

Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi and His Unconditional Opposition to Napoleon.

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Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi, the "Alter Rebbe" (1745-1812).

A brief biography.

Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi was a great Chassidic personality, he became the founder of Chabad Chassidism, the movement was founded in Lithuania in 5533 (1773).

Rabbi Shneur Zalman was a direct descendant of the Maharal of Prague. His great-grandfather later lived in a village in Posen. The family moved eastward, wandering through Galicia and Poland, and finally settled in Vitebsk, then a flourishing center of Torah and Talmudic scholarship.



It was there that Rabbi Shneur Zalman's father, Rabbi Baruch, was born and reared in the spirit and tradition of learning. Later he moved to Liozna, near the town of Lubavitch, which was to become famous as the seat of the dynasty of the Rav's descendants. To develop further his son's scholarship, Rabbi Baruch took him to a renowned teacher of the time, Rabbi Issachar Ber of Kobilnik, who lived in Lubavitch. Under Rabbi Issachar Ber's tutelage, the young scholar traversed the "sea of the Talmud" in all directions and familiarized himself with Kabbalah, the esoteric side of traditional Torah wisdom.

In his spare time, the eager boy further increased his knowledge through the study of science and mathematics. Before long, Rabbi Issachar Ber sent for Rabbi Baruch and told the overjoyed father of his student: "There is nothing more than I can teach your son; he has grown beyond me." Rabbi Baruch now took Shneur Zalman to Vitebsk. The twelve-year-old boy won immediate recognition and fame as a genius, and he was accepted as an equal by the great scholars of the city.

Two centers of Jewish learning and leadership competed for his attention: Vilna, the main seat of Talmudic scholarship and the fortress of the opposition to the young yet rapidly growing Chassidic movement; and Meseritch, the seat of Rabbi Dovber, the famed Maggid of Meseritch, heir to the ideology of Rabbi Israel Baal Shem Tov and the leadership of the Chassidic movement. He decided to try Meseritch which is a new world called. A world, it was said, that taught its people how to pray. Full of hope and expectation, but with few material resources, he set out on the long journey. To pay his way the eminent scholar did any chores which came along, chopping wood and working in the fields. Yet he still had to make most of the long trek to Meseritch on foot.

The first impression of the inner circle of disciples gathered about Rabbi Dovber of Meseritch was not very encouraging to Rabbi Shneur Zalman. He had expected a large academy brimming with sparkling personalities, scholars, and wise men. Instead, he found a group of unobtrusive people who, at first sight, seemed to possess little that made seeking worthwhile. Nor was he particularly inspired by the pious admonitions that the Maggid of Meseritch addressed to the crowd that gathered in his synagogue.

He was about to leave when his eyes were opened to the true nature of the master and his inner circle. Rabbi Shneur Zalman had decided to pay his respects to the Maggid before returning to Liozna. He entered the master's house and stood among the crowd when the eyes of Rabbi Dovber singled him out. They bored deeply into the very abyss of Shneur Zalman's soul, exploring and evaluating its every quality. After a few minutes of pregnant silence, the master not only told him what had been in his mind but without having been asked, gave Shneur Zalman astoundingly simple, yet convincing answers to some test questions the young scholar had prepared to assure himself of a worthy master. Deeply impressed, Rabbi Shneur Zalman begged to be admitted into the inner circle of Rabbi Dovber's disciples.

A new world now unfolded itself before the eager eyes of the scholar from Liozna as he absorbed the Maggid's daily lectures on the teachings of the Baal Shem Tov. In the company of rabbis of great renown, he delved into the realm of the holy relations that unite God, Israel, the Torah, and the world into one insoluble system of universal scope.

Rabbi Dovber's young son, Rabbi Abraham, who by his saintly conduct earned the title of "the Angel" (Malach), was his guide to this higher sphere of wisdom and knowledge. In return, Rabbi Shneur Zalman

instructed him in the realm of Halachah - a major part of the Talmudic and Rabbinic literature dealing with Jewish law.

Thus, the young Rav absorbed the fundamentals of Chassidism and satisfied the yearning in his soul which had driven him from his home and family. He never regretted having chosen Meseritch in preference to Vilna.

Rabbi Shneur Zalman enjoyed little prestige at first among the established followers of the Maggid, until one day Rabbi Dovber disclosed the Rav's extraordinary qualities and revealed him as a "light in Israel." He commanded Rabbi Shneur Zalman, then at most twenty-five years old, to rewrite the Code of Jewish Law to include the latest decisions.

