

## WEEKEND

# The serpent is the Messiah's secret

Not even the gravest accusations against Rabbi Berland – or convictions and imprisonment – have shaken the faith of his pious believers. To understand the secret of his criminal charisma, one needs to examine the theological justification for his acts, and his use of the serpent motif to satisfy his cravings

## Mordy Miller

In a recording made without her knowledge, one of the women who claimed to have had sexual relations with Rabbi Eliezer Berland describes how “he told me that only through the secret of the serpent... my whole matter with him is this... The whole matter of the serpent is Messiah's secret, and the Messiah arrives by prohibition. It is impossible to bring him with permission [...] Only from there does his light descend, from the secret of the serpent, as though it arrives in the uncleanest way.”

There were already rumors more than a decade ago in the Shuvu Banim community of Bratslav Hasidism to the effect that the leader of the community, Rabbi Berland, was having sexual relations with women in the community – married and single, elderly and young. Berland, who was born in 1937, was one of the best-known and most influential rabbis in Israel. He was known for bringing people “back to religion,” including even the most hardened criminals, whom he would put through a spiritual upheaval in a short time. His natural charisma, along with the extraordinary manner in which he comported himself, drew large numbers. He was an ascetic who slept and ate little, prayed at length and imposed harsh prohibitions in the realm of modesty on himself and his followers.

“Reb Leiser,” as he is known to his longtime adherents, is perceived as being superior, and at times even superhuman, in nature. His language is rolling and rapid, and his sermons are interspersed with slang and even street lingo. He orates with repetitive rhetorical flourishes, in categorical terms, and is capable of issuing radical instructions to his followers unhesitatingly. Toward the end of 1986, after his pupil Eliahu Amadi was murdered by Arabs in East Jerusalem, he encouraged his devotees to embark on a campaign of revenge against Arabs.

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He always had a tendency to adventurism and to showing his contempt for danger and the law. Thus he ordered his followers to enter secretly to worship in Joseph's Tomb, in Nablus, in the West Bank, without the required security coordination; and he encouraged them to visit the tomb of Rabbi Nachman from Bratslav, located in Uman, Ukraine, illegally (until 1988, Jews were not permitted in Uman) and with forged passports. This year, too, he has made it clear to his community that despite the war in Ukraine, they are expected to go on pilgrimage to the tomb.

Rabbi Berland offered his followers a powerful spiritual experience: unexpected, regenerative and incandescent. For their part, they reciprocated with love, and saw him as a *tzaddik* and an incontestable source of authority. He referred to himself in the third person (“the rabbi says”) and gradually was transformed from being a mere *tzaddik*, a just man, to “the true *tzaddik*” or “the *tzaddik* of the generation” who is waiting to be revealed as Messiah and to bring redemption to the people of Israel.

The transformation of Berland into “the *tzaddik*” is an unusual innovation in the history of the Bratslav Hasidic dynasty. Since the death of its founder, Rabbi Nachman, in 1810, no *admor*, as the leaders of Hasidic sects are known, had been appointed as his successor. Rabbi Nachman himself spoke much about the virtues of the “*tzaddik*” and the obligation to adhere and devote oneself to him, and it was clear that he was referring to himself. The Bratslav rabbis across the generations, however influential they were, made a point of abnegating themselves before “the true *tzaddik*” – Rabbi Nachman – and none presumed to take his place. Now a religious leader had arrived who presumed to don the mantle that had been reserved for Rabbi Nachman exclusively.

In 2018, Berland's opponents circulated a pamphlet against him titled “A Stranger Shall Not Sit on His Chair.” Its authors made it clear that there was no one worthy of inheriting the

spiritual chair of Rabbi Nachman, and certainly that one but he is capable of “remediating Israel's souls”; they also emphasized that “our master's [Rabbi Nachman's] might is today immeasurably greater and vaster than it was in his life.”

