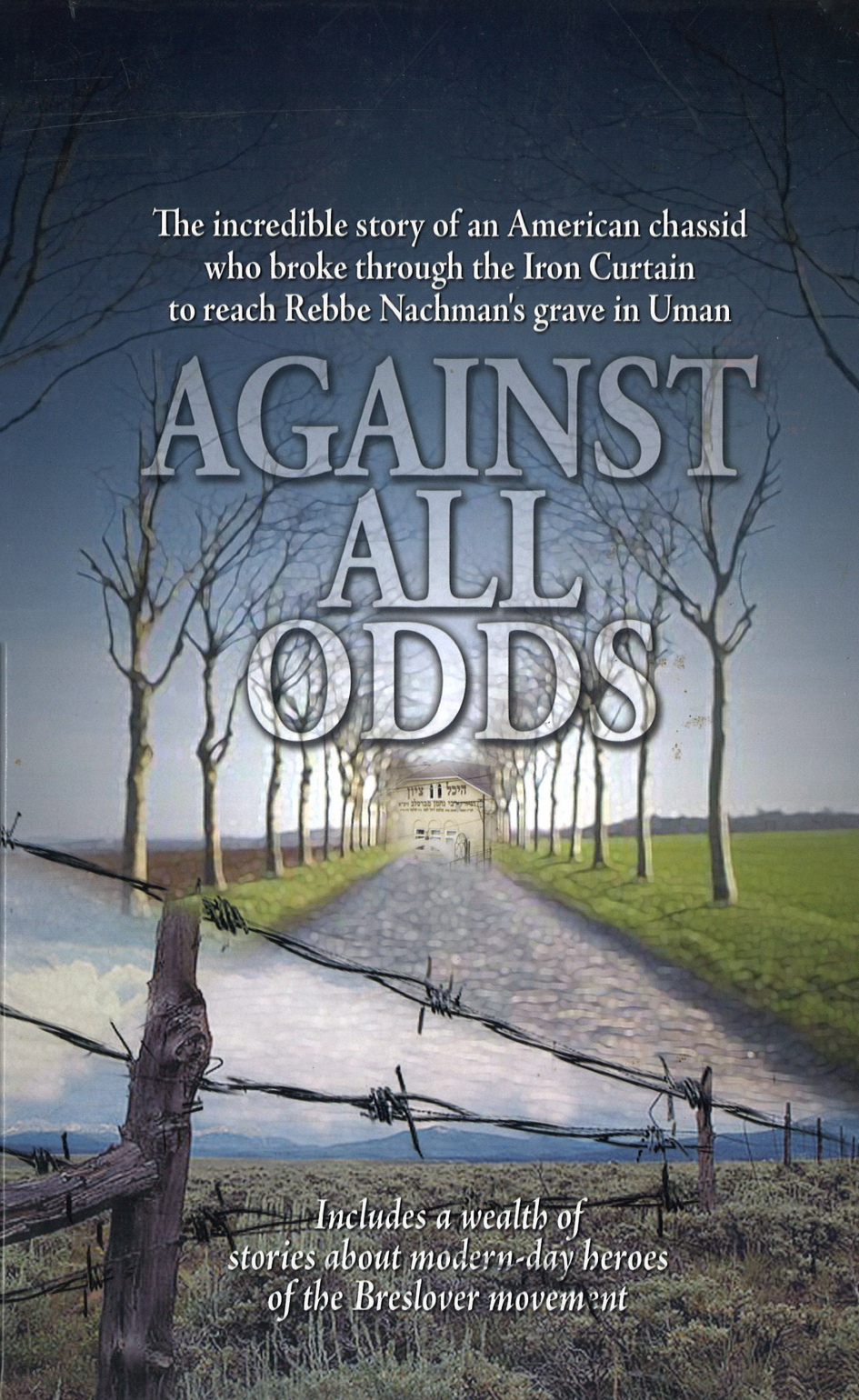
The incredible story of an American chassid who broke through the Iron Curtain to reach Rebbe Nachman's grave in Uman

AGAINST ALL ODDS



Includes a wealth of stories about modern-day heroes of the Breslover movement

Against All Odds

GEDALIAH FLEER

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ולא יעמדו בדין

We dedicate this book to
our teacher and friend

Rabbi Gedaliah Fleer

who has inspired us
on our spiritual journey

Bob & Sarah Friedman

Jerusalem

Acknowledgments

"And he went and did something reckless..."

(*Rabbi Nachman's Stories* #10, p. 200)

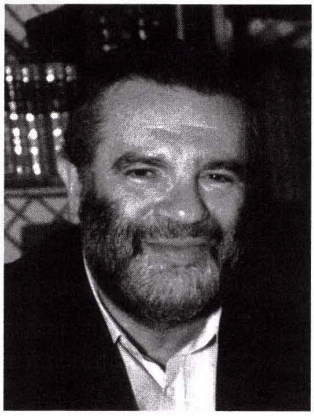
This book speaks of things that are reckless and wild. Things that I was privileged to accomplish in my youth. It also speaks of people living in different countries around the world – their life experiences, ages and educational backgrounds would have made it nearly impossible for them to ever meet. Each of them suffered the "illness of love" (*Songs* 2:5) and would have sacrificed all that it might take for but one truly meaningful and lasting experience of God.

But, in essence, this book is about our great and holy master, Rebbe Nachman of Breslov (1772-1810). His teachings remain a wondrous source of spiritual inspiration, wisdom and guidance for every Jewish soul in quest of God. These teachings were what brought the above-mentioned people together. Through their prayers and efforts, Rebbe Nachman's vision was made manifest and the glory of God was revealed anew.

* * *

To my teachers: Rabbi Tzvi Aryeh Rosenfeld, who first pointed out the path and taught me the way; R' Hirsch Leib Lippel, who encouraged me throughout my journey; and R' Michel Dorfman, who, with God's help, brought me to my destination.

This work was first published in Hebrew under the title *Kakh Nifr'tza HaDerekh* (*How the Road Came to Be Opened*), detailing my trips to the Soviet Union in the early 1960s as the first person in over thirty years to attempt the pilgrimage to Rebbe Nachman's gravesite in Uman. Special thanks to my nephew, Pinchas Zilberman, who patiently listened to many, many hours of my taped recordings of these journeys, and subsequently published the Hebrew version.



Many Hebrew speakers are familiar with Rebbe Nachman, his teachings about the tzaddik, the city of Uman and the difficulties under the Soviet regime, but most English readers have not been privy to the full story in all its historical detail. For this reason, this English-language edition contains much additional material, such as information about Rebbe Nachman, the centrality of the tzaddik in the Jewish faith, the custom and the rewards of visiting the graves of tzaddikim, and the experience of spending Rosh HaShanah in Uman. I am indebted to the staff of Breslov Research Institute, including translator and researcher D. Shapiro and editor Y. Hall, for turning my story into such a comprehensive and appealing literary product.

It is my fervent hope that this book will help direct readers to their most important asset – themselves and their inner strengths – to be willing to face the challenges which confront them, to the point that they are willing to confront and overcome any obstacles they encounter.

GEDALIAH FLEER
Elul 5765/September 2005

PROLOGUE

UNTIL THE COMMUNIST REVOLUTION IN 1917, the Ukrainian city of Uman was a well-known, oft-visited site that boasted a large medical school, a world- renowned botanical garden and a spiritual gem treasured by Jews throughout Russia: the gravesite of Rebbe Nachman of Breslov, founder of Breslover Chassidut. For more than a century after the Rebbe's passing in 1810, his followers regularly undertook the long journey from their homes in other parts of Russia for the privilege of praying at the tzaddik's grave.

However, with the rise of Communism and the subsequent suppression of religious life in Russia, pilgrims to Uman were harassed and even imprisoned by local police. While chassidim in Russia continued to travel to Uman at great personal risk, the gravesite was declared off-limits to foreign visitors, cutting off the hopes of Breslover chassidim in Israel, Europe and America. No amount of petitioning the Soviet government could force the gates open – and, as everyone knew, too much interest exhibited by a tourist would mark him for special attention by the Russian secret police. As much as modern-day chassidim desired to visit Uman, the key to the "forbidden city" no longer existed.

As fate would have it, a key was finally fashioned and placed in the hands of a most unlikely person. Gedaliah Fleer was a typical Jewish boy who grew up in Brooklyn, New York, in the 1940s. Although his family was not religious, he was sent to a local Hebrew school to prepare for his upcoming bar mitzvah. There he met a rabbi who would eventually turn his life around; as a result of his influence, he became a Breslover chassid.

Years later, he risked his life and freedom to travel to the Soviet Union to pray at the grave of Rebbe Nachman. With stealth, ingenuity and iron determination, he became the first foreign citizen from the west

to penetrate the "forbidden city" in more than thirty years, since Rabbi Shmuel Horowitz stole across the border in 1930. As a result of his journey, Uman was eventually opened to visitors from around the world. Today, tens of thousands of Jews regularly make the pilgrimage to Uman for the privilege of praying at Rebbe Nachman's grave.

This is Gedaliah Fleer's story.

PART ONE

New Directions

| 1 |

I WAS BORN IN THE BRONX, NEW YORK, IN 1940; shortly afterwards my parents moved to Brooklyn. My father, who had immigrated to the United States from Russia when he was ten years old, left behind his religious upbringing and immersed himself in the secular melting pot of America. My American-born mother had even less of a religious background than my father.

Although my friends and I were Jewish, we had little understanding of what it meant to be a Jew. We enjoyed going to movies, reading comic books, playing baseball and being part of the American scene. Which made it come as somewhat of a surprise when one day, when we were all about eleven years old, our parents decided that we were old enough to enter the local afternoon Hebrew school and begin studying for our upcoming bar mitzvahs. (In postwar America, it was customary for many Jewish parents to send their children to public schools for most of the day and to a Talmud Torah in the late afternoon and early evening for an hour or two of Jewish studies, until they were thirteen years old.)

We despised school, so obviously we were not excited about attending additional classes in the afternoon. But despite our grumbling, within a few days our parents marched us off to Congregation Shaarei Tefillah, located in the Flatbush Gravesend section of Brooklyn, to begin our two-year stint of Torah study. After all, how could we have bar mitzvahs if we didn't know how to read Hebrew?

Our first impression of the school principal, Rabbi Yechezkel Kahane, was not a pleasant one. He scolded our parents for not having brought us earlier. "A Jewish education is supposed to start at seven years old at the latest," he chided them. "Your boys are eleven and they know no Hebrew? What do you think this is, a bar mitzvah factory?"

My friends and I stood there, hoping in our hearts that he would refuse to accept us. But in the end, Rabbi Kahane agreed to take us, with

the understanding that we would have to be put in a class with seven- and eight-year-old kids. We would be given extra coaching so that hopefully we would be able to catch up. The fee was $5 a month. Our parents wrote out checks without bargaining and left.

The minute our parents were gone, the rabbi's demeanor underwent a drastic change. It was almost as if he had become another person. He smiled at us and said in a kind voice, "I had to say that to your parents, but it isn't your fault. Don't worry. It's not so hard to learn Hebrew. We'll do what we can to help you."

He presented each of us with a prayer book, explaining that since Hebrew is read from right to left we would have to start reading from the back of the book. "Here's your first lesson in Hebrew," he added with a smile. "Remember that in Hebrew, *who* is he, *he* is she and a *dog* is a fish." After that piece of clarity, we were led downstairs to meet our teacher, Miss Hirsch.

The first few classes were not easy. The little kids could read already; we didn't even know the alphabet. Still, Miss Hirsch never embarrassed us. There was an unspoken agreement between us that if she did not insist that we do our homework, we would not disturb the class. Rabbi Kahane sent us tutors from the older grades, and somehow, slowly, with Miss Hirsch's encouragement, we started learning Hebrew.

About a month before Purim, Rabbi Kahane walked into our class and handed out invitations for our parents to attend a grand Purim assembly. On Purim eve, all the boys and girls were expected to come to the synagogue to see a presentation put on by the children in the Talmud Torah and to hear the Megillah, the Book of Esther, read. The younger children were excited, but we viewed the whole idea as another inconvenience. On our way home, the invitations found their way into the nearest garbage can. But although we would have preferred to spend Purim eve riding our bikes, we realized that we really had no choice but to attend. After all, we did want to graduate.

That evening I had my first glimpse of how a Torah life can make a person more in touch with himself. I also encountered, for the first time, the rabbi who would become my spiritual mentor and bring me close to Rebbe Nachman's path.

Miss Hirsch had told us we would hear the Megillah read aloud in Hebrew. But Rabbi Tzvi Aryeh Rosenfeld, who taught the Talmud Torah's higher grades, had prepared his students a little more carefully. The day before Purim, he told them, "There's a certain problem that happens on Purim. According to Jewish law, everyone is required to hear every word of the Megillah. If you miss one word, you have to hear the entire Book of Esther a second time. There's also a tradition that when you hear the villain Haman's name, it's good to shout and pound your feet so that he will have a more awful time in Gehinnom. But the problem is, if you are shouting for a long time, the reader might lose patience and continue reading before the children have quieted down, and then you might miss the next word in the story. So, what should you do?

"This is my plan. Bring any noisemaker you want to the synagogue, and when you hear Haman's name, make as much noise as you can and shout at the top of your voice. I will stand next to the person who is reading the Megillah, and when I see that he is about to go on to the next word, I will bring my two hands together as a signal. The minute you see me do this, stop, so you don't miss a word. Other than my signal, if anyone else, even Rabbi Kahane, tells you to be quiet, don't listen to them. That will be our own little secret," he concluded with a twinkle in his eye. "No one will ever find out."

The program began. Skits were performed. Speeches were made. Songs were sung. And finally it was the moment to read the Megillah. I had never been to a Megillah reading, and neither had any of my friends. All of a sudden, as the reader mentioned a certain word, pandemonium broke out. The older boys had brought groggers, cap guns, pots and pans. There were more than a hundred of them and the racket they made was deafening. But as quickly as the noise started, it suddenly stopped. A few minutes later, when the name Haman came again, again there was pandemonium. Each time, the noise became louder and more boisterous. We had to put our hands in our ears, it was so loud. Rabbi Kahane was trying to get the kids to stop. The parents were trying to get the kids to stop. Nothing worked and yet magically, all of a sudden, the kids would be quiet all at the same time.

The little children in Miss Hirsch's classes also got caught up in the excitement. Ten minutes into the reading they too began to shout and

stamp their feet. But since they didn't know the secret signal, they didn't know when to stop. After half an hour had passed, the reader had barely gotten into the Megillah.

The president of the synagogue was furious. Why were the children making so much noise? He unfairly assumed that Miss Hirsch had been remiss in her duties and had never taught her classes how to behave properly in public. He insisted that she leave the auditorium together with her young charges.

My friends and I, however, did not like the idea of getting thrown out of the assembly. Rather than leave, we slipped out of line and ducked back into the aisles where the older kids were sitting. No one noticed. The reader resumed the Megillah reading and we whispered to the boy next to us, "How do you know when to stop?"

"Simple," he said. "Just watch the rabbi's hands."

So we joined in and were making as much noise as they were, and as soon as the rabbi touched his hands together, we also stopped. Fifteen minutes went by and we were having a lot of fun. I was the last one seated in my row and I suddenly sensed that there was someone sitting in the empty seat next to me. It was Myrna, one of our classmates, and I could see that something was wrong. "Why did you return to the assembly?" I asked, but she was much too upset to reply.

A few minutes later, Myrna had composed herself enough to inform us that there was no way she could possibly explain why she was so upset. She insisted, however, that we follow her out of the assembly. She wanted to show us something.

"Let's get out of here," I whispered to my friends.

"But what if someone tries to stop us?" Jerry asked.

"Just tell the truth," whispered David. "We'll say we're in Miss Hirsch's class and we got kicked out."

As unobtrusively as possible, we filed out of the assembly and tiptoed downstairs to the classrooms. We spoke in whispers, petrified that someone might discover us. Myrna's hand was shaking as she pointed towards our classroom door, which was partially open.

"Look in there," she said.

We sneaked over to the door and peered inside. Our teacher, Miss Hirsch, was sitting at her desk, crying like a small child.

We could not believe our eyes. It had never occurred to us that teachers actually had feelings and were capable of emotion. We had always assumed that teachers were misfits who took pleasure in torturing their young charges. But here was a teacher who was crying because she felt sorry that the children had been thrown out of the assembly. We wanted to cheer her up.

"Anyone got any money?" David asked.

We searched our pockets and came up with $1.10 between us. That was a lot of money in those days. We sent Arnie, who was the fastest runner, to race down Kings Highway to buy a box of Barton's candy, because we knew that was kosher. We told him to make sure they wrapped it in Purim gift wrap. We decided to follow Miss Hirsch home, give her the candy and tell her how much we liked her.

It was late and people were starting to leave the assembly. Myrna told us that she had better hurry home before her parents started to worry. We waited a long time for Miss Hirsch to come out. At last she came out and locked up the synagogue. We gave her a three-quarter-block lead and then followed her. We crouched in the gutter and leaped from one parked car to another so she wouldn't see us.

It didn't take long, however, before she realized that someone was following her. When we saw that she was frightened, we came out of our hiding places. At first, she was upset that we had had the audacity to traipse after her. But once she understood why, she was grateful for our concern. "It's true," she began, "that they told you to leave the assembly. But I wasn't crying because of that. I was upset because everyone assumed I did not know how to control my classes and that I am not a good teacher. I was embarrassed."

We were stunned. We never knew that an adult could be so honest. It would have been so easy for her to remain silent and allow us to believe that she had been crying because of us.

"I live around the corner," she continued, "in a two-story house. My husband and I live on the top floor, and my parents live below us. After

what happened tonight, I'll have to look for another job. I can't return to the Talmud Torah."

I was standing next to her and could see how upset she was. "Don't do that," I argued. "You're the best teacher we've ever had. Why do you care what people think? We want you!"

Miss Hirsch did not answer. Instead, she became an adult again. "Listen, it's getting late," she said. "You boys should be going home now."

"No!" we all protested. "We're not leaving unless you promise you're coming back!"

Miss Hirsch did not argue. Instead, she began to cry again. We were flabbergasted. In a few minutes she pulled herself together, blew her nose and said, "If it was up to me, I would invite all of you to my house right now for Purim treats. But it's late and your parents will be worried about you. So tomorrow, when public school lets out, come to my house and I'll have some treats ready. We'll talk some more. I promise I'll come back to school until the end of the year."

We cheered. She wrote down her address, gave it to us and left.

We started walking home. Everything seemed so profound, so real, so filled with meaning. We were amazed by Miss Hirsch's honesty and ability to relate to us in a meaningful way. It was the first time in any of our lives that we had a straightforward, deeply meaningful conversation with an adult without having the feeling that we were younger or unequal.

David, however, argued that we were naive for thinking that we could remain friends with an adult. "Don't fool yourselves," he said. "Tomorrow she'll stop being human and turn into a teacher again."

We showed up on Miss Hirsch's doorstep the following afternoon. As we knocked at her door, I couldn't help but wonder, "Who's going to open the door for us now? An inhuman teacher or a genuine human being?"

Miss Hirsch's mother opened the door, and Miss Hirsch was right behind her. They invited us in, took our coats and gave us a tour of the house. Miss Hirsch took us to her mother's apartment and showed us the room she had when she was a child. Her dolls and toys were still in the room. She told us she had a different married name now, but she had kept her maiden name for teaching.

"If you're married, how come you don't have any babies?" Arnie asked.

"I had a miscarriage," Miss Hirsch replied.

None of us knew what a miscarriage was, so she explained it. We felt she was treating us like grown-ups. Then she invited us into the living room where the table was set with real plates, not paper party dishes. We were all given a choice of coffee, tea or soda. Nobody took coffee or tea, but we were grateful for the choice.

We began to talk and she wanted to know how we got along at home, how many sisters and brothers we had and what we really thought about Hebrew school. We felt that she was relating to us as human beings, and therefore we gave her straight, honest answers. She told us that any time we wanted, separately or together, we could come to visit her. And we did. All through the year we went to see her.

This was my first meaningful contact with a religious person. Miss Hirsch had an incredible sense of humanity and goodness, which I had never encountered before. It occurred to me that if all religious people were that honest, that open, maybe there was something in that religion worth looking into.

The following year I joined Rabbi Tzvi Aryeh Rosenfeld's class. I remained his student for the rest of my life.

| 2 |

Rabbi Tzvi Aryeh Rosenfeld

Rabbi Tzvi Aryeh Rosenfeld was a descendant of two of Rebbe Nachman's most prominent followers: Rabbi Aharon, the rabbi of Breslov, and Rabbi Shmuel Yitzchak, the rabbi of Tcherin. His father, R' Yisrael Abba, had fled the pogroms and persecutions of the Cossacks in the Ukraine during the Russian Revolution to settle in Gydinia, Poland, where Rabbi Tzvi Aryeh was born in 1922. The Rosenfeld

family emigrated to the United States in 1924 and settled in the Brownsville section of Brooklyn.

Rabbi Tzvi Aryeh attended Yeshivat Rabbi Chaim Berlin (elementary school) and Yeshivat Torah Vodaath (high school). After completing high school, he studied under the renowned Rabbi Avraham Yaffen at the Novardok – Beit Yosef Yeshivah. He was such a diligent student that, in addition to his regular yeshivah studies, Rabbi Tzvi Aryeh completed the entire Talmud with its commentaries and most of the Shulchan Arukh for the second time by the age of twenty-three – a feat that takes many people a lifetime to accomplish. Rabbi Yaffen presented Rabbi Tzvi Aryeh with his rabbinical ordination.

After his marriage in 1946, Rabbi Tzvi Aryeh devoted his mornings to Torah study and his afternoons to teaching in the local Talmud Torah. This was at a time when most people viewed Torah study as a waste of time. He was also the rabbi of Young Israel of Coney Island.

In 1949, Rabbi Tzvi Aryeh traveled to Israel for the first time. The trip involved tremendous financial sacrifice; he gave up his job and was forced to sell his car to pay for the airfare. He became ill a few days before the scheduled departure date, and his doctor warned him that it was too dangerous to travel and might even prove fatal. But Rabbi Tzvi Aryeh was not about to abandon his dream. By the time he arrived in Israel, he was in perfect health.

Rabbi Avraham Sternhartz

On that trip, Rabbi Tzvi Aryeh spent time with the Breslover leaders in Israel, especially Rabbi Avraham Sternhartz, a great-grandson of Rebbe Nachman's closest disciple, Reb Noson. One Shabbat, Rabbi Tzvi Aryeh expressed his desire to live in the Holy Land. Rabbi Avraham advised him to remain in America, explaining that the merit of saving one Jewish soul was worth more than the merit of living in Israel.

Encouraged by these words, Rabbi Tzvi Aryeh returned to the United States, although at the time the concept of Jewish outreach was almost unknown in America. He and his family settled in Flatbush, which boasted a large, mainly non-religious Jewish community. Rabbi Tzvi Aryeh accepted a position in the local Talmud Torah and succeeded in influencing a large percentage of his students to become religious. Despite the opposition he faced from his students' parents, he helped dozens of Jewish youth rediscover their roots.

It wasn't easy. One Pesach, the police came to his house in the middle of the Seder and charged him with kidnapping. The parents of one of the boys in attendance were upset that their son had chosen to celebrate the Seder with his rabbi instead of with them, since their home was not kosher and he couldn't eat with them. Some parents even went so far as to threaten to murder Rabbi Tzvi Aryeh for the "negative" influence he wielded over their children.

Many amazing stories were told about how Rabbi Tzvi Aryeh turned people's lives around. Once, a friend of the Rosenfeld family visited a synagogue in a distant neighborhood and noticed a large plaque dedicated to Rabbi Tzvi Aryeh. When he asked the synagogue rabbi about the plaque, the rabbi eagerly related how Rabbi Tzvi Aryeh had changed his life.

"As a teenager, I was hooked on drugs and stuck in a hopeless situation," the rabbi related. "My father had abandoned me and my mother was hospitalized with only a slim chance of recovery. One of my friends insisted that I speak to Rabbi Rosenfeld."

Rabbi Tzvi Aryeh advised him to take his mother out of the hospital and bring her home. The young man did, and much to everyone's amazement, his mother recovered completely and was still alive years later. He eventually became religious and was appointed rabbi of this congregation. "And I owe it all to Rabbi Rosenfeld!" he exclaimed.

In addition to teaching in the Talmud Torah, Rabbi Tzvi Aryeh delivered lectures to Jews of all ages and affiliations. He loved to share his encyclopedic knowledge of Talmud, Midrash, Zohar, Kabbalah and, of course, Breslover Chassidut. He had a way of breathing life into whatever material he was teaching.

Rabbi Tzvi Aryeh always dreamed of moving to Israel. In 1969, he visited his son who was learning in a yeshivah there. His son urged him to retire and move to the Holy Land, pointing out that he had already carried out his mission in America. Rabbi Tzvi Aryeh shook his head impatiently. "There is no limit to helping other Jews," he said. He returned to America and continued to devote himself to reaching out to others.

Rabbi Tzvi Aryeh made his first journey to Rebbe Nachman's grave in Uman in December 1963. Until he passed away fifteen years later, he was privileged to make the trip sixteen times, notwithstanding the formidable obstacles created by the Soviet Union and the financial hardship. He always included friends and acquaintances on these journeys. In addition, he traveled to Russia on several other occasions, without reaching Uman.

Rabbi Tzvi Aryeh was only fifty-six years old when he was diagnosed with cancer. Told that he had just a few months to live, he finally moved to Jerusalem to prepare himself to leave this world. "How can a Jew leave his soul outside of Israel and bring his body to Israel? It's not good enough!" he explained.

When Rabbi Tzvi Aryeh grew so weak that he was unable to get out of bed, his students came to his bedside to study with him. Although he was barely able to sit up, he remained alert and followed their discussions, occasionally interjecting his own comments. Many of his students made the pilgrimage to Israel to see their beloved teacher for the last time. A true servant of God, he continued to recite Rebbe Nachman's *Tikkun HaKlali* despite his debilitating illness.

Rabbi Tzvi Aryeh passed away on 11 Kislev 1978. He left a legacy that includes thousands of hours of taped classes and lectures, all of which shine a light into Rebbe Nachman's teachings and their relation to different aspects of Torah. But perhaps his greatest legacy is the thousands of Torah-true Jews and their families who owe their spiritual existence to his influence. May his memory be a blessing.

| 3 |

I ENTERED RABBI TZVI ARYEH'S CLASS when I was twelve years old. After what had happened at the Purim assembly, which led to Miss Hirsch having to leave the Talmud Torah, I bore a personal grudge towards my new teacher. Why hadn't he let Miss Hirsch in on his secret, instead of allowing her to be put to shame in front of the entire school?

I was also having problems coming to terms with Orthodox Judaism. I imagined that all religions were basically the same, just a bunch of rules and regulations based on superstitions and old-fashioned notions. But all my doubts about Rabbi Tzvi Aryeh underwent an abrupt turnaround when I started learning with him. I was surprised to discover that Rabbi Tzvi Aryeh had an amazing ability to speak directly to our young hearts. His obvious sincerity and unquestioning faith attracted us like a magnet, infusing many of us with a deep desire to learn Torah and observe the mitzvot for ourselves.

Over the years, Rabbi Tzvi Aryeh developed his own, unique method of inspiring his students. We would literally shudder with fear when he described the horrors of Gehinnom. "There is an Accountant and there is an accounting, there is a Judge and there is a judgment," he would tell us. "Our life has a purpose, and we were placed here for a reason."

He taught us that the Torah contains 613 commandments. Although no one, not even a very great tzaddik, could possibly fulfill all of the mitzvot, it is our duty to observe whatever we can. Then Rabbi Tzvi Aryeh asked us: "How many mitzvot do you think a person has to do in order to be guaranteed a place in Gan Eden, no matter how many sins he's done?"

"One hundred?" suggested one boy.

"Two hundred?" said another.

"Let me tell you a secret," said Rabbi Tzvi Aryeh. "In order to get a reward in the Next World, you only have to fulfill four basic mitzvot, which include all the others."

Only four? We were all ears.

"The first of these four basic mitzvot is to believe in the existence of God and that He gave the Torah (which includes the entire Bible and the Oral Law) to Moses on Mount Sinai," he began.

"The second mitzvah is to observe those commandments which are referred to as a 'sign' – meaning that they are an active expression of our belief in God. These include the observance of Shabbat and Yom Tov and donning tefillin on weekdays. The third mitzvah is to believe in the coming of the Messiah and *Techiyat HaMeitim*, when the dead will return to life. The fourth mitzvah is to honor and respect our rabbis, particularly those who have taught us Torah. Fulfilling these four mitzvot is a little like spiritual life insurance," he added with a smile.

We looked at each other skeptically.

We were all much more interested in having a good time than in keeping so many difficult mitzvot, especially observing Shabbat and putting on tefillin every morning. At the same time, though, we certainly hoped that we would be able to enter Gan Eden. Having heard the horrors of Gehinnom, none of us were interested in staying there too long.

Josh raised his hand. "Rabbi," he asked, "isn't there an easier way to get into Gan Eden?"

"Yes," Rabbi Tzvi Aryeh replied immediately. "There are actually two shortcuts. The first is to die because you're a Jew, sanctifying God's name, as mentioned in the Talmud (*Pesachim* 50a). The second is to travel to the grave of the great tzaddik, Rebbe Nachman of Breslov, recite ten specific chapters of Psalms, and give a coin to charity. This great tzaddik promised that he would intercede on behalf of anyone who visits his grave and does these things. Even if that person sinks to the very bottom of Gehinnom, he said, he would pull him out."

Now, this was getting interesting. The first option – to die because we were Jewish – did not particularly appeal to us, of course. But the second option – to travel to some exotic place to visit a dead rabbi's grave – excited us tremendously. We asked our teacher how to get there. We wanted to set out immediately!

Rabbi Tzvi Aryeh said that on the other side of the Iron Curtain, in faraway Ukraine, there was a city called Uman. In that almost mystical place, one could find the tzaddik's grave.

"If that's the case," Josh said, "instead of observing so many difficult mitzvot, let's travel to Uman!"

"Hold on," Rabbi Tzvi Aryeh replied. "Firstly, it's impossible to travel there, since no tourists are allowed into the city. And even before the existence of the Iron Curtain, it was difficult for people to travel there.

"Secondly, you think that if you travel to Uman, you will not have to observe the mitzvot? The opposite is true. I personally know people who visited the Rebbe's grave and, as a result, began to observe the mitzvot even more carefully than they did before."

The whole time I was listening to this exchange, I had difficulty believing it. The only thought that crossed my mind at the time was, "If *he* believes it – which he obviously does – then why doesn't *he* go to Uman? For something as important as gaining entry to the Next World, it would make sense to risk your life to visit that tzaddik's grave."

Little did I know that in ten years' time, I would risk everything to get to Uman.

| 4 |

The Promise

About seven months before he passed away, Rebbe Nachman called for two of his closest followers, Rabbi Aharon, the rabbi of Breslov, and Rabbi Naftali of Nemirov, and asked them to act as witnesses for a most unusual vow. He proclaimed, "If someone comes to my grave, gives a coin to charity, and says these ten Psalms [known as the *Tikkun HaKlali*], I will pull him out from the depths of Gehinnom! It makes no difference what he did until that day, but from that day on, he must take upon himself not to return to his foolish ways" (*Tzaddik* #229).

This declaration was revolutionary. No other tzaddik had ever made such a promise. And because of the magnitude of this promise, Rebbe Nachman's followers throughout the centuries have yearned to make the journey to Uman to pray at his gravesite.

Rebbe Nachman, like other renowned kabbalists before him, such as the ARI, explained that a tzaddik has the power to elevate all souls, including those that have not made even the slightest move towards spirituality (see *Shaar HaKavanot, Shabbat,* p. 49; *Likutey Moharan* I, 13:2, end). A

tzaddik's special connection with God has the power to elevate anyone who comes into contact with him, drawing him closer to God (see Appendix A for greater detail).

The Tzaddik

WHAT IS A TZADDIK, and how does he have such power?

The tzaddik is someone who has attained such a level of self-mastery and connection to the Divine that all his thoughts, feelings and actions – his very being – are totally consonant with God's will. This gives him a uniquely close relationship with God. In essence, what distinguishes the tzaddik from everyone else is his unique ability to bridge the physical and spiritual worlds.

Yet despite his great spiritual attainments, the tzaddik is – and remains – a human being. The fact that he remains a human being, understanding the struggles of flesh and blood, underscores his strength. By channeling Torah understanding into this world, he can guide others towards serving God properly. Just being in the proximity of someone who is so connected to spirituality raises one's own level of God-consciousness significantly.

We can appreciate this by recalling a time when we too felt a special closeness to God. The spiritual arousal that is often experienced during the final prayers of Yom Kippur is a good example. If we are open to taking advantage of the holiness of those few minutes, we can use them to literally turn our lives around. Being in an atmosphere of holiness can have a deep and, hopefully, lasting effect on us.

That is the level of the tzaddik. Just being near a human being who has attained such an exalted level of holiness will cause one to yearn deeply to draw close to God.

The *Tzion*

"TZADDIKIM ARE GREATER AFTER THEIR PASSING than when they are alive" (*Chullin* 7b).

The tzaddik's power is limited by the confines of his body. But after his physical death, when his soul ascends to much greater levels, he acquires much more power to draw others close to God, and in that way to rectify their souls.

When we come to the gravesite – the *tzion* – of a tzaddik, on a certain "soul level" that tzaddik is there together with us. Rebbe Nachman taught that the burial site of a tzaddik is as holy as the Land of Israel, and is infused with a degree of holiness that will arouse us and make us want to come close to God (see *Likutey Moharan* II, 109). Just standing next to a tzaddik's grave works a metaphysical wonder: Our souls can become bound with the soul of the tzaddik without the physical impediments of this earthly world.

The time-honored Jewish custom of visiting the graves of tzaddikim is first mentioned in the Bible. When the spies entered the Land of Israel, the Torah says, "And they ascended from the south and he came to Hebron" (Numbers 13:22). Since there were twelve spies, why does the verse say "and *he* came to Hebron"? Rashi, the great medieval commentator, explains that *he* refers to Caleb. Caleb wanted to be saved from the counsel of the spies and therefore went by himself to pray at the graves of the Patriarchs.

Caleb learned the importance of praying next to a tzaddik's grave from his ancestor, Jacob. When Rachel died, Jacob buried her by the side of the road rather than in the nearby village of Bethlehem. He foresaw that in the future, when Nevuzaradan would drive the Children of Israel (Rachel's descendants) into exile, they would pass right by her grave. When Rachel would see them, her soul would weep and entreat God to have mercy on His children (see Rashi on Genesis 48:7).

The ARI writes that it is a very great mitzvah to draw close to God by visiting the graves of tzaddikim. Through praying at such a grave we can bind ourselves to that tzaddik, and even acquire some of the tzaddik's holiness. Because we are aroused to repentance by the power of the tzaddik, our prayers are more acceptable. At the same time, the tzaddik will entreat God on our behalf (see *Sha'ar Ruach HaKodesh*, p. 76, #4).

Yet Rebbe Nachman's promise to his followers is even greater.

"If someone comes to my grave, gives a coin to charity, and says these ten Psalms, I will pull him out from the depths of Gehinnom! It makes no difference what he did until that day, but from that day on, he must take upon himself not to return to his foolish ways" (see Appendix A). Breslover chassidim say that when a person travels to Rebbe Nachman's

grave, the Rebbe will also pull him out of this worldly quagmire and elevate him to new spiritual heights.

Performing the three key devotions (going to the *tzion*, giving charity and saying the *Tikkun HaKlali*) deepens one's connection to God and to all things holy. In the words of Rabbi Tzvi Aryeh Rosenfeld: "You think that if you travel to Uman, you will not have to observe any mitzvot? The opposite is true. I personally know people who visited the Rebbe's grave and, as a result, began to observe the mitzvot even more carefully than they did before."

Because of Rebbe Nachman's promise, Breslover chassidim have been willing to endanger their lives and suffer financial privation for the privilege of praying at his *tzion* – in Uman.

Uman!

Reb Noson 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."

Under normal circumstances, a movement cannot exist without a leader. In most chassidic groups, when one rebbe dies, a new rebbe (usually a son or other close relative) is chosen to succeed him. Since Rebbe Nachman did not leave a successor, it would have been natural for his followers to drift apart until eventually the Chassidut disappeared.

But Rebbe Nachman's closest disciple, Reb Noson, who was only thirty years old at the time of the Rebbe's passing, could not accept that Breslover Chassidut would die together with the Rebbe. After all, Rebbe Nachman had told his disciples that if they followed his teachings and worked on developing and purifying themselves, people who had never known Rebbe Nachman in his lifetime would become attached to him and, in turn, would bring even more people close to the Chassidut. "I have accomplished (in my lifetime) and I will accomplish (after I leave this world)," he promised them.

When Reb Noson returned home from the Rebbe's funeral in the fall of 1810, he started to consider what steps he could take to maintain Breslover Chassidut. He recalled the words of wisdom that he had heard from Rebbe Nachman during the years that he had been his disciple, especially those having to do with the importance of visiting the

tzaddik's grave. Less than four months after the Rebbe passed away, Reb Noson hired a carriage and traveled from village to village to gather Rebbe Nachman's followers and bring them to the Rebbe's *tzion*. They arrived on Rosh Chodesh Shevat (January 1811). This was the first time that a group of chassidim traveled to Uman for the express purpose of praying at the Rebbe's *tzion*.

From then on, the chassidim joined together to pray at the Rebbe's *tzion* several times a year, taking advantage of these gatherings to give each other encouragement and form a cohesive Breslover community. As the Rebbe's followers developed disciples of their own, more and more chassidim made the trip to Uman, until the city turned into a focal point

Rebbe Nachman's gravesite, Erev Rosh HaShanah, 1922

for the Chassidut. A large number of chassidim chose to make their pilgrimage to Uman on Rosh HaShanah. During his lifetime, Rebbe Nachman had often spoken about the importance of being together with him on Rosh HaShanah to channel the new year's blessings. And, as we have learned, a tzaddik's influence is even greater after he has left this world.

At first, the chassidim prayed in the local synagogue. Within ten years, however, so many chassidim had joined the Rosh HaShanah *kibutz* (gathering), as the group pilgrimage came to be called, that the synagogue could no longer accommodate them. Each year some other place had to be found to hold the services. It soon became clear to Reb Noson that the only practical solution was to build a Breslover shul near the *tzion*.

Despite the enormous cost of such an undertaking, Reb Noson had no alternative. By Rosh HaShanah of 1829, the *kibutz* had grown so large and the synagogue was so overcrowded that Reb Noson feared that without larger accommodations, people would not return the following year.

The next few years brought a succession of bitter winters and serious epidemics that exacted a heavy toll on many Breslover families, and an armed conflict between Poland and Russia that made life precarious and travel for fund-raising nearly impossible. Despite these difficulties, Reb Noson secured a suitable property, obtained government permission, purchased the necessary timber and other materials and started construction.

By the summer of 1834, the Breslover shul, known as the *kloyz*, was complete and made ready for Rosh HaShanah. Reb Noson purchased a beautiful Torah scroll and bought furnishings. But his joy did not last long. With uncanny timing, opposition to the Chassidut, which had been simmering underground, erupted into the open.

Even during Rebbe Nachman's lifetime, there existed groups of Jews that opposed the Rebbe's teachings because of his novel approach to disseminating the message of Chassidut. After Rebbe Nachman passed away, this antagonism was directed towards Reb Noson, the main disseminator of the Rebbe's teachings. Because he refused to accept the

mantle of leadership and instead continued to present Rebbe Nachman's teachings to expand the tzaddik's influence, Reb Noson's actions were considered open rebellion against the way Chassidut was developing at that time.

After the opening of the Breslover shul in Uman, Reb Noson's opponents denounced him to the Russian authorities, claiming that he was a false prophet whose activities opposed the interests of the czar. Reb Noson was arrested, charged with treason, exiled to Nemirov (his hometown) and placed under house arrest. A week before Rosh HaShanah, Reb Noson somehow obtained a travel permit and journeyed to Uman in secret. He assumed that if he would be in Uman, his opponents would leave him in peace, at least until after the holiday.

But he misjudged his opponents' zeal. They reported him to the authorities, who arrested him on the night before Rosh HaShanah. Assimilated Jews who lived in Uman and who had been friendly with Rebbe Nachman intervened on Reb Noson's behalf. They convinced the police to allow Reb Noson to remain in Uman for the holiday, since he possessed a legitimate travel permit. When Reb Noson recalled the suffering that he endured to spend that Rosh HaShanah in Uman, he commented that it was the most meaningful Rosh HaShanah he had ever experienced. Eventually, Reb Noson's opponents came to acknowledge him for the sincere and God-fearing person that he was, and grudgingly accepted Breslover Chassidut as a valid pathway to serving God (see *Through Fire and Water: The Life of Reb Noson of Breslov*, Breslov Research Institute, Part VII, "The Years of Oppression").

In 1866, Reb Noson's leading disciple, Rabbi Nachman of Tulchin, moved to Uman to be near the Rebbe's *tzion*. More and more chassidim followed his lead until eventually the city turned into a vibrant center of spirituality and devotion. Jews would travel to Uman from all over Ukraine, White Russia, Lithuania and Poland in search of the living Torah of Rebbe Nachman. Between 1866 and 1870, the *kloyz* was rebuilt by R' Sender of Terhovitza, and in 1903, it was completely renovated by R' Isaac.

But after the Communist Revolution of 1917, it became almost impossible for chassidim to get to Uman. Successive waves of troops

passing through the town in 1919 perpetrated a series of pogroms, murdering hundreds of Jews. Meanwhile, the new Communist regime made every effort to repress religious life. In 1936, after years of persecution, the authorities finally closed the *kloyz* altogether and turned it into a metalworking factory. Only a few hardy chassidim, displaying incredible self-sacrifice, continued to undertake the arduous journey to pray at the Rebbe's *tzion* in Uman.

Rabbi Levi Yitzchak Bender

One year, the Soviet authorities granted permission for the chassidim to gather in Uman on Rosh HaShanah. It was really a ploy to discover their identity, for twenty-eight chassidim were caught. Sixteen were murdered while still in Uman and twelve were exiled to Siberia. (Only four returned from exile: R' Naftali Tzvi Dubinski, a yeshivah student named Yisrael der Gomeler, R' Nachman Strakes and R' Chaim Poliner.) Rabbi Eliyahu Chaim Rosen and Rabbi Levi Yitzchak Bender were accused of having connections with a spy ring that supposedly existed outside the Soviet Union and were thrown into jail. The government closed down the room where the Breslovers held their prayer services, as well as the adjoining mikvah.

Despite the oppression, the chassidim refused to give in. Brave individuals continued to make their way to Uman for Rosh HaShanah. In 1936 and 1937 the annual *kibutz* was held in a rented apartment. For Rosh HaShanah of 1938, Rabbi Levi Yitzchak Bender and twenty-six others risked their lives to pray near the Rebbe's *tzion*.

There was no minyan at the *tzion* during the Holocaust. The Germans herded a large number of Uman's Jews into an enormous pit, now located on Shalom Aleikhem Street, and shot them to death. Only two children survived. Other Jews were forced into the river and drowned.[1]

(1) Today, thousands of Jews come to that same river on Rosh HaShanah to perform *Tashlikh*.

In the summer of 1943, a fierce battle for control of Uman took place. The fighting extended to the site of the Jewish cemetery, completely destroying the last traces of the thriving Jewish community that had once existed in that city. The *tzion* of Rebbe Nachman was reduced to rubble. But it was an open miracle that even after the cemetery was destroyed, the exact location of Rebbe Nachman's grave was not forgotten.

At the end of World War II, Uman was returned to Soviet control. The few surviving chassidim began to look for ways to re-establish the Rosh HaShanah *kibutz*. They were led by R' Zanvil Lubarski, whose grandfather (also named R' Zanvil) and great-uncle, R' Moshe Breslover, had been close disciples of Reb Noson. R' Zanvil Lubarski lived in Lemberg (Lvov), which was annexed to Ukraine during the war.

R' Zanvil played a prominent role in locating the destroyed *tzion* and renewing the Rosh HaShanah *kibutz*. In 1947, he applied to the Uman City Council to purchase the plot of land that contained Rebbe Nachman's *tzion*. At the time, the municipality was making plans to raze the entire cemetery, divide it into plots and sell the plots for housing. The application was filed in the name of R' Daniel Zagaiski, a convert and resident of Uman, whose official identity card did not refer to him as a Jew. The city approved R' Daniel's application.

R' Daniel the Convert

With the help of the Lubavitcher chassidim living in Lemberg, R' Zanvil raised sufficient funds to purchase the plot of land and erect a house on it. But before construction could begin, R' Zanvil needed to determine the exact location of the Rebbe's grave. To do that, he searched for the foundations of the small stone structure that had previously covered the grave. Although R' Zanvil spent hours digging in the area where he assumed the *tzion* to be, he was unsuccessful. He began

to plead with God to assist him, in the merit of Rebbe Nachman, to find the exact location of the grave.

That night, R' Zanvil dreamt that he saw Rebbe Nachman dressed in his Shabbat finery. R' Zanvil started shouting at him, "Rebbe! Don't leave us!"

"I am not leaving," Rebbe Nachman assured him. "I am remaining with you."

The next morning, R' Zanvil resumed his excavations. This time he unearthed the foundations that marked the exact spot of the stone structure. Full of gratitude to God, he poured cement over the site of the grave, which was two meters long and 80 centimeters wide.

The house acquired by R' Daniel was constructed next to Rebbe Nachman's *tzion* and was built in such a way that the second window was positioned directly above the head of the grave. One of the outer walls was adjacent to the *tzion*. In this way, the *tzion* would always remain within the yard of the house, and no one would be able to build on top of it.

R' Zanvil returned to his home in Lemberg while the house was being built. When he came back to Uman, however, R' Daniel notified him that he had obtained an exit visa to leave the Soviet Union. The establishment of Israel as a socialist democracy in the Middle East in 1948 motivated Stalin to allow Russian Jews to emigrate there, in the hope that Russia would be able to maintain a socialist presence in the area. R' Daniel was one of the few thousand fortunate individuals chosen to receive an exit visa before Stalin closed the gates. Without asking R' Zanvil, R' Daniel had sold the house in the former cemetery to a non-Jewish family so he could leave the country.

The new owners of the house refused to allow the chassidim to pray at the *tzion*.[2] In the early 1950s, the head of the house died suddenly and his widow sold the property to another non-Jewish family. This family remained there until 1997.

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(2) To deter would-be worshippers, this family owned two enormous dogs that made it all but impossible for anyone to pray at the *tzion*. One time R' Chaim Binyamin Brodie tried to jump over the fence and the dogs attacked him. He barely managed to escape.

When the second family moved into the house, R' Zanvil's wife, Mirel, paid a visit to the owner's wife. Mirel explained that since her grandfather was buried in the yard, she wanted permission to enter and pray there. The woman agreed. Later, Mirel asked if her husband could also join her, and the woman agreed to this as well.

This woman was not as amenable, however, to the other chassidim who came and asked to pray in her yard. Her attitude changed after her daughter became ill. One Rosh HaShanah, this woman barged into the house in which the chassidim were eating their holiday meal and begged them to pray for her daughter, who had been sent to a mental institution. When the girl recovered,[3] the woman began to treat the chassidim with respect, allowing them to enter her yard whenever they wished.[4]

In 1948, eleven chassidim traveled independently to Uman to pray together with the Jews who had returned to that city after the Holocaust. They were: R' Zanvil; R' Chaim Binyamin Brodie and his son-in-law, R' Zalman Leib Astolin; R' Nachman Sternhartz (a grandson of Reb Noson); R' Yisrael Korsonski and two of his cousins; R' Yochanan Galant; R' Michel Dorfman; R' Ben Tzion Kanelski; and R' Yitzchak Zelig Rabinowitz (one of the few Jews living in Uman after the war). This pilgrimage continued until the 1970s, when most Breslover chassidim were able to emigrate to Israel.

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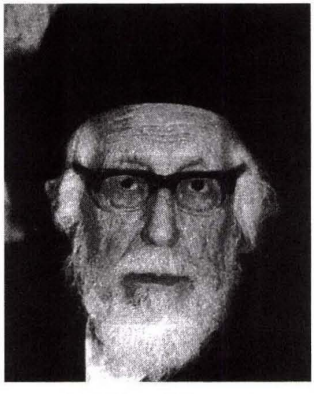
(3) R' Yisrael Korsonski was the chassid who promised the woman that her daughter would merit a complete recovery. "No question about it," he reassured the distraught mother. "We'll pray for your daughter if you let us into your yard, and you'll see, this year she'll be completely healed." After the woman left, the other chassidim turned on R' Yisrael and demanded, "How dare you promise something that only God can provide?" Still, they all went to pray at the *tzion* in the woman's yard after Rosh HaShanah. Not only was the woman's daughter given a clean bill of health a few months later, but she was even able to get married (as heard from R' Michel Dorfman and R' Yitzchak Goldberg).

(4) When I was in Uman for Rosh HaShanah of 1965, I saw for myself the positive relationship between this woman and the chassidim. She allowed us to enter the yard in pairs (so that we would not draw attention to ourselves), and even prepared a bench for us to sit on while we prayed. She also prepared water for us to wash our hands.

Although they had reached the *tzion*, Breslover chassidim still faced enormous difficulties to fulfill Rebbe Nachman's will. Every so often they were forced to change the location of their services, and R' Yitzchak Zelig had to change his residence on several occasions. He was not frightened, however, since he was already an old man and the government usually did not bother with older Jews who insisted on remaining religious.

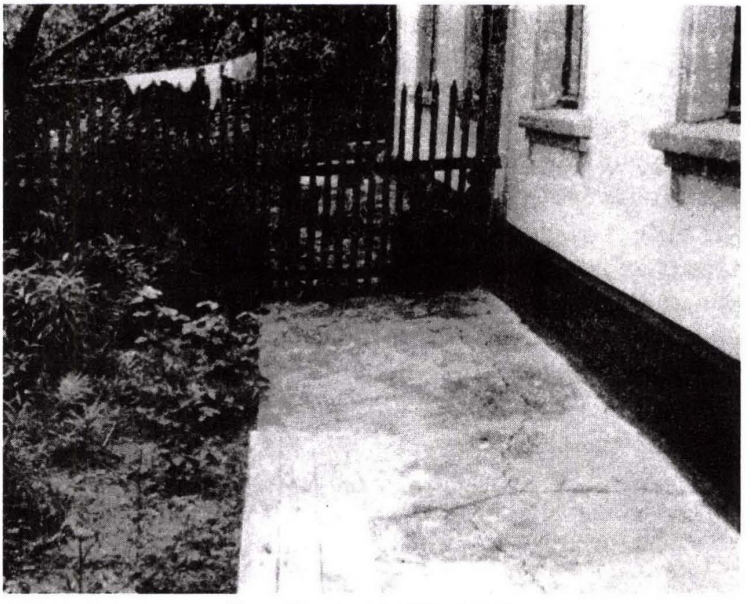
The chassidim traveled vast distances to reach the *tzion*. By this time, most Breslovers lived in Tashkent, Bukhara and other remote regions, where the authorities more or less ignored the population's religious beliefs. The trip from Tashkent to Uman took almost a full week. Other chassidim lived even farther away in Prunzi, Georgia, not far from Uzbekistan. To avoid traveling on Shabbat, they would first journey to Tashkent (a distance of 400 kilometers) and from there to Moscow, Kiev and, finally, Uman.



