

When God sees that a certain tzaddik has the power to draw people to the service of God, He raises enemies against him, in order that he will be able to draw people to God. For when a tzaddik does not have enemies, he cannot draw people to God, just like in the days of Moshiach, when the world will be a peace, and converts will not be accepted.

- Rebbe Nachman of Breslov, writing in the *Sefer HaMiddot*, Chapter entitled 'Tzaddik', Second Book, #17

ALWAYS UNUSUAL

On December 26, 1937 Chaim and Ettia Berland¹ became the proud parents of a little Eliezer. The couple had recently escaped pre-War Europe to settle in Haifa. Chaim Berland, a Polish Jew, had made every effort to get to the land of Israel because he said he could see the Holocaust coming. He worked as a partner and baker at one of Haifa's cooperative bakeries, while Ettia Berland worked for a coffee wholesaler.

The Berland family were unusual, even then. Most of their neighbors were diehard Labor Socialists who celebrated Labor Day instead of Yom Kippur, while the Berland household was that rare oddity, a family who still believed in the Torah. As a three year old boy, the young Eliezer Berland was mocked by his friends for being the only religious boy in his playgroup.

In his Bnei Akiva high-school, Eliezer Berland was the only boy who insisted on wearing his hat to school, which raised the ire of the headteacher and nearly earned him a beating. "Why are you insisting on being different from the other pupils?!" the head demanded, angrily. No-one else was making such a fuss about covering their head. But Eliezer Berland was never a person of half-measures. If he was going to do something, he was going to do it 100%.

The young Berland was unusual in other ways, too. While other kids would spend their time playing and swimming, he spent his time with his head in a Gemara, and would stay up all night learning Torah. His friends were struck by how serious he looked, even as a young teen, and his

¹ The Berland family stem from the Davidic dynasty through Rav Eliezer Zev the Rav of Buchetch in Romania.

strange way of praying in the local Vizhnitz shul – where he would bend down to the ground, engrossed in his prayers - drew all the neighborhood kids to come and watch him.

At the age of 17, Eliezer Berland went to study at the Lithuanian yeshiva Knesses Chizkiyahu, that had just opened up in nearby Kfar Chassidim. His strange conduct was noticed by the staff and students alike, who'd never seen any other student learn for 20 hours day, even on fast days, when everything else was melting in the pre-airconditioned heat.

They also noticed that Lazer Berland's prayers seemed to get answered. Whenever another student fell ill, someone would ask Lazer to pray for him, and he'd then shut himself in his room, with his book of psalms, and come out again a couple of hours later with red eyes, from crying. And the student would recover.

One of the young Berland's contemporaries at the Knesses Chizkiyahu, Rabbi Yaakov Moshe Shpitzer recalls: "I never once saw him teasing someone else, or heard him speak badly about another person. I never once saw him sitting with the other boys outside the yeshiva after our studies and spending his time chit-chatting. I only saw Rav Berland engaged in holy matters and Torah learning. He really threw himself into his learning with an enormous amount of energy."

But there was no question that the young Eliezer was unusual, and that his strange behavior made a deep impression on people, wherever he went. When he was 21, Lazer Berland left Haifa to learn in the Ponevezh Yeshiva in Bnei Brak. Around that same time, he was set up on a *shidduch* with Tehillah Shaki, daughter of Rabbi Shalom Avraham Shaki, a Yemenite immigrant and member of the National Religious Party.

Before the date, Lazer Berland wrote a question to the Steipler Gaon, Rav Yaakov Yisrael Kanievsky, who he'd been corresponding with since his time at Knesses Chizkiyahu, asking him if he could keep his eyes closed during the meeting². The Steipler responded with his customary sharpness: 'If you're going to keep your eyes closed for the rest of your life,' he told him, "then it's also permitted for you to close your eyes during that meeting.'"

After the wedding, the young man moved from the Ponovezh Yeshiva to study with the Steipler, at the Volozhin kollel. He was the Steipler's study partner for more than three years, and Rav Yaakov was clearly taken with his young prodigy. In one letter, he referred to him as: "The precious young avreich, genius in Torah and fear of heaven, our master and teacher Rav Eliezer Berland, shlit'a."

As news of the Steipler's special treatment of the unusual young man from Haifa spread, another of the young men studying Torah in Bnei Brak, Dovid Chaim Stern, plucked up the courage to ask the Steipler what he saw in Eliezer Berland.

"He was a young man while the Steipler was the Gadol Hador and much older than him. They were study partners, learning many hours together each day, so I was interested in finding out what he had to say about him," explains Rav Stern. "The Steipler told me, 'You should know, he

² Rav Berland actually had more than 10,000 written responses from the Steipler Gaon over the course of their correspondence, sadly most of which have been lost.

is an expert in the entire Torah, a holy man and a tzaddik!' That was the testimony from the mouth of the Gadol Hador."

