

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel: God In Search of You

Source Sheet by Rabbi Melinda Panken

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Remember, there is a meaning beyond absurdity, let [young people] be sure that every little deed counts, that every word has power, that we can do everyone our share to redeem the world. Despite all of the absurdity and all the frustration and all disappointment. And above all, remember that the meaning of life is to build life as if it were a work of art.

Abraham Joshua Heschel and the Source of Wonder by Rabbi Michael Marmor

Each decade of his life represented a significant metamorphosis.

- At the age of ten, he was a Hasidic prodigy in Warsaw;
- at twenty, a modernist Yiddish poet leaving Vilna.
- The thirty-year-old Heschel was part of the spiritual resistance movement of Jewish intellectuals in Nazi Germany.
- Heschel at forty had recently arrived at the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York, after spending most of the war years at the Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati.
- Heschel at fifty was the author of a string of theological works – *The Sabbath*, *Man Is Not Alone*, *Man's Question for God*, and *God in Search of Man* – that place him in the first rank of American Jewish thinkers.
- At the age of sixty, Heschel was penning a theological response to the events of the Six Day War. At that stage of his life, he was one of the leading voices of conscience, interreligious dialogue, and spiritual awakening in American society, having also published two volumes of a monumental study of rabbinic theology, reworked his Berlin dissertation into *The Prophets*, and published a collection of his more popular articles entitled *The Insecurity of Freedom*.
- Five years later, having recently completed a study of Menahem Mendel of Kotzk, whose spirit had presided over his earliest years, Heschel died.

1) Abraham Joshua Heschel: *The Call of Transcendence*, Shai Held

In Heschel, theology and spirituality are always interwoven; to attempt to separate them is, inevitably, to flatten and falsify his thought...

Heschel's work is animated by a passion for self-transcendence, for moving beyond an exclusive focus on the ego and its needs and desires.

Self-transcendence is both the dominant theme of Heschel's theology—God is, he argues, perfectly self-transcendent—and the paramount aspiration of his spirituality—to become truly human, he insists, is to progress from self-centeredness to God-centeredness. Heschel will try to convince us, but he will also attempt to move us, stir us, and reorient us in fundamental ways so that our conventional, egoistic ways of thinking, feeling, and acting can be replaced with something radically different—an approach to the world in which God is the hub and the radial point of our lives.

The Meaning of Existence

2) *Who is Man*, pg. 52-53

What is the meaning of my being? ...My quest - man's quest - is not for a theoretical knowledge about myself. Another discovery of a universal law in nature will not answer my problem. Nor is it simply a striving to extend the length of my life span into an afterlife. What I look for is not how to gain a firm hold of myself and on life, but primarily how to live a life that would deserve and evoke an eternal Amen. It is not simply a search for certitude (though that is implied in it), but for personal relevance, for a degree of compatibility; not an anchor of being but a direction of being. It is not enough for me to be able to say "I am"; I want to know *who I am*, and in relation to whom I live. It is not enough for me to ask questions; I want to know how to answer the one question that seems to encompass everything I face: What am I here for?

Revelation and Torah

3) *God in Search of Man*, pg. 184-185

If revelation was a moment in which God succeeded in reaching man, then to try to describe it exclusively in terms of optics or acoustics, or to inquire was it a vision or was it a sound? was it forte or piano? would be even more ludicrous

than to ask about the velocity of "the wind that sighs before the dawn." Of course, the prophets claimed to have seen, to have heard. But that kind of seeing and hearing cannot be subjected to psychological or physiological analysis. An analysis of the poet's ability to hear the wind sigh would have no relevance to our understanding of the poem. Did the prophet claim to have encountered God in the way in which he met one of his contemporaries or in the way in which Aristotle met Alexander the Great?

If revelation were only a psycho-physical act, then it would be little more than a human experience, an event in the life of man. Yet just as a work of sculpture is more than the stone in which it is carved, so is revelation more than a human experience. True, a revelation that did not become known by experience would be like a figure carved in the air. Still its being a human experience is but a part of what really happened in revelation, and we must, therefore, not equate the event of revelation with man's experience of revelation.

