



# PILGRIMAGE TO UMAN

ALMOST 200 YEARS AFTER REBBE NACHMAN'S DEATH, HIS FOLLOWERS  
FLOCK TO A ONCE-CLOSED SOVIET TOWN TO CELEBRATE ROSH HASHANAH.

Nadine Epstein

**I'm on a bus to Uman**, the provincial Ukrainian town where the Breslover Rebbe Nachman chose to be buried. I am the only passenger not transfixed by the blaring Ukrainian sitcom flitting across the television screen in the front. Rather I am plastered against the window, compulsively humming tunes from *Fiddler on the Roof*, soaking in the fields, the chestnut trees and villages mile after mile. Ukraine, the birthplace of my four grandparents, is a land I have often imagined. We're racing along a new highway through the south central part of the country, traversing the cradle of Hasidism, the movement that sprang forth in various garbs to take back Judaism from overly cerebral rabbis to a life of simple joy.

It is the day before Rosh Hashanah, and we are scheduled to arrive in Uman with a couple of hours to spare before the holiday begins at sundown. On Rosh Hashanah, post-Iron Curtain Uman is transformed into a modern Jewish happening of the first degree. Twenty-four thousand Jews—Breslovers and other Hasidim like Satmars and Belzers, plus non-Hasids and even the non-Orthodox—come to pray at Rebbe Nachman's grave.

The pilgrimage is a tradition of the Breslovers, a sect that takes its name from the town of Bratslav, about a two-hour drive away, where the charismatic Nachman lived for many years. A great-grandson of Hasidism's founder, the Baal Shem Tov, Nachman breathed new life into the movement, combining Kabbalah, Torah scholarship and folk tales to teach a religious philosophy that centered on speaking to God directly, without intermediaries. During his lifetime, his followers journeyed to be with him for Rosh Hashanah, Hanukkah and Shavuot when he delivered his formal lessons. But Rosh Hashanah was the most important: "My Rosh Hashanah is greater than everything," he once said. "I cannot understand how

it is that if my followers really believe in me, they are not scrupulous about being with me on Rosh Hashanah. No one should be missing!" And to a follower who preferred to travel to Uman at a less congested time, Nachman said: "Whether you eat or don't eat; whether you sleep or don't sleep; whether you pray or don't pray; just make sure you are with me on Rosh Hashanah, no matter what!"

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**—REBBE NACHMAN—**

Shortly before his death from tuberculosis at age 38 on October 16, 1810, Nachman asked his flock to return to his grave each Rosh Hashanah. "No matter from what city you come, my followers should return home and say: 'Whoever believes in G-d should come to Rebbe Nachman for Rosh Hashanah.'" Today, they heed his call from nearly 40 countries, traveling from such far-flung places as New York, Israel, South Africa, New Zealand and Brazil.

I decided I must see this in person and was not dissuaded when I learned that women are discouraged from coming during Rosh Hashanah. I received phone calls from Jews who had been to Uman, or knew someone who had,

warning me not to go. "Men will spit on you! They can be violent," one man told me. "You'll starve because no one will sell you food and you can't go to meals. You will be forced to sleep in the street." "The only women who go are crazy ones who dance through the streets looking for husbands." One woman I spoke with asked if she could accompany me so I could protect her. The more conversations like this I had, the more determined I became that I'd show up in Uman even if I did have to sleep in the street.

I am the only American on the bus since most American tourists, especially Jewish ones, fear venturing out alone into Ukraine, preferring taxis, guides and chartered buses, the legacy of an egregiously anti-Semitic history and the Soviet bureaucratic nightmare. But 18 years after the country gained its independence, I come armed with the latest edition of *Ukraine: The Bradt Travel Guide*, and travel without fear, as I have with many a guidebook in other countries. I had roamed Eastern Europe on my own at 19, visiting Bulgaria, Romania, Hungary and East Germany before the wall came down. My biggest problem then had been men convinced that they were irresistible to American women.

The night before I was in Medzhybizh, the town where Nachman was born in 1772. I arrived in time to watch the last of the sunlight fade over the cemetery where many revered Jewish figures had been laid to rest. A small synagogue surrounded the Baal Shem Tov's grave, and the light pouring from its windows illuminated the dark gray stones marking other graves. The synagogue was packed with men, and I peeked in through the window to see the burial site as best I could around their backs.

