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The Jewish Tradition in the Philosophy of A.J. Heschel

Judaism is not an unaltered monolithic entity for the historian of Jewish religion and thought, but instead represents a plurality of interpretations and redefinitions that vary from epoch to epoch and from author to author. Overlooking this conceptual plurality that is Judaism, it is helpful to categorize various authors as belonging to particular schools of thought within Judaism. For instance, some authors may be classified as examples of the rabbinical trend, whereas others may be more usefully labeled as writing works of a philosophical or mystical nature. Normally, such classification helps scholars to understand the particular author, showing his indebtedness to a particular style, as well as indicating the degree to which he has innovated or even deviated from the original trend.

Approaching Abraham Joshua Heschel, things are much more complicated. It is not easy to assign him to one of the great trends of the Jewish tradition. However, in order to make things a bit easier, I will restrict myself in this case to the consideration of Heschel's central opus, *God in Search of Man: A Philosophy of Judaism*.¹ The justification for this choice is offered by the subtitle of the book itself, for it expresses Heschel's aim to give a holistic and basic picture of what he deems to be Judaism. Therefore, the title of my work should be rephrased; perhaps *The Jewish Tradition in the "Philosophy of Judaism" by A.J. Heschel* would be more fitting.

There are good reasons to agree with those authors who stress the existence of a clear relationship between Eastern European Hasidism and the thought of Heschel. But to confine our analysis to this statement would be insufficient. Since the days of medieval Jewish Philosophy and the development of a specialization in Jewish literary activity, a division of Judaism into two basic trends has developed: the first being characterized by its orientation towards halakhah, and the second by its more theological-philosophical character. This dual tendency in Judaism resulted in a concrete social separation into two Judaisms in the 19th century. The first was halakhically oriented, normally called Orthodoxy, or since Moses Mendelssohn, known more aptly as Orthopraxy, and the second was a fideistic Judaism, which placed "Faith" at the center of the Jewish religion instead of halakhah.

The most outstanding feature of Heschel's book is his return to a conception of Judaism before this split into Orthodoxy and Reform Judaism. This is a return to the pre-medieval conception of a complementarity between aggadah and halakhah. For Heschel, both halakhah and aggadah are inseparable foundations of Judaism. But to be sure, this return to the older talmudic conception does not mean for Heschel a simple return to the previous status quo, since the aforementioned split into a fideistic and halakhic Judaism left a profound imprint on Heschel's philosophy. This split is felt most prominently in the first part of the book bearing the title "God." In this part of the book, the reader who is familiar with Jewish literature might expect topics drawn from the rabbinical Midrash or from medieval philosophy, namely chapters on "theology" properly

¹ A.J. Heschel, *God in Search of Man. A Philosophy of Judaism* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1996).

speaking. These would be chapters on God as creator or redeemer of Israel, about the Shekhina, or the transformation of these ideas in medieval philosophical metaphysics. Yet, neither in this part of the book nor elsewhere in it is anything of the sort to be found. Instead, in the first part of the book, entitled "God," Heschel writes about the terrestrial world, and about God as perceived in it. In the second part, entitled "Revelation," he deals with God's presence in the Bible. Finally, in part three, entitled "Response," Heschel describes God's presence as revealed in the sacred acts performed by man. In short, we meet three different ways of speaking about God in Heschel's philosophy. Common to all of them is the diversified presence of God in this world, as opposed to the medieval and rabbinic focus on God's transcendence.

Regarding the main question of this paper, concerning which Jewish tradition Heschel is relying on in his philosophy, we have to treat each of the three parts of the book separately, given that he draws from differing and even contradictory traditions from various epochs in each of the three sections. It is on these features and sources particular to each section that the following analysis will focus.

1. God's Presence in Human Faith

Turning to the first part of the book, entitled "God," it becomes obvious that Heschel's supposed return to the pre-medieval combination, giving aggadah sufficient emphasis at the side of halakhah, is carried out by means of two quite modern and even contradictory Jewish traditions not known in rabbinical times. The one tradition is derived from post-enlightenment empiricism and the other from Hasidic mysticism.

