



A JEWISH OPERA ON A HASSIDIC TALE

Paul Schoenfield's *THE MERCHANT AND THE PAUPER*

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... lang, vi di yidishe goles
(... as long as the Jewish Exile)

Vos der mentsh farshteyt veyniger, iz alts far im beser.
(The less a man understands, the better off he is.)

Nit itlekher, vos zitst oybn-on, iz a pan.
(Not all who sit in seats of honor are nobles.)

— old Yiddish proverbs

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When Paul Schoenfield was searching for a Jewish subject for an opera, he found himself faced with an artistic dilemma. He wanted to address an aspect of serious Jewish literature that would be worthy of probing musical-theatrical treatment yet neither despairing nor tragic—nor even tragicomic. But the opera also had to embody his personal approach to “Jewish music”—which, for his purposes, is inseparable from a synergetic combination of joy and spiritual elevation.

Perhaps oddly, Schoenfield intuited one level of solution in the long-standing tradition of the *purimshpiel*, which, historically, has frequently accompanied and amplified the annual Purim festivities celebrating the averting of Jewish genocide in the ancient Persian Empire as described in the biblical Book of Esther.¹ *Purimshpiel* is a genre of jocular theatre dating at least to the Middle Ages in Europe and containing some of the germinal seeds for the nineteenth-century birth of secular Yiddish theatre. Even throughout the many centuries following the destruction of the Second Temple, during which some rabbinical authorities, out of continued mourning for the Temple’s eradication, proscribed instrumental music, the *purimshpiel*, along with weddings, was the permitted exception in many if not eventually in most cases.

A *purimshpiel* typically combines revelry, lampoon, and caricature. Yet even though the fictional biblical tale or parable is entirely secular, without even the mention of God or any religious element, the event it commemorates—the near success of a conspiracy to annihilate the Jewish people and the implausible Jewish military victory in preventing it—can have redemptive religious and sober historical ramifications that go beyond humor.

In his quest for a specific topic, Schoenfield turned to the tales of Reb Naḥman of Bratslav, also known as the Bratslaver *rebbe*; and he found his desired nexus in Reb Naḥman's own words concerning joy:

To find true joy is the hardest thing of all—more difficult than all other spiritual tasks. One must literally force oneself to be happy all the time . . . When you bring joy to another person, you literally give new life to a soul . . . Often the only way is to do something foolish or childish.

To have a grasp on the underlying layers of meaning, veiled references and overall significance of the opera—as well as on how these resonated with Schoenfield's own sensibilities—one must first know something of the mysterious context of the Bratslaver's ideas and the mindset, legacy, and worldview of his followers, all of which were unique in the wider Hassidic world. Schoenfield made a concentrated study of all this before arriving at his decision, and these factors inform the opera both directly and subliminally.

REB NAḤMAN OF BRATSLAV AND HIS DOCTRINES

Among Hassidic *rebbs* (rabbinical-type charismatic leaders of the various individual Hassidic groups or dynasties, some but not all of whom were also rabbis—viz., with officially conferred rabbinical authority) and among *tzaddikim* (righteous Hassidic masters), R. Naḥman was unique in his reliance upon cryptic allegorical and even phantasmagorical folk-type tales as primary vehicles for conveying his theological, moral, and mystical teachings.² He was also one of the most controversial and isolated of all the Hassidic masters.³ Reports indicate that early on in his role as a *tzaddik*, his self-perceived persona already differed from the quasi-royal, court-centered style of other Hassidic *rebbs*. He appears to have been more concerned with immersion in intense spiritual devotion that led, ultimately, to his mystical doctrines of repair, restoration and redemption of the cosmic world. Nor did he surround himself continually, as other *rebbs* have, with courtly retinues or clusters of disciples. He usually restricted his meetings with disciples to a handful of annual occasions.

Throughout his life, R. Naḥman was often embroiled in sharp theological controversy and even bitter interpersonal disputes. At one time or another he alienated nearly all of his contemporary Hassidic *tzaddikim* and other serious Hassidic thinkers, especially those with whom he had contact (with the exception of the legendary kindly and charitable Reb Levi Yitzḥak of Berdichev). In some cases, the acrimony arose from attitude and behavior. But on a deeper level the conflicts were propelled by his particular concepts and views—of himself and his own exclusive role—vis-à-vis the world and God's relationship to it; the nature, meaning and means of ultimate redemption; the nature and essence of faith; and the kabbalistic concept of *tikkun*—repair, restoration and redemption. The Bratslaver perception of *tikkun* has been understood to focus in particular on the repair of that which is seen to be broken or shattered in existence itself—and of that which is broken in the soul, in the cosmos, in truth, and in the essence of divine oneness with man and with the universe.

Central to the controversies and even the denouncements Reb Naḥman aroused was the highly paradoxical and complicated character of the particular concept of faith he and his followers embraced. When it came to questions of God's personal versus impersonal relationship to the world and to existence, of the relationship between good and evil, and whether prayer is ideally an unfathomably distant yet personal dialogue with God or a complete submergence of the self in clinging to God (*hitlahavut*), R. Naḥman's teachings diverged sharply from the prevailing thought of other leading Hassidic theoreticians of the day. By some accounts, he seems deliberately to have provoked these disputes, for he is believed to have developed the notion that his place at the center of controversy was both inevitable and a mark of his own significance in the redemptive process. Apparently he viewed greatness and ultimate legitimacy in a true *tzaddik* as inseparable from—perhaps even in proportion to—rejection and isolation as necessary phases to be overcome.

