

## The Breslover Hasidim, the Shoah, and Points of Messianic Witness

By Jim Melnick, LCJE International Coordinator

### Origin of the Breslev Movement and the Breslover Hasidism

A number of years ago I happened to be flying out of Borispol Airport in Kiev and was stunned to see hundreds of Hasidic Jews milling around the airport. I later discovered that these were the Breslover Hasidim, assembling in Kiev from around the world on their way to the grave of their sect's founding in the small Ukrainian city of Uman. Alternatively known as 'Breslov', 'Breslev' or 'Bratzlav,' the movement was founded by Rabbi or Rebbe Nachman (also written 'Nahman' with a hard 'h'), who lived for a time in the town of Breslov in Ukraine, from whence this branch of Hasidism derives its name. Nachman (1772-1810) was a great-grandson of the founder of Hasidism, Baal Shem Tov. His movement is often referred to as simply 'Breslev'. When Nachman lived, Ukraine was then part of the Russian Empire and under the authority of the Tsar.

Years after this airport incident, I and some of the staff of Chosen People Ministries had just finished our third Russian Messianic Leaders conference, held here in Kiev in 2012. I had just said good-bye to Mitch Glaser, Michael Zinn and Vladimir and Inna Pikman and was planning to spend an extra day sight-seeing in Kiev. The hotel where we had all stayed that week was virtually empty at the time. A short time later I went up to the registration desk and asked about paying for one more night. I was quite surprised when the hotel clerk said, "Oh no, we are completely sold out tonight." What, I thought, could be happening?! It didn't take long to discover why. Before long, a number of Hasids began arriving at the hotel – Breslovers once again! They were starting to flood Kiev hotels on their way to Uman. A small group of them near me began discussing how they were going to leave Kiev to travel down to Uman. They planned to stop along the way to visit the gravesites of other famous rabbis along the way, a practice known as *Kivrei Tzadikim*.<sup>1</sup> Within Hasidism, praying at the gravesites of *tzaddikim* ("the righteous ones") is believed to make one's prayers more acceptable to God because of the (alleged) righteousness of the *tzaddik* himself. Some rabbis, however, denounce this practice, viewing it as a form of idolatry.<sup>2</sup> However, the practice remains popular within the Breslev movement and various other Hasidic sects.<sup>3</sup>

The Breslovers (also known as the "Bratslavers" or "Breslevers") have thus fascinated me for many years. With respect to their reach and influence, they are one of the most significant groups

---

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, [www.kevorim.com](http://www.kevorim.com) for links and information about how widespread this practice is within Judaism.

<sup>2</sup> "Jerusalem – Rabbi: Traveling Overseas to 'Kivrei Tzadikim' A Form of Idolatry," September 13, 2009. <http://www.vosizneias.com/38301/2009/09/13/jerusalem-rabbi-traveling-overseas-to-kivrei-tzadikim-a-form-of-idolatry/>

<sup>3</sup> The practice is so important to Breslovers that dozens of them were reportedly involved in storming Joseph's Tomb in Shechem (Nablus) in 2011, barricading themselves in the tomb complex from the Israel Defense Force soldiers ("Breslov Hasidim Storm Joseph's Tomb," May 4, 2011. [http://failedmessiah.typepad.com/failed\\_messiahcom/2011/05/breslov-hasidim-storm-josephs-tomb-456.html](http://failedmessiah.typepad.com/failed_messiahcom/2011/05/breslov-hasidim-storm-josephs-tomb-456.html))

in worldwide Hasidism. In 2010, a *Jerusalem Post* reporter examined “why Breslov [Hasidism] has come to attract so many young Jews.”<sup>4</sup>

