No Wonder

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Hasidic song expressed exultation in the Lord. It seemed to celebrate Israel's marriage to God…
When Russia occupied Poland in 1792, few Jews knew the Russian language. Once a Cossack visited a Jewish homeowner and asked him, "Are you the *khazyayen* [the owner]?"
The Jew did not understand. His wife translated wrongly: "The Cossack says: 'Are you a cantor [a hazan]? Sing for me.'"
So the Jew began singing the chant "The sons of the Temple."
The Cossack lost his temper and began to beat him.
So his wife explained: "He obviously doesn't like that song. He wants another one! A new song!"

—*A Passion for Truth*, pp. 284–285

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"I did not ask for success; I asked for wonder and You gave it to me."

—Abraham Joshua Heschel

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"The central thought of Judaism is the living God. It is the perspective from which all other issues are seen. And the supreme problem in any philosophy of Judaism is: What are grounds for man's believing in the realness of the living God?"

—*God in Search of Man*, pp. 25–26

These words, penned by Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, summarize one of the great challenges facing contemporary Jews. How can one achieve spirituality? Of course, there is the problem of how to properly define spirituality. Heschel does an excellent job when he considers the "realness of the living God." The essential problem is the difficulty in feeling the proximity of God in our lives.
Abraham Joshua Heschel (1907–1972) was born in Warsaw, Poland, in 1907 to a family of Hassidic rabbis. Following a traditional Jewish education in Warsaw, Heschel went to Berlin, where he studied at the university. He earned his PhD degree in 1933.
In 1938, Heschel arrived in Cincinnati, Ohio, where he joined the faculty of Hebrew Union College in 1940. He later became professor of Jewish ethics and mysticism at the Jewish Theological Seminary of America in New York City. Heschel was married to concert pianist Sylvia Straus, and they had one daughter, Susannah. Heschel remained at the Jewish Theological Seminary until his death in New York City on December 23, 1972.

Heschel was a pioneer of Jewish involvement in the civil rights demonstrations of the 1960s and early 1970s to end discrimination against African Americans. He spoke out against the war in Vietnam. Heschel met with Pope Paul VI at the Vatican to discuss Jewish feelings concerning Vatican Council II.

Rabbi Heschel presents a blueprint of how to live a life feeling the realness of God. It is a program that is simple to understand, and, at the same time, is quite profound. It is not a simplistic program, as it grapples with serious theological questions and requires considerable thought. It may best be described as "the longer shorter way" based on a story in the Talmud (*Eruvin* 53b) and popularized by Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Lyadi in the Introduction to his classic work, *Tanya*. The phrase "the longer shorter way" represents an approach that requires hard work, but will, in the long run, lead to success in helping individuals develop a relationship with God, as opposed to a quick fix that is short lived.

Immediately upon attempting to offer a way to God, Heschel first stops to consider, and then rejects, the possibility that feeling the realness of God is based solely on belief in events of the past. For Heschel, such an approach is too distant and does not reveal the "realness of the living God." Heschel asks:

> Is it true that Judaism derived its religious vitality exclusively from loyalty to events that occurred in the days of Moses and from obedience to Scripture in which those events occurred? Such an assumption seems to overlook the nature of man and faith. A great event, miraculous as it may be, if it happened only once, will hardly be able to dominate forever a mind of man." (*God in Search of Man*, p. 26)

Heschel distinguishes between memory and personal insight in terms of ways of religious thinking. Both, says Heschel, are required modes for religious development. Heschel does distinguish and even prioritize, when he suggests that first comes the personal insight, helping a person arrive at "This is my God" (personal insight), which subsequently leads to: "He is the God of my father" (memory).

Heschel's approach to spirituality can be contrasted to the approach presented by his contemporary, Rabbi Eliezer Berkovits. According to Berkovits, while the prophets were able to personally encounter God, non-prophets are left with the memory of those encounters as recorded in our sacred literature. Those encounters and their records are powerful enough to craft faith. (It is interesting to note that they both speak of the "Paradox" of the encounter with God as described in the Bible and wonder how it is possible for a human being to survive such an encounter. Their answers are remarkably similar as well).

