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SARAH OUR REBBE: R. KALONYMUS KALMAN SHAPIRA'S FEMININE SPIRITUAL LEADERSHIP IN THE WARSAW GHETTO

Daniel Reiser

Theological argument with and protest against God has deep roots in Jewish tradition. Usually the role models for such protests are male biblical figures, such as Abraham, Moses, Jeremiah, Jonah and Job. In this article, I will present an exceptional hasidic interpretation of Sarah's death as an act of "protest within faith." According to Rabbi Kalonymus Kalman Shapira, a hasidic rebbe in the Warsaw ghetto, Sarah "our matriarch" committed "suicide" for the sake of the people of Israel. Sarah died in order to demonstrate to God that her excessive suffering in the wake of Isaac's near sacrifice was absolutely unbearable. R. Shapira found himself at a time of utter collapse and extreme personal crisis at the beginning of World War II. I argue that, in his biblical exegesis, R. Shapira took Sarah's mode of besieged protestation upon himself as a spiritual leader of the Jewish people, a mantle he carried until his tragic death.

Sermons from the Years of Rage

On December 1, 1950, Warsaw construction workers unearthed two aluminum milk canisters from an excavation site at 68 Nowolipki Street. Like bottles bearing messages from a destroyed world, they were found to contain a treasury of previously unknown documents from the clandestine "Ringelblum Archives," documenting the lives, deaths and mass murder of Warsaw Jewry.¹ The two cans, containing 9,829 pages of documentation, were well preserved. The handwritten manuscripts of Rabbi Kalonymus Kalman Shapira (1889–1943), known as the Piaseczner Rebbe, were among these documents.²

Kalonymus Kalman Shapira³ was born on July 13, 1889,⁴ to R. Elimelekh Shapira (the Grodzisker Rebbe, 1824–1892) and Hannah Berakhah Shternfeld, the daughter

of R. Hayyim Shemu'el of Chęciny (the Chentshiner Rebbe).⁵ Before Kalonymus Kalman was three years old, his father passed away, and he was taken in by his father's grandson from his first marriage, R. Yerahmiel Moshe Hopstein (the Kozh-nitzer Rebbe, 1860–1909). R. Hopstein later became Kalonymus Kalman's father-in-law when, at the age of sixteen, Shapira married Hopstein's daughter, Raḥel Hayyah Miriam.⁶ They had two children, Elimelekh Ben-Zion (1908–1939) and Rekhil Yehudith (1912?–1942).

In 1913, at the age of twenty-four, Shapira was appointed rabbi of the city of Piaseczno, close to Warsaw. Toward the end of World War I, he moved to Warsaw, though he continued to make brief visits to Piaseczno. In 1923, he founded the Da'as Moshe yeshiva, named in memory of R. Hopstein. It was one of the largest hasidic yeshivas in Warsaw, with three hundred enrolled students.⁷ R. Shapira was a member of Agudath Israel, established in the early twentieth century as the political arm of Ashkenazi Torah Judaism, and he encouraged others to join it.⁸ Within the movement, known in Poland as Agudas Shelomei Emunei Yisro'el (the Union of Faithful Jewry), he belonged to the faction that took a positive view of settlement in the Land of Israel. Influenced by his brother, R. Yeshayahu Shapira (the "Pioneer Rebbe," 1891–1945), who belonged to the Mizrahi religious Zionist movement, he bought land in Kefar Ata (now Kiryat Ata).⁹

During his lifetime, R. Shapira published one book, *Hovat hatalmidim* (The students' responsibility), in 1932, and a booklet, *Benei mahshavah tovah* (Disciples of proper thought), of which only a few copies were printed and privately distributed to a select group of students.¹⁰ His other works, *Hakhsharat ha'avreikhim* (The young men's preparation), *Mevo hashe'arim* (The entrance to the gates), his personal journal *Tzav veziruz* (Command and urging) and his sermons delivered during the Holocaust, were discovered with the unearthing of the Ringelblum archive and published from the 1960s onward.¹¹ *Derekh hamelekh* is a collection of some of his sermons given on Sabbaths and on holidays, as well as letters and writings from the years 1925 to 1938.¹²

R. Shapira's wife, Raḥel Hayyah Miriam, was renowned for her erudition and took an active role in the composition of her husband's books.¹³ She would review his drafts, proofread them and comment upon them. R. Shapira mentions her in an annotation in his book *Mevo hashe'arim*: "My spouse, the Rebbetzin, the righteous, Madame Raḥel Hayyah Miriam ... read this [book], as she read several of my other writings, and made comments that spurred me to expand and clarify" (p. 21b). Quoting her specific comment, he opens a new discussion.

In a letter written by R. Shapira in 1937, after Raḥel Hayyah Miriam's death in that year, he describes her as knowledgeable and educated, inter alia, in Hasidism and Kabbalah:

Almost no day passed in which she did not study Torah.... And, for its own sake (*lishmah*), she studied in order to [spiritually] bind herself to the Torah and holiness ... her studies were of Bible, midrash and *Zohar*, as well as kabbalistic and

hasidic books, and she had a broad knowledge of Kabbalah and Hasidism. I was very often amazed by her erudition and the breadth of her knowledge of these matters ... even some secular scholars were humbled before her. The professor in Vienna was astonished by her wisdom and insights.¹⁴

In the conservative-hasidic world, it is not self-evident for a hasidic leader to praise his wife publicly for having studied Kabbalah and the *Zohar*, considered forbidden to women.¹⁵ Moreover, it seems that she enjoyed a limited but valued and acknowledged leadership role in hasidic circles.¹⁶ In the same letter, R. Shapira writes that many Hasidim wept at her funeral, crying out: “Mother, the mother of the Hasidim is gone” (*Mame, di Mame fun hasidim is avek*). In a memorial inscription appended to the sermons he gave in the ghetto, he writes of her: “In honor of my mate, the Rebbetzin, the righteous, modest and pious [*hasidah*]... Her character traits were noble; in addition, she studied Torah every day. She was as a merciful mother to embittered souls in general, and to hasidim specifically.”¹⁷ In another dedication to her, on the first page of the manuscript of *Hakhsharat ha'avreikhim*, he elaborates:

In memory of my spouse, the Rebbetzin, the righteous, modest and pious [*hasidah*] ... She was a great, righteous person; her traits were noble. Charity and acts of kindness were her daily doings ... She studied Torah daily, and also learned hasidic books, in order to know God and cleave to His holiness. Rationality and emotion, brain and heart merged in her. She also helped me in all my activities.