R' Michel Dorfman

Throughout most of the year there was no communication between the far-flung communities of Breslover chassidim. Just before Rosh HaShanah, however, the chassidim would make their way to public phones (fearing that someone might be listening in on their home lines) and call R' Michel Dorfman, the de facto head of Breslover Chassidut in Russia, to clarify the details of the upcoming *kibutz*. R' Michel would send an inspiring letter to those who lived in remote areas, reminding them of the importance of spending Rosh HaShanah in Uman and encouraging them to join the *kibutz*, despite all the hardships involved.

The *tzion* remained covered with cement until 1991, when a low concrete monument was placed over the grave. In 1992, the Breslover chassidim, with R' Michel's assistance, replaced the concrete monument with a marble one. In 1997, the houses surrounding the *tzion* were finally



Rebbe Nachman's tzion, 1970s

purchased from the non-Jewish families who owned them, and the Breslover chassidim renovated the *tzion* and enlarged the monument. In 1999, the present shul at the gravesite was built.

| 5 |

Although I appreciated Rabbi Tzvi Aryeh's sincerity, I was still very far from being what one would call an Orthodox Jew. I was studying in the Talmud Torah in the afternoons and attending Rabbi Tzvi Aryeh's classes on Shabbat. Slowly I found myself having more contact with Orthodox Jews. The boys who studied in yeshivah seemed much more "real" than the ones from public school. I admired them, but at the same time that I wondered why they were so excited about their commitment to Torah

and mitzvot. It was my sixth-grade public school teacher, however, who planted the idea of transferring to yeshivah.

Mrs. Adele Lichtman was the oldest teacher in my school – and the toughest. According to rumor, she had been teaching so long that she had even taught the principal. Mrs. Lichtman was a short woman with steel gray hair, piercing eyes and black, horn-rimmed glasses that were perched on the edge of her nose. She was tough – even tougher than the neighborhood gangs – and no one ever tried to start up with her. Once I saw four big, Italian teenagers enter the schoolyard when she was on duty. The bell rang and all the kids lined up to go back to class. The teenagers started making fun of the little kids and mimicking Mrs. Lichtman's orders. Mrs. Lichtman asked them to leave. When one of them answered with foul language, she walked over and smacked him across the face. The teenagers were so stunned that they turned around and left.

She was just as tough in the classroom. She taught five different subjects – math, geography, English, grammar and history – with exacting thoroughness. Every Friday, she would fill the blackboards in our classroom with questions on everything we had studied that week in all five subjects. While we were busy writing the answers to all those questions, she would put on a colored smock and sit atop a high stool (her feet did not even touch the ground), marking the tests from the previous week. After finishing each student's test, she would call up that student and review it with him.

I was a terrible student. I never did homework, nor did I take any tests. My father had always emphasized the value of education, but when I was very little, he had kept me indoors to learn the ABCs while all the other kids were outside playing. After that, classes and homework left a sour taste in my mouth. There was always a lot of tension in my house, too, since my father struggled for a living and was always on edge. His whole demeanor created in me a sense of rebellion against authority.

Since I never listened to a word the teacher said, I never took Mrs. Lichtman's tests. Every Friday, I handed in five blank sheets of paper with my name neatly written in the upper left-hand corner.

When Mrs. Lichtman called me up the first time, she asked me what mark I thought she had given me. I told her that probably she had given me a zero.

"Is that what my colleagues did?" she asked.

When I told her that I had no idea what the word *colleague* meant, she swallowed a smile and explained that she was referring to her fellow teachers whom I had had in previous years, adding, "the ones who are younger than I."

"Yes," I replied. "They always gave me zeroes."

"Well, I think they were wrong," she said. "You don't deserve a zero. A zero shows that you failed. But you did not fail; you simply did not take the test.

"The question is," she continued, "why didn't you take the test? It could be for one of two reasons. Either you are stupid and incapable of learning, and therefore, instead of letting me see how dumb you are, you refuse to take the test. Or you are protesting, trying to show me that you really do not want to be in school. But since you are forced to be here, the least you can do to show your feelings is refuse to participate."

Mrs. Lichtman looked me straight in the eye and asked, "Did you hand in five blank papers because you are stupid, or because you are protesting? Which is it?"

Of course I had never really thought about this question before. I certainly did not want to be considered stupid. "I was protesting," I decided.

"If it was up to me," she told me, "I would send you straight home. Learning is a privilege. But since I am unable to do that, you might as well do something while you're here. Why waste your time? On the other hand, perhaps you just need to continue your protest. Sit down and think it over."

The following week, I also handed in five blank sheets of paper. "I see that you have decided to continue your protest," Mrs. Lichtman said when it was my turn to speak with her. "But you must be very bored doing nothing all day. Perhaps you would like to learn how to run the mimeograph machine?"

Within a few days, I became the secretary's assistant. Later Mrs. Lichtman found all sorts of other jobs for me to do in the school, like

assisting Mr. Levinson who ran the movie projector and ushering parents up to the principal's office, until most of the day I was out of class, assisting with various projects.

On one of the few occasions that I happened to be in class, Mrs. Lichtman was in the middle of a geography lesson. She turned to the girls in the class and asked all those whose parents or grandparents had immigrated to the United States to raise their hands. Most of the girls raised their hands.

"I have a very special request," she said. "I would like you to ask your mothers and grandmothers what types of food they ate in their country of origin, and then I would like you to prepare some of those foods to share with the class. When you bring us your homemade dishes, I'll explain why the people in each country ate that particular food."

Of course this sounded intriguing, but at the same time I had a policy never to participate in class activities. After all, as Mrs. Lichtman explained, I was protesting. And if I was going to protest, I was going to protest all the way. So the next week, when the girls brought in an assortment of homemade dishes, I refused to taste them.

"Why don't you try some food?" Mrs. Lichtman asked while all the kids were happily nibbling away at the exotic fare. "This isn't learning, you know."

The first thing that popped into my head was, "It isn't kosher."

"Kosher? You mean your parents are Orthodox Jews?" she asked in surprise.

"Well, no," I replied hesitantly.

"So how do you know about kosher?"

"I learned it in Hebrew school."

That surprised her even more. She stared at me for a few moments, and then said, "Do you know what a yeshivah is? I think that you would fit in very well in a place like that."

My first reaction was that since the hours were so much longer in a yeshivah than in public school, how would I ever survive there? But her words made an impression on me. I trusted Mrs. Lichtman's judgment. That was the first time I had ever considered the idea of learning in a yeshivah.

When I was in seventh grade, I started thinking more seriously about God and religion. On Shabbat I joined the junior congregation services held in the same building as the Hebrew school. Carol, a girl from my public school, also attended the services.

Every week after services, the junior congregation would hold a small Kiddush and the kids would spend time socializing with each other. One Shabbat, Carol and I started talking. She told me that although she would like to be religious and study in a girl's yeshivah, she had no idea how to go about making such a change in her life. "You're lucky that you have Rabbi Rosenfeld to guide you," she said. "I feel as though I am groping in the dark, without anyone to show me the way."

I appreciated Carol's sincerity and her words made a deep impression on me. I had noticed that most of the people I met who were really sincere and able to share their emotions with me were either religious, like Miss Hirsch, or wanted to be religious, like Carol.

I eventually found myself spending more time with "Rabbi Rosenfeld's boys," many of whom had already transferred to yeshivah and some, like myself, who weren't ready to take that step. Every Friday night we prayed in Rabbi Kahane's synagogue and on Saturday morning we had our own minyan which met on the lower floor of the building. After each prayer service, we walked across the street to Rabbi Tzvi Aryeh's home for Kiddush. Shabbat afternoon we made our way to the Mirrer Yeshivah, where we talked or played games on the roof of the building or in the dining room. Almost every week, one of the men at the yeshivah would come and tell us interesting stories. Later, Rabbi Tzvi Aryeh would teach us a lesson and then we would eat the third Shabbat meal together.

The kids who were attracted to Rabbi Tzvi Aryeh were special. Although we ranged in age from nine to fifteen, we felt connected. There was a strong sense of unity that I had never experienced anywhere else. We were more like a family than a congregation. Although we had our own parents, for many of us, Rabbi Tzvi Aryeh was the strong and loving father figure that we did not have. We viewed serving him as a great privilege.

There were all types of boys in our group. One of them, Stanley, a pudgy boy with bright red cheeks, attended the same junior high school

as I did. He was one year older than me and had been religious longer. He was the type of boy who read Shakespeare for pleasure and who wasn't trying to make a joke when he greeted someone on Shabbat by holding out his hand and saying, "Sabbatical salutations."

One Shabbat morning, Stanley confided to me that he was upset he had never been the one to hand Rabbi Tzvi Aryeh his tallit after Shabbat ended. Every Shabbat morning after services, Rabbi Tzvi Aryeh would go up to his classroom and carefully place his tallit in the top drawer of his desk. The minute Shabbat was over, the boys would race from the Mirrer Yeshivah back to Rabbi Kahane's synagogue, each hoping to be the first to grab Rabbi Tzvi Aryeh's tallit and return it to him when we assembled at his house for Havdalah.

Although I had never competed for this honor, Stanley confided to me how much he wanted to bring the rabbi his tallit to fulfill the mitzvah of serving a Torah scholar. Rabbi Tzvi Aryeh always gave a warm smile and a nice "thank you" to the lucky boy, and Stanley longed for that seal of approval.

"If you really want to hand him his tallit, I can tell you how to do it," I said, an idea forming in my head. "Let's meet back here later this afternoon. We can sneak into the classroom, take the tallit out of the drawer and hide it in a different place. You'll be the only one who knows where it is."

Stanley was all for it, and we carried out our plan without anyone else knowing. That night, as usual, the minute Shabbat was over, the boys raced to see who would be the first to grab the rabbi's tallit. But the tallit was not in its usual place. The boys searched the room and finally gave up. They continued on to Rabbi Tzvi Aryeh's house where we normally gathered to hear Havdalah. They were in the middle of telling the rabbi that his tallit had mysteriously disappeared when Stanley and I entered the room. Making his way through the crowd, Stanley came up to Rabbi Tzvi Aryeh and proclaimed, "Rabbi, may I have the honor of presenting you with your tallit?" He handed it over with a flourish.

The rest of the boys were dumbfounded. No one could figure out how Stanley had managed to grab the tallit before they did. Rabbi Tzvi

Aryeh asked Stanley and me to stay behind after the other boys left. When we were alone, he said he also wanted to know how Stanley had managed to get the tallit. Stanley explained what we had done, adding that I was the one who had come up with the idea of hiding the tallit.

Rabbi Tzvi Aryeh turned to me and said, "You had the idea, but you gave away the mitzvah to your friend. You should have valued the mitzvah enough to want it for yourself."

Recalling this incident years later, I realized that Rabbi Tzvi Aryeh was trying to raise my consciousness to appreciate a mitzvah as something inspired by more than simple reflexive human conditioning. I had wanted to help Stanley because I sympathized with him. But this had nothing to do with an awareness of God or the desire to fulfill His commandments.

Nevertheless, at the time I felt devastated. How could my teacher overlook the goodness of my intention? In time, however, I concluded that only God is perfect, while the bridges people make to come close to Him are always under construction. This insight served me well throughout my formative years. It enabled me to revere Rabbi Tzvi Aryeh and humble myself before the enormity of his scholarship. And, at the same time, I could admire him for his humanness and what I perceived to be the depth of his own personal struggles. The more I got to know him, the more I came to appreciate his will to continue in the face of success or failure, in health or in illness.

We adored our teacher because we knew he was devoted to our welfare, physical and spiritual. For example, although he was far from rich and could not afford to send his own children to camp, he personally collected the money for many of us to attend a religious summer camp.

The summer that I went to Camp Agudah in the Catskills Mountains changed my life. Although the camp itself was rundown and the conditions far from luxurious, I developed close friendships with boys who had been religious their whole lives. Some of the counselors and campers were Holocaust survivors. Despite everything they had gone through, they were brimming with joy and enthusiasm for life. There was a certain depth and intensity that I realized must come from an uncompromising trust and belief in God and His Torah.

One of my closest friends was Mottel, the son of a chassidic rebbe. One morning I walked into the bunk and found Mottel lying in bed, crying. "Did someone beat you up?" I asked. "Tell me who it was and I'll settle accounts for you."

"You always think in terms of fighting," he sniffled.

"Then what's the matter with you?" I demanded, coming around his bed. It was then that I noticed an open box protruding from underneath his bed. I looked closer. Inside were a shiny chassidic coat and a large, flat hat. "What's this?" I asked, totally confused.

Mottel explained that soon he would be celebrating his bar mitzvah. Since his father was a chassidic rebbe, he was expected to wear these clothes every Shabbat. "But I don't want to look different from my friends," he added with another sniffle.

"There are other kids around here whose fathers are rabbis. How come they don't have to wear clothes like these?" I asked.

"You don't understand. My father is a rebbe."

"What's that?"

"Well, he's like a rabbi for rabbis."

I reached down, pulled the shiny coat out of its box, and tried it on.

"Leave it alone," Mottel shouted.

"No," I said. "I always wanted to see how it feels to wear one of these. In fact, now that I have it on, it feels really good."

Just then some other boys walked into the bunk and asked why I was wearing the coat. I explained that the coat belonged to Mottel, whose father was a rebbe, and that he would be wearing this coat every Shabbat after his bar mitzvah. "Isn't he lucky?" I coaxed them. "Only the camp rabbi, Rabbi Yaakov, gets to wear something like this."

The boys began fingering the material and commenting on how good the coat looked on me. Within a few minutes, they were all making a concerted effort to help Mottel feel good about himself. That made a big impression on me. In public school, the kids would try to put each other down to prove their own superiority. Here, everyone tried to help his friend feel good. Relationships were based on kindness rather than childish cruelty.

By the end of my second summer in camp, I decided I did not belong in public school and transferred to a yeshivah with the approval

of my parents, who figured that any interest I showed in any kind of education was a good sign!

| 6 |

MY FIRST YESHIVAH WAS YESHIVAT TORAT EMET in the Boro Park neighborhood, which was mostly Italian at the time. I had a wonderful rebbe who was tolerant of me as well as of the three other boys from Rabbi Tzvi Aryeh's group who had joined his class. In those days, there were no yeshivot specializing in *ba'alei teshuvah*, and I had a lot to learn.

Although we newcomers were all around fourteen years old, we were put into a class of seven-year-olds who were translating the Bible from Hebrew (a language we did not understand) into Yiddish (another language we did not understand). Most of these children looked down on us because we knew so little. At lunchtime I sat next to one little boy named Yankele Milikovsky and told him stories about the Baal Shem Tov that I'd heard from Rabbi Tzvi Aryeh. After a while, Yankele took pity on me and agreed to be my study partner.[1] Eventually, my friends and I learned to read and write Hebrew as well as to speak Yiddish. We also picked up the beginnings of Bible, Mishnah and Talmud. At age sixteen we transferred to Yeshivah Torah Vodaath, which had created a special class for boys who came from backgrounds similar to ours.

Although I admired and wanted to be like my religious friends, I was still not entirely committed to being Orthodox. Something inside of me knew that I could not just study in a yeshivah – study the Torah intellectually – without living a full Torah life. At the same time, I was afraid of change. I wanted to be religious, yet still wanted to retain my independence. I was afraid of being forced into a mold. Also, I was young and sensitive and could not stand anything that even hinted at hypocrisy. I had to proceed slowly, at my own pace.

Rabbi Tzvi Aryeh made a point of inviting his students who were studying in yeshivah to join his family for the Pesach Seders. Although I

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(1) Little Yankele Milikovsky grew up to become today's Amshinover Rebbe.

was studying in a yeshivah, I was not invited. I felt slighted, and assumed that the reason was because I insisted on retaining my independence, never joining his ardent fan club. Eventually other boys spoke up for me and I did receive an invitation.

For some time, however, I was so upset that I considered giving up on Yiddishkeit and quitting yeshivah. But then I thought, only the Torah is perfect and a religious Jew is a good person to the extent that he incorporates that perfect Torah within himself. Despite my questions and conflicts, I listened to that second voice and did not return to public school. Most of the people I associated with were God-fearing Jews, and their goodness, honesty and clarity gradually made inroads into my soul.

There's a famous story told about Rabbi Akiva, the great Talmudic sage who lived some 2,000 years ago. Walking beside a river, he noticed a hole in a large rock that had been made by a small but steady drip of water over a long period of time. He realized that if something as hard and solid as a rock could be bored through by one drop of water after another, then Torah, which is compared to water for a thirsty soul, could break through the hardness surrounding his own heart. He immediately went to the study hall and began to learn Torah (*Avot D'Rebbe Noson* 6:2).

The Torah that I was studying and the religious people with whom I was associating gradually melted my own reservations until they disappeared completely, and I became fully committed to Torah Judaism. Eventually my friends and I transferred to the Novardok Yeshivah, where we were able to study with a private tutor for several years.

MOSHE EISENMESSER

Although I was now a religious Jew, I was still not a Breslover chassid. My journey continued as I became friendly with Moshe Eisenmesser, one of Rabbi Tzvi Aryeh's closest students. Moshe

was an extremely talented youth, with a real zest for life and a wonderful singing voice that he often used to express that enthusiasm. We became close friends one summer at Camp Agudah.

LEIBEL BERGER

Moshe studied in the Mirrer Yeshivah, and I would visit him there often. I also became friendly with Leibel Berger, Moshe's study partner, who had become a Breslover chassid thanks to Rabbi Tzvi Aryeh's influence. In 1958, Leibel left New York to study in a yeshivah in Israel. He wrote us letters full of interesting stories about his experiences in the Holy Land. He also wrote about Breslover Chassidut. But Moshe and I both saw the *Likutey Moharan*, Rebbe Nachum's magnum opus, as "just another *mussar sefer*." We were only drawn to books that contained lots of kabbalistic jargon and imagery. Though we couldn't understand such things, we were intrigued and wanted to learn something of the mysteries bound up in those symbolic metaphors. (What we didn't know at that point was that Rebbe Nachman's teachings were meant to be meaningful to whoever was reading them. To the layman, they seem simple and straightforward. But to the learned and initiated who already possess a deep understanding of Talmud and Kabbalah, they are filled with profound ideas and endless, original insights.)

A few months after Leibel left for Israel, Rabbi Tzvi Aryeh invited Moshe and me to an informal meeting in his kitchen. "Leibel is studying in Israel," he told us. "I think it's about time that you joined him."

We were incredulous. "That's impossible!" I exclaimed. "I don't have a penny to my name!" I knew that I could never expect any help from my parents. Besides, I really had no desire to travel to Israel. I was very content to remain in New York.

At the time, one of the topics that Moshe and I were studying was the power of will. The Hebrew word for will power, *RaTZoN*, has the same letters as the word for pipe, *TZiNoR*. This teaches us that if a

person carefully channels his will power, as a pipe channels water, he is capable of directing heavenly blessing onto almost anything he sets out to accomplish.

Logically, Rabbi Tzvi Aryeh's suggestion seemed impossible. After all, we were poverty-stricken teenagers and it was obvious that our parents would never allow us to make such a trip. The cost of the trip was staggering – $800 apiece – and this was in 1958, when $800 was still a large sum of money. There was also the problem of a passport. But we decided that it would be an interesting experiment to see what would happen if we focused our will power towards the goal of traveling to Israel within the next three months. According to what we had learned, when a person channels his will power, he can accomplish almost anything.

Moshe and I decided that for the next three months we would eat, sleep and think "Israel." We spent a considerable amount of time together each day learning about the holiness of the Land, and each devoted half an hour daily to *hitbodedut* to increase our yearning to travel there. We made up our minds to sanctify ourselves in every way possible and to elevate ourselves spiritually so that we would be privileged to reach Jerusalem. We immersed daily in the mikvah, making sure to concentrate while under the water on our longing to reach Israel.

We also tried natural means. We sent postcards to just about everyone we knew, asking for donations. We received about $5 in return. We also took long walks, scrutinizing the pavement to see if anyone had accidentally dropped a few coins, and prayed constantly for Divine assistance to help us find our way to the Holy Land.

The most amazing thing is that in the end, we succeeded in obtaining our parents' permission as well as $1,600, and soon found ourselves on board a plane heading to Jerusalem!

The fact that we were successful taught me that if a person harnesses his will power, there is practically no limit to what he is capable of achieving. Later, when I decided to try to do the impossible and travel to Rebbe Nachman's grave, I used that same method – the force of sheer will power – to break through the Iron Curtain and reach Uman. I simply refused to allow anything to stand in my way.

| 7 |

LEIBEL BERGER MET MOSHE EISENMESSER AND ME at the airport outside Tel Aviv and took us straight to Rabbi Eliezer Yehudah Finkel, dean of the Mirrer Yeshivah in Jerusalem. Rabbi Leizer Yudel, as he was fondly known, was not interested in accepting Breslovers into the yeshivah, but we argued that we were not Breslovers, which at the time was true.

Moshe, Leibel and I studied full time in the Mirrer Yeshivah. In the mornings, before our official studies began, we attended a class in *Likutey Moharan*; in the afternoons, between *Minchah* and *Maariv*, we also studied Breslover Chassidut. But although I was studying Breslover books daily, I didn't yet consider myself a Breslover chassid.

Rabbi Tzvi Aryeh used to visit Israel every summer. One morning, he showed up at the yeshivah and said that he wanted to take me along to visit some of the prominent Breslover chassidim living in Jerusalem. The first person we visited was R' Moshe Burstein. He was one of Rabbi Avraham Sternhartz's closest disciples. Rabbi Avraham had even lived in his home for eight years.

R' Moshe was a true servant of God. Although he worked a full day in the Ministry of Religious Affairs, he devoted many hours to prayer and Torah study and only slept about three hours a night. I saw many of the letters that he sent to Rabbi Tzvi Aryeh. One of them consisted entirely of a series of quotes, but it read like a regular letter.

As I got to know R' Moshe better, he invited me to accompany him to Meron (in the Galilee) for a Shabbat. In those days, the trip from Jerusalem to the town of Meron took close to five hours. I spent the entire trip asking him questions about things I had learned or heard about Rebbe Nachman and his teachings. R' Moshe

R' MOSHE BURSTEIN

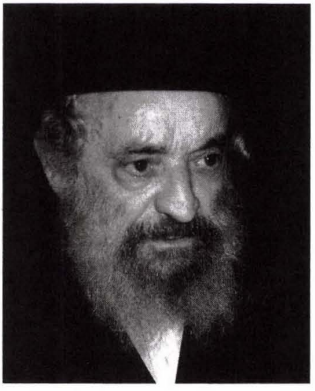
R' Gedaliah Koenig

pretended not to understand my questions. Although R' Moshe had studied the entire Talmud with Rabbi Avraham Sternhartz, he was not interested in publicizing the extent of his knowledge. He preferred to stay out of the limelight and to serve God with simplicity and joy. He was sincere and his powerful simplicity made a deep impression on me, bringing me closer to the Chassidut.

The second Breslover leader to whom Rabbi Tzvi Aryeh introduced me was R' Gedaliah Koenig. R' Gedaliah was also a close student of Rabbi Avraham Sternhartz and had studied Rebbe Nachman's teachings with him. R' Gedaliah was renowned for his deep and encyclopedic knowledge of the Chassidut and Kabbalah. He warmly invited us into his small, two-room home in Batei Wittenberg and offered us a cup of tea. The moment we were settled, he and Rabbi Tzvi Aryeh delved into a discussion of some difficult points in the *Likutey Moharan*. I listened in fascination and realized that there was much more to Rebbe Nachman's teachings than I had assumed.

From then on, I visited R' Gedaliah several times a week. Each time I came, he would hand me a shoebox filled with his novellae on the *Likutey Moharan* and I would spend the next hour and a half studying the material. Afterwards, he would patiently listen to my questions and answer them. He was generous with his time and, consequently, I learned to respect the *Likutey Moharan*. I corresponded with R' Gedaliah for many years afterward, and admired him greatly.

The third leader to whom Rabbi Tzvi Aryeh introduced me was R' Yitzchak Gelbach, who also had a deep, encyclopedic knowledge of the entire Talmud. He worked in the central post office and was very down-to-earth. He was in charge of the third Shabbat meal in the main Breslover shul and would personally set the tables and serve the food for the dozens of people who ate there each week.



R' Yitzchak Gelbach

R' Yitzchak was an incredible storyteller and kept me enthralled with countless tales, mostly about his own experiences. He had studied in the Baranowitz Yeshivah under Rabbi Elchanan Wasserman and was together with that great sage in Lithuania. While living in Lithuania under Soviet rule, R' Yitzchak had been found in the possession of several copies of a ten-year calendar of the Jewish festivals. He would distribute them to Jews so that they would at least know when Yom Tov came out. He was caught by the Russians, who said to him, "You like ten-year calendars, so we're sentencing you to ten years in Siberia." R' Yitzchak told me many stories about how he managed to observe the Torah under what could only be described as impossible conditions in a Siberian labor camp. One of his lungs was permanently damaged by the cold. But the harsh sentence actually saved his life, because shortly after he was sent to Siberia, the Nazis invaded Lithuania and killed as many Jews as they could.

Beneath R' Yitzchak's unusual commitment to the mitzvot and his scope of knowledge was an exceptionally kind, humble and unassuming human being. When I tried to ask him some of my questions about Breslover Chassidut, he answered me in a surprising way. "You know, those are good questions," he said. "Are you sure you want to know the answers?"

"Why, of course," I stammered.

"You have to understand what I mean. You see, you're asking questions that most people your age don't even think about. While they're learning a little Talmud and a little Jewish law in yeshivah, you're already delving into all these philosophical ideas. You must know that every piece of information you learn, especially in the area of Kabbalah, obligates you to act on it. Here's what I suggest. I'll answer one of your

questions, and if you can come back to me and tell me how you used what I told you to become a better Jew, you can ask me another question."

I smiled. "It's a deal."

I met with these three individuals almost every week throughout that summer. I was profoundly moved by their simple faith and awed by their knowledge. I was soaking up the atmosphere of Israel as I kept in constant contact with people who took their religion seriously. By the time Rosh HaShanah came around, I considered myself a Breslover chassid.

PART TWO

The First Attempt
August 1962

| 1 |

DURING THAT SUMMER IN ISRAEL IN 1958, I also met R' Moshe Yuroslovski. A native of Russia, his entire life revolved around finding a way back to the Soviet Union so he could pray at Rebbe Nachman's *tzion*. He used to travel to the Russian embassy in Ramat Gan, bringing along a large bottle of vodka to bribe the clerks. After presenting the vodka, he would ask what he would have to do to be able to return to Russia. The clerks, of course, stared at him in shock. "People who look like you, with beard and *peyot*, wish to leave Russia," they said. "Why are you asking to return?"

R' Moshe explained that he longed to travel to the Soviet Union to pray at the *tzion* in Uman. He told them that it was only while praying at that holy spot that he was able to feel a kind of closeness to God that he had never experienced anywhere else. R' Moshe traveled to the embassy so many times that the clerks there actually began to enjoy his company. But despite his efforts, Uman remained securely locked away behind the Iron Curtain.

R' MOSHE YUROSLOVSKI

In that summer of 1958, the Russian government finally granted R' Moshe official permission to travel to the Soviet Union before Rosh HaShanah, on the condition that he would organize a group of twenty people and that the group would also tour Moscow and Kiev. The officials said that they would decide whether or not the chassidim could also visit Uman once they were in Russia. Even with all those conditions, the chassidim were elated at the opportunity and started to prepare for their journey. The trip itself was quite expensive – over $1,000 per person.

R' Nachman Strakes

Just a few years earlier, R' Nachman Strakes had arrived in Israel. His years in Russian prison camps had so weakened him that he was barely able to stand on his own two feet. He was blind in one eye and missing several toes, courtesy of the KGB, the Soviet secret police. But he had recently visited Uman and was able to describe how one could recognize the *tzion* in its present state.

Leibel, Moshe and I considered joining this group. Before taking such a step, however, we decided to talk it over with R' Moshe Burstein. We found him in his office at the Ministry of Religious Affairs. R' Moshe brought us to his home and showed us the suitcase that he had packed for the journey. "I've taken out several loans to pay for my ticket," he told us.

"Do you think we should also take out loans so we can join you?" we asked him.

"No," he replied solemnly. "You shouldn't go into debt. I'm only showing you my packed suitcase so that you can see how much I long to make this trip. But I doubt that the group will actually reach the *tzion*." When we asked him why he explained that though the Breslover community in Israel was much larger than the one in america, the one in America seemed to be more tightly knit and people were generally more friendly and caring toward each other. This was something Rabbi Tzvi Aryeh instilled in his students and to some extent was looking amongst Rebbe Nachman's followers in Israel. He mentioned the story where Rebbe Nachman says that only people who are of one accord can reach the trees (*Rabbi Nachman's Stories* #13, p. 407). Thus he predicted that if anyone gets to the *tzion*, it will be the American chassidim that will get there first.

The leaders of the Breslover community in Yerushalayim, Rabbi Levi Yitzchak Bender and Rabbi Eliyahu Chaim Rosen, opposed the trip.

Their fears were not unfounded. Both were imprisoned under Stalin and suffered terribly. They argued that it was extremely dangerous, especially since R' Moshe Yuroslovski wasn't afraid to take chances to reach his goal. "He is a native Russian and speaks the language fluently," they said. "He wants to get to the *tzion* so badly that if he and others are refused permission, in all probability he'll just hail a cab and go to Uman. If he gets caught, woe to him and woe to those associated with him."

Rabbi Eliyahu Chaim Rosen

Despite the doubts and apprehensions, some thirty men registered for the trip. They planned to leave a few days before Rosh HaShanah so they would be able to get to Uman before the holiday, if permission was granted.

On the morning their plane was supposed to leave, Leibel, Moshe and I went to Rabbi Eliyahu Chaim's home to wish him a good year before we traveled to Meron for Rosh HaShanah. With Uman off-limits to the Breslover community in Israel, Rosh HaShanah gatherings were established in Jerusalem and in the Galilee town of Meron, site of the *tzion* of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, the great Talmudic tzaddik and kabbalist of the second century. At Rabbi Eliyahu Chaim's home we met R' Moshe Burstein, who was about to leave for the airport. R' Moshe told us that although he was supposed to be departing for Russia in just a few hours, he doubted that his plans would actually materialize. "Chances are," he told us, "I'll end up spending Rosh HaShanah in Meron, just like you."

At 11 a.m., the Israeli government informed the group that all men of military age were denied permission to leave the country. Since most of the men fell into that category, only a few individuals remained on board the plane. R' Moshe Yuroslovski had promised the Russians that he would come with at least twenty people, but the ones who remained were far fewer in number. R' Moshe Burstein spent Rosh HaShanah in Meron.

Never before had I met someone who spoke of Uman and the Rebbe's *tzion* with such longing and enthusiasm as did R' Moshe Yuroslovski. He was a good-natured and generous businessman, ordinary in so many ways, but when he spoke of Uman he seemed on fire. Before I met R' Moshe, Uman had seemed like a mystical city, a fairy-tale place. Now I realized that Uman really existed, that people had actually been there and that there was a possibility of traveling there – no matter how many barriers the Russians put in our way.

| 2 |

AFTER R' MOSHE YUROSLOVSKI'S ABORTED TRIP TO UMAN, I started to think about traveling to Uman myself. It occurred to me that since I didn't look particularly Jewish, nor did my English name "Jay", sound Jewish, I might be able to succeed, while others who were much greater in Torah knowledge and personal piety could not.

At the end of that special summer in Israel, Leibel Berger and I returned to America. It wasn't long before we were both married. Moshe Eisenmesser returned to America a year and a half later. The next year, on Rosh Chodesh Adar, a Thursday night, we celebrated his wedding. On Friday night, he suddenly took ill, and was taken to the hospital on Saturday night. He was in and out of the hospital for two months after that and passed away on 5 Iyar 1961. I quit my job to be with him; after all, Moshe was even closer to me than a brother. Together we had channeled our will to travel to Israel.

Moshe knew he was going to die and often told us so, but we refused to believe him. One day he was healthy and the next day he wasn't; it was all so strange and sudden. When he passed away, no one had made any special arrangements for his burial. As it turned out, he was buried in a part of the cemetery that contained some of the greatest rabbis who ever lived in America. Later, I wondered if we had known who Moshe really was. And in the aftermath of the whole affair, I felt a powerful urge to go to Uman. The only way I could explain it is that somehow, because I was with Moshe that whole time, something about him, an energy

force entered into me and affected me profoundly. I was convinced that now was the time for me to travel to Rebbe Nachman's *tzion*.

Rabbi Tzvi Aryeh, however, did not think it was possible to get to the *tzion*. "There's an Iron Curtain," he reminded me, "and even if by some chance you were able to enter Russia as a tourist, I am sure that Uman would not be open to foreigners. Besides, the travel expenses will end up costing you a small fortune."

He was right. Since I had quit my job to spend time with Moshe, I didn't have a penny to my name. To put it bluntly, I was broke. In addition, it was the height of the Cold War. Everyone, Jew and non-Jew alike, was afraid to go to the Soviet Union. According to logic, the trip was impossible. Yet, three years before, when Moshe and I succeeded against all odds in traveling to Israel, I discovered that there is nothing that can oppose a person's will. Now, I was determined to travel to the Rebbe's *tzion*.

I threw myself into finding out as much as I could about Uman. At the public library, I looked up the city in an atlas. Then I visited the Russian embassy in New York, and was given a list of travel agencies dealing in Russian tourism. I approached one of these travel agencies with my desire to visit Moscow, Kiev, Odessa and the city of Uman, which is located midway between Odessa and Kiev.

"Why are you interested in visiting Uman?" the travel agent asked.

"One of my grandfathers is buried there," I replied. "Is it possible to enter the city?"

"Usually not," he said. "Uman is not on the list of authorized tourist destinations. But I could telegram your request for a visa to Intourist, the Russian tourism bureau. The telegram will cost an additional $15. The trip itself costs $1,300." I paid for the telegram and told him I'd be in touch.

I went to tell Rabbi Tzvi Aryeh what I had found out about Uman and added that I had even gone to the Russian embassy. When I told him that the travel agent had said the trip would cost $1,300, Rabbi Tzvi Aryeh was flabbergasted. "The trip is so inexpensive," he said in amazement, "and there is even a chance that you will actually succeed and be able to pray at the *tzion*!" He said he was interested in going as well, and insisted on paying for half the cost of the telegram so that he could have a share

in this mitzvah. "As my father used to say, 'When one goes into battle, one must smell the gunpowder,'" he quipped.

One week later, I returned to the travel agent. He told me that Intourist had denied my request for a visa to Uman without any explanation.

"If that's the case," I said, "then I would like to travel just to Moscow, Kiev and Odessa." I put down a $100 deposit and promised to bring the rest of the payment before the actual trip. When I told Rabbi Tzvi Aryeh what I had done, he asked, "So, why didn't you wait for me?"

I grinned happily. "If you really want to travel, you can also order tickets!" I exclaimed. Leibel Berger was standing with us and he said that he would also like to come. They both gave me money, and I registered them for the trip. This took place on a Thursday.

That Shabbat, we talked about what we had done. We knew we were making the effort to show God that we were ready to do everything in our power to reach Uman. The outcome was up to Him.

"Even if you change your minds at the last minute," I told Rabbi Tzvi Aryeh and Leibel, "I'm still going."

"Come what may, we're also going," they replied.

But in the end, they both backed out. Rabbi Tzvi Aryeh's wife was afraid of him making such a risky trip. He decided it would be best if only one person undertook the journey. After all, it was just an experiment, and it would be a pity for everyone's money to go to waste. Leibel Berger also opted out, especially after Rabbi Tzvi Aryeh said that he wasn't going.

My resolve to travel to Uman never wavered. The only hitch was that I didn't have any money to pay for the trip. Several months passed, and I decided that I would pay for the trip when I would find a job. Meanwhile, I borrowed $800 from Moshe Eisenmesser's widow.

The summer of 1962 was approaching and I made plans to spend it in Israel once again. I discovered that if I were to travel to Russia via Israel, it would only cost an additional $50. So I decided to spend the summer in Israel and fly to Russia on my way back to the States.

I also had another reason for visiting Israel before Russia. I knew that I must discover the exact location of the *tzion* and receive detailed instructions on how to identify it. Living in Israel were Jews who had

recently left Russia and could provide me with the necessary information. Some of them still had relatives living in the Soviet Union, and I thought that might also prove beneficial.

On the one hand, I wanted the entire plan to remain a secret, especially since I recalled that when R' Moshe Yuroslovski was planning his trip to Uman, people had called him crazy and warned that he might end up rotting in a Russian prison. On the other hand, I realized that it was important to clarify as many details as possible before entering the Soviet Union. If I didn't prepare for the trip properly, I would never be able to find the *tzion*.

As soon as I arrived in Israel, I quietly began to make inquiries into the location of Rebbe Nachman's gravesite. I also approached a few prominent chassidim, such as R' Shmuel Shapiro and R' Moshe Burstein, to pray for my success. They agreed to keep quiet about the matter, but eventually word leaked out that I was planning to travel to Uman. The chassidim thought that I was crazy. They were upset to hear that I had even obtained a visa to enter the Soviet Union. Everyone was worried about me, especially those who had spent time in Russian prisons.

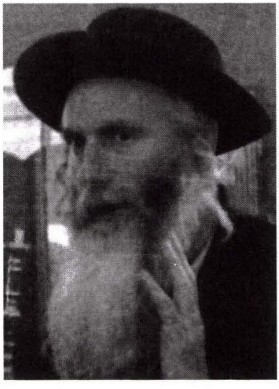
Rabbi Tzvi Aryeh was also in Israel that summer. One evening, right after *Maariv* in the main Breslover shul, the chassidim started pressuring him to persuade me to forget my "crazy" idea. I had already made up with him, however, that if such a thing were to happen, Rabbi Tzvi Aryeh would tell everyone that there was nothing more he could say, and that although he had tried to talk me out of the trip, he could not force me to change my mind.

Rabbi Levi Yitzchak Bender (l) and R' Michel Dorfman (r)

Another evening after *Maariv*, Rabbi Levi Yitzchak Bender, leader of the Breslover community in Israel, asked Rabbi Tzvi Aryeh and me to stay and talk with him. Rabbi Levi Yitzchak told us that the

Russians were extremely evil and that by putting my life on the line, I just might end up being killed. He also reminded us that he had personally suffered at their hands, and described some of the terrible things he had endured in Russian prisons.

Rabbi Levi Yitzchak's brother-in-law, R' Hirsch Leib Lippel, happened to be in the shul while this was going on. From where he sat, he could hear what Rabbi Levi Yitzchak was saying. After a while, R' Hirsch Leib stood up and began to pace back and forth. Then, quite suddenly, he called over to Rabbi Levi Yitzchak, "Why are there so many stories about Elijah the Prophet? If Gedaliah travels and meets up with any difficulties, Elijah will come to his aid. Listen to me: Let him go and he will succeed. Elijah the Prophet will personally assist him."



R' Hirsch Leib Lippel

Then R' Hirsch Leib turned to me and said, "Don't worry. Go, and may you meet with success."

But Rabbi Levi Yitzchak was not convinced. "Even the craziest person in the world would never attempt to do anything as insane as traveling to Uman," he insisted. At just that moment, R' Shmuel Tchechik walked into the room. Rabbi Levi Yitzchak called him over and said to me, "Let me prove to you that your idea is crazy."

He turned to R' Shmuel. "You must have heard that Gedaliah already has a passport and a special visa to enter Russia," he said. "Would you ever attempt to make such a trip?"

R' Shmuel shook his head. "No, I would not."

"And if you had a visa to Kiev?" prodded Rabbi Levi Yitzchak. "Would you try to sneak into Uman from Kiev?"

"Absolutely not," replied R' Shmuel.

"You see," said Rabbi Levi Yitzchak, "even a person like R' Shmuel, who is known for his zealousness, would not do such a crazy thing."

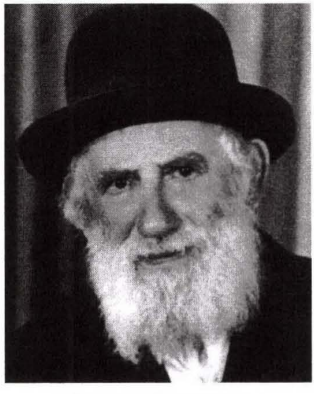
"Wait a minute," R' Shmuel interrupted. "I said *I* wouldn't do it. But if I were Gedaliah, I certainly would!"

"What do you mean?" asked Rabbi Levi Yitzchak in surprise.

"Well," said R' Shmuel, "I was born in Israel. I live here and I would like to die here. But Gedaliah lives in New York. So what difference does it make if he's buried in New York or in Kiev?"

Their words did not deter me. It was only after speaking with R' Nachman Strakes that I became a bit frightened. R' Nachman had suffered almost every imaginable form of torture in the Russian prison camps and looked more like a walking skeleton than a human being. Although I was alarmed by his description of life in a Russian prison and his recollections of the jail in Uman, I remained determined to travel to the *tzion*.

In order to get exact directions to the *tzion*, I spoke with R' Noson Sternhartz, son of Rabbi Avraham Sternhartz. R' Noson had left Russia about six years before, on Rosh Chodesh Iyar 1956. "It will be impossible for you to find your way to the *tzion* on your own," he told me. "I'm going to give you the address of my son-in-law, R' Michel Dorfman, who lives in Malachovkha, a neighborhood on the outskirts of Moscow."



R' Noson Sternhartz

R' Michel was the de facto head of Breslover Chassidut in Russia. He organized the annual Rosh HaShanah *kibutz* and led the holiday *Mussaf* prayers each year. He also visited the *tzion* several times a year and knew its exact location. R' Michel earned his living as a bookbinder and was also one of the few *shochtim* left in Russia.

"As soon as you arrive in Moscow," R' Noson advised, "send R' Michel a postcard, preferably in Yiddish, and include the name and room number of the hotel where you're staying. Write that you have

personal regards from me. If he receives the card, he might visit you, and then you can tell him what you want. It's even possible that he will personally take you to the *tzion*. That's your only chance of getting there. Without his help, you will never succeed."

This piece of information proved extremely helpful. Throughout that summer, I often prayed to God, "Don't look at what I am. Just look at how I would like to be." Often, in the middle of the night, my good friend Yaakov Gedaliah Tefilinsky and I would go out to the fields surrounding Jerusalem and pour out our hearts in *hitbodedut*. When we finished, we would dance together as the sun rose over the hills.

I longed to reach the *tzion*. I had to give it my best try, even if I would only reach Kiev. At least then I would be able to say with complete sincerity, "God, I've made it to Kiev, so why don't You help me to make it to the *tzion*? I want to connect with the tzaddik, and I want his assistance in coming close to You. I want to be able to rely on Rebbe Nachman's promise, and it is for this reason that I have persisted, despite all the difficulties that stand in my way."

R' Yaakov Gedaliah Tefilinsky

I often talked about these ideas with Yaakov Gedaliah, who encouraged me to make the journey. In the 1960s, travel to Russia was unheard of. The very idea seemed ridiculous, somewhat akin to traveling to the moon. But, as often happens, people are positive that something is impossible when really it is not.

Rebbe Nachman says in *Shir Yedidut*, "Do not be like an elephant that quivers before a mouse." It seems there is a quirk of nature that causes an elephant to become terrified at the sight of a mouse. Rebbe Nachman advises us to be aware of our strengths and realize that we are able to accomplish whatever we set out to do...as long as we really want to do it.

| 3 |

IN AUGUST 1962, I SET OUT ON the first leg of my journey. From Israel I flew to Vienna, where I spent the night. The next morning I was scheduled to fly to Warsaw and then, that same afternoon, to Moscow.

I arrived at the airport in Vienna about four hours before the scheduled departure time. It suddenly occurred to me that I had not looked at a newspaper that entire summer. I realized that in order to hold a normal conversation with other tourists I would likely meet, I had better catch up on world affairs. Most of the people who traveled to Russia in those years were exchange students majoring in political science or Russian history at the University of Moscow. They would expect me to know what was going on in the world.

Reading my paper in the airport, I suddenly had the feeling that someone was watching me. I looked up and saw a big, stocky man with a bulldog face staring straight at me. I quickly lowered my eyes. But every so often I glanced up. When I tried to make eye contact, he quickly looked away. "Who is this fellow?" I wondered nervously.

Finally we were called to board the plane. The cabin was practically empty; there were maybe fifteen or sixteen passengers on board. Everyone was either Polish or Russian. Nobody spoke English. Very few citizens of Communist countries were allowed to travel to the free world, but these people seemed to be traveling back to their homes in Warsaw or Moscow.

As I made my way down the aisle, trying to figure out where to sit, I suddenly heard someone call out in English, "*Pssst* – I say there, old man! Would you like to join me?"

I looked up with a start. The big fellow who had been eyeing me in the airport was waving to me. "I noticed that you were reading an American paper," he said. "You speak English. Come sit down next to me."

I had been warned by Russians who had made it to Israel to keep my Jewish identity a secret. My English name, Jay Fleer, which was printed on my American passport, didn't sound particularly Jewish, so people

wouldn't assume that I was. I took the seat next to the man, but kept my cap on.

The man introduced himself as Dr. Alfasi, a dentist from South Africa, who was on sabbatical. I was so flustered about the meaning of this encounter that I didn't realize that Alfasi was a Jewish name. He didn't look the least bit Jewish. As the plane took off, Dr. Alfasi started telling me stories about his travels around the world.

When the flight attendant brought us our meal, I had to think up some reason why I wasn't eating the non-kosher food. "I have colitis and have to watch what I eat," I explained to Dr. Alfasi. "Excellent!" he replied happily – and proceeded to consume my entire portion. He had a jovial personality and seemed to be having a great time.

All of a sudden, he started speaking to me in Hebrew. "Do you know how to speak Hebrew?" he asked

I looked at him in shock. "What did you say?"

He repeated himself. Carefully, I ventured, "I think that sounds like Hebrew."

"It is," he agreed. "And you must be a Yid."

"Yes, I am," I admitted. "Is that what you are trying to find out?"

"I had a feeling you were Jewish," he said, looking very self-satisfied. "Tell me about your background."

"I got bar mitzvahed – not much more than that," I replied cautiously.

"Do you also know Yiddish in addition to Hebrew?" Dr. Alfasi asked, switching to Yiddish. At my blank look, he conceded, "I guess I expect more from people than I should. Actually, I speak seventeen languages fluently, including Russian." He then began to speak with me in Russian, and even sang a Russian song.

As we neared Moscow, Dr. Alfasi asked me how long I was planning to stay in Russia and which cities I was planning to visit. I told him that I was planning to visit Moscow, Odessa and Kiev.

"Does that mean that you're going first to Moscow, then to Odessa and then to Kiev?" he inquired.

"Why, yes," I said.

"That's strange," he remarked. "Because I'm going first to Moscow, then to Odessa and then to Riga. Maybe we should travel together?"

There was only one limousine waiting when we landed at the airport. We both got in since, as it turned out, we were staying at the same hotel. En route, Dr. Alfasi told me that if the Russians were to ask me if I was satisfied, I must make sure to tell them that I was extremely satisfied. He also warned me that I should be very careful not to say a single negative thing about the country, especially since I was Jewish and the Russians did not like Jews.

We arrived at the Ukraina Hotel, an enormous old hotel dating back to the Stalinist era, at around 9 p.m. Half a dozen young women were sitting behind the reception desk, checking in guests in every language imaginable. Our receptionist looked at our visas, consulted some lists, called over some other women to look at the records, and then regarded us impassively. "You weren't supposed to come today," she said flatly.

"What do you mean?" we asked. "It says right in our visas that we're arriving tonight."

"Maybe you were supposed to come, but we didn't know you were coming," she replied. "The hotel is full. You'll have to wait until tomorrow afternoon for a room."

"We've been traveling for most of the day. It's the middle of the night. Can we please get a room?" we pleaded.

"No. There's no room. We didn't expect you. You'll have to wait."

"In that case," we argued, "we should get a refund!"

"You'll have to discuss that with the Intourist bureau, which opens tomorrow morning," she replied without batting an eyelash.

We were getting nowhere. "Listen," said Dr. Alfasi, "why don't you tell us where we can buy something to eat while we're waiting?"

"You need special vouchers to buy food in this hotel," the receptionist answered crisply. "You can obtain these vouchers at the Intourist bureau, which is open from 9 to 5. You will need Russian rubles to pay for your food vouchers, as well as for anything else you might want to buy while you are here. Since the bank is already closed, it is impossible to change your money now. You have no choice but to wait until the morning."

Dr. Alfasi kept up a stream of arguments without making a dent in the long list of rules.

We retreated to the lobby. The large waiting area was crowded with people smoking and talking in various languages. We were the only English speakers there. Most of the guests were from Europe. In addition, there was a battalion of Red Chinese soldiers who had arrived on holiday. Just looking at those short, muscular men with their big chests and red-striped uniforms was strange and frightening.

Dr. Alfasi kept asking me to keep an eye on our suitcases while he went back to the reception desk to try to get a room and some food for us. At one point he joined a group of people who had just arrived from Italy. He pretended that he was Italian and started chatting with the guests in that language. But the receptionist told him to stop wasting her time and to get out of line. Dr. Alfasi returned to his seat in the lobby, his mind working feverishly to come up with a solution to our dilemma.

At about 1 a.m., Dr. Alfasi turned to me and said, "Take the bags and come with me to the desk. This time we're going to get a room."

"How can you be so sure?" I asked.

He told me something quite strange, which reminded me of Rebbe Nachman's story, "The Humble King" (*Rabbi Nachman's Stories* #6). "In all my travels," he said, "I have noticed that every region has its own particular sense of humor. If you can grasp that sense of humor, you can tell a lot about the people of that place. And if you happen to be a foreigner who can mimic that sense of humor, you can get anything you want. I've been spending the last few hours listening and trying to figure out what Russians view as funny, and I think I know what it is. Now let's go speak with the receptionist again."

We approached the desk. Before the receptionist could open her mouth, Dr. Alfasi waved at her to listen.

"My friend and I have been traveling the whole day and have been sitting here in the lobby for hours," he said. "Just because you made a mistake, should we suffer? There's got to be some place in this hotel for us to put our heads down for the night. Give us a bed, anywhere!"

He lowered his voice conspiratorially and leaned closer to the clerk. "I'll tell you what. Maybe you can arrange for them to put a little bed in a broom closet and we'll both sleep there, me and my friend. And when you go off duty, you can come join us."

The receptionist burst into uproarious laughter – and gave us two rooms.

| 4 |

THE NEXT MORNING I WOKE UP EARLY AND, like a good tourist, embarked on an official tour of Moscow. As a private tourist, I was entitled to three hours daily with a guide and a chauffeured limousine.

