

Comparing Chabad and Breslov: A Response to Rabbi Naftali Citron

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The diversity of approaches to divine service in the Chassidic world provides a range of options for people on different spiritual wavelengths. But this diversity has also led to many misconceptions about what these various paths have and do not have in common. One misunderstanding that keeps getting recycled caught my eye in an email I received about a recent conference in Manhattan on Jewish spirituality. Rabbi Naftali Citron of the Carlebach Shul, who organized the event, writes:

"Different streams within the Chassidic community emphasize different aspects of Divine service. Some emphasize faith in *tzaddikim*, others, mystical contemplation. In Kotsk, the truth was the most important goal; in Vurka, it was loving people.

"Two Chassidic schools with distinct approaches to Divine service are Chabad and Breslov. Chabad, whose name indicates wisdom, understanding, and knowledge, is primarily focused on a mystical understanding of G-d and of the spiritual and physical universe inhabited by the Divine. The ultimate awareness is "*Ein Od Milvado*:" there is nothing but G-d. One is nothing, but is totally part of G-d. The Alter Rebbe of Chabad developed the teachings of the Arizal into a philosophy that finds G-d in everything and comprehends that everything flows from G-d's Oneness.

"These idea of G-d's oneness was given a new emphasis over the last fifty years by the seventh Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, z'l. He stressed the concept of "*deera b'tachtonim*," the Divine desire to dwell even in the lowest of places. This concept was actualized in the creation of thousands of Chabad houses, with Chabad trained emissaries of the Rebbe traveling to the most challenging areas of the world to spread Judaism. Their philosophy and mission is that G-d is everywhere, even in places that don't recognize Him.

"In Breslov, the teachings of Reb Nachman -- faith and distance from G-d -- play a significant role. The ideas of Reb Nachman (while also grounded in Kabbalah) do not emphasize the importance of mystical comprehension as put forth by Chabad. Rather, the connection to the Divine is based not on G-d's immanence but on the great distance that exists between oneself and G-d. The shortcomings of human experience are both an obstacle and an impetus towards faith, hope, and, ultimately, redemption. This is epitomized in the words of Rav Nachman's song, "the whole world is just a narrow bridge, the main principle is not to have any fear." We live in a challenging world. G-d is far from us, but don't despair; G-d will be there when you call out to Him. This approach, which acknowledges our flaws, appeals to the brokenness of our generation. (Reb Shlomo moved from Chabad.) Reb Shlomo frequently invoked the Breslov paradigm once he realized how responsive the Hippie generation was to Reb Nachman's teachings.

"The two schools Chabad and Breslov also have differing ways of prayer. In Chabad, the prayer is contemplative and inward; it finds G-d everywhere. The Siddur, combined with hours of meditation, can lead the supplicant into a sublime state. In Breslov, one goes out into the field, and talks to G-d. In a sense, G-d is outside the individual and there is the need to talk to Him, as if to a friend. The emotional intensity of speaking to G-d is both raw and powerful in a way that the more silent meditative approach of Chabad is not. To have a conversation with G-d can be difficult to do while following the prescribed prayers of the Siddur.

"There is a lot of joy in both movements, which is perceived in the music of Breslov and Chabad. With some exceptions, Chabad *niggunim* have a very contemplative aspect while it is easier to access joy in a Breslov *niggun*. *Tanya*, Chabad's primary text, describes its form of praying as a "long shorter way." In Breslov and other Chassidic schools, the distance from G-d creates a call of extreme yearning. It emphasizes the value of emotions over intellectual understanding.

"Although Reb Shlomo had his Chassidic training in Chabad, once he tried reaching an alienated generation, with no knowledge of Judaism, he turned to Breslov and Ishbitz to offer the needed emotional impact. Today, the Carlebach philosophy is most identified with the Ishbitz Chassidic stream, which -- like Reb Nachman -- emphasizes faith..."

Bibliography: *Mystical Hasidism and Hasidism of Faith, a Typological Analysis* by Joseph Weiss.

