David Assaf

David Assaf is Professor of Modern Jewish History at Tel Aviv University, and author of the popular Oneg Shabbat blog.

When the Rabbis "Met" Napoleon

Rabbi Nahman of Bratslav "Meets" Napoleon

Rabbi Nahman of Bratslav (1772–1810), accompanied by his trusted disciple Shimon, visited the Land of Israel in 1798. They set sail from Odessa for Istanbul, and thence to Haifa, disembarking on September 10, 1798, the eve of Rosh Hashana 5559. After about half a year, R. Nahman decided it was time to return home and they made their way to Acre, arriving there on March 15, 1799, just five days before Napoleon's army would lay siege to the city. Despite the chaos in Acre, rebbe and disciple managed to stow away on a Turkish warship, which went on to survive two attempts to sink her—one by the French navy, and one by Mother Nature. After a harrowing journey, the vessel docked at Rhodes on April 19, 1799, the eve of Passover, where the local Jewish community ransomed the two stowaways from their Turkish captors. The pair then sailed on to Constantinople, where they caught a boat to Galaţi, near the Danube Delta in today's Romania. They completed the rest of the journey on foot. The rebbe celebrated Rosh Hashana 5560, which occurred on September 30, 1799, at home in Russia. The itinerary and adventures of this journey are known from scattered accounts by his major disciple and personal scribe, Rabbi Nathan Sternhartz of Nemirov (1780–1844), and these writings have received considerable scholarly treatment.[1]

R. Nahman had certainly heard reports about Napoleon—could it have been otherwise?—and even after his return home he continued to think about him and his spectacular military campaigns.

[1] Ada Rapoport-Albert, "Two Sources for the Account of Rabbi Nahman of Bratslav's Journey to the Land of Israel" [Hebrew] in *Hasidim ve-Shabbeta'im, Anashim ve-Nashim* (Zalman Shazar Center, 2015), 86–94; Arthur Green, *Tormented Master: The Life and Spiritual Quest of Rabbi Nahman of Bratslav* (University of Alabama Press, 1979), 63–93; David Assaf, *Bratslav: Bibliographia Mu'eret* (Zalman Shazar Center, 2000), 172–177.

DOI: 10.54469/4S94A9Q5W

TRADITION 54:2 / © 2022
Rabbinical Council of America

> One time someone had an audience with him [Nahman]. He [Nahman] said to him: "Not a moment ago the minister [of Greece] and the minister [of France] sought me out. They asked who will emerge victorious. I responded to them: Whoever supports the Jews more will be the victor."[2]

These "ministers" were not human beings but ministering angels on high assigned to each nation, and R. Nahman met them in his mystical visions. "Greece" (*yavan*) here refers to Russia by way of a traditional Jewish synecdoche (Ivan), which allows for dating the episode to the very end of 1805, when the French delivered a crushing defeat to the Russians at the Battle of Austerlitz.

According to the testimony of R. Nathan, sometime in October 1809 one Rabbi Naftali, a disciple of R. Nahman, shared "what he heard at the time of the ongoing French war." The rebbe and his two disciples were "puzzled by [Napoleon's] unexpected meteoric rise, because he started out as a simple servant and had become emperor." R. Nahman mulled it over and said, "Who can say whose soul he possesses? Perhaps it was switched, for in the heavenly 'Palaces of Exchange' sometimes souls are switched."[3]

Despite all of the foregoing, not a single historian has entertained the possibility that R. Nahman actually met Napoleon or even one of his representatives in the Land of Israel. Not only is there no shred of evidence from reliable sources within Bratslav Hasidism,[4] and not only does common sense dictate against it, but the very fabric of reality, time, and space, do not allow for it. Simply put, Nahman departed Acre before Napoleon arrived in the area.

And yet, a bizarre literary tradition has impossibly placed the two young men (Napoleon was all of 29 and R. Nahman 26) in the same

[2] *Hayyei Moharan*, vol. 2 (Lemberg, 1874), 17b (*Avodat Hashem*, §47). The names of the countries were supplied in later editions of the book.

[3] Ibid., 1, 10a–b (connected to *Sippurei ha-Ma'asiyyot*, §2). It would seem that in light of these events R. Nahman told the story of "The King's Son and the Maidservant's Son Who Were Switched." See *Nahman of Bratslav: The Tales*, translated by Arnold J. Band (Paulist Press, 1978), 189–209.

