

## ABRAHAM JOSHUA HESCHEL: A TRIBUTE

by PINHAS PELI

This year marks a decade since the passing of Abraham Joshua Heschel. While there does exist a long and growing series of works on various aspects of Heschel's contribution to current Jewish thought and being, the comprehensive, conclusive work concerning the man who, in the opinion of many, was the greatest — or at least one of the greatest — of Jewish philosophers in the past generation is yet to be written. We may say that, as we distance ourselves from the mountain, we perceive its height and wealth of flora ever more clearly. Heschel's spiritual legacy, though not removed from the situation contemporary to its composition, is not of the type which will either sink into the blur of the past or be forgotten in the future. Indeed, as the years pass, Heschel's work will doubtless be consulted again and again, as thinkers continue to seek keys to understanding the timeless Jewish experience. In his central *future* role, Heschel stands head and shoulders above his contemporaries.

While Heschel certainly made a notable contribution to various fields of Jewish scholarship, he had contemporaries greater still in this respect, thinkers who sired systematic Judaic research enterprises; while he certainly comes through in his

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philosophical writings as creator of a number of brilliant original analyses and formulations, here, too, he is not alone; neither does Jewish thought in later generations lack brilliant and original thinkers. Heschel most certainly appears before us as an activist, pioneering leader and as a moral force in the great social and national issues of our time, but in these fields, again he was not alone.

Heschel's greatness for coming generations comes from his having combined broad erudition in Jewish studies, expertise and originality in philosophy, and inspiring leadership in matters of social and national problems. It is in this combination — which some have regarded as his weakness — that we find his strength and creativity. This rare blend of Heschel's was neither coincidental nor superficial. Not only does it assure his central position in future Jewish existential consciousness but, in our view, it also expresses his personality and life-work.

In his life, and even today in certain academic circles loyal to the principle of “knowing more and more about less and less,” many have failed to understand Heschel due to this factor. The scope of his literary output is vast and all-encompassing: from the Bible (his Ph.D. dissertation on prophecy, *Die Prophetie*, written in German, 1936, which was altered — considerably — afterwards into an English-language work, *The Prophets*, 1955); to his work of distinguishing various schools within Rabbinic thought (*Torah min ha-Shamayim be-Aspaklariah shel ha-Dorot* — 2 v., 1965); to his profound insights into Medieval Jewish philosophy (his German biography of Maimonides, 1935; and his studies of the thought of Saadya, and Abravanel); to his masterful analyses of Hassidism (exhaustive research monographs concerning the circle of the Ba'al Shem Tov, and his works on Kotzk in Yiddish (*Kotzk, ein gerangl far Emesdekayt*, 2 v., 1973) and in English (*A Passion for Truth*, 1973); his description of Eastern European Jewish life (*The Earth is the Lord's*, 1950); and his ideological understanding of the challenge presented by the State of Israel following the Six-Day War (*Israel: An Echo of Eternity*, 1969). To these must be added the volumes in which Heschel examined central themes in theology and Jewish thought (*Man Is Not Alone*, 1951; *God in Search of Man*, 1955; *The Sabbath: Its Meaning for Modern Man*, 1951; *The Insecurity of Freedom*, 1972).

‘How could one man have covered such expanses?’ critics asked dubiously. The answer rests in the phenomenon itself: *he* could do it; his articles and books speak for themselves. To challenge the intellectual structures Heschel created, one must be able to indicate specific flaws within them. Most of Heschel's critics fail to do this, settling for out-of-hand dismissal with snobbishly upturned noses. Such reactions may have a short-term impact, but must certainly leave no lasting impression.

A more pertinent question is not *how* Heschel did what he did, but *why*. Why did

he disperse his spiritual energy over so many fields, refusing to confine them to a restricted territory in which his life-work would have been even more impressive? The answer lies in the secret of Heschel's unique personality. For him, the study of Judaism was not a mere academic endeavor, a pursuit of knowledge for its own sake in the accepted sense; it was rather, primarily, a personal-existential quest for meaning — the meaning of all those ultimate questions of man *qua* man. He undertook this personal quest out of an absolute commitment to the world of Judaism, and deep erudition in the fine points of its Torah.

