

***“Unprecedented and Unparalleled:” The Last Step in Rabbi  
Kalonymus Kalman Shapira’s Altered Faith***

Aiden Englander



*Abstract: This essay reexamines the final writings of Rabbi Kalonymus Kalman Shapira after the Grossaktion Warsaw, challenging the claim—most prominently advanced by Shaul Magid—that Shapira’s faith was “broken” at the end of 1942. Through a close analysis of two post-deportation sermon addenda and two letters buried in the Ringelblum Archive, I argue that R. Shapira did not abandon faith, but rather arrived at its final form: a faith marked not by rational theodicy or historical paradigms, but by radical submission to divine will and the continued potency of prayer. This “altered faith,” though stripped of explanatory frameworks, remains robust and deeply devotional—a final, faithful response to incomprehensible suffering.*

## Introduction

One of Hasidism's most studied works of the last century is *Esh Kodesh*, the collected wartime sermons of Rabbi Kalonymous Kalman Shapira, known by some as the Rebbe of Piaseczno, delivered between 1939-1942 in the Warsaw Ghetto.<sup>1</sup> The import of R. Shapira's book is manifold; scholars, such as Nehemia Polen,<sup>2</sup> have been interested in it on the basis of theology,<sup>3</sup> religious phenomenology,<sup>4</sup> and history.<sup>5</sup> One question whose answer scholars have been trying to glean from these sermons relates to the nature of R. Shapira's faith during this time; specifically, scholars wonder how R. Shapira altered and revised his theological view during his time in the ghetto until his tragic death at the hands of the Nazis in November of 1943. After *Grossaktion Warsaw*—the mass deportation of Jews from the Warsaw Ghetto to the extermination camp in Treblinka from July to September 1942—R. Shapira stopped writing down sermons,<sup>6</sup> however, during the rest of his time in the ghetto, R. Shapira composed two addendums to previous sermons as well as two cover letters.<sup>7</sup> These materials were buried along with R. Shapira's works in the Ringelblum archives in January 1943.<sup>8</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> R. Shapira began delivering these sermons in September 1939, around a year before the ghetto was officially instituted, until July 1942.

<sup>2</sup> The first full English scholarly work on *Esh Kodesh*, and a foundation for all studies on it since, is Nehemia Polen, *The Holy Fire: The Teachings of Rabbi Kalonymus Kalman Shapira, the Rebbe of the Warsaw Ghetto* (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 1994).

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Erin Leib Smokler, "At The Edge of Explanation: Rethinking 'Afflictions of Love' in *Sermons from Years of Rage*" in *Hasidism, Suffering, and Renewal: The Prewar and Holocaust legacy of Rabbi Kalonymus Kalman Shapira* ed. Don Seeman et al. (State University of New York Press, 2021), 259-280; James A. Diamon, "Raging against Reason: Overcoming Sekhel in R. Shapira's Thought" in Seeman, *Hasidism, Suffering, and Renewal*, 235-258.

<sup>4</sup> See Don Seeman, "Ritual Efficacy, Hasidic Mysticism, and 'Useless Suffering' in the Warsaw Ghetto," *Harvard Theological Review* 101 (2008): 465–505, in which he argues that we ought to analyze R. Shapira's methods of religious experience in the face of suffering than deduce conclusions about his faith.

<sup>5</sup> See Abramson in Seeman, *Hasidism, Suffering, and Renewal*.

<sup>6</sup> It seems R. Shapira stopped delivering sermons altogether considering most of his congregants were taken away in the mass deportations from July 22, 1942 to mid-September 1942. See Polen, *The Holy Fire*, 147. Additionally, R. Shapira made it clear that he wanted to publish these sermons; he likely decided to start going over his manuscripts in the summer of 1942 as he knew he would have to hide them before it was too late. See Abramson in Seeman, *Hasidism, Suffering and Renewal*, 292, where he talks about a note R. Shapira had written in August 1942, asking that his manuscripts be included with his emendations.

<sup>7</sup> It is worth noting, as Reiser made clear in his new 2017 edition of R. Shapira's sermons and manuscripts, that R. Shapira had made hundreds of edits to his manuscripts after the deportations. However, these four writings were the most consequential as it relates to R. Shapira's theology.

