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A Hero for All Jews – Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel by Zvi Andrews

My Jewish Hero, a great mystic, theologian, philosopher, poet, and social activist by the name of Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel was a fascinating and unique character and he represents, at least in my mind, the very ideal of the word Rabbi; embodying the spectrum of characteristics that make a theologian great and epitomised what every Rabbi and indeed every living human should strive to be. Heschel was passionate about both God and his fellow man. Heschel marched with Martin Luther King, influenced the Second Vatican Council¹ and wrote profoundly elegant and evocative treatises ranging from the philosophy of religion to rabbinic theology to poetically masterful musings on the nature of the Sabbath. Heschel's theology and his actions demonstrated that social justice and compassion are as much a critical part of Jewish theology as ritual halakhic practice.

Heschel was born in Poland in 1907 and was the descendent of two highly distinguished Hassidic figures². On his mother's side he was descended from Rabbi Levi Yitzhaq of Berditchev. On his father's side from Rabbi Dov Baer – the eminent Maggid of Mezrich and famous student of the Baal Shem Tov – as well as his name sake, Rabbi Avraham Yehoshua of Apt. The mystical, ecstatic, and devotional aspects Hassidut are

¹ Heschel was greatly respected amongst non-Jewish theologians, including Catholics. He was therefore appointed by American Jewish organisations to negotiate with the Catholic Church during the Second Vatican Council. Heschel, with his inclusivist and anti-racist stance managed to have much Catholic liturgy that demeaned Jews or called for conversion removed. Heschel maintained that Religious experience is a fundamentally human impulse and no religion can claim a monopoly on religious truth. "Religion is Finite, but God is infinite." Regarding the call to convert Heschel famously retorted that he "would rather go to Auschwitz!"

² All biographical information unless otherwise stated is from Encyclopedia Judaica: CD-ROM Edition, 1997. Heschel, Abraham Joshua by Fritz A Rothchild.

clearly in Heschel's theology. However, Heschel did not constrain his studies and his approach to the exclusive Orthodox world. After being ordained as a Rabbi in a traditional Yeshiva with a focus on Talmud and Kabbalah Heschel left Poland to study at the University of Berlin where he obtained a doctorate in Philosophy in the face of tremendous adversity and anti-Semitism.

Concurrently Heschel also attended the Hochschule für die Wissenschaft des Judentums; one of the main liberal Jewish education institutions of pre-war Europe. There he taught Talmud and received a liberal Rabbinic ordination studying under some of the greatest names in the German-Jewish world at the time such as, Chanoch Albeck, Ismar Elbogen, Julius Guttmann, and Leo Baeck. Heschel was appointed by Martin Buber as his successor at the Central Organization for Jewish Adult Education at Frankfurt on the Main in 1937.

Heschel was deported with the rest of non German Jewry from the country back to Poland in 1938 where he taught for 8 months at the Polish Warsaw Institute of Jewish Studies. Heschel managed to escape Poland shortly before the German invasion due to the effort of the Hebrew Union College – the educational institution of Reform Judaism in America- which attempted to secure hundreds of visas for Jewish intellectuals in Europe but managed to get only two, one of which went to Heschel who left mere days before the Germans invaded.³

With such a multi-faceted and broad background, Heschel came to blend the two worlds of the Tradition and modernity in a profound manner merging passionate and ecstatic

³ This information is from a CBC Radio documentary about Heschel which included an interview with his daughter Susannah who relayed this information. The Sunday Edition: Holy Deeds which aired 2002/04/01

religious experience with the analytical world of philosophy and the critical study of Judaism.

Heschel came to America in 1940 and was a professor of Philosophy as well as Rabbis at the Hebrew Union College for five years. According to the popular account Heschel was increasingly uncomfortable with the lack of traditional Jewish observance at the HUC and he sought an institution where critical academic study was allowed and yet Jewish practice was still important at the same time. In 1945 he took a position at the Jewish Theological Seminary as a professor of Jewish ethics and mysticism where he taught until his death at the age of 65 in 1972. It was here, in the seat of Conservative Judaism's core academic institution that Heschel began to shine as one of the most illuminating, inspiring, and influential theologians of the 20th century.

