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Perceptions of Danger Around Jewish Pilgrimages to Uman in Times of Insecurity

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Abstract
This text examines Uman in contemporary Ukraine as a significant Jewish pilgrimage destination in Europe, with a particular focus on the period of 2019–2024. Through the lens of integrated threat theory of prejudice, the author analyzes popular perceptions of danger among pilgrims and local residents. Utilizing qualitative content analysis of posts and comments in Facebook groups, as well as field observations during that period, the research highlights the gendered aspects of these perceptions. Findings reveal several categories related to pilgrimage and danger: pilgrims as appropriators, pilgrims as a threat to local life, the spiritual danger of pilgrimage cancellation, and the wartime insecurities of pilgrimage. Within these dynamics, women emerge both as those perceived to be at risk—especially in discourses of local harassment and vulnerability—and as those shaping debates on safety online. The idea of space holiness is articulated in a limited domain belonging to discourses of pilgrims.

Keywords Perceptions of danger · Jewish pilgrimages · Uman · Insecurity

Introduction

In the early twenty-first century, the most popular Jewish pilgrimage in Europe became connected to traveling to a town called Uman, located in central Ukraine, where Nachman ben Feiga found his rest in 1810. Nachman ben Feiga, colloquially called Rabbi Nachman, was born in the town of Bratslav (Breslov) and became known as the founder of Breslov Hasidism (considered as Rebbe Nachman by his

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followers) [1]. The growing interest in his teachings among various Jewish circles, including people who turned to religion in later stages of their life (so-called *baalei tshuva*, in Hebrew) and those who decided to make significant life changes, can be explained by the inclusive character of his teachings.

Nachman of Breslov died from tuberculosis at the age of 38 years without leaving behind living sons to carry on his legacy. According to the memoirs written by his closest disciple, Nathan Sternhartz, R. Nachman requested to be buried in Uman in honor of Jewish victims of an earlier pogrom in the town during the Koliivshchyna revolt of 1768.

The risks embedded in the Uman pilgrimage can be structured through two interlinked concepts in Hasidic discourse: *Rebbe Nachman as spiritual Father* and *mesirat nefesh* (self- sacrifice). As Brooker and Sa'ar demonstrate, Rabbi Nachman is imagined as the spiritual father of all Breslov Hasidim, with biological fathers acting as mediators who bring their sons into his presence, often described as "bringing them to their grandfather" (Brooker and Sa'ar 2024, 76–78). This paternal figure extends the liturgical notion of God as *Avinu* (our Father), creating a theological chain in which divine fatherhood is embodied in the Rebbe and transmitted through biological fathers to their sons. This configuration raises the symbolic stakes of participation: men without sons, or those unable to bring them, may experience a perceived deficit in fulfilling their paternal–religious duty, while daughters remain structurally excluded from the religious capital generated in this male-only setting (Ibid., 90–92). In this context, guarding male spiritual purity becomes a central aspect of paternal responsibility, directly linking the father's role to the practice of *mesirat nefesh* as a means of protecting the sacred lineage from moral or sexual transgression.

R. Nachman's personality was revolutionary in many respects. His famous words, "The most important thing is not to fear at all," were popularized in an Israeli song by Baruch Chait during the Yom Kippur War of 1973 and are still embraced by his followers (Tucker 2010). The times of insecurity present in the title of this text relate to global developments since the beginning of 2020: the gradual closing down of international travel and pilgrimage owing to the pandemic of COVID-19, the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine since February 2022, and the war of Israel on multiple fronts and regional instability in the Middle East since October 2023. This is important, as the majority of Uman pilgrims come from Israel.

Before 2022, Uman had become home to no fewer than 100 Hasidic families during the last decade, many of whom reside there either full-time or part-time, taking care of the pilgrimage infrastructure. Jewish pilgrims tend to visit Uman throughout the year, with a peak during Rosh Hashanah (the beginning of a new year, celebrated on the 1st and 2nd of Tishrei in the Hebrew calendar). During this time, 30,000–35,000 pilgrims typically converge in Uman, primarily comprising groups

[1] The life of Nachman coincided with political turbulences in the region. Both Bratslav and Uman belonged to the Polish Kingdom in the eighteenth century, where Bratslav was a prominent center of Bratslav Voyevodship (in Polish: Województwo Bracławskie) until the second partition of the Polish Kingdom in 1793. After that, the region was annexed by the Russian Empire. In contemporary Ukraine, Bratslav functions as a small village, while Uman gained its importance as a middle-size town of nearly 90,000 inhabitants.

of Breslov Hasidim but, as mentioned, also attracting a broader Jewish audience. Despite the ongoing war in Ukraine, pilgrimage has persisted, with no fewer than 35,000 pilgrims arriving for the Rosh Hashanah celebrations in October 2024. [2]

Historically, similar pilgrimages to the tombs of the righteous people (*kivrey tsaddikim*, in Hebrew) were considered a "men's activity," and women's participation was deemed either unnecessary or, in some cases, inappropriate for devout male prayer. In Haredi [3] narratives, women's physical presence in male religious spaces has at times been framed as a cause of divine displeasure, even in the wake of mass tragedies. After the 1911 Mount Meron disaster—when a platform collapsed during Lag BaOmer celebrations at the tomb of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, killing 11—some attributed the catastrophe to the immodesty and proximity of women to men at the site. More than a century later, the 2021 Meron disaster, which killed 45 male celebrants, generated similar attributions in segments of the Haredi community, where the tragedy was interpreted as divine punishment for breaches in modesty and gender separation (Gado and Fishof 2023, 7–8). This recurring interpretive pattern, linking physical catastrophe to women's spatial transgression, underscores the enduring role of gendered moral frameworks in explaining disaster within certain segments of the Haredi world.

