

Reb Nakhman of Breslov's "The Loss of the Princess"

A GREAT JEWISH BOOKS TEACHER WORKSHOP RESOURCE KIT

Teachers' Guide

This guide accompanies resources that can be found at: <http://teachgreatjewishbooks.org/resource-kits/reb-nakhman-breslovs-loss-princess>.

Introduction

"The Loss of the Princess" (*"Meyaveydes bas-meylekh,"* 1807; also translated as "The Story of a Lost Princess") is the first story in the collected tales of Reb Nakhman of Breslov (1772-1810)—first published in a Hebrew and Yiddish edition in 1815—and is arguably the first modern short story written in a Jewish language. Reb Nakhman, great-grandson of the Baal Shem Tov whose teachings launched the Jewish religious movement known as Hasidism, was a spiritual leader in his own right, founding the Breslov branch of Hasidism, which exists to this day. Mixing traditional folk motifs with Kabbalistic imagery, this story is unlike previous Jewish stories in that it offers no explicit link to Jewish ritual or written tradition, no clear ethical teaching, and no conclusive ending. The mysteriousness of the tale, however, has exerted fascination for subsequent Jewish authors, particularly in Yiddish and Hebrew literature. The consecration of this new type of storytelling also consciously blurred once seemingly distinct lines distinguishing the sacred from the profane, the Jewish from the non-Jewish, and the specific from the universal in ways that are provocatively modern.

A note about the author's name: Most sources refer to him as "Reb" Nakhman (or Nachman, or Nahman, depending on transliteration customs), or as a *rebbe*, rather than "Rabbi" Nakhman. In the Hasidic tradition of which Nakhman was an early proponent, a *rebbe* is distinct from a rabbi. A rabbi's function historically was primarily legal, not pastoral; one consulted a rabbi on questions of kosher practices, marriage, even business ethics. In the Hasidic tradition that began in Eastern Europe during the second half of the eighteenth century, the figure of *rebbe* was, and is, a charismatic mystic. Although many *rebbes*, including Reb Nakhman, have been well-versed scholars of Torah, Talmud, midrash, and Jewish law, their unique role has been inspiring devotees to understand that ordinary actions contain the potential for extraordinary religious meaning. Hasidic *rebbes* have often included storytelling as part of their religious mission, and Reb Nakhman is perhaps the greatest of these storytellers.

As for the name of Reb Nakhman's hometown: one Yiddish linguist counted fifteen distinct spellings and pronunciations of the place name, including Bratslav, Brislov, Broslev, and Breslav. Contemporary Hasidim tend to refer to him as Nakhman of Breslov, and to their movement as Breslov or Breslover Hasidism. The town of Breslov is in present-day Ukraine. (It is not to be confused with the city of Breslau [now Wrocław], which is in Western Poland, or Bratislava, which is now the capital of Slovakia.) In fact, Reb Nakhman was born in the town of Miedzybóz, but he is associated with Breslov because he chose to begin his career as a Hasidic *rebbe* there.

Cover image: Painting, "The Wandering Moon," ca. 1816-1820, by William Blake, a contemporary of Reb Nakhman. Blake was an English poet and artist whose devout Christian spirituality rejected the religious establishment and embraced mysticism, and whose work was rife with allegories not unlike Reb Nakhman's. From [WikiArt](#).

Subjects

Eastern Europe, Fiction, Folklore, Hasidism, Hebrew, Kabbalah, Music, Religion, Yiddish

Reading and Background

- There are several translations of Reb Nakhman's tales available in English. This kit bases its questions on Arnold Band's translation in his volume *Nahman of Bratslav: The Tales*, first published as part of the Paulist Press's Classics of Western Spirituality series in 1978, and we recommend this translation for classroom use. Band's section of commentary on "The Loss of the Princess" describes the story's roots in Lurianic kabbalah, which those teaching Resource 4 of this kit may be interested in.



The Great Jewish Books Teacher Workshop, a program of the Yiddish Book Center, is made possible with support from the Jim Joseph Foundation. The Foundation, established in 2006, is devoted to fostering compelling, effective Jewish learning experiences for youth and young adults in the U.S.

- There is also a translation prepared by contemporary Breslover Hasidim, originally published in 1983, which is available in two volumes as *The Lost Princess and Other Kabbalistic Tales of Rebbe Nachman of Breslov* and *The Seven Beggars and Other Kabbalistic Tales of Rebbe Nachman of Breslov* (each volume originally published in 2005). This version contains footnotes that detail various religious and spiritual interpretations of the motifs in the tales.
- An extensive scholarly literature exists, primarily in English and in Hebrew, dedicated to Reb Nakhman's religious teachings. The only academic biography of Reb Nakhman to date is Arthur Green's *Tormented Master: The Life and Spiritual Quest of Rabbi Nahman of Bratslav* (1979), also available online in its entirety with a Questia subscription. Zvi Mark's more recent study of Reb Nakhman's thought, *Mysticism and Madness*, was translated into English in 2009. Although both sources are excellent, they often arrive at different interpretations of Reb Nakhman's philosophy.
- Ora Wiskind-Elper's *Tradition and Fantasy in the Tales of Reb Nahman of Bratslav* (1998) is a full-length study of Reb Nakhman's stories. David G. Roskies also includes a chapter on Reb Nakhman's tales in his study of modern Yiddish fiction, *A Bridge of Longing: The Lost Art of Yiddish Storytelling* (1995).
- A map showing the location of the town of Breslav in present-day Ukraine (as well as cities with which it is commonly confused) can be found [here](#).

