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DIVREI TORAH  
IN MEMORY OF  
DR. ABRAHAM  
JOSHUA HESCHEL

# A. J. Heschel, Irenic Polemicist

RABBI HAROLD STERN  
*Congregation Bnai Emunah*  
*Skokie, Illinois*

I am certain that there are many here this morning who have fond memories of Dr. Heschel from their days at the Seminary, from hearing him at one of his lectures or from sharing one of his *Shabbos tishen*. Our younger colleagues who did not know him personally have surely seen the photographs or heard of his historic march with the late Martin Luther King, Jr. in Selma, Alabama. The impassioned address he delivered at a Rabbinical Assembly Convention on the immorality of the war in Vietnam is indelibly fixed in the minds of those who were privileged to hear it.

My memories of Heschel are extremely varied. I remember him as my teacher of Medieval Jewish Philosophy at the Seminary whose "mysticism" I had to defend against the criticism voiced by fellow-students who boasted of being strict rationalists. I remember him as he sat at the head of the table and conducted his seminar, rapidly turning the pages of a loose-leaf notebook in which he hurriedly scribbled down *tokh kdei limud* ideas which later would appear in the books which brought him to the attention of the community of philosophers and theologians.

There is one impression which I believe I share with everyone whose life he touched: Heschel was an irenic personality. He was passionate, committed, dedicated, but he was not offensive. If he differed with you he never resorted to strong language or *ad hominem* retorts. Even before the serious coronary which slowed him down considerably, he projected a peaceful, tranquil countenance. He walked straight as a ramrod, I should say he strode, more like a soldier than a philosopher of religion. Yet he had a twinkle in his eye, and his speech was soft and tender. When I would meet him in the corridors of the Seminary he always greeted me before I could transcend my awe of him and say *shalom* to him. I can still hear the melody with which he pronounced my name. I knew he would have preferred to call me Herschel, but I had come to be known as Harold or Zvi.

While Heschel was an irenic person, we must not overlook the fact that he was a skilled polemicist as well. In our haste to determine what he had to say or in what his original contribution to Jewish philosophy and theology consisted, we tend to neglect the fact that he constantly directed his sights against doctrines which he considered

false or inadequate to explain human reality in general, and Jewish reality in particular. Admittedly, we justifiably extol the *unique* contribution which a thinker makes to a body of knowledge, and it is the extent of his adding to the corpus of thought which insures a thinker's fame and reputation. Nevertheless, it is no mean task for a thinker to engage in a critique of the opinions of others, especially if the projection of one's own ideas against a background of opposing views may serve to clarify and render more penetrating the ideas one seeks to set forth.

Heschel excelled in this approach. He was familiar with the whole of Western philosophy: Plato, Aristotle, the medievals, the British empiricists, the German idealists, the pragmatists, the logical positivists, the linguistic analysts, the existentialists (both religious and atheistic), the phenomenologists. There was no aspect of philosophy which he had not come to understand. He combined this with a thorough acquaintance with Rabbinic thought, its sources as well as its classical and modern formulations, and his special appreciation of Hasidism, the earlier doctrines of the Baal Shem Tov and the Maggid as well as the later *hasidut* of Pzyscha and Kotzk. Is it any wonder that he would find it necessary to tear down old fences in order to build a new edifice? He wanted to present an understanding of Judaism which could serve to attract the searching minds and sensitive souls of those contemporary Jews who were turned off from Judaism, because they failed to find it adequate to their philosophical sophistication and/or because they considered Judaism an antiquated religion shot through with superstition, mythology and chauvinistic ethnicity.

