrested together with the Bratzlavers who were involved, and sent to the governor's house. As he was led away while onlookers jeered, they heard him muttering to himself, "What do I hear them saying? Soon people will be saying 'It is almost 40 years since R. Noson died'" .³²³ Here as well, awareness of his own mortality served as a liberating element in the face of the mockery of his enemies. Thus the teleological consciousness of the *tachlis* that R. Nachman taught was very much alive, but in a new way, as a source of personal liberation and encouragement rather than a form of rebuke.

Though in many other Bratzlav sources the *tachlis* was presented as a challenge to the complacency of those who are attached to this-worldly things, in the context of persecution, R. Noson made use of the idea to offer the Bratzlavers a broader perspective, one that would attenuate their humiliation at the hands of their oppressors. He transmitted this concept, newly reconstituted as a source of comforting perspective, to his son and followers, especially in his many letters during the Years of Oppression. For example, in a letter responding to his son's distress over the persecutions he wrote:

Take heart! ...for time flies away and our days are as a passing shadow,
and soon everything will be gone and forgotten....³²⁴

The concept of the *tachlis*, rather than evoking a morbid dread of his mortality,

³²³ Kramer, Through Fire and Water, p.416. Also cf. R. Nachman Goldstein, *Alim L'Trufah*, Letter 182.

served R. Nosen as a source of comfort and perspective that he could offer his persecuted community.

This is the second method by which he applied inherited traditions to a new situation. He did not alter the idea itself, but he used it differently, with a shift in emphasis from challenge to comfort. Again, this was characteristic of R. Nosen, whose role was identified with the aspect of encouragement in R. Nachman's teachings. It is an important example of the flexibility with which he responded to the needs of his community by reapplying an old concept, without fundamentally changing the meaning of the concept itself.

***Nirdaf*: the Spiritualization of Persecution**

The third method of application involves a method typical of Hasidic hermeneutics, which was discussed in the previous chapter with regard to reinterpreting war: the spiritualization of traditional ideas.³²⁵ Prominent among the principles which informed R. Nosen's response to antagonism and persecution was the notion of pursuit (which was discussed above in the discussion of R. Nosen's interpretation of David), drawn from rabbinic sources and explicated by R. Nachman. The concept of "pursuit" finds a place in both the ethical and legal literature of Judaism. A *rodef*, pursuer with intent to kill, has a peculiar legal status: if the pursued harms or even kills the *rodef*, (assuming there is no other way to prevent

³²⁴ R. Nachman Goldstein, *Alim L'Trufah*, Letter 169.

³²⁵ Schindler, p. 109.

his carrying out the intended act of violence) he is guiltless, for he has acted in self-defense.³²⁶ The parallel term, *nirdaf* (pursued) found expression as an ethical ideal in a verse in Ecclesiastes 3:15: “God seeks the pursued”. The rabbis extended this principle in the following way:

‘God seeks the pursued’: This apparently refers to the righteous pursued by the wicked. What if the righteous pursues the righteous or the wicked pursues the wicked? Even so, ‘God seeks the pursued’. But what if the righteous pursues the wicked? Still, ‘God seeks the pursued’.³²⁷

In other words, it is a measure of religious integrity to choose to be victim rather than victimizer, regardless of the general moral standing of the parties involved. In keeping with this traditional value (which informed Jewish public policies in relation to various rulers and regimes throughout history), R. Noson chose to maintain his role as *nirdaf* when he might instead have gone on the offensive against his pursuers.

In an example of Hasidic spiritualization of the concept of *nirdaf*, R. Noson places full responsibility for his experience of pursuit on himself.

Have mercy on me and save me from all my pursuers, especially myself, for I am pursued – by myself!

In this text, the motif of the *nirdaf* has become entirely internalized. External enemies are irrelevant; it is the supplicant himself who is the oppressor, the

³²⁶ Note that the legal definitions are expressed not in terms of the actions (verbs) but of the people involved (nouns). The distinction has repercussions in Jewish law.

³²⁷ *Vayikra Rabbah* 27:5. Also Cf. Kramer, *Through Fire and Water* p. 630n10. As we saw, R. Noson made reference to this midrash in his letter to the Savraner (see Chapter 6).

pursuer and the victimizer. Through his sins, he causes himself unnecessary suffering. Thus, this third method of application of one of R. Nachman's major ideas, the *nirdaf*, preserves the integrity of the traditional meaning of the inherited concept, while offering a new, spiritualized form which downplays the role of political enemies and emphasizes the importance of self-scrutiny and moral responsibility of the victim.

R. Noson's use of the principle of preferring victim status to the role of oppressor can be found in numerous sources in his lessons, letters, prayers and recorded conversations. One discourse in *Likutei Halachos*, written while R. Noson was imprisoned in 1835 for 9 days on false charges brought by followers of the Savraner, offers a clear glimpse of R. Noson's theological understanding of and application of the principle of *nirdaf*. In the discourse he draws a parallel between the Jewish people's experience of exile and that of God. Here he places himself on solid rabbinic footing, as the midrashic texts are full of references to God's suffering with the Jewish people.³²⁸ The rabbis invoked a verse to support this radical theology: Psalms 91:15, "I [God] am with him [Israel] in his suffering". On the basis of this verse as well as their own politico-theological agenda they developed the notion of "the exile of the Shechina": God's immanent and compassionate presence accompanies Israel into exile. Among the mystics this idea was taken to the next step, in which it is the task of the Jewish people, through the performance of the commandments, to release the Shechina from bondage.

R. Noson extends this theological scaffolding to encompass his current experience of imprisonment: God is also (as it were) imprisoned, as His infinite light is trapped in flawed and limited vessels of those who “make of transgressions commandments” by calling upon Torah to justify their persecution of fellow Jews. Here R. Noson clearly intends his opponents, the followers of the Savraner, whose activities resulted in his imprisonment. R. Noson projects from his immediate dilemma to the experience of God.

...These fosterers of conflict... distort and reverse the light of truth through their own faulty minds, to the point that they channel the light of Torah in ways opposite its true meaning, which is an aspect of imprisonment and jailing of the Shechina and her main exile. All the more so when the opponents go further and pursue (*rodfim*) and actually hand over the pursued Jewish person to jail, (God forbid!) and the Shechina is (as it were) in jail with him, for “I am with him in trouble”. Woe to those who cause all this! Woe to their souls, for they cause themselves harm!³²⁹

The imprisonment of a Jew through the claims of other Jews mirrors – and indeed causes - the imprisonment of the Shechina, God’s immanent presence. The activities of R. Noson’s opponents are built on faulty interpretations of “the light of truth”, the Torah which, according to classical theology, is one with God’s substance.³³⁰ In pursuing the followers of R. Nachman the opponents are actually causing God to experience exile and imprisonment. R. Noson could articulate no greater theological condemnation of the activities of his enemies than this. This passage also contributes

³²⁸ Cf. TB Brachot... , ,

³²⁹ R. Noson Sternhartz, *Likutei Halachot*, Yoreh Deah, Yayin Nesech 4:22.

³³⁰ The formulation in the Zohar is “Israel, God and the Torah are one.”

to our understanding of R. Noson's great reluctance to assume the role of pursuer, to take the offensive in his struggles with his antagonists, as in his view oppressing another person had the theological consequence of oppressing God, as it were.

As for the task of one who is a victim of all of this, he invokes his teacher's spiritual emphasis on self-scrutiny and repentance:

And when a Jew sees that exile is overwhelming him from all sides, and even more so one who is so pursued (*nirdaf*) that he has come to be imprisoned (God forbid!), must turn himself to run and to escape from there – only to God. For clearly there is no advice or activity that is effective against such troubles, especially not against the opponents who pursue him at threat of his very life, to the point that he has come to imprisonment (God forbid!). The only thing to do is to cry out to God ... he must cry out to God and return in complete repentance. And the main repentance is to seek out one's actions in introspection, to seek and investigate why God has done this – for surely it is because I did damage with my mind and I took the light of God into imprisonment [through false interpretations and sins] for even a holy person can fall into such mistakes, for there are levels upon levels....³³¹

Although in the earlier section R. Noson began his discourse with a harsh theological condemnation of the activities of his oppressors who cause God's light to be imprisoned, he makes an important shift in tone as he discusses the experience of being pursued. It is almost as if, in the process of writing the discourse, he is working out his own reactions to the complex and painful events that had just taken place, sublimating his anger and contextualizing his circumstances in light of theological principles. The *nirdaf*, pursued by enemies who mean him harm, must flee to God

³³¹ Ibid. also cf. *Otzar HaYirah* by R. Nachman of Tcherin, "Geulah" 10 par. 22-24 for further elaboration of the concept of the imprisonment of the Shechina. This passage provides an interesting example of how

through repentance and prayer. The *halachic* principle of the *nirdaf* here provides R. Noson with a vocabulary and spiritual program for responding to persecution in spiritually sound, nonviolent ways.

