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The Breslov Mesorah

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There were several Breslov communities in Ukraine during the 19th century until Stalin destroyed them in the 1930s, including Uman, Breslov, Teplik, Dashev, and Tcherin, of which Uman and Tcherin were the largest. During the 1920s, Breslover Chassidus began to spread in Poland, too, largely through the efforts of the fiery Rabbi Yitzchok Breiter, who later perished in the Holocaust. (Reb Yitzchok Breiter traveled to Uman for Rosh Hashanah until WWI. He was in touch with Breslovers in Uman already by Pesach 5666 [Spring 1905].)

In addition, there were a few Breslovers in Eretz Yisrael, beginning with disciples of the Rebbe and Reb Noson in Tzefas and Tiveria, and continuing until the present. The letters Rabbi Noson of Tiveria (son of Reb Leibel Reuven's, a close disciple of Reb Noson), published as "Nesiv Tzaddik," are an inspiring body of work, full of spiritual guidance, as well as historical information. Inevitably there were different groups with different leaders; but by and large the Breslover Chassidim got along with each other, and their ahavas chaverim seems to have been very strong in most times and places.

Not all of the Rebbe's followers accepted Reb Noson as the preeminent teacher after the Rebbe's passing, but we have no record that this ever led to actual strife. In fact, several prominent members of other *chaburos* (groups) sent their sons to learn from Reb Noson; case in point, Reb Hirsch Leib was a follower of the Rebbe's talmid Reb Shmuel Isaac, but he sent his son Reb Nachman – later to become the Tcheriner Rov – to Reb Noson. Similarly, Reb Naftoli sent his son Reb Ephraim to Reb Noson. None of these other groups lasted after their founders passed away, while Reb Noson alone succeeded in enabling the Rebbe's light to endure – as the Rebbe had indicated in calling Reb Noson "my Yehoshua." In Uman at the turn of the 20th century, there were different teachers, such as Reb Avraham ben Reb Nachman, Reb Shimshon Barsky, Reb Avraham Sternhartz, etc. Yet they all were close with one another, despite any differences of viewpoint or approach.

When the surviving remnants of European Breslov relocated to Eretz Yisrael during the 1930s and thereafter, more pronounced differences began to emerge. The Polish Breslovers were from a different cultural background than the Russians / Ukrainians, and both were different than scions of old-time Yerushalayim families who became Breslovers. So they occasionally had different ways of doing things and seeing things. Plus they had somewhat different mesorahs (traditions).

Born in Poland, Reb Yisrael Karduner discovered a copy of Tikkun HaKlalli in his youth, and eventually traveled to Tcherin and Uman to study at the feet of Reb Noson's talmidim. He eventually made his way to Eretz Yisrael, where was mekarev other Breslover Chasidim until his untimely death during an epidemic in 1920.

Reb Avraham ben Reb Nachman, son of Reb Noson's close follower Reb Nachman Tulchiner, was a key figure in Uman and later in Yerushalayim, and he passed on many oral traditions (some of which are found in his "Kokhvei Ohr"). Plus Reb Avraham ben Reb Nachman was an extreme ascetic who had nothing to do with the materialism of this world, and his approach no doubt reflected his unusual personality. His "Bi'ur HaLikkutim" is one of the most profound works ever written on Likkutei Moharan.

Then the tremendous *gaon* (preeminent scholar) and kabbalist Rav Avraham Sternhartz arrived in Yerushalayim from Ukraine in 1936 and provided a major link in the transmission of Breslover Chassidus to Eretz Yisrael.

Among the prominent Polish Breslovers in Eretz Yisrael were Reb Elchonon Spector (not to be confused with the Kovno Rov of the same name), whose letters are published in "Ginzei Abbah"; and after WWII, Reb Ephraim'l of Pshedbarz, author of "Oneg Shabbos," and the holy badchan (wedding jester) and baal menagen Reb Ben Zion Apter, among others.

After the War of Independence in 1948, the Yerushalayim Breslover community continued to grow, and soon extended to several neighborhoods. Reb Levi Yitzchok Bender, a Polish Breslover who had gone to Uman as a sixteen-year-old and miraculously survived the Stalinist persecutions, became a central figure in Meah

Shearim. He deserves most of the credit for building up the Breslov kehillah in Meah Shearim after the Holocaust. Reb Levi Yitzchok's oral histories were published in six volumes as "Si'ach Sarfei Kodesh."

