

לע"נ  
הרה"ח הרה"ת ר' זאב יוסף ע"ה  
בן יבלחט"א ר' שלום שיחי'  
וזוגתו מרת רחל ע"ה  
בת יבלחט"א ר' מרדכי שיחי'  
נלב"ע י"א טבת ה'תשס"ח  
נדפס ע"י משפחתם  
הרה"ת ר' אריה  
וזוגתו דבורה לאה שיחיו  
לאנג



# No Backing Down

*The Rebbe Rashab's fearless approach  
to the issues of Russian Jewry*

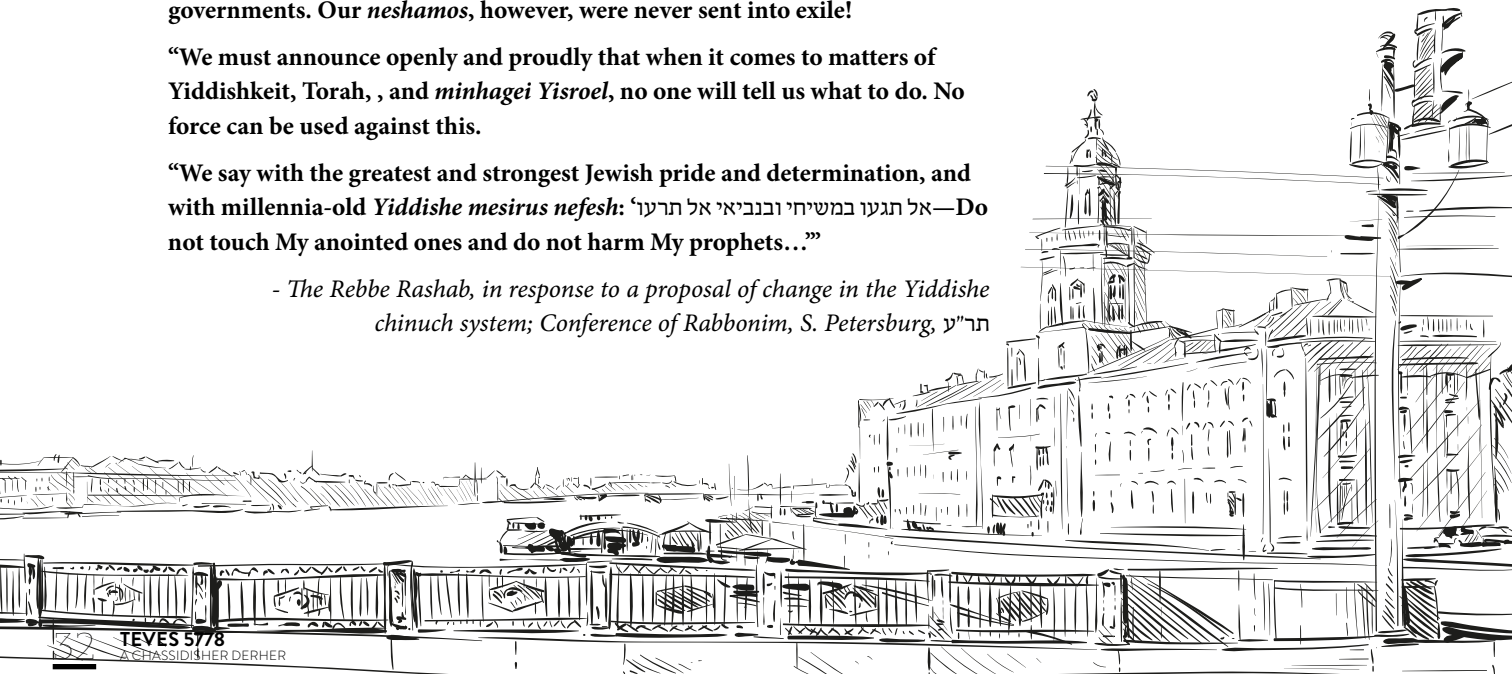
“...It was not by our own will that we were exiled from Eretz Yisroel, and it is not by our own power that we will return to Eretz Yisroel. Our Father, our King was the One Who banished us into *golus*, and only He will be the One to gather our exiles and bring us back with the coming of Moshiach.

