

Compassion in the World's Religions

Envisioning Human Solidarity

edited by

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6. Chapter

Compassion – The Teachings of R. Nachman of Breslav

ALON GOSHEN-GOTTSTEIN

RABBI NACHMAN OF BRESLAV, a late 18th – early 19th century hassidic master, is an original thinker, whose thought is both a continuation of longstanding spiritual traditions and an expression of his own personal spiritual experiences and the specific intuitions and understandings that arose from it. His unique literary style and associative way of thinking are best understood as a way of giving expression to his direct spiritual cognitions, clothing and expressing them in the language of classical Jewish homiletics.¹ In reading R. Nachman, then, we are dealing with original spiritual intuitions, born within the matrix of and expressed in continuity with broader Jewish notions. The power of the spiritual life of R. Nachman and the fact that so much of his writing is born of personal experience and original intuition makes him a fascinating and inspiring figure to study, on any topic. My personal love for him and the inspiration I continually draw from his writings lead me to approach his work as a resource for tackling issues upon which I seek to reflect. Compassion is a theme that comes up in several contexts in R. Nachman's work and it is fair to characterize it as an important element in his thinking, and implicitly in his personal religious experience. How R. Nachman works through

¹ For a biography of R. Nachman, see Arthur Green, *Tormented Master: A Life of Rabbi Nahman of Bratslav*, University, Ala., University of Alabama Press, 1979. I assume most readers of this essay will not be able to handle scholarly literature in Hebrew and will therefore not reference it. For a bibliography of works on R. Nachman and his movement, Breslav hassidism, see David Assaf, *Breslav - An Annotated Bibliography*, Jerusalem, Zalman Schazar Center, 2000 [Hebrew].

the notion of compassion, its applications and the range of ideas he associates with it is quite unique, and on the whole not part of a broader thematization of compassion in Jewish literature. The present project that seeks to bring together insights on compassion, drawn from various religious traditions, will benefit from following R. Nachman's train of thought. I therefore permit myself to focus this presentation on his thought, rather than attempting a more conventional portrait of how compassion is conceptualized in Jewish thought, as a whole.²

Rather than attempt a synthetic presentation of compassion in R. Nachman's thought,³ I would like to present several key teachings of R. Nachman, each of which thematizes compassion differently, in relation to other core values. How we understand any cardinal value is not only a matter of what we may have to say about it but also of how it intersects with other ideas and values and the range of associations that are brought to bear on that value. In what follows, I will present a range of associations that R. Nachman brings to bear on compassion, thereby stretching our thinking on the subject. The thicker the web of associations, the more central an idea may be said to be within the broader economy of a system of thought. In what follows I hope to demonstrate indirectly the centrality of compassion to R. Nachman's thought through the associative web within which compassion is weaved.

I. Compassion - The Ground of Being, the Purpose of Creation

One of R. Nachman's most famous teachings, Teaching 64, discusses creation and how to cope with the fundamental existential questions, some of

² For a concise recent statement, see the article "Compassion in Judaism", in *Encyclopedia of Love in World Religions*, ed. Yudit Kornberg Greenberg, Santa Barbara, ABC-CLIO, 2008, vol. 1, pp. 132-133. Actually, very little has been written on the topic, and there is no monograph length treatment of compassion in Jewish thought.

³ I have attempted that in "Judaism: the Battle for Survival, the struggle for Compassion", in *Religion, Society and the Other: Hostility, Hospitality and the Hope of Human Flourishing*, ed. Alon Goshen-Gottstein, forthcoming, Fordham University Press.

which are beyond the comprehension of the human mind, associated with it.⁴ This celebrated teaching opens with the following statement:

God created the world because of His compassion, because He wanted to reveal His compassion, and if the world had not been created, who would He show his compassion to? Therefore He created all of creation, from the beginning of the emanation to the final center point of the physical world, in order to show His compassion.

