

In the Eyes of Uman Pilgrims: A Vision of Place and Its Inhabitants

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Abstract This article is focused on the visions of pilgrimages to Rabbi Nachman’s site located in Uman, Ukraine. Research results are based on the analysis of in-depth interviews with eighteen Americans who have made the pilgrimage, supplemented by reading in secondary sources about pilgrimage and travel, especially American Jewish travel to Eastern Europe. Emphasis is made on the perception of both place and locals, as well as upon the leading motives and characteristics of pilgrimage. This research sheds light upon the role of existing stereotypes and personal encounters in cross-cultural issues. Dominant attitudes of pilgrims to locals in Uman may be characterized in the frame of the conceptual trio of “background fear,” “historical aftertaste,” and “learned neutrality.” Huge differences between the understanding of Uman as a place for pilgrimage and a space with inhabitants raise the questions of parallel historical heritages bound within the same territory and time.

Keywords Hasidim · Pilgrimage · Uman · Rabbi Nachman · Ukraine · Jewish heritage

Introduction

Making a pilgrimage—a trip to a sacred place or a physical journey in search of spiritual objects—is an established practice in many religious traditions. The advent of quick modern means of transportation and communication has expanded the logistical possibilities for such trips, and, in fact, approximately 240 million people

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become pilgrims each year (Timothy and Olsen 2006: 1). Many scholars agree that a pilgrimage constitutes a form of religious tourism (Cohen 1979; Vukonić 1996; Timothy and Olsen 2006) driven by special motives, not by specific content (Stausberg 2011). This article is an attempt to shed light upon one of the most frequently conducted pilgrimages in the Jewish world—the pilgrimage of Hasidim (most of them members of the Breslover sect of Hasidic Judaism) to Uman, a town in Central Ukraine, where Rebbe Nachman of Bratslav (Breslov), founder of the Breslover Hasidic movement, was buried in 1810.

In this article, I intend to answer a number of questions: Which types of existential tourists define the pilgrims from the United States? Are they realistic idealists who are bereft of illusions, starry-eyed idealists who see Rebbe Nachman as perfect, or critical idealists who oscillate between enchantment and disenchantment? (Cohen 1979: 196) How do the pilgrims perceive the locals, the people who live permanently in Ukraine and Uman, taking into account the limited possibilities for cross-cultural communication during the pilgrimage? In this vein, my argument is that Hasidim who travel from the United States to Uman become pilgrims because of their religious attachment and nostalgic feelings about the old country of their ancestors. Their vision of the place is shaped through two lenses: their spiritual connection to Rebbe Nachman and their perception of the past, while their vision of the locals in Uman may be linked more closely to their stereotypical views before the trip than to their encounters during the pilgrimage.

The aim of this research is to analyze why so many members of the American Hasidic community opt to make a pilgrimage to Uman. What are their most powerful motives for taking part in such a pilgrimage? What do they hope to learn about the people and the place they visit? However, I leave many questions unanswered in this text—for example, the differences among the pilgrims, and between the economic and political platforms of the pilgrimage. I will start my discourse with a brief review of the literature about these pilgrims and the context of this research. Next, I will outline the methodology of the research. After that, I will proceed to the findings of my research, starting with the pilgrims' own reflections about the goals of their pilgrimage. Then, I will analyze the pilgrims' perceptions about the place of the pilgrimage and the local people they met there. I will discuss the most important results of my research in my conclusion.

Pilgrimage as Tourism: Jewish Pilgrimages to Eastern Europe

Contemporary studies of pilgrimages pay attention to the variety of its forms (Greenia 2014: 5), which include patriotic pilgrimages, communal remembrances, and historical circuits, each of which is aimed at bringing about some transformation, not necessarily of a religious origin. Scholars rely on the continuum of different groups representing combinations of spirituality and secularity, from pious pilgrims to secular tourists (Smith 1992: 4). Israeli scholar Collins-Kreiner, in her 2009 article on the geography of pilgrimage and tourism, emphasizes the increasing convergence of modern-day tourists and pilgrims, where the position of a pilgrim on a continuum is mostly defined by religious affiliation, and not by other social

characteristics. According to noted sociologist Erik Cohen, there are five modes of tourist experiences: the recreational mode, the diversionary mode, the experiential mode, the experimental mode, and the existential mode (Cohen 1979: 183–190). Cohen argues that pilgrims correspond to the existential mode, a mode that emphasizes the attachment of the pilgrim to his elective spiritual center. Taking into account the preliminary assumption about the religious devotion of the Hasidic pilgrims, this existential mode is clearly an essential characteristic of their pilgrimages.

Jewish pilgrimages to Eastern Europe have a special niche that deals with the dark pages of Jewish history, from pogroms to the massive destruction of the Holocaust. As anthropologist Valene L. Smith suggests, pilgrimage destinations associated with gloomy pages of history constitute “the largest single category of tourist attractions” (Smith 1998: 205), and such pilgrimages can be classified as dark tourism (Collins-Kreiner 2015). Visits by Hasidim to the graves of *tzaddikim* (righteous ones) also deal with Jewish history in a contemporary non-Jewish environment, making the trip more complex in its meaning. This complexity is often ignored or treated as “a topic of research within Israeli social sciences” (Luz and Collins-Kreiner 2015).

Uman as a site of pilgrimage has gained some attention in the genre of autobiographies and fiction that incorporate personal experiences (see, for example, Fleer 2005; Kamenetz 2010; Lewis-Kraus 2012). Scientific knowledge about such pilgrimages remains scarce. Three notable exceptions are the works of Akao Mitsuharu, who paid attention to the history of the rebbe’s gravesite in Uman and to political tensions there (Mitsuharu 2003, 2007), an ethnographic analysis of structure of the place of pilgrimage by Sam Schuman (Schuman 2009), and my own research paper on the structure of the pilgrimage as a cultural performance (Marchenko 2014). However, the pilgrims’ perceptions of a place of pilgrimage and its inhabitants remain unclear, and clarifying them is the central idea of this text.