Response

As a born and bred Lubavitcher Chassid, Rabbi Naftoli Citron would probably take a dim view of any analysis of Chabad written by someone who never "tasted the kasha in Tomchei Temimim," regardless of that individual's scholarly qualifications. If not, he is an unusually open-minded man; but certainly the average Lubavitcher would have greater confidence in a member of the Chabad community expert in its philosophy and way of divine service. This is not because you have to be a "member of the club" to have an opinion, but simply because if you don't live and breathe there, inevitably you will be relegated to peering through a keyhole. Therefore, it is surprising that Rabbi Citron bases his knowledge of Rabbi Nachman's teachings and path of divine service on the analysis of a secular academic, the late Joseph Weiss. One would have expected Rabbi Citron to base his remarks on firsthand knowledge, gleaned from Breslover Chassidim. Unfortunately, he did not. Thus he did a disservice (albeit unwittingly) to Breslov, his readers, and himself.

I wouldn't venture any criticism of Rabbi Citron's presentation of Chabad, since this is his area of expertise -- aside from voicing my surprise that he does not mention the Baal Shem Tov in describing the roots of the Alter Rebbe's philosophy. I am also compelled to mention this glaring omission because it touches on the misrepresentation of Breslov in his subsequent remarks.

Mystical Philosophies: Rabbi Citron sees the difference between Chabad and Breslov as primarily that of a contemplative mysticism, which conceives G-d to be immanent

within all things, versus a spiritual path based on faith in a remote G-d, combined the imperative to seek G-d through longing. Let us take a closer look at this dichotomy.

First, the concept of “*Ein Ode Milvado*,” in the mystical sense that nothing but G-d truly exists, is not unique to Chabad, but pervades Chassidic literature. (Scholars find precedents for this theology in the Shelah Ha-kadosh, Maharal, Ramak, and *Tikkunei Zohar*, among other pre-Chassidic sources.) This doctrine is the cornerstone of the spiritual edifice of the Baal Shem Tov. It appears again and again in the writings of his holy disciples, including the Maggid of Mezeritch, Toldos Yaakov Yosef, Rabbi Pinchas of Koretz, Chernobyler Maggid, and Kedushas Levi, among many others. This belief in G-d’s omnipresence is a legacy of the Baal Shem Tov common to all Chassidim – including Breslov.

Rabbi Nachman discusses this issue in a number of lessons in *Likkutei Moharan*. One example is Torah 64 (“*Bo El Paroh*”), where he delves into the mystery of how G-d is present even in His seeming absence. We traverse the terrifying void of divine self-concealment through faith. Compare this to the words of the Baal Shem Tov: “As soon as one realizes that G-d is hidden, there is no longer any concealment and all negativity disappears” (*Toldos Yaakov Yosef, Bereshis*).

Rabbi Nachman’s foremost disciple and scribe, Reb Noson, also affirms this concept: “When the verse states ‘*ein ode milvado*,’ it means to say that nothing exists but G-d. Above and below, in heaven and on earth, everything is absolutely naught and without substance – although this is impossible to explain, but can only be grasped according to the intuition of each person” (*Likkutei Halakhos, Matnas Sh’chiv me-Ra’ 2:2*). Thus, there does not seem to be any significant theological difference here between Breslov and the Baal Shem Tov, and by implication, the school of Chabad.

This is borne out by an oral tradition. Once a Chassid met the Tzemach Tzedek of Lubavitch, who was passing through his village. Upon hearing that he was a Breslover, the Tzemach Tzedek commented: “*Benei ish echad anachnu . . .* We are sons of the same man!” (Genesis 42:11) (cited in *Sefer Shivcho shel Tzaddik*). This remark probably referred to the issue of the Baal Shem Tov’s immanentism, among many other common points shared by Chabad and Breslov.

Yet the intellectual instincts of Joseph Weiss (and by default, Rabbi Citron) are not entirely off the mark. It is undeniable that the mood of the Breslover teachings is not the same as that of the Chabad teachings, or for that matter, those of the Baal Shem Tov and the Maggid.

