

FEATURE

Preparing Uman for Klal Yisrael

Meet Reb Nosson Ben-Nun, the Breslover chasid who is the go-to man for anything and everything that needs to be done for Breslover chasidim making the journey to Rebbe Nachman

By Rabbi Yitzchok Frankfurter

רביה"ק רבי נחמן מברסלב זי"ע
לעי"נ האשה החשובה מרת אלטע רחל לאה ב"ר שלמה ע"ה

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“Eight years ago,” my soft-spoken guest tells me, “someone suggested that I might be able to help improve conditions in Uman for the Jews who come to visit not only on Rosh Hashanah but all year round. There were new people in charge, and during a regular year when there aren’t any COVID restrictions in place, there were between 1,500 and 2,000 people showing up every week. Just to give you an example of the numbers, when I was in Uman four years, there were 97,000 guests for Rosh Hashanah. I was in shock.



Reb Nosson Ben-Nun

“In fact, the whole city was in shock; it was utterly incapable of absorbing that many people. There are officially around 80,000 residents in Uman, and the infrastructure couldn’t cope with such a huge influx. So of course there were electrical outages, problems with sewage and so forth. Ukraine is still a Third-World country in many ways, even though they’re working hard to change that.”

“Which also has its advantages,” I interject.

“For sure,” he states. “It took time for the Ukrainians to realize what a treasure they have in their midst. But last year, when they saw the *mesirat nefesh* of so many thousands of people to get to Uman, they started to grasp its significance. So far we aren’t seeing a repeat of last year, but there are already several thousand people in Uman, just in case the borders close.”

The complications caused by the pandemic have meant a lot more work for Reb Nosson Ben-Nun, who has been flying back and forth from Eretz Yisrael over the past few months, meeting with senior officials and attempting to ease the way for Breslover *chasidim* on their way to Rebbe Nachman.

“Most of what I do has to be done in person, face-to-face,” he explains. “It doesn’t work otherwise. Before the pandemic I was flying there every week, leaving on the early morning flight on Monday and returning on Friday. In fact, a lot of Israelis who work in Ukraine, especially Kiev, commute like that.

“There’s no end of things to organize and no end of people to negotiate with, persuade and convince. I have to be in touch

with the police—and not just local police but also from Kiev—as well as firefighters and medical personnel. We bring in 25 doctors from the United States every year, as well as a few psychologists.”

“And you’re the person to turn to with any query or problem?”

“Unfortunately, yes,” Reb Nosson says with a wry smile. “From President Zelensky down to the lowliest janitor and everyone in between. We have lobbyists in America as well as contacts with lawyers and politicians. Then in Uman we need to have contacts in high places too. It’s all about organization, and we’ve made many improvements over the years. Today, for instance, there are surveillance cameras all over to stop the thefts that used to be a regular occurrence. We also have a huge *otzar sefarim* and a secure storage facility where people can leave their *tefillin* over Rosh Hashanah along with other valuables.

“Of course, it’s not only Ichud Breslov, of which I am the president, that’s involved in doing all this,” Reb Nosson clarifies. “Reb Laizer Sheiner provides meals for tens of thousands of guests entirely for free. Years ago, anyone who came for Rosh Hashanah had to pack enough food to last for ten days. I remember my first year, when my diet consisted of tuna fish, mayonnaise and gefilte fish in jars. Today, there’s no comparison. We even have a *mikvah* that’s open 24 hours a day and doesn’t charge a fee.”

FROM HAIFA TO BORO PARK

In fact, Reb Nosson is so at home in Uman that he spends most of his time there. His real home is in Haifa, where he was born and grew up as a typical resident of the city—that is to say, totally secular. “Until today, everything is open on Shabbat,” he says with evident pain. “Stores, restaurants—even public transportation.”