In 1800, 90% of Ashkenazi Jews lived within the territory of contemporary Lithuania, Poland, Belarus, and Ukraine (Jacobs 1906); as of 2016, the majority of Ashkenazi Jews lived in the United States. Their trips to Eastern Europe have a number of goals. For example, anthropologist Jack Kugelmass points out that the trips of American Jews to Poland implicitly sustain their Jewish identity and help them to “re-invent” Jewish traditions with an “aura of authenticity,” and introduce the pilgrims to the “rites of the tribe” (Kugelmass 2010: 383–385). The Hasidim¹ do not participate in these rites with the majority of American Jews. Moreover, they tend to resume the prewar traditions of petitionary visits to the graves of famous rebbes, or *tzaddikim* (Kugelmass 2010: 394). Many of these graves are located in Eastern Europe, and the two most common pilgrimages among Hasidim today are those to the grave of Elimelech of Lizhensk in Leżajsk in Southern Poland, on the

¹ Hasidim constitute a set of ultra-Orthodox Jewish streams originating from the territories of contemporary Ukraine, Poland, and Lithuania in the second part of the eighteenth century (e.g., Satmar Hasidim, Bobover Hasidim, Viznitz Hasidim, etc.). Hasidim have many characteristic features, such as their piety, their black suits and black hats, their veneration for a rebbe, and their strict obedience to his authority.

anniversary of his death, and the grave of Rebbe Nachman of Bratslav in Uman, Ukraine, on Rosh Hashanah.

Rebbe Nachman, leader of the Breslover Hasidim,² died in Uman and was buried there. According to the sect's hagiography, Rebbe Nachman chose Uman as the place to die because it was a site where Jews had been murdered in large numbers in the 1768 Koliivshchyna uprising. During that rebellion, a mass national movement of Ukrainian "*haidamaky*" (insurgents) rose up against Polish domination, in the course of which many Poles and Jews were exterminated (Galant 1908; Krebs 1879). The Uman massacre ("*Umanska riznya*") was memorialized in Ukrainian poet Taras Shevchenko's famous work "*Haidamaky*," a poem that is included in the Ukrainian literature curriculum and one that has become a part not only of the local lore, but also of the nation's history.

The growing popularity of pilgrimages to Uman has transformed such journeys into a kind of invented tradition, with new social structures (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983). This is not a surprise when one takes into account the increasing numbers of pilgrims who travel there, from two hundred pilgrims in 1989 to thirty thousand pilgrims in 2016. It is well known that any heritage, in addition to incorporating historically significant symbols, also contains some added value from the present (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1995: 370), and this addition can be found in new infrastructure and new rituals, etc. The increasing number of pilgrims is not an exclusively Jewish phenomenon; rather, this reflects a worldwide pattern that may be understood in terms of cultural and religious opposition to globalization³ and a nostalgic link to the authenticity of the past (Cohen 2008: 313).

Methodology

I am focusing my attention on pilgrims from the United States for several reasons. First, the number of pilgrims from the United States is comparable to those from Israel.⁴ However, the American pilgrims are different because of the longer distance they have to travel to and from the pilgrimage site. Second, the American Hasidim's sense of being at home in Uman is important, especially since living in the diaspora

² Rebbe Nachman, great-grandson of the founder of Hasidism, Rabbi Yisroel ben Eliezer (known as the Baal Shem Tov), lived in Breslov and moved to Uman not long before his death in 1810. He wrote in his notes and told his followers that all those who wanted to be forgiven could come to his gravesite during Rosh Hashanah (the Jewish New Year). Thus, his follower Rebbe Noson (Nathan of Breslow, the chief disciple of Rebbe Nachman) made the first pilgrimage with a small gathering near the rebbe's grave in the year after his death. However, such early gatherings included only several dozens of people, and pilgrimages were forbidden during the Soviet regime until 1988.

³ For example, the Hajj, the annual Islamic pilgrimage to Mecca, grew from 24,000 in 1941 to 1,379,500 pilgrims from around the world in 2013. See <http://islam.about.com/od/hajj/tp/Hajj-by-the-Numbers.htm>.

⁴ For instance, the official statistics confirm that about 80% of pilgrims come from Israel and the United States, with Israeli pilgrims comprising the more numerous group of pilgrims. The numbers of Hasidim visiting Uman are officially declared by the National Police of Ukraine in Uman—<https://ch.npu.gov.ua/en/> and the State Border Guard Service of Ukraine—<http://special.dpsu.gov.ua/ua/news/Prikordonniki-iformili-ponad-30-tisyach-palomnikiv-hasidiv/>. In 2016, this number exceeded thirty thousand pilgrims from around the world.

in America may be interpreted as an ‘extra’ exile—a supplement to the condition of *galut*, of living in exile outside of *Eretz Yisrael*, the Land of Israel. In addition, the place of the pilgrimage may be especially meaningful for the American pilgrims as the land of their ancestors, leading to a sense of so-called “nostalgic pilgrimages”, which differentiates them from the Sephardi pilgrims from Israel.

I carried out my inquiry through semi-structured, in-depth interviews with the pilgrims who reside in the United States (mainly in New York City and New York State, which are home to the largest enclaves of Hasidic Jews outside of Israel). Through screening questions, I selected 18 informants (interviewees, see the Interview Guide in “[Appendix](#)” section) who represented a wide range of reactions and experiences in terms of making a pilgrimage (from those who had made only one pilgrimage to those who made many pilgrimages, and from those who made earlier visits to those who had made more recent ones). The informants also included representatives from various religious affiliations). The majority of the interviewees were born into Orthodoxy; however, four of them were *baalei teshuva*—literally, “masters of return,” those who have returned to God. Many of them classified themselves as Breslover Hasidim; however, the others defined themselves as a Hasid or as being close to Hasidism in their religious practice. Those who participated in the interviews tended to be religiously observant; however, several of them articulated more liberal ideas than the others.

