

# Hasidism, Suffering, and Renewal

SUNY series in Contemporary Jewish Thought

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Richard A. Cohen, editor

# Hasidism, Suffering, and Renewal

*The Prewar and Holocaust Legacy of  
Kalonymus Kalman Shapira*

Edited by

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P R E S S

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## Creative Writing in the Shadow of Death

### Psychological and Phenomenological Aspects of Rabbi Shapira's Manuscript "Sermons from the Years of Rage"

DANIEL REISER

Man should not cast aside from him the fear of the earthly; in his fear of death he should—stay.

—Franz Rosenzweig, *The Star of Redemption*

#### Sermons from the Years of Rage

There are few extant documents of rabbinic thought composed under the Nazi regime. As such, the collection of sermons authored by the Piaseczner Rebbe, R. Kalonymus Kalmish Shapira, in the Warsaw Ghetto<sup>1</sup>—effectively the final Hasidic work to be written in Poland, as noted by Mendel Piekarz—is among the canonical, if not the leading, work of Orthodox thought written during this period.<sup>2</sup> Like his prewar sermons (see Wiskind, this volume), they were probably first delivered orally in Yiddish and then recorded in rabbinic Hebrew.<sup>3</sup> It should be noted that they contain no direct references to current political or historical events, nor is there any direct mention of Germans or other key Ghetto figures, though there are

numerous indirect references to specific occurrences: “evildoers,” suffering, tribulations, physical and spiritual distress, the pain of losing loved-ones, and crises of religion and faith.<sup>4</sup> The book is primarily concerned with the religious and phenomenological significance of suffering.

These wartime sermons aimed to provide their audience with hope and self-respect as well as offer counsel, forge a religious path, and persuade listeners that spiritual gains and human dignity were still attainable, despite the German efforts to destroy them.<sup>5</sup> But that was not their sole purpose. One must recall that R. Shapira not only delivered the sermons orally but also took pains to preserve them in writing. It is evident from the sermons of the latter half of 1941 and onward that R. Shapira was well aware that his chances of survival—and those of the people around him—were steadily diminishing<sup>6</sup> and that the destruction wrought by war, including spiritual and religious crises, would never be fully healed:

Who is not pained as they behold the suffering of Israel, in body and soul; and whose heart does not ache when they see that there are no *hadarim*, no *yeshivot*, no place of Torah or gathering of Torah scholars? This is not only the case at this moment, as the houses of the Lord are destroyed, but the [conditions of the] present will also be manifested in the future. For young men who are students of Torah will be lacking: some will be missing on account of unnatural deaths and starvation, God save us, and others will be compelled by circumstances to go out and seek sustenance for themselves. From where shall we lay hold of lads who are students of Torah if now there are none studying, and some of them have not withstood the test and, driven by hunger, have gone out to the market on the Sabbath in order to barter? Do we really think that such lads and young men who have spent years wandering about the marketplace and streets conducting business or begging for bread, whether on a weekday or the Sabbath—the Torah and Hasidic teachings acquired over several years in the *hadarim* and *yeshivot* having been forgotten—[do we really think] that when the opportunity arises, these ones will return to the *hadarim* and *yeshivot* like before?!<sup>7</sup>

Given these circumstances, there is no doubt that the effort taken to preserve this sermon in writing—particularly in light of the difficult physical

conditions prevailing at that time in the Ghetto—indicates a broader objective.<sup>8</sup> R. Shapira's request in his final testament that these sermons be published demonstrates that he did not perceive them as mere consolation speeches, nor were they addressed solely to his ill-fated contemporaries. R. Shapira understood his sermons to be religious writings of enduring significance addressed to future generations and others not party to the historical context in which they were originally delivered. One might even suggest that he refrained from addressing particular historical events in order that the significance of the sermons not be limited to any particular incident occurring within a specific context, time, and location. He sought to preserve the sermons for all time, "to scatter them throughout Jacob and divide them amongst Israel," as indicated in his final testament.<sup>9</sup>

This collection, which he titled *Sermons from the Years of Rage* in his handwritten manuscript, is distinguished by its willingness to confront the experience of suffering:

When we studied the words of the prophets and of our sages of blessed memory regarding the tribulations of the destruction [of the temple in Jerusalem], we thought we had some grasp of these tribulations, even crying on occasion at that time. However, now we see how great the difference is between hearing about tribulations and seeing them, and all the more so suffering them—God save us—such that they are nearly incomparable . . . and as much as we discuss the tribulations, we are not able to describe them as they truly are, for knowledge and discussion of tribulations cannot be compared to experiencing them.<sup>10</sup>

R. Shapira shares his intimate doubts and misgivings with the reader,<sup>11</sup> producing a unique and moving document. An examination of these sermons does not reveal a clear and defined stance on either the meaning of suffering or the aim of the sermons themselves. Instead, R. Shapira invites the reader to join his own struggle to persist. In one of his first sermons, R. Shapira declares his aim to provide strength and encouragement, "that you [the future reader] might be strengthened through me"<sup>12</sup> and "when others see that I fortify myself despite my tremendous suffering, they too might issue an *a fortiori* ruling regarding their own suffering—which is not as bitter as mine—and be strengthened."<sup>13</sup> Yet two years later, R. Shapira admits that he is no longer persuaded by his own words of consolation:



Particularly when the sorrows are unceasing, then even the one who had initially strengthened himself and the rest of Israel now ceases to be strengthened and is weary of being consoled. Even if he wanted to exert himself and utter some remarks of comfort and strength, he would have no words to say, for over these many long days of suffering he has already spoken and repeated once more everything there is to say. The words have grown old and have no further effect on him or on his listeners.<sup>14</sup>

Such honesty has few parallels in rabbinic literature. For two and a half years, R. Shapira preached, encouraged, and comforted. Now, as his sermons draw to a close and “the sorrows are unceasing,” he publicly declares that he no longer has the strength to fortify and console himself—or the strength to fortify and console his readers. This obviously raises the question of why he exerted such energy to complete his manuscript, correcting the sermons and committing them to future publication.