Roughly two hundred years had passed since Rabbi Joseph Caro had published his masterwork, the Shulchan Aruch, and throughout this period generations of Jewish codifiers and commentators called "Acharonim" had added to and elucidated what was to have been the final word in the discussion of Jewish law.

Rabbi Shneur Zalman gave full consideration to this further two hundred year of commentary on the Shulchan Aruch, and by careful editing, he presented the Code of Jewish Law in a precise and handy form.

From about the year 5532 (1772), Rabbi Shneur Zalman was engaged in an extensive plan to induce large numbers of Jews living on the Russo-Polish border to move eastwards, into the interior of Russia, where the opportunities for economic existence were more promising.

Rabbi Shneur Zalman also devoted himself to fund-raising activities to support the newly established Chassidic settlements in the land of Israel.

However, his efforts were subsequently distorted by his opponents, who slandered him and denounced him to the Russian government, accusing him of sending funds to the Turkish government. Relations were strained between the two countries at that time.

When a decree was issued in 5568 (1808) for the expulsion of Jews living in rural areas and on farms, depriving thousands of Jewish families of their means of livelihood, Rabbi Shneur Zalman undertook an extensive fund-raising journey throughout Russia, to meet the emergency and create the means for the rehabilitation of these unfortunates. During the years of struggle for the betterment of the spiritual life and economic conditions of his co-religionists Rabbi Shneur Zalman built the structure of Chabad ideology. Total man serves God with mind, heart, and deed in unison, each complementing the other. The mind understands, the heart feels and the hand performs.

With the rapid expansion of the Chassidic movement under Rabbi Shneur Zalman's leadership, its opponents resorted to the most extreme measures to undermine his work. He was denounced to the Russian government as a traitor and heretic, an accusation leveled also against certain other Chassidic rabbis.

In the year 5558 (1798), Rabbi Shneur Zalman was arrested and taken to the capital, St Petersburg, where he was thrown into prison to face trial for high treason and subversive political activities.

Numerous tales of his sagacity, presence of mind, and majestic poise attest to the impression he made on the Czarist commission selected to try his case. Czar Paul I incognito and other men of the highest social and military standing visited him to test his sincerity and to fathom his wisdom. On Kislev 19 in the year 5559 (1798), he was freed on the express orders of the Czar.

Hardly two years after the first attempt, the extreme opposition again denounced Rabbi Shneur Zalman on false charges. Again, he was brought to the Russian capital and imprisoned, but as before, he was cleared of all guilt and released with the approval of Czar Alexander I, who shared the admiration of his predecessor for the venerable leader of the Lithuanian Chassidic movement.

During the war between France and Russia, Rabbi Shneur Zalman espoused the Russian cause, and through the cooperation of his followers proved of great service to the Russian High Command. Other Chassidic leaders, such as the famous Maggid of Kosnice, were loud in their acclaim of Napoleon who promised freedom and equality to all the oppressed, including the Jews. But Rabbi Shneur Zalman realized that the spread of French influence might bring greater moral harm than all the hostility of the Czarist regime. **(1)**

The Alter Rebbe's stark rejection of Napoleon.



By 1812, the eve of Napoleon's world-historic invasion of Russia, the Alter Rebbe's name as a mystic and Halachic authority was well known. Just 14 years earlier he had been imprisoned on false treason charges in St. Petersburg, and his subsequent vindication and release by Czar Pavel on the 19th of Kislev was celebrated far and wide.

Despite his suffering at the hands of the Russian Empire, when the emperor's eastward designs became clear that summer, the Alter Rebbe announced his unconditional opposition to Napoleon. He was, writes: "As soon as the enemy, the notorious oppressor and wholesale murderer [Napoleon], entered the borders of Poland, into Kovno and Vilna... If Napoleon were not arrogant, he would remain in Poland and fortified himself; persistence in his foolish belief in the military prowess vested in himself would be the root of his ultimate downfall. The Alter Rebbe declared, "It is a great distress for the Jews, for not one will remain [steadfast] in his Judaism, nor retain his possessions."

The Alter Rebbe's stark rejection of Napoleon was on the surface not an easy or obvious position to take. It placed him in direct opposition to other great contemporary Polish and Galician Hasidic leaders, including Rabbi Yisroel Hopstein, the Maggid of Kozhnitz, and Rabbi Mendel of Rimanov, who insisted that the liberation promised by Napoleon would be preferable to Russia's oppression of its Jews. After all, "It was the ideology of the French Revolution, incarnated in Napoleon, that liberated European Jewry from confinement in the ghetto," as Irving Kristol observed in a 1988 *Commentary* essay.