On her tombstone, too, he included these words in her epitaph: “And she herself was engaged daily in Torah” (see Figure 2, ll. 5–6). R. Shapira was known to compose *nigunim* (melodies) and play them on his violin after the Sabbath, but he stopped this custom after the death of his wife.¹⁸

Nehemia Polen has pointed out that many women in R. Shapira's family were acknowledged as spiritually gifted. His maternal grandmother, Sarah Horowitz Sternfeld (the Chentshine Rebbetzin, 1838–1937) was a well known figure in the hasidic world of interbellum Poland. After the death of her husband in 1916, she conducted herself as a rebbe for over twenty years and was famed for her miraculous powers. Hasidim traveled to her with *kvittlekh* (notes bearing petitionary prayers and requests) and sought her blessings. She prayed with a minyan (a prayer quorum of men) three times a day and gave advice to path-seekers. Rabbi Shapira's great-grandmother Perl, the daughter of the Kozhnitzer Maggid, was considered to have spiritual powers exceeding those of men.¹⁹ The acceptance of these extraordinary women as legitimate in hasidic circles suggests, to some extent, the possibility of a spiritual leadership role for women in Hasidism.²⁰ R. Shapira's broader positive attitude to woman's spiritual leadership, as shown by Polen and Uziel Fuchs,²¹ serve as a background for understanding his own spiritual leadership role in the coming “Years of Rage.”²²



Figure 1. Raḥel Ḥayyah Miriam's tombstone, Okopowa Street Jewish Cemetery, Warsaw, section 57, row 7, tomb no. 4 (Photo: D. Reiser)

During the Holocaust, R. Shapira resided in his home at 5 Dzielna St. in the Warsaw Ghetto. There he delivered weekly sermons, commenting on the weekly Torah readings, from the beginning of the war in September 1939 until just before the Grossaktion Warsaw in July 1942, when most of the Jews were sent to their deaths in Treblinka and the ghetto was largely emptied. He consigned his manuscripts to the underground archive for safekeeping in January 1943, with the beginning of armed Jewish resistance in the Warsaw Ghetto.²³ He refused a number of opportunities to leave the ghetto, declaring, recalled hasidic journalist Leibel Bein, that “it was unthinkable that he should save himself and leave his brothers to moan.”²⁴ Similarly, when the American Joint Distribution Committee wanted to get him an exit visa from Poland, he is reported to have said, “I will not abandon my hasidim at such a difficult time.”²⁵ It is believed that R. Shapira was sent to the Trawniki work camp, whose surviving prisoners were marched into the forest and shot on November 3, 1943.²⁶

פ"נ

- [1] הרבנית הצדיקת המצוינת במדותי' [ה] הטהורות
 [2] והכי טובות, המפורסמת בחסידותה וצדקתה
 [3] כפה פרשה לעני יותר מיכולתה
 [4] וכאם רחמני' [ה] היתה לכל מצוק ומר נפש
 [5] בכלל ולבני תורה בפרט וגם היא בעצמה
 [6] בכל יום עסקה בתורה אשת חיל מגזע קדושים
 [7] וטהורים וכו' כשי' [כבוד שם תורתה/תפארתה] **מרת רחל חי' [ה] מרים**
 [8] בת הרה"ק מו"ה ירחמיאל משה מקאזניץ
 [9] נכדת הרה"ק המגיד מקאזניץ הרה"ק היהודי מפשיסחא
 [10] הרה"ק מראפשיץ הרה"ק ממעזביו בעמח"ס [בעל מחבר ספר]
 [11] אוהב ישראל הרה"ק מטשערנאבעל
 [12] הרה"ק מוהר"א הגדול מקארלין הרה"ק מליזענסק
 [13] הבעש"ט הקדוש גדולים וקדושים וצוקללה"ה
 [14] אשת הרה"צ מהו"ר קלונימוס קלמיש שליט"א
 [15] אבדק"ק פיאסעצנא בהרה"ק מהו"ר
 [16] אלימלך וצוקללה"ה אבד"ק גראדיסק
 [17] בעמח"ס [בעל מחבר ספרים] אמרי אלימלך ודברי אלימלך
 [18] עלתה נשמתה בטהרה ביום שבת קודש
 [19] לסדר ותמת שם מרים
 [20] יו"ד לחודש תמוז תרצ"ז לפ"ק
 ת. נ. צ. ב. ה.

Figure 2. The epitaph on Raḥel Ḥayyah Miriam's tombstone.

After the archive's discovery, R. Shapira's wartime sermons were published under the name *Esh kodesh* (Sacred fire). Recently, I published a critical edition of this work.²⁷ Surprisingly, these sermons make no direct reference to political or historical events. R. Shapira never mentions the Germans or—later on—important ghetto personalities by name; nor does he relate directly to specific events. However, as Judy Baumel, Nehemiah Polen and, most recently and extensively, Henry Abramson, have shown, these sermons do contain indirect references to events in the ghetto,²⁸ including the forced shaving of beards (on the Sabbath of the Torah portion of *Toledot*, November 11, 1939); the closing of the synagogues (*Vayehi*, December 23, 1939); the closure of Jewish shops (*Beshalah*, January 20, 1940); the founding of Jewish aid organizations and the persecution and abuse of Jews in the streets (*Vayikra*, March 16, 1940); the looting of Jewish property (*Zakhor*, on the Sabbath before Purim, March 23, 1940); and the prohibition of public prayer (*Nitzavim*, September 28, 1940). More generally, R. Shapira mentions the “wicked” ones and refers to

suffering, agony, physical and mental distress, the grief of losing loved ones, and the crisis of religion and faith.²⁹ These references offer a rare glimpse into R. Shapira’s understanding of faith and religious leadership under the strain of extreme crises.

Hayyei (the Life of) Sarah

One of the first sermons delivered by R. Shapira during the war was given on the Sabbath of November 4, 1939, dealing with that week’s reading from the Torah, the *parashah* of *Hayyei Sarah* (Gen. 23:1–25:18). The sermon opens with a question, goes on to deal with several topics, and concludes with an effort to answer the opening question. I have divided the sermon into five sections in order to analyze it step by step. The translation is based on Hershy Worch’s English edition,³⁰ with some revisions based on the Hebrew version and the original manuscript.