The question of why God created the world is a crux of all religious thought, including Jewish thought. While the question that opens the discussion is standard, R. Nachman's answer is not. As far as I am aware, he is the first person to frame the answer in terms of compassion. Compassion is the *telos* of creation and the act of creation is grounded and motivated in divine compassion. Compassion requires the duality of creator and creation. God's compassion is such a fundamental dimension of His being, that it requires an arena within which it can be manifested and that arena is creation itself.

Compassion is not simply the ultimate purpose of creation, it is also what governs all aspects of creation, manifesting itself in every distinct stage of the process. Moreover, compassion is not limited to the higher rungs of the order of creation, where it is recognizable. It extends down to the most physical level whose creation may be construed as an act of compassion and which provides the opportunity and possibility for manifesting further divine compassion. All that was created is necessary for the manifestation of divine compassion.

The meaning of this statement is that all that God does within the field of creation is an expression of his goodness and compassion. R. Nachman specifies that this overarching *raison d'être* of creation, addresses creation down to its most physical and most detailed aspects. This means that nothing in creation is excluded from Divine compassion and goodness. This statement is of great significance, in light of the themes which R. Nachman will discuss farther along in this teaching. In what follows, R. Nachman discusses the epistemological limitations placed upon our consciousness by the very structure of creation. These limitations touch upon our ability to deal adequately and correctly with questions of theodicy. It is important,

⁴ On this teaching, see my Speech, Silence, Song : Epistemology and Theodicy in a Teaching of R. Nahman of Breslav, *Philosophia* 30, 1-4, 2003, pp. 143-187. I did not consider seriously enough how compassion is thematized in this teaching in that article, though such consideration would not alter my presentation.

therefore, that prior to any statement that places a limitation upon the human capacity to know, R. Nachman makes a positive statement, affirming the compassion that finds expression in all aspects of creation. This meta-statement expresses the ultimate religious perspective, which the subject-matter of this teaching threatens, and which is ultimately reaffirmed by R. Nachman.

If compassion is the goal and logic of creation, this may be taken a step further, suggesting that in fact all of life and all of being takes place within the context of compassion. Compassion may thus be considered not only the purpose, but the very substance of life and creation. This emerges later on the teaching, when R. Nachman revisits the opening statement, in light of the kabbalistic doctrine of *zimzum*, divine contraction, an important theme within this teaching. Towards the end of the teaching, R. Nachman states:

The principle of creation was for the sake of His compassion ... For in everything that was created within the empty space (i.e. the space of the *zimzum*, cleared by God in order to make room for creation) there is contraction of His compassion, and He created this specific thing in the particular form and image it has, in accordance with His compassion, for His compassion, blessed be He, necessitated that this matter will be so. Because compassion is the root of all creation, for everything was created in order to manifest His compassion.

One would have expected divine Wisdom to be the reason for why the various details of creation have come into being, while divine compassion might be the overarching cause for the act of creation. However, R. Nachman associates all stages of creation with compassion. Compassion dictates how creation is to unfold. In other words, everything within creation, every detail within it, may be considered an occasion for manifesting divine compassion and a way of serving that goal. God has given thought to how construct every fine detail within creation, so as to maximize its impact as a means of manifesting His compassion. R. Nachman is more radical still. R. Nachman speaks of the *zimzum*, the contraction of divine being and light in order to make room for creation, as the contraction of divine compassion. If it is divine compassion that has to be contracted in order to make room for the world, this suggests that compassion is the very nature of divine being. Compassion is thus a legitimate way of referring to the divine being, alongside more conventional ways of referring to God's being,

as well as the *zimzum*, in terms of light or being.⁵ Now, if it divine compassion that is being contracted, this suggests compassion is much more than simply the purpose of creation. It is the very ground of being. It is the divine itself. God is compassion. Therefore, every act in creation, whether it is an act of self limitation or the giving of form to life within the structures of creation, is an expression of this divine compassion. Differently put: compassion is the substance of life. It is not simply a human quality, a virtue. It is the essence, or at least one way of talking, of the divine. That creation takes place within compassion and that compassion informs decisions regarding the particulars of creation allows us to consider creation as in some way divine. Creation with and within compassion is creation within God.

