

## DIVINE GENDER TRANSFORMATIONS IN REBBE NAHMAN OF BRATSLAV

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**ABSTRACT** In several passages in the tales and teachings of Rebbe Nahman of Bratslav, the divine undergoes a process of gender transformation. »The Holy One Blessed Be He» becomes female, and the Shekhinah temporarily takes on a male persona. Characterizations of Hasidic thought as androcentric generally apply to R' Nahman. There is an accepted hierarchy and polarization of gender which informs much of his oeuvre. This article argues, however, that in these particular passages R' Nahman disrupts this hierarchy. Whereas Kabbalah and Hasidism normally view the feminine as an outer »garment» for the divine masculine, in these passages the devotee discovers the hidden inwardness of God, which turns out to be feminine. This radical imagery is nourishing for followers of R' Nahman's controversial brand of Hasidism. In particular, it provides a theological justification for their unexpectedly intimate encounters with the divine, as they engage in the meditative practice of personal, solitary prayer according to R' Nahman's directives.

This article will consider two remarkable images of gender transformation in the teachings and tales of the Hasidic master Nahman of Bratslav (1772–1810).

In his brief lifetime, R' Nahman was not a particularly successful Hasidic leader; he had no more than a few hundred followers and was surrounded by controversy.<sup>1</sup> Yet, he demanded and inspired an unusually intense focus on his own person and teachings. This led to his disciple R' Nathan Sternhartz's devoted efforts to transcribe and

publish R' Nahman's teachings, the stories he told, and biographical information and anecdotes about him. After R' Nahman's death, his followers (known today as Breslov Hasidim) continued to acknowledge him as their rebbe, never choosing a successor; this was and remains a controversial choice.<sup>2</sup>

As a spiritual guide for his followers, R' Nahman sought new ways of achieving closeness to the divine. Controversially, for example, he introduced a ritual in which new disciples confessed their sins to him.<sup>3</sup> Most significantly, R' Nahman advocated individual, personal prayer in the vernacular, in seclusion, and established it as a regular spiritual discipline, in effect more important than liturgical prayer.

This individual form of prayer, known in Breslov Hasidism as *hitbodedut*, »seclusion»,<sup>4</sup> can lead to profound meditative states.<sup>5</sup> It is said to be especially accessible to those who experience many emotional ups and downs<sup>6</sup> – although in my own limited experience, it actually tends to *produce* emotional fluctuations.<sup>7</sup> A subset of this practice is »turning torah into prayer». <sup>8</sup> Here »torah» has the special Hasidic sense of the spiritual teachings of the Rebbe. The Hasid is asked to reflect on the Rebbe's teachings and pray, in his own words, to live out their implications.

In today's Hasidic world, R' Nahman is highly regarded. Critics suggest, however, that Breslov Hasidism involves an escape into a dream world.<sup>9</sup> From a Breslov perspective, of course, the escape is an awakening to the world of inner truth, deeper and more real than that of outer perceptions.

R' Nahman's teachings, as understood by his followers, are not primarily theological but always contain advice for spiritual living.<sup>10</sup> Yet, he is recognized as a bold and original theologian. His teachings work through an associative system in which the word *behinat* (»an aspect of...») links disparate images and concepts. *Behinat*... in R' Nahman's thought, like *bandhu* in Vedic cosmology, sets up »relationships that can be formulated as follows: 'X is so »bound» to Y that X is Y.'<sup>11</sup> The results of these associations are often surprising and compelling.

R' Nahman's stories, though resembling secular wonder tales or romances,<sup>12</sup> with little overt religious content, have been understood from the beginning as communicating deep spiritual messages.<sup>13</sup> Their dreamlike shifts in plot and imagery function much as the chains of association in the teachings do, but on a different level, less

intellectual and more emotional, opening the imagination to new possibilities.

The teachings were gathered by the devoted disciple R' Nathan in the book *Liqutei Moharan* («Gleanings from Our Teacher R' Nahman»), and the major tales in the book *Sipurei Ma'asiyot* («Tales»). These two works are canonical in Breslov Hasidism, objects of sacred study. They are the sources of the passages to be examined here.

*Liqutei Moharan* 1:15 is a long teaching, transcribed from R' Nahman's own notes, whose theme is the question of how to attain the hidden, inner secrets of the Torah and of God. Toward the end of subsection 6, it includes the following passage:<sup>14</sup>

And one merits to this [attaining the inner secrets of Torah] through prayer, because »The Holy One Blessed Be He desires (*mit'aveh*<sup>15</sup>) the prayers of the people of Israel» [cf. *Midrash Tehillim* 116]. So when the people of Israel pray before Him and fulfill His desire, then He, as it were, becomes the aspect of (*behinat*) woman, since He receives pleasure from us. As it is written, »a fire-offering (*isheh*), an appeasing fragrance to God» [a phrase referring to burnt offerings, Exodus 19:18 and repeatedly in Leviticus and Numbers]. Through the appeasing fragrance which He receives, He becomes the aspect of woman (*ishah*). And »a female shall surround a male» [Jeremiah 31:21] since the Holy One Blessed Be He becomes the aspect of the garment, the revealed. That is, the aspect that was originally hidden is now revealed, through prayer. And »the Holy One Blessed Be He and the Torah are all one» [a frequent phrase in Hasidic literature, based on similar phrases in the Zohar (2:90b, 3:723a)]; so through prayer the Torah has been revealed, that is, the secrets of the Torah.

