

# My Trip to Uman 2003

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My trip was motivated by a number of factors. The romance of travel, the exotic nature of Sofia park and her possible relationship with Reb Nachman and my learning of his work Lekutei Moharan since pesach this year when Yehuda Leib my friend had placed "samech daled" the 64th maamar of the Rebbe under my face early in spring. This Torah seemed to resolve for me the whole issue of the Tzimtzum what I call the incarnation theory of the divine and the controversy between the Alter Rebbe of Lubavitch and Reb Chayim of Volozyn. Suddenly right before my eyes was a Torah that demanded we hold the paradox of divine immanence and transcendence, that

our lives are in fact a constant struggle between the two, and that the avodah, the worship was to hold all paradox in tension. My foray into the world of chassidut, prompted by reading "lemaan achai veraiyai" a likut of Reb Shlomo Carlebach's teachings printed a year after his death, found me attracted to Izbitz-Radzyn and the world of Polish Chassidut of Kotzk-Lublin. The demand there was for the notion of birur, that self-analysis required to know one's place in time and psycho-spiritual state and refine the spirit. However I was constantly frustrated by the dissonance between the brilliance of the Rebbe's Torah, the insight and analysis of the human soul, whether The Izbiter, the Radzyner, the Beis Yaakov, or of late, Reb Zadok; and the absence of a manual as to get there, how to do this avodah.

Whereas I had been studying Chabad literature (with my friend Yitzchak Chakiris) on a weekly basis and found it to be intellectually brilliant but very heady, in Polish chassidut I found the heart of chassidut with its demand on a broken heart as a prerequisite for avodah. But after that it left me a little in the cold, where were the steps to take, the Rebbe did not expound. The trickle-down theory of spirituality where fixing the head would eventually inflame the heart, was turned around in "Chagat" chassidut and the Kotzker's demand to fix the heart first was paramount. Yet the yesod and its addictions remained to be addressed. I remember when I first came to Brooklyn to do my "shomer shabbos" internship at Maimonides Hospital in 1974 I met the group around Reb Gedaliah Fleer who expounded Breslov chassidut and I spent many a Shabbat at his home, but not very connected to the chassidut itself. It was more a social group for me, although I loved his Torah. That had been my last contact with Breslov until this Yehuda Leib shoved Lekutei Moharan in my face! Suddenly aware of the Rebbe's demand for fixing the yesod and Tikkun Habris, he was telling me "do not fool yourself regarding your spirituality!!! do not think you can fix the brain (Chabad) or even the heart (chagat) until you have fixed the yesod! ("Nahi" Chassidut I call it...netzach, hod and yesod). So I began

to learn his Torah and that his chassidut was unlike all others. It was NOT a club, there was NO specific dress, times to meet, nusach of t'fillah, rather he made only three demands: 1. learn daily, shulchan aruch ugh! behavioral Judaism I had run from all those years! "come back" he demanded! you need the 4 ells of halacha! 2. Hitbodedut: meditation and direct onversation with God: another difficult avodas for me: to actually talk to God as a father, as if He really existed!!!! crickey! 3. Come to visit the Rebbe once a year on Rosh Hashana. Well since learning this stuff weird things were happening to me...I came back to the daf yomi! after so many years of resentment (I do not distinguish whether the resentment was directed to in-laws or the daf itself!) here I was up at 5:00 a.m. trotting off to shul to "do the daf" (actually the "killer-daf" kodshim to be precise! what a place to join the cycle!) and Hitbodedut was beginning as well. Lekutyeyi Halachot was amazing since it attempts to resolve the divide between Halacha and the Rebbe's Torah (nistar).

Then a group called "Simply Sfat" showed up in Chicago and their music was so energized and different from the usual shlock rock we hear these days. They came from Sfat and invited me there on my next trip to Israel. So on my trip this summer I drag my parents up to the Holy city at dawn to pray with the Breslovers on Rosh Chodesh Elul in the Trisk shul in Sfat. We then have an audience with Reb Koenig the son of Reb Gedaliah Koenig who had written the sefer "Chayei nefesh" a treatise that claimed there was no difference between the spirituality of Reb Chayim Volozyn and Chassidut. All he had to tell me beside giving a bracha and inscribing his father's book for me, was "are you going to Uman". the first time I had been challenged with this question which I answered instinctively "yes". I had not planned it, I had not discussed it with my family but it seemed as if whatever questions I had about my life, the questions I could not discuss in the presence of my parents and his own ill health that morning, were answered in those few moments, "go to Uman" was his

implied demand.