But while he was very happy with the Torah learning at the Volozhin yeshiva, Lazer Berland was still feeling something lacking in his religious devotions. He discussed this with the Steipler, and told him: "What's going to be with my praying?" The Steipler responded, "If you want praying, you need to go to the Chassidim."

Over the coming months, Reb Lazer went to a number of different *chassidische* shtiebels, shuls and yeshivas, to see where he felt most inspired. In the end, he came across Breslov almost by accident, on the night of Purim, 1961. He was returning back from Megillah reading at the Lelov *beis midrash* in Tel Aviv when he suddenly felt inexplicably tired, so he turned into the Breslov Yeshiva in Bnei Brak³, to sit down for a while, and started learning a Likutey Moharan, which he found there.

The yeshiva appeared to be deserted, so when the mashgiach, Rabbi Nachman Rosenthal, showed up, Reb Lazer asked him where all the students were. He discovered that everyone was in bed, asleep, so they could wake up at midnight to go out to the fields and pray. Reb Lazer responded: "What?! There are other people who go out to the field to pray?! That's what I've been looking for!"

But it wasn't so easy to make the jump, instantly, into Breslov, not least because Breslov had a reputation as being the 'dead *chassidut*', and post-World War II, the community was tiny, and in disarray. For the next two weeks, returning to the Breslov yeshiva slipped Reb Lazer's mind, until he bumped into Rabbi Nachman Rosenthal late one Friday afternoon, and agreed to come and visit him again at the yeshiva that Friday night. When he heard the davening, and the way the cantor was repeating the same word over and over again for 15 minutes, Reb Lazer was sold. Finally, he'd found the path he'd been searching for.

But first, Reb Lazer first returned to the Steipler, to get his input about all the unusual ideas Breslov *chassidut* seemed to teach about the concept of the "Tzaddik", who exists within every generation. He sat with Rav Yaakov, and went through every detail.

When he got up to the comment where Rebbe Nachman of Breslov stated that the Tzaddik could even get his students out of *gehinnom*, hell, he asked the Steipler: "Can you get me out of *gehinnom*?" The Steipler laughed, and told his young learning partner that it was only with great difficulty that he could get himself out of *gehinnom*. Who'd ever heard of such a thing?!

But Reb Lazer wasn't to be put off. He asked again: "But, what if you found a tzaddik who could get you out of *gehinnom*?" The Steipler responded, "If that's the case — run after him!" So that's what Reb Lazer did, with every drop of his strength.

Very quickly, he became a legend in the Breslov yeshiva in Bnei Brak. No-one could keep up with him, as he spent whole nights doing hitbodedut in the fields, davening for hours on the roof of

³ Located on Am Haderech Street, between Chazon Ish and Vizhnitz

the yeshiva at full volume, dancing away the judgments, getting up for the *chatzot*, or midnight prayers, and sleeping just an hour a night, in the process.

Whatever advice he found in the Breslov books, Reb Lazer made every effort to fulfill it in every detail. He sought out the Breslov elders in Jerusalem, and spent months and even years as their attendants, building close relationships with luminaries including Rabbi Israel Ber Odesser, Rav Zvi Aryeh (Hersh Leib) Lippel, Rav Tzvi Aryeh Rosenfeld, and Rav Binyomin Zev Cheshin, Rosh Yeshiva of the 'Shaar Hashamayim' kabbalistic yeshiva in Jerusalem.

Lazer Berland's budding reputation as a miracle worker had also followed him to Haifa, and the Steipler and other rabbinic luminaries at that time, like the famous Sephardi kabbalist Rav Mordechai Sharabi, started sending members of the public over to Reb Lazer for a blessing.

"Go to the Lederman synagogue in Bnei Brak," Rav Sharabi told one of his petitioners. "There, you'll see an *avreich* who prays with a lot of enthusiasm and different movements. Ask him to give you a blessing that you should get your miracle — and don't take no for an answer! Even if he tells you he's nothing and speaks disparagingly about himself and tells you he's not on the level to give you a blessing."

But not everyone in Bnei Brak was thrilled with their strange neighbor, who would often disappear for weeks at a time to pray in the wilderness, like a Biblical prophet of yore. "There were times when the Rav would disappear for whole weeks, or even whole fortnights," recalls Abish Dickshtein, one of the Berland's old neighbors. "Some of the Litvaks who lived on Rashbam Street in Bnei Brak used to laugh at the Rebbetzin and tell her, 'You see! Your husband has run off and disappeared!' The Rav used to go away to pray, so I used to go and talk to the Rebbetzin to give her some encouragement, so she shouldn't be broken by the things her neighbors were saying."