Afterwards, I went to the hotel post office. "I have regards for someone I don't know," I told the clerk, who spoke English. "How do I go about sending him a postcard?"

The clerk was very obliging and even helped me address the card to R' Michel Dorfman. In Yiddish, I wrote my name, where I was staying, and that I had regards for him from his father-in-law, R' Noson Sternhartz. Then I posted the card, figuring that it would arrive at its destination the next day.

In the evening I met up with Dr. Alfasi again. We compared notes on our sightseeing excursions and he invited me to join him for supper. "But Doctor," I said, "don't you remember I have colitis?"

"Yes, but certainly you can eat some fruit or have some juices," he replied. I shrugged and followed him into the dining room. At the table beside us sat two Arab exchange students and an American priest with his daughter. They were all speaking English, and the Arabs spent a good deal of time vilifying Israel and its Jews in the strongest language. They spoke with such hatred and anti-Semitism that I found myself quite shaken by this encounter.

Two days passed. To my chagrin, I didn't hear from R' Michel at all. Upon reflection, I realized that I had no idea how long it took for mail to get to its destination here. I couldn't afford to wait much longer. Although I enjoyed touring Moscow, I had come on a mission and was not about to leave without accomplishing what I had set out to do. R' Michel was the only living person who could give me exact details to reach Rebbe Nachman's *tzion*. I decided to travel to Malachovkha and find R' Michel myself.

Leaving the hotel, I made myself as inconspicuous as possible. I removed my glasses (since I noticed that very few Russians wore them) and put on a small, Russian-looking cap. Weaving through alleys and streets to make sure no one was following me, I finally stumbled upon a taxi parked somewhere and jumped in. The driver started to ask me questions, but I put my finger to my lips to indicate that I couldn't speak. He nodded sympathetically. Then I showed him the piece of paper on which R' Noson Sternhartz had written R' Michel's address. The cab driver nodded and sped off.

It took us about forty-five minutes to leave the city proper. After another quarter of an hour, we approached a police station situated on the side of the road. An officer stopped the cab and asked me where I was heading. The driver explained that I was a mute. The officer waved us on without further comment.

We arrived in a small country village where people lived in quaint, two-story log houses with small gardens surrounded by picket fences. Although it was late in the afternoon, the sun still shone brightly. The driver pointed out the correct address and I motioned to him to wait for me. I passed through a gate into a grassy yard, and saw a young woman sitting outdoors. Closer to the house, I could see an older woman sitting on a bench, reading a book.

As I came through the gate, the younger woman said something to me in Russian. "I don't understand you – I'm an American," I said in halting Russian. Then I said the words, "Michel Dorfman."

She pointed toward the older woman. I walked over to where she was seated and asked if she spoke Yiddish. "*Ya*," she replied. "Why do you want Michel Dorfman?"

"I have personal regards from his father-in-law, R' Noson."

"You know Noson?" she said. As it turned out, this woman was R' Michel's aunt, Nechama, the daughter of R' Mordekhai Shochet of Breslov. Her husband, R' Fischel Kofiobeker, was also a Breslover chassid. I showed her a picture of Rabbi Avraham Sternhartz, R' Noson's father, whom she had known, and she trusted me.

"R' Michel and his wife are in Moscow today on business and are coming back late," she told me. I asked if they had received my postcard

and had gone to visit me at my hotel, but she replied that they had not received any postcard. I told her where I was staying and asked her to let R' Michel know that I would like him to come to my hotel at 2 p.m. the following afternoon.

This entire episode took about twenty minutes. Meanwhile, the younger woman joined us, explaining that although she spoke both Yiddish and English, she had been frightened. Her name was Batya and she was R' Michel's youngest daughter. Batya started asking me questions to see if I was really a religious Jew and if I actually lived in America. She was amazed to find out that there were young, religious Jews residing in the United States. She too promised to tell her father about my visit.

I went touring again the next morning, as I was expected to do. Then I returned to my hotel room to await R' Michel's arrival. The phone rang and someone said something in Russian, to which I responded with the few Russian words that I knew: "I don't understand you." The phone went dead. The same thing happened from time to time during the course of my stay in Russia. After a while I realized that these phone calls were meant to verify my whereabouts. This was the Russian way of keeping an eye on guests who were staying at the hotel.

At exactly 2 p.m., a man with a small beard, wearing a decorated Russian cap, knocked on my door. He was obviously frightened and asked if I was Gedaliah Fleer. When I replied that I was, he walked in, removed a piece of paper from his pocket and wrote in Hebrew, *The walls have ears*. Then he turned the radio up to its highest volume and whispered in my ear, "What are you doing here?"

I explained in Yiddish that I was an American, that I had just arrived from Israel and that I brought him regards from his father-in-law, R' Noson. It took R' Michel a while to understand that I was a Breslover chassid and that I wanted him to take me to the *tzion* in Uman. When he finally understood, he looked at me as though I was crazy, especially since he had never seen a Breslover dressed in such modern clothes.

To find out if I was telling the truth, he asked, "Did you ever study Breslover books?"

"Yes."

He continued to interrogate me. "Who was Rebbe Nachman's mother?"

"Feiga, the daughter of Adil, the daughter of the Baal Shem Tov," I said.

He asked me several other simple questions, which I had no difficulty answering. Every time I tried to raise my voice to be heard above the radio, he pointed to the piece of paper with the words, *The walls have ears*. Finally he said, "It would be best to go for a walk outside."

I turned off the radio and stuffed my pockets with American cigarettes that I planned to give him. Out on the street, we walked to a bridge about a block away and paced back and forth across it as we talked.

"I spent six years and seven months in prison," R' Michel began. "The police keep my friends and me under constant surveillance. To take you to the *tzion* would be extremely risky, and I don't think that I can endanger myself like that. After all, I still have an unmarried daughter, and what will become of her if I end up in prison again? The only thing that I can do is give you explicit instructions how to find the *tzion*, so listen well!"

He described how the Rebbe's gravesite had looked when the cemetery was still in existence. He told me how it had been destroyed and, finally, how it looked today. Then he gave me all sorts of signs to help me recognize the *tzion* when I would finally get there. He told me, for example, that the *tzion* was surrounded by a very tall picket fence that was impossible to see through or climb over; that the grave was positioned directly underneath two windows on the left-hand side of the house; and that the *tzion* was covered with a slab of cement and had a bench next to it.

R' Michel told me that Kiev was the closest city to Uman; Odessa was a bit farther away. In those years, there were only about seventy cities in the entire Soviet Union that were open to tourists. It was a criminal offense for a foreigner to travel to any of the other cities in the country. If a tourist was caught in one of these forbidden cities, he was threatened with imprisonment. In most cases, though, the police would revoke his visa and add his name to the list of people who were *persona*

non grata – permanently banished from the Soviet Union. For me, being thrown out of the country without an opportunity to return was the harsher of the two punishments. If I didn't reach the *tzion* on this trip, I would want to try again.

"In Kiev," continued R' Michel, "there is a central bus depot where inter-city buses come and go. There are buses that go all the way to Odessa and stop in Uman. But you have to speak Russian to buy a ticket, and you have to be able to read the bus signs to know which bus to take. Under no circumstances should you talk in English, even if someone starts to speak with you in English. No, taking the bus isn't a good idea."

R' Michel thought more about the matter and then gave me this piece of advice: "Pretend that you are mute. When you get to Kiev, find a taxi and show him this note that I will write for you, telling him to take you to the central bus depot. About a block away from the depot, you will see a shared taxi service to Uman. You'll recognize it since the Russian letters for *Uman* are similar to the English ones. Take a seat in one of the taxis and wait for it to fill up with other passengers, but under no circumstances should you open your mouth to speak. That's your only hope.

"Uman is an old city," continued R' Michel," and its marketplace has been in existence since the time of Rebbe Nachman. I will write another note telling the driver to let you off near that marketplace. The city has been expanded and there is also a new and more modern section. But you will know that you are in the right place when you see the ancient-looking cobblestones on the ground.

ROAD SIGN FOR UMAN

"Although the *tzion* is only a ten- to twelve-minute walk from there, you will never be able to find it without help. You'll see chickens being sold in the marketplace. The majority of people who buy these chickens are Jewish women. When you see someone who looks Jewish, ask her – in

Yiddish – to take you to the burial place of the tzaddik, Rebbe Nachman. In Uman, every Jew – even one who is not religious – knows how to find the *tzion*. If you are lucky, you will find some old woman willing to take you there, and you will know whether or not she has brought you to the correct place by the signs that I have described to you."

I gave R' Michel the cigarettes as a token of thanks. He wished me luck and apologized that he couldn't help me any more than that. I returned to my room and wrote down everything he told me so that I would not forget a word of it.

The following day, I left Moscow for Odessa, together with Dr. Alfasi. The other tourists were surprised that I had had the foresight to request a visa to Odessa, since Odessa was considered a desirable vacation spot and a relatively relaxed city for anyone seeking a good time.

| 5 |

In Odessa, Dr. Alfasi and I were checked into a smaller hotel than the one we had occupied in Moscow. My companion suggested we unpack and get something to eat. By this time, I had already found out the Russian names for foods that were kosher. On my little notepad I had written words like *tea, black bread, butter, sardines* and even *ice cream* (which R' Michel had told me was okay). So I was able to dine with Dr. Alfasi.

On Friday we said goodbye to each other. Although I planned to leave Odessa for Kiev early Friday morning, my plane was delayed and I ended up arriving in Kiev just an hour and a half before Shabbat started – and it was a forty-five-minute drive from the airport to the hotel. I walked into the hotel just minutes before the beginning of Shabbat.

The receptionist asked for my passport and said I could have it back either the following morning or when I left. Although I handed it over, I was faced with a dilemma. People in Israel had warned me that an American passport is extremely valuable on the Russian black market – a key to escape from the gigantic prison that was Russia – so I had better guard it carefully. If it would be lost or stolen, I would be trapped in the

country until I obtained a new one. And for every day that I remained in the country without a passport, I would have to pay a $35 fine.

Leaving my passport with the receptionist longer than absolutely necessary could cause many complications. But on the other hand, I could not sign the forms to get my passport back on Shabbat. This made me feel very vulnerable and anxious.

I went up to my room and quickly unpacked my suitcase before praying *Kabbalat Shabbat* and *Maariv*. I also spent time in *hitbodedut*, thanking God for the goodness that He had bestowed upon me until now and begging Him to continue to assist me. Now that I was so close to my goal, I pleaded with God to continue to guide me towards the *tzion*.

Then I ate my Shabbat meal, which consisted of some canned fish, meat and matzah that I had brought with me from Israel. By the time I was done, it was already 9 p.m. and I felt like having a cup of tea. I went downstairs to the restaurant to see if I would be able to order a drink. I told the waiter that I had forgotten my food voucher in my room and would pay the next day.

The moment I walked in, the waiter pointed to one of the tables and said, "You're an American, so you sit there." Every table in the dining room was decorated with the flag of a different country. My table sported a small American flag.

A few minutes later, a youth of about seventeen walked over to my table. I overheard him order pork chops, insisting that they be served without butter. The waiter brought the dish with a small pat of butter atop each pork chop. The young man started screaming at the waiter to bring him pork chops without butter, and finally the waiter got the message.

While the young man was waiting for his food, he turned toward me with a smile. "You know why I did that?" he asked me.

"No, why?"

"Because it's not kosher," he explained. "You're not supposed to eat meat with milk."

"But what about the pork chops?" I asked in astonishment.

"Look, if you can't get kosher, you can't get kosher. But you don't have to eat it with milk!" he defended himself.

We got to talking, and the young man introduced himself as Michael R., whose father was a millionaire who owned four hotels in Florida and buildings in other cities. His father had given him a ticket to travel around the world for his high school graduation. Every evening he would phone his father and talk about the terrible conditions in Russia, while his father, petrified that he might end up in trouble with the authorities, would tell him to stop complaining.

"And what are you doing in Russia?" Michael asked me.

I decided to tell him that I was a newspaper reporter and had come to investigate the difficulties facing the Jews of Russia.

"That must be very interesting," he said, adding that he had studied in a yeshivah until the seventh grade. Although his parents were not religious, his grandfather had been very devout. After his grandfather's death, his parents had taken him out of yeshivah. "I see that you are wearing a cap," he observed. "That means you must be religious."

"Yes," I answered.

"When did you arrive here?"

"Today."

"If that's the case, then you're going to have to take your passport back tomorrow, and in order to do that, you'll have to sign for it. But tomorrow is Shabbat."

"You're right," I said. "That is a problem, and I don't know how I will handle it."

At 11 a.m. the next morning, Michael came to my door and handed me my passport. "Those Russians cannot distinguish between you and me," he chuckled. "So I went twice – once for me and once for you – and got back both of our passports." (Jewish law does not allow one to ask another Jew to do something that he can't do himself on Shabbat. But I did not ask him.)

Michael and I spent the rest of Shabbat together. He joined me for the third meal. We even studied a chapter of *Pirkey Avot* together.

Throughout that Shabbat, all I could think about was Rebbe Nachman's *tzion*. I wondered if I would really succeed in getting there. In addition to all the difficulties involved in traveling from Kiev to Uman, I also had to find a way to leave my room without anyone in the hotel

noticing that I was gone. It was common for hotels in Russia to have "floor attendants," women who were on duty around the clock on forty-eight-hour shifts. They sat near the stairwells and elevators and slept at their posts during the night. They were in charge of handing out and collecting keys when people went in and out of their rooms, so they could keep a close eye on the guests.

I told Michael that I planned to travel to Uman. "The city has historical importance for Jews, with its old synagogues and cemeteries, and I am interested in finding out how the Russians have been treating such places," I told him. "Perhaps you would be willing to remain in my room while I am away and answer the phone if someone calls to see if I'm there?"

"That wouldn't be a problem," Michael agreed, "but if I had my choice, I would prefer to accompany you to Uman."

I weighed the idea for about half a minute and decided against it. The two of us would attract twice as much attention. The following afternoon Michael came to my room anyway, and remained there for the rest of the day.

| 6 |

JUST TO MAKE SURE THAT no one would suspect I was up to something, I went touring in Kiev on Sunday morning. Later, I took a cab to the central bus depot and found my way to the shared taxi service to Uman. But I couldn't get away with pretending that I was a mute. The drivers wanted to see my internal passport, which Russian citizens carry with them and present as identification before embarking on an inter-city trip. Since I wasn't Russian, the only thing I had to show was my American passport. R' Michel had not alerted me to this problem.

I decided to speak a little English and a little German with the drivers, indicating that I wanted to travel to Uman. But when I started speaking, they realized I was a foreigner and wanted to see my passport and visa. When they didn't see Uman on my list of approved travel destinations, they refused to take me. The situation looked hopeless and

any reasonable person would have given up in despair. But I doggedly stayed there for hours, desperately searching for a driver who would be willing to take the risk.

Finally, at 5 p.m., I approached one of the drivers who looked at my passport and visa and said, "Get in."

I handed him the second note R' Michel had written for me, asking to be let off at the old marketplace in Uman. One by one, other people entered the taxi until finally the last passenger – an imposing Russian officer with four stars pinned to his uniform and an official-looking leather briefcase in his hand – plopped down in the front seat next to the driver.

The driver turned white as chalk and proceeded to inform the officer that there was an American sitting in the back seat.

The officer turned around and said in perfect English, "Where do you want to go?"

"Uman," I replied, trying to keep my voice even.

"Why?"

Fortunately, R' Michal had prepared me for this kind of question. Uman was one of the places where the Russians had fought the Nazis during World War II, and the city had a large military cemetery for Russian soliders who had been killed in battle. "I want to place flowers on the grave of a relative buried in the military cemetery there," I said.

It would be impossible for anyone to verify the truth of this story. It seemed to make sense to the officer, because he said, "Yes, I know where that military cemetery is." He turned back to the driver. "You can go," he said.

Throughout the trip, the other passengers remained silent. They were all afraid of the officer, who was meanwhile having a grand time discussing with me all the differences between Russia and America. He asked me how I liked it in America, how it compared to Russia, and so on. He told me that his rank was equivalent to that of a general in the American army, and that he served in the medical corps. He was on leave to visit his mother in Uman.

At one point, the officer noticed my wrist watch. Although the watch itself was a cheap brand, I had attached it to a silver-plated band

that made it look more expensive than it really was. "Your watch," he said, "looks as though it is of top quality. Was it made in America?"

"Yes," I replied hesitantly.

"Here in Russia there are also good quality wrist watches. Are you thinking of taking back some souvenirs?"

"Yes. But I haven't had time to go shopping."

"How do you like the idea of taking back a really good Russian watch for a souvenir?" he asked. "I'll trade you mine for yours."

I was afraid to refuse. The officer was thrilled when I handed him my watch. I ended up wearing his watch for the next five years and took pleasure from the fact that I really had made a good deal: My old watch was always three minutes slow, while his worked perfectly.

We had left Kiev just after 5. Since it was a three-hour drive to Uman, I realized that it would be quite late by the time we arrived. Once in Uman, I would be faced with several difficulties. First and foremost, it was against the law for me to be there. Second, although it was summer, a storm had broken out and our cab was being pounded with rain, accompanied by thunder and lightning. The roads were not good and the taxi was moving slower because of the rain. Surely we would not reach Uman until after dark, and then what chance would I have of finding an old Jewish woman in the marketplace shopping for chickens in a storm? In fact, the marketplace would probably be closed by the time we got there.

The taxi moved closer and closer to my goal. *Uman – 116 kilometers*, one sign said. *Uman – 72 kilometers*, said the next. Passengers started getting off in villages along the way. When we were just outside the city limits, I asked the officer, "Have you ever heard of a pen pal?"

"No. What is that?"

"Pen pals are friends who stay in contact through writing. Would you like to be my pen pal?"

"Why, of course," he agreed.

"Let's exchange addresses," I suggested. I gave him my address in New York and he gave me his address in Uman.

I thought up this ploy to protect myself in case I would be arrested. If they asked me why I had come to Uman, I could tell them that the officer had said it was all right, and would show them his address as

proof. This emergency plan made me feel somewhat more secure. Our taxi rolled on in the storm.

| 7 |

AS THE TAXI ENTERED THE CITY OF UMAN, the driver turned to the officer. From his body language and the few words I recognized, I figured he was saying, "If the American wants to visit the cemetery, why did he ask to get off at the old marketplace?" He showed the officer the note I had given him.

"What difference does it make to you?" retorted the officer. "Let him get off wherever he wants." A few minutes later, the officer was the last person to get out of the taxi, and I was left alone with the driver.

We drove down another city block to a traffic light. But instead of taking me to the marketplace, the driver pulled up alongside a policeman and honked his horn. The policeman walked over, the driver told him something, and the policeman leaned over and barked, "Passport!"

The situation was tense. I showed him my American passport. The policeman jumped into the taxi and instructed the driver to take us straight to the police station.

At the station I was brought before the meanest-looking desk sergeant I had ever seen. He had a deep scar that ran the entire length of his right cheek, making him look downright evil. He started yelling at me, but I had no idea what he was trying to say. He motioned to me to take everything out of my pockets. I emptied everything onto the counter. He took my passport, examined the visa and started reading out loud, "*Moscow. Odessa. Kiev.* Uman? No Uman here."

"*Amerikansky,*" I kept saying. "Intourist. I'm a tourist. *Nyet panyamiah* (I don't understand)." I asked for an interpreter, but the sergeant ignored me. He looked through the rest of my things, but since he couldn't read a word of English, he returned everything and motioned to me to sit down and wait. I took a seat. It was already close to 9 p.m.

There was a small jail in the police station. Two burly police officers dragged a young-looking man through the room where I was seated. The man was yelling and seemed to be cursing the officers. They pushed him

roughly into an adjacent room. I heard what sounded like two slaps, followed by an alarming silence. The situation was frightening.

Still, I was able to maintain a sense of calm because I knew that wherever I was, God was with me. I remained seated and quietly recited the *Tikkun HaKlali*. After all, I was in Uman. It occurred to me that although I wasn't actually at the *tzion*, just reciting these Psalms in Uman must carry some special merit.

Everyone in the station was staring at me in the most unnerving way. After I recited the *Tikkun HaKlali*, I tried to think about everything that had happened to me since I had set out on my journey. I recalled the words of Dr. Alfasi, who had told me that it is possible to ingratiate yourself with strangers by mimicking their sense of humor.

Slowly I collected my thoughts and came up with an idea. I got up and walked over to the counter where the mean-looking desk sergeant was seated and stood there expectantly, waiting for him to start a conversation. Sure enough, he did. He pointed to my passport and, using hand gestures, asked, "Who is that in the picture? And why is there an *X* over her face?"

I replied with hand gestures and a bit of German, which he seemed to understand. The year before, I had traveled with my wife to Israel on a joint passport, which had one picture of the two of us together. Since my wife did not accompany me on this trip to Russia, I had to change the passport. The clerk at the American passport agency in New York had simply drawn an *X* over my wife's face and stamped it to show that the change was official.

It took a while before the sergeant understood that the picture with the *X* over it was my wife's. Then, of course, he wanted to know where she was. "In America," I replied.

"But why is there an *X* over her face?"

I smiled broadly, walked around the counter, took the passport out of his hand, turned to the page where the visa was, and pointed to the word *Odessa*. The sergeant broke out into hysterical laughter. Odessa was a vacation spot where people went to have affairs. For the rest of the evening, the sergeant repeated this story to every policeman who entered the station. Each time he told it, he displayed my passport and

laughingly clapped me on the back. We all became friendly, which, of course, made things much easier for me. By now, it was already 11:30 p.m. and everyone was talking to me and laughing about the passport, although I still couldn't understand a word they were saying.

Finally, someone walked over to me and said, "Come with me." He guided me upstairs to a large meeting room that contained a long, massive table set up like a dais. At the table sat ten men with frozen expressions on their faces. Two policemen guarded the door. As I entered, a short, bald man came over to me and said in English, "Excuse me, sir. I understand that you are the American."

"I am."

"It is my pleasure to meet you," he said politely. "I am the English high school teacher in Uman, and I would like you to know that this meeting is an incredible experience that I will never forget. You are the first American that I have seen since World War II, and even then I did not see too many of them. Since my English is not very good, I would like to apologize if I don't speak properly, and I would like to ask you to have patience. Please sit down next to me at this small table." He motioned for me to sit beside him at a table with two chairs, which was located about ten feet from the dais.

Noticing my unease, he added, "Don't be worried. I will introduce you to the people sitting here. That man over there is the police commissioner. That one is the mayor. That is the deputy mayor. That is the head of the board of education." Every single top official in Uman was in that room, including the fire chief and all the school principals.

"Now that I have introduced you to these people, I would like you to understand that we do not wish to harm you," he told me. "We just want to know why you chose to visit Uman. Don't you realize that it is against the law and that you are not allowed to be here?"

"I had no idea that it was against the law," I replied innocently.

"Weren't you told that Americans are not allowed to travel from one city to another unless it is specified in their visas?" he asked patiently. "Why did you come to Uman?"

"I was never told I couldn't travel. I came to place flowers on my relative's grave in the military cemetery."

He asked me to repeat what I just said and to explain the meaning of the word *cemetery*. I explained that a cemetery was a place where dead people were buried.

"Oh, yes," he replied. "There definitely is such a place." He repeated the word *cemetery* several times. "Please do me a personal favor," he asked. "I brought a notebook with me. Could you please write the word *cemetery* in capital letters, so that I will always remember it and spell it correctly?"

I wrote the word in his notebook and he thanked me profusely. After that, he explained to the people in the room why I had come. Their expressions remained frozen. No one smiled.

At 12:30 a.m., someone ordered a taxi to take me back to Kiev. I started to plead with them, "Now that I am here, perhaps you'll allow me at least to visit the cemetery..."

"No, you can't," they answered. "After all, there is presently a Cold War going on between Russia and the United States. Diplomatic relations are not entirely friendly. Therefore, when we travel to New York, we are not permitted to visit New Jersey. It's a matter of formality to which both our countries strictly adhere."

I was back in my hotel room at 4 a.m. Michael told me that the telephone had rung several times while I was away. Each time he had answered it, the line went dead. After I recounted my adventures, Michael returned to his own room.

I was heartbroken about the way my trip had turned out. I had paid so much money and traveled so far, and had even reached the city of Uman – yet I wasn't able to reach the *tzion*. There must be some reason why I was not deemed worthy to reach the Rebbe's gravesite.

I was lying in bed feeling sorry for myself and trying to fall asleep when I found myself thinking about the sport of pole vaulting. I had never had any interest in sports, except maybe the martial arts, so I couldn't understand why I was suddenly thinking about pole vaulting, a sport I had probably seen on the news. Nevertheless, I relaxed and let the pole vaulting scene play itself out in my mind. I watched the athlete run to the place from which he intended to make his leap. But instead of leaping, I saw him stop and return to the starting line to begin again and make the actual leap the second time.

It seemed to me that the runner was sizing up the strength he would need to make the actual leap when he ran forward the first time. But he didn't make the jump until he ran again. The same could be true for me. Tonight's experience was my first move forward, and now I would have to go back and start again. But the next time I would do it. I got to Uman this time; I would get to the *tzion* next time, with God's help.

This idea is similar to what Rebbe Nachman writes in *Likutey Moharan* (II, 48). When a person first begins to come close to God, he may feel that Heaven is spurning all his efforts, and he must fortify himself not to give up. Eventually, all the barriers will disappear. I knew that God had placed this thought in my mind to show me that my aborted attempt was really a *yeridah*, a failure, for the sake of a later *aliyah*, success. Although it appeared that I had failed, this was only so that I would be able to succeed at a later date. I was encouraged by the realization that both success and failure come from Above.

I wondered what I should say to Rabbi Tzvi Aryeh and my friends upon my return. If I told them that I had failed, they might retort that I had been foolish to try and had also wasted a lot of money. Their lack of encouragement might cause me to become despondent. I felt that I had to come up with a plausible story.

When I returned to New York, I recounted everything that had happened to me exactly as it had occurred – except that I changed the ending. I said that the Russian officer in the taxi had been so nice to me that he had instructed the driver to take me all the way to the *tzion*, despite the late hour. The moment I saw the fence surrounding the *tzion*, I started to recite the *Tikkun HaKlali* in the light that shone from one of the houses. Since I was afraid that someone might notice me, I remained outside, intending to enter the yard as soon as I finished reciting the ten chapters of Psalms. But I only managed to recite three chapters before the taxi returned. This time, however, instead of the officer, a policeman was sitting in the taxi.

The driver, I figured, must have feared that if I were caught and interrogated, I would implicate him. Therefore, he had called the police, who came to take me to the police station. I told everyone that I had reached the *tzion*, but since I had not managed to recite the entire *Tikkun*

HaKlali, I was planning to travel there again. The next time, I would not allow anything to stand in my way.

I assumed that everyone would find this story encouraging. In fact, anyone who heard the story told me that since I had made it to the *tzion* and succeeded in reciting three chapters of Psalms, that was sufficient reason for me to try another time. A year later, though, when I returned to Israel for my next trip, I ran into R' Nachman Kanelski and his brother, R' Ben Tzion. "So, you really got to the *tzion*?" they asked me.

"Yes," I said modestly.

"Really? You got to the *tzion*? How did you get there?" R' Ben Tzion prodded.

"By taxi," I replied.

"Which way did the taxi go after it let you off?" he asked casually.

"Straight ahead."

"Very interesting," he said. I realized he had caught me in a lie. When I finally did make it to the *tzion*, I saw that it would be impossible for the taxi to continue straight, since the road came to a dead end (today the road continues).

For the next year I thought about, prayed about and spoke about how I would get back to Uman to prostrate myself at the *tzion*. Nothing else in my life seemed to matter as much.

R' Nachman Kanelski (R) and his brother R' Ben Tzion Kanelski (L)

PART THREE

Breaking All Barriers
August 1963

| 1 |

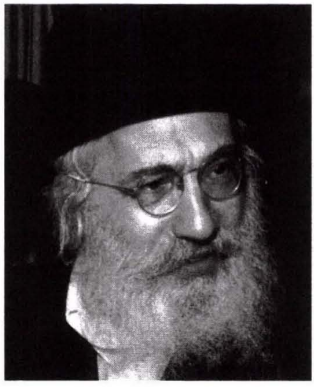
ONE OF THE FIRST THINGS I HAD DONE when I returned to New York was contact Rabbi Tzvi Aryeh and tell him about my trip. He was amazed at what I had accomplished. "From now on, I will have to treat you with extra respect since you have been privileged to pray at the *tzion*," he said. Everyone urged me to make another trip, and some even said that they would like to go with me.

I began to notice encouraging signs that inspired me to try again. I found a teaching job and was able to pay back all my debts. My life was going well and I prayed that the next time I made the trip, God would assist me in actually reaching the *tzion*.

Early in 1963, I requested another permit to visit Moscow, Kiev and Odessa, although I had no idea how I could possibly afford the trip. Each person has some obstacle that makes it "impossible" for him to travel to Uman. For some it is family; for others, it is fear of the Soviet regime. For me, it was money. I started looking for people who could lend me the necessary funds.

But all my friends were either yeshivah students or newly-married men. No one had extra money to lend. So I came up with a plan. I had seen the spiritual suffering of the Jews in Russia and knew that there were no organizations set up to assist them. It occurred to me that I might be able to earn the money for my trip by helping those isolated Jews. I made up my mind to smuggle in religious articles such as tzitzit, tefillin, mezuzot, prayer books, etc. – and let R' Michel distribute them to whoever needed them. R' Michel had mentioned that his own tefillin were already twenty years old. He was afraid to check them to see if they were still kosher since, if they were invalid, there was no place in the entire country where he could buy another pair.

I decided to approach several rabbis to discuss my plan and to ask for financial assistance. The first rabbi I spoke with was Rabbi Moshe Tzvi Aryeh



Rabbi Moshe Tzvi Aryeh Bick

Bick, who was living in the Bronx at the time. I had been friendly with a student of his who suggested I speak with Rabbi Bick about the Jewish situation in Russia. Rabbi Bick was very interested in what I was doing and asked me why I had gone to Russia in the first place.

"I went to visit the *tzion* of Rebbe Nachman in Uman," I replied.

"Are you a Breslover chassid?" he asked.

"I would like to be."

"If you answer me like that, then I can tell that you are already a Breslover," he said with a smile. "I would like you to know that I highly respect the Breslover chassidim. My father lived in Medzeboz. Every year before Rosh HaShanah, he would hide the Polish chassidim who had illegally crossed into Russia. On their way home from Uman after the holiday, they would stay with us again. I remember how R' Yitzchak Mendel Rottenberg would bounce me on his knee when I was a small child.

"In my opinion, it is against Jewish law for you to risk your life trying to sneak into Uman. But you didn't ask for my opinion, and anyway, there is one thing I know for sure: If you are really a Breslover, there is nothing I can say that will make any difference. I cannot give over a large sum of money to support a trip that I consider life-threatening. On the other hand, I cannot send you away without giving you something, so I will give you $50. If you do succeed in reaching the *tzion*, please pray for me there. When you return home, come speak with me again and I will give you money for sending packages to needy people you have met in Russia."[1]

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(1) When I returned from Russia, Rabbi Bick gave me a $500 donation to send packages to Russian Jews. He still felt, however, that the trip was too dangerous and that I should not make other attempts to journey to Russia.

After speaking with Rabbi Bick, I went to speak with the Kapischnitzer Rebbe, Rabbi Avraham Yehoshua Heschel, who lived on the Lower East Side. I knew the Kapischnitzer's grandson, Noson Gur Aryeh, from summer camp. Several years before, I had saved Noson from falling out of a car, and he had introduced me to his grandfather. After that, I would occasionally visit the rebbe.

I spoke in English and the rebbe answered in Yiddish. I told him about my previous trip and about my plans to bring religious articles to the Jews in Russia. He stared at me in amazement and asked, "But why? What connection do you have with Russia? Why did you go there to begin with?"

I told him that I wanted to travel to the *tzion* in Uman. He wished me luck and gave me a $50 donation.

I also went to speak with the Satmar Rebbe, Rabbi Yoel Teitelbaum, who gave me a $100 donation.[2] I spoke with several more chassidic rebbes and heads of yeshivot and collected a total of $500. Rabbi Tzvi Aryeh promised to give me $200 and other friends offered me loans or monetary grants. I needed nearly $1,500 for the trip. The price had gone up since I estimated that I would have to stay in Russia longer this year in order to accomplish my objectives.

Although immediately after I had returned from Russia the previous summer everyone had encouraged me to go again, a year later, these same people were trying to convince me not to go. My sister, for example, had promised me a sum of money, but now she claimed that she had lent the money to someone else who had not yet paid her back. Later I discovered that Rabbi Tzvi Aryeh had asked her not to help me,

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(2) R' Tzvi Yosef Wasilski (d. 1981) discussed his plans to print the *Tikkun HaKlali* with the Satmar Rebbe, who regularly studied Rebbe Nachman's books. The rebbe once related that his father, the Kedushas Yom Tov, had studied these books with him when he was a young man, and the rebbe himself refers to Rebbe Nachman's teachings in many of his own writings. The Satmar Rebbe gave R' Tzvi Yosef a $150 donation towards the printing of his book. But when R' Tzvi Yosef asked if he should acknowledge the rebbe's donation in the introduction to the book, the rebbe declined, lest those who opposed Satmar Chassidut would thereafter refrain from reciting the *Tikkun HaKlali*.

since he was worried that something might happen to me during the trip. On the one hand he really did want me to travel to the *tzion*, but on the other hand he realized that since I already had a record with the police, I couldn't plead ignorance if I was caught again. And if anything serious happened to me, he would blame himself.

Leibel Berger decided to join me on my next trip. He was with me when I went to speak with R' Yitzchak Mendel Rottenberg about my smuggling project. When R' Yitzchak Mendel heard that I was planning to travel to Russia again, he started screaming that I was out of my mind to do such a crazy thing and told Leibel that I was leading him straight into a Russian prison. When Leibel heard this, he canceled his plans.

I received much encouragement, however, from a different quarter. Several years earlier, when Leibel, Moshe Eisenmesser and I had been yeshivah students, we had traveled to Crown Heights one Saturday night to raise money for the Breslover Yeshivah in Jerusalem. We saw that one of the houses was all lit up and heard men fervently singing inside.

When we entered that house, we felt totally out of place. We looked like typical American yeshivah boys, while all the other men present wore their chassidic finery. A short man sat at the head of the table. Someone told us that he was the Skulener Rebbe, Rabbi Eliezer Zusia Portugal. The moment he noticed us, the rebbe ran over and greeted us warmly, asking how he could be of service.

"We're collecting for the Breslover Yeshivah in Jerusalem," we told him.

He apologized that he could not assist us, since he had just arrived from Romania and was completely destitute. The Kapischnitzer Rebbe, he explained, had purchased this house for him. At the moment, he was in the middle of a *Melaveh Malkah* that doubled as a housewarming party. Though he was penniless, he did want to give us something. He went upstairs to his private residence and returned with $25, which was considered a nice sum in those days. "I would be more than happy to help you another time," he said warmly.

Now I remembered the Skulener Rebbe and how nice he had been to us. So one Saturday night, I asked a friend to drive me to Crown Heights, thinking that the rebbe might want to help me again. We

arrived to find him and his assistant alone in the shul. His aide explained that it took the rebbe a long time to pray the *Shemoneh Esrei* of *Maariv*. Meanwhile, his chassidim went home to eat their *Melaveh Malkah*. By the time the rebbe finished *Maariv* it was 11 p.m., and the shul filled up with chassidim who came to finish the prayer service with him and hear the rebbe recite Havdalah.

Right after Havdalah, people started lining up to speak privately with the rebbe. By the time my turn came, it was 1:30 a.m. The rebbe was sitting in a large study lined with books. I told him that I was planning to travel to Russia.

"Why?" he asked.

"I am planning to smuggle in religious articles."

"What connection do you have with Russia?" he began the by-now familiar refrain.

"I went the first time to visit the *tzion* of Rebbe Nachman in Uman," I explained. "While I was there, I saw how much the Russian Jews needed religious articles like tefillin, mezuzot, books, etc. So I decided to go again and smuggle in some of these things. But I need money for my expenses. I would also like to visit the *tzion*, with God's help."

"Are you a Breslover?"

"I would like to be."

"I never saw a Breslover dressed like you. Are you an American?"

"Yes."

"Okay, let's say I believe that you are a Breslover. In that case, before we begin speaking about money, I would like you to know that all the books you see in this room do not belong to me. My chassidim bought them for me, but I personally have no money. When I lived in Romania, I never let a day go by without studying something from Rebbe Nachman's books. I owned every single Breslover book. But here in the United States, I never asked my chassidim to purchase Breslover books for me, since I had no idea that Breslov exists in America. But now that I know that Breslov does exist in America, I would appreciate it if you could bring me copies of all the Breslover books."

"When?"

"As quickly as possible."

The next day I went to Leibel Berger's house and together we prepared a large package of Breslover books. The following evening, I delivered them to the Skulener Rebbe. He was delighted. "I am not in control of my own money, but I did put some pressure on the people supporting me," he told me. "Here is a check for $500. They did not want to let me give more than that." Besides his $500 donation, the rebbe also handed me a $200 check for the books, even though the actual cost was only $80. "The rest of the money is a donation to Breslov," he said with a smile.

I put the checks in my left pocket, but the rebbe told me to place them in my right pocket, since the Zohar states that the attribute of *chesed*, lovingkindness, is on the right side and supports the forces of holiness. "My intention was that the checks, which symbolize giving and lovingkindness, should overpower the forces of harsh judgment, *gevurah*, which are on my left side," I responded. "That's why I placed them in my left pocket." The rebbe took pleasure in my words and wished me well. He asked me to write his name on a piece of paper so that I would remember to pray for him at the *tzion*.

Eventually I collected enough money to pay for my trip and was on my way to Israel. One of the first things I did when I arrived was to visit Rabbi Tzvi Aryeh, who had traveled there a few weeks earlier, as he did every summer. When he heard that I had managed to amass enough money to pay for the trip, he looked at me in surprise and said, "*Nu*, it was from Heaven." After handing me the $200 he had promised, he said, "Let's make up to do the same thing as we did last year. If someone asks you about your trip, and if I am encouraging you, tell them that I have nothing to do with your decisions."

Throughout that summer, only Yaakov Gedaliah Tefilinsky spoke to me about my plans. Rabbi Eliyahu Chaim Rosen, one of the leaders of the Breslover chassidim, once scolded me, "You are a fool. They caught you last year. What will happen if they catch you again? Even America will not be able to help you. Russia is a horrible country. I was imprisoned there, and only someone who suffered like I did can understand what goes on there. If they catch you, there is no one in the entire world who will be able to save you."

R' Kalman Rosen

While Rabbi Eliyahu Chaim was berating me, his son, R' Kalman, entered the room. "I have just one question to ask you," R' Kalman said. "Why do you want to be the one to make this trip? Here in Jerusalem there lives a precious Jew by the name of R' Shmuel Shapiro. He is a true Breslover and no one has reached his level of piety. Every day he goes into the fields for *hitbodedut* and prays that he will be able to travel to the *tzion*. So why doesn't he make the trip? Why are you the one to go? If a Breslover chassid like R' Shmuel doesn't steal himself into Russia to get to the *tzion*, it means that there is no need for a real Breslover to do such a thing."

"That has occurred to me as well," I replied. "I will ask R' Shmuel about it, since it really is a difficult question. If he truly yearns to get to Uman, then he should find some way to travel to Russia."

Rabbi Eliyahu Chaim laughed. "I'm not really worried about you, Gedaliah. You can travel. But I worry about all those people who will try to follow your example. What will happen to them if they are caught?"

Despite his fears, I was greatly encouraged by his words.

| 2 |

Towards the end of the summer of 1963, Rabbi Levi Yitzchak Bender asked to speak with me. He was the one who had objected most strongly to my trip the previous year. "I heard that you were at the *tzion* last year," he said. "Tell me about your trip. Let me know what happened to you." I spent the next hour and a half talking, while he listened intently.

"Now I would like to tell you several stories about myself," he said when I finished. "I left my home in Poland and traveled to Uman when I was only seventeen. I did this without my parents' permission. Once I got to Uman, I sent them a letter to let them know where I was. Although

they were angry, they allowed me to stay, and eventually my father made peace with what I had done. I was the tenth of twelve children, and the apple of my mother's eye.

"While I was there, the late R' Aharon Leib Tziegelman arrived in Uman and told me that he had recently visited my parents in my hometown of Grodzisk. My mother had asked him to bring me a package, which included a warm scarf she had knitted to protect me from the freezing cold winter."

R' Aharon Leib had crossed the border into Russia and spent the night at an inn, Rabbi Levi Yitzchak continued. In the middle of the night, a group of drunken gentiles entered the inn and R' Aharon Leib overheard them asking the proprietor if there were any Jews staying there. To his horror, a few minutes later, R' Aharon Leib heard the gentiles beating up a Jew who had been sleeping in a nearby room. He realized that he had better escape quickly or he would suffer the same fate. He raced out of the inn, leaving the package behind. As he dashed out the door, he told the innkeeper to give the scarf to someone named Levi Yitzchak.

"When I heard this story, I thought about how my mother must have spent weeks knitting that warm scarf for me," Rabbi Levi Yitzchak recalled. "I thought about my relationship with my family and especially with my mother, and was overwhelmed with longing to possess that scarf. So I did a very strange thing. Despite the risks involved, dressed in my chassidic garb and with my beard and *peyot*, I traveled all the way to the village where that inn was located. I went into the inn and retrieved my scarf. Then I returned to Uman."

I understood that God had seen his pure motives and helped him achieve his goal, despite the tremendous risks involved.

The second story concerned Rabbi Levi Yitzchak's last Rosh HaShanah in Uman in 1938. It was extremely dangerous for him to be there, because he had already spent time in prison and had been released two years earlier with a warning to stay out of Uman. Thus, it was risky for him to travel to Uman, especially since the Jews who lived there knew him.

"About a month and a half before the holiday, I decided that I must spend Rosh HaShanah in Uman," he told me. "As soon as I began to prepare for the journey, everyone asked how I could possibly do such a

thing when the situation was so dangerous. 'Aren't you afraid?' they asked me. After considering the matter, I explained that I was more afraid *not* to make the journey."

A friend of Rabbi Levi Yitzchak was shocked when he opened the door to his home in Uman and saw him standing there. "Why did you come? It's forbidden!" his friend cried.

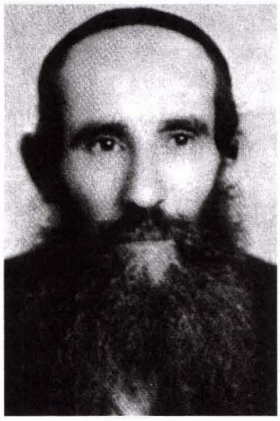
"That's exactly why I showed up on your doorstep just before the holiday, when it's too late for you to tell me to leave," Rabbi Levi Yitzchak responded. "I would like to spend Rosh HaShanah praying in your basement." My friend knew that if the authorities found me praying with the Breslover minyan, everyone there would be in trouble as well so he let me stay.

At 7 a.m. the day before Rosh HaShanah, Rabbi Levi Yitzchak went to the *tzion* to spend a few minutes reciting the *Tikkun HaKlali*. He was not alone. Another Jew from Uman, whom everyone knew was a government informer, was also at the *tzion*. He immediately recognized Rabbi Levi Yitzchak.

Rabbi Levi Yitzchak's face turned pale. He began to plead with the informer, begging him not to report him to the authorities. The man replied that Rabbi Levi Yitzchak had no reason to be afraid and that the rumors about him were untrue. But as Rabbi Levi Yitzchak walked back to his friend's house, he noticed that the informer was following him. Since Rabbi Levi Yitzchak was familiar with all the alleys and back roads of Uman, he managed to shake the informer off his trail.

The informer went directly to the police and told them that Rabbi Levi Yitzchak was in Uman. The following day, Rosh HaShanah, the police searched every Jewish house in the city. When they arrived at the house where Rabbi Levi Yitzchak was hiding, Rabbi Levi Yitzchak's friend denied that he was there. The police did not believe him. They searched all the upstairs rooms, opened every closet and looked under all the beds. Then they went down to the basement. It was very dark inside and they overlooked the room in which Rabbi Levi Yitzchak was hiding.

After Rosh HaShanah, several of the chassidim, including R' Nachman Sternhartz, met to discuss how they could help Rabbi Levi Yitzchak escape from Uman. They decided to bandage his head, leaving



R' Chaim Binyamin Brodie

only his eyes uncovered. R' Chaim Binyamin Brodie would pretend to be his attendant, and in that way they would spirit him out of Uman.

Rabbi Levi Yitzchak's wife had also come to Uman for the holiday. Rabbi Levi Yitzchak instructed her to take the night train to Kiev. In Charsinvaka, a small village located two stations away from Uman, she hopped off the train, purchased two tickets, and then reboarded for the trip to Kiev. Rabbi Levi Yitzchak was on the same train, but she did not recognize him.

When the train reached Kiev, Rabbi Levi Yitzchak got rid of his bandages and approached his wife. He took the two tickets that she had bought in Charsinvaka and got rid of the ticket that he had purchased in Uman.

The informer was hot on their trail. He had recognized Rabbi Levi Yitzchak's wife on the train and assumed that her husband must also be on board. Now that Rabbi Levi Yitzchak had removed his disguise, the informer recognized him and immediately flagged the nearest policeman. Rabbi Levi Yitzchak was arrested and interrogated. He denied all the charges, claiming that he was not coming from Uman and to prove it he showed them the tickets his wife had purchased in Charsinvaka. He was released, but the police were furious at the informer and started shouting at him, complaining that the Jews were always fighting amongst themselves and informing on each another. The informer was thrown out of the police station in disgrace.

"That was the last time that I had the privilege to be in Uman," Rabbi Levi Yitzchak said sadly.

The third story occurred after the war, when R' Levi Yitzchak escaped Russia and traveled to Germany, where he became the rabbi of the displaced persons camp at Bad Reichenhal.

"Before Pesach, the government provided the refugees with matzot," he told me. "I had no doubt that those matzot were not kosher for Pesach. I spent the entire night in a quandary, wondering what I should do. If I told the refugees that the matzot were not kosher, I would probably find myself in trouble with the authorities. But if I didn't tell them, they would end up eating forbidden food on Pesach.

"I decided to inform the refugees that the matzot were not kosher for Pesach and should not be eaten. Despite my fears, the authorities did not take any action against me.

"From these stories, you can see that when a person wants to do something for a good and honest reason, and his conscience is clear, then God will come to his assistance and he has no need to be afraid."

I felt encouraged by his words and strengthened my resolve to do everything I could to reach Rebbe Nachman's *tzion*.

| 3 |

I SET OUT ON MY JOURNEY A FEW DAYS LATER. On the flight to Vienna, I met a medical student who was studying in Hadassah Hospital in Israel. He asked me how long I was planning to stay in Vienna and I said I would only be staying one night. Since he was also leaving the next day, we decided to rent a hotel room together.

Once we were settled at our hotel, he suggested that we look for a restaurant and have a bite to eat. He wasn't religious, but he showed much patience as I dragged him from place to place until we found a kosher eatery.

The following morning, I flew to Moscow via Warsaw. Half of the passengers disembarked in Poland, and after we took off again, we ran into a storm and the plane began to pitch violently back and forth. Despite the thunder, lightning and turbulence, the Russians who were left on the plane sat stony-faced. I tried to steady myself with the thought, "*b'Yadkhah afkid ruchi*" (in Your Hand I entrust my soul [Psalms 31:6]). I recalled the words of the Zohar on that verse, explaining that God moves the soul according to His will. It was very hard to keep calm in such difficult circumstances.

This time, when I arrived in Moscow, I knew what to expect and the procedure was familiar. At the hotel, the receptionist took my passport and I had no difficulty receiving a room. I spent my first morning in Moscow touring the city with an official Intourist representative. Afterwards, I hopped into a taxi and showed the driver a piece of paper with R' Michel's address. Once again, I pretended that I was mute and encountered no difficulties.

R' Michel recognized me as soon as he opened his door. He was so happy to see me that he hugged me warmly and said that he had hoped I would return a second time. He brought me into his house and offered me a meal. He apologized for not having taken me to the *tzion* the previous year. When we finished eating, he told me the following story:

"I have a niece who is a secretary for the KGB. She visited us just before you came last year. She told us that there was a group of Americans purportedly touring Russia who were, in fact, spies. Although the government planned to expel them, it first wanted to discover their sources of information.

"The Americans found out that the Russians knew who they really were. In order to throw the Russians off-track, the Americans sent letters to many ex-criminals who were on a government list that they had managed to obtain. They invited these ex-criminals to visit them at the hotel where they were staying. So many people came to visit that it was impossible for the Russians to figure out which of these people were the informers."

The previous year, R' Michel received my postcard the morning after I had come to visit him. Although he had been frightened, he decided to visit me at my hotel anyway. However, he had promised himself not to help me in any way that was illegal. "Since then," he added, "I have been in contact with my father-in-law, R' Noson Sternhartz, who confirmed that you really are who you say you are."

"So now that you trust me, will you take me to the *tzion*?" I asked hopefully.

"Even if I'm not able to accompany you to Uman," he replied, "R' Shika might do it."

R' Avraham Yehoshua Rosenvald, known among the chassidim as R' Shika, had lived in Uman and was personally dedicated to keeping the flame of Yiddishkeit alive in Russia. R' Michel had told R' Shika about my first visit, and R' Shika, who now lived in Moscow, had said that if I were to return to Russia, he would be willing to take me to Uman.

R' Shika

"When will I be able to meet him?" I asked.

"We have a secret minyan here for *Minchah* and *Maariv*," replied R' Michel. "He should be here then."

Still, I was worried. Who knew if I would actually make it to the *tzion* this year?

Before I had left Israel, I had met with R' Nachman Kanelski, whose son, R' Noson Kanelski, lived in Moscow. R' Noson's father-in-law, Rabbi Yehudah Kalasher, was one of the leaders of the Lubavitcher chassidim who still remained in Russia at that time. R' Noson and Rabbi Yehudah were both neighbors of R' Michel.

R' Nachman had received several letters from his son requesting Rabbeinu Tam tefillin.[1] "If you bring my son these tefillin, it's very possible that he would be willing to take you to the *tzion*," R' Nachman had told me. "He sometimes travels there to pray. You can locate him through R' Michel Dorfman."

I asked R' Michel if he knew R' Noson Kanelski.

"Yes, I know him," R' Michel said.

"I brought him a new pair of tefillin," I explained. "I was told that he might be willing to accompany me to the *tzion*."

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(1) There exists a difference of opinion between Rashi and his grandson, Rabbeinu Tam, about the correct order of placing the passages of parchment into the tefillin. Most opinions side with Rashi. Some people wear two pairs of tefillin to subscribe to both Rashi's and Rabbeinu Tam's viewpoints.

