

My trip was motivated by a number of factors. The romance of travel, the exotic nature of Sofia park and my research into Countess Pototski's life, her relationship with the Sultan, the Empress of Russia and her possible relationship with Reb Nachman. Motivated too by my learning of his life's work "Lekutei Moharan". His spirituality and Torah seemed to resolve for me the whole issue of the mystical notion of Divine contraction or "Tzimtzum" what I call the "incarnation theory of the divine" (and the controversy between the Alter Rebbe of Lubavitch and the Gaon or his disciple, Reb Chayim of Volozyn.) After three years of studying this topic, suddenly, right before my eyes was a Torah that demanded we hold the paradox of divine immanence and transcendence, that our lives are, in fact, a constant struggle between the two, and that the avodah, the spiritual path, was to hold the very paradox in tension.

My foray into the world of chassidut, prompted by reading a collection of Reb Shlomo Carlebach's teachings printed a year after his death, in 1994 found me attracted to IzbitzRadzyn and the world of Polish Chassidut (specifically of of Kotzk-Lublin). The spiritual demand was for the notion of 'birur', the demanding constant self-analysis required to know one's place in time and one's psycho-spiritual state of mind and to refine the spirit by such in depth analysis.

However, I was frustrated by the dissonance between the brilliance of the Rebbe's Torah and the absence of a spiritual kind of manual as to get there, how to do this avodah, the inner work. Whereas, I had been studying Chabad literature (with my friend Yitzchak Chakiris) on a weekly basis and found it (then) to be intellectually brilliant but very heady, in Polish chassidut I found the heart of chassidut with its demand on a broken heart as a prerequisite for avodah. But even after all that I still felt a little in the cold. I still asked where were the steps to take and found little response beyond the theoretical. The 'trickle-down' theory of spirituality where fixing the head would eventually inflame the heart, was turned around in Polish "Chagat" chassidut and the Kotzker's demand to fix the heart first which was paramount. Yet the yesod and its addictions remained to be addressed. (I remember when I first came to Brooklyn to do my "shomer shabbes" internship at Maimonides Hospital in 1974 I had met the group of hassidim centered around Reb Gedaliah Fleer who expounded Breslov chassidut and I spent many a Shabbat at his home, but did not feel very connected to the chassidut itself at the time. It was more a social group for me, although I loved his Torah). That had been my last contact with Breslov until a friend showed me chapter 64 in Lekutei Moharan. Suddenly aware of the Rebbe's demand for fixing the yesod and Tikkun Habris, he was, in fact, demanding that we "do not fool ourselves" regarding our spirituality!!! "Do not think you can fix the brain (Chabad) or even the heart (ch! agat) until you have fixed the yesod! ("Nahi")" he seemed to say.

So I began to learn Breslov Torah and discovered that his chassidut was unlike all others. It was NOT a club, there was NO specific dress, frequent "fabrengen" nusach of t'fillah, rather he made only three demands:

1. Learn daily, the codes! shulchan aruch (ugh! the behavioral Judaism! I had run from all those years! "comes back" with a vengeance) you need the 4 ells of halacha! Hitbodedut: meditation and direct conversation with God: another difficult avodas for me: to actually talk to God as a father, as if He really existed!!!! oi vey! you mean we can no longer hide behind ritual!! The kibbutz. This meant a pilgrimage to come to visit the Rebbe once a year on Rosh Hashana. Well since learning this stuff weird things were happening to me...I came back to the daf yomi! The daily page of Talmud study after so many years of resentment (I cannot distinguish whether the resentment was directed to in-laws or the daf itself!) I found I was up at 5:00 a.m. trotting off to shul to "do the daf" (actually the

"killer-daf" kodshim to be precise! what a place to join the cycle!) with that most gentle of Rabbis who encouraged me to join, Rabbi Yehoshua Eichenstein (on Touhy).

Then a hassidic rock group called "Simply Sfat" showed up in Chicago and their music was so energized and different from the usual shlock rock we hear these days. They came from Sfat and invited me there on my next trip to Israel.

So on my trip in the summer of 2003, I dragged my parents up to the Holy city of Safed at dawn to pray with the Breslovers on Rosh Chodesh Elul in the Trisk shul in Sfat. We then have an audience with Reb Koenig the son of Reb Gedaliah Koenig who had written the sefer "Chayei nefesh" a treatise that claimed there was no significant difference between the spirituality of Reb Chayim Volozyn and Chassidut.

