

Rabbi Nachman of Breslev and Cognitive Therapy: A Short Comparison of Conceptual and Psycho-Educational Similarities

The teachings of Rabbi Nachman of Breslev (1772-1810) focused on a number of key concepts. He taught his followers that deviant past actions result from perceiving illusions which contorted reality. In addition, these illusions which led in the past to transgressions and deviant religious and social behavior, need to be rationally understood in order to erase them. The individual needs to focus on the rational present in order to improve his or her perceptions and actions and to live according to god's will. Unlike classical depth psychology which dwells on problematic key personality issues linked to the individual's past and are usually embedded in the subconscious or the unconscious, cognitive therapy suggests that problematic issues affecting the individual can be dealt with by helping the individual to rationally overcome difficulties by identifying and changing dysfunctional thinking, beliefs, behavior, and emotional responses. The conceptual definitions used by Rabbi Nachman in his theological model expounded in the latter part of the eighteenth century and by those espousing the model underlying cognitive therapy in the 20th and 21st centuries are remarkably similar and seem to have evolved from the same psychological assumptions. The similarities between the principles underlying two theories are analyzed and discussed in the present paper.

Keywords: Chassidic (Piety) movement; Likutey Moharan; Tzaddik, (holy man); Rabbi Nachman's guiding principles; Guiding principles of cognitive therapy

Introduction

The Chassidic (Piety) movement was founded in the early 18th-century Eastern Europe as a reaction against traditional Orthodox Judaism that traditionally focused almost solely on legalistic and intellectual aspects of the Jewish religion till that time. The founder of the movement, Rabbi Israel Baal Shem Tov (Master of the Good Name) and known as the Besht, born in 1698 and died in 1760, was recognized as a charismatic miracle worker who was able to influence the lives of hundreds and perhaps even thousands of disciples and followers. Rabbi Israel recognized the acute difficulties suffered by the Jewish masses in the 17th and 18th centuries. These difficulties included religious discrimination which in many cases led to anti-semitic violence, poverty and limited civil rights and led Rabbi Israel to believe that the Jewish masses needed to be encouraged to adopt religious spirituality and prayer as a fundamental aspect of faith.

Rabbi Israel preached that it was the prerogative of all to establish a relationship with god, similar to the relationship between a son and his father. He added that all Jews, especially the poor masses who were characterized by ignorance, poverty and bleak living conditions, could fully realize their religious aims and goals without feeling any inferiority when compared to those better educated in their religious knowledge and perceived as the more highly esteemed Jewish intelligentsia (Schochet, 1961).

Rabbi Nachman of Breslev

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Rabbi Nachman ben Simcha (1772-1810) was the great grandson of Rabbi Israel Baal Shem Tov (Besht), born about a decade after the Besht died. Rabbi Nachman was born at a time when the Chassidic movement entered its first serious crisis. A week after his birth, the opponents of the Chassidic movement issued a decree of excommunication against the movement and about six months later the Besht's successor, the Maggid (Preacher) of Mezritch, passed away. As Rabbi Nachman's father, as well as two of his mother's brothers were renowned disciples of the Besht, Rabbi Nachman's family connections were naturally in his favor and facilitated his joining the inner circle of the Besht's closest disciples. Rabbi Nachman imbibed his great grandfathers' spirit and teachings as passed on to him by the Besht's closest confidants and as he grew up it became apparent that he had the potential to become a prominent leader in the Chassidic movement.

After his wedding, Rabbi Nachman moved to his father-in-law's town, Ossipin, and lived there for about five years. From there, he moved to Medvedevka, where he began to attract a large following, among whom were prominent Chassidic masters who had large followings of disciples. In 1798-1799 Rabbi Nachman made a pilgrimage to the Holy Land. On his return to Ukraine he moved to the Jewish center of Zlatipolia and in the summer of 1802 he settled in Breslev where he met Rabbi Natan Sternhartz who was to become his prime disciple and editor of his theological and philosophical works. Rabbi Nachman took ill with tuberculosis and as his illness became more serious, he became very weak and frail and realized that his illness was incurable. He began making arrangements to move to Uman, where he chose to be buried because in Uman there had been a huge massacre of some 20,000 Jews by the Haidemacks in 1768. He told his disciples that as his death was approaching, he wished to be buried close to those who died as martyrs. The move to Uman was accelerated by a fire that destroyed Rabbi Nachman's home in Breslev and in May 1810 he moved into a house provided by the Jewish community of Uman (Kramer, 1989).

