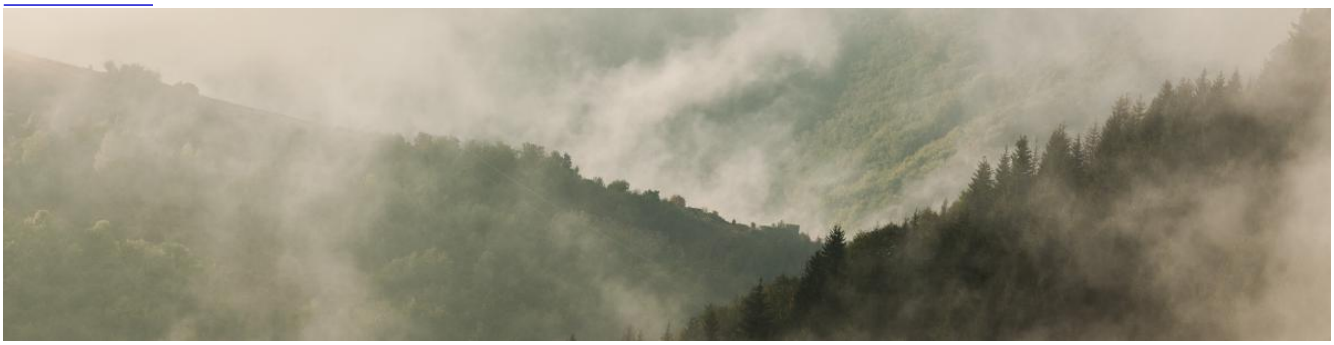
Selected Writings by Abraham Joshua Heschel

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These excerpts are from Abraham Joshua Heschel: Essential Writings, edited by Susannah Heschel [Orbis Books: Maryknoll, NY, 2017], and are reprinted with permission. These excerpts are included in issue 31 of Conversations, the journal of the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals.

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What Manner of Man is the Prophet?

The prophet is a man who feels fiercely. God has thrust a burden on 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….

Above all, the prophets remind us of the moral state of a people: Few are guilty, but all are responsible. If we admit that the individual is in some measure conditioned or affected by the spirit of society, an individual's crime discloses society's corruption. In a community not indifferent to suffering, uncompromisingly impatient with cruelty and falsehood, continually concerned for God and every man, crime would be infrequent rather than common.

To a person endowed with prophetic sight, everyone else appears blind; to a person whose ear perceives God's voice, everyone else appears deaf. No one is just; no knowing is strong enough, no trust complete enough. The prophet hates the approximate; he shuns the middle of the road. Man must live on the summit to avoid the abyss. There is nothing to hold to except God. Carried away by the challenge, the demand to straighten out man's ways, the prophet is strange, one-sided, an unbearable extremist.

Others may suffer from the terror of cosmic aloneness; the prophet is overwhelmed by the grandeur of divine presence. He is incapable of isolating the world. There is an interaction between man and God, which to disregard is an act of insolence. Isolation is a fairy tale.

Where an idea is the father of faith, faith must conform to the ideas of the given system. In the Bible the realness of God came first, and the task was how to live in a way compatible with His presence. Man's coexistence with God determines the course of history.

The prophet disdains those for whom God's presence is comfort and security; to him it is a challenge, an incessant demand. God is compassion, not compromise; justice, though not inclemency. The prophet's predictions can always be proved wrong by a change in man's conduct, but never the certainty that God is full of compassion.

The prophet's word is a scream in the night. While the world is at ease and asleep, the prophet feels the blast from heaven.

The prophet faces a coalition of callousness and established authority and undertakes to stop a mighty stream with mere words. Had the purpose been to express great ideas, prophecy would have had to be acclaimed as a triumph. Yet the purpose of prophecy is to conquer callousness, to change the inner man as well as to revolutionize history.

It is embarrassing to be a prophet. There are so many pretenders, predicting peace and prosperity, offering cheerful words, adding strength to self-reliance, while the prophet predicts disaster, pestilence, agony, and destruction. People need exhortations to courage, endurance, confidence, fighting spirit, but Jeremiah proclaims: You are about to die if you do not have a change of heart and cease being callous to the word of God. He sends shudders over the whole city, at a time when the will to fight is most important.

By the standards of ancient religions, the great prophets were rather unimpressive. The paraphernalia of nimbus and evidence, such as miracles, were not at their disposal….

The words the prophet utters are not offered as souvenirs. His speech to the people is not a reminiscence, a report, hearsay. The prophet not only conveys; he reveals. He almost does unto others what God does unto him. In speaking, the prophet reveals God. This is the marvel of a prophet's work; in his words, *the invisible God becomes audible*. He does not prove or argue. The thought he has to convey is more than language can contain. Divine power bursts in his words. The authority of the prophet is in the Presence his words reveal.

There are no proofs for the existence of the God of Abraham. There are only witnesses. The greatness of the prophet lies not only in the ideas he expressed, but also in the moments he experienced. The prophet is a witness, and his words a testimony—to *His* power and judgment, to *His* justice and mercy.

What Is Sin?

What is a sin? The abuse of freedom. A failure in depth, failure to respond to God's challenge.

The root of sin is callousness, hardness of heart, lack of understanding what is at stake in being alive.

Not ultimate, irreducible condition, but disturbance in relationship between God and man.

There is an evil which most of us condone and are even guilty of: indifference to evil.

We remain neutral, impartial, and not easily moved by the wrongs done unto other people.

Indifference to evil is more insidious than evil itself; it is more universal, more contagious, more dangerous.

A silent justification, it makes possible an evil erupting as an exception becoming the rule and being in turn accepted.

The knowledge of evil is something which the first man acquired; it was not something that the prophets had to discover. Their great contribution to humanity was the discovery of the evil of indifference. One may be decent and sinister, pious and sinful. I am my brother's keeper.

The prophet is a person who suffers the harm done to others.

Wherever a crime is committed, it is as if the prophet were the victim and the prey. The prophet's angry words cry. The wrath of God is a lamentation.

All prophecy is one great exclamation: God is not indifferent to evil!

God is always concerned, He is personally affected by what man does to man. He is a God of pathos. This is one of the meanings of the anger of God: the end of indifference!

The message of wrath is frightful, indeed. But for those who have been driven to the brink of despair by the sight of what malice and ruthlessness can do, comfort will be found in the thought that evil is not the end, that evil is never the climax of history. This is the most vexing question in a world where the righteous suffer and the wicked prosper: Does God condone? Does God care for right and wrong? If the agony of man were a form of serenity, a mild assertion – a word of divine commiseration, a word of reprobation – would have been adequate. To a generation afflicted by the fury of cruel men, by the outrage of abandoning God, no condemnation is too harrowing.

Man's sense of injustice is a poor analogy to God's sense of injustice. The exploitation of the poor is to us a misdemeanor; to God, it is a disaster. Our reaction is disapproval, God's reaction is something no language can convey.

Man is what he thinks. Man dwells where his mind dwells. Intellectually irrelevant is imprisoned in Temples, has no access to the minds.

We repeat clichés; we remember platitudes.

God is presented to us as a comfort, not a challenge, a rumor, as if it is nice to have Him around. But God means defiance, rejection, as well as affirmation.

We have relinquished our role as educators. We surrender, we abandon, we desert, and we forget.