

HESCHEL,  
HASIDISM,  
and HALAKHA

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# Heschel

DYING WITH A "KISS" (DECEMBER 1972)

LET US BEGIN at the end.

Several years before Abraham Heschel's death in 1972, he suffered a near-fatal heart attack from which he never fully recovered. I traveled to his apartment in New York to see him. He had gotten out of bed for the first time to greet me and was sitting in the living room when I arrived, looking weak and pale. He spoke slowly and with some effort, almost in a whisper. I strained to hear his words.

"Sam," he said, "when I regained consciousness, my first feelings were not of despair or anger. I felt only gratitude to God for my life, for every moment I had lived. I was ready to depart. 'Take me, O Lord,' I thought, 'I have seen so many miracles in my lifetime.'"<sup>1</sup>

Exhausted by the effort, he paused for a moment, then added: "That is what I meant when I wrote [in the preface to his book of Yiddish poems]":

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

*"Khob gebetn vunder anshtot glik, un du host zey mir gegeben."*

Leaving Heschel's home, I walked alone, in silence, aimlessly, oblivious of others, depressed by the knowledge that the man who meant so much to so many was mortally ill.

I pondered his words. What had he meant by them? Was it possible to accept death so easily? Death. Faceless enemy, fearsome monster who devours our days, confounds the philosopher, silences the poet, and reduces the mighty to offer-

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An earlier version of this chapter appeared in *Abraham Joshua Heschel: Exploring His Life and Thought*, ed. John C. Merkle (New York: Macmillan, c1985), pp. 3-27.

ing all their gold, in vain, for yet another hour! Was he telling me not to grieve overmuch, thinking of my feelings when he was moving toward the end of all feeling? Could he have been consoling me?

Suddenly there rang in my mind the striking passage with which he had concluded his first major work, *Man Is Not Alone*:

Our greatest problem is not how to continue but how to return. "How can I repay unto the Lord all his bountiful dealings with me?" (Psalms 116:12). When life is an answer, death is a home-coming. . . .

The deepest wisdom man can attain is to know that his destiny is to aid, to serve. . . . This is the meaning of death: the ultimate self-dedication to the divine. Death so understood will not be distorted by the craving for immortality, for this act of giving away is reciprocity on man's part for God's gift of life. For the pious man it is a privilege to die.<sup>2</sup>

And I found myself recalling a Hasidic teaching he often quoted. "There are three ascending levels of mourning: with tears—that is the lowest. With silence—that is higher. And with a song—that is the highest."

I understood then what it was I had experienced: the lesson that how a man meets death is a sign of how he has met life. Intimations of melody countered my sadness. At that moment the power of the human spirit, mortal and frail though it is, never seemed so strong.

Ten days before his death, Heschel had taped a television interview for NBC and was asked by the interviewer at the close of the program if he had a special message for young people. He nodded his head and seemed to turn to the future he would never see.

"Remember that there is meaning beyond absurdity.

"Know that every deed counts,

"That every word is power. . . .

"Above all, remember that you must build your life,

"As if it were a work of art. . . ."

The day before his death, Heschel insisted upon traveling

to Connecticut to stand outside a federal prison in the freezing snow, waiting for the release of a friend, a priest, who had been jailed for civil protest.

He died on the Sabbath eve, in his sleep, peacefully, with a "kiss," as the ancient Rabbis describe the death of those who die on the Sabbath. At his bedside were two books: one a Hasidic classic, the other a work on the war in Vietnam. The combination was symbolic. The two books represented two different worlds: eternal spirit and mundane present, mysticism and diplomacy, heaven and earth. Most choose one over the other. Heschel refused to ignore either, preferring to live in the tension of polarity.

After the close of the Sabbath and before the funeral a strange gathering of friends collected in his home to comfort the family: there were several former students, a Hasidic rabbi, an esteemed writer on the Holocaust, a well-known Catholic priest, and Heschel's last disciple, the son of the founder of a Japanese sect.

How to mourn? with tears, with silence, with a song?

#### HUMAN GRANDEUR AND DIGNITY

In a time of such madness that the earth threatens to explode in our hands, how else to preserve sanity than by recalling saints of old with whom to commune, by pouring over enlightened texts from which to regain insight, and, above all, by identifying one who faced the absurd and the demonic and yet triumphed: who dared speak, even sing, of the glory of God and the marvel of man, of heavenly grace and human compassion? In a period of divine eclipse, it is well to focus on the life and work of someone upon whom Heaven's light continued to shine.

In some ways it would be easier to treat Heschel the philosopher, the biblical scholar, or even the poet, for then an area of investigation would be marked out and the printed word available for all to examine. To discuss Heschel the man, however, is another matter—perhaps a more difficult

matter. Not only his words, but also his dreams, his deeds, his entire life now become the subject of inquiry.

Inquiries such as this are fraught with danger, because ours is an age that flaunts irreverence, when debunking has taken on all the trappings of a national sport, and when historians revel in revealing the clay feet of the mightiest. Heschel himself once observed that "Suspect thy neighbor as thyself" had become the newly emended version of the commandment. Contemporary biographers, nurtured in this subversive view of humanity, tend to be skeptical of human dignity.

However, a major theme of Heschel's writings was human grandeur and dignity. For this, we find no argument more compelling than his works. As a youth, he titled his first book of poems *Der Shem Hameforash: Mentsh* (Man: The Ineffable Name of God). For our purpose, the question is not so much what he intended by his defense of human grandeur as how his views were related to his own life. "My father," his daughter has testified, "was the kind of man he wrote about."<sup>3</sup> Could he have written the following passage, for example, without experiencing something of what he wrote?

Awareness of God is as close to him [the pious man] as the throbbing of his own heart, often deep and calm but at times overwhelming, intoxicating, setting the soul afire. The momentous reality of God stands there as peace, power and endless tranquility, as an inexhaustible source of help, as boundless compassion, as an open gate awaiting prayer. It sometimes happens that the life of a pious man becomes so involved in God that his heart overflows as though it were a cup in the hand of God.<sup>4</sup>

#### MASTER STYLIST

A master of English prose, though he knew little of that language when he arrived in America in 1940, Heschel, like his Hasidic forebears, had the gift of combining profundity with simplicity. He found just the right word not only to

express what he thought but also to evoke what he felt, startling the mind and delighting the heart as well as addressing and challenging the whole person. So compelling are his sentences that a single paragraph often offers an embarrassment of riches. One reader, overwhelmed by this plenty, suggested studying Heschel like a page of the Talmud, that is, weighing with care each sentence, each phrase, each word. In contrast to the sustained thinking of Heschel's writings, and following the adage that less is more, the reader may at times want to stand still and dwell upon the kernel of a word, or a phrase, or a sentence, that he might better taste the whole loaf of Heschel's thought. There are passages in his writings that, once encountered, will be taken up again and again, until they are absorbed into one's inner life.

#### THE DIVINE IMAGE

"Emblazoned over the gates of the world in which we live is the escutcheon of the demons. The mark of Cain in the face of man has come to overshadow the likeness of God"—so Heschel wrote while still living in Hitler's Germany.<sup>5</sup>

The nineteenth century saw the shaking of the foundations of faith in God. We who dwell in the twentieth-first century have experienced the collapse of faith in the rival who was to replace Him: man. Poets applaud the absurd, novelists explore the decadent, and men prostrate themselves before the deities of lust and power. Our obsession is with human flesh. The ghoul who devours it is the latest film craze; the science of feeding it, firming it up, and preparing it for fornication is the most popular theme in literature. Daring to affirm common pieties such as marriage and children is to be subversive, while deconstruction obliterates all meaning but orgasm, which reigns supreme. Daily we are bombarded with lurid reports on the mass-killer, the rapist, and the corrupt bureaucrat. The fantasies of even little children are now peopled with perverts and the radiated dead.

