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Twentieth-Century Hasidic-Zionist Homiletics: The Case of Netivot Shalom by “the Rebbe Painter”, Avraham Ya’akov Shapira of Drohobych

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Abstract: Much has been written about the theological, cultural, and social foundations of the Zionist movement and its historical development. While scholars have discussed the immigration of the first Hasidim to the Land of Israel in the late eighteenth century, little attention has been paid to the Hasidic leaders who were active in Mandatory Palestine between the two World Wars, some of whom had a positive attitude toward Zionism. My article addresses this scholarly gap and focuses on one figure: the Rebbe painter (Admor ha-Tsayar) Avraham Yaakov Shapira (1886–1962) of the Drohobych dynasty. In this first academic study examining his sermon book *Netivot Shalom*, I will show how he coherently used the Hasidic homiletic style, as well as textual and oral traditions, to reinforce a commitment to the settlement of Zion and cultivate a positive attitude toward the Jewish people, including the secular settlers. Following in his father’s footsteps, he fervently taught that the way to the hearts of secular settlers was not through rebuke, but through peace, shared mission, and unity. He viewed the activists’ approach to settling Zion as an act of divine action revealing the “new Torah”, and saw their success as a miracle manifested through nature.

Keywords: Hasidism; Zionism; messianism; land of Israel; peace; homiletical writings; natural revelation; activism; redemption; Jewish Arab conflict in Palestine



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1. Introduction

Many scholars have examined the theological, cultural, and social basis of the Zionist movement and its historical development. Yet while the literature discusses the immigration of the first Hasidim to the Land of Israel in the late eighteenth century (Assaf 1996; Etkes 2013; Glazer et al. 2020, pp. 102–16; Mayse 2020), little attention has been paid to Hasidic leaders active in Mandatory Palestine between the two World Wars, some of whom adopted a positive approach to Zionism.¹

My article will address this scholarly lacuna, focusing on one figure: the Rebbe painter (the *Admor ha-Tsayar*), Avraham Ya’akov Shapira (1886–1962), of the Drohobych dynasty.² While scholars disagree regarding the messianic character of early Hasidism,³ messianism became an acute theological and social topic for figures such as Shapira during the period of national revival. In this first academic study to examine his book of sermons, *Netivot Shalom*, I will demonstrate how he coherently used the Hasidic homiletical style, as well as textual and oral traditions, to enhance the commitment to settling Zion and cultivate a positive approach toward the Jewish people, including secular settlers.

Avraham Ya’akov Shapira, born in Sadigura to Rebbe Haim Meir Yeḥiel and Batsheva, daughter of Rebbe R. Yitzchak of Bahush, later moved with his father to Drohobych and Vienna, finally arriving in Mandatory Palestine in 1922. Uncommonly for a Hasidic rebbe, at the age of 63, after losing his wife, he devoted himself to painting. Shapira’s son, the well-known Israeli poet Sh. Shalom, penned a memoir that includes accounts of his father’s life, his immigration to the Land of Israel, and how he later participated in the establishment of Kefar Hasidim (founded by Shapira’s relative, the Rebbe of Kohzhnitz).

In the early years of the Zionist movement, many Hasidic leaders treated Zionism with suspicion, and some penned harsh polemics against it (Alfasi 2010, p. 70).⁴ However, this opposition was far from consolidated. Indeed, some Hasidic figures supported the settlement of the Land of Israel. For example, Rabbi Mordechai Ashkenazi, a prominent figure in Gur Hasidism, composed the book *Ge'ulat Israel* and received many approbations for it (Alfasi 2010, p. 77).⁵ Another example is the work under discussion here, *Netivot shalom*, which stresses the irony of the need to prove the importance of settling the Land of Israel and contradicts its opponents. Especially revealing in this context is the fact that R. Abraham Isaac HaCohen Kook wrote an approbation for Shapira's book, praising the author's use of the lore he inherited from his ancestor, R. Yisrael of Ruzhin, the Rebbe of Sadigura, as well as his love of holiness, Zion, and the Jewish people (*kelal Yisrael*).⁶

This book provides a rich treasury of material for exploring a largely overlooked cultural chapter in the history of Hasidism in the Land of Israel. Since the dissolution of R. Yaakov Shapira's court, which did not continue as a distinctive Hasidic court under his descendants, one may argue that this is evidence of the marginal impact of his ideas. However, I suggest that the integration of his family members into the religious Zionist community was actually part of his ethos. Through their active participation in leading roles within this social movement, his ideas continued to manifest in the social reality. Therefore, retrieving the ethos from his sermons can help us uncover the spiritual motives behind this integration. The analysis herein will shed new light on the multifaceted response of twentieth-century Hasidic leaders to contemporary controversies concerning Zionism and modernity in the Land of Israel between the two World Wars.

