

A Quest for Holiness The Hasidic Background of A. J. Heschel's Philosophy of Religion

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1.

Abraham Joshua Heschel is one of the transitional figures, Jews from Eastern Europe but having spent most of their productive lives in the West, particularly in the United States, like Joseph Dov Soloveitchik (1903–1993) or Menahem Mendel Schneerson (1902–1994).

Heschel was born into an important Hasidic family in Warsaw in 1907, was raised as a Hasid, and was considered a future leader of his dynasty. However, later on, in his teens, he moved to Vilna to study at the secular, Yiddish-language Real-Gymnasium (1925–1927), and then to Berlin, to study philosophy at Friedrich Wilhelm (now Humboldt) University (1927–1931).

As a student of philosophy, Heschel was confronted first of all with Neo-Kantian thinking, prevalent in German universities in the '20s and at the beginning of the '30s of the 20th century. Unlike J. D. Soloveitchik, who studied the Neo-Kantian system thoroughly, wrote a dissertation on the Neo-Kantian philosophy of Hermann Cohen, and later applied many Kantian and Neo-Kantian elements to his own religious philosophy, Heschel used a rather phenomenological approach¹ when studying Biblical prophecy, on which he wrote his dissertation, entitled *Das prophetische Bewusstsein*, published in 1936 as *Die Prophetie*,² and in 1962 as an expanded English version under the title *The Prophets*.³ In the '30s, which were quite difficult for a Jewish intellectual living and teaching in Germany (he gave lectures at the Berlin Jüdisches Lehrhaus and in 1937 he was invited by Martin Buber to Frankfurt-am-Main to become a co-director of the Central Organization for Jewish Education and the Jüdisches Lehrhaus), Heschel wrote a series of articles and books on great Talmudic rabbis and medieval Jewish philosophers, such as Maimonides,⁴ Ibn Gabirol,⁵ and Isaac Abravanel.⁶ The main reason for doing that was, besides Heschel's academic interests, to show the greatness of Jewish luminaries of the past, in order to strengthen the frustrated and persecuted Jewish population in Germany.⁷

When Heschel, "a brand plucked from the fire", according to his own words,⁸ found a safe haven in the United States and became a professor of Jewish philosophy, first at the Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati, Ohio, later at the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York, he soon realized that his life mission would be to contribute to a renewal of Jewish spirituality, which had been heavily damaged by the modern industrial society. It is

¹ "He was a phenomenologist. He held that discursive reason, while essential, was, alone, inadequate to penetrate the inner recesses of religion. This could better be achieved through a description of the religious phenomena themselves, which, much as the artist's canvas, would have the power to evoke another level of comprehension." Dresner, Samuel H.: *Heschel, Hasidism and Halakha*, New York 2002, 63.

² Heschel, Abraham: *Die Prophetie*, Kraków 1936.

³ Heschel, Abraham Joshua: *The Prophets*, New York 1962.

⁴ Heschel, Abraham: *Maimonides. Eine Biographie*, Berlin 1935.

⁵ Heschel, Abraham: "Der Begriff des Seins in der Philosophie Gabirols", in: *Festschrift Jakob Freimann zum 70. Geburtstag*, Berlin 1937, 68–77. – "Der Begriff der Einheit in der Philosophie Gabirols", in: *Monatschrift für Geschichte und Wissenschaft des Judentums* 82, 1938, 889–111. – "Das Wesen der Dinge nach der Lehre Gabirols", in: *Hebrew Union College Annual* 14, 359–385.

⁶ Heschel, Abraham: *Don Jizchak Abravanel*, Berlin 1937.

⁷ Later, in the United States, he also published a study on Saadia Gaon's philosophy: *The Quest for Certainty in Saadia's Philosophy*, New York 1944.

⁸ "I am a brand plucked from the fire in which my people was burned to death. I am a brand plucked from the fire of an altar of Satan on which millions of human lives were exterminated to evil's greater glory..." Heschel, Abraham Joshua: "No Religion Is an Island", in: Heschel, Abraham Joshua: *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity*, New York 1997, 235.

symptomatic that his first scholarly publications written in English were *An Analysis of Piety*,⁹ *The Holy Dimension*,¹⁰ and *Faith*,¹¹ topics quite far away from traditional philosophical themes. His shift from purely academic studies to religiously oriented philosophy had personal reasons. First, he himself experienced a sense of alienation and vanity during his student years in Berlin: one day, when walking through the streets of Berlin, he suddenly noticed that the sun had gone down and he had forgotten to pray. He expressed his shock in quite an emotional way: “I had forgotten God – I had forgotten Sinai – I had forgotten that sunset is my business – that my task is to ‘restore the world to the kingship of the Lord’.”¹² An apparently secularized Jewish student of philosophy suddenly realized that what gave substance to his life was his Hasidic upbringing and Hasidic spiritual heritage. Second, Heschel lost part of his closest family, his mother and three sisters, in the Shoah. And third, not only his family but the whole world of Eastern European Jewry, his spiritual homeland, vanished in the Holocaust; Heschel felt obligated to bear witness to the greatness of his former fellows and ancestors to the world, not only through his involvement in social and political issues, but in his theoretical writings as well.

