



ABRAHAM JOSHUA HESCHEL IN AMERICA

Theologian, Zaddik, Prophetic Voice

A prophet is a man who feels fiercely. God has thrust a burden upon his soul, and he is bowed and stunned at man's fierce greed. Frightful is the agony of man; no human voice can convey its full terror. 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. It is a form of living, a crossing point of God and man.

—Heschel, 1962¹

Because of his combination of substance and charisma, Heschel became a revered and controversial public figure in the United States during the tumultuous 1960s. His prominence as a writer was ratified in the mass media during that same period. In 1966 *Newsweek* wrote of him: "To recover the prophetic message of ancient Judaism, Heschel has built up a rich, contemporary Jewish theology that may well be the most significant achievement of modern Jewish thought,"² confirming Reinhold Niebuhr's prediction fifteen years earlier that "he will become a commanding and authoritative voice not only in the Jewish community but in the religious life of America."³

Heschel's distinctive presence in the United States is a result of his having integrated the spiritual and intellectual cultures of three capitals of pre-World War II Europe: Warsaw, his birthplace; Vilna ("the Jerusalem of Lithuania"), where he earned a high school diploma from the secular, Yiddish-language *Real-Gymnasium*; and Berlin, where he attended a liberal rabbinic college and the university. His complex personality, his originality and shortcomings, reflect these different sources of North American Jewry.

Born on 11 January 1907 in Warsaw, Abraham Joshua Heschel Heschel (named after his ancestor, Abraham Joshua Heschel, the rebbe of Apt) was groomed to lead the Hasidic dynasty of his

father, Moshe Mordecai Heschel (1873–1917), whose forebears included Dov Baer of Mezeritch (the “Great Maggid”), the principal disciple of the Baal Shem Tov, the founder of Hasidism; Israel Friedman of Ruzhin (1797–1850); and the Apter rebbe (1749–1825), who “was buried next to the holy Baal Shem.”⁴ His mother Rifka Reizel Perlow (1874–1942), also of distinguished Hasidic stock, was a descendant of Pinchas of Koretz (1726–1791) and Levi Yitzhak of Berditchev (1740–1793).

Heschel’s aristocratic Hasidic pedigree (or *yikhus*) is vaguely known and still incompletely studied.⁵ Reared in a devout community, Heschel was a child prodigy who mastered the extensive body of classical Jewish texts, particularly “the sea of Talmud.” (His retention of texts from Bible, Talmud, Kabbalah, and Hasidic sources dates from his childhood.) Then he went on to earn his modern scholarly and philosophical credentials in Berlin, at the modern Jewish research and teaching institute, the Hochschule für die Wissenschaft des Judentums and at the Friedrich Wilhelm (now Humboldt) University.

An agonizing involvement in history accompanied this European education. Heschel completed his doctoral dissertation on prophetic consciousness in 1933 amidst events that remolded the world: on 30 January Adolf Hitler became Chancellor of Germany; on 27 February the Reichstag building was set on fire; the Nazis seized power in July. During that same period, even after Jews were eliminated from the German academic system, the University of Berlin finally accorded him the doctorate in December 1935.⁶

Writer and Teacher

From the very beginning, Heschel was a committed writer. Words would become his most effective weapon against hostile political and cultural forces. The very year he completed his dissertation he published his first—and perhaps most autobiographical—book, a collection of Yiddish poems, *Der Shem Ham’Forash—Mentsh (Mankind—God’s Ineffable Name)*, which combines compassion with human suffering and closeness to the living God.⁷ Emblematic of his vision, the poem “*Ikh un Du*” (I and Thou), first published in the New York Yiddish periodical *Zukunft* (The Future) in 1929, proclaims an intimacy of human and divine surpassing the dialogical relation celebrated by Martin Buber: “My nerves’ tendrils are intertwined with Yours, / Your dreams with mine. / Are we not one embraced in multitudes?”⁸

It has been observed that, after 1933, the systematic exclusion of Jews from Germany's cultural life revived latent Jewish creativity. Many assimilated Jews returned to the synagogue and enrolled in adult education courses in Judaism.⁹ Publishing houses owned by Jews, forbidden to print "Aryan" authors, issued an impressive new list of books in Judaica. With a Ph.D. and a liberal rabbinical degree (he was ordained at the Hochschule in 1934), Heschel began to offer his knowledge to the general public in print and as a teacher.