The nature of revelation, being an event in the realm of the ineffable, is something which words cannot spell, which human language will never be able to portray. Our categories are not applicable to that which is both within and beyond the realm of matter and mind. In speaking about revelation, the more descriptive the terms, the less adequate is the description. The words in which the prophets attempted to relate their experiences were not photographs but illustrations, not descriptions but songs. A psychological reconstruction of the prophetic act is, therefore, no more possible than the attempt to paint a photographic likeness of a face on the basis of a song. The word "revelation" is like an exclamation; it is an indicative rather than a descriptive term. Like all terms that express the ultimate, it points to its meaning rather than fully rendering it. "It is very difficult to have a true conception of the events at Sinai, for there has never been before nor will there ever be again anything like it." (Maimonides, Guide II:33) "We believe," says Maimonides, "that the Torah has reached Moses from God in a manner which is described in Scripture figuratively by the term 'word,' and that nobody has ever known how that took place except Moses himself to whom that word reached." (Maimonides, Commentary on Mishnah Sanhedrin X:8)

We must not try to read chapters in the Bible dealing with the event at Sinai as

if they were texts in systematic theology. Its intention is to celebrate the mystery, to introduce us to it rather than to penetrate or to explain it. As a report about revelation the Bible itself is a midrash.

Prayer

4) *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity*, pg. 258

Prayer is not a stratagem for occasional use, a refuge to resort to now and then. It is rather like an established residence for the innermost self. All things have a home: the bird has a nest, the fox has a hole, the bee has a hive. A soul without prayer is a soul without a home.

5) *Moral Grandeur & Spiritual Audacity*, pg. 259

Prayer serves many aims. It serves to save the inward life from oblivion. It serves to alleviate anguish. It serves to partake of God's mysterious grace and guidance. Yet, ultimately, prayer must not be experienced as an act for the sake of something else. We pray in order to pray. Prayer is a perspective from which to behold, from which to respond to, the challenges we face. Man in prayer does not seek to impose his will upon God; he seeks to impose God's will and mercy upon himself. Prayer is necessary to make us aware of our failures, backsliding, transgressions, sins. Prayer is more than paying attention to the holy. Prayer comes about as an event. It consists of two inner acts: an act of turning and an act of direction. I leave the world behind as well as all interests of the self. Divested of all concerns, I am overwhelmed by only one desire: to place my heart upon the altar of God.

6) *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity*, pg. 262-263

"Prayer is meaningless unless it is subversive, unless it seeks to overthrow and to ruin the pyramids of callousness, hatred, opportunism, falsehoods. The liturgical movement must become a revolutionary movement seeking to overthrow forces that destroy the promise, the hope, the vision."

Mitzvah

7) *Between God and Man*, pg. 194

“What is a mitzvah? A prayer in the form of a deed. And to pray is to sense His presence. 'In all thy ways thou shalt know Him.' Prayer should be a part of all our ways. It does not have to always be on our lips; it must always be on our minds, in our hearts.”

8) *The Insecurity of Freedom*, pg. 255

The only way we can discuss prayer is on the basis of self-reflection, trying to describe what has happened to us in a rare and precious moment of prayer. The difficulty of self-reflection consists in the fact that what is given to us is only a recollection. You cannot, of course, analyze the act of prayer while praying. To worship God means to forget the self; an extremely difficult, though possible, act. What takes place in a moment of prayer may be described as a shift of the center of living – from self-consciousness to self-surrender. This implies, I believe, an important indication of the nature of man. Prayer begins as an “it-He” relationship. I am not ready to accept the ancient concept of prayer as dialogue. Who are we to enter a dialogue with God? The better metaphor would be to describe prayer as an act of immersion, comparable to the ancient Hebrew custom of immersing oneself completely in the waters as a way of self-purification to be done over and over again. Immersion in the waters! One feels surrounded, touched by the waters, drowned in the waters of mercy. In prayer the “I” becomes an “it”. This is the discovery: what is an “I” to me is, first of all and essentially, an “it” to God. If it is God’s mercy that lends eternity to a speck of being which is usually described as a self, then prayer begins as a moment of living as an “it” in the presence of God. The closer to the presence of Him, the more obvious becomes the absurdity of the “I”. The “I” is dust and ashes. “I am dust and ashes,” says Abraham; then he goes on in dialogue to argue with the Lord, about saving the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. How does Moses at the burning bush respond to the call to go to the people and to bring to them the message of redemption? “Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh...”

Justice

9) *The Prophets*, p. 252-253

Why should religion, the essence of which is worship of God, put such stress on justice for man? Does not the preoccupation with morality tend to divest religion of immediate devotion to God? Why should a worldly virtue like justice be so important to the Holy of Israel? Did not the prophets overrate the worth of justice?

Perhaps the answer lies here: righteousness is not just a value; it is God's part of human life, God's stake in human history. Perhaps it is because the suffering of man is a blot upon God's conscience; because it is in relations between man and man that God is at stake. Or is it simply because the infamy of a wicked act is infinitely greater than we are able to imagine? People act as they please, doing what is vile, abusing the weak, not realizing that they are fighting God, affronting the divine, or that the oppression of man is a humiliation of God.