<sup>8</sup> R. Shapira's manuscripts to *Esh Kodesh*, along with other pedagogical tracts on which he was working before the war, were hidden in a milk carton together with other works from the Ringelblum archives. These manuscripts were later found by a construction worker in December,

In this essay, I will analyze these four writings and argue that after *Grossaktion Warsaw*, R. Shapira's faith was not "broken," but had been altered and reached its final position, moving away from Shaul Magid's thesis that argues the opposite.<sup>9</sup> At this point, R. Shapira withdrew all attempts to rationalize or contextualize his suffering, yet embodied steadfast faith in the Divine plan, still believing in the potency of prayer—in the last few writings of R. Shapira's life, we hear from a man of changed faith, yet faith nonetheless.

I will begin by highlighting three ideological phases that can be found in the *Esh Kodesh* sermons which may reflect the development of R. Shapira's theological view through his years of writing these sermons and portray how his faith system had been altered. I will then shift to what I will call R. Shapira's "post-deportation writings"—the four writings we have from R. Shapira after *Grossaktion Warsaw*. I will explore Abramson and Magid's dispute regarding the theological implications of R. Shapira's addendum from November 1942, which qualifies a decisive statement he had made a year earlier in a sermon for the holiday of Hanukkah, regarding the suffering of the Jews. I will then analyze the same addendum in light of both the other three "post-deportation writings" and based on themes from his earlier sermons, from which I will conclude that R. Shapira's faith was not "broken," as Magid suggests, but rather R. Shapira's faith was altered. Evidently, R. Shapira acknowledged that the suffering of the Holocaust was unprecedented; however, I will argue that this unprecedented suffering did not rupture his faith but transformed it into something new.

### Three Phases in Esh Kodesh

Scholars have suggested that R. Shapira's theological outlook, as it developed from his wartime sermons, can be placed, albeit loosely, into three generally chronological categories.<sup>10</sup> At the beginning of the war, R. Shapira's sermons rely on a traditional Rabbinic notion that God punishes humans for their

---

1950. For more on the discovery of the manuscripts see Henry Abramson, *Torah from the Years of Wrath, 1939–1943: The Historical Context of the Aish Kodesh* (New York: Sam Sapozhnik, 2017), 7–63; Daniel Reiser, *Esh Kodesh: A New Evaluation in Light of a Philological Examination of the Manuscript*. *Yad Vashem Studies* 44.1 (2016): 70–81.

<sup>9</sup> See Magid, Shaul. "Covenantal Rupture and Broken Faith in *Esh Kodesh*" in Don Seeman, et al. *Hasidism, Suffering, and Renewal: The Prewar and Holocaust Legacy of Rabbi Kalonymus Kalman Shapira*. SUNY Press, 2021.

<sup>10</sup> I use "loosely" and "generally" because these phases and themes are not strictly bound—ideologically or chronologically—as pointed out in Reiser, *Esh Kodesh: A New Evaluation in Light of a Philological Examination of the Manuscript*. Reiser writes, "It seems to me that, although different phases in the Rebbe's theory of suffering are discernible and have been clearly distinguished, this differentiation is not that clear cut, and each phase does not constitute a paradigm in itself. One may detect, for example, a 'late' concept of suffering in the Rebbe's early sermons and an 'early' one in later sermons. Nevertheless, this does not refute the thesis that his theory was of an evolutionary nature; it merely refines it."

sins. More specifically, R. Shapira writes that “Jews had succumbed to the false allure of Western culture and humanistic thought, abandoning or weakening their commitment to Torah and the Jewish tradition,”<sup>11</sup> a notion he describes in his renowned prewar pedagogical tract, *Chovat Hatalmidim*. R. Shapira consequently asserts that God plans negative events to encourage repentance and yearning for Him. This theological stance can be seen clearly from a parable quoted in the sermon for Rosh Hashanah 5701 (October 3, 1940). The parable describes a prince who has gone astray from his father, the king, writing: “the prince has become so insensible and capricious that he did not even acknowledge his father as sovereign, and could not distinguish between his father and a commoner.”<sup>12</sup> This parable was intended as a reference to Jews’ preference to counter-religious movements in the interbellum period. The prince gets punished again and again, yet remains steadfast in his rebelliousness until his father’s ministers imprison and torture him; at this point, the prince screams “a great cry unto the king, who heard it and came to save him.”<sup>13</sup> The imagery is clear: R. Shapira believes that the Jews of Europe are receiving due punishment from their great Father, the King, and will only be saved if they cry out—even insincere tears—because “it is impossible for a father to hear the sounds of his son being punished, and not rescue him.”<sup>14</sup> This message—a rational calculus for divine punishment, which had served as a core Jewish tenant of theodicy<sup>15</sup>—permeates numerous sermons of R. Shapira in the first two years of the war.