The limits of this presentation mitigate against any exhaustive analysis of Heschel's *oeuvre*. I can only point out some instances of what I choose to call his irenic polemicism. The demands of brevity limit my treatment to *Man is not Alone*, subtitled: "A Philosophy of Religion," published in 1951. His later works in English, however, subjected to similar analysis, would confirm my thesis. To talmudists and halakhists I suggest the special task of explicating the doctrines Heschel sought to refute in his Rabbinic writings. I doubt that Heschel adopted a different *derekh* when he engaged in the study of Rabbinics. One additional remark. In consonance with his irenic nature Heschel rarely specifies his opponents by name, reserving to the reader the challenge of identifying the philosopher or theologian to whose view he places himself in opposition. At times it is not easy to be precise about Heschel's adversary, and the casual reader is bound to skim over a passage which would become more trenchant

when compared with the philosophical position it seeks to challenge. But reading Heschel is a challenge in *every* respect.

At the beginning of *Man is not Alone*, Heschel makes a claim which contradicts the spirit of medieval philosophy based primarily on Aristotle. It is an axiom of the Scholastics that nothing is to be found in the intellect which is not first mediated through the senses. *Nihil est in intellectu nisi prius in sensu*. That is how the Latins formulated this principle. Heschel, on the contrary, denies that discursive reasoning or syllogistic thinking based on empirical observation is man's sole source of knowledge. There is a dimension of reality which is not permeable to the senses: the realm of the ineffable, that which cannot be talked about. "Just as the mind is able to form conceptions supported by sense perception, it can derive insights from the dimension of the ineffable." Furthermore, Heschel insists that since all men are capable of sensing the ineffable, human beings as such confront something or someone outside of themselves, so that man is not alone.

Certain moderns claim that only that which can be talked about is real. Heschel, while agreeing that the ineffable cannot be *talked about*, asserts that it can be *pointed to*, provided that the type of language used is indicative rather than descriptive. Linguistic philosophy holds that being able to be expressed is a *sine qua non* of meaningfulness. Heschel, on the other hand, considers the awe and reverence inspired by the ineffable as legitimate responses and allusions to meaning. Kant formulated two versions of his categorical imperative, both of them relating to ethics. Heschel offers another categorical imperative, one just as compelling: the compulsion to feel awe and reverence. The feeling of awe and reverence, too, is universal. "There is no man who is not shaken for an instant by the eternal!" Why? What profit in it? We have no desire to feel awe. We may even suppress such a desire. Yet we feel awe. It must be because we are compelled to. And this compulsion takes the form of a quest for meaning which, contrary to commonly-held opinion, exists *outside* the mind and not in it. We do not revere what we know, the familiar, the regular, mental constructs, but that which surpasses our minds, that which, in a sense, created our minds. Metaphysics, the investigation of being *qua* being is vain. Being as being is unavailable to us; the *Ding-an-sich* is inextricably hidden. Any dichotomy between facts and meanings is specious. Every fact is endowed with meaning independent of man's intellect. Man discovers the meaning in facts, he does not supply it.

The work of Martin Heidegger looms behind much of what Heschel has to say about being. When Heschel defines "to be" as meaning "to stand for," one cannot help but conjure up Heidegger's *Dasein* (his term for human reality) which exists, that is, stands outside as the particular being who is concerned with Being. It is true that Heschel is referring to beings (with a small "b"). Nevertheless, when he says that all beings are representative of something and stand for more than themselves, he is claiming for all beings that which Heidegger in his later works will predicate of *Dasein*, namely, a projection toward transcendence (Being with a capital "B").

Heidegger's doctrine of the self (the "I") as a correlative with the world and one of the constituents of *Dasein*, its quality of "mineness," is expressly denied by Heschel. He writes:

The essence of what I am is not mine. . . . I am that I am not . . . in penetrating and exposing the self, I realize that the self did not originate in itself, that the essence of the self is in its being a non-self, that ultimately man is not a subject but an *object*.

It should not be necessary to indicate the revolutionary nature of Heschel's contention that man is not a subject but an object. Of course, he does not mean that man is an object in the sense of a thing which is finished, once and for all, something to-hand, a tool to be manipulated. What he means is that man is an object *for* something, specifically the transcendent.