Resources

1: Video, the Jewish Daily Forward's "Next Year in Uman: A Journey to Ukraine" (2011).

At the time of Reb Nakhman's death, over two hundred years ago, he asked that his Hasidim (devotees) make an annual pilgrimage at Rosh Hashanah to his grave in Uman, Ukraine. Since the end of the Cold War in the 1990s, this pilgrimage has become one of the leading events in the world of Orthodox Jewry. In recent years, upwards of 20,000 Jewish men and boys—women are almost completely excluded from the event—travel primarily from Israel and the United States for three days of prayer and celebration of both the Jewish New Year and Reb Nakhman's teachings.

The pilgrimage to Uman is the defining event of Breslover Hasidism today. Although the activities that take place there are dedicated to traditional religious rituals, they are filtered through the charisma associated with Reb Nakhman himself. Reb Nakhman died in 1810, and unlike other Hasidic leaders he never chose a successor to lead his movement—thereby earning for his followers the Yiddish epithet *toyte khsidim* ("dead Hasidim," since they follow a dead *rebbe*)—but the movement holds together thanks to the devotion Reb Nakhman inspires and the meaning his Hasidim project onto him. The stories he left behind, which were first published five years after his death, contribute to this sense of connection, as if he were telling them to his followers today.

Published in 2011 by the English-language edition of the Yiddish newspaper *The Forward*, this video is a slideshow put together by an American Jewish photographer from his photos of various Uman pilgrimages in the early 2000s.

Those who would like to see footage of the event may wish to view [this short video](#) of the 2016 Uman pilgrimage, published by news outlet Ukraine Today.

Suggested Activity: Discuss the ways in which "The Loss of the Princess" contributes to Reb Nakhman's mystique, by creating an aura of mystery and creativity for the *rebbe* quite distinct from the functions of an ordinary rabbi. Once students have seen one or both videos, ask: how does the twenty-first century pilgrimage add new dimensions to this mystique? Consider how Reb Nakhman's appeal has grown beyond the parameters of his own Hasidim, or even Hasidism as such. How might stories like this have helped lead to such wide appeal?

As seen in these images (and videos), contemporary Hasidim have added elements of dance, music, and contemporary fashions to the celebration of Reb Nakhman's memory. Is this different from what you would expect to see on a religious pilgrimage memorializing a dead spiritual leader? If so, how? Thinking about "The Loss of the Princess," how is it different from (or similar to) literature you are familiar with that is considered "religious"?

Consider the fact that Reb Nakhman begins his story announcing that he conceived it on a journey, and that the story itself would bring all of its hearers (or readers) to repentance. What role do travel, journeying, quest, and repentance play in the story? How might that connect with the contemporary Uman pilgrimage?

Sources: *Forward*, "Next Year in Uman: A Journey to Ukraine," Apr. 28 2011, video, 6:32, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gjuB->

DaOF_s&feature=emb_logo.

2: Songs, the Breslov Research Institute’s “L’cho Dodi,” 1986, and Andy Statman’s “Breslever Lecha Dodi,” 1998.

In addition to his expansive series of philosophical sermons and his celebrated stories, Reb Nakhman is also credited with the composition of several liturgical melodies known as nigunim. These melodies can be used in solitude or communally, either without words or adapted to specific prayers or psalms, as an aid to meditation or to formal worship. Since these melodies were not transcribed in formal musical notation, it is likely that not all of the numerous melodies attributed to Reb Nakhman were actually his. It is also likely that many of the melodies he *did* create were adapted from Eastern European folk songs, including songs originally sung by non-Jews in Polish or Ukrainian.

Perhaps the most famous nigun attributed to Reb Nakhman has been used as a melody for the Friday night hymn *Lekha dodi* (“Come, My Beloved”), which welcomes the arrival of the Sabbath, poetically personified as a bride. These YouTube clips feature Reb Nakhman’s *Lekha dodi* nigun performed in two strikingly different ways. The first, produced by the Hasidic organization the Breslov Research Institute, is a traditional arrangement with vocals. The second, by the klezmer and bluegrass musician Andy Statman, is a jazz-influenced instrumental. Statman, though not strictly Hasidic, is an observant Jew who has participated in and performed at pilgrimages to Uman on several occasions.

Suggested Activity: Can you imagine ways in which melody (not lyrics, but *melody*) contributes to religious worship or spirituality? To community? Are there ways in which storytelling contributes to these experiences as well? What role might “The Loss of the Princess” play in contributing to religious worship, meditation, and communion? If a bride is used in *Lekha dodi* as a symbol representing the Sabbath, then might the princess in “The Loss of the Princess” represent a religious concept as well? Break into groups and have students make lists of what the princess could possibly symbolize.