2.

One of Heschel’s projects was to write a chronicle of Hasidic life from its very beginnings in the 18th century up to the time of his youth. He did not want to follow the pattern of the representatives of the *Wissenschaft des Judentums* in the 19th century who were writing voluminous works on Jewish history, obviously with an apologetic accent, to present Judaism to the broader public, non-Jewish included, as a valuable part of the general history of Western civilization.¹³ Instead of the history of the movement, for Heschel it was much more important to create a gallery of portraits of the greatest personalities of different Hasidic courts and to paint a lively picture of their lives, thoughts, and deeds. Unlike the two “religious anarchists”, Martin Buber and Gershom Scholem, who helped greatly to mend the image of Hasidism through their books, which became quite popular in Western Europe, Heschel was an authentic Hasid, in a sense, who was seriously concerned about the future of the Hasidic heritage. While the “neo-Hasid” Buber, in his *Tales of the Hasidim*, as well as in his other texts that dealt with Hasidism, pursued his own “mystical” or “existential” agenda, and for Scholem Hasidism was one of the culminations of the spiritual (revivalist) movement begun by Shabbetai Tzvi in the 17th century (besides Haskalah, Reform, and Zionism), Heschel considered Hasidism a specific way of life in which external material conditions were endowed with powerful spiritual content, where life meant living in the constant presence of God.

For some reasons, which were not known even to his closest friends and students, Heschel never materialized the plan fully, and left only a torso behind. It would be natural, of course, to expect from him a comprehensive study on the founder of Hasidism, Baal Shem Tov, and Heschel himself took steps to prepare such a volume, but unfortunately only a handful of preliminary studies (and not all of those ready to be published) remained.¹⁴ At the

⁹ Heschel, Abraham Joshua: “An Analysis of Piety”, in: *Review of Religion* 6, 3 (March), 1942, 293–307.

¹⁰ Heschel, Abraham Joshua: “The Holy Dimension”, in: *Journal of Religion* 23, 2 (April), 1943, 117–124.

¹¹ Heschel, Abraham Joshua: “Faith”, in: *The Reconstructionist* 10, 13, 1944, 10–14 (Part I); 10, 14, 12–16 (Part II).

¹² Heschel, Abraham Joshua: *Man’s Quest for God*, New York 1954, 96.

¹³ An almost indispensable part of these historical books was condemnations of the Hasidic “drunkards and sorcerers” who should not have a place in mainstream Judaism, either in teaching and liturgy; Hasidic “irrationalism” was a stumbling block for the *maskilim*, Jewish scholars who cherished the Western intellectual style of *clare et distincte*.

¹⁴ They were edited by Samuel H. Dresner; see Heschel, Abraham Joshua: *The Circle of the Baal Shem Tov. Studies in Hasidism*, Chicago – London 1985.

end of his life, Heschel wrote a monumental book in Yiddish on Rabbi Menahem Mendel of Kotzk,¹⁵ part of which appeared in English in another text by Heschel, *A Passion for Truth*. The use of Yiddish was not a freak of an aging author who in this way wished to pay homage to his mother tongue, to the language of his youth, but an expression of Heschel's opinion that to hand down Hasidic spiritual lore means not to rely on written resources, but rather to resort to the oral tradition. It is a well-known fact that a huge part of the Hasidic texts at our disposal are translations into poor Hebrew and, according to Heschel, they miss the core of the Hasidic legacy, which resides in the living word:

Some oral statements have survived which are more correct than their literary form. While the oral tradition preserved what was spoken by the rabbis, the literary text conveys them only as they were translated into Hebrew. One who has been close to Hasidic life knows with what reverence the words of the Masters were transmitted after they were 'heard'. One literally lived with them, was nourished by them: every effort was taken to transmit such words accurately.¹⁶

But Heschel was not primarily a scholar on Hasidism; from the time he left the narrow confines of his Hasidic milieu in Poland his mission was to partly adapt the Hasidic worldview to the modern world and offer a cure for the malaise of the alienated Western society. Nevertheless, it is to be regretted that Heschel did not pass on more of his unique knowledge of Hasidism – particularly after the loss of so many written documents in the Shoah – as well as of its critical evaluation. In the words of Samuel Dresner, one of Heschel's closest disciples and friends:

Descendant of a Hasidic dynasty and heir of the living tradition at its most vital source, master of the philosophical and historical-critical method of the West, and possessing unusual creative gifts, Heschel was perhaps the one scholar who might have given us the definitive work on Hasidism.¹⁷

3.