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The story of his return began in 1982, when Reb Nosson completed his mandatory army service and flew off to the United States, just like many other Israelis wishing to see something of the world before settling down. He headed to New York, to the area around Avenue J in Brooklyn, where many of his fellow countrymen liked to hang out—and from there his path began to diverge from the usual.

Reb Nosson wanted to find Jews, which was a rather odd objective given that he had just arrived from a country with a Jewish majority, but there it was. He chose Boro Park as his destination.

“I had never seen such Jews before, never in my life!” he recounts. “At first, I didn’t even realize they were Jewish; I thought maybe they were Amish.”

Neither of Reb Nosson’s parents came from religious families, and for the first 22 years of his life Reb Nosson had never so much as stepped over the threshold of a *shul*—not even on Yom Kippur. His connection with *Yiddishkeit* was minimally cultural: “We ate matzah on Pesach rather than bread, but it was just like eating doughnuts on Chanukah. We didn’t clean the house of *chametz*. I had no experience of Jews like the ones I encountered in Boro Park, but I knew one thing: I wanted to live there and be close to them.”

Reb Nosson started looking for an apartment and was told by a friend that if he was really serious about living in Boro Park, he would have to make at least some effort to blend in. “He said that I’d have to put on a *kippah*, and I didn’t have a problem with that. After all, in New York there were all kinds of people wearing all kinds of headgear, so I put on a *yarmulke*, reassured my landlord that I was a respectable person who wouldn’t make trouble and settled in.”

The next two years passed peacefully, as Reb Nosson gradually absorbed the Jewish vibes around him. “Purim was great, with everyone happy, all dressed up and giving

each other *mishloach manot*. Pesach was wonderful too. I started putting on *tefillin* and keeping Shabbat, but I admit that it was a bit of a challenge, especially during the long afternoons in the summer when there wasn’t much to do. After a while, I realized that if I wanted to enjoy Shabbat, I had to do it the right way, which meant going to *shul*, learning the *parshat hashavua*, eating the *seudot* and singing during the meals. Of course, I slept a lot too.”

Then, at the age of 24, after almost two

years in New York, *Hakadosh Baruch Hu* sent him a special messenger who would change his life forever.

ENCOUNTER WITH “A CERTAIN TZADDIK”

“I had been working as a security guard in the Diamond District,” Reb Nosson recalls. “In those days, that was one of the only two

options open to Israelis after their army service. The other choice was to drive a taxi. So I was working there and living quietly, until one day a certain *tzaddik* who spoke *Ivrit* moved into the neighborhood. “He was a Breslover,” Reb Nosson adds, “and we would have long discussions every day. We even sang together. I told him that I already knew one song from his *rebbe* from my army days, “*Kol ha’olam kulo gesher tzar me’od*.” But soon I knew a whole lot more about Rebbe Nachman.”

The “*tzaddik*” was none other than Rav Yisroel Ber Odesser, *zt”l* (otherwise known as the “Saba”), who had come to New York to disseminate *sifrei Breslov*.

“He was a very wise man, and he spoke to me gently and with refinement. He never told me what to do or what not to do; he knew how to address every individual according to his own *nefesh*. It was from him that I learned to be *b’simchah* and not to fall into *yei’ush*, despair, and I also read

Chayei Moharan, the biography of Rebbe Nachman, which drew me even closer to Breslov. And of course, he taught me *hitbodedut*. The idea of speaking to Hashem appealed to me very strongly. It was almost like having my own psychologist, *l’havdil*. But by then, I knew that this was the life I wanted to lead.”

I ask him if he specifically wanted to become a Breslover.

“Not exactly, because at that stage all I knew was Breslov. I didn’t realize that there were all these different streams of religious Jews. I thought that I’d encountered all of *Yiddishkeit*.”

“How did your parents take your decision? Were they part of your life during this period?” I inquire.

“My father passed away that same year, in 1984, when I was 24 and he was 52. He was killed ‘in the service of the state.’ We never found out exactly what happened. My mother, though, was fine with my decision. I was already older and renting my own place, so it was clear that I was making a balanced decision. And today, she’s a Breslover herself! She’s the only other member of my family who became religious.”

