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**Hasidim and Academics Debate
a Rebbe's Faith during the Holocaust
(on Facebook, of all Places)**

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HASIDIM AND ACADEMICS DEBATE A REBBE'S FAITH DURING THE
HOLOCAUST
(ON FACEBOOK, OF ALL PLACES)

HENRY ABRAMSON

Earlier this month an obscure corner of the Internet witnessed a remarkable exchange between followers of the martyred Rabbi Kalonymus Kalmish Shapiro and Professor Shaul Magid, a scholar of Hasidism and a *Tablet* Contributing Writer. In what one observer called “the best thing doing on Jewish Facebook,” the trilingual dust-up extended deep into two distinct worlds: the academy on one hand, and pious (albeit internet-enabled) Hasidim on the other. It soon became a bona fide *mahkloket*, descending into ad hominem attacks involving slurs like *farbissener* (embittered) and “*apikores*” (heretic), until Rabbi Dr. Daniel Reiser, winner of the 2018 Yad Vashem Prize for his research on Rabbi Shapiro, attempted to calm the dispute by suggesting that “we all try yoga to achieve inner peace.”

The intense debate was occasioned by a ragged fissure at the juncture between two world-views: did the saintly Rabbi Kalonymus Kalmish Shapiro of Piaseczno, heroic Rebbe of the Warsaw Ghetto, lose his faith? For his disciples, even the question alone is offensive (I myself, a long-time student of the Rebbe's Torah, am tempted to add the traditional *has ve-sholem*), while for critical scholars of modern Jewish thought, clarifying the precise meaning of the Rebbe's last wartime writings may earn him a rare place in intellectual history as the first thinker to articulate a post-Holocaust theology of Judaism.

* * *

Rabbi Kalonymous Kalmish Shapiro (1889-1943) is best known as the author of a collection of sermons delivered in the Warsaw Ghetto between 1939 and 1942. Before his death, the Rebbe committed his precious manuscripts to historian Emanuel Ringelblum, whose underground Oyneg Shabbos group was secretly collecting data on the life of Jews under Nazi occupation. The manuscripts, along with a variety of other Ghetto documents, were sealed within two milk containers and buried, where they remained until they were discovered in 1950 by a Polish construction worker. The Rebbe's sermons represent a *sui generis* glimpse into the spiritual life of Hasidic Jews under Nazi oppression, demonstrating how Rabbi Shapiro attempted to place the unimaginable suffering of the community within the larger context of Torah, week after hellish week. Since their publication in 1960 under the title [Aish Kodesh \(Holy Fire\)](#), they have been the subject of intense study, both in the neo-Hasidic world as well as the academy.

Early scholars such as the pioneering [Nehemia Polen](#) attempted to identify the development of the Rebbe's thought over the course of the war, outlining a progression from a traditional theological understanding of the problem of evil in the early weeks of the occupation, through a period in which the Rebbe seemed to be preparing his Hasidim to die with dignity, until the fateful spring of 1942, when the Rebbe's anguish seems to break loose from conventional expressions of Jewish theology into completely uncharted territory. [Daniel Reiser](#)'s major contribution was to return to the actual manuscript, which reveals a universe of sophistication and nuance not available to readers of the printed text: the Rebbe's cramped

Hebrew script is littered with strikeouts, emendations, and insertions, suggesting that it is less accurate to describe his thought as a linear arc than as a tortured canvas, with the author returning again and again to moments of pain, shading and revising his text multiple times throughout the war.

The moment of inflection occurred in 1942, evidenced by a number of explicit annotations such as the Rebbe's famous admission that his comments in earlier sermons on the nature of persecution in Jewish history were incorrect: the period that we would later call the Holocaust was completely unprecedented, a novum in Jewish history, and by implication, required a new theological response. The Rebbe, bemoaning his spiritual exhaustion, did not articulate this new response—or was his admission a theological statement in itself? This is precisely the argument.