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Rabbi Nachman's Guiding Principles

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Although Rabbi Nachman became a controversial figure as a result of a bitter feud with another famous Chassidic leader, Rabbi Aryeh Leib of Shpola who contended that he deviated from the teachings of classical Judaism and from the teachings of the Besht, Rabbi Nachman increasingly became one of the most influential Chassidic leaders of his time. In his seminal volume, Likutey Moharan, in which he laid out the principles governing his particular interpretation of Chassidic Judaism, Rabbi Nachman indicated that achieving spiritual well-being and religious coherence with God was the prerogative of anyone who accepted the principles designed to ensure personal well-being as well as self-satisfaction and self-actualization are enumerated below:

Devotion to a Tzaddik (Holy Man)

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3 Devotion to a Tzaddik, (holy man) is a central issue in Chassidic thought
 4 according to Rabbi Nachman. Each individual is required to identify a Tzaddik
 5 to serve as a teacher and a spiritual mentor. The Tzaddik under no
 6 circumstances is perceived as an intermediary between the individual and god,
 7 but rather serves as a role model who influences and guides the individual in
 8 his religious and social deportment. The Tzaddik also serves as a spiritual
 9 confidant and instructor who is qualified to assist the individual to overcome
 10 psychological feelings of incoherence and feelings of guilt that result from
 11 unscrupulously religious or social behavior. The Tzaddik maps out a behavioral plan
 12 that will contribute to the allaying of the individual's negative feelings and
 13 emotions and will enhance the individual's chances of drawing closer to god
 14 (Green, 1992). Lieber (1995) confirmed that according to Rabbi Nachman,
 15 even if one feels that he or she has no redeeming qualities, there is no need to
 16 give up in despair, but rather to continue the struggle with oneself and to search
 17 further. The search will eventually uncover some good which justifies the
 18 individual's existence. In short, while drawing on vastly different world-views,
 19 the rabbinical and cognitive-behavioral perspectives may be said to converge,
 20 in the matter of the individual's intrinsic and unalienable redeeming potential.

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Hithodedut - Private Meditation

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24 Although Rabbi Nachman religiously preached that the three organized
 25 prayer sessions (shacharit – morning prayer; mincha – afternoon prayer; arvit –
 26 evening prayer) are mandatory for every Jew, the most important platform for
 27 the individual's relationship with god is daily private meditation. In this daily
 28 ritual the individual converses with god and discusses his daily problems and
 29 needs just as a son converses with and takes advice from his father. The daily
 30 meditation should take place in nature where the individual will be alone with
 31 god thereby being able to concentrate on his needs (Bergman, 2006). In the
 32 private one-to-one meditation-based dialogue with god, the individual details
 33 his or her perceptions of problems that affect him or her and attempts to elicit
 34 understandings of how to counter the negative inclinations that lead him or
 35 herself to distorted thoughts and actions. Thus, the revelation of personal
 36 thoughts and feelings as well as problematic behavior in the meditation
 37 dialogue, affords the individual the opportunity to check alternative thought
 38 processes that will lead to adaptive behavior as a result of his or her total belief
 39 that the god given answers to questions raised in the dialogue will succeed
 40 when implemented.

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Tikun Haklali - General Remedy

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44 The General Remedy consists of the following ten biblical psalms recited
 45 in the order: Psalms 16, 32, 41, 42, 59, 77, 90, 105, 137, and 150. The aim of
 46 reciting the Tikun Haklali is to undo the feelings of guilt and depression that lie

at the core of any sin and to encourage a feeling of atonement and emotional well-being. Rabbi Nachman viewed the General Remedy as a corner stone of belief and a few months before his death, Rabbi Nachman appointed two of his closest disciples, Rabbi Aharon of Breslev and Rabbi Naftali of Nemirov, to act as witnesses to an unprecedented vow in which he said: "If an individual comes to my grave, contributes a coin to charity, and recites the General Remedy, I will do my utmost to extract him from the depths of Gehinnom, irrespective of the sins perpetrated by him in the past" (Greenbaum, 1987). Rabbi Nachman further taught that the General Remedy can rectify all spiritual and physical flaws or maladies. Greenbaum (1984) quoted Rabbi Nachman as saying in his seminal work (Likutey Moharan I, 29:4,10):

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13 There are places that are so fine and narrow that no remedy has the power
14 penetrate them except through the General Remedy, which injects
15 healing into even the narrowest, finest places. First it is necessary to apply
16 the General Remedy, and through this all the individual flaws will
17 automatically be rectified".