Although much younger than Reb Avraham Sternhartz (in fact, he almost became Reb Avraham's son-in-law at one point), Reb Levi Yitzchok turned into something of an opponent of Reb Avraham. The lightning rod for this conflict ostensibly was Reb Avraham's position about forming a Breslover kibbutz (gathering) in Meron for Rosh Hashanah. Reb Avraham held that davenning in Meron on Rosh Hashanah near the kever (grave) of Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai is tantamount to davenning in Uman near the kever of Rebbe Nachman, given the profound connection between Reb Shimon and the Rebbe (see Rabbi Shmuel Moshe Kramer's "Chadi Rabbi Shimon" for a presentation of the Meroner shittah). This was a radical idea that Reb Levi Yitzchok and others could not accept, even though it came from one of Reb Avraham's towering stature.

This controversy deeply divided the community until Uman finally opened up again in the late 1980s. Reb Avraham's closest talmid, Reb Gedaliah Kenig, persisted in keeping the Meron gathering alive after his teacher's passing in 1955, and he was fiercely loyal to Reb Avraham's mesorahs. He published some of Reb Avraham's oral histories related to Likkutei Moharan in "Tovos Zichronos." Reb Gedaliah founded the Tzefat Breslov community at Reb Avraham's behest; and he authored "Chayei Nefesh," an exploration of the role of the tzaddik, written as a response to Rabbi Chaim of Volozhin's "Nefesh HaChaim." (Reb Gedaliah's other works remain in manuscript.)

Other close talmidim of Reb Avraham were Rabbi Moshe Burstein (now in his mid-90s) and his son Rabbi Nachman Burstein (now in his early 70s), who were "Meroners," but avoided being at loggerheads with Reb Levi Yitzchok as much as possible. Reb Moshe founded the Ohr Avraham Shul in the Katamon neighborhood of Yerushalayim, which later was sold and rebuilt in another neighborhood. During the last years of his life, Reb Avraham actually lived with Reb Moshe Burstein's family. Reb Shmuel Shapiro was a talmid of Reb Avraham and a "Meroner," who nevertheless remained close with Reb Levi Yitzchok. Reb Shmuel was a respected member of the Meah Shearim kehillah (community), known for his prishus (asceticism) and intense devotions, as well as for his kind and pleasant personality. A biography plus some of his letters was published as

“U’Shmuel Bekorei Shemo.” Rabbi Shmuel Horowitz, too, was a talmid of Reb Avraham who went on to become one of the great ovdim ("servants of God") and profound thinkers of his generation. Reb Shmuel’s father had been the chief rabbi of Tzefat and a prominent Chabad chassid, who initially fought his young son’s “conversion” to Breslov tooth and nail. However, later they not only became reconciled, but Reb Shmuel’s father helped to support him during some financial hard times. Reb Shmuel tells his story in the three-volume autobiography, “Yemei Shmuel.”

The Rosh Yeshiva of the Breslov yeshivah in Meah Shearim was Rabbi Elyah Chaim Rosen, a product of the Lomza Teshiva who had spent a number of his younger years in Uman. (Reb Elyah Chaim was the main teacher of Reb Chaim Kramer after he came to Eretz Yisrael as a bochur, as well as numerous other Breslover Chassidim today.). He was politically aligned with his lifelong friend, Reb Levi Yitzchok.

In Bnei Brak, Rabbi Shimon Bergstein and Rabbi Noson Zvi Kenig founded yeshivos and were important scholars. Reb Noson Zvi created numerous indexes and anthologies from the Breslov literature; biographical and bibliographical works; volumes of historical letters from Breslover Chassidim; and similar anthologies from the works of the RAMAK, ARI, and Tikkunei Zohar.

Summary:

In brief, there are at least two basic lines of transmission: 1) From Reb Noson to the Tcheriner Rav to Reb Avraham Sternhartz to Reb Gedaliah Kenig (Tzefas) and other talmidim of Reb Avraham; 2) from Reb Noson to Reb Nachman Tulchiner to Reb Avraham ben Reb Nachman to Reb Levi Yitchok Bender (Yerushalayim) and his talmidim. The “Poilisher” Breslovers might see Reb Yitzchok Breiter as the key person after Reb Avraham Sternhartz, or after Reb Avraham and Reb Shimshon Barsky, both of whom were teachers of Reb Yitzchok. (I’m not sure, because I never discussed this with any of them. Rabbi Moshe Yaakov Rosen and Rabbi Nachman Dov of Monsey or Rabbi Avraham Moshe Wasilski of Williamsburg would know more about this chapter of Breslov history.) Many Breslovers accept traditions from more than one mesorah, even if they have an allegiance to one in particular.

To become a true Breslover Chassid, it is essential to receive from teachers who are bearers of the mesorah. Otherwise, the “mesorah” one follows will be that of his own imagination. However, in the final analysis, the Rebbe speaks to each of us in his own way – through his writings and through his talmidim – and this is the main thing.