There is a close parallel to this teaching in *Liqutei Moharan* 1:73, a brief passage, transcribed from notes taken by disciples, which addresses the same theme of attaining the inner secrets of Torah through prayer. Toward the end of this text it is stated that God desires our prayer, because He wants to bestow kindness on us;

And it is known that whoever receives pleasure from someone else is called female – that is, in relation to the other. Therefore, when The Blessed Name receives pleasure from the people of

Israel, from their prayers, He becomes, as it were, female in relation to the people of Israel. So it is written, »a fire-offering (*isheh*), an appeasing fragrance to God» – because through the appeasing fragrance which The Blessed Name receives from the prayers of the people of Israel, He mystically becomes woman (*na'aseh besod ishab*). »And a female shall surround a male»; if so, the inner becomes the outer.

During the past decade or so there has been increasing scholarly attention to gender in R' Nahman, as in Jewish texts in general.<sup>16</sup> The study of gender in Kabbalah and Hasidism is dominated by the oeuvre of Elliot Wolfson,<sup>17</sup> who argues that these traditions are strongly phallogocentric.<sup>18</sup> In this context, both Zvi Mark and Daniel Abrams have taken note of the striking and unusual imagery of these two passages from R' Nahman.<sup>19</sup> In agreement with Mark and Abrams, I read these particular passages as creating a vulvic, rather than phallic, image of the Divine.<sup>20</sup> In imagery with sexual connotations, the female surrounds the male, that is, the female genitals envelop the male. Here it is the Jew at prayer who is imaged phallically, entering into the Divine, giving it pleasure and having direct access to its inner parts.<sup>21</sup>

I would like to add to this interpretation a greater emphasis on the *change* of gender in these passages. The texts' emphasis on God's *becoming* female indicate that what is evoked here is not the usual situation. The choice of verse from Jeremiah makes the same point; in that verse, the words R' Nahman quotes are immediately preceded by the phrase »for the Eternal has created something new upon the earth.»

This transformation of gender takes place against the background of a particular set of polarities which are assumed to be the normal situation. These polarities, as they emerge from these texts themselves, are as follows:

*Gender: the »normal» polarities*

Female	Male
Israel [in other contexts, Shekhinah, the Divine Presence]	God (»The Holy One Blessed Be He«/ »The Blessed Name«) <sup>22</sup>
Receiving	Bestowing
Outer	Inner
Revealed	Hidden
Garment	Body

These polarities will be familiar to students of Kabbalah.<sup>23</sup> They are fundamentals of the Kabbalistic gender system studied by Wolfson, aspects of which pervade much of Jewish thought.<sup>24</sup> It is a fixed system which informs many, many texts, including other teachings of R' Nahman's.

This system contains a paradox which renders the experience of the mystic poignantly unfulfilled. »Revealed» and »garment» are part of the same polarity; but a garment is also a concealment. In theosophic Kabbalah,<sup>25</sup> which provides the underpinnings of Hasidic mysticism, the Divine Presence (Shekhinah), through which the mystic accesses the Divine, is simultaneously the garment, the concealment, of the inner, higher Divine to which the mystic aspires. The mystic who enters more deeply into the divine realms discovers that each of the *sefirot*, the manifestations of the Divine, is a garment concealing that which is still higher and deeper. There is no manifestation that is not simultaneously a concealment.

In the two parallel teachings cited above, R' Nahman invokes this system only in order to explode it. He does so by focusing on an aspect of the system which he does not emphasize elsewhere: the equation of »receiving» (*meqabel*) with »female».<sup>26</sup> Maintaining this equation, while invoking the Biblically and midrashically well-founded notion that God receives pleasure from prayer, willy-nilly makes God female. This is a reversal in which the beginning of our table of correspondences now looks like this:

*Gender polarities reversed*

Female	Male
God	Israel
Receiving	Bestowing

But R' Nahman's move goes beyond simple reversal. We are not told that what was revealed becomes hidden, or that what was outer becomes inner. Rather, most of the changes are in one direction, gathering former opposites together on one side of the binary system. The initial reversal has broken down the rigid system of correspondences and allowed it to recombine in new ways. At the end of the teaching, most of the polarities have become identities:

*Gender polarities rearranged*

Female	Male
God	Israel
Receiving	Bestowing
Outer = Inner	
Revealed = Hidden	
Garment = Body	

As God has become female, the hidden has become identical with the revealed and the inner has become equivalent to the outer. The garment and the body are now the same. All this from the point of view of the praying Jew enveloped by the Divine.

It is significant that R' Nahman does not use Kabbalistic terminology referring to the Shekhinah, the Divine Presence usually imaged as female, in these passages.<sup>27</sup> That is, he is not teaching that through prayer we can connect with this more immanent aspect of the Divine. Much more radically, we can enter inside the transcendent, hidden Divine in intimate knowing.