The imprint of Heschel's Hasidic-oriented thinking is manifest in his philosophy. His main philosophical works are *Man Is Not Alone* (1951) and *God in Search of Man* (1955), but the outlines of Heschel's philosophical system are to be found to a certain degree in a small book, *The Earth Is the Lord's: The Inner World of the Jew in Eastern Europe* (1950). As the title reminds us, it is a portrait of the everyday life of Eastern European, mainly Hasidic, Jews. But it is not merely a chronicle, an idealized picture of a lost world; for Heschel it is essential to keep the ideas and spiritual values of Hasidism alive. So he has to identify them and implement them into his own philosophical system. As a philosopher, Heschel very much appreciated the long chain of philosophical tradition in the Middle Ages, starting with Saadia Gaon's *Book of Beliefs and Opinions*, and culminating in the *Guide of the Perplexed* by Maimonides. But, for Heschel, this philosophy was a part of Spanish Sephardic culture, shaped by an elite, drawing mostly on sources foreign to Judaism, classical Greek philosophy and Arabic poetry. Sephardic Jewish intellectuals contributed greatly to the advancement of Western, European civilization, but, according to Heschel, "knowledge of Jewish lore does

¹⁵ Heschel, Abraham Joshua: Kotzk: In gerangl far emesdikayt, Tel Aviv 1973; a Hebrew translation: Kotzk: Bema'avak lema'an hayye emet, Jerusalem 2015.

¹⁶ Heschel, Kotzk, 9; English translation by S. H. Dresner, in: Dresner, Heschel, Hasidism and Halakha, 59.

¹⁷ Dresner: Heschel, Hasidism and Halakha, 75.

not seem to have been widespread among Spanish Jews”.¹⁸ The other great Jewish tradition, however, that of Eastern European Jews, the Ashkenazic, in which he himself had been immersed since his childhood, never produced great theological books such as Maimonides’ code (*Mishneh Torah*), nor cultivated poetry like that written by Solomon ibn Gabirol or Jehuda ha-Levi. However, the whole life of Ashkenazic Jews was deeply penetrated with love of God, with a feeling of his permanent presence in the reality of this world, which was celebrated not by writing scholarly texts but by serving God through keeping the commandments and by praying. According to Heschel, the mode of expression of the Sephardic Jews is static, measured, and logically arranged, while that of the Ashkenazic Jews is dynamic, lively, and enthusiastic. “Sephardic books are like neatly trimmed and cultivated parks, Ashkenazic writings like enchanted ancient forests...”, or, more dramatically, “Sephardic books are like Raphaellesque paintings, Ashkenazic books like the works of Rembrandt – profound, allusive, and full of hidden meanings”.¹⁹

Heschel’s philosophy follows this “Ashkenazic” pattern in both its form and content. His way of expression is highly allusive, sometimes enigmatic; he does not write long passages full of logical constructions or deductive or inductive reflexions. He uses quite short paragraphs that remind us of the Hasidic anecdotes recorded by Martin Buber. Heschel’s specific style is not self-serving or self-indulgent, but is consistent with the content of his philosophy. According to him, philosophy should not deal with lofty ideas but reflect the everyday reality of humans, their most profound concerns; for an Eastern European Jew, however, everything and every moment was permeated with God’s presence, his *Shekhina*. The whole life of an Eastern Jew was oriented towards Heaven, towards the *yihud*, the unification of the lower realms of reality with the upper through prayer and other forms of service of God. For Heschel, therefore, it was necessary that philosophy, on one side, should not lose awareness of the transcendent horizon of human life, and on the other side should not lose contact with the reality of here and now. Philosophy should not serve as a vehicle for utilitarian purposes, to become a methodology of natural sciences, or a superstructure of expedient existence, but must be an expression of the most fundamental values of human existence. Heschel was an admirer of Maimonides’ philosophy and very much appreciated what Maimonides had done for a philosophical articulation of the Jewish spiritual heritage. However, Maimonides’ strictly rationalist position, with his rejection of all kinds of anthropomorphisms and other “naïve” concepts of God, could undermine the very foundation of Jewish religious tradition, based on the collective, “popular” experience of the Sinai revelation, and lead to abstract views of the divine which bordered on negative theology. The controversies concerning divine attributes, so popular in the Middle Ages, give ample testimony of this. Heschel denies any conception that would deprive God of his creative presence in history and make him a kind of an “unmoved mover”. On the contrary, Heschel’s God is a Creator who has a stake in his creation, who even shares responsibility for its destiny with humans. God’s involvement with the world is the prerequisite of meaningful human existence.

To sense the meaning of existence is to live in accordance with the will of God; to grasp it rationally is the task of philosophy. Heschel does not oppose religion to philosophy; following Maimonides, he is convinced that authentic religion and true philosophy must

¹⁸ Heschel, Abraham Joshua: *The Earth Is the Lord’s: The Inner Life of the Jew in East Europe*, Woodstock 1995, 30.

