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A Psychospiritual Guide to Rosh Hashanah

Part 1: The King's Decorators – A Short Story by Rebbe Nachman

Part 2: How to Make a Fresh Start

Part 3: Easy Jewish New Year's Resolution Plan

Dedicated in honor of Leib and Hilda Spektor for their great love of and support of myriad Breslov programs and publications around the world. May they be blessed with a sweet year.

Sponsored by Pauline Brown in honor of Annick

Dedicated to Gedale ben Leah Tema and Tikva Rut bat Exie, may their support of Breslov programs for women bring blessings of good health, simcha, Yiddishe nachas, success and a sweet year.

Part 1

The King's Decorators – A Short Story by Rebbe Nachman

Once upon a time there was a king who hired two craftsmen to paint his palace. He divided the palace into two and each artisan took half. The first one studied intensively, applied himself and became a true artist, a master of trompe l'oeil. He painted gorgeous birds, flowers and intricate designs on the palace walls. It was a masterpiece!

The second one spent his time puttering and doing little. He waited until the last possible moment before the deadline. Then he applied a glossy coat of pitch to the walls. The pitch was so shiny it reflected everything the first artist had painted on the other side. The second artist hung a curtain between the two halves.

Finally, the appointed day arrived and the king admired the brilliant work of the first artist. When it was the turn of the second artist, the sun began shining brightly. The man ripped aside the curtain and revealed the reflection of the first artist's paintings. His walls even reflected some of the furnishings and treasures the king himself had placed in the palace. The second artist's work found great favor in the king's eyes.

This is not just a simple story* – it is a tale of many possible interpretations, apropos this time of year. Here we are in the week before Rosh Hashanah. Ever-present in our thoughts is an urgent whisper: We are about to stand before Hashem and crown Him King. We want our tefillot to be accepted and we yearn to find favor in the King's eyes.

In the story, the king is Hashem. The first artist is the tzaddik. And the second is each of us. Maybe we haven't prepared ourselves as much as we could. Maybe we forgot the King's assignment during the course of the past year. But now we are nearing the end of the year. Even though like the second artist we might have completed little despite the looming deadline, through the help of the art of the first artist, who is the Tzaddik, he is able to achieve. We too are able to make use of the art of the Tzaddik, complete the year and celebrate Rosh Hashana with true joy. We are even able to find favor in the eyes of our King, Hashem. Over time, the Tzaddik's teachings have given us so much, helping us come closer to Hashem than we might have achieved on our own. If we have taken his advice to heart, we've made something beautiful out of ourselves. Even a slight connection to the Tzaddik gives us an edge.

A mirror represents prophecy, like the "bright mirror" of Moshe Rabbeinu, who was the greatest prophet who ever lived. The pitch in the story was a mirror, reflecting the unique, glorious work of the Tzaddik. How do we reflect the work of the Tzaddik? Perhaps we made hitbodedut throughout the year talking to Hashem about whatever is on our minds and in our hearts. (It's not too late to begin today and if you are so moved, the Rebbe advises: grab the opportunity this instant!) Hitbodedut is a time when a type of minor prophecy might even occur; as we do teshuvah, as we speak from the heart, Hashem places the most beautiful words into our mouths which enables us to speak to Him with grace. These graceful words reflect the King's own treasures and furnishings back to Him. We become word artists.

It is of course no accident that the Hebrew word for craftsman/artist is Uman. This time of year, tens of thousands of Chassidim are on the way to Uman, Ukraine to do teshuvah, daven by the holy gravesite of Rebbe Nachman the Tzaddik and the unique artist, and celebrate Rosh Hashanah with tremendous joy. They will pour out their hearts and cry out to Hashem. They will receive the sublime light of the Tzaddik

and reflect it out to their families, friends and the world. No matter where we are on Rosh Hashanah, we merit to be included in Uman, Rosh Hashanah, through our connection to Rabbeinu. Our year is dependent on those prayers, illuminated by the light of the artist, the Tzaddik.

What does our art look like? Teshuvah is our art. Tefilla is our art. Tzedakah is our art, too. These and all the mitzvot are the beautiful arts of the Jewish people, which the master artist, the Tzaddik, teaches us how to reflect and even create, with love. We don't have to be experts. We can smear some pitch, hang a curtain and catch the light of the sun. We can reflect what we've learned, and fill the world with light.

*According to Tzaddik (Chayey Moharan) this story refers to LM 153. Above I give another interpretation.

Part 2

How to Make a Fresh Start

Do you ever wish you could make a genuine fresh start? The possibility of correcting your mistakes, leaving the past behind, and forging a new beginning doesn't just have to be a dream. The belief that you can start again is a foundation of Breslov thought and practice, as Rebbe Nachman teaches: "You can always start over" and "If you believe you can damage, believe you can repair."