Even then, Eliezer Berland was a polarizing figure. But love or hate him, no-one could really ignore him, or the dramatic events that always seemed to surround him.

When the Berland's only son, Nachman, was four months old, he fell out of his pram and sustained a severe head injury that left him a coma for almost six weeks. The doctors told the distraught parents that he had a one in a thousand chance of surviving, and recommended very high risk brain surgery, as the only possible course of action.

But Eliezer Berland knew about something called a *pidyon nefesh*, which the Chassidic works talk about at length. So he told the doctors that his son would live, even though he needed an open miracle. Lazer Berland left the hospital, and went straight to sell his apartment in Bnei Brak for 10,000 Israeli lira.⁴ He then distributed all the money from the house sale to charity.

Miraculously, Nachman Berland woke up, and completely recovered.

When a person is sick, a pidyon nefesh (monetary redemption) is the pre-requisite of any cure. Only after the redemption has been made does the Torah give the doctor permission to cure. — Rebbe Nachman of Breslov, in Likutey Moharan, II:3

⁴ Roughly equivalent to around 500,000 shekels, in today's money.

Over the next few years, Reb Lazer started to make a lot of friends within the still relatively closed circles of Breslov chassidut – but also a few enemies. Over time, he'd grown closer to the Breslov elders, including Rav Shmuel Shapira, and Rav Levi Yitzhak Bender, who in his quiet way had become the *de facto* leader of Breslov chassidut, after the war.

One year, Reb Lazer had astounded the Breslov chassidim gathered together in Meron for Yom Kippur by standing rooted to the spot, in prayer, for the full 25 hours. When Reb Lazer finally made it onto the bus returning to Jerusalem, he broke his fast with a drop of grape juice, and then launched into a three hour Torah class, which only ended when he decided to get off the bus in the Jerusalem forest, to spend the rest of the night praying in the fields.

The next morning, he appeared for Shacharis in the Breslov shul in Meah Shearim, and again he just stood there davening for hours and hours. When the service was over, he went up to the roof to continue his prayers, and at that point, some of the congregants went over to Rav Shmuel Shapira. "What do you say, about this Rav Lazer Berland?" they wanted to know. Rav Shmuel replied, "It's already known to us that this is not a person, it's an angel!"

But not everyone agreed with that assessment. Some people within Breslov eyed the newcomer, and his strange habits and boundless enthusiasm, with a lot of suspicion. They referred to him as the *meshugganer*, the crazy man – and Reb Lazer did everything he could to encourage them.

Ben Zion Grossman explains that this wasn't an accident, and that Reb Lazer would actively seek out ways for people to disparage him. "One of his spiritual devotions is to bring shame upon himself," begins Rav Grossman. "It's not just that he doesn't go after honor, he literally encourages people to insult him and humiliate him."

And the more positive attention he was starting to garner for his erudition and sincerity, the more Reb Lazer was looking for ways to cool all the adoration down. From a young age, it seems that Reb Lazer decided to take a leaf out of King David's book, and to turn himself into a 'fool', who didn't appear to know or understand anything.

Moshe Yosef Haas first met Reb Lazer at the Vizhnitzer yeshiva in Bnei Brak, where he was routinely called 'Reb Lazer the *Meshugganer*.' People would mock him and laugh at his funny practices and strange ways – and Reb Lazer heartily encouraged them to continue. It was only a few years' later, when Rav Haas got interested in Breslov *chassidut* that he discovered that 'Reb Lazer the Meshugganer' was actually a Rosh Yeshiva in his own right, and a highly accomplished scholar.

"That's when I realized that Rav Berland had fooled a whole city for decades," says Rav Haas. "It was really a miraculous thing, because he was already a Rosh Yeshiva and also the Steipler's regular chavrusa. Yet despite all that, people in Bnei Brak believed he was a *meshugganer*."

"I started to understand that as well as being part of his spiritual work to deliberately seek out humiliation, it had also been a strategy to get people to leave him alone so they wouldn't argue with him about the new path he'd chosen. Now, when I think about it, it's truly a wondrous thing: How could someone run his own yeshiva, learn with the Steipler, and still get people to

believe he was *meshugger*? The Rav is simply a genius at hiding his greatness from other people.”

When members of the community used to approach Rav Bender with negative comments about his young protégé, he told them, “What can I tell you? What I see in Reb Lazer, I don’t see in any other person.” But not everyone was willing, or able, to see through the disguise.

