

Camus, Rebbe Nachman, and the Absurdity of Wholeness

By: YAAKOV KLEIN

Within the great ocean of philosophical speculation produced by roving minds from time immemorial, the contribution of French-Algerian thinker Albert Camus (1913–1960) stands apart, starkly unique in its terrifying honesty. Whereas the main of philosophical analysis addresses questions such as “What can we be certain about?” (epistemology), “What is the nature of reality?” (metaphysics), “What is good?” (axiology), or “What is the best form of government?” (political theory), Camus turns the volume down on our ceaseless cognition for long enough to ask a question that precedes every other question we might endeavor to explore. In the silent darkness exposed when the cloak of an illuminated existence is violently torn away (what he calls, “a universe suddenly divested of illusions and lights”), Albert Camus’ question echoes across the barren plane: “Why live at all?”

At the outset of his primary work, a slim volume titled *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus writes, “There is but one truly serious philosophical problem and that is suicide.” What follows this morose opening is a presentation of his theory of Absurdism, which essentially states that the only conclusion we can draw from our experience of a human condition characterized by the probability of suffering and the certainty of death on the one hand, and our deep desire for meaning on the other, is the total futility of life. Framing the world as devoid of any purpose (“formless chaos”) and considering the major philosophical approaches inadequate in their proposed solutions, Camus wonders whether suicide, the act of self-destruction, is the only rational act. After this grim consideration, Camus ultimately goes on to repudiate both the anti-natalist theory

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of Selinus, a figure in Greek mythology described to have disclosed the terrible wisdom that “Not to be born is the best of all” as well as Kierkegaard’s “leap of faith,” the existentialist or religious attempt to confer meaning upon the fundamentally meaningless (“the nostalgia of hope”). Instead, he offers a third solution: *revolt*. To live with constant awareness of the absurdity of living, to fully face the utter futility of life and carry on living, freely and passionately—this is Camus’ ideal.

Camus finds an illustration for the futility of life in a Greek myth for which his book is named, the myth of Sisyphus. As the myth goes, Sisyphus is required to roll a heavy boulder up a hill each day. When he finally reaches the hilltop at the end of the long day, the bolder immediately rolls back down to the bottom, and this process begins once more—for all eternity. Camus sees Sisyphus as a quintessential symbol for the anguished absurdity of our condition and the futility of our efforts in the arena of consciousness. With a bit of poetic imagination, Sisyphus becomes Camus’ hero, the symbol of one who has accepted the absurdity of his condition and yet defiantly chooses to engage with it nonetheless, thus finding happiness. He closes his presentation with these famous words: “I leave Sisyphus at the foot of the mountain! One always finds one’s burden again... The struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a man’s heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy.”

The word “happy” notwithstanding, there would appear to be no greater contrast to the desperate, skeptical absurdism of Albert Camus than the optimistic philosophy of Rebbe Nachman of Breslov (1772–1810). Renowned for his teachings on joy, encouragement, renewal, and the value of yearning, Rebbe Nachman’s world—permeated with Godliness and hurtling toward redemption—could not be more different than the world of Camus. It would seem that the darkness of absurdity is simply never encountered by the individual who experiences life through the lens of his faith, all the more so one as radically optimistic as Rebbe Nachman.

The truth, however, is not as simple. Strange as it may sound, there is, in fact, a pocket of literature hidden beneath the surface of the more popular Breslover writings on hope, wherein we find the deathly shadow of futility. And when we do, we encounter the absurd in a form even more grotesque than the jarring conception of Camus.

In a remarkable teaching,¹ Rebbe Nachman tells that there are two levels of philosophical inquiry. The first, rooted within creation itself, includes problems for which rational solutions may be offered (words).

¹ *Likutei Moharan* 64.