[4] In a book that records conversations of Rabbi Yisrael Ber Odesser (1886–1994), the late leader of contemporary *Na-Nach* Hasidim, he is quoted as saying the following: "When our holy rabbi was in the Land of Israel, Napoleon's wars were raging. Napoleon would have wanted to kill all of the Jews, *but our holy rabbi said some things to him, to Napoleon…*" (*Sefer Yisra'el Sabba* [Odesser Foundation Press, 2003], 286; emphasis added). A more recent Bratslav work appears to exclude this possibility: "Some say our rabbi met Napoleon while he was in Tiberias but it is incorrect" (Avraham Weitzhandler, *Si'ah Sarfei Kodesh*, new edition [Meshekh Hanachal, 2020], 1:339, §308).

room. So far as I can tell, the first to invent this story was the writer Yohanan Twersky (1900–1967), a descendent of the Chernobyl Hasidic dynasty who left the world of Hasidism and specialized in writing historical novels, on the one hand, and stories about the Hasidic way of life, on the other.

In the epigraph for his book *Ha-Lev ve-ha-Herev* (*The Heart and the Sword*), which was published in 1955 and for which he was awarded the prestigious Brenner Prize the next year, Twersky wrote:

> The *confrontation* between Rabbi Nahman of Bratslav, one of the fathers of our modern literature from whose fount many have drank, and Napoleon Bonaparte, a role model for both major and minor dictators who followed, perhaps could not be of greater relevance to our generation, which has witnessed the spirit cut down and power and tyranny venerated.[5]

Who were these tyrants that Twersky had in mind? In an interview published in the daily newspaper *Davar* in 1958, he told his interviewer:

> Our era is one of emotions. An era of blind faith. We have no shortage of false messiahs: Stalin, Hitler, Mussolini, Perón, Franco. Who knows, maybe one of these days some demagogue will rise up and seize the reins of power in Israel—it can happen here too….[6]

Through R. Nahman and Napoleon's encounter, Twersky sought to starkly contrast Jewish tradition with bloodthirsty totalitarianism, which in every generation tries, without success, to wipe out the Jewish people physically and spiritually. It should be noted that the majority of the novel deals with R. Nahman and his journey to the Holy Land. Only the final third discusses Napoleon, and the actual encounter between the two personae spans fewer than three pages.

In the continuation of the interview, Twersky was asked: "To what extent may an author alter history for the sake of his novel?" He responded: "I try, to the extent possible, to avoid distorting facts. When all is said and done, life is stranger than fiction. But I am not saying that you should not invent; to the contrary, invent you must!"

And invent Twersky did. He put Napoleon's encampment around Ramle and told of a convoy taken captive on the road from Acre to Jaffa

[5] Yohanan Twersky, *Ha-Lev ve-ha-Herev: Roman, bo Meto'eret Aliyyato shel ha-Meshorer R. Nahman u-Felishato shel Napole'on le-Eretz Yisrael* (Masada, 1955), p. [3] (emphasis in the original).

[6] Michael Ohad, "*Ani Kotev – Siman she-Ani Hai*," *Davar: HaShavua* (July 18, 1958), 14–15.

which included "a great Jewish rabbi." Napoleon demanded that the young rabbi be brought to him. They carried on a conversation, during which Napoleon offered to appoint R. Nahman "chief rabbi of this land," an offer he politely declined. Napoleon promised him that soon he would do something great for the Jews, "the rightful heirs of Palestine. The end to two millennia of disgrace is nigh."[7]

The next incarnation of the story appeared in 1970, in the Chabad monthly *Sihot la-No'ar* (Discourses for Youth).[8] In this fantastical tale spun out of whole cloth—it comes as no surprise that the author's name is not given—Napoleon set up command on the shores of the Kinneret, "precisely opposite the place where Rabbi Nahman of Bratslav was residing and learning Torah day and night." It goes on to tell how R. Nahman, with powers of hypnosis and great courage, defended an old Jewish fisherman from the abuse of French soldiers and succeeded in banishing them from his house. "Since that incident, the French soldiers did not dare approach Jewish residences in Tiberias." When Napoleon got wind of this, he sent an officer to size up the young rabbi. In conversation with him, the officer was astounded to discover "Rabbi Nahman's deep grasp of the problems that troubled Napoleon and his command staff. His wide knowledge of global politics and strategy astounded the officer, who could not help but become an enthusiastic admirer of the young rebbe."

One night, as R. Nahman sat on the shore of the Kinneret, a skiff suddenly approached, from which Napoleon emerged. During their tête-à-tête, "once he was convinced that Rabbi Nahman had a deep understanding and sound judgment of world affairs, he asked his advice whether to continue his campaign to Asia in an attempt to conquer the world, or to return to France and try to solve its internal problems." R. Nahman advised him to go home, but Napoleon didn't listen. Before parting, Napoleon requested R. Nahman "agree to be one of his advisors," but he refused, saying, "I seek neither glory nor honor for myself, but only to serve the Lord with all my heart and with all my soul."