It is possible to articulate in analytical terms some of the debatable differences in doctrine and approach that account for the rift between Reb Naḥman and other Hassidic thinkers, but much of his *modus operandi* and many of his positions and actions were, and remain, shrouded in mystery. Even his defining trip to the Holy Land and his motivations for the journey have an aura of mystery about them that have fueled various directions and sometimes competing degrees of speculation.⁴

That his tales, too, can defy understanding—at least outside the tightly packed epicenter of his initiated disciples—may also be a part of the self-imposed enigma he appears to have cultivated. It has even been suggested that the tales were never intended to be understood or deciphered. A slightly less radical variation on that idea suggests that R. Naḥman expected only his inner core of disciples, who were oriented in Lurianic mysticism, kabbalistic conceptions, and in particular the *Zohar*—and were thus schooled in seeking out hidden references and symbolism—to understand the stories. Yet another variation on that assessment might be that their meaning would become revealed to the others at some future time, perhaps as part of the eventual restoration in the cosmos.

Reb Naḥman's position on faith went beyond the obvious traditional Judaic faith in God and all that it has implied historically, and he required of his disciples faith in *him* as the true *tzaddik*—inextricable from any messianic issues. In his view, the Jewish exile persists in its prolongation because of lack of faith, so that the meaning of redemption from that exile is tied to the resolution of all doubts.

His greatest disappointment, therefore, was the frustration of his perceived role in messianic expectations and the failure of his bid for acceptance of those aspirations, which occurred in 1806—the same year in which his only son died. That the emergence of his tales and the beginning of his institutionalized storytelling coincide with that time frame should probably not be overlooked. He did not necessarily abandon his messianic convictions or his longing for messianic redemption. Rather, he appears to have refocused his energies and regrouped his spiritual forces, now refracting his teachings and longings through the new prism of his tales. In one way or another, even if their details and deepest layers of meaning elude our understanding, these tales can all be viewed as dealing with the issue of faith in the yearned-for cosmic redemption.

As foreign as Reb Naḥman's messianic self-perceptions may seem to modern rational orientation, they cannot simply be dismissed as psychotic delusions. For, in the event, we do not know the precise nature of those convictions, nor how literal was the plane on which he considered them. This component of his teachings remains a function of both his essential mystery and his pervasive mysteriousness. Little wonder then that his tales, too, are drenched in mystery and secrecy. In that context, their invention has been seen as his means of encoding the very secrets that those outside his inner circle had dismissed. Those secrets, according to this thesis, would then be protected and decipherable only by the elite few who had attained an exclusive level of understanding; only they would be spiritually ready and worthy, by virtue of their faith in Reb Naḥman, to know the means to the repair of the world.

THE TALES

Reb Naḥman's stories, on their surface, resemble fairy tales with universal themes more than they do traditionally Jewish anecdotal folklore or typical religious exegetical literature. They concern such things from the world of enchantment as mythical kings and emperors, lovestruck princes and princesses, far-off lands, improbable romances, mysterious riddles, evil spells, beggars who become prosperous, and magical cures. But they are saturated with mystical allegories, metaphors and symbols. It cannot be known whether all the tales were entirely original or whether Reb Naḥman drew upon other folklore as models. It is possible, however, to consider some of their characters and situations as variants on well-known fairy-tale motifs. There is also the possibility, raised by some contemporary observers, that certain tales might have been based on Reb Naḥman's dreams.⁵ This, too, remains conjecture. Either way, the uninitiated audience, even if otherwise educated, might understandably relate to the tales as fanciful variations on universal folklore. But scholars of this Bratslaver chapter of Hassidic history and philosophy generally accept that when Reb Naḥman told these tales to his disciples, it was understood among them that they contained

hidden messages and truths deliberately buried from all but those who knew not only how to unearth them but also how to internalize them.

The fierce opposition to R. Naḥman and the open controversies might have underscored in his mind the need for such secrecy. The deception of simplicity could guard those secret truths—at least until a later stage on the way to redemption—from those who would not understand them anyway and who might, under the influence of his vilifiers or, simply, of Western ideas, misuse his teachings. The enigma would protect knowledge still too dangerous to be in such hands.

Thus, among Bratslaver Hassidim, the tales are treated not as secular or quasi-religious ethical-moral literature, nor even as ancillary religious illustrations, but as basic sacred texts in themselves. For them, R. Naḥman's sacred teachings are embedded in the images, objects, characters and even landscapes.

There are thirteen primary tales and several other brief ones. Reb Naḥman instructed his Hassidim to burn all his writings upon his death, with the exception of these tales—which were recorded by his scribe. In an evaluation by Arthur Green, a leading authority on the subject, the tales address, through mythological lenses, Reb Naḥman's central ideas on the very essence of existence “at the meeting-place between the truth of the soul and the truth of the cosmos.”⁶ Yet even apart from their specifically mystical world, these tales may also have a place in the development of Jewish literature in general. From the vantage point of twentieth-century literary criticism, they have been perceived collectively as an unintended bridge from a centuries-old tradition of biblically related and other purely sacred writings to a modern Jewish secular literature. In all likelihood, though, R. Naḥman would have rejected that assessment, or his interpreted role in any path to modern literature. Still, given the very mystery of his motives coupled with his obvious awareness of secular folktale literature outside the Jewish realm, perhaps we ought not be so sure.

