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IN MEMORY OF
DR. ABRAHAM
JOSHUA HESCHEL

The Wonder of Heschel

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He loved stories, and so let me begin this tribute to him with a story that I found recently. It comes from Sam Dresner, who was one of his closest disciples, and who has continued in these last years since his teacher's death to write about him and to keep alive his spirit. Sam is at work on a book about Dr. Heschel. An excerpt from this book appeared recently in the Catholic magazine, *America*. I want to share one story from it with you.

Sam begins his essay with a story that took place near the end. Several years before Dr. Heschel died, he suffered a nearly fatal heart attack. Soon after, Sam came from Chicago to New York to see him. And this is what he recalls:

He had gotten out of bed for the first time to greet me, and he 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 feeling was not of despair, or of anger. I felt only gratitude to God for my life, for every moment I had lived. I was ready to depart, if need be. 'Take me, O Lord,' I thought. 'I have seen so many miracles in my lifetime.' " Exhausted by the effort, he paused, and then added: "This is what I meant when I wrote in the preface to my book of poems: I did not ask for success; I asked for wonder. And You gave it to me."

I did not ask for success: I asked for wonder. And You gave it to me. This is the way that Abraham Joshua Heschel, *zikhrono livrakhah*, evaluated his own life. Those of us who had the privilege of knowing him and of being his students can testify to the accuracy of this evaluation.

He was a man blessed with an extraordinary capacity for wonder. He was a man blessed with a remarkable ability to be excited, to be thrilled, to be exhilarated, to be uplifted. Things that other people took for granted, things that other people never bothered to notice, filled his heart with awe, his soul with joy, his mind with excitement.

Many of us remember how, before a seminar would begin, he would walk to the window and look out at the sky, and say to us: "Gentlemen, something wondrous happened tonight. Did you see it? Did you notice? The sun set." And we would look at each other

with embarrassment, for we had seen it, but not really, until he called it to our attention. We had seen it, but not noticed.

I remember an experience from my student days. I went to a wedding, and when I came back I met him in the Seminary courtyard. He asked me where I had been and I told him. "What kind of wedding was it?" he asked. I began by saying that it was a sad wedding because the groom had no relatives and the bride had no relatives, and the groom had a physical handicap and the bride was up in years. I got less than halfway through what I was going to say when he interrupted me with an exclamation: "How wonderful!" And then I realized that he was right. To me the wedding had seemed sad, but when I saw it through his eyes, from his perspective, I realized he was right. When two lonely people find each other, when two people, each of whom has little beauty, are able to discover the beauty in each other, how wonderful that is! I hadn't realized it until he showed it to me.

To be with him was to be in the presence of effervescence, to be in the company of constant excitement, to be near lightning. He could be angry, he could be fervent, he could be charming, he could be passionate, he could be satirical, he could be meditative, but he could never be dull. He could never be pedestrian. And nothing that he touched, nothing that he thought about, could ever be dull.

I love two stories that he tells in *Man Is Not Alone* and in *God in Search of Man*. They are about wonder, and about how we can crush the sense of wonder in our students and in ourselves if we are not careful.

The first story is about an educator walking with his child. The little girl asked him: "Daddy, what is up there beyond the sky?" The father gave her a "scientific" explanation. "Ether, my child," he said.

"Ether?" And she held her nose.

To give an answer like that is to crush, not to enlighten; to block, not to teach; to limit, not to enlarge the horizons of a child's mind. Many of us are the victims of such educators. Some of us were taught to paint what the teacher thought we should see, not what we saw. Some of us were taught the "primitive origins" of prayers or "the real sociological meaning" of commandments, and have had to fight long and hard to overcome the effects of explanations like these. Heschel tried to teach us how to stand for what is beyond us, how to point beyond ourselves, how to bear witness and not debunk, how to convey reverence instead of crushing wonder.

Now for the second story. What happened when the first electric streetcar made its appearance in Warsaw? Some good old Jews

could simply not believe their eyes. A car that moves without a horse? Some of them were stupified, some were frightened. All of them were at a loss for words to explain this amazing invention.

