

Wenceslas Hollar, 'Die Bettler Zunft', after Jacques Callot.



A translation of Rabbi Nahman's 'The Seven Beggars'

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There was once a king who was tired of being king. He decided to hand over his kingdom to his only son, and on the appointed day he held a great feast.

At a royal feast there is always great rejoicing, but this was even more special, for it is not every day that a ruler hands over his power to his son. All the ministers and lords and dukes were there, and across the land the common people too shared in the fun. There were musicians and jugglers and clowns, each one better than the last.

But when the rejoicing was at its height, the king stood up and said to his son, "I have seen in the stars that you are destined to lose your kingdom. When this happens, you must not be downcast. Be joyful. If you are happy, then I will be happy. I will still be happy if you are sad – happy that you are no longer king. For if you cannot be happy without having power over others you are not fit to rule. But if when you are powerless you still rejoice, then I will be truly happy."

Despite this warning, the son took over the kingdom. He appointed ministers, and formed an army, but neither politics nor war held his interest for long. He was a very clever man, and what really excited him were ideas. He surrounded himself with wise and learned men, and whenever anyone came to court with some new piece of knowledge or a new idea, the king would reward him as if he had brought a great treasure. "Wisdom is the only thing that matters," said the king.

Soon all the nobles left off their usual tasks to search for wisdom. One studied this, the other studied that. Even the stupidest of them knew as much as the wisest men in other lands, while the cleverest came up with new ideas so fast it would make your head spin.

Soon there were so many ideas and theories in the air that no one knew what to believe; and so they stopped believing in anything.

The king was tormented with thoughts and doubts. *Just because people tell me I exist, he would think, how do I know it is true? And then he would think, Just because people say God exists, how do I know that is true? Has anyone ever seen him? And then he would think, There is no God.*

Soon all the wise men thought this way. And because they stopped believing in anything, they stopped doing anything.

The king had a spark of good in him, and sometimes he stopped to wonder how his search for wisdom could have come to this. *Whatever will become of me?* he would sigh. But then his thoughts would go off in another direction, twisting first this way and then that, and often concluding in a dead end.

Only the common people did not change. They were simple people, and they couldn't follow that kind of thinking.

Life became harder and harder, and one day all the people fled the country. They passed through a dark forest, and on the way two small children were lost – a boy from one family and a girl from another, both around four or five years old. The children had nothing to eat. They began to whimper and cry, they were so hungry.

Just then a beggar came by, with a sack containing crusts of bread. The children clung to him, and he gave them bread to eat. "How did you get here?" he asked.

"We don't know," they replied, for they were only little children.

The beggar started to walk on, and they stumbled after him.

"Don't follow me," he said.

And then they noticed that he was blind. How could he find the way out of the forest? So they let him go. As he left, he blessed them, saying, "May you be as I am."

Night fell, and the children slept in the forest. When they woke, they were hungry again, and began to cry. Another beggar came. When they spoke to him, he only gestured with his hands, and they realized he was deaf. He too gave them bread from his sack, but would not let them follow him. He blessed them, "May you be as I am," and went on his way.

Each night the children slept in the forest, and woke hungry. And five more beggars came – a beggar with a terrible stammer, a beggar with a crooked neck, a beggar with a hunchback, a beggar without hands, and lastly a beggar without feet. Each of these beggars gave them bread, and blessed them, "May you be as I am."

When all the bread from the last beggar was gone, the children started to walk through the forest, and at last they came to a path which took them to a village. At the first house, the people took pity on them and gave them bread. At the second house, the same thing happened. So the children resolved to become beggars, and made themselves sacks to hold the bread they were given.

As the children grew up, they went from town to town, begging from house to house, and sitting with the other beggars by the gates, holding out their plates for alms. All the beggars had a soft spot for the children who had been lost in the forest.