By the end of 1941, however, R. Shapira essentially abandons this theme—the suffering had become too great for a rational explanation. As Nehemia Polen writes, “Rationalism—even *religious* rationalism—was called into question, and was replaced in Rabbi Shapira’s thought by an emphasis on absolute faith...a willed surrender to critical reason.”<sup>16</sup> The immense suffering reached a certain point at which R. Shapira could no longer make sense of it on a rational level; this is when R. Shapira places a new emphasis on “mythic, eschatological, and apocalyptic motifs.”<sup>17</sup> A sermon from July 26, 1941, on *Parashat Masei* is a perfect example. Describing the Rabbinic idea of *chevlei mashiach*—the idea that before the coming of the Messiah, there will be “birth pangs” that afflict the world<sup>18</sup>—R. Shapira attributes his suffering to these afflictions. In this sense,

---

<sup>11</sup> Polen, *The Holy Fire*, 137.

<sup>12</sup> Shapira, *Sacred Fire*, 129.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 130.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 131.

<sup>15</sup> There are numerous examples of this idea in the Hebrew Bible; one has to look only as far as Genesis 3:14-24, in which *Adam* and *Hava* are expelled from the Garden of Eden for their sin. In the Talmud (B.T. Yoma 9b), the destruction of the second temple is attributed to the sin of “baseless hatred.”

<sup>16</sup> Polen, *The Holy Fire*, 137.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 138.

<sup>18</sup> B.T. Sanhedrin 98b.

instead of designating man's deeds as the impetus for divine punishment, R. Shapira takes a different stance: the brutal persecution of the Jewish people is a cosmological necessity. R. Shapira explains, based on Kabbalistic notions, that a perpetual effect of the primordial sin is that "birth" can only be preceded by "death." Because "it is impossible for anything to reveal the Divine Light while retaining the illusion of existence,"<sup>19</sup> the eschaton's arrival requires a preceding death; it is this death that the Jews are experiencing, argues R. Shapira. In this stage, as opposed to the first, R. Shapira is absolving the Jews of their responsibility for the great calamity which has befallen them; they belong to the generation before the coming of Messiah, and will, therefore, realize that the tremendous sufferings "issue from the Mouth of God." From late 1941 and on, R. Shapira communicated to his congregants that their suffering was not retribution for their sins; rather, it was a "sacrificial act in a cosmic drama whose full dimensions could not be rationally comprehended."<sup>20</sup>

The last phase of *Esh Kodesh* came after the mass deportation in the summer of 1942 and is accentuated in the aforementioned addendum from November 1942.<sup>21</sup> As mentioned earlier, R. Shapira composed his last sermon right before the mass deportation from Warsaw in the summer of 1942. After around 265,000 Jews, including R. Shapira's daughter and only remaining child, were deported from the Warsaw Ghetto to Treblinka to be systematically murdered. R. Shapira lost most of the community who, over the previous three years, he was trying to inspire and strengthen. In December 1941, R. Shapira delivered a sermon for the holiday of Hanukkah 5702, in which he preached about the theme of faith (or, *emunah*) and the importance of maintaining this faith despite the tremendous suffering, stating that, "faith [*emunah*] is the foundation of everything."<sup>22</sup> In a rhetorical move, R. Shapira asks his listeners:

What excuse does a person have to question God and have his faith damaged by this prevailing suffering more than all the Jews who went through suffering in bygone times? Why should a person's faith become damaged now, if it was not damaged when he read descriptions of Jewish suffering from antiquity to the present day in Scripture, the Talmud, or

---

<sup>19</sup> Shapira, *Sacred Fire*, 198.

<sup>20</sup> Polen, *The Holy Fire*, 137.

<sup>21</sup> The third phase of thought beginning after the mass deportation of July 1942 follows more closely Magid, Reiser and Polen. Abramson, "Living with the Times," 298, suggests that the drastic shift in thought began in January 1942 "with Jacob Grojanowski's escape from Chelmno and report on the conduct of the 'final solution.'" This is when R. Shapira realized "the Nazis fully intended to murder every last Jew in Europe and seemed well on their way to succeeding through their terrible bureaucratic apparatus of death. Shapira could no longer fit the suffering of Warsaw Jewry into any previous paradigm of history, least of all suffering as a redemptive response to sin, bringing with it the hope of repentance."

<sup>22</sup> Shapira, *Sacred Fire*, 251.