### A Philology of Suffering

A philological examination of the handwritten manuscript “Sermons from the Years of Rage,” which I conducted for the critical edition, indicates that the sermons were produced sequentially, one proof succeeding another. Further evidence of this appears in a letter R. Shapira appended to the manuscript with instructions for the reader and publisher, including a system he had devised for proofing his text:

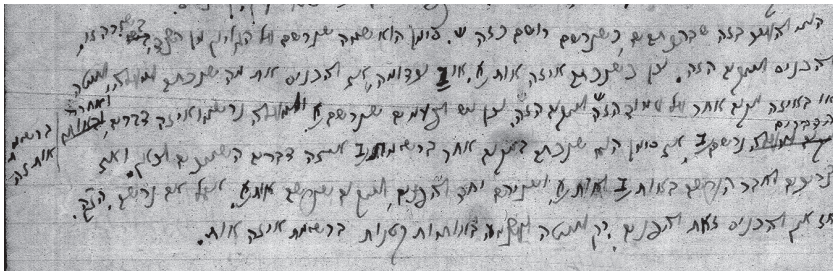


Figure 8.1. Manuscript no. ARG II 15 (Ring. II/370), page 4. Courtesy of ŻIH (Żydowski Instytut Historyczny).

I note herewith that in the writings, wherever a mark such as this ↓ appears, it means that what is written on the side of the page at this line should be inserted at this location. And also, when a letter such as *alef* or *bet* or the like appears, then what is written above, below, or somewhere else on this page should be inserted at the location where the notation is recorded. And sometimes an *alef* is recorded and sentences appear above, after which the letter *bet* is written. This indicates that written elsewhere in the text marked by *bet* are remarks that belong here. Then what is written at the letter *bet* should be connected to the letter *alef*, and both should be inserted together at the place where the letter *alef* appears. But if the word *hagaha* [proofreading] is written, then the text should not be inserted; it should only appear below in small letters and should be marked by some letter.<sup>15</sup>

In fact, initial proofing appears in the body of the manuscript text itself: words are deleted by being crossed out, and added words and sentences are placed atop existing or deleted words. Further proofing is done by adding arrows to indicate supplemental text in the margins of the page. Sometimes the author decides to delete an old “add” mark by crossing the words out; wherever this is done, the arrow is deleted in the same manner. Such deletion is evidence of at least one additional round of proofing, in which the author reviewed his comments and decided to delete some of them.

A further stage of editing was accomplished by adding letters to the body of the text: inscriptions in square (Assyrian) Hebrew letters, and underlining for emphasis. Each such letter is a reference to a note on the upper or lower margin of the page—not on the side margins, as with the arrow marking. The reference in the text proper appears again next to the added text (upper or lower), so that the proper location for each added text may be identified.

In general, I concluded that the notes marked with arrows are older than those marked with letters, because many marginalia that are referenced by arrows end with the appending of a letter that leads to an additional remark on the top or bottom margin of the page. Admittedly, the opposite sometimes occurs as well—a comment marked by a letter is added at the top or the bottom of the page, at which location an arrow directs the reader to an additional supplemental text alongside the first

comment. This represents yet another level of proofing, in which R. Shapira reviewed the remarks that he had added and corrected them as well.<sup>16</sup>

I believe that careful investigation of the manuscript's archaeology, its layers and emendations over time, calls our attention to a human phenomenon worthy of discussion. Many of the marginal notes were actually written late in 1942, though R. Shapira was already aware by late 1941 (see Magid, this volume) that Polish Jewry was facing an unprecedented catastrophe from which it might never recover. By the time these last notes were added to the manuscript in 1942, in fact, the mass transports from the Ghetto to the death camps had already begun. R. Shapira must also have known that there was very little chance that he, his manuscript, or any of his immediate followers would survive. Under these circumstances, his commitment to painstaking, multilayered, and minute revision of his already finished text should not be taken for granted.

R. Shapira knew that he was going to die and had already lost all his family, and how did he occupy himself? With correcting and editing his sermons! Moreover, all of this was done without any certainty that these sermons would ever be found and published. Such literary activity is testimony to a life lived at two extremes: the bitter reality of death and the simultaneous vitality invested in writing, corrections, and stylistic editing. On one hand, there is calamitous death that destroys everything, while on the other hand, a new literary creation is produced that requires a great deal of concentration. Even before we consider the actual content of these sermons, their very existence should be treated as testimony to an extraordinary human endeavor. R. Shapira was himself aware of this tension, which sometimes provoked him to reflect on whether his own ability to write under these circumstances was a sign of indifference or apathy to his own suffering and that of others around him:

There are times when a person is astounded by himself, exclaiming, "Am I not broken? Am I not nearly always in a state of tears, crying from time to time? How can I study Torah? By what means may I strengthen myself to produce new teachings of Torah and *hasidut*?" At times, his heart strikes him, as he declares: "Is it not my heartlessness that allows me to fortify myself in the study of Torah while my sorrows and the sorrows of the Jewish people are so great?" He will once more answer himself, "Am I not broken? How great are my tears; all of my life is woe and gloom." This person is perplexed by himself.<sup>17</sup>

Handwritten text in Hebrew, likely a sermon for Passover 1940. The page is numbered 11 in the top right corner. The text is written in a cursive script and is organized into several paragraphs. There are several marginal notes and headings on the right side of the page, including "המקום", "היום", "השנה", "החודש", "היום", "השנה", "החודש", "היום", "השנה", "החודש". The text discusses the significance of the Passover festival and the role of the Jewish community in the world.