Netivot Shalom was published in two parts. The first, a commentary on the *Book of Genesis*, was published in Jerusalem in 1928. The second, on *Exodus*, appeared in the same city two years later, dedicated to the "martyrs, the slaughtered, and the murdered, victims of Hebron and Safed, Jerusalem and the settlements who sanctified the heavens there for generations" (expressing horror at the riots of 1929). The work includes explicit quotes from midrashim, biblical commentators (Rashi, Ibn Ezra, *Or haḥaim*), Medieval and early modern sources (Maimonides *Hilkhot teshuva*), kabbalistic (Zohar, *Shnei luḥot habrit*, *Or haḥaim*) and Hasidic works (*Kedushat Levi*, *'avodat Yisrael* by the Magid of Koznitz), as well as oral Hasidic traditions and hagiographies.⁷ In terms of cultural climate and style, *Netivot Shalom* can be compared to a later work, *Sefer ohalei Ya'akov* by the Zionist Hasidic leader Rabbi Ya'akov Friedman of Husiatyn-Tel Aviv (Bohush 1879–Tel Aviv 1957), which includes homilies from the period of World War II and emphasizes the importance of peace within the nation.⁸ Friedman also quotes extensively from *Or haḥaim*, Hasidic works and statements made by members of the Ruzhin dynasty. His words reveal a desire to avoid creating a fissure between the religious and secular, and concern over the divisions emerging among the people:

"The reason that they avoided ascending [to the Land of Israel] with Ezra [. . .] was that they were lazy, and to calm their conscience they said that the end has not yet come; and we also saw many ultra-orthodox leaders making such a mistake in recent decades, not encouraging *aliya* [to the Land of Israel] when there was a good opportunity for it. [. . .]; division is the reason for the exile (Yoma 9) and peace and unity constitute the *tikun* (repair)." (Friedman 2006, Vayetze, p. 57)

Thus, this homily, as the remainder of the work, sharply criticizes those who refrained from moving to the Land of Israel, as well as highlights the importance of unity as a condition for redemption.⁹

2. *Netivot Shalom*: The Homily as Part of the Dynastic Legacy

One of the central foundations of Hasidism is the dynastic perspective and numerous references to the fathers of the dynasty (Sagiv 2014; Brown 2018). This is evident in the perception of continuity between Shapira and his father, Ḥaim Meir Yeḥiel, which is also noted in Abraham Isaac HaCohen Kook's approbation. Indeed, as Kook notes, "Interwoven

into the holy of holiest statements are [those of] his grandfather, the holy one Israel of Ruzhin, the memory of the saint and holy one is a blessing for the world to come, and his son, the saint our teacher Rabbi A. Y., may the memory of the saint be a blessing, of Sadigora" (Shapira 1928, p. 1). Likewise, Kook praises the author for his love of Zion and unity of the Jewish people, noting that *Netivot Shalom* comprises "short and valuable homilies on each and every weekly Torah portion [. . .] paved with love of the Torah and piety and filled with love of the holy, love of Zion and Jerusalem, and love of the entire Jewish nation, waving the banner of peace and unity between all parts of Israel as one nation in the land". Shapira's worldview was clearly molded not only by the legacy of his dynastic predecessors but by the words and actions of his father, including the practical arrangements he made to take his family to the Land of Israel. Indeed, Shapira concludes the introduction to his book with an autobiographical statement, noting that he learned about love of the Jewish people and settling the land from his father: "And they influenced me to relinquish all my expectations and hopes in the exile and to come to settle the Land of Israel and to join all those who lament its destruction and hope to see it [rebuilt] soon in our days" (Shapira 1928, pp. 2–3).

Shapira's son, Sh. Shalom, also describes the major role played by his grandfather, the father of the dynasty, Rabbi Israel of Ruzhin:

The mother of my father's father, Rabbanit Hadassah Feygele, who came to the Land of Israel with us and died in Jerusalem aged near 100, was the granddaughter of the Admor of Ruzhin [. . .] and she told us [. . .] that when the Admor of Ruzhin arrived in Sadigora he did not become an Austrian citizen but purchased a Turkish travel permit, upon which was written "citizen of Jerusalem". Since then, all members of the family are citizens of Jerusalem. And the son of that same Hadassah Feygele was my grandfather, of blessed memory, my father's father, the Admor of Ruzhin, Rabbi Haim Meir Yehiel Shapira, who burned with the fire of his love for Zion, and the light of this fire was a brand for all those who approached him and went up with him to Zion. (Shalom 1946, pp. 5–6)

This memory, which is supplemented by recollections of his parents, depicts the entire dynasty, including a "dynastic matriarch", as lovers of Zion. We can also discern the importance of the dynastic family in establishing a Hasidic-Zionist message in the childhood memory of his parents with which Sh. Shalom begins his memoirs, in which he describes the songs and lullabies he heard as a child. Indeed, these included, "By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down, yea, we wept, when we remembered Zion" (Psalm 137:1), the first song his father taught him, and, "In the middle of the way wallows the rose with red eyes [. . .], "Please, have mercy on me, in your hand carry me to Eden my garden". As he notes, "This is the lullaby that my mother sang to me and my brothers and two sisters. And I know that the rose languishing in the middle of the way, this is Knesset Israel,¹⁰ and that 'Please, have mercy on me, in your hands carry me'—this is towards the nations of the world, and Eden my garden is the Land of Israel" (Shalom 1946, pp. 5–6).