The month of Elul, the period of rising early for selichot, Rosh Hashanah, the 10 Days of Teshuvah, and Yom Kippur are a special time on the Jewish calendar, an eit ratzon (a time of Divine Favor), when returning to Hashem, repairing the past and starting over are not only possible but are helped along with an extra measure of Divine assistance. Rosh Hashanah itself is a new beginning, the head of the year.

It makes sense then that Rebbe Nachman of Breslov said: "Gohr mein zach iz Rosh Hashanah", my whole thing/essence is Rosh Hashanah! The Rebbe not only emphasized how vital it was to make a fresh start but also spoke about the importance of beginnings in general, teaching that beginnings have profound influence on the outcome of any goal, as the kabbalah expresses: "the end is wedged into the beginning and the beginning is wedged into the end." This idea is tied to the importance of thought, as we sing on Shabbat, "Last in deed is first in thought." (Lecha Dodi by the 16th century kabbalist, Rabbi Shlomo Alkebetz.) This refers to Shabbat being first in Hashem's thought and the last in deed, the ultimate outcome of the six days of creation.

The Rebbe encourages us to live with this concept ever-present in our minds and apply it to our everyday lives, not just Shabbat. For example, every day your first thoughts in the morning have an impact on the rest of your day. Before you even start out on the right foot, start out with the right thought! Think about the ultimate purpose of your life and the goals of your day.

On Rosh Hashanah, the first day of the year, your initial thoughts are of a different order of magnitude, as they will significantly impact not only your day, but your entire year. (But keep in mind: You can start over whenever you need to.) What should you think about on Rosh Hashanah? The Rebbe tells us on the two days of this special Yom Tov, you must be wise. How? By thinking only positive thoughts. This will set the stage for your thoughts (and speech and actions) throughout the year. Your thoughts are so important they can literally create reality. Anyone who's had depressing thoughts knows that your thoughts can drag you down. Likewise, positive, happy thoughts can truly lift you up. Your experience of life lies in the tenor of your thoughts and the feelings that accompany them; therefore you want your

thoughts to be of the best possible quality. What kinds of thoughts are good quality? Thoughts of Hashem's love for you and the Jewish people, the joy you have from Torah, the mitzvot and the beauty of the world Hashem made, the Torah texts you are learning, the good points in yourself and others, thoughts of emunah, hopeful thoughts, and so on. Equally important, avoid negative thoughts, especially negative thoughts about yourself or others.

Thoughts are also central to your experience of davening. The Rebbe tells us to put all our strength into our prayers *especially* on Rosh Hashanah. What is a simple way to accomplish this? When you are praying, keep pulling your awareness back to the words on the page. Pay attention to what you are actually saying. Stay strong, even though your mind might wander. Rein in your wandering thoughts the way you'd rein in a wandering horse. Throughout his teachings, Rebbe Nachman talks about many aspects of da'at, holy awareness and understanding. True da'at, says the Rebbe, is in the heart. Bring your intellectual understanding to your heart, your feelings. Thought and feeling unite. It is also important on this day to keep in mind your connection to the Tzaddik Emet and his teachings, and remember that he is the one who is connecting you to all these life-changing ideas. We can rely on the Tzaddik to help us stay focused on the greater purpose.

In order to center yourself in your thoughts and prayers, the Rebbe advises that one should avoid extraneous speech. What is extraneous speech? In general, it means talking about anything that is unrelated to Rosh Hashanah itself. There are many, many mitzvot and concepts of Rosh Hashanah one can talk about, for example, the simanim (the special foods we eat and what they represent) or the shofar or any one of numerous lessons from the Rebbe and other Tzaddikim about this Yom Tov. For others it means speaking as little as possible or not at all. What is the right amount of speech for you? You must know yourself and where you are holding in order to determine what is appropriate, and you must also balance that with being available to family, guests, and community. The Rebbe teaches we all must understand and respect our personal limitations while at the same time remain growth-oriented.

In order to truly make a fresh start on Rosh Hashanah, you need to carve out some time for Hitbodedut on this special day, talking to Hashem about whatever is truly on your mind and in your heart. Share with Him the difficulties you face and the hopes and dreams that you have for the coming year. Ask Him to help you develop holy awareness. Plead with Him to help you start over. Ask Hashem to help you *truly believe* you can start over. Now is the time! In truth, anytime is the time, but Rosh Hashanah is the ultimate time to make a fresh start.