Since I am an outsider to the Hasidic community and a woman (the majority of the pilgrims were men), I found the selection procedure challenging. I used a strategy of snowball sampling—that is, I asked each interviewee about his circle of friends and acquaintances who had visited Rebbe Nachman’s gravesite. I based this method of selection on several sources: preliminary Internet searches of pilgrims who had already shared their stories, searches of travel agencies that offered trips to Uman, and meetings with journalists who had worked on topics connected with the Hasidic community and who could put me in touch with their acquaintances. I also talked to Hasidic and non-Hasidic Jewish people in New York who could refer me to their contacts in the Hasidic world. I subsequently used all of these sources (except for the travel agencies) in my research. However, the challenges somewhat limited the scope of my research: All of my interviewees were either close to the Hasidic world or they were more liberal Hasidim who were willing to speak with me in a public place. I conducted four interviews over the phone, and each conversation lasted for about 2 hours or less. The language of the interviews was English; however, in two cases, the interviewees also spoke Russian and Ukrainian.

I found that the pilgrims were generally eager to speak about their experience of visiting Rebbe Nachman’s gravesite (which they sometimes referred to simply as “Uman,” implying that they associated Uman only with the pilgrimage). The keyword “Uman” became a symbolic one, and all of the informants were willing to share their ideas about the visits once they knew the topic.

Pilgrims: Visions and Divisions

It is important to know that Hasidic communities in New York State are somewhat⁵ insular: they have their own institutions, including schools and medical facilities. Hasidim tend to live in close proximity to one another—for instance, the largest Hasidic community outside of Israel is located in Borough Park in Brooklyn,⁶ New York, and other well-known settlements are in the Williamsburg⁷ and Crown Heights neighborhoods of Brooklyn. Some Hasidic Jews, such as the residents of Kiryas Yoel, a Hasidic village in Monroe, New York, settle outside of the city. Some American Hasidim may live an insulated life, having only business contacts with the non-Hasidic world, but, in many cases, this insularity is overstated by people who live outside the community. However, it is important to keep this insularity in mind in order to understand the behavior of pilgrims in an unfamiliar environment during the pilgrimages.

Feeling safe is essential for every traveler. In the case of pilgrimages to Uman, historical issues may complicate that sense of safety. During the Soviet era, Uman (like many other destinations in the Soviet Union) was practically out of reach for international tourists; a trip there required a separate visa. Rabbi Gedaliah Fleer, a noted kabbalist, teacher, and storyteller, became the first American who managed to journey to Uman despite the travel restrictions in the 1960s. In his 2003 book, *Against All Odds*, Gedalia Fleer vividly describes the stumbling blocks he faced in getting to Uman, including his negotiations with taxi drivers about making the trip from Kyiv to Uman and his encounters with the local police. The story leaves one feeling that the pilgrimage to Uman was more about ‘travail’ than travel.

Hardship is important. You come out of your everyday routine; you challenge some psychological barriers. You should be aware of safety. (13⁸)

A trip to Uman is a kind of safari, metaphorically speaking. (14)

Contemporary pilgrims often allude to the issues of safety and being careful, hinting at contemporary challenges. Some of the challenges seem strange, such as the idea that speaking English in Uman can be a mark of one’s Jewish identity. However, this is not surprising, taking into account the general idea of a provincial town where locals speak their native language, Ukrainian: Moreover, Uman was

⁵ I use the word “somewhat,” since Hasidic Jews take advantage of municipal and national legal systems, communal services, and police services; they also use public transportation. Traditionally, Hasidic Jews dealt with the garment and diamond industries in New York. Nowadays, they engage in a variety of business activities in the non-Hasidic world. For instance, the largest non-chain photo and video equipment store in the United States, B&H Photo Video, is a business belonging to Satmar Hasidim. (<http://web.archive.org/web/20060516165724/http://www.post-gazette.com/pg/05340/616255.stm>).

⁶ According to statistics, more than one hundred and fifty thousand inhabitants lived in Borough Park in 2013, and the vast majority of them were Jews belonging to various Hasidic branches (<http://www.areaivibes.com/new+york-ny/borough+park/demographics/>).

⁷ About forty-three thousand Hasidim, mainly belonging to the Satmar sect, lived in Williamsburg in 2014, according to various public sources.

⁸ Here and below, I use numbers as codes for my interviewees in order to protect their privacy.

historically a site of shared violence against Jews, and the visit of the American Hasidim included some interaction with those whom the pilgrims could have perceived as descendants of the perpetrators.

I was warned to be careful with the locals... They told me some horror stories about people who went alone and were found robbed or killed. I remember those stories and I was very careful. (12)

We were constantly warned by our local co-workers, Ukrainians, to be careful: ‘Speak with us, don’t speak English, as people will understand that you are a Jew.’ (2)

According to Polish sociologist and philosopher Zygmunt Bauman, a sense of being united within a community is an important instrument for maintaining one’s feelings of safety in an insecure world full of risks (Bauman 1998). I assume that in the case of this pilgrimage, such a sense of community was both a precondition and a result that created distance between the pilgrims and the locals, as well as other symbolic boundaries. Symbolic boundaries, as we know, become social markers when they are drawn in opposition to one outside group, rather than to multiple out-groups (Lamont and Molnár 2002: 174). In our case, these boundaries were created by extraterritorial differences throughout history as well as conditions specific to Uman. Those conditions included the fact that Uman formerly was a partly Jewish town (shtetl) that consequently belonged to *Rzeczpospolita* (a traditional name for the Polish state), to the Russian Empire, and to the Soviet Union, and then it became a non-Jewish town inhabited by Ukrainians in an independent Ukraine.⁹

When I note these extraterritorial differences of Jewish pilgrims, I am focusing on specific visual symbols and historical time perceptions that are also important to an understanding of contemporary pilgrimages. Religious men wore yarmulkes, black garments, sidelocks, and beards (Tavory 2010), while women wore long dresses and covered their hair.¹⁰ Besides the visible differences in their physical appearance, Jews had distinctive perceptions of time relating to the calendar, the holidays, the crucial role of Shabbos (the Sabbath) among all of the activities during the week, and the specific role of sunset as the beginning of all holidays and religious observances. All of these elements are reflected in contemporary pilgrimages, and they separate the pilgrims from the external, non-Jewish world, and emphasize the historical view of the Jew as “an outsider and insider at the same time” (Cahnman 2004: 224). In Uman, however, there were pilgrims dressed in a variety of attire, from the traditional black Hasidic garments; to the white garments

⁹ According to statistical data <http://uman-rada.gov.ua/index.php/novyny/item/7566-upravlinnia-statystyky-informuie>, 85,800 people resided in Uman in the middle of 2016. Jews accounted for less than 1% of the population. In 1802, during the times of Rebbe Nachman, Jews comprised 38% of the Uman population. According to the 2001 national census conducted in Ukraine, only 0.1% of the people considered themselves to be Jewish.

