

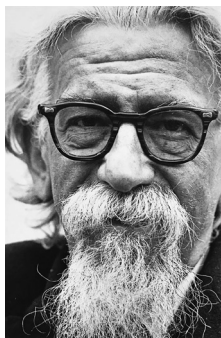
A stylized, high-contrast portrait of Abraham Joshua Heschel. He is depicted from the chest up, wearing a dark suit jacket, a light-colored shirt, and a striped tie. He has a full, white beard and is wearing thick, black-rimmed glasses. The background is a solid teal color. The portrait is rendered in a graphic, almost cubist style with bold outlines and a limited color palette of teal, yellow, orange, and black.

Thunder
in the **Soul**

To Be Known by God

— *oh* —
**ABRAHAM
JOSHUA
HESCHEL**

*Edited by Robert Erlewine
Foreword by Susannah Heschel*



Thunder in the Soul

To Be Known by God

Abraham Joshua Heschel

Edited by Robert Erlewine



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Who Was Abraham Joshua Heschel?

Robert Erlewine

ABRAHAM JOSHUA HESCHEL is a singular figure in American Jewish history and modern Jewish thought. His life and work defy easy categorization, bringing together an array of seemingly contradictory tendencies. While rooted in traditionalist Judaism, he is attendant to the forces of modernity. A religiously observant Jew, he nevertheless insists that creative dissent is essential for the vitality of tradition. Fluent in Talmud, and deeply knowledgeable of traditional Jewish learning more generally, he is also at home in philosophy and modern biblical criticism. His most significant works address a popular audience, with prose accessible and often quite beautiful, and yet their premises are sophisticated and complex. Additionally, he is the rare modern Jewish thinker whose work reflects a profound knowledge of

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all genres of Jewish expression: Bible, Talmud, Midrash, medieval philosophy, Kabbalah, Hasidism, and modern thought. Even the language in which he composed his works varied; he wrote eloquent prose in four languages: Hebrew, German, English, and Yiddish.

Heschel offered a galvanizing vision of Judaism that was at times sharply critical of the status quo, while remaining deeply anchored in tradition. He rejected the notion that worship and religious practice were private matters, arguing instead that they have vital relevance for addressing the most pressing concerns of society. And he insisted this was the case even if it meant giving voice to views that were unpopular or controversial. Heschel's theological commitments undergirded his courageous efforts on behalf of the civil rights movement, his protests against the war in Vietnam, and his work to improve Jewish-Christian relations. Not adhering to any particular denomination of American Judaism, he engaged them all. He also maintained dialogue and friendships with leading Christian thinkers of his day.

Considering this vision and strength of character, it should not be surprising that nearly five decades after his death in 1972, he remains a towering figure in the consciousness of the American Jewish community and

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beyond. Indeed, his writings have had a global reach, with his books translated into many languages including Hebrew, Spanish, French, German, Croatian, Portuguese, Lithuanian, Urdu, Chinese, Korean, Japanese, Polish, and Dutch.

Heschel was born in Warsaw, Poland, in 1907. His lineage was illustrious, with many prominent rabbis on both sides of his family tree, including his namesake, the legendary Hasidic rebbe known as the Apter Rav, Avraham Yehoshua Heshel (1748–1825). As was the custom, he began studying Torah at three years of age and quickly showed himself to be a child prodigy. Significant energy and attention were devoted to his education in the traditional sources. Given his ancestry, upbringing, and intellectual abilities, he seemed destined to become a Hasidic rebbe.

And yet Heschel did not become a rebbe, at least not in a traditional sense. During his teenage years he developed an avid interest in literature and began writing poetry in Yiddish. With support from his mother (his father died during an epidemic in 1916), Heschel attended a secular Jewish gymnasium in Vilna for a year as preparation for university. While there, he was a member of Yung Vilna, a renowned Yiddish poetry group. In the fall of 1927,

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when he was twenty years old, he arrived in Berlin. At this time, Berlin was a major intellectual hub, not only of science, literature, art, and philosophy but also of Yiddish culture and the academic study of Judaism. He enrolled in the University of Berlin, where he studied philosophy, Semitics, and art history, and in the Hochschule für die Wissenschaft des Judentums, which trained liberal rabbis and scholars. He also studied at the Orthodox Hildesheimer rabbinical college, though he had already received Orthodox rabbinical ordination in Warsaw. Heschel showed a remarkable capacity to be at home in all Jewish communities, a trait that would be prominently displayed for the rest of his life.

