I • The Poet's Self and the Poem

Once there was a king whose land was conquered by a greater and stronger king. In time, though, the weaker king gained power until he was able to win his kingdom back. But even in his victory, the lesser king understood that the perfidies of fate would allow him no lasting peace. And so he built a wall against the sea, and in his fortress hid away the wealth he had amassed. (At its entrance he hung a sign describing the treasure contained in each room.) To enter the fortress was nigh impossible—at the gateway stood a machine that would behead all who did not know the labyrinthine path. But a sign hung there as well, recounting, in many languages, the wisdom needed to find the right path, to come within unharmed. Years passed, and the sea washed over the fortress. Centuries went by. Then once again a king desired to settle that long-buried island. He brought back Jews and gentiles. A poor Jew built himself a hut on the island. One Friday, as he was digging clay, he discovered the tablet that had hung in the ruined fortress. All his attempts to uncover the history of the place met with failure; it had been erased from memory. But at last a wandering Jew came in search of food and shelter for the Sabbath. The one told the other of his discovery and appealed for his advice. The humble wanderer responded, "I will read the message on it." He looked and comprehended. The two, together, went and uncovered the riches hidden so long ago.

This tale, recorded in *Hayyei Moharan*,[1] seems in some way an

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emblem of its creator's own history. The nameless figure who deciphers a forgotten language and leads another to treasure houses of wisdom obscured for centuries reflects the master's life, his self-imposed task as spiritual leader, linking past to present through his teachings and his stories. Essential to our understanding of Reb Nahman's oeuvre is awareness of the author's own self-image. Numerous statements, expressed in *Likkutei Moharan* and biographical sources, reveal Reb Nahman's conviction of his responsibility, both on the social and eschatological level, toward the world in which he lived. Yet they disclose, as well, the psychic tension inherent in such an awesome mission and the effect of that tension in Reb Nahman's creative life.[2]

The tales he told, then, are a transparent reflection of this composite self-image. In the chapter that follows, I would like to examine some of the myriad self-referential elements that pervade Reb Nahman's tales. My intent is by no means to present a psychological sketch of their author. Rather, I hope to propose a framework in which many in his colorful cast of characters may be seen as a face of Reb Nahman's own prismatic figure. This contention serves as the foundation stone in Joseph Weiss's discussion of Reb Nahman's thought: "In every instance that Reb Nahman speaks of the 'true zaddik' or even 'the zaddik' alone, his sole intent is toward himself."[3] Indeed, the very possibility that heroes and heroines, infants, prayer masters, beggars and prodigal sons may all be disguises of a single self is in itself a notion that beckons toward a fantastic dimension. In our endeavor to understand the dynamics of Reb Nahman's imagination, the tales he told will be considered as dramatizations of the more polemical autobiographical statements that inform the secondary sources.

Part 1 of this chapter concerns the monumental figure of the zaddik in Hasidic tradition, both as spiritual leader and as a channel connecting earthly life to higher realms of being through his life and his words. Part 2 focuses on Reb Nahman's view of his place in an historical continuum. His identification with biblical and aggadic figures becomes apparent through the tales; in various guises, his characters speak in a composite voice—messengers from the past transfigured, merging with the author's own person. In part 3 the messianic theme that informs all the tales will be discussed; the chameleon protagonist in each of them and his self-referential qualities shed much light on Reb Nahman's vision of his own potential role as a harbinger of the world's redemption.

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Finally, part 4 will touch on some aspects of Reb Nahman's emotional life, on the ways in which his existential struggle finds expression in the persons and events of the tales.

The cardinal element binding these four subjects is the consciousness that disguises play a vital role in mystical thought in general; in Reb Nahman's works in particular, a fascination with alter egos serves as a motivating force in the creation of his fictions. Let us turn, then, to the first question, the author's reflexive perception of the zaddik as a historical figure, his fate bound up with the loyalty and trust of his followers, and of his own worth cast in that imposing role.

1. THE FIGURE OF THE ZADDIK

The title page of the Bratslav edition of the tales, *Sefer Sippurei Maʿasiyot*, alerts us to Reb Nahman's true aspiration as storyteller: "See and understand his wonderful and terrible way . . . to clothe and to conceal the treasures of the King in the guise of tales, in accordance with the generation and the age. . . ." In the story of the forgotten fortress above, we recognized Reb Nahman in the person of the humble Jew, master of the way leading to the hidden riches. These words, in contrast, written by Reb Nahman's followers, cast their rebbe differently—here, *he* is the master builder, intent on the castle of his creation. The metaphor of a fairy-tale structure housing precious truths reappears yet again in *Shivhei Moharan*; the wondrous process of exploring the castle is observed there from the architect's lofty perspective:

> My teachings are like a palace containing halls and chambers, exedras and mosaics—all of them beautiful, wondrous, awe-inspiring. And there are staircases upon staircases, each of them novel and terrible. The moment one enters a room and begins to look about, wondering at all the marvels it holds, in that very moment he sees that a fantastic passage has opened before him to another room, and so from room to room, from room to room. . . . [4]