The Facebook debate broke loose when Pesach Sommer, a dedicated student of the Rebbe, reacted to Shaul Magid's [recent Tablet review](#) of Reiser's research. Based on his readings of the Rebbe's wartime writings, Magid had written, "by the middle of 1942, most of [Rabbi Shapiro's] community had perished, including his family, and he was increasingly alone with his thoughts, struggling to make sense of the tragedy that was unfolding before his eyes. Scholars differ as to how he fared: Did he remain a believer as before? Did his faith waver, change, or get destroyed? We will never know the answer." Sommer was deeply offended by the suggestion that the Rebbe's faith somehow wavered, changed or (*has ve-sholem*) was destroyed, and moreover Sommer has still not reconciled himself to [a 2017 article](#), in which Professor Magid wrote of the Rebbe's last words: "That note was not written by a man of faith; it was written by a man of broken faith."

What was the historical antecedent of this apparent shift in the Rebbe's thinking? [I have argued](#) that the turning point is the testimony of Szlama Fainer, a young man who escaped from Chelmno in mid-January and smuggled himself into the Ghetto. Fainer provided the first authoritative report of the newly established death camps, where he was forced to work as one of the *Sonderkommando*, processing the bodies of thousands of Jews and Roma, including the corpses of his parents and many of his townspeople. His report detailed precisely how the Nazis had advanced their killing technologies since the mobile killing squads first overran the *shtetlakh* of Eastern Europe.

The Ghetto was paralyzed by Fainer's news from Chelmno. The Hasidim who gathered to hear the Rebbe's thoughts on *Parashat Mishpatim* (February 14, 1942) must have been filled with trepidation. The Rebbe responded with arguably the most powerful sermon of his life, emphasizing that if finite human beings could suffer so, how much more so should the Holy One, who is infinite, be suffering. God's weeping, however, could not be contained within a finite Universe:

This is also the reason that the world continues to exist and is not destroyed by the anguish and the voice of the Holy One who is Blessed over the suffering of God's people and the destruction of God's home: the terrible anguish of the Holy One who is Blessed cannot be made manifest in the world...since God's anguish was, as it were, infinite, greater than the universe, thus it could not be made manifest in the universe, and the universe remained unshaken by God's anguish...

For if the universe would hear the sound of the weeping of God, the universe would hear and explode—a spark of Divine anguish would enter into the universe and all of God’s enemies would be incinerated. At the sea, the Holy One who is Blessed said, “my handiwork is drowning in the sea—and you wish to sing songs of praise?” Now, however, that the Jewish people are drowning in blood—shall the universe continue to exist?

What is the meaning of the last phrase? What is the answer to the Rebbe’s question? The Rebbe cited the well-known *aggadata* (see *Sanhedrin* 35b) in which God rebukes the angels who wished to celebrate the drowning of the Egyptian army. God refused to hear songs of praise because the rescue of the Jews required the destruction of the Egyptians, who were after all human beings, God’s handiwork. In Warsaw, when the Jewish people were the ones drowning in their own blood—who is the subject of the Rebbe’s rebuke, if not God himself? Is he not saying, “Master of the Universe! You were so sensitive to the deaths of the cruel Egyptians. How can you remain silent when the merciful Jews are slaughtered in Treblinka?” The Rebbe provides no answer to his own question. And yet.

* * *

Magid’s position is more clearly articulated in his forthcoming book, [Piety and Rebellion: Essays on Hasidism](#).¹ There he writes, “I am not saying that Shapira lost faith in God entirely; I think he did not. But the faith that he had after November 1942, based on the only words we have, is not the faith he had previously.” This more nuanced statement helps clarify the precise location of the factor that, ironically, unites both Piaseczno Hasidim and academic students of his thought, like tiny iron filings caught between two powerful magnets. Some—[myself included](#)—have argued that the Rebbe never lost his faith in God, but he was forced to relinquish his traditional view of the inevitably redemptive trajectory of history. God’s apparent decision not to intervene in the massacre of Warsaw Jewry, for the Rebbe, was a tremendum that was so qualitatively and quantitatively different that it could not be contained within traditional Jewish thought. As such, exhausted and incapable of providing a theological response to suffering (an activity that had been his daily preoccupation since the invasion of Poland in September 1939), the Rebbe confessed his loss of faith in history—but not his faith in God. The fact remains that the Rebbe continued to deliver sermons right up until the deportations of the summer of 1942, and he continued to annotate his sermons until January 1943. This refusal to relinquish his Torah is the undeniable proof of his intact faith.