Who will speak for those who do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly? At such a time we need nothing so much as to be reminded of the divine image in which we are framed, of our purpose on earth. I know of no writer who has done this more powerfully, eloquently, and convincingly than Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel.

He knew he was the descendent of a people who, ever since Sinai, was destined to "dwell apart" and whose vocation was to be a witness to the living God amidst all the idolatries of history. Because he was spared from the flames that devoured his family, his community, and the whole irreplaceable world of learning and piety of Eastern Europe, which alone could have produced him, Heschel felt a special burden had been placed upon his shoulders. He reminded us, with a testimony all the more convincing from one who had experienced consummate evil, that, despite the absurdity and the apathy, our world is marked by mystery and meaning, by wonder and joy; that we have the power to do God's will; and that the divine image in which we are framed can be distorted but not obliterated. In the end, he believed, the likeness of God will triumph over the mark of Cain.

#### SHALEM

Who was Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel? He was *shalem*, a person marvelously whole.

#### *Environment*

Consider the worlds of his *environment*.

Born in Warsaw, Poland, in 1907, a descendent of an illustrious line of Hasidic rabbis, Heschel, even from early childhood, was viewed with great expectations. When he was four or five, scholars would place him on a table and interrogate him for the surprising and amusing answers he would give.

When his father died during his ninth year, there were

those who wanted the young boy to succeed him almost at once. He had already mastered many of the classical religious texts; he had begun to write, and the words he spoke were a strange combination of maturity and youth. The sheer joy he felt as a child, so uncontrollable at times that he would burst out in laughter when meeting a good friend in the street, was later tamed into an easy sense of humor that added to his special personal charm.

Along with his talent for acquiring knowledge at an astounding rate and his keen understanding was a growing awareness that we dwell on the tangent of the infinite, within the holy dimension, that the life of man is part of the life of God. Some Hasidic leaders felt that in Heschel a renewal of their movement, which had grown dormant in the twentieth century, might come about. Others, too, were aware of the new light that was glowing in their midst.

Speaking about his early childhood, Heschel wrote:

I was born in Warsaw, Poland, but my cradle stood in Mezbizh (a small town in the province of Podolia, Ukraine), where the Baal Shem Tov, founder of the Hasidic movement, lived during the last twenty years of his life. That is where my father came from, and he continued to regard it as his home. . . .

I was named after my grandfather, Reb Abraham Joshua Heschel—"the Apter Rav," and last great rebbe of Mezbizh. He was marvelous in all his ways, and it was as if the Baal Shem Tov had come to life in him. . . .

Enchanted by a wealth of traditions and tales, I felt truly at home in Mezbizh. That little town so distant from Warsaw and yet so near was the place to which my childish imagination went on many journeys.<sup>6</sup>

The Apter Rav, after whom Heschel was named, was popularly known as the "lover of Israel" (*'Ohev Yisra'el*), which is the title of his book and the sole inscription on his grave. A story that Heschel's father told him as a boy about their celebrated ancestor reflects a trait that has remained with the Heschel family. When other Hasidic rabbis would ask the Apter how it was that his prayers were accepted while theirs

were not, he would answer, "You see, whenever some Jew comes to me and pours out his heart and tells me of his suffering, I have such compassion that a little hole is created in my heart. Since I have listened to a great many Jews with their anguish, there are a great many holes in my heart. I'm an old Jew, and when I start to pray I take my heart and place it before God. He sees this broken heart, so many holes, so many tears, that He has compassion for my heart, and that's why He listens to me. He listens to my prayers."<sup>7</sup>

It can be said with certainty that the years in Warsaw provided that nourishment of spirit and intellect, that inner dignity of who he was, that gave permanent direction to Heschel's life. It could not, however, prevent him from peering beyond and, in the end, setting out from his home to explore the world of Western civilization that thundered and glittered about him.

Departing from Warsaw at eighteen, he traveled first to Vilna, where he pursued his secular education at the Yiddish Real-Gymnasium and joined a promising group of young Yiddish poets; then on to Berlin in 1927, the metropolis of science and philosophy in the twenties, where he immersed himself in the culture of the West, and began to absorb the rich offerings of art, music, philosophic thought, and scientific method.

He claimed he was no longer a Hasid. He had indeed abandoned their style of dress and their restricted social contacts for the larger world, both Jewish and German. But somehow Hasidism remained within Heschel:

In my childhood and in my youth, I was the recipient of many blessings. I lived in the presence of quite a number of extraordinary persons I could revere. And just as I lived as a child in their presence, their presence continues to live in me as an adult. And yet I am not just a dwelling place for other people, an echo of the past. . . . I disagree with those who think of the present in the past tense. . . . The greatest danger is to become obsolete. I try not to be stale. I try to remain young. I have one talent and that is the capacity to be tremendously surprised, surprised at life, at ideas. This is to me the supreme Hasidic imperative.<sup>8</sup>

Later he gave a memorable description of the conflict he experienced between Berlin and Warsaw, between the intellectual claim of the university and the way of Torah:

I came with great hunger to the University of Berlin to study philosophy. I looked for a system of thought, for the depth of the spirit, for the meaning of existence. Erudite and profound scholars gave courses in logic, epistemology, esthetics, ethics and metaphysics. . . .

Yet, in spite of the intellectual power and honesty which I was privileged to witness, I became increasingly aware of the gulf that separated my views from those held at the university. . . . To them, religion was a feeling. To me, religion included the insights of the Torah which is a vision of man from the point of view of God. They spoke of God from the point of view of man. To them God was an idea, a postulate of reason. They granted Him the status of being a logical possibility. But to assume that He had existence would have been a crime against epistemology. . . .

In those months in Berlin I went through moments of profound bitterness. I felt very much alone with my own problems and anxieties. I walked alone in the evenings through the magnificent streets of Berlin. I admired the solidity of its architecture, the overwhelming drive and power of a dynamic civilization. There were concerts, theatres, and lectures by famous scholars about the latest theories and inventions, and I was pondering whether to go to the new Max Reinhardt play or to a lecture about the theory of relativity.

Suddenly I noticed the sun had gone down, evening had arrived. . . .

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."

So I began to utter the words of the evening prayer.

*Blessed art thou, Lord our God,*

*King of the universe,*

*who by His word brings on the evenings. . . .*

On that evening in the streets of Berlin, I was not in a mood to pray. My heart was heavy, my soul was sad. It was difficult for the lofty words of prayer to break through the dark clouds of my inner life.

But how would I dare not to *pray*? How would I dare to miss an evening prayer?<sup>9</sup>

With Hitler's ascendancy to power and the tightening of the Nazi tentacles, the young Heschel made rapid steps to establish his uncertain career. Though he arrived in Berlin only in 1927, he published in rapid order a series of impressive works: in 1933 his Yiddish poetry; in 1935 his biography of Maimonides (along with receiving his doctorate from the University of Berlin); in 1936 his important study on prophecy, which received an enthusiastic reception in scholarly journals; in 1937 his brief work on Abravanel. He had just reached thirty years of age. Meanwhile, his frequent articles for the weekly of the Berlin Jewish community supplemented his meager income as a part-time editor at the Reiss Verlag and as instructor in Talmud at the Hochschule, enabling him to contribute to the support of his mother and sisters in Warsaw. In 1938 he moved to Frankfurt, chosen by Martin Buber, who had left for Israel, as his successor as director of an area-wide program of Jewish studies, important for the spiritual defense of the German Jews. When he had been there for a year and a half, Heschel, along with all Polish Jews in Germany, was expelled back to Poland. He taught at the modern rabbinical academy in Warsaw, from which he was able to flee weeks before the Nazi invasion thanks to a call from the Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati, Ohio. After half a decade there, he spent the rest of his life in his small, crowded study at the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York from which his works emanated and to which many made pilgrimage.

