

Rabbi Elazar Mordechai Kenig on "The Rebbe's Rosh Hashanah"

Part I

This is not a verbatim translation, but a careful synopsis of Rav Kenig's remarks on the subject of going to the Rebbe, Rabbi Nachman of Breslov, *zatza*, for Rosh Hashanah, based on both written sources and the Breslov oral tradition that Rav Kenig received from his father and teachers of previous generations.

These remarks are taken from a conversation between the Rav and a Breslover *mashpi'a* who met with him in Monsey, NY, during Elul 5765 (Sept. 2005). The Rav's comments are not exhaustive explanations, but provide a basic perspective on this central issue in Breslov Chassidus.

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Traveling to the Tzaddik

There were six times during the year that the Rebbe and the Chasidim customarily gathered together. Three times the Chassidim would travel to the Rebbe, and three times the Rebbe would travel to the Chassidim. The three times the Chassidim traveled to the Rebbe were Rosh Hashanah, Shabbos Chanukah, and Shavuos. The three times that the Rebbe traveled to the Chassidim were Shabbos Shirah in the winter, and in the summer months, Shabbos Nachamu and one other Shabbos. On those occasions, he would go to Tcherin and sometimes other towns where his followers lived. However, the one time that the Rebbe said that it was an absolute imperative to come to him was Rosh Hashanah.

The Rebbe said that he could accomplish *tikkunim* on Rosh Hashanah that he could not accomplish at any other time during the year. This was the case during his lifetime. However, he also intended that this continue after his *histalkus*. The Rebbe passed away on 18 Tishrei 5571/1810, two weeks after Rosh Hashanah. Yet when the Chassidim came to him for his last Rosh Hashanah, he told them

that when they returned home, they should announce to all: "There is nothing greater than to come to me for Rosh Hashanah."

The Rebbe was mortally ill. He was unsure if he would have the strength to deliver his Torah lesson. He was extremely weak and coughed up a great quantity of blood. Between the first and second day, when the Rebbe usually delivered his Rosh Hashanah teaching, he called Reb Noson to his room and presented his dilemma. On the one hand, he was in grave danger and did not know how he could survive the strain of speaking. In addition, there was a great crowd and the space was not large enough, so everyone was physically crushed. On the other hand, he had prepared all summer long to deliver this lesson. Reb Noson understood that the Rebbe really wanted that he encourage him to speak. Therefore, Reb Noson responded that he would put the Rebbe's chair in the doorway, so that if there was an emergency, the Rebbe could immediately be removed. Then he encouraged him to try – and the Rebbe said that he was ready to sacrifice his life to deliver his lesson.

Everyone saw that he was at death's door. The Rebbe had already dictated his will in detail. Yet he told his followers that upon returning home, they should announce to others how important it was to come to him for Rosh Hashanah. From this, Reb Noson inferred that the Rebbe meant that we should continue to come to him on Rosh Hashanah even after his *histalkus*.

Reb Noson describes the Rebbe's last Rosh Hashanah in *Chayei Moharan* 406. A few days before Rosh Hashanah, Reb Aharon, the Rov of Breslov, visited the Rebbe, and was torn between remaining with him in Uman for Rosh Hashanah, or yielding to the written request of his congregation that he return home to them. The Rebbe did not try to prejudice Reb Aharon's decision in any way. After a painful period of vacillation, he chose to leave. On Erev Rosh Hashanah, the Rebbe spoke of this, commenting that it was a great pity on Reb Aharon, who had truly wanted to remain, but was deterred. Then he declared with a strong voice, from the depth of his heart, "*Vie azoy zohl ich eich zog'n? Kein gressers der fuhn is nitt farhanen!* What can I tell you? Nothing is greater than this!" – that

is, to be with him on Rosh Hashanah. "As for the fact that other '*guhter Yidden*' [i.e. Chassidic leaders] do not say this – so this will be another question..."

Then Reb Noson states (and this is the main point): "I again understood from this the awesome obligation to be with him on Rosh Hashanah. Despite the fact that we already knew this in the past, from the profusion of the Rebbe's words and his awesome gestures at that time, we grasped the importance of this obligation even more, which is something that cannot be adequately explained in words. We also understood that he strongly desired that we should always come to him in Uman on Rosh Hashanah, even after his physical death, and that nothing is greater than this..."