The motif of the *nirdaf* appears in R. Noson's prayers as well as in his *Likutei Halachos* and letters. Its appearance is generally accompanied by articulations of R. Noson's general attitude toward suffering as ultimately beneficial motivation to turn toward God – as in the following prayer from his *Likutei Tfilos*.

...And so I have come to You, Father in Heaven Who is merciful toward the poor, for Your way is to seek the pursued, “even if a righteous person pursues a wicked person”, that You may act for Your Name and help me and save me to always run and flee to You at every moment and in the face of all types of pursuit, strife and attacks, God forbid, and from all enemies and haters – from all of them let me run and flee only to You, and I will merit to come closer to You through this And please open the eyes of my enemies and they will see the truth: that all of their opposition is for naught, and that I have no business with them at all, and that I desire peace, “I am peace, but when I speak they are for war” (Psalms 120:7)³³²

This deeply-felt personal prayer conveys the essence of R. Noson's attitude toward persecution. The task of the victim of violent antagonism is to run to God, the source of all things, to use the suffering of oppression to grow spiritually, “to come closer to You through this”. That is, recognition that pursuit by enemies is itself a way to God is a central demand of R. Noson's theology. At the same time, however, there is an equally passionate prayer that the oppression may cease, that the enemies will see the truth and recognize the futility and misguided nature of their persecution. The motif

one of R. Noson's prominent disciples, R. Nachman of Tcherin, interpreted and extended his work.

of the *nirdaf*, originally an ethical-legal term, became, through R. Noson's spiritualizing interpretation, an expression of surrender to and total reliance on God, as well as, in certain of his writings, a symbol of his own responsibility for his suffering.

In his use of concepts like *Azamra*, the *tachlis*, and the *nirdaf*, R. Noson applied and extended concepts he inherited from R. Nachman. As a communal leader during the crisis of the Years of Oppression, R. Noson had to invoke R. Nachman's teachings in ways that would best serve his community, while furthering his nonviolent vision. As a result he tailored R. Nachman's teachings to the current challenges, and he did so in three ways. First, his application of *Azamra* to enemies who were causing him harm, though not a radical innovation, was an important practical extension of the concept which provided a model for other Bratzlavers. Second, his use of *tachlis*-awareness not as a moral spur but as a consoling, liberating element was a departure from earlier uses of the term. And third, R. Noson's use of the principle that it is better to be pursued than pursuer, while rooted in classical Jewish tradition, gave the idea a new, spiritualized and quietistic form. In all of these cases it was his devotion to tradition that served him; but there were instances in which the challenges necessitated a more radical departure from tradition. We find an example of this in R. Noson's teaching on truth and conflict, written in 1835 at the height of the persecutions.

³³² R. Noson Sternhartz, *Likutei Tfilos*, II:15.

Emes L'Amita: Radical Creativity

The intensity of the anti-Bratzlav opposition presented R. Noson with the task of asserting the righteousness of his own position while avoiding the sort of triumphalism that could foster violence. As a result, over the course of the Years of Oppression R. Noson dedicated himself to the search for a new approach to understanding conflict. This search, which was both a product of and a fruitful response to the events of the 1830s, led R. Noson to a radical theological innovation regarding the nature of truth. In order to better appreciate the nature of this innovation we must first survey some of R. Noson's earlier writings to note the trajectory and evolution of his thought on the subjects of conflict, controversy and truth.

R. Noson did not develop his ideas in a vacuum; we must bear in mind that classical rabbinic texts deal with the topic of the search for truth in community at great length. In fact, it is not an exaggeration to posit that the rabbinic attitude toward controversy is the foundation for the entirety of the rabbinic corpus: the Mishna, Talmud and Midrash. All of these texts function on the basis of a generally agreed-upon set of rules concerning controversy; and these texts themselves are composed largely of recordings of controversies (*machlokot*) between various sages over matters legal and ethical. That minority opinions are recorded in the Mishna in spite of the fact that those opinions are generally not followed is a testament to the rabbinic hospitality to disagreement. The rabbis explicitly examined the boundaries of controversy in important passages recorded in the Talmud. Therefore the rabbinic

tradition served as an important source of guidance and direction for those Jewish thinkers throughout the generations who became embroiled in controversy.

As we have seen³³³ controversy, particularly when leveled against Hasidic leaders, was a central concern for R. Noson from an early age. The theology of conflict he received from R. Nachman (and which I discuss at length in Chapter 5) formed the basis of his own thinking on the subject. In many of his writings before 1835 R. Noson remained firmly within the theological framework of the rabbinic tradition and that of R. Nachman. In an early discourse printed in *Likutei Halachos* he writes,

“Surely ‘Two are better than one’³³⁴ for it is impossible for one person to clarify the truth alone. For it has already been explained that the simple truth is not the complete truth; rather, the ideal is to clarify the truth in a place where it is possible to mistakenly choose a competing rationale. [It is the process of coming to truth that makes it whole.] Therefore we need two because wherever there are two people there is a difference of perspective, for every person is different, as is known and as our Rabbis have taught us. Therefore, when one puts forth an opinion and another argues back, when one builds and the other destroys, they clarify the Law... But sometimes it happens that they can not reach a conclusion, and they require a third person to decide the law. And this is the fullness of truth, when there is a clear decision rendered after a disagreement. And this is the meaning of ‘Any controversy that is for the sake of Heaven in the end will be established’, for example the differences of opinion of Shammai and Hillel, the truth is clarified, for both of them have sincere intention and dedication to the true truth (*emes l’amita*). ‘...In the end will be established’, in the Messianic era the true truth will be revealed, that ‘these and those are the words of the Living God’. But ‘a controversy that is not for the sake of Heaven, like that of Korach and his group - its end is not to be established’, i.e. in the Messianic era the insincerity of their motives will be revealed to

³³³ Chapter 2, “R. Noson’s Biography”.

³³⁴ Ecclesiastes 4:9.

all....”³³⁵

The reference here is to the well-known teaching of Chapters of the Fathers: “Any controversy that is for the sake of Heaven will in the end be established; any controversy that is not for the sake of Heaven will not be established.”³³⁶ The example offered by the rabbis of the former, positive model is the series of controversies of the 1st century sages Hillel and Shammai that comprise much of the Mishna. The example of the latter, negative model is the biblical Korach and his followers, who opposed Moses’ leadership out of personal jealousy. This succinct formulation of the rabbinic ethic of controversy would appear to be the inspiration for R. Noson’s own view of the topic, and he follows the rabbis in his implicit critique of those who oppose the Tzaddik as acting “not for the sake of Heaven”. It is through the process of sincerely seeking truth in a complex reality – within the parameters of differences of opinion – that one can attain the fullness of truth. But when motivated by self-interest or ego the search for truth becomes distorted and does not eventuate in arrival at truth. The “true truth” (*emes l’amita*), i.e. the inner motives of the participants in the dispute, can only be revealed in the Messianic era. (Note R. Noson’s use of this concept here; later we will see that it takes on deeper meaning.) It is evident from this passage that at this point in his evolution R. Noson viewed the actions of his opponents through the lens of the classical rabbinic model, and this tradition sufficed in providing R. Noson with a cogent and convincing

³³⁵ R. Noson Sternhartz, *Likutei Halachos* Shavuot 2: 28-9.

theory of controversy. This was to change, however, as the actions of his opponents became more extreme and the antipathy more pronounced.

