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JOURNEY BEYOND TRADITION

HOW WOMEN ARE REDEFINING PILGRIMAGES IN A HEARTLAND OF JEWISH HISTORY

Alla Marchenko spent her childhood near Europe’s most visited Hasidic pilgrimage site, in Uman, a city of about 81,000 in central Ukraine. But, at age 16, she couldn’t wait one moment longer to explore the outside world. She embarked on a personal journey that took her to Kyiv, New York, Warsaw and Jerusalem, along the way learning English, Yiddish, Hebrew and Polish.

Marchenko’s life, it seems, has come full circle. During her five years pursuing a PhD, she studied cultural memory in places connected to Hasidic pilgrimage in Poland and Ukraine, including Uman. And she worked on numerous international projects to uncover the neglected heritage of Uman and Lviv, in western Ukraine.

Today, Marchenko is an Azrieli International Postdoctoral Fellow in sociology and anthropology at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem — and returning again and again to Polish and Ukrainian pilgrimage sites. In Polish towns of Leżajsk and Dynów and Ukrainian towns of Medzhybizh and Uman, she sees first-hand how Jewish female pilgrims navigate and make meaning in areas where they traditionally have been overlooked.

The duality of religion and female empowerment is an understudied phenomenon, and the views of religious women who have agency are rarely heard, she says. “The voice of religious women who don’t think in the dual frame of oppression and liberation is the one that is often neglected,” she says. “I try to represent this voice through the phenomenon of pilgrimages. Pilgrimages constitute a part of important religious rituals, but they also fulfil other roles along the way.”

Marchenko has been able to build trust among female religious pilgrims who are normally quite reticent. She travels to and from pilgrimage sites with them and accompanies them as they visit shrines. “Women can share their private matters with me and feel comfortable that I am also a pilgrim, not an outside scandal hunter,” she says.

The women she has met so far have been motivated to travel to Ukraine and Poland for a variety of reasons. Some pilgrims have attended to pray for a husband, fertility or good health for themselves or family. Others have searched for an elevated spiritual experience or heard stories of miracles happening at the shrine and wanted to see for themselves.

For Alla Marchenko, who studies the experience of female pilgrims, the past is always in the foreground. Here, she holds an image she took of Nachman of Breslov’s shrine in Uman, Ukraine, the most visited Jewish pilgrimage site in Europe.

The female pilgrims certainly do not challenge the traditional Orthodox Jewish gender order; they dress modestly, follow the recommendations of rabbis and respect the divisions of space at the shrines. But the presence of the female pilgrims challenges the traditional perception of the pilgrimage site as “a man’s territory,” and creates new meanings, Marchenko has written.

While the women follow the same rituals as the men, they experience the pilgrimage in unique ways. At the very least, the logistics of the pilgrimage are set up with men in mind, not women. Few hotels enable gender separation and there are many physical inconveniences to work around. “In my observations,” says Marchenko, “it’s not always easy for a religious woman to get kosher service in these circumstances.”

But the unique experience of the women goes deeper than mere logistics, a fact that was brought home to the researcher during her fieldwork in Uman.

The Uman pilgrimage is centred on the burial site of the 18th century spiritual leader, Nachman of Breslov (now Bratslav in Ukraine). In his time, the charismatic Rebbe Nachman, driven by a messianic mission, founded the Hasidic group known as Bratslav Hasidim. It is believed that he wanted to be buried in Uman in memory of the thousands of Jewish martyrs who died there, and promised to intercede on behalf of followers who came to pray at his grave and give money to charity.

While the shrine originally held meaning mainly for the Bratslav Hasidim, today it is seen as a meeting place for Jews of all persuasions. It is now the most visited Jewish shrine in Europe. In peacetime, Uman welcomes up to 40,000 mostly male pilgrims every Rosh Hashanah (the Jewish New Year) and both male and female pilgrims from various Jewish denominations year-round.

Although women have traditionally been excluded from Hasidic pilgrimages, there are signs of change. More than 10,000 visited Rebbe Nachman’s grave each year before the COVID-19 pandemic and the Russia-Ukraine war. Female pilgrims may be less visible but attend in larger groups on certain holidays such as Tu B’Av, the mystical Jewish day of love, and Hanukkah, the festival of lights and miracles. Most trips done by female pilgrims are made in groups led by a guide with a religious background, usually the wife of a rabbi.

For her most recent visits in 2023, during the Russia-Ukraine war, Marchenko travelled with pilgrims via pre-arranged transportation from Moldova through the Ukrainian countryside. During this difficult time, recent pilgrimages understandably have been small, but she was still able to interview 20 female pilgrims and trip organizers, most of whom travelled from Israel, and had dozens of other informal conversations with pilgrims. Her informants ranged in age, from 20 to 75, and in their religious observance.

From her fieldwork in Uman, Marchenko identified what she terms the “female pilgrim’s gaze.” adapting the concept of the “female gaze” associated with cinema as the lens through which the world is viewed. The female pilgrim’s gaze encompasses four distinct aspects of the female pilgrim experience that set it apart from how religious men experience pilgrimage.

