

Having been unable to travel last year... The accident and all that... My father's command (the first in many many years!) "Thou shalt not go" so biblical!

All year I yearn to go like never before. Previous years (I began going 2003) were a combination of curiosity, commitment and irritation. The sanitation, the food, the indigestion and constipation, the packed bodies by the Tzion, the length of services, the hassles by the authorities all came pressing down to interfere with the experience.

But, not having been there last year and the ano horribilis I suffered this year, the ongoing debilitating legal battles, the car accident and aftermath, and the herniated disc 6 months later to the day! The chronic fatigue and prospects of unending battle all came to bear down heavily in an occult depressive landscape that loomed large. All provided the very fuel to wish to be by the Rebbe this year like never before.

I gave myself more time than other years so I arrived a day earlier, well in time for selichot at three a.m. My half bedroom was even clean and ready and the toilet facility was usable. There was a new private mikveh available with daily fresh water so in all, the infrastructure was clearly improved over prior years in all respects. The road from Kiev to Uman keeps getting paved better and thus faster.

I traveled with an acquaintance from Chicago who had brought a Rosh Yeshiva from Gateshead! I felt the friction in the cab already! But it was clearly a message for me to clean up my act regarding this aspect of my past. I remain powerless of those with Talmudic mastery and scholarship which exposes my own shame and ignorance despite so many years in study. The message hammered into me right away was that this was to be no picnic. The inner work was to begin right now. To accept those things I cannot change and understand that each person has his own strengths that must be used in service. Also, to remain loving, tolerant, kind, and patient despite the triggers, to those with different struggles : oh boy did I need to learn that!

Uman remains a pilgrimage and discomfort is an integral part of the trip. But I cannot describe the feelings of meeting up with old fellow worshippers mainly the "Anglo group" headed by Reb Chaim Kramer (lodged at the Uman "Ritz Carlton" as it is affectionately called.) I had not seen the blokes for some two years now and it was truly precious. No longer did I judge each one the way I usually ended up doing! I was just grateful to be by the Rebbe's Rosh Hashanah. I was also able to sit through much more of the long long services which usually end up around 4:30 pm. I also minded less the dancing and craziness of the Na nach's. They, too, have an equal right to be by the Rebbe. In any case, the so-called hanhalla or world council did not exactly perform well with regards to the local authorities and government. The hotel is closed; millions of dollars lost etc. who can claim to be the true Hasid of the Rebbe. Why are we allowing the Meah Shearim branch to run the show, are they the true inheritors. This year I did not need to delve into these distractions. I was here to be by the Rebbe Rosh Hashanah. Period. To daven, to pray, to plead, and to dance!

The biggest surprise was Shabbat. In the kloiz where thousands flock to pray the oilam burst into song with the Lecha Dodi. It was a surprise since the normal sober spirit that had characterized the davening all the Yomim Noraim was suddenly replaced with this cathartic burst of simple joy, the Rebbe's song in welcoming the Shabbat Queen. How they were able to dance in the aisles I do not know. The kloiz seats 5000 and with another 4000 in the aisles where does one find the room to dance! Yet, in those 20 minutes, I was able let go and found something I had never experienced in my

life. Pure, undiluted simchah or joy untainted by my overly conscious sense of self-criticism; you know that inner voice that reminds one that whatever one receives remains undeserved!

Most importantly, I have honed in on my skills as to when to visit with the Rebbe and it remains a delicate art of knowing when the crowds thin to the point that you can actually enter the inner chamber of the tomb and actually be within 6 rows deep of the Tzion. Since coming annually from 2003 I have found that 3 a.m. on the second night of Rosh Hashana is a very opportune time to visit, for then the fatigue and jet lag hits most pilgrims and true to my theory this year I was able to daven by the Rebbe that night.

