

# Elie Wiesel, Hasidism and the Hiddenness of God

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Orthodox Judaism, in its liturgy, practice and thought, presupposes God's providential guidance of human affairs; the calendar of the Jewish year, observed, admittedly with considerable variation, by religious Jews of all denominations, focuses upon divine intervention in human history, particularly in the sacred narrative of the people of Israel<sup>1</sup>.

Passover remains one of the most popularly observed festivals, even among Jews who are quite distant from many other religious practices. On Passover the story of the Exodus is both recited and relived – as the founders of rabbinic Judaism put it, every Jewish person is obliged to see themselves as if they personally were redeemed from Egyptian slavery as they celebrate the seder on the first nights of the festival. Eating unleavened bread and tasting bitter herbs, Jews recall both their affliction and the redemption of their ancestors by a God who heard the cries of a people suffering at the hands of a tyrant and intervened, to overthrow the oppressor and liberate the slaves. It is not unreasonable to describe the Exodus as the founding narrative of the Jewish encounter with God. Redemption is, in this context, an historic and deeply political construct, rather than a term referring primarily to God's salvific response to human sinfulness. It implies a God who is engaged with the world, particularly with those who suffer, and who has both the will and the capacity to intervene on their behalf.

The theme is reworked at different points in the year. Pentecost recalls the epiphany at Sinai and Tabernacles the fragile dwellings of the wilderness, when the Israelites were sustained by God's grace as they journeyed to the promised land. Minor festivals recall divine intervention – Chanukah celebrates the Maccabees, but with particular emphasis on providence rather than military victory, and Purim, the most joyous day of the Jewish year, is based on the Esther story. Jews are rescued from a tyrant once more, and the story, in which

<sup>1</sup> For further details of what follows, see Jacobs, L. *The Jewish Religion: A Companion*. (OUP 1995). Hasidism refers to a Jewish spiritual renaissance commencing in eighteenth century Ukraine, that remains a major element of Jewish Orthodoxy. For a good introduction see relevant article in *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, (1971) Volume 7, especially pp 1403–1414

God is never mentioned implicitly, is taken to illustrate that even in the absence of overt miraculous deliverance we can still believe that history is subject to providential guidance and that we are not alone in our travails.

The annual calendar also recalls a second, and very different mode of divine engagement. In midsummer, traditionally observant Jews keep three weeks of gradually intensifying semi-mourning. At the end of the three weeks is the fast of the 9<sup>th</sup> of Av (the Jewish calendar months have names that originated in the Babylonian exile) which is kept for twenty-five hours. In the evening people sit on the floor of the synagogue and chant the book of Lamentations: the synagogue is in semi-darkness lit only by a few flickering candles, and the curtain that covers the ark is removed, so that only the plain wooden doors are visible. Morning service can last until about midday, with the congregation spending the morning reciting later laments – primarily ancient or medieval in origin. The atmosphere gradually changes as the hours pass and an ancient tradition has it that the Messiah will be born on the 9<sup>th</sup> of Av.

The three weeks are a time of reflection on the sins that provoked the exile: here too history is rooted in divine intervention. The exile is not a secular event which occurred in a purely political context – it is seen in terms of God's judgement to which the appropriate response is penitence. Indeed, the three weeks are followed by a period when passages of prophetic comfort are read every Sabbath until the coming of the High Holy Days, the great penitential season of the Jewish year, culminating in the Day of Atonement. Traditional Jewish liturgies are studded with prayers for the ingathering of the exiles and the return of the divine presence to Jerusalem. The great categories of Jewish historical self-understanding are exile and return and the whole pattern is predicated upon the relationship of God and Israel. People who live within the universe formed by the liturgical year do not understand their situation in terms of historical or sociological analysis: their concepts are drawn from the language of their tradition.

It is important to note that the celebration of the Jewish year, its Sabbaths and festivals, give a sense of intimacy with God that is not confined to affirmation of saving acts in the past. Particularly for those engaged in the study of the Torah, the divine universe is a living reality, and for those influenced by the Jewish esoteric traditions, their studies are an act of reparation, a 'tikkun' restoring existence to its primeval holiness.

This world has been touchingly evoked by Elie Wiesel, who inhabited it unselfconsciously until his understanding was shattered by the Holocaust. Elie Wiesel was born in 1928 in the Hungarian town of Sighet, where he spent his childhood. The Holocaust struck Hungarian Jewry in 1944, when Elie Wiesel was sixteen and Wiesel and his family

were taken to Auschwitz. Elie Wiesel survived, and from the 1950's onward he has endeavoured in his novels, essays and stories to reconstruct his broken life and rebuild his faith. Wiesel refuses to take refuge in any form of theodicy, and will not continue with a religious life the foundations of which he can no longer honestly affirm.