Thus did Heschel seek to raise the torch which the Prophets waved at the gates of Jerusalem and in Samaria, illuminating dark corners of the human soul; thus did he venture into the realm of the Sages, whom he knew well not only as legislators of practical *halacha* but as wise, sensitive men whom, in their houses of study in Judea and the Galilee — as in those along the Tigris and the Euphrates — probed the ways of man and God. Thus did Heschel deal with the giants of Medieval Jewish philosophy, the finest sons of Spain and Provence, who continued in the mighty quest for truth; thus did Heschel join company with the *tzaddikim* of Hassidism, entering their modest homes in the villages of Poland and the Ukraine from whence beams radiate warmth and light upon an alienated modern world.

Nor did Heschel set out to add another tier of scholarly commentary to the ivory tower; he rather conducted a personal hunt through the hidden recesses of Judaism for enduring answers to the troublesome and debilitating questions of a world whose *raison d'existence* had vanished in the flames of Maidanek and Auschwitz.

Heschel's entire literary output may come under one heading: Heschel in Search of Meaning — the meaning of a living God in a world divorced from Him; the meaning of man as a partner in a Divine covenant, as one who mends the world and ever strives to hope for the good and the holy which lay beyond the despair and filth surrounding him; the meaning of Jewish existence as a noble mission transcending a mere stroke of blind fate. Heschel undertakes this search within the timeless heritage of Judaism, approaching it with the piercing questions of the hour. Thus does he breath new life into old scrolls: the holy and the grand, the sinful and the righteous — what do they mean to twentieth-century man? Heschel knew both to ask and to respond.

Those who love precise definitions will ask: If so, how may we define him? As a philosopher? A spiritual or social leader? Or perhaps — taking a defense counsel's stance — a poet? They would find it difficult to insert him into any one of these cubicles. If we were to seek a similar figure among typologies known to us, we would — most hesitantly and reservedly — identify him with a type well-known in Jewish history (and only in Jewish history) — the prophet.

A prophet *lives* his time, rather than merely living *in* it; he presents his contemporaries a new thesis, a dimension of another world. Such was Heschel's achievement in presenting the spiritual-moral heritage of the Jewish past, along with the highest hope and promise of the Jewish future, as challenges to those living today.

At the same time, Heschel must not be counted among the prophets of rage. While he stood at the ramparts waving a reproving finger, he did so out of an all-encompassing love — of man and of the People Israel. He perceived the glow of the Sabbath from the gloom of daily life, and spun his song in a slender book which is among those rare books of this generation which has deeply changed the lives of many people.

Even within the raging flames of the Holocaust, Heschel could perceive flickering lights of Jewish life in Eastern Europe, composing a poem about the *shtetl* (small Jewish town), which he regarded as heaven on earth, whose greatness stemmed not from the fact that its local *Tzaddik*, Rabbi Leiber, merited the “revelation of Elijah,” but that that prophet merited the “revelation of Rabbi Lieber.”

In the midst of man's terrible isolation in the post-Auschwitz and post-Hiroshima world, Heschel's heart told him that “man is not alone” (the title of his philosophical work which paved the way to his personal philosophical system) and that “God (is) in search of man” (the title of the great work which followed), under the condition that man give expression to his “Quest for God” (the title of his book on prayer). Man cannot despair altogether when the possibility of prayer yet exists in his life. “Prayer may not save us. But prayer may make us worthy of being saved.”

Even amidst the war, the bloodshed, the exploitation and the repression which fill the world, and which he fought with the fullness of his indefatigable Biblical power and courage, Heschel sought to distinguish between darkness and light, appealing to the non-Jewish world (among some of whom he became recognized as a rebirth of one of the ancient Prophets of Israel) to acknowledge the justice and purity of the cause of the State of Israel, which he regarded as the triumph of faith over apostasy, good over evil. Given all that takes place in this world, Heschel observed man and believed in him. The Bible — so he wrote — “is not the theology of man — but rather the anthropology of God.” It is God Who commanded that the void of Creation be turned into “that (which) is good.”

