The Kabbalah of Relation by Rabbi Bezalel Naor book review

Book Review[1] by Dovid Sears

Bezalel Naor, The Kabbalah of Relation (Spring Valley, NY: Orot, 2012)

Before discussing Rabbi Naor’s new book, I must say that anything with his name on the cover should be of interest to any explorer of Jewish mystical tradition. Despite some twenty first-rate scholarly works in English and Hebrew, Bezalel Naor remains a “hidden light,” perhaps too brilliant for many to gaze upon directly. He is one of the leading intellectuals in the traditional world of Jewish scholarship—as he would be in the academic world if, by the grace of God, we would be spared the ravages of intellectual climate change and the wind would shift. Bezalel Naor once described himself as a “frequent flyer of the corpus callosum connecting the left and right hemispheres of the brain.”

This work, jam-packed with creative thinking and the vast erudition we have come to expect from the author, deals with the male-female relationship from the standpoint of the Aggadah and Kabbalah, at the level of plain-meaning and at various levels of mystical allusion.

The departure point for the book is an oft-cited yet curious passage in the Babylonian Talmud (Eruvin 100b) which says that had the Torah not been given on Mount Sinai, then we would have learned various positive character traits from the animal kingdom. The most famous example given is that we would have learned modesty from the example of the cat. Surprisingly, most of the Talmud’s attention is lavished on
the rooster, from whom a husband would learn that he must appease his wife before entering into marital relations with her. From the Talmud’s telling of the story, it turns out that the rooster lies to the hen, promising to buy her a coat (or in another reading, earrings) that he is no position financially to purchase! According to Naor, this “white lie” is the very secret of our finite, paradoxical existence in this world, and he then takes us, the readers, on a tour de force, as only he is capable, of our entire Judaic literature: Bible, Talmud, Medieval Philosophy, Kabbalah, Hasidism—and of course, the specialty of the house: Rav Kook.

Q. The book begins with an autobiographical description of Chagall’s youthful meeting (yehidut) with the Rebbe of Lubavitch, Rabbi Shalom Baer (Rashab). This raises the question of the artist’s connection to the teachings of Habad and the Hasidic world of his youth. Beyond this, one wonders about other encounters the Habad Rebbeim may have had with Jewish artists, for better or worse. Any thoughts?

DS: Marc Chagall is widely-embraced as the outstanding Jewish artist of the 20th century, who embraced his shtetl roots in his colorful, expressionistic and often surrealistic paintings. Many Jewish artists, both secular and religious, have used Chagall as a point of departure for their own brand of Jewish art. But actually the autobiographical vignette presented at the beginning of the book, which is patently insulting to the towering Hasidic thinker and tsaddik, Rabbi Shalom Dov Ber of Lubavitch (RaSHaB), is an eloquent testimony to Chagall’s chutzpah and am ha’aratzus (ignorance). Although he grew up in a traditional Hasidic environment in the village of Lyozno, famed for having once been the home of the “Alter Rebbe” (Rabbi Shneur Zalman, founder of Habad), he didn’t seem to know a line of Tanya or Likkutei Torah—despite his fond memory of his mother’s Habad niggun (melody). Religiously, he was a pathetic figure.
As for the Rebbeim and artists, I remember reading that one of the Kotzker Rebbe’s descendants was a painter. Nothing to do with Habad, though. I don’t know about earlier Rebbes in the
Habad lineage, but this last Lubavitcher Rebbe zt”l had a positive relationship with a few artists: Jacques Lipschutz, Yakov Agam, Baruch Nachshon, and born-and-raised Lubavitchers Hendel Lieberman (who was the brother of the legendary mashpi’ā Rabbi Mendel Futerfass) and my wonderful and unforgettable friend, the late Zalman Kleinman. But maybe that was part of Rabbi Schneerson’s kiruv (outreach) mission with its nuanced embrace of selective parts of modernism in order turn them around to kedushah (holiness)—which the kabbalists call “it’hapkha,” meaning transformation or reversal. Jewish fine art (as opposed to decorative art) is a relatively new thing if we begin with Camille Pissarro (1830-1903)—whose father was Jewish, although some claim that his mother was Creole (at any rate he was Jewish enough to be hated for it by Degas and Renoir)—or Amedeo Modigliani (1884-1920), who was only a couple of years older than Chagall. So I’d be surprised if the early Hasidic Rebbes or their Mitnagdic counterparts had much exposure to it. But, of course, with Rebbes you can never tell…

Q. In The Kabbalah of Relation, Marc Chagall’s paintings have been juxtaposed to this Talmudic-Kabbalistic text. Is the juxtaposition warranted, not to the point, or even unlawful?