- (1) “And the life of Sarah was one hundred years [*shanah*] and twenty years [*shanah*] and seven years [*shanah*]. These were the years of the life of Sarah” [Gen. 23:1]. Rashi explains: The reason the word *shanah* is written at every

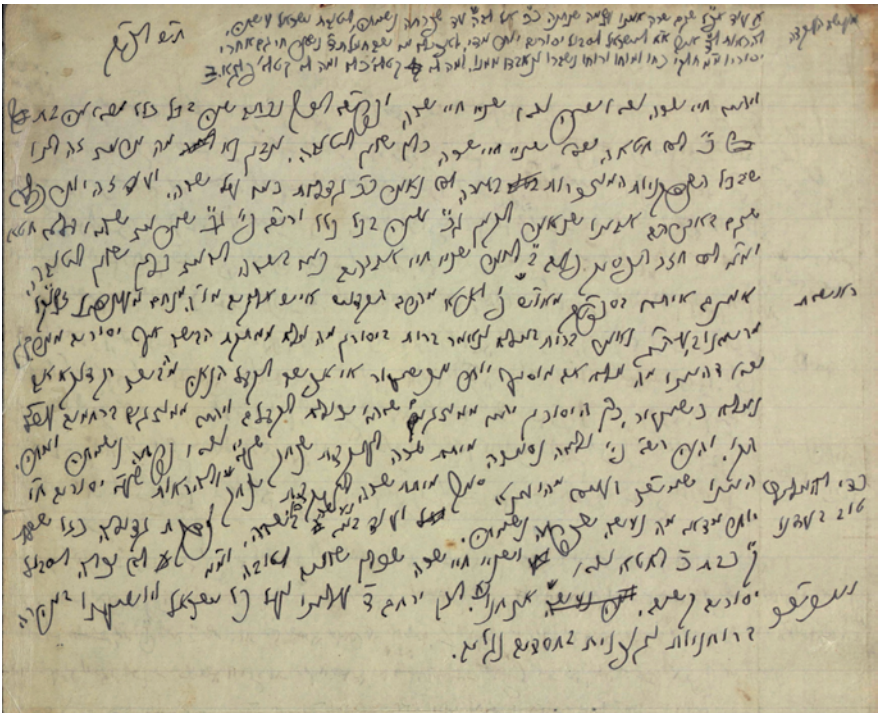


Figure 3. Rabbi Shapira’s sermon on *Parashat Hayyei Sarah*, ARG II 15 (Ring. II/370), Jewish Historical Institute, Warsaw

term is to teach us that each term must be explained by itself: at the age of one hundred she was as a woman of twenty with regard to sin ... “These were the Years of the life of Sarah” [this repetition indicates that her “years”] were all equally virtuous.

Early commentators pointed to two seemingly unnecessary repetitions in the verse. One is the triple repetition of the word *years*, which the eleventh-century commentator Rashi [*ad loc.*], quoting Genesis *rabbah* 58:1, explains as teaching us that Sarah in old age was as free of sin as a young child. The other comes at the end of the verse, which reiterates what was said at the beginning. Here, after again quoting Rashi, R. Shapira challenges his interpretation:

What is this verse teaching us? Of all the great saints and righteous women mentioned in the Torah, none are spoken of as highly as is Sarah.³¹ The puzzle becomes even greater when considered in light of what is written of Abraham upon his death. When Abraham our father dies, the Torah also says, “He lived a total of one hundred *years* and seventy *years* and five *years*” (Gen. 25:7), and Rashi there explains that this repetition was also because Abraham lived without sin. And yet, at the end of this verse, we do not find the words “These were the years of the life of Abraham,” which might tell us, as with Sarah, that all the sets of years were considered equal in virtue.

From this question, which points to Sarah’s uniqueness, R. Shapira starts developing his own highly original interpretation:

(2) Indeed, in the holy book *Ma’or vashemesh* [1841/2, by R. Shapira’s great-grandfather Kalonymus Kalman Epstein], we find a quote from R. Menachem Mendel of Rymanov concerning a teaching found in the Talmud [BT *Berakhot* 5a]: “[R. Simeon b. Lakish said: The Torah uses the word] ‘covenant’ in reference to salt [Lev. 2:13]; [it also uses the word] ‘covenant’ in reference to suffering [Deut. 28:69, referring to the chapter’s description of the sufferings that would be meted out to the people for breaking the covenant]. This teaches us that just as salt purges meat, so does suffering purify [a person].” R. Menachem Mendel of Rymanov adds: “And similarly, just as meat is ruined when overly salted, and has to be salted properly, so should the sufferings be moderated, so that people can cope with them; suffering must be administered with mercy (*beraḥamim*).”

Like salt, which, according to Jewish law and tradition, prepares the meat to be eaten, torments may strengthen us and prepare us for life. However, unbearable suffering, like too much salt, spoils everything. A person can—or more precisely, will—be damaged by too much pain.³²

This sermon is the fourth in a collection of 86 sermons, delivered over almost three years. It was given two months after the beginning of the war, almost a year

before the ghetto was established and then sealed off in Warsaw, in October–November 1940. What is R. Shapira talking about in his reference to unbearable suffering? At the beginning of November, 1939, the Jews were not yet particularly discriminated against, and their conditions were similar, more or less, to those of the local Poles.³³ The policy of mass extermination had not yet been put into place.³⁴ It is not clear from the sermon itself what R. Shapira is crying out about.

The solution lies in the historical background to the sermon and in R. Shapira's personal history. His wife Raḥel Ḥayyah Miriam had already died two years before; now, at the very outbreak of the war in Warsaw, he had lost almost his entire remaining family in the most tragic way. His only son, Elimelekh Ben-Zion, was wounded in the bombing of September 25, 1939, and he was hospitalized in the Red Cross Hospital at 6 Smolna St. The next day, September 26, when Elimelekh's wife and aunt came to visit him, the entrance to the hospital was bombed by German planes, and they were both killed. Elimelekh Ben-Zion himself died of his wounds on September 29, on the second day of the week-long festival of Sukkot (the Feast of Tabernacles), when observance of mourning customs is not permitted by Jewish law. R. Shapira started his *shiv'ah*, the prescribed seven days of mourning, only on October 7, after the close of the holiday of Simchat Torah, which immediately follows Sukkot, and the following Sabbath.