Proving the existence of God was a major concern of the medievals. Heschel, who greatly respected Maimonides, shows no desire to offend his master by questioning the validity of these proofs although he does contend that all of them, including the most convincing of the "five ways," the argument from design, contain subtle fallacies. His argument with the medievals is not that they are invalid, but that the traditional proofs prove *too little*.

A God derived from speculation is at best as much as our finite knowledge of the facts of the universe would demand. . . . Why should we be concerned with Him, the most perfect? We may, indeed, accept the idea that there is a supreme designer and still say: So what? As long as a concept of God does not overpower us . . . it is not God that we talk about but something else.

Heschel rejects the God of the Philosophers, but he does not share Blaise Pascal's insight. The oft-quoted *Pensee XIII*, purportedly found in Pascal's habit after his death, begins: "God of Abraham,

God of Isaac, God of Jacob," not of the philosophers and the sages. "Certitude, Certitude, Sentiment, Joy, Peace."

Heschel asks a different question: "Is there a God who collects the tears, who honors hope, and rewards the ordeals of the guiltless?" Or, as one of his students put it: "Is there a God whom you can address as *tatenyu*?"

The question concerning the nature of religion is answered differently by the various intellectual disciplines. Sociology sees religion as a social convention designed to bring people together for common needs and purposes. Psychology views religion in terms of a supposed need for an authority figure. Marx, as is well-known, taught that religion was an opiate of the masses derailing them from the path leading to the class struggle. For Heschel, religion has its roots in man's choosing "what to do with the feeling of mystery, what to do with awe, wonder or fear . . . (it) begins with the feeling that something is asked of us," that we are obligated. Within us there is an innate sense of indebtedness. "Within our awe we only know that all we own we owe."

In German, a language Heschel knew well, "indebtedness" and "guilt" are expressed by the same word: *Schuld*. By punning on the word *Schuld* (did he assume that his readers knew German?) Heschel effectively contrasts the Christian doctrine of man's total depravity and guilt before his Maker with the authentically Jewish idea expressed by the question of the prophet Micah: What doth the Lord require of thee? To sum it up, "Philosophy begins with man's question; religion begins with God's question and man's answer."

Heschel denies that polytheism has no appeal to contemporary man. On the contrary, he sees manifestations of polytheism reflected in the yearning of men for pagan forms. How else explain the fascination with paganism which afflicted the German people under Hitler? Probably there was no more intellectually sophisticated people in the forties of this century than the Germans. Yet they fell prey to the attractiveness of national myths which affirmed values directly opposed to those established by their scientific society and those preached by the monotheistic religion they professed in their churches. It is, therefore, necessary to reassert monotheism. However, that God is one, or that there is only one God, must be properly understood. God's unity is not a matter of mathematics alone. To say that God is one means that He is unique. He is incomparable. He is the sole reality, His is an inner unity,

both beyond and here, both in nature and in history, both love and power, near and far, known and unknown, Father and

Eternal . . . His is only a single way. His power is His love,  
His justice is His mercy. What is divergent in us is one in Him.

In another poignant passage Heschel explains why Genesis speaks of "a second day," "a third day," and so forth, while it speaks of "one day" instead of "the first day." *Yom ehad* does not mean one day; it means the day of unity, "the day on which God desired to be *one* with man. . . . The unity of God is a concern for the unity of the world."

For Heschel, "life is not a passive state of indifference and inertia. The essence of life is intense care and concern." Behind his delineation of the three dimensions of human concern: the self, the fellow-man and the dimension of the holy, lie the three stages which Soren Kierkegaard distinguishes in the life of man: the aesthetic, the ethical and the religious. Yet Heschel's mood is different from that of the melancholy Dane. Concern for the self, for one's fellow-man and for the dimension of the holy are all legitimate concerns that are constituent of the human being's concern with one's self which becomes selfishness only when it is not referred to the ethical concern. The ethical concern itself, however, is not the ultimate. As the verse says: "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself; I am the Lord." It is this conclusion (often omitted when the verse is quoted) that contains the ultimate rationale for the commandment. God's concern is designated by Heschel as "transitive" as opposed to "reflexive." God is not concerned with Himself, but rather with what He created. It is a continuous concern, even (Cicero notwithstanding) when small matters are involved, for "to be is to stand for, to stand for a divine concern."