THE OPERA

Serving his artistic purposes, Schoenfield's vision of a potential nexus between the *purimshpiel* tradition and the Bratslaver tales was an extraordinary creative impulse. “And so it was in the spirit of the *purimshpiel* that I decided to write *The Merchant and the Pauper*,” he has explained.⁷ Referring to his status and reputation as a late-twentieth-century composer whose harmonic language and overall style were well-known, he went further to justify his approach to this particular work. “People who wonder whether I'm being serious or sarcastic when I use eighteenth- and nineteenth-century harmonies must remember that in a Purim play the division between fact and farce can and should be blurry.” One senses in that observation an awareness of the fairy-tale-like, fable-oriented analogies between the Purim story in the Hebrew Bible and the Bratslaver tales on their unanalyzed surfaces, perhaps including possible fairly simple lessons—albeit of very different types—that some would propose to extract from both. But such extracted “lessons” are far from certain, even if the reasoning behind them is legitimate. And in the case of R. Naḥman's tales, in all likelihood any intuited lessons still remain relatively superficial compared with his embedded secret meanings, from whose revelation we are supposed to be immune.

But Schoenfield has gone well beyond harmonic language in fashioning the contradictions of this multilayered work, clothing mystical and melancholic Bratslaver yearnings in the vestments of uplifting and even cheerful music. He created a work that ties his perception of an opera “on a Jewish subject”—viz., something ultimately and inherently joyful for him in the spirit of Hassidism in general—to Reb Naḥman's cosmic messianic concerns. “I've come along to write some entertainment to ‘make the sad happy and bring peace among enemies,’ as the Talmud expresses,” he wrote in the program booklet for the premiere.⁸ “I haven't had to concern myself with profundity or musicological importance—because such an attitude would be antithetical both to the *purimshpiel* and to the views of Reb Naḥman.”

Indeed, both musicological and, for that matter, musical importance and profundity could be said to run counter to the tradition as well as the purpose of the *purimshpiel*, which was conceived primarily to provide fun and lighthearted entertainment for both participants and audiences. For centuries among Ashkenazi Jews it has been part of the

joyous celebration of the outcome of the Purim story as it reads in the Book of Esther, with or without traditional commentary. That is, unless one insists on subjecting the narrative to the devices of modern literary analysis, apart from etymological reconsideration of the meanings of certain Hebrew, ancient Persian or Persian-derived words and phrases.

But profundity as “antithetical” to the views of Reb Naḥman? Was Schoenfield speaking with a bit of tongue in his cheek or inviting a rather large grain of kosher salt? Or, as is more likely on another, intersecting plane (he has declined to expand), perhaps he was referring at the same time more narrowly to R. Naḥman’s emphasis on the challenging importance of joy—sometimes even requiring childishness or foolishness—which is what Purim is “all about” in popular observance and celebration.

Yet, on another level, Schoenfield’s reference to antithesis is not necessarily inapplicable to Reb Naḥman’s views, in the sense that he certainly would not have approved of an opera attempting to reveal and decipher his encoded secrets for repair and redemption. As with any other vehicle attempting to decode his secrets, he would have feared that such efforts in the guise of an opera might even be dangerous—until the proper time arrived for the few among the schooled generations of his disciples to unravel these secrets. And to his twentieth-century disciples in Israel (and those of ensuing generations awaiting the signal of that proper time), who consider his recorded as well as orally transmitted teachings to be sacred texts, the very composition of an opera based on one of his tales might be sacrilege enough without further trespassing—that is, if in their insular world they would even know of the opera’s existence, or, for that matter, what an opera is.

Moreover, Schoenfield’s idea of incorporating and expressing an adaptation of the tale partially in the context of a *purimshpiel* tradition can make some sense in another way, outside specifically Hassidic circles. In the simplest of terms, on its only minimally penetrated façade, and in that way analogous to the unprobed, unembellished and undeconstructed Purim story, good simply triumphs over evil; valor and courage lead to rescue from destructive forces; ethical integrity prevails over the temptation of material and social security, trumping greed; and the tale concludes on its surface not only with salvation of the innocent but with restoration and continuation of life free from fear of iniquitous enemies—all of which would merit celebration as a “happily ever after” fable or parable, if that were the extent of the tale.

On the other hand, despite its composer’s claim, this opera is hardly mere diversionary entertainment, as is the *purimshpiel* genre more or less by definition uncomplicated enjoyment. Perhaps after all, as subtexts wrapped in the garb of a joy-inspiring musical theatre piece, Schoenfield has cleverly hidden some of the very profundity he denies or refuses to reveal—taking his cue in that case from Reb Naḥman.

The basic substance of *The Merchant and the Pauper* derives from the interrelated twin doctrines of the exile of the *sh’khina* (the divine presence) as part of the overall Jewish exile, and the persisting delay of the messianic era, to be preceded by restoration and redemption. And the continued exclusion of the Messiah represents a form of exile of its own.

However, not only was Margaret B. Stearns’s libretto never intended as a literal transcription of the tale in all its details (which applies of course in general to librettos based on literary sources), but rather as an adaptation. As a theatrical vehicle, therefore, it naturally omits certain otherwise important elements that bear upon a deeply probing deliberation of the tale’s symbolism and metaphors from varying perspectives and viewpoints. Moreover, we must be cautioned that the symbolic representations of the opera’s characters as quasi-factual, i.e., as *if* intended by R. Naḥman, relied on a fairly recent, late-twentieth-century reading of the tale by one scholar and analyst in particular. That interpretation is not necessarily to be dismissed or negated, especially since Schoenfield chose to follow it fundamentally. Which is to say that however one might wish (or not) additionally and separately to examine and evaluate more profoundly R. Naḥman’s teachings, philosophy, concepts, convictions and mysterious doctrines, *The Merchant and the Pauper*—with the symbolic representations its composer elected to incorporate—stands as the opera as it is. Nonetheless, his storyline (one might say Stearns’s as well, though the operatic “buck” stops with the composer)

still leaves room for deeper speculation and excavation for those who wish to try. And of course the full, unadapted tale is readily available in print.⁹

