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**The Tales  
of Rabbi  
Nachman  
of Bratslav**

Retold with commentary  
by Adin Steinsaltz

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# The Losing of the King's Daughter

Once there was a king. He had six sons and one daughter. The daughter was very precious to him. He was very fond of her and used to play with her. One day when they were together, he was annoyed at her, and the words flew from his lips, "May the evil one take you!"

That night she went to her room, and in the morning no one knew where she was. Her father, the king, was very distressed, and he sought her everywhere. On seeing that the king was in great sorrow, the king's chamberlain asked to be given a servant, a horse, and money for expenses, and he went to look for her. He searched for a very long time until he found her.

He journeyed through deserts, fields, and forests. Once when he was traveling in the desert, he saw a side path. He decided that, since he had been in the desert for such a long time and had not found her, he should try that path, and perhaps he would reach a town or village. He went on for a long time, and in the end he saw a castle and many soldiers standing guard all around it.

The castle was beautiful and finely laid out, with well-trained

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guards. He was afraid that the guards would not let him in. But he decided, "I shall take the risk." So he left the horse and went up to the castle. He was allowed to go in – no one hindered him – and he went from room to room. He came to a great hall and saw a king wearing his crown and many soldiers standing about. Many musicians were playing their instruments before the king, and it was all very beautiful and fine. And neither the king nor anyone else there asked him anything. He saw good food there, and he went and ate. Then he went and lay down in a corner, to watch what was happening. He saw the king order that the queen be brought, and servants went to bring her. Then there was a great commotion and much joy, and the musicians played and sang when she was brought. A throne was brought for her, and she was seated next to the king. The chamberlain saw her and recognized her. It was the lost daughter of his king.

Then the queen looked around and saw someone lying in the corner, and she recognized him. She got up and went over to him, and then she touched him and asked, "Do you recognize me?"

He answered, "Yes, I recognize you – you are the king's daughter who was lost." He asked her, "How do you come to be here?"

She answered, "Because of the words that flew from my father's lips, that the evil one take me. This is the evil one's place."

He told her that her father was grief-stricken and had been looking for her for many years. Then he asked her, "How can I get you out of here?"

She answered, "You cannot, unless you choose a place and remain there for a year, and for the entire year you yearn to get me out of here. Whenever you have a free moment, you must do nothing but yearn for me and hope to get me out of here. And on the last day of the year, you must fast and not sleep for twenty-four hours."

So he went away and did all that she said. At the end of the year, on the last day, he fasted and did not sleep all night. Then he got up and went to the king's daughter, to take her away. On the way he saw a tree on which fine apples were growing, and he was filled with longing, and he ate one of them. As soon as he ate the apple, he fell down, and a deep sleep overcame him. He slept for a very long time. His servant

shook him but could not rouse him. Then, when he awoke, he asked the servant, “Where am I in the world?”

The servant told him the whole story: “You have been sleeping for many years. I kept myself alive by eating the fruit.”

He was grief-stricken and went back to the king’s daughter. She was in great sorrow and said, “Because of one day, because you could not restrain yourself for one day and you ate the apple, you have lost everything. Had you come on that day, you would have taken me out of here. True, it is difficult not to eat, especially on the last day, when the evil impulse is so strong. Go, therefore, and choose yourself another place and remain there for a year. On the last day you may eat, but you must not slumber, and you must drink no wine, lest you fall asleep. The main thing is sleep.”

He went away and did what she said. On the last day, he returned to her. On the way he saw a flowing spring. It was red, and its smell was the smell of wine. He said to his servant, “Look, there is a spring, and water should be flowing from it, but it is red, and its smell is the smell of wine.” And he went and tasted a little of the spring, and immediately he fell down and slept for seventy years.

While he was sleeping, many soldiers marched past, and their baggage trains went after them. The servant hid himself from the soldiers. Then a carriage went past, and the king’s daughter was in it. She stepped down and sat next to the chamberlain. She recognized him and tried to rouse him, but he did not wake up. She then began to complain: that after all the troubles and tribulations, after all the years that he had spent trying to get her away, “because of one day, on which you might have succeeded, you have lost everything.” And she wept a great deal and said, “It’s a great pity for you and for me. I have been here for such a long time, and I cannot get away.” Then she took a kerchief from her head, and she wrote on it with her tears and left it by his side, and she rose and seated herself in the carriage and drove away.

When he woke up, he asked the servant, “Where am I in the world?”

The servant told him the whole story: how many soldiers had marched past, and then a carriage had gone by, and the king’s daughter

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had stepped down and had wept over him, and that she had said that it was a great pity for both of them.