The Western tradition was originally conceived by the German Jewish writer Saul Ascher (1767–1822) and soon became the basis for a fideistic Judaism. In his book *Leviathan oder über Religion in Rücksicht des Judenthums. Herausgegeben von S. Ascher*, published in 1792, Saul Ascher based his conception of Judaism entirely on faith, in open opposition to Moses Mendelssohn. Referring to the philosopher David Hume, Ascher believed that faith was a different and independent path to knowledge at the side of reason. In opposition to medieval Jewish philosophy, Ascher stressed that there exists no relation whatsoever between human reason and faith, as faith is an independent faculty of man at the side of reason, leading him to insights different from those of reason. Ascher was convinced that man needs both faith and reason to lead a genuine human life. For him, both reason and faith have their own peculiar territories which cannot intermingle or overlap. Reason has nature as its object, whereas faith has revelation as its object, or even more precisely, faith is the basis of revelation. According to Ascher, a direct consequence of this position is that man does not need any preformulated law; consequently, man does not need halakhah, as by way of faith and revelation he is independent of these traditional prescriptions. Heschel clearly agrees with Ascher in seeing "faith" as the basis of religion, whereas regarding the need for halakhah, he is in total opposition to him. I shall return shortly to this last point. Therefore, the first result of our inquiry is that in stressing of the importance of faith for religion, Heschel is clearly the heir of Ascher's post-Enlightenment concept of a religion of faith.

But when asking what is the exact meaning of faith, we become aware that Heschel is leaning on a Hasidic notion, as formulated by the founder of this movement, Israel Ben Eliezer, the Baal Shem Tov (acronym: Besht). According to Heschel, the basis of all faith is "awe,"

reminiscent of the old rabbinic concept of *yira'at shamayim*. For Heschel, awe is a human sense for transcendence: "Awe is a sense for the transcendence, for the reference everywhere to Him who is beyond all things."²

Awe is an attitude that enables man to "perceive in the world intimations of the Divine, to sense in small things the beginning of infinitive significance, to sense the ultimate in the common and the simple."³ In other words: The presence of the Divine in all and everything becomes perceptible by means of this human attitude, which is *awe*. The presence of the Divine in this world makes its appearance by means of this human way of looking at the existing things in this world. This description of awe, as the basis of faith, is exactly what the Baal Shem Tov formulated. Referring to the kabbalistic notion that God created the world by means of the letters of the Hebrew alphabet, the Besht believed that all worlds are replete with the Divine Glory (*kavod*). But the decisive point, according to the Besht, would be that no one could perceive the Divine unless he is able to look at things in the right way. Only a person who is able to see the light and unity of the Divine behind the shells of matter will arrive at the second step, which the Baal Shem Tov, like Heschel, calls *emunah*, meaning faith – but according to the Besht, this faith is the same as *devekut*, clinging to the Divine.

As there are the twenty two letters in the words of Tora and prayer they exist in the same way as everything in this world, as the world was created by means of them ... but the letters are hidden by matter ... and in the letters there is the spirit of the Holy one, may He be blessed, as all creation is full of His Glory, there is no space empty of Him ... But when the men of knowledge know about this, then there is no longer anything hidden...⁴

For both the Baal Shem Tov and Heschel, the epiphany of the Divine presence in this world is therefore dependent on a human attitude, on his way of looking on things in this creation. And only by way of adequate human perception, man will arrive at faith (according to Heschel) or at *devekut*, which means *emunah* (according to the Besht). So the Baal Shem Tov would have been able to fully agree with Heschel when saying:

This indeed, is the greatness of man: to be able to have faith. For faith is an act of freedom, of independence of our own limited faculties, whether reason or sense-perception. It is *an act of spiritual ecstasy*, of rising above our own wisdom.⁵

2. God's Presence in the Bible

Proceeding to the second part of the book, entitled "Revelation," the findings again will be two-sided. Regarding Heschel's conception of prophecy, the most outstanding result is his rejection of the medieval philosophical concept of prophecy. For example, whereas Maimonides

² *God in Search of Man*, p. 75.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Sefer Ba'al Shem Tov*, ed. S.M. Wadnik mi-Gowartschov (Łódź 1938, reprint Tel Aviv) I, Bereshit # 11, p. 39; for this see my detailed description in *Jüdisches Denken, Theologie – Philosophie – Mystik*, vol. 2 (Frankfurt, New York: Campus, 2005), p. 769.