In an essay published in 1990, Wiesel reflected on his early life: the extract illustrates the inner life of his childhood, and it is worth quoting in full. Reflecting on the contrast between then and now, he says that strangely enough, the child knew what the adult did not:

In my small town, somewhere in the Carpathian Mountains, I knew where I was. I knew why I existed. I existed to glorify God and to sanctify his world. I existed to link my destiny to that of my people and the destiny of my people to that of humanity. I existed to do good and to combat evil, to accomplish the will of heaven; in short to fit each of my acts, each of my dreams, each of my prayers into God's design.

I knew that God was at the same time near and far, magnanimous and severe, rigorous and merciful. I knew that I belonged to his chosen people – chosen to serve him by suffering as well as by hope. I knew that I was in exile and that the exile was total, universal, even cosmic. I knew as well, that the exile would not last, that it would end in redemption. I knew so many things, about so many subjects. I knew especially when to rejoice and when to lament: I consulted the calendar: everything was there.

Now I no longer know anything.

As in a dusty mirror I look at my childhood and I wonder if it is mine, I don't recognise the child who studies there with fervour, who says his prayers. Its because he is surrounded by other children; he walks like them, head bowed and hips firm. He advances into the night as if attracted by its shadows. I watch them as they enter an abyss of flames, I see them transformed into ashes, I hear their cries turn into silence and I no longer know anything: they have taken away my certainties, and no one will give them back to me.<sup>2</sup>

Two further texts illustrate the depths of Wiesel's distance from his broken tradition. In 1973 he wrote a cantata entitled *Ani Maamin*. *Ani Maamin* – I believe – is the opening affirmation of the Maimonidean creed, a summary of Maimonides thirteen principles of the Jewish faith. Each principle starts with the affirmation and Wiesel's usage of it is in no way ironic. He has an inmate of camps, a man with no face or destiny talking soundlessly to himself on the first night of Passover, when the camp was asleep, and he alone was awake. The man says he has not partaken of the unleavened bread or bitter herbs, and has not drunk the four cups that symbolise deliverance. He has not invited the hungry to share his repast, or even his hunger, and he no longer has a son to ask him the four questions that preface the retelling of the Exodus narrative, the Haggadah.

<sup>2</sup> Wiesel, E. *From the Kingdom of Memory*, (Summit Books 1990) pp 136–145.

No longer have I the strength  
To answer.  
I say the Haggadah  
And now I know it lies.  
The parable of Had-Gadya is false:  
God will not come  
To slay the slaughterer.  
The innocent victims  
Will go unavenged.  
The ancient wish –  
Next year in Jerusalem –  
Will not be granted.

Wiesel continues to affirm his faith, but it is no longer the faith of this early life.

Still I recite the Haggadah  
As though I believe in it.  
And I await the prophet Elijah,  
As I did long ago.  
I open my heart to him  
And say:  
Welcome prophet of the promise,  
Welcome herald of redemption,  
Come, share in my story,  
Come, rejoice with the dead  
That we are . . . . .  
I shall wait for you.  
And even if you disappoint me  
I shall go on waiting,  
Ani Maamin.

Wiesel concludes that he will go on believing even against God's will  
“even if you punish me for believing in you”.

Blessed are the fools  
Who shout their faith.  
Blessed are the fools  
Who go on laughing. . . .  
Singing over and over and over:  
Ani Maamin  
Ani maamin beviat ha-Mashiah.  
I believe in the coming of the Messiah  
And I await his coming every day  
Ani maamin.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> The extracts are reprinted in Schiff, H. (ed) *Holocaust Poetry*. (Fount 1995) pp 194–204. From Wiesel, E., *Ani Maamin: A Song Lost and Found Again* (Random House, 1973). Used by permission of Random House, Inc. © Elie Wiesel.

The final lines are Maimonides twelfth principle, and were sung by some religious circles in the ghettos. Many Jewish communities sing them at the conclusion of their morning services.

