

**Athens Institute for Education and Research
ATINER**



**ATINER's Conference Paper Series
EDU2016-2125**

**Rabbi Nachman of Breslev and Cognitive Therapy:
Conceptual and Educational Similarities**

**Yaacov. J Katz
Professor Emeritus
Bar-Ilan University
Israel**

An Introduction to
ATINER's Conference Paper Series

ATINER started to publish this conference papers series in 2012. It includes only the papers submitted for publication after they were presented at one of the conferences organized by our Institute every year. This paper has been peer reviewed by at least two academic members of ATINER.

Dr. Gregory T. Papanikos
President
Athens Institute for Education and Research

This paper should be cited as follows:

Katz, Y., J., (2016). "Rabbi Nachman of Breslev and Cognitive Therapy: Conceptual and Educational Similarities ", Athens: ATINER'S Conference Paper Series, No: EDU2016-2125.

Athens Institute for Education and Research
8 Valaoritou Street, Kolonaki, 10671 Athens, Greece
Tel: + 30 210 3634210 Fax: + 30 210 3634209 Email: info@atiner.gr URL:
www.atiner.gr

URL Conference Papers Series: www.atiner.gr/papers.htm

Printed in Athens, Greece by the Athens Institute for Education and Research. All rights reserved. Reproduction is allowed for non-commercial purposes if the source is fully acknowledged.

ISSN: 2241-2891

09/02/2017

Rabbi Nachman of Breslev and Cognitive Therapy: Conceptual and Educational Similarities

**Yaacov. J Katz
Professor Emeritus
Bar-Ilan University
Israel**

Abstract

Rabbi Nachman of Breslev, born in 1772, was the great-grandson of Rabbi Yisrael Baal Shem Tov (Master of the Good Name) and founder of the Chassidic movement. He grew up to be an outstanding and charismatic Chassidic master. During his lifetime he attracted a group of devoted followers who looked to him as their prime source of spiritual guidance in their quest for God. The teachings of Rabbi Nachman focused on a number of key concepts such as faith in God, simplicity, study of Jewish sources (bible, talmud, legal code) individual and private prayer, and joy. He taught his followers that deviant past actions result from perceiving illusions which contorted reality. In addition, these illusions which led in the past to transgressions and deviant religious and social behavior, need to be rationally understood in order to erase them. The individual needs to focus on the rational present in order to improve his or her perceptions and actions and to live according to God's will.

Unlike classical depth psychology which dwells on problematic key personality issues linked to the individual's past and are usually embedded in the subconscious or the unconscious, cognitive therapy suggests that problematic issues affecting the individual can be dealt with by helping the individual to rationally overcome difficulties by identifying and changing dysfunctional thinking, beliefs, behavior, and emotional responses. Cognitive therapy consists of testing the assumptions which one makes and identifying how some of one's usually unquestioned thoughts are distorted, unrealistic and unhelpful on the one hand and what the individual needs to do in order to view life rationally on the other.

The conceptual definitions used by Rabbi Nachman in his theological model expounded in the latter part of the eighteenth century and by those espousing the model underlying cognitive therapy in the 20th and 21st centuries are remarkably similar and seem to have evolved from the same psychological assumptions. The similarities between the principles underlying two theories are analyzed and discussed in the present paper.

Keywords:

Introduction

The Chassidic (Piety) movement was founded in the early 18th-century Eastern Europe as a reaction against traditional Orthodox Judaism that traditionally focused almost solely on legalistic and intellectual aspects of the Jewish religion till that time. The founder of the movement, Rabbi Israel Baal Shem Tov (Master of the Good Name) and known as the Besht, born in 1698 and died in 1760, was recognized as a charismatic miracle worker who was able to influence the lives of hundreds and perhaps even thousands of disciples and followers. Rabbi Israel recognized the acute difficulties suffered by the Jewish masses in the 17th and 18th centuries. These difficulties included religious discrimination which in many cases led to anti-semitic violence, poverty and limited civil rights and led Rabbi Israel to believe that the Jewish masses needed to be encouraged to adopt religious spirituality and prayer as a fundamental aspect of faith. He preached that it was the prerogative of all to establish a relationship with God, similar to the relationship between a son and his father. He added that all Jews, especially the poor masses who were characterized by ignorance, poverty and bleak living conditions, could fully realize their religious aims and goals without feeling any inferiority when compared to those better educated in their religious knowledge and perceived as the more highly esteemed Jewish intelligentsia (Schochet, 1961).