Figure 8.2. Sermon for Passover 1940. Manuscript no. ARG II 15 (Ring. II/370). Courtesy of ŻIH (Żydowski Instytut Historyczny).

While this passage is framed in the third person, it is clear that the author, who “strengthen[s himself] to produce new teachings of Torah and *hasidut*,” is actually testifying about himself. If my reading is correct, this passage represents a personal testament to the pangs of guilt that seized him (“his heart strikes him”) because he was apparently able to remain creative despite the torments of his fellows, which “are so great.” On the one hand, he feels great discomfort about allowing his routine of studying Torah and Hasidic teachings to continue as though nothing has happened; on the other, he expresses deep awareness of pain and rupture, so that he is “perplexed by himself.” The ability to live in between these two opposing worlds—the world of literary creation and innovation, and the world of total destruction—is testimony to a special kind of resilience deserving description in its own right.

### A Psychology of Suffering: Writing in the Shadow of Death

Beginning in the 1970s, a psychological theory was developed that was concerned with the influence of awareness of death on human cognition and behavior: terror management theory. The Jewish American writer and cultural anthropologist Ernest Becker claimed that all creative activity is directly related to the denial of death.<sup>18</sup> For him, culture and creativity supply a certain bulwark against the fear of death, while the denial of death motivates man to write and create. In other words, human creative activity is a form of escape from or ignoring of death, an attempt to prevent the inexorable end. According to this model, writing may have offered R. Shapira a mental reprieve from the bitter reality and death surrounding him, despite the fact that his sermons directly address death and suffering.<sup>19</sup>

A different approach suggests that human creativity contends with death and, rather than evading it, emerges victorious. There are matters more important than life, and engagement with them represents the victory of the spirit over death and the physical. When Socrates was sentenced to death by the court of Athens in 399 BCE, he was faced with the possibility of evading and changing his punishment. However, Socrates decided, for philosophical reasons, to bear his punishment and drink the cup of poison hemlock. His death was portrayed by Plato as a victory of the philosopher and of philosophy.<sup>20</sup> Socrates refused to desist from philosophy and stated in his defense, “On this point I would say to you, men of Athens: ‘Whether you believe Anytus or not, whether you acquit me or not, do

so on the understanding that this is my course of action, even if I am to face death many times.’”<sup>21</sup> Also, “death is something I couldn’t care less about.”<sup>22</sup> His engagement with philosophy overcame his instinctive fear of dying. This is a victory, not an escape.

It must be noted, however, that Socrates left behind no writings of his own and that Plato’s dialogues were written as works of philosophical fiction after his death. This being the case, it is worth noting an authentic autobiographical work authored by an individual sentenced to death, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, by Anicius Manlius Severinus Boethius, which was written while its author was in prison awaiting his execution.<sup>23</sup> Boethius was a Roman consul at the beginning of the sixth century who was executed for treason in 524 CE, after two years of imprisonment. *The Consolation of Philosophy*, written in the shadow of his impending death, is not merely a depiction of his inner life but a manifestation of the philosophy that is, in the words of Kabbalah scholar Yehuda Liebes, “the triumph of the spirit of the individual over the reigning tyranny, and the victory of reason over suffering and emotion.”<sup>24</sup> Like *Sermons from the Years of Rage*, this can be understood as a triumph of the spirit through the writing of a text. In this understanding, the writing does not escape or commemorate suffering—it overcomes it.

Viktor Frankl, the founder of logotherapy, wrote about his experiences in German concentration camps and maintained that he and his fellow prisoners succeeded in actualizing their spiritual freedom in the very place where they had been deprived of all human rights.<sup>25</sup> Frankl came to Auschwitz with a completed manuscript ready for publication, which was confiscated upon arrival. Realizing that the manuscript was lost, he began to reconstruct the work, an activity that gave meaning to his life and endowed him with physical and spiritual strength. “Certainly,” he testifies, “my deep desire to write this manuscript anew helped me to survive the rigors of the camps I was in. For instance, when in a camp in Bavaria I fell ill with typhus fever, I jotted down on little scraps of paper many notes intended to enable me to rewrite the manuscript, should I live to the day of liberation. I am sure that this reconstruction of my lost manuscript in the dark barracks of a Bavarian concentration camp assisted me in overcoming the danger of cardiovascular collapse.”<sup>26</sup> The writing of notes on scraps of paper and the desire to rewrite his book enabled Frankl to overcome his difficult surroundings and actualize his spiritual freedom. According to this model, R. Shapira’s writing was an actualization of freedom in a freedomless world.

A third approach can be found in the writings of Martin Heidegger. His *Being and Time* (1927) addresses the meaning of death at great length.<sup>27</sup> According to him, death exposes the individual to his own mortality and the lack of meaning in his life, but it is this very lack of meaning that enables the individuation of the individual and is therefore true meaning. Death is devoid of substance; it is a pure emptiness, which contains all and hence brings forth the creation of the new. The mental renunciation of the everyday world gives birth to the new, as the universal meaning is abandoned and gives way to the personal creation of the individual.<sup>28</sup>

Similarly, Franz Rosenzweig utilized the existential fear of death to criticize rationalist Western philosophy, opening his *Star of Redemption* (1921) with the words, “*in philosophos!*”<sup>29</sup> As an existentialist, Rosenzweig positions existence as prior to all thought and places the earthly fear of death—which philosophical idealism, and Hegel in particular, attempt to deny—as the starting point of *Star of Redemption*. Rosenzweig wrote the book in light of his encounter with the horrors of World War I. For him, death establishes existence as prior to all thought. From the fear of death, man realizes his being; this fear is the source of all life.<sup>30</sup>

Another modern writer, Lev Shestov—born Yehuda Leyb Schwarzmann (1866–1938)—argued that meaninglessness and despair are primary human experiences (“Utter futility! All is futile!”),<sup>31</sup> which, however, point to an experience of faith beyond both knowledge and hopelessness.<sup>32</sup>