In Eastern Europe Heschel acquired ancestral Jewish learning and piety; in Vilna, appreciation for secular Yiddish culture; in Berlin, philosophy, method, and European culture. In Frankfurt he witnessed the fruitful synthesis of Jewish tradition and European culture. In America, with the blessings of the free society that he cherished, the full extent of his powers was reached. But wherever Heschel's feet took him they always pointed toward Jerusalem.

Heschel was intimately familiar with the Jewries among whom he lived. It was the Warsaw-born Hasid, Abraham Heschel, who was chosen to write the introduction to the Lazer Ran's massive three-volume work on Vilna. Eugen Täubler, Mommsen's successor as professor of classics at Heidelberg, remarked to me that Heschel had a better grasp of German culture than the German-born faculty of the American academic institution in which Täubler found himself in the 1940s. Heschel not only understood the major Jewries of Europe and America, but also was thoroughly conversant with their cultures. He soon came to appreciate the pragmatic, open, and socially oriented American society that he encountered after his arrival in 1940, and for which, in time, he served as a leading spokesman. "You cannot realize," he once remarked to me, "what it means to be able to cast a ballot without fear. Americans do not sufficiently appreciate their country." Some questioned whether his enthusiastic political views were adopted with the same thorough understanding of the issues he demanded of himself in his strictly Jewish writings.

### *Scholarship*

If the worlds of his environment were universal, so were the worlds of his *scholarship*.

Our age is one in which scholars know more and more about less and less. Heschel's genius embraced a number of fields. His interests were not limited to a single epoch or subject area. Vertically, there was hardly a major topic in the history of Jewish thought that he did not plumb. He wrote, among others, seminal works on the Bible: *The Prophets*, *Die Prophetie* (German); the Talmud: *The Theology of Ancient Judaism*, three volumes (Hebrew); biography: *Maimonides*; medieval thought: Saadia, Gabirol, etc.; theology: *Man Is Not Alone* and *God in Search of Man*; Hasidism: *A Passion for Truth*, *The Circle of the Baal Shem Tov*, and *Kotzk*, two volumes (Yiddish); contemporary moral issues: *The Insecurity of Freedom*; and poetry: *Man: The Ineffable Name of God* (Yid-



dish). He was a theologian, a poet, a mystic, a social reformer, and an historian. Indeed, the best of the whole tradition of Israel, its way of thought and life, found a unique synthesis in him. It was this mastery of virtually the entire range of Jewish creative experience, as well as much of Western culture, that contributed to the richness of his thinking. He was equally gifted in four languages—Yiddish, Hebrew, German, and English—and would select in which language he would write a book according to its subject. Poetry and Hasidism in Yiddish, theology and ethics in English (and German), and rabbinics in Hebrew.

What Heschel wrote of Maimonides—that his “achievements . . . seem so incredible that one is almost inclined to believe that Maimonides is the name of a whole academy of scholars rather than the name of an individual!”<sup>10</sup>—reminds one of Heschel himself.

Such scholarship had two requirements, at least: a lucid mind and a determined will. Heschel possessed both. He accepted the old Jewish view that “Living is not a private affair of the individual. Living is what man does with God’s time, what man does with God’s world. . . .” “Life is a mandate, not the enjoyment of an annuity; a task, not a game; a command, not a favor.”<sup>11</sup> For the scholar this means never wasting precious hours or energy. Petty controversy, for example, was to be avoided at all costs. Once, after an unpleasant attack by a critic, he told me a story about his uncle, a famed Warsaw rabbi. During a nasty dispute between his own Hasidic sect and another, he remained silent to all appeals for support. When asked why, he quoted the Talmud: “The fence around wisdom is silence. But,” he added, “silence is only the fence; what is the wisdom? The wisdom is that petty controversy does not even concern me!”

Heschel admonished me not to forget the tale.

Heschel’s immense productivity, despite his having been uprooted twice from his cultural milieu, was not unrelated to his understanding that, with the demise of East European Jewry, he remained one of the few who could leave the record of what had been and what it should mean to future

generations. He felt a solemn burden: to pass this legacy on to the next generation. How dare one waste valuable time? “A world has vanished. All that remains is a sanctuary hidden in the realm of spirit. We of this generation are still holding the key. Unless we remember, unless we unlock it, the holiness of ages will remain a secret of God. . . . We are either the last Jews or those who will hand over the entire past to generations to come.”<sup>12</sup> Heschel, above all, held that key. And he lived with the knowledge that he held it.

### *Concern*

In addition to the worlds of his environment and his scholarship, the worlds of Heschel’s *concern* were likewise universal, bridging the divisions that tend to divide. If his scholarship moved readily across the vertical dimension from the Bible to contemporary thought, his Jewish concern was just as remarkably horizontal. By this I mean his understanding of, sympathy for, and acceptance by almost the entire spectrum of Jewish life—from the Zionists, the Hebraists, and the Yiddishists to the artists, writers, and social activists; from the Reform and Conservative to the Orthodox and the Hasidim. Though eschewing labels, identifying wholly with none of these schools, and all the while holding his own views, Heschel established good relations with each of the factions, since he believed each represented, in greater or lesser measure, an affirmation of Jewish life. His breadth expressed the quality of his *’ahavat Yisra’el* (love of Israel).

Heschel reached out a hand to those of other faiths because of the depth, not the shallowness, of his own spiritual life: the deeper the roots, the broader the branches. Or, as one Christian scholar noted, “Heschel was most human as he was most Jewish.”<sup>13</sup> His ecumenical call was grounded in his belief that human life partakes in the life of God; that human beings dwell both in the realm of nature and in the dimension of the holy; that the divine image, not only the chromosome and the circulatory system, is the common bond of humankind. Beneath the divisiveness of creeds lie

those underpinnings of religion, such as humility, compassion, awe, and faith, which characterize the community of all true persons of spirit. "Different are the languages of prayer," he wrote, "but the tears are the same."<sup>14</sup>

Heschel acted upon the spiritual fraternity of humankind in his ecumenical relations. His effort to nurture this bond was responded to so warmly by others because their spirits as well as their minds were engaged. He knew that if the divine fellowship did not enjoin us, a demonic one would. While some are "wary of the ecumenical movement," he wrote, "there is another ecumenical movement, worldwide in influence: nihilism. We must choose between interfaith and inter-nihilism."<sup>15</sup>

No religion is an island. We are all involved with one another. Spiritual betrayal on the part of one of us affects the faith of all of us. Views adopted in one community have an impact on other communities. Today religious isolationism is a myth. . . . Should we refuse to be on speaking terms with one another and hope for each other's failure? Or should we pray for each other's health, and help one another in preserving one's respective legacy, in preserving a common legacy?<sup>16</sup>

An example of how Heschel was perceived by gentiles comes from a letter of an executive of the Bell System. He told how, in the 1960s, this corporation had an arrangement with Dartmouth College whereby each summer fifteen of its more promising middle managers spent eight weeks in Hanover, New Hampshire, studying the humanities and meeting special guests invited for a twenty-four-hour period. In the summer of 1964, Heschel was such a guest. Despite the passage of a decade and a half, Heschel's theme—the dignity, uniqueness, and sacredness of being human—was still fresh in his mind. Of his encounter with Heschel, the executive wrote:

You must understand that the Bell System group was made up of middle-aged, gentile business executives, whose normal concerns were those of the corporation, and yet each member of the group was, I remember, struck by the aura of rever-

ence, wisdom, and concern for mankind which seemed to emanate from Rabbi Heschel. In my own case, I felt that his thoughts were communicated to me through a medium far beyond his words. If, when he had finished, he had risen and beckoned me to follow, I would have done so without questions. Even after 15 years, I am convinced that, on that day, I sat with a Biblical prophet.<sup>17</sup>

Heschel's environment, his scholarship, and his concern were each characterized by an unusually broad range. This contributed to the wholeness of his person: the breadth of his understanding as well as its depth.

