

MORAL GRANDEUR

AND SPIRITUAL

AUDACITY

ESSAYS

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FARRAR, STRAUS AND GIROUX

NEW YORK

Farrar, Straus and Giroux
19 Union Square West, New York 10003

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Distributed in Canada by Douglas & McIntyre Ltd.
Printed in the United States of America
First published in 1996 by Farrar, Straus and Giroux
First paperback edition, 1997

11 12 10

The Library of Congress has catalogued the hardcover edition as follows:
Heschel, Abraham Joshua, 1907-1972.

Moral grandeur & spiritual audacity : essays / edited by Susannah Heschel. — 1st ed.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references (p.).

ISBN 0-374-19980-9 (hardcover)

1. Judaism—Essence, genius, nature. 2. Spiritual life—Judaism.
 3. Judaism and social problems. I. Heschel, Susannah. II. Title.
- BM45.H4549 1906
296—dc20

95-41392
CIP



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The Holy Dimension

TO LOOK UPON RELIGION as upon a star, sublime, distant, and inaccessible, while at the same time handling it as if it were a bank account, a matter of calculation, wherein every detail is explainable and every transaction a computable operation, is an extravagant inconsistency. To apply a paleontological method to religion as if it were a fossil chiseled from the shale is intellectual violence. Indeed, the routine of our scientific procedure threatens to confine living religion in a frozen system of concepts, treating it as if it were a plant brought home by an expedition from exotic lands. But will observations made on a plant that is uprooted from its soil, removed from its native winds, sunrays, and vegetal surroundings, and kept in a hothouse disclose its primordial nature? The growth in the inwardness of man that reaches and curves toward the light of God can hardly be transplanted into the shallowness of mere reflection. When taken out of the depths of piety, it exists mostly in a symbiosis with other values like beauty, justice, or truth. Torn out of its medium in human life, it is metamorphosed like a rose pressed between the pages of a book. Reduced to terms and definitions, to concepts and moral principles, religion is like a desiccated remnant of a living reality.

Religion should be studied in its natural habitat of faith and piety, in a soul where the divine is within reach of all its thoughts. From the point of view of a critical mind, to which the enigmatic holiness of religion is not a certainty but a problem, we can hardly expect more than a telescopic examination, a glimpse from afar of what is to the pious man compellingly present and overwhelmingly close. A questionnaire submitted to a chance audience will not yield the evidence we need. It is fallacious to idealize neutral and indifferent informants. Vacancy of experience cannot be compensated for by lack of bias. How do we gain an adequate concept of

history or astronomy? We do not turn to the man in the street but to those who devote their life to research, to those who are trained in scientific thought and have absorbed all the data about the subject. For an adequate concept of religion we likewise should turn to those whose mind is bent upon the spiritual, whose life is religion, and who are able to discern between truth and happiness, between spirit and emotion, between faith and self-reliance. Only those will apprehend religion who can probe its depth with unhalting precision, who can combine the intuition of love with rigor of method, who are able to translate the ineffable into thought and to forge the imponderable into words. It is not enough to describe the given content of religious consciousness. We have to press the man of piety with questions, compelling him to understand and unravel the meaning of what is taking place in his life as it stands at the divine horizon. While penetrating the consciousness of the pious man, we may conceive the reality behind it.

Every investigation springs out of a basic question, which sets the rudder of our mind. Yet the number of questions available for our research is limited. They are conventionally repeated in almost every scientific investigation. Like tools, they are handed down from one scholar to another. Not through our own eyes but through lenses ground by our intellectual ancestry do we look at the world. But our eyes are strained and tired of staring through spectacles worn by another generation. We are tired of overlooking entities, of squinting at their relations to other things. We want to face reality as it is and not ask only: What is its cause? What is its relation to its sources? To society? To psychological motives? We are tired of dating and comparing. Indeed, when the questions that were once keen and penetrating are worn out, the investigated object no longer reacts to the inquiry. Much depends upon the driving force of a new question. The question is an invocation of the enigma, a challenge to the examined object, provoking the answer. A new question is more than the projection or vision of a new goal; it is the first step toward it. To know what we want to know is the first prerequisite of research.