Part 3

Easy Jewish New Year's Resolution Plan

The idea of a making resolutions for the year ahead is a valuable Jewish tradition, long pre-dating the idea of secular New Year's resolutions. Just as we divide up the mitzvot into two main categories – those between a person and Hashem and those between person and person – we are also able to divide up our Rosh Hashana resolutions into the same categories. The Gra also alludes to the mitzvot a person does for oneself, and I've included that

Here are some suggestions for how to prepare to make resolutions:

1. **Hitbodedut:** Perhaps you already have an idea of what you'd like to improve, even so, a good way to refine your ideas is to make hitbodedut. Speak to Hashem about the things you want to resolve to improve or take on and the things you want to resolve to let go of and avoid. Often new ideas will come during hitbodedut. If you feel you have no ideas or too many, talk about that as well. Talking it through with your loving father in Heaven will help you sift and clarify.
2. **Write:** Choose some resolutions from any or all of the categories, ones that you think you can realistically commit to. Most people find it best to stick with a few resolutions at the most. Even one resolution from one category is enough to change your life! The Rebbe says: A little bit is also good. Write them down so you can refer to them throughout the year. At some point, you might find they have become second nature. Mazel tov! You've created a good habit.
3. **Get Specific:** If the resolutions are broad, such as improving in the area of making brachot or avoiding lashon hara or not yelling at your spouse or children, make them more specific, the more specific the better. Specificity is conducive to commitment as it makes the thing you want to do or avoid readily recognizable and achievable. Here are some examples.
 - A. **Example 1** You would like to improve the way you make brachot. Make it more specific. Resolve to improve your kavanna while making the brachot over food and/or resolve to always saying the bracha of asher yatzar from a text and/or learn a page on the halachot of brachot each day. Remember: You can always add more specific goals anytime throughout the year.
 - B. **Example 2** You would like to avoid lashon hara. Make it more specific. Resolve to avoid shopping at the store where you end up gossiping with the shop owner and/or resolve to memorize several phrases that can steer conversations into a more positive direction and/or learn a page of the Chofetz Chaim each day.
 - C. **Example 3** You would like to yell less at home. Make it more specific. Resolve to leave the room when you feel like yelling at your spouse or children and/or resolve that when you feel like yelling you will get a drink of water, make the bracha slowly, drink it, and hopefully by that time you will have calmed down and/or if you feel like yelling you resolve to say a perek of Tehillim, using the delay to not only calm down but say the holy words of Psalms. (Another good one is to run and look in the mirror. It's impossible to yell watching yourself yell.)
4. **Learn More:** Buy supportive texts (or props such as posters, magnets, etc.) to help you stick to your resolution. The more you read and learn about your resolution, the more you'll keep your resolution in mind. (It's also okay to reward yourself if you find it helpful.)
5. **Believe:** Believe in yourself and in your personal power to change and grow. You are not stuck. You can always change your life. It is up to you.

Note: Although we are discouraged from making vows or promises, we can make a resolution while verbally affirming that we are doing this bli neder, without a vow.

Examples of Resolutions in Each Category

(These are general resolutions, if any of them appeal to you, you will want to make them more specific.)

Bein adam le-chavero: Between a person and his friend, other people

Resolve to: look for and see the good points in others, give tzedakah, take phone calls from those in need whenever possible, prepare your family member's favorite dinners, daven for others, join

a Tehillim group and pray for others, forgive others and ignore slights, avoid all conflicts as much as possible, pay back money you borrowed as quickly as possible, offer to regularly learn a little Breslov Torah with someone, lend items to people, drive someone to an appointment, listen to a lonely person, visit the sick, treat the elderly with respect, give gifts the recipient wants rather than what you like, etc.

Bein adam la-Makom: Between a person and Hashem

Resolve to: Pray from the siddur, make hitbodedut, say Tehillim, read texts and lessons on prayer and improve in this area, learn about and keep the mitzvot of the Torah that apply to you, make blessings over food, honor and keep the Shabbat, upgrade your kashrut, physically beautify your Shabbat by upgrading the foods, table settings, etc., learn Breslov teachings every day, etc.

Bein Adam Le-atzmo: Between a person and himself

Resolve to: Make hitbodedut every day, create more joy in your life each day, look for and identify your good points (try writing them down), surround yourself with Jews who focus on spirituality, learn Breslov teachings (it's good to decide on a specific text or texts), take a walk in nature often and appreciate the beautiful world Hashem created, read more about and eat healthy foods, listen to inspiring holy music each day, beautify your own space, take a class in something that interests you, sing and dance, etc.

May 5784 be the best year ever!

Shana Tova u'Metouka

Chaya Rivka Z.

BreslovWoman.org

P.S. For more information about Breslov classes, books, and programs for women visit BreslovWoman.org, see the Chaya Rivka Zwolinski YouTube channel or text Chaya Rivka at 914-758-9968 to join the WhatsApp group where you'll receive daily audio mini-lessons and announcements.