R. Shapira wrote in his personal diary *Tzav veziruz*, about his love and his admiration for his son and his devastating sense of loss:

Such a lovely, dear son. A true man of Torah, wise and honest, gentle in his character and of noble qualities. He was very close to me, even ready to give his life for me [...] and with him his wife, my humble daughter in-law Madame Gitl [...]. All the hopes I had—are crushed, and my future—destroyed. My crisis is immense, unbearable.³⁵

“This one was still speaking when another came” (Job 1:16). On October 20, exactly a week after R. Shapira rose from the *shiv'ah* for his son, his elderly mother passed away as well, and he again sat *shiv'ah* and recited the *kaddish*.³⁶ This mourning period explains the lacuna in his sermons, from the holiday of Sukkot up to the Sabbath of *Ḥayyei Sarah* (September 28–November 4, 1939), which was the first sermon he gave after losing his family. The entire time he was mourning was a period of silence. Thirty-seven days after the loss of his son, he stood up and said the above words.³⁷ Clearly, *he*, who had lost almost all of his family and his beloved son, is addressing his own unbearable suffering, causing him to cry out that there is a limit to what we humans can endure.³⁸

It seems to me that the first months of the war were crucial for R. Shapira and influenced his self-image and his perception of himself as a religious leader. In several later sermons he expressed his aim as strengthening and providing spiritual encouragement to his disciples and listeners. He who has lost all presents himself as an example for continuing a life of faith and observing Torah and the

commandments, in spite of everything he has gone through: “So that you, too, will find strength by my means,” as he wrote in a sermon given in early December.³⁹ “When others see that I find strength even amid my immense troubles,” he said in September 1940, “*a fortiori*, they, too, will find strength amid their troubles, which are not as bitter as mine.”⁴⁰ But he does not end his sermon for *Hayyei Sarah* by seeing himself as a role model for religious existence. There is more to it; there is another, spiritual level:

(3) Rashi asks: “Why does the Torah recount the death of Sarah directly after the account of the binding of Isaac?” And he answers:⁴¹ “When Sarah was told of the binding of Isaac [that her son was taken for slaughter], her soul fled, and she died.” That is, when Moses, our teacher, the trusted shepherd, edited the Torah, he purposely placed these two events—the death of Sarah and the binding of Isaac—side by side in the text in order to advocate on our behalf. By doing this, Moses is suggesting that if the suffering is, God forbid, unbearable, then death can result. Moreover, if this could happen even to Sarah—who was of such a righteous stature, that when she was a hundred years old she was as virtuous as a girl of twenty—if she, Sarah, was unable to bear such pain, how can we? It is possible to explain that Sarah our matriarch, who took the binding of Isaac so much to heart, to the point that her soul departed, acted for the benefit of Israel, in order to demonstrate to God that the Jewish nation is not capable of tolerating such excessive suffering.

The previous *parashah*, *Vayera*, ends with the story of the binding of Isaac in Genesis 22, while this one, *Hayyei Sarah*, opens with Sarah’s death. Rashi maintains that ordering and editing has meaning. According to this, Sarah died when she heard that Abraham was going to slaughter her only son. Here R. Shapira uses Rashi’s words in order to develop a radical idea. James Diamond has shown that this sermon, born of extreme personal crisis, expresses a turning point in R. Shapira’s life and theology, at which he opens the door to abandoning old theologies that “justified God’s countenance.”⁴²

R. Shapira considered Sarah to have committed a type of suicide.⁴³ As Diamond points out, he exonerates Sarah “from what would normally be viewed as a transgressive act.”⁴⁴ According to R. Shapira, Sarah performed an extreme act of protest that was simultaneously an act of physical, spiritual and religious heroism. That is why the Torah reiterates, to her credit: “These were the years of the life of Sarah.” In her situation, even putting an end to her own life, which is forbidden by the Torah, was an act of virtue:

(5) Perhaps the text itself is answering the question by saying, “These were the years of the life of Sarah.” One might tend to judge Sarah as having sinned against the remainder of her years, because if she had not taken the binding of Isaac so much to heart, she would have lived longer. However, since this taking

to heart was done for the good of the Jewish people, Scripture hints that the years Sarah might have lived beyond her 127 years were not wasted, and so she did not really sin against those years.

Diamond notes that there is a rabbinic source which attributes Abraham's refraining from telling Sarah of the binding of Isaac to his fear that she might commit suicide.⁴⁵ However there is no other source for R. Shapira's claim that Sarah actually went through with it. Don Seeman, relating to this sermon, hesitates to call R. Shapira's characterization of Sarah's death here as a suicide, saying, rather, that she "allowed" herself to die of grief,⁴⁶ but this distinction does not seem to make a significant difference. Diamond's analysis shows that the sermon's disturbing potency is seriously undercut if Sarah's death is not characterized as a suicide, since it is "performed by her," "for the benefit of Israel," and yet she had not "sinned" for cutting her life short. What "sin" would that be, if not suicide?⁴⁷

Sarah is a character who does not submit herself to God; on the contrary, she struggles with Him for the sake of the people of Israel. Indeed, theological argument with and protest against God have deep roots in Jewish tradition.⁴⁸ Abraham, Moses, Jeremiah, Job and other biblical figures stood up to God and made provocative statements of protest. Abraham said: "Shall not the Judge of all the earth do justice?" (Gen. 18:25). Moses confronted God and demanded "Forgive their sin, and if not, erase me now from Your book, which You have written" (Ex. 32:32). Jeremiah asked, "Why does the way of the wicked prosper?" (Jer. 12:1).⁴⁹ This trait reappears in the rabbinic period in wonder-sages such as Hanina ben Dosa and Honi HaMe'agel.⁵⁰ Some courageous hasidic masters, too, took God to task for mistreating the Jewish people. R. Levi Yitzhak of Berdichev (d. 1809), remembered as a great advocate and defender (*melitz yosher*) of Israel,⁵¹ was captivated by the figure of Moses, who inspired his own vision of spiritual leadership.⁵²

Notably, however, Abraham, Moses and the other iconic religious and cultural personalities who have served as a source of inspiration for spiritual leadership embodying "protest within faith" were all men. No medieval biblical commentators, nor any rabbinic, kabbalistic or hasidic interpreters appear ever to have given Sarah that role and function. R. Shapira is the first to comprehend Sarah's leadership as a spiritual protest and to grant her the status of a *melitz yosher*. Sarah's drive and intention is "to advocate on our behalf" (*lehamlitz tov ba'adenu*).

As Polen has shown, R. Shapira took a positive attitude toward women's religious activities, including their taking upon themselves "masculine halakhic obligations."⁵³ We have seen, too, that he was raised in exceptional hasidic circles, in which women (including his mother, grandmother and wife) were more active and their religious roles more prominent and appreciated than in other traditional communities, including most hasidic courts. This background provides a context to his unique, original and radical interpretation of Sarah's death. However, there is an additional passage in the sermon that is much more explicit—and even revolutionary—than those quoted above. R. Shapira added a few sentences in a footnote

between what I have numbered as sections (3) and (5). These were embedded in the sermon in the edition of *Esh Kodesh* printed in 1960, without it being specified that they comprised a later comment (see the manuscript photo below),⁵⁴ thus adding a puzzling and seemingly incongruous paragraph:

(4) Even the one who survived that suffering by divine mercy, nevertheless elements of his strength, mind and spirit are broken and lost forever, [As the Talmud says:] *Mah li katla khula, mah li katla palga* [BT Hulin 35b]—“what difference does it make, whether all of him or part of him is killed/dead?”