Modern man seldom faces things as they are. In the interpretation of religion our eyes are bent toward its bearing upon various realms of life rather than upon its own essence and reality. We investigate the relation of religion to economics, history, art, libido. We ask for the origin and development, for its effect upon psychical, social, and political life. We look upon religion as if it were an instrument only, not an entity. We forget to inquire: What is religion itself? In our contemplations religion as such is left in the background. In the foreground looms large and salient its subjective supplement, the human response to religion. We heed the resonance and ignore the bell, we peer into religiousness and forget re-

ligion, we behold the experience and disregard the reality that antecedes the experience. But to understand religion through the analysis of the sentiments it instills is as if instead of describing the inner value of a work of art we were to apprehend it by its effects on our mind or feelings. The essence of a thing is neither tantamount to nor commensurable with the impression it produces; what is reflected in the imagination of an individual is something altogether different from the original. The stratum of inner experience and the realm of objective reality do not lie on the same level.

IT IS HARD to dismiss the popular concept that religion is a function of human nature, an avenue in the wide estate of civilization. We have been indoctrinated with the idea that religion is man's own response to a need, the result of craving for immortality, or the attempt to conquer fear. But are we not like the dwellers in the desert who, never having seen rivers, presume that they are canals devised and constructed by man for navigation? It is true that economic needs and political factors have taught him to exploit the riverways. But are the rivers the product of human genius?

Most people assume that we feed our body to ease the pangs of hunger, to calm the irritated nerves of the empty stomach. As a matter of fact, we do not eat because we feel hungry but because the intake of food is essential for the maintenance of life, supplying the energy necessary for the various functions of the body. Hunger is the signal for eating, its occasion and regulator, not its true cause. Let us not confound the river with navigation, nutrition with hunger, or religion with the use which man makes of it.

To restrict religion to the realm of human endeavor or consciousness would imply that a person who refuses to take notice of God could isolate himself from the Omnipresent. But there is no neutrality before God; to ignore means to defy him. Even the emptiness of indifference breeds a concern, and the bitterness of blasphemy is a perversion of a regard for God. There is no vacuum of religion. Religion is neither the outgrowth of imagination nor the product of will. It is not an inner process, a feeling, or a thought, and should not be looked upon as a bundle of episodes in the life of man. To assume that religion is limited to specific acts of man, that man is religious for the duration of an experience, meditation, or performance of a ritual is absurd. Religion is not a cursory activity. What is going on between God and man is for the duration of life.

We do not see the forest for the trees. We hear, see, feel, and think, but are unaware of our soul; we devise systems of ideas and we organize society and nature but do not comprehend the purpose of our life. Our life seems to be a confused jumble of spasmodic and disconnected events. The overwhelming desire of yesterday is forgotten today, and the mon-

umental achievement of today will be obliterated tomorrow. Does our soul live in dispersion? Is there nothing but a medley of facts unrelated to one another, chaos camouflaged by civilization?

The pious man believes that there is a secret interrelationship among all events, that the sweep of all we are doing reaches beyond the horizon of our comprehension, that there is a history of God and man in which everything is involved.

Religion is the light in which even the momentous appears as a detail. It is the ultimateness in the face of which everything seems premature, preliminary, and transitory. The pious man lives in esteem for ultimateness, in devotion to the final amid the mortal and evanescent. Religion to him is the integration of the detail into the whole, the infusion of the momentary into the lasting. As time and space in any perception, so is the totality of life implied in every act of piety. There is an objective coherency that holds all episodes together. A man may commit a crime now and teach mathematics perfectly an hour later. But when a man prays, all he has done in his life enters his prayer.

His own heart is not the source of that light in which the pious man sees his simple words becoming signals of eternity. Hands do not build the citadel in which the pious man takes shelter when all towers reared by man are tottering. Man does not produce what is overwhelming and holy. The wonder occurs to him when he is ready to accept it.

Religion is neither a state of mind nor an achievement of the intellect. It does not rule hearts by the grace of man; its roots lie not in his inwardness. It is not an event in the soul but a matter of fact outside the soul. Even what starts as an experience *in* man transcends the human sphere, becoming an objective event outside him. In this power of transcending the soul, time, and space, the pious man sees the distinction of religious acts. If prayer were only the articulation of words, of nothing but psychological relevance and of no metaphysical resonance, nobody would in an hour of crisis waste his time by praying in self-delusion.

