

Introduction

In December 1950, a Polish construction worker clearing rubble from the ruined Warsaw Ghetto unearthed a tin milk container containing a trove of Hebrew and Yiddish-language manuscripts. The papers proved to be one of the three caches buried in the last months of the war by Oneg Shabbat, the secret society of amateur historians working under the direction of Dr. Emmanuel Ringelblum, dedicated to the task of documenting the life and death of Warsaw Jewry under the Nazi occupation. Included among the documents were the wartime writings of Rabbi Kalonymus Kalmish Shapira, a noted Hasidic leader. His Saturday afternoon sermons, delivered between September 1939 and July 1942 and with annotations through January 1943, were published in 1960 under the Hebrew title *Aish Kodesh*: Holy Fire.¹

The sermons, which the author called *Torah from the Years of Wrath*, are virtually unparalleled as a source for the spiritual life of religious Jews during the Holocaust. Taken together, they constitute perhaps the most sustained discussion of theodicy since the biblical Book of Job. Pious Hasidim and secular academics alike have studied these writings for Rabbi Shapira's profound theological insights.

The sermons seem inscrutably disconnected from history. Nowhere in the book do the terms "Nazi" or "German" appear, and indeed if it were not for a few scattered annotations, it would be possible to read the entire work without realizing that it was anything other than an unusually dark work of Hasidic thought from the late nineteenth or early twentieth century. Scholars therefore

¹ Alternatively transliterated *Esh Kodesh*.

tended to dismiss the possibility of mining his writings for historical information. The prevailing wisdom among students of Rabbi Shapira's wartime writings argued that the principal value of the Rebbe's thought was accessible to anyone possessing a cursory familiarity with the history of Warsaw Jewry during the Holocaust.

The following chapters will demonstrate precisely the opposite: a full appreciation of the Rebbe's wartime work is *only* possible with a thorough grounding in the specific events in the daily life in the Ghetto. This is because the sermons should be understood as *public* documents, shared widely in real time, and not as solitary meditations written in private and stored away in a desk drawer. Week after week the followers of the Rebbe gathered to hear his wisdom, the wisdom of the Torah and Hasidism, to help them understand the traumatic experiences they shared since the previous Sabbath. The veil cast over the Rebbe's words was a literary and theological device, opaque to post-war readers but easily penetrated by his audience. Each and every sermon was nothing less than a Hasidic response to the micro-history of the Ghetto, placing the quotidian events in the cosmic meta-history of the weekly Torah reading.

Reading the sermons in the light of historical data reveals the hidden meaning of the Rebbe's words. It also exposes a spiritual and intellectual heroism of incredible proportions. Refusing offers to escape the Ghetto, the Rebbe insisted on remaining with his Hasidim to the bitter end, enduring tragedies both communal and personal. He drew deeply from his immense reservoirs of faith and Torah learning to provide *hizuk*, encouragement, to his fellow Jews, right up to his own martyrdom in November 1943. This book illustrates the Rebbe's method of conveying hope and

meaning to Jews suffering in the hellish environment of the Warsaw Ghetto.

Chapter One will provide a biographical introduction to Rabbi Shapira, placing him in his religious, literary, and cultural environment. Chapters Two, Three and Four will look at the Hebrew years 5700, 5701 and 5702 respectively, covering the secular dates September 1939 through July 1942, when the great deportation of Warsaw's Jewish population to Treblinka took place. Chapter Five will discuss the Rebbe's final textual annotations, his last days in a labor camp, and the spiritual legacy he left for his followers.

As part of his literary will, Rabbi Shapira requested that any publication of his works include a memorial to his family members, including his wife Hanah Berakhah who passed away in 1937.² He also asked that the names of his father and father-in-law should appear on the title page. Not included in the memorial was the name of his only daughter Rekhil Yehudis, whose fate was unknown when the Rebbe composed the document. Instead, in a cover letter he expressed his heartfelt prayer for the safety of his "precious daughter, the gentle and modest Rekhil Yehudis."³ She was last seen in Warsaw on the second day of Rosh Hodesh Elul, 5702 (August 14, 1942), when the Nazis deported her along with 6,000 other Jews to Treblinka.

² Daniel Reiser, ed., *Rabbi Kalonymus Kalmish Shapira: Derashot mi-shenot ha-za'am* Jerusalem: Herzog Academic College/World Union of Jewish Studies/Yad Vashem, 2017 1: 328-329. Reiser's two-volume critical edition of the Rebbe's writings will be cited henceforth as *Derashot*.

³ *Derashot* 1:328.

The following memorial represents the last written testimony to the centuries of Hasidic civilization that once flourished in Poland.⁴

In Eternal Memory

of my holy, righteous and honored mother and teacher, the woman of valor Hanah Berakhah of noble lineage, daughter of the holy and righteous Rabbi Hayim Shmuel ha-Levi of Hantshin. She served God with all her might, heart and soul, and with great effort raised her children to Torah. Her holy and pure soul rose on high on the Sabbath eve of the 7th of Marheshvan 5700 [October 20 1939].

My honored wife, the righteous, modest, pious woman of noble lineage Rahel Hayah Miriam, the daughter of the righteous and holy Rabbi Yerahmiel Moshe, Head of the court of Kozenice. She had an exceptionally fine character and even learned Torah every day. She was like a merciful mother to every embittered soul, and especially to Torah students and Hasidim. In the bloom of youth her holy and pure soul rose on high, on the holy Sabbath of the week and Miriam died there,⁵ the tenth of Tammuz, 5697 [June 19, 1937].

My honored only son, cherished heart and soul, the holy and pious Rabbi of noble lineage

⁴ Mendel Piekarz (Paikazh), *Ha-teudah he-hasidit ha-sifrutit ha-aharonah al admat Polin: Divrei ha-Rebi be-gito Varsha Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 1977.*

⁵ Numbers 20:1.

Elimelekh Ben Tzion. A man of truth, of fine and good character, steeped in Torah, wise, a lover of Israel, who left behind Torah insights on tractate Shabbat and the first volume of Yoreh Deah. Gravely wounded at a time of suffering for Yaakov,⁶ on Monday the 12th of Tishrei 5700, after great and bitter suffering his holy and pure soul rose on high on the 16th, the second day of Sukkot [September 29, 1939].

His honored wife, my daughter-in-law, the holy, pure and modest woman of noble lineage Gitl, daughter of the righteous Rabbi Shlomo Hayim of Balakhov. With great personal sacrifice she remained by the hospital where her husband, my holy son, lay wounded, and she was killed on Tuesday the 13th of Tishrei [September 26, 1939].

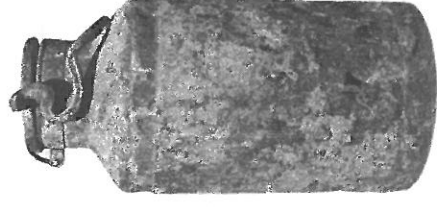
May the Merciful One shelter them forever and bind their souls in the bonds of life. God is their inheritance, and may they rest in peace, amen.⁷

⁶ Cf. Jeremiah 30:7.

⁷ Reproduced in *Sefer Aish Kodesh Jerusalem: Va'ad Hasidei Piasestnah/Feldheim, 2007*, unnumbered page xi; *Dershot* 1:329.

Chapter One

Discovery

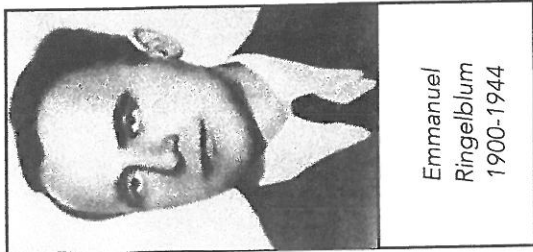


Milk can buried under 68 Nowolipki Street, Warsaw

Clearing the rubble of the destroyed Warsaw Ghetto in December 1950, a Polish construction worker discovered two metal milk cans sunk into the foundation of 68 Nowolipki street, a building that once housed a Jewish school. He broke the makeshift seals and discovered a literary and historical treasure: a massive collection of Hebrew, Yiddish and Polish writings, one of the lost caches of a secret archive that documented the agony of Warsaw Jewry during the years of Nazi occupation.

The documents were assiduously compiled by a diverse group of amateur historians, demographers and sociologists working under the direction of the martyred historian Emanuel Ringelblum. Trapped in the Ghetto, Ringelblum realized early in the war that the complex, multifaceted story of Warsaw Jewry's response to the

horrific Nazi onslaught was historically significant and deserved thorough documentation. Working feverishly and with virtually no material resources, he recruited a cadre of dedicated *zamlers* ("collectors") and gave them the task of penetrating, analyzing, and above all documenting every aspect of ghetto life: the bizarre economy with its dependence on children smuggling food from outside the walls, the political factions and the resistance, the Jewish Council (*Judenrat*) administration and its hated Jewish Police force, cultural institutions, and religious activity. For the *zamlers*, the secret archive represented a type of resistance to the Nazis through scholarship. What the Germans sought to obliterate, the *zamlers* sought to preserve forever. The clandestine group operated under the code name *Oneg Shabbat* ("the joy of the Sabbath").¹

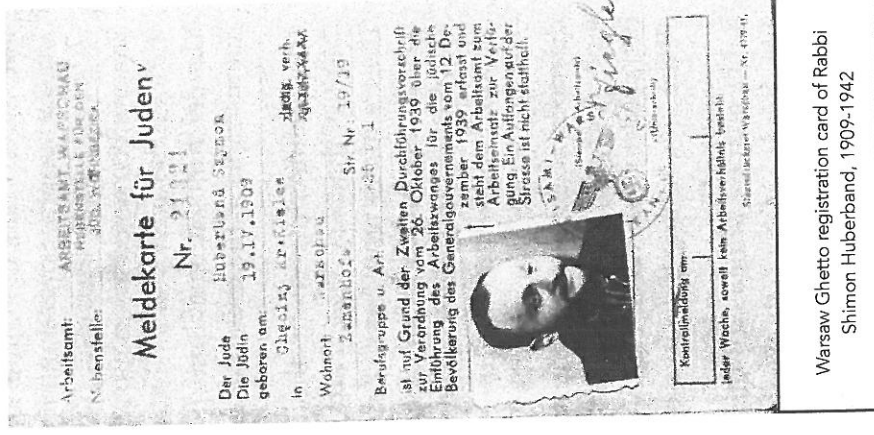


After the summer of 1942, when the deportations to the Treblinka death camp reduced the remaining Jewish population of Warsaw to a fraction of its wartime height of half a million, Ringelblum determined—correctly—that the Ghetto would be completely razed. He directed his *zamlers* to cease collecting new documents, and prepare all the materials for burial in three secret locations. Many of the *zamlers* included their final wills, expecting they would not survive the war.

¹ Samuel D. Kassow, *Who Will Write Our History? Emanuel Ringelblum, the Warsaw Ghetto, and the Oyneg Shabes Archive* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007).

Charged with the task of documenting religious life in the Ghetto was Rabbi Shimon Huberband, a Torah scholar who devoted his final years to the secret archive. Huberband was considered Ringelblum's closest collaborator. Huberband's first wife and child were killed in the initial German bombing raids, and he sought solace by immersing himself in his historical research, documenting the religious life of Warsaw Jewry. He deposited a remarkable manuscript in the *Oneg Shabbat* archive that was eventually published under the title *Kiddush Hashem: Jewish Religious and Cultural Life during the Holocaust* (New York: Yeshiva University Press, 1987). The book appeared posthumously, for he and his second wife were deported to the Treblinka Death Camp on August 18, 1942 and murdered shortly thereafter.

Rabbi Huberband had regularly attended the underground Sabbath services led by a charismatic Hasidic leader, Rabbi Kalonymus Kalmish Shapira, and described several of these clandestine meetings in his own work. Rabbi Huberband had familial connections with Rabbi Shapira,



and even edited a student publication published by Rabbi Shapira's school.² It is likely that Rabbi Huberband introduced Rabbi Shapira to the research of the *Oneg Shabbat* society. Several months after the great deportation of August 1942 that took Rabbi Huberband's life, Rabbi Shapira conveyed his manuscripts to the archive, probably through the agency of a Ghetto resident named Menachem Mendel Kon.³ Ringelblum included the Rebbe's precious manuscripts in the milk cans for burial.

The manuscripts—both the Rebbe's writings and two-thirds of the *Oneg Shabbat* archive—would survive the war. Their authors would not. Emmanuel Ringelblum escaped the Ghetto in March of 1943, but heroically returned a month later to participate in the great uprising. He was captured and sent to the Trawniki labor camp, rescued in a daring operation conducted by the resistance, then disappeared into an underground bunker with thirty other Jews for nearly a year until the secret location was betrayed to the Nazis. He, his wife and child, along with all the Jews hiding there, were killed on March 7, 1944.

Rabbi Shapira remained in the Ghetto for several months after the 1942 deportations, working in a forced-labor shoe factory for several months until he, too, was deported to Trawniki. The cycle of Jewish revolts that began with the

Warsaw Ghetto Uprising in April 1943 culminated in similar insurrections at Treblinka (August) and Sobibor (October), moving the Nazis to initiate "Operation Harvest Festival," the plan to murder the last Warsaw Jews in labor camps. On November 3, 1943, the Jews incarcerated in Trawniki were rounded up and shot *en masse*. While the Rabbi's soul ascended in holy fire, his manuscripts remained safely entombed, black fire on white fire, awaiting their discovery seven years later.

In 1956, Barukh Duvdevani, an intrepid Polish-born activist with the Jewish Agency, travelled to Warsaw on a dual mission.



Duvdevani, a seventh-generation direct descendant of Rabbi Elimelech of Lizhensk, had both impeccable Hasidic credentials and a long history of service to the nascent State of Israel. He served in the fledgling military and had organized the mass immigration of

Jews from Italy, Algeria, Tunisia, Morocco, South Africa and France. His assignment in Poland, however, came with a personal charge as well. Rabbi Elimelech ben Porat, a former student of Rabbi Shapira living in Israel, implored Duvdevani to search for the lost prewar writings of Rabbi Kalonymus Kalmish Shapira, including *Hakhsharat ha-Avreichim*, the companion volume of Rabbi Shapira's 1932 *Horat ha-Talmidim*, which was known to be in copyediting stage at the outbreak of the war in 1939.