However, because our experience of reality is founded upon the paradox of “*Tzimtzum*,” the constriction of the Divine Light to form a theoretical void which “makes space” for creation, there is a second level of inquiry: questions that can never be answered (silence). Rebbe Nachman sees the experience of doubt as a fundamental prerequisite for faith itself. He expresses the understanding that there are questions which, as far as we are concerned, *truly have no answer*, that—from our perspective—there must necessarily exist a layer of experience where God appears to be absent. To be sure, the great light of faith eventually illuminates those existential gaps. But, crucially, this illumination does nothing to collapse the space it fills. For Rebbe Nachman, there is a *Challal HaPannui*, a Vacant Space. And there is also a *Kav*, a ray of Godliness which fills that space with the illumination of hope (“*kiyut*”). For Rebbe Nachman, there is absurdity. And there is also meaning. But it is more than that: for Rebbe Nachman, the very gestation of faith takes place specifically within the womb of the absurd. Seen from this perspective, the experience of atheistic absurdity paradoxically takes on religious significance; it is those who have tasted the utter futility of life-in-itself and the deafening silence of God who have any chance of experiencing the thin, still, whisper of His Presence.² In other words, if Rebbe Nachman wishes to claim victory over hopelessness and declare “There is no despair in the world at all!”³ he must wrestle with it first. And wrestle with it he does.⁴

In a teaching that seems completely out of place in a work as optimistic as *Likutei Moharan*, the *tzaddik* writes:

Everyone says that there is *Olam HaZeh* (“this world”) and there is *Olam HaBa* (“the World to Come”). I believe that there is *Olam HaBa*. Perhaps *Olam HaZeh* also exists somewhere. Because by all appearances, it seems that this place is *Gehinnom* (hell).⁵

This shocking declaration is the conclusion of a lesson in which Reb Nosson, Rebbe Nachman’s primary disciple and scribe, records his master’s frequent comments on the miserable nature of the human condition.

He spoke with us many times about the suffering of this world. He said that all people’s lives were replete with suffering and that there

² See *Sichos HaRan* 102: “God’s life-force is present even within heresy itself.”

³ *Likutei Moharan Tinyana* 78.

⁴ Regarding the *tzaddik*’s necessary encounter with philosophical traditions, see *Likutei Moharan Tinyana* 19.

⁵ *Likutei Moharan Tinyana* 119.

was not ever a person who attained satisfaction in this world. Even the very wealthy people, even distinguished officials—they have nothing from this world at all, for all their days are filled with anger and frustration, and they are all constantly laden with burdens, worries, depression, angst, and sadness.

Rising in the gentle heart of a young man who suffered the loss of his first wife and four of his children, the travails of tuberculosis, and the anguish of unfounded social castigation, Rebbe Nachman's hope is not the product of a naïve and privileged optimism. No, he fully appreciates the hellish nature of this world. We find that although Rebbe Nachman was initially very fearful of death,⁶ as his tragic experience of life unfolded, he seems to have experienced a shift in his attitude. "Why do you not have time to look up at the sky," he asks one of his students as they stand above the marketplace, "when in fifty years from now the marketplace will be full of different horses and different merchants selling different merchandise, when neither you nor I will be alive?"⁷

Reb Nosson relates the way Rebbe Nachman comforted a group of *chassidim* who were suffering from terminal illnesses. "What reason do you have to fear death?" he asked them. "Don't you know that the next world is far more beautiful than ours?"⁸ In the next teaching, Reb Nosson describes the way Rebbe Nachman reacted when a funeral procession passed and the loud wailing of the mourners split the silence: "The deceased is probably laughing," he quipped. "For they are crying over him as if to say, 'Would it not be good if you had lived more days in this world, and suffered more anguish in this world, and experienced more of this world's bitterness?'"⁹ Ultimately, this deathly laughter is an experience known to Rebbe Nachman in his lifetime. On one occasion he announced, "I would like to take my wife with me and travel to a faraway place, where I would live in great concealment and only emerge from time to time to walk in the marketplace and laugh at the world."¹⁰

Interestingly, Reb Nosson's own encounter with the absurd, an event he cites as the catalyst of a soul-searching that ultimately led to his discovery of Rebbe Nachman, occurred very early on in his emotional development. He recounts that as a young child, he would often sit with his grandfather in the front section of the shul where the elders sat. One

⁶ *Sichos HaRan* 57.

⁷ *Kochvei Obr, Anshei Moharan* 5.

⁸ *Chayei Moharan* 445.

⁹ *Chayei Moharan* 446.

