

Chapter Six: Pilgrimage To Uman

"Eat or don't eat, sleep or don't sleep,
pray or don't pray, as long as you're
with me on Rosh Hashanah."

-- Rebbe Nachman

"Even if the road to Uman were paved
with knives, I would crawl there –
just so that I could be by Rebbe
Nachman for Rosh Hashanah."

-- Rabbi Nosson of Nemirov

"A pilgrim's commitment, in full physicality, to an arduous yet inspiring journey, is, for him, even more impressive, in the symbolic domain, than the visual and auditory symbols which dominate the liturgies and ceremonies of calendrically structured religion. He only looks at these; he participates in the pilgrimage way. The pilgrim becomes himself a total symbol, indeed, a symbol of totality ... [He participates] in a sacred existence, with the aim of achieving a step toward holiness and wholeness in oneself, both of body and soul. But since one aspect of oneself consists of the cherished values of one's specific culture, it is not unnatural that the new formation desired by pilgrims should include a more intense realization of the inner meaning of that culture.

For many that inner meaning is identical with
its religious and core values."

(Turner 1974: 207 – 208)

Let's look at the three quotes above. In the first, we have the words of the Rebbe who commands his disciples to travel to him for Rosh Hashanah even if they have to give up eating, sleeping, or praying to get there. This pilgrimage demands that people simply follow the advice of Rebbe Nachman and is a radical expression of the Breslovers' faith in the *tzaddik*. The quote from Reb Noson, the Rebbe's closest disciple, shows the strong willingness of a Breslover Hasid to overcome any obstacle that might keep him from seeing his master. In *A Day In The Life of a Breslover Chassid*, Reb Yitzchok Breiter discusses the relationship between the dedication of faithful disciples and the beneficial healing light they receive from the true *tzaddik* for such dedication when he writes:

"All the followers of the Tzaddik must come together in one place on Rosh Hashanah and pray in a bond with the Tzaddik. This gives them an amazing light from the Tzaddik and brings about great repair. On Rosh Hashanah the followers of the Tzaddik are very close to him. They can attain more on Rosh Hashanah than through the whole year. As the Rebbe said, 'My whole thing is Rosh Hashanah.' The light of the Tzaddik shines on his followers and on the whole world for all the generations. Don't let anything stop you from coming to the Rosh Hashanah gathering. The only valid reason not to come would be a danger to human life of the kind that would suspend the laws of Shabbat. Any other obstacles, such as work or money problems, the effort involved, what people might think or the like, must be broken and overcome. Nothing is greater than the Rosh Hashanah gathering." (Breiter 1989: 55-56)

The first quotes of this chapter from Rebbe Nachman and Reb Noson combine to show the intensity of their relationship. As I've said earlier, their relationship is paradigmatically the ultimate student-teacher relationship and is the model for all Breslov Hasidim to follow. Rebbe Nachman's advice for his disciples to come to him at all costs and Reb Noson's willingness to adhere to that advice is enacted on a community wide level every year for Rosh Hashanah. When that time comes around, and people actually begin to physically travel to Uman, Ukraine, the persuasiveness and power of the experience goes beyond belief or words and into the realm of just doing, whether or not the pilgrim understands why.

Victor Turner's quote describes how the physical journey of a pilgrim can in itself be an expression and enactment of Breslov's cultural and religious values in a way that words can't express or even make sense of. As he writes:

"The pilgrim becomes himself a total symbol, indeed, a symbol of totality ... [He participates] in a sacred existence, with the aim of achieving a step toward holiness and wholeness in oneself, both of body and soul. But since one aspect of oneself consists of the cherished values of one's own specific culture, it is not unnatural that the new formation desired by pilgrims should include a more intense realization of the inner meaning of that culture." (Turner 1974: 207-208)

To look back at the other chapters of this thesis is to see other expressions of the pilgrimage nature of the learning process. By analyzing the religious practices of Torah Study, storytelling, song, and prayer, I showed how outsiders are brought closer to the Breslov community center. This pilgrimage to Uman involves the same journeying process but in a more realized and radical form.

