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The Seven Beggars' Wondrous Gifts, Part I

In loving memory of my mother Gittel bas Yitzchok / Grace Sears, a"h, who passed away after a long illness on 5 Adar II, 5768 (3.12.08). "Ki malakhav yetzaveh lakh lishmarkha be-khol derakhekha..." – may her neshamah have an aliyah.

This essay is based on Rabbi Nachman of Breslov's "Tale of the Seven Beggars," which was translated and annotated by the late Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan in "Rabbi Nachman's Stories" (Breslov Research Institute, and subsequently republished separately by Jewish Lights by special arrangement with BRI). I surely couldn't begin to do justice to the Rebbe's masterwork here, and therefore recommend that anyone who is unfamiliar with the full story get a copy of the book and read it. Then what we have written should be less obscure -- even though the entire subject is extremely obscure!

When faced with the blandishments of *olam hazeh* (or sometimes just the thought of them), Breslover Chassidim typically caution each other with a one-word reminder: "*Tachlis!*" -- meaning "Don't forget the true goal!" As Rabbi Nachman observes (*Likkutei Moharan* I, 268): "If a person doesn't consider the *tachlis*, of what purpose is his life?" Life is not a cosmic accident! It has a God-given purpose, which we must not lose sight of.

What is the nature of this *tachlis*? In the same lesson from *Likkutei Moharan*, the Rebbe states what may seem to be obvious, at least to his immediate circle of followers: the purpose of life in this world is to serve God. But he also explains that our divine service, though surely its own intrinsic reward, goes hand in hand with another dimension of the *tachlis* -- at the level of consciousness. This is the *da'as*, or higher awareness, associated with the "Future World." As the famous prophecy goes: "The knowledge (*de'ah*, a construct of *da'as*) of God will fill the earth like the water that covers the sea" (Isaiah 1:9). This is the Jewish equivalent of enlightenment in its most universal aspect. For the *da'as* of the "Future World" will reach all beings on all levels,

from the highest to the lowest, like the vastness of the water in the prophet's metaphor (for more on this subject, see the end of *Likkutei Moharan I*, 21).

In *Likkutei Moharan II*, 19, the Rebbe brings out another facet of this idea, telling us that this higher awareness is attained by performing the *mitzvos* and serving God with simplicity and faith, the cardinal virtues of his path. Clearly, the two dimensions of consciousness and action are inextricably connected. He similarly states at the beginning of *Likkutei Moharan II*, 37: "The main purpose is only to labor and proceed in the ways of God for the sake of His Name, in order to merit to recognize God and know Him. This is the *tachlis* – and this is what God desires: that we perceive Him."

He adds that this goal must not be approached in a materialistic way, but in keeping with the deepest longing of the soul. "One person might labor all of his days and pursue worldly desires in order to fill his belly with them," he explains, "while another might strive to attain the World to Come – but this, too, is called 'filling one's belly.' For he wishes to fill his belly and gratify his desire with the World to Come! The only difference is that he is a little wiser than the first . . . However, I don't choose to emulate either of them. All I want is to 'gaze upon the pleasantness of God' (Psalms 27:4)."

Thus, the "Future World" is not just the spiritual equivalent of cashing in our chips after a lucky day at the casino. It is actually the culmination of our *avodah* (spiritual effort): the experience of "gazing upon the pleasantness of God." This may be attained by the meritorious after death, as well as by the tzaddikim even in this world. The Gemara (*Berachos 17a*) says as much when it cites the custom of the sages to bless each other with the words: "May you behold your Hereafter (*olam habah*) in this life!"

Olam habah is more than a future realm or state of being, but a sublime perception that may be experienced here and now by the tzaddikim – and by those who are attached to them.

One way we can achieve this, the Rebbe tells us, is by conquering our anger with compassion (*Likkutei Moharan* I, 18). In so doing, we transcend our innate selfishness and get in touch with a greater reality – the transpersonal, integrated reality that is so vividly perceived by the tzaddikim. Another way is by heeding the guidance and advice of the tzaddikim, which not only sets our feet in the right direction, but also establishes a spiritual bond between us and the awesome sages who prescribed such holy advice (*Likkutei Moharan* II, 39).