Once while they were discussing the matter in the synagogue, a man who had a reputation for being sophisticated entered. He not only studied the Talmud; he was reputed to know books on secular subjects, to subscribe to a general newspaper, and to be well versed in worldly affairs. They clustered around him and asked him if he knew how this thing worked.

"Of course I know," he said. They hung on his every word as he began to explain. "Picture four large wheels in a vertical position in four corners of a square, connected to each other by wires. Do you get it?"

"Yes, we get it," they said hesitantly.

"Now, these wires are tied together in a knot in the center of the square and then placed within a large wheel which is placed in a horizontal position. Do you get it?"

"Yes, we get it," said the listeners cautiously.

"Now, above the large wheel there are several more wheels, each one smaller than the one before. Do you get it?" said the sophisticate.

"Yes, we get it," they said a bit more hesitantly.

"Now, on top of the smallest wheel there is one tiny screw which is connected by a wire to the center of the car which lies on top of the wheels. Do you get it?"

"Yes, we get it."

"Now the machinist in the car presses the button that moves the screw that causes the horizontal wheels to move, which causes the vertical wheels to move, which causes the car to run through the streets. So you see, it is no wonder," said the sophisticate proudly.

"Ah, now we understand," said the old people.

But there was one old Jew there who said, "By me it is *still* a wonder."

And so it is. After all the explanations, *because* of all the explanations, the world is still a wonder. Even after we know *how* things work, *that* things work is still a wonder. The wonder is not only in the extraordinary; it is in the ordinary. That a piece of bread can emerge from a seed and the sun and the work of the farmer is a wonder. That a glass of water can revive the spirit of a person is a wonder. That the sun rises and that it sets is just as much of a wonder as an eclipse, even though for some reason so many people rush out to observe the eclipse and so few ever bother to notice the sunrise.

The heart of religion for Heschel is wonder. Gratitude makes a person great, according to him. The central question for him is not whether we have faith in God. The central issue for him is that God has faith in us, that after all the times we have disappointed Him, He still continues to believe in us. What we do with our lives is the response to that trust. We love in response to the love with which we are loved. To be the recipient of God's trust and to ignore it is a sin. To be entrusted with the gift of life and waste it is a transgression. To have eyes and not really see, is a loss.

In *The Earth Is the Lord's*, Heschel writes: "What is the main objective of observance if not to feel the soul, *the soul in oneself, the soul in the Torah, and the soul in the world?*" Much of the rest of his writings can be organized around these three rubrics. They were efforts to make us aware of the wonder of our own selves, the wonder within the Torah, and the wonder within the world.

Let us consider each of these insights in turn.

What, or, as he preferred to say, *who* is a human being? How shall we understand ourselves? Heschel was profoundly shocked in pre-Nazi Germany when he found Biology textbooks that defined a human being as a collection of iron and phosphorus and other chemicals that were worth so and so many dollars on the market. He felt that the road to Nazism began in those books, that one could draw a straight line between teachings like that and what the Nazis ended up doing to human beings. People were dehumanized first in theory and then in fact, first in the classroom and then in the streets. If man is only this, why revere him, why not use him, why not abuse him?

What Heschel found in those Biology textbooks in pre-Nazi Germany can be replicated in many classrooms in post-Nazi America. There are Philosophy classes in which all values are said to be relative (except relativism itself), in which all truths are said to be only a matter of opinion. And there are Science classes that speak of "programming people" and of "turning them on" as if man were made in the image of the machine instead of in the image of God. We have become so accustomed to such words that we are no longer even conscious of how callous, how dehumanizing and how dangerous such language is.

A human being must know who he is, and where he comes from and Who he represents. This is the message that Heschel crossed the country teaching and preaching. A person must know two truths: that he is dust and ashes, and that he is made in the image. A person must hold on to two insights at once: that he is mortal, and that he is immortal. He must constantly be aware that he can be here today

and gone today, and that he can be gone today and yet still be here ever afterwards.

