

From Breslov To Uman: A Journal

written by breslov.org

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The events in the following account of Rebbe Nachman's move to Uman are true. All that we know about Rebbe Nachman's life is based solely on Reb Noson's writings, as none of the Rebbe's other followers recorded anything for posterity. We have taken the liberty of telling the story of this journey as it *might have been* told by the Rebbe's *gabbai* (personal attendant). The events of the Rebbe's move can be found in *Tzaddik* #107, *Yemey Moharanat*, pp. 32b-34b, and *Until the Mashiach*, pp. 184-187.

Friday night, May 4, 1810 (Rosh Chodesh Iyar 5570):

The Rebbe was sitting at the Shabbat table. "I swear by the holy Shabbat that right now I know absolutely nothing!" he said.

This was not the first time that I had heard him say this. In fact, I have been present on more than a few occasions when he would declare: "Now I know nothing, nothing at all!" This could happen a day after, or even an hour after, he had revealed the deepest Torah insights imaginable. His great wisdom was obvious for all to see, and yet afterwards he insisted that he was totally ignorant. No wonder that he himself once remarked: "My teachings are very unique, but my not-knowing is even more so!"

I was thinking about this when suddenly we heard cries from the nearby street, where a great fire was burning out of control. "*Shoin! Shoin!* (Already! Already!)," the Rebbe exclaimed. Throughout the week of Pesach there were many fires in Breslov, and he had spoken about this at length. His reaction now indicated his readiness for what was about to happen.

The fire drew nearer and nearer. There was a great commotion inside the house. Grabbing what we could, we ran for our lives, and with the help of the Almighty, everyone managed to escape. But as it was Shabbat, no attempt was made to extinguish the fire, so that in the end the Rebbe's house and his *bet hamidrash* were destroyed.

With the fire still burning, we waded through the nearby river and sat on the hill with the *sifrei Torah*. I looked over to where the Rebbe was sitting and surveying the burning town. I could see a mixture of joy and excitement in his face. Shortly before dawn, Reb Noson joined us. He had spent the night helping remove things from the Rebbe's house, and now appeared exhausted, though relieved.

Sunday, May 6, 1810 (2 Iyar 5570):

Today a man arrived with a message for the Rebbe from the *maskilim* (followers of the Enlightenment movement) of Uman. When the Rebbe heard the message his face turned red, but I'm getting ahead of myself here.

About a month ago, several men from the village of Teplik who were visiting in Breslov asked the Rebbe if he was ready to move to Uman. These men traveled often to Uman and were convinced that the Rebbe would be very well-received there. Actually, I recall their having raised this topic a number of times throughout the winter, but each time the Rebbe put them off. More recently he himself had brought this up, saying that he wanted to live in the house of Nachman Nathan Rappaport, a

well-known *maskil* who had passed away the previous summer. Then after Pesach, the Rebbe sent someone to arrange lodgings for him in Uman, and also apparently to ensure that his residence there would be welcomed by the different factions that governed the city.

Uman had become a stronghold of the *Haskalah* (Enlightenment movement) under Chaikel Hurwitz and Hirsh Ber Hurwitz. Chaikel was personally responsible for blocking the appointment of no less a personage than Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Berdichov as the city's chief rabbi. Today a man arrived from Uman with a reply to the Rebbe's inquiry of the previous week. In his hands I could see the book *Yain Levanon* by the renowned *maskil*, Naftali Hertz Wiesel. Chaikel and Hirsh Ber had sent it for the Rebbe, as the agreed-upon sign that they would welcome him to Uman. When the Rebbe saw the book, his face flushed a deep red. None of us realized then what the Rebbe understood well: that he was being called by Heaven to die.

Tuesday morning, May 8, 1810 (4 Iyar 5570):

The coach hired two days earlier to take the Rebbe to Uman would be arriving soon. I recall thinking that the Rebbe had been waiting so long for this day, and now it had finally come. As I poured hot water into a cup, it dawned on me that this would be the last coffee I would serve the Rebbe in Breslov. The eight years that Breslov had been his home had certainly passed quickly. Considering all that had taken place the previous Shabbat, it seemed likely that he would never be returning. And yet, a couple of hours later, as we were getting ready to leave Breslov, the Rebbe put his hand on the mezuzah and said that if his followers prayed together with sincerity, they could bring him back.

Accompanying the Rebbe in the coach were Reb Noson, myself, and the man who had brought the message from Uman's *maskilim*.