This is conceptually impossible as long as the standard system of gender polarities, with its inherent paradox of revelation/concealment, is maintained. In these remarkable passages, R' Nahman explodes this system in order to allow for the possibility of unmediated intimacy with the Divine.

I would like to juxtapose these parallel teachings from *Liqutei Moharan* with two narrative passages from *Sipurei Ma'asiyot* which involve gender transformation from female to male. As with the two teachings above, these two narrative passages can be seen as variations of the same motif. In both tales, an emperor's daughter, in the wake of an encounter with a robber, assumes male clothing and remains in a male role until the end of the story, when she has masterminded her reunion with her destined husband.

All the characters in these tales can be understood as playing symbolic roles grounded in theosophic Kabbalah. The interpretations of these roles are often disputed among commentators and certainly deserve further study; for purposes of this article I will focus on the emperor's daughter.<sup>28</sup> Traditional and academic commentaries on both tales agree that she is the Shekhinah.<sup>29</sup>

Summaries of these narrative passages follow.

*Summary:* the last portion of the second tale in *Sipurei Maasiyot*,  
»The King and the Emperor«

1. An emperor's daughter, separated from her true bridegroom, has acquired by three episodes of trickery – each involving promises of marriage and strong wine – a ship, eleven noblewomen as companions, and the treasures of twelve robbers, whom she and her companions have killed. Now she and her companions »agreed not to go dressed like women any more, and they sewed themselves male clothes, in German style, and went on in the ship«.

2. A young king is on a sea journey with his wife and courtiers. They play games and the king begins to climb the mast. The emperor's daughter sees him from her ship, boasts to her companions that she can throw him into the sea, takes a lens, focuses the sun's rays onto his head, and kills him by »burning his brain«.

3. His courtiers sail over to her ship in the hope of finding a doctor who can help. She shows them that his brain is burnt, and they are so impressed that they want her to come home with them and be their court doctor. She demurs, but they sail on together.

4. A long episode involving promises of marriage and strong wine ends with everyone agreeing that the dead king's wife will marry the »doctor« (the emperor's daughter). They all sail back to the dead king's country, where the »doctor« is introduced as the new king, the queen's husband-to-be, and accepted joyfully.

5. The new king issues orders: every wanderer or exile in any country is invited to his wedding. Drinking-fountains are to be set up all around the city. His portrait is to be placed at each fountain and guards are to see if anyone makes a face when they see it.

6. Among the wanderers who respond to the invitation are two rejected suitors of the emperor's daughter – from whom she acquired the ship and her women companions – and her true bridegroom. The three of them react to her portrait, and are arrested.

7. The king orders these prisoners brought to him. She recognizes them but they do not recognize her, because she is dressed like a man. She speaks to each of them, returns the ship and the noblewomen to the men she took them from, and says to her bridegroom, »Let us travel home«.

Grammatically, the emperor's daughter / »doctor« / king is feminine in episodes 1–3, masculine in 4–5, feminine in 6, masculine at the beginning of 7 and then feminine.

*Summary:* the last portion of the tenth tale in *Sipurei Maasiyot*, »The Burgher and the Pauper«

An emperor's daughter, whose father has prevented her marriage to her destined bridegroom, is kidnapped by a robber. To protect himself in case they are caught, the robber »went and dressed her in a sailor's clothes, and she looked like a man; and he travelled over the sea with him«.

Here there is a note in the text: »From this point on we will speak about the emperor's daughter in the masculine, because that is how our Rebbe, of blessed memory, told the story, for the murderer had dressed her like a male«.<sup>30</sup>

She and the robber are shipwrecked, and she gets away from him and walks on until she meets her bridegroom, who has been cast away there earlier. They do not recognize each other, but make friends.

At this point, her father, the emperor, is exiled by his people, who give the rulership to his wife. He ends up cast away along with his daughter and her bridegroom. None of them recognize each other »because their hair had grown long, and years had passed«. The bridegroom plays the most active role in keeping them fed. After a long time together, the bridegroom and the emperor tell their stories, reveal each other's identities and are reconciled. The emperor's daughter listens but does not reveal herself.

The bridegroom had a letter from the emperor's daughter, promising to marry the bearer. He has lost this letter, however. When the emperor's daughter and her father hear about this, they decide to help him find it. The emperor's daughter finds it, and shows it to him, still concealing her identity so as not to overwhelm him with shock. At first he rejoices, but then loses hope again. He encourages his friend (the emperor's daughter) to take his place: »He gave back the letter to her and said to her, 'Here is the letter, you [masculine] go and marry her' (for she looked like a male).«

She agrees, but persuades her bridegroom and her father to go with her. They return to her country and she approaches her mother,

the empress, alone, tells the story, and then reveals herself as the daughter. In short order, she settles everything and she and her bridegroom are happily married and assume power.