#### *Nasi: A Prince of His People*

If the sages of the Talmud were correct in saying that Israel's teachers are its royalty, then Heschel, the preeminent Jewish teacher of our generation, was a *nasi*, a prince of his people. Indeed, he was elected to high office as much by others as by his own.

#### *His Importance for Catholics, Protestants, and Muslims*

Rooted in the most authentic sources of Israel's faith, Heschel's audience reached beyond creedal boundaries. In the 1950s and 1960s, he was easily the most respected Jewish voice for Protestants and Catholics. His friendship with Reinhold Niebuhr was memorable, and his crucial role at Vatican II has yet to be fully described.

**Catholics** A token of the esteem in which Catholics held Heschel is evident from the fact that among the tributes accorded him after his death in 1972 was an entire issue of *America* magazine devoted to his memory, unusual in any case and duplicated for no other Jew. The years since his passing, far from dimming his person, have cast in even brighter relief the unique role he played on the contemporary scene, a role no Jew, or gentile for that matter, has since filled.

His pervasive influence was felt at Vatican Council II, which was to review Catholic-Jewish relations in the form of a schema on the Jews. Asked by Cardinal Bea to draw up a proposal, Heschel composed a document that has served as a guideline for Catholics. Heschel traveled to Rome several times, where he argued for the Church's acceptance of "the permanent preciousness of the Jewish people," which meant the abandonment of its mission to the Jews and the recognition of its role in history. Heschel's efforts at Vatican II were of enormous significance. Moreover, he left a deep impression in Italy. He made a lecture tour there in conjunction with the Vatican; his books were translated into Italian, and he is, I believe, the only Jewish thinker to be quoted by a pope in this century.<sup>18</sup>

Several major Catholic-authored studies on Heschel's thought have been written, and a number of conferences have been sponsored. The most memorable was the one at a Catholic college in Minnesota in 1983, in preparation for which all students were required to read one or more of Heschel's works. The conference ran for three days and, in addition to kosher food and a formidable list of lecturers, featured the symphonic concert of a piece composed in Heschel's honor. At that gathering a faculty department head told me that she prayed to Heschel!

Two episodes may help to illustrate Heschel's unique relationship to the Catholic community:

One afternoon in the 1960s Heschel told me that he had just received a delegation of nuns. Their order was considering whether or not to give up their formal, longer habit for shorter, less cumbersome clothing. "What did you advise?" I asked. "I told them that such a personal matter should be settled by themselves." "But what is your opinion?" I persisted. "I do not believe they should change," he replied.

How unusual that the nuns should have come to him at all with such a request!

Once, while walking past St. Patrick's Cathedral, a Jew (Dr. Shlomo Noble of the YIVO) noticed in progress a protest demonstration against the war in Vietnam, where Cardi-

nal Cooke had gone to support the military mission. While the Jew took a leaflet and put a few coins on the tray, the young boy who had handed him the tract looked at him, and then, trying to make contact, said hesitantly, "I know Rabbi Heschel."<sup>19</sup>

That name bridged the gap between a Catholic boy and the Jewish world.

**Protestants** The Protestants also valued their link with Heschel. The most influential Protestant thinker in America in this century, Reinhold Niebuhr, placed him for the first time before the American reading public when, on the front page of the Sunday *New York Herald Tribune Book Review* of April 1, 1951, discussing Heschel's first major work, *Man Is Not Alone*, he wrote: "Abraham Heschel is one of the treasuries of spirit by which the persecutions, unloosed in Europe, inadvertently enriched our American culture. . . . He will become a commanding and authoritative voice not only in the Jewish community but in the religious life of America."<sup>20</sup>

Years later (1965-1966), Heschel became the first Jewish professor at the Union Theological Seminary in New York. Shortly after his death, I saw a handwritten letter on his desk from a noted Protestant which began with the salutation: "Dear Father Abraham"! And in his column in *The Christian Century* Martin Marty wrote: "Ha[s] the death of anyone since Pope John moved us so much . . . ?"<sup>21</sup>

**Muslims** And the Muslims came to deeply respect Heschel. In 1972, some months before his death and against doctor's orders, Heschel attended a hitherto unpublicized conference in Rome. "It was the first occasion since the establishment of the State of Israel—and the last—that religious and other leaders of the three faiths involved in Jerusalem had met together to define the religious content of their devotion to the Holy City."<sup>22</sup> The conference had been proposed by the Anglican archbishop of Jerusalem and was sponsored by the Center for Mediterranean Studies in Rome, in cooperation with the Friends and the Jerusalem Foundation, "to explore the religious dynamics of the Jeru-

salem problem by attempting to define the spiritual necessities embedded in each of the three religions involved with the city."<sup>23</sup> It was their hope that political considerations might be influenced by the "devout and profound personalities present."<sup>24</sup>

Archbishop Appleton opened each day's discussion with prayers, and a reading was given by each of the different faiths. Heschel was invited to read for the Jews. Observing that the coming Sabbath immediately preceded Rosh Hashana, the Jewish New Year, he recited the prophetic portion from Isaiah assigned for that Sabbath in the synagogue liturgy:

For Zion's sake will I not hold my peace,  
And for Jerusalem's sake I will not rest. . . .  
I have set watchmen upon thy walls, O Jerusalem,  
They shall never hold their peace day nor night:  
"Ye that are the Lord's remembrances,  
Take ye no rest, and give Him no rest,  
Till He establish, and till He make Jerusalem  
A praise in the earth. . . ."  
For He said: "Surely, they are My people,  
Children that will not deal falsely. . . ."  
In all their affliction He was afflicted,  
And the angel of His presence saved them;  
And He bore them, and carried them all the days  
of old (Is. 62:1, 2, 4, 5-7; 63:8-9).

After the ecumenical service had concluded, Heschel visibly moved the Muslims by remarking that, "It is important for me to remember now, that, while I have prayed from the heart for the Muslims all my life, I have never prayed with them before, or been face-to-face with them to talk about God. This is so important. We must go further."<sup>25</sup>

Heschel believed that seemingly insoluble problems, even one so hoary and complex as Jerusalem, could be resolved if a spiritual understanding were first achieved. He trusted that even during those few meetings a "common language among the religions could be found."<sup>26</sup> Summarizing the conference, the Center director, E. A. Bayne, wrote me. "In

such a setting Rabbi Heschel performed superbly as we had hoped. Although [he was] fragile in health, his spirit never flagged. . . . Largely because of his presence, I believe, in support of the spiritual dimension of the inquiry, the seminar was rewarding. . . . Had we the funds, however, another session could have been fruitful, if not definitive; but it was not to be."<sup>27</sup>

At the close of the final meeting, Heschel, who moved slowly in those days, shuffled toward the door with only the two Muslim Khadis apparently remaining behind. One approached him, squeezed his hand, and departed. The second took his hand and said: "I have read all that you have written. God bless your work."