Outside, a legion of spanking new white charter buses gleamed in the moonlight, standing by to deliver pilgrims to Uman that night. Since I

was heading the same way, I asked if I might join them, but my gender made me forbidden cargo. A blessing, it turns out, since I now have plenty of daylight to decipher the Cyrillic alphabet by reading the large ugly signs that the communists built to identify towns and villages, each sign a scar on the lovely countryside.

There are no major cities near Uman; its signature sign appears after a vast stretch of fields and forests. Although not large, the town is a crossroads between Kiev to the north and Odessa to the south, and East and West Ukraine meet there as well. The bus pulls into a busy station in a new part of town. On the paved plaza outside are the usual array of Ukrainians: girls with impossibly high heels and young men in tight jeans, along with folk story-like matrons in babushkas, and older men colored gray from lives of invisibility, alcohol and cigarettes.

As I make my way closer to the old part of town, I begin to see men attired from every era of Jewish finery—the white robes called *kittels*, long and short black coats, black suits, white shirts hanging out over black pants, and even T-shirts and grungy jeans. Bearded heads are topped with black hats of varying shapes, turbans, colorful Bukharan caps and carefully balanced fur *shtreimels*, some resembling dead turkeys.

In the 17th century, Uman was a well-fortified Polish city that offered relative protection from roving bands of Tatars. Jews flocked there and by 1768, Uman had 33,000 Jewish residents. We know this because that June, 20,000 of them were killed in what is known as the Massacre of Uman. Cossack rebels rose up against Poland, attacking Uman. After a three-day siege, they broke through the town's defenses: Bodies of Jews were stacked up, then buried en masse in the old Jewish cemetery, not far from the center of town.

Nearly 40 years later, Nachman passed through Uman and visited

the mass grave. "This is a good place to be buried," he told his disciples, explaining that he wanted to be laid to rest with the martyrs. So in May of 1810, after a fire destroyed his home in Bratslav, the already ill Nachman moved to Uman.

He spent his last months with his followers, children and grandchildren, occasionally walking in Sofya Park, Uman's other claim to fame. (The beautifully landscaped park, founded in 1796 by a Polish noble who named

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it for his wife, features waterfalls and stone bridges across streams and scenic ravines.) But by Rosh Hashanah, Nachman was coughing up so much blood he struggled through his sermon. He died 18 days later. Nachman's chief disciple, Reb Noson, immediately instituted the annual Rosh Hashanah pilgrimage, which drew Breslovers from the surrounding communities.

The pilgrimage ground to a halt in 1918 after the Bolshevik Revolution. Ukraine became part of the Soviet Union and Uman, a military city, was closed to foreigners. Prayer gatherings were also outlawed, although some

locals still assembled at Nachman's grave despite persecution. But even this came to an end when German and Italian troops swept through Uman in 1941. (Hitler himself, accompanied by Mussolini, flew in to survey the victory.) The Jewish community was deported—some 17,000 Jews were killed—and the old cemetery destroyed.

The Soviets parceled out its land after the war. As the story goes, a Jewish convert requested the plot that held Nachman's remains. He built a small house and erected a courtyard around the grave, which was marked with poured concrete. The house successfully protected the site when apartment buildings were later constructed around it. Neighbors complained to the authorities, however, because the convert allowed Jews to visit and pray. He was forced to give up the house, and a less friendly non-Jewish woman moved in.

Breslovers, now scattered around the globe, had never chosen a rebbe to succeed Nachman, and hadn't forgotten his request to be with him on Rosh Hashanah. But it was nearly impossible for them to travel to Uman, and they were even uncertain if the grave could still be found. In 1962, an adventurous New York Breslover named Gedaliah Fleer slipped illegally into Uman, hoping to find the grave. "I snuck into the city," he recalls. "I didn't have a visa and I got picked up by the police. They arrested me and I never got to the *Tzion* [grave.] I came back the next year and Reb Michael Dorfman, the leader of Uman's Jews, agreed to help me." This time, Fleer was able to visit the grave, reporting his find to fellow Breslovers.