I had also brought a pair of tefillin for R' Michel, a gift from Rabbi Tzvi Aryeh, and R' Michel's eyes lit up when he saw them. I also presented him with approximately twenty-five pounds of religious articles, including tefillin, tzitzit, mezuzot and Breslover books to distribute among the chassidim. R' Michel was elated, but his joy was mixed with trepidation. He said he was going to hide these gifts until after I had left Russia, for fear that if he was caught with these things in his possession while I was still in Russia, I might be implicated in this "crime" of smuggling in religious articles.

"It is very possible that if R' Noson was here, he would take you to the *tzion*," mused R' Michel, "but he has traveled to Tashkent on business. However, since you brought regards from his father as well as a pair of tefillin, I suggest that you meet his father-in-law, Rabbi Yehudah Kalasher."

Rabbi Yehudah was an accomplished Torah scholar who spent his days in study and prayer. He answered all questions of Jewish law in the region, and was regarded as the community's rabbi. He also lived in Malachovkha, about a ten-minute walk from R' Michel's house. We set out to visit him together.

As soon as we entered his house, I beheld a person from another time and place. Though it was strongly discouraged and at times even against the law, Rabbi Yehudah retained his chassidic dress – down to his long beard and curled *peyot*. Off to the side, I observed two boys, aged seven or eight, holding a conversation in Yiddish. These were the children of R' Noson Kanelski, Rabbi Yehudah's son-in-law. They studied at home with a private tutor instead of attending the non-Jewish government school. To keep his grandchildren at home, Rabbi Yehudah had arranged for a doctor to write a note stating that they were too sick to attend school.

Rabbi Yehudah stood up for me and then started a conversation in Yiddish. He kept an extremely high standard of *kashrut*; no processed foods entered his home. He offered me something to eat and we drank a toast together. R' Michel said that he was going to find R' Shika, and asked us to wait for him at his house.

As Rabbi Yehudah and I walked back to R' Michel's house, I told him about America. Rabbi Yehudah asked me why I had come to Russia and

I replied that I had come to prostrate myself at the *tzion* in Uman. "That is the proper way for a chassid to behave," he said with a smile.

Soon R' Michel and R' Shika joined us. R' Shika made a strong impression on me. He was of medium build, with a short beard and a slightly hunched back. All his clothes were white – shirt, pants, coat, hat, everything. When he entered the room, he seemed to exude a quiet but pervasive presence. R' Michel's wife was also there, and we all started to talk at once. For me, it was an emotional experience to speak with a group of Russian Jews. We had so much to say to each other that we soon concluded that it would be impossible for everyone to speak at once. Since Rabbi Yehudah was the most accomplished Torah scholar among us, he was asked to speak first.

Rabbi Yehudah said, "Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi, the Baal HaTanya, quotes the Talmud that says there are four different types of people: a tzaddik who has good, a tzaddik who has bad, an evil person who has good, and an evil person who has bad.

"It seems to me that 'a tzaddik who has good' refers to a tzaddik who lives in a place where it is easy for him to be a tzaddik, and 'a tzaddik who has bad' resides in a place where it is difficult for him to observe the mitzvot. 'An evil person who has good' lives in a place where everyone is good but he is evil, and 'an evil person who has bad' lives in a place where all the people are evil and he is also evil.

"Perhaps we are considered 'tzaddikim who have bad' since the Russians are trying to destroy everything holy and do everything in their power to prevent us from studying the Torah and fulfilling the mitzvot. But even under such difficult circumstances, we somehow try to observe whatever we can. However, our children and grandchildren will fall under the category of 'an evil person who has bad,' since they will not be able to remain strong in such an environment."

Tears began to course down Rabbi Yehudah's face as he said those last words. He was so overcome that he could not continue.

R' Shika was the next to speak, and it was obvious that he was extremely intelligent. "Rabbi Yehudah, you look at it one way, but I see it differently. I think that 'a tzaddik who has good' is a tzaddik who remains a tzaddik and whose children become tzaddikim. 'A tzaddik who

has bad' is one who remains a tzaddik, but whose children turn to evil. 'An evil person who has good' is an evil person whose children become tzaddikim, while 'an evil person who has bad' is an evil person whose children continue on his evil path. If things continue the way they have been going, then our children might become evil people whose offspring are also evil." Having said that, he too began to weep.

It is interesting to note that despite their gloomy forecast, today, forty years later, Judaism is thriving in the former Soviet Union.

Although we spoke about many different things, my hosts were mostly interested in hearing about life on the other side of the Iron Curtain. They were amazed to hear that it was possible to buy ready-made kosher food, and asked if I had brought any with me. When they heard that I had, they begged me to leave some with them, so that they could show their children and friends that it was possible to live as a religious Jew in the free world.

At 11:30 p.m., R' Michel told me that I had better hurry if I wanted to catch the last train back to Moscow. But before I left, I said, "*Nu*, R' Michel, are you going to take me to the *tzion*?"

"I still have to think about it," he hedged.

I turned to R' Shika. "R' Shika, I heard that last year you told R' Michel that had you known I was here, you would have taken me to the *tzion*."

"Believe me, I would have been happy to," he replied. "But since then my daughter had a nervous breakdown and now I must stay home to take care of her. If I leave the house for more than a few hours, the police will begin searching for me."

R' Yochanan Galant

I could not make any more requests. Instead, I returned to my hotel accompanied by R' Michel. He promised to visit me the following afternoon to let me know if he could take me to the *tzion*. Before giving me an answer, R' Michel explained, he wanted to discuss the pros and cons with someone by the name of R' Yochanan Galant. R' Yochanan had just received an exit visa after many years of waiting, and

was afraid that the authorities would revoke it if they found out he had anything to do with an American citizen. (In the 1970s it was easier to obtain an exit visa from Russia, but in the 1960s, it was almost unheard of.) I relied on R' Michel to state my case for me, but my mind was full of doubts. Here I was in Russia again. Would my mission be successful?

| 4 |

ALTHOUGH I WAS NERVOUS ABOUT MY MEETING with R' Michel the next afternoon, I went touring in Moscow in the morning and tried to relax as my guide pointed out the city's famous sites. At 1:45 p.m., I went up to my room. R' Michel arrived at exactly 2 p.m. This time he was much less frightened than he had been the previous year, and didn't even bother to turn on the radio before he spoke.

He presented me with a small, handwritten book penned by R' Alter Tepliker that included many Torah insights previously published in the book *Kokhavey Or*, as well as some information about Rebbe Nachman and his followers that had never been published. Rabbi Avraham Sternhartz had given this book to R' Michel before he left the Soviet Union. It was a very rare volume.

"This book is very dear to me," R' Michel said. "But if I remain in Russia, so few people will ever see it and in the end it will be lost. I am giving this book to you as a gift, since you will be able to take it out of the country. I couldn't give it to you last night because R' Yochanan was studying from it. I spoke with R' Yochanan about you, and he told me that he does not want to meet you or even hear about you. He also said that the question of whether or not I should take you to the *tzion* is my problem. He refuses to become involved.

"I was imprisoned in Siberia," continued R' Michel, "and I also have an unmarried daughter at home. My wife becomes frightened when you show up, and then she begins to worry. After I spoke with you last year, my wife was so worried that she was unable to sleep for the next three weeks and almost became ill. She cannot believe that I would be foolish enough to take you to a place where tourists are forbidden to go. She

thinks that you might be a spy and will take pictures of the broken-down tombstones and the *tzion*, and then we will both be caught. It is dangerous for me to visit you at the hotel, since every tourist is kept under surveillance, and it is possible that they have already discovered our relationship. Therefore, I am unable to take you to the *tzion*."

My heart plummeted. I knew that if I could not convince R' Michel to change his mind, I would never reach the *tzion*. I silently prayed that God would put the right words in my mouth.

I started to speak about all sorts of things. I related the famous story from the Talmud about Rabbi Akiva and Papus ben Yehudah. The Romans arrested and imprisoned Rabbi Akiva for violating the law against teaching Torah in public. In prison, he met Papus, who had been jailed for some frivolous infringement of the law. When Papus asked Rabbi Akiva why he had endangered himself by teaching Torah, Rabbi Akiva replied that just as fish cannot survive without water, Jews are unable to survive without Torah, which is like life-giving water for the soul. "Most probably both of us were destined to spend time here," Papus reflected. "But you were sent here as a result of your dedication to God and His Torah, while I was imprisoned for frivolity" (*Berakhot* 61a).

I said to R' Michel, "It is impossible for us to know what will be in the future. If we are destined to suffer, we will suffer no matter what we do. At least the suffering should come about because of something positive that we accomplished."

I also told R' Michel one of the last things that Rabbi Levi Yitzchak Bender and Rabbi Eliyahu Chaim Rosen had said to me before I left on this trip. Although I was about to do something dangerous, they admitted that if I did succeed it would probably open a path through which other people could reach the *tzion* safely.

"Rabbi Levi Yitzchak, Rabbi Eliyahu Chaim and R' Hirsch Leib – all the chassidim whom you know and respect so much, and who were with you in Uman in the 1930s – each and every one showed tremendous self-sacrifice for Torah and mitzvot and, as a result, did things that were illegal," I said. "Most of them were caught and spent time in prison, but in the end they all managed to find their way to Israel. You, however, have remained here. Who knows? Maybe the only reason you are still here is

because you never had the courage to do anything really great, and the act of bringing me to the *tzion* will make it possible for you to leave."

Desperately, I continued to present my case using whatever arguments came to mind. Finally, exhausted, I fell silent.

"I am not impressed," R' Michel finally said, "by any of your arguments – except one. Both Rabbi Levi Yitzchak and Rabbi Eliyahu Chaim said that in all probability, the only way you will succeed in getting to the *tzion* is if I take you. And it is very possible that if we get there, we will open the way for others. That would be wonderful. The fact that others would be able to travel there is something I would very much like to have a hand in.

"I want you to understand that I am constantly praying to be a vessel through which Rebbe Nachman's teachings can be revealed to the world, and to help bring people to the *tzion*. I do everything in my power to encourage the chassidim who are still in Russia to travel to Uman for Rosh HaShanah, and I also put aside money to help them with their journey. And now you are telling me that if I help you, I will be opening the path for hundreds of Jews to travel to Uman? I like that idea." (Little did we imagine that what we were talking about would eventually lead to tens of thousands of people coming to the *tzion*!)

"But I also know that when I return home and tell my wife what I am planning to do, both she and my daughter will start to cry," R' Michel added. "My sons-in-law will tell me that it is all my fault that they are so upset. I don't know if I will be able to stand up to such pressure."

I could see him weighing his decision carefully before he spoke again.

"Here's what you must do," he decided. "First of all, I will write down for you the numbers of the buses that travel to Uman. That way, in case I won't be able to go with you, you will have a slightly better chance of getting there if you can manage to get a ticket without speaking Russian. On another piece of paper, I will write a note to a taxi driver, telling him to take you to the old marketplace in Uman. Perhaps this time, with God's help, you will be successful.

"But there is another possibility. Today is Tuesday. Tomorrow, you travel to Odessa and on Sunday, to Kiev. The first chance that I have to

get away will be on Monday. At 10 a.m. Monday morning, wait for me at the entrance to the central bus depot in Kiev. Every day, there are two planes that fly from Moscow to Kiev, one in the morning and one in the evening. I will try to be on the first flight, which leaves around 8 a.m. The flight takes about an hour and a half, so I should be able to meet you at the bus depot at 10. But if for some reason I don't show up at 10, wait for me until noon. If I'm not there by then, do as you see fit."

I was elated. Though the timing sounded right, I was aware of all the unforeseen delays and obstacles that could crop up and ruin our plans. Still, it was the best I could hope for. R' Michel suggested that we spend some time in *hitbodedut* and plead with God that our journey be a success.

As we walked out of the hotel lobby and into the street where we said good-bye, it began to rain. Within a few minutes, the rain turned into a thunderstorm. I recounted Rebbe Nachman's words in *Likutey Moharan* (Lesson 5) that one's voice can sound like thunder. Perhaps the power of our words had caused it to "thunder" in the upper realms? R' Michel smiled, and we parted.

That night, while I poured out my heart to God in *hitbodedut*, R' Michel was grappling with a decision far more weighty than my single-minded desire to reach the *tzion*. He secluded himself in a quiet place and started to pray:

"Dear God – I was deeply moved by the words of Rabbi Eliyahu Chaim and Rabbi Levi Yitzchak: 'The only way you will succeed in reaching the tzion is if R' Michel will be willing to take you. And it is very possible that this will open up the way for other people to travel there.' I was struck by those words. They touched my heart. Every day I stay in Russia, I tell myself that I have had enough, and wonder why I have to live such a life. Now Heaven is sending me a person who might give me the opportunity to open the path to the tzion for other people. And if I succeed, it would be the most wonderful present that I could bequeath to the next generation. It would explain why I'm still here in this Soviet hell.

"But on the other hand, there is always a possibility that I will be caught by the government and never return to my family. Yet, what would be so terrible about that? Life here is horrible, no matter how you look at it.

"Master of the Universe! I am taking Gedaliah to Uman! I know that if we are caught by the KGB, nothing much will happen to him. But they can do whatever they please with me, and if I am caught, I will never return home to my family. Therefore I beg of you, dear God, if I am caught, do not make my death difficult, since I know that they are capable of torturing me for many years. And when I meet Rebbe Nachman, I will tell him, 'Rebbe! I traveled to Uman to open the path for people to get to you. I was caught, but at least I tried.'"

As he articulated these thoughts, R' Michel started to cry. He felt ready to give up his life to do whatever would be necessary. He would either succeed in bringing me to the *tzion*, or he would be killed for having tried. Later he would tell me, "I will never forget the feeling of self-sacrifice that I experienced. I am sure that in the merit of that resolve, the gates were opened for more people to visit the *tzion*. It is impossible to fathom the willingness for self-sacrifice that I experienced at that moment."

| 5 |

WHEN I GOT TO KIEV ON SUNDAY, I told the hotel receptionist that I was exhausted from my trip and would not be able to join any of the tours. At 5 p.m., I took a taxi to the central bus depot to make sure that I would be able to find it the next day. The drive took thirty minutes. I walked around for a while, thrilled that I had succeeded in getting as far as I had. Afterwards, I returned to my hotel.

On Monday morning, I awoke early, prayed, spent some time in *hitbodedut* and then took a taxi to the bus depot. I was there by 9:30. I waited patiently, watching the hands of the clock as they approached 10, 10:30 and 11. R' Michel was nowhere in sight. I could not understand what had happened. Perhaps I had been too optimistic. As the clock struck noon, I noticed it had become extremely hot – typical weather for the month of August.

Some people were staring at me. They were probably wondering why I was standing in one place for so long. I started to walk around. At 1 p.m. – a full hour after the latest possible time that R' Michel said he

would show up – I became really worried and wondered what my next step should be. Perhaps I should try once again to travel to the *tzion* by myself? After all, I had the same chance of getting there as I had the previous year. Since I was staying in Kiev for two more days, I decided to attempt the trip the following day.

I went to buy a glass of soda water from a vending machine. Until then, I had been fasting in accordance with the custom of not eating before visiting a gravesite. I was amazed to see that the cups were made of real glass, and each person was expected to rinse his own cup after finishing his drink. It appeared as though the cups never broke, although many people were lining up to buy drinks. I marveled at the fear of breaking the law that typified the average citizen in Russia. What a contrast to life in New York, where two real drinking glasses in a place like Penn Station would not have lasted more than five minutes!

By the time my turn came, there was no more soda water in the machine and I had to wait in a different line for twenty minutes before I was finally able to buy a drink. After that, I went to buy some ice cream. The elderly saleswoman had no idea what I wanted and showed me all sorts of different items until she finally realized what it was.

As I ate the ice cream, I looked at my watch. It was just after 2 p.m. I decided to return to the same spot where I had been waiting. Perhaps R' Michel had arrived? The moment I got there, a taxi screeched to a stop right opposite where I was standing. R' Michel jumped out and gestured to me to join him inside. The driver was just about to make a U-turn when a female militia guard started yelling at him. Both the driver and R' Michel started arguing with her, and they shouted at each other for a good few minutes. The whole time, the driver and the guard kept looking at me. I was sure they realized I was a foreigner and that it was forbidden for me to travel. Eventually, however, the guard calmed down and we were able to set out on our journey.

I later learned that that guard was in charge of keeping order among the taxis. She was upset that I had gotten into the taxi without waiting my turn. The driver argued that R' Michel had hired him elsewhere and they were merely picking me up at the bus depot, so there was no reason for me to wait my turn in line.

The driver sped through the streets. When we reached the edge of the city, he stopped in front of a building, turned around and said something in Russian. R' Michel reached across my chest, opened the door on my side and motioned for me to get out. He did this quickly so the driver wouldn't notice that I hadn't understood his instructions. We got out of the taxi to stretch our legs, as the driver had apparently suggested, while the driver himself went into the building. "He's going to get permission to take us to Uman," R' Michel explained as we waited.

"What happened to you?" I asked. "Why were you so late?"

"When I decided that I would take you to Uman, I assumed that if my wife, daughter and sons-in-law would find out about my plans, they would start pressuring me not to go," R' Michel replied. "So I decided not to tell them a thing. Right after I left you, I went to buy a plane ticket for the Monday morning flight. I had difficulty falling asleep that night. I wondered what would be with my wife if something were to happen to me. How would she manage without me? Although I was resolved not to tell her anything, I decided to leave her a note.

"The next morning, while we were eating our breakfast, my wife told me that she could not stop thinking about you. 'It's such a pity,' she said. 'It's already the second time that he's come to Russia and he has met both you and R' Shika. He has spent so much money and shown such an incredible desire to travel to the *tzion*, yet no one is willing to take him. If I were a man, I would take him myself.'

"'What would you like me to do?' I asked.

"'Do whatever you feel is right,' she answered.

"When I told her that I had already bought a plane ticket to meet you in Kiev, she was very pleased."

R' Michel arrived at the airport early Monday morning. Even though he had a ticket, he wanted to make sure that he would get a seat. Since there are only two flights a day between Moscow and Kiev, the planes were always packed. Sure enough, there were about one hundred and twenty people crammed into the small passenger cabin. As the plane started down the runway for takeoff, it suddenly came to a stop. The passengers were told that one of the propellers was broken and that there would be a four-hour delay.

"We got off the plane and started to wait," R' Michel recalled. "We sat in the airport for about an hour, and it occurred to me that perhaps the entire plane was delayed to keep me from opening the gates to Uman – somewhat like the story of Jonah, who was on a ship in which everyone was about to drown because of him.

"While we sat and waited, I recited some Psalms. All of a sudden, an announcement was made that it would be impossible to repair the plane by noon and that we would not be leaving until the evening."

Though R' Michel had lived his entire life in Russia, he had never before witnessed the uproar that greeted this announcement. "Even though Russians are afraid of the authorities, they became hysterical and started screaming that it was abnormal that there were only two flights a day between major cities. Mothers started hitting their children so that they, too, would begin to cry and join the ruckus. Someone even contacted the Supreme Soviet, the highest authority in the city, to complain about the terrible plane service.

"The commotion grew stronger. It was almost noon and I had done everything in my power to get to you. I had bought my ticket early, traveled to the airport and even boarded the airplane. But it seemed that at this late hour, the chances of our meeting and getting to the *tzion* were practically nonexistent. Nevertheless, I decided to travel to Kiev. Even if you were not there waiting for me, I wanted to do whatever I could, and let God take care of the rest."

At noon, the airport officials suddenly announced that the plane was repaired and ready for re-boarding. "I suspected that they were telling us this to restore order in the terminal," R' Michel confided. "We would take our seats on the plane and end up waiting there until the late afternoon. These types of things happen in Russia. But once everyone was on board, the plane started to taxi towards the runway. It was another forty-five minutes before we received permission for takeoff, so we arrived in Kiev at a quarter to 2. I hadn't brought any luggage with me, and I made sure to be the first one off the plane. I ran out of the airport, stopped a taxi and asked the driver to take me to the central bus depot, since I was supposed to meet someone there over an hour ago. If he drove fast, I promised, he would get a large tip."

As the taxi sped off, R' Michel noticed that the driver maneuvered quickly and expertly through traffic in the hope of earning his tip. So he said, "I'm also looking for someone to take me to Uman."

The driver shot him a look. "I'm only licensed to drive within the city, not between cities. Besides, I have to get home soon," he replied.

"If you will take me and my friend all the way to Uman and back, I will pay you double," R' Michel said calmly.

"It's a deal," the driver decided. First, though, he had to get permission from the supervisor of his taxi station, which was the building we were parked in front of right now.

The driver came back outside and told us that his supervisor had approved the trip. We climbed back into the taxi and the driver started to drive quickly.

"Is it alright for us to speak in Yiddish?" I whispered to R' Michel.

"No problem," he said. "There are many people living in Russia who speak languages other than Russian."

The taxi rolled on for another two hours. I was very excited. Soon I would be arriving in Uman, accompanied by someone who was capable of taking me directly to the *tzion*. It seemed as though everything was working out perfectly. Most of the time, I was too excited to talk.

Suddenly, I saw a policeman wearing a red visor standing in the middle of the road, signaling our taxi to stop. R' Michel whispered to me to pretend that I had fallen asleep. Even before he finished his sentence, my eyes were closed and I pretended to be fast asleep. The driver must have thought this was strange, but he said nothing.

The taxi pulled up beside the policeman, who climbed in next to the driver and wished both him and R' Michel a good afternoon. He directed the driver to take him to a police post some miles up the road. R' Michel's heart dropped. He was sure that we were going straight to KGB headquarters.

Meanwhile, I pretended to be sound asleep. I couldn't understand a word of what they were saying, and had no idea of what was going on or where we were going. The whole way, R' Michel, trying to divert the policeman's attention from the passenger "asleep" at his side, kept up a light conversation with the two men, telling them jokes to keep them

laughing. I marveled at how he was able to keep up such a jolly façade. After about half an hour, the taxi stopped. The policeman thanked everyone and left the cab – alone.

Relief washed over me. I pretended to slowly wake up as the cab resumed its journey. I looked over at R' Michel and saw that the color was returning to his face. "What happened?" I asked.

"When the policeman got into the taxi and sat next to the driver I was positive that he was going to take us straight to the nearest KGB headquarters," he answered, his voice still edged with fear. "I was positive that the police in the area had been notified that there were two spies traveling on this road, and that they had succeeded in stopping us. But when he got out, I realized that he had only stopped our taxi because he saw a vacant seat next to the driver. Apparently, his motorcycle had broken down and he needed a ride to the nearest police post. That half hour was pure hell. But I knew that I must not show my fear. While the policeman sat in the car, I kept on wondering what would become of me. But when a person spends time in the Lubianka prison in Moscow, one of the most notorious prisons in the Soviet Union, he learns how to hide his fear. It's very possible that the reason I spent so much time in there was to prepare myself for this one half hour.

| 6 |

We arrived in Uman and stopped near the old marketplace. "We'll be back in an hour and a half," R' Michel told the driver.

"I'll be waiting for you here," he answered.

As we stepped out of the taxi, R' Michel whispered, "Say a special prayer that the driver did not notice anything unusual, and that when we return, the police won't be waiting for us."

My nervousness mingled with excitement as we walked towards the *tzion* and R' Michel described our surroundings. He told me that Reb Noson had mentioned the old marketplace that we were passing through, to his son, R' Yitzchak. Reb Noson had said, "There may come a time when you cannot, or will not, be permitted to approach the *tzion*.

If that should happen, you should stand in the marketplace, from where you can see the *tzion*, and recite the *Tikkun HaKlali* (*Kokhavey Or*, p. 69, #2).

We approached and then passed the *kloyz* built by Reb Noson, and continued walking down into a valley. R' Michel told me that the path we were taking led straight to the *tzion*. Some of the greatest servants of God had walked along this same path. R' Michel pointed out a stream of water that flowed into a small pool. The chassidim would immerse themselves in this pool before *Shacharit*, having spent the entire night in *hitbodedut*. Even during the winter, in sub-zero temperatures, they would break through the layer of ice covering the pool and immerse themselves with incredible self-sacrifice. It is impossible to describe the holiness and purity of the people who spent their nights here.

The road began to rise as we headed in the direction of what was once the old cemetery. R' Michel stopped beside a small house. The yard was completely fenced in, just as he had described it to me. All around us were buildings in the process of construction and many workers idled about on their dinner break. Although it was 7 p.m., the sun was still shining. Some workers were eating their meal opposite the entrance to the yard that contained the *tzion*, making it impossible for us to enter. So we continued walking around and hoped that once they finished, we would be able to go into the yard.

I asked R' Michel what street we were walking on. "Bilinski," he replied. "The larger street above us is called Pushkina." As we walked, I jotted down all the street names and identifying markers and tried to memorize how the streets were connected to each another. We continued walking for about forty minutes.

R' Michel told me that a non-Jewish couple lived in the house adjoining the *tzion*. The woman was a kind-hearted Ukrainian and most of the time it did not bother her that Jews came to pray there. But she was wary of her neighbors. They assumed that the Jews paid her to be able to pray in her yard and were jealous of her presumed wealth. They caused her all sorts of problems. Therefore, she only allowed people to enter her yard at night, when the neighbors wouldn't notice. "The moment we enter the yard," R' Michel said, "you should start reciting the *Tikkun HaKlali* and hope that no one sees us."

We returned to the yard. The workers were gone. We slipped inside and I immediately began to recite the *Tikkun HaKlali*. Together with us in the yard were four elderly neighbors – a man and three women – sitting and talking. The Ukrainian woman who owned the house was indoors. R' Michel told the four neighbors that a relative of ours was buried there and asked if it would be all right for us to pray. They told us that it wouldn't be a problem.

While reciting the *Tikkun HaKlali*, I gestured with my hands for R' Michel to point out the actual *tzion*. "You're standing on it," he said. I recoiled in fright. I had been standing on an area covered with cement, and the very thought that this was the holy *tzion* made me shiver in awe. I was shocked that I had actually succeeded in my goal and did not know what to do first.

I made it though four or five chapters of the *Tikkun HaKlali* before the woman of the house noticed us and began screaming. "Go away from here!" she shouted. "Why are you bothering me? If you don't leave immediately, I will call the police! Why are you giving me such a bad name and disturbing me like this?" I threw all my concentration into reciting the *Tikkun HaKlali*, trying not to skip a single word. Other than the last two Psalms, which I recited while standing just outside the gate, I was able to recite most of the *Tikkun* while still inside the yard.

GEDALIAH BY THE TZION

R' Michel and I went out and sat down just outside the gate, but we could not see into the yard. Everything was quiet again. I took out the list of people who had donated money towards my trip and handed it to R' Michel.

Both of us said a prayer for all those generous people. We remained there for another half hour before we realized that it was late.

We returned to the old marketplace and saw our taxi waiting for us. From a distance, we were unable to make out the figure of the driver, and became frightened that he had gone to alert the police. But as we drew closer, we saw that the driver had fallen asleep on the front seat of the taxi. We knocked on the window to wake him up.

As we drove out of the city, we noticed that it was growing dark. We had not yet said our afternoon prayers. Because of the danger, we prayed sitting down.

On the drive back to Kiev, R' Michel told me how he had become a Breslover chassid. His father had come from a family that was opposed to Breslov, but R' Michel was drawn to Rebbe Nachman's teachings. Though R' Michel studied in the Boyaner Yeshivah, he journeyed to Uman at the age of fifteen. Some time later, he became engaged to the daughter of R' Noson Sternhartz and remained in Uman, studying in the *kloyz*.

"Did your father oppose the fact that you had become a Breslover?" I asked.

"I sent a letter to my father to tell him what I had done. My father wrote back to me that worse things could have happened to me. And if I was satisfied there, I could remain in Uman."

We asked the cab driver to drop us off two blocks from my hotel. After all that R' Michel had done for me, I wanted to give him something. I convinced him to wait outside while I ran up to my room. Although I had already given him the religious articles to distribute among the Jews who needed them, I wanted to give him a personal gift. Quickly, I put together a package containing a hand-knitted sweater, fish, meat, gum and cigarettes that I had brought from America. I included some bottles of wine and canned vegetables from Israel. I could see that R' Michel was moved when I handed him the package.

"I can't stay any longer," he told me. "I must return to Moscow." There was a train leaving at 1 a.m., which would arrive in Moscow the following day. We bid each other an emotional farewell.

When R' Michel and I met again, he told me that he had gone straight to the train station to wait for the 1 a.m. train. He sat alone,

holding the package that I had given him. A policeman walked over and asked to see his internal passport. Trembling inside, he handed it over.

The policeman looked from the passport to R' Michel. "Open your package," he ordered.

R' Michel was petrified that the policeman would demand to know how he had obtained all these items. Suddenly, another policeman walked over and told his comrade not to waste his time. The first policeman apologized and walked away. The train arrived at exactly that moment, and R' Michel hopped safely aboard.

| 7 |

I RETURNED TO AMERICA THREE DAYS LATER, filled with the incredible satisfaction of having attained my goal. I told Rabbi Tzvi Aryeh the entire story and even admitted that I had not made it to the *tzion* on my first trip, but now I had. He agreed that I had done the right thing by not telling anyone that I had failed the first time.

That Rosh HaShanah, I prayed at the Breslover *shtiebel* on the Lower East Side. As usual, R' Yitzchak Mendel Rottenberg led *Mussaf*. All the chassidim knew that I had been at the *tzion*, but no one spoke to me about it. On Yom Kippur, we gathered in the *shtiebel* again. During a break, as I lay on a bench trying to get some rest, I overheard R' Yitzchak Mendel talking with Leibel Berger.

R' YITZCHAK MENDEL ROTTENBERG

"You missed out, Leibel," R' Yitzchak Mendel was saying. "Why didn't you go to the *tzion* with Gedaliah? He went, and you remained here."

"It was your fault that I didn't go," replied Leibel. "You were the one who said that I might end up spending the rest of my life in a Russian prison camp."

"What did you think I would tell you?" retorted R' Yitzchak

Mendel. "Did you really think I would tell you to make such a trip? But you should have gone anyway, despite my warnings."

Leibel looked defeated. R' Yitzchak Mendel turned in my direction and barked, "Get up, Gedaliah! I want to speak with you. You have done a great thing by traveling to the *tzion*. But I have done even wilder things."

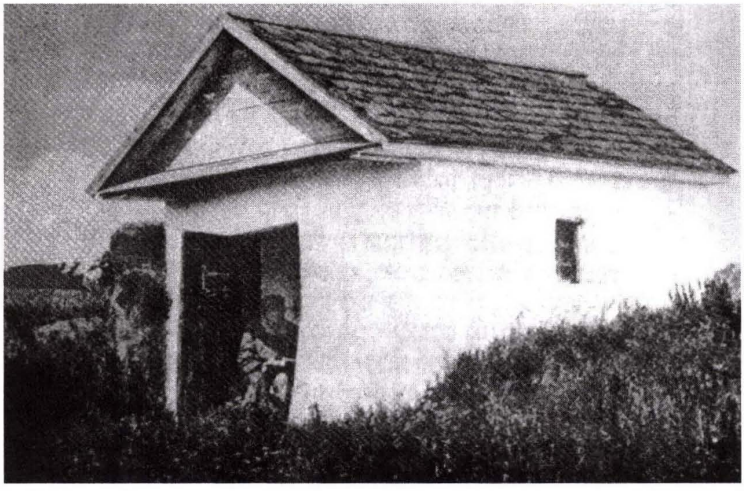
He told me that a pogrom had broken out in the village of Teplik, home of R' Alter Tepliker, on 13 Adar 1919. R' Alter was murdered as he read from a Torah scroll. R' Nachman Sternhartz and R' Yisrael, the stepbrother of Rabbi Avraham Sternhartz, were also present. R' Nachman managed to escape by hiding behind a closet. R' Yisrael tried to hide under a table, but the murderers spotted him and shot him to death.

Most of the Jews of Teplik were killed in that pogrom. The gentiles threatened the Jews living in the surrounding villages that if they didn't hand over all their money, the gentiles would burn the homes that contained the bodies of the murdered Jews of Teplik. But the Jews in the other villages refused to comply. They assumed that the gentiles would take their money and murder them – and then play the same trick on other villages.

"When I heard this story," said R' Yitzchak Mendel, "I could not stop thinking about R' Alter Tepliker. Such a precious Jew who had written so many books deserved a proper burial. I owned a pair of tzitzit that R' Alter had given me as a present, and I cherished them so much that I only wore them on Yom Kippur. How could such a holy man's body be burned? Didn't he deserve a Jewish burial?"

R' Yitzchak Mendel was impelled to take action. "I wrapped my long beard in a towel, rented a wagon and, in the middle of the night, traveled seventy miles to Teplik. When I got there, I stole into R' Alter's house, removed his body and buried it."

R' Yitzchak Mendel's story was very inspiring. His words made me realize that whatever risks I had taken to reach the *tzion* were nothing compared to what could have happened to R' Yizchak Mendel in those early days of Russian anarchy. There was no end to the heroic acts that Jews would do for one another and for the honor of Hashem.



R' Alter Tepliker at the entrance to Rebbe Nachman's gravesite, 1903

PART FOUR

A Heaven-Sent Opportunity
Chanukah 1963

| 1 |

NOW THAT I WAS HOME AGAIN, I started looking for another job. Yeshivah Torah Vodaath had set up an office to help its graduates find teaching positions and I went to see what they had to offer. Rabbi Chaim Uri Lipschitz, one of the editors of *The Jewish Press* and director of the Torah Vodaath employment agency, was in charge. He knew who I was and asked how he could be of assistance.

"I'm looking for a job," I said.

"What? You're looking for a job? According to rumor, you've been keeping yourself quite busy of late. I thought that you were somehow getting paid for all your trouble."

"What do you mean?"

"Is it true that you went to Russia twice, and that you just came back from there recently?"

"That's correct. But how did you find that out?"

"From my sources," he replied vaguely. "Why did you go?"

"To pray at Rebbe Nachman's *tzion* in Uman."

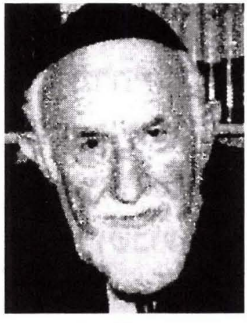
"And that's all you did while you were in Russia?"

"Well, in addition, I also smuggled in religious articles."

"I have a good friend who told me that you were there," Rabbi Lipschitz revealed. "He is interested in meeting you."

"Who is he?"

"I'm sure you never heard of him. His name is R' Tzvi Bronstein and he is, by profession, a *mohel*. He is well-to-do and has already traveled six or seven times to Russia. He assists Jews trying to leave the country and smuggles in religious articles for those who are living there. In short, he does an incredible job of helping Jews



R' Tzvi Bronstein

behind the Iron Curtain. He teaches Hebrew and the basics of Judaism in the Jewish underground and is making major inroads in Jewish life in the Soviet Union. But because he is afraid that the Russians might cause him problems, everything he does remains a secret. Therefore, most people haven't heard of his activities.

"Have you noticed," added Rabbi Lipschitz, "that recently there have been several articles in *The Jewish Press* about the plight of the Russian Jews? R' Bronstein is the one who gives us our information."

At just that moment the phone rang. It was R' Tzvi Bronstein himself. Rabbi Lipschitz spoke to him briefly and mentioned that I was with him in the room. After a few moments, he handed me the phone. The first thing R' Tzvi said was, "Are you the idiot who traveled to Russia recently?"

"I would imagine that was me," I responded.

"From what I heard, R' Michel took you to the *tzion*."

I realized that R' Tzvi must have an excellent source of information.

"Both of you," he continued, "could have ended up in prison. Doesn't your conscience bother you for having endangered the life of such a precious Jew?"

"Just one moment," I interrupted. "How could I have reached the *tzion* without his help? For a Breslover chassid, going to the *tzion* is of utmost importance."

"Yes, of course," he said. "I myself have been wanting to go, but haven't yet had the opportunity. Someday I will manage. Even so, you were foolish to put R' Michel in such danger. If you wanted to go to the *tzion*, you should have called me. I could have arranged it for you."

I was momentarily taken aback. "All right," I finally replied. "Perhaps it is as you say. I don't know if I believe you. But if you really can arrange such things, then there are hundreds of people who want to travel to the *tzion*."

"No problem. Just come to me and I will arrange everything," R' Tzvi asserted.

When I asked him how, he laughed. "You want to know everything from one telephone conversation? Here is my address. Come to my house and we can speak personally."

Afterwards, I told Rabbi Tzvi Aryeh about this conversation. Both of us thought it strange that a person we had never heard of could make

such a promise. Still, we were intrigued. I asked Rabbi Tzvi Aryeh to accompany me when I went to speak with R' Tzvi.

We visited his home the following evening. R' Tzvi lived in a beautiful house in Crown Heights, and from our very first impression, we could see that he was intelligent. He seated us in his living room and served us tea with a variety of desserts while showing us dozens of pictures of people and places in Russia. After he told us about himself and his work, we were convinced that he was serious and that he was well aware of what was going on inside Russia. At that time, very few people in the free world knew much about the Jewish situation behind the Iron Curtain.

We were astounded by R' Tzvi's accomplishments. In those days, there were no established organizations to assist Russian Jews. Yet here was a private individual who had been able to accomplish so much, completely on his own. Eventually he asked us if we were serious about going to Uman, and if there were other Jews who were also interested in going.

"Of course," we answered.

"Listen," said R' Tzvi, "I have a friend named Gabriel Reiner. He is one of the best-known travel agents in the United States. Before becoming a travel agent, he worked for the CIA. He knows how to speak eight languages and is friendly with our country's president. When Nikita Khrushchev spoke at the United Nations in 1956, the American government picked Reiner to be his translator. The whole time Khrushchev was in the United States, Reiner was his constant companion. As a result, he and Khrushchev became friendly.

"At one point, Reiner said to Khrushchev, 'Politics or no politics, let's talk business.'

"'What are you talking about?' Khrushchev responded.

"'Your government would gain financially if it would open that so-called Iron Curtain,' said Reiner.

"'What do you mean?'

"'Throughout the world, there are people who have relatives in Russia,' Reiner explained. 'Open the gates. Decide how much money you will charge for entrance visas, hotel accommodations, guided tours, etc., and people will come flocking in.'

"So they made a deal. Khrushchev persuaded his government to open the Soviet Union to tourism. Reiner's travel agency, Cosmos, would oversee all tourism from the United States, and was granted a franchise on all packages sent from America to the Soviet Union, which was a lucrative business in itself."

At the time, a Russian ruble was worth about fifteen cents on the world market. But once the Russian tourist business was established, the Russian government started charging tourists $1.10 per ruble and only allowed visitors to pay in rubles when they were in the country. Thus, there was much profit to be had for the Soviets as a result of Reiner's idea.

"Reiner travels to Russia about seven times a year," continued R' Tzvi. "Each time he goes, he meets with Khrushchev and Khrushchev's Jewish son-in-law. He has all the right connections in the Soviet Union's upper political echelons. The next step is to make a meeting between you and Reiner. If you can convince him to help you get to Uman, then the next time he travels to Russia, he will arrange everything for you. The Russians do whatever he asks, since he brings in millions of dollars for their economy.

"I could speak to Reiner for you, but since he is such a close friend, I don't want to. I am afraid to travel to Russia alone. Therefore, I accompany him on his trips. That way, I know that if I am caught, I can tell the police that I am traveling with Reiner. Reiner knows that my real purpose in going to Russia is to help Soviet Jews, and that I travel with him for protection, so I don't feel comfortable requesting another favor from him. It would be best if one of you could meet with him personally."

Could it be that we had found the door through which hundreds of people could make their way to Rebbe Nachman's grave freely and openly? We were captivated by the thought. Rabbi Tzvi Aryeh met with Reiner and explained to him that many, many people had been dreaming of traveling to Uman for years, and that such a trip would be a tremendous *Kiddush HaShem*. Reiner promised to see what he could do about it.

A month later, R' Tzvi called me and said that he and Reiner were about to travel to the Soviet Union and that they hoped they would be successful. Three weeks later, R' Tzvi phoned Rabbi Tzvi Aryeh. He had just returned from Russia. Within ten days, he promised, there would be

visas available for anyone who wanted to travel to Rebbe Nachman's *tzion*. The only stipulation was that at least ten people must make the trip.

Rabbi Tzvi Aryeh was speechless. R' Tzvi assured him that everything was taken care of. Reiner was still in Russia and would bring the visas with him when he returned to New York. "But remember," R' Tzvi warned, "there must be at least ten people on your trip."

That evening, Rabbi Tzvi Aryeh shared the news with me. When Reiner returned from Russia, he told Rabbi Tzvi Aryeh that he had convinced Khrushchev and his Jewish son-in-law that it would be good for public relations to allow a group of Jews to visit Rebbe Nachman's gravesite in Uman. This would prove to the world that the Soviets were not anti-Semitic. The trip would be highly publicized; if we would agree to that condition, then everything would be fine.

Rabbi Tzvi Aryeh started asking the chassidim in New York if they would be interested in joining the trip. But most of them complained that it was too expensive. Each ticket cost $1,300, plus a refundable deposit of $200 to cover any unforeseen expenses. This was an astronomical sum of money for most of the people contemplating the trip at that time. They suggested that Rabbi Tzvi Aryeh's students go first and "test the waters," so to speak. If all went well, they would follow on future trips.

R' Tzvi Reichman, who was not one of Rabbi Tzvi Aryeh's students, was the only other Breslover who joined our group. He had once lent me $200 to help pay for one of my previous trips, and afterwards told me that I didn't have to return the money.

I was amazed that only two months after I had gone to the *tzion*, an organized trip was being planned – something that had been impossible for the past forty years! Breslover chassidim lived with the dream of prostrating themselves on the Rebbe's *tzion*, and now it was becoming a reality. The city that had been kept under lock and key was suddenly open to us. As soon as we received our visas, we started looking for ways to fund this incredible opportunity.

R' Tzvi Reichman

| 2 |

I WAS ECSTATIC ABOUT THE UPCOMING TRIP. But at the same time, I didn't have any idea how I would be able to pay for my ticket.

Rabbi Tzvi Aryeh called me to his house. "People are finding it difficult to raise the money for the trip," he admitted. "It seems that only ten people, including R' Tzvi Reichman, will be going."

I told Rabbi Tzvi Aryeh that it looked like I wouldn't be going, either. I explained that I had no money and couldn't borrow any more since I still owed money from the previous trip. He understood my financial predicament and agreed that I shouldn't go this time.

But I desperately wanted to be part of that group. Practically speaking, I had opened the path to the *tzion* so that others could make the journey after me. It didn't seem fair that I should have to come up with the money another time, especially now that I had no source of income.

I was very upset when I left Rabbi Tzvi Aryeh's home. "The people who are traveling are already paying so much money for this trip," I thought as I walked home. "If each one would just lay out another $150, I would be able to join them. Why don't they appreciate what I've done for them? After all, without my efforts, none of this would have ever come about. On the other hand, they are mostly yeshivah people and can hardly put together what they need for themselves. Still, without me, how will they know for sure that they have reached the *tzion*? Even I needed R' Michel to show me precisely where it was."

Two hours later, Rabbi Tzvi Aryeh phoned me at home and asked me to come back to speak with him. "I realize that we shouldn't be going without you," he said kindly. "After all, how will we recognize the place and know for sure that we haven't been misled? I also know that it is impossible for you to go into more debt. Here's an idea. I have two students, David Hidary and Manny Haber, who would like to go but who are unable to get away from work. As they are quite well-off, they offered to buy tickets for you and your wife on the condition that the merit of your recital of the *Tikkun HaKlali* at Rebbe Nachman's grave would be on their behalf."

This solution was originally suggested by Rabbi Mordekhai Sokolover, a Breslover chassid who served as a rabbinical court judge in Sokolov, Poland, before World War II. Someone once asked him if it was possible to send a messenger to recite the *Tikkun HaKlali* at the *tzion* on his behalf, and if the person who sent the messenger could receive the merit of that recital. Rabbi Sokolover answered that according to the strict letter of the law, it was permissible.

Rebbe Nachman himself had said that each person should come personally to his grave to recite the *Tikkun HaKlali*, give charity and engage in thoughts of repentance. So the majority of Breslover chassidim did not accept Rabbi Mordekhai's opinion. Sending a messenger, however, would certainly be preferable to not going at all. Rabbi Tzvi Aryeh's students were willing to pay for my tickets on the condition that no matter how many times my wife and I recited the *Tikkun HaKlali*, the spiritual merit would go to them.

Still, I didn't feel comfortable with that solution. "I can't do that," I told Rabbi Tzvi Aryeh. "I will not make a trip to Russia just to be someone's messenger. But I would be willing to share the merit." In the end, those two generous Jews paid for our tickets and my wife and I agreed to share the merit of reciting *Tikkun HaKlali* at the *tzion*. Everyone was satisfied.

For the majority of travelers, the pilgrimage to the *tzion* involved great financial hardship. In addition, they had to make arrangements at their jobs and inform their relatives that they were leaving on a short trip without revealing their actual destination, since the idea of traveling to the Soviet Union in those days instilled fear in people's hearts. Everyone, however, felt that the sacrifices were well worth it. This was the first time that the Soviet Union ever issued visas for Uman. The gates were open. All we wanted was to get to the *tzion* before they slammed shut again.

Many people made some effort to overcome personal and financial obstacles. But in the end, only eleven adults and one child managed to go. They were: Rabbi Tzvi Aryeh; Moshe Rosen and his wife; my wife and myself; my sister Esther and her friend Chana; Meir Kalmanowitz; Leibel Berger, his wife Bracha and their two-year-old son, Avremi; and R' Tzvi Reichman. As a well-to-do businessman, R' Tzvi was the only one who didn't have to worry about money.

We left New York for Paris on a Saturday night flight. But foggy weather diverted our plane to Geneva and we arrived late in Paris, just missing our connecting flight to Moscow. The next flight would be in two more days. By then, however, our visas would be almost expired and we would not have much time left in the Soviet Union.

I had never seen Rabbi Tzvi Aryeh as upset as he was in the Paris airport. When he berated the airline staff for our late arrival, he had the presence of mind not to say that we had bought our tickets from a private agent. He led them to believe that we had bought our tickets from the airline itself. So they put us up in one of the nicest hotels in Paris, the Hotel Lutiecia,[1] and gave us food vouchers for our stay. Rabbi Tzvi Aryeh sold the vouchers to the maitre d' at the hotel for half of what they were worth, which was still enough to pay for our meals at the most expensive kosher restaurants in Paris.

We spent the next two days praying that Reiner would be able to extend our visas. Although everyone waited anxiously for news, I was still upbeat about the trip. I had already prepared myself for unexpected obstacles. As I had discovered on my previous journeys, getting to the *tzion* is never easy. In fact, anything one does while trying to get closer to God requires a willingness for sacrifice.

Finally, our visas were extended and we proceeded on our journey. According to the original schedule, we were supposed to spend our first night in Moscow and continue on to Kiev the following day. But because of the delay, we flew directly from Moscow to Kiev on Tuesday night. We were so excited about being in Russia, so close to our goal, that we hardly slept that night. We still worried that we might fail.

Early the next morning, the Soviet authorities took us to Uman – with full permission from the government and without our having to devise any clever schemes! It was freezing cold, and the many clothes we wore weren't enough to really keep us warm. I sat next to R' Tzvi Reichman and gazed out the window at the signs showing the distance to Uman as our bus moved closer and closer to our destination.

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(1) During World War II, the Nazis took over the Hotel Lutiecia and turned it into a Gestapo headquarters.

"Tell me, R' Tzvi," I said, "why do you think it was so much easier for you to make this trip, financially speaking, than it was for the rest of us?"

He smiled. "Although I did not put in the same effort as the rest of you,I put in my effort thirty years ago, when I was a young man studying at the Breslover Yeshivah in Warsaw," he replied. "In those years before the war, the Breslover chassidim would sometimes smuggle themselves across the Polish border into Russia. Often, they endangered their lives to spend Rosh HaShanah in Uman. I spent an entire year preparing spiritually and mentally to smuggle myself across the border. I prayed every day and spent a great deal of time in *hitbodedut*, asking God to grant me the privilege of reaching the *tzion* in one piece. My friends and I arrived at the border after having spent twelve months concentrating our thoughts towards the *tzion*. We had also prepared ourselves spiritually for the journey by immersing ourselves in the mikvah and fasting.

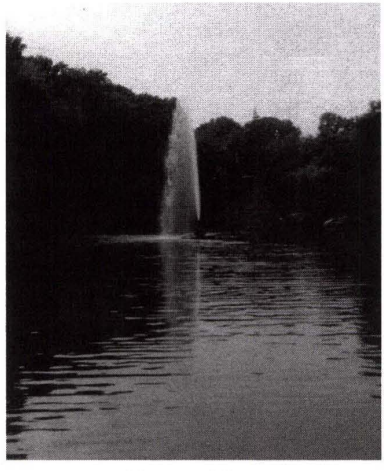
"But when we finally arrived at the border, we found out that a different group of Breslover chassidim had been caught and imprisoned for attempting to smuggle themselves into Russia. Fearing that the same thing might happen to us, we lost our courage to try. In the end, we spent Rosh HaShanah in Poland.

"I have often recalled that year of spiritual growth, the hours that I devoted to *hitbodedut*, and how much I pleaded with God that I should merit to pray at the *tzion*," he told me. "I also vividly remember my intense disappointment when we discovered what had happened to the other group. Perhaps we shouldn't have been so afraid. But I knew that someday, all the effort and longing that I put into making that trip to Uman would come to my aid. And that is why today, it was not difficult for me to make this journey. God arranged it in such a way that all I had to do was to write a check and be on my way."

| 3 |

TWO INTOURIST GUIDES – GUARDS, REALLY – accompanied us to Uman. One was Jewish and spoke fluent Yiddish. A full-fledged Communist, he constantly extolled the virtues of the Russian paradise. Throughout the trip, he repeatedly told us that the stores were filled with food, there were

no real problems here compared to what he heard went on in the United States, and that everything was just wonderful.



Sofiefka Park

"Why do you want to be religious?" he badgered us. "It's pointless. You are young people. What are you missing in life that drives you to Judaism? In Uman there is a beautiful place called Sofiefka Park, and also a large medical school. Go visit these places. Why do you want to visit a grave?"

The second Intourist guide, a woman named Maria, agreed. Speaking fluent English, she too asked why we had come so far to visit a grave. There was something about this non- Jewish woman that told us she was sincerely trying to understand us. So we did what we could to explain our connection to Rebbe Nachman and his teachings. We also shared our fear that the woman who lived next to the *tzion* would not permit us to enter her yard.

"The Ukrainians are famous for their hospitality," Maria assured us.

We pressed her, however, to consider what would happen if the woman refused to let us enter her yard.

"Don't worry," Maria replied. "I'll make sure you get in."

But we still had our doubts. Rabbi Tzvi Aryeh told us he was worried because of what Rebbe Nachman says in the *Likutey Moharan* (I, Torah 72): "The obstacles facing the person when traveling to the tzaddik always seem to loom larger as he draws closer to the tzaddik." He told Maria, "If you assist us and do everything humanly possible to make sure that we succeed, you will be promoted and become one of the directors of Intourist here in the Ukraine."