Duvdevani's efforts, as one might imagine, were frustrated by the highly fragmentary nature of the evidence he had to work with. One cache of *Oneg Shabbat* documents was found, and surviving members of the organization insisted that two more collections remained somewhere under the

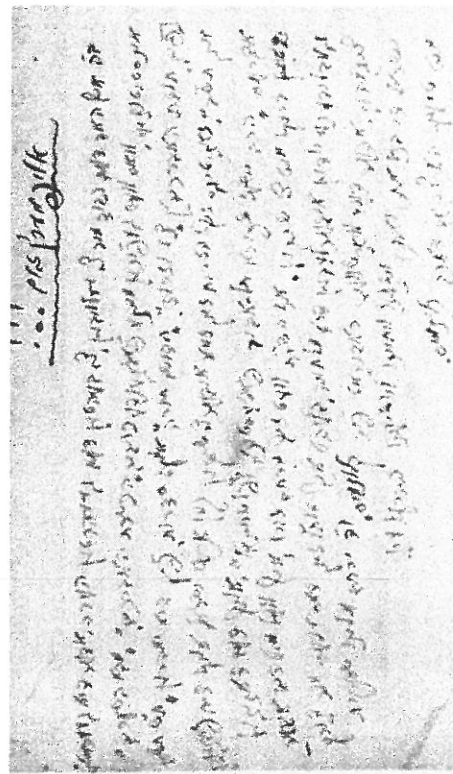
² Daniel Reiser, ed., *Rabi Kalonymus Kalmish Shapira: Derashot mi-shenot ha-za'am* Jerusalem: Herzog Academic College/World Union of Jewish Studies/Yad Vashem, 2017 1: 30. Reiser's two-volume critical edition of the Rebbe's writings will be cited henceforth as *Derashot*.

³ Kon was a close friend of Huberband, and wrote a moving obituary for the amateur historian. See *To Live With Honor and Die With Honor...Selected Documents from the Warsaw Ghetto Underground Archives "O.S." ["Oneg Shabbath"]*, ed. Joseph Kermish, Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 1986, 54-57. It is also likely that the Rebbe was personally acquainted to some degree with Emmanuel Ringelblum, judging from a passing comment in Hillel Seidman, *Tog-bukh fun Varshaver Geto*, Buenos Aires: Tsentral-Farband fun Poylishe Yidn in Argentine, 1947, p. 102.

wreckage of the ghetto. Where was one to look amidst the destruction of Poland's first city? Through a remarkable turn of events, Duvdevani managed to realize the dream of the surviving remnant of Piaseczno Hasidim by locating the precious manuscripts. Duvdevani described his amazing discovery in 1961, when he was summoned to testify at the Nazi War Crimes trial of the notorious war criminal Adolf Eichmann:

The staff of the Jewish Historical Institute helped me but to no avail. One day, when I had decided to search further, suddenly they brought me a will which had been found amongst these documents, of Rabbi Kalonymus Shapira in favor of his brother in the Land of Israel, the late Rabbi Yeshayah Shapira and two other disciples who are living today in Israel. When I noticed the date, which was four months before the Warsaw Ghetto revolt, I became very excited and began reading. And I saw that he had put into the can books which he had written during the War years.⁴

The document Duvdevani discovered was a brief cover letter written by the Rebbe in ornate Yiddish prose:



ATTENTION!!!

Blessed is God. I have the honor of requesting the esteemed individual or institution that finds my enclosed writings *Hakhsharat Ha-Avreichim*, *Mavo Ha-She'arim*, (from *Hovat Ha-Avreikhim*), *Tsav ve-Zeruz*, *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 will show 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,
Kalonymus⁵

Switching to eloquent Rabbinic Hebrew, Rabbi Shapira then penned a message to his brother Yeshaya Shapira, describing the nature of the manuscripts and asking that they be produced for publication. This letter, Rabbi Shapira's final will, contained an exhortation to future readers of his work. "Please also print in every work," he wrote, "that I urge every single Jew to study my books, and the merit of my holy ancestors will stand by every student and his family, now and forever." The will and

⁵ The Rebbe's cover letter is reproduced in *Derashot* 1:328. Unless otherwise indicated, translations are my own.

letter is dated 27 Tevet, 5703 (January 3, 1943) and concludes with the words "May God have mercy upon us."

The Manuscript

Rabbi Shapira's wartime writings were published in 1960 under the title *Aish Kodesh* (also transliterated *Esh Kodesh*). The title was not of Rabbi Shapira's choosing—he referred to these collected sermons as simply *Torah Insights from the Years 5700, 5701 and 5702* (September 1939-July 1942), and elsewhere as *Torah Insights from the Years of Wrath (Hidushei Torah mi-shenot ha-za'am)*.⁶ The first publishers chose instead the evocative title *Holy Fire (Aish Kodesh)*, a term that appears occasionally in the Rebbe's works, although never in the wartime writings themselves.⁷ The editors wished to memorialize the martyred Jews of the Holocaust, as the Hebrew word *kodesh* is at the root of the term *kidush haShem*, or "martyrdom," in homage to those Jews whose bodies were



Title page of first edition of *Esh Kodesh* (1960)

⁶ The title is referenced in his cover letter, *Derashot* I:328. The title page reads, "Words of Torah that I spoke on Sabbaths and Holidays, 5700 5701 5702," and signed simply, "Kalonymus." See *Derashot* II: 16-17.

⁷ See for example *Hakhsharat ha-Avreikhim*, chapter 3 (p. 18 in the undated but revised Feldheim printing of the 1961 edition) and chapter 9 (109).

destroyed in the crematoria of the death camps.⁸ *Aish Kodesh* enjoyed such widespread regard that Rabbi Shapira himself is often referred to as "The *Aish Kodesh*," a mark of distinction in Jewish literary convention.

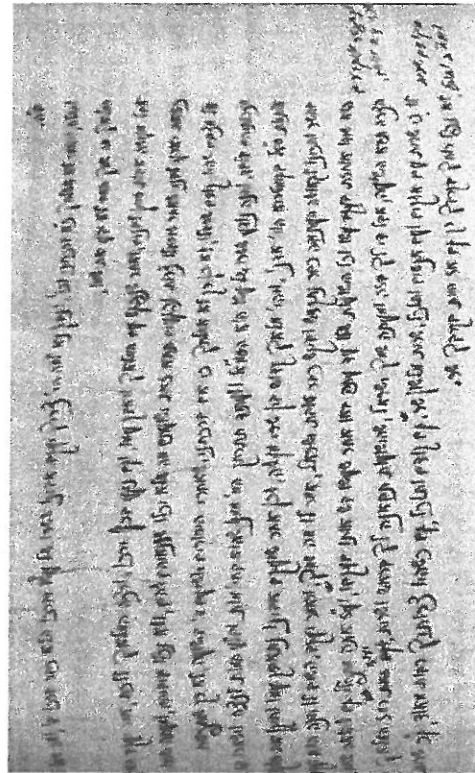
The printed version records almost 100 sermons (*derashot*) delivered between Rosh Hashanah of the Hebrew year 5700 (September 14-15, 1939) and Shabbat Hazon of 5702 (July 18, 1942), the eve of the deportations to the death camp Treblinka. Rabbi Shapira survived the first major wave of deportations, working in one of the few slave-labor "shops" that the Nazis maintained until the uprising of 1943. Understanding that his fate was at risk, Rabbi Shapira reviewed the entire manuscript and made hundreds of annotations, some of them dated, ending with his literary will and cover letter of January 3, 1943.

The manuscript text is written in two distinct hands, with the earliest entries penned in the elegant script of an anonymous scribe.⁹ His beautiful calligraphy disappears after the entry of March 9, 1940 (Pekudei-Shkalim), and the majority of the manuscript is written Rabbi Shapira's cramped style. The scribe's entries often bear additional annotations in the Rebbe's hand, one of many indications that the Rebbe subjected the text to editorial refinement

⁸ Publisher's preface, *Sefer Esh Kodesh*, Jerusalem: Va'ad Hasidei Piaseczno, 1960, unnumbered pages iii-iv. The term *kidush Hashem* literally means "sanctification of the Name" of God. In other contexts, the term may refer to any laudatory activity that reflects well on Torah, Judaism or the Jewish people.

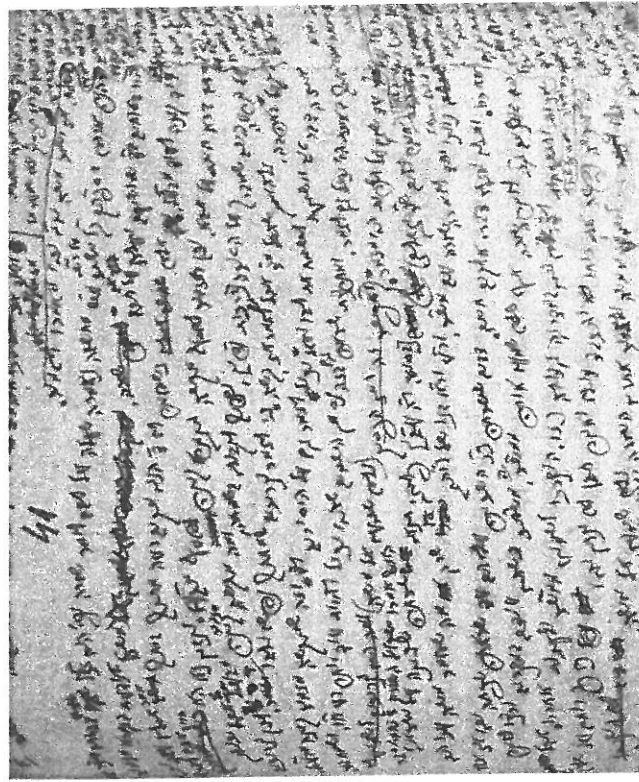
⁹ The name of the scribe is not recorded in the manuscript. Daniel Reiser received personal testimony from Avraham Hammer that Rabbi Elazar Bane recognized the script as the handwriting of a student of the Rebbe named "Nute." His surname is unknown. Reiser, *Sermons* I:61, note 211. Esther Farbstein was unaware of the scribe's work and mistakenly attributed the difference between the clean, elegant hand of the early entries and the cramped, difficult style of later entries to the horrible conditions present in the Ghetto (Be-sefer Re'em: *Halakhah, Hagut ve-Minhagut be-yemei ha-sho'ah*, Jerusalem: Mosad Ha-Rav Kook, 2002, p. 441).

over time. The Rebbe continued this practice long after he lost his scribe; most entries bear strikeouts, corrections, and footnotes tucked into the margins of the page. Differing impressions imply that the notes were written at various times, perhaps with different writing instruments. The papers were generally used with great economy, tiny words often running to the very edge of each page. Thankfully, the Rebbe left a paragraph of instructions for his future editors which described how to understand the various and idiosyncratic copy-editing symbols used in the manuscript.¹⁰



Above: an entry written by the anonymous scribe, with a marginal annotation by the Rebbe. Following page: an entry written by the Rebbe. Derashot 11:26 and 194.

¹⁰ See Derashot 11:9-14 for Reiser's translation of these rules into his remarkable facsimile edition of the Rebbe's manuscript.



Four editors painstakingly deciphered the Rebbe's often difficult shorthand for the first printed edition, published in 1960 under the supervision of Rabbi Elimelech Shapira, nephew of the Rebbe and son of his literary heir, Rabbi Yeshaya Shapira. Working with black and white copies of the original manuscript, possibly made from microfilm, the team divided the text between themselves and met every two weeks to review and revise. Hundreds of the Rebbe's emendations were absorbed directly into the printed text without comment, and given the technological limitations of the 1950s, many errors crept into the text. A revised edition appeared in 2007, improving the readability of the text significantly with modern typography, expanded acronyms and light annotation. The newer edition was not based on the original manuscript, however, so errors in the

1960 edition were preserved and sometimes even compounded.¹¹

Ten years later, a critical edition was published that carefully catalogued the strikeouts, annotations, and other emendations of the original manuscript, correcting the limitations of the 1960 and 2007 printings with a two-volume, definitive edition. Dr. Daniel Reiser, a scholar at Zefat College and Herzog College, worked with the original document *in situ* and took advantage of digital technology to expand, reveal, and ultimately decipher hundreds of difficult passages. Many of Dr. Reiser's discoveries were quite dramatic in nature, shedding light on the Rebbe's thought in a manner that was impossible to determine from the printed editions. Dr. Reiser's Hebrew work, published in 2017 under the title *Derashot mi-shenot ha-za'am* (English title: *Sermons From the Years of Rage*) is demonstrably superior to previous editions and will be used for all citations in this book.

The entries vary in length from one to ten printed pages. An offhand comment on the entry for January 13, 1940, "more of what I said I cannot recall," suggests that they were committed to paper after they were delivered orally to an audience, as writing on the Sabbath is forbidden by Jewish law.¹² The setting of most of the sermons was the traditional Saturday afternoon gathering, although some of the more formal sermons may have been offered at morning services and one was apparently delivered on

¹¹ For an exhaustive discussion of how the manuscript was deciphered, see *Derashot* 1:62-73.

¹² *Derashot* II:33. Note that while this entry for *Parashat Bo* was printed without comment in the 1960 and 2007 editions, it is only reproduced in the facsimile volume of *Derashot* as the Rebbe clearly marked it for deletion.

Friday evening.¹³ The specific nature of these gatherings, including attendees, format, and the special relevance they had for Rabbi Shapira, will be discussed below. The traditional amount of time allotted for these sermons would be twenty to thirty minutes, although many may have lasted much longer.

The entries do not correspond word-for-word with what the Rebbe discussed the previous Sabbath. For one thing, the sermons were delivered in the vernacular Yiddish, while the entries are recorded in the literary standard of rabbinic Hebrew (specific phrases in the original Yiddish are occasionally interspersed).¹⁴ Thus, depending on the Rebbe's time, health, and discretion, any given written record of the sermon might represent a highly attenuated version of the original oral presentation, or it may be a greatly expanded and more sophisticated treatise. Comparisons between his prewar and wartime sermons suggest that the Rebbe may have intended to flesh out the ideas in a revised, expanded publication.¹⁵ Large gaps of silence punctuate several weeks between entries, often for unknown reasons. The absence of an entry, however, does not indicate that the Rebbe was inactive—he may have simply chosen not to preserve a record of his sermon that week.

¹³ See *Derashot* I:54 note 186.

¹⁴ Regarding this phenomenon of Yiddish-Hebrew diglossia, see Reiser, *Derashot* I:66 n5, also his "Ha-derashah he-Hasidit—bein Yiddish le-Ivrit," *Judaica Petropolitana* 6 (2013), 3-22 (Hebrew section).

¹⁵ For a much larger discussion of continuity and discontinuity between the Rebbe's prewar sermons and his wartime work, see Yitschak Herszkowitz, "R. Kalonymus Kalmish Shapira hy"d Ha-Admo"r mi-Piasczno: Hagut ha-Shoah mul hagut tarum ha-Shoah, hemshekh o temura?" Master's Dissertation, Bar-Ilan University 5765 (2005/6).