"So the two men went their own ways," the author concludes his tale. Napoleon died alone in exile, and R. Nahman reached the pinnacle of faith, his grave becoming a magnetic pilgrimage site for Jews around the world.

[7] *Ha-Lev ve-ha-Herev*, 210–212. Twersky was presumably alluding to "Napoleon's Overture to the Jews," published on April 20, 1799, in which he promised to establish a state for the Jewish people in the Land of Israel.

[8] "*Napole'on ve-Rabbi Nahman mi-Bratslav Sippur*," *Sihot la-No'ar* 14 (Tevet 5730), 4–5, 12 (reprinted in *Sihot la-No'ar* 5 [Kefar Chabad, 1976]).

The latest iterations of this legend can be found in different languages on various Chabad websites, under the title "A Tzaddik is Rescued from Danger: The Amazing Story of Rabbi Nahman of Bratslav's Meetings with Napoleon during His Stay in the Land of Israel."[9]

The Maggid of Kozhnitz "Meets" Napoleon

Let us now turn from the Land of Israel to Poland. Polish Jewry was exposed to Napoleon and his grand designs in 1807, when he established the Duchy of Warsaw with a liberal constitution affirming exceptional religious tolerance. Popular acclaim for Napoleon, who was viewed as a near-messianic figure and liberator, mingled with concerns of the religious elite about the freethinking that accompanied freedom, and the libertinism that often followed in the wake of liberation. This ambivalence can be detected in the controversy that ensued at the time between a number of Hasidic rebbes on how to view Napoleon—some prayed for his victory (prominent among them, Rabbi Menahem Mendel of Rimanov) and some for his defeat (leading figures included Rabbis Shneur Zalman of Liadi and Jacob Isaac Horwitz, the Seer of Lublin).[10]

This heated climate facilitated the rapid growth of legends, including one in which Napoleon met Rabbi Yisrael Hopstein, the Maggid of Kozhnitz (1737–1814). According to this folktale, perhaps first mentioned in print in 1910, Napoleon disguised himself to meet the Maggid at his house:

> It is told that Emperor Napoleon disguised himself as a commoner and entered [the residence of] the Maggid of Kozhnitz when passing through that way. On leaving the house, the rebbe of Kozhnitz took the Scroll of Esther and read aloud after him: "*nafol tippol* (you shall surely fall)—*Napole'on tippol* (Napoleon shall fall)."[11]

[9] See, e.g., KikarChabad.org at tinyurl.com/wtu3u4an

[10] Avraham Hayyim Michelson, *Ateret Menahem* (Bilgoray, 1910), 38–39, §124–127; Azriel Nathan Frenk, *Yehudei Polin bi-Yemei Milhemet Napolyon* (Warsaw, 1913); Yitzhak Alfasi, *Bi-Sedeh ha-Hasidut* (Ariel, 1986), 249–260.

[11] So far as I can tell, this story is first mentioned in a letter received by Rabbi Yisrael Berger of Bucharest (1855–1919), author of the series *Zekhut Yisra'el*, from his friend Rabbi Avraham Itinga of Dukla (1874–1924); see Yisrael Berger, *Eser Tzahtzahot* (Piotrków, 1910), 83, §2; 87, §17. The folk etymology of Napoleon being derived from *nefila*, downfall (cf. Esther 6:13), had a role in shaping Hasidic interpretation of contemporary events. See David Assaf, *Untold Tales of the Hasidim: Crisis and Discontent in the History of Hasidism*, trans. Dena Ordan (Brandeis University Press, 2010), 99–101.

Thirteen years later, in 1923, this short legend was expanded by another secular writer with a Hasidic background, similar to that of Yohanan Twerski—the journalist and historian Azriel Nathan Frenk (1862–1924) residing in Warsaw. In his *Aggadot ha-Hasidim li-Venei ha-Ne'urim* (Hasidic Tales for Youth), Frenk presents a much thicker version of the story, according to which a large segment of Napoleon's army made camp in the forests near Kozhnitz. The commanding officer, "who heard tell of the Maggid and the miracles he performed," requested that the Maggid come and bless him, but the latter strongly refused. With his clairvoyance, the Maggid could see that this French general would betray Napoleon. Such was in fact the case, and the plot was foiled in time.[12]