When we arrived in Uman, the mayor and his assistant boarded our bus and greeted us with a cheerful, "Good morning." "You are the first Americans to come to our city," the mayor said excitedly. "I had no idea there was such an important grave located here."

I was the only one present who knew the location of the *tzion*. With Maria's help, I conveyed the directions to the driver. I was amazed that no one asked me how I knew the way so well. Inwardly, I was worried that the woman who lived next to the *tzion* would recognize me. Luckily, it was an extremely cold day. I was able to keep most of my face covered with a heavy scarf. Since several others were dressed likewise, I did not stand out.

We arrived at the house. The woman living there was flustered when she saw a group of tourists, the mayor with his assistant, and several policemen standing outside. Maria tried to explain that the tourists had come to pray in her yard. The woman, however, became hysterical and started screaming that there was no grave in her yard.

"Okay," said the mayor. "Perhaps this is not the correct house. Let's look for a grave in someone else's yard."

"This is the correct place," I whispered to Rabbi Tzvi Aryeh. "This is the yard, and this is the woman."

Rabbi Tzvi Aryeh repeated my words to the mayor. No one thought of asking us how we could be so sure. The woman, meanwhile, continued to scream at us. She was actually a nice person, but she was afraid of how her neighbors would react.

The mayor, his assistant and the Jewish guide started to argue with us. "What's the big problem?" they demanded. "If you can't get in to see the grave, forget about it. We'll take you on a tour of the city. Uman is beautiful."

We appealed to Maria. "You see. We told you this would happen."

Maria became furious. "Open the gate immediately!" she shouted at the woman, and then pushed in the gate without waiting for a reply. "Go inside!" she instructed us. No one asked any questions. We entered the yard and I showed the others the exact location of the *tzion*. The woman who lived there was completely confused. The mayor scratched his head in wonder and we, of course, started to recite the *Tikkun HaKlali*.

Once we were inside her yard, the woman started acting friendly toward us. She even invited us to come into her home to warm up, and offered us something hot to drink.

It is impossible to describe how we felt standing next to Rebbe Nachman's holy *tzion*. We were privileged to remain there for an hour and a half in prayer and *hitbodedut*. It was so cold that it was impossible to stand in one place. Yet despite the snow blanketing everything, we prostrated ourselves on the *tzion*. We felt as though we were bonding ourselves to our Rebbe and splitting the heavens open with our tears and joy. By the time we returned to the bus, a wondrous warmth flowed through our veins.

The only one who caught a cold was the Jewish Intourist guide, who had stayed behind in the heated bus.

Afterwards, our guides brought us to a hotel in Uman. The mayor had prepared a festive meal for us – which, of course, we were unable to eat. We sat at the beautifully-laid tables in the hotel restaurant and took out the food that we had brought with us from America. No one in the restaurant could take their eyes off us. Not only were the people of Uman having their first look at Americans, they were also getting their first chance to see American cans of tuna and baked beans, paper plates and can openers. I'm afraid that we gave the citizens of Uman the impression that all Americans wear hats in public places and refuse to eat food other than their own.

We spent that night in Kiev and traveled to Moscow the following day. The trip back was completely different. Everyone was in high spirits and no one even felt the cold. The impossible had occurred. A ray of light had pierced the inky blackness of Russia.

In Moscow, our hotel rooms faced the Kremlin. Since it was Chanukah, we lit the Chanukah menorah. Our joy was beyond words. Watching the tiny flames that symbolized pure belief in God, bringing the light of Torah into the darkness of Russia, we realized that we had been given the privilege of spreading the Rebbe's light.

I thought it was very important that Rabbi Tzvi Aryeh meet with R' Michel before we left. These two men were totally dedicated to Rebbe Nachman's ideals, and perhaps Rabbi Tzvi Aryeh could make the right

connections to help R' Michel secure his long-awaited exit visa to Israel. Although it was illegal for foreigners to talk to Soviet citizens, I managed to get R' Michel to our hotel, and then sneaked out with Rabbi Tzvi Aryeh to talk with him in a train station. The two men became good friends. Upon his return to the United States, Rabbi Tzvi Aryeh worked with Gabriel Reiner to get an exit visa for R' Michel. He eventually received his visa in 1971.

The next plane leaving Russia was on a Friday morning. We left the hotel early and said our *Shacharit* prayers at the airport. The men put on tallit and tefillin in full view of everyone there. We left Moscow at 10 a.m. Our plane was scheduled to stop in Warsaw for two hours before continuing on to Vienna. Due to fog, however, we were unable to land in Warsaw and flew directly to Vienna, arriving at 2:30 p.m. We arranged to stay in a hotel near a kosher restaurant and a synagogue. On Shabbat, we gratefully recited *Birkhat HaGomel*, thanking God for seeing us through a perilous journey. On Monday morning, we flew to Israel.

Maria, our Intourist guide, was promoted several times during the next few years until she became Director of Intourist in Ukraine. She tried very hard to help us organize other trips, but without success. The KGB kept her under constant surveillance, and stunted all her efforts.

PART FIVE

Rosh HaShanah with Rebbe Nachman
September 1965

| 1 |

THE RUSSIAN GOVERNMENT REFUSED to issue any more visas to Uman. Yet during my next visit to Israel the following summer, R' Hirsch Leib Lippel urged me to return to Russia and spend Rosh HaShanah in Uman. He succeeded in convincing me, and I decided to travel there in another year's time, for Rosh HaShanah 1965.

The chassidim living in the United States didn't want to hear about my new idea. Those who had made the trip were grateful that they had actually reached the *tzion* and returned safely that one time. Those who hadn't were just getting used to the fact that visiting Uman was a reality. My idea of going to Uman for Rosh HaShanah, following in the footsteps of generations of chassidim who made every effort to attend the annual *kibutz* at Rebbe Nachman's gravesite, sounded like a pipe dream, something totally unrealistic.

Rabbi Tzvi Aryeh did give me some encouragement. "If you want to go, then go," he told me. "I will help you to the extent that I am able, but don't expect much."

That entire year, I thought about spending Rosh HaShanah with Rebbe Nachman in Uman. I devoted a great deal of time to *hitbodedut*, begging God to help me find a way to go.

After Pesach of 1965, I started asking people if they would be willing to help finance my expedition. I offered to recite the *Tikkun HaKlali* at the *tzion* for anyone who gave me a $100 donation. Even four people who contributed $25 each could have the *Tikkun HaKlali* said in their merit. Some people gave me $100 outright, while others said they were willing to give a donation on condition that if I didn't make it, I would return the money. I said that even if I didn't get there, I would make sure the *Tikkun HaKlali* would be recited for them by one of the Breslover chassidim in Russia who traveled to Uman each year.

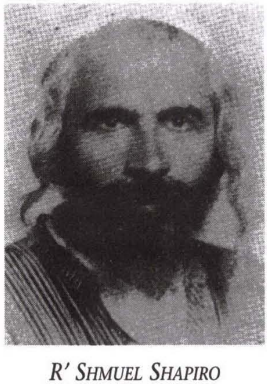
Within a short time, I had sufficient funds to cover my plane fare to Israel and Russia. But I still did not have enough money to cover my expenses in Russia.

I wanted to see R' Michel again. That year I had written him several letters, asking him if he would be willing to assist me. Since I did not hear from him, I assumed he was thinking the matter over. I bought my plane ticket from Gabriel Reiner, the travel agent. First I wanted to spend a week in Moscow to meet with R' Michel, followed by a few days in Minsk. Then I would travel to Kiev and from there, hopefully, to Uman. I had added Minsk to my itinerary to make it seem as though I was interested in expanding my sightseeing expeditions in Russia. Altogether, I planned to be in Russia for about three weeks. Reiner said it would cost around $800 for my traveling expenses.

I had no idea how I could possibly come up with such a large sum of money. "Could you arrange the permits and visas on the condition that if I don't send you the money by a certain date, you'll cancel my ticket?" I asked him.

"If you cancel at the last minute, the Russian government might insist that you pay a fine of 35% to 40% of the cost of the trip," Reiner replied.

I mulled it over. "Let me give you my final decision about two months before the date of my trip," I decided. "Meanwhile, please get me the necessary documents."



R' Shmuel Shapiro

When I arrived in Israel, I continued my fund-raising rounds. The first person to hand me a donation was R' Shmuel Shapiro. Everyone knew how strongly he desired to travel to the *tzion*. I found R' Shmuel sitting in his usual seat in the Breslover shul in Meah Shearim and told him that I planned to spend Rosh HaShanah in Uman. I explained that I had already traveled to the *tzion*, opening the way for others. Now, however, I needed another $800 for my

expenses and promised to recite the *Tikkun HaKlali* at the *tzion* for the benefit of anyone who gave me a $100 donation.

"Come back tomorrow at this time," he said.

The next day, R' Shmuel approached me the moment I walked into the Breslover shul. "Come, let's go up to the roof," he said. I followed him up the stairs, wondering what he had in mind.

Once on the roof, he handed me a $100 bill. "I'm giving this to you on condition that you don't tell anyone in Israel that you received it from me," he warned.

"But why not?" I asked.

"There are people who try to emulate everything I do, and many of them are extremely poor," he explained. "If they were to find out that I gave you this money, they would even go into debt to give you a donation. I don't want to cause someone who cannot afford it to give you money. Whoever wants to should give, but not because I gave."

I was greatly impressed by R' Shmuel's sensitivity, and asked him to pray that I overcome the difficulties and succeed in reaching the *tzion* for Rosh HaShanah. R' Shmuel promised to include me in his prayers. When I said good-bye to him at the end of the summer, he told me that he had prayed for my success during every *Shemoneh Esrei*, as well as each time he had immersed in a mikvah.

My good friend Yaakov Gedaliah Tefilinsky told me that he also wanted to contribute $100 towards my trip. I was aware of his financial situation and knew that he would have to borrow the money. Besides, he was such a close friend that I was ready to recite the *Tikkun HaKlali* for him even without receiving a donation. Instead of giving me a donation, I suggested that he help me raise the $700 I was still lacking. Yaakov Gedaliah agreed to accompany me to the chassidim who lived in Katamon and Bnei Brak.

Since I offered to divide the $100 donation among four men at $25 apiece, many people gave me $25 donations. I received $100 donations from R' Ben Tzion Grossman, R' Yitzchak Gelbach, R' Moshe Burstein and R' Leib Lupata. One evening after *Maariv*, R' Leib handed me a $100 bill. He must have heard that I was collecting, and gave his donation without my having to ask for it. He also handed me a note with his name

and the names of his children, and wished me success. In this way, I slowly managed to obtain the entire sum necessary for the trip and mailed it to the travel agent.

As I began to prepare myself spiritually for this trip, R' Hirsch Leib Lippel gave me a practical piece of advice: "Rebbe Nachman said that it makes no difference whether you pray or don't pray, eat or don't eat, sleep or don't sleep, as long as you are with him for Rosh HaShanah. But he never said, 'shofar or no shofar.' You must take a shofar with you, and in addition, you must learn how to blow it!" (The main mitzvah of Rosh HaShanah is listening to the shofar.)

Rabbi Yaakov Meir Shechter

R' Hirsch Leib found a shofar for me. After I finished studying all the pertinent laws related to shofar-blowing, I went to speak with Yaakov Gedaliah's uncle, Rabbi Yaakov Meir Shechter, who blew the shofar for the annual Rosh HaShanah *kibutz* in Jerusalem. At the time, Rabbi Yaakov Meir was teaching in the *kollel* located in the Breslover shul in Katamon. I approached him and asked him for a $100 donation in exchange for reciting the *Tikkun HaKlali* in Uman.

He regarded me kindly. "Although I would like to help you, I do not have the financial means to do so right now," he replied.

"Then perhaps you would be willing to teach me how to blow the shofar instead?" I suggested. To my delight, Rabbi Yaakov Meir agreed.

Yaakov Gedaliah and I spent hours discussing what would happen to me if I were caught on my journey to Uman. We concluded that at the worst, I would be deported from Russia and never allowed to return. We also spent a great deal of time in *hitbodedut* in the fields surrounding Jerusalem. Yaakov Gedaliah would have liked to come with me to Russia, but since he had an Israeli passport, it was impossible. I urged him to come to the United States where he could make a temporary, stateless person's passport, but that idea wasn't feasible for him at the time.

Rabbi Levi Yitzchak Bender heard about my plans and told everyone that what I was doing was beneficial and important, and he encouraged me to go.

But I had not yet heard from R' Michel. I had no idea if he would be willing to assist me. Chaim Kramer, another American student of Rabbi Tzvi Aryeh who was studying in Israel when we made our last trip to Uman, planned his own trip to Russia in the summer of 1965. He volunteered to deliver a message to R' Michel. I gave him R' Michel's address and suggested that he ask R' Michel to take him to the *tzion*. At the same time, I asked him to tell R' Michel that I planned to spend Rosh HaShanah in Uman.

R' Hirsch Leib Lippel and Gedaliah

R' Michel, together with a friend from Kiev who owned a car, did take Chaim to Uman. Chaim also met with R' Shika and told both R' Shika and R' Michel that I was planning to spend Rosh HaShanah in Uman. When Chaim returned to Israel, he told me that R' Michel was still deciding whether he could take me to Uman, but warned, "Gedaliah's trip is not so easy, considering that he must spend a few days in Uman. We'll do what we can, but I can't guarantee it will work out."

One day, R' Noson Sternhartz, R' Michel's father-in-law, asked me to visit him. He showed me a letter that he had just received from R' Michel, which included a small note addressed to me. R' Michel had written across the top of the note, in such a way that it looked as though it was part of the date: *To save me from fear, direct me towards the tzion, my holy portion* (*Zemirot Motza'ei Shabbat*). Even before I read the note, I realized that R' Michel was letting me know that although he was frightened, he would help me get to Uman for Rosh HaShanah. In the note, R' Michel wrote that he was willing and actually desired to do whatever he could to assist me.

Two and a half weeks before Rosh HaShanah, when it was time for me to leave Israel, everyone suddenly became angry with R' Hirsch Leib. Why had he convinced me to go? It was dangerous. I had already been caught once. R' Hirsch Leib assured everyone that he was positive I would spend Rosh HaShanah in Uman, and their fears were groundless. Nevertheless, the pressure on him was so intense that when he accompanied me to the airport, he had me pick him up in a neighborhood far from where he lived, lest people say that he was accompanying me on the way to doom.

| 2 |

I FLEW TO VIENNA and remained there for Shabbat. On Sunday I flew to Moscow and came to R' Michel on Monday morning, about two weeks before Rosh HaShanah. R' Michel was pleased to see me, but warned me not to breathe a word about my plans. My venture was extremely dangerous, and if his wife found out, she would become very upset. Not only would I have to accomplish the 150-mile journey from Kiev to Uman, but I would have to spend at least two days in the "forbidden city" itself.

We made up to meet again the following day. R' Michel wanted to introduce me to R' Yisrael Korsonski, a Breslover chassid living in Moscow. R' Yisrael was considered a man of means: He lived in a four-room apartment in a new neighborhood and even had a private telephone. When we came to his house, R' Yisrael served us a delicious meal and constantly pointed out, "Thank God, it is possible to sit and have a discussion without anyone walking through the door."

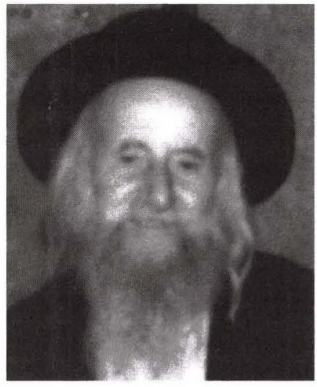
Both R' Shika and R' Noson Kanelski were present at this meeting. R' Michel began by saying that there was no argument over the fact that I would be in Uman for Rosh HaShanah. The only thing left to decide was the safest way to accomplish that.

The discussion continued for about two hours. They decided to take advantage of the fact that Rabbi Yehudah Kalasher, R' Noson Kanelski's father-in-law, had once lived in the Russian state of Georgia. Although

R' Noson never joined the Rosh HaShanah *kibutz*, this year he decided he would come. He would tell everyone at the *kibutz* that I was his father-in-law's cousin, that I was interested in Breslover Chassidut, and that I had traveled all the way from Georgia to spend Rosh HaShanah in Uman. Since the Georgian Jews did not speak Hebrew, Russian or Yiddish – only Georgian – no one would be able to communicate with me. To make matters easier, there are also many Jews who refrain from speaking the entire Rosh HaShanah, so it could be assumed that I was one of them. It was important that none of the others in attendance realize there was an American at the *kibutz*; otherwise, they would become frightened and leave.

Only R' Naftali Tzvi Dubinski and his son, R' Yaakov Galant, could be told my true identity, since both of them knew how to keep a secret and could be trusted implicitly.

I remained in Moscow until Thursday. During those four days, I met with R' Michel several times. At each meeting, we spoke at length about Breslover Chassidut and the Land of Israel.



R' Naftali Tzvi Dubinski

Rebbe Nachman had told his followers to recite the *Selichot* prayers on the day before Rosh HaShanah together with him. R' Michel was particular to arrive in Uman early so that he would have sufficient time to set up the seats and spend time at the *tzion* before the holiday began. The *Selichot* prayers, of course, were always recited in Uman.

That year, the day before Rosh HaShanah came out on a Sunday. I was scheduled to arrive in Kiev on the Monday before. Several of the chassidim planned to travel from Moscow to Kiev on Wednesday; they would meet me at Kiev's central bus depot at 2 p.m. Wednesday to let me know me that everything was going as planned. R' Michel would return to Kiev on Saturday night. At 7 a.m. on Sunday, he would accompany me to Uman.

In the meantime, I traveled to Minsk. A week before, the authorities had closed the city's last remaining synagogue. Prior to World War II, the city had been full of synagogues and yeshivot, but now Minsk was a spiritual wasteland.

As I walked around on Shabbat, I felt the tension that had been building up inside of me ever since I arrived in Russia. It seemed that my entire self-worth depended on my getting to the *tzion*. But, in fact, who knew if I would succeed? Perhaps, for reasons only God could understand, the time for opening the *tzion* to myself and others had not yet arrived? As much as I wanted to be with Rebbe Nachman for Rosh HaShanah, I had to be ready to accept another "not just yet" answer from God.

On Saturday night, partially to break the tension and also to play the part of an ordinary tourist, I went to the lobby to purchase a ticket for the circus that was in town that evening. At the circus, I met another Jew. He realized that I was Jewish since I was wearing a cap on my head. We spoke together until 1:30 a.m. He asked me a lot of questions about Jews and Judaism, and said that his father had been a Lubavitcher chassid who had lived in Vitebsk. My companion explained that although he was not religious, he had requested permission to emigrate to Israel, and had been fired from his job as a result.

He found it difficult to believe the things I told him about how Jews lived in the free world. He could not believe that kosher food was sold almost everywhere. He was so moved that he said to me, "I have no words to express my gratitude at having met you." Then, quite suddenly, he turned and walked away.

The next day, Sunday, I stayed in the hotel and ate black bread, sardines and tea in the hotel restaurant for dinner. Next to me sat another guest who had ordered coffee, bread, vodka, salad and sardines. I assumed that he was Jewish, since these foods are all kosher. He started his meal by taking a bite of bread, which made me sure of his identity, since Jews traditionally begin their meal with bread. The man saw that I was staring at him and started to speak to me in Russian.

"I'm sorry, I'm an American," I answered in broken Russian.

He switched to broken English and started to stutter. I felt sorry for him and asked if he knew Yiddish.

"Why, of course!" he replied in Yiddish. "My mother called me 'Yitzchak' all her life." We continued speaking in Yiddish.

Suddenly a waitress walked over to our table and patted Yitzchak on the shoulder, saying something to him in Russian. When she left, Yitzchak told me that she had asked him what he had to talk about with an American. Without finishing his food, he stood up abruptly and said, "I am in Room 202. I'm going there now. Wait a few minutes, then come and we can continue talking. If you are afraid to come," he added, "I'll understand."

I drank my tea and went up to his room. When we were seated, I removed my cap. Yitzchak stared at my yarmulke in shock.

"I had no idea that there are still young Jews who understand Yiddish," he said wonderingly. "But I am even more surprised that there are still young people who are religious. I would have never dreamed of such a thing.

"I would like to tell you about myself. I was born in Poland and studied in the Chakhmei Lublin Yeshivah under the famous Rabbi Meir Shapiro. During the Holocaust, I was placed on a train traveling to one of the labor camps in Russia. Some of my friends and I managed to escape and we hid in the forest in Russian territory.

"The Germans eventually caught us and brought us to Babi Yar, not far from Kiev. We arrived there on Yom Kippur. Many Jews were murdered there on that day. I heard the machine guns firing at them and watched as the dead and injured collapsed into the pits. A woman was standing next to me. All of a sudden she screamed, 'We can't die without a fight!' She ran over to one of the soldiers, grabbed his rifle from him and started shooting. Other soldiers opened fire on her from all directions. A few of us took advantage of this diversion to escape. The Germans started shooting at us, too, and several of the people in our group were killed. Only one other Jew besides me managed to escape. Russian peasants hid us until the end of the war. A Jewish girl was hiding together with us, and we decided to get married when the war was over.

"Afterwards, I applied for Russian citizenship. I thought the Russians were better than the Poles, since they had come to my aid while I

was hiding from the Germans. But once I had Russian citizenship, I wasn't allowed to return to Poland. Jews were severely persecuted and I was forced to work on Shabbat to support my family. I got a job in a millinery plant, and over the years was promoted to foreman. I'm here for a few days to purchase material for the plant. I live on the outskirts of Minsk."

Yitzchak continued to stare at my yarmulke as he spoke. He could not take his eyes off it. When he finished telling me about himself, he went over to his suitcase and took out some fruit, which he placed on the table between us. Then he placed a handkerchief on his head and recited the blessing over fruit, letting me know that he still remembered how to make a blessing before eating.

I also recited a blessing over a piece of fruit. Yitzchak was so overwhelmed with emotion that he hugged and kissed me out of pure joy that Jews who know how to recite blessings still exist.

"I have three children," he said proudly, "and they all married Jews and had proper Jewish wedding ceremonies." This was quite an accomplishment in Russia. "I have never eaten anything that wasn't kosher. I always bring a chicken to the *shochet* on Friday so I can have a kosher meal for Shabbat."

"Do you put on tefillin each morning?" I asked, since that was a mitzvah that he could do in the privacy of his own home.

"I put away my tefillin twenty-five years ago," he replied sadly, "and don't judge another until you have stood in his place (*Pirkey Avot* 2:4)."

"If I was in your place, most probably I would have ended up even less religious than you are," I answered. Our conversation continued until the wee hours of the morning.

Before I went back to my room, I told Yitzchak that I was leaving for Kiev in the morning. He asked if I would do him the favor of calling his relatives in Kansas, and said he would have to call his wife to get the number. However, since the phone in the hotel was probably bugged, he needed to phone home from somewhere else. He promised to bring me the number in the morning. Then he added. "A person like you must have a pair of tefillin. Perhaps when I see you in the morning, I could borrow them for a few minutes."

His words moved me deeply. I set my clock for 5:30 a.m. and tried to get some sleep.[1]

The next morning, I prayed an early *Shacharit* and waited for Yitzchak to arrive. Finally, at a quarter to 7, I decided to go to his room. As I was about to open the door of my room, I noticed a note had been pushed under it. Curious, I picked it up and read:

I will never forget the hours that we spent together. I decided, however, not to press my luck by seeing you again. Therefore, I am leaving early. Take care of yourself, and remember the verse from Ecclesiastes 10:20: "Curse not the king, no, not even in your thought. And curse not the rich in your bedroom. For a bird of the air will carry the voice, and that which has wings will tell the matter."

A chill ran through me as I read this message. In other words, Yitzchak was too frightened to come to my room that morning. He was also warning me that I should be careful not tell anyone about our encounter, since it might put him in danger. He was also reminding me to be careful about whom I chose to speak with. I was lucky opening up to him. But who knows what the next person might be.

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(1) That night I dreamed a strange dream. Among the people who had given me money for my trip had been Leibel Berger's brother-in-law, Eddie, a policeman. He had made a point of personally delivering his $100 donation. I had asked for his Hebrew name, but he had no idea what it was. Only his grandparents had known, but they were no longer alive. I asked Rabbi Tzvi Aryeh how to handle this situation. He advised me to mention him as "Eddie, the son of Sarah" (his mother's name was Sarah).

Since he had been the last person in America to give me a donation, I had not written his name on my list, but committed it to memory. During the meeting at R' Yisrael Korsonski's home in Moscow, I had given R' Michel my list of names. That way, if for some reason I didn't end up in Uman for Rosh HaShanah, he could divide the names among the chassidim there and recite the *Tikkun HaKlali* on their behalf. But the name, "Eddie, the son of Sarah" was not on the list.

In my dream, I suddenly recalled his name. The truth is, without that dream I would have forgotten about him completely. But in the merit of the fact that he donated money for my trip, Eddie's goodwill was not lost. I remembered to mention his name at the *tzion*.

| 3 |

I TRAVELED TO KIEV ON MONDAY MORNING. When I arrived at my hotel, I encountered a group of wild and noisy young American students playing musical instruments, dancing in the corridors and generally making a commotion. The Russians were staring at them and couldn't understand how they could behave like that. I thought that they were purposely acting obnoxious. It was almost as if they were trying to cause themselves problems.

"What's going on?" I asked one of the students.

"We've already been in Russia for two and a half weeks," he explained. "We were supposed to leave yesterday morning and split into smaller groups to visit other countries. Yesterday, however, we arrived at the airport only to be told that our plane was out of commission and there would be no other planes available until next week. For every day we remain in Russia, we have to pay an additional $30, and if we can't come up with the money, we won't be allowed to leave the country."

Yesterday, before we were told that our plane had broken down, we arrived at the airport and passed through customs. There we turned in our remaining rubles and received British pounds. But when we were told we would have to remain here for another week, we took the pounds we were just given and wanted to exchange them back to rubles. But we were told that we would have to pay in dollars if we wanted rubles. Furious at this unreasonable treatment, they decided to drive the hotel staff crazy. "We want them to regret every moment of our forced stay in this place," the student said.

I realized that because of the American group, I had a somewhat better chance of accomplishing my purpose in Kiev. With so much of the hotel staff's attention being drawn to these boisterous students, I might be able to disappear for a few days without being noticed.

I came up with a plan. I decided to do strange things the entire week. One day, for example, I remained in my room the entire day. Another day, I left the hotel in the evening and did not return until the middle of the night. One morning, I left at dawn and returned late in the afternoon. I constantly went in and out of my room, and whenever the

floor attendant sitting at the stairwell inquired where I was going, I gestured with my hands and explained with the few words of Russian that I knew, that I didn't speak Russian.

To further mislead the hotel staff, I noted how my bed looked when it was made up in the morning so that I would be able to make it myself. Sometimes I even slept on the floor so that the bed would remain exactly as the cleaning lady had made it the day before. When the cleaning lady showed up in the morning, she asked me why I had already made my bed. After all, that was her job, not mine. I cheerfully gestured that I enjoyed making my own bed.

So even when I did sleep there, the bed was always perfectly made when the cleaning lady arrived. I did everything possible to confuse the hotel staff so they could not be sure whether or not I had spent the night in my room. Next, I had to solve the problem of getting in and out with my key in hand. Otherwise, if I turned in my key to the woman at the stairwell, she would know how much time elapsed before I picked it up again.

I was supposed to meet R' Michel near the central bus depot on Wednesday. Tuesday evening I decided to take a cab to the meeting place to make sure I wouldn't have any trouble finding it. On the way back, to lighten things up, I got a policeman to give me a ride on his motorcycle back to my hotel. On Wednesday afternoon, R' Michel and R' Shika met me at the central bus depot. They told me that everything was proceeding according to plan. Every year before Rosh HaShanah, the two of them traveled to the graves of the Baal Shem Tov in Medzeboz, Rebbe Levi Yitzchak in Berditchev and Reb Noson in Breslov. This year, they were planning to spend Wednesday and Thursday visiting these holy sites and would travel to Uman on Thursday night. R' Michel would return to Kiev on Saturday night to accompany me to Uman on Sunday morning.

"Everything is arranged," R' Michel told me. "God willing, on Sunday morning, I will meet you here. Until then, spend your time in *hitbodedut* and pray that we will succeed."

Our rendezvous was short. I returned to the hotel to spend Shabbat in Kiev.

| 4 |

ON SUNDAY MORNING, the day before Rosh HaShanah, I awoke early to pray. I had not slept in my bed, so it was perfectly made. Taking the shofar that I had received from R' Hirsch Leib Lippel, I quietly opened the door to my room. I planned to rush past the woman sitting at the stairwell without surrendering my key. She would have alerted her superiors, of course, but with the key in my possession they couldn't be absolutely certain that I hadn't returned to my room for several days. But now I saw that the woman at the stairwell was fast asleep! Praising God for this small but significant miracle, I stole down the stairs and hurried to the bus depot, where I met R' Michel. Together, we boarded a bus to Uman.

With R' Michel at my side, nobody looked at me twice. We were dressed like Russians, and he spoke the language perfectly as he handled all the ticket transactions and boarding procedures. I could not believe how smoothly our trip was going. After all the risks I had taken to get to Rebbe Nachman's *tzion*, here I was bussing into Uman like an ordinary Russian citizen. Still, I had to be careful when I joined the other Breslover chassidim at the *kibutz*. I didn't want to cause those who didn't know who I was to panic.

During our ride, I told R' Michel the story of how R' Hirsch Leib Lippel used to pray at Rebbe Nachman's grave several times a day during the time he lived in Uman. This added up to thousands of trips to the *tzion*.

When we arrived in Uman, R' Michel went around to different homes to slaughter chickens for the holiday. Whenever R' Michel was asked about me, he remained silent. Afterwards, we went to the house of R' Yitzchak Zelig Rabinowitz, who rented two rooms to the Breslover chassidim. One room contained an improvised ark made out of some boxes, which held the tiny Torah scroll that R' Michel had brought with him. We would pray here during the holiday. The other room was crowded with beds and blankets.

I met some very interesting people there. One of them, R' Zalman Leib Astolin, had been a student of Rabbi Aharon Kotler in Slutzk. One

of R' Zalman Leib's legs had been amputated when he was a young man. As a result, he had received a disability pension from work and was able to devote himself to Torah study until he developed into a great Torah scholar. He lived in Tashkent and had several students. Eventually, he was allowed to leave Russia and settled in the Israeli city of Bnei Brak. Had he realized who I was, he would have probably been too frightened to remain at the *kibutz*.

R' Zalman Leib Astolin

R' Michel told R' Zalman Leib that I was from Georgia. R' Zalman Leib greeted me warmly and served me a meal. Later, R' Naftali Tzvi Dubinski and his son, R' Yaakov Galant, arrived. They were aware of my identity. R' Yaakov, who was close to me in age, said that he wanted to get to know me better and suggested we take a walk around Uman. I was frightened to walk around in public, but he told me that there was no reason for me to be afraid.

I knew that R' Yaakov had a kosher mikvah in his house in Tashkent, the only one in the entire region. The entrance to the mikvah was though a closet. The clothes in the closet and the wooden planks on the floor of the closet had to be removed each time someone entered the mikvah. This enterprise, of course, was extremely dangerous. But it was obvious that R' Yaakov did not frighten easily. As we walked together, I asked him about his fearlessness.

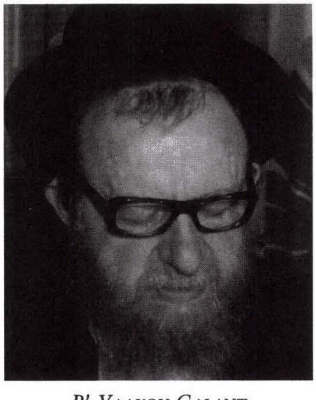
"Experience has taught me that nothing truly good comes easily," he replied, recalling a story about Rabbi Avraham Sternhartz (see Appendix C, p. 220). "All too often we struggle in our youth to achieve goals to live by, but the older we get, the more we fall into the trap of predictability and repetitiveness. We stop breaking new ground. But God is infinite and there is no end to what we can experience of His goodness. All we need to do is transcend our self-imposed limitations and be willing to give up some of the comforts we have grown used to. Then when a difficult

mitzvah comes our way, we can make room for God to enter our lives at a deeper level. As long as there is constant growth and renewed vitality in our relationship with God, there is nothing to fear."

Uman was a sleepy city of about 90,000 people that looked like something out of a nineteenth-century novel. All the houses were old and the roads were badly paved, with many potholes. Every corner cried out with the Soviets' neglect of their people. We walked around the area of the marketplace, the river and the old Jewish cemetery that had been destroyed during the war. There wasn't much to look at.

Afterwards, I met R' Nachman Sternhartz, the son of Rabbi Yitzchak of Babrinitz, a descendant of Reb Noson. He was over seventy years old at the time and was spending his forty-ninth Rosh HaShanah in Uman. Since he was the oldest person there, the chassidim stood up for him whenever he entered the room. His wife, Yitta, cooked the Yom Tov meals for us. Another woman, Sara Basha Kanelski, the mother of R' Motel Kanelski and grandmother of R' Noson Kanelski, was also there. R' Mordekhai Sirota, his son R' Zev, and R' Itzel Korsonski had come from Tashkent.

R' Itzel's cousin, R' Yisrael Korsonski from Moscow, was also there. He seemed very nervous and every few minutes he would come up to me and say, "Thank God so far. Let's hope things continue to go well." Of course, R' Noson Kanelski and R' Shika were also present.



R' Yaakov Galant

When R' Yaakov and I returned to the group, we all prepared to immerse ourselves in the river. This river was wide and icy cold. We entered it in pairs. R' Yaakov helped R' Zalman Leib immerse, since R' Zalman Leib had only one leg. The entire time that R' Zalman Leib was in the water, he kept whispering, "*Mesirut nefesh, mesirut nefesh* (self-sacrifice, self-sacrifice)."

From the river, we went to the *tzion*. The woman who lived in the

house next to the *tzion* was very accommodating. We were able to spend two and a half hours praying at the *tzion* and reciting the *Tikkun HaKlali* before returning to the apartment for afternoon prayers.

R' Nachman Sternhartz led *Minchah*. The service lasted one and a half hours. When he reached the words, "And return us to Jerusalem, Your city," R' Nachman burst into tears and cried for a full ten minutes. The others waited patiently for him to regain his composure, silently yearning in their own hearts to be able to see the Land of Israel in their lifetimes.

I sat next to R' Zalman Leib, he was so absorbed in his own prayers that he would never notice that I did not pray like a Georgian Jew. And even if he would notice, he never spoke on Rosh HaShanah, so he wouldn't say a word to anyone. Yitta, however, immediately realized that I was not from Georgia. She knew Rabbi Yehudah Kalasher personally and was familiar with the Jewish community in Georgia, but she had never seen or heard of me before. She was constantly mumbling that I could not be from Georgia. Later, during the meal, she kept asking me questions like, "What do you want to eat?" to get me to talk. But I never answered her.

R' Michel led *Maariv*, ushering in the holiday. We ate our holiday meal in relative silence and then went straight to bed. I slept between R' Shika and R' Noson. R' Naftali Tzvi and his son, R' Yaakov, were in the other two beds. Everyone in this room knew my identity and asked me questions about life in America and about various points of Jewish law.

We arose early the next morning and went down to the river to immerse. Although it was dark and the water was icy cold, R' Michel was the only one who entered the water effortlessly. He told me that when he was a small child, his father would wake him and his brother in the early mornings and take them to immerse in a cold spring before they went to the study hall. Consequently, he was used to immersing in cold water.

Shacharit was led by R' Yisrael Korsonski. Besides the Breslover minyan, there was also a Rosh HaShanah minyan of Jews who had returned to Uman after the Holocaust. R' Yaakov Galant left our minyan briefly in order to blow the shofar for them, and then he returned to our service.

R' Naftali Tzvi Dubinski had been part of the original group of Breslover chassidim that journeyed to Uman prior to World War II. He prayed with such exuberance and screamed so loudly that the others were afraid someone outside might hear him. It was 3:30 p.m. by the time we finished *Mussaf*. We immediately started the *Minchah* service and then went to the river for *Tashlikh* before sitting down to our Yom Tov meal. Everyone had contributed some food for the meals, which the two women prepared for us.

After *Maariv*, we began to dance and sing, *"Lo Yekalmu LaNetzach"* (All who hope in You shall not be ashamed nor disgraced forever) and, *"Utzu Eitzah V'Tufar"* (Be not afraid of sudden fear... Take counsel together and it [the plans of the wicked against you] shall come to naught). Songs such as these are usually not sung on Rosh HaShanah. However, considering the plight in which these people found themselves – trapped behind an Iron Curtain, harassed by anti-Semitic decrees and constantly threatened by assimilation and possible imprisonment – these songs of strength and faith seemed most appropriate.

Although we were barely a minyan, we felt uplifted and sang with extreme devotion and yearning. While we were in the midst of dancing, someone told me to go to the bedroom in case the police showed up. Almost every year, the police raided the Rosh HaShanah *kibutz* and wrote down the details of all the men there. R' Noson Kanelski joined me in the bedroom, and we spent quite a bit of time talking. The following morning, we awoke early and immersed again before prayers.

During the meal on the second day of Rosh HaShanah, R' Shika taught Rebbe Nachman's story, "The Exchanged Children" (*Rabbi Nachman's Stories* #11). I do not remember everything he said, but I do remember that all those in attendance were crying. Someone explained that they cried because R' Shika was R' Shimshon Barski's son-in-law, and every year, he gave over the lesson in exactly the same way his father-in-law had done many years before. Every year, everyone cried when they recalled the fiery faith and conviction with which R' Shimshon had taught the lesson.

Next R' Michel spoke. "Know, my friends, that every year we are jealous of the Jews who live anywhere else in the world but here. But on

this day, when we have the privilege of being with the Rebbe, we are more fortunate than anyone else. And anyone who senses the truth and profundity of Rebbe Nachman's teachings should be jealous of us."

It was R' Zalman Leib's custom not to speak for most of the holiday. Towards the end of the final meal, however, he would address the others with words of encouragement. He began by recounting the Baal Shem Tov's story about Rabbi Eliezer, author of the *Rokeach* (1164-1232). Rabbi Eliezer was once on board a ship during Rosh HaShanah. While he was sleeping, the ship was rocked by a storm and was in danger of sinking. Everyone was afraid. The captain was already considering which items should be thrown overboard to make the ship lighter.

Rabbi Eliezer's disciples woke him up and let him know what was happening. The rabbi immediately instructed them to go on deck to see if dawn had broken. When they told him that the sun had begun to rise, he instructed them to blow the shofar. The moment they finished blowing the shofar, the storm abated.

"What do you think?" the Baal Shem Tov asked after telling this story. "Do you think that Rabbi Eliezer realized that the storm would stop after he blew the shofar?"

His listeners answered that one as great as Rabbi Eliezer must have realized that sounding the shofar would indeed save them.

"No," retorted the Baal Shem Tov. "Rabbi Eliezer was just as frightened as everyone else. But he wanted the privilege of performing one last mitzvah before he died. And since it was Rosh HaShanah, when it is a mitzvah to blow the shofar, he performed that mitzvah – and then the storm abated."

"You must realize," continued R' Zalman Leib, "that we are in immediate danger. Our boat is sinking, and this year we must grab every available mitzvah before the boat sinks completely."

We continued our meal. One of the men brought out a bottle of homemade wine. Every year, each of the chassidim would make a toast over a small glass of wine and tell the others his heart's desire. Everyone would listen and answer, "*Amen*," praying that in the merit of being near Rebbe Nachman's *tzion*, their wishes would be fulfilled.

This year, the men were brokenhearted. They had traveled great distances to take part in this *kibutz*, and each had his own troubles. One requested that his wife merit a complete recovery, another that his children should remain religious, and yet another that he be privileged to emigrate to Israel with his family. The men wept bitterly as they spoke from the depths of their hearts.

Throughout the entire holiday, I had pretended that I could not speak the language. So when my turn came, R' Michel said, "He most probably doesn't understand what we are saying. Let's just toast each other and pray that his wishes also be fulfilled."

R' Michel continued, "Do you remember that I told you that a person by the name of Gedaliah came to visit me twice? Over Rosh HaShanah I was thinking about him, and wondered what he might be asking for. I will make a request for him, and you will answer, *'Amen.'*" He went on to speak for the next forty-five minutes, recounting the story I had told him on the bus about how R' Hirsch Leib Lippel had prayed at Rebbe Nachman's *tzion* thousands of times. The men were inspired by these words, and I was grateful that in my merit they were privileged to hear them.

When Rosh HaShanah was over and we returned a last time to the *tzion*, I told the others who I really was. Everyone was happy for me and told me that it was good they had not known this before.

R' Noson Kanelski accompanied me back to Kiev. We waited a long time until we found a taxi driver in Uman who was willing to take us. When we arrived at a street near my hotel, R' Noson asked the driver to stop and let me off. R' Noson got out with me and whispered in my ear, "Have success. Good luck, and don't worry." He patted me on the back and went back into the taxi.

I returned to the hotel. The front door was locked and I had to knock for the night clerk to open it for me. He gave me a strange look – after all, it was 2 a.m. When I reached the landing on my floor, the woman at the stairwell tried to ask me where I had been and what I had been doing. I made all sorts of strange gestures indicating that I didn't understand what she was saying. I also walked back and forth in front of her desk to convey the idea that I had been out walking. Then I went to my room. I still had the key with me.

The next morning, when I went downstairs, I heard that the group of American students had gone wild in my absence. The police had been so busy with the ruckus that they probably had no time to focus on my disappearance.

I flew back to Vienna. From there, I sent Rabbi Eliyahu Chaim Rosen a telegram informing him that I had spent Rosh HaShanah in Uman and was now on my way back to America. Rabbi Eliyahu Chaim was just about to journey to Meron for the Ten Days of Repentance. He took the telegram with him to show the other chassidim, especially R' Hirsch Leib. R' Hirsch Leib was ecstatic and told the others that they should learn from the Americans. Afterwards, the chassidim started to sing and dance.

I have no idea why I merited such a privilege, but I am grateful to God that I merited to be with Rebbe Nachman for Rosh HaShanah. The fact that I was able to succeed shows the power of a person's will. There is nothing that can stand against a strong will.

Group visits Uman, 1968

Epilogue

The Rosh HaShanah *kibutz* in Uman continued to exist until most of the chassidim were able to leave Russia for Israel. In 1970, only nine men came for the holiday. On Rebbe Nachman's *yahrtzeit* during the intermediary days of Sukkot, R' Yaakov Galant traveled to Uman together with three of his children and stayed to pray with the local Jews on the last day of the festival. Afterwards, he too left for Israel.

More Breslover chassidim from America began to travel to the *tzion*. During the summers of 1966-1969, the Soviets granted visas for groups to visit the *tzion*. This stopped abruptly in 1970. However, the gates were pried open, even if only a little, and the chassidim made great efforts to try to reach the *tzion*. In the early 1970s small groups of a few people were granted permission to travel to Uman after having arrived in Kiev. Others began to sneak their way into Uman using Vinnitsa, Cherkaz and Odessa as jumping-off points. Israelis who were denied visas, would "borrow foreign passports" and make the trip despite the dangers involved.

With the fall of Communism in 1989, the path was open for any person who wished to prostrate himself on Rebbe Nachman's holy grave. In 2005, some 20,000 people made the pilgrimage. Some day, we will tell the stories of self-sacrifice that surrounded those trips, as well.

Appendix A

Rebbe Nachman, Uman and the Promise

The whole idea sounds a little strange at first – leaving home to spend one of the most important days in the Jewish calendar near a gravesite in a small town somewhere in Ukraine. What is it about Uman that attracts nearly 20,000 men and boys (in 2005) from literally all over the world to spend Rosh HaShanah away from their families, regular synagogue services, home-cooked Yom Tov meals...?

The answer lies, perhaps, in a rather simple yet often misunderstood concept – the tzaddik. Outside of chassidic circles, when asked, "What exactly is a tzaddik?" some might answer: "a saintly individual," "a very good person," "someone very religious," etc. Yet this still doesn't explain the force that propels not only lifelong chassidim, but Jews from all backgrounds and walks of life, to a place like Uman, where Rebbe Nachman chose to spend the last six months of his life.

There is a common misconception that the idea of the tzaddik was introduced by the founders of the chassidic movement. While there are certain aspects of the tzaddik's role that had their beginnings with the Baal Shem Tov and his followers (though many of them, such as dynasties, dress codes and the like have no place in Rebbe Nachman's teachings), the concept of the righteous individual and his greatness has always been a part of Judaism. From Moshe to Joshua to the Judges and onward, each generation had its own tzaddikim, spiritual giants who would lead, teach and guide the nation. It would take literally a whole book just to quote from the Talmud, Midrash and Zohar about the greatness of the tzaddikim. However, just as our understanding of the Torah has diminished through history, so too has our appreciation of the role of the tzaddik – ironically, just when we need it the most.

Connecting Heaven and Earth

The tzaddik is one who attains such a level of self-mastery and spirituality that all his thoughts, feelings and actions – his very being – are in total consonance with God's will. This gives him a uniquely close relationship with God. In essence, what distinguishes the tzaddik from anyone else is that he has an unparalleled mastery of the spiritual, which gives him the ability to bridge the physical and spiritual worlds. Yet for all his spirituality, he is, and remains, a human being. This is his strength. He is able to channel Torah spirituality into this world, and guide others as to how to serve God.

Does this mean that the tzaddik is an intermediary? Well, yes and no. First of all, God forbid that anyone should think he needs a medium between the Almighty and himself – not from his side and certainly not from God's. Furthermore, God forbid that anyone should think he needs someone else to carry out some form of devotion on his behalf so as to somehow absolve him from fulfilling his own religious duties. We are all able, and indeed required, to accept responsibility for our own lives and deeds and to take practical steps to develop our own personal relationship with God. If the tzaddik is an intermediary, it is only in the sense that, having succeeded in conquering the physicality of this world, he is able to be an agent or catalyst for bringing spirituality down into it. Through his efforts and attainments, a tzaddik knows what is necessary to serve God in a true and proper manner. The average individual generally does not have a strong enough grasp of the spiritual to be able to perceive God's will clearly, and know how to serve Him in practice. He must therefore turn to someone who can guide him.

Do we always know what to do? Can we on our own know what direction to take? And what happens when we have estranged ourselves from God by our misdeeds? Even the Torah, as the instrument that conveys God's infinite wisdom to man, can actually mislead a person who tries to follow it without the benefit of true guidance and leadership! Which of us can honestly say that he is wise enough to look into the Torah and grasp exactly what is required of him? The Talmud, Midrash and Shulchan Arukh stress the importance of receiving from a teacher, so that one's understanding of Torah is clear. As the Talmud teaches: "Even one who has studied, as long as he has not received from a *talmid chakham*, a qualified teacher, is still considered an ignoramus" (*Berakhot* 47a). The true tzaddik can take the most elevated aspects of Godliness and bring them down to a level at which the simplest person can relate to them. The tzaddik gives direction.

How does Rebbe Nachman fit into all this? Rebbe Nachman has always been different things to different people. To his followers, the Breslover chassidim, he is simply "The Rebbe," their prime source of spiritual guidance in the quest for God. Some know him as a master storyteller: His tales are counted among the great classics of Jewish literature. To countless others, Rebbe Nachman is an outstanding chassidic teacher, the great-grandson of the Baal Shem Tov, an ever-fresh source of inspiration. His lessons, conversations, parables and sayings continue to electrify and inspire until today, expressing the wisdom of the Torah in a totally original way, opening up whole new vistas in every area of life. Rebbe Nachman's optimistic message – serve God with simplicity and joy – strikes a deep chord in many who have found themselves on the fringes of the Jewish people, as well as "lifers" born and raised in observant homes.

Born in 1772, Rebbe Nachman was only eighteen years old when he first began to attract a following. Many of his chassidim were outstanding scholars and kabbalists in their own right, some of them far older than he. Rebbe Nachman was only thirty-eight years old when he passed away in 1810, but even afterwards his influence remained potent. His teachings spread by word of mouth as well as with the printing of his writings. Today his ideas are studied by

both Jews and non-Jews, and have been the subject of a growing body of literature, academic and popular, in English, French, Spanish, Russian, Yiddish and Hebrew.

Why Uman?

The name of the Breslover chassidim comes from the town of Breslov (Bratslav), where Rebbe Nachman spent most of the last eight years of his life. That being the case, where does Uman come in? Why did he particularly want to be buried there? Nobody can claim to know exactly what was in Rebbe Nachman's mind. Still, if we transport ourselves about two hundred years back in time and take a look at what Uman stood for then, a coherent picture begins to emerge.

In a certain sense, Uman was a place of opposites. In 1768, four decades before Rebbe Nachman passed away, Uman, then under Polish rule, was a garrison town. With the advance of an army of rebellious Haidemacks, thousands upon thousands of Jews from all the surrounding areas fled to the town for safety. When the Haidemacks arrived at the gates, the governor gave them access – if they would agree to spare all the gentiles in exchange for the Jews. The Haidemacks entered, set up a cross, and offered the Jews a choice between conversion and death. Without exception, they chose death. In the space of three days some 8,000 were slain. Their martyrdom brought about a great sanctification of God's name. The Haidemack riots in 1734, 1750 and 1768 left a total of 20,000 Jews dead in Ukraine.

When Rebbe Nachman once passed through Uman – eight years before he died – he took special note of its cemetery, praising it in the most glowing terms. "How beautiful it would be to be buried in this cemetery," he commented. By then, however, Uman was notorious for a new kind of Jew, one whose outlook was almost diametrically opposed to that of the 20,000 martyrs. Paradoxically, Uman had become one of the first centers of the Haskalah (Enlightenment) movement in Russia.

Although the Haskalah first developed in Germany, it was now beginning to spread eastward to what had for centuries been the bastion of Ashkenazic Jewry: Poland, Ukraine and Russia. This was a time of unprecedented philosophical explosion, in which many of the ideas that had previously defined man's place in the world were shattered. Leading intellectuals resented the notion that man is subservient to God; they wanted to sever all links with the Divine. This thinking took its toll on the Jewish world. Traditionally, religious debates centered on how to fulfill the mitzvot of the Torah – for instance, the Shema: at what hour is it to be recited, should it be said sitting or standing, etc. Now, however, people started questioning the very necessity of reciting the Shema, as well as practicing the other mitzvot.

Unlike today, there was no such thing as an "Orthodox" Jew – one was either a Jew or not. Owing to outside hostility, most Jews had little choice but to live in their own, insular communities. But in the new political climate in Europe,

"equality" was now being offered to all, even Jews. For the first time they could gain admission to non-Jewish society and culture! But the price was steep: The tallit and tefillin had to be discarded at the door. It was the ultimate challenge to that generation's leaders, who fought to innovate ways to preserve Torah observance against the sweeping tide of assimilation. Yet many could not resist the promise of "full equality," and pursued it with all their might. Rebbe Nachman made a chilling statement to his followers: "We are now at the end of the Jewish people, their outer limit. This is the point where the boundary of the Jewish people ends... When the Jewish people reaches this point, they are very far from God" (*Tzaddik* #92).