Rabbi Nachman Of Breslev

Rabbi Nachman ben Simcha (1772-1810) was the great grandson of Rabbi Israel Baal Shem Tov, born about a decade after the Besht died. Rabbi Nachman was born at a time when the Chassidic movement entered its first serious crisis. A week after his birth, the opponents of the Chassidic movement issued a decree of excommunication against the movement and about six months later the Besht's successor, the Maggid (Preacher) of Mezritch, passed away. As Rabbi Nachman's father, as well as two of his mother's brothers were renowned disciples of the Besht, Rabbi Nachman's family connections were naturally in his favor and facilitated his joining the inner circle of the Besht's closest disciples. Rabbi Nachman imbibed his great grandfathers' spirit and teachings as passed on to him by the Besht's closest confidants and as he grew up it became apparent that he had the potential to become a prominent leader in the Chassidic movement.

After his wedding, Rabbi Nachman moved to his father-in-law's town, Ossatin, and lived there for about five years. From there, he moved to Medvedevka, where he began to attract a large following, among whom were prominent Chassidic masters who had large followings of disciples. In 1798-1799 Rabbi Nachman made a pilgrimage to the Holy Land. On his return to Ukraine he moved to the Jewish center of Zlatipolia and in the summer of 1802 he settled in Breslev where he met Rabbi Natan Sternhartz who was to become his prime disciple and editor of his theological and philosophical works.

Rabbi Nachman took ill with tuberculosis and as his illness became more serious, he became very weak and frail and realized that his illness was incurable. He began making arrangements to move to Uman, where he chose to be buried because in Uman there had been a huge massacre of some 20,000 Jews by the Haidemacks in 1768. He told his disciples that as his death was approaching, he wished to be buried close to those who died as martyrs. The move to Uman was accelerated by a fire that destroyed Rabbi Nachman's home in Breslev and in May 1810 he moved into a house provided by the Jewish community of Uman (Kramer, 1989).

Rabbi Nachman's Guiding Principles

Although Rabbi Nachman became a controversial figure as a result of a bitter feud with another famous Chassidic leader, Rabbi Aryeh Leib of Shpola who contended that he deviated from the teachings of classical Judaism and from the teachings of the Besht, Rabbi Nachman increasingly became one of the most influential Chassidic leaders of his time. In his seminal book, *Likutey Moharan*, in which he laid out the principles governing his particular interpretation of Chassidic Judaism, Rabbi Nachman indicated that achieving spiritual well-being and religious coherence with God was the prerogative of anyone who accepted the principles designed to ensure personal well-being as well as self-satisfaction and self-actualization are enumerated below:

Devotion to a Tzaddik (Holy Man)

Devotion to a Tzaddik, (holy man) is a central issue in Chassidic thought according to Rabbi Nachman. Each individual is required to identify a Tzaddik to serve as a teacher and a spiritual mentor. The Tzaddik under no circumstances is perceived as an intermediary between the individual and God, but rather serves as a role model who influences and guides the individual in his religious and social deportment. The Tzaddik also serves as a spiritual confidant and instructor who is qualified to assist the individual to overcome psychological feelings of incoherence and feelings of guilt that result from unseemly religious or social behavior. The Tzaddik maps out a behavioral plan that will contribute to the allaying of the individual's negative feelings and emotions and will enhance the individual's chances of drawing closer to God (Green, 1992).

Hitbodedut - Private Meditation

Although Rabbi Nachman religiously preached that the three organized prayer sessions (shacharit – morning prayer; mincha – afternoon prayer; arvit – evening prayer) are mandatory for every Jew, the most important platform for the individual's relationship with God is daily private meditation. In this daily ritual the individual converses with God and discusses his daily problems and needs just as a son converses with and takes advice from his father. The daily

meditation should take place in nature where the individual will be alone with God, thereby being able to concentrate on his needs (Bergman, 2006).

Tikkun Haklali - General Remedy

The Tikkun HaKlali consists of the following ten Psalms said in this order: 16, 32, 41, 42, 59, 77, 90, 105, 137, and 150. The aim of reciting the Tikkun Haklali is to undo the feelings of guilt and depression that lie at the core of any sin and to encourage a feeling of atonement and emotional well-being. Rabbi Nachman viewed the Tikkun Haklali as a corner stone of belief and a few months before his death, Rabbi Nachman appointed two of his closest disciples, Rabbi Aharon of Breslev and Rabbi Naftali of Nemirov, to act as witnesses to an unprecedented vow in which he said: "If an individual comes to my grave, gives a coin to charity, and says the Tikkun HaKlali, I will do my utmost to extract him from the depths of Gehinnom, irrespective of the sins perpetrated by the individual in the past" (Greenbaum, 1987).

