

“The Lord Hides in Inner Chambers”: The Doctrine of Suffering in the Theosophy of Rabbi Kalonymus Kalman Shapira of Piaseczno

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Scripture is one continuous dialogue, a compassionate and a forceful dialogue, brutal and kind, sublime and insane, between a nation and a God who chose each other and, consequently, are responsible to each other.

“Until he turned tail and sicked Adam Koch on his nation,” said Wolfowitz

“Right,” said she, “but you don’t understand why. There are reasons, but you don’t know them. Just as you don’t know why the Holy-One-blessed-Be-He allows you to talk heresy. Only a believer – and every Jew is a believer, whether he calls his belief religion or atheism, righteousness, socialism, nature, positivism, science – only a believer who suffers on account of his belief, on account of the Covenant, can break out into slander. The man who guards his tongue too much probably hates too much. On Dr. Gross’s couch lie hundreds of people prating about hatred, hatred for mother and father, yet all their words are nothing but a manifesto of trust, and trust is love. You are laughable, like every Jew who casts stones at God for being cruel and jealous, because He chose you and you chose Him, the two of you are in the same boat, and the waters of death swirl around it, until, in distress, you cry out, God!”¹

* Dedicated to the memory of my grandmother, Yetka Yochid (Yocheved) Wollnerman, daughter of Avraham ha-Levi Ringer z”l.

1 Yoram Kaniuk, *Adam Resurrected*, trans. Seymour Simckes (New York: Grove Press, 1971), p. 226.

Where Theory Meets Reality

Philosophical theories that address the problem of evil and the significance of suffering grapple with the reality of suffering in a number of ways. Non-devastating suffering can easily be incorporated into a philosophical system as part of a linear process of descent-enabled ascent. Amos Goldberg calls this the “crisis approach.” He likens it to the travails of childbirth, where pain is part of a process that ends in the emergence of new life (In Hebrew the words *mashber* has two meanings). The happy ending imbues the suffering with meaning; it is instrumental in the engendering of the good eventually attained. It has no independent status, but is rather an obstacle, or possibly a catalyst, on the path to redemption.²

But when suffering reaches catastrophic proportions, the crisis approach is fraught with danger. A philosophical system that treats suffering merely as a crisis ignores both the facts and its own inability to conceptualize those facts. A philosophy that maintains its a priori attitude toward suffering in such a case displays insensitivity. It oscillates between denial and forcing reality into the straitjacket of its preconceptions. Such dogmatic straitjacketing³ may well cause further pain to sufferers, their families, and their friends, forced to divorce themselves from their own reality. Their physical pain is thus compounded by emotional distress brought on by a sense of arbitrariness (“Why did it happen to me? Had I done x instead of y, I would have been spared?”). Furthermore, they may feel compelled to privilege the rigid ideology of the philosophical system over their very real experiences. To sustain such an ideology, the victim may need to apply force not only against his own psyche, but also against the souls and bodies of those close to him.

Conversely, a philosophical theory sensitive to circumstances will recognize its own failure. The greater the tragedy, the more fragmented the theory will become. Goldberg calls this fragmentation “trauma”: “As opposed to crisis, trauma contains no kernel of positive cognition with which one can cope and, ultimately, profit from.

2 On the difference between trauma and crisis, see Amos Goldberg, “‘Ani Hasar 'Onim': Ketivat Yomanim biTqufat haSho'ah,” PhD diss., Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 2004, pp. 59-89.

3 Some might call it “messianic,” obviously referring to a false messianism, while true messianic theory would in fact emphasize the dynamism of faith. See the section on “Redemption, Trauma and Crisis,” below. On the inherent rigidity of ideology, see Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt, Brace Jovanovich, 1968), pp. 468-70.

At the hub of trauma is always cataclysm, which can never be integrated into our consciousness and thus eludes it.”⁴

Trauma thus shatters previous conceptions – the narrative whereby one affords meaning to qualitative existence in the world and to suffering itself. If this is the case in every human life and story, it is all the more so in philosophical thought that seeks to contend with the question of evil in general. Jean Améry has described it as follows:

I also did not allow myself any [illusions] for a single moment. For, God knows, I regarded myself – wrongly as I see today – as an old, hardened expert on the system, its men, and its methods.... I thought there could be nothing new for me in this area. What would take place would then have to be incorporated into the relevant literature, as it were. Prison, interrogation, blows, torture; in the end, most probably death. Thus it was written and thus it would happen.... But does one really know? Only in part.... Nothing really happens as we hope it will, not as we fear it will. But not because the occurrence, as one says, perhaps “goes beyond the imagination” (it is not a quantitative question), but because it is reality and not phantasy. One can devote an entire life to comparing the imagined and the real, and still never accomplish anything by it....⁵ It would be totally senseless to try and describe here the pain that was inflicted on me.... One comparison would only stand for the other, and in the end we would be hoaxed by turn on the hopeless merry-go-round of figurative speech. The pain was what it was. Beyond that there is nothing to say. Qualities of feeling are

- 4 Amos Goldberg, “If This Is a Man: The Image of Man in Autobiographical and Historical Writing During and After the Holocaust,” *Yad Vashem Studies* 33 (2005), pp. 381-429 (on p. 396).
- 5 Jean Améry, *At the Mind's Limits: Contemplations by a Survivor on Auschwitz and its Realities*, trans. Sidney Rosenfeld and Stella P. Rosenfeld (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1980), pp. 24-5. Bruno Bettelheim, however, wrote that prior intellectual knowledge of torture made it easier to endure. See Bettelheim's essay, “Individual and Mass Behavior in Extreme Situations,” in *Surviving and Other Essays* (New York: Vintage, 1979), pp. 48-83. Intellectual knowledge probably helped up to a point but, as noted, the greater the catastrophe, the greater the extent to which prior cognitive conceptions are shattered, including those pertaining to the suffering itself, until all that remains is a broken body.

as incomparable as they are indescribable. They mark the limit of the capacity of language to communicate.... Whoever is overcome by pain through torture experiences his body as never before. In self-negation his flesh becomes a total reality.... [T]he tortured person is only a body, and nothing else beside that.⁶

This raises a fundamental question. Theory that tries to afford meaning to suffering will necessarily be self-contradictory, because suffering itself denotes a lack of existential meaning, a breaking of the meaning-giving narrative that is inherently “good” for human existence. Furthermore, theory that tries to afford meaning to suffering will necessarily address the abstraction of suffering detached from its reality, as rigid theory removed from human suffering.⁷ If so, how can we even speak of the meaning

6 Améry, *At the Mind's Limits*, p. 33.

7 Emmanuel Levinas rejected all theodicy (seeking meaning in suffering), religious or secular, since meaninglessness is the quiddity of suffering, a given in human consciousness, just like the experience of color or taste. According to Levinas, the search for meaning stems from the priority given to ontology over ethics in Western philosophy, privileging the “question of Being” over the problem of human individuals. In this tradition, greater importance is attached to the fear of death (as stressed by Levinas’s teacher, Martin Heidegger, who joined the Nazi Party) than to the fear of committing murder. See Emmanuel Levinas, “Useless Suffering” (trans. Richard Cohen), in Robert Bernasconi and David Wood (eds.), *The Provocation of Levinas: Rethinking the Other* (New York: Routledge, 1988), pp. 156-7; Don Seeman, “Ritual Efficacy, Hasidic Mysticism and ‘Useless Suffering’ in the Warsaw Ghetto,” *Harvard Theological Review* 101:3-4 (2008), pp. 465-505 (in n. 142, and the discussion of “Useless Suffering,” on pp. 467, 501). Elsewhere, Levinas criticized what he called “The Temptation of Temptation,” the Western philosophical consciousness that seeks to experience all facets of life, good and evil alike, without succumbing to the temptations they present, experiencing everything theoretically, abstractly and a priori, *before* choosing one course of action or another. Theoretical knowledge thus avoids the pitfalls of unidimensional or irresponsible innocence – the naiveté of childhood – and therein lies its freedom. Levinas argued however, that such abstraction focuses on the position of the subject, isolating him from the concrete other and his suffering, from the ethics and ethical action (as opposed to theory) whereby man establishes his freedom. Levinas identified this innocence with the Sinaitic Revelation, which entailed “doing” before “hearing.” He believed that such covenantal submission, such uprightness, is what establishes the ego and the subject, and so determines the maturity of the act. The Torah is thus not theoretical knowledge, but the establishment of ethical behavior

of evil in the world? How can humans, who naturally conceptualize existence by means of language, aspire to redemption through the conceptualization of suffering? The attempt to do so alienates the person from the real world, but declining to make the attempt compounds his physical pain with the pain of meaninglessness!

The Piaseczner Rebbe's Theory of Suffering – Continuity or Change?

Rabbi Kalonymus Kalman Shapira⁸ was a Hasidic rabbi in the town of Piaseczno, near Warsaw. As the scion of important Hasidic dynasties, he was steeped in Hasidic teaching. In his encounters with the reality of suffering, Rabbi Shapira gave expression to these ideas, which he interpreted in a profoundly personal fashion in which he preserved the spiritual radicalism of Hasidism at a time when the movement and its theories had lost their creative impetus.

by means of revelation. See Emmanuel Levinas, *Nine Talmudic Readings*, trans. Annette Aronowicz (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990), pp. 30-50.

- 8 Shapira, one of the most important Hasidic leaders of the twentieth century, born in 1889, was the son of Rabbi Elimelekh of Grodzisk, a scion of Polish Hasidism, and the pre-eminent Hasidic rabbi of his time. His forebears included Rabbi Elimelekh of Lizensk, the Seer of Lublin, the Maggid of Kozienice, and Rabbi Kalonymus Kalman ha-Levi Epstein, after whom he was named. These illustrious rabbis, whose works he cited frequently, influenced his approach to Hasidism, as did his nephew and father-in-law, Rabbi Yerahmiel Moshe Hapstein of Kozienice, who raised him after his father's death. Apart from leading a Hasidic court, Shapira also served as head of the Da'at Moshe yeshiva (named in honor of his father-in-law), where he applied his pedagogical theories. His abilities as an educator are reflected in his books, which follow the progression of a student through the yeshiva system, striving to understand the inner world of yeshiva students subject to the influences of the Haskalah movement. R. Shapira himself was not immune to these influences, reflected in the elements of modern psychology that he incorporated into his pedagogical approach (see, for example, the "Author's Introduction: A Discussion with Teachers and Parents", in Kalonymus Kalman Shapira, *A Student's Obligation: Advice from the Rebbe of the Warsaw Ghetto*, trans. Micha Odenheimer (Northvale, New Jersey: Jason Aronson, 1991), pp. 3-29. Shapira's son was fatally injured during the German invasion of Poland, in September 1939, and was taken to hospital. When his daughter-in-law and sister-in-law came to see him, they were killed by another shell. His son passed away on the holiday of Sukkot, followed a few weeks later by his mother, leaving him only with his daughter, who was abducted and killed by the Nazis during the Great

In 1924, R. Shapira and his family moved to Warsaw, although he continued to frequent his community in Piaseczno. During the war, R. Shapira and his community suffered the anguish of confinement in the ghetto. Most of the Sabbath and festival sermons he delivered during these years addressed suffering and its spiritual significance. He transcribed each sermon after the end of the Sabbath and, prior to his deportation from the ghetto, hid the manuscripts in the same milk cans in which Emmanuel Ringelblum's Oyneg Shabes archives were found.⁹ After the war, his surviving disciples published these writings under the title *Esh Kodesh* (Holy Fire).

But R. Shapira did not take up the subject of the meaning of suffering only as a result of the torments he and his followers endured under Nazi oppression. He wrote about this issue before the war as well, primarily in his works *Derekh ha-Melekh* and *Tzav veZeruz*. My purpose here is to compare the doctrine of suffering he advanced in *Esh Kodesh* with that asserted in his earlier work, to see whether his doctrine changed as a result of the suffering he encountered in the ghetto.¹⁰ Common wisdom would

Deportation in the summer of 1942. After the liquidation of the ghetto following the 1943 uprising, he was deported to a concentration camp, and was murdered on 4 Heshvan 5704 (November 2, 1943). See Aharon Sorasky, "MiToldot ha'Admo'r Rabi Qalonimus Qalmish Shapira Tz'l miPaisetzna," printed at the end of Kalonymus Kalman Shapira, *Esh Qodesh* (Jerusalem: Va'ad Hasidei Piaseztna, 1959/60); and in a slightly different version in the forward to Shapira, *A Student's Obligation*. An extensive essay on the life of R. Shapira can be found in the first chapter of Nehemia Polen, *The Holy Fire: The Teachings of Rabbi Kalonymus Kalman Shapira, the Rebbe of the Warsaw Ghetto* (Northvale, New Jersey: Jason Aronson, 1994). According to Polen (pp. 154-6), Shapira was murdered in the Trawniki labor camp, near Treblinka. See also *ibid.*, p. 185, n. 27. Sorasky (in Shapira, *A Student's Obligation*, p. xliv) asserts that "the last months of his life were spent in a Nazi concentration camp near Lublin," while Esther Farbstein (*Hidden in Thunder: Perspectives on Faith, Halacha and Leadership during the Holocaust*, Rachelle Emanuel (ed.), (Jerusalem: Old City Press, 2007), p. 119), writes that he perished in the Będzin (*sic*; should be Budzyn) labor camp, in the Lublin district. According to these accounts, Rabbi Kalonymus Kalman Shapira was murdered on November 3, 1943, during Operation Harvest Festival (*Aktion Erntefest*), when the Nazis murdered all of the remaining Jews in the Majdanek camps in the Lublin district.

9 See the *Oneg Shabbat* Archive website (Polish State Archives): http://www.archiwa.gov.pl/memory/sub_ringelblum/index.php?va_lang=en&fileid=003_12 (accessed March 2, 2011).

10 Yitzhak Hershkowitz dealt extensively with the question of change in Shapira's philosophical approach to suffering in light of the Holocaust in Yitzhak Hershkowitz,

lead one to expect that the Holocaust's unprecedented horrors, far beyond any previous tribulations in Jewish history and certainly on a different plane than "ordinary" misery, should produce a conceptual break in any theory of suffering. The pre-Holocaust theory, it would seem, could only disintegrate under the weight of the Holocaust. At the very least, a thinker would feel compelled to change his approach radically.

Yet this is not the case with the Piaseczner Rebbe.

During the war, R. Shapira placed the suffering he endured and witnessed in the context of the persecution suffered by the Jewish people throughout history. It therefore warranted traditional rabbinic responses:

Why is it that an individual is affected by these current sufferings more than by all the sufferings which have swept over Israel in the past? Why is it that while learning in Scripture, Talmud, or Midrash about the sufferings of Israel from former times to the present, one's faith was not weakened, but now it is weakened? For those people who say that Israel has never experienced sufferings such as these are mistaken. At the time of the destruction of the Temple, and at the fall of Betar, etc., there were [sufferings] such as these.¹¹

Nevertheless, as the war progressed and suffering increased, R. Shapira did indeed change his approach radically;¹² yet – incredibly – the concepts and methods he had

"R. Qalonimus Qalmish Shapira Hy'd, ha'Admo'r miPiaseczna: Hagut ha-Sho'ah Mul Hagut Terom Sho'ah, Hemshekh O Temurah?" MA thesis, Bar Ilan University, Ramat Gan, 2004, pp. 12-24. I disagree with his conclusions, as I shall explain below. For an extensive bibliography of scholarship on the Piaseczno Rebbe during the Holocaust, see nn. 35-36, below.

- 11 Shapira, *Esh Qodesh*, p. 139, Hanukkah 5702 (Dec. 21, 1941), in Polen, *The Holy Fire*, p. 83. The Rebbe expressed himself in this manner until at least sometime in 1942. It is worth noting that at the time he did not think of events in terms of 'the Holocaust', as we do now in our post-war perspective, and hence in the early years of the war did not perceive the uniqueness of the suffering of himself and his people.
- 12 On 18 Kislev 5703 (November 27, 1942), R. Shapira added the following postscript regarding the continuity of Jewish suffering: "Only until the end of the year 5702 [summer of 1942] was it the case that such sufferings were experienced before. However, as for the monstrous torments, the terrible and freakish deaths which the malevolent, monstrous murderers invented against us, the House of Israel, from the end of 5702 and on – according to my knowledge of rabbinic literature and Jewish

used to cope with suffering before the war remained unchanged. A comprehensive review of these concepts, methods, and the Hasidic-kabbalistic principles in which they are rooted is beyond the scope of the present article. Rather, I will present three recurrent dimensions of the Piaseczner Rebbe's theory of suffering, before and during the Holocaust. The first two represent the two extremes: (ostensible) theoretical rigidity on the one hand and disintegration of the theory on the other. The third dimension reflects the interplay between these two other dimensions. But what is the significance of the fact that these dimensions recur both before and during the war? Is this, when all is said and done, an indication of a theoretical rigidity that disregards reality?