Around the same time, the short-lived thaw in the Cold War brought about by the ascension of Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev, the former head of the Communist Party in Ukraine under Stalin, created a diplomatic opening. The Soviets made an overture to the





NAOMI EPSTEIN





Above: On Rosh Hashanah, Nachman's followers swarm to Uman, Ukraine, crowding the synagogue built around his grave. Right: Leibel Berger

Breslover community in New York, allowing a handful of its leaders to travel to Moscow, Kiev and then to Uman with an official Intourist travel guide. "They wanted to show the world the Soviet Union was not anti-Semitic," says Leibel Berger, the director of Friends of Breslovers in Eastern Europe, a member of the group. "We arrived in the middle of snow up to our waists; it was Hanukkah time. The woman who lived in the house was so frightened she didn't want to let us in, but she did. It was very dramatic. We stayed for an hour. They held a banquet for us in a hotel but we couldn't eat anything because it wasn't kosher." The group was taken back to Kiev for the night and flown on to Moscow.

It is Berger himself who greets me on a street corner. Unlike some other

Hasidic groups, Breslovers have no single dress code, and Berger wears a simple suit, sweater and a cap to ward off the early fall chill. We walk down Pushkina Street, lined by unattractive concrete apartment buildings and vendors selling food and trinkets to the throngs. The street is closed to cars; there are checkpoints manned by military police hired by the Breslovers to search bags for bombs and guns, and to keep out non-Jewish Ukrainians who do not live in the vicinity.

As we walk, Berger, 69, tells me about the origins of the modern-day pilgrimage in a pleasant Yiddish-inflected Brooklynese. "In 1967 another group was allowed to come, then there were a couple of groups during the 1970s, but there was no possible way to be here on Rosh Hashanah because they

didn't allow you to sleep over in Uman [no traveling is allowed on holidays]," he says. Things began to change in 1989 during perestroika, when he obtained permission to travel to Uman to petition the mayor for visas that would allow a group to stay overnight so they could be with Nachman on Rosh Hashanah. He arranged a meeting with the mayor, or rather, with Svetlana, the mayor's secretary and head of the city council. "She really controlled everything."

"First I went to the *Tzion* and I said to Rebbe Nachman that I am not a speaking person, I am not a big shot, it's up to you to help me with the words so that they should allow us. And from America I brought a big fancy crystal vase, two or three feet tall. Uman is known for its flowers, so I bought flowers and filled the vase with

I don't know how many. I handed the vase to Svetlana and she was flabbergasted." Berger's flower strategy was a success. "She said, 'Your prayers have been answered, Rabbi Berger.'" He was given visas to bring 1,000 people for Rosh Hashanah and leaped into action, chartering planes, flying in kosher food and setting up tents for eating and sleeping.

Gradually, the Breslovers purchased the land around the grave, bought up the cemetery and surrounding properties, razed the house and courtyard, and built a synagogue around the grave and a larger one to enclose that one. The more they built, the more people came. Berger, a retired systems analyst who has apartments in Boro Park in Brooklyn, Israel and Uman, has now spent two decades handling the logistics for Uman's Rosh Hashanah festivities.

By now we are at the intersection of Pushkina and Bolinsky, and men are dancing wildly, happily in the streets. One balances a blue plastic chair on his forehead to the cheers of others. There's a loud hum of male voices and a mélange of languages. "The pilgrimage with all its different people is in the mood of Rebbe Nachman—he believed the highest to the lowest should pray together," says Berger.

There's space for only 6,000 people in Uman's synagogues. To our right, up Bolinsky, is the synagogue over the grave, which holds 1,500. Up a hilly path, there's an even larger synagogue that seats 4,500. The other 20,000 or so men pray on the streets or wherever they can.

Berger shows me more of the cemetery. There are no gravestones, only patches of grass and untamed tumbles of weeds. "When it rains the topsoil runs off and sometimes you can see the bones," he says. The cemetery actually extends much farther than the iron fence that surrounds it. Dotted yellow lines are painted on the roads

to demarcate the cemetery boundaries. The lines are there to warn the Cohanim, descendants of the Temple priests who are forbidden to enter cemeteries, that they may not cross.

As the afternoon wanes, Berger guides me toward the apartment building closest to Nachman's grave, one of several inside the yellow lines. The town's residents rent out their flats, delighted to earn as much as \$300 a bed, \$2,500 for a large apartment for a week, enough to live on for an entire year. It turns out I won't be sleeping in the street. Berger has found me a cot in what are luxury digs for Uman during Rosh Hashanah: I am to be the guest of his niece, Rhona "Bathsheva" Peretz, who made aliyah to Israel years back, and two of her friends, one with a young child.