He who oppresses a poor man insults his Maker

He who is kind to the needy honors God.

Proverbs 14:31; cf. 17:5

The universe is done. The greater masterpiece still undone, still in the process of being created, is history...It is within the realm of history that man is charged with God's mission.

10) *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity*, p. 224-225

Justice is not an ancient custom, a human convention, a value, but a transcendent demand, freighted with divine concern. It is not only a relationship between man and man, it is an act involving God, a divine need.

There is immense silent agony in the world, and the task of man is to be a voice for the plundered poor, to prevent the desecration of the soul and the violation of our dream of honesty.

The more deeply immersed I became in the thinking of the prophets, the more powerfully it became clear to me what the lives of the Prophets sought to convey: that morally speaking, there is no limit to the concern one must feel for the suffering of human beings, that indifference to evil is worse than evil itself, that in a free society, some are guilty, but all are responsible.

11) Susannah Heschel, *Intro to The Prophets*

The greatness of that Selma march continues to reverberate because it was not simply a political event, but an extraordinary moral and religious event as well. For my father, the march was a deeply spiritual occasion. When he came home, he said, "I felt my legs were praying." His only regret, he later wrote, was that "Jewish religious institutions have again missed a great opportunity, namely, to interpret a Civil Rights movement in terms of Judaism. The vast number of Jews participating actively in it are totally unaware of what the movement means in terms of the prophetic traditions."

Shabbat

12) *The Sabbath*, Abraham Joshua Heschel, p. xviii

The meaning of the Sabbath is to celebrate time rather than space. Six days a week we live under the tyranny of things of space; on the Sabbath we try to become attuned to *holiness in time*. It is a day on which we are called upon to share in what is eternal in time, to turn from the results of creation to the mystery of creation; from the world of creation to the creation of the world. (p. 11)

The seventh day is like a palace in time with a kingdom for all. It is not a date but an atmosphere. Is it not a different state of consciousness but a different climate; it is as if the appearance of all things somehow changed. The primary awareness is one of our being *within* the Sabbath rather than of the Sabbath being within us... The difference between the Sabbath and all other days is not to be noticed in the physical structure of things, in their spatial dimension. Things do not change on that day. There is only a difference in the dimension of time, in the relation of the universe to G-d.

He who wants to enter the holiness of the day must first lay down the profanity of clattering commerce, of being yoked to toil...He must say farewell to manual work and learn to understand that the world has already been created and will survive without the help of man. Six days a week we wrestle with the world, wringing profit from the earth; on the Sabbath we especially care for the seed of

eternity planted in the soul. The world has our hands, but our soul belongs to Someone Else. Six days a week we seek to dominate the world, on the seventh day we try to dominate the self. (p. 13)

The tyranny of things of space is all that brings us to the desire of having. He who wants to enter the holiness of the day must first lay down the profanity of clattering commerce, of being yoked to toil. He must go away from the screech of dissonant days, from the nervousness and fury of acquisitiveness and the betrayal in embezzling his own life. He must say farewell to manual work and learn to understand that the world has already been created and will survive without the help of man. Six days a week we wrestle with the world, wringing profit from the earth; on the Sabbath we especially care for the seed of eternity planted in the soul. The world has our hands, but our soul belongs to Someone Else. Six days a week we seek to dominate the world, on the seventh day we try to dominate the self. (p.13)

13) *No Religion is an Island*, pg. 264

Just to be is a blessing. Just to live is holy. And yet being alive is no answer to the problems of living. To be or not to be is not the question. The vital question is: how to be and how not to be?

The tendency to forget this vital question is the tragic disease of contemporary man, a disease that may prove fatal, that may end in disaster. To pray is to recollect *passionately* the perpetual urgency of this vital question.

14) “Our goal should be to live life in radical amazement.get up in the morning and look at the world in a way that takes nothing for granted. Everything is phenomenal; everything is incredible; never treat life casually. To be spiritual is to be amazed.”

15) *Essential Writings*, pg. 93

God follows me everywhere,
Weaves a net of glances around me,

Dazzles my blind back like a sun.

God follows me everywhere like a forest.
My lips are constantly astonished, heartfelt-mute,
Like a child stumbling upon an ancient shrine.

God follows me everywhere like a shudder.
I yearn for rest, but within me sounds the call: "Come!
See how visions linger in the streets."

I stroll about my thoughts like a mystery,
Down a long corridor through the world,
And sometimes high above I see the faceless face of God.

God follows me in trams, in cafes—
Oh, only with the backs of my pupils can I see
How mysteries arise, how visions transpire!