Midrash? Those who say that suffering such as this has never befallen the Jewish people are mistaken. There was torture comparable to ours at the destruction of the Temple and at Beitar, etc. May God have mercy and call an end to our suffering; may He save us now, immediately, forthwith and forever.<sup>23</sup>

R. Shapira emphasizes that the tragedies recounted in Jewish texts are equivalent to the present suffering. A few lines after R. Shapira says, “Jews endure suffering of the sort with which we are currently afflicted only every few hundred years,”<sup>24</sup> he uses this notion to suggest that the Jews of Warsaw ought to maintain faith in the same way that their ancestors did in their respective bouts of suffering. Towards the end of the sermon, R. Shapira says that God ultimately saved the Jews from prior persecutions; implicitly, R. Shapira is suggesting that God will save the Jews of the Warsaw Ghetto because, after all, this suffering is part of the cosmological scheme whose strings are being pulled by God Himself. However, a year later, right before Chanukah 5703 (November 27th, 1942) and a few months after the deportations, R. Shapira went back to read this sermon and qualified the statement he had made a year prior. Regarding the notion that their suffering was not unprecedented, R. Shapira writes:

Only such torment as was endured until the middle of 1942 has ever transpired previously in history. The bizarre tortures and the freakish, brutal murders that have been invented for us by the depraved, perverted murderers, solely for the suffering of Israel, since the middle of 1942, are, according to my knowledge of the words of our sages of blessed memory, and of the chronicles of the Jewish people in general, unprecedented and unparalleled. May God have mercy upon us, and save us from their hands, in the blink of an eye.<sup>25</sup>

Evidently referencing the deportations and the worsening situation of the ghetto since the summer of 1942, R. Shapira admits that although the suffering prior to the deportation may have been comparable to previous Jewish suffering, the events following the deportations of 1942, are completely unprecedented. Like the year before, R. Shapira elicits a prayer for his congregation's immediate salvation. At this point, R. Shapira has clearly entered into a new phase, distraught about the loss of his community and living through the tumultuous degradation of the ghetto. In the words of Polen: “he was forced to reconstruct his worldview beyond the precedent of prior Jewish responses to catastrophe.”<sup>26</sup>

---

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Polen, *The Holy Fire*, 145.

As shown, Shapira's theodic stance transformed over the course of his sermon writing. He started with the notion of punishment because of sin, but the suffering became too illogical for such a logical explanation; he, therefore, transitioned to the idea that Jewish suffering was a cosmological necessity and that "they are part of some divine drama and serve as its cadre of heroes."<sup>27</sup> However, as shown in the addendum of November 1942, something significant had changed. R. Shapira's prior notions were no longer tenable, hence the need, as Polen writes, for R. Shapira to "reconstruct his worldview." What scholars debate, however, is what exactly this reconstruction looked like: considering R. Shapira's admission that this magnitude of suffering had never before been experienced in Jewish history, did he still maintain faith that salvation was possible? This is what we will explore in the coming pages.

### **The Rebbe's Faith at the End of His Life: Abramson and Magid Regarding the Addendum of November 1942**

As mentioned, the addendum of November 1942 is striking for scholars and provokes differing opinions about R. Shapira's faith. Specifically focused on the historical aspects of *Esh Kodesh*, Abramson pays close attention to R. Shapira's writings whose dates are recorded, one of which being the addendum of November 1942.<sup>28</sup> Similar to Polen, Abramson states that we can deduce from this annotation that "Shapira viewed the great deportation as a major rift in the cosmos, altering the millennia-long relationship between the Jews and their God."<sup>29</sup> "By November 1942," says Abramson, R. Shapira firmly believed that "the Holocaust...could not be compared to any prior tribulation the Jews had ever endured in their long history."<sup>30</sup> However, to the inquiry of whether this significant change of stance represented a break in R. Shapira's faith, Abramson responds, "Even a cursory reading of his wartime writings demonstrates the absurdity of the question. At no point does R. Shapira ever despair of God's existence and omnipotence." This being said, after reiterating that "Shapira's faith in God was unshaken," Abramson does concede that R. Shapira's faith had been altered in a significant way: "What broke was his faith in *history*."<sup>31</sup>

This is where Magid is troubled. After explaining the traditional Jewish perspective on history called "paradigmatic thinking"<sup>32</sup> as "a belief that all events

---

<sup>27</sup> Shaul Magid, "Covenantal Rupture and Broken Faith" in *Esh Kodesh* in Seeman, *Hasidism, Suffering and Renewal*, 305-332.

<sup>28</sup> Henry Abramson, "Living with the Times" in Seeman, *Hasidism, Suffering, and Renewal*, 282-303.