In 1935 Heschel worked for a literary and artistic publisher in Berlin, the Erich Reiss Verlag, as editor of their series on Jewish thought and history. Heschel addressed readers directly in his 1935 biography of Maimonides and his 1937 biographical essay on Don Isaac Abravanel.¹⁰ He complemented these retrievals of Jewish tradition with eight brief biographical essays on Tannaim (rabbis of the Talmudic period, among them, Yohanan ben Zakai, Gamliel II, Akiba, Jehuda Hanassi) published in the Berlin Jewish newspaper, *Jüdisches Gemeindeblatt*, in 1936.¹¹

Heschel's teaching paralleled his writing for the community. He gave lectures at the Berlin Lehrhaus. His theological career began in March 1937, when Martin Buber invited him to Frankfurt-am-Main as codirector of the Central Organization for Jewish Education and the Jüdisches Lehrhaus. It was there that Fritz Rothschild—who became Heschel's authoritative interpreter in the United States—first heard him present the Bible to a skeptical group of youth leaders. After their eventual emigration to the United States, the two men formed a lifelong professional tie.¹² In Frankfurt, Heschel consolidated his vision of Jewish renewal.

Then he was almost crushed by events. Heschel was expelled from Germany on 28 October 1938, with about eighteen thousand other Jews holding Polish passports. After a short stay at the frontier he returned to Warsaw, where he remained from November 1938 to June 1939 (one academic year), teaching at the Institute for Jewish Studies, a scientific academy of higher learning similar in orientation to the Berlin Hochschule. During this period he desperately sought a haven. Finally, in the spring of 1939, he received an invitation from President Julian Morgenstern to teach at Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati.¹³

Remarkably, amidst these uncertainties, Heschel maintained his spiritual center. Awaiting approval of a nonquota visa to the United States, he left Warsaw for London and wrote to Dr. Morgenstern on 28 July in his still-faltering immigrant English: "I would like very much to study the English language and to con-

tinue the work on a philosophical book on the prayer [*sic*]. Two chapters therefrom will be published before long." Heschel faced Europe's economic depression, fierce anti-Semitism, and the unknown future by preparing a book on Jewish inwardness.¹⁴

"A Brand Plucked from the Fire"

Heschel the refugee arrived in New York City on 21 March 1940, thoroughly familiar with Jewish culture and assimilation in Germany and Poland. Having long reflected upon various attempts at Jewish self-definition, secular and religious, as well as conditions of Jewish life in pre-War London, he rapidly concluded what Americans needed.

His thinking absorbed the Catastrophe and riveted upon redemption. In the early 1940s, he remained acutely aware, on a daily basis, that his family and the thousand-year-old Jewish civilization of Europe were being annihilated. Much later, in his 1965 inaugural lecture at the Union Theological Seminary, he defined himself as a survivor: "I am a brand plucked from the fire, in which my people was burned to death. I am a brand plucked from the fire of an altar to Satan on which millions of human lives were exterminated to evil's greater glory."¹⁵

Biblical values and reverence for each and every person would defy the genocide and the moral callousness that made it possible. His mission would be to preserve the essential principles of biblical religion: "the divine image of so many human beings, many people's faith in the God of justice and compassion, and much of the secret and power of attachment to the Bible bred and cherished in the hearts of men for nearly two thousand years."

Heschel the new American was an unusual prophetic voice. He had reached intellectual maturity in Europe and witnessed the cultural crisis following World War I. He saw the Nazi rise to power. And he had bridged the traditional and modern worlds without relinquishing his Hasidic ideals. Now he did not place in the Shoah—our century's major catastrophe—a source of Jewish energy, as did many postwar thinkers. Heschel's theology represents a passionate alternative to Judaism redefined by the Holocaust and the State of Israel.¹⁶ It implies that Jewish survival does not require us to see ourselves, even triumphally, as victims.