Therefore, when we go to Uman today, why are we doing so? To whom are we going? We are going to the Rebbe.

The Rosh Hashanah Kibbutz: Past and Present

When the Rebbe passed away, there was no room left in the old *beis ha-chaim*. The new cemetery was already in use. However, Reb Noson understood that the Rebbe wished to be buried with the thousands of holy martyrs of the Haidamak massacres in the old *beis ha-chaim*. [These massacres took place in 1768, four years before the Rebbe's birth.] Therefore, he saw to it that the Rebbe was buried there. Just as the Chassidim came to the Rebbe during his life, so they continued to come to Uman. Of course, it was not feasible to pray in a *beis ha-chaim*. Therefore, they prayed the pre-dawn "*Zekhor Bris*" *selichos* on Erev Rosh Hashanah in various places from year to year. After *Shacharis*, they would go to the Rebbe's *tziyun* and recite *Tikkun ha-Klalli*, *vidu'i devarim*, *tefillos*, etc. When Yom Tov arrived, the *tzibbur* would again pray in whatever place they had arranged to use, whether a *shul* or another appropriate space. At last, more than twenty years later, Reb Noson built a Breslover *kloiz* in Uman overlooking the *beis ha-chaim*. From then on, the Breslover Chasidim used this site for the Rosh Hashanah *kibbutz*, until the doors of the *kloiz* were finally closed during the Stalinist era.

This shows us several things. When we go to Uman for Rosh Hashanah, we are going to the Rebbe. But how does this manifest itself? What do we actually do? The Rebbe did not want us to arrive at the last minute before Rosh Hashanah. He wanted us to come a day earlier, to pray the *selichos* of "*Zekhor Bris*" together, to make a *hakhanah* – to enter into the holiness of Rosh Hashanah properly. (The Rebbe once remarked that other *tzaddikim* would have wished to have a Rosh Hashanah like his Erev Rosh Hashanah.) Then we pray together on Rosh Hashanah itself. What is the meaning of this? Our gathering is not just for the sake of being together. Rather, because we have come the Rebbe, we are now praying together in Uman. This is what is meant when we speak of "being with the Rebbe for Rosh Hashanah."

[The questioner then asked about the Sefardim who come to Uman, some of whom do not pray in the main synagogue, but beside the Rebbe's *tziyun*.]

It doesn't make a difference. They are coming to the Rebbe.

As for praying at the *tziyun* – during World War II, the old cemetery was destroyed. However, the Breslover Chassidim saw to it that the Rebbe's *tziyun* was preserved. In recent years, they made this area into a place where it is possible to pray. So there is no problem that people organize *minyanim* there today.

[The Rav now reverts to his previous concern, the nature of the *kibbutz* itself.]

Let me repeat what I was saying, because there have been many mistakes concerning this issue.

The Kibbutz in Lublin

In Poland, there came a time when Breslover Chassidim could no longer go to the Rebbe for Rosh Hashanah. [Editor: The Rav refers to the time when the borders between Poland and the Ukraine were closed, during the early Communist period.] Therefore, they decided to form their own *kibbutz* in order to pray together on Rosh Hashanah.

Was this "The Rebbe's Rosh Hashanah?" Only in one limited aspect. They did not have the Rebbe's Rosh Hashanah. Why? Because they did not come to the Rebbe for Rosh Hashanah. However, they consoled themselves with the fact that at least they were able to come together and pray on Rosh Hashanah, which was also a great thing.

Rabbi Shimshon Barsky, a descendant of the Rebbe and one of the Gedolei Breslov in Uman, corresponded with the Breslover Chasidim in Poland. He wrote: "I have also discussed this [i.e. the formation of a Rosh Hashanah *kibbutz* in Lublin] with Rav Avraham Sofer [Sternhartz] in order to clarify this issue. The gathering of our brothers (*anshei shelomeinu*) in Poland, as in the past year, is beneficial only because it allows them to pray slowly and fervently. However, for the *tikkun* of [the Rebbe's] Rosh Hashanah, all of our brothers must yearn to come to Uman – because [the Rebbe's] Rosh Hashanah is only there, and in no other place. Thus stated Reb Noson, of blessed memory" (*She'aris Yisrael*, Letter 62).