Speculative philosophy affirms the notion that God is the perfect being. Yet Biblical writers, Heschel reminds us, do not refer to God as perfect. If there is one concept which could serve as a starting point for determining the meaning of the divine, it would be the idea of the *one*. This is a departure point which religion shares with science, for science also begins with a postulate that there are unifying laws which govern nature; the world is a cosmos, not a chaos. Nevertheless, despite its unity, there are forces in nature which tend to destroy that unity. There are conflicts that rage within nature; there is disharmony as well as harmony. Consequently, we must go beyond nature and its unifying laws and raise the question: What is the origin of those laws? Certainly we must try to discover the universal laws which govern nature, but only when we go beyond those laws and sense the divine unity do the disharmonies of nature dissolve in a higher oneness. "God means: Togetherness of all beings in holy otherness."



Dealing with the nature of faith, Heschel takes issue with those who hold that faith can be defined as an assent to things unseen, that to have faith means to express certain convictions, judgments, truths. For him, such expressions are in the sphere of creed rather than faith.

Faith is an act, something that happens rather than something that is stored away; it is a moment in which the soul of man communes with the glory of God.

More specifically, to have faith is to remember, to recollect past events, this recollection being itself a holy act. No leap is necessary to achieve faith (*pace* Kierkegaard); one must open one's heart to the call to communal memory. But faith is not merely passive. It is also faithfulness, loyalty to a past event, especially to the experience (and each of us had at least one such experience!) which occurs at moments when we sense the reality of God. Faith is to be contrasted with belief which relates to propositions accepted as true. Faith is an act of consent rather than assent. As Heschel puts it, "(faith) is as reducible to an assent as love, and its adequate expression is not a sober assertion but an exclamation."

Yet creeds, propositional formulations of what we believe in, are necessary, despite the danger of confusing what we believe *in* with the *act* of believing, which is faith. Creeds are required in order that our insights into ultimate reality be communicable to others. Therefore, any conflict between faith and reason is specious since they deal with separate dimensions. If a conflict exists, it would be between *reason* and belief. In addition, there is a mutual dependence between faith and reason: "Faith without reason is mute; reason without faith is deaf."

The second part of *Man is not Alone* is entitled "The Problem of Living." It takes us from the realm of thinking about ultimate reality to the concrete acts of the human personality. Once again Heschel begins with a universal phenomenon of human being: the experience of needs. More precisely, needs as the awareness of a lack, of an unrealized or unsatisfied condition. Man's predicament derives in large part from the fact that such needs are different for each person, and often involve conflict with the perceived needs of others. Ethics attempts, by means of the application of human reason, to instruct us how to adjust our needs to those of others, how to make wise judgments, how to avoid the conflict of interests. It may be successful in doing this, but it fails to assure us that our struggle to attain universal harmony will be in the end successful. Heschel holds with Aristotle in the latter's critique of Socrates'

equating knowledge with virtue. Knowledge of the good does not insure the doing of the good. The passions of man, his appetites and desires, are equally constituent of his moral decisions. Moreover, needs are not sacred in the sense that modern psychology asserts it a sacrilege, so to speak, to suppress one's needs. There can be evil needs, needs which hem us in, make us slaves, oppress us. To truly understand the problem of man's needs it is necessary to go to their root, to understand man, the subject of those needs, to come to see man as not only having needs, but being himself a need. Kant's second categorical imperative that one must never use one's fellow man as a means tells us only how we should treat others, not how we should treat ourselves. If we consider ourselves as an end unto ourselves, we will of necessity treat others as means. Eventually we will be led into feelings of uselessness and into despair. True happiness consists in being needed. But who needs us? Nature? No! Our fellow-man? Only indirectly, if at all. "Man is needed, he is a need of God."