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19 *Pilgrimage to Ensure Penitence, Self-Fulfilment and Self-Actualization*

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21 Rabbi Nachman said that the greatest innovation in his belief system is the
22 way his followers are required to spend Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year
23 festival. According to Rabbi Nachman, all his followers, both in his life time as
24 well as after his death, are required to make a pilgrimage to Uman to spend the
25 Jewish New Year at his graveside praying to god for a happy, healthy,
26 prosperous and peaceful new year. All who undertake the pilgrimage, pray at
27 Rabbi Nachman's grave and also recite the ten psalms of the General Remedy
28 will be blessed with a good year (Shulman, 1993), with enhanced religious
29 fervor, emotional well-being and the ability to adopt balanced rational
30 behavior. The gathering of crowds of fervent believers and disciples at the
31 graveside during the Rosh Hashana festival, together with the common wish to
32 pray for a happy, healthy and successful new year, inject unique power into the
33 mass prayer session that leaves an indelibly positive impression on all who
34 participate in the gathering and serve as a catalyst to the actualization of the
35 prayers and requests (following Kramer, 1992).

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37 *Simplicity in the Service of God*

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39 Rabbi Nachman demanded that his followers maintain simplicity and
40 naïveté in their belief in god and concentrate on doing the best they can for
41 themselves, their families, their fellow human beings and their communities.
42 According to Rabbi Nachman true religious belief in god is a simplistic process
43 without the individual needing to delve into the intellectual and philosophical
44 meanings of god and existence. Simplicity and naïveté enhance the individual's
45 ability to draw closer to god without raising doubts or questions (Kramer,
46 1989) and lead to enhanced rationality and emotional well-being. Lieber (1995)
47 concluded that Rabbi Nachman suggested that rather than falling into despair

over his shortcomings, the individual needs to seek out positive elements in the totality of his being and judge him or herself favorably on that basis. Such an attitude brings one to the calm, quiet and restfulness necessary to serve god.

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Happiness and Optimism

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According to Rabbi Nachman an important and central cornerstone of Judaism is happiness. The individual is required to strive for happiness irrespective of his or her personal situation and feelings. In the event of feelings of sadness and depression the individual embraces imaginary negative thoughts and imagination that, in turn, raise serious doubts about his or her ability to function rationally. Most of one's misery is created by his or her own irrational thinking. Rabbi Nachman intimated that one can eliminate most of one's despair or anger by changing thought processes. Thus, the individual needs to strive and to even force him or herself to adopt balanced cognitive processes and behaviors in the firm belief that rational behavior will emerge from positive internal thought and deliberation. This process will necessarily act as a catalyst to a true and objective perception of reality and, as a result, happiness will be enhanced. He encouraged his followers to clap, sing and dance during or after their prayers in an effort to maintain happiness which is a vital condition for drawing closer to god (Shulman, 1993) as well as to positive emotional well-being.

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Religious Study

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Unlike most of the other leaders of the emerging Chassidic movement, Rabbi Nachman insisted that his disciples maintain a strict study regimen in which each individual is obliged to study bible, mishna (legal aspects contained in the talmud), gemara (hermeneutical aspects contained in the talmud), halakha (legal law), zohar (handbook of mysticism) and Likutey Moharan (handbook of the Breslev Chassidic sect). Rabbi Nachman implored his followers to study all the above on a daily basis in order to continually enhance knowledge of the classical sources and to draw closer to god (Greenbaum, 1987). According to Rabbi Nachman, a deeper understanding of religious sources positively contributes to the individual's feeling of rationality and emotional well-being and leads to an enhanced feeling of being in control of one's destiny.