Research has suggested that Reb Nakhman may have developed “The Loss of the Princess” from a Polish folk tale. With this in mind, ask students to think about which elements, symbols, and motifs in “The Loss of the Princess” might have been borrowed from other European storytelling traditions, and which seem to be uniquely Jewish and/or uniquely Reb Nakhman’s.

Sources: Breslov Research Institute, “L’cho Dodi,” Nov. 10 2015, video, 4:53, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OMvDie4CMLs&feature=emb_logo.

Andy Statman, “Come, My Beloved (Lecha Dodi) (Instrumental),” Sep. 10 2015, video, 4:41, https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=3&v=GgrbQJtgkcl&feature=emb_...

3: Excerpt, the Brothers Grimm, “The King of the Golden Mountain,” ca. 1812-1858, trans. Margaret Hunt, 1884.

Reb Nakhman’s stories are supernatural tales that depict an enchanted world of talking animals, personified natural forces, and daring feats of escape and rescue. Today we would call these fairy tales, and perhaps consider them mostly suitable for children, but two hundred years ago they were considered not only works of literature for all ages, but also the keys to unlock a culture. In this respect, one should note that Reb Nakhman was telling his stories around the same time that the Brothers Grimm were collecting stories from their neighbors in German-speaking lands. Nakhman’s stories share certain features with the Grimm tales. Subsequent scholars of folklore, in particular the Russian theorist Vladimir Propp, working about a century after Reb Nakhman and the Brothers Grimm, have argued that every fairy tale shares features with every other fairy tale, regardless of its place of origin.

Suggested Activity: Ask students to consider the similarities between Reb Nakhman’s stories and other fairy tales they are familiar with, both in their oral versions and in cinematic adaptations, such as Disney’s *Cinderella*, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves*, etc. How does “The Loss of the Princess” compare with these? Do you notice any similarities between “The Loss of the Princess” and contemporary fantasy genres like science fiction, anime, and comic books? Is it possible to imagine how Reb Nakhman’s story could be filmed as a Pixar movie? Or to imagine how a contemporary film could be retold in the style of Reb Nakhman’s stories? Conversely, are there any elements in Nakhman’s story that you believe could *only* be found in a Jewish folk tale?

Now have students read the excerpt from “The King of the Golden Mountain.” Ask them whether they notice any characters, elements, or settings that this story shares with “The Loss of the Princess.” You may wish to draw their attention to the following parts of Reb Nakhman’s story: the trapped princess asking the Viceroy for rescue, the princess’s captivity in an enchanted castle on a golden mountain, the princess tasking the Viceroy with a feat of endurance in order to break the curse and free her. Ask students: Do you think Reb Nakhman and the Brothers Grimm had completely independent sources for their stories? Or is it possible that these stories derived from closely related oral traditions? If Reb Nakhman was simply adapting an existing European folk tale (or combination of tales), does that in any way decrease or change its value as a Jewish spiritual text?

Source: Jacob Grimm and Wilhelm Grimm, “The King of the Golden Mountain,” in *Grimm’s Household Tales, Volume 2*, trans. Margaret Hunt (London: George Bell and Sons, 1884), 30-31, https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Grimm%27s_Household_Tales,_Volume_2/The_King_of_the_Golden_Mountain.

4: Excerpt, Arnold J. Band’s commentary on “The Loss of the Princess,” from “Nahman of Bratslav: The Tales,” 1978.

However strange some of the details of Reb Nakhman’s first story are—and many of his subsequent tales are just as mysterious—perhaps the most baffling feature is the lack of an ending. Though Reb Nakhman does provide a kind of “happily ever after,” any description of *how* this happy ending is achieved is strikingly absent. How did the King’s Viceroy rescue the Princess? What happened to the kingdom? What reasons could Reb Nakhman have had for telling this story without an ending?

In his volume of translations of Reb Nakhman’s tales, Arnold J. Band includes a section of commentary in which he summarizes religious and scholarly consensus on the intended meaning of these stories. In this excerpt, Band comments on the role of the Viceroy in “The Loss of the Princess,” and on how Reb Nakhman deliberately caps his protagonist’s quest with an unsatisfying conclusion.

Suggested Activity: Ask students to consider other ways that Reb Nakhman could have finished the story, or ask them to write their own alternate endings that build on the original. How might the Viceroy have succeeded in rescuing the Princess? Do they think the story would be better with a clearer ending, or do they like that this part of the story was left untold?

Then present students with the Band excerpt. Ask whether they agree with Band’s analysis that the focus of the story is not on the Princess, but on the Viceroy and his struggle to retrieve her. If so, what does that struggle entail? Is the Viceroy’s quest a metaphor for something? And, if so, what? Ask students what it means for Nakhman to have “declined to describe the actual act of redemption.” What is the “redemption” Band is referring to, and why might Nakhman have chosen to leave it out? Can they think of other stories (contemporary or not) where this happens? Can they think of stories where the “redemption” is detailed, and is an important part of the narrative?

Source: Arnold J. Band, “Commentaries, I: The Loss of the Princess,” in *Nahman of Bratslav: The Tales*, trans. Arnold J. Band (New York: Paulist Press, 1978), 286-287.