¹⁰ Women also make pilgrimages to Uman—however, not during Rosh Hashanah. Rosh Hashanah is traditionally considered to be a festival for men—a tradition based on religious doctrines. Hasidic men would consider it inappropriate for women to appear in Uman during the time of their Rosh Hashanah celebrations.

of the Na Nach, a subgroup of Breslover Hasidim; to modern Western garments and a small yarmulke.

In the context of the pilgrimages, locals felt the need to distance themselves from tourists in order to maintain their own pace of life and their privacy (Boissevain 2004). Such a need was hard to meet in places close to the pilgrimage site. As I stated above, the number of pilgrims arriving in Uman to celebrate Rosh Hashanah each year amounted to more than one-third of the town's population, the majority of whom are Orthodox Christians (as in contemporary Ukraine as a whole).¹¹ For their part, pilgrims reported feeling the need to stay together while celebrating Rosh Hashanah and being close to Rebbe Nachman's tomb. The pilgrims' sense of being united remains one of their most intense memories and one of the most important triggers for subsequent visits to Uman. This spirit of community is a kind of "communitas," where spontaneity and freedom go hand-in-hand with a structure of obligation, if we take into account the fact that any pilgrimage involves a personal commitment and a vow (Turner 1975: 49). My interviewees used various sets of categories to distinguish Uman pilgrims from one another: "real Hasidim" (meaning religious Orthodox Jews who belonged mainly to the Breslover sect of Hasidim) versus "other pilgrims" versus "American pilgrims" versus "Israeli pilgrims."

As noted above, Erik Cohen sees the existential mode of pilgrimage as a form of religious tourism that may be connected with realistic idealists, starry-eyed idealists, or critical idealists (Cohen 1979: 196), so I questioned the interviewees about their driving motivations for making the trip. It is worthy to note that I found a tremendous difference between their motivation for the first trip and their motivation for subsequent trips. The first trip was often motivated by general interest (fostered by the growing popularity of pilgrimages), by the prospect of having good company, and by the possibility of getting a free trip. Such free trips are funded through an involvement campaign conducted by congregations, and many of my interviewees mentioned them ("The first trip to Uman is paid."). The idea of being in familiar company was also crucial to making the decision about going on the first trip. People who belonged to the same branch of Hasidism (and who attended the same synagogue) made their decisions together. Rosh Hashanah, in this case, became a special socializing event,¹² a valuable life experience, rather than an ordinary religious celebration. These motives may have been intertwined or distinct for the pilgrims.

I wanted to see how the locals interact with the pilgrims, how many pilgrims are there and what is going on in Uman... I wanted to see a Rosh Hashanah celebration in the context. (8)

¹¹ According to the Religious Information Service of Ukraine—<http://risu.org.ua/en/index/reference>—more than 97% of the members of registered religious communities in Ukraine are Christian. About half of them are Orthodox Christians; the other half is split between Catholics and Protestants.

¹² It is known that working-class people often return to their work sites during their days off in order to socialize with their co-workers. This sense of connection is particularly revealed during a pilgrimage made during the time of Rosh Hashanah.

A good friend of mine organized the trip in 2000. It was an exciting adventure for me. I came there for a holiday and my friend was also with me. (3)

What is more important, many made their trips to Uman at a time when they were at a crossroads in their life or before making an important life decision. Thus, their goal may have been to receive a blessing (*bracha*) for future endeavors, even if they did not emphasize this aspect of their pilgrimage.

It was my trip before the marriage. (5)

I was at that time in between—between my law-school and my law work. (6)

All in all, it is possible to speak about pilgrims having a rather secular motivation for their first trip to Uman, which may be interpreted as a kind of curiosity far from Cohen's ideas. This changed for subsequent trips, which were mostly driven by what pilgrims called "spirituality." There can be a significant difference between being religious and being spiritual (Timothy and Olsen 2006), meaning that people can find spirituality in many experiences: tracing one's family roots, feeling pride for the nation, helping others, and so forth. In this case, "spirituality" seems to be a compromise term that embraces all possible dimensions of non-materiality, including distance from one's everyday routine and the mundane world. What is more important, some pilgrims perceived their trip as a whole, and did not differentiate between its parts or express the special feelings they had about certain parts of their trips. Some of them used rather rational explanations, which lets us call them "realistic idealists":

I remember that I was very happy. Everything was so spiritual! And my primitive accommodation only added to this spirituality. (5)

Several pilgrims used the term "religious" as their motivation for visiting Uman. This did not contradict the above-mentioned sense of spirituality, and the more religious interviewees used this characterization. Traveling to a new environment helps to shake off one's everyday routine, while allowing one to remain inside of religious boundaries. Many of the interviewees shared their feelings of enthusiasm about the pilgrimage when speaking either about themselves or about other pilgrims, and, in the majority of cases, they saw such enthusiasm in a positive and spiritual light. The word they used most frequently when explaining what they meant by "spirituality" was "connection." The pilgrims talked about becoming connected to Rebbe Nachman, to other pilgrims, and to themselves. Those who spoke this way were the starry-eyed idealists among the pilgrims:

This is religious ecstasy. No drugs, of course. It is connected with dancing, listening, a festival spirit—all those [activities] Uman developed over the years. (13)

Uman is a kind of prescription, and you know the doctor. Rebbe Nachman's wisdom makes you better. You feel that connection, and you come again to make it stronger; you come again to your doctor. (15)