There are some theologies that exalt God by putting man down; Heschel never put man down. On the contrary, he constantly reminded us of our potential, not only of our shortcomings. What is said of nothing else on earth is said of man: man, every man, is made in the image of God. How sad it is, he used to lament, for a man to forget who he is, where he comes from, and what he can be. "The Lord is your shadow," says the Bible, and a very bold Midrash that Heschel loved to quote took that to mean that just as a shadow depends upon the person, so does God depend upon us, so to speak.

One must know the wonder which is oneself. Otherwise, one can see no wonder anywhere else. To make us conscious of our own cosmic significance was Heschel's first pedagogic task. It was an enormously difficult task, for so much in contemporary culture combines to put man down, to make him feel that he is only animal or creature, worker or consumer, robot or thing.

Heschel's second pedagogic task was to help us discover the soul within the Torah. He was a *bona fide* scholar, and he could do systematic research as well as any pedant, but his desire was to go beyond that. He wanted to know facts and dates. But more than that, he wanted to capture the echo of the soul that reverberated within the words of a manuscript, to gain an insight into the inner life of the historical figure he was studying. He wanted to know the yearnings in the soul of his people, not only the social or economic factors in their lives. He wanted not only to dissect the words of a text; he wanted to catch the melody within them.

Let me share a ballad by Menachem Boraisha that I think says something about what it means to seek the soul within the Torah. It is an excerpt from his major philosophical work, *Der Geyer*. I found it in a translation by Zalman Schachter-Shlomi. It is a bit long, I know, but I ask you to bear with me, for the humor and the power of the last lines depend on the development that leads up to them, and I find it too good a story to weaken by shortening. It is a tale that I think Dr. Heschel must have known, and that I think he must have enjoyed:

A *shtetl* far from the highway.
The *shtetl* Jews, peasants,
do business with the village,
work for the farmers.

In his room, door locked,
the rabbi studies,
and the books on his shelves multiply.

He makes his way to town,
finds a holy book.
The seller names his price.
Weeks of wages! "I'll be back."
And the rabbi goes off to borrow the money.
In the morning he is back, but
too late; the bookseller cuts him off.
It's sold. Some coachman bought it.
A coachman? A *baaleguleh*? A book of kabbalah?!

The rabbi, not knowing if the dealer teases,
walks into the slum streets and asks for
the *baaleguleh* who buys books.
They just stare at him. The last one on his list
boards at the shoepatcher.
The rabbi gets his shoes patched.
He asks, "What's in these books you buy?"
"Oh," the *baaleguleh* replies, "tales
and stories." The rabbi, his suspicions
confirmed, could have guessed as much.
Imagine, *ballegulehs* and kabbalah!

His heart brined in salt, disgusted
by the loss of the book and the
bookseller's teasing, he wants only
to travel home. He goes to the market
to find a ride. Ready to go, the
baaleguleh yells: "Hop in, let's move!"
Amazed, the rabbi wonders, "Only one fare
and he travels?"
"Come on up, rabbi, don't worry!"

The *balleguleh*, high on the driver's seat,
the rabbi under the covered wagon's hood, they travel.
Only an hour or two, he thinks, and I'll
be home. But soon he feels a halt and,
looking out, he hears the *baaleguleh* say:
"Come! Crawl out and look at this!"
The rabbi crawls, looks, but cannot even
recognize the road. "Is this not a strange
road?" he asks. "It'll get to be your own.

Look!" And he points to a field, to
peasants, barefoot, scythes in hand, cutting hay.
Fragrant hay! Rolling fields! Vaulted sky!
Bird swarms swooping overhead!
"I see nothing," says the rabbi.
"O.K." We'll keep trucking!"

Hours pass. Suddenly another stop.
"Come on out, rabbi!"
This time, even more alien,
a field and forest. The *baaleguleh*
stops to chat with a village peddler.
"Why drag me around?" The rabbi is angry,
but the *baaleguleh* just says, "This fellow
can use a ride; move over and we'll
take him a spell."

The wagon moves on, the peddler and the
rabbi sitting under the hood.
The rabbi's silence breathes icy anger,
so the peddler keeps his peace and
they move on.