The Hasidic Ethical Dimension: *Nitzachon*

As the anti-Bratzlav agitation grew, R. Noson turned to Hasidic thought in his attempts to formulate fruitful and credible attitudes toward controversy. The Hasidic masters, including R. Nachman, generally related to the issue of ethical behavior in controversy as a character issue, in Hasidic parlance an issue of “*tikun hamidos*”. Just as a person can suffer from an excess of lust, depression or gluttony (other personal problems about which many of the Hasidic masters spoke extensively), he or she can also face the challenge of an excessively combative nature. Drawing on this notion, R. Noson writes as follows:

...Therefore God created the entire creation from diverse elements, and they appear to be engaged in constant battle, but in truth their existence depends upon their urge to victory (*nitzachon*) remaining in balance as is God’s will.... But as soon as one element goes beyond its limit and is excessively victorious then destruction follows.... And this [natural fact] is a hint to human beings that they, too, must seek victory and accomplishment, but that search for victory must be for God’s sake, for the sake of the survival of the world... and not a victory for one’s own appetites, which destroy the world.³³⁷

The problem with excessive and ill-intentioned *nitzachon* is that it leads to the destruction of the world. It also obfuscates matters, and the search for truth is

³³⁶ *Chapters of the Fathers* 5:20.

³³⁷ R. Noson, Sternhartz, *Likutei Halachos* Birchos Hareah 5:6.

compromised. “*Nitzachon* can not stand truth.”³³⁸ One whose nature compels him to seek victory over all opponents at all costs cannot rely on himself to seek truth with integrity. When a person like this engages in controversy his motives are suspect. This is to say that the greatest danger posed by the negative character trait of *nitzachon* is its effect on clarity of thought.

It is fitting for any conscious person, anyone who has a brain in his skull and desires the fixing of his soul and true success to look at the truth very well with an eye of truth without any *nitzachon* or bellicosity. For through *nitzachon* one can turn any truth to falsehood, God forbid. And all the words that are spoken in truth can be turned on their heads *ad infinitum*.³³⁹

Simply put, the character flaw of *nitzachon* distorts, it causes a person to lose one’s moral bearings, and to choose belligerence over truth. In contrast, the balanced and sincere intellectual battle of the Tzaddik fosters peace, because in disputes he seeks only truth to benefit others.³⁴⁰

This language adds a new dimension to R. Noson’s discussions regarding controversy and his analysis of the motives of his opponents. The implication is that not only are the opponents’ motives not for the sake of Heaven (the classical rabbinic critique), but their actions might be a result of an addictive nature, the subject of which addiction is not a drug or food but victory. The moral corruption and distortion that proceeds from excess desire for victory led them to consider it a religious commandment to persecute the Bratzlavers, to imprison R. Noson, and to

³³⁸ Ibid., Birchas hashachar 5:79.

³³⁹ Ibid., Pesach 7:2.

trample and burn R. Nachman's books. This is an example of what R. Nachman referred to as "Satan dressing up in mitzvot [commandments]", a complete moral reversal in which evil acts are justified on religious grounds. R. Nosen uses similar language in the discourse we saw above (pg. 15) regarding those who "make of transgressions commandments" by persecuting other Jews.

The use of the term *nitzachon* here in this regard suggests that solutions to extreme forms of conflict can be found not in negotiating between the parties but in the realm of *tikun hamidos*, personal growth and expanded self-awareness. Awareness of one's motives can render such natural elements of personality as *nitzachon* less harmful, and one can compensate by a higher degree of humility. Implicit in his presentation of two contrasting approaches to truth, that of one under the influence of excessive *nitzachon* and that of the Tzaddik is a call to his community, the Bratzlaver Hasidim, to engage in soul-searching to remove any trace of the desire to win against their adversaries. The way to true peace, R. Nosen seems to be saying to his followers, lies through self-scrutiny. This is in accord with R. Nosen's general attitude toward suffering as an opportunity for growth through greater self-awareness.

Emes L'Amita: Truth as Obstacle

As the activities of the Savraners worsened R. Nosen seems to have become dissatisfied with his earlier understandings of the causes of conflict and persecution,

³⁴⁰ Ibid., Shabbas 6:8.

and he turned to a concept that had powerful resonances in his personal life. In 1804 R. Noson had been faced with a major career decision. His father-in-law, R. Dovid Tzvi, who was Chief Rabbi of Mohilev and environs, pressured R. Noson to take a post as rabbi of a town that fell under his jurisdiction. In this way he probably wished to secure a reliable source of income for the young man, one that would be somewhat aligned with his rabbinic (non-Hasidic) values. R. Noson debated the matter before asking R. Nachman for his advice. Here is the account of their conversation as recorded in *Siach Sarfei Kodesh*:

[When the question of a rabbinical appointment arose] R. Noson asked R. Nachman whether accepting the position was true and right. R. Nachman answered: “Yes, it is true”. R. Noson asked again, “Is it the true truth [*emes l’amita*]?” R. Nachman answered, “If you want the true truth, do not become a rabbi”. And R. Noson was saved from this.³⁴¹

The 20th century Bratzlaver value judgment concerning rabbinic posts of the last line aside, this passage provides a glimpse into an important and surprising notion, one that clearly influenced R. Noson but that he developed in new ways: the notion of “true truth”.

It was not until years after this episode that R. Noson fleshed out the implications of this idea, and the result was a new understanding of the events of the Years of Oppression and of conflict in general. The fully developed notion appears in a discourse in *Likutei Halachos* written during his exile from Bratzlav in 1835 in which he discusses, among other topics, the cause of the opposition to early Hasidism.

...And the main thing is that the truth should not prevent one from the truth of the truth. For the main distancing of each person from the essential truth of the truth comes from the truth itself, as we have seen with our eyes that all the conflicts are through truth, as the opponents say the truth is theirs.

And so it is in each generation, especially in recent generations in which the learned opposed the Hasidim, and the conflict was tremendous and life-threatening, and many souls were drowned in it, and many separations between husband and wife [occurred as a result], and many lost both worlds through it, as is well-known to anyone who knows the stories of those days that our parents and teachers told us.

And the main source of opposition was the truth itself. For now we know that most of the leaders of the learned ones who opposed the leaders of the Hasidim were also great and true Tzaddikim, and all their antagonism toward the Hasidim was only through truth. Because the leaders of the learned ones said the truth is with them and that the leaders of the Hasidim were distant from truth and transgress the Torah of truth, as I heard myself many times, especially from my father-in-law the genius and Tzaddik R. Dovid-Tzvi, may his memory be a blessing, who was a very great Tzaddik as is well-known, and who opposed the Hasidim so much due to his own truth. And so it is in each generation.

...this is because truth itself cannot grasp the true essence of God. And just as it cannot grasp the essence of God, so it cannot apprehend the depth of God's thought, which is one with His Essence, the truth of the truth [*emes l'amita*].³⁴²

While the phrase “true truth (*emes l'amita*)” appears in earlier writings,³⁴³ it is only in this discourse written in 1835 that R. Noson presents the radical notion of a conflict between truth and “true truth”. The application of this concept as an explanation for opposition to the Tzaddikim is striking: legitimate conflict devolves into such opposition when the truth known by the opponents prevents them from apprehending the true truth. Truth itself is the obstacle.

³⁴¹ Levi-Yitchak Bender, *Siach Sarfei Kodesh*, I:175. Also cf. Kramer, 99. Through Fire and Water p.99.

³⁴² R. Noson Sternhartz, *Likutei Halachos*, Ribis 5.

³⁴³ e.g. *Ibid. Likutei Halachos*, Behema Tehora 4 and Gitin 3.

In order to elucidate the concept of true truth we must turn back to the 20th century Bratzlav text *Siach Sarfei Kodesh*, a collection of oral traditions recorded by R. Levi-Yitzchak Bender. Included in the collection are two statements by R. Noson on the subject of *emes l'amita*.

He said: "A person must ask God to guide him in His truth, for a person's truth may cause him to err, as it is not *emes lamita* – as opposed to God's truth. And this is what King David asked of God: "Guide me in Your truth", that is, "Guide me in the truth that is Yours".

This statement of R. Noson suggests that the distinction between truth and "true truth" has to do with the problem of subjectivity. A human being can apprehend truth, but it is naturally limited by his limited perspective, and so that truth "can cause a person to err". When one becomes attached to his or her truth, i.e. when one loses sight of the contingent nature of that truth, he or she cannot achieve the *emes l'amita*. However, there is another, more pragmatic dimension to this notion, which appears in another text in *Siach Sarfei Kodesh*.