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Cognitive Therapy

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According to Beck (2011) cognitive therapy, founded and published by Aaron Beck (1979) emphasizes the concept that emotional and behavioral problems exhibited by an individual are usually the result of maladaptive or faulty thought perceptions and distorted attitudes toward oneself and others. Thus a) cognitive therapy focuses on the discovery of negative cognitive

distortions (e.g. thoughts, beliefs, and attitudes) and behaviors; b) on the enhancement of emotional regulation; and c) on the development of personal coping strategies that lead to the solution of current cognitive distortions. The objective of the therapy is to identify these faulty thoughts and cognitions and replace them with more realistic and adaptive understanding of reality. According to Dobson (2009) added that the aim of cognitive therapy is to target and change ill-perceived negative emotions that can not only be overwhelming but can also have a detrimental effect on an individual's quality of life.

McLeod (2019) confirmed that cognitive therapy is based on the idea that how the individual thinks (cognition), how the individual feels (emotion) and how the individual acts (behavior) all interact together. Specifically, thoughts determine feelings and behavior. Thus, negative and unrealistic thoughts can cause distress and result in problems. When an individual person suffers from psychological distress, the way in which he or she interpret situations becomes unrealistic and based on imagination, which in turn has a negative impact on the actions taken.

Dobson (2009) added that cognitive therapy focuses on problems that are related to the individual's imaginary and faulty interpretation of reality that lead to erratic and deviant behavior. In cognitive therapy, after identifying the underlying cognitive distortions that lead to unrealistic thought processes and nonadaptive behavior, the therapist takes the role of an active guide who attempts to make the client aware of these distorted thought patterns and who helps the client to correct and revise his or her perceptions and attitudes by citing evidence to the contrary or by eliciting it from the client.

Beck (2006) postulated that cognitive therapy itself is tailored to meet the patients' needs and aims to utilize a therapeutic alliance forged between patient and therapist to recognize and comprehend present difficulties. Patients are required to engage with *homework* outside of therapeutic hours. This encourages patients to foster a sense of cognitive self-awareness away from a clinical setting.

Haarhoff & Kazantzis (2007) contested that several components of cognitive therapy, such as observing and altering one's own beliefs, feelings, and conduct, can be considered as salient self-help techniques. When completing exercises that set by a cognitive therapist, the individual seeking assistance is essentially contributing to his or her own well-being using self-help methodology.

Beck (2011) elaborated on the different key illogical cognitive processes that lead to a distortion of the individual's perception of reality. She referred in detail to Aron Beck's (1967) enumeration of these illogical thought patterns which are as follows:

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Arbitrary Interference

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Here the individual reaches illogical conclusions about reality because of insufficient or irrelevant information at his or her disposal. This leads to the

distortion of reality by the individual by imagining or projecting negative thoughts about reality. As a result of this distortion, behavior becomes erratic and irregular.

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Selective Abstraction

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This happens when the individual concentrates on a very limited number of aspects that are related to the relation of the situation in which he or she is immersed. The selective choice of issues highly limits the ability of the individual to cognitively understand the true and objective meaning of the situation in which he or she is immersed, resulting in deviant behavior that is not congruent with the true parameters of reality.

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Magnification

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When an individual negatively magnifies a segment of reality and perceives this segment to override all other aspects of the given situation, the response of the individual becomes irrelevant to the true meaning of the situation. The individual will make exaggerated negative predictions and make a mountain out of a mole hill which leads to unacceptably negative attitudes and feelings about the reality of the given situation.

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Minimization

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Here, despite the clearly positive signs embedded in a given situation, the individual minimizes the meanings of these signs of reality and maintains and perceives reality to be negative. As a result of the distorted minimization, the individual's cognitive perceptions become distorted, and as a result, behavior ceases to be coherent and is characterized by negative and pessimistic feelings.

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Overgeneralization

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The individual concentrates on one isolated negative aspect of a given situation and erroneously concludes that all aspects of the situation are negative. This irregular perception of reality leads the individual to develop anxiety about what is a non-threatening situation and elicits behavior that is not congruent with the true characteristics of the situation.

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Personalization

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In this situation the individual incorrectly perceives the attitudes of others towards him or herself to be negative, and as direct result, adopts negative attitudes towards those who he or she incorrectly feel are hostile to him or herself. This leads to a chain of irrelevant hostile and negative feelings that generate irrational behavior in the given situation.