The figure of Shalom's grandfather, Haim Meir Yehiel, reappears also at the end of the book when the author sketches the ideal of the tzaddik as redeeming the *Shekhinah* (divine presence), expressed in total devotion to and sacrifice for the Land of Israel. In his opinion, his father, in whose memory he testifies that he wrote the book, was an example of this ideal (Shalom 1946, p. 47).

The homilies of *Netivot Shalom* are a direct development of the Zionist-Hasidic seed planted by Shapira's father. Devotion to the land of Israel, and the love and unity of the Jewish people constitute the axes around which the entire book revolves and are consistently interwoven into all its homilies, connecting with the centrality of the Hasidic leader and words of ethical reproach.¹¹ In the following sections, I explore various aspects of Shapira's acute messianic perspective, which demands human activity and exposes divine providence and God's presence in history.¹²

3. “A New Instruction Shall Go Forth from Me”: Activism as Divine Revelation and the Extended Process of Redemption

Shapira opens his book by describing the virtues of the Land of Israel.¹³ For this purpose, he quotes the introduction to *Sifre* on the portion of *Re'eh*: the tale of Rabbi Elazar ben Shamu'a and Rabbi Yoḥanan the shoemaker, who left the land of Israel, regretted their decision, and decided to turn back:

They arrived at Tyre and remembered the Land of Israel, raised up their eyes and tears flowed, and they tore their clothes and read this biblical verse: ‘And ye shall possess it, and dwell therein. And ye shall observe to do all the statutes’ [Deuteronomy 11:31–32]. They said that dwelling in the land of Israel is equal to all the commandments of the Torah.

This story emphasizes the importance of dwelling in the Land of Israel, in particular, for anyone who is uncertain (Shapira 1928, p. 1). Shapira uses this tale to emphasize that while leaving the Land of Israel is permitted, people might deduce from their departure that the commandment to dwell in the Land of Israel is not included in the 613 commandments. Likewise, he adds that this is not the only such example; rather relatedly is to support this opinion and arouse hearts to cling to the land and overcome all the difficulties and torments involved in living there (Shapira 1928, p. 2).

In fact, he considers the need to prove that living in the Land of Israel as a commandment is absurd, the result of the work of demonic powers. In this respect, he quotes his father:

And my father, the lord teacher and Rabbi, may the memory of the righteous be a blessing, used to say that the two commandments, the love of Israel and the settling of the Land of Israel, are equal to the whole Torah [. . .] and the Devil (s"m) in his tricks overturned these in the minds of some people, including God-fearing and flawless people, [so these commandments became] prohibitions in order to interrupt the steps of redemption. And with deep sorrow, we need to look for (Torah) sayings and facts that permit them. (Shapira 1928, p. 3)

We hear in these words a clear criticism of the divides that beset contemporaneous Jewry and objections to the Zionist endeavor, which Shapira regards as simply ridiculous. Therefore, he feels a need to adopt a rhetoric that contradicts anti-Zionist homilies: ascribing the opposition to an external, demonic element that plants thoughts without foundation. To wave the double banner of love of the Jewish people and settling the Land of Israel, it is necessary to tackle this demonic element.

Apart from propaganda in favor of settling the Land of Israel, he suggests an ideological-theological eschatological framework that can explain history and human activity as part of a process of redemption in which God is involved and revealed in human acts. As the source for this theological framework, he cites a homily by Rabbi Israel of Ruzhin on the verse “for instruction shall go forth from Me” (Isaiah 51:4) and the contradiction between it and the idea that “God will never alter the divine law or exchange it for another” (from the *Yigdal* prayer):

I saw in the writings in my possession, from the late, honored, holy Rabbi of Ruzhin, my grandfather, of blessed memory [...] in these words: it is said “and a new instruction shall go forth from me” [Isaiah 51:4]. And this is difficult (to understand) because it also written “the Lord will not change nor covert his law”.¹⁴ But truthfully the Torah we were given includes stories about the holy patriarchs, about Israel, and Esau, and Laban, and what the Blessed Holy One did since then until now is not written. (Shapira 1928, pp. 2–3)

Shapira asks how it is possible that a new Torah and commandments will be given, contradicting the idea that God will never change His law. The answer views history as the revelation of a new Torah. Human acts that were not written in the Torah had not “yet” been written, and they are all part of a process of gradual and long redemption.