R. Noson explained the verse (Psalms 71:22) "I will also praise You with harp, Your truth, my God" in the following way: That I in my baseness merit to praise God with harp – is due to God's truth, for He has mercy on me as well and rants me even in my baseness the ability to praise Him. And this is what is meant by the verse: "I also will praise You ... Your truth, my God!"³⁴⁴

In light of this statement of R. Noson we can add a new dimension to our definition of *emes l'amita*. Not only is true truth transcendent and beyond human error; it is

value-laden. God's truth is characterized by mercy, the willingness to look beyond human failure and baseness. Truth can be evaluated in the extent of its generosity toward sinners. The previous text linking truth and mercy, dealing as it does with God's truth, is theological; in a letter to his son R. Noson applies the same notion to the ethical realm of human self-image.

[You feel distressed] because you know the truth of how far you are [from God or holiness]. But since this truth wishes to distance you, God forbid, or to make you insane, at the very least you must throw this truth away, etc. etc.³⁴⁵

The elision at the end of the passage in the printed version of this letter (and perhaps in the original as well) is a sign of the discomfort the publisher³⁴⁶ or the author felt at presenting the idea of discarding truth. For a community whose first decades were defined by opposition and consistent deliberate misinterpretation of their founder's words, such discomfort is understandable. Yet R. Noson wrote the words, and they were indeed published (unlike certain other esoteric Bratzlav texts³⁴⁷), such was the importance of the concept. Truth is such an essential value in Judaism and in Bratzlav in particular that to render it no longer the highest value is radical. When truth interferes with spiritual growth by causing despair – it must be discarded. I believe the justification for this concept that has the greatest internal Bratzlav logic is:

³⁴⁴ Levi-Yitzchak Bender, *Siach Sarfei Kodesh*, I'501.

³⁴⁵ R. Nachman Goldstein, *Alim L'Trufah*, Letter, letter 214.

³⁴⁶ R. Noson's letters were collected and printed by his disciple R. Nachman of Tcherin. Later editions, including the one I consulted, were published by various Bratzlav houses in Poland before World War II and in Israel and New York in recent decades.

³⁴⁷ Tzvi Mark has researched some of these texts. See his *Megilat Setarim*, (Hotsaat Universitat Bar-Ilan

truth can be discarded in favor of *emes l'amita*. This jives well with the previous text, in which *emes l'amita* is defined by mercy and compassion.

Impact of This View

The evolution of R. Noson's theory of truth and conflict was a result of the reevaluation of his thinking in light of new unfolding challenges. As the 1830s progressed and the opposition intensified from an amorphous series of measures to an outright organized campaign of persecution, he needed recourse to deeper and more nuanced formulations, ones that would both remain credible in light of the Savraners' actions without betraying the religious principles and values espoused by the Bratzlaver Hasidim. R. Noson accomplished this by resorting to a new language and dimension of discourse: the category of *emes l'amita*. This innovation contributed to the repudiation of violence among the Bratzlavers as much as other interpretive novellae. As a result of this novel explanation for conflict, R. Noson was able to negotiate a complex and difficult challenge in a new way. On the one hand as a leader of a beleaguered minority he felt the need to present the Bratzlav community as holy in spite of the claims of their enemies. As followers of the True Tzaddik they were walking in the "paths of the righteous". But such an assertion is often accompanied by a sense of triumphalism, a morally damaging counter-claim of the illegitimacy or wickedness of the opponent. The concept of true truth allowed R. Noson to present his side as correct without condemning opponents as totally wrong.

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Just as R. Dovid Tzvi and other anti-Hasidic leaders were misguided Tzaddikim blinded by their own version of the truth, the Savraner and his followers could be no less righteous even while misguided. The connection between *emes l'amita* and compassion established in the *Siach Sarfei Kodesh* text leads to the conclusion that those who wish to avoid the mistakes of the opponents must practice mercy – even for those opponents. In the *Likutei Halachos* text above, R. Noson relativized the respective truth-claims of the Bratzlavers and their foes, allowing for an intellectual map of the world that could contain both the unique (existential, theoretical, subjective) path of R. Nachman and the more traditional (practical popular) Hasidic style of the Savraner. A world in which these two can coexist is a world in which the followers of R. Noson, though persecuted, could maintain their dignity without resorting to retaliation.

The preceding analyses of R. Noson's interpretive methodologies indicate the diversity of ways of applying received concepts to new situations. Just as in his *Likutei Halachos* R. Noson offered a variety of approaches to aspects of Jewish law as well as R. Nachman's lessons, here he felt free to make use of multiple methods of applying earlier ideas. R. Noson elaborated on inherited traditions in these different ways because the situation demanded a great diversity of responses and interpretive methods. But these four methods all share the common trait of the negotiation of tradition and creativity. In the next chapter I will outline some of the implications of R. Noson's response and methods, particularly regarding this negotiation.

CHAPTER 9: HASIDIC NONVIOLENCE

Throughout this study, I have examined R. Noson of Bratzlav's nonviolent response to persecution and conflict, a response which I argue holds important implications for the study and practice of religion and conflict resolution. In this concluding chapter of the study, I seek to integrate the concepts and methods which were introduced in earlier chapters into a unified whole, in order to demonstrate the uniqueness and relevance of R. Noson's theological and interpretive approach for Conflict Studies.

Two problems invariably confront scholars and activists attempting to resolve conflicts. First, those who have contributed most to addressing and analyzing conflict and its amelioration have generally done so from modern, secular perspectives: historians, social scientists, and other academic scholars proffering theories of ethics, violence, power and human rights. But participants in religiously motivated conflict, rooted as they are in the values and narratives of their respective traditions – values often defined explicitly in opposition to those of liberal Western culture - remain skeptical of reconciliatory messages in non-traditional language emanating from academia, think-tanks, and human rights groups. As was noted in

the Introduction to the present study, over the last decades, scholars in the field of Conflict Studies have identified the need for religious sources on conflict resolution, in part for their greater efficacy in convincing actors in religious conflicts that non-violence is a religiously viable option. One of these scholars, Marc Gopin justifies this need as follows:

There are two benefits to exploring a relationship between religion and conflict resolution theory....Religion plays the central role in the inner life and social behavior of millions of human beings, many of whom are currently actively engaged in violent struggle.³⁴⁸

Secondly, on perhaps a more essential level, by implicitly dismissing the possibility of religious contributions to conflict resolution, rich resources for innovative ways of approaching conflict are lost.

...There is a vast reservoir of information in sacred texts on peacemaking and conflict. This literature contains a long history of individual struggles with the inner life, which have either led toward or away from a violent disposition....³⁴⁹

Shaul Magid has written of the many people committed to non-violence who are “...examining sources in their religious traditions or searching for spokespeople from those traditions to translate previous theories of nonviolence to the present situation”.³⁵⁰ This turn to religious traditions for tools, perspectives, exemplars,

³⁴⁸ Gopin, *Between Eden and Armageddon*, p. 13-14.

³⁴⁹ Ibid.

³⁵⁰ Shaul Magid, “A Monk, a Rabbi and ‘The Meaning of This Hour’: War and Nonviolence in Abraham Joshua Heschel and Thomas Merton,” (*Crosscurrents*, Summer 2005), p. 1.

values and methods of transmission can aid us in deepening our responses to conflict, rendering them more nuanced and relevant to a large segment of humanity that places great weight on myths, stories, beliefs and religious values as well as social theories and political structures.

R. Noson of Bratzlav's innovative approach to the persecutions of the Saveraner provides a powerful illustration of the potential for applying religious sources to conflict situations. As a pre-modern religious thinker and leader who used Hasidic novellae and vocabulary to transmit a message of nonviolence to his community, R. Noson offers a unique model for responding to persecution in nonviolent ways. The theological and practical innovations which constituted R. Noson's response emerged from his interpretive methods, including those examined in Chapters 7 and 8. These new interpretations were essential in providing a theological context and motive for the eschewal of violence and pursuit of peace. As a result, R. Noson's resistance did not take the forms of appeals to governmental authority, bans of excommunication or negative speech about the opponents. Instead, it took the positive forms of spiritual resistance we have seen in the course of this study.

INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL CONFLICT RESOLUTION

Tradition and Creativity: A Theological Conflict

The interpretations R. Noson innovated as part of his program of spiritual resistance all derive from a common theological underpinning: his mystical belief in

radical oneness, represented by the One God of classical monotheism. Drawing upon the sources of Jewish mysticism, R. Noson developed an original and ultimately transformative perspective on conflict, based on the mystical principle of the radical oneness of God. This vision of unity led him to question the very premise of conflict, deconstructing the opposing binary concepts that often are taken as axiomatic. To explain this novel approach, which R. Noson applied to various forms of conflict, it will first be helpful to take the example of a significant internal conflict from his religious-intellectual life. The internal process of resolving conflicting values demonstrated in the following paragraphs preceded and offered a central mechanism for R. Noson's transformation of the external, sectarian conflict between Bratzlav and Savran.