When Napoleon received news of this, he understood that the Maggid was a holy man, "and he desired to receive a blessing before personally leading his armies into battle." Napoleon donned the uniform of a "simple regimental commander and traveled to Kohznitz." He arrived on Purim day at the exact moment the Maggid was reading the Megilla. When he reached the verse containing *nafol tippol* (Esther 6:13), he shouted it. Upon finishing reading, he turned to the stranger and pronounced upon him the blessing, "Blessed be He who apportioned some of His glory to flesh and blood," the blessing recited when one sees a non-Jewish king. The Maggid brought the stranger into his private room, where he treated him with great respect and showed him the deference of a slave before his master. The stranger asked how the Maggid knew he was a king, and why, once he did know, he had not accorded him the proper respect immediately upon his entry into the study hall. The Maggid responded that he saw Napoleon's "minister" had entered with him, meaning, the guardian angel appointed to watch over Napoleon. After some back-and-forth, Napoleon stood up and pleaded with the Maggid:

> "Rebbe, bless me that I might prevail in battle." The Maggid listened to this plea and his face burned a fiery red. He turned his head this way and that, as if searching for a way out of this predicament. He was confounded. He suddenly raised his hands and cried out: "May it be His will that you strike down your enemies!" He did not say "that you prevail."

Napoleon did go on to deliver a mighty blow to the Russians, but in the end he met his downfall. When he was treading through the Russian mud in retreat, the elderly Maggid rose, gazed out the window, and said:

[12] This legend also resonates with the Book of Esther. Mordecai, who had uncovered the plot of Bigtan and Teresh, informed King Ahasuerus of it, and gained the respect of the non-Jewish ruler. (I thank Daniel Tabak for this insight.)

> You arrogant man, what did you think? You thought the world ownerless and all of it for the taking? You mix up nations and eliminate religion! […] You have struck down many peoples, but you shall be struck down; you have felled many kings, but you shall fall! *Nafol tippol.* The Maggid sat back down and turned to the Hasidim standing around him, smiled and said: "That is what I read before him when he entered the bet midrash—*nafol tippol.*" […] The Maggid's blessing came true: He did strike down his enemy. But so too was his prophecy fulfilled: Napoleon fell and never rose again.[13]

Rabbi Hayyim of Volozhin "Meets" Napoleon

The legend of a meeting between a superlative Jewish leader and Napoleon was also prevalent among the opponents of Hasidism, the *mitnaggedim*. According to a spurious tradition, in 1812, with the French invasion of Russia, Napoleon met with none other than Rabbi Hayyim of Volozhin (1749–1821), disciple of the Vilna Gaon and founder of the renowned Lithuanian yeshiva. When Napoleon made camp near the town of Volozhin (today in Belarus), R. Hayyim was summoned to the commander-in-chief's tent; he wanted to hear the opinion of the Jewish sage about his prospects of victory.

In reply, R. Hayyim offered a parable in which he compared the state of the emperor to that of a glorious chariot drawn by majestic warhorses that becomes stuck in deep mud. A sorry peasant wagon pulled by nags, on the other hand, can easily be pulled from the very same mire. Why? Because the purebred, sinewy steeds each come from different stock and therefore lack a unity of purpose, so each pulls as strongly as it can in its own direction, the net result being no movement. R. Hayyim's point was that Napoleon's army comprised mostly mercenaries, and so each field officer had his own individual goals. According to the legend, Napoleon heard R. Hayyim out but did not act on his advice, and the rest is history.

This legend has no factual basis. It is reproduced in diverse sources in different versions, each writer adding his own flourishes to the tale. In the first published version, which seems to be the original, Napo-

[13] Azriel Nathan Frenk, *Mivhar Aggadot ha-Hasidim li-Venei ha-Ne'urim ve-la-Am* (Warsaw, 1923), 108–114. In the introduction, Frenk states that he specifically chose to include unpublished legends that were circulating orally among Hasidim: "Of these legends […] the collector selected the choicest. He recorded them based on the stories he heard in his childhood from the best of the Hasidim, those masters of the craft among the raconteurs relating the praises, greatness, and miracles of the early tzaddikim, and set them in this book."

leon is not even mentioned; instead, R. Hayyim converses with "a French officer."[14] Only in later iterations does this unnamed officer morph into Napoleon himself.[15]

Moreover, the parable of the horses that R. Hayyim supposedly told Napoleon is also attributed to the Hasidic Rebbe Simha Bunim of Peshischa (d. 1827), although without the claim that he had met Napoleon in person.[16]

All the above stories are variations on a general European genre of "Napoleon Tales," and these in particular originated and spread among the Jews of Europe, particularly those living in the Russian Empire. This genre took many forms: false memories, ethical stories, jokes and witticisms, folk songs, and even games. Some of them were collected and printed in later collections.[17]

Hasidic folklore did not differ from the general framework of this genre but propelled it a step forward: The tales' authors fabricated encounters between the powerful non-Jewish ruler and the seemingly weak Jewish rabbi, who was naturally the wiser of the two.