DS: On the one hand, Rabbi Naor’s recognition of this correspondence was a brilliant observation. As such, it would have been hard to resist. On the other, I question whether it’s okay halakhically, particularly in a sefer, a volume of Torah. One or two of these paintings should definitely keep this volume off the shelf in Biegeleisen’s Seforim Store. But sometimes when we look at art, we enter another mental space and unconsciously set aside such considerations. We’re looking at imaginal reality, not the physical world in the conventional sense. Maybe there’s a faint glimmer of a heter (leniency) there—but maybe not.

Another question that this “tzushtell” (tie-in) raises is the legitimacy of Chagall as a Jewish mystic, which the book seems to propose (as with Chagall’s “Hasidim vs. Misnagdim” comment). Although he was a towering creative artist, I don’t think Chagall was a Jewish mystic, as Rabbi Naor suggests, but a Jewish pagan. Erich Neumann might have fitted Chagall’s
fertility symbolism very nicely into his huge Jungian opus, *The Origins and History of Consciousness* (which I actually read from cover to cover about 40 years ago). Chagall didn’t need Kabbalah or Hasidism for his images. These are archetypal ideas, as shaped by the artistic vision of a White Russian village Jew who somehow made it past the maitre d’ and into the high culture of Paris.

There was an early 20th century British critic and writer named T.E. Hulme who once famously remarked that “Romanticism is spilt religion.” There’s plenty of that in Chagall. But on the other hand, we see that for many religious Jewish artists, Chagall created a dreamy, surrealist style that allowed them to weave together powerful mystical images. Examples are Elyah Sukkot, Baruch Nachshon, Shoshanna Brombacher and others. So in a way, the “spilt religion” can be channeled back to where it comes from.

Q. Is Naor’s transition or extrapolation from a Talmudic text to Kabbalistic teachings traditional or non-traditional?

**DS:** I’d say that it’s brilliant, creative, and poetic in its way of linking ideas. The tone and texture of the *hiddush* (innovation) is not traditional, but the hook-up between *nigleh* (exoteric) and *nistar* (esoteric) is quite traditional and legitimate. One may object to this or that point, but that’s Torah, isn’t it? Not only halakhic issues are debated in the Gemara but also matters of Aggadah (theological and other non-legalistic teachings), as Abraham J. Heschel shows in *Torah min ha-Shamayim*. And besides, whatever a perspicacious thinker such as Bezalel Naor says deserves our attention, whatever its proximity to the edge of the cliff may be.

Q. What is the essential difference between the Mitnagdic (Vilna Gaon) and Hasidic (Ba’al Shem Tov) approaches to interpreting Kabbalah, and how do we see this difference illustrated in the two solutions or “endings” offered in this book?

**DS:** In art, we often speak of classicism and romanticism. The classicists are (or more accurately “were”) the “straight-arrows.” They stressed academic training and were concerned with realistic depictions and fine technique; certain subjects
were acceptable, while other were not, or were certainly overlooked. Emotional restraint, rational intellect and high culture were implicitly valued. Romanticism represented a radical break with this approach to life and art. Our old friend T.E. Hulme described it as being “informed by a belief in the infinite in man and nature” – although most of these artists were and are secularists. (Look at the way the Abstract Expressionists talked about their art! Especially Mark Rothko, who really missed his calling as a kabbalist—or at least a professor of Kabbalah. The art critic Katharine Kuh once published a book of interviews with a number of artists whose words often reflect this “belief in the infinite in man and nature.”[2])

Somewhat similarly, in their own way the Mitnagdim were religious classicists and the Hasidim were closer to the romantics. Maybe that’s what Chagall meant with his remark that the new artists of his day were like the Hasidim.