The mazelike palace into which Reb Nahman entices his listeners is a compelling symbol. Yet beyond all that the enchanted edifice of his teachings holds are even more sublime truths it cannot possibly contain. The world, Reb Nahman protests, is not yet worthy of such divine

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wisdom. The paradoxical presence and ineffability of such knowledge is vividly described in an incident recalled by Reb Nahman's students:

> Once, when some people were with him, he drew out a piece of paper marked with his holy handwriting; grasping it, he exclaimed, "How many teachings are written on this page!" And he said, "Many, many worlds are sustained, draw life from the smoke of my teachings." And he took the paper and burned it in the candle flame. And he said, "There are many, many teachings that have not even been expressed in letters. Thus it is truly novel, a wonder, when one is permitted to bring such teachings down [into this world] and put them in the shapes of letters. . . ."[5]

In these anecdotes, the author sees himself as an emissary, an intermediary summoned to draw abstract, preexisting truths from the upper spheres, and to make them tangible and immediate to those around him. In chapter 2 we will suggest some reasons Reb Nahman chose tales in particular as the ideal genre in which to veil his esoteric vision. Here what concerns us is Reb Nahman's desire—in his oeuvre as a whole—to entice his listeners into the enchanted castle of his making and to open before them some of its endless passageways.

Two objectives may be isolated as motivating this desire. The first, and most immediate, is to engender spiritual growth in those who follow him, healing and awakening them, bringing them to repentance, that they may serve God with all their being. The idea of *tikkun*, or repair, a seminal notion guiding the Hasidic movement as a whole, is emphasized as a process occurring not only on the cosmic level but in the soul of each individual.[6] Statements throughout Reb Nahman's oeuvre attest to his consciousness that the rebbe *must* be deeply involved in the religious life of those around him. A most cogent expression of how daunting this task was is his protest, found in *Shivhei Moharan:*

> Am I not like someone who walks day and night through a desert, searching and seeking to make that wasteland into a settlement? For each of your hearts is like a barren desert, uninhabitable. The Shekhinah cannot dwell therein, and so I search and seek continually to achieve some *tikkun*, to make a place in your hearts

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> where the Shekhinah may rest. Alas, what great efforts are needed to make a fruitless tree into pleasant vessels, worthy of being used by men. . . . In the same way, how indefatigably I must strive to help each and every one of you, to "repair" you in some way.[7]

Among Reb Nahman's tales, certainly the one that most directly portrays the life's work of a Hasidic spiritual leader is *The Master of Prayer*. Devoted to "drawing people to serve God," the master of prayer has the gift of knowing the way to help each and every individual "return." "If one of them needed to wear a golden cape to that end, he would provide one . . . and if, on the other hand, a rich man had to wear tattered, shameful garments, he would encourage him to."[8]

The "true zaddik"' succeeds in communicating with the masses by containing his own transcendent understanding, and speaking, instead, in the language of those he wishes to affect. Thus, the "true zaddik must talk with them of everyday things, yet clothed in those matters are words of Torah. For the people are not strangers to the words and stories the zaddik relates, and thus he raises his listeners, joining them to God."[9] Even from the filthy depths of heresy he pulls them upward, confident that their eyes may be opened.[10]

The second motivation compelling the rebbe's intercourse with those around him is, of course, the desire to perpetuate his teachings beyond his own death. Only when a person exists in both this world and the world to come, he insists, has he achieved wholeness. "Thus a man must leave some part of himself on earth, a son or a student."[11] Just as children perpetuate the memory of their parents, so students pass on their teachers' understanding to future generations. The despair of the childless man that his name will die with his death opens four of the thirteen tales: "Once there was a kaiser who had no sons" *(King and Kaiser)*; "Once there was a king who had no sons" *(The Son of Precious Stones)*; "Once there was a rabbi who had no sons" *(Rabbi and Only Son)*; "Once there was a burgher, and beneath him lived a miserably poor man. And both of them were childless" *(Burgher and Poor Man)*. Three other stories revolve around struggles of bequest and inheritance: "Once there was a wise man who, before his death, called his children and family to him and charged them to water trees" *(The Cripple)*; "Once there was a king; he had a single son and desired to transfer the kingdom to him in his own lifetime" *(The Seven Beggars)*;

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and *The Two Sons Who Were Reversed* is consumed with the question of who is "the king's true son" and rightful heir.

Remarkably, the organic wholeness of Reb Nahman's thought leads him to conceive this notion of continuity in unexpectedly liberal terms. Mother as well as father wish to invest themselves in their children, and this image of parents' flowing stream of love gives birth to the following thought:

> The zaddik of the generation is called "mother," because he nourishes Israel with the light of his wisdom in Torah. . . . And the Torah is called "milk," as it is written in the Song of Songs (4:11) "Honey and milk beneath your tongue. . . ."

The mutual dependence of mother and baby, Reb Nahman continues, is evident to all of us.

> For whenever the infant is sad and dejected, as soon as he sees his mother, he awakens in a moment in anticipation of her, i.e., of the root of his being. Similarly, we see that when he is occupied with his little foolishnesses, even though he is engrossed in them, as soon as he sees his mother he casts all his passions away, and draws himself to her.