One day a great fair was held outside a large city. All the beggars were there, including the children. It struck the beggars that the boy and the girl were of an age to be married, and one said, "They should marry each other!" All the beggars agreed it was a good idea, and therefore they dug a huge pit, big enough for a hundred guests, and covered it over with a

roof of reeds and mud. And they all went down into the pit, with food and drink that they had begged, and held a wedding feast for the boy and girl who had been lost in the forest.

Everyone was full of joy, especially the boy and girl, who were so happy, and who thanked God for the kindness he had shown them when they were lost in the forest. "If only the blind beggar who first gave us bread were here," they said.

And from the crowd the blind beggar called out, "I am here!"

He stood up and said, "I have come to be at your wedding, and my wedding present is that you shall be as I am. That was my blessing to you in the forest, and now it is my gift to you at your wedding.

"You think that I am blind. But I am not blind at all. To me, the whole history of the world is nothing but the blinking of an eye. I am the oldest of the old, and the youngest of the young. I am so old that my life has not begun yet.

"I was told this by a great eagle. Let me tell you the story."

And this is the story the blind beggar told:

Once some people took to the sea in many ships. A storm came, and the ships were wrecked. But the people were saved, and reached a tower where they found food, drink, clothing, and all they needed. All good things were there.

The people fell to talking, and they decided that each of them should tell the story of their earliest memory.

The oldest spoke first. "I remember when the apple was cut from the bough," he said.

No one could understand this, but they all agreed it must be a very ancient tale.

Then the next oldest said, "I too remember that. But further back, I remember when the fruit began to form."

"That tale is even older!" they all said.

Then the next oldest said, "Further back still, I remember when the blossom flowered."

"Older yet!" they all said.

Then the next oldest said, "Further back still, I remember when the seed was brought to plant the fruit."

And others, each younger than the last, said they remembered still further back. One remembered the taste of the fruit before it entered the fruit; another remembered the smell of the fruit before it entered the fruit.

I was there too, though I was still a child, and I spoke up, telling them, "I, too, remember all these things. And further back still, I remember when there was nothing at all."

And everyone said, "That is the most ancient tale of all!"

Then a great eagle came, calling, "Stop being poor! Return to your treasures, and use them wisely!" He led us out of the tower in order of age, the oldest first – and that was me, for I was really the oldest, because I could remember back before I was born or even thought of, back to the nothingness before my soul was shaped.

Then the eagle told them, "Go back to your ships, and your broken bodies, which will be made whole." And he said to me, "Come with me, for you are like me. You are very old, yet very young. You are so old that your life has not yet begun. We are alike, you and I."

And then the blind beggar said, "I am the oldest of the old, and the youngest of the young. I give you my long life as your wedding gift."

The newlyweds were very grateful to the blind beggar, both for his gift and for his story of the creation of life from nothingness.

"We will make good use of your gift of long life," said the groom.

"And like you, we will face each day as if we have been created anew," said his bride.

The wedding celebrations were to last seven days. On the second day, the couple remembered the deaf beggar, and said, "If only he were here."

And then, looking among the crowd, they saw him, and beckoned to him.

He stood up, and said, "I have brought you a wedding gift – that you should be as I am. That was my blessing to you in the forest, and now it is my gift at your wedding.

"You think that I am deaf. But I am not deaf at all. The cries of this world are just babble and confusion; noise without meaning. Why should I listen to them? People cry out, 'I want this!' 'I want that!'

They all want what they do not have. But I want for nothing. My life is good; so I was told by the people of the land of wealth. Let me tell you the story.'

And this is the story that the deaf beggar told.

There is a land of wealth, where everyone is rich. Once, all the people there were gathered together, and each began to boast about how good their life was. Each one had more riches and luxury than the last. But I spoke up, and said, "My life is better than your life. I shall prove it. Come with me to the neighbouring land, and we shall see whose life is best."

Now this neighbouring land had a wonderful garden, that contained every fruit, every flower, every fragrance, and every colour in the world. A gardener tended the garden, and because of the garden the people of that land lived a good life. But then the gardener vanished, and with no one to tend the garden, everything withered and died.