One of the leading theologians among Berland's followers is his son-in-law Rabbi Yehuda Asher Goldblum. Goldblum is the author of “Sefer Or Tzaddik” (“Book of the Light of the Tzaddik,” 2010), which, he writes, was intended to prepare them to “draw close to the *tzaddik* of the generation” – meaning Rabbi Berland. Goldblum maintains that although there is no substitute for Rabbi Nachman, Rabbi Berland is Rabbi Nachman himself “in actuality,” and he carries the soul of Rabbi Nachman in an improved version. Now, by his lights, the time of Rabbi Nachman, namely Rabbi Berland, had arrived to reveal him as Messiah and to complete the *tikkun*, the repair, of the world.

However, the work of *tikkun* is uncongenial and requires a descent into the depths and a titanic struggle with the forces of evil. It's an approach identified with the tradition of the Lurianic kabbala, propounded by Rabbi Isaac Luria (“Ha'ari,” or, “the Lion”), of 16th-century Safed, and his pupils. Even in ancient Jewish sources, and more pronouncedly in the later kabbalistic and Hasidic literature, the Messiah's origins are said to lie in the realms of impurity, which he alone is capable of engaging with at close quarters (“descent into the *kelipot*” – the “husks,” which are the manifestations of the forces of evil), thus bringing about its *tikkun*.

## Sins of a tzaddik

As rumors spread about Rabbi Berland's sexual sins, together with testimony that he encouraged acts of violence – indictments on murder charges were recently handed down against two of his followers – some of his Hasidim left the community. During the past decade, the chief leaders of mainstream Bratslav have also issued sharply worded public statements against him, which compared him to the false messiahs Shabbetai Zvi and Jacob Frank.

At the same time, a vibrant, protective community of some several thousand continues to exist around Rabbi Berland. In the past it was claimed that his health was poor, and because of that, the terms of his punishment were repeatedly lightened significantly. (Berland has been convicted over the years of both carrying out indecent acts against women from within in his community, and of tax evasion and fraud, but his prison terms have been cut short and today, Rabbi Berland is a free man.) Yet, the impression created by his current strenuous activity is that his health is relatively good for a person of 85. He delivers public talks, sings, attends gatherings and travels around the country to teach.

Support for Berland falls into two categories: denial and justification. Some of his followers found it difficult to believe the accusations against their revered rabbi, especially in light of his still-extant instructions calling for men to stay well away from women (certainly, if they aren't married to them), and warnings about entertaining even a hint of a forbidden thought. He declared, for example, that because of an immodest gaze at girls and women, a serious accident this past summer in Jerusalem in which a mother and her two daughters were killed when they were run over by a bus.

These followers cling to a sweeping denial of everything attributed to him, and for every bit of testimony given against the rabbi, they are happy to provide a host of contradictory evidence. Conversations with them reveal a deep-seated suspicion of the media, the police and also of other Bratslav leaders who are perceived as long-time haters of Rabbi Berland. Some of these followers are ready to admit that he touched women, but will maintain that the contact was not intimate and in any event was devoid of sexual intent. They will also mention other rabbis who touched women “paternally” in the course of blessing them.

Other devotees, mainly from inner circles, also are apparently aware of the stories about sexual relations, but raise theological justifications for Rabbi Berland's deeds. These can be found mainly in two books that collate quotations from earlier, traditional texts: “The Inscription From Within the Trees,” by Ofer Erez, from 2013, and “Wisdom of Sages by Halakha” by Rabbi Goldblum, which was removed from circulation shortly after publication in 2016.

The theology of the justification of sin is multifaceted. Although Rabbi Berland is heard ostensibly admitting to rape in a recording made public in 2016, one would have a hard time finding a clear



Berland arriving at his home, last December, after his latest release from prison. Today, he continues to deliver sermons and to fire up his audience of hundreds from his Mea She'arim balcony.

