

SENSITIZATION TO HOLINESS:

THE LIFE AND WORKS OF RABBI KALONYMOS KALMISH SHAPIRO

By Rabbi
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One of the luminous figures of twentieth-century *Hassidism* in Poland, that world that is no more, was Rabbi Kalonymos Kalmish Shapiro. Known as the Piaseczner Rebbe, he was a multi-faceted personality who served as *Hassidic* master to an intellectual elite as well as to the desperately poor common folk of interbellum Poland. Famed as a pedagogue, educational theorist, and founder of a yeshiva, he was also sought after for medical advice and re-

ferrals. In the Warsaw Ghetto, as Polish Jewry went through its death agony, Rabbi Shapiro continued to teach, to encourage, to give material and spiritual support, and finally to show how it is possible to maintain a radiant faith in the midst of profound darkness and despair. His book *Esh Kodesh*, written after most of his family had already died in the war, is the last work of *Hassidism* written in Poland.

Born in 1889, R. Shapiro was a

descendant of many of the most famous masters of Polish *Hassidism*, including Rabbi Elimel-ekh of Lyzhansk, the Seer of Lublin, and the Maggid of Kozienice. His father, Rabbi Elimel-ekh of Grodzisk, passed away when Kalonymos was but three years old, and the young boy was raised by his mother, Hannah Berakhah, as well as by the man who was to become his father-in-law, Rabbi Yerahmiel Moshe Hapstein of Kozienice (1860-1909). Soon after the passing of his father-in-law, he became Rebbe and then community Rabbi in Piaseczno, a town just outside of Warsaw. In 1923, he founded the yeshiva Da-as Moshe, named after his father-in-law. In the pre-war period, it was one of the largest *Hassidic* yeshivot in Warsaw.

The period between the two World Wars was a time of revolutionary change for Jewish family life in Poland. The generation gap was perhaps even more pronounced than it was in America. The processes of Polonization and secularization were affecting the

youth in particular, so that parents steeped in tradition were often viewed by their children as being hopelessly backward. In addition, the shift of population to the large cities brought new pressures and tensions to the *Hassidic* movement. Crammed into the teeming streets, alleys, and tenements of Warsaw, Lodz and other large cities, the *Hassidic* milieu was quite different from the largely rural setting of the movement's pristine youth. Warsaw, for example, was known as the "Paris of Eastern Europe;" it boasted a vibrant cultural life, including theater, art, music, and moving pictures, not to mention cafes and other less attractive elements of city life. Even for those youngsters who could not or did not wish to assimilate into Polish society, the many active Jewish youth movements provided an avenue for political activity as well as a nurturing environment, a surrogate home. These socialist, Zionist, Yiddishist, and other youth movements were largely secular in nature and served as a vehicle of escape for those who wished to leave the bonds of traditional society and Jewish observance. For these reasons, defections were becoming increasingly common even in *Hassidic* circles. Finally, when we recall the extreme poverty which prevailed in the Jewish community as a whole (largely as a result of government-fostered discrimination), we get some glimpse at the problems which faced the *Hassidic* educator.

It must also be noted that the *Hassidic* movement had undergone changes since its early days. The freshness, vitality, and boldness which had once characterized the movement had inevitably dissipated somewhat with the passage of time. A movement which was once daring and innovative in its spirituality had become to some extent predictable, even conservative. While reformers had periodically made efforts to breathe new life into the move-

ment from within, it was nevertheless true that by the twentieth century, the appellation '*Hassid*' often had more to do with attachment to a specific community, adherence to its modes of dress and loyalty to its leader, than with the fostering of inner spirituality as taught by the Ba'al Shem Tov and his disciples.

Rabbi Shapiro's goals for his yeshiva were more far-reaching. He wished to develop a core group of students of "sublime stature" (*b'nai aliyah*) who might revitalize the *Hassidic* movement. But if the original Beshtian vision was to be recovered, it would now require a systematically presented, developmental approach to *Hassidic* spirituality. This was the task which R. Shapiro set for himself.