<sup>29</sup> Abramson in Seeman, *Hasidism, Suffering, and Renewal*, 294.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 296.

<sup>31</sup> Abramson, "Living with the Times," 298.

<sup>32</sup> Magid says the term was coined by Jacob Neusner. He points out that Yosef Haim Yerushalmi explained it well in his magnum opus, *Zakhor*: "What has occurred now is similar to the

correspond to a predetermined notion of covenant, even if that correspondence, or God's providence, may be veiled from view,"<sup>33</sup> Magid agrees with Abramson that R. Shapira lost faith in history, but takes it one step further, contending that "in a covenantal model, there cannot be a loss of faith in history without also a loss of faith in God."<sup>34</sup> Emphasizing the fact that R. Shapira's notions of faith in his sermons were so heavily supported by paradigmatic thinking, Magid argues that R. Shapira's concession that the suffering of the Holocaust was unprecedented implies that it does not fit within the covenantal framework upon which his faith had previously stood, and hence, R. Shapira had necessarily "moved from theodic faith to broken faith."<sup>35</sup> To be clear, however, Magid is not suggesting that R. Shapira lost his faith entirely; rather, he suggests that "the faith he had after November 1942, based on the only words we have, is not the faith he had previously." More specifically, Magid compares R. Shapira's faith to that of Yosl Rakover, a fictional character from a Yiddish story about a *Ger* hasid in the Warsaw Ghetto in 1943, who grapples with his faith in God's salvation despite his love for God and the Torah. Like that of Rakover, Magid says, R. Shapira's faith is a "broken faith, a faith without theodicy, in some way, a faith without covenant."<sup>36</sup> In short, Magid believes that R. Shapira's faith in an omnipotent and omnibenevolent God was fractured.

#### Four "Post-Deportation Writings"

Like Magid, I believe that when describing the nature of R. Shapira's faith at the end of his life, scholars are not specific in what they mean by "faith." Magid, therefore, attempts to be more deliberate and descriptive in capturing R. Shapira's theological outlook, specifically after the November 1942 addendum. However, I take trouble with Magid's overall thesis and conclusion. As pointed out above, the foundation of faith in R. Shapira's sermons was altered numerous times throughout the war. Therefore, I resoundingly agree with Magid when he says that R. Shapira's faith in November 1942 was "not the faith he had previously"—of course, it was not. However, for R. Shapira to change his worldview once again, following the mass deportations of 1942, does not necessarily mean that R. Shapira's faith was "broken." Was R. Shapira's faith "broken" when he significantly abandoned the view of suffering as Divine punishment for human sins, a theodicy that has been employed since the Hebrew Bible? No, his faith was *altered*, just like it continued to change throughout the

---

persecutions of old, and all that happened to the forefathers has happened to their descendants. Upon the former already the earlier generations composed *selihot* and narrated the events. It is all one."

<sup>33</sup> Magid, "Covenantal Rupture and Broken Faith in Esh Kodesh," 311.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid, 309.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid, 321.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid, 325.



war. I suggest, therefore, not to call R. Shapira's worldview after the "unprecedented and unparalleled"<sup>37</sup> suffering "broken faith," but refer to it as the final juncture of R. Shapira's gradation of *altered* faith.<sup>38</sup> Through Magid's strict definition of what "faith" is, he presumes that a withdrawal from the foundation of a previous faith is broken faith. What I am suggesting, based on the development of R. Shapira's theological views throughout his writings, is that "faith" should not be looked at in such a binary lens such that words like "broken" and "complete" need to be placed in front of it; rather, there exists a spectrum of faith—that stretches *even* beyond theodicy<sup>39</sup>—which contains numerous positions at which R. Shapira had resided throughout his writings only to find his final faith position at the end of 1942.

This final juncture represents R. Shapira's most absolute nullification of self and acceptance of God's will along with a complete withdrawal from human reasoning—even more than he had described years earlier. Granted, the covenant between the Jewish people and God had been heavily established on this paradigmatic thinking; however, R. Shapira abandoning this notion does not suggest that his faith in an omnipotent God has been ruptured, but, instead, that his faith foundation has become defined by a greater submission and nullification to God's will, as R. Shapira had written in a previous sermon: "since God does thus, that is the way it is supposed to be."<sup>40</sup> Faith that previously contained the last ounce of rational understanding—the final impetus to engage in "paradigmatic thinking"—has been dropped and substituted for a nullification of the urge to understand or contextualize the immense suffering, and a desire to retreat to prayer, hence R. Shapira's closing words: "May God have mercy upon us, and save us from their hands, in the blink of an eye."<sup>41</sup> Magid is quick to dismiss this prayer "as a classic kind of liturgical conclusion (*chatimah*), a formulaic finale to one who has, in effect, stopped praying, or at least stopped believing in the efficacy of his prayer, because he knows those prayers will not be answered." This claim is hard to substantiate considering the fact that if R. Shapira had really stopped believing that his prayer would be answered, he would not have bothered

---

<sup>37</sup> See footnote 25.