Pilgrimage to Ensure Penitence, Self-Fulfilment and Self-Actualization

Rabbi Nachman said that the greatest innovation in his belief system is the way his followers are required to spend Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year festival. According to Rabbi Nachman, all his followers, both in his life time as well as after his death, are required to make a pilgrimage to Uman to spend the Jewish New Year at his graveside praying to God for a good new year. All who undertake the pilgrimage, pray at Rabbi Nachman's grave and also utter the ten psalms of the Tikkun Haklali will be blessed with a good year (Shulman, 1993), with enhanced religious fervor, emotional well-being and the ability to adopt rational behavior.

Service of God

Rabbi Nachman demanded that his followers maintain simplicity and naiveté in their belief in God and concentrate on doing the best they can for themselves, their families, their fellow human beings and their communities. According to Rabbi Nachman true religious belief in God is a simplistic process without the individual needing to delve into the intellectual and philosophical meanings of God and existence. Simplicity and naiveté enhance the individual's ability to draw closer to God without raising doubts or questions (Kramer, 1989) and lead to enhanced emotional well-being.

Happiness and Optimism

According to Rabbi Nachman an important and central precept of Judaism is happiness. The individual is required to strive for happiness irrespective of his or her personal situation and feelings. In the event of feelings of sadness and depression the individual needs to force him or herself to adopt rational thought

processes and behaviors in belief that true happiness will be enhanced. He encouraged his followers to clap, sing and dance during or after their prayers in an effort to maintain happiness which is a vital condition for drawing closer to God (Shulman, 1993) as well as to positive emotional well-being.

Religious Study

Unlike most of the other leaders of the emerging Chassidic movement, Rabbi Nachman insisted that his disciples maintain a strict study regimen in which each individual is obliged to study bible, mishna (legal aspect of the talmud), gemara (hermeneutical aspect of the talmud), halacha (legal law), zohar (handbook of mysticism) and Likutey Moharan (handbook of the Breslev Chassidic sect). Rabbi Nachman implored his followers to study all the above on a daily basis, each individual according to his ability and understanding in order to continually enhance knowledge of the classical sources and to draw closer to God (Greenbaum, 1987). According to Rabbi Nachman, a deeper understanding of religious sources positively contributes to the individual's feeling of emotional well-being.

Guiding Principles of Cognitive Therapy

According to Beck (2011) cognitive therapy, founded and published by Aaron Beck (1979) is on the concept that emotional and behavioral problems in an individual are usually the result of maladaptive or faulty ways of thinking and distorted attitudes toward oneself and others. The objective of the therapy is to identify these faulty cognitions and replace them with more adaptive ones. The therapist takes the role of an active guide who attempts to make the client aware of these distorted thinking patterns and who helps the client correct and revise his or her perceptions and attitudes by citing evidence to the contrary or by eliciting it from the client. The major guiding principles of cognitive therapy (based on the ten principles proposed by Beck, 2011), are listed below:

First Principle

Cognitive therapy is based on the definition of the client's emotional and behavioral problems and requires a sound alliance that nurtures cooperation between the client and the therapist who through empathy, support and goal orientation is able to offer the client a realistic as well as optimistic view of the future.

Second Principle

Cognitive therapy focuses on goals to be adopted by the client as well as on ways to solve problems that have disrupted the client's feelings and behavior and have led to the client's need for professional help. The therapist needs to clarify

the rationale of these goals and to enhance the client's chances of adopting as well as realizing these goals.

Third Principle

Cognitive therapy focuses on the present and emphasizes the importance of coming to terms with present needs and difficulties and seeking solutions to these and difficulties. Focus on what realistically can be done to enhance emotional well-being is preferable to delving into problems and distortions that are rooted in the client's past and are part of history that cannot easily be rewritten.

Fourth Principle

Cognitive therapy emphasizes collaboration between the client and the therapist and active participation of the therapist in mapping out potential emotional and behavioral avenues of endeavor for the client that will assist him or her to overcome the distorted and detached emotions and behaviors characterizing his or her feelings and functioning.

Fifth Principle

Cognitive therapy prepares the client to adequately identify, evaluate and respond to dysfunctional feelings and behaviors. The therapist helps the client view emotions and behaviors rationally and provides the client with the ability to adopt feelings and behaviors that are congruent with the reality in which the client lives and functions.

Sixth Principle

Cognitive therapy perceives the therapist as an instructor who educates and guides the client towards increased autonomy in the adoption of emotions and behaviors that could well lead to enhanced emotional well-being and self-actualization.