Heschel was not satisfied with a faith based on someone else's encounter with God, and he goes to great lengths to devise a system in which a direct encounter with the Divine is available to all. In trying to define real faith, Heschel notes:

> What does having faith mean? To follow the path of your ancestors? To carry out what is contained in a creed? Such simple faith is the backbone of all religions. After all, hundreds of generations of Jews have borne testimony to the existence of God. So one may accept their words, their beliefs. Yet the Kotzker refused to be a follower, living on spiritual crumbs left by the princes of the past…" (*A Passion for Truth*, pp. 187–188)

According to Heschel, faith could not be inherited; every person has to earn it. He warns against settling even on our own ideas and conceptions. Not only must we be original, our very originality must be challenged and fine-tuned.

> It is impossible to be at ease and to repose on ideas which have turned into habits, on canned theories in which our own or other people's insights are preserved. We can never leave behind our concern in the safe-deposit of opinions, nor delegate its force to others and so attain vicarious insights. We must keep our own amazement, our own eagerness alive." (*Man Is Not Alone*, p. 14)

It is often the case that educators and rabbis direct students to focus on the approaches and insights of others in terms of forming the basis of faith and closeness to God. Heschel is suggesting that in order to experience closeness to God one must be empowered and encouraged to find one's unique and specialized path.

This may be true in the realm of Torah study as well. Perhaps more time can be spent on developing the personal interpretations of Jewish texts, not as a means of supplanting traditional interpretation, but as a means toward greater connection to the text.

The idea that each person has a unique connection to Torah is expressed in the law that mandates a teacher go with his students to an *Ir Miklat*—a city of refuge when the student kills inadvertently. This is precisely because once the student has found a teacher he can successfully learn from, the halakha is hesitant to separate them.

A similar idea may be behind the prayer "grant us our share in your Torah" that is part of the concluding supplication of the *amidah*, among other prayers. It also expresses that individuals have a specific "share" or portion in Torah.

In the realm of spirituality, individuals can be given license to develop their unique route to feeling the realness of God. Once that is accomplished, connection via prayer and study may be attainable. Often the reverse method is used, in that individuals are expected to initially connect to God via prayer and study. This is not to suggest that people should not be taught how to pray until they acknowledge a connection to God. Rather, it can serve as a reminder that prayer may not serve the purpose of connecting a person to God. Once a person has developed a relationship to God based on personal insight, meaningful prayer may simply be the symptom of that relationship or a means to rekindle it after a period of diminution.

In focusing on the importance of individual and unique spiritual development, Heschel is echoing a classic Hassidic approach made popular by Shneuer Zalman of Lyadi in *Tanya*. In the introduction to that work, Rav Shneuer Zalman explains that one of the shortcomings of the written word is that people have different approaches to spirituality and will thereby not necessarily find inspiration in a book written for a general audience. He points out that the challenge of a leader is to be able to relate to the unique personality of each individual. He also notes that the blessing said upon seeing a group of 600,000 people—"knower of secrets"—points to idea that every person is distinctive. All of this boils down to the need for individuals to develop their own spiritual path.

It is important to point out that although Heschel saw the development of the personal God ("This is my God") as coming before other's appreciation of God, ("The God of my fathers"), he very much considered the mitzvoth and Torah study as the path to a personal relationship with God.