He looked about him and saw the kerchief lying nearby. He asked, "Where is this from?"

The servant answered, "She left it here and wrote on it with her tears."

So he took the kerchief and raised it to the sun, and he began to see letters, and then he read what was written: about her complaints and her weeping, and that she was no longer in the same castle, and he should search for a golden mountain on which stood a castle of pearl, "and there you will find me."

He left the servant and went off by himself to search for her. He searched for several years. Then he thought, "In places where men dwell one cannot find a golden mountain on which stands a castle of pearl [for he knew geography]. So I shall go into the desert and seek her there."

He went to the desert for many, many years. Then he saw a huge man, a giant, of a size that was not human, who was carrying a huge tree, of a size that one does not see where men live. And the giant asked him, "Who are you?"

He answered, "I am a human being."

The giant was astonished and said, "I have been here in the desert for such a long time, and I have never yet seen a human being here."

The chamberlain told him the story of what had happened and how he was searching for a golden mountain on which stood a castle of pearl.

The giant answered, "There can be no such thing. It cannot be. People have been telling you stupid tales."

But the chamberlain insisted, "It must exist somewhere."

Then the giant said, "In my opinion, it is all nonsense, but since you insist, I shall help you. I am in charge of all the beasts. For your sake, I shall summon them all here. They run all over the world, and perhaps one of them knows about your mountain and castle."

So he summoned all the beasts, large and small, and questioned them. They all answered that they had not seen the mountain. He said, "You see, you have been told stupid tales. If you listen to me, you will turn back, because what you are seeking does not exist."

But the chamberlain insisted, "I know that it must exist."

Then the giant said, "I have a brother in the desert. He is in charge of all the birds. Perhaps they know, because they fly high in the air. Maybe they have seen the mountain and the castle. Go to him and tell him that I sent you." And the chamberlain went to search for him.

After many years he met a huge man, a giant who was also carrying a huge tree and who also questioned him, as the first one had. And the chamberlain told him the whole story and that the giant's brother had sent him. And this giant, too, said that no such thing existed. But the chamberlain insisted that it must exist somewhere. Then the giant said, "I am in charge of all the birds, large and small. I shall summon them; perhaps they will know."

So he summoned all the birds, large and small, and questioned them. They all answered that they did not know of the mountain and the castle. He said, "You see, no such thing exists. If you listen to me, you will turn back because what you are seeking does not exist."

But the chamberlain persisted and said, "It certainly does exist, somewhere in the world."

The giant said, "Farther on in this same desert is my brother. He is in charge of the winds. Since they blow over the whole world, perhaps they will know."

And the chamberlain went on and searched for many years, and then he found another giant, who was also carrying a huge tree. The chamberlain told him also the story of what had happened. And this giant also tried to discourage him, telling him that no such thing existed. But the chamberlain persisted. So the giant said, "For your sake, I shall summon all the winds and question them."

So he summoned all the winds and asked them, and not one of them knew about the mountain and the castle. The giant said to the chamberlain, "You see, you have been told stupid tales."

Then the chamberlain began to weep and said, "I know that it does exist, somewhere in the world."

Meanwhile, the giant saw that another wind had come. He was angry with it and said, "Why are you late? Did I not summon all the winds? Why didn't you come with them?"

The wind answered, "I was delayed because I had to carry the daughter of a king to a golden mountain on which stands a castle of pearl."

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The chamberlain was filled with joy. The giant asked the wind, “What precious things are in that place?”

The wind answered, “Everything there is precious.”

Then the giant said to the chamberlain, “You have been searching for so long, and you have undergone many tribulations. Perhaps lack of money is troubling you. I shall give you a vessel; when you put your hand into it, you will take out money.” And he ordered the wind to take him to the mountain of gold.

So the storm wind came and carried him there and set him down by the gate of a city. Soldiers stood there and did not let him enter. So he put his hand in the vessel and took out money and bribed them, and he entered the city.

It was a beautiful city. And he went to a rich man and arranged to board with him, for he would have to spend time there. He would need to use wisdom and knowledge to get the king's daughter out.

And how he got her out of there, he did not relate.

But in the end he succeeded.

## *Commentary*

The basic narrative of this story is not original. Versions that are similar in both general plot and particular details can be found in the Grimm brothers' tales and in Russian and Ukrainian folklore. Rabbi Nachman “adopted” this ancient folktale, made a number of relatively small changes, and created a religious allegory of deep human significance. The transformation is so complete that in his introduction Nachman could write, “I told this story on the way, and everyone who heard it had thoughts of repentance.”