Rav Shagar (Shimon Gershon Rosenberg, 1949-2007) argued that the existential, immediate, and ineffable experience of personal suffering, especially at the scale endemic to the Warsaw ghetto, caused a visceral clash with traditional theology. Rav Shagar’s reading of the Rebbe also locates the essential problem in the theological understanding of history. In an essay entitled “Good and Evil in Jewish Thought,” he wrote that “we cannot abandon history, we cannot abandon the world,” and offered the question, “Is the explanation of the Holocaust

¹ I am grateful to Professor Magid for sharing unpublished proofs of his chapter on the Rebbe.

that history is lost, or is the explanation that, despite everything, the possibility nevertheless exists of the victory of good in history?”²

Rav Shagar then points to another characteristically challenging aspect of the Rebbe’s writings, almost too awesome to imagine: that just as God suffers along with the victims of the Holocaust, God also repents--literally *does teshuvah*--for their pain. Rav Shagar maintains that the Rebbe’s approach was to validate the essential trajectory of redemptive history, finding a new and terrifying theodicy instead of the sympathetic suffering of God.

Shaul Magid, by way of contrast, argues that faith without the belief in God’s presence in history is a fundamentally broken faith. “The God that remains [after the loss of faith in history],” he writes, “is not the same God as before theodicy crumbled with the Ghetto walls or the Great Deportation.” And yet, Magid concedes that, even crippled by this altered faith, the Rebbe continued to serve his Hasidim until the bitter end, teaching Torah and Hasidism. For Magid, this determination to endure even in the face of an apparently absent God—perhaps in an ethical modality, evidenced by the famous story of the holy hunchback of Tel Aviv, which he cites in an [earlier publication](#)—represents the genesis of post-Holocaust theology.

* * *

The Facebook debate, however heated, is likely to remain within the category of “controversies for the sake of Heaven,” which, as the Mishnah teaches us, is destined to endure. Both groups of the Rebbe’s students—those who could arguably called his post-war Hasidim, and those who seek to critically analyze his contributions to Jewish thought—must balance at the end of the abyss if they seek to understand his vision of spirituality in the maelstrom of the Holocaust. Like Talmudic disputants, one group claims, “this is mine,” and the other claims “this is mine,” yet no division will satisfy them. Still, one might reflect that the Rebbe has nevertheless achieved a posthumous victory—a lover of all Jews, in his martyrdom he has brought together these disparate brethren, united in their desire to plumb the depths of his holy writings from the Holocaust. For those of us who strive to embody the religious teachings of the Piaseczno Rebbe, however, Rabbi Yoel Rubin’s comments toward the end of the Facebook debate resonate with power: in his last words, “the Rebbe’s faith was never stronger...we should all live and merit to have such broken faith.”

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² I am grateful to Levi Morrow for sharing this passage: תל אביב תשמ"ז עמ' 87, which is cited in a chapter entitled *ביום ההוא, דרושות ומאמרים למועדי אייר* תל אביב תשמ"ז, עמ' 53.

VASHTI: FEMINIST OR FOE?