Emil Salman



Rabbi Berland, in a 2018 photo. For his staunch defenders, the *tzaddik* must descend to the lowest depths of reality and undergo the experience of genuine sin.

Itan Assayag

admission by his followers that their rabbi sinned. At the same time, justifications in principle exist that grant the true *tzaddik*, and him alone, permission to sin. For example, it's explained that the just man must descend to the lowest depths of reality and undergo the experience of genuine sin.

There are various rationales for this, such as: God causes the *tzaddik* to sin so that he will be able to descend to the inferior spiritual level of the Jewish people, the better to understand their feelings and assist them; the *tzaddik* extracts from impurity the holy sparks that are embedded in it, by way of repentance for the sins. The most common explanation is that the true *tzaddik* does not enjoy sin, because he has succeeded in annulling his material cravings; and that his indecent acts are not defined as a sin but as fulfillment of a commandment, for God caused him to do what he did, or at least wanted those acts to take place.

## Sowing a seed of redemption

Whether Berland made cynical use of Jewish sources in order to justify satisfying his appetites, or was truly convinced that he was acting as the Messiah of Israel, who is required to perform sexual acts as part of raising the sparks of holiness up from the impure realm – he was well aware of the decisive role of a familiar element in the messianic theology of sin: the serpent.

The Bible already portrays the primal serpent as seducer, inducer of sin and harbinger of death. Between it and the human race an eternal struggle is destined to play out: “And I will put enmity between thee [the serpent] and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed” (Genesis 3:15); and it is nourished from the dust: “and dust shall be the serpent's food” (Isaiah 65:25).

In the midrash the serpent's seductiveness becomes sexual, and it is described as having sexual relations

with Eve and implanting in her impurity that was then passed on to the human race. Yet, whereas the impurity remained among the non-Jews, it was cleansed from the people of Israel at Mount Sinai: “When the serpent came upon Eve he injected a lust into her: [as for] the Israelites who stood at Mount Sinai, their lustfulness departed” (Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Shabbat, Folio 146a).

In the kabbalistic literature, the serpent acquired both autonomy, as a demonic opposition to holiness, and also an array of mythic traits. The 13th-century book “Gates of Light,” by Rabbi Joseph Gikatilla, states that despite what happened at Mount Sinai, something of the serpent's impurity still remains in the people of Israel, and the remnants of impurity still reside in the heart of the holy and threaten to burst out. In the Zohar literature the serpent becomes the leading figure of the forces of impurity, obsessed with the feminine *shekhina* (the dwelling of the divine presence), which is also described as a doe, and seeking to couple with her against her will.

The serpent, whose shape is that of a penis, succeeds in forcing itself on the *shekhina* (she is *sefirat Malkhut* – the lowest of the emanations through which The Infinite reveals itself, constituting a gate between the human world and the upper worlds) – and blocks it from coupling with the divine male force (*sefirat Tiferet*), preventing it from receiving higher abundance and thereby causing both the blockage of the springs of abundance for the human world, and the “exile of the *shekhina*.”

However, counterposed to the unclean serpent that violates divine harmony, there is also a holy serpent, similar to the healing brass serpent fashioned by Moses (Numbers 21:9). A positive role was assigned to the serpent in the Talmud, where it bites the doe in her womb and thus enables it to give birth (Babylonian Talmud,

Bava Batra, Folio 16a). Subsequently the birth was interpreted as redemption, and the serpent was assigned an important role in having brought it about. In many kabbalistic sources, the Messiah, who is often embodied by Moses, is described as having a staff that turns into a serpent, and as being the original redeemer of Israel, as a serpent, whose equal numerical value (in Hebrew, *nahash=mashiach=358*) is often mentioned.

According to the kabbalistic sources, Berland could explain his coupling as the messianic act of a holy serpent whose task is to penetrate the female in order to extract the impurity infiltrated into it by the unclean serpent, and in order to sow a seed of redemption in her. By his deeds he is perceived as restoring the divine harmony to its proper order and connecting between *shekhina* and *tiferet*. This act redeems the *shekhina* itself from its exile, and as such also the people of Israel and the entire world.