A second text, written in 1976 and entitled 'Job: Our Contemporary' draws on the ancient Jewish traditions of arguing with God. Albeit, that there are biblical exemplars – the best known is Abraham's argument before the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah – this tradition has been used both rarely and sparingly in Jewish orthodoxy, but Wiesel does not hesitate to push it to the boundaries of the blasphemous and is scathingly critical of Job's restored piety and well-being at the end of the biblical narrative. Wiesel strongly identified with Job's refusal to accept available theodicy as accounting for his plight; it was precisely Job's insistence on the truth of his situation as being sacrosanct even if such fidelity left him in conflict with accepted theological understanding that was so important for Wiesel. For Elie Wiesel, a relationship with God demands absolute and unremitting truthfulness. We must be unremittingly faithful to the demands of the situations we have been given and neither flinch nor compromise – if the situation is truly terrible then we summon forth our courage and cry out in protest. If the situation demands that we set aside God-given understanding – revealed truth – then this ultimately is what God wants of us. As Wiesel points out, Job's act of courage was not futile, for it was the occasion of the divine response.

For Wiesel, Job should have carried on arguing even after the divine speech because it had offered no explanation of his ordeals: "Job should not have given in so easily. He should have continued to protest, to refuse the handouts. He should have said to God: Very well, I forgive You. I forgive the extent of my sorrow, my anguish. But what about my dead children, do they forgive You. . . . Now it is my turn to choose between You and my children, and I refuse to repudiate them".<sup>4</sup>

It is possible to attribute Wiesel's position to his being so young when catastrophe struck in 1944. As a sixteen year old, his faith had not yet encountered the inevitable trials that mark the journey of adulthood, and he has had to work through his experiences only after his world was shattered by the horror of the Holocaust. But it is reasonable to argue that there is more to his position than that: his unceasing pre-occupation – he is now in his seventies – with articulating what he had witnessed and wrestling with the consequences for his faith and his absolute refusal to take refuge in theodicy are both equally remarkable. His alternative position takes argument to the point – almost – of denial of his faith while simultaneously affirming it: derived from an absolute commitment to truth, it is part of one strand of the Hasidic heritage. We relate to God from out of our

<sup>4</sup> Wiesel, E. *Messengers of God: Biblical Portraits and Legends*, (Summit 1976) especially pp 230–35.

situation, we pour out our hearts, our anger and our protest without stopping to consider the consequences, and only in finding this selfless courage do we truly enter into relation with our creator. For Wiesel, the divine speech at the end of Job was not an answer but a trial and when Job gave in he failed: this was not what God had wanted of him.

Wiesel's response to the catastrophe of God's hiddenness is derived from a Jewish traditionalism touched perhaps by Menachem Mendl of Kotsk, one of the great Hasidic figures of the nineteenth century. Wiesel wrestles with God as He is manifest in Jewish liturgy and the sacred calendar of the Jewish year and his greatest concern, like that of Martin Buber in his writings on Hasidism, is with the lived life of faith, the religious response to our experience of reality as it is manifest in the world of the Hasidic masters.

But Wiesel's work is not the only Hasidic response to catastrophe, and it is arguably, quite atypical. In the twentieth century Gershom Scholem, who founded the academic study of the Jewish esoteric tradition – kabbala – took strong issue with Buber's existential reading of Hasidism, focused on its tales and narratives, and argued that what truly mattered was its highly innovative theology, which was in turn derived from kabbala. The Buber-Scholem dispute was one of the most celebrated fracas of Judaic scholarship in the twentieth century and periodically its passions are still rekindled. Scholem founded a school that flourishes at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem and it has produced major work on the Hasidic theologies.<sup>5</sup>

In turning to these theologies, it is helpful to assume that whereas Wiesel focuses on the God of history, their first concern is God as creator. If God is infinite, then how do we account for the existence of the universe? If God is indeed boundless, then any 'other' being is clearly impossible, for the 'other' implies some physical and spatial boundary to the divine being, and this is not so. One of the most influential solutions for this problem was provided by the sixteenth century kabbalist and mystic, Rabbi Isaac Luria, albeit that in studying Hasidism there are a number of reasons for proceeding cautiously when tracing his influence. Rabbi Luria left no writings and we are therefore dependent on the very brief notes and allusions made by his disciples. His ideas have been interpreted very differently by later generations of Hasidic masters, some of whom do not draw on him at all, preferring neo-platonic emanationist theories that were accepted before Rabbi Luria, and continue to be influential today.<sup>6</sup> Also, many schools of Hasidism are not necessarily concerned to express themselves in terms

<sup>5</sup> For a summary and defence of Buber's view, see Friedman, M *Encounter on the Narrow Ridge: A Life of Martin Buber*, (Paragon House, N.Y. 1993) pp 377–408. For Scholem's position see Scholem, G. *The Messianic Idea in Judaism and other Essays on Jewish Spirituality*, (Schocke, N.Y. 1971) pp 227–250.