I have also wanted to write this paper because we in the Messianic/Jewish missions community have produced virtually next to nothing about this Hasidic sect. A quick search of our extensive LCJE database of papers and articles yielded only two hits for “Breslov” or “Breslover,” and one of them was a very brief reference to the Breslovers in a paper that I did in 2003 comparing this sect to the Chabad Lubavitch Hasidim. That comparison discussed how the Breslovers, who lost Nachman in 1810, came to be known as the *Toite Hasidim* (the ‘dead Hasidim’) because Nachman had no successor. In that sense, the Breslovers share a similarity with the Lubavitchers, who were plunged into crisis in 1994 after the death of their last Rebbe, Menachem Mendel Schneerson.<sup>5</sup> Rebbe Nachman and the founder of Chabad Lubavitch, Rabbi Shneur Zalman, were also contemporaries. According to a biography of Nachman titled, *Until the Mashiach*, Nachman once tried to intercede in a major dispute between Zalman and a then leading rabbi in Israel, Rabbi Avraham Kalisker, over funds collected for the Jewish community in Israel.<sup>6</sup>

There is another similarity between Breslover Hasidism and the Lubavitch Chabad Hasidism that has emerged in recent years. Some of its adherents speak of Rebbe Nachman as if he were still alive – a practice that many Lubavitchers have also now adopted with respect to Schneerson. Elie Wiesel wrote about this many years ago in *Souls on Fire* (1972): For Breslovers, he said, “the Tzaddik of Bratzlav [Rabbi Nachman] remains alive. When they speak of him, they use the present tense.”<sup>7</sup>

Although the core members of Breslev may only number in the thousands, they remain a very important Hasidic group with a significant impact around the world. This influence extends way beyond their core numbers.<sup>8</sup> It is important that we understand what they are all about.

---

<sup>4</sup> Ben Hartman, “First Person: The kids are alright.” *Jerusalem Post*. Sept. 29, 2010. <http://www.jpost.com/Magazine/Features/First-Person-The-kids-are-alright>. Also reprinted in “Letter from Uman: Behind Breslov’s Success,” Sept. 29, 2010. Cited on FailedMessiah.com [http://failedmessiah.typepad.com/failed\\_messiahcom/2010/09/behind-breslovs-success-456.html](http://failedmessiah.typepad.com/failed_messiahcom/2010/09/behind-breslovs-success-456.html)

<sup>5</sup> Jim Melnick, “The Struggle within Chabad Lubavitch: Views on King Messiah and Isaiah 53,” LCJE.net, [www.lcje.net/papers/2003/melnick.doc](http://www.lcje.net/papers/2003/melnick.doc)

<sup>6</sup> *Until the Mashiach: Rabbi Nachman’s Biography: An Annotated Chronology* (by Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan; Edited by Rabbi Dovid Shapiro, Jerusalem: The Breslov Research Institute, 1985), p. 53.

<sup>7</sup> Elie Wiesel, *Souls on Fire* (1972), p. 200. For a more recent account of Breslovers speaking of Nachman in the present tense, see Ben Hartman’s 2010 article (“First Person: The kids are alright”) in *The Jerusalem Post Magazine* on his visit to Uman: “...the rest of the gang spoke of Rabbi Nahman in the present tense, as a living, breathing conduit to God, who understands their spiritual journey, their questions about observance, and their own failings before the Almighty...” <http://www.jpost.com/Magazine/Features/First-Person-The-kids-are-alright> (Sept. 29, 2010)

<sup>8</sup> One of main Breslov websites states that it “would be practically impossible to give more than the roughest numerical estimate of the size of the main Breslov communities in Israel and America. There is no such thing as a membership roll of the movement.” There are believed to be “several thousand families in Jerusalem and Bnei Brak” in Israel and a much smaller community in Safed, Israel. (Breslov.org <http://www.breslov.org/breslov-faq/#4>). There are also small Breslover communities in New York City and some other Western cities.

## Why Do They Go to Uman?

The High Holy day of Rosh Hashanah is central to Breslev theology. Each Rosh Hashanah, thousands upon thousands of Breslovers and other Jews from around the world descend upon Uman. There are numerous videos available on the Internet showing these groups coming to Uman, often dancing in an exuberant atmosphere. Why do they come to Uman from the four corners of the earth? The answer lies in a simple promise, but one that has resounded for more than two centuries among Nachman's followers. According to the Israeli Breslov website, that promise was this: "*If someone comes to my grave, gives a coin to charity and says these ten Psalms, I will pull him out from the depths of Gehinnom. It makes no difference what he did until that day, but from that day on, he must take upon himself not to return to his foolish ways.*"<sup>9</sup> The ten Psalms - 16, 32, 41, 42, 59, 77, 90, 105, 137, and 155 – are known as the *Tikkun HaKlali*.