I kept a journal during my pilgrimage to Uman, Ukraine, for Rosh Hashanah 1996 with Rebbe Nachman and the Breslov Hasidim. Entries from that journal will make up the rest of this chapter. I share them so that my readers may in a sense go on the pilgrimage with me. I realize the account will be subjective; yet I hope readers will see through the "I" that wrote it at the time. This journal perspective may serve as an experiential window to their world, although I admit that this window is a very emotional and partial one. Ultimately, I think the entries speak for themselves to critically address the need for humans to understand what's going on with pilgrimage. They are a realization of the thick simplicity of just doing to understand. I intend to preserve that common sense understanding through the silence that follows this thick description of the Uman experience and I see it as a way of representing the fact that sometimes actions speak louder than words.

September 10, 1996: I haven't slept really for two days. I am in the separation stage of Van Gennep's *rite de passage*, and I am entering the liminal, the threshold. Uman, Ukraine, is beyond mere periphery for me. It is off the map. It takes stubbornness and work to walk wholeheartedly toward the seemingly irrational. I, the pilgrim, experience conflict before embarking on this journey. My Breslov teachers and friends will see the trip to Uman as a big initiation for me. I see it as an amazing culmination after the last intense, beautiful, and overwhelming year in Israel. My Hasidic friends see me getting deeper into their sacred world. I see myself looking forward to re-aggregation after Rosh Hashanah to the Wesleyan world. What do I do with this conflict? Stay as silent and clear as I can while I'm there and soak it all in.

September 11, Morning: I am in the Shuttle Bus riding to JFK going over a bridge. I can see New York City across the water. Leaving New York. Leaving Ellis Island. We are going to Germany and further still to Russia, where our grandparents and great grandparents come from. It is their immigration trip backwards. Why do we go back to the place from which they fled for their lives? There is a Shlomo Carlebach song that is sung around the time of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur:

Return again, Return again
Return to the home of your soul
Return to who you are, Return to what you are
Return to where you are, Born and reborn again

That song will have meaning for both ways of this trip. Running and returning, running and returning, running to Uman and returning to Wesleyan. Remember Turner: "The closer you get, the richer the symbols, the more powerful the metaphors, the vaster the field, the more all-pervasive the drama." Leaving New York and stopping in Frankfurt. Thinking of Hitler – how can I not? Thinking of Nazis and camps and Jewish fear and wounds – how can I not? Leaving that place, into Kiev and deeper still. Last night I talked to Joey, and he said, "You can't even imagine the place you are going to."

September 11, Afternoon: I got to the airport. I talked with a Canadian Breslover and his son. He told me about the first Breslov Hasid he ever met. It sounded like a Rebbe Nachman story:

The man was in a concentration camp. His family, his wife and daughters had been killed in the fires of the Holocaust. He prayed to Master of the Universe, "*Ribbono Shel Olam!* Please save me. If I survive I swear that I will publish and spread these teachings and books of Rebbe Nachman. I will devote my life to spreading his words." That night, four men came to him in a dream. They were Jews wearing *tallit and tefillin*, and they spoke to him: "You will be going on a train, and there will be a battle in an area you will pass through. The train will stop, and everyone will get out and go to the woods for shelter. They will blow a whistle for everyone to come back, but you will stay in the forest. This way you will save your life."

Sure enough, within a few days he and the others at the camp were ordered onto a train and along the way the train had to stop and the details unfolded as described in the dream. The Hasid stayed in the forest, and while he was hiding, there was a battle. The American soldiers were fighting there. After all the shooting had stopped and it was silent, he didn't know who had won. He wandered into a small town at the other side of the forest and first saw two little girls. He asked them for help, but they ran away because he had become so skinny and ragged that he appeared as if a scarecrow. Finally he ran into an American soldier in a Jeep. The soldier picked him up, fed him, and took care of him. Soon after he moved to America, and that is when the Canadian man I was talking to met this Breslov survivor and became connected to Rebbe Nachman.

