

have yearned to make the journey to Uman to pray at his gravesite. One who fulfills these three conditions at any time of year receives the same benefit, quite apart from the custom of doing so on Erev Rosh HaShanah.

## The Movement Grows

THANKS TO REB NOSON'S DEDICATION in publishing the Rebbe's works and teaching other searching souls, the Breslov movement grew. And because Reb Noson and others refused to take the place of the Rebbe, Rebbe Nachman's message was transmitted directly to future followers, giving each person the opportunity to have a direct relationship with the Rebbe. Because of the draw of the Rebbe's *tziyun*, it was natural that Uman would become more and more of a focal point. In Uman, Reb Noson built the first Breslov synagogue, known as the *kloyz*.<sup>1</sup>

After Reb Noson's passing on December 20, 1844, his devoted student, Reb Nachman of Tulchin, kept the Breslov community in Uman alive, turning it into a vibrant center of spirituality and devotion. Reb Noson's *kloyz* continued to host Rosh HaShanah services for Jews who would travel to Uman from all over the Ukraine, White Russia and Lithuania, and from as far away as Poland. By the early 1900s, people were even making the Rosh HaShanah pilgrimage from Israel, where the beginnings of a Breslov community was forming.

Then the gates slammed shut. The Russian Revolution of 1917 sealed the border to foreign tourists. In 1919, successive waves of troops passed through Uman, perpetrating a series of pogroms in which hundreds of Jews lost their lives. As the Communist regime made every effort to repress Jewish religious life, the chassidim in Poland began to hold their own Rosh HaShanah

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<sup>1</sup> Still standing, the *kloyz* is no longer in use as a synagogue today. To avoid confusion with the "New *Kloyz*" built under the leadership of Reb Michel Dorfman, it is sometimes called the "Old *Kloyz*."

gathering in Lublin. The chassidim in Jerusalem established another gathering. These gatherings were not meant to replace Uman, but to prevent Breslover chassidim from eventually forgetting about “the Rebbe’s Rosh HaShanah.”

Meanwhile, those who had immigrated abroad established new Breslov communities in Israel and America, and these were expanding rapidly. With all access to Uman completely barred to Jews from outside the Soviet Union, the main Rosh HaShanah gatherings became those held in Israel. In 1936, Rabbi Avraham Sternhartz, a great-grandson of Reb Noson, immigrated to Israel and initiated an annual gathering in Meron at the gravesite of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, author of the *Zohar*, citing the deep connection between Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai and Rebbe Nachman, as explained in the Prologue of the *Likutey Moharan*. By the 1970s and 1980s, the gatherings held in Meron and Jerusalem each attracted many thousands, while smaller gatherings took place in New York and, later, in Manchester, England.

The gatherings in Meron and Jerusalem were major events, involving a whole organizational infrastructure to arrange accommodations, meals and so on. But, from time to time during the Rosh HaShanah dancing, a few people would sing the traditional Breslov song, “*Uman, Uman, Rosh HaShanah.*” However, the idea of actually being in Uman for Rosh HaShanah was as laughable as Abraham and Sarah having a baby in their old age.

The first chink in the Iron Curtain developed in the summer of 1963, when Gedaliah Fleer, a student of Rabbi Zvi Aryeh Rosenfeld in New York, met with Reb Michel Dorfman in Moscow and told him of his wish to travel to Uman, an impossibility at that time. Nevertheless, Reb Michel agreed to meet the determined young man in Kiev and accompany him to the *tziyun*. Being caught would have meant immediate exile to Siberia. But the trip came off, opening a door to Uman for the first time in over forty-five years.

The following winter, a group of eleven people from the United States traveled to Uman under the leadership of Rabbi

Rosenfeld. More trips followed, but owing to the presence of military installations nearby, the Soviets circumscribed the visitors in every conceivable way. You had to travel all the way to Kiev just to apply for the special visa required to visit Uman, and visas were often as not refused. Even when they were granted, it was forbidden to visit Uman unaccompanied, and certainly not to stay in the town overnight.