And this is what the scripture meant in saying “a new Torah will go forth from Me” and “it shall be said of Jacob and of Israel, what hath God wrought” [Numbers 23:23]. “From me”, meaning from what I have accomplished until now. And in my humble opinion, in his holy words he, of blessed memory, [meant] that “the Torah that will go forth from me”, “that will be said of Jacob what has God wrought from then until now” is the Torah of the days called the days of the Messiah [...] and all human deeds that seem plain are part of the Messiah’s arrival, may he come soon, and we must reveal in them the work of God in this direction, and, as the sages said, the redemption of Israel will come gradually. (Shapira 1928, pp. 2–3)

Thus, bringing about the redemption is the revelation of a new Torah (instruction).

4. The Vision of Redemption and the Attitude to Arabs in the Land of Israel

Jewish settlement of the Land of Israel in the twentieth century elicited hostile responses from the Arab residents. Accordingly, when consolidating a messianic vision, thinkers necessarily confronted this issue.¹⁵ For example, while various religious Zionist leaders saw the Arabs as the enemy, the biblical Ishmael, Shapira’s cousin, Yehoshua Shapira, “the Rebbe pioneer”, a prominent leader in the Mizrahi movement, saw peace with the Arabs as part of the vision of redemption and expressed explicitly pacifist attitudes (Baruchi 2015, pp. 47–49; Tzoreff 2018). Similarly, Shapira cites midrashim concerning the nations of the world to create a Zionist message that expresses an innovative, positive attitude to the local Arabs: a miracle will enable the populations to coexist peacefully. Such an attitude diverges from the general line of Hasidic homiletical literature, according to Marcin Wodziński and Wojciech Tworek: “Where gentiles are mentioned in the sermon, they are typically described in terms of exclusivist stereotypes that have been passed down from rabbinical and kabbalistic traditions depicting the latter as manifestations of demonic husks devoid of the basic human soul” (Wodziński and Wojciech 2020, p. 57). Shapira’s approach appears to accord with the divergent attitudes expressed by Chabad Hasidism regarding the nations that will rise in the messianic age (Wodziński and Wojciech 2020, p. 45; Tworek 2019, pp. 74–79).

Shapira first tackles this issue in the first weekly reading of the book of Genesis, noting that “the purpose of the Torah is connected to the land of Israel”. He relies on a homily cited in Rashi’s commentary in the name of Rabbi Isaac: the Torah opens with the words, “In the beginning” rather than with the first commandment in order to contradict the nations’ efforts to undermine Israel’s right to inherit the land: “For should the peoples of the world say to Israel, ‘You are robbers, because you took by force the lands of the seven nations of Canaan,’ Israel may reply to them, ‘All the earth belongs to the Holy One, blessed be He; He created it and gave it to whom He pleased’” (Shapira 1928, p. 5).¹⁶ Shapira considers this claim a “legal weapon” that grants Israel the right to the land “with the agreement of the nations”, echoing the emerging political Zionism, which sought to obtain the agreement of the United Nations. Yet at the same time Israel’s weapon is not a real army and sword but rather prayer:

“For I trust not in my bow, neither can my sword save me” [Psalm 44:7] but rather my sword—this is prayer—and my request—this is supplication [. . .] and because Moses’ hands make war [. . .] only to say to you that when Israel looked upwards and made themselves a servant to their father in heaven, they would win. (Shapira 1928, p. 6)

Accordingly, the Zionist message concerning the return of the people to its land at the beginning of the book, a foundation of the Torah, and the legal justification for this return, expresses an echo of national, political Zionist sensitivity yet does not contradict the simple religious message of worshipping God through prayer. Indeed, the two are closely interwoven.

However, the obligation to pray does not negate the need for practical Zionist efforts. For example, in the portion *Haye Sara*, the homily discussing Abraham's purchase of a burial plot emphasizes the obligation to redeem lands: "For also in the time of the exile it is a mitzvah to redeem the land of the Land of Israel fully with money" (Shapira 1928, p. 19). This idea is further developed in the homily for the portion of *Vayishlah*. There Shapira builds upon the stratagems that Jacob employed prior to meeting Esau—according to the midrash: gifts, war, and prayer—as relevant to his period (Shapira 1928, p. 29).¹⁷ He cites evidence from the Zohar that the passive and submissive approach to redemption is a demonic element, and that one of the signs of the redemption is terminating this approach and embarking on activities to bring about the redemption even before its time:

The Holy Zohar explicates "and he wrestled (*ve-yea'vek*)" [Genesis 32:25] is from the root of the word dust (*avak*),¹⁸ that this dust and contemptibility dominates the spirit of the nation of Israel. And in my humble opinion this is the reason preventing the redemption of the land and the fulfillment the commandment to settle the Land of Israel [. . .]; and in their eyes it seems that the commandment is to do nothing and in this way he [Samael] entraps them. (Shapira 1928, p. 29)

The political, legal message noted above is here combined with a depiction of the agreement of the nations:

And we merited all these allusions, thank God, to see in our days the awakening from below of the future redemption, to come soon in our days, that all the kingdoms admitted the right of the Jewish people to the Land of Israel, and it is, according to the Admor, may the memory of the righteous be a blessing, the expression of Esau's thanks for the blessings. (Shapira 1928, p. 30)