<sup>6</sup> For Rabbi Isaac Luria, see Gershom Scholem's article in *Encyclopedia Judaica*, pp 571–578.

of systematic theology; they emphasise the infinity of the Torah, and prefer an eclectic approach to specific problems.

There are several key Lurianic ideas, of which the first is Tzimtzum or withdrawal. The universe can exist because God, so to speak, withdrew into himself, creating a 'space' where the world was brought into being. A second idea is 'shevira' – the breaking of the vessels – meaning that the created fabric takes on its own dynamic and is no longer simply reflective of the Divine will – the 'vessels' could not hold the holiness of their 'content' – thus accounting for chaos and catastrophe in the world. Thirdly and finally 'tikkun', meaning reparation: in studying the Torah and practising our faith we are helping restore the broken fabric of creation. The terminology is not intended as literal description; rather it offers metaphorical insight into sacred mystery.

In discussing the hiddenness of God, clearly the first term – 'withdrawal' – is of great importance. It does not deny God's presence – we exist, so to speak, in a space surrounded by the divine. But what of that space, does it imply a literal 'absence' of God, or is it rather an expression of his hiddenness? Two Hasidic schools, Lubavitch and Breslov, have very different interpretations.<sup>7</sup>

Lubavitch strongly emphasise divine immanence and draw upon Hasidic masters to the effect that, as one of them succinctly expressed it: "And the matter is that man is obligated to believe that the whole earth is full of His glory, may he be praised, and there is no place devoid of Him. . . ." God is indeed omnipresent, and everything in the world exists only because it is imbued with divine vitality. Rachel Elior explains that for Lubavitch their purpose is to achieve consciousness that material reality as a separate realm of existence is not ultimately real, but its existence is merely apparent and the only true reality is the all-pervasive divine presence. Spiritual attainment involves nullification of existence via the contemplation of ultimate reality, and *devekut*, or attachment to God. We must overcome all forms of self-centredness and seek only to be at one with the divine will. In short, God's withdrawal involves the creation of a 'reality' that is only fully grasped when it is negated in the contemplation of its divine source.

Like Lubavitch, Breslov came into being in the later part of the eighteenth century, and Rabbi Nachman, its inspiration, also believed that the world was sustained by the energies of its creator, but for him the 'space' could never be negated until the end of time.

<sup>7</sup> For Lubavitch, see Elior, R. *The Paradoxical Ascent to God. The Kabbalistic Theosophy of Habad Hasidism*, (SUNY 1993) For a useful but controversial introduction to R. Nahman of Breslov see Green, *A Tormented Master: The Life and Spiritual Quest of Rabbi Nahman of Bratslav*, (Jewish Lights, Woodstock, Vermont 1992), especially the excurses entitled *Faith, Doubt and Reason*, pp: 285–356 which I have drawn upon in this paper. For discussion on the impact of Rabbi Luria on Hasidic theology see Idel, M *Hasidism: Between Ecstasy and Magic*, (SUNY 1995) pp 31–45. For an early and much discussed attempt to clearly distinguish different Hasidic theologies, see Weiss, J. *Studies in Eastern European Jewish Mysticism*, (OUP, 1985) pp 43–55.

The void indeed came about through the withdrawal of God: "There is, as it were, no God there, for if divinity were present in it, it would not be a void... yet in a deeper sense surely there is divinity there nevertheless, for nothing exists without this life. For this reason it will be possible to understand the void only in the future."

The void is real, and in our perception God is absent. Nachman argued that theological endeavour to prove God's existence was bound to lead only to heresy because rational examination of the world will inevitably lead to the opposite conclusion. He was particularly concerned to keep people from philosophical speculation, because the objections philosophers raise "come from the void" and for that reason they cannot be answered. It is only in simple faith that we can acquire understanding, but that faith is constantly challenged by its apparently godless context and must constantly wrestle with doubts inherent in its situation. As one doubt is overcome, it will be succeeded by another: such is the journey of the faithful, and the great thing is to understand and not be afraid. When one of his followers summoned up the courage to share his doubts with his teacher, he was probably surprised by the response, "My son, it is for people like you that the world was created". This was not only a matter of pastoral sensitivity; it truly reflected Nachman's understanding of the human situation and the life of faith.