[The questioner then asks Rav Kenig about the Breslover Rosh Hashanah *kibbutz* in Meron, which has existed for many decades.]

The Kibbutz in Meron

After Rabbi Avraham Sternhartz (who was a great-grandson of Reb Noson and a grandson of the Rav of Tcherin) came to Eretz Yisrael in 1936, he wrote his *kuntres "Amaros Tehoros."* There, he explains his views on praying near the grave of Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai in Meron when one cannot go to Uman for Rosh Hashanah.

Reb Avraham left Uman for Eretz Yisrael at the last minute. After Rosh Hashanah of 5697 / 1936, the Breslover Chassidim in Uman were no longer allowed to pray as a *tzibbur* in the Breslover *Kloiz*. Only a small remnant continued to pray in a house in secrecy. Therefore, he determined that when it is impossible to go to the Rebbe, as had become the case in Eretz Yisrael, one must travel to Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai in Meron. There is a profound

connection between Reb Shimon and the Rebbe, as is well known and mentioned in numerous sources. Therefore, Reb Avraham concluded that one must travel to Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai, where it is easier to connect to the Rebbe.

[Editor: For more on this subject in detail, see Rabbi Shmuel Moshe Kramer, *Chadi Rabbi Shimon*. Among many other sources, he cites the statement of Rabbi Avraham ben Nachman, another major Breslov figure: "Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai is the aspect of this above-mentioned *tzaddik*, whose engages in the *tikkunim* of Rosh Hashanah through the souls that come to him and become unified with him" (*Bi'ur ha-Likkutim* on *Likkutei Moharan* I, 61); see there at length. In addition, Reb Avraham Sternhartz possessed many traditions from Reb Noson's *talmidim* about this connection.]

Again, this reflects the same idea: on Rosh Hashanah, one goes to the *tzaddik*. The procedure in Meron was the same as it had been in Uman. One would come a day earlier in order to recite the *selechos* of "*Zekhor Bris*." This would be followed by *Shacharis*, after which one would recite *Tikkun ha-Klalli*, etc. Then on Yom Tov, the *'olam* would pray together. All of this would take place in the synagogue that is built on Reb Shimon's gravesite [which is not in a *beis ha-chaim*].

At that time in Jerusalem, there was also a *kibbutz* for Rosh Hashanah, for the most part made up of Breslover Chassidim from Poland. They stayed in Jerusalem because they felt that it was enough to pray together on Rosh Hashanah. Many of these people had never gone to Uman, and had only experienced the *kibbutz* in Lublin. Therefore, they were content with what they were used to. [Therefore, they did not accept Reb Avraham's argument that it was imperative to go to Meron.]

Two Other Mistakes

Another error was that of certain people who believed that the main thing is to be with the Rebbe only on Erev Rosh Hashanah. However, for Rosh Hashanah itself, one could go wherever one wished. Reb Noson had inferred from the Rebbe that

we should come to him for Rosh Hashanah even after his *histalkus*, just as we did during his lifetime. However, the Rebbe never spoke about Erev Rosh Hashanah.

Some people thought that gathering in a synagogue *nikra al shemo* – established in the Rebbe's name – was sufficient. This, too, was incorrect. The synagogue established in the Rebbe's name has no direct bearing on the *'inyan* of Rosh Hashanah, for we see that for more than twenty years after the Rebbe's *histalkus*, they did not establish such a synagogue.

There is no *'inyan* of Erev Rosh Hashanah without Rosh Hashanah, and there is no *'inyan* of a synagogue *nikra al shemo* without the place of the *tzaddik*. The *'inyan* of Rosh Hashanah is to come to the Rebbe, as when he was still alive.

On Erev Rosh Hashanah we visit the Rebbe's *tziyun*, as it states in *Shulchan Arukh* about the custom of visiting *kivrei tzaddikim* at this time – and of course, this is related to the *tikkunim* of Rosh Hashanah. Then on Rosh Hashanah we are with the Rebbe, and pray together with the Rebbe.