So I make my plans and tell my folks and get on the plane and land in Munich erev Rosh hashana. I am incensed that there is 10 hour layover. What kind of planning and travel agency is this! I call the agency but get little response. Here I am in Munich. stuck. I hire a car and start to drive. I see Dachau on the map and rather than go downtown I drive on the autobahn for about 20 minutes and arrive in this neat town with fotoshops and restaurants, cafe houses and beer halls. Then suddenly a looming presence, barbed wire heralding the entrance to another world, a sinister reminder, a presence in this normality, of another darker reality. I walked through the entrance to the Dachau concentration camp, the way Uncle Emil must have done as a frightened young man in 1938, forever wounded by his experience here. Peering through his window on Cornwall Avenue in Finchley some 50 years later I could never understand his paranoia. Dad even took him to the local police station once to convince him that the police were not looking for him, that he had nothing to fear, to no avail.

I went straight to the archive hall and looked up his name on the computer records. Fisher or Fischer, Emil, born around 1910, deported from Vienna to Dachau around 1938. 7 names appeared. None of them fit his description. I leave frustrated. walk to the memorials, a huge cross stands down the central road, the Catholic monument to a suffering Jesus. To its left the Protestant monument and to the right the Jewish memorial. Jesus, here in Dachau. a Carmelite nunnery behind it, I wander in and cannot bear the incense and nuns floating around it. I go to the Jewish memorial a dark quartz stone quarried into the ground a fitting darkness designed by an Israeli sculptor. I put on tallis and t'fillin there davening for memory and Jewish history and the erasure of Jewish identity even here in their darkest place and hour. 60 years later all we have is the erasure of memory. I wander to the video presentation hall where a BBC documentary barely

mentions Jews. "Man's inhumanity to man; Jews and other victims, homosexuals gypsies Communists Poles and priests. Not to belittle their heroism and victim hood, I do not play the victim stakes game. But the majority of victims were Jews and the documentary seemed to downplay the ethnic character of the victim rather playing its own hermeneutic of humanity. In that Jews once again lose identity and the victim is robbed after the grave, of his and her identity. I leave the hall to wander around the darkest area, a beautifully wooded grove that could have been a Buddhist meditation wood but was rather the site of the worst crimes. A shooting gallery where humans were shot along with a ravine of blood. Then the gas chamber and the crematorium. So clean and sanitary now, museum like. I stood in the gas chamber remembering the stories of the clutching nails on the walls with blood staining the white pasted walls from the nails attempting to climb above other humans to stay with the oxygen that was slowly rising as the gas came up. Beyond belief, I just could not absorb the immensity of this small chamber and the numbers that passed through here in their last breathing moments of life. Too much to even comprehend. I leave Dachau glad I came because Providence would have me come here , before Rosh hashana (a usual custom to visit the cemetery on this day) and also prior to going to Uman. I travel downtown and go to the Jewish community center where I meet the Chief

Rabbi and we exchange blessings for the New Year and talk of YU where he graduated and pleasantries. I pass quickly the famous town center with its glockenspiels where Hitler held his early rallies. It is a beautiful day and the town is bustling. On to Kiev where I disembark into another dark world of ex-communism. The Breslovers arriving fill the hall and the taxi-drivers argue like in Ben Gurion but here once is wary of the mafia groups and the absence of alternatives. We get stopped twice along the way to bribe local Police who seem to know that 17000 visas have been issued and lots of cash is coming their way. Arriving in Uman in the dark night with little outside lighting on the streets I do not know where to

find Rabbi Cramer who was to have found me accommodations. One of the men of the Sfat group find me (Eliyahu the guitarist) and (like in Sfat) goes out of his way to show me to my quarters. I try to sleep that night but others snore in the room. They get up during the night for s'lichot etc. Next day I try to get to the Tzion (the grave) but it is too crowded. Everywhere hundreds of Israelis are pouring through the town, bringing suitcases and hustling and bustling like a small town in Northern Israel.

That night all quietens down as we go to shul for the services. I eat with the mostly American-Israeli group in a tent in the courtyard of Chaim Kramer's house. He asks me to tell them what brought me to Breslov. I give over the Torah of Reb Akiva Eiger and the lapsed Kohen Gadol and the Melech and their respective sacrifices (Talmud Zevachim). Next day I am suffering from severe constipation, I had not slept since leaving Chicago wed and Thursday night and was quite disoriented from all the hustle and bustle. I simply could not squeeze my way back to shul. I was upset that my towel had mysteriously gotten lost when I was in the mikveh and I had to basically dry off in my clothes.