Without the garden, the people's senses withered and died too. Soon all they could taste was rotting flesh, all they could smell was bitter poison, and all they could see was dense fog.

The rich people from the land of wealth went to that land, and I went with them. They travelled in luxury, eating rare meats and drinking fine wines. I walked beside them, eating plain bread and drinking pure water.

As we approached the country of the garden, the rich people began to hold their noses, and spit out their food. "This meat's gone off," one said. "This wine is bad," said another. "Where has the sun gone?" said a third. Their senses were corrupted, and all their pleasure in the sights and smells and tastes of the world was spoiled. They could not enter the country of the garden, or help its people.

So I entered the land alone. I found that everything people said was full of spite and wickedness; the words had gone bad in their mouths, and that was why all their food tasted of rotting flesh.

I found that they had lost all sense of right and wrong, and each one behaved just as he pleased; it was their own selfishness that made everything smell of bitter poison.

And lastly I found that they were always arguing, and that they settled their quarrels by bribery and corruption; they had forgotten there was even such a thing as the truth, and it was their own lies that led them astray in the fog.

So I told the people, "If you wish to restore the garden, and bring back your sense of taste, your sense of smell, and your clear sight, these are the things you must change: you must be generous, you must do right, and you must speak the truth."

The people did as I said, and the garden began to revive. Soon people began talking of a madman who was going around saying he was the gardener; they threw stones at him and drove him away. But when they brought him before me, I told them, "He is the gardener."

And the garden and the land were restored.

I returned to the rich people from the land of wealth, and asked them, "Whose life is better, yours or mine?" And they told me, "Yours is the good life."

And the deaf beggar said, "I give you my good life as your wedding gift."

"Thank you," said the young groom. "With your gift of a good life, we will be able to make better use of the blind beggar's gift of a long life."

"We will nurture the garden," said his bride.

On the third day, the young couple remembered the beggar with the terrible stammer. "If only he were here," they said.

He spoke up from the crowd, "I am here!"

He stood up, and said, "You think I have a stammer, and can barely speak. In fact, I do not have a stammer at all. But the words of this world are not worth speaking, unless they are spoken in praise of God.

"I am actually a great orator, a master of both prose and verse. I know stories and poems so wonderful that all the creatures of the world would stop to listen to them; they contain all the wisdom of the world. This I was told by the True Man of Kindness.

"Let me tell you the story."

And this is the story the beggar with the stammer told:

Once all the wise men were sitting together, and each one began to boast of his knowledge.

One had invented a way of smelting iron. Another had discovered how to make silver. A third had discovered how to make gold. A fourth had invented a new weapon, even more terrible than gunpowder.

As they sat there boasting, one of them said, "I am wiser than all of you, for I am as wise as the day."

None of them understood what he meant. He explained, "If all your knowledge was added together, it would only amount to a single hour. All things were created in seven days, and man's science is only to try to understand things that were created on each of those days. All your knowledge together only explains a single hour of the creation; but I am as wise as a whole day."

Now I was there, and I spoke up, asking, "As wise as which day?"

"This man is even wiser than I am!" he said. "He asks, 'which day?' The answer is, whichever day you choose."

You may wonder how my question showed me to be wiser than someone who is as wise as any day you choose. That is a story in itself, and it is the story of the true man of kindness, who is a very great man. It is my task to gather and bring to him all the acts of kindness that are done in the world – for time itself is created and sustained by acts of kindness.

At one end of the world is a mountain. On that mountain is a rock, and from that rock there flows a spring.

At the other end of the world is the heart of the world – for everything has a heart. The heart of the world is shaped like a man, with face, hands, and feet; even its toenails have more true heart than the heart of any other being.

The heart and the spring face each other from opposite ends of the world. The heart yearns for the spring, and cries out for it with great longing; and the spring yearns for the heart, and cries out for it.

The burning sun scorches the heart, and leaves it parched and gasping for the cool waters of the spring. It longs so much to be refreshed that its soul stands always facing the spring, crying,

“Help! Help!”