One thing that is readily apparent is that Rabbi Nachman repeatedly addresses human struggle, and uses more personal and experiential language, as does Reb Noson in *Likkutei Halakhos*. Perhaps it is the empathetic quality of Breslov and the deep *chizuk* of Rabbi Nachman's declaration "*Ein shum ye'ush ba-'olam klal* . . . Nothing in the world is hopeless" that appeals to so many spiritually seekers -- hippies and non-hippies alike. Rabbi Citron rightly acknowledges this.

However, the reason behind Rabbi Nachman's motto of "no despair" is the very omnipresence of Hashem that Rabbi Citron takes to be foreign to Breslov. This is evident from many discourses, among them *Likkutei Moharan* II, 78, known to Breslover Chassidim as "*Prostock*" (meaning something like "peasant" or "commoner"). One of the central concepts of this awesome lesson is that everything in the universe is animated by the Torah, either in a revealed way or a hidden way; and by connecting to both aspects -- that is, the sacred and the mundane -- the *tzaddik* enables the rest of us to make these connections, as well. Therefore, no place or situation exists in which one cannot connect to G-d.

Hisbodedus: In *Likkutei Moharan* I, 52 ("*Ha-ne'or ba-Laylah*"), Rabbi Nachman outlines his practice of *hisbodedus*, going out to the fields and forests to commune with G-d and pray in one's native tongue. There, he explains how through *hisbodedus*, one can eradicate all unholy desires and negative traits, until one uproots the very root of ego -- enabling one to realize the "Imperative Existent." This is the transforming realization that nothing truly exists but Divinity. Speaking to G-d in the night is an inner workshop to attain this illumination. The forest or field in which one stands is actually the "forest" or "field" within each person. Thus, we find that *hisbodedus* is not the antithesis of contemplative prayer. It is just another way of "getting there."

In this spirit, Rabbi Nachman Goldstein of Tcherin, the foremost Breslover teacher of the third generation, wrote: “The word *hisbodedus* is a construct of *badad*, meaning either ‘seclusion’ or ‘oneness,’ as in the phrase ‘they shall be *bad be-vad*, one with one [i.e. of equal weight]’ (Rashi on Exodus 30:34). That is, you must become “one” with G-d to the extent that all sensory awareness ceases and the only reality you perceive is Godliness. This is the mystical meaning of ‘*ein ode milvado . . . There is nothing but G-d alone*’ “ (*Zimras Ha’aretz*, 52).

Hisbodedus is also mentioned in the Chabad literature. In his introduction to the Mittler Rebbe’s “*Poke’ach Ivrim*,” Rabbi Yosef Yitzchok Schneersohn the previous Lubavitcher Rebbe, tells how he was walking with his father, the Rebbe Rashab, early in the morning, and how they encountered his teacher, Rabbi Shmuel Bezael, returning from *hisbodedus* in the forest, where he regularly poured out his heart to G-d. It is apparent from the author’s description that this sort of *hisbodedus* was no contradiction to the Chabad method of contemplative prayer. In fact, the previous Rebbe has much to say in praise of *hisbodedus* in the first volume (toward the end) of *Likkutei Dibburim*, his collected talks. Friends in the Chabad community have also told me that the Lubavitcher Rebbe once gave a *sichah* about *hisbodedus* in 770 on Rabbi Nachman’s *yahrtzeit*, the second day of Chol HaMoed Sukkos.

Another thing that is distinctive of Breslov is that Rabbi Nachman goes down “into the trenches” with us. To paraphrase the English novelist Eric Ambler, he is not just a “non-swimmer working as a lifeguard.” This quality is associated with the *sefirah* of *Netzach*, meaning either “victory” or “eternity.” In the writings of the Arizal, *Netzach* is represented by the *chirik*, the vowel point represented by a single dot. Symbolically, this dot alludes to the descent of wisdom from the heights of creation to the lowest depths, thus to accomplish the rectification of all souls and holy “sparks.” (Incidentally, the Hebrew word “*netzach*” has the same numerical value as “Nachman” (148). And Rabbi Nachman habitually took the fourth *‘aliyah* to the Torah, corresponding to *Netzach*. And he left the world on the fourth day of Sukkos, corresponding to *Netzach*.)