In many instances R. Noson, like many religious leaders, found himself challenged by seemingly irreconcilable principles, each with its own compelling claims. Based on his faith that everything comes from God – and thus, that all contradictions are only apparent, the result of distance from God's oneness - he sought ways to find compatibility and often even symbiosis between the two seemingly opposing sides of the theological conflict. To illustrate this process let us take the example of an internal conflict that was of central importance to R. Noson: the tension between devotion to tradition and creative innovation. Many instances of sectarian conflict in modern Jewish history, including the strife between Hasidim and Mitnagdim, and the later strife between traditionalists and secularists, revolved around the seeming opposition between conservative traditionalism and

commitment to progressive change. Based on his faith propositions, R. Noson could not accept such conflicts as inherent or absolute. Prompted at least in part by his steadfast belief in ultimate unity, he demonstrated how devotion to the Jewish legacy and innovation could serve as complementary principles. This realization was a fundamental mechanism in the generation of many of the specific ideas and reinterpretations encountered in this study, all of which relied on traditional sources and creative re-readings.

R. Noson's faith in the ultimate reconcilability of seeming opposites was strong; it was, however, not blind. His belief that the two parts of a dichotomy had more to identify than distinguish them from one another was not abstract; in each conflict he sought to find an element prominent to one side possessed in latent or hidden form by the other. Once he did, he would surrender completely to that element. Take the primary subjects of his devotion, R. Nachman of Bratzlav and, more broadly, the Jewish textual tradition. In both cases the subject of his extreme devotion and surrender encouraged his individuation and creative development.

As the study demonstrates, it was R. Noson's devotion and surrender to R. Nachman that led to his empowerment as an innovator. From early on in their relationship R. Nachman, the subject of R. Noson's utmost devotion and awe, encouraged his student to develop his creativity, to expand and apply the master's teachings and to record his own novel ideas.³⁵¹ Throughout their master-disciple

³⁵¹ This process began when R. Nachman taught Lesson 6, which, as we have seen, was a central lesson in R. Noson's life and response to persecution. Upon completion of the teaching, the master asked R. Noson

relationship, and here I include the period after R. Nachman's passing, the relationship between surrender and empowerment was the defining dimension. As R. Noson grew in personal stature and communal leadership, this dynamic was central to his role, a form of disciple-leadership composed equally of devotion to R. Nachman's person and legacy and of great creative energy.

That R. Noson devoted his life to following and explicating the works of this teacher in particular was not the result of chance. We must not forget that he chose R. Nachman after years of investigating other masters. He rejected these masters, some of them prominent among Ukrainian leaders, because although he respected them deeply, they did not speak to his innermost desire to develop his unique creativity.³⁵² Had R. Noson chosen another master to follow his work might have been only that of a scribe, not the original thinker who wrote *Likutei Tfilos* and *Likutei Halachos*. His surrender was selective: it was preceded by a careful choice of the subject of that surrender, a Hasidic master who would see, honor and encourage his creativity. Based upon his belief in ultimate unity, R. Noson believed that true self-expression – and all the forms of creativity to which it gives rise, which for R. Noson included his empowerment as a communal leader – must be predicated upon an act of surrender. In order for such a creative rebirth to be effectuated, though, the object

to apply what he had learned to other, seemingly unrelated concepts. This was the first stage of his training as an independent interpreter.

³⁵² There is a Bratzlav tradition that some of the teachings included in *Kedushas Levi* by R. Levi-Yitzchak of Berdichev were transcribed by R. Noson during the period in which he visited the leader. This tradition would support our claim that the prospect of playing the part of the scribe was not what drew him to R. Nachman; it was the opportunity to go beyond the role of amanuensis to his own creative writing. R. Nachman consistently encouraged him in this. To my knowledge scholars have yet to analyze *Kedushas*

of the surrender must have the proper attitude towards creativity to begin with. This decision-making process, which I am calling “selective surrender”, was a principle element in his integration of two seemingly conflicting principles, self-surrender (*bitul*) and bold innovation.

Selective Surrender and Hermeneutic Innovation

R. Noson applied the principle of selective surrender not only to his theology, but to his hermeneutics as well, setting the terms for his relationship with the Jewish textual tradition. As a Hasidic Jewish thinker R. Noson was devoted wholly to Jewish tradition. His profound respect, even awe of the Sages of Israel and the true Tzaddikim (in his language) and his faith in Torah anchored him in a world of ideas, practices and exemplars. Even his language was commonly that of classical biblical, rabbinic and Hasidic texts. But in a way similar to the one in which R. Nachman explicitly promoted R. Noson’s creativity, the Jewish textual tradition, composed as it was of differing opinions and diverse expressions, implicitly encouraged his innovation. Throughout its long history the Jewish textual tradition has functioned on the basis of creative applications of received ideas according to specific methods developed by the rabbis. The tension between tradition and creativity was carefully negotiated and allowed to prosper by the rabbis to the benefit of the Jewish community. (Historical moments of Jewish weakness could often be traced to a breakdown in this delicate dynamic at the heart of the Jewish textual tradition.)

Levi in search of stylistic similarities in order to verify or disprove the Bratzlav claim.

Throughout his career R. Nosen selected those elements of the tradition that encouraged innovation in his interpretive decisions, and he consistently emphasized those elements, giving them pride of place in his written works. He expressed his commitment to creativity in a comment that on a certain day he was unable to develop any new insights until he “pulled a new idea [*chidush*] out of [his] little finger”.³⁵³ Although he saw himself as a preserver and interpreter of Jewish tradition, as an innovator and creative mind he drew sustenance and encouragement from the rabbinic injunction to innovate: “There can be no House of Study without innovation!”³⁵⁴

Interpretation, then, is another practice in which we find R. Nosen challenging the common conception of an ineluctable tension between tradition and creativity. For R. Nosen’s innovations and Torah novellae emerged precisely from his immersion in traditional sources. In a manner similar to that of halachic authorities whose grounding in precedent produces new legal positions, R. Nosen found continuity in the generation of new insights at the very edges of traditional Jewish thinking. Unlike some of his contemporaries among the Maskilim (whom he criticized intensely) he refused to depart from a traditional Hasidic framework.

³⁵³ *Siach Sarfei Kodesh* I:609

³⁵⁴ As we saw in Chapter 5, in *Likutei MoHaRaN* Lesson 65, in which he discusses suffering, R. Nachman treats the role of *bitul*, complete surrender to (and fleeting apprehension of) this oneness. Such apprehension is by nature temporary, but even temporary *unio mystico* leaves an indelible impression which bears fruit in the form of new religious creativity [*chidushei Torah*]. One who experiences such a moment of transcendent *bitul* returns with a profoundly altered perspective, with new insight which can then be applied to concrete dilemmas. A response to suffering, mystical moments of *bitul* can directly inform practical action. This text may have provided a source for R. Nosen’s reconciliation of the principles of tradition and creativity: it is through *bitul* that one arrives at *chidush*.

Unlike some of his more conservative colleagues, both among the Hasidim and the Mitnagdim, he refused to offer old medicine for the treatment of new maladies. And in deconstructing the putative binary of tradition/innovation, he showed his followers how commitment to the former could foster the rich production of the latter, and the latter a revitalized commitment to the former. His entire *oeuvre* is marked by this paradigm of selective surrender, as is the essential fact that his writing life is composed both of a faithful record of his master's every word and deed, and his own original thoughts. This method of resolving theological and hermeneutic conflict eventually formed the basis of his nonviolent social policies and leadership. This was crucial to his response to conflict, which often confronts religious actors with the need for new interpretations and innovative hermeneutic methods.

Quietism and Power, Fate and Free Will: The Hermeneutics of *Bitul*

The persecution of the Saveraner presented an apparently simple binary choice: quietism vs. resistance. These two principles are conventionally seen as existing in conflict, locked in a dichotomy related to that of fate and agency: one cannot passively accept one's fate (quietism) while actively exerting agency by fighting back (resistance). But R. Noson exhibited the patient acceptance of painful events commonly associated with quietism (grounded in a traditional faith that everything is for the best); while simultaneously exercising bold new forms of resistance in the form of greater communal and creative activity, prayer, and new, paradigm-shifting interpretations of the events themselves. This reconciliation was an

essential ingredient in his spiritual resistance: his acceptance led directly to a nonviolent approach, even while he refused to give in to the pressures of his persecutors.

