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a classic story of "boy-meets-long-dead-Hasidic-rabbi."

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# Summer of Bres(love)

Moses Goren '16 | BronfmanTorah | Fellowship Summer 2016

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Moses Goren is from New York City and a senior at Friends Seminary in New York City, where he is a member of the Feminists at Friends club and Raising Awareness Advocating Diversity club. Moses is also an avid guitarist, visual artist, and leads havurah classes for young children at the Aggadah school.

My summer with the Bronfman Youth Fellowship was a beautiful and enriching experience. I met so many brilliant people from backgrounds totally unlike my own. I learned from them, I struggled with them, and I even fell in love with some of them. Over the past six weeks I've had something of a summer fling, which I've kept under wraps up to this point but which I now would like to reveal.

This summer I fell in love with Rebbe Nachman of Breslov. It's cliché, I know: the classic story of boy-meets-long-dead-Hasidic-rabbi.

Close-up detail of Rebbe Nachman of Breslov's chair, on display in the Breslov synagogue in the Meah Shearim neighborhood of Jerusalem.

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In a sense, Rebbe Nachman fell for me first. Let me explain. I was playing pool with Itamar on my homestay at his house in Herzliya. Itamar's pool table was dangerously close to his book shelf, so every time I took a shot from one side of the table the back of my cue knocked a couple of books to the floor. I sent dozens of books flying that weekend, but something about Martin Buber's *The Tales of Rabbi Nachman* compelled me to pick it up and read it later that night. Perhaps the book just seemed out of place; Itamar, like myself, is a devout atheist, and Buber's collection of stories was the only Jewish book on his shelf. I read eighty pages that night and was so engrossed that I was unaware of how much I was reading or how late it was getting.

As in any good love story, we come from different backgrounds and are temperamentally different. Growing up in the 21st century on the Upper West Side of Manhattan, my life is full of technology, secular learning, and pork. I'm an atheist. I don't pray. I have a distant relationship with God. I believe the actions of human beings are predetermined by trillions of cause and effect relationships that follow the laws of chemistry, physics, and logic. At age 17 I am still a bachelor. Nachman grew up in a small town in what is now Ukraine. He studied Talmud. He was married at age 13. I'm pretty sure he ate Kosher food when he wasn't fasting. My great grandfather bought and sold feathers and artificial flowers, while Nachman's great grandfather was the Baal Shem Tov, founder of Hasidism, and one of the most important and influential Jewish mystical teachers of all time. Rebbe Nachman's stories taught simplicity over sophistication. He taught his students to be in constant communication with God, to author one's own prayers about any desire one felt or lesson one learned. Rebbe Nachman would find my thought too sophisticated, and he would be shocked that I never pray. But opposites attract?

Nachman's stories are dreamlike, fantastical, often verging on psychedelic. They are filled with kings, princesses, wise men, and demons. I was surprised to find that they almost never explicitly dealt with God, Jews, or Israel. I may have fallen for them because they are amusing and surprising, but Rabbi Nachman's stories are more than a pretty face. I could sense that there was meaning concealed in the stories that went beyond entertainment. That meaning still plays hard to get; it's part of Nachman's appeal. Later, lessons taught by Rabbi Mishael gave me some of the skills I needed to look deeper, but the deeper I went the more I became aware of more and more layers I didn't understand. A new, heavily annotated

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collection of stories led me to some of the classic Breslover interpretations of Nachman's symbolism. I learned that kings are stand-ins for God and that physical journeys are stand-ins for spiritual ones. I, an atheist who despairs of his ability to have a meaningful spiritual relationship with God, nevertheless searched stories like "The Lost Princess," "The Sophisticate and the Simpleton," and "The Humble King" hungrily for maps of spiritual journeys and advice about how to pray.

Ours was a forbidden love. We would stay up together long past curfew. Every night I read the story I had read the night before, I read the next story in the book without footnotes, I read it again with footnotes, and then if I had time, I read one of the shorter parables in the back of the book. Sometimes I would sit in the hallway in front of my room, reading in the sliver of light coming through the door which led to the Ramah building. If Daniel the madrich walked from the men's dorms to the women's dorms and happened to look over his right shoulder, he would see me there and tell me to go to sleep. Not wanting to wake my roommates I would go to my room and take Nachman into the bathroom where, if balanced properly on the window sill, a few lines of text could be illuminated. Only when I had finished reading could I go to sleep.

In Breslov at the turn of the 19th century, Nachman told stories to wake people up who were asleep. Even though in Jerusalem in 2016 I stayed up long after curfew to read his stories, I'm sure Rebbe Nachman would have counted me among the sleeping. Rebbe Nachman told stories when his conventional teaching methods failed. He considered his stories a form of compact Torah. The stories conveyed complicated moral and mystical truths in language simple enough for students to understand and remember. He aimed for the gut and the heart. His stories lodged themselves in my heart and gut, acting upon me just as if I were one of his original sleeping followers.

Ours was always an unlikely love story, and I hope it can continue to defy the odds. I hope what began as a fling will become a lifelong love. The summer is over, but Rebbe Nachman's stories are as beautiful and mysterious to me as they were when I first read them. Along with my many new friends and teachers from my Bronfman summer, my heart belongs to Rebbe Nachman.

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