Gender segregation and the regulation of women's bodies in Haredi society operate as key strategies of boundary-making, reinforcing male authority while casting women's presence in sacred space as potentially disruptive (Stadler 2009). Breslov narratives in Uman bring vivid examples to this trend of importance of men's separation from women, such as morality posters and advertisements emphasizing the necessity to contact with men only (Marchenko 2025, 5). At the same time, as pilgrimage to Uman has become an umbrella term for many Jewish seekers, it is no surprise that more and more women join the pilgrimage teams. The pilgrimage draws a wide spectrum of participants, including neo-Hasidic seekers, secular Israelis, and both Ashkenazi and Mizrahi Jews, each bringing distinct cultural backgrounds and expectations (Weinstock 2011). This heterogeneity underscores that Uman cannot be understood solely through the lens of ultra-Orthodox religious practice, but must be seen as a space where varied identities converge.

Theoretical Background

This research investigates perceptions of danger articulated across different constituencies—both locals and pilgrims—linked to the pilgrimage to Uman. An integrated threat theory of prejudice (Stephan and Stephan 2000) emphasizes that the feeling of insecurity can be connected to four factors: physical danger, symbolic danger,

[2] Importantly, the pilgrimage in 2024 coincided with one of the Iranian ballistic attacks on Israel on 1 October 2024, resulting in airspace closures and flight cancellations for several thousand pilgrims to Uman.

[3] I use the word "Haredi" ("God-fearing," from Hebrew) to describe the most religiously dedicated and closed segments of Jewish observance, sometimes labeled as "ultra-Orthodox," which includes various Hasidic, Lithanian (Yeshivish), and Sephardic sub-groups. Traditional Breslov Hasidic representatives of Haredi people constitute the core of the pilgrimage.

negative stereotypes, and intergroup anxiety. Pilgrimage settings are often marked by physical challenges, encounters with unfamiliar populations, and the moral demands of sacred space. In the case of pilgrimage to Uman, the encounters take place across tremendous differences in religion (Orthodox Christians—often not highly observant [Hrushetsky 2024]—and Haredi Jews alongside Jewish pilgrims of varied backgrounds), language (Ukrainian as a local language, Hebrew as a dominant language among pilgrims), customs, and general culture (with Middle Eastern social codes operating in an East European setting). From the perspective of intergroup threat theory, such contrasts can heighten sensitivity to perceived breaches of expected behavior or boundaries.

Gender differences in danger perception are embedded in practices connected with traveling. The so-called geography of women's fear implies that women adapt their everyday mobility by avoiding "dangerous places" and "dangerous times," revealing how threats of male violence shape spatial behavior beyond objective levels of risk (Valentine 1989, 389). Women are particularly sensitive to risks associated with male-dominated institutions, crime, and sexual assault, making their risk perception qualitatively different from men's (Gustafson 1998, 810). Extending this to sacred spaces, women engage in "domesticating the holy," softening a male-dominated site by introducing elements of family, intimacy, and docility (Ben Shitrit 2017, 815–17, 829–32). Taken together, these perspectives highlight that risk is never neutral: it is interpreted through gendered lenses that both constrain women's movement and enable them to reconfigure contested religious spaces.

This research asks: how are perceptions of danger and security constructed among groups connected to the Jewish pilgrimage to Uman, and how are these perceptions shaped by gender? It examines how these perceptions and related practices have evolved between 2019 and 2024, and how the idea of Uman's "holiness" is articulated across different groups during periods of heightened uncertainty.

Methodology

The research is grounded on a combination of social media analysis, personal on-site observations, and informal talks. The inclusion of both digital and in-person methods broadens the representational scope of the study. Analysis includes pages and groups, arranged by the number of followers, that include a popular platform for Uman inhabitants ("Uman [news, people, problems"])[4], local media highlighting activities of the Hasidic community in Uman ("Uman Media")[5], and groups

[4] Facebook group "Uman (news, people, problems)" https://www.facebook.com/groups/122577324482570 had 33,700 followers. Accessed 13 November 2025.

[5] Facebook group "Uman Media" https://www.facebook.com/umanmedianews had 1500 followers. Accessed 13 November 2025.

representing pilgrims ("Union Breslev in Uman"[6] and "Need anything in Uman").[7] All these groups highlighted various angles of the relationships of pilgrimage to danger and security, being openly accessed for wider audiences in 2019–2024 (Facebook Users in Ukraine 2024). I employed qualitative content analysis of social media texts in 2019–2024, using MaxQDA 24 software for systematizing and organizing data.

