

# Introduction

## ATTENTION!!

Blessed is God. I have the honor of requesting the esteemed individual or institution that finds my enclosed writings . . . to please exert themselves to send them to the Land of Israel to the following address. . . . When the Blessed One shows mercy so that the remaining Jews and I 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.

On the first of December 1950, Warsaw construction workers unearthed two aluminum milk canisters from an excavation site at 68 Nowolipki Street. Like a message in a bottle from a destroyed world, they were found to contain a treasure of previously unknown documents from the clandestine “Ringelblum archives” documenting the lives, deaths, and mass murder of Warsaw Jewry.<sup>1</sup> A similar cache of ten metal boxes (containing some 25,540 pages of documentation) had been discovered in the same location in 1946, and a third (that we know of), buried elsewhere, has never been found.<sup>2</sup> The two canisters discovered in 1950, containing 9,829 pages of documentation, were better preserved than the previous cache. It is our good fortune that the handwritten manuscripts of R. Kalonymus Kalman Shapira (1889–1943), otherwise known as the Piaseczner Rebbe, were among the documents preserved.

Rabbi Shapira was the scion of a relatively minor Hasidic dynasty, but he founded one of the largest Hasidic academies in interbellum Warsaw.

He experimented with new literary forms, and his influence among a wide variety of readers has only continued to grow. Before the war, he had already published one innovative tract on Hasidic pedagogy (*Hovat ha-talmidim*, published in English as *A Student's Obligation*) and had distributed a handbook on mystical fraternities (*Benei mahshavah tovah*, published as *Conscious Community*) among his close disciples.<sup>3</sup> A volume of sermons from the 1920s and 1930s was published posthumously under the title *Derekh ha-melekh* (*The King's Way*).<sup>4</sup> His students also separately published his Yiddish-language sermon for the Sabbath before Yom Kippur in Piaseczno in 1936.<sup>5</sup> The buried Warsaw archive brought several additional manuscripts to light. These included mystical and pedagogical tracts devoted to students and devotees at different developmental levels: *Hakhsharat ha-avrekhim* (*The Young Men's Preparation*), *Mevo ha-she'arim* (*Entrance to the Gates*), and his personal journal, *Tsav ve-zeruz* (*Command and Urging*). It also included a one hundred page handwritten manuscript of wartime sermons, *Hiddushei torah mi-shnot ha-za'am 5700–5702*, originally published under the title *Esh kodesh* (translated as *Sacred Fire*) by Piaseczner Hasidim who survived the war.<sup>6</sup> The sermons were all composed in Warsaw between September 1939 (Hebrew year 5700) and July 1942 (5702). Reiser has shown that R. Shapira consigned his manuscripts to the underground archive for safekeeping in January 1943, coinciding with the beginning of armed Jewish resistance in the Warsaw Ghetto; they were buried at 68 Nowolipki that February. By the middle of May, the last of the Jews in Warsaw (estimated around four hundred thousand at the Ghetto's most populous phase) were dead or facing almost certain death under deportation to various camps. It is believed that R. Shapira was sent to the Trawniki work camp, whose surviving prisoners were marched into the forest and shot on or around November 3, 1943. He would have been just fifty-four years of age.

Since their discovery, R. Shapira's texts have been published, republished, and in several cases translated for a broad popular audience. They have engendered a dedicated readership across a wide range of religious communities, from ultra-Orthodox to New Age and Neo-Hasidic, and have contributed to a public renaissance in appreciation for Hasidic ideas and texts. They have also engendered a significant and growing body of scholarly research. Our own volume, *Hasidism, Suffering, and Renewal*, was made possible by the recognition that a critical mass of such scholarship now invites reflection across a wide variety of methods and disciplines. This interdisciplinary volume thus includes contributions from scholars whose

interest in Hasidic studies has been inflected by social history, literature, anthropology, modern Jewish thought and theology, phenomenology of religion, and the history of ideas. This generates some degree of incommensurability among the approaches taken by our writers, but it also allows the volume as a whole to explore some of the more important tensions and controversies raised by the study of R. Shapira's legacy. What is his relationship to the different spiritual and intellectual genealogies of Hasidism and, later, Neo-Hasidism? How insistent must we be about locating his activity in the context, not just of Hasidism, but of interbellum Poland or modern Jewish thought? What literary techniques did he employ, and how are they related to the various registers in which these texts might be read— theological, literary-aesthetic, phenomenological? What light, if any, can the prewar and Holocaust writings shed upon one another? Or, to frame this in more existential terms, to what extent do the Warsaw Ghetto sermons bear witness to the resilience of faith in extremis or to the final rupture of meaning and human subjectivity? While academic scholarship must have its due, none of these are exclusively academic problems or concerns, nor are academics the only audience for these debates.

One reason for our decision to publish this volume at this time was our recognition that this field has been changed irrevocably by the publication of Daniel Reiser's groundbreaking critical edition of R. Shapira's wartime sermons. These were originally published in 1960 by survivors of the Piaseczno Hasidic community under the title *Esh kodesh (Sacred Fire)*, but the title of Reiser's volume, *Derashot mi-shnot ha-za'am (Sermons from the Years of Rage)*, is closer to the author's description of his own work (no consistent title appears in the original manuscript), and we use it throughout. For the first time, thanks to Reiser, we can now encounter the text as R. Shapira apparently intended it to appear, free of inadvertent distortion by editors who may have had difficulty deciphering his handwriting (written under almost unbelievable duress) or the numerous notes and symbols that he left as guidance for some future editor.