One Extreme – Rigidity and Continuity: Absolute Faith (“Crisis”)

Faith approaches the world with analytical tools that identify causal continuity between suffering and the sins that precede it. In general, suffering is considered, a priori, to be commensurate punishment for transgressions. The greater the suffering however, the more religion will tend to consider it a test of faith rather than retribution. Originally, when the Jewish people suffered a causal relationship was inferred – sin elicited punishment. But later, suffering itself became self-validating.¹³ It is relatively

history in general, there has never been anything like them” (Shapira, *Esh Qodesh*, p. 139; in Polen, *The Holy Fire*, p. 84). A similar remark appears on p. 112 (in Polen, pp. 34-5): “The above words were stated and recorded in 5701 [1941], when, although the sufferings were very bitter ... yet it was still possible to lament them and to describe them at least in part; it was possible to be concerned about those who remained alive, and to grieve about the future: to wonder how the schools and *yeshivot* would be rebuilt, and even to admonish those present, instilling in them the strength for study of Torah and divine service. Not so, however, in the end of 5702 [late summer, 1942], when the communities are almost completely destroyed, and even those few individuals who are spared are forced into wretched slave labor.... There are no words with which to lament our sufferings; there is no one to admonish, there is no heart to rouse to religious activities.... Please, God, have mercy, and save us without delay.”

- 13 In this sense, absolute faith – the kind that believes even when there is no objective proof of divine existence or Providence – is ultimate continuity. Objective-causal continuity between sin and punishment is superseded by the continuity of suffering itself that has *always* plagued the Jewish people for its faith, thereby demonstrating that faith. The insistence on continuity and absolute faith make religious belief appear rigid. Nevertheless, in order to address the extremes in R. Shapira's thought I have focused on the ultimate aspect of continuity. See however n. 67 et seq., in sources before and during the Holocaust, where R. Shapira expresses causal continuity between suffering and sin.

easy to have faith when all goes well. It is, rather, at times of crisis that faith is put to the test – can it endure the occultation of Providence?

There is [a kind of] faith that, when a man sees a sign or [an instance of] divine salvation, he will also believe things that he does not see. But perfect faith is that, even when one sees nothing – [or] what is more, sees the opposite, that the enemies of God prosper and his beloved are persecuted, Heaven forbid – even then he believes. “I trusted, though I did speak – Oh, I was sorely afflicted”:¹⁴ although I “speak” words of Torah and prayer, nevertheless “I am afflicted,” Heaven forbid, with suffering; and not only [when] “I am afflicted,” but even when “I am sorely afflicted,” still I trust in God. And consequently He, blessed be He, will also trust in man, when he undertakes to serve God, and resolves to engage in divine service, although obstacles may yet stand in his way, Heaven forbid...¹⁵

While knowledge of God is acquired through present and proven demonstrations – miracles or intellectual proof – faith is greater than knowledge, specifically at times of affliction and the occultation of Providence that they entail. Versed in the ways of Hasidism, the Piaseczner Rebbe believed in the divine spark concealed within every worldly phenomenon.¹⁶ Man’s duty to gather these sparks and to reveal them goes beyond merely recognizing divinity in hidden places. In Hasidic thought, man has the power to influence the supernal spheres, drawing down or, God forbid, obstructing the divine influx, for his own sake and that of the world.¹⁷ A reciprocal relationship is

14 Psalms 116:10.

15 Kalonymus Kalman Shapira, *Derekh haMelekh* (Jerusalem: Va’ad Hasidei Piaseczna, 1994/5), p. 177. *Derekh haMelekh* is a collection of homilies and letters from the years 1921-1939 (March), compiled after the Holocaust by the surviving remnant of the Piaseczno Hasidic community.

16 On the “uplifting of the divine sparks” in Hasidism, see e.g. Yoram Jacobson, *Hasidic Thought*, trans. Jonathan Chipman (Tel Aviv: MOD Press, 1998), esp. pp. 56-68.

17 The early kabbalists also spoke of man’s power to influence the supernal worlds (theurgy), although Hasidic thought added the centrality of man in drawing down the divine influx specifically in this world. See, for example, Rachel Elior, “*HaZiqah sheBeyn Qabbalah leHasidut: Retzifut uTmurah*,” *Proceedings of the Ninth World Congress of Jewish Studies, Division C: Jewish Thought and Literature* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1985), pp. 107-14.

thus created, “measure for measure”: man’s faith in God causes the supernal worlds to “respond” with God’s faith in man. This faith can be observed in a sense of renewed trust in the world and in Providence – even, and especially, at times of suffering, which reflect the apparent absence of Providence. The revelation of the divine sparks represents, at once, both man’s faith in God and God’s faith in man.

R. Shapira expressed these views prior to the Holocaust, and reiterated them in the Warsaw Ghetto:

When we see the devastation in matters of religion and divine service caused by the sufferings; when we see how the calamities have wrought the destruction of the entire heritage of Torah and divine service which our ancestors, as well as ourselves, impressed upon the coming generations (our children and grandchildren); [when we see the devastation in such areas as] Kosher food, Sabbath observance ... then take care that even under such circumstances your faith is not impaired, God forbid, by even a hairsbreadth.... There are sufferings in the category of *mishpatim*, whose function and purpose we understand; but there are also sufferings in the category of *hukkim* whose purpose we do not understand and quite the opposite – we see their counterproductivity....¹⁸

- 18 Shapira, *Esh Qodesh*, pp. 84-5, *Parashat Va-Yeshev* 5701 (Dec. 21, 1940), in Polen, *The Holy Fire*, p. 81. It is again worth emphasizing (see note 11) that this sermon was delivered during an interim phase, when the suffering of the Holocaust had already begun, but those who experienced it did not perceive a radical change or the fact that it constituted a “holocaust” as such. This was certainly the case for R. Shapira, who had witnessed the suffering but – although terribly shaken – had not yet experienced it personally. At the end of the new edition of *Derekh haMelekh* (the edition I have cited here) is a sermon for *Shabbat Shuvah* – the Sabbath between Rosh HaShanah and Yom Kippur – i.e. in September or October (the year is not cited). This sermon, like most sermons for this particular Sabbath, is full of admonitions regarding sins that must be rectified during the season of repentance. R. Shapira addresses the subject of non-Jews and assimilation, Jewish nationalism that seeks to supplant the Jewish religion, factionalism and pointless hatred among Jews, as well as more specific admonitions regarding laxity in the observance of the laws of family purity, etc. At the end of the sermon, he says: “We weep today for the calamity that has befallen our brethren in Germany. But even when our prophets lamented the exile of the Ten Tribes, they admonished the tribes of Judah and Benjamin for having failed to learn the lessons of their calamity. Five years ago, the situation of our brethren in Germany was far

In this passage, R. Shapira creates a parallel between the internal and the external: internal faith expressed in the external observance of religious law. The suffering imposed from without that devastates religious observance may also result in the devastation of man's soul and faith. In order to contend with this danger, R. Shapira divides suffering into two categories: *mishpat* and *hoq*. In exegesis of the Torah and halachic discourse, the former refers to precepts and actions within the realm of human comprehension, and the latter to those that are beyond comprehension and fall rather in the realm of faith that is above reason. He applies these terms to suffering and its internal expression, in terms of the challenge it poses to faith. Suffering thus assumes the character of a religious precept. Sometimes it is comprehensible, fitting the template of divine Providence and retribution, and is associated with knowledge of the divine. Yet at other times it is incomprehensible, associated with faith. Incomprehensible suffering is the test by means of which a human being may demonstrate his heroism by adhering to his faith in the face of unspeakable suffering – as did Abraham, whom

better and more secure than our situation now, so that it did not even occur to them that such a calamity would ever come to be. There were, in Germany, Jewish cabinet ministers, Jewish officials, and almost all of the great scholars, the 'professors,' who brought glory and honor to the name of Germany the world over, were Jews. They were punished however, for having deviated from the way of God. *May God, blessed be He, have mercy, and may their salvation be at hand, and may God help us too, that we may not find ourselves, Heaven forbid, in a similar situation.*" (*Derekh haMelekh*, pp. 26-7, of the sermon's 28 unnumbered pages; emphasis in the original.)

Since the sermon is not dated, it is hard to determine the events to which R. Shapira was referring. From the content, the reference would appear to be to the first stages of what we, today, call the Holocaust: perhaps the first pogroms of 1933, or the Nuremberg Laws of 1935, or *Kristallnacht* and the other events of 1938. In any event, R. Shapira draws a clear continuum from past to present suffering – so self-evident that he felt no need to elaborate any further – and, causally, from the assimilation of the Jews of Germany to their current plight. This does not stop him from asking for mercy on their behalf or praying for their immediate salvation, but it leads him to assert that it is not enough merely to lament their tragedy without learning from it, and especially from its causes, so as to avert a similar spiritual condition and, thereby, a similar physical fate. These continuums, and R. Shapira's critical remarks, reflect his understanding of the events at the outset of the Holocaust in terms of his clear and harmonious belief that the Jewish people is persecuted for its faith and for its betrayal of its faith. Neither R. Shapira's interpretation of reality nor the belief on which it was based was weakened by the events in question.

Kierkegaard called a “knight of faith,” when he obeyed God’s command to offer his son Isaac as a sacrifice.¹⁹ But the Piaseczner Rebbe went one step further. He placed his own suffering during the Holocaust within the continuum of Jewish exile – suffering characterized as *hoq*. The Israelites in Egypt endured this *hoq* kind of suffering in order to gather up the divine sparks of that exile through their faith.

[That is why our sages of blessed memory said that “the Israelites were only redeemed by virtue of (their) faith,”²⁰ for then too exile was a *hukkah*, for they saw that they were descending further and further... And (what was the purpose) of [this] exile? Because its purpose was to lift up the holy sparks, it was a *hukkah* in their eyes. [T]o meet every *hukkah*, a strengthening of faith is required. The *hukkah* is without reason; but faith too is above reason, so that when we bind ourselves with a perfect faith, to God [Who is] above reason, then even the *hukkah*-type calamities are transformed into sweetness.²¹

Faith is above human reason, and expresses trust in God, whose knowledge and wisdom are, by definition, transcendent, incomprehensible to humankind. Humans cannot expect to comprehend divine providence, which stems from God’s wisdom: “In reality, however, what place is there for arguments, God forbid, and questions? It is true that sufferings like these which we are now enduring come only once every several hundred years, but nevertheless, how can we expect to understand these actions of God?”²²

19 Søren Kierkegaard, “A Tribute to Abraham,” in C. Stephen Evans and Sylvia Walsh (eds.), *Fear and Trembling* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 12-20. Kierkegaard admired faith precisely for its absurdity.

20 *Yalqut Shim’oni*, Exodus 14, sec. 240.

21 Shapira, *Esh Qodesh*, pp. 84-5, *Parshat va-Yeshev* 5701 (Dec. 21, 1940), in Polen, *The Holy Fire*, p. 81. (Here and in further quotes below I provide, in brackets, passages omitted in Polen’s translation. Within these additions, words of clarification added by me or the English translator of this article that do not appear in the original are enclosed within parentheses.)

22 Shapira, *Esh Qodesh*, p. 139, Hanukkah 5702 (Dec. 21, 1941), in Polen, *The Holy Fire*, p. 83. It is on this passage that R. Shapira added a postscript in 1942, explaining that the current suffering was not along the same continuum of Jewish suffering (see nn. 11 and 18, above) – in fact thereby warranting questions. I shall address this issue further, below.

Is this not blind faith, which seeks to believe specifically in the absurd, thereby denying reality? Is this not an attempt to place the physical world and the suffering it entails in a straitjacket of abstract theory, making the theory's attitude to the world, and indeed the theory itself, nothing more than a cynical lie? Does the theory of crisis, so useful in contending with the suffering that preceded the Holocaust, not disintegrate when confronted with the anguish endured during the Holocaust? And if it does not disintegrate, does it not remain a closed and dogmatic theory that makes a mockery of the suffering body by cynically transforming it into an instrument for the apprehension of the divine?

**The Other Extreme – Disintegration, Uniqueness, and Rupture:
Harsh Words (“Trauma”)**

At the other extreme of the Piaseczner Rebbe's thought, we find trenchant remonstrations against heaven and questions that openly address the disintegration of the body and crisis of the spirit in the face of suffering.

In light of his encounters with suffering before the Holocaust, R. Shapira dared to challenge the heavenly host. God's minions observe humankind rise above its afflictions and rejoice in spite of its tribulations. Yet these heavenly beings do not bolster this heroism; instead they remain silent. R. Shapira wrote the following at the conclusion of Simhat Torah 5693 (23 October 1932):

And you of the heavenly multitude, seraphim of God ... have you ever seen such a creature as this?... He stands on his day of rejoicing and surrenders himself to his God.... And you see not only the perspiration of his emotion, and not only his tears ... but all is blood before your penetrating eyes, slaughtered flowing blood, and he, with all his might, rejoices in honor of God and dances in honor of His Torah. You too rejoice in our joy; why then do you keep silent at our suffering? How long will you keep silent?... We no longer have the strength to endure nor the spirit to be strong!... Arise righteous men of the world throughout the generations! Cry mercy, gather all the tears of our repentance and joy.... And why are the rivers of holy tears themselves silent? Who stills their raging at the last from performing their actions? Furthermore, why is it that after the storm and the wars, all have returned to their houses of pleasure, and we, [the people of] Israel, [have returned] to our woes and to our destitution? All rejoice – and we

are ashamed! Most in the towns and provinces have prospered – and we [remain] in poverty and sorrow!²³

The appeal to the heavenly host is an indirect, pious way of reproaching God.²⁴ R. Shapira refers not only to the sufferer's entreaty for mercy, but also the religious devotion of the anguished Jew who rejoices on Simhat Torah despite his agony, thereby giving expression to his faith even when the divine countenance is hidden from him. Such devotion demands a heavenly response and salvation. Yet the heavens remain silent. R. Shapira alludes to the religious crisis that accompanies physical suffering. In doing so, he not only acknowledges the physical facts, but enhances them by adding a spiritual dimension in order to heighten the paradox and remonstrate against the discrepancy between theory – the Torah – and reality!

The passage above was written before the Holocaust. In the ghetto, enduring agonies of an entirely new nature, he wrote no less harshly:

Every Jewish person believes that “there is none else beside Him.”...²⁵ Our sacred literature interprets this verse to mean not only that there is no other divinity beside Him, but that there is no existence at all in the universe other than Him; the entire universe and all that is within it is an aura of the divine. For that reason, nothing in the world should be taken as a thing in itself, but rather as His aura.... For this reason, everything a Jewish person says or does is, at the level of his inner soul, directed to God. For his soul knows that there is nothing beside Him, that all is divinity; so whatever the soul does or says is directed to Him. However, one's physical being hides this fact, just as it hides the soul's sanctity and its longing for God; so it seems to the individual that his statements and actions are directed to material objects and needs. This is even true of the Jewish person's request of a favor from his friend: deep down inside, his soul knows that only God can bestow

23 Kalonymus Kalman Shapira, *Tzav ve-Zeruz* (Jerusalem: Va'ad Hasidei Piasezna, 1961/2), sec. 30, pp. 24-5: “A collection of some of the emotions from the holidays and especially from the times of dancing 5693 [Simhat Torah, 1932].”

24 According to Seeman (Seeman, “Ritual Efficacy,” p. 496), R. Shapira perceived the angels as nothing more than “competing impulses” or “ambivalence within the divine persona.”