¹⁹ Ibid. 31. One of the reasons of Heschel’s somehow critical attitude to Reform Judaism and the Science of Judaism (*Wissenschaft des Judentums*) was his conviction that their representatives held medieval Sephardic culture in high esteem and rejected Ashkenazic tradition. “The scholars of emancipated German Jewry saw in the Spanish period the ‘Golden Age’ of Jewish history, and celebrated it as a happy blend of progress and traditionalism upon which they desired to model their own course.” Heschel, Abraham Joshua: “The Two Great Traditions: The Sephardim and the Ashkenazim”, in: *Commentary* 5 (1948), 420.

correspond with each other. Philosophy and religion share common roots; both begin in wonder. Heschel rejects the Cartesian foundation of philosophy in doubt: “A philosophy that begins with radical doubt ends in radical despair.”²⁰ He would rather return to the Platonic concept: “Philosophy begins in wonder.”²¹ A religiously oriented mind does not take the world for granted, the essence of the universe cannot be exhausted by discovering and establishing the causal nexus within it, and the meaningfulness of existence should not be measured by expediency. There is something in nature that cannot be grasped, measured, or utilized; it is something majestic, sublime, that fills us with awe, that we cannot express in words, that we are able to sense solely through intuition, through our “sense of the ineffable”. Our reaction to it is a “radical amazement”. Both philosophy and religion aim to come to terms with the profoundest mystery of being, the ultimate meaning of all existence: “The tangible phenomena we scrutinize with our reason, the sacred and indemonstrable we overhear with the sense of the ineffable.”²² Therefore, philosophy and religion should cooperate; there is no “progress” from *mythos* to *logos*, from irrationalism to rationalism, from a lower stage of human thinking to a higher one, from religion to philosophy. Despite the fact that philosophy began in ancient Greece and is concerned with a rational description of what is stable, universal, and eternal, and the Bible has its origins in the Middle East and is concerned with events in the history of the people of Israel, that means with what is *prima facie* unstable, unique, and transient, there is no serious obstacle to them going along with each other. “Philosophy is reflective thinking, and philosophy of religion may be defined as religion’s reflection upon its basic insights and basic attitudes, as *radical self-understanding of religion in terms of its own spirit*.”²³ For Heschel, in a sense, the only authentic philosophy is philosophy of religion, and the only authentic religion is Biblical religion, one of its expressions being Judaism; therefore the philosophy he is primarily interested in is the philosophy of Judaism.

According to Heschel, philosophy of religion, or Judaism, cannot be a cold, analytic discipline; as there is no impartiality within religion, there is no detachment within philosophy. “There is a perpetual temptation for the analytic mind to classify religion under strict heads, to seal its facts with preconceived labels, as if reality had to fit the handy trade-marks of our theories...”²⁴ Philosophy of religion should not lose sight of the concrete and historical setting of the religion under scrutiny, nor should it forget about those who have ever lived their religion. Religion is not a system of dogmas, doctrines, commandments; it is lively experience of the “holy dimension” of the universe and human existence,²⁵ and the experience of being challenged, of being required, needed. *God in Search of Man* is not only the title of one of Heschel’s books; this is one of the foundation stones of his religious philosophy. The Bible is not a story of Israel’s quest for God, but God’s view of man and the universe conveyed by prophets and holy men. God needs man: “It is as if God were unwilling to be alone, and He had chosen man to serve Him.”²⁶ Yet to serve God does not mean slavery; it is rather a form of cooperation, of sharing. God asks and we respond; when we cry out to him, when we pray, we reply to the challenge of him. “Faith comes out of awe, out of awareness that we are exposed to His presence, out of anxiety to answer the challenge of God, out of

²⁰ Heschel, Abraham Joshua: *Man Is Not Alone. A Philosophy of Religion*, New York 1966, 13.

²¹ Plato: *Theatetus* 155D.

²² Heschel: *Man Is Not Alone*, 9.

²³ Heschel, Abraham Joshua: *God in Search of Man: A Philosophy of Judaism*, New York 1986, 8.

²⁴ Heschel: *Man Is Not Alone*, 229.

²⁵ “What gives rise to faith is not a sentiment, a state of mind, an aspiration, but an everlasting fact in the universe, something which is prior to and independent of human knowledge and experience – *the holy dimension* of all existence.” *Ibid.* 237.

²⁶ Heschel: *God in Search of Man*, 136.

awareness of our being called upon. Religion consists of *God's question and man's answer*.²⁷

“Speak unto all the congregation of the children of Israel, and say unto them, Ye shall be holy: for I the LORD your God *am* holy” (*Leviticus* 19:2). This is God’s ultimate question to which man has to respond. For Heschel, the main problem of religion is not how people view God but how God views man; the whole Bible is an appeal to man to fulfil the task with which he was charged when being created: “So God created man in his *own* image, in the image of God created he him...” (*Genesis* 1:27). God’s inspired messengers who brought the Bible into being were prophets, and through their prophecy people received the divine message of how they ought to be. “Prophecy, then, may be described as *exegesis of existence from a divine perspective*.”²⁸ The prophetic vision is not an insight into the mystery of being, neither of its origin, nor of its end. The Bible is not a theological or philosophical treatise; it is rather good news of the vivid relationship between God and man. “Biblical religion did not simply evolve from a reflection about an ultimate cause. Its premise rather seems to be that, just as there is an ultimate origin, there is an ultimate concern. Human life is life that God cares for and that is concerned with Him.”²⁹ This mutual concern finds its final expression in the call to man to become holy, to imitate divine holiness, to translate it into a human condition. Unlike the heathens, who, according to Heschel, considered the holy as numinous, as something wholly other which must be set apart and be revered, the Bible comes with a completely different concept of holiness: “The holy in the Bible is not a synonym for the weird. [...] The Holy is otherness as well as nonotherness. This is why it is possible to speak of God’s holiness as a pattern for man.”³⁰

4.