A heretic, the Talmud reports, chided the Jews for the rashness in which he claimed they persisted. "First you should have listened; if the commandments were within your power of fulfillment, you should have accepted them; if beyond your power, rejected them."…Do we not always maintain that we must first explore a system before we decide to accept it? This order of inquiry is valid in regard to pure theory…but it has limitations when applied to realms where thought and fact...theory and experience are inseparable. It would be futile, for example, to explore the meaning of music and abstain for listening to music. It would be just as futile to explore Jewish thought from a distance, in self-detachment. Jewish thought is disclosed in Jewish living. (*God in Search of Man,* p. 282)

Wonder and Radical Amazement

Heschel's key idea in terms of a relationship with God built on personal insight is the notion of wonder or radical amazement. Personal insight as far a feeling God's realness is dependent on wonder.

Rabbi Heschel uses a familiar Midrash as a means to understanding wonder.

How did Abraham arrive at his certainty that there is God who is concerned with the world? According to the Rabbis, Abraham may be "compared to a man who was traveling from place to place when he saw a *palace full of light* (*birah ahat doleket*). "Is it possible that there is no one who cares for the palace?" he wondered. Until the owner of the palace looked at him and said, "I am the owner of the palace." Similarly, Abraham our father wondered, "Is it conceivable that the world is without a guide?" The Holy One, blessed be He, looked out and said. "I am the guide, the sovereign of the world." It was in wonder that Abraham's quest for God began. (*God in Search of Man*, p. 112)

Lift up your eyes on high. Religion is the result of what man does with his ultimate wonder, with moments of awe, with the sense of mystery. Heschel warns us not to waste moments of wonder.
It is interesting to note that elsewhere Rabbi Heschel uses this very same Midrash to deal with the problem of evil. He does so by changing his interpretation of the phrase *birah ahat doleket,* from a "palace full of light," to a "palace in flames."
In many ways, Heschel's response to the problem of Evil is the flip side of the coin of his doctrine of wonder. For Heschel, the existence of evil in the world, "living as we do in a civilization where factories were established in order to exterminate millions of men, women and children..." is the result of what can be termed the absence of negative wonder, or what Heschel refers to as "the loss of our sense of horror." Heschel lays the blame for the Shoah squarely at the feet of humanity when he notes in his rewording of the above Midrash: "The world is in flames, consumed by evil. Is it possible that there is no one who cares?" It is God who declares: "I am the Guide, the sovereign of the world" (*God in Search of Man*, p. 367).

Divine Care and the Human Encounter

All of reality was a source of amazement for Heschel as every encounter with the world was by definition an encounter with God. "Awe is a way of being in rapport with the mystery of all reality" (*God in Search of Man*, p. 74).
This is especially true when it comes to the encounter with human beings. Heschel demonstrates exceptional spiritual sensitivity when he depicts the nature of human encounter.

The awe that we sense or ought to sense when standing in the presence of a human being is a moment of intuition for the likeness of God which is concealed in his essence…The secret of every being is the Divine care and concern that are invested in it. Something sacred is at stake in every event. (*Ibid*., p.74).

Wonder and Science

Heschel is quick to remind us that he is not referring to the well-known argument from design. "Depth-Theology" is the term he uses to hone in on the distinction between wonder and science. In explaining "Depth-Theology" Heschel writes: "To apprehend the depth of religious faith we will try to ascertain not so much what the person is able to express as that which he is unable to express, the insights that no language can declare." Heschel quotes F. P. Ramsey and notes that: "We must keep in mind that 'the chief danger to philosophy, apart from laziness and woolliness, is scholasticism, the essence of which is treating what is vague as if it were precise and trying to fit it into an exact logical category.'" The difference between science and wonder is that for the prophets "wonder is a form of thinking" and that "the fact that there are facts at all" creates a sense of "perpetual surprise."

Petition and Thanksgiving in Prayer: Rabbi Heschel and Rabbi Soloveitichik

The central place of wonder in the thought of Rabbi Heschel is made clear when considering his focus on praise and thanksgiving as the central motif of prayer. The importance of praise and thanksgiving in the prayer scheme of Rabbi Heschel is illuminated when contrasted with the approach of Rabbi Joseph Dov Soloveitchik.

Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik sees petition as the foundation of prayer. He makes this point with great clarity and force in his essay: Prayer, Redemption and Talmud Torah. In this essay Rabbi Soloveitchik defines the ability to cry out to God as a medium toward redemption as well as being a symbol of a free existence.

Related to the centrality of petitional prayer, Rabbi Soloveitchik remarks:

Therefore, prayer in Judaism, unlike the prayer of classical mysticism, is bound up with the human needs, wants, drives and urges, which make man suffer. Prayer is the doctrine of human needs. Prayer tells the individual, as well as the community, what his, or its, genuine needs are, what he should, or should not, petition God about. Of the nineteen benedictions in our Amidah, thirteen are concerned with basic human needs, individual as well as social-national. Even two of the last three benedictions are of a petitional nature. The person in need is summoned to pray. Prayer and Tsa'ar (trouble) are inseparably linked. Who prays? Only the sufferer prays. If man does not find himself in narrow straits, if he is not troubled by anything, if he knows not what Tsara is, then he need not pray. To a happy man, to contented man, the secret of prayer was not revealed. God needs neither thanks nor hymns. He wants to hear the outcry of man, confronted with a ruthless reality. (Rabbi Joseph B. Solovetichik, *Prayer, Redemption and Talmud Torah*)

Rabbi Heschel offers a different focus of prayer.

To worship God means to forget the self; an extremely difficult, thought possible, act. What takes place in a moment of prayer may be described as a shift of the center of living—from self-consciousness to self-surrender. This implies, I believe, an important indication of the nature of man. Prayer begins as an "it-He" relationship. I am not ready to accept the ancient concept of prayer as dialogue. Who are we to enter a dialogue with God?" ("Prayer as Discipline" in *The Insecurity of Freedom*, pp. 255–256)

This conception of humanity in relation to God leads Rabbi Heschel to conclude that priority in prayer must be given to praise.

This is why in Jewish liturgy primacy is given to prayer of praise. One must never begin with supplication. One begins with praise because praise is the prerequisite and essence of prayer. To praise means to make Him present.... (*Ibid.*)

Heschel strengthens his point when he argues that not only is wonder the central religious mood of a Jew, it also requires daily maintenance.

The profound and personal awareness of the wonder of being has become a part of the religious consciousness of the Jew. Three times a day we pray:

> We thank thee…
> For thy miracles which are daily with us,
> For thy continual marvels…

Every evening we recite: "He creates light and makes dark." Twice a day we say: "He is one." What is the meaning of such repetition? A scientific theory, once it is announced and accepted, does not have

to be repeated twice a day. The insights of wonder must be constantly kept alive. Since there is a need for daily wonder, there is need for daily worship." (*God in Search of Man*, pp. 48–49)

How Do We Know?

One of the basic issue Rabbi Heschel deals with in terms of wonder is the question of how do we know we have experienced it. Interestingly, for Rabbi Heschel, the characteristic of a spiritually developed person is the ability to "draw a distinction between the utterable and the unutterable, to be stunned by that which is but cannot be put into words" (*Man is Not Alone*, p. 4).

We are often taught that one can only claim to understand something when it can be put into words. This may be true of knowledge; it is not so, according to Rabbi Heschel when it comes to experiences. "Always we are chasing words, and always words recede. But the greatest experiences are those for which we have no expression...To become aware of the ineffable is to part company with words" (*Ibid*., pp. 15–16).

Our Challenges

For Heschel there are two fundamental reasons why it is so hard for human beings to experience the "realness of God." He first turns his attention to the "Dogma of Man's Self Sufficiency." He views both social reforms and technological advance as having failed to replace belief in revelation of God's will. The development of human power and social awareness are not enough to pacify the human drive to cruelty. We need God, argues Heschel, because we are not great and because God is great. The Dogma of Man's Self Sufficiency in not only based on the overestimation of humanity's greatness, but on the underestimation of God's greatness. For the so-called self-sufficient man, the only thing not known is when all will be known. Ultimately, all mysteries will be solved and all obscurities made apparent.

