

What Women Seek in Uman

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We've all heard about the tens of thousands of men who fly to Uman for Rosh HaShanah; many of us know someone who goes every year. What's less well known is that each year an estimated 10,000 to 15,000 women make the same journey. They don't go for Rosh HaShanah; Breslov *rabbanim* are outspoken about women not traveling to Uman for Rosh HaShanah due to *tzniyus* concerns. But throughout the year they come. Like their male counterparts, these women come from all over the world, and from every color and stripe of the Jewish world. What draws them? What do they find when they get there? And why has Tu B'Av become known in recent years as the "Rosh HaShanah for women" in Uman, with well over 1,000 women making the pilgrimage? Some women travel to Uman because they are in need of a particular *yeshuah* (salvation) and have heard it's the place to go. For others the trip is an extension of their spiritual life and the study of Rebbe Nachman's life and works. Some women are encouraged to go by husbands who find yearly inspiration from spending Rosh HaShanah there. And for yet others the reasons are unclear, sometimes even to themselves. During one of my visits to Uman, a woman in tight jeans and long, painted nails turned to me and asked, "Do you know why I'm here?" "No," I answered, expecting her to tell me. "Neither do I. A few months ago, I felt like I needed to start saying Tehillim regularly. Then I felt like I needed to

come here. I thought maybe you could explain it to me." I couldn't, but in time she'll probably discover the answer for herself.

First Encounter

I grew up in a non-Orthodox family, but my father was raised in a chassidic home. He didn't pass on much from his childhood to me, except stories of the Baal Shem Tov. While my peers focused on superheroes, I dreamed about the Baal Shem Tov. Those images were part of the process that brought me to Torah as a young adult. One Friday afternoon in 1998, just hours before Shabbos, a friend asked if, early the following week, I would go with her and a few other friends to Uman and Mezibuzh. With no idea where the money would come from, my "yes" was instantaneous. Was this my opportunity to jump on the Baal Shem Tov's wagon and travel off into the night? While my dreams remained lofty, the trip was a rather bumpy ride. We arrived in Uman late at night, exhausted, and were taken to the home of some locals in a huge apartment building that smelled of gasoline, dust, and foreign foods. I just wanted to sleep, but my friends were going to the *kever*, and I wasn't going to stay alone. I walked to the *kever*, part of me expecting a life-altering experience, and part of me wondering how long it would take before my friends would be ready to return to the apartment. I stumbled my way through some prayers until the first woman headed back. We spent four days in Uman, and I'd never before had so much time with nothing to do but daven. Shacharis, Tehillim, personal prayer, Tehillim, Minchah, *Shir HaShirim*, Maariv. At the time, my father was seriously ill, and my brother was drifting further and further from Yiddishkeit. I prayed for them and others, as well as for myself to find a husband. I compelled myself to sit at the *kever* and daven, hour after hour, day after day. At moments I felt some connection, but most of my *tefillos* felt forced. From Uman we visited Breslov, where Rebbe Nachman's primary disciple, Reb Nosson, is buried atop a hill overlooking a wide

river and surrounded by fields of wildflowers. Old, intricately carved headstones peeked up among the greenery. I felt the disorientation I'd had in Uman fading. Then we headed for Mezibuzh, arriving in the magical town of the Baal Shem Tov at twilight, and spending that night at his *kever*. Only after returning home did I grasp what I felt had really transpired in Uman. I told a friend that Rebbe Nachman had taken a sledgehammer and smashed the *klipos*, the outer shells surrounding my *neshamah*. Parts of me that had formerly felt comfortable had cracked and were no longer part of me. When we reached the Baal Shem Tov, I felt light seeping in between the cracks, giving me the strength and courage I needed to start peeling off the unneeded and unholy things that had been part of me for so long. Within that year my father, may he live until 120, recovered; my brother shaved off his ponytail, leaving only *peyos*; and I married a Breslover. Since then I've been back to Uman umpteen times. The connection I feel there is so deep it's hard to describe. I've had the honor of leading many groups of women to Uman, each trip and each woman unique. These ladies span the spectrum in every way possible, but to me they're all beautiful. I've witnessed their souls blossom.

A Change of Body, Heart, and Soul

Rebbetzin Yehudis Golshevsky has been teaching an Englishlanguage women's *shiur* on Breslov Chassidus for the past thirteen years. Eventually it became clear to her that the next step was bringing her students to the Rebbe. Rebbetzin Golshevsky's students describe these trips as lifechanging. From a wide range of ages and backgrounds, these women are looking for more meaning, and they find it in Uman. The Rebbetzin gives daily classes during the trip to help the women connect to the tzaddik and to their deeper selves. She teaches about *Tikun HaKlali*, the ten psalms Rebbe Nachman prescribed as a general remedy; *hisbodedus*, personal prayer; and *vidui*, confessing one's sins in the presence of the