Rabbi Nachman talks about the primacy of this relationship with the tzaddikim as it bears upon our reaching the true goal of life in his tale of the “Seven Beggars,” the culmination of the thirteen mystical stories for which the Rebbe is best known. The narrative is too lengthy and complex to retell here, but we can summarize a few of its key features: after a storm wind ravages the world, turning sea to dry land and dry land to sea, two little children, a boy and a girl, escape into a vast forest. There, hungry and thirsty and frightened, they encounter seven wandering beggars, who appear one after the next each day, and give the lost children bread and water, as well as a blessing. The nature of these blessings is that the children should become like their benefactors in a particular way. For each beggar possesses a physical disability – one is blind, one is deaf, etc. – but the seeming disability masks an awesome holy power. These blessings are assurances that the children will one day acquire the same lofty spiritual levels. Eventually, the homeless boy and girl find their way back to civilization and join a band of wandering hoboos, who adopt them and look after them.

These beggars represent the great tzaddikim throughout history, who sustained us again and again during our long and bitter exile; while the lost children represent the male and female aspects of the Jewish people (or maybe the Jewish people, represented as the groom, and the *Shekhinah* / Divine Presence, represented as the bride). The seven blessings, and subsequently, seven gifts, are that the children should become “just like” their nameless benefactors. This echoes the Rebbe’s declaration (*Chayei Moharan* 269), “I can make you tzaddikim *ki’moni mamash*, just like me!” On the one hand, this sounds pretty democratic: it means that we can all get there. On the other, it indicates that everything essentially depends on the tzaddik, who confers his attainments upon those who follow his guidance.

What are the wondrous blessings and gifts that the children in the Rebbe's story receive? We will describe the Seven Beggars' wedding presents in the [second part of this posting](#), and in so doing, try to get a clearer picture of what is meant by the "*tachlis*" in spiritual terms.

The Seven Beggars' Wondrous Gifts, Part II

In Rabbi Nachman's story of the Seven Beggars, each one of the wandering holy men gives the young bride and groom his most essential quality as a wedding present, this being his most fitting empowerment. If our hypothesis is correct, each gift is an aspect of the fully-realized state of being that is the tachlis, or ultimate spiritual goal. Together, these qualities paint a symbolic portrait of what Rabbi Nachman calls the "tzaddik emes," the perfected human being.

1. The Blind Beggar

The blessing of the Blind Beggar is: "You should be old like me; that is, you should have a long life, like mine. You think that I'm blind, but actually, I'm not blind at all. It is just that for me, the entire duration of the world's existence doesn't amount to even the blink of an eye . . . I am extremely old, but I am extremely young. In fact, I have not yet begun to live – but nevertheless, I am very old." He goes on to describe a contest with other sages about whose memory is the greatest. The Blind Beggar alone remembers the primal Nothingness (Yiddish: "*Ich gedenk gohr-nisht!*") that altogether precedes creation. (He is therefore the "Elder on the Side of Holiness" and the "Elder of Elders"; see *Chayei Moharan* 123 and 272, citing an expression of the *Zohar*.) And this sublime realization is his gift to the newlyweds – and to us all when we reach the hour of "finding" or spiritual discovery, the unification that is comparable to a wedding. (In *Likkutei Moharan* I, 65, the *tachlis* is related to the paradigm of closed eyes, which can perceive the transcendental reality and not be distracted by worldly illusion.)

2. The Deaf Beggar

The blessing of the Deaf Beggar is: "You should be like me; that is, you should live a good life, like mine. You think that I'm deaf, but actually, I'm not deaf at all. It is just that the entire world does not amount to anything to me, that I should listen to its deficiencies. All sounds come from deficiencies, since everyone cries out about what he is lacking. Even the world's joys are due to deficiencies, since one only rejoices when his lack is filled . . . However, I have a good life in which nothing is lacking." In the story he tells as proof of his claim, he alone is capable of saving a mythical Land of Wealth, once perfect in its delights, but now corrupted by an evil king and his emissaries. The Deaf Beggar guides the populace to purify themselves of the three poisons of

profane speech, which had ruined the sense of taste; bribery, which had ruined the sense of sight; and sexual immorality, which had ruined the sense of smell. Purged of these evils, the ill-tended garden in the midst of the land reverts to its former Eden-like state, and the lost gardener, who had been taken for a madman, is discovered and restored to his former position. Implicit in this sub-plot is the idea that the “good life,” which is the spiritual life, may be experienced through our very senses, if only we would purify ourselves of these toxins.