Reb Nosson sighs. “It was a very hard time, all the same. I was so confused about what to do next. On the one hand, I wanted to be a Jew, but on the other hand, I still wanted to go to university, complete my studies and get a job. In that frame of mind I returned to Eretz Yisrael and went to live in Yerushalayim.

“People who are religious their whole lives are clueless about what it means to be a *baal teshuvah*,” he continues. “A *baal teshuvah* goes through a special kind of Gehinnom with thoughts that torture him day and night. There are endless battles with family and friends, but the hardest battles are with oneself and the perpetual question either in the back or forefront of the mind: What do I need this for?”

“What helps at such times is what I



A rendering of Reb Nosson Ben-Nun’s plans for a new complex at the tziyun in Uman

“YEARS AGO, ANYONE WHO
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always tell myself and others: Don't look at Jews; look at Judaism. Don't look at Breslovers; look at Rebbe Nachman. That's how to keep from falling into despair."

Reb Nossan explains this rather profound statement as follows:

"Today, around 80% of Breslovers are secular. Only around 20% are true *chasidim*. What do I mean by that? If you go to Uman, you can see for yourself that the experience doesn't only belong to the real Breslov *chasidim*. The Rebbe belongs to the entire world. You can find Japanese tourists at the Rebbe's *tziyun* on a regular Shabbat there. The Ukrainian football team even made a trip to Uman to pray at the *tziyun* before their European tour."

ICHUD BRESLOV

The fact that so many people, both Jew and gentile, are familiar with Uman and Rebbe Nachman is extremely helpful to Reb Nossan in his role as president of Ichud Breslov. "I've been holding so many meetings of late, including with several senators here in the United States, and I was amazed by how much they know about Uman on Rosh Hashanah, especially about what happened last year on the border with Belarus.

"That's what we've been focusing on recently: making sure that what happened last year doesn't repeat itself. There are so many Breslov *chasidim* in the United States who want to go to Uman for Rosh Hashanah, so we decided to approach the administration to help make it possible. I've also been meeting with a lot of Ukrainian government officials as well as the ambassador to solve some of the myriad issues that crop up every year, especially now with all the coronavirus restrictions."

Everything in Uman happens on a huge scale, and despite all the preparations Ukraine is still ill-equipped to deal with it. This is where Ichud Breslov steps in, helping the Ukrainians coordinate their own opera-



Davening outside the *tziyun* on Erev Rosh Hashanah

tions and bolstering their numbers from abroad.

"This year, we've arranged for double the number of police to be on hand," Reb Nossan says. "The tragedy in Meron is still on everyone's minds, and we are doing all we can to make sure that everything is safe. For instance, you aren't going to be seeing pictures of people on the rooftops during the worldwide *Tikkun Haklali* this year. We put up barbed wire to stop people from climbing. And at the *tziyun* itself, we've had a system in place for years that prevents overcrowding. We have Breslover ushers keeping the line moving. You get only a few minutes inside the building, just a few seconds at the *kever* itself, and then you have to move on."

"Do you try to employ Breslovers wherever possible?"

"Ichud Breslov has around 90 full-time

"THE UKRAINIAN FOOTBALL TEAM EVEN MADE A TRIP TO UMAN TO PRAY AT THE TZIYUN BEFORE THEIR EUROPEAN TOUR."

employees who work for us all year round," Reb Nossan replies. "Ninety-five percent of them aren't Jewish. We give them jobs, and there are even Ukrainians who travel to Uman to work for us. In the past there were problems with the locals, but we've managed to keep a lid on things, partly because they know how much they gain from us.

"For instance, we donate money to the local hospitals and to government organizations. What we want to avoid is giving them the feeling that we're moving in like a conquering power. We want them to feel that we are their guests and that they are hosting us, not serving us, and we are grateful to them.

