

Breslov FAQ

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January 7, 2014

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1. What is Breslov?

Breslov is the name of the town in the Ukraine where Rebbe Nachman spent most of the last eight years of his life. It has given its name to the Chassidic movement he founded. Breslov is sometimes transliterated as Bratzlav or Braclav, and should

not be confused with Bratislava in Czechoslovakia or Breslau (Wrocław in Polish) in Poland. Breslov is situated on the River Bug midway between Nemirov and Tulchin in what was the government of Podolia. It was usual for the Chassidic groups of Eastern Europe to take their name from the name of the town where their leader, the Rebbe, lived, and in most cases they have retained their original name even if most or all of the group, including the Rebbe, have relocated. When Rebbe Nachman first settled in Breslov in 1802, he said that his followers would always be known as Breslover Chassidim. This is so today even though Breslov is now a worldwide movement and there are no known Breslover Chassidim in the town of Breslov itself. The name Breslov has more than merely topographical significance. Rebbe Nachman once said that BReSLoV has the same letters as the Hebrew words LeV BaSaR, the 'heart of flesh' every Jew should have, as in the prophecy of Ezekiel (36:26): 'I will take away your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh.'

2. Who was Rebbe Nachman?

Rebbe Nachman was the great grandson of Rabbi Israel, the Baal Shem Tov – 'Master of the Good Name' – founder of the Chassidic movement. Rebbe Nachman's mother, Feiga, was the daughter of the Baal Shem's daughter Udel, while his father, Rabbi Simcha, was the son of Rabbi Nachman Horodenker, one of the Baal Shem Tov's closest disciples. Rebbe Nachman was born in 1772 in the Ukrainian town of Medzeboz. He became an outstanding Tzaddik, Torah sage, mystic, teacher, Chassidic master and storyteller. During his lifetime he attracted a devoted following of Chassidim who looked to him as their prime source of spiritual guidance in the quest for God. For them he was 'the Rebbe.' After being ill with tuberculosis for several years, Rebbe Nachman passed away in 1810 at the age of thirty-eight. He had moved to the Ukrainian town of Uman a few months earlier, and there he was buried. His gravesite is visited by many Jews until today. Even after his

passing, Rebbe Nachman's influence remained potent. His teachings spread by word of mouth, and especially with the printing of his writings, until he became established as one of the leading Jewish teachers of all time. His ideas are studied by Jews and non-Jews and have been the subject of a growing body of literature, academic and popular, in English, French, German and other languages.

3. Who is the leader of the Breslover Chassidim today?

Rebbe Nachman.

Most other Chassidic groups, when their Rebbe dies, choose a new Rebbe to succeed him, often his son or another close relative. Although Rebbe Nachman had two sons, both died in infancy. Even if they had survived, there is no evidence that Rebbe Nachman ever intended to establish a Chassidic dynasty. When Rebbe Nachman passed away his followers saw no one on the same outstanding level to take his place. Instead of appointing a new Rebbe, they continued to turn to Rebbe Nachman's teachings for inspiration and guidance and still looked on him as 'the Rebbe.' The Breslover Chassidim have done so ever since. This earned them the nickname the 'toite Chassidim,' the 'dead Chassidim,' amongst the Jewish communities of Eastern Europe. However the Chassidim themselves have always seen Rebbe Nachman as being very much alive spiritually, in accordance with the Talmudic dictum that 'the Tzaddikim are greater after their death than in their lifetime' (Chullin 7b). Breslover Chassidim still refer to Rebbe Nachman as 'the Rebbe,' studying his writings and endeavoring to follow his teachings in their day-to-day lives. In this sense Rebbe Nachman is still the leader of the Breslover Chassidim.