Several pilgrims reported that their pilgrimages to Uman were connected with their work—particularly their work in kitchens, preparing kosher food for their fellow pilgrims. Their stories were not as enthusiastic as those of some of the others; however, they included an element of satisfaction that they were helping with the logistical part of the pilgrimage. Other pilgrims reported that they observed people who spontaneously decided to do something good for the community of pilgrims; they associated this with the general impact of Uman on helping one to become a better person. These pilgrims can be seen as the critical idealists among the group:

[The spirit of the celebration of Rosh Hashanah in Uman] was initially for me part of something I did not feel, but then my attitude changed. I saw that my help in the kitchen was very important. (1)

I work there in a soup kitchen. This is volunteer work, and I did it for four or five years. Nothing spiritual is in my work. (2)

All in all, it is not surprising that pilgrims to Uman compared their experiences to participation in other secular events (for example, a concert or a football match that brings together people who have a similar agenda):

I can compare it to Woodstock—a concert in the summer of 1970, where three or four thousand people came. Every year, more and more people came there. It can be a parallel. (11)

Energy, celebration—it becomes a popular religion. Compare it to [watching] a football match in a sports bar. You will be engaged even if you don't understand what is going on. (12)

It was important that the pilgrims characterize the period of their pilgrimage as a special experience, not only because of the religious meaning of spending Rosh Hashanah in Uman, but also because of the complete change the pilgrimage represented in their lifestyle and their surroundings. As described above, Hasidim tend to live in the Hasidic communities where they were socialized. Their stay in Uman offered them a very condensed time and space, forming a new and rather transformative experience: “They were here to go beyond the fields for 3 days a year, to take a short and uniquely authorized break from the responsibilities of home, such that they might return to their seamlessly circumscribed lives with renewed vigor in compliance” (Lewis-Kraus 2012). Actually, the most important thing was that such a change was made within the boundaries of what is accepted in most Orthodox communities. Diversity of pilgrims means diversity of concepts about something being acceptable or unacceptable. However, none of the informants talked about longing for their home or family during the pilgrimage; rather, they mentioned home as a marker of the inner change they felt afterward:

And I must tell you that I have a special and better life every time when I get home. That is why I personally go to Uman. (6)

Tourism is often blamed for introducing or exacerbating many social ills in the place being visited—everything from drugs, crime, and prostitution to bad language, bad manners, and bad art (Gmelch 2010: 16). In this regard, some pilgrims spoke about some “wrong” motives for the pilgrimage that they had experienced or heard

about, for instance, temptation to behave inappropriately with alcohol or non-Jewish women. However, most of the interviewees denied the idea that pilgrimages to Uman could be made just for fun or, as some of them called it, out of “wrong intentions,” and such episodes were commonly treated as isolated cases or cases of misunderstanding. It was also interesting that some interviewees revealed their awareness of entertainment in the non-Hasidic world, possibly to show themselves as “up-to-date” people in the eyes of an outsider like me.

I barely think it is for relaxing. The food is bad; the place is overcrowded; there is no beach. It is so expensive, you could go to Greece and drink cocktails. (12)

Some people come just to check [the place] out, but the majority have spiritual intentions. (9)

Three interviewees mentioned the special units known as the modesty police, which the pilgrims formed to monitor and prevent inappropriate behavior within their community. One interviewee mentioned an informal agreement between the modesty police and the local service workers to prevent pilgrims from visiting such inappropriate places as bars. This only emphasized the strictness of the control mechanisms imposed during the pilgrimage.

There were always some attempts to do bad things within such numbers of people, so the modesty police were doing their job. (14)

I know that people who worked in bars or night clubs were warned not to let pilgrims in to prevent conflicts both with the locals and the modesty police. (18)

It appears that all three types of existential tourists mentioned in the 1979 work of Erik Cohen were present among the pilgrims from the United States to Uman, and that a first pilgrimage is more connected to their secular curiosity and their wish to escape from boredom. What does this curiosity lead to, when it comes to place and people from the “other” side?

Uman, or namU: Place and People from the ‘Other’ Side

Perhaps, stage rather than shrine...
(Kugelmass 2010, 390).

The main point that emerged from the interviews was that the pilgrims separated the place of pilgrimage (Uman, broadly speaking) from its inhabitants. The latter became the invisible context, the so-called “figures of silence,” and this invisibility and silence were physical, not symbolic. The former is personified (“I have a funny relationship with Uman”) (14). Moreover, the place is associated with a personal encounter with the gravesite of Rebbe Nachman, the pilgrimage destination, used as a metaphor and a “sacred object.”

I did not know anything about Uman before. I knew only from television about the Uman mantra [“Na Nach Nachma Nachman Me’Uman,” written by]

Rabbi Yisroel Ber Odesser (I did not know his name from the beginning) and Na Nach words. I knew the mantra before I knew the place. (12)

Thus, in many interpretations, Uman was perceived not as a homeland or an ancestral home, but rather as a holy land. The pilgrims did not emphasize their heritage, which in many cases originated in Ukraine. Instead, many of the interviewees emphasized that the trip to Uman reminded them of a trip to Israel. Such an idea clearly differentiates the Hasidic pilgrimage to Uman from other kinds of Jewish heritage travel, as we proposed at the beginning.

What is interesting, you can meet many types of Jews. It is a mixture of Jews. The general mood is joy. For me, I had a similar experience in Tsfat, Israel.

Everything is Israeli in that place—the Hebrew language, you know? I felt in Uman like I am in Israel in Rosh Hashanah time. (6)

It is worth mentioning that Rebbe Nachman's decision to be buried in Uman, a "garden of souls" (Kamenetz 2010), can also be interpreted as an attempt to transform Uman into a central scene equal in sanctity to the Land of Israel (*Eretz Yisrael*) (Mitsuharu 2003). Such a transformation was possible because of the symbolic role of the *tzaddik* as an intermediary between Heaven and Earth, which was reflected in the pilgrims' narratives. Thus, it is not surprising that many of the pilgrims spoke about the significance of Uman and the beauty of Ukraine:

There is a world of myths in Uman. Let us think about grottos in [the arboretum at] Sofiyivka [Park in Uman]. They are adding to that world. (14)

My impression about Ukraine after the pilgrimage is that it is an unexpectedly beautiful country. It is, to my impression, much more beautiful than Poland. (5)

While in Uman, the overwhelming majority of pilgrims did not leave the area of Rebbe Nachman's grave, the area set aside for the pilgrims and secured by the police (both from Ukraine and Israel). The issue of the pilgrims' safety, which I raised at the beginning of this article, was also highlighted in the instructions for the pilgrims, which advised them not to leave their own community or to communicate with strangers. Taking into account the fact that in the entire history of such pilgrimages, there have been very few open conflicts or cases of assault, the idea of the safety of pilgrimages to Uman (with very few exceptions), adds to the mythology of the place.