25 Deuteronomy 4:35.

a kindness, and that the person of whom the request is made is merely God's agent. Thus, it may seem to the individual that he is asking for a favor from another person, but his soul within him is really asking the favor for God, the omnipotent, compassionate Father; we ask that He show compassion and save us. When we hear the voices of young and old crying out under torture, crying out "*Ratevet! Ratevet!*" [Help! Help!], we know that this is their soul's cry and the cry of all our souls to God, the compassionate Father – "Help! Help!, while the breath of life is still within us!"²⁶

In keeping with Hasidic thought, which seeks to reveal the divine spark concealed within worldly phenomena, R. Shapira here reveals the hidden meaning within the ghetto voices crying "Help!" The subtext of their manifest behavior – asking for human intervention – subconsciously reveals their souls' plea for divine salvation. Here too, the theory comes to highlight the rupture entailed by reality: R. Shapira revealed the hidden spark within the voices crying for help, but that spark failed to respond, measure for measure, as promised: the Godhead ignores their cries:

It is indeed incredible that the world exists after so many screams. We are told that, regarding the Ten Martyrs, the angels cried, "Is this the Torah, and this its reward?" Whereupon a voice answered from heaven, "If I hear another sound I will turn the world back to [primordial] water." But now innocent children, pure angels, as well as adults, the saintly of Israel, are killed and slaughtered just because they are Jews, who are greater than angels. They fill the entire space of the universe with these cries and the world does not turn back to water, but remains in place as if, God forbid, He remained untouched.²⁷

Even now, faced with the horror, R. Shapira reproaches heaven, in his indirect manner; although by this point he seems to have despaired of the angels, and no longer appeals to them! He appeals to the world, sustained by constant and immanent Providence, but his remarks are undoubtedly directed at God himself. His remonstrance is twofold:

26 Shapira, *Esh Qodesh*, pp. 186-7, *Parashat Huqqat*, 5702 (June 29, 1942), in Polen, *The Holy Fire*, pp. 102-3.

27 Ibid.

when the Ten Martyrs (of the Hadrianic persecutions) – only ten – suffered, the angels cried out, and now, when countless people are suffering, they are silent; furthermore, at that time, the Heavenly Voice replied that for the sake of the angels' cry He would turn the world to water, yet, the world is now filled with the cries of the Jews, who are greater than angels,²⁸ and all remains as before. R. Shapira no longer seeks the “honey” of divine redemption, but would be satisfied with an end to the “sting” of suffering that precedes redemption. He therefore asks for the destruction of the world and an end to the suffering it entails!

The reader of *Esh Kodesh* can hardly fail to notice the author's anguished cries at the disintegration of his world and his sense of helplessness. For example:

For now the troubles are increasing so greatly;²⁹ indeed, they are shearing the beards of Jews, so that they cannot be recognized by their external appearance. Furthermore, due to the many persecutions and unbearable, unimaginable torments, people even lose their inner identities. This process can go so far that the individual loses himself (*er farlirt zich*), and does not recognize himself. He cannot recall his self-image as it was a year ago on the Sabbath, or even on a weekday before prayer itself. Now he is crushed and trampled, so much so that he cannot discern if he is a Jew, a human being, or rather an animal who does not have the capacity for feeling. He is, then, “lost” in the scriptural sense....³⁰

Amos Goldberg remarks, on this passage:

Note that the rebbe is not shaken by the decree itself, but by its devastating effect on God-fearing Jews, the shaving of whose beards

28 The concept of human superiority over the angels is based on the *midrash* in the Babylonian Talmud (*Shabbat* 88b) that explains why the Torah was given to Moses “born of woman.” It is in fact the evil inclination that man possesses and contends with that renders him greater than the angels, who obey God without choice. This pertains to a fundamental principle in Hasidic thought regarding man's influence on the supernal worlds. See, e.g., R. Tzadok ha-Kohen of Lublin, *Sihat Malakhei haSharet* (Har Bracha: Har Bracha Institute, 1999/2000).

29 See Isaiah 27:13.

30 Shapira, *Esh Qodesh*, p. 11, *Parashat Toledot*, 5700 (November 11, 1939), in Polen, *The Holy Fire*, p. 39.

affects their “inner identities,” to the point that they are no longer recognizable even in this way... The text ... reveals the terrible spiritual distress in the ghetto... The rebbe has the terrible feeling that suffering is completely undermining the divine image in man, resulting in a [level of] devastation from which there may be no return.³¹

Here, then, is the “trauma”: the inability to conceptualize reality within the old theoretical framework. Was the Rabbi’s theory disintegrating to the point of a loss of faith and the very ability to conceptualize, like Améry’s “flesh ... and nothing else beside that?” Or did he actually evade the reality of physical agony in the passages cited above? On the one hand, R. Shapira castigated heaven prior to the Holocaust as well, while on the other he continued to employ the language of faith even in the Ghetto. But does not his desperation, the expression of disintegration, itself reflect a sense of continuity rather than of breakdown?

Encounter(?): Dialogue between Theory and Reality

R. Shapira’s theory becomes more complex as he addresses the discrepancy between his philosophy and reality. His question, which subsumes both theoretical continuity and the disintegration of reality, arose before the Holocaust, but was reiterated during the Holocaust without losing its sense of continuity!

Years before, R. Shapira had questioned the joy he experienced on Simhat Torah. How was it possible to rejoice, he asked, when he and his community were suffering?!

A Jew is always under the yoke of divine service ... but how arduous it is for him to rejoice before God on ... Simhat Torah.... When he begins to flame [*lehittlahev*] with joyous emotion, his heart becomes embittered: How can he rejoice when the Jewish people – including [his] friends and [he him]self – are plagued with afflictions and burdened with worries? Then he takes heart and says: I rejoice with my God who is on high and exalted above all worlds ... and with his holy Torah. All is null now; there is no world and no worries, no body and no afflictions ... and the soul objects and speaks to the man in his heart ...

31 Amos Goldberg, “*HaRebi miPiassetzna: Gibbor veAnti-Gibbor*,” *Bishvil Hazikaron* 20 (1996/7) pp. 18-23 (on p. 21).

What do you have to do with your God that you dance before Him? Has your service before Him, blessed be He, been service without measure? And have you also been careful and safeguarded me, a Jewish soul?... And the man will arise in horror and cry: Will you keep my God from me, heaven forbid, and despise the bond [I have] with Him? Master of the universe, You know that I am prepared at all times ... to surrender myself for Your sake, and that it is indeed true that by measure of Your greatness, in all of my service, I have given You nothing, but my neck is always ... stretched out [as if for slaughter] before your glory. With all my might I rejoice in You, my God ... The soul is filled with what it does not grasp, and rejoices more than she knows... And perhaps this joy constitutes the unity [of man with God], when the wall of iron comes down and every division falls away, at least for a moment.³²

Here R. Shapira conducts a dialogue with his soul. On the one hand, he rejoices in the Torah and in God; on the other he feels that his joy is detached from the very real suffering all around him. Yet he harnessed even this self-doubt to serve God. Doubt, he proclaimed, is a greater threat to religious devotion than the suffering that engenders it. With regard to suffering itself, he appears to oscillate between the two extremes: absolute theory and faith, and their disintegration when confronted with painful reality.

He took a similar approach during the Holocaust, even during the big deportation of 1942, in which he lost his daughter. R. Shapira was well aware of the incongruity between his understanding of suffering and the radical reality he and his followers were experiencing:

We see now how different hearing about troubles is from seeing them or experiencing them. When we studied the prophetic and rabbinic accounts of the destruction of the Temple, we thought we had some conception of what those troubles meant. At times we would even weep.

32 Shapira, *Tzav ve-Zeruz*, pp. 23-4; (see n. 23, above). According to Zvi Leshem, “*Beyn Meshihyut li-Nvuah: HeHasidut ’Al-pi ha’Admo’r miPiassetzna*,” PhD diss., Bar Ilan University, Ramat Gan, 2007, p. 231, n. 784, the reference is to the general condition of the Jewish people, both spiritual and material – poverty and antisemitism – that may have deteriorated at that time.

Now we see how great the difference is between hearing troubles, and seeing or undergoing them directly. One has almost nothing in common with the other.³³

The difference between recounted or even witnessed suffering and direct experience reawakened his doubts:

- 33 Shapira, *Esh Qodesh*, p. 194, *Shabbat Hazon 5702* (the final sermon, July 18, 1942), in Polen, *The Holy Fire*, p. 36. Despite the difference between the ghetto and the death camp, there is a certain similarity between R. Shapira's words here and those of Jean Améry (Améry, *At the Mind's Limits*, p. 15): "Only in exceptional cases did the magnificent example of his comrades make a Christian or a Marxist *engagé* of the sceptic-intellectual. Mostly he turned away and said to himself: an admirable and redeeming illusion, but an illusion nonetheless. At times he also rebelled ferociously against his unbelieving comrades' exclusive claim to the truth. To speak of God's boundless mercy appeared outrageous to him, given the presence of a so-called senior camp inmate ... who was known to have literally trampled a number of prisoners to death."

As a secular intellectual, Améry sought to maintain a rational approach, distinguishing between diverse elements. He viewed faith that affords unity to disintegrating reality as little more than cynicism. Indeed, a religious approach may extenuate the different shades of reality in the name of the God ideal. As we shall see, the Piaseczner Rebbe tried to incorporate both approaches. Améry's own approach in this matter may have been at the heart of his failure to be rehabilitated, and even his eventual suicide. As Primo Levi wrote (Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, trans. Raymond Rosenthal (New York: Vintage, 1989), p. 136): "I must point out that ... [Améry's] choice, protracted throughout his post-Auschwitz existence, led him to positions of such severity and intransigence as to make him incapable of finding joy in his life, indeed of living. Those who 'trade blows' with the entire world achieve dignity but pay a very high price for it... *Améry's suicide*.... like other suicides admits of a cloud of explanations, but, in hindsight, that episode [in which he 'traded blows'] ... offers one interpretation." Levi himself eventually committed suicide as well, and Jorge Semprun offered a similar explanation of his death. See Goldberg, "If This Is a Man," pp. 399-401. I believe there is another explanation, however. Both Améry and Levi sought to represent, in language, a trauma inherently devoid of language, and were consequently consumed by it. For that very reason however, their words animate the language of those who live on after them, and thus, as the Talmud says, "in their deaths are called alive" (jBerakhot 15b, 2:3), in the sense of "a Torah scholar whose words are cited in this world – his lips murmur in the grave" (bBekhorot 31b).

There are times when the individual is astonished at himself. [He thinks:] “Am I not broken? Am I not always on the verge of tears – and indeed, I do weep from time to time! How then can I study Torah? How can I find the strength to think creatively in Torah and Hasidism?” At times the person torments himself by thinking, “Can it be anything but inner callousness that I am able to pull myself together and study, despite my troubles and those of Israel, which are so numerous?” Then again, he will say to himself, “Am I not broken? I have so much to make me cry; my whole life is gloomy and dark.” Such a person is perplexed about himself.... God, blessed be He, is to be found in His inner chambers weeping, so that one who pushes in and comes close to Him by means of studying Torah, weeps together with God, and studies Torah with Him. Just this makes the difference: the weeping, the pain which a person undergoes by himself, alone, may have the effect of breaking him, of bringing him down, so that he is incapable of doing anything. But the weeping which the person does together with God – that strengthens him. He weeps – and is strengthened; he is broken – but finds courage to study and teach. **It is hard to raise one’s self up, time and again, from the tribulations, but when one is determined, stretching his mind to connect to the Torah and Divine service, then he enters the Inner Chambers where the Blessed Holy One is to be found; he weeps and wails together with Him, as it were, and even finds the strength to study Torah and serve Him.**³⁴

Once again, R. Shapira addresses suffering in the most direct manner possible, asking himself a poignant question: Is it not mere callousness to study Torah and transform

34 Shapira, *Esh Qodesh, Parashat HaHodesh* 5702 (March 14, 1942), in Polen, *The Holy Fire*, pp. 31, 119. On weeping in the “inner chambers,” see bHagigah 5b: “‘But if ye will not hear it, my soul shall weep in secret [*mistarim*] for your pride [*gevah*]’ [Jeremiah 13:17]. Rabbi Samuel bar Inya said in the name of Rav: The Holy One, blessed be He, has a place and it is called *Mistarim*.... And does the Holy One, blessed be He, weep? Did not Rabbi Papa say that God experiences no sadness, as it is written, ‘Honour and majesty are before Him; strength and gladness are in His place’ [I Chronicles 16:27]?! There is no contradiction; the one [where there is weeping] is in the inner [*gava’i*] chambers and the other [where there is gladness] is in the outer chambers.” The reply is also apparently a play on words: *gevah* [pride] – *gava’i* [inner].

suffering itself into a vehicle for Hasidism? Is this not disregard for and straitjacketing of reality?

Here, too, he finds suffering itself – physical suffering and the meaninglessness that accompanies it, as well as the torment of doubt, due to the discrepancy between reality and the Torah – a path to higher communion (*dvequt*) with God. This could mean that R. Shapira opted for absolute faith and a closed theory and teaching, setting aside the disintegration of the physical world around him. Harnessing of suffering itself to *dvequt* is completely consistent with the theory of suffering he espoused before the Holocaust, when he also engaged in internal dialogue between theory and reality, with the same result: a decision in favor of faith and theory.

The question thus arises once again, albeit now with redoubled force: What role does disintegrating reality play? Were the numerous testimonies to the disintegration of the “divine image” and theory in *Esh Kodesh*, together with R. Shapira’s inner dialogue and awareness of the discrepancy between theory and reality, merely a renewed guise for the straitjacketing of reality in favor of dogmatic faith? Was there no change in his consciousness and theory of suffering? Did he become callous?

The Language of Faith – Absoluteness, Dynamism, and Paradox

This contradiction in R. Shapira’s writings – particularly during the Holocaust – has been a source of debate among scholars. Most scholars have primarily stressed his absolute faith, and sought to explain his harsh language in one way or another.³⁵ Some, however, have stressed the disintegration and even heresy in his writings.³⁶

35 See Leshem, “*Beyn Meshihiyut*,” p. 44: “Schindler [Pesach Schindler, *Hasidic Responses to the Holocaust in the Light of Hasidic Thought*, (Hoboken: Ktav, 1990), pp. 20, 25, 35, 41, 111 ...] espoused a position that stressed the Rebbe’s faith in spite of the suffering of the Holocaust ... [thereby] creating an interpretive model that greatly influenced subsequent, more-traditional interpreters [of R. Shapira’s work], such as Tydor-Baumel [‘*Esh Qodesh, Sifro Shel ha’Admo’r miPiasetzna uMqomo beHavanat heHayyim beGeto Varshah*,’ *Yalkut Moreshet* 29 (May 1980)], Polen [*The Holy Fire*], Farbstein [*Hidden in Thunder*] and Hershkowitz [R. *Qalonimus Qalmish Shapira*].” Leshem also associates Gershon Kitzis (“*Rabi Qalonimus miPiasetzna Sah ‘Im Qono*,” *Mahanayim* 8 [November 1994], pp. 132-9) and Aliza Levanon (“*Derashot Shel Rabbanim sheNidreshu biTqufat haSho’ah, be’Artzot haKibbush haNatzzi beyn haShanim 1939-1945*,” MA thesis, Touro College, 1992) with this approach.

36 Leshem (“*Beyn Meshihiyut*,” pp. 45-6) includes Mendel Piekarcz and Eliezer Schweid in this category. Piekarcz notes three main elements in *Esh Qodesh*: (1) “The decrees destroyed the structure of religious life and undermined Jewish faith”; (2) “There is

Both of these scholarly approaches miss the point. It was precisely the dynamism in R. Shapira's faith, and the remonstrations and trenchant questions he posed, which rendered it absolute. He was not satisfied with simplistic theodicy, dogmatic false messianism, whereby suffering may indicate past sins or necessary future redemption, faith from absurdity, or demoralization and heresy when faith is challenged. A careful examination of his writings reveals the paradox inherent in his faith and the theory of suffering that derived from it.³⁷

no positive explanation of the reasons for the calamity or its significance"; (3) "The answers in his sermons ... more than explaining the meaning of the decrees ... show clear signs of nagging perplexity and uncertainty" (Mendel Piekarz, "*HaTe'udah haHasidit haSifrutit haAharonah 'Al Admat Polin: Divrey haRabi miPiasezna beGeto Varshah,*" in Mendel Piekarz, *Ideological Trends of Hasidism in Poland During the Interwar Period and the Holocaust* (Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 1990), pp. 373-411, on p. 381).

Leshem ("*Beyn Meshihuyut,*" pp. 47-9) writes: "Like Piekarz ... Schweid seeks theological responses to the suffering of the Holocaust in the content of the sermons, and tends to stress those statements that could be interpreted as expressions of doubt and despair... [H]is desperate faith persisted ... but, on the other hand, he clearly did not wish to hide his doubts ... even such absolute faith ... could not find within itself, justification for what appeared to a man like him as suffering that exceeds the boundaries..." (Eliezer Schweid, *Beyn Hurban li-Yshu'ah: Teguvot Shel Hagut Haredit la-Sho'ah bi-Zmanah* (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 1994), p.159). I would add to this group of scholars Goldberg ("If This Is a Man," pp. 427-9), who highlights the disintegration of the "image of man".