The actual title of the tale as first published in 1816 is *Mayse m'bergir v'he'oni*, and the first published English translation was *The Burgher and the Pauper* [Poor One]. Although “burgher” is not necessarily interchangeable with “merchant,” in Reb Naḥman’s day it signified primarily a member of the middle class, usually a man of business who was thus neither a member of the aristocracy or landed gentry nor a peasant, farmer, laborer, etc. (“Burgher” derives from the word for a free citizen of a borough or town.) And it did commonly connote a member of the so-called merchant class. Whereas not all burghers were necessarily merchants, however (they could be engaged on other occupations such as various trades, managers or even owners of companies), all merchants would have been burghers, which could also mean simply a prosperous bourgeois. R. Naḥman used the term in that sense, even though nowhere in the tale does “the Merchant” engage in buying and selling, i.e., merchandising. Aryeh Kaplan, in his exhaustive 1983 scholarly study of R. Naḥman’s tales, allowed “merchant” as an acceptable if not precise alternative to “burgher.” Schoenfield may have chosen that alternative because he thought it sounded more mellifluous or because he feared that the now little used “burgher” might not resonate with contemporary audiences—or for both reasons.

Reb Naḥman told this tale to his Hassidim just after Purim in 1809. Bratslaver Hassidim have believed that R. Naḥman had been told previously about something written in golden letters and related it to this story in which the pauper is given a document embossed in golden letters.

Conveying the basic plot of the adaptation, together with its allegorical commentary, presented a theatrical staging challenge—first to Stearns and Schoenfield, and then to a director of any future production. The solution of the librettist and composer jointly was to have commentary, as well as many of the plot details, declaimed by a narrator. For the world premiere in 1999 by the Opera Theatre of St. Louis (which had commissioned the opera), the director cast the narrator as Reb Naḥman himself, recounting the story and commenting on it as if he were speaking to his disciples. The emotional expressions of the characters’ reactions, whether in the present or as flashback, in turn became the bases for the musical numbers: arias, ensembles and choruses. As clever and viable as it was, however, that directorial imagination is not necessarily required for future productions, in which a different persona of the narrator could be conceived. Commenting on the role of the narrator in principle, the *New York Times* critic Allan Kozinn wondered briefly if “there are moments when the work seems more like an oratorio than an opera.” But he gave a stellar review of it as unquestionably an opera, with its staging and “meltingly beautiful music” that benefits from the judicious juxtapositions of musical styles and traditions for which Schoenfield is known—from his lush choral writing to his gift for solo vocal lyricism.

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DRAMATIS PERSONAE

NARRATOR

THE MERCHANT..... Bass-Baritone
The man whose wealth is both worldly and spiritual—the representation of Moses

THE PAUPER..... Tenor
The man who remains poor in spirit even in prosperity

THE PAUPER’S WIFE..... Mezzo-Soprano
The simple people of Israel

THE WICKED GENERAL / THE PIRATE..... Countertenor
The evil one

THE MERCHANT'S SON Baritone
The future Messiah

BEAUTY, The Pauper's Daughter Soprano
The Sh'khina, the glory of Israel

FIRST NOBLEMAN Tenor

SECOND NOBLEMAN Baritone

THIRD NOBLEMAN Bass

FIRST HANDMAIDEN Soprano

SECOND HANDMAIDEN Soprano

THIRD HANDMAIDEN Mezzo-Soprano

FIRST SUITOR Baritone

SECOND SUITOR Baritone

THIRD SUITOR Tenor
The false prophets who seek to approach the sh'khina

Villagers, Courtiers, Crowd, Animals

TIME: Unspecified.

PLACE: An imagined kingdom and a far-off island.

THE ACTION

ACT I

The curtain rises on a dark stage, with the narrator singing a Hassidic *niggun* (tune), but with Yiddish words in addition to typically Hassidic meaningless syllables. The stage gradually becomes illuminated to reveal the rest of the ensemble, according to the composer's directions:

[In Yiddish]:

Come into my house, let it be a refuge . . .
 Come close and let the fire warm you,
 for its sparks will light the world
 with a flame that will burn forever.
 Let this place be a shelter, and someday
 goodness will prevail, wisdom shall rule
 the earth, all mankind shall be as one,
 and the Messiah shall stand among us
 in the flame that burns forever.

"When men wander across the earth," the narrator continues—now speaking—"if they are fortunate, they find a place where it is warm inside. But for now "we are lost in storm and chaos. Will God find us in the storm? Will He see us in the grave? Can there be joy anywhere?" The chorus expands on those sentiments, singing that there is "nothing left to save," at the same time imploring God to see their anguish. "Cruel chaos rages around us, we are lost in storm and

fire.” Acknowledging their fear, the narrator offers to tell them a story—one so bright they will keep it in their hearts forever. He thus proceeds to relate the tale, referring to the Merchant not only as rich but “as great as Moses, as tall as Abraham, and as wise as all the mountains of Jerusalem.”

The Merchant takes over, to describe himself as one who, having no children, once gave much of his wealth to the poor and was grateful for God’s blessings of this life.

The Merchant had a neighbor, explains the narrator, who was very poor, living on charity, with neither any means to a livelihood nor any children. The Pauper’s “spirit was shriveled” from years of poverty, and his meanness pervaded “even his bones.” His wife, however, was known for her goodness. And the Merchant, who has given alms to the couple gladly, now has dreamt that his (eventual) children will be exiled, and that all his God-given wealth and power will be taken from him—all of which has only made him that much more generous.

The only thing the Merchant and the Pauper have in common is their childlessness. Otherwise they are opposites in every respect. “For all the gold the rich bestow,” sing the village women as they taunt the Pauper, “makes a poor man mean, cunning and low.”

