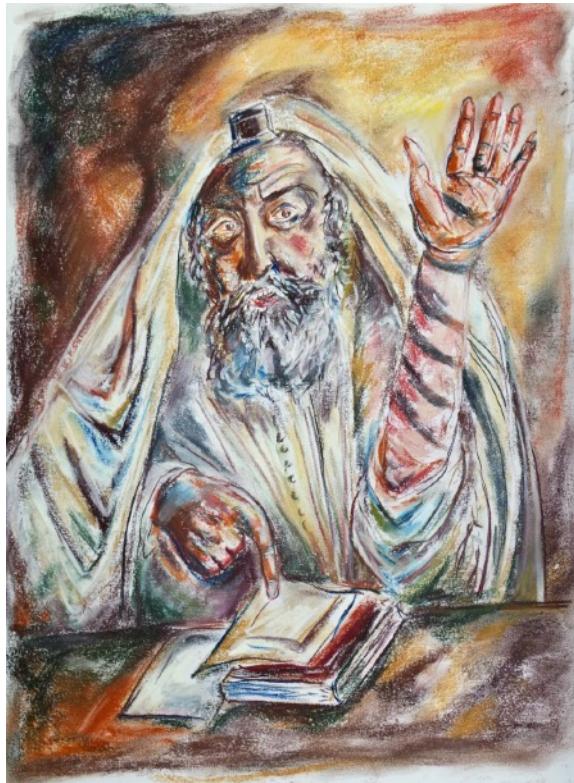


# PORTRAITS OF THE SHPOLER ZEIDA CONDUCTING HIS TRIAL



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It is May, the year 2020. Our lives have been drastically changed since March. The city of New York is in lockdown. My neighborhood in Brooklyn has been hit hard by the corona virus. The safest option is to stay at home, drink coffee next to the house—weather permitting—and make walks around the block. People are shopping at the supermarket at night, when there are fewer people, and always with a face mask and gloves. Justified fear and social distancing rule out having visitors, going to art meetings, cafes, the sea, museums, or use the subway. People connect via social media. It saves travel-time, but there are more meetings and webinars to attend than ever. There is also more time for studying and reading, or watching films at the computer. Wildlife proliferated since there is less traffic, including pedestrians, in this big city. For the first time my cats have brought snakes home. The good thing for an artist is, I spend more time in my studio and paint until deep into the night.

I am currently working on a series about the Chassidic Master known as the Shpoler Zeida (Rabbi Aryeh Loeb from Shpola, 1725-1811). This project started several years ago after I was contacted by two scientists doing genetic research on the Shpoler Zeida's lineage, Dr. Jeffrey Mark Paull and Dr. Jeffrey Briskman, tracing the Zeida's descendants and writing a book about the "Grandfather of Shpola." They asked me to illustrate the stories, like the Zeida's trial with G-d. During a famine, which worsened the already deplorable circumstances of the Jewish population in the Ukraine, the Zeida summoned HaShem to court on accusations of a "breach of contract". When the Jews received the Torah they promised to keep its mitzvot, rules and precepts to their best ability. In turn, HaShem promised to protect and sustain His children.<sup>1</sup> But during this famine, the lives of the entire community were in peril. The Zeida invited several famous rabbis to participate as judges in his Beit Din, or court, with members of the Jewish community acting as witnesses and audience. The Zeida obviously won the case, because soon after it ended ships with rain arrived to alleviate the famine.

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<sup>1</sup> You can read about this in: [https://www.academia.edu/22368052/  
The\\_Shpoler\\_Zeide\\_and\\_the\\_Trial\\_of\\_G-d](https://www.academia.edu/22368052/The_Shpoler_Zeide_and_the_Trial_of_G-d)

The following series consists of 21 numbered paintings and drawings, including some older works that were made between 2015 and 2019, when my Shpoler Zeida project started ([no. 18 - 21](#)), but the majority has been created between February and May 2020.

The earlier paintings are in an exhibition in Brooklyn at OneBeforeEscape ([info@onebeforeescape.com](mailto:info@onebeforeescape.com)), which is closed at the moment due to the Covid 19 lockdown. The paintings made in 2020 are still in my studio.