The basis of R. Noson's approach to reconciling quietism and resistance was R. Nachman's teaching about the paradox of providence and free will. Put succinctly, if God fills all of creation, if He is everywhere at all times, how is there any room for individual existence? And by extension, if God knows everything we are going to do, how can there be room for free will? According to R. Nachman,³⁵⁵ human life is defined by this paradox: the void in which creation exists poses the theological challenge of God's absence, the existence of suffering, and the possibility of sin; while religious claims assert God's continuing presence, even within the void. In the language of the Zohar, *let atar panui miney*, no place is empty of Him.³⁵⁶

R. Noson applied this teaching on the paradox of providence and free will to the problem of conflict. His belief in divine providence led him to the view that even conflict and persecution originate in God, and offer ways to approach God. If "No place is empty of Him" and God is the ultimate source of all things, then the actions of enemies such as the Savraner, however painful, are ultimately expressive of God's attempts to touch humanity. In light of this faith, R. Noson's enemies could be considered messengers – perhaps in spite of themselves – bearing messages of God regarding his own and his community's spiritual life. R. Noson's nonviolence

³⁵⁵ This concept appears in a number of places in *Likutei MoHaRaN*, most famously in his Lesson 64, known as the "Torah of the Void". See p. 116, n90 of this study.

stemmed from this belief. Violent reactivity against opponents or oppressors bespeaks forgetfulness of their origin in God. While spiritual resistance may be necessary, anger and violence never are. Therefore, wrote R. Noson, the path of a Bratzlaver in dealing with opposition is to refrain from fighting back. Rather than sacrifice one's religious integrity by becoming a *rodef* (pursuer) who rails against enemies as if they act outside of any theological framework, one must remain silent in the face of humiliation, listening for God's message, and pray for the enemy to recognize the underlying unity that exists between himself and his victim. In this way, he taught, one affirms the presence of God even in the conflict situation.

If the first step is acknowledging in principle that conflict bears a message, the second is interpreting that message. Therefore, interpretation was a critical component of R. Noson's nonviolent path. He believed that this was a critical arena of free choice: it is up to the victim of persecution to make careful choices regarding the proper interpretation of events. This aspect of R. Noson's theology of conflict may be referred to as "hermeneutic choice", the process of conscious and reflective interpretation. In this approach R. Noson was guided by R. Nachman's teaching that conflict can be water for growth. He therefore interpreted the persecutions of the SAvraner in ways that led him to new religious inspiration and creative growth in the form of new ideas, writings and practices. As R. Noson wrote in a letter to his son during the persecutions, "There is nothing through which we cannot find guidance

³⁵⁶ From the Zohar, and a constant refrain in Bratzlav texts.

on how to come closer to God”.³⁵⁷

Spiritual Resistance and the Conservation of Power

The belief that God is present even in conflict led R. Noson to a new theology of power. When he rejected the secularist Hirsch Ber’s offer for government intervention on his behalf, R. Noson quoted the Psalmist: “I am prayer”. In other words, rather than resort to outside help he would rely on inner, spiritual resources. This decision was based on R. Noson’s belief in a spiritual economy that might be termed the “conservation of power”, i.e. that power used to garner support from influential people, or in the form of physical or social violence – what I will refer to as “external power” – depletes inner strength that could otherwise be expressed as “internal power”. Faith engenders deeper faith, as the rejection of physical, social or political power liberates inner resources for use in spiritual resistance, e.g. calling out to God in prayer or otherwise increasing religious activities.

Accordingly, as we have seen, in response to the Savraner persecutions R. Noson refused to make use of certain types of power: physical, political, social. He did not, however, refrain from exercising other forms of power during the Years of Oppression. All of the uses of power R. Noson disavowed (as we saw in Chapter 6), including physical force, the ban and government intervention, are examples of external power. All of the activities in which he persisted (which we also saw in that chapter), such as greater communal activity, prayer and recording new Torah

³⁵⁷ R. Nachman Goldstein, *Alim L’Trufah*, Letter 161.

insights, are examples of the internal power that accompanies spiritual resistance. R. Noson rejected external power, which, according to his theory of the conservation of power, would interfere with or displace internal, spiritual power, transferring his energies instead to forms of nonviolent spiritual resistance. In effect, he translated the events of 1834-1838, such as stone-throwing, the vandalizing of Bratzlav books, his imprisonment and exile, etc., into texts to be studied for the sake of his own, and his community's, spiritual growth.

This approach presents an essential contribution to the study and practice of religion and conflict resolution. Drawing on R. Nachman's theology, R. Noson took the notion of *let atar panui miney*, of God's authorship of all events, as the root-principle for his response to conflict, and applied it to the social crisis engendered by the actions of the Saveraner in the form of a reconciliation of quietism and resistance. On the one hand, the ultimate expression of R. Noson's selective surrender was his surrender to God as the author of his suffering, and his willingness to bear it without rebellion. On the other hand, his use of power was expressed in hermeneutic choice, which led to spiritual resistance and new forms of religious creativity. Many theorists in the field of Conflict Studies have regarded noncompliance or disobedience as exercises of power; our study of R. Noson reveals a new religious basis for the idea of internal power and a religious identification of internal dimensions, particularly hermeneutic choice, as potent expressions of that power. In other words, R. Noson's religious response to the actions of the Saveraner Hasidim offers a new form of power in response to conflict, spiritual resistance as defined in the Introduction to the

dissertation.

Perhaps more importantly, from our study of R. Noson there emerges the notion of hermeneutic power, a creative application of traditional interpretive methods that is nonviolent yet potent. The exercise of hermeneutic power can be reduced methodologically to four basic principles. The first is the conscious identification of preexisting, inherited core religious values. In R. Noson's case such values included the root-principle of *let atar panui miney* - seeking God in every moment, as well as other religious notions such as Azamra or finding "good points"; Lesson 6 on remaining silent in the face of humiliation; the spiritual benefits to being the *nirdaf* (pursued) and not the *rodef* (pursuer); and the subjective nature of personal truth as opposed to *emes l'amita*.

The second principle of hermeneutic power is theological reflection on conflict situations in light of those core values. R. Noson did not view the actions of the Savraner in a vacuum; rather he saw them through the lens of R. Nachman's teachings and classical rabbinic texts, and these defined the terms of his response.

This in turn guided the development of new approaches which constitutes the third principle: the generation of new paradigms that are responsive to the living needs of the community using inherited sources, texts, practices and narratives. These new paradigms must maintain consonance with the religious values established in the first step. For R. Noson, Jewish tradition, especially R. Nachman's lessons, served as material for new prayers, letters and novellae, all of which emphasized peace, faith and joy in spite of suffering.

The fourth and final principle is the communication in traditional language of those new paradigms to the religious community. R. Noson accomplished this using biblical exemplars and narratives. R. Noson effectively used traditional language to communicate difficult principles of nonviolence to his followers, thus creating a culture of nonviolent spiritual resistance. Although some of the Bratzlavers at times failed to live up to his nonviolent teachings and reacted with anger and violence, as a result of R. Noson's leadership, such reactions were eclipsed by that culture.

Through these methods, R. Noson came to radically new concepts and attitudes. To take one example, his spiritualized application of the *nirdaf* motif relied on a Hasidic approach to the reinterpretation of militaristic ideas, but took this further, to the point that a traditionally interpersonal, ethical-legal principle could be understood as a fully internal one, entailing total responsibility for one's own suffering. R. Noson then communicated this new idea to his followers, through his spoken and written discourses, and his personal letters to the Bratzlaver Hasidim.

Internal Credibility and Outer Impact

An important result of this theology of conflict resolution is a new negotiation of a tactical issue of great import to conflict resolution, the issue of credibility. Conflicts in which religion plays a role are frequently preceded by internal sectarian controversy, as a religious community is torn by competing interpretive claims (about identity, foreign cultural influences, violence and honor, for example) advanced by competing authorities or denominations. The ways in which these

internal disputes are resolved or sustained often determines the role of religious communities in larger conflicts. When we recall instances of violent reactivity on the part of other Bratzlav Hasidim, such as R. Yudel, who issued a ban of excommunication (as we saw in Chapter 6), this point becomes clearer. Although we have no record of alternate Bratzlav theological responses to the persecutions of the Savraner, a theological scaffold must have existed for R. Yudel's ban and for similar belligerent reactions of Bratzlavers.³⁵⁸ The method by which R. Noson advanced his hermeneutic of nonviolence in the face of other interpretations offers valuable lessons to other religious groups struggling with competing claims as to the best response to conflict.