The six abovementioned illogical cognitive processes (following Beck, 1967 as developed by Beck, 2011) cause the individual to feel anxious, isolated, depressed and unable to successfully deal with reality. These illogical cognitive processes closely resemble situations described by Rabbi Nachman where imaginary feelings of the individual dictate a distortion of reality, a resulting loss of coherence, a negative upheaval in emotions and feelings and the ability to function normatively within the community and society.

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Guiding Principles of Cognitive Therapy

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The major guiding principles of cognitive therapy (based on the ten principles proposed by Beck, 2011), that coincide to a great extent with Rabbi Nachman's guiding principles are those listed below.

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Client's Problems

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Cognitive therapy is based on the definition of the individual's emotional and behavioral problems and requires a sound alliance that nurtures cooperation between the client and the therapist, who through empathy, support and goal orientation, is able to understand the illogical cognitive logic of the individual and is then qualified to offer the client a realistic as well as optimistic view of the future. When the individual's problems are clearly defined, then the way forward to logical cognitive perceptions is facilitated in the client-therapist alliance.

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Required Goals

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Cognitive therapy focuses on goals to be adopted by the client as well as on ways to solve problems that have disrupted the client's feelings and behavior and have led to the client's need for professional help. The therapist needs to clarify the rationale of these goals and to enhance the client's chances of adopting as well as realizing these goals. When the goals are clear to the client then the client's ability to think logically and to adopt clear cognitive perceptions of reality are facilitated and the client is then able to more reliably evaluate the true reality of a given situation and to adopt feelings and attitudes that will lead to coherent behavior in the given situation.

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Focus on Present

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Cognitive therapy focuses on the present and emphasizes the importance of coming to terms with present needs and difficulties and seeking solutions to these and difficulties. Focus on what realistically can be done to enhance emotional well-being is preferable to delving into problems and distortions that are noted in the client's past and are part of history that cannot easily be rewritten. Once the client is able to focus on the present and to evaluate the

present in terms of what is perceived here and now rather than to delve into previous problematic situations, the path is cleared for the client to realistically evaluate the present situation and to respond coherently.

Collaboration between Client and Therapist

Cognitive therapy emphasizes collaboration between the client and the therapist and active participation of the therapist in mapping out potential emotional and behavioral avenues of endeavor for the client that will assist him or her to overcome the distorted and detached emotions and behaviors characterizing his or her feelings and functioning. When the client has confidence in the bone fide sincerity of the therapist then the therapist-client can flourish on common accepted grounds and lead to a partnership that will afford the client the opportunity to implement the methodology needed to counter distorted perceptions and emotions and thereby develop more realistic perceptions of reality that will lead to coherent and prosocial behavior.

Client's Identification of Dysfunctional Feelings and Behaviors

Cognitive therapy prepares the client to adequately identify, evaluate and respond to dysfunctional feelings and behaviors. The therapist helps the client view emotions and behaviors rationally and provides the client with the ability to adopt feelings and behaviors that are congruent with the reality in which the client lives and functions. It is imperative that the client becomes autonomous in the ability to focus on realistic cognitive perceptions of reality so as to prepare the basis for normative and acceptable behavior in any given situation.

Client Perceives Therapist as Instructor and Educator

Cognitive therapy perceives the therapist as an instructor who educates and guides the client towards increased autonomy in the adoption of emotions and behaviors as well as thoughts and beliefs that could well lead to enhanced emotional well-being and self-actualization. The perception by the client of the therapist as an instructor, teacher and educator is crucial to the success of the therapy. Once the therapist is perceived as one who prepares the individual with the necessary skills for enhanced ability to cognitively evaluate situations, the chances of the client performing coherently rises dramatically.

Rabbi Nachman and Cognitive Therapy

When comparing the Rabbi Nachman's guiding principles with the guiding principles of cognitive therapy, one can perceive a marked similarity between the two systems. In Rabbi Nachman's writings (Likutey Moharan) reference is made to many principles that characterize the guiding principles of cognitive therapy. The mentoring and guidance suggested by Rabbi Nachman for his