The Israeli Breslov site claims that Rebbe Nachman's promise or declaration "was revolutionary. No other tzaddik had – or has – ever made such a promise." This promise emerged from the Kabbalistic view by some Hasidim "that a tzaddik has the power to elevate souls, including those that have not made even the slightest move toward spirituality."<sup>10</sup> This is what draws thousands of Breslovers on these pilgrimages to Uman. The pilgrimages have resulted in the construction in Uman of one of the largest synagogues in the world.<sup>11</sup> According to one account, "Nachman's followers have visited his grave almost every Rosh Hashanah from the Napoleonic era to the present."<sup>12</sup> The gravesite is so revered that in 2013 it was reported that some Breslovers were actually bringing their infant sons to Uman to be circumcised on or near Nachman's grave – a practice denounced as "bizarre" by a rabbi of another Hasidic sect.<sup>13</sup>

## Nachman's Theology

Rebbe Nachman told his followers: "My fire will burn until the Mashiach will come..."<sup>14</sup> He was a thorough-going Kabbalist who studied the *Zohar* in his youth.<sup>15</sup> One example of the

---

<sup>9</sup> "Rebbe Nachman's Gravesite," Breslev.co.il (Undated article, but circa 2007. A statement at the end of the article says that much of the material in it "was taken from Against All Odds, published by Breslov Research Institute 2005"). [http://www.breslev.co.il/html/rebbe\\_nachmans\\_gravesite.aspx?id=21&language=english](http://www.breslev.co.il/html/rebbe_nachmans_gravesite.aspx?id=21&language=english)

<sup>10</sup> "Rebbe Nachman's Gravesite," op. cit.

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.shuls.us/Synagogues/world-largest-synagogues.html>

<sup>12</sup> Robert Eisenberg, *Boychiks in the Hood* (1995), pp. 88-89. A January 2014 proposal by a representative to the Ukrainian parliament would authorize local officials in Uman to charge Breslovers as much as \$100 per day to participate in these pilgrimages. (KEMOKiev.org, 14 February 2014. <http://www.kemokiev.org/ukrnews/456-nardep-regional-predlozhil-vvesti-v-umani-platnye-propuska-dlya-khasidov>). See also "Ukraine May Charge Jews \$100 Each to Visit Grave of Rabbi Nachman of Breslov," FailedMessiah.com, January 20, 2014. [http://failedmessiah.typepad.com/failed\\_messiahcom/2014/01/ukraine-may-charge-jews-100-each-to-visit-grave-of-rabbi-nachman-of-breslov-234.html](http://failedmessiah.typepad.com/failed_messiahcom/2014/01/ukraine-may-charge-jews-100-each-to-visit-grave-of-rabbi-nachman-of-breslov-234.html) Predictably, this proposal was greeted with a storm of protest; a much lower figure was then reportedly suggested. As far as is known, nothing related to this proposal has actually been implemented.

<sup>13</sup> "Breslov Hasidim Fly Days Old Infants to Uman to Circumcise Them on Rabbi Nachman's Grave, Sparking Outrage, Concern," FailedMessiah.com, October 15, 2013. [http://failedmessiah.typepad.com/failed\\_messiahcom/2013/10/breslov-hasidim-fly-days-old-infants-to-uman-to-circumcise-them-on-rabbi-nachmans-grave-sparking-outrage-345.html](http://failedmessiah.typepad.com/failed_messiahcom/2013/10/breslov-hasidim-fly-days-old-infants-to-uman-to-circumcise-them-on-rabbi-nachmans-grave-sparking-outrage-345.html)

<sup>14</sup> Cited in the Publisher's Preface to *Until the Mashiach: Rabbi Nachman's Biography: An Annotated Chronology* (by Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan; Edited by Rabbi Dovid Shapiro, Jerusalem: The Breslov Research Institute, 1985), p. xi.

mystical claims that some of his followers have made about him is recorded in the biography, *Until the Mashiach*: “he could not sleep at night, because the six hundred thousand letters of the Torah would pass before his eyes.”<sup>16</sup>