3. The Beggar With a Speech Defect

The blessing of the Beggar With a Speech Defect is: “You should be like me. You think that I have a speech defect. I don’t have a speech defect at all. Rather, all the words in the world that do not praise God lack perfection. [Therefore, I seem to have a speech defect, since I cannot speak such imperfect words.] But actually, I don’t have a speech impediment at all. Quite the contrary, I am a wonderful orator and speaker. I can speak in parables and verses that are so wonderful that no created thing in the world doesn’t want to hear me. For the parables and lyrics that I know contain all wisdom.” In the course of the tale he tells to “prove” his claims, the Deaf Beggar indicates that his parables and verses sustain the entire universe – and they reflect the animating wisdom of all seven days of creation, which were created through the divine speech. (In *Likkutei Moharan I*, 65, the *tachlis* is also related to the perfection of speech, in the Rebbe’s description of “making *echad* / unity of the words of prayer” in the course of *davenning*.)

4. The Beggar With a Crooked Neck

The blessing of the Beggar With a Crooked Neck is: “You should be like me. You think I have a crooked neck, but actually, my neck isn’t crooked at all. Quite the contrary, it is very straight. I have a most beautiful neck. However, there are vapors in the world, and I don’t want to exhale and add to these vain vapors. [This is why my neck seems to be crooked: I twisted my neck to avoid exhaling into the atmosphere of the world.] But in fact, I have a most beautiful, wonderful neck, since I have a wonderful voice. There are many sounds in the world that are unrelated to speech. I have such a wonderful neck and voice that I can mimic any of these sounds.” In the extremely obscure tale that the Beggar With a Crooked Neck goes on to relate, this power seems to be the root of all music and prophecy. This is suggested by the symbolism of the two estranged birds that the Beggar With a Crooked Neck reunites, which allude to the two *K’ruvim*, or winged

angelic forms that hovered over the Ark of the Covenant in the Holy Temple and, according to Chazal, served as the channel for prophecy. The Rebbe also implies that this power brings about the spiritual unification associated with the Messianic Redemption.

5. The Beggar With a Hunchback

The blessing of the Beggar With a Hunchback is: “You should be like me. I am not a hunchback at all. Quite the contrary, I have broad shoulders (Yiddish: *breiter pleitzes*, which also means the ability bear difficult responsibilities). My shoulders are an example of the ‘little that holds much’ (a concept found in the Midrash).” Reb Noson later adds: “The hunchback was on the level of the intermediate zone between space and that which is beyond space. He possessed the highest possible concept of the ‘little that holds much,’ at the very end of space, beyond which the term ‘space’ no longer applies . . . Therefore, he could carry [his companions] from within space to a dimension that transcends space.” In the tale the Beggar With a Hunchback tells to prove his point, this dimension is symbolized by the wondrous “Tree That Stands Beyond Space,” evocative of the biblical Tree of Life, in the branches of which all beings find repose and peace.

6. The Beggar Without Hands

The blessing of the Beggar Without Hands is: “[You think there is something wrong with my hands.] Actually, there is nothing wrong with my hands. I have vast power in my hands – but I do not use the power of my hands in this physical world, since I need it for something else.” In the course of the story he tells, this other purpose turns out to be the healing of the Queen’s Daughter – another symbol of the collectivity of souls. This healing is accomplished through the Ten Types of Song, corresponding to the Ten Types of Charity, Ten Types of Pulse (mentioned in the *Tikkunei Zohar* – which seem to be a little different than those used in Chinese medicine), and the beggar’s ten invisible fingers. Then he tells the newlyweds, “And I am giving this power to you as a wedding present.”