Yet the draw of Rebbe Nachman's *tziyun* never lost its grip on the imagination of the Breslover chassidim. By the early 1980s, organized groups were traveling to Uman from the United States, England and even Israel. The Russian authorities turned down all requests to arrange a tour to coincide with Rosh HaShanah—they still wouldn't even allow visitors to stay in Uman overnight—but the Breslovers kept asking...and praying.

Reb Noson once said, "Even if the road to Uman were paved with knives, I would crawl there just so I could be at Rebbe Nachman's grave" (*Tovot Zikhronot*, p. 137). For the most devoted Breslovers, visiting Rebbe Nachman's *tziyun* was the dream of a lifetime. People resorted to all kinds of stratagems to get around the Soviet obstinacy, sometimes putting themselves at considerable risk to travel to Uman even without a visa. One of the main principles of Breslov teachings is that the obstacles to any holy goal are only sent in order to increase one's yearning and determination to achieve it. How many prayers flowed forth in the endeavor to get to Uman! And they were answered.

In 1988, it happened. After protracted negotiations, the Soviet façade cracked and the authorities finally gave permission for 250 people to spend Rosh HaShanah in Uman. Even after agreeing, they kept changing their minds, creating innumerable difficulties along the way. Nevertheless, by a miracle, it came off. Uman's one and only hotel—a shabby, dilapidated building that was more like an army barracks—was inundated with chassidim who sang, danced and poured out their hearts in prayer, leaving the bemused locals to stare at the strange spectacle in their midst.

The following year, 1989, over 1,000 people came. A large, empty factory site was rented some ten minutes' walk from the *tziyun*. The production halls were hastily converted into a synagogue, dining hall and dormitories, and food was flown in from Israel. Elderly Jews who had lived their entire lives in Uman began to emerge out of nowhere to join the festivities. The sight of so many of their emancipated brethren literally dancing in the streets finally convinced them that they could drop the paranoid attitudes that had perforce become second nature during the long years of Stalinist, Nazi and post-Stalinist persecution.

By Rosh HaShanah 1990, the number of visitors had doubled to 2,000 and an even larger factory site was acquired two minutes away from the gravesite. In 2000, over 10,000 visitors were present for the Rebbe's Rosh HaShanah. Five years later, that number doubled!

### Future Vision

IN HIS MANUSCRIPT OF *Chayey Moharan* (translated into English as *Tzaddik*), Reb Noson writes that a time will come when people will travel to Uman from all over the world to pray beside Rebbe Nachman's grave on Erev Rosh HaShanah. The gathering will be so large that it will be necessary to hire guards to ensure that visitors do not remain at the *tziyun* too long, so that others will have a place to stand (*Siach Sarfey Kodesh V*, 125).

At the time that Reb Noson made this prediction, it no doubt seemed unimaginable to his followers. Yet we see that we have virtually reached this point today!

We also cherish the words of Reb Shimshon Barski, an influential Breslover chassid in pre-war Uman, who wrote: "I once read an old letter that told of how the Rebbe had predicted the invention of the airplane, stating that this is one of the signs of the Final Redemption. The Rebbe declared: 'Many machines are destined to be invented. And in one of these machines, a great number of people will travel in the air. Thus, a Jew who has

## Pathway To The Heart

Dr. Julian Ungar-Sargon

*Originally from London, England, Dr. Julian Ungar-Sargon is a neurologist living in Chicago, Illinois.*

I was born in London in 1950 and attended an Orthodox Jewish school where my mother was the principal. I spent my post-high-school year in Israel at Yeshivat Merkaz HaRav.<sup>128</sup> Despite my traditional Orthodox upbringing, I was plagued by questions and doubts. For the next twenty years, I continued on my path in traditional Judaism, resigned to the fact that I would not get any answers.