Although there has thus been no Rebbe 'in the flesh' since Rebbe Nachman's passing in 1810, each generation of Breslover

Chassidim have had their manhigim (leaders), Chassidim of outstanding piety, scholarship and insight into Rebbe Nachman's teachings. Rebbe Nachman's own closest disciples, themselves outstanding Tzaddikim and scholars, handed his teachings on to their own pupils, thus establishing the continuity of the movement. Closest of all to Rebbe Nachman was Reb Noson (1780-1844), who transcribed practically all of Rebbe Nachman's writings and had them printed. Reb Noson wrote prolifically explaining Rebbe Nachman's teachings, and he played a decisive role in the development and spread of the Breslover movement. He thus emerged as the first major manhig. The full story of Reb Noson's life is told in his biography, *Through Fire and Water*. Reb Noson was followed by his leading disciples, Rebbe Nachman of Tulchin (c. 1813-1884) and Rebbe Nachman of Tcherin (d. 1894). They in turn were followed by their closest pupils, Rabbi Avraham b'Reb Nachman (1849-1918) and Rabbi Avraham Sternhartz (1862-1955), and so on. The traditions of the Breslover Chassidim have thus been handed down from generation to generation in an unbroken line of transmission from the time of Rebbe Nachman until the present day.

None of these manhigim ever tried or would have wanted to try to impose himself as leader of the Chassidim. Their authority stemmed from the fact that their piety and greatness was recognized by the majority of Breslover Chassidim, who turned to them for guidance about the interpretation of Rebbe Nachman's writings, how to apply his ideas in practice, and how to live in the contemporary world in a way consistent with the spirit of his teachings.

In the present period there is no single manhig acknowledged by all the Breslover Chassidim. There are a number of prominent Chassidim, mostly in Israel, to whom other Breslovers turn for guidance. They include the leading disciples of the manhigim of the previous generation. Every Breslover Chassid is completely free to turn to any guide or

teacher he chooses or feels some personal connection with. While individual Breslover institutions have their boards of governors, there is no single 'Council of Elders' or similar body with authority over the entire Breslov movement. Nevertheless, strong bonds of regard and friendship exist between the elders, senior Chassidim and scholars of the movement. They remain in close contact with each other and may meet periodically to discuss matters of importance to the Breslov movement.

4. What is the scope of the Breslov movement today?

It would be practically impossible to give more than the roughest numerical estimate of the size of the main Breslov communities in Israel and America. There is no such thing as a membership roll of the movement. There are perhaps several thousand families in Jerusalem and Bnei Brak and several tens of families in Safed who could be identified as making up the core of the Breslover communities there. There are likewise many tens of Breslover families in the communities of the western hemisphere.

However, the existence or non-existence of Breslov communities gives no indication of the scope of Rebbe Nachman's influence in the Jewish world today. Outside of the main communities in Israel and New York there are hundreds of individuals and small groups throughout the world who feel a strong affiliation to the Breslov movement. Besides them, unknown numbers ranging from scholars, academics and Yeshiva students to ordinary lay men and women study Rebbe Nachman's writings. They include Jews of all backgrounds, Ashkenazim and Sefardim alike. Not all of them necessarily keep in contact with established Breslover communities, whether because they are geographically remote or for other reasons. Certainly, there is no inconsistency in following Rebbe Nachman's teachings while being an active member of any Jewish community.

In Rebbe Nachman's own time there was not really a community of Breslover Chassidim as such. While a few of his followers moved to live close by him, the majority lived scattered in their own towns and villages throughout the Ukraine. They would come to the Rebbe on fixed occasions through the year, first and foremost on Rosh HaShanah, the New Year, which Rebbe Nachman emphasized more than anything. They would hear him teach and perhaps talk to him personally. Then they would go home and endeavor to follow his teachings in their daily lives as Jews. After the Rebbe's passing, Reb Noson lived mostly in Breslov, and because of his central role the town became a major focal point, with a Breslover synagogue/study hall. However the annual Rosh HaShanah gatherings were held in Uman, where the Rebbe was buried. When Rabbi Nachman of Tulchin moved to Uman in 1866, it became the center of the movement with a flourishing Breslover community. Still, with the spread of Rebbe Nachman's influence through the Ukraine and into Poland, there were followers further and further afield. By the 1920's and 1930's there were so many Breslover Chassidim in Poland that a separate Rosh HaShanah gathering was held each year in Lublin for the many who were unable to travel to Uman.

The migrations of Jews from Russia and Poland in the late 19th and 20th centuries included Breslover Chassidim, some of whom came to Israel, others to the United States and elsewhere. The first Breslover synagogue was established in the Old City of Jerusalem in 1936. The community relocated to the Western part of the city in 1948. With the persecutions of the Jews in Russia and Eastern Europe, the old centers declined and the focus of the movement shifted to Israel and New York.