It is apparently not for nothing that Berland wears a *tallit*, a prayer shawl, at all times. As is emphasized in Rabbi Nachman's writings, the *tzitzit*, the fringes or tassels on ceremonial garments worn by Orthodox men, constitute rescue “from the serpent's advice [...] from immorality [...] protected from a serpent's marriage, from a union of wickedness, and merited a union of holiness” (Likutei Moharan, 7). Doubting the true *tzaddik* infuses the impure serpent with unprecedented strength, the same source says. Indeed, “The Inscription

dik must be accepted “without straying from his words, heaven forbid, left or right,” and “to ignore his own wisdom, and cast off his own opinion, so as to obey only what he hears from the *tzaddik*, the great rabbi of the generation.”

Likewise, if it seems to the Hasid that the rabbi is acting “against the Torah,” he is enjoined “to believe in the sages and to cast off his reason and his opinion.” Second, according to Rabbi Nachman, the disputes over the *tzaddik* are necessary in order to enable him to bring about the repair of the world without interference, for “by means of the dispute that exists about the *tzaddikim*, by this means they can continue to wield influence without divine indictment.”

## Beneficent humiliations

Paradoxically, those who defy the *tzaddik* do him a great good: They allow him to complete the necessary *tikkun*. Accordingly, Rabbi Berland encouraged his followers to strengthen the hands of his opponents, “with everything they need, with money, with cars, and let them vilify and talk as much as they please. All the humiliations only work in our favor, creating a tool for infinite light.”

Thus, Rabbi Berland neutralizes his adversaries' ability to prove their rightness by means of their revealing his admissions of sinning; for the admissions themselves are perceived by his followers as a deception that their rabbi is deliberately creating in order to intensify against him disagreement, persecutions and humiliations.

Now it becomes possible to understand why all the severe accusations against the rabbi – which led to his hasty escape from Israel in 2013, sojourns in various countries and finally a return to Israel and prison – did not lead his community to disavow him. On the contrary: From the balcony of his home on Hahoma Hashlishit Street in Jerusalem's ultra-Orthodox Mea She'arim neighborhood, Rabbi Berland continues today to deliver sermons and to fire up his audience of hundreds with words of spiritual reinforcement. Despite the warnings issued by the leading rabbis of the Bratslav Hasidic sect and by part of the Lithuanian Haredi leadership, there are still important spiritual leaders – such as his pupil Rabbi Shalom Arush, Rabbi Dov Kook and Rabbi Yaakov Ates – who remain silent and refuse to declare their opposition to Rabbi Berland. Some of them have even been documented at prayer gatherings for his wellbeing and are recorded singing his praises.

As Rabbi Berland put it, the truth lies in the total opposite: “The matter of Shuvu Banim is a double reverse”: What what looks most repulsive is actually the purest, and when it comes to the *tzaddik* – the serpent messiah – human feelings have no authority.

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Rabbi Berland encouraged his followers to support his opponents, ‘with everything they need, with money, with cars, and let them vilify and talk as much as they please. All the humiliations only work in our favor, creating a tool for infinite light.’

from Within the Trees” cites various kabbalistic sources concerning the Messiah's struggle with the serpent, like Samson (the judge), who is described (in “Likutei Hilkhot,” written by Rabbi Nathan, who was Rabbi Nachman's close pupil) as a serpent who sleeps with many women in order to “descend to the depth of the evil” and as one who “descended into the evil which includes the contamination of the serpent, and broke it.” Finally, the Bratslav way of thought, in which the Shuvu Banim community is steeped, grants Rabbi Berland immunity from any possible doubt about his justice. First, Rabbi Nachman from Bratslav explicitly instructed that the words of the *tzad-*