### *The Blacks*

A picture that should hang in black and Jewish homes is that of Heschel and Martin Luther King marching arm-in-arm in Selma, Alabama, an event Heschel recalled in typically striking summation: "When I marched in Selma, I felt that my legs were praying." Not only did Heschel and King march together, they also had profound respect for each other as well. Shortly before King's assassination, Heschel said of him: "Martin Luther King is a sign that God has not forsaken the United States of America. God has sent him to us. . . . His mission is sacred. . . . I call upon every Jew to hearken to his voice, to share his vision, to follow in his way. The whole future of America will depend upon the . . . influence of Dr. King."<sup>28</sup>

Describing Heschel as "one of the great men of our age, a truly great prophet," King recognized his contribution to the Civil Rights Movement: "He has been with us in many struggles. I remember marching from Selma to Montgomery, how he stood at my side. . . . I remember very well when we were in Chicago for the Conference on Religion and Race. . . . his speech inspired clergymen of all faiths . . . to do something that they had not done before."<sup>29</sup>

In that historic speech to which King referred, given in

1963 at the initial Conference on Religion and Race in Chicago, Heschel's opening words startled his audience and helped to set the stage for the momentous changes that were to come:

At the first conference on religion and race, the main participants were Pharaoh and Moses. Moses' words were: "Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, let My people go that they may celebrate a feast to Me." While Pharaoh retorted: "Who is the Lord that I should heed His voice and let Israel go? . . ."

The outcome of that summit meeting has not come to an end. Pharaoh is not ready to capitulate. The exodus began, but is far from having been completed. . . . The Negro movement is an outcry of pain in which a sickness of our total society comes to the expression. . . . It is the problem of jobs for the unemployed, dignity for those who are on relief, employment for the unskilled, the threat of automation, the curse of poverty, the blighted slums in our cities.<sup>30</sup>

By 1984 the black-Jewish coalition from the civil rights era, which had been ailing throughout the 1970s, came to an end as the Rev. Jesse Jackson, a Baptist preacher like King, started to preach a very different sermon to the Jewish community. During the warmer days of their relationship, some blacks had believed Jews were not "white," as many Jews had believed that blacks were not "goyim." But attitudes changed, and blacks began to see Jews, who had advanced on the ladder of financial success, not only as whites but as super-scapegoat-whites. Jews, for their part, saw that some blacks were capable of such anti-Semitism as to be branded "super-goyim."

Jewish support for the civil rights movement began cooling as discrimination "for" blacks replaced discrimination against them; affirmative action shifted from "equal opportunity," its original intent, into strict "quotas," and honest competition was replaced by a massive government-supported spoils system. A black candidate—instead of the Ku Klux Klan—injecting anti-Semitism into the 1984 presidential campaign. For both blacks and Jews, the anti-Semitic aspect of the Jackson phenomenon was a danger signal. As it

had once refused to disavow the Ku Klux Klan in the 1924 campaign, so in the 1984 campaign, the Democratic Party's "failure to repudiate by name, loud and clear, the purveyors of racist antisemitism" showed that anti-Jewish bigotry had "voter appeal." In the 1990s, far from disavowal, overtures of cooperation were extended by the NAACP, the Congressional Black Caucus, and others to the charismatic spokesman of a far more vicious antisemitism, that of "minister" Farrakan.

Still, as late as 1983, when a conference was convened to confront black-Jewish relations, it was structured around the personalities of Heschel and King. By examining their lives and teachings, it was hoped that a common spiritual ground might be explored, out of which a constructive dialogue on sensitive issues could grow.

#### *Champion of the Poor and the Aged*

The eloquence of Heschel's voice and the power of his word were heard again and again on behalf of the neglected and the forlorn. He once said he was propelled out of the security of the ivory tower of research into the swirling domain of public issues because of his study of the prophets. "Prophecy," he wrote, "is the voice that God has lent to the silent agony, a voice to the plundered poor. . . . God is raging in the prophets' words."<sup>31</sup> In Heschel's voice an echo of that rage was heard.

Abraham Joshua Heschel was, as well, the most effective spokesman on behalf of the aged. In 1961, the first White House Conference on Aging found some six thousand delegates in attendance. Hundreds of sessions took place, and countless papers from noted authorities were given. However, one address—Heschel's—so impressed the assembly that it was selected as the single representative statement for the conference and appeared in the *Congressional Record*, as well as on the official recording, whose other side contains the address of President Eisenhower. These are the closing words of Heschel's speech:

We must seek ways to overcome the traumatic fear of being old, the prejudice, the discrimination against those advanced in years. All men are created equal, including those advanced in years. Being old is not necessarily the same as being stale. The effort to restore the dignity of old age will depend upon our ability to revive the equation of old age and wisdom. Wisdom is the substance upon which the inner security of the old will forever depend. But the attainment of wisdom is the work of a life time.

Old men need a vision, not only recreation.  
 Old men need a dream, not only a memory.  
 It takes three things to attain a sense of significant being:  
     God  
     A Soul  
     And a Moment.  
 And these three are always here.  
 Just to be is a blessing. Just to live is holy.<sup>32</sup>

### *The Struggle for Soviet Jewry*

The Russian Jews were grateful to Heschel.

He was among the first to alert us to the calamity in those early years when few were aware of it. (He urged Elie Wiesel to travel to Russia, the result of which was his book *The Jews of Silence*—Jews, that is, who speak out of fear, in silence, with their eyes.) Heschel's plea on behalf of Russian Jews led to rescue efforts that brought thousands into freedom. Heschel used to remind us that the Russian Jews will do more for us than we will ever do for them. He was referring to the courageous example of those who persisted as Jews for seventy-five years without synagogues, religious schools or books, and against the vicious anti-religious and anti-Semitic apparatus of the Soviet government.

In an early address he compared modern Jewry's attitude toward the Russian Jews to the stance of ancient Jewry toward the Ten Lost Tribes:

One of the tragic failures of ancient Judaism was the indifference of our people to the Ten Tribes of Israel which were

carried away into exile by Assyria after the Northern Kingdom of Samaria was destroyed. Uncared for, unattended to, overlooked and abandoned, the Ten Tribes were consigned to oblivion. . . . At the end, they vanished. . . .

There is a nightmare that terrifies me today: the unawareness of our being involved in a new failure, in a tragic dereliction of duty.

East European Jewry vanished. Russian Jewry is the last remnant of a people destroyed in extermination camps, the last remnant of a spiritual glory that is no more. . . . Let the twentieth century not enter the annals of Jewish history as the century of physical and spiritual destruction.<sup>33</sup>

### *The Six Million*

The Jews of Europe, living and dead, had in Heschel their most persuasive spokesman. His inaugural address at The Union Theological Seminary before a distinguished body of Christian leaders, began:

I speak as a member of a congregation whose founder was Abraham, and the name of my Rabbi is Moses. I speak as a person who was able to leave Warsaw, the city in which I was born, just six weeks before the disaster began. My destination was New York; it would have been Auschwitz or Treblinka. 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, and on which so much else was consumed: the divine image of so many human beings, many people's faith in the God of justice and compassion, and much of the secret and power of attachment to the Bible bred and cherished in the hearts of men for nearly 2,000 years.<sup>34</sup>

I saw Heschel almost daily from the end of 1942 to 1945, but rarely did he discuss with me what must have grieved him most, the end of the thousand-year period of East European Jewry, which he called "the golden period of Jewish history."<sup>35</sup> An interview with the Yiddish journalist Gershon Jacobson in 1963 reveals his frustrating efforts in behalf of his dying people.