As we enter the high rise, Berger explains that while women are welcome in Uman other times of the year, there is no way to follow the halachic rules of modesty and separation during Rosh Hashanah. The few women who do show up generally stay hidden in rented flats. The women themselves seem split on the male-only Rosh Hashanah policy: My query on a Breslover women's listserv before I left the United States had sparked debate. I received comments such as: "Why are you going to Uman on Rosh Hashanah? It is the time for men to go," and "We should just leave men to spend Rosh Hashanah with the Rabeinu...we have the whole year to spend with Rabeinu, why *davka* to be there on Rosh Hashanah???" But others politely disagreed with the suggestion: "I take great issue with alienation/separation of women from an equal spiritual experience," one woman wrote.

The stairwell and corridors are tenement-like, but the tiny, dark flat has the best view possible of Rosh Hashanah in Uman for a woman. Our windows overlook the cemetery and the synagogue over the grave.

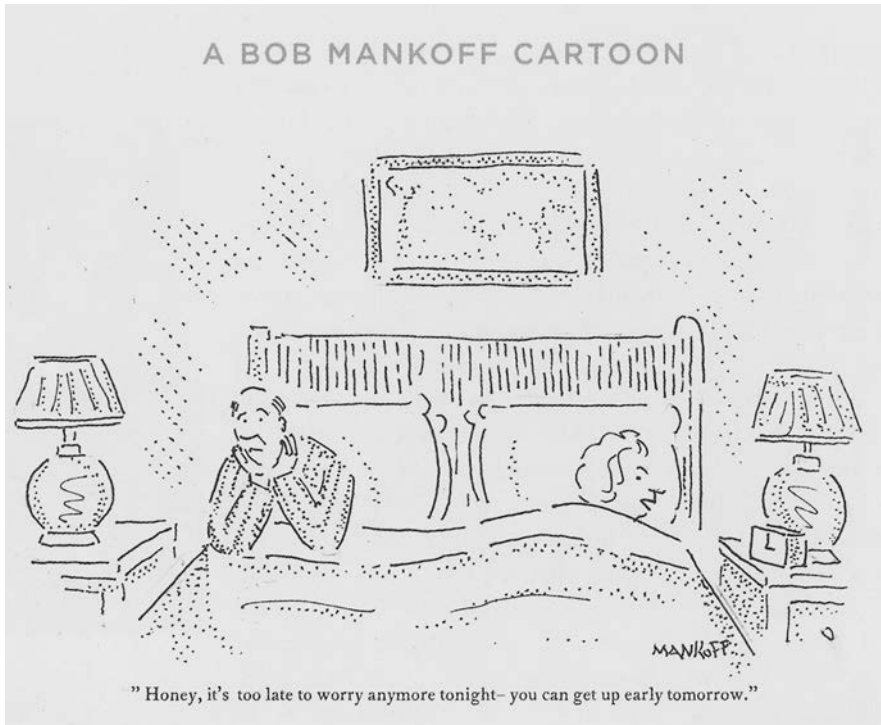


Berger goes off to join the men, and as the sun drops behind the old part of town outside the window, the true beauty of the apartment is revealed. We hear men chanting together, men chanting alone. Their voices drift up to us.

Peretz, I learn, has been coming to Uman for Rosh Hashanah since 1967, arriving with the first official group and leading the first women's group in 1989. "In the beginning we were forbidden to be in Uman," she tells me. "We had to fly to Kiev to see if we could get permission, and it was not guaranteed. Then we had to get special permission to go to Sofya Park. Then we would bribe the driver to bring us to the woman's house. Then we would bribe the woman to let us in. Not everyone was able to get into the garden." Back then, there were just a dozen or so pilgrims, and men and women davened together, on either side of the grave. Women weren't excluded from Rosh Hashanah, she adds, until the past few years, when the gathering grew bigger.

We spend the evening haunting the windows. Eventually I fall asleep to the chanting. In the morning I leave the other women and go out. I lean against a lone tree near the intersection of Pushkina and Bolinsky

A BOB MANKOFF CARTOON



"Honey, it's too late to worry anymore tonight— you can get up early tomorrow."

and watch masses of men press against the entrance to the outer synagogue. Others daven and dance in streets, and groups cluster around Torahs. It is as if I do not exist.