There is no known portrait of the Shpoler Zeida. The authors of the book about his life sent me a few photographs of his descendants—without any claim that the Zeida resembled those, of course,—and I painted the Zeida with a similar physiognomy, as a stately man with a handsome and impressive appearance.

My goal was to depict different states of mind and emotions which the Zeida likely experienced during his famous trial. Being a great rabbi and posek (an authority making halachic decisions), he acted in a calm and composed manner ([no. 1, 5, 8, 9, 11, 18, 19, 21](#)).

But witnessing how his people suffered unbearably and died during the famine might have induced a holy rage, not the kind of anger or rage of ordinary people, but a justified, composed anger for a good cause, as in [no. 2, 3, 10, 20](#).

At other moments, the Zeida looks like a scholar and knowledgeable judge weighing arguments and making balanced statements, as in [no. 5, 8, 9, 11](#). He emphasizes his point with powerful hand gestures, as in [no. 5, 8, 9, 10, 14, 15, 16, 17, 19](#), looking stern and confident, being engaged in the important and just cause of saving his community. But this great rabbi and President of the Court of Shpola, who was a descendant of Rabbi Loeb of Prague, the famous creator of the golem, must have felt a trembling, holy fear of Heaven, “*knowing before Whom he was standing*,” as is expressed specifically in [no. 7, 10, 14, 17](#). The phrase “*Know before whom you are standing*” (viz., *before the King of Kings, blessed be He*) is frequently written on or over the aron kodesh, the Torah shrine, in Eastern European shuls, in full or as an acronym, like in the works [no. 10, 11, 12, 13, 15, 16](#), or on the wall of the court room or synagogue where the trial was conducted ([no. 20](#)). In [no. 12](#) and [no. 13](#) the Zeida appears full of trust in HaShem’s justice and the procedures of his own Beit Din, lifting his eyes towards HaShem and making a reconciliatory, almost supplicating gesture.

In some of the paintings the Zeida is illuminated by rays of sunlight from a window in the courtroom, an idea of one of the author of the Zeida book, as a sign that HaShem looks upon him and his court-case benevolently. Many works contain a letter *w shin*, which is a symbol of HaShem. Some art displays a few judges of the Beit Din and the empty chair which symbolizes the Divine Defendant, who is present but can't be seen or depicted. In several paintings, the Zeida is "crowned with his tallit and tefillin," in full regalia, as if standing in prayer in front of the Divine Defendant. In other works he wears his tallit and his shtraymel, or places the latter on the table in front of him ([no. 6, 9](#)).

The audience in the courthouse isn't displayed in most of my canvasses. Their role in the big oil painting [no. 21](#) and the symbolism of the tallit and the lettering is discussed in an earlier article about the trial (see footnote 1), and on the Facebook blog of the American Guild of Judaic Art <sup>2</sup>. In the latter case ([no. 11](#)), the audience attending the Zeida's court has been painted in a smaller size than the main characters in the composition, much like in medieval miniatures.

Two paintings show the Shpoler Zeida after the trial is over. In [no. 4](#) we see him dancing with his Chassidim, relieved and full of joy that the famine is finally over. In [no. 18](#) he is an old man, reflecting on the past, as always full of trust in HaShem. The paper behind him mentions his title, Av Beit Din, the President of the Court.

This series will be continued.

Brooklyn, May 2020

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<sup>2</sup> May 1, 2020: The Trial of the Shpoler Zeida. The AGJA website is currently under construction but it will be included in the AGJA blog as well.