No less important, Reiser also demonstrates that R. Shapira continued to edit his work, including the *Sermons from the Years of Rage*, until the very end of his capacity to go on doing so. Reiser devotes an entire volume to clarification of the handwritten corrections, marginalia, and even additions or deletions of whole passages, which sometimes reflect the author's ongoing and emergent experience of the genocide unfolding all around him. This collection of sermons may well have been the last work of traditional Hasidic scholarship ever composed on Polish soil, and

it remains one of the only surviving rabbinic works of any kind composed directly under Holocaust conditions (i.e., not composed by an author who had already escaped or had yet to suffer the full force of Nazi brutality). All of our authors used Reiser's new edition for their reflections upon *Sermons from the Years of Rage*, and this alone constitutes an advance over previous efforts to leverage these texts for our understanding of life in the context of almost unimaginable suffering.

Our decision to divide this volume into two sections, "Hasidism and Renewal" followed by "Text, Theodicy, and Suffering," reflects our conviction that while the prewar and Ghetto-era writings each deserve dedicated and detailed attention, the wartime sermons should no longer be read in a vacuum. While early scholarship on the Hasidism of Piaseczno understandably emphasized radical suffering and Holocaust experience, it has more recently become clear just how essential the prewar writings are for any honest appraisal of R. Shapira's contribution. These interbellum writings portray a Hasidic leader working hard to develop new literary strategies for communication with a diversifying and, in many cases, secularizing urban audience, focused particularly on youth.

After the terrible upheavals and dislocations of World War I, even faithful Hasidim were increasingly drawn to what Marcin Wodziński here calls "à la carte Hasidism," whose effect on the conditions of R. Shapira's work may have been decisive.<sup>7</sup> Newly urbanized interbellum Polish Hasidim had the option not just to secularize or leave the Hasidic community but also to draw, in eclectic and individualizing ways, upon a variety of Hasidic schools and masters simultaneously. This was the context in which R. Shapira developed some of his most interesting prewar teachings on pedagogy and new forms of visionary-contemplative technique. It was also the context for his distinctive interpretation of Jewish modernity through the lens of both prophetic renewal and the contemporary psychotherapeutic discourse of nervous disorder. Both of these were common themes in early-twentieth-century Jewish writing, but R. Shapira brings them together in exceptionally powerful and suggestive ways. It has already been noted that Abraham Joshua Heschel's later work on biblical prophecy may best be understood in light of Hasidic motifs very similar to those R. Shapira develops.<sup>8</sup>

We are gratified that *Hasidism, Suffering, and Renewal* will appear in a prominent series devoted to contemporary Jewish thought. This only serves to underscore a growing appreciation for the importance of

Hasidism—including “late” and not just allegedly pure or authentic “early” Hasidism—to the spiritual and intellectual contours of modern Jewish life.<sup>9</sup> Study of Piaseczno Hasidism should mediate against any claim that later Polish Hasidism as a whole had stagnated, was uninterested in the project of spiritual self-renewal, or had essentially given up on the potential for ecstasy and mystical experience.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, along with his unprecedented depiction of suffering, which pushes theological expression to its very limits, R. Shapira’s emphasis on sociospiritual renewal, mystical technique, and literary outreach to a mobile and diversifying urban community all underline his potential relevance to contemporary spiritual life.

### What Is Hasidism, and Who Is R. Shapira?

The movement of mystical renewal that came to be known as Hasidism grew out of the teachings of R. Israel ben Eliezer of Miedzybozh (Ukr. Medzhibizh, d. 1760), popularly known as the Besht or Baal Shem Tov (“Master of the Good Name”).<sup>11</sup> This enigmatic and creative mystic lived in Podolia (modern Ukraine) near the Carpathian Mountains.<sup>12</sup> There are few historical sources that shed light on the Baal Shem Tov’s life, but Hasidic hagiography tells of humble beginnings followed by periods of solitude and mystical study. After “revealing” himself in the 1730s, he began to preach an approach to religious life that foregrounded the values of divine immanence, human joy, and ecstasy through prayer.<sup>13</sup> Hasidism has tended to reject the rigorous self-mortification of some earlier pietistic schools in favor of a more psychological and, in many cases, broadly pantheistic (or panentheistic) approach. Beshtian Hasidism typically emphasizes *devekut*, or cleaving to the divine, through the spiritual uprush of ecstatic prayer, performance of the commandments, and *avodah ba-gashmiyut*, or devotion through apparently mundane acts such as eating or drinking with proper intent.<sup>14</sup> Sometimes, Hasidism described the goal of devotional practice not just as personal *devekut* but also as “freeing the sparks” that had been trapped, according to Lurianic kabbalah, within the phenomenal world at the time of creation.<sup>15</sup> In some schools, this might even be described as a sort of divine ecology, with vitality “drawn down” through some activities (such as fasting, prayer, or even ritual weeping, identified with *tzimtzum*), then “raised up” again through others—especially acts of enjoyment or pleasure accompanied by correct intention.<sup>16</sup> These teachings frequently

focused on the activity of the tsaddik, or rebbe, whose activities rendered him a veritable “axis mundi”<sup>17</sup> or channel for divine vitality and ritual efficacy, including what Moshe Idel has described as “magic.”<sup>18</sup>

There is no evidence that the Baal Shem Tov sought to establish a new religious movement, though later Hasidic schools unanimously relate to him as a founder. It was only in the decades after his death that a social movement known as Hasidism began to crystallize, particularly under the leadership of “the Maggid,” R. Dov Ber of Mezritsh, who was already a talmudic scholar and ascetic before he met the Baal Shem Tov.<sup>19</sup> The Maggid’s own disciples included scholars from some of the most illustrious families in eastern Europe, who quickly began to develop their own distinctive devotional styles and to spread their diversifying schools, or “courts,” through all the Jewish population centers in the region.<sup>20</sup> Among the Maggid’s direct disciples was R. Shapira’s paternal ancestor Elimelekh of Lizhensk, who did much to develop the centrality of the tsaddik to Hasidic devotion. Some of these developments were alarming to established rabbinic leadership, engendering more than a generation of bans and counterbans until the two sides attained some degree of rapprochement. Ultimately, Hasidism became the dominant form of Jewish traditionalism in the Jewish communities of the former Polish commonwealth (Galicia and Western Russia) before the Holocaust.

