

# How was Uman?

written by Davy Dombrowsky

September 23, 2020



That's always the question I get when I come back. This year especially, since so few merited to get there, even the regular Uman-goers want to know how it was.

Honestly, there's so much to say about it, on so many levels. Getting there was not an easy task. It took a lot of prayer, a lot of perseverance and a lot of guts. Once I arrived, I had to come to terms with the fact that I would be there for 2 weeks, a much longer stay than I'm accustomed to. I usually arrive and leave within a day of the holiday, but arriving 10 days before *yom tov* to a particularly empty Uman posed some new challenges. Everyone who arrived this year had a story how they got there. It seemed that nothing was happenstance and every attendee was hand-picked by the Rebbe. People with better strategies or more money spent had their hopes dashed, but somehow we got there. We all knew that much holier and

devoted chassidim of the Rebbe didn't make it, yet we did, so we wondered why we got his invitation. There was constant news of people whose attempts to penetrate the borders were thwarted, many of them getting punished in the process. Always looming was the overwhelming – and somewhat controversial – pleas of the chassidim stationed on the border of Belarus and Ukraine. I spent time trying to help numerous others get in, some made it and some didn't. The Rebbe talked about the *avodah* of traveling to the Tzaddik. He said that the actual travel was beneficial and part of the *tikkun*. It's said over that when his student Reb Yudel moved closer to him, the Rebbe lamented that Reb Yudel wouldn't be traveling to him anymore. Reb Yudel retorted that at least he wouldn't have to waste time hiring a coach and packing his bags. The Rebbe replied that those precious steps are exactly what he was lamenting. In general, I don't follow current events but there was something different here. Rebbe Nachman used to ask his followers (even at the shabbos table) what was happening in the world. Based on their replies, he would originate the most awesome Torah lessons. Likutei Moharan isn't a cute sefer with lessons on the week's Torah Portion. As Reb Nosson realized early on, the Rebbe's every word was divinely inspired for the moment and necessary to be recorded for posterity as well. As an example, Rebbe Nachman actually once slipped in the mud during *tashlich* on Rosh Hashanah. After he got back to his lodgings and changed his clothes, he originated the most lofty teaching about falling in the mud etc. I'm not sure if someone who's new to Breslov can understand this, but it felt as if all the "hock" about getting to Uman was very much part of this year's Uman experience. As my dear friend, Rabbi Leibish Hundert commented, "the entire world is the Rebbe's playground", meaning that each step in the process of traveling to the tzaddik is all part of the *tikkun* the traveler needs, including the scenery, the doubts, the desires and the fear. Every feeling and movement is a necessary part of it.

As the Jewish lobbyists attempted to negotiate with the Ukrainian government to open the borders for the pilgrimage, the [tziyun](#) where Rebbe Nachman is buried became a showcase of strict COVID-19 precautions. There were tens of Ukrainian guards stationed there taking temperature, encouraging mask wearing, and moving the visitors through a maze of barriers to support social distancing. At first, this unusual setup made the tziyun experience awkward and somewhat sterile. It took me a few days to overcome the unpleasantness of the barriers and realize that the barriers were just illusionary and if I close my eyes to them, I can access through faith that the light and blessing of the world is emanating from that place just as strongly as ever.

In the days before Rosh Hashana hundreds of Ukrainian police officers were stationed in the city. They were asking to see people's documents and there were rumors that they were arresting people who came after August 28th. This fear of leaving our lodgings just added to all the *bilbulim*, the confusion.

In the end, only about 2,000 chassidim reached Uman this year for Rosh Hashana, in contrast to last year's 60,000 pilgrims. Once it became clear that the borders would remain closed, the barriers in the tziyun were removed and the intimacy was greater than ever. In a typical year, it's quite hard to actually touch the gravestone, whereas this year we merited to have near seclusion with the Rebbe. The realization for me that I merited to be by the Rebbe's Rosh Hashanah was so strong that I couldn't stop thinking how lucky I am. I kept on reminding myself and others of Rebbe Nachman's wonderful claims. He claimed that his Rosh HaShanah is the greatest thing there is. Period. He added, "If someone merits to be by me for Rosh HaShanah, it is fitting for him to be very, very happy" (*Chayei Moharan* #403). The Rebbe also said, "My Rosh HaShanah is a *chiddush gadol*, an entirely new thing. HaShem knows that I didn't inherit it from my ancestors. HaShem gave

me a gift to [really] know what Rosh HaShanah is... **The entire world is dependent on my Rosh HaShanah!**" (ibid. #405). He said that on Rosh HaShanah, he could make *tikkunim* for someone in a way that wouldn't be possible for that person at any other time of year. He also said, "What can I tell you? There is nothing greater [than my Rosh HaShanah]" (ibid. #406).

Once Rosh Hashanah arrived I felt transformed. Everything prior fell to the wayside. I really felt like a new creation. I'm sure everyone received the gifts they each needed but, for me personally, I felt that the entire experience was brimming with hope. I felt the light of the Rebbe's scream "Gevald, there's never a reason to give up hope" (Tinyana 78) was enveloping everything. Every bite of food, every step, every conversation, every dip in the mikvah, every smile, every dance, every prayer, every cry, every blow of the shofar was saturated with that feeling of hope. Reb Nosson writes over there that the Rebbe drew out those words (Never give up), saying them with such awesome power and depth to hint to everyone in all generations that there never could be a reason to give up. I felt that after everything it took to get there, and all the broken hearted people who couldn't get in, and all the craziness and loss from this past year due to this virus, I was (and still am) loaded with hope for the new year, and encouraged by this loving tzaddik that nothing is ever too hard and no situation is impossible. Hashem is always right there with us, even in the darkest moments. There is always hope. Always.

Wishing you all a Gmar Chatima Tova!

published on [TikkunHaklali.net](http://TikkunHaklali.net).