“But in the meantime, let all the nations of the world know: It was merely our bodies that were sent into exile and placed under the jurisdiction of foreign governments. Our *neshamos*, however, were never sent into exile!

“We must announce openly and proudly that when it comes to matters of Yiddishkeit, Torah, , and *minhagei Yisroel*, no one will tell us what to do. No force can be used against this.

“We say with the greatest and strongest Jewish pride and determination, and with millennia-old *Yiddishe mesirus nefesh*: ‘אל תגעו במשיחי ובנביאי אל תרעו’—Do not touch My anointed ones and do not harm My prophets...”

- *The Rebbe Rashab, in response to a proposal of change in the Yiddishe chinuch system; Conference of Rabbonim, S. Petersburg, תר"ע*



## *Different Mold; Same Challenge*

We are quite fortunate that with Hashem's help, we were born into a free society where we can live like true Torah Yidden without fear of persecution. As we know all-too well, the situation of our people was not always so. A mere two or three generations back, *frum* Yidden faced severe challenges and had to fight what was at times a fierce uphill battle.

Today's challenges are of a different nature. We experience the "test of affluence," when endless opportunity seems to entice us into the coarseness of *olam hazeh*, luring us to stray from the *derech hayashar*, the true and only path of Torah, *chas v'shalom*.

When taking a deeper look, however, we might discover that some of the struggles we face today—about which the Rebbe fought long and hard to change our perception—are surprisingly similar to the challenges of yesteryear. And our approach must be to face them with the same uncompromising determination, unwilling to bend even slightly in our Yiddishkeit.

Let us read the Rebbe's words from the *farbrengen* of Simchas Torah 5715:

Parents are afraid that when their child walks in the street and asks a stranger for directions, he'll speak with a "Jewish accent" and it will be noticeable that he is Jewish. So they're sure to teach him English and all the other *chachmos chitzoniyos*, contaminating his young mind!

A child's first three years of study are precious and pure, yet they fill them up with English, grammar, and other such subjects. In truth, even adults don't need to know these things, and certainly not children at such young ages until age 9, 12, or even older!

...Where has our Jewish pride gone?!

They say they need to teach their child English so he'll have an easier life when he grows older; so he'll be able to earn a good livelihood. But this makes no sense because they don't know the future.

The first and foremost thing to do is to behave according to the Torah. Hashem gave the Torah to the Yidden more than three thousand years ago. History has since proven that the so-called "ignoramus"



THE REBBE RASHAB זצ"ל.

JEM 2767



SOME OF THE PARTICIPANTS AT THE ASIFAS HARABBONIM

nation, which never bothered to study grammar or anything like it, is still standing strong! All the other nations, with all their great philosophies, have all disappeared...<sup>1</sup>

Decades earlier, in the oppressive Czarist Russian empire, the Rebbe Rashab fought almost exactly the same battle.

### *Rabbonim Mitaam*

In the year תקפ"ו, shortly after the wicked Czar Nicholas I ascended to the throne, a system was formulated requiring Jewish communities to have government-recognized rabbis. One of the main roles they served was to record all births, deaths, and marriages in the local community on the government's behalf.

When a community chose a rabbi, he would have to receive government approval. These rabbis would need to be able to read and write Russian, which most of the *frum rabbonim* could not do; hence the notion of *rabbonim mitaam*—rabbis on behalf [of the government]—took shape. In this system, every community had two rabbis—one was the *rav mitaam*, recognized by the government, and the other was a traditional *rav*, who led the community in all spiritual matters, presided over *dinei Torah*, and so on.

In many cases, the *rabbonim mitaam* did not know basic *halacha*, and at times they were not even *frum*.

Eventually, the Russian government opened up two religious schools to train potential *rabbonim mitaam*. The curriculum consisted mostly of secular studies, and even the small amount of *limudei kodesh* they included was diluted and distorted.

At the same time, the government formed an official Rabbinical Council to deal with major issues facing the Russian Jewish community. Every few years, the rabbis (or laymen) of this council were to meet in the capital city of S. Petersburg for a special conference.

### *The Proposed Solution*

At the fifth rabbinical conference, in the year תרנ"ד, a discussion was held about the detriment of each community having two rabbis, and a solution was proposed: The *frum rabbonim* would be required to learn Russian and receive a secular degree, enabling them to adequately keep the records of their community members. With that, the “double-rabbi” issue could be avoided.