¹⁰ *Chayei Moharan* 259.

day, he noticed that one of his grandfather's friends was absent—he had passed away. When this was explained to little Nosson and the reality of death set in, he began to wonder: “Is this the ultimate purpose of life? To grow older and older and then to die?”¹¹

Predisposed to this experience of life's essential absurdity, Reb Nosson echoed his master's pessimism in even more radical terms. In the final entry in *sefer Sichos HaRan* (which is also by far the lengthiest), Reb Nosson addresses the notion of absurdity found in the writings of earlier existentialist philosophers:

For in truth, anyone with eyes that see and a heart that understands the ultimate truth can comprehend with his intellect and see that in bygone times the world was also full of worries and economic stress... even the philosophers of the nations admit that this world is constantly full of suffering, as is often brought in their books... for even if this world had been full of goodness and wealth, without any suffering or pain, it would still be futile and empty on account of the passing time which vanishes with the blink of an eye, for our days are like the shadow of a passing bird. How much more so, now that our world is indeed full of pain, sighs, suffering, anguish, and endless frustrations without measure, for all people—from the fabulously wealthy to the desperately poor; they are all filled with worry...

As Camus himself points out, however, the subtle flicker of absurdity echoes most loudly not in philosophical reflection but between the lines of our day-to-day circumstances. This was expressed by Reb Nosson with brutal candor in a conversation with his friend, the prestigious *maskil* Dr. Hirsh Ber Landau.

Dr. Landau had just returned from a successful business trip to Berditchov. As is customary, he had purchased gifts for his wife and children whom he had not seen for some time. Upon hearing that Reb Nosson was in town, Dr. Landau went to visit him before continuing home, and, as was his way, Reb Nosson began speaking about the futility of this world and the foolishness of investing efforts in this lifetime. Having just enjoyed a lucrative trip to Berditchov, Dr. Landau could not quite grasp Reb Nosson's words. “I don't understand,” he exclaimed. “Look at all the money I made, the comfort I enjoy! What am I missing from this world?” Reb Nosson smiled wryly and responded, “It is possible to return home from a successful trip to Berditchov bearing a golden ring for one's wife. When one shows the ring to his wife with excite-

¹¹ *Avanehab Barzel* #1.

ment, it is possible that his wife will not appreciate this particular ring and grow angry with him for not having bought her something else. The mood suddenly shifts, and death becomes more attractive to him than life.” Dr. Landau took leave of Reb Nosson, but only a few minutes passed before he returned, breathless, and with a look of bewilderment on his face. “Reb Nosson!” he cried. “How right you were!”¹²

Unlike the existentialists so ruthlessly berated by Camus, those thinkers like Jaspers, Chestov, Kierkegaard, and Husserl whom he charges with turning away from the absurd in an act of cowardice (“philosophical suicide”) by finding reason beyond the reasonless, the Breslover conception faces the void just as fully as does Camus. Rebbe Nachman and his disciple do not deny the appearance of futility one iota. This world is, indeed, an absurd place of suffering. Our experience is, in fact, tortured and rife with anguish. But whereas Camus leads us to the brink of the existential cliff, Rebbe Nachman pushes us over the edge, and the strangest thing happens: we fly.

How do we fly? What is the secret of Rebbe Nachman’s hope, the ecstatic joy he describes as being happy “from within the darkness of depression”¹³? How is it possible to walk the narrow bridge of life and yet to “have no fear at all?”¹⁴ Where is the point of departure at which Rebbe Nachman leaves Camus in his defiant revolt before the fork in the road between life and death?

Let us turn to one of the Rebbe’s lesser-known parables:

There was once a king who sent his son to distant lands to study. When he returned home, fully versed in the arts and sciences, the king gave his son instructions to carry a heavy boulder up to the top floor of the palace. Because the boulder was tremendous, the size of a millstone, the son was unable to lift it at all. Disappointed that he was unable to fulfil his father’s wish, he returned to the king. Rebbe Nachman tells us that the king “opened himself up to his son,” saying, “Did you really imagine I would tell you something as difficult as that? Would I tell you to take the stone, just as it is, and lift it to the top floor? Even with all your wisdom, how could you have done something like that? This was not my intention at all. What I wanted you to do was to take a hammer and hit

¹² *Kochvei Ohr, Sippurim Nifla'im.*

¹³ Introductory comment to the *Tale of the Seven Beggars.*

¹⁴ *Likutei Moharan Tinyana* 48.

the stone until it splintered into little pieces. This way, you would indeed have been able to bring it up to the top floor.”¹⁵

The similarities between this parable and *The Myth of Sisyphus* are striking. Whether presenting an alternative to that tale was Rebbe Nachman’s intention, we will never know for sure. What seems perfectly certain, however, is that this short story contains within it the very essence of the Breslover worldview.