Taking into account the personal and historical events that underlie this sermon enables us to understand it in a new light. Who is “the one who survived”? Who is the one who lost his entire family and remained alive, if not R. Shapira himself? Reading this passage as a comment on section (3) suggests that R. Shapira presents himself as Sarah and sees his spiritual leadership role in the Warsaw Ghetto as similar to Sarah’s. As a religious leader, R. Shapira tries to find a religious meaning to his suffering. Sarah, at least from her perspective, had lost her son, who was slaughtered on the altar. R. Shapira’s son was also slaughtered on the altar of war; but R. Shapira’s situation was worse, for Sarah only *thought* her son had been sacrificed, while R. Shapira’s son was *indeed* sacrificed. Moreover, Sarah “lost” the son who was supposed to be her continuation; and so did R. Shapira, for Elimelekh Ben-Zion was meant to inherit his father’s position and sit on the throne of the Piaseczno hasidic court.⁵⁵

However, R. Shapira’s resemblance to Sarah is incomplete, since Sarah is dead, while he still lives. The added quotation from the Talmud—“what difference does it make, whether all of him or part of him is dead?”—perfects the similarity to Sarah. There is no difference between half death and complete death, meaning that *he*, who is half alive, in fact is dead. He has already lost everything. His suffering, like Sarah’s, is a call to heaven, in which R. Shapira, a hasidic rebbe, gathers all the power of his grief to scream—enough! Not for himself does he cry out, for he is already dead, nor for his family, which does not exist anymore, as he wrote: “All the hopes I had—are crushed, and my future—destroyed. My crisis is immense, unbearable.” Like Sarah, he is crying out for the people of Israel.⁵⁶

Indeed, a Piaseczno hasid testified that R. Shapira, after the death of his son, said in Yiddish: “Ikh hob shoyrn di milhume farshpilt! Hashem yisburekh zol helfn az der klal Isruel zol di milhume gevinen” (“I have already lost the war! God should help the nation of Israel to win the war”).⁵⁷ R. Shapira found a religious meaning to his torments. He placed himself in the position of Sarah, confronting God and crying out, in his unbearable suffering, that “the Jewish nation cannot suffer any more.” R. Shapira chooses to end his heartbreaking sermon with a blessing and a prayer: “May God quickly send us spiritual and physical salvation, with revealed kindness.” Too much salt destroys everything. Suffering must be administered with revealed kindness and mercy.

Conclusions

Rabbi Shapira began his sermon with the question: Why is there an unnecessary repetition in the biblical verse? Why, after counting Sarah's 127 years, does the verse state: "These were the years of the life of Sarah"? His answer is that Sarah's death can be considered as a type of suicide, which is strictly prohibited in Judaism. According to this interpretation, Sarah might be considered guilty for "taking the binding of Isaac too much to heart." According to R. Shapira, the verse repeats "the years of [her] life" in order to legitimize her actions. True, to some extent she may be understood to have "killed" herself, but she did so for the sake of the Jewish nation.

Sarah, like many other biblical figures and like some well known hasidic figures, such as Rabbi Levi Yitzhak of Berdichev, stood up for the people of Israel by opposing God. Sarah's death served as a warning sign that there are torments so extreme as to be intolerable.

Rabbi Shapira chose to see himself as a leader who, out of his personal agony, confronted God and cried out for the sake of the Jewish nation. Extraordinarily, he drew his inspiration from Sarah rather than from Moses, or any of the other male biblical figures more commonly held up as models of spiritual protest. He did so not just orally in front of his followers, but also in writing. In this sense, this sermon itself comprises what Polen characterizes as his "activist, interventionist mode of interpretation," espoused in the hope that its very "articulation will lead to the desired result."⁵⁸

R. Shapira perceived himself and his spiritual leadership as inspired by a female figure. Taking Sarah's role, he desperately confronted God, willing to die for the sake of Israel. By delivering this sermon, he expressed his conscious death; tragically, with his murder in November 1943, it became an ontological death. I am not aware of any hasidic leaders or, in fact, any rabbinic personalities who chose to see themselves and present themselves by way of a female character. Sarah is not just "our matriarch," but also—after R. Shapira stepped into her shoes—"our rebbe."

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Notes:

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1. Emmanuel Ringelblum, *Notes from the Warsaw Ghetto: The Journal of Emmanuel Ringelblum* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1958); Samuel D. Kassow, *Who Will Write our History?: Emanuel Ringelblum, the Warsaw Ghetto, and the Oyneg Shabes Archive* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007).
2. See Don Seeman, Daniel Reiser and Ariel Evan Mayse (eds.), *Hasidism, Suffering and Renewal: The Pre-war and Holocaust Legacy of R. Kalonymus Kalman Shapira* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2021 [forthcoming]), Introduction.
3. For biographical details, see Aharon Soroski, “Metoledot ha’ADMO”R hakadosh Maran Rabi Kalonimus Kalmish Shapira mePi’asetznah,” in Kalonymus Kalman Shapira, *Esh kodesh* (Jerusalem: Sifra Press, 1960), pp. i–xxviii; Nehemia Polen, *The Holy Fire: The Teachings of Rabbi Kalonymus Kalman Shapira, the Rebbe of the Warsaw Ghetto* (Northvale: Jason Aronson, 1994), pp. 1–14; Mendel Piekarz, *The Literature of Testimony as a Historical Source of the Holocaust and Three Hasidic Reflections on the Holocaust* (Hebrew; Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 2003), pp. 89–100; Esther Farbstein, *Hidden in Thunder: Perspectives on Faith, Halachah and Leadership During the Holocaust* (English transl. by Deborah Stern; Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 2007), pp. 479–488; Ron Wacks, *The Flame of the Holy Fire: Perspectives on the Teachings of Rabbi Kalonymus Kalmish Shapiro of Piaczena* (Hebrew; Alon Shevut: Tevunot, 2010), pp. 21–33; Daniel Reiser, *R. Kalonymus Kalman Shapira: Sermons from the Years of Rage* (Hebrew; Jerusalem: Herzog College–World Union of Jewish Studies–Yad Vashem, 2017), I, pp. 13–24; and David Biale et al., *Hasidism: A New History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018), pp. 614–616, 660–662. See also the recent extensive work in Polish, Marta Dudzik-Rudkowska, *Pisma Rabina Kalonimusa Szapiro* (Warsaw: Jewish Historical Institute, 2017), pp. ix–xxx.
4. According to the birth registry book of Grodzisk Mazowiecki for 1889, no. 53, although family tradition set his birth date as 19 Iyyar 5649, i.e., May 20, 1889. His birth certificate is reproduced in my article, “Pisarstwo w cieniu śmierci: Rękopis rabina Szapiry ‘Kazania z lat szału’ w perspektywie psychologicznej i fenomenologicznej,” *Zagłada Żydów: Studia i materiały*, 15 (2019), pp. 62–90.
5. R. Elimelekh’s marriage to Hannah Berakhah was his second, and so Kalonymus Kalman had many siblings and half-siblings. We have a number of letters written by Hannah Berakhah in Yiddish and Hebrew demonstrating her unique character, which I hope to discuss in future studies. Regarding Hanah Berkahah and other female figures in the Chentshin and Kozhnitz Hasidic courts, see Nehemia Polen, “Miriam’s Dance: Radical Egalitarianism in Hasidic Thought,” *Modern Judaism*, 12 (1992), pp. 1–21.
6. Consequently, Shapira’s father, R. Elimelekh, was also the great-grandfather(!) of Raḥel Hayyah Miriam.
7. On this see Reiser, *Sermons from the Years of Rage* (above, note 3), I, pp. 14, 337.
8. Shapira’s signature appears in two publications of Agudath Israel from the early 1920s: *Haderekh*, 6–7 (February–March, 1920), p. 3; and *Kovetz histadruti shel Agudat Yisra’el, 5672–5683* (Vienna: Lishkat haMerkaz shel Agudat Yisra’el ha’Olamit, 1923), p. 29.