"I was an immigrant, a refugee. No one listened to me. In 1941 I met with a prominent Jewish communal leader, a devoted Zionist. I told him that the Jews of the Warsaw ghetto endure in the belief that American Jewry is working ceaselessly on their behalf. Were they to know of our indifference, the Jews in Warsaw would perish from shock. My words fell on deaf ears. In 1942 [or 1941] I was at a convention of Reform rabbis. A representative of the Quakers appeared, demanding that the rabbis adopt a resolution to have food parcels sent to the Jews in the ghettos and concentration camps. The appeal was turned down. The rabbis explained that they could not do it officially, because it might aid the Germans by sending food into their territory. In 1943 I attended the American Jewish Conference, which encompassed all major Jewish organizations in the country, to appeal that they act to extinguish the flames which had engulfed Eastern European Jewry. The Conference had a long agenda—Eretz-Yisrael, fascism, finances, etc.—the last item of which was Jews under the Germans. By the time they reached this issue, almost all the representatives had left. I went away broken-hearted."

"What did you do then," asked Jacobson?

"I went to Rabbi Eliezer Silver's synagogue in Cincinnati [Silver was actively involved in saving Jews during the Holocaust], recited Psalms, fasted, and cried myself out. I was a stranger in this country. My word had no power. When I did speak, they shouted me down. They called me a mystic, unrealistic. I had no influence on leaders of American Jewry."<sup>36</sup>

Instead of describing the horror—the "Holocaust"—he preferred to write about what was most enduring from that golden era—its beauty, its meaning, its holiness. He delivered an unforgettable eulogy to the six million in his book *The Earth Is the Lord's*, in which he sketched the lasting values of East European Jewry, and wrote during the war years while he was still in Cincinnati. He referred me to a short story, written by a friend of his, in which a Hasidic master warned his disciples, in the name of sanity, not to dwell overmuch upon the horrors that were to come, citing as

proof the Book of Exodus, in which only the first few chapters deal with the sufferings of slavery, while the preponderance of the volume dwells upon the "going out from Egypt," the "exodus."<sup>37</sup> Of course, we need both records—the Holocaust and the holiness. But it was the way of Heschel to choose the affirmative portrayal of the noble. Of East European Jewry, he wrote: "The little Jewish communities in Eastern Europe were like sacred texts opened before the eyes of God, so close were their houses of worship to Mount Sinai. In the humble wooden synagogues, looking as if they were deliberately closing themselves off from the world, the Jews purified the souls that God had given them. . . . They did not write songs, they themselves were songs."<sup>38</sup> The liquidation of East-European Jewry left Heschel as one of the few authentic interpreters of that great period of Jewish life and thought.

#### ZADDIK OF THE GENERATION

I have said that Heschel was a *nasi*, a prince of his people, and *shalem*, a whole person. He was, finally, a *zaddik*.

Behind his public face as thinker, writer, and advocate, was a private undisclosed frame—the *zaddik*, the Hasidic master, that remarkable new leader who emerged from the movement of Hasidism, and who renewed the life of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century East European Jewry. Heschel must be understood, in good measure, against the pattern of those masters. Since succession in Hasidic leadership was dynastic, Heschel, as a member of that royalty, had been raised to sit upon the *zaddik's* throne, as his father and his father's father had done before. Indeed, of him even more was expected. And yet, though he abdicated his destined role by departing for the West, that is what he ultimately became: the *zaddik* of his generation.<sup>39</sup>

To read Heschel is to peer into the heart of that rarest of human phenomena, the holy man. For he was one of those who experienced the presence of the living God, before

Whom he walked in the seclusion of prayer and study as well as in the maelstrom of public life. He represented what Gershom Scholem described as the paradox of the zaddik: isolation and communion, to live a public life and yet to be alone with God. To Heschel the question of religion "is not 'what man does with his solitariness,' " but "what man does with the presence of God":<sup>40</sup> how to think, feel, act; how to live in a way that is compatible with our being a likeness of God; how to *be* what one *is*; how to so conduct ourselves that our lives can be an answer to God's question.

Entering his study one afternoon, I found Heschel weary from the visit of a self-centered Jewish thinker who enjoyed "talking" theology. Pensive, Heschel finally remarked to me: "One can only speak of God in the presence of God."

Sometime later, in an address to theologians, he said, "a theory of God can easily become a substitute for God, impressive to the mind when God as a living reality is absent from the soul."<sup>41</sup>

The zaddik was both scholar and pietist, master of prayer and teacher of Torah, bound up with God and the center of the community, wielder of power yet humble, a teacher by example as well as by word, one who affirmed life by celebrating it in joy, whose every act was meant to glorify God. The zaddik was meant not only to teach Torah but also to be Torah, a living Torah. His disciples were to learn from his life as well as from his words. When we consider Heschel's life and work against this description, we see how he approximated it.

Prayer, upon which the life of the zaddik centered, sustained Heschel's rich inner life. The analysis of prayer that he has given us is as profound as any we possess. That analysis—descriptive, analytical, poetic, suggestive—is surely, in part, personal.

Prayer is *spiritual ecstasy*. It is as if all our vital thoughts in fierce ardor would burst the mind to stream toward God. A keen single force draws our yearning for the utmost out of the seclusion of the soul. We try to see our visions in His light, to

feel our life as His affair. We begin by letting the thought of Him engage our minds, by realizing His name and entering into a reverie which leads through beauty and stillness, from feeling to thought, and from understanding to devotion.<sup>42</sup>

In the mid-1940s, Heschel initiated me into the regimen of daily worship. I would join him in his room at dawn to pray the morning service. Those were unforgettable hours. With his large prayer shawl about him and his tefillin on his head and arm, he paced the room reciting the long pages by heart, at first slowly and softly but then more quickly and loudly, the words flowing as a torrent from him, at times roaring like a lion, rising at last to a culmination of motionless silence, all within. Time opened to eternity.

The task of the zaddik was to seek out the sparks of holiness everywhere, even amidst evil. This too was true of Heschel. He restrained himself from unnecessary criticism, even when under attack, preferring to dwell upon the virtues of others.

How sad, a student once remarked to him, that two Holocaust orphans would be bereft of family at their forthcoming wedding. How wonderful, Heschel corrected him, that two orphans, each with no one else, had found each other!

Isolation was anathema to the zaddik. Hasidic writers disparage Noah as the symbol of the unconcerned leader, because he "walked *with* God," that is, in such selfish seclusion that he, in effect, caused the flood; while Abraham was acclaimed as the symbol of the zaddik, because he walked "*before*" God "in the midst of the city" and would have prevented the deluge had he lived earlier.<sup>43</sup> Though Heschel was absorbed with his research and writing, his door was open to all. And they came, not only with problems of the intellect, but also with problems of life. Other scholars protected their privacy and were unavailable. Not so Heschel.