Heschel refers to the perception of humanity's unworthiness to be in a relationship with God. Referencing the Shoah, Heschel argues that it seems impossible that God wishes any relationship with a species capable of such fantastic horrors. It is the very physical strength of humanity that calls for a spiritual response. In fact, the one being powerful enough to respond to the destructive power of humanity is God. In short, although humanity may not be worthy of a relationship with God, God imposes it, in order to save humanity form itself.

Here too, humanity's distance from God is based on an inability to recognize greatness. This time, however, it is not God's greatness that is overlooked, but human greatness in the guise of potential, and in Heschel's lifetime, realized destructiveness.

In Heschel's comments on wonder and the problem of evil, one can sense a concern for the general inability to experience strong passion. Underlying both radical amazement and the loss of the sense of horror is a generic "Hardness of Heart" as Heschel calls it. For Heschel, it is impossible to ignore a world so full of the magnificence of God and the dreadfulness of humanity.

Seeing the Ultimate

Heschel uses a powerful illustration in regard to living in radical amazement.

Let us take a loaf of bread. It is the product of climate, soil and the work of the farmer, merchant and baker. If it were our intention to extol the forces that concurred in producing a loaf of bread, we would have to give praise to the sun and the rain, to the soil and the intelligence of man. However, it is not these we praise before breaking bread. We say, "Blessed be Thou, O Lord our God, King of the universe, who brings forth bread from the earth." Empirically speaking, would it not be more correct to give credit to the farmer, the merchant and the baker? To our eyes, it is they who bring forth the

bread… It is not possible to dwell each time on what bread is empirically. It is important to dwell each time on what bread is ultimately. (*God in Search of Man*, p. 63)

Who Moved?

Paradoxically, although God desires to be in relationship with the world, humanity's refusal to reciprocate causes God to depart.

Man was the first to hide himself from God, after having eaten of the forbidden fruit. The will of God is to be here, manifest and near; but when the doors of the world are slammed on Him, His truth betrayed, His will defied, He withdraws, leaving man to himself. God did not depart of his own volition; He was expelled. God is in exile. (*Man Is Not Alone*, p. 153)

The real God is not the hiding God, but the discovered God. Humanity has worked itself into a terrible problem. The challenge for humanity is how to reintroduce God to the world. Heschel offers an important understanding of God's place in the world: God's place in the world depends on humanity—not God. He begins with the radical statement that God is lost in His world.

God who created the world is not at home in the world…. Of Noah it is said, Noah walked with God, and to Abraham the Lord said Walk before Me. Said the midrash: 'Noah might be compared to a king's friend who was plunging about in the dark alleys, and when the king looked out and saw him, he said to him, Instead of plunging about in dark alleys, come and walk with me. But Abraham's case is rather to be compared to that of a king who was sinking in dark alleys, and when his friend saw him he shone a light from him through the window. Said he to him, Instead of lighting me through the window, come and show a light before me. (*God in Search of Man*, p.156)

The dilemma is summed up well in the following analysis of the approaches of the Baal Shem Tov and Rav Menachem Mendl of Kotzk.

The Baal Shem constantly reminds us how close God is to man and all things. Reb Mendl perennially recalls how alienated, how estranged man is from truth, from God. The Baal Shem discloses the presence of God, the Creator of the Universe, within the world; he brings heaven nearer to man. But for what purpose; says Reb Mendl, since man's corruption spurns the Divine…When asked where God dwelt, the Baal Shem answered, everywhere, the Kotzker, where he is allowed to enter…" (*A Passion for Truth*, pp. 32–33)

Heschel desired to help the world realize the contemporary existence of these two paths. God so very much desires to be in the world and for all intents and purposes God is close to man, but humanity has spurned God's advances so we must light the path for Him to return.

God and Torah

Heschel points to another potential pitfall in one's quest to feel the realness of God—halakha.