To tell the truth, many pilgrims see all the locals as [Ivan] Gonta's¹³ offspring. (14)

¹³ Ivan Gonta was one of the leaders of the 1768 Koliivshchyna uprising. He was known for initially being on the side of defending Uman against the rebels ("*haidamaky*") who were ruled by the Cossack Maksym Zalizniak. However, Gonta and his forces joined the rebels. I doubt that the pilgrims had a deep understanding of the roles of Gonta and Zalizniak in the Koliivshchyna rebellion. Rather, they used the names as they were generally used in Hasidic circles to emphasize the vicious antisemitic history of

People do not seek cross-cultural experience; it is not the aim. Pilgrims like to be in their communities. (3)

Only a few interviewees expressed their curiosity about the locals, but this curiosity was also limited to the space of the neighborhood around the gravesite: “I felt surprised not to see the locals around, no one at all. I wanted to see someone, but no one was around.” (8) I assume that such absence of Uman inhabitants may also be called their symbolic erasure, a reminder about the dark history of the place.

The infrastructure of the pilgrimage has been described as a “total institution” (Kelner 2010: 147–148) in which all of the facilities that supported the pilgrims, including the kitchen, the dining room, and the bedrooms, were concentrated within the community. Such a practice of relative insularity is typical for Hasidic Jews in their usual environment—for instance, in their communities in New York State, where their activities are concentrated in the places of their rituals and routines: the tomb, the synagogue, the dining place, and the sleeping place. However, the majority of visitors remembered Sofiyivka Park, an arboretum and scientific research institute of the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine—another Uman tourist attraction that is completely secular. Only a small number of people dared to see more—the cafes, the streets, or the central part of the city. Thus, the pilgrims stayed in the “ecological bubble of their home environment” (Cohen 1972).

The pilgrims generally did not feel any special need to see more of the town; they felt content with fulfilling their goal to be there during Rosh Hashanah. This may be explained by their internal needs for maintaining the separation between the sacred and the profane, the Jewish and the non-Jewish, and by the organization of the pilgrimage. “Jewish Uman” contains some locals who work for the pilgrims, but this is perceived as something “given” (14) and often left unnoticed. Such a temporary construction of “a small Jewish world” may constitute a kind of “nostalgia for the premodern” (Graburn 1995), or the pilgrims’ search for a better version of themselves, but it was almost never the pursuit of being “other” (Graburn 1995, 35) or of being with the “other.”

It is interesting to compare the initial expectations of the pilgrims and their real experience. The majority of them did not have any specific concepts of the place they were traveling to (except for two of them, who had migrated from Ukraine in the early 1990s and 2000s). The only common conceptualization of Ukraine was that it was “a place from the past.” Some pilgrims provided insight into their expectations, but their insight lacked detail, which signifies that it was not the focus of the pilgrims’ interest:

My impression before the trip was that Ukraine is a very backward country, somewhere in 1800, but when I saw the Kyiv highways and gas stations, I was surprised. It is a modern country! A special word about the countryside—it is very, very beautiful. (6)

Footnote 13 continued

Uman. In many cases, the pilgrims used the last name of the Ukrainian hetman Bohdan Khmelnytsky as a collective term meaning “antisemite.”

It was like in the old movie. We were passing across the fields and we watched peasants working... I remember a man with a cow on a rope walking somewhere in the field. Where were they going? And why? (13)

Turning to the pilgrims' perception of the people of Uman, one finds several categories that I refer to as "background fear," "historical aftertaste," and "learned neutrality." These categories can also be understood as the emotional, rational, and behavioral components of a complex attitude, or a general discourse about danger and being cautious, though each of these components can be analyzed separately as the perception of a particular pilgrim. Background fear is an emotional category that was supported by the examples of two cases of assault during the pilgrimage; in the majority of other cases, this fear was shared in the form of warnings. People who expressed such fear tended not to communicate with the locals and not to go outside the area around the gravesite of Rebbe Nachman.

A lot of fear is in the Jewish community, security problems. We are afraid of violence. At least one person gets assaulted every year, although I know that it may be a provocation. (5)

One thing people usually keep in mind when it comes to Ukraine is safety. Police were hostile, not friendly. But they were protecting us. And some people could make links—KGB, prison, police. (13)

I really feel nervous there in Uman because I am Jewish... The history is always with us. I would love to know that it is only history, not the present. (1)

Historical aftertaste, unlike the previous category, is free from the articulated emotions of fear; it reflects a cognitive aspect of the attitude and memories of the historical past for a typical pilgrim. For example, the interviewees commonly used certain words, such as "pogroms," "Khmelnysky," and "Cossacks." The very complicated relationship between Cossacks and Jews has been discussed in many literary and media sources, and the appearance of Jews even in the Red Army's Cossack units was a rarity (Estraiikh 2014). Three of the interviewees used the name "Gonta" referring to the current locals—the name of the man they associate with the 1768 mass murder of the Jews of Uman. I want to emphasize that this field research was conducted in late 2015, when the town of Uman erected a monument to Ivan Gonta and his fellow Cossack leader Maksym Zalizniak;¹⁴ however, most of the pilgrims were not aware of that fact. The historical aftertaste of antisemitism in the region was most widespread even for those who expressed a positive attitude toward at least some of the locals.