In an NBC-TV interview broadcast some two weeks before his death, Heschel told of an encounter which changed his life — his encounter with the prophets while composing his work on prophecy. In this interview, as in many of his writings, he repeatedly urged that we “... take the Prophets seriously” because, so the prophets tell us, God also takes man seriously.

What's so great about the message of the prophet, about the prophet as a character? I would say the prophet is a man who is able to hold God and man in one thought, at one time, at all times. This means that whatever I do to man, I do to God. When I hurt a human being, I injure God.

Early in my life, my great love was for learning, studying. And the place where I preferred to live was my study and books and writing and thinking. I've learned from the prophets I have to be involved in the affairs of man, in the affairs of suffering man.<sup>1</sup>

When the conversation turned in the direction of the message of Israel's prophets to modern man, the interviewer, writer Karl Stern, interrupted Heschel to ask: "Are you a prophet?" Heschel responded:

I wouldn't accept this praise, it's enough for me to say that I am a descendant of the prophets, which is an old Jewish statement. It is a claim almost arrogant enough to say that I'm a descendant of the prophets, what is called *B'nai Nevi'im*. So let us hope and pray that I am worthy of being a descendant of the prophets.<sup>2</sup>

Heschel always rejected the title of Prophet which admirers sought to ascribe to him; nevertheless, his sentiments here — and similar ones scattered through his writings — gave rise to the prophet-figure as a "model" which Heschel ever bore consciously and subconsciously in mind. Indeed, this model alone allows us to peer into his spiritual world and understand his special place among the greats of Judaism in recent generations.

The course of Abraham Joshua Heschel's life resembles that of many among his contemporaries: born in Eastern Europe (Warsaw, 1907) into a family replete with renowned Hassidic personages, he was fed Torah, Jewish mysticism and Hassidism in copious quantities in the classic yeshivah manner. Orphaned at an early age, Heschel spent adolescence under the clouds of World War I. The maelstrom of Eastern European Jewry flung him from his family nest into the company of the *avant-garde* "Young Vilna" circle of Yiddish poets (his first book was a volume of poetry, *Der Shem ha-Mefurash: Mensch*—1933); thence he set out to explore "the great wide world" in the University of Berlin. Then: Hitler's rise to power, World War II, expulsion, America — dislocation after dislocation. Externally, this resembles the biographies of many other personalities; but it differs in that he was unable to remain spiritually at any of the stations to which life brought him, but he carried with him the entire spiritual load he had accumulated from his first steps into each new location. He disposed of nothing along the way, neither out of desire to ease his burden nor out of lapse of memory. Even as an outstanding student in the University of Berlin, he remained a fervent Hassid in Warsaw. Even as he earned fame as a chief spokesman of morality and con-

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1. "A Conversation with Doctor Abraham Joshua Heschel," [unpublished television transcript] *The Eternal Light*: February 4, 1973 (NBC/TV), p. 5-6.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 6.

science in America — his words resounding in the White House and in the Selma civil-rights demonstrations — he remained entirely a member of his people; his heart was in Zion. Even as he developed into a researcher and a philosopher, he remained a poet, weaving intricate tapestries of words and grasping for the lofty and the noble.

When appointed in 1947 to the position of visiting professor in Union Theological Seminary, the prestigious Christian theological school, he opened his first lecture thus:

I speak to you as a member of a congregation whose founder was Abraham, and the name of my rabbi is Moses. I speak as a person who was able to leave Warsaw, the city in which I was born, just six weeks before the disaster began. My destination was New York — it would have been Auschwitz or Treblinka. ...I am a brand plucked from the fire of an altar of Satan on which millions of human lives were exterminated.<sup>3</sup>

Heschel's thought places him in the school of religious existentialism. Like others of that genre, he was attentive to individual man's dread of existence, fear of death and freedom of decision. Along with Martin Buber, who was close to him (whose substitute Heschel was as head of the "Leherhaus" founded by Franz Rosenzweig in Frankfurt), he was among the pioneers of Dialogic Philosophy; indeed, Heschel's entire lifework is founded 'on the ongoing dialogue which promises that man is indeed not alone. Heschel, however, stands alone within this school in that he, and he alone, imparts to it the fullness of the timeless heritage of Judaism, being totally, utterly immersed in it himself. Heschel subscribed to the "I-Thou" dialogue as surely as did Buber, but his understanding of it is characterized by a far greater degree of Jewishness and much deeper roots. within traditional Jewish teachings, While Buber viewed the dialogue as starting with the "I," the individual standing before the eternal "Thou" — God — Heschel perceived God as the "I" who launches the dialogue, while the "Thou" standing before Him is man. Man is not alone, because God initiates a search for him.