Through sheer punctiliousness in observing the law one may become oblivious of the living presence and forget that the law is not for its own sake, but for the sake of God. Indeed, the essence of observance has, at ties, become encrusted with so many customs and conventions that the Jewel was lost in the setting. Outward compliance with externalities of the law took the place of the engagement of the whole person to the living God. What is the ultimate purpose of observance if not to become

sensitive to the spirit of Him, in whose ways the mitzvoth are signposts? (*God in Search of Man*, p. 326)

In this passage, Heschel enters into the debate surrounding the telos of the mitzvoth and he comes down clearly on the side of those who believe that the telos of the commandments can be ascertained. As an antidote to this potential problem, Heschel offers the study of aggada. For Heschel, aggada can save God from halakha.

The preciousness and fundamental importance of aggada is categorically set forth in the following statements of the ancient Rabbis: 'If you desire to know Him at whose word the universe came into being, study aggada for thereby will you recognize the Holy One and cleave unto his ways'…The collections of aggada that have been preserved contain an almost inexhaustible wealth of religious insight and feeling, for in the aggada the religious consciousness with its motivations, difficulties, perplexities and longings came to immediate and imaginative expression. (*God in Search of Man*, p.324)

The study of aggada, then, becomes another way to achieve wonder.
Heschel goes so far as to identify an "anti-aggadic" strain within Jewish teaching.

The outstanding expression of the anti-aggadic attitude is contained in a classical rabbinic question with which Rashi opens his famous commentary on the Book of Genesis. "Rabbi Isaac said: The Torah should have commenced with chapter 12 of Exodus, since prior to that chapter hardly any laws are set forth." The premise and implications of this question are staggering. The Bible should have omitted such non-legal chapters as those on creation, the sins of Adam and Cain, the flood, the Tower of Babel, the lives of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the lives of the twelve tribes, the suffering and miracles in Egypt." (*God in Search of Man*, p. 328)

In a fascinating modification of the positive notion of "*lifnim mishurat haDin*" generally understood as a legalistic term encouraging additional stricture than those minimally required by law, Heschel writes that this dictum is referring to an aggadic approach to Torah—to not just fulfilling the mitzvoth, but fulfilling them with God in mind.

Is It Possible?

How is wonder supposed to help us overcome the decisive religious and theological questions that we often grapple with? For Heschel, the sense of wonder is so overwhelming that it conquers our doubts and questions about evil and meaning in a world that often seems absurd. Significantly, Heschel is not on a quest to ultimate solutions, but rather "to find ourselves as part of a context of meaning." Heschel is willing to let absurdity and wonder go head to head.

We do not need to drink the whole ocean to know what kind of water it contains. One drop yields its salty flavor. Our very existence exposes us to the challenge of wonder and radical amazement at the universe despite the absurdities we encounter. It is possible on the basis of personal experience to arrive at the conclusion that the human situation as far as one can see is absurd. However, to stand face to face with the infinite world of stars and galaxies and to declare all of this absurd would be idiotic. (*A Passion for Truth*, pp. 294–295)

Potential for All

According to Heshcel perceiving God is a phenomenon, “of which all men are at all times capable.” Feeling the realness of God is not something reserved for the religious genius. In fact, he argues that the absence of radical amazement represents a shortcoming and lack of effort. Subjectivity is the absence, not the presence, of radical amazement. Such lack or absence is a sign of a half-hearted, listless mind, of an undeveloped sense for the depth of things” (*Man Is Not Alone*, p. 21).
It is important for Heschel to make this point as he is attempting to construct a theology and approach to God that can be implemented. He is concerned with the spirit of humanity and the dangers faced by a society that does not live in the presence of God. In a way, Heshcel suggests that his program is quite simple for those who are willing to be open to a relationship with God as such a relationship is available to us in “every perception, every act of thinking and every enjoyment of valuation of reality” (*Ibid*., p. 20).

Partial Reading List of Works by Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel

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