Yet, as the previous Lubavitcher Rebbe pointed out in his last epic discourse, “*Basi le-Gani*,” *Netzach* receives its power to overcome obstacles from the *sefirah* of *Keser*, the “Divine Crown.” *Keser* alludes to the loftiest transcendental realm, where

“somethingness” pours forth from “nothingness,” and Creator and creation meet. Thus its innermost point is associated with the quality of *‘oneg*, delight. This is the sweetness and peace that prevails on the plane beyond all dualism and strife, where all opposites dissolve. The outer aspect of *Keser*, the “face” directed toward the unborn world that is destined to come into existence, is associated with *ratzon*, meaning “will” or “desire.” This indicates G-d’s utterly mysterious and unknowable predilection to create the universe. Both qualities of *‘oneg* and *ratzon* figure prominently in Rabbi Nachman’s teachings.

Rabbi Nachman and the Cosmic Paradox: Another factor that conditions this difference in mood is the pervasive sense of paradox in Rabbi Nachman’s thought. I have often described this aspect of the Breslover teachings as being like taking a shower in hot and cold water at the same time. (This comparison may not work for everybody, but I don’t know how else to describe it.)

This sense of paradox conditions the way Rabbi Nachman discusses immanence. For example, in *Likkutei Moharan* II, 7, he speaks of two perceptions: “*Ayeh makom kevodo . . . Where is the place of His Glory?*” indicating G-d’s utter transcendence; and “*M’lo kol ha’aretz kevodo . . . The entire earth is full of His Glory,*” indicating G-d’s immanence. Both perceptions are true – which is a paradox. Moreover, each needs the other. Each perception must be tempered by its opposite in order to produce *yirah*, meaning fear or awe. (It is self-understood that we are talking about *yiras ha-romemus*, religious awe, not *yiras ha-onesh*, fear of punishment.) This produces the distance from G-d that makes it possible to engage in divine service and not disappear from the radar screen. This distance is necessary if we are to serve G-d in this world, according to His will. As the Lubavitcher Rebbe also used to say repeatedly “*Ha-ma’aseh hu ha-ikkar . . . The main thing is action*” (*Avos* 1:17).

Philosophy or Spiritual Wavelength: I would not venture to say anything about where Rabbi Nachman or any *tzaddik* received his illuminations. Rabbi Nachman is so far beyond our grasp – we don’t even begin to know how much we don’t know! However, I believe that this is where the real answers lie: in the inner world of each master. Rather than search for differences in philosophy or theology or kabbalistic metaphysics to explain the diversity of Chassidic approaches – and the very inclination to do so reflects

the philosophical sensibility of Chabad – perhaps it would be more fruitful to ascribe them to *shoresh neshamah*. By this, I mean the innate spiritual characteristics of the *tzaddikim* and axiomatically the souls ancillary to them. To be sure, these differences defy the perception of ordinary people. But the *tzaddikim* themselves have given us a few clues that we may be permitted to follow. If the teachings of the Alter Rebbe and his successors are, by their own assertion, an expression of *Chokhmah-Binah-Da'as* (Chabad), those of Rabbi Nachman and his school seem to be more aligned with the *sefiros* of *Keser* and *Netzach*, for the reasons given above. Thus, we need not discuss philosophy but the nature of mystical perception, and the need for each seeker to find the right guide, according to his own inner imperatives. Each *tzaddik* has his own *neshamos*, and each *neshamah* is uniquely connected to a certain *tzaddik*.

Chabad and ChaGaS: Rabbi Citron proposes that his maternal grand-uncle, Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach, of blessed memory, turned to the teachings of Breslov and Ishbitz in response to the plight of his followers. By implication, he suggests that Reb Shlomo set aside the rarified teachings of Chabad in order to supply a fallen generation with a message that had more “emotional impact,” as Rabbi Citron calls it. Emotionalism is often associated with the *sefiros* of *Chesed-Gevurah-Tiferes*, known by the acronym “ChaGaS.” Thus, Rabbi Citron suggests that what Reb Shlomo tried to supply was the ChaGaS that had been somewhat lacking in the world of Chabad he left behind.