Heschel entitled his greatest work in Jewish thought *God in Search of Man*. Man may know God only because and to the extent to which he is known to God. One must be known before he can know. Man's centrality in the world lies in that he is a "need" of God, His personal handiwork, a creature ever destined to stand before Him. The blunting of man's senses distances him from his Creator; the significance of man is in his overcoming, his never losing his sense of presence, indicated by "radical astonishment," of the Divine, of the Creator and of Creation, attentiveness to the spoken voice of God in the act of Creation and in the words of the prophets, and the possibility granted him to respond to this voice by means

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3. A.J. Heschel, "No Religion is an Island," *The Graduate Journal*, University of Texas, Vol. VII. Supplement (1966), p. 65.

of prayer. Such prayer, for Heschel, is not the mere mouthing of certain passages but rather the observance of each and every Divine commandment, which he defines as “prayer-in-action.” And what are the *mitzvot* if not the reaction-prayer-response to the declared desire of He who commands? There is then a perpetual polarity: *halacha* and *aggada*; fixity and intention; love and fear; covenant and freedom; the acceptance of the “yoke” of heaven and spontaneity — the bases of Jewish existence, even as they represent two contrasting sides of equal value. He who grasps only one of these sides has obtained only half of Judaism, as is one who stresses one element at the expense of the other.

Heschel fought here on two fronts — against those who claim that the essence of Judaism lies in *halacha*, and against those who seek to place it on a conceptual basis alone. Jerusalem is of course thoroughly holy and spiritual, but it is also a city of stones, streets and markets; the one without the other is a void. Spirituality is not an escape from life but an actuality, a fact. Halakha, a way.

This polarity, this paradox, lies at the cornerstone of Heschel’s entire philosophy. Heschel places the Jew in a state of constant tension, of alertness, of perpetual search for the truth — which is to be found not in the upper reaches of the world of ideas but in day-to-day life, in relationships between God and man, man and man, nation and nation. In this often-painful search (see Heschel’s work on the Kotzker Rebbe) the prophets of Israel ever stand as a model. Their voices echo in Heschel’s.

What manner of man, then, is the prophet? asks Heschel in the preface to his work on the Prophets. And he answers:

A student of philosophy who turns from the discourses of the great metaphysicians to the orations of the prophets may feel as if he were going from the realm of the sublime to an arca of trivialities. Instead of dealing with the timeless issues of being and becoming, of matter and form, of definitions and demonstrations, he is thrown into exhortations about widows and orphans, about the corruption of judges and affairs of the market place... The world is a proud place, full of beauty, but the prophets are scandalized, and rave as if the whole world were a slum... What if somewhere in ancient Palestine poor people have not been treated properly by the rich?... Why such an immoderate excitement?... The things that horrified the prophets are even now daily occurrences all over the world.

Indeed, the sort of crimes and even the amount of delinquency that fill the prophets of Israel with dismay do not go beyond that which we regard as normal, as typical ingredients of social dynamics. To us a single act of injustice — cheating in business, exploitation of the poor — is slight; to the prophets, a disaster...

The Prophet is a man who feels fiercely. God has thrust a burden upon his soul, and he is bowed and stunned at man’s fierce greed. Frightful is the agony of man; no human voice can convey its full terror. Prophecy is the voice that God has lent to the silent agony, a voice to the plundered poor, to the profaned riches of the world. It is a form of living, a crossing point of God and man. God is raging in the prophet’s words.

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4. A.J. Heschel, *The Prophets* (Philadelphia, 1955), pp. 3–5, 16, 22.