I know that they did not like Jews earlier, but I somehow didn't think about this issue when I was there. (3)

¹⁴ The idea of the monument originated in 1968. However, there was just a foundation stone at the site of the monument until late November of 2015. Taking advantage of the changes in local government and the general patriotic surge in the wake of Euromaidan (a wave of demonstrations and civil unrest in Ukraine in 2013) and military conflict in Donbass, a region in eastern Ukraine, Uman's civic and political activists raised additional funds and facilitated the building of the monument.

I am not sure that everyone enjoys [making a] pilgrimage to Uman. I personally don't feel Uman is nice. I [think of] mass graves over there, and it is dark for me. (9)

It is worth noting that the historical aftertaste was fostered by the already existing or newly created stories of suspicion revealed in the case of background fear. The most general one was found in the recent memories of one pilgrim who tried, on the contrary, to disprove the concept of "total antisemitism."

In 1979, people were afraid of us. That happened not because we were Jewish, but because we were Americans. People were afraid of being bombed by America. My friend from Uman told me that. (11)

The learned neutrality category of perceiving the locals was more articulated in the non-intrusive behavior of the majority of the American pilgrims. It was based on their reading various sources on Ukraine, on their personal interest in the contradictions of Ukrainian history, or on their longtime contacts with the Ukrainians. In the latter case, the interviewee built an explanatory scheme that was not typical of most of the pilgrims.

Yeah, I think local people are interested but confused. This is language confusion and being skeptical about the external appearance [of the pilgrims], which was strange [for a local]. (9)

I observed mutual contempt between the pilgrims and the locals. Pilgrims regarded the locals as goyish and [as looking down on them] while locals regarded the pilgrims as savages—medieval, with sidelocks. (14)

As was expected, not many pilgrims could share stories of personal encounters with the locals. Most of those they did share were episodes with much room for personal interpretation.

I remember one situation in Sofiyivka Park, when a woman who was selling tickets made some comments to us. You could see that she was not pleased with us. (1)

I was in the Internet café once in Uman (I did not bring my phone) and I remember an encounter with one local. He was about 7 years old, and he came to me and asked: 'One cigarette, please!' That was my only conversation with the locals. I was so embarrassed. (5)

During my last visit to Uman, in 2015, I saw that Hasidic and Ukrainian children played football together. I was astonished. Maybe something is getting better... (10)

Several interviewees showed cognitive biases in sharing their memories. For instance, they referred to personal contacts with the police in the airport or in places outside of Uman as Uman contacts. This may be explained by the destination of the pilgrimage and the unexpectedness of the pilgrims' impressions. In those cases, such encounters with the police were made with those who patrolled the roads, the airport, or the streets. When the pilgrims used such words as "Gulag" or "prison" or

‘KGB,’ it evoked their sense that the totalitarianism and antisemitism of Ukraine’s past was still very much alive in its present.

Road police (“gaishniki,” in Russian) is a separate theme. Pilgrims have them in mind when reading the longer version of the road prayer, where there are words about wild beasts and armed robbers. (14)

Despite the fact that the majority of the pilgrims reported no personal negative experiences or encounters while in Uman, more than half of the interviewees shared their sense of certainty that antisemitism was flourishing in Uman. One pilgrim had a bad personal experience to share:

There is huge antisemitism in Uman. I was assaulted several times. For instance, at the local bus station, three guys attacked me and pulled my scarf away, and then one of them recognized me, since we had been working together, and they all disappeared. (10)

Other interviewees referred to the Christian cross erected close to the pilgrimage site as the most evident and open sign of the locals’ hidden antisemitism, which was not reflected in their everyday behavior:

And I must say that a cross ... erected at the place of pilgrimage, was a sign of being disrespectful and stupid, to be honest with you. (9)

Yeah, people speak about the cross erected by the lake. It was interpreted as, “They do not want us to pray here.” (12)

Interviews with locals in Uman about their understanding of the pilgrimage revealed their displeasure with the pilgrims who were seen as a disturbance to their everyday comfort zone (Marchenko 2014). In general, the locals’ displeasure could be described as a kind of culture shock in reaction to their encounters with the pilgrims, and I focused on it in one of my research questions. However, the pilgrims’ attitudes did not mirror those of the locals; they did not seem to be shocked at all. They expressed an awareness of who the locals were and often referred to dramatic historical events in the region. I want to emphasize that two of the interviewees who had both Soviet and post-Soviet experiences of pilgrimages to the town, tended to be more positive in their general evaluations of the locals.

The pilgrims most notably characterized the locals as being focused on making a profit to benefit either their own prosperity or the general economy of Uman. As they discussed this, they spoke about some abstract local, almost never connecting their conclusions to personal contacts or to business contacts in Uman. The concept of profit pervaded the majority of the interviews. These attitudes about profits and disturbances may be rather typical for any kind of tourism, where tourists report that the locals were greedy and the locals report that the tourists were noisy, and vice versa.

Locals sell things to the pilgrims; they have places such as Internet cafes, so I don’t understand why people don’t like pilgrims. [A pilgrimage] is economically profitable. (5)

With locals, everything depends. When they want to sell something, they are polite. (9)

In fact, many pilgrims were sure that pilgrimages like theirs significantly helped Uman's economy. Some interviewees expressed very ironic thoughts when it came to this issue.

But without pilgrims, Uman could be one of the poorest towns in Ukraine. We understand this. Thirty million dollars is the annual gift from the pilgrims to Uman. (10)

In conclusion, pilgrims base their perceptions of locals on existing stereotypes and stories about the antisemitic past in Ukraine. Personal conversations with locals (usually those who worked at the site during the pilgrimage) often tended to support those stereotypes. Personal encounters with locals outside the site of the pilgrimage were very rare, and they usually happened only to the most curious pilgrims. However, such atypical encounters were connected with more positive impressions. Taking into account the prevailing moods of the pilgrims (at least of those from the United States, as reflected in my research), it was not difficult to predict their reaction to the monument to Gonta and Zalizniak that was erected in Uman in late 2015.

Conclusion

This research shows that a pilgrimage to Uman is a complicated phenomenon that evokes memories of the violence against Jews in the past and connects the past with the present time of contemporary pilgrims. Pilgrims who are united by similar levels of religious commitment and affiliation show rather unified attitudes toward the pilgrimage, the town of Uman outside the site of the pilgrimage, and Uman's inhabitants. Such findings correspond to the general idea of pilgrims' shared feelings (Collins-Kreiner 2015).