TZVI SINENSKY

The Canadian Jewish feminist Michele Landsberg, reflecting on her elementary-age Jewish Day School years in the late 1940s, recalls her ambivalence about the character of Vashti: “I thought, Hey, what’s wrong with Vashti? She had dignity. She had self-respect. She said: I’m not going to dance for you and your pals. There I was, nine or ten years old, and I thought, I like Vashti but I’m supposed to hate her.”³

Landsberg’s conflict neatly captures the tension between two seemingly irreconcilable schools of thought as to Vashti’s character. On one hand, despite little apparent support in the text of the *Megillah*, the familiar midrashic view of Vashti is [the villainous one widely taught in Yeshiva Day Schools](#). According to this interpretation, which most famously endows Vashti with a tail, the queen is portrayed as Nebuchadnezzar’s granddaughter, and the one who convinced Ahashveirosh, referenced in the book of Ezra (4:6), to block the Second Temple rebuilding project. In recompense for having brutally forced her Jewish servants to work naked on the Shabbat, she is bidden to appear unclothed on the seventh day of the party. Hardly a pawn of the hedonic king, Vashti too seeks promiscuity - she had been holding a parallel party in the king’s chambers - and would have happily appeared naked (aside from her crown), which is precisely how *Hazal* imagine that she is bidden to appear. She refuses his request not out of modesty or principle but vanity, only because she grows a tail or contracts leprosy. As a result of her wickedness, Vashti is not merely deposed, but executed. Put simply, the rabbinic tradition depicts Vashti as a vile scoundrel.⁴

Yet the past two hundred years have witnessed the rise of a radically divergent vision of Vashti, first championed by some celebrated 19th century feminists. In her epochal [Women’s Bible](#), for example, [Elizabeth Cady Stanton](#) delivered the following paean to Ahashveirosh’s first queen:

We have some grand types of women presented for our admiration in the Bible... Esther, who ruled as well as reigned, and Vashti, who scorned the Apostle’s command, “Wives, obey your husbands.” She refused the king’s orders to grace with her presence his revelling court. Tennyson pays this tribute to her virtue and dignity:
“Oh, Vashti! noble Vashti!
Summoned forth, she kept her state,
And left the drunken king to brawl
In Shushan underneath his palms.”

Similarly, for feminist activist [Harriet Beecher Stowe](#), the decrees against Vashti, and the subsequent royal epistle instructing that “[each man rule in his home](#),” are the men’s desperate

³ Cited by Elliot Horowitz, [Reckless Rites: Purim and the Legacy of Jewish Violence](#) (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 60.

⁴ For an excellent summary of the rabbinic portrayal of Vashti, see Malka Z. Simkovich, Zev Farber, and David Steinberg, “[Ahasuerus and Vashti: The Story Megillat Esther Does Not Tell You](#).”

attempts to seize control of the patriarchal grip that Vashti had loosened. Somewhat later writers such as [Helen Hunt Jackson](#) saw Vashti as motivated to retain her royal status: “He might well loathe me ever, if I go / Before these drunken pines as a show. / I am his queen; I come of king’s descent, I will not let him bring our crown so low.”

Nor was it only first-wave feminists who championed Vashti’s cause: late twentieth- and early twenty-first century feminist biblical scholars have come to much the same conclusion. For example, in [Vashti’s Victory, and Other Biblical Women Resisting Injustice](#), Laverne McCain Gill presents Vashti as the paragon of anti-patriarchal resistance, in whose footsteps other biblical women walked. Or, as Alice Laffey puts it succinctly, “Vashti never speaks yet her actions speak loud and clear: NO! She will not become the sexual object of drunken men!”⁵ Finally, the feminist interpretation has taken on additional urgency in the #metoo era, which is leading women and men alike to embrace the feminist vision of Vashti.

At first blush, the rabbinic and feminist readings seem utterly irreconcilable. Vashti is either a vainglorious beauty queen or a feminist icon. In responding to Ahashveirosh’s command, she either desires debauchery or seeks to avoid it at all costs. Her refusal to attend the king’s party is born of vanity or dignity.

The conflict between these two interpretations, coupled with the popularity of the midrashic view set against the feminist interpretation’s recent inroads in the Jewish community,⁶ has spurred reactionary responses from religious conservatives and liberals alike.

