

TRIPLE JUMP

Elisha Porat

Translated by Alan Sacks

I'M ANNOYED by the saying attributed to Rabbi Nachman from Bratslav, "The entire world is a very narrow bridge." The words that follow, "What is important is to have no fear," strike me as even falsier. It seems that Rabbi Nachman, who was chronically ill, never grew very old. I can't accept that this is how he painted his life, and I especially can't accept that his is how he portrayed his old age: as a deep, narrow abyss veering between two wondrous banks, the first a happy childhood awash in colors and the other, the life beyond life, life after death or the eternal life prophesied in a land of the resurrected dead. My idea of the bridge is completely the opposite of what he said. In my mind's eye, the narrow bridge of his saying is actually a delicate link between two chasms, the void that he has left and the void to which he is coming. Only a trace of our brief life in the physical world of suffering forms a link between these two yearned-for voids. We know that Rabbi Nachman's life was short and grief-stricken. We know also that he yearned all his days for another life, free of suffering. That's why I believe that he understood neither the bleakness of old age nor the sorrow of slowly taking leave of life.

I don't agree with the pious rebbe's words, if they're really his. First of all, I don't believe in the world to come or in the next life. Nor do I believe that we inherit good and happiness in the next world. Would believing that I'm on my way to the next world make it easier for me to go through my illness? Even if I were to recite to myself, lying in bed every tormented night, that the point of life is to have no fear, would I be able to master my terrifying fears? And if that is the point of life, where do we get our gnawing hunger for what comes after life?

No one has ever come back from that curtained world. Even the suffering pious man had no informants who returned after fulfilling their mission there. How could he be absolutely positive that fearing nothing is the right guide for life, that it would lead him and his followers to a world where all is good? And how would they be brought there? By the shortest, fastest route or, rather, by long, twisting journey racked with grief and pain, at least as prolonged in the hidden world as in the known?

For myself, I was summoned for just one quick peek at the realms beyond life. It was so fleeting that I don't

feel qualified to report what I saw. I can only wonder at the courage of those who decide to bear witness. On the other hand, the doctors tell me that I was lucky that my peek didn't last too long. If you don't come back from there right away, you aren't likely to come back at all. "How long is that?" I asked the doctors. "One hour? Half an hour? Less than that?"

"Something less," said the doctors before hurrying on to the patient in the next bed.

"Better yet, don't peek there at all. It's a greedy, grasping place; anyone sneaking a look is bound to get hurt."

For weeks, I was tormented by the thought that I had caught something during my brief glance. Had I really come back 100 percent? I lay in my bed and tried to read in the faces of friends and relatives whether they had noticed anything that I couldn't see. Were they trying to hide something from me? My wife said there was one thing that I hadn't lost during my trip there and back, my sick man's suspicious mind, she said. That was because I hadn't felt that I was going over a very narrow bridge, that I was crossing from one void to another brought yet a third. I hadn't seen the bank I stood on, or made out the opposite side, or found the pylons of a bridge close by. Was I destined to meet someone on the narrow bridge? Was I called to an important rendezvous on the span? Had I missed my mission?

There is still another fallacy in the proverb ascribed to the holy man, an irritating flaw that teaches more about what his followers said than about his words themselves. If he really did say that the whole world is nothing but a narrow bridge, and that the important thing is not fear crossing to the other side, just what did he mean? That there is something on the other, longed-for side worth the struggle to tame our fear, worth staggering over the narrow bridge, going over the deep chasm dizzy and faint from fear but not stopping, staying the course, continuing towards the other side of life. It's a shame he didn't say whether there are other routes connecting one void to the other. Are there other narrow bridges within our reach? Might there be a bridge, one not so narrow or frightful, that can be crossed in safety? Or is it the one only passage in all the world, what soldiers here call a "necessary crossing"?

If there are other ways, I would be the first to pick one of them. I would reserve the pious rebbe's bridge

crossing for people better and more faithful than I, just as I would leave the conquest of fear to those who are braver. I would even go further and ask, who really? If the adage attributed to the holy man is correct, there is no one who can answer my question. There isn't anyone on the bridge or walking on the banks on either side of the void. One can only go crazy from this cold, surrounding isolation. But let's suppose that there had been a wise old man sitting on the opposite bank, smack in the middle of the route leading from the suspension bridge, and that I had talked with him, exchanging a few words. I would have asked him straight off, "Of all the billions now living on the earth, why me?"