The outlines of his approach were presented in his first book, *Hovat ha-Talmidim* ('The Students' Responsibility'), first published in 5692 (1932) in Warsaw. The introduction, directed to teachers and parents, addresses the failure of traditional educational methods to stem the rising tide of defections from the observant community. The answer, says R. Shapiro, is not more authoritarian discipline and rote learning, but to imbue the child with a vision of his own potential greatness and to enlist him as an active participant in his own development. The teacher must learn to speak the language of the student, and to graphically convey the delights of a life of closeness to God. In earlier times it was possible to teach the structure of Jewish religious practice without imparting a sense of its inner significance, in the hope that practice would lead to genuine involvement and inner commitment. Now, however, writes R. Shapiro, the youngster's intellectual and emotional capabilities develop at an earlier age than previously, and the child must be presented, from the very beginning of his educational career, with a sense of the inner beauty of

the life of Torah, to prevent his being captured by the far more obtrusive and blatant attractions of the big city and its culture. Talk of punishment should be avoided, for it is the surest way to alienate the student. Instead the teacher should sprinkle his teaching with touches of humor, and should also not neglect to invoke the power of the imagination, in such forms as the parable and the story, while imparting his message.

The text itself constantly reminds the student of the powerful spiritual potential within him, that he is a descendant of the prophets of Israel, and must work hard to uncover the greatness inside him. Psychologically astute advice is given for character flaws: if a student feels an obsessive hatred towards a fellow, then:

"Write him a letter (but don't send it!) ... Heap scorn on him, as much as your venomous heart desires; for several days read the letter out loud, while imagining that you are facing him and reviling him with those words of abuse. After some days of this, no doubt your anger will leave your heart, and... you will hasten to reconcile with him."

Hovat ha-Talmidim was the only work of R. Shapiro to be published in his lifetime. It established his reputation as a master of *Hassidic* educational theory. The essayist Hillel Zeitlin wrote a review of the book soon after it appeared, in which he praised the author for bringing order and method into *Hassidic* studies, for his emphasis on *simcha* — joy, and for injecting vitality and freshness in the life of the yeshiva student. Zeitlin concluded, "This book is a gateway for anyone, in particular for the modern Jew who has felt a genuine urge to return to his tradition (*niznez be-libo hirhur teshuvah amitiit*), to enter into the palace of *Hassidism*."

Another work, which remained in manuscript during R. Shapiro's lifetime, but which has since been published in Israel, is *Hakhsharat*,

ha-Avrekhim ('The Young Men's Preparation'). This book, meant for those who had already mastered the material in *Hovat ha-Talmidim*, emphasizes the development and channeling of emotion. Nowadays, he writes, *hitlahavut* — fervor, must be taught and developed — by employing such means as song, music and dance (in common with other Rebbeim of his lineage, R. Shapiro played the violin himself, and would often lead his *Hassidim* in song on the violin). The goal is to "uncover one's soul," to "grab one's soul by the scruff of its neck," as he puts it.

There is a great emphasis on employing the imagination, in the form of *mahshavah hazakah* — 'intense thought,' which involves focusing on specific mental images and scenes, designed to bind one's bodily emotions to a sacred matrix. He suggests, for example, imagining oneself at the Holy Temple in Yerushalayim, going into the courtyard, past the *mizbeah* (altar), and finally standing at the Holy of Holies. There are passages where R. Shapiro takes one on a guided journey of a visit to a Rebbe, a *Se'udah Shelishit* (Third Sabbath Meal), a festival, or turning to biblical motifs — he has us accompany Abraham and Isaac at the *Akedah*, or the Children of Israel at the Exodus from Egypt. The guided imagery is vivid and detailed, and is designed to awaken the spiritual sensitivity of the reader.