In this way Heschel philosophically articulates what is implicit in the Hasidic teachings: the ultimate meaning and end of human existence is to become holy. Holiness does not primarily mean moral perfection; it is rather a fundamental change of the ontological status of human beings, beginning with the radical amazement with which humans confront empirical reality, and culminating with devotion of the whole of human life to God, which is called piety. This is the main lesson of the founder of Hasidism, Israel ben Eliezer, or the Baal Shem Tov (acronym the Besht) (1690/1700-1760), “Master of the Good Name”, of Mezbizh (in today’s Southern Ukraine; Polish: Miedzyborz). He taught that no place was devoid of the Divine, that there was nothing in man that could not serve as a vehicle for Divine force. Attachment to God did not require seclusion or isolation from this world; on the contrary, it was possible even during mundane activities, while carrying out tasks of everyday life. Nearness to God was no longer reserved to learned men, scholars, and rabbis, but access to God was open to the unlearned, poor, and oppressed. “Thus, unlike the sages of the past, who delivered discourses *about* God, the Baal Shem [...] brought God to every man.”³¹ “Bringing God” is probably not the right word; a better one would be “discovering” God in all things around us, but, even more, in ourselves. This idea of the intimate closeness of humans and God haunted the young Heschel so much that he expressed it in one of his Yiddish poems called *I and You*, where for the first time he articulated the concept that man and God are somehow identical:

Transmissions flow from your heart to Mine,
trading, twining my pain with yours.

²⁷ Ibid. 137.

²⁸ Heschel, Abraham Joshua: The Prophets, New York 2001, xxvii.

²⁹ Ibid. 357.

³⁰ Ibid. 293.

³¹ Heschel, Abraham Joshua: A Passion for Truth, Woodstock 1995, 6.

Am I not – you? Are you not – I?

[...]

I live in Me and in you.
Through your lips goes a word from Me to Me,
from your eyes drips a tear – its source in Me.

When a need pains You, alarm me!
When You miss a human being
tear open my door!
You live in Yourself, You live in me.³²

The Baal Shem Tov did not only bring new insights and ideas to impoverished Jewish folk in Eastern Europe, but also created a new kind of personality – a Hasid, a pious person, and a tzaddik, an almost divine being able to strengthen the faint hearts of the poor Jewish masses through mystical unification with the sphere of the Divine.

The Baal Shem brought about a radical shift in the religious outlook of Jewry. In ancient times the sanctuary in Jerusalem had been the holy center from which expiation and blessing radiated out to the world. But the sanctuary was in ruins, the soul of Israel in mourning. Then the Baal Shem established a new center: the tzaddik, the rebbe – he was to be the sanctuary. For the Baal Shem believed that a man could be the true dwelling place of the Divine.³³

The Besht's teaching was the opposite of the approaches to the world that had prevailed among East European Jews in previous times. Under the influence of medieval German pietism and Kabbalah, and with the experience of apparently senseless persecution, Ashkenazic Jews were inclined more to strive for transcendent values than to fight for an improvement of their worldly situation. A long tradition of self-accusation for the tragedies of the Jewish people that was already present at the birth of rabbinic Judaism strongly influenced the style of behaviour and of reflection of Eastern Jews. The sense of the power of omnipresent evil and of the necessity of the redemption of the world led them to a hypercritical assessment of their faults and sins and, consequently, to ascetic practices that were intended to eliminate the evil urge in them. They often fasted and underwent bodily mortifications and in their prayers they confessed their unworthiness and disgracefulness; their view of the world was gloomy and sad. "Then came rabbi Israel Baal Shem, in the eighteenth century, and brought heaven down to earth. He and his disciples, the Hasidim, banished melancholy from the soul and uncovered the ineffable delight of being a Jew."³⁴

Heschel's attitude towards the world was similar to that of the Besht. While warning against the worship of nature and its beauties, he cherished the material world as basically good ("and God saw that *it* was good") but laid stress on the Biblical concept of desacralized nature, completely dependent on God's will. A religious man is aware of the natural laws, of the reliable regularity of the cosmos, but for him this order is heteronomous, it is the expression of God's supreme power over nature. People can search for the laws of nature and can organize their life in accordance with them, but it is not up to man to enter the innermost sanctuary of being, to understand the deepest mystery of creation. "God stands between man

³² Heschel, Abraham Joshua: The Ineffable Name of God: Man. Poems, New York – London 2004, 31.