Reading Sermons as History

Since their first publication in Hebrew in 1960, the Holocaust writings of Rabbi Shapira have been recognized as phenomenally important to researchers of theodicy.¹⁶ One of the first was Mendel Peikarz' study, *The Last Hasidic Document Written in Poland* (Hebrew, 1979).¹⁷ In English, certainly the most influential work was Nehemia Polen's pathbreaking 1994 study, *The Holy Fire: The Teachings of Rabbi Kalonymus Kalman Shapira, the Rebbe of the Warsaw Ghetto*.¹⁸ Both scholars sparked a considerable amount of scholarly activity centered on the Rebbe's wartime writings, almost all of which concentrated on understanding what Rabbi Shapira had to say about the central theological question, "where was God during the Holocaust." Scholarship subsequently advanced in several directions. At Bar-Ilan University, dissertations were completed by Yitshak Hirshkowitz and Tsvi Leshem, extending the theological discussion beyond the war years to the Rebbe's pre-war thought as well.¹⁹ English-language readers availed themselves of solid scholarship produced by James Diamond, Gershon Greenberg, Don Seeman, and a PhD dissertation at the University of Chicago by Erin

¹⁶ For an introduction to the main sources for theological of this nature, in which the Rebbe's work features prominently, see Gershon Greenberg and Assad Yedidyah, eds. *Mishpatetkha tehom rabah: tagavot hegoyiyut ortodoksiut la-shoah*, Jerusalem: Mosad ha-Rav Kook, 2016.

¹⁷ Mendel Peikarz (Paikazh), *Ha-teudah he-hasidit ha-sifrutit ha-aharonah al admat Polin: Divrei ha-Rebi be-gito Varsha* Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 1977.

¹⁸ Nehemia Polen, *The Holy Fire: The Teachings of Rabbi Kalonymus Kalman Shapira, the Rebbe of the Warsaw Ghetto* Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 1994.

¹⁹ Yitshak Hirshkowitz, "R' Kalonymus Kalmish Shapira hy'd, Ha-admo"r mi-Piaseczno: hagot ha-shoah mul hagot terem ha-shoah, hemshekh o temurah?" Master's Dissertation, Bar-Ilan University, 2005. Tsvi Leshem, "Bein meshihuyt le-nevuah: he-hasidut al pi ha-admo"r mi-Piaseczno," PhD Dissertation, Bar-Ilan University, 2007.

Lieb Smokler.²⁰ Popular enthusiasm for Rabbi Shapira's work was also expressed in the publication of several hagiographic works and multiple translations of his prewar and wartime writings into English, French, Italian and Russian.²¹

One exception to the strongly theological trend of research into Rabbi Shapira's writings was a brief 1980 Hebrew-language article by a graduate student at Bar-Ilan University named Judith Thidor-Baumel.²² Titled simply "*Aish Kodesh*: The Book of the Piaseczno Rebbe and its Place in Understanding Religious Life in the Warsaw Ghetto," Thidor-Baumel made an observation that was as

²⁰ Don Seeman, "Ritual Efficacy, Hassidic Mysticism and 'Useless Suffering' in the Warsaw Ghetto," *Harvard Theological Review* 101: 3-4 (2008), 465-505. Steven T. Katz, Shlomo Biderman and Gershon Greenberg, eds. *Wrestling with God: Jewish Theological Responses during and after the Holocaust* New York: Oxford University Press, 2007. Erin Dana Lieb [Smokler], "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.

²¹ Ron Waks, *Lehavat Aish kodesh: she'arim shel ha-admo"r mi-Piaseczno Alon Shvut: Tevunot/Herzog*, 2010. Hayim Frankel, ed. *Zikhron kodesh Aish kodesh: yuval le-aliyato al moked shel rabenu ha-kodesh ve-ha-tahor mi-Piaseczno mo ha"r Kalonymus Kalmish Shapira hy"d*, Jerusalem: Va'ad Hasidei Piaseczno-Grodzisk, 1993; Moshe Weinberger, *Warmed by the Fire of the Aish Kodesh: Torah from the Hillulas of Reb Kalonymus Kalman Shapira of Piaseczna*, Jerusalem: Feldheim, 2015. English translations of the Rebbe's works include A Student's Obligation: Advice from the Rebbe of the Warsaw Ghetto, Rabbi Kalonymus Kalmish Shapira, trans. Micah Odenheimer, Lanham, MD: Jason Aronson, 2004 (also translated anonymously and published by Feldheim, 2011, and into Russian by Shvut Ami in 2008), *To Heal the Soul: The Spiritual Journal of a Chasidic Rebbe*, trans. Yehoshua Starrett, Lanham, MD: Jason Aronson/Rowman & Littlefield, 1995, *Sacred Fire: Torah from the Years of Fury 1939-1942*, translated by J. Hershy Worch and edited by Deborah Miller Lanham, MD: Jason Aronson, 2000, and *Conscious Community: A Guide to Inner Work*, trans. Andrea Cohen-Kiener, Lanham, MD: Jason Aronson, 2013 (also under the title *Experiencing the Divine: A Practical Jewish Guide*, translated by Yaacov David Shulman, Baltimore 2002). See also Catherine Challer, *Kalonymus Shapira: rabbi au Ghetto de Varsovie 1889-1943* Paris: Arfuyen, 2011 and in Italian, *Kalonymus Shapira Rabbino del ghetto di Varsavia*, trans. Wanna Lucatini-Vogelmann, Firenze: Giuntina, 2013.

²² Ester Yehudit Thidor-Baumel, "*Aish Kodesh*," *sifro shel ha-admo"r mi-Piaseczno*, u-mekomo be-havanat ha-hayim ha-dati'im be-gito Varshah," *Yalkut Moresheet* 29 (1980), 173-187.

startling as it was original: given that the entries in *Torah from the Years of Wrath* are all dated, and given that we know from multiple sources the events of the Ghetto that week, a careful historical comparison should reveal significant insight into the way in which Hasidim in the Ghetto found spiritual and intellectual tools to deal with the brutal Nazi occupation. Her brief article only dedicated four pages to providing examples, but the presumption was incredibly important.

Thidor-Baumel's thesis is well-supported by a careful comparison of the historical record of events in the Warsaw Ghetto and the sermons of the Rebbe. It is important to note that the Rebbe's recorded sermons constitute *public* documents, the representation of one man's attempt to provide the Jewish community of Warsaw with the intellectual and spiritual resources to understand, and ultimately withstand, the persecutions of the Holocaust. Unlike journals, which were written primarily as personal and private meditations (even if their authors intended them ultimately to be read by others), the entries in *Torah from the Years of Wrath* were communicated on a weekly basis, providing a glimpse into how a spiritual leader such as Rabbi Shapira attempted to place the horrific events of the prior week into the context of Jewish faith. Unlike memoirs, written long after the fact and inescapably colored by the overwhelming hindsight of the murder of millions of innocents, the Rebbe's wartime writings are literary artifacts that illuminate the thinking of a faith community in real time, providing insight into how the followers of a Hasidic Rebbe incorporated the *tremendum* of the Holocaust into their theistic *Weltanschauung*.

Reading *Torah from the Years of Wrath* for historical information is not easy. Although the document is exceptionally grounded in the events of the ghetto—the Rebbe's Hasidim would turn to him every week, hoping for a theological message that would help them understand and accept their personal tragedies by providing context within the meaning-system of Judaism—at no point does the Rebbe explicitly use the terms “Nazi” or “German,” and generally avoids any specific reference to the occupation of Warsaw at all. Only rare, fleeting passages betray oblique references to specific Nazi *Aktionen*. Indeed, if a reader were unaware of the historical setting, it would be possible to imagine these sermons as a creation of a Hasidic thinker of 19th century, albeit somewhat obsessed with the problem of evil.

Yet when one places the sermons within the historical context of the daily and weekly experiences of the Jews in Warsaw, it becomes obvious that the Rebbe was in fact alluding to very specific occurrences of the prior week, hoping to assimilate the unthinkable into a Hasidic worldview, providing his followers with the spiritual tools of survival. Indeed, it is virtually impossible to appreciate these Sabbath discourses properly without first understanding the historical circumstances of the previous week.

Barbara Krawcowicz noted the use of this philosophical-rhetorical device in the writings of Rabbi Zalman Ehrenreich. Her suggestion that the concept, which she termed “paradigmatic thinking” following Jacob Neusner, was “a crucial element of the theological responses coming from ultra-Orthodox circles during the period of World War II.”

It was precisely the use of these eternally valid, timeless models that enabled these thinkers to describe events in such a way as to assert that the covenant between the people of Israel and God had not been disrupted. By interpreting the anti-Jewish persecution through lenses that focus on the repetitive and the recurring, ultra-Orthodox thinkers were able to uphold the tenets of traditional covenantal theodicy.²³

Or, as a Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi put it, "for the rabbis the Bible was not only a repository of past history, but a revealed pattern of the whole of history...the true pulse of history often beat beneath its manifest surfaces, an invisible history that was more real than what the world, deceived by the more strident outward rhythms of power, could recognize."²⁴ Much of The Rebbe's work, particularly during the first two years of the occupation, represents an examination of how Hasidim could discern the "true pulse of history," despite the more obvious "outward rhythms of power."

A careful reading of the weekly entries also reveals a subtle use of Aesopian language, allowing Rabbi Shapira to speak to his audience in veiled terms that placed their immediate suffering on the larger canvas of what Gershon Greenberg called "meta-history." Evoking the ancient Midrashic teaching "the experience of the fathers is a sign for the sons," (*ma'ase avot siman le-banim*) Rabbi Shapira analyzes the weekly Torah portion with a view to its message for the imperiled Jews of Warsaw, helping them

²³ Barbara Krawcowicz, "Paradigmatic Thinking and Holocaust Theology," *Journal of Jewish Thought & Philosophy* 22 (2014), p. 167.

²⁴ Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory*, New York: Schocken, 1989, p. 21.

understand their incomprehensible suffering as a part of a cosmic plan, foretold thousands of years ago in the holy Torah. The Ghetto was, by definition, a tightly enclosed space, and both genuine news and baseless rumors spread rapidly through the population. Third-person accounts indicate that many Jews (sometimes numbering in the hundreds) attended Rabbi Shapira's Saturday afternoon addresses, no doubt hoping to find some way to comprehend the tragedies that befell this beleaguered community. Rabbi Shapira clearly responded to this need, and his wartime writings stand in dramatic contrast to his prewar sermons in this regard.

To date, the most extensive research on the Rebbe's work has been theological in nature, and no one has taken up the challenge posed by Esther Judith Thidor-Baumel in her 1980 article. I hope to fill that lacuna. With careful historical reconstruction, we can transport ourselves to that close chamber on 5 Dzielna street, our minds still reeling from the shock of the events that transpired over the previous week in the Ghetto. From a distance, we may hear the Rebbe speak, helping us assimilated those terrible events into our worldview, and gain the strength to persevere despite our deep fear for the future.

The Rebbe and his Hasidim

"How can I recite the *kaddish* prayer," said the recently orphaned three-year old Kalonymus Kalmish, "when I clearly see my father sitting before me in his chair?" So goes the legend as told by the elders of the Piaseczno

Hasidim.²⁵ Such ascriptions of precocious ability and transcendental spiritual sensitivity are commonly applied to Hasidic leaders by their pious followers, but in many ways this story stands out as emblematic of Rabbi Kalonymus Kalmish Shapira's productive, heroic, and tragically brief life. Themes of transcendent awareness of higher levels of being, the longing for a distant father separated by an illusory veil of temporal perception, and above all the refusal to abandon hope in a speedy redemption, are deep-rooted characteristics of the man who would become famous through his last and most profound work.

Kalonymus Kalmish was heir to a rich heritage of Hasidic thought, with many of the greatest minds of the movement in his family tree. His father Elimelekh (1823-1892) was the founder of the Grodzisk dynasty (named, like most Hasidic dynasties, for their place of origin: Grodzisk is the Yiddish name for Grodzisk Mazowiecki, a town in central Poland). Elimelekh's father was Rabbi Hayim Meir Shapira (1789-1849), the leader of the Hasidim of Kozhnits (Kozienice), known popularly as the "Angel" (*sorof*) of Moglenits (Mogielnica) who was in turn a grandson of Rabbi Elimelekh of Lizhensk (1717-1787), one of the most influential Hasidic leaders of the 18th century. Kalonymus Kalmish's mother Hanah Berakhah Sztternfeld also descended from an impressive Hasidic background, and she named her youngest child after her grandfather

²⁵ Aharon Sorensky, "Mi-toledot ha-admor ha-kadosh maran Rabi Kalonimus Kalmish Shapira zts"l hy" d mi-Piaseczno," printed as an appendix to the Feldheim 2007 printing of *Aish Kodesh*, pages 267-322.

Kalonymus Kalman Epstein (1751-1823), author of the classic *Ma'or va-Shemesh*.²⁶

Cognoscenti of Hasidic dynasties will recognize these names as royalty, but what exactly is Hasidism? The movement takes its name from the Hebrew word *hesed*, which is often translated as "kindness," but in this context is might be better understood as "going beyond the letter of the law." Although the term has ancient roots (e.g. Psalms 86:2, *guard my soul, for I am a hasid*), it was adopted as a designator for the Jewish religious revival that developed in the mid-18th century in Eastern Europe. Pre-Hasidic Jewish spirituality privileged rigorous study of the Talmud, an ancient legal text written in Aramaic that required years of intense training to decipher. The Talmudic elite were concentrated in the northern regions of the Polish-Lithuanian commonwealth, and largely viewed Rabbi Eliyahu of Vilnius ("the Vilna Gaon," 1720-1797) as the exemplar of Jewish intellectual attainment. Despite the valorization of textual literacy in classical Rabbinic sources, few Jews could aspire to such levels of academic excellence, as even rudimentary education required significant expenditure to provide children with anything more than a few years of full-time education. Women in particular received little access to Talmudic training, although Yiddish-language adaptations of Jewish thought remained popular among the larger masses. On the whole, Jews in the southern regions of Eastern Europe often felt disenfranchised and even abandoned from the main

²⁶ See Polen, *Holy Fire*, xliii. The Rebbe's Hebrew family name was Latinized to Szapiro in Polish, but scholarly convention has adopted the spelling "Shapira" in English, following the usage of the descendants of the Rebbe's surviving Israeli brother. The Rebbe preferred the diminutive form Kalonymus Kalmish, which distinguished him from his illustrious great-grandfather, Kalonymus Kalman. For an example of the Rebbe's own transliteration of his name into Roman letters as Szapiro, see his handwritten name reproduced in *Derashot* 1:326.

centers of Talmudic activity, a problem which was exacerbated by the sometimes corrupt practices of established leadership.²⁷

Seeking spiritual fulfillment that was not readily provided by the intellectual meritocracy of the Lithuanian Rabbinical seminaries, a spontaneous folk religiosity flourished in Ukraine and southern Poland. Emphasizing song and camaraderie, these Jews were viewed with suspicion by the Lithuanian Jews and their sober study of the holy texts. Thus the Hasidic movement emerged against the backdrop of the elitist Judaism of Lithuania on the one hand and the credulous and sometimes antinomian folk practices of southeastern Europe on the other.

