

Why I Keep Coming Back

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Born in Cuba, Nestor (Nachum) Gor?nkel is now a lawyer in Miami, Florida. He is married to Maria (Miriam) and has two children, Luis (Eliyahu) and Hannah.

Nestor's family fled Cuba to the United States about three years after Castro came into power. His father had survived the war years in Siberia and in the Russian army. "They were starving and unable to observe the mitzvot," says Nestor. When his father arrived in Cuba, he was no longer observant, so Nestor grew up in a "traditional" Conservative Jewish environment.

My wife and I began exploring our Jewish roots when I was around thirty-?ve years old. We started our spiritual journey at the Kabbalah Centre in Miami, but soon realized that the "religion" they were teaching had nothing to do with coming closer to God.

One Shabbat, one of the members of the community invited us for the Friday-night meal. That Friday night was December 31,

1999. The host had a Breslov brochure which piqued my curiosity, and we spent a lot of time talking about Rebbe Nachman and what it meant to go to Uman. I was very curious. It swung me spiritually.

I picked up my host's copy of Rebbe Nachman's Tikkun and started to read. Something clicked in me, and when I read about Uman, I had the strange feeling that I would be going there that year.

A few weeks later, I spoke with another friend who was learning with me about some of the things which I had read in Rebbe Nachman's Tikkun, and this opened up a whole side of him that I had never known. He was a Breslover chassid.

He also showed me pictures of Uman and spoke about its holiness and the concept of traveling to see Rebbe Nachman. That intrigued me even more, especially since I came from a secular yet "traditional" Jewish background. Before I started becoming religious, I never thought about such ideas as spirituality, sanctity and connection with God.

Nestor first traveled to Uman in 2000. He tried to go the following year, but was stopped by 9/11.

I travel to Uman because there's a lot that I've done in my life that I need to correct. I need to connect with this tzaddik to help me get through what I've done in the past and to provide me with guidance for the future. But it's not just for me—it also brings blessings to my wife and my entire family.

The first time my son and I went, I thought the journey would be highly structured, but it's not. It's like trying to get through a cafeteria; you're completely on your own. In Kiev, we stood in a huge line for an hour and a half just to get through customs.

Then we learned that our luggage was on its way to Uzbekistan!

The planes were called back so that we could get our bags. But by the time we had our bags, the bus to Uman had already left.

We managed to get on a different bus to Uman. But then upon arriving in Uman, I had no idea where we were supposed to go. We wandered around until we finally found an apartment to rent. It was a dump. It didn't even have running water. There were five of us in a filthy room that was less than the size of the little waiting room outside my office. I don't know how we managed to get our luggage in.

That year, Rosh HaShanah was late in the season, so it was very cold—and we didn't have heat. I wore six layers of clothing and covered myself with two blankets, and I was still freezing. We also did not have our meal cards when we arrived, even though we had paid for them in New York. We schlepped all the way to the old army barracks where they were serving the meals, hoping that they'd let us in without a card, but they didn't. We were starving and exhausted. In the end, a couple of kind people lent us their cards so we were able to eat something.

After eating, I went to the tziyun. I was completely numb by this point and wondered why I had come. And I would have to remain here for another five days!

But Rosh HaShanah was special. I prayed next to the tziyun with the Sephardim. It was so crowded that I don't think you could have stuck a piece of paper between the people. It was amazing and intense. The next day, I prayed in the main kloyz. I was astounded at the quiet; there were over 5,000 people there, yet one could hear the sound of footsteps on the gravel outside. Musaf was very long and very powerful. Afterward, I went to the tziyun and recited Psalms. It felt very private and personal.

By the time Rosh HaShanah was over, I understood why I had come, and I was happy that I had made the journey.

One year, when I was having some financial problems, I considered remaining in Miami for Yom Tov. A week later, a client phoned me, a wealthy, non-Jewish man who is very spiritual and very aware that he owes his wealth to God. He had already paid for my legal services, but was so happy with my work that he handed me a check and said, "You saved me a tremendous amount of money, so here's something extra." I used that money to travel to Uman with my son.

I've been to Uman about 7ve times, but each year is unique and special. Since there are so many people, there are plenty of minyanim to choose from. The last two years, we made a minyan in a parking lot.

Don't ask yourself if it's logical to go, because if you think logically, you'll come up with a hundred and one excuses why you should stay at home. But Rebbe Nachman wants you there, and it's a huge privilege to be there. If you want to go, then even if you don't have the money, it will happen somehow. Your lifestyle will not suffer because of the financial sacrifice.

A few years ago, I met a man who told me that it was his first year in Uman. He said that it was nice, and he was happy that he'd had the experience, but he wouldn't be back next year. The following year, I met him again on the street. When I asked him what had happened, he replied, "I don't understand it myself. But I just had to come again!"

Whenever I arrive in Uman, I'm shocked at the primitive conditions. I ask myself,

What am I doing here? When Rosh HaShanah is over, we're very grateful, because that means we're leaving the Ukraine, and the Ukraine is horrible! My son says that the best part of traveling to Uman is getting there, being with the Rebbe, and then leaving again! The first few days are great, but by the time Yom Tov is over, we're tired and ready to return home. Although we're happy to be leaving, we have no doubt that

we'll be back again the following year.