Heschel published books on a wide variety of topics. Not only did Heschel work on studying and understanding the classical texts of the Jewish tradition he also strove to produce a contemporary and authentic theology which applied the insights and beauty of the Tradition to the complex issues facing the Jew in the modern world. Heschel's effort and wide range of study culminated to produce his first major publication in English *Man is not Alone: A Philosophy of Religion*, published in 1951. In this seminal work, Heschel delves into the core issues of religion, such as how man can apprehend God in an age when mankind is largely estranged from the reality that informs genuine religion. The work tackles issues such as doubt and faith, what it means that God is one, human yearning for spirituality, and the essence of what it means to be human with human need. It is well beyond the scope of this paper to describe this work in anyway that is complete or does it justice yet I shall attempt to illustrate some of the core concepts.

Underlying all our conceptual knowledge is an innate sense of the ineffable, a radical amazement at the world that man experiences. This sense is manifest in the human effort to define the indefinable through endeavours such as poetry and art. This Sense of the Ineffable is the wonder at the divine, the ineffable *is* the divine. It is Man's ecstatic amazement at what he can not fully express that is fundamentally our apprehension of God. This existential immediate awareness far transcends what traditional philosophy of religion can get us. When we try to understand religion solely through philosophy, then philosophy becomes religion and at best it can produce a cold and abstract 'necessary being.' The sense of the ineffable is immediate and thus defies the doubt that pervades the purely conceptual approach. It is only once one conceives of a proposition that it can be doubted but this awareness is pre-conceptual and is the underlying foundation upon which we can form propositions in the first place! This is starting point for acquiring knowledge not doubt. As Heschel famously writes, "Wonder rather than doubt is the root of all knowledge."⁴ A philosophy that begins with radical doubt ends in radical despair⁵.

The work attempts to penetrate and illuminate the underlying reality of religion and illustrate the organic and dynamic relationship between God and Man.

The above summation is surely lacking and it is hard to describe the profundity and depth with which Heschel so movingly writes. And this is not even Heschel's sole magnum opus but rather one of several such works. Heschel composed a companion work called *God in Search of Man: A Philosophy of Judaism* (1955) where he deals in great depth with more specifically Jewish topics. He discusses how God seeks man as

⁴ Man is not Alone: A Philosophy of Religion by Abraham Joshua Heschel, Noonday Printing 1977

⁵ *ibid.* pg.13

much as man seeks God. He engages in a study in what it means for Jews to be the 'Chosen People' and deals in great depth with prophetic experience. Heschel discusses the "divine concern" – the notion that humanity has the ability to transcend its self-centered nature and respond with love and devotion to the *'transitive concern'* of divine command and this is the core of Jewish observance and ethics. The ability to transcend egoism and ascend to the holy dimension of the divine imperative is the metaphysical source of our own human freedom. Our successes and our failures as the Hebrew nation to rise to the occasion of God's calling constitute the "drama" of the Jewish historical narrative. The seeming polarities between life and divine obligation, the established pattern and the spontaneous are shown to fuel the creative interplay between normative mitzvah and personal, novel reaction to the divine reality. Heschel does take the position that halakha is normative, that it is important and binding and faith alone does not suffice. The carrying out of our rituals and practice from our living tradition are methodological conduits through which we can have existential interaction with God. This of course requires *kavanah* – intention or as Heschel refers to it, *'devotion.'*

With regard to Jewish practice it is important when talking about Heschel that we do not leave out what he considered to be his master work which he wrote in Hebrew called *Torah min Ha-Shamayim or Heavenly Torah* (1962). In this three-volume work Heschel focuses on Aggadah a topic largely ignored in orthodox circles. This is something that disturbed Heschel a great deal because as he argues it is the Aggadah, the homiletic and exegetical works of the ancient Rabbis, which contains the fundamental theology of Judaism. In this work Heschel beautifully parses out topics on the nature of the Torah, the nature of Man and his interaction with God, and the underlying methods