American Jewish pilgrims who go to Uman are connected to their nostalgic feelings about "the place from the past"; however, their understanding of the place is mostly conceptualized as a holy land, not as a homeland. It is interesting that when abstract places become real (a shift from expected experiences to actual ones), no specific features, or distinctions (Bourdieu 1984), arise in the stories. Pilgrims still describe their trip in general terms, omitting details. This is explained by the character and the main aims of the pilgrimage, which are generally far from the aim of making contact with the external world. Thus, the actual site of the pilgrimage (Uman, Ukraine) is much less important than the religious content of the pilgrimage. Such a finding shapes the difference between Hasidic pilgrimages to the ancestral lands of Eastern Europe and the Hasidic pilgrimage to Uman; at the same time, this research shows the complexity of the motives connected with the latter.

The range of motives for the pilgrimage to Uman lets us differentiate among all three types of existential tourism as described by Erik Cohen (Cohen 1979: 196)—realistic idealists, starry-eyed idealists, and critical idealists. Some Breslover

Hasidim expressed total religious commitment and extreme devotion to Rebbe Nachman. For example, one interviewee said, expressing his belief in Nachman's resurrection: "I want Rebbe Nachman to come out; how could I not visit Uman?" (7). However, a pilgrim's first trip to Uman can often be characterized as a case of curiosity, as it is driven by secular intentions and the desire to escape from the routine—a type of diversionary tourism. It is possible to say that the pilgrimages to Uman "essentialize" Jewish identities (Kelner 2010: 177)—in this case, enforcing a sense of belonging in the followers of Rebbe Nachman. In fact, such essentialization seems to be important to some of the more liberal Hasidim in terms of experiencing their cohesion with the community. Actually, such impressions are facilitated both by the numbers of pilgrims and their activities during the pilgrimage. One should keep in mind that all of the activities are made in a foreign environment, away from the pilgrims' usual communities, which adds to the novelty of their impressions.

A sense of danger and risk have historically been associated with going on such pilgrimages (contemporary interviewees also expressed their awareness of the Soviet regime and the KGB, its main security agency, and so forth). As German sociologist Ulrich Beck has pointed out, "helpless individualization" arises from external danger, which is another reason for staying inside one's community's boundaries (Beck 1992). Overcoming obstacles (the contemporary equivalent of overcoming the danger associated with taking a risk) remains the main distinctive feature of the pilgrimage. Such obstacles include threats (real or metaphorical), financial burdens (the round trip from the United States to Ukraine is a costly one), and general hardships (living under more primitive conditions, often in tents, and away from family).

As I noted above, the pilgrims' dominant perceptions of the people of Uman can be framed within three categories—background fear, historical aftertaste, and learned neutrality. Some fragments of history mentioned by the pilgrims during the interviews ("pogroms," "Cossacks," "Khmelnysky") are still on their minds, and the majority believe in the implicit or explicit antisemitism in Uman and Ukraine in general. Being cautious with the locals seemed to be a necessary element during the pilgrimage. Of course, such interactions were limited by the organizational and linguistic constraints during the pilgrimage (the majority of the locals did not know English, let alone Hebrew or Yiddish, and the majority of the pilgrims did not know Ukrainian or Russian). The main focus of the pilgrimage was to be present at the gravesite of the *tzaddik*, not to interact with the locals, and this was confirmed in all of the interviews.

There is an enormous difference between seeing Uman as the site of the pilgrimage and seeing it as the hometown of the local inhabitants. This distinction arose in all of the interviews. On the one hand, the pilgrims were amazed by the nature of Ukraine and Sofiyivka Park in Uman. On the other hand, they mostly noted the absence of any locals near the site of the pilgrimage and tended to evaluate the locals as antisemites. That evaluation was based on their general assumptions and it did not change as a result of the pilgrimage. As proof of that evaluation, people pointed to the cross erected near the pilgrimage site and interpreted it as an insult hurled at them by the locals. All in all, it raises the question of the clash of parallel historical heritages bound up within the same place and time.

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Appendix: Guidelines for the Interviews with Pilgrims to Uman

Screening Questions

1. Have you been to Uman?
2. How many times have you been to Uman?
3. How would you define your religious affiliation?

Interview Questions

1. What country are you from? (Were you born in the United States? What country are your parents from)? How do you define your community? How do you refer to yourself?
2. What do you know about Ukraine, generally? What do you know about Uman? How do you know these things? Who told you, and when did they tell you?
3. How many times have you been to Uman? How long have you stayed there?
4. Where have you stayed when you were there?
5. How did you decide to go there? Tell me your story.
6. How did you plan your trip? Did anyone organize it for you or help you? Was it well-organized?
7. Did you visit any other places in Uman besides Rebbe Nachman's grave? Which places? Have you visited other places in Ukraine, as well? Describe your experience.
8. How would you describe pilgrims? How many of them are Breslover Hasidim? Were any Jews there other than Hasidim among the pilgrims, in your view?
9. Did you communicate with the pilgrims who were not Hasidim? With whom? Describe these communications.
10. How would you describe the local people in Uman? What shaped your impressions?

11. As far as I know, it is said that people go to Uman especially during Rosh Hashanah in order to receive a blessing from Rebbe Nachman. Am I right? What are some other reasons why people go to Uman?
12. What is your impression of Uman/Ukraine now, after visiting the region? How did your ideas change after the pilgrimage?
13. Can you remember what your friends who had previously visited Uman told you about their experiences of the pilgrimage? Did they tell you any interesting stories about being there, about the local people, or about Uman?
14. Would you like to return to Uman or to parts of Ukraine outside of Uman in the future? Why?
15. What do you think should be improved in terms of organizing a pilgrimage? Who should make these improvements?
16. Do you know of any other people who have visited Uman and who would be willing to speak to me? Could you act as a reference and ask them to contact me or to give me their contact information?
17. How old are you? What is your level of education? What is your profession?

Thank you very much!

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