

Two Versions of a Tale of Rebbe Nachman of Breslov (1772-1810)

The Tale of the Tainted Grain: Version 1

Once an astrologer-king saw in the stars that anyone who would eat of the coming year's harvest would go mad. He called in his viceroy and friend to ask for his advice.

"Sire," replied the counselor, "you and I shall eat only last year's harvest, which is untainted. And so we shall remain sane."

But the king replied, "I do not accept your proposal. How can we separate ourselves from our people? To remain the only sane people among a nation of madmen – they will think we are the ones who are mad. Instead, you and I shall eat of the tainted grain, and shall enter into madness with our people."

The king thought for a moment, then said, "We must, however, at least recognize our malady. Therefore, you and I shall mark each other's foreheads with a sign. And every time we look at one another, we shall remember that we are mad."

The Tale of the Tainted Grain: Version 2

Once an astrologer-king saw in the stars that anyone who would eat of the coming year's harvest would go mad. He called in his viceroy and friend to ask for his advice.

"Sire," replied the counselor, "you and I shall eat only last year's harvest, which is untainted. And so we shall remain sane."

But the king replied, "I have a different solution. I shall eat the tainted grain, and I shall join our people in their madness. You shall not: you will remain the only sane person in all the land. But there is one condition. You must leave the palace, you must wander as a beggar, and you must travel from town to town, from village to village. Everywhere you go, you must shout in all the marketplaces and from all the rooftops: *Remember, my people, that you are mad!*"

Once there was a group of people who were seeking a mythical tree, one in whose shadow all the beasts could lie down, and upon whose branches all the birds of the sky would rest. They wanted to find that tree, for the delight it offers is limitless,

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since all creatures exist in peace and unity there. They began to investigate which direction they needed to travel to find the tree, and they began to argue: one said that they needed to go to the east, and another to the west; one said here, another said there, and so on, until they could not decide the right way to go.

Finally, a sage appeared and said to them, "Why are you investigating which way to go to find the tree? Instead you should be asking, *Who* are the people who have the capacity to find the tree! Because only one who shares the tree's qualities can find it.

The sage of this story tells us that the question we must ask in our search for the tree, which stands for the world we yearn, for is not a technical one. It is an existential one, a movement from "what/where" to "who": Who are we? Who do our children, our students need us to be? What qualities do we need to develop in ourselves in order to change the course of the world for the better?

In a time of discord, the rise of polarization and extremism, understanding who we are, and how we guide our children to be compassionate and courageous, become urgent and immediate questions.

To explore possible response to those Questions, let's turn now to the tale: *The Tale of the Tainted Grain*.

This tale was written by Rebbe Nachman (1772-1810) a religious personality who was deeply aware of the potential for madness – moral, spiritual, psychological, collective madness – in society.

In the first version of the tale, the response to madness is contemplative and relational. It is another person's face that serves as the mnemonic device by which we remember to question the conventional wisdom of the sick society. It is precisely when we encounter one another, someone else with a different mind and worldview, that we return to ourselves. This is the power of *chevruta*, the traditional paired study which helps make our assumptions visible by contrasting

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them with someone else's. The operative task here is watching, listening, considering. It is quiet and thoughtful.

The second version of the tale is different. It emphasizes the solitary role of the messenger, the alarm-sounder, the one person in a culture who knows and remembers the unpleasant truth, and who faces the daunting prospect of reminding others.

In this second version, it is activism, ferocity, courage, and commitment that constitute the response.

Together these two versions remind us that both contemplation and action are essential responses to moral madness.

In both versions of the tale, the King knows that it is impossible to avoid becoming infected; we live, after all, in intimate contact with society and its norms. Our thinking, our wiring, is a function of our innate qualities, but also of the influences of the culture in which we grow.

Though we are all influenced by our society and its unexamined assumptions, that doesn't mean we cannot transcend its madness; we can.