I talked with another Hasid who had gone to Brandeis University and had been involved with Breslov for twelve years. He seemed interested in my anthropology. He offered me a cultural critique of his own world. He noted that he thought it would be easier to study the seclusionary, isolationist, and dogmatic aspects of these religious communities than it would to come to an understanding of how people from all different backgrounds, cultures, and creeds end up moving into, accepting, and embracing this *haredi* way of life. He said it's one thing to make a study and critique of the boy who grows up in a Yeshiva knowing no other world. It's a different story, though, for *baalei tshuvah* like him and me. He said, "Now, if you want to make a study of me, go right ahead. It wouldn't be so easy." I told him that's what I was trying to do with my thesis.

I talked more with this Hasid and told him about my interest in studying student-teacher relationships among the Hasidim. He said that when he first started learning among the Hasidim he was easily frustrated. He said he found that the people who lived this *haredi* life – which on certain levels consisted of following what the Rabbi of the community said and not questioning – discouraged his free thinking. He said further that in the case of a Rebbe and his student, where the Rebbe is for sure a true *tzaddik*, it is indeed wise and healthy for the Hasid to follow his Master's advice without question. But, he continued, that is true of the *tzaddikim* of Poland and Russia during the Baal Shem Tov and Rebbe Nachman's time. Nowadays he doubts if there is any man who can come close to that level. So to blindly follow their

advice without questioning or without negotiation is not so healthy.

September 11, Evening: We just prayed the evening service on the plane and upset the flight attendants. We had to face Jerusalem, so everybody stood and faced the right side of the plane. The flight attendant said, "You will cause a big disaster if you all stand on one side of the plane like that. Couldn't you pray in small groups at a time?" "We need ten people!" the Hasidim replied, "Give us just five, ten minutes." A pretty funny scene. The plane cabin was our prayer hall. I'm not the only one of my kind among them. I mean the hippie-*baal tshuvah*- different yarmulke non-black & white wearing kind of pilgrim. I reckon I'll see more of those when I get there. Hopefully I'll hear their stories. Everybody wants to know about each other's story here. "How did you get close to Breslov?" "Is this your first time to Uman."

September 12, 1:00 P.M.: I can see the green farm fields of Russia below. Before we got on the plane in Frankfurt, Germany, we prayed morning services in the airport lobby. It was powerful praying in that place which is so historically and emotionally loaded. The Breslovers read the Torah and blew the Shofar and wore their *Tefillin & Tallit*. There were about one hundred of them praying together while German business men and women were walking through the lobby and waiting to get on their planes. This plane is much more filled with Hasidim than the last. The pilgrims are coming together. I told one of the older Breslovers that this journey was very exciting for me and he told me it was exciting for him. He said it is a big *tikkun*, a very healing thing to see the Rebbe for Rosh Hashanah. We are about to land. Uman is about four hours away. I am looking forward to seeing Baruch.

September 12, 4:00 P.M.: Waiting in Kiev Airport for three hours till the bus gets full. We're about to leave. I was walking around a dark red flower garden. I was trying to breathe in the Russian air and check the people out. The soldiers and the Ukrainian Mafia guys, the old couples, and the young woman holding pink roses. There's a lot of kvetching among the pilgrims, a lot of pretty silly complaining. There seems to be a quickness to amplify the sense of suffering on the road to Uman. The truth at least for me is that the road has been smooth since I left Wesleyan. That is, besides everything taking a long time, everything else has been

taken care of.

The man sitting next to me likes that I'm writing in this Journal. He, like a lot of others, teased me gently about being an Anthropology major. A sweet old man named Yaakov was telling me about the drive ahead, that it's like Ohio, fertile farm land, a new highway. The man next to me said that this was a big exercise in patience. That's one part of it. I mean there is always a voice whispering in the head that says this is all a waste of time. Sometimes it screams but now it's only a faint whisper because I have done my best to weaken it, to beat that monster down, to humble it. It is Pharaoh's voice, a hardening of the heart, saying, "do not let the people go." Overcoming that inner struggle involves a softening of the heart and a saying to oneself, "What do I know?" and not "What do I care?"

I care. Everybody on this journey cares and knows that it is a big *tikkun*, a big healing for the soul which means on some level every pilgrim hear knows that he is wounded, that he is broken, needs repair, and needs healing. Coming to Ukraine to reap the harvest of this year past and to clear the fields for the year to come. It's an intense threshold to stand on between closing and opening, ending and beginning.