The assimilationists in Uman were led by a clique of three. Rebbe Nachman was the only chassidic leader who was able to communicate with them, and they themselves invited him to move to Uman in 1802. He told them that it was not yet time. He did move to the town to die eight years later, and then he spent hours playing chess and talking with them, much to the wonderment of his followers. He used to talk to them about every subject under the sun...except Torah. Yet one of them, Hirsch Ber, said that it was as if each conversation with the Rebbe conveyed the message, "There is a God." Later, after the Rebbe's death, Hirsch Ber told the Rebbe's foremost disciple, Reb Noson, "You have lost the Rebbe? *We* have lost the Rebbe! If the Rebbe had lived, we would have repented completely and become tzaddikim!" (*Until the Mashiach*, p. 206).

"I WANT TO STAY AMONG YOU!"

REBBE NACHMAN'S LIFETIME CAME AT A CROSSROADS in history. Just beginning was the Industrial Revolution that has so totally transformed our material life, unleashing the most amazing, hitherto undreamed-of possibilities for both good and evil. Perhaps even more fateful was the burgeoning ideological revolution, which was to shake the entire framework of beliefs and assumptions on which people had based their lives for centuries. Standing on the threshold of the modern age, Rebbe Nachman said: "I'll tell you a secret. A great wave of atheism is about to enter the world" (*Rabbi Nachman's Wisdom* #220).

One of Rebbe Nachman's main objectives was to throw out life rafts to those who would become engulfed in the massive, impending ideological torrent. Rebbe Nachman had a profound grasp of the alienation, anguish and despair so characteristic of the modern age. Hero after hero in his stories spends years wandering through vast forests, deserts, wildernesses and the like, searching and searching... Again and again Rebbe Nachman addresses such contemporary issues as anxiety, frustration, depression, disease... He saw clearly that further sophistication was not the answer. "The greatest wisdom of all," he said, "is to be simple." He stressed faith, joy and looking for the good. "*Gevalt*!" he cried. "Don't give up!!!"

Rebbe Nachman wanted the fire of his Torah to keep burning brightly. For eight years he nurtured his disciple, Reb Noson, imbuing him with his spirit and guiding him as to how to spread it in the world. Reb Noson later printed all of

Rebbe Nachman's teachings. He established regular gatherings of the Breslover chassidim. He built the first Breslover synagogues. And through his own voluminous writings, he encouraged – and continues to encourage – countless Jews to follow Rebbe Nachman's pathways with strength and joy.

Yes, Rebbe Nachman certainly wanted his influence to remain alive in the world. But when he said to his followers, "I want to stay among you," he meant something more specific. From the time he first became sick with tuberculosis, he started talking more and more about his burial place. He spoke about the possibility of going to die in the Holy Land, or of traveling to Lemberg (Lvov), where many other great rabbis were buried. When he finally settled on Uman, one of the reasons he gave his followers was that it would be easy for them to travel to his gravesite.

The Talmud states that the tzaddikim are greater after their passing than during their lifetime (*Chullin* 7b). Personally, the tzaddik has no need for this material world. His only mission is to bring people back to God. But during his physical lifetime, the tzaddik is limited by his body. Though he constantly strives to negate his being in God's infinity in order to accomplish his mission, he can only do so intermittently, because he cannot leave his physical body. After his physical death, however, his soul remains permanently in harmony with God's infinity, making him all the more capable of rectifying the world.

The practice of visiting the graves of tzaddikim is an ancient one. When the spies entered the Land of Israel, we are told, "And they ascended from the south, and he came to Hebron" (Numbers 13:22). Since there were twelve spies, why does the verse say, "and *he* came to Hebron"? Rashi (ad. loc.) explains that this refers to Caleb: "He wanted to be saved from the counsel of the spies, so he went there alone to prostrate himself at the graves of the Patriarchs." Earlier, we find that Jacob explained to Joseph why he buried Rachel by the roadside instead of taking her to Bethlehem: "This way she will be of help to her children when Nevuzaradan takes them into exile. They will pass by her grave, and Rachel will come forth and weep and entreat for mercy on their behalf" (*Rashi*, Genesis 48:7).

Rebbe Nachman made a promise that no other tzaddik in the whole of Jewish history has ever made. Taking two of his closest followers as witnesses, he said: "When my days are ended and I leave this world, I will intercede for anyone who comes to my grave, recites the ten Psalms of the General Remedy (the *Tikkun HaKlali*) and gives some charity. No matter how serious his sins and transgressions, I will do everything in my power to save him and cleanse him. I will span the length and breadth of the Creation for him. By his *peyot* I will pull him out of Gehinnom (hell)!" (*Rabbi Nachman's Wisdom* #141). "It makes no difference what he did until that day, as long as he undertakes not to return to his foolish ways from now on" (*Tzaddik* #122).

We are still trying to stay afloat today as we are deluged with the ideological descendants of the Haskalah movement. The seeds Rebbe Nachman planted are only now, two hundred years later, beginning to show their full bloom. This is one of the reasons why to Breslovers, Rebbe Nachman is very much alive today. In a world with an overabundance of questions and far too few answers, we can

all profit from the veritable treasure that the Rebbe wants to give us. His ideas are addressed to all seeking generations, but in many ways they resonate clearest in this generation of intense spiritual searching. Although his wide appeal is evinced by the range of Jews who overcome all obstacles to spend Rosh HaShanah with him in Uman, his message is nonetheless felt as a deeply personal one. Now, having some idea of the awesomeness of what a tzaddik is and what he can accomplish, we begin to view the journey to Uman on Rosh HaShanah from a completely different perspective.

The Tzaddik Intercedes

Rebbe Nachman's promise must be qualified. The Rebbe promised that if a person comes to his grave, recites the *Tikkun HaKlali* and gives a coin to charity, then the Rebbe will extend himself on that person's behalf and remove him from Gehinnom, provided that the person takes it upon himself not to return to his foolish ways. The question arises: How does this differ from the reward earned by anyone who fully repents? That person, too, will not see Gehinnom! Why, then, should one make a special effort to travel to Uman? There are several answers.

First, there is a tradition among the Rebbe's followers that the Rebbe's promise does not only apply to what happens to an individual after death. The Rebbe will also help anyone who comes to his gravesite to escape his or her personal Gehinnom in this world. The Rebbe will defend that person on the basis of his or her sincere intention and desire to do good from now on. Since that intention was declared at the Rebbe's gravesite, the Rebbe will use his influence with the Heavenly Advocates of Justice and encourage them to judge the person on the scale of merit. With this accomplished, the individual will experience changes in his or her life and perception of God. People who take advantage of these blessings while they last are equipped to face the torments and despair of their personal Gehinnom and will always be able to live with hope and joy.

Second, the ARI states that every Friday evening, when the fires of Gehinnom are extinguished in honor of Shabbat, Moshe descends into Gehinnom to help retrieve as many souls as possible. And not only Moshe, but tens of thousands of tzaddikim who have passed on, each according to their level, descend with him to assist those forlorn souls who lack the good deeds to exit Gehinnom (*Sha'ar HaKavannot, Shabbat,* p. 49).

We see that there are many, many tzaddikim who possess different means of saving souls. What is unique to Rebbe Nachman is his promise to save the one who visits his gravesite. True, a person who has sinned and is being punished in Gehinnom, God forbid, has a chance to be removed from there. But it's only a chance. By traveling to Uman during one's lifetime, reciting the ten Psalms and giving charity, one is assured that Rebbe Nachman won't leave it to chance.

Furthermore, Reb Noson writes: Once a tzaddik passes away, he can no longer ascend from level to level to attain greater spiritual perceptions and knowledge of God. Only someone who is in this material world – who experiences ups and downs – can continuously strive for greater heights. However, if a person visits

the grave of a tzaddik and prays to God in the tzaddik's merit to draw close to Him, he effectively draws the soul of that tzaddik down to this world. Having descended to this world, the tzaddik experiences a descent. He now has the merit to experience an ascent, and uses the opportunity to come even closer to God. Concludes Reb Noson, the tzaddik actually owes the person who visits his grave a favor, since because of that visit the tzaddik can rise to greater heights (cf. *Likutey Halakhot, Korchah* 3:4).

Thus we see that the tzaddik has tremendous power to intercede on behalf of others. By visiting Rebbe Nachman's gravesite and securing his promise, one earns a guarantee to be brought to the front of the line and not have to wait years, decades or perhaps centuries until his soul is redeemed.

What remains to be explained is, why should a soul have to be redeemed? God created man in order for him to receive an eternal reward for his good deeds. But man was purposefully exposed to temptations to deter him from his spiritual quest. And sometimes, perhaps oft-times, the person sins and blemishes his soul rather than perfects it. This is the mission of the tzaddik, to help a person on his/her spiritual quest during the course of a lifetime. Should that person not succeed, the tzaddik does what he can to redeem that soul from Gehinnom and rectify it so that it will reap rewards for the good deeds the person has accomplished.

Rosh HaShanah

Rosh HaShanah is an extraordinary day. When you add Rebbe Nachman's unique flavor to it, the picture comes into sharp focus, enabling us to view the day with a new clarity. We suddenly realize that a Rosh HaShanah with the Rebbe is not one to be missed – it gives us a chance to tap into the intrinsic power of the day itself. And, with the tzaddik's help, we can get the most possible benefit. Opportunity awaits us.

To put this in perspective, traveling to tzaddikim is hardly a new idea – our Sages allude to it in the Talmud. "In the time of the Holy Temple, the shofar was not heard on Shabbat except in the Temple [where the Sanhedrin sat]. When the Temple was destroyed, Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai instituted the custom of sounding the shofar on Shabbat wherever a *bet din* (rabbinical court, i.e. the tzaddikim) convened" (*Rosh HaShanah* 29b). Thus, to fully experience the holiness of the day, one had to spend Rosh HaShanah with the tzaddikim. We see that the custom of traveling to spend Rosh HaShanah with tzaddikim goes back thousands of years.

Rebbe Nachman was most emphatic that his followers should travel to him for Rosh HaShanah. "Although many other chassidim traveled to the tzaddikim for Rosh HaShanah, there was no one who was as insistent about the matter as Rebbe Nachman" (*Tzaddik* #23). He said, "My Rosh HaShanah is completely new. God gave me the gift of knowing what Rosh HaShanah is" (*ibid.* #406). Rebbe

Nachman said that on Rosh HaShanah he was able to help people in ways that he simply was not able to effect the rest of the year (*Tzaddik* #406). He put so much stress on the importance of his Rosh HaShanah that he exclaimed, "My very essence is Rosh HaShanah!" (*ibid.* #403).

The Head

Before we can fully appreciate the meaning of Rosh HaShanah with the tzaddik, we first have to understand a little of what Rosh HaShanah itself is all about – what sets this day apart from the rest of the year. Rosh HaShanah literally means, "the head of the year." The year is like an organic entity, with a head, heart, arms, legs and so on. The head is at the top – the first day of the year. Just as the head directs the body, so too, one's Rosh HaShanah will determine the outcome of the rest of the year. Thus, our Sages teach: "On Rosh HaShanah it is decreed what will be at the end of the year" (*Rosh HaShanah* 8b). Whatever takes place up until the very end of the month of Elul (the last month on the Jewish calendar) was already decreed at its "head," at the very beginning of the year, at Rosh HaShanah.

Rosh HaShanah has an entirely different character than Pesach, Shavuot or Sukkot. It is the "Day of Judgment." Our health, our wealth, indeed our very lives are at stake. In a sense, Rosh HaShanah is a repeat of Creation. In order to create anything new, there is always an element of judgment. What form should this new creation take? What will be best, taking all the different factors into account? Should we go ahead at all? Rosh HaShanah is no different. It requires, from God's side, a new creation: a New Year. The year to come has not yet been, and needs to be brought into existence. Creation. Just as construction of a building requires a blueprint, so too, the construction of the year calls for a specific plan. Just as an architect draws up the blueprints for the building, so God is the Architect for the year. His plans are prepared and drafted on Rosh HaShanah.

So Rosh HaShanah is not merely the first day of the Jewish year. It is the outline for the entire year. Aside from his many other considerations, Rebbe Nachman places paramount importance on Rosh HaShanah because he wants to impress upon us the significance of the "head" – what we can accomplish if we attempt to begin the year properly and have our "heads" – our thoughts – in the right place. Therefore, Rebbe Nachman teaches: We must be wise on Rosh HaShanah. We should only think good, positive thoughts: that God will be good to us and give us a good year, and that we will do our best to live the way we know we should. And, because Rosh HaShanah is associated with thought rather than speech, the Rebbe also counsels us to be very careful to speak as little as possible on the first day of Rosh HaShanah (*Rabbi Nachman's Wisdom* #21).

The Shofar

The Torah commands us to sound the ram's horn on Rosh HaShanah. The Talmud, Midrash and Zohar, as well as all the later writings, offer numerous

insights to explain the connection. Among those upon which Rebbe Nachman puts particular emphasis are that the shofar blasts "sweeten" the severity of God's judgment (*Likutey Moharan* I:42), and that they arouse people from their spiritual slumber, preventing them from idling away their days (*ibid.* I:60). Hearing the shofar sounded by a man of true piety evokes awe of Heaven in the heart, giving flight to extraneous fears and worries and moving us to rejoice (*ibid.* I:5,3). Thus, when we include the blowing of the shofar by a pious person in the blueprint of our year, we can look forward to fear of Heaven and a joyous heart for the rest of the year.

The Honey on the Apple

We can see now that Rosh HaShanah is the day that the rest of the year depends on and, in fact, the whole world depends on. As the Rebbe said, "The entire world is dependent upon my Rosh HaShanah" (*Tzaddik* #405). So what is it that Rebbe Nachman wants us to gain from this day? Rosh HaShanah is actually a marvelous good given to the world; as the Rebbe teaches: "God gave Rosh HaShanah out of great kindness" (*Likutey Moharan* II, 1:14). When we begin to fathom the remarkable role that the tzaddik can play on this day, we realize why it is considered such a kindness and, in fact, presents us with a unique opportunity.

On Rosh HaShanah, all of creation comes before God to be judged (*Rosh HaShanah* 16a). We are judged for every act, every word, even every thought. If we truly believe this, we know that we have cause for concern. Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev used to say, "When Elul comes around, I feel the fear in my shoulders" (Rabbi Eliyahu Chaim Rosen).

So what are we to do? Repent! Yes. But if things are as bad as we think they are, what chance do we have? The charge sheet may be pages long. The credit sheet is at best so-so. Rebbe Nachman teaches that people should travel to the tzaddik for Rosh HaShanah.

Rosh HaShanah is the time when decrees pertaining to the entire year are issued. Therefore, it is the best time to mitigate and "sweeten" those decrees. Each decree has a precise and specific way of its own to be mitigated. A decree can only be sweetened at its source – found in a specific place in God's "thought" (the "Upper Wisdom"). If we want to turn every judgment into compassion and kindness, we need to rise to each one of these sources individually.

This is quite an undertaking for anyone, but Rebbe Nachman tells us that there is a level of Divine Wisdom where all individual wisdoms are merged in unity – an all-inclusive Wisdom so exalted that it encompasses the sources of all individual judgments. Since all individual decrees ultimately emanate from this all-inclusive Wisdom, someone who is able to rise to this level actually has the ability to sweeten all decrees at their source, rather than on an individual basis. Certain outstanding tzaddikim have this power, and this is why people go to them for Rosh HaShanah. Each person comes with his individual problems, his personal limitations, his own good and bad. Because the tzaddik can rise to the highest

source, he can take each constriction, each judgment and decree, and sweeten it, arousing kindness and compassion for the entire year (*Likutey Moharan* I, 61:6, 7).

Rosh HaShanah is a Day of Judgment, when dire decrees can be issued against a person or his family, God forbid. But it also contains its own antidote against strict judgment. Therefore, even if a person fell short of what he should have been during the year, he has a chance, a good chance, to make amends and begin afresh. The New Year brings with it an opportunity for a new start, so that even if the charge sheet is long, the seemingly impossible task of setting everything right can be made much easier by traveling to the tzaddik.

"Anyone who has the privilege of being with the Rebbe on Rosh HaShanah is entitled to be very, very happy" (*Tzaddik* #403).

Return to Uman

We live in remarkable times. "History" has suddenly come alive, no longer confined to school texts and dust-covered library books. The drama continues to unfold before our eyes in Eastern Europe and what was once the Soviet Union. Newspapers have been filled with pictures of one massive statue after another being toppled by a crowd that has had enough. We can't keep up with the dizzying pace of events that has put books, maps and even newspapers out of date before they are printed. In Uman – a tiny dot on the map – a gate has creaked open.

Hundreds of Breslover chassidim used to travel to Uman to be with Rebbe Nachman at Rosh HaShanah during his lifetime and, thanks to the efforts of Reb Noson, continued to make the Rosh HaShanah pilgrimage throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Following World War I, however, the successive ravages of the Bolsheviks and the Nazis and the rigors of Stalinism forced the remnants of the Breslover chassidim in Ukraine to go underground. Any visits they made to the *tzion* had to be covert. Nevertheless, even after World War II, the few remaining Breslover chassidim in Russia continued to hold a secret Rosh HaShanah minyan in Uman despite the risk of imprisonment.

In the meantime, those who had emigrated abroad established new Breslov centers in Israel and America, and these expanded rapidly. The main Rosh HaShanah gatherings became those that were held in Israel. By the 1970s and '80s, the gatherings held in Meron and Jerusalem were each attracting 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 accommodation, meals and so on. The two days of intense prayer, festive communal meals, chassidic study sessions, song and dance created a unique atmosphere that made a deep impression on many who had never been in Uman nor dreamed that they would ever go. From time to time during the Rosh HaShanah dancing, a few people would sing the traditional Breslover song, "Uman, Uman, Rosh HaShanah..." But the idea of

actually being in Uman for Rosh HaShanah was as laughable as Avraham 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 Tzvi Aryeh Rosenfeld, met with R' Michel Dorfman in Moscow and told him of his wish to travel to Uman, an impossibility at that time. R' Michel agreed to meet him in Kiev and accompany him to the *tzion*. 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.

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." For the most devoted Breslovers, visiting Rebbe Nachman's *tzion* 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 Breslover 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 facade began to crumble, and the authorities finally gave permission for two hundred and fifty people to spend Rosh HaShanah in Uman. Even after agreeing, they kept on changing their minds, creating innumerable difficulties along the way. Nevertheless, by a miracle, it came off. Uman's one and only hotel – an old, 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 total wonderment.

The following year, over a thousand people came. A large, empty factory site was rented some ten minutes' walk from the *tzion*. 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 at last drop the paranoid attitudes which had perforce become second nature during the long years of Stalinist, Nazi and post-Stalinist persecution. By Rosh HaShanah of 1990, the number of visitors had doubled to 2,000, and an even larger factory site was acquired two minutes away from the *tzion*. As Rebbe Nachman once observed: "Every year people say that previous years were better and times are not as good as they were before. But the opposite is true. God now directs the world better than ever" (*Rabbi Nachman's Wisdom* #307).

The Rebbe's Rosh HaShanah Today

Rebbe Nachman's Rosh HaShanah starts long before the first day of Tishrei. The Rebbe himself said that as soon as one Rosh HaShanah ends, he already started waiting for next year's (*Rabbi Nachman's Wisdom* #215). But for most people today, serious practical preparations start in the early summer. First, almost everyone must confront obstacles of one kind or another, whether from within themselves or the world outside. This was as true in Rebbe Nachman's time as it is today. Reb Noson wrote: "We learned how determined we have to be to break the obstacles that stand in the way of any holy action, especially the barriers against being with the Rebbe for Rosh HaShanah" (*Tzaddik* #406). It seems that the only way to receive the unique spiritual uplift that comes from being in Uman for Rosh HaShanah is by first having to fight for it a bit.

This applies even to those who have already had a taste of an Uman Rosh HaShanah and who normally find it hard to imagine ever going anywhere else; how much more does it apply to those who are contemplating going for the first time. Today the trip to Uman ought to be almost as easy as booking your tickets and packing a suitcase. But while the collapse of the Soviet Union has eliminated many of the obstacles that used to exist, more obstacles have a way of popping up.

Few people are in the happy position of not having to wonder how to finance such a trip. One of the first things to do is to pray for the necessary funds...and then start saving! The Breslover chassidim of old used to put aside a special savings box at the beginning of the year and add at least a few coins every so often. For those whose yearning to go is very strong, the necessary funds often have a way of appearing at the very moment when things seem most hopeless. Rebbe Nachman explicitly stated: "I have already made it my business to take care of the expenses of those who come to me for Rosh HaShanah" (*Siach Sarfei Kodesh* 1-27). Many today can testify to this as an actuality!

Another obstacle most people face is their sense of responsibility to their families, their home community and the like. Understandably, wives have always had great difficulties with the idea of being left at home with the children on this holiday. Yet it is important to point out that the husband, as in many other realms of Jewish life, is considered the family's representative – in the long term, the benefits from the trip to Uman are enjoyed by the rest of the family as well. As for the short term, Reb Noson once remarked, "It is one of God's miracles that Yom Kippur comes right after Rosh HaShanah. This way, the members of the family have to forgive each other!" (Rabbi Eliyahu Chaim Rosen; *Siach Sarfei Kodesh* 1-665).

Some people feel torn about the idea of leaving Israel in order to travel to Ukraine for Rosh HaShanah. From America, England, France or any of the other places in the Diaspora where there are Breslover chassidim, the holiday journey seems logical enough. But to leave the Holy Land? Yet Rebbe Nachman taught that the holiness of the graves of the tzaddikim falls in the same category as the

holiness of the Land of Israel (*Likutey Moharan* II, 109). Thus, "those who travel [from Israel] to the graves of tzaddikim are actually traveling from the Holy Land...to the Holy Land!" (R' Shmuel Shapiro).

In a deeper sense, we find that when it came time to divide the Holy Land among the twelve tribes, the tribes of Reuven and Gad chose as their heritage the land on the east bank of the Jordan River (Numbers 32). As the commentators point out, they were willing to forgo the Holy Land itself in order to be near the burial site of Moshe (*Sforno* on Deuteronomy 33:21). *The Ohr HaChaim*, Rabbi Chaim ibn Atar, adds, "Whoever is buried in the Holy Land is granted a portion in the World to Come." The tribes of Reuven and Gad were even willing to forgo that promise, since they would be right near the grave of Moshe.

Our Sages teach that Moshe was specifically buried outside the Land so that he could effect forgiveness for everyone else who did not make it to the Land, ensuring that not one Jew would be left behind outside the Land! (Rabbi Tzvi Cheshin). Thus, the advantages of traveling to and being in the proximity of the gravesite of tzaddikim who are buried outside the Holy Land can sometimes outweigh the benefits of not leaving the Land for such a great mitzvah.

Even after dealing with all the other issues, there may still be a nagging voice inside that keeps saying, "I can only get a good night's sleep in my own bed... I won't be able to eat the kind of food I'm used to... The davening will be so crowded... Wouldn't it be just as good to stay at home? Surely my *kavanah* in davening will be much better – I won't have the distractions of an unfamiliar place!" These exact same points were put to Rebbe Nachman by one of his followers, who much preferred visiting the Rebbe when things were quieter. The Rebbe responded: "Whether you eat or don't eat, whether you sleep or don't sleep, whether you concentrate on your prayers or you don't concentrate properly... just make sure you are with me for Rosh HaShanah!" Reb Noson adds: "All the distractions the man mentioned were purely imaginary. They were the promptings of the evil inclination – because, thank God, it was perfectly evident that in the main, people prayed with deeper concentration among the assembled chassidim on Rosh HaShanah than they would have done had they prayed in their own hometowns" (*Tzaddik* #404).

Every effort and sacrifice, large or small, that we make in our journey to the tzaddik is precious. Two of Rebbe Nachman's closest followers, R' Yudel and R' Shmuel Isaac, used to travel long distances from their homes to get to the Rebbe. At one point, they decided to move to the same region so as to be close to him all the time. The Rebbe then told them that he greatly missed their journeys to him. With every single step they took, an angel was created. They said, "What about all our efforts to hire the coach to bring us?" "They are also included," replied the Rebbe. "Every one of those steps also creates an angel." Just before his last Rosh HaShanah in Uman, the Rebbe spoke about this again and said, "Oh, to have the merit to see the clear, radiant light of the roads you travel to be with me!" (*Tzaddik* #291).

Waking Up

Practically everybody traveling to Uman for Rosh HaShanah today, especially from Europe, the United States and further afield, undertakes a lengthy journey by night and day. If there is anything positive to be said about the disorientation caused by this effort, it could be that it helps to prepare for the intensity of the Uman experience – which is very much about waking up, literally as well as spiritually. After the various delays that can crop up on the way, many finally get into Uman in the wee hours of the night, only to find the area near the Rebbe's *tzion* surprisingly alive with a bustle of activity (the hours after midnight are a favored time for Breslovers to pray and meditate). It is an interesting fact that many people who at home are unable to manage without their seven to eight hours of nightly slumber discover that they can do very well with much less while in Uman.

Representatives of the Vaad (organizing committee) are available day and night to direct people to their accommodations. Normally, the first thing most people want to do after depositing their bags is to go to the Rebbe's *tzion* to pray, a deeply moving experience both for those coming for the first time and for those returning. With more and more people arriving by the hour, the excitement and awesomeness of Rosh HaShanah can be felt ever more strongly. Due to the present economic crisis in Ukraine, there is practically nothing to buy in Uman, and all the sights worth seeing in the town can be "done" more than adequately in less than half an hour. The only place really worth visiting is the elegant Sofiefka Park, about which Rebbe Nachman himself said, "To be in Uman and not go there?" The absence of distractions is probably just as well, since it leaves one free to rest and then take advantage of every available moment before Rosh HaShanah to be at the *tzion*, to pray, study, meditate and contemplate. Those with a spare day or two before or after the holiday may wish to visit the graves of the Baal Shem Tov in Medzeboz, Rabbi Levi Yitzchak in Berditchev, Reb Noson in Breslov, etc.

On Rosh HaShanah eve, the *Selichot* start quite early. The synagogue is packed, the atmosphere electric, the praying full of fervor. As Rebbe Nachman said: "Other tzaddikim wish themselves a Rosh HaShanah as good as our *erev* Rosh HaShanah" (*Imrot Tehorot*).

At last, Rosh HaShanah itself arrives. The Breslover davening is slow, which is fine for those who are accustomed to it. For those who are not, they can take a break whenever necessary in order to get some air, relax, offer their own private prayers, etc. (Sefardim, please note: To accommodate those who feel out of place in the main minyan, some of the Sefardim who come to Uman have chosen to pray in their own minyan following their own customs.) In any case, the traditional Breslover prayer service is never tedious. At those moments of great solemnity, when the words of the *machzor* confront us with the ultimate facts of our mortal existence, the melodies are hauntingly moving, followed by a rapturous burst of the most infectiously "*leibedik*" singing that forces you to clap your hands with everybody else and literally jump for joy.

"Eat rich foods and drink sweet drinks, and send portions to those who are without, for the day is holy to our Lord; and do not be somber, for the joy of God is your strength" (Nechemiah 8:10). The Vaad has put special care into catering the festive Yom Tov meals, making sure to provide ample food for all. Sitting and enjoying together with everyone else gives one a chance to appreciate the amazing variety of Rebbe Nachman's followers and the wonder of the Godly unity that has been made out of such diversity. Perhaps this is one of the things Rebbe Nachman meant when he compared the tzaddik to the *Even Shetiyah*, the Foundation Stone in the Holy Temple, which is reminiscent of the one single stone formed out of the twelve separate stones Jacob took to lay his head upon (Genesis 28:11). The true tzaddik has the power to reconcile opposites and make peace.

One of the high points of Rosh HaShanah in Uman is *Tashlikh*, which takes place on the afternoon of the first day. This ceremony of casting our sins to the water is held at what is now a reservoir located a few minutes away from the *tzion*. The sight of tens of thousands of chassidim clad in white, advancing through the streets of Uman and gathering at the water's edge, is impressive enough. It is even more moving to those who are aware that this was one of the spots where, in 1941, the Nazis rounded up hundreds of Jews and started pushing them into the water – with plenty of local collaborators looking on to make sure that no one escaped being drowned. "Those who sow in tears will reap in joyous song..." (Psalms 126:5). The return from *Tashlikh* is a triumphant dance through the streets: "And you shall draw water with joy from the springs of salvation" (Isaiah 12:3). Just try to picture the scene – where the Nazis and their cronies once slaughtered Jews, the police now stop the traffic to allow thousands of chassidim to dance joyously in the streets!

After *Tashlikh*, Rebbe Nachman used to teach his Rosh HaShanah lesson. Today this is the time for study sessions with leading scholars of the Breslov movement. A wide variety of classes are offered at all levels in Yiddish, Hebrew, English, French, Russian... The various Rosh HaShanah lessons found in the writings of Rebbe Nachman and Reb Noson are not only a commentary on and explanation of today's Rosh HaShanah. The manifold facets of Rosh HaShanah as it actually occurs in Uman today are themselves a teaching – a vivid, living commentary on the practical implications of Rebbe Nachman's pathways. They show us the vital importance of putting all our strength into prayer and joyous service of God; of being prepared to confront ourselves and ask ourselves the deepest questions about the purpose of our lives and how we are measuring up in fulfilling our potential; of valuing the spiritual over and above the material; of loving and appreciating our fellow Jews even when they are so exasperatingly different from ourselves.

People who have never been in Uman for Rosh HaShanah may wonder what it means to go to the tzaddik if he isn't actually there in the flesh. But for those who have had the experience, the Rebbe's spirit can be felt at every turn: at the *tzion*, where somehow one finds himself expressing his deepest personal needs and issues so naturally; in the shul, where "intensity" is too tame a word to

describe the euphoric joy and profound awe that inspires the entire gathering; in the singing and dancing accompanying the Yom Tov meals; at *Tashlikh*; and in the words of Torah that flow forth, whether at the organized classes or in informal study sessions and conversations with friends old and new. Each person comes away with a wealth of new insights and *chizuk* (encouragement) to start off the new year on the best footing possible.

Appendix B

Biographical Sketches

Rabbi Aharon of Breslov (1775-1845)

Rabbi Aharon Goldstein, known as Rabbi Aharon of Breslov, was the son of Rabbi Moshe of Kherson, a noted rabbinical authority. Rabbi Aharon himself would serve as rabbi of Kherson during his father's tenure. His clarity in rendering halakhic decisions was unparalleled. Rebbe Nachman held Rabbi Aharon in such high esteem that he said he invoked his ancestral merits to help Rabbi Aharon become the chief rabbi of Breslov in 1802, when Rebbe Nachman moved there. Rebbe Nachman also called him as a witness to his promise to save anyone who visits his *tzion*, gives charity and recites the *Tikkun HaKlali*. Rabbi Aharon's son, Rabbi Tzvi Aryeh, succeeded his father as rabbi of Breslov, and his grandson, Rabbi Nachman Goldstein, was the Tcheriner Rav (q.v.). A later descendant was Rabbi Tzvi Aryeh Rosenfeld (q.v.).

R' Zalman Leib Astolin (d. 2005)

A native of Tashkent, R' Zalman Leib studied under Rabbi Aharon Kotler in Slutzk. Having lost a leg in his youth, he received a disability pension which enabled him to devote himself totally to Torah study. He eventually developed into a great Torah scholar and taught students in the Soviet Union. He married the daughter of R' Chaim Binyamin Brodie (q.v.) and was one of the eleven Jews who attended the first Rosh HaShanah *kibutz* in Uman following the Holocaust. R' Zalman Leib emigrated to Israel in the early 1970s and settled in Bnei Brak. He passed away in 2005.

Baal Shem Tov (R' Yisrael ben Eliezer) (1698-1760)

The founder of Chassidut was born in Okup, Podolia (today part of Ukraine), where he was orphaned at a young age. A deeply spiritual man who often secluded himself in the forests to pray and meditate, the young R' Yisrael hid his devotions by posing as an assistant teacher of young children. He rose to great heights of saintliness during his years of seclusion. At the age of thirty-six he began to attract many followers, including some of the leading Talmudists of his day. Together with his disciples he spread the tenets of Chassidut, creating what has become the most popular mass movement in Judaism. His teachings demonstrate how even the simplest Jew can derive spiritual benefit from the mystical secrets of the Torah. The Baal Shem Tov first established his movement in Tlust, but eventually moved to Medzeboz, where he is buried.

R' Noson Barski

R' Noson Barski (1894-1972)

Son of R' Shimshon Barski (q.v.), R' Noson fled from Uman to Poland and made his way to Israel in 1939, just before the outbreak of World War II. R' Noson is credited with taking the famous picture of Breslover chassidim praying near Rebbe Nachman's gravesite in 1922.

R' Shimshon Barski (1873-1935)

A direct descendant of Rebbe Nachman, R' Shimshon was an important and influential Breslover chassid in Uman prior to World War II. He authored *HaEtzot HaMevu'erot* (*Explained Advice*), which expands and clarifies Reb Noson's *Likutey Etzot* (*Advice*), a collection of practical advice found in Rebbe Nachman's teachings. R' Shimshon also wrote many essays that were either lost during the war or destroyed by the Communists. He brought many Jews close to Breslover Chassidut, especially Polish Jews. A student of R' Moshe Breslover (R' Moshe Lubarski, q.v.), he was known for his clear, rational thinking and calm demeanor. He passed away on 1 Sivan 1935.

Rabbi Levi Yitzchak Bender (1897-1989)

Rabbi Levi Yitzchak came to Uman in 1915 as a penniless war refugee from Poland and became a very close student of R' Avraham Chazan (q.v.). Even after R' Avraham passed away in 1917, Rabbi Levi Yitzchak remained in Uman. He spent the next twenty years living and teaching Breslover Chassidut, and was selected to be the chazzan for the Rosh HaShanah prayers at the annual *kibutz*.

Rabbi Levi Yitzchak's personal study schedule was legendary. He followed Rebbe Nachman's directive to cover as much as possible of the major Jewish works (Mishnah, Talmud, Midrash, Zohar, etc.) each year. He was diligent in following the Rebbe's advice to recite *Tikkun Chatzot* and practice *hitbodedut*. For nearly seventy-five years he never once missed getting up in the middle of the night to recite the *chatzot* prayers. Yet, when someone once asked him, "Which of your spiritual accomplishments is most precious to you? Which are you going to present to the Heavenly Court?" Rabbi Levi Yitzchak responded in true Breslover fashion: "I spent thirty years in Russia, and I still believe in God!"

In the winter of 1935, Rabbi Levi Yitchak and Rabbi Eliyahu Chaim Rosen (q.v.) were imprisoned by the Communists for "subversive activities" (they had appealed to an American organization for relief for local Jews during the Ukrainian famine of the early 1930s). Granted a conditional reprieve, Rabbi Levi Yitzchak fled Uman and went from city to city, never remaining long in any spot. He spent World War II in Siberia and emigrated to Israel in 1949. Until his passing in 1989, he was the recognized head of the Breslover community in Jerusalem.

Many Breslover chassidim accepted him as their spiritual guide, especially *ba'alei teshuvah* who joined Rebbe Nachman's following in large numbers in the 1970s and 1980s. Rabbi Levi Yitzchak passed away on 22 Tamuz 1989.

Leibel Berger (b. 1938)

One of the earliest students of Rabbi Tzvi Aryeh Rosenfeld (q.v.), Berger became instrumental in spreading Rebbe Nachman's teachings worldwide and is one of the pillars of the New York Breslover community. He was a founder of the first Breslover synagogue in Brooklyn, sponsored the printing of many editions of Rebbe Nachman's works and created a priceless archive of Breslover manuscripts, publications, letters and memorabilia. He has been a member of the American Breslov-Uman Committee since its formation in the late 1980s, working tirelessly to organize the annual Rosh HaShanah *kibutz* in Uman. In 1989, as the Breslov representative of the Jewish Heritage Foundation which opened Jewish schools and synagogues in Russia, Leibel was the one who convinced the authorities in both Ukraine and Uman to establish the yearly pilgrimage to Rebbe Nachman's *tzion*.

Rabbi Moshe Tzvi Aryeh Bick (d. 1990)

Rabbi Bick was the son of Rabbi Chaim Yechiel Michel Bick, the last head of the rabbinical court of Medzeboz. His ancestors served as heads of the rabbinical court for seven generations, from the time of the Baal Shem Tov. Arriving in America, he moved to the Bronx and later to the Boro Park section of Brooklyn. He was an acclaimed halakhic authority. Rabbi Bick passed away on 19 Elul 1990.

R' Yitzchak Breiter (1886-1943)

Born in Poland seventy-six years after Rebbe Nachman's passing, R' Yitzchak came across a copy of *Likutey Moharan* for the first time when he was studying in yeshivah. Learning the Rebbe's Torah opened new worlds of thought and faith for him. He hid the book so he could find it easily the following day, but when he returned, the book had disappeared.

A few weeks later, R' Yitzchak came across a copy of *Parparaot LeChokhmah*, the commentary on *Likutey Moharan* by Rabbi Nachman Goldstein, the Tcheriner Rav (q.v.), and he used the information it contained to make contact with the Breslover chassidim living in Uman. The following Rosh HaShanah, R' Yitzchak made the first of many trips to Uman.

R' Yitzchak Breiter

R' Yitzchak was instrumental in spreading Rebbe Nachman's teachings in Poland before World War I. He continued traveling to Uman until 1917, when the Bolshevik Revolution

closed the border between Poland and Soviet Russia. Unable to reach Uman, he established the Rosh HaShanah *kibutz* in Lublin, and by the 1930s, succeeded in increasing the ranks of Polish Breslover chassidim to several thousand. Following the closure of the border between Poland and the Soviet Union, R' Yitzchak composed a very moving prayer, asking to be able to travel to Rebbe Nachman's gravesite. This prayer was recited by Breslover chassidim for some seventy years until the gates were finally opened.

R' Yitzchak authored *Seder HaYom,* which provides clear directives on how to apply the Rebbe's teachings to one's daily life, and *Chilukay HaNachal* (*Seven Pillars of Faith*), illustrating the areas of faith one must develop and how to go about accomplishing this. He also composed the stirring song, "*Chidush Kemoso,*" in praise of Rebbe Nachman, which is often sung at Breslover gatherings. A recognized elder in the Warsaw Ghetto, he was deported and murdered by the Nazis in Treblinka, may God avenge his blood.

R' Chaim Binyamin Brodie (d. 1971)

R' Chaim Binyamin was one of the eleven Breslover chassidim who attended the first Rosh HaShanah *kibutz* after the Holocaust. He emigrated to Eretz Yisrael and passed away on 21 Kislev 1971.

R' Tzvi Bronstein (1915-1993)

Born in Vishkov, Poland, R' Tzvi studied in the Novardok Yeshivah before emigrating to Canada in 1932. He later moved to the United States to become the chief *mohel* at Cedars of Lebanon Hospital, New York. He is famous for inventing the *magen* (protective) clamp, which is still used by *mohelim* today.

In 1956, American Jewish leaders sent R' Tzvi to Austria to circumcise Jews who were unable to leave that country after fleeing the Hungarian Revolution. That mission led to his involvement with Jews behind the Iron Curtain. At great personal risk, he traveled to Russia to secretly circumcise hundreds of Soviet Jews in deserted locations. In the mid-1960s, R' Tzvi founded an organization called *Al Tidom* (Do Not Be Silent), which sent food packages and clothing to Jews living behind the Iron Curtain. The organization also smuggled religious articles and Zionist literature into the Soviet Union and brought out petitions to the United Nations signed by prominent activists, describing the plight of Soviet Jewry.

In the course of his travels, R' Tzvi retrieved many precious manuscripts from the Soviet Union, among them a Pesach Haggadah containing seven different commentaries, handwritten by Rabbi Avraham Aharon Friedman of Ungvar. Another manuscript was a commentary on the Jerusalem Talmud, *Toldos Yitzchak*. Its author, the Poltova Rav, Rabbi Yitzchak Isaac Krasilschikov, composed this lengthy work with great self-sacrifice while living behind the Iron Curtain. His commentary was included in an edition of the Jerusalem Talmud published by Rabbi Chaim Kanievsky's institute, *Machon Mutzal Mai'eish,* in Bnei

Brak. The Soviet authorities were furious when they discovered that such a valuable manuscript had been smuggled out of Russia, and asked the Ministry of the Interior why the book had never been printed. The Ministry excused itself by saying that there was not enough paper in the country to print such a monumental work!

R' Tzvi passed away in Jerusalem on 11 Nissan 1993.

†

R' Moshe Burstein (b. 1914)

R' Moshe is one of the leading figures in the contemporary Breslov world. Born in Poltosk, Poland, he came to Jerusalem with his wife and infant son in 1935. They settled in the Old City of Jerusalem, where R' Moshe founded the daily Breslover minyan in the Jewish Quarter. During the Israeli War of Independence, he was captured by the Jordanians and spent nine months as a civilian hostage in Jordan, together with eight other Breslover chassidim.

After his release, R' Moshe was resettled in the Katamon neighborhood of Jerusalem, where he bought, rebuilt and administered the Breslover shul there. He was one of Rabbi Avraham Sternhartz's (q.v.) closest disciples; Rabbi Avraham even lived in his home in Katamon for eight years. When nearly all the Breslover chassidim of Katamon had either died or left the neighborhood, R' Moshe sold the building and built a newer, larger shul in the Givat Moshe neighborhood of Jerusalem. He called it *Or Avraham* (the Light of Avraham) in memory of Rabbi Avraham Sternhartz. R' Moshe also led the prayers in the annual Rosh HaShanah *kibutz* in the northern Israeli town of Meron. For fifty years he longed to be worthy of praying at Rebbe Nachman's gravesite. When he finally reached the *tzion* in 1988, he recited the *Shehecheyanu* blessing.

Despite his great Talmudic knowledge and clarity in Rebbe Nachman's teachings, R' Moshe is best known for his ability to "say little and do much." He attends nearly every wedding of a Breslover chassid, visits the sick in hospital and spends his days helping others.

R' Avraham Chazan (1849-1917)

A true servant of God, renowned for the intensity of his devotions, R' Avraham was known to all as "Reb Avraham b'Reb (the son of Reb) Nachman's," after his famous father, R' Nachman Chazan of Tulchin (q.v.), the prime disciple of Reb Noson. R' Avraham was the bridge between the founders of Breslover Chassidut and the followers to come, recording many of the stories and Breslover traditions that he had received from his father. These anecdotes and traditions formed the basis for his *Kokhavey Or*, *Sichot v'Sipurim* and other works.

His own profound understanding can be seen from his commentary, *Biur HaLikutim*, which dissects Rebbe Nachman's lessons point by point. Nevertheless, R' Avraham himself said about the Rebbe's simple conversations: "I hope that 10,000 years after the Resurrection, I will be worthy of understanding even one of Rebbe Nachman's statements the way the Rebbe himself understood it in this world."

Although R' Avraham left Ukraine to settle in Jerusalem in 1884, he returned to Russia each year to spend Rosh HaShanah in Uman. He was stranded in Russia during World War I and passed away there during Chanukah 1917. Among his students were Rabbi Eliyahu Chaim Rosen (q.v.), founder and dean of the Breslover Yeshivah in Jerusalem, and Rabbi Levi Yitzchak Bender (q.v.), who led the Breslover community in Jerusalem after World War II.

R' Nachman Chazan (of Tulchin) (1813-1884)

Born around 1813, a few years after Rebbe Nachman passed away, R' Nachman, whose grandfather was a follower of the Rebbe, was named after him. He was orphaned as a very young child and grew up in his uncle's house, where he met Reb Noson during the latter's pilgrimage to the Holy Land in 1822. Reb Noson made such a deep impression upon him that the young Nachman decided to stay close to Reb Noson forever. He became Reb Noson's most intimate follower and eventually led the Breslov movement.

R' Nachman was the chazzan for the *Mussaf* service on Rosh HaShanah – hence his family name, Chazan. His supplications were so intense that his listeners felt he was "standing on air" while reciting the prayers. His great fervor was matched by his modesty. Though he became leader of the Breslover chassidim, he did not consider it beneath his dignity to serve others. Immediately after praying the daily prayers with great devotion, he would take the water buckets to draw water for the synagogue.

R' Nachman published the first volume of his mentor's *Likutey Halakhot* while Reb Noson was still alive. Later he edited and published the remaining seven volumes. R' Nachman moved to Breslov after Reb Noson passed away so that he could continue Reb Noson's work. After eighteen years in Breslov he moved to Uman, where he lived an additional eighteen years. It was this move that shifted the focus of Breslover Chassidut to Uman. He passed away on 26 Nissan 1884.

R' Michel Dorfman (b. 1913)

Originally from Kiev, R' Michel became a Breslover chassid in his early teens. He married Rabbi Avraham Sternhartz's granddaughter, Mariasah. Escaping the Stalinist purges of Ukraine in the late 1930s, he fled to Moscow, where he survived the war. He was arrested by the NKVD and exiled to Siberia for nearly seven years. After Stalin's death, his sentence was commuted and he was allowed to return to Moscow.

R' Michel received his certificate as a *shochet* from the Poltova Rav and made his living as a bookbinder. He kept in touch with Breslover chassidim throughout Russia and was a key figure in maintaining the annual Rosh HaShanah *kibutz* in Uman, despite the government ban on religious gatherings. He was willing to place himself in great danger to escort American Breslovers to Uman and show them Rebbe Nachman's *tzion*. His efforts and self-sacrifice eventually led to the lifting of the Iron Curtain that prevented Breslover chassidim from getting to Rebbe Nachman's gravesite.

In 1971, R' Michel and his family received permission to leave the Soviet Union and settle in the Holy Land. He is presently the Rosh Yeshivah of the Breslover Yeshivah in Jerusalem.

R' Naftali Tzvi Dubinski (d. 1993)

R' Naftali Tzvi came to Uman when he was seventeen years old and joined Reb Baruch Getche's (q.v.) group of *ovdim* (devotees) who spent their nights in *hitbodedut*, their mornings in prayer and their days in Torah study.

His wife died in childbirth, leaving him with one son, Yaakov. In 1937, R' Naftali Tzvi was arrested and sentenced to eight years in a Siberian slave labor camp for the "crime" of convincing a Jewish boy to stop working on Shabbat. Completely isolated during this period, he had no idea what happened to his six-year-old son during World War II. In fact, his son was being raised by R' Yochanan Galant (q.v.). After his release from Siberia, R' Naftali Tzvi moved to Prunz. He was only reunited with his son in 1954, when they met in Uman for Rosh HaShanah. He then moved to Tashkent until he was able to emigrate to Israel in 1971, at the same time as his son and grandchildren.

In Jerusalem, R' Naftali Tzvi would often go up to the roof of the Breslover shul in Meah Shearim for *hitbodedut*. One day, the wife of R' Nachman Strakes heard someone crying out to God from the roof and commented that that was exactly the way R' Naftali Tzvi used to cry out in Uman – not realizing that R' Naftali Tzvi had arrived in Israel and was the one she was hearing!

Moshe Eisenmesser (1940-1961)

Born in New York, the son of Chaim Akiva HaKohen, Eisenmesser became a student of Rabbi Tzvi Aryeh Rosenfeld (q.v.) at a very young age, and showed incredible self-sacrifice for the Chassidut throughout his life. He faced strong opposition from his parents. For example, they would not allow him to enter the house on Shabbat unless he rang the bell! His parents even moved to a neighborhood far from other observant Jews in order to discourage his religious leanings.

In the summer of 1958, with the encouragement of Rabbi Tzvi Aryeh, Eisenmesser traveled to Israel to study in Jerusalem's Mirrer Yeshivah. While in Israel, he befriended Yaakov Gedaliah Tefilinsky (q.v.), and together they devoted much time to an intense regimen of study and *hitbodedut*. After he returned to New York he kept up a frequent correspondence with Yaakov Gedaliah; those letters were eventually published in *She'arit Yaakov*. In March 1961 he married. The night after his wedding, he suddenly took ill, and passed away two months later on 5 Iyar 1961.

R' Yaakov Galant (b. 1931)

Born Yaakov Dubinski in Uman, R' Yaakov lost his mother in childbirth and was separated from his father, R' Naftali Tzvi Dubinski, when the latter was exiled to Siberia in 1937. R' Yaakov was raised by R' Yochanan Galant, who personally

educated him to be a God-fearing Jew and, with tremendous self-sacrifice, kept him out of the anti-religious Soviet school system. R' Yaakov changed his last name to Galant in honor of his adoptive father, who had no children of his own. R' Yaakov was reunited with his father, R' Naftali Tzvi, in Uman in 1954.

R' Yaakov was highly respected among the Breslover chassidim in Russia and was honored with blowing the shofar for the annual Rosh HaShanah *kibutz* in Uman, in addition to blowing the shofar for the local Jews. Despite the Soviet decrees against religion, R' Yaakov built a mikvah under the floorboards of a closet in his home in Tashkent, providing a ritual bath for the Jews of that city. He and his family emigrated to Israel in 1971, where he resides today.

R' Yochanan Galant (1901-1979)

R' Yochanan was the son of R' Baruch Berditchever, a well-known Breslover chassid from the Ukrainian town of Berditchev and a disciple of R' Avraham Chazan (q.v.). A joyful and vibrant Jew, R' Yochanan was one of the eleven chassidim who traveled to Uman for the first Rosh HaShanah *kibutz* after the Holocaust. Although he had no children of his own, he showed tremendous self-sacrifice to raise and teach R' Yaakov, the son of R' Naftali Tzvi Dubinski (q.v.), when the latter was exiled to Siberia.

It is said that when he lived in Uman, R' Yochanan would prostrate himself daily at the *tzion* and shed so many tears that the gravestone would become sopping wet. R' Yochanan's wife, Yocheved, was also a true Breslover. She used to cook huge pots of food to distribute to the chassidim who came to pray in the *kloyz*. R' Yochanan and his wife emigrated to Israel in 1964, where he taught the chassidim many traditional tunes that had been sung in Uman.

R' Yitzchak Gelbach (1916-1996)

Born in Likev, Poland, to a family of Gerrer chassidim, R' Yitzchak stumbled across a copy of *Hishtafkhut HaNefesh* by R' Alter Tepliker when he was twelve years old. He later became a committed Breslover chassid after meeting R' Yitzchak Breiter, who spread the Chassidut throughout Poland. R' Yitzchak's father was unhappy with his son's decision to follow Rebbe Nachman's teachings and took him to the Gerrer Rebbe, hoping that the rebbe would convince R' Yitzchak to abandon Breslov. The rebbe asked R' Yitzchak to describe his daily schedule. After hearing how the young man devoted himself to learning Torah and serving God, the rebbe told his father, "Do I lack chassidim that he must remain my chassid?"

R' Yitzchak studied in the famous yeshivot of Baranowitz and Kaminetz. At the beginning of World War II, he was exiled to a Siberian labor camp for ten years as punishment for having in his possession many copies of a ten-year calendar of Jewish festivals. He became so discouraged and fell into such deep despair at the prospect of surviving the labor camp that he prayed, "God! Help me at least to die like a Jew!" That night he dreamt he saw R' Aharon Leib Tziegelman (q.v.), who said to him, "Yitzchak! Did we teach you to die like a Jew or to *live* like a Jew?!" This dream, he said, helped sustain him through the dark days of Soviet bondage.

