

Nehemia Polen

Turning Darkness into Light: Teachings of the Piaseczno Rebbe

The following is a translation of a derashah (homily) from *Esh Kodesh*, a collection of hasidic teachings by Rabbi Kalonymos Kalmish Shapiro of Piaseczno (1889–1943). *Esh Kodesh* is the last work of Hasidism written in Poland. Rabbi Shapiro was a master of hasidic educational philosophy, who was especially famed for his abilities in working with the estranged and alienated Jewish youth of twentieth century Poland. Refusing opportunities to escape at the beginning of World War II, Rabbi Shapiro was caught in the devastating events of the Holocaust. He lost almost his entire family in the first weeks of the war but continued his work of spiritual leadership and teaching throughout the period of the Warsaw Ghetto. He recorded his discourses in his own hand, and when it became clear that he was not likely to survive the war, he buried them. After the war they were dug up and eventually published in Israel as *Esh Kodesh*. (My own interest in *Esh Kodesh* was sparked by Reb Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, who pointed out the significance and spiritual profundity of the work to me and encouraged me to take this work as the topic for my doctoral dissertation.)¹

The homily was delivered on November 25, 1939 (*Parashat Vayishlah*, 5700). The biblical text is the story of Jacob's struggle with an enigmatic individual at the river Jabok. According to tradition, the figure with whom Jacob struggled was actually the guardian angel of Esau, identified with Samael, the personification of evil.² Rabbi Shapiro's exegesis is rooted in the hasidic emphasis

1. This translation and commentary has since been printed in Polen, Nehemia, *The Holy Fire: The Teachings of Rabbi Kalonymus K. Shapiro* (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, Inc. 1994).

2. See *Bereishit Rabbah* 77:2–3; *Tanhuma Va-Yishlah* 8; *Zohar* 1:146a. Cf. the

on God's imminent presence in all things. In the hasidic view, no sector of reality can be excluded from the presence of God. From this perspective, evil is not viewed as an independent realm of substantive power, nor as a mere privation as the philosophers would have it, but as a misaligned or unbalanced version of divine goodness, which can be raised up or "sweetened" by the consciousness of the individual who knows how to trace its source in the divine realm.

But this hasidic notion, which was usually associated with the practice of sublimating extraneous thoughts in prayer, now confronted a far more virulent problem: physical actions of human cruelty, perpetrated by sadistic, implacable enemy, designed to inflict maximum pain, suffering, and degradation. How could these be raised up or sweetened? In *Esh Kodesh*, Rabbi Shapiro maintains the hasidic viewpoint on evil, not from a posture of detached theorizing, but while staring into the very face of darkness.

[*Esh Kodesh*, p. 13]

And he said, I will not let you leave, unless you bless me (Gen. 32:26).

Let us understand: Why did our father Jacob deem it necessary for Esau's guardian angel to bless him? Did not God already bless him? Furthermore, why did the angel ask Jacob "what is your name?" (v. 27) Did he not know his name?

We may suggest the following answer. It is a well-known principle that the deeds of the Patriarchs are a sign for their descendents.³ Jacob encountered the angel and struggled with him, and the angel touched the hip socket of Jacob's thigh. When the angel desired to go, Jacob said to himself, "Will this same pattern occur to my children? Will it happen that, after enduring troubles and mishaps, their salvation will be limited to the fact

that their enemies will not overcome them, that they will not fall into their enemies' hands, but will return to the situation which prevailed before the crisis? This can't be!" So he cried, "I will not let you leave, unless you bless me. After the sufferings are over, God must liberate my descendents decisively, not just remove them from their immediate crisis."

Now we now that Esau's guardian angel is Samael. In the messianic future, the letter *mem* of his name—which symbolizes death—will be removed, because "death will be swallowed up forever." (Isaiah 25:8) What will remain are the letters of *Sa-el*, the *Gematria* of which is equivalent to that of the Tetragrammaton added to that of *Ado-nai*. This means that he will then be a holy angel, one of the celestial princes. After Jacob struggled with him, he repaired the aspect of himself which was in the angel, thus preparing him for the future redemption. At that point in the narrative, then, the angel was already sanctified, was already seeking good for Israel. So the angel asked him, "What is your name?" And He Said, "Jacob." The angel then replied that the name Jacob is related to the time when *His hand was grasping Esau's heel* (Gen. 25:26); all the acts of deliverance which Jacob had known up to that time had come after Esau had treaded on him with his heel; [the deliverance had consisted of] slipping away from the oppressor's heels. [So, the angel went on,] "Your prayer is that this cycle continue—that after the trouble arrives, the deliverance might follow. But enough of that whole cycle! From now on your name is Israel: deliverance will be yours *ab initio*. You have indeed triumphed!"

Furthermore, we note that the word *sarita* (You have struggled) is related to *sar* (prince, great one). Thus, by saying, "You have struggled with a divine being and with man, and have prevailed," the angel suggested to Jacob that he first became great, though he only later prevailed. The angel stated in effect: Even before you prevailed, even when your troubles were very great indeed, *you became great*. Your inner spirit did not fall; even then, inwardly, you were a prince.

Rabbi Shapiro's message of hope and encouragement is clear. To the hounded Jews of Warsaw he gave a reminder that they were, and would always remain, princes. But what is most extraordinary

discussion in Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York, 1946), p. 239, and nn. 115–116; also idem, *Kabbalah* (New York, 1978), p. 128.

3. Cf. Nahmanides on Gen. 12:6.

about this teaching is his vision: of Samael redeemed, mended, transformed into a force for good, a sacred angel whose desire was now to bless Israel.⁴ To have had that vision, to have had the courage and audacity to publicly expound it at *that* time and in *that* place, was itself the ultimate triumph over, and transformation of, evil. By his example and by his teaching, Rabbi Shapiro did indeed prevail.

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4. Rabbi Shapiro's statement that Jacob "repaired the aspect of himself which was in the angel" is also striking in context, for it suggests that there was some deep, intimate connection between the Jews and their persecutors, who were perpetrating a colossal evil, but might yet be rectified into a source of blessing. Compare *Esh Kodesh*, pp. 61–62, and see my "Hasidic Theology in the Face of Evil," *Proceedings of the International Conference on Religious Jewry and Religion During and After the Holocaust* (forthcoming).

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