Rabbi Israel Friedman imparted a similar message regarding the ultra-Orthodox refusal to leave for the land of Israel as an act of the devil.¹⁹

Finally, the acts of the tribe of Judah and Nahshon ben Aminadav, jumping into the Reed Sea, set a precedent of that justified the salvation of Israel, as opposed to the drowning of the Egyptians: "And indeed, there is another thing, that it is in His power to show the difference between these ones and these ones and to quiet the complaint; and Nahshon's jump is the great awakening, to leave the 49 gates of exile and to go up in self-sacrifice to our holy land" (Shapira 1928, p. 45). Just as those who left Egypt desired redemption, so too leaving for the Land of Israel in his period, despite the difficulties, articulates a desire that will cause the Jewish people to merit redemption. It creates an analogy between the drowning of the Egyptians and the central difficulty in the birth pangs of the Messiah, which is rooted in the national battle with the Arabs and the British in the Land of Israel:

Since the main suffering of the Messiah's arrival and the obstacle for redemption is that other nations are residing in our land, and how will they be eliminated for our sake [. . .] there will be no need to eliminate the people that reside in the land, rather the redemption of Israel will inspire blessings unto them as well. (Shapira 1928, p. 44)

He suggests the following dialectic: if redemption will occur when Israel does not merit it, the miracles will take place secretly and the Messiah will be poor and ride on an ass, meaning, not with victory trumpets: "And there will be no need to lose the nation dwelling in the land, rather the redemption of Israel will also inspire them with its blessing" (Shapira 1928, p. 44). The resolution of the conflict will be a divine blessing of affluence for the peoples. He draws support for this idea from the Zohar, kabbalistic works, and *Or haChaim* (albeit without clarifying his exact sources).

5. Humility, Reproach, and Unity in the Land of Israel as a Condition for Redemption

Unity and peace among the various segments of the Jewish people, in particular the inclusive attitude towards the secular, is a guiding principle in *Netivot Shalom* and

continues the educational legacy of Shapira's father. Notably, in the context of the well-known portrayal of the violent controversy between Sanz and Sadigura,²⁰ father and son both consistently wrote about the importance of love, peace, and unity among the Jewish people.

Although the homily for the portion of *Noah* ostensibly opens with a classic Hasidic topic (humility and reproach, topics with which Hasidic thinkers were concerned from the beginning of the eighteenth century),²¹ unconnected to national unity and the land of Israel, Shapira includes here a demand for reproach that will not detract from the unity of Jewish people.

This homily combines a classic Hasidic source, *Sefer yosher divrei emet* by Rabbi Meshulam Feibush in the name of the Maggid of Złoczów, regarding the importance of humility, and quotations from the Zohar and the sages, as well as a literary tradition regarding an early Hasidic preacher (Shapira 1928, p. 9). However, surprisingly, Shapira concludes the homily by connecting these classic messages with the return to Zion—hinting at the disagreements and the hostile attitude to the “free” Zionists. He clarifies the words of the *Zohar hadash* regarding Noah, according to which the redemption depends on “uniting into one for the act of repentance”, on the importance of connection, and reminds his readers that the destruction of the Temple was caused by baseless hatred (Shapira 1928, pp. 10–11). This recalls Rabbi Kook's attitude: that sinners bring the redemption closer by participating in the redemption of the land.²² The very fact of the return to the land testified to the beginning of a process of repentance, and the path to complete it necessitates that the Tzadikim and Hasidim also join this endeavor. This enabled the sinners to open their hearts to repentance and the ways of the Torah. This idea recurs on other occasions (see for example, Shapira 1928, p. 27).

Similarly, the end of the homily on the portion of *Toldot*, ostensibly concerning a classic Hasidic topic, also connects to the land and national unity. The main part of the homily explains why Jacob stole the blessings by outlining the principles of Hasidism in the name of the Baal Shem Tov, among them the obligation to speak positively about Israel and the Tzaddik's obligation to connect with wickedness in order to raise up the sparks (Shapira 1928, p. 24). It also notes that the intention of receiving the blessings was to bring plenty to the world and not for personal interest. However, here too, at the end of the homily, Shapira explains that Abraham's blessing in receiving the land is dependent upon peace, because conflict is Esau's blessing—“on your sword you shall live”—while receiving plenty depends on peace. These things connect to the clear and relevant messianic message:

And they, of blessed memory, said that before the redemption Elijah will come to make peace in the world, and to return the heart of the fathers to the sons and the hearts of the sons to the fathers, and not to strike the land with excommunication and ostracism, but rather to bring close the distant under the wings of the divine presence. (Shapira 1928, pp. 25–26)