³³ Heschel: Passion, 4-5.

³⁴ Heschel: The Earth, 75.

and the world,”³⁵ says Heschel; the world serves as an allusion to the ultimate meaning. A religious person is not satisfied with what is given but searches for what is beyond; so also should a philosopher of religion. The first step to the foundation of an authentic philosophy of religion is, according to Heschel, to feel the presence of God in everyday reality, to be amazed, to sense the ineffable. To be a religious philosopher is not a neutral occupation, it is to enjoy the nearness of God, to articulate God’s message to man in philosophical terms, to rationally express the meaningfulness of existence. In this sense the spirit of Heschel’s philosophy is almost identical with the religious mood of the Baal Shem Tov.

5.

The other personality that was enormously instrumental for Heschel was Menachem Mendel of Kotzk (eastern Poland), called the Kotzker (1787-1859). He was originally a faithful follower of the Besht but his stress was not so much on “love” as on “truth”. Particularly in the last decades of his life, he devoted himself fully to a search for truth; he would be ready to sacrifice everything to this uncompromising hunt for truth. The Kotzker was terribly serious about life; his severity was frightening. Heschel was strongly influenced by this attitude, which helped to formulate his own search for truth as his life programme. Heschel’s philosophy was therefore based on two pillars: that of Baal Shem Tov and that of the Kotzker. But this was not a static situation, a balance; both Hasidic giants affected Heschel in a different manner, very often even in opposite ways. Heschel himself described the situation as ambivalent: “In a very strange way, I found my soul at home with the Baal Shem but driven by the Kotzker.” And then he asks: “Was it good to live with one’s heart torn between the joy of Mezbizh and the anxiety of Kotzk?”³⁶ Heschel expressed this strange kind of dialectics in a series of antithetical statements: “The Baal Shem dwelled in my life like a lamp, while the Kotzker struck like lightning”... “The Baal Shem gave me wings; the Kotzker encircled me with chain”... And finally: “The Kotzker’s presence recalls the nightmare of mendacity. The presence of the Baal Shem is an assurance that falsehood dissolves into compassion through the power of love. The Baal Shem suspends sadness, the Kotzker enhances it. The Baal Shem helped me to refine my sense of immediate mystery; the Kotzker warned me of the constant peril of forfeiting authenticity.”³⁷

Why was the Kotzker so important to Heschel, although he caused him this spiritual anguish? While the central word of the Besht’s teaching was “love”, *ahavah*, that of the Kotzker’s was “truth”, *emet*. Truth precedes love: “Truth leads to love, whereas love may be blind and yield to untruth.”³⁸ Rabbi Mendel was concerned with the “trivialization” of Hasidism, of its becoming a routine; he was not content with the view that God can easily be found in this world, that God can reveal himself to everyone according to his or her capacities. Life was too serious for him, it was not to be wasted in mundane activities and mechanical study and prayer, it was not to be run through in superficiality and shallowness. The true and ultimate meaning of human existence consisted in the search for truth on a daily basis, “as if it had not been known before”.³⁹ The truth is not accessible to everyone; it requires total abandonment of the self, the total sacrifice of one’s life. Why? Heschel quotes from the Midrash (*Genesis Rabba* 8,5):

When God was about to create Adam, the ministering angels split into contending groups. Some said, “Let him be created!” while others cried, “Let

³⁵ Heschel: *Man Is Not Alone*, 283.

³⁶ Heschel: *Passion*, xiv.

³⁷ *Ibid.* xv.

³⁸ *Ibid.* 164.

³⁹ *Ibid.* 11.

him not be created!” That is why it is written: “Mercy and truth collided, righteousness and peace engaged in a clash” (Psalms 85:11). Mercy said, “Let him be created, for he will do merciful deeds.” Truth said, “Let him not be created, for he will be false.” Righteousness said, “Let him be created, for he will do righteous deeds. Peace said, “Let him not be created, for he will never cease quarrelling. What did the Holy One, blessed be He, do? He took Truth and cast it into the ground.⁴⁰

According to Heschel’s interpretation, the truth is incompatible with human existence. He quotes ancient Greek and Latin authors who speak of the inaccessibility of the truth, but according to him the Midrash indicates “either – or”, either truth or man. “While the image of truth being out of man’s reach was known to the skeptics of antiquity, the thought stressed in this parable goes further in maintaining that truth is not congruous with man; it disagrees with his very being.”⁴¹ Or, in a more poetic and dramatic way, “man’s very existence is founded upon the tomb in which Truth is imprisoned”.⁴²