But Nachman drew not only on heroic affirmation, but also on the longing of the human soul for its ultimate source which is the root of our spiritual lives. Whereas early Hasidism had emphasised the preciousness of the longing of the soul for its creator, R. Nachman gives this longing a pathos of his own, perhaps because of the context of the of the place without God in which the soul is located. Nachman's parable of the heart and spring, an episode in his tale of the Seven Beggars, is as follows:

There is a mountain, and on that mountain there stands a rock. A spring gushes forth from that rock. Now everything has a heart, and the world as a whole has a heart... more heart-like than any other heart.

The mountain and the spring stand at one end of the world and the heart is at the other. The heart stands facing the spring, yearning and constantly cries out in its longing... The spring, too, longs for the heart...

Now if the heart is filled with so great a desire to draw near to the spring... why does it not simply do so? But as soon as it begins to move toward the mountain, the mountain top where the spring stands simply disappears from view. And the life of the heart flows from the spring: if it were to allow the spring to vanish it would die...

If the heart were to die, God forbid, the entire world would be destroyed... For this reason the heart can never approach the spring, but ever stands opposite it and looks at in longing."<sup>8</sup>

<sup>8</sup> For the Breslov sources see Green A., *ibid*, pp. 285–336. The parable of the heart and the spring is quoted on p. 301.

Finally, I would like to look at a third Hasidic response to the hiddenness of God, which is again different from that of Wiesel. We return to the period of the holocaust, and the writings of Rabbi Kalonymus Kalman Shapira, one of the great figures of Polish Hasidism in the inter-war period. Rabbi Shapira's last work, entitled *The Fire of Holiness*, was written *in extremis* in the Warsaw ghetto: it is a series of addresses given to his community between Autumn 1939 and mid-July 1942. Rabbi Shapira died in November 1943. He buried his manuscripts before he was deported to the labour camp of Trawniki in 1943, and they were found and published after the war.

The addresses, albeit delivered in a deeply erudite manner replete with Talmudic references, are not simply learned theological treatises. The rabbi is speaking to the condition of his people in terrifying times and trying to comfort them, addressing their fragility, their doubts and their grief-stricken incomprehension. Many of their reactions would have been similar to those of Elie Wiesel, and it was in this context that Rabbi Shapira spoke.

Like Nachman of Breslov, Rabbi Shapira is aware of the limitations and the perils of questioning the unfathomable will of God, and he finds truth in the spiritual longings of the soul and the experience of religious life. But he is equally aware that in times of great suffering the light of spiritual inwardness can be virtually extinguished, and he seeks to reassure his people that the darkness of their experience does not mean that they are losing their faith. Explaining what is happening in terms of spiritual psychology, he tries to help them still their doubts and their fearfulness by offering self-understanding.

In the depth of God's absence Rabbi Shapira continues to affirm His presence. Tragic and sudden bereavement was the daily experience of both the rabbi and his people and in January 1942, he took up the theme of sacrifice: "When some of us are absent because it is God's will that they rise as an offering to Him, blessed be He, we only feel their greatness after they are gone. . . . Before, when they were with us, as precious as they were to us . . . and as much as we rejoiced and found delight in our closeness to them, we nevertheless did not fully know how to appreciate what we had. . . . Now they are missing, we see better the acuteness of our loss. The heart yearns, it pains. It has no consolation but the words of God to Moses recorded in the Talmud, 'Thus it arose in thought before me'".

Rabbi Shapira went on to speak of the Temple music used to accompany the taking of the ashes of the sacrifices; the music was a remembrance-offering that would arouse the Divine compassion and bring about salvation. So also, perhaps, the music of the service which was offered amidst the ashes in the ghetto of Warsaw. As Nehemiah Polen, who has made Rabbi Shapira's writings accessible to English-speaking students, comments: "The melancholy engendered by death and loss can be transmuted through the fire of the

sacrificial altar into the ash of longing, yearning and ultimately of song”.