- 37 Seeman ("Ritual Efficacy," p. 482) also notes that this debate obscures the real significance of R. Shapira's work. According to Seeman, R. Shapira did not attempt to find meaning or divine presence in suffering, which is inherently meaningless (see n. 7, above). He thus disagrees with those scholars who find meaning, continuity and faith in Shapira's thought – in spite of suffering (see n. 35, above). He also disagrees however, with those who stress the disintegration of faith in R. Shapira's thought, recognizable in the fragmentary nature of his sermons – an eclectic collection of ideas that masked the underlying disintegration, in order to sustain himself and his followers (n. 36, above). Seeman asserts (*ibid.*, pp. 493-4) that R. Shapira abandoned the discussion of meaning, and that the method in his sermons was not theosophical, but rather ritual-theurgic (in the sense that spiritual and physical acts performed in this world with the proper intentionality create a bond with the supernal worlds, allowing man to influence the upper worlds themselves, and to "draw down" spiritual vitality and abundance from them, effecting change in the lower world as well). Seeman shows

Since divine thought is beyond all human thought and language, R. Shapira's words were, in effect, a transcription of an intuition that transcends understanding and language – and is hence convoluted. He stressed that we do not understand the way in which God governs the universe.³⁸ Only through our suffering, he maintained, may we grasp some part of it, as if “running and returning (*ratzo' vashov*),”³⁹ that is, comprehending and uncomprehending, as our comprehension is necessarily partial. Such comprehension does not force itself on reality as an absolute explanation.

how this approach was directly related to Shapira's prewar cosmology and spiritual-ritual theory of emotions as a means to consciousness of the divine in general, and prophecy in particular.

Yet there is a theosophical aspect to Shapira's thought as well; one that lies, in fact, at the heart of the theurgic act (see n. 78, below). Seeman (*ibid.*, p. 465-6) points out that most studies of Shapira's theology have focused on his wartime sermons, without relating to his prewar homiletics, despite the fact that there is a coherent continuity of thought (which Seeman associates with their theurgic aspect) between the two periods. Seeman himself, however, fails to address the question of suffering in the prewar writings (even on a theurgic level), and although he stresses the evident disintegration arising from R. Shapira's words, does not relate it to the changes in his thought during the Holocaust – on the theological level, which he claims R. Shapira had abandoned, or the theurgic level, which remained more or less the same in principle, merely intensifying in proportion to the degree of suffering. Like theory that ignores reality and its suffering by means of philosophical abstraction, so too theurgy that maintains the same praxis even in the face of radical suffering ignores reality, becoming extrinsic magic, without mystical intentionality or communion between upper and lower worlds.

I believe that significant changes occurred in R. Shapira's thought, although the seeds of these changes can already be found in his early writings. The paradox of “divine retraction” (*tzimtzum*) and the “vacated space” (*hehalal hapanui*), which I will discuss below, subsumes not only meaning and meaninglessness (theological-religious and humanistic-secular), but also body and soul, theosophy and ritual-theurgy, continuity and rupture. We may thus understand both Shapira's sermon on Sarah's collapse following the binding of Isaac (Shapira, *Esh Qodesh*, p. 10, *Parashat Hayyei Sarah* 5700 [Nov. 4, 1939], in Polen, *The Holy Fire*, pp. 96-7), and the descriptions by his followers (see Polen, *ibid.*, pp. 11-2) of his fortitude at the deaths of the members of his family at the beginning of the war, as two sides of the same coin rather than ambivalent feelings, as Seeman explains (Seeman, “Ritual Efficacy,” p. 487).

38 See Isaiah 55:8-9 and n. 100 below.

39 See *Sefer Yetzirah* 1:8: “The ten *sefirot* are the basis: restrain your mouth from speaking, restrain your heart from thinking. And if your heart races return to the Place,

The Western concept of belief (“belief that ...”) refers to objective content – beyond time, place and human subjectivity – the veracity of which must be proven before it can be believed. The existence of the individual as an individual is threatened by this dichotomy between subject and object, which subsumes the individual’s experience of infinity – the absolute object – and is thus rendered insignificant. From this perspective, viewing human suffering as divine suffering indeed becomes cynical.

But the Piaseczner Rebbe’s system is completely different. Here, belief is not external to the soul, something to be adopted and made part of one’s identity only if proven. It is rather reality and existence itself, the world in which human beings live and act. It is not an external conceptual addendum with which to “clothe” reality, but rather a conceptual world in its own right, with its own, internal language that is in itself belief,⁴⁰ within which man exists, and to which he gives expression in his entire way of life.

Faith transcends consciousness and persists even at times of crisis and paradox, when believers suffer and non-believers prosper. It is an inner process of accepting, as divine revelation, the world as it is, including the meaninglessness and suffering it entails. Faith is not a dogma that compels God to act in a specific, objective manner that, in turn, serves as the only basis for belief. Faith that believes in God only when life is good believes only in itself. Hence R. Shapira’s unequivocal stance on faith: “He is the God. What is good in His eyes let Him do.”⁴¹ His goodness is thus ever-present, even when good, in its simple human sense, is not apparent.

for it is written: (like) *running and returning* (Ezek 1:14). And concerning this matter the covenant was made” (*Sefer Yetzira*, ed., trans. and text-critical commentary by A. Peter Hayman (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2004), p. 72).

40 On the “language of belief” and existing “within” it, see Shimon Gershon Rosenberg (Shagar), “*Emunah veLashon Lefi ha’Admo’r haZaqen miHaba’d miPerspeqtivat Filosofiyat haLashon shel Vitgenshteyn*,” in Moshe Halbertal, David Kurzweil, and Avi Sagi (eds.), *‘Al haEmunah*, (Jerusalem: Keter, 2005), pp. 365-87, esp. 381-2 and n. 57. Shagar stresses that such faith can be realized even in the absence of awareness or particular self-transcendence (*hit’alut*).

41 I Samuel 3:18, cited in Shapira, *Esh Qodesh*, p. 166, *Parashat Zakhor* 5702 (Feb. 28, 1942), in Polen, *The Holy Fire*, p. 74. The sermon on *Parashat HaHodosh* 5702 (March 14, 1942), Shapira, *Esh Qodesh*, p. 175, in Polen, *The Holy Fire*, pp. 89-90, expresses a contrary view: just as the body’s essential functions are unconscious, so faith, which is an essential function, is unconscious and inherited. In times of distress, it is hidden and suppressed, but it is always present. When one adds to this basic faith, it awakens and increases. Uplifting the sparks adds to the light of one’s soul and strengthens one’s faith, even at times of separateness from God.

Yet blind faith is also forbidden. It poses the danger of rigid idolatry – an obsession with a given idea that appears to express divinity and reifies God just like a physical statue or image.⁴² Once a believer has accepted the language of faith – an integral part of accepting the yoke of heaven – he may and even must ask questions and explore his doubts from within the language, in a process of “running and returning,” rather than believing out of absurdity. In a world where faith is a reality within which one lives, only the narrative of human suffering as divine suffering⁴³ affords real meaning.

42 See Mordecai Joseph Leiner of Izbica, *Mei haShilo'ah*, vol. 1, p. 96, s.v. “No molten Gods shall you make for yourselves” (Exodus 34.17): “Molten, that is general rules ... When you have explicit understanding of the heart, then do not look to general rules to govern your behavior, but with the understanding of your heart you will know how to behave in every individual [circumstance].”

43 Indeed this is one of the ways in which the Piaseczner Rebbe dealt with suffering. Based on the concept of “*tzimtzum*” (divine retraction), which I shall discuss further, below, R. Shapira identified divine suffering with human suffering (and vice versa). For the period preceding the Holocaust, see Shapira, *Derekh haMelekh*, pp. 251-2, 126-7. For the period during the Holocaust, see Shapira, *Esh Qodesh*, pp. 81-2, *Parashat Toledot 5701* (Nov. 30, 1940); see also Polen, *The Holy Fire*, p. 174, n. 16. R. Shapira proposes a method that Leshem calls “guided imagination” (Leshem, “*Beyn Meshihyut*,” pp. 223-38). Through the use of imagination, spiritual concepts detached from mundane life are afforded a real-existential context. Imagination may mislead, reifying spiritual concepts, and thereby resulting in idolatry. Many – Maimonides foremost – have opposed the use of imagination (see *Guide for the Perplexed* III: 49), although even Maimonides believed that imagination is the faculty employed in prophecy and so transcends the comprehension of the philosophers, who rely only on the intellect. R. Shapira aspired to prophecy even in times of divine occultation. Prophecy requires material existence and the faculty of imagination, and may in fact be realized specifically at a time of despair of human consciousness and natural redemption. R. Shapira employed imagination in order to attain prophecy, or at least to break the barrier separating the believer from God. A radical expression of this can be found in his advice to envisage a physical image of God (Shapira, *Tzav ve-Zeruz*, pp. 19-20). This position is controversial even among rationalist-religious thinkers today. See Shimon Gershon Rosenberg (Shagar), “*Al Emunah, Omanut veDimyon*,” *Mashiv Haru'ach* 12 (winter, 2002/3), pp. 57-62 (on p. 57 and p. 181, n. 612). The comparison between human and divine suffering can be viewed as part of R. Shapira’s method of “guided imagination,” which considers the body itself as a divine revelation, in the sense of “from my flesh I shall behold God” (Job 19:26) – asserted, not coincidentally, by Job, who suffered both physical and spiritual anguish.

The idea of the absoluteness of divine thought does not represent closed and dogmatic thinking, but rather a dynamic theory. In kabbalah, divine thought is associated with the sefirah of Keter (Crown), representing infinite and perpetually-renewing divine will rather than static knowledge. This renewal is life itself and all its vicissitudes, for good and for ill, in the present.

Absolute faith does not turn a blind eye to suffering. On the contrary, it entails acceptance of divine judgment and recognition of circumstances for what they are, which makes non-rigid hope in faith and prayer for divine salvation possible.⁴⁴ In this way, materially immutable reality can (but need not) change through a dynamic process of human will acting within it and “activating” the divine will.

In seeking to understand God’s will in suffering, R. Shapira reveals the divine sparks hidden even within those phenomena that seem most disconnected from God – suffering and doubt. Revealing them and uplifting them will also put an end to

While the kabbalists considered the body a representation of the Godhead, from which they inferred the supernal worlds on which they focused, Hasidism focused specifically on manifestations of the divine in the physical world, including the human body. See Elijah, “*HaZiqah sheBeyn Qabbalah leHasidut.*” I shall address the subject of the body in R. Shapira’s thought, below.

44 See Shapira, *Esh Qodesh*, p. 166, *Parashat Zakhor* 5702 (Feb. 28, 1942), in Polen, *The Holy Fire*, pp. 74-5. As we shall see below, R. Shapira’s absolute faith not only drew upon reality and avoided withdrawing into detached spirituality, but was precisely what grounded him in the physical world and enabled him to accept the terrible divine judgment, without being tempted by false hopes – in divine salvation or, a fortiori, in deliverance by natural means, in complete contradiction to reality. Such false hopes entail denying and twisting reality, resulting in greater pain and suffering, followed by ever greater rigidity, when they fail to materialize. Acceptance of divine judgment puts an immediate stop to the sense of meaninglessness (the question “Why is this happening? If only ...” making room for the question “What does it mean? What does it teach us?”). On a practical level, it directs attention away from the fool’s belief in false hopes, to pragmatic questions of coping with reality (see n. 52, below). Seeman (“Ritual Efficacy,” p. 482) stresses R. Shapira’s avoidance, both before and during the Holocaust, of premature messianism (which he compared to a man rushing passionately somewhere, who stumbles and hurts himself as a result of his very passion) – contrary to other rabbis at the time – and of numerological speculation, or the kinds of searches for hidden meaning in scripture and historical events to which many desperate Jews turned. After such predictions proved false, demoralization further increased, leading even to suicide, as Seeman notes (*ibid.*, n. 72), based on Ringelblum’s diary.

suffering, inasmuch as it will show that suffering too is a part of the unity of God. Its role of provoking return to God and His precepts, and recognition of His presence even in suffering, will no longer be necessary. Even if suffering continues, the uplifting of its sparks greatly mitigates it, in the context of a profound understanding of reality. With the help of Hasidic concepts such as *bitul hayesh* (effacement of the self)⁴⁵ and *hamtakat hadinim* (sweetening of the judgments), R. Shapira created a method for the mitigation (“sweetening”) of suffering through acceptance, explained as follows by Rabbi Shimon Gershon Rosenberg (Shagar):

This acceptance does not obviate [suffering].... One who accepts his suffering mitigates it by the very fact that he lifts it up and renders it a part of divine will. In this sense, God is revealed in suffering, no less than in anything else, and perhaps even more – inasmuch as it is inexplicable. Accepting suffering transforms it into a connection with the divine, and in that it is mitigated. The effect is not ... the elimination of pain, but its mitigation; not by justifying it, but by accepting it despite its arbitrariness; transforming it from oppressive affliction to intense and infinite elation.... Man effaces his human thought, his understanding of the world, the knowledge of the “self,” and attains divine knowledge, future understanding, which is not conceptual, like present understanding. It is the paradox in suffering that brings about the effacement of the self, because any explanation would still belong to the self.⁴⁶

This is why R. Shapira did not claim that absolute faith would eliminate suffering, but would rather mitigate it. It is also the source of his castigation and remonstrations against heaven. These are not heresy, for in the language of faith, heresy negates the language itself. The utter repudiation of God precludes the possibility of remonstrating against Him. Instead, the believer who rebukes God expresses a faith that is not satisfied with vague theodicy. Job was just such a believer, and God praised him above

45 See e.g. Shapira, *Esh Qodesh, Parashat Mas'ei* 5701 (July 26, 1941), in Polen, *The Holy Fire*, pp. 111-2; Shapira, *Esh Qodesh*, p. *Parashat Yitro* 5702 (Feb. 7 1942), (see Polen, *The Holy Fire*, pp. 138 and 175, n. 30); Shapira, *Esh Qodesh*, p. 172, *Parashat Parah* 5702 (March 7, 1942), in Polen, *The Holy Fire*, pp. 87-8.

46 Shimon Gershon Rosenberg (Shagar), “*Torat haGmul beMivhan haSho'ah*,” in *Kelim Shevurim* (Efrat: Yeshivat Siach Yitzchak, 2003), pp. 125, 138.

his friends,⁴⁷ who sought to defend God after Job had remonstrated against Him. In appealing to the angels, rather than to God Himself, R. Shapira retained the language of faith, using it to reproach heaven. On the other hand, the fact that he appealed to the angels – which is prohibited by halakha⁴⁸ – clearly reflects the radical nature of the rupture and the protest, for which he was prepared to shatter the boundaries of religious law.

The paradox of faith is particularly evident in his internal dialogues on the discrepancy between the absoluteness of faith and the questioning and consideration of the reality of suffering. A careful analysis of his language demonstrates the dynamism of his theory of suffering.

In the prewar dialogue cited above, R. Shapira grapples with a twofold problem. First: How can a person rejoice when he is surrounded by suffering? Is it not cynical to ignore real suffering or to harness it to some metaphysical illusion? Second: How can a sinner rejoice with God? Even a lifetime of faithful service in complete purity would still be insufficient, because God is infinite. How, then, can such a sinner tell his soul that it is worthy of rejoicing in God's joy?

These would appear to be two distinct problems – the first one existential, and the second metaphysical. But R. Shapira saw them as one, in keeping with the Hasidic practice of expressing the kabbalistic theory of divine ontology in terms of human psychology. The path to gathering the divine sparks in the world passes through the human soul and existential status.⁴⁹ This principle brought the Hasidic masters to find the evil inclination – which separates man from God – in more than just the material sinful act. Seeing the evil inclination solely in the sinful act draws attention away

47 Job 42:7-8: “[T]he Lord said to Eliphaz the Temanite: ‘My wrath has flared against you and your two companions because you have not spoken rightly of Me as did My servant Job. And now, take for yourselves seven bulls and seven rams and go to My servant Job, and offer a burnt-offering for yourselves, and Job My servant will pray on your behalf. To him only shall I show favor, not to do a vile thing to you, for you have not spoken rightly of Me as did My servant Job.’”