This conceptualization challenges us to think in fresh ways about creation, both the act and its outcome. It changes our valuation of creation, highlighting all that is good in it and featuring compassion as the means of expressing the fundamental goodness of creation. Being created means being a recipient of God's compassion. We are created through an act of compassion and our very creatureliness calls for divine compassion. Compassion thus emerges as the most fundamental attitude to life.

Now, R. Nachman has only spoken of divine compassion. His way of conceptualizing and presenting classical kabbalistic notions of *zimzum* serves the epistemological challenges of dealing with theodicy and other limitations of human understanding, as expounded in Teaching 64. R. Nachman makes no attempt to develop the moral implications of grounding creation in divine compassion. But such reflections naturally emerge from thoughtful consideration of the move he has made. If creation is grounded in compassion, this has moral consequences for us and must condition our behavior as well. Compassion emerges as the fundamental characteristic of creation, thereby inviting us to act in accordance with this ground and ground rule of all being. If God has created out of compassion, surely we too must treat all of creation in similar light. And compassion is neither limited to our co-religionists nor to our brothers and sisters in the human

⁵ In the opening of Teaching 64, R. Nachman refers to the divine contraction in terms of light. The same is true for the opening of Teaching 49. In this R. Nachman is faithful to the language of R. Isaac Luria, from whom he takes the notion of *zimzum*. R. Nachman's original thinking is expressed by substituting compassion for light.

species. Compassion as the ground of creation invites us to practice compassion towards all life, all creation. Taking this a step further, we note again that compassion is what accounts for the particularity of every detail in creation. If details of creation are governed by compassion, it would seem that compassion should inform not only our broadest intentions, but also the specifics of our actions. Thinking how our actions might increase compassion is not simply an act of *imitatio dei*. It is a way of attuning ourselves to the very fabric of being, informed by the ultimate divine purpose and the careful attention it has given to every detail of creation. Compassion thus emerges as a means of being in harmony with the world, as well as of attuning oneself to the purposes of the creator. I cannot think of a more profound way of grounding compassion. Compassion is not simply an excellent moral virtue nor is it limited to human relations. It is a basic, perhaps the most basic, law of life, inviting us to a way of living that accords with the deeper cosmic purpose.

Compassion's cosmic status would best account for the following novel statement, R. Nachman makes in another teaching: The world⁶ needs great compassion, both spiritually and physically. And every one asks for compassion,⁷ and does not know where it is. And compassion is present before everyone's eyes,⁸ as it says "it is not far, and not in heaven".⁹

Compassion is the fundamental human quest. It is required to address both spiritual and physical needs, seeking divine compassion and mercy. Our condition is one of ignorance, as we seek divine compassion and struggle to locate and identify it. However, such struggle is really born of ignorance, for compassion is here and now, ever present. R. Nachman paraphrases a verse in Deut. 30, 11-12, in order to prove that compassion is not far and distant, but close by and readily available. In light of Teaching 64, we may well account for why compassion is omnipresent. If compassion is the stuff of creation, then it is indeed not in heaven and not far off. It is

⁶ Following colloquial usage, this is a way of saying "people", rather than the cosmos, even though R. Nachman's thought could justify also a broader application of the term.

⁷ R. Nachman uses in this teaching the form *rachamim*, rather than *rachmanut*, as in Teaching 64. This could also be translated as mercy.

⁸ This comes close to suggesting that compassion is omnipresent, and perhaps might even be thus translated. Hebrew does not have one word to designate the notion of omnipresence.

⁹ Teaching 105.

what informs every act of creation and what provides the deeper logic and purpose for every detail of creation. It is thus present in the very fabric of creation, available as creation's most basic substance.¹⁰ We are, however, in ignorance of it, an ignorance that may be traced back to the original *zimzum*, wherein God contracts his light and his compassion, thereby obscuring it from our understanding.¹¹ We thus search for what we have before our eyes, seeking to find the hidden ground of Being, which is hidden from us only by our own ignorance. This leads to the second theme to be presently explored, the relationship between knowledge, ignorance, and compassion. One final point, however, before moving on.