He continued to write and publish poetry while finishing his dissertation, “Das prophetische Bewusstsein” (The Prophetic Consciousness), which he submitted in December 1932. The dissertation was subsequently published as a monograph, *Die Prophetie* (On Prophecy), in 1936. Almost three decades later, in 1962, an expanded English language translation, *The Prophets*, was published. On the surface, *Die Prophetie* is a work of comparative religion, in that it seeks to elucidate what makes the classical prophets of the Bible distinct as religious figures. While rooted in solid philological and

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historical scholarship, this work is, in fact, quite radical and subversive. It rejects the dominant tendencies in Protestant scholarship on the prophets, particularly the attempt to characterize the lives and visions of the prophets as evidence of mental illness, but also takes issue with the efforts of liberal Jewish interpreters to cast the prophets as rationalist philosophers. Instead, Heschel seeks to provide a more appropriate set of categories for understanding prophecy among the ancient Israelites. Thus, while this work employs the terminology and conventions of comparative religion as it was practiced at that time in Germany, it also calls attention to fundamental deficiencies of this discipline.

In addition to criticizing the methods used in the comparative study of religions, Heschel challenges the dominant assumptions of the philosophy and theology of his day. At its most profound level, *Die Prophetie* offers a meditation on, and critique of, the manner in which God and revelation have been understood in the West. In order to appreciate the prophets, Heschel insists, one must first clear away obstacles to understanding biblical thinking. First and foremost, this means rejecting philosophical views which render the idea of God's pathos – the inner, emotional life of God – unthinkable

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and even embarrassing. The biblical God is neither distant and impersonal like Aristotle's unmoved mover, nor an all-powerful lawgiver demanding obedience. Rather, with his notion of divine pathos, Heschel presents God as profoundly concerned with human behavior and history, and, indeed, as vulnerable, in a very real sense, to human affairs. Human actions affect God, bringing God grief, anger, or joy and strengthening or diminishing God's presence in the world. Far from an imperfection, this vulnerability defines God's relationship with human beings.

In 1937, Heschel moved to Frankfurt am Main when Martin Buber offered him a teaching position at the Jüdische Lehrhaus, an educational institute for Jewish adults. In addition to his duties at the Lehrhaus, Heschel lectured widely in the towns around Frankfurt, and tutored Buber in modern Hebrew. Meanwhile, keenly aware of the rising anti-Semitism in Germany, he actively sought to find an academic position elsewhere. An invitation to work at Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati eventually did arrive, but he faced delays in obtaining a visa. Before dawn on October 28, 1938, police agents entered his apartment and deported him – along with thousands of others – to Poland. He was thirty-one years old.

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In Poland, Heschel continued to struggle to procure visas for himself, his mother, and three of his sisters. Concluding that he would be better positioned to secure the visas in England, he went to London in July 1939. A month later Germany invaded Poland and World War II broke out, preventing him from getting his relatives out of Poland. They were murdered in the Holocaust.

Heschel arrived in the United States in 1940. He lived in a dormitory while teaching at the Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati. When not writing academic studies or coping with teaching Judaica to American students who had little knowledge of Hebrew, he mastered the English language. Indeed, within a year of moving to the United States, he was already astonishing people with the eloquence of his written English.

In 1945, he joined the faculty at the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York, the hub of Conservative Judaism. The next year he married the classical pianist, Sylvia Straus. They had a daughter, Susannah, who is today an internationally celebrated scholar in Jewish studies.

Heschel wrote with great intensity during the late 1940s and early 1950s, publishing numerous influential works including *The Earth is the Lord's*, *The Sabbath*, and *Man's Quest for God*. The major treatise *Man Is Not*

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Alone was published in 1951. While already well-known in Jewish circles, he achieved national renown when the famed Christian theologian, Reinhold Niebuhr, reviewed it for the *New York Herald Tribune*, predicting that Heschel would “become a commanding and authoritative voice not only in the Jewish community but in the religious life of America.” During this period, Heschel became increasingly prominent as a scholar and theologian, and his work was admired and discussed by many significant theologians, both Jewish and Christian. He received a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1954 to write a biography of the Baal Shem Tov, the legendary founder of Hasidism, though he never finished the work. The fellowship, however, did allow him to complete the massive *God in Search of Man*. Unfortunately, the success and fame that Heschel achieved was met with jealousy and resentment by many of his colleagues at the Jewish Theological Seminary.

In works from this fecund period of his career, Heschel challenges the sensibilities of the modern West, which emphasize detachment and disinterestedness, viewing human reason as sufficient to understand all that there is. In contrast, Heschel insists that for matters of ultimate concern, reason is inadequate. It is not reason but wonder

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and awe that open us to the vastness of the universe, which make us receptive to the deepest aspects of reality that are accessible to us.