48 See Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, Laws of Idolatry, 2:1: “The primary commandment with regard to idolatry [is] not to worship any creature – neither angel, nor sphere, nor star, nor one of the four elements, nor any of the things created from them. And even if the worshiper knows that God is God, and worships a creature as Enosh and the men of his generation worshiped at first [i.e. as intermediaries to God], he is an idol-worshiper.”

49 See Jacobson, *Hasidic Thought*, p. 51. I disagree here with the distinction that Hershkowitz makes between theory and existentiality. See n. 66, below.

from the essence of sin and diverts it to physical reality and its ephemeral temptations. More than in the sinful act itself, the evil inclination lies in the sadness and despair that accompany the act, in the thought that there is no return from sin.⁵⁰ The spiritual-existential essence of sin poses a far greater problem than the material act, inasmuch as it compromises the sinner's ability to effect *tiqqun*. So, too, suffering is more than just the physical effect (pain) of sin – as punishment. Its real significance as punishment for sin lies in the doubt and sense of arbitrariness and meaninglessness that accompany it and deepen the anguish.⁵¹

In this passage, R. Shapira finds the evil inclination neither in suffering itself (initial doubting) nor in sin (subsequent doubting), but in the doubts that arise from suffering and from man's finitude, and especially in the doubt that arises from the discrepancy between theory and reality. In keeping with Hasidic tradition, even the evil inclination

50 See e.g. Nahman of Breslov, *Liqqutei Moharan I* (Jerusalem: Meshekh Hanahal, 2001/2), sec. 282, p. 121b (emphasis mine): “That man must take great care always to be joyous and to keep sadness very far away... And even when he begins to examine himself and sees that there is no good in him, *and he is full of sin, and the “interested party” [i.e. the evil inclination, Satan] seeks to cast him down in sadness and melancholy ... he must not be dejected by it.*” Note that man recognizes his own sins, but it is the evil inclination that tempts him into sadness. In Hasidic thought, various emotions associated with sin are considered the essence of the temptation presented by the evil inclination. The tendency to focus on the act of sin rather than its essence can also be attributed to the temptations of the evil inclination, which seeks to prevent man from repenting and effecting *tiqqun* (kabbalistic “repair”).

51 On the distinction between pain and anguish pain, see Shimon Gershon Rosenberg (Shagar), *‘Al Kappot haMan’ul*, (Efrat: Yeshivat Siach Yitzchak, 2004), p. 37 (emphasis mine): “Until man confesses [his sin], punishment exists on a legal-social level, as a blow struck from without. Theodicy and acceptance of divine judgment changes its ‘location’; it is no longer a punishment, but a means to atonement. In this acceptance ... man subordinates his interest – as one who wishes to escape punishment – to a greater interest, to the moral justice that he accepts. Undergoing punishment cancels it, because what I agree to, and even desire, is not a punishment. *The pain does not go away, but not so the anguish and distress, which are not the pain itself, but the attitude and reaction to it.* That is because the anguish of punishment derives primarily from its perceived arbitrariness, from the feeling that ‘I’ve been had,’ ‘I don’t deserve it.’ The willingness to accept punishment mitigates the pain. In Hasidic thought they called it ‘sweetening the judgments,’ and taught that the divine *‘Eyn Sof* can be found even in judgment and in knowing this suffering is ‘sweetened.’” This is in keeping with Rav Shagar’s views cited above.

is to be harnessed to divine service. Doubt therefore becomes a vehicle for communion with the divine (*dvequt*) without barriers (*mehitzot*), and this doubt, in and of itself, becomes “Torah.”

This *dvequt* does not eliminate suffering in the name of unity of and with God. On the contrary, it is unity with the Godhead that affords suffering the language and the ability to be what it is: the disintegration of a finite and disunited creature. In this sense, it is precisely as a meaningless phenomenon that suffering assumes meaning. Its significance as disintegrated disunion is reflected in R. Shapira’s harsh words – in themselves, a part of encounter and communion with the divine.

R. Shapira’s wartime inner dialogue can be explained in a similar fashion. Suffering man may “enter the inner chambers” and there unite with God. This is not an escape from the physical world of suffering into “neutral,” inner spaces, an alternative reality where all is good and pleasant. The world of the inner chambers is one of weeping, of anguished physical and spiritual existence. The inner chambers are the place where one weeps, because *they are the place of suffering itself* – detached from manifest providence, although not devoid of providence either, depending on the state of the individual.⁵² God’s reality in the inner chambers – or the divine unity that subsumes

52 Shapira, *Esh Qodesh*, p. 178, *Parashat haHodesh* 5702 (March 14, 1942), in Polen, *The Holy Fire*, p. 119 (emphasis mine): “Therefore, there are occasions when, at a time of [divine] concealment [*hester*] – meaning, when He, blessed be He, conceals Himself in His inner chambers – the Jewish person communes with Him there, *each individual in accord with his situation*, and [new aspects of] Torah and divine service are revealed to him there. We have already mentioned how the Oral Torah was revealed in exile; [similarly], the Holy *Zohar* was revealed to Rabbi Simeon bar Yohai ... at a time of extraordinary calamity, caused by the terror of the [Roman] government.” On the concept of the “inner chambers” in kabbalah and Hasidic thought, see Seeman, “Ritual Efficacy,” pp. 497-8 and notes.

Viktor Frankl, in *Man’s Search for Meaning* (Boston: Beacon, 2006), claims, based on his experiences at Auschwitz, that a prisoner’s ability to survive depended upon his *inner* world, upon the creation of inner meaning unaffected by camp life. R. Shapira’s view is very different. The “inner chambers” are not a meaningful inner world into which one may escape, but the consciousness of divine presence even where it is absent. Paradoxically, divine presence affords “meaning” to a meaningless world, *as such*. The inner world is the world of a Jew afflicted by the suffering of this (external!) world, internalized in the context of existential-Hasidic thought. Moreover, it is this consciousness that affords renewed sensitivity to reality (see n. 44, above, and compare to the views of Ety Hillesom, in n. 63, below). Another important difference between Frankl and Shapira pertains to the issue of perspective. Frankl’s analysis

them – intensifies their intrinsic separateness and intensifies suffering; hence the weeping.⁵³

R. Shapira's doubt thus became Torah, and a sacred text in its own right.⁵⁴ This *yihud* (unification) does not preclude the “crisis theory” of suffering – the positive outcome of which erases the previous rupture – but rather expands divine unity into these isolated places, by virtue of their separateness. The spark, revealed in suffering that expresses the absence of God's presence, does not fill that space with God's presence. On the contrary, the spark grants ontological existence to suffering as a space devoid of the divine presence. Although this approach falls into the category of “trauma theory,” it finds God and the Torah in what is itself a separate trauma:

Here we come to [R. Shapira's] main endeavor, which runs counter to the standard response to suffering. Usually, the endeavor is to find a reason and justification for suffering, thereby mitigating it. R. Kalonymus [Shapira] felt that, with regard to the Holocaust, this would be false theodicy, one that distances man from the reality of suffering and therefore from the reality of his own existence and

is retrospective, and identifies a characteristic that he believed facilitated survival (together with a good deal of luck): meaning and purpose in life – the lack of which, despair, resulted in certain death. We must ask ourselves, however, how such a radical catastrophe can be interpreted in light of a single theory? Did all of the survivors maintain a sense of meaning? And would this not imply blaming those who did not survive for having brought about their own deaths by virtue of their despair? Indeed, according to this approach, escape to an inner world, far from reality, was a *sine qua non*. The Piaseczner Rebbe, on the other hand, speaks from within events that, at least at the time of their occurrence, resulted in a loss of meaning, and seeks paradoxical meaning – which, as we shall see below, affords value and meaning even to moments of absolute meaninglessness. There is thus a place in R. Shapira's dynamic theory, even for one who has lost all sense of meaning.

53 According to Seeman (“Ritual Efficacy,” p. 498), the theurgic ritual of “weeping in secret places” intensifies the pain and renders it authentic, while preventing the revelation of divine weeping and thereby protecting the world from collapse (“breaking of the vessel”), as it would be unable to withstand the infinity of divine suffering for the suffering of Israel.

54 R. Shapira describes the possibility of entering the “inner chambers” through Torah study. According to Seeman (*ibid.*), “Torah” here includes R. Shapira's own teachings.

faith. Paradoxically, he strives to find theological validation for his suffering, rather than to mitigate suffering by imbuing it with religious significance, even significance rooted in [the concepts of] divine judgment and retribution. This is the existentialist response that protests and even rebels against the erosion of suffering by means of abstract consolation.⁵⁵

***Tzimtzum* – Divine Retraction**

R. Shapira's theosophy is not merely dialectic, oscillating between two extremes. The limitations of language impose emphases that appear to contradict one another. In fact, however, "crisis" and "trauma" converge and compel one another. R. Shapira's theory entails its own disintegration, but finds divine presence even in that disintegration – presence that enables its existence as such.

In order to understand the *yihud* that exists in a disintegrating world, we must understand two basic concepts in kabbalistic and Hasidic thought: *tzimtzum* (divine retraction) and *hehalal hapanui* (vacated space). In Lurianic Kabbalah,⁵⁶ these terms are used to describe the creation of the world out of divine infinity ('*Eyn Sof*). In kabbalistic thought, it is the '*Eyn Sof* (the '*ayin* or nothingness from which all is created) that is considered substantial, whereas the *yesh* (existence) is finite and therefore ephemeral and insubstantial. Since the Godhead is substantiality itself, nothing can exist without the divine presence within it.

The world thus requires immanent divine presence for its ongoing existence. Divine presence is, however, infinite, and thus fundamentally incompatible with boundaries of any kind. How then do the finite boundaries of the created world remain unbroken by the infinite presence that gives it vitality?

Isaac Luria (Ha-Ari) explained that before every act of emanation of infinite divine light, '*Eyn Sof*, the Infinite Being, retracts into Itself, creating a "vacated space" from within the Godhead, in which the world can be created. This space is paradoxical. On the one hand, it is devoid of divine presence, lest it break the finite vessels⁵⁷ of the world. On the other hand, the Godhead surrounds the space and is present in Its absence (leaving a vestige or residue called *reshimu*), for without divine presence, nothing can live or exist.

55 Rosenberg, *Kelim Shevurim*, pp. 135-6.

56 See Hayyim Vital, '*Etz Hayyim*, portal 1, ch. 2. For an explanation of the concept of Lurianic Kabbalah, see Isaiah Tishby, *Torat haRa' vahaQelippah beQabbalat haAri* (Jerusalem: Schocken, 1942), pp. 52-61.

Some of the Hasidic masters offered an existential interpretation of this paradox.⁵⁷ The *tzimtzum* of the Godhead is “divine occultation,” a state in which God and His meaning-giving presence are hidden. Were it not for this occultation, however, the full presence of divine truth would negate individual human existence, i.e. free will. It is only through divine occultation that humans gain independence and the ability to interpret reality. Suffering – both the suffering that is inherent to physical existence (that is, death), and the existential suffering of meaninglessness, confusion and concealment (*he’alem*) – is an inherent part of man’s complete independence to determine his actions and give meaning to his life. The source of suffering is thus *tzimtzum*, or boundary-setting divine judgment.

On the other hand, we find suffering prior to *tzimtzum* as well. Divine infinity is an effusion of grace and love, but such boundless abundance is like a torrent that would – in the absence of a dam – sweep through and destroy everything in its path. Divine grace can thus be catastrophic for a finite creature. Indeed, in the stage that followed *tzimtzum*, only a “thread” of grace flowed from the infinite light surrounding empty space. This light enabled the creation of vessels to contain it. Its infinite source, however, could not be contained by the vessels, and so a further catastrophe occurred – the “breaking of the vessels.”

In existential terms, were the meaning of life entirely manifest, there would be no place for man who seeks and chooses meaning. Man would be compelled to accept meaning “under the shadow of the mountain” (bShabbat 88a), and his independent spiritual and physical existence would cease to exist.

Infinity is thus not the opposite of finitude. According to Isaac Luria, infinity lies in the paradox and co-existence of opposites – infinity and finitude; in surrounding nothingness (*‘ayin*) and existence (*yesh*), and the vacated space (*hehalal hapanui*) that separates them while simultaneously containing them both (hence its importance); and in enabling the existence of a separate and choosing world as part of the all-encompassing and all-knowing divine order.

This is not the ultimate purpose envisioned by the Creator, however. The culmination of man’s finite and separate choice is the recognition of divine presence even in actions that derive from his own choice and are therefore separate from God. In so doing, he unifies the Holy Name. This was the divine purpose in creating a separate world – one that would recognize Him even in its very separateness.

57 See e.g. Nahman of Breslov, *Liqqutei Moharan I*, sec. 64, pp. 68a-80a.

Tzimtzum in R. Shapira's Thought

R. Shapira used this concept to justify suffering, both before⁵⁸ and during⁵⁹ the Holocaust. More than a specific means of coping with suffering, the concept of *tzimtzum* is indicative of the fundamental paradox in R. Shapira's teachings.

Absolute infinity – in which meaning and truth are manifest – negates reality and real suffering by turning them into incidental and insignificant hindrances, transient “crises” on the way to a future ideal. This is an absolute or rigid theory or belief, while “trauma” focuses entirely on the finite and ephemeral world, separate from the *'Eyn Sof* that affords it meaning. In this world, man's free will and independence are absolute, to the point that radical catastrophe results in a loss of meaning and faith along with the disintegration and dissolution of the body.

The theory of *tzimtzum*, however, creates an independent space for trauma, in which it will neither disintegrate and consume itself, nor be annihilated by the excessive meaning of the *'Eyn Sof*. *'Eyn Sof* is not absolute meaning, but the co-existence of opposites: absoluteness that subsumes finitude and disintegration.

Within the trauma of a disintegrating world, R. Shapira seeks meaning that will bear witness to the disintegration as such.⁶⁰ The very quest for meaning – even if

58 See Shapira, *Derekh haMelekh*, p. 234: One must look beyond the first stream of light and its withdrawal, to the light that is hidden even in separate places – separate by virtue of divine occultation. R. Shapira goes on to affirm the sinner's greater potential for divine service, as his sin leads him to places that are more separate from God, the separateness of which he may consecrate to unification of and with the divine. On pp. 43-4, he describes God's desire for the prayers of Israel, rendered possible by *tzimtzum*, and necessary for renewed unification.

59 See Shapira, *Esh Qodesh*, pp. 168-9, *Parashat Zakhor* 5702 (Feb. 28, 1942), in Polen, *The Holy Fire*, p. 61. R. Shapira shows that divine judgment (*din*) is in fact divine grace (*hesed*), as doing a kindness to another requires the benefactor to transcend himself (*tzimtzum*) and his own boundaries. It is the task of the Jew to reveal that the proliferation of judgment in the world, i.e. the suffering that he encounters, derives from divine grace transcending itself. For further interpretations of *tzimtzum*, see *ibid.*, p. 165 (*Parashat Zakhor* 5702) and pp. 184-5 (*Parashat Huqqat* 5702 [June 29, 1942]). See also *ibid.*, *Parashat haHodesh* 5702 (March 14, 1942). Seeman (“Ritual Efficacy,” p. 499) relates to the concept of *tzimtzum* in R. Shapira's thought, but as a result of his dismissal of philosophy-meaning in R. Shapira's writings, in favor of ritual-theurgy, he fails to address the idea of paradox and the co-existence of opposites, of meaninglessness subsuming meaning – even in the context of radical suffering.