⁵ *God in Search of Man*, p. 118.

sees in prophecy a natural intellectual process theoretically open to everyone,⁶ Heschel stresses that prophecy is a historical event occurring only for particular gifted persons. Therefore, our only sources of knowledge about prophecy are the records of the prophets themselves – a notion close to the position of Baruch Spinoza in his *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*. By insisting on the historical character of prophecy, Heschel is at the same time in variance with the Jewish-reform notion of a continuous revelation, as for example propagated by the German father of Reform Judaism, Abraham Geiger.⁷

Totally different from this view of prophecy are Heschel's considerations regarding the role and position of the Bible. On the one hand, Heschel follows the enlightened reaffirmation of the Bible as a document independent from the *Oral Torah*, but, on the other hand, he builds his convictions completely on the kabbalistic tradition. When speaking about the Biblical tradition and its place in religion, rabbinic Judaism would talk about the *Torah* in its dual forms as *Written-* and *Oral-Law*. Instead, Heschel speaks about the Bible and its prophetic heroes who gained a permanent role in human history, a typically modern post-Enlightenment view. But more important than this is the main notion Heschel attributes to the Bible itself: For him, the Bible is the eminent place of God's presence in this world, the place where God can be found.

It may seem easy to play with the idea that the Bible is a book like many other books, or that the story of Sinai is a fairy tale. Yet it is in such playing that we may gamble away our commitment, our tie to God. ... If God is not found in the Bible, where should we seek him?⁸

And this is not a mere metaphor for the general notion that the Bible is the document of Sinaitical and prophetic revelation. Speaking on the real presence of God in the Bible, on His "immanence" in it, Heschel means the following:

He who wishes to ponder what is *beyond* the Bible must first learn to be sensitive to what is *within* the Bible. We do not have to believe Moses and the prophets on their word alone. More decisive than *the origin of the Bible in God is the presence of God in the Bible*. It is the sense for the presence that leads us to a belief in its origin.⁹

If the belief in the immanence of God in nature is plausible, then the belief in the immanence of God in the Bible is compelling.¹⁰

Heschel is even more explicit when he says that God is present in the "Biblical words."¹¹ This is why he is able to declare: "The words of the Bible are sources of spirit."¹² It is not a matter of chance when Heschel cites the Book of Zohar in this context,¹³ as it is a typical kabbalistic notion to see in the books of the Bible not a mere book, but the representation of the Divine in this world. The Torah, says the great Nachmanides, is nothing less than the Names of God,

⁶ Cf. K. E. Grözinger, *Jüdisches Denken*, vol. 1 (Frankfurt, New York: Campus, 2004), pp. 468–471.

⁷ Cf. M.A. Meyer, "Abraham Geiger's Historical Judaism," in *New Perspectives on Abraham Geiger*, ed. J.J. Petuchowski (New York: Hebrew Union College Press / Ktav Publishing House, 1975), pp. 3–16.

⁸ *God in Search of Man*, p. 236.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 250.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 245.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 246.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 253.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 254.

and the Names of God themselves are the essence and the emanation of the Godhead.¹⁴ For a kabbalist, to study the Bible means to be in the real presence of the Divine, to handle the Divine presence. But here again, as with the aforementioned Divine presence in the world, for the kabbalist this presence makes its appearance only if the reader of the text is able to perceive the divine light hidden within the letters of the Holy Torah. It is exactly this meaning that Heschel has in mind when he says:

To be able to encounter the spirit within the words, we must learn to crave for an affinity with the pathos of God.¹⁵

To sense the presence of God in the Bible, one must learn *to be present* to God in the Bible.¹⁶

Presence is not disclosed to those who are unattached and try to judge, to those who have no power to go beyond the values they cherish...¹⁷

Furthermore, as if to make us sure that we are not mistaken with this affiliation between Kabbalah and Heschel, he introduces into this concept the dual kabbalistic notion of the "supernal Torah" and "revealed Torah" – the latter being the terrestrial accommodation of the higher form of Torah to lower levels of reality. This basically Neoplatonic view brings Heschel to the further statement that the Torah here on earth is in exile, and that there exist different levels of meaning in the Torah, an outer one and an inner one:

The primordial light is hidden. Had the Torah demanded perfection, it would have remained a utopia. ... Thus the Bible had to deal [even] with the ugly laws of war, though it was aware of the ugliness of war. *The Torah, too, is in exile*.¹⁸

3. God's Presence in the Acts of Man

Finally, the third part of the book, bearing the title "Response," is somehow surprising after the radically fideistic first part of the book that based all of religion on human faith. Here, in opposition to the purely fideistic conception of other modern forms of Judaism, Heschel insists on the essential need of halakhah. He uses certain psychological arguments in support of this need, but again the gist of his argument is taken from the Kabbalah. The first guess as to why Heschel insists on the unity of aggadah and halakhah might be that he simply wants to return to the pre-medieval talmudic view. But this would only be half of the truth. While rabbinical Judaism conceives of man's fulfillment of the mitzvot as merely a demonstration of his obedience to his creator and additionally as a means of sanctification for man, for Heschel the fulfillment of the mitzvot goes far beyond this. Similarly to the words of the Bible, according to Heschel, the mitzvot are a representation of the Divine in this world. Therefore he says:

¹⁴ For this notion cf. my *Jüdisches Denken*, vol. 2, pp. 303–334.