In addition to online sources, the research draws on my field-based observations during repeated visits to Uman and along common pilgrimage routes in January–February 2023, August 2024, and January 2025. Observations offered valuable insight into how pilgrims frame danger, negotiate legitimacy, and interpret gendered boundaries in both physical and digital contexts. I had dozens of informal conversations with women pilgrims—primarily from Breslov Hasidic backgrounds of varying levels of religious observance (mostly in Hebrew and Yiddish).

Possibilities and Limitations

This research opens up windows to understanding the discourses/themes related to danger and the Jewish pilgrimage in Uman, popular in certain social circles, at a certain period of time marked by major disruptions (the pandemic, the war). Local groups that are well moderated and connected to specific Uman events and knowledge could serve as a shield against fake comments and topics; however, it could not be 100% guaranteed owing to the nature of social media. Online debates amplify the loudest voices while marginalizing others, and the dynamics of social media engagement may not accurately reflect the broader societal consensus. At the same time, voices of pilgrims are presented on two Hebrew-language online platforms, widely used by former or prospective pilgrims from Israel, many of whom are returnees to religion. While it is common for core Haredi communities to have prohibitions on internet usage, it should be emphasized that those voices would be absent from the online forums and could only be partly heard using the field data from observations and informal talks with women. Combining methods expands the representational scope of the study, also enabling a temporal perspective, tracing changes in attitudes over a period marked by the ongoing Russian invasion of Ukraine and the post 7 October 2023 war in Israel. These overlapping conflicts form the backdrop against which perceptions of risk are gendered, negotiated, and normalized within the contemporary pilgrimage experience.

[6] Facebook group "Union Breslev in Uman" https://www.facebook.com/UnionBreslev had 2800 followers. Accessed 13 November 2025. The language of the group is Hebrew.

[7] Facebook group "Need anything in Uman / Tsarikhim Mashehu Uman" https://www.facebook.com/groups/400703800390698 had 5500 members. Accessed 13 November 2025. This group covers any Uman-related inquiries of Hebrew-speakers.

Research Results

All in all, I analyzed 66 posts, selecting all available posts within six indicated years related to risk and danger in the context of the pilgrimage in Uman. The selection was done manually, using keywords "danger," "risk," "dangerous," "pilgrimage," and "pilgrim" in a corresponding language (Ukrainian, Hebrew, and sometimes Russian). The biggest share—26 posts—belongs to a popular local group "Uman (news, people, problems)," followed by a local mediator journalistic channel focusing on giving space to the voices of pilgrims, "Uman Media" (25 posts). About a quarter of my sample (15 posts), divided between "Union Breslev in Uman" (6 posts) and "Need anything in Uman" (9 posts) and represented pilgrims' perspectives, either a more official group of Breslov Hasidim or a more inclusive group for anyone interested in pilgrimage to Uman (see a distribution by year in Table 1).

Importantly, the style and target audience of all those groups differed—while groups in Ukrainian were oriented to Ukrainian speakers, most likely connected to or living in Uman, the groups in Hebrew targeted Hebrew-speakers—either interested in general activities of the Breslov Union in Uman or certain exchange between experienced and potential pilgrims. Posts in the group 'Uman (news, people, problems)' contained links to both official news and personal impressions in regard to the topic, typically followed by emotionally charged reactions and comments. At the same time, "Uman Media" as a journalistic outlet provided information about the local logistics of pilgrimage and the position of Rabbi Natan Ben Noon, the Head of Rabbi Nachman Charitable Foundation, the main Breslov organization in Uman, in these logistics.

The topic of mass Hasidic pilgrimages looks like a sensitive one for regular inhabitants of Uman—an earlier representative survey in Uman showed that locals in Uman link pilgrims to creating chaos, searching for entertainment, and disrespecting regular inhabitants (Results… 2018).

It deserves attention that Uman inhabitants often linked their dissatisfaction with the actions of local government and the current mayor Iryna Pletniova to the topic of pilgrimages and pilgrims. A former Uman mayor, Oleksandr Tsebrii, expressed a firm stance against the pilgrimage in Uman in the light of the coronavirus pandemic in 2020—a year of municipal elections in Ukraine. He asked the President of Ukraine to prohibit the entry of pilgrims in 2020, using petitions, recording videos with local doctors, and allegedly sleeping by the doors of the Office of the President of Ukraine in Kyiv.[8] It is not surprising that his performative approach to the pilgrimage in 2020 became memorable among the locals, even if the topic did not become a decisive one for him to win the elections.

[8] Oleksandr Tsebrii voluntarily joined the Armed Forces of Ukraine in March 2022. During his service, he acquired the nickname "Mayor" and gained public recognition through his frontline videos and his outspoken criticism of political corruption. He was killed in combat near Donetsk in July 2024. Thousands of residents attended his funeral in Uman. In this context, Tsebrii came to be referred to as "the people's mayor," a designation that implicitly contrasted him with the incumbent mayor, and he has since been regarded as a local hero in Uman.

Main Categories

I have differentiated several dominant categories regarding the perception of danger in the context of pilgrimages between 2019 and 2024: "pilgrims as appropriators" and "pilgrims as a threat to local life" among local residents, and "the spiritual danger of pilgrimage cancellation" among pilgrims. In addition, a distinctive category, "the wartime insecurities of pilgrimage," emerged as especially relevant for women pilgrims.