In the same way, Reb Nahman concludes, all of a person's negative attributes, all of his resemblance to petrified and vegetative life are as naught when he gazes into the face of the zaddik.[12] The pathos of a mother whose infant is missing and cannot nurse is a poignant detail in *The Master of Prayer*. The king's daughter mourns her golden baby's disappearance; her flood of tears form a sea of blood, and her useless milk a lake of sorrow (*SM*, p. 209). The image seems to suggest the plight of the zaddik bereft of heirs—his knowledge wasted, with no one to seek his abundance.

It is his followers alone who can grant the zaddik immortality. His teachings contain his essence; without students to hand them down, the master himself fades into oblivion. Whether we interpret the tales mentioned above as reflecting Reb Nahman's desire for biological or for spiritual heirs, the predominance of the theme testifies to its importance in his life. The interdependence of Hasidic rebbe and student, the

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existential necessity, in Reb Nahman's worldview, for their union, underlies a disquieting dream he had, recounted in *Hayyei Moharan*:

At the close of Rosh ha-Shanah, his followers surround Reb Nahman, bidding farewell as they set off on their way home. One man, whom the dreamer knew had recently died, stood among them. Reb Nahman asked him, "Why did you not come to me on Rosh ha-Shanah?" He answered, "But I am already dead." "I said to him, 'Is that why? And is a dead person forbidden to come on Rosh ha-Shanah?' And he was silent. Some people had been speaking with me of faith, and so I spoke with him of that as well. [Apparently, notes the editor, he understood that the man had lost his faith.] And I said to him, 'Am I the only one in the world? If you do not believe in me, be loyal to other zaddikim.' And he said, 'Who should I draw close to?' . . ."[13]

In the dream, Reb Nahman names one illustrious personality after another, so great is his wish to help the soul before him find a spiritual guide. The figure of the zaddik, then, is the axis of the Hasidic world, the Virgilian figure who, ideally, accompanies each individual through his religious life. Reb Nahman's teachings are filled with meditations on "the zaddik of the generation," the "true zaddik," the "hidden zaddik," the "complete zaddik," the "zaddik—pillar of the world," the "higher zaddik" and "lower zaddik." What, then, are his qualities, his countenances, appearing in the tales? And how is Reb Nahman's self-image reflected in the variegated folktale heroes that people his oeuvre?

A passage from *Likkutei Moharan*, with its description of the rare privilege of witnessing the zaddik's death, suggests a key to understanding the "fantastic" nature of his being. Reb Nahman's inspiration for the teaching comes from the drama of the prophet Elijah's parting from earthly life.[14] His pupil Elisha requests "to receive twice your spirit upon myself," and the prophet promises his reward "If you see me being taken from you" (2 Kings 2:10–12). This scene leads Reb Nahman to reflect: "The zaddik has two spirits, an upper and a lower spirit. . . . In his dying hour, that upper spirit descends to embrace and unite with the lower. For in truth, they are one. . . . Yet as soon as they reveal themselves to one another, the upper spirit must disappear once again, as it cannot suffer this world at all." It is this sudden appearance of

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that otherworldly spirit in the human realm that invests the zaddik's students with the power to perpetuate their master's teaching. And it is the zaddik's double state of being, his simultaneous existence in the divine and earthly realm, that makes him a central player in Reb Nahman's fantastic tales. We glimpse this duality already in the legendary zaddik hero, the Baʿal Shem Tov. Famed for his wondrous insight, that forefather could read the secrets of every heart and know and speak of distant places, transcendent realms, and past and future events.[15] In Reb Nahman's oeuvre, the hierarchy between world orders shifts continually: at times an abyss separates them; at others, they join spontaneously. The zaddik rules effortlessly and equally over both. He uses his knowledge to guide his followers, reminding them of whichever world has abandoned them.[16]

Thus the zaddik strives to create balance within the psyche of every man. Yet his essential duality enables him to conjoin valences on higher levels as well. The figure of the beggar appearing on the fourth day, for example, deftly illustrates the classic social role of the zaddik as a channel spanning between earth and heaven.

As that character explains, his crooked neck is but a metonymy, symbolizing his preeminent occupation. From his wondrous throat emerges a wondrous voice, and it is that ventriloquistic voice alone that may save the two lovesick birds, tragically estranged from one another. By directing each one's forlorn song to the other, by drawing it further in his own voice, the crooked-necked beggar can lead the birds back together again (*SM,* pp. 261–66). The allegorical identity of the two birds, and the part of the beggar between them, is set out in *Likkutei Halakhot*, with a pretext from the *Zohar* predominant in the background. The allusively crooked neck, and the air that passes through it, make the beggar himself a shofar, gathering in the windy breath of this dark world and sending it to the world to come in the voice of the ram's horn. In Jewish religious life the sounding of the shofar has bipolar meaning: as an appeal to God to have mercy on His creatures, and as a summons to the community of Israel to return to Him in repentance.[17] Beyond this cyclical, historical event, however, lies an escatological role: the shofar also alludes to the messianic era—"For on that day, a great shofar will be sounded"—and by that trumpeting voice, "They shall come who were lost in the land of Assyria, and the outcasts in the land of Egypt, and shall worship the Lord at the holy