The solution was agreed upon by all the rabbis present, but they hadn't discussed the matter with the *gedolei Yisroel* of the time.

When the Rebbe Rashab heard about the idea, he vehemently opposed it. The idea that a rav should have to receive a secular degree was out of the question. Instead, the Rebbe Rashab suggested that a special officer could be appointed to oversee the community records, and the "double-rabbi" issue could be done away with in that manner.

The Rebbe Rashab explained his opinion in a letter:

"There's no doubt that many of the secularly educated young rabbis will not have *yiras Shamayim*. Learning these subjects will create an all-consuming fire in their hearts. Once they taste a little bit (albeit unwillingly), they may want more and more... These new *rabbonim* can pose an even greater threat than the one posed by the *rabbonim mitaam* right now. The latter, at least, have no connection to Yiddishkeit and are open about their *kefira*. They don't seek to represent Torah-true Yiddishkeit at all..."<sup>2</sup>

With that, the Rebbe Rashab set out on a fierce campaign to undo the resolution decided upon at the last rabbinical conference, and to call for another meeting of the true *gedolim* and *tzaddikim* of the day to come up with a better solution.

"In my opinion, what they did at the last rabbinical conference was wrong," the Rebbe Rashab writes in a letter. "They knew that the government wished to enact this law about receiving a degree, and they went along with it. They justify this by saying they were forced into it and had no choice, which may be true. But why didn't they discuss it with their colleagues? Perhaps someone else could have come up with a better solution... Therefore, it is imperative that we call together a conference of *tzaddikim*, *rabbonim*, and *ge'onim*, where the matter will be discussed properly, and a course of action will be decided upon."<sup>3</sup>

The Rebbe Rashab continued the effort to bring together this conference for a long time. Unfortunately, many obstacles stood in his way and the conference took place almost a decade later.<sup>4</sup>

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## *Chadarim*

In addition to the issue about *rabbonim*, the Rebbe Rashab was concerned that the *chadarim* and *talmud Torahs* would have to begin teaching Russian. He explains in a letter:

"*Boruch Hashem*, in our region there is no requirement for *melamdim* to have a secular degree. But as far as a requirement to teach Russian in the *chadarim*, the law is still open to change. Members of the *haskala* movement are trying very hard to introduce this law..."

The main concern of the Rebbe Rashab was that allowing Russian studies in *chadarim* would give the *maskilim* access to the education of the children in the *chadarim*, the results of which could spiral into something much worse. (Igros Kodesh vol. 3, p. 328.)

Over the course of the next few years, the Rebbe Rashab worked tirelessly to keep this law from being passed.

## *Roadblocks*

For starters, it was forbidden by law for rabbis to gather in Russia without a government-issued permit, allowing each one of the attendees to participate on a case-by-case basis. The process was long and painstaking.



EARLIEST EXTANT PICTURE OF THE FRIERDIKER REBBE.

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On the other hand, an unofficial conference without government approval would have to be held in secret and would be far less productive. No official “resolutions” of the conference could be submitted to the government for consideration.

In the meantime, the *rabbonim mitaam* held their own conference in Nikolayev. The *frum* community of the Russian Empire was stricken with fear: Who knew what sort of damage this conference could cause to Torah-true Yiddishkeit? What if their anti-religious resolutions were adopted by the government?

This only intensified the urgency that a conference of real *rabbonim* should be held.

At that point, other *gedolei Yisroel* also realized that something needed to be done. Reb Chaim Ozer Grodzinski of Vilna, Reb Chaim Brisker, the Slonimer Rebbe, and others began taking interest in the idea of joining together for a conference.<sup>5</sup>

Eventually, in the year תרס"ד, after much effort, it seemed like the long-

awaited conference would actually take place. The government had almost granted the necessary permits.

But when members of the anti-religious *haskala* movement heard about the idea, they did all in their power to stop it. Slanderous articles appeared in all their major periodicals decrying the plan of the *gedolei Yisroel* as “anti-progressive.” They even sent letters to the government and tried, unsuccessfully, to ruin the plan that way.

