Teachings of Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel

View PDF



This article by Rabbi Marc D. Angel appears in issue 38 of Conversations, the journal of the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals.

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel (1907-1972) was one of the major voices in Jewish thought and philosophy during the 20th century. Born in Poland, he received a traditional yeshiva education and rabbinic ordination. He then pursued his doctoral work at the University of Berlin, and also studied at the Hochschule fur die Wissenschaft des Judentums. In October 1938 he was deported to Poland by the Germans. He was able to escape the Nazi onslaught by obtaining a visa to teach in the United States where he arrived in 1940. His mother and two sisters were among the millions of Jews who perished during the Holocaust.

Heschel taught for five years at the Hebrew Union College; in 1946 he joined the faculty of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America, in New York City. Along with his academic work, he devoted himself to activism on behalf of social justice. On January 14, 1963, he gave a speech, “Religion and Race,” at a conference in Chicago. There he met Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King and the two became friends. Rabbi Heschel marched with Dr. King at a demonstration in Selma, Alabama in 1965.

Heschel was a descendant of Hassidic masters; he was thoroughly trained as a rabbi and a modern scholar. While drawing on the spiritual foundations of Hassidism and Jewish mysticism, he sought to engage modern day Jews with a vibrant spirituality and a sophisticated religious worldview. When he reminisced about the warm religious life in which he was raised, he contrasted it with the often cold and barren religious experience of many modern Jews.

Why was religion losing its hold among moderns? Heschel pointed to a number of problems. “It is customary to blame secular science and antireligious philosophy

for the eclipse of religion in modern society. It would be more honest to blame religion for its own defeats. Religion declined not because it was refuted, but because it became irrelevant, dull, oppressive, insipid. When faith is completely replaced by creed, worship by discipline, love by habit; when the crisis of today is ignored because of the splendor of the past; when faith becomes an heirloom rather than a living fountain; when religion speaks only in the name of authority rather than with the voice of compassion—its message becomes meaningless" (A. J. Heschel: Essential Writings, p. 49).

For some Jews, religion became a matter of rote. People followed the rules by habit, not by inner spiritual connection. For others, Judaism was honored for its past, but not granted a serious role in life today. And yet for others, religion became disconnected from the ongoing crises of everyday living, the challenges facing society at large.

One of Heschel's recurring themes was that moderns have lost the sense of awe, wonder, radical amazement, confrontation with the Eternal. "Awe is an intuition for the creaturely dignity of all things and their preciousness to God; a realization that things not only are what they are but also stand, however remotely, for something absolute. Awe is a sense for the transcendence, for the reference everywhere to Him who is beyond all things" (God in Search of Man, p. 75). And again: "It is not utility that we seek in religion, but eternity. The criterion of religion is not in its being in agreement with our common sense but in its being compatible with our sense of the ineffable. The purpose of religion is not to satisfy the needs we feel but to create in us the need of serving ends, of which we otherwise remain oblivious" (Ibid., p. 351).

In an address to the Rabbinical Assembly in 1953, Rabbi Heschel lamented the diminishing spiritual experience in modern synagogues. "Of course, people still attend services—but what does this attendance mean to them? Outpouring of the soul? Worship? Prayer? Synagogue attendance has become a benefaction to the synagogue, a service to the community rather than service of God….Spiritual issues cannot be solved by administrative techniques. The issue is not how to fill buildings but how to inspire hearts. The issue is not synagogue attendance but one of spiritual attendance. The issue is not how to attract bodies to enter the space of a temple but how to inspire souls to enter an hour of spiritual concentration in the presence of God."

Do moderns feel the presence of God? Has our secularized world robbed us of the gift of spiritual insight, radical amazement? "God is not an explanation of the world's enigmas or a guarantee for our salvation. He is an eternal challenge, an

urgent demand. He is not a problem to be solved but a question addressed to us as individuals, as nations, as mankind. God is of no importance unless He is of supreme importance, which means a deep certainty that it is better to be defeated with Him than be victorious without Him" (Man is Not Alone, p. 92).

In a trenchant critique of the modern dilemma, Rabbi Heschel notes: "The joys of inner living are denied to most of us. Sensitivity is a luxury, but entertainment is becoming a compulsion…The Greeks learned in order to comprehend. The Hebrews learned in order to revere. The modern man learns in order to use" (The Insecurity of Freedom, pp. 40-41). Utilitarianism and hedonism obstruct the path to the Almighty.

One of R. Heschel's religious heroes was the Hassidic master, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Morgensztern (1787-1859) of Kotzk. In his book about the Kotzker Rebbe, Heschel highlights the struggle for integrity. The Kotzker was famous for his clear-headed thinking and for his abhorrence of sham, of pseudo-piety. He stressed that each individual had to find his and her own road to God, and that the religious quest demanded an open mind and a receptive heart. There were no short cuts. The Kotzker commented on the biblical passage in Genesis: "And God appeared to him (Abraham) and he was sitting at the entrance to the tent." Why does the verse mention that our forefather Abraham was sitting at the entrance to his tent when God appeared to him? This teaches that even in the presence of God, Abraham felt as though he were sitting at the door and not within the center of the tent. He—as all truly religious people—understood that he was always standing at the beginning, at a starting point, still outside the center. Religious feeling requires humility and a sense of tentativeness (Kotzk, p. 113).

Rabbi Heschel wrote a book about the Hebrew prophets in which his own prophetic voice found expression. "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 word is a scream in the night. While the world is at ease and asleep, the prophet feels the blast from heaven" (A. J. Heschel: Essential Writings, p. 63).

Rabbi Heschel believed that spirituality was not simply an ethereal experience of the transcendence. Rather, it is a power that makes claims on us. It expects us to work for righteousness. In his essay "What is Sin?" he offers these words: "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" (Ibid., p. 86).

* * *

During my student days at Yeshiva College and then later in Yeshiva's rabbinical school (1963-1970) I was attracted to the writings of Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel. I bought his books and read them eagerly. He articulated ideas that resonated strongly with me, as with so many others.

But I never actually met him in person, nor did I hear him lecture. Indeed, I read his books and was an avid member of his reading audience…but he was, in some sense, considered "off limits" to students at our Yeshiva. After all, we were an Orthodox institution, and our spiritual guides were expected to be fully identified with Orthodoxy. Rabbi Heschel taught at the Jewish Theological Seminary, the rabbinical school of the Conservative movement.

We students at Yeshiva lost an amazing opportunity to be in the presence of Rabbi Heschel. And he was deprived of the opportunity to interact directly with Orthodox rabbinical students. I believe he knew that his words, through his writings, were reaching us along with a much larger general readership. The breath of his voice continues to resonate.

References:

Abraham Joshua Heschel: Essential Writings, ed. Susannah Heschel, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, 2011.

God in Search of Man, Harper Torchbooks, New York, 1955.

Kotzk: The Struggle for Integrity, Maggid Press, Jerusalem, 2015 (Hebrew).

Man is Not Alone, Jewish Publication Society of America, Philadelphia, 1951.

The Insecurity of Freedom: Essays on Human Existence, Farrar, Straus And Giroux, New York, 1967.

nce, Farrar, Straus And Giroux, New York, 1967.