R. Noson offered his followers the model of a leader who is part of his community, who did not stand above but spoke from within, who suffered the same humiliations they did, and who struggled with reactivity just as they did. This lent credibility to his arguments for nonviolence, which had been tested in the same crucible in which the Bratzlavers lived. Unlike most Hasidic leaders who acted in ways set apart by the cultural protocol of their exalted stations, R. Noson's disciple-leadership is an example of the power of one of the community to provide solace, encouragement and clarity to his fellows in time of crisis. Further, R. Noson's choice to express even the most radical concepts in traditional language lent his position great credibility. Had he not appealed to the inherent spiritual values of the Bratzlav

³⁵⁸ We can imagine that these would have drawn on more aggressive interpretations in classical Jewish sources, such as the opinion of R. Shimon bar Yochai (as opposed to those of either R. Yehudah or R.

community his response would have been far less effective. Finally, and most central to this study, the nature of R. Noson's authentic spiritual strivings played a role in his success as a leader. The demands of authenticity often determine the extent to which an innovative or challenging approach will be accepted by a collective. That R. Noson's response clearly emerged from within his own lived faith and was not merely the contingent answer to the demands of the situation gave it great weight in the eyes of his religious community. The results of the authority with which R. Noson was viewed can be seen in the examples of disciples and others following suit, responding to attacks in nonviolent ways, while asserting their own unpopular religious principles, sometimes at great cost.³⁵⁹

If religious traditions are to provide textual sources for peace as well as violence, hermeneutics of nonviolence must be developed, and these interpretive approaches need to be credible in the eyes of religious populaces. R. Noson's leadership was effective for his community because he was one of them, because he drew on traditional forms even while promoting new messages, and because of his evident authenticity. The specific means by which he developed and communicated his ideas were built on this basis. From our perspective his commitment to peace may seem progressive. But his followers recognized that it emerged from traditional values, namely R. Nachman's lessons and earlier Jewish traditions. This rendered his positions consonant with the values of the Bratzlav community, and therefore

Yosi) on how to view the Roman occupier in TB Shabbat 33b.

³⁵⁹ See Chapter 6.

sufficiently credible to effect change.

Religion and Conflict

Perhaps the most far-reaching implication of this study challenges the common notion of the mutually exclusive nature of mysticism and social change. R. Noson's response to persecution offers a new view of Hasidism as a marriage of deep spirituality and pragmatic responses to real-life challenges. For the field of Conflict Studies, which is often dominated by pragmatic and strategic approaches to nonviolence, this is a significant paradigm shift, offering a new model and an implicit critique of dominant methodologies that ignore or marginalize spiritual perspectives, or attempt to evaluate in secular, rational terms what religious practitioners refer to as spiritual categories.

The fact that one notices in religious literature, from East to West, from Buddhism to Judaism, a careful attention to nurturing the inner life and working on the moral life from internal perspectives suggests an important critique of current Conflict Resolution practice.³⁶⁰

As a Hasid, R. Noson expressed himself not only in the religious language of Judaism but in the specific spiritual dialect of Bratzlav Hasidism. His response, rooted as it was in seemingly esoteric and otherworldly aspects of Jewish thought, was in fact a socially effective exercise of power. The principle of radical oneness, of *let atar panui miney*, led R. Noson to a commitment to the integration of opposites.

³⁶⁰ Gopin, p. 179.

Since everything comes from God then even seemingly contradictory principles must be reconcilable. This had two dimensions in his response to the events of 1834-1838. First, it opened a way for the reconciliation of seemingly incompatible principles, such as providence and free will, self-surrender (*bitul*) and empowerment and devotion to tradition and creative innovation. Second, and a direct extension of that first form of reconciliation, it allowed him to maintain compassion for and even identification with his enemies, whom he recognized as fellow creatures and children of God.

It was precisely by creatively drawing on the strength of his mystical Hasidic heritage that this religious leader was able to effectively transform his community's response to persecution. R. Noson often was content to apply inherited concepts and motifs, like R. Nachman's *Azamra*, to new situations. At other times, he made new use of traditional modes of interpretation, such as the Hasidic spiritualization of militant texts and concepts, and this led him, for example, to new visions of biblical figures like David, who served as an exemplar for the spiritual resistance he affirmed. On other occasions, such tried-and-true methods were insufficient for his purposes, and he moved into unexplored territory. Such was the case with his creative reevaluation of the categories of truth and "true truth", and the identification of the latter concept with compassion.

R. Noson's approach was not only innovative, but effective as well. In the Introduction to this study Gene Sharp's definition of success was quoted:

For our purposes, “success” in nonviolent action will be measured by whether the avowed goals of the nonviolent group were achieved as a consequence of the struggle, either at its end or shortly thereafter...³⁶¹

As was noted in the Introduction, R. Noson’s goals of the long-term survival of Bratzlav Hasidism can, on the whole, be considered a success. The physical survival of the group, its exponential growth in spite of persecution and hardship, is well-known; and the culture of nonviolence and spiritual resistance he created translated to a general emphasis on peaceful values among the Bratzlaver Hasidim. However, certain qualifications must be noted. Although R. Noson was successful in transmitting a nonviolent ethic to his community, thereby fostering a culture of conflict resolution that outlived him by many years, the attacks of the Savraner and his followers had a great impact on their victims as well, to the point that only a handful of Bratzlaver Hasidim remained publicly loyal to R. Noson. In fact, it may be surmised that, had R. Noson not insisted on nonviolence among his followers, more of them may have remained publicly identified with Bratzlav. While this may be a testament to R. Noson’s uncompromising commitment to nonviolence, it also shows that spiritual resistance is difficult, and that the Bratzlav community paid a price for it in strength of numbers during the period 1834-1838. Further, we have had occasion to note the few instances in which Bratzlaver Hasidim failed to live up to R. Noson’s demand for peace, prayer and introspection. Although these examples are few, it is important to mention them, for in a sense they represent the boundary of R.

³⁶¹ Sharp, p.766.

Noson's successful attempts at persuasion. However, these caveats aside, when the history of the Years of Oppression is viewed in its entirety, and especially when it is viewed against the backdrop of the general Hasidic culture of conflict and reactivity, one can only reach the conclusion that he was on the whole successful.

The challenge R. Noson poses to students of religion and conflict is to reevaluate the rigidity of our distinctions between religious and mystical values on the one hand and effective approaches to social issues such as conflict on the other. His Hasidic form of conflict resolution integrated spiritual principles with social creativity, modeling a resolution to a false conflict between soul and *polis*. In effect he cut the Gordian knot of quietism and resistance, commitment to tradition and innovation and devoted discipleship and powerful leadership, showing that in fact these values can be mutually reinforcing. This is the legacy of R. Noson's response to the Years of Oppression.

The type of examination of religious responses to conflict which this study exemplifies contributes to opening the field of Conflict Studies to religious methodologies and theological approaches in all their specificity, in the hope that each of these unique facets of the human community will contribute something new to the problem of inter-group conflict. This study implicitly appeals for further studies of other traditions, with the same purpose in mind. The study has shown that R. Noson of Bratzlav's response to sectarian conflict offers innovative ways of approaching conflict, new methods of interpreting inherited texts and unique pathways for reconciling both competing principles and warring parties. What might

a similar examination of other religious groups reveal?

EPILOGUE

Included in R. Nosen's book of original prayers based on R. Nachman's teachings is a prayer for peace. Its language is unique, its tone passionate. It is, in effect, an example of the prayer technique called "defeating God" of which R. Nachman spoke often. In this view the task of one who prays is to overcome God's strict justice, to convince God that mercy would be more just than justice. R. Nosen adopts the tone of one who tries to persuade rather than beg.

