

Vayishlach/Esh Kodesh Siyum 12/6/2025

We're doing something special for the drash today,  
A siyum, conclusion, of learning a very special book  
Called Esh Kodesh or the Holy Fire,  
Written by Rabbi Kalonymus Kalman Shapira, the Piasezner rebbe.  
These were his teachings in the Warsaw ghetto 1939-1942, which he  
saved by burying them in a milk canister, which were found after the  
war by a construction worker with a note that said: if anyone ever finds  
these teachings, please send them to Israel.  
The book was published 1960 in Israel.  
He was killed in a labor camp in 1943.  
We starting learning this in Feb 2024 when Ben Stern was dying to  
honor him – as a youth in Poland, he had been a student in the  
Piasezner's yeshiva.

It's been extraordinary to study this book together for almost 2 years:  
To explore inside the mind and heart of a spiritual master and rebbe  
Who is trying to lead and guide his people in the midst of the most  
horrific and unimaginable suffering.  
We wrestled with his own wrestling with his faith, his leadership, his  
theologies of sin and punishment, and how to stay spiritually intact and  
encourage others to do so when loved ones are being killed and there is  
mass hunger, torture, and death all around you.  
And we were deeply moved by the wonder and miracle that this book  
even exists – that he had the wherewithal to teach Torah and write  
drashot in the midst of it all, and that he managed to bury these  
teachings, and that they were found and published. It's miraculous.

And studying this book over the last two years with all the challenges in  
our world has given us a powerful, relevant framework to wrestle with  
questions of evil, suffering, God, faith, in difficult times. I'm going to  
share a few words and then 3 others in our class will share theirs.

We had many beautiful and tearful conversations and as we read the Piastezner wrestling, we did a lot of wrestling too.

Which brings me to our parasha: wrestling:

We have a long Jewish tradition of wrestling that goes back to our parasha, *Vayishlach*, and Jacob wrestling with this mysterious man, or angel of Esav, or God, or his conscience, or all of the above.

He wrestles, he gets injured, he gets a new name, Yisrael, but ultimately he prevails, as it says: [Gen 32:29]

This is our prototypical moment of our long tradition with wrestling with God and humans, but the Piastezner does something extraordinary with this parasha in his drash on Vayishlach in 1939, 2 months after Germany invaded Poland and Rabbi Shapira's own son had already been killed in the bombing of Warsaw.

He cites the midrashic understanding that the man with whom Jacob wrestled was Esav's guardian angel, Samael, who is the personification of evil.

One thing to note is that the rebbe rarely mentioned current events or the Nazis. He referred to them in eternal Torah terms and archetypes, like here: Samael is evil, the evil that we are wrestling with.

And he goes on through a mystical wordplay to explain that The Mem will be removed (which represents "death" /mavet) and the remaining letters (Sa-el) are the numerical equivalent (91) of Adonai + YHVH. What does this all mean? In short, the Piastezner is teaching that evil can be transformed and become a force for good, and for blessing us, like the angel blesses Jacob.

See, in Hasidic thought, there is nothing outside of God.

So even evil can't be a separate force because Everything is God.

How we transform evil is a longer topic, and one we explored for several weeks:

First, he teaches that we can change evil.

Then as time went on, he suggests that we have to wait for the end of days for it to be transformed.

Finally, he seems to teach that the way we can transform evil is to change our own consciousness. Perhaps when we have no power and agency, our consciousness is the only thing we have power over.

The Piasetzner is doing his own wrestling with evil and how to make sense of it for himself and his hasidim,

when his own theology is "everything is God."

Even in a time of the most horrific evil being perpetrated against him and his people, he holds on to his message that evil can only be the Divine life force that has been misdirected, corrupted and therefore it can and must be transformed back into a force for good and for blessing.

That's what Jacob's wrestling with Esav meant to him,

And that's what the Piasetzner wanted us, his students to believe.

Rita Largman

Lee Bearson

Charlene Stern

Kaddish Derabbanan p. 111

Being in the Hope and Gratitude group has been a precious learning experience for me. We meet only for 1/2 hour. R Chai reads a small section of reading, in this case The Esh Kosesh drashot of R Shapira, and we discuss the reading. I love what people say. Comments range from personal responses to general thoughts about the reading. After the group ends, I often feel a softness, an opening, a sadness, a lightness. I'm not sure what engenders these feelings, but I believe my ineffable responses have something to do with being in a community of learning, respect and meaningful sharing.

I'd like to give a brief summary of R Shapira's notions of suffering which changed as the catastrophe grew. In the Esh Kodesh, R Shapira held early notions of a G-d who punished bad behavior. But the devastation and catastrophe surrounding him was so great, he could no longer subscribe to that theology. (Eli Weisel, in contrast, confronted god as a silent witness who failed his people.) R. Shapira's theology finds holiness in brokenness. His relationship to g\_d became more personal, and god became a fellow sufferer who goes into his sanctuary and suffers alone and with his people. The human heart's cry must be acknowledged. Pain which is this intense cannot be explained away.

Here are some takeaways (perhaps extrapolations) and implications in r R Shapira's changing theology:

1. God's presence is concealed, and when G-d hides, we must find him not in light but in this brokenness. This is akin to Leonard Cohen's "where there is a crack, that's how the light gets in. "God cries with us.
2. Suffering creates a new kind of prayer. A broken heart can reach places intact hearts cannot [Even the inability to pray becomes a form of prayer.](#)  
[Tears themselves become a sacred offering.](#)
- 3 Collective suffering unifies souls. Everyone's prayers become interwoven- your pain lifted my prayers, and mine lifted yours.
4. Suffering creates spiritual responsibilities. One has to try to hold compassion even when desperately hungry and weak, and in times when no one can lift up themselves, we must carry each other.