Another stop. Now it's a *kuzhnya* (smithy)
in some strange *shtetl*. The peddler leaves,
moving on his way. The *baaleguleh* waits
in the *kuzhnya* for the *kowal* (smith)
to shoe the horse. He calls outside
to the rabbi: "Come on in, it's happier
here." At the door of the smithy stands
the rabbi, growling with anger.
"What *hutspah!* All I need is to overhear
the conversations of *kowals* and *baalegulehs!*"

Finally, they travel on. But soon oats are
needed for the horse, so on to the feedstore.
In friendly conversation stand the storekeeper,
the *baaleguleh*, and a woman. The rabbi burns
with rage. "When will there be an end to this?!"
The *baaleguleh* looks at him. "It's a good store,
good folks here, why don't you come in?"
The rabbi bites his lip. Even exile will someday
find its end. . . .

Night falls, and they drive up to a *kretchma* (roadhouse)
as the *baaleguleh* unhitches the horse.

The rabbi starts to go,
 trying to find his colleague in the *shtetl*.
 But he is stopped:
 "You'll find good people in the roadhouse too."
 The *hutspah* of the *baaleguleh*
 imprisons him, and he stays. The *kretchma* is
 filled with simple folk, eating, drinking, smoking.
 He finds a corner and prays the *Ma'ariv*.
 He lets himself be served supper
 while the *kretchmer* and the *baaleguleh* hum.
 Tired of his anger, he naps and knows not
 when lamps are doused and where the night gets lost.
 The day greys to dawn and the *baaleguleh* shakes him awake.
 He wants to wash his hands for prayer
 but the other rushes him. "You'll *daven* at home."
 Now the wagon flies, the road looks familiar.
 The sun is fully up, and they are at the rabbi's house.
 "Rabbi! Arrived!"
 Feeling fortunate, "at home at last," he reaches for his wallet.
 "How much do I owe you?" he asks.
 "You owe me nothing," the answer comes.
 "I'll even pay you." And he pulls out
 the book and gives it to the rabbi.
 "Take it, rabbi. If you see nothing,
 and hear nothing, this book won't help you
 either!" He turns to his horse and
 urges him with a "Heigh-Ho!"
 The rabbi stands there confused.
 He rushes to pursue the wagon,
 but the *baaleguleh* is way gone.

Is the point of the story and its relevance to Torah study clear? If one cannot discern any meaning, any mystery, any message in the work of the farmer, or on the face of the innkeeper, or in the company of fellow passengers, one will not find it in the Torah either.

There are many ways to read the Torah. What we get out of it depends on what we bring to it. Ezekiel complains somewhere that they call him a singer of songs instead of paying attention to what he is saying. To call the Prophets "literature," Heschel used to say, is like praising the manuscript of Einstein's theory of relativity by saying that he had a nice handwriting. His intention was to say something important about reality. So it with the Prophets. To focus on precisely when or where they lived, or on the exact spelling of their

words, can be a digression, an escape, from hearing what they wanted to say. They want to judge us, not to be judged by us. As in the story about the brash young man who comes back to his first teacher after a stay in the Yeshiva, told by Heschel in *The Earth Is The Lord's*, the central question is not: How much Talmud have we gone through? The central question is: *How much has gone through us?* This is what Torah study meant for Heschel.

There is a soul in the world. Heschel taught us to be sensitive to the difference between the Greek word for "world" and the Hebrew word. The Greek word is *cosmos*, which means something complete in itself. The Hebrew word is *olam*, which is a cousin of the word *ne-elam*, which means mystery, wonder, something hidden. The world itself is a wonder. That which we understand is still a wonder. *That we understand is a wonder.*

There are two ways of looking at the world. One can say that the world is getting older every day. One can feel sorry for the world that has to get up every day for centuries, for millenia. One can wish that the world could retire and move to Florida to live on social security. Or one can sense that *the world is being born today!* One can bend down and listen to the world's heartbeat and know that underneath everything there is life, pulsating life, coming to expression in the grass, in the birds, in us, in all. Heschel lived with dynamism, with electricity, because he sensed the aliveness of all that is, and responded to it.