The clash between the Mitnagdim and the Hasidim was also a clash between two broad mindsets: a dominant (albeit faith-based) rationalism vs. a greater emphasis on intuition and passionate feeling; scholarly elitism vs. greater democracy of spirit, and even an inclusivism within the social strata of the close-knit fraternities we associate with the Hasidic movement.

In terms of Rabbi Naor’s book, the “Mitnagdic ending” (admittedly this is a gross oversimplification) is that the rooster, who represents the Creator, extends a garment of divine protection over the hen, who represents either the Shekhinah or the individual soul. By virtue of the holiness of the Torah and mitsvot (commandments), the extrication of the fallen souls on the lowest levels of creation is accomplished. All souls will be incarnated and refined of their spiritual dross; then the rooster’s promise to the hen that “the robe will reach down to your legs” will be fulfilled, and Mashi’ah will come. (This is based on a teaching of Rabbi Isaac Haver, representing the school of the Vilna Gaon, if I didn’t take a wrong turn along the way.)

In the Hasidic counterpart to this scenario (à la Reb Eizikl Komarner, fusing teachings of the Baal Shem Tov and the Maggid of Mezeritch), the Shekhinah is “adorned with adornments that do not exist”[3]—that is, there is not only a cosmic
restoration accomplished by our ‘avodat ha-birurim (spiritual work) throughout the course of time, but an advantage of some sort to creation. Something “extra” is delivered to the Creator, beyond the holiness of the Torah and mitsvot (commandments). And this is accomplished by the tsaddik who descends into the nether regions in order to procure those “adornments.”[4]

The author concludes his book on the following note:
What is certain is that in the process, the tsaddik will be beaten to a pulp. (In the words of the Rabbi of Komarno, “[God] chastises and beats the righteous.”) The crown of the just man and his wings—his entire spiritual profile—will be lowered. And yet, even in defeat the tsaddik is valiant and beloved to the Shekhinah.[5]

Q. Rabbi Naor contrasts Maimonides’ view of human sensuality with that of the Kabbalists. How Judaic or Hellenic is Maimonides’ view?

DS: The Zohar, Rabbi Moses Cordovero (RaMaK), the Reshit Hokhmah, the main schools of Hasidism that I’m familiar with, and certainly Rabbi Nahman of Breslov, all have a marked ascetic element. Sexuality is often sublimated to the spiritual plane, and kedushah (sanctity) in all such matters is stressed. Rabbi Nahman uses the term “yihuda tata’ah” (lower unification) to describe the ideal conduct of the married couple; sanctification of the marital relationship elicits the “yihuda ila’ah” (upper unification) on the sublime level (which brings about cosmic harmony). Ditto the approach to the ko’ah ha-medameh, or imagination. The Breslov literature often contrasts the imagination of a spiritually-evolved human being with that of a coarse person who has the “imagination of a beast.”[6] Rabbi Nathan [Sternhartz] discusses these concepts in Likkutei Halakhot (beginning Hil. Sheluhin 5). There he states that the imagination can be a shali’ah (emissary) of the sekhel (reason)[7]; or it can be co-opted by the physical, which is to say, the animalistic side of human nature. Rabbi Nahman’s lessons are extremely imagistic and poetic in their construction. “This is a behinah (aspect) of this; that is a behinah (aspect) of that.” In this way Rabbi Nahman builds connections between things and shows their underlying
unity. And of course, there are Rabbi Nahman’s famous thirteen mystical stories, which anticipated surrealism by more than a century. All this is a demonstration of “birur ko’ah ha-medameh,” clarification of the imagination, so that it may express the essence of mind.

Although the kabbalists do not share the puritanical view of Maimonides toward the body and the conjugal act, as Rabbi Naor points out,[8] they are not so far apart in their attitudes toward hedonism—but not for the same reasons. The philosophers prized the intellect’s ascendancy over emotion and sensuality, and Maimonides may have been influenced by this attitude. The mystics, however, are more concerned with transcendence and sublimation (in the religious sense, not in the Freudian sense). Their bias is not due to a prejudice in favor of reason, but bespeaks the love and awe of God.

Q. The morning blessing reads: “…Who has given understanding to the rooster to discern between day and night.” Isn’t the blessing reversed? Night precedes day. Certainly the blessing should read “to discern between night and day”!