6. Understanding and Revelation, an Acute Call for a National-Zionist Messianic Consciousness

Shapira's words concerning the portion of *Lekh Lekha* continue the active messianic line, intensifying it. First, he determines that Abraham's desire to go to the Land of Israel preceded the divine command in the same way that the patriarch grasped the remainder of the Torah's commandments via his “internal understanding.” Inspired by the midrash, Hasidic literature molded the character of Abraham as a platform to discuss the internal source of the commandments.²³ In addition, Shapira sees the famine that Abraham met upon his arrival as a trial similar to contemporaneous challenges faced by “many Jews in our time upon arrival in the land” (Shapira 1928, p. 11). Until this point, the homily is relatively standard, although it adds an element of desire and internal understanding to Abraham's story. However, the next stage intensifies the value of the Land of Israel. First, he determines that “the status and existence of the city of Jerusalem in the hands of Israel depend in these years on piety and peace between man and his neighbor” (Shapira 1928, p. 11). Here

he again connects the principle that we noted vis-à-vis the previous homily: repentance and piety are intertwined and merge with the unity of Israel. He reads the midrash about master of the castle (*Bereshit Rabba* 39:1) as Abraham's difficulty in comprehending that God is master of the universe. This difficulty arose because outside the Land of Israel understanding is unclear. Accordingly, the verse "that I will show you" is a promise to Abraham that in the Land of Israel he will comprehend God clearly "in appearance." Shapira reinforces these words, in accordance with the tradition that prophecy outside the land of Israel is of a lower level and with reference to *Or haḥaim*, determining that outside Israel the holy spirit of Abraham heard, "And He said to Abraham", while in the Land of Israel he saw, "And Abraham saw" (Shapira 1928, p. 12). The support from *Or haḥaim* is also reinforced with proof from the Zohar.

Shapira subsequently continues the discussion about prophecy at the beginning of the portion of *Vayera*, where he discusses three levels of prophecy, relying on biblical commentators and Hasidic homilies: Moses' prophecy—knowledge; the prophecy of the patriarchs in the Land of Israel—sight; the prophecy of the forefathers outside the Land of Israel—hearing. Although he establishes that Moses was on a higher level than the patriarchs, in accordance with the bible and as supported by the sages and rabbinic tradition, at the end of the homily Shapira emphasizes that there was an element of a barrier in this prophecy—God hid His face—as opposed to the providence and revelation in the Land of Israel, which is direct, without a barrier:

And this is God's oath, that also in the time of hiddenness and exile, the windows are open towards Jerusalem because from there the revelation will penetrate with the providence of the creator, blessed be He, before the eyes of all. (Shapira 1928, p. 18)

Although Shapira is careful not to diverge from the view that Moses was the highest form of prophecy, he in fact undermines this, noting that his prophecy was beset by an element of the hidden, which does not occur in the Land of Israel, where God reveals His face.

Following the discussion of revelation in the Land of Israel in *Lekh lekha*, Shapira offers a timely, explicit, and sharp messianic national message. He discusses Midrash Pikkudei on the verse "Hearken O daughter, and consider" (Psalm 45:11) and the three ways that God addresses the people of Israel—daughter, sister, mother—viewing this as a conversation between God and Israel in three exiles—the exile in Egypt, the exile in Babylon, and the last exile. He sharpens his observation concerning the verse on which the homily relies vis-a-vis the last exile—"He continues to love them, to the level that He calls them *imi* (my mother), as it is said: 'Attend unto Me, O My people, and give ear unto Me, O My nation [le'umi]; for instruction shall go forth from Me'" ([Isaiah 51:4]). Shapira reads the word *le'umi* (my people) as *le'imi* (to my mother), drawing a parallel between *le'om* (people) and *le'em* (to my mother):

God, blessed be He, calls us to leave the exile, in the name of my motherand Rabbi Yitzhak reads the words "my mother" (*le'imi*) as denoting my people (*le'umi*),²⁴ [. . .] which means that we will unite and gather to be called by the name *le'om* [people] and people of God and not, God forbid, to assimilate with those nations, and that we should not make the mistake that it is possible to learn and fulfill the Torah also outside of Israel [. . .] and in the days of our third redemption, when the danger of assimilation and denial is greater, we will require the most lofty name, *imi* (my mother). (Shapira 1928, p. 18)

Shapira talks here about two dangers—assimilation and the idea that it is possible to keep the Torah outside the Land of Israel. To counteract these two dangers, he hears a close and urgent call from God to His people to join together, using the name *imi*. Here, Shapira adds a clear national consciousness to the discourse regarding the commandment of settling the Land of Israel, voicing an acute call:

In particular, in our time we [see] that the divine providence gave us the ability to redeem our holy land from the hands of strangers, how much more so that the obligation falls on each and every individual from Israel not to miss, God forbid, the opportunity and to use this great merit for the good of the people and the land. (Shapira 1928, p. 15)