According to Shestov, the experience of doubt and the deepest uncertainty are continuous with the experience of “faith.” The believer begins his path in the depths of despair, but it is from these very depths that he cries out to God: “Out of the depths I call you, O Lord.”<sup>33</sup> What does he call? “My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?”<sup>34</sup> Faith is not a sense of contentment but rather a struggle with bitterness and a darkened spirit: “I say to God, my rock, ‘Why have You forgotten me, why must I walk in gloom?’”<sup>35</sup> The individual finds himself in a constant struggle against reason and logic, against the “truth” thrust upon him; this struggle is the state of faith. Shestov’s final work, *Athens and Jerusalem*, concludes with these words: “Philosophy is not *Besinnen* but struggle. And this struggle has no end and will have no end. The kingdom of God, as it is written, is attained through violence.”<sup>36</sup>

Much like awareness of despair, which is the starting point of religious experience, awareness of death also serves a central function in Shestov’s thought. Only death can shake off from man the false enchantments of knowledge and scientific truth.<sup>37</sup> “[Shestov’s] philosophy seeks to instruct

man to contend with the horrors of his historical existence, to live authentically with his despair without evasion, and to recognize the horrific reality of mortality and the lack of importance of an existence bound to end. All of these are meant to instruct him however in that spiritual strength which is faith, to lead him to God who will provide him not only with a primary meaning to his life, but with freedom.<sup>38</sup> Death exposes man to the end, and consequent meaningless nature, of his life and reminds him of his finality in order that he not be engulfed by a fabricated world devoid of meaning.<sup>39</sup> The fear of death shatters the illusion of our existence as independent and distinct beings. The possibility of faith thus develops in the very face of death.

The Neo-Hasidic thinker Hillel Zeitlin (see Leshem, this volume), who was acquainted with R. Shapira and even wrote a glowing review of his educational tract *A Student's Obligation*,<sup>40</sup> was also influenced by Shestov. In an essay titled "From the Depths of Doubt and Despair (On the Tremendous Striving of Lev Shestov)," Zeitlin addresses the extreme negation of all values and meaning in the world, which found expression in Shestov's thought.<sup>41</sup> "Friedrich Nietzsche came and rejected all that was human," writes Zeitlin, "conceiving by this to make room for the *Übermensch*. Lev Shestov . . . came and elevated the rejection of all things human to a degree of shocking and wondrous perfection in his recognition that the *Übermensch* too is but a 'human, all too human' conception." For Shestov, according to Zeitlin, "all that is human—even if it be decorated with the finest adornments of philosophy, science, and verse—is nothing but futility and pursuit of wind."<sup>42</sup> However, Zeitlin notes, Shestov's negations must be understood as continuations of "Hume's efforts in the critique of human perception; Schopenhauer's efforts in the negation of any value to life; Nietzsche's efforts in the critique of man and all that he has; Rousseau and Tolstoy's efforts in the negation of all that is called culture and civilization; Dostoyevsky's efforts in his groping about and prodding . . . and [that] it is from that very depth of nothingness that he calls out to God-Wonder."<sup>43</sup> Zeitlin puts all this into a familiar Jewish idiom: "Through recognizing the nullity of all that is human, he [Shestov] seeks 'the One who spoke and the world came into being.'"<sup>44</sup>

According to this third model, R. Shapira's writings are not a manifestation of a polarized life led between a mode of innovative creation and a reality emblematic of death and destruction. The bitter existence to which he was fated had already lost all meaning, and the works he wrote were a possession to bring before God, evoking the talmudic aphorism



“Praiseworthy is he who comes here with his teachings in his hand.”<sup>45</sup> R. Shapira did not record his sermons for others but rather for himself, as he wrote elsewhere: “Behold, a person does not write solely for others . . . but also notes for himself”;<sup>46</sup> “Every [personal] impression (*roshem*) needs paper and space to be written (*yirshemu*) on.”<sup>47</sup> The manuscript is R. Shapira’s offering for eternal life: “Fix yourself in the vestibule so that you may enter the palace.”<sup>48</sup>

In sum, the manuscript *Sermons from the Years of Rage* is a testimony to the phenomenon of creation in the shadow of death. Three philosophical and psychological explanations have been given above for this phenomenon:

1. Ignoring the world: the attempt to prevent inevitable death.
2. Triumph over the world: the actualization of freedom in a freedomless world.
3. Disillusionment with the world: through recognizing the nullity of all that is human, he seeks “He who spoke and the world came into being.”

### A Phenomenology of Suffering

The attempts I have suggested above to explain R. Shapira’s “creative writing in the shadow of death” should not be seen as three distinct approaches that do not correspond. We should note that R. Shapira’s sermons do not contain a clear and decisive doctrine, and R. Shapira does not hesitate to acknowledge that he himself is perplexed, as we saw above.<sup>49</sup> Therefore, it is more likely that R. Shapira engages in all these three different approaches—on different occasions. In practice, we can also approach this subject from a completely different perspective: the phenomenological one. According to this approach, his sermons are more of an attempt to refashion the question of suffering in phenomenological terms, as a wandering journey rather than a quest for “meaning” alone.<sup>50</sup> Don Seeman has argued, convincingly, that this collection of sermons should be “approached as it was written, with a view to ritual and hermeneutic strategies rather than foregone ideological conclusions, and to lived experience in suffering rather than doctrine.”<sup>51</sup>

Cultural anthropology tends to assume that ordered and coherent meaning is the primary desideratum of social life. Both Max Weber and

Clifford Geertz associate religious rituals with the quest for meaning in suffering. According to Geertz, the purpose of rituals is to make suffering meaningful and therefore sufferable.<sup>52</sup> In contrast, Seeman uses the phenomenological account of Emmanuel Levinas, who argues that suffering is inherently “useless” and therefore resistant to meaning’s claim. Seeman demonstrates how R. Shapira’s Ghetto sermons constitute a denial that the insufferable can be made sufferable and “urge ritual fidelity *in spite of* meaninglessness, and not always as its antidote.”<sup>53</sup> In a later article, Seeman expands and deepens his idea of “ritual in its own right” and deals with R. Shapira’s quest for ritual efficacy in a reality of radical suffering. R. Shapira’s response to crisis in the Warsaw Ghetto was not limited to making suffering meaningful but extended to the problem of efficacy, which precedes “meaning.”<sup>54</sup> Seeman was the first to use this kind of language and to develop categories of experience as a key method for reading R. Shapira’s sermons.