According to a controversial debate within the Breslover Hasidic world, Nachman allegedly once gave a secret talk about what he thought would be the attributes of the Messiah. He is said to have claimed that the Messiah “would begin his messianic mission as a young child,” and would “conquer the world without firing a single shot: his war will be a spiritual battle with a tidal wave of atheism that will have engulfed the world.” He will create entirely new types of medicines and “compose melodies with the power to arouse tremendous yearning and hunger for God.” He would come “not just to the Jews, but to all nations, and for the good of the whole world.”<sup>17</sup> Whether such beliefs actually sprang from Nachman himself, they clearly reflect the hopes and ideas about Messiah among some in the Breslev movement.

While many of his followers have faith in Nachman’s Rosh Hashanah promise in a mystical sense, and while Nachman himself spoke of his own fire burning “until the Mashiach will come,” some followers today seem to have gone much further and speak of him in almost divine terms. One song produced by Breslev Israel and sung in Uman speaks of ‘clinging’ to Rebbe Nachman, calling him “*Light of lights, who revives souls, the Tzaddik, foundation of the world...*”<sup>18</sup>

## **The Shoah and Breslover Hasidim**

Now we shall look at the Shoah and its impact on the Breslover Hasidim. The Holocaust devastated the Breslev movement in Europe primarily in three towns: Bratslav (Ukraine), Czestochowa (Poland) and Uman itself. Specific information on the number of Breslover victims is quite difficult to come by, but, according to the 2001 *Encyclopedia of Jewish Life Before and During the Holocaust* published by Yad Vashem, there were Breslover populations in those three locations prior to the Holocaust.<sup>19</sup> Breslover victims were part of the general numbers of Jewish victims from those localities.

### **Bratslav (‘Breslov’ or ‘Bratslaw’, Ukraine)**

Most of the Jews of the town of Bratslav “were followers of Nahman of Bratslav,” who arrived there “in 1802 and served as rabbi until 1808.” In 1939, the Jewish population of Bratslav was a little over 1,000. It fell to the Nazis on 22 July 1941. Two labor camps were soon set up: “In

---

<sup>15</sup> *Until the Mashiach*, op. cit., pp. 9-10.

<sup>16</sup> From *Sichos HaRan* #176, 90, cited in *Until the Mashiach*, op. cit., p. 17.

<sup>17</sup> “Secret Breslov Document on Messiah To Be Released – Contains Rabbi Nachman’s Explanation of The Coming of Mashiach,” FailedMessiah.com, April 21, 2006.  
[http://failedmessiah.typepad.com/failed\\_messiahcom/2006/04/secret\\_breslov\\_.html](http://failedmessiah.typepad.com/failed_messiahcom/2006/04/secret_breslov_.html)

<sup>18</sup> Song produced by Breslev Israel (breslev.co.il), YouTube video, “A Glimpse of Real Joy.”  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oAnUpFY8p8Q>

<sup>19</sup> Shmuel Spector, Editor-in-Chief, *The Encyclopedia of Jewish Life Before and During the Holocaust*, Volumes I-III. Foreword by Elie Wiesel. Abridged English language edition (New York: New York University Press, 2001).

September 1942, 400 Jews were executed, including 85 children. Another 15 were shot on 18 January 1943. Only 227 Jews survived in the two camps.”<sup>20</sup>

### **Czenstochowa (Poland)**

Czenstochowa (Częstochowa) is perhaps best known as the site of the famous ‘Black Madonna’ painting from the 1300s and as a key place for Catholic pilgrimage in Poland. The Jewish population was large enough to support six Hasidic courts “and a number of *shtiblekh*... Among the large hasidic groups were the followers of R. Nahman of Bratslav....” The city fell to the Nazis on 3 September 1939, who soon launched a reign of terror “against the Jews, with men, women, and children seized in the streets for forced labor and abused, beaten, and robbed.” After being ordered into a ghetto in April 1941, “[m]any died of starvation and exposure in the harsh winter of 1941-42... The Orthodox also defied German bans and continued to pray and study in small groups... On 22 September, the Jews were herded together and selections made. About 7,000 were then deported to the Treblinka death camp.” This was followed by five additional *Aktions*: “In each, about 6,000 Jews were transported to Treblinka.” Within the city, “up to 2,000 Jews were murdered, including the residents of the old age home and 13 newly delivered mothers with their infants...” Hundreds of Jews were also executed at the Jewish cemetery. Surviving Jews from Czenstochowa were part of the Treblinka uprising of 2 August 1943. A small community of a little over 2,100 Jews was re-established in June 1946, “but many left in the face of Polish anti-Semitism and by 1962 just 200 remained.”<sup>21</sup>