When the heart needs to rest and catch its breath, a great bird comes and shades it from the sun with its wings. But even then the heart gazes longingly at the spring, and yearns for it.

You may ask why, if the heart yearns so much for the spring, it does not go to it. It is because if the heart came closer to the mountain, it would lose sight of the summit, and would no longer be able to see the spring. And if the heart could not see the spring, it would die, for its life depends on the spring.

If the heart died, the world would cease to exist. Nothing can exist without a heart. So the heart cannot go to the spring. It must stand facing it forever, yearning and crying out.

Time does not exist for the spring. It is outside time.

As each day draws to an end, so time draws to an end. Without a new day, the spring would die. Without the spring, the heart would die. Without the heart, the world would die. It would be the end of everything.

So each nightfall, the spring and the heart bid each other farewell, with wonderful speeches, and stories, and poems – words full of love and yearning.

The True Man of Kindness watches over all this. Each day he takes the acts of kindness done that day, and from them he makes the heart the gift of another day.

The heart gives the new day to the spring, and so the spring has time in which to exist. And each day brings new speeches, new stories, new poems, full of wisdom and grace, and acts of kindness from which the next day is made.

All kindnesses from which the True Man of Kindness forges the new days come from me, for I gather together all the acts of kindness that are done in the world, and take them to him. It is those acts of kindness from which time is made. Therefore I am wiser than the man who is as wise as any day you choose; for without me, there would be no more days.

Then the beggar with the stammer said, “I give you my wisdom as your wedding gift.”

A hush had fallen on all the listeners as the stammering beggar told how each new day is forged.

“We will use your wisdom to create new songs and stories, and perform new acts of kindness, so that the True Man of Kindness may always have materials from which to make the new day,” said the bridegroom.

“We will remember how the heart yearns for the spring,” said his bride.

On the fourth day, the bride and groom remembered the beggar with the crooked neck. “If only he were here,” they said.

He spoke from the crowd, “I am here!”

He stood up, and said, “You think I have a crooked neck. But my neck is not crooked at all. It is perfectly straight. But I do not wish to add my breath to the foolish vapours of this vain world; so I hold my neck at a crooked angle.

“Really, I have a neck so beautifully formed that I can mimic every sound that is not speech; this gift has been confirmed by the people of the land of music. Let me tell you the story.”

And this is the story that the beggar with the crooked neck told.

There is a land of music, where everyone can sing in tune. Even the little children are fine musicians, and would be hailed as great artists in any other country. The king and his orchestra play like angels.

Once the greatest of them were boasting to each other about their musical skill. One was a virtuoso on this instrument, another on that. One said he could play any instrument in the world; yet another trumped him by saying he could imitate the sound of any instrument, even a drum, with his voice alone.

I was there too, and I said, “My skill is superior to any of you, and if you will come with me I will prove it to you.

“There are two countries a thousand miles apart. None of the people in these lands can sleep at night, because at dusk each day the sky is filled with a dreadful wailing. And as soon as the sky begins to wail, all the people – men, women, and children – wail too. The sound is so pitiful it would melt a stone.

“Come with me, and we will see whose skill is most helpful to these poor people.”

So the musicians came with me to one of the two lands where no one could sleep. At dusk, the sky filled with wailing, and all the musicians wailed too. They wailed in perfect harmony with the sky; but all they did was add to the power of that heartbreaking sound.

In the morning they asked me what was the cause of the wailing. I told them, “There are two birds, the only two of their kind – one male, one female. Once they became separated from each other in a high wind, and they have never found each other again, though they search for each other everywhere. Eventually, one made its nest at the edge of this land, the other at the edge of the land a thousand miles away. From their nests they call to each other, and the pain of their longing turns their calls into the terrible wailing that you hear.

“In the morning, other birds flock to them, singing songs of encouragement. ‘You will find each other,’ they sing. But at dusk, when the other birds fall silent, the pair are left to wail their loneliness across the night.”