<sup>38</sup> In a recent phone call I had with Dr. Nehemia Polen, he strongly asserted that the addendum from November 1942 does not warrant theological inquiry. Rather, he claimed that imbuing this addendum with theological significance is a "categorical error;" instead, Polen, believes R. Shapira was making a matter of fact statement about the nature of the ghetto at that time and how it was drastically different than his account of the ghetto a year earlier. That being said, Polen does agree that R. Shapira's faith was altered after the mass deportation as seen in Polen, *The Holy Fire*, 145.

<sup>39</sup> Magid is adamant that faith without theodicy, or an anti-theodic faith, "can never claim superiority over nonfaith." See Magid, "Covenantal Rupture and Broken Faith in *Esh Kodesh*," 325.

<sup>40</sup> Polen, *The Holy Fire*, 138.

<sup>41</sup> Shapira, *Sacred Fire*, 251.

to offer the prayer here, or the three other prayers that I will highlight below. This is why calling R. Shapira's abandonment of paradigmatic thinking "a loss of faith,"<sup>42</sup> is unfair and, as Seeman says, is "less than R. Shapira deserves."<sup>43</sup>

If we look at R. Shapira's other post-deportation writings, this notion—that R. Shapira's faith at the end of his life can be categorized as complete submission to the divine will—becomes more evident. The first addendum, written in August or September 1942,<sup>44</sup> is a qualification to a statement that R. Shapira had made a year earlier in a sermon on *Parashat Ekev*. That statement reads:

Certainly it is true that at a time when every mind is depressed, and every heart is ill, it is difficult to study and pray as one ought. There are some people, however, who become overly preoccupied with their suffering, and idly waste their time speaking of foolish matters all day. Even if it is impossible for such a person to study in depth in these times, then let him at least recite Psalms.<sup>45</sup>

Attempting to strengthen his constituents to engage in religious activities despite the turmoil of the ghetto, R. Shapira, with a somewhat aggrieved tone, beseeches that people should at least engage in the less rigorous, yet pious, recitation of Psalms if they do not have the mental capacity for more immersive worship like Torah study and prayer. However, a year later, R. Shapira recognizes that such a request has much less credibility. While a year prior it is still possible for his fellow Jews to "experience anguish" and "cry regarding the future" and for him to "encourage them to study and fulfill the Torah," "this is no longer the case at the end of 5702 because the holy communities have all but been irrevocably destroyed." R. Shapira acknowledges this extremely challenging shift in perspective, writing:

Even the few who survive are overcome with this Egyptian servitude, crushed and living in mortal fear. They no longer have the ability to express lament over their troubles, and there is no one left to encourage, no heart to awaken to Divine Service and Torah study. Prayers are only

---

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 311.

<sup>43</sup> Don Seeman, "Pain and Words: On Suffering, Hasidic Modernism, and the Phenomenological Turn," in Seeman, *Hasidism, Suffering, and Renewal*, 333.

<sup>44</sup> The note is not dated but Abramson suggests that R. Shapira started annotating his sermons in August 1942 and likely made edits to each sermon around the time that its respective Torah portion or holiday came around; this is why the Hanukkah addendum was written in late November, just a few days before Hanukkah of 5703. For more, see Abramson, "Living with the Times," 292. Further, R. Shapira's addendum refers to "the end of 5702." See, Abramson, *Torah from the Years of Wrath*, 242.