tzaddik. Rebbe Nachman taught that when a person does *vidui* in his presence, he is able to “direct him on the right path according to the root of his soul, and everything is rectified” (*Kitzur Likutei Moharan* 4:10). Like the other group leaders, Yehudis has miracle stories of prayers answered speedily and completely, but those aren’t the stories she finds most exciting. For her and her students, the trips are about the spiritual connection forged in Uman. “People asked me if the trip fulfilled my expectations,” says Miriam, one of Yehudis’s students. “Truthfully, when I first got there I had no idea what I was even doing there. And I didn’t have any expectations to fulfill because I had no idea what to expect. I just went there thinking, ‘Okay, whatever happens, happens. Whatever I feel is what I feel.’” “I’m usually pretty unemotional and controlled, especially in public, but practically from the first second I walked into the *tziyun*, I was crying. And kept crying and couldn’t stop. It felt okay, though, even though there were so many other women around, because almost everyone else was crying too.” On Yehudis’s trip right after Succos, there were hardly any men in Uman. Her ladies woke early, recited *Shir HaShirim* before sunrise, and davened with the *neitz* minyan. At one point, one of the few men present on the men’s side turned to the Rebbetzin’s father, who’d traveled with them, and made a derogatory comment about the loud sobbing heard through the *mechitzah*. Yehudis’s father responded, “Who’s getting us out of *galus*? Mama Rochel is crying, these women are crying with her, and you’re making fun?” “I had no idea what to daven at Reb Nosson’s *kever*,” says Dina Perel, another of Yehudis’s students. “‘Try saying *vidui* from his *Likutei Tefillos* 1:4, but right up at the *tziyun*,’ Yehudis advised me, ‘and see what happens.’ At first I hung back; there was always such a crowd up there. But suddenly a space seemed to clear just for me and I thought, ‘It’s now or never, what do I have to lose?’ Well, I’ve never had a davening like that one. I couldn’t believe it. I cried through the whole thing, for over an hour, and left feeling amazing – amazingly broken and amazingly fixed.”

Yehudis is always impressed by the hidden spiritual strengths within these women, many of whom tell her beforehand they're not into davening and don't even know why they're coming, and then end up spending hours straight pouring out their hearts. "Traveling to Uman seems to bring out the best in us," she says. Rabbanit Marcelle Ovadia has been traveling to Uman for the last twenty years. She's there every Tu B'Av, and many other times during the year. A small, lively French lady, known for her blessings and *segulos*, it's immediately clear why her travel companions are enchanted by her. Young ladies who traveled to Uman with her to pray for *zivugim* often return with her the following year to express gratitude for having married, and to pray for a child. The following year they return to Uman with their babies. Rabbanit Ovadia told of a particularly remarkable experience. A woman had traveled to Uman after over twenty years of childlessness. She described being a young bride full of hope for the future, and how her hope had slowly faded. The Rabbanit blessed her, and told her it was a shame she'd wasted so much time, but that in the merit of Rebbe Nachman she would quickly make up for lost time with twins, triplets, and more. After they returned to Israel they stayed in touch ... and this woman gave birth to twins, then triplets, then healthy quintuplets! After twenty years of barrenness, she found herself in her mid-forties with ten children. Stories of miraculous recoveries from illness also abound. Rabbanit Marcelle told me about the time her routine mammogram showed a frightening lump. The doctor scheduled followup tests, but before the tests, she traveled to Uman. While praying there she felt a physical change in her body and upon her return, she was grateful, but not at all surprised, to find the lump gone. Rabbanit Miriam Arush, wife of Rav Shalom Arush, author of *Garden of Emunah*, has led many groups of many different types of women. For Rabbanit Arush, the greatest miracles are the women inspired to *teshuvah* in Uman. She has witnessed women boarding the flight from Tel Aviv in shorts and tank tops and returning in skirts and scarves. Rabbanit Arush, whose success in *kiruv* has been enough to

build a whole community, concludes, "There is no place for *kiruv* like Uman." "In Uman a woman poured out her heart to me," she says. "She and her husband had done *teshuvah*, they kept Shabbos and kashrus, and their sons were in a Talmud Torah, but her husband wouldn't wear a yarmulke. His profession brings him into contact with a wide variety of people, and he felt covering his head would create a barrier that would diminish his professional success. I told her she'd come to the right place, and we'd pray for him together, and that's what we did. When we arrived back in Israel, her husband came to pick her up, wearing, yes, a yarmulke." Rebbetzin Tziporah Heller, who's traveled twice to Uman, described her first trip, which took place about ten years ago: "We traveled for hours and hours on our bus, for the most part seeing exactly what chassidim traveling to their rebbes saw hundreds of years ago: endless forests dotted with small villages, chickens and cows surrounding houses built as they've been built for centuries, kerchiefed women selling apples and potatoes by the side of the road. By the time I arrived in Uman I felt I'd traveled not only through space, but through time as well. "That night by the *tziyun* I experienced a *vidui*, prayer, and connection I'd never experienced before or since. There's something very precious and unique about spending three days isolated in prayer and *avodas Hashem*. When does a woman get a chance to do that? People understand that men have spiritual needs, but women have spiritual needs as well. For some women those needs are satisfied at home; for others, their *ruach* needs more private time and attention. People don't question a woman's need to get away occasionally, and women's retreats are well established. Should a woman give any less attention to the needs of her soul?"