Rebelling against what many perceived as a desiccated, reified Judaism that prized mental acuity at the expense of enthusiastic prayer, song, and fellowship, the movement coalesced around the figure of Rabbi Yisrael ben Eliezer (c. 1700-1760), a remarkable spiritual leader known to his followers as the Ba'al Shem Tov. Emphasizing the value of the faith of the common Jew, the Ba'al Shem Tov's teachings spread far and wide, sparking bitter antagonism between the emerging Hasidic Jews and the traditionalist Talmudic Jews, dubbed "opponents" (*mitnagdim*) because of their rejectionist stance.

The intellectual inheritors of the Ba'al Shem Tov's teachings spread and bifurcated again and again, with followers spontaneously joining one Rebbe or another, sometimes based on geographic proximity, sometimes based on

²⁷ See Gershon David Hundert, ed. *Essential Papers in Hasidism* (New York: New York University Press, 1991) and Ada Rappaport-Albert, ed. *Hasidism Reappraised* (London: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 1997).

cultural or intellectual affinity. One important third-generation Rebbe was Elimelekh of Lizhensk mentioned above, from whom Piaseczno Hasidism derives.

Theologically and pragmatically, Hasidism rests on a foundation recognizable to all Orthodox Jews: belief in a omnipotent Creator, whose covenant with the Jewish people through the Torah is eternally binding and expressed through 613 commandments, which are encoded in the first five books of the Bible and elucidated through Rabbinic writings such as the Talmud. The life cycles and ritual calendars of Hasidic Jews also follow the traditional pattern, with the Sabbath an inviolate day of rest and the year punctuated by celebrations and fast days. Highly gendered, both traditionalist and Hasidic Jews recognize major differences between the roles of women and men in communal and family life, and observe detailed laws regulating marital intimacy. Both traditionalist Lithuanian Jews and Hasidim recognize the value of the mystical tradition of Kabbalah, but Mitnagdic Jews (also known as "Litvaks," meaning Lithuanians) restrict its study to only the most accomplished students, observing the medieval bans that proscribed Kabbalistic study for women and men under the age of forty. By contrast, Hasidim celebrate Kabbalistic study even by children, so long as it is expressed in the literature such as the *Tanya*, a late eighteenth century work authored by Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liady, the founder of the Chabad school of Hasidism.

Hasidim also favored adherence to outmoded styles of dress and other outward identifiers of ethnicity such as untrimmed beards. Hasidim were usually organized in tight social units under the authoritative leadership of a single Rabbi (often called Rebbe, rhymes with "ready"),

who typically inherited his position from his father or father-in-law.

Rabbi Shapira meditated on the essence of Hasidism in several of his works. For him, the spiritual enlightenment engendered by Hasidism was intrinsically related to the phenomenon of prophecy.²⁸ Although prophetic insight into future events (*nevuah le-atid*) had ended in the biblical period, argued the Rebbe, the communication between the Divine and creation persisted in the form of prophetic instruction (*nevuah le-hadrakhah*). Perhaps the most succinct description of what Hasidism meant to him is provided in his popular work, *The Obligation of Students*, beautifully rendered into English by Micah Odenheimer:

You may ask: What is Hasidism and in what way is a Hasid who serves God greater than someone who serves God but is not a Hasid? Be aware that this is impossible to explain. Hasidism is not something merely intellectual, and thus explainable. The intellectual component of Hasidism is only one part of it, and is itself revealed only after one has engaged in the service of God. This is the same as in prophecy. It is impossible to rationally explain prophecy. A prophet is the only one who actually understands the nature of prophecy—and for him, the phenomenon seems so simple and obvious that he cannot understand why others do not see what he does, as Scripture states in Amos 3:8: *the Lord, God, has spoken, who will not prophesy?*

²⁸ Daniel Reiser, "To Rend the Entire Veil: Prophecy in the Teachings of Rabbi Kalonymous Kalman Shapira of Piaszeczno and its Renewal in the Twentieth Century," *Modern Judaism* 34, 3 (2014), pp. 334-352, Leshem, "Bein meshihyut."

Amos was unable to comprehend how anyone would not experience prophecy when God had spoken.

This is also the case in Hasidism, which is the revelation of the tiny spark of prophecy that exists within each Jew (as the Talmud states in *Pesahim* 66a: "Jews are the children of prophets"). It is impossible to explain Hasidism with the intellect. Neither the Hasidic way of serving God nor the Hasid's perception of the world can be explained rationally. It is impossible to intellectually describe how a true Hasid prays, how his soul becomes inflamed and bound to supernal holiness, or how he sees in the Torah and in the commandments the lovely splendor of God, the world's glory, and he sees a spark of His presence everywhere in the world. It is difficult even for the Hasid himself to comprehend these matters. When he sees and perceives these things during his periods of spiritual ascent and burning enthusiasm they seem simple and certain, yet if he falls from his spiritual level, he himself cannot understand them.²⁹

Piaszeczno

The town of Piaszeczno (pronounced Pee-ah-SECH-no), some ten kilometers south of the capital city Warsaw in central Poland, was home to approximately 2,700

²⁹ A Student's Obligation: Advice from the Rebbe of the Warsaw Ghetto, translated by Micah Odenheimer, Lanham, NJ: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004, 99. Transliteration was slightly altered to conform with the system used in this publication.

inhabitants at the turn of the 20th century.³⁰ The Jewish community in this village dated back centuries and its presence was formally acknowledged in the municipal reforms of 1869. Demographically, Piaseczno was unremarkable for Polish towns of its size, with Jews making up forty percent of its population at the end of the nineteenth century. The town enjoyed significant growth in the first two decades of the twentieth century, its population tripling by 1918, with the Jewish share of the population rising to 56%, perhaps due to the proximity of Warsaw and the refugee traffic created by the First World War.³¹ Linkages between the hamlet and the capital extended beyond the economic and demographic, a phenomenon that extended to the Hasidic community as well: after the establishment of his Yeshiva (religious school) in Warsaw, *Da'at Moshe*, Rabbi Shapira would spend his summers in Piaseczno.

When Kalonymus Kalmish's father Elimelekh died in 1892, he left behind five children: three from a previous marriage, and two from his second marriage to Hanah Berakhah Szternfeld. The youngest was Kalonymus Kalmish, who turned three that year. Rabbi Elimelekh lavished attention on his youngest son, and numerous stories demonstrate how the father anticipated greatness for him. When Hasidim would approach Rabbi Elimelekh with *kvittlekh*, written petitions for various personal needs, Rabbi Elimelekh would direct them to place the notes

³⁰ Juliusz Łukasiewicz, "Powiat Piaseczyński w latach 1867-1914," in Jerzego Antoniewicza, ed., *Studia i Materiały do Dziejów Piaseczyńskiego* (Warsaw: Drukarnia im. Rewolucji Październikowej w Warszawie, 1973), 239-247.

³¹ Józef Kazimierski, "Miasto Piaseczno i Powiat Piaseczyński w latach Wojny i Okupacji Hitlerowskiej," in Jerzego Antoniewicza, ed., *Studia i Materiały do Dziejów Piaseczno-Powiatu Piaseczyńskiego* (Warsaw: Drukarnia im. Rewolucji Październikowej w Warszawie, 1973), 253-267.

under the baby's pillow and wait for the answer to come from Heaven. He also insisted on various pious practices, such as ritually washing the baby's hands and covering his head, arguing that the destiny of the young Kalonymus Kalmish required an additional level of scrupulousness. For his part, the precocious Kalonymus Kalmish later claimed to have distinct memories of his father, even his specific religious practices and teachings. In one poignant memory, he recalled bursting into tears in synagogue, calling out to his father who was leading the congregation. Rabbi Elimelekh responded, "you are calling your father? I am also calling my Father!"³²

After Rabbi Elimelekh's passing, Kalonymus Kalmish was raised by his mother, a well-known Hasidic leader in her own right. Hannah Berakhah was famous for her erudition and even her unusual adoption of practices such as the bestowal of blessings, which were usually reserved for male Hasidic leaders.³³ She moved young Kalonymus Kalmish to nearby Grodzisk, home to the famous Hasidic dynasty of her family, where Yerahmiel Moshe, an older grandson of Rabbi Elimelekh from his first marriage, took responsibility to educate the boy. Yerahmiel Moshe was not only Kalonymus Kalmish's nephew, he also became his father-in-law when, at 16, Kalonymus Kalmish married his daughter Rahel Hayah Miriam. Yerahmiel Moshe was Kalonymus Kalmish's principal teacher in Kabbalah for four years until his untimely passing in 1909.

Bereft of its leader, the Jewish community of Piaseczno was faced with a dilemma: should they follow the late Rabbi Yerahmiel Moshe's son Rabbi Aharon Yehiel, or choose

³² Sorasky, "Mi-toledot ha-admo"r," 277.

³³ Polen, *Holy Fire*, 158 note 1.

Rabbi Kalonymus Kalmish, the brilliant but untested 20-year-old son-in-law? Supporters of Rabbi Aharon Yehiel argued for the traditional preservation of the paternal line, but those backing Rabbi Kalonymus Kalmish pointed out several telling gestures made by the late Rabbi Yerachmiel Moshe during the illness that preceded his passing, such as his granting to Kalonymus Kalmish the privilege of reciting the *Akdamot* prayer on the holiday of Shavuot, an honor typically reserved for the Rebbe of Grodzisk alone.³⁴

Rabbi Shapira—now known, by Hasidic custom, as “the Rebbe” to his followers—adopted a leadership style that exemplified humility and compassion. He preempted the potentially corrosive dynastic struggle by leaving the seat of the Hasidic court of Grodzisk and returning to his home town of Piaseczno immediately upon the conclusion of the seven-day mourning period for his father-in-law. Despite unsolicited statements of support by many Hasidic luminaries, Rabbi Kalonymus Kalmish preferred to avoid the attendant controversy by retreating to the smaller, less prestigious village.

His return immediately transformed the town into a magnet for followers of the fledgling Hasidic court led by the already famous 20-year-old Rebbe. His reticence to accept communal honor was demonstrated again three years later, when the leaders of Piaseczno begged him to take the position of town Rabbi, recently vacated with the passing of the former Rabbi. The Rebbe firmly refused the proposition, arguing that the deceased Rabbi’s son should receive the position. Ultimately, the community leaders persuaded the Rebbe to relent, but he insisted on two conditions: first, the former Rabbi’s son would be appointed Chief Judge (*Dayan*) of Piaseczno. Second, the

³⁴ Sorasky, “Mi-Toledot ha-admo”r,” 291.

Rebbe would personally receive no salary for his service to the town: all remuneration would be directed exclusively to the late Rabbi’s widow.

Rabbi Aaron Sorasky, the principal biographer of the Rebbe, describes his daily routine with color and piety. Rising before dawn, the Rebbe would engage in deep study of the Talmud. When the time for morning devotions arrived, the Rebbe would make his way to synagogue, where he encouraged children to crowd around him in a semi-circle and recite their Hebrew prayers aloud and with great fervor. This was a source of some consternation to the adult worshippers. The Rebbe ignored protests for decorum, seeking instead to nurture the spontaneous ardor of youth, a concept that would figure prominently in his later written work.³⁵

The remainder of the Rebbe’s day was taken up by a long queue of Hasidim seeking his aid and counsel on a wide variety of personal issues. Visitors would prepare a written request for guidance and blessing, listing the petitioner’s name and mother’s name, along with a brief statement of the request. The Rebbe would read each *krittel* and receive the petitioner in turn, often concluding the visits only after midnight. Between each visit, the Rebbe would make personal notes and observations, some of which would

³⁵ Mr. Chaim Kenner, an elderly survivor from the Ghetto, vividly relates his childhood experience of praying with the Rebbe in Hatsik Varsha, “Ha-Admor mi-Piasezna Aish Kodesh,” <https://youtu.be/0a2Mh8UFkk> (accessed June 14, 2017). Simha Rotem also confirmed the warm reception he received from the Rebbe when, as a child, he was sent to the Rebbe on errands from his father. See Kazik (Simha Rotem), *Memoirs of a Warsaw Ghetto Fighter*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994, p. 3.

later appear in his own spiritual journal, published posthumously under the title *Tsav ve-zeruz*.³⁶

After World War I the Rebbe moved his principal residence to Warsaw, yet he continued to maintain close connections with the smaller community, visiting it for several weeks at a time. In 1923 the Rebbe established a Hasidic rabbinic seminary in Warsaw, *Da'at Moshe*, named after his father-in-law, which became the central focus of his communal and literary activity.

Jewish Warsaw

The Jewish presence in Poland dated back centuries, when rising antisemitism in Western Europe and increased economic opportunity drew Jewish migrants eastward. For much of the second millennium of the Common Era, Jews considered Poland a rare haven for a distressed people: the Hebrew translation of the term *Polin* ("Poland") was fancifully rendered as *po lin*: "here there is rest." Indeed, with the exception of some notable outbursts of ethnic upheavals in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Jews lived peaceably alongside their Christian neighbors in general amity until the late 19th century. Economically, Poland was a highly segmented society, with the vast majority of the population living in rural areas and engaging in agrarian pursuits. Jews were concentrated in villages, towns and increasingly in cities, and their economic profile heavily leaned toward small commerce. In the premodern period, this ethnic division of labor

³⁶ *Tsav ve-zeruz* was published in a single volume with *Hakhsharat ha-Avreikhim* and *Mavo ha-She'arim* by the Va'ad Hasidei Piaseczno in Jerusalem, 1962. These works, composed but not published before the war, are discussed briefly below. *Tsav ve-zeruz* was beautifully translated by Yehoshua Starratt and published under the title *To Heal the Soul: The Spiritual Journal of a Chasidic Rebbe*, Lanham, MD: Jason Aronson/Rowman & Littlefield, 1995.

created a tense but relatively stable symbiosis between the Jewish and non-Jewish populations.

Ironically, one of the most prominent historians to chronicle the beginnings of Warsaw Jewry was also the principal recorders of its destruction: Emmanuel Ringelblum, director of the underground Oneg Shabbat archive that preserved the Rebbe's works. In a 1932 study, Ringelblum traced the Warsaw Jewish community back to the fourteenth century. Jews were concentrated on a single L-shaped street some 900 feet long, terminating in the city center at a stone synagogue on Donaj street (pronounced "do-nai"). The name may even have been derived from the sound of Jewish prayer heard by passers-by.³⁷

The decades before and especially after the turn of the twentieth century witnessed profound changes in the Jewish population of Warsaw. The Tsarist regime imposed increasingly onerous restrictions on the Jews, including frequent expulsions, and pogrom violence swept the region from the early 1880s. Nevertheless, the Jewish population grew apace. By the beginning of the nineteenth century Jews constituted 15 percent of the overall population of Warsaw and eventually reached a peak of 45 percent of the city in 1917, but the highly urbanized Jews made up only ten percent of the total population of Poland as a whole. By the end of the 1930s, the city had grown rapidly but with emigration the Jewish community remained fairly stable. In 1938 Warsaw was home to 368,000 Jews, the largest concentration in the world after New York City.³⁸

³⁷ Barbara Engelking and Jacek Leociak, eds., *The Warsaw Ghetto: A Guide to the Perished City* New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009, 3.