First, let us reflect upon the contrast between the crises in Camus’ myth and the crises in Rebbe Nachman’s parable. In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, the crisis of Camus’ hero is that he is trapped in a cycle of futility. However futile it may be, there is a cycle, a process; Sisyphus is able to lift the stone. Rebbe Nachman ventures further into the absurd than Camus ever dares. For Rebbe Nachman, the futility of this world is so debilitating, so total, that no process even begins: the stone will not budge. If the Vacant Space exists, there are questions that reason, logic, delusion, even faith in something beyond reason simply cannot resolve. From this suffocating standpoint, there is no space within which the revolt of Camus can play out. Upon entertaining this notion, the existential road does not merely split, leaving the traveler with the options of suicide to the left, delusional living to the right, or the ability to stand still in defiance. To Rebbe Nachman, there is no fork in the road at all. The road simply dissolves.

Rebbe Nachman’s parable does not end in crises. Eventually, the king explains to his son that wisdom, rationality, cannot lift the stone. Not even the conclusion of Camus—birthed and nurtured in the mind of the conscious individual facing the absurd—holds relevance in the face of such crushing futility. One cannot carry on in revolt when one cannot carry on at all. Instead, the *tzaddik* introduces a fourth option; an option Camus does not begin to consider: *bittul*—self-nullification. Maintaining full awareness of the Vacant Space and the answerless questions of being, Rebbe Nachman teaches that *surrendering to the void*—a convincing construct created to afford us a sense of self and its perception of autonomy—enables us to soar beyond it. By shattering the stone, a metaphor for humbling oneself before the irrationality of existence, one crosses the existential bridge and finds oneself on the other side of the paradox; a realm within which there is no longer any self that must wrestle with the absurdity of a Vacant Space.

This is the secret of “*temimus upeshitus*,” the simplicity that is such a foundational pillar of Breslover virtue. Futility is rightly our experi-

¹⁵ Chayei Moharan 441.

ence—but only inasmuch as we hold on to the illusion of wholeness, the supposed value of attempting to understand the very process of living. If it is “I” who understand, “I” who revolt, even “I” who believe that somewhere, Someone has an answer to all our questions, the absurd yet casts its menacing shadow over our existence. But the moment we leap into the full catastrophe of the absurd and—in so doing—place the locus of being outside of our consciousness; nullifying our sense of wholeness by assuming a state of *bittul*, of simplicity and authentic openness, something incredible happens. The stone is shattered and—piece by piece, each fragment of experience an eternity unto its own—the absurdity is somehow undone, the stone lifted to an elevated realm of being where we realize the void as itself housed within the palace of the King, and the Vacant Space is vacant no more. “Even with your wisdom,” says the king, “did you really think you could lift the boulder?” “The greatest wisdom of all the wisdoms,” taught Rebbe Nachman, “is not to be wise at all.”¹⁶ “My not knowing,” he declared on another occasion, “is greater than my knowing.”¹⁷ In another place: “the pinnacle of knowledge is to arrive at the level where one recognizes that in fact, he does not know.”¹⁸ When we untether our consciousness from the wisdom of rationality and embrace this “greatest wisdoms of all the wisdoms,” there is indeed no despair in the world at all—because there is no word at all. When there is no world, there are no words, the building blocks of creation—only silence. And it is then that, just as in Rebbe Nachman’s tale “The Exchanged Children,” the frightful din of the forest wildlife is revealed to be a glorious symphony, the human consciousness begins to reverberate with the melody of redemption.

