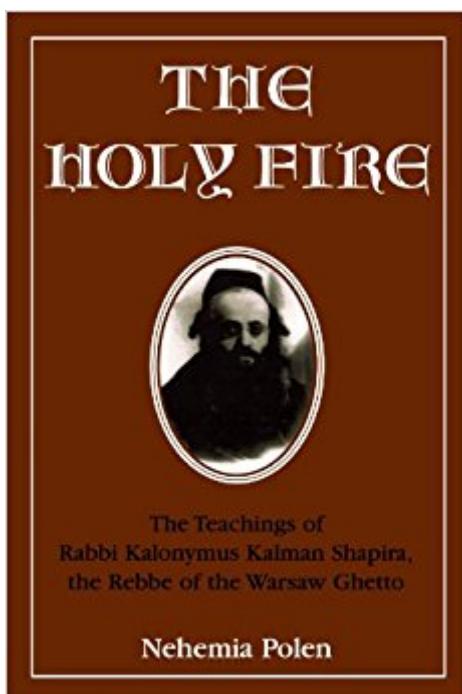


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# The Holy Fire: The Teachings Of Rabbi Kalonymus Kalman Shapira, The Rebbe Of The Warsaw Ghetto



## **Synopsis**

The Holy Fire: The Teachings of Rabbi Kalonymus Kalman Shapira, the Rebbe of the Warsaw Ghetto is a journey into the mind and spirit of a sublime hasidic master in his moments of joy and tranquillity, and later, in his time of personal and communal catastrophe. The reader takes a voyage into the rich and variegated world of twentieth-century Hasidism in Poland, a world destroyed by the Holocaust. This is a volume inspired by a deeply sensitive and poetic individual of faith who is grappling with an unfolding disaster. While the Holocaust has engendered a voluminous body of religious and philosophical writings attempting to probe the issues this unfathomable period raises in all their enormity, virtually all were written after the war, when a modicum of distance and reflection is possible. Contemporaneous diaries and chronicles written as the events were happening concentrate on the descriptive accounts of the horrors. The Holy Fire, however, engages a sustained theological reflection and stands alone as an extended religious response from within the heart of darkness itself while the catastrophe takes place, and is, for this reason, an extraordinary document and an astonishing personal achievement.

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## **Customer Reviews**

Nehemia Polen has written a book of major importance. The first detailed study of the teachings of Rabbi Kalonymus Kalman Shapira, the Rebbe of the Warsaw Ghetto, this work illuminates as few others have done the real issues of faith and doubt during the Shoah. Unlike most of the ruminations about the meaning of the Holocaust for Jewish belief that have been written after the event by those who were not there, the teachings of Rabbi Shapira emerged from, and were shaped

by, the daily reality of ghetto life. Their power and authenticity are overwhelming. Polen has done a wonderful job of deciphering them and making them available to a contemporary audience.

Everyone interested in Jewish thought during and after the Holocaust should read this book.

(Steven T. Katz, Cornell University)This is not a book about the Holocaust or hasidism. Contrary to the subtitle, it is not even a book about the final writings of one of the gedolim, or great ones of our generation. The Holy Fire is primarily a manual on comprehending evil from within God. And that makes it an invaluable tool for anyone interested in Jewish spiritual renewal. (Lawrence Kushner Tikkun)Written with fear and in anguish by an exceptionally promising young scholar, Rabbi Nehemia Polen's volume about one of the most inspired hasidic masters during the Holocaust deserves to be studied and shared by theologians and secular readers alike. (Elie Wiesel)

The Holy Fire: The Teachings of Rabbi Kalonymus Kalman Shapira, the Rebbe of the Warsaw Ghetto is a journey into the mind and spirit of a sublime hasidic master in his moments of joy and tranquillity, and later, in his time of personal and communal catastrophe. The reader takes a voyage into the rich and variegated world of twentieth-century Hasidism in Poland, a world destroyed by the Holocaust. This is a volume inspired by a deeply sensitive and poetic individual of faith who is grappling with an unfolding disaster. While the Holocaust has engendered a voluminous body of religious and philosophical writings attempting to probe the issues this unfathomable period raises in all their enormity, virtually all were written after the war, when a modicum of distance and reflection is possible. Contemporaneous diaries and chronicles written as the events were happening concentrate on the descriptive accounts of the horrors. The Holy Fire, however, engages a sustained theological reflection and stands alone as an extended religious response from within the heart of darkness itself while the catastrophe takes place, and is, for this reason, an extraordinary document and an astonishing personal achievement. In The Holy Fire, Rabbi Nehemia Polen analyzes the social and spiritual anguish of war-besieged Warsaw and of Eastern Europe's last hasidic master. Polen's research articulates Rabbi Shapira's realization that the theological garment, however holy and true, is acknowledged as inadequate for understanding the atrocities with which he is confronted. Faith, the author suggests, involves a mystical, participatory relationship with God, leaving no room for a realm isolated from divinity. Human will, power, mind, and heart are all gifts from God and are all surrendered fully to Him. In this consciousness, one arrives at a view of the world beyond judgment, beyond evaluation, beyond criticism or the need for explanation. The world simply is; it is the way it must be. Such a vision is achieved by a surrender of every particle of autonomous ego, a total submergence of the self and the mind in the enveloping

waters of divine being. While the world crumbles around him, disassembled piece by piece, and his soul is simultaneously cut to the marrow by the inexorable progression of events, Rabbi Shapira continues to inject his living, unyielding, and edifying presence and occasions the birth of a document among the falling ruins. --This text refers to the Hardcover edition.