The Breslover communities include families who have been associated with the Breslov movement in some cases for several generations. A number of families trace their ancestry to the Rebbe's own family and his closest Chassidim. However, in every generation there have been many new followers who have

come in from the outside. This is especially so today, and the main Breslov communities now include newcomers from all backgrounds, among them large numbers of 'ba'alei teshuvah,' formerly non-observant Jews who have returned to Torah observance, and converts.

The Breslover institutions in Israel today include several synagogues, yeshivot for all ages and Rabbinic academies in different parts of Jerusalem, Bnei Brak and Safed; a housing project in Safed; aid funds for scholars and needy families, and other communal facilities. There are a number of publishing operations to print and distribute Rebbe Nachman's writings in Hebrew, English, French, Russian and other languages. A number of groups organize lectures and other educational programs for the general public. All these institutions are independently run and funded. They have been established on the initiative of individuals or groups of Chassidim. In the greater New York area there are a number of synagogues, organized classes and other activities. In Los Angeles, London, Manchester, Paris, Aix-les-Bains and elsewhere there are regular classes and other activities.

The most important communal focusses are the annual Rosh HaShanah gatherings. In recent years, the city of Uman has once again become the main gathering place for the Breslover Chassidim. The past few years have seen literally thousands of Jews from around the world and from all walks of life flocking to Uman to spend Rosh HaShanah 'with the Rebbe.' A separate pamphlet, 'Uman, Uman, Rosh HaShanah' – bearing the title of a popular song – describes the annual pilgrimage and gives suggestions as to how to participate.

Before the democratization of Eastern Europe, the largest gatherings for Rosh HaShanah were held in Jerusalem and Meron, the gravesite of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, in the Galilee. Each is still attended by over a thousand people, some of whom travel from as far as Paris, London, New York and Los Angeles to be present. Among them are many who have little or no

active association with Breslover communities for the rest of the year. There are smaller Rosh HaShanah gatherings in the United States. Other events through the year include Rebbe Nachman's yahrzeit, death anniversary, on the 18th of Tishrei, fourth day of the festival of Succot, celebrated by gatherings for study and communal meals; and the yahrzeit of Reb Noson on the 10th of Tevet, celebrated by a communal meal on the evening before the fast. Besides the on-going activities in the Breslover synagogues, yeshivot and other institutions and organizations, each of Rebbe Nachman's followers endeavors to practice the Rebbe's teachings in his own way according to his abilities.

5. Do the Breslover Chassidim have their own minhagim, customs, or other practices? Is there a typical Breslover dress-code? What is special about Breslov Chassidism?

The Breslover Chassidim do not have a book of their own minhagim as some other Chassidic groups do. Rebbe Nachman's writings abound with advice on practices which, while not always being halachically binding on every Jew, he nevertheless strongly recommended, such as regular hisbodidus (private prayer and meditation), and daily study of the Shulchan Aruch, the Code of Jewish Law. Although some of the practices Rebbe Nachman recommends could be said to come into the category of minhag, there are many other matters concerning which various Jewish groups have clear minhagim yet there is no guidance either way in the corpus of Breslover literature. Even where the established Breslover communities have particular minhagim, some adherents who have come from other backgrounds continue to practice minhagim of their own communities, as in the case of a number of Sefardim. There is no typical Breslover dress-code, and indeed Breslover

community gatherings are characterized by an enormous diversity of costume indicating the diversity of those making up the movement. Mens clothes range from traditional kaftans and shtreimels, to suits, casual shirts and slacks, blue jeans etc.

The Breslover Chassidim do not have their own special version of the prayers. The majority follow the standard nusach Sefard as used by most Chassidic Jews (not to be confused with the Sefardi nuscha'ot of the oriental communities). However, some individual Breslover Chassidim may use other nuscha'ot when praying.