The zaddik stood for exalted leadership, for the Baal Shem Tov had taught that all could be changed by a true master. Heschel tried to convey the gravity of the rabbinic calling to his students. In class each year he would recall the answer



that the German poet Rainer Maria Rilke gave to the young man who wrote, asking whether he should become a poet: "Only if you cannot live without being a poet!" That was Heschel's advice to incipient rabbis (or ministers): become a rabbi only if your life depends upon it. Heschel once told me that before his death Moses prayed for a worthy successor—"Let the Lord set a man over the congregation, who will go out before them and will come in before them . . . that the congregation of the Lord be not as sheep which have no shepherd" (Num. 27:18). To which Heschel cited the interpretation of the Hasidic master of Kotzk: To "go out before them" can be translated in Yiddish as "*ois-gehen far zey*"—one who is willing to die for them!

#### FROM METAPHYSICS TO HUMAN DEED

On the anniversary of the death of Albert Schweitzer, Heschel occasionally took class-time to review the latter's life: how he forsook glory as a famed philosopher, organist, and musicologist to become a common doctor in a clinic in deepest Africa as atonement for the sins of the white race.

One is reminded of the last chapter of his biography of Maimonides in which Heschel proposed a solution to a paradox that had long puzzled scholars. Maimonides, a colossus in philosophy, law, and science, wrote, for the most part, in the lingua franca of the time, Arabic, though he knew that only in Hebrew could his writings reach the entire Jewish people. Nevertheless, toward the end of his life, he advised his translator, Ibn Tibbon, by letter, not to take the long journey from Europe to visit him in Egypt, because he could spend little time with him even were he to come. There follows an exhausting itinerary of Maimonides' schedule of daily medical work from early dawn to late evening with time only for a single meal. Why? Why did he forsake his momentous unfinished scholarly projects to heal the sick, which any doctor could have done? Heschel suggests an answer: "This is Maimonides' last metamorphosis: From meta-

physics to medicine, from contemplation to practice, from speculation to the imitation of God. . . . Preoccupation with the concrete man and the effort to aid him in his suffering is now the form of religious devotion. . . . Personal achievement is abandoned for the sake of enhancing God's presence in human deeds. . . ."<sup>44</sup>

What Heschel said of Maimonides might once again be said of himself. Despite the frailty of his health and the projects yet to be completed and the books yet to be written—The Baal Shem Tov, a "Midrash Rabba" of Hasidism, biblical versus Greek thinking, The Shema, The Day of Atonement, etc.—he spent more and more time in the last years of his life on such social issues as civil rights, the Vietnam war, and the plight of Russian Jewry.

Prayer had become deed.

#### HESCHEL'S TWO HASIDIC MASTERS

According to his own testimony, two opposite Hasidic masters served as models to Heschel: The Baal Shem Tov, the founder of Hasidism, and his counterpart, Rabbi Mendl of Kotzk. About their influence on him, Heschel wrote:

The earliest fascination I can recall is associated with the Baal Shem, whose parables disclosed some of the first insights I gained as a child. He remained a model too sublime to follow yet too overwhelming to ignore.

It was in my ninth year that the presence of Reb Menahem Mendl of Kotzk, known as the Kotzker, entered my life. Since then he has remained a steady companion and a haunting challenge. Although he often stunted me, he also urged me to confront perplexities that I might have preferred to evade.

Years later I realized that, in being guided by both the Baal Shem Tov and the Kotzker, I had allowed two forces to carry on a struggle within me. . . . The one reminded me that there could be a Heaven on earth, the other shocked me into discovering Hell in the alleged Heavenly places in our world. . . .

The Baal Shem dwelled in my life like a lamp, while the Kotzker struck like lightning.<sup>45</sup>

As in his philosophy, so in his life, a polarity of ways prevailed; the love, forgiveness, and gentleness of the Baal Shem versus the Kotzker's uncompromising demand, his contempt for fraud, his harsh manner, his fearless pursuit of truth.

From a master in the tradition of Kotzk, Heschel's words were often like a hammer upon a rock: sparks lit up the darkness of apathy.

To a conference of American religious leaders, Heschel lamented:

This is a time to cry out. One is ashamed to be human. One is embarrassed to be called religious in the face of religion's failure to keep alive the image of God in the face of man. . . . Religion declined not because it was refuted, but because it became irrelevant, dull, oppressive, insipid. . . . We have imprisoned God in our sanctuaries and slogans, and now the word of God is dying on our lips. . . . There is darkness in the East, and smugness in the West. What of the night? What of the night?<sup>46</sup>

Heschel chided rabbis lest they fall into one of two camps: those who are willing to kill every Jew for a din (a religious law), and those who are willing to kill every din for a Jew. Reform rabbis were reproached for their prejudice against the Law: "Let us beware lest we reduce Bible to literature, Jewish observance to good manners, the Talmud to Emily Post."<sup>47</sup> The Orthodox were cautioned against an "all or nothing" approach: "The intransigent refuse to surrender a single iota, yet are ready to surrender the multitudes of Israel";<sup>48</sup> while Conservatives were stunned to be challenged as to whether the temple has "become the graveyard where prayer is buried. . . . There are many who labor in the vineyard of oratory; but who knows how to pray, or how to inspire others to pray? . . . The modern temple suffers from a severe cold. . . . Our motto is monotony. The fire has gone out of our worship. It is cold, stiff, and dead. . . . the rabbi [has become] a master of ceremonies" but "Judaism does not stand on ceremonies. . . ."<sup>49</sup>

Before Jewish educators, Heschel attacked the popular notion of self-expression. "Self-expression depends upon self-attachment to what is greater than the self. . . . There must be something to be expressed, an emotion, a vision, an end. . . . everything depends on the person who stands in the front of the classroom. . . . To guide a pupil into the promised land, he [the teacher] must have been there himself. . . . What we need more than anything else is not *textbooks* but *textpeople*."<sup>50</sup>

At a American Medical Association convention in San Francisco, he warned that medicine itself was in need of therapy, that while "[m]edicine is a sacred art," too many doctors had become plumbers, and that sickness was not only a physical disorder but a "crisis of the total person." He spoke of the "nightmare of medical bills," and berated them for creating a "*Sisyphus complex*," by curing the patient physically while destroying him economically.<sup>51</sup> The following day the San Francisco paper ran a banner: "Dr. Heschel's Bitter Pill"!

Few were to depart from such lectures unchanged. The searing words were in the spirit of the master of Kotzk.

But even more than a cry for justice, one heard from Heschel a call to grandeur, to compassion, to hope, a song of celebration and exaltation. It was the voice of the other, still greater master: the Baal Shem Tov.