Later I walk the streets. I am not the only woman. A pair of young, extremely well-dressed Hasidic women come out of hiding, pushing baby strollers. A family including wife and daughters strolls by. Ukrainian women trudge by with bags and briefcases. I meet a group of American men who invite me to share their Kiddush. They have rented a luxurious modern house and have their meals catered. A tall, dark, handsome Belgian-born Jew who lives in Hell's Kitchen in Manhattan tells me: "I'm here for two days and then back to the clubs. Uman's a very special place, but two days of praying is enough." A man from Lakewood, New Jersey, confides: "It's a lot to spend two intense days with men."

I walk several miles to the other end of town to Sofya Park. On my way I meet a man originally from Elizabeth, New Jersey, who now lives in Jerusalem with his wife and seven children. "People ask me how I can leave my family for the holiday," he says. "My wife pushes me to come here." He's been to Uman 24 times, five on Rosh Hashanah. "I have

asked for far-fetched things and they have all come true. No one knows why Rebbe Nachman asked people to pray at his grave. I don't even know if he really said it. But I keep coming back."

Except for a busload of chattering Russian tourists, Sofya Park is nearly empty and there are no rowboats out on the lake, which reflects the reds and yellow of the turning leaves. Nachman is said to have asked wonderingly, "To be in Uman and not go there?" I agree. It is peaceful, and, I must say, lovely to be away from the hubbub. For the first time since coming to Uman, I can imagine talking with God one on one, the Rebbe Nachman way.

Later on Rhona Peretz tells me: "You can't compare Uman in 1967 to now. Then the grave was in a garden with trees and a little bench. Then they put tile on it. Then they covered it with a big stone. Then they put a gate around it. When they bought the place, they put a shul there. Then Rosh Hashanah started to get out of hand. Now it's the fashion, and a lot of mental and sick people come. Every year it really gets

ADAM MEANS EARTH\*

I am the man  
Whose name is mud  
But what's in a name  
to shame one who knows  
Mud does not stain  
Clay he's made of  
Dust Adam became—  
The dust he was—  
Was he his name?

\*Adam from *adamah*, "earth" in Hebrew.

—Samuel Menashe



worse and worse. Now, the closeness and the feeling of being *mamash* with the rebbe and speaking with him is lost. Sometimes improvements aren't really improvements."

Gedaliah Fleer adds: "We knew that if somebody broke their way into Uman it would open but we never dreamed

that it would be this many people. We figured maybe a couple hundred."

I walk back into town from the park through streets that are littered with discarded wrappers and plastic bottles. But despite what the pilgrimage has become, I am struck by the power of a man long dead to draw people to this place.

Leibel Berger, who is credited with opening up Uman for Rosh Hashanah, has a new vision: He'd like to rebuild what was lost to history. There are 500 to 1,000 Jewish families, some of them intermarried, out of 90,000 inhabitants in Uman. Most are not religious.

Berger wants devout Jews to come back to Uman to live. "I would like Uman to be a thriving *yishuv* [Jewish settlement] with 200 religious families with shops and schools," he tells me. He dreams of opening a yeshiva for boys from Eastern Europe who want to learn, and of establishing a trade school for troubled Jewish boys from Israel. He sees Ukrainians, Jewish and not, living side by side with this new religious community. Already 30 to 40 new religious families—some from Israel—live there year around. Says Berger: "It is a blessing for Jews to be back in Uman." ☞

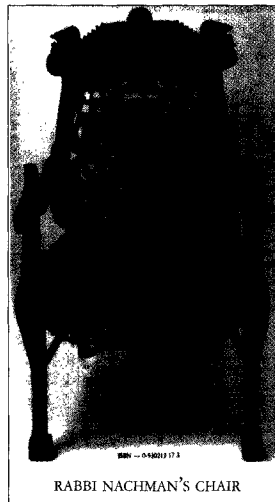
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## Friends of Breslov in Eastern Europe

The Friends of Breslov in Eastern Europe's mission is to establish vibrant, thriving Jewish communities in Eastern Europe especially in the city of Uman in the Ukraine, the resting place of Rabbi Nachman of Breslov. The Rabbi is known throughout both the Jewish and secular worlds as one of the greatest cultivators of Jewish souls. We aim to bring Jewish culture back to a nation where it was stamped out by Communism for over 100 years. Tens of thousands of Jews are looking to Rabbi Nachman for inspiration. Help us help them find the strength and fortitude to stand upright and say, "I'm proud to be a Jew."

Support rebuilding the Jewish community and establishing a yeshiva along with other communal services in Uman.

To find out more, contact Leibel Berger at [berger@umanbreslov.com](mailto:berger@umanbreslov.com)



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