As Rabbi Yitzchak Breiter wrote in his *Shir Yedidus* ("Song of Love"):

Rosh kol shanah vi-shanah tzivah le-hiskabetz 'al tziyuno ha-kadosh Umanah / Le-hispallel 'imo yachad bir'nanah, ve-litz'ok 'al nefilas ha-Melukhah bi-kavannah.

Every Rosh Hashanah he enjoined us to convene at his holy burial place in Uman / With him to pray together, and the descent of the Kingdom sincerely to bemoan.

Convergence of Souls

During the year, when people travel to the *tzaddik*, they do so as individuals, even when they are part of a group. However, when they travel to the Rebbe for Rosh Hashanah, they all share in a collective undertaking. All of the Rebbe's followers convene and become bound to one another, to the point that they form

one whole on Rosh Hashanah. There is a unification that is performed by the *tzaddik*, and a unification that depends upon his followers.

In the lesson "*Tikk'u / Tochakhah*" (*Likkutei Moharan* II, 8, which is the lesson the Rebbe delivered on that last Rosh Hashanah), the Rebbe quotes *Sefer Yetzirah*: "Two stones build two houses, three stones build six houses, four build twenty-four, five equals one hundred twenty," etc. Do you see the progression? One keeps multiplying each new number by the sum of the previous numbers. Thus, by the time one gets to the number thirteen, one already has billions. Similarly, the Rebbe states that with each person who joins the *kibbutz* on Rosh Hashanah, the total combination of souls increases exponentially. The *tzaddik* works with the souls of all who come to him, and with them he builds "houses"; he combines them in all sorts of ways.

What does "combination" mean? It means that they become incorporated into one another, and form one integrated spiritual entity. What are "stones?" The stones are letters. What are "houses?" Each combination of letters makes a "house." The letters *alef* and *beis* may be combined as *alef-beis* and *beis-alef*. The first way, they are in order; the second way, the order is reversed. With three letters, *alef-beis-gimel*, there are more possible combinations, six combinations; until when we get to thirteen, there are billions of combinations. The Rebbe takes the terms "stones" and "letters" to mean souls. Thus, these are billions of permutations of souls, which the *tzaddik* combines in all sorts of ways.

Some say that the *kibbutz* itself generates the increase in permutations of letters to form "houses." However, this is incorrect. The Rebbe explicitly states in his lesson that the *tzaddik* makes these permutations and builds the "houses." On a certain level, this happens to some extent whenever Jews convene at any time during the year. However, in *Tikku / Tokhachah*, the Rebbe states that when we come to the *tzaddik* for Rosh Hashanah, it is not the power of the gathering *per se* that is efficacious; rather, it is the fact that that the gathering is now with the *tzaddik*.

[The questioner asks how this can be explained to those who have no previous understanding of this concept.]

As mentioned before, Reb Aharon was a great *tzaddik* – a very great *tzaddik*. The Rebbe praised him highly. It is known that the Rebbe rarely used his ancestral merits, but he did so to bring about Reb Aharon's appointment as Rav of Breslov. Yet regarding the *'inyan* of coming to him for Rosh Hashanah, the Rebbe mentioned him in the same breath as [Reb Berel], a very simple man. Both followers were missing. In this aspect, they were equal.

Similarly, regarding the *tzirufim* / combination and permutation of souls, the *tzaddik* connects each person who comes to him with everyone else, in various ways. The *tzaddik* alone knows how to do this. These are extremely lofty spiritual matters, beyond our understanding.

In practical terms, this means that when we come to the *tzaddik*, we should not feel that we are coming as individuals, along with many other individuals. We are all coming as one – converging and becoming transformed into one collective entity. This is why it is so important that we feel the greatest love for everyone: so that we may bind ourselves and become spiritually galvanized with everyone else who comes. This feeling of mutual connectedness is not limited to when we are praying together – especially today, when so many thousands come to the Rebbe, and it is not possible for us all to pray together in one *minyán*. This mutual connectedness is accomplished by love. By fulfilling the *mitzvah* to "love one's friend as oneself," we enable the *tzaddik* to build "houses."

To restate our point: when we come to the Rebbe on Rosh Hashanah, we come not as individuals, but as a *tzibbur*, and our ordinary sense of individuality should dissolve into that greater unity of souls.

(To be continued)