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mountain in Jerusalem" (Is. 27:13). Indeed, R. Nathan avers, the long-awaited return of the Diaspora, and ultimately the Redemption itself, all depends on the union between the two birds.[18]

In other tales, a second social phenomenon centered around the figure of the zaddik provides the axis on which the plot turns. That is the quasi-ritual pilgrimage to the "true zaddik's" court, an expression of his followers' loyalty and devotion.[19] The story *Rabbi and Only Son*, for example, describes the aborted journey of the son to his spiritual mentor with its tragic and Kafkaesque consequences. In *The Humble King*, the quest of the wise servant to glimpse the face of the king evokes the *hasid*'s wish to gaze upon the face of the zaddik, as the sole way to intimate the zaddik's essence.[20] And finally, each of the omnipotent beggars, and the children's longing to speak with him and receive his blessing, recall a telling comment Reb Nahman's followers attribute to their master: "In days to come, people will say, 'Once there was such a Reb Nahman,' because they will miss me greatly. . . ."[21]

Yet Reb Nahman manifests the vital role of the zaddik as a life-sustaining force through other analogies as well. Above, we spoke of the zaddik's task as a spiritual healer. This image finds literal realization in *Likkutei Moharan*, in the tales, and in Reb Nahman's biography, where the attributes of doctor of souls are bestowed upon him. In *Likkutei Moharan*, the superior ways of the zaddik are contrasted with the dangerous reductivism of the medical expert, who sees only the body and ignores the soul. A man falls ill and is compelled to turn to a great physician. This expert councils severe measures, and the man decides to appeal to "the sage and zaddik of the generation," healer of psychic illnesses. Part of his treatment requires drugs so potent that, were the patient to receive them unadulterated, he would certainly die. Thus "he had to mix them with other substances, for there are people to whom the inwardness of the Torah, essential for their healing, cannot be revealed." This remark alerts us to Reb Nahman's true meaning: as a faith healer, this zaddik "must clothe the inwardness of his Torah . . . in stories of external things, that [his patient] may be able to receive the cure contained within them. . . ."[22]

The interaction of wise doctor and ailing patient that dramatizes the relationship of the zaddik and his *hasidim* may be traced back to a classic kabbalistic allegory, which is then transplanted as the core of the sixth beggar's story. The *Zohar* considers the verse from the Song

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of Songs (5:8): "I charge you, O daughters of Jerusalem, if you find my beloved, tell him that I am sick with love," and conjures this scene: The lovesick patient is surrounded by doctors striving to understand her illness. Carefully, they check her pulse. Not one of them, though, is able to grasp its meaning. For the languishing patient is the Assembly of Israel, and her heartbeat, the text declares, is the coded sounding of the shofar—it speaks of the Exile, the redemption drawing closer, and the trials of that nearly relentless pain.[23]

When we turn to *The Seven Beggars*, the identity between the faithful shepherd, the zaddik as portrayed in *Likkutei Moharan* and the handless beggar cannot be denied. The beggar's story, evocatively related in the first person, is but a filmy curtain concealing the author himself and his self-appointed role as the spiritual healer of his generation and, potentially, of the world itself. He describes the predicament of the king's daughter, helpless and mortally ill in the palace of water, in order to declare, "And I can heal her . . . by all ten kinds of music, indeed, I can heal her" (*SM*, pp. 280–81). Behind the curtain, in the backstage of *Likkutei Moharan*, the enigmatic allusions stand undisguised: On a psychological level, the king's daughter is Everyman, drawn by melancholy and sadness into the lonely, wailing prison of his mind.[24] The wise doctor, none other than Reb Nahman, prescribes his famous cure, known in Bratslav tradition as "the great *tikkun*" *[ha-tikkun ha-kelali]*. By grace of ten manners of musical playing, in the form of ten psalms,[25] souls that have estranged themselves from God in sadness may return to Him in joy.

But perhaps the most lyrical image of the zaddik in Reb Nahman's worldview is that of the shepherd/musician. Attributes of each of the traditional "Seven Shepherds of Israel"—Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Aaron, and David—merge with the shepherd of romantic Eastern European folklore to embody countless figures in Reb Nahman's oeuvre. Consider, for example, Reb Nahman's reflections on Moses, "the faithful shepherd," and his contemporary alter ego. In his innovative rereading of Num. 11:12, Moses' cry of frustration with his rebellious flocks—"Have I conceived all this people, have I begotten them that you should say to me, 'Carry them in your bosom, as a nursing father carries the suckling child, to the land you have sworn to their fathers?'"—becomes an affirmation. Indeed, Reb Nahman teaches, Moses—a prototype of the Hasidic zaddik—*is* responsible for bearing

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all the world and for engendering its blessings. At once feminine and masculine, the zaddik bears the seminal drop of all souls, in the sense of the sower who "bears the bag of seed" (Ps. 126); from his effluence, this seed passes to all of the Assembly of Israel, and she gives it to the world.[26]