In these works, among other things, Heschel seeks to upend the standard approach to the philosophy of religion. Philosophy of religion is too beholden to the “common sense” view of things, where meaning consists only in what we knowing selves bestow upon the world through our minds. Heschel seeks to displace this distinctly modern way of experiencing the world by reconstituting philosophy of religion on the basis of the experiences and sensibilities of the pious person. For the pious person, God is not an object to be known. Rather, God’s overwhelming reality takes priority to the human mind’s judgments. It is not for the human mind to render a verdict as to whether or not God exists, but rather, it is God who bestows meaning on everything, including the human self. Heschel is trying to evoke a sense that human beings are situated in much grander horizons than they realize, that there is a judge and center of meaning apart from and beyond our own minds. Philosophy of religion conducted in this manner, then, celebrates humility before the divine, since the awareness

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of God's overwhelming priority decenters us and puts us in our proper place.

In Heschel's view, the forfeiture of piety that has taken place in modernity, this loss of wonder and awe, has been disastrous for Western civilization. The atrocities of the twentieth century – the Holocaust prominent among them – are indicators of this debasement of culture and value. The segregation of religion into a private sphere, away from ethics and politics, is artificial and dangerous. Religion, when properly grasped, is inextricably bound to justice, and therefore it is of public, not merely personal, interest. If this rhetoric seems similar to that employed by religious conservatives in the so-called culture wars of recent history, it is important to recognize that Heschel did not view religion through a nostalgic lens, as a means to uphold the status quo. Rather, as he saw it, religion constitutes a radical challenge to the manner in which we conduct ourselves in daily life. For him, this challenge underlay a progressive politics based on his faith's recognition of human dignity.

During the 1950s, Heschel brought the fervor of the prophets to his role as a public intellectual. He delivered lectures to rabbinical organizations and synagogues and soon was invited to lecture at national forums, including

the White House Conference on Children and Youth. In January 1963 he delivered a keynote address at the opening plenary session of the National Conference on Religion and Race in Chicago. In his address, he framed contemporary race relations in biblical terms, and denounced racism as satanic. Heschel's insights in *Die Prophetie*, which had recently been expanded and translated into English, took on a new resonance in the United States during the civil rights movement. The talk was passionate, reflecting his own experience with anti-Semitism in Europe and his observations of racism in Cincinnati and New York.

Heschel's denunciation of racism evoked the prophetic tradition he had written about. "Prophecy is the voice that God has lent to the silent agony, a voice to the plundered poor, to the profaned riches of the world." Anywhere injustice takes place, Heschel said, "few are guilty, but all are responsible." We are all responsible for evil because only a world indifferent to suffering will tolerate injustice and systematic inequality. Thus, "indifference to evil is more insidious than evil itself."

Yet so often injustice is simply accepted as the way things are. We remain unmoved, as if nothing calamitous were happening in our midst. Heschel understood the

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United States to be undergoing a terrible spiritual crisis. In his 1963 address for the Chicago conference, he provocatively asked, “The Negro’s plight, the blighted areas in the large cities, are they not the fruit of our sins?” He suggested that we are accessories to this injustice by our failure “to demand, to insist, to challenge, to chastise,” which is what true religion requires us to do.

Again, Heschel connected this failure to our loss of awe and wonder. “The root of sin is callousness, hardness of heart, lack of understanding what is at stake in being alive.” When we lose sight of God’s priorities and our place in the order of things, we become indifferent to our fellow human beings. Atrocities such as the Holocaust and the rampant poverty and racism in the United States happen because human beings close off the world to God and force God into hiding.

At the Chicago conference, Heschel first met Martin Luther King Jr., who also gave a plenary address. The two quickly became friends and frequently collaborated. After the police assault on nonviolent black protestors in Selma, Alabama, on March 7, 1965, Heschel began participating in rallies and protests. It was not long before he was included on an FBI list of citizens to monitor.

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Heschel took part in the famous march from Selma to Montgomery, alongside King and other civil rights leaders.

During this time, Heschel was actively engaged in a number of other issues, including protesting the Vietnam War, advocating on the behalf of Soviet Jewry, and consulting with the Vatican officials drafting *Nostra aetate*. Heschel worked closely with Augustin Cardinal Bea on the formulation of this declaration, the first of its kind, which emphasized the commonalities and shared commitments between Catholics and Jews. He was the most visible traditional Jew in the anti-Vietnam War movement, working alongside luminaries including Richard John Neuhaus, Daniel Berrigan, William Sloane Coffin Jr., and Robert McAfee Brown. Heschel played an important role in paving the way for King's address at the Riverside Church on the Vietnam War and American militarism. Heschel's engagement with these issues was not uncontroversial among American Jews. Many worried that if Jews were too visible in opposition to the Vietnam War, it would result in the United States withdrawing support from Israel. Others were critical of Heschel's collaboration with Christians.

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Before his death in June 1971, Reinhold Niebuhr asked Heschel to deliver the eulogy at his funeral. According to Ursula Niebuhr, Heschel was her husband's closest friend in the last twelve years of his life.