When all else failed, the anti-religious *maskilim* sent a wealthy and influential representative to the Minister of Interior, and succeeded in persuading him not to grant a permit for a conference of *frum rabbonim*.<sup>6</sup>

### *The Vilna Conference*

Finally, in תרס"ט, the Rebbe Rashab received permission to hold a small-scale conference of *rabbonim* in Vilna, as a prelude to the grand rabbinical conference in S. Petersburg to take place the following year. The Rebbe Rashab and the Frierdiker Rebbe attended the Vilna conference, along with twenty distinguished *rabbonim*, including Reb Chaim Brisker, Reb Chaim Ozer Grodzinski, Reb Dovid Tzvi Chein of Chernigov (“the Radatz”), and others.<sup>7</sup>

### *Preparations for the Grand Conference*

One year later, the grand rabbinical conference took place in S. Petersburg.

This was one of the routine conferences called by the government every few years. Only this time it would be a bit different from the usual. Normally, the government decided on specific Jewish dignitaries who would attend. This time, they decided to

turn to *rabbonim* and ask for their input as well. The invitation was extended mostly to the *rabbonim mitaam*, but some others were invited as well, including the Rebbe Rashab. He was insistent that a few others attend this conference as well, including Reb Chaim Brisker, Reb Dovid Friedman of Karlin-Pinsk, and Reb Chaim Ozer Grodzinski.

The government had decided that each Jewish community would send elected representatives to the conference, so the next step taken by the Rebbe Rashab was to ensure that as many representatives as possible would be *frum rabbonim*. While at the conference in Vilna, the *rabbonim* decided that they would travel from city to city to see to it that *frum rabbonim* would be selected for the S. Petersburg conference. In fact, the Rebbe Rashab himself traveled to various cities and met with the powers that be to make sure this was taken care of.

Issuing a special “*kol korei*,” with thousands of copies disseminated throughout the Russian Empire, the Rebbe Rashab pleaded with his brethren to choose only Torah-true representatives to send to the conference in S. Petersburg. “Let not our brothers who have *yiras Shamayim* think that they have no power left,” he called passionately. “This is certainly not true. A feeling for holiness still lives on amongst our brethren, which needs only to be awakened...”<sup>8</sup>

Again, the *maskilim* tried to oppose the Rebbe Rashab’s campaign, but with Hashem’s help, and with a fierce campaign led on many fronts, he was successful in ensuring that most of the selected *rabbonim* were indeed *y’rei Shamayim*.

## The Towering Personality

The conference itself took place just before the spring of תר”ע, over the span of about a month.

The Rebbe Rashab was considered by many to have been the leading figure throughout. Mr. Yitzchok Schneerson, a distant cousin of the Rebbe Rashab<sup>9</sup> and the *rav mitaam* of Chernigov, later described this in his book:

“The towering presence of the Lubavitcher Rebbe shined with extraordinary brightness over the entire gathering. He was the true leader who set the tone for the conference. Since by government law all the speeches needed to be in Russian, which the Rebbe did not speak so fluently, he found a mouthpiece in his representative, Reb Mendel Chein of Nyezhin...”

Another individual present, Heinrich Slusberg, also noted the Rebbe Rashab’s towering presence:

“The Lubavitcher Rebbe had immense impact on all the *rabbonim*. Though he was not so old, his every word captivated the crowd... He was tough as a rock on all matters pertaining to Yiddishkeit; he would not bend an iota on any Jewish practice...”

One of the main issues discussed at the conference was the status of *rabbonim* and the issue of *rabbonim mitaam* (see above).

In order to eliminate the need for two *rabbonim* in each community, many of the *rabbonim* at the conference, including true Torah-giants, thought it would be beneficial to require *rabbonim* to learn at least a minimal amount of Russian. With that, they would be able to oversee the community records and the (often non-*frum*) *rabbonim mitaam* would be done away with.

The Rebbe Rashab was vehemently opposed to this idea. Instead, he suggested that each community could have a special officer who would oversee the records, and the *rav* would be dedicated only to Torah and Yiddishkeit.<sup>10</sup>



A BRIEF ACCOUNT BOOKLET OF THE ASIFAS HARABONIM IN S. PETERSBURG.

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“LUBAVITCHER  
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## “Why Are You Crying?!”

The following story was told by the Rebbe on more than one occasion, demonstrating the Rebbe Rashab's immense mesirus nefesh and staunch determination to uphold Yiddishkeit at all costs:

At one point during the proceedings, a message was conveyed on behalf of Minister of the Interior Stolypin: If the attendees continue their opposition to the government's requirement of educating *rabbonim* in Russian, terrible pogroms will break out in 101 cities across the Russian Empire.