### **Uman (Ukraine)**

Uman has been described as “a center of Hasidism, particularly Bratslav [Breslov], since R. Nachman of Bratslav was buried there.” The city fell to the Nazis on 1 August 1941: “In early September, over 1,000 Jews were locked into a cellar and suffocated to death. On 9 October, about 10,000 Jews were murdered in a mass *Aktion*.” Those who survived “were confined in a ghetto and subjected to a regime of forced labor under conditions of starvation and overcrowding. All were murdered in a final *Aktion* in April 1942.”<sup>22</sup>

### **Kamenets (Kamenets-Podilskiy)**

The city of Kamenets should be added to these three towns. It is one of the most ancient cities in Ukraine. While it is unclear if there was any significant number of Breslovers in Kamenets at the start of the Second World War, it seems likely that there were some. Over the years the Jewish population at times reached fifty per cent, and the city was also considered “a cradle” of Hasidic Judaism. It was once the subject of a famous visit by Nachman. An area outside of Kamenets is infamous as the first reported mass murder of Jews during the war. This massacre occurred in forests outside the city.<sup>23</sup>

---

<sup>20</sup> S. Spector, Editor-in-Chief, *The Encyclopedia of Jewish Life Before and During the Holocaust*, Volume I (2001), p. 185.

<sup>21</sup> S. Spector, op. cit., Volume I (2001), pp. 285-288.

<sup>22</sup> S. Spector, op. cit., Volume III (2001), p. 1361.

<sup>23</sup> See entry for “Kamyanets-Podilskiy,” JewishGen.org “KehilaLinks”, <http://kehilalinks.jewishgen.org/Kamyanets-Podilskiy/> (Compiled by Martin Davis); see also United States Holocaust Memorial Museum entry for “Kamenets-Podolsk,” <http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10005442> (Updated June 2013).

## Problems within the Breslev Movement

For articles about various current problems within Breslover Hasidism, one can visit the ‘Failed Messiah’ website (failedmessiah.com) and do a search under “*Breslov*” and see that there are a number of hits on various topics. One reported scandal from 2010 claimed that a leader in Israel’s Breslov community had been held captive for ten years, allegedly by his son and grandson.<sup>24</sup> Another scandal involved alleged sexual abuse involving a major Breslev rabbi, Eliezer Berland. Berland fled Israel for Morocco rather than face the charges, an incident that has rocked the Breslover community.<sup>25</sup> In November 2013, Berland was expelled from Morocco and next went to Zimbabwe. Very recently in March 2014, hundreds of Breslovers went to Zimbabwe to celebrate Purim with Berland.<sup>26</sup> In 2011, there was enough inappropriate behavior among the estimated 22,000 Breslover pilgrims flying to Uman that El Al published “a leaflet with strict instructions” on how to behave on these flights.<sup>27</sup>

## Flash Point: Cross Erected Near Nachman’s Gravesite

One potentially very serious flash point has arisen involving a cross that was erected in Uman by an unknown person or persons.<sup>28</sup> In 2013 it was defaced with Hebrew graffiti; Breslovers upset at the cross’s presence are suspected of being behind the graffiti. The graffiti on the statue of Jesus said: “To exact vengeance on the gentiles” and “Stop desecrating the name of God.” A spokesman for the Rabbi Nachman International Fund reportedly told a Russian news site that some of his less understanding co-religionists “could break or destroy the cross. That would lead to a genuine war between hasidim and Christians. We cannot allow that, so we request that the cross be moved to a different location.” A Ukrainian local in Uman was quoted as saying “If they touch the cross, we will retaliate on the grave of their tzaddik.”<sup>29</sup> The Chief Haredi Rabbi of