Religion is a bestowal, a divine grant to man. It did not come into existence to console the desperate, to guarantee immortality, or to protect society. It is a reality in itself, not a function of man.

Religion is not an exclusive event in the course of time but a permanent condition, an invisible continuity. It is not a conclusion won from an inquiry into the nature of the universe, not an explanation of a riddle, but the living in the riddle, the effort to be the answer to the riddle oneself.

The domain of religion is the entire world, all of history, the vast as well as the tiny, the glorious as well as the trite. Everything in the universe throws its weight upon the scales of God's balance. Every deed denotes a degree in the gauge of the holy, irrespective of whether the man who

performs it is aiming at this goal or not. It is just the nonritual, the secular conditions, which the prophets of Israel regarded as being a divine concern. To them the totality of human activities, social and individual, all inner and external circumstances, are the divine sphere of interest.

The desire of a pious man is not to acquire knowledge of God but to abide by him, to dedicate to him the entire life. How does he conceive the possibility of such devotion? How can man be near to God?

RELIGION in itself, the state which exists between God and man, is neither produced by man nor dependent upon his belief; it is neither a display of human spirit nor the outgrowth of his conscience. Religion exists even if it is in this moment not realized, perceived, or acknowledged by anybody, and those who reject or betray it do not diminish its validity. Religion is more than a creed or a doctrine, more than faith or piety; it is an everlasting fact in the universe, something that exists outside knowledge and experience, an *order of being*, the *holy dimension* of existence. It does not emanate from the affections and moods, aspirations and visions of the soul. It is not a divine force in us, a mere possibility, left to the initiative of man, something that may or may not take place, but an actuality, the inner constitution of the universe, the system of divine values involved in every being and exposed to the activity of man, the ultimate in our reality. As an absolute implication of being, as an ontological entity, not as an adorning veneer for a psychical wish or for a material want, religion cannot be totally described in psychological or sociological terms.

All actions are not only agencies in the endless series of cause and effect; they also affect and concern God, with or without human intention, with or without human consent. All existence stands in a holy dimension. All existence stands before God—not only men—here and everywhere, now and at all times. Not only a vow or conversion, not only the focusing of the mind upon God, engages man to Him. Life is enlistment in His service; all deeds, thoughts, feelings, and events become His concern.

Religion is, as it were, the space for perpetual contact between God and the universe. This condition outlasts catastrophes and apostasies and constitutes God's covenant with mankind and the universe.

Man does not possess religion; he exists *in* religion. This religious existence precedes his religious experience. Creed and aspiration are the adjustments of consciousness to the holy dimension. Religion is not an election; it is the destiny of man.

Man can know God only because God knows him. Our love of God is a scant reflection of God's love for us. For every soul is a wave in the endless stream that flows out of the heart of God.

Man is an animal at heart, carnal, covetous, selfish, and vain; yet spiritual in his destiny: a vision beheld by God in the darkness of flesh and blood. Only eyes vigilant and fortified against the glaring and superficial can still perceive God's vision in the soul's horror-stricken night of falsehood, hatred, and malice.

We are prone to be impressed by the ostentatious, the obvious. The strident caterwaul of the animal fills the air, while the still, small voice of the spirit is heard only in the rare hours of prayer and devotion. From the streetcar window we may see the hunt for wealth and pleasure, the onslaught upon the weak, faces expressing suspicion or contempt. On the other hand, the holy lives only in the depths. What is noble retires from sight when exposed to light, humility is extinguished in the awareness of it, and the willingness for martyrdom rests in the secrecy of the things to be. Walking upon clay, we live in nature, surrendering to impulse and passion, to vanity and arrogance, while our eyes reach out to the lasting light of truth. We are subject to terrestrial gravitation, yet we are faced by God.