R. Shapiro introduces a technique of witnessing one's thoughts to correct negative habits and character traits. This is based on his notion that the examination of a thought from the outside tends to dampen it. He advises, not to dwell in the negative thought pattern, but scrutinize the negative thought while remaining aloof from it. This technique of witnessing the stream of one's thoughts without being caught up in them eventually crystallized into a meditation practice which he called *hashkatak** — silencing the conscious mind. Once the

mind is silenced or stilled, it is fully receptive to *mahshavah ahat shel kedushah* — the focusing on one holy thought (a brief phrase of Torah) — to fill the mind with holiness. The next stage in the meditation is to ask God, in a quiet yet articulated manner, for help in attaining a spiritual gift, such as faith, love of God, or liveliness in His service. The meditation session ends in a *niggun*. R. Shapiro intimated that those who practice this meditation for several weeks would come to know the meaning of the verse "THIS IS MY GOD" (*Exodus* 15:2) in a most tangible way.

One proposal discussed in *Hakhsharat ha-Avrekhim* was the formation of a spiritual fellowship, with membership dependent on sincere dedication to the group's spiritual and fraternal goals. Taken as a whole, his approach might be called "Sensitization to Holiness," the goal of which was to arouse and sensitize the individual to the holiness within him; once the person was sensitized to the holiness within, he would be awakened to the holiness in the Torah, in the mitzvot, and in those extraordinary individuals called *tzaddikim*, and would be well on his way to becoming a *Hassid* in reality as well as in name.

R. Shapiro was more than just a theoretician of *Hassidic* pedagogy. As an active Rebbe, he daily came into contact with people from all over Poland who sought his help. In particular, he was famed for his knowledge of medicine. It is said that he acquired his medical knowledge, which seems to have included clinical practice, from physicians such as Dr. Aharon Soloveitchik, Chief of Surgery at the Jewish Hospital in Warsaw. Through the good offices of Dr. Soloveitchik, R. Shapiro's prescriptions, written in Latin, were accepted and filled in Warsaw pharmacies.

One of his *Hassidim* tells the following story. Once a *Hassid*, an old-timer of pure and simple faith, came to the Rebbe, complaining

that his headaches had returned ever since the Rebbe's prescription had faded. The *Hassidim* who were present were puzzled by the notion of a 'faded' prescription, but in any event the Rebbe took pen in hand and wrote a new prescription for the man. The man took the piece of paper and placed it firmly in the band of his hat, breathing a sigh of relief: "Thanks to the Rebbe, I feel so much better — my headache is gone!" The *Hassidim* could barely control their laughter, but the Rebbe turned to them and gently explained that "The modern world would classify this as 'suggestion,' but we who hold fast to the way of the Besht call it *emunah peshutah* — simple faith." The Rebbe further explained that the blessing of any person who maintains purity of speech and thought is effective for healing, but "in order to cover this effect in the garb of natural causation, I write prescriptions."

R. Shapiro was very striking in his appearance. He is universally recalled as being handsome and well-groomed, distinguished and elegant — though not 'modern' in his dress. He radiated an aura of dignity and nobility. His eyes were penetrating, his manner thoughtful and deliberate. As one person put it, "He was the most impressive man I ever met in my life. You could not be indifferent to him."

Those who knew his family well and who were often present at his home recall the atmosphere of love and respect which prevailed in the household. The mutual devotion and admiration between the Rebbe and his wife, Rahel Hayyah Miriam Hapstein, were evident to all. Like her three sisters, all daughters of the previous Kozienczer Rebbe, Rahel Hayyah Miriam was very learned; she would avidly follow her husband's discourses. In one passage of *Hakhsharat ha-Avrekhim*, he notes that his wife reviewed his writings, making comments and posing questions. When she passed away in 1937, he wrote a poignant

* This meditation practice was described to the author by a close disciple of Rabbi Shapiro.

ant and moving letter to his *Hassidim* in *Eretz Israel* eulogizing her.