But when a society enters madness, the values that can help us move forward often become marginalized, and eventually are seen as crazy, beyond the pale.

In the first ending of the Tale, it is through a sign, through a reminder, that we can move forward. In the second it is through a refusal to join in when others do. In both versions, the first step is to remember, to recall. Memory is not simply contact with information about the past. It is an awakening to context, to the meaning of the present moment, and, as we shall see, to other people's stories. It is a vision for a different world, and the yearning that accompanies it. It is recalling who we are, and who we might be.

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Therefore, memory is dangerous. When you are pressured to numb your heart, to turn away and not pay attention to urgent realities, as if hunger and homelessness, family separation at the border, the suffering of the earth, and a steady stream of hate crimes can be dismissed as “just the way things are”; then to remember other times, to imagine new possibilities, to hold fast to different values, is threatening. The messenger who shouts that the people are all mad is seen as a madman. But the message of the story is that we can, we must, claim that madness.

During dark periods, memory becomes a kind of resistance, and passing on one’s history and values becomes an act of sabotage. The deeds of hatred we see today are directed against bodies, but they are also directed against stories, traditions, different ways of seeing the world. Therefore, in the face of such deeds, *education is an essential act of resistance*. In moments such as the ones we are living through today, Education is the act of making the holy madness of memory contagious.

Elie Wiesel taught us that sanity is *not* the best way to fight the moral madness that overtakes societies. Instead, we must fight moral madness with a better madness, a mystical or holy madness. If to educate means to recall values and qualities that are marginalized and seen as mad, what are some of the qualities that are seen as mad in our society today? I want to look at 5 of them with you, 5 qualities I suggest we emphasize in our work.

First is the simple act of truth-telling. We need to train children and adults alike to pay close attention, to identify assumptions, others’ and their own. This is what allows us to begin to *see* moral madness. And once we see it we must name it. Because what is more dangerous than evil? Evil wearing a mask. When society conspires to justify evil, the pressure is almost unbearable to go along with that justification. But when we notice the early warning signs of hatred, we can respond to it quickly and forcefully. Hatred is like a cancer that spreads if it is not caught early. Our commitment to pay close attention pushes against the culture’s pressure to avoid, to turn away, to focus on inessentials. We need to ask “What are we not supposed to name? Which topics are a faux pas?” and pull on those threads. We need to look beyond the blinders we are offered.

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A story: Once a woman was walking in the marketplace, when suddenly her teacher called to her from a second-story window. “Have you looked at the sky today?” The student, startled, looked up for the first time in many days, and remembered that she was made for something more than trading in the marketplace.

To be committed to holy madness means to look at the sky, beyond the market stalls, the commodities, and the transactions surrounding you, it means to question and sometimes reject the terms offered to you by culture, the media, your surroundings.

A second dimension of holy madness: When society claims that some people are undeserving of dignity, justice, and compassion, in certain circles empathy is seen as a kind of madness.

How do we nurture empathy? Through stories, by encountering others’ stories with the requisite presence and listening, so that those stories inhabit you with such force that your mind, heart, nervous system are changed. You can no longer walk by a hungry person on the street without seeing her humanity. You can no longer sleep well when others are suffering. You become a vehicle for the stories you have been told, and you no longer walk alone. You are lifted by your obligations.

A community is a group of people who tell and share one another’s stories. But which stories we tell, and how we tell them, will define our collective destiny. Will we tell stories that feed our fears of one another, like nightmares told in generations past to keep small children in line? Or will we remind one another of our essential connection, through tales in which we see the familiar silhouette of another human being? Rebbe Nachman said, “People say that stories put one to sleep. But I say, stories wake you up!” Stories can awaken us to empathy.

That empathy can lead us to see the reality of other people and groups, to feel and share their pain, to allow them to share ours. This has practical ramifications. It

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may cause us to shift from the use of 3rd person – talking *about* them – to the power of the 2nd person – speaking *to* them. It may help us decide that, rather than seek *answers* for others’ suffering, we will work instead to *respond* to it. Suffering, especially other people’s suffering, demands a response, not an answer.