In the holy dimension the spiritual is a bridge flung across a frightful abyss, while in the realm of nature the spiritual hovers like the wafted clouds, too tenuous to bear man across the abyss. When a vessel sails into a typhoon and the maw of the boiling maelstrom opens to envelop the tottering prey, it is not the pious man, engrossed in supplication, but the helmsman who intervenes in the proper sphere with proper means, fighting with physical tools against physical powers. What sense is there in imploring the mercy of God? Words do not stem the flood nor does meditation banish the storm. Prayer never entwines directly with the chain of physical cause and effect; the spiritual does not interfere with the natural order of things. The fact that man with undaunted sincerity pours into prayer the ichor of his soul springs from the conviction that there is a realm in which the acts of faith are puissant and potent, that there is an order in which things of spirit can be of momentous consequence.

There are phenomena which appear irrelevant and accidental in the realm of nature but are of great meaning in religion. To worship violence, to use brutal force, is natural, while sacrifice, humility, and martyrdom are absurd from the point of view of nature. It is in the domain of religion that a thought or a sentiment may stand out as an everlasting approach to truth, where prayers are steps toward him that never retreat.

Just as man lives in the realm of nature and is subject to its laws, so does he find himself in religion; and just as it is impossible to take leave of nature, so it is impossible to escape the bounds of religion. Whatever happens to man, he will sever himself from the dimension of the divine neither by sin nor by stupidity, neither by apostasy nor by ignorance.

It has become a general habit to denote religion as the relationship between God and man. However, relationship expresses only a particular aspect in the existence of a subject, while religion is an essence, the meaning and totality of existence. Relationships do not touch the quick of life. Man's being related to state, society, family, etc., does not penetrate all strata of his personality. In his final solitude, in the hour of approaching death, they are blown away like chaff. It is in religion, in the holy dimension, that he abides whatever befalls him.

There is no relationship *ex nihilo*, no relationship in a void. Every relationship presupposes a setting in which it can take place, the common ground to those associated in it. In this setting the relationship is potentially contained even before it comes into effect. It is the setting, origin, and possibility of the relationship between God and man that we call religion.

Man's life is not imprisoned in a realm wherein causality, struggle for existence, will to power, *libido sexualis*, and the craving for prestige are the only springs of action. Life is not permanently enslaved to these variable motives. It is woven into relations which run far beyond that realm. Besides the struggle for physical existence there is an effort to acquire meaning and value, an endeavor to preserve what is lasting in man, to maintain the essential in all the vicissitudes and changes. But what is the lasting in man? What is the meaning of the whole life, not of particular actions or of single episodes which happen now and then, but of existence as such?

WHAT DO we mean by the concept of existence? In ascribing existence to a person, we imply that the person is more than a mere word, name, or idea, and that he exists independent of us and our thinking, while what is denoted as a product of our imagination, like the chimerical Brobdingnags or the Yahoos, depends entirely on our mind; it is nonexistent when we do not think of it. However, existence so described is a negative concept, asserting what the existing is not or indicating the relation of the existing to us. What is the positive and direct meaning of existence? Even if we add that existence always implies some minimum of continuity or permanence, we gain nothing but an insight into the relation between existence and time, saying that the existing has some sequence in time. The concept of what is most fundamental is thus impregnable to analysis. It is even immune to a question, for to ask what *is* existence is almost a tautology. However, we may ask: What does existence mean to us? How do we understand our own existence?

We usually ignore the problem; it is an intellectual adventure that few dare. Yet we are harrowed with wonder and awe when swept by the awareness of our existence. When death wipes away what has once been dear, mighty, and independent, the rock and riddle of life fall upon us,

and we learn that life is not a matter of course, that it cannot be taken for granted. Why are we in existence instead of nothing? Is life the offspring of nothingness or the germ of immortality? What is the course of the shuttle that runs but once between birth and death?

Our existence seesaws between what is more and what is less than existence. Death stands behind each of us, while before us is the open door of the divine exchequer, where we lay up the sterling coin of piety and spirit, the immortal remains of our dying lives. We are constantly in the mills of death, while for a limited time the contemporaries of God.

The island of existence is washed by the two oceans of eternity and nothingness, eroding it into what is less and elevating it into what is more than existence, into nothingness and into a higher reality, namely, the identity of event and value, the unity of being and meaning.