60 See e.g. Shapira, *Esh Qodesh*, p. 115, *Parashat Re'eh* 5701 (Aug. 23, 1941): “Suffering is occultation of the divine countenance. Therefore, when one sees the hand

pursued via vituperation aimed at God – is an expression of faith, of the fact that even the discrete world requires (absent) divine presence for its distinct existence. Divine presence enables the world to be “meaningful” in its meaninglessness.⁶¹ Man takes the

of God, His justice and His truth, even in them – he removes the occultation in them and reveals Him, blessed be He, in occultation and in judgment. And thus when the occultation passes, kindness [*hesed*] is shown, and the revelation of the light of His face, blessed be He.” So, too, in his response to the question of why the Israelites were commanded to eat bitter herbs while they were still in Egypt and still suffered the bitterness of exile (ibid., pp. 45-6, *Parashat Behar* 5700): “We must fix in our memory and within ourselves, our terrible situation at times of affliction, and how we now long inside ourselves, saying ‘if only God would save us, and I shall serve him’ ... For while still in Egypt, before the exodus, we were commanded to eat bitter herbs ... to assimilate the bitterness of that time, that they would always remember, even after their redemption, the bitterness and acceptance of the yoke of heaven then .” The practice of *creating future memory in the present* enables suffering to endure as memory that will not be erased by redemption. Harsh reality ruptures consciousness, and becomes a nightmare. The loss of familiar meaning makes life appear unreal, and leads man to despair of redemption. When it finally comes, he may think that his suffering was all the product of his imagination. The uplifting of suffering to God and the creation of future memory as the events themselves unfold, affords meaning to suffering as such, in the context of a new narrative. Consequently, man does not despair of redemption, and when it finally arrives, he will experience it as the realization of the future longed for in the tormented past. In this way, his suffering is not erased by redemption. This is the opposite of the advice of Rabbi Nahman of Breslov, to remember the good times at times of crisis: “one must always be joyous ... Since in previous times a little [divine light] shone upon him, and he would be strengthened and his heart aroused to God, blessed be He, although he now falls short of it and his eyes and heart are closed, nevertheless he should hold onto the previous times and go ... after the arousal and the [light that] shone upon him then, although he now falls short of it ... until, before long, God will help him and His light, blessed be He, will again shine upon him” (Nahman of Breslov, *Liqqutei Moharan I*, sec. 222, p. 114a). On the present anticipating the past and the future anticipating the present, see Shimon Gershon Rosenberg (Shagar), *Zeman Shel Herut*, ed. Yishai Mevorach (Alon Shvut: Institute for the Advancement of Rav Shagar’s Writings, 2010), pp. 86-7, 154-6; ibid., n. 149, for further references on this subject in Rosenberg’s writings.

61 According to the theory of *tzimtzum*, the Godhead *needs* an imperfect world that strives for perfection, for such a world gives expression to divine dynamism and “becoming”. Were there no such world the Godhead would be uninterrupted, infinite, and perpetual wisdom, without deficiency and therefore without fluidity – a state that would, in itself,

vessels broken in suffering and, from them, creates new vessels, capable of receiving more of the infinite light. Redemption, in this context, is not only physical salvation but a change in consciousness – the ability of the finite to contain the infinite without breaking or suffering. The infinite, in turn, will not obliterate the finite, the utopian ideal will not compel reality and nullify the individual and his suffering, but will afford them meaning as such.

Until such redemption, infinity irrupts into the finite dimension from time to time. The significance of these irruptions is twofold. First, they represent future utopias irrupting into the present, shattering it and rebuilding it until it can contain infinity without breaking. Second, the finite world tends to stagnate, preferring to approach reality with familiar vessels. Such stagnation however, impedes the dynamism that is inherent to life, thereby creating the need for rupture – or at least the suffering that it entails – as a result of its attachment to old dogmas and fear of innovation. Recognizing the “vacated space” and the need for dynamism can prevent the suffering associated with the pain of rupture (and, sometimes, even the rupture itself) – thereby, in effect, containing infinity in a finite vessel.

But this is a theory suited to times of “normal” suffering. And indeed, before the Holocaust, this is how the Piaseczner Rebbe explained the place of trauma and suffering in the world – as, in and of themselves, communion with the divine. During the Holocaust however, reality was utterly disintegrating. *'Eyn Sof* was no longer merely a theoretical concept that was fragmenting the theory itself; it was a concrete presence that permeated and disintegrated both theory and reality. Yet it was precisely in this sense and at this time that the validity of the theory that purported to subsume reality itself could be proven in a non-theoretical way – in contending with its own disintegration, when prior recognition of the vacated space was no longer able to avert suffering.

The paradox of the vacated space pertains not only to the space between the infinite and the finite, but also to the discontinuity between theory and reality. The absoluteness of faith is revealed specifically in its dynamism, which demands that man pose trenchant questions and bear witness to disintegration and, in so doing, express his freedom.⁶² Moreover, it is finding the divine (absence) in suffering that

be a deficiency for the Godhead. See the passages on “Perfection and Perfectibility” (*Shelemut ve-Hishtalmut*), in Abraham Isaac Kook, *Orot haQedushah*, vol. 2, pp. 528-33.

62 Hans Jonas, in his essay “The Concept of God after Auschwitz” (in Lawrence Vogel (ed.), *Mortality and Morality: A Search for the Good after Auschwitz*, (Evanston:

affords it meaning as meaninglessness.⁶³ Man thus unites the two extremes, achieving communion with God even and especially in His absence, and approaching redemption

Northwestern University, 1996), pp. 131-43), offers a speculative-philosophical interpretation of the concept of “vacated space” in an attempt to address the question of God’s presence/absence during the Holocaust. Jonas argues that the Divinity cannot simultaneously be (1) omnipotent, (2) absolutely good, and (3) intelligible. In creating the world, the Godhead renounced its limitless power, thereby granting choice and agency to man. In this sense, God Himself was “burnt” at Auschwitz; not that the concept of God was destroyed, but that it is human actions that determine the nature of the divine presence in the world. Elsewhere (*ibid.*, p. 192), Jonas links this concept to the words of Etty Hillesum, written in Amsterdam, during the Holocaust: “it is not God’s fault that things are as they are at present, but our own... [A]nd if God does not help me to go on, then I shall have to help God” (Etty Hillesum, *Etty: The Letters and Diaries of Etty Hillesum 1941-1943*, ed. Klaas A. D. Smelik and trans. Arnold J. Pomerans [Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2002], pp. 481-4). Hillesum, however, was influenced by Christian theology. Her philosophy thus differed greatly from that of the Piaseczner Rebbe. This is particularly evident in her unwillingness to remonstrate against heaven, which she perceived as absolute grace, devoid of the attributes of judgment and punishment (although such approaches can also be found in Jewish thought), and in her willingness to suffer, to the point of seeking it out, like a Christian martyr or the hero of a Greek tragedy. The Jewish martyr (“sanctifier of God’s name”) does not seek to prove anything by the needful act of death (although something may be proven from it afterward). R. Shapira wrote (*Esh Qodesh*, pp. 72-3 16 Tishrei 5701 [Oct. 18, 1940]) that there was no conscious “sanctification” (i.e. martyrdom) in the ghetto, but rather the practical acceptance of Abraham commanded to sacrifice his son – an act he was never actually required to perform. “Sanctification of God’s name” in the Holocaust lay, in fact, in human fragility and in the incapacity even to choose death, as R. Shapira implied that Sarah had done (*Esh Qodesh*, p. 10, *Parashat Hayyei Sarah* 5700 [Nov. 4, 1939], in Polen, *The Holy Fire*, pp. 96-7) following the binding of Isaac, choosing to die of a broken heart for the sake of future generations and their fragility.

63 A comparison of the concept of the “vacated space” with similar ideas is beyond the scope of this article. I would like to point out a few of these, however, for the purposes of further study: (1) Primo Levi’s “Gray Zone” (Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, pp. 36-69), which is “the most dangerous area of all, as Levi himself stated. But, although dangerous, it is necessary in understanding the Holocaust. While the separation between murderer and victim is obviously profound, it is hard to maintain this unequivocal distinction in certain spheres, including even the inner world and language of the *victim* himself” (Goldberg, “If This Is a Man,” p. 414); (2) Critical theory speaks of the “black hole” such as Lyotard’s “differend,” that can become a

through consciousness. R. Shapira's powerful outcry regarding the disintegration of the divine image thus becomes "Torah" – a sacred work of Hasidic thought.⁶⁴

R. Shapira expressed this dynamism before the Holocaust, in the presence of "light" suffering, which also awakened him to disintegration and rebuilding, to the recognition of God even in disintegration itself. Through the radical catastrophe of the Holocaust, however, the voice of disintegration – construed from within the language of faith – grew immeasurably stronger. Beyond general expressions of faith, remonstrance, and dialogue, the voice of disintegration could be heard in a number of specific contexts, reflecting the changes (already present in the theory) that occurred during the Holocaust:⁶⁵

source of creativity and fluidity, see Jean-François Lyotard, *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute*, trans. Georges Van Den Abbeele (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2002): "This is what a wrong ... would be: a damage ... accompanied by the loss of the means to prove the damage" (ibid., p. 5); "It is in the nature of a victim not to be able to prove that one has been done a wrong" (ibid., p. 8); "[A] *differend* ... [is] the case where the plaintiff is divested of the means to argue and becomes for that reason a victim" (ibid., p. 9); "The differend is signalled by this inability to prove" (ibid. p. 10); (3) Jacques Lacan's "metonymy": see Dylan Evans, *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis* (London: Brunner-Routledge, 1996), p. 114; (4) Agamben's "Homo sacer" (as manifested in the Muselmann and the witness), based on a careful reading of Primo Levi: see Giorgio Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive. Homo Sacer III*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (New York: Zone, 1999); (5) Derrida's "trace" (which is closer to the Kabbalistic concept of *reshimu*): see Jacques Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena and Other Essays on Husserl's Theory*, trans. David B. Allison (Evanston: Northwestern University, 1973).

I would merely note that these theories tend to highlight the disintegration and emptiness that generate creativity, but can also degenerate into nihilism. The "vacated space," on the other hand, although empty and disintegrating, is but one part of divine unity, since there is also the divine abundance that surrounds it. Recognizing the vacuum, accepting divine judgment, teaches man the infinite power of human choice and freedom – revolutionary at times, in a world in which divinity is hidden. This freedom drives man to repair the world with creative order and law, to aspire to unify the world of human freedom, in which God is hidden, and the world of divine abundance.

64 See n. 55, above.

65 Numbers 3-6 are based on the views of R. Shagar, in *Kelim Shevurim*; and 1-3 on Hershkowitz, although he claims that the changes were few and external for the most part – of little importance in terms of the fundamental principles of R. Shapira's

1. Before the Holocaust and at its outset, R. Shapira did not hesitate to associate suffering with laxity in religious observance, sin, or abandonment of the faith, although he rarely chastised his followers directly.⁶⁶ As the hardships increased, criticism became

thought (see Hershkowitz, “*R. Qalonimus Qalmish Shapira*,” pp. 127-8). I disagree with Hershkowitz on a number of points:

(1) Hershkowitz makes a methodological distinction between “speculative” (*hagut*) and “existential” (*qiyyumiyut*) teachings, and shows that the change in both categories was not significant, with the exception of a few existential issues. Although he notes the connection between the approaches, I believe that the distinction is not appropriate in the case of Hasidic thought, which strives to unite the two through the uplifting of the sparks. “Dry” conclusions can indeed be drawn from the speculative teachings, but to do so would be to undermine their foundation. There would also appear to be a contradiction between this division and the clear connection he finds between the approaches, to which he adds that the hardships experienced by R. Shapira seeped into his thought. In any event, Hershkowitz fails to explain the *significance* of the division, in terms of the changes that in fact occurred in R. Shapira’s teachings. Furthermore, R. Shapira continued to teach theoretical kabbalistic principles in an existential fashion (in keeping with his prewar method) throughout the Holocaust period (see e.g. Shapira, *Esh Qodesh*, pp. 180-90, on the *sefirot* of *Binah* [intelligence] and *Malkhut* [kingdom], and the “unknowable head” of God, and their existential interpretation in terms of actual hardships).

(2) According to Hershkowitz, R. Shapira’s questions do not reflect “a lack of faith, but rather an attempt to reconcile the faith that beat deep in R. Shapira’s heart” (Hershkowitz, “*R. Qalonimus Qalmish Shapira*,” p. 125). R. Shapira’s questions are striking, yet Hershkowitz merely reviews them, without providing an analysis of their significance, as a change in Shapira’s philosophy. Hershkowitz appears reluctant to recognize the difficult moments in R. Shapira’s thought, and therefore shrouds them in an aura of unquestioning faith, based on a passage in *Esh Qodesh* (p. 139), in which R. Shapira explains that his is a cry of despair. He seems to have overlooked the poignant nature of the questions, and the substantial “separateness” of R. Shapira’s suffering – both during and before the Holocaust – and strives to attenuate the moments of doubt (see e.g. Hershkowitz, “*R. Qalonimus Qalmish Shapira*,” p. 56, n. 73). I believe that the strength and intensity of R. Shapira’s complex faith derives precisely from its capacity to incorporate the crisis of faith to which he openly admits. His faith was not a monolith capable of weathering suffering, but a dynamic system able to subsume rupture and even actual heresy, and it is that ability that was the source of its absoluteness.

(3) See n. 67, below.

66 On such occasions, the objects of his admonitions were primarily the leaders of the community. See Shapira, *Derekh haMelekh*, pp. 460-2. The reasons for this were not

more infrequent,⁶⁷ and R. Shapira no longer attributed suffering to sin. With regard to observance of the religious precepts, he made few demands – mostly, he simply exhorted his flock to try to avoid sin and observe the precepts whenever possible⁶⁸ – realizing how inadequate such “bookkeeping” was in light of the suffering they were experiencing. The precepts, sins, and suffering assume a completely different meaning in such circumstances – that of communion from absence.

2. Before and during the Holocaust, R. Shapira identified the suffering of God with that of the Jewish people, and vice versa. Suffering disintegrates meaning. Associating it with God and His suffering does not cheapen it and harness it to an abstract ideal but, on the contrary, affords meaning to suffering as meaning-disintegrating. Before the Holocaust, the divine suffering in which the Jews shared was due to the need to inflict suffering on the Jewish people in order to arouse them to return to their Creator. In other words, the participation in suffering stemmed from a deficiency in the people. During the Holocaust however, the divine suffering was God’s own suffering, transcending human influence and understanding. Nevertheless, the Jewish people shared in that suffering, to their credit.⁶⁹ Moreover, R. Shapira even went as far as identifying human sin with divine sin, implying that the horrors of the Holocaust

merely pragmatic (although R. Shapira, as a pedagogue, must have considered this aspect as well), in order to avoid alienating his followers, as Hershkovitz suggests (“*R. Qalonimus Qalmish Shapira*,” pp. 38, 128). R. Shapira’s approach to his individual followers was based on his understanding that their difficult and humble condition in fact offered great potential for attaining spiritual heights (see n. 59, above). Of course, the exhortation to recognize the divine below entailed a demand for greater attention to spirituality and religious observance.

67 At the beginning of the Holocaust, R. Shapira still chastised his followers. See Shapira, *Esh Qodesh*, p. 4, Rosh HaShanah 5700 (Sept. 14, 1939), in Polen, *The Holy Fire*, pp. 38, 108-9; Shapira, *Esh Qodesh*, p. 48, *Parashat Be-Huqqotai* 5700 (May 15, 1940), in Polen, *The Holy Fire*, pp. 44-5; Shapira, *Esh Qodesh*, p. 112, *Parashat ‘Ekev* 5701 (Aug. 16, 1941); Shapira, *Esh Qodesh*, p. 141, Hanukkah 5702 (Dec. 21, 1941), in Polen, *The Holy Fire*, pp. 82-3. R. Shapira’s postscript on the unprecedented nature of the current suffering (see n. 12, above) clearly severs the connection between suffering and sin.

68 Shapira, *Esh Qodesh*, p. 69, Rosh HaShanah 5701 (Oct. 3, 1940).

69 On the identification of divine suffering with that of the Jewish people, see n. 43, above. The change appears in Shapira, *Esh Qodesh*, *Parashat Mattot* 5702 (July 11, 1942), in Polen, *The Holy Fire*, p. 120, and similarly, in *Esh Qodesh*, pp. 179-80, *Parashat HaHodesh* 5702 (March 14, 1942), in Polen, *The Holy Fire*, p. 119.

were a divine sin!⁷⁰ Meaninglessness and the disintegration of theory fully realize their meaning as such, inasmuch as they are divine acts.

3. Before the Holocaust, it was the actions of the Jews that were responsible for their suffering.⁷¹ During the Holocaust however, R. Shapira absolved the Jews of responsibility, which then passed to God. This passage has many ramifications, including the expectation that God will save the Jews on the basis of their good will alone and without concrete action on their part – or at least considering partial action as if it had been completed.⁷² Internal disintegration created a new paradigm for the question of human responsibility, and resulted in a trenchant demand from God – expressing both faith and veiled protest, deriving from a single source.

4. Before the Holocaust, R. Shapira spoke in terms of the suffering of the Jewish people as a whole,⁷³ generalizing individual suffering. During the Holocaust however, he sought a place for individual suffering as such.⁷⁴ A general vision of reality tends to ignore passing hardship, while extreme reality demanded that R. Shapira relate to the disintegration experienced specifically by the individual. In his inquiry, he expanded faith to include the minutiae of individual life.