When Heschel died in 1972, he left a behind a significant legacy. It is striking how many prominent voices in Jewish thought today were his students and present themselves as continuing his legacy. It is also striking that these students tend to gravitate to opposing ends of the political spectrum. Heschel's own thought is deeply inimical to the conceptual binaries between right and left, conservatism and liberalism, that characterize our thinking today. His work rejects the all-too-easy equation of "tradition" with conservative politics and insists upon the theological stakes of the everyday business of the public square. At this precarious moment in history, with increasing political polarization, declining commitments to democracy, staggering economic inequality, forced migrations, and serious human rights abuses, Heschel's writings are not merely relevant, they are urgent. In contrast to the emphasis on ideological purity and virtue signaling that drive so much political and cultural discourse, Heschel challenges us to attend to our own tendencies to deceive ourselves, and to recognize

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that self-righteousness often serves as a cover for indifference. To attain political and economic justice, a spiritual revolution is required.

Robert Erlewine is the Isaac Funk Professor of Religion at Illinois Wesleyan University and the author of *Monotheism and Tolerance* and *Judaism and the West*.

Reading Abraham Joshua Heschel Today

Susannah Heschel

WE LIVE IN AN AGE OF DESPAIR, and those who despair would seem justified, considering the compounding crises we face, whether they be economic, viral, political, or environmental. Yet despair, my father used to remind me, is forbidden; to despair is to deny that God is present, with us, caring for us, and that there is no challenge we are given without the resources to cope. My father, Abraham Joshua Heschel, is one of those resources. He speaks in the prophetic tradition of hope. The prophets know that unless we understand the very depths of corruption, misery, and despair, the hope we offer is superficial. Only the prophet who gives voice to the silent agony, who rages against injustice, whose

passion exudes from every word, can offer true hope that “evil is never the climax of history,” that redemption will come.

According to my father, the crises we face today are also a religious problem: “the systematic liquidation of man’s sensitivity to the challenge of God.” With that phrase, my father defines the purpose of his life’s efforts.

Religion begins with a sense of embarrassment, he writes in his book *Who Is Man*, “the awareness of the incongruity of character and challenge, of perceptivity and reality, of knowledge and understanding, of mystery and comprehension.” He used to say, “God begins where words end.” In order to pray we need a refinement of the inner life, a sharpened conscience, a recognition that “prayer is action, an event.”

“The beginning of wisdom is awe of God,” the Bible often states, which my father translates: Embarrassment, loss of face, is the beginning of faith; it will make room within us. Religious people can never be self-assured or complacent; they can never say, “I am a good person,” because they are constantly striving. He writes, “I am afraid of people who are never embarrassed at their own pettiness, prejudices, envy, and conceit, never embarrassed at the profanation of life.” Embarrassment is

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meant to be productive; an end to embarrassment would bring a callousness that would threaten our humanity.

Yet my father did not stop with embarrassment, nor did he view religion as a form of self-abasement. On the contrary, religion is an awareness that God needs us. God is waiting for us, he writes in his book *God in Search of Man*. Like Abraham, who found God by contemplating nature, we, too, can sense God in the marvels of nature. We can also come to awareness of God through the Bible, and through study, to which my father was devoted in every spare moment. And then there are sacred deeds. What makes a deed sacred? In a striking passage in his book *The Sabbath*, he points out that we make the Sabbath holy: “The Sabbath is the presence of God in the world, open to the soul of man.” Holy deeds are the mitzvot (commandments) of Torah, including prayer. The mitzvot, he writes, are prayers in the form of deeds. When my father returned from the 1965 civil rights march in Selma he said, “I felt my legs were praying.” For him, marching for justice for black Americans was holy, an act of prayer.

Awareness of God is a challenge. It leads us to recognize that our life is not merely a gift but also a mandate

to make our lives witnesses to God. Indeed, our lives are precisely what brings God into our world. An old Hasidic teaching he often quotes says that someone came to a rebbe to ask, “Where is God?” to which the rebbe answered, “Does not the psalmist say, ‘The whole earth is filled with God’s glory?’ God is where you let God enter.” In his book *The Earth Is the Lord’s* my father writes, “In the days of Moses, Israel had a revelation of God; in the days of the Baal Shem (the founder of Hasidism), God had a revelation of Israel. Suddenly, there was revealed a holiness in Jewish life that had accumulated in the course of many generations.” If to be a human being, created in God’s image, means living a life that will serve to others as a reminder of God, then the purpose of Jewish life is to offer God a revelation of human holiness.