In common with all observant Jews, Breslover Chassidim endeavor to adhere to the Written and Oral Torah as codified in the Shulchan Aruch. What makes Breslov Chassidism distinctive is its approach to fulfilling the spirit as well as the letter of the law. Torah living is experienced as a vital, joyous spiritual journey in which the individual seeks to develop his own unique potential in serving God and experiencing the Divine. The one universal practice which Rebbe Nachman emphasized more than any other – hisbodidus – is itself the most individual: daily sessions of private prayer and meditation in which each person talks to God in his own language in his own way about his own needs and concerns.

Other major emphases of Rebbe Nachman are on joy and living intensely. He saw joy as the key to spiritual growth and achievement, and urged people to take a positive view of themselves and their lives, and also of other people. He advocated putting all of one's strength into prayer, Torah study and religious observance, all of which give renewed vitality.

These and other ideas in Rebbe Nachman's writings can all be found in other sources throughout Rabbinic literature. Indeed, Rebbe Nachman was at pains to give backing to all his statements with sources from the Bible, Talmud, Midrash,

Kabbalah, etc. Does this mean that there is nothing special about Breslov Chassidism?

Ultimately what is unique about Breslov is the uniqueness of Rebbe Nachman himself as a teacher, guide and fountain of wisdom, inspiration and encouragement. He taught in many different ways. He told stories and parables. He coined epigrams. He would converse casually with his followers. He gave formal discourses. In every case the form he chose became a fresh, graceful garb expressing classic Torah wisdom in a totally original way. His words have the power to open up whole new vistas even in areas we thought were perfectly familiar. 'I will take you on a new way,' he said, 'which is really the old way our ancestors followed.'

6. How does one become a Breslover Chassid?

Through hard work! There is no standard admissions procedure and no membership card. Chassidism is by its very nature a voluntary movement. It is up to the individual Jew himself to decide if he wants to be a Chassid, and if so, how much of a Chassid. Every good Chassid would like his children to follow in his footsteps. Yet even those born and brought up in a Chassidic family are ultimately free to choose if they want to carry on the tradition or not. Essentially a Breslover Chassid is someone who has made Rebbe Nachman his guide in life. He looks to Rebbe Nachman's teachings for insight about how to live, and endeavors to carry out his advice in practice. Following the Rebbe means accepting his ideas even when they are contrary to one's own initial thinking. This means having faith in the superior wisdom of the Rebbe. It is like taking medicine on the recommendation of a doctor. You take it without necessarily understanding how or why it works: you have faith that the doctor has a better idea about medicine.

What prompts someone to become a Breslover Chassid?

If you went to all the Chassidim who have come in from outside, you would hear a different story from each one about the unique chain of events which brought him to hear about Rebbe Nachman and become involved. There are people from all kinds of backgrounds. Those brought up as Orthodox Jews include people from Chassidic and non-Chassidic backgrounds. Those from non-Orthodox backgrounds may have been anything from Conservative and Reform or their equivalents to non-affiliated, assimilated or even anti-religious. There are Ashkenazim and Sefardim as well as converts to Judaism. The range of personalities is equally diverse. There is no evidence that any one personality type is more likely to get involved than any other. People hear about Rebbe Nachman and his teachings in many different ways: some from friends or acquaintances, others from strangers or 'by accident.' Some have had contact with Breslover communities or with individual Breslover Chassidim. Others found out about Rebbe Nachman from books.

And there are as many ways of being a Breslover Chassid as there are Breslover Chassidim. Rebbe Nachman's writings cover every aspect of Jewish life and open up an enormous variety of different pathways – more than anyone could hope to explore in a single lifetime. There is no standard Breslov path applicable to everyone, with all the Chassidim being required to conform. Rebbe Nachman's appeal is to the individual, to relate to God in his own unique way. Thus a Breslover is not a Jew who happens to be a Chassid as well. His Chassidism is his way to be a Jew – as best he can.

Each individual Chassid must work out his own way of applying the Rebbe's teachings in the context of his own life. Some do so through their own study of Rebbe Nachman's writings, others in conjunction with a friend, study partner or teacher or through consultation with a manhig. Each Chassid is free to lead his life the way he chooses, and the community makes no efforts to influence anyone in a particular direction. Some

devote themselves entirely to Torah and prayer; some are scribes, some teachers, others active in community affairs. Still others are engaged in the whole array of occupations from science and engineering to law, accountancy, business, industry and the arts, etc.