Twenty miles out of Breslov we met Rabbi Mordechai of Teplik, who told the Rebbe how anxiously Uman's inhabitants were awaiting his arrival. The Rebbe replied, "Isn't everything ours? As our Sages teach: A person must say, 'The world was created for me!'" He noted the irony that Rebbe Nachman and Reb Noson were traveling to the house of Nachman Nathan (Noson) and that he would be reciting Kiddush there, in a place where antipathy for religion was so great that care was taken never to mention the name of God.

After a brief stop in Ladizin, where many people came out to greet the Rebbe and accompany us to the town's outskirts, we traveled on. The atmosphere inside the coach was heavy with anticipation. The Rebbe spoke of many things, most of which I cannot recall—although I am confident that Reb Noson can. I do remember the Rebbe discussing Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai's remark that the Torah would never be forgotten by the Jews. He explained that the source of Rabbi Shimon's surety was his own mystical revelations, namely the *Zohar*, on account of which the Jewish people would always achieve *tikkun* (rectification) even in the darkest exile. After elaborating on this, the Rebbe cryptically concluded, "But now there is a '*Nachal novei'a mekor chokhmah* – A flowing brook, a wellspring of wisdom'" (Proverbs 18:4).

I was dumbstruck and began shaking. I had no idea what the Rebbe meant by this. But from the intensity of his expression, and the sheer awe in Reb Noson's face, I could sense that he had just entrusted us with one of the most extraordinary insights in all of God's wondrous creation.

Reb Noson later explained to me that the Rebbe's words revealed the main reason he was moving to Uman, and in fact, also his ultimate mission in the world. The initial letters of the phrase "*Ir Vekadish Min Shemaya Nachit* – A holy angel came down from Heaven" (Daniel 4:10) spell *SHIMON*, a reference to Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai. The initial letters of the phrase "*Nachal Novei'a Mekor Chokhmah*" spell *NaChMaN*. The Rebbe was

teaching that like Rabbi Shimon and the *Zohar*, he, Rebbe Nachman, and his revealed teachings in the *Likutey Moharan* would ensure the Jewish people's spiritual survival and *tikkun*. A tidal wave of atheism and secularization was engulfing the world. The Rebbe was telling us, continued Reb Noson, that his move to Uman was the next step in his battle against the *Haskalah* movement which had made inroads in our region of Eastern Europe, threatening to cause rampant assimilation and a massive flight from Torah. It was the next step, too, in his efforts to instill faith and a desire for *teshuvah* even in those who were most distant from God. Just as there was an "*Ir ve-kadish min shemaya nachit*," there is now a "*Nachal novei'a mekor chokhmah*," a wellspring of wisdom and guidance, and the brook from which the Jewish people's ultimate redemption will flow.

As night approached, rain began to fall. We were nearing Teplik, where the Rebbe had a following. I suggested to the Rebbe that we might stop there. But the Rebbe wanted to keep going, and so we continued our journey until we came to a small village where we stayed the night. Many of the Rebbe's followers from Teplik came there to greet him.

Wednesday, May 9, 1810 (5 Iyar 5570):

After *davening*, we set out on the final leg of our journey. As we approached Uman, the Rebbe spoke about the death and concealment of the tzaddik. He told a story about how the Baal Shem Tov had once come to a city where there were souls that had been waiting for their rectification for over 300 years. "I do not recall all the details of the story," the Rebbe said—but he did explain that the only way these souls could receive their *tikkun* was if the tzaddik (in this case, the Baal Shem Tov) were to die.

In hindsight, the Rebbe's mention of that story makes sense to

me. He later told us that he had chosen Uman as the place where he would die and be buried because of the many souls there awaiting rectification, particularly the souls of the martyrs killed in the Haidemack massacre forty-two years earlier. Reb Noson told me that on the day before the Rebbe died, he said, "For a long time now they've had their eye on me, to get me here. There are not just thousands of souls here, but myriads upon myriads...souls that did not know me at all are awaiting the *tikkun* I can give them." No wonder he was so excited when the messenger of the *maskilim* brought him the news that he was expected in Uman.

Later that same day we arrived in Uman. As we alighted from the coach I could not help but think about the past few days. In my mind I ran through the amazing events of Shabbat, and then replayed each part of our momentous journey. There was the sense that something special had ended, but that something far greater, and more timeless, was about to begin.