70 Shapira, *Esh Qodesh*, p. 109, *Shabbat Nahamu* 5701 (Aug. 9, 1941). Suffering and sin, which, in their essence, express existential arbitrariness and meaninglessness, are uplifted to a “divine [dimension] ... that extricates man from a state of lifelessness to *dvequt*... This uplifting ... elicits profound and exquisite elation in pain” (Rosenberg, *Kelim Shevurim*, p. 139). R. Shapira even found divinity in expressions of antisemitic hatred! “[A]ll evil discourse which Israel’s enemies utter against her, is all transformed into the voice of Torah. This must follow since even these utterances are part of the world as we find it; their vital energy is rooted in the voice of God in the Torah which has devolved into evil discourse. What this means, simply stated, is that the words of admonition in the Torah [Leviticus 26; Deuteronomy 28] materialized in such a manner that one or another enemy of Israel uttered a demand to attack or torment the Jews, God forbid. But when we conjoin everything to Torah ... they are all sublimated to the voice of Torah, and all evil is transmuted into sweetness” (Shapira, *Esh Qodesh*, p. 163, *Parashat Mishpatim* 5702 [Feb. 14, 1942], in Polen, *The Holy Fire*, p. 132).

71 Shapira, *Derekh haMelekh*, pp. 44, 234.

72 Shapira, *Esh Qodesh*, p. 42, *Parashat Qedoshim* 5700 (May 4, 1940).

73 See e.g. Shapira, *Derekh haMelekh*, p. 234.

74 Shapira, *Esh Qodesh*, pp. 61-2, *Parashat Toledot* 5701 (Nov. 30, 1940), in Polen, *The Holy Fire*, p. 26.

5. Before the Holocaust, R. Shapira generally perceived physical suffering as a manifestation of spiritual suffering.⁷⁵ Even at the beginning of the Holocaust, he urged his followers to focus their prayers on the “exile of the *Shekhinah*,” rather than on their own physical needs.⁷⁶ Later, however, he stressed the fact that it is not only permissible, but obligatory, to pray for the suffering of the body.⁷⁷ Thus, the “flesh ... and nothing else beside that,” devoid of language and theory, has the potential to generate the greatest *dvequt*, precisely because it is the farthest from divine unity.

- 75 A notable exception to this is R. Shapira’s mourning for the absence of one particular individual from *this world and physical existence*. Although the soul is happy in the next world, R. Shapira lamented the death of his wife – for himself, as he missed her, and for her physical existence in this world: “Rabbi Yohanan certainly saw the souls [of his departed sons] even after they left their bodies, but yet he wept ‘for that beauty that will wither in the earth.’ And what shall I say? Yes I am heartbroken, but it is not only for my sorrow that my heart is so burdened and oppressed, but for *her*. Where is that gentle woman, that righteous woman? The Lord is just in all his ways and gracious in all his deeds” (Shapira, *Derekh haMelekh*, p. 446, in a letter dating from 5697 [1936/7]). This, however, is the exception that proves the rule. Most of his prewar teachings on suffering translate the physical into the spiritual, while in his wartime writings – public homilies rather than private letters – he compares physical suffering to the suffering of the *Shekhinah*, thereby affording it existence as such.
- 76 Shapira, *Esh Qodesh*, p. 125, Rosh HaShanah 5702 (Sept. 22, 1941). R. Shapira writes that, in such distressing times, it is understandable that one cannot pray for heavenly matters, but only for his own needs. He therefore calls upon the worshiper to pray for this hardship as well: the inability to pray for the spirit, but only for the body. Thus even a prayer for one’s own needs may create *dvequt*, even from the most distant places from God. Furthermore, the *Shekhinah* is the Godhead’s lowest attribute, the revelation of God in the world, through the Jewish people. The needs of the Jewish people are thus, in themselves, the needs of heaven – especially when their prayers express their desire to pray for the sake of heaven.
- 77 Shapira, pp. 180-1, *Esh Qodesh, Rosh Hodesh Nisan 5702* (March 19, 1942), in Polen, *The Holy Fire*, pp. 52-3. Don Seeman’s analysis (see n. 37, above) strengthens the idea of focusing on the body, since the theurgic act unifies body and soul, the lower, physical world and the supernal, spiritual worlds, thereby enabling a change in reality. The focus on the body is not only compassionate, but ritual-theurgic as well. In this sense, the theurgic act is a practical ramification of R. Shapira’s theosophical speculation, based on the contradiction-bearing concepts of *tzimtzum* and *hehalal hapanui*.

6. Before the Holocaust, R. Shapira found comfort in what he later called “consolations of grace.”⁷⁸ The improvements and good that followed the crises satisfied him and, in effect, allowed him to ignore suffering-inflicting divine judgment. During the Holocaust, however, he refused to be comforted by such consolations. The only consolation, in his eyes, was in judgment (*din*) itself – in the restoration of the very thing that has been lost, the restoration of the soul to the body in the resurrection of the dead and the end of history, which entails a change in consciousness, capable of recognizing the “good” in such evil. R. Shapira sought to find the good specifically in wordless trauma: the grace in judgment, *tzimutzum* and suffering itself.⁷⁹

Redemption, Trauma and Crisis

Given the above, I believe there is a need for new concepts. That which Goldberg calls “crisis” is, in fact, a theory of *redemption*.⁸⁰ Such a theory focuses on ultimate redemption, and views suffering along the way as a hindrance or complication. Future redemption thus forces itself upon the present, canceling the concrete trauma. The

78 See R. Shapira lamenting the loss of his wife, specifically in this world (n 76, above). In closing his lament with the *tzidduq hadin* (justification of [divine] judgment), R. Shapira maintained the language of faith. In so doing, he did not efface his own grief and take comfort in her existence in the next world. On the contrary, the language of faith offers a “space” in which he could even mourn the loss of her physical presence in this world. This in no way implies a demand for resurrection or a reversal of divine judgment itself. As noted above, this is the exception that proves the rule.

79 Shapira, *Esh Qodesh*, p. 108, *Shabbat Nahamu* 5701 (Aug. 9, 1941). The concept of divine judgment (*din*) as divine grace (*hesed*) is rooted in the recognition that even infinite grace can rupture finite reality, like a torrent in the absence of a dam. This is how R. Tzadok of Lublin explained the destruction of the Temple, as the result of an excess of divine love (*Tzidqat ha-Tzaddiq* [Beit El: Har Bracha Institute, 1997/8], sec. 171, pp. 81-2). In a similar vein, Rabbi Nahman of Breslov explains the difference between divine mercy and mercy as we would like it: “‘And may El Shaddai grant you mercy’ (Genesis 43:14) – specifically [mercy that is] for you. That is to say that He, blessed be He ... will put mercy in our hands, for ... all the suffering is His mercy, for certainly everything that God, blessed be He, does to man, even terrible suffering, is all out of mercy, but we want Him to put mercy in our hands, because we do not understand His mercy, and cannot receive that mercy of His, but rather ... that we will have mercy on ourselves, and our mercy is simple – to be cured of an illness and so forth” (*Liqqutei Moharan II*, sec. 62, p. 29b).

80 Some have associated this approach with the *midrash* in the Jerusalem Talmud (jBerakhot 4b, 1:1): “They saw that the light of dawn had broken. Rabbi Hiyya

future utopia's excess of meaning renders the present entirely meaningless – thereby increasing suffering. Sometimes, the utopia becomes a pragmatic ideology, shattering reality and actually creating suffering. Such a theory would stress faith, which would become rigid and immobile.

The theory of trauma, on the other hand, stresses human disintegration and detachment from God, meaning, or any kind of coherent narrative. This perspective is entirely devoid of redemption, and its description of disintegration adds to the disintegration actually experienced.

This dichotomy does not give adequate expression to “the nature of human nature”⁸¹ when faced with a radical catastrophe like the Holocaust, because man himself is lost – whether in a utopian ideology, or in the complete disintegration of trauma. Both theories run the risk of losing man and faith alike. The redemption theory ignores the individual and his suffering, the words that do not fit the mold, and the victim's inability to speak them. The trauma theory may identify completely with the victim and his suffering, and oppose any coherent discourse since it would ignore the individual and his suffering. This is “acting out,” however, or “post-traumatic repetition compulsion” – the compulsive repetition of the traumatic disintegration – which does not allow any attempt to collocate trauma along a continuum or within a narrative.⁸² The two extremes may thus perpetuate the effacement and suffering of the individual.

Paradoxically, R. Shapira's theory comprises both extremes, without synthesis or compromise. This position should rightly be called crisis theory, according to R. Shapira's understanding of the midrash regarding the birthing stool (*mashber*, which,

said ... so is the redemption of Israel: little by little at first and, as it proceeds, it waxes ever greater.” In other words, redemption comes slowly and there are obstacles along the way. Even this *midrash* however, stresses the darkness from which redemption emerges.

81 Like the title of Goldberg's article (“If This Is the Nature of Human Nature?: Re-reading Holocaust Diaries,” *Yad Vashem Studies* 33 [2005]), and reflecting his view that we cannot ignore the dimension of human disintegration within redemptive writing.

82 On post-traumatic “acting out” as compared to “working through” trauma, see Dominick LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 2001), pp. 141-9. According to LaCapra, trauma should neither be denied nor fixed, but a new vocabulary and new modalities should be created for the analysis of the past with a view to the future, on the basis of “empathic unsettlement,” which challenges the old modalities without rejecting the use of discourse per se (*ibid.*, p. 78).

as already noted, also means “crisis” in Hebrew), which differs from Goldberg’s interpretation:

Let us understand ... the meaning of the birth pangs of the Messiah. The simple explanation of the function of these sufferings is that they serve to cleanse us of our sins before the revelation of the Messiah’s advent. But ... [w]hy should the generation of the Messiah have to suffer for the sins of past generations? Rather [the explanation is along the following lines]: After the sin of Adam, God said, “In pain shall you bring forth children.”...⁸³ This is not simply a kind of vengeance.... It refers to death, or pain approaching death, for the forces which need to achieve annihilation before the birth of a new creation. [As we find in the midrash, regarding a woman seated on the birthing stool, ninety-nine (of whose) cries lead to death and one to life.]⁸⁴... This, then, is the way we may understand the birth pangs of the Messiah. For what, after all, is redemption? It is a divine revelation wherein God will manifest His light and holiness. Now this revelation takes place by means of Israel... So in order that Israel merit that such light be manifested through them, it is necessary that certain of their capacities be annihilated; that is what is called the birth pangs of the Messiah. God states in Scripture, “Shall I labor, and not give birth?”...⁸⁵ This means that God labors and gives birth by means of Israel. So it is that Israel suffers birth pangs and experiences the annihilation of part of its energies, and thereby gives birth to the light of the Messiah. [And like the woman seated on the birthing stool – by greater pain, we know that a greater part of the child has emerged and been revealed. So too when we see a person of Israel enduring greater suffering from the birth pangs of the Messiah, we know that a greater part of the light of the Messiah has been revealed.]⁸⁶

83 Genesis 3:16.

84 Midrash Tanhuma, Parashat Tazri’a, sec. 4.

85 Isaiah 66:9.

86 Shapira, *Esh Qodesh*, pp. 106-7, *Parashat Mas’ei* 5701 (July 26, 1941), in Polen, *The Holy Fire*, pp. 111-2.

R. Shapira compares the suffering that precedes the coming of the Messiah to the birth pangs inflicted as punishment for the sin of the Garden of Eden. He stresses that this punishment was not intended as vengeance or a penalty, but as a commensurate *tiqqun*, or correction, of Eve's sin. Since the sin occurred immediately after creation, R. Shapira saw this punishment as part of the process of creation. He asserts that every new creation requires the annihilation of the creation and forces that preceded it, citing the well-known metaphor of the seed that must decompose in order to produce a new plant. A woman in labor must die ninety-nine deaths to produce a new life and, for the sake of creation, *'Eyn Sof* must withdraw, killing something within itself, in order to make room for separate alterity. So, too, for the sake of future redemption, known reality – physical and spiritual – will have to be annihilated, in order to enable the existence of a new kind of world.

Why is it not vengeance? R. Shapira would appear to have perceived reality as a perpetual reenactment of the process of *tzimtzum* and creation. In this sense, the sin of Adam and Eve corresponded both to *tzimtzum*, and to the “breaking of the vessels” that could not contain the infinite light. The desire for freedom, for independent and other existence, requires the shattering of previous reality. The Godhead shatters itself in order to give rise to a separate world; the woman in labor is shattered in order to give birth to a child who is separate from her; Adam and Eve sinned because they wished to be independent rather than childishly dependent on God, to resemble God, to know good and evil, and to encounter Him face-to-face. And the advent of the Messiah, who will repair the sin of the Garden of Eden, will depend upon man's attaining the kind of freedom that requires the annihilation of present reality. The process is one of emancipation and disengagement, although it is immanent in reality, and so possesses an element of determinism. Man's desire for freedom inherently entails rebellion and rupture, only after which there can be renewed encounter and mutual independence. This is “measure for measure,” not vengeance. In this sense, the sin of the Garden of Eden and sin in general, as well as punishment and *tiqqun*, are inevitable, but ultimately lead to complete freedom.⁸⁷

87 A process corresponding to *tzimtzum* is *nesirah* (“severing”). According to the Midrash (Genesis Rabbah 8:1, on the contradiction between the two biblical accounts of man's creation), man was created as a single being with two faces: one male and one female, in harmonious combination, but the encounter between the sides was “back-to-back,” lacking internal recognition. God thus “severed” the being in two, in a process that entailed suffering, but ultimately resulted in a renewed encounter on equal footing, full of contradictions and contrasts, like the contrasts between male and female:

Nevertheless, there is continuity between the previous reality and the new creation, the revelation of which does not entirely destroy the old, but raises it to a new level. Just as a woman in labor does not necessarily die in a physical sense, but experiences deaths in essence, for the sake of childbirth – thus the creation of the world (and so future redemption) did not eradicate all that existed before:

The worlds that God created ... before the sin (in the Garden of Eden), were all subsumed within God, and the *essence* that each had in its own right, was not its own in *existence* ... for God miraculously created [them] so that *each would have essence in its own right but not existence of its own* [my emphasis]. And so it was in this world ... and so it will be in the future as well... [But] ... after the sin [in the Garden of Eden] the world became corporeal, so that each individual has a separate existence. In consequence, it is impossible for anything to give birth – i.e., to be the vehicle for the elicitation and revelation of new light – without the annihilation of a portion of the light of the individual self. In other words, it is impossible for anything to reveal the divine light without self-annihilation. Before a seed manifests a new creation – a tree with branches, leaves, and fruit, which is many orders

“a sustainer opposite him” – “face to face.” This process occurs between man and woman, or between man and his fellow, but also between God and Adam in the Garden of Eden and, subsequently, between God and the Jewish people. In the beginning, the relationship was infantile: God gave Adam and the Jewish people direct abundance – such as miracles and prophecy – but they lacked independence. In kabbalistic thought, this abundance is termed “bread of shame” (*nahama dekisufa*) – bread given as alms undeserved by the recipient, and the giver’s kindness shames the recipient, so that he cannot look him in the face (see j’Orlah 1.3, according to the explanation of Joseph Karo, *Maggid Meisharim* [Peatch Tikva: Bar-Lev, 1989/90], Genesis, p. 12; Moses Hayyim Luzzatto, *Da’at Tevunot* [Bnei Brak: Friedlander (Sifriyati), 1997/8], sec. 18, pp. 4-5). God, like man, seeks an “equal” relationship – “face to face.” The Jewish people rebels and goes to graze in the fields of idolatry, and God hides His manifest Providence – not merely as an external penalty, but immanent to the distance imposed by the independence-seeking people. The process ends in the face-to-face encounter of redemption. On the one hand, there is unification and convergence, on the other hand, each side maintains its independence, won through suffering. Hasidic thought, in keeping with its general approach, explained this process in terms of the individual soul seeking its God.

of magnitude greater than the seed – the being of the seed must first be annihilated. That is why every seed must decompose in the ground, as a kind of death.⁸⁸

R. Shapira distinguishes between *existence* and *essence*. The created worlds – separated, in their creation, from divine unity – were never meant to surrender their *essence*, but only their *existence*. In other words, they must recognize their divine source and surrender to it, but this does not mean that they must surrender their independent essence. Their surrender, or self-annihilation, before God means the death of their existence but, paradoxically, this self-annihilation and recognition of the divinity that gives them life perpetuates them and affords meaning to their essence.