How do we let God enter? My father used to tease his audiences at a lecture, “When did God break the Ten Commandments?” The listeners were puzzled; he would then answer, “The Ten Commandments says, ‘Thou shalt not make an image of God.’ Yet God created us in his image.” We are, he pointed out, the only image of God that we have. To live as an image of God is to live so that those who come to know us are reminded of God. My

father often quotes an old Midrash (rabbinic commentary), “I am God and you are my witnesses; if you are not my witnesses, then I am not God.”

My father places no limitations on this mandate to live as a witness to God; there is no singular path of a particular religion, nor is there a particular way to live as a Jew. In *Man Is Not Alone*, he draws on an old rabbinic teaching that divine revelation is an experience of God that is different for each person. The Torah comes to each of us, a revelation of God that we receive, each in a unique way, renewed every day. No single path leads to God because one’s religion must be authentic to who we are. Since each person is unique, each expression will be as well. One cannot be Jewish the way one’s grandparents were Jewish; that would be spiritual plagiarism: “A vibrant society does not dwell in the shadows of old ideas and viewpoints; in the realm of the spirit, only a pioneer can be a true heir. The wages of spiritual plagiarism are the loss of integrity; self-aggrandizement is self-betrayal. Authentic faith is more than an echo of a tradition. It is a creative situation, an event.”

That our religiosity must be authentic to who we are as individuals is an old Hasidic teaching from Menachem Mendel, the rebbe of Kotzk, about whom my father wrote

a two-volume book in Yiddish. The Kotzker rebbe, a complex and highly original thinker, insisted on truth, sincerity, and authenticity and loathed mendacity. My father wrote that book toward the end of his life, during the years he was active against the war in Vietnam. That war made him sick: he was outraged over the lies of American politicians and the callousness of a government killing thousands of innocent civilians. Yet why were Americans deceived by falsehoods of their government? The lies of politicians were abhorrent, but so was the gullibility of Americans. This was a religious problem, my father felt; people can want to be deceived. Do not deceive, the Kotzker rebbe insisted, and that also means do not deceive oneself by being gullible.

My father was unique among Jewish thinkers and scholars in his mastery of the full range of Jewish texts and ideas, from the Bible to rabbinics, kabbalah, philosophy, Hasidism, and modern scholarship. I know of no one else who has ever been able to cover that range and do so in four languages, in books and articles written for scholars and for a general audience, for Jews Christians, Muslims, and even atheists. Seen in historical perspective, my father would find it extraordinary that the writings of a Jewish theologian would find such

resonance around the world: A Jew has brought them closer to God, deeper in their prayer, strengthened in their faith.

In fact, he often said that he felt he was better understood by Christians than by Jews. Christians had a long tradition of theological discussion, whereas many Jews had turned away from theology, preferring political analyses of Jewish identity, or focusing on “customs and ceremonies,” words my father wanted erased from our vocabulary. Where was genuine piety to be found? My father grew up, he said, surrounded by people of “religious nobility” – an extraordinary phrase. That entire world that nurtured him was destroyed by the Nazis. In America, Judaism was something different, and he was sharply critical of the forms it took. The synagogue, he said, is where prayer goes to die. Congregants sit back in their pews and let the rabbi and cantor conduct “vicarious praying.” Sermons are superficial, failing to recognize the genuine anguish of those who come to pray. Too many people leave the synagogue just as they entered, feeling good about themselves, whereas prayer, he wrote, should be subversive. We don’t pray in order to achieve something else, he said, “we pray in order to pray,” to open a door to God, who is “a refugee

in his own world.” If there is any hope for the future of Judaism in America, my father used to say, it lies with the black church. That is where he felt the spirit he had known in Eastern Europe.

Hasidism inspired my father’s religiosity and also his social activism. Descended from some of the most important Hasidic rebbes for many generations, my father learned from them the true depths of empathy and the great efforts of rebbes to lift people out of despair and restore to them the joy of being a Jew. Empathy was central to the prophets, too, he argued: “The prophet’s ear perceives the silent sigh” of human suffering. “The prophet’s word is a scream in the night. While the world is at ease and asleep, the prophet feels the blast from heaven.” In speaking on behalf of the silent, the prophet is also expressing God’s empathy, or what my father calls “divine pathos.” It is God’s profound concern for humanity, indeed God’s suffering in response to ours, that the prophet comes to convey: “The prophet hears God’s voice and feels his heart.”

How do we live in the prophetic spirit? After all, my father said so often, “some are guilty, but all are responsible.” Faith is a challenge that requires a prophetic response from us, involvement in the lives of other

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human beings: “Man insists not only on being satisfied but also on being able to satisfy, on being needed, not only on having needs. Personal needs come and go, but one anxiety remains: Am I needed?” The prophet answers: Yes, profoundly.