September 12, 6:00 P.M.: The sun is setting now. We are still driving, and with the appearance of the first three stars comes Erev Rosh Hashanah. Everybody is tired. Everybody is quiet. The green fields are being warmed and soaked by golden rays. An old Rabbi is sleeping next to me. He has his head on my shoulder. These fields all around look like the kind of fields Rebbe Nachman described and recommended we walk and pray and meditate in. He said that among the grasses we must walk with utmost piety. For every blade of grass sings a song, does its perfect prayer to God, and is dancing with the angel that whispers through a star and encourages it commanding it to grow!

Baruch once told me that when he first "merited" to be in Uman for Rosh Hashanah, he had been running around, restless and unsure if he was in the right place or whether it was the right time for him to be doing it. But when Rosh Hashanah began, he felt in a very rich and comforting way that he was in the right place at the right time. May I merit that same feeling this Rosh Hashanah.

September 12, It's 9:00 P.M.: We just arrived in Uman. This is a medium-sized city. There are many many Hasidim here embracing and reuniting. There's a whole different energy her. We've come to the home of the *Tzaddik*. Every step was a prayer.

September 13, 9:00 A.M.: Once we got off the bus I had to find Baruch but had no idea how. There were so many people there. Over five thousand people singing, praying, making noise, asking for charity, Ashkenazim and Sephardim mostly in black and white. I saw a couple of people I knew but they didn't know where Baruch was. I ran into Avraham Zelig Meyers and he helped me. We went to the Rebbe's grave. He said, "Prepare yourself because you're not just going in to see if Baruch is there." I distractedly recited some psalms and then looked for a note from Baruch. I found it and got to his apartment at 10:30. I went to bed and then woke up at 3:00 A.M. to go to *Slichos* [penitential prayers]. It is a difficult and very intense service, first, because I am not familiar with it and second, because the nature of the prayers is painful and sad. It is said that during *Slichos* you are supposed to feel like a crying child. The *shul* was full. The morning prayers which followed *Slichos* felt better and more intense. The praying here is powerful. So much energy. It wakes you up. There is a whole different thing happening during group *davening* than what happens at the Rebbe's grave. I'm going there now.

Septemeber 13, 12:00 P.M.: What can I say about being at Rebbe Nachman's grave? He said that if a man comes to him on Rosh Hashanah, gives a certain amount for charity, and says a certain ten psalms, he will life that man out of Hell by his *peyos* [side locks]. On a very simple level, that's what I came here to do so that is what I did. It is the thick simplicity of just doing and then understanding. It really was beautiful. It was so crowded. I worked my way up to the front, threw myself face down on the grave like everybody else. I didn't know what to say. I left a prayer I had hand-written. I left it there, and then I was pushed away. From a distance I recited the *Tikkun Ha Klali* (the ten psalms) and then sat next to Baruch.

September 13, 5:51 P.M.: This will be my last entry until after Rosh Hashanah. You are not allowed to write on Holy Days, and it's

Recommended very strongly to be as silent as possible. This is Rosh Hashanah, the new year, a new moon, and a new week. It's also Shabbat and the seventh month after Passover, so it's a Sabbath month. There's an excitement in the air. It's a big privilege to be here.

()** **Two Days of Rosh Hashanah:** I would like to leave this time as an experiential moment of silence that began and ended a year in my life, and leave it unanalyzed and quiet, as within the sepulcher of God.

September 16, 1:00 P.M.: I'm on my way home now. One of the last Things Baruch said to me when we said good bye this morning was, "Please, do not make this be something you just talk about ... internalize it and bring it into your life." Last night he told me what the Rabbi of the first Yeshiva he studied at told him when he was leaving Israel to go back to America. He said, "You just want to have this as an experience that you can put into your pocket. You don't want to live it." He told me that when he heard those words he cried hard, because he knew they were true. He said to me, "It's ok for you to feel that you can't live the life I'm leading. You can feel that it's impossible for you right now to feel the truth of my way of life. But you cannot say that the reason is because my way isn't true. You are responsible for the distance you keep." I accept that responsibility fully and have been running and returning, *ratzah v' shava* ever since.

Eternally Yours,

Avniel David Benonim
Peter Abel Salzman