³⁸ Engelking and Leociak, *The Warsaw Ghetto*, 15.

The Jews of Warsaw were overwhelmingly involved in petty commerce, eking out a living by engaging in trade and small manufacturing. Nobel laureate Isaac Bashevis Singer grew up in Warsaw's Jewish quarter. In 1940 he reflected on the economic activity of "those" streets, meaning the poorer, less desirable parts of the city:

"Those" streets were Dzielna, Pawia, Gęsia, Miła, Niska, Stawki, Muranowski Square, and above all Nalewki and Franciszkańska Streets. There was a constant uproar and confusion there. Those Jews traded before the first war with Vladivostok, Pietropavlosk, and even China. Their shops were crammed with goods piled up to the ceiling. Rents in these areas were high, because every flat was a little business. Nobody would honestly be able to count the little factories that were there. During the day, the babble of bargaining voices never faltered even for a moment. There were also houses of learning and Hasid[ic] shtiebels, but they were not noticeable among the shops, workshops, and factories that surrounded them. In "those" streets, people walked at a quickened pace, and even when they wanted to go somewhere nearby, they got on a tram. Thousands of traveling salesmen went off from here with goods around even the farthest districts. They met up afterward in restaurants and little hotels (all known as the "Hôtel de la Bedbug"), joked, and admired one another as they told how tricks had helped them in their trading...

Almost every flat in "those" streets was also a little shop or boardinghouse. The unloading of goods that had been brought in never ceased. In Gęsia Street there were enormous merchants'

warehouses, where clients from all over Poland were served. Here they talked about rising and falling share prices, commented on exchange rates for foreign currencies; here they were interested in whether the pound sterling would go up. Here the Hasidim put on stiff collars and ties because it helped in business. Here Jewish newspapers were snapped up in the morning, here masses of Litvaks could be seen in the streets...It is difficult to imagine that all this pulsating and glittering life has disappeared and that this enormous collection of human uniqueness has been wiped from the earth.³⁹

Warsaw endured rapid political and economic change throughout the nineteenth century. Absorbed into the Russian Empire as part of the partitions of Poland, the population seethed with resentment and rebelled with some frequency before the Romanov dynasty's downfall in late 1917. Poles and Jews frequently found themselves making common cause against the foreign rulers, engendering a significant movement toward Polish-Jewish social *rapprochement*. The Polish-Jewish synthesis mirrored in many ways the similar German-Jewish phenomenon, but like its western neighbor, this modernizing mood of coexistence was expressed principally in Warsaw's most liberal circles and did not reach deeply into the rural Polish hinterland or the insular Jewish Orthodox population.

Jews in particular experienced rapid internal transformation at the turn of the 20th century. Several waves of pogrom violence in the south-western Russian

³⁹ Forverts, July 2 1944, cited in Engelking and Leociak, *The Warsaw Ghetto*, 23-24.

Empire dislodged the traditional political quiescence of the Jewish population, and many turned their backs on traditional Orthodoxy in favor of newly formed mass movements that promised to solve social ills with one or another broad, bold idea. Some chose to identify closely with middle-class urban Polish values, replacing Yiddish with Polish and even converting to Catholicism. Others simply chose to leave Poland for the economic opportunity and personal freedoms promised by the United States. The burgeoning Zionist movement made considerable inroads among Polish Jewry, promising a secular redemption with a return to the land of Israel. Finally, a significant number of Jewish youth were attracted to various shadings of Socialism, which promised an end to human strife with the radical economic transformation of Polish society.⁴⁰

Rabbi Shapira's Prewar Writings

The Rebbe railed against the failure of the religious establishment to keep Polish-Jewish youth inspired by traditional Judaism. He was especially concerned that the traditional rabbinic leadership failed to understand the gravity of the threat of assimilation. Speaking at an undated interwar conference of the Council to Preserve the Yeshivot of Poland and Lithuania, the Rebbe decried the lack of concern for the broad masses of Jewish youth:

⁴⁰ For an overview of the several ideological opportunities pursued by Eastern European Jewry in the early twentieth century, see Henry Abramson, "The End of Intimate Insularity: New Narratives of Jewish History in the Post-Soviet Era," *Construction and Deconstruction of National Identities in Post-Soviet Eurasia*, Ed. Tadayuki Hayashi, Sapporo: Hokkaido University, 2003, 87-115; "Two Jews, Three Opinions: Politics in the Shtetl at the Turn of the 20th Century," *The Shtetl: New Evaluations*, Ed. Steven Katz, New York: New York University Press, 2007, 85-101.

Once, we used to concern ourselves that the students who left the *heder* [traditional religious primary school] would continue learning Torah, and our concern still deserves encouragement. In those days, it was necessary for them to continue studying, in order that they be learned people of Torah, but now it is necessary for them to remain Jews. Today we see that the majority of those who do not continue to study Torah simply leave the fold, Heaven forbid, shave their beards and desecrate the Sabbath. I am not a fool to suggest that only the Yeshivah students will remain Jewish, those people and no more, and we should be satisfied. Should we say that it would be sufficient that in every city only the Rabbi, the ritual slaughterer and the assistant be Jews, and the rest of the population not?!

Consider this: approximately ten thousand students currently study, out of several million Jews, may there be no evil eye, in Poland and Lithuania—should they be the only remnant of faithful Jewry? Shall we look beyond the Rabbis and the ritual slaughterers of every city? The Jewish people, the entirety of Israel is what we require! All of them must be true to God and His Torah! Yet we hope only that the students will themselves sanctify the entire generation, they will fortify it with Torah and Divine service.⁴¹

⁴¹ *Derekh ha-Melekh*, 462.

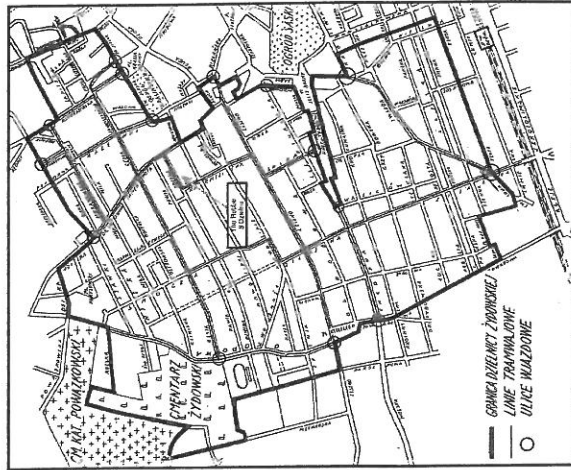
through the valley of the shadow of death, I will
not fear evil, for You are with me.⁵⁸

Let us now turn to the Rebbe's writings from the valley of
the shadow of death itself.

Chapter Two

The Prince in Captivity

The Hebrew Year 5700 (1939-40)



Boundaries of the Warsaw Ghetto and
the Rebbe's Bet Midrash at 5 Dzielna

The striking originality of the Rebbe's writings are apparent from the very first sermon, delivered on September 14, 1939. In fact, it is almost impossible to compare his work to any other document that survived the Holocaust. While the literature associated with the unfortunate term "Holocaust theology" has grown over the last eight decades, the Rebbe's *Torah from the Years of Wrath* remains *sui generis*: nothing remotely similar has been discovered. It is unlikely that this evaluation of the qualitative uniqueness of his writings will ever change.

⁵⁸ Shulman, "Experiencing the Divine," lightly edited for consistency.

True, a broad range of Rabbis authored works, large and small, that address the Holocaust. The most prominent are included in the recent Hebrew scholarly anthology edited by Gershon Greenberg and Asaf Yedidya, entitled *Justice is like the Great Deep: Orthodox Theological Responses to the Holocaust*.¹ Yet even a brief perusal of the fifteen theologians represented in this work demonstrates the unusual status of the Rebbe's writings. Only four of the scholars wrote works related to the Holocaust during the war itself. Works written after the war, while of profound value, are qualitatively distinct because of the inescapable influence of hindsight. Of those four Rabbis who wrote during the war years, only three of them were living under Nazi occupation at the time. Of the three who wrote under Nazi occupation, only two recorded sermons that were communicated to audiences over the duration of the war.²

Basically, only two book-length collections of Rabbinic sermons survived the war: *Torah from the Years of Wrath* by the Rebbe, and the collected sermons of Rabbi Shlomo

Zalman Unsorfer (1888-1944).³ On the surface, the two books have much in common. Both Rabbis maintained a heroically pious posture throughout the war years, defying Nazi prohibitions to deliver weekly messages of encouragement to despairing Jewish audiences—the Rebbe in Warsaw, Rabbi Unsorfer in Bratislava and nearby refugee camps.⁴ Both authors were ultimately martyred during the Holocaust, and their written works were published posthumously.

In one aspect, key to our study, the Rebbe and Rabbi Unsorfer differed radically: the presentation and integration of historical data into their Sabbath sermons. Rabbi Unsorfer took a straightforward, direct approach to addressing the immediate existential concerns of his audience by discussing them explicitly. The historical context is often at the forefront of his talks, both in terms of brief introductions intended for his later readership and also within the body of the message itself. For example, his message for January 3, 1942 is prefaced with this note:

On the eve of the holy Sabbath of *Parashat Vayehi* 5702, a time of great suffering, may the Merciful One rescue us. This week the home for the aged in

³ Omitted from Greenberg and Yedidya's study of theological responses to the Holocaust is the important work of Rabbi Ephraim Oshry (1914-2003). Imprisoned in the Ghetto of Kaunas, Lithuania, Rabbi Oshry recorded his responses to numerous questions posed to him in Jewish law. After the war he published them in five Hebrew volumes and an abridged English translation (*Responsa from the Holocaust*, eds. B. Goldman and Y. Leiman, New York: Judaica Press, 2001). Religiously and historically significant, Rabbi Oshry's work is nevertheless of an entirely different genre: legal, pragmatic responses to specific conditions of persecution rather than intellectual and spiritual guidance, hence the omission from Greenberg and Yedidya's work.

⁴ Gershon Greenberg, "The Suffering of the Righteous according to Shlomo Zalman Unsorfer of Bratislava, 1939-1944," in John K. Roth et al., eds., *Remembering for the Future: The Holocaust in an Age of Genocide*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001, 422-438.

¹ *Mishpateha tehom rabah: tagavot hegatiyot ortodiksiyot la-sho'ah*, Jerusalem: Mosad Ha-Rav Kook, 2016.

² Rabbi Yissakhar Shlomo Teikhtal's *Em ha-Banim Semeihah* was written for print dissemination and published by the author in 1943 as a stand-alone volume supporting religious Zionism. Unlike sermons, this work had a single unifying thesis (arguing for support of Zionism) and was composed as a monographic response to the Holocaust as a whole rather than specific, weekly developments during the occupation. For another volume of sermons, delivered in a French camp, see Moshe Kalenberg, *Yedei Moshe: Derashot be-mahaneh hesger be-Tsarfat be-yemei ha-shoah*, ed. E. Farbstein Jerusalem: Michlalah-Jerusalem College, 2005.

Patronka was burned to the ground. The elderly residents fled in fear to the dining room, and it is possible that the righteous daughter of Rabbi Zalman Shpitser was killed, may God avenge her blood. Also, the wicked ones, may their names be blotted out, entered the synagogues and beat the Jews, pure of heart, who were in the midst of prayer, may God have mercy.⁵

Rabbi Unsendorfer's sermon begins with an explicit statement of grief, and continues with an account of the prior suffering of his community, even down to the detailed level of specific restrictions on the amount of money the Jews could withdraw from their bank accounts. The message is couched in the traditional context of the weekly Torah reading, but the bulk of the sermon focuses on giving voice to the persecutions endured by the Jews of Bratislava and the surrounding refugee camps, culminating in the horrific condition of the elderly Jews of Patronka.⁶

By contrast, the Rebbe's approach, with a few notable exceptions, never made explicit reference to specific historical events in the Ghetto. This is not to say that the Rebbe turned a blind eye to the suffering of his congregation—nothing could be further from the truth. Rather, the Rebbe adopted a literary style that approached the core concerns of his audience from an oblique angle, artfully couching his message in the discussion of the weekly Torah reading. This rhetorical method, sometimes called Aesopian language for its allegorical nature, served several purposes.

⁵ Greenberg and Yedidya, *Mishpatekha*, 81.

⁶ Greenberg and Yedidya, *Mishpatekha*, 81–87.

Many Warsaw diarists employed some version of coded language, fearing reprisals if their documents were discovered. Typically such devices—referring to Nazis as “others” or disguising records as personal correspondence to fictional relatives—disappeared as the war progressed. Writers soon learned that life was cheap to the occupying powers, and they cared little what Ghetto dwellers wrote: random violence could ensue for far more minor infractions. Aesopian language also allowed the Rebbe to remain compliant with Jewish law, which forbids public signs of mourning on the Sabbath. Not only are eulogies prohibited on the holy seventh day, even discussions of mundane matters such as commerce are forbidden.⁷

Aesopian language allowed the Rebbe to convey his central message in an artfully indirect manner that was often more powerful than a straightforward exhortation. The Rebbe's sophisticated veiling of contemporary realia within the weekly scriptural reading removed the fundamental axis of history from the Ghetto and placed it within the Torah instead. His literary style reinforced the message, week after week, that the answer to the existential questions posed by the Holocaust lay not within the pages of the ghetto press, not in the rumors circulating throughout the Ghetto, but within the text of the weekly Torah portion and the teachings of the Sages. This approach also allowed the Rebbe to construct his remarks for an audience beyond 5 Dzielna: it is clear that the Rebbe believed that the Torah's message transcended the time and place of the Warsaw Ghetto, and framed his marks with a view to future readers.⁸

⁷ See Isaiah 58:13, codified into Jewish law in *Shulhan Arukh Orach Hayim* 246. The Rebbe refers to this concept of Sabbath speech restrictions, see *Derashot* 1:96.

⁸ I am grateful to Dean Stanley Boylan for this observation.

The first sermon is a formal Rosh Hashanah address. Unlike the vast majority of entries, delivered in the more intimate setting of the afternoon *shalosh seudos* meal, the Rosh Hashanah sermon was probably delivered from the pulpit on the morning of the holiday. It is likely that the audience was smaller than earlier years, given the air raids that blanketed Warsaw shortly after the beginning of the war on September 1, but the annual Rosh Hashanah *drashah* remained one of most important public addresses of the liturgical year. At 1800 words it is indeed much longer than almost all entries in his wartime writings, but under such conditions it is remarkable that the Rebbe spoke at all.

The primary value of the sermon is its theological message, but the full import of the Rebbe's words cannot be grasped without an awareness of the immediate historical context of its presentation. As we mentioned above, Jewish law frowns upon the discussion of sad or distressing news on the Sabbath or holidays, preventing the Rebbe from referring openly to the terror without—even though that was precisely the burning issue on the mind of everyone in the audience. With a handful of notable exceptions, the Rebbe never deviated from this pious and heroic literary practice.