Pilgrims as Appropriators

The category "pilgrims as appropriators" was often based on providing examples with asymmetrical comparisons, where pilgrims were shown as those who enjoy more privilege than locals. This is a typical manifestation of negative stereotypes and symbolic threat in the integrated threat theory of prejudice.

Interestingly, locals made parallels between Rosh Hashanah and New Year's Eve: "It is two o-clock at night, and the Hasidim do not stop celebrating New Year. Music is calling out to all of Uman. I live three kilometers from the grave of the tzaddik and I hear well these songs of 'pilgrims.' Ukrainian laws are not obligatory for foreigners? Can you imagine Ukrainians celebrating New Year in Israel this way? I would have called the police, but 500 policemen already guard the pilgrims there. Maybe they do not hear…???"[9] (28 reactions, 10 comments).

The category "pilgrims as appropriators" covered several dimensions: pilgrims in Uman versus Ukrainian citizens in Israel, where the latter were allegedly treated badly; pilgrims in Uman versus locals in Uman, where the latter had more restrictions and less rights; and pilgrims in Uman versus pious believers. Furthermore, during the first year of the full-scale Russian war in Ukraine, this theme employed contrasts between the ongoing mourning for numerous residents of Uman killed while fighting for Ukraine[10] and the Hasidim dancing next door. Words typically used in posts and comments under this category contain dichotomies: "allowed" versus "not allowed," "war" versus "festival." This category was often expressed through irony, using quotation marks to highlight something perceived as fake or not genuine, or by adopting an inappropriate tone to emphasize paradoxes.

In 2023, "Uman Media" introduced ethnographic notes by a local female journalist, offering various topics to contemplate about the relation of pilgrimage to danger and safety in Uman. Many comments under the posts implied the frustration of Uman residents with pilgrims: "Don't bring drug addicts, drunkards and all sorts of garbage with you and everything will be fine."[11] This illustrates a popular perception of pilgrimage among locals in Uman as an excuse and a cover for prohibited activities. It is interesting that the topic of religion is almost never mentioned, which may

[9] A post with a short video by Dzvenyslava Karpliuk in "Uman (news, people, problems)" on 2 October 2019.All sources provided in footnotes were accessed November 13, 2025.

[10] Although the official statistics about the war losses of Uman is scarce, the local alley of commemoration of Uman residents fallen during the Russian war in Ukraine in the beginning of January 2025 contained about 350 names with photos.

[11] A comment to a post in "Uman Media" on 28 August 2023.

Table 1 Distribution of posts connected to danger in the context of pilgrimage across groups, 2019–2024

	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Need anything in Uman	1	4	2	0	0	2
Union Breslev in Uman	0	0	2	2	1	1
Uman media	3	0	1	7	12	2
Uman: people	5	5	4	4	6	2

signify general perceptions of pilgrims by locals as people coming not for religious reasons.

The category "pilgrims as appropriators" employed emotions of fear that pilgrims "occupy" and "appropriate" land from locals, on the basis of facts of pilgrims owning flats bought from locals, and the existence of new construction sites for hotels and residential buildings in neighborhoods adjacent to the grave of R. Nachman: "Uman residents! Who knows what the Hasidim are picking up to buy for themselves on Hrushevsky street? Our mayor is now leading their delegation in the center!!!…"[12] (9 reactions, 2 comments).

This category embraced posts that discussed spatial restrictions and regulations during the peak pilgrimage time. To give a general idea, non-residents of the area of pilgrimage are typically banned from entering the neighborhood by the police, while persons identified as pilgrims are able to move freely in and out of the site. Such restrictions are imposed primarily to ensure the safety of the pilgrims, taking into account the huge crowds located on a small territory. Some posts addressing the issue also contained dissatisfaction with local authorities mentioned earlier:

"Don't you want to show documents that you are legally blocking traffic, where people cannot get home, children are deprived of studying at school and attending kindergarten? The main thing is that Hasidim are allowed to do everything, including setting off fireworks, walking during curfew, driving under the influence of drugs, etc. Not dear mayor, your actions are illegal, we will find a way to punish you."[13] (6 likes).

Pilgrims as a Threat to Local Life

Alongside the mentioned category present in posts and comments throughout the whole research period, another category—"pilgrims as a threat to local life"—was articulated explicitly in 2020. Being initially connected to the pandemic of COVID-19, it contained such typical words as "disease," "physical attack," and "disobedience" in the context of pilgrims. Unlike the previous category, this one is connected to (perceived) physical danger and negative stereotypes about pilgrims as a group. Pilgrims were connected to at least three problematic COVID-19 related issues: (1) they had to gather in large groups during the pilgrimage (which means quick transmission of disease), (2) they could travel from the so-called red (unsafe in terms of COVID-19) countries (which means a higher probability of arriving while being ill),

[12] A post by Iryna Harkava Biliavska in "Uman (news, people, problems)" on 25 August 2019.

[13] A comment to the post by Viktoriia Nianko "A meeting of the town authorities with representatives of the Breslov Hasidim took place" in "Uman (news, people, problems)" on 12 July 2023.

and (3) they disobey safety instructions valid in Ukraine (which means they will transmit the virus among the Uman locals). For instance, a repost of an article about vaccination as a prerequisite of allowing pilgrims to come to Uman[14] provoked a popular comment: "Which infection haven't we had yet? Wait—they will bring it in this season." (10 likes).