Deut. 30,11, that R. Nachman just quoted, speaks of the commandment that God commands us today, without specifying what it is, as not being far and distant. Did R. Nachman understand this unspecified commandment as a reference to compassion? Is his application of Deut. 30,11 limited to the potential linguistic expression of omnipresence or immanence, or does it go further, amounting to a complete reading of the verse and the commandment of which it speaks? If the latter is the case, then R. Nachman has also identified a scriptural basis for compassion, and perhaps even for its grounding in creation, in the here and now of the details of creation, not just the above and beyond. If I have not over read R. Nachman, then perhaps we also have here a proof text that grounds human obligation to practice compassion in the existential ground of compassion, that informs all of creation. The commandment to practice omnipresent compassion would ultimately be grounded in the fact that creation itself is the supreme expression of divine compassion.

II. Compassion and Consciousness

Teaching 64 suggests a relationship between metaphysics and epistemology. *Zimzum* effects not only Being itself, but also our ability to know and understand. The connection between compassion and consciousness is one of the major motifs in R. Nachman's reflections on compassion. The mes-

¹⁰ See further *Likutey Moharan* 2,49: "God is full of compassion, and the entire world is full of compassion".

¹¹ We have already noted that R. Nachman casts the *zimzum* in epistemological terms. The hiding of divine compassion from human recognition and understanding is thus perfectly in accordance with how these ideas are presented in his teachings.

sage is quite simple: compassion is grounded in consciousness. The Hebrew term is *da'at*, which can be rendered as mind, understanding, and in my view is best captured as consciousness. The idea is that compassion is not simply a quality we have or possess. Rather, it is something that grows in us and its growth is related to the evolution of consciousness. As our mind and understanding expand, so does our capacity to have compassion. Someone with a limited view of reality and with limited horizons of consciousness will be self involved and unable to extend compassion to his or her environs. Broadening the horizons of awareness is in fact growing into the broader divine awareness and therefore a gateway into participating in divine compassion. The association of compassion and *da'at* suggests that compassion is not simply an emotion, or a feeling towards another. It is, rather, the flow of being and goodwill towards another, that is grounded in a higher spiritual realization, born of the expanded consciousness, *da'at*, and the broader understanding of the meaning of life that it brings with it. While it touches our hearts, it is more than emotion. It is the expression in the emotional, perhaps also in the volitional realm, of a movement that is born of recognition of fundamental spiritual realities. Because we perceive spiritual reality and partake of the divine vision of life, creation and their ultimate purpose, we share in divine compassion. Divine compassion may accordingly be presented as the drive that impels our spiritual evolution forward and that shows care for our overall wellbeing, along with the wellbeing of all of creation. In fact, if compassion is another way of referring to God's very being, then what *da'at* provides is the capacity to comprehend the true nature of Being, creation grounded in the divine Being. From such fuller comprehension arises the identification with divine compassion and its extension to all beings.

The association of compassion and consciousness is repeated in various teachings of R. Nachman. Let us look at several of them.

When a person is in need of compassion, God sends him compassion, that he may extend it to others, and thereby compassion is extended to him, as our sages have taught, "whoever has compassion on others, himself receives compassion thereby" (Talmud Shabbat 151b) ... And compassion is dependent upon *da'at* (consciousness). Whoever has awareness has compassion. Because anger, which is the opposite of compassion, is due to ignorance ... Now, a sick person himself requires compassion. But he must have compassion upon others and that is a function of consciousness. And Shabbat is an expression of consciousness ... And on Shabbat awareness is extended to everyone. This is why one says to the sick person, whom one visits on the

Shabbat, “it (meaning the Shabbat) can have compassion”, meaning that the Shabbat, which is an aspect of consciousness, can make you have compassion upon others ... And if you have compassion, then surely compassion will be extended from Heaven towards you.¹²