"That's why we established Uman Media, which is on television, Facebook and Ins-

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tagram. It's solely for Ukrainians. We interview them, let them air their views, and keep open the channels of communication with the mayor and local authorities.”

“Bringing Ukraine into the modern world, past the age of bribery and corruption?” I suggest.

“I wouldn't put it quite like that. For example, four years ago I managed to arrange the construction of the bridge for *kohanim* at the *tziyun*. They placed so many bureaucratic obstacles in our path, but eventually it was built. It cost us \$300,000—and the land there is owned by Jews! But the Ukrainians want money for every little thing. The same is true of the airport. Today, anyone traveling to Uman flies either to Kiev or another Ukrainian airport such as Odessa, both of which are a few hours away by car. Uman actually has its own military airport, and twice in the past I succeeded in persuading them to let me land there, for a sizeable fee. We want to build a new airport

on Jewish-owned land, but the authorities are demanding \$20 million for the permits. But just imagine what a difference it would make.”

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Reb Nosson's eyes light up; finally, we're talking about his vision for Uman's future, which he hopes Ichud Breslov will be able to achieve. “I want to build a new *tziyun*,” he says, “a huge building large enough for all our needs. Once that is done, I will have achieved my goal and I'll go back to my regular life.”

“All the plans are ready,” he adds. “It could all be completed within five years. I'm talking about construction that will cost

“WE WANT THEM TO FEEL THAT WE ARE THEIR GUESTS AND THAT THEY ARE HOSTING US, NOT SERVING US, AND WE ARE GRATEFUL TO THEM.”

around \$100 million to build a *shul* unlike any other in the world, which will be around 65,000 square feet. Plus a *mikvah* big enough to accommodate 20,000 people a day.

“We really do need structures of that size,” he says, anticipating my next question. “The first time I came to Uman I brought 200 *chasidim* along. That was a huge number back then, but today? Today, we have Breslov ‘fans’ in the millions! It's unbelievable how many people come. There are 60 hotels, but they are no longer enough. And we have to do everything to a high standard because it's not just ‘official’ Breslovers.”

“Let me give you an example,” he continues. “I have a good friend named Chaim Dotan. He's one of the top architects in the world and designed the famous glass bridge in China. He also won the Israel Prize for Architecture when he was only 33 years old. He's a Breslover—and he's not religious. I once told him, ‘Chaim, come to Uman for Rosh Hashanah just to take a look and see what it's all about.’ Eventually he did, and afterwards he told me. ‘Nosson, I've been all over the world, but I want to give you the gift of a bridge in Uman. You won't have to pay a penny.’”

Reb Nosson gives me a big smile. “I'll tell you another nice story about a different friend of mine, a plastic surgeon from France. He's tops in his field and has an international reputation as well as lots of

money. One time, he was in Ukraine to give a presentation in Kiev, and I told him that if he was already in the country he should go to Uman. Since he's such a prominent person, I was a little worried that he would be pestered for donations, so I warned him that it's customary to recite the *Tikkun Haklali* and give money to *tzedakah*. Anyway, he went there, and a few days later he called me to say that he'd had a wonderful experience. Not only had he said the *Tikkun Haklali* and put some money in a *pushke*, but no one bothered him to make a donation.

“I was very surprised and kept asking him questions until he happened to mention when he was there: on Shabbat!”

“I'm telling you this so you can understand what Uman is. Uman is for everyone. As Breslovers, we believe that this is the way it should be. Everyone should come to Uman, and our job is to get it ready for them and make it as easy as possible. People should be able to buy a ticket and have everything prepared in advance without paying through the nose and without red tape, obstacles or difficulties.”

“Uman is a tremendous spiritual experience; there's nothing like it,” he stresses, “but that's not my business. Your spirituality is between you and Rebbe Nachman and *Hakadosh Baruch Hu*. My job is to concern myself with your physical needs. So leave your publication behind and come to Uman!” □

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