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After a couple of years of learning the ropes of Breslov *chassidut*, one of his mentors, Rav Lippel, took him to one side, and told him that he couldn’t teach him any more Breslov Torah until he’d made the trip to Uman. Back then, in the late sixties and early seventies, the USSR was totally barred to citizens of Israel. The Soviet Union had broken off diplomatic ties with Israel after the Six Day War in 1967, and they weren’t minded to do favors for religious Jews.

While most people faced with the challenge of getting to Uman would have given up before they ever really began, Reb Lazer was not most people. In 1972, he traveled to America and stayed there for six months, hoping to get the Green Card that would unlock the gates of Uman, as American citizens could still get permission from the Soviets to visit.

But successfully getting into the former USSR was only the first obstacle. While the Soviets permitted foreign tourists to visit the cities of Odessa and Kiev⁵, Uman itself was totally off-limits, because it was home to a Soviet army base. Any foreigner caught visiting illegally would be interrogated, imprisoned — and perhaps even killed.

It was the height of the cold war, and no-one was taking these threats lightly. The first few attempts Reb Lazer made to get to Uman ended in failure, when he was caught by Communist officials and prevented from even crossing the border into the Ukraine. But he didn’t give up, and kept trying different routes until nine attempts — and many tens of thousands of dollars later — he finally made it in. The gates to Uman were open.

By the early 1970s, Reb Lazer was making the hazardous trip to Uman every two weeks, each time taking a different route and using a different counterfeit passport, and bringing tens of new visitors with him. On each trip, Reb Lazer would give all his fellow travelers careful instructions on what to say and do at the border, and also how to deal with the Communist officials and give them the runaround so they wouldn’t make any further trouble or succeed in their repeated attempts to arrest the ‘illegal tourists’.

Back in the alleyways of Meah Shearim, not everyone was happy about these trips to Uman. At various points in the 1970s, dissenting voices were heard within the Breslov community that Rav Berland was taking unnecessary risks, endangering people’s lives with his clandestine visits to Uman, and charging way too much money for the trips.

While the trip was certainly dangerous and expensive — not least because securing counterfeit documents didn’t come cheap, and it was impossible to take a direct route into Uman — the

⁵ Both these cities are a couple of hundred miles away from Uman, but the closest big cities in the vicinity.

careful observer could also detect a hint of festering jealousy from some of the old-school Breslov chassidim, who'd been pipped to the post on getting to Uman.

True, Reb Lazer was taking risks to get to Uman, but there really was no other way of doing it, and it was widely known that he would fast the whole day of the trip, until his group had successfully crossed the border into the Ukraine. The dangers involved were very real, no-one denied that. But what was the alternative?

On one occasion, Rav Levi Yitzchak saw Reb Lazer in the street, and started screaming at him that he was endangering people's lives. Before World War II, Rav Bender himself had famously risked his life to attend the last Rosh Hashanah gathering in Uman in 1938, where he'd only narrowly escaped being caught and executed by the murderous Soviet authorities. That was the last time he'd been in Uman, and he was keenly aware of the risks involved.⁶

Reb Lazer wasn't fazed by the accusation. He asked Rav Bender: "And what about when you went to Uman, to the grave, [in 1938] and the informer was running after you? How did you get there? Wasn't that endangering people's lives?" Rav Levi Yitzchak started laughing and accepted the Rav's answer. As Rav Bender himself used to say, the only thing more frightening than the idea of going to Uman is the idea of staying away.

So the clandestine trips continued for the best part of two decades, before they finally became legal for Israeli citizens in 1989, when the former Soviet Union imploded, and the Iron Curtain disintegrated.

In 1977, on the way home from one of these trips, where he'd been caught, interrogated, and finally released by the KGB, Reb Lazer finally decided the time had come to open his own yeshiva, for all the hundreds of people he was steadily attracting to Breslov chassidut.

This yeshiva would put the focus on in-depth Torah learning; lengthy, heartfelt prayers, including hours spent talking to God in the fields around Bnei Brak, and getting up for the midnight lamentation every single night; visits to holy grave sites; personal holiness – and accepting criticism and humiliation with love.

And when it came to that last piece of 'spiritual devotion', it would quickly become clear that no-other yeshiva in the world would be able to hold a candle to Reb Lazer, now Rav Eliezer Berland, and his 'Shuvu Banim' yeshiva.

In the meantime, young Jews were starting to throng to Rav Berland in their hundreds and even their thousands, as he criss-crossed the country giving Torah lessons anywhere he believed he could find these 'lost' Jews. Way before the concept of 'outreach' became popular and acceptable, Rav Berland was spending his days and nights in anti-religious kibbutzes and bars in Tel Aviv, where he'd close his eyes, and just start talking Torah.