Let us therefore put ourselves into the *bet midrash* on 5 Dzielna street with the Rebbe on Thursday, September 14, 1939, the first day of Rosh Hashanah of the Hebrew year 5700. Two weeks earlier, Germany attacked the western border, toppling the nearby major city of Cześćochowa within two days. Warsaw hurriedly prepared its defenses, but the Luftwaffe dominated the skies, bombing at will. All

Varsovians, Polish and Jewish alike, were called to mobilize for work and self-defense duties. By September 7 a mass flight of Warsaw's citizens to the east ensued. Many leading citizens fled, including the Polish government and its commander-in-chief. Prominent figures in the rabbinic establishment also left the city, correctly fearing that they would be singled out for special abuse from the Nazis. Notably, the Rebbe refused to join this exodus, and in fact refused all future offers to be taken to safety if it meant separation from his Hasidim.⁹ He did not, however, insist that his followers remain within the city. Aviva Kerwasser Sadan, a survivor of the Ghetto, recorded the Rebbe's advice to her father in her memoirs:

Papa returns from the house of the Piaseczno Rebbe after evening prayers with a sad face...he gathers us, the daughters, around him and says, 'Difficult days are approaching for the Jews of Warsaw. According to the Rebbe's advice you must escape from the ghetto as soon as possible. All your lives you girls have been faithful to the Torah and the commandments, but from this moment on you are exempt from this. In the name of Heaven you are commanded in relation to one thing alone: to save your lives...after the storm has passed, come home.'"¹⁰

⁹ See Havi Dreifus, "The Work of My Hands is Drowning in the Sea, and You Would Offer Me Song?": Orthodox Behavior and Leadership in Warsaw during the Holocaust," in Warsaw: The Jewish Metropolis, Essays in Honor of the 75th Birthday of Professor Antony Polonsky, eds. Glenn Dynner and François Guesnet, Leiden: Brill, 2015, p. 479 note 36. The Rebbe even refused to be spirited out of the Trawniki labor camp unless the rescue included a large number of fellow prisoners. This mutual rescue pact will be discussed in Chapter Five.

¹⁰ Aviva Kerwasser Sadan, *Lihyot al kav ha-kets* (Kiryat Hayim, 1995), 210, cited in Dreifus, "Work of My Hands," 491 note 72. Transliteration has been adapted slightly for consistency.

The Nazis reached Warsaw on Friday, September 8. They did not immediately enter the city, but brutalized it with mortar and artillery fire and punishing air strikes. After a week of sheltering in cellars for fear of the Angel of Death death dropping from the skies, the Jews of Warsaw cautiously prepared to greet the new year 5700.

The Rebbe's message for Rosh Hashanah, like all his sermons, was delivered in the vernacular Yiddish but recorded later in Rabbinic Hebrew, the literary standard.¹¹ The manuscript shows evidence of editing—as per the Rebbe's documented prewar practice, he wrote the original in his own hand and gave it to a scribe for copying and later annotation.¹² Most of the earliest sermons are preserved in this format. The existence of annotations indicate that the Rebbe clearly intended his text for publication. We can only surmise how the Rebbe, known as a powerful public speaker, would have expanded on the core concepts. Reading the text aloud in Hebrew at a moderate pace requires just over fifteen minutes, but a typical Rosh Hashanah sermon in Yiddish might last thirty to sixty minutes, possibly even longer. Rabbi Moshe Weinberger, one of the premier expositors of Piaseczno Hasidism, took nearly two full hours to deliver this sermon in English in a classroom setting.¹³

¹¹ See Reiser, "Ha-derashah he-Hasidit."

¹² See Reiser's introduction to the first volume of *Derashot* for a reconstruction of the Rebbe's editorial process, esp. pp. 54-61.

¹³ Audio versions of Rabbi Moshe Weinberger's study of this are available at [yutorah.org](http://www.yutorah.org). Rosh Hashanah 5700 is discussed in <http://www.yutorah.org/sidebar/lecture.cfm/840172/> <http://www.yutorah.org/sidebar/lecture.cfm/840476/rabbi-moshe-weinberger/sefer-aish-kodesh-2-our-crying-expresses-hashem-s-presence/>. Accessed August 29, 2017.

The Rebbe began by citing a Midrash (*Kohélet* 9) that alludes to the three fasts of Tishrei: the fast of the eve of Rosh Hashanah, generally only observed by the very pious,¹⁴ the Fast of Gedalyah, which occurs immediately after Rosh Hashanah and is observed by most Orthodox Jews, and the fast of Yom Kippur, more universally maintained:

A city owed taxes to the king, and he sent out collectors. When the tax collectors approached within ten *mil* of the city, the local dignitaries went out and paid homage to the king, and the collectors waived a third of the taxes. [At a distance of 5 *mil*, the middle-level authorities went out and paid homage to the king, and the collectors waived another third. When they drew close to the city, men, women and children came out and paid homage to the king, and the collectors waived the remaining third.]

So too on the eve of Rosh Hashanah the great ones of the generation fast, and the Holy One who is Blessed waives a third of their sins...until the day of Yom Kippur and the Holy One who is Blessed forgives them all.¹⁵

The text of the sermon omits a significant amount of the text of this lesser-known Midrash, as well as information the Rebbe would certainly have included in his oral explanation of the Midrash: specifically, the analogy of the three approaches of the collectors to the three fasts of the

¹⁴ See Shulhan Arukh, *Orah Hayim* 581:2.

¹⁵ *Derashot* 1:83.

eve of a Rosh Hashanah, the Fast of Gedalyah, and the Fast of Yom Kippur. This omission is probably indicative of the Rebbe's intent to review the material for eventual publication, and not an exact reproduction of the words he used to deliver the sermon orally. The sense of his message, and in particular the connection between the advance of the German army and its meaning for the High Holy Days, is clear.

Certainly the Rebbe's audience must have been perturbed by the presence of the German invader, camped outside the defenseless, leaderless city. When would they enter, and what would their incursion mean for the Jews? The Rebbe, mindful of their obvious concern, opened with a Midrashic source that evoked the contemporary political moment, absorbing and even co-opting the audience's fear into his message. The obvious similarities between the Jews of the Midrash, anxious about the tax collectors of the king outside city gates, and the presence of the Wehrmacht looming outside Warsaw, allowed the Rebbe to capitalize on the emotive moment and provide Torah guidance. The Rebbe's message captured his follower's fears and placed them within the cosmic, timeless ecosystem of the Midrash. Fear formed the core of his message that Rosh Hashanah, and he described it as an encouraging symptom of spiritual health, not weakness:

The essence of fear is derived from the greatness of God. Every Jewish soul feels this, each person according to his ability. Thus, whereas one person might feel within himself the fear of the greatness and holiness of God, and tremble with the thought,

Heaven forbid, of sinning against God, another person might merely feel the fear of punishment.¹⁶

The Rebbe then introduced a parable that, in various forms, permeates much of his written *oeuvre*: the plight of the prince in captivity, yearning to be reunited with his father the king. It is especially poignant the the Rebbe himself was orphaned as a toddler, and his relationship with his father could be best described as literary in nature. His citation of a version of the parable, recorded in his father's work *Imrei Elimelekh*, carried an irony that resonated with the gravitas of the moment.

A parable: A prince is held captive among wanton people who torment him, when he suddenly senses that the king is close by. He begins to shriek bitterly, "save me, my father! Save me, my king!" He cries because he senses that the king is near. The intensification of his plaintive cries is an indication of the king's greater proximity. So too when a Jew is broken-hearted, whether over his own troubles, the suffering of his loved ones, or for Jewry as a whole, is a sign that he senses the revelation of the sovereignty of Heaven. All this, however, is dependent on the intensification of his fear of the Blessed One, and his repentant desire to coronate the Blessed One as his King.¹⁷

The Rebbe argued that fear should be embraced as a sign that a person recognizes the proximity of God on Rosh Hashanah. A Hasid cannot sink into desperation, but he or

¹⁶ *Derashot* 1:83.

¹⁷ *Derashot* 1:84-85.

she can give voice to fear in prayer and the sound of the shofar. The Rebbe did not argue, as he did in other contexts, that fear should be ignored. On the contrary: properly channeled, the fear itself is the vehicle for salvation. The trepidation caused by the advance of the Nazis was, in itself, a spiritual lever by which the Jews could propel their closeness to God. In so doing, they would—like the Jews of the Midrash, fearing the tax collectors—bring about their own redemption.

The Rebbe's messages for Rosh Hashanah and the following Sabbath echo themes that are characteristic of his prewar works: the call to repentance, urging Hasidim to abandon faddish ideologies and return to the traditional observance of their ancestors. The eve of Yom Kippur, however, witnessed an especially punishing Luftwaffe bombardment. This was not a coincidence—the Nazis were diabolically fond of choosing auspicious dates in the Jewish calendar for new *aktionen*. An estimated 60,000 citizens of Warsaw lost their lives in the bombardment that began on September 22, 1939. The Rebbe's message was crafted to address the grieving survivors. Implicit in his words is a broad definition of who receives the designation of a martyr (that is, one who dies *al kiddush Hashem*, in sanctification of the Name of God) to include, presumably, those Jews who were killed in the bombing raids:

The holy book *Arvei Nahal*, *Parshas Masai*, discusses an oral tradition from a responsum from the *Maharam*,¹⁸ stating that a person who is martyred does not feel any pain whatsoever.¹⁹ The author of *Arvei Nahal* explains that this is because

¹⁸ Rabbi Meir ben Barukh of Rottenberg, 1220-1293.

¹⁹ Rabbi David Shlomo Eibeschuetz, *Arvei Nahal*, *Parashat Masei*, s.v. "Biaiti."

the martyr is set ablaze with such an intense desire to be martyred for sanctifying the Divine Name that he elevates all his senses to the world of pure intellect, such that his entire being is clothed in intellect, and all his senses, sensations, and physicality are stripped from him. Thus he feels only pleasure.

This is also the case with all the trials that a Jew endures—the trials are indeed difficult, and God should have mercy and remove them from us. When a person elevates them to the level of intellect, however, understanding them as a means to purge his sins and to purify himself to draw closer to God, then the more strongly he attaches himself to this thought, the lighter the difficulties become, and easier for him to bear.²⁰

Until this point, the Rebbe's message of consolation, his appeal for strength and renewed commitment to Jewish spirituality, are well understood as conventional expressions of pastoral sentiment. The survivors might receive comfort from the notion that their loved ones, as martyrs, felt no pain in their last moments. Within days, however, tragedy struck the Rebbe in the most personal of ways, and he was forced to confront the suffering of his Hasidim in an immediate manner, within his own family.

The bombing assault continued, and on the morning of September 25, two days after Yom Kippur, a shell fragment flew through a window and grievously wounded the Rebbe's only son, Ben Tsion Elimelekh. The Rebbe and

²⁰ *Derashot*, 1:89. The 1960 and 2007 editions of *Aish Kodesh* incorrectly include this passage as part of the previous entry for Shabbat Teshuvah.

some of his followers carried him through a fusillade of bombs from one hospital to another, desperate to secure medical treatment for the young man, bleeding profusely from the injury. He was eventually admitted to a hospital, leaving his wife, father, and his sister-in-law outside at the entrance, reciting Psalms for his recovery throughout that terrible night. As morning broke, the Rebbe left them to go to the private home of a doctor to seek his assistance. While he was away, Nazi planes disgorged another deadly load immediately over the hospital entrance, killing the Rebbe's sister-in-law Hannah Hasten and his daughter-in-law Gitl. His son died of his wounds four days later. A contemporary account, published in the American Yiddish paper *Der Forverts*, describes the Rebbe's reaction:

For a time, the hasidim who were with the Rebbe thought he would collapse, though this lasted only a moment. The Rebbe composed himself, recited the verse, "The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away..." (Job 1:21), and directed that the deceased be taken to the cemetery for a eulogy and burial.²¹

The Rebbe was silent for a month. No entries for the weeks after the death of his son are recorded in *Torah from the Years of Wrath*. The Rebbe did, however, record his anguish in *Tsav Ve-Zeruz*, his personal spiritual journal, which also survived the war.

Now I sit still and silent. The intensity of pain is beyond bearing—I am broken beyond repair...it was decreed in Heaven a harsh decree, a very

²¹ The full account, originally published in the March 30, 1940 issue (p.8), is translated in Nehemia Polen, *The Holy Fire: The Teachings of Rabbi Kalonymus Kalman Shapira, the Rebbe of the Warsaw Ghetto* Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 1994, 8-9. The translation presented here is adapted from Dr. Polen's fluid style.

bitter one, to take him from me in 5700 at the outbreak of the war. On the 12th of Tishrei, during the bombing, he was mortally wounded—he was standing near me. A few days later, on the second day of Sukkot, the 16th of Tishrei, he returned his pure and holy soul to his Maker.

Also at that time, my daughter-in-law, his wife, was killed while standing outside the hospital. That was on the 13th of Tishrei. Her name was Gittel, daughter of Rabbi Shlomo Hayim of Balikov. All hope for myself and my soul both in this world and the next was aborted with their premature deaths. And my own future in them through their continued spiritual growth was also destroyed for me. The tragedy is too great to bear—only You, God, can sustain and encourage me with Your wonders....

Please, God, have pity on a poor Jew like me. Have mercy on me, Father and Master! Listen to the petition of my heart, which wallows in pain and sorrow.²²

Heshvan 5700 (October 14-November 12)

No entries were recorded in *Torah from the Years of Wrath* for six weeks. Then, on November 4, the Rebbe broke his public silence with a sermon on the weekly Torah reading of Haye Sarah, which begins with the death of the matriarch Sarah.

²² *To Heal the Soul*, 116-117.

demonstrations of Jewish prayers and other rituals. Absurdly ironic scenes were recorded, including set pieces demonstrating superior Nazi values: a Jewish child was forced to pretend to be caught in the act of smuggling, and is about to be beaten by a cruel Polish policeman when a Nazi soldier stays his hand. At the same time, the Nazis erected a sign forbidding Germans from entering the Jewish cemetery, which had become a macabre destination for sadistic tourists wishing to witness the stacks of corpses delivered every morning for mass burial.⁶⁸ Incidents of random cruelties, sometimes fatal, occurred with regularity in the early summer of 1942.

Tammuz-4 Av 5702 (June 16-July 18)

The Rebbe recorded only three final entries in 5702, the last dated just days before the mass deportation of Warsaw Jews to the Death Camp called Treblinka. News of deportations from other locations continued to filter into the Ghetto, including a report in mid-June from Biala Podloska that described sixty wagonloads of children under the age of ten and adults over the age of sixty who were selected and deported for mass murder.⁶⁹ The murder of children is overwhelming for any human being, how much more so must it have been awful for the Rebbe, who devoted his life and literary efforts to the development of Jewish youth. His long sermon of June 27, 1942, discussed the importance of children to the Jewish people, and meditated on the cruelties meted out to this most helpless of populations:

⁶⁸ Ringelblum, Notes, 266-268.