In a general amnesty for Polish nationals, R' Yitzchak was released from Siberia and offered a ticket to whichever destination he chose. He went straight to Rebbe Nachman's *tzion* in Uman, where he married Sarah, the daughter of R' Avraham Dzeregovsky. Sarah's mother, Toiba Rochel, was a direct descendant of Rebbe Nachman. From Uman, R' Yitzchak continued on to the displaced persons camps in Germany. In the chaos of postwar Europe, R' Yitzchak lived in Germany and France and finally arrived in Jerusalem in 1949.

R' Yitzchak was a genius in simplicity. He hid his encyclopedic knowledge of the Talmud and Chassidut while working as a simple clerk in the Jerusalem central post office. He passed away on 16 Tishrei 1996.

R' Baruch Getches

R' Baruch, a devoted Breslover chassid and an accomplished Torah scholar, studied Chassidut under R' Avraham Chazan. His twin brother was an important Communist official who occasionally assisted his family. R' Baruch's father, R' Getche Lubovna, a follower of the Novardok approach, would isolate himself for days on end to devote himself completely to God. R' Baruch introduced and integrated this approach into Breslover Chassidut. R' Baruch founded the *ovdim* (devotees) group in Uman which arose every night at *chatzot*, immersed in the river (they lit bonfires with straw to warm up as they emerged from the water), and then spent hours in the fields in *hitbodedut*. When they returned in the morning, they would pray *Shacharit* for several hours and then spend the remainder of the day in Torah study.

In 1934, the Communists granted permission for Breslover chassidim to gather in Uman for Rosh HaShanah. It was really a ploy to discover their identity, and twenty-eight men, including R' Baruch, were arrested. R' Baruch was held in one wing of the prison while Rabbi Eliyahu Chaim Rosen (q.v.) was held in another. After one heavy snow, the prisoners were brought to the yard to clean up. Rabbi Eliyahu Chaim overheard R' Baruch saying, as he turned over his shovel with snow, Rebbe Nachman's oft-quoted teaching, "There is something that can be turned around for good!" He was exiled to Siberia and never heard from again.

Rabbi Nachman Goldstein (the Tcheriner Rav) (1815-1894)

Affectionately and reverently known as the Tcheriner Rav, Rabbi Nachman was the son of Rabbi Tzvi Aryeh of Breslov and the grandson of Rabbi Aharon of Breslov (q.v.). An erudite scholar even as a young boy, the Tcheriner Rav granted scholarly legitimacy to Breslover teachings in a total of twenty in-depth works, several of which were only seen by Breslover chassidim in manuscript form before they were lost. The ones that survive include: *Parparaot LeChokhmah* (an indispensable commentary for understanding many of the complex concepts and structures in *Likutey Moharan*), *Zimrat HaAretz* (which connects each lesson in *Likutey Moharan* to the Land of Israel), *Yekara DeShabbata* (which relates each lesson in *Likutey Moharan* to Shabbat) and *Yerach HaEitanim* (which connects each lesson in *Likutey Moharan* to the holidays of the month of Tishrei – Rosh

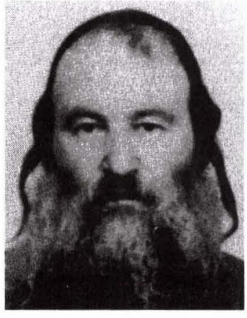
HaShanah, Yom Kippur, etc.). Many of today's English-language translations were only made possible because the Tcheriner Rav opened "closed doors" in Breslover teachings through his meticulously-researched commentaries.

The Tcheriner Rav also collected sources for the thousands of aphorisms found in Rebbe Nachman's *Sefer HaMiddot* (*The Aleph-Bet Book*). He collected and published Reb Noson's teachings in the monumental *Likutey Halakhot*, and produced an expanded version of *Likutey Etzot* (*Advice*) called *Likutey Etzot HaMeshulash*. Following Reb Noson's lead with *Likutey Etzot*, the Tcheriner Rav compiled several works of the Baal Shem Tov, his followers and the followers of Rabbi Dov Ber, the saintly Maggid of Mezeritch, under the titles, *Lashon Chassidim* and *Derekh Chassidim*. He passed away on 11 Adar 1854.

Rabbi Avraham Yehoshua Heschel (the Kapischnitzer Rebbe) (1888-1967)

In his thirty-one years as Kapischnitzer Rebbe, Rabbi Avraham Yehoshua shouldered the suffering and pain of thousands of fellow Jews and extended warmth and lovingkindness to all. He was a direct descendant and namesake of the Apta Rebbe, the Ohev Yisrael, and son of the founder of the Kapischnitzer dynasty, Rabbi Yitzchak Meir.

With the outbreak of World War I, his family fled to Vienna. There, Rabbi Avraham Yehoshua went daily to the train station to help refugees find accommodations. Afterwards, he secretly delivered money and food to these impoverished families. Two years after he succeeded his father as Kapischnitzer Rebbe in 1936, the Nazis took over Austria. Singling him out as a community leader, they forced Rabbi Avraham Yehoshua to sweep the streets. Not long afterwards, he escaped to New York and settled on the Lower East Side, where he threw himself into rescue work. Following the Holocaust, he cared for many refugees and orphans, established an orphanage in Petach Tikvah, Israel, and was one of the founders of Chinuch Atzmai (the semi-private religious school system in Israel). He passed away on 16 Tamuz 1967.



R' Shmuel Horowitz

R' Shmuel Horowitz (1913-1989)

According to tradition, a man came to sell Breslover books in R' Shmuel's father's hometown of Tzefat in northern Israel. When his father told the man to pack his bags and leave the town, the man blessed him that he would have children and grandchildren who would study from those same books. At the age of seventeen, R' Shmuel started practicing *hitbodedut* after reading R' Alter Tepliker's *Hishtafkhut HaNefesh* (*Outpouring of the Soul*). He noticed a dramatic improvement in his ability to pray, and slowly drew closer to Breslover Chassidut.

Around 1929, R' Shmuel traveled to Poland and smuggled himself into Russia, remaining in Uman for two and a half years, during which time he studied with Rabbi Avraham Sternhartz (q.v.). He was privileged to participate in the Rosh HaShanah *kibutz* three times before he was discovered and arrested by the Soviets for illegal entry into Russia. He spent three months in a Russian prison and was released with the intervention of the Chief Rabbi of Israel, Rabbi Avraham Yitzchak Kook, who arranged for him to be returned to Israel in 1933.

R' Shmuel was an accomplished scholar both in the revealed Torah and the Kabbalah. He was able to deliver intricate lectures on Rebbe Nachman's writings for hours on end, weaving together both simple and Kabbalistic teachings. His prayers were so intense that he would turn bright red from all the effort and energy he placed into his supplications. Despite his poverty – his small home in Meron, near the gravesite of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, lacked a decent floor – he would spend nights in the mountains around Meron practicing *hitbodedut*. One could say he was "removed" or "beyond" the physical needs of this world. He passed away on 12 Adar 1972.

Rabbi Yechezkel Shraga Kahane (1905-1979)

Born in Tzefat, Israel, Rabbi Yechezkel Shraga traveled with his father to Poland at the age of thirteen to learn in yeshivah. He studied in Oswiciem (Auschwitz) and in Pressburg, Czechoslovakia, where he received rabbinical ordination from Rabbi Akiva Sofer. Upon returning to Israel in 1924, he was unable to make a living and decided to join his brothers in America. He graduated from the Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Rabbinical Seminary in New York and became rabbi of Congregation Shaarei Tefillah in 1942, a post he held until he made aliyah in 1971. He passed away on 8 Adar I 1979. His son, Rabbi Meir Kahane, founded the right-wing Kach movement in Israel and the Jewish Defense League in the United States.

Rabbi Yehudah Kalasher (Botrashvili) (d. 1985)

Known as Rabbi Yehudah Kalasher after his city of origin (Kalash, Georgia), Rabbi Yehudah Botrashvili was a great Torah scholar who fearlessly defended the practice of religious Judaism in Communist Russia. He studied in a Lubavitcher yeshivah and was highly regarded for his diligence in learning by the previous Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Yitzchak Yosef Schneersohn. Even during the Bolshevik Revolution, Rabbi Yehudah continued his Torah learning with total dedication. When the Communists attempted to close the synagogue in his town, he personally opposed them. Although the synagogue remained open, he was forced to flee for his life.

During World War II, Rabbi Yehudah and his family fled to the city of Samarkand, Uzbekistan, where he maintained his high religious standards at great personal risk. After the war, he returned to Moscow and became an underground activist for everything having to do with religious Judaism. He secretly baked matzot in his home, answered halakhic queries, circumcised

Jewish infants, slaughtered animals according to Jewish law, officiated at Jewish marriages and arranged proper Jewish burials. He also sent food packages to Jews incarcerated in Soviet prison camps, conducted rabbinical court cases and held chassidic gatherings in his home, which became a meeting place for religious Jews from around the Soviet Union.

In 1970, Rabbi Yehudah was allowed to emigrate to Israel, where he dedicated himself to improving the conditions of the Georgian Jews residing there. The Lubavitcher Rebbe appointed him as a judge for the Lubavitcher rabbinical court, despite Rabbi Yehudah's advanced age. Other rabbinical authorities in Israel were amazed that someone who had spent most of his life behind the Iron Curtain had achieved such a high degree of Torah scholarship. Rabbi Yehudah passed away on 27 Sivan 1985.

R' Nachman Kanelski (b. 1925?)

Commonly known as R' Nachman Russisher (he was one of the few Breslovers who survived World War II and escaped to Israel from Russia), he was the son of R' Motel Kanelski. R' Nachman married at the age of thirteen and was drafted three years later into the Soviet Army during World War II. Left for dead under a pile of bodies, he was able to switch into a Polish uniform and assume a Polish identity, enabling him (as well as his brother and sister) to escape Russia. Each individually then made their way to Israel.

R' Noson Kanelski (b. 1938?)

The son of R' Nachman Kanelski, R' Noson was only fourteen years younger than his father. He remained in the Soviet Union with his mother after his father escaped to Israel. When his mother was arrested, his maternal grandmother, Toiba Rochel, the widow of R' Avraham Dzeregovsky, raised him. She traveled to Moscow and asked someone who looked like a religious Jew where it was possible to give a child a proper Jewish education. The man told her to travel to Samarkand, Uzbekistan. There R' Noson studied under Rabbi Yehudah Kalasher, and eventually became his son-in-law. He, too, merited to emigrate to Israel.

R' Gedaliah Aharon Koenig (1921-1980)

Originally a Lubavitcher chassid, R' Gedaliah was drawn to Breslov by Rabbi Avraham Sternhartz (q.v.) and eventually became one of his leading disciples. R' Gedaliah was famous for his extraordinary ability to connect with any Jew and his accessibility to all types of spiritual seekers. His one-room home in the Meah Shearim section of Jerusalem was always open. He was recognized as a genius in the revealed as well as the mystical aspects of the Torah, and channeled his knowledge into the world by giving practical, simple advice to those who came to him.

He adopted as his life's mission the establishment of a Breslover community in Tzefat, a mission personally entrusted to him by Rabbi Avraham. He authored *Chayey Nefesh*, a book on what it means to bind oneself to the tzaddik, and left

numerous other unpublished manuscripts, including commentaries on *Likutey Moharan*. He passed away in Manchester, England on 23 Tamuz 1980, while working on behalf of the Breslover community in Tzefat.

R' Itzel Korsinski (d. 1973)

A native of Lvov, Poland, R' Itzel lived in Tashkent and emigrated to Israel in the early 1970s. An extremely quiet individual, he only spoke when asked a question. When he was not praying, he recited Psalms or reviewed *Likutey Tefilot*. He was chosen to be the chazzan for *Shacharit* on the second day of the Rosh HaShanah *kibutz* in Uman on account of his great piety. Since there was no mikvah where he lived, every morning he walked five miles to immerse in the closest river. During his walk, he would recite the entire Book of Psalms and knew all the Psalms by heart.

Chaim Kramer (b. 1945)

A native of New York, Kramer studied under Rabbi Tzvi Aryeh Rosenfeld (q.v.) and eventually became his son-in-law. He is the director of the Breslov Research Institute, which he founded in Jerusalem in 1979.

Rabbi Levi Yitzchak (the Berditchever Rebbe) (1740-1810)

A disciple of the Maggid of Mezritch, the successor to the Baal Shem Tov, Rabbi Levi Yitzchak was famous for his consuming love of God and His people and became known as the defender of the people of Israel. He would argue with God, charging Him with being too stern a Father to His children, and pleading for an end to the long exile. He served as rabbi in the cities of Britchval, Zelichov and Pinsk, and for the last twenty-five years of his life was the Rabbi of Berditchev, which under his inspired leadership grew into a flourishing center of Chassidut. He authored *Kedushat Levi*, a classic collection of chassidic thoughts arranged according to the weekly Torah portion.

R' Hirsch Leib Lippel (1904-1979)

A native of Poland, R' Hirsch Leib was a member of the group of *ovdim* (devotees) in Uman that arose every night at *chatzot*, immersed in the river, and then spent hours in the fields in *hitbodedut*. They spent their days in prayer and Torah study. R' Hirsch Leib would say that the biggest fear they had when immersing in the river was that they wouldn't find the hole they made in the ice to get back out!

R' Hirsch Leib expressed his desire to reach Israel by setting out for the Holy Land on foot. Each year, he began walking out of Uman after Sukkot with the intention of crossing the Russian border near Iran. He would get as far as he could go but, as Chanukah approached, he would say, "How can I leave Uman when it is so close to Chanukah?" and would turn around to spend Shabbat Chanukah with Rebbe Nachman. On one occasion, as he was "walking" to Israel with a companion, his friend said, "It is so cold, I wish I were in a house." R' Hirsch Leib replied, "King David prayed (Psalms 135:19-20), 'The House of Israel,

praise God. The House of Aharon (the priestly families), praise God. The House of the Levites, praise God. Those who fear God, praise God.' Why doesn't it mention 'house' with those who fear God? Because their devotions to God are such that they do not need houses!"

Around 1933-1934, R' Hirsch Leib was stopped by the police and asked to show his papers. Not having legal papers to live in Ukraine, he was arrested. He was fortunate in that he was allowed to leave the country on the condition that he would never set foot on Russian soil again. He and his wife finally reached Israel in 1934.

His prayers were legendary and accompanied by many, many tears. Despite the intensity of his devotions and sanctity, he was able to converse with anyone and had a deep grasp of the world around him. Upon his arrival in Jerusalem in 1934, he befriended R' Shmuel Shapiro (q.v.) and taught him how the *ovdim* of Uman would practice *hitbodedut* in the fields at night. R' Hirsch Leib passed away on 23 Cheshvan 1979.

R' Moshe Lubarski (R' Moshe Breslover) (d. 1890?)

R' Moshe and his brother, R' Zanvil, were the fruits of a blessing that Reb Noson gave their childless mother. Their parents were the caretakers of one of the *mikvaot* in the town of Breslov. They would always provide warm water and towels for Reb Noson's use, since he arose every night for *chatzot*. When the opposition against Reb Noson reached its height in the 1830s, his opponents tried to stop the caretakers from helping Reb Noson, but they refused. The opponents stopped using that mikvah, causing them financial loss. R' Moshe's mother went to Reb Noson and told him their problems. Reb Noson said that if he had money, he would help them, but he didn't have any. Perhaps there was something else he could help with? When he heard that the woman was childless, Reb Noson promised her children and she had two sons: R' Moshe and R' Zanvil Lubarski.

R' Moshe, who became known as R' Moshe Breslover, was one of Reb Noson's closest followers. After his mentor's passing, R' Moshe became one of the leading figures in Breslov. His faith in Reb Noson was so strong that once when he was robbed, he did not go after the thief, but entered the house of study and reviewed what Reb Noson wrote in *Likutey Halakhot* about stealing. Shortly afterwards, his possessions were returned to him.

R' Zanvil Lubarski (d. 1962)

R' Zanvil's grandfather, also named R' Zanvil, and great-uncle, R' Moshe Lubarski (R' Moshe Breslover) (q.v.), were close disciples of Reb Noson. R' Zanvil played a prominent role in locating the destroyed *tzion* and renewing the Rosh HaShanah *kibutz* after World War II. Almost two years after he passed away in the Soviet Union, his wife, Mirel, brought his body to Israel for burial. The burial society was shocked to discover that it had not decomposed, a sign of his great righteousness.

Reb Noson (Sternhartz) (1780-1844)

Reb Noson was born in Nemirov, a small town near Breslov, to Rabbi Naftali Hertz, a noted Talmudic scholar and wealthy businessman. Over the objections of his father and his wife's father, Rabbi David Tzvi Orbach, the rabbi of Mohilov, Sharograd and Kremenetz, Reb Noson was drawn to Chassidut. In 1802 he found his mentor, Rebbe Nachman of Breslov, and eventually became Rebbe Nachman's foremost disciple as well as his scribe.

Using his formidable talents in learning and a phenomenal memory, Reb Noson preserved the lessons, stories and everyday conversations of Rebbe Nachman for posterity. He published all of the Rebbe's works and wrote his own commentaries and novellae, including a monumental, eight-volume commentary on the Rebbe's teachings, *Likutey Halakhot*, and two volumes of prayers based on the Rebbe's lessons, *Likutey Tefilot*. More than anyone else, Reb Noson shaped the movement that follows the path set out by the Rebbe and spread the Rebbe's light throughout the world. Reb Noson passed away close to Shabbat on 10 Tevet 1844. A detailed biography of Reb Noson is found in *Through Fire and Water: The Life of Reb Noson of Breslov* (Breslov Research Institute).

Rabbi Eliezer Zusia Portugal (the Skulener Rebbe) (1886-1982)

The Skulener Rebbe led the small town of Sculeni in what was formerly northeastern Romania (present-day Ukraine). He survived World War II and in March 1945 lived together with other Holocaust survivors and displaced persons in the Russian-governed town of Czernovitz, Bukovina. He spent his remaining time in Romania helping others in any way he could.

In 1959, due to his religious activities, the rebbe was jailed for five months on the charge of being a spy for Israel and the United States. After his release, he emigrated to the United States in the spring of 1960, explaining that he chose the United States over Israel since he felt he could better help the remaining Romanian Jews emigrate to America. He was encouraged to open a yeshivah in his new home, but he countered, "What would my yeshivah add to all the others? A person who wants to do a mitzvah must ask how he can give the most 'pleasure' to G-d." Instead of opening a yeshivah, he founded the *Chessed L'Avraham* network of religious schools in Israel.

The rebbe visited Israel for the first time in 1961. He took a side trip to a left-wing kibbutz in order to forgive a Romanian socialist who had been one of his fiercest opponents years before. That man's descendants later became *ba'alei teshuvah*. The rebbe passed away on 29 Av 1982.

R' Tzvi Reichman (d. 1967)

Born in Poland, R' Tzvi was a proud Breslover chassid. Though there was much opposition to Breslover Chassidut in prewar Europe, making it hard for young chassidim to find suitable marriage partners, R' Tzvi would always be up-front about his Breslover affiliation. As a result, he had difficulty getting married. He survived World War II in the concentration camps and, with great dedication,

printed the *Likutey Moharan* in Germany in 1947. After emigrating to America, he successfully established himself as a businessman in the copper industry and gave generously to Breslover charities. He married and raised a family. In 1967, he contracted cancer, and his daughter's wedding was held at his bedside in a New York hospital. He passed away a few days later on 14 Adar I, 1967.

Rabbi Eliyahu Chaim Rosen (1899-1984)

The founder and dean of the Breslover Yeshivah in Jerusalem was born in Poltosk, Poland, and orphaned as a very young boy. A child prodigy, he left home at the age of five to continue his Torah studies in a nearby city, where the custom was to "eat *teg*." (A homeowner would accept students into his house on certain days to feed them; *teg* means "days." If the homeowner was not home or didn't have enough food, the student went hungry.) Rabbi Eliyahu Chaim was admitted to the famous Lomzer Yeshivah when he was only twelve. There he was coupled with a *chavruta* (study partner) who introduced him to Breslover Chassidut and convinced him to travel to Uman in 1914.

In Uman, Rabbi Eliyahu Chaim heard that Rebbe Nachman had said: "The most difficult spiritual devotion is far easier than a simple physical transaction." Not understanding this, he sought an explanation from R' Avraham Chazan, who was the Breslover leader at the time. R' Avraham Chazan replied, "*Hitbodedut* is the greatest spiritual devotion one can perform. All it takes is speaking with one's mouth. Even earning a small amount of money requires more effort than that." From then on, Rabbi Eliyahu Chaim remained in Uman as R' Avraham Chazan's student, and undertook the practice of *hitbodedut* for the rest of his life.

A resident of Uman for twenty-two years, Rabbi Eliyahu Chaim was instrumental in the survival of many Breslover chassidim during the famine that swept the Ukraine in 1933. He organized food to be shipped from the breadlines in Moscow to the starving chassidim in Uman and surrounding areas. He also applied to the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee for assistance. As a result, he was arrested by the NKVD (predecessor of the KGB) in November 1935, together with Rabbi Levi Yitzchak Bender (q.v.), and charged with making contact with a foreign organization. The two were imprisoned, put on trial and lived under the threat of a death sentence until a Jewish official in the Ministry of Justice in Kiev interceded on their behalf and allowed them to return home. They were, however, forbidden to leave Uman.

Despite the restraining order, Rabbi Eliyahu Chaim returned to Moscow. In 1931, before the famine, he had requested permission to emigrate to Israel, and the exit visa was now waiting for him. He arrived in Israel in the summer of 1936 and moved to Meah Shearim. One year later, he established the Breslover Yeshivah in the Old City of Jerusalem. In 1953, he began construction of what is today the home of the Breslover Yeshivah and shul on Meah Shearim Street. Many of his contemporaries ridiculed him for building such a large synagogue for a population of some 150 Breslover chassidim countrywide. Today, his brilliant foresight cannot be questioned: The synagogue is no longer large enough to house the rapidly expanding Breslov community.

Rabbi Eliyahu Chaim was renowned for his ability to analyze problems. The brokenhearted streamed to him to pour out their woes, and walked away wondering why they had been so troubled. Their problems did not disappear, but Rabbi Eliyahu Chaim's razor-sharp mind analyzed and discarded all the accompanying pressures and anxieties, leaving the person to deal with the actual problem. With a broad smile he would say, "The Torah has five books. The Shulchan Arukh comprises four volumes. What happened to the fifth volume? It corresponds to common sense – knowing where and how to apply your knowledge!"

Rabbi Eliyahu Chaim was a constant source of strength and joy. His level of *yishuv hada'at* (calmness and serenity) had no equal. Though his body was weakened by typhus and other illnesses during his early years, and he was extremely weak towards the end of his life, he never missed reciting *Tikkun Chatzot* and practicing *hitbodedut*. When asked how he found the strength for such devotions, he replied, "If you get used to it when you are young, it comes automatically after so many years." He taught the chassidim never to do anything without *hitbodedut*. During his last year, when he was bedridden most of the time, he commented, "What would I be able to do now if I didn't have Rebbe Nachman's advice of *hitbodedut*?" He passed away on 20 Kislev 1984.

R' Kalman Rosen (1931-1998)

Born in Uman, R' Kalman was spared the fate of many other Russian-born children when his father, Rabbi Eliyahu Chaim Rosen, succeeded in obtaining exit visas for his family in 1936. Arriving in Haifa port, the Rosens moved immediately to Jerusalem, settling in Meah Shearim. R' Kalman was a child prodigy. When he entered the Mirrer Yeshivah, he was one of the few young men selected by the world-renowned *gaon*, Rabbi Chaim Shmuelevitz (1902-1978), to be his study partner. R' Kalman possessed an incredible ability to elucidate some of the deepest discussions in the Talmud and its commentaries in a manner that even a laymen could quickly grasp. A student of Breslov writings, he expanded the sources of Rabbi Nachman Goldstein, the Tcheriner Rav (q.v.), on *Sefer HaMiddot*, adding his own commentary. Together with his father, R' Kalman built up the Breslover Yeshivah, *Or HaNe'elam*, in Jerusalem. He passed away on 25 Tevet 1998.

Rabbi Shmuel Yitzchak Rosenfeld (rabbi of Tcherin) (d. 1850)

Rabbi Shmuel Yitzchak was an early follower of Rebbe Nachman, long before the Rebbe moved to Breslov. As a young man he was appointed the Rav of the city of Tcherin. He was chosen to accompany Rebbe Nachman on the latter's mysterious journey in 1807 (see *Through Fire and Water: The Life of Reb Noson of Breslov*, Breslov Research Institute, Chapter 14). His descendant was Rabbi Tzvi Aryeh Rosenfeld (q.v.).

Rabbi Tzvi Aryeh Rosenfeld (1922-1978)

A modern-day pioneer of the Breslov movement, Rabbi Tzvi Aryeh brought the Chassidut to American shores and nurtured its growth among American-born

students for more than thirty years. A scion of Breslover families who dated back to Rebbe Nachman's time, he was born in Gydinia, Poland, and grew up in Brooklyn, New York. He studied under Rabbi Shraga Feivel Mendelowitz at Yeshivah Torah Vodaath, and afterwards received his rabbinical ordination from Rabbi Avraham Yaffen of Novardok – Beis Yosef Yeshivah at the age of twenty-three, after completing the entire Talmud for the second time.

In 1946, he married the daughter of R' Rafael Eliezer Faivelson of Chicago and began teaching in a Talmud Torah in Flatbush. His sincerity and demeanor were such that he brought hundreds of Jews back to their heritage and in contact with Rebbe Nachman. Today many of his students are rabbis and leaders in their communities, and many thousands are benefiting from the efforts he invested in his students.

Rabbi Tzvi Aryeh also devoted himself to strengthening Breslover Chassidut in Israel. He collected funds to build the Breslover Yeshivah in Jerusalem and to publish Rebbe Nachman's works in Hebrew. He also pioneered the translation of Rebbe Nachman's teachings into English, beginning with *Rabbi Nachman's Wisdom*, which Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan translated at Rabbi Tzvi Aryeh's behest; Rabbi Tzvi Aryeh himself edited the book. He also raised and distributed funds for many needy Breslover families in Israel.

Rabbi Tzvi Aryeh had an immense love for the Holy Land and wished to settle there. The one thing that always held him back was seeing the new students who kept joining his classes each year. He decided that should an entire year go by without one new student, he would move to Jerusalem. Stricken with cancer at the age of fifty-six, he finally moved to Jerusalem in the summer of 1978. He passed away on 11 Kislev 1978.

R' Avraham Yehoshua Rosenvald ("R' Shika") (d. 1970)

Born in Poland to R' Mordechai Refael Rosenvald, R' Avraham Yehoshua was known among the Breslover chassidim as "R' Shika." He moved to Uman and married the daughter of R' Shimshon Barski (q.v.), a descendant of Rebbe Nachman. With the rise of Communism, R' Shika became involved with the Soviets, but he eventually returned to his Jewish roots and became a stalwart of the Breslover chassidim trapped in the Communist crucible.

R' Shika displayed much dedication and ingenuity to keep the flame of Yiddishkeit alive in Russia. For example, when the Jewish cemetery in Moscow was completely full and the Soviets began to cremate bodies or bury them next to crosses, R' Shika persuaded his former friends in the Communist party to reallocate several acres of a planned garbage dump near the suburb of Malachovkha for a new Jewish cemetery.

In one meeting with R' Michel Dorfman (q.v.), R' Shika complained of a decline in his personal devotions. He explained: "I arise at midnight and say *Tikkun Chatzot*, then recite the ten Psalms of the *Tikkun HaKlali*. Then I say the entire Book of Psalms." R' Michel thought this was a great accomplishment and

complimented R' Shika on these devotions. Replied R' Shika, "You don't understand! I used to cry so much that I never even got to finish the *Tikkun HaKlali*!"

R' Naftali Tzvi Dubinski (q.v.) recalled that on one of his journeys to Uman, he spent a Shabbat in Moscow. R' Shika invited him for the Shabbat morning meal. R' Naftali Tzvi asked R' Shika if he lived close to the shul, and R' Shika replied that it was not far away. In reality, the shul was located three hours away by foot. R' Naftali was amazed that R' Shika walked three hours *each way* to be able to pray in a shul on Shabbat.

Whenever Gedaliah Fleer saw R' Shika, he promised to help him emigrate to the free world. "You could try," R' Shika would reply, "but I don't think you will succeed, because I have to be buried in Russia." Fleer tried to bring him out, but without success. In 1965, R' Shika told the visiting Chaim Kramer that he had a forty-three-year-old daughter and would not leave Russia unless she was married to a Jew, which was a very difficult thing at that time.

R' Shika passed away on the eve of Sukkot 1970. The news reached Israel several days later. However, on the first night of Sukkot, Rabbi Eliyahu Chaim Rosen (q.v.) was learning in his sukkah in Jerusalem when he fell asleep and dreamt that he saw R' Shika standing next to him. "Shika, is that you?" Rabbi Eliyahu Chaim asked. "It certainly is," R' Shika replied. "Could you do me a favor and say the *Tikkun HaKlali* for me?" In the dream, Rabbi Eliyahu Chaim did as R' Shika requested, but R' Shika continued to stand next to him. "What else do you want?" Rabbi Eliyahu Chaim asked.

"For such a good friend, you recite the *Tikkun HaKlali* only once?" R' Shika chided him gently. So Rabbi Eliyahu Chaim recited the *Tikkun HaKlali* again.

When Rabbi Eliyahu Chaim awoke, he recalled the details of his dream and recited the *Tikkun HaKlali* twice, just as R' Shika had requested. A few days later, he heard that R' Shika had passed away before the holiday and that he had been buried in the Jewish cemetery in Moscow.

R' Yitzchak Mendel Rottenberg (1895-1991)

As a child in Poland, R' Yitzchak Mendel noticed that one of his teachers would cry while reading from a book as the children reviewed their lessons, and afterwards place the volume in a locked drawer. This teacher was a harsh man, and R' Yitzchak Mendel could not understand what could evoke such an emotional response from him. His curiosity got the better of him and he decided to break into the drawer. There he discovered the Breslover book, *Likutey Tefilot*.

R' Yitzchak Mendel traveled to Uman for the first time around 1908, where he was drawn to R' Avraham Chazan and became one of his close students. He emigrated to Israel in 1919 and was one of the founders of the original Breslover shul in Meah Shearim. He was counted among the pious chassidim and possessed an incredible knowledge of Talmud. He was a study partner of the renowned Tepliker Rav, Rabbi Shimshon Aharon Polansky. After he moved to America in

the mid-1920s, R' Yitzchak Mendel became one of the founders of the Breslover *shtiebel* on New York's Lower East Side. He was the chazzan for Rosh HaShanah, and many chassidim fondly recall the beautiful services he led. He passed away on 5 Iyar 1991.

Rabbi Meir Shapiro (the Lubliner Rav) (1887-1934)

A brilliant thinker and powerful orator who dedicated his life to the education of Jewish youth, Rabbi Meir assumed his first rabbinical post in Galicia, Poland, at the age of twenty-four. He also served in the Sejm (Polish parliament) to promote the interests of Polish Jewry. In 1930 he opened Yeshivat Chakhmei Lublin, one of the largest and most famous yeshivot in prewar Europe, which enrolled chassidim and non-chassidim alike. Rabbi Meir gave over his yeshivah to the Breslover chassidim for their annual Rosh HaShanah *kibutz* after the Soviets closed the border in 1917, cutting off access to Uman.

Rabbi Meir is credited with establishing the *Daf Yomi* ("the page of the day"), a system of study in which the same page of Talmud is reviewed each day by Jews all over the world. With this system, the entire Talmud is completed every seven and a half years, and wherever one travels he can find a *Daf Yomi* study group. Rabbi Meir passed away in the prime of his life on 7 Cheshvan 1934.

R' Shmuel Shapiro (1913-1989)

Born in Jerusalem, R' Shmuel was one of the most outstanding students in the Etz Chaim Yeshivah under its world-renowned Rosh Yeshivah, Rabbi Isser Zalman Meltzer. Attracted to Breslov by R' Shmuel Horowitz (q.v.), R' Shapiro became a chassid in 1934. When he heard what his student had done, Rabbi Isser Zalman said, "Whoever made him a Breslover will never leave Gehinnom!" To which R' Shapiro countered, "Correct. That's because he'll never go in!"

R' Shmuel learned under both Rabbi Avraham Sternhartz (q.v.) and R' Hirsch Leib Lippel (q.v.). During the Israeli War of Independence, he was taken to Jordan as a civilian hostage, together with R' Moshe Burstein and seven other Breslover chassidim.

Known as "the tzaddik of Jerusalem," R' Shmuel always kept his eyes lowered in public, never looking at any of the physical attractions of this world. He would spend the night practicing *hitbodedut* in the fields and then put in a full day's Torah study in some obscure synagogue, always shunning the public eye. In preparation for Rosh HaShanah, he would spend the entire month of Elul in Meron, the burial place of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai. "Here I have everything I need: a synagogue, a mikvah and mountains for *hitbodedut*. It's Gan Eden on Earth," he was heard to say.

His one great desire, that seemed to elude him perpetually, was to visit the *tzion* in Uman. In 1970, he traveled to America to get a special, stateless passport so he could apply for a visa to Russia. Even with this so-called "white passport," it took nearly three years before he was finally able to make the trip. In 1988, he was able to spend Rosh HaShanah with Rebbe Nachman, this time on an Israeli passport.

Shortly afterwards, he passed away on the last day of Pesach 1989, after having suffered from Parkinson's disease for nearly thirteen years.

After R' Shmuel Shapiro passed away, Rabbi Levi Yitzchak Bender (q.v.) said, "The Breslov 'factory of Judaism' [meaning Rebbe Nachman's teachings] has lost an all-star worker. No one individual can fill his shoes. But if each of us makes an extra effort to do the best he can, we can pick up the slack."

Rabbi Yaakov Meir Shechter (b. 1931)

One of the foremost and fiery leaders of contemporary Breslov, Rabbi Yaakov Meir was born in the Old City of Jerusalem to R' Dovid, a prominent Breslover chassid. He studied under some of the leading Breslover chassidim of the past generation, particularly Rabbi Avraham Sternhartz (q.v.). In 1948, Rabbi Yaakov Meir was expelled from the Old City along with the rest of its Jews and resettled in Katamon. Later, he moved to Meah Shearim to be near the Breslover Yeshivah.

As a young married man, Rabbi Yaakov Meir was called upon to give classes in the Sha'ar HaShamayim Yeshivah, a house of study devoted to the Kabbalah. His piety and knowledge have made him world-renowned and many, many people from all walks of life – even those who have nothing to do with Breslov or Rebbe Nachman's teachings – seek his advice from all over the world.

R' Mordekhai Sirota (d. 1991)

Born in the city of Teplik (about fifteen miles from Uman), R' Mordekhai fled to Tashkent during World War II. He displayed tremendous self-sacrifice in attending the annual Rosh HaShanah *kibutz* in Uman, despite the Soviets' ban on religious gatherings. Towards the end of 1970, he went to Moscow to arrange an exit visa. When he succeeded in doing so, he traveled straight to the *tzion* in Uman. He arrived in Israel in 1971 and settled in Kiryat Malachi. He passed away on 10 Iyar 1991.

Rabbi Mordekhai Sokolover (Halberstam) (d. 1943?)

Called by the name of the town (Sokolov, Poland) in which he served as a rabbinical court judge before World War II, Rabbi Mordekhai Halberstam studied under R' Gershon Henoch of Radzin, the Baal Techeles (who discovered the *techeles* [blue threads] used in making tzitzit), and received his rabbinical ordination from the Brisker Rav, the Beis Halevi. He often went into the forests for *hitbodedut*. One time he told a friend that there would be good news waiting for him at home. When he came home, he received a letter offering him the position of rabbi and judge in Sokolov.

Rabbi Mordekhai was beloved by his community, despite the fact that he left them every Rosh HaShanah for the annual Breslover Rosh HaShanah *kibutz*. Though he possessed a powerful personality, Rabbi Mordekhai often imbued his prayers with tears and cries. It is told that one time a Breslover approached the *tzion* of Rebbe Nachman and sensed an awesome light radiating from within. When he entered the yard in which the *tzion* lay, he found Rabbi Mordekhai prostrated on the gravesite, crying and begging God to draw him close to Him.

Rabbi Mordekhai was once given the opportunity to study *shechita* (ritual slaughtering). He asked Rabbi Avraham Sternhartz if he should become a *shochet*. Rabbi Avraham instructed him to study the pertinent laws in *Likutey Halakhot*, explaining that as a result, he would probably lose all desire to become a *shochet* – which is what happened. He was murdered by the Nazis early in the war, year unknown. May God avenge his blood.

Rabbi Avraham Sternhartz (1862-1955)

Rabbi Avraham Sternhartz (Kokhav Lev) was the great-grandson of Reb Noson and grandson of the Tcheriner Rav, Rabbi Nachman Goldstein (q.v.). Orphaned of his parents when still a young boy, Rabbi Avraham was raised by his grandfather and showed great diligence in Torah study, a trait for which his grandfather was well known. After *Shacharit*, the young Rabbi Avraham would seclude himself in an attic and study Rebbe Nachman's *Likutey Moharan*, not interrupting his study until he knew that day's lesson by heart. A child prodigy with a phenomenal memory, he married at age sixteen after having completed the entire Talmud. After his marriage, he received rabbinical ordination from the Rogotchover Gaon. At the age of nineteen, he was appointed rabbi of Kremenchug. At twenty-two, he was appointed prayer leader for the Rosh HaShanah *kibutz*, a post that he held both in Uman and in Israel for a total of seventy years.

Rabbi Avraham arrived in Jerusalem's Old City in 1936, where he was received and recognized as the outstanding Breslover elder of his generation. In 1940, he established the Rosh HaShanah *kibutz* in Meron. In 1948, during the Israeli War of Independence, he was exiled from the Old City and resettled in Katamon together with many other Breslover families. Among his disciples were a number of the major Breslover leaders of the past few decades, including: R' Moshe and R' Nachman Burstein, R' Michel Dorfman, R' Shmuel Horowitz, R' Gedaliah Aharon Koenig, R' Hirsch Leib Lippel, Rabbi Tzvi Aryeh Rosenfeld, R' Shmuel Shapiro and Rabbi Yaakov Meir Shechter.

It was said of Rabbi Avraham that he was a "living *Likutey Moharan*." Everything he did was based on some statement in Rebbe Nachman's teachings. He taught his lessons entirely from memory, without having to look into the text. He continued teaching like this until his passing on 20 Elul 1955 at the age of ninety-three.

R' Nachman Sternhartz (d. 1968)

The son of R' Yitzchak of Babrinitz and a descendant of Reb Noson, R' Nachman was one of the eleven chassidim who participated in the first Rosh HaShanah *kibutz* in Uman after the Holocaust. Although he suffered from ill health and was extremely poor, he made every effort to follow Rebbe Nachman's will and spend Rosh HaShanah in Uman.

Once, when his flight from Tashkent to the Rosh HaShanah *kibutz* in Uman was delayed, he rented a helicopter to take him there, an act that elicited both the attention of the KGB and the concern of those attending the *kibutz* in Uman.

Another time, after his gall bladder was removed, he left the hospital to be able to spend Rosh HaShanah in Uman. Although he suffered greatly, he recovered completely and experienced no ill effects. At the *kibutz*, he always made a point of looking at the faces of all the men in attendance, to fulfill the Torah teaching to look at the face of a tzaddik (cf. *Yerushalmi, Shekalim* 2:5).

R' Nachman arrived in Israel in 1966 and passed away two years later, in Elul 1968.

R' Noson Sternhartz (1879-1971)

The son of Rabbi Avraham Sternhartz (q.v.) and father-in-law of R' Michel Dorfman (q.v.), R' Noson was privileged to know both R' Nachman Chazan of Tulchin (q.v.) and the Tcheriner Rav, Rabbi Nachman Goldstein (q.v.). By the time of the Bolshevik Revolution, R' Noson was an accomplished rabbi and scribe. His father, Rabbi Avraham, was able to obtain an exit visa from Russia in 1936, but he could not, and his whereabouts were unknown after World War II. Sometime in 1954, contact was reestablished between the father in Israel and the son in Russia. Rabbi Avraham pleaded with the Soviets to let a ninety-year-old father see his seventy-two-year-old son. Finally, the Communists relented and issued the exit visa. But by the time R' Noson arrived in Israel on Rosh Chodesh Iyar 1956, Rabbi Avraham had passed away.

R' Noson lived to a ripe old age and passed away on 3 Tishrei 1971.

Yaakov Gedaliah Tefilinsky (1942-1971)

Born to an outstanding Yerushalmi *Litvishe* family, Yaakov Gedaliah's father was R' Nesanel and his uncle was Rabbi Yaakov Meir Shechter (q.v.), one of the most influential chassidim in Jerusalem today. Rabbi Yaakov Meir taught Yaakov Gedaliah the foundations of Breslover Chassidut and encouraged him tremendously. Yaakov Gedaliah studied in the Slonimer Yeshivah in Jerusalem and became an accredited scholar and scribe.

Always willing to help his fellow Jews, Yaakov Gedaliah served God simply, without any false haughtiness. He would often go out into the fields for *hitbodedut*. He was a very close friend of Moshe Eisenmesser (q.v.), and after Moshe's passing, extended that friendship to Gedaliah Fleer. With great self-sacrifice, he made the pilgrimage to Rebbe Nachman's gravesite in 1969. After being childless for ten years, his daughter was born within the year after his visit to the *tzion*. Always weak and sickly, Yaakov Gedaliah passed away a few months after his daughter's birth, on 16 Shevat 1971.

R' Alter Tepliker (1860?-1919)

R' Alter Tepliker was the nickname given to R' Moshe Yehoshua Bezhilianski, a leading Breslover in Uman at the turn of the century and the brother-in-law of R' Avraham Chazan (q.v.). Author of ten works on Breslover Chassidut, R' Alter pioneered the publication of Breslover teachings on specific topics, such as *Hishtafkhut HaNefesh* (on *hitbodedut*), *Meshivat Nefesh* (on inner strength),

Or Zorei'ach Haggadah (on the Passover Haggadah), a commentary on *Pirkey Avot*, and *Mey HaNachal*, an important commentary on the *Likutey Moharan*. R' Alter was an erudite scholar and devotee of Rebbe Nachman's teachings. He was murdered during a pogrom in 1919 while studying in the shul in Teplik.

R' Aharon Leib Tziegelman (d. circa 1943)

One of the leaders of the Breslover chassidim in Poland, R' Aharon Leib devoted most of his time to printing and distributing Breslover books. By 1936 he had succeeded in printing 75,000 books. Together with R' Yitzchak Breiter (q.v.), he headed the Breslover yeshivah in Warsaw. He was murdered by the Nazis during the Holocaust, may God avenge his blood.

R' Moshe Yuroslovski (1888?-1961)

R' Moshe emigrated to Israel from the Soviet Union in 1937. Once in Israel, his life revolved around finding a way to return to the *tzion*, though this never took place. He was privileged to print Rebbe Nachman's books and generously distributed charity. He passed away on 19 Sivan 1961.

R' Daniel Zagaiski, the Convert (d. 1970)

R' Daniel was a righteous convert and a devoted Breslover chassid who played a prominent role in purchasing the plot of land containing Rebbe Nachman's gravesite. After the Holocaust, R' Daniel hosted Uman's only minyan. He was not afraid of the Soviet authorities, stating that the Nazis had murdered his entire family and the only reason he was saved was because neither the Nazis nor the Russians accepted the fact that he had converted to Judaism! R' Daniel left the Soviet Union in 1949 and spent the last years of his life in an old-age home in Jerusalem. He was buried in the Sanhedria cemetery in Jerusalem.

Appendix C

Related Stories

Last Foreigner in Uman

(This story corresponds to the Prologue, page 8)

R' Shmuel Horowitz was considered one of the most pious Breslover chassidim living in Israel before and after World War II. His father, Rabbi Yeshayah HaLevi Horowitz, who served as a rabbi in Tzefat and authored the book *Eden Tzion* about the holy sites in Israel, was a Lubavitcher chassid known for his hospitality.

For many years, Rabbi Yeshayah HaLevi and his wife were childless. Once, a Jew selling Breslover books came to the *shtiebel* in Tzefat. When Rabbi Horowitz saw the books on display, he told the peddler to pack his bags and leave immediately. The Jew began to plead with the rabbi, begging him to let him remain and sell his books. But Rabbi Horowitz was adamant, and even helped the peddler pack up his wares. Before the peddler left, he gave Rabbi Horowitz a "blessing" that he should have children and grandchildren who would study *Likutey Moharan* and other writings by Rebbe Nachman.

R' Shmuel was an extremely sensitive youth who would investigate and question everything that happened to him. Very often, he would accidentally begin to pray the weekday *Shemoneh Esrei* on Friday night, which was Shabbat. The Shulchan Arukh states that if such a thing happens, one should look into his deeds, since the error indicates that he is not worthy of accepting the holiness of Shabbat.

When R' Shmuel was seventeen, he needed to look up a reference in a particular book. In those days, it was very difficult to obtain religious books in Israel. R' Shmuel appealed to a friend whose father owned a large library to lend him that book. When R' Shmuel received it, he found that another book was bound together with it: R' Alter Tepliker's *Hishtafkhut HaNefesh*, which discusses the importance of spending time in *hitbodedut*. From the time that R' Shmuel began practicing *hitbodedut*, he stopped making mistakes with his *Shemoneh Esrei*. He continued to study Rebbe Nachman's teachings and grew closer to his approach to life.

In 1929, R' Shmuel decided to travel to Uman. In order to get there from Israel, he first had to travel to Poland and then cross over the border into Russia. By that time, however, most Breslovers who lived outside Russia no longer attempted to cross the border because it was so dangerous. Patrols were always

on the lookout for people trying to slip in, and those who were caught were often sent to prison. Nevertheless, R' Shmuel managed to get across the border and traveled toward Uman on foot until he happened to meet R' Hirsch Leib Lippel. R' Shmuel asked R' Hirsch Leib to take him to the *tzion*, but the latter hesitated. The Stalinist purges were in full effect and anyone who lived in Russia at the time was afraid to be seen with anyone from outside the country, lest he be arrested and accused of conspiring with foreigners.

R' Shmuel begged R' Hirsch Leib to reconsider. "I promise you all my *Olam Haba* (reward in the World to Come) if you take me to the *tzion*," R' Shmuel promised. Confronted by such an offer, R' Hirsch Leib relented and brought him to the *tzion*. R' Shmuel's visit to Uman was the last one made by a foreigner until Gedaliah Fleer made his first attempt in 1962.

R' Shmuel passed away on 12 Adar 1972. A few days later, R' Hirsch Leib had a dream in which R' Shmuel appeared to him, begging and pleading him to release him from the promise to give him his entire *Olam Haba*. The reward awaiting R' Shmuel in the World to Come (for that one visit to the *tzion*) was greater than he could have ever imagined. R' Hirsch Leib, who had himself visited the *tzion* thousands of times, agreed to release R' Shmuel from his promise.

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Rabbi Tzvi Aryeh Rosenfeld: A Scholar and a Doer

(This story corresponds to page 17)

Rabbi Tzvi Aryeh Rosenfeld was much more than a scholar – he was a doer, constantly searching for ways to help his follow Jews, advance Torah-true Judaism and spread the light of Chassidut.

During World War II, he was active on the Vaad Hatzalah and succeeded in saving many European Jews. When his father passed away in 1947, Rabbi Tzvi Aryeh assumed his father's charitable obligations. Eventually, he raised hundreds of thousands of dollars for many worthy causes. Despite the fact that he and his family lived in abject poverty, he never kept any money he collected for himself. He sent enormous sums to help Jews in Israel, and people there assumed that he was quite well-to-do. Those who came to visit him in America were shocked to discover that the "palatial" Rosenfeld residence was actually a tiny, one-bedroom apartment with four children sharing the bedroom while the parents slept in the living room.

With the encouragement of the two leaders of the Breslov community in Israel, Rabbi Avraham Sternhartz and Rabbi Eliyahu Chaim Rosen, Rabbi Tzvi Aryeh collected funds for the construction of the Breslover Yeshivah in Meah Shearim, Jerusalem, almost single-handedly. After the building was complete, he continued to raise money to publish Rebbe Nachman's works in Hebrew. He also pioneered the translation of Rebbe Nachman's teachings into English.

The leading rabbis of the era, however, were aware of the diamond in their midst. Rabbi Tzvi Aryeh had frequent access to Rabbi Moshe Feinstein, who

would discuss with him difficult rabbinical decisions. Rabbi Feinstein referred to him as "Torah that is found in a remote corner." He was well-known to the Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneersohn, who valued Rabbi Tzvi Aryeh's high level of scholarship and enjoyed his visits.

Rabbi Tzvi Aryeh's breadth of knowledge was legendary, as can be seen from this story which occurred during World War II:

The American Jewish Committee was charged with making sure that only serious yeshivah students received a draft deferment. It occasionally tested the students, and any boy who failed was eligible for the draft. One of Rabbi Tzvi Aryeh's friends was so nervous about failing that he mistranslated a quote that any yeshivah boy could have translated easily. The young man knew that it was just a matter of days before he would receive his draft notice.

Rabbi Tzvi Aryeh, however, recalled a certain source that explained the quote according to the way his friend had translated it. He showed the source to the committee and convinced them that his friend's answer was actually the correct one. After the committee members saw the high level of scholarship in the yeshivah, they never bothered to test the students again.

Rabbi Tzvi Aryeh successfully dedicated his life to bringing hundreds of young people closer to Judaism and Breslover Chassidut. He displayed extraordinary concern for all his students, even those who in the end were unable to pursue a true Jewish life. Yaakov was one public school student who decided to study in yeshivah. His mother, however, was opposed. Yaakov's father and brother had tragically passed away in an accident, and she was petrified that her only son – her pride and joy – would turn into a "religious fanatic" without a secular education.

The boys in Rabbi Tzvi Aryeh's group joined together to form a "ways and means committee" whose goal was to help Yaakov convince his mother that he should learn in yeshivah. The committee decided that Yaakov should go on a hunger strike (eating, of course, as much as he wanted in his friends' homes). Within less than a week, Yaakov's mother succumbed to the pressure and gave her son permission to transfer to yeshivah.

But when Yaakov's mother went to her son's public school to obtain his school records, the non-Jewish principal rekindled her worst fears and convinced her that Yaakov should remain in public school. Yaakov renewed his hunger strike. Not long after that, Yaakov's mother, who had troubles with her heart, became deathly ill. Her doctor informed Yaakov that if he didn't want to lose her, he had better stop causing her such anguish.

When Rabbi Tzvi Aryeh heard about these developments, he instructed Yaakov to break his hunger strike. Meanwhile, he wrote to Rabbi Avraham Sternhartz in Israel, asking how to proceed. Rabbi Avraham wrote that Yaakov must do whatever was necessary to convince his mother to allow him to learn in yeshivah. He guaranteed that although Yaakov's mother might appear to be very ill, nothing would happen to her. He explained that it would be impossible for Yaakov to remain religious if he did not study in a yeshivah.