In kabbalistic thought, independent existence of the *yesh* – the self – is the quintessential sin, the sin of pride, of the desire to rule. The punishment for this sin is immanent however, since the *yesh* is a finite entity, its independent existence, its immobility and rigidity within its own limits, with no opening to alterity, will eventually result in its own demise. This death of the *yesh* opens its boundaries, allowing it to encounter alterity, and in the case of creation, the finite worlds and vessels open to receive infinite divine abundance, recognizing that it is the source of their vitality. In so doing, they themselves attain infinity – their essence living on even after their existence is surrendered to God.

For the purposes of the present discussion, the infinite presence that bursts into the world (theory of *redemption*) creates *trauma* that shatters man's finite existence. Indeed, this shattering break is sometimes complete disintegration, to the point of death. The Piaseczner Rebbe, however, offers a theory of *crisis*: breaking boundaries through suffering annihilates the *yesh* (self-contained existence), and enables man to contain the infinite light, for the sake of new creation. The new creation comprises its own destruction: man and his suffering do not disintegrate completely, but retain their finite essence and assume meaning as such, specifically in their surrender to infinity. The *'Eyn Sof* is not the kind of utopian ideal that obliterates concrete reality, but rather the paradoxical incorporation of finitude as such in infinity, of reality in theory, of trauma as such in redemption, and of heresy in faith.⁸⁹

88 Shapira, *Esh Qodesh*, pp. 106-7, *Parashat Mas'ei* 5701 (July 26, 1941), in Polen, *The Holy Fire*, pp. 111-2 (emphasis mine). In kabbalistic thought, the creation of the world comprised the creation of a series of spiritual worlds, leading up to this, physical world.

89 Certain approaches within Hasidic thought surrender both existence and essence to God, aspiring to *unio mystica* (mystical union). See e.g. Jacobson, *Hasidic Thought*,

**Illustration and Summary – Depth within Depth:
The Piaseczner Rebbe and Rabbi Nahman of Breslov**

In order to illustrate the paradox, I propose to analyze another passage from R. Shapira's sermons:

I thought that with troubles such as these, when Rosh Hashanah would come, the sound of our prayers would be tumultuous and that our hearts would pour out to God like a stream of water.

The truth is, however, that while we no doubt have faith in God that our [High Holiday] prayers [this year] had a positive effect, nevertheless our eyes are witness to the fact that before the war, during previous High Holidays, our prayers had greater fervor and enthusiasm, with a greater outpouring of heart, than this year. The obvious reason for this is physical weakness; we have no strength. But even leaving that aside, we see that our Rosh Hashanah ... devotions are missing the sense of awe and fervor they had in former years...

There are several reasons for this. The first is that when a Jew prays and his prayers are answered, he then finds strength and enthusiasm for his subsequent prayers. But when people pray and they see that not only are they not answered, but the troubles increase even more, God forbid, then our hearts fall, and we cannot rouse ourselves in prayer... The second reason is ... that the attainment of any spiritual state, including faith and joy, requires the existence of a *person* – someone to do the believing and rejoicing. *But when every individual is crushed and trampled, there is no one to rejoice* (my emphasis).

And so it is with regard to fervor in prayer. Each of us is now fallen, prostrate, trampled. So there is no one – no inner “I” – to arouse us to prayer.⁹⁰

pp. 47-51, 84-98. Jacobson agrees that Hasidism does not demand total annihilation of physical reality, but refers to “conscious acosmism,” the significance of which is the complete nullification of man’s self-awareness and even the reality of the world in terms of consciousness.

90 Shapira, *Esh Qodesh*, p. 128, *Shabbat Shuvah 5702* (Sept. 27, 1941), in Polen, *The Holy Fire*, pp. 56-7 (emphasis mine).

R. Shapira describes faith disheartened by the fact that not only are prayers not answered, but things actually get worse. He also cites the disintegration of the divine image in man: the “person.” In order to pray and rejoice, there must be a “person.” R. Shapira’s mother tongue (in which he probably formed his thoughts before writing them down in Hebrew) was Yiddish. The Hebrew word “*ish*” (person) translates the Yiddish “*mentsh*,” the connotations of which go well beyond its literal meaning. It connotes a person capable of standing on his own, someone with a sense of self-worth and dignity: “Our father Abraham, when he saw the angels in human form, said: ‘If I see them showing respect to one another, I will know that they are decent human beings.’... This is a great principle; it is obvious in the world that one who is not [himself] a person and does not perceive his own humanity, will not consider his fellow a person either or show him respect...”⁹¹

R. Shapira notes the absence of that “person” from Rosh Hashanah prayers that year. Perhaps one such “person” would have been enough to arouse the “person” in others, but suffering had disintegrated the divine image in all of them. Yet, he attempts to find God even where He is not, and this is the source of his trenchant questions and the radical words that follow:⁹² “But King David said, ‘From the depths I have called You, O Lord’ ...:⁹³ not from one depth, but from two. After I fell into the first depth I called you, but not only was I not answered or saved, but I’ve since fallen into a second depth – depth within depth. Nevertheless, even in such a circumstance I strengthen myself and I once again call upon you.”⁹⁴

91 Shapira, *Esh Qodesh*, p. 177, *Parashat HaHodesh* 5702 (Sept. 27, 1941) (emphasis mine); In his sermon on *Parashat Shoftim* 5701 (Aug. 30, 1941) (ibid., p. 116, in Polen, *The Holy Fire*, p. 40), he describes how pain and suffering result in the loss of joy even after redemption has come, because “there is no longer a person to be happy.” R. Shapira would appear to be describing a situation of post-traumatic acting out, whereby the trauma is relived, producing endless melancholy and preventing reengagement in life.

92 Goldberg (“If This Is a Man,” p. 384-6) analyzes this passage, but remarks only on the disintegration of the divine image, without addressing the issue of repairing the broken vessels.

93 Psalms 130:1.

94 Shapira, *Esh Hakodesh*, p. 128, *Shabbat Shuvah* 5702 (Sept. 27, 1941), in Polen, *The Holy Fire*, p. 57 (emphasis mine).

R. Shapira describes two depths from which prayer emerges: not only the depth of suffering that is answered, but the depth of suffering that is not answered;⁹⁵ suffering that – despite prayer – only increases. The above passage echoes the words of Rabbi Nahman of Breslov:

For there are two contradictions. And when God, blessed be He, is *occulted in a single occultation*, it is also very difficult to find Him. But nevertheless ... one may toil and strive until he finds Him, blessed be He, because he knows that God, blessed be He, is hidden from him. When, however, God, blessed be He, is *occulted in occultation within occultation*, that is that the occultation itself is hidden from him ... that he does not even know that God, blessed be He, is hidden from him, then He cannot be found at all, since he knows nothing of God, blessed be He. And this is the meaning of “And I will doubly hide my face,”⁹⁶ that is that I will hide the hiding ... that he does not even know that he must seek God, blessed be He.... But indeed, even within all of the occultations, and even in the occultation within occultation, certainly, even there, God, blessed be He, is “clothed” [immanent]. *For certainly there is nothing in which the vitality of God, blessed be He, is not present, for without His vitality it could not exist at all. And therefore, certainly, in all things, and all actions, and all thoughts, God, blessed be He, is “clothed,” as it were. And even if, God forbid, one commits a sin, which is not in accordance with the will of God, blessed be He, nevertheless, the vitality of God, blessed be He, is certainly there, but in concealment and great tzimtzum* [my emphasis].⁹⁷

Rabbi Nahman describes a situation in which man cannot find God in reality and, what is more, even the fact that he cannot find Him is hidden from him. He does not even know that he must search. This is a description, in the vocabulary of Hasidic thought, of one whose life lacks meaning, i.e. a cohesive and coherent narrative within which to collocate its events.

95 This is similar to the distinction above, between consolable and inconsolable suffering.

96 Deuteronomy 31:18.

97 Nahman of Breslov, *Liqqutei Moharan I*, sec. 56, par. 3, p. 65b (emphasis mine).

Rabbi Nahman affirms God's presence even when he is "doubly hidden." His assertion that "there is nothing in which the vitality of God, blessed be He, is not present, for without His vitality it could not exist at all" is rooted in his interpretation⁹⁸ of the mystery of the "vacated space" – a "place" (*maqom*) that subsumes the paradoxes without which the world could not exist. Rabbi Nahman translates Lurianic ontology into existential questions, such as the question of foreknowledge and choice, or the question of adversity experienced by the righteous. Contrary to questions deriving from the issue of the "breaking of the vessels" (like the single occultation of God), which can be explained, such questions derive from the vacated space (occultation within occultation) – the paradoxical coexistence of good and evil upon which the world's existence depends. Divine infinity is not only that which annihilates all finite reality, but also that which enables the paradoxical existence of finitude within it.

Rabbi Nahman's solution to these questions is silence, like Moses's silence when confronted with the torture of Rabbi Akiva.⁹⁹ The understanding of the vacated space transcends language because – contrary to language, which is discursive – such

98 See n. 58, above.

99 *Tzimtzum* is the expression of divine *thought* with regard to the creation of the world: "At first He thought to create [the world] with the attribute of judgment, [but] saw that the world could not exist, [and therefore] placed the attribute of mercy first, conjoining it to the attribute of judgment" (Rashi, Genesis 1.1, based on Genesis Rabbah 12:15). God's first thought was the *tzimtzum* of his infinity – the attribute of judgment. The highest degree of divine relation is, in fact, associated with the attribute of judgment. Rabbi Zadok of Lublin (R. Tzadok ha-Kohen of Lublin, *Resisei Laylah* [Har Bracha: Har Bracha Institute, 2002/3], sec. 45, pp. 105-7) links this thought to the thought of judgment in the midrash concerning the torture of Rabbi Akiva (bMenahot 29b). Moses witnesses the torture of Rabbi Akiva and asks "Is this Torah, and this its reward?" God replies: "Silence! For so I *thought*." Thought, the highest of God's attributes, is expressed in the world as judgment and suffering, since limited human vessels lack the capacity to contain such divine abundance. Love inundates and "upsets the [natural] order." Divine thought cannot be grasped in speech and consciousness, but only in silence – to which God commands Moses – and in intuition that transcends consciousness. The sages of the Talmud also cautioned (bBerakhot 33b) that one must not ascribe "the attributes of God to mercy, when they are but commands." That is to say, even divine actions that we may perceive as merciful do not occur as a result of change or arousal in His infinite essence, for He is not affected by human action. His goodness is not motivated by a sense of guilt (which evokes guilt in the recipient as well), but by the attribute of judgment, measure for measure – "He who has mercy on

understanding is paradoxical and beyond reason. Silence enables one to understand that there is divine presence even in places that are entirely separate from God. In this way, man can gather the divine sparks concealed within double occultation, and fashion a melody (*niggun*) from them, expressing musical understanding that transcends words.¹⁰⁰ He thus expands divine unity to include the separate places – the “vacated space” itself.

[his fellow] men, heaven will have mercy on him” (bShabbat 151b). According to this approach, judgment comes *before* mercy and love, contrary to the Christian view that gives precedence to love and grace, which supplant judgment and the precepts, but ultimately resorts to excessive judgment and bloodshed. See Abraham Isaac Kook, *'Orot* (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1992/3), p. 21 (“*Yisra'el uTeHiyyato*,” sec. 3), 33 (ibid. sec. 15).

In Shapira, *Esh Qodesh*, pp. 75-76, *Shemini 'Atzeret* 5701 (Oct. 24, 1940), in Polen, *The Holy Fire*, pp. 129-30, R. Shapira (like R. Zadok of Lublin) asserts that the attribute of judgment is above that of mercy, and that the world (with the exception of the prophets who foresee the future) is, as yet, unable to withstand it, and it is therefore conjoined with the attribute of mercy. At the end of days, the ascendancy of judgment will be restored, in the more stringent rulings of the School of Shammai, and the Temple service of the Levites – men of judgment. In another interpretation of the story of Rabbi Akiva’s martyrdom however (Shapira, *Esh Qodesh*, p. 137; see Polen, *The Holy Fire*, p. 18), he argues that the world of thought is the world of mercy, and that silence prevents mercy from assuming concrete form in this world: Rabbi Akiva left it in the world of thought, failing to draw it down into the world of speech – this world – and “that is why mercy is not revealed below, and occultation and judgment remain.”

100 Speech is naturally constructed in temporal sequence, employing mutually-exclusive definitions. Any attempt to speak of a paradox simultaneously comprising two contradictory positions is thus doomed to failure. Rabbi Nahman therefore proposes silence at first, followed by melody. On the other hand, he offers a lengthy explanation of the paradox of the “vacated space,” as speech is man’s distinctive feature: the “speaking animal” (according to Aristotle), or the “speaking spirit” (as the *Targum Onqelos* renders “and the human became a *living creature*,” Genesis 2:7). The empty space allows human independence and speech to exist without being engulfed by the infinite silence that preceded creation, but it must not exaggerate to the point of pornography, mystification, or rigid definitions that afford the defined no other possibilities and thus “kill” it (Goldberg calls this “closing the gap between the signifier and the signified”; see Amos Goldberg, “Trauma, Narrative and Two Forms

In the above passage, Rabbi Nahman insists that there is divine presence in every action and thought in the world – even in sin! Divinity is thus present even in double occultation, thus providing it with vitality and existence. The hidden spark need not have any specific content. The very recognition of the presence of a divine spark is, in itself, the revelation of the spark hidden within the occultation. The writing of a homily as a “Torah,” a teaching, that instructs about the divine presence in everything – even in a reality that causes man to feel doubly distant from any significant narrative in his life – is thus, in itself, a revelation of the spark and expansion of divine unity in the world.

Like Rabbi Nahman, the Piaseczner Rebbe sought divine presence in everything, even in painful physical suffering and emotional anguish, and the dimension of sin in remonstrance and heresy. Even at the worst moments of disintegration, depth within depth, when prayer was met not with salvation but with increased suffering, and all of his attempts to retain the old vessels and language had failed, he found the divine spark in separateness as such. When all lay shattered – and outcry, protest and disintegration rose to the heavens – there opened a way to new inspiration and new vessels¹⁰¹ that had previously been trapped within the old vessels and in the ego of the seeker.

Even though the divine presence cannot be discerned clearly in suffering, leaving the suffering without purpose or meaning, by recognizing that the divine presence was nevertheless there, R. Shapira succeeded in expanding the concept of divine unity. He prayed (and remonstrated) from within two depths, and found the divine spark in the very fact that he spoke and wrote these things as Torah. In the real world he remained separated from God and continued to suffer – but these very things became God’s Torah. This is a crisis theory that, paradoxically, comprises both trauma and redemption, each in its own right, together.

of Death,” *Literature and Medicine* 25: 1 (Spring 2006), pp. 122-40, esp. 122-4). Such extreme manifestations can be termed “exile of speech,” as the Zohar (I, 5a) defines the Egyptian exile.

101 See Leviticus Rabbah 7.2: “It is shameful for an ordinary person to use broken vessels, but the vessels used by the Holy One, blessed be He, are broken, as it is written: ‘Near is the Lord to the broken-hearted’ (Psalms 34:19); ‘Healer of the broken-hearted’ (ibid. 147:3); ‘with him also that is of a contrite and humble spirit’ (Isaiah 57:15); ‘The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and a contrite heart’ (Psalms 51:19).”

As a result of the suffering of the Holocaust, R. Shapira's theory underwent significant change – change that brought new understanding, but was deeply rooted in its prior fundamental principles.^{102*}

Translation: Shmuel Sermoneta Gertel

102 See Yehuda Liebes, “*HaHiddush Shel R. Nahman*,” *Daat* 45 (1999/2000), pp. 91-103. Liebes describes R. Nahman's constant innovation, of which R. Nahman himself said: “I am walking in a new path, that no man has ever walked before; although it is a very old path, it is nonetheless, entirely new” (*Shivhei Moharan* [Jerusalem: Vardi, 1961/2], *His Attainments* 7:5, col. 1); Avichai Zur, “*Deqonstruqtzyah deQdushah: Mavo leHaguto Shel haRav Shagar*,” *Akdamos* 21 (Elul 5768 (2007)), pp. 110-39.

* Translator's note: for the translation of biblical sources, I have relied primarily on the translations of Robert Alter (*The Five Books of Moses: A Translation with Commentary* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2004); *The Book of Psalms: A Translation with Commentary*, (New York: W. W. Norton, 2007); *The Wisdom Books: Job, Proverbs and Ecclesiastes: A Translation with Commentary* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2010); and *The David Story: A Translation with Commentary of 1 and 2 Samuel* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1999).