On a more general level, Heschel recognized the perils of vicarious experience of any kind, moral or religious. American Jewry, despite its struggle with recent historical facts, could not derive enduring values and identity from events essentially foreign to its

daily reality. Nor could Judaism survive without taking seriously the reality of God and God's immanence in Torah. He called Jews to their sacred mission to enhance religion and to redeem the world.¹⁷

Heschel's soul took root. His American career can be divided into three phases: (1) from 1940 to 1950 he defined the philosophical and theological foundations of contemporary values; (2) from 1951 to 1962 he elaborated a critique of Jewish philosophy and practice; and (3) from 1960 to his death in 1972 he became a prophetic activist. His writings and public appearances became like the divine tree of Kabbalistic legend: its roots in heaven, its branches and leaves on earth.

At Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati, where he remained from 1940 to 1945, Heschel was perceived as a traditionally observant but modern scholar committed to spiritual issues. There he refined his goal as writer and thinker: "how to share the certainty of Israel that the Bible contains that which God wants us to know and hearken to; how to attain a collective sense for the presence of God in the biblical words."¹⁸

Grateful for their having rescued him, Heschel nevertheless judged American Jews as being in the throes of a second Holocaust—he called it "spiritual absenteeism." He did not find enough leaders asserting the reality of God nor defending prophetic ethical imperatives. After the war, American Jews were relatively safe from anti-Semitism, gaining social and political power, moving to the suburbs, building synagogues and schools—all the while handicapped by reductionistic conceptions of Jewish tradition. For Heschel, the living God must not be reduced to folklore or symbols.

Rescuing the Jewish Soul

In America, Heschel soon realized that he could have an impact only through his writings. He would attack the sources of evil. During his first fifteen years in this country (1940–1955), Heschel's publications focus on prayer and piety and faith. By defining the inner life of religion, he sought to retrieve the Jewish soul (in Hebrew, *neshama*) from oblivion.¹⁹

Everything he subsequently wrote defies the twentieth century's spiritual crisis, of which Nazism was the most devastating, almost unspeakable, outbreak. But he did not broadcast his private agonies. He had tried unsuccessfully to convince Jewish leaders to help European victims.²⁰ His mother and two unmar-

ried sisters—Gittel and Esther Sima—perished in the Warsaw Ghetto, while a third who lived in Vienna, Devorah Miriam Dermer, was deported to Treblinka with her husband and murdered in Auschwitz.²¹ (His oldest sister, Sarah, had emigrated in February 1939 to the United States with her family and her husband, the rebbe of Kopitzhinitz—also named Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel.)²²

Heschel announced his understanding of the destruction of European Jewry in the *Hebrew Union College Bulletin* of March 1943. He published an English version of a speech he had delivered to a Quaker group in Frankfurt, Germany, in 1938. Entitled “The Meaning of this War,” it began: “Emblazoned over the gates of the world in which we live is the escutcheon of the demons. The mark of Cain in the face of man has come to overshadow the likeness of God.”²³ Heschel blamed secular civilization—“us” not “them,” including Americans—for distorted values and a feeble, ineffective response to events: “The outbreak of war was no surprise. It came as a long expected sequel to a spiritual disaster.”²⁴

His first scholarly publications written in (an impeccable) English appeared between 1942 and 1944: “An Analysis of Piety,” “The Holy Dimension,” and “Faith.”²⁵ For an essay on “Prayer,” published in 1945,²⁶ the author signed his name as “Abraham Joshua Heschel, Associate Professor of Jewish Philosophy, Hebrew Union College”; by stating his full name for the first time, the American academic had discreetly reappropriated his Hasidic ancestry. In 1945, after moving from Hebrew Union College to The Jewish Theological Seminary, he published another major article, “The Mystical Element in Judaism.”²⁷ These elegant reflections on spirituality establish Heschel’s post-Holocaust mission.