Nonetheless, Seeman does find a kind of meaning—not in the sense of meaningfulness with which anthropology remains preoccupied but rather in the sense of a purpose, sometimes pragmatic, for suffering. Such as: “bringing down blessing,” “defending the cosmos,” and “suffering for the other,” which all derive from kabbalistic teachings: “I have argued that the impossible weight of suffering in Warsaw pushed ritual practice inexorably away from its meaning-making dimension and towards an increased emphasis on the essentially ethical gestures of bringing down blessing, defending the cosmos, and suffering for the other.”<sup>55</sup>

With this perspective, I would like to look into what I have described as the tension of “writing in the shadow of death.” There is no doubt that both preaching and writing down the sermons are ritual practices, which have the highest priority in halakhah and the deepest significance in Jewish mysticism.<sup>56</sup> Studying and teaching Torah are rituals that carry deep cosmological significance for Rabbi Shapira: “Innovative study and teaching of the sacred texts in their traditional form is a ritual activity that literally draws divine vitality down from above to support the integrity and existence of the cosmos, including the community of believers.”<sup>57</sup> R. Shapira himself engages this problem through the study and teaching of Torah: “It is certain that Rabbi Shapira refers not just to the text of Scripture when he says ‘Torah’ in this context, but to the whole interwoven corpus of Jewish sacred textuality, including his own Hasidic sermons, whose production and study are without a doubt meant to be ritually efficacious in their own right.”<sup>58</sup>

This concept of “ritual in its own right” can lead us to a more extreme approach and at once a very simple claim: R. Shapira wrote down his sermons as a plain act of learning Torah. He continued doing what he always did in his lifetime: teach and write—rituals in their own right—with no additional explanation, even not the pragmatistic one, and a fortiori the mystical motive. This explains the feelings of guilt and perplexity he expresses over the very act of writing these sermons. But at the same time, he expresses the feeling that he cannot put down his pen. To be clear, I do not underestimate the value of the concept of ritual efficacy developed by Seeman. However, I want to differentiate between teaching Torah by preaching a sermon to the public and writing it down afterward, especially given the layers of editing and proofreading explored above.

Rituals bring down divine blessing and defend the cosmos, according to Jewish mysticism. However, writing down the sermons may be an action of *torah lishmah*, learning Torah for its own sake, a value that has a long history in Jewish tradition.<sup>59</sup> The study of Torah outweighs, in Judaism, all other precepts (*mitsvot*),<sup>60</sup> hence we can approach it in a different manner from all other rituals. R. Shapira writes his sermons, then he proofreads them and writes corrections in the margins of a manuscript, then he adds another layer of corrections and additions, and so on, all alongside the bitter reality outside, because this is his way of learning Torah. Obviously, there is no certainty that these sermons will ever be found or published. However, this did not change R. Shapira’s sense of obligation toward learning Torah, which became part of his DNA and which he could not disengage from, even in times of crises, just as he could not stop breathing oxygen.<sup>61</sup>

As Seeman points out, learning Torah in the Ghetto (like all other religious rituals) was not done in order to “make suffering sufferable,” in Geertz’s terms. It was a ritual efficiency, which, according to Ariel Evan Mayse, was “surely meant to open the heart and awaken the soul amid the sadness, destruction, and pain of the Warsaw Ghetto. In this crushing environment, the talmudic and midrashic aggadah spirit offered a way of transcending time and entering the world of illuminated exegesis rather than temporal suffering.”<sup>62</sup> This is true for learning the sources that construct the homily and then teaching it aloud to the public. Nevertheless, R. Shapira could have stopped here. Why did he need to write his sermons, and why did he need to make changes—often very minor ones that have no effect on meaning? Moreover, R. Shapira stopped preaching just before the “Great Action,” which began on July 22, 1942. Major parts of

his proofreading were carried out after the Ghetto emptied.<sup>63</sup> It is clear that at that point, R. Shapira was not working on his Torah in order to provide hope or self-respect or for the sake of “suffering for the other,” or even for “affective strategies that would allow his followers—and the cosmos itself—to resist collapse,”<sup>64</sup> since there was no longer an audience, or an “other,” or followers, and the cosmos did collapse. It seems to me that his writing, under these circumstances, expresses the value of *torah lishmah* in its most extreme form, as a “ritual in its own right.”<sup>65</sup>

We can never know with any degree of certainty how R. Shapira himself viewed this tension of creativity in the shadow of death—if he saw any tension at all—aside from the personal testimony that he recorded for various audiences, both immediate and less proximate, in these sermons. But I believe that critical examination of his manuscript together with openness to the psychological and phenomenological dimensions of suffering and creativity offers the best chance we have to do justice to his torment.

## Notes

This research was supported by Herzog College, to which I would like to express my sincere and deepest gratitude. The present article is an updated and revised version of an earlier Polish draft which appeared as Daniel Reiser, “Pisarstwo w cieniu śmierci: rękopis rabina Szapiry ‘Kazania z lat szafu’ w perspektywie psychologicznej i fenomenologicznej,” *Zagłada Żydów: Studia i Materiały* 15 (2019): 62–88.