My father always saw experiences in historical perspective, reminding me, for example, of the extraordinary breakthrough represented by *Nostra aetate*; when had the church ever spoken in such positive words about Judaism? At the same time, he was not insistent on retaining tradition at all costs. He suggested that I become a rabbi, telling me that he believed things would change and women might one day become rabbis.

When I think of the Sabbath observances in my parents’ home, I feel the sacredness of that day. My father knew how to create a moment pregnant with significance, and he once wrote, “It takes three things to create a sense of significant being: God, a soul, and a moment. And the three are always present.” Always remember that God needs us, that we are an object of divine concern. For my father, that is the heart of religious faith.

Modernity promised us that we could overcome ignorance and achieve great things, if only we would emerge from the tutelage of others and use our reason. By now

we have discovered that man cannot live by reason alone; many thinkers, including my father, have pointed to the rationalization that underlay Auschwitz and Hiroshima. What has happened to our sense of wonder, of mystery, of the ineffable, all of which have been suppressed as unnecessary to a modern age, yet all of which are essential to our humanity? The obligation falls upon us to foster in ourselves the sensibilities that modernity has suppressed or even denigrated. For example, he writes that we look at nature and see its power, beauty, and grandeur. How do we respond? We exploit and we enjoy, but do we stand in awe? Without awe, our lives are impoverished, our society decays.

For my father, it is not that we need religion; it is that our very humanity can only come into fullness if we give our souls a chance to express themselves. Only in prayer can we speak our deepest yearnings. We are born human, but prayer challenges us to remember that we shape ourselves as human beings.

While we live in the present, we also live in biblical time: that is a guiding principle of Jewish and Christian liturgy that imbues my father's writings. At the Passover Seder, the Haggadah reminds us that we must see ourselves as though we, too, have gone forth from Egypt. In

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interreligious dialogue, he identified himself biblically: “I speak as a member of a congregation whose founder was Abraham, and the name of my rabbi is Moses.” Speaking at a conference on religion and race in 1963, he opened by stating, “At the first summit on religion and race, the main participants were Pharaoh and Moses.” He went on to declare, “Racism is satanism, unmitigated evil,” becoming one of the strongest white voices for racial justice. He was horrified to flee Nazi Germany’s anti-Semitism and find rampant racism in a country dedicated to democratic ideals. He would inveigh again and again, in talks to a variety of audiences, that racism is not just wrong, it diminishes our humanity, denies God as the creator, and shatters every principle of the Bible. Already then, he understood the systemic nature of racism, how it is institutionalized in an economy that forces some people into horrendous poverty, and in laws that function as barriers to the institutions that are supposed to be guaranteed rights of education, housing, and medical care. He enjoined Martin Luther King Jr. to speak out against the war in Vietnam, which both of them viewed as a force of racism in American society.

My father did not write for one group or one faith; he wrote for all of us. Most important are the questions my

father poses as central to interreligious encounter. We share so many problems that affect all of us, regardless of our religious affiliation; racism is a religious problem, as is war, poverty, nuclear weaponry, or injustice. These are religious problems for all of us.

Within our faiths, we also have problems: “No religion, magnificent as it may be, can survive without repair from time to time.” Together we have to face the callousness that has overtaken us; the opposite of good, he writes, is not evil but indifference.

At the conclusion of his extraordinary lecture, “No Religion Is an Island,” my father asks, “What is the purpose of interreligious dialogue?” He answers his own question:

It is neither to flatter nor to refute one another, but to help one another, to share insight and learning, to cooperate in academic ventures on the highest scholarly level and, what is even more important, to search in the wilderness for wellsprings of devotion, for treasures of stillness, for the power of love and care for man. What is urgently needed are ways of helping one another in the terrible predicament of here and now by the courage to believe that the word

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of the Lord endures forever as well as here and now; to cooperate in trying to bring about a resurrection of sensitivity, a revival of conscience; to keep alive the divine sparks in our souls; to nurture openness to the spirit of the Psalms, reverence for the words of the prophets, and faithfulness to the Living God.

Susannah Heschel, the only child of Abraham Joshua Heschel, is the Eli Black Professor of Jewish Studies at Dartmouth College and the editor of *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity: Essays of Abraham Joshua Heschel*.



Every Moment Touches Eternity

NOT THE INDIVIDUAL MAN, nor a single generation by its own power, can erect the bridge that leads to God. Faith is the achievement of ages, an effort accumulated over centuries. Many of its ideas are as the light of a star that left its source centuries ago. Many songs, unfathomable today, are the resonance of voices of bygone times. There is a collective memory of God in the human spirit, and it is this memory of which we partake in our faith. . . .

The riches of a soul are stored up in its memory. This is the test of character – not whether a man follows the daily fashion, but whether the past is alive in his present. When we want to understand ourselves, to find out what

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is most precious in our lives, we search our memory. Memory is the soul's witness to the capricious mind.