For some Breslover Chassidim participation in the community is an important part of being a Chassid. Someone wanting to pray in the intense way taught by Rebbe Nachman may feel best able to do so in a minyan, prayer-meeting, or others trying to do the same. Many find the community the best focus for study of Rebbe Nachman's writings, and regular shiurim, classes, are arranged.

The community can also be a powerful source of support and encouragement for those trying to practice regular hisbodidus and other practices taught by Rebbe Nachman. On the other hand there are Chassidim who live very far from the major communities and yet are as strong as any in their commitment to the Rebbe's teachings. Even some who live in close proximity to the community may not feel that their connection with the Rebbe requires close involvement in community activities.

What does it mean to call oneself a Breslover Chassid?

It is perfectly possible to study Rebbe Nachman's writings, follow his guidance and interact with Breslover Chassidim without calling oneself a Breslover Chassid. Some are comfortable saying they feel closer to Breslov than anything else. Even if someone does call himself a Breslover Chassid, does that make him one? Who decides?

There is no such thing as a community decision to admit new members, nor is there any kind of initiation making one a fully-fledged Breslover Chassid. Breslover Chassidim do believe that Rebbe Nachman's way is very good and would like to share it with others, so they may try to influence people they think likely to respond. But it is still impossible to

make someone else become a Chassid. It is up to the individual himself.

Indeed, the more one grasps Rebbe Nachman's message, the more evident it is that to be a true Breslover Chassid is a very high level. Many would consider it a great achievement to be worthy of the name. Rebbe Nachman demands nothing less than that we be ourselves! That is why being a Breslover Chassid takes hard work! For this reason there are some who do reply that they are Breslover Chassidim when people ask them, but only because they know that most people find labels convenient. In their own hearts they are deeply aware that calling themselves a Breslover Chassid is not a description of their state of being. It is a declaration of intent: 'Yes, I study Rebbe Nachman's teachings and I would like to try to be the Jew I should be.'

7. Other Chassidim go to see their Rebbe and may talk to him personally or write him. What relationship does a Breslover Chassid have with Rebbe Nachman?

This touches on one of the greatest paradoxes of Breslov Chassidism – the physical absence of the Rebbe. It is a paradox because the relationship between the individual Jew and the Tzaddik is one of the cornerstones of Rebbe Nachman's teachings. Indeed this relationship is fundamental to Judaism, as is apparent from the Torah. The Children of Israel heard the first commandment directly from God. Everything else they knew about God was taught to them through Moses. In many other places in the Bible, Talmud etc. it is clear that direct contact between the Jew and his teacher is an integral part of the Torah experience. Torah learning is more than just the transfer of academic knowledge from one brain to another. Torah is for living, and the student must have direct contact with the Rav as the living embodiment of the Torah. Rebbe

Nachman himself repeatedly emphasizes the importance of seeing the Tzaddik in the flesh, hearing Torah from his lips, etc. Certainly, many Breslover Chassidim keenly feel the physical absence of the Rebbe and would yearn for direct contact. The fact that they continue to turn to his writings instead of going to a different Rebbe is itself an indication of the enduring potency of Rebbe Nachman's teachings. They possess the universality of true Torah, transcending the immediate circumstances in which they were first revealed and having relevance to all situations in all places and at all times.

Breslov literature speaks of the importance of searching for the Tzaddik. On one level this certainly means physically carrying on looking for a truly great Tzaddik who can give one guidance. It also means searching for the Tzaddik in Rebbe Nachman's writings – searching for the spirit behind the words on the page. The relationship between the Breslover Chassid and Rebbe Nachman is thus founded on an intense study of the Rebbe's works. This includes not only his formal Torah discourses but also his casual conversations, his stories, and the wealth of anecdotes about him showing how an outstanding Tzaddik lived Torah with his every movement.