During the year that I spent at Merkaz HaRav, I developed a love for the teachings of Rabbi Avraham Yitzchak Kook and his creative genius (little did I know then of his deep connection to Rebbe Nachman). At the end of the year, I returned to England to get my diploma from the Royal Academy of Music (in piano) and to attend the London Hospital Medical College. A few years later, in 1972, I won the Duke scholarship to study medicine in the United States. While there, I fell in love with neurology and decided to pursue my postgraduate training in the U.S.

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128 A national-religious yeshivah founded in Jerusalem in 1924 by Rabbi Avraham Yitzchak Kook, the first Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi of Israel.

In 1977, I married into a prominent *litvishe* family. After completing my fellowship at the Neurological Institute of New York, we went to Israel, where I learned in a yeshivah in Bnei Brak. My father-in-law, a Torah scholar and pulpit rabbi, took a sabbatical that year to join me in Israel and teach me “how to learn.” I owe him all my skills in *nigleh*.<sup>129</sup>

We returned to the United States and settled in Philadelphia, where I learned with the legendary Reb Mendel Kaplan, a student of the Brisker Rav, Rabbi Yitzchak Zev Soloveitchik.<sup>130</sup>

In 1984, I joined the faculty of the Harvard Medical School in Boston. The Rav, Rabbi Yoshe Ber Soloveitchik,<sup>131</sup> was still alive, and I jumped at the opportunity to attend his lectures and *daven* in his shul for the last few remaining years of his life. He articulated the schizophrenia that I had always felt existed in *Yiddishkeit* and presented a “*Torah im derekh erez*” approach to Judaism that appealed to me.<sup>132</sup>

Two years later, I decided to deepen my knowledge of *Tanakh* and history and enrolled at Harvard Divinity School, where I graduated with a master’s in theology. From there, I went on to Brandeis University to work on a PhD in Midrash.

We moved to Israel in 1990. I learned half-day in the Volozhin *kollel* and worked on my PhD during the other half. During this time, I was going through an intense midlife crisis. I could no longer ignore the conflict I saw between Western values and

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129 The “revealed” parts of the Torah—e.g., the Talmud and the Codes.

130 Rabbi Yitzchak Zev Soloveitchik (1868-1959) was the son and successor of Rabbi Chaim Soloveitchik, *rav* of the Lithuanian city of Brisk. He fled the Holocaust and re-established the Brisker Yeshiva in Israel.

131 Rabbi Yoshe Ber Soloveitchik (1903-1993), known as “the Rav” to his thousands of students, was *rosh yeshivah* of the Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary at Yeshiva University in New York. He was a grandson of Rabbi Chaim Soloveitchik of Brisk.

132 Rabbi Soloveitchik emphasized the synthesis between Torah and secular scholarship in the Western world, which became a basis for the philosophical framework of Modern Orthodoxy.

strict Orthodoxy, as well as other theological and moral issues, especially concerning the Holocaust.

I also felt unfulfilled in both my personal and professional life. My children constantly forced me to evaluate my value system, and I often fell short. I found it a real challenge to raise children who would remain committed to our tradition without losing their critical thinking abilities in the process. I felt that the Judaism they were being taught was being spoon-fed to them in neat sound bites, with trite and banal answers.

IT WAS IN 1994, a year after the death of Reb Shlomo Carlebach,<sup>133</sup> that I came across a collection of Reb Shlomo's teachings entitled "*Lema'an Achai Vere'ai* (For My Brothers and Friends)." Suddenly, I was exposed to a new way of thinking. His Torah was sweet! It included references to the teachings of Rebbe Nachman and Rabbi Tzadok HaKohen.<sup>134</sup>

Reading this book, I felt something inside me open up. I had been raised in a very strict, "German" home<sup>135</sup> and had been taught the *litvishe*, analytic methods of learning. There was almost no connection between my emotions and my intellect. In Reb Shlomo's book, I discovered a synthesis of the two, something I had never experienced before.

Over the next few years, I immersed myself in this new approach, studying it on both an academic and personal level. These new (for me) concepts of serving God with the heart, and all that this entailed, radically altered my perspective on *davening* and learning.

