



# SERMON RESOURCE FOR SHLUCHIM

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***The War against Napoleon***

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In loving memory of

Emil W. Herman ז"ל אהב ונתמך לימודי תורה  
who loved and supported Torah learning.

# Ki Teitzei

## The War against Napoleon

Good Shabbos!

To mark the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Franco Russian War of 1812, a group of people in the Czech Republic dressed exactly like Napoleon's soldiers and carried the same weapons while riding horses, and reenacted the experience of the war.

In the era of the actual war, much of the Jewish People lived in Russia under the rule of the Russian Czar. There were those among the Jews who rejoiced that Napoleon was conquering Russia because they thought that he would bring values of democratic equality with him. On the other hand, Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi, the Alter Rebbe, was very much supportive of the Russian side.

He wanted Russia to win—firstly, as a matter of halachah (Jewish law). The Prophet Yirmiyahu (Jeremiah) sent a message to the Jews living in Babylon in his days before the Destruction of the First Temple, saying, “And seek the peace of the city to which I have exiled you and pray for it to Hashem, for with its peace they shall be to you peace” (Yirmiyahu 29:6-7). So right there we have an explicit instruction in the Torah that every Jew must be loyal to the country and the land in which he or she lives, and to pray for its welfare. And so, the Alter Rebbe held, it was incumbent on Russian Jewry to pray for Russia's victory.

What's more, in that era, the movement of Chasidism in general and Chabad chassidus in particular began to flourish. The Jewish establishment didn't look kindly upon this new and popular movement in the Jewish community—and the more the movement spread, the opposition of the establishment towards it got stronger and stronger until it degenerated into open war against the Chasidim. Primarily, this opposition was directed against the strong leader of the Chasidic movement in Lithuania, the Alter Rebbe.

Finally it got to the point that the opponents slandered and informed upon the Alter Rebbe, falsely claiming that he was trying to spy and commit treason against the Czar. And so he was arrested and taken to prison in S. Petersburg—but after 53 days of interrogation and trial, a signed verdict was issued by the Czar himself that the Alter Rebbe was innocent, and he was set free.

Not only that, but the Chasidic movement then had no complaint against the authorities and was permitted to establish its own synagogues, and no one had permission to hinder them from conducting themselves as they wished. What happened was that the Czar himself basically came

out in defense of the Chasidim, and it was he who legitimized Chasidism an official and legal movement.

We thus see that the Alter Rebbe had a warm spot in his heart for the Russian Czar, who was a “Chosid of the nations of the world ” – a righteous gentile.

But what’s interesting is that the Alter Rebbe didn’t just pray for the victory of Russia but did much more—he took an active part in actions that helped guarantee the Czar’s victory.

The Alter Rebbe had a chosid by the name of Reb Moshe Meisels. Rabbi Meisels was a man fluent in several languages, including Russian, French, German and others. Additionally, he was a major activist who led the Vilna Jewish community for 22 years, and was also a big businessman. In other words, he was a very talented individual. And it was he whom the Alter Rebbe sent to spy for the Russian army.

Now the French army entered Russian territory and, in the course of battle, came to need interpreters from Russian to French and vice versa. Mr. Meisels found a way to ingratiate himself with the French officers until he won their trust. They consulted with him and he came to know many technical details of the French military. He then passed this vital intelligence to the Russian army—where the French were planning to attack, and using which roads, etc. After the war, the Czar himself extensively thanked the Jews for their help.

Not only that, but when the French army approached Liadi, the Alter Rebbe said that he didn’t want to be under Napoleon’s rule for even one moment. So he and his family abandoned Liadi very hastily, riding four big wagons carrying all family members and all their belongings. They traveled the roads for several long months and at great danger to life, all just to avoid Napoleon’s rule.

So we can ask an obvious question: What was so terrible about Napoleon that the Alter Rebbe ran away from him, so much so that he ultimately paid for it with his life? The Alter Rebbe got sick from the stress of travel and the terrible cold, and he died in a remote village.

So we must say that there is something very deep here.