He often went door to door for days at a time in the big cities, with no sleep, trying to talk to the people society had rejected, and to find the traumatized, searching people who had a big, black hole which only God could fill. Many of the people who were attracted to Rav Berland at this

⁶ See *Words of Faith*, Volume II, #53, The Last Rosh Hashana in Uman.

stage were hippies, who were searching for an alternative to non-stop materialism and the emphasis on making money.

The Berlands' neighbor from Bnei Brak, Abish Dichter recalls that the Berland residence became like a second home for many of these hippies. "He used to travel down to Eilat, and he'd even meet the hippies on the bus and bring them back to Bnei Brak," he recalls. "And that's how he started Shuvu Banim."

Of course, many of the neighbors were less than impressed about what was going on, which is when Rav Berland collected another nickname, this time as the "Rebbe of Wayward People". 'Pious' people were gossiping about what was happening at the Berland home, and the shame and the *shmutz* all these irreligious hippies were bringing into the holy environment of Bnei Brak.

Some residents on the increasingly prestigious Rashbam Street were so upset about all the "outreach" going on at the Berland home, they decided to take matters into their hands. Some of the neighbors started a petition to have the Berlands kicked out of Bnei Brak. The petition was taken around to the important people in the neighborhood – some of whom even signed it – but when it reached the door of the Steipler Gaon, he gave the organizers a scathing look, and killed their petition stone dead.

In Yiddish, he told them 'Reb Lazer *az ir agroiser, groiser yarai Shamayim!*' (Reb Lazer is a tremendous G-d fearing Jew) and refused to listen to another word. So the neighbors had to back down, but some of them weren't done with trying to get Rav Berland out of their neighborhood just yet. They'd just have to be more *creative*.

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Just as Rav Berland was coming up to the grave of Shmuel HaNavi, in the Jerusalem suburb of Ramot, the two thugs struck. Some of Rav Berland's neighbors had received permission from a 'rabbi' in Bnei Brak to hire people to beat up the Rav and teach him a lesson, and they wasted no time in following the *psak* they'd been given.

When the Rav went out to the field that night and began to walk into the forest near Shmuel HaNavi, two ruffians jumped out of the bushes where they'd been hiding in wait for him, and started to beat him up. Rav Berland had some students with him, but everyone was too shocked to react. As the beating continued, one of the thugs prepared to deliver the message from the man who'd sent them.

Before he could say the name, Rav Berland got back onto his feet, and held out two 100 shekels⁷ notes to his assailants. "Thank you, thank you," he told them. "If you do it again, I'll pay you another 100 shekels each!"

The two thugs were so bewildered and embarrassed by this bizarre turn of events, they ran off. Later, they showed up on Rav Nachman Horowitz's doorstep, and told him that they'd been paid

⁷ 100 shekels was obviously worth way more then, than now.

20 shekels each by a neighbor, to beat up the Rav. The Rav's response made such an impression on them, one of them subsequently joined Shuvu Banim.

Another time, the people who owned the local mikvah in Bnei Brak decided to super-heat the water, to stop Rav Berland bringing all his hippies, drop-outs and irreligious hangers-on from using it. When the Rav and his followers showed up at the mikva at 3am, after a long night of praying in the fields and reciting the midnight lament, they found the water was at boiling point. No-one could use it. No-one, that is, except Rav Berland, who simply carried on as usual and immersed in the water.

One of the people who witnessed this firsthand said: "There's no way of explaining what happened according to the laws of nature. I still have no idea how the Rav did that." But finding a yeshiva that would accept his new followers was proving resistant to even the Rav's very powerful brand of magic.

In a fundraising letter that Rav Berland wrote to a potential donor in July 1976, he explained:

"We have tens and tens of baalei teshuvah coming to us, and we have nowhere to place them. And they davka want to come and learn with us, and to be drawn closer [to Hashem] by us, but many of them are being lost, because there is no yeshiva that is suitable for them.

"We tried to get them into other yeshivos, but they weren't always received so nicely, and experienced whatever they experienced. Last year, I had one person with me in my home for two whole months, eating and drinking by me. Afterwards, he enrolled in a yeshiva where he was treated so badly, [literally: 'broken'] that he ran away and completely disappeared from the scene. We've been looking for him for a few months, and we still have no idea where he is.

"Tens and tens of people, and in truth it's already close to 200 people, if not more [are coming to us], and if we had a suitable institution, with God's help we could save hundreds and even thousands of people... as every baal teshuvah immediately attracts another, and another."