1. For more extensive biographical information, see Aharon Sorsky, “Rabbi Kalonymus Kalmish Shapira, of Blessed Memory,” in Kalonymus Kalmish Shapira, *Esh Kodesh* [in Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Va’ad Hasidei Piaseczno, 2008) 279–322; Mendel Piekarcz, *The Last Hasidic Literary Document Written in Poland: The Teachings of the Piaseczner Rebbe in the Warsaw Ghetto* [in Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 1979). For biographical details focusing on the period of the Holocaust derived from testimonial and archival material, see Esther Farbstein, *Hidden in Thunder*, trans. Deborah Stern (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 2007), 479–88; Isaac Hershkowitz, “Rabbi Kalonymus Kalmish Shapira, The Piasechner Rebbe His Holocaust and Pre-Holocaust Thought, Continuity or Discontinuity?” [in Hebrew] (master’s thesis, Bar-Ilan University, 2005), 17–18; Zvi Leshem, “Between Messianism and Prophecy: Hasidism According to the Piaseczner Rebbe” [in Hebrew] (PhD dissertation, Bar-Ilan University, 2007), 1–5; Ron Wacks, *The Flame of the Holy Fire: Perspectives on the Teachings of Rabbi Kalonymous Kalmish Shapira of*

*Piaczena* [in Hebrew] (Alon Shvut: Tevunot, 2010), 21–33; Kalonymus Kalman Shapira, *Sermons from the Years of Rage* [in Hebrew], ed. Daniel Reiser, 2 vols. (Jerusalem: Herzog Academic College, 2017), 1:13–24; Nehemia Polen, *The Holy Fire: The Teachings of Rabbi Kalonymus Kalman Shapira, the Rebbe of the Warsaw Ghetto* (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 1994), 1–14; David Biale et al., *Hasidism: A New History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018), 614–16, 660–62. Also, see the recent extensive work in Polish, Marta Dudzik-Rudkowska, *Pisma Rabina Kalonimusa Szapiro* (Warszawa: Żydowski Instytut Historyczny, 2017), ix–xxx.

2. Prominent works include Yissakhar Shlomo Teichtal, *Eim Habanim Semeichah: On Eretz Yisrael, Redemption, and Unity*, trans. Moshe Lichtman (Israel: Kol Mevaser Publishers, 2000), originally published in Budapest, 1943; Ephraim Oshry, *Responsa from the Holocaust*, trans. Y. Leiman, rev. ed. (New York: Judaica Press, 2001). For other Orthodox writings from the Holocaust, see Esther Farbstein, *Hidden in Thunder*; Farbstein, ed., *Leaves of Bitterness: Diaries, Responsa, and Theology in the Holocaust: The Writings of Rabbi Yehoshua Moshe Aronson* [in Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 2014); Steven T. Katz, Shlomo Biderman, and Gershon Greenberg, eds., *Wrestling with God: Jewish Theological Responses during and after the Holocaust* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007). While the value of these works should not be minimized, it should be noted that *Em ha-Banim Semehah* was largely written in Hungary prior to the Nazi invasion of that country, while *Responsa from the Holocaust* was edited following the Holocaust and is primarily concerned with issues of halakhah rather than philosophy. Because it was written in the midst of the terrible suffering, *Sermons from the Years of Rage* is a unique work entirely devoted to the subject of suffering and tribulations.

3. The process of orally delivering the sermons on the Sabbath and reconstructing and transcribing them afterward from memory is indicated by the text of the sermons themselves. See, for example, *Sermons from the Years of Rage*, 1:226: “We said on the holy Sabbath at the kiddush,” and “Now, as I write this down, I can add that other people told me so as well”; *ibid.*, *parashat mishpatim-shekalim* 5702 (1942), 1:271: “As we said last week”; and *ibid.*, *parashat bo* 5700 (1940), 2:33: “I do not remember what more we said on this matter.” (This last sermon was later stricken out.)

4. Polen, *Holy Fire*, 17–20. Regarding the forced cutting of beards, see: Shapira, *Sermons from the Years of Rage*, *parashat toledot* 5700 (1939), 1:92: “They also cut off the beards of the elders of Israel, such that they are no longer externally recognizable.” Regarding the closure of Jewish workplaces, see *ibid.*, *parashat be-shalah* 5700 (1940), 1:103: “And similarly, when the workers are idle, God forbid, they are in a very embittered mood, for your nation Israel needs sustenance.” Regarding aid organizations, see *ibid.*, *parashat vayyikra* 5700 (1940), 1:112: “When they give alms to one other and receive help from each other.” Regarding hunger and the persecution or humiliation of Jews in the streets, see

ibid., 1:113: “For has an angel tasted the suffering of a Jew at the moment he is beaten, the shame he feels as they pursue and debase him . . . or his hardship when he lacks for food?” Regarding the Nazi justifications for killing Jews and plundering their property, see ibid., *parashat zakhor* 5700 (1940), 1:115: “Now they contrive rationales and explanations for why theft, burglary, murder, and all other foulness are good”; and ibid., *shabbat ha-gadol* 5700 (1940), 1:118–20. Regarding the killing of Jews, see ibid., *pesah* 5700 (1940), 1:125–26; on the prohibition of public prayer, see ibid., *parashat nitsavim* 5700 (1940), 1:153–54; on the plundering of Jewish property, see ibid., *rosh ha-shanah* 5701 (1940), 1:155–58. Regarding the murder of Jews, see ibid., *sukkot* 5702 (1941), 1:226–30; ibid., *parashat zakhor* 5702 (1942), 1:275–82; and on the murder of children, ibid., *hukkat* 5702 (1942), 1:288–306. Regarding the spread of typhus in the Ghetto, see ibid., *parashat toledot* 5702 (1941), 1:233–36. See also Esther-Judith Thidor-Baumel, “*Esh Kodesh: The Book of the Piaseczner Rebbe and Its Place in Understanding Religious Life in the Warsaw Ghetto*” [in Hebrew], *Yalkut Moreshet* 29 (1980): 173–87. For an extensive study of the sermons in light of their historical background, see Henry Abramson, *Torah from the Years of Wrath 1939–1943: The Historical Context of the Aish Kodesh* (CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2017).