In a broadside entitled “[Actually, Feminists, Vashti Was The Harvey Weinstein Of Persia](#),” Joshua Krisch assails what he terms “Vashti feminism,” contending that “Vashti was no champion of women’s rights. She would summon Jewish women, force them to undress, and demand they work for her on Shabbat. In other words, Queen Vashti used her unchecked power to sexually harass her female employees. Sound familiar? If Vashti is a feminist icon, so are Harvey Weinstein, Bill Cosby, and Matt Lauer.” Kirsch’s polemical rejoinder epitomizes the view that the feminist interpretation threatens the traditional one, leading him to reject the former in defense of the latter.

At the other end of the denominational spectrum, liberal Jewish thinkers have critiqued the Sages for seeking to uphold the patriarchy. [Arthur Waskow](#) puts it this way:

The Talmud’s midrash about Vashti, like Courtier Memucan’s attack on her in the text of the Megillah itself, arises from panic at the idea of an independent woman. The MEN of the Talmud... saw women as uncanny deviations from model (i.e. male) human beings (see [Neusner on women as Other in the Talmud](#)), and defined their place as subordinate and protected -- to be treated nicely by their masters. Vashti clearly challenged that role. So the men of the Talmud created a midrashic gestalt that further denigrated Vashti. And today, feminist women and men create midrash that celebrates her.

⁵ Alice Laffey, [An Introduction to the Old Testament: A Feminist Perspective](#) (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988), 216.

⁶ As I refine this essay, a colleague’s Facebook Live *shiur* entitled “[The Megillah’s metoo moment](#)” came across my newsfeed.

Despite their obvious differences, both ends of the spectrum share the premise that the rabbinic and feminist interpretations are utterly contradictory, and that the high stakes demand that we reject one interpretation in favor of the other. But accepting this binary blinds us from seeing a key point. The face reading of the *Megillah*, as Stanton and Hunt indicate, seems to compare Vashti favorably with Ahashveirosh. He is impetuous where she is determined. He decides grave matters while inebriated, she when sober. So, rather than assume from the outset that the rabbinic and modern feminist views are entirely at odds with one another, we may still posit, while acknowledging that there are extremely significant differences between them, that the feminist reading draws our attention to a key element in *Hazal's* accounting.⁷

This point emerges from [Esther Rabbah 3:14](#). First, the Midrash iterates many of the classic rabbinic statements casting Vashti as a villain. Then it presents the following dialogue:

Queen Vashti refused: She sent to him and said to him words that touched his heart. She said to him: "If they see me as beautiful, they will set their eyes toward involving themselves with me, and will kill you. And if they see me as ugly, you will be defamed through me. She hinted to him but he did not receive the hint; she stung him but he was not stung. She sent to him and said to him, "You were my father's house's stable attendant, and you were accustomed to bring before you naked harlots. Yet now that you have entered the monarchy you have not returned from your corruption. She hinted to him but he did not receive the hint; she stung him but he was not stung. She sent to him and said, "Even those judged by my father were not judged naked."

This passage, which seems mildly complimentary toward Vashti, is worth unpacking. First, Vashti establishes her superiority by staking a moral claim: her father was more humane than Ahashveirosh will ever be. Second, the text clearly establishes the queen as her husband's intellectual superior. From the outset, it suggests that she uses her emotional intelligence to subtly mock his lowly lineage. But the barbs go over the king's head, finally requiring her to speak bluntly to the fool. Taken in its larger rabbinic context, including other passages in *Esther Rabbah* itself, these commendations are downright strange. How can this passage be reconciled with the Rabbis' nefarious view of Vashti?

Apparently, the Midrash draws the following distinction: Vashti may be evil, but, unlike her husband, she is no knave. Possessing wisdom and street smarts, she understands how to manipulate the king. Ultimately, she must die for her sins. Yet even if she is driven by sheer self-interest, Vashti's intelligence serves as a foil to the foolishness of her husband. Vashti may be morally bankrupt, but that in no way detracts from her superior intellect, which *Hazal* go out of their way to underscore. Of course, this is a far cry from the full-fledged feminist interpretation, which sees Vashti as not just sophisticated but also as bravely refusing to bow to the patriarchy. For *Hazal*, this reading is beside the point. Still, this passage does suggest that the Rabbis recognized aspects of Vashti's character that a one-dimensional reading might otherwise overlook.