The explanation for this is supplied us by, Rabbi Dov Ber of Lubavitch, known as the Mittlerer Rebbe. In a letter he wrote after the war (Igros Admor HaEmtzai, Vol. VIII, pg. 237 et al), he says that the Alter Rebbe said that the Czar was a religious man, a person who believed in G-d. “Kol bitchono baHashem”—all his faith was in G-d. He respected religion and valued people of faith.

This was not the case with Napoleon, who “removed Providence, belief and trust in G-d,” the Mittlerer Rebbe wrote, “as is known from the mockery with which he laughed off belief in G-d.” In other words, Napoleon laughed at religion. He was an atheist and a heretic, and ultimately, he was interested in negating all religion. Additionally, the Rebbe says in a talk that the Alter Rebbe held that he was a “sonei Yisrael”—an anti Semite (Sichos Kodosh 5733, Vol. II, pg.

67)—and the Alter Rebbe didn't want to be under the rule of a core denier even for one second, because in the war between faith and heresy, there's no place for compromise.

The Mittler Rebbe wrote in his letter that on the eve of Rosh Hashanah, the Alter Rebbe's convoy got to Moscow and the Alter Rebbe was very bitter. He recited Tehilim with threefold tears. He was anxious over the fact that the French Army had been winning great victories and was progressively conquering Russia.

But on Rosh Hashanah itself, the Alter Rebbe summoned the Mittler Rebbe and told him, "Today I saw in my prayers that a good change has been made On High, and that our side shall win... Thus has been inscribed On High today."

That Yom Kippur eve, the Mittler Rebbe came to the Alter Rebbe in tears and said to him, "Don't you see, father, the Russian Senate is fleeing Moscow." At that moment, the Alter Rebbe was wearing tefillin, and he took an oath, saying, "As G-d Lives and my soul lives, I shall not depart Moscow... and his downfall shall be soon." And so it was: From that point on, Napoleon's downfall began. (See Hisvaduyos 5752, Vol. I, pg. 402.)

And that brings us to this week's Torah portion.

In this week's Parshah of Ki Teitzei, we read towards the end about the mitzvah of *michiyas Amalek*, of eradicating the evil nation of Amalek.

We first encounter the Amaleikim in the Parshah of Beshalach: "And Amalek came and battled with Israel in Refidim." At that time, Moshe Rabbeinu sent Yehoshua to battle against them and indeed, Yehoshua weakened Amalek. And then G-d says to Moshe: "Place it in the ears of Yehoshua that I shall surely eradicate the memory of Amalek from beneath the heavens." And the Torah adds that G-d *swore* "a war unto G-d against Amalek from generation to generation" (Shmos 17:8-16).

So here we can ask the obvious question: What's so terrible about Amalek? Many nations fought against the Jewish Nation—but nowhere else do we see such a sharp comment like "a war unto G-d against Amalek from generation to generation." Nowhere else do we find a mitzvah like the one to "surely eradicate the memory of Amalek." What happened already? Why such anger?

But the answer is found in our Parshah. The Torah tells us about Amalek, "And they did not fear G-d" (Devarim 25:18). The Nation of Amalek was not impressed with G-d. It didn't believe in the concept of the universe having a master. It was a nation of heresy and atheism.

Other nationalities may have believed in a higher power—the only problem was that they thought that the sun or the moon was that higher power, or something else. But they knew that there had to be something above them. They believed in a higher power.

But Amalek laughed this off. Amalek rebelled against the entire concept that there is “an owner to this house”—“Amalek knew its master and intended to rebel against it” (Maamar, *Zachor* 5718). Amalek became symbol of denial—and so G-d said, “I will surely wipe out the memory of Amalek.” When it comes to denial, then you enter the zone of “zero tolerance.”

Chasidic philosophy teaches us that every Jew, whoever he or she may be, believes in G-d. Even if you meet a Jew who insists that he doesn't believe in G-d, tell him that your rabbi says that you can say whatever you want—but that deep within, you too also believe in G-d.

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