Other than diseases, local groups discussed several cases of physical injuries done by pilgrims: "At about 7:00 PM, a group of Hasidim were probably going to pray on Sadova Street, near the entrance to the Sofiivka Park. On the way, they behaved inappropriately and just pushed a woman who was passing by. Then one of them approached a parked car and kicked it… The police said that any complaint would not yield any results—the Hasidim would celebrate their New Year and go on to live peacefully in their countries… When will the police start protecting us, Ukrainians, from them, the "peaceful" pilgrims, and not the other way around?"[15] As one may note, the alleged peaceful routine of pilgrims in their everyday lives stand in contrast to their less peaceful behavior during pilgrimage, observed by the local residents, and the concept of "peace" is used here to emphasize the danger coming from certain pilgrims.

A post about another physical assault contained a citation by Zoya Vovk, a spokeswoman for the National Police of Ukraine in the region: "We recommend that women not walk alone in the pilgrimage area, near the grave, be accompanied by police officers and take care of their safety." Here, it was suggested for locals to wait until the pilgrims finish their celebrations, tolerating certain law breaches in public spaces. The most popular comment demonstrated objection to this position of police: "Women should not walk? Or maybe our police must keep an eye on order???" (12 likes).[16] Once again, the behavior of local police are interpreted as incongruent with rules. While these concerns focus on interpersonal encounters rather than wartime security, they touch upon the questions of safety and vulnerability of local women, somewhat shared by visiting female pilgrims, as will be shown later.

The number of posts and comments belonging to the category "pilgrims as a threat to local life" grew stronger with the outbreak of war, albeit in a different context. Since 24 February 2022, mass gatherings have been forbidden in Ukraine owing to the high risk of becoming easy targets. Specifically, locals expressed fears about potential damage to the town and its inhabitants from Russian rockets, given the presence of large groups of Hasidim in Uman. However, making an exception for the pilgrims fueled perceptions of them as potential targets of missile and drone attacks on the town.[17] An emphasis on employment of significant Ukrainian police

[14] Korniienko, Anna. Rosh Hashanah 2021: Only vaccinated Hasidim will be able to visit Cherkasy region. Suspilne Cherkasy. 19 March 2021. https://suspilne.media/cherkasy/114828-ros-ga-sana-2021-vidvidati-cerkasinu- zmozut-lise-vakcinovani-hasidi/.

[15] A post by Anna Mazura in "Uman (news, people, problems)" on 4 September 2021, with 72 reactions.

[16] A post "A Hasid beated up a woman" by Roman Manko in "Uman (news, people, problems)" on 25 September 2022, with 36 reactions.

[17] Uman has been targeted multiple times since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, including the bombing of the town center on 24 February 2022, the destruction of a multi-story residential building on 28 April 2023, and damage to infrastructure on 1 October 2023, with each attack resulting in

forces during the pilgrimage time led to numerous comments of locals about inappropriate use of security forces in the times of war in Ukraine and questions about the need to guard the Hasidim as possible objects or subjects of violence: "With such forces, you can win a war. Such an army is not where it is needed! If they are not protecting the government, then the Hasidim. For whom and for what is this protection?!"[18]

At the same time, although the two mentioned categories associating pilgrims with danger prevailed through posts and comments in the local groups, it would be misleading not to notice minor voices that were present, as well. "Uman media" channel provided posts that focused on positive activities of pilgrims in the domain of security, including holding prayers for peace in Ukraine and saving lives.[19] The same channel cited Natan Ben Noon as a representative of the Breslov Hasidim: "No, Hasidim are not afraid to go to Ukraine, they don't even have it in their minds… They are ready to go and pray for peace in Ukraine, that's all. Russia will not scare them."[20] This citation deserves attention, as it may serve a certain explanatory frame by the Hasidim intended for Ukrainians, and I will focus on the main public discussions on the matter later.

A post in "Uman (news, people, problems)", which stated: "Tzaddik Nachman commanded: Whoever comes to his grave on this day (his birthday) will definitely receive a gift. What gifts do we ask for?",[21] got a surprisingly positive reply "Respect to the Hasidim for not being afraid and praying for Ukraine." Several commentators admitted that pilgrims left a significant sum of money in Uman's budget, which could be used for the war defense of Ukraine, for instance: "A lot of money has been raised! We could have bought air defense for a wonderful city and beautiful people to protect it all!"[22] While the former comment could be labeled as uniquely positive, the latter one could be interpreted as expressing dissatisfaction with possibly corrupt actions by the local government. To sum it up, existing popular narratives connected to pilgrimage and danger in Uman connect pilgrims to being a source of danger, although there are voices that undermine this connection.

Spiritual Danger of Pilgrimage Cancellation

Importantly, Uman inhabitants expressed no acknowledgment of Uman's holiness or fascination with pilgrims coming to pray in a war area neither in the analyzed

Footnote 17 (Continued)

deaths and injuries. Relatively calm periods during the High Holidays—the peak of pilgrimage—gave rise to conspiracy theories about alleged agreements between Putin/Russia and the Hasidim. These theories appeared in online comments but remained minor and largely unpopular within the period of this research.

[18] One of comments to a repost by Serhii Stasko in "Uman (news, people, problems) on 28 September 2024 with 15 reactions and 30 comments.