I had never really known the art of *davening*. I never really grasped the meaning of Divine Providence at the personal

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133 See note 88, p. 175.

134 Rabbi Tzadok HaKohen Rabinowitz (1823-1900) was the scion of a *litvishe* rabbinic family who became a *chassidische* rebbe. He was a prolific writer in all areas of Judaism, *halakhah*, Kabbalah and *mussar*.

135 Jews originating from Germany (sometimes called "*Yekke*") are famously punctual and known for an attention to detail that manifests in an exacting adherence to Jewish laws and customs.

level. In fact, I had never really had a personal relationship with God! I was never taught these things. It was as if I had been given the road map, but had never been shown how to drive.

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In my new course of study, I discovered, on the one hand, a brilliant analysis of the human soul in the unique psychological style of the Polish rebbes, while on the other, an insistence on the “broken heart” as a prerequisite to *avodat HaShem*. I realized that although I had been able to master the texts, I had never learned to control my emotions.

But although I had discovered the problem, I was not given practical steps to solve it. How could I reach balance and harmony with these disparate and opposing drives and feelings? I had seen the diagram, but now I needed a practical manual. So while I changed my method of learning, there was no real change in my behavior or relationships.

IN 2003, AS I WAS TRYING TO UNDERSTAND the difference between Rabbi Chaim Volozhin’s *litvishe* understanding of certain esoteric concepts and the *chassidishe* approach of Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi, founder of the Chabad-Lubavitch movement, someone showed me Lesson 64 in *Likutey Moharan*, which discusses these ideas. As I read it, I literally found myself falling off of my chair. It was amazing! In these few paragraphs, Rebbe Nachman articulates a position that somehow includes all the paradoxes of life and the questions that can and cannot be answered.

Here were answers to the deepest questions of my life. The Rebbe articulates the issues of God’s goodness and justice, free choice, and all the philosophical questions I had piled up in the course of my “*schizofrumkeit*.” His words resonated deeply within me, and it dawned on me that after studying the Torah of Rabbi Kook and Rabbi Tzadok HaKohen, I had finally come to *their* rebbe—Rebbe Nachman!

I began learning *Likutey Moharan* intensively, as well as other works by the Rebbe and Reb Noson. I discovered that instead

of focusing on externalities such as dress, rituals, *nusach* (order of prayers) or family customs, Breslov really required from me only three things—three difficult things.

The first is that I learn *Shulchan Arukh*<sup>136</sup> every single day. Although I had never formally “left” the practical observance of *halakhah*, it had become habitual. By nature, I am rebellious, and I don’t like being told what to do every minute of the day. What I saw as the focus on outward behavior and the superficiality of modern *frumkeit* (religiosity) made it difficult for me to see any meaning in the endless repetition of ritual practice. The lifeless *davening* I encountered in shul contributed to my impression that *frumkeit* was in fact “brain-dead” (according to the Harvard criteria, of course!).

Once I started studying Breslov books, I felt the Rebbe pushing me to return to learning the *Shulchan Arukh* and the *daf yomi*,<sup>137</sup> something that I had stopped doing some years earlier out of all sorts of resentments. Instead, I had studied anything else but that! Now Rebbe Nachman, who had shown me the “heart” in *Yiddishkeit*, was instructing me to return to learning it. The Rebbe insisted on both *halakhic* observance as well as the fire of enthusiasm. How could I refuse? And the gifts were not long in coming. With my commitment to the Rebbe, I found my resentments melting.

The second thing Breslov Chassidut requires is that I speak with God directly—*hitbodedut*. I found it extremely difficult to talk to God as if He is really there, as close to me as a father. As the child of a Holocaust survivor, I had been taught that God was an entity to be feared above all and that strict *halakhic* observance did not include any sense of intimacy with the Divine.

This would prove to be (and remains as) the single most difficult challenge for me in my time-strapped lifestyle. Along with *hitbodedut* came the Ten Psalms (the *Tikkun HaKlali*) and

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136 See note 51, p. 106.