---

<sup>24</sup> “Jerusalem Breslov Leader Claims Held Prisoner By Son And Grandson For 10 Years,” Failedmessiah.typepad.com, Dec. 19, 2010 [http://failedmessiah.typepad.com/failed\\_messiahcom/2010/12/jerusalem-breslov-leader-kidnapped-held-by-son-and-grandson-for-10-years-123.html](http://failedmessiah.typepad.com/failed_messiahcom/2010/12/jerusalem-breslov-leader-kidnapped-held-by-son-and-grandson-for-10-years-123.html)

<sup>25</sup> “Fewer Breslov Hasidim Fly To Uman Amid Financial And Leadership Crisis,” FailedMessiah.typepad.com, Sept. 4, 2013, [http://failedmessiah.typepad.com/failed\\_messiahcom/2013/09/fewer-breslov-hasidim-fly-to-uman-amid-financial-and-leadership-crisis-456.html](http://failedmessiah.typepad.com/failed_messiahcom/2013/09/fewer-breslov-hasidim-fly-to-uman-amid-financial-and-leadership-crisis-456.html)

<sup>26</sup> “Hundreds of Hasidim Celebrate Purim With Accused Sex Criminal Rabbi,” March 17, 2014. FailedMessiah.com. [http://failedmessiah.typepad.com/failed\\_messiahcom/2014/03/hundreds-of-hasidim-celebrate-purim-with-accused-sex-criminal-rabbi-234.html](http://failedmessiah.typepad.com/failed_messiahcom/2014/03/hundreds-of-hasidim-celebrate-purim-with-accused-sex-criminal-rabbi-234.html)

<sup>27</sup> Danny Sadeh, “El Al to Hasidim: Don’t smoke on plane,” YNET. “After Trashing Planes and Fighting With Crew, El Al Lays Down the Law for Breslov Hasidim,” FailedMessiah.com, October 1, 2011. [http://failedmessiah.typepad.com/failed\\_messiahcom/2011/10/after-trashing-planes-and-fighting-with-crew-el-al-lays-down-the-law-for-breslov-hasidim-789.html](http://failedmessiah.typepad.com/failed_messiahcom/2011/10/after-trashing-planes-and-fighting-with-crew-el-al-lays-down-the-law-for-breslov-hasidim-789.html)

<sup>28</sup> “Ukraine May Charge Jews \$100 Each to Visit Grave of Rabbi Nachman of Breslov,” FailedMessiah.com, January 20, 2014. [http://failedmessiah.typepad.com/failed\\_messiahcom/2014/01/ukraine-may-charge-jews-100-each-to-visit-grave-of-rabbi-nachman-of-breslov-234.html](http://failedmessiah.typepad.com/failed_messiahcom/2014/01/ukraine-may-charge-jews-100-each-to-visit-grave-of-rabbi-nachman-of-breslov-234.html)

<sup>29</sup> Shmarya Rosenberg, “Breslov Hasidim Allegedly Defaced Statue of Jesus on the Cross, Ukrainian Observers Fear Retaliatory Violence,” FailedMessiah.com, August 17, 2013 [http://failedmessiah.typepad.com/failed\\_messiahcom/2013/08/breslov-hasidim-allegedly-defaced-statue-of-jesus-on-the-cross-ukrainian-observers-fear-retaliatory-violence-789.html](http://failedmessiah.typepad.com/failed_messiahcom/2013/08/breslov-hasidim-allegedly-defaced-statue-of-jesus-on-the-cross-ukrainian-observers-fear-retaliatory-violence-789.html)

Ukraine, Yaakov Bleich, reportedly said that the erection of the cross – which is said to be visible from Nachman’s gravesite - is a “clear provocation” and requested that it be removed.<sup>30</sup>

While all the stories on the FailedMessiah.com website should not necessarily be taken at face value, the site nevertheless does offer interesting internal insights about Breslev and other Hasidic communities that are largely unavailable anywhere else.