Wendy Doniger discusses myths which »involve either transvestism (dressing as someone of the other gender) or transsexuality (transformation into someone of the other sex)» and notes that »when it comes to mythology at least, it is not always possible or desirable to draw a clean line splitting these two phenomena».<sup>31</sup>

Here, too, it would not be accurate to understand the emperor's daughter's move into a male role as simply a matter of disguise. Her assumption of a male persona goes deeper than the surface.<sup>32</sup> The tale of »The King and the Emperor» indicates this grammatically, referring to her in the masculine during a substantial portion of the story.<sup>33</sup>

In »The Burgher and the Pauper», we are told that R' Nahman used the same kind of linguistic cues as he told the story. Further, in this tale the emperor's daughter's male identity is sustained over years, during many of which she lives side by side with her bridegroom, and then also with her father, without either of them recognizing her or questioning her male identity.

On the other hand, in both tales the emperor's daughter reclaims her female identity at the redemptive ending of the story. The male identity, though more than a costume, has been an outer manifestation which is removed at last to reveal the inner reality.

Commentators have not adequately accounted for this gender transformation.<sup>34</sup> Kaplan, in his comments on »The King and the Emperor», gives it particular attention, taking several approaches. One suggestion is that the emperor's daughter »takes on a male aspect» when she »becomes active».<sup>35</sup> In fact, however, she has been actively making choices, manipulating others and determining the outcome of events from a much earlier point in this tale.

Kaplan also notes that »The Zohar teaches that when Malkhut [Shekhinah] brings blessings to the world, she is called a male».<sup>36</sup> However, in »The King and the Emperor», the emperor's daughter in her male persona is no bringer of blessings, but a murderer and deceiver.<sup>37</sup>

This destructiveness itself is linked by Kaplan to the male role,<sup>38</sup>

but in fact (as noted by Wiskind-Elper),<sup>39</sup> in the Kabbalistic imagery of the Zohar the Shekhinah personified as female often has a terrifying, destructive aspect.

In light of the teachings considered above, what R' Nahman is doing in these tales is, once again, to explode the inherited system of gender polarities in order to open up new possibilities. The standard polarities of female-outer-revealed-garment and male-inner-hidden-body are reversed. It is the male persona, initiated by donning a male garment, which is the outer, revealed dimension, while the female persona, that of the body under the garment, is inner and hidden. Schematically:

*Gender: the »normal» polarities*

Female	Male
Outer	Inner
Revealed	Hidden
Garment	Body

*Gender polarities reversed in the »emperor's daughter» tales*

Female persona	Male persona
Inner	Outer
Hidden	Revealed
Body	Garment

More specifically, in each tale the emperor's daughter can be seen as assuming a particular persona from the world of popularized Kabbalistic myth. Of the many masculine aspects of the divine and the demonic which play a role in theosophic Kabbalah, the popular Jewish religious imagination of the Hasidic milieu focused on two: the Holy One Blessed Be He (whose feminine counterpart is the Shekhinah), and Samael, the Devil (whose feminine counterpart is Lilith).<sup>40</sup>

Samael is the destroyer and deceiver. This is the role the emperor's daughter takes on in »The King and the Emperor». Her wanton killing of the king, by the use of a lens – an extension of the eye which could be an image of the »evil eye» or in Lacanian terms the »phallic gaze» – and her seduction/deception of his widow are characteristic of the activities of this fearsome male figure. This also fits with the fact that her male clothing is specifically »German», that is, in

R' Nahman's context, associated with Western European secularism and anti-traditionalism.

The Holy One Blessed Be He is the male God who is at a distance, transcendent, but who hears prayer and is compassionate and benevolent. This is the male role of the emperor's daughter in »The Burgher and the Pauper«. Her female persona, earlier in this tale, has a destructive aspect: she is so beautiful that men who see her faint or become weak or mad. In her male role, she presents no such danger. During her time as a man, she is a quiet, rather impassive presence; she is primarily involved with listening, and she is completely benevolent. She hears her bridegroom and father reveal their identities to each other; she listens to her bridegroom's story about the missing letter, and answers his prayer by finding and returning the letter; she brings about the final restoration.

Thus, in the symbolism of »The King and the Emperor«, the male Samael is the outer garb of the female Shekhinah. In »The Burgher and the Pauper«, the Holy One Blessed Be He is the outer garb of the female Shekhinah.<sup>41</sup> This latter image especially is a radical reversal, a new conceptualization of the Divine.<sup>42</sup> If anything, it goes further than the teachings discussed above in imaging the inner core of the Divine as female.

It is worth dwelling on the performative dimension of R' Nahman's work here.<sup>43</sup> As a storyteller, he works with his audience, his original disciples as well as future readers or hearers of the tales among Eastern European Jewry. Like every storyteller who knows his audience, he plays upon their store of beliefs and knowledge.

On one level, the motif of a woman dressed as a man would stir some anxiety in this audience for religious reasons. Cross-dressing is prohibited by Jewish law, based on Deuteronomy 22:5; the sometimes far-reaching ramifications of this prohibition are a live topic in rabbinical discussions from the nineteenth-century Hasidic milieu.<sup>44</sup> Enjoying this element of the tales would be somewhat transgressive in itself on the part of the Hasidic listener.