Heschel’s manner of marketing his ideas, even then, was quintessentially American. He understood that his credibility would benefit from recognition by professionals outside as well as within the Jewish community, so he placed articles in English with the prestigious journals of Columbia University and the University of Chicago and in Mordecai Kaplan’s *Reconstructionist*, which then reached a large, diverse readership.²⁸ Deprived of his Yiddish-, German-, or Hebrew-speaking communities, Heschel had become a translator of the Spirit.

Moreover, Heschel’s literary style was, by necessity, addressed particularly to outsiders. He understood that American readers could not recognize his constant allusions (most of them without direct citation of sources) to Jewish texts nor was their normal

experience conducive to intuitions of the Divine. His goal was to unveil, and to make verbally and imaginatively graphic, life's fundamental holiness.

The destruction of European Jewry made especially urgent his commitment to transplant the Kabbalistic tree of heaven to the new world. In a speech he gave in Yiddish to the New York YIVO conference in January 1945, he insisted that "romantic portraiture of Hasidism, nostalgia and piety, are merely ephemeral; they disappear with the first generation. We are in need of Jews whose life is a garden, not a hothouse. Only a living Judaism can survive. Books are no more than seeds; we must be both the soil and the atmosphere in which they grow."²⁹

Heschel's first American book of spiritual rescue was an expansion in English of this speech, an essay entitled *The Earth Is the Lord's: The Inner World of the Jew in East Europe* (1950). Illustrated with exquisite woodcuts by Ilya Schor, also a Jewish refugee from Poland, this work is more than an idealization of Heschel's heritage and a *kaddish* (prayer for the dead) to a civilization lost; it outlines his theological system (in chapter 10, "Kabbalah"). His conclusion calls Jews to fulfill a prophetic task, as it joins the mystical and social dimensions of the tradition: "We are God's stake in human history. . . . There is a war to wage against the vulgar, against the glorification of the absurd, a war that is incessant, universal. Loyal to the presence of the ultimate in the common, we may be able to make it clear that man is more than man, that in doing the finite he may perceive the infinite."³⁰

Heschel's reputation in the United States was established by 1951 when two more books appeared: *The Sabbath* and *Man Is Not Alone*.³¹ At that time the author was recognized by America's leading Protestant theologian and social activist, Reinhold Niebuhr, as an authority on Judaism and religious insight. Heschel had become the paradigm of a Jewish theologian and prophetic witness.

A Zaddik for the 1950s

Mindful that American readers must at first share his spirit vicariously, Heschel the writer developed a rhetorical strategy meant to stimulate intuition. He sought to evoke what he called "the ineffable"—intimations of the transcendent that cannot be expressed in language. His narrative is both plain and poetic. His particular gift was to use language to surpass language so as to

thrust readers beyond concepts—making us available to God’s initiative.

Heschel is both stimulating and frustrating to read. His polyphonic style bristles with insights derived from biblical, rabbinic, Kabbalistic, philosophical, and literary knowledge. Yet at times his sentences become a virtuoso performance, verbal acrobatics. Some of his writerly excesses have led many readers to reject the thinker as a mere “poet.” His artistry, however, plays a pragmatic role: pointing us to holiness—in the prayerbook, in the Bible, and notably in everyday living.

Heschel indeed completed “a philosophical book on the prayer” (as he had written to Morgenstern in 1939). He diagnosed American Judaism in *Man’s Quest for God: Studies in Prayer and Symbolism* (1954), which includes his 1945 article on prayer and an English version of his 1938 address to the Quakers at Frankfurt. Two central chapters propose remedies for the illnesses of contemporary religious institutions. These judgments epitomize Heschel’s dialectic method of inducing people to seek holiness.