The key concept is that of hitkashrut, binding. One binds himself to the Tzaddik first and foremost through faith: believing in the Torah of the Tzaddik even without understanding. One endeavors to draw as much as possible from his teachings and relate them to oneself, incorporating them into one's practical life. On the level of thought, this means adopting the ideas of the Tzaddik as one's own. On the level of speech, one studies the writings of the Tzaddik – it is the custom to study Torah out loud – and discusses them with others. One prays to be able to fulfill the Tzaddik's teachings. This leads to action fulfilling the teachings in practice – because 'the main thing is not study but practice' (Avot 1:17). Contact with other Chassidim who are genuinely trying to live according to the Tzaddik's teachings is also an

important aspect of the relationship with the Tzaddik. Each Chassid has his own unique 'point' which others can receive from. In moments of uncertainty, stress and so on one can turn to friends who are able to see the situation from the outside and offer advice and help in the spirit of the Rebbe.

The more the Chassid opens himself to the Tzaddik's teachings on the deepest levels of his personality and the more he fills himself with them, the more they become a source of support and guidance in all of life. No matter what the situation – even in the moments of deepest crisis – an appropriate phrase or idea, story or anecdote comes to mind, giving insight, advice, inspiration and encouragement.

8. Without a Rebbe 'in the flesh' isn't there a risk of misinterpreting Rebbe Nachman's teachings?

We are all only human, and this risk certainly exists in Breslov, as it does in any movement, even those with a continuous line of leaders 'in the flesh.' Later generations are always prone to reinterpret or misinterpret older ideas. Many passages in Rebbe Nachman's writings are very obscure, especially those dealing with abstruse mystical concepts. Some passages which are relatively clear on the surface seem to have a far deeper underlying meaning. Even the foremost Breslover scholars of Rebbe Nachman's writings today would be the first to admit the limitations of their own understanding. In other places, however, Rebbe Nachman is perfectly clear and direct. When it came to his most fundamental teachings applicable to all Jews – hisbodidus, the importance of having simple faith and trying to be happy, regular study of the Jewish codes, etc. – Rebbe Nachman expressed himself so precisely and clearly that the meaning is quite unmistakable. Indeed one of his guiding principles is 't'mimut u-p'shitut,' sincerity and simplicity. Adherence to this principle is the best guarantee against misunderstanding. Often the problem

lies not with Rebbe Nachman's teachings themselves, but with individuals who want to play the sophisticate and dabble with ideas they are not ready for while ignoring other perfectly clear directives. For those encountering Rebbe Nachman's difficult ideas for the first time, the best protection against misunderstanding would be to try to contact experienced Chassidim. The fact that there is an unbroken line of tradition going back to Rebbe Nachman's own followers is the best guarantee against misinterpretations of his teachings.

9. Do you have to be a Breslover Chassid to follow Rebbe Nachman's teachings?

No.

10. Are Rebbe Nachman's teachings applicable to women? Is there a role for women in Breslov?

Many of Rebbe Nachman's teachings apply equally to both sexes, especially his stress on the fundamental importance of faith and happiness and the inner feeling with which Torah observance should be accompanied. Prayer and hisbodidus are highly applicable to women, and indeed Rebbe Nachman set great store by the prayers of women. He told one of his closest followers, who had asked him to intercede when his son was dangerously ill, that it was his wife's fervent prayers for their child that not only saved him but earned him long life.

Some of Rebbe Nachman's lessons relate primarily to mitzvot applying exclusively to men, such as tzitzit and tefillin. Rebbe Nachman revealed Ten Psalms as the remedy for night-time emissions, and this obviously applies to men. However, he called this remedy the 'Tikkun HaKlali' – the General Remedy – and as such it can be said by women. Rebbe Nachman's stories contain his deepest Torah secrets. He stated that his reason

for relating them in the Yiddish vernacular was so that women, who at that time did not usually study Hebrew, would be able to understand them.

Besides the many women who study Rebbe Nachman's writings today, a number of Breslover women in Israel and the U.S. are active in lecturing and organizing study groups, promoting Rebbe Nachman's books, fundraising, public relations and other activities.

11. Do Breslover Chassidim only study Rebbe Nachman's writings or do they study other Chassidic and non-Chassidic Torah literature as well?

