

There's No "Body" In Uman

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I grew up in a Conservative Jewish home in New Jersey. My family celebrated the Jewish holidays and went to synagogue on Shabbat. But they did not keep Shabbat or a kosher kitchen. Looking back, however, I can see little hints about the future. For example, all the other boys put on te?lin perhaps once or twice after their bar mitzvah. Although I was completely secular, after my bar mitzvah, I would pray in my room and put on te?lin every morning.

After graduating high school, I studied to be a blacksmith. In 1992, I moved to Florida because that's where the horses are. As far as Torah observance, I was beyond secular; leave that to your imagination.

My father passed away in June 1995. When that happened, something came over me and I decided to recite Kaddish for

him.

A lot of *ba'alei teshuvah* (returnees to Observance) come to Torah this way. I thought that I'd go to shul once a week on Shabbat to say Kaddish and that would be it. But I wasn't happy with any of the shuls I went to. Finally, I went to a more traditional shul. There they told me that I was doing it all wrong: I had to pray with a minyan three times a day. That's how I got started.

I was searching for more. I joined classes and started to learn. One day, in a secular bookstore, looking in the Judaica section for something meaningful, I stumbled across *The Empty Chair*.

It's such a thin book—only a quarter of an inch thick—yet there, in that huge store, I discovered the only Breslov book on the shelves. I stood in the aisle and started reading. I realized that I must have this book!

I read that book over and over again. I noticed that in the back of the book there was information about the Breslov Research Institute. The next thing I knew, I was phoning the American office in Monsey to order more books.

During the next year and a half, I continued ordering books from the Breslov Research Institute in Monsey. Usually, whenever I called the office, I just left a message on their machine. One time, though, a person rather than a machine picked up the call. I was interested in purchasing a certain book and asked that person to tell me about it. He described the book for me and then he asked, "So who am I speaking with?"

When I told him my name, he said, "Oh, you've bought a lot of our books recently."

I asked whom I was speaking to. It was Chaim Kramer. We talked for a while. I told him that from everything I read, I had a

strong desire to travel to Uman, but I had no idea how to get there.

Chaim responded that if I really wanted to go, then "You're going to the Rebbe" and he'd figure out the logistics together with me. He gave me his home and office numbers in Jerusalem, and his cell phone number for when he's in the United States. He said to me, "Whenever you need to speak with someone, call me."

The first time I travelled to Uman, it was definitely not ba'al teshuvah time. It was all chassidim; the plane out of New York was totally "black hat." Although that wasn't me, I felt one with it.

In the Frankfurt Airport (maybe it was Kiev), I noticed a chassid staring at me. It was pretty obvious that I was new Howard Kessler to Breslov. He asked me, "What brings you to the Rebbe?" I answered, "The Rebbe speaks to me." He hugged me. With that hug, I realized that it is not the clothes that make a Breslover chassid.

In Kiev, the taxi dispatcher placed me and a few friends whom I had convinced to join me into a waiting taxi. But the driver had never been to Uman before and was unable to find the street where our accommodations were located. Finally, the driver said, "Kaputsky." I said to the others in the car, "I think he's throwing us out." They thought I was nuts. But I was right.

The driver threw all our luggage—everything—into the street. The guys I traveled with never returned to Uman. That was their first and last trip. I noticed a chassid walking somewhere. I was looking for the tziyun, and I assumed he would know how to get there. So I just left all my luggage and ran after him. "Tell me the way to the Rebbe," I said.

He pointed out the way and I ran straight there. I had left my luggage on the street, but I didn't care. It was still a few

days before Rosh HaShanah, so there were only a handful of people in Uman.

After praying at the tziyun, I walked back to where I had left my luggage. When I was about half a block from the tziyun, I noticed someone walking toward me. The guy looked at me and asked, "Howard Kessler?" I said, "Chaim Kramer?" This was the first time that we actually met. The other guys had brought our luggage to the apartment where Chaim was waiting for us, and they had told him that I had gone to the tziyun. When I apologized for going to the Rebbe instead of to the apartment, he said, "I would expect no less from you."

Whenever I ask people who went to Uman what it was like there, they reply that it's impossible to describe it. But after I went, I realized they were telling the truth. Uman is beyond description. I feel that the Rebbe chose to be buried in Uman because if, let's say, he was buried in Israel, we would travel to Israel, stay at a fancy hotel, have hot showers and warm food, go to pray by the Rebbe, and then return home. That's it. But in Uman, it's as if the body is gone; there is no body. Washing, eating, sleeping—they all cease to exist. There is no physicality. There is only one thing, praying with the Rebbe, and your soul is completely with the Rebbe.

Today, every one of my experiences is filtered through the eyes of Breslov and is taken in through the teachings of the Rebbe. I learn Chassidut every single day.

Rebbe Nachman said that even the least of his followers will have story after story about what it took for them to come to him.

Each trip to Uman is such a great experience that some people are actually frightened by it. Each time they go, they wonder how the trip can be equal to the previous trip. Every year at the end of Yom Tov, I see that it was even more incredible than previous years. It's amazing. I don't understand it.