⁷ For a rich discussion of R. Meir Leibush's proto-feminist rabbinic commentary on the *Megillah*, see Don Seeman's 2017 [Lehrhaus article](#).

Perhaps even more surprising than the rabbinic portrayal of Vashti is the extent to which their depiction of Zeresh, Haman's wife, echoes that of Vashti. As in the case of Vashti, *Hazal* view Zeresh as wicked. [Esther Rabbah \(10:9\)](#) records in the name of Rav that "one is required to say cursed is Haman, cursed are his sons, cursed is Zeresh his wife. As it states, and the name of the wicked shall rot." This is echoed by the hymn "[Shoshanat Yaakov](#)," in which we declare that "Cursed is Zeresh, wife of the one who inflicted fear." [Targum Yerushalmi](#) (to *Esther* 10:5) bluntly calls Zeresh Haman's "wicked wife," identifying her as the daughter of Tatnai the governor, who questions the Jews' right to rebuild the Temple (see [Ezra 5:3](#)). Just as Zeresh's father stalls the rebuilding efforts, Vashti is similarly credited by the rabbis with having discouraged Ahashveirosh from permitting the resumption of the Temple's reconstruction.

Despite the rabbis' vilification of Zeresh, the *Megillah* itself attributes to Zeresh a significant degree of insight. The text records that Zeresh and Haman's friends recommend that he build a gallows on which to hang Mordechai ([Esther 5:14](#)). Later, Haman's "advisors and his wife Zeresh said to him, 'If Mordecai, before whom you have begun to fall, is of Jewish stock, you will not overcome him; you will fall before him to your ruin'" ([Esther 6:13](#)). In both cases, Zeresh and the friends' or advisors' counsel is decisive.

Building on the text but taking a dramatic step further, the Midrash maintains that Zeresh's insight exceeds that of all Haman's advisors:

Among them, there was none who knew how to give counsel like Zeresh his wife. For he had 365 counselors, like the numbers of days in a solar year. His wife said to him, "This person regarding whom you ask: If he is from Jewish stock, you will not overcome him, unless you set upon him with a stratagem that no one has attempted against his people... Rather, hang him on a gallows, for we never found any member of his nation that was saved from that. Immediately, "the matter was good in the eyes of Haman, and he made the tree." ([Esther Rabbah 9:2](#))

A striking resemblance emerges in the midrashic accounting of Vashti and Zeresh's stories: both are wicked individuals descended from hateful ancestors, yet they easily surpass their husbands' intelligence. Both are accursed, for they used their intelligence to ignoble ends. Yet this does not stop the Rabbis from seeing the sheer intelligence possessed by both and comparing them favorably with their husbands, and, explicitly for Zeresh and implicitly for Vashti, all of his male advisors. What is more, the parallel to Zeresh suggests that the women's intelligence is not merely set in contrast to their husband's imbecility - Haman, all indications suggest, was anything but unintelligent - but is significant in its own respect.

In light of these *midrashim*, the feminist and rabbinic readings are not quite as diametrically opposed as we might have initially assumed. The Rabbis certainly portray Vashti and Zeresh as rabid anti-Semites, and they do not see Vashti as motivated by a noble desire to preserve her dignity and achieve social justice. Yet the feminist reading sensitizes us to the fact that rather than see Vashti and Zeresh as one-sided villains, in fact the Rabbis view them as multidimensional personalities whose intelligence eclipses that of all the men around them.

In the end, our appreciation for the midrashic reading is enhanced when we transcend the polemics and thoughtfully consider competing interpretations. In doing so, we are not only

exposed to alternative readings of the *Megillah*. We are also led to observe that the Rabbis implicitly appreciated and even amplified elements of what would later be termed “Vashti feminism,” even as they saw the queen as the Jews’ unflinching foe.

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