Rebbe Nachman encouraged people to aim to cover the whole range of Torah literature including TaNaCh, Talmud, Midrash, Halachah, Mussar, Kabbalah, Chassidut etc. Obviously in regard to inspirational literature Breslover Chassidim give pride of place to the writings of the Rebbe and his followers. Nevertheless, they study a wide variety of works as well, in accordance with the saying of the Rabbis that 'the wise man learns from all men' (Avot 4:1).

12. Does Breslov Chassidism encourage religious extremism?

Rebbe Nachman said: 'Dont be a fanatic. Serving God is not fanaticism. Those who run after worldly goods are the true fanatics. The world will consider you a lunatic if you abandon all worldliness in your quest for the Godly. This is said to be fanaticism. Yet even this is not necessary. You can serve God with restraint' (Rabbi Nachman's Wisdom p.159).

Rebbe Nachman cautioned not to be overly stringent in any observance. While he did endorse the practice of each individual choosing one observance to keep strictly with all

its fine points, he stressed that even with this observance one should not be abnormally strict to the point of foolishness. Regarding the other commandments, he said there was no need to observe them with any unnecessary stringency at all. 'It would be enough,' he said, 'if we were worthy of keeping all the Torah's commandments according to the law, without going beyond it... True devotion consists mainly of simplicity and sincerity. Pray much, study much Torah, do many good deeds. Do not worry yourself with unnecessary restrictions. Just follow the way of our forefathers. 'The Torah was not given to ministering angels' ' (Berakhot 25b)(Rabbi Nachman's Wisdom pp. 370f).

13. Some Breslover Chassidim travel to Rebbe Nachman's gravesite in Uman in the Ukraine. Why?

Rebbe Nachman made a promise 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 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, his sidecurls, I will pull him out of Hell!' (Rabbi Nachman's Wisdom #141).

The practice of visiting the graves of the Tzaddikim to pray is an ancient one, going back to biblical times (Rashi, Numbers 13:22) and was well known in Talmudic times (see Sotah 13a; Zohar II:70b). Even today, many visit the cemetery before the High Holidays, to pray for good health and a successful year. After the death of the Tzaddik, his soul is permanently absorbed in God's infinity. Since according to the Kabbalah the nefesh, the lowest part of the soul, remains at the gravesite, this is a fitting place for Jews to pray to become

attached to the infinity of God. While visiting the graves of Tzaddikim has its definite material benefits, the desire to be a good Jew, to serve God with all one's heart, is the focal point of the trip to Uman.

14. Is the Rebbe an intermediary between the Chassid and God?

The Second Commandment forbids us to accept any mediator between God and man. There is no sense in which the Tzaddik carries out some form of devotion which then absolves the individual Jew from fulfilling his own religious duties. On the contrary, Rebbe Nachman's teachings call on each Jew to accept responsibility for his life and take practical steps to develop his own personal relationship with God, especially through intense prayer and hisbodidus.

At the same time, Torah literature frequently portrays the Tzaddikim interceding with God on behalf of the Jewish People, as Moses did after the sin of the Golden Calf, when he prayed to God for forgiveness (Exodus 32:11-13). Similarly when the Jews were taken into exile in Babylon the soul of Rachel came forth from her grave entreating for mercy on their behalf (Rashi, Genesis 48:7). Rebbe Nachman thus emphasized the importance of turning to the Tzaddik to intercede in times of trouble. It is like when a private person is summoned to court. Recognizing his own inexperience in matters of law and court procedure, he turns to an experienced advocate to help put his case in the best possible light.

Belief in the power of the Tzaddik is quite different from relating to him as an intermediary. Having belief in the Tzaddik means recognizing one's own inadequacies and accepting that the Tzaddik is wiser and more saintly. Because of the Tzaddik's closeness to God, he is able to reveal the ways of serving God to others. The book, 'Crossing the Narrow Bridge,' (Chapter #17) explains this concept in detail.

15. Is Breslov a cult?

What is a cult? Today there are growing numbers of insidious fringe movements and organizations offering various routes to 'salvation' or other forms of 'religious' experience, including literal idolatry. The often unscrupulous individuals who are behind them may use a variety of brainwashing and other techniques to keep hold of unwary recruits against their own best interests.