There were other *rabbonim* who subtly spoke out against it, but the Rebbe Rashab was the only one who openly took a bold stand.

The Rebbe Rashab asked for permission to speak, and he said:

“...It was merely our bodies that were sent into exile and placed under the jurisdiction of foreign governments. Our *neshamos*, however, were never sent into exile!...” (See full transcript at the beginning of the article.)

Passionately, he called on all the attendees to ignore the threats and stay true to Yiddishkeit. “Yidden!” he called out, “Be *mekadesh* Hashem's name in public!” and he fell into a faint.

Immediately after that, word was received that the Rebbe Rashab was placed under house arrest and was prohibited from leaving his hotel room.

While there, Reb Chaim Brisker came to visit the Rebbe Rashab, only to find him crying.

“Lubavitcher Rebbe!” Reb Chaim protested, “we have done everything we could. From this point on, we rely only on Hashem.”

The Rebbe Rashab responded with a *mashal*:

There are two types of personalities in running a business. There's a hired worker and there's a business owner. The worker, though very devoted to his job, will never lose sleep when the business is not doing well. He'll do all he can to help the situation, but when there's nothing more he can do, he'll go home and have a good rest.

The owner, on the other hand, will not be able to sleep peacefully. True, he's done all he can to save the situation. But who cares? It's *his* business at stake and its failure still troubles him deeply.



The Rebbe concluded the story:

The Frieddiker Rebbe repeated that *sicha* of the Rebbe Rashab when he was at the train station, on his way to exile in Kostroma.

Later, he had the *sicha* printed in order to teach us and give us the strength to live by that idea. Every Yid, no matter where he finds himself, must remember that only the *guf* is subject to the confines of *golus*. The *neshama* is always free—no one can subjugate it other than Hashem Himself. When our *neshamos* are connected to Hashem, we can achieve anything; our potential is infinite.

Let this thought give us the strength to overcome all the challenges we may face, and have the light of Torah and mitzvos illuminate our dwellings wherever we may be.<sup>11</sup> **T**

1. Toras Menachem vol. 13, p. 73. See also, “How to Make a Living,” Derher, Sivan 5777.
2. Igros Kodesh Admur HaRashab vol. 3, p. 57.
3. Ibid., p. 76.
4. Toldos Chabad B’Russia HaTzaris ch. 127.
5. Ibid. ch. 134.
6. Ibid. ch. 136.
7. See Igros Kodesh Admur HaRashab vol. 4, p. 329.
8. Igros Kodesh Admur HaRashab vol. 2, p. 494.

9. Yitzchok's wife was also a great-niece of the Rebbe Rashab's Rebbetzin, Shterna Sarah.
10. Toldos Chabad B'Russia HaTzaris ch. 138
11. Sichos Yud-Beis Tammuz 5711, 5713; Toras Menachem vol. 3, p. 210; vol. 12, p. 95.

### *Such Chassidim!*

The Friediker Rebbe once related a story that took place at a conference of *rabbonim*, (presumably the grand conference in S. Petersburg):

In between the official proceedings, the *rabbonim* often spoke with one another in learning. Once, the Chossid Reb Mendel Chein and Reb Chaim Brisker got into a scholarly argument. Reb Chaim said to Reb Mendel that there's a ruling from the Rambam that supports his opinion. Hearing this, Reb Mendel respectfully suggested that the wording of the Rambam that Reb Chaim was quoting is actually a little different, and that it indeed supports Reb Mendel's opinion.

In the meantime someone went to bring the volume of Rambam, but before the *sefer* was brought, Reb Mendel left the room to have a cup of tea. When Reb Chaim finally saw the wording inside, he realized that Reb Mendel was correct. He then realized that Reb Mendel had left the room so as not to cause Reb Chaim any embarrassment.

Reb Chaim was extremely impressed and he later wrote a letter to the Rebbe Rashab saying that he is jealous of someone who is able to educate such Chassidim. Not so much because Reb Mendel was an incredible *lamdan*, but because he had such refined *middos* and wouldn't watch someone else be proved wrong.

*(Reb Yoel Kahan, B'Darkei HaChassidim, p. 183)*

