

The Rebbe and Napoleon

Anticipating Napoleon's evil designs to attack and conquer Russia, **Rabbi Shneur Zalman** (the first Rebbe of Chabad-Lubavitch, known as the Alter Rebbe), instructed his family to be ready to flee at a moment's notice.

The famous Chabad spiritual mentor, Rav Shmuel Gronem, noted: "The Alter Rebbe said, 'Napoleon is a very powerful evil force, and I fear that I will have to have self-sacrifice in order to humble him.'"

Secretly the Alter Rebbe instructed his Chasidim to spy against Napoleon's army. The Alter Rebbe wanted nothing less than a total collapse of Napoleon's power. In his eyes, the French leader was the greatest threat to the heart and soul of Judaism. Behind his abolishing the economic and social restrictions that oppressed the Jews (which swayed some of the Rebbe's colleagues to support Napoleon against Russia) was a veil hiding his true intentions. What Napoleon wanted to accomplish with his revolution was a refusal to accept any authority, which in turn would weaken religious adherence.

For this reason, the Alter Rebbe refused to live in Napoleon's conquered domain for even a short period of time. When he heard of the approach of the French army he fled with his entire family, assisted by the Russian forces.

The Alter Rebbe insisted that every possession of his be removed from his house, no matter how insignificant; he then gave instructions that his house be burned down. Some say that the Alter Rebbe had reason to believe that Napoleon engaged in sorcery, and so he took stringent precautions that none of his things would fall into Napoleon's hands.

The rapid advance of Napoleon's army made it impossible for the Alter Rebbe to rest, and he was forced to constantly be on the run. His hope was to reach the Jewish community of Poltava before Rosh Hashana.

In his diary, the Alter Rebbe's son and successor, Reb Dovber, wrote: "On the eve of Rosh Hashana my father, the Alter Rebbe, confided to me, 'I am extremely pained and worried about the battle of Mazaisk [known as the battle of Borodino], since the enemy is becoming stronger, and I believe he [Napoleon] is also going to conquer Moscow.' He then wept bitterly, with tears streaming down his face.

"On Rosh Hashana, my father again called me to him and happily told me the sweet and comforting news: 'Today, during my prayers, I had a vision that the tide has changed for the better and our side will win. Although Napoleon will capture Moscow, he will eventually lose the war. This is what was written today in Heaven.' "

With the rout of Napoleon's army, the Alter Rebbe could proceed toward Poltava. On Friday, the eighth of Tevet, the entourage arrived in the city of Piena. As soon as he

arrived there the Alter Rebbe changed his plans. He began organizing a relief campaign to aid all Jews who had been affected by the war, sending out emissaries to raise funds and organize and coordinate efforts.

No one could foresee the rapid deterioration of the Alter Rebbe's health. As the Rebbe for many thousands of Chasidim, the Alter Rebbe finally paid the heavy price of worrying about the sufferings of the Jewish community, the difficult traveling conditions (especially for someone of advanced years) in an unusually cold winter and his anguish in general about Napoleon's influence and effect on the Jewish nation. On Monday, the 18th of Tevet, he became bedridden.

Five days later, on Saturday night, the eve of the 24th of Tevet, he wrote a note stating that one of the main purposes of a soul's descent into this world (in addition to Torah study) is to do a favor for another Jew in whatever way possible. A short while after writing this he passed away.

Rabbi Dovber noted that in one of the greatest acts of self-sacrifice, the Alter Rebbe put his own life in mortal danger against the evil ways of Napoleon.

Indeed, the Alter Rebbe's ill-fated prophecy about Napoleon came to be, for the humbled last remnants of Napoleon's army retreated from Russia at the exact time of the Alter Rebbe's passing.

Shortly before his passing, the Alter Rebbe said: "Anyone who will hold on to my door handle, I will do him a favor in this world and the World to Come."

The third Rebbe of Chabad-Lubavitch, the Tzemach Tzedek, explained that "my door handle" does not merely mean studying the Chasidic teachings of the Alter Rebbe, but also practicing *ahavat Yisrael* (love of a fellow Jew) -- in this manner one must also follow the Alter Rebbe.

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*Source:* Supplemented by Yerachmiel Tilles from the version on //Lchaimweekly.org (#1054), which is excerpted from "Dates in Lubavitch" by Rabbi Sholom D. Avtzon.

*Biographical note:*

**Rabbi Shneur Zalman** [of blessed memory: 18 Elul 5505 - **24 Tevet** 5573 (1745 - Dec. 1812 C.E.)], one of the main disciples of the Maggid of Mezritch, successor to the Baal Shem Tov. He is the founder of the Chabad-Chassidic movement and the author of Shulchan Aruch HaRav and Tanya as well as many other major works in both Jewish law and the mystical teachings.

*Connection:* This Tuesday is 24 Tevet, the anniversary of the passing of Rabbi Shneur Zalman, founder of Chabad Chasidism.