This teaching pulls together several principles. The first is that compassion is a kind of existential circle. It flows from one to another, with the extension of compassion as the gateway to its reception. Thus, if one requires compassion, one must join the existential cycle of compassion, by extending it to others, thereby entering the cycle of giving and receiving. This cycle may originate in Heaven, but it unites the human and divine spheres in one act of continuous giving. As we give below, so we receive from above. A second theme is that compassion is grounded in consciousness. Here R. Nachman actually offers a way of accessing divine consciousness. The way is Shabbat. Shabbat is not simply a day of rest but a spiritual reality, whose foundation is the entering into divine presence and divine compassion. A higher state of consciousness is available on Shabbat. Entry into this state of consciousness makes it possible for the sick person to extend compassion to others, thereby making him a worthy recipient of divine compassion. We also note how anger and compassion are contrasted with each other. Anger seems to be basic to human psychology. In several places R. Nachman seems to suggest that anger is a component of human psychology that requires transformation.¹³ Human spiritual evolution may be measured in terms of our ability to transform anger into compassion. The ongoing struggle against the anger in our hearts cannot be attained simply through will power and self control. Rather, it requires the elevation to a higher state of consciousness that provides the means of transformation for innate anger. Consciousness is thus the means of transformation of anger into compassion.

The relationship between compassion and consciousness and understanding can be conceived in various ways. Probably the most common is the recognition that consciousness is the ground of compassion.¹⁴ In some contexts *da'at* is the condition not only for extending compassion, but also for receiving compassion. The point is not that one who lacks *da'at* should not receive compassion. On the contrary, R. Nachman is explicit about

¹² *Likutey Moharan* 119.

¹³ See, for example, *Likutey Moharan* 18.

¹⁴ In addition to the sources already discussed, see also *Likutey Moharan* 105 and 56.

the fact that there is nothing more deserving of compassion than the lack of *da'at*.¹⁵ Rather, due to the close association of *da'at* and compassion, one lacking in *da'at* may be cruel. To such a person compassion should not be extended, as it might reinforce the cruel behavior or nature. However, withholding compassion is itself an expression of compassion, as it amounts to providing for those who cannot receive compassion the very food they require. Compassion is thus universal, though its application may differ radically, depending on the recipient.¹⁶

The recognition that consciousness is the ground for compassion allows R. Nachman to revisit biblical eschatological prophecies. Compassion's ground in consciousness is not only a spiritual and existential principle, but is also the focus of a vision of history and provides the rationale for how history can change in the future. Prophecies describing change in human nature and in nature in general can be understood as the outcome of growth in consciousness, which would bring about fundamental changes in human behavior.

Compassion depends on *da'at*, as it says (Isa. 11): "No harm nor destruction shall be wrought throughout all my holy mountain; for the land will have become full of the knowledge of God, as the waters cover the sea". For in the future *da'at* will greatly increase, and then there will be no harm or cruelty, because compassion will spread about, through *da'at*, since compassion depends upon *da'at*.¹⁷

The basic insight captured in all these teachings is that through consciousness, the higher spiritual understanding, we gain compassion. A higher vision allows us to have compassion within a given situation. Such compassion provides a drive for change and motivates one to act. Thus, com-

¹⁵ See *Likutey Moharan* 106.

¹⁶ See *Likutey Moharan* 2,7,1 and compare 2,8,2.

¹⁷ *Likutey Moharan* 2,8,2. For a grounding of eschatological visions in the increase of the knowledge of God, see Maimonides, Laws of Kings 12,5. Maimonides cites the latter part of the verse in Isaiah, after describing the future age as an age without wars. From Maimonides it would seem that there will be no wars because of the abundance of goods, making war superfluous. People would accordingly devote themselves to the knowledge of God. Knowledge of God does not seem to be the cause of the future peaceful world, but rather its outcome. The plain sense of the verse in Isaiah does suggest a causality, according to which knowledge is the ground of future peace. R. Nachman's reading, and the place he allots for compassion, allow the plain sense of the verse to resonate powerfully. In light of this reading, the collocation of compassion and peace, found in *Likutey Moharan* 56,6 makes particularly good sense.

passion for lack of knowledge translates itself into action that would fill the lack.