⁶⁹ Ringelblum, Notes, 293.

The first antisemite, Pharaoh, pounced upon Jewish children: every male child born [shall be thrown into the Nile].⁷⁰ So too, the cruelty of the antisemite is always directed primarily against Jewish children, whether to murder them, Heaven forbid, or to force them into apostasy, as is well known from the evil decrees of previous centuries, may the Merciful One preserve us. This is, to our great anguish, apparent in our own days, for of all the horrific, murderous cruelty which is poured upon us, the Jewish people, the murderous cruelty directed against young boys and girls is by far the worst. Woe, what has befallen us! More than this — when they seek, Heaven forbid, to murder the children of the Jewish people, it is not exclusively the children that are lost, Heaven forbid. The effect extends to their parents and grandparents who are in Garden of Eden, since the continued existence of the ancestors in this world is accomplished solely through their progeny, and when, Heaven forbid, they are wiped out, then the continued existence of the ancestors is severed, may the Merciful One preserve us. Regarding this we pray, "our Father, our King, take pity on us and on our infants and children," for they are not merely our children, they are us...⁷¹

The Rebbe also referenced again the concept of divine weeping, yet at this point the Rebbe seems astounded that

⁷⁰ Exodus 1:22.

⁷¹ Derashot I:304. Emphasis in 1960 and 2007 editions is not present in the manuscript, see Derashot II:238-239.

the pain of the children is powerless to move God to act on their behalf:

In truth, it is astonishing that the universe continues to exist after so many screams such as these. With regard the Ten Martyrs of the State it is taught that when the angels cried out, "this is Torah, and this is its reward?" A Heavenly Voice responded, "if I hear one more word, I will cause the universe to revert to primordial waters!" In our time, innocent children, pure angels, as well as great and holy ones of the Jewish people, are murdered and slaughtered simply because they are Jews, who themselves are greater than angels—their screams suffuse the entire universe, and yet the universe does not revert to primordial waters. It continues to exist as if completely unaffected, Heaven forbid.⁷²

The Rebbe's spoke again on *Parashat Matot*, July 10, 1942, and then a final sermon was recorded on the Sabbath immediately preceding the day of national Jewish mourning, Tisha B'Av, on July 18, 1942. Both sermons focus on a theme prominent in the Rebbe's early writings: the development of contemporary prophecy.

The Rebbe wrote often that the faculty of prophecy was accessible to individuals of spiritual sensitivity, and described a series of visualization exercises to encourage the development of this skill. To be sure, he distinguished contemporary prophecy from Biblical prophecy in quality

⁷² Derashot I:305. Emphasis in 1960 and 2007 editions is not present in the manuscript, see Derashot II:238-239.

but not necessarily in kind, arguing that elevated souls could access more direct communications with the Divine in a manner broadly similar to the inspiration of prophecy. Problematic, however, was the Rabbinic teaching that prophecy may only be accessed while in a state of joy.

Prophecy is impossible amidst sadness. The Talmud states that this is also true for the study of Jewish law. Not only the investigation of a point of law, but even to comment on the suffering, is impossible with a broken heart and a crushed spirit. At times it is even impossible to force one's self to speak at all, due to the enormity of the calamity, may the Merciful One rescue us. How is it possible to strengthen one's self, if only a little, as long as the salvation has not yet arrived? How is it possible to elevate the spirit, if only a little, at a time of crushing oppression such as this? First and foremost, we must pray and have trust in God, the Merciful One, that it is impossible that God will so utterly cast out children from God's presence. It is also impossible that God would abandon us in such danger as we experience now for the sake of the Blessed Name. Certainly, God will have mercy and will immediately save us in the blink of an eye.⁷³

The final sermon was delivered on July 18, 1942. On that day, Adam Czerniaków recorded an ominous note in his diary: "A day full of foreboding. Rumors that the deportations will start on Monday evening (All?!!) I asked the *Kommissar* whether he knew anything about it. He

⁷³ Derashot I:309.

*Head of the Warsaw Ghetto
Jewish Council -
The Judenrat*

replied that he did not and that he did not believe the rumors. In the meantime panic in the Quarter; some speak of deportations, others of a pogrom."⁷⁴ The rumors, of course, would be proven true: beginning at 4:00 pm on July 22, the eve of Tisha B'Av, the Jewish community would be forced to provide the first daily quota of 6,000 deportees. Czerniaków refused to sign the order. The next day, when the Nazis specifically informed him that children were not exempted from deportation, he wrote a note to his wife that read, "I am powerless, my heart trembles in sorrow and compassion. I can no longer bear all this. My act will show everyone the right thing to do." Retrieving a potassium cyanide tablet that he had secreted away with the intent of utilizing it when he could no longer reconcile his cooperation with the Nazi authorities with faithful service to the Jewish community, the President placed his diary on the desk before him, swallowed the pill, and ended his suffering.⁷⁵

When the Rebbe spoke several days before Czerniaków's suicide, it was on the afternoon of a day suffused with panic. The Rebbe's remarks stood in stark contrast to the chaos and consternation outside the walls of the Bet Midrash. He returned, for the final time, to the concept of prophecy, beginning with the unusual name for that Sabbath: *Shabbat Hazon*, or the "Sabbath of Vision," taken from the Biblical text of Isaiah read on that day:

The vision [hazon] of Isaiah, son of Amoz, which he envisioned. We must understand: why do we refer to this Sabbath by its reading from the prophets? Even though there are other Sabbaths, such as

⁷⁴ Czerniaków, *Diary*, 381-382.

⁷⁵ Czerniaków, *Diary*, 23.

Shabbat Nahamu and *Shabbat Shuvah* that are referred to by the names of their prophetic readings, yet certainly each one has a reason for being different from all the other Sabbaths of the year, that are not referred to by the names of their prophetic readings. If the reason is because this Sabbath falls in the period of time called "between the straits," and the prophetic reading speaks about the destruction [of the Temple], are not the readings of the preceding two Sabbaths taken from the prophecy of Jeremiah, which describe events which took place many years after Jeremiah, and describe the destruction of the Temple itself? Nonetheless, these Sabbaths are not referred to by the names of their prophetic readings.

It is taught in *Shir ha-Shirim Rabah*, chapter 3: "there are ten names for prophecy...Which is the harshest of all? Rabbi Eliezer says, *hazon* is the harshest...When we studied the words of the prophets and the words of our Sages of blessed memory regarding the suffering surrounding the destruction, we thought we had some understanding of these sufferings, and at times we even cried. Now we see the gulf between hearing about suffering on the one hand, and witnessing—how much more so enduring suffering—on the other. We did not understand even a minuscule portion of suffering. Consequently, of those types of prophecies describing the suffering of the Jewish people that were revealed to the prophets, whether by speech which they heard from Above

or in another fashion, the harshest of all was when they were shown a prophecy in a vision [hazon], an actual vision of the troubles and sufferings. A harsh vision [hazon] was related to me...

Shabbat Hazon. The vision of Isaiah. It is the harshest of all, envisioning the suffering...The haftarah begins with hazon, the harshest of all, and concludes with salvation: Zion will be redeemed through justice, and its exiles with righteousness.⁷⁶

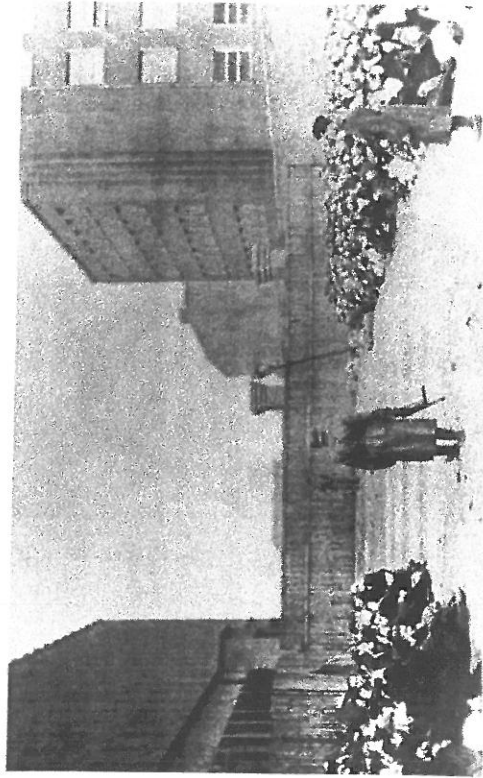
Chapter Five The Rebbe and His Faith The Hebrew Year 5703 (1942-43)



With ruthless, studied efficiency, the Nazis used the Jewish police to surround a number of assigned apartment blocks each morning, ordering all the inhabitants out into the street for inspection of documents. Those with special permission, including the small number of holders of work permits in Nazi-approved industries, were spared, along with fellow Jewish policemen and Jews assigned to burial duties. All others were directed to the *Umschlagplatz*, a commercial railway loading zone in the north of the Ghetto. Incentives of bread and marmalade were promised to encourage cooperation. Those who resisted or attempted to hide were often shot on the spot by German soldiers. At the *Umschlagplatz*, Jews were separated by gender. A photograph from the period shows Jews seated

⁷⁶ *Derashot* 1:313-314.

on the street, men on the left and women on the right, guarded by a small number of armed German soldiers. The street is blocked by a wooden fence.



The Jews were loaded onto cattle cars, 100 per sixty cars, every day. By September 1942, 280,000 Warsaw Jews were sent to their deaths in Treblinka, and an additional 11,580 to labor camps. Another 10,300 were killed in the context of the deportation. Out of a wartime population of almost half a million, an estimated 60,000 Jews remained in Warsaw, 25,000 in hiding.¹ The Rebbe was among the legal residents. His daughter, Rekhil Yehudis, was not: she was taken to the *Umschlagplatz* on August 14, 1942.

No sermons were recorded after the deportations of July 1942. The *Oneg Shabbat* archive contains an anonymous prayer, attributed by some to the Rebbe, written after the deportations. A moving petition for mercy, the prayer cries out:

¹ Engelking and Leociak, *Warsaw Ghetto* 44, 50, 703-730.

Master of the Universe!...our dearest families, wives and children, mothers and fathers, brothers and sisters, among all our siblings, the Children of Israel, are torn away from us, taken captive to destinations unknown...protect all the prisoners, guard them from oppression and persecution, give them strength to withstand affliction from those who oppress, torment and insult them. Preserve them alive to return to their families. The children and tender infants, who have been stolen from their parents' arms, please redeem them and return them to their parents, as in the days of the exodus from Egypt.²

To confer greater merit on the petitioner's request, the reader is directed to pledge charity in the name of those taken in the Deportation. The prayer concludes with references to miraculous rescues in Biblical and Rabbinic texts: Abraham from Nimrod, Jacob from Laban, Moses from Pharaoh, David from Goliath, and so on.

The Rebbe survived because he had been assigned work at one of the so-called "shops," small German-sponsored industrial ventures associated with the war effort. Fritz Schultz' "shop" was established in September 1941, and employed Warsaw Jews to recycle articles of clothing, sometimes confiscated from Ghetto inhabitants, into

² A reproduction of the original Yiddish-language typescript is available in Ruta Sakowska, ed. *Archiwum Ringelbluma Getto Warszawskie lipiec 1942-styczeń 1943* (Warsaw: Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, 1980, p. 378. Hebrew translation is presented in Yehudit Thidor-Baumel, "Kol Bekhiut" *Ha-Shoah ve-ha-Tefilah* Ramat Gan: Bar Ilan University, 1992, p. 119. An English translation is presented in Joseph Kermish, ed., *To Live with Honor and Die with Honor...Selected Documents from the Warsaw Ghetto Underground Archives "O.S."* [*"Oneg Shabbath"*] Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 1986, 429-430. See also Esther Farbstein, *Hidden in Thunder: Perspectives on Faith, Halachah and Leadership during the Holocaust* 2 vols. Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 2007, 418-419.

material for German soldiers.³ Schultz employed a Jewish overseer named Avraham Hendel who used his position to provide religious and communal leaders with the work permits.⁴ Hillel Seidman was among them, and he recorded a rare moment from October 1942:

Now I am in Schultz' factory; I have come at the time when people are both hammering in nails and reciting *Hoshanot* prayers. Here are gathered, thanks to one of the directors Mr. Avraham Hendel, the elite of the Orthodox community: hasidic masters, rabbis, scholars, religious community organizers, well-known *hasidim*. Sitting beside the anvil for shoe repairing...is the Kozi Glover Rav, Yehudah Aryeh Frimer, once the Dean of Yeshivat Hakhmei Lublin. He is sitting here, but his spirit is sailing in other worlds. He continues his studies from memory, without interruption, his lips moving constantly. From time to time he addresses a word to the Piaseczno Rebbe, Rabbi Kalonymus Shapira, the author of *Hovot ha-Talmidim*, who is sitting opposite him, and a subdued discussion on a Torah topic ensues. Talmudic and rabbinic quotations fly back and forth; soon there appear on the anvil—or, to be precise, on the minds and lips of these brilliant scholars—the words of Maimonides and Ravad, the author of the *Tur*, Rama, earlier and later authorities. The atmosphere of the factory is filled with the opinions of eminent scholars, so who cares about the S.S., the German overseers, the hunger, suffering, persecution and

³ Engelking and Leociak, *Warsaw Ghetto*, 396-398.

⁴ Yonah Turkov, *Azoy iz es geven...hurban Varsho Buenos Aires: Tsentral-Farband fun Poylishe Yidn in Argentine*, 1948, 434-435.

fear of death? They are really sailing in the upper worlds; they're not sitting in a factory on Nowolipie 46, but rather in the Hall of the Sanhedrin...⁵

After the war, Hendel moved to Israel and published his memoirs, a powerful first-hand account of the spiritual heroism of these religious leaders. Indeed, Hendel specifically credits his own survival to a blessing he received from the Rebbe, who worked in the "shop" until it was dismantled after the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising of April 1943. We will return to discuss his memoirs shortly, but at this point let us turn to the Rebbe's last writings, composed between the final sermon of July 1942 and the burial of his manuscripts in February 1943.