7. The Beggar Without Feet

The blessing of the Beggar Without Feet remains a mystery. This final section of the story remains untold until the Mashiach – who in kabbalistic symbology is associated with the feet – arrives and reveals it to us, may it be speedily in our days!

To sum everything up, the gifts of the Seven Beggars are: long life / transcendence of time (eyes); good life / transcendence of need and desire (ears); oratory that contains all wisdom / transcendent speech (mouth); wondrous voice that can produce all sounds / transcendent sound or cosmic music (neck); ultimate degree of “the small that contains the great” / transcendence of space (shoulders); miraculous healing power / transcendence of mortality and sadness (hands); and presumably either perfect faith, or kingship, or joy (all of which are aspects of *Malkhus* / Kingship), corresponding to transcendence of self, or ego (feet). They make up one structure, just as the parts of the human anatomy to which they correspond form one structure. Acquiring these sublime powers through the grace of the tzaddikim enables one to reach the *tachlis* at the individual spiritual level.

This is supported by a few more descriptions of the ultimate goal in the Rebbe’s teachings. In *Likkutei Moharan* I, 18, the *tachlis* equals the “primordial thought,” or divine intention that underlies all of creation. This primordial thought is revealed only at end of the process it sets into motion, and is the aspect of “*ayin lo ra’asah* / no eye has seen it” (another hint to the symbolism of the Blind Beggar in our story). (Cf. *Likkutei Moharan* I, 8, citing *Berakhos* 34b, where this phrase indicates *Chokhmah* and the non-dualistic level. This is supported by the principle that “He and what He enlivens are one, He and what He causes are one – in the ten *sefiros* of *Atzilus* / World of Emanation” [*Tikkunei Zohar, Introduction*, 3b], the realm which corresponds to *Chokhmah*; see the explanation of this in *Sefer Ha-Tanya, Iggeres Ha-Kodesh* 20).

In *Likkutei Moharan* II, 83, the *tachlis* is related to the paradigm of “*Mekomo shel Olam* / Place of the World“ -- the *ohr makkif* (encompassing light) or “supra-domain” of creation altogether. And in *Likkutei Moharan* II, 39, the *tachlis* is related to Shabbos, the *olam ha-neshamos* / world of souls, and at the experiential level, the lucid perception of God. This may correspond to the “Tree That Stands Beyond Space” in the tale of the Beggar With a Hunchback.

The qualities that the Seven Beggars confer upon the bride and groom are various expressions of being rooted in the “whole” -- the transcendent Divine Unity -- and not being stranded in the “part,” the illusion of creation as something autonomous, hopelessly conflicted, separate from God. The preeminent tzaddikim represented by the beggars in the Rebbe’s story are those who have fully attained this wholeness and seen through worldly illusion. Therefore, they are uniquely capable of correcting our confusions and elevating us from the spiritual quagmire, so that we, too, may reach the luminous goal for which we were created.

Afterthought

In *Likkutei Moharan* (quoted above), the Rebbe teaches that we must engage in the *avodah* of Torah study, performance of the *mitzvos*, prayer (especially *hisbodedus*) and self-improvement in order to reach the *tachlis*. However, in the story of the Seven Beggars, the main factor seems to be the tzaddikim who bestow their wondrous gifts upon the newlyweds. Is there a correspondence between what the Rebbe is saying in each body of work, or not?

Maybe we can read *avodas atzmo*, personal spiritual work, into two elements of the story. First, the children must attain maturity before their companions escort them to the *chuppah* and beg leftovers from the royal banquet in order to put together a wedding feast. Maybe this maturation process equals personal *avodah*, which elevates one from a lower level to a higher level. Second, the bride and groom express their yearning for each beggar to join them before the desired guest miraculously appears. This yearning is a key factor, too. We must make what the *Zohar* calls an “*isarusa de-le’sata* / awakening from below” before we can experience a reciprocal “*isarusa de-le’eila* / awakening from above.” The longing for the beggars on the part of the bride and groom indicates *hiskashrus le-tzaddikim*, creating a spiritual bond, which is up to us, as well. These two factors are the prerequisites for our ability to receive the greatest gifts of the tzaddikim: to become “just like them *mamash*.”