

# The Rebbe's Promise

written by Yossi Katz

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Rebbe Nachman chose to spend the last six months of his life in Uman, a small city in the Ukraine, and to be buried in the cemetery there.

Decades earlier, Uman had been the site of several massacres of Jews by the Haidemaks, a band of peasant Cossacks who overran cities, towns and villages across the entire region in their revolt against the Polish nobility. The first massacre in Uman took place in 1749, when many hundreds of Jews were murdered and part of the city was burned. In 1768 the peasants staged yet another revolt. Uman is strategically situated in the center of the Ukraine, about halfway between Kiev to the north and Odessa to the south, and is also a midpoint between east and west. In the 18th century it was a fortified and walled city and could have withstood battles for a long time. Between 25,000 to 30,000 Jews from the surrounding areas fled to Uman in advance of the Haidemak army and secured themselves behind the city walls. But when the Haidemaks arrived, the governor of Uman betrayed the Jews and threw open the gates, resulting in a three-day massacre of well over 20,000 Jews.

Ivan Gunta, the leader of the Haidemaks, then built a canopy outside the synagogue where some 3,000 Jews had found refuge. He said that anyone who left the synagogue and converted to the Russian Orthodox Church would be spared. No Jew left the

synagogue and Guntá murdered them all. Only a handful of the remaining Jews survived.

In 1802 Rebbe Nachman passed through Uman on his way to the town of Breslov. Seeing the cemetery and recognizing the sanctity of the Jewish martyrs buried there, Rebbe Nachman remarked, "It would be good to be buried here." In 1810 he chose to return to Uman to be buried among the martyrs.

Reb Noson, who shepherded the expansion of the Breslov movement after the Rebbe's passing, realized that Uman, rather than Breslov, should be the focal point of the Chassidut because the Rebbe was buried there. He invested much time and effort to encourage Chassidim to join the annual Rosh HaShanah pilgrimage to the Rebbe's grave.

Besides the annual Rosh HaShanah pilgrimage to Rebbe Nachman's grave, Uman became a magnet for visitors at any time of year. Its popularity is based on a unique promise that the Rebbe made about half a year before he passed away. At that time Rebbe Nachman revealed the *Tikkun HaKlali* (General Remedy), the Ten Chapters of Psalms one should recite in order to rectify sexual sins. The Rebbe then testified in the presence of two witnesses: "Whoever comes to my grave, recites the Ten Chapters of Psalms, and gives something to charity, I will extend myself the length and breadth of Creation for him; by his *peyot* (sidelocks), I will pull him out of Gehinnom!"

No one before or since ever made such a promise. As a result, thousands of people made the effort to travel to Rebbe Nachman's grave in Uman. During the Communist era from 1917 to 1989, travel to Uman was restricted and anyone who was caught there risked being deported to Siberia—or worse. But come they did, and they kept coming—from Israel, England and America where new Breslover communities were founded after the Holocaust. More and more people pounded on the gates until finally the Iron Curtain crumbled and the way was opened for all.

Today over 30,000 people travel to the annual Rosh HaShanah *kibutz* in Uman. You can find a minyan for prayers there every Shabbat. It's never been easier to travel to Uman and reap the benefits of praying by the Rebbe's grave.