Poverty is [poverty] from knowledge (Talmud Nedarim 41). And for this (i.e., lack of knowledge) one ought to have compassion, for there is nothing more deserving of compassion. And such poverty applies in general and in relation to oneself. In general, regarding a person who lacks understanding¹⁸ in the service of God, someone who possesses understanding should share it with him. And in relation to oneself, there are times when one lacks consciousness, and this state is called small mindedness, and one should fortify oneself to come to great mindedness.¹⁹

Compassion to the poor is to fill the poor's need, be it the other or oneself. Compassion thus drives to action. In other cases, the practice of compassion calls for withholding of actual kindness, for fear of growing the evil in others, as noted above.

In one working out of the relations of compassion and consciousness, R. Nachman makes us aware of an important paradox and how it may be resolved.

Compassion is in the aspect of the acronym ISRAEL found in the Hebrew verse, and the Lord Shaday will give you compassion (Gen. 43,14). That is, that God will give us the compassion, He will entrust it in our hands. Because from God's perspective, it may be that even great illness and all forms of suffering are expressions of His compassion. For surely all that God does to a person, even great sufferings, all is pure compassion. But we ask that God should give and entrust compassion into our hands. Because we do not understand His compassion and we are also unable to receive that compassion of His. Therefore we ask that God should entrust compassion into our hands, that we ourselves should have compassion upon ourselves, and when it comes to us, compassion is manifested in the plain sense, to be healed from sickness, and the likes.²⁰

To talk of consciousness begs the question of what level of consciousness we are talking about. The drive for raising consciousness is one of moving from lesser to greater awareness, from human to divine understanding. But reaching a divine understanding is potentially counter productive to the application of compassion. After all, as we have already seen, God is Himself compassion. How can one request anything from God - how can

¹⁸ The Hebrew *sekhel* can be translated as understanding, knowledge or consciousness. While I think the latter captures the intention most fully, the first translation reads most easily in English.

¹⁹ *Likutey Moharan* 106.

²⁰ *Likutey Moharan* 2,62.

one request God's compassion - when in fact anything that God does, suffering included, is already founded upon divine compassion? Taking seriously compassion as the ground of being and the profound motivation for all divine action would actually lead to inaction. Compassion could be configured as simply rising to the heights of divine consciousness, understanding the cause of suffering and how it too is grounded in divine compassion. Much like the inaction we practice towards the evil, we might be tempted to become resigned to such treatment by God, recognizing the ubiquity of compassion in the fabric of creation and in the profundity of the divine will. This would make prayer superfluous, perhaps impossible. Recognizing the depth of compassion would disable its active practice, making it an exercise in raising consciousness, rather than in extending relief and help to the world.²¹ The answer to this conundrum is the limitation of consciousness. Perhaps this echoes the initial limitation of the *zimzum*, itself founded upon compassion, as we noted above. However, R. Nachman does not appeal to the term here. He merely constructs compassion in human terms, rather than in relation to God's own understanding. Accordingly, we beseech God to entrust compassion to us, so that compassion will accord with the human understanding of what is considered compassionate, rather than with the potential higher divine understanding of compassion, that could sustain suffering within it. The plain sense of compassion, based in human understanding, is thus upheld, at the expense of the higher consciousness of God. Here we encounter an opposite movement to that encountered in most texts. Whereas the usual movement is one in which compassion is born of consciousness, and therefore the greater the consciousness the greater the compassion, here consciousness is limited to the human understanding. Configuring compassion in relation to consciousness in this way provides a theoretical basis for extending compassion into acts of kindness. Perhaps even more importantly, it provides a foundation for prayer.²²

²¹ How powerfully compassion is a drive for effecting change in the world through prayer may be seen from *Likutey Moharan* 2,105.