¹⁵ *God in Search of Man*, p. 252.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 252.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 252.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 270.

Sacred acts, mitzvot, do not only imitate; they represent the Divine.¹⁹
The mitzvot are of the essence of God...²⁰

Whereas Maimonides perceived the essential link between man and his God in the human intellect,²¹ for Heschel this function is taken over by the mitzvot: "A mitzvah is an act which God and man *have in common* ... Their fulfillment is not valued as an act performed in spite of 'the evil drive,' but as an act of *communion* with him."²² This communion between man and God by means of the mitzvot is possible, according to Heschel, because man is made in the image of God. There exist many interpretations of this biblical notion in Judaism, but here again Heschel resorts to the kabbalistic interpretation when he says: "The Bible speaks of man as having been created in the likeness of God, establishing the principle of *an analogy of being*. In his very being, man has something common with God."²³ This, too, is a typical kabbalistic notion. The Zohar and other kabbalistic writings see in the double structural analogy between the human body and soul and between the ten sefirot the basis for man's ability to communicate with the Godhead by means of the performance of the mitzvot.²⁴

To mention just one more example of the similarity between Heschel's philosophy and the Kabbalah, I would like to point to an additional effect of the performance of mitzvot. According to the Kabbalah, especially the later form of Lurianic Kabbalah, the fulfillment of the mitzvot is part of the redemptive process (*tikkun*) that will culminate in the final redemption of the world and of the Godhead itself.²⁵ Heschel writes accordingly: God "is in need of the work of man for the fulfillment of His end in the world."²⁶ Indeed, the notion that God is in need of man defines precisely the effect of the mitzvot and explains what makes them, according to Heschel, indispensable at the side of faith. For while faith makes God perceptible in this world, the mitzvot promote the possibility of redemption.

But at this point a problem in the interpretation of Heschel's views arises. Besides these notions regarding the importance of mitzvot and halakhah, several passages contain Heschel's very critical remarks about halakhah.²⁷ How does Heschel treat this seeming contradiction? The solution to this problem arises from those passages in the book where Heschel is discussing the importance of halakhah, and where he substitutes the wider term of "Jewish life," or "Jewish living" for the technical terms "halakhah" and "mitzvah," as for instance:

God asks for the heart because he needs lives. It is by lives that the world will be redeemed, by lives that beat in concordance with God...²⁸

The order of Jewish living is meant to be, not a set of rituals but an order of all man's existence...²⁹

19 Ibid., p. 289.

20 Ibid., p. 289.

21 Cf. my *Jüdisches Denken*, vol. 1, pp. 462–471.

22 *God in Search of Man*, p. 287.

23 Ibid., p. 289.

24 Cf. *Jüdisches Denken*, vol. 2, pp. 579–603.

25 Cf. *Jüdisches Denken*, vol. 2, pp. 676–680, 650–654.

26 *God in Search of Man*, p. 291.

27 See e.g. *ibid.*, pp. 322–328.

28 Ibid., p. 296.

29 Ibid., p. 301.

By performing this switch from halakhah and mitzvot to "Jewish life" Heschel tries to combine "faith" and "Jewish ritual" as inseparable parts of *the* Jewish life. According to this new encompassing term, it is not the fulfillment of one peculiar mitzvah which could be important for the Jew; what matters is the complete way and order of Jewish life, the Jewishness of this life, which is not defined by single acts, but by the more comprehensive Jewish way of life. The indispensable coexistence of faith and halakhah is, according to Heschel, rooted in this overall Jewish way of life. According to Heschel, the Jewish way of life is a life within body and soul,³⁰ and there is therefore a need for both *faith* and halakhah. As a result, we may conclude with the words of Heschel himself: "We must learn to be one with what we do. This is why in addition to halacha, the science of deeds, there is agada, the art of being."³¹

30 Ibid., p. 307.

31 Ibid., p. 310.