Like Wiesel, Rabbi Shapira also draws on the tradition of arguing with God, which seems to conflict with his refusal to question the divine will. He is aware of this tension and comments as follows: “If one speaks this way as an expression of prayer and supplication, as he pours out his heart before God, that is good. But if, God forbid, he is posing questions; or even if he is not (actively) questioning, but in the depths of his heart, his faith, God forbid, is weakened, then God help us!” Rabbi Shapira is usually more restrained in his argument than one of Wiesel’s inspirations, Levi Yitzchak of Berdichev, whose boundless love of his people has entered Jewish folklore far beyond the Hasidic world. Wiesel describes Levi Yitzchak’s boldness in terms which Polen takes as reflective also of Rabbi Shapira: His (Levi Yitzchak’s) reproaches vented, his threats uttered, he resumed . . . the ancient, majestic litany of the kaddish (doxology) . . . It all depends on where the rebel chooses to stand. From inside the community he may say everything. Let him step outside it, and he will be denied this right. The revolt of the believer is not that of the renegade; the two do not speak in the name of the same anguish”.

It is not clear that Wiesel’s comment is quite the same as Rabbi Shapira’s or that Rabbi Shapira would have gone as far as some of the Wiesel texts cited above, albeit that Wiesel was responding to Auschwitz which would already have been inconceivable even in the ghetto, which the rabbi describes as surpassing in its horror any previous Jewish tragedy. Rabbi Shapira insists that critique of God must be as an expression of prayer and supplication rather than a questioning of faith. Elie Wiesel privileges not the interiority of the expression, its deepest motivation, but the concern of the individual – or not – for the community. Even if faith is questioned, the questioner will find divine understanding, provided he speaks from within the community of Israel. This is a very profound distinction indeed, if it is correct.

It is inconceivable for Rabbi Shapira, that in such catastrophic times God does not suffer with His people, and the Divine suffering is particularly spoken of in his writings from the final months – from February to July 1942. Rabbinic literature offers a number of sources for this understanding, but influenced by the medieval philosophers, there has been a tendency in Judaism to emphasise the divine transcendence, and regard the previous sources as figurative rather than literally descriptive. Rabbi Shapira certainly rejects this, as might be expected, because Hasidism has always privileged the Jewish esoteric tradition and drawn back from the God of the philosophers. But what is unexpected here is the prominence given to the theme of Divine suffering – its centrality in Rabbi Shapira’s understanding and its magnitude. Given God’s infinity the

depth of this suffering must equally surpass all of our human conceptions.

Rabbi Shapira obliquely touches in a few references upon his understanding of God and creation, which is closer to Lubavitch than Breslov. It is known by the soul “that there is nothing beside Him, that all is divinity. . . .” There is no existence at all in the universe, other than Him. The entire universe is an aura of the divine and nothing in the world should be taken as a thing in itself. This view is taken to an extreme bordering on the quietist elements in the Hasidic tradition. When we request a favour from a friend we know that what will happen will in fact be the will of God, and the friend is merely an agent. All that happens is God’s will, and the world lies beyond human judgement or evaluation and certainly beyond criticism.

Rabbi Shapira accepts the Lurianic view of creation, and at one point, in September 1941, referred explicitly to the shevira, the breaking of the vessels, arguing that it can be that the forces of evil might catastrophically increase. The shevira was not only a primeval happening. It can be repeated, and the world can only be repaired amidst great suffering.

But the void is in no sense empty of God. Rabbi Shapira’s address in February 1942 was given in the wake of news of the death camps reaching Warsaw. By the third year of the war, his understanding of what was happening had changed very considerably. Initially, in 1939, he had assumed that the war must be seen as punishment for sin, but he soon came to see such a view as inapplicable. Evil had exploded into the world, but even in depths of unspeakable anguish we must not lose hope or be overwhelmed by the darkness. (Rabbi Shapira never speaks of Nazism or its antisemitic fury – his one concern is the relationship of God and Israel.) Evil can never triumph because the world is a divine creation and Torah is its essence: this does not in any way detract from the magnitude of the horror, but those who restore the world to its holiness will ultimately overcome even the greatest manifestation of darkness.

The physical world must not be seen as distant from or in opposition to the Torah, for the world is a divine creation and when one achieves spiritual insight one hears the sound of the Torah in the world as a whole “from the chirping of the birds, the mooing of the cows, the voices and tumult of human beings – from all these one hears the voice. The unceasing voice of God in the Torah. . . .” So Rabbi Shapira, in February 1942, in the Warsaw Ghetto.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>9</sup> For Rabbi Shapira see Polen, N *The Holy Fire: The Teachings of Rabbi Kalonymus Kalman Shapira* (Jason Aronson 1994) from which the sources quoted are taken. For Elie Wiesel’s view of arguing with God see Wiesel, E. *Souls on Fire* (Summit 1972) p 111.