Only those who are spiritually imitators, only people who are afraid to be grateful and too weak to be loyal, have nothing but the present moment. To a noble person it is a holy joy to remember, an overwhelming thrill to be grateful, while to a person whose character is neither rich nor strong, gratitude is a most painful sensation. The secret of wisdom is never to get lost in a momentary mood or passion, never to forget friendship because of a momentary grievance, never to lose sight of the lasting values because of a transitory episode. The things which sweep through our daily life should be valued according to whether or not they enrich the inner cistern. That only is valuable in our experience which is worth remembering. Remembrance is the touchstone of all actions.

Memory is a source of faith. To have faith is to remember. Jewish faith is a recollection of that which happened to Israel in the past. The events in which the spirit of God became a reality stand before our eyes painted in colors that never fade. Much of what the Bible demands can be comprised in one word: *Remember*. "Take heed to thyself, and keep thy soul diligently lest thou forget the things which thine eyes saw, and lest they depart from thy

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heart all the days of thy life; make them known unto thy children and thy children's children" (Deut. 4:9).

Jews have not preserved the ancient monuments, they have retained the ancient moments. The light kindled in their history was never extinguished. With sustaining vitality the past survives in their thoughts, hearts, rituals. Recollection is a holy act: we sanctify the present by remembering the past.

TO HAVE FAITH does not mean, however, to dwell in the shadow of old ideas conceived by prophets and sages, to live off an inherited estate of doctrines and dogmas. In the realm of spirit only he who is a pioneer is able to be an heir. The wages of spiritual plagiarism is the loss of integrity; self-aggrandizement is self-betrayal.

Authentic faith is more than an echo of a tradition. It is a creative situation, an event. For God is not always silent, and man is not always blind. In every man's life there are moments when there is a lifting of the veil at the horizon of the known, opening a sight of the eternal. Each of us has at least once in his life experienced the momentous reality of God. Each of us has once caught a glimpse of the beauty, peace, and power that flow through the souls of those who are devoted to Him.

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But such experiences or inspirations are rare events. To some people they are like shooting stars, passing and unremembered. In others they kindle a light that is never quenched. The remembrance of that experience and the loyalty to the response of that moment are the forces that sustain our faith. In this sense, *faith is faithfulness*, loyalty to an event, loyalty to our response.

THE WAY TO THE LASTING does not lie on the other side of life; it does not begin where time breaks off. The lasting begins not beyond but *within time*, within the moment, within the concrete. Time can be seen from two aspects: from the aspect of *temporality* and from the aspect of *eternity*.

Time is the border of eternity. Time is eternity formed into tassels. The moments of our lives are like luxuriant tassels. They are attached to the garment and are made of the same cloth. It is through spiritual living that we realize that the infinite can be confined in a measured line.

Life without integrity is like loosely hanging threads, easily straying from the main cloth, while in acts of piety we learn to understand that every instant is like a thread raveling out of eternity to form a delicate tassel. We must

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not cast off the threads but weave them into the design of an eternal fabric.

The days of our lives are representatives of eternity rather than fugitives, and we must live as if the fate of all of time would totally depend on a single moment.

Seen as temporality, the essence of time is detachment, isolation. A temporal moment is always alone, always exclusive. Two instants can never be together, never contemporary. Seen as eternity, the essence of time is attachment, communion. It is within time rather than within space that we are able to commune, to worship, to love. It is within time that one day may be worth a thousand years.

Creative insights grow a lifetime to last a moment, and yet they last forever. For to last means to commune with God, “to cleave unto Him” (Deut. 11:22). A moment has no contemporary within temporality. But within eternity every moment can become a contemporary of God.

LITTLE IS RECORDED or remembered either about the life and character of Euclid or about the way in which his *Elements* came into being. The laws of his geometry are timeless, and the moment in which they first dawned upon the human mind seems to have no bearing upon

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their meaning and validity. Time and thought, act and content, author and teaching, are not related to each other.

In contrast, the words of the Bible are not suspended; they do not dangle in an air of timelessness. Here time and thought, act and content, author and teaching, are profoundly related to each other.

The Bible is not only a system of norms but also a record of happenings in history. Indeed, some of the biblical maxims and principles may be found or could have been conceived elsewhere. Without parallel in the world are the events it tells us about and the fact of taking these events as the points where God and man meet. Events are among the basic categories by which the biblical man lives; they are to his existence what axioms are to measuring and weighing.

Judaism is *a religion of history, a religion of time*. The God of Israel was not found primarily in the facts of nature. He spoke through events in history. While the deities of other peoples were associated with places or things, the God of the prophets was the God of events: the Redeemer from slavery, the Revealer of the Torah, manifesting Himself in events of history rather than in things or places.