In Nachman's rendering, the search for the king's daughter is symbolic of the quest to redeem the *Shekhinah* (God's presence in the world), which is held captive by the forces of evil. The king's chamberlain is symbolic of the people of Israel or, more specifically, of its spiritual leaders. The efforts to save the king's daughter, and the various failures, are a tragic and poetic depiction of the historical struggle of the Jewish people – externally with the world and internally with its members.



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In Nachman's stories where there is a king, he frequently represents the Supreme King, God Himself. This is clearly the case here, as it is also the case that the king's daughter is the *Shekhinah*, who is to a certain extent equivalent to *Knesset Israel*; the collective soul of Israel. The six sons also reflect certain details of the kabbalistic picture of the world. The special bond that exists between God and the *Shekhinah* (and *Knesset Israel*) is clearly established in the description of the king's affection for his daughter. This first passage recalls the time when the *Shekhinah* resided in the Temple in Jerusalem, and Israel lived in its land in close connection with God.

In an unexplained, and perhaps inexplicable, moment of crisis, the king withholds his paternal care from his daughter, who is immediately snatched away by the powers of evil. The king immediately regrets what he has done and seeks to reestablish the original bond. Such a situation was in fact depicted by the prophet: "For a small moment have I forsaken thee, but with great compassion will I gather thee" (Isaiah 54:7).

After the banishment of the *Shekhinah* the Jewish people, too, must go into exile. Here, in fact, Nachman has inverted the order of the traditional account in which the *Shekhinah* follows the Jews into exile – that is, the physical banishment precedes the spiritual. As Nachman tells it, the chamberlain makes a voluntary decision to seek out the king's daughter. Two tasks lie before him as leader of the people: to help the Jews find their collective soul and to reunite daughter and father. To attain these goals, he is willing to suffer all the tribulations of an almost endless quest.

## *The Quest: Stage I*

When the chamberlain sets out, he takes with him no more than the basic necessities; in such a manner the Jewish people have had to leave their homes on numerous occasions. Nevertheless, he is accompanied by a servant, symbolic of the simple, innocent people of Israel who seek

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redemption together with their spiritual leaders, and who frequently have an important role to play. In two of Nachman's stories included in this book ("The Merchant and the Pauper" and "The Master of Prayer"), the simple folk participate actively in the process, but here their role is secondary.

After years of searching, the chamberlain finds the king's daughter in the middle of the desert, which is traditionally the abode of the powers of evil (and also, paradoxically, where the divine revelation takes place and the Torah is given). The desert castle in which the daughter is held is described as if it were a regal palace; according to the symbolism of the story, this reflects the kabbalistic idea that the realm of evil resembles the actual world. Nevertheless, it is ultimately illusory. When the chamberlain overcomes his fear of the apparently powerful guards, he can enter unhampered. Evil is a mirror image of reality and has no power or even existence of its own. When man is aware of the nature of evil, he can enter its stronghold unharmed. The chamberlain penetrates the castle as an onlooker, and as such he sits in the corner.

The festivities in the kingdom of evil reach a climax when the queen – who is, of course, the king's daughter – is presented at court. Her regal status reflects the deeper level of significance of the exile of the *Shekhinah*: not only is she separated from the Divine, but she actually supports and sustains evil. The *Shekhinah* is, of course, not a willing partner, for she is a captive. The imagery used by the Kabbalah and Hasidism to describe the hold of evil on the *Shekhinah* is frequently powerful and dramatic.

The Baal Shem Tov, Nachman's great-grandfather, once said that the battle against evil is decided when one realizes that evil, too, contains something of the Divine. This profound and difficult hasidic idea – which was frequently misunderstood – is central in this episode: the chamberlain recognizes the king's daughter in the midst of corruption, and at that moment the process of redemption is initiated. The next stage is her recognizing him and providing him with detailed instructions on how he is to rescue her. He is to perform certain tasks that are in fact spiritual exercises: penances, self-mortification, and incessant yearning.

The chamberlain's failure is almost inevitable. External evil can be overcome not by force, but only by recognizing the Divine within it.

Similarly, on the psychological level, the evil within man cannot be suppressed by asceticism and penances. The longer it is repressed, the more the evil inclination grows in strength. The problems that derive from strong natural desires must be resolved at their source, not at the level at which they are manifest. Though it is expressed in purely theological terms, this hasidic idea is similar to modern psychological theories.

The chamberlain's failure is reminiscent of the biblical account of the fall of Adam, who ate the forbidden fruit. Here the sin is followed by deep sleep, a decline, a kind of spiritual death in which there is no awareness or knowledge of the world. The Talmud describes sleep as being one sixtieth part of death. There is a surprising element here: the servant, who had no aspirations to achieve spiritual greatness, experiences no great fall and remains awake to look after the physical needs of the people.