This idea of the fundamental incongruence of man and truth was complemented with a feeling of an unbridgeable gap between man and God. The Besht taught the preciousness of the world, of all existence, because it is endowed with the divine presence. People should not avoid living in the reality of this world in order to reach what is above, in the heavens. The Kotzker, on the other hand, taught the falseness of the world; people do not live in a real world, they live in a world of veils, in a world of phantoms. Everything is only an illusion because there is a lack of truth in the world, and what seems to be truth is a fake: “Everything in the world can be imitated and made to appear like the real product – all but the truth, because the truth that has been labelled falsely is not truth any longer.”⁴³ To live in such a world is itself to pretend to be alive. “As a result, man dies while yet alive. Who can speak of resurrection when life itself has become death?”⁴⁴ This is why the Kotzker literally abandoned the world and went into seclusion; he spent his last twenty years alone, isolated from the world. He was not an adherent of asceticism, self-affliction, and mortification, but he was horrified by the corruption of the world and inauthenticity of human existence. He denied the almost “automatic” and spontaneous omnipresence of God, heralded by the Besht; his maxim was that God is only there where he is allowed to enter. To open a door that God could enter means to live in a steady and unceasing process of self-examination and repentance. While the Besht enabled access to God to masses of Jewish people and stressed the democratic character of Judaism, the Kotzker, with the almost superhuman requirements he imposed upon himself and his disciples, emphasized rather the “aristocratic” aspects of Jewish tradition, Judaism for the chosen, for spiritual champions.

Heschel was fascinated by this heroic attempt to live in the search for truth. While he did not share the Kotzker’s contempt for this world, he agreed with him that the greatest human sin is to live in expediency, to lose from one’s horizon the transcendent meaning of existence which is the truth. “Existence without transcendence is a way of living where things become idols and idols become monsters.”⁴⁵ The truth cannot be found apart from God, because he is its origin and source. To live in obedience to the will of God is the prerequisite for attaining the truth; in this the Kotzker was an extremist when requiring a perfect and

⁴⁰ Ibid. 13.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Fox, Joseph: Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Kotzk. A Biographical Study of the Chasidic Master, New York 1988, 143.

⁴⁴ Heschel: Passion, 22.

⁴⁵ Heschel, Abraham Joshua: Who Is Man? Stanford 1978, 86.

absolute surrender to the will of God: “To fulfil an obligation? Not at all! Either everything or nothing. – A complete gentile is better than a half Jew.”⁴⁶ Heschel would agree that man has to make an effort to fulfil such of his duties towards God as he is capable of. But the Kotzker’s excessive demands for denial of the world and self-denial were too much; they were beyond the standards of traditional Judaism. There is no doubt that it is not enough to fulfil God’s commandments only externally; there must also be internal aspects. A medieval thinker stated: “We [...] are duty bound to serve the Creator both outwardly and inwardly. *Outwardly*, through the duties of the limbs [...]. *Inwardly*, through the duties of the heart [...].”⁴⁷ For Heschel both aspects must be present in order to live an authentic Jewish life and strive for holiness. The Kotzker wanted both aspects to be separated, the quest for holiness being incompatible with the concern for worldly affairs. “I came into the world to discriminate between holiness and outwardness,” Heschel quotes him.⁴⁸ In this, according to Heschel, the Kotzker is very close to a Christian radical, Søren Kierkegaard; a part of *A Passion for Truth* (as well as its Yiddish counterpart, *Kotzk*) is devoted to a comparative study of both thinkers. Yet there is a saying of Rabbi Mendel that seems to be less harsh, making a concession to the human condition, which would be acceptable for Heschel. Quoting from *Exodus 22:30*, “And ye shall be holy men unto me,” the Kotzker used to say:

This means that your holiness should be a human kind of holiness, and your human deeds should be holy. This is the quality of holiness that was requested of men. The Holy One Blessed Be He has no lack of angels. He wants holy men who are humanly holy.⁴⁹

Heschel’s demands go exactly this way. He does not require man to forsake the world. On the contrary, in accordance with the rabbinic tradition, he wants to pull the heavenly down to the earth. “The Halakhah does not aspire to a heavenly transcendence, nor does it seek to soar upon the wings of some abstract, mysterious spirituality. It fixes its gaze upon concrete, empirical reality and does not allow its attention to be diverted from it,” says Heschel’s fellow and “opponent”, *mitnagged*, Joseph Soloveitchik.⁵⁰ For him, as well for Heschel, to live according to the will of God, revealed in the Halakhah, means to sanctify the world, the empirical reality. While Soloveitchik wanted the “theoretical” Halakhah to be translated into practical commandments, *mitzvot*, and through their performance the world to get closer to its “ideal” Halakhic pattern, Heschel laid stress rather on a life in accord with the “holy dimension” of reality, a pious life. “Piety is thus a mode of living. It is the orientation of human inwardness toward the holy”⁵¹ – in these words we can hear the Baal Shem Tov. Yet,

[p]iety is the direct opposite of selfishness. [...] [The pious man] is aware of both the shabbiness of human life and the meagerness and insufficiency of human service; and so, to protect the inner wholesomeness and purity of devotion from being defiled by interference from the petty self, he strives toward self-exclusion, self-forgetfulness and an inner anonymity of service.⁵²

This is in accord with the profoundest conviction of the Kotzker that in the search for truth men have to abandon themselves. Heschel in his philosophy has absorbed both

⁴⁶ Fox: Rabbi Menachem Mendel, 141.