However, Yaakov could not bear to see his mother suffer so, and never transferred to yeshivah. He remained religious until he turned twenty-one and

then, without any warning, removed his yarmulke and left the Jewish world behind. Sadly, Rabbi Avraham's advice had been proven correct.

Rabbi Tzvi Aryeh was overwhelmed with grief if one of his students abandoned Torah and mitzvot. He mourned the loss almost as deeply as if he had lost one of his own children. Yet although some students did not remain religious, Rabbi Tzvi Aryeh's sincere words left a deep imprint on their souls. Former students who became completely irreligious would often visit him years after they had left the Talmud Torah. Despite the years that had elapsed, almost all of them were able to recall clearly what they had learned from their wise and caring teacher, and invariably each one had continued to perform a specific mitzvah that they still held dear.

The fruits of Rabbi Tzvi Aryeh's labor today number in the thousands of Jews who have established Torah-observant homes.

* * *

The General

(This story corresponds to page 31)

After the cemetery in Uman was demolished during World War II, there were some Holocaust survivors who remembered the location of Rebbe Nachman's *tzion*. In New York, I met one of the last people to see the *tzion* before it was destroyed, and who even witnessed the fierce battle that turned it to rubble.

In the late 1950s, only a handful of Breslover chassidim lived in New York. The only Breslover *shtiebel* was located on the Lower East Side, and only a few chassidim joined the *kibutz* that was held there every Rosh HaShanah. One year, an elderly man joined our minyan. After we finished the holiday prayers, he told Leibel Berger and me his story.

He had recently emigrated from the Soviet Union, where he had been a general in the Russian army. He proceeded to recount several stories that sounded as though they were greatly exaggerated. Of course, we doubted that they were true.

The following Rosh HaShanah, the general showed up again. This time, he brought a large photo album with him. When we saw pictures of him dressed in his army uniform, standing next to Stalin, we realized that the previous year he had been telling us the truth. Now, too, he regaled us with interesting tales about his colorful life.

He was born in Poland to a religious family. His father had passed away before he was born and his mother had died when he was still a young child. The young orphan had been sent to live in his uncle's home. There, he had been forced to work from morning to night. Since he was never given an opportunity to study Torah, his connection to Yiddishkeit slowly weakened. When he became a teenager, he fled across the border and joined the Russian army. Although he was quite young, he looked older than his age and was able to enlist.

The general took his military studies seriously and slowly worked his way up the ranks. By the time the war between Russia and Poland erupted in 1940, he had attained the rank of field marshal (general). He and his soldiers spent two weeks in one of the many small towns that dotted Poland. Those two weeks spanned the High Holy Days, but the general had no idea of their significance. On Yom Kippur, however, he recalled that it was his father's *yahrtzeit*, and made up his mind to recite *Kaddish* in the local shul.

Accompanied by two soldiers, the general entered the village shul while the congregation was still in the middle of *Shacharit*. When the Jews saw him, they were terrified. Speaking to them in Yiddish, the general explained that he was a Jew just like them and had not come to harm them. He simply wanted to say *Kaddish* for his father.

The rabbi of the shul told the general that the people were frightened because every Yom Kippur afternoon, a group of Polish gentiles attacked the shul. When the congregation saw him enter with two burly soldiers, they had assumed that the hooligans had started their attack earlier than usual.

The general promised the rabbi that he would personally take care of the troublemakers. When the rioters arrived and begin to break the shul's windows, the general and his soldiers went up on the synagogue's roof and fired into the mob, which immediately dispersed. In his official report, the general stated that he had started shooting after the hooligans had attacked the synagogue to get at him and his soldiers; otherwise he would have been punished for killing gentiles to save the lives of Jews. The general later received a medal for this act of bravery.

Following this incident, the rabbi of the shul approached the general with tears in his eyes. He said, "Return home to eat a festive meal. I will say *Kaddish* for you, since you did such a great thing and were willing to sacrifice yourself for the sake of saving your fellow Jews."

The next day, the general returned to speak with the rabbi, who was a Breslover chassid. The rabbi asked him, "How is it possible that you live in Russia and have never traveled to the city of Uman, where a very great tzaddik is buried? It will be beneficial for your soul if you go there and recite the *Tikkun HaKlali* next to the tzaddik's grave."

These words made a deep impression on the general. He realized that they had been said with utmost sincerity and now he, too, longed to travel to Uman. But even though he was a high-ranking officer, he was always on call and could not leave Moscow even during his free time.

During World War II, the general was one of several officers who had to decide where to engage the Nazi troops. Since he had wanted to visit the *tzion*, he argued for Uman as the ideal place to confront the enemy. (Uman is located in central Ukraine on the main north-south road between Kiev and Odessa, and midway on the east-west axis of the country. It also has an air force base.) The general arranged that his division would camp outside Uman so that he could pray at the Rebbe's *tzion*. While the battle was raging around Uman, the general searched the city until he found a Jewish home with a mezuzah on the doorpost and knocked loudly. The family was petrified to see a fully-armed Russian soldier

standing on their doorstep. The general assuaged their fears and asked them to show him the way to the Rebbe's *tzion*. He was able to pray at the *tzion*, recite the *Tikkun HaKlali* and repent for his past behavior.

As the general was leaving Uman, he saw that the building over the *tzion* was destroyed by a grenade and realized that he was the last person to see the original structure that covered the grave.

At the end of the war, he escaped Russia and returned to his Jewish roots. Eventually he married and moved to the United States, where he made his home on the Lower East Side. During the year, he prayed in the *Polisher shtiebel*, but on Rosh HaShanah he prayed with the Breslover *kibutz*.

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R' Yitzchak Gelbach: A Chassid's Story

(This story corresponds to page 48)

On my first visit to Israel in the summer of 1958, I got to know R' Yitzchak Gelbach. When I asked him how he became drawn to Breslov, he told me that he was born in Poland to a family of Gerrer chassidim. He had been a very active child, extremely curious and getting into everything. One time he started looking through the *genizah* (repository for old or torn books) in the village shul, and had discovered a book that was missing its cover. This book was *Hishtafkhut HaNefesh* by R' Alter Tepliker, and R' Yitzchak felt as though every word was directed straight to him.

A short while later, R' Yitzchak introduced himself to a Breslover chassid who lived in his town. This chassid, R' Moshe by name, was nicknamed "the dancer" because every once in a while he would jump up in fiery enthusiasm in the middle of his prayers. R' Moshe gave R' Yitzchak a new copy of *Hishtafkhut HaNefesh*, and in it R' Yitzchak saw R' Aharon Leib Tziegelman's name mentioned. Desiring to meet him personally, R' Yitzchak convinced his father to let him study in the Toras Chaim Yeshivah associated with Brisk. There he met R' Aharon Leib's son. The two of them would go to the Breslover shul to hear R' Shlomo Yehudah Hoffman deliver a lecture on Rebbe Nachman's lessons. R' Yitzchak said that this lecture inspired him and rejuvenated his soul.

For Rosh HaShanah, R' Yitzchak traveled to the Breslov *kibutz* in Lublin, Poland. He returned home to face the opposition of his family, but he found encouragement from an unexpected source. An elderly Jew who dealt in buying and refurbishing old things lived in R' Yitzchak's hometown. His name was R' Betzalel Pepper, but people called him all sorts of other names and said that he was crazy since he constantly talked to himself. R' Yitzchak was curious to discover what R' Betzalel was really saying to himself, and decided to observe him closely.

R' Yitzchak started to follow R' Betzalel around. He noticed that as he pushed his cart through the streets, stopping every once in a while to shout that he was interested in buying old things, the peddler would mutter to himself, *"Gevalt!*

Master of the Universe, please help me to make a living so that I may study Your Torah. What kind of a mission in life is this, to push around an old cart?" R' Betzalel would also recite Psalms at length. When R' Yitzchak heard this, he realized that R' Betzalel must be a very special person.

R' Yitzchak decided to find out where R' Betzalel lived. He followed him to a basement apartment whose windows were placed at ceiling level. The outside walls were damp and covered with mold. R' Yitzchak returned home and planned how he could meet this very special Jew.

The next day, R' Yitzchak took some old clothes and walked to R' Betzalel's house. He knocked on the door and, when R' Betzalel opened it, R' Yitzchak said that he had an old shirt to sell. R' Betzalel invited him inside. R' Yitzchak looked around and saw that there was barely any furniture in the house, and that there were boxes instead of a table. His host offered him a cup of tea and then asked, "Tell me, what is it that you really want?"

"I would like to know what you are doing when you talk in the streets. I have already heard what you said," replied R' Yitzchak.

"If you heard, then it means that you were supposed to have heard," said R' Betzalel.

R' Yitzchak discovered that R' Betzalel was a Breslover chassid and a widower. His two sons learned in the Chakhmei Lublin Yeshivah and would come to him to spend the holidays. From that day on, the two began learning Rebbe Nachman's books together. R' Betzalel taught R' Yitzchak how to spend time in *hitbodedut*, recite Psalms and many other things.

When R' Yitzchak grew older, he went to study in the Baronowitz Yeshivah under Rabbi Elchanan Wasserman, one of the elite students of the Chafetz Chaim. At the time, a large group of Breslover students learned in this yeshivah, among them R' Pinchas Apter, the son of R' Ben Tzion Apter. Rabbi Elchanan and R' Pinchas were later murdered together in Kovno Ghetto's Ninth Fort by the Nazis. R' Yitzchak survived the horrors of the Holocaust when he was banished to Siberia for his role in distributing the ten-year Jewish calendars.

When the war ended in Russia, R' Yitzchak was given a free ticket to travel to wherever he wished. He chose a town near Uman, since he was afraid that the authorities might suspect him of religious leanings if he would specify Uman. He thought to himself that since all his relatives were murdered in Poland, and he was now all alone in the world, he had a special opportunity to travel to the Rebbe's *tzion* in Uman.

R' Yitzchak arrived in Moscow in the middle of Kislev 1944, during the bitter Russian winter. All he owned were the clothes on his back – he had no coat and no shoes. The snow was over three feet deep. When he showed up in a shul, the people there took care of all his needs and tried to protect his feet by wrapping them in layers of rags and newspapers.

When R' Yitzchak asked if there were any Breslover chassidim living in Moscow, he was informed that many of the chassidim had been killed during the reign of Stalin, and whoever remained alive had moved far away. There was only one Breslover chassid left in Moscow: R' Michel Dorfman.

At that time, R' Michel was a government employee who was in charge of one section of a large clothing factory. This section acquired clothes and warm boots from other factories and recycled them. R' Yitzchak contacted R' Michel and went to speak with him in his house.

R' Michel explained to R' Yitzchak that because of the war with Germany, the economic situation in Russia was extremely difficult. "It is forbidden for them to see me with you," he added. "It would be very dangerous for me if I was caught. But I will be able to give you a pair of warm boots if you come to my factory. Now I will give you two notes. Tomorrow, come to the factory and present one to the guard at the entrance and the other to me, and I will exchange them for things you need. After that, leave the factory immediately. More than that, I am unable to do."

R' Yitzchak did as R' Michel suggested. He arrived in his old clothes and gave one note to the guard. He entered the factory and gave the second note to R' Michel, who, without uttering a word, exchanged it for some new winter clothes and a pair of boots. R' Yitzchak walked out without the guard suspecting a thing.

R' Yitzchak spent three and a half months traveling to Uman via bus, train and car, as well as on foot. He arrived in Uman one Shabbat morning, exhausted and hungry. Not knowing anyone who lived there, he sat down on the sidewalk and looked to see if he could find another Jew. All of a sudden, he noticed a man walking by, carrying a newspaper under his arm. R' Yitzchak realized that the newspaper was hiding a tallit, and asked the man to take him to shul. The man agreed on the condition that R' Yitzchak would not tell anyone in shul who had brought him. Then he guided him through the streets of the city until they arrived at the home of R' Daniel the convert. R' Yitzchak prayed in a room together with a small group of frightened Jews. This was the first time that he had received an aliyah to the Torah in many years.

Everyone left quickly after the prayer service except for R' Daniel. He was a righteous convert, but he said he wasn't frightened of the Communists. The Nazis had killed his wife and children but left him alive because they refused to recognize his conversion. R' Daniel gave R' Yitzchak a meal of hot water and beans, which revived the weary traveler, and then brought him to the *tzion*. Later he suggested a shidduch with Sarah, the daughter of R' Avraham Dzeregovsky, whose wife, Toiba Rochel, was a direct descendant of Rebbe Nachman.

R' Yitzchak's new father-in-law was a tzaddik and a God-fearing Jew who took care of the mikvah and *kloyz* in Uman, as well as arranged kosher meat for the Jews living there. This was such a dangerous undertaking that R' Avraham would slaughter the animals, check them, *kasher* them, divide them and distribute them all in one night to lessen his chances of being discovered by the authorities. That same night, he would also have to thoroughly clean the room in which the slaughtering had taken place. Occasionally he even repainted the room to erase all traces of his activity, lest government officials come for a surprise morning inspection.

When World War II broke out, R' Avraham and his family fled to Kremenchug and later to Stalingrad, where R' Avraham passed away. Following

the war, R' Avraham's wife, Toiba Rochel, returned to Uman with her daughter, Sarah. She remarried R' Yochanan Galant while Sarah stayed in R' Daniel's house. Sarah said that in 1945 there was a Rosh HaShanah *kibutz* in R' Daniel's house.

R' Yitzchak and Sarah married and settled in Uman, where their eldest daughter was born. Several years later they were allowed to leave Russia, since R' Yitzchak was a Polish citizen. They stayed in displaced persons camps in Germany and France before finally arriving in Jerusalem in 1949.

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The Dust of Mitzvot

(This story corresponds to page 53)

When he lived in Russia, R' Moshe Yuroslovski was considered a man of means. Rebbe Nachman said that a poor person is closer to God because he recognizes how much he has to rely on God for his every need. In fact, it would be a good thing if his followers were not wealthy. "Still," Rebbe Nachman continued, "in each generation there will be a few of my people who will be wealthy enough to help others." R' Moshe, in his time, was counted as one who could always offer a helping hand.

R' Moshe distributed enormous sums to charity, as well as to the printing of Rebbe Nachman's books. He would arrive in Uman quite a while before Rosh HaShanah, rent an enormous hall and prepare a large amount of food. He would then announce that anyone who wished to spend the month of Elul in Uman, preparing himself spiritually for Rosh HaShanah by praying at the *tzion* and in the *kloyz*, could be his guest and eat his food. Hundreds of people came to Uman in Elul, and R' Moshe also arranged places for them to sleep.

One time there was not enough flour in Uman to prepare *challot* for Rosh HaShanah. R' Moshe traveled to a nearby city to obtain flour. He bought two sacks, and on the eve of the holiday found himself at the train station, waiting for the last train back to Uman.

At the station, R' Moshe noticed other Breslover chassidim who were also on their way to Uman. R' Moshe asked them to help carry the heavy sacks onto the train, but the chassidim were afraid to miss the crowded train and refused. R' Moshe told the chassidim that this was for the Rebbe's Rosh HaShanah. "And if you don't want to help me," he continued, "then let me tell you that, God willing, I will make it to Uman, but you will not."

That is exactly what happened. The train was completely filled with passengers, but since everyone was afraid of getting dirty from the sacks of flour that R' Moshe was carrying, they moved aside to make room for him to enter. The others, however, couldn't get in. This story shows that when a person wants to do a mitzvah with his whole heart and is willing to act with self-sacrifice, God helps him to accomplish his goal.

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10,000 Visits to the *Tzion*

(This story corresponds to page 137)

I remember the summer of 1964 well, since it was then that I became close to R' Hirsch Leib Lippel, one of the most prominent Breslovers of our time. A student of Rabbi Avraham Sternhartz, he had a certain distinguished look about him. I would pay him a visit every week and would spend hours talking with him.

R' Hirsch Leib was considered a genius among the chassidim. He lived on a totally different plane. His life was devoted solely to serving his Creator. He was one of the *ovdim* (devotees) of Uman, a group of about twenty chassidim formed by R' Baruch Getches, who strived to live a life similar to that of the "Master of Prayer" described in one of Rebbe Nachman's stories (*Rabbi Nachman's Stories* #12). The *ovdim* would arise each night at *chatzot*, immerse in the river (they lit bonfires with straw to warm up as they emerged from the water), and then spent hours in the fields in *hitbodedut*. When they returned in the morning, they would pray *Shacharit* for several hours and then spend the remainder of the day studying Torah.

Listening to R' Hirsch Leib speak about himself, about how he was drawn close to Rebbe Nachman, and about his first time at the *tzion* and his determination to pray there again and again, strengthened and encouraged me, until I began to think that perhaps it really would be possible for me to travel to Uman for Rosh HaShanah.

R' Hirsch Leib's father was a Radomsker chassid, a simple and honest Jew who owned a grocery store in their Polish village. R' Hirsch Leib noticed one strange thing about his father: Every morning he would take out a small book and start to pray from it. Whenever he asked his father about this, his father replied that it was none of his business, and then he would put the book into a drawer and lock it. One time R' Hirsch Leib noticed that his father forgot to lock the drawer. He removed the book and saw that it was called *Tikkun HaKlali*, nothing more than ten chapters of Psalms. Why was his father hiding this from him? As he perused the volume, he came across the promise that Rebbe Nachman had made: "If someone comes to my grave, gives a coin to charity and says these ten Psalms, I will pull him out from the depths of Gehinnom!"

Now R' Hirsch Leib understood why his father had hidden the book from him. His father knew that he was an adventurous boy, and if he read those words, he would most probably attempt to smuggle himself across the Russian border to take advantage of the Rebbe's promise. R' Hirsch Leib knew that he was still too young to do such a thing. He returned the book to its place and pondered how he would be able to succeed in reaching Uman. He finally came up with a plan. In the village where he lived, there was only one cheder with one *melamed* (teacher) in charge of twelve boys of various ages. Every hour, the *melamed* taught another group of boys. R' Hirsch Leib threw himself into his studies and began to make great progress. Eventually the *melamed* told R' Hirsch Leib's father that his son was ready to learn in a higher yeshivah. He advised him to send the boy to Warsaw, where he could develop into a great Torah scholar.

R' Hirsch Leib's father agreed to the suggestion. At first, R' Hirsch Leib traveled to the yeshivah of the Chafetz Chaim in Radin, Poland. Later, his father arranged for his acceptance to a yeshivah in Warsaw. In Warsaw, R' Hirsch Leib ate his Shabbat meals in the homes of R' Aharon Leib Tziegelman and R' Yitzchak Breiter, and he shared their longing to pray at the *tzion*. At this point, R' Hirsch Leib decided to travel to Uman for the coming Rosh HaShanah.

Everyone in the yeshivah, however, was talking about what had happened the previous Rosh HaShanah, when a group of twenty boys from the yeshivah had tried to travel to Uman. Only eighteen succeeded; two of the boys had been caught at the border. Originally there were supposed to be twenty-one boys in the group, but one, the son of a *Litvishe* rabbi, had been held back by his father. The boy had been drawn to Breslov when he was eighteen years old, and had left his father a note informing him that he must travel to Uman for Rosh HaShanah. Although the father was shocked, he remained levelheaded. He removed his rabbinical frock, put on the clothes of a simple Jew and started to study Breslover works. Then he traveled to the Breslover yeshivah in Warsaw and introduced himself as a Breslover chassid from such and such a city who wanted to go to Uman for Rosh HaShanah. His words were accepted and he was told exactly how to make the trip. He hurried along the prescribed route until he managed to catch up with his son, who was waiting to cross the border into Russia. He forced his son to leave the group and brought him back home.

When this rabbi returned home, he composed a declaration, signed by the rabbinical court, prohibiting travel to the *tzion* because of the great risk of being caught and imprisoned. Making the attempt was tantamount to suicide, which is prohibited by Jewish law. The rabbinical court approved the declaration, and asked R' Aharon Leib Tziegelman and R' Yitzchak Breiter to sign it as well. They did, agreeing that it was forbidden to travel to Uman under such circumstances. The *Litvishe* rabbi publicized the declaration in all the local Orthodox newspapers, igniting a stormy debate among the chassidim, since their own leaders had signed it.

Some time after the declaration was publicized, R' Hirsch Leib entered R' Aharon Leib's house. His host told him that he was happy that the declaration had been made, since it really was dangerous and life-threatening to travel to the *tzion*. R' Hirsch Leib replied that he wanted to go anyway during the coming year.

A few days later, R' Aharon Leib and R' Yitzchak took R' Hirsch Leib aside and said to him, "At the age of sixteen and a half you are thinking of traveling to Uman? Don't smuggle yourself across the border; it is much too dangerous. Instead, do the following: Every day during the coming year, spend one and a half hours in *hitbodedut* and study Rebbe Nachman's teachings. Put aside 20% of whatever you earn towards printing Rebbe Nachman's books, and after a hundred and twenty years we will go together with you to testify in front of Rebbe Nachman that you did everything you could, and that you are considered one of his chassidim. We will ask him to do for you what he promised to anyone who visits his grave."

"How do you know that Rebbe Nachman will take your suggestion?" asked R' Hirsch Leib.

"We have not spoken to Rebbe Nachman, but we are willing to swear that we will testify before him on your behalf," they replied.

"If you do not have Rebbe Nachman's agreement, my opinion is that I should travel to Uman," R' Hirsch Leib declared.

He refused to listen to any more warnings and decided that, no matter what, he would make the trip to Uman. Shortly before Rosh HaShanah of 1921, he attempted to cross the border into Russia together with a group of twenty students. They were caught and sent back to Poland.

R' Hirsch Leib refused to give up. He tried to smuggle himself across the border a second time, this time with a group of four other men. They crossed the border at a point where there was no fence. There was, however, a freshly-harvested field whose stalks tore their clothes and cut into their skin. By nature, R' Hirsch Leib was strong and robust, but the others were not as strong and were in great pain from their cuts. One of the men suggested that they drink some of the vodka that they were carrying so that they would not feel the pain as intensely. Then one of the men sprained his ankle and was unable to continue walking. A while later, this man fell asleep from sheer exhaustion. The group felt that they were unable to remain where they were for the night, since they were in danger of being caught by the border patrol.

R' Hirsch Leib decided to stay with the fellow who had sprained his ankle, but the other three decided to continue on. The next morning, when the man awoke, R' Hirsch Leib carried him across the border and managed to make it to Uman for Rosh HaShanah. The other three, however, were caught by the Polish border guards and ended up spending the next six months in prison.

R' Hirsch Leib arrived in Uman to find the city plagued by a deadly typhus epidemic. People were literally dying in the streets. There were sick people lying inside the *kloyz*; to prevent the spread of infection, the *kloyz* had been placed under quarantine. R' Hirsch Leib caught the disease and was hospitalized in critical condition. Two days later, when the doctors removed the IV from his arm, he rushed out of the hospital and, despite his extreme weakness, raced straight to the *tzion*. Ignoring the freezing cold weather, R' Hirsch Leib spent four hours praying with intense devotion at the *tzion*. Afterwards he felt much better.

R' Hirsch Leib sent a letter to his father informing him that he was in Uman. His father wrote back, "If you would have asked me, I would not have allowed you to go. But now that you are there, I am happy and jealous of your success, and wish that I had done as you did."

R' Hirsch Leib married the daughter of R' Aharon Kublitcher, whose other daughter married Rabbi Levi Yitzchak Bender. He and his wife succeeded in emigrating to Israel in 1934. They were among the first Breslover chassidim to come from Russia. R' Hirsch Leib sent visas to his parents and to Rabbi Avraham Sternhartz and Rabbi Eliyahu Chaim Rosen so that they, too, could enter Israel. Shortly after he arrived in the Holy Land, R' Hirsch Leib's father passed away. He was buried in Jerusalem.

On his father's *yahrtzeit*, R' Hirsch Leib told me how he honored his father's memory, and even prayed that he intercede on behalf of the living. During the British occupation of Palestine, R' Hirsch Leib's mother became ill enough to require hospitalization. But the hospital demanded an enormous sum of money for her treatment and threatened that if payment was not received by a certain date, they would send her back home, where she would most probably die.

R' Hirsch Leib went to his father's grave and pleaded, "You were always good to me. There were Breslover chassidim whose parents refused to speak with them after they traveled to Uman and caused them all sorts of problems. When you heard that I had gone to Uman, you were happy and even sent me packages. Once I arrived in Israel, I did whatever I could to observe the mitzvah of honoring my parents. I sent you visas, and, thank God, you came to Israel. But now I am in trouble. Mother is very sick in the hospital, and they are asking me to pay an enormous sum of money to cover the cost of her treatment. But I do not have sufficient funds. Help me! She is not only my mother; she is also your wife. Although it is my responsibility, please intercede with God on my behalf."

R' Hirsch Leib thought for a few moments before continuing: "There is a great difference between the two of us. I prayed at the *tzion* about 10,000 times, and you were not there even once. If Rebbe Nachman agrees, and although it is very difficult for me, I will give you the merit of one of those times that I prostrated myself on the *tzion*." R' Hirsch Leib stood next to his father's grave and cried for some time before returning home.

That night he dreamed that he and his father were crossing the Russian border on their way to Uman for Rosh HaShanah. R' Hirsch Leib was caught by the Polish border guards, but his father managed to make it to the *tzion*. When R' Hirsch Leib woke up, he said, "That dream was a sign that Rebbe Nachman agrees."

A short while later, the wealthy R' Shabsai Travitsky, who was known as R' Shabsai Breslover, heard about R' Hirsch Leib's mother's plight. Two weeks later, he sent R' Hirsch Leib the entire sum necessary to pay her hospital bill. Reb Michel told this story at the Rosh HaShanah gathering in Uman in 1965 and emphasized how R' Hirsch Leib, who had been at the *tzion* 10,000 times, was still reluctant to give his father the merit of even one single time!

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Overheard in Odessa

(This story corresponds to page 74)

Before I arrived in Kiev on Sunday, I spent Shabbat in Odessa. During the day, I took a walk in one of the city's parks and noticed two elderly men sitting on a bench, speaking Yiddish to each other. I sat down nearby and heard one of them say, "Soon it will be Rosh HaShanah. Every year I have managed to take a vacation for the holiday. But this year I was warned that I will have to work as usual."

His friend replied, "This past year I had to work on Yom Kippur. They even forced me to eat."

I turned around and said in Yiddish, "Hello. How are you?"

The two men were frightened. I tried to calm their fears by informing them that I was an American tourist, but that caused them to become even more upset. "There must be at least five people watching everything you do," they said. "The kindest thing you could do for us would be to ignore us."

I realized that they were right and left them alone.

Generally, however, the Jews that I met in the Soviet Union enjoyed speaking with an American who was so obviously Jewish.

* * *

Prayer of the Heart

(This story corresponds to page 93)

The following story exemplifies R' Shmuel Shapiro's strong desire to travel to Uman:

Every Thursday night, Breslover chassidim in Jerusalem went to the Tomb of King David on Mount Zion to recite the *Tikkun Chatzot*, spend time in *hitbodedut* and study Torah until sunrise. One time when I was there, I overheard R' Shmuel Shapiro and R' Shmuel Tchetchik discussing Rebbe Nachman's *tzion*.

R' Tchetchik asked R' Shapiro, "Do you mean that there is actually a chance that in our times one can travel there?"

"One has to pray," replied R' Shapiro.

"I have already prayed so much that I have no more words left," replied R' Tchetchik.

"At the very least you should recite the prayer composed by R' Yitzchak Breiter," R' Shapiro said, referring to the moving prayer said by Breslover chassidim for over seventy years until the Communist barriers to Uman finally disintegrated.

"First one has to remember to carry the prayer around with him!" R' Tchetchik retorted.

R' Shapiro looked at R' Tchetchik in shock. "What? You don't know that prayer by heart?" he exclaimed. "I recite it every single day!"

* * *

The Torah Riddle

(This story corresponds to page 99)

When I met Rabbi Yehudah Kalasher for the first time, I had the opportunity to engage in a Talmudic discussion with him. He asked me if I had studied in a yeshivah, and whether I had *semichah* (rabbinical ordination). I wanted to make a good impression on Rabbi Yehudah since I knew that R' Michel valued his opinion. If I got him to like me, perhaps he would encourage R' Michel to travel with me to the *tzion*.

"Yes," I said modestly. Since I always carry a copy of my rabbinical ordination with me, I was able to show it to him. He took the certificate, put on his glasses and stood directly under a light bulb to have a better look. I had received this *semichah* while studying in Israel. Rabbi Yehudah read the text of the certificate out loud, and every few minutes he looked up at me in amazement. It occurred to me that by showing him the *semichah*, I was getting myself into deep water, since now he would most probably want to verify the *semichah's* credibility.

When we returned to R' Michel's house, he raised the subject again. "Your rabbinical ordination is nice," he said. "I received mine many, many years ago, at my bar mitzvah. It was a big day for me, since on that day I also received a blessing from the previous Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak Schneersohn. When I entered the rebbe's study, he asked me, 'What are you learning?'

"'Thank God, I have just completed the Shulchan Arukh,' I replied.

"'Did you receive *semichah* to become a rabbi?' he asked.

"'Yes.'

"The rebbe was amazed. After all, I was only thirteen years old. With a wide smile, the rebbe said, 'I would like to ask you a question. Since you already have *semichah*, and have studied *Yoreh Deah* (one of the sections of the Shulchan Arukh), I will ask you a Torah riddle.'

"He asked me the following question: 'In every mitzvah, it is possible to transgress the negative commandment of *bal tosif* [not adding onto the original mitzvah]. For example, it is a mitzvah to put tzitzit on a four-cornered garment, yet by putting tzitzit on each corner of a five-cornered garment, one has transgressed this negative commandment. The same can be said about the mitzvah of mezuzah. It is a mitzvah to place one mezuzah on your doorpost, but it is a transgression to place two.

"'However, concerning a negative commandment, such as the mitzvah not to kill or steal, it is impossible to transgress the negative commandment of *bal tosif*. Each time a person murders or steals, he is transgressing rather than compounding the prohibition. There is only one place in the Torah where it is possible to transgress *bal tosif* on a negative commandment. And if you are really familiar with *Yoreh Deah*, then you should know the answer to this question.'"

Rabbi Yehudah looked straight at me. "*Nu*? What would you have said? Do you know the answer?"

While I was studying in the Novardok Yeshivah, one of my friends was writing a book of Torah riddles. He would spend a great deal of time researching the questions and then tell me all the interesting things that he had discovered. He once asked me the very same question. Without even stopping to think, I returned Reb Yehudah's gaze and told him that the *Shach* brings down in the name of the *Rambam*, at the beginning of the section of laws dealing with meat and milk, that anyone who claims that chicken and milk are prohibited by the Torah transgresses the commandment of *bal tosif*. (This opinion is only according to the *Rambam*.) Rabbi Yehudah was flabbergasted.

"I didn't really want to test you, but we will soon be parting ways," Rabbi Yehudah said to me afterwards. "And I want to observe what it says in the

Talmud (*Berakhot* 31a) that a person should take leave of his friend with words of Torah."

I recalled that before leaving Israel, I had gone into one of the bookshops in Meah Shearim and noticed a small volume entitled *Medrash Pliah*, which explains unusual *medrashim* (non-legalistic teachings of the Sages) on the Talmud. I had noticed the following *medrash*: "A person should not take leave of his friend except through words of *halakhah* (Jewish law). Which ruling should one quote? 'When the opinion of one person is opposed to the opinion of many, the *halakhah* goes according to the majority.'"

I said to Rabbi Yehudah, "You should have told me that in a case in which the opinion of one person is opposed to the opinion of many, the *halakhah* goes according to the majority, since that is the *halakhah* the *medrash* is referring to."

Rabbi Yehudah replied that although he was familiar with that *medrash*, he could not understand why it stated that "words of *halakhah*" referred to that particular *halakhah*. Obviously the book *Medrash Pliah* was unavailable in Russia. I added that the initial letters of the words, "[When] the opinion of one person is opposed to the opinion of many, the *halakhah* goes according to the majority (*Yachid V'rabbim Halakhah K'rabbim*)" are the same as the final letters of the words in the verse, "because He will send the angels to guard you (*kY malachaV yetaveH laKh*)" (Psalms 91:11). The latter verse contains the blessing one says to a person about to embark on a trip.

Rabbi Yehudah was amazed that I had been able to give such comprehensive answers. But the truth of the matter is that I was much more amazed than he was. I felt that the Rebbe was right there with me.

* * *

The Rare Manuscript

(This story corresponds to page 103)

The small book that R' Michel gave me to take out of Russia was a manuscript transcribed by R' Alter Tepliker, may Hashem avenge his blood. It contained many insights which Rebbe Nachman had told his disciples, Reb Noson and R' Naftali, regarding what would happen in the end of days. Rebbe Nachman had instructed Reb Noson to record his words in a cryptic, abbreviated form, without telling anyone what he had heard. In every generation, the Rebbe said, one chassid would possess this book and it should be passed from hand to hand. A part of this book, *Megilas Setarim Katzar* (*A Short Book of Secrets*), was contained in the manuscript that R' Michel gave me.

When I came to Israel and showed the manuscript to R' Hirsch Leib Lippel, he told me that it really belonged to him. He said that after R' Alter had transcribed the book, he left it with his son, and R' Hirsch Leib had bought the book from him for fifty rubles. However, when he was ready to leave Russia, R' Hirsch Leib was afraid to take the book with him, so he left it with Rabbi Avraham Sternhartz. Rabbi Avraham, in turn, gave the manuscript to R' Michel, who had married his granddaughter.

"R' Michel gave you this book so that it should reach me, because it is mine," R' Hirsch Leib insisted. "But don't be frightened. If it is in your possession, it means that it was supposed to be in your possession. Just allow me to look at it."

So every day I went to visit him, and every day R' Hirsch Leib told me how much the book was reviving him. Every night he would wake up and look at the manuscript and study the holy letters written by R' Alter Tepliker. Since the book was written in a cryptic style, I wondered how he had learned to decipher it.

R' Hirsch Leib told me that he had given the manuscript to Rabbi Avraham Sternhartz while he was living in Kremenchug. Rabbi Avraham had stayed up an entire night studying the book until he figured out its code. Then he explained to R' Hirsch Leib the meaning of each and every word.

"If that's the case," I said, "perhaps you can teach me how to decipher it, too?" But R' Hirsch Leib demurred, saying that since his body was weak and full of suffering, his memory was not clear. Even if one was able to decipher the actual words, he added, the book itself was difficult to understand.

Some time later, R' Hirsch Leib told me that he remembered how to decipher the words and offered to show me what everything meant. He brought me together with Rabbi Tzvi Aryeh Rosenfeld and Leibel Berger and deciphered each and every one of the abbreviated words for us. Yet although we understood each word, we were unable to understand the book's deep and profound meaning.

I did understand one thing, however. Rebbe Nachman said that the Mashiach will redeem Israel with a "general redemption" and a "private redemption." The general redemption means that when the Mashiach arrives, he will gather in all the Jews from their places of exile and return them to the Land of Israel. The private redemption means that Mashiach will reveal to each Jew his individual spiritual condition, as well as what he is missing in his own Divine service. Before the time of redemption, the Mashiach will come to Rebbe Nachman's *tzion* in Uman. We know this is true, since before Moshe redeemed the Jewish people from Egypt, he first went to take the bones of Yosef HaTzaddik (see Exodus 14).

I must admit that after I saw those words written in the manuscript that R' Alter Tepliker had copied directly from a manuscript written by Reb Noson, my desire to reach the *tzion* for Rosh HaShanah grew even greater. After all, the same Rebbe Nachman who had said such incredible Torah had also said, "My very essence is Rosh HaShanah" (*Tzaddik* #403) and, "The main thing that interests me is Rosh HaShanah" (*ibid.*). This gave me the push to try to make it again to the *tzion*, this time to be with Rebbe Nachman on Rosh HaShanah.

* * *

A Risky Meeting

(This story corresponds to page 115)

While we stayed in a Moscow hotel after the first government-approved group trip to the *tzion* during Chanukah 1963, I felt it was important for Rabbi Tzvi Aryeh Rosenfeld to meet R' Michel Dorfman. R' Michel desperately needed an exit visa from Russia, and Rabbi Tzvi Aryeh might be able to bring that about.

So I told Rabbi Tzvi Aryeh that I wanted to go to R' Michel's home and bring him back to the hotel for them to meet. Rabbi Tzvi Aryeh was rather lukewarm to my idea, because when we had first arrived in Russia and gone through customs, he had been called aside and warned that everything would be all right as long as no one made any contact with Soviet citizens.

"But this man went out of his way to help me reach the *tzion*," I protested. "It's only right that you meet him and see how you can help him. Even if nothing comes of it, just meeting you will be a source of renewed strength and hope for him. We owe him at least that much." Rabbi Tzvi Aryeh agreed.

I slipped out of the hotel to make contact with R' Michel. I found a taxi, pretended I couldn't talk and showed the driver R' Michel's address. When I arrived at his house, he wasn't there and I had to wait for him for about an hour. Finally he came home to light the Chanukah candles. He was very excited to see me, and was thrilled to hear that we had been able to come to the *tzion* legally and as a group. But he asked me to wait in his house a little longer, as he had to light the Chanukah candles. He couldn't light them in the window, of course, but he placed them just beneath the window. His little granddaughter was with him. He sang "*Maor Tzur*" to a stirring Breslover tune filled with *deveikut* (longing for God), and cried as he sang.

Before he was ready to come with me, he said he wanted to dress for the occasion. "I'm going amongst people now," he told his wife. He changed into a suit and put on a tie (which he didn't usually wear). Finally he was ready to join me. A visit that I had thought would take around two hours had taken close to five hours.

I had no idea that back in the hotel, my companions were frantic over my absence. Moshe Rosen, a member of our group, had been taking a walk through the hotel when he passed an office and thought he heard someone saying my name. He immediately told the others, and everyone was convinced that I had been arrested for making contact with a Soviet citizen. As the hours dragged on, everyone became more and more anxious, certain that I was now under interrogation and that my actions would put them all in danger. The women who were in the group gathered in the hotel room I was sharing with my wife, to give her moral support.

When I finally returned with R' Michel at around 10 p.m., Rabbi Tzvi Aryeh and Leibel Berger were sitting and playing chess at a table set up in the hallway of the floor where we all had our rooms. As they played, they nervously kept an eye out for any unusual happenings. When they saw me come up the stairs with R' Michel, they turned pale, though they were glad to see me at the same time. As I escorted R' Michel to my room, I told them in passing that they should join me in my room as soon as possible.

Inside the room, I found my wife surrounded by the other women on the trip, who were all certain that I had been arrested since I had been away for five hours. Leibel Berger's wife was there with her two-year-old son, Avremi. When R' Michel saw these religious women dressed in a modest fashion and this little

boy wearing a yarmulke and tzitzit, he was overcome with emotion. He hadn't seen such a sight for forty years, and tears sprang to his eyes. I introduced him to the group, having no idea that we were in any kind of danger.

Suddenly there was a knock at the door. It wasn't an ordinary knock, more like an insistent rattle. It was 10:30 p.m. Unceremoniously, I pushed R' Michel into the bathroom and told him not to come out for any reason. My heart pounding, I went to the door of the room and opened it.

An old lady wrapped in a babushka and holding a vacuum cleaner stood in the doorway. "It's important that I vacuum the rug now," she said. Obviously, she had been sent to spy on us. The woman who sat by the stairwell had probably seen me taking this Russian-looking person into my room, and had sent one of the chambermaids to investigate.

The chambermaid insisted on entering the room. Using sign language to communicate with her, I pointed to my watch to indicate, "It's too late to come in." Then I held up my hand as if to say, "Wait a minute," closed the door in her face, and turned to the women standing in the room. "Don't ask any questions," I ordered, "just help me pick up the rug." It wasn't a small piece of material, but a wall-to-wall carpet, and five or six of us managed to pull it up. Then I opened the door to the hallway, dragged out the rug, and motioned to the astonished chambermaid, "Go ahead, you can vacuum it now." Putting my hand to my nose, I conveyed the message that I could not tolerate dust. She turned and ran away to whoever had sent her.

I hurried back to the bathroom where I had concealed R' Michel. "Don't ask any questions," I told him. "Go outside the hotel, turn right, and wait for me. I'll join you soon."

While R' Michel hurried to comply, Rabbi Tzvi Aryeh and Leibel, who had seen everything that had happened from their place at the chess table, started yelling at me. "You'll put us all in jail!" they cried. Meanwhile, my sister had positioned herself by the stairwell where she could look down and see the hotel reception desk. She came running back to tell us that whoever had been in my room was back in the hotel and speaking to a receptionist at the desk! Apparently, R' Michel thought that the hotel staff had come to check up on him because he didn't announce himself properly when he first came in, and was introducing himself to the receptionist.

I ran down the stairs and begged R' Michel to get out of the hotel and wait for me where I had told him. He complied the second time.

Now I pulled Rabbi Tzvi Aryeh aside and assured him, "Nothing's going to happen to us. I want you to meet this man. Let's meet him downstairs and go somewhere where we can talk."

Rabbi Tzvi Aryeh managed to overcome his fear, fetched his coat and accompanied me downstairs. We met R' Michel at the corner. He hailed a taxi for us and we drove to a train station where we could sit down and talk while many people milled around us. Rabbi Tzvi Aryeh and R' Michel spoke for about an hour. R' Michel told him about himself and how difficult it was for him in Russia.

He made a profound impression on Rabbi Tzvi Aryeh, who promised to help him in any way he could.

After we left R' Michel, Rabbi Tzvi Aryeh worried about what might happen since we'd made contact with a Soviet citizen. "Everything will be okay," I assured him. "If the police don't catch you red-handed, they're not going to do anything to you. And from a spiritual point of view, it's only *before* you try to do something that the evil inclination tries to stop you. We already did it. So don't worry about it."

We returned to our hotel. The rug had been put back into my room, and no one said a word to us. We went to sleep, got up the next morning and left the country.

After our return to America, Rabbi Tzvi Aryeh stayed in touch with R' Michel and put a lot of pressure on Gabriel Reiner, the travel agent, to meet R' Michel and to use his influence to convince the authorities to issue R' Michel an exit visa. In the coming years, Rabbi Tzvi Aryeh also sent packages containing American goods which R' Michel could sell for Russian rubles. R' Michel used the money to support himself and to help other religious Jews and Breslover chassidim who were still trapped behind the Iron Curtain.

When R' Michel finally came out of Russia in 1971, he refused to take charity. He had supported himself in different ways in Russia – as a tailor, a shoemaker and a bookbinder, among other things. He and his wife moved into the home of a Russian friend in Meah Shearim. R' Michel rented a sewing machine and began sewing headscarves for religious women. He also visited the Breslover Yeshivah in Meah Shearim every day, reacquainting himself with Rabbi Levi Yitzchak Bender and Rabbi Eliyahu Chaim Rosen, whom he had known in Russia. Later he began a daily learning session with Rabbi Eliyahu Chaim. Rabbi Tzvi Aryeh helped R' Michel to buy an apartment in the Geula neighborhood, where he lives to this day.

* * *

Too Easy to be a Mitzvah

(This story corresponds to page 151)

When Rabbi Avraham Sternhartz was the rabbi of Kremenchug, the head of the community once knocked at his door with an urgent summons. A few soldiers had just arrived in the village square and were demanding 50,000 rubles in exchange for two Jews they were holding for ransom. If the community did not hand over the money by evening, they threatened, they would kill the hostages.

"This certainly warrants my attention," cried Rabbi Avraham as he ran to get his coat. "It is a great mitzvah to redeem a captive Jew!"

He hurried to the home of one of the wealthy members of the community. The wealthy man listened carefully to his request and asked, "How much do you want me to give?"

"Ten thousand rubles," replied Rabbi Avraham.

"What?" exclaimed the wealthy man. "For such an important mitzvah you are only asking for 10,000? I will give you 20,000."

At the next house, Rabbi Avraham asked for 5,000 rubles and the wealthy benefactor gave him 10,000. This scenario repeated itself at almost every house the rabbi visited until he had accumulated the entire 50,000 rubles in a very short amount of time. But before delivering the ransom money to the soldiers, Rabbi Avraham told the head of the community, "Take all the money and give it back to the donors."

"But what about the captured Jews?" the other man exclaimed.

"Instead of handing the money to the soldiers," replied Rabbi Avraham, "take ten strong boys from the yeshivah and let them pretend that they are delivering the money. But instead, they will attack the soldiers and free the prisoners."

The head of the community was shocked. Such behavior could result in a pogrom. Rabbi Avraham understood his hesitation. "Whenever you have listened to me in the past, I have not been wrong," he assured him. "Now, too, do what I say and God will assist us."

After returning all the money, the head of the community called everyone in the village to a meeting and told them about the danger. The townspeople debated the issue and decided to listen to their rabbi. For the past forty years they had always listened to him, and now they would do so, as well.

At the appointed hour, the head of the community accompanied the ten boys to the village square and watched as they attacked the soldiers. The soldiers started to scream and beg for mercy. "It's all because of you Jews," they sobbed. "The Jews ruin everything. We were walking peacefully when we ran into these two Jews who suggested that we pretend to hold them for ransom and split the profits." The two Jews and the soldiers who had "captured" them were chased out of the village in disgrace.

Afterwards, the head of the community visited Rabbi Avraham once again. "We always realized that you are a true tzaddik," he said. "But we never knew that you were a prophet!"

"I'm not a prophet," Rabbi Avraham replied. "But I learned from my teachers that a mitzvah never comes easily. When the wealthy Jews so willingly donated more than I requested and I was able to collect the money so quickly, I realized that this collection was not for a mitzvah."

Glossary

Ba'alei teshuvah – returnees to the faith

Birkhat HaGomel – a public prayer of thanks after surviving a perilous episode

Challah (pl. *challot*) – braided bread baked in honor of Shabbat and Yom Tov

Chassid (pl. *chassidim*) – follower of a Rebbe

Chassidut – teachings of a Rebbe

Chazzan – cantor

Gan Eden – paradise

Gehinnom – hell

Haggadah – book retelling the Exodus from Egypt and detailing the rituals of the Pesach Seder

Halakhic – pertaining to Jewish law

Havdalah – ceremony marking the conclusion of Shabbat

Hitbodedut – solitary communion with God

Kabbalah – Jewish mystical teachings

Kabbalat Shabbat – prayers ushering in the Shabbat

Kaddish – memorial prayer for the departed

Kashrut – kosher standards

Kibutz – Breslover prayer gathering at Rosh HaShanah, as well as at other times of year

Kiddush – a reception held after Shabbat morning prayers, featuring wine, cake and other buffet items

Kiddush HaShem – sanctification of God's Name

Kloyz – Breslover synagogue built by Reb Noson in Uman

Kollel – learning program for married men

Leibedik – lively

Litvishe – non-chassidic

Maariv – the evening prayer service

Machzor – Rosh HaShanah/Yom Kippur prayer book

Matzah (pl. *matzot*) – flat, crispy cakes of unleavened bread eaten on Pesach

Megillah – Book of Esther

Melaveh Malkah – festive meal held on Saturday night

Mezuzah (pl. *mezuzot*) – small scroll attached to the doorposts of religious homes

Mikvah (pl. *mikvaot*) – ritual bath

Minchah – the afternoon prayer service

Minyan – prayer quorum of ten men

Mitzvah (pl. *mitzvot*) – Torah commandment

Mohel – ritual circumcisor

Mussaf – the additional prayer service on Shabbat and holidays

Mussar sefer – book extolling ethical behavior

Pesach – the Passover holiday

Peyot – sidelocks

Pirkey Avot – "Chapters of the Fathers," a tractate of the Mishnah, which is studied every Shabbat afternoon during the summer

Rosh HaShanah – the Jewish New Year

Seder – ritual meal held on the first two nights of Pesach (the first night only in the Land of Israel), following the order of the Haggadah

Selichot – prayers for forgiveness, recited before the advent of Rosh HaShanah and through Yom Kippur

Shabbat – the Jewish Sabbath

Shacharit – the morning prayer service

Shemoneh Esrei – (lit. "Eighteen Blessings"), the private devotional prayer

Shidduch – marriage match

Shochet (pl. *shochtim*) – ritual slaughterer

Shtiebel – small building designated for prayer

Shul – synagogue

Shulchan Arukh – the Code of Jewish Law

Tallit – prayer shawl

Talmud Torah – religious elementary school

Tashlikh – prayers recited next to a body of water on Rosh HaShanah afternoon

Techiyat HaMeitim – Resurrection of the Dead

Tefillin – phylacteries

Tikkun Chatzot – midnight lament over the destruction of the Holy Temple

Tikkun HaKlali – Rebbe Nachman's "General Remedy," a specific order of ten chapters of Psalms

Tzaddik (pl. *tzaddikim*) – a righteous and holy individual

Tzion – gravesite

Tzitzit – knotted strings attached to a four-cornered garment

Yahrtzeit – anniversary of a person's death

Yeshivah (pl. *yeshivot*) – learning program for unmarried men

Yom Tov – Jewish holiday

"Even the craziest person in the world would never attempt to do anything as insane as traveling to Uman," said Rabbi Levi Yitzchak Bender, a leader of the Breslover community in Jerusalem.

He called over R' Shmuel Tchechik. "You must have heard that Gedaliah already has a passport and a special visa to enter Russia," he said. "Would you ever attempt to make such a trip?" R' Shmuel shook his head. "No, I would not." "And if you had a visa to Kiev?" prodded Rabbi Levi Yitzchak. "Would you try to sneak into Uman from Kiev?"

"Absolutely not," replied R' Shmuel.

"You see," said Rabbi Levi Yitzchak, "even a person like R' Shmuel, who is known for his zealousness, would not do such a crazy thing."

"Wait a minute," R' Shmuel interrupted. "I said I wouldnt do it. But if I were Gedaliah I certainly would!"

"What do you mean?" asked Rabbi Levi Yitzchak in surprise.

"Well," said R' Shmuel, "I was born in Israel. I live here and I would like to die here. But Gedaliah lives in New York. So what difference does it make if he's buried in New York or in Kiev?" For nearly 50 years, the Communists barred access to the city of Uman, burial site of Rebbe Nachman of Breslov. Braving police intimidation, fear tactics and the threat of imprisonment, a handful of Breslover chassidim trapped behind the Iron Curtain did risk all to reach the forbidden city. But those living in Israel, Europe and America could only yearn from afar. The situation looked hopeless until a young American chassid fearlessly set out to pray at Rebbe Nachman's grave, no matter what obstacles stood in his way.

A student of Breslov for more than 50 years, Gedaliah Fleer is a popular teacher, story-teller and author. His lectures cover the entire spectrum of Jewish thought from the simple to the sublime, from Shabbat, honoring parents, Kabalistic thought and much more. He is also well known for his personal insights into the profound and intricate teachings of Rebbe Nachman.

Many of Gedaliah's lectures are available on CD and can be ordered from www.geruva.com. Gedaliah can be contacted for lectures in your community at: fleer@actcom.co.il. He lives in Jerusalem.

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