I began to walk around the Jewish quarter wandering into town. I saw Sofia park and so much wanted to enter but there was an entrance fee so I could not fulfill one of my goals in going to Uman, to experience that place. I met a David Seidenberg whose thesis I had already read before meeting him, on eco-theology! we talked and he was accepting it was a healing walk together. We Breslovers jumping into the local reservoir but I was worried by stories that the Nazis had, in 1941, taken all the Jews out of Uman and had them drowned while the local Ukrainians looked on and prevented them from surfacing. I was worried that this had been the place. Later an old Ukrainian told me that they were taken further up stream about ten minutes outside of town, and that there is a memorial there marking the site. I was unable to do Tashlich in a ravine

where Jews might have died. Later I meet a bunch of Satmar Chassidim. What are they doing here!! Men like Nota Weiss an amazing Yid with a heart the size of Europe and Asher Wieder a Yid with a wry sense of humor. It seems that the Satmarer Rebbe held Reb Nachman in high esteem and they do learn Lekutei Moharan. These guys had their own shteibl and I davened there at night. They invited me for a meal. I joined them in the garden eating and singing. They saved my soul. Next day i rose at 3 am and made it to the Tzion. By now I was at my lowest point. Wandering aimlessly and not feeling much in my hunger, constipation and sleeplessness. Having met Rabbi Tauber, a Breslover who is the dayan in L.A., who suffered greatly in his own personal life, who told me to go to the grave and do a hisbodedut. I went at 3 am and poured out my heart, not actually praying to the Rebbe but more showing up and speaking to him as if he were alive and I was in a yechidus. "I have come to you and want to daven for my family my friends, my patients and my enemies" I said the tikkun and went back to bed. Next morning I actually went to shul finally! Along with 7000 men I davened musaf. It was truly amazing. when quiet one could hear a pin drop like by the shofar. the baal musaf had a sweetness. the shofar was so shrill it pierced my heart. they brought in a sephardi to do a "truah gedola" which sounded like a baby crying. But most of all i was introduced into the practice of clapping "as if" we were at a coronation! It was cathartic for me. Actually clapping and applauding the KING of KINGS! That afternoon I had a taste of fresh cooked fish from the Satmar group and davened mincha with them. I also met some Breslovers from Monsey including the songwriter or archivist for Reb Shlomo who lives in Modiin. I later bought some CD's from him. I left that night with Rabbi Tauber and we spoke the whole way to Kiev and on the plane to Munich where we parted company.

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As I try to make sense of this trip, three things come to mind. 1. The suffering physically, with exhaustion, some fear,

frustration, food issues and constipation are all part of the pilgrim's suffering which is expected in other traditions. Like crawling on one's knees around the mountain of Lasha before entering the shrine. I had certainly felt that there "menious" as the Rebbe had predicted for all those wishing to come.<sup>2</sup> The glorious davening, the shofar and the clapping will stay with me and inspire throughout the year ahead. It was truly divine when men come together to worship. Going to the Tzion was like none other, for the Rebbe had made a commitment to those who would come and I had arrived, joining the band of the few who had made it. Maybe I too maybe called Al Haj before MY name now!

3. The trip was for me to be entitled "From Dachau to Uman: the erasure and celebration of Jewish memory" since the moment Yom Tov was out there was an explosion of dancing on the streets of Uman. And, after all, the Rebbe had chosen it precisely because of the Jewish martyrs there. So here we were celebrating Jewish memory 200 years after his death and after their martyrdom, otherwise this would have been confined to the dustbin of Jewish history and a possible PhD thesis. The Rebbe somehow foresaw the evil to befall Europe and in his own way demands his Chassidim come on the Holy Days to this site where he lies buried along with those Jewish martyrs from the Gonta massacre in a celebration of Jewish memory, maybe he even knew of the Nazis who would repeat the same dance of death in Uman. Maybe he saw that all of Europe would one day drip with Jewish blood and that the Yidden of Eretz Yisrael, Yemenites, sefardim, drug addicts, university professors would all one day leave the Holy Land to come to this sacred spot equal in holiness to the kedusha of Eretz Yisrael, to dance and fix the death and blood and evil and the silence of Dachau.

So I returned home and completed the chodesh and the yomim tovim a journey which began with Rosh Chodesh Elul in Sfat and ended Hoshana rabba. Who knows the future. I feel I have been



on a roller coaster ride. May Hashem grant refuah to all my patients and a healing to my family and self.