The musicians saw at once that for all their skill, all they could do was make matters worse. But, they asked, how could I do any better?

“Not only can I imitate every sound in the world,” I told them, “but because of my crooked neck, I can throw my voice, so that it is heard at a great distance, not where I am. And because I can imitate both birds, each night I do so, throwing my voice from one to the other to make it seem that their partner is close at hand. So every night the birds edge a little closer to each other, lured by my voice, and one day they will be reunited.”

And the musicians readily agreed that my skill was the most marvellous of all.

And the beggar with the crooked neck said, "The gift of my beautiful voice is my wedding gift to you."

The bride and groom understood from the story told by the beggar with the crooked neck how true art can heal and repair the hurts of the world, and so they made use of his gift straight away, and sang for joy.

On the fifth day, the young couple remembered the beggar with the hunchback. "If only he were here," they said.

He called from the crowd, "I am here!"

He stood, and said, "You think I am a hunchback. But I am not a hunchback at all. My shoulders are broad and strong. They can truly be called the cradle that rocks the world.

"It is well known that a massive rock can balance on one small stone, that great ideas can be contained in one slim book, or that huge quantities of fruit can be harvested from one little tree.

"All of these are examples of small things that contain or support larger ones, but of all such examples I am the best.

"Let me tell you the story."

And this is the story that the hunchbacked beggar told.

Once a group of men were contesting with each other as to which one contained or supported the most.

One was a writer. "My mind contains multitudes," he said. "Thousands of different people, with all their thoughts, and passions, and histories, all live in my brain."

Another was a farmer. "My orchards produce so much fruit that, once it is harvested, there is not room on the land to store it."

A third said, "There is a poor blind man who is very huge. And though I am very small, I lead that poor blind man everywhere he goes. If it were not for me, he would slip and fall."

I was there, and I said, "You each contain or support things greater than yourselves, especially the last small man, who is like the sun which guides the huge, blind moon safely across the skies each night. For how could the world exist without the moon? But I am the cradle that rocks the world.

"You may have heard that somewhere there exists a tree that provides shade and shelter for every animal and bird, who all live there in peace and harmony. Come with me, and I will lead you to that tree."

I took them with me, travelling far across the world. At last they saw the tree, away in the distance. And then they were dismayed, for they saw that there was no way to reach the tree, which exists beyond space, and outside time.

But I told them, "I can take you to the tree. For I am truly the cradle that rocks the world. On my shoulders I bear all that exists – all space, all time, and all that is beyond space, and outside time. Through me, you can reach the world tree."

And the hunchbacked beggar said, "The ability to reach the shelter of the world tree is my wedding gift to you."

"This is a great gift," said the groom. "For who could find their way to the shelter that awaits us beyond space and outside time without a guide?"

"Yes," said his bride. "And who would have realised, without the wisdom that was the gift of the stammering beggar, that the whole of eternity is built from tiny acts of kindness, and it is the small things that bear the whole weight of the world?"

On the sixth day, the young couple remembered the beggar without hands. "If only he were here," they said.

He called from the crowd, "I am here!"

He stood, and said, "You think I have no hands. But there is nothing wrong with my hands. In fact they are very strong. But I have no need of strength in this world. My strength is needed for other things, as I proved at the castle of water.

"Let me tell you the story."

And this is the story that the beggar without hands told.

Once there was a king who desired a princess. He plotted many ways to capture her, and at last he succeeded and made her his prisoner.

The next night, the king dreamed that the princess was standing over him, and she killed him.

He was very troubled by this dream. He consulted with soothsayers and dream-readers, and they all agreed that the dream would come true.

He did not know what to do. He did not want to kill the princess, for he desired her. He did not want to set her free, after all the trouble it had taken him to capture her. And in any case, if he set her free there was nothing to stop the dream coming true.