Some Hasidic leaders were clearly aware of the western European Haskalah (Jewish Enlightenment) by the early 1770s. Over the next four decades, however, those modernist ideals grew from a sporadic trickle to a steady stream of modernizing and, in many cases, secularizing influence, which also took new forms, such as socialism and various types of Jewish nationalism, as they traveled east. In this context, Hasidism had little choice but to join forces, to some degree, with its old opponents, the *mitnagdim*, who also opposed at least some forms of secularization.<sup>21</sup> Meanwhile, the position of Hasidic tsaddik developed into a hereditary office whose holders could not always match the charismatic force of their predecessors.<sup>22</sup> The deaths of the Maggid’s immediate disciples by the first decade of the nineteenth century have been described as a turning point toward greater social and theological conservatism.<sup>23</sup> This century also saw the Hasidic movement reach the apogee of its demographic reach, its political influence, and its ability to selectively resist some unwelcome features of modernity.<sup>24</sup> Though possibly overemphasized by romanticizing scholars, there is evidence that some nineteenth-century Hasidim, such

as R. Nahman of Bratslav, did seek to revitalize what they had come to perceive as an ossifying religious traditionalism.<sup>25</sup>

Anti-Jewish legislation and the pogroms that began during the 1880s helped to stimulate mass emigration from eastern Europe and brought any sense of a Hasidic golden age crashing down. Worsening conditions also increased the resonance of explicitly secularizing platforms such as socialism or Zionism, both of which tended to identify Hasidic piety with a kind of quietism that persecuted Jews could no longer afford. Soon enough, World War I and the fall of multiethnic empires would come to dislocate hundreds of thousands of Jews, forcing newly urbanized Hasidim now living in places like Warsaw and Vienna to find their way economically and politically within an unstable and frequently hostile constellation of European states.

This is the context within which R. Shapira's own life as a descendant of major figures in the Hasidic movement (on both his father's and his mother's side) begins to take shape.<sup>26</sup> Kalonymos Shapira was born on July 13, 1889,<sup>27</sup> to R. Elimelekh Shapira (known as the Grodzisker Rebbe, 1824–1892) and Hannah Berakhah, the daughter of R. Hayyim Shemuel Horowicz of Chęciny.<sup>28</sup> His father passed away before his third birthday, leaving him to be raised in the home of R. Yerahmiel Moshe Hopstein (the Kozhnytser Rebbe, 1860–1909), his father's grandson through a prior marriage. Hopstein later became Shapira's father-in-law when, at the age of sixteen, Shapira married the rebbe's daughter, Rahel Hayya Miriam, after an engagement that began when he was just thirteen.<sup>29</sup> Rahel Hayya Miriam was renowned for her erudition and took an active role in Kalonymus's writing before her untimely death in 1937. It is likely that she was memorialized in her husband's later sermons on the prophetess Miriam, but there is as yet no sustained study of her own possible stylistic or conceptual influence on her husband's teaching.<sup>30</sup>

Shapira was appointed rabbi of the city of Piaseczno in 1913, at the age of twenty-four. Following the Great War in 1917, he moved to nearby Warsaw but continued to visit Piaseczno frequently. In 1923, he founded a Warsaw yeshiva for boys, named Da'at Moshe in memory of his father-in-law, which became one of the largest Hasidic academies in the Polish capitol.<sup>31</sup> His Hasidim and students described R. Shapira as a person of elegant countenance, projecting an air of gravitas and nobility and evincing remarkable concern for the education of children.<sup>32</sup> His relationship to the world around him was complex and nuanced. In addition

to his sacred studies in Hasidism, Jewish law, and Bible, he taught himself about medicine and other secular subjects.<sup>33</sup> He wrote Hasidic melodies and learned to play the violin like his wife's father but stopped playing when Rahel Hayya Miriam died at a young age.<sup>34</sup> R. Shapira served as a mohel (ritual circumciser)<sup>35</sup> and was an active member of the Orthodox Jewish political alliance Agudath Israel,<sup>36</sup> though he favored a section of the movement that was more positively disposed toward settlement in the land of Israel than most, and even purchased property there. His brother, Rabbi Yeshayahu Shapiro, "the Pioneer Rabbi," joined the religious Zionist movement Mizrahi and moved to an agricultural settlement in the Land of Israel before the war.<sup>37</sup> R. Shapira's only son, Elimelekh Ben-Zion, died a lingering death from shrapnel wounds during the festival of Sukkot on September 29, 1939. His daughter-in-law and sister-in-law—the latter a religious Zionist pioneer who had helped to build the Kfar Hasidim settlement—were also killed on September 26, when the hospital at which they were visiting Elimelekh came under German artillery fire. Not long after, his elderly mother passed away as well, and he recited Kaddish on her behalf.<sup>38</sup> Many of his own most intimate losses therefore occurred even before German troops had secured Warsaw.

The Warsaw Ghetto was established in October 1940 (its borders encompassed R. Shapira's home at 5 Dzielna) and sealed off from the rest of the city in November. Four hundred thousand Jews from Warsaw and surrounding towns were incarcerated there in an area of just 1.3 square miles. During the first two years of its existence alone, 83,000 people died of disease and starvation, and by late 1942, Ghetto governance had moved to an explicit policy of genocide through direct killing, starvation, and gradual deportation. Between late July and mid-September 1942, 265,000 Jews were sent to their deaths at Treblinka.<sup>39</sup> These realities, and the dawning realization of the annihilation of European Jewry, provide the background against which *Sermons from the Years of Rage* was composed.