One day the Pauper’s home is visited by terror. Soldiers on their way to a faraway battle abduct the Pauper’s Wife as a prize for their general. In a stirring duet, the Merchant assures the Pauper that he will find her, free her and bring her home, while the Pauper cries in agony that she is all he has.

The Pauper’s Wife is naturally stunned, crying out fearfully in Scene 2 at the horror of her abduction and praying that God will keep her safe from evil men. The general reassures her that in his camp, unlike at her home of poverty, pleasure awaits her. He entreats her to share his bed and his wine, and to be his.

But the Merchant accomplishes what he promised, marching into the army encampment with such an aura of fearlessness that the soldiers are shocked to the point of paralysis. The knowledge of evil, proclaims the Narrator, shields us against darkness and makes us giants. Assuring the Pauper’s Wife that God is with them, the Merchant leads her home as the general disappears and the soldiers remain frozen in amazement.

For his bravery, chivalry and goodness, the Merchant is blest with a son, as we learn by the second scene. (Strangely enough, which must be secretly significant, his wife is never mentioned—neither by name nor even by her existence.) And the Pauper and his wife have been blest with the birth of a daughter, apparently, or so it seems, as a reward for the wife’s faith in God and her faithfulness to her husband. (Noteworthy, but not emphasized, the general has not forced himself on her, only offering her a better life and imploring her to become his.)

The Pauper’s daughter is now regarded by all as the most beautiful girl ever seen on earth, even, sing the villagers, “the root of all holiness in her splendor, the brightness of God.” And she is given the name Beauty.

The Merchant, the Pauper and his wife are convinced that their children have been predestined to marry. “From their union would come the healing of the world,” proclaims the Narrator. The Pauper’s Wife and the Merchant sing that they have no doubt that this is God’s will, which is why the Merchant was permitted to bring the Pauper’s Wife home safely.

The two children go to school together, to “study the stars, sun and moon, all the wisdom of the world.” They also learn poetry and music, becoming accomplished at singing “in harmony together” and at playing musical instruments. God has blest them with the voices of angels, and people listen to them “in wonder to songs as old as time.”

Of course all this taken literally would be impossible for Jewish children of Reb Naḥman’s world, not only because boys and girls would never have been in the same school together (which applies even today among most Hassidic communities, as well as those of other regressive, unmodernized or “demodernized,” self-proclaimed fervently pious branches of orthodoxy known collectively as *haredim*), but because girls would not have been allowed any formal

schooling. And for the boys, yeshiva learning (their only type of formal education)—confined to the study of Torah, Talmud and related sacred texts and traditional rabbinic commentary—would certainly not include a curriculum of music and poetry in the sense that the tale implies. Nor, of course, could boys and girls sing together, certainly not outside their homes or perhaps those of close family. So we must keep in mind that this is all fancy and obviously symbolic, as nowhere in the tale or the opera are we told—or is it even suggested—that any of the characters are Jews. Nor is anything about the plot Jewish per se; and some, albeit not all, elements and components could not possibly apply historically to Jewish situations. Yet we know that anything to do with Reb Naḥman and his tales can be assumed in some way or on some level to be inherently Jewish.

In referring to the Merchant's Son and Beauty (the only character who has a proper name) as representing the Messiah and the *sh'khina* respectively, and to the Merchant as Moses leading the *sh'khina* out of exile (as he led his people out of Egyptian bondage), the opera follows primarily one modern literary interpretation—that of Howard Schwartz, a noted scholar on the subject.¹⁰ He also contributed an essay to the program notes for the opera's premiere, which encapsulates his interpretation. Even though that interpretation can make sense on one level, some, however, might consider it a bit presumptuous to be presented as intuited fact in the opera. Not that Schwartz's reading of the tale necessarily lacks legitimacy as an interpretation, but that line of interpretive explanation can still be viewed as *relatively* superficial compared with what we don't and cannot pretend to *know*, viz., Reb Naḥman's more deeply embedded secrets and meanings. For it is generally accepted that he was careful to guard against the deepest levels of penetration, which he feared could produce premature assumptions that could be potentially hazardous.

Nonetheless, there is a tender duet between the Merchant's Son and Beauty in which they pledge their mutual love, each beholding a star when seeing the other: "Beloved as the sun and moon, as golden as the summer with the splendor of the sun." Of course this sort of romantic love (if indeed that is what the interaction is meant to be) would also have been largely foreign to R. Naḥman's Jewish world, with some exceptions, but common in "outside" fairy-tale literature and traditions. It may be worth remembering that R. Naḥman is said to have exposed himself to such outside knowledge and literature, and he is reported to have wrestled with eroticism.

Beauty's reputation for extraordinary exquisiteness spreads far and wide, so that noblemen come to compete in bidding for her hand for their sons. But since her poverty and humble station preclude her acceptance by their noble families and among the nobility in general, they help the Pauper rise far above his financial as well as social status. His penchant for greed causes him to take advantage of the situation and ask for more and more, even that he may be a king. Thus the noblemen, all eager to increase Beauty's eligibility for marriage to their sons, promise the Pauper that, with their intercession, he will rule as far as he can see. "Even the smallest man," they observe, "can touch the sky."