7. Revelation in Nature and Divine Providence in the Land of Israel

Shapira distinguishes between Noah and Abraham: Noah needed divine aid via revealed miracles, as opposed to Abraham, who went “without aid in simple faith because also the way of nature is full of miracles” (Shapira 1928, p. 17). This perception accords with Maimonides’ writings and those of Isaac Jacob Reines (1839–1915) regarding the immanent religious Zionist perception of divine providence in nature and in history.²⁵ Shapira sees the natural landscape of the Land of Israel, in which God reveals Himself with His clear providence through nature, as explaining that whoever lives [there], God is revealed to him. He again views the divine providence as manifest throughout history:

Anyone who lives in the Land of Israel and delves into all that has emerged and is emerging there, from the time that Israel became a nation to this day, this person stands astonished and amazed at the power of divinity revealed precisely in the natural way, because since the destruction no nation nor people successfully settled permanently in it, and most of the land is not planted nor grows, like it stands and waits for the return of her sons. And anyone who looks at the Western Wall, which has stood since the first Temple and through various revolutions, while all the forts are covered with dirt, this person comprehends the providence of the Blessed Name concealed and hidden in nature (*teva*) which in *gematria* is equal to God (*elohim*). (Shapira 1928, p. 18)

The occupation with miracles recurs in the homily for the portion of *Miketz* and *Hannukah*. It begins by discussing humility, morality, and improving the qualities of the private individual, topics that ostensibly concern the individual and are not connected to redemption and settling the land of Israel. Yet it links to the latter by discussing types of miracles and the balance between humility and confidence and activism. Too much humility is likely to cause sadness and gloom, and confidence can lead to pride and arrogance—therefore, a balance is necessary. We find an example of this on the national level in the story of the Hasmoneans at *Hanukkah*:

That the actions of the Hasmoneans caused the appearance of the miracle of *Hannukah*, we find this in *Kedushat Levi*, for this reason, we say [the blessing] “who performed miracles for our fathers in those days and at that time” [. . .] in our actions for the people and the holy land we can also arouse natural miracles and in this way bring closer the complete redemption. (Shapira 1928, pp. 38–39)

In keeping with his call throughout the book, here too there is a demand for activism based on the actions of the Hasmoneans, who also inspired the secular Zionists. However, this is interpreted as the revelation of hidden miracles. In addition, although when the full redemption occurs there supernatural miracles will occur due to Israel’s merit, in contrast to the redemption from Egypt, which was accomplished via clear miracles but not due to Israel’s merit, the beginning of this redemption is achieved via hidden miracles, due to the merit of “the Jewish people’s strong aim to return to the land of their fathers today” (Shapira 1928, p. 40). Although this outlines a hierarchy according to which hidden miracles are on a lower level, immediately afterwards Shapira cites a pronouncement in the name of the Rebbe of Sadigura, explaining that the days of Purim will not be cancelled in the Messianic age because the aim of creation was to reveal the way of nature, and the order of nature was disrupted only by the sin of the first man, meaning that man needs to strive in order to reveal divine providence, a disruption that will be repaired in the Messianic age. He returns to *Hanukkah* and again praises the Hasmoneans, who via their struggles enabled the revelation of miracles in nature and in human actions:

The Hasmoneans did well that they did not sit idle but with their actions set in motion the miracle of the oil that lights up our eyes to see miracles within nature, every day, at all times, and every hour, by contemplating the actions of the Creator, blessed be He, His presence is hidden in human actions without His knowledge, and thus God will grant us quickly to see the raising of the horn of Israel between the material and the spiritual and will bring close the end of the salvation by bringing the redeemer soon in our days, amen. (Shapira 1928, p. 42)

Thus, the balance between modesty and pride, which is also mentioned in his homily on the portion of *Vayishlah*, “and there wrestled with a man”, is found in deeds acknowledging that God is revealed in human actions.

8. Conclusions

Netivot Shalom, which was first printed in 1928–30 in Jerusalem, is a collection of Zionist-Hasidic homilies by a Hasidic rebbe who has been overlooked by scholarly literature. Employing the genre of the Hasidic homily on the weekly Torah portion, the author cites classic Hasidic thinkers, the Zohar, and *Or haḥaim* to express explicitly religious Zionist ideas of acute messianism, immigrating to the land of Israel, purchasing lands, the revelation of God through nature, history, and more. The Hasidic aspect is evident not only in the structure of the homilies but in the classic Hasidic ethos concerning the role of reproach, modesty, devotion, and the centrality of the Tzaddik. This ethos is consistently connected with explicitly national messages. Apart from the strong Zionist principle, continuing the vision of “peace and unity” espoused by the author’s father, Shapira strives for unity among the people, including a supportive attitude towards the “free”, seeing this as a condition for redemption. The inclusive attitude expands to include not only the free but also a request for redemption that will bless the rest of the nations, among them the Arabs living in the Land of Israel. These notions are interwoven into dynastic Hasidic-Zionist traditions that anchor the homilies in the legacy of the Ruzhin dynasty and his father’s teachings.