R. Shapira apparently had a number of opportunities to leave the Ghetto before its liquidation in 1943 but "declared that it was unthinkable that he should save himself and leave his brothers to moan."<sup>40</sup> The American Joint Distribution Committee sought to procure him and some other Jewish leaders an exit visa from Poland but was rebuffed. A contemporary journalist cited him as saying, "I will not abandon my Hasidim at such a difficult time."<sup>41</sup> He continued to serve as a spiritual leader throughout his time in the Ghetto and even survived the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, which led to its final "liquidation" after Passover 1943. Scholars are not

sure about the place and circumstances of his death, but it is believed, as we have already mentioned, that he was among a group that was marched into the forest and shot in early November 1943.

### Renewal, Vitality, and the Human Subject

The theme of renewal that dominates the first half of this book raises important questions about R. Shapira's relationship to the genealogy of Hasidism, past and present. Marcin Wodziński (chapter 1) sets the stage by locating R. Shapira within the context of newly urban "à la carte" Polish Hasidism between the wars. If the number of documented followers and *shtiblekh* (prayer houses) identified with Piaseczno Hasidim serves as any guide, Wodziński concludes, R. Shapira should be thought of as "a minor tsaddik but a major Hasidic innovator, who long after his death became one of the most prominent figures of Polish Hasidism." R. Shapira's innovations took several forms, including the development of extensive contemplative techniques grounded in earlier Hasidic and possibly even medieval kabbalistic practice but also taking on new "cinematic" qualities of sustained narrative visualization that go beyond earlier Jewish mystical writers.<sup>42</sup> Moshe Idel (chapter 2) identifies close parallels between certain passages in R. Shapira's pedagogic tracts and those in Abulafia's thirteenth-century ecstatic Kabbalah, though he notes that R. Shapira also wrote under the influence of more proximate Hasidic writers as well as modern psychological and therapeutic discourse related to mesmerism, hypnosis, and nervous disorder.<sup>43</sup>

Indeed, although the majority of his citations are to R. Shapira's immediate Hasidic forbears, Idel provocatively suggests that his phenomenological style—his emphasis on contemplative technique and mystical experience rather than the power of the tsaddik—betrays a kinship with other branches of Hasidism entirely, the diverse "spiritualizing" trends identified with the Maggid, Chabad, or Kotsk-Izhbits. More suggestive still is Idel's claim that these features of what Seeman (chapter 14) refers to as "Hasidic modernism" may have been influenced by growing familiarity with figures such as Swami Vivekananda, who had recently visited eastern Europe. At the same time, in his evaluation of R. Shapira's handbook for mystical fraternities, *Benei mahshavah tovah*, Zvi Leshem (chapter 4) offers an unprecedentedly detailed account of connections and parallels to the mystical fellowship of the Zohar and to nineteenth-century Hasidic

fraternities established in the Galilean city of Tiberius. Collectively, the writers of this volume demonstrate the inadequacy of treating the search for intellectual genealogies in R. Shapira's oeuvre as if it were a simple taxonomic project. It should be viewed instead as a means of opening up the text in all of its potential keys and registers, including some that may not yet have been discovered. Rigorously establishing the contours of R. Shapira's own socioreligious context and taking his potential contemporary relevance as seriously as that of any other great author requires an openness to possibly unforeseen juxtapositions as well as resistance to any delimiting academic paradigms, including an overemphasis on historical "proximism."<sup>44</sup>

Hasidic renewal must be understood on a number of different levels simultaneously. On page after page of R. Shapira's text, it refers not only to the infusing of Hasidic life with a renewed sense of purpose or charisma in the Weberian sense but also to the literal repair of blocked or desiccated channels for the flow of divine vitality into human life and awareness. Kalonymus Shapira precedes Gershom Scholem in noting that Hasidism transformed the theosophy of medieval Kabbalah into a kind of mystical psychology that both describes and shapes the contours of human subjectivity—which is also, not insignificantly, where the locus of devotional activity has moved.<sup>45</sup> R. Shapira only sharpens this trend through his emotionally evocative sermons and pedagogic manuals as well as his handbook for mystical fraternities described by Leshem. Perhaps more surprising is that R. Shapira applied the same paradigm to the study of legal and talmudic texts, which were, after all, the strong backbone of the traditional rabbinic curriculum. A crucial hub of R. Shapira's teaching, made explicit by Ariel Evan Mayse in chapter 3, is that the flow of divine vitality—the "pulsing core of Torah"—is itself identified with the free flow of charged subjectivity, emotion, or feeling, "thus fusing the nomian with the emotive in order to generate a fully integrated religious experience."

Personalism is manifest everywhere in R. Shapira's work, deeply imbricated with his monistic appreciation for the sheer corporeality of human life, mediated and underwritten by sacred text and language through which, according to Beshtian Hasidism, the world is continually renewed. In slightly different ways, David Maayan (chapter 5) and Ora Wiskind (chapter 6) each analyze R. Shapira's striking focus on the religious legitimacy of the unique, embodied subjectivity of each individual (not just the *tsaddik*), that emerges from the prewar writings. Maayan claims that this "incarnational theology" mediates against the adoption of *bittul*

or any other form of self-annihilation as a central motif in Piaseczno, as it is, for example, in Chabad.<sup>46</sup> Since all existence is underwritten by the vitality conveyed by the sacred letters, no aspect of corporeal life should be considered irredeemable. Wiskind, meanwhile, breaks new ground by attending to the nuanced and delicate literary strategies through which R. Shapira approaches these themes in order to promote particular forms of modern Hasidic “mindfulness” and emergent religious subjectivity in his still insufficiently studied prewar sermons. These themes would later be tested in the Warsaw Ghetto’s crucible.