The noblemen remind him that he could have the rich future they could provide only if Beauty were no longer promised to the son of a mere Merchant. So the Pauper, admitting his vile scheme in a sung monologue, spreads terrible false rumors about the Merchant, such that his word as a businessman will no longer be respected. And indeed, as the Pauper rises in status and wealth, the Merchant's fortune shrinks and becomes negligible. In Scene 5 he has come to subsist as a beggar, "forgotten in the dust." Meanwhile, the Pauper has become not only a king, as the noblemen promised, but emperor over the entire land—although the distinction between a king and an emperor is unclear, as is the difference between a kingdom and an empire, perhaps suggesting another undecipherable secret message or symbolism. Following Schwartz's interpretation, the Narrator explains with unsubstantiated certainty that this all symbolizes Israel's exile and persecution—as, he says, foretold by Abraham's dream.

The Pauper-become-emperor now determines that his daughter can, must and will make a royal marriage—to a prince or even a king. But in Scene 6 his wife insists that the promise to the Merchant must be honored, not only as a matter of integrity but as God's will. She assures Beauty that, as God is her witness, when the time is ripe, she will be the promised bride of the son whose father rescued her mother. In a duet between mother and daughter, Beauty sings romantically that her heart was "promised long ago" and that she will never love another.

So the Pauper/emperor orders his men to abduct the Merchant's Son, put him in a sack, and throw him into the sea. The Pauper's Wife, however, prevails on those men to spare his life and somehow find a way to put a convicted, condemned murderer into the sack instead. And in so doing, they urge the Merchant's Son to flee across the ocean to a distant land. Before fleeing, he sings to and with Beauty that memory is all they have left to them now. In their farewell they pledge that when they gaze upon the evening star—far distant from each other—they will be seeing into each other's hearts, "into the blazing flame at the heart of the world." Thus, superimposes the Narrator, the *sh'khina* and the Messiah were parted, suggesting the further prolongation of the unrepaired world and of the exile.

Meanwhile, a fierce storm at sea threatens, in which "the earth drowns in chaos" and overflows. It seems as if the end of the world has come or is coming—with "darkness over space and time" and nothing remaining but despair. But the Merchant's Son sails away before encountering the full measure of the storm.

ACT II

The second act, which contains some of Schoenfield's most arresting music as the story builds and the plot thickens, finds the Merchant's Son shipwrecked on a deserted, humanly uninhabited island, far from shore. But as the chorus of animals confirms, there is abundant (fresh drinking) water and vegetation in which to rejoice as God's bounty. In addition, he has survived thus far and been nourished by the meat of deer and rabbits (the latter of course a nonkosher animal and thus forbidden for Jews' consumption, another reminder—or is it?—that none of the characters are identified as Jews, and seemingly not intended as such by R. Nahman on the surface of the tales.)

The Merchant's Son has become resigned to living there forever, fending for himself against dangerous beasts in the forest that appear to leave him alone. How he could have caught, killed, skinned, butchered and then roasted or boiled deer and rabbits with neither the necessary implements nor experience is left to our imagination. Perhaps these are the kinds of missing details among the mysteries we are not supposed to be able to resolve. In any case, leaving aside all issues of symbolism, metaphors and embedded secret meanings, one can be tempted here to recall *Robinson Crusoe* as a model. Given what is known or at least suspected about R. Nahman, his familiarity with that novel is not entirely outside the realm of possibility, though in the absence of any specific evidence, that temptation probably should be resisted.

Further extending implausibility, the Merchant's Son is said to use bones and skins of animals to make musical instruments. And he prays not only for continued protection against dangerous animals ("harmony from danger . . . from *minions* of evil") but for music of longing and pain—music for Beauty, who is lost to him: "Here beneath the silent stars I remain alone, to sing of my love forever."

Every evening he waits impatiently for the evening star, gazing at it with longing, knowing that Beauty, somewhere, is doing the same, both keeping their mutual pledge. "The great star brilliant in the west rises in love from the sea," he sings. "I know I see beyond the sky into your heart, oh beloved of the sun and moon; and the universe shall hear our singing and the heavens tremble with our song, for we are the blazing flame at the heart of the world."

The Pauper/emperor, assuming that his instructions for the Merchant's Son's murder have been followed, has become even more intent on a noble, if not royal, marriage for Beauty. She "knows in her heart," albeit secretly, that somehow her beloved has survived, even if never to be seen by her again, but she cannot reveal her mother's successful scheme to save his life. So the Pauper-become-emperor now builds an elaborate palace where Beauty—along with her handmaidens, the daughters of noblemen—can receive the kings who, with poetic supplications of love, come to court her for their sons (*viz.*, that she may love one of them).

Beauty has blossomed into the fullness of her splendor by the second scene, in which she is said to be so beautiful that some faint at the sight of her, while others are driven to madness. Therefore she would veil her face. But the nobles who come to the palace are identified in the libretto as "false prophets," for Beauty can be united only with the Merchant's Son, if indeed he represents the Messiah. Although politely responding to the poems of the competing

noblemen with poems of her own of love combined with sadness, she sends each of them away. In a signature aria she dwells on the implied possibility that she might not even recognize the Merchant's Son after so long a time apart. But she is sure that she will know him by his words: "by the words of his heart, by the song of his love—My beloved is mine and I am his," quoting from the biblical Song of Songs. But calamity is about to strike.

Yet another suitor appears at the palace, offering incentives far beyond any previous enticements: all his gold, other treasure and lands. It turns out that he is a pirate in disguise, come to abduct "Princess Beauty" to use her as barter with a king, to whom he can offer her in exchange for a mountain of gold. He shows Beauty the preliminary gifts he has brought: birds made of gold, sitting on golden branches but made to appear as if real and singing. Enchanted by this overture, Beauty forgets her sadness for only a moment, but long enough for the pirate (identified by the Narrator as the force of evil threatening the *sh'khina*) to seize her with a knife to her throat. He forces her to disguise herself in the clothing of a sailor and carries her off to his ship before anyone in the palace notices. Although it is now too late, her mother engages in a duet with her from a distance, partly connecting their two abductions and articulating their joint plea that God will save Beauty, too, from evil men.