The zaddik as sower of seeds, as gardener of souls, as fluting shepherd gathering his flocks, is perhaps the most romantic poetic image in Reb Nahman's oeuvre. His most detailed appearance is surely in *The Seven Beggars*, in the deaf figure who offers his story-gift on the second day. Allusively, he tells of a legendary land that once possessed a garden; there, fruits grew that contained all the tastes in the world, all the aromas, all colors and shapes that ever were. A gardener took care of that Edenic garden. But suddenly he disappeared; worse, a cruel king became ruler, and his forces ruined all the lovely blessings the garden had grown. The narrator then tells of his own resolution to try and save the kingdom. He ventures within, and discovers that the disgust, stench, and blindness plaguing it are caused by moral sins spread by the king's base servants. Emphatically, he counsels the miserable people: only when these evil ways are driven out will taste and smell, color and shape, be restored, and will their nurturing gardener be returned to them. At once they take up the task. As the kingdom becomes pure, "all of a sudden there was a tumult [and here the narrator adds sardonically]—maybe, just the same, it was that madman, proclaiming he was the gardener. Everyone thinks he is a madman; they throw stones after him to drive him away and yet, after all, maybe he truly *is* the gardener. They brought him before them, and I said, 'Certainly, in truth, he is the gardener.'" In the beggar's conclusion, the figure of madman/gardener and narrator/beggar at last converge: "Indeed, the kingdom of wealth can attest that I live a good life, for *I* restored the kingdom" (*SM*, pp. 253–54).

A hint of the autobiographic aspects of this transparent allegory is suggested in the commentary *Likkutei 'Ezot*: "Sometimes, the sins of the generation are so great that the gardener is lost, i.e., the zaddik's light disappears, is covered over. Then the world is unworthy of realizing that he is the true gardener, who can help them attain a life of goodness and truth with their garden. . . . They mistake him for a madman. . . ."[27] In part 4 we will explore the threshold between inspiration and madness that preoccupied Reb Nahman, his desire to repair,

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and concomitant fear of rejection. For now, let us consider the link between zaddik and gardener within the framework of kabbalistic allegory. From the verse (Ps. 97:11) "Light is sown for the righteous," the author of the *Zohar* learns that

> God sowed that primordial light in His Garden...the zaddik, who is the gardener of that garden, took the light and planted it as seeds of truth, placing it in rows. Plants are born, sprouting and growing and bearing fruit, and this fruit nourishes the world.[28]

The zaddik, then, is charged with the care and sustenance of God's creation. The world depends on his labors; in his absence, we may suppose, the garden would wither and die.

Reb Nahman expands the allegory of the garden and its divinely appointed caretaker in *Likkutei Moharan*. The idea expressed in that text sheds light on *The Seven Beggars*, and refracts, as well, Reb Nahman's understanding of the image in the *Zohar* quoted above.

> Know, that there is a field where beautiful trees and plants grow. The splendor of this field and all it holds is indescribable, happy is the eye that has glimpsed it. The trees and plants are holy souls that grow therein. Many naked souls are there as well, they wander restlessly outside the field, waiting and longing to be repaired, that they may return and regain their places within. . . . And all of them seek the master of the field, that he may further their *tikkun*.[29]

Who, then, may this field's caretaker be? Reb Nahman paints a telling portrait of him:

> He who is willing to gird his loins, to go in and be, himself, the master of the field must be a steadfast and vigorous man, a mighty hero, a wise and great zaddik.

Not every individual, Reb Nahman continues, has been able to complete the task in his lifetime; some even with their deaths did not succeed. Only a truly great man can endure, for he will suffer much pain, and many difficulties.[30] The mixture of verbal tenses, past and present, alerts us to the continuous role in history Reb Nahman conceives for the gardeners in their esoteric field of souls. The zaddik of each genera-

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tion is responsible for the tender plants and trees under his aegis; it is his task to water their spirit with the Torah, and provide them space where they can flourish, and to draw those outside back to their waiting roots. As we saw earlier in this chapter, their figure is inseparable from the self-image Reb Nahman bore; to repair the separate soul of each of his followers was, in his eyes, but a fulfillment of divine intent from the first moment of Creation.

Both shepherd and gardener spend their days under the wide sky, their companions the winds, grasses and flocks. The indwelling voices of nature, an omnipresent force in the romantic imagination,[31] could not help but penetrate the shepherd's consciousness, and the song of all those speechless lives emerges, transformed, in the song of his flute. The Pan-like musician-shepherd dear to the Western European romantics and to the folklore tradition that inspired them may be recognized in the third day's mute singer of Reb Nahman's *Seven Beggars*. Hidden in the simple words of his story are ideas concerning music and its creation that stand as pillars in Reb Nahman's quintessentially romantic worldview. Let us begin with his tale, turning then to the texts linking it to powerful concepts in Jewish tradition.

As the beggar tells the child bride and groom, his apparent speechlessness is illusory; rather, the riddles and wondrous songs he can utter contain endless wisdom. The loquacity of the world, all its fragmentary blessings and praises of God—it is they, and not he, who remain forever lacking (*SM*, p. 254). A true poet, he goes on to describe the undying romance of spring and heart, and the melodies that flow from them as day fades into twilight.[32] The mute beggar's intuitive perception of these indwelling voices is explained in *Likkutei Moharan;* pointing beyond himself, our mute beggar bespeaks a dynasty of inspired shepherd-players.