All he had to tell me besides blessing us (giving a bracha) and inscribing his father's book for me, was "are you going to Uman?", the first time I had been challenged with this question which I answered instinctively "yes". I had not planned it, I had not discussed it with my family but it seemed as if whatever questions I had about my life, the questions I could not discuss in the presence of my parents and his own ill health, that morning, were answered in those few moments, "go to Uman" was his implied demand. So I made my travel plans and having shocked my folks, landed in Munich erev Rosh Hashana. I am incensed that there is 10 hour layover. What kind of planning and travel agency is this! I call the agency but get little response. Here I am in Munich, stuck. I hire a car and start to drive. I see Dachau on the map and drive on the autobahn for about 20 minutes arriving in this neat town with fotoshops and restaurants, cafe houses and beer halls. Then suddenly at the end of town I feel a looming presence, barbed wire heralding the entrance to another world, a sinister reminder, a presence in this normality, of another darker reality.

I walked through the entrance to the Dachau concentration camp, the way my Uncle Emil must have done as a frightened young man in 1938, forever wounded by his experience here. (Peering through his window on Cornwall Avenue in Finchley some 50 years later I could never understand his paranoia. Dad even took him to the local police station once to convince him that the police were not looking for him, that he had nothing to fear, to no avail.)

I went straight to the archive hall and looked up his name on the computer records. Fisher or Fischer, Emil, born around 1910, deported from Vienna to Dachau around 1938. 7 names appeared. None of them fit his description. I leave frustrated and walk to the memorials. A huge cross stands down the central road, the Catholic monument to a suffering Jesus. To its left the Protestant monument and to the right the Jewish memorial.

Jesus, here in Dachau. a Carmelite nunnery behind it, I wander in and cannot bear the incense and nuns floating around it. I go to the Jewish memorial a dark quartz stone quarried into the ground a fitting darkness designed by an Israeli sculptor.

I put on tallis and t'fillin there davening for memory and Jewish history and the erasure of Jewish identity even here in their darkest place and hour. 60 years later all we have is the erasure of memory. I wander to the video presentation hall where a BBC documentary barely mentions Jews. "Man's inhumanity to man; Jews and other victims, homosexuals, gypsies, Communists Poles and priests". Not to belittle their heroism and victim hood, (I do not play the victim stakes game.) But the majority of victims were Jews and the documentary seemed to downplay the ethnic character of the victim rather playing its own hermeneutic of suffering humanity. In that Jews once again lose identity and the victim is robbed after the grave, of his and her identity.

I leave the hall to wander around the darkest area, a beautifully wooded grove that could have been a Buddhist meditation wood but was rather the site of the worst crimes. A shooting gallery where

humans were shot along with a ravine of blood. Then the gas chamber and the crematorium. So clean and sanitary now, museum like. I stood in the gas chamber remembering the stories of the clutching nails on the walls with blood staining the white pasted walls from the nails attempting to climb above other humans to stay with the oxygen that was slowly rising as the gas came up.

Beyond belief, I just could not absorb the immensity of this small chamber and the numbers that passed through here in their last breathing moments of life. Too much to even comprehend.

I leave Dachau glad I came because Providence would have me come here, before Rosh Hashana (a usual custom to visit the cemetery on this day). I travel to downtown Munich and go to the Jewish community center where I meet the Chief Rabbi and we exchange blessings for the New Year and talk of YU where he graduated and pleasantries. I pass quickly the famous town center with its glockenspiels where Hitler held his early rallies. It is a beautiful day and the town is bustling.

On to Kiev where I disembark into another dark world of ex-communism. The Breslovers arriving fill the hall and the taxi-drivers argue like in Ben Gurion, but here one is wary of the mafia groups and the absence of alternatives. We get stopped twice along the highway and are forced to bribe local Police who seem to know that 17000 visas have been issued and lots of cash is coming their way. Arriving in Uman in the dark night with little outside lighting on the streets I do not know where to find Rabbi Chaim Kramer who was to have found me accommodations. One of the men of the Sfat group find me (Eliyahu the guitarist) and (like in Sfat) goes out of his way to show me to my quarters.