The pirate's ship, however, sails into another intense storm and is grounded on the shore of the same island on which the Merchant's Son has been living. The dangerous beasts attack the pirate and tear him to pieces.

By the fourth scene, Beauty's abduction has been discovered by all within the palace. Her mother has blamed all this on her husband because of his pride, greed and selfishness. The implication of course is that, had the promise to the Merchant been kept, none of this would have happened. In a palace revolt, the former Pauper is deposed and stripped of his throne and wealth by the court nobles, who invite his wife to become the reigning empress in his place.

The court nobles apologize to the Merchant, who is restored to his former material wealth and lives in a palatial edifice with God's blessing. And the Pauper is once again a pauper—"as a beggar forgotten in the dust at the foot of the [Merchant's] stairs." But now the empress realizes that sorrow has returned to her and the Merchant, for they are childless once again: "All of the rivers run to the sea, then they return again . . . Despair and joy only dreaming, for only God sees the purpose of men's faith, hope, beauty and love; nothing is left in the end . . . and all of our wisdom . . . all of it passes away."

With the pirate dead, Beauty wanders for a long time and eventually comes by chance upon the Merchant's Son. But neither recognizes the other. Beauty is disheveled, unkempt, unwashed and dressed in a sailor's suit. He simply welcomes her as a stranger and offers her shelter so that they may live together as wanderers. Still, he tells her that he can dream only of Beauty and must "remain in loneliness forever."

At that, Beauty realizes who he is, for she knows her beloved by "the words of his heart and the song of his love." They sing of the miracle that has saved them from permanent despair, with chaos and darkness now gone: "For the universe has heard our singing and the heavens tremble with our song . . . For you are my beloved before the throne of God; the time of the singing of birds has come."

They somehow find their way home, to discover how radically things have changed for the better in their absence. An ensemble of Beauty, her mother the empress, the Pauper, the Merchant and his son sing of reconciliation. The Pauper is forgiven, and Beauty and the Merchant's Son are wedded. The two now (inexplicably) take over the kingdom and reign supreme over the entire world. "Despair shall turn to joy," sing the chorus along with the Merchant, "wisdom and truth shall rule on earth. For light shall pierce the darkness, and the flame of our love shall rise until we all rejoice together." Just before the final curtain, the Narrator repeats the Yiddish song that he sang at the opening, with the chorus in a descant of typically Hassidic wordless syllables, which are believed by Hassidim to surpass and transcend the limited capacity of words for deep spiritual communication and contemplation.

The composer's stage directions call for the palace to fade away, creating the impression that the gloom of the beginning of the opera is still outside and that the story itself has "disappeared like a puff of golden smoke."

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MODERN LITERARY INTERPRETATION

In the modern and so-called postmodern eras there have been (and continue to be) many stabs at analyzing and interpreting Reb Naḥman's tales, even allowing for deeper levels of implanted secrets that defy unearthing and deciphering by us—or, for that matter, not yet even by R. Naḥman's living generations of disciples. But inasmuch as the opera is based largely on Howard Schwartz's reading of this particular tale, it is worth considering his view—shared by others but not universally accepted—that the tales should be considered collectively as a forerunner of modern secular Jewish literature, which in some respects might have roots in such rabbinic storytelling in general.¹¹

In his annotations to the program booklet for the premiere, Schwartz began by attempting to imagine a conventional Bratslaver Hassidic interpretation of the story on a basic allegorical plane as it was adopted for the text of the narration. But he sees the tale in terms of a *dual* allegory—one biblical and the other mystical and kabbalistic in its focus on what he interprets or identifies as the *sh'khina*. In that perceived duality, the Merchant represents Moses (the biblical prong of the allegory) for Schwartz, and the Pauper's Wife symbolizes the people of Israel (the mystical component). Read on this level, Moses represents not only the physical redemption of the Israelites from Egyptian bondage but also their subsequent wandering in the wilderness in search of completion of that redemption: receiving and accepting God's teaching and laws of the Torah, possession of their sacred land, and thus fulfillment of the divine promise. But the even more telling concern on this intuited level is with the Merchant's Son representing the Messiah and the Pauper's daughter symbolizing the *sh'khina*.

Schwartz further suggests that the search for the *sh'khina* here may also be an individual personal quest to seek out and free the *sh'khina* within each human being. In this he echoes the words of R. Naḥman's scribe, to the effect that "everyone in [the people] Israel is preoccupied with the search for the lost princess"—viz., the *sh'khina*. Comparisons have also been drawn between this kabbalistic concept and the Jungian idea of the *anima*—the theory of a symbolic feminine in every male and the symbolic male aspect, or *animus*, in each female. According to that psychological or psychoanalytic theory, those two sides must be integrated and reconciled to produce wholeness. From the Jungian perspective, it is the anima that must be sought out and with which each man must come to terms, just as all Israel must seek out the *sh'khina*.

* * * * *

POSTSCRIPT:

Persons attempting to find a motive
in this narrative will be prosecuted;
persons attempting to find a moral
in it will be banished; persons
attempting to find a plot in it will
be shot.