Rabbi Citron may be right about this. However, I suspect that this is not the whole story. Reb Shlomo was not only packaging Yiddishkeit according to the needs of his audience, but was personally involved in the exploration of the Breslov and Ishbitz literature. This was evident from his *shiurim*, and from the other Chassidic teachers he sought out. (One such master was Rabbi Gedaliah Kenig, *zatza!*, my teacher's father, and a prominent Breslover leader in Jerusalem.) If the exalted intellectualism of Chabad was the only problem, Reb Shlomo could have limited himself to simple teachings of a purely emotional nature. But we see that he did not. Instead he delved deeply into Breslov, Ishbitz, Piacetzna, and other extremely profound schools of Chassidism. There was surely a good reason for this. Rabbi Citron should give his uncle a little more credit!

Moreover, Breslov and Ishbitz cannot be so conveniently rolled up and stuffed into the same drawer. The numerous other branches of Chassidism are not all the same, mere

variants on the theme of “ChaGaS,” as certain members of the Chabad community mistakenly think. Breslov is an entire world, Ishbitz is another world, Komarno is another, Slonim is still another. They are not identical! Therefore, we must reject this simplistic dichotomy.

Music: This subtle bias also colors Rabbi Citron’s remarks on the differences between the musical traditions of Chabad and Breslov. It is true that Chabad possesses a rich musical legacy, which includes many contemplative works of a deeply stirring nature. And it is also true that many Breslover *niggunim* are extremely joyous (as anyone who has ever attended a “Simply Tsfat” concert will attest). However, from Rabbi Citron’s description, one might conclude that Breslover *niggunim* are little more than happy ditties, the musical equivalent of those pictures of dancing Chassidim that adorn so many Jewish dining room walls. This is easily refuted by anyone who has heard a group of “real life” Breslover Chassidim sing *deveykus niggunim*, such as those composed by Rabbi Nachman, or the powerful melodies of third-generation Breslover Reb Meir Leib Blecher, or the many bittersweet lyrical gems of anonymous Breslover composers.

In conclusion, the only *tikkun* I can suggest is for Rabbi Citron to pack up his family and spend a Shabbos in a Breslov community such as Tsfat, where he can hear the music for himself, and see what a Breslover *chaburah* looks like without binoculars. Whichever Shabbos he picks, I’m sure he won’t be the only “Carlebach Chassid” in the circle of dancers after *davenning* on Friday night!

Questions and Answers

This essay first appeared online on asimplejew.blogspot.com. In the dialogue that ensued, several points were raised that extended the discussion in some interesting directions. A few of those points are included here.

Q. Maybe Rabbi Sears could point out what he thinks separates Chabad and Breslov most? Too me, it seems that all Chassidic groups more-or-less share the same ideas, the differences being on emphasis. Therefore you can find any specific topic discussed in any Chassidic group’s literature, compare it to another’s, and they should more-or-less be the on the same page.

Rabbi Citron probably didn't do a good job of clarifying this, but ultimately the "differences" are minor, and he just tried to highlight the difference in *ruach* (as Rabbi Sears points out, as well). Breslov seems to emphasize the "*ratzo*," or spiritual ascent, whereas Chabad emphasizes the "*shov*," or return from this higher state to engage in the refinement and perfection of the world.