### Rupture, Efficacy, and the End of Meaning?

Some of the most generative debates in this volume concern the problem of meaning in R. Shapira’s oeuvre. There are at least two parts to this problem, the first of which is a general one (what sort of hermeneutic best reveals the significance of Hasidic texts?), while the second calls attention to the specific question of rupture and continuity in light of the Holocaust. With respect to the first problem, writers in this volume might be broadly divided between those who emphasize a theological-discursive paradigm seeking to clarify some area of R. Shapira’s thought and a cluster of alternative readings that focus on textual practice through the prism of literary, psychological, or ritual efficacy: “how Hasidic authors do things with words.”<sup>47</sup> The latter might include the literary-aesthetic evocation of existential drama and concern, the shaping of a distinctively Hasidic religious and ethical habitus, or the channeling of divine vitality and blessing. While any of these textual effects might also invoke particular Hasidic “doctrines” such as divine immanence or acosmism, scholars in this group emphasize the emergent properties of textual effects that are not easily abstracted from the particular literary and ritual contexts in which they appear. To take just one debate that resonates through this volume: Should “faith” be treated as belief in a set of propositional contents that can be stated abstractly or is it better understood as a kind of experience related to ritual efficacy and channeling of vitality? In the latter case, the medium really cannot be meaningfully separated from the message.<sup>48</sup>

Each of these two broad approaches offers certain advantages. One benefit of the intellectualist “Hasidic thought” paradigm (which remains dominant in contemporary Hasidic studies) is that it encourages readers to focus deeply on the specific theological content the texts avowedly

convey, their intellectual genealogies and specialized terminologies. In the best cases, this approach makes the discursive content of Hasidic texts available for analytic comparison with other schools of Hasidism as well as other religious and intellectual traditions. Scholarship in Hasidic thought has rendered insupportable the views of earlier writers who once treated Hasidism as little more than an eruption of Dionysian irrationality and superstition, or who portrayed it as a shallow aberration from the sober rabbinic, philosophical, or emancipatory-secular forms of Jewish life to which scholars themselves may have been committed.<sup>49</sup>

A significant though not always realized concomitant of this intellectualist approach is that the translation of labyrinthine homiletic or exegetical literature into repositories of discursive content or doctrine might, under the right circumstances, accord to “Hasidic thought” the implied dignity of ideas that would allow it to be taken seriously in communities of readership outside of its native ritual or sectarian context. Daniel Reiser’s painstaking archaeology of the *Sermons from the Years of Rage*, described in chapter 8 (and ably reviewed by Moria Herman in chapter 7), is therefore noteworthy for drawing R. Shapira’s wartime sermons into conversation with recognized figures of Western thought, such as Franz Rosenzweig, Ernest Becker, even Socrates. Reiser nonetheless signals his own view that scholars should go beyond the philosophical “content” of the sermons by attending to the phenomenological contradictions that defined their composition in the face of genocide. Herman’s and Reiser’s accounts of the technical work involved in Reiser’s critical edition are crucial here, because several of the subsequent chapters argue about the significance of textual features that would have been impossible to address without this painstaking research.

Nehemia Polen was one of the first scholars to treat *Sermons from the Years of Rage* (or *Esh Kodesh*, as it was popularly known) seriously on an intellectual level, so it is especially gratifying that he has taken the opportunity of his essay in chapter 9 of this volume to reexamine his own methodology in light of Reiser’s critical edition. By analyzing a complete June 1942 sermon, available for the first time in its original layering and paragraphing, Polen demonstrates the emergent quality of themes such as gender and mortality, the desperate human “thirst” for God, and “the divinity of children” as bearers of human continuity in the face of death. These are not easily identifiable as “doctrines,” inasmuch as they are said to depend upon an “architectural integrity” that emerges from the unfolding movement of the original sermon. Rather than mining

the sermon for abstract ideas to be unearthed and carried away, in other words, Polen treats it like a musical score whose significance can only be appreciated through engagement with the context in which it unfolds.<sup>50</sup> Indeed, music, ritual, and homiletic writing are all arguably intractable to systematic formulation precisely because they have in common this temporal dimension of unfolding over time.<sup>51</sup> The tension (it probably should not be thought of as an outright contradiction) between these two paradigms runs throughout this volume, but become more explicit in the chapters dealing with R. Shapira's Holocaust-era sermons.

Even under duress, it is obvious that R. Shapira engaged broad dimensions of the Jewish literary and intellectual tradition. James A. Diamond (chapter 10) provocatively argues that *Sermons from the Years of Rage* invokes Maimonidean philosophical language precisely in order to establish a distinctively Hasidic, and determinedly nonphilosophical response to radical suffering, beyond all reason and intelligibility. In this reading, the Aristotelian unity of the knower and the known allows for the mystical identification of the divine with human suffering. Erin Leib Smokler (chapter 11), similarly, traces R. Shapira's daring use of a well-known talmudic concept, *yissurim shel ahavah* or "chastenings born of love," to engage and ultimately transcend any possible Jewish theodicy of justice and intelligibility under Ghetto conditions. Extraordinary in both chapters is the sense of a deep, possibly inevitable rupture in Jewish thought occasioned by the Holocaust yet conveyed in the language of the exegetical tradition.

Despite its considerable power, critics of the traditional academic emphasis on Hasidic "thought" argue that this focus threatens to overintellectualize religious life. Moshe Idel has critiqued the "theologization" of Hasidism and points in this volume (chapter 2) to the "conceptual fluidity" he associates with R. Shapira's approach, calling for a more phenomenological analysis of how Hasidic texts function. Several other authors also offer implicit or explicit critique of the intellectualist paradigm. Ora Wiskind (chapter 6) calls for a holistic literary analysis of the prewar and wartime sermons, attuned to the ways in which they consistently thematize "self-awareness, emotion, the need for inner psychic unity, empowerment, the urgency of communication, and an endless desire for divine presence." Don Seeman (chapter 14) endorses this formulation in the context of an expansive, anthropologically informed understanding of textual practice. Seeman focuses on the relationship between what he calls literary and ritual efficacy—the ways in which these texts are both written and read in

attunement with urgent projects such as renewal, healing, and the defense of human subjectivity against collapse. These are contingent and quotidian goals that can only be appreciated against the backdrop of potential failure, to which R. Shapira was extraordinarily sensitive.

