

Introduction: Do and You Will Understand

“... I walked home through town and there were some young men in Zion Square [the new city center of Jerusalem] with books on a table, and there was music playing ... They were Breslov Hasidim. I was planning on calling one of them this evening to ask about going to Shabbat services with them tomorrow. These fellows were my age and they were happy to talk with me, even though I could hardly speak Hebrew. While I was talking to them, an angry old man started getting violent and started scolding them in Hebrew. He threw some of their books on the ground. He wasn't *dati* [religious] and I didn't know why he was mad. But I watched him bring his violence on, and I watched how these Hasidim received him. The old man attacked one of them, and the Breslov Hasid being attacked smiled in response, and held him in a way that looked more like a hug than a move in self-defense. When the Israeli soldier took the old guy away, the Hasid who was holding him off, looked to the heavens, kissed his closed fingers, and blessed God. These are the people I'm praying with tomorrow.”

(journal entry: February 8, 1996)

“With regard to joy, a parable:

Sometimes when people are joyous and dancing, they grab a man from outside their dancing circle, one who is sad and melancholy, and force him to join with them in their dance. Thus it is with joy: when a person is happy, his own sadness and suffering stand off on the side. But it is a higher achievement to struggle and pursue that sadness, bringing it too into the joy, until it is transformed ... you grab hold of this suffering, and force it to join with you in the rejoicing, just as in the parable.”

a teaching from Rebbe Nachman of Breslov (1772 – 1810)
(trs. Green 1979: 142)

During my seven month stay in Israel, from January 15 to July 27 of 1996, I befriended a religious community known as the Breslov Hasidim. Through participant observation and active engagement in *tshuvah* [return to Judaism], I came to an understanding of their ritual practices and their ways of integrating outsiders into their community. This integrative process, which I call the learning process, involves the incorporating of non-orthodox, and non-practicing Jews like myself into the Breslov Hasidic ultra-orthodox world. Upon entering this world, I found that the student-teacher and master-disciple relationships I developed were essential to that learning process. I call these relationships learning relationships. I will therefore focus on the ritual process of the Breslov Hasidim and the relational context of that process.

The learning process I describe is problematic for those situated outside of Breslov religious culture who are prone to judgmentalism and skepticism, if not outright hostility, toward those inside. By accounting for some of the cultural dimensions and dynamics of their social reality, this ethnography attempts to render the world of the Breslov Hasidim less obscure, less inscrutable, and less troubling to outside viewers.

The outsider view can be seen from many angles. Some are respectful, some romanticizing, and some demonizing. Most outside views, however, are characterized by distance from, and non-participation in, the Breslov ritual process. The distance is marked both cognitively, by dualistic conceptions of us and them, as well as practically, by repulsion and resistance to the strictness of ultra-orthodox ritual observance.

The above journal entry [2/8/1996] demonstrates one man's violent repulsion and resistance to the Breslov Hasidim. The old man's anger had deep cultural and historical roots and typified the kind of negativity that other outsiders often shared with me. Many people in Israel warned me not to get lured into the Breslov Hasidic circle. And many of the Breslov Hasidim, themselves outsiders to religious life at one time in their lives, told me of their conflicts with family and friends while they were entering their new God-fearing [*haredi*] community.

The fear and anger toward this group, however, was not limited to the secular world. In fact, one man who had grown up in an orthodox Jewish home told me, "I don't care if you become ultra-orthodox, just stay away from Breslov. Their Rebbe was a madman, and his Hasidim are crazy." He described the insanity of their religious practices (e.g. going out to the forest alone in the middle of the night and crying out to God) and warned me to stay away from them. Had I paid attention to such outsiders, I might have left Israel believing these people were a bunch of crazed religious fanatics, just another group of ultra-orthodox "black hats", or a community of dogmatic fundamentalists.