5. Polen, *Holy Fire*, 16. Regarding humiliation and threats to human dignity from the beginning of the war, see *Sermons from the Years of Rage, parashat toledot* 5700 (1939), 1:92–93: “Now he is trampled and tread upon until he can no longer sense whether he is a Jew, a human being, or an animal that has no sense of self.” R. Shapira next offers words of consolation and support.

6. For example, see *Sermons from the Years of Rage, parashat shoftim* 5701 (1941), 1:214: “For amid all of our suffering, we see that if everyone were to be suddenly informed that they were to be saved the next day, a great share of the hopeless would still find strength. Regrettably, however, they perceive no end to the darkness, and many have no means of fortifying themselves and are filled with despair as their spirits collapse, God forbid.” It is worth mentioning that rather than hiding this fact from his Hasidim, R. Shapira discusses their dire circumstances in his sermons and may have thus allowed them to process the experience together within the dignified, spiritual framework of the Hasidic gathering.

7. *Sermons from the Years of Rage, parashat ekev* 5701 (1941), 1:209–10. See his note from the end of ibid., 5702 (1942), 1:212 on the destruction of Polish Jewry: “For the holy community is nearly in a state of complete destruction.”

8. Polen, *Holy Fire*, 23–24.

9. See *Sermons from the Years of Rage*, 1:55–56.

10. Ibid., *shabbat hazon* 5702 (1942), 1:313–14.

11. See below, for example, on his feelings of guilt over the very act of writing these sermons.

12. *Sermons from the Years of Rage, parashat vayyeshev* 5700 (1939), 1:97. Although he paraphrases biblical verses, it is clear that R. Shapira’s remarks

allude to both his personal circumstances and his task, as a Hasidic tsaddik, to arouse divine mercy. See *ibid.*: “The blessed Holy One said, ‘It is not enough for the righteous, that which is prepared for them in the world to come.’ It truly is not enough for it be good in the future—mercy must be aroused now [by the tsaddikim].” Regarding the theurgical quality of these sermons, see Don Seeman, “Ritual Efficacy, Hasidic Mysticism and ‘Useless Suffering’ in the Warsaw Ghetto,” *Harvard Theological Review* 101, no. 3–4 (2008): 480–502; James A. Diamond, “The Warsaw Ghetto Rebbe: Diverting God’s Gaze from a Utopian End to an Anguished Now,” *Modern Judaism* 30, no. 3 (2010): 299–331.

13. *Sermons from the Years of Rage, parashat ki tavo* 5700 (1940), 1:152.

14. *Ibid.*, *shabbat zakhor* 5702 (1942), 1:277.

15. ŻIH (Żydowski Instytut Historyczny) Archives, manuscript no. ARG II 15 (Ring. II/370).

16. See Daniel Reiser, “*Esh Kodesh*: A New Evaluation in Light of a Philological Examination of the Manuscript,” *Yad Vashem Studies* 44, no. 1 (2016): 65–97.

17. *Sermons from the Years of Rage, parshat ha-hodesh* 5702 (1942), 1:293. See also Seeman, “Ritual Efficacy, Hasidic Mysticism, and ‘Useless Suffering’ in the Warsaw Ghetto,” 488–89.

18. Ernest Becker, *The Denial of Death* (New York: Free Press, 1973).

19. The need to write as a type of promise for eternal life is already expressed by R. Shapira in 1928: “It is best for a person to write down all his thoughts. Not to earn fame by writing a book, but rather to engrave his soul on paper. By that he will sustain his soul’s worries, its successes and failures . . . and grant it an eternal life within the lives of his readers” (*Tsav ve-zeruz*, 1).

20. See Plato’s dialogues “Apology,” “Crito,” and “Phaedo” in *Plato: Complete Works*, ed. John M. Cooper (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997).

21. *Ibid.*, 28.

22. *Ibid.*, 30.

23. See Yehuda Liebes, “The Consolation of Philosophy: An Introduction to a Translation of the Opening Fragments of Boethius’ *Consolation of Philosophy*” [in Hebrew], *Alpayim* 21 (2001): 215–23.

24. *Ibid.*

25. Viktor Frankl, *Man’s Search for Meaning* (New York: Washington Square Press, 1984).

26. *Ibid.*, 126–27. For more on art and creative activity as a means of contending with pain and suffering in Jewish culture, see B. Kahana, C. Deutsch, and Redman, eds., *The Enigma of Suffering* [in Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Yedioth Ahronoth Books, 2012), 319–48.

27. The irony of discussing Heidegger together with R. Shapira is not lost on this author. Heidegger is a controversial figure, largely for his affiliation with Nazism, for which he neither apologized nor publicly expressed regret.

28. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. J. Macquarrie and E. Robinson (San Francisco: Harper, 1962), 285–311. See also William Large, *Heidegger's Being and Time* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008), 73–79.

29. Rosenzweig, *The Star of Redemption*, 9.

30. *Ibid.*, 9–31.

31. Eccl 1:2 (NJPS).

32. Such a philosophical approach had already been developed by Arthur Schopenhauer, Søren Kierkegaard, and in numerous works of Russian literature, but Shestov brought it to a climax. See Adir Cohen, “Thinking Your Life: The Personal Story Meets the Philosophical Story” [in Hebrew], *Iyun u-Nehkar be-Hakhsharat Morim* 10 (2006): 191–219; Nikolai Alexandrovich Berdyaev, “Lev Shestov i Kirkegaard,” *Sovremennye Zapiski* 62 (1936), 376–82 [English trans. by Fr. S. Janos, [http://www.berdyaev.com/berdiaev/berd\\_lib/1936\\_419.html](http://www.berdyaev.com/berdiaev/berd_lib/1936_419.html)]. See also Elliot Wolfson, *Alef, Mem, Tau: Kabbalistic Musings on Time, Truth, and Death* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 156–74.