While these issues can be raised with respect to virtually any Hasidic text, they arise here with special force because of the extreme conditions under which R. Shapira labored. In his provocative essay (chapter 13), Shaul Magid argues that by the time R. Shapira consigned his manuscripts for burial, he had already been forced to acknowledge the apparent success of the Nazi genocide and with it the apparent collapse of Judaism's covenantal framework. While the sermons themselves may remain equivocal, Magid claims he can show on the basis of a late postscript that the author of *Sermons from the Years of Rage* suffered a crisis of faith profound enough to establish him as a "missing link" between traditional Judaism and radical post-Holocaust theology. This is a claim that has, not surprisingly, engendered some spirited public debate (mentioned in chapter 14), but on a scholarly level, Magid raises issues that must be addressed, and he does so with admirable clarity. Implicitly or explicitly, most of the authors in the second half of this book relate to the issue of rupture and faith that Magid raises.

With a few exceptions, R. Shapira typically makes only oblique reference to contemporary events in his Warsaw sermons. Henry Abramson (chapter 12) argues plausibly that historical research into the dates on which particular sermons were first composed can therefore shed significant new light on their meaning. He associates the intensifying urgency of sermons beginning in mid-February 1942, for example, with the eyewitness testimony of mass murders that a Jewish refugee from Chelmno had recently brought with him to Warsaw. Without such contextualization, we may fail to grasp the "original and primary purpose" of these sermons, which was ostensibly to address the fear, grief, and demoralization of Ghetto inhabitants. By the same token, Abramson insists that R. Shapira's own faith was never in question. "At no point does R. Shapira ever despair of God's existence and omnipotence, even up to his final will and testament. . . . He maintains an active, passionate relationship with God . . . sometimes raising his voice in anguish and fear but always confident in God's ability to save the Jewish people." While he may have come to despair of *history*, Abramson asserts, "even a cursory reading of the wartime writings demonstrates the absurdity of attributing a loss of faith to their author." Magid counters that he finds the proposed distinction between faith in God and faith

in history untenable given the long Jewish commitment to covenantal/providential thinking.

Responding to Magid's challenge that his critics rarely define precisely what they mean by "faith" in these disputes, Seeman brings this volume to a close (chapter 14) by arguing that R. Shapira almost always refers to this term (Heb. *emunah*) in terms of ritual efficacy and unimpeded flow of divine vitality rather than "belief" in a propositional sense. Such efficacy is, to repeat, never a foregone conclusion; vital flow may be halting, susceptible to blockage, or to desiccating disconnection from its source. The identification between vital flow and the experience of affect in Hasidic thought therefore contributes to R. Shapira's phenomenological turn, inasmuch as the literary *description* of experience and its ritual *modulation* are deeply intertwined. With that, Seeman brings radical suffering and the problem of meaning that are emphasized in the second half of this volume back to the analysis of Hasidic renewal with which our volume began.

### Hasidism, Neo-Hasidism, Hasidic Modernism

A few final words of context are in order. Very few Piaseczner Hasidim survived the second world war. The small group of followers who did survive were unable to reconstitute themselves in the manner of larger groups like Satmar, Ger, Belz, and Vizhnits, whose leaders all left Europe before the Holocaust, or Chabad, whose remarkable resurrection began with the escape of its leadership to the United States in 1940. Nevertheless, the last several decades have witnessed a surge in interest in the Hasidism of Piaseczno among a diverse group of scholars, seekers, and admirers.

Among the contemporary institutions laying claim to the Piaseczno legacy is a synagogue in Ramat Beit Shemesh, Israel, whose rabbi is the grandson of R. Shapira's younger brother Yeshayahu, who joined a religious agricultural settlement in Palestine before the war.<sup>52</sup> This synagogue and its associated study hall are located in a heavily Orthodox neighborhood, but its visitors are not necessarily Hasidim in any classical sense. The synagogue promotes the study of R. Shapira's writings, including his pedagogical tracts, and uses some of the *niggunim*, or melodies, that he wrote. Nevertheless, the fact that R. Shapira left no dynastic successor may have allowed his teachings to be perceived as the joint possession of the whole Hasidic, or even larger Jewish, community rather than being too closely identified with any contemporary "court." His books have been published

and republished by a variety of Orthodox and Ultraorthodox publishing houses, have begun to engender commentaries of their own, and have been invoked in public reckoning with Jewish suffering and resilience in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Piaseczno has played a role for some time now in the “spiritual renaissance” of the Ashkenazi Haredi world (Yiddish-, Hebrew-, and English-speaking), as these communities grapple not only with the still-devastating losses of the Holocaust but also with a growing demand for broad access to spiritual resources.<sup>53</sup> This includes a return to the study of early Hasidic works that may have been underutilized in recent generations as well as the addition of a few important later works, including R. Shapira’s own relatively accessible guides to contemplative practice and cultivation of inner life.