Napoleon saw himself as nothing less than the secular Messiah. "I am called to change the face of the world; at least I believe so," he wrote to his brother. "If I ruled a people of Jews, I would rebuild the Temple of Solomon!" he remarked another time. But Napoleon believed in nothing other than power and himself. "Was I obliged to have a religion," the

French emperor once said, “I would worship the sun-the source of all life-the real god of the earth.”

The Alter Rebbe’s argument with his Hasidic opponents was: while the material condition of the Jews might improve under the freedom promised by Napoleon, their spiritual circumstances would certainly falter. The Kozhnitzer Maggid and Rabbi Mendel of Riminov felt this risk was worth taking; the Alter Rebbe did not. On another level, however, the Alter Rebbe saw this as an existential battle to save the Jewish people, spiritually and materially.

On June 24, 1812, Napoleon tempted history by invading the Russian Empire, an endeavor no military commander had ever emerged successfully. The Grande Armée’s advance cut straight through the heavily Jewish White Russian region that the Alter Rebbe called home. The Alter Rebbe vowed he would not live under the emperor’s rule for a moment, and on Friday, Aug. 7, he fled Liadi with his family and a circle of followers. Before leaving, he instructed that his remaining belongings be burned so as not to fall into Napoleon’s possession.

As the late Rabbi Yehoshua Mondshine has carefully documented in his *The Last Journey (Ha’Maasa HaAcharon)*, the Alter Rebbe’s party was met by the Russian Army 20 kilometers east, at Krasny, where General Dmitry Neverovski was engaging in a heated rearguard action with the advancing French Grande Armée. Neverovski immediately issued documents granting the party right of passage and commanding soldiers and authorities to aid them. These documents survive until today and allowed Mondshine to reconstruct the Alter Rebbe’s journey in meticulous detail. At many of the places along the Alter Rebbe’s route, he and his party left mere hours before the arrival of Napoleon and his advancing vanguard.

He instructed his followers, among them the influential polyglot Moshe Meisels of Vilna, to spy on the French High Command on Russia's behalf. When Napoleon's armies entered the region he sent more emissaries to spy on their positions and report back to the Russians. Predicting that Napoleon would be forced to turn back and would wreak carnage on the Jewish villages sitting in the path of his eventual retreat, he worked to set up emergency housing for White Russian Jewry in Ukraine's Poltava region.

As the war was being waged all around him, the Alter Rebbe spent what would be the final year of his life writing and reciting Hasidic discourses, many of them crystallizing core concepts of his revolutionary teachings. The Alter Rebbe alludes to the tradition that the Baal Shem Tov refused to travel in a wagon driven by a gentile who did not make the sign of the cross while passing a church along the road.

The Alter Rebbe was 67 years old in December of 1812. He was physically frail and the months on the frozen roads had taken a heavy toll on him. In the leadup to the preceding Rosh Hashanah, the Alter Rebbe was despondent when it became clear Napoleon would soon capture Moscow. The morning of the Jewish New Year saw the bloody Battle of Borodino, the only significant engagement between the two armies of the entire war.

Ultimately, Napoleon reached Moscow before being forced to turn back. The historian Andrew Roberts estimates that the emperor invaded Russia with 615,000 soldiers, losing 524,000. The Russian czar recognized his victory as nothing short of a miracle.

"Almighty God has granted us a striking victory over the famous Napoleon," Alexander would tell his adviser Prince Alexander Golitsyn after witnessing the emperor's disastrous escape over the Berezina River. to the Lord," Golitsyn observed. **(2)**

Accompanied by his family and several close disciples he took to the road, barely keeping ahead of the onrushing French armies. Though he escaped capturing several times, Rabbi Shneur Zalman's weakened body was not equal to the harrowing strains of the flight. He became seriously ill and died in Piena, a small village near Kursk, on Teves 24, 5573 (1812) He was laid to rest in the Jewish cemetery at Haditz, a small place near Poltava.

It used to be said: "In Vilna, they knew how to study; in Meseritch they knew how to pray." Rabbi Shneur Zalman, the Sage of Liadi, knew how to do both. He bridged the gap between the mind and heart through his masterly synthesis of intellect and emotion within the framework of Chabad ideology. **(1)**

Bibliography

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https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/110437/jewish/The-Alter-Rebbe.htm#Arrest

(2) The Hasidic Rebbe Who Helped Defeat Napoleon

Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi stood up to the secular French revolutionary, lighting a flame of resistance that still burns today

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<https://www.tabletmag.com/sections/history/articles/hasidic-rebbe-who-helped-defeat-napoleon>