"The universe is not a waif and life is not a derelict. Man is neither the lord of the universe nor even the master of his own destiny. Our life is not our own property but a possession of God. And it is this divine ownership that makes life a sacred thing."<sup>52</sup>

Or—"We live by the conviction that acts of goodness reflect the hidden light of His holiness. His light is above our minds but not beyond our will. It is within our power to mirror His unending love in deeds of kindness, like brooks that hold the sky."<sup>53</sup>

Again—"The world of things we perceive is but a veil. Its flutter is music, its ornament science, but what it conceals is inscrutable. Its silence remains unbroken; no words can carry

it away. Sometimes we wish the world could cry and tell us about that which made it pregnant with fear-filling grandeur. Sometimes we wish our own heart would speak of that which made it heavy with wonder."<sup>54</sup>

For Jews, hearing and reading Heschel meant understanding, often for the first time, the message, and the glory, of their destiny: "Judaism is the track of God in the wilderness of oblivion. By being what we are, namely Jews; by attuning our own yearning to the lonely holiness in this world, we will aid humanity more than by any particular service we may render." For "[w]hat we do as individuals is a trivial episode; what we attain as Israel causes us to become a part of eternity."<sup>55</sup>

"[The people] Israel is the tree, we are the leaves. It is the clinging to the stem that keeps us alive. There has perhaps never been more need of Judaism than in our time, a time in which many cherished hopes of humanity lie crushed. We should be pioneers as were our fathers three thousand years ago. The future of all men depends upon their realizing that the sense of holiness is as vital as health. By following the Jewish way of life we maintain that sense and preserve the light for mankind's future visions."<sup>56</sup>

"We are God's stake in human history. We are the dawn and the dusk, the challenge and the test. How strange to be a Jew and go astray on God's perilous errands. We have been offered as a pattern of worship and as a prey for scorn, but there is more still in our destiny. We carry the gold of God in our souls to forge the gate of the kingdom. The time for the kingdom may be far off, but the task is plain: to retain our share in God in spite of peril and contempt. . . . Loyal to the presence of the ultimate in the common, we may be able to make it clear that man is more than man, that in doing the finite he may perceive the infinite."<sup>57</sup>

How could one hear such words and not listen to their echo, and re-echo, not ponder them, and be changed by them?

Who was Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel? He was a *nasi*,

a prince of his people; *shalem*, marvelously whole; *zaddik hador*, master for our age.

#### NOTES

1. Quotations for which no sources are given come from my conversations with Heschel, or from family members.
2. Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Man Is Not Alone: A Philosophy of Religion* (New York: Farrar, Straus, & Young, 1951), pp. 295-96.
3. Susannah Heschel, in an address at a conference on Abraham Joshua Heschel sponsored by the Chicago Board of Jewish Education, February 20-21, 1983.
4. *Man Is Not Alone*, p. 282.
5. Abraham J. Heschel, *Man's Quest for God: Studies in Prayer and Symbolism* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1954), p. 147, from an address originally delivered in March 1938 at a conference of Quaker leaders in Frankfurt.
6. Abraham Joshua Heschel, *A Passion for Truth* (New York: Farrar, Straus, & Giroux, 1973; repr. New York: Noonday, 1974; Woodstock, Vt.: Jewish Lights Publishing, 1995), p. xiii.
7. Abraham Heschel, "Hasidism," *Jewish Heritage*, 14, No. 3 (1972), 21.
8. Abraham Joshua Heschel, "In Search of Exaltation," *ibid.*, 13 (Fall 1971), 29, 30, 35.
9. *Man's Quest for God*, pp. 94, 95, 96, 97-98.
10. Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Insecurity of Freedom* (New York: Schocken Books, 1966), p. 285.
11. Abraham Joshua Heschel, *God in Search of Man: A Philosophy of Judaism* (New York: Farrar, Straus, & Cudahy, 1955), p. 356; *Man Is Not Alone*, p. 294.
12. Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Earth Is the Lord's: The Inner World of the Jew in East Europe* (New York: Henry Schuman, Inc., 1950), p. 107.
13. W. D. Davies, "Conscience, Scholar, Witness," *America*, 128 (March 10, 1973), p. 215.
14. *The Insecurity of Freedom*, p. 180.
15. Abraham Joshua Heschel, "No Religion Is an Island," *Union Seminary Quarterly Review*, 21 (January 1966), 119.
16. *Ibid.*

17. Letter from S. H. Washburn to Samuel H. Dresner, March 20, 1979.
18. Cf. "Editorial: Contemporary Judaism and the Christian," *America*, 128 (March 10, 1973), p. 202.
19. Personal communication, Shlomo Noble.
20. Reinhold Niebuhr, "Masterful Analysis of Faith," *New York Herald Tribune Book Review*, 118 (April 1, 1951), p. 12.
21. Martin Marty, *The Christian Century*, 19 (January 17, 1973), 87.
22. E. A. Bayne, pamphlet published by the Center for Mediterranean Studies in Rome, 1973.
23. Letter from E. A. Bayne to Samuel H. Dresner, December 29, 1982.
24. *Ibid.*
25. Bayne, pamphlet of the Center for Mediterranean Studies.
26. *Ibid.*
27. Bayne, letter to Samuel Dresner.
28. Abraham Joshua Heschel, quoted in *Conservative Judaism*, 22 (Spring 1968), 1.
29. Martin Luther King, Jr., quoted in *Conservative Judaism*, 22 (Spring 1968), 1.
30. *The Insecurity of Freedom*, p. 85.
31. *Ibid.*, p. 11.
32. *Ibid.*, p. 84.
33. *Ibid.*, pp. 271, 273.
34. "No Religion Is an Island," 117.
35. *The Earth Is the Lord's*, p. 10.
36. *Day-Morning Journal*, June 13, 1963. I thank Dr. Zanvel Klein for calling this interview to my attention. Further evidence of Heschel's efforts is found in a letter of the talmudist Rabbi Levi Ginzberg, appended to a legal responsum to a prominent rabbi. "May I . . . ask of you a great favor. My friend and colleague, Doctor Abraham Heschel, told me that he had written to you asking you to use your influence with the HIAS [Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society]. Doctor Heschel is not only a great scholar, but a very close friend of mine, and any favor shown to him I would consider as shown to me" (E. Golinkin, ed., *The Responsa of Professor Louis Ginzberg* [New York: Jewish Theological Seminary, 1996]).
37. Cf. Fischel Schneirson, "Ani Maamin" ("I Believe"), translation Samuel H. Dresner, *Conservative Judaism*, 22 (Spring 1968), 20-30.

38. *The Earth Is the Lord's*, pp. 92-93.
39. Cf. Samuel H. Dresner, *The Zaddik* (London and New York: Abelard-Schuman, 1960; repr. New York: Schocken Books, 1974; Aronson, 1994). The day after Heschel's funeral the noted thinker Arthur Green told me that when in 1960 he first read the words of the dedication of my book—"To Abraham Joshua Heschel, . . . Zaddik Hador (Zaddik of the generation)"—he did not believe it. "Now," he concluded, "I know you were right."
40. *Man's Quest for God*, p. xiv.
41. Abraham Joshua Heschel, "The Jewish Notion of God and Christian Renewal," in *Renewal of Religious Thought*, vol. 1 of *Theology of Renewal*, ed. L. K. Shook (New York: Herder & Herder, 1968), p. 106; from an address to a congress of Catholic Theologians in Toronto, 1967.
42. *Man's Quest for God*, pp. 18-19.
43. Cf. Dresner, *The Zaddik*, chaps. 4 and 7.
44. *The Insecurity of Freedom*, pp. 289-90.
45. *A Passion for Truth*, pp. xiv, xv.
46. *The Insecurity of Freedom*, pp. 165, 3-4, 165.
47. *Man's Quest for God*, p. 113; from an address originally delivered in 1953 before the Central Conference of Conservative Rabbis.
48. *The Insecurity of Freedom*, p. 205; from an address entitled "The Individual Jew and His Obligations," delivered in 1957 at the Jerusalem Ideological Conference, convened at the Hebrew University.
49. *Man's Quest for God*, pp. 50, 49, 114.
50. *The Insecurity of Freedom*, pp. 64, 229, 237.
51. *Ibid.*, pp. 33, 32, 35.
52. *Man Is Not Alone*, pp. 226-27.
53. *God in Search of Man*, p. 290.
54. *Man Is Not Alone*, p. 16.
55. *The Earth Is the Lord's*, p. 108; *Man's Quest for God*, p. 45.
56. *God in Search of Man*, p. 424.
57. *The Earth Is the Lord's*, p. 109.