The prototype of the shepherd blessed with intimate knowledge of nature's song is, for Reb Nahman, the biblical Jacob. The patriarch's sons, on their journey to Joseph in Egypt, take in their vessels "the melody of the Land" (Gen. 43:11). Indeed, the balm and honey, the almonds and ladanum, their father sent, a gift to the foreign king, sing their own song, "for every shepherd has a special melody, according to what grows in the place he grazes. . . .Each and every plant has a song it sings, and from the song of the grasses, the shepherd's melody is formed. . . ."[33]

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Yet behind the poetic sensitivity of this conception lies one of the most important philosophical innovations Reb Nahman bequeathed to Bratslav Hasidism. In effect, he counters the Cartesian formula *cogito ergo sum* with the certainty that something else transcends all separate mental constructs: "Beyond the private tunes of any system of [cognitive] knowledge is the melody of faith—this song invests the light of *Ein sof* itself."[34] The unspoken conviction here is that Descartes's view inevitably leads to a destructive dualism between mind and body, to a proliferation of splintered systems that no logic can reunite. To combat all the contradictory fragments of knowledge that fill the world, Reb Nahman points to music—disembodied, entirely spiritual—as the only hope of salvation, the only means by which oneness may be restored. And then, just as his teaching threatens to recede into abstraction, Reb Nahman introduces the human element—the music master who, alone, can touch the intangible melody of faith. "Only the zaddik of the generation, in the aspect of Moses, is worthy to be on their level of faith," and that is, paradoxically, because his essence is *silence*, an entity far more supreme than speech.[35] Moses' inherent muteness, his wordless response to God's revelation of His ways (Ex. 15:1) casts him, in Reb Nahman's mind, as a sort of orchestral conductor. He raises his baton (or shepherd's staff) and, from the primordial silence of Creation calls forth the voices of his players; skillfully he combines their disparate tones to form a song of many voices. That is the symphony of faith—in God, in their ultimate redemption—the all-encompassing musical creation performed by the Jewish people. In a final thought closing this teaching, Reb Nahman merges the image of the gardener with that of the shepherd-musician in an imaginative crescendo: "Thus, by grace of the music of the zaddik, in the aspect of Moses, all the souls who have fallen into apostasy are drawn back to complete faith . . . and all the deformed melodies are annulled in that greater music. . . ."[36] Moses wields his staff and miraculously brings the dead back to life;[37] the zaddik infuses empty black notes—the forlorn, spiritually void lost ones from his flock—with breath and voice. He weaves the emerging songs of his community together, and sends that wholly new, ever new prayer and melody on high, to rejoin its source in endless Being.

Reb Nahman's intense self-awareness seems to have encouraged him to give free flight to his powers of imagination. His poetic language metamorphoses in a continuous stream of images—indeed, just

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as all of us bear multiple identities in our consciousness, in his eyes the zaddik is *at once* mother, doctor, musician, shepherd, artist, master builder. The multiple reflections of a single figure—Reb Nahman himself—create the fantastic effect of amusement-park mirrors that make one short and fat, tall and thin, deformed and distorted, in most convincing succession. Yet in all of them we may detect the author's concern for his (self-imposed) responsibilities as spiritual leader—more, as a legitimate zaddik of his generation.

2. INNOVATION AND INSPIRATION: LINKING PAST TO FUTURE

Reb Nahman addresses this matter directly through his highly personal understanding of classic prophetic experience in Jewish tradition. The following remarks are relayed by his followers in *Sihot HaRan*. As we know, aside from Moses, all the prophets were able to convey their revelation only indirectly, in metaphorical language, "through a mirror darkly." Moses alone envisioned all in a "luminous mirror" and his words bear the divine clarity of his insight. The same distinction exists, Reb Nahman says, in the innovations of the zaddik in the dialectics of Torah. Some scholars interweave their message with biblical verses and talmudic prooftexts, but their artfulness merely serves their own ends. Yet there are great and awesome zaddikim, after the pattern of Moses, whose innovations are pure and shining as the sun; the pre-texts they use form an organic texture with their own meaning; thus, their message is a luminous insight.[38]

Certainly, a crucial component in an individual's ability to create is his sense of the source of his vision. Reb Nahman's comments above show that a scholar's legitimacy, in the eyes of the world and in his own, is granted by his link to tradition. To prove that his understanding is not solipsistic, no imaginative invention, but rather an inherent aspect of the canonical text—this is the scholar's sole hope of winning respect, in his own eyes and in others'. Following this idea to a logical extreme, an inescapable paradox emerges: at the highest state innovation can reach, any novelty at all is utterly impossible. The moment hermeneutics objectifies itself from its source, it fissures; the commentary becomes more important than its foundation and origin. Thus, the

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belief that the Torah is all-encompassing and all-inclusive precludes the possibility that artistic creation may be ex nihilo. What seems to be innovation, then, can actually only be *transformation*. In Gershom Scholem's metaphor, the eternal substance of the sacred text is melted down and forged anew as it passes through the fiery stream of the mystical consciousness.[39] Or in Reb Nahman's words, the zaddik, divinely inspired, is able to clothe the true words of the Torah, welding them together in new patterns that people are able to understand.[40]

In part 1 of this chapter, we suggested some instances in which characters in the tales resemble their author's own self-image as projected in other contexts. Yet the autobiographical nature of the tales is augmented by a further degree of reflection: the polymorphous figure of the zaddik that so concerned Reb Nahman himself also embodies the attributes of many historical and biblical personages. This multiple resemblance is certainly much more than artful literary allusion; rather, it brings into play a kind of magical correspondence—between the author's own life and the history of his ancestors, and between both of them and the stories of his characters. The effect is almost self-evident: the patriarchs Moses, David, Elijah, and Elisha are called zaddikim; when a Hasidic rebbe is honored with the title of zaddik, the aura of power and of wisdom inherent in those figures' being must be transferred to him.