Guided instead by the general goal of understanding the human condition in all its forms, and by the specific goal of learning more about Judaism and its ritual practices, I entered into a relationship with this community. For six months, I would go to Breslov on the weekends for *Shabbos* [Sabbath] rituals and on Tuesday nights to learn Rebbe Nachman's Stories. The rest of the time I spent in classes at Hebrew University and in a Jerusalem apartment shared with two other Wesleyan students. Finally however, I abandoned my island of separation from the ultra-orthodox world and lived with the Breslov community in Tsfat for my last four weeks in Israel. I was then able to immerse myself in their practices, praying and studying all day, every day. Through these cultural immersions I made connections that enabled me to participate in the yearly *Rosh*

Hashanah [Jewish New Year] pilgrimage to their teacher Rebbe Nachman's grave in Uman, Ukraine in the early fall of 1996.

Through participant observation in the ritual practices of Torah study, storytelling, song, prayer, and pilgrimage, I came to a deeper understanding of Breslov religious culture than that offered by the outsider's point of view. This thesis may not be able to soften the angry eye of the old man attacking the Hasidim, but hopefully it will allow the reader to share my understanding of the Breslov Hasidic learning path and the relationships that constitute and are constituted by it. Therefore, I move beyond the outsider's problematic conceptions of religious dogmatism, fanaticism, or fundamentalism, to focus on what these people actually do and what really goes on among them.

The statement, "Do and you will understand," is an important teaching in Judaism. Anthropologists also know this teaching well and have argued that that consequently participant observation is the best fieldwork method. This approach is based not on the belief of "it takes one to know one", but that it takes one doing what an "other" does in everyday life to make sense of the shared understandings of that particular culture.¹ I came to know the Breslov Hasidim and their ways of life through active, relatively unreserved participation in their daily study and prayer. Furthermore, the religious learning relationships I developed while in Israel greatly informed my anthropological understanding of the learning path and the learning process. As Pierre Bourdieu put it:

"The relationship between informant and anthropologist is somewhat analogous to a pedagogical relationship, in which the master must bring to the state of explicitness, for the purposes of transmission, the unconscious schemes of his practice." (Bourdieu 1977: 18-19)

While working toward an understanding of the more unconscious dimensions of the Judaic practices of textual study, prayer, music, and storytelling, I came to see that the Breslov way of integrating outsiders into their community was less a matter of feeding dogma and doctrine to the neophyte, and more in the spirit of Rebbe Nachman's parable of joy (cited above and now here again):

¹ Limiting culture to shared understandings is problematic. We know that culture consists as much of arguments and contentions as it does of agreement. At the same time, arguments, contentions, and disagreements often interrelate in complicated ways. In any case, this thesis will focus on shared, not contended meanings.

“With regard to joy, a parable: Sometimes when people are joyous and dancing, they grab a man from outside their dancing circle, one who is sad and melancholy, and force him to join with them in their dance. Thus it is with joy: when a person is happy, his own sadness and suffering stand off on the side. But it is a higher achievement to struggle and pursue that sadness, bringing it too into the joy, until it is transformed ... you grab hold of the suffering, and force it to join with you in the rejoicing, just as in the parable.” (trs. Green 1979: 142)

This parable provides a model for this ethnography, which focuses on the attractive, integrative, and transformative “forces” of Breslov ritual practices. In the process I tell how their community embraced me and how I found my feet among them.

As said earlier, many people look upon religious groups such as Breslov with little understanding. They have no idea what these people are up to. Their understandings are clouded and they see Breslov’s lived social reality as strange and opaque. Clifford Geertz’s semiotic approach to culture offers a perspective that can lessen this opacity and make the strange normal. He writes:

“The claim to attention of an ethnographic account does not rest on its author’s ability to capture primitive facts in faraway places and carry them home like a mask or a carving, but on the degree to which he is able to clarify what goes on in such places, to reduce the puzzlement – what manner of men are these? – to which unfamiliar acts emerging out of unfamiliar backgrounds naturally give rise ... It is not against a body of uninterpreted data, radically thinned descriptions, that we must measure the cogency of our explications, but against the power of the scientific imagination to bring us in touch with the lives of strangers.” (Geertz 1973: 16)

In order to explain what manner of men these are, I will use an integrative theoretical approach based on the processual analysis of Victor Turner and the performative perspectives of practice anthropology.