The Rebbe's final texts may be divided into several categories. First among them are the hundreds of literary edits he made to his manuscripts. The overwhelming majority of those strikeouts, corrections and annotations are undated, and indeed he may have made those changes much earlier in the war. A small but highly significant number of them are dated, however, and it appears that the Rebbe dedicated significant effort to reviewing his work in the final months of 1942 and into January 1943. The wartime sermons are our principal concern, but his review seems to have included the other unpublished works he had with him in the Ghetto. A note reproduced in the 2007 printing of *Aish Kodesh* records the Rebbe's wishes that the copyedited version of *Haklsharat Ha-Avreichim*, which had been sent to press before the war, be

⁵ Seidman, *Warsaw Ghetto Diary*, cited in Polen. The transliteration has been altered to conform to the style used here. See also the brief reference in the Yiddish original, *Tog-bukh fun Varshaver Geto*, Buenos Aires: Tsentral-Farband fun Poylishe Yidn in Argentine, 1947, p. 60.

disregarded in favor of the version updated by the Rebbe during the war.⁶ The date on the note, August 3 1942, suggests that the Rebbe diverted his attention to the review of his manuscripts after the deportations. The annotations to the sermons were likely written after August 1942 but no later than January 1943, when the Rebbe handed them to *Oneg Shabbat*. The milk container that held his work, along with many other documents written by the clandestine group of Ghetto scholars, was buried at 68 Nowolipkie Street in February and would remain there until its accidental discovery in December 1950.⁷

For the most part, the hundreds of emendations are literary in nature. The Rebbe, like most writers, sometimes struggled to find the precise word or turn of phrase to express his thoughts, and the manuscript bears ample testimony to his efforts. Advanced students of the Rebbe's thought will undoubtedly make much use of Dr. Daniel Reiser's 2017 facsimile edition of the wartime sermons, which allows researchers an incredibly granular view into the Rebbe's sermons.⁸ His detailed analysis of the original uncovered many discrepancies with the printed versions (both the original 1960 edition and the revised 2007 edition). For our purposes in this study, the literary discrepancies that had relevance for the historical context

⁶ Aish Kodesh, unpaginated section prior to sermons which begin on p. 7.

⁷ Engelking and Leociak, *Warsaw Ghetto* 40. At present, a detailed study of annotations to the Rebbe's other works buried in the Oneg Shabbat archive remains unwritten. Reading the printed versions of the three works in question, (*Haksharat Ha-Avreichim*, *Mavo Ha-She'arim*, and *Tsav Ve-Zeruz*), it seems unlikely that the manuscripts contain any annotations of historical value for the war years themselves, with the exception of some passages in *Tsav Ve-Zeruz* surrounding the death of his son in 1939.

⁸ *Derashot* volume II.

of the Rebbe's writings were noted. Otherwise, the literary edits do not have a significant impact on our study.

Much more important are the two dated annotations that appear as footnotes to the wartime sermons. The Rebbe specifically indicated precisely how he wanted these presented: as footnotes rather than interpolations into the text. Indeed, they are spoken in a distinct voice. The sermons read, almost without exception, like transcripts of oral addresses, which is basically what they were. The two dated annotations, on the other hand, read as if the Rebbe is speaking directly to a single reader. Let us first consider an annotation he made to *Parashat Ekev*, 5701. The original sermon, which was delivered on August 16, 1941, bears a footnote after the following passage:

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.⁹

The Rebbe's comment represented a fairly conventional exhortation intended to encourage Jews to engage in religious activity. Recognizing the huge psychic burden carried by the suffering Jews of Warsaw, the Rebbe urged them not to succumb to despair, rather to assuage their woes with the more productive use of their depleted spiritual energies, either through study of Torah or, failing

⁹ *Derashot* I:212.

that more intellectually demanding task, at least the pious recital of Psalms.

A year later, and with a view to posterity, the Rebbe felt the need to qualify his words. The resulting note refers to "the end of 5702," suggesting that it was composed in August or early September 1942, likely just after the review of *Hakhsharat Ha-Avreichim* was completed (the last day of 5702 was September 11, 1942).¹⁰

I said and recorded these words in 5701. At that time, even though there was much bitter suffering, some of which is apparent in my words, nonetheless at this time it was still possible to lament them and relate a small portion of them in words, to experience anguish over the survivors, to cry regarding the future, how will the schools and yeshivot be built once again, and so on, even to strengthen the survivors, and encourage them to study and fulfill Torah. This is no longer the case at the end of 5702, because the holy communities have all but been irrevocably destroyed. 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 recited under difficult conditions, and the observance of the Sabbath, even for those who truly wish to observe

¹⁰ Parashat Ekev fell on August 2, 1942. It is possible that the Rebbe may have reviewed his prior entries for the weekly Torah reading in following years, reinforcing the assertion that he wrote this note in August 1942.

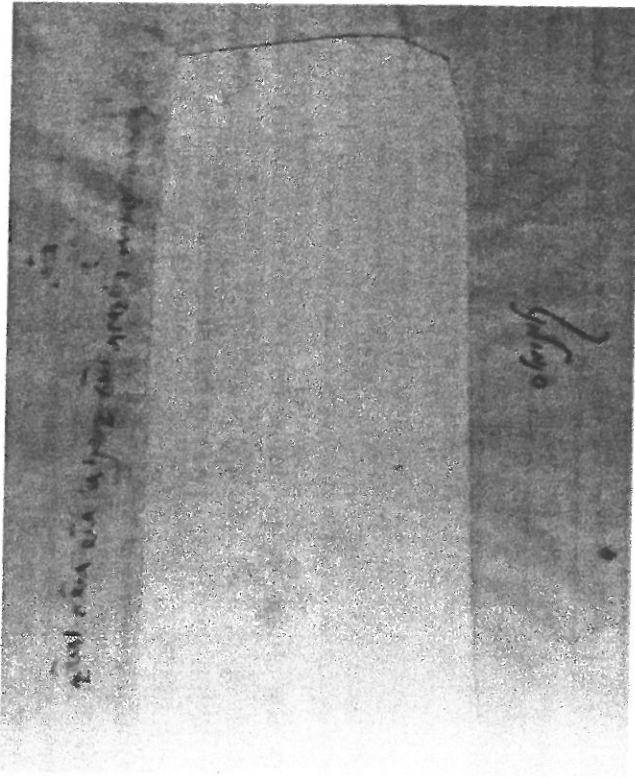
it, is exceptionally onerous, and how much more so is it difficult to cry regarding the future, and regarding the establishments that have been devastated, at a time when (may God have mercy and save us) no spirit or heart remains. It is up to God alone, to have compassion and save us in the blink of 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.¹¹

The Rebbe's comment is rich in significance. The continuity of his message, encouraging Jews to remain steadfast in their faith despite persecution, was broken by the severity of suffering after the great deportation. Theologically, the implications are dramatic: "no spirit or heart remains. It is up to God alone, to have compassion and save us." The Jewish role in redemption, although understood as an unequal share, can no longer be expected. The Jews in Egyptian bondage, for example, expressed their efforts (Hebrew: *hishtadlut*) by crying out for salvation, and God responded with overwhelming "signs and wonders," leading the Jews to freedom. This pattern of "arousal from below" (*hit'aruta de-l'tata*), Jewish appeal to God in prayer or deed, followed by "arousal from above" (*hit'aruta de-l'eila*), or Divine intervention in human affairs, was no longer relevant after the great deportation. The suffering had so depleted the spiritual reserves of the Jews that they simply could not even summon the energy to pray for redemption. Thus the Rebbe argued, "it is up to God alone." The Jews were completely unable from any further effort, and were therefore exempt.

¹¹ Derashot I:212.

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A similar phenomenon may be evident in the title page to the sermons themselves.¹⁶ It is apparent that paper was not easily acquired, because the title page is not clean and correct, rather it was adapted from an earlier use. A small strikeout appears at the very top: the Hebrew letters



forming the year 5700. This title page was likely the original, dating from the beginning of the war. It is written in the Rebbe's own hand, not the scribe that recorded the earliest sermons, so it was probably created sometime after the Spring of 1940, a reflection of the Rebbe's decision to publish these sermons in a special collection after the war's conclusion.

The page carries a simple, working title: "words of Torah that I spoke on the Sabbath and Holidays of the years 5700,

¹⁶ Derashot II:16-17.

5701 and 5702." Below the title is a mysterious paper patch, glued to the cover page and probably obscuring text beneath it. The Rebbe then simply and humbly signed his name, "Kalonymus."

What was originally written below the patch? In personal correspondence, Dr. Daniel Reiser wrote that he was unable to determine, with currently available technology, what text might have been hidden. Given the purpose of the page as a title, it is possible that the pre-patch document originally bore the author's name and title, his lineage and perhaps a few honorifics like "author of *Horat Ha-Talmudim*." Perhaps the Rebbe sought to obliterate all of these secondary markers of identity, in a manner comparable to his dramatic strikeout on the title page of his *Maavo Le-She'arim* manuscript. After the great deportation, perhaps the Rebbe no longer wished to be reminded of his murdered Hasidim and remained simply "Kalonymus."

Did the Rebbe lose his faith in the Holocaust? Even a cursory reading of his wartime writings demonstrates the absurdity of that question. At no point does he ever despair of God's existence and omnipotence, even up to his final will and testament, bequeathing his manuscripts to his brother in Israel. He maintained an active, passionate relationship with God throughout the Holocaust, sometimes raising his voice in anguish and fear, but always confident in God's ability to save the Jewish people in the blink of an eye. Why, then, did God not intervene to save the Jews of Europe? This question is implicit or explicit in every sermon the Rebbe delivered since the outbreak of the war. The Rebbe did presume to provide a definitive, absolute answer: even Moses' request to "know God's ways" was denied. The Rebbe nevertheless

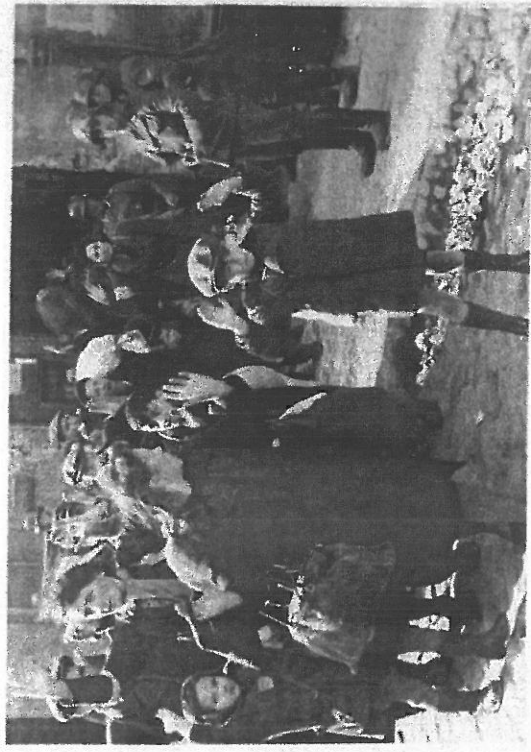
→ P. 250

The last recorded writings of the Rebbe were dedicated to preserving *Torah from the Years of Wrath*. He composed a note to future editors with instructions on how to read his idiosyncratic textual notations. He left a memorial page dedicated to his parents, in-laws and son, asking that it be included in eventual publication of his writings. Rekhil Yehudis, his daughter, was the subject of a prayerful request that she remain safe, despite her disappearance in one of the deportation actions. He wrote a personal note to brother in Israel, urging him to publish his works, and promising that the merit of his ancestors would stand by all who studied them. One last cover letter—this time directed to whomsoever would discover his manuscripts—and the precious cache was delivered to *Oneg Shabbat* for burial.

The last months of the Rebbe's life are recorded by a few survivor testimonies, some of them conflicting with each other in a few smaller respects. Avraham Hendel is the most detailed, describing how the Rebbe continued to devote himself to public service and religious tradition to the very end. He arranged for the circumcision of a boy, incredibly born in the hellish environment of post-deportation Warsaw, and he managed somehow to bake *matzot* for Passover in 1943.¹⁸ Grateful to Hendel for saving his life through employment in Schultz' shop, he presented him with a rare Purim gift: an orange, smuggled at great expense from the Aryan side of Warsaw. The Rebbe's activity during the heroic Warsaw Ghetto Uprising of April 1943 is unknown, but Hendel reports that he was among the survivors who were deported to a labor camp shortly thereafter, in late April or May.

Trawniki 7

¹⁸ See Pesach Schindler, *Hasidic Responses to the Holocaust in the Light of Hasidic Thought* (Hoboken: KTAV, 1990, 101-102).



Another survivor, Simhah Rotem, recalls his time with the Rebbe in the labor camp Trawniki. The underground resistance was determined, says Rotem, to spirit the Rebbe out of the camp and into hiding with partisans.¹⁹ The Rebbe refused, just as he had refused all earlier offers of escape from the Ghetto. Rotem's account, which is confirmed by another survivor, Melech Neustadt (Noy), relates that the Rebbe had entered into a solidarity pact with a number of other prisoners: either they all escape together, or none of them at all.²⁰ No amount of pleading

¹⁹ Polen, *Holy Fire*, 154, citing an interview the author conducted with Rotem on June 1, 1986.

²⁰ Meilich Neustadt (Noy), *Hurban u-Mered shel Yehudei Varshaw* Tel-Aviv: Executive Committee of the General Federation of Jewish Labor in Palestine, 1947, p. 480, cited in Polen, *Holy Fire*, pp. 154-155. See also p. 185 note 27, discussing a discrepancy between Rotem and Noy's account over the specific camp where this happened. Polen's conclusion that the camp was Trawniki and not Budzyn seems logical; Neustadt seems to have conflated the Rebbe, Kalmish Shapira, with another Rabbi Shapira from Warsaw. The recollection of the collective rescue pact, however, is identical in both Rotem's and Neustadt's accounts.

would convince the Rebbe otherwise—adamant, he refused to abandon his Hasidim in Trawniki, just as he refused to abandon his Hasidim in Warsaw. Nehemia Polen underscores the fact that the Rebbe's solidarity pact included non-believing, secular individuals: the Rebbe would sacrifice himself for a fellow Jew, regardless of his level of ritual observance.

The summer and autumn of 1943 witnessed a number of rebellions, inspired by the heroic uprising in Warsaw. Treblinka itself rose up unsuccessfully in August, followed by Sobibor the next month, and the Nazis accelerated the pace of murder by extending their scope into the already brutal labor camps. Codenamed Operation *Erntefest* (Harvest Festival), the inmates of Trawniki were scheduled for slaughter. The Rebbe surrendered his soul to his Maker on the fifth day of Heshvan in the Hebrew year 5703 (November 3, 1943).

Following Nehemia Polen, the father of Piaseczno studies, the final word must not go to the murderers, but to the Rebbe himself. The following undated passage is taken from Yehoshua Starratt's translation of *Tsav ve-Zeruz*, the Rebbe's personal spiritual dairy.

Whatever holiness and purity of soul I am capable of attaining are nothing before the Ultimate Pure Being. How insignificant they are before Him to Whom even the heavens are unrefined.

Yet none of these feelings were new insights—I had known it all before. But then, I only knew. Now, at this *Shalosh Seudos*, it was real: there was God's holy Presence right before me, pressing my

very being. And in front of His dazzling Presence the peak of my enlightenment became darkened.

My being melts away. I have lost sense of selfness; I have no existence of my own. But my soul takes courage, come what may. I cry out: Even in the depths of Hell I shall not fear, for You are with me.