[19] A post by "Uman Media": "Hasidim continue to save lives. The story of Uman resident Vadim Kulyatov" on 20 March 2019.

[20] A post by "Uman Media" on 25 August 2023 with seven reactions.

[21] A post by Lana Makarevych in "Uman (news, people, problems) on 23 March 2023 with eight reactions and one comment.

[22] One of the comments to a post about a massive Russian attack on Uman by Inga Holyk in "Uman (news, people, problems) on 1 October 2023 with 74 reactions and 46 comments.

posts, nor in the comments. I connect it to the local community's grief after the mentioned tragedies, and a general focus on physical safety and security rather than spiritual narratives of a different religious group. At the same time, the core group of pilgrims, the Breslov Hasidim, attributed holiness to Uman, but in specific ways. The holiness of space was seen through the holiness of the tzaddik, Rebbe Nachman—*Rabeynu hakodesh* ("our holy Rebbe"), *kibutz hakadosh baUman* ("holy gathering in Uman"), *tziyun hakodesh* ("holy grave"), and *kdusha batziyun* ("holiness of the grave"). This gives keys to understanding the main category connected to pilgrimage among the followers of the movement—"spiritual danger of pilgrimage cancellation."

The idea of *mesirat nefesh* in the context of Uman is not limited to enduring physical hardship, such as long travel, overcrowding, or substandard living conditions. It also encompasses moral–spiritual self-sacrifice, particularly the deliberate avoidance of contact with women, framed as an act of devotion in the service of God (Goshen-Gottstein 2010, 14–15). Even ordinary transactions, such as buying from female vendors—are construed as potential spiritual hazards, carrying the risk of *hirhurim* (sexual thoughts) and thereby threatening ritual purity (Goshen-Gottstein 2010, 18–19). By reframing avoidance itself as an expression of *mesirat nefesh*, the pilgrimage transforms gender segregation into a performative act of piety, with male exclusivity positioned as both a protective measure and a visible marker of spiritual commitment. This logic not only reinforces the exclusion of women—local and Jewish alike—from the sacred center, but also embeds the management of gendered risk into the very definition of religious sacrifice.

The category "spiritual danger of pilgrimage cancellation" was prevalent in posts for and by the pilgrims throughout the research. A group "Need anything in Uman," although being oriented to logistic purposes, contained posts on the importance of following spiritual fulfillment in order to avoid dangers[23] or undermining the existence of the danger of the pandemic under the pretext of some conspiracy in 2020.[24] Importantly, the group "Breslov Union in Uman" maintained an official tone, providing necessary guidelines for the pilgrims to comply with any rules valid—be they connected to epidemiological rules of local authorities to be vaccinated and wear masks, or to the war-time restrictions on music, fireworks, gatherings at night, etc. Basically, this rigor could be interpreted as the manifestation of "spiritual danger of pilgrimage cancellation" in the context of power relations. As Rachel Feldman cited one of her informants who still made it to Uman in 2020, "Uman is a spiritual oxygen for the soul" (Feldman 2022, 119).

In this context, demonstration of support of Ukraine by the Hasidic authorities, with emphasis on pilgrims' prayers for peace in Ukraine, could be interpreted also as a public instrument of articulating the pro-Ukrainian position in order to prevent

[23] A post by Rabbi Ishay Imenu Shlita in "Need anything in Uman" about a moral story by Chaim Walder on 21 August 2019; two reactions and one comment.

[24] A post by Moshe Tzvi Hagadol in "Need anything in Uman" on 3 September 2020, four reactions and one comment; a post by Oshrat Nissim on 19 October 2020.

any anti-Jewish propaganda in the conflict[25] and, finally, possible pilgrimage cancellation. A big banner with the flag of Ukraine and a phrase "We pray for the peace in Ukraine" above the main entrance to the burial place of R. Nachman appeared shortly after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine by Russia, in the spring of 2022. Banning the entry of all foreigners in Ukraine in late August 2020 owing to coronavirus restrictions served as a reminder that cancellation of the pilgrimage owing to safety reasons is real. Those 2020 prohibitions also served as a reminder of the Soviet prohibitions of any religious activities since the early 1930s until the late 1980s, and most probably intensified the intentions to come to Uman for those potential pilgrims in doubt.

Women Pilgrims in Uman

In September 2024, a woman in her 60s started to talk to me on a bus in Jerusalem, checking certain details of her trip to friends with me—she did not have a Google Map application on her phone. In our informal talk in Hebrew, it turned out that she comes from a Breslov Hasidic family. Living in Jerusalem all her life, she traveled on a few occasions with her husband to Uman, while her husband traveled many times—although some years ago. When I asked her if they travel there now, she explained: "It is dangerous, you should know there is war in Ukraine now, G-d willing we will travel again when the situation becomes safer…" I was curious to find several similar examples in my other "transport talks" with Haredi women in Israel during 2023–2025. However, I found a post questioning safety in Uman during the war—not surprisingly initiated by a woman (and most likely non-negotiable in men's circles). This post sparked the most active discussion in the comments throughout the research period: "Hi, I want to go to Uman on an organized trip, but I am hesitant because of the war there and if it is dangerous. Does anyone know?"[26] I define this post as support-seeking, while its goal seemed to get additional assurance of safety in Uman after making a decision in favor of a trip. All comments provided were solely based on other pilgrims' subjective experiences, not objective information—obviously, those who chose not to travel to Uman were not active on such a forum. Many women (and men) wrote that they felt safe and secure in Uman. Examples from women include: "There is nothing there, safer than here (Israel—the author), for sure. Not noticeable at all" or "It's not scary. I fly there every three weeks and don't feel any fear."