While Geertz provides a useful starting point, his ideas do not account for the processual or transformative dimensions of the social reality I address. Therefore, I turn to the theoretical frameworks offered by Victor Turner in *The Ritual Process* (1969) and *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors* (1974). Turner’s theoretical concepts are useful in discussing the engagement in *tshuvah* [return to Judaism] and the other transformative processes that occur as one travels toward an authentic [*erlicher*] Judaic center or sense of self. These concepts include the relationship between structure and anti-structure or *communitas*, the phenomenon of pilgrimage, and, borrowing from Van Gennep, the *rites*

de passage through which neophytes must travel to become incorporated into new social statuses.

Liminality, that state betwixt and between, neither here nor there, defined my being in Breslov. I was not an orthodox Jew, yet I was not not-orthodox either. I was a *baal tshuvah* [master of return]. I was a permanent neophyte. And my willingness to learn put me into a very dynamic position. This role *baal tshuvah* is dynamic and liminal for all those involved and takes place in the paradigm of mental, emotional, spiritual, and physical pilgrimage toward a Judaic center. The head of the Israel Institute for Talmudic Publications in Jerusalem, Adin Steinsaltz suggests the strength of these centering forces in traditional Judaism when he writes:

“It is indeed a return to Judaism, but not to the external framework, not to the religious norms that man seeks to understand or to integrate into, with their clear-cut formulae, directives, actions, rituals; it is a return to one’s own paradigm, to the prototype of the Jewish person. Intellectually, this paradigm may be perceived as a historical reality to which one is personally related, but beyond this is the memory of the essential archetype that is a part of the soul structure of the individual Jew. In spite of the vast range of ways in which a Jew can alienate himself from his past and express himself in foreign cultural forms, he nevertheless retains a metaphysically, almost genetically, imprinted image of his Jewishness. To use a metaphor from the world of botany: a change of climate, soil, or other physical conditions can induce marked alterations in the form and functioning of a plant, and even the adoption of characteristics of other species and genera, but the unique paradigm or prototype persists.

Reattachment to one’s prototype may be expressed in many ways, not only in accepting a faith or a credo or in fulfilling certain traditional obligations. As he liberates himself from alien influences, the penitent can only gradually straighten himself out; he has to overcome the forms engraved by time and place before he can reach his own image. He must break free of the chains, the limitations, and the restrictions imposed by environment and education. If pursued aimlessly, with no clear goal, this primal search does not transcend the urge to be free; without a vector, it can be spiritually exhausting and many never lead to a genuine discovery of the true self. In this respect, not in vain has the Torah been perceived as a system of knowledge and insights that guide the individual Jew to reach his own pattern of selfhood. The mutual relationship between the individual Jew and Judaism, between the man and his God, depends on the fact that Judaism is not only the Law, the prescribed religious practice, but is a life framework in which, in his aloneness and in his search, he will be able to find himself. Whereas potentially a man can adapt himself, there exists, whether he acknowledges it or not, a path that is his own, which relates to him, to his family, to his home.” (Steinsaltz 1980: 127-128)

I do not ask secular readers to believe Steinsaltz’s statement, but it is a clear description of the path formed by the learning process, outlined in native terms.

To understand the texture and vitality of Breslov ritual practices, I also turn to practice anthropology. Practice theorists often focus on the performative, improvised, or

extra-symbolic aspects of ritual. Edward Schieffelin explains, “[T]hrough performance, meanings are engaged with the symbols in the interactional creation of a performance reality, rather than merely being informed by them as knowers. (Schieffelin 1985: 707).” Along with other practice theorists (e.g., Kapferer (1986), Tambiah (1979), and Bourdieu (1977)), he argues that ritual practice goes beyond the text, meaning, belief, and language, to co-communicate reality and meaningfulness to its participants.