The ancient concept of "zaddik, pillar of the world" (Prov. 10:25), and the identification of the patriarch Joseph with the *sefirah Yesod,* or foundation,[41] determines his centrality in the Hasidic rejuvenation of that classic figure. The threefold responsibility of the contemporary zaddik, in the Hasidic conception, for his community's "spiritual lives, children, and material sustenance"[42] are directly linked to Joseph's deeds in Egypt. Reb Nahman, however, focuses on another vital characteristic of that princely figure: "Joseph, because he had total possession of the Holy Tongue, was able to interpret dreams. For the fundament of the dream is in *slumber*, i.e., *translation;* he knew how to refine out the good and the truth contained in a dream.[43] The axis on which this statement turns is the numerical equivalence *(gematria)* of the two key words, "slumber" and "translation." Here, translation is much more than a linguistic phenomenon; it symbolizes a transfiguration, a purification of essence. Joseph's uprightness enabled him to redeem the holy elements imprisoned in the impure web of the dream; by rearranging

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the letters of the foreign words, he reconstructed the divine order hidden in their message, and restored to them their lost and truest identity. The relationship suggested here between translation and Hebrew, between dreams and their interpretation, parallels, on one hand, the relationship between the "tales the world tells" and Reb Nahman's fantastic tales and, on the other, between his fictions and their true referent in higher worlds. Emulating his biblical master, Joseph, in narrative technique, Reb Nahman recognizes that in every retelling, the new text draws closer to its origin—the pristine words God used to create the world.[44]

A second famous zaddik and storyteller—although of a completely other order—whose influence was instrumental in Reb Nahman's self-conception is the talmudic figure of Honi ha-Maʿagel. R. Yohanan evokes his memory in B.T. *Taʿanit:* "All the days of that zaddik's life, he worried over the verse (Ps. 126:1) 'A song of ascent: Returning to Zion we were as dreamers. . . .'"[45] In his own reading of that talmudic text, Reb Nahman takes up the yarn, inserting these parenthetical comments: One day Honi encounters a man planting carob trees (that is, a storyteller who speaks of times gone by). He asks him, Do you really suppose you will live seventy years, will enjoy the fruits of these seeds you plant? (In other words, Have you not thought to awaken your students with stories of our own times, for if you tell tales concerning more sublime matters, students who are unfit may hear them.) The man responds, I found myself in a world filled with carob trees (i.e., Even if I tell stories of ancient days, I can cause unfit listeners to forget their innermost truth). Indeed, Rav Nathan comments parenthetically, God Himself protects the zaddik who has dedicated himself to arousing the world from this existential slumber by telling tales. And the planter explains, Just as my forefathers planted trees for my benefit, so I wish to plant for my sons (meaning, just as tales gave birth to me, so my stories will cause children to be born).[46] Honi's legendary interaction with the carob planter and the understanding he gains reveals, vicariously, Reb Nahman's own recognition that every zaddik bears a historical responsibility to tell stories. Inherent in them is the power to make barren women fruitful, to bring the next generation into existence, and to link past to future in the fruits of tradition.

One final element intrinsic in Reb Nahman's image of himself as an innovative heir of eternal truths is his identification with eminent

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mystics of history. According to the testimony in *Shivhei Moharan*, Reb Nahman spoke of the revolutionary esoteric teachings that passed directly from R. Simeon bar Yohai to R. Isaac Luria, to the Ba'al Shem Tov, and, finally, to himself.[47] And in his biography, he represents himself as a kind of messenger from the world of the dead, charged by the illustrious talmudic mind, Rabba bar bar Hannah, to perpetuate his abstruse teaching guarded by the sage himself. The insights he revealed to him, Reb Nahman adds, are recorded in the first teachings of the book *Likkutei Moharan*.[48] The ambivalent effect of such a claim is a self-portrait at once self-aggrandizing and self-effacing. An artist's greatness is measured by his originality (as Reb Nahman is said to have said, "Never in the world has there been such a novelty as I"),[49] and yet if his creation is *true*, it must be utterly unoriginal, a veiling of the eternal body in ever-changing hues. The dialectic between innovation and perpetuation that pervades all of Reb Nahman's thought and shapes his self-conception is eloquently expressed in *Likkutei Moharan*.[50] Explaining the statement, "All my days I grew [up] among the sages,"[51] Reb Nahman says: The dissonant opinions of the sages fracture space; a void forms amidst them, and in that vacuum, the world is created.[52] To say that "all my days I grew up among the sages" means that amidst the words of the rabbis I improved myself, made my days and my character greater. And thus they are *my* days, for in their spaces I myself create the world.