The remainder of *Man is not Alone* consists of a preliminary study of the nature of religion in general and of Judaism in particular. These subjects are treated in greater detail in *God in Search of Man*. The lectures which comprise the little book entitled *Who is Man?* develop Heschel's anthropology even further. In *A Passion for Truth*, published posthumously, he compares two seemingly disparate conceptions of religion and man: those of Rabbi Menahem Mendl of Kotzk and of Soren Kierkegaard, demonstrating that in many respects they are not so far apart. All of Heschel's works, which are a delight to read, deserve careful study. An attempt should be made to provide a detailed delineation of what Heschel was against. Such an inquiry would offer an effective method of attaining to a deeper understanding and appreciation of his philosophical and religious stance. However, it would not be enough to specify what Heschel opposed; students of Heschel should be concerned also with *how* he related to his adversaries: with dignity and respect, with quiet calm and dispassionate words. He was an example of a seeker after truth who does not attempt to exalt himself by bringing others down. His writing, though often allusive, was never abusive. He proclaimed that we praise God before we prove His existence. As for the thinkers with whom he disagreed, he praised them too, so to speak, before he tried to show their deficiencies. For example, as a Jew, a brand plucked from the fire, he had a right to relate negatively to Martin Heidegger whose Nazi sympathies are well-attested despite his resignation from the post as Rector of the University of Freiburg to which he was appointed during the Nazi regime. Yet, in *Who is Man?*

Heschel shows a distinct respect for the author of *Being and Time* who, perhaps as no other beside Heschel himself, sought to answer the perplexing question which comprises the book's title.

Heschel liked to end his lectures and seminars with a story. It was usually a pithy Hasidic *maaseh*, and it was left for the listener to get the point of the parable or the allegory. At the conclusion of this presentation I have no Hasidic story to tell to illustrate my thesis. But I do have a personal anecdote to relate, *b'didi hava uvda*.

When I was a student at the Seminary, Heschel assigned our class the writing of a short theme interpreting the phrase from Isaiah 6:3: *mlo khol ha-aretz k'vodo*, usually translated: "the whole earth is full of His glory." When I received the assignment I resolved to impress him. After all, he must have had something profound in mind if he asked for an interpretation of such a time-worn verse! So, applying my linguistic bent, I composed a theme in which I wrote that the usual translation is wrong. If Isaiah had wanted to express the idea that the whole earth is full of God's glory, he would have said *mol'ah* or *meleiah khol ha-aretz k'vodo*. (See Isaiah 11:9.) *Mlo ha-aretz* means the "fullness of the earth," so the meaning of the received text is that God's glory consists of the *fullness* of the earth. Isaiah is calling attention to a quality which the world possesses: fullness, completeness, perfection. Heschel returned my masterpiece with no comment. Also with no grade. Yet his attitude toward me did not change. He was the same sweet person to me as previously. Only later, many years later, when I decided to engage in a serious study of *hasidut*, did I understand how irenic Heschel really was. My interpretation must have disturbed him no end. Do you realize that I had in one fell swoop shown that the controversy between the Vilna Gaon and the Rabbi of Ladi rested on a mere linguistic confusion? Here I was implying that the question of the extent of God's imminence in the world which precipitated such pain and anguish in the Jewish communities of Eastern Europe, divided families, disrupted Jewish society, led to excommunications and even *hillul hashem* derived from a simple misunderstanding of grammar! All that *tsuros* would have been avoided if the Alter Rebbe had known of my translation!

I recall this personal experience with Heschel often. It has helped to keep me humble to some degree. It serves as a constant reminder to me to try to emulate the irenic polemicist who was my teacher. I have not always remained faithful to his charge, but I have always been grateful for the inspiration he gave me. I pray that I may someday be worthy of being numbered among his disciples. *Yehei zikhro barukh*.