<sup>45</sup> Abramson's translation of Shapira, *Sermons from the Years of Rage* (Reiser), I:212.

recited under difficult conditions, and the observance of the Sabbath, even for those who truly wish it, is exceptionally onerous, and how much more so is it difficult to cry regarding the future, and regarding the establishments that have been devastated, at a time when (may God have mercy and save us) no spirit or heart remains. It is up to God alone, to have compassion and save us in the blink of an eye, and reestablish the devastated. Only with the final redemption and the resurrection of the dead will the Blessed One be able to rebuild and heal. I beseech you, God, have mercy and do not delay our salvation.<sup>46</sup>

Through the declaration of ultimate submission to God, R. Shapira, on behalf of all the Jews in the ghetto, forfeits any role in predicting or facilitating the redemption of the Jewish people. “It is up to God alone,” remarks R. Shapira, knowing that there was nothing left for him to do, except to submit to God’s will. Mentioning the final redemption and the resurrection of the dead, R. Shapira elicits an attitude that accepts the reality in which he and the rest of the ghetto community will fall to the Nazi war machine, yet exudes confidence that if God wills it, God will ultimately rebuild after the destruction and redeem the Jewish people. Polen puts this attitude succinctly: “Such a vision is achieved by a surrender of every particle of autonomous ego, a total submergence of the self and the mind in the enveloping waters of divine being.”<sup>47</sup> This is not “broken faith,” but the faith of absolute submission to the divine will, even if it does not fit into the prior Jewish framework of suffering and redemption.

The above addendum is noteworthy in relation to the November 1942 addendum. Considering this addendum to *Parashat Ekev* came soon before the one in November 1942, it is plausible to suggest that R. Shapira’s faith foundation had remained consistent over this period. Hence, I suggest that R. Shapira, both in the *Ekev* and *Hanukkah* addendums, is not describing a broken faith, but a new faith founded upon complete submission to God’s will.

In January 1943,<sup>48</sup> R. Shapira handed over his manuscripts to be hidden with other materials in the Ringelblum Archives. Before doing so, however, R. Shapira wrote two letters. The first one was a cover letter for the manuscripts which was meant to inform its discoverer of the contents as well as the instruction to send them to his brother in Palestine. This read:

---

<sup>46</sup> Ibid, I:212.

<sup>47</sup> Polen, *The Holy Fire*, 138.

<sup>48</sup> It is not known exactly when R. Shapira “gave over” his writings to the Oyneg Shabes archives, but Reiser believes it was between January 3 and February 1943. For more on the details of the interment of the manuscripts and their discovery, see Reiser, *Esh Kodesh: A New Evaluation in Light of a Philological Examination of the Manuscript*, pp. 76-82.

### ATTENTION!!!

Blessed is God. I have the honor of requesting the esteemed individual or institution that finds my enclosed writings Hakhsharat ha-avreichim, Mevo ha-she'arim (from Hovat ha-avreikhim), Tsav ve-zeruz, and Torah Insights on the Weekly Readings for the Years 5700, 5701 and 5702, to please exert themselves to send them to the Land of Israel to the following address: Rabbi Yeshaya Shapira, Tel Aviv, Palestine. Please also send the enclosed letter. When the Blessed One shows mercy and I and the remaining Jews survive the war, please return all materials to me or to the Warsaw rabbinate for Kalonymus, and may God have mercy upon us, the remnant of Israel in every place, and rescue us, and sustain us, and save us in the blink of an eye. With deep, heartfelt gratitude, Kalonymus.<sup>49</sup>

Magid does a disservice to R. Shapira's legacy by practically ignoring this letter. He suggests, in a mere footnote, that this letter is "more practical" and "does not relate to the events and their significance," which is why he considers the November 1942 note "the last significant thing we have from him."<sup>50</sup>

Contrary to Magid, I believe this letter serves as a crucial source to decipher R. Shapira's outlook at this time for two reasons. Firstly, R. Shapira's statement that, "When the Blessed One shows mercy and I and the remaining Jews survive the war," deserves attention. Surely, he could have written, "If the Blessed One shows mercy [...]." What purpose, after all the death and devastation, did R. Shapira have for using such an assertive word as "when?"<sup>51</sup> If R. Shapira did not believe he would be saved, all he had to do was instruct the delivery of the manuscripts to his brother and conclude the letter there. I believe R. Shapira's wording and request for the manuscripts to be returned to *himself* after the war serves as a kind of assertive supplication in which R. Shapira hopes for redemption, yet submits to God's ultimate will even if it means he will be sacrificed. Therefore, I again suggest R. Shapira's faith in salvation could not be called "broken." Secondly, R. Shapira again offers a prayer for salvation, knowing that "It is up to God alone," as he had remarked just a few months earlier. The repetition of R. Shapira's prayers makes it hard to believe that they were empty murmurings of a man of broken faith.

The final note R. Shapira wrote, which is dated January 3, 1943, is a private letter to his brother detailing printing instructions for his manuscripts,

---

<sup>49</sup> Polen's translation of the manuscript reproduction of the cover letter in Shapira, *Esh Kodesh* (Jerusalem, 1960), p. iv.