9. His land acquisition documents are in the Central Zionist Archives, Jerusalem, no. s6/501–6t. I thank Shalom Matan Shalom for this information.
10. One copy of *Benei maḥshavah tovah* is in New York, Habad Library, MS 1192:27. Another printed copy, from which copying is not permitted, signed by R. Shapira, is in the possession of R. Avraham Hamer in Bnei Brak. It was given to his father, R. Eliyahu Hamer, who was among R. Shapira's principal disciples and one of the first transcribers of his sermons.
11. The manuscript of *Hakhsharat ha'avreikhim* was sent to the publisher in 1939, according to a letter written by R. Shapira to R. Avraham Mosheh Gribstein (Ringelblum Archive, Jewish Historical Institute, Warsaw, MS Ring. II/432. Mf. ZIH-806, p. 4). The German invasion of Poland may have derailed its publication. The manuscripts of *Hakhsharat ha'avreikhim* and *Mevo hashe'arim* were found bound together, indicating that he may have sent them together to be printed.
12. Kalman Kalonymus Shapira, *Derekh hamelekh* (Jerusalem: Va'ad Hasidei Piasetzna, 1995). In its latest edition (2011), *Derekh HaMelekh* contains 43 sermons for the weekly Torah readings, 68 sermons for the holidays and 15 articles and letters. Selected excerpts from this book have been translated into French and Italian. See Catherine Chaliel, *Kalonymus Shapiro: Rabbin au Ghetto de Varsovie 1889–1943* (Paris: Arfuyen, 2011), pp. 97–115; and eadem, *Kalonymus Shapiro: Rabbino nel ghetto di Varsavia* (Italian transl. by Vanna Lucattini-Vogelmann; Florence: Giuntina, 2013), pp. 81–96.
13. About Rahel Hayyah Miriam's (and her sisters') education in the Kozhnitz hasidic court see Malkah Shapiro, *The Rebbe's Daughter: Memoir of a Hasidic Childhood* (English transl. by Nehemia Polen; Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2002). See also Uziel Fuchs, "Miriam the Prophetess and the Rebbetzin: The Eulogy of Rebbe Kalonymos of Piasetzna in Memory of Two Great Women," *Masekhet*, 3 (2005), pp. 65–76 (Hebrew).
14. Shapira, *Derekh hamelekh* (above, note 12), pp. 445–446.
15. As far as I know, there is no clear source for this prohibition; however, the conservative-kabbalistic world forbids it. See, e.g., the responsa of Rabbi Ben Zion Mutzafi (1946–), a present-day halakhic authority and kabbalist: <http://www.doreshtzion.co.il/QAShowAnswer.aspx?qaid=70798>.
16. See Polen, "Miriam's Dance" (above, note 5).
17. English translation by Polen, *ibid.*, p. 16.
18. See Leibel Bein, *From the Notebook of a Hassidic Journalist* (Hebrew; Jerusalem: s.n., 1967), p. 30; Polen, *Holy Fire* (above, note 3), p. 6; and Yael Levine, "Ha'ADMO"R shenigen bekinor vehadal 'im histalkut ra'yato," *Dafletarbut Yehudit*, 273 (2007), p. 39.
19. Polen, "Miriam's Dance" (above, note 5); Moshe Feinkind, *Froyen-rebeyyim un berihmte perzenlikhkeiten in Poylen* (Warsaw: Grafja, 1937), pp. 37–42, 56–61. A contemporary example is Rebbetzin Sarah Rokaḥ (wife of the present Belzer Rebbe). Surah'le, as she is usually referred to, gives audiences and grants blessings. She accepts *kvitlekh* and holds meetings in Israel and elsewhere with hasidic followers—female and male (and not only from the Belz hasidic court). She is accompanied by an entourage and by female *gaba'iyot*. She has numerous videos on the Web, including one in which, dressed in *admoriyan* garments (special clothes worn by the hasidic leader, the *admor*), she conducts a *tish* for men and even directs the hasidic singing. See, e.g., <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N0btDmShkRY>.