The Shuvu Banim yeshiva officially opened its doors in the summer of 1978, in Bnei Brak, and from the very beginning, it charted a unique course. Even newly-observant students were obliged to wake up for the midnight prayers, and there was a strong emphasis placed on praying with feeling, and serving God sincerely, and with self-sacrifice. Torah learning was also strongly stressed, as Rav Berland emphasized over and over again that Breslov teachings could only really grow in the soil of long hours spent toiling over a Gemara.

Not everyone was convinced. When they heard that Rav Berland was refusing to run his yeshiva the way 'everyone else' was, he quickly lost the support of his main backers. Unperturbed, Rav Berland explained: "We want to found a yeshiva that follows Rebbe Nachman's path, and Rabbenu's path is hitbodedut and getting up for the midnight prayers. Whoever can't do it doesn't need to stay here. There are lots of other yeshivos in Bnei Brak."

And many of those first students who enrolled and stayed on have become some of the leading lights of the Breslov community today. Rav Michael Lasry, Rav Shalom Arush, Rav Moshe Tzanani, Rav Michael Goll, Rav Ofer Erez, Rav Shmuel Stern, Rav Meir Malka, Rav Eliyahu Meirav

and Rav Eliyahu Succot, to name but a few, are all household names today, in Israel and often beyond.

As the yeshiva continued to grow, Rav Berland sent groups of his students out on more 'outreach' missions across Israel, and many more people, numbering into the thousands, returned to the fold of observant Judaism as a result, including top soldiers in the IDF, fighter pilots, and many other highly-talented individuals.

At this point, even the secular establishment started to hear about this "dangerously charismatic" rabbi who could persuade promising officers in the IDF to turn their backs on the base and leave, after just a short conversation. The secular media started to come up with all sorts of strange theories and bizarre ideas about how Rav Berland was exerting so much influence over otherwise 'normal' people – and they have continued to do that ever since.

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By 1982, things were getting a little out of hand. Shuvu Banim had exploded in popularity, and so a new branch of the yeshiva had opened in Jerusalem, while the yeshiva also continued to operate in Bnei Brak. Also, the Rav was still spending large amounts of time learning at the knee of the Breslov elders in Meah Shearim, and bringing his students with him.

On Thursday nights, seven taxis would leave from Bnei Brak to Jerusalem, filled with students from Shuvu Banim who were coming with the Rav to attend Rav Levi Yitzhak Bender's *shiur*, which was reinvigorated by this influx of newcomers. At first, Rav Bender continued to speak in Yiddish, but agreed to have a Hebrew translator for the Shuvu Banim students.

Then, as the number of Yiddish speakers attending started to be dwarfed by the Hebrew-speaking *baalei teshuvos* being brought in by Rav Berland, Rav Bender announced that he was henceforth switching to Hebrew – and not everyone in Meah Shearim was happy about that. Some of the old-school Breslov community were so *unhappy* about that, that they decided to lock Rav Bender out of his own Breslov shul in Meah Shearim, to prevent him from giving the *shiur*.

When Rav Levi Yitzchak saw this, he told the Shuvu Banim students who were stuck outside on the pavement, "Why are you just standing there?! Bring some crowbars and break down the door!" That was the the first of many subsequent occasions when extremists based in the Breslov shul tried to prevent Rav Berland and his students from entering. But all that was still in the future, and for now, Rav Berland was far more preoccupied with the question of what to do with his yeshiva.

Despite the Rav's great willingness to sacrifice himself for his students, the fact of the matter was that with the yeshiva in two separate locations, he had no time to sleep, no time to eat, and was constantly traveling back and forth between Bnei Brak and Jerusalem. It was obvious to everyone that things couldn't continue like that for much longer, so the Berlands started to look for a suitable building in Jerusalem where the whole yeshiva could be reunited.

By Pesach 1982, they still hadn't found anything suitable, but then, shortly after the holiday, the sea parted for Shuvu Banim. One of the students, Rav Dachbash, was down by the Kotel that

morning, when he heard a man crying his eyes out by the wall. Rav Dachbash went over to him to see if he could comfort him, and discovered that the man, a rich Syrian industrialist by the name of Avraham Dwek, had been double-crossed by the State of Israel.

Dwek had donated money to purchase a half-ruined building called the Chayei Olam courtyard, on Maale Haladia Street in the Muslim Quarter of the Old City. He'd been promised by the quasi-governmental Atara L'Yoshna organization that if he put up the funds, they would turn the building into a synagogue, to honor the memory of Reb Dwek's grandfather, Rabbi Shaul Dwek HaKohen. But Dwek had just discovered that they were planning to turn the place into residential apartments instead, and he was heart-broken.