The following took place soon after her passing: the Rebbe led one of his close *Hassidim* to a cabinet in his home, opened up the drawer and took out a piece of paper. On it was written, a *ma'amar* — *Hassidic* discourse of the Rebbe, but, as the *Hassid* noted, the handwriting changed in the middle of the paper. The Rebbe explained that he was writing up his *ma'amar* when he was called away for a medical consultation. When he returned, he saw that his Rebbetzin had picked up the pen and finished writing the *ma'amar*. Displaying the paper in his hand like a treasure, the Rebbe looked at the *Hassid* and said, "You see, this is the true fulfillment of the verse 'AND THEY SHALL BE ONE FLESH' (*Genesis* 2:24)!"

We cannot assess what the full impact of R. Shapiro's leadership might have been, for nearly everything was swept away in the years of catastrophe. In the very first weeks of the war, during the bombing of Warsaw, he already lost his son and much of his immediate family; yet instead of being broken, he continued teaching, leading clandestine services, counseling and consoling, as well as providing material assistance to others. Time and again he was offered opportunities to escape to the relative safety of the East, behind the Russian lines, but he refused them all, saying, "I am not going to desert my *Hassidim* at this difficult time! Wherever my *Hassidim* are, that's where I must be. I will not consent to saving myself while leaving my *Hassidim* abandoned!" He risked his life to keep *mikvaot* open, to perform circumcisions (he was an expert *mohel*), and to celebrate the holidays in the proper manner.

But the most lasting legacy of those days in the Warsaw Ghetto was the book he wrote, based on his Sabbath talks from September 1939 until July 1942, the time of the Great Deportation. Here emerges the true greatness of this *Hassidic* master: the profound

faith in God, the attempt to provide a measure of comfort and hope to his flock, the ability to transcend the horrific events of the moment and to transport himself and his listeners to a realm of peace and sanctity — all this and much more is evident on each page of *Esh Kodesh*. R. Shapiro never mentions the evil ones, the perpetrators, by name. The struggle is depicted entirely on the spiritual plane. There are passages which give no trace of their provenance, passages of great lyrical splendor and compositional grace, where the author totally transcends his personal situation, expressing a lofty vision in which all events of the mundane world, as well as the words of the Torah, are seen as harmonious aspects of one Divine revelation, so that: "one hears the Torah's voice from the world as a whole; from the chirping of the birds, the mooing of the cows, from the voices and tumult of human beings — from all these one hears the voice of God in the Torah..." (*Esh Kodesh*, p. 163).

Other passages explore the meaning of evil from a kabbalistic and *Hassidic* perspective, and the nature of *emunah* — faith. Finally, drawing upon talmudic and midrashic sources, R. Shapiro develops a most daring conception of the meaning of *hester panim* — 'the eclipse of God.' For R. Shapiro, this biblical formulation does not mean that God hides His face, indifferent to the fate of His people. To the contrary, His pain, as it were, at Israel's suffering is so great that the world would explode were it to manifest; hence God turns aside and weeps, as it were, in His 'inner chambers.' But by means of a profound communion-in suffering, the Jew may find God even there.

Rabbi Shapiro did not survive the war. His life was taken on 4 Heshvan, 5704 (November 1943). Shortly before he was taken away, he buried the manuscript of his writings, along with some last-minute addenda, one of which acknowledges that, although the Jewish people had known many persecutions in the past, what they were undergoing at that time was

simply without parallel. The manuscript was discovered after the war and was eventually published by his nephew in Tel Aviv. As mentioned above, *Esh Kodesh* remains, in effect, the last testament of *Hassidism* in Poland. In a profoundly moving cover letter appended to the manuscript, R. Shapiro begs "every Jew to study my works; surely the merit of my holy ancestors will stand him and his household in good stead, both in this world and the world to come ..."

It is the belief of this writer that the life and works of Rabbi Shapiro are not only a monument to an illustrious past, but may yet serve as a beacon and guide for the future, for those thirsting for an authentic and profound Jewish spirituality. May his merit indeed guide us.

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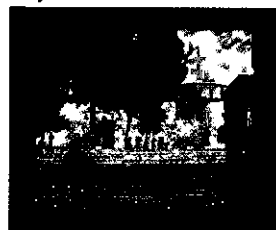
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