DS: Based on teachings from the Zohar and Rabbi Isaac Luria (Ari),[9] the robe given by rooster to the hen may be said to correspond to the process of birur—the extrication of all souls from Adam Beli’al, or “Anti-Adam”–throughout the course of history. That is, the human body from the head to feet represents the yeridat ha-dorot, the spiritual decline of the generations. The “head,” beginning with Adam, is like day, while the “feet,” or later generations, are like night. In these final generations, the Shekhinah, which represents God’s immanence in creation, is positioned at the feet of Adam Beli’al. The rooster understands the spiritual decline at each stage of the game. We who live in the spiritual “twilight zone” can’t function like our noble ancestors (compared to whom the Talmud says we are as donkeys). Hence, the phraseology of the blessing, “between day and night.”

Postscript:

I’d like to add one more thought about the issue discussed at the end of the text. As mentioned above, Rabbi Naor quotes Reb Eizikl Komarner’s remarks about the fallen “letters” of
creation, which the tsaddikim must elevate from what the Zohar calls “raglin de-raglin,” or “feet of feet”–the lowest levels. The Komarno Rebbe cites the Maggid of Mezeritch, who contrasts “adornments that did exist” with “adornments that did not exist.” The former are related to the Torah and mitsvot (commandments)–the holy–while the latter are related to the mundane and that which is most distant from holiness.

It strikes me as worth comparing this to Rabbi Nahman’s cryptic parable about a king who commissioned two fellows to decorate separate but facing halves of his new palace.[10] The first appointee mastered all the necessary skills and then painted the most beautiful murals depicting all sorts of animals and birds on the walls of his chamber. The second guy goofed off until the deadline was only a few days away–and became panic-stricken. Then he had a brainstorm. He smeared the walls with a substance (“pakst”) so black that it shined. Thus the walls were able to reflect everything in the other room. Then Decorator Number Two hung a curtain to divide between the rooms.

When the big day arrived, the king inspected his new palace, and was overjoyed with the murals of the first man, executed with such consummate skill. The other chamber was shrouded in darkness, due to the curtain. But when our “chevreman” drew back the curtain, there now shone into the room the reflection of everything that was in the first room directly across. (Here the Rebbe mentions birds specifically for the third time.) Even the elegant furnishings and precious objects that the king brought into the first chamber were reflected in the second. Moreover, whatever additional wondrous vessels the king wanted to bring into his palace were visible in the second chamber.

What were these “additional wondrous vessels” that had not yet been brought to the palace, but which the king desired? Moreover, it is not clear that the king meant to bring them to the first chamber, with its lovely murals and furnishings, thus to be reflected in the second chamber. What the text seems to state is that these desired “wondrous vessels” were already visible in the second chamber–“and the matter was good in the king’s eyes.”[11]

Maybe we can venture the interpretation that it is the tsaddik (righteous man) who diligently heeds the king’s command and
decorates his half of the palace so beautifully, while it is the ba’al teshuvah (penitent) who creates the shiny black room. The ba’al teshuvah must receive an illumination from the tsaddik on the other side of the hall, who did everything “by the book.” Yet Rabbi Nahman indicates that the ba’al teshuvah has an advantage over the tsaddik.[12]

Perhaps this parable of Rabbi Nahman is cut from the same cloth as the Hasidic idea discussed at the end of Rabbi Naor’s book, that the tsaddik, through his willing and somewhat self-sacrificial descent to the lowest levels, brings to the realm of kedushah additional elements that could not otherwise have been obtained. It is this paradoxical descent of the tsaddik that ultimately brings the greatest delight to the Master of the Universe.

[2] In addition, see Robert Rosenblum’s Modern Painting and the Northern Romantic Tradition, if you can still find a copy. It’s a real “eye-opener,” both artistically and intellectually.
[3] See Naor’s endnote on p. 62, especially citing Rabbenu Hananel’s reading in the Gemara (‘Eruvin 100b) which is the departure point of the entire book.
[6] For example, see Likkutei Moharan, Part I, lessons 25, 49; and especially Part II, lesson 8 (“Tik’u/Tohakhah”).
[7] I am loath to equate this with the rational faculty in the Maimonidean sense.
[12] Cf. TB, Berakhot 34b: “In the place where the penitents stand, the wholly righteous cannot stand.”