This would likely be softened, however, by the fact that there is no indication in these two tales that any of the characters are Jewish. Regarding R' Nahman's tales in general, Ora Wiskind-Elper has noted, with only slight exaggeration, »the complete lack... of

any indication their landscape was a Jewish world». <sup>45</sup> R' Nahman performed his tales as a folk storyteller, working with familiar plot elements from folk tales, as his disciples were aware; <sup>46</sup> and Jews have always been familiar with the tales of the non-Jewish cultures around them. <sup>47</sup>

The motif of a woman dressing as a man, often in order to help or reunite with her beloved, is widespread in European, including Eastern European, literature and folklore. <sup>48</sup> For example, in the Russian *bylina* (heroic poem) of »Stavr Godinovich and his Clever Wife«, the wife disguises herself as a male warrior and demonstrates skill in all »manly arts« in order to save her husband from imprisonment. <sup>49</sup> Afanas'ev's classic collections of Russian folk tales include the stories of »Vasilisa the Priest's Daughter« who dresses and acts like a man for her own pleasure and outwits a king who tries to test her identity, and »The Maiden Tsar« who sails the sea with her thirty foster sisters, much like R' Nahman's emperor's daughter with her noblewomen. <sup>50</sup>

Having been exposed to images of this sort in wonder tales and romances, R' Nahman's audience would experience a sense of familiarity as they heard of the emperor's daughter's entry into a male role. This was the kind of thing one might expect at any time in this kind of story. This familiarity would help the listener or reader to accept the story and be absorbed by it.

R' Nahman thus invites his audience to accept something transgressive while providing them with the comfortable experience of something familiar. In so doing, he creates optimum conditions for the listener or reader to absorb his images of the emperor's daughter in male garb, while alerted to the fact that they may have challenging implications. Once the images are taken in emotionally and imaginatively, their theological implications can work their way into consciousness. In this way, insights too radical to present as ideas for intellectual consideration can be offered, through the medium of story, to an audience predisposed to reflecting on the tales as theosophical allegories.

Thus, in these teachings and tales, R' Nahman offers a radical theological vision in which the inner essence of the divine is imaged as female. Given his consistent emphasis on practical guidance in

the spiritual life, we can assume that there is an experiential grounding to these bold theological moves. From the full text of the two teachings in *Liqutei Moharan*, it appears that the experiential ground is intense personal prayer in the distinctive manner insisted upon by R' Nahman, the spiritual discipline of *hitbodedut*. This is what penetrates into the inner core of the divine and transforms it, or, perhaps, reveals it as feminine.

These passages from *Liqutei Moharan* relate in particular to the practice of »turning torah into prayer». <sup>51</sup> This practice brings about a shift from primarily intellectual contemplation of the Rebbe's words to an emotional experience of closeness to the divine; the Hasid moves from looking at the Torah or God from the outside, striving for comprehension, to feeling it from the inside, received and enveloped by the divine. <sup>52</sup> Since, in the common imagery of theosophic Kabbalah, Torah is associated with the masculine dimension of the divine and prayer with the feminine dimension, <sup>53</sup> to turn torah into prayer implies exactly the gender transformation spelled out by these teachings.

The tales of the emperor's daughter relate to the experience of *hitbodedut* more generally. *Hitbodedut* is a form of meditation which cultivates a sense of the divine as ever-present and accessible, and this immanence characterizes the Shekhinah. It is an encounter with the divine through speech, and speech itself is identified with the Shekhinah in Kabbalah and in R' Nahman's thought. <sup>54</sup> The implicit teaching of the tales, that the Shekhinah is the core of the divine, validates and reinforces the Hasid's experience of intimate encounter with the divine through *hitbodedut*. As noted earlier, *hitbodedut* is also associated with emotional ups and downs. This is reflected in the alternately gentle and destructive manifestations of the emperor's daughter in her male roles.

Thus, through these tales and teachings, R' Nahman opens mental and imaginative space for his followers, to allow them to accept the unexpectedly intimate and unmediated encounters with the Divine which his practical guidance makes available to them.

More generally, the reversal of normal Hasidic theology in these passages supports the entire experience of being a follower of R' Nahman. All the strange and potentially alienating aspects of Breslov Hasidism – intense adherence to a controversial Rebbe with a small following; eccentric spiritual practices; the cultivation of a reversal of

perceptions which others see as an escape into dreams – may be more easily integrated by followers whose most basic received ideas have been radically overturned, however tentatively and provisionally.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> See the major scholarly biography of Rebbe Nahman by Arthur Green, *Tormented Master*, for a detailed account of his life and work.

<sup>2</sup> This choice now has a parallel, however, in the evolution of the large and influential Habad/Lubavitch sect since the death of their seventh rebbe in 1994.

<sup>3</sup> See Green, *Tormented Master*, 45–46, 60–61, 145.

<sup>4</sup> Seclusion, with its deprivation of stimulation from other human beings, can provoke altered states of consciousness; see Wulff, *Psychology of Religion*, 61–82.

<sup>5</sup> See Kaplan, *Jewish Meditation*, 92: »many people feel that it is one of the most powerful of all the Jewish meditative techniques».

<sup>6</sup> See Weiner, *9 1/2 Mystics*, 199.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Kaplan, *Jewish Meditation*, 98, on the dangers of *hitbodedut* as »self-therapy».