These tales did not spring from nowhere. Jewish leaders, rabbis, or saints encountering non-Jewish emperors, kings, or lesser rulers has

[14] This story seems to have first appeared in Hayyim Yaakov Kremer, *Doresh le-Tziyyon* (Warsaw, 1886), 41–43.

[15] As far as I can tell, the first mention of Hayyim of Volozhin meeting Napoleon himself appeared in 1912, the centennial of Napoleon's invasion of Russia, in a popular piece printed in the St. Petersburg Yiddish daily *Der Fraynd* devoted to Jewish legends surrounding the events of 1812. See Nevelski-Loyter, "*Yudishe legendes fun yohr 1812: Napoleon un Reb Hayyim Volozhiner*," *Der Fraynd* 134 (June 26, 1912), 2. From here the story was copied into various works, such as: Moshe Tzinovitz, *Etz Hayyim: Toledot Yeshivat Volozhin* (Mor Press, 1972), 77–79; Dov Eliach, *Avi ha-Yeshivot* (Makhon Moreshet ha-Yeshivot, 1990–1991), 2:475–478; Mordechai Gerlitz, *Am le-Vadad Yishkon* (Makhon Mayim Hayyim, 1999–2000), 199–205; David Shaul Greenfeld, *Bi-Ne'ot Deshe: Sihot al ha-Torah*, vol. 1 (D. Greenfeld, 2005), 150–151.

[16] Yehuda Menahem Boim, *Ha-Rabbi Rabbi Bunem mi-Peshis'ha* (Makhon Torat Simha, 1997), 2:656–660. The author says he heard the story from his mother (ibid., 2:677).

[17] One of the first stories in this genre is "*Napoleon und der Ba'al Shem*" by Markus Heyn, published in a collection of Yiddish folktales edited by Wolf Pascheles: *Sippurim*, vol. 1, part 2. (Prague, 1860), 230–233. A collection of 113 folklore items from all over Eastern Europe and the Land of Israel was published by Shmuel Zanvil Pipeh, "*Napoleon in Yiddishn Folklor*" in *Yidn in Frankreich: Shtudyes un Materyaln*, ed. Elias Tcherikower, vol. 1 (New York, 1942), 153–189. See especially nos. 54 (Napoleon met with the Maggid Dov Ber of Mezeritch), 55, 69–70 (Napoleon met with the Maggid of Kozhnitz).

been the stuff of Jewish folklore for nearly two millennia. Late antiquity sources conjoined Shimon HaTzaddik and Alexander the Great, Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai and emperor-to-be Vespasian, Rabbi Judah HaNasi and Emperor Antoninus. In the Middle Ages, Rashi supposedly met Godfrey of Bouillon, one of the Frankish nobles who led the First Crusade. And so on and so forth down through the ages.

This genre has special prominence among Hasidim, such that the "Napoleon Tales" discussed above fit right in. Leib Surehs (1730–1791), it is told, participated in the coronation ceremony of the last Polish king, Stanisław August Poniatowski, in Warsaw, and infiltrated the palace of Joseph II, the Holy Roman Emperor, in Vienna. Tsar Paul I of Russia visited a prison in St. Petersburg to see Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi, the founder of Chabad Hasidism. Similarly, Tsar Nicholas I, fearful and jealous of Rabbi Israel of Ruzhin, paid a visit to his prison cell in Kiev. By the end of each tale, the non-Jewish leader is deeply impressed by the wisdom and holiness of the *tzaddik* he has met.[18]

Such encounters between Jewish and non-Jewish leaders, in which the former often best the latter in some way, are a product of the imagination of traditional Jewish society. Whatever historical kernel might have existed has been leavened by mythos and set in a literary arena in which archetypes square off against one another. This struggle reduces a complex reality into two stark sides: In one corner stands the rabbi or *tzaddik*, representing the forces of light and good; on the other side is his persecutor, the non-Jewish ruler in charge of the forces of darkness and evil. These tales in which the saint prevails were ultimately intended to consolidate the identity of the Jewish community against an odious, persecutory regime embodied by its highest representative.

Translated from Hebrew by Daniel Tabak

[18] I discuss these kinds of fabricated encounters in "When the Rebbe 'Met' the Tsar: History or Folklore?" in *Festschrift in Honor of Michael Stanislawski*, edited by J. Karp, J. Loeffler, H. Lupovitch, N. Sinkoff (Wayne State University Press, forthcoming).