through which Jews have used exegetical methods to understand our canonical texts. For Heschel all aspects of Judaism are a critical part of the picture. Heschel critiques the Reform movement for failing to observe normative Jewish practice, but his works also contain a rejoinder to the orthodox world as well where legalistic concerns of external compliance with the halakha tend to supersede the inner devotion and the meaning behind them. It has become the practice amongst many orthodox communities to be very much 'halakhocentric' either ignoring aggadah altogether or making it subservient in a sort of 'pan-halakhism'. In fact, in many Yeshivot it is common practice to skip the Aggadic sections of the Talmud completely, viewing it as largely irrelevant to the all important dry legal matters of straight Halakha. Heschel bemoans this fact claiming on solid, well demonstrated grounds that the reverse is actually true of historical Jewish theology, stating, "*Halakha is dependent upon Aggadah*"⁶. A scholar of Heschel, Samuel H. Dressner explains Heschel's view on the matter.

*"According to the Talmud, Jerusalem was destroyed because they were judging only according to din Torah (the letter of the law), and not lifnim mishrat hadin (beyond the letter of the law i.e. the spirit). To do otherwise is to exclude ethics and morality, theology, even God himself out of your Judaism."*⁷

For Heschel, one's approach to Judaism must be holistic and spiritual and contain conscious thought. Going through the motions of empty practice is meaningless but likewise the abandonment of the Tradition wholesale is not the way either. There is a beauty and a purpose to being human and being Jewish. Heschel states,

⁶ *God in Search of Man* p.328

⁷ Paraphrasing from *Heschel, Hasidim, and Halakha* by Samuel H. Dressner. Copyright 2002 by Fordham University Press. See pages 97 – 1113 for a full understanding of Heschel's concern about this issue.

“Remember that there is a meaning beyond absurdity. Be sure that every deed counts, that every word has power. Never forget that you can still do your share to redeem the world in spite of all absurdities and frustrations and disappointments.”

Heschel also wrote a delightful short work called *The Sabbath: Its Meaning for Modern Man* (1951) in which he characterises Judaism not as a religion of spatial categories but rather one of hallowed time. ‘*Cathedrals in Time*’ as Heschel describes those moments that are most auspicious in our Jewish Tradition. Heschel also widely writes about the Prophets and prophecy tends to be a central theme of his entire theology. In fact, Heschel’s doctoral thesis was on the topic and culminated in his expanded English multi volumed-work entitled *The Prophets* (1962). The work examines the life and historical context through which the Prophets carried out their mission and their respective psychological states of mind as they did it. Heschel also expounds a central theme in his theology; that God should not be understood as anthropomorphic (A god with human characteristics) rather as anthropopathic – the notion that God has human emotions and feels what we feel. From this stems a crucial aspect of Heschel, his devotion to mankind and his passion for compassion and for respect and equality.

For Heschel, the works of the Prophets carry an undeniable clarion call for social justice and for Heschel this importance was in part supplemented by the Jewish experience in Europe which he barely escaped. Heschel was actively involved in the movement for black civil rights and is famously photographed marching in the front with Martin Luther King (they were close friends) in Selma, Alabama. About this Heschel writes, *“When I marched in Selma, my feet were praying.”* For Heschel, social justice was a pivotal part of spirituality and religiosity. Heschel once said,

“A religious man is a person who holds God and man in one thought at one time, at all times, who suffers harm done to others, whose greatest passion is compassion, whose greatest strength is love and defiance of despair.”

Heschel was also vocally opposed to the Vietnam War and was once at an anti-Vietnam rally and when asked why he was there he responded that he could not pray – images of children suffering and burning and dying from napalm filled his mind whenever he tried.

Thus Heschel is my Hero, a man of great conviction and idealism who managed to present traditional practice to the modern world through stunning theology, and to return theology back to practice as well. His breadth of knowledge, education, and his deep love for both his fellow man and God are inspiring. His works are exquisitely written, compelling and focus on big-picture spirituality in a manner that infuses humanism with notions of the divine and brings the divine into all activities in life. Heschel is the archetype of the ideal Rabbi in the modern world and that is why he is my Jewish Hero.