20. This is the subject of a long scholarly debate. See Ada Rapaport-Albert, "On Women in Hasidism: S.A. Horodecky and the Maid of Ludmir Tradition," in eadem and Steven J. Zipperstein (eds.), *Jewish History: Essays in Honour of Chimen Abramsky* (London: P. Halban, 1988), pp. 495–525. Albert's conclusions were challenged by Polen, in "Miriam's Dance" (above, note 5), and Shaul Stampfer, in "The Impact of Hasidism on the Jewish Family in Eastern Europe: Towards a Re-Evaluation," in David Assaf and Ada Rapoport-Albert (eds.), *Yashan mipenei hadash: Shai le'Imanu'el Etkes* (Jerusalem: Zalman Shazar Center, 2009), I, pp. 165–184 (Hebrew). See also Naftali Loewenthal, "Women and the Dialectic of Spirituality in Hasidism," in Immanuel Etkes et al. (eds.), *Bema'agelei hasidim: Kovets mehkarim lezikhro shel Profesor Mordekhai Vilensky* (Jerusalem: Mosad Bialik, 2000), English section, pp. 7–65. For a summary of diverse opinions, see Moshe Rosman, "On Women in Hasidism: Comments for Discussion," in Assaf and Rapoport-Albert, *Yashan mipenei hadash*, I, pp. 151–164 (Hebrew). For recent research dealing with the status of women in Hasidism, see Marcin Wodziński, *Hasidism: Key Questions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), pp. 43–52. For a totally different approach see Tsippi Kauffman, "Hasidic Women: Beyond Egalitarianist Discourse," in Ariel E. Mayse and Arthur Green (eds.), *Be-Ron Yahad: Studies in Jewish Thought and Theology in Honor of Nehemia Polen* (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2019), pp. 223–257; and Glenn Dynner, "Writing Hasidic Gender," *Marginalia* (April 10, 2020), at: <https://marginalia.lareviewofbooks.org/writing-hasidic-gender/> (accessed January 28, 2021).
21. See Polen, "Miriam's Dance" (above, note 5), and Fuchs, "Miriam the Prophetess" (above, note 13).
22. The expression "years of rage" (*shenot haza'am*) derives from Isaiah 26:20 and Ezekiel 22:24. On the use of this biblical phrase for the Holocaust, see Dan Michman and Matthias Weber, "Editor's Preface," *Remembrance and Solidarity: Studies in 20th-Century European History*, 5 (2016), pp. 7–9.
23. Daniel Reiser, "Esh Kodesh: A New Evaluation in Light of a Philological Examination of the Manuscript," *Yad Vashem Studies*, 44 (2016), pp. 78–80.
24. Bein, *From the Notebook* (above, note 18), p. 34.
25. Polen, *Holy Fire* (above, note 3), p. 7, based on a report in the New York Yiddish newspaper *Forverts*, March 30, 1940.
26. See the scholarship cited in Zvi Leshem, "Between Messianism and Prophecy: Hasidism According to the Piaseczner Rebbe" (Hebrew; Ph.D. Dissertation, Bar-Ilan University, 2007), p. 4, note 11.
27. Reiser, *Sermons from the Years of Rage* (above, note 3). For other editions, see above, note 3.
28. Judith Tydor-Baumel, "Esh kodesh by the Rebbe of Piaseczno and Its Place in Understanding Religious Life in the Warsaw Ghetto," *Yalqut moreshet*, 29 (1980), pp. 173–187 (Hebrew); Polen, *Holy Fire* (above, note 3), pp. 17–20; Henry Abramson, *Torah from the Years of Wrath* (North Charleston, SC: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2017); and idem, "'Living with the Times': Historical Context in the Wartime Writings of Rabbi Kalonymus Kalman Shapira," in Seeman et al., *Hasidism, Suffering and Renewal* (above, note 2).
29. On different aspects and approaches to this crisis, see Seeman et al., *Hasidism, Suffering and Renewal* (above, note 3), Section II: Text, Suffering and Theodicy.

30. Hershy J. Worch, *Sacred Fire: Torah from the Years of Fury, 1939–1942* (Northvale, NJ–Jerusalem: Jason Aronson, 2000), pp. 40–41.
31. In rabbinic literature, even women who clearly speak with God in biblical texts are demoted in stature, and their direct address by God is denied—except for Sarah. See JT *Sotah* 7:1, 21b: “Rabbi Yohanan said in the name of Rabbi Leazar, in the name of Rabbi Shimon, ‘We have not found that God spoke with a woman, except with Sarah alone.’” See also Genesis *rabbah* 48:20 and 63:7. These rabbinic midrashim explain all other biblical examples of divine speech to women as indirect, usually via angels. Thus, Sarah’s high status remains unique.
32. Regarding R. Shapira’s framing of the covenant between God and Israel in his final sermons, in 1942, see Shaul Magid, “Covenantal Rupture and Broken Faith in R. Kalonymus Kalman Shapira’s ‘Eish Kodesh,’” in: idem, *Piety and Rebellion: Essays in Hasidism* (Brighton, MA: Academic Studies Press, 2019), pp. 237–262.
33. German soldiers and Polish civilians victimized Jews from the very beginning of the war, but until mid-November 1939 these were individual actions rather than a defined and organized policy; see Yisrael Gutman, *The Jews of Warsaw, 1939–1943: Ghetto, Underground, Revolt* (English transl. by Ina Friedman; Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982), pp. 3–47. For the Wehrmacht’s criticism of the harassment and persecution of the Jewish population in September–October see *ibid.*, p. 12. See also Barbara Engelking and Jacek Leociak, *The Warsaw Ghetto: A Guide to the Perished City* (New Haven–London: Yale University Press, 2009), pp. 26–37. However, Jewish bank accounts were frozen already in mid-October, with a weekly limit of 250 *zlotys* on withdrawals and a ban on possession of more than 2000 *zlotys* in cash, which made personal economic management virtually impossible (*ibid.*, p. 37).
34. R. Shapira’s first historical reference to the persecution of Jews would be made in the following week’s sermon, on November 11, 1939, regarding the forced shaving of beards.
35. Shapira, *Tzav veziruz* (Jerusalem: Va’ad Hasidei Piasetzna, 1962), p. 45.
36. Polen, *Holy Fire* (above, note 3), p. 12.
37. The prevailing custom follows the ruling of R. Joseph Karo, *Shulḥan ‘arukh, Orat hayyim*, §548:1: “One who buries a dead relative on a holiday does not have the obligations of mourning during the holiday. After the holiday, he observes *shiv’ah* [for seven days] and mourns accordingly. [However,] the *sheloshim* [the thirty days] he counts from the burial and observes the mourning practices for the remainder of the thirty days that are after the holiday.” However, several halakhic authorities did not accept this ruling and taught that the counting of the *sheloshim* also starts after the holiday; see R. David Halevi Segal, *Turei zahav*, *ad loc.* Either way, this is the first sermon that R. Shapira delivered after his personal tragedy.
38. For a reading of this sermon against its historical background, see *ibid.*, pp. 96–97; Isaac Herschkowitz, “Rabbi Kalonymus Kalmish Shapira, the Piaseczno Rebbe: His Holocaust and Pre-Holocaust Thought, Continuity or Discontinuity?” (Hebrew; M.A. Thesis, Bar-Ilan University, 2004), pp. 132–133; Don Seeman, “Ritual Efficacy, Hasidic Mysticism and ‘Useless Suffering’ in the Warsaw Ghetto,” *Harvard Theological Review*, 101 (2008), pp. 483–487; and Abramson, *Torah from the Years of Wrath* (above, note 28), pp. 81–83.
39. Sermon for the *parashah* of *Vayeshev*, 5700 (December 2, 1939), in Reiser, *Sermons from the Years of Rage* (above, note 3), p. 97. Quoting Genesis 37:7—“For, behold, we