For one, the female pilgrims take a more introspective view of the experience by focusing on Rebbe Nachman’s writings and the larger meaning of the pilgrimage. Unlike male religious pilgrims, many of whom feel obligated to attend, female pilgrims attend by choice. They can follow their urge to make an important personal change in life or adjust to a life change. Given that many religious Jewish women tend to consider modesty and lack of visibility as virtues, Marchenko says, their introspection during pilgrimage is only heightened.

Female pilgrims dress modestly, follow the recommendations of rabbis and respect the divisions of space at Rebbe Nachman’s shrine. But their presence challenges the traditional perception of Uman as “a man’s territory”



PHOTOGRAPH BY KITRA CAHANA

Given the many roadblocks they face, going on a religious pilgrimage is a powerful choice women make, says Marchenko, an Azrieli International Postdoctoral Fellow in sociology and anthropology at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem.



A second aspect is the pilgrim’s sole focus on the shrine, prayers and their fellow female pilgrims. Gender separation, in fact, was mentioned by many pilgrims as a source of comfort.

The female pilgrims Marchenko interviewed also emphasized the uniqueness of their aspirations and privacy of their motivation to attend. More than once, a pilgrim told her, “I am not a typical pilgrim. I follow my own rules.” She says this is not surprising: For one, while the rules and norms of male religious pilgrimage to shrines are well established, they are not so for women. For another, female pilgrimage to the graves of revered religious leaders is still an unusual, and not entirely accepted, phenomenon among the larger Jewish community.

Finally, the pilgrimage is a special time when the religious women can be with others of similar background — without interacting with men.

Taken together, one can readily see how female pilgrims can feel a unique connection to their experience. In most cases, Marchenko says,

women said they encountered something “higher” or “holy” during the trip. Interestingly, the women she met who travelled without an organized group tended to report they felt nothing special at the shrine. “My hypothesis is that this special ‘feeling connection’ is formed by intensified pilgrim’s gaze, due to structure and content of this trip,” she says.

Marchenko’s understanding of both Jewish and Ukrainian cultures and languages gives her unique insight on the pilgrimage and the steps taken by Jewish women toward self-determination, says Nurit Stadler, a professor of sociology and anthropology at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, who is advising Marchenko on her postdoctoral research.

She says this research builds a greater understanding of religious Jewish women, including ultra-Orthodox, who have had little public presence, and shows how they are deepening their religiosity, self-esteem and identities within their communities.

Though Ukraine, at war with Russia, has urged pilgrims to stay away, tens of thousands continue to make the perilous journey. During her recent visits, Marchenko travelled with pilgrims from Moldova through the Ukrainian countryside.

Marchenko plans to extend her research in the coming years, examining the different interpretations of pilgrimage depending on the religious destination.

Her research is part of a growing body of scholarship on the gendered nature of pilgrimage. There have been many studies on the experiences of Christian women pilgrims to shrines of saints. Of late, researchers have shown how Muslim women experience hajj and umra, the compulsory and voluntary pilgrimages to Mecca, and ziyarat, the visits to local shrines, differently from men. These differences stem from social relations, experiences of the rituals and the social and political positioning of women in Muslim society.

For many religious women and men on a pilgrimage to sites in Ukraine or Poland, the experience can evoke a complicated collection of emotions. This part of Europe is home to a rich Jewish history but also the site of the Holocaust and countless pogroms, horrific events that, for many, are woven into family histories. For some younger pilgrims, this history is reason enough to visit the religious sites of Eastern Europe.

In her earlier research, Marchenko found that most male pilgrims see Uman as a “dark place,” evoking memories of violence against Jews, where locals are implicitly or explicitly antisemitic. “Cross-cultural communication between the pilgrims and the locals is complicated, as if they live in two separate worlds,” she says.

Over the past decade, however, the distance between these worlds has narrowed, she says. Some pilgrims moved to Uman and started businesses, mostly to service pilgrims. In a survey she supervised in 2018, Uman residents were asked to name an important local personality. “It was our big surprise to find out that five per cent of local inhabitants included the name of Rebbe Nachman,” she says, “I think that was a sign of the ice breaking.”

In normal times, most Uman locals have little interaction with pilgrims. But these are not normal times. While Uman is well away from the front-line fighting between Russia and Ukraine, it has been bombarded several times by Russian rockets, including on April 28, 2023, when two missiles struck an apartment building, killing 23 people. Ukrainian authorities asked pilgrims to refrain from making the trip to Uman, where there was limited bomb shelter capacity. There were also concerns that the presence of large groups of people could provoke additional attacks from Russia.

Given this complicated background, Marchenko hopes that her ongoing research in Poland and Ukraine can act as a bridge between pilgrims visiting Hasidic shrines and residents of those communities. She is careful, as always, to be mindful of her role as a dispassionate researcher searching for the most telling insights and dominant themes from her fieldwork. Yet she allows herself time to pray alongside the pilgrims she interviews, for her own needs, for others and for peace in her homeland.

“I can’t say that I can change the world,” Marchenko says. “I cannot. But I can open the door to find some better solutions. I want to speak and give voice to those unheard.” ▲●■