May it be Your will, O Master of Peace, King to Whom peace belongs, that you shall place peace among Your people Israel. And may the peace grow until it spreads out over all the inhabitants of the world. And let there not be any hatred, jealousy, competition or triumphalism between man and his fellow. Instead let there be love and great peace among all, and let everyone know the love of the other, that the other seeks his good, seeks his love and desires his success eternally – until they will be able to come together and gather together, each with his friend, and they will speak to one another and explain the truth to one another. Master of peace, bless us with peace!"³⁶²

This passionate prayer is in fact currently in use in synagogues of all denominations in America and Israel. Often the congregants are ignorant of the source of the prayer, even as they express particular feelings of connection to it. But perhaps more powerful still is the little-known fact that in the 1970s a Bratzlaver Hasid translated it into Arabic and posted it all over Arab East Jerusalem. This call for peace across ethnic and religious lines owes much to the legacy of R. Nosen of Bratzlav. It is a testament to the possibilities for expansive applications of parochial religious and mystical creativity. It is a prayer that has yet to be answered.

APPENDIX A: SELECTED CHRONOLOGY

- **1648-9** Chmelnicky massacres
- the false Messiah Sabbetai Tzvi converts to Islam
- **1698?** R. Israel Baal Shem Tov (the Besht) born
- **1760** The Besht passes away
- **1772** Mitnagdim excommunicate Hasidim in Brody
- R. Dov Ber, the Great Magid, dies
- R. Nachman of Bratzlav born in the Besht's house to R. Simcha and Feige, the Besht's granddaughter
- **1780** R. Noson born in Nemirov
- Ukraine, formerly part of Poland, becomes Russian territory
- **1793** R. Noson marries Esther Shaindel, daughter of R. Dovid Tzvi Ohrbach
- **1797** Vilna Gaon dies
- R. Noson begins his journeys to the courts of leading Hasidic leaders
- **1798-9** R. Nachman travels to Israel
- **1799** R. Nachman moves to Zlatipolia and enters into conflict with the Shpola Zeide
- **1802** R. Nachman moves to Bratzlav with intention to establish his Hasidic center
- R. Noson meets R. Nachman
- **1804** Czar Alexander's "statute concerning the Jews" leads to changes in traditional Jewish life, including the expulsion of the Jews from rural areas and the limitation of rabbis to spiritual affairs
- **1808** First half of *Likutei MoHaRaN* printed in Ostrog
- R. Yitzchak, R. Noson's son to whom most of his letters are addressed, is born
- **1810** R. Nachman succumbs to tuberculosis on the holiday of Succot at the age of 38
- **1811** R. Noson organizes first pilgrimage to R. Nachman's gravesite in Uman for Rosh Hashana
- Second volume of *Likutei MoHaRaN* printed in Moghilev
- **1815** *Sippurei Massiyos* (R. Nachman's Tales) printed
- **1821** *Sefer Hamidos* printed in Moghilev
- *Tikun HaKlali* printed
- **1822** R. Noson leaves on his journey to Israel
- The 9-year-old R. Nachman of Tulchin meets R. Noson, and decides to become his student

³⁶² R. Noson Sternhartz, *Likutei Tfilos*, 27.

- **1826** Esther Shaindel, R. Noson's first wife, dies, after reconciling herself to his spiritual path. In accordance with Hasidic custom, R. Noson remarries later that year
- **1830** Building project begun for Bratzlav synagogue in Uman
- **1834** Beginning of Years of Oppression, campaign of persecution led by R. Moshe Tzvi of Savran
- **1835** R. Noson imprisoned and exiled from Bratzlav to Nemirov, where he is placed under house arrest
- **1836** R. Moshe Tzvi of Savran flees Ukraine after his involvement in a capital case is discovered by Russian authorities
- **1838** Death of the Savraner
- **1842** R. Nachman of Tulchin sets out on foot for a journey to Iassi to supervise the printing of *Likutei Halachos*
- **1844** R. Noson of Bratzlav dies at the age of 65
- **1849** R. Avraham Chazan of Tulchin is born to R. Nachman of Tulchin
- **1862** R. Avraham Sternhartz, R. Noson's great-grandson (and the grandson on his mother's side of R. Nachman of Tcherin), is born. R. Avraham became the teacher of many 20th century Bratzlav leaders
- **1868** R. Yitzchok, son of R. Noson, moves to Israel
- **1884** R. Nachman of Tulchin, student and successor of R. Noson, dies
- **1894** R. Nachman Goldstein of Tcherin, student of R. Noson and author of many Bratzlav works, dies
- **1911** R. Levi Yitzchak Bender travels to Uman from Poland and becomes a close disciple of R. Avraham Chazan. His prodigious memory later becomes the main source for the encyclopedic collection of Bratzlav traditions and stories, *Siach Sarfei Kodesh*
- **1917** Bolshevik Revolution, border between Poland and Communist Russia sealed. R. Yitzhok Breiter, a Polish Bratzlav leader, establishes a Rosh Hashana gathering in Lublin, Poland. By 1930s there are thousands of Bratzlaver Hasidim in Poland
- R. Avraham Chazan of Tulchin, who had traveled to Uman from Israel every year since his *aliyah*, dies after being unable to return to Israel due to the outbreak of WWI
- **1930s** Stalinist purges, in which many Bratzlavers disappear or die in Siberian exile
- **1933** *Yemei HaTlaos*, ["The Years of Oppression"] printed for the first and only time
- **1940** R. Avraham Sternhartz establishes a New Year gathering in Meron, Israel, because admission to Uman was prohibited to foreigners
- **1941** Nazi invasion of Ukraine

- **1949** After surviving the war in Siberia and serving as rabbi of a DP camp, R. Levi Yitzchak Bender moves to Israel, where he establishes a Bratzlav center in Jerusalem
- **1989** New Year gathering in Uman officially reinstated after decades under Communism

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PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE

Teaching Fellow, Boston University (September 2003 to Present)

Created syllabi for Professor Elie Wiesel; administered undergraduate- and graduate-level courses; led discussion sections for “Literature of Memory” courses at Boston University.

Teacher, Combined Jewish Philanthropies (November 2004 to Present)

Taught courses on Jewish thought, history and law to adults of varying backgrounds.

Teacher, Sharon, MA (September 2004 to Present)

Taught Talmud, Hasidic Thought and Jewish Philosophy to local adults.

Kasty Fellow, Facing History and Ourselves (August 2007-Present)

Designed supplementary Jewish text project for Facing History curricula; taught history and religious texts relating to the Holocaust and moral education.

Consultant, Jewish Life Network (September 2005-December 2006)

In partnership with Rabbi Yitz Greenberg, developed materials to expand and apply his theology of religious pluralism.

Lecturer, Tufts Hillel (Spring 2005)

Taught course on ethics of conflict and pluralism in the light of Jewish sources.

Lecturer, Harvard Hillel (January 2004 to 2005)

Designed and taught courses on Rabbinic Literature and Hasidic Thought.

Lecturer, Massachusetts Board of Education (Summer 2005-6)

Co-taught seminars with Boston University Classics Professor Steve Esposito comparing Greek and Hebrew thought in antiquity.

Educator, Livnot U'lehibanot (July 2000 to June 2003)

Together with wife Sabrina, taught classes, led activities and provided informal counseling for groups of young adults on intensive two-week birthright israel programs.

Art Director, Camp Isabella Freedman (Summer 1998)

Developed educational arts programming for four two-week sessions for low-income senior citizens.

Educational Director, Hazamir Summer Institute (Summer 1997)

Led intensive summer experience for group of thirty high school students focusing on the arts, community-building and identity.

Prozdor Instructor (September 1996 to June 1997, September 2004-2005)

Taught core courses on ethics and religion to 10th and 11th graders.

EDUCATION

Limdu Fellowship and Association (September 2006-Present)

Fellowship for young modern Orthodox leaders, rabbis and educators with Rabbi Yitz Greenberg.

University Professors, Boston University (September 2003 to Present)

Doctoral Program in Jewish Thought and Conflict Transformation.

Amiel Fellowship (October 2001 to June 2001)

Studies in Jewish Law, leadership, and counseling for rabbis, educators and activists.

Shir Chadash Chesed Fellowship (September 2001-June 2002)

Examined role of social services in religious communities in Israel.

Yeshivat Bat Ayin Rabbinical School (May 1998 to June 2003)

Advanced text study towards Rabbinical ordination (Orthodox).

Darhei Noam Institute (August 1997 to May 1998)

Participated in teacher training courses in Talmud and Jewish Law.

Skidmore College (September 1993 to May 1997)
B.A. in Judaic Studies and Comparative Religion

Yeshiva University High School (September 1989 to 1993)

LANGUAGES

Fluency in Hebrew