I read this book before I bought it and understood that I wanted to have it and re-read it many times.

THis is a superb presentation of one of the Chassidic giants. It is a must read.

Extended PhD of Rabbi Nechemia Polen, who teaches at Hebrew College. great insight into the Aish Kodesh.

I had long wanted to learn more about Rabbi Shapira. The book deals mostly with the last years of his life in the Warsaw Ghetto, and the evolution in his theological and mystical thinking as he tried to answer the question: how to maintain Jewish faith and practice in a situation that feels hopeless and where G-d has not intervened to save you? You may or may not agree with Rabbi Shapira's answers to this question. If I understand the book correctly, Rabbi Shapira came to believe that if grace would not descend from above -- G-d was withholding his presence from the trapped Jews of Warsaw for reasons not known to human beings -- then human beings should continue to reach upward to G-d and lead lives of holiness, trusting that we are part of G-d and can never be taken from G-d's presence. I gave the book four stars instead of five only because in some parts the author assumes that the reader has a familiarity with Hasidism that is true of me, but will not be the case with all readers. But the book is clearly and lucidly written, and one need not be a scholar to comprehend it. I recommend reading the book to see how his thought evolved to that point. I plan to re-read it. I also plan to buy his spiritual diary that is on sale at .

There are two separate issues to discuss in this review: Polen's book, and Rabbi Shapira himself. Let me start with the former. Polen has really done a superior job with the material here. She has taken the last book written by Rabbi Shapira--the collection of his weekly "sermons" and his private notes that he compiled while serving as Rabbi in the Warsaw Ghetto--and she has made the contents comprehensible to a general audience. Rather than following Shapira's text chronologically, Polen has mined the work and extracted six central themes. She has devoted a chapter to each of these themes, and then discussed the development of each theme in its own

chapter. This type of organization accomplishes two important pedagogical goals: firstly, it enables readers to appreciate, in detail, the specific roots of Shapira's Jewish concerns and leanings. Polen brings into her discussion of Shapira's text, passages from Talmud, historical information about European Judaism (Hasidism, in particular), etc. Secondly, distilling each theme and tracing his own developing orientation toward it enables the reader to gain what I can only call a sense of awe regarding Shapira's increasing spiritual sophistication and maturity as his own life and the lives of those around him become more and more intolerable. And this brings me to the second aspect of what I want to write about here: the character of Shapira himself. It is very easy to approach a work like this from an intellectual perspective--the material is rich with historical information, it has a certain puzzle-like quality typical of Rabbinic writings that invites all sorts of back-engineering investigations, and it is painful. But Shapira himself did not approach things from any type of intellectual distance--he did not indulge in that kind of denial strategy. Instead, he fully acknowledged the evil and the agony occurring around him, and he--by some extraordinary spiritual means--found a way to make sense of it. Or something even beyond sense. He found a way to see everything that was happening as an expression of the Divine will, even while that same Divine Being was weeping with Israel. Shapira not only refused to give up on serving the people around him, but he refused to give up on Judaism, on the covenant between Israel and God, and he refused to give up on God. It is so shocking to come across such a person--even through the indirect medium of the pages of his book--that one is somewhat stunned at first. Is holiness of this kind really possible on earth? And especially in such dire surroundings? Simply hearing about him could make you think that he was crazy. But reading his work does away with such a notion very quickly, as his words show him to be lucid, compassionate, of the highest intelligence and education, and fully aware of the challenges--internal and external--being faced by everyone in the ghetto. Thanks to Polen's analysis, we can trace the progress of the spiritual reflection, over the course of three+ years, that enabled Rabbi Shapira to arrive at his rarified understanding of the events that he was living through and at his unshakeable faith in the God of Israel.

This account, found in the Warsaw Ghetto, was written under the extreme deprivations and in the midst of the horrors of life under Nazi imprisonment and murder of Jews that Nehemia Polen experienced. As a Rabbi, he chose to seek and communicate paths to survival of the soul while one's physical life is being ravaged. But this book is more than a polemic; it is a transcendence beyond suffering evils and into the holy; its compilation of Polen writings, some no doubt spoken to his fellow sufferers, that reach for - and in mounting intensity - achieve living beyond pain and

deprivation. While it is a manuscript to be marveled at, especially for those who are familiar with the history of the Warsaw Ghetto, it is also a meditation on how to rise above and remain human through adversity of a modern sort. Although a slight volume, it will challenge the reader to think; for those who are familiar with Judaism that thinking will probably be easier to access. But anyone, if he/she takes the time to contemplate the contents, will find it illuminating. Clearly, a hidden jewel among the ashes of the Ghetto.

This book traces the spiritual journey of a Hasidic rebbe during the years between the Nazi invasion of Poland and the destruction of the Warsaw ghetto. At first, Rabbi Shapira thought the Nazi invasion was no different from other persecutions, and suggested that perhaps Jews were being punished for something. But by 1942, he realized that "there has never been anything like [Nazism]" (p. 133) and abandoned the "punishment for sin" view of anti-Semitism. Instead, he admitted that the Holocaust was essentially incomprehensible. And at the start of the Nazi occupation, Rabbi Shapira urged his followers to trust in Divine intervention and in possible Messianic deliverance - but later on, he dropped this idea as well. This book was interesting not just because of it describes the evolution of Shapira's theology, but also as a description of the Nazi persecution. It is easy to forget that the Nazis sought not just to destroy our bodies but our souls as well, by doing their best to prevent the free exercise of Judaism.

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