### **Points of Messianic Witness; A Former Breslover Hasid’s Testimony**

Steve Zober is an American Jewish believer in Jesus who is a former Breslover Hasid. Through email and phone interviews conducted in 2013-2014, Steve has graciously shared some of his insights about Breslover Hasidism. One of those insights is how much so many members of Breslev desire a personal relationship with God – a feature of many other Hasidim as well and part of the origin of this larger movement within Judaism going back to its founder, Baal Shem Tov. Although he left the Breslovers around 1976, in 1998-2000 he made three trips back to Israel and visited friends whom he used to know in the movement. By this time he was married and was a believer in Jesus. One of the things that especially struck him on one of the trips was how one of his friends, who is still in Breslev, ‘guarded his eyes’ from looking at a woman (Steve’s wife) even while being introduced.

Steve also shared at length about the practice of *Kivrei Tzadikim* as he experienced it himself when he was active in Breslev. Often, on Thursday nights before Shabbat, he said, groups would go on a circuit, starting at David’s Tomb in Jerusalem where they would recite psalms, then go to the Western Wall to pray, and finally go to Rachel’s Tomb in Bethlehem. He continues:

Breslevers as I knew them were very keen on going to the tombs of the very righteous...They were taught to read ten psalms in a certain order and that would help the one reading them get more righteous. Especially if they could get to Uman...at the tombstone of Rabbi Nachman. He would intercede for them to get to *Olam HaBah* – Heaven – if they could accomplish this feat. Hmmm...an intercessor who could prepare the way to heaven. Can you guess how this might be a jumping off point to the ONE who is at the right hand of the Father interceding for us, Whose grave is empty, Who has conquered death and Satan?! A lot of potential.<sup>31</sup>

Steve added that there was not a “type of zealous combative element” in Breslev when he was part of the movement during the 1974-1976 timeframe. Now, however, there is reportedly a faction of Breslev that is very militant along the lines of Yad L’Achim, according to a discussion with a Jewish believer in Israel who is familiar with current activity.

What made him leave the Breslovers, as the Lord was working on his heart? There were various factors - one of them, Steve recalls, occurred while he was still living in Mea Shearim in Jerusalem in the Breslev community. There was an incident on Shabbat: Mea Shearim has a reputation for responding very strongly to persons violating the Sabbath, such as cars being driven on Shabbat being stoned. Steve witnessed one of these incidents himself in Mea Shearim when a Breslev youth picked up a stone and threw it at a car, breaking the windshield. It troubled him; he thought, ‘It is considered *muktzeh* to pick up most objects on Shabbat. Here is someone

---

<sup>30</sup> “Take Down Jesus Statue, Ukraine’s Haredi Chief Rabbi Says,” FailedMessiah.com, August 22, 2013

[http://failedmessiah.typepad.com/failed\\_messiahcom/2013/08/take-down-jesus-statue-ukraines-haredi-chief-rabbi-says-567.html](http://failedmessiah.typepad.com/failed_messiahcom/2013/08/take-down-jesus-statue-ukraines-haredi-chief-rabbi-says-567.html)

<sup>31</sup> Email to the author from Steve Zober (dated January 9, 2014)

violating the Law by picking up a stone because someone else [the driver of the car] is also violating the Law.’ Both acts - driving on Shabbat and picking up and throwing a stone - were violations of the Law. But why was one supposedly justified but the other was not? The more he thought about it, the more it just didn’t make sense to him.

## **The Kiev Jewish Messianic Congregation (KEMO) and a Gospel Witness in Uman**

There is a Messianic Jewish Gospel witness in Uman itself. I learned this in 2012 after speaking with KEMO (KJMC) Pastor-Rabbi Boris Grisenko. KEMO is a Russian language acronym that stands for “Kiev Jewish Messianic Congregation.” The KEMO website lists a “daughter congregation” in Uman.<sup>32</sup> I would think that this is probably a home group of some kind.