Rav Dachbash asked Dwek if there was anything he could do to help, Dwek answered: "If you could bring me a kollel of at least 25 or 30 students, we could house them there today and establish our rights to the building. That's the only way of saving the situation." Shuvu Banim had found its new home.

But the State of Israel, and particularly Teddy Kollek, the then mayor of Jerusalem, were very unimpressed with this turn of events, and sent in the army to boot out the yeshiva. But they met their match in Shuvu Banim, many of whom had been elite soldiers in the IDF, and eventually, even the Teddy Kollek had to admit defeat. Shuvu Banim were in the Old City to stay – and the people in the defense establishment started to sit up, and take notice.

After this stunning turn of events, Rav Berland returned to emphasizing what he saw as the main role of the yeshiva. Shuvu Banim had been created for outreach, and to help more people discover the path of Rebbe Nachman, and Breslov chassidut. He stressed that he didn't want a yeshiva where people would start think they were better than others, just because they had long beards and side curls.

Rav Berland said: "I would prefer to sit here with just five students who have simplicity and innocence, because with those five students, I could get a lot more done in the world than if I had the 24,000 students of Rabbi Akiva, who were obsessed with their own honor and status, and thought they were better than other people."

Who would have thought that Shuvu Banim could ever get close to numbering 24,000 students? But within a decade, Rav Berland found himself the head of an organization that comprised a number of Talmud Torahs, chadarim, nurseries, boys' schools, girls' schools, kollelim and seminaries in Jerusalem and many other locations around the country. And his enemies within the Breslov community of Meah Shearim couldn't stand it.

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Shuvu Banim's arrival in Jerusalem announced the beginning of a worldwide Breslov revival that had slowly been gathering steam for years. The move to Jerusalem's Old Quarter brought many of the Rav's students in much closer contact with the existing Breslov community of Meah Shearim, and this clash of cultures lead to a lot of resentment and hard feelings on both sides.

On the one hand, there was Rav Berland's formerly secular, often Sephardi, Hebrew-speaking "new" Breslovers, some of whom were still sporting long, hippy hair, who sincerely tried to fulfill

every word that Rebbe Nachman spoke, to the best of their abilities. These guys were making maximum effort to spend Rosh Hashanah in Uman; they were getting up for *chatzos*, going out to the fields to do *hitbodedut* every night, going to the mikvah every day, learning Torah, praying with feeling and guarding their eyes.

But to the Yiddish-speaking group of Breslov extremists centred around the Breslov Shul in Meah Shearim, these newly-observant Jews were anathema. Whenever students from Shuvu Banim would try to pray in the Breslov Shul, these extremists would yell at them, insult them, and even physically bar them from entering. More than one of the Rav's newly-religious students left the Breslov shul in tears, stunned at the hostile reception they'd been given by these Breslov zealots.

The obvious aggression at the Shul was paired with a growing campaign of slander and gossip in the backstreets of Meah Shearim. The extremists would go to Rav Levi Yitzchak's house and come to him in shul, to try to turn him against Rav Berland and his followers. Their non-stop slander once prompted Rav Levi Yitzhak to say: "What do they want? I get to shul before dawn and who do I find there? Rav Lazer's people. Who goes to the field [to do hisbodedus]? Rav Lazer's men. Who do I meet in the mikvah before dawn? Rav Lazer's men. What do they want?"

It looks like the extremists wanted Breslov chassidus to stay small and effectively "dead" forever. What they definitely didn't want was for Rav Berland to bring in a flood of outsiders whom they viewed as trying to take over "their" shul and "their" customs. And they were particularly possessive over Uman.

Over Succot in 1989, the year the Soviet Union finally crumbled, Rav Michel Dorfman, a leading Breslov figure who'd spent many years behind the Iron Curtain, publically praised Rav Berland for blasting open the gates to Uman for everyone. It seems that was the last straw.

For years, Rav Berland's enemies in Meah Shearim had been muttering about the "outsider" and the "usurper" who was taking over Breslov and filling it with hippies and Sephardim. As long as Rav Berland continued to have the backing of the Breslov elders, there was nothing they could really do against him openly. But when Rav Bender, the last of the three Breslov elders who'd been shielding the Rav from his opponents, died, the hatred against the Rav and Shuvu Banim erupted into the open.

People started complaining that Rav Berland had taken too much money for the clandestine trips to Uman. Then they started arguing against the Breslov idea that there is a "true tzaddik" in every generation, who had been given the unique ability of passing the Rebbe's teachings on to the next generation. Either, they said that Rebbe Nachman was the only "tzaddik" required, or they took umbrage at the suggestion that Rav Berland could be the "true tzaddik" of our generation – even though he seemed to have all the necessary credentials.