137 See note 124, p. 258.

the notion of *Tikkun HaBrit* (sexual purity). Although other Chassidic dynasties emphasize different aspects of *avodat HaShem* (for instance, Chabad emphasizes the intellectual approach which is then supposed to “inflame the heart,” while Ger focuses on service of the heart), Rebbe Nachman insists that the way to holiness begins with *Tikkun HaBrit*. Over the course of time, *hitbodedut* combined with the *Tikkun HaKlali* and spiritual purification in the *mikveh* began to influence my imaginative soul and cleanse it of its impurities.

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The third aspect of Breslov Chassidut, which I had yet to fulfill, was traveling to Rebbe Nachman’s *tziyun* in Uman for Rosh HaShanah.

IN THE SUMMER OF 2003, I TRAVELED TO ISRAEL. I stopped by the Breslov bookstore on Meah Shearim Street to ask if they had any books that clarify Lesson 64 in *Likutey Moharan*, the teaching that had first brought me to Breslov. They didn’t, but they suggested that I speak to Chaim Kramer of the Breslov Research Institute. That was how I first met Chaim.

On Rosh Chodesh Elul, I traveled to Tzefat to ask Rabbi Elazar Mordekhai Koenig, the leader of the Tzefat Breslov community, to clarify certain points for me. At the end of the conversation, Rabbi Koenig turned to me and said, “Nu?”

I had no idea what he was referring to, so I remained silent.

He looked at me again and repeated, “Nu?”

Again I remained silent.

This repeated itself several times until someone in the room whispered to me, “Uman.”

Rabbi Koenig wanted to know if I would be traveling to Uman for Rosh HaShanah.

A voice inside me prompted me to reply, “All right,” although at that point, I had no idea what Uman was all about. But since I had given him my word, that was it. I would be traveling to Uman.

When my wife heard about it, she couldn't believe what I was proposing. "Uman? On Rosh HaShanah?" We hadn't been apart from each other or from our six kids for decades on the High Holidays! *Oy vey*, you can imagine the discussions that went on!

I BOARDED A PLANE FOR MUNICH a couple of days before Rosh HaShanah. I had a ten-hour layover before my connecting flight to Kiev, so I decided to rent a car and drive to Dachau.

Dachau is a neat little town with photo shops and restaurants, café houses and beer halls. Amidst the quaint village scenery, you suddenly see a looming presence: barbed wire heralding the entrance to another world, a sinister reminder of another, darker reality. Although the overwhelming majority of Dachau's victims were Jewish, the Jews are barely mentioned in the recordings for tourists. Instead, you hear about "man's inhumanity to man." What an erasure of memory! Disgusted, I returned to the airport to catch my flight to Kiev.

Kiev and the Ukraine reminded me of the dark world of Communism. Outside the airport, the Breslovers argued with the taxi drivers while remaining wary of the very real danger posed by the local mafia. Every five or ten miles, we were stopped by "police" and the driver had to bribe them to let us go further.

By the time we arrived in Uman, it was dark, the streetlights few and far between. With the kind help of Eliyahu Reiter, I found Chaim Kramer. I was jet-lagged and depressed, but his warm welcome and bear hug gave me hope! He showed me to the apartment where I would be staying.

I barely slept that night. The following day, Erev Rosh HaShanah, I attempted to get to the *tziyun*, but it was too crowded and I was unsuccessful. All around me, I saw Israelis pouring into the town, *shlepping* suitcases and trying to get settled before Yom Tov began. It was chaotic and disorderly and felt a bit like

the *arba'ah minim shuk* in Jerusalem right before Sukkot.<sup>138</sup>

With the start of Yom Tov, the hustle and bustle came to an abrupt stop as everyone rushed to shul to *daven*. From there, I joined the group eating in a tent set up in the courtyard of Chaim's house. Over the last five years, this festive meal has become the center for me and many other English-speakers in Uman. Chaim's warmth and unconditional love make for a great collegial spirit.