Heschel’s complementary approaches to prayer—one delivered to the (Conservative) Rabbinical Assembly of America and the other to the (Reform) Central Conference of American Rabbis—judged the practice of each audience in a manner each wanted the least to acknowledge. He warned his Conservative colleagues about the emptiness of their orderly services. He urged the Reform rabbis not to abandon *halakhah* (Jewish law) in favor of “customs and ceremonies.” Both audiences expressed a mixture of outrage, embarrassment, and veneration. Heschel had pinpointed the theological crisis of both groups. Taken together, however, Heschel’s two speeches promote a conception of Judaism as a *polarity* of apparently contradictory standards.

Heschel’s message to the Conservative rabbinate began with a critique of current practice: “Has the synagogue become a graveyard where prayer is buried?” he asked.³² “We have developed the habit of *praying by proxy*” (Heschel’s emphasis).³³ Rabbis must face honestly the frailty of their faith: “I have been in the United States of America for thirteen years. I have not discovered America but I have discovered something in America. It is possible to be a rabbi and not believe in the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.”³⁴

He then applied worship as a touchstone to criticize (some would say caricature) four approaches that subvert true religion: (1) the agnosticism that claims “that the only way to revitalize the synagogue is to minimize the importance of prayer and to

convert the synagogue into a center"; (2) religious behaviorism, whose "supreme article of faith is *respect for tradition*"; (3) the view that prayer is a social act, "built on a theology which regards God as a symbol of social action, as an epitome of the ideals of the group";³⁵ and (4) a religious solipsism, which "maintains that the individual self of the worshipper is the whole sphere of prayer life. The assumption is that God is an idea, a process, a source, a fountain, a spring, a power."

Heschel countered with an imposing goal, citing an earlier work: "It is precisely the function of prayer to shift the center of living from self-consciousness to self-surrender."³⁶ People should strive to view reality from God's perspective, emulating the theocentric judgments of the Hebrew prophets. Already Heschel had defined his religious Copernican revolution; his works comprise a vast apologetics meant to recenter our consciousness from the self to God.³⁷

This theology faced the realities of modern anguish. In response to the view that Judaism bestows "peace of mind" (as Joshua Loth Liebman or Norman Vincent Peale would have it) and makes us feel at home in the universe, he insisted that "we could not but experience anxiety and spiritual homelessness in the sight of so much suffering and evil, in countless examples of failure to live up to the will of God. That experience gained in intensity by the soul-stirring awareness that God Himself was not at home in the universe, where His will is defied, where His kingship is denied."³⁸

Theological seriousness is imperative. Religious observance can provide the elements of a remedy: "To pray, then, means to bring God back into the world. . . . God is transcendent, but our worship makes Him immanent." Human beings have immense power and responsibility.

In North America as in Europe, before and after the War, skepticism had undermined the ability to recall God's self-expression at Sinai: "If [conviction in the reality of God] is lacking, if the presence of God is a myth, then prayer to God is a delusion. If God is unable to listen to us, then we are insane in talking to Him."³⁹ Heschel seems to have considered the 1930s and 1950s as spiritually equivalent. He of course holds to the objective reality of God; to many of us, however, if taken seriously, his demand might tempt one to relinquish any pretense to *religious*, as opposed to ethnic or political, identity. Such were the risks.

Heschel's admonition to the Reform rabbinate two days later also challenges agnosticism or atheism.⁴⁰ After expressing his

gratitude to Julian Morgenstern, who made his emigration to the United States possible, he reassured his less traditional colleagues: "I, too, have wrestled with the difficulties inherent in our faith as Jews."⁴¹

In a rare autobiographical sketch, Heschel presented himself as paradigmatic of the Jewish journey to modernity. Scion of generations of rabbis, the young man had arrived in Berlin in the fall of 1927 to study at the university. One day he "walks alone through the magnificent streets of Berlin" and suddenly notices that the sun has gone down. He had forgotten to pray! "I had forgotten God—I had forgotten Sinai—I had forgotten that sunset is my business—that my task is to 'restore the world to the kingship of the Lord.'"⁴² The East European Hasid, nourished in the hot-house of German academia, uprooted once again and transplanted to America, reminds liberal rabbis of their true origin: "There is something which is far greater than my will to believe. Namely, God's will that I believe."⁴³