Now, it must be made clear that Rebbe Nachman is under no illusion that it is possible to constantly maintain this level of perception. At the end of the day, the human being must be human. His writings are replete with references to the eventual return from the perception of the Illuminated Space after the shattering of our hearts of stone lets the light in.¹⁹

Remember: Rebbe Nachman is not a naïve optimist. He does not deny the absurd. What he does is introduce and embrace the paradox of being. The result is a consciousness of unique intensity, a perception of

¹⁶ *Likutei Moharan Tinyana* 44.

¹⁷ *Shivchei HaRan* #33.

¹⁸ *Sichos HaRan* 3.

¹⁹ See, for example, *Likutei Moharan* 4:10 and 65:4.

being both “here” and “there” at the very same time²⁰—with the benefits of both. The resolve to not participate in the absurdity of life but rather to divest the self altogether counterintuitively enables the Jew to embrace life fully and with great joy; not the pessimistic and scornful “happiness” of Camus’ desperate revolt, but with the deep contentment of breaking time open so profoundly that the light of eternity can shine through the fractures snaking across the face of each and every moment. Conscious of the sadness cemented into the very experience of being human, the Jew grabs hold of it with both hands and draws it into the joyous circle of an elevated perspective.²¹ Light and darkness link arms, and in the frenzied whirl of their dance, they merge as one.²²

The seeds for this essay took root a number of years ago when I first encountered Camus and wondered about the uncanny similarity between his myth and Rebbe Nachman’s parable of the shattered boulder. Recently, Hashem guided me toward a lecture by Rabbi Dr. Yaakov Weinroth, רב, a famous Israeli lawyer who had studied under some of the most illustrious *gedolim* of the previous generation and was known to be a prodigious scholar of many spiritual and intellectual disciplines. I was told that toward the end of his life, Rabbi Weinroth discovered the world of Rebbe Nachman and began to study his teachings with Breslover *chassidim*, and that this lecture—the final lecture of his life (he passed tragically away some three weeks later)—was about his experi-

²⁰ Perhaps alluded to in his vision of the man who is soaring through the cosmos with an angelic guest at the very same time he is sitting alone in his home. See *Chayei Moharan* 85.

²¹ See *Likutei Moharan Tinyana* 24.

²² It may be argued that the primary leitmotif in the writings of Rebbe Nachman and his disciple is that of *coincidentia oppositorum*, a concept which surfaces in almost of all his major teachings. Ultimately, the “*Nachal Noveiah Mekor Chochmah*” (*Mishlei* 18:4, the opening letters spell “*Nachman*”) with which Rebbe Nachman personally identified (see *Chayei Moharan* 189) implies the extension of *Chochmah* into *Binah* (“*Nachal*”)—the ultimate foundation of all duality—via the unfathomable unifying energy of *Kesser* (the “*Mekor Chochmah*”). In this ineffable energy-source, a taste of which Rebbe Nachman’s teachings hope to reveal, there is neither *Chessed* nor *Gevurah*—neither Meaning nor Absurdity—but something beyond both; “a day that is neither day nor night” (“*Karev Yom*”—*Haggadah shel Pesach*). See *Likutei Moharan* 33:6. In my series of *shiurim* on *Likutei Moharan*, we are tracking these pairs of opposites throughout the entire *sefer*, attempting to use the system of dialectical synthesis to achieve a taste of the unfathomable Truth of Oneness. The *shiurim* may be accessed on various platforms here:
<https://linktr.ee/LikuteiMoharan>.

ence with Rebbe Nachman's thought. I began to watch this talk and was soon shocked to find that the entire two hours were devoted to treating the contrast between Camus' absurdity and Rebbe Nachman's paradox. With penetrating clarity, Rabbi Weinroth uses the first hour to present the theory of Camus before shifting gears and describing the "silent song" of Rebbe Nachman—an artistic experience beyond rationality, beyond self, beyond our visceral experience of the absurd. He does not mention the parable of the shattered boulder, although I imagine he would have found interest in that connection. He does present an important insight, however, with which I would like to conclude.