1. Oil on canvas, 18 X 24 inches, New York 2020



2. Oil on canvas, 18 X 24 inches, New York 2020



3. Oil on canvas, 18 X 24 inches, New York 2020



4. Oil on canvas, 18 X 24 inches, New York 2020



5. Oil on canvas, 18 X 24 inches, New York 2020



6. Oil on canvas, 16 X 20 inches, New York 2020



7. Oil on canvas, 16 X 20 inches, New York 2020



8. Oil on canvas, 16 X 20 inches, New York 2020



9. Oil on canvas, 16 X 20 inches, New York 2020



10. Oil on canvas, 16 X 20 inches, New York 2020



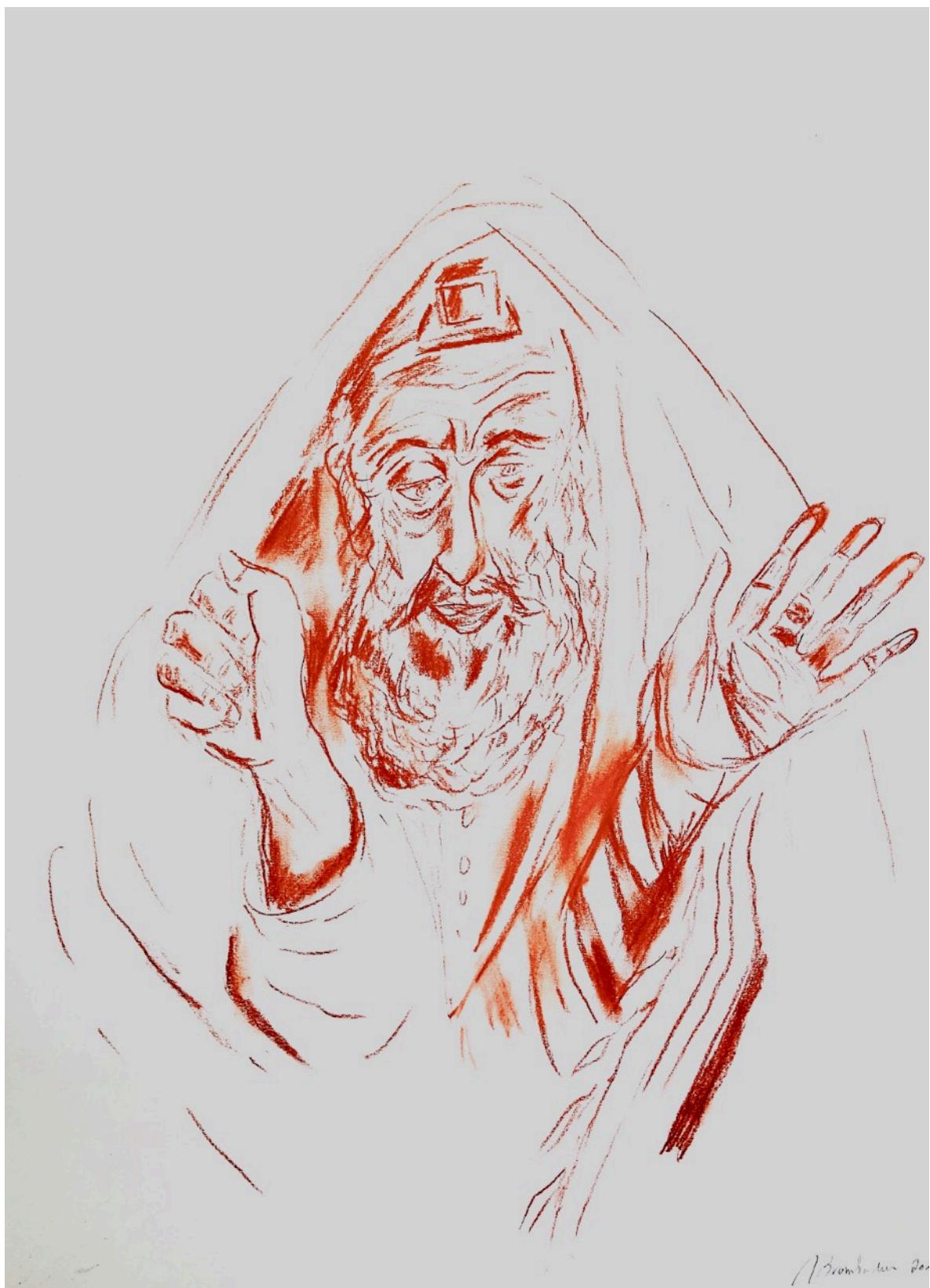
11. Oil on canvas, 18 X 24 inches, New York 2020