The following morning, I *davened Musaf* together with more than 10,000 men! During the *Amidah*<sup>139</sup> prayer, it was so quiet that one could hear a pin drop. The *chazzan*, Rabbi Moshe Bienenstock, prayed with an incredible sweetness until he finally broke down sobbing. (It was worth traveling to Uman just to hear that heartfelt cry.) The shofar's shrill notes pierced my heart; they sounded like the bawling of an infant. Most surprising was the clapping as we recited "*HaMelekh HaKadosh* (The Holy King)," crowning God as our King. It was liberating. I felt as if we were actually coronating the King of kings!

Immediately after Yom Tov was over, the place exploded with dancing and unrestrained joy. I felt that we were celebrating the miracle of Jewish survival! Throughout the generations, nations have tried to annihilate us, yet we are very much alive. Perhaps that is one of the reasons why Rebbe Nachman chose to be buried in Uman, the site of the Gonta massacre.<sup>140</sup> Here we

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138 A busy marketplace set up in several areas of the city, where vendors sell *lulavim* (palm fronds), *hadasim* (myrtle leaves), *aravot* (willow branches) and *etrogim* (citrons), which are used to fulfill the mitzvah of the Four Species (*arba'ah minim*) on the festival of Sukkot.

139 See note 83, p. 161.

140 In 1768, the Ukrainian Haidamak army, under the leadership of Ivan Gonta, massacred tens of thousands of Jews in Uman. Before his death, Rebbe Nachman said, "The souls of the martyrs [slaughtered by Gonta] await me."

were, 235 years later, nearly sixty years after the Nazis and also a decade and a half after the fall of Communism, and we were dancing on the streets of Uman under the very eyes of the local National Guard that was standing on every street corner. What historical irony! It was as if the Rebbe were tapping his finger to our singing. Rebbe Nachman's prophecy about his legacy was finally justified as his message was getting through to the Jewish nation. Having woken up from a spiritual coma, we needed the Rebbe like never before.

THE ANNUAL TRIP TO UMAN has impacted my life in so many ways. My year now revolves around Rosh HaShanah and *Shabbat Zakhor*,<sup>141</sup> the two times of the year when I visit the Rebbe. Each time, I prepare myself weeks in advance, and the effects linger long after my return.

My *avodat HaShem* has also changed. My prayers and Torah learning are more balanced, something I had never even thought about in my younger years. Rebbe Nachman taught me the art of *davening*—slowly and with intention.

Each year, I try to be of service to the newcomers who join the meal at Chaim's table, to help them in their struggles and spiritual journeys. The conversations and the bonds that we Breslovers share extends to my service at the emergency medical clinic in Uman, as well making the chassidim who visit Chicago feel less alienated.

I hope to become a better chassid. To me, this means following the path of others before me—like Rabbi Yitzchak Breiter, who gave us guidelines to follow on a daily basis.<sup>142</sup> It means deepening my understanding of the Rebbe's Torah and of Reb Noson's *Likutey Halakhot*. It means using the tools of Breslov to

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141 The Shabbat preceding Purim, when the Torah portion of "*Zakhor et asher asah lekha Amalek*—Remember what Amalek did to you" is read.

142 Rabbi Breiter authored *Seder HaYom*, a work which provides clear directives on how to apply the Rebbe's teachings to one's daily life.

help me in my continuing struggles, like going to the *mikveh* and learning *Likutey Halakhot*. *Sefer HaMidot*, *Hishtapkhut HaNefesh* and *Meshivat Nefesh*, all of which are part of my daily “quota” that must be completed before my day begins. It means helping disseminate the Rebbe’s Torah to my own community, whether through classes or personal conversation or our weekly *hitbodedut* group.

Rebbe Nachman  
taught me the art of  
davening.

Above all, it means living with a connection to the *tzaddik*, realizing that I must live a life consistent with his teachings and demands.

Yes, Breslov is a very demanding spiritual path, but for broken souls like me, it is a lifesaver.