A. I don't know the answer, either. But it seems to me that you are basically right. Although both paths speak of "*ratzo*" and "*shov*," Breslov seems to emphasize "*ratzo*," or at least the primacy of "*ratzo*," and Chabad, "*shov*." (Take a look at *Parpara'os le-Chokhmah* on *Likkutei Moharan* II, 119, for an extremely interesting reflection on Reb Nachman's view of 'Olam HaZeh as Gehinnom!) One could find plenty of "*shov*" statements in Breslov, too; e.g. the Rebbe once remarked that for him, the '*ikkar* is *dibbur* and reaching people. And in the great *hisbodedus* teaching, *Likkutei Moharan* I, 52, the easily-overlooked central point appears at the end of the first section, where the Rebbe speaks about the fundamental importance of connecting to Hashem by performing His will; also the primacy of *simchah shel mitzvah* in *Likkutei Moharan* I, 24. However, in Chabad, "*shov*" gets most of the airplay, even to the exclusion of "*ratzo*." But I can't really prove this; it is only a subjective impression.

What I could not find a way to weave into the essay presented above was another few other points related to your question:

1. The very different infrastructure of Breslov has made a difference in how people "live the life." Although for example, Ger has had numerous *shtiblach* and *chaburos*, and is not as centralized as other *kehillos*; and today we have real *kehillos* in Breslov, which was rarely the case in the past, given that Breslov was a small, persecuted group -- yet in a way, all this is secondary to the *derech* of Breslov as formulated by Reb Noson and developed in the *seforim*. Breslov Chassidus seems to be more "portable" and personalized, and independent of *chaburos* (despite their desirability).

2. Another difference is the character of Breslover teachings vis-a-vis those of Chabad. Ours are "circular," while those of Chabad are linear; ours are symbolic-prophetic-poetic, while those of Chabad are rational and logical and square. Thus, it is not surprising that

Chabad is so deeply connected to the Rambam, while Breslov is full of spirals and loops and swoops, and is not "Greek" at all.

This has a big affect on which types of people each *derech* attracts, too. A lot of creative types wind up in Breslov, and more purely philosophical thinkers often turn to Chabad.

3. I heard that my teacher's father, Rabbi Gedaliah Kenig, *zatzal*, who started off as a *mashpiya* in Chabad during his early twenties and then turned to Breslov, once commented on this subject. "Chabad is essentially a *hesber*," he said, "while Breslov is a *gilu'i*, a revelation that NEEDS a *hesber*!"

Q. In my opinion, the thing that seems unique to Chabad is not so much *ein oid milvado*, but *'avodas 'atzmo*. The *'avodas 'atzmo* emphasis in the Ba'al HaTanya's *derech* is the one thing that I don't often see elsewhere. As I said, I'm talking about emphasis. Although I agree no group is anti-*'avodas-'atzmo*, i have never seen it emphasized the way it is in Chabad. Do you disagree with that? Please tell me where in Breslov it is given high emphasis?

A. As for *'avodas 'atzmo* -- if I understand the term correctly, i.e. that the Chassid has to do his own spiritual work and not just depend on the *tikkunim* and *hisorerus*, etc., of the *tzaddik* -- the Breslover *mekoros* on this are beyond count!

For example, take a look in *Likkutei Eitzos*, under "*Tokhecha*." Or consider the following passages from *Chayei Moharan* (which are only excerpts):

1. The Rebbe once said that without a doubt, every one of us would finally succeed in fulfilling his mission in this world. "Hashem would never do such a thing to me, " the Rebbe said, "as to take one of my followers away from me in the middle..." That is, each of us would have enough time to struggle and systematically break through all of his negative traits until he reached the ultimate goal of creation... (sec. 302)

2. The Rebbe said: "Even the least of my followers will achieve..." (sec. 312)

3. "Anyone who pays attention to me and follows what I tell him to do will certainly become a great *tzaddik*, come what may..." (sec. 320)

4. "I am constantly standing and waiting and expecting and longing and yearning to Hashem to grant me the *zechus* to see you as I want you to be, serving Him in truth and sincerely, as I desire. And with G-d's help, it will be so..." (sec. 322)

5. He said that many stories would be told about his followers, stories and stories about each and every one of them. (sec. 327)

6. The Rebbe once said: "The only thing that gives me any pleasure and satisfaction is when I see one of my followers showing some sign of attachment to Torah and '*avodas Hashem*... I beg you: be good pure Jews! This is my only hope and desire!" (sec. 335)

The Rebbe surely does his part -- but we must do ours!