Rabbi Dr. Weinroth points us to a dispute in the Gemara²³ as to whether Shlomo HaMelech's *Kobeles* should be included in the Biblical canon. The argument against its inclusion is understandable—*Kobeles* seems to have no place in the religious worldview. In light of the classical understanding of faith, which maintains that everything has meaning, that there is a rational answer to all questions, that whatever happens is for the best, and so on, how are we to stomach such pessimistic statements as, "Vanity of vanities, all is vain!"²⁴ "One generation goes, another generation comes, but the earth remains the same forever."²⁵ "All streams flow into the sea, but the sea is never full."²⁶ "There is nothing new beneath the sun," or "it is a twisted thing that cannot be made straight, a lack that cannot be made good."²⁷ On and on Shlomo HaMelech fumes, relentlessly repudiating life in the most uncompromisingly vicious terms. In the end, *Chazal* chose to include *Kobeles*, because it has redeeming value in its final line: "The sum of the matter, when all is said and done: Revere God and observe His commandments, for this is the entirety of man." Still, the lingering question remains: what is the source of King Shlomo's great anguish? And where does it fit within the context of faith? Seen through the lens of Rebbe Nachman's paradox, *Kobeles* comes into sharp focus.

In 221 verses, Shlomo HaMelech takes us on a tour of the absurd. He walks us through the valley of the shadow of death and demands that we face the Vacant Space; that we peer into the abyss of overwhelming futility. Then, after granting us this necessary experience, the wisest of all men who would certainly have achieved the "greatest of

²³ *Shabbos* 30b.

²⁴ *Kobeles* 1:2

²⁵ *Ibid*, 1:4.

²⁶ *Ibid*, 1:7

²⁷ *Ibid*, 1:9.

wisdoms—not to be wise at all,” teaches us how to access the other side of the paradox: *bittul*. Fear of Heaven and heeding the commandments is not to be seen as Shlomo HaMelech’s advice for how to confer meaning upon a meaningless experience. It is rather a key to the unraveling of the absurd, a tool with which we can soar beyond the nausea of being by becoming humbled, by breaking open our sense of self—thus creating a vacant space inside our consciousness within which God’s Presence can rest.²⁸

Returning to Reb Nosson’s outpouring of the soul at the very end of *Sichos HaRan*, we find an echo of this approach:

After this truth, that regardless of whether one is wealthy or poor he will experience toil and anger all his life, because the suffering and pain of each person are very great... therefore, fortunate is one who escapes from the toil of this-worldly frustration to the toil of Torah. Then, he will be happy in this world and the next... There is no place to which one can escape this depression and sadness that shorten and waste away a person’s days other than to Hashem and His Torah... Then, when one resigns himself to live a life of contentment with even the smallest amounts... it is specifically then that one can experience true life even in this world... If you will do this, “fortunate are you in this world”—certainly! For you will certainly have much true vitality from this that you accepted upon yourself that this world was not created for us to enjoy it. Rather on the contrary, a person who desires to experience pleasure in this world which is full of pain and suffering should run from the toil of this-worldliness to the toil of the Torah which is our life-force and the length of our days.

In our post-modern, sometimes post-truth world riddled with ethical quagmires, the collapse of age-old norms, and a thick atmosphere of confused distrust, Rebbe Nachman’s message is more impactful than ever. It is crucial, however, that we first understand the nuance and complexity of this master’s approach. If all we know about Rebbe Nachman is that he preached joy and optimism, the dissonance between our experience of reality and these messages render them hollow. Even if we learn that Rebbe Nachman did indeed experience suffering, we may be tempted to deflect his optimism by considering his attitudes super-human, the reaction of a *tzaddik*, above and beyond our spiritual and emotional reach. When we become aware, however, of just how deeply Rebbe Nachman appreciated just how hellish this world can sometimes

²⁸ See Rebbe Nachman’s comments on this verse in *Likutei Moharan Tinyana* 19.

be, just how viscerally he experienced the absurdity, the futility, the angst of living, his path toward radical optimism becomes relatable. And when we feel that Rebbe Nachman understands our pain, we become ready to pay closer attention to his message, to relinquish the sense of self which apprehends the absurdity of the Vacant Space, to take his hand and join him in a remarkable flight beyond the horizon of “the one truly serious philosophical problem” and into the dawn of a paradox. 