- were binding sheaves [*me'almin 'alumim*] in the field, and, lo, my sheaf [*'alumati*] arose, and also stood upright; and, behold, your sheaves [*'alumoteikhem*] stood round about ..."—R. Shapira points out that the word *'alumah* also means muteness, such as may ensue from suffering. In the dream-vision of "Joseph the *tzaddik*," he "arose" from his suffering and "stood up"; that is, he "took the courage to cry out to God," so that his brothers, surrounding him, "found strength by his means." These words, written by R. Shapira in the first person, plainly allude to his own situation and his duty as a hasidic *tzaddik* to arouse Divine mercy for "his brothers."
40. Sermon for the *parashah* of *Ki Tavo*, 5700 (September 21, 1940); Reiser, *Sermons from the Years of Rage* (above, note 3), p. 152.
 41. Based on *Pirkei DeRabbi Eliezer*, 32.
 42. James A. Diamond, "Raging Hasidic Sermons: R. Kalonymus Kalman Shapira's Halting Retreat from Theodicy," *Yad Vashem Studies* (forthcoming). See also Seeman, "Ritual Efficacy" (above, note 38), pp. 483–487. My thanks to the author for sharing his paper with me prior to its publication.
 43. Suicide here does not mean that Sarah jumped off a cliff, but rather that she actively decided to take the situation to heart and die, although she had the ability to restrain herself.
 44. Diamond, "Raging Hasidic Sermons" (above, note 42). Diamond points to six main junctures in the sermons and argues convincingly that R. Shapira retreated from traditional theodicies and from the enterprise of justifying God in the face of innocent suffering. Relating to this sermon, Diamond claims that R. Shapira had begun already at this early stage of the war, in November 1939, seriously to challenge traditional reconciliations between God's goodness and the suffering of innocents. However, a perusal of the manuscript teaches us that the passage Diamond quotes in support of this claim is a note likely added by R. Shapira in 1942; on the dating of the different types of notes in the manuscript, see Reiser, "Esh Kodesh" (above, note 23), pp. 93–97. Either way, I agree that this sermon is anti-theodicy.
 45. See Midrash *Tanḥuma*, *Vayera* 22; *Yalkut Shimoni* 98.
 46. Seeman, "Ritual Efficacy" (above, note 38), pp. 483–487.
 47. Diamond, "Raging Hasidic Sermons" (above, note 42), note 10.
 48. For a selection of studies on this, see Anson Laytner, *Arguing With God: A Jewish Tradition* (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aaronson, 1990); David R. Blumenthal, *Facing the Abusing God: A Theology of Protest* (Louisville–Westminster: John Knox Press, 1993); and Dov Weiss, *Pious Irreverence: Confronting God in Rabbinic Judaism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017). On expressions of this theological attitude in the time of the Holocaust see Steven T. Katz et al. (eds.), *Wrestling with God: Jewish Theological Responses During and After the Holocaust* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007). On R. Shapira's "protest within faith" see Polen, *Holy Fire* (above, note 3), pp. 94–105.
 49. According to R. Jonathan Sacks, biblical faith is a revolutionary gesture; see idem, *To Heal a Fractured World: The Ethics of Responsibility* (New York: Schocken Books, 2005), pp. 17–29.
 50. For Honi Hame'agel see Mishnah *Ta'anit* 3:8: "What did he do? He drew a circle and stood within it and said ... I swear by Your great name that I will not move from here until You have mercy upon Your children." See Ephraim E. Urbach, *The Sages: Their*

- Concepts and Beliefs* (Hebrew; Jerusalem: The Hebrew University–Magnes Press, 1975), pp. 104, 397, 510–511. On Hanina ben Dosa see *ibid.*, pp. 450–451.
51. Or N. Rose, “Protest or Discernment?: Divine Limitation and Mystical Activism in the ‘Qedushat Levi,’” in Mayse and Green, *Be-Ron Yaḥad* (above, note 20), pp. 155–176.
 52. Idem, “Moses and Hasidic Leadership in the Teachings of R. Levi Yitzḥak of Berdichev,” in Zvi Mark and Roe Horen (eds.), *Rabbi Levi Yitzḥak of Berdichev: History, Thought, Literature and Melody* (Hebrew; Rishon LeZion: Miskal, 2017), pp. 184–202.
 53. See Polen, “Miriam’s Dance” (above, note 5), pp. 7–8. Polen demonstrates that R. Shapira, in contrast to traditional Jewish thought, gives women who perform “a commandment without being commanded” a higher status than men and sees their voluntary actions in a positive light.
 54. As I have discussed elsewhere, there are several types of notes in this manuscript, of which the latest, marked in the upper or lower margins of the pages in square Hebrew letters, may be dated to 1942. Therefore, I believe this comment expresses his outlook as a leader during the ghetto period, although the sermon itself precedes the establishment of the ghetto. See Reiser, *Sermons from the Years of Rage* (above, note 3), I, pp. 50–53, 70–72.
 55. R. Shapira still had his daughter, Rekhil Yehudith, who was taken to Treblinka during the *Grossaktion* in July 1942. However, in a traditional hasidic environment only a son would inherit the leadership of his father’s hasidic court. Thus, although Elimelekh Ben-Zion had a sister, he was considered an “only son” [*ben yohid*].
 56. Polen writes that R. Shapira was referring the death of his mother, Ḥannah Berakhah, who died on October 20, 1939, as a conscious protest to God, intended to put an end to Jewish suffering (*Holy Fire*, p. 97). However, I believe that R. Shapira was referring not to his mother but to himself, “the one who survived” but nevertheless is dead.
 57. Aron Sorsky, Appendix to *Esh kodesh* (above, note 3).
 58. See Nehemia Polen, “Hasidic Derashah as Illuminated Exegesis,” in Michael Zank and Ingrid Anderson (eds.), *The Value of the Particular: Lessons from Judaism and the Modern Jewish Experience: Festschrift for Steven T. Katz on the Occasion of His Seventieth Birthday* (Leiden: Brill, 2015), p. 56.