Regardless of certain public disapproval in the core community of pilgrims, I admit the existence of category "the wartime insecurities of pilgrimage" in the analysis. I interpret it as an important reason why some women decide to write anonymous posts in relevant forums, even if they discuss positive experiences. For instance: "After we returned from a dreamy week by our Rebbe, thank G-d I would be happy to give you recommendations for those who are afraid or are wondering

[25] Uman as a Jewish destination was employed by Russian propaganda—for instance, the Ministry of Defense of Russia declared that the main Uman synagogue is used for military training of Ukrainian nationalists on 30 March 2022. This declaration was later dismissed by official statements and fact-checking, which, nevertheless, demonstrated a sensitive position of the Jewish communities in Ukraine.

[26] A post by Shir Cohen in "Need anything in Uman" on 3 December 2024; 21 comments.

how to do this, and especially during the war, which by the way is not scary at all, there is more of a sense of war in Israel…"[27]

At the same time, another woman in her 40s, accompanied by her five daughters, seemed to be a bit irritated by my question about her decision to travel in a war-torn zone—the talk took place on a bus from Uman to Chisinau in August 2024, after another loud siren had ended. "We are all here under the Rebbe's protection, and we trust the only G-d that is above us. We are totally safe," she said to me. The woman defined herself similarly to my previous mentioned interlocutor, "coming from Breslov Hasidic family." I sensed that she had to answer similar questions before and, most likely, faced certain disapproval. She developed her thought by a statement: "I was in Uman in the summer of 2022, and the war was really in the air, it was scary. But it is different now, I sense no war in Uman anymore" (A woman, 40+ years, January 2025). Considering the frequency of air raid sirens (in my observations during the mentioned visits to Uman, there were days with five or six sirens in a row) and a progressively increasing number of attacks since 2022–2025, responses of this kind might seem insensitive for regular Uman residents. However, they reflect a distinctly different perception of the ongoing events by pilgrims and their intention to stay focused in spirituality and immediate safety (e.g., a siren is perceived as disconnected from immediate danger). In many cases, this is also connected to their adaptation to the dense security situation in Israel (a source country for many pilgrims), often mentioned in posts and comments as a reference point.

The ethos of *mesirat nefesh* and privileging spiritual achievement over immediate bodily welfare is a strong driving force behind the idea of pilgrimages for men and women alike. I observed an illustrative example of this ethos on a return flight from a trip to Uman in early 2023, when an observant woman pilgrim lost consciousness mid-flight. Her travel companions—also women of different ages, most likely her family members—refused any assistance from male attendants or a male doctor, as well as providing any medical information. According to the crew, they already knew the woman, as she had experienced similar episodes on previous pilgrimage trips, possibly connected to her condition. The mentioned collective reticence reflects a shared hierarchy of personal risks in certain Haredi circles, where spiritual realm remains the primary one even in physically critical times.

My observation showed that the fall of 2024 marked a turning point in safety awareness among women, which I saw in a surge of women-only initiatives in Uman for celebrating Hanukkah 5785 (25 December 2024 to 2 January 2025). The latter added contextual nuances to the earlier absence of women's voices in this research: the psychological benchmark of 1 year since 7 October 2023; the prolonged nature of both the Middle Eastern and Ukrainian wars, where people attempt to continue life as if this were the "new normal"; and the cumulative positive experiences of those who had recently visited Uman, at least as articulated in social media. Importantly, the category "the wartime insecurities of pilgrimage," which I identified in informal talks with women, could also be interpreted through the absence of public discussion on this topic from 2022 until late 2024—again, it was women who

[27] A post by an anonymous author (a woman who traveled to Uman with her female friends) in "Need anything in Uman" on 21 January 2025; two comments.

initiated the debate. This discussion revealed a prevalent opinion that being a pilgrim in Uman during the war is perceived as a "secure" activity. However, new research covering later periods is needed to confirm or disprove this observation.

It is noteworthy that intergroup relations as a source of danger were not mentioned even once, either in public forums or in my recent fieldwork observations. Pilgrims usually do not interact with locals outside pilgrimage infrastructure and services, staying close to the tomb of R. Nachman. A prevalent stereotype among pilgrims is that locals unanimously benefit from their arrival. However, the war as a total event must have been the strongest explanatory factor for this omission, taking precedence when threats were discussed.

Conclusions

This research has explored perceptions of danger surrounding Jewish pilgrimage to Uman between 2019 and 2025, focusing on how threats are framed, negotiated, and gendered under conditions of prolonged insecurity. By applying integrated threat theory, it demonstrates that categories of risk articulated in this context reflect both intergroup and intragroup dynamics, as well as broader geopolitical disruptions.