When I try to answer the questions that I myself have raised, I quickly tire. What little strength I have deserts me. Minute after minute, I reconsider the issue, turning over the possibilities. One can take Rabbi Nachman's saying as a prayer meant to relieve the soul's anguish. One can find in these words a call to quiet faith and trust in him. But this requires that I concede certain prior assumptions that result in a destination that I find distasteful and therefore must immediately reject. On the other hand, one can see the bank up close, free and happy, easy to approach and oh so attractive. And there is a deep realm that precludes compromise. This is a realm of the same type that haunts me even in my dreams at night. If I flee from it, it pursues me. There is no escape, I must confront it at night. So why don't I pluck up the bit of courage still left me in the hospital, lengthen my stride and simply march across the rough planks of the bridge? For if I continue to argue with myself as I have till now, I'll wake up gasping for air one morning. And then, even if I should want to, even if I beg and convince the doctors to help me, I won't find the strength to cross the narrow bridge. Do I really yearn for that bank?

If I don't accept the maxim attributed to the holy man, that isn't to say that I don't cherish the melody to which it's sung. Why, just the opposite. The pretty tune has a captivating charm. It's a cool drink that refreshes the afflicted heart and the downcast soul. Sometimes, when the cleaning lady walks me in the little room from the bed to the armchair and then back from the armchair to the bed, the transistor radio on her cleaning cart chirping the whole time, I can't help hearing the pleasant tune. But I'm unable to free myself suddenly from the agonizing bonds of illness and join in the words pouring from the radio in a soothing stream, for I no longer have the strength to sing.

Yes, it definitely would be easy to accept these sweet lies. No one among the healthy, who go about their business unaware of the unseen illness lurking for them, rejoices in singing that the world actually is nothing but a very narrow bridge. And if that sad expression weren't enough, there would still be some hope for man, the frantic rush to the gloomy entrance. True, the world

before us is nothing but a very narrow bridge, but waiting for us beyond the bridge are realms of everlasting radiance, sweetness and joy, health and absolute freedom from sickness. And what do you think? You need to make some effort, to gird yourself a little and take a deep breath. If I were a boy, I would now take my mother's ephemeral hand, clamp my eyes shut, hold my nose, shut my mouth and jump across the abyss. One two three. Just as I used to leap across the little swamp on the slope of the wintry path leading to the kibbutz's children's house.

And on opening my eyes, I'd already be planted on the coveted bank on the other side. It would be the best and longest triple jump in the world. Just three steps, the faltering steps of a sick man. But what a vast distance I've covered. What a gaping abyss I've crossed. What's important, though, is that I have obeyed the mandate attributed to the pious rebbe. I had no fear, I tore from my heart all fright and terror. Maybe I'll return and again leave that huge building, the regional hospital, which imprisons me in its great concrete walls. Just grab my mother's slippery hand, plug my nostrils and, just as when I was a boy, cheer myself on. Hoop-la, one two, now we're across. Sprawled in my sick bed, I have the satisfying feeling that, at this moment, I've taken the first small steps to getting well.

When the young doctor, always hurrying, came to draw blood from me, I met him with a weak smile. As in some long-past children's show, I heard him humming to himself the pleasant melody played earlier on the cleaning lady's miniature radio. *The entire world, the entire world, is a very narrow bridge, a very narrow bridge, very narrow bridge. The important thing* – he wraps the rubber tourniquet around my arm – *the important thing is to have no fear.*

"Why so happy, doctor?" I asked him. "What's made you so happy this morning?" He doesn't even bother to answer me. He unwraps my forearm and bends it. Then he affectionately slaps me on the back, and although I can't bend over and look, I'm ready to bet that he's wearing the latest sneakers. I feel sure that his greenish back pack, not a woeful doctor's bag, hangs in the physician's room. And when he moves towards the nurse's station, a syringe of my blood in his hand, I imagine hearing him dancing joyfully. *What's important, what's important, is to have no fear, to have no fear.*