Rabbi Nachman and Cognitive Therapy

When comparing the Rabbi Nachman's guiding principles with the guiding principles of cognitive therapy, one can perceive a marked similarity between the two systems. In Rabbi Nachman's writings (Likutey Moharan) reference is made to many principles that characterize the guiding principles of cognitive therapy. The mentoring and guidance suggested by Rabbi Nachman for his followers in need of emotional support (following Shulman, 1993) and the role of the modern day cognitive therapist (following Beck, 2011) are remarkably similar. According to Green (1992) Rabbi Nachman believed that the individual has the

capacity to maintain willful control over his or her mind and thought processes. Pies (2008) indicated that Rabbi Nachman's worldview is fundamentally cognitive and rational; the individual's self-esteem and mood are dependent upon the setting of rational goals through positive cognitive judgment and attitude. Although the individual may draw close to God by means of simple faith, he or she is best able to surmount despair by thinking his or her way out of it. Greenberg & Scheffler (2008) confirmed that Rabbi Nachman of Breslev adopted a cognitive style approach when advising and counseling followers who turned to him for guidance when in a state of emotional and spiritual distress.

Beck (2011) laid down the principles of cognitive therapy and emphasized the importance of analyzing the emotions and feelings of the individual in need together with him or her so as to reach an understanding as to what is troubling him or her, just as Rabbi Nachman demanded that the followers of the Tzaddik make a supreme effort to understand the source of their negative emotions, behavior and deportment. Thus the therapist-client relationship as defined by Beck closely resembles the mentor-follower relationship described by Rabbi Nachman. In addition, the cognitive therapist and the client need to decide how to work together on the individual's problems and what means will lead to an improvement in the client's emotional situation just as Rabbi Nachman suggests that the Tzaddik needs to urge his followers in need of advice and counseling to adopt faith and behavioral patterns that will enhance a rational perception of their true needs.

Beck (2011) emphasized that cognitive therapy recognizes the importance of focusing on present problems and feelings in order to correctly ascertain what is necessary for the client to do in order to attain improved psychological coherence. Rabbi Nachman similarly indicated that, as the past cannot be changed and the future is unclear, the present needs to be examined by both Tzaddik and followers in order to provide the followers with rational plans to solve their problems. Lastly the cognitive therapist uses the relationship with the client to form an educative alliance in which the client learns what feelings and behaviors will contribute to improved emotional well-being and normative behavior. Similarly Rabbi Nachman stated that the relationship between the Tzaddik and his followers must lead the followers to an improved understanding of their spiritual needs and to their internalization of the how to rationally realize these needs in their daily lives.

Significance of Rabbi Nachman's Worldview

Rabbi Nachman of Breslev who lived in the late 18th and early 19th centuries became a popular Chassidic master and Tzaddik in his life, but more especially, two centuries after his death. His major appeal to the masses is based on his psycho-cognitive perceptions that affirm the ability of all individuals to control their own destiny by positive thought and actions. In addition Rabbi Nachman preached that any negative emotional-religious or social behavior that characterized the individual in his or her past can be totally superseded by

positive emotional-religious and social behavior in the present. Positive thoughts and actions in the present are able to displace negative experiences that occurred in the individual's past, thereby providing the individual with the ability to embrace a more rational and optimistic worldview. In addition, the belief that the individual can converse with God as a child converses with his or her father or mother adds to the reinforcement of a positive and optimistic outlook on life. In post-modern Jewish society Rabbi Nachman's teachings are becoming increasingly more popular and provide his followers with enhanced religious, spiritual and emotional well-being in a troubled world.

References

- Beck, A.T. (1979). *Cognitive therapy and the emotional disorders*. New York, NY: Meridian – A Division of Penguin Books.
- Beck, J. S. (2011). *Cognitive behavior therapy: Basics and beyond* (2nd ed.) New York, NY: Guilford.
- Bergman, O. (2006). *Where earth and heaven kiss: A guide to Rebbe Nachman's path of meditation*. Jerusalem: Breslev Research Institute.
- Green, Arthur (1992). *Tormented master: The life and spiritual quest of Rabbi Nahman of Bratslav*. Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing.
- Greenbaum, Avraham (1987). *Tzaddik: A portrait of Rabbi Nachman*. Jerusalem: Breslev Research Institute.
- Greenberg, D. & Shefler, G. (2008). Ultra-orthodox rabbinic responses to religious obsessive-compulsive disorder. *Israel Journal of Psychiatry Related Sciences*, 45(3), 183–192.
- Kramer, C. (1989). *Crossing the narrow bridge*. Jerusalem: Breslev Research Institute.
- Pies, R. (2008). Integrating the rational and the mystical: The insights and methods of three hassidic rebbeim. *Hakirah* 6, 139-146.
- Schochet, J.I. (1961). *Rabbi Israel Baal Shem Tov*, Toronto: Liebermann Publishers
- Shulman, Y.D. (1993). *The chambers of the palace: Teachings of Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav*. Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, Inc.