Rejecting the sociological view of observance as "customs and ceremonies," Heschel insisted on God's reality and the divine origin of the *mitzvot* (commandments). The current crisis of belief results from a false premise, namely, that the mind must first know God before obeying the law. So he urged his Reform colleagues to surpass rationalizations and "take a *leap of action* rather than a *leap of thought*."⁴⁴

Heschel is both "orthodox" and "liberal"—unsatisfactory to purists in both camps. To his Reform colleagues, he defended the metaphysical substance of ancestral practices: "In carrying out the word of the Torah [a Jew] is ushered into the presence of spiritual meaning. Through the ecstasy of deeds [a Jew] learns to be certain of the presence of God." He concluded: "For many years rabbis have in speeches delivered at conventions of the Central Conference of American Rabbis voiced their sense of shock and grief at the state of religious chaos prevalent in modern congregations, and have urged the members of this Conference to return to Jewish observance. May it be a *return* to a *halakhic* way of life, not to customs and ceremonies."⁴⁵

Heschel thus broadcast his mission by 1953, thirteen years after his arrival on our shores. There is an instructive symmetry to this chronology. Twenty years before, he had completed his doctoral dissertation in Berlin and published his book of Yiddish poems in Warsaw. Now safe (if not secure) in the United States, he consecrated his bar mitzvah as a New American by denouncing vicarious Judaism. Faith in a real God can be achieved

through tradition. At the same time, contemporary Jews must authenticate acts defined by *halakhah* through personal, inward experience. Such prayer can organize and inspire an ethical life.

Heschel's works in English address believers and secular readers alike. As a twentieth-century observant Jew, he himself lived within tensions between religious confidence and a harsh historical realism. Both contemporary and traditional, he integrated universal religious experience with Jewish law as revealed at Sinai. His two foundational works of Jewish philosophy and theology, *Man Is Not Alone* (1951) and *God in Search of Man* (1955), led Heschel to be viewed as "a *zaddik* (or holy man) of the 1950s." *The Prophets* (1962) and *The Insecurity of Freedom* (1966) define the theological foundations of his activities as a "prophet of the 1960s." *A Passion for Truth* (1973), published soon after his death, outlines a paradoxical post-Holocaust faith and ethics.

Heschel had one model for contemporary religion: the God of pathos, Who cares passionately about the quality of human life. This bold confidence is at once a stumbling block, a challenge, and a gift. GOD always was and remains the source of Jewish energy: not large synagogues, community centers, money—nor deeply felt responsibility toward Israel. God is both the origin and the goal:

GOD. Not an emotion, a stir within us, but a power, a marvel beyond us, tearing the world apart. The word that means more than universe, more than eternity, holy, holy, holy; we cannot comprehend it. We only know it means infinitely more than we are able to echo. Staggered, embarrassed, we stammer and say: He, who is more than all there is, who speaks through the ineffable, whose question is more than our minds can answer; He to whom our life can be the spelling of an answer.⁴⁶

Heschel's life and writings comprise "the spelling of an answer." Prophetic truth rejects administrative solutions to the emptiness of contemporary life. Heschel's 1962 book *The Prophets* spans his career, as it assigns to moral action the fulfillment of theocentric thinking. His 1933 dissertation had defined a "religion of sympathy" as a response to God's pathos, the moral emotions expressed by the Divine reacting to human events. In both

versions of the study, Heschel's phenomenological method—a detailed analysis of the prophets' identification with God's turning toward humanity—helps today's readers welcome inspiration.

Abraham Joshua Heschel writes as a Western philosopher, a Judaic scholar, a theologian, a Hasidic rebbe, and a poet who assumes an unshaking confidence in God's love for humankind. In addition, he emulates the Hebrew prophets' compassion and ethical radicalism. Now we seek to understand his conviction that words can become "a crossing point" between ourselves and God. Heschel hoped that readers would achieve communion—with the author, with their own depths, and with the Eternal.