At last he began to hate and fear the princess, and resolved to kill her. But she escaped, and he pursued her. She came to the castle of water, which is surrounded by ten walls of water, one inside the other. It is a very beautiful castle, for the water reflects the light in glorious colours, but no one had ever entered it, for fear of drowning.

The princess preferred to drown than to be captured again by the king, and so she leapt into the waters. The king ordered his archers to shoot, and as she dived in they shot her with ten different arrows each tipped with a different deadly poison. When she came through the ten walls of water to the courtyard of the castle she fell down as if dead. But she was not dead, and it was my task to heal her.

When the princess first entered the castle of water, the strongest men of the world gathered to say how they would rescue her. One boasted that his hands were so powerful he could catch an arrow and turn it back after it had left the bow; even after it had hit its mark. But when I questioned him, he could only do this with one kind of arrow, while the princess had been shot with ten different kinds. "If you can only turn back one kind of arrow, you cannot heal the princess," I said.

Another boasted that his hands were so powerful that when he took something from someone else, he was actually giving. He was a master of charity. But when I questioned him, he only knew one kind of charity, although there are ten different kinds. "If you are only a master of one kind of charity, you can only get through one of the walls of water," I said, "so you cannot heal the princess."

Another boasted that his hands were so powerful that he could transfer wisdom simply by laying his hands on a person's head. But when I questioned him, he knew only one kind of wisdom. "If you have only one kind of wisdom," I said, "you cannot heal the princess. For you could restore only one pulse, and there are ten different pulses, that require ten different wisdoms."

Yet another man boasted that his hands were so powerful that he could hold back a storm with his hands, and reduce it to a pleasant breeze. But when I questioned him, he could only do this with one kind of wind, and there are ten different kinds of wind. "You have only mastered one melody of the song of the winds," I said, "so you cannot heal the princess. She can only be given back her breath by all ten melodies."

All these men had boasted of their power, but they had only one tenth of the power required. I am master of all that they could do, but I have the other nine tenths as well. Only I could heal the princess.

The king and all his soldiers had drowned in the walls of water when they tried to enter the castle, for they did not possess any of the ten kinds of charity. I am a master of them all, and so I was able to enter the castle.

With the strength in my hands I was able to turn back the arrows that had struck down the princess, and remove all ten kinds of deadly poison.

With the strength in my ten fingers I was able to detect all ten pulses, and restore them.

With the strength of my song I was able to rouse the princess with all ten melodies of the wind, and make her breathe again.

And the beggar without hands said, "My gift of the healing power in my hands is my wedding gift to you."

The bride and groom listened with wonder to the story of how the beggar without hands had healed the princess in the castle of water, and received from him the gift of his healing power. For now they understood how a poisoned heart and a poisoned mind can be cured by a simple touch, and how a land and a people that are sick at heart may be

restored and refreshed by kindness, patience, laughter, and love. And so once more the young couple opened their mouths and sang for joy.

The seventh day will be the last day of the wedding feast, when the beggar without feet will bring his dancing gift to the bride and groom. But that day has not happened yet.

And when they have all seven gifts, the bride and groom shall surely dance back through the forest, leading the way to the shelter of the world tree, healing the sick and weary as they go, and singing in their beautiful voices all the wisdom of the world. Surely the king of that country where they have learned so many things that they have ceased to believe in anything will join them in their dance. He will hand over his throne to them and, using the gift of a good life and the gift of a long life, they will rule in joy and wisdom. And the dance will never end.

A Note on ‘The Seven Beggars’

Rabbi Nahman's stories are regarded by his followers as sacred texts, in which every single word and image is precious. In making this retelling of ‘The Seven Beggars’ I have tried to treat Nahman's text with respect, and to retain his voice and his vision. But these do not pretend to be word-for-word translations of Nahman's storytelling, such as those of Arnold J. Band or Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan.

Rabbi Nahman himself well understood that the same story may need to be told in different ways at different times. Before he narrated ‘The Seven Beggars’, he told his followers that he had a story to tell that had only been told once previously, and that was before Solomon's temple was built. “Although the story has already been told once,” he said, “it is now totally new. Many things have changed in it since it was last told. For then it was told for that time, and now it is told for this time.”