Among local residents of Uman, the figure of the pilgrim is predominantly constructed through the lens of realistic and symbolic threats. The categories of "pilgrims as appropriators" and "pilgrims as a threat to local life" capture perceptions that pilgrims monopolize space, privilege, and resources while disregarding rules meant to protect the local population. Such narratives map directly onto integrated threat theory's emphasis on symbolic threat, negative stereotypes, and realistic concerns about physical harm. These framings are not incidental but rather embedded in the heightened visibility of pilgrimage during crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic and Russia's ongoing invasion of Ukraine. Under these conditions, the pilgrims' presence was amplified as a potential attractor of danger, especially when contrasted with the losses suffered by Uman residents at the front.

For Breslov Hasidim and other pilgrim groups, the central category was markedly different. The primary danger identified was the "spiritual danger of pilgrimage cancellation." Unlike the locals' focus on threats generated by the pilgrims, Hasidic discourse framed the pilgrimage itself as sacred and indispensable, with the possibility of its interruption articulated as a core danger. Compliance with health measures during the pandemic or security restrictions during wartime was not primarily understood as civic duty but as an obligation to protect access to the tzaddik's grave. In theoretical terms, this category resonates with intergroup anxiety within integrated threat theory: the anticipation that external actors—be they Ukrainian authorities, international airlines, or military conditions—might curtail a ritual deemed vital for spiritual survival.

For Breslov Hasidim, this sense of danger is inseparable from the figure of Rebbe Nachman as a *spiritual father*. Pilgrimage to Uman is not only a ritual act but also a form of filial devotion, where access to the Rebbe represents continuity of spiritual lineage. In this framing, cancellation is perceived as severing a paternal bond, threatening not just individual fulfillment but the collective identity of the community.

The "spiritual danger of pilgrimage cancellation" thus goes beyond practical disruption: it is understood as an interruption of sacred fatherhood and a weakening of the chain of transmission that sustains Breslov Hasidism.

A distinct category—"the wartime insecurities of pilgrimage"—emerged with particular clarity in discourses initiated by women. Unlike the pilgrims' collective emphasis on spiritual threat, women often articulated questions about whether traveling to Uman during the war was physically safe. This was less a matter of intergroup encounters than of exposure to the general hazards of war: missile alerts, drone strikes, and the uncertainty of travel through a country at war. Even when women publicly minimized these dangers by comparing Uman to Israel— claiming that "it feels no less safe than home"—their very need to ask questions in semi-anonymous forums indicates the salience of embodied physical risk. This suggests that gendered perspectives introduce another dimension to integrated threat theory: not only intergroup anxieties but also gendered evaluations of *realistic threat*, rooted in bodily vulnerability and the everyday navigation of insecurity.

The interplay of these categories highlights a striking asymmetry. Local residents consistently interpreted pilgrims as a source of insecurity, while pilgrims—both men and women—framed danger as external interference with pilgrimage itself. Women's contributions, however, shifted the focus to the embodied dimension of war insecurity, often voiced offline. These discussions demonstrate that the perception of danger is never a neutral reflection of external conditions; it is shaped by group identity, authority structures, and the ways gender mediates vulnerability.

Another finding is the near-absence of intergroup relations as an explicit category of threat in public discourse. Pilgrims rarely interact with local residents beyond the boundaries of pilgrimage infrastructure, and online discussions largely overlooked the potential frictions of coexistence. Instead, the ongoing wars provided an overwhelming frame that displaced more localized concerns. The war as a "total event" reoriented perceptions of risk, reducing intergroup encounters to the margins while foregrounding either the sanctity of access (for pilgrims) or the misallocation of security resources (for locals). Taken together, these findings suggest that integrated threat theory helps in better understanding the intergroup and intragroup contexts of insecurities. All categories, though distinct, reveal that danger is socially produced and negotiated through different axes of identity, experience, and power.

The methodological approach of combining social media analysis with field observations and informal conversations proved especially fruitful for uncovering how perceptions of danger are articulated differently across settings. Online forums made it possible to trace dominant narratives, particularly the ways in which local residents—often local women—actively debated pilgrimage-related risks in public. By contrast, the voices of pilgrims in these forums were predominantly male, reflecting cultural and religious norms of modesty that discourage women from engaging in open debate. This asymmetry highlights both a pitfall and a potential: While online sources tend to reproduce established gendered boundaries, informal conversations and fieldwork allowed access to women pilgrims' perspectives that would otherwise remain underrepresented. Taken together, the methodology revealed not only the categories of danger but also the cultural logics shaping who is authorized to speak about them, and where.

In conclusion, the Jewish pilgrimage to Uman in 2019–2025 illustrates how perceptions of danger evolve within overlapping crises. For locals, pilgrims remain a visible "other," associated with appropriation, disorder, and heightened risk. For pilgrims, the central danger is the loss of access to sacred space, transformed into an act of devotion through *mesirat nefesh* and collective discipline. For women, the discourse of wartime insecurity underscores the embodied dimension of danger, where safety is both questioned and redefined in comparison with the conditions of everyday life in Israel. These asymmetries underline that pilgrimage in times of war is not only a ritual practice but also a site where security, sanctity, and gendered vulnerability intersect. Future research should continue to trace how these categories shift in later phases of the war and whether new forms of interaction between pilgrims and locals emerge when war ceases to overshadow all other concerns.

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