<sup>8</sup> On *hitbodedut* in general and the practice of »making torah into prayer» specifically, see *Liqutei Moharan* 2:25. According to R' Nathan's introduction to his compilation of prayers based on this principle, *Liqutei Tefilot*, R' Nahman often urged his followers to turn his torah into prayer (*Liqutei Tefilot, haqdamah*).

<sup>9</sup> Weiner, *9 1/2 Mystics*, 217, 225, citing Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz, who is closely associated

with Habad/Lubavitch Hasidism but has also published a retelling of stories of R' Nahman, with a sympathetic and insightful commentary, *Beggars and Prayers*.

<sup>10</sup> See Shaul Magid, »Associative Midrash«, in Magid, *God's Voice from the Void*, especially the section »The Hasidic Proem: From Midrash to Praxis«, 37–43.

<sup>11</sup> Handelman and Shulman, *God Inside Out*, 58.

<sup>12</sup> Arnold Band notes in reference to »The King and the Emperor« in *Sipurei Ma'asiyot*, »The basic plot of the story is familiar to anyone who has read romances from the Hellenistic period onwards« (*Nahman of Bratslav: The Tales*, 289) and, similarly, that »The Burgher and the Pauper«, the second story discussed here, »utilizes a basic plot found in romances of all nations« (311).

<sup>13</sup> The most thorough theological reading of these tales is that of Marianne Schleicher (University of Aarhus) in her Ph.D. thesis, *A Theology of Redemption*, 2003. Schleicher draws on, and goes beyond, the major previous commentaries on the tales, both from within and outside the Breslov tradition. Thus we have a Scandinavian context for the study of R' Nahman.

<sup>14</sup> All translations in this article are my own.

<sup>15</sup> This is a strong term, which could also be translated »craves« or »lusts for«.

<sup>16</sup> A new and significant contribution to the study of gender in R' Nahman has been made by Eliezer Shore in his doctoral dissertation, *Letters of Desire*, 2006.

<sup>17</sup> Wolfson's first major work in this area, *Through a Speculum That Shines*, has been followed by *Circle in the Square: Studies in the Use of Gender in Kabbalistic Symbolism* (1995), *Language, Eros, Being: Kabbalistic Hermeneutics and Poetic Imagination* (2005), and many other books and articles.

<sup>18</sup> Wolfson argues emphatically that this is true of R' Nahman's teachings, in »The Cut That Binds: Time, Memory, and the Ascetic Impulse (Reflections on Bratslav Hasidism)«, in Magid, *God's Voice from the Void*; see especially 134f.

<sup>19</sup> Ora Wiskind-Elper has also commented evocatively on the second of these passages, in which »God Himself, receiving the shower of blessings from his People, becomes God 'Herself'« (*Tradition and Fantasy*, 114).

<sup>20</sup> Mark goes on to argue that Wolfson's analysis of Jewish mystical experience as focused on the phallic potency of the Divine simply does not apply to R' Nahman's mysticism (Mark, *Mistika V'Shig'at on Bitsinat R' Nahman MiBreslav*, 151.) This is not precisely how I see things, as will become clear below.

<sup>21</sup> See Mark, *Mistika*, 147ff; Abrams, *HaGuf HaElohi HaNashi BaQabalah*, 44f.

<sup>22</sup> More technically we are speaking here about an inner, hidden dimension of God, which in both everyday and Kabbalistic language is masculine. *Liqueti Moharan* 1:73 begins »...The Holy One Blessed Be He is [both] hidden and revealed« but as the teaching proceeds it is referring to the hidden dimension; similarly, in the Zohar »The Holy One Blessed Be He« (*qudsha brikh hu*) can mean »God« in a general way but also refers specifically to the transcendent masculine sefirah *Tiferet*. In theosophic Kabbalah, the revealed dimension of the Holy One Blessed Be He is in fact the Shekhinah, usually imaged in the feminine.

<sup>23</sup> Compare, for example, the list of associations with male and female in Kabbalah worked out by Charles Mopsik (*z»l*), in which the female is associated with receptivity, exteriority, and limitation in contrast to the corresponding »male« qualities. Mopsik, *Le sexe des âmes*, 42f; English translation in Mopsik, *Sex of the Soul*, 17.

<sup>24</sup> On some aspects of gender hierarchy and stereotyping in primarily non-Kabbalistic Jewish thought, see Grossman, *Pious and Rebellious*, ch. 1, 8–32.

<sup>25</sup> Theosophic Kabbalah is distinguished by scholars from «ecstatic Kabbalah», especially associated with R' Abraham Abulafia, which is more overtly experiential and avoids sweeping claims to knowledge of the Divine. The terminology is Gershom Scholem's, see *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* 124. I owe the insights on concealment in this paragraph to classes with Elliot Wolfson, at the University of Toronto, and his student David Greenstein, at the Academy for Jewish Religion.

<sup>26</sup> A key-word search of various Hasidic texts with the DBS »Torah Treasures« database shows that the words »woman« (*ishah*) or »female« (*neqevab/nuqba*) and »receiving« (*meqabel*) are associated frequently in other Hasidic sources but only in these two passages in R' Nahman's oeuvre.