followers in need of emotional support (following Shulman, 1993) and the role of the modern day cognitive therapist (following Beck, 2011) are remarkably similar. According to Green (1992) Rabbi Nachman believed that the individual has the capacity to maintain willful control over his or her mind and thought processes. Pies (2008) indicated that Rabbi Nachman's worldview is fundamentally cognitive and rational; the individual's self-esteem and mood are dependent upon the setting of rational goals through positive cognitive judgment and attitude. Although the individual may draw close to god by means of simple faith, he or she is best able to surmount despair by thinking his or her way out of it. Greenberg & Scheffler (2008) confirmed that Rabbi Nachman of Breslev adopted a cognitive style approach when advising and counseling followers who turned to him for guidance when in a state of emotional and spiritual distress. The Tzaddik serves as a mentor who formulates those cognitive and spiritual skills necessary for the disciple to cognitively perceive reality in its true perspective. Thus, the disciple is able to overcome problems, such as anxiety and the illogical perceptions of reality, and steer clear of negative imagination that is the root of all deviation, and to adopt normative cognitive perceptions of reality and resulting normative behavior.

Beck (2011) laid down the principles of cognitive therapy and emphasized the importance of analyzing the emotions and feelings of the individual in need together with him or her so as to reach an understanding as to what is troubling him or her, just as Rabbi Nachman demanded that the followers of the Tzaddik make a supreme effort to understand the source of their negative emotions, behavior and deportment. Thus the therapist-client relationship as defined by Beck closely resembles the mentor-follower relationship described by Rabbi Nachman. In addition, the cognitive therapist and the client need to decide how to work together on the individual's problems and what means will lead to an improvement in the client's emotional situation just as Rabbi Nachman suggests that the Tzaddik needs to urge his followers in need of advice and counseling to adopt faith and behavioral patterns that will enhance a rational perception of their true needs.

Beck (2011) emphasized that cognitive therapy recognizes the importance of focusing on present problems and feelings in order to correctly ascertain what is necessary for the client to do in order to attain improved psychological coherence. Rabbi Nachman similarly indicated that, as the past cannot be changed and the future is unclear, the present needs to be examined by both Tzaddik and followers in order to provide the followers with rational plans to solve their problems. Lastly the cognitive therapist uses the relationship with the client to form an educative alliance in which the client learns what feelings and behaviors will contribute to improved emotional well-being and normative behavior. Similarly, Rabbi Nachman stated that the relationship between the Tzaddik and his followers must lead the followers to an improved understanding of their spiritual needs and to their internalization of the how to rationally realize these needs in their daily lives.

Thus, the major guiding principles of cognitive therapy, similar to the solutions presented by Rabbi Nachman in his guiding principles, deal with ways and means to counter the negative perceptions of reality that are perceived by individuals whose cognitive perceptions of reality are distorted, illogical and irregular. Proponents of cognitive therapy as well as Rabbi Nachman emphasize that the major problem faced by individuals is their tendency to distort reality. If this distortion of reality becomes overbearing, then the individual develops imaginary and irregular perceptions of given situations and invariably acts negatively in the given situation that in reality are not threatening or problematic. Thus, the aim of both Rabbi Nachman and cognitive therapy is to enhance true and balanced cognitive perceptions of any given situation that will allow the individual to behave logically and normatively.

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Conclusion

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Rabbi Nachman of Breslev who lived in the late 18th and early 19th centuries became a popular Chassidic master and Tzaddik in his life, but more especially, two centuries after his death. His major appeal to the masses is based on his psycho-cognitive perceptions that affirm the ability of all individuals to control their own destiny by positive thought and actions. In addition, Rabbi Nachman preached that any negative emotional-religious or social behavior that characterized the individual in his or her past can be totally superseded by positive emotional-religious and social behavior in the present. Positive thoughts and actions in the present are able to displace negative experiences that occurred in the individual's past, thereby providing the individual with the ability to embrace a more rational and optimistic outlook on the world in which he or she lives and functions. The Tzaddik, to whom the disciple can turn in times of stress, serves as the therapist and instructor as well as educator who supports the individual in his or her quest to enhance rational feelings and emotions and to accomplish peace of mind in his or her life. The Tzaddik encourages the disciple to converse with god in private meditation sessions and strengthens the belief that the individual can converse with god as a child converses with his or her father or mother, an imperative that adds vital reinforcement to the adoption of a positive and optimistic outlook on the realities of life. In post-modern Jewish society Rabbi Nachman's teachings are becoming increasingly more popular and provide his rapidly growing groups of followers with enhanced psycho-educational modes of adopting genuine cognitive perceptions of reality as well as improving religious, spiritual and emotional well-being in a complicated and somewhat troubled world.

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