This, the longest and last of Rabbi Nahman's tales, is considered by many to be his masterpiece. Certainly that was his own view. He said, “If I only told the world this one story, I would still be truly great.”

The story was begun on the night of Friday, 30 March 1810, and told in parts over the coming week. It was told, he said, “to show you how to rejoice”. In it, Nahman shows how depression can be overcome by joy, and looks forward to the ultimate joy of the coming of the Messiah.

However, he refused to tell the story of the seventh beggar, or complete the story of the king in the framing tale. As with his very first tale, ‘The Lost Princess’, the story is left unfinished, in anticipation of the Messiah. Nahman may have secretly hoped in telling this tale in the week before Passover 1810, at a time of high messianic hopes, that the Messiah would come, and enable him to finish the story.

But Rabbi Nahman never told what would happen on the seventh day. “We will not be worthy to hear it until the Messiah comes,” he said.

The tormented prince in the framing tale is a self-portrait of Nahman at his most negative. This is the Nahman who told his followers, "Everybody says that there is the world and also the world to come. Now as for the world to come, we believe in it. And perhaps the world also exists somewhere. But this place where we are appears to be hell, for it is so full of suffering!"

The seven crippled beggars also all represent more positive aspects of Rabbi Nahman himself. He said, for instance, that when surrounded by a crowd of people he could cry out in a 'still small voice' that would resound to the ends of the earth but not be heard by those around him. The last beggar, the one with no feet, would evidently have expressed his gift by dancing. Dancing was very important to Nahman – especially in the year 1803, he expressed his most profound religious instincts in ritual dances as wild and as focussed as those of whirling dervishes.

It is perhaps by the gift of dance that the bride and groom will be able to shake the king out of his depression. Nahman said, "Sometimes when people are joyous and dancing, they grab a man from outside their dancing circle, one who is sad and melancholy, and force him to join with them in their dance."

In her book *Voices of a People*, Ruth Rubin translates a number of Hasidic songs that celebrate both the ecstasy of the dance and the miracle-working powers of the zaddik:

The *rebe*, the *rebe*, the holy man,
He is a delight,
For him all the world,
The entire world is free.
Our *rebe*, our healer,
Works many miracles,
Make him happy,
Be gay Berl, dance Shmerl,
With the power of the *rebe*.

Just as – in one of Rabbi Nahman's most unforgettable images – the heart of the world is shaped like a man, crying out in anguish, so too he said that 'Man is a miniature world'. This seems to be the idea behind the fact that while each of the beggars appears to be crippled, his disability is in fact the source of his strength, the focus of all his being, and a form of perfection.

'The Seven Beggars' seems an utterly original achievement, but it does have parallels in folk literature. The frame story of the outcast children and the beggars' wedding is certainly borrowed from a folklore source; the same story can be found in the English tradition, in the tale of 'The Dorsetshire Garland, or The Beggars' Wedding' in J.S. Udal's *Dorsetshire Folklore*. It is also likely that the disabled beggars were suggested by a folk tale such as the

Russian story 'The Footless and Blind Champions' (Jeremiah Curtin, *Myths and Folk-Tales of the Russians, Western Slavs, and Magyars*). More crucially, the essential structure of 'The Seven Beggars' seems borrowed from the oriental story-cycle 'The Seven Sages'. This dates back at least to the 10th century, and had been translated into Hebrew as 'The Parables of Sandabar' by the first half of the 13th century. The stories are not the same, but 'The Seven Sages' provides a model for the kind of storytelling Nahman needs for this ambitious interlocking series of tales.

Whatever the sources of his inspiration, in 'The Seven Beggars' Nahman created his masterpiece. He claimed that in it there was not a single redundant word. As an example of the subtlety that could not be conveyed even in a literal translation, the Yiddish word used for beggar is *betler*, which Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan points out also means 'seeker'.



Neil Philip