²² In aramaic prayer is called "compassion", a fact noted by R. Nachman. We have here one more indication for the centrality of prayer in his spiritual experience. The most central spiritual practice grounds and provides an approach to the fundamental nature of the divine - compassion.

III. Compassion and Leadership

Perhaps the most powerful indication of the active nature of compassion is to be found in how R. Nachman relates compassion to leadership. Given the strong mystical and experiential background of R. Nachman's writing, many readers assume that R. Nachman's teachings are always in some way autobiographical, even when R. Nachman is not speaking in the first person. If so, the association of compassion and leadership would be not only a matter of theory and reflection on compassion and its application, but a testimony to the power that drove his own leadership of the community. The following words, describing the archetypal Jewish leader, Moses, may provide a window unto R. Nachman's own understanding of the purpose and goal of his leadership.

1. "For the compassionate one will be their leader" (Isa.49) - this suggests that only someone possessing compassion can be a leader ...
2. And such a compassionate one is found only in Moses our teacher, who was the leader of Israel and is its future leader ... For Moses our teacher had true compassion for Israel, and was willing to give his life for Israel, casting aside his own soul, having no concern for himself whatsoever. [We know this] because God offered to make of him a great nation (Ex. 32) [following the sin of the golden calf, thereby replacing Israel with Moses' progeny], but he paid no attention to this offer at all, and said in response only: "Forgive their sin and if not, erase me from the book you have written". For he was compassionate and a true leader. And he engaged in making the world civilized, that the world should be settled by human beings. Because the most important thing about a human being is *da'at*. And whoever lacks *da'at* is not civilized and can't be called a human being properly, but only a human shaped animal. And Moses our teacher had compassion, and he engaged in making the world civilized, that the world should be settled and filled with human beings, that is possessors of knowledge, for he opened for us the light of *da'at*, as it says: "you have been given the understanding that the Lord is God" (Deut. 4). For Moses opened for us the *da'at*, and revealed to us that there is a God, who rules the earth.
3. Because the core of compassion is when Israel, the holy nation, fall, God forbid, into sin. For this is the greatest compassion of all compassions. Because all the sufferings in the world do not count at all compared with the heavy burden of sins, God forbid. For when Israel fall into sin, God forbid, this is a very heavy burden, that is unbearable ... And this is the core of compassion, to have compassion upon Israel, the holy nation, to take them out of the heavy burden of sins. And this is why Moses our teacher, whenever Israel fell into any sin, would give his soul for them, and pray for them.²³

²³ *Likutey Moharan* 2,7,1-3.

Compassion is, once again, understood in terms of *da'at*. Endowing human beings with *da'at* is the supreme act of compassion. Compassion and wisdom thus figure time and again in close association. Because Moses possesses God's knowledge fully, he has the true perspective on reality. This perspective allows him to know God, as well as the soul and the meaning of what it is to be a human being. Compassion leads to populating the world and making it civilized, by spreading the knowledge of God. From the language used by R. Nachman it seems that the burden of sins, referred to in relation to Israel, is even more weighty than the general human condition of ignorance. It is this pain that impels Moses to offer his life, in a sacrificial movement, in order to remove the burden of sins from Israel. Exodus 32, 32's reference to the book God has written, a rare moment of self referentiality in the Bible, is read back into reality and understood as Moses' offer to give his life for Israel. The strategy succeeds and Israel are forgiven, based on this offer of self sacrifice. Compassion leads to the highest form of sacrifice- self sacrifice.

Leadership is a completely spiritual affair. Even though Moses also functions as a political leader, as the Rabbis understood, as well as a military leader, these dimensions of leadership are ignored. Instead, the leader is the teacher, the one who removes ignorance and makes God's knowledge known, the one who lifts up the burden of sin and suffering. This description of leadership and its scope fits well with the range of activities in which R. Nachman himself engaged. While the description of Moses' offer of his life is traditional, his description of the painful burden of sin is not. It is reasonable to suggest that here we hear R. Nachman's own voice, as it offers us a window into his own compassion-driven exercise of leadership.