A scholar gains insight only when enveloped in the teachings of the wise. Yet his understanding is, forever, uniquely his own. It comes into being in the silence between the voices.

3. THE APPROACHING REDEMPTION

We turn now to a troubling and volatile chapter in the history of Hasidism as a whole: the messianic aspirations of its leaders, and interest expressed by followers in the process of redemption.[53] Our focus, as always, is the tales Reb Nahman told; both the players and events described in them open a window upon the author's most profound beliefs concerning the theme of messianism. Exploration of this subject poses certain dangers: our intent is not to scrutinize the author's private life and records of his conversations with students in order to

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"prove" his personal tendencies.[54] Rather, we have, through the stories themselves, to crystallize the image Reb Nahman harbored of the Messiah in regard to the various roles and guises he adopts in the lower, material world. It is important to avoid a simplistic reading, drawing facile parallels between these messianic figures and their fabulator. More appropriate is an associative reading, in which sources from rabbinic and kabbalistic literature are introduced to shed light on Reb Nahman's unique creation. Through his theoretical teachings and comments by generations of Bratslav Hasidim, we learn of the vast sociological and spiritual task that rests on the zaddik's shoulders. The world's readiness to welcome the messianic age is inextricably bound to their awareness of its nature. And clearly, for Reb Nahman, the telling of stories plays a vital role in awakening his people to their own destiny. The recurrent protean images of the Messiah—the tragedy of his [non]-recognition, the trials he suffers as God's scorned messenger, the signs foretelling his advent—these are the testimony we seek to overhear within the texture of the tales themselves.

In B.T. *Sanhedrin*, the inherent ambivalence of the Messiah figure is weighed.[55] R. Alexanderi, in the name of R. Joshua ben Levi, points to the apparent contradiction between various biblical prophetic visions of the Messiah. Daniel, in a night vision, beheld "one like a son of man, who came with the clouds of heaven. . . . And there was given him dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all the peoples, nations and tongues should serve him . . ." (Dan. 7:13). This triumphal advent sharply contrasts with the words of Zechariah: "Behold, your king comes to you; he is just and victorious, humble and riding upon an ass . . ." (Zech. 9:9).[56] To this second image we could add the pathos of Isaiah's words: "He was despised and rejected of men; a man of pains, acquainted with sickness, and we hid our faces from him; he was despised, and we esteemed him not" (Is. 53:3).[57] Many of Reb Nahman's tales vivify the uncertainty concerning the Messiah's true identity, the tenuousness that has haunted the Jewish people throughout history. The turmoil caused by false messiahs, the anguished thought that the true one was driven away and that the search for him is unending—these experiences inform their events.

The story entitled *Burgher and Poor Man*, for example, "speaks," in the words of Reb Nahman's followers, "of the secret of the future

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Redemption, and of the secret of drawing down the Messiah's soul."[58] The burgher's son, driven away from his promised bride by her ambitious father, is cast out into the world, his only link to her the map recounting their shared destiny. While he endures a long exile, paralyzed by inertia, then disaster, and finally despair, the poor man's beautiful daughter loyally resists all suitors. One by one they come to court her, singing her stolen story, each in the deceitful hope that his lie will convince her he is her promised one. All of them fail, until she falls into the clutches of the pirate. Her escape on the desert island, disguised as a sailor, leads to her unknowing reunion with the burgher's son. Then begins the true test of faith—only when each agent realizes his own destiny, when he rediscovers the *signs* on his path, can the original promise be fulfilled. For from the union of burgher's son and poor man's daughter, we learn, the Messiah is born.

The biblical prototype underlying this tale, and represented in three separate yet vitally linked narratives[59] is evoked in numerous allusions. One of the most moving among them is the "losing of the signs" in Reb Nahman's story. The map proving the lover's true identity is lost in the forest; in the midrash, it is Tamar who, as she is led to be burnt, "loses the signs," Judah's staff and signet proving her innocence. The treacherous interference of evil forces (Satan, or the storm wind) exposes the character in all his vulnerability and only a moment of grace (the angel Gabriel, the daughter's mercy) saves him from ruin.[60] Another is the idea underlying the plot that "the council of God will stand" (Prov. 18:21). The divinely appointed union (between Boaz and Ruth, Judah and Tamar, Lot and his daughters, the burgher's son and poor man's daughter) can be nullified by no power on earth, writes R. Nahman of Tcherin. Just as, according to Mishnah *Avot*, the Messiah's name was created before the world itself came into being, so the union of feminine and masculine engendering his birth is preexisting, a matter of divine will. The interference of the suitors speaks, on one hand, of the false messiahs seducing the Assembly of Israel through the ages. Yet on the other, the nightmare of the "lost signs" represents a most contemporary tragedy in the eyes of the *hasid:* "[T]he controversy and struggle over true and great zaddikim like the Ba'al Shem Tov, may his memory be for a blessing . . . and our rebbe [Reb Nahman], whose greatness the whole world did not merit recognizing. For if all of Israel had drawn close to them, the Redemption would necessarily have come to pass."[61]

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