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A Summons to Spiritual War

In a letter to his family, a famed chasid, Rabbi Eliyahu-Chayim Altheus, writes:

It was midnight, Purim 5687/1927 [after the festive meal, during the long *farbrenge*, while we were singing a wordless Chasidic tune]. Tears were falling from the eyes of the [sixth Lubavitcher] Rebbe [Rabbi Yosef-Yitzchak Schneersohn] and moistened the white tablecloth.

Those of us seated before him in that cavernous hall noticed the Rebbe's turmoil and easily guessed the reason. Until then we had made gallant attempts to lose ourselves and celebrate the holiday and the historic rescue of our people. But now, more than ever, we were in need of deliverance. With the Communists at our heels, in particular that odious Jewish branch, the *Yevsektzia*, we were not merely concerned with physical survival. We were fighting for our souls.



We intensified our communal melody, along with the undertone of bitterness.

Suddenly the Rebbe rose.

Both face and eyes were aflame. His whole body trembled.

“Brothers! Jews in general and my congregants in particular!

“All of us in Russia find ourselves in the same situation as our ancestors who left Egypt – the desert on two sides, the sea in front, and Pharaoh and his army behind.

“Every Jew must know, and every one must convey this in my name to his fellow: Every Jew is allowed, according to government law, to fulfill all the commandments without interference. Everyone can have his son learn with a [Torah] teacher.

“Brother Jews! The desolate desert is on two sides and the Egyptians – the *Yevsektzia* – are pressing from behind. It is very bitter for us; we have no way and no choice except to fling ourselves into the sea of self-sacrifice, into the sea of faith and trust!

“Every Jew in Russia, no matter his age, position, or affiliation – middle class or intelligentsia – must remember the period of the Inquisition in which we were burned and slaughtered for Torah and mitzvot. Every Jew must say just this: He is a Jew, and he should display this with his participation in the founding of a Jewish school. Every Jew should remember this moment: Come and let us fling ourselves into the fire of self-sacrifice!

“All should remember – they are taking our children away from us. They want to make us all childless, Heaven forbid. All of us – rabbis, teachers, scholars, men and women alike – together we must prepare to be burned, Heaven forbid, for Torah and mitzvot, in order to merit children and grandchildren.

“Jews! Explain to one another this terrible situation and where we have been led by the riffraff, the Yevsektzia, may their names be erased. Remember who your enemies are. Each of you should arouse the G-dly feeling within and fight this bitter enemy. We have suffered greatly; in every generation they rise up against us to destroy us, and in every generation G-d saves us.

“They want, Heaven forbid, to apostatize Jews. Remember, and saves yourselves while you still can. Make schools and classrooms, go to synagogues, and learn in them each day. Strengthen the path of your fathers. And may G-d give you children and grandchildren.”

The Rebbe ripped open his shirt and uncovered the area near his heart. With clenched fist he beat on his chest. His audience recoiled, but the Rebbe paid them no attention.

He turned to me, standing nearby, and thundered, “Eliyahu Chayim! Eliyahu Chayim! Last year I told you to write, and you did not listen! Therefore, you’ve been suffering the entire year.

“Now I am ordering you to write to all the cities and towns as follows: We had a Rebbe, and he left us a son. What kind of fruit is he?”

The crowd of devotees remained speechless, not daring to utter a word. The Rebbe continued, “I order you to write in my name – that whoever has a son and sends him to the schools of the Soviets and Yevseksim will not live out the year! Will you write that?”

The Rebbe repeated this, over and over, pounding his chest. “When you see the body burn, do not have mercy. Watch out for the head!”

The Rebbe sank into his seat, body wracked with sobs.

* * *

We chasidim had had enough. Fear and dread fell upon us all. We could no longer hear such piercing and fiery words. Our fear was twice what it was before.

At the end of the table, facing the Rebbe, stood members of the Yevsektzia. They came, as they did to all the special farbrengens, and brazenly stood there, listening. In the past, however, the Rebbe, aware of their presence, had cloaked his speech to avoid giving them any pretext. This time, however, he ignored them completely. To him, they were nothing, simply the dust of the earth. Even when many chasidim shot nervous glances their way, he continued his harangue while opening mentioning them.

The agents themselves appeared discomfited as if aware they were caught spying. Soon, however, their expressions turned to rage, and their eyes burned with murder and madness. All knew that the threat hanging over the Rebbe's head had grown stronger.

I [Rabbi Altheus] slipped out of the room and hurried to the nearby alcove, where Rebbetzin Shterna Sara, the Rebbe's mother, placidly sat. I knew that only she had the ability to stop this dangerous farbrengen. Indeed, little was needed to convince her.

As she swept into the full hall, the Chassidim parted way for her in anticipation and the Rebbe rose in honor.

"Mother," he announced, before she could utter a word, "please go to your room, read a chapter of Psalms, and weep. This will help us greatly." He himself wept as he spoke.

At the sight of her anguished son, the Rebbetzin burst into tears. Soon the Chassidim there joined them in grief and bitterness. The only ones not in tears were the wicked ones, who scanned the crowd.

"Mother," the Rebbe sobbed, "I do nothing on my own. All this I worked out with Father." He stopped, unable to finish.

The air was tense and still. Suddenly the Rebbetzin broke the silence.

"Yosef Yitzchok," she said, "please stop. Have mercy on your health – for your sake, for my sake, and for the chasidim. Please, go to the nearby room and rest. You must preserve your health, I beg you." She was already well aware of the Rebbe's weakened condition.

The Rebbe, however, remained planted to the floor. Suddenly, he fainted.

His body was carried into the adjacent room where efforts were made to revive him. One chasid even poured cold water on him! Ten minutes later, which seemed like an eternity, the Rebbe regained consciousness.

Outside, in the hall, the chasidim stirred about in despair, each one feeling resigned to his fate. Each one envisioned his house going up in flames, the proverbial ship sinking, leaving everyone to drown in utter helplessness.

About two hours later, the Rebbe returned to the table. As if the midnight madness had simply gotten up and walked out the door, the Rebbe resumed his normal farbrengen patterns. He gave over inspiring words and we sang our songs the usual way, until half past seven in the morning.

We left, refreshed and invigorated by the Rebbe's guidance. But what had unfolded earlier prepared us for the holiday ahead, where we would leave our oppressors and plunge into the waters of Torah and Jewish nationhood. It was truly a night of inspiration.

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*Source:* Excerpted and supplemented by Yerachmiel Tilles from an emailing of the Avner Institute (Rebbebook@ gmail.com) on July 5, 2017.

*Biographical note:*

**Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak Schneerson** [of blessed memory: 12 Tammuz 5640 - **10 Shvat** 5710 (Jan. 1880-June 1950)], known as the **Rebbe Rayatz**, was the sixth Lubavitcher Rebbe, from 1920 to 1950. He established a network of Jewish educational institutions and Chassidim that was the single most significant factor for the preservation of Judaism during the dread reign of the communist Soviets. In 1940 he moved to the USA, established Chabad world-wide headquarters in Brooklyn and launched the global campaign to renew and spread Judaism in all languages and in every corner of the world, the campaign continued and expanded so remarkably successfully by his son-in-law and successor, Rabbi Menachem-Mendel Schneerson.

*Connection:* *Yud Shvat* on the Jewish calendar [this year: Feb. 1] is the 73rd *yahrzeit* of the Rebbe Rayatz (and the 72nd anniversary of his son-in-law officially ascending to the Leadership of Chabad).