Leadership is not something to be sought out or desired. The honor and status that are associated with leadership provide motivation that is the opposite of the ideal compassion-based motivation. In fact, a true spiritual leader will refuse leadership. Again, Moses provides the example, with his refusal of leadership, as recounted in Exodus, chapter 3.²⁴

R. Nachman tells us that the true spiritual master has practiced the sweetening of anger. Wherever anger arose, he would appease it with compassion, allowing compassion to subdue and sweeten the anger. R. Nach-

²⁴ For the present and following section, see *Likutey Moharan* 18,2.

man uses a very particular expression in this context. The Zaddikim, spiritual masters, are crowned with compassion. Their practice of sweetening anger with compassion makes them a crown of compassion. R. Nachman may be alluding to the understanding that the force of compassion resides in the spiritual center known in the Kabbalah as the crown, located at the top of the head. The high value attached to compassion may be based on the recognition that compassion has its source in the highest spiritual center. This could also account for the idea we saw at the beginning of our study, according to which the world was created due to God's compassion. The crown is associated with will and higher purpose, and is the source of the creative process. If creation draws from the crown and the crown is associated with compassion, compassion readily emerges as the underlying drive behind creation.

Reference to compassion in terms of the crown also allows R. Nachman to shift from the crown of compassion to the crown of leadership. A condition for undertaking communal leadership is that the leader is already crowned. Only one who is already crowned with compassion should accept the responsibility of leadership.

IV. Conclusion – Applying R. Nachman's Wisdom

By way of conclusion, I would like to draw the lessons that R. Nachman's teachings hold for those who contemplate what compassion might mean for us today. The association of compassion and leadership that we have just explored should not mislead us to thinking that compassion is the domain of the choice few, the spiritual masters. While these have mastered compassion, compassion actually belongs to all. Let us recall that the spiritual masters practice the sweetening of anger with compassion. This suggests an ongoing active effort at cultivating compassion and eradicating anger. This reveals a spiritual practice that is applicable to all and that is universal in scope. While one may not yet attain the fullness of compassion, one may strive and practice towards this goal.

Beyond the possibility for common practice, there is deeper commonality that makes compassion relevant to and within reach of all. Compassion is structured in the very fabric of creation. Such an understanding constitutes a call to uncover that which is foundational. If God creates the world in and through compassion, we have the possibility of uncovering

and bringing to light the fundamental spiritual principle that informs all of creation.

However, unlike the practice of compassion, the uncovering of true compassion, grounded in life and creation, is less accessible. The challenge is precisely that the true nature of reality is hidden. Unlike the Hindu tradition that allocates a prominent role in its metaphysical system to ignorance, and even assigns it a special term, *avidya*, the Jewish tradition has not elevated ignorance to such a high level in its systematic reflection. Nevertheless, the emphasis on *da'at*, knowledge and consciousness, leads us to the recognition that it is the lack of *da'at*, ignorance, that accounts for lack of compassion. Compassion cannot be realized simply by goodwill and intention. It requires a deeper knowledge that goes to the root of creation, its purpose and the ultimate goal of all - the knowledge of God. For compassion to be realized, the fullness of knowledge and the fullness of faith are needed.²⁵ This is a process and as all processes, it requires time. Some master it more fully than others, but all are called to realize it.

R. Nachman offers us a realistic view of compassion. Its spiritual reality eludes us, even as its practice is constant. It may be attained, but only in conjunction with the attainment of wisdom and faith. It is thus the most ubiquitous spiritual reality, but also the most hidden. Realizing compassion is thus a process, a lifelong process. All this is well summarized in the quote we saw above, which serves us well as a conclusion to this essay:

Every one asks for compassion, and does not know where it is. And compassion is present before everyone's eyes, as it says "it is not far, and not in heaven".²⁶

²⁵ On faith as a condition for true compassion, see *Likutey Moharan* 18,2.

²⁶ *Likutey Moharan* 105.