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Cultivating Mindfulness. Deepening Connection. Enlivening Jewish Life.

A Teaching for a Challenge to Faith

Parashat Pinchas 5740/1940, from *Esh Kodesh* of R. Kalonymus Kalmish Shapira of Piaseczno (and the Warsaw Ghetto)

Rabbi Shapira, bereft of his only son, daughter-in-law and sister-in-law, killed in aerial bombings during the invasion of Poland in 1939, was soon after interned in the Warsaw Ghetto. There he continued to serve as rabbi and *rebbe*, sustaining ongoing connection to traditional religious practice, and providing necessary spiritual sustenance. In this lesson, he turns his attention to upholding the inner strength of his students and followers in the face of oppression. His concern is to 1) clarify the role of a leader in a time of crisis; 2) identify that which will undermine faith in the possibility of redemption, of liberation, and life.

He centers his teaching on a passage from the Talmud, where Rabbi Eleazar provides instruction to his students as to how to merit “paths of life so that we might merit through them life of the ‘world-to-come’”. The Piaseczner frames his teaching in the context of this teaching immediately before Rabbi Eleazar’s death. He sees the students’ question as grounded in their concern for how they will serve as leaders following his lead. This, of course, is the issue facing Moses as he anticipates his demise before the People enter the Land.

In this context, Rabbi Eleazar rejects the traditional path of Torah study as the way to gain a life in the world-to-come, to focus instead on Rabbi Eleazar’s caution against allowing one’s children (and also oneself) from “speculation (or, “meditation”; ההגיון)”. Rashi understands this to mean tiresome study of Bible, or children’s prattle. The Piaseczner sees this as something more serious and challenging.

He gives voice to what such inquiry, speculation about the future, sounds like in his community, suffering in the cruel and unprecedented conditions of the Ghetto: “‘Who knows how long this will last?’; ‘Who knows if we can bear all this?’ and the like”. Such “speculation” – trying to plot out the future, plan for the unknown, imagine what could happen next – is an invitation to the *yetzer hara*. The work of the *yetzer hara* is to “weaken the knees”, to cause us to falter and flag in the midst of our lives. His response:

First, the simple message was for them to investigate, and then make manifest to their students that our speculative capacity is meaningless, and no one – through speculation – can know what will happen in the future. Therefore, they will work on themselves. Second, this was to teach



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that when the leader is deeply connected to faith, then their students – connected to them – will be influenced to let go of inquiry and speculation, holding fast to faith, through the portion of their master which entered them.

Let go of trying to suss out the future. Pay attention to what is true now. Ground yourself in the fact of your aliveness in this moment, and your capacity to do the next thing. Allow this to become the ground of faith: that it will be possible to meet the challenge of this moment, and whatever comes next. Allow your faith to inspire others, to enter their minds and hearts.

This moment in our history is surely unlike that of the Nazis, of the predations of genocide, of inhumanity on such a large scale. But, it is surely one of uncertainty, of the awareness that the greatness of our democratic institutions may not be able to withstand communal division. We are witness to violence of all sorts; to deceit and hypocrisy; to the inability – and unwillingness – to hear the other out. It is enough for our worst fears to spin out of control; for “speculation” about what “they” will do; about our inability to control the future. That “speculation” is debilitating. Now is the time for all of us to seek to be “leaders”, to ground ourselves in faith: in this moment; in our communities; in our institutions; in our capacity to build a community in which all are valued, all are honored, all are embraced as finite manifestations of the infinite One, and so deserving of love. We may then help to bring that faith into the hearts of others. And, then, may we all be able to act on that faith.

[See Full Esh Kodesh Text](#)