The public is justly apprehensive about the activities of such cults, and the very word 'cult' has pejorative overtones. For this reason it is easy for opponents of established religious movements to exploit fears about cults and use the term to smear any group they happen to disagree with. Judaism, a major world religion, has existed for over three thousand years. Although Chassidism first appeared only two and a half centuries ago, it is profoundly rooted in traditional Judaism. Neither traditional Judaism nor Chassidism are cults. Nevertheless, a number of opponents of religious life have recently taken to using the term in this connection, especially in relation to the growing number of ba'alei teshuvah who are returning to Torah observance. Their enthusiastic embrace of the religious life is understandably disquieting to those who are opposed to it, but that is no justification for trying to smear mainstream Judaism.

Rebbe Nachman's intolerance of complacency has elicited opposition to the Breslov movement from its inception amongst those who felt threatened. One of the accusations laid against Breslov from time to time is that it is a 'cult.' In two major respects this typification is totally inaccurate. Firstly, as far as actual religious practice is concerned, the Breslover Chassidim are trying to be observant Jews, no more, no less. Some opponents of Breslov have suggested that the concept of hitkashrut, binding, explained in #7 above is somehow parallel to the leader-worship practiced in some cults. Among the

untruths spread about the movement are that the Chassidim dance around the Rebbe's chair (which is on display in the Breslov Yeshiva in Jerusalem) or that they stand in solemn silence while the Rebbe is called to the Shabbat Torah-reading.

It may be somewhat amusing to hear how far peoples imagination goes, but it is tragic that innocent bystanders exposed to similar untruths may as a result be deterred for life from a source of inspiration that could genuinely improve their lives. The second main characteristic of cults is their handling of recruits. Trying to pressure individuals to enter or stay in the movement goes against one of the basic canons of Breslov Chassidism, that it is up to the individual to decide for himself to attach himself to the Tzaddik. This may involve a major upheaval in life, especially for someone who was previously non-observant. His family and acquaintances may understandably feel disquieted seeing him abandon attitudes and activities they previously had in common in favor of an unfamiliar life-style. They may find it difficult to look on his chosen course without feelings of rancor and bitterness. That does not make Breslov a cult.

16. Is Breslov out to make recruits?

The Breslover Chassidim do go out to other Jews to talk about Rebbe Nachman's teachings. The Breslovers know they are onto something genuinely good and would like to share it! Rebbe Nachman emphasized the supreme value of dialogue. Not the kind of double monologue where each side of the argument just wants to score points and win, but rather, genuine cooperation in the search for truth.

Rebbe Nachman had the confidence born of perfect faith in God. He knew that all the questions on the Torah can be answered, and he therefore had no need to shy away from discussion. From his side, the channels of communication were wide open. This he showed at the end of his life, when he made his final

journey to the town of Uman. Living there at the time was a group of Jewish non-believers who saw themselves as being pioneers. Alone among the religious leaders of the time, Rebbe Nachman was able to forge contacts with them. He used to sit with them playing chess and talking. Their love and respect for him was so deep that some of them – who had gone as far as to take a formal oath not to mention the name of God for twenty years! – eventually returned to God. Those three were 'ahead' of their contemporaries in their abandonment of Judaism. Perhaps they were also ahead of many today in their teshuvah!

In a world obsessed with the pursuit of materialism there is a grave risk that the light of spirituality will be eclipsed. Spreading the teachings of the Tzaddik is therefore among the highest priorities of the Breslover Chassidim, whether through books and publications, live teaching, counseling, discussion or through taking advantage of the most simple everyday encounters in the street, at work, etc. to offer gentle reminders about the true purpose of life.

The object is not to pressure as many people as possible into becoming token members of the Breslov movement. The goal of Rebbe Nachman's teachings is not to make everyone identical. On the contrary, their purpose is to help each individual find his own way to God. A person has to know where he is holding and move forward steadily, without taking on more than he can handle. 'Try and grasp a lot and you won't,' says the Talmud, but 'take hold of a little and you've got it' (Rosh HaShanah 4b). But Rebbe Nachman did warn people not to deceive themselves and let themselves off too lightly. He said, 'My fire will burn until the coming of Mashiach.' The spiritual fervor and joy his teachings can arouse will actually help to bring the Mashiach. Speedily in our days. Amen.