The Medical clinic made use of my services twice; in one case, an elderly pilgrim was mugged and suffered a concussion so I was driven to the local hospital in Uman where the doctors wear top white hats very much like cordon blue chefs in this country! Their arrogance and ignorance remains legendary. The second case was a little boy who fell from an upper bunk onto his head. The blessing was meeting this Israeli nurse practitioner who was so street smart he knew how to handle, bribe and schmooze the locals in their original tongue and got me whatever I needed. He came in very useful when the next day there looked like a riot breaking out between local police and teenage pilgrims. The police had cordoned off the main street on either side of the market so there was no access. I was worried that the whole thing might get out of hand. I immediately went to the clinic to get this nurse out there, since I truly believed he could diffuse anything! The power of the Rebbe was most obvious when visitors are asked by Rabbi Kramer to "tell their story" at the "Anglo" dinners we had, a conglomeration of mainly British and American Hassidim. They come from such different backgrounds, yet are all attracted by the Rebbe's Torah and the spiritual path of Breslov. One spiritually broken man, however, was told that there was little hope for him psychologically so he might as well come to Uman as a last ditch effort! He had suffered a traumatic brain injury in a roll over van crash some 10 years earlier with the loss of many of his friends. He had been in a coma for some 3 weeks and suffered a post concussion syndrome. No one could determine how much of his symptomatology was brain trauma driven and how much was psychological. Only the original neurologist might be able to determine the differential since he had taken care of him, but where to find him after all these years! So they asked him whether he remembered the name of the neurologist! "Ungar" he believed. We all went silent!

For me, personally, the idea of bittul or self nullification had always been a theoretical Hassidic concept. But this trip I felt I had nowhere else to go, this was the only place for me, by the Rebbe. Once I was able to set aside all the psychoanalytical psycho-babble about projection and wish formation and ego identification and transference etc etc: the bilbullim that plague the mind the chattering monkey inside, I was able to just let go...be in the presence of the Rebbe, and turn my life over to my Higher Power as they say in recovery terminology. This letting go was a crucial step for me, letting go of resistance and barriers to moving forward. Letting go of the inner voice that objects criticizes and denies. The inner scientist, the skeptic, the philosopher. The doubting Thomas the inner voice of dissent the man on the outside, the outsider even of outsiders! Letting go of all of this to be able to relate in an I-Thou kind of manner. This was the difference between this trip and prior ones. Once you have seen the angel of death, in the guise of a ten ton truck staring you in your face, sitting in the drivers seat of your SUV, pinned to the door, unable to breath, spitting blood and thinking this is either a torn aorta, whereby, I might have 10 minutes to live, or a punctured lung and my pO2 is dropping fast, where my only other thought is whether I might be able to go to Uman that year (not allowed by dad remember!) visiting the Rebbe takes on a different key. Everything becomes more fraught and life seems much more fragile. Remember, one does not pray to the Rebbe! One prays to God. Being by the Rebbe means having a good lawyer handy to

represent you (speak to me about lawyers, rather don't speak to me about lawyers!). But, more so, we are the toiyte Chassidim! Really, one should have said der toiyte Rebbe! After all the Rebbe is dead and the Chassidim are alive! Sometimes I feel as if he remains alive in spirit despite his physical death and we are deader in our lives than he is in his death! Dead to our meaning and purpose, our families and children our true vocations and deadening our lives with media TV intrusions of the outside world (I include NPR and all the intellectual stuff as well, for that is sometimes even a greater valium!). We, above all remain dead to our feelings and do anything to avoid feeling our feelings and being real. Here, in this stinking town, in this stinking country, we gather to feel real by the Rebbe and possibly with our friends and fellows. There are few distractions here. If the industry in Bnei B'rak is learning, here it is davening!

Tashlich, by the reservoir downstream from where the massacres took place in 1941 also took on more meaning by the year. As if as the years go by the meaning and historical significance of our dancing and screaming by these waters does not diminish with time, as if we continue to demand that the messiah come in our days, that we have waited long enough in this long exile...ironic, since so many Israelis were present and also realize that the State as it is may not be the glorious Utopia it was cracked up to be. A state is a state and collectives are all violent to their citizenry. This is truly a post Zionist post-chassidic, post modern, post denominational gathering!

Finally, I made the commitments to the Rebbe in terms of learning, refining personal character traits and the promise to come back next year.

I prayed for my patients, my family and all humanity for klal Yisrael and that sanity may soon prevail where wars, famine, torture and suffering will become diminished as people awaken to the truth about man's inhumanity to man. May the spirit of the Rebbe and his message become clearer as time goes on.