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The events from which the religion of Israel is derived, the particular moments in time in which God and man met are as fundamental to Judaism as the eternity of divine justice and compassion and the general truth that God and man stand at all times in relation to each other. To maintain that the exodus from Egypt is a symbol only, that the essential point is the general idea of liberty which the story signifies is to disregard the heart of Jewish faith.

Judaism demands the acceptance of some basic thoughts or norms as well as attachment to some decisive events. Its ideas and its events are inseparable from each other. The spirit manifests itself through God's presence in history, and the acts of manifestation are verified through basic thoughts or norms.

TO MOST OF US the idea of revelation is unacceptable, not because it cannot be proved or explained, but because it is *unprecedented*. We do not even reject it, it simply does not enter our minds; we possess no form or category in which that idea could take hold. Trained in seeking to explain all that happens as a manifestation of a general law, every phenomenon as an example of a type, we find it hard to believe in the extraordinary, in the absolutely singular; we find it hard to believe that an event which

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does not happen *all the time* or from time to time should have happened only *once, at one time*. It is taken for granted in science that in the realm of space a process which happened once can happen all the time, but we have not the power to understand that in the realm of time certain events do not happen again and again. Now, revelation is an event that does not happen all the time but at a particular time, at a unique moment of time.

No other deficiency makes the soul more barren than the lack of a sense for the unique. The creative man is he who succeeds in capturing the exceptional and instantaneous before it becomes stagnant in his mind. In the language of creative thinking, whatever is alive is unique. And true insight is a moment of perceiving a situation before it freezes into similarity with something else.

Only genius knows how to communicate to others the sense of the instantaneous and unique, and even so the poetry of all ages has captured a mere fraction of the endless music of the incomparable. There is more discernment in sensing the ineffable uniqueness of an event than in trying to explain it away by our stereotyped doubts.

Just as there are ideas which are true, though only a few people are able to corroborate or verify them, there are experiences which are real, though only a few people

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are able to attain them. Many things occur between God and man which escape the attention even of those to whom they happen.

UNLESS WE LEARN how to appreciate and distinguish moments of time as we do things of space, unless we become sensitive to the uniqueness of individual events, the meaning of revelation will remain obscure. Indeed, uniqueness is a category that belongs more to the realm of time than to the realm of space. Two stones, two things in space may be alike; two hours in a person's life or two ages in human history are never alike. What happened once will never happen again in the same sense. The age of Pericles or the period of the Renaissance were never duplicated. It is ignorance of time, unawareness of the depth of events that leads to the claim that history repeats itself. It is because of his profound sense of time that the biblical man was able to comprehend that at Sinai* he witnessed an event without parallel in human history. . . .

The lack of realism, the insistence upon generalizations at the price of a total disregard of the particular and the

* The revelation of God at Mount Sinai is a central event in the Jewish understanding of the Bible because it is the moment when God forms a covenant with the Jewish people.

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concrete is something which would be alien to prophetic thinking. Prophetic words are never detached from the concrete, historic situation. Theirs is not a timeless, abstract message; it always refers to an actual situation. The general is given in the particular, and the verification of the abstract is in the concrete.

Judaism does not seek to subordinate philosophy to events, timeless verities to a particular history. It tries to point to a level of reality where the events are the manifestations of divine norms, where history is understood as the fulfillment of truth.

The meaning of history is our profound concern. It is difficult to remain immune to the anxiety of the question, whence we come, where we are, and whither we are going.

IT IS IMPOSSIBLE for man to shirk the problem of time. The more we think the more we realize: we cannot conquer time through space. We can only master time in time.

The higher goal of spiritual living is not to amass a wealth of information, but to face sacred moments. In a religious experience, for example, it is not a thing that imposes itself on man but a spiritual presence. What

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is retained in the soul is the moment of insight rather than the place where the act came to pass. A moment of insight is a fortune, transporting us beyond the confines of measured time. Spiritual life begins to decay when we fail to sense the grandeur of what is eternal in time. . . .

Time and space are interrelated. To overlook either of them is to be partially blind. What we plead against is man's unconditional surrender to space, his enslavement to things. We must not forget that it is not a thing that lends significance to a moment; it is the moment that lends significance to things.



The Only Life Worth Living

AWARENESS OF A MYSTERY is shared by all people. Yet, as we have seen, they usually mistake what they sense as being apart from their own existence, as if there were only wonder in what they see, not in the very act of seeing, as if the mystery were merely an object of observation. Unsparing, unqualified thinking opens our minds to the fact that the mystery is not apart from ourselves, not a far-off thing like a rainbow in the sky; the mystery is out of doors, in all things to be seen, not only where there is more than what the senses can grasp. Those to whom awareness of the ineffable is a constant state of mind know that the mystery is not an exception but an air

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