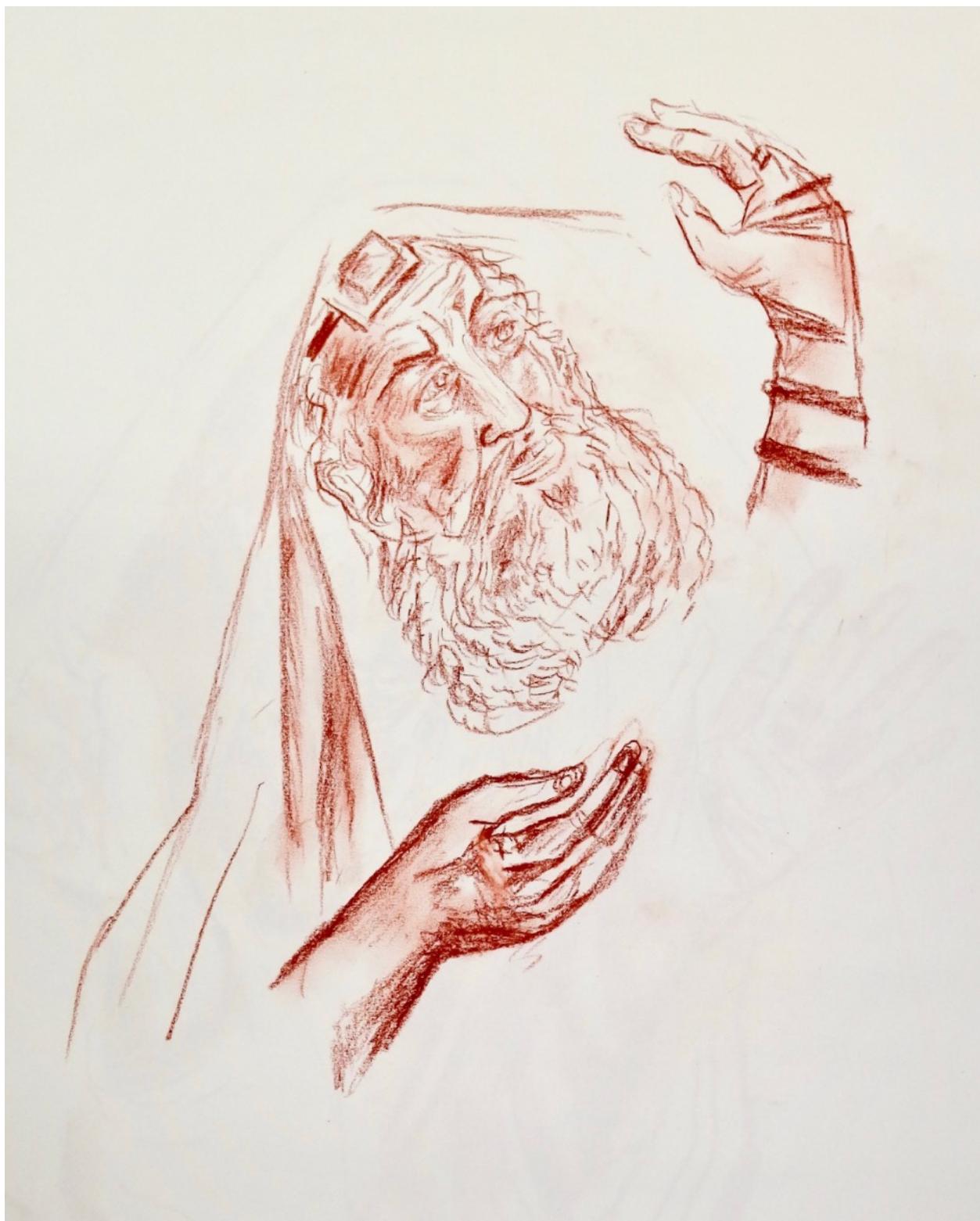
12. Oil on canvas, 18 X 24 inches, New York 2020



13. Oil on canvas, 18 X 24 inches, New York 2020



14 Conte pencil on paper, 18 X 24, New York 2020



15. Conte pencil on paper, 18 X 24, New York 2020



16. Pastel on paper, 18 X 24 inches, New York 2020



17. Pastel on paper, 18 X 24 inches, New York 2020

Older paintings:



18. Oil on canvas, 16 X 20 inches, New York 2017



19. Oil on canvas, 16 X 20 inches, New York 2017



20. Oil on canvas, 16 X 20 inches, New York 2017



21. Oil on canvas, 36 X 36 inches, New York 2015



To be continued.