Let me say something now about Heschel's last years. In one sense, these were the years of his greatest fame and glory. But in another sense, these were the years of his greatest isolation and loneliness. The question is: *why* did he turn at this point in his life to activism? Why did he invest so much of himself to social causes in these last years? He must have known how precarious his health was, how precious his time was, how much writing he still had to do. Why did he choose to spend his last energies this way, in a race against time, juggling tasks, commuting between worlds, finishing his book on the Kotsker and carrying on political activities at the same time? What did he need it for, when it brought him so much criticism from Jews, maligning from students, harsh judgments from peers?

The key may be in something that Dr. Heschel once wrote about Maimonides. Scholars have long wondered about the relationship between Maimonides the philosopher and Maimonides the physician. Was the latter simply his way of making a living so that he could be the former? In his biography of Maimonides, Dr. Heschel offers a different suggestion. He proposes that, for Maimonides, the

practice of medicine was not instead of religion, or in addition to religion; it *was* religion. It was prayer in the form of a deed. His life moved in stages. His metaphysics led him to the love of God, and the love of God led him to the healing of God's people. Byron Sherwin, in his book about Heschel, suggests that the same point Heschel made about Maimonides can also be made about him. He too moved in stages. In the nineteen-sixties Heschel worked on the prophets, producing a book that is a lasting contribution to biblical scholarship. But in the process, the prophets worked on him too. As he lived with them in his consciousness, a change came over him. The man who easily could have lived out his years in a scholar's study became more and more deeply involved in social issues. The pain of the blacks in the South, of Jews in the Soviet Union, of human beings in Vietnam, penetrated his soul and gave him no rest. He became a guide and a goad to us all on the controversial issues of our time. He took on the American Medical Association, went to the White House to speak up for the rights of the aged, became a central figure in the civil rights movement, and one of the major voices in the protest against the Vietnam war. Sherwin suggests that all these involvements were not digressions from his study of the prophets; they were the *result* of his study of the prophets.

It is true that others have studied the prophets and not come away so deeply affected. Perhaps they did not really study the prophets, but only the details that surround them. Heschel studied the prophets, and came away from the experience transformed. Speaking up in the name of God against evil became, for him, not a digression from religion, but its essence.

And so began those last lonely years, the years in which he won so much admiration in the Christian world and so little appreciation within the Jewish world. He journeyed to Rome in the hope of bringing about a change in the Church's understanding of the Jew, and although he had some effect there, he was harshly criticized by certain elements within the Jewish community for going. He journeyed to Selma to stand with Martin Luther King. "Father Abraham" they called him there, for they sensed in him more than just a spokesman for the Bible. They sensed in him an embodiment of the Bible. When, a few years later, the civil rights movement fell apart and blacks robbed and pillaged in Jewish neighborhoods, he was mocked and made fun of by cynics for what he had done. The day before he died, he went, in the cold, and despite ill health, to be at the gate to greet a Catholic priest as he came out of prison after an anti-Vietnam demonstration; and he was criticized, and petitioned against by his own Seminary students for cancelling his classes to do

it. Some of his own students and some of his own peers could not understand why he did these things "instead of Judaism." Like the prophets of old, he was alone at the end, isolated and misunderstood, and yet those last lonely years were the ones in which he brought to fruition all that he had studied and taught and become until then.

How can we pay tribute to him, we who miss him so much? Who else do we have since his departure who can reach out so far and yet remain so rooted? Who else do we have like him, who had two books side by side near his bed when he died: a hasidic *sefer* and a book about the Vietnam war? Who do we have who cares about what *either* book represents, much less about both? Who else do we have like him to remind us of who we should be, of who we can be, of who we are?

In a eulogy that he once gave for a friend, he said that there are three levels of mourning. The first level is with tears. The second level, higher than that, is with silence. And the third level, the highest of all, is with song. Tears we have shed aplenty since his going. Silence we have observed for a long time now, each time we contemplate how orphaned our generation is, how much more there still was that we could have done with him, how much more there still was that we should have done for him. Ten years have passed. It is time now to turn our mourning into song.

Dovev siftei yisheininim. "When one quotes his master's words, it is as if his master's lips still move from the grave," says the Midrash. May our teacher's lips continue to move, and may his spirit continue to live in us, with us and through us. And may these words that I have recalled, by him and about him, be a source of blessing to us all.