This perspective sharpens my account of Breslov ritual practice by focusing my analysis on the non-discursive yet compelling performative arguments the Breslov make through songs, stories, prayers, and pilgrimage. Through this aspect of ritual, “the ‘unthinkable’ may be consciously ‘thought’. The message may be effectively delivered and received without full awareness on the part of sender or receiver. (Myerhoff 1978: 107).” Therefore, because a kind of dialogue exists between sender and receiver in performance, ritual reality, like social reality, is relational.

In addition to the theoretical work of anthropologists, the social thought of philosopher Martin Buber is important to my analysis. It is partly due to Buber’s influence that I focus so intently on learning relationships and the relational aspect of the learning process. Buber based his ideas on a “philosophy of the inter-human – with a twofold human movement of distancing and relating and a twofold human relation of ‘I-Thou’ and ‘I-It’. Buber’s approach goes beyond cultural anthropology in that it asks philosophical questions about the human species: about our wholeness and uniqueness, about what makes us human. It can only touch on the problem of the human, however, insofar as it recognizes that the anthropologist is a human being and as such, a part of what he or she seeks to know. To understand the human you must be a participant who only afterward gains the distance from your subject matter that enables you to formulate the insights you have attained.” (Friedman 1996: 16)

Buber had profound insight into the nature of human relationships and the ideal of community. He observed Hasidic communities very closely and gained insight from them into the crises of alienation and dehumanization that mark the modern era. In the words of Laurence Silberstein, “Like modern existentialism, Hasidism was conscious of the factors that impede our ability to commune with one another ... Hasidism, in Buber’s view, taught that alienation could be overcome through acts of love and through

communal existence.” (Silberstein 1989: 50) Furthermore, in reference to Hasidic learning and human relations Buber writes, “Man cannot approach the divine by reaching beyond the human; he can approach Him through becoming human. To become human is what he, this individual man, has been created for. This, so it seems to me, is the eternal core of Hasidic life and of Hasidic teaching.” (Buber 1958: 42-43)

Understood in Buber’s terms, it was clear to me that the predominating outsider view of the Breslov Hasidim saw their community as an It and not Thou. Hearing criticism of this religious group from people who were uninvolved, unpracticing, and self-distancing, felt similar to hearing a friend talk negatively about another person who I did not know. In such situations I cannot simply agree with their judgements, even if they seem well founded. Instead, I felt the need to turn to Breslov as a Thou and enter into a deeper and more real relationship with them which acknowledged their humanity. The way this community responded to my respectful approach was a true learning experience that affirmed Buber’s statement cited above. I learned how to pray and study Torah among these Breslovers, and, in doing so, learned about how humans relate to each other.

Rebbe Nachman offers the following advice in tune with what I am saying about human relationships and he makes it clear that relating well with people is what spiritual awareness depends on:

“Take care, there is much power in a glance. If accompanied by a negative thought, it can cause harm. This is what is known as the evil eye ... Have a good eye. Always see the good point [*nekuda tovah*] in others. Spiritual awareness depends upon it. Spiritual awareness is lost when people dull their hearts with jealousy and develop an evil eye.” (trs. Mykoff 1994: 58)

The Rebbe’s words are a simple yet deep challenge to the anthropological eye and to the eyes of all outside observers of Breslov social reality.

So with the help of the theoretical perspective outlined above, and mindful of Rebbe Nachman’s advice, I offer an integrative approach that works toward a deeper understanding of the Breslov social world. I base my framework on an account of the learning process which in turn is intimately related to the ritual process. Thus, I analyze the practices of Torah study, storytelling, song, prayer, and pilgrimage, using a performative approach and focusing on the inter-human dimensions of socially constructed and lived realities. However, before dealing with these five forms of ritual practice, I will provide a historical context for Breslov culture.