Who else had hundreds of people beating a path to their door to ask for a blessing? Who else had inspired tens of thousands of people to come back to God and observant Judaism, and to travel to Uman? Who else was trying to follow Rebbe Nachman's path as sincerely and wholeheartedly, as Rav Berland?

After Rav Shmuel Horowitz and Rav Velvel Cheshin passed away, Rav Bender had become increasingly concerned about what the Breslov zealots would try to do to harm Rav Berland and his community after his own passing. A month before he passed away from cancer on July 25, 1989, Rav Bender made a final attempt to pull the community back together, and to stop all the in-fighting being stoked by the extremists.

Rav Bender said then: *“When I begin to speak about the topic of love, people don’t understand what I’m referring to, they have no idea what I’m talking about, but we need to know that this is what’s lacking, this is what’s lacking by us!!! ... Even if I don’t agree with the other person I still need to love him!*

“We have to be very careful not to lose or even lessen the love between all the Breslov chassidim. When I’m talking about how we need to hold ourselves together in unity, people have no idea what I’m talking about! It seems to them that I’m talking in a different language...!

“Rebbe Nachman said: ‘I judge everyone to the side of mercy, apart from people who instigate strife and communal discord.’...[T]here is always a punishment for the sin of speaking lashon hara. Whether the punishment will occur immediately or be delayed — this is a decision made Above, but certainly a punishment will come!

“Hashem has mercy on us. We have Rebbe Nachman, a merciful Rebbe, a true merciful leader! Rabbeinu judges everyone favorably. Nevertheless, WATCH YOURSELVES! Watch yourselves with this one point, because about this he is not silent. You will get punished for this [the sin of speaking lashon hara] no matter how great you are!

“We have no idea about the secrets of the arguments between the tzaddikim, therefore, DON’T GET INVOLVED! It seems like they are arguing, but in reality, they are working together in a way that’s deeper than we can imagine... All of a sudden, a third person gets involved and gives his opinion — ‘this one is good, that one is bad...’ He’s messing up the whole thing!”

Rav Bender was giving a stark warning that whoever came after him, Breslov Chassidus should pull together and unite behind him. But the Breslov zealots were too far gone in their hatred and jealousy to heed him.

Following Rav Bender’s passing, the zealots’ antagonism against Rav Berland only intensified. Rav Berland had maintained the custom of praying the Breslov Shul in Meah Shearim on Friday nights, and also on Yom Kippur, even after Shuvu Banim moved to the Old City. That year, on the first night of the *selichos* service, the Breslov shul was packed to the rafters.

As soon as Rav Berland entered, the zealots started yelling at him and cursing him. Some people even stood on tables to throw things at him and there was a tremendous commotion as they screamed themselves hoarse, yelling at the Rav to leave. Yosef Assulin was with him at the time, and he recalls:

“Throughout the whole ordeal, Rav Berland just stood completely still, with a serene, pleased look on his face. After the storm died down, Rav Berland left to meet his Rebbetzin outside the shul, and he was still wearing a look of amazed delight, as if he’d just experienced the best thing in the world. The Rebbetzin asked him: ‘How was it?’ And the Rav replied: ‘It was great! I prayed

for this for so long. But one thing bothered me, I was hoping it would go on for 2 hrs, why only 20 minutes?!"

As the poisonous storm in Meah Shearim Breslov's community continued to rage, Rav Yehuda Zerachia Halevi Segal, a leading kabbalist of the previous generation, decided to intercede, to try to end the *machlokes*. On November 11, 1991, he wrote a letter to Rav Yaakov Meir Shecter, the official head of the community in the Breslov shul, where he emphasized how important it was to have peaceful relations within the Breslov community.

Rav Segal wrote: *"The very high level of piousness and avodas Hashem of the gaon and tzaddik Rav Eliezer Berland, shlita, is well known to me. It's forbidden to harm an angel of God... and Rabbeinu Hakadosh (Rebbe Nachman) is extremely upset about recent events... The honor of Rabbeinu Hakadosh forces me to intercede and protest about what is going on."*

Thanks to the pressure they came under from Rav Segal and a number of other Rabbis and spiritual leaders to end their attacks against Rav Berland and his followers, the Breslov extremists in Meah Shearim ultimately had no choice but to stop their open persecution of Shuvu Banim.

But these people's hatred of Rav Berland and his students never really disappeared, it just quietly festered underground, watching and waiting for the next opportunity to burst out into the open. Over the next few years, one of their ranks would quietly infiltrate himself into Shuvu Banim, and attempt to destroy the community from within. And he very nearly succeeded.