

Why Would Anybody Go To Uman?

Uman is in the Ukraine. Why would anyone voluntarily go there during this time of war? Russia has already launched missiles against the city in its attempt to bring the Ukraine to its knees.

Uman is the burial location of Rabbi Nachman of Breslov, great grandson of the Baal Shem Tov. The Baal Shem Tov is frequently referred to as founder of the Chassidic movement.

By the time of the Baal Shem Tov, in the late Middle Ages/early Enlightenment period, the Jews of Europe had been decimated, largely destroyed, and disheartened. From the time of the Seventh Century, when invading Huns occupied Western Europe through to the First through Fourth Crusades, the Jewish people in Britain, France, Spain, and Germany were murdered, driven out, and degraded. Each of those communities were places of learning, literature, poetry, and education prior to the rise of Christianity in Western Europe.

When Richard the Lionheart led the First Crusade, the King left in charge his brother who immediately murdered all the Jews in York, London, and everywhere else where they could be found. Those Jews had come to the islands before the Angles or the Saxons. They accompanied Julius Caesar's conquering armies.

Jewish life in France gave rise to some of the greatest thinkers and writers of all time. Their holy books were burned and they were hounded from the country. In Spain, the edict expelling all Jews was issued in 1492. Columbus had a difficult time leaving the harbor on his first trip to the New World, so crowded was the harbor with fleeing refugees.

Columbus took many of those rejected Jews with him as map makers, translators, and crew. In Columbus' third trip to the New World, a mutiny was prevented by his young Jewish crewmembers. Columbus paid his respects to the Jewish community by permitting them to settle on the island of Jamaica, which was given to him by Ferdinand and Isabella as a reward for his discoveries.

As a result of the tragedies in Western Europe, the remaining Jews on the continent found their way to the Middle East, North Africa, Turkey, and Eastern Europe. Many of those fleeing Jews wound up in the Ukraine.

The Chassidic movement began as a result of the depression felt by the Jewish community. It seemed that only sadness and destruction followed the Jewish community wherever it went. There were even those who thought perhaps it was time to give up the ancient religion that had birthed both Christianity and Islam. Against this backdrop arose the Baal Shem Tov who taught the benefits of joy, song, and renewal of the spirit even if the body was crushed and destroyed.

At first, the Chassidic movement was opposed even by those in the Jewish community who were concerned that it placed too much emphasis on song and dance and not enough on study and learning. The Baal Shem Tov was followed by many adherents including Rabbi Nachman who was ultimately buried in the Ukrainian city of Uman.

Rabbi Nachman is followed today by the Chassidim originally from the city of Breslov. The famed rabbi lived a life of joy, music, and fidelity to Judaism as a religion of love and acceptance.

After World Wars I, II and the downfall of Communism, Uman became a pilgrimage site for many Jews, especially the young, attempting to reconnect with the G-d found by the ancient Jewish people wandering in the desert. They preached the word of positivity against the backdrop of a world torn by war and bloodshed.

The Jews have a mixed relationship with Ukraine. It was one of the countries which gleefully joined with the Germans and their leader Adolf Hitler in destroying the remainder of the Jewish community left in Europe, this time in Eastern Europe. No Jew was safe in the Ukraine during World War II. When the Russians took control after the war, Stalin's purges sent many of those surviving Jews to Siberia. Until the war between Ukraine and Russia, Uman became a symbol of the dry bones coming together in the valley with renewed life and spirit, like the vision of Ezekiel.

Today, in spite of the dangers from the lunatic Russian dictator Vladimir Putin, somewhere between 50,000 and 70,000 Jews, mostly young, will descend upon Uman to celebrate the holiday of Rosh Hashanah, head of the year. While traditionally the beginning of the Jewish year was on Passover, today it is celebrated as the beginning of the Days of Awe, leading to the fast and repentance of Yom Kippur. Just what is it that attracts these young Jewish people to a dangerous, inhospitable place like Uman in the Ukraine?

There is a new spirit among young Jews today who decided that they want to continue to affiliate with their ancient tradition. Uman and the burial site of Rabbi Nachman represent rebirth, regeneration, and an opportunity to connect with Judaism through the ancient rituals of prayer and the joy that accompanies the privilege of being Jewish. Ancient rituals during the time the Temple stood in Jerusalem were expressions of great passion, love, and fidelity both to humankind and to God.

On my bucket list is to travel to Uman with friends and family. I have dodged enough missiles, in trips to Israel alone, not to chance Uman at this time. Nevertheless, the spirit of those who will celebrate Rosh Hashanah in Uman as a tribute to Rabbi Nachman have my full support and respect.

Let us live lives of joy, peace, and love.

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