Better than Flowers or Jewelry

Rabbi Lazer Brody, a student of Rabbi Shalom Arush, and the translator of Rabbi Arush's *Garden of Emunah*, is also a big

supporter of women's trips to Uman. "The greatest gift a husband can give his wife is to send her to Uman," he says. "When a man gives his wife flowers, or even jewelry, he acknowledges her importance in his life. When a man gives his wife a ticket to Uman, he acknowledges that she is a soul with her own spiritual needs and desires that should be attended to. How much time and money does a woman invest in her home and taking care of her body? Her soul needs attention too! "Personally, I found it to be wonderful for my *shalom bayis*. I am glad I sent my wife and daughter, and have seen long-term changes in them since their return. They feel more joy and life in their Yiddishkeit, and feel more connected to the Torah and stories of the tzaddikim. Yes, a woman is connected to the spiritual accomplishments of her husband, and ultimately her spirituality is found at home, but a trip to Uman can be the 'recharge' that helps her connect to her role in life. A woman, by the nature of her life's roles, is deeply immersed in physicality. A trip to *kivrei tzaddikim* is a chance for her to recharge, then come home and elevate that physicality instead of sinking in it!" Leah Hartman of Jerusalem was one of the women encouraged by her husband to go. "My husband has traveled annually to Uman for fifteen years; I waited for many years after we married to go – I was afraid I just wouldn't connect. I've only been once. I can't explain it still to this day, but once there it was hard for me to leave the *tziyun* even to go rest. My prayer flowed in a way I've never experienced before – for hours and hours. I believe this is partly something general about prayer at the grave of a tzaddik, as I've experienced something similar in Meron by Rabi Shimon bar Yochai, and partly something particular about Rebbe Nachman's *kever* – but it's definitely not something I get with my head or can explain logically.

"Ladies" Day

In recent years, Tu B'Av, known as an auspicious day to pray to find one's mate, has become the occasion for a large number

of single women to make their way to Uman. In his lifetime, Rebbe Nachman alluded to his powers as a *shadchan* (*Chayei Moharan* 84) and as stories of *shidduchim* that came quickly after these trips make their rounds, more and more come. Well-known singer Miri Or performs for religious women worldwide, yet enjoys her yearly Tu B'Av performance in Uman the most. "Nowhere else can I look out into the audience and see a lady with a *tichel* standing next to another with long, bleached curls, arm in arm with a dark-skinned woman in a hat, next to another with a trim *sheitel*, holding hands with a woman with more earrings than I can count ... Yet they're all rocking and singing together. The powerful connection opens all our hearts and we all cry out to Hashem together. What could be greater? These women know they can come to Uman as they are, and will be seen for their *neshamos* – and truly, you can see their *neshamos* shining!" Last Tu B'Av, on the evening following Miri's performance, the chef turned on music in the dining hall as women were finishing their meal, and within moments, tables were pushed aside and joyous dancing broke out. All boundaries between young and old, *frum* and not-yet *frum*, Ashkenazic and Sephardic, completely disappeared. The singing and dancing were so powerful that a few women were crying and praying unabashedly. Comforts Too When groups of women began traveling to Uman about twenty years ago, the physical conditions were dismal. Rabbanit Marcelle described her first trip to Uman. They flew from Israel to Romania, to Moscow, and from there to Odessa. There were no kosher meals on the flights, and the food they'd brought was confiscated by customs officials. When they arrived in Odessa, all the suitcases were thrown into a big pile on the floor, with travelers expected to dig through them to find their belongings. They traveled four hours in an old dilapidated bus to Uman, checked into a dirty, smelly hotel, and went to the *tziyun*, at that time just a spot marked on the ground, against the wall of the home of a non-Jewish woman. Until about nine years ago, visitors to Uman stayed mostly in the apartments of the local residents, their owners vacating them for the

duration for \$3 to \$5 a bed per night. The kitchens weren't kosher, of course; visitors ate canned food and crackers. The water ran for only a short time in the morning and in the evening. Bathtubs were filled, buckets used to flush toilets. If more water was needed, a manual pump was outside. Conditions today have improved dramatically. Beautifully renovated houses and apartments are available to rent for \$25 to \$50 per bed per night. Two restaurants have opened this year, and plans for a luxury hotel are under way. Most visitors fly into Kiev's Borispol Airport and make the two-and-a-half hour drive to Uman in modern buses or taxis. I've heard a helicopter can be rented for \$500 a day, and that could shorten the trip to half an hour. There's a modern supermarket, and even a mall. Travel companies provide meals on par with fine hotels. There are enclosed areas for both men and women to pray with heating and air-conditioning, as the season demands. It's no longer physically difficult to obtain this spiritual experience. When I asked the guides if they'd had travelers who were disappointed by their Uman experience, they could think of very few. Even those ladies who didn't have the experience they were hoping for found, when they returned home, that many of their prayers had been answered, and their lives had been changed.

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