⁴⁷ Ibn Paquda, Bachya ben Joseph: *Duties of the Heart*, Jerusalem – New York 1999, 11.

⁴⁸ Heschel: *Passion*, 168.

⁴⁹ Fox: Rabbi Menachem Mendel, 144.

⁵⁰ Soloveitchik, Joseph Dov: *Halakhic Man*, Philadelphia 1983, 92.

⁵¹ Heschel: *Man Is Not Alone*, 278.

⁵² *Ibid.* 279.

the graciousness of the Besht and the rigorousness of the Kotzker. These two poles of his Hasidic orientation are, for him, not mutually exclusive but complementary. Love and truth are two sides of one coin – of life in the presence of God, of life in holiness.

6.

Heschel's philosophy has often been labelled as poetic, mystical, irrational, and lacking logical links among the different parts of his philosophical "system". It is true that his way of expression is quite unusual for those who are used to working with notions and concepts bearing on the strict laws of logic. However, philosophy for Heschel is not a science that would discover natural, economic, or social laws to be used in the exploitation of the world. The very essence of philosophy consists, according to him, in the articulation of what is ineffable, what transcends the worldly reality. And this requires a very specific style of demonstration; a Heschelian philosopher cannot operate with traditional figures of thinking because the ultimate meaning transcends the sphere where logic can be applied. "The universe, Being itself, cannot offer an answer to the question of the meaning of the universe, or the meaning of being, since the question seeks to assess being in terms other than being, in terms exceeding the universe."⁵³ On the level of human existence the application of strict logic which would handle man as *animal rationale*, a civilized or cultured beast, might even cause a disaster in the self-perception of humankind: "Indeed, in giving up the anxiety for meaning, man would cease to be human; logical positivism's gain would be humanity's loss."⁵⁴ This is why Heschel has recourse to the Hasidic manner of dealing with existential issues: allusions, metaphors, anecdotes.

More important, however, is Heschel's somehow problematic conviction that true philosophy is a philosophy of religion, which basically excludes any neutral, indifferent approach to reality. Philosophy of religion cannot express a unique religious experience in universal terms; specific religions cannot be exemplifications of general laws. Thus, in working out his own philosophy, Heschel presupposes a particular religious consciousness, not only of himself as the author but also of those who would like to understand his ideas. To comprehend Heschel, one must go beyond the plain meaning of his texts, to uncover the hidden strata of his thinking. His Hasidic background might be the key to gaining access to his unusual but stimulating way of philosophizing. And both great teachers of the Hasidic tradition, the Besht and the Kotzker, have left their imprint on Heschel's philosophy that is an ultimate expression of his way of living:

For Heschel, as for the Kotzker [...], Truth was not a doctrine or a metaphysic but integrity of personal existence. What the Baal Shem and the Kotzker treated as an either/or, Heschel somehow combined: for the former love and compassion were higher than truth; for the latter a man's love and goodness were shame if he himself was false. Heschel demanded compassion and truth together. Both have for him a single source: the awareness of the ineffable.⁵⁵

Heschel's philosophy can be characterized as an unceasing search for truth hidden in the recesses of human existence; on the one hand, it is cultivating the ability to grasp what seems to be completely out of reach, on the other hand, it is a continuous process of rational reflexion, not allowing the human psyche to fall into a trap of illusion and fantasy. "Honesty, authenticity, integrity without love may lead to the ruin of others, of oneself, or both. On the

⁵³ Heschel: *Who Is Man?* 71.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.* 72.

⁵⁵ Friedman, Maurice S.: *Abraham Joshua Heschel. Philosopher of Wonder. Our Thirty-Year Friendship and Dialogue*, Eugene (OR) 2012, 40-41.

other hand, love, fervor, or exaltation alone may seduce us into living in a fool's Paradise – a wise man's Hell.”⁵⁶

Abstract

Abraham Joshua Heschel's atypical philosophy has quite often led to critical assessments and controversies with respect to its content and form. The essay aims to show that both the fundamentals and structure of Heschel's philosophical thinking stem from the Hasidic milieu into which he was born and in which he received his rabbinical education. The decisive roles played by two of his spiritual teachers, the founder of the Hasidic movement Israel Baal Shem Tov (the Besht) and a dissident of the sixth generation of Hasidim Menahem Mendel of Kotzk (the Kotzker), in shaping Heschel's thought are pointed out, and the creative tension between the Besht's graciousness and optimism and the Kotzker's rigorousness and pessimism is highlighted. Heschel's own philosophy is then considered an attempt to mediate between these two opposing poles of the Hasidic heritage and to reach a kind of synthesis. In the spirit of the Hasidic attitude to the world, Heschel's philosophy is not a disinterested reflexion of reality but an unceasing effort to grasp the ultimate meaning of all existence, which is Truth or God, through living in accordance with the divine will, in a life in holiness.

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⁵⁶ Heschel: *Passion*, xv.

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