BY ORDER OF THE AUTHOR
Per G. G., Chief of Ordnance

—Mark Twain: Preface to *Huckleberry Finn*

ENDNOTES

- 1 For an overview of the Book of Esther in terms of its issues of origin, authorship, fictional nature, incongruities, puzzles, and thus basis for opera as well as the *purimshpiel* tradition, see the introductory essay in the chapter concerning operas based on or derived from that biblical book, also known as “Esther operas.”
- 2 Rabbinical authority—viz., the established, institutionalized authority to decide, advise and give opinions on questions or matters of Judaic law on which Jews may rely—constitutes historically the primary role and meaning of “rabbi.” This authority comes with mainstream, rabbinically acknowledged qualifications for and conferral of what is known as a certificate of *s’mikha*, which has not necessarily been officially earned, held or even desired by *all* Hassidic *rebbe*s—although many have indeed held *s’mikha*. (The essential phrase *yoreh yoreh, yadin yadin* as part of the certification permits the holder to pronounce judgments on matters of Judaic law and to act as judge at a court of rabbinical adjudication: a *din torah*.) The term *s’mikha* is not necessarily synonymous, however, with the more historically recent, modern concept of nonorthodox “ordination” (nor “investiture,” as used by some Reform institutions); nor is “ordination” a correct translation of *s’mikha*.
- 3 Reb Naḥman (1772–1810) was born in Medzhybizh, a small village in the southwest Ukraine. His maternal great-grandfather was the Ba’al Shem Tov (Israel ben Eliezar, also known by the acronym the BESHT), recognized as the progenitor of the Hassidic movement in the eighteenth century (although some recent scholarship suggests some uncertainty, alluding to possible earlier origins). On his father’s side he was a grandson of a pre-Hassidic leader who was a later disciple of the Ba’al Shem Tov—Naḥman of Horodenka (Gorodenka), after whom he was named. His childhood and youth were suffused with Hassidic atmosphere and spirit. Biographers and historians have pieced together a probable image of a young man increasingly drawn to asceticism and deep prayer, attracted to the mystical aura surrounding earlier *tzaddikim*, and beset with feelings of divine rejection that were later to emerge as crushing disappointment when his messianic hopes were defeated. He is also said to have been preoccupied at times with eroticism and the conflicts it generated within him.

During his final year—in Uman, where he resettled a year before his death and where his body is buried—R. Naḥman is known inexplicably to have associated with prominent nonreligious (certainly non-pious) Haskala (Jewish Enlightenment) adherents whose worldviews could not have been more distant from the orthodox faith and mystical piety of a typical *tzaddik*.

Also enigmatic and atypical of the *rebbe*s was the fact that he did not appoint a successor, especially since his only son had died and he was aware of his own failing health. Neither his disciples nor their descendants or other subsequent-generation adherents have ever chosen one. Yet in the absence of a dynasty, his followers did not disband or permit themselves to disintegrate. Known colloquially as the *toyte hassidim* (dead Hassidim) because of their dead leader, they have continued as a distinct group (actually three groups) in Israel without a living *rebbe*. Those who are able make a pilgrimage to his grave and tombstone in Uman each year before Rosh Hashana. However, according to a perpetuated account, R. Naḥman assured his Hassidim that he would continue to be their *rebbe* even after his death, so there would be no need for a successor. (See in Howard Schwartz, “Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav: Forerunner of Modern Jewish Literature,” in *Judaism* [AJC] 122, vol. 31, no. 2 [1982].) For an authoritative twentieth-century biography of R. Naḥman, widely considered both a seminal study and one of the most revealing intellectual examinations of the subject, see Arthur Green, *Tormented Master*, Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1979. See also in David Biale, et al., *Hasidism: A New History*, Princeton, NJ, and Woodstock, Oxfordshire, 2018, *passim*.

- 4 In 1798 R. Naḥman traveled to the Holy Land (*eretz yisra'el*—the Land of Israel, then and until 1948 called Palestine), where he visited Haifa, Jaffa, Tiberias and Safed, and where, according to his disciple and first biographer, R. Nathan of Nemirov, he traveled incognito before returning to Europe after only a few months. Some biographers, including R. Nathan, have attached mystical objectives to the trip; other analysts and interpreters have discerned pre- or preparatory messianic purposes; and still others have connected the two. Arthur Green (op. cit.) suggests that the journey was a kabbalistic stage in R. Naḥman's spiritual growth. Envisioning it as a possible paradigm for a rite of passage, Green compares the journey with undergoing a dangerous ordeal to attain a "next level." In that context, the journey to the Holy Land might have been analogous to a journey to the center of the cosmic spiritual world, and the passage through water to arrive there could be viewed as a metaphor for a first stage of a rebirth process—and therefore the preface to restoration and redemption.
- 5 Re: R. Naḥman's dreams, see in Zalman Schachter, *Fragments of a Future Scroll, Hassidism for the Here and Now*, Leaves of Grass Press, 1975. Also in Green, *Tormented Master*, op. cit.
- 6 Green, *ibid.*
- 7 p.c. January 17, 1999.
- 8 In that talmudic echo, in relation to "making the sad happy" with this opera as entertainment in the spirit of a *purimshpiel* yet on a deeper plane, Schoenfield might have been referring to a charming apocryphal talmudic vignette in which a simple, buffoonish street entertainer and clown is said to be "first in line" to be rewarded with eternal life in "the world to come," viz., ahead of worthy Torah scholars, pious Jews at prayer, Jews dispensing charity, and merchants striving honestly to earn sustenance for their families—because, goes the anecdote, he "brings laughter to sad people." See in my essay on the opera by David Schiff, *Gimpel the Fool*.
- 9 This tale was first published in *Sippurei ma'asiyyot* in Ostrog in 1816. It can be found in an English translation in Arnold J. Band, *Nachman of Bratslav: The Tales*, Paulist Press, 1978; and in *Beggars and Prayers: Adin Steinsaltz Retells the Tales of Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav*, Basic Books, 1979.
- 10 Schwartz, op. cit.
- 11 *Ibid.*