<sup>27</sup> This is one way in which these teachings differ from a text with some similar themes ascribed to R' Phinehas of Koretz and discussed by Wolfson in »Crossing Gender Boundaries« (Ostow, *Ultimate Intimacy*, 15; Hebrew text in Abrahams, *HaGuf HaElohi* 44, n. 42).

<sup>28</sup> The identification of her bridegroom is especially interesting in this context, of course. In »The Burgher and the Pauper«, this is fairly straightforward. Kaplan, whose commentary is based on Breslov sources, states that the bridegroom is »the soul of the Messiah« (*Rabbi Nahman's Stories*, 204); Steinsaltz (*Beggars and Prayers*, 39) writes that he »is clearly the Messiah«. These views follow the early Breslov commentary *Rimzei Ma'asiyot* (printed at the end of *Sipurei Ma'asiyot*) and the »hints« offered by R' Nahman at the end of the tale itself. In »The King and the Emperor«, matters are less clear. The reference in *Rimzei Ma'asiyot* to *yihud haqadosh ha'elyon* suggests that the bridegroom is the divine masculine (*Tif'eret* or *Z'e'ir Anpin*). Kaplan (57) at first identifies the bridegroom in this tale as *Z'e'ir Anpin* but then identifies this divine dimension with »the souls of Israel«. Then the bridegroom is identified straightforwardly as the people of Israel, and it is this aspect of the interpretation which is followed throughout Kaplan's notes on the tale. Green considers the possibilities of the bridegroom as Israel, Messiah, and/or R' Nahman himself (*Tormented Master*, 354f). See further the discussions of both tales in Schleicher, *A Theology of Redemption*, where all available commentators' views are considered. If Israel is imaged here as masculine in relation to the divine feminine, antecedents and implications of this gender dynamism deserve further study.

<sup>29</sup> See Arnold Band, *Nahman of Bratslav: The Tales*, 291, 312f (summing up other commentators; Band expresses skepticism about the basic premise of such »allegorical reading«); Green, *Tormented Master*, 353 (on »The King and the Emperor«); Kaplan, *Rabbi Nahman's Stories*, 56, 204; Steinsaltz, *Beggars and Prayers*, 38 (on »The Burgher and the Pauper«); Wiskind-Elper, *Tradition and Fantasy*, 108ff (on »The King and the Emperor«); and Schleicher's digest of the commentators in *A Theology of Redemption*.

<sup>30</sup> In the text as we have it, though, this linguistic change does not happen. Throughout the rest of the story, the emperor's daughter remains grammatically feminine. I see only one exception: at one point in the next section of the story the Hebrew text says »he was going further from the robber« in reference to the emperor's daughter. Shortly thereafter a note says »the language is not exact, since sometimes she is referred to in the masculine and sometimes in the feminine«. The Yiddish version stays in the feminine and does not have the note about inexact language. Nevertheless, the earlier note suggests that R' Nahman's original oral telling of the story referred to her in the masculine more consistently.

<sup>31</sup> Doniger, *Splitting the Difference*, 260.

<sup>32</sup> Howard Schwartz's retelling of this tale introduces an episode in which the emperor's daughter »confessed that she was a woman« to the woman she is supposed to marry (*Elijah's Violin*, 244). There is no such claim of a true female identity in the original.

<sup>33</sup> The narrative returns to the feminine gender to represent the point of view of her suitors as they think about her, but then moves to the masculine again when she confronts them as king, before concluding in the feminine as she resumes her identity as a woman.

<sup>34</sup> See the discussion in Schleicher, *A Theology of Redemption*.

<sup>35</sup> Kaplan, *Rabbi Nahman's Stories*, 73.

<sup>36</sup> Kaplan, 73, citing Zohar 1:232a. A more relevant passage in the Zohar might be 1:2a in which the Shekhinah »adorns Herself in masculine clothing in the presence of every male in Israel« on the occasion of the pilgrimage festivals (Daniel Matt translation, *Zohar* v. 1, 9). Wolfson discusses this important passage in »Crossing Gender Boundaries« (Ostow, *Ultimate Intimacy*, 309ff) and it is the subject of a powerful series of paintings under the title »The Great Transformation« by the midrashic artist Denise Lilliman (Gananoque, Ontario). This Zoharic passage would certainly have been familiar to R' Nahman and its relationship to his tales deserves further study, but the dynamics of meaning are quite different. The gist of Wolfson's analysis of this Zohar passage and thematically related texts is that, in a mental world where only the male is valued, the female becomes male to reach a higher plane and ultimately to be incorporated into the male. In R' Nahman's narratives, however, the emperor's daughter uses the male role to accomplish her own purposes, and sheds it when she has done so. At least in »The Burgher and the Pauper«, her status in the world of the story is lower in her male role than in her female identity. Though at the end of each tale she is reunited with her male partner, it does not appear that he absorbs or overshadows her. In »The Burgher and the Pauper« the last words of the story indicate equality between them (»and they ruled over the whole world«), whereas »The King and the Emperor« ends with her dominant voice, inviting or commanding the bridegroom (who remains silent) to travel home with her.

<sup>37</sup> Howard Schwartz, in retelling this tale, has evidently found the emperor's daughter's murder of the king and deceit of his widow so disturbing that he has left them out. See Schwartz, *Elijah's Violin*, 243f.