I try to sleep that night but others snore in the room. They get up during the night for s'lichot etc. Next day I try to get to the shrine of Rabbi Nachman, his 'Tzion' (the grave) but it is too crowded. Everywhere hundreds of Israelis are pouring through the town, bringing suitcases and hustling and bustling like a small town in Northern Israel. That night, however, all quietens down as we go to shul for the services. A makeshift factory able to contain some 7000 men it is overwhelming. I have never prayed with so many people, not even at the Wall in Jerusalem. I could not pray. Too much churning in my soul I guess. Next morning, feeling somewhat claustrophobic, I leave the temporary 'Jewish quarter' near the shrine wander into town. I saw Sofia park and so much wanted to enter but there was an entrance fee, and proscribed from touching money on this holy day, I could not fulfill one of my goals in going to Uman, to experience that place.

On the way back I saw some Breslovers jumping into the local reservoir but I was disturbed about this place. Stories that the Nazis had, in 1941, taken all the Jews out of Uman and had them drowned while the local Ukrainians looked on and prevented them from surfacing. I was worried that this had been the place. Later an old Ukrainian told me that they were taken further up stream about ten minutes outside of town, and that there is a memorial there marking the site. I was unable to do Tashlich in a ravine where Jews might have died.

Next day I rose at 3 a.m. and made it to the Rebbe's Tzion. By now I was at my lowest point. Wandering aimlessly and not feeling much in my hunger, constipation and sleeplessness. I followed the advice of a Rabbi Tauber, a Breslover who is the dayan in L.A., who suffered greatly in his own personal life, who told me to go to the grave and do a meditation or hisbodedus. I went at 3 a.m. and poured out my heart, not actually praying to the Rebbe, but more just showing up and speaking to him as if he were alive and I was in a private audience or yechidus. "I have come to you and want to daven for my family, my friends, my patients and my broken life". I recited the famous 10 psalms the tikkun and went back to bed. Next morning I was finally able to pray in shul! Along with 7000

men. I had to finally let go of all the resentments and preconceived petty notions of what prayer should be. It was truly amazing. When all were engrossed in the silent prayer and quiet one could hear a pin drop. The baal musaf had a sweetness and his tears made me cry. The shofar was so shrill it pierced my heart. They brought in a sephardi to do a "truah gedola" which sounded like a baby crying. But the custom most different of all was my introduction into the practice of clapping "as if" we were at a coronation! It was cathartic for me. We were actually clapping and applauding the KING of KINGS!

That afternoon I had a taste of fresh cooked fish from the Satmar group and davened mincha with them. I also met some Breslovers from Monsey including the songwriter or archivist for Reb Shlomo who lives in Modiin.

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As I try to make sense of this trip, three things come to mind.

- 1) The suffering, physically with exhaustion, some fear, frustration, food issues and constipation are all part of the pilgrim's suffering which is also found in other traditions. Like crawling on one's knees around the mountain of Lasha before entering the shrine. I had certainly felt that there "menious" or obstacles as the Rebbe had predicted for all those wishing to come.
- 2) The glorious davening, the shofar and the clapping will stay with me and inspire throughout the year ahead. It was truly divine when men come together to worship. Going to the Tzion was like none other, for the Rebbe had made a commitment to those who would come-and I had arrived-, joining the band of the few who had made it. Maybe I too maybe called Al Haj before MY name now! (oops sorry wrong tradition!)
- 3) The trip was, for me, to be entitled "From Dachau to Uman: the erasure and celebration of Jewish memory" since the moment Yom Tov was out there was an explosion of dancing on the streets of Uman. And, after all, the Rebbe had chosen it precisely because of the Jewish martyrs there. So here we were celebrating Jewish memory 200 years after his death and after their martyrdom even as late as 1941, otherwise this would have been confined to the dustbin of Jewish history and a possible PhD thesis. The Rebbe somehow foresaw the evil to befall Europe and in his own way demands his Chassidim come on the Holy Days to this site where he lies buried along with those Jewish martyrs from the Gonta (1764) massacre in a celebration of Jewish memory, maybe he even knew of the Nazis who would repeat the same dance of death in Uman. Maybe he saw that all of Europe would one day drip with Jewish blood and that the Yidden of Eretz Yisrael, Yemenites, sefardim, drug addicts, university prof! essors would all one day leave the Holy Land to come to this sacred spot equal in holiness to the kedusha of Eretz Yisrael, to dance and fix the death and blood and evil and the silence of Dachau.

So, I returned home and completed the chodesh and the yomim tovim a journey which began with Rosh Chodesh Elul in Sfat and ended Hoshana rabba. Who knows the future. I feel I have been on a roller coaster ride. May Hashem grant refuah a healing to all my patients and a healing to my family and self.