### **H.O.P.E.: Expand to Europe?**

H.O.P.E. stands for “Hasidic Outreach Partnership for Evangelism.” It is a small network of ministries and individuals that I co-founded to help coordinate and encourage Gospel outreach to Hasidic Jews. Although currently U.S.-based, with an emphasis on New York City, we would very much like to expand this network to Europe, as well as Israel. We try to have conference calls 2-3 times a year, where we share information about recent developments, resources, and prayer requests. This could be one way to share information and resources about trying to reach the Breslover Hasidim and other Hasidic sects. Another group of mission workers in New York is also doing research and developing an Hasidic outreach training manual. For more information about H.O.P.E., please send an email to: [info@chutzpahnik.org](mailto:info@chutzpahnik.org).

### **A Personal Note**

Many of the towns that Rebbe Nachman and his followers traversed in the 19<sup>th</sup> century – towns with names such as Medzeboz, Medvedevka, and Kamenets – bring out feelings of identification with the region itself. My grandfather on my father’s side came from a little village that is a short drive today from the ancient city of Kamenets, where I once visited. As noted, Nachman himself once went to Kamenets in a trip that is famous within the movement.<sup>33</sup> Following this trip, he pursued a very arduous journey to Israel. After he returned from the Holy Land, Nachman made a match between his oldest daughter Adil and “the son of Rabbi Avraham Dov of **Chmelnick**.”<sup>34</sup> So, the names of the towns and villages of this region evoke a personal connection with my own background.

---

<sup>32</sup> KEMO (KJMC) Russian language website. See <http://www.kemokiev.org/congregations>

<sup>33</sup> Rebbe Nachman’s trip to Kamenets is filled with mystical overtones for Breslovers. Nachman claimed that the Baal Shem Tov had appeared to him in a vision and told him to go to that city. Later he made this comment to his followers: “Whoever knows why the Holy Land was first in possession of the Canaanites and only later settled by the Jews, will know why I first went to Kaminetz and then to *Eretz Yisroel*.” (Found in *Until the Mashiach: Rabbi Nachman’s Biography: An Annotated Chronology*, by Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan; Edited by Rabbi Dovid Shapiro; Jerusalem: The Breslov Research Institute, 1985, pp. 24-26).

<sup>34</sup> *Until the Mashiach: Rabbi Nachman’s Biography: An Annotated Chronology*, op. cit., p. 54. On a side note, Yad Vashem published a photo of a 1987 memorial service for the Jews of Chmelnick [also written as ‘Chmielnik’] who perished in the Holocaust, available at: <http://collections.yadvashem.org/photosarchive/en-us/56455.html>



I also think that for most of us working in Jewish ministry, our hearts are deeply moved as we think of these little *shtetls* scattered across Ukraine, Russia and Belarus within the Jewish Pale of Settlement – a world that is gone now but was revived so vividly for us in the famous movie and play, “Fiddler on the Roof” and the fictional village of ‘Anatevka’. The closest thing that we have today to that Jewish world - which vanished long ago - is Mea Shearim in Jerusalem. As we think about ministry to the Breslovers and other Hasidim around the world, I recall my own first visit to Mea Shearim in 1995. As a group of us was going down one of the many winding streets within Mea Shearim, we suddenly came upon an Hasidic wedding celebration that was just getting underway. I felt as if I had been transported to another world, and, in a sense, I had been. The experience touched me deeply enough that I began to write a novel about it – a project that, alas, remains unfinished!

I share this story for two reasons: first, it is right and fitting that we should remember this history and feel the sense of loss for this part of the Jewish world that has been destroyed. We need to know this history! This is very important for our witness and for our understanding. But, on the other hand, we must not be careful not to idealize this Hasidic world overly much, nor allow it to in any way paralyze us from reaching out to the remnants of that world which survive today – in this case, in Mea Shearim itself and other Hasidic pockets around the world – in Jerusalem, New York, Paris, London and elsewhere. Think of the other ‘Steve Zober’s’ who today are still in Breslev and various Hasidic sects who are earnestly searching for a personal relationship with God, who are so hungry for it and try to achieve it with the greatest zeal, “but not according to knowledge.” (Romans 10:2). We must continue to work at finding new points of Messianic witness into that world with the Good News of eternal life in Messiah Yeshua.

*Jim Melnick*  
[lcje.int@gmail.com](mailto:lcje.int@gmail.com)  
[info@frji.org](mailto:info@frji.org)