In recent years, R. Shapira’s books have played an increasingly prominent role in both the “national religious” (*dati le’umi*) and “national Ultraorthodox” (*hardal*) wings of Religious Zionism in Israel.<sup>54</sup> His teachings are featured prominently in the libraries of many of the *yeshivot hesder*, which combine Israeli military service with Torah study for young men and where, together with select other works of Hasidism—such as those of Bratzlav, Izhbits-Radzin, and Chabad—they provide a counterbalance to the once nearly exclusive focus on Talmud and Bible in the Zionist yeshiva curriculum.<sup>55</sup> This has been less true of institutions with a close historical connection to the early-twentieth-century mystic and chief rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, or whose “Lithuanian” focus on the absolute primacy of Talmudic study remain undisturbed, but these institutions are also not nearly as dominant in the broadly Zionist yeshiva world as was once the case. Smaller yeshivot with a variety of different intellectual and ideological agendas, including the diversification of the curriculum to include Hasidic studies, have multiplied. The late R. Shimon Gershon Rosenberg (“Shagar”), who was known for his attempts to bridge Hasidic and postmodern thought, became an important conduit for the study of Piaseczno and other Hasidic teachings in this world.<sup>56</sup>

Piaseczno has also figured prominently in North American Jewish Renewal and Neo-Hasidism in its Orthodox and liberal Jewish varieties. R. Shapira’s works were, for example, an important resource for the charismatic teachers Shlomo Carlebach (1925–1994) and Zalman Schachter-Shalomi (1924–2014), both of whom had Hasidic roots.<sup>57</sup> Carlebach’s adaptation, which emphasized R. Shapira’s resilience in the face of tragedy, emphasized Jewish solidarity and offered a classically Orthodox portrait of the Piaseczner Rebbe. Carlebach’s possibly apocryphal story “The Holy Hunchback” describes a chance encounter with a former student of the Piaseczner who

survived Auschwitz and had become a Tel Aviv street sweeper. He tells Carlebach that the only thing keeping him from suicide is his childhood memory of the Piaseczno Rebbe's voice. "Remember children, the greatest thing in the world is to do somebody else a favor."<sup>58</sup> Schachter-Shalomi, by contrast, emphasized the devotional aspects of R. Shapira's legacy, focusing for his mostly non-Orthodox audience on the remarkable array of contemplative techniques the Piasezcner Rebbe taught. We should also note that Schachter-Shalomi was the first to suggest *Sermons from the Years of Rage* as a dissertation topic for Nehemia Polen (author of chapter 9 of this volume), whose 1994 monograph, *Holy Fire*, ushered in a wave of English-language scholarship whose distant reverberations include the current volume.<sup>59</sup>

Several writers in this volume, including Marcin Wodziński, Moshe Idel, Ariel Evan-Mayse, Ora Wiskind, and Don Seeman, have noted R. Shapira's importance for contemporary Neo-Hasidism, a loosely defined movement with both Orthodox and liberal Jewish manifestations. Though he is not alone within American Orthodoxy, special mention should be made of R. Moshe Weinberger, who was the founding rabbi of a Piaseczno-inflected synagogue called Aish Kodesh in Woodmere, New York, in 1992. Weinberger draws upon the teachings of many different Hasidic masters along with those of Rav Kook (whose contribution to Neo-Hasidism deserves special analysis, inasmuch as he was not, strictly speaking, a Hasidic leader at all), but R. Shapira occupies a special place in his spiritual library and lineage.<sup>60</sup> Weinberger's appointment in 2013 as *mashpia*, or "spiritual guide," of Yeshiva College in New York was widely understood as testimony to the growing influence of Neo-Hasidism among modern or centrist Orthodox youth in America.<sup>61</sup> Perhaps predictably, popular Neo-Hasidism tends to blur what we take to be important distinctions among different schools of classical Hasidic thought and practice.<sup>62</sup> A somewhat different but related blurring of historical boundaries is also apparent in the non-Orthodox world, where the Neo-Hasidic turn self-consciously blends Hasidic, Buddhist, and other contemplative forms. An example might be the work of James Jacobson Maisels, a rabbi and popular meditation teacher whose University of Chicago dissertation focused on the Piasezcner and who acknowledges that his own Neo-Hasidic mindfulness practice has been shaped by various Buddhist teachings as well as by R. Shapira.<sup>63</sup>

Proper ethnographic and sociology of knowledge analysis of R. Shapira's multifaceted "afterlife" remains an important desideratum.<sup>64</sup> During the Second Palestinian Intifada, in October 2000, a child of American

immigrants named Esh Kodesh Gilmore, who was raised at Shlomo Carlebach's Moshav Modiin, was shot and killed while working as a security guard at the Israeli National Insurance Institute in Jerusalem.<sup>65</sup> Within a few months, an unofficial Israeli outpost or small settlement named Esh Kodesh was erected in his name near the West Bank community of Shvut Rachel, itself named for Rachel Drouk, the victim of a terror attack on a civilian bus in 1991.<sup>66</sup> The temptation to omit these troubling nontextual events from a scholarly account of R. Shapira's reception history is to be resisted; one way or another, he would have been the first to acknowledge that the fate of his teaching and the concrete, sometimes catastrophic destiny of his people cannot be disentangled.

At the time of this writing, a group of more than nine hundred people, including rabbis, academics, spiritual "tourists," Neo-Hasidim, and spiritual fellow travelers meet in a "virtual *beis midrash*" on Facebook "to share the teachings, inspiration, and anecdotes of the holy Piaseczno Rebbe Kalonymus Kalmish Shapira."<sup>67</sup> There are very few Hasidic personalities (let alone twentieth-century Hasidic leaders) who can claim this kind of public recognition and significance. While *Hasidism, Suffering, and Renewal* is intended for academic scholars of religion, Hasidism, and Jewish thought therefore, we also hope that this work will engage readers outside of the academy among those who seek intelligent but accessible scholarship on Hasidism in general or Piaseczno in particular. We are inspired not just by the enormous growth in scholarly writing on R. Shapira's legacy, well exceeding the scope of this volume, but also by the vitality and seriousness of readers (some of them also academics!) who look to Piaseczno for wisdom and inspiration—for the emergence of what Buber might have called a *teaching* that can "address the crisis of modern men and women."<sup>68</sup>

Readers outside the academy should be aware that the choice of individual authors to use or not use the honorific R. ("rabbi") for addressing R. Shapira in this volume may reflect debates about the conventions of academic writing that are not necessarily intended to convey any particular religious or spiritual sensibility (or lack thereof). All our authors have shown R. Shapira the ultimate respect of devoting their time and expertise to understanding his legacy.