I think it's worth asking ourselves: what are we looking for when we read the Piaseczner? For many of us, I suspect there's an unspoken question. It's a bit unseemly. We're wondering: what will a person who professes such deep faith do when the going gets rough? How will their beliefs stand up when challenged by the harshest reality?

Of course, this is a very old trope. It goes back to the akedah — the test of Avraham; it's the premise of the Book of Job. For those of us who habitually fail to meet much lesser challenges, these stories dangle a bit of potential *schadenfreude* — will those held in highest esteem also fall short?

Rabbi Shapira exemplifies the struggle to preserve faith under impossible conditions. He strives to remain true to himself while fulfilling his responsibility to give his congregation what they need — a challenge Rabbi Chai might well relate to.

But Rabbi Nehemia Polen calls our attention to another remarkable quality of the Piaseczner's writings: Sometimes a deeply personal dimension breaks through, and Rabbi Shapira describes what it **feels like** to be in his position.

I'll give one example: In one of his last preserved drashot, delivered February 28, 1942, the Piaseczner cites a remarkable midrash.

The book of *Eicha* (Lamentations) describes the destruction of the First Temple and its aftermath in shocking detail. We're told the book was written by the prophet Jeremiah. But the Talmud makes an extraordinary claim about **when** it was written: Jeremiah is said to have composed the book in advance — via prophetic vision — **before** the catastrophe actually happened.

Explaining this text, Rabbi Shapira writes:

...after the destruction Jeremiah was in such great pain  
that he could not have uttered Lamentations with *ruach ha'kodesh*, the

Divine Spirit. ...prophecy is impossible in a state of sadness, even to preach on the topic of calamities is impossible when the heart is broken and the spirit is crushed.

Hasidic leaders were expected to be like prophets — conjuring sparks of divinity with their words. Rabbi Shapira intimated that tragedy could make that impossible.

There were times when he went months without speaking publicly.

As the situation in the ghetto deteriorated, as Rabbi Shapira absorbed repeated personal tragedies, it became harder and harder for him to sustain his work. Like Jeremiah, he sometimes felt that his life-giving well of Torah had run dry.

I began by likening Rabbi Shapira to two mythic figures — Avraham and Job — but part of the power of his writings stems from the fact that he doesn't just share his profound insights into Torah — He also allows us to see that he is no archetype, but rather deeply human.

*Lee Bearson, December 6, 2025*

Netivot Shalom

Mini-Drash; WARSAW GHETTO ; The Holy Fire by Rabbi Kalmonynos Shapira

December 6, 2025

Rabbi Shapira's thinking and teachings evolved during the years of the Warsaw Ghetto. My beloved Father, Baruch Bendit z"ll, was a student at his Yishivah in the Warsaw Ghetto before 1939. He stood with all the other students at the walls of Rabbi Shapira's large dining room before Shabbos, waiting for the Rabbi to enter. At the table were rabbis from the school and other scholars.

June 1940 - At the beginning of WW II, Rabbi Kalmanynos Shapira counseled a "a firm faith that God will intervene to save the Ghetto residents." At this time our most basic task is to strengthen our faith and banish probing questions and thoughts, trusting in God that he will be good to us, saving us, delivering us.

"Faith need not imply a passive waiting for salvation. . . people have a measure of control over their situation. He pointed to a mitzvah performed with sincerity and profound intention as a theurgic act which hastens redemption. (p. 73)

*And so, my Father in the 1930's went to Shul and recited Psalms with everyone in Molgenice.*

By December, 1940 - (the second winter) the situation progressively deteriorated. R. Shapira tempered his words that stress divine deliverance.

By December 1941-1942, R. Shapira acknowledges that his previous focus on deliverance may not have been the wisest one. He begins to emphasize **the total submission to divine will** to accept come what may. Our burdens are lightened as we embrace "it is the Lord; let him do what is good". This is faith and lessens the pain of waiting longer and longer for rescue March, 1942. "God forbid, our love of God, awe and faith are in a state of slackness and weakness, but it is not the case that we do not believe. . . . We all believe in God, it's just that "at a time we don't feel the faith and the certainty that faith reveals."

Rabbi Shapira then pivots to teaching that human reasoning must be replaced by submission to divine will = " the martyrdom of the mind".

*When I was 42ish, my Father gave me an audiotape to listen to his whole story. I had heard many pieces of it but not the whole story in detail. I couldn't listen to it for over a year, but then one morning I was clearly sick with a bad cold. Michael was at work and my children were in school. I went back to bed and listened to this long tape with my beloved Father's voice clearly suffering while telling what happened, the terror, in great detail and the vast, profound loss. At the end of listening to the whole tape, I couldn't talk, I could barely breathe; I cried and cried. And then I turned away from G-d and let go of my faith in G-d completely. The darkness was complete, overwhelming and terrifying. Without faith in G-d, I was left with nothing. It lasted a day or two, then I couldn't stand living without it. As quickly as possible, I turned back and let the light of life and blessing come back into my heart and soul. I don't have an answer; I have faith in answers that are not given to us to know. Perhaps after death, I will learn why such evil befell us. What is certain is my faith in G-d and G-d's essential goodness. We will do, keep faith; and then some day we will comprehend.*