

The Collision with the Evil in the Esh Kodesh of Kalonymos Kalmish Shapira, Rebbe of the Warsaw Ghetto

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This paper examines Rabbi Kalonymos Kalmish Shapira's Esh Kodesh, a response to the catastrophe of the Shoah written from the depths of the Warsaw Ghetto (September 1939–July 1942), with the aim of better understanding a religious Jewish response to the Nazi assault on the Jewish religion. Of particular interest is Rabbi Shapira's reflection on the withdrawal of the divine in the contexts of an assault on the divine. Arguing that many post-Holocaust Jewish responses to the evil of the Shoah have been ill-defined, the paper shows how Rabbi Shapira opens up new possibilities for an understanding of radical evil, without slipping into a theodicy that might "justify" God.

First, the paper explains Chasidic views of evil as the formation of kelipot or "shells" that hide the divine spark within creation. It shows that these kelipot are predominantly characterized by the ego and ego-based thought, such as the ontological, totalizing thought that belongs to the Nazi Weltanschauung. Next, the paper explains Rabbi Shapira's account of evil in terms of Chasidic thought. Here Rabbi Shapira draws upon ancient sources to show that the radical evil of the Nazis lies in an attempt to destroy the God of Abraham—that is, the divine spark that constitutes the human image—by annihilating the Chosen of God. Drawing on Rabbi Shapira's invocation of talmudic and mystical teaching, the paper then shows that evil during and after the Holocaust lies in a retreat of the Divine in the face of (1) an assault upon His witnesses and (2) a post-Holocaust turning away from that assault on the part of many scholars, thinkers, intellectuals, and other leaders. Finally, the paper elaborates on how what might be deemed a Chasidic "theodicy" actually undermines theodicy by placing the power of evil in human hands, not in divine providence.