<sup>38</sup> »Now she becomes active, as we see when she kills [the king]. Thus, she takes on a male aspect«. Kaplan, *Rabbi Nahman's Stories*, 73.

<sup>39</sup> In discussing »The King and the Emperor«, *Tradition and Fantasy*, 108f. Band is thus mistaken in stating »The duplicity and ruthlessness of the emperor's daughter are difficult to reconcile with her figure as a representative of the Shekhinah« (*Nahman of Bratslav: The Tales*, 290).

<sup>40</sup> Samael plays a terrifying role in R' Nahman's eighth tale, »The Rabbi and his Son«, while »the Devil« appears in the ninth tale, »The Wise Man and the Simpleton«.

<sup>41</sup> These interpretations fit well with identifying the bridegroom in »The King and the Emperor« as the divine masculine and the bridegroom in »The Burgher and the Pauper« as the Messiah, as discussed earlier; in either case the male identity assumed by the emperor's daughter is not that of her bridegroom.

<sup>42</sup> In the well-known »tree« of the *sefirot* it would mean a reversal of the positions of *Malhut* and *Tiferet*.

<sup>43</sup> Compare Marianne Schleicher's article on »The King and the Emperor« in an earlier issue of *Nordisk Judaistik*.

<sup>44</sup> For example, in a later generation the *Maharsham*, Rabbi Shalom Mordecai ben Moses Schwadron (1835–1911), a highly respected Galician decisor, investigates whether a young man is permitted to dye his greying beard or whether it would violate this prohibition (*Shut Maharsham* 2:243, in Bar-Ilan database).

<sup>45</sup> Wiskind-Elper, *Tradition and Fantasy*, 1.

<sup>46</sup> The introduction to *Sipurei Ma'asiyot* (7), contains a description of how R' Nahman would use existing folktales in his storytelling: »He would also sometimes tell one of the stories that people tell. But he would add a lot to [such stories], and rearrange and correct the order, until the story was completely different from what people tell.» From the content of the stories in *Sipurei Ma'asiyot* it is clear that the reference is not to hagiographic Hasidic stories, but to wonder tales.

<sup>47</sup> See »Tales from International Folklore» in Eli Yassif, *The Hebrew Folktales*, 265–282.

<sup>48</sup> This is international folklore motif # K1837, »Disguise of woman in man's clothes» (see Thompson, *Motif-Index*, vol. 4, 440.) See also Arnold Band's comments, quoted above, on the ubiquity of the plot elements of these tails »in romances of all nations» (*Nahman of Bratslav: The Tales*, 289, 311). For a thoughtful article on the gender implications of this motif in ballads in English, see Pauline Greenhill, »Neither A Man Nor A Maid».

<sup>49</sup> Translated in Downing, *Russian Tales and Legends*, 47–54.

<sup>50</sup> Translated in Guterman, *Russian Fairy Tales*, 131–133, 229–234. It is not clear from the text whether the Maiden Tsar or her companions are in male dress, but her title suggests a male role. R' Nahman lived in the Ukraine rather than Russia proper but there is, of course, considerable cultural overlap. In this cultural milieu, the specifically Ukrainian »Malanka» tradition of New Year celebration is also of interest regarding cross-dressing: »A young man, known as Malanka, is dressed up as a woman, having on a skirt, a wimple and a head-kerchief...» (Rudnycky, *Ukrainian-Canadian Folklore*, 11, describing traditions in the informant's home village in West Ukraine). In a broader cultural context compare also the Grimms' tale of »The Fisherman and his Wife» (»Von dem Fischer un syner Fru») where the wife becomes successively the king, the emperor, and the pope, with no comment from the narrator as to the gender transposition.

<sup>51</sup> Here the »authorized» Breslov commentaries are very helpful (Mykoff, *Likutei Moharan*, in volumes 2 and 9). Cf. also the extended teaching of R' Nahman's disciple R' Nathan on the verse »a female shall surround a male» (*Likutei Halakhot, Hilkhot Rosh Hodesh* 5:22, 5:26–27) which he interprets as »*behinat she'osin mehorot tefilot*» – »that we make prayers out of [the Rebbe's] teachings/Torah».

<sup>52</sup> Eliezer Shore notes various discourses in which »Rabbi Nahman discusses a mystical state of total absorption into the Divine» (*Letters of Desire*, 71).

<sup>53</sup> This is spelled out in several passages in the later Breslov book *Hishtapkhut HaNefesh* (by Alter Tepliker, d. 1919), a tract on *hitbodedut*. For example: »'The Eternal' and 'God' (*HaShem* and *Elohim*) are the aspects of *Z'e'ir Anpin* [masculine] and *Malkhut* [feminine], the aspects of Torah and prayer, as is known...» (*Hishtapkhut HaNefesh, ma'amirim* 5, s.v. *ve'al ken omrim besof tefilat ne'ilah*).

<sup>54</sup> For example: »Speech (*hadibur*) is the aspect of the Shekhinah, as it is written [in the *Tiqunei HaZohar*, in the passage *Patah Eliyahu* included in Hasidic editions of the prayerbook] *Malkhut* is the mouth'. *Likutei Moharan* 1:37:6.