It is a commonplace that all human beings are innately worthy of dignity, awe, and reverence. But actually putting idea into practice is radical and subversive. That’s alright: we come from a *tradition* of subversion, one at whose heart is a vision of humanity, of an encounter between a fragile and precious humanity with the Absolute, a vision which leads to an insistence that all of us, regardless of our proximate origins, are rooted in the infinite, and that the infinite is our shared destiny. In spite of the anger and rage of the nations, we have held fast to this vision. And we still do.

And so, if it is mad to empathize with others, *we must* teach our children this madness.

The third element of holy madness: When our society offers us false dichotomies and demands that we choose, we must claim the countercultural quality of both/and, paradoxical thinking. Perhaps Elie Wiesel’s favorite phrase was “and yet”. One of the signature gestures of Jewish tradition is the dialectical approach in which generations of Talmud students are trained.

This is important because it helps us to live with conflicting principles: indignation and empathy, moral ferocity and humility, tribal pride and universal solidarity. You can care for your own community *and* others, you can be a passionate lover of Israel *and* a progressive, you can hold the tension between particular and universal, understanding that in truth they can/should be mutually reinforcing.

In the case of antisemitism: rather than choose between a parochial paranoia and a false complacency, we can call out problematic statements even from allies quickly and with clarity; and we can find common cause with our sincere critics.

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We need to avoid the unreflective conflation of legitimate criticism with antisemitism. But we also need to be aware of the ways in which internalized antisemitism can make it difficult for us to call out and fight actual antisemitism. Antisemitism can function by shutting down conversation *about* antisemitism, in a kind of built-in gaslighting that takes advantage of Jewish trauma. It may help us to overcome this difficulty to remember that antisemitism is not just about Jews; it's a harbinger for the world. And so when we fight antisemitism: we are not just fighting for ourselves.

One of the most countercultural values today is perhaps the most essential to holy madness: it is joy, the ability to truly enjoy life rather than numb out. We, and our children, need the madness of joy.

Marge Piercy writes, "Pay sharp attention to that trouble looming, but don't let it taint your Sabbath celebration." We have so much to celebrate, and upon which to draw our strength, pride, and hope. One of the most important messages we can send our children is: *We do not let the enemy define us!*

We have given the world so much. We have survived and thrived in spite of everything, and we have confounded historians with our eternity.

Antisemitism is the shadow of Jewish eternity. Its metaphysical nature defies historical logic, just as Jewish survival does. Our response to antisemitism must therefore be: to connect to the eternity of Judaism, the Jewish people, Torah. And eternity is found in the depths. When I was nineteen years old, Elie Wiesel told me: "Superficiality is the enemy of everything", and this phrase has shaped my life. It is time to remember the depth of who we are, and to offer that depth to our children so that they can celebrate it. Their joy will keep our past alive.

Finally, in spite of everything – in spite of all the evidence that we need to be hard and armored up to survive, and *together* with the need to fight hard and consistently, we also must teach our children the underappreciated value of tenderness.

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For today I believe we are desperately in need of a revolution in tenderness and a politics of tenderness... the kind of tenderness we experience when holding a baby. *(Imagine it for a moment, you're holding a small beautiful baby in your arms.)* There's ferocity there too, you'll do whatever it takes to protect that child, but your moral clarity and courage are expressions of tenderness. What would that look like on a debate stage, in congressional hearings, on our streets, at our borders?

Like it or not, we have all eaten the tainted grain. But the test, the choice we face is: will we make a sign, will we *be* a sign to one another, and to remember; and then to shout a reminder to others. When the world shows us signs of madness, we must choose a *better* madness – the madness of truth-telling, empathy, paradox, joy, and tenderness. The holy madness of an open heart, in spite of everything.