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Notes

- ¹ For a study of a Hasidic leader from the Ruzhin dynasty, see (Brandes 2006). For bibliographic information regarding a Hasidic leader active in Palestine, see (Alfasi 2010). For a reference to Avraham Ya’akov Shapira, see (Alfasi 2010, p. 91) and (Alfasi 2006, p. 441). On messianic concepts between the two World Wars in the Munkacs dynasty (albeit not Zionist), see (Inbari 2014).
- ² For a nonacademic study of Haim Meir Yehiel, the Rebbe of Drohobych and father of Avraham Ya’akov Shapira, with various family accounts of their their immigration to Zion and establishing the “company for the settlement of Eretz Yisrael”, see (Kempinski 2010).
- ³ The question of messianism and Hasidism is extremely broad. For a survey and analysis of different responses to Scholem’s claim, as advocated by Dinnur, Isaiah Tishby, Elliot R. Wolfson, Moshe Idel, Mor Altshuler, Arie Morgenstern, and others, see (Dauber 2009). For an analysis of the Lubavitcher Rebbe’s messianic message in the 20th century, see (Wolfson 2009).
- ⁴ Regarding the Agudat Yisrael orthodox organization and its non-Zionist attitude, see (Fund 1999). On anti-Zionism of Satmar Hasidism, see (Myers 2013; Keren-Kratz 2017). Regarding Satmar and other anti-Zionist stances of Hasidic branches in America, see (Magid 2019, pp. 263–310).
- ⁵ Rabbi David Moshe of Tshortkov (Chortkov) supported political Zionism and was in contact with Herzl, as was his successor, Rabbi Israel Friedman of Tshortkov. See (Alfasi 2010, pp. 67–69).
- ⁶ Haim Meir Yehiel Michl’s attitude is manifest in his Hasidic work *Hashalom veva’ahdut*.
- ⁷ For example, he reports traditions that he heard in the name of Rabbi A. I. of Sadigura, see (Shapira 1928, p. 17), another story regarding him as well as the Magid of Mezritch, (Shapira 1928, p. 35), and a statement made by him (Shapira 1928, p. 37).

- 8 He emphasizes that the distant should be treated pleasantly, even while reproaching them. See, for example, (Friedman 2006, Genesis, p. 4).
- 9 See also (Friedman 2006, p. 108): “Unity is a condition for the redemption” and later in the homily, p. 110. And a homily on *Vayehi* from 194, p. 113. A similar homily about the same verses from 1944/45 on the portion *Haḥodesh (Tazri’a)*, p. 215 (a homily that recurs also in *Netivot shalom*). Further, see the homily on the importance of unity from 1938/39, *Vayikahel*, p. 205. And also from 1941, p. 249; 1938, p. 359. Yet, at the same time, he makes unity dependent on accepting the yoke of the heavenly kingdom—faith leads to unity, an idea that recurs on several occasions and is developed broadly in the homily for 15th of Av 1938, pp. 373–74. It is unclear how he guides his followers to create unity with those that do not take this yoke upon themselves.
- 10 Knesset Israel, literally the assembly of Israel denotes both the Shekhina, the feminine divine presence, and the nation of Israel.
- 11 The tsaddik as a central aspect of Hasidic ethos has been discussed thoroughly in scholarship. For example, see (Green 1977; Biale et al. 2018, pp. 165–70, 822–23).
- 12 Compare to Kook’s kabbalistic view of history as divine manifestation, as analyzed by (Garb 2004).
- 13 On the Land of Israel in earlier Hasidic thought, see (Hallamish 1998; Idel 1998; Goshen-Gottstein 1998; Hershkowitz 2022).
- 14 In the liturgical prayer *Yigdal*.
- 15 For religious Zionist attitudes vis-à-vis the Arabs and conquering the land of Israel, see (Schwartz 2011; Burgansky 2012).
- 16 Translation of Rashi from M. Rosenbaum and A.M. Silbermann’s translation, London, 1929–1934.
- 17 And compare the topical discussion by Ya’akov Friedman where the war-related dilemma is more complex (Friedman 2006, *Va-yishlach* (Kislev 14, 1947), p. 65).
- 18 A pun on the Hebrew root for the words dust and wrestling: a.v.k.
- 19 Found in a letter printed in the collection *Zimrat Ha’arets* edited by Moshe Tzvi Fogel, see (Fogel 1941, p. 7).
- 20 Regarding the controversy, see (Assaf 2011, pp. 407–10).
- 21 On the role of preaching and reproach in early Hasidism, see (Etkes 1997; Peikarz 1978, pp. 96–172).
- 22 For a discussion of this aspect of Kook’s attitude towards sinners in relation to kabbalistic and Hasidic ideals, see (Mirsky 2014, pp. 97–98, 168).
- 23 On the idea of Abraham and the inner commandments in Hasidism, see (Green 1989).
- 24 The interpretation and identification between the nation and mother is a pun because they are both written using the same Hebrew letters but with different vowels.
- 25 On Reines’ perception of nature and divinity as an imminent perception of faith rooted in Maimonides, see (Schwartz 2002, pp. 51–56).

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