<sup>50</sup> Magid, "Covenantal Rupture and Broken Faith in *Esh Kodesh*," p. 328 (footnote 9).

<sup>51</sup> From my standpoint, the line "When the Blessed One shows mercy" is a fair translation of the line in the Hebrew translation of the letter that appears in Shapira, *Esh Kodesh* (Jerusalem, 1960), p. Iv, which says, "כַּאֲשֶׁר ה' יִרְחֵם יִתְבַּרַח יִרְאַחֵם אֲלֵנוּ" [ka'asher hashem yitbarach yerachem alenu]. However, since the original letter is written in Yiddish, I do not know if Polen had translated the Hebrew translation into English or he translated the original Yiddish.

which Magid glosses over as well. In the letter, R. Shapira describes the tremendous suffering he has endured, specifically mentioning the loss of his entire family. Again, amidst the chaos, a prayer is offered: “May God have mercy and preserve me with the remnants of Israel, that I also merit to join in the work of printing them,”<sup>52</sup> further instantiating R. Shapira’s belief in supplication, and countering Magid’s assumption of R. Shapira’s habitual prayer. In the letter, R. Shapira begs of his dear brother to do all he can to print these manuscripts and “distribute them among Jacob and disperse them among Israel” and to include within all the books that he “beg[s] and plead[s] with every individual Jew to study my books.”<sup>53</sup> R. Shapira’s intense desire to have his teachings printed and distributed is a testament to his faith in future generations and faith that God will restore the Jewish people. Despite his “torments...which are as deep as the manifold abyss and high as heaven’s heavens,” R. Shapira finds faith that his teachings will inspire the generations to come.

## Conclusions

The ideological divergence between Magid and me begins when considering whether abandoning theodicy necessitates a “broken faith.” For Magid, R. Shapira’s proclamation that the sufferings they have experienced were “unprecedented and unparalleled” serves as a rupture in the covenant between God and the Jewish people and hence, a degradation of his faith. I, on the other hand, believe that R. Shapira’s retreat from meaning-making by exclaiming the absurdity and incongruity of this suffering serves as a subsequent alteration of his faith, but certainly does not cheapen his faith; on the contrary, I suggest that it reinforces R. Shapira’s submission to the divine will despite its incomprehensibility, which may be the *truest* form of faith. In light of the other three post-deportation writings, we understand that we are hearing from a man who is honest about the utter destruction that has transpired and knows that the suffering is too much for a human to withstand. Yet, we are also hearing from a man who surrenders before God and is willing to pray to God despite prayer’s apparent absurdity. In the end, we are hearing from a man of faith.

---

<sup>52</sup> Shapira, *Sacred Fire*, p. xxxvii.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*

### **Bibliography**

- Abramson, Henry. *Torah from the Years of Wrath, 1939–1943: The Historical Context of the Aish Kodesh*. New York: Sam Sapozhnik, 2017.
- Kalonymus Kalmish ben Elimelekh. *Sacred Fire: Torah from the Years of Fury, 1939-1942*. edited by J. Hershy Worch and Deborah Miller, J. Aronson, 2000.
- Lieb (Smokler), Erin Diana, “God in the Years of Fury: Theodicy and Anti-Theodicy in the Holocaust Writings of Rabbi Kalonymus Kalman Shapira,” PhD Dissertation, University of Chicago, 2014.
- Polen, Nehemia. *The Holy Fire: The Teachings of Rabbi Kalonymus Kalman Shapira, the Rebbe of the Warsaw Ghetto*. Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 1994.
- Reiser, Daniel. “Esh Kodesh: A New Evaluation in Light of a Philological Examination of the Manuscript.” *Yad Vashem Studies* 44.1 (2016): 65-97.
- Roskies, David G., and Samuel D. Kassow. *Voices From the Warsaw Ghetto : Writing Our History*. Yale University Press, 2019.
- Seeman, Don, Daniel Reiser, and Ariel Evan Mayse, eds. *Hasidism, Suffering, and Renewal: The Prewar and Holocaust Legacy of Rabbi Kalonymus Kalman Shapira*. State University of New York Press, 2021.
- Seeman, Don, “Ritual Efficacy, Hassidic Mysticism and ‘Useless Suffering’ in the Warsaw Ghetto,” *Harvard Theological Review* 101: 3-4 (2008), 465-505.
- Shapira, R. Kalonymus, *Sermons from the Years of Rage* [in Hebrew], ed. Daniel Reiser, 2 vols. (Jerusalem: Herzog Academic College, 2017).