## *The Quest: Stage II*

When the chamberlain finally awakens, he appears to have lost all sense of orientation and has to ask the servant what has happened. He returns to the king's daughter and finds her in the same place, for her exile is not yet total. His second task is easier – not to sleep when the great opportunity comes and not to drink wine, so as not to fall into a drunken slumber in which it would be impossible to distinguish between exile and redemption.

The task is easier, but the temptation, when it comes, is subtler, and the chamberlain succumbs to a species of formalistic reasoning. The commandment he received was quite clear, but he manages to find a casuistic way to circumvent it. Once again he falls into a deep sleep, this time for seventy years, the length of the Babylonian exile, during which, it is written, "We were as dreamers." This drunken slumber is so deep that all memory of the Redemption is lost. Indeed, not even the appeal of the king's daughter, the direct personal intervention of the *Shekhinah*, can arouse the chamberlain from his spiritual coma.

After this second failure, the situation of the king's daughter is drastically changed and becomes symbolic of the final exile, when all

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hopes of immediate return are lost. She is banished to an inconceivably remote place. Nevertheless, she leaves the chamberlain a message, one that he can neither forget nor ignore. The Jewish people receive this letter, written in tears and suffering, which tells them that there is still hope, that the Redemption will come, but that it is far off and fantastic. Its beginning will be in a form and a place that are beyond human comprehension and experience – a golden mountain and a castle of pearl.

## *The Quest: The Final Stage*

When Abraham was about to climb the mountain to sacrifice his son Isaac and was facing the most terrible test of faith imaginable, he told the servants who had accompanied him on the journey to stay behind. So, too, the chamberlain, about to go beyond the limits of human experience in search of the golden mountain, must go alone. The servant (the common people) endures the physical hardship of exile together with his master, but the latter must bear its spiritual torment and despair alone. This was the way that many hasidic leaders, and notably Nachman, envisaged their task: they had, on one hand, to direct and comfort their followers and, on the other, to face in isolation the spiritual challenges and existential loneliness of the final stages of the exile.

The final stage of the quest can be read at two levels, one geographical-historical, the other spiritual-metaphysical. Nachman frequently used the technique of ambiguous symbolism to present different messages within a single story to audiences of differing degrees of sophistication. At the first level, the quest goes deeper into exile through the centuries, and the giants are the various peoples among whom the Jewish people dwelled, who mocked their hopes and tested their faith. At the second level of significance, this last stage of the quest takes the chamberlain from the ordinary “real” world into another dimension of being, to other, metaphysical worlds. The golden mountain is not marked on any map of the world but exists in the higher spheres, and it is there that he must solve the problem of redemption. However, the exile of the *Shekhinah* is so deep and abysmal that not even the three giants, angels who rule over three such celestial worlds, can help. It is

said that God did not reveal the time of the Redemption to any of His creatures, not even to the angels.

An interesting Jewish idea present in this episode is the status of man in relation to the angels. Man is small, a terrestrial being, whereas the angels are at a higher level in the cosmic scale. Nevertheless, the angels cannot move from their fixed positions, nor can they change their role. Man, on the other hand, is free in every meaning of the word.

The chamberlain has passed through many stages in his quest, from the first attempts to bring redemption by mortification of the body, to the spiritual voyages in which he encounters failure after failure. However, even after the third giant, the angel of the highest world he can reach, can help him no more and there is apparently no hope, his faith remains unbroken.

## *The Road to Redemption*

At this very point, the ultimate crisis of reality, many seekers after redemption gave up. In the rich vein of literature that deals with redemption, there are frequent descriptions of the time when the Messiah, son of Joseph (the precursor of the final Messiah, son of David), is killed, Jerusalem is destroyed again, and the few remaining believers flee into the wilderness. This is the moment of the greatest trial of faith, and those who pass it are the remnant who will see the Redemption.

Once again, good appears from within evil. The tidings that there is indeed a mountain of gold are brought by the very wind that transported the king's daughter to her place of exile, and the giant, who had previously declared that the search was futile, is willing to help, now that there are clear signs that the search can succeed.

The description of the chamberlain's entry into the city is brief, but it is replete with images drawn from messianic texts in the Talmud. The fact that the story does not end, and that the actual rescue of the king's daughter is not depicted, is typical of many of Nachman's stories and will be discussed again in later commentaries. At this point it is sufficient to note that the Redemption is a matter of the future, either remote or very close.