Abraham Joshua Heschel: An Appreciation

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Human identities are like categories: Invented from the outside, they rarely capture the essence of our personalities, commitments, and sparks that animates us. My father is definitely someone who doesn't fit the categories; indeed, he often writes that we too often apply the wrong categories, especially in our religious lives. Just as we wouldn't speak of a "pound of Beethoven," surely, we should not try to measure the spiritual grandeur of the Sabbath. My father never called himself a Conservative Jew, nor labeled himself in any way. He grew up in Warsaw, stemming from one of the most distinguished Hassidic families, with a royal lineage, and already as a small child, he was expected to become a *rebbe*. Yet he wanted to study, and in the 1920s, it was not as unusual for a pious young man to attend university. My father had already received *semikha* from Rabbi Menachem Zemba in Warsaw before he left for Berlin, which he viewed as a city at the center of the intellectual universe. In addition to his doctorate at the university, he took classes at the two rabbinical seminaries, Orthodox and Reform, because he wanted to understand the outlook of each school.

My father appreciated what he learned, but he was also terribly disappointed with the kind of approach his professors were taking, and he felt that none of his teachers, experts in Jewish topics, understood the nature of religious life. For his doctoral dissertation, he wrote about the Hebrew prophets. For decades, German biblical scholars, mostly Protestants, had denigrated the prophets as "ecstatics," or described them as rural country bumpkins whose messages of peace and an end to war were naïve and ridiculous when presented to urban centers, kings, and priests. No, my father wrote: The prophets were not ecstatics; they were people of extraordinary inner lives who resonated with God's own pathos and compassion. Their message was not at all naïve, but a demand for justice and a hope for ultimate peace that should guide our own lives.
My father was rescued "as a brand plucked from the fire" from Nazi Europe, and he arrived in the United States in March of 1940. After five years at the Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati, he moved to the Upper West Side of New York City and taught at the Jewish Theological Seminary until his death in 1972.

There was always something extraordinarily moving and also terribly ephemeral about the Hassidic *rebbes* my father took me to visit when I was growing up in New York. These *rebbes* were

relatives, refugees from Europe, elderly men of tremendous gentleness and exquisite refinement. The air in the room felt alive when we entered their small studies; there was an intensity in those encounters because they were a small taste, for my father, of what he had lost in Europe: family, friends, a special Jewish world that he describes in his book, *The Earth is the Lord's*.

My father wanted the whole world to know Judaism, to know the Jewish spirit that he had experienced in Poland, and he wanted American Jews to understand what they were missing with what he called the "vicarious davening" of the cold formality of the suburban Conservative and Reform synagogues. He railed against the "religious behaviorism" of Orthodox Jews who focused on the punctilious observance of the *Shulhan Arukh*, as if that law guide was a substitute for Torah. Judaism was in decline, he wrote, not because of the challenges of science or philosophy, but because its message had become insipid. It was time to recapture the greatness of the Torah and the Talmud, but we can only do that, he wrote, if we know what questions to ask. Jews, he said, had become messengers who forgot the message. Studying Torah and Talmud superficially brought the exile of the *Shekhinah*. How can we recapture the questions, the insights, and the greatness of the Torah? That was the goal of his three-volume Hebrew book, *Torah min HaShamayim*.

My father was a person who always brought people together. He was full of warmth, enthusiasm, great humor, and he filled a room with his personality. He was also the most gentle and compassionate and loving person I have ever known. I had the feeling I could tell him anything, discuss any problem. He was always open to ideas, but critically: He was never satisfied, but always wanted to know more, and move to the next step in addressing a problem. He was passionate, studying all the time, and had no interest in entertainment, relaxation, or anything that was superficial. Conversations were also intense, and so was his concern with the world.

When my father returned from the Civil Rights march in Selma, Alabama, he said, "I felt my legs were praying," a very Hassidic statement. He added that marching with Martin Luther King, Jr., reminded him of walking with Hassidic *rebbes* in Europe. Before he agreed to meet with Pope Paul VI and Vatican officials in Rome concerning the formulation of *Nostra Aetate*, the Church's statement regarding its relations with the Jews, he talked with his brother in law, the Kopycznitzer *rebbe*. His concern about Jews who were stranded in the Soviet Union, unable to leave and unable to practice Judaism, led my father to deliver strongly worded lectures and encourage his friend, Elie Wiesel, to visit Moscow, which led to *The Jews of Silence*, Wiesel's book about the Soviet Jews. Dr. King and my father lectured to Jewish groups together, speaking about racism, Zionism, and freedom for Soviet Jews.

In his last years, my father was brokenhearted over the war in Vietnam, which had become a political stranglehold on the presidency, and seemed to be deteriorating into a series of atrocities without clear military objectives. Dropping napalm on children, destroying villages, killing civilians: This left my father sleepless with horror. He spoke out because, he wrote, "in a free society, some are guilty, but all are responsible." It was impossible, he said, to be a religious Jew and not protest the atrocities committed by our government and in our name.

My father cannot be categorized. His heart was Hassidic; his life was that of a scholar and teacher. What is clear, though, is that he preserved the heart and soul of Judaism, both in his writings and in the life that he led.

My father's voice was one of "moral grandeur and spiritual audacity." He spoke out in the prophetic tradition, and we are proud that he represented the Jewish people to the world. After the devastation of Europe, he gave us back our souls, reminding us of the greatness of Judaism and urging us to study more deeply, pray with greater intensity, and always remember what we stand for.