Rather than claiming to have offered a final, authoritative account, we are hopeful that this collection of essays will help to forestall premature closure on disquieting questions about the intellectual and existential significance of Piaseczno, Hasidism, or suffering and the Holocaust. To choose just one example from among many, authors in this volume have

described R. Shapira alternately as a precursor to radical Neo-Hasidism (Idel, Mayse, Leshem, Wiskind) or post-Holocaust theology (Magid); as the purveyor of an essentially conservative retrenchment (a kind of “Jewish counter-Reformation” [Wodzinski]); or as the initiator of a distinctive “Hasidic Modernism” (Seeman) adopting strategies parallel to those of modernizing Buddhist groups confronted by the crisis of colonialism, as well as the challenges of modern science and psychotherapeutic models. Piaseczno stands for the tenacity and resilience of faith (Reiser, Polen, Abramson) as well as the rupture of faith and meaning (Diamond, Smokler); for spiritual renewal (Mayse, Maayan) as well as catastrophic failure that may never be repaired (Magid, Seeman). Do we need to choose decisively among these views? Perhaps. Certainly, each author has made their best case, and much is at stake. As editors though, we prefer to conclude with the words of Rashi (the only medieval commentator mentioned by name in *Sermons from the Years of Rage*) on the plenitude of scripture, which also represents perforce the plenitude of life. Writing around the time that Franco-German Jewry was convulsed and nearly destroyed by the First Crusade, Rashi affirmed multiple—even apparently contradictory—readings of the same scriptural texts, citing a midrash on the prophecy of Jeremiah: “Is not my word like fire, says the Lord of hosts, or like a hammer that splits a rock (Jer. 23:29)?” Just as the rock is split into many pieces, in one version of the midrash that Rashi cites, so the word of God “is divisible into many different understandings.”<sup>69</sup>

## Notes

R. Shapira’s cover letter is reproduced in Kalonymus Kalman Shapira, *Sermons from the Years of Rage* [in Hebrew], ed. Daniel Reiser, 2 vols. (Jerusalem: Herzog Academic College, 2017), 1:328. Translation by Shaul Magid, this volume.

1. Emmanuel Ringelblum, *Notes from the Warsaw Ghetto: The Journal of Emmanuel Ringelblum* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1958); and Samuel D. Kassow, *Who Will Write our History?: Emanuel Ringelblum, the Warsaw Ghetto, and the Oyneg Shabes Archive* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007).

2. *Sermons from the Years of Rage*, 1:27.

3. See Leshem, “Between Messianism and Prophecy,” 5n15. One copy of *Benei mahshavah tovah* is found in the New York Chabad Library, MS 1192:27, and another, signed by Shapira (who notes that it is forbidden to copy the work without his permission), is the property of R. Avraham Hamer in Bnei Brak. This copy was given to his father, R. Eliyahu Hamer, who was one of Shapira’s

main disciples and one of the first copiers of his sermons. R. Kalonymus Kalman Shapira, *Conscious Community*, trans. Andrea Cohen Kiener (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aaronson, 1977); idem., *A Student's Obligation: Advice from the Rebbe of the Warsaw Ghetto*, trans. Micha Odenheimer (Oxford: Roman and Littlefield, 1991).

4. Kalonymus Kalman Shapira, *Shalosh derashot* (Tel Aviv: Merkaz hasidei Koźnic, 1985); idem, *Derekh ha-melekh* (Jerusalem: Va'ad Hasidei Piaseczno, 1995); and, on the process of editing these sermons, *Sermons from the Years of Rage*, 1:26–53.

5. Kalonymus Kalman Shapira, *Derashah* (Warsaw: Hevrei ha-kehilah ha-Ivrit de-Pi'acetsna, 1936).

6. Kalonymus Kalman Shapira, *Esh Kodesh* (Va'ad hasidei Piaseczno, 1960); idem, *Sacred Fire: Torah from the Years of Fury 1939–1942*, trans. J. Hershey Worch (Jerusalem: Jason Aronson, 2000).

7. See also David Biale et al., *Hasidism: A New History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018), 587.

8. Don Seeman, "Ritual Efficacy, Hasidic Mysticism and 'Useless Suffering' in the Warsaw Ghetto," *Harvard Theological Review* 101 (2008): 465–505; see Idel, this volume.

9. See Moshe Idel, *Old World, New Mirrors: On Jewish Mysticism and Twentieth-Century Thought* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010).

10. It is worth noting that Benjamin Brown, "Substitutes for Mysticism: A General Model for the Theological Development of Hasidism in the Nineteenth Century," *History of Religions* (2017): 248–88, specifically excludes R. Shapira from his consideration of mysticism's decline. See, however, Biale et al., *Hasidism*, 615.

11. The only single-volume history of this religious movement is Biale et al., *Hasidism*. For a recent anthology of Hasidic sources from the eighteenth century to the present, see Ariel Evan Mayse and Sam Berrin Shonkoff, eds., *Hasidism: Writings on Devotion, Community, and Life in the Modern World* (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2020). The following summary of Hasidism draws on the introduction to that volume.

12. For two important biographies of the Besht, see Moshe Rosman, *Founder of Hasidism: A Quest for the Historical Ba'al Shem Tov* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996); and Immanuel Etkes, *The Besht: Magician, Mystic, and Leader*, trans. Saadya Sternberg (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2005).

13. See Etkes, *The Besht*, 113–51. Scholars have noted the similarity between the Baal Shem Tov's emphasis on religious ecstasy and the devotional attitudes of some Christian mystics living in the same region. For a recent study, see Moshe Idel, "R. Israel Ba'al Shem Tov 'in the State of Walachia': Widening the Besht's Cultural Panorama," in *Holy Dissent: Jewish and Christian Mystics in Eastern Europe*, ed. Glenn Dynner (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2011), 69–103.