33. Ps 130:1.

34. Ps 22:2.

35. Ps 42:10.

36. Lev Shestov, *Athens and Jerusalem*, trans. B. Martin (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1966), 489. *Besinnen* in German means to think about something.

37. Shestov did not reject scientific truth or technological advancement, but he did not think that science could endow man's life with meaning.

38. Cohen, “Thinking Your Life,” 201.

39. *Ibid.*, 202. A similar perception, without the element of faith, appears in the philosophy of Heidegger. For him, death must by necessity lead to life, to the powerful longing to live life to the fullest and actualize the potential latent within us. Death “attracts” us in order that we might thrust it aside, in order that we put an end to that routine that transforms us into creations engaged in evading being rather than being itself. Our escape from death is the escape from life into the “safe” hands of “them,” who endow us with false meaning and security and take away from us our most precious possession—our selfhood. See the summary in Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 311.

40. Hillel Zeitlin, “Rebbe: Craftsman and Pedagogue” [in Hebrew], in Zeitlin, *Sifran shel Yehidim* (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1979), 241–44.

41. Hillel Zeitlin, “From the Depths of Doubt and Despair (On the Tremendous Striving of Lev Shestov)” [in Hebrew], *Ha-Tekufah* 20 (1923): 425–44 and 21 (1924): 369–79. I am grateful to Sam Glauber for drawing my attention to important differences between Hillel Zeitlin's original words, which were published in his lifetime, and his edited books, which were published after his death.

42. *Ibid.*, 427.

43. *Ibid.*, 428–29. See further *ibid.*, 442–43.



44. Hillel Zeitlin, "L. Shestov" [in Hebrew], *Ha-Me'orer* 2, no. 5 (1907): 177.
45. B. Bava Batra 10b. See Zeitlin, "L. Shestov," who observes that the discussion pertains to martyrdom: "Martyrs—no other creation can stand in their company." See also *Midrash Zuta Kohelet* 9:10 [Buber]; *Kohelet Rabba* 9:1 [Vilna].
46. Kalonymus Kalman Shapira, *Derekh ha-Melekh parashat vayyeshev* 5690 (1929), 51. The word *roshem* in Hebrew has two meanings: "impression" and "to write." R. Shapira makes clever use of the word, implying both meanings.
47. *Ibid.*, 53. See also *ibid.*, 433: "I am writing notes (*reshimot*) on *Sefer ha-Zohar*, that these notes will, with God's help, inscribe the holy *Zohar* within me (*ve-yirashem be-Zohar ha-kadosh*).
48. M. Avot 4:16.
49. However, see an attempt to indicate a gradated doctrine: Polen, *Holy Fire*; Hershkowitz, "Rabbi Kalonymus Kalmish Shapira."
50. See Don Seeman, "Sacred Fire (Review)," *Common Knowledge* 9, no. 3 (2003): 547; Seeman, "Otherwise Than Meaning: On the Generosity of Ritual," *Social Analysis* 48, no. 2 (2004): 55–71; Seeman, "Ritual Efficacy," 465–505.
51. Seeman, "Ritual Efficacy," 505.
52. Seeman, "Otherwise Than Meaning," 57–59.
53. *Ibid.*, 67.
54. Seeman, "Ritual Efficacy," 480.
55. *Ibid.*, 501.
56. See Elliot Wolfson, "The Mystical Significance of Torah Study in German Pietism," *JQR* 84 (1993): 43–78; Moshe Idel, "Torah: Between Presence and Representation of the Divine in Jewish Mysticism," in Idel, *Representing God* (Boston: Brill, 2014), 31–70. Regarding Talmud study as a devotional practice and a search for mystical self-expression in the teachings of R. Shapira, see Ariel Evan Mayse's article in this volume.
57. Seeman, "Otherwise Than Meaning," 66.
58. Seeman, "Ritual Efficacy," 498.
59. See Norman Lamm, "Pukhovitzer's concept of Torah lishmah," *Jewish Social Studies* 30, no. 3 (1968): 149–56; Lamm, *Torah Lishmah: Torah for Torah's Sake in the Works of Rabbi Hayyim of Volozhin and His Contemporaries* (New York: Yeshiva University Press, 1989); Roland Goetschel, "Torah Lishmah as a Central Concept in the 'Degel mahane Efrayim' of Moses Hayyim Ephraim of Sudytkow," in *Hasidism Reappraised*, ed. Ada Rapoport-Albert (London: Vallentine Mitchell, 1996), 258–67.
60. M. Peah 1:1: "The study of Torah exceeds them all."
61. I want to emphasize that R. Shapira's depiction of writing as a natural obligation was already expressed in his prewar *Tsav ve-zeruz*, 42: "When will I pay my debts to *my soul*, after I promised her [my soul] to deliver from within her books and other writings . . . with which she is pregnant." Emphasis added. I would like to thank Shalom Matan Shalom for bringing this passage to my attention.

62. See Ariel Evan Mayse, this volume.

63. *Sermons from the Years of Rage*, 1:52, 70–72.

64. Seeman, “Ritual Efficacy,” 467.

65. In contrast to that of R. Shapira, R. Teikhtal’s writing during the Holocaust (the work *Eim Ha-Banim Semehah*) is a clear example of writing that is done declaredly as an active mystical ritual. Teikhtal writes his book as an act of mystical activity in order to attract the merit (*zekhut*) of the Land of Israel to the Diaspora and thereby be saved. See Eliezer Schweid, *From Ruin to Salvation* [in Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 1994), 100–104.