Existence, the domain of things and facts, is not the ultimate realm. There is a reality of spirit. The realm of values that illumine our lives—justice, beauty, goodness, purity, holiness—did not evolve from nature. Values cannot be derived from being nor can being be derived from nature. Both originate in a higher source. Values are ideals that ought to be realized, a challenge to nature, not a part of nature. Values are not laws of being that express a regularity in the life of nature like the laws of physics. They never fully agree with natural reality. Being as such is neutral and indifferent to values. The physician is not concerned with the question whether the heart of his patient is "good" or "bad" in a moral sense. He is interested only in a diagnosis of the physical condition. The cosmic tragedy is the abyss between being and value. It is incumbent upon us to build the bridge, to invade life with spirit, and to anoint the slaves of selfishness princes of spirit.

The universe, the apex of our abstractive thinking, is a concept of totality that implies not only the sum of parts but some sort of unity or system, in which each part has its specific function, in which each particular is related to the whole. Totality, the arrangement of being according to a purpose, is neither a quantity nor a relation; it is a quality *sui generis* that is not contained in the parts. "The human body contains a sufficient amount of fat to make seven cakes of soap, enough iron to make a medium-sized nail, a sufficient amount of phosphorus to equip two thousand matchheads; enough sulphur to rid oneself of one's fleas." But man as such is more than the mere addition of these elements. The parts did not exist prior to the whole; their character is derived from and conditioned by the whole. Totality is an essence, a value. But being valuable, it points toward something that is beyond itself. Things can be valuable only for something or somebody. The universe has a value that transcends its being; its totality is prior to its parts.

There is a connection between being and value. No being is without

relation to value. The universe is not without windows. But where do they lead if not to God? Religion is the value of the universe, the inner unity of all being, a cosmic disposition toward what is more than being and value. As totality is implied in every part, so is the value of the universe involved in every event, in every phenomenon. The care for the universal in the particular, for the complete in the part, is the essence of piety. Piety is emancipation from the absurdity of the particular.

There is no existence in itself. Existence always belongs to an existing but is not identical with it. Every existence belongs to something that is by itself less than existence. But this relationship between existence and existing is transitory, mortal. All beings are perishable, passing, and always dependent upon external conditions. The very essence of existence reveals the inner impotence of being *qua* being. For existence implies, as we have seen, belonging to somebody as well as permanence and independence; but there is neither independence nor true permanence in the existence of an existing. This want manifests the dualism of being and value. Independence and permanence are values, the freedom from what is less than being, namely, nothingness. Existence as such is devoid of value and borders on nothingness. Hence existence must also imply another relationship that is permanent and independent; it must stand in a relationship to something that is devoid of nothingness. Existence without what is more than existence is an abstraction.

To exist is to belong to an existing as well as to something that is more than existence. Existence has two sides: one is directed to us; the other is open to God. To be means to belong to God and to man. This dual ownership is the value of life. In visions of wisdom, in devotion to the good, in submission to beauty, and when overwhelmed by the holy, we awake to behold existence in this relationship. In reverence, suffering, and humility we discover our existence and find the bridge that leads from existence to God. And this is religion.

Life is something that visits matter. It is a transcendent loan, hidden to man and faced by God. Since it is present in our body, we are inclined to take it for granted. To the unbiased mind it is a revelation of a transcendent sphere. Being neither physical nor emotional, neither material nor rational, it remains a mystery in spite of its reality. Human will never creates life. In generating life, man is the tool, not the master. Science can produce a machine but not an organism. The old dream of a homunculus, a man produced artificially, has been renounced by science. We know that something animates and inspirits a living body. But how? And whence does life come?

Nothing can exist or be conceived of as being apart from the holy dimension. Through our very existence we possess duration in the divine

knowledge. Existence is our contact with God. In existence man discovers God. We do not infer ourself through a syllogism or through any reasoning but through our existence. So we approach God not only through our thoughts but, first of all, through our life.

Religion is the interest of God in man, his covenant with the universe. Our task is to concur with his interest, to live in accordance with God's vision of man. Piety is the response of man to the holy dimension, the subjective correlative of objective religion.¹

We live not only in